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Void, a comic novel: practice-led research into humour

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## Abstract

This thesis comprises a critical essay and practice-led research in the form of a full-length novel, *Void*, that constitutes my original contribution to knowledge.

The critical essay comprises three principal chapters, the first of which is a memoir that discusses the early comic influences that have shaped my creative imagination in the form of the films of Laurel and Hardy, Harold Lloyd and Will Hay. The second chapter considers humour and science fiction, concentrating on the origins and definitions of science fiction and then focussing on Douglas Adams' *The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* novels and how his comedic techniques relate to *Void*. The third chapter considers the methods to generate humour that I employ in my own text, through the framework of the origins of comedy, the leading theories of humour, the associated incongruities of situation, character and language and my use of intertextuality to incorporate elements of Adams' novels into my own.

The final section contains *Void*, my debut humorous novel that blends elements of romance, science fiction and action-adventure.

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Although it is a futile gesture, I must thank Stan Laurel, Oliver Hardy, Harold Lloyd, Will Hay and Douglas Adams for their superb comedy antics; writers often build upon the work of their predecessors and I would be flattered if *Void* similarly inspired anyone.

I would also like to thank my family and friends for their encouragement and for allowing me the time to dedicate myself to the protracted challenge of part-time study whilst working full-time.

Finally, I would like to thank my father for introducing me to humour; his own tastes have been inspirational and this thesis is dedicated to him.

## Introduction

The precise nature of humour is contentious. Speculation about its nature dates back to the writings of Plato and Aristotle and there are ongoing academic debates about humour's origins, definitions and theoretical framework. In the first century AD, the Roman rhetorician Quintilian lamented that no one had yet adequately explained what laughter is, despite many attempts (Quintilian 1875, VI, 3, 6); almost two millennia later and, despite the research undertaken by philosophers and psychologists in the intervening centuries, we are still without an adequate general theory of laughter: the psychologist Professor Eysenck notes that "The outcome, as far as any theory of humor is concerned, is of course nugatory; contradictions abound, and agreed conclusions are noticeable by their absence" (Eysenck 1972, p. xiii). This theoretical aspect of humour lacking consensus is beyond dispute, yet humour in all of its forms is also notoriously subjective even at the level of the individual, so that what one person deems to be humorous, another may reject as being too obvious or infantile or otherwise immaterial; this thesis explores my own interest in humour, via my practice-led research culminating in the full-length comic novel, *Void*, that constitutes my original contribution to knowledge.

My novel echoes the subjective nature of humour with characters, situations and linguistic jokes that are indicative of the personal influences that have shaped my writing. I examine these influences in chapter one, which include the elements of imagination and observation that are fundamental in allowing me to create my own fictional world. However, the primary influence on *Void* is humour, specifically the films of Laurel and Hardy, Harold Lloyd and Will Hay. Laurel and Hardy introduced me to the incongruities of situation, language and character from which humour can derive and I discuss why it was their inane slapstick that I first found appealing. Laurel, as principal gag writer, also

established humour in other ways, by using the incongruities of language and by differentiating the personas of Laurel and Hardy to facilitate comic disagreements. I have endeavoured to capture their sense of idiocy in *Void* and the interplay between their characters has taught me how to fashion humour from the conflict between my own characters.

The visual humour of Harold Lloyd's films has also inspired my writing and, in chapter one, I consider how Lloyd was skilled in prolonging humour by using variations of the same joke, with each alternative often building on the previous one; I discuss this technique in *Why Worry?* (1923). Lloyd also maximised humour by adding new complications to a joke and I investigate how *Safety Last!* (1923) sustains its humour and assess how Lloyd's comedic approaches have been influential in writing *Void*.

Many of the films starring Will Hay rely on linguistic incongruities to create humour and I show not only that such material was sometimes either written by Hay, or was based upon his own music hall sketches, but also how Hay developed humour from comic misunderstandings. Indeed, it is Hay's film partnership with Moore Marriott and Graham Moffatt that has had the greatest impact on my writing, since their personas helped to establish internal conflict for comedic effect. Hay assumed the role of leader and authority figure, whilst being undermined by the goading and ineptness of Marriott and Moffatt, and I survey their interplay and discuss how this has helped me to define my own characters with opposing attitudes or goals to craft humour. I thus demonstrate how the films of Laurel and Hardy, Harold Lloyd and Will Hay have shaped my creative imagination by teaching me elements of comedy as well as inspiring me to explore humour further.

Given the science fiction elements of *Void*, it is perhaps unsurprising that this genre represents the secondary influence on my writing; I explore this in chapter two. I examine some of the literary definitions of science fiction, its disputed origins and Darko Suvin's

academic engagement with the genre as the “literature of cognitive estrangement”. My own interest in science fiction led to my discovery of science fiction humour and the remainder of chapter two investigates the science fiction narrative that has most inspired my writing: Douglas Adams’ *The Hitch Hiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* novels (collectively termed *Hitch Hikers*). Adams’ humour involves portraying a comic world view based on absurdity, the incongruities of situation, character and language and also his parodying of the tropes and conventions of science fiction. Adams’ incongruous situations and characters are legion and I compare some of these with *Void* to convey how Adams has inspired me. Adams’ incongruities of language are particularly influential and I analyse his wordplay and compare it with that of P. G. Wodehouse, his inspirational figure, to elucidate Adams’ comic techniques and to demonstrate how I exploit these in my own text. The principal method Adams uses to produce humour in *Hitch Hikers* is by parodying some of the conventions of the science fiction genre and I discuss how “space opera”, technology, robots, aliens and time travel operate and how Adams subverts these; I relate such subversions to *Void*, to illustrate how I use similar approaches in my own work. Finally, I consider Adams’ comic science fiction and suggest why he was so successful.

Chapter three considers the definitions and origins of comedy, the leading theories of humour and the comedic techniques that I have employed in *Void*, including the incongruities of situation, character and language and my use of intertextuality to incorporate elements of Adams’ *Hitch Hikers* novels into my own. The nature and scope of humour remain disputed and I discuss numerous competing definitions; the origins of comedy in written literary form are similarly elusive and I summarise its first formal notions and consider the nature and function of comedy with the speculations of Plato and Aristotle, who consider laughter as an unworthy aspect of human behaviour. A central part of the chapter discusses the three theoretical traditions commonly referred to as the



superiority theory, the incongruity theory and the relief theory. The superiority theory described by Thomas Hobbes states that laughter arises from feelings of superiority over others and is thus humour based on ridicule. The incongruity theory iterated by James Beattie, Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer proposes that humour arises as a result of the violation of expectations: a joke often directs us along a conceptual path and it is the perception and resolution of the incongruity between what is expected of that joke and its reality that can create humour. The relief theory advocated by Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud is a physiological explanation of laughter that represents the venting of nervous or psychic energy: humour involves summoning energy for a task that becomes superfluous and, as that task is abandoned, such superfluous energy is discharged through laughter. I show that whilst no one theory offers a comprehensive general theory of humour, each one does, nevertheless, provide a partial contribution that is useful to the comic writer. After considering these theories, I show how *Void* incorporates a variety of techniques to construct humour based on these theories, including my preferred incongruity theory. Indeed, I use incongruities of language, character and situation and analyse examples from my own writing to demonstrate how I intentionally misdirect the reader to generate humour. The final part of the chapter discusses my intertextuality with Adams' *Hitch Hikers* novels, whereby I create chapter titles that quote his phrases and I weave his text into the body of *Void*; I also intersperse other science fiction fragments into my narrative to produce humour for the science fiction enthusiast.

This thesis considers my early comedic influences, humour and science fiction and also the theories and techniques of humour that have impacted on my writing of *Void*. Through this analysis, I hope with reference to my own experience and relevant literature to outline my understanding of comedy in terms of writing *Void* and to apply my deeper

understanding of humour to the development of my future writing. I hope that this exploration might also prove useful for other students, researchers and writers.

## Chapter 1: Comedic Influences

What influences the novelist? It is a straightforward question yet one I have often pondered when, as I was writing my comic novel *Void*, some of its words seemed to appear on my screen without conscious thought, as if I were a mere tap regulating the flow of pre-written sentences that had their origins elsewhere. The imagination is, therefore, an obvious influence, given that it is where ideas and images form, develop and coalesce before any adaptation into the more structured written form. Indeed, my mind now houses numerous characters who each demonstrate an almost tangible physical presence and credible motivations and aspirations. Such specificity owes its debt to the imagination but also to its partnership with observation: if the imagination is the perception of our personal world, then observation is the perception of our physical world. The novelist observes and compares the differences between, say, a shower and a drizzle, or contrasts the mood of a sunset with that of a sunrise. We also watch people: how workers shake hands in an office, how children play in a park or how diners in a restaurant chat with friends. Novelists observe the world and the people in it to discern their similarities and differences and to comprehend how, if at all, human behaviour varies. We observe as a painter might, although the novelist goes further than creating the inanimate image: we use such similarities and differences as source material, helping us to create a world of animate people that may, itself, be perceived by the reader in *their* imagination.

Whilst imagination and observation will continue to inspire me, the primary influence on writing *Void* originates from my love of humour: my first recollection is as an infant of four years-old, when I can hear my father laughing at the living-room television; this was 1974 when, pre-internet, repeats of old films were prevalent. I went to investigate: there were black and white images of two odd-looking men – one thin and the other fat –

both dressed in shabby clothes and surrounded by ancient cars. My father encouraged me to sit next to him and, though I did not know it at the time, he was introducing me to the wonderful world of Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy. Whilst I do not recall what film we watched, I do remember my father laughing at some jokes but me not doing so; I had yet to comprehend a principal rule of slapstick, which is that seemingly painful physical acts do not actually hurt the actors. However, as my exposure increased over the ensuing months, I soon delighted in Laurel and Hardy's squabbles and misunderstandings that often led to comedic chaos.

Humour derives from incongruities of situation, language and character, and Laurel and Hardy influenced me using these components in the guises of slapstick comedy, linguistic jokes and humour arising from characterisation. Chapter three discusses the comedic techniques that I use in *Void* and it was their slapstick that first intrigued me, as it seemed to possess a pure, almost magical, energy. Moreover, whilst a kick up the backside or a poke in the eye are absurd, to my child's eyes it was hilarious watching *adults* become embroiled in such activities. My early favourite was *Battle of the Century* (1927), in which Hardy has the idea of insuring Laurel and claiming the insurance money once Laurel has slipped on a deliberately positioned banana peel. However, a pie vendor slips on the peel instead, becomes angry with Hardy and hurls a pie in Hardy's face. Hardy responds with a pie, but misses and hits an innocent bystander and soon the entire street becomes ensnared in a gloriously silly pie fight; such hilarity is echoed decades later in the finales of both *Carry On Loving* (1970) and *Bugsy Malone* (1976), which demonstrate the continuing power of slapstick in a world now more reliant on verbal humour. Another favourite was *Big Business* (1929), in which the antagonist is a home owner to whom Laurel and Hardy try to sell a Christmas tree. However, when they repeatedly trap its branches inside the home owner's front door, he becomes irritated and destroys the tree with hedge-clippers;

this escalates into comical tit-for-tat vandalism, with the home owner damaging Laurel and Hardy's car as they wreck his home. Furthermore, such films feature what I would later understand to be the "running gag", which Beaver (2007, p. 207) defines as a "repetitive comic element in a motion picture". Whilst popularised by Laurel and Hardy, and the so-called silent comedians, slapstick can trace its origins to the court jester of the Middle Ages and further back to the Greek "Old Comedy" of Aristophanes, which includes male characters parading their visible erections in *Lysistrata* (Aristophanes 2002); slapstick has been used in works as diverse as the *Tom and Jerry* cartoons originating in the 1940s and Rik Mayall's and Adrian Edmondson's situational comedy *Bottom* (1991), half a century later. Slapstick as exaggerated physical comedy is a technique I use and perhaps the most notable example is Doug hitting Colin with a stainless steel frying pan; slapstick's sense of kinetic energy and zaniness has influenced me to create scenes that exhibit a similar pace and unexpected comic lunacy.

Although slapstick as an incongruity of situation is perhaps the style of comedy most associated with Laurel and Hardy, their films also feature humour derived from incongruities of language. Laurel writes jokes using a variety of linguistic techniques and here, respectively, is a pun, a non sequitur and a malapropism: "Remember the old adage, you can lead a horse to water, but a pencil must be lead" (*Brats* 1930); "I'm not as dumb as you look" (*Their First Mistake* 1932); "The doctor said I might get hydrophosphates" (*Helpmates* 1932). Laurel also employs bathos. In *One Good Turn* (1931), Hardy complains that Laurel should know something about cutting wood since Laurel's father was in the lumber business. Laurel agrees, yet maintains that his father was only in the business in a small way: he used to sell toothpicks. In several of their films, Laurel uses a more unexpected approach to create linguistic humour by articulating an idea that sounds plausible yet, upon iteration, morphs into an illogical mess redolent of the non sequitur. In

*Towed in a Hole* (1932), Laurel and Hardy have a small business selling fish and Laurel suggests that they could make more money by catching their own fish and selling them for a profit. He then confuses his idea: “Well, if you caught a fish . . . and whoever you sold it, they wouldn’t have to pay for it, then the profits would go to the fish . . .”. Laurel also wrote the occasional one-liner and, in *Below Zero* (1930), Laurel and Hardy are two street musicians in the winter of 1929. A woman asks them how much money they make and when Hardy replies “about fifty cents a street”, she throws them something: “There’s a dollar. Move down a couple of streets”. I share Laurel’s love of the comic potential of subverting linguistic expectations and my efforts in *Void* stem partly from Laurel’s influence; I discuss my use of language and humour in chapter three.

Another technique to produce humour is via the incongruity of character and the Laurel and Hardy films often use a belligerent antagonist to instigate conflict from which their humour arises. Thus whilst the home owner in *Big Business* could have behaved rationally, by politely declining their offer of a Christmas tree, because he did not, humour was fashioned from the conflict between his behaviour and the actions of Laurel and Hardy. They also create humour via their own characterisation: Laurel often portrays himself as the innocent “child” and cries or scratches his fluffed-up hair when accused of a mistake; Hardy affects dominance as the “adult”, twiddles his tie in times of stress and, after some embarrassment or consternation, breaks the so-called fourth wall by staring into the camera, a technique descended from a long theatrical tradition of addressing the audience (and since copied by comedienne Miranda Hart). Such differentiation helps to establish their personas and delineate their internal conflict for comic effect, with Hardy typically playing someone who assumes superior knowledge to Laurel’s character; this interplay has influenced my writing of *Void* by demonstrating how humour can be generated from the comic banter that arises from their conflicting stances, especially when

Laurel questions Hardy's viewpoint or subsequently shows it to be incorrect. The real life affection Laurel and Hardy have for each other also helps, by creating empathy for their characters and a believable onscreen relationship that adds to the sense of fun. Thus, as chapter three shows, in *Void* I have also tried to create credible characters that are likeable and feel affection towards each other. I have especially strived to establish Void as the sympathetic protagonist with whom the reader can identify, given his irreverence and self-deprecating manner and his character as potentially echoing the reader's former student life or, at least, their younger and impetuous self.

I am indebted to Laurel and Hardy for providing my first sustained introduction to humour and to its techniques of slapstick, linguistic incongruities and humour derived from characterisation. Indeed, as an adult I was so interested in their films that I read McCabe's biographies (McCabe 1990, 1993) and visited the location of their Oscar-winning *The Music Box* (1932): the actual steps up which Laurel and Hardy pushed their music box are still there, along with a commemorative plaque. My homage to Laurel and Hardy is to name-check them in the Chinese restaurant chapter and I hope their innocence and infectious fun have permeated *Void*.

Once I had been seduced by Laurel and Hardy's bygone comedy world, my father suggested that if I like them then I might like others from that era and so, over the ensuing months and years, we watched the films of Harold Lloyd and Will Hay, which also use incongruous characters, situations and language to create humour. Since I was now intrigued by the techniques of humour and its instigators, I also read a biography of Lloyd (Dardis 1984) and Lloyd's revised 1928 autobiography (Lloyd 1971). In the latter, Lloyd described how he liked to alternate his comedies between "gag pictures" and "story pictures", with the corresponding emphasis in each, and how he devised "business" (gags) at the start of his career using the simple formula of a policeman (or policemen) chasing

the comedian, along with a girl (Lloyd 1971, pp. 54, 91). Lloyd's initial characters of Willie Work and Lonesome Luke were grotesque imitations of Chaplin's tramp character that even Lloyd himself later reflected upon as being "ludicrous" (Lloyd 1971, p. 123); such was Lloyd's early basic characterisation that the principal characters in many of his films were listed as "The Boy" or "The Girl". Indeed, it was only from 1917, when Lloyd developed his "glasses character" who embodied the boy next door and became a credible romantic lead, that Lloyd began to find success in his own right.

I soon relished Lloyd's adept timing and athleticism when performing his own stunts, his slapstick, the quick pacing of his predominantly silent films and also his skill in creating humour through visual jokes, called the "sight gag". A biographer of Lloyd describes the sight gag as "supreme" in 1919 (Dardis 1984, p. 82) and, with no scripts to worry about at that time, it is this aspect that is most evident in the opening of Lloyd's *Safety Last!* (1923). Lloyd's character ("The Boy") is first seen standing behind bars, alongside a noose; a sombre official and priest arrive. However, the camera view reverses and our expectation of capital punishment is subverted: Lloyd steps out onto a railway station platform; the "noose" is a hoop used for collecting mail; the bars are the ticket barrier; and the priest and official merely Lloyd's friends seeing him off. When his train leaves, Lloyd mistakenly snatches the handle of a pushchair instead of his suitcase and chases after the train. The baby's minder snatches Lloyd's suitcase and manages to swap it as Lloyd clasps a grab rail on the last railway carriage. A few seconds later, Lloyd reaches for the grab rail again and – with perfect timing – mistakenly finds the grab rail of a passing horse and carriage and steps aboard. The finest visual humour has a unique simplicity that I find charming and *Void* exploits this: fireworks spell out "LINTF IS A CNUT" and Doug's van has more spots of rust than a "pack of Dalmatians with measles".



Lloyd was also skilled in prolonging a gag to maximise its humour by “layering” it, partly through variations of the same joke. In *Why Worry?* (1923), Lloyd encounters the giant Colosso, with toothache, and first ties a shoelace around the tooth and yanks the lace: nothing happens. Lloyd finds some rope, ties it to the tooth and *climbs* up Colosso until Lloyd reaches his neck, in a fantastic sight gag akin to a reverse abseil; but still the tooth remains. After a few more variations, Lloyd ties the rope around his waist and to a tree next to a balcony. Lloyd jumps off the balcony yet merely swings from the branch. He spots a huge balcony vase but cannot reach it, so tugs on the slack of the rope and, comically, pulls out the tooth. Unaware of his success, Lloyd grasps the vase and leaps off the balcony: he crashes to the ground, completing the layering of just one gag with variations over five minutes.

In some of Lloyd’s other films, he achieves his layering of a gag to maximise its humour not by adding variations of the same joke, but by providing new complications to it. *Safety Last!* (1923) is perhaps the finest example and Lloyd dangling off a clock face, above the teeming streets of Los Angeles, is one of the most famous cinematic images. Indeed, the film is a “thrill picture”, about which Lloyd says this: “The recipe for thrill pictures is a laugh, a scream and a laugh. Combine screams of apprehension with stomach laughs of comedy and it is hard to fail” (Lloyd 1971, p. 84).<sup>1</sup> Lloyd plays a department store clerk and his “glasses character” has his chance to succeed when the general manager pledges \$1,000 to anyone who can attract a crowd to his store; Lloyd persuades him to hire his steeplejack roommate to climb the store building. However, on the day of the climb a policeman is searching for his roommate and so the joke is that Lloyd himself is forced to climb, with his roommate promising to swap places once he has evaded the policeman. Various complications then impede Lloyd’s progress to trade positions in an ingenious

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<sup>1</sup> *Safety Last!* (1923) is the fourth of Lloyd’s five thrill pictures, the others being *Look Out Below* (1919), *High and Dizzy* (1920), *Never Weaken* (1921) and *Feet First* (1930).

sequence that interweaves comedy with suspense: pigeons eat discarded peanuts from his boater hat; he becomes entangled in a tossed tennis net; and Lloyd encounters the clock itself, the face of which expands outwards as he dangles from it. As well as amply providing the humour and thrills that Lloyd desired, his ascent is an incongruous situation that acts as a visual metaphor for the everyman of the 1920s and the extent to which he climbs to achieve the American dream.

Lloyd's films contain ingenious examples of slapstick, the sight gag and skilled physicality which, collectively, reinforced ideas that I had encountered with Laurel and Hardy, such as comic timing, how evil a comedy villain can be and the "correct" balance of comedy versus characterisation and plot; each of these elements has influenced my writing of *Void*. Yet it is Lloyd's scenes that layer a gag with variations or complications that have had the greatest impact; they demonstrate a detailed understanding of how humour operates and, more importantly, how it can be sustained. Indeed, such layering reflects Lloyd's methodology, since he worked collaboratively with "gag men" (salaried men employed to think up jokes) and continually aimed for perfection: Lloyd conceded that even if his team had "shot the first scene maybe *exactly* as we wanted it, we would shoot it again, and maybe again and again" (Lloyd 1971, p. 123). I adopt Lloyd's layering of a gag with variations by using Doug's collection of inappropriate guns and Pete's Scrabble words. I layer a gag with complications when Void and his companions sneak through the MI7 base and encounter various obstacles such as the door that opens only from the inside. I have also tried to embrace Lloyd's frenetic pacing in my work, so that scenes and dialogue are only those necessary to reveal character or to propel the story forwards. One area of Lloyd's negative influence is that of characterisation: as a child I much preferred the comic interplay between Laurel and Hardy and found Lloyd's goal-driven "glasses character" too one-dimensional. Indeed, whilst optimism chimed with

1920s America, Lloyd's career went into terminal decline in the 1930s possibly because cinema audiences during the Great Depression lacked empathy with his character that Dardis describes as a “dynamo of furious, unflagging energy and wild success” (Dardis 1984, p. 51). However, as with Laurel and Hardy, Lloyd's exquisite demonstrations of the differing techniques of creating comedy have directly influenced *Void*.

The career of Will Hay contrasts with those of Lloyd and Laurel and Hardy in that Hay enjoyed a long music hall experience of 1,321 appearances from 1909 to 1935 (Rinaldi 2009, p. vi), rather than a lengthy cinematic one. Hay's music hall experience is critical here, because the performative motif of his persona as the blustering authority figure, who is supercilious but incompetent, underpins the majority of his films, yet originated from his music hall sketches. Of all the authority figures Hay played – magistrate, headmaster, ship's captain, prison governor, solicitor, vicar, police sergeant, principal, fire chief – it is as the schoolmaster for which he is most famous: Hay wrote “Bend Down”, his first schoolmaster sketch, in 1910 (Rinaldi 2009, p. 27); he recorded his *The Fourth Form at St. Michaels* sketches as Will Hay and His Scholars (1929, 1930, 1933); and showcased his schoolmaster persona in films such as *Boys Will Be Boys* (1935), *Good Morning, Boys!* (1937) and *The Ghost of St. Michael's* (1941), the last two also featuring a young, pre-*Carry On*, Charles Hawtrey. *Boys Will Be Boys* (1935) was the first Hay film that I saw as a child and its depiction of single-sex classes and teachers wearing mortar boards and wielding canes fascinated me: not only did they portray my father's childhood, but the film also represented humour within an educational setting; *Void* appropriated this for its University of Snowdon milieu.

Much of the humour in Hay's films uses the linguistic incongruity of the pun. Also called paronomasia, it is a form of wordplay that suggests two or more meanings for humorous effect via the intentional use of homophonic, homographic, metonymic or

figurative language; the pun has been used in texts dating back to Shakespeare, Chaucer and Aristophanes. Whilst teaching geography in *Boys Will Be Boys* (1935), headmaster Dr. Smart (Hay) states that the people in the countries bordering China tend to be shorter, which results in a (now deemed racist) exchange with a pupil who says, “How Hi is a Chinaman”. Smart interprets this as a question and so prolonged comic confusion ensues that is only resolved when the pupil clarifies that How Hi is the name of a Chinaman who keeps a laundry. *Good Morning, Boys!* (1937) repeats such verbal confusion, with Hay’s character (Dr. Twist) asking “What is the unit of electricity?” and a pupil, interpreting it as a statement, replying in the affirmative. In addition to these heterographs, humour also develops from the incongruity of Hay’s characters, subverting the idea that a teacher has superior knowledge to their pupils, and so them concealing their ignorance under the academic robe of authority also satirises the British educational system. The screenplay of *Boys Will Be Boys* (1935) is credited to Hay himself – his “How high is a Chinaman?” routine was one of his music hall sketches – and he therefore helped construct a form of comic narrative to suit his talents as a music hall performer.

Whilst I employ linguistic humour in *Void*, as I discuss in chapter three, it is the humour derived from Hay’s six-film partnership with Moore Marriott and Graham Moffatt that has had the most influence on my writing: Marriott played the elderly Harbottle and Moffatt the insolent and overweight Albert respectively and the rich comic interplay between these three characters is a template for my novel. As a child I found their antics hilarious and my favourite Hay films are *Ask a Policeman* (1939) and *Oh, Mr. Porter!* (1937). In the former, the coastal village of Turnbotham Round has not had any crime for ten years and so Sergeant Dudfoot (Hay), Constable Harbottle (Marriott) and Constable Albert Brown (Moffatt) decide to invent some to retain their positions. They set up a speed trap but squabble when calculating a driver’s speed: Harbottle suggests that he was

travelling “twenty-five minutes” whilst Dudfoot explains that his speed was sixty because “twenty miles each you see and there are three of us, that makes it sixty”. Afterwards, Dudfoot, Harbottle and Albert trace smugglers to the cellar beneath their police station and are handcuffed to each other, in their own police cell. Three abreast, they escape through the bars and pursue the criminals, first in their police car (with Harbottle running alongside), and later in a double-decker bus, which they drive the wrong way around an occupied racetrack amidst their continual quarrelling. These situations are superb instances of incongruity and character interaction that create humour; the plot device of a village with no recorded crime was appropriated knowingly in *Hot Fuzz* (2009).

In *Oh, Mr. Porter!* (1937) Hay plays the stationmaster of Buggleskelly and it is again the incongruous situations and resultant bickering between Hay (Porter), Marriott (Harbottle) and Moffatt (Albert) that make the film such a joy. Porter reads out a railway communication stating that Summertime starts today and thus the eleven o’clock express will now run at twelve o’clock Summertime; Porter suggests that because they have two hours spare, there is no urgency to shunt their carriage off their main line before the train arrives:

Porter        Well, if we put the clocks back an hour, the train’s an hour late,  
that’s two hours, isn’t it?

Albert        No, you put the clocks forward and the train back.

Porter        Well what do we get then?

Albert        You’ve got the express coming any minute.

Porter        What you talking about? Listen, if the train’s an hour late, how  
can it be coming now?

Harbottle     It’s Summertime.

Porter           Summertime. Huh, the old fool's potty. Summertime or  
                       Wintertime, if a train's late, it's late.

Harbottle       Yes, that's right.

Albert           Yes, but you put the clocks forward.

Porter           Well if the clocks go forward, then the train's already gone.

Harbottle       No, no, no, no, you put the clocks back.

Porter           Course you do. You lengthen the day by taking an hour off the  
                       end and sticking it on the beginning.

Harbottle       No, no, no, you take an hour off the beginning and stick it on the  
                       end.

Porter           That's Wintertime.

Albert           No Wintertime you put 'em back.

Porter           That's what I said.

Albert           No you said to put it back for Summertime.

Harbottle       Yes, that's right.

Albert           It ain't. You put the clocks forward, which makes the train early.

Porter           Ah, would you believe it. I know what I'm talking about. You  
                       don't put the clocks forward, you put them back.

Porter then asserts that the express train will not arrive for another two hours; it promptly smashes into their carriage, concluding my favourite scene across all of the Hay films.

Hay's latest biographer describes the Hay-Marriott-Moffatt partnership as "the funniest comedy team in British films" (Rinaldi 2009, p. 135) and, as with Laurel and Hardy, their personas helped to establish internal conflict for comic effect: although Hay's character always thinks that he is more competent than his assistants – much like Hardy's

affectation of being intellectually superior to Laurel – they nevertheless collude against Hay to goad him and to undermine his authority and it is from such behaviour, as evidenced above, that the humour arises. This interplay taught me that characters with opposing attitudes or goals can be utilised to craft humour through verbal sparring such as sarcasm or one-liners. Furthermore, since my protagonist and antagonist meet only at the end of *Void*, I introduced internal conflict *between* my team to create humour, much as Hay and Laurel and Hardy had done: Void, as an indolent and failing student, opposes Pete, a conscientious undergraduate who advocates diligence and wishes to progress to doctoral study; Void opposes Kate, because he believes in romance and love whereas she says that she does not; Doug values engineering and immediate action and opposes Pete, who prizes theory and contemplating strategy. There is also internal conflict in terms of roles and age, given that Kate as Void's landlady represents the authority figure, like Hay, and that Pete, like Harbottle, is much older than everyone else; I have thus endeavoured to create multi-dimensional characters with rich comic interplay and to fashion humour from their conflicting characteristics.

After watching Laurel and Hardy, Harold Lloyd and Will Hay as a child, I began to comprehend elements of comedy such as slapstick and sight gags and how humour can be derived from situations and characters and wordplay; to some extent I also understood how these elements were being constructed. Yet perhaps more important than the inculcation of any specific comedic technique was my feeling that not only was comedy exciting, and quite complex and clever in places, it was also something that I needed to explore further. However, competing for my attention as a child was what would become the secondary influence on my writing of *Void*: science fiction.

## Chapter 2: Humour and Science Fiction

Science fiction, which is also known as sci-fi and sf/SF, is primarily the arena of speculation and wonder concerning the universe beyond Earth, of humans staring at the stars and pondering on what they might be like. Despite such enduring speculation, however, scholars and writers of science fiction remain divided over its literary definition and origins. McCracken (1998, p. 102) contends that the alien encounter lies at the root of all science fiction; Disch suggests that the rocket ship is science fiction's primary icon (Disch 2000, p. 57); Roberts defines science fiction as stories of travel through space and time and stories of imaginary technologies (Roberts 2005, p. viii); Pringle states that science fiction signifies the "wonder-stories of the chromium-plated future; the literature of the impossible made plausible; the mythology of a technological age; the fairy tales of science" (Pringle 1990, p. ix); Shippey claims that science fiction is the opposite of the pastoral tradition and, as such, is part of a literary mode that he calls "fabril", which is "overwhelmingly urban, disruptive, future-oriented and eager for novelty (Shippey 1992b, p. ix); Aldiss maintains that science fiction is the "search for a definition of man and his status in the universe which will stand in our advanced but confused state of knowledge (science), and is characteristically cast in the Gothic or post-Gothic mould" (Aldiss 1973, p. 8); Suvin defines science fiction as the "*literature of cognitive estrangement*" whereby "cognitive" represents what is scientifically "*not impossible*" within an author's world and "estrangement" is as a result of encountering a "strange newness, a *novum*": something in the narrative that is "significantly different from what is the norm in 'naturalistic' or empiricist fiction", is "validated by cognitive logic" and is therefore "so central and significant that it determines the whole narrative logic" (Suvin 2016, pp. 15-17, 79, 87). Suvin's other argument, that science fiction is essentially closer to the pastoral yet less



congenial to fantasy including the Gothic, contradicts those definitions offered by Shippey and Aldiss. The many definitions offered have thus been challenged or modified by others and, indeed, Roberts (2000, pp. 1-2) quotes James and Spinraid, who both resist providing a definition and instead resort to circular reasoning by identifying science fiction as something marketed or published as such respectively. Seed (2011, p. 1) goes further and contends that to call science fiction a genre at all is problematic given the hybrid nature of many of its works.

There is no real consensus on what science fiction is, beyond agreement that it is a form of cultural discourse involving speculation and a version of reality differentiated from our own. Yet *how* it is differentiated, and the degree to which science fiction is, or should, be based on empirical scientific rigour remains debated. Suvin's "cognitive estrangement" was one of the first major academic engagements with the genre and represents a strict form of "hard sf", which is generally defined as science fiction that incorporates science without contradicting contemporary scientific knowledge (Cramer 2003; Samuelson 2009). However, Suvin's definition of what science fiction does, and thus what makes the genre distinctive, is prescriptive, rather than descriptive. For Suvin, "real" science fiction comprises only those narratives that satisfy his definitional constraints and so, in his opinion, "90 or even 95 per cent of SF production" is aesthetically insignificant (Suvin 2016, p. 1). Indeed, the entire science fiction trope of time travel would seem to violate Suvin's cognitive requirement in that velocities approaching the speed of light would cause time dilation, yet faster-than-light travel without empirical explanation of its effects has been central to what is considered science fiction for decades, especially within "space opera"; unless the laws of physics are empirically different in the universes of *Star Trek*, *Star Wars* and many others, these cannot, for Suvin, represent science fiction narratives.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Suvin dismisses the entire *Star Wars* saga as a "primitive fairy-tale" (Suvin 2016, p. xlvii).

Moreover, few science fiction texts adhere with complete consistency to Suvin's cognitive requirement and so his strict emphasis on the empirical dimension of science fiction excludes too many narratives and ignores the fluidity of fiction by denying the possibility of hybrid narratives where the novum is not cognitive; Suvin's "cognitive estrangement" definition of science fiction is important, but too conceptually inflexible and restrictive.

Given that the definition of science fiction remains in dispute, it is hardly surprising that there is also a lack of agreement on its literary origins. Roberts (2005, p. vii) contends that the roots of science fiction are found in the fantastic voyages of the Ancient Greek narratives and an early text that exhibits an element that we would now associate with science fiction is Lucian of Samosata's *True History* (Lucian 1894), in which a second-century Lucian and his adventurers sail to the moon and witness a war between the king of the moon and the king of the sun. McCracken (1998, p. 103) suggests that science fiction developed from the romance and fantasy elements of early European travel literature and proposes Thomas More's 1516 *Utopia* (More 1684) as an early text that tries to define an alternative perfect society. Brantlinger (1980, p. 31) traces the origins of science fiction to the Gothic novel and proposes that because the central message of both involves an assertion of the irrational over the rational, they are "forms of apocalyptic nightmare fantasy characterized by themes of demonic possession and monstrous distortion"; Aldiss (1973, pp. 7-36) also argues that science fiction springs from the dream world of the Gothic novel and cites Mary Shelley as the first science fiction writer, with her 1818 novel *Frankenstein* (Shelley 1986); Disch (2000, pp. 32-56) agrees with the Gothic novel as being the ancestor of science fiction, yet maintains that the genre's "founding genius" is Edgar Allan Poe. Seed (2011, p. 3) advocates that science fiction began to emerge especially around 1870 through to the First World War; Shippey (1992a, p. xxi) considers the reception, not the production, of science fiction as its critical timing and dates its public

acceptance and the creation of a market to be the 1890s; Pringle (1990, p. ix) states that science fiction began as an imaginative response to the Industrial Revolution and to the scientific developments which followed, most notably Darwin's theory of evolution; as a defined genre of prose fiction, Pringle dates science fiction as beginning in the late 1920s; Westfahl (1998, p. 8) is emphatic in his insistence that, since Hugo Gernsback founded *Amazing Stories*, the first magazine dedicated to science fiction, "a true history of science fiction as a genre must begin in 1926".

There may never be a consensus on the origins of science fiction given that its foundations are necessarily filtered through its definition, which remains contested. Whilst travel to another world has been traced to the writings of Lucian of Samosata, I find Shippey's emphasis and dating of science fiction to around the 1890s to be the most convincing, given the writings of authors such as H. G. Wells who employed many of the conventions we now associate with science fiction, such as time travel and alien invasion, and who wrote rationally about alternative possible worlds. My own immersion into what I deem science fiction began with *Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope* (1977); the 1970s was perhaps *the* decade for science fiction films, in as much as *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) approached a genre often perceived to be somewhat niche and irrelevant and helped to make it a more dominant and mainstream mode of cinematic discourse.

Post-*Star Wars*, there have been many narratives that explore recent modes of science fiction, such as the "new weird" or cyberpunk, rather than the more established tropes of advanced technologies and faster-than-light travel to alien worlds. Scalzi's novel *Redshirts* (Scalzi 2013), for example, is metafiction that examines the role of the security guards from the original *Star Trek* episodes. The guards became known as "redshirts" because they wore red shirts and were minor, usually nameless, characters that invariably

died soon after being introduced to dramatise the dangers the other characters faced. Scalzi plays with this convention and also satirises the trope of the black box in television science fiction writing. On the spaceship *Intrepid*, the junior officers use the Box: a device resembling a microwave oven that, when given a biological sample, hums until it is dramatically appropriate and then produces a “ding” sound and the required solution without any scientifically coherent explanation. Moreover, the junior officers are fearful of going on away missions, owing to their unusually high fatality rate, and of being near the five senior officers, who never die on away missions despite the statistical odds that they should. The junior officers also realise that they know facts that they did not moments ago and deduce that their reality is being periodically influenced by the Narrative: episodes of an old television science fiction series called *Chronicles of the Intrepid*. Scalzi’s novel is redolent of the film *Galaxy Quest* (1999), which also satirises television science fiction series, such as *Star Trek*, as well as the trope of redshirts.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, whilst I could have employed a similar approach in *Void*, I deemed such a recent influence inappropriate: as I discuss in chapter three, I wanted to portray Billie-Jo as a credible young woman and playing with science fiction tropes, as Scalzi does, might have jeopardised this depiction prior to the reveal of Billie-Jo’s true identity in chapter forty-one.

My interest in *Star Wars* also led to my discovery of science fiction comedy, which includes renowned humorists such as Woody Allen, Robert Bloch, Robert Sheckley and Kurt Vonnegut, as well as Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, H. G. Wells and John Wyndham who, despite being more famous for their traditional non-humorous texts, also wrote comic science fiction as evidenced in Haining’s anthologies (Haining 1997, 1998,

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<sup>3</sup> *Galaxy Quest* features actors from a defunct television science fiction series, set aboard the NSEA *Protector* spaceship, who end up serving on an actual spaceship. The crew even includes Guy Flegman, who is terrified about dying on a genuine away mission because his only appearance in the series was as the unnamed Crewman Number Six, who was killed in episode eighty-one before the first commercial break.

1999).<sup>4</sup> Science fiction comedy also embraces writers who swapped genre: before *The Colour of Magic* launched his fantasy Discworld series, Terry Pratchett's first two published adult novels were the science fiction *The Dark Side of the Sun* and *Strata* (Pratchett 1976, 1981, 1983).

The science fiction comedy that has most influenced my writing of *Void* is Douglas Adams' *The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* "trilogy" of five novels (hereafter collectively referred to as *Hitch Hikers*) which is philosophical fiction in which a significant proportion of his narratives are devoted to a discussion of society and the world; Adams' original synopsis even states that many of the alien races will "epitomise some particular human folly such as greed, pretentiousness etc., rather in the manner of Gulliver's Travels" (Gaiman 2009, p. 242). Adams' comic world view is characterised by the absurd and his narratives portray situations that define a universe that lacks meaning so that human endeavours appear trivial and inconsequential; absurdism has a close relationship with incongruity in that our rational expectation of finding inherent value and meaning in life contrasts with our inability to find any. I relish Adams' clever and inventive humour, share the tenet of his absurd comic world view of the universe as meaningless and agree with Barnett (2013) who states that Adams remains the "undisputed king of comic science fiction"; where I diverge from Adams in *Void* is in my lack of desire to present a philosophical stance and my preference for a more positive (and structured) narrative instead of absurdist commentaries about the meaninglessness of life.

Science fiction comedy operates in several ways, including the use of incongruities of situation, character and language as evinced by Laurel and Hardy, Lloyd and Hay. *Hitch Hikers* features many incongruous and hilarious situations: the drinking of a Pan Galactic Gargle Blaster is "like having your brains smashed out by a slice of lemon wrapped round

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<sup>4</sup> See for example: 'Playboy and the Slime God' (Asimov 1997); 'Captain Wyxtptthll's Flying Saucer' (Clarke 1997); 'No Morning After' (Clarke 1999); 'The Wild Asses of the Devil' (Wells 1997); 'Female of the Species' (Wyndham 1999).

a large gold brick” (Adams 1979, p. 20); Zaphod’s Joo Janta 200 Super-Chromatic Peril Sensitive Sunglasses turn black when the building he is inside is bombed, thus preventing him from seeing anything that might alarm him; four in an audience listening to the second worst poetry in the universe die of internal haemorrhaging, with one only surviving by gnawing one of his own legs off; Shirley (2004, pp. 175-176) describes Adams’ many absurdities as “the exotic in the banal . . . the banal in the exotic”. Furthermore, once the Infinite Improbability Drive is switched on several improbable things happen, which add to the theme of coincidence in *Hitch Hikers*: Arthur and Ford are rescued from space without spacesuits at a probability of 276,709 to one against, they appear at Southend sea front and pass a man with five heads and an elderberry bush full of kippers and 239,000 lightly fried eggs fall out of a hole in the universe and onto the famine-struck land of Poghril. The Drive licenses many of these coincidences and allows Adams to construct situations that would, in other narratives, be considered too implausible; the improbable engine of the ship becomes the engine of an improbable plot.

Adams also creates humour by emphasising the absurdity of incongruous characters and so Hotblack Desiato spends a year being dead for tax reasons and the captain of the Golgafrincham “B” Ark has spent over three years in his bath, with his rubber duck. Of the principal characters, Arthur is the English tea-drinking everyman in a dressing gown with a Babel fish in one ear and Zaphod has two heads, three arms and is 200 years old. Adams also uses incongruities of language to produce humour and perhaps of all the linguistic techniques he adopts, he glories in wordplay the most. The names of his characters and his technologies are splendidly absurd and include the colours Ultra Violent and Gan Green, the character Pizpot Gargravarr, the Kill-o-Zap gun and the Breathe-o-Smart climate control system. Indeed, it is evident that Adams enjoys a particular fondness for the humble pun because many of his are almost childlike in eliciting the reader’s groan: when

Arthur arrives on the Vogon ship he feels like a military academy because “bits of me keep on passing out”; the Cathedral of Hate is “the product of a mind that was not merely twisted, but actually sprained” (Adams 1979, p. 42; Adams 1982, p. 92). This childlike quality is also evident in the remarkably few references to innuendo. Adams’ novels do include the characters of Majikthise and Eccentrica Gallumbits, the triple-breasted whore of Eroticon 6 with alleged erogenous zones that start four miles from her body, yet the only strong sexual allusion is possibly Deep Thought, which is a possible pun on the pornographic film *Deep Throat* (1972); Adams admitted only that Deep Thought was a “very obvious joke” (Gaiman 2009, p. 252).

Adams uses other linguistic techniques to creature humour. He incorporates bathos with the phrase “The ships hung in the sky in much the same way that bricks don’t” (Adams 1979, p. 30), but he more frequently adopts the bathetic technique of listing a few exalted references prior to the final transition to the trivial: the Galactic Fleet Battleships comprise “the GSS *Daring*, the GSS *Audacity* and the GSS *Suicidal Insanity*”, whilst the history of the *Guide* is “one of idealism, struggle, despair, passion, success, failure, and enormously long lunch breaks” (Adams 1982, pp. 70, 98). Adams also uses recursive humour with his “green pieces of paper” and “bunch of mindless jerks” jokes (Adams 1979, pp. 6, 73-74) and, if used sparingly, such a contrived technique is effective.

Adams’ use of language caused his work to be compared with other comic science fiction writers such as Kurt Vonnegut and Robert Sheckley, specifically their *The Sirens of Titan* (Vonnegut 2004) and *Dimensions of Miracles* (Sheckley 1968). Yet Adams most aspired to write like P. G. Wodehouse (Shirley 2004, p. 172) and comparing their work is illuminating. Here is Wodehouse (1987, pp. 116-117):

Steeple Bumbleigh must have come upon him as a totally new experience, causing him to wonder what had hit him—like a man who, stooping to pluck a nosegay of wild flowers on a railway line, is unexpectedly struck in the small of the back by the Cornish Express.

Wodehouse uses the comedic technique of describing a familiar situation before adding an absurdity and Adams often adopts the same method, such as the two missiles turning into a bowl of petunias and a whale or the battle fleet being swallowed by a small dog. The flow and rhythm of Adams' prose is also sometimes akin to Wodehouse's. This is Wodehouse (1958, p.10):

Claire saw to it that these doubts sprouted, by confining her conversation on the occasions of their meeting almost entirely to the great theme of money, with its minor sub-divisions of How to get it, Why don't you get it? and I'm sick and tired of not having it.

This is Adams (1979, p. 7):

*Not only is it a wholly remarkable book, it is also a highly successful one - more popular than the Celestial Home Care Omnibus, better selling than Fifty-three More Things to do in Zero Gravity, and more controversial than Oolon Colluphid's trilogy of philosophical blockbusters Where God Went Wrong, Some More of God's Greatest Mistakes and Who is this God Person Anyway?*



In *Void* I also relish incongruities of situations, characters and language, as chapter three demonstrates, and my most incongruous situations include Pete wearing a dinner jacket as he describes his walking tour of Victorian and Edwardian post boxes to the security guard. Adams' writing has also influenced my creation of incongruous characters: Colin the MI7 Officer who wants to be an accountant and my security guard with a passion for the K6 telephone kiosk are inspired by the Vogon guard who throws Arthur and Ford into the airlock and by the two shooting cops on Magrathea, who have been despatched to apprehend Zaphod after Frankie and Benji mouse fail to buy Arthur's brain; Adams' humour is bathetic and derives from these characters having an oppressing occupation yet nevertheless contemplating gentler alternatives, such as writing novels. Like Adams, I also relish wordplay, with jokes including "(briefly)", Stoke as "pretty *awful*" and MI7 being "a secret service that offers a service and is secret". I also incorporate incongruities of language with puns, including "Who's responsible?" / "Pete's quite responsible" and "The only guy who had his work done by Friday was Robinson Crusoe"; Kate's self-erecting tent provides some innuendo. Bathos is a useful technique I employ: after the MI7 forced entry, Void surveys the grave situation then comments on the debris with "Even the WELCOME doormat is dirty"; I also use Adams' listing of references that conclude with the trivial, with societies at the Freshers' Fayre "searching for truth, wisdom and Budweiser". Recursive humour is an interesting technique and Void seeing Doug's camouflaged outfit because it is not camouflaged, and phrases such as "Around here I bet the City's expensive because it's the capital, whereas the countryside's expensive because it isn't", reveal my fascination with the technique. I have also written the occasional line in an absurd style evocative of Adams, such as "There's a noise like a constipated bee" (from chapter twenty-five).

Another technique used in science fiction comedy is that of parody. Parodies of the *Star Wars* saga, for example, include *Spaceballs* (1987), *Robot Chicken: Star Wars* (2008, 2009, 2010) and *Laugh it Up, Fuzzball: The Family Guy Trilogy* (2010); the episodes from *Star Trek: The Original Series* (2009a, 2009b, 2010) and its many spin-off series and films are parodied in films such as *Galaxy Quest* (1999). Pawlak and Joll (2012) classify *Hitch Hikers* as satire and whilst certain elements are satirical in highlighting human folly and vices – or in Hodgart’s words, a critical and aggressive mind irritated by “human absurdity, inefficiency or wickedness” (Hodgart 1969, p. 10) – Adams himself considered *Hitch Hikers* overall to be parody (Gaiman 2009, p. 165). Dentith defines parody as “any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice” (Dentith 2000, p. 9) and Adams parodies both specific instances of science fiction and also its many tropes and conventions; his humour thus depends for its effect on some knowledge of the form to which allusion is being made, if not the recognition of the parodied original itself.

One science fiction convention parodied in *Hitch Hikers* is “space opera”, which Roberts (2000, p. 72) credits to the writings of E. E. “Doc” Smith in the 1920s and which Sawyer (2009) typifies as featuring minimal characterisation and interstellar conflicts between clearly defined “good” and “bad” sides. Space opera includes the *Flash Gordon* film serials of the 1930s and part of the *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* universes; here is Adams’ parodic version (Adams 1979, p. 89):

*Far back in the mists of ancient time, in the great and glorious days of  
the former Galactic Empire, life was wild, rich and largely tax free.*

*Mighty starships plied their way between exotic suns, seeking adventure  
and reward amongst the furthest reaches of Galactic space. In those days*

*spirits were brave, the stakes were high, men were real men, women were real women, and small furry creatures from Alpha Centauri were real small furry creatures from Alpha Centauri. And all dared to brave unknown terrors, to do mighty deeds, to boldly split infinitives that no man had split before - and thus was the Empire forged.*

The tax-free comment produces humour using bathos, the split infinitives line ridicules the linguistic introduction to the 1960s *Star Trek* episodes and the Galactic Empire phrase parodies Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* series. Adams also later parodies interstellar conflicts by describing an attack on Earth by the VI'Hurges and G'Gugvuntts: for thousands of years the "mighty ships tore across the empty wastes of space" until they attacked Earth, where "due to a terrible miscalculation of scale the entire battle fleet was accidentally swallowed by a small dog" (Adams 1979, p. 145). The humour again uses bathos but also anti-climax, by emphasising the size of the battle fleet and the gravity and duration of its mission prior to the punchline. *Void* references "space opera" narratives, including *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*, and incorporates specific dialogue from science fiction texts to create humour, as chapter three demonstrates.

A major science fiction convention portrays how all technology is invaluable to our lives, such as Robert Sheckley's short story 'Cost of Living' which shows the importance of Avignon Electric domestic labour-saving devices (Sheckley 2009b). That Adams also gloried in the possibilities of technology is evident in the articles he wrote on aspects such as the internet (Adams 1999), yet Adams prized only useful technology and so, in *Hitch Hikers*, he parodies the convention by imagining its absurd negative consequences. The value of the Babel fish removing all barriers to communication is, for example, ironical, causing "*more and bloodier wars than anything else in the history of creation*" (Adams

1979, p. 50). Moreover, although the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* electronic book can store vast quantities of information, this is no guarantee of quality: Ford's description of Earth across the Sub-Etha Net is "mostly harmless", whilst the *Guide* itself is described as "where it is inaccurate it is at least *definitively* inaccurate" (Adams 1979, p. 52; Adams 1980, p. 35). These *Guide* entries as witty digressions from the plot not only provide a strong non-linear narrative, and use the ancient device of an inset narrative, but make Adams' work distinctive in the subgenre of science fiction humour.<sup>5</sup> The Transtellar Cruise Lines spaceship is delayed 900 years owing to the obstinate computer autopilot awaiting the delivery of lemon-soaked paper napkins, despite the outside world being a wasteland incapable of delivering any. Deep Thought's absurdly long computational time of seven and a half million years to calculate the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe and Everything creates the expectation of a perfect answer, as if technology is always able to provide the solution, which makes its succinct answer of forty-two simultaneously bathetic and disconcertingly plausible. When tea-drinking Arthur finds a Nutri-Matic Drinks Synthesizer, it provides only "liquid that was almost, but not quite, entirely unlike tea" (Adams 1979, p. 94). Adams thus recognises that technology is driven by our desires and welcomes its potential as an aid, yet mocks our faith in it to solve all of our problems. Indeed, in Adams' universe, *no* being is content with technology: the complaints department of the Sirius Cybernetics Corporation (which designed the Nutri-Matic and the machines with Genuine People Personalities) "covers the major land masses of three medium sized planets" (Adams 1980, p. 15).

That Adams uses his imaginary technologies to create humour is a trait he shares with other comic science fiction writers such as Vonnegut and Sheckley: Adams' Infinite Improbability Drive passing through every point in the universe is redolent of Vonnegut's

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<sup>5</sup> Bruce Bethke, who is credited with the term "cyberpunk", suggests that the oblique narrative structure of the *Guide* presages the development of hypertext (Bethke 2004, p. 42).

chrono-synclastic infundibulum, where all “different kinds of truth fit together” in the universe; and Adams’ Deep Thought echoes Sheckley’s all-powerful Sweepstakes Computer (Sheckley 1968, p. 20; Vonnegut 2004, p. 12). However, Adams is notable in relishing technological ideas *per se* and tending towards so-called “hard sf” and, therefore, satisfying Suvin’s “cognitive” requirement.<sup>6</sup>

The use of robots as artificial beings in science fiction is another convention that Adams parodies. Robots tend to be one of two types and the first is emotionless and often threatening to humans, such as Gort in *The Day The Earth Stood Still* (1951), Philip K. Dick’s Nexus-6 androids in *Blade Runner* (1982), Arthur C. Clarke’s malfunctioning HAL 9000 in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), Ridley Scott’s Ash in *Alien* (1979), James Cameron’s time-travelling cybernetic organism in *The Terminator* (1984) and Michael Crichton’s amusement park androids of *Westworld* (1973) which, interestingly, were partly filmed in Harold Lloyd’s estate (for the Roman World theme park). This view of robots as hostile originates from the work that first provided the word “robot”, Karel Čapek’s 1921 play *R. U. R.* (Čapek 2005), in which robots toil for their human masters until they rebel and exterminate them. The second type of robot tends to be friendly and benign, and includes Robby the Robot in *Forbidden Planet* (1956), the drones of Huey, Dewey and Louie in *Silent Running* (1972) and, perhaps most famously, R2-D2 and C-3PO from *Star Wars*.

Adams plays with the convention of robots being given artificial personalities to interact more easily with their human masters and exaggerates this until it becomes parody. The Happy Vertical People Transporters are imbued with intelligence and a Genuine People Personality designed by the Sirius Cybernetics Corporation, but the lifts become frustrated with only moving vertically and sulk in the basement. Marvin the Paranoid

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<sup>6</sup> Hanlon (2006) discusses the science behind Adams’ “wealth of brilliant and arresting inventions” (Dainton 2012, p. 153).

Android also has a Genuine People Personality and is a glorious source of humour, as demonstrated when Arthur tells him that the stars are coming out (Adams 1979, p. 114):

The robot obediently looked up at them, then looked back.

“I know,” he said. “Wretched isn’t it?”

“But that sunset! I’ve never seen anything like it in my wildest dreams . . . the two suns! It was like mountains of fire boiling into space.”

“I’ve seen it,” said Marvin. “It’s rubbish.”

“We only ever had the one sun at home,” persevered Arthur, “I came from a planet called Earth you know.”

“I know,” said Marvin, “you keep going on about it. It sounds awful.”

“Ah no, it was a beautiful place.”

“Did it have oceans?”

“Oh yes,” said Arthur with a sigh, “great wide rolling blue oceans . . .”

“Can’t bear oceans,” said Marvin.

Adams’ humour derives from the incongruity between Arthur’s positive view of Earth and Marvin’s rejection of it. Yet with Marvin’s first line about oceans, Adams also establishes the expectation that – finally – Arthur has mentioned something that Marvin likes; that Marvin does not sharpen the contrast between the expected and actual response and this incongruity intensifies the humour. Eddie the Ship Computer and the doors on the *Heart of Gold* also possess Genuine People Personalities and all are irritatingly happy. However, when the ship seems destined to crash, Eddie becomes resigned to imminent death and starts singing, which parodies HAL’s slow demise in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). Adams uses personification since his robots suffer the same absurd neuroses as us, such as

depression, and the more closely they approximate human behaviour, the more obnoxious they seem; devices with a Genuine People Personality suffer from genuine people personality problems. In *Void* I subvert the usefulness of technology to create humour by featuring technologies that malfunction or behave in an absurd or incongruous way: Doug's satnav is linguistically temperamental, his damage monitoring machine becomes damaged and the medical chamber's self-diagnosis software seems to want to diagnose itself as requiring diagnosis; Adams' parodying of the value of technology has thus infused my creative practice.

Much science fiction is founded upon the premise that other, more intelligent and advanced, species exist and *Hitch Hikers* reverses this so that Adams' absurd comic world view includes discussions of society and the universe in what Kind describes as an "extended philosophical meditation on absurdity" (Kind 2012, p. 76). Magratheans are materialists who sleep through five-million-year-long recessions until the galactic economy can once more afford their custom-built planets, whilst the Vogons are callous and bureaucratic, preferring to follow orders and destroy Earth rather than to discuss it; the Vogon captain even cancels all planet leave because of an unhappy love affair. Though the *Guide* considers the inhabitants of Earth as "mostly harmless", ironically Adams' aliens exhibit the same problems that humans do and are seemingly just as self-obsessed, bureaucratic and otherwise emotionally compromised. The only alien in *Void* is Billie-Jo (and her unseen clone) but, in order to mislead the reader, I have purposely attempted to portray her as a normal young woman with whom Void falls in love; my comments related to aliens include Flint's discussion about whether or not they will only speak Welsh, Void's car-themed observations about Billie-Jo's spaceship and his confused science fiction rant in chapter forty-one, when he learns of her true identity.

Kind correctly observes that a “strong case is made, and remade, for the absurdity of the human condition” (Kind 2012, p. 77) and so Adams mocks certain professions, which Joll calls “recurrent light abuse” (Joll 2012b, p. 5). Advertising is consequently full of “overpaid and under-scrupulous bastards”, insurance company directors are suitable for the death penalty and “respectable physicists” are so boring that they do not get invited to parties (Adams 1979, p. 69; Adams 1984, p. 44). After the Golgafrinchams have jettisoned an “entire useless third of their population” onto prehistoric Earth, management consultants observe committee etiquette by always addressing the chair (even though it is a rock) and adhering to the agenda so that, after 573 meetings, they have yet to invent fire or the wheel. Adams’ absurd comic world view also satirises human endeavours on a global scale:

*This planet has – or rather had – a problem, which was this: most of the people living on it were unhappy for pretty much all of the time. Many solutions were suggested for this problem, but most of these were largely concerned with the movement of small green pieces of paper, which is odd because on the whole it wasn’t the small green pieces of paper that were unhappy.*

By ridiculing our obsession with paper that has no intrinsic value, Adams depicts how much of what we consider important is actually valueless. He also uses ironically bathetic parallels: the plans for the demolition of Arthur’s house “have been available in the local planning office for the last nine months”, whilst the plans for the demolition of Earth “*have been on display in your local planning department in Alpha Centauri for fifty of your Earth years*” (Adams 1979, pp. 12, 31); Arthur worries about his home being demolished when he is minutes away from having his planet demolished. Adams also conveys the



meaninglessness of human life itself, since we have evolved from the “useless” Golgafrinchams, rather than from the indigenous cave dwellers and, two million years later in Adams’ universe, humans are only the third most intelligent creatures on the Earth, after mice and dolphins. Furthermore, the mice are “vast hyperintelligent pan-dimensional beings” (Adams 1979, p. 124) conducting experiments on *us*, rather than vice versa, thereby undermining our notion of human supremacy.

Yet Adams’ absurd comic world view goes further by suggesting how meaningless, and so futile, *all* life is: the Total Perspective Vortex shows the universe as mostly empty and also emphasises the irrational discrepancy between the significance attributed to a being’s life and its cosmic lack of significance. Deep Thought’s answer of forty-two to the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe and Everything is a “comically inappropriate non sequitur” (Roberts 2004, p. 55) and so Adams’ atheism ridicules any efforts to answer spiritual questions with empirical evidence; there are no rational answers and so life lacks intrinsic meaning. The science fiction convention of time travel facilitates the paradox of meeting one’s ancestors, as explored in *Back to the Future* (1985), *The Terminator* (1984) and *The Twilight Zone* episode “Walking Distance” (Zicree 1982, pp. 41-45), and Adams parodies this convention to show life as meaningless: at the Milliways restaurant customers watch the end of the universe whilst the host comments on the possibility of raising families and striving for better societies to provide hope for the future, “except of course that we know it hasn’t got one” (Adams 1980, p. 97). One approach for mortals to seek refuge from this bleak perspective that Chappell describes as “cosmic vertigo” (Chappell 2012, p. 107) might involve a quest for immortality. Yet, according to Adams, even an infinite life would still lack meaning: the immortal Wowbagger the Infinitely Prolonged becomes so bored of “generally outliving the hell out of everybody” (Adams 1982, p. 9) that he decides to insult the entire population of the universe, individually, and in

alphabetical order. In *Hitch Hikers*, human endeavours are mocked, the importance of human existence is undermined and the value of all life is parodied; life as meaningless reflects Adams' stance as an atheist and, as a fellow atheist, I share Adams' comic world view as one characterised by the absurd. My characters also make satirical comments, about lecturers, driving examiners, puritans and Young Conservatives and, moreover, *Void* contains humorous absurdities that include Doug using a Bunsen burner as a lightsaber and Void sending his pregnant cousin a Get Well Soon card.

The subgenre of comic science fiction is now well established and, with the various parodies of *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*, it is no longer such a niche form. Indeed, its popularity is evidenced by Adams' *Hitch Hikers Guide to the Galaxy* narrative having spawned five radio series, five novels, a television series, two albums, two Marvin singles, a computer game, a film and multiple stage shows and audio books.<sup>7</sup> The initial success of the novels was undoubtedly aided by their timing, given that the late 1970s was a period when science fiction became more accepted as mainstream entertainment. Yet *Hitch Hikers* also accorded with the tenets of traditional science fiction by exploring philosophical issues of time and space and evaluating the significance of the human race. *Hitch Hikers* also helped popularise comic science fiction as a subgenre because, unlike other comic science fiction writers such as Sheckley and Vonnegut, Adams not only enjoyed creating humorous technologies but also applied significant thought as to how these might function. Thus the Infinite Improbability Drive and the Nutri-Matic Drinks Synthesizer, and many of his other ideas, are both comic *and* science fiction inventions that try to satisfy "hard sf" or Suvin's strict "cognitive estrangement". Indeed, it is this balance between humour and traditional science fiction that might represent the uniqueness of Adams, for he neither saturated his work with science fiction in-jokes for the literati nor

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<sup>7</sup> Gaiman (2009) details the history of the radio series and its subsequent success across other formats.

attacked its tropes with a viciousness to alienate its core readers; his *Hitch Hikers Guide to the Galaxy* novels endure because of his unique mix of originality, wit and thought-provoking ideas and perhaps because, ultimately, they feature an ordinary human who simply wants to do the most normal things in a universe where nothing is normal.

This chapter considered Adams' theory and practice of humour that involves portraying a comic world view based on absurdity, incongruities of situation, character and language and his parodying of some of the conventions of science fiction; the next chapter contains a discussion of the comedy theories and techniques that I have considered and employed in *Void*.

### Chapter 3: Humour Theories and Techniques

Humour has made a significant contribution in enriching people's lives since the beginning of Western literary history, yet its literary definition and origins lack consensus in cultural and literary discourse. In considering the occasions and functions of humour, Palmer defines humour as "everything that is actually or potentially funny, and the processes by which this 'funniness' occurs" (Palmer 1994, p. 3). Stott discusses the changing nature of comedy and defines humour as a "specific tone operating free from generic restraints" that is closely associated with comedy (Stott 2005, p. 2). Weitz assesses humour in relation to drama and insists that humour is a "*social transaction* between at least two people . . . through which one party intends to evoke amusement or laughter" (Weitz 2009, p. 2). Morreall eschews a formal definition and provides examples of humour's effects and evidence of its presence. For example, "Nonhumorous laughter situations" include unravelling a problem, feeling embarrassed or regaining safety after being in danger; "Humorous laughter situations" include hearing a joke, clever insults, spoonerisms or puns (Morreall 1983, p. 1). The nature and scope of humour is, much like science fiction, ever subject to analytical dispute and a principal obstacle to any comprehensive definition is that humour encompasses a range of forms and styles, from physical pantomime, slapstick and stand-up to the more verbal epigram, anecdote and one-liner.<sup>8</sup>

The origins of comedy in written literary form are similarly elusive. Western civilisation's first formal notions of comedy derive from ancient Greek drama and the earliest Western literary epic, Homer's *Iliad*, contains risible characters and characters who laugh. Alexander Pope, the poet and translator of Homer, states "That *Homer* was no enemy to mirth may appear from several places of his poem; which so serious as it is, is

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<sup>8</sup> A definition of a specific form of humour is itself problematic, as demonstrated by Dentith's review of four accounts of parody in which each one offered a competing explanation (Dentith 2000, pp. 11-21).

interspers'd with many gayeties" (Homer 1996, p. 277). However, the historical sources that exist are, at best, fragmentary; historians can only speculate about comedy's exact birth. Comedy appears to be the product of a rural environment, with a strong association with seasonal fertility rites, and became associated with Dionysus, originally a god of the fertility of nature. About 1000 BC, the cult of Dionysus reached ancient Greece and later, around 486 BC, comedy became institutionalised in Greece through official annual comedy competitions such as those held in Athens that formed part of the City Dionysia civic festival; such comedy is termed "Old Comedy" and is represented, albeit incompletely, by the plays of Aristophanes, of which we have eleven out of forty he is known to have written.

Commentary on the nature and function of comedy begins with the theoretical speculations of Plato and Aristotle. Plato deems comedy to be a mixture of pleasure (laughter) and pain (malice): one form of ignorance is conceit, whereby a person considers themselves as being richer, wiser or more beautiful than they actually are; since we enjoy laughing at such weak people, and given that laughter is a pleasure, to laugh at the misfortune of their conceit also implies malice, which Plato describes as "a pain of the soul" (*Philebus*, 47-51); malice thus involves a *desire* in the malicious person to see others suffer. Plato judges comedy to be an emotion that can be morally corrosive, since when we laugh not only are our rational responses disabled, but through imitation we also move towards becoming clowns and comedians ourselves (*Republic*, X, 596-599). Aristotle argues that both tragedy and comedy represent the world mimetically yet contrasts their opposition by stating that tragic imitation represents "noble actions, and those of noble personages" whereas comedy represents the "actions of the ignoble". For Aristotle, comedy is an imitation of people who are worse than the average and, moreover, such imitation is only of the ridiculous, which is a subdivision of the ugly (*Poetics*, 1448b26,

1449a32-35). Aristotle does concede that amusement is a necessary element of social intercourse (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1128b2) yet, given that comedy is an imitation of the ridiculous or unworthy aspects of human behaviour, he insists that excessive laughter is incompatible with living a good life and claims that those who carry humour to excess are “vulgar buffoons” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1128a4-10): Aristotle thus denounces only the excesses of laughter, whereas Plato’s condemnation is much more absolute. Although Plato and Aristotle exert an enduring influence on literary criticism and aesthetic theory, not all laughter involves malicious thought, we do not lose all control of our rational selves when experiencing an emotion such as laughter and nor do we always imitate behaviours we see without exercising judgement; Plato and Aristotle underestimate our ability to retain our rational faculties without appreciating that elements of humour, such as Aristophanes’ wordplay, succeed *because* our intellectual faculties remain active and allow us to process humour on a non-emotional basis.

The multitude of humour theories proposed since Plato and Aristotle reflect the nature of humour as an arena of contested debate. Indeed, in their comprehensive study, Schmidt and Williams (1971, p. 96) note that there are “hundreds of major and minor interpretations” which they categorise into six overlapping areas of anthropological, physiological, philosophical, psychological, psychoanalytical and sociological.<sup>9</sup> Researchers have since consolidated these interpretations into a more commonly accepted classification of three theoretical traditions, commonly referred to as the superiority theory, the incongruity theory and the relief theory (Attardo 1994, pp. 46-59; Morreall 1983, pp. 4-37).<sup>10</sup> Whilst none of these theories offers a comprehensive general theory that can

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<sup>9</sup> There are almost as many surveys of interpretations as interpretations themselves. See for example: Attardo (1994); Bergson (1911); Boston (1974); Chapman and Foot (1976); Goldstein and McGhee (1972); Grieg (1923); Keith-Spiegel (1972); Kline (1907); McGhee (1979); Morreall (1983, 1987, 2009); Piddington (1963); Roeckelein (2002); Sully (1902); and Swabey (1961).

<sup>10</sup> These traditions express one feature shared by accounts of laughter that differ in other respects, rather than established theories that groups of thinkers have consciously adopted and strived to improve.

adequately explain every instance of humour, each theory does offer a partial contribution that is useful to the writer creating comic material.

The superiority theory states that laughter arises primarily from feelings of superiority over others and humour based on ridicule as first outlined by Plato and Aristotle represents the negative element of humour. Aristotle's concept of the ridiculous specifically inspired Thomas Hobbes (Skinner 2004, p. 139) who, in 1650, formulated the idea that laughter develops from a sense of superiority towards another person or our past self: "the passion of laughter is nothing else but *sudden glory* arising from some sudden *conception* of some *eminency* in ourselves, by *comparison* with the *infirmity* of others, or with our own formerly" (Molesworth 1839-1845, IV, p. 46). Hobbes account of laughter as that "sudden glory" someone feels on becoming aware of their own superiority to others, or to themselves in the past, became the classic form of the superiority theory which dominated the philosophical tradition until the eighteenth century.

The theory is predominantly one about feeling and thus ignores the mental processing of a joke. Moreover, Hobbes' exclusive emphasis on superiority denies those situations where we find something amusing without making a comparison with someone else or with our past self in order to feel superior, such as self-deprecating behaviour, wordplay or absurd or nonsense humour. Yet despite criticisms by Hutcheson (1750, pp. 7-13), Morreall (1983, pp. 8-14) and many others, the superiority theory does make a valid contribution: it justifies the "fool", the stock comic character of ridicule and, since much humour involves someone being the butt of a joke, the theory is useful to the comic writer who wishes to generate humour using someone else's mistakes, misfortune or perceived weaknesses; the theory can explain the rationale of racist and sexist jokes. Creating humour at someone else's expense is a technique used by Aristophanes with his portrayal

of Socrates in *The Clouds* (Aristophanes 2002) and by Laurel and Hardy and Will Hay in their comic misunderstandings and bombastic pronouncements of a “superior” character.

Human existence includes learned patterns and what we have experienced trains us to cope with future situations so that, for example, touching snow for the first time will shape our subsequent expectations of all snow being cold. In the incongruity theory, humour occurs when we perceive an incongruity between our expectations (of an object, situation or concept) and its actuality and thus our learned patterns are violated in an “intellectual reaction to something that is unexpected, illogical, or inappropriate” (Morreall 1983, p. 15). Although Aristotle does not use the term “incongruity”, he first hints at the theory when discussing a writer’s joke that uses an expectation of the word “sandals” under someone’s feet, yet substitutes it with “chilblains” (*Rhetoric*, III, 1412a); however, Aristotle did not develop this idea further.

Indeed, the incongruity theory was not considered in any great detail until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when Francis Hutcheson (1750) refuted Hobbe’s idea of “sudden glory” and James Beattie, Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer elaborated the incongruity theory in related, but distinct, ways. Beattie is the first philosopher to use the word “incongruous” to analyse humour and, in 1779, states that the object of laughter is “two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage” (Beattie 1779, p. 320). Writing in 1790, Kant’s explanation of laughter is also based on the violations of expectations: “In everything that is to excite a lively convulsive laugh there must be something absurd (in which the Understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction). *Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing*” (Kant 1914, pp. 223-224). Kant does not state what his “nothing” represents, though much humour directs us along a conceptual path and it is often only at a punchline that we comprehend



such misdirection; the path we *had* followed leads nowhere, or at least not to the punchline, so it is perhaps this sense in which Kant's expectation is "nothing".

Schopenhauer asserts that amusement is not nothing as Kant claims; amusement is the discrepancy between our abstract concepts and our sensory perceptions of real things that are instances of those concepts. In 1818, Schopenhauer remarks that "laughter always signifies the sudden apprehension of an incongruity between such a concept and the real object through it, and hence between what is abstract and what is perceptive"

(Schopenhauer 1966, II, p. 91). Thus, for Schopenhauer, when we organise our sensory experience we ignore many differences between things that fall under one concept, such as when we categorise both lions and tigers as "cats", and humour arises when we notice an incongruity between a concept and a perception that are supposed to be of the same thing.

The principal weakness of the incongruity theory is that it fails to address why anyone should laugh when their conceptual patterns and expectations are violated or why some instances of laughter, such as tickling, cannot be explained by incongruity. Moreover, it does not account for why only certain incongruities are amusing: solving a puzzle can evoke incredulity rather than humour, whilst finding a burglar in our home would induce an incongruity of fear rather than amusement. Notwithstanding the criticisms of Piddington (1963, pp. 18-25), Sully (1902, pp. 125-135) and various others, the incongruity theory does explain the dual nature of linguistic humour such as the pun and the misdirection and resolution effect utilised by the traditional setup-punchline joke structure. Stand-up comedians Jimmy Carr and Lucy Greeves even admit that many jokes are written backwards, by *starting* with the punchline that will deliver the humorous incongruity, and they provide this example: "A Buddhist goes to a hotdog stand. He says, 'Make me one with everything.'" (Carr and Greeves 2006, pp. 129-130). Using the incongruity theory to create humour is thus an invaluable technique.

The relief theory is a physiological explanation of laughter which represents the venting of nervous or psychic energy. Seventeenth-century physicians understood that nerves connect the brain with the sense organs and muscles, but assumed that nerves carried “animal spirits” of gases and liquids, such as air and blood.<sup>11</sup> Lord Shaftesbury’s 1709 explanation of laughter, in his “An Essay on the Freedom of *Wit* and *Humour*”, first alludes to the theory by suggesting that laughter releases animal spirits that have built up pressure inside the nerves (Shaftesbury 2001, p. 46):

And thus the natural free Spirits of ingenious Men, if imprison’d and controul’d, will find out other ways of Motion to relieve themselves in their *Constraint*: and whether it be in Burlesque, Mimickry or Buffoonery, they will be glad at any rate to vent themselves, and be reveng’d on their *Constrainers*.

Over the next two centuries, theorists such as Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud refine the physiological element of the theory and add new components.

In 1860 Spencer argues that emotions such as laughter take the physical form of nervous energy: “Nervous excitation always *tends* to beget muscular motion; and when it rises to a certain intensity, always does beget it . . . laughter is a display of muscular excitement, and so illustrates the general law that feeling passing a certain pitch habitually vents itself in bodily action” (Spencer 1911, pp. 299, 302). Thus the muscular movements associated with emotions discharge pent-up nervous energy but, Spencer insists, the bodily motions comprising laughter are not the initial stages of other movements associated with an emotion, such as the clenching of a fist in anger; the physical movements of laughter are purposeless, “having no object, but being results of an uncontrolled discharge of energy . . .

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<sup>11</sup> The philosopher and physician John Locke said this in 1690: “In the circulation of the blood, a good part of it goes up into the head; and by the brains are separated from it, or made out of it, the animal spirits; which, by the nerves, impart sense and motion to all parts of the body” (Locke 1824, II, p. 433).

an overflow of nerve-force, undirected by any motive” (Spencer 1911, p. 303). For Spencer, laughter is *only* a method of channelling excess nervous energy that arises from emotional energy that is no longer required.

Better known than the work of Spencer is Sigmund Freud’s 1905 *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (Freud 2002), in which he insists that the three different sources of laughter he calls joking or wit (*der Witz*), the comic and humour are all forms of economy that represent a saving in expenditure of psychical effort: “Pleasure in the joke seemed to come from savings in expenditure on inhibition, comic pleasure from savings in the imagining of ideas (when charged with energy), and humorous pleasure from savings in expenditure on feeling” (Freud 2002, p. 228). Each source involves summoning psychic energy for a task that then becomes superfluous as that task is abandoned; this superfluous energy is discharged through laughter. In joking, the psychic energy released is the energy that would have repressed the emotions being expressed as a person laughs; according to Freud, the most repressed emotions are sexual desire and hostility and so, in telling or listening to these types of tendentious jokes, the psychic energy normally used to do the repressing becomes superfluous and is released in laughter. Freud’s second laughter source, the comic, is the psychic energy devoted to thinking and he adopts “*mimicry of the imagination*” in that “imagining something large requires a greater effort than imagining something small” (Freud 2002, pp. 187-188). Freud uses the example of a clown. We compare the clown’s exaggerated physical movements to our own, if we performed the same actions, summon a large amount of psychic energy to understand the clown’s movements and, as we do so, we compare this with the smaller amount of psychic energy required to understand our own simpler movements; the difference is surplus psychic energy our laughter at the clown discharges. Freud’s third laughter source, humour, occurs in situations in which we summon psychic energy for a negative emotion, such as pity, that

then becomes superfluous when the situation's conclusion reveals a humorous finale: the pleasure of humour arises "at the cost of this release of affect that did not happen. It comes from *an expenditure of affect saved*" (Freud 2002, p. 223). Here Freud's humour is aligned with Spencer's discharge of pent-up nervous energy.

The relief theory has several weaknesses. Spencer's excess of nervous energy built up from emotional energy implies the potential for greater laughter the greater this excess; conversely, someone should be unable to laugh if they have no excess. Yet laughter and its intensity are in part linked to a person's mood and their ability to perceive humour, rather than their nervous energy. Moreover, much wordplay has an intellectual rather than an emotional basis and so someone in an emotionally neutral state introduced to such wordplay may still laugh, even though they should be unable to do so given their lack of excess nervous energy. Without a detailed knowledge of Freud's psychoanalytic theories, it is problematic to evaluate fully his contribution to humour theory. However, with his joking it seems neither clear nor empirically verifiable how energy that *would* have repressed emotions is "saved", whilst Freud's explanation suggests that the most inhibited and repressed people would seem to enjoy joking the most; the opposite seems likelier to me. Freud's theory of "mimicry of the imagination" confuses physical size for complexity; imagining something minute but complex, such as the composition of subatomic particles, demands more psychic energy than the consideration of something of a greater physical magnitude yet conceptually much simpler, such as a cloud. Moreover, if we compare a clown's exaggerated physicality with our own more refined movements, since such a comparison itself uses mental energy, where is the *surplus* energy? Despite criticisms by Boston (1974, pp. 28-42), Kline (1907, pp. 421-426) and others, the relief theory does present the connection between laughter and the physical expenditure of energy, especially hearty laughter that involves many muscle groups. Moreover, the theory explains the idea

of comic relief, whereby something amusing is introduced into a serious or tragic element to provide temporary relief from built-up emotional tension; this idea can be used by the comic writer.

Researchers have detailed numerous iterations of the superiority, incongruity and relief theories and no one theory, in whatever form, adequately explains all varieties of humour. Nevertheless, as we have seen, these theories do elucidate specific elements and so they remain useful to someone wishing to write humorous material. Indeed, the incongruity theory, which is dominant in philosophy and psychology, is the theory that I consider the most plausible when explaining humour that matches Morreall's "Humorous laughter situations", since it is better able to account for humour than the superiority and relief theories; I use the incongruity theory to write my own comic material, via incongruities of language, character and situation.

I incorporate a variety of linguistic techniques to subvert expectations in *Void* and the novel depends on this, especially in the first half, to acquire and sustain the reader's engagement. As shown in the previous chapter, these techniques include bathos, innuendo, puns and one-liners. I also employ understatement in chapter twenty-five ("It's at this point in Operation Certain Death that I'm beginning to attach some merit to Doug's Plan B of mooning") although the inherent risk of understatement is that the reader may not detect it and thus may not perceive it as being intentionally amusing. I also swap entire words for humorous effect: "We have dragons to save and princesses to slay. No, wait, that doesn't sound right" is from chapter twenty-seven. Moreover, I make childish jokes using dialogue such as "So less damsel in distress, more damsel without a dress" (chapter thirty-eight) which also expresses the childishness of the character Void as a source of humour. Indeed, I relish wordplay and techniques such as hyperbole, non sequitur and absurdity are ones I wish to develop. I particularly enjoy the one-liner, because it is usefully concise and can

elucidate character. Chapter one of *Void* features “Like jobs”, “Never snore on the front row” and “Not even if I work in advertising?”, which each relate to Void as the indolent undergraduate, even if the reader is not yet familiar with his character. Given the one-liner’s succinct nature, it is similarly effective in closing scenes, as the conclusions to chapters twenty-three (“Operation Certain Death”) and twenty-eight (“The medlab door slides open”) demonstrate.

I further exploit the dual nature of linguistic incongruities by misdirecting the reader along an incorrect conceptual path that results in humour, as these examples from chapters six and twenty-five confirm:

“And you were attacked by a woman?”

“Of course. Being hugged by a man doesn’t excite my pecker.”

Flint scribbled in his notebook. “Your statement is of critical importance.

I realise it was dark, but can you provide a description?”

“White and I’d say about twelve centimetres when erect.”

“Before I woke you, I heard noises. A creature. There is something outside.”

“Pete, there’s bound to be *something* outside. You can’t expect the whole universe to be in our tent.”

“You get off wearing this macho kit,” says Kate. “Don’t you?”

“Nowt wrong with my Beretta pistol and body armour. Also keep two pocket knives in my boxer shorts.”

“Urgh, don’t they hurt?”

“Nope, pure cotton.”

Flint’s concern at Manor House Farm is his comprehension of the attack on Geraint Evans and so the description that Flint requires relates to the female assailant. Yet Evans’ previous response refers to his “pecker” and so Evans assumes that Flint’s description refers to his penis; such misdirection violates the expectations of the reader in a way that Kant would have understood. This technique of exploiting the duality of language to create humour also applies to the second example and I deliberately employ the word “something”, as its lack of specificity allows me to have Void focus on the something being the universe outside their tent, rather than it being the “creature”. In the third example, the reader is being intentionally misdirected along the conceptual path of Doug’s “macho kit” so that their attention is on Doug’s knives. Thus when Kate asks if they hurt, the reader is expecting Doug’s reply to refer to the lack of comfort from the knives, not to the material of his boxer shorts; this incongruity produces the humour.

I also employ incongruities of character. The stereotype of a student embraces indolence, intoxication, drug consumption, sexual abandon and a paucity of money and I play with such clichés, as Adams does with his science fiction conventions, to generate humour. Therefore, although Void is indolent, he does finally revise his Karl Marx essay, albeit at the MI7 base. Moreover, when Void becomes intoxicated, he suffers the consequence of vomiting and then spots Flint’s shadow in the back garden. Doug does consume sugar lumps infused with lysergic acid diethylamide, but he later employs some of these to distract the MI7 guard dogs. Kate’s condoms and her recollection of the stag party in chapter one hint at sexual abandon, as does Billie-Jo’s “attack” on Geraint Evans, yet Kate later becomes enamoured with Officer Flint. Doug does suffer from poor finances, owing to his new purchases of assault rifles and gas canisters in his workshop, so

I subvert this cliché not only with Kate having a wealthy father but with Doug stealing, and then selling, her Mercedes.

I design characters with attitudes, beliefs and values that contrast with each other and then explore these differences to create humour. Such major disparities are highlighted against Void's character: he desires love and a sustained relationship, yet Kate does not value love, feels that being someone's partner somehow represents a loss of individual power and embraces the choice of women to have relationships on their terms; Void's academic lethargy conflicts with Pete's desire to continue studying to doctoral level in order to teach. More minor conflicting viewpoints between characters are also used for humour, such as Kate's vegetarianism at the Freshers' Fayre and her emphasis on home ownership when Void assesses her new car. Kate is an older and more mature character than Void and so I also contrast his sense of childish humour against hers: I want the reader to be amused by Void's character by demonstrating that he is not always aware of his own naivety or silliness. Officer Flint's relationship with Officer Adams also provides humour using incongruity of character, via role reversal: Flint incorrectly considers himself to be more capable than Adams, who is his subordinate. Moreover, a character who thinks that they are superior to their subordinate or colleague also references the superiority theory and has, as discussed, been used to great comic effect by Laurel and Hardy and Will Hay; the comedic infighting between Void, Doug and Pete chimes with the Hay-Marriott-Moffatt partnership.

Thus throughout *Void* I delineate characters that I hope are credible, and must exist for a narrative purpose, yet nevertheless possess contrasting characteristics that can be exploited to fashion humour. Indeed, there are character elements that I could have emphasised further. Billie-Jo dressing up as Margaret Thatcher at the 1980s Freshers' Ball could have been transformed into a running gag, whereby Billie-Jo always dresses as



Thatcher when she meets Void. Although humorous, I considered this too alienating for the reader; Billie-Jo might have seemed less believable as a “normal” young woman and the real Margaret Thatcher was a divisive person both respected and despised. Establishing the “correct” characters to serve my narrative is, therefore, fundamental and my early drafts comprised characters that were later modified or expunged: Kate the landlady was initially Patrick, with a stronger emphasis on parsimony as a source of humour; I soon decided that an all-male household was too prosaic.

I particularly wanted Kate to be a resilient and independent character given the issues of women and gender representation as discussed by some scholars. Mulvey (1999), for example, adopts psychoanalytic theory to scrutinise film and, in her opinion, the all-pervasive power of patriarchal imagery: cinematic visual pleasure is divided “between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly” (Mulvey 1999, p. 837). That some films objectify women for male visual pleasure cannot be denied, perhaps most famously with the idea of the “Bond girl”, who is invariably styled as visually appealing if not sexually available. However, Mulvey’s exclusive condemnation of scopophilic men precludes the female viewer, who may want to reject the male gaze and, instead, identify or construct a female gaze. Indeed, the female viewer might derive satisfaction from representations of women being confident and in control of their lives, as with the femme fatale archetype or with active female protagonists such as Ellen Ripley in *Aliens* (1986), Sarah Connor in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) and Rey in *Star Wars: Episode VII - The Force Awakens* (2015). Yet, for Mulvey, the female viewer must always be too passive to escape the “determining male gaze” and thus the female viewer is denied the possibility of ever reading film as celebrating women, rather than as classifying women as passive objectified beings oppressed by Hollywood patriarchy; Mulvey’s deterministic function of woman is

only “in forming the patriarchal unconscious . . . tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning” (Mulvey 1999, pp. 833-384). Mulvey’s exclusive focus on gender difference also neglects other differentiators, such as sexual preference: a male gaze that is heterosexual in objectifying only women rejects the possible functioning of man as erotic object and so ignores the spectatorship of homosexual males (and heterosexual females) who may seek to objectify male protagonists. Also crucial to Mulvey’s argument is her claim that audience interpretation occurs unconsciously, which provides the basis for ignorance towards gender oppression and subordination. Yet audiences are not passive and so are not manipulated by film; viewers are active critical subjects capable of engaging with any intended messages and can choose to decode and read them differently or to discard them accordingly.

Despite these weaknesses, Mulvey’s idea of the male gaze has resonance in *Void* given the depiction of Kate primarily through the male viewpoint character of Void: Void as someone searching for romance is sometimes critical of Kate’s sexual behaviour that he considers too explicit. Yet Void naturally contrasts her behaviour against his and is thus commenting on Kate specifically, *not* on the gender representation of all women. Moreover, Kate as a strong female character, who is financially independent and who does not believe in love as much as Void, offers a more spirited and humorous comparison with him. My depiction of Kate has also been influenced by Adams’ characterisation of his female characters: Trillian and Fenchurch are almost as superficial as Random, Arthur’s clichéd adolescent daughter, and so Kate is my attempt to address Adams’ weakness.<sup>12</sup>

My early drafts also featured the MI7 character of Officer Simpkins who, as Flint’s incompetent trainee, acted as the traditional comic sidekick by misinterpreting Flint’s orders. Simpkins accompanied Flint to Wales until I realised that these chapters were too

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<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Adams admitted that he never understood women and that the character of Trillian was weak and superfluous (Gaiman 2009, pp. 40, 257); unfortunately, this absence of strong female characters does accord with the science fiction stereotype.

comedic, did not contrast enough with Void's and that I had conveyed too much of an unnecessary narrative. I deleted Simpkins, made Flint more incompetent, uprated Adams' role from mere walk-on part and transferred some of Flint's bickering with Simpkins to Adams; the Flint chapters became more concise and a necessary distinction to Void's.

Creating humour via incongruous situations dates back at least to Aristophanes and his sexualised anti-war farce *Lysistrata* (Aristophanes 2002), in which women prevent an Athenian war by withholding sexual privileges from their male soldiers in order to force them to negotiate for peace. The principal incongruous situation in *Void* is the student conflict with MI7, with the humour deriving from a dysfunctional group facing the seemingly all-powerful government organisation. Other incongruous situations support this: Pete acts as a military adviser when facing the modern threat of Officer Flint, yet suggests outdated methods such as the Maginot Line; and Doug's uncle antagonises MI7 by electrocuting his chickens against their fence. There are also several references to previous incidents in their first-year together as undergraduates: the visit to Nevada, Doug building his covert workshop and him forcing Void to watch his science fiction film collection. These incidents support the premise that the characters function as a team, provide additional backstory that is required later in the narrative and emphasise that Void is in his last year as an undergraduate and so must pass his examination to prevent expulsion. The chapters involving Officer Flint also contain incongruous situations, yet they rely more on MI7 procedures to produce humour: Flint's conversation with Adams about the rabbit in the drainpipe in chapter thirty-four; the Be Friendly To Suspects Day initiative; and Flint's shaping of strategy in chapter thirty-seven using the threat profile of "STUDENTS LOVE INVISIBLE PIZZA SEX". This humour is more subdued, to contrast better with the Void narrative and to sustain Flint as the antagonist.

I also incorporate intertextuality to establish humour. In the previous chapter I discussed how Adams parodied some of the conventions of science fiction and, given that fans of science fiction often possess an intimate knowledge of the genre and these conventions, science fiction intertextuality is, itself, another convention used to create an in-joke for the aficionado. Its use is commonplace: *Tron* (1982) shows a sign in Alan Bradley's cubicle that reads "Gort, Klaatu Barada Nikto" as a tribute to *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951); *Back to the Future* (1985) plays with cultural references from *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* with "Silence Earthling. My name is Darth Vader. I'm an extra-terrestrial from the planet Vulcan"; and *Paul* (2011) repeats the *Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope* (1977) dialogue "Boring conversation anyway", features the *Alien* (1979) actress Sigourney Weaver and showcases a finale of a spaceship taking off in a style redolent of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977).<sup>13</sup>

In *Void* I use intertextuality in three ways: by creating chapter titles that quote text from *Hitch Hikers*; by weaving Adams' text into the body of *Void*; and by interspersing other science fiction text into my narrative. My rationale is to employ a deliberate range and impact of references, from the obvious to the very subtle that might be only discernible to an enthusiast with detailed knowledge, but always without revealing Billie-Jo's alien nature prematurely. Thus chapter one begins with "You are here" which, in *Hitch Hikers*, refers to the Total Perspective Vortex. Yet since this phrase is commonly shown on tourist maps, it also suggests that at the start of my novel *Void* is lost and has a journey to embark upon in order to return home.<sup>14</sup> I use these chapter titles to hint at the associated content in a humorous or intriguing way and so the chapter twenty-eight title of "making a simple door very happy" resonates with its final joke of the medlab door opening only after Pete's

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<sup>13</sup> Roberts (2000, pp. 84-90) discusses the intertextuality of *Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope* (1977), including its debts to the Japanese cinema of Kurosawa and the war films of the Second World War.

<sup>14</sup> The title of *Void* itself also suggests a personal emptiness for the protagonist and thus foreshadows his relationship with Billie-Jo that will satisfy such vacuity.

“Flint is a fool”. Although “usually obscenely biological” in *Hitch Hikers* refers to a forfeit for losing a drinking game involving Old Janx Spirit, my chapter five title alludes to the antics of the Freshers’ Fayre and its potential to amuse. Some of the chapter titles are necessarily more oblique, to arouse intrigue: chapter eight’s “There is no longer any such thing as a McDonald’s” not only anticipates the Chinese meal but is more effective for truncating “hamburger” from the original text; “burger” is the more common nomenclature and using “McDonald’s” as a synecdoche for the company rather than its food implies that the company will somehow no longer exist, which is more intriguing. The chapter forty-five title of “Dent” acts as an explicit reference to Arthur Dent, yet it is a pun by also referring to Doug crashing the van and creating a dent. I also adopt this dual meaning technique with some of the Flint chapters and so the chapter two title “his two hundredth birthday” acts as a parallel to Flint’s fortieth birthday, implying that after too much Vodka and not enough sleep Flint now feels 200 years old (the age of Zaphod). Chapter twenty-six (“playing with a rubber duck”) suggests that Flint is a pathetic character like the Golgafrincham Captain, a person capable of only playing at being someone in authority and thus lacking the intellectual capacity to do anything other than play, which foreshadows Flint’s eventual demotion; it can also be interpreted as Flint playing with Kate as his toy and discarding her if he becomes bored. The chapter thirty-two title (“Five hundred and seventy-six thousand million, three thousand five hundred and seventy-nine years”) not only incorporates Adams’ use of the hyperbole of very large and very small numbers to create humour, but also implies that Kate will be spending a considerable amount of time being interrogated by Flint (and subsequently imprisoned). The chapter forty-seven title of “Fook” I use to suggest “fuck”, which is what Flint thinks when he learns of his demotion by Professor Black. The chapter titles become more explicit in their references to *Hitch Hikers* after the alien reveal in chapter forty-one: its title of “only

human” points to this reveal given that Void is the only human in the context of himself and Billie-Jo.<sup>15</sup>

My additional rationale with *Hitch Hikers* references embedded in the body of *Void* is to employ them only where they seamlessly slot into my narrative with natural absurdity or humour. The first in-text reference to *Hitch Hikers* is “Horse and Groom”, the pub in which Ford orders six pints of bitter prior to hitching a lift aboard the Vogon ship; I also use this as the last *Hitch Hikers* reference, so that the intertextual circle completes as the story of Void searching for Billie-Jo also concludes. As with the chapter titles, I chose the in-text references to match the context of my narrative even if some are obvious in that they are words and phrases closely, if not uniquely, associated with *Hitch Hikers*: “Rickmansworth”, “Norway” and “Guildford” (chapters eighteen, twenty-five and forty-five) and “small furry creatures”, “large, friendly letters” and “a bowl of petunias” (chapters eleven, twenty-three, twenty-five). Indeed, the enjoyment of using *Hitch Hikers* as a source is that I am able to import some of Adams’ glorious absurdities into *Void* and use them to create alternative meanings to his text: humans using nuclear weapons against “mutant star goats”; Pete “trying to teach cavemen to play Scrabble”; Doug describing Flint as if he has “personality problems to ten decimal places”; Void using possibly out-of-date milk to make Billie-Jo a mug of liquid that is “almost, but not quite, entirely unlike tea”; and Adams telling Flint, “More, erm, mice. Frankie mouse and Benjy mouse?” (chapters five, twenty-three, twenty-seven, thirty-four, forty-one). As with the chapter titles, I also intentionally use some text that only a devotee of *Hitch Hikers* might recognise. Thus with the chapter eighteen phrase “I could have teased her into lending you the money, since she’s a rich kid with nothing to do”, I use “teased her” as an intertextual oronym for “teasers”, along with the more obvious references to “rich” and “nothing”; in

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<sup>15</sup> This title may also be interpreted in two other ways: in the humorous manner Adams originally used it, referring to someone who has evolved from an ape, and also in the conventional sense as someone who is fallible because they are an imperfect human; Void has failed to guess the alien origins of Billie-Jo.

the chapter seventeen fragment of “accidentally created perfect beetle juice”, I employ “beetle juice” as an intertextual oronym of Betelgeuse, Ford Prefect’s home planet, and use “perfect” as an anagram of Prefect. Both Flint and Void mention “five hundred and ninety-seven thousand million sheep” (chapters six and forty-six), which is more of Adams’ hyperbole; I use this to humorously reference the cliché of Wales containing excessive sheep.

The remaining science fiction references are to texts other than *Hitch Hikers* and they are again intentionally varied, from the obvious to the subtle: chapter twenty-three’s “Or do we wave our hands and say, ‘These aren’t the students you’re looking for?’” is a pun on the *Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope* (1977) dialogue “These aren’t the droids you’re looking for”; chapter twenty-eight’s ominous line, “Houston, we have a problem”, is from *Apollo 13* (1995); and Void’s wish for Pete to “hit 88 miles per hour and activate Doug’s flashing yellow flux capacitor” in chapter forty-five is a comic nod to *Back to the Future* (1985). There are also various references to *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991): I incorporate its dialogue in chapter thirty-one (“You can’t go around killing people” to “Because you just can’t, OK”) whilst chapter forty-two features its “All of them, I think”. The latter is John Connor’s reply inside the Cyberdyne building when the T-800 terminator asks John how many police have surrounded them outside; the line is a humorous parallel in suggesting that Void is surrounded by all of MI7. In chapter thirty-one, Void and Doug enter the medlab to find Billie-Jo using the password of 180924609, which is the registration number of the USSCSS *Nostromo* displayed on a screen at the start of *Alien* (1979). Since the film ends with this ship being destroyed in an attempt to kill the rampaging alien, 180924609 hints at Billie-Jo’s alien status. Other obscure allusions are “There’s too much fear, anger, hate and suffering” in chapter forty-six, which references *Star Wars: Episode I - The Phantom Menace* (1999) and “United Planets Cruiser C-57D”

and “NCC-1701” in chapter forty-six, which are the spaceships from *Forbidden Planet* (1956) and *Star Trek* (2009a, 2009b, 2010) respectively. Chapter forty-one from “Let me get this right” to “Am I right?” cites *Alien* (1979), *Blade Runner* (1982), *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), *Forbidden Planet* (1956), *The Terminator* (1984) and the *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* franchises; Void is remembering Doug’s films and trying to match his alien girlfriend to one.

Each intertextual reference in the chapter titles or in the body of *Void* must amuse or intrigue the reader, who has no knowledge of the reference, without detracting from the meaning of my narrative, in addition to providing the knowledgeable science fiction fanatic with amusement from their recognition of the reference. Indeed, the originality of *Void* is the unusual and interesting way in which it self-consciously combines an array of different types of humour whilst deploying the tropes of science fiction. However, as with all texts, the reader will create their own interpretations of the intertextual references, if any, and how they relate to the novel.

Contemporary comedic writing post-Adams incorporates a range of techniques that largely correspond to those in *Void*. Mills’ *The Restraint of Beasts* (Mills 1998), for example, features various incongruities to generate humour and here Mills demonstrates an incongruity of language by using “I mascot” as an oronym for “I’m a Scot” (Mills 1998, p. 80):

I noticed for the first time that Tam had a tattoo on his forearm. It consisted of a diagonal flag and a scroll bearing the words, ‘I’m a Scot’. However, the tattooist hadn’t really left himself enough room, so the words actually read ‘I mascot’.



*Void* also deploys oronyms, and other incongruities of language, as discussed above.

However, Mills' novel can be characterised by his incongruous black comedic situations and deadpan humour, which focus on the characters of Tam, Ritchie and the unnamed narrator, who all work for a Scottish fencing company. During their first assignment together they suffer a work-related accident by killing dairy farmer Mr. McCrindle with a chain winch. The characters immediately bury Mr. McCrindle in a perfunctory manner and progress to their next assignment without any consideration of notifying the police or, indeed, of how Mr. McCrindle's cows will be milked in the ensuing days. During their next assignment the characters accidentally kill sheep farmer Mr. Perkins by throwing a fence post at his head and, this too, is reported using deadpan humour: "I looked at Mr Perkins. He'd gone very quiet. In fact, he wasn't just quiet, he was dead" (Mills 1998, pp. 120-121). I use both incongruous situations and deadpan humour in *Void*, for example when Void reacts to the apparent death of Pete by saying to Doug "See, that's better. Oh" (chapter thirty-nine). Yet deadpan humour is not a technique I adopt as extensively as Mills and, moreover, since I strive to create characters the reader will sympathise with, and hopefully care about, I intentionally do not use black comedy; I did not sympathise with Tam, Ritchie and the unnamed narrator given their unrealistic and loathsome (but humorous) behaviour. However, black comedy and deadpan humour are useful techniques to foster humour and I will thus consider using these more readily in my future novels.

Given the ongoing debates surrounding the nature of science fiction, as discussed in the previous chapter, I am not surprised at the lack of consensus on the definitions and origins of humour. Indeed, what I find puzzling are the competing theories about humour and that, two thousand years after the writings of Plato and Aristotle on the subject, there is still no one general theory that can explain all instances of humour, comedy and laughter. This reflects the diverse forms of humour and how they have been considered from a

philosophical, social or psychological basis, to which the definitions at the start of this chapter allude. Moreover, and as we have seen, despite the weaknesses of the superiority theory, the incongruity theory and the relief theory as presented by thinkers such as Hobbes, Kant, Schopenhauer, Spencer and Freud, the comic writer can nevertheless exploit the contribution that each theory makes for their own work. I have shown that my own preference is for the incongruity theory and that I use linguistic incongruities, incongruities of character and also incongruous situations to create humour. I also generate humour by using intertextuality with *Hitch Hikers* and with other science fiction narratives. Therefore, combining my knowledge of humour from the films of Laurel and Hardy, Harold Lloyd and Will Hay with that gained from the *Hitch Hikers* novels and the theories of humour has enabled me to employ a variety of humorous techniques to write my debut novel, *Void*.

## Conclusions

Sullivan (2009, p. 47) defines practice-led research as entailing a significant focus on creative practice and, during my own research, I have found humour to be a fascinating subject in terms of its definitions, origins and theoretical framework, and also as a result of writing my full-length comic novel, *Void*.

I considered the films of Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, Harold Lloyd and Will Hay amusing as a child and still do so as an adult; humour has had a profound effect on my life. What has undoubtedly changed is my perception of this humour: as a child I found their slapstick, wordplay and comic characters amusing, but not much more; as an adult I enjoy their humour *and* appreciate its skilled creation. Their films taught me some of the principles of humour, namely the importance of pacing and timing, balancing humour with story and also notions about the comedy villain. Lloyd through his filmic “layering” techniques showed me how to sustain a joke through variations or complications; Laurel and Hardy and Hay demonstrated how contrasting characters can generate conflict from which humour can emerge, by featuring a supposedly superior character being undermined by a colleague or sidekick. I have tried to use these techniques by creating conflict not only between “superior” Officer Flint and “inferior” Officer Adams, but also by establishing characters such as Kate, who opposes Void in not sharing his belief in romance. Laurel and Hay wrote much of their own material and it is clear that they both shared a love of humour based on the structures of language and delighted in puns and one-liners; my ear for linguistic humour I credit to them.

Linguistic incongruities are also used by Douglas Adams in his *The Hitch Hiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* “trilogy” of five novels and the joy of reading these is the obvious delight Adams takes in the construction of his humour, especially his puns and his science

fiction ideas such as the Infinite Improbability Drive. His other linguistic techniques of bathos and recursive humour are also ones I employ in *Void*; recursive humour is intriguing because of its unusual structure and I wish to develop its use in future novels. The first two *Hitch Hikers* novels are the finest because his science fiction ideas are the most inventive and his wit is the sharpest; the absence in his later novels of the witty digressions in the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* electronic book is particularly unfortunate. Adams' parodies of the major tropes and conventions of science fiction are also effective in creating humour, because of his skill as a comic writer and his focus on material to parody that is so familiar. Indeed, if Billie-Jo's alien status had been revealed much earlier in *Void*, I would have been able to exploit the subversion of these tropes and conventions more readily, as Adams does. His comic world view characterised by the absurd is also a delight to experience and, given his creative imagination, perhaps science fiction and its close relation fantasy are the only genres in which the limits of creativity are those governed by an author's imagination; Adams' humour is clever and inventive and has yet to be bettered, possibly because as well as making the reader laugh, he creates amusing *and* interesting science fiction ideas.

It has also been fascinating to research the many humour theories that have been proposed since Plato and Aristotle to explain the nature of comedy. Considerable thinking on this issue in the ensuing centuries has led to the categorisation of these theories into the generally accepted framework of the superiority theory, incongruity theory and relief theory and, whilst these may not individually represent a comprehensive general theory of humour, they nonetheless do provide a useful theoretical framework for the comic writer. My own preference is for the incongruity theory, given its more comprehensive nature, and I have employed many incongruities of character, situation and language in *Void* to create humour. These contrasting elements must contain some logic in their incongruity, to avoid

nonsense humour, and it has been enjoyable to play with differing components to try to maximise the hilarity. Moreover, as is the case with Stan Laurel, Will Hay and Douglas Adams, I love writing jokes based on wordplay; the most effectual pun or one-liner can be simultaneously concise, powerful and indicative of character. The use of intertextuality in my own work is innovative, for me, and this technique seems particularly valuable in a longer text such as a novel. I chose Adams' *Hitch Hikers* novels since I admire his comedic skill and absurd worlds and because fragments of his text in *Void* might add subtle layers of amusement for the knowledgeable reader, whilst allowing me to use Adams' glorious absurdities to create alternative meanings. My hope is that my use of intertextuality with the other science fiction narratives will also furnish the science fiction devotee with enjoyment from their recognition of these references.

The evidence of practice-led research as a process that generates detectable research outputs is my novel, *Void*, and whilst I have not written this for any target readership, given the novel's comedy, pacing and inclusion of student characters, its principal interest might be to readers aged eighteen to fifty and to former undergraduates of any age; its intertextuality should also engage with those who have an interest in science fiction. However, the appeal of any creative work is highly subjective and a granular analysis of potential readership across gender, race or nationality is thus far more problematic.

As a debut novelist I have understandably learnt several critical aspects about the writing process itself and these relate to conception, characterisation, situations, language and decision making. The most pertinent lesson is that creating a seventy-thousand word text is neither quick nor painless and it is only now, at its completion, that the true scale of the undertaking is more readily appreciated. This process has not been aided by *Void*'s conception, which comprised the final scene of chapter three rather than the initial scene of chapter one; predicating an entire novel on the fragile idea of two students kissing in a bus

shelter is not the most efficient strategy. Indeed, I had to challenge myself by wondering who they were and what they were doing at the bus stop and, from this initial thinking, I had to construct their story, the rationale for MI7 and build the supporting characters and narrative arc. How and where to start any creative endeavour is a moot point, but that *Void* has flourished through trial and error is my most significant neophyte mistake; future novels will benefit from judicious planning.

I have learnt that characterisation is the foundation of my novel and that sufficient time needs to be allocated to establish believable characters with their own personalities, desires and physical attributes. That they can also be in conflict with another to fashion humour is a useful technique, as evidenced by Hay and Laurel and Hardy. Yet it is the balance of characters and how they serve the narrative that is of greater importance: each character should exhibit a rationale for their own existence and consideration of this necessitated the deletion of Officer Simpkins, as his comic sensibilities unbalanced the narrative and rendered him superfluous. As the protagonist, I wanted Void to be a fun and lovable character who would contrast with Kate as the confident female: their conflicts are spirited and her necessary presence as part of the team is more interesting than an all-male student ensemble. Officer Flint as the comic villain antagonist has perhaps been a little more problematic to depict, given that the equilibrium of comic versus villain is subjective; Adams' treatment of similar characters, and also of his ineffectual portrayal of women, has been expedient.

I have used my characters as a foundation to instigate humorous situations and the narrative arc of the novel emanates from Void meeting Billie-Jo. Indeed, her being captured by MI7 helped with the structure of the book and so, for me, the first half feels different to the second; the initial chapters comprise the set-up for the later scenes and thus exhibit the energy of what must occur. The films of Laurel and Hardy, Lloyd and Hay have

also been influential, as these films demonstrate how to generate humour from banal situations such as extracting a tooth or selling Christmas trees. The comedic possibilities of any situation can be a joy to ponder and, in my own work, my favourite scenes are Void and Billie-Jo flirting at the bus stop, Pete and Void inside the tent and the scene in which Pete consumes Viagra; these still make me smile. The issue of what situations to portray or ignore is ongoing with any novel but, throughout *Void*, I have chosen to write it using the premise of the house motto (“Teamwork conquers all”) as the literary equivalent of Suvin’s “cognitive logic”; each scene and chapter featuring Void and his housemates should, in some way, confirm the premise; this approach has helped me to maintain a structural focus and to eradicate otherwise superfluous scenes and chapters.

Supporting my characters and situations is language itself and I have also learnt to disentangle my own text by eliminating words, sentences and paragraphs wherever I can without a detrimental loss of meaning; whilst it is a cliché, the phrase “less is more” is nevertheless true of the writing process in my own experience. I have been influenced by Adams’ sparse writing style in his first two novels, which were developed from his radio series, and of course by the invaluable comments and feedback from my supervisors. I admit a temptation to sometimes thinking that more jokes are better than fewer and this originates from my experience of reading so-called humorous novels that have displayed a dearth of jokes. I have also discovered that there is an enormous list of writing pitfalls to avoid, such as the unintentional use of cliché or mixed metaphor, describing a character with a physical attribute in one scene that changes in another, unintended repetition and the obvious reliance on telling rather than showing. My supervisors have helped me to become a better writer but also, I hope, a more critical one and such analytical skills have made the end processes of writing easier.

There are, at times, seemingly endless decisions to make about every aspect of writing and this is especially true in the initial phases, when the fictional world's milieu and inhabitants have yet to be finalised. Moreover, since *Void* is my first novel, there are some stylistic choices that I may only be able to evaluate fully with the distance of time. For example, I decided to write the Flint chapters in third person, past tense, to offset the first person present tense *Void* narration more starkly and to position the Flint narrative in a more conventional style. Given that the final *Void* chapter begins in the past tense, I also considered that this approach would help signal that these two narratives have, in a certain sense, fused together by the novel's conclusion. If such creative choices at the beginning of the writing process are numerous, those made at its finale can also feel incessant. Indeed, no matter what story is in the writer's mind, and no matter what characters inhabit their fictional world, the final critical element to creating a publishable novel is the editing process. Editing is a parallel but often simultaneous activity to writing and each of my chapters has been drafted and re-drafted until it seems "correct": characters have been expunged and entire scenes have been merged, deleted or transferred elsewhere in the narrative. Editing one's own final work is necessarily emotionally traumatic, given the time invested in its initial creation, yet my rationale has been to truncate as much as is necessary to deliver the required "best" narrative; the reader will evaluate my efforts.



*Void*

1

You are here

I peer into my glass of flat beer trying to decide if it's half-full, half-empty or deep enough to drown in.

*MissChief321* is 26 and from Llandudno. She has long eyelashes and a perfect dentist's smile, yet no body from the neck down. She loves travel and skiing.

*ZoeX888*, 23, is a natural blonde wearing a pink necklace and floral skirt. Her hair treacles down her white blouse.

*Hothunni77* is a 24 year-old brunette holding a glass of red. She has one silver earring and two brown eyes. Sunglasses perch on her head.

Rows of coloured squares shimmer across the screen, sending a pixel-sea over my face.

*ZoeX888* lives in the next town.

I gulp more. Women want guys older than them, not twenty year-old me.

The gloom of a Welsh evening pours through my window. Tiles on the terraced houses opposite are grey and endless. I power-off my screen.

My glass is half-empty.

I traipse to the snug of the Horse and Groom, a backstreet pub near the University of Snowdon campus.

Bare bulbs and portraits of famously-dead Victorians hang above a sawdust floor. In one corner are old men, playing dominoes and hunching over their tin tankards. In another corner, Doug's leather jacket bulges around his body-builder chest.

Doug: one of my undergraduate housemates, also twenty, but studying engineering, not sociology.

'It's great to be back here, lad,' he says. 'Need to make our last year the best.'

I slump opposite him. His jaw's solid enough to make a boxer weep.

Doug unzips a jacket pocket and starts stacking sugar lumps next to his glass. The black curls of his hair sit on his shoulders.

'Any luck on that site?' he says.

'Some interesting profiles, if they're not fakes. But no, not yet.'

Doug raises his lone eyebrow. He lost his other in an arm wrestle with a blowtorch.

'I know it's as fashionable as chlamydia,' I say, 'but I want to love and be loved.'

'Freshers' Ball tomorrow night. 1980s fancy dress.' Doug lowers the final sugar lump to form a pyramid of crystalline white. 'Where you met Heather.'

I study a beer mat.

'She wasn't the one,' I say. I drag a pen from my pocket and doodle numbers, letters, hangman. 'I guess I only stayed with Heather because I thought it'd be easier to find another girl while I already had one. Like jobs.'

Doug plucks lumps from his sugar pyramid and drops them into his glass. There are explosions of gold bubbles.

'I must find her, Doug. The girl for me.'

The snug door judders back and Pete appears in a bottle-green cardigan, clutching a book with Churchill on its cover.

Pete: my second housemate. Seventy years-old and a trainee historian.

He strolls over, leaning on table corners for support. The bare bulbs shine on his balding head.

‘Gentlemen, may I say, it is magnificent to be here once more celebrating what students do best.’

‘Aye,’ says Doug, slurping his lager.

‘I mean studying, Douglas.’ Pete straightens his cardigan. He opens his book and taps a page. ‘Our final year as undergraduates starts tomorrow, so it shall be our last opportunity to assimilate knowledge.’

Doug picks up a beer mat and, with the skill of an engineer, rips it into perfect quarters.

The shreds are like a torn-up exam paper. Why return for the final year? I should be searching for her, not enduring Pete’s prattle. What does *he* know about love?

‘Education is important,’ says Pete. ‘As are our studies.’ He wags a finger at portraits of Lloyd George, Telford and Brunel. ‘Consider any famous person. Only with great determination did they achieve anything.’

‘I worked over the summer.’ I flip my beer mat over and over. ‘Temping.’

‘You too must now concentrate on academia. Tell me, after all of your lectures, what is the most important truth you have learned?’

‘Never snore on the front row.’

‘Does your unopened letter not signify anything?’

‘What letter?’

‘The one in our house. It has the University postmark, so it may concern your examination results.’

The exams were back in the summer when I thought I might pass my course (briefly) and when I’d last made love to Heather (briefly).

Pete leans towards me. ‘My dear boy, your indolence risks ejection from University.’

Grey foam slides down my glass. ‘It’s our first night together after the summer. There’s time—’

‘No, there is not.’ Pete shuts his book. ‘For after graduation your career shall be quite different. There shall be no more subsidised alcohol, lying in bed until the evening or those ridiculous parlour games storing coins in your underpants.’

‘Not even if I work in advertising?’

Pete’s wrinkled fingers crook around his lemonade.

‘Void, have you ever considered a career lasting more than a single day?’

‘No, but your sermons last more than a single day. You’re becoming as predictable as one of your scratched 78s, and just as inflexible. I didn’t plan to hang off the failure cliff. And I know I have to make my final year count.’

‘Do you?’

‘Yeah, I do. But it’s . . .’ I shrug. ‘I shudder if I even hear the words “Monday” and “work”. I can’t think of a more terrifying combination.’

‘Midget vampire dentists,’ says Doug.

Doug took to soaking sugar lumps in LSD two years ago. It was around the time he started dating Kate.

I gaze at my beer-mat scribbles. At numbers, letters and a stick man with a noose dangling over him. Why had Heather ended it? I'm funny. Reliable. Honest. The things women say they want.

The snug door bursts open, wafting the stale air.

My third housemate and also my landlady: Kate. She's a part-time psychology postgraduate and research assistant. She's thirty.

She's carrying a tray of beers and a packet of peanuts. She curves her scarlet 'fcuk 24/7' T-shirt and ripped denim hot pants between the tables, teasing their edges with her thighs. The old men in the corner ogle. Whisper. She slides the tray across our table, demolishing Doug's sugar lump stockade.

'Katharine,' says Pete, 'you appear somewhat flushed. Where precisely have you been?'

'Stag party upstairs,' she says. 'Military theme. Gorgeous uniforms.' She hips onto a chair next to Pete. She winks at me. 'The sailors loved my hot pants.'

'Nautical, but nice?' I say.

I open the peanuts.

'So, Void. Not that I'm interested, but how's *your* sex life?'

I spill some peanuts.

'Heather ditched you?'

'Last month. She asked me if I loved her. And when I didn't reply, she started crying.'

'You're joking?' She bites her purple lip. 'How long did it last?'

'Ten months and twenty-two days.'

'*Per-lease*. You're with someone that long, then it finishes, just like that?'

'My next girlfriend is going to be *the* relationship.'

‘What, eleven months?’

‘No, a lifetime.’

Doug spent the summer in his workshop playing with his new engineering toys. I read the *Highway Code* and failed my driving test. Pete studied. Kate enjoyed not listening to my childish jokes.

She and Pete leave and, two hours and five more beers later, Doug and I wobble outside. We take a shortcut through Owen Park, past a refurbished Victorian bandstand guarded by traffic cones. We flop down in an avenue of silver birches. We stare upwards, saying nothing. I cuddle a stray traffic cone. A comet scratches the sky, competing with the glare of the moon and the glimmer of stars in the cosmic dot-to-dot.

Still drunk and still horizontal, I remember to blink. No degree equals no job. Years staring at a screen in a call-centre.

I wrench myself up off the ground. ‘Why do I listen to you? You going to answer?’

There’s no reply from the traffic cone.

Doug appears from behind a tree. ‘And?’

‘I’ve had better advice from my beer mat.’

‘Ask a different question.’ Doug zips up his trousers. ‘See you back home.’

I watch him cross the moonlit wilderness.

A lone owl swoops, its flapping wings the only sounds to stroke the night. I clutch the traffic cone. Lurch into the avenue of trees.

Pete’s right. I must study.

The moon shines onto the branches. I zigzag around a corner but stumble over exposed roots. I spend an instant hanging in the air before smashing into the ground. I roll

over. My knees throb. I drag myself up but fall into a tree. My fingers scrape its bark. I sense something. Behind me.

*Breathing.*

‘Good evening.’

‘You’re . . . a tad early for Halloween,’ I say.

‘Don’t be afraid.’

‘Isn’t that what all axe murderers say? If you want cash, don’t bother cleaving my skull. I’m a student.’

The figure steps into the moonlight.

Naked.



2

his two hundredth birthday

Officer Flint stopped typing and sat back in his leather chair. He yawned. He looked through his solitary office window at the Hertfordshire night beyond the MI7 facility. Three days without sleep, he closed his eyes yet saw everything: the guards with sub-machine-guns patrolling between the perimeter fences; the red LED of CCTV cameras glowing on the security watchtowers. Always on, always ready. His fingers twitched across a screen on his desk. His watch shone 09:39 hours, +17°C.

Flint's wallet contained a photograph of a woman in her thirties. She had blue eyes and deep auburn hair that covered her ears. She was a woman with happiness across her face. Flint stared at her.

The door opened and Officer Adams entered in a white tent of a shirt. 'You've not spent another night here? Not on your fortieth? What did your wife say?'

'Ex-wife.'

Surveying the room, Adams locked onto the black paper bin overflowing with plastic cups and a vodka bottle. 'Been celebrating your new romantic freedom?'

'I require coffee.'

'You could go speed-dating or join a—'

‘You’re my personal assistant, not my nanny.’ Flint slapped his desk and a stack of interrogation reports toppled to the floor. ‘Black, three sugars.’

Kneeling, Adams lifted the reports onto the desk.

‘I have slept in here on a diet of coffee, vodka and Twix chocolate bars because I am an officer of MI7. I am the grade A2, you are the grade B3.’ Flint reclined in his chair until the padded leather massaged his backbone. ‘I do not need my bed, sleep or motherly advice from a subordinate. I *do* need coffee. Black, three sugars.’

‘That’s if the machine’s been fixed, sir.’ Adams thumbed the order and a skin-thin plastic cup plunged down the chute. The machine hummed, beeped, relinquished its offering. ‘Does it taste normal?’

Flint swilled the liquid. He bent over the side of his desk, retching brown gobs into the paper bin. ‘Yes, yes, perfectly normal.’

‘Anyway, sir, we have been notified of multiple incidents. One has been formally reported to Snowdon Constabulary.’

Flint wiped his mouth. ‘I don’t care about Snowdon Constabulary. Remind them that MI7 has jurisdiction over any sensitive incidents reported to us. They must never become public knowledge. Question. What do we know?’

‘It’s odd. The descriptions of the attackers are identical, but some incidents happened at the same time across different locations. The formal report is by a farmer.’

‘You are joking?’

‘No, sir. Snowdon Constabulary took a statement from a Geraint Evans, a local dairy farmer at Manor House Farm, in Snowdonia National Park. It mentions beer bottles and pizza boxes. This Evans says he was attacked in a stone ruin.’

‘Prepare my car.’

3

five hundred entirely naked women

Floorboards creak, glass squeaks and I open my eyelids: digital clock, single-glazed window dripping with condensation and a strange lurking shadow.

‘United won again.’ Doug stands at the window, scanning the Victorian terraced houses of Brackenbury Road like a Terminator on guard. ‘Want to know the score?’

I prop my pillow behind my back. The same bed that for the last two years has moulded itself to my body and no one else’s. An ancient mattress where the springs depress so much it curves like a banana.

Socks, jeans and unpacked boxes scatter across my carpet with bomb-site precision. My bookcase leans: discs of *Groundhog Day*, *Sleepless In Seattle* and *A Matter of Life and Death* share space with curling *Empire* magazines.

Doug’s wearing an oil-stained navy blue boiler suit. ‘You OK, lad?’

‘Can we . . .’ I rub my forehead. ‘Not do the talking thing?’

He steps back from the window. ‘Hangover?’

‘No thanks, already got one.’

‘Shouldn’t have attacked my homebrew last night then. Remember what you said to Kate?’

‘I have a snapshot of falling over and scraping my knees. Nothing else.’

I wipe my eyes.

My screen sits on my desk in a field of dust. Above it is a *Casablanca* poster of Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman, cheek to cheek in each other's arms. The poster shivers in a draught.

'But,' I say, 'if I told Kate she's related to Scrooge or has the sexual appetite of a revolving door, it was the beer chatting. It's much better at it than me. Anyway, she'll forgive me.'

Doug passes me a glass. 'You're still drunk.'

'I hope this isn't her Hawaiian fruit juice. Otherwise we'll both be wearing rope ties when she finds out.'

Doug pulls out a hand grenade from his boiler suit. He lobbs it into the air and catches it.

'Latest acquisition?' I say.

'One of twelve.' He taps the side of his nose. 'My best supplier.'

'You're here to show off your new toys?'

'Nope.' Doug whirls an envelope around like a Samurai sword. 'Postman Pat party time.'

'Is that it? The one Pete mentioned?'

'Found it in her cupboard. Hidden behind her rice and tuna tins.'

'How devious. No wonder Kate's studying psychology.'

The envelope's dotted with Doug's fingerprints. And the University of Snowdon postmark, like Pete said. It trembles between my fingers. I don't know its contents, my destiny or the Man United score.

'What's the date?' I say.

'Tenth.'

‘Of *October*. But this postmark’s August the first. Kate’s hidden this for over two months. She’s sabotaging my academic career. She’s well out of order. That’s my job.’

My hands are sweating. I tear into the envelope. The letter’s white. White, the colour of salvation. The letter’s triple-folded. The University logo’s in the top corner.

*Dear Mr A V Wilson . . .*

‘And?’ says Doug.

‘It says . . . I have an exam a week today. And if I don’t pass . . . oh, I’m out. It’s my own fault. I should have seen the warning signs. Last year my tutor said I was underachieving and not listening to her. I think.’

‘Let’s play one of Pete’s games then. Monopoly?’ Doug stabs at the floor.

‘Downstairs? Take your mind off it.’

‘I can’t.’

I lean over the bed and my head pulses with the pressure. My fingers find *Introduction to Sociology*, the Ken Browne textbook I used to amass my entire sociological knowledge, one morning.

I nestle back into my soft reassuring pillows. ‘What’s the time?’

‘5PM.’

‘Phew, I thought I’d wasted the whole day. You know, over the summer, well my dad kept banging on about me getting a job after graduation.’

Doug engraves ‘MUFC’ into the condensation: the window squeaks again.

‘I might have a debt mountain even Sir Edmund Hillary couldn’t conquer, but if I pass my degree I might be able to find a job other than flipping burgers. Which means the Freshers’ Ball has to be my last night of fun.’

Doug marches out of my room. He’ll be back.

My red dressing gown swishes on my closing door. I wrap myself up in it and slurp the remains of the juice. I collapse onto my bed.

The letter. The bleakness of each assembled word, solid and black.

I peer into my glass.

Deep enough.

A hinge to the living room door has dropped off. A coffee table tilts on unequal legs thanks to Doug's turbo chainsaw. On the table a *Times* crossword leans against an opened packet of biscuits. Doug's homebrew barrel sits beneath.

'Good afternoon,' says Pete from his easy chair. He's wearing a tweed deerstalker hat and cape.

'Afternoon,' I say. 'So you're going as him again?'

'Tonight's Ball is an eighties night, but it failed to specify *which* eighties.

Therefore I shall attend as Sherlock Holmes, whose first appearance in *A Study in Scarlet* was published in 1887.'

'Shame you don't have a time machine.'

'Indeed, for the London of the 1880s is almost as intriguing as my specific interests in the First and Second World Wars. Moreover, since secondary sources are blighted with inherent limitations, to experience the emotion of conflict first-hand would be perfect.'

Some of Kate's Mickey Mouse teddy collection line the TV stand behind Pete.

Across his lap is a book with Stalin's photo on the cover.

'So how is World War Two?' I say. 'Let me know if we win on penalties.'

'That phrase is an aberration the careful historian eschews, for the correct term is the Second World War.'



Despite this being classic Pete pedanticism, he *is* talking to me. In our first-year together in this house, I once came downstairs and found him slumped in his chair, suffering from sleep apnoea. Or at least I thought he was asleep. It transpired his pacemaker was connecting to Doug's network and downloading an update.

'Tea?' says Pete.

There's a stench of damp leaves, but Kate's cactus is the only plant, in a pot on a windowsill of flaking paint. 'What's that smell? Is it . . . you?'

'It is Golden Acorns, a speciality tea with a subtle nuance of the timberland. My palate demands only the most delicate of flavours. Jaffa Cake?'

'No thanks.'

'Are you here to apologise for last night?'

I shrug.

'Your priority should be your studies.' Pete takes the biscuit. 'Never tolerate failure.'

'OK then, how about . . . "deferred success"? Look, I know I sometimes see the road to success as under construction, but I am sorry.' I sit on the split leather sofa and foam pellets spill out towards Kate's teddies. 'Next week I have to write a five-thousand word essay in exam conditions. On Karl Marx and his theory of value. I failed last time, so after the Ball I promise to put my studies first. If you'll help me revise.'

'But of course. Moreover, before we leave tonight I shall regale you with my knowledge of the 1980s.'

Doug strides into the room holding his frayed *Counterespionage: Advanced Techniques* manual and a pistol.

'Like it?' he says.

'Beretta 92FS?' I say.

‘Aye, 9mm semi-auto. You’re getting smart at recognising my collection. But you should see my other stuff. Hydrogen cyanide, nitromethane and my lawnmower projects.’

‘You’ve been doing that lawnmower thing for two years.’

‘It’s engineered for combat. Be finished tomorrow.’

‘Yeah and you’ve been saying that for two years. I bet you need more Sellotape and swearing.’

‘Need more beer. Before we go out.’ Doug kicks his homebrew barrel. ‘Hear about Kate’s new motor? Her birthday present is going to be delivered on Wednesday.’

‘Yes,’ says Kate in the doorway, ‘and if anyone even so much as looks at my Mercedes, I’ll have them arrested, understand?’

Her hair’s tied with a white bow. She’s wearing lace fingerless gloves and a black mini-skirt and fishnets.

‘Peter, sweetie, I’m trying to look like Madonna but I have a clothing dilemma. Is this my best outfit?’

‘Katharine, this is the fifth time you have asked and you are indeed magnificent.’

Kate looks me up and down.

‘Void, it’s fancy dress, and we’re meant to, like, be 1980s celebs. Even Doug with his curls is Brian May from Queen, but who are you supposed to be? You look miserable.’

‘I’m supposed to look miserable,’ I say. ‘I’m Morrissey.’

Brian May, Morrissey, Madonna and Sherlock Holmes infiltrate the glamour of the Students’ Union Freshers’ Ball, via the 42 bus. A bar on the first floor stretches out beneath flashing neon; students swarm around in columns five deep. Synthesized music

bounces off posters of red Porsches, Filofaxes, Pac-Man and mobile phones as tall as my sociology textbook. Overhead are diagonal banners: 'Welcome to the 1980s!!!'

Kate uses a brutal combination of feminine charm and elbows to battle through the bar queue.

Before we left, Pete didn't regale me with facts about the 1980s; he enveloped me within a self-perpetuating tornado of economic theory and political ideology. I'm now an expert on Black Monday, the Falklands War and the miners' strike; I'm a certified master of the 'Greed Is Good' decade, when British Steel, British Telecom, British Gas and every other company with 'British' in its title was privatised by men in stripy shirts, with bleached blond hair. Yet Pete the historian didn't know the casualty figures for the VHS vs Betamax war, how many kids POKEd their ZX Spectrums or who shot JR Ewing. Nor could he explain the significance of rain that is somehow purple, moon boots or four teenage mutant anthropomorphic turtles.

Kate lowers our tray of drinks to our table. For one beautiful moment we all lift our glasses to our last ever Ball.

Students are milling around in 1980s fancy dress, trying to look sophisticated. I'm trying not to imagine being ejected from uni. Trying not to think about where I'll be a year today and which type of burger I'll be flipping.

After a while, Kate faces us.

'I'm so going to find me a Richard Gere lookalike tonight,' she says. 'Someone in a uniform. Tight, pristine.' She glares at me. 'But don't think a loser like you will find anyone. You know sod all about women.' Kate stands. 'You're my tenant, nothing more.' She snatches her glass. 'Bye Peter.'

Pete sips his lemonade.

Doug stacks sugar lumps on the table in a triangular fortress.

There are distant flashes.

‘Who is that peculiar fellow with a beard?’ says Pete. ‘The one holding a Rubik’s Cube and a camera with what appears to be a prophylactic on his head?’

‘Oh, that’s Ed,’ I say, ‘the *Snow* photographer. You never met him? He takes the photos for the student paper and wears the condom to break the ice. His dad’s the editor of the *Chronicle*, so he’s doing the *Snow* shoots to gain experience. Ed told me last year he was still waiting for his major scoop. He wanted to take photos of alcoholic priests in a Catholic church, but his dad wouldn’t let him.’

‘I am not at all surprised if he wore a prophylactic.’

‘No, you’d like Ed. He’s the great determination type. He has his own darkroom and even uses vintage 35mm cameras. Says the quality’s more authentic.’

Pete watches Ed taking photos of students. He finishes his lemonade.

‘I am grateful for your invitation tonight,’ says Pete, ‘but I do have the final chapter of my dissertation to draft.’

‘Don’t go,’ I say, ‘the Ball’s just started. And it’s our last. Plus you might meet the woman of your dreams.’

Sherlock Holmes doffs his deerstalker.

‘I shall never meet her again,’ he says and sleuths off into the fluorescent sunset.

Doug points to the floor. ‘C’mon.’

We walk down a cement staircase towards the ground floor dancing area. With each step the music rumbles louder.

‘Hear about the comet last night?’ says Doug. ‘Crater should be mega. Me mates Gaz, Baz and Daz are going there tonight.’

‘And miss all this?’ I say.

I grip a door handle; it throbs.

I open the door to a shockwave of music and three giant glitterballs above the dance floor. Multi-coloured laser beams shimmer into an arena of sweat and perfume, where lads wearing stonewashed 501s confront girls in white 'FRANKIE SAYS RELAX' T-shirts. A DJ cranks up the bass and students wriggle like they're being electrocuted.

I see-saw my empty glass.

My table overlooks the dance floor. It's dark and humid. The dry ice machine seems to be broken, because a thick cloud lurks on the dance floor at knee height. A blond wearing a red headband moonwalks into it. Legwarmers and shirts with braces pass by.

'Hi,' says Ed. His teeth poke through his beard. 'You still read *Snow*?'

'Sure, but it's full of crosswords and editorials on debt. Your photos are the best bits.'

'Take yours?' Ed aims his 35mm camera and flashgun. Click, flash, motorised whirr. 'Thanks. This will be in the first issue, the Freshers' Special. Out Wednesday, after the Fayre.'

A brunette wades out of the dry ice cloud and her hair's crisscrossed black with moisture. A redhead wearing a ra-ra skirt and hoop earrings takes her slot.

Doug returns with a tray of six beers. Our extensive homebrew sampling before we left mustn't count. He drains his first beer in one.

So do I.

The DJ boosts the volume and more shoulder pads and mullet hair surge onto the dance floor. Steam rises from the packed bodies. I catch a faint whiff of armpit overtime.

A figure floats through the dry ice. She's a blonde with wavy hair. She's a . . . Margaret Thatcher?

Her hair's a solid swept-back helmet of a wig. She's wearing giant pearl earrings and a double-breasted blue suit with a skirt well below the knees. Her suit is so tight it's as

if God's Gorgeous Lab has dripped one stunning molecule into her outfit after another. There's a floppy bow at the blouse neck but, thanks to shoulder pads, her shoulders are long and straight enough to double as aircraft carriers.

'It's me, Billie-Jo,' she says. 'You seemed pensive before. Sad. You OK?'

I glance about.

'Sorry,' I say, 'have I pinched your table?'

'Perhaps you need counselling?'

'Er, hi. Who did you say you were? The welfare officer?'

'I'm doing English. First-year. What about you?'

'Me? Third-year. Sociology, sometimes.'

Colours shimmer over a handbag strapped to her forearm. It isn't a palm-sized clutch bag designed for lipstick and a compact: it's a bank-vault of a handbag designed for gold bars.

She gazes around.

'I keep getting odd looks,' she says. 'Like everyone hates me. Is my hair OK?'

'You look great.'

'Must be my outfit then.' Her suit is blue tweed. She has more curves than a rollercoaster. 'Why would people hate that? Do you like it? My pussy bow?'

Doug chokes on his beer.

'Your what?' I say.

'Pussy bow blouse. It's so feminine, I love it. I wanted to wear pearls as well, but thought this and a necklace would be too much. I prefer skirts to trousers and do love stilettos, but what girl can dance in those? So, boring low heels it is. What do you think?'

I look at Doug and back to her.

'I'm not a fashion guru,' I say. 'Not even with menswear.'

‘That’s OK,’ she says. ‘But for next time, would you prefer a pearl necklace or the pussy?’

I’m speechless.

Her skin seems pale, with an almost ethereal beauty. She stares deep into my eyes.

‘You’re cute,’ she says.

I’m going to explode.

‘Looking for a dance?’

‘Er, no. Not really. Just looking. Sorry.’

She smiles and her cheekbones tighten to circles.

‘I love a joker,’ she says. ‘What’s your name?’

‘My name? Well, it’s Void.’

‘I like you, Void. Want to dance, 1980s style? Assuming *you* aren’t in stilettos?’

Doug shakes his head at her.

‘Not too old for a Fresher, are you?’ she says to me.

My beer goggles need adjusting from Fantasy to Reality. She’s mistaking me for someone else. Or chatting to me for a bet.

‘My handbag won’t bite.’ She holds out her hand. ‘Promise.’

Doug raises his glass. ‘Another round?’

Before I can decide, she grasps my hand and we’re under the spinning glitterballs and shouting at each others’ ears. I discover her name really is Billie-Jo. I also discover break-dancing with a beer glass is my worst idea since sending my pregnant cousin that Get Well Soon card. We chat. We laugh. I think I’m swaying. There’s the boom of some 1980s power ballad Pete hasn’t told me about; she makes me lose the glass and gain her waist.

She says she noticed me earlier, presumably when I was upstairs with the others. I should be flattered. I am; I have my own stalker. Yet I know I'll soon be surrounded by her girlfriends. They'll point at me and snigger and tell Billie-Jo she's won her bet by enticing a guy even whilst dressed as Margaret Thatcher. I don't care; she's friendly and sweet and lovely. Wow. An impossibly friendly, sweet and lovely Margaret Thatcher. And, right now, she's with me.

Students surround us in the dry ice cloud. Some bounce through it like decapitated heads on a trampoline. Time disappears. After a while we cuddle in hypnotic strobe lights. Or am I leaning on her? Beer scaffold?

There's more chatter. More of her laughter at my lame jokes. One moment of perfection slurs into the next until I'm sweating like an orphan in Toys "Я" Us on Christmas Eve.

Midnight sneaks off and we flow outside with the crowd. The night air cools my hot forehead. My ears are ringing. We walk-talk off campus. Hold hands. There's a light drizzle; an autumnal mist. We retreat to an open-air bus shelter that stinks of diesel.

Nowhere near the Students' Union and nowhere near sober, I blink into life.

'What's a nice girl like you doing in a bus shelter like this?' I say.

'I took a wrong turn. I was looking for a nuclear bunker.'

'Oh, you're the romantic type?'

'Void, you have no idea how exciting concrete is to a girl. There's nothing like it, except the inside of a bus shelter or coal-fired power station.'

'I'm guessing Margaret Thatcher was only inside a coal-fired power station to shut it down.'

Billie-Jo twirls her handbag in the rain. It's black and shiny.

'Why do I feel as though I've known you for ever?'



‘Because,’ she says, ‘we’re similar. We love positivity and care about others. We share a sense of humour. Plus both Morrissey and Margaret Thatcher are rabid socialists.’ She’s smiling, but her damp wig isn’t. ‘And we share a strong emotional connection. I felt it when I saw you and it’s grown as we’ve chatted. Wait, that’s wrong. One is a socialist and one is rabid. Yes, that’s right. Like my outfit? You can see it better out here.’

A street light bathes the contours of her suit orange. Despite her out-of-date clothes, there’s an elegance about her. A natural warmth.

‘You have an exquisite body,’ I say, ‘up there with somebody and anybody.’

‘I love a funny guy. I do like you. Want to kiss me?’

‘I feel the connection too but we’ve just met. I’m not that kind of boy. Perhaps if we start dating I’ll submit a formal request. In writing, addressed to you and copied to your dad and everything.’

She clasps my hand.

I turn and offer her my cheek.

‘I’m not that kind of boy either,’ she says. ‘You turn if you want to. The lady’s not for turning.’

‘Kiss me in this bus shelter?’ The rain’s bouncing off the tarmac. ‘Call me old-fashioned, but I do have a rule never to be intimate on a first date. And what if the bus arrives? Or a lecturer turns up? That would be terrible. They might talk to me.’

‘If we don’t kiss, I’ll have to break the promise about my handbag.’ She leans in. ‘It’s carnivorous when released. Loves a three-course meal of liberals.’

Her lips engulf mine; I guzzle a cocktail of adrenaline, anticipation and diesel fumes.

‘Well OK,’ I say, ‘maybe more guideline than rule?’

People appear through the layers of rain, in a bus shelter on the opposite side of the road.

Billie-Jo pats my thigh.

‘Don’t,’ I say.

‘Why not?’

‘It feels wrong. Not here. Not in public.’

She squeezes my bum.

‘No, you shouldn’t. You mustn’t. You’ll make me rabid.’

She giggles.

I gulp. Retreat into the bus shelter shadows.

She cuddles me. Kisses me again.

Only now, I want her to. Need her to.

Soft kisses spark between our lips. Her tongue darts in and out of my mouth and I fight memories of old girlfriends and toothpaste commercials.

I shut my eyes. Swallow vast breaths. This is glorious. This is perfection: Margaret snogging Morrissey. This evening must never end. Nothing can spoil this.

Click, flash, motorised whirr.

4

In, as you say, the mud

Officer Flint's satnav displayed a zoomed-in portion of Wales. He drove through country lanes in his armour-plated car. Fat tyres rumbled on narrow tarmac. In Snowdonia National Park, trees flicked past below a scattering of grey clouds.

Flint steered onto a track. Mountains loomed. Diagonal rain whipped the land. He bumped along, towards a stone ruin. In the middle was a wooden door. Above, slate roof tiles.

Flint opened his car door. The Welsh air was sharp. The rain felt cold and thick, redolent of unwanted childhood stew. A gust carried a stench of manure to a horizon green and brown and annoyingly uneven. Sheep and cattle loitered.

Flint approached the ruin. Trees surrounded it. Leaves covered what was left of the roof. Searching for evidence, he paced around the ruin. Rain sprayed his face. His blond hair dribbled. He completed three circuits, paused at the front. The wooden door had no lock. No bolts. Its bottom edge was split, exposed by the elements.

Inside, shafts of light penetrated through missing roof tiles. Ceiling beams were exposed, dripping. Tucked in one corner, a bird's nest. Wet leaves obscured the ground. Flint took measured steps across last season's discarded wallpaper. Among broken tiles

and fresh mud were no empty beer bottles or pizza boxes. No remnants of recent human activity. Was this Evans a liar?

On a screen in his dashboard, Flint scrolled through menus. He selected 'Maps' and a question mark blinked. Rain crawled down the windscreen, trying to escape. Flint checked his mirrors and over his shoulders. He typed his password: a map of Wales glowed with military accuracy. The screen magnified, coordinates flashed.

A red line crept across the screen and highlighted *Manor House Farm*.

5

usually obscenely biological

I'm sitting in bed, thinking about her. I have no choice; I see her face. I see her smile and the arch of her eyebrows. Condensation flows down my window in streaks. I see fine blonde hair. Freckles. The glimmer of her eyes.

The essay's on my duvet. Its creased pages are straining against the corner staple. The paragraphs are expertly plagiarised and were the ones I used to revise for my exams. Exams I failed.

I drag myself up and fold the essay back to the first page. My palm brushes over five intersecting coffee-ring stains I'd assembled to look like the Olympic emblem. 'Karl Marx was a philosopher and revolutionary thinker whose ideas became more pervasive when, in 1868, Fredrick Engels advocated—'

Karate kicks spin over to my bed; my *Casablanca* poster ripples in the turbulence.

'Want to hear the gossip?' says Doug, not out of breath. 'Hey, what you doing?'

'Revising for my exam. Tonight, too. Jumping scissor kicks?'

'*Flying* jumping scissor kicks. Now black belt, third dan.' Doug points at my essay.

'How's it going?'

'It's being propelled by apathy. I can't concentrate, I feel ill.'

'Because of revising?'

‘Because I’ve been awake since eight and haven’t eaten.’ I yawn. ‘What time is it?’

‘Eleven.’ Doug scratches his stubble. ‘Lad, revising for three hours is a winner.’

‘Yeah it is. So it’s a shame I only started at five to eleven. I wish I wasn’t so lazy.’

I lie back under my duvet.

‘I see her everywhere,’ I say.

‘The wench last night?’

‘Is fantastic. She’s the one, Doug. We danced and talked and the hours disappeared.’ I bite the top of my essay. ‘I can’t believe I’ve found her. Billie-Jo’s lovely. Pretty too. If I’d been wearing sunglasses they wouldn’t have steamed up, they’d have melted.’

The blue of Doug’s boiler suit blurs into the white of my essay.

‘I’m meeting her at the Fayre, at twelve.’ I yawn again. ‘We should ask Pete to tag along, but I suppose he’s already camped out in the library.’

‘Aye, meeting us there.’

‘What about Kate, our beloved lady of land?’

Doug shoves his hands into his boiler suit.

‘Come on, you can’t split up the team. Not in our final year. Not after Nevada. Let’s say hi.’

Saying hi involves the living room, Doug standing behind me and lots and lots of paper: yellow Post-It notes, green index cards and pieces of white A4 smother the carpet, coffee table and Pete’s easy chair. Even Kate’s cactus is enjoying the dead tree love, hugging a Post-It note.

‘What’s all this?’ I say. ‘Recycling?’

Kate’s belly-down on the sofa in a black T-shirt and jeans. And more paper.

‘Kettle’s boiled,’ she says, not looking up. ‘Peter and I had a cuppa before he left.’



‘We haven’t got time for coffee.’

Her legs bend into an upside-down V-shape. ‘There’s some cookies in the kitchen.’

‘Baking duties already? Impressive.’

‘On the left, next to the microwave. Help yourself.’

‘Thanks, maybe later. So, all this lot? Recycling?’

‘Pre-signed membership forms,’ says Kate, twiddling a red pen in her hand. ‘And minutes of meetings I need to type up as President of the Stop Animal Cruelty Society. I fight for what I believe in.’ She stares through her fringe. ‘You should try it.’

‘The Freshers’ Fayre’s on. Coming?’

‘With you?’

‘And Doug.’

She cackles.

Doug dips under the doorway and plugs the gap. He hurls a sugar lump into his mouth.

‘Can you believe it,’ I say, ‘our last ever Fayre?’ I sit in Pete’s easy chair. ‘It started at ten.’

Kate’s feet clap together. ‘Actually, for your information, I had, like, another clothing dilemma. So I’m running way late.’

I think about Billie-Jo. About leaving the Ball hand in hand, swinging the swing of young lovers. I peel off yellow Post-it notes from the chair. She loves me, she loves me lots.

‘But wasn’t the Ball totally awesome?’ says Kate. She inserts her pen between her lips. ‘Last night was so exciting.’ She slides the pen in and out. Twice. ‘Not that I believe you, but I hear you pulled. And a woman this time, not a traffic cone.’

‘She isn’t a woman, she’s *the* woman.’

Kate winches a mousy-brown eyebrow. ‘Yeah, right. Did you have to knock her unconscious first, like Chloroform Julie?’

Chloroform Julie is the name Kate gave to Doug’s sister, after Doug chloroformed Julie and hid her in my wardrobe ‘for a laugh’.

I grasp an index card from the carpet. I shred it.

‘Whatever,’ says Kate with a wobble of her head. She plucks a glass of water from the carpet debris like a magician’s rabbit from a hat. ‘I’d prefer my fruit juice but someone’s opened my carton and drunk most of it. You do realise it’s imported from Hawaii?’

‘I’ll go to your veggie shop and buy you another.’

‘I’ll write you a list, but if you steal my juice again I’ll have you hanged—’

A pounding noise. Silence. The doorbell pulsates the original *Dr Who* theme across time.

Kate slides off the sofa with a scowl.

I turn to Doug.

‘Let’s find Billie-Jo.’

Doug and I are sitting in campus at the top of some white-edged steps. Monolithic concrete buildings surround us and thrust towards the sun. We’re watching and waiting. We’re playing the roles of the veteran third-year undergraduates who know it all, the student equivalent of the war correspondents who have witnessed everything.

There are a series of posters over an archway ahead of us: one says ‘FRESHER’S FAYRE TODAY’ in bold red letters. Pete must hate the positioning of that apostrophe. Below us, sunshine and students saturate a gigantic oval of sport and leisure stands covered

in banners. Every year it's the same chaotic banter. Society members at each stand are busy handing out leaflets and chatting, trying to enlist new recruits. Elected by students *for* students, each society promises so much intellectual fun, each one searching for truth, wisdom and Budweiser.

I point to the Astronomy Society stand, which has a screen and a mechanical model of the Solar System. 'You joining this lot again?'

'After them buggers booted me out?' says Doug.

'Oh yeah, I remember. To be fair you can't blame the AstroSoc. Not after that trip to the observatory. Their president transmitted "Peace and goodwill from planet Earth" into space and then you sent "Humans nuke mutant star goats".'

Doug sniggers.

'So, your projects?'

'Almost finished. Need more dosh though.'

'Rigging the doorbell to explode again should be top of your To Do list.'

Students pass us on the steps, laden down with carrier bags and expectations.

'I don't believe it,' I say, 'my tongue's dry.'

'Can't be nervous, lad. Already met her.'

'Yeah, but that was after your homebrew and more beer. When I'd tasted that courage imported from Holland. Last night I was on cocksure autopilot as she was doing the flying. Now I'll see her for who she really is. I'm sober.'

'*She's* sober.'

'Thanks. So, what's the plan? It's half eleven and I can't see her. I don't have her number. And can we fit in the canteen? I need some water and food. A pasty. Pie. Anything. Too much beer last night.'

Doug fingers his barren eyebrow patch. 'Reckon we split up. Meet back here at twelve. If we can't find your wench, Gaz, Baz and Daz might know. They're trainee journos and owe me some favours. Later.' He pushes into the mass of bodies.

Students chat around me the same as that October morning two years ago, when I ambled about the campus as a new University of Snowdon undergraduate. Back when I was carefree. Debt-free. Before I really knew Doug, Pete and Kate. Before I knew anything. Some things never change.

In the distance: a lit match head of blonde.

She glances to one side. It's Billie-Jo.

I slither through the shifting crowd. I begin to catch her.

A wall of rugby players blocks me.

Retreat.

There's a banner draped over the front of another stand, offering free T-shirts. The adjacent stand is enticing freshers with promises of drinking games and orgies. What lunacy oozes from the Puritan Society.

I try to check faces, but I'm heaved sideways in the shuffling bodies.

I spot Billie-Jo again, only this time she's at the other end of the Fayre. I wave. She doesn't see me.

'We're the Film Society,' says an asthmatic voice. It's a man dressed in black, in a Darth Vader mask and cape. He's holding a lightsaber. 'Want to join?'

'Thanks for asking,' I say, 'but no, not really.'

'This *is* the society you're looking for.'

I inspect the student throng.

‘Hmmm, the Force is strong with this one.’

Vader twirls his lightsaber.

He taps a banner: ‘FILM SOC’. ‘We present contemporary works and important films from the past that would otherwise be difficult to view. This includes theme retrospectives, world cinema, art house films, documentaries and fringe genres that are under-represented in mainstream cinemas.’

‘Any custard pie fights?’

‘Have a sausage,’ says a girl at another stand. Her waist-length black hair shines white in the sun. ‘They’re meat-free. Made from organic Soya. Go on, try one.’

Foreheads bob past. My last ever Fayre. Is it really two years since my first?

‘They’re delicious and full of protein. More ethical than fresh whale meat.’ Her denim jacket is littered with enamel pins and badges. She scoops up a paper plate. ‘You’ll have a sausage.’

I have a sausage.

I aim it at a badge that says ‘NIC’. ‘What’s that mean?’

She lowers her plate to the stand and her gaze to her chest. ‘That’s me. I’m Nic. Nicola.’

I waggle my sausage at ‘SACS’.

“‘Stop Animal Cruelty Society’”. That’s us silly.’ Nic the veggie twists her finger around an unexpected pigtail. ‘We believe animals have the same rights as humans. We’re opposed to animal testing and avoid everything derived from meat, including leather shoes, jelly and toothpastes.’ Her arm sweeps across products dissected on the pathologist’s slab.

I bite into the veggie sausage: as dry as the paper plate.

Nic nods at me and her pigtails become skipping ropes. ‘My best friend who’s nipped to the loo might even try veganism. I’ve been veggie for six years. My favourite’s lentils. You?’

‘Me?’ I say, still chewing. ‘I’m a . . . a pie veggie.’

‘Really? Never heard of that.’

‘You know . . .’ I swallow. ‘Cheese pie. Apple pie. Magpie.’

‘Gosh, you’re so silly.’

This from someone with more pins in them than a Hitler voodoo doll.

‘You must join. I have the forms here. We will fight the carnivores raping the ecosystem.’

I point to a yellow badge with the letters ‘TGS’. ‘What’s that?’

“‘The Great Stupido’. He’s playing the Union tonight. The magician?’

‘I’m back now—’ The returning best friend smiles at Nic but scowls at me. ‘What’s *he* doing here?’ says Kate.

‘He’s a pie veggie,’ says Nic.

‘He’s a sodding pain,’ says Kate. ‘Remember that loser of a tenant I told you about? This is him.’

Kate looks past me.

‘C’mon, lad,’ says Doug. ‘Let’s stuff ourselves with steak and kidney pies.’

Nic’s eyes widen. ‘You *both* eat meat?’ She leans across her stand. ‘PIGS.’

‘*Pork* pies?’ I say. ‘Yeah, I guess that would work. But I thought you were a veggie?’

I stumble back, from the mob to the multitude. Doug’s already metres away, carving through the crowd a full head above everyone. I pinball off shoulders.

‘That girl was a fervent veggie,’ I say. ‘She didn’t realise it’s subjective what people eat. Some like snacking on root vegetables. For others, the options include pies, pigs or unloved pets.’

‘Ain’t seen your wench,’ says Doug.

‘I saw her, but couldn’t get to her in time. There are thousands of students here. I also stumbled into the Virgin Society and the Young Conservatives, one consolation being joint membership offers a discount. What did Gaz, Baz and Daz say?’

‘Nowt. But they’ll be in touch. They owe me.’ Doug stops.

She is here. She is her. She is not Margaret Thatcher.

Billie-Jo’s wearing a white blouse and pink skirt. Even minus last night’s beer goggles, she is still beautiful. She waves.

I push through the student hustle and muscle. I spring up the steps and their white edges segue into Heaven.

Billie-Jo runs towards me with her smile wide, her legs long and her breasts all bouncy-bouncy. Her hair lavas into the sky. No longer coloured by the lights of the Freshers’ Ball or tinged bus-shelter-orange, she transmits her cosmic beauty across all known dimensions and languages. Including Welsh.

‘It’s me, Billie-Jo.’

‘You, er, don’t know a Billie-Jo, do you?’

She lassos me with kisses. ‘I wouldn’t go anywhere near her.’

‘I’ve heard that.’

She giggles into my ear. ‘What else have you heard?’

‘Only that she preys on sociology students. And coal miners. And socialists. I saw you earlier. How did you get to the other end of the Fayre so quickly?’

Billie-Jo releases me. ‘How’s my favourite dancing partner?’

‘I don’t know, who is he?’

‘You, dummy.’

‘No, *me* Tarzan.’

‘Who is Tarzan? Is she famous?’

‘You OK? You look lovely. Even prettier than last night.’

‘I’m sorry about forcing myself on you.’

‘You didn’t.’ I look away for a second. ‘Anyway, I *can* defend myself against your handbag.’

‘I did force you, Void. I think I enjoyed being Margaret Thatcher too much. Power is like being a lady . . . if you have to tell people you are, you aren’t.’ Her sapphire eyes glisten. ‘So I shouldn’t have. Sorry. I was excited to connect with someone so soon after arriving. I love your positivity.’

‘It’s fine, honest. We were both excited. And possibly too drunk. I didn’t mind really. Bit embarrassing in a bus shelter, that’s all. And wasn’t there a flash?’

‘A teenager. Messing around with his phone.’ She pecks my lips. ‘You’re a funny boyfriend.’

*Boyfriend.* I’m smiling with an inner heat.

‘So . . .’ I say, ‘what do you want to do?’

Students pass us on the steps, jostling for toe slots.

I look around. ‘We could . . . or maybe—’

‘Either.’

I seize my chance and Billie-Jo’s hand and escort her down the steps.

She glances at our palms welded together. ‘This feels so right.’

‘Yes,’ I say. ‘Yes, it does.’

She stops at the bottom of the steps. ‘It’s busy. Have you joined any societies?’



‘Me? Oh yeah. Lots.’

‘That’s great. Which ones?’

‘Well . . . these two.’

Billie-Jo pushes closer to the stands. ‘You joined these?’

‘Yeah. Yeah I did.’

She moves to one side and a banner displays ‘RUSSIAN SOC.’ ‘I didn’t know you could speak Russian.’

‘But of course. Or should I say, *Oui*.’

Her lips curve. ‘Impressive.’

‘One of my special skills.’ I run my fingers through my hair. ‘But I don’t like to shout about it.’

She sidesteps to the other stand. ‘You certainly do have special skills. First fluency in Russian and now this. I never knew you were a lesbian feminist.’ She points:

‘LESBIAN FEMINIST SOC.’

‘Special, hidden skills.’

‘No, you don’t shout about it. And definitely not in Russian.’ Her cheekbones circle on a face not stained by make-up.

I grip her hand again and guide her to a magical place of ancient power I seldom visit: a library bench. Sunshine warms my face.

‘Why do I feel like I’ve always known you?’ I say. ‘As though my life is complete only when we’re together?’

Billie-Jo stands in the shade. A triangle of skin peeks through her blouse.

I stare into the ground.

‘But it’s even more than that,’ I say. ‘It feels like we’re—’

‘Connected emotionally? Made for each other?’

‘Yeah, you’re right. It does feel like that. But do you mind not—’

‘Finishing your sentences?’

‘Yeah, that. It’s—’

‘Annoying?’

I smile up at her. ‘I was going to say *funny* . . .’

Billie-Jo steps out of the shade: sunshine transforms her blonde hair into a lightning strike. She flinches.

I track her gaze. Two human walls with legs are skulking next to the Students’ Union entrance.

‘Don’t worry, they’re rugby players. They blocked me earlier. The one with shoulders like an overinflated triangle only has one ear. Whilst the other, with the neck like a pillar, is trying to eat that door.’

‘Protect me?’

I cuddle her. Sunlight caresses my cheeks.

How can life be more perfect? It’s as if I’ve swallowed the sun itself, warmth radiating through every pore. I sense the love of Billie-Jo’s arm around my shoulder.

‘I need to tell you something,’ she says.

I slot my finger over her lips. ‘Please, don’t spoil this.’

‘I have to—’

‘Go? See, I can finish sentences too.’

Silence.

‘But why? This is the second time you’re leaving me. I’m the only boyfriend who never spends enough time with his girl. Can’t you stay longer? Say, for ever?’

Billie-Jo drags her arm away.

‘Want to do something tonight then? My house?’

‘You’re free?’

‘I do have some homebrew I’m compelled to drain. Plus there’s my superhero work. If I tell you, I’ll have to kiss you. But my housemates will be here, on campus, watching a magician.’

I clasp her hand. Skin smoother than mercury.

‘So me and you,’ I say. ‘You’d make it bearable.’

‘It?’

‘Revising. Beer, hero, study. Yeah, I’m free.’

6

five hundred and ninety-seven  
thousand million sheep

Officer Flint sat at a kitchen table in Manor House Farm. Beyond a window lay the snow-capped mountain of Snowdon, solid stone borders, patches of vibrant green. Where was the grime? The noise? Not birds singing or the still country air, but the endless march of commuters and taxi horns? London was where a thief couldn't snatch colour from the night sky. London was his home and—

‘It were all a bit confusing, weren't it?’ Evans said opposite. He was mid-fifties with a face grooved by the outdoor life. He poured milk into his cup. ‘Are you sure you won't?’

‘No thank you,’ Flint said.

Evans sat back. In a pot on a Rayburn behind him, his lunch simmered. ‘The attacker said, “Do not be afraid”. Thought it was a joke, see.’

‘Joke?’

‘One of them student pranks. Seen them sniffing around before.’ His fingernails were black. ‘They're always scaring my herd, fiddling about in my ruin and dumping empty beer bottles. Terrible behaviour for educated folk.’

Flint retrieved his low-tech notebook, gripped his no-tech pencil. 'You made a statement to Snowdon Constabulary but never mentioned students. You said, "Someone pushed me against a wall and must have knocked me out. When I came to they'd gone."'

'Like I say, thought it were students, didn't I? They dump their beer bottles and pizza boxes. They go to that college—'

'The University of Snowdon?'

'It's not far from here.' Evans poured tea, stirred. 'Not for them geography students and their blasted field work. It's not right.'

Flint patted his notebook with his pencil. 'I appreciate your wife's presence at the station last night forced you to summarise. But now, without her, I require the facts. You assert that students attacked you—'

'Didn't push me against a wall.' Evans glanced at his wedding photograph on a wall. 'Sort of . . . hugged me.'

'This is no time for coyness. You mean attacked. Don't you?'

'In the ruin, like I said. It's only a few fields away and I go there sometimes to escape. About eleven last night it were.'

'And you were attacked by a woman?'

'Of course. Being hugged by a man doesn't excite my pecker.'

Flint scribbled in his notebook. 'Your statement may be critical to my investigation. I realise it was dark, but can you provide a description?'

'White and I'd say about twelve centimetres when erect.'

'The attacker, not your penis.'

Staring at his cup Evans said, 'Well the moon were out but she were a tall one and—'

'Yes?'

‘Naked. I . . . I must have passed out, because when I opened my eyes she’d gone. I came back here.’ Evans rubbed his knuckles. ‘Rowed with the wife.’

‘We have a Caucasian woman, perhaps six feet tall in old money, who attacked you at twenty-three hundred hours.’ Flint scanned his notes, underlined key phrases. ‘It sounds like a prank. A drunk teenager, a student on drugs.’

Evans tapped, tapped, tapped his cup. ‘That’s the thing, see. She couldn’t have been a student, because she asked *me* if any students were nearby.’

Flint’s pencil flatlined.

7

*wild, rich and largely tax free*



At the University of Snowdon, Chancellor Morgan sat in a dark blue suit at his desk. His hair was silver, cropped like a lawn. On his desk was a screen and three pens in parallel.

‘Officer Flint, I know nothing of a stranger loitering on campus. Although with a new student intake that is to be expected.’

‘Page three, appropriately,’ Flint said. He lowered a copy of *Snow* onto the desk. Pens scattered.

The Chancellor put on his glasses. Above a photograph, the headline: THATCHER SMOOCHES WITH MYSTERY MAN. Pushing the paper to one side, the Chancellor lined up his pens. ‘*Snow* is the student paper. It reports on all undergraduate activities, including the spirited adventures to be expected with a new cohort.’

‘Your University has its reputation to consider. Does it now desire mayhem? In public, near your campus?’

Behind the Chancellor, framed certificates hung on a wall. ‘Yes, the University routinely recovers underwear from trees and employs plumbers to resolve the issue of exploding toilets. But this . . .’ He pointed to *Snow*. ‘This is nothing. Last year a former student was photographed streaking across campus.’

‘A man?’

‘Yes, a man. An old Etonian. Standards have declined since my day. To compound his misfortune he chose Cambridge for his doctorate.’ The Chancellor stroked his pens. ‘It seems some are unable to think and can only comprehend rudimentary instructions. That’s Cambridge postgraduates for you.’ He straightened his tie to match his certificates. ‘I’m an Oxford man.’

Flint sat forwards. ‘The angle of the man’s face in the bus shelter makes identification difficult. However, the woman’s face is clearer. She is kissing the other student and MI7 want her.’

‘I’m sure they do.’

‘For reasons of national security. You will give me the identities of these and any other students I require.’

Chancellor Morgan patted his fingertips together.

‘Or would you prefer a compulsory reduction in your student fees?’

Behind port cheeks the Chancellor swallowed hard.

Flint stepped over to the screen. ‘The photograph is credited to Edward Dickens. He identified the male suspect as a Void Wilson, one of your students.’

The Chancellor typed his password: the screen highlighted ‘Wilson, Anthony Void’ in the Department of Sociology. ‘What will you do to him?’

8

There is no longer any such thing  
as a McDonald's

Bricks and walls are underrated. Bricks support houses and offices. And the shoulders of men forgotten by the prettiest and loveliest girl they've ever met. Walls don't offer the warmth of a bed or the softness of a sofa, yet walls are solid. Faithful. They don't let anyone down. Except Humpty Dumpty.

My shoulder turns first.

'Hi,' I say. 'How are you?'

It's a tranquil evening and Billie-Jo's wearing a knee-length coat and heels. *Now* she has a palm-sized clutch bag.

'It's me, Billie-Jo.'

I smile.

'You hadn't forgotten?' she says.

'No. I was loitering.'

Me: blue shirt (washed), black trousers (ironed), boxers (too tight).

We're in a cobbled square in the centre of town. Above us are stone archways and a Victorian clock. There's nowhere near enough concrete to excite her, yet the square still feels romantic. Poetic even. Rows of street lights glow their nocturnal suns.

‘You were thinking I’d stood you up.’ She prods the end of my nose as if it’s a doorbell. ‘Weren’t you?’

‘Of course not. I loiter in cobbled squares in my spare time. For fun. I have a special badge and everything. Ask my mum.’

‘Oh, I think you were. I know that look.’ She’s smiling. ‘Well, your positivity has been rewarded. I’m here now. It’s too late to escape.’

Eleven long minutes late.

The restaurant is small with dark red wallpaper. There are pictures everywhere. Buddha. Bridges crossing streams. Dragons.

At the far end, a row of waiters are draped across the bar like Laurel and Hardy impersonators: black ties, white shirts and black trousers. One shows us to our table with an understudy’s desperation. He lifts Billie-Jo’s coat.

*The LBD.* Only on her, the Little Black Dress shows off her sculpted shoulders and the nip of her waist. Her hair’s in a ponytail.

My throat is dry. Again.

The comedy waiter drags out a chair for Billie-Jo. I half expect him to yank it away as she sits. He hands us some menus, smiles and retreats.

Sliced Duck in Lemon Sauce? King Prawn Fried Rice? I pretend to be knowledgeable. I peer over the menu: Billie-Jo has a cute kink in her nose. The place is empty and, without her, would feel as romantic as a multi-storey car park. Beef with Oyster Sauce? I don’t pretend to be fluent in Chinese.

From the bar other waiters are watching. *Me.* What do I say to her? Anyone?

Billie-Jo glances around the restaurant. Her long eyelashes are shaped like antennae.

‘This place is charming,’ she says. ‘Romantic too. Don’t you think?’ The shadow of her chin slides over her collar bones. ‘I meant to ask you before. Void. It’s an unusual name.’

‘And it’s a complicated name. My dad’s a maths teacher, but before he was married he was passionate about cars and found cylinders and inlet manifolds exciting. Yeah, don’t ask. His first proper car, the one he saved up for, was a restored Golf. Someone else had done the restoration but that didn’t matter to my dad; he adored it. He drove it everywhere. Became a Volkswagen aficionado. With his surname of Wilson, he decided if he ever had any kids he wanted their names to begin with “V” to create “VW”. OK, so he could have picked Vincent or Victoria—’

‘Virgil?’

I nod. ‘Imagine that. The school bullies would have put in overtime. Anyway, he discovered his Golf was a special edition model imported from Australia called “The Void”, the idea being the space occupied by such a fast car would always be vacant. A bit lame in terms of marketing, but he loved the name so much he used it when I was born.’

‘Void Warranty?’ Her lips curl on one side.

‘Void’s my middle name because my mum overruled him. She’s a nurse. My dad still loves fast cars and he wants me to do well at my studies so I can afford one after graduation.’

More waiters swarm our table and are attentive, annoying and other words that start with ‘a’. Aeronautical? A bowl of prawn crackers appears. The waiters glare at my indecision.

I have a whim to test their patience by ordering two hundred and thirty-nine thousand spring rolls.

Ah, the student special: one course.

‘So,’ says Billie-Jo, ‘tell me more about yourself. Where are you from? What things do you like?’

‘Stoke.’

‘What is Stoke? A margarine?’

‘That’s where I’m from. Originally I mean.’

Her face says nothing: the usual reaction to Stoke.

‘Stoke’s known for oatcakes, the birth place of Robbie Williams, from *Take That*, and Stoke City FC. And in Victorian times it was the home of Wedgwood pottery and thousands of bottle kilns, as Pete once explained one very wet and very long Sunday afternoon. But it’s not famous for much industry now.’

‘Pete?’

‘Oh yeah, you’ve not met him yet. He’s one of my housemates. He’s great. They all are. We do lots of things together, as a team. We’ve been to Cheltenham. London. Even Nevada. That part of America’s great. Eerie rusting ghost towns and roads that seem to go on forever. There are lots of cute little communities in the middle of nowhere, serving breakfast sunny side up. The landscape’s so pretty.’

She plucks a prawn cracker from the bowl.

‘What’s Stoke like?’ she says.

‘Ever been to Las Vegas? The neon, the gambling machines and the dusty desert climate? Stoke’s the same as that. Stoke and Las Vegas, it’s like they’re clones. Uncanny.’

‘So Stoke is pretty? Void, why are you laughing?’

‘If you’d ever been there, you’d know. Pretty isn’t the word you associate with Stoke. Pretty *awful*, maybe.’

White cracker flakes crumble from her lips. ‘It can’t be that bad.’

‘Well it’s nothing like Nevada. It’s cramped and wet, though the people are friendly and honest. And, to be fair, Stoke does have a cultural quarter. Though that kind of implies the other three-quarters of the city has no culture. Which sums up the place. Industrial. Rundown. Time has moved on and forgotten Stoke. Shame.’

We crunch.

We chat.

Billie-Jo is polite enough to giggle at my lame jokes.

Freckles sprinkle over the bridge of her nose. Her skin is veinless, almost petal-thin.

Tonight she doesn’t resemble Margaret Thatcher. I cannot see a damp wig or any aircraft carriers. I try not to imagine her wearing a pearl necklace.

Our mains arrive.

For one brief moment as I peer at my Sweet and Sour Chicken and egg fried rice, I’m not a student. I am king. I’m not in a back-street Chinese in north-west Wales, I am at a banquet. Sitting at the head of a feast in my English castle, in honour of my princess.

Billie-Jo begins her assault on Chicken Chow Mein. Steam swirls.

‘So,’ I say as she chews, ‘where are you from? Not Stoke, obviously. And not from around here, I’m guessing?’

She shakes her head and full mouth.

‘Yeah, most don’t choose the University of Snowdon. More the university chooses *them*.’ I push my chopsticks to one side. ‘Grade point attainment and all that.’

She touches her lips. ‘From a distant place. You won’t have heard of it.’



‘Don’t worry, when you’re in Wales everywhere is a distant place. Stunning countryside though. Smudges of greens and browns. In the winter I love its rugged isolation.’ I lay my napkin across my lap. ‘So, English. Why?’

‘Poetry’s so beautiful.’

‘Is it? I mean, it is. Very.’ I wave a prawn cracker. ‘Beautiful like . . . a snowflake sunset. Do you know any?’

As Billie-Jo recites something beautiful written by the famously-dead, I imagine my mouth exploring the smoothness of her neck. The soft kisses sparking between our lips, again.

I play with my balls. Of sweet and sour, on my plate.

Her pupils dilate. ‘Oh, you have a dimple. I never noticed before. I love them, they’re so cute. You’re cute.’

I shrug. ‘My secret’s out. The dimple in my chin is because I’m really Bum Chin Man, a superhero. I save the Earth from intergalactic attacks.’

‘You repel bums?’

‘Just chins shaped like bums.’

She giggles; the freckles on her nose cuddle.

‘Or is it bums shaped like chins? I never can remember.’

The waiters are still watching.

‘But oh,’ I say, ‘you should see my costume.’

‘You have kissable lips. And you’re sexy.’

White flecks in her blue eyes radiate outwards as spiral galaxies.

‘You’re gorgeous,’ I say. ‘You know that? You have stunning eyes.’

She gazes at her plate.

‘Call me old-fashioned, but I do love eyes that come as a pair.’

Billie-Jo giggles again. An infectious, addictive giggle I need to hear a lot more.

We chat and chew.

Waiters swoop away our plates.

She offers to split the bill.

I open a cellophane wrapper. My fortune cookie says: 'POVERTY IS NO DISGRACE'.

I pay with money I don't have.

Her heels clack against the cobbles. The square's empty other than the fake orange tan of the street lights above the Victorian clock.

I'm leaning. Bricks and walls. Exciting concrete still optional.

'I love our time together,' says Billie-Jo. 'We need to meet more often.'

I kiss her. Bathe in her scent.

'What was that for?' she says.

'I told you, so had to kiss you. I hope you're happy now you've unmasked my secret identity. I also have to tell you that I live at 45 Brackenbury Road.'

'I've had a great evening. Thanks, Void.'

'You don't need beauty sleep.'

She squeezes my hand. 'Yes, I'm very happy now.'

'Will I see you again?'

Will I?

9

the Drink button

A few hours later I'm sitting in the green glow of my bedside clock. It's gone midnight and my belly's rumbling.

While the others left to watch *The Great Stupido* on campus, I returned to toast my successful dinner date with a beer. One led to two, and two to six, until I'd made Doug's homebrew barrel my best friend. If only I hadn't opened Kate's Chilean Cabernet Sauvignon.

My stomach shudders. Glass of water, *now*.

I wrap myself in a dressing gown.

Light switch on: no light. The bathroom's a fractured grey haze. Wind rattles the cracked sash window until it's a Victorian echo chamber.

I reach into the darkness and slide back a cabinet door. Empty. Where would she hide it? Kitchen? The last chance of aquatic relief, short of sucking the bath taps with a plea of insanity?

The kitchen's ceramic floor tiles chill my feet. The room's silent in the moonlight. The kitchen feels like a morgue, which isn't surprising given my cooking skills.

I open a drawer. Cutlery glints. I drag back another drawer and fondle an implement of torture. No, a sink plunger. I yawn. Open a cupboard. Plates share shelf space with Kate's wine goblets.

I clench the edge of the sink. My gut contracts. Shudders of yawning nausea. Face bent down, stomach pulsing. Liquid fire spews out in waves, splattering the sink like a drunken drummer. My searing throat prepares for another.

Nothing.

Deep breaths. I tighten my dressing gown.

I nudge the tap with my glass. Cold gulps.

Tentacles of frost cling to the window.

I etch a porthole.

Doug's workshop casts a shadow across the moonlit back garden.

I peer deeper into the black depths.

There's something moving. A figure.

Who?

10

*digital watches*

01:57 hours. -2°C.

Officer Flint stepped from the garden into the blackness of Brackenbury Road. The sky was clear. Curtains were closed.

Flint turned, faced his car. His shoes slapped against the pavement flags. His car doors unlocked with an expensive silence.

From his leather seat he glanced over his shoulders. He hunched forwards, removed his wallet. He folded back one creased corner until it was smooth. The photograph in a transparent slot was his wife. No, his ex-wife. Flint rubbed dust away. He stared at her image, at the faded snapshot of happiness.

He sank back into a seat of shadows.

Beneath a car, a cat flashed its eyes.

Flint reached into a compartment, tore off the wrapper of a Twix. He chewed. He rummaged in another pocket amongst multiple passports and no-limit credit cards. He placed his laser audio surveillance device on the passenger seat. Listening to student chatter, he had endured thirty tormented minutes. Homebrew? Karl Marx essays? The Great Stupido? Wasters, the damn lot of them. What did they know of threats to society? At last they had left.

Flint chewed the last part of the Twix. His tongue congealed. The dregs of his coffee were cold. He readjusted his seat until it was upright, stiff. Scanning the road, he started the engine. A map of north-west Wales glowed. Rain began to splatter against bulletproof glass.

The comms cube flashed across the gloom of the dashboard. 'Flint here.'

'Encryption signal confirmed,' Adams said. 'Sir, here at the facility we've had a perimeter alert. In Sector F, causing an outage in the power fence.'

'Last month we strengthened security for another 9/11 anniversary, while this year's memorial of 7/7 was too diabolical to mention. And yet we only have six months to prepare for the next remembrance of 5/3.'

'But the Officer Handbook states—'

'Adams, we *give* orders and that includes to owners of land adjoining our facility.' Flint leaned over the comms cube. 'Since our electrified power fence is a vital part of our security, tell our farmer friend it remains on.'

'But the repair is—'

'Overdue?' Flint gripped his gear stick. 'As the senior officer, I will take responsibility for overdue maintenance of the fence. But right now I've decided to hit the target, later this morning.' He yawned into the night. 'Has Professor Black authorised my request for the seizure squad?'

'Your men are awaiting orders.'

'Excellent,' Flint said. 'The target location is 45 Brackenbury Road, Snowdon, LL25 5QT.'

'It's a mid-terraced house,' Adams said. 'The owner is an IC1 female aged thirty. Watson, Katharine. Others registered at that address are Marten, Peter, seventy, and Bolt,



Douglas, twenty. And, erm, there's also a Wilson, Anthony, who's known by his middle name of Void.'

'Warrants, convictions?'

'Bolt was arrested two years ago for theft and dangerous driving near Oxford, but the charges were dropped. Suspect?'

'Void. Question. What else do we know?'

'IC1 male, aged twenty. Sociology undergraduate at the University of Snowdon. Native British citizen, no convictions or outstanding warrants.'

'Known hostile?' Flint said.

'No, sir.'

'Armed and dangerous?'

'No, sir.'

'Will there be *any* resistance?'

'Unlikely. The target is a student house.'

A pause.

'Pity,' Flint said.

11

None at all

It's a cold morning and I'm standing next to Doug, in Kate's back garden.

In our first-year at uni Doug built a covert workshop designed to look like a 'posh shed'. Two generators buried in the garden with underground cables provide the energy, whilst chemical water-recycling supplements air filtered inside through a tree of pipes in the soil. It took Doug months to build and he made extensive use of metal panels sprayed terracotta and Kate's purse. I had doubts but, from the outside, Doug's covert workshop does now look like a posh shed. It also seems to occupy zero space, which sounds ideal until he stumbles home drunk and can't find it.

Doug examines the workshop's six windows in turn: wire mesh glass, stretching vertical and narrow like arrow slits.

I follow him around and the black curls of his hair compress and release.

At the final window his fists bulge in the pockets of his boiler suit. He circles back to the outer doors and inserts three keys. Padlocks plop open. He points to a Twix wrapper between the inner and outer doors. 'Intruder.'

'Impossible,' I say.

Doug crouches. The tails of his suit drag along the floor. He holds up two strands of metal wire.

He stares into an inner-entrance retina-scan and double bolts shoot back behind the reinforced doors like starter pistols. The doors strain inward under their own bulk and a ten-second timer buzzes the air, the difference between consciousness or collapsing in a cloud of non-lethal Kolokol-1 knockout gas. Doug loves his homely touches.

He steps past a row of chained gas canisters to a screen. Nine metal panels are sunk in the back wall and a matrix of diodes either side flash like a karaoke night. Buttons glow. Doug's workshop is Dr Who's Tardis, except it isn't blue, can't travel through time and doesn't have 'POLICE BOX' written across it.

On a shelf above the panels are his favourite discs of *Die Hard*, *First Blood* and *Dirty Harry*. The discs are stacked in a row next to his dad's old Man United scarf as if they're Doug's library books.

Other shelves contain an array of equipment, including explosives (not used), assault rifles (used) and one male mannequin bought for target practice (used lots). Spare ammunition complements the equipment; the mannequin no longer has its head.

Doug skims his fingerprints across the screen to kill the buzzer. The inner doors slide back with a mechanical hush. He strides over to a crumpled tarpaulin mountain in the centre of the floor.

'MI7,' he says. He nods at the inner doors. 'Recognise the technique.'

'You're paranoid,' I say. 'It's a meaningless coincidence. Unless they stole something?'

'Tripwire.'

'MI7 broke in here and stole your tripwire?'

'Not robbed.' Doug holds up the wire again. 'Snapped.'

He marches to the metal panels and presses a button. Three panels slide back: three screens labelled CAM01, CAM02 and CAM03 reveal live views of the front-door, the

back-door into the garden and a strategic aerial shot of the workshop, from a strategic tree branch.

Doug thumbs a button labelled PLAY under CAM03 and it shows the workshop in shadows.

‘Last night’s footage,’ he says. ‘Night-vision camera.’

A green figure approaches the workshop’s outer doors. It glances over its shoulder and pulls something from its coat. The outer doors open. It slinks inside.

I traipse past a pair of 50kg dumbbells on the floor. I press PAUSE.

‘Someone,’ I say, ‘picked the outer door locks but couldn’t defeat the inner ones?’

‘Inner doors have steel shutters. Digital security. Bespoke 4096-bit encryption.

Two-factor authentication . . .’

Sometimes when Doug enters Tech Mode Overload, sounds abate. My vision defocusses. Engulfed within a fog of dense technical detail, I’m only able to issue a zombie-nod and reach out for his full-stop.

‘But why do you think it’s MI7?’ I say. ‘I spotted something last night while I was being sick, but it could have been another student. Anyone.’

‘Past three padlocks?’

Doug presses PLAY. The green figure reappears and ghosts into the night. Doug pokes another button and the screens ping off. Metal panels slide back, flush against the wall.

He stares at where the screens used to be and his chest flexes beneath his boiler suit. Rising and falling. Rising and falling.

A red punchbag swings to itself in one corner. Posters behind it show a series of karate moves.

I clutch the punchbag. ‘So . . . big guy. If it’s MI7 you’ll have to update your security. Extra checks that analyse your voice or fingerprints—’

‘Systems can be bypassed.’ Doug gazes at the tarpaulin. ‘Electronics disabled.’

‘That’s true. If you had a fingerprint scanner, criminals would steal people’s fingers. Imagine waking up with no fingers and trying to call the police? How would you pick up the phone?’

Doug steps across to a big circular red button. He palms a sticker above it with the words *KEEP CALM and WATCH CARRY ON* in large, friendly letters.

‘It’s a shame the footage was at night. Those green images make identification difficult.’ I wag a finger at the metal panels. ‘Anyway, let’s do a Pete and consider the facts. An officer of MI7 discovered this place, but realised it isn’t a normal workshop. So . . . he decided to investigate. We know he examined your windows.’

‘Aye.’

‘He picked your locks.’

‘Aye.’

‘Then he ate a Twix. That’s ridiculous. Snacking between meals? Still, you know what Pete the historian will say.’

Doug scratches his stubble. ‘Need more proof?’

‘Yeah, so we need to work on that. Sorry, I’d love to stay and help further, but I’d best get back. Revision revision revision.’

12

a thousand hairy horsemen

Last night, Officer Flint had parked at one end of Brackenbury Road, away from the target location. Via the comms cube, he had contacted the seizure squad leader and ordered him to ready his team.

Flint had watched, waited.

The sun had risen.

Lampposts had solidified from the darkness. Shadows had drifted along the terraced bricks as black floodlights.

The next morning, curtains parted. A lone chimney coughed grey breath into the sky.

One man slid into his car, drove off.

Locals strolled past Flint's car. Some smiled at him. Or waved.

Flint wondered why.

No one in London smiled or waved. Or acknowledged anyone else, even when standing in front of them, lips moving. What was wrong with the countryside?

07:59 hours. +9°C.

In the rearview mirror the seizure squad van appeared as a black dot. It surged nearer until its tinted windows bled across the width of the reflective glass.



Flint glanced over his shoulders, assessed Brackenbury Road.

He clambered inside the seizure squad van.

Six grunts were bunched together on a bench seat, wearing visors, black leather gloves and body armour. Their toecaps were polished beneath laces symmetrical for the mission. Lasersighted Heckler and Koch UMP sub-machine-guns straddled their laps. Their knuckles twitched.

Flint sat opposite the squad leader: shaved hair and a slashed face.

Muffled sounds from Brackenbury Road penetrated the van's armour plating.

Flint discussed the mission, confirmed the target.

The squad leader surveyed his team.

One leather thumb raised after another.

'How do you want it, sir?' the squad leader said. 'Take him alive?'

Smiling, Flint said: 'If you must.'

13

A million-gallon vat of custard

I'm sleeping with Karl Marx.

I'm also on my bed alone with my Karl Marx essay.

Alone with the same words and desperate paragraphs my mind refuses to acknowledge. It's as if part of my brain is rebelling against revision on my behalf. As though it recognises, parental-like, what is best for me, as the cliché goes. Yet this is the same parental brain that, but a few hours ago, cowered the other way as I drank the alcohol that later caused me to vomit.

The *Dr Who* theme pulses beneath my floorboards for the second time.

I stop reading and listen; the front-door stays shut.

'I'LL GET IT, THEN,' I shout, to myself. As usual.

I open the front-door: Billie-Jo.

'Oh, hi,' I say. 'How are you?'

'It's me, Billie-Jo.'

She's wearing a pair of jeans ripped at the knees and a blue sweater at least two sizes too big. A white T-shirt pokes out around her moon-coloured neck. She's smiling. She's lovely.

Cold air blankets my bare legs. 'I, er, wasn't expecting you.'

She glances at my Snow UNI dressing gown. 'I can see that.'

I laugh with the high-pitched strain of a schoolboy. 'No, I mean after last night.

You did enjoy yourself?'

'Loved it. Really enjoyed your positivity.' Her gaze drops to the floor. 'So, can I come in?'

'Sure. Sorry.' I pull back the front-door: the sky thickens with black clouds.

She glides past me in boots. No ponytail today.

The front-door clicks shut.

'It's lovely to see you,' I say. 'Did you want anything?'

'To see you, of course.' Her sweater covers the knuckles of her hands so only her long fingers show. 'A girl can see her guy every day, can't she? It's not illegal.'

'Should be compulsory. There's only one thing worse than revising home alone and that's *not* revising, home alone. I'd love to see you every day too. Only, I thought you'd be busy. New academic year and all that good stuff?'

'VOID?' says Kate from the kitchen.

Billie-Jo peers over my shoulder. 'Is that your—'

'Irascible landlady? Certainly is. I haven't told you much about Kate, have I?'

'VOID, GET IN HERE.'

I slide my hands around Billie-Jo's waist; her breasts push into my chest.

She squeezes my hand. 'Kate?'

'Oh, she's wanted to kick me out ever since the first-year. When I mistakenly kissed her friend in the back of her car.'

'Really? What was it like?'

'Gorgeous. BMW convertible with leather seats.'

Her lipstick-free lips curl.

‘NOW,’ says Kate.

Billie-Jo tilts her head. ‘But if it was a mistake, what’s her problem?’

‘Her friend turned out to be her sister.’

‘Oops.’

‘That’s what I said when Kate found us on the back seat. Kissing. Of all the luck . . . just as I kissed her, my foot caught the dashboard and the roof peeled back. How was I to know she’d parked below a CCTV camera?’

‘*NOW.*’

I sigh.

I release Billie-Jo: her hair curves below her neck until her blonde strands melt into the whiteness of her T-shirt.

‘I do like Kate, but sometimes she never shuts up.’

Billie-Jo studies my dressing-gown body. She bites her bottom lip. ‘Can I stay here and enjoy the view?’

‘No, you’d best hide. Commandant Kate might want a full hut inspection. Want to wait in my bedroom?’

‘At eight in the morning?’

My watch: only the second time it’s ever shown me the *other* eight o’clock.

‘Wait if you want. I should only be five minutes.’

‘KITCHEN,’ says Kate. ‘OR I’LL HAVE YOU HANGED UNTIL YOUR NECK SNAPS.’

‘Sorry about this,’ I say. ‘She’s not always this reasonable. My room’s the second door upstairs.’

I give Billie-Jo a lingering kiss. Even minus her makeup, her skin's still smooth, her body still inviting. If she's perfect when her beauty blinds me, what would she look like with twenty-twenty vision?

She tiptoes up the exposed wooden stairs. Her hips are a pendulum sway.

Love, *the* drug.

I face the kitchen; my right hand is trembling. I shouldn't be scared of Kate. Not after two years of living with her. Or perhaps I'm scared *because* of those two years? Since that day when the University of Snowdon allocated me, Doug and Pete to Kate's house at random; the house 'daddy' bought as a gift for her choosing to become a psychologist.

Kate lurks in the kitchen doorway in a black T-shirt, boots and faded denim mini-skirt.

'Well?' she says.

'Well what?'

She folds her arms over her chest like a nightclub bouncer. 'What the sodding hell happened last night?'

'I don't know. Some people were born, some died?'

'Don't get clever. You did this, didn't you?'

'You're making as much sense as a Monday morning lecture.'

I tighten my dressing gown belt until my stomach aches. I rub it.

Kate sidesteps into the kitchen. Her eyes bore into me.

I enter the kitchen where, for the last two years, I have committed crimes of poison against humanity using only a wooden spoon.

'Don't deny it,' she says.

I shuffle past a pedal bin where the neck of last night's wine bottle pokes out; past an oven that is cleaned regularly every century or so; and past a fridge where two lines of alphabet magnets usually spell out rude words. I'll have to fix that.

I lean over the sink: there's a stench of vomit. Purple flakes of semi-digested wine drench cups and plates teetering like pre-demolition high-rise blocks.

'If you knew you were going to be sick,' says Kate, 'why didn't you, like, go upstairs to use the toilet?'

'But if I'd chanced upstairs instead of aiming—'

'You so did not aim. No way.'

Her boots drum rubber thuds over to the sink.

'Look at it.' Kate flashes me a glare. '*Look.*'

I inspect my drunken accuracy. Liquid carnage. Her crockery has been seasoned with homebrew and drizzled with liberal shots of Chilean Cabernet Sauvignon.

'Your vomit covers both draining boards,' she says. 'Every plate, cup, saucer, knife, fork and spoon I own. How's that possible?'

'I . . . I don't know. Natural ability?'

'It's not funny. It's everywhere.' Her eyebrows spasm. 'Well?'

'I'm sorry, Kate.'

She plucks a saucer from a draining board and rotates it over the sink. Purple flakes slide down into the gloop.

'Urgh,' she says. 'Everywhere except *in* the sink.'

'Yeah it is. Look, I am sorry. Really.'

Kate re-slots the saucer. She flicks her fingers at my face. 'So, loser, how much did you drink?'

‘I do admit it was too much. Probably . . . half a bottle of red, as a chaser to Doug’s homebrew. I was as legless as Long John Silver. Knee deep in fish.’

A vein in her neck twitches.

Her gaze settles on the pedal bin, where she spots the wine bottle.

‘My Cabernet Sauvignon?’ she says. ‘You’re so thoughtless. When are you going to clean it up?’

‘Isn’t that a tad drastic? The last time I scrubbed the sink it lost all its character. I love those Saturn rings around the sides.’

I review the housework roster pinned to the door. In our first week together as undergraduates, Doug devised a rigorous schedule of weekly housework duties. He designed it to be logical and fair so that everyone took their turn to leave the housework for Kate.

I trace along the row for Wednesday. ‘Not my turn. I’m going back to bed.’

Kate jabs at the sink. ‘What about this?’

‘I’ll clear it up later.’

‘If you don’t—’

‘I will, I will. I’ll also buy you some fruit juice right now. And another bottle of wine. I promise. Your favourite, yeah?’

Her fringe quivers. ‘I’ll be back at eleven, after my tutorial. If my kitchen isn’t spotless, pack your bags.’

‘What? But I’ve signed your tenancy thing. You can’t—’

‘Spotless.’



14

*Hi there!*

Six red laser dots clustered on the front-door of 45 Brackenbury Road. Domestic property, pathetic five lever mortise lock construction. Officer Flint surveyed the road. No witnesses. Excellent.

The squad leader glanced across.

Flint nodded.

The squad leader thrust the battering ram into the front-door. The lock ejected, the door splintered from its frame.

Dots swept the short hallway, stairs. Six grunts stormed across the flattened door, along a hall, through three downstairs rooms. Six shadows regrouped at the stairs.

The squad leader shook his head. 'Target not found, sir. Area secure.'

Flint pointed upwards.

Revealing no resistance markers, the squad leader charged his team upstairs. Thick black boots clattered on bare wood.

Leading off from the landing were four doors. Wooden, white, closed. Kindergarten pin tumbler locks.

The squad leader bullied down the first door handle, poked his UMP inside.

Flint followed. A single-glazed sash window. Wood, insecure. Thin morning light strayed across dusted records, highlighter pens, lever arch files. A deerstalker swayed on the back of the door. Towers of books were in the centre of the bedroom.

Flint surveyed, squinted. Wastrel. Was this Void's room?

Some of the grunts entered. They searched, assessed. No signs of student ID. No body.

The squad leader lowered an old photo onto a desk. There was a completed *Times* crossword. A pair of tartan slippers peeped out from an iron bed.

Damn. Not his room. Flint clicked his fingers at the door.

Grunts retreated.

The squad leader grasped the second door handle: it rattled in his glove. Gauge the threat, construct the strategy.

Flint crept into the room. No door smashing. No gas canisters. No orders to drop to the floor spread-eagled, because he wasn't expecting violence. His jaw wilted; there wasn't any.

He gazed around. There were half-closed curtains and a bed (occupied). Facing the window, its owner wore a red dressing gown marked white with 'Snow UNI'. Ectomorphic male, asleep. Excellent.

The squad leader edged forwards.

Grunts grouped behind him, following procedure. Assess environment, analyse target. Laser sights scanned a room of clothes, film discs, an alarm clock and a *Casablanca* poster.

The squad leader aimed his UMP at Void, beckoned his assassins. Boots swayed in formation, his team fanned out as one.

*S-l-o-w.*

Void remained still.

The grunts evaluated objects, confirming the target. Hushed fingers captured a book and dangled it in front of Flint: *Introduction to Sociology*. On a desk a screen was flipped, scrutinised, replaced.

More fingers snatched a credit card shape. The top portion displayed 'University of Snowdon' and 'Void Wilson, Dept of Sociology, Year 3'. The lower part contained crude biometric technology and a quite hideous passport photograph.

Flint nodded.

The grunts pressed deeper into the carpet, their boots one death-watch foot after another. Prey, in their sights.

Condensation trailed down the window. A floorboard squealed.

The squad leader raised his hand.

The hangman's ankles hovered upright, motionless. Closed visors misted.

Flint watched. And yet nothing. Void was lifeless. Or soon would be.

The squad leader lowered his hand. He slithered alongside the bed.

Suppressing the threat, fingers pawed at triggers. Flanking Void, shoulders hunched below the window.

Six red laser dots orbited Void's heart.

15

where it is inaccurate it is at least

*definitively* inaccurate

Sunshine scattered through tree branches onto clumps of mud edging a country lane.

Staring through his windscreen, Officer Flint followed the seizure squad van. It clipped the apex of corners, scraping hedges with its metal secret. Flint tapped the 'D' button on his comms cube.

'Morning,' Adams said. 'How are you—'

'I have the suspect. After all this time, after all those wasted missions. I might even make A1. Me, an Advanced Officer A1, with twenty years' service. Or the Honours List? Arise *Sir* Flint.' The lane narrowed and a squirrel scuttled across. Flint swerved. 'I'm trailing the seizure squad van through the rural wasteland that is Wales, though not fast enough for my liking. We'll hit the motorway network within two hours and the facility within five. Inform Professor Black that my suspect will soon be available. Prepare my interrogation cells. Where is the reserve seizure squad?'

'Outside Manchester,' Adams said. 'They won't be in position for a few hours.'

'That's so irresponsible,' Flint said, sliding over double lines in the middle of the lane.

'Sir, here at the facility we've had another perimeter alert. Sector F again. We should investigate—'

‘Remember, Adams, I am the A2, you are the B3.’

‘But we have to investigate all matters relating to breaches of security. As per the Officer Handbook.’

‘That handbook is an outdated mass of contradictions. Rule 212 states that “Holidays may only be authorised by Advanced Officers graded A3 and above”. And yet, Rule 268 states that “Advanced Officers graded A3 and above are not permitted to authorise holidays”.’ Flint accelerated around a corner and the lane curved towards a farm. Amid the stench of manure, he overtook a tractor. ‘Does the CCTV show any intruders?’

‘No, but we—’

‘Sometimes you possess the IQ of a small green banana. Investigate what, Adams? We need evidence. A wilful attack by terrorists or other hostiles.’ Snatching at the steering wheel, Flint veered past a cyclist. ‘Damn fool.’

‘Me?’

‘No, not— Yes, you. Our facility is classified. Buried deep within countryside designed to maintain our anonymity. And given that a farm borders one side of our facility, a random perimeter alert points to yet another escaped animal.’

‘But sir, the security of the entire facility will be compromised.’

‘Very well,’ Flint said. ‘Review all CCTV footage from the last seventy-two hours. Verify our systems remain operational. Then send Officer Bodie to survey Sector F. However, preparation for my suspect is *the* priority. Results matter, rules don’t.’ The lane straightened. Far ahead a rabbit chewed on a grass verge. ‘Issue the standard warning letter to our farmer friend. Remind him again that unless he keeps his livestock under control, we will take *the* most inappropriate action. Then prepare the interrogation cells.’ Flint disconnected, dropped a gear. Holding the wheel with both hands, he aimed for the rabbit.

16

Wretched isn't it?



I leave Kate's veggie shop clutching two bags: wholemeal loaf, cartons of Hawaiian fruit juice, bottles of Chilean Cabernet Sauvignon and several tins of dolphin-friendly tuna. The black clouds have dispersed.

I head home, wondering if Billie-Jo will have minded waiting for me in my bedroom.

I've trundled along these streets and gutters for two years. Sometimes it's felt like a holiday; at other times it's been a prison sentence. I know every cracked window pane, every panel of rotting wooden fence and every windowsill needing yet another layer of paint.

Soon I will never know them again.

My long morning shadow turns into Brackenbury Road. I stroll along chipped kerbs, crooked pavement flags and the clutter of satellite dishes. Bags bang against my knees. I cross the road at the same place I always do, navigating between cars that never seem to age.

Pete's outside Kate's front-door, examining an empty door frame. A doorbell wire thrusts out. Thorns of wood jut from the frame and into a hallway covered with screws, hinges and broken glass. Even the WELCOME doormat is dirty.

‘Wow,’ I say. ‘What’s this? It’s a bigger mess than usual.’

Pete glances around in his beloved green cardigan. ‘Good morning.’

I nod at the empty doorway. ‘Doesn’t look good to me. What’s happened?’

‘It appears that Katharine has suffered an irruption.’

‘More like explosion. The front-door’s lost a hinge and our house has lost the front-door. And there are bits of glass everywhere. Wood curling like shells. Has Doug rigged the doorbell to detonate again?’

Pete scrapes a patch of bare wood with his fingernail. He holds up a splinter. He peers closer, with the historian’s precision.

I lower my bags. There’s a wide band of white across my pink fingers. ‘So what’s Kate said? Now that the front-door matches the rest of the house.’

‘She is not here. Therefore, I have organised a house meeting in the parlour, at eleven o’clock, to discuss this incident.’

‘I hope she spends some of daddy’s money on this place.’

‘This is hardly the occasion to remonstrate with her.’

‘But the house is a mess. Always has been.’

Above me is the rotting wooden frame of my bedroom window. Flaking bricks surround it and the doorway, with strips of chipped cement in between.

‘We’ve lived here for two years,’ I say, ‘and she’s not spent one penny. Not one.’

Pete crouches. There’s a crunch of glass. Or his old body. Or both. He leans over the fragments; the dome of his balding head shines.

‘Our sofa’s made from foam they banned centuries ago,’ I say. ‘And all the windows are single-glazed and falling to pieces. Well, apart from Kate’s bedroom of course.’ I point at the wood and glass strewn across the ground. ‘So no one will notice this. DIY that went wrong.’

Pete stares up with his yellowing eyes.

‘Well if it wasn’t her or Doug . . . burglars?’

‘I have yet to determine whether anything has been stolen or the precise reason for the break-in.’

‘More like break *everything*.’

Pete pulls the cuff of his cardigan over his knuckles and wraps it into a mitten. He slides it left and right, sifting through the carnage a fragment at a time. He flips over several pieces. Finds a screw.

I step back. Vent my breath into the crisp air. Cold water from cracked guttering drips onto my forehead.

‘What about the police?’ I say.

‘It is not likely that they performed such destruction.’

‘I mean, have you called them?’

‘I have returned from the library to find this. Moreover, Katharine as our landlady shall make that decision upon her arrival.’

Pete uncovers a bent silver hinge speckled with corrosion. Metal shines.

‘It seems,’ he says, ‘that uniformed intruders marched inside.’

“‘Uniformed’?”

‘Yes, according to Douglas’ précis of his CCTV footage. He is waiting for you in his workshop.’

A white snout of a camera pokes down from the guttering. Black glass at the front shields an invisible camera, an invisible camera I helped Doug build.

I clutch my bags and step around Pete. Glass shards crack underfoot. The front-door lies at the bottom of the stairs, flat like a vandalised tombstone. To one side the lock rests in pieces.

‘You’re right, this is serious. There’s debris everywhere, the front-door’s ripped off its frame and, worst of all, the doorbell no longer plays the *Dr Who* theme. No more swirling music.’

Pete puts a palm on his knee and stands. ‘I caution against levity. Several uniformed men have penetrated Katharine’s house and when she returns she will be most upset.’

‘Yeah she will; they’ve escaped.’

Doug’s polishing a rifle in his workshop. His punchbag is swinging with a fresh photo of Kate stapled to it.

‘I can’t believe you’ve done it,’ I say. ‘I was joking about your To Do list. Why have you rigged the doorbell to explode again?’

‘I ain’t.’

‘So who’s blown up the front-door?’

Doug slides open the panels in the back wall. He rewinds CAM01 and thumbs PLAY.

On the screen is an empty pavement. There are voices.

Thugs with body armour and sub-machine-guns scuttle into view. They smash down the front-door.

‘Bloody hell,’ I say, ‘they’re not burglars. When was this?’

‘Time stamped one minute after you went. You turned left. They entered from the right.’

One by one, the thugs disappear inside our house.

A lone thug with blond hair swaggers across CAM01.

‘Kate had a tutorial,’ says Doug, ‘and Pete was at the library. I was in here.’ Doug jabs his fist at the screen. ‘Search is quick. Focussed.’ The thugs reappear at the front-door, lugging a body wrapped in my Snow UNI dressing gown. ‘Knew what they wanted.’

‘Yeah, my dressing gown. Wait a minute, that isn’t—’

‘Billie-Jo?’ Doug’s jaw swivels. ‘Aye, lad. Was in your room.’

‘But they’re taking her.’

My throat constricts.

The thugs escape across the screen.

My eyes brim.

‘Taking *her* . . .’

17

Lucky escape for Arsenal if it did

A bubble of silence. No blinking. Fingers?

Sound spills in. A voice?

‘You OK?’

It’s Doug. He’s crouching in his blue boiler suit and black boots.

I’m on the workshop floor. Knees against my chest and rocking in the metallic gloom.

His fingers stop snapping. His hazel eyes are gawping at me. ‘You zoned out.’

My cheeks are hot. Wet.

I wipe them.

‘Sure you’re OK?’ Doug offers me a spade of a hand. ‘There’s a house meeting at eleven.’

‘Gone. She’s gone. My fault, all my fault.’

I stagger over dumbbells, to the bench. A lathe is surrounded by drill bits and spanners. There are computer chips and circuit boards. Coiled cables. Multi-coloured diodes flicker around CAM01, CAM02 and CAM03. The bright and the shiny.

I clutch my head. ‘What’s going on? Why have they taken Billie-Jo? Where is she? She OK?’

Above the lathe is a framed album cover: 'Out of the Blue', by the Electric Light Orchestra. The gatefold sleeve shows a huge flying saucer of red, yellow and blue with 'ELO' in its middle and, in one corner of the sleeve, a smaller spaceship docking.

'Doug, our time together . . . it wasn't enough. I need more. I need her. She was taken before I got to know her. Her loves and hates. Before I found out where she's from. I don't even know her phone number. That's my point. I met her two days ago. On Monday. I only know what I feel about her. But now . . .'

The filtered air reeks of burnt electrics. Stale sweat.

I shuffle along the floor, parallel to the tarpaulin mound and shelves of assault rifles. I turn around to canisters chained against a wall. Laughing gas? I wish.

'I don't know,' I say, 'would it have been easier if we'd never met? If I'd concentrated on my studies like Pete said in the pub?'

Doug stares at me, empty of expression. He rubs his one eyebrow. 'You were lucky.'

'I don't feel it. I feel like I've crawled out of a car crusher.'

'Meant MI7 nabbed her, not you.'

I sigh. 'You don't know it's them.'

Doug presses PLAY below CAM01. It replays footage of Billie-Jo's abduction. 'See that geezer?'

I wander closer to the screen. Try to focus.

'Blond hair?' says Doug.

'That one without a gun?'

'UMP. MI7 standard issue sub-machine-gun. Lasersighted for accuracy. Wet technology stainless steel sound suppressor. Nice and quiet.' Doug taps the screen. 'The geezer with blond hair is Mark Richard Flint.'



‘Flint?’ I stroke my chin. ‘That name’s familiar. Wait a minute, didn’t he . . . didn’t Flint—’

‘Work with my old man.’

‘Yeah, that’s it. You once said they worked on missions together. Oh.’ I pat him on the back. ‘Sorry. You OK?’

Doug’s chest swells and expands the holes in his boiler suit. Holes he earned one night using a Bunsen burner as a lightsaber.

‘I suppose at least now we have the proof,’ I say. ‘Even if it’s scattered across the hallway as bits of wood and glass. But why MI7? Why me? Or is it just another meaningless coincidence?’

‘MI5 protects Britain from national hazards. MI6, threats from another country. MI7 guards against global dangers.’

‘Thanks to your homebrew, I once did a party trick storing coins. But I’m no global danger. MI7 got the wrong house. The wrong guy. Sure, identity theft sounds terrible, but they’re quite welcome to my fail grade in French.’

Doug marches over to his red punchbag. ‘Ain’t that. Unless . . .’ He hits Kate’s photo and the punchbag arcs ninety degrees of red before swinging back into his hands. ‘Unless they were after your girl.’

‘Billie-Jo? The English student? You’re wrong on this one. True, MI7 might want to stop crimes against humanity, but poetry isn’t *that* bad. Anyway, even if you’re right, which you aren’t, you’re as academic as Pete’s dissertation. She’s gone.’

Doug rubs his hands. ‘Get her back.’

‘That’s a great idea and I have but one tiny question. What are you babbling about?’

‘Standard MI7 procedure, lad. Nab the suspect and return to base. So let’s go in.

Rescue mission.’

‘Rescue Billie-Jo? From MI7?’

‘Aye.’

‘Really?’

Doug retreats to his screens and presses PLAY under CAM01. The thugs storm through the front-door.

‘That won’t happen again,’ I say. ‘Having unpaid library fines is no death sentence. Yet.’

‘But they’ll think you’re a suspect.’

‘So I’ll tell them—’

‘No one negotiates with MI7.’ Doug freezes one frame: Billie-Jo being bundled outside.

I lean back against a wall. Cold metal presses into my shoulders.

‘OK,’ I say, ‘as you’re not joking, I’ll listen. Rescue her from where, exactly?’

‘Base is in Hertfordshire.’

‘That’s north of London. Hours away. And even longer when you don’t have transport. And don’t think you can “borrow” Kate’s car again, she’d notice.’

‘Hire some vans.’ Doug scratches a forest of stubble. ‘From Andy’s Autos. I’ll get a good deal. He owes me.’

‘I have a major cash-flow problem because mine’s flowed elsewhere.’ I point at his new assault rifles and gas canisters. ‘Plus, after your summer refit, you must be sofa-surfing for pennies.’

Doug punches the air. ‘Plan A. Kate lends us the dosh.’

‘Single-glazed windows? Not switching the central heating on until the first of November? And have you seen the cellar? There’s that spare fridge labelled “MADE IN ENGLAND”. So it will never work.’

‘The fridge or my plan?’

‘Both. You know Kate. Even if she’s ill and feeling generous, she hates me and you’re her ex. And a double dose of hate is hard to swallow.’

I meander over to a vertical window gauzed with wire. On one side is a poster of the periodic table and a wire diagram of a turbocharger; on the other side is a poster of William Shatner as James T Kirk, from *Star Trek*, pointing his phaser at some unseen alien.

Doug made me watch his science fiction film collection in our first-year. I understood the relationship between Kirk, Spock and Bones; I understood the spiritual nature of the Jedi and the Sith. After a long week of watching *Star Wars* films back-to-back, I understood the Force meant being able to raise our TV off the floor with precision, before smashing it against a wall.

‘Look,’ I say, ‘I realise your dad was in MI7 for twenty years before . . . but what do you know? About the base?’

‘MI7 started thinking about Evitara Research after September eleventh,’ says Doug. ‘My old man helped design it. Chief Technical Architect.’

‘Was he? You’ve never told me that before. I thought he went around switching off the screens at night to save energy. That would be such a relaxing job.’

‘Base is a covert operation. Got detailed files.’ He pats the side of his head. ‘Whole area is s’posed to look like a mega science park. Even has research links with local unis. Dealing out professor titles to keep it real. Base has a training block, medlab and an electrified fence.’

‘Wow.’

‘To electrocute foxes. To zap stray badgers.’

Doug picks up both of his 50kg dumbbells and strides past the tarpaulin. ‘Next to it is National Institute for Cosmetic Excellence.’ He lowers the dumbbells alongside the chained canisters. ‘Behind is ZP.’

‘ZP?’

‘ZygniaPharma. Pharmaceutical company. Research facility with laboratories.’ He checks the valves on the gas canisters. ‘They animal-test drugs.’

‘Until they’ve accidentally created perfect beetle juice or a gigantic swarm of piranha bees? Look, I know you made bombs and gadgets with your dad. But MI7? A secure base?’

‘It’ll be fine.’ He taps each of the cylinder pressure gauges. All full. He checks a row of hand-held canisters. ‘Get help. Gaz, Baz and Daz owe me.’

‘Not enough. Pete?’

Doug glances across. ‘Mister Pedantic? He don’t have no offence skills.’

‘Yeah, but you have to love an eccentric fossil who needs carbon-dating. Someone who uses an atlas coloured pink for the British Empire. Who still plays 78rpm records.’

‘Loads of old geezers play vinyl.’

‘Not dressed as Sherlock Holmes.’

I step away from the window. Sunshine pours onto the tarpaulin heap in the centre of the workshop.

‘Anyway,’ I say, ‘Pete has the big brain you need. He’s forgotten more than we know. He’s so clever he can even name all the pasta shapes.’

‘Nobody’s that smart.’

‘Think of the tactics he’s studied. Those military leaders. You need him.’ I pluck the photo of Kate from the punchbag. ‘You need everyone.’

Doug glares at the photo.

‘What then? MI7 won’t let you stroll inside their base.’

He peels back the tarpaulin: it’s a block of metal squatting on tyres pristine with chevron tread. A front grille houses a giant Cyclops light above a trio of cameras. There are side-mounted machine-guns and a seat at the rear.

‘Wow,’ I say. ‘Your lawnmower’s finished?’

‘Conrods are shot-peened for strength. Twin-turbo engine pulls like a bastard. Might rig up some nitromethane. Aluminium chamber brakes with cross-drilled rotors, diagonally vented. Magnetorheological dampers. Triple-camera surveillance for daylight CCTV, thermal imaging and night-vision. Remote controlled with homing beacon tracker. Zoom lenses. Mower is armour-plated.’ Doug kisses each machine-gun barrel. ‘Engineered for combat.’

‘Yeah, but does it run on unleaded?’ The machine-guns speckle in the sunlight. I prod one.

‘Point four-five calibre,’ he says. ‘Close range winner.’

I prod the other.

‘They’re loaded.’

I stop prodding. ‘What’s that crate at the back?’

A smirk crawls through Doug’s oil-blotched face. ‘Auto gren launcher.’ He scissor-kicks over the lawnmower’s rubber handlebars. He thumps a button and a wall panel slides back: twelve oval grenades sit together on a shelf like an egg box.

‘Testing my hardware later,’ he says. ‘Can buy more with Kate’s dosh. We have weapons. We know where the base is. C’mon, get her back.’

‘Me?’

‘I drive one van, you the other.’

‘I failed my driving test the day Heather ditched me. Anyway, I have my exam.

You know that. I’ll help you ask the others, but I can’t go to a secret base.’

Doug circles the lawnmower in boiler oil and blue. He crouches next to a machine-gun barrel. Breathes on its tip.

‘If I miss my exam,’ I say, ‘I’ll be kicked out.’

He rubs the tip of the barrel with the cuff of his boiler suit.

‘Failure means no degree. No career.’

‘Can’t take your exam when they nab you.’

‘If I fail my degree my life will be nothing anyway. It will be no better than being a cockroach or a driving examiner.’

‘Come with me and get Billie-Jo. Stay here and MI7 nab you.’ His pupils dilate.

‘Choose.’

18

The best conversation I had  
was over forty million years ago

I'm leaning against the windowsill of Pete's parlour. Bricks and walls. Behind me is an aspidistra and a window to reality. Ahead, the unreality of a house invaded by MI7.

The downstairs front room is Pete's historical fetish: blue and white Wedgwood plates line a shelf above the original tiled Victorian fireplace whilst, in a corner, his grandfather clock stands upright and proud in an oak case cross banded with mahogany. The hour hand points to XI; the minute hand nudges III. The hands sweep round as though Queen Victoria herself were still alive, each solemn tock and tick the same as the ones that swept before.

Pete's patriotic red, white and blue beanbags form a triangle in the centre of the room. His Monopoly, Cluedo and Scrabble boards lie in between, nailed into the wooden floor. Why a historian has an unnatural obsession with these games belongs to a lost evening of beer and pizza we had in our first year together. We should be told.

Doug is sprawled across his blue beanbag. He rolls up the sleeves of his boiler suit and throws a dart at Einstein, who is propped against the back wall. Doug's life-size cardboard cut-out of the physicist boasts one arm, a Man United bobble hat and dents around his groin.



Pete's wearing a shirt, cardigan and black corduroy trousers. He's in a leather armchair next to a table with a lace tablecloth. On the table is a bone china teapot, a jug of milk, two stacks of cups and saucers and an unopened packet of Jaffa Cakes.

Doug hurls two more darts. 'Where is she?'

Pete glances from behind a book with Mussolini on its cover. 'Please show some patience. For although Katharine may often act like a scarlet woman, she *is* our landlady.' He smooths out wrinkles in the tablecloth with slow, deliberate strokes.

I lean on the edge of the windowsill. A wind snatches at trees and tosses their leaves over the pavement. Ravens on a roof hunch. Houses huddle. Locals scuttle across the road. No mayhem. No crisis. Stay here, never to see Billie-Jo again; or rescue her and fail my degree. The wrath of MI7 or sociology lecturers: bullet or boredom. To do anything could be murder; to do nothing would be suicide. The aspidistra shivers. I step back from the edge.

A shriek.

Scrunching glass.

Stomp, stomp, stomp.

The door scythes open: Kate. She's holding a folded newspaper and has a bag over her shoulder.

'Have you seen my front-door?' she says. 'There's glass and wood and . . . and it's everywhere. Who's responsible?'

'Pete's quite responsible,' I say.

Kate stampedes through the beanbags. 'It's you, isn't it? You broke my hinge and now you've totally broken my door.'

'Not me. I wasn't even in the house.'

‘I leave for my tutorial, my house is fine. I return, complete sodding wreck.’ Her black fingernails scrape the windowsill. ‘Whoever smashed my front-door is so going to suffer. I’m all for the sympathetic approach, but rapists and car thieves and burglars should be strung up.’

‘Hmm, very sympathetic.’

She slaps my belly with the newspaper.

‘I *have* studied criminology,’ she says. ‘Prison’s way too soft. The authorities should stream it live on screens in pubs and town squares, like they do with England games. The ultimate deterrent. Surveys show loads more people want to bring back hanging.’

‘Not in public, on big screens. We’d spill our popcorn.’ With tiny backward steps I retreat to the sanctuary of my white beanbag.

‘MI7,’ says Doug. ‘They did your door.’

Kate flops into her red beanbag. Polystyrene beads spurt through a hole and bounce across the wooden floor like hailstones on a car roof.

Doug keeps yanking his darts out of Einstein and crumpling back into his beanbag. Between the dart throws he describes the lone MI7 officer outside his workshop and the CCTV footage of Billie-Jo’s abduction.

Pete listens with his book on his lap and the tips of his fingers prised together as a church steeple.

‘I understand the chronology,’ he says, ‘yet I still fail to comprehend why MI7 would attack our house. We are hardly a strategic target. Why, for example, did they break our front-door? Why did they search Void’s bedroom?’

Kate cackles. ‘Yeah, nothing exciting ever happens in there.’ Her boots dangle over the Ballroom of the Cluedo board.

Pete lifts the lid of his teapot and stirs. 'Moreover, why abduct this Billie-Jo?'

Kate glares at me.

'It's not my fault,' I say. 'Her being in my room isn't illegal. Pete's house motto even encourages it.' I nod to the frame over the fireplace: 'TEAMWORK CONQUERS ALL'.

Pete unstacks the cups and saucers across the tablecloth. Bone china chinks.

'In our first-year,' he says, 'I suggested that we should perform as a team to maximise our chances of completing our courses. A strategy of strength through numbers, as a general would operate.'

He arranges the cups as the number four on a die. He pours the milk and tea.

'If we consider the evidence,' he says, 'Douglas must be correct, for if they *were* MI7 and not burglars, it explains why they did not search the rest of the house in any detail. Or, indeed, steal anything.'

Pete buttons up his cardigan.

'Tea, ladies and gentlemen,' he says. He looks at me. 'Ah, I do apologise for my lack of coffee.'

'That's OK. I'll drink tea, as it's you.'

Doug lowers his cup to the Monopoly board. He drops two of his sugar lumps and brown waves of tea spill over his saucer and submerge Whitehall and the Electric Company.

'MI7 were after Void,' he says.

Kate glowers at me behind her fringe. 'I should have evicted you over the summer. You do realise I have a door-shaped hole?'

'No, I didn't,' I say, 'and if I were you I'd keep quiet about that.'

‘Your so-called jokes are so not helping. Because of you, I don’t have a front-door. Can this, like, get any worse?’

‘Well yeah, you don’t have a doorbell either.’ I scoop my cup off the table. ‘But I’ve already spoken to a carpenter. I said it was an emergency. He’ll pop round this afternoon.’

Kate tips back in her beanbag and her boots lift higher off the floor. She unfolds her newspaper across her denim lap. Her beanbag hisses as she reads.

‘If MI7 did want Void,’ says Pete, ‘it would explain the mistaken abduction.’ He wrestles the unopened packet of Jaffa Cakes. It tears. He dunks a biscuit in his tea. ‘Therefore, Void, if Douglas *is* correct, can you suggest why MI7 might be interested in you?’

I shrug. ‘Overdue library books?’

Pete isn’t smiling.

‘Look, how can I take this seriously when I don’t know what’s going on? I have no idea why they wanted me or took Billie-Jo by mistake. You might be the historian but I need answers too.’

‘*Hell-oooo?*’ says Kate, ‘I totally know why MI7 wanted him.’ She holds up *Snow*:  
THATCHER SMOOCHES WITH MYSTERY MAN.

I squirm deeper into my beanbag. ‘So we had a kiss and a cuddle? That’s no crime. Billie-Jo’s my girlfriend and I love what we do.’

Kate flaps the paper at me. ‘I can so see that from your photo. You’re—’

‘HELLO, ANYONE IN? I DID TRY TO RING YOUR DOORBELL, BUT YOU DON’T SEEM TO HAVE A DOOR. HELLO?’

Doug back-flips to the window and pulls a 9mm Beretta from a pocket in one smooth arc, like a knight with his sword. He pokes through the leaves of the aspidistra.

‘Your Merc’s here, girl.’

Kate exits: she leaves the room with haste and Einstein with another dent in his groin.

Before following her down the hall, I allow for the recommended stopping distance as stated in the *Highway Code*.

Beyond the empty doorway of splintered glass is a man in a suit, on the pavement. He’s chatting to Kate. He escorts her around her new car and points to parts of it.

Doug plugs the doorway with his V-shaped torso.

‘Go on then,’ I say. ‘Ask her.’

The suit gives Kate something to sign. He shakes her hand. He enters his own car and drives off.

I reach up and push Doug’s shoulders: no movement.

Kate sits inside her car. She rummages in her bag and puts on a pair of sunglasses.

I slide past Doug onto the pavement. Kate’s silver Merc squats low against the old brown bricks of the terraced houses. The car hugs the tarmac with gleaming ten-spoke alloys. I peer into the driver’s window.

The glass lowers a lipstick-width to reveal a slit of brown fringe and black sunglasses. ‘What do you bozos want now?’ says Kate.

‘Love this,’ I say. ‘Folding hardtop? Daddy *is* generous with his bonuses.’

‘Isn’t it gorgeous? Tellurium silver metallic Mercedes. But if you even think about breathing on my car, I’ll call the police.’

I step back from the kerb. Metal creases swoop and curve.

Kate closes the window and opens her door. ‘Some free advice you’ll need if you grow up into a real man: my uncle says stay silent when arrested. Saying nothing means admitting nothing. And he’s a detective inspector.’

She strokes her seat. 'Red flamenco Nappa leather. Daddy ordered the car for my birthday while I was on holiday over the summer. I wanted to go to Disneyland again. But even I thought the tenth time in six years might be too much.'

'I wish I could afford a holiday to Rickmansworth.'

She clambers out with a mini-skirt of denim and two big black insect eyes.

'For your information,' she says, 'Turkey was totally crawling with criminals. Ones with tattoos, thick eyebrows and eyes set too close together. But at least I didn't have my Mercedes over there. I tell you now, if anyone had stolen my car they'd suffer.'

'I hope you enjoyed your hols, but we have something to ask. Can you lend Doug some money?'

Kate slams the door: a solid *thunk* echoes off the terraced houses.

Doug pats the car's roof. 'Want me to drive it to your private lock-up? Make sure it's safe. Like with your M3.'

Kate drags her sunglasses down her nose.

'Don't want to leave it out here,' says Doug. He glances up and down the dented cars and vandalised wheelie bins. His lone eyebrow twitches. 'Not overnight.'

Kate pushes her sunglasses back. The wind brushes her fringe across her forehead.

She squeezes her fob and the Merc's indicators splash orange over the tarmac.

'I want this fob back within the hour,' she says, 'or else you'll be seeing my uncle again.'

Doug snatches it.

Kate's queen bee eyes fix on him.

'This is another crazy mission,' she says. 'Isn't it? Like the first year, when you were totally obsessed with government conspiracies. When you wasted my money dragging us all to Arizona—'

‘Nevada,’ says Doug. ‘Area 51’s north of Vegas.’

She caresses a wing mirror.

‘Your dad’s a merchant banker,’ I say. ‘And you never spend much on our house.’

‘*Your* house?’ she says.

I point to the window of the front room. ‘What about our resident physicist? He has one arm and a groin full of your boot marks. Doesn’t Einstein suffer enough wearing a Man United bobble hat?’

‘*Hell-oooo?* He’s cardboard.’

‘That’s not all. The window in the bathroom’s still cracked. Plus do you realise the sofa in the back room contains foam? The fire-friendly stuff banned in all peace-loving countries? And Germany? Oh no, I’m turning into Pete.’

Kate folds her arms.

‘Please, help Doug out. Lend him some money. You know you still love him.’

She shoves past.

I turn to Doug. ‘I thought I could have teased her into lending you the money, since she’s a rich kid with nothing to do. But obviously not. Double dose not swallowed. Why bother?’

Inside *her* house, Doug discusses the evidence again; Pete nods and his white hair drifts.

To rescue Billie-Jo or not to rescue Billie-Jo, that is the question. I should be studying Shakespeare, not Karl Marx.

I sag deeper into my beanbag.

I dip a toe across Chance, slide a heel into the Study and try to organise ‘CHOOSE’ onto a Triple Word Score.

Pete liberates another Jaffa Cake from the packet.

‘If,’ he says, ‘MI7 sought Void, they shall return. However, you suggest that we travel to the MI7 base and discuss the rescue of Void’s girlfriend?’

Doug scrapes a dart along his forearm. ‘Something like that.’

I sip my cup of tea. Cold.

‘Your chance to help,’ I say. ‘Like your house motto.’

‘Rescuing Billie-Jo may be laudable,’ says Pete, ‘but such a diplomatic mission would be difficult. Moreover, I have a five-thousand word essay to write before the end of this week.’

‘Lectures won’t start until next week and no one gives out essay titles yet.’

‘They do if you request them a semester in advance.’

‘I understand you want to be prepared for the year ahead. The whole great determination thing. But why write your essay before the end of the week? The only guy who had his work done by Friday was Robinson Crusoe.’

Pete waves his Jaffa Cake at me. ‘I also have my dissertation to finalise, “The Effectiveness of Strategic Military Leadership, 1914-1945”. I examine the campaigns of the First and Second World War and critically assess the impact of leadership.’ He snaps the biscuit. ‘I have the concluding chapters to write.’

‘For a dissertation to be submitted *next* year?’

‘My tutor stated that it lacks the intuitive components of leadership and recommended an analysis of the emotional dimensions of war. Therefore, I shall remain here.’

The grandfather clock ticks louder.



19

knocked his two heads together

On the motorway Officer Flint's car was a stab of metal. The engine growled, his car surged ahead. Other cars swerved.

The seizure squad van in front was an armour-plated shadow. *The* shadow. The crawl of vehicles slowed, gave way.

Flint tapped the 'D' button on his comms cube.

'Afternoon,' Adams said. 'Did you have a nice—'

'I'm approaching Milton Keynes. I will be at the facility in an hour. Status update?'

'I've told Professor Black about the suspect. Everything is being prepared. Erm, about the power fence?'

'Has there been another incident?'

'No.'

'Perimeter alerts?'

'No.'

'You mean no, *sir*.' The traffic tide over tarmac. Smother of rubber. Flint glided past a white van greyed by encounters. 'Question. Did you review all CCTV footage from the last seventy-two hours?'

'Yes. Nothing unusual. Shall I still send Officer Bodie to survey Sector F?'

Flint stamped on the accelerator, his car lunged forwards. Amidst a swell of brake lights he tucked in behind the seizure squad van. Its silhouette stained the horizon. ‘That Sector F alert was a one-off. No compromise of security, no investigation necessary. And no paperwork, understand?’

‘But what if—’

‘Understand?’

A pause. ‘Yes.’

‘What did you say?’

‘Yes, *sir*.’

Flint checked over his shoulders. Surrounding him were shuffling cars, eager for their slot. Clones travelling from one box to another box, in a box. ‘Contact the reserve seizure squad, move them into position.’

‘Sir?’

‘I want to interrogate the rest of the people in that house. So let’s hit Brackenbury Road again.’ Flint signalled, overtook. White lines bulleted past. ‘Now.’

20

*What's yellow and dangerous?*

Tight rubber. Fingers. Dribbling liquid.

I'm cleaning up my kitchen sink vomit in a pair of yellow rubber gloves. I'm stacking plates and saucers in a rack; I'm scrubbing knives, forks and spoons.

It's only right that I clean up my own mess in Kate's house. Yet how different could Pete's history have been if Churchill had washed dishes as he contemplated beaches and finest hours? A different and a better world, if only Hitler had been filmed performing his salute wearing a yellow rubber glove.

Suds slide from my gloves into the sink. Billie-Jo hovers everywhere I look. I yank the plug: the sink gurgles.

My bedroom door swings back. Sunlight sieves through my closed curtains into a room where MI7 once lurked. My film magazines are slotted in my bookcase, yet rearranged. A heap of clothes and boxes sit in the middle of the room, only in different positions.

Everywhere still has the comforting precision of an unguarded sneeze, only now my room smells industrial. The odour of infiltration. I never thought we'd be broken into, because the house always looked as if it already had been.

Windows in the terraced houses opposite wink black eyes of glass. Brackenbury  
Road is empty of people. Witnesses erased.

Doug folds himself into Kate's Merc and smears black lines along the tarmac.

I stare.

I see my dad berating me for not revising enough. My graduation ceremony with  
one empty seat.

I see Billie-Jo's silent face. Her eyes are shut.

I'm dizzy. My body aches.

A lone raven flaps onto a roof. A hunched man ambles along the pavement and zips  
up his coat against an unseen wind.

Doug hands Kate her fob; she wags a finger at his skid marks along the tarmac.

Kate is watching the emergency-carpenter hinge her new front-door. She smiles at  
his muscles. Plays with her hair.

My clock glows over my duvet, not my pillow. My screen still sits in a field of dust  
but it's no longer parallel to the desk. Everywhere's the same yet somehow different, as if  
all the shadows have been peeled off and glued back down in the wrong order.

I grope under my bed for my Karl Marx essay. I flip its pages back to the first.  
*Again.* I prop a pillow behind my back.

I stare.

I see her in the spaces between my typed words. Standing on each full stop. I shut  
my eyes but her scent fills my nostrils.

I blink. Start revising.

Start listening to my dad's voice. Graduation. The career to pay off my debts. His voice circles in my head, crackling with repetition like one of Pete's scratched 78s.

The words on the page drift out of focus. My fingers trace the interlocking coffee stains.

A second voice: *I shall never meet her again.*

I look away.

The second voice grows louder.

*Never . . .*

I pace around.

The essay trembles in my fingers.

My feet twitch, between my door and my window.

21

I'll have to think about it



Doug bursts into my room gripping his Beretta. He parts my curtains a fraction and sunshine spills onto his cheek.

‘MI7 will be ages away by now,’ I say, on my bed.

My essay’s creased and its words are leaking from my mind. My back’s against a pillow. And the wall.

‘They come in here,’ I say, ‘and steal my dressing gown, student ID and my only textbook. I can’t believe that. It’s awful. They could have at least tidied up afterwards.’

‘They’ll be back,’ says Doug. He releases the curtain and prison-bar shadows line his face. ‘Hired two vans. And more hardware.’

Words. Black impenetrable words. My Karl Marx essay takes longer to read than it did to write.

Doug paces to my door and back to my window in one oval circuit, clicking the safety catch of his pistol off and on, off and on. A toy in his huge hand.

‘Revising . . .’

He slides open the curtains with the gun barrel. His nose thuds against my window.

I sigh.

‘Leaving for the base,’ he says.

‘It sounds . . . well, ridiculous. Rescue Billie-Jo using your gas canisters, your grenades and your *KEEP CALM* sticker? And from the clutches of a secret service that offers a service and is secret?’

Doug mists the glass.

‘Those sugar lumps are rotting your brain and your teeth.’

‘It’ll work, no probs.’

‘You mean no *chance*. Rescue her from a base loaded with security? From troops trained to kill? There’d be no second chances. None of your *Star Trek* phasers set to stun. And both Kate and Pete said no.’

‘Instructions and a backpack are in my room. Your van’ll be delivered in about an hour—’

‘What van? Kate didn’t lend you the cash.’

Doug shuts one eye and sniggers.

The essay flops against my nose.

His shoulders are vibrating.

‘Please tell me you haven’t?’ I say. ‘Not her new car? Not the Mercedes?’

Doug rubs his palms together.

‘But you said. Outside.’ I aim the essay at my window. ‘I saw you drive it away. Her Merc’s all snuggled up in her private garage, with immobilisers and alarms and her furry Minnie Mouse dice.’

‘*Was*, lad. All electronics can be disabled.’

‘Like our first year, when you “borrowed” Kate’s M3 convertible and the police arrested you for theft and dangerous driving?’

‘Wanted to see how it handled.’

‘Yeah, but you handled it for so long you were arrested near Oxford.’

‘Motorways are smoother near Oxford.’

‘But you don’t see much of them cruising at a hundred and twenty. And if you hadn’t been dating her, Kate wouldn’t have dropped the charges. So you’d better “un-borrow” her Merc pronto. Otherwise her uncle will throw you in a cell overnight, again.’

‘Too late.’

The essay drops onto my bed.

Doug kneels at its side.

‘She reckons it’s in her lock-up,’ he says. His forearms plank across my bed.

‘Really sold it to Andy Autos.’

‘You did what?’

‘Fair swap. They had duplicate fobs, I needed dosh for weapons and my tech stuff.’

I sit on the edge of my bed. Not revising. Not listening.

I scroll through my menu options: Stay; Go; Save As.

‘Look,’ I say, ‘I know sometimes she can be annoying. But stealing?’

‘Her Merc’s a good buy for someone.’

‘Maybe it is or maybe it isn’t. That’s not my point. My point is that it’s also a goodbye for Douglas Bolt when you end up sharing a prison cell with Mister Big.

Resistance is useless.’

‘Agreed a clause with the sale, so can buy her car back afterwards. If we need to.’

‘That’s something, but what about my dad? I promised him.’

Doug stands and the oil-slick ringlets of his hair touch the ceiling. ‘It’ll be fine.’

‘Stop saying that. If I don’t pass the exam, I fail my degree. No job. No career.’

‘If you stay here, MI7’ll return and capture you too. Could suffer.’

‘Worse than seeing Billie-Jo everywhere I look? Worse than seeing myself growing old and lonely like Pete?’

My *Casablanca* poster ripples to itself in the draught from my window: Bergman's cheek forever touching Bogart's.

I drag myself to my window. The lone raven has flown.

Doug plucks a bullet from his boiler suit. He licks it.

Black clouds are drifting closer.

22

*the How, Why, and Where phases*

I knock on Pete's bedroom door.

'Good afternoon,' he says. He pivots on a tartan slipper. 'Do forgive my room, for I am somewhat engrossed in the machinations of Operation Overlord.'

I step into a semi-circle of books heaped to the ceiling. There's a dry musty smell.

'Somewhat?' I say. 'You must have every book here.'

Post-It notes spike into sunshine like radioactive porcupines. I sit in an antique chair between his collection of 78rpm records.

'Doug's hired two vans,' I say. 'We're going to rescue Billie-Jo.'

Pete closes his door and his deerstalker cape sways. 'A noble idea, yet diplomacy is a delicate art.' He lowers himself onto his bed; his knees crack. 'Moreover, I have two essays to complete.'

'Two?'

His lips crinkle to reveal gravestone teeth. 'Certain events have precipitated the additional task.'

'Forget that. If you help you'll miss lectures and tutorials.'

'Why should I choose to do that? I enjoy lectures and tutorials.'

Pete reaches over to his bedside table. Next to a bottle of cod liver oil is an upturned book and his seventieth birthday bookmark, the sophisticated Hitler one with leather trim and pulsating red eyes above a narrow Velcro moustache. He seizes both.

‘I also plan to teach after my doctorate,’ he says.

‘A PhD? Really? But you’d understand more and more about less and less. And you’d be too old to teach.’

Pete inserts the bookmark. ‘One may teach privately at any age.’

‘You’d be a doctor?’

He lowers the book onto his bedside table.

‘Doctor Peter Marten?’

‘Indeed. My doctorate would earn respect from my students.’

‘But you’d be Doc *Marten*. You wouldn’t earn respect from your students, you’d earn thousands from their orders for air-cushioned boots. They’d wiggle their socks in the air and laugh. Sure, we need lecturers to do the research for undergraduates to copy. But a PhD? Your research would be abstract. Irrelevant.’

I grasp a Peter Dawson record and scrape its sleeve: twirling worms of dust.

‘Anyway,’ I say, ‘I thought you wanted to experience conflict first-hand? “Perfect” you said.’

‘I did and I do,’ says Pete. ‘However, my specialities are the First and Second World Wars and I have yet to read the blueprints of a time machine.’

‘If you help us, you’d witness a historical event. Isn’t that the ultimate primary source?’ I lean forwards and the antique chair creaks. ‘OK, so you wouldn’t be writing essays or your dissertation, but you would feel the emotions your leaders felt, first-hand. Courage. Trust. Hope. Plus if it goes wrong you’d feel the rush of panic and trousers shaded brown.’

Pete strokes a tuft of white hair.

‘You do establish an interesting point,’ he says. ‘I shall sleep—’

‘No, we have to go. Now.’

I ram the Peter Dawson 78 into his collection.

‘Pete, in our first year we camped outside GCHQ and also flew to Nevada. We did that for Doug, when he was dating Kate’s purse. For Kate, we broke into a research site that used to be owned by Huntingdon Life Sciences, because she said they were experimenting on animals. Last year, for you, we scampered off for a week to the Imperial War Museum, the British Library and the Churchill War Rooms. Teamwork conquers all, right? Well, now I want you to help me.’

‘You would not benefit from a diminution of your studies.’

‘I know my dad wouldn’t—’

‘Ah yes, what would your father say?’

‘He’d want me to stay here and graduate of course. Look for a job. Have a career.’

Pete’s photocopied journal articles and copies of ‘History Today’ are on the carpet, next to his bed. ‘But if I stay here I’ll never see Billie-Jo again. Part of me knows I’d regret that for the rest of my life. I . . . I don’t expect you to understand.’

Pete clutches the top rail of his bed and lurches over to a dressing table. He caresses a silver photo frame. Says nothing.

After a while he turns around. ‘I met Ethel Booth when I was sixteen and she is the only woman I have ever loved. We shared our prelapsarian youth and secured places at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, to read History.’

I remember the Freshers’ Ball: *I shall never meet her again.*

‘That’s *her*, is it?’ I say.

Pete nods.



‘If you had a place at Cambridge, why are you here, doing the degree again?’

‘She accepted her place, I did not.’ Pete cradles the photo. ‘My father believed that acquiring a technical skill was the only future. As an engineer, he thought that university education was irrelevant for the industrial age and he thus instructed me to seek employment. I relinquished my place at Cambridge.’

Pete pulls a lace handkerchief from a pocket. New tears spring from old eyes.

He sniffs. ‘During Ethel’s first Michaelmas term, she . . . she was hit by an automobile. She died.’

‘Oh shit. I’m so sorry.’

‘Thank you for your concern.’ His hands are shaking. ‘Most kind.’ He dabs his eyes. ‘On my father’s advice I put her and my studies second. I was a fool. Ethel demonstrated taste, wisdom and a mercurial mind. Quite remarkable.’

Pete lowers the photo onto the dressing table, yet keeps clutching it.

‘We enjoyed an almost telepathic rapport,’ he says.

‘Yeah, me and Billie-Jo, we’re . . . connected somehow. Different sides of the same coin.’

‘I could not bear to see such misjudgement occur again. Therefore, if you promise to abide by our house motto and enlist Katharine’s help, I shall also accompany you.’

‘I will, Pete. I promise. Thank you.’

He lets go.

‘Even a vague approximation of a man would have taken the hint.’ Kate’s standing in her doorway with long yellow laces veined across black boots. ‘I’m not lending you a penny.’

‘I don’t want anything,’ I say. ‘I need your help.’

‘Me?’ Her fringe quivers. ‘I wouldn’t help if you begged.’

‘I *am* begging.’

‘You’re doing a terrible job. Shouldn’t you, like, be on your knees?’ She snorts. ‘So terrible I’m going to slam the door in your face.’

She slams the door in my face.

‘Look,’ I say, ‘I don’t want any money. Not yours, not anyone’s. So let me in and I’ll explain.’

‘You don’t know much about women, do you? No means no. Always has, always will.’

‘I’m not leaving here. I can’t leave. Please, let me in and—’

The bolt behind her door shunts across.

Three . . . two . . . one. I knock.

Nothing.

I kneel and flatten my eye against the keyhole.

My key-shaped landlady is on the edge of her double bed staring into her red carpet. Over her shoulder a huge white seal of a teddy sits on her pillow, next to Disney’s Pluto and a donkey with a sunflower in its mouth.

‘Please, Kate.’

Silence.

‘I’m fighting for what I believe in. You said.’

She crosses her legs.

‘*Please.*’

Her laces toss in the air like spaghetti.

I stare and wait. ‘OK, you win. I give up. What’s the password?’

‘Sod. Off.’

‘You really should add some unique characters to strengthen that. And change the “o” of sod to a zero.’

She scowls at the keyhole.

I sigh. ‘If you help . . . if you help me, I’ll do something. For you.’

The bolt to her door scrapes back.

A TV as long as a coffin hangs high on a wall, above postcards of muscular soldiers in uniforms. There’s a huge poster of the Disneyland castle over her bed, complete with fake bricks and saccharine turrets. Next to it is a poster of Belle, the cartoon princess from *Beauty and the Beast*. Elsewhere there are photographs of famous boxers (the fighters, not the underwear): Louis, Ali, Tyson. Photographs of muscular semi-naked men performing unnatural acts with other muscular semi-naked men.

‘Blood,’ she says, as if reading my mind. Her double bed is laden with teddies. ‘I love boxing because of the blood.’

A table is scattered with purple lipsticks. Psychology books line the windowsill of the only triple-glazed window in the house.

‘Doug says you want me to help you rescue Billie-Jo.’ Kate jabs a black fingernail in my ribs. ‘You despise me.’

‘I don’t. Not *despise*. I think . . . relationships matter, that’s all.’

‘It’s Wednesday afternoon. You want to rescue the girl you met on, like, Monday?’

Her bookcase contains teddies. Grey ones clutching red hearts with ‘I LOVE YOU’ in white lettering and huge versions of Snoopy, Tigger and a one-eyed Shrek. Below the teddies unopened condom packets cram together with a cellophane shine.

Kate has a poster of white rabbits in a lab lined up with their heads poking out of stocks. Their eyelids are stretched back and their eyes are a liquidised mush of green and purple.

‘Pretty, isn’t it?’ she says, with a snarl. ‘Their eyes are ulcerated and bleeding because of tests for acute toxicity.’

‘It’s horrible. And wrong. They should use guinea pigs as their, er, guinea pigs. Better still would be computer modelling, then no animal would suffer.’

Kate points to one sad-faced rabbit. ‘Chemicals are, like, dripped into the eye while the rabbit is conscious. Then some fucker in a lab coat records its deterioration over a number of days. Animal testing makes cosmetics safe. So *they* say.’

Another poster shows a woman wearing a short black skirt, tights and stilettos. She’s dragging a fur coat along the ground behind her, staining it with blood: ‘It takes up to 40 dumb animals to make a fur coat. But only one to wear it.’

‘Classic reprint,’ says Kate.

‘You joined the Stop Animal Cruelty Society in the first-year because you care. And I think that’s great. I really do.’

Her eyes narrow.

‘You’re now its president and regularly protest against organisations that animal test. Again, I agree. Well, they test at MI7.’

She folds her arms.

‘Don’t believe me then. But if you stay here, how many more bunnies will suffer? Doug’s hired a van. It’s outside. Pete and I are leaving in ten minutes. And if you don’t believe me, think about the base. The hundreds of young men in white shirts. Uniforms so crisp they show every muscular bulge. Tight. Pristine. Fit guys with . . . dog tags.’

‘Yeah, right.’

‘I don’t mind why you help me, as long as you do. Do it for the animals.’ Her double bed lurks in one corner with its black duvet and reinforced springs. ‘For yourself, if

you like. But if you help me, when we get back I'll help you. I'll move out. Promise.

That's what *you* want.'

The cheeks of the scarlet woman turn crimson.

23

discontinuities in the blue  
and green watery sausage

After hours squashed in the front of the van between Kate and Pete, I watch Pete steer us into a clearing. It's bordered by trees and separated from the distant drone of traffic.

Pete parks. 'It appears that we are here . . . wherever here is.'

'Finally,' says Kate. 'This had better be worth it.'

'It's Hertfordshire,' I say. 'Or at least that's where Doug's instructions say we *should* be.'

Before Doug left in his van, he gaffer-taped a black square on top of our dashboard: a homing beacon. Throughout the journey the homing beacon beeped at us. The beeps increased as we neared our target destination until, now, they've meshed into a continuous tone.

I switch it off.

'Maybe we're between London and rural life beyond the sprawl?' I say. 'It's leafy and private, but where exactly I've no idea. If we're near the MI7 base we're in the centre of nowhere. Around here I bet the City's expensive because it's the capital, whereas the countryside's expensive because it isn't.'

I lower my window: the night air soaks my skin. It's foggy. Fresh rain covers the ground.

Kate yawns at me.

‘Doug has detailed info,’ I say. ‘The area’s supposed to look like a research park. On one side is a cosmetics company, whilst at the rear is a pharmaceutical company. He says the base itself looks like a science research facility.’

Pete gazes ahead. ‘We shall require more detailed information if our negotiations are to succeed. However, I cannot see any facility.’

‘I’ll investigate.’

I flank the beams of the van’s headlights and the forest fades into darkness. I stick my arms out, as though somehow that will improve my night-vision.

Deeper in and moonlight shines through the trees. They surround me like a prehistoric zone unchanged for millennia. I could be hunting dinosaurs in a previous life; instead I’m scouting for Doug.

I trudge through mud. There’s an eerie chill amid the trees, as if I’m being watched. Things touch my hair. My cheeks.

‘FREEZE.’

The voice sounds weird. Metallic. My breathing’s too fast.

‘THIS WAY.’

‘Doug?’

‘Aye. Follow my torch.’

There’s a spot of light ahead.

‘Been tracking your van.’ Doug’s solid and thick, amongst the trees. He’s wearing a military helmet with night-vision goggles. He lights me up. ‘Where’s Pedantic Pete?’

‘He’s waiting for me. Your voice sounded weird. Distorted.’

Doug aims his torch under his chin: two white blades slide either side of his nose.

‘Audio processor scrambles my voice to mask normal vocal patterns. Has settings to



change pitch and duration.’ He shines the torch at a metal case in his hand. ‘Recorded some phrases earlier.’ Doug thumbs a button and a lifeless mechanical version of Doug says ‘BUY AMMO FOR DESERT EAGLE. BRING GAS MASKS. WASH MY SOCKS.’

We creep through the forest, which splits and cracks around us. Doug’s torchlight scurries along the ground like a sniffer dog.

We stop at the edge of the forest. A thick beard of conifers surrounds a small field.

‘Welcome to base camp,’ says Doug.

There’s a camp fire at the back of the field, in front of three tents and three camping chairs. A huge backpack is lengthwise next to one of the chairs. Elsewhere there’s some kind of equipment dump, with bags and boxes and a stockpile of logs and branches.

Doug snatches a stick. He crouches by the fire. ‘Been stuffing my backpack with hardware and provisions. Essentials like my night-scope, timers, lump hammer—’

‘You’ve brought a lump hammer?’

‘Don’t know what we’ll need till we do.’

I sit in a camping chair next to the fire. The nylon arms of the chair are flimsy but at least my demands for decadent luxury are met by the built-in plastic cup holder.

‘I wasn’t sure what we needed,’ I say, ‘so I packed pillows, some random goodies and my joke set of emergency moustaches. Did you bring a sleeping bag?’

‘Nope. Left her at home.’

‘You see, that’s the thing. I realise for you it’s like cuddling a cactus, but . . . I brought Kate.’

Doug stabs the fire. It hisses and spits.

‘Pete wouldn’t help us otherwise. He made me promise. The team has to stick together. Right?’

‘Brought extra kit anyhow. Spare clothes. Equipment.’ Doug squashes himself into one of the camping chairs: its arms bend inwards over his lap. ‘Like my camouflaged outfit?’

‘I hope you’ve kept your receipt; I can see you.’

Doug squirms around in his chair. ‘Also got chicken feed.’ He spotlights the conifers. ‘Beyond them an electrified fence circles the MI7 base. I sprinkle chicken feed onto the fence. They peck. Big burning hole.’

‘Have you been at those sugar lumps again?’

‘My uncle’s farm is next to the base. Ever since MI7 messed up his brother, my uncle lets his animals roam around. Been doing it for years. Kind of like his hobby.’ Doug twirls his torch in the air. ‘Some animals attack the electrified fence. Weaken it. Or create false alarms. Annoys MI7 but makes my uncle laugh. But when MI7 kills the power to the fence to fix the holes, my remote thermal sensors’ll detect it.’ Doug smirks. ‘Show time.’

‘What about the murdered chickens? All those white chalk outlines on the ground? Anyway, we can’t stay here. We have no guarantee MI7 will do the repair, never mind in time. And we don’t know what would happen to Billie-Jo if we did stay.’

Doug stares into the depths of the fire. Smoke washes over his face. He doesn’t blink.

‘Reckon my Plan B would work,’ he says. ‘All of us get into position. Wait for *the* moment. Then together, as a team, we moon at MI7.’

Doug and I are *inside* the conifers facing the MI7 base. He’s wedged beside me, with a backpack between his ankles and branches scratching his cheeks. Beyond the conifers is a small strip of grass. Beyond that, a fence marking the boundary of the base.

‘Proper name for the base,’ says Doug, ‘is Evitara Research. My uncle helped me post my cameras on surveillance. Motion detectors record activity in and out. Thermal imaging data arc reveals two isolated compartments. Both active. Reckon Billie-Jo’s in the medlab or one of interrogation cells.’

‘You “reckon”?’ I say. ‘You don’t know?’

Doug twists through the branches to his backpack. He offers me something: a metallic cylinder.

‘Use night-scope for detail,’ he says. ‘Contains telephoto and auto-image intensifiers to punch through the fog.’

I rest the scope against the crook of a branch. The gloom of the base is green and fuzzy. Watchtowers rise into the sky. The base contains several inconveniently large buildings; it seems very very very big.

‘Courtyard’s surrounded by a compound of buildings,’ says Doug. ‘Low-slung and clad in gun-metal panels. Strip windows are mirrored to control the internal environment. Buttons on the scope zoom it in and out.’

‘I see a small square building. Looks like two entrances. I’ll zoom in. Yeah, two doors. One with a figure of a man on it, the other . . . a woman.’

‘Them’s the toilets. They’re attached to the canteen.’

‘The food’s *that* bad?’

‘Medlab’s beyond the far side of the courtyard, opposite the interrogation cells. Courtyard’s in the centre of the base. There’s also a training block. Much further out, electricity generators and water filtration units. Got them?’

I track a metal fence tiptoeing into the night.

‘What I’ve got,’ I say, ‘is a fence connected to concrete posts.’

‘That’s the inner fence. Four hundred metres behind the outer fence. Uniformed guards with baseball caps and sub-machine-guns patrol the gap. Some have dogs. Outer fence is electrified, but inner one has razor-wire instead. Security lights blast it every fifty metres.’

‘I do love this red carpet treatment.’

‘There are big trees halfway between the fences. Electrified fence is four metres high. Watchtowers at each corner, two kilometres apart. Contain sniper rifle placements, spotlights and CCTV cameras. Day-vision and infrared. Camera lights glow when operational.’

‘So . . . they hate everyone. They’d shoot at you even if you brought them a take-away. Double cheeseburger and fries to go, *elsewhere*.’

‘Two more watchtowers span the inner entrance and its gatehouse. With extra guards. Inner gatehouse has proper security. Sound-sensitive alarms and pressure detectors scan out front.’

‘We’ve done wild missions before, but nothing on this scale. Nothing so risky. My panic level is rising from code white to code red.’

‘Outer gatehouse is four hundred metres closer. Shouldn’t have much security because it has to look low-key. Like a science park would. Need you and Pete to assess it.’

Pete and I follow the conifers in the moonlight until they curve into a field. It dips and rises in the fog. Puddles of stagnant water shine. Mud slurps up my shoes.

We enter some woods. The fog loiters around our ankles.

Pete removes a shoe in a slit of moonlight.

‘I am not impressed with this location,’ he says. ‘Not only do these trees seem to reflect any residual heat, but the ground is permeated with a special mud possessing the most emetic odour.’

I squint at his shoe. ‘That’s not mud. More the whiff of man’s best friend.’

‘Canine excreta? I understand the moral turpitude of society, yet such irresponsibility must reside with the owner.’

‘No, Pete, it’s definitely the dog. There’s no toilet paper around here.’

We crush tree debris in the gloom until the woods give way to a dirt path known only by Little Red Riding Hood. The path curls, then edges onto a tarmac road wide enough for one lane of traffic.

One in, one out. No hokey-cokey.

We’re several metres away from the outer gatehouse. A sign illuminated in gold letters glares through the fog: ‘EVITARA RESEARCH’.

‘Security guards can be aggressive,’ I say. ‘So don’t antagonise them. Keep them engaged and convince them of our innocents abroad routine and we should be OK. Don’t overdo it.’

We stroll towards the gatehouse: the tarmac beneath our feet is a calculated layer of blackness. The upper half of the gatehouse is glass and scattering a haze of light into the darkness. There’s a horizontal barrier to the right.

Inside the gatehouse is a small booth with an open window. There’s a torch on a shelf.

A security guard with ginger hair, sideburns and glasses is sitting back in an office chair. He has his feet up on a counter and is wearing cowboy boots engraved with skulls. He’s not clutching a sub-machine-gun; he’s reading a book.

Pete stands in the spray of light.

The guard raises his hand. He's wearing a white shirt (no tie) and jeans.

The guard swaps his book with the torch on the shelf.

'Who are you?' he says.

'I am a professor of history,' says Pete, 'and this is my student assistant. We are engaged on a walking tour of Victorian and Edwardian post boxes.'

'Is that right?'

'Yes, it is correct. Moreover, my assistant has been tasked with writing his dissertation that will comprise a guide to the area.'

'Get out of here,' says the guard.

'I shall soon comply, for we are en route to a convention later this evening in my honour.'

'Convention?'

'One moment,' I say. I drag Pete away from the booth. 'I say don't overdo it and you make up *this*'

Pete undoes his coat. He rolls up his sweater.

'What's that?'

Pete studies his clothes. 'Do you not like my attire? Is it too informal?'

'We're at a secret base. The clue's in the title. So why the James Bond tuxedo and bow tie?'

'As an *English* gentleman, it is a dinner jacket, not a tuxedo.' Pete smiles. 'It is also a form of double bluff, for the apparel of James Bond would be the last a real spy might wear.'

Pete returns to the booth.

The guard gawps at Pete's dinner jacket. 'Convention, eh?' He sniffs. 'What's that smell?'

‘It is . . .’ Pete looks at me. ‘The odour of—’

‘The countryside,’ I say. ‘The beautiful natural aroma of English woodland and . . . some of its creatures.’

The guard spotlights Pete’s shoes. He sniffs again. ‘Smells like dog muck.’

‘OK,’ I say, ‘*one* of its creatures.’

‘You’re dressed for the convention,’ says the guard, ‘so what are you doing here?’

‘I can assure you,’ says Pete, ‘that it is purely accidental. Anthony?’

‘Who?’ I say. ‘Oh, me. Well . . . yeah, it was an accident. We strolled under a ladder, a bowl of petunias fell on our heads and when we awoke we were lost in Hertfordshire.’

‘Joker, eh?’ says the guard. He shines his torch in my eyes. ‘If you were lost, how could you know you were in Hertfordshire?’

‘Because we started our tour here,’ I say. ‘We kept walking, for research purposes. Too involved and too eager. That’s the student way. I didn’t plan on wanting to write a tour guide so badly.’

‘But now you have?’

‘Yeah, now the guide is written badly.’

Pete’s nodding; his horseshoe of white hair is drifting.

‘We have already discovered a wealth of historical artefacts,’ he says. ‘One morning we encountered an Edward VII pillar box in front of a K6 telephone kiosk. It was most invigorating.’

The guard points his torch at Pete. ‘Do you know the historical significance of the K6?’

There’s a welcome silence. One that doesn’t try to outstay itself.

Now the guard’s smiling.

He folds his legs onto the top of his chair. 'The K6 was designed by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott and introduced for King George V's silver jubilee, in 1935. I prefer the K2. With the K6 they simplified the design and removed the Grecian fluting from the door and window surrounds.' He holds up his book: *The K Series: Great Telephone Kiosks Of Our Time*. 'My grandfather has a scrap yard and collects them. Worst of all with the K6, the previously separated pediment and frieze were merged.'

'Sacrilege,' says Pete. 'Please, do tell me more.'

Pete does as we agreed; he keeps the guard engaged.

Either side of the gatehouse is the electrified fence, yet behind the gatehouse there is nothing. Nothing but an endless black road sliding into the fog. There are no extra guards with baseball caps and starving dogs. No secret cameras with facial recognition software. No black boxes shuffling zeros and ones.

Pete clasps his hands. 'Owing to time restrictions, we made a painful decision to exclude wall-mounted post boxes at railway stations.'

'Which were,' says the guard, 'cheaper to produce than the free-standing pillar boxes.'

'Indeed. Railway stations are an endless source of exhilaration and, in the course of our tour, we have catalogued a multiplicity of rural pole-mounted post boxes. Yet our excitement did not end there. We noted several hexagonal pillar boxes and we even delighted in finding a post box without the royal cipher of Queen Victoria.'

'You don't say?'

'I do, I do. Moreover, we spotted a cylindrical pillar box with one side box. We were most thrilled, as it had lettering around the black base—'



‘Which,’ says the guard, ‘identifies it as a Handyside box, first manufactured in great quantities in 1879.’ He leans out of the booth. ‘Telephone kiosks are exciting, but post boxes . . . they are the best. So, why are you guys here now?’

‘You’d have to ask my parents,’ I say. ‘And his. Probably yet more accidents. Or just the one, an accident with a contraceptive and a time machine.’

Pete clears his throat. ‘We became somewhat sidetracked in our endeavours. Could you therefore offer guidance to the nearest residence where we may rest for the evening? Any hostelry or coaching inn shall suffice.’

‘You want Clifton Hall,’ says the guard. ‘That’s where they hold conventions. They have plenty of rooms.’

‘Ah yes, I did mean Clifton Hall. Thank you for reminding me.’

There is more silence. Followed by mutual gazing.

I want to suggest *they* get a room, so all evening they can pleasure each other in waves of historical analysis and baby oil.

Pete sets up the camping stove back at base camp. He places a saucepan on each burner and fills one with water and the other with baked beans and Kate’s veggie sausages. It’s her homemade cookies for dessert.

We’re sitting around the fire with glistening foreheads.

‘Is this not exhilarating?’ says Pete. ‘Hitler called his eastern front offensive Operation Barbarossa, whilst Eisenhower chose Operation Overlord to denote the Normandy invasion. Therefore we also need a historic designation.’ He gives the saucepan of beans and sausages a slow stir. ‘Before we dine, however, we shall consider our bargaining strategy prior to opening negotiations with MI7. Douglas?’

Doug switches his torch on and off as he gives an overview of the base. He reiterates that no one negotiates with MI7. He describes Flint as ‘a fool’ and makes him sound like he has personality problems to ten decimal places.

Kate’s fringe shimmers in the orange of the flames.

‘Fences?’ she says. ‘Yeah, right. So not cool.’

‘Fences can be climbed or cut,’ says Doug. ‘We’re cutting.’ He puts his hand over his torch: blood-light floods his face. ‘Going to storm the base from the side.’

Pete is still. We’re surrounded by trees and amongst the sound of those that fall but aren’t heard is the clunk of cogs, as Pete’s ancient brain computes Doug’s illegal plan.

Pete blinks. ‘Did you say, “storm”?’

‘Aye,’ says Doug. Open wound, pour salt. ‘Get in. Get her. Get out. It’ll be easy.’

‘Ah, a definition of “easy” that I have not previously encountered.’

I raise my hand. ‘Pete, don’t worry. Doug’s brought a selection of guns and gadgets to protect us, like layers in a chocolate box. Use up one layer and, hey presto, there’s another one underneath. So we’ll be safe. Tell them, Doug.’

Doug points his torch into the fire.

‘Tell them why we’ll be one hundred per cent safe.’

‘We . . . got no bullets.’

‘That’s impossible. No one’s fired anything.’

‘Bullets and guns . . . fakes. Replicas.’

‘What?’

Doug faces me. ‘Needed more dosh for my tech stuff. Had to sell my weapons.’

‘Most of them? Or some of them?’

‘All of them.’

‘You sold all of your weapons for cash . . . and then spent *that* cash on replicas?’

‘Couldn’t afford both tech and weapons. And I needed two vans.’ Doug shrugs.

‘Had no choice.’

‘What about Pete’s choice? Kate’s? Why didn’t you say this before?’

‘Lad, you reckon we’re going to kill someone? C’mon, we ain’t murderers.’

I lean closer to the fire and pretend to warm my hands. The tips of the flames are jagged, like a snake’s tongue.

‘So . . .’ I say, ‘replica guns. What do we do if the MI7 thugs find us? Run away? Hide? Defend ourselves using harsh language? Or do we wave our hands and say, “These aren’t the students you’re looking for”?’

Doug’s face dips.

The night sky is also silent. Deep ocean colours swirl overhead. The evening is cool and calm but hasn’t yet collected itself.

Pete turns to Kate. ‘Katharine, I would welcome your view.’

She tilts her head. ‘I’ve done loads of illegal things. Breaking into research labs. Ripping out stuff. *Doing* stuff. I’m not crazy about no weapons, but we haven’t needed any before. And I’m so up for some uniformed action.’

Light from the flames obscures Pete’s wrinkles so he looks younger. Almost young again and brimmed with the energy and yearning desire to change the world. Almost.

Pete gives the saucepan of beans and sausages a slow stir.

‘I assumed that we would be negotiating with MI7,’ he says, ‘not entering their base illegally. It is immoral.’

‘Slipping into places we shouldn’t is part of student life,’ I say. ‘Like late-night beers and slices of limp pizza the next morning. And what of Churchill’s morality? He authorised missions when German civilians died. Men, women, children. *That’s* immoral. Yet because his overall aim was to win the war, he saw the grander picture. The future.’

Pete frowns. 'A future bereft of Nazism, perhaps. However, we cannot abrogate our diplomatic responsibilities.'

I sigh. 'When Churchill tried diplomacy he got egg on his face. Churchill asked Hitler to withdraw from Europe, Hitler didn't. Churchill warned Hitler not to continue his aggression, Hitler did. That's what *you* once told me. Minus the egg.'

Pete leans forwards in his chair. He's staring at me.

'The point is, some people can't be negotiated with. MI7 raided Kate's house, no negotiation there. OK, so us breaking into the base *is* immoral, but the grander picture is to rescue someone from an organisation that can't be bargained with. Which, for Churchill, would have been justifiable.'

He's still staring.

'Wouldn't it, Pete?'

'I suppose so.'

'We need a plan,' I say. 'One that's effective. One that doesn't involve chickens. Instead of straight on at the inner entrance, we veer left and hide in the gap between the fences. That way we bypass the full MI7 security and don't need to cut through the electrified fence. We wait. Cut through the non-electrified inner fence instead and slink through the base until we find Billie-Jo.'

Kate folds her arms. 'Simple idea, but cool.'

'But would it work? Doug?'

Doug scratches his chin. 'My uncle says the gatehouse guard ends his shift at two in the morning. The gatehouse will stay empty until the next shift, at eight.'

'Empty? Really?'

'Aye. Base is s'posed to look like a real science park. So we go at two.'

‘Let us dine before retiring,’ says Pete. ‘Now, are we all for tea? Douglas? Anyone not for tea? I shall be mother.’

Pete is mother with style. Not the *Psycho* wig-on-head slasher style, more the pour-milk-into-cup-and-*then*-add-tea regal style. I’ll sell Pete to Hollywood as the king of England if I don’t graduate and pay my debts.

Pete lays four metal plates on the ground. He passes around lemon-soaked paper napkins. He dollops out the food.

We’re sitting around the fire and watching strips of yellow against the black sky. Ginger sparks pop. A light breeze carries embers off into the sky and I feel the desire to whistle the rousing theme from *The Great Escape*. We sip tea. We munch through the veggie sausages, the beans and the silence.

Nevada, all over again.

Only now it’s our last adventure, in our last year together. They’ll be no more fun like sneaking into the British Library, after Pete, and surrounding him with Whoopee Cushions, ‘for a laugh’. Or those Saturday nights watching a drunken Kate slide pins through her condom packets, when she was dating Doug.

No more fun, together.

The fire fizzes.

Doug grins. ‘Operation Certain Death.’

24

a perfectly safe penguin

Officer Flint kicked his office filing cabinet: grey metal clanked. ‘What do you mean, empty? How can the target premises be empty?’

Adams’s fat face flushed, adding a vibrant pink to his otherwise uninspiring colour palette of white shirt and black trousers. ‘I . . .’ he said, his lips stretching into a gasping circle. ‘The reserve seizure squad raided the house, as you instructed. But they found no one.’ He retreated to the nearest wall. ‘I, erm, don’t know why.’

‘Damn well find out then. A new strain of terrorists masquerading as students cannot disappear.’

‘Terrorists?’

‘I’ve been decoding my in-tray memos,’ Flint said. ‘As of this week, “terrorist” is MI7’s preferred nomenclature for all unknown hostiles.’

‘Sir, there’s also a memo about recycling and excessive usage of toilet paper. Oh and a booklet called *Empower To Succeed: Making Evitara Research Accessible*. It’s an initiative to make MI7 friendlier.’

Leaning against the cabinet, Flint rapped his nails on its brittle metal. ‘Odd. Most odd. What did they find?’

‘It seems officers are using far too many toilet rolls—’

‘I mean the seizure squad.’

‘Erm, only a man with a camera, loitering outside. The squad took some photos and the facial recognition guys matched him to someone registered as a freelance journalist.’

‘Thank you, Chancellor Morgan. Never mind. Order the squad to maintain surveillance on Brackenbury Road. I need to know if these terrorists return. Check all motorway footage from the last seventy-two hours.’

Adams’s white shirt crumpled. ‘All?’

‘Are you deaf and fatuous? Yes, all. Match facial images and number plates against our database. And check all plates caught by motorway cameras. And ferries. And flights in and out of the country. Passenger lists, passport numbers, the lot. If these terrorists have left Brackenbury Road I need to know where they are and why. But first, coffee. Black, three sugars.’

Adams thumbed the order at the coffee machine. It gurgled.

Flint slunk into his leather chair behind his desk. Between his stacked in- and out-trays was a screen. He tapped it: a strip of ceiling slid back. A large rectangular glass panel descended and glowed green with a satellite map.

Flint’s eyes narrowed. ‘I need their patterns. What they want, where they will strike. This could win my promotion. Me, an Advanced Officer A1.’ He nodded. ‘Yes, I will never be deflected from achieving my goals.’

‘Coffee?’

‘Excellent.’ Flint stroked his screen and the map on the glass panel rotated.

‘Interesting. Not a resource-rich country or a site essential to the world’s defences . . .

Wales.’ He panned across the map, tracking a river. ‘But where next?’ He zoomed into a mountainous landscape. ‘Remote too. Perhaps these terrorists are clever?’

‘Sir?’



‘By not choosing the obvious strategic sites. London, Washington, Beijing.’

Adams rubbed a small circle onto his gut. ‘Erm, so how was Wales?’

‘If you must know, as hospitable as a ditch.’ Flint reached across to his in-tray and lifted a latest approved MI7 procedure: eight pages on health and safety. He snatched another: ten pages of energy efficiency advice. His third selection was almost an entire tree about drainage. He lobbed them all at his out-tray. ‘Everywhere in Wales, the countryside is a wasteland of inefficiency. Farmers plead poverty while the unemployed with one earring fester around corners.’

‘This facility’s in the countryside,’ Adams said.

‘And yet it didn’t used to be hindered this way. Before you joined, the City housed our headquarters. Our Shoe Lane HQ boasted acres of bullet-proofed smoked glass, so Covent Garden, Saint Paul’s and the majestic Thames were all accessible.’ Flint ran his fingers through his blond hair. ‘Ever been to Wales?’

‘No.’

‘Don’t. It’s too wet, too cold and far too green. Everywhere, mountains and valleys fold endlessly into each another, while Welsh is less a language, more a throat infection.’ Flint peered into his plastic cup. ‘The food made me constipated.’

‘Really?’ Adams wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. ‘What about the people?’

‘The same.’ Flint snorted the remains of his coffee. ‘Has Snowdon Constabulary informed you of any more attacks?’

Adams shook his blubber. ‘But the power fence still needs urgent repair.’

‘Very well, requisition the maintenance team. I do not wish to see your fat teeth here again until the repairs are completed, understand?’

‘Sir, cutting the power poses a risk, so we should divert the guards.’

‘And waste MI7 resources?’ Flint prodded his screen: the glass panel shrank into the ceiling. ‘This facility, this military installation, has been erased from all black maps *and* Google. The threat is zero. Not even an invisible mouse wearing slippers could go undetected.’

‘But—’

‘However, since you’re clearly wetting your bed at night over this, instruct Officer Bodie to investigate Sector F.’ Flint leaned back in his chair, crossed his legs. ‘What’s the status of the suspect from Brackenbury Road?’

‘Professor Black has completed his preliminary medical. He’ll be doing the psychometric profile tomorrow morning. He should be able to authorise the release to you in the afternoon.’

‘Excellent. Confine the suspect to Cell 1 for my interrogation.’

Adams pointed to the in-tray. ‘Sir, you can’t interrogate without proper authorisation. Officer Handbook, Rule 613?’

Flint tapped his chin. ‘613? “No Officer may report for duty wearing Hawaiian shorts and flip flops”?’

‘That’s *614*, sir.’

With his hand Flint batted away an invisible fly.

Adams pushed his thighs against the desk, creasing his trousers. ‘Remember Officer Carter? Ignoring the rules and drowning in that vat of diarrhoea? *Your* diarrhoea.’

‘That was unfortunate.’ Flint crushed the plastic cup. ‘And yet his drowning was the only action possible after those terrorists forced us to swallow a whole bottle of laxative tablets.’

‘Your tablets, sir.’

‘As you well know, later evidence exonerated me.’ Flint switched the shredder on: it gnawed with a feral whirr. ‘Very well, place the forms in my in-tray. After all, I do possess the suspect. And after my interrogation . . .’ Flint dropped his cup into the jaws of the shredder.

25

Disaster Area

A prod in my back. A shake of the shoulder.

My hot eyes open, yet again, to a canopy of darkness. My nose is cold. Our tent's damp.

'There is something out there,' says Pete. 'I sense something foul. A foreboding.'

In the dark I imagine three Scottish witches double-toiling around a bubbling cauldron.

'Are you awake?'

'This is a recording. After the third beep, go back to bed.'

Pete nudges my sleeping bag.

'This is what, your second time? I told you not to drink so much tea.'

'This does not pertain to my bladder. Some vengeful creature with crepuscular tendencies is lurking outside, waiting to do us harm. I am convinced of it. There is a malevolent odour in the air.'

'That's Kate's veggie sausages repeating on you. My stomach's already rejecting them. Got any toilet paper?'

'I am being serious.'

‘So am I. Unless it’s her cookies?’ My yawn heats my sleeping bag. ‘Anyway, night. Or is it morning?’

‘Before I woke you, I heard noises. A creature. There is something outside.’

‘Pete, there’s bound to be *something* outside. You can’t expect the whole universe to be in our tent.’

I curl up in my sleeping bag. Nuzzle into its warm folds.

There’s a crunch.

‘Yeah,’ I say, ‘I heard that. Where’s the torch?’

‘We shall investigate?’ says Pete.

‘Sure. I’m the decisive and brave one here. Want to go first?’

‘An officer sends his infantry into battle.’

‘So I’m the cannon fodder?’

‘The fodder to which you refer is more closely associated with the First World War, not the Second.’

I rub my eyes.

‘It’s very late or very early,’ I say. ‘Or very possibly both. Do you have to be so pedantic?’

‘It is not a matter of pedanticism, for I am a historian. We are trained to be precise.’

‘OK, but do you have to be precise at . . . what time is it?’

‘It is dark.’

‘That’s the best you can do? “Dark”? That’s not precise. Pass me the torch—’

‘I hear something.’

My head snaps to the sounds: a *clomp, clomp* circling our tent.

The air’s dense with moisture.

Silence.

Pete's snatching short breaths.

There's a noise like a constipated bee.

'I believe . . .' says Pete.

I scrabble around for the torch. There are shoes and socks and escaped tea bags.

'I believe . . .'

'In God? That you can fly?'

'I believe that the entrance to our tent is being unzipped.'

I aim the torch.

'Show time,' says Doug.

It's a quarter to two. It's rained whilst we've slept and the ground is sodden.

The first half of Doug's show involves him kicking Kate's tent until she wakes up. This takes a while, partly because it's too black for anything other than sleep, but mainly because her tent looks like the type that self-erects.

Kate staggers outside in her Minnie Mouse onesie. It's red with white spots and has huge black ears and a red bow.

She wipes her mouth. 'I'm tired and grumpy and hormonal and someone is going to die.'

Pete removes his sweater and has a slow stretch. There's an odd bulkiness to his chest, like he's wearing Second World War body armour.

I yawn between a James Bond dinner jacket and a Minnie Mouse onesie. What next, a Bugs Bunny gas mask with long grey ears and carrot filter?

Doug is carrying two backpacks. He lowers one in front of Pete. 'Grab it.'

Pete grips the straps with both hands. He leans back; the backpack doesn't.

With one hand Doug yanks the backpack a metre off the ground. He hoists it across to Kate. 'You carry the food.'

Doug rummages inside the other backpack. He hands around gloves and balaclavas. 'We're still slaves to physics. Still visible to infrared light.'

'You get off wearing this macho kit,' says Kate. 'Don't you?'

'Nowt wrong with my Beretta pistol and body armour. Also keep two pocket knives in my boxer shorts.'

'Urgh, don't they hurt?'

'Nope, pure cotton.'

We're shadows: black face, black torso, black legs.

The second half of Doug's show is us traipsing back to the gatehouse via the field and woods. From inside the woods, the MI7 base is a distant shape of rectangles and black. Lights glitter through the fog. Guards with sub-machine-guns are patrolling.

Doug peeks around a tree. 'Outer gatehouse is empty. Shift's finished.'

Kate's leaning against another tree with a band of moonlight across her chest: a one-striped zebra.

'So,' she says, 'what now?'

'Four security patrols,' says Doug. 'Each with three guards. Trained to march at a constant pace, so patrols reach a watchtower every twenty-four minutes. Reckon we edge past the gatehouse. Cross the open ground to the inner fence.'

Doug stares at each of us in turn.

'Remember five rules,' he says. 'One, don't die. It'll hurt. Two, stealth's your best friend: if you see the cameras, they'll see you. Three, never say "See you later", because you won't. Four, stay quiet. Five, be careful. *Very* careful. Got to be delicate and subtle.'



Traps are simple to enter but impossible to escape. So do what I say, when I say. Nowt else. Understood?’

‘Completely,’ says Pete. He’s perched on a tree stump amid the shadows, the black king in a game of chess.

Doug puts on his gloves. ‘Use the night-scope. If you see the guards, warn me.’

‘Call your mobile?’ I say.

‘Keep phones off. No calls, no texts, no messaging. MI7 monitor civilian comms.’

Doug shines his torch onto his palm: a plastic rectangle. ‘Walkie-talkie in your backpack. Press green button to talk. But only in an emergency. Stealth mode, yeah? I’ll flash one of my torches, when done. There’s a CCTV blind spot between the watchtowers. In the middle of the fences, between the big trees. Head there first. Keep low.’ Doug hands the torch to Kate. ‘Stay safe.’

Doug marches off through the woods, towards the empty gatehouse. Branches snap under his feet. Small furry creatures scatter.

Kate props her backpack of food against a tree. She picks up a stick and starts tapping her palm.

Doug scuttles across the open ground between the two fences. In the distance a watchtower spotlight switches on. It arcs across the ground for a few moments. Doug uses the big trees to shield himself. He waits. Pushes on.

Breaking through the inner fence involves him crouching and cutting. And Pete and Kate watching him crouching and cutting.

‘I hope his endeavours are not too laboured,’ says Pete, ‘for I am beginning to find these low temperatures problematic.’

‘It’s the timing I don’t like,’ I say. ‘Two in the morning’s when I go to bed, not wake up.’

Charcoal clouds smoke across the moon.

I pat Kate's arm. 'Thanks for doing this. For me.'

She snorts.

'You think I've travelled here for you?' she says. 'I'm here for me, me, me. No one else. Your "girlfriend" had better be worth it. Not that I believe you have one. I bet she's a rumour you've heard.'

'Billie-Jo *is* worth it. Have you never been in love?'

'That's a concept invented by losers like you. I feel totally in control by myself. More powerful.'

'More lonely.'

Her stick snaps. Large furry creatures scatter.

I zoom in with the night-scope: three padded thugs fill the viewfinder. Their image-intensified pupils are marbles of green-white.

'A security patrol,' I say, 'heading towards Doug.'

'No way,' says Kate. 'He said patrols reach the watchtowers every twenty-four minutes.'

I scroll along the fence: Doug's still crouching. Security lights stoop over him like mechanical supermodels.

'He's not at the watchtowers,' I say. 'He's in between. So he has twelve minutes, tops.' I sketch the route of the patrol. 'But even in this fog they'll see him before they reach him. So more eight to ten minutes, if we're lucky. I say we warn him. Pete?'

Pete the king of England and chess looks up from his tree stump. 'Informing Douglas does sound like the practical choice.'

'Great, I can do practical.'

I swap the night-scope for Kate's backpack.

‘Kate,’ I say, ‘shine the torch in here.’

White streams inside.

I yank out the walkie-talkie. I press a green button. ‘Broadsword calling Danny Boy, Broadsword calling Danny Boy.’ I press it again. ‘The walkie-talkie doesn’t work.’

‘Are you sure?’ says Pete.

‘When I try the green button, nothing.’ I prod it. ‘See?’

‘Have you considered that the red button may, in fact, be for transmitting?’

I stab the red button.

‘Still nothing,’ I say. ‘Whichever button I press, it should make a noise. Right?’

‘They’re marching this way,’ says Kate. ‘They’ll so be on him in a couple of minutes.’

It’s at this point in Operation Certain Death that I’m beginning to attach some merit to Doug’s Plan B of mooning.

Pete studies the walkie-talkie in the strips of moonlight. ‘Yes, it does appear to be unable to transmit or receive. We must inform Douglas in person.’

‘Yeah, right,’ says Kate.

‘I agree,’ I say. ‘Scamper across open ground in front of a security patrol? We can’t risk giving ourselves up. Leaving Doug and returning to the van isn’t an option either.’ I bite my lip. ‘What would Churchill do?’

‘Churchill would never surrender,’ says Pete. ‘He would fight them.’

‘On the beaches?’ I say. ‘That’s impossible. We don’t have weapons or ammo. Plus we’re nowhere near a beach and lack the buckets and spades. Any other suggestions? Ones not involving Spitfires or lederhosen?’

‘I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat.’

‘Great. We can’t surrender, can’t retreat, can’t fight. If we warn Doug, we’ll die. If we don’t warn Doug, *he’ll* die.’

We’re defenceless. Doug’s alone. The seconds are being ripped off the calendar.

‘Let’s distract the guards,’ says Kate.

There’s a solid chill to the air.

She tosses her gloves and balaclava on the ground. She pulls her sweater over her head and static sparks across her chest.

‘*You* want to distract them?’ I say.

‘If there’s one thing I can do way better than anyone, it’s flirting with men in uniforms.’

‘But they’re armed. It’s too dangerous.’

‘I’ll meet up at the inner fence afterwards. Wait for me.’

I block her. ‘I’m going instead.’

‘*Hell-oooo*? The patrol guards are men. Ruled by their two tiny brains in their boxer shorts.’

‘Feminine guile? That’s your strategy?’

She flitters her man-trap eyelashes in the torchlight. ‘What man would hurt an innocent little girl?’

Pete stands up from his tree stump throne. ‘If that is Katharine’s decision, we must respect that and provide strategic support for her endeavours. Void?’

‘OK,’ I say, ‘if that’s our best idea then yeah, let’s support Kate from a strategic location. I suggest Norway.’

Pete hugs her. 'He means, dear Katharine, that we shall support you in the same manner that the generals in the First World War supported their privates.'

Kate sniggers. It's refreshing.

'See you later,' she says.

Kate aligns herself with the weather: she fogs off.

She threads through the woods. After a minute or two her moonlit shadow drifts across the open ground, into darkness.

Pete peeps through the night-scope.

'She seems,' he says, 'to have established contact with the security patrol.'

'Whatever she's doing, we have to go. Now. If her plan doesn't work, the patrol will find us *and* Doug.'

We meander through the woods and along the dirt path again; the outer gatehouse behind us is soon lost to the fog. We aim for the big trees Doug told us about.

We penetrate the blackness not knowing what lies ahead, not knowing if we're visible to the snipers and not knowing if Pete's bladder will cope. He can't run as fast as me, so I alternate between jogging and marching to create a bizarre type of scamper.

We're silent, other than the rhythmic bump of feet on ground.

Pete's biscuit bones are alongside me. He's keeping low as Doug said.

Tall shapes form.

I squint. 'Look, the big trees.'

We maintain the pace and scamper between the trees. The cold air soothes my hot forehead.

The base is still. Desolate. A no-man's-land.

A line appears out of the fog. It sparkles.

We scamper closer: it's the inner fence, lit by security lights.

Nearer, I spot something. Someone. A figure, kneeling.

It spins around: Doug.

‘Morning,’ I say. I’m panting. ‘Can I . . . interest you in triple-glazing?’

‘Lad, told you to wait. Until I signalled.’

‘True.’ I’m taking deep breaths. ‘But you also said to warn you. If we saw the guards.’

‘S’posed to use the walkie-talkie.’

‘Didn’t work.’

‘You switch it on?’

‘Still, we’re here now.’

Doug tilts his head. ‘Where’s Kate?’

Pete is leaning on his thighs like an overpaid footballer.

‘Katharine . . .’ he says. ‘Katharine made somewhat of an executive decision. She is . . . misdirecting the guards. To prevent your capture.’

Doug wipes his balaclava mouth. ‘Bad move. No one plays with MI7. No one. Should’ve stopped her.’

‘We endeavoured to dissuade her. But could not.’ Pete’s old lungs are wheezing. ‘She will reconvene with us, afterwards.’

Doug studies us. ‘You both OK?’

Pete nods. ‘Thanks to the restorative qualities of my cod liver oil, my osseous tissue remains functional.’

‘Bits of tree in my mouth,’ I say, ‘sweat on my skin and an upset stomach. Not daisy-fresh, but we’ll live.’

Doug resumes cutting. His metallic snips firework into the sky.

I zoom in with the night-scope, but can't see Kate or the patrol guards. There are two figures pacing in a watchtower. There's a spotlight. Rifles. CCTV cameras.

Security lights along the top of the fence shine fluorescent cones. Spirals of razor-wire shimmer like tinsel.

'Time to go,' says Doug.

'We have to wait,' I say.

'Another minute.' Doug's balaclava face aims at the black sky. 'After that, too risky here. Cameras might spot us.'

'We're hidden in this fog.'

'Not from infrared. Cameras'll detect our heat sources. And them bullet holes ain't subtle.'

Doug peels the fence back. He points to Pete.

Pete crawls through the hole to the other side.

In the distance a band of light appears from a watchtower. The spotlight sweeps across the ground.

Doug turns to me.

'*Another* another minute?' I say.

'Only have time to get your halo dirty.'

'But Kate's meeting us here. We're a team.'

Doug crawls through. He beckons me over as if encouraging a child to leap from a skyscraper inferno.

Abandon one friend or abandon two. The choice of no choice.

26

playing with a rubber duck



03:07 hours. +15°C.

Officer Flint tossed an approved procedure at his out-tray. The stack of paper was skewed and beginning to create a shadow across his desk. Across everything. 'I did not want to see you until Officer Bodie had finished his survey of Sector F. If ever.'

With a holdall over his shoulder, Adams bouldered past the coffee machine to the desk. 'But I've finished the checks you wanted.'

'You have finished analysing the facial imaging? The number plates? The motorway cameras?'

'Yes, sir. All motorway footage, as you requested.'

Next to his mug of coffee, Flint unwrapped a Twix. 'Ferries? Flights?'

'All passenger lists and all passports.' Adams's black trousers strained around the thigh. 'Nothing.'

'Pity. But at least we know the terrorists have yet to leave the country.'

'The maintenance team cut the power to the fence and Officer Bodie surveyed Sector F. He found some remains.'

Flint stirred, with his chocolate. 'It is oh-three-hundred hours. I am not interested in archaeology.'

‘The electrocuted remains of four chickens.’

‘Our farmer neighbour, playing childish games again. Very well, I only want to know where these terrorists are. You may go.’

Adams’s holdall thudded onto the floor.

‘I said I need answers, not poultry.’

‘The guards have captured someone. They’re wearing a “fcuk 24/7” T-shirt.’

Flint stopped stirring. Melting chocolate globbed off into his mug. It sank. ‘Why was I not damn well informed?’

‘I’m, erm, damn well informing you now.’

‘*Sir*. I am becoming weary of your insolence.’

Adams patted his forehead with a handkerchief.

‘Was he caught inside the facility?’

‘The guards made the capture between the fences.’ Adams knelt, unzipped his holdall. ‘Sector F.’

‘The guards have maintained the safety of this facility, as I predicted.’

‘They also found a backpack and these.’ Adams laid black gloves and a mask across the desk, each one sealed in a transparent bag.

Flint leaned over them. ‘These are from a terrorist. Though a crude and unimaginative one. But why discard them? A decoy? Or perhaps he panicked, aborted his mission?’ The bags crinkled in his hands. ‘Intriguing.’

‘Sir?’

‘And yet, perhaps these items are his calling cards? Terrorists have such egos. Send them to the lab guys for analysis.’ Flint lifted another unread procedure from his in-tray and slotted it in his out-tray. ‘Also, increase security around the cell block and initiate a wider search of Sectors E, F and G. Review all camera footage from the last forty-eight

hours and prepare Cell 4 for our new guest.' He sat back in his leather chair. 'I want to interrogate him immediately, so instruct the guards to bring him to me.'

'I can't do that.'

'And why not, Officer Adams?'

'Because, sir, the terrorist is a she.'

27

will explode later for your pleasure

I crawl through the hole in the inner fence. There's still no sign of Kate. No evidence she's ever even existed. Blackness surrounds me.

'I've lost Billie-Jo,' I say, 'and now I'm losing Kate? *Two* women? No. We have to wait here for her. Pete, tell him will you?'

Pete is patting dirt off his trousers. He stands alongside Doug.

The night air catches in my lungs.

Doug drags his backpack through the hole. He points to a distant building. 'Got to hide behind the training block.'

Doug ducks under an invisible hurdle and weaves left and right. He darts behind a wall. He watches. Thumbs us over.

My legs are leaden. Yet, somehow, part of me is forced to move. I struggle through black fog.

Pete and I sprawl flat against a wall, in our best pancake impressions.

Pete's old bones are silent; he's trying to conceal his weariness.

Doug burrows into his backpack. 'Stay here.'

'You *are* going to rescue Kate?' I say.

‘Nope. Inside inner fence now, so need to plant these babies.’ Doug holds up some squares. ‘Remote-activated mini charges. Useful for a diversion.’

I point at him. ‘Your background is in being super sly, all that training from your dad. But ours isn’t. Pete might know everything about military strategy from his books, but I don’t know . . . anything.’

‘Keep still, keep quiet.’

‘Do what you have to, but don’t abandon us like Kate.’ I grip Doug’s thick forearm. ‘If you die, I’ll kill you.’

Pete and I are slouched on the ground against the wall of the training block. The wall’s long and windowless and pressing into our shoulders. My knees are raised.

Pete grips the bottom of his sweater and starts rolling it up. He unbuttons his dinner jacket. Delves inside.

‘Are you . . . touching yourself?’ I say.

‘In a manner of speaking, yes. However, it is far from the onanistic behaviour to which your crude mind is alluding.’

‘From where I’m sitting it’s not that far. But I am tolerant, so what you do in the privacy of your own, er, secret base is up to you.’

Pete arches his back. He slides out a small plastic case from his dinner jacket.

‘Now that’s a neat trick,’ I say. ‘I’ll give you an ovation if you pull out a white rabbit.’

Instead of a white rabbit, Pete tugs out some kind of cloth drawstring bag. He unfolds the case into a square across his lap. ‘It is intellectual stimulation.’ He opens the bag and counts seven small plastic tiles onto the square.

‘You need medical treatment if your intellectual stimulation is counting. No, wait. It’s Scrabble. Isn’t it?’

‘It *is* Scrabble, although technically it is Travel Scrabble Deluxe edition. Are you familiar with themed boards of Monopoly? This Scrabble is themed around Sherlock Holmes.’

‘Well, with only seven tiles you’ll never be able to spell “ELEMENTARY”. What am I saying? This is silly. I can’t believe you want to play Scrabble, here.’

Pete taps my knee. ‘I have meditated on the issue of Katharine and, if we had attempted a rescue, it would have been but a pyrrhic victory. However, I do acknowledge that we have a responsibility to facilitate the safe return of both her and Billie-Jo and, therefore, we ought to be patient.’

‘Yeah, but much longer and we’ll be captured by the MI7 thugs. And they’ll put us on the naughty step and make us talk with a tickling stick. Confess to crimes we haven’t done. Oh, I’m jabbering.’

Jabbering because soon the night will become the day. And soon damp ground will turn dry bums into soiled ones. Such transformation isn’t quite on a par with alchemy, but it has a proven success rate.

Pete and I sit and wait.

I sometimes see the spectre of Doug in the night-scope, scurrying about.

The base looks deserted, almost as though it’s in hibernation. But is it?

‘Muffins,’ says Pete.

‘We only finished the cookies and tea a few hours ago. You can’t be hungry.’

‘You misunderstand. The word “MUFFINS” is what I have spelt with my Scrabble tiles. The “M” scores three points and the “F”s four, whilst the remaining tiles each score one.’

‘And “WTF” scores nine.’

Pete could be frowning. His forehead of criss-crossing lines could be Crewe railway station.

He’s asleep.

The sky *is* now becoming banded with the purple and blue promise of a new day. Soon it will be morning sunshine.

There’s a rumble in the earth. A dull *clomp, clomp* sound.

‘Doug, where’ve you been?’ I say. ‘You’ve been gone over an hour. I left your dinner in the oven and everything. It’s burnt now.’

‘Babies planted.’ Doug holds up a black box. ‘Will water them later.’

‘Explosions? No, don’t tell me. You sold your explosions for replica ones, so now a boy called Tim pops out from your black box and shouts “BANG”.’

Doug’s slow breaths steam into the sky.

‘Ain’t doing mission creep,’ he says. ‘They’d capture us too if we’d waited longer. Was either Billie-Jo or Kate. Her or us. Don’t you see?’

I see darkness. The gloom of nothing.

Doug pokes the air. ‘Courtyard’s over there. Interrogation cells are beyond. Couple of hundred metres.’

I spring to my feet.

Doug pats an invisible Rottweiler. ‘Easy, lad. Compound still has security guards.’

‘How many?’

‘Enough.’



‘If there are five hundred guards, somehow we need to make those five hundred become two. As in *two*, not two hundred.’

‘Don’t know how many.’

‘So how do we progress? We’re four students— *three* students, with no clue and no weapons and no way of rescuing Billie-Jo. Not without being shot at or captured. Or both. We’re the proverbial sitting ducks who can’t quack.’

Doug draws out of his backpack what he says is a modified M27 Infantry Automatic Rifle with a long barrel and sight.

‘There is a minor issue,’ he says. ‘Had to rebore the barrel. Only fires peas.’

‘The small green things kids hate? Garden peas?’

‘Don’t be daft.’

I slap his shoulder. ‘Phew, thank Churchill for that. For one terrible moment I thought we were marooned and defenceless inside a secret base.’

‘Frozen peas.’

‘An automatic rifle firing frozen peas? What’s the calibre, green ice? And what happens when the peas defrost? That issue’s major.’

‘Better than nowt.’

He’s right: the M27 might fire only frozen peas, but it looks authentic and dangerous. We should be OK if we don’t mush the ammunition and serve with fish and chips.

Doug hands me something.

His real Beretta pistol is black and metallic and fires 9mm bullets. This replica is identical in every way, apart from it *isn’t* black and metallic and fires 9mm bullets.

‘From a distance it looks the same,’ I say. ‘But it’s too light. And close up . . . well, it looks like a water pistol. Grey plastic. Plus it’s leaking H<sub>2</sub>O onto my hand. Which means, and I’m guessing here, it probably does fire water.’

Doug nods. ‘Could still be useful though.’

‘To a small child on a hot day, perhaps. But it’s not hot now and you’re the dictionary definition of “not small”. You are, however, a child. One who has escaped from somewhere secure but obviously not secure enough.’

Doug snatches the pistol.

‘With a suggestion like this,’ I say, ‘our friendship might be short-lived. As will we if you believe a water pistol is enough.’

He passes me something else. Something heavy.

‘Better,’ I say.

‘My Desert Eagle. It don’t fire, but it’s an exact copy.’ He traces its outline. ‘Size and shape’s the same as a real one too. Reckon detailing’s spot on.’

‘True, but you’re missing the one obvious fact. Your Desert Eagle is . . . pink. As if Barbie has bought a day-pass to the Wild West as a gunslinger.’

‘Got it from a toy shop.’

‘And you didn’t wonder if pink was an odd colour for an adult male two metres tall sneaking around a secret base?’

Doug shrugs. ‘Reckoned it wouldn’t matter. At night and everything. Who’s going to see it?’

‘But not only is this pink, it’s *glowing*. Doug, you’ve bought a perfect replica Desert Eagle, except yours is luminous Barbie pink.’ I sigh. ‘We can’t rescue Billie-Jo with these fakes. We need something real. Something much more substantial.’

‘Waffles,’ says Pete.

After his nap Pete needs time to ‘come round’ and to ‘have a little stretch’. Doug explains that Billie-Jo should be in the interrogation cells, so we need to run across via the courtyard. *Now.*

I ask Pete to pack away his Scrabble and, in Doug’s torchlight, he plucks each of his tiles off the board and places them in his cloth bag. Yet he’s stacking the tiles one at a time, like miniature plates, and shuffling the bag after each tile to keep them all horizontal.

‘Can you maybe perhaps hurry?’ I say. ‘We have dragons to save and princesses to slay. No, wait, that doesn’t sound right.’

“‘WAFFLES” scores sixteen points,’ says Pete, ‘as it uses a “W” worth four points and two “F”s that, combined, score eight. Plus, of course, the fifty bonus points for a first attempt comprising seven letters.’

‘How many points would “QUICKLY” score? That’s seven letters.’

‘Would you prefer me to calculate its score rather than disassemble my Travel Scrabble Deluxe?’

‘That’s what I like about you, when we’re in a crisis you adhere to logic. Pedantic?’

‘That is eight letters.’

*‘Pete.’*

He folds up his small plastic Travel Scrabble Deluxe edition case. He slots it, and the cloth bag full of stacked tiles, back into his dinner jacket.

*S-l-o-w-l-y.*

Pete could sit there all day, drinking tea and eating triangular-shaped cucumber sandwiches as if he’s trying to teach cavemen to play Scrabble. Though if he did he might be involved in a freak strangling accident with seven tiles that spell ‘AARRGHH’.

Doug tells us to wait for his signal. He gallops off into the shadows. The distant courtyard trees are veiled blue; in the night-scope Doug's a nebulous figure of green. He crouches. Scans the vicinity. Thumbs us over.

I launch myself from the training block. The early morning air's crisp. Whisper-thin. My sprinting shoes slap the ground. The courtyard trees bend like crooked nails. The fog is thinning.

'Are those the interrogation cells?' I say. 'Where's the animal labs?'

Doug nestles against a corner tree. 'Ain't any.'

'But I told Kate MI7 do animal testing.'

'ZygniaPharma animal-test, but that's three kilometres behind the base. MI7 is strategic intelligence, not animal research. Don't worry, lad. Simple mistake.'

'Yeah, that's how she'll describe me when she finds out.'

'Don't be scared of her.'

I rub my belly. 'I don't need protecting from our landlady. In Void World, *I* am king.'

'I won't tell her.'

'Thanks.'

Doug studies the interrogation cells. He times our sprinting gap. The night is also thinning.

'Guards,' he says. 'About twenty of them.' He blinks bullet-hole eyes at me. 'Some kind of night exercise. Show of strength. Can't risk breaking into the interrogation cells.'

'We can't rescue Billie-Jo?' I say. 'I'm delighted Operation Certain Death is succeeding. So, what now? Stand here and wait? Retreat to the fence and rescue Kate? Quit?'

'Attack.'

‘With frozen peas?’

28

*making a simple door very happy*

Doug's 'attack' entails us hiding amongst the courtyard trees to assess MI7 movement patterns. The courtyard seems about forty metres long with rows of tables and benches in the middle. On the far side it's fringed by yet more trees and, without the night-scope, they're indistinct shapes in a black haze.

'Still some guards near the interrogation cells,' says Doug. 'But most of them around the medlab have gone. Let's go. Lad, guard the rear.'

'No,' I say, 'that's where they'd attack us the least. I should guard the front.'

'Nope. Definitely the rear.'

'Let's ask the expert. Pete, where's the best place to guard against, er, guards?'

Pete straightens his bow tie. 'I would have thought that that is obvious. The most strategic location is, of course, everywhere. For everywhere is precisely where one should anticipate the enemy.'

Rain speckles the ground. The fog is starting to lift. As is the darkness.

Doug points to the trees on the other side. 'Need to creep across. Silent running from now on. Lad, guard the front and rear. And middle.'

We skulk across the courtyard as one mighty trio of inefficiency. I start off guarding the front but, as we penetrate deeper into enemy territory, I circle clockwise to the middle and then from the middle to the rear. Always guarding, always vigilant.

‘My guts,’ I say. ‘There’s something wrong. I think . . . I think I’m going to have to fart.’

Doug puts a finger over his lips.

‘It’s not seeping from my mouth. I can feel it trying to escape . . . a loud rasping fart.’

‘Sshh. You’ll get us killed.’

‘That’s why I’m trying to hold it in.’ I rub my belly. ‘Gross I know, but blame Miss Bakewell Tart. She made the cookies. I bet she put something evil in mine on purpose.’

‘Whatever you got to do, do it.’

‘Not here. I can’t guarantee my fart will be quiet. Or one hundred per cent gas.’

We steal ourselves through the rows of tables and benches. The moon is living in one big puddle. My gastrointestinal tract is behaving.

Solemn shapes hover all around us. With each step I visualise the compound I saw from the conifers: the low-slung panelled buildings and the mirrored strip windows.

I circle from the rear to the middle and then from the middle to the front. Always guarding, always a bit dizzy to be honest. We keep sidling forwards until we’re hidden in the trees on the far side of the courtyard.

‘Pete,’ I say, ‘how are you? How’s your creaking bones?’

‘Still creaking, I am afraid. I think I may have been somewhat optimistic regarding the cod liver oil.’

Doug crouches. He waits a while. He leads us out of the trees and scissors along walls; he smuggles us around corners. Where possible he hides us in the shadows and the



lines of buildings. He moves as a master of stealth: with slow, considered steps, with his head and shoulders lowered and with his luminous Barbie pink Desert Eagle not visible from outer space.

Doug points at a keypad glinting in the moonlight. 'Medlab entrance.'

The medlab building's wide with rows of windows long and thin, like envelopes.

'So,' I say, 'we've made it. That's great, only . . . this feels too easy. What if MI7 know we're here? If it's a game and they're waiting for us?'

'Want to go back? Under the fence?'

'No . . . but you don't know how to open the medlab door either.'

Doug raises his finger.

'You open it with your finger?' I say. 'Won't that hurt?'

'Nope. Punch the code on the keypad.'

'Well, for once this will be as simple as a country bumpkin. What's the code?'

'No idea.'

The medlab door is solid. Solid and black and closed.

'You *don't* know the code?' I say. 'OK, so ten out of ten for style, but minus several million for good thinking, yeah?'

Pete holds something. 'I appreciate that my knowledge of Bletchley Park is unforgivably scant. However, is this important?'

Doug shines a pen torch onto a wire. He traces the loop of the wire back into the base of the keypad. Snaps it off.

'Ah,' says Pete, 'apparently not.'

'Ain't punching in codes no more.'

Doug aims his torch onto a black box. It has an empty socket at one end and a probe sticking out of the other. He spotlights another box, with a cable trailing out.

‘Know what these are?’ he says.

‘Two black boxes?’ I say.

‘Technical terms are interrogator and decrypter. You won’t understand.’

‘Try me. And what’s with the cables?’

‘MI7 would detect wireless signals. Cables are old tech, but pure. One interrogates the CPU—’

‘What CPU?’

‘The one in the door. Some doors also have cameras.’

‘I hope not. Can you imagine Kate’s selfies in the Ladies?’

‘The CPU’s behind the keypad,’ says Doug. ‘One box interrogates the door CPU and copies the audit trail.’

‘The?’

‘Audit trail. It’s a chronological sequence of computer records. Each one stores the date and time when a code is entered into the keypad. The door CPU date-stamps the last three codes and stores the code itself. Interrogator and decrypter override security systems. Unlock door codes. Disable alarms . . .’

Zombie-nod and wait.

‘Quite remarkable,’ says Pete. ‘Is there any activity I may perform during these endeavours?’

Doug hands Pete his Beretta water pistol. ‘Guard duty.’

‘Oh my.’ Pete studies the pistol. ‘But I have never been trained in small-bore firearms.’

‘You know which end bullets come out of. Don’t you? Stand over there facing the other way. Aim the Beretta at the enemy. That’s everyone but us.’

Doug shoves the pen torch between his teeth. He plugs the decrypter into the interrogator and connects the probe to the door's keypad. He taps the decrypter and a trio of LEDs blink into red life.

‘Analysing . . .’ he says.

The first LED becomes solid red . . . followed by the second . . . and the third.

‘Should work,’ says Doug. He disconnects the probe. He connects it to the keypad again: three solid reds. ‘Houston, we have a problem.’

‘What do you mean?’ I say. ‘The Houston Savoy lacks a sea-view?’

‘Worse. No sea-view and no door that opens.’ He grunts. ‘Reckon they’ve upgraded the door security since my old man designed it.’

‘Let me guess, the keypad has a childproof lock?’

‘Aye. It’s working well. I’ll have to recalibrate the decryption routine.’ Doug peers into the sky. ‘It’ll take a while. Might not even work.’

Pete’s defending against what’s left of the darkness.

Yet everywhere I see it. And Billie-Jo. And sunrises.

Doug taps a few buttons. Nothing. He turns a dial. He fingers a switch: *ping*.

Damp seconds pass.

Pete strolls over. ‘I must say that this pistol is most unusual. Why is it wet?’

‘Special design,’ says Doug. ‘Wet suppressor.’

Pete examines the keypad. ‘May I also ask what this is for? It appears to be a small grille. A type of speaker that—’

‘Not speaker. *Microphone*. Aye, got to be.’ Doug inspects a grille above the keypad. ‘Door used to open with the keypad. But reckon it’s now voice-activated.’

‘Does that mean we shall require a specific vocal pattern?’

‘Or phrase.’

‘What a calamity. Perhaps, after all, this MI7 is more organised and efficient than you first envisaged? Moreover, perhaps this Flint is a noble character? A worthy adversary?’

Doug stands rigid.

Pete glances from Doug to me. ‘Of course, I may be incorrect. I have been known to err on occasion. Therefore it is quite feasible that this Flint is precisely as you have described.’ Pete clears his throat. ‘Flint is a fool.’

The medlab door slides open.

29

Share and Enjoy

We're all staring at the medlab door: solid and black and *open*.

'Inside,' says Doug, 'before any guards see.'

'Wait,' I say. 'You think Billie-Jo could be in the medlab or the interrogation cells. What if we're entering the wrong place?'

'Inside. Now.'

The medlab is an unlit corridor. We take slow steps into its unknown world as if we're all Neil Armstrong. A ceiling tile flicks on.

Doug paws at it. 'Motion sensors activate a bank of lights. But there's no CCTV, no windows.'

Four . . . five . . . six ceiling tiles shimmer above a highway of black. There's mustiness in the air.

Doug sniffs. 'What's that smell?'

'It's Pete.'

Pete glares at me. 'It is most definitely not.'

'It is. It's your shoe. That "special" mud you found. Dog poo really whiffs.'

Doug tut-tuts him with a mocking loudness. 'Delicate and subtle.'

We wander around a corner. Lights fire up everywhere: the corridor's emptied into some kind of foyer.

A partition of tinted glass spans several metres between two concrete walls. In the middle of the partition is a glass double-width door, also tinted. The partition is stuffed with squares: an imposing cubist castle of black glass.

'What's with this glass fetish?' I say.

Doug prods the door's frame. He positions his black boxes against the door. LEDs blink red. They transform into solid reds.

'This door, it's glass. Only, where's the keypad to let us in?'

'Ain't none, lad. No microphones either. Or CCTV.'

Metal posters adorn both concrete walls. They're drilled into the walls with bold commandments and colourful warning symbols: 'LAB COATS MUST BE WORN', 'NO SMOKING' and 'AUTHORISED PERSONS ONLY'. A blue circle showing a face wearing glasses competes against a red circle with a line through a cup, knife and fork.

Doug stomps from one end of the partition to the other. 'Extraction?' He prises his nose against the partition door at various heights. 'Or insertion?'

'I know I mentioned triple-glazing,' I say, 'but can you stop measuring up for a new conservatory?'

Pete is studying the posters.

Doug outlines a vent in the wall. 'Insertion.' He taps the door's frame. The LEDs shine solid red.

'We're trapped in the trap,' I say. 'Great. Why can't you open it?'

'Because it's a door that don't open.'

'All doors open, otherwise they wouldn't be doors.'

'Air circulation. Insertion, not extraction. This door don't open from the outside.'

‘How interesting,’ says Pete. ‘The front-door to ten Downing Street operates in the same manner.’

‘Yeah,’ I say, ‘but ego-crooks aside, why have a door that only opens from the inside?’

Pete strolls over. ‘My dear boy, is it not obvious? First, it ensures that intruders cannot penetrate any further. Second, it guarantees that someone must be behind the door at all times.’

‘Who?’

‘Who indeed,’ says a voice.

Energy surges through the glass partition, creating a widescreen of white.

‘Now, my friends, who might you be?’

The voice behind the partition belongs to an old guy, someone in a white lab coat with a sagging face and centre-parted strings of grey hair. He’s standing behind a bench desk that has a phone and screen. The only light is from the partition itself, so metres beyond the desk are shadows sliding into darkness.

Pete’s a few metres away from the partition, yet has the water pistol aimed at the guy. At everyone but us.

Doug dips into his back pocket.

‘FREEZE,’ says his audio processor.

“‘Freeze’?” says the guy. ‘Have you been reading the *Terrorist Cliché Manual*?’

‘OPEN THE DOOR.’



The guy skirts around to the front of the desk. Underneath his white lab coat he's wearing white trousers, white socks and white trainers. 'Other than your futile door request, what are your demands?'

'WASH MY SOCKS.'

On a wall is a transparent cap over a red button. The guy strokes the cap with his left hand. Part of his thumb is missing; the part above the knuckle.

'I have not yet activated the site alarm,' says the guy, 'because I first wish to know who you are and what organisation you represent. However, I will activate this with your next trivial answer.'

'DO IT OR DIE.'

'Ah, the simple threat. A sophisticated demand is such a waste. I much prefer it when terrorists strip out the rich layers of language and supply a direct verb.'

'NOW.'

'Yes, you understand the idea. However, your threats are superfluous.' The guy steps closer to the partition. 'This glass is a special molecular compound dense enough to withstand sustained close-range machine-gun fire. It's easily capable of resisting damage from your insubstantial firearms.' He wipes away his centre parting with his gruesome knuckle-less thumb. 'So you see, my friends, it is *I* who shall be making the demands.'

'OPEN THE DOOR.'

He laughs. 'Your desire for anonymity is laudable. Yet irrelevant. There are no cameras in here. You can see my face so why not reciprocate? I prefer to comprehend my adversaries before I eliminate them.' The guy approaches the partition. 'Unless you comply, I *will* trigger the alarm.'

Doug's chest expands and contracts. He peels off his balaclava. Shoves it in his backpack.

‘Thank you. And your colleagues?’

I pull off my balaclava.

Pete drags his off: his rubber ears flop over his white hair.

‘Much more accommodating,’ says the guy. ‘Now, if we can dispense with your crude voice synthesizer we may start to behave like adults.’

‘Open the door,’ says Doug.

‘You are persistent, I give you that. However, you must realise that I will never open this door.’

The phone on the desk rings.

Doug whips out a gas canister. ‘HCN.’

‘But hydrogen cyanide is lethal. A concentration of three hundred milligrams per cubic metre would kill us all within minutes.’

‘Concentration of this puppy is three thousand.’

I look at Doug. His canister’s fake. Must be. A replica canister full of . . . replica hydrogen cyanide. Hot air?

‘This is preposterous,’ says the guy. ‘Stop this or I will activate the alarm.’

‘Do it,’ says Doug. ‘You’ll still die.’

The guy folds his arms. ‘As will all of you.’

I look to Pete for help: his arms remain stapled to his sides, yet the staples are trembling as if they want to escape.

Doug yanks a gas mask from his backpack and slides it over his face. He lobs across a pair for us.

We put them on.

The guy’s cheeks fade to match his white lab coat. He backs away from the partition. ‘You cannot do this.’

Doug cradles the gas canister. 'Reckon I can do what I like, Professor Black.'

The Prof's eyes narrow.

'Aye, I know loads of things. Defence capabilities of MI7. Who dealt with my old man. How to make hydrogen cyanide. Now open the door.'

'You are bluffing.'

The phone stops ringing; there's a lurid silence.

'Want to bet?' says Doug. He lines the canister up against the wall's air intake.

'Your life?'

The Prof studies the canister.

'Ain't asking again.'

The Prof's face twitches.

Doug pincers the opening valve.

'You cannot do this!'

Doug turns it.

A cloud of lethal gas is released; I fart.

30

don't try to outweird me

From behind the privacy glass, Officer Flint surveyed his kingdom. Within the facility were the interrogation cells, the rooms in which officers denied the senses. CCTV cameras recorded the actions of every suspect, providing critical footage that could be compiled . . . used as evidence . . . erased. Attached to each interrogation cell was a surveillance cubicle with privacy glass and a huge screen, for observing the suspect as their defiance was squeezed from them, pore by pore.

Adams leaned on a chair. It didn't buckle. 'I've increased the security around the interrogation cell block, as you requested, and have also ordered a wider search of Sectors E to G. Next I'll review the last forty-eight hours of footage from our cameras.'

Flint was sitting in a chair opposite. Beside him was the screen.

'Sir, there's no update from the seizure squad. They're maintaining their surveillance on Brackenbury Road, as you requested. Before you arrived I also tried to contact the Professor in the medlab, to discuss the release of your other suspect. No answer.'

'Try again.'

Adams barrelled over to the privacy glass. ‘The cell has been prepared as per your instructions. I’ve also muted the audio, but it doesn’t matter. The terrorist hasn’t said anything.’

‘I want every splinter of information about her. What organisation she represents, why she tried to infiltrate this facility, what her support networks are. I want to predict her demands, her intentions.’ Pivoting, the corner cameras of Interrogation Cell 4 locked onto her lissom body. Ten silent black fingernails tapped a table. That silent, futile tap. ‘Name?’

‘Adams.’

‘*Her* name, you fool.’

‘She wasn’t carrying ID.’

‘So cross-check the database using her photo and also extract her DNA for analysis.’ Through the privacy glass, Flint studied her.

Her T-shirt proclaimed ‘fcuk 24/7’. She folded her arms in defiance like they all do.

At first.

31

*a pretty neat idea*

Doug doesn't kill the Prof with his replica hydrogen cyanide and I don't gas everyone with my fart either, despite it being a Nobel Prize rasper. Instead, the glass double-width door develops a hairline fracture. It grows and feeds itself until the room washes in white from the ceiling tiles.

When Pete writes his definitive thirteen-volume *History of the World* for his PhD, we will still never know whether the Prof succumbed to the pressure of Doug or to the pressure of Kate's cookies on my gastrointestinal tract; we should not be told.

Doug aims his automatic rifle at the Prof.

'Know who you are and what you get up to,' says Doug. 'All your grubby secrets. If you don't behave, them secrets will go viral across the internet.' He peers over his shoulder. 'Inside, quick.'

The Prof leaps across to the wall in a fuzz of white.

Axe-kick: *crack*.

The Prof trades his grip of the transparent cap for his arm. He collapses. The bench desk phone clatters across the floor.

The Prof cowers. 'You imbecile. You have broken my arm.'



I'm gawping at this with non-functioning feet; my shoes are somehow glued to the floor.

'Still have two hundred unbroken bones,' says Doug. He skewers the gun barrel into the Prof's neck. 'Ain't very friendly trying to set off the site alarm.'

'You are hurting me,' says the Prof.

'My firearms ain't so insubstantial now.'

'If your plan is to execute me, do so quickly.'

One dry gulp. My vocal chords aren't functioning either.

Doug towers over the Prof.

'Ain't planning to kill you,' says Doug. 'But try games like that again and you'll get it. Got it?'

Professor Plum Black, in the library medlab, with the revolver M27 Infantry Automatic Rifle.

'In here, you two,' says Doug, this time without peering over his shoulder. 'Bring my backpack.'

I heave his backpack to the bench desk, which contains a sunken keypad. In one corner of the room are lockers and a rack of lab coats; in another is a work surface cluttered with beakers, surgical gloves and microscopes. At the rear is a sign for toilets. An unlit corridor stretches into a sock of black.

Pete lifts the phone back onto the bench desk. He examines the Prof, who is still hunched on the floor. 'This chap needs medical attention.'

'Security first,' says Doug. He throws Pete a rope. 'Tie him up.'

The Prof is clutching his forearm. 'I am unarmed and in pain.'

Doug impales his gun barrel deeper into the Prof's neck, which flexes like the side of a marquee.

‘Reckon one arm’s enough to trigger the alarm,’ says Doug.

The Prof offers his wrists without resistance and his mouth without comment; Pete does his scout and knot routine with the rope.

The phone starts ringing again.

I stare at Doug. ‘If nobody answers it, they’ll know something’s wrong.’

Doug yanks his interrogator and decrypter from his backpack. He uncoils a cable.

He attaches his kit to the sunken keypad.

The phone rings and rings.

‘Wouldn’t you?’ I say.

‘We’re safe,’ says Doug. He studies the bulbs in the glass partition wall. ‘Answer it and they’ll know we’re here.’ He punches a button: white energy flowering the wall wilts. His LEDs shine green. ‘Door’s locked. Alarm deactivated.’

‘Across the base?’

‘Just here. But it’ll do, for now. Time to check the other floors.’

‘Don’t leave us. Not again. We need to find Billie-Jo. That’s why we’re here.’

Doug marches towards the unlit corridor.

I stand in front of him. ‘That’s why *I’m* here.’

‘Best if you help Pete. Too ancient by himself.’ Doug slaps my shoulder. ‘I’ll be back when I find your wench. But if I’m not here in thirty minutes—’

‘Wait longer?’

‘Aye. And watch the Prof.’

The Prof stands for a while, asserting his doomed authority. But he soon becomes tired. And humble. He slumps against the bench desk with his head drooped and with his arm and resolve broken.

Pete cocks his head at the unlit corridor.

‘I am most concerned about his behaviour,’ he says.

‘The Prof seems—’

‘No, Douglas. From where I was positioned, he endeavoured to murder the Professor with his canister—’

‘He didn’t.’

‘Please, do not interrupt.’

‘But you’re being pedantic again.’

‘Moreover, Douglas kicked the Professor, which broke his forearm.’

‘Trust me, you’d know if Doug tried to kill anyone. He threatened the Prof so he’d let us in, that’s all.’ I shrug. ‘This *is* Operation Certain Death.’

‘My dear boy, whilst you may believe me to be decrepit, I am not yet senile. I too once snapped my ulna and the sound is most distinct.’

‘Doug did that to stop the Prof setting off the alarm. You *were* there.’

Pete glimpses back at the Prof.

‘Furthermore,’ says Pete, ‘once the kerfuffle had subsided, Douglas insisted that the Professor’s broken arm be bound, which would have undoubtedly magnified his pain. Given these behaviours, I would appreciate your view of his mental state.’

‘Me? You’ve lived with Doug for two years as well. So you should know he’s your average regular guy. Whatever he did, he needed to do.’

‘By “average regular guy”, are you implying that he is a psychopath with unstable leanings towards gratuitous destruction?’

‘Those aren’t *all* his strengths.’

‘I see. Would you also state that Douglas expresses an immature approach to firearms?’

‘Not to his face, no. Sure, Doug sleeps with a pillow under his gun, but he’s fair. Loyal. His trigger finger only spasms if he has enough bullets. Without bullets, he’ll lie back and chill.’

‘Most comforting.’

‘Then detonate a rack of grenades. And before you complain, it’s the “emotion of conflict” you wanted to experience.’

Pete nods. ‘Sometimes my perception of Douglas is of someone with a deficient social conscience. Someone who would, should he feel so possessed, slaughter an entire village.’

‘Yeah . . . but that guy in the first-year *did* call him “big nose”.’ I slide my arm around Pete’s shoulder. ‘Don’t panic. I can sense when Doug’s about to spray a room with bullets. He telegraphs signs, obscure nuances of body language only his best friend can detect. The eyebrow twitch. The nostril flare. Plus he employs subtle coded language only I can decipher, such as “Going to kill them buggers.” Feeling any better?’

‘Not especially.’

Pete and I guard the Prof and await Doug’s return. But after a while Pete doesn’t feel ‘quite at ease’ holding the Beretta, so hands it to me.

Now *I* am James Bond: not Pete’s crinkled version, but young, elegant and sophisticated. A pre-corset Connery surrounded by fast cars and faster Bond girls. I’m the

cool ultra-spy who does have it all, including guns, gadgets, clichés and bits of conifer in my ear. Oh and a plastic Beretta leaking water onto my fingers.

Ceiling tiles shine white. A figure expands in the corridor and nourishes its dimensions. Taller. Wider. Hairier.

Doug's black curls spring from side to side.

I run towards him. 'Well?'

'Downstairs.'

I punch the air. 'She OK? What did she say when she saw you? Did she—'

'How's the Prof?'

'Him? Oh, fine. Come on then. Let's go.'

Doug chats with Pete. Doug inspects the sunken keypad. Doug checks the Prof, who is still hunched on the floor. Doug hooks his backpack over a shoulder and stomps off towards the corridor.

I bounce up and down alongside. 'How is she? She ask about me?'

He keeps marching.

'Doug?'

'She's in a special box.'

'What does that mean? What did she say?'

Doug reaches the end of the corridor. He turns a corner. 'Here we are.'

The special box has two thin metal doors, not much wider than Doug. He punches a button: the doors glide open.

My breathing is fast. I shuffle inside. The box is tiny.

Thousands of ovals protrude through metal walls like wasp eyes. The doors barricade shut behind me: the only way out. A menacing plaque reads 'LOAD 8 PERSONS OR 630 KG'. I stroke an oval. It's cold and lifeless.

‘This is it?’ I say. ‘I can’t believe this can contain so many people in such a small space. It doesn’t look like a special box.’

‘It ain’t. It’s the lift.’

Doug thumbs the ‘B’ button. The lift whines.

‘Medlab has three floors,’ he says. ‘She’s in the basement. Prof’s on the ground floor. Top floor is a recreational area with a store room and kitchen. Sofas and coffee tables.’

‘Kitchen?’ I say.

‘Medlab does research, not nine to five.’

‘So where is everyone? It’s not nine to five now. Not PM, anyway.’

‘Your wench must be top priority. For the Prof’s eyes only.’

The basement corridor is chilled like a fridge. It’s also long and one, two . . . twenty breezeblocks tall; the lift has not dropped one physical floor. A tube easily a metre wide veins along the high ceiling and is wrapped in what looks like aluminium foil.

‘Why’s it so cold?’ I say. ‘And is it my imagination or is the floor sloping?’

‘Maybe something to do with the air intake.’ Doug jabs at the tube. ‘Corridor’s over a hundred metres long.’

We follow it. The white breezeblock walls are monotonous patterns, like an endless piano minus the black keys. There are no windows. No doors. Yet despite its chill, I’m sweating.

‘What were you doing with the Prof?’ I say. ‘You can’t go around killing people.’

‘Why?’

‘What do you mean why? Because you can’t.’

‘Why?’

‘Because you just can’t, OK?’

The corridor is silent.

I should be grateful Doug didn't kill the Prof. Didn't kill anyone.

There are some toilets halfway along the corridor. Stick figures on doors.

Doug powers ahead and his boots thud into the distance in his familiar symmetrical rhythm.

Eventually – finally – a proper door ahead of us.

Close up, the door's one solid pane of glass tinged green. Drilled into one wall is a metal poster with black letters on a yellow label: 'WARNING: BIOHAZARD'. Across another wall is a sign, freckled with blood: 'MEDICAL BAY: RESTRICTED ACCESS'.

A keypad with a grille protrudes.

'Flint is a fool,' I say.

'Door ain't voice activated,' says Doug.

'I know.'

Doug smirks. He attaches the decrypter to the interrogator and connects the probe to the keypad. 'Should analyse door CPU. Should decrypt access codes.'

'You like "should", don't you? I worry each time you say it.'

Three LEDs blink red like damaged Christmas tree lights. Doug taps his boxes.

'I thought your technical ideas were foolproof? So simple they could even be understood by a sociologist?'

He taps the boxes again: three solid reds.

'If that's not worked, why not kick your boxes?'

Doug glances around. 'Lad, it's a delicate bit of kit. Can't kick them. My boxes need love. Need attention. Need . . .' He swings his arm over his head and punches his black boxes. '. . . To be told to work.'

The row of LEDs flicker and steady as a solid panel of green.

‘We’re in,’ he says. ‘Password’s 180924609.’

Doug types it into the keypad: the whole glass door disappears into the wall in one sideways slide with a distinctive loud *whoosh* sound. A fizz of escaping air.

The floor of the medical bay is tiled matt grey and patterned with blobs of white and black. Scientific dandruff. The air has a sharp chemical taste, like bleach. The room itself is a windowless deep rectangle full of bench desks and chairs. The desks house screens and equipment and spike out from the right-hand wall to create bays wide enough for a quartet of scientists. If I were Superman and could rip the roof off, the desks would be teeth in a comb. But I’m not and I can’t; I’m James Bond.

Beyond the desks is a gap of several metres. Past that, green opaque curtains like those in a hospital gather together. I drag one back: the temperature drops. A chest freezer of a metal box is slabbed waist-height across a table. The sides of the box are grooved like an edge of a coin. My fingers stumble along them, tracing scratches of history. A low humming noise envelops me. I stoop over a transparent slit.

Billie-Jo’s silent face. Her eyes are shut.



32

Five hundred and seventy-six thousand  
million, three thousand five hundred  
and seventy-nine years

In Interrogation Cell 4, Officer Flint stood in front of the suspect with his chest taut and his legs apart, in what he hoped was an intimidating stance. A lone striplight flickered, crackled. Creating shadows of shadows.

Sitting at the other end of the table, the suspect was limp and unvoiced. Over her face her hair dangled with a beguiling sadness. Magenta lipstick streaked her jaw.

‘I am Officer Flint and this is Evitara Research, the facility of MI7. We are a government organisation and earlier this morning you were caught trespassing. What is your name and what was your intention?’

She stayed mute. Her cute fringe obscured a forehead unlined and naive.

‘You may elect to remain silent, but this will not aid your cause. The guards captured you between our perimeter fences. You screamed obscenities to them in English, I know you understand me.’

Behind the truth-table she stared into her lap. Peering at herself, within herself.

Flint stood opposite her, arms folded. ‘You may think you can outwit us, but here we are beyond the reaches of the Whitehall drones. Bombproof doors protect this interrogation cell, imprison you. The blacked-out privacy glass behind me is toughened for safety. *My* safety. Either side attention lights signal new information demanding my time.

See those panic buttons on each wall? My guards would appear in seconds. The two corner cameras record your every thought. Their footage, like yourself, may of course be erased.'

Her curved shoulders bent into defiance.

With measured steps, Flint circled her. Her denim shorts were torn. 'You are wearing street clothes. Was your mission surveillance, to understand our defensive capabilities?' Round and round the cell he paced, as she assessed its confines. 'Or reconnaissance, prior to launching your campaign? Did you believe you could infiltrate this facility and access our technologies? Destroy us?'

She slid a black fingernail into her nostril.

'What were your demands to have been, had you succeeded? Finance for your organisation? Or would you have bargained for power? Information? Was this a propaganda exercise?' Flint strummed a radiator: a hollow sound. Rust edged to a pipe. 'This facility is locked into the countryside, you could not have strayed here by accident. What was your purpose?'

She still resisted eye contact. They never learned.

'You do not grasp the seriousness of this. If you fail to cooperate you will never see your friends and family again.' He faced her. 'Now, what is your name and which organisation do you represent?'

Withdrawing nail from nostril, she flicked.

11:39 hours. +17°C.

Officer Flint held a transparent bag behind his back. 'You targeted our facility for a specific reason. What motivated you to confront our guards? Is your overtly sexual manner a new technique? A specialised form of counter-intuitive bluff-camouflage?'

She rocked back and forth in her chair. Above her, the corner cameras swivelled and nodded: digital magpies. From the blackness of their squares, red dots winked down at her and on her. But never *for* her. Cell 4 was her tomb.

‘Did you hope to sabotage this facility?’ Flint said. ‘Hack our systems? Or were your aims political, spotlighting your cause?’

She stayed silent. As she rocked, her lithe arms flexed at the elbows. Clutching the table, her black fingertips bled white with the pressure.

‘You may believe your organisation remains offline. Wrong. MI7 knows everything about you.’ Flint leaned over her. ‘Your family, your friends, your network. We know your history, your routine. Everything.’

Connecting with his gaze, she said nothing.

Flint circled her table. He used slow footsteps and timed their cadence with readings of her body language. ‘You have invaded a military installation, forfeited your human rights. No phone call. No lawyer. MI7 is a covert organisation, the knife-twisting big brother to MI5 and MI6.’ He stopped and started, trying to break her defensive stance. ‘And yet, unlike our siblings, we do not retain statistics to verify our efficiency. We never respond to freedom of information requests. Our records do not exist for public consumption. MI7 does not exist.’

She focussed on a wall pockmarked with bullet holes, at the resistance from previous suspects before they . . . disappeared.

Flint lobbed the transparent bag across the table. ‘These gloves and mask are yours, I presume? Calling card? Decoy? Do not worry, I have had them sent for DNA analysis, along with your blood sample and backpack, so your silence is futile. Thank you for your “cooperation” and I will—’ He span round: the lesser spotted Adams, with his creased

white shirt. Flint marched over. 'You are something washed up by the sea, something yet to evolve. I am busy.'

Adams looked over Flint's shoulder. 'But it's Be Friendly To Suspects Day. Part of the *Empower To Succeed: Making Evitara Research Accessible* initiative. You had the booklet, sir. It's a management idea.'

'I *am* management.'

The creases on Adams's shirt were blades. 'It's, erm, one of the initiatives intended to make MI7 appear more welcoming.'

'And what do management also intend? To offer all suspects free refreshments?

"Coffee and biscuits are being served for your comfort and convenience"?"

'And cake, sir. Would you like some?'

Flint shoved Adams into a corner, beneath one of the cameras. 'I would like to interrogate my suspect and I would like silence from you. Understand?'

Adams blinked.

Flint sighed. 'You may speak.'

'I understand, but we should be more amiable with her. She's pretty.'

'Officer Adams, I am conducting an interrogation of a terrorist suspect, not a chauvinistic beauty contest. This is not the time for silly remarks.' Flint looked back at her.

'Do you really think she's pretty?'

33

the brain we want to buy

I think my fingertips haven't moved. Not since I leant over the box. Since the cold of its metal smeared into my palms. My elbows are also locked. Twitching. Billie-Jo's closed eyes almost stare back through the transparent slit. Her body's peaceful. At rest.

I stand back and my hands, they're weightless. Tingling with rushed blood.

The tube wrapped in aluminium foil wriggles across the ceiling. A fire exit sign glows green and white above an emergency door.

Only now do I sense the burn streaks of old tears.

I am annoyingly, impressively and gruesomely sick.

Creased shininess. A tube of foil. I sit up. My bum's numb, thanks to the unrelenting floor of the medical bay. Questions, so many questions. After seeing her entombed I had to lie down; all of me was numb.

My stomach, however, feels much friendlier. Doug has mopped up its contents and is perusing Billie-Jo's box. There's a sink to one side with a tap piped up to a white plastic container. Next to it are vials, cylinders, pipettes and measuring jugs. Further along is some

kind of glass cupboard attached to a chimney thrusting through the ceiling. The air smells synthetic. Of disinfectant.

‘Sorry,’ I say. ‘About the mess.’

Doug glances around. ‘Don’t worry, lad. Vomit’s easy to clean. Sometimes Kate’s cookies gave me the shits for days. Used to spurt out like oxtail soup. Reckon only Pete’s immune.’

The bench desks are separated with dividers. On one desk there’s a red rectangular contraption called ‘The Belly Dancer’: two square platforms like small plates connect to each other via a set of four metal legs, whilst underneath the lower platform is another set of legs, only transparent and twisted.

I rub my eyes. ‘How long have I been asleep?’

‘About an hour.’

‘I’ve always thought the morning was a myth.’

‘You needed the rest. I’ve been up to check Pete and get my backpack. You feel OK?’

Some benches are filled with technology towers of black and white. Stacked four high, their LEDs flash and their rectangular panels are aglow with decimalised numbers. Glass bottles on top are full of liquid and have thin tubes spiralling from their lids. A confusion of chemicals.

I drag myself onto a chair. ‘I felt OK until I woke up and saw this big loitering elephant asking questions. Why put her in this . . . box?’

‘No idea,’ says Doug. ‘Maybe for protection.’

‘To protect her? Or to protect us? And does it mean Kate’s in one too?’

Doug shrugs.



‘So we find out everything. What the box is, why Billie-Jo is in it and what happens to her when we open this thing.’

Everywhere in the medical bay there are small square boxes, devices with printouts, glass-panelled instruments and not-so-small square boxes. Everywhere the murmur of machines, of technologies.

‘We should hunt about the place,’ I say. ‘Search for paperwork. Data. Files. Anything.’

Doug paces around the box. After the third lap of silence, he prods it at regular intervals as if he’s a sleuth in an oak-lined library searching for the secret door. ‘Reckon it’s some kind of chamber. But what and why, not sure.’

Billie-Jo’s ‘chamber’ is powder coated in a hideous shade of industrial green. The transparent slit is clouded. Her face is not touched by colour.

‘Is she . . .?’

‘Looks that way,’ says Doug. ‘At least from the neck down.’

‘What?’

‘Naked?’

‘No, I mean is she frozen? This slit is fogged up at the edges with ice crystals, like a freezer. I’ve seen more signs of life in a fish finger.’

‘That’s because she *is* a fish finger.’

Embryonic words dribble down my chin.

‘Feel it,’ says Doug. ‘Feel the freeze.’ He hovers a palm over the chamber. ‘But she ain’t too bad. Not covered in golden breadcrumbs.’

‘How can you say that? She’s trapped in this thing. It’s sealed shut like a sarcophagus. She’s still. Her eyes, they’re closed.’

‘Your wench is . . . she’s resting, that’s all.’

‘You think my dead girlfriend is “resting”? Blimey, Doug, after graduation never work at a crematorium.’

He continues his tour around the chamber. ‘Even colder inside. Probably triple-glazed to reduce thermal conductivity. Pretty interesting stuff.’ His opera arms sweep the medical bay. ‘Entire place must be insulated.’

Two pipes as wide as a body suspend from the ceiling and funnel together to make a ‘Y’ shape. An extraction grille pokes out of the end, over Billie-Jo’s chamber. Or is it insertion?

I step back. ‘I can’t see any vapours. Those wisps of dry ice when you open a freezer.’

Doug crabs along to the opposite end of the chamber.

‘This puppy’s engineered,’ he says. ‘Has loads more tech than a freezer. Temperature’s minus eighty.’

‘Eighty degrees below zero? Wow.’ I lean over the chamber again and my thumbs touch like in a séance. ‘That is one cold fish finger.’

‘Climate controlled to keep things safe. Five degrees for milk, minus eighteen for chickens and minus eighty for naked girlfriends. Smart, eh?’

I snatch a breath. ‘No. It’s not smart. It’s sick. What kind of organisation freezes a bloody corpse?’

Doug frowns. ‘She ain’t bloody. Not a mark on her.’

‘You know what I mean. Why would MI7 freeze a dead body?’

‘MI7 ain’t freezing a dead body.’

‘I know you’re the techie, but you said she’s at minus eighty. They’ve frozen her to death—’

‘Lad, listen to me. MI7 ain’t freezing a *dead* body.’

‘Billie-Jo’s alive?’

‘For now.’

34

wonder if it will be friends with me?

15:13 hours. +19°C.

Flint sat alone, sipping a plastic cup in the surveillance cubicle. His feet were on a chair. The sting of caffeine was his sole companion. For the past hour he had been watching her in Cell 4: assessing her mannerisms, her facial expressions. She had looked around, the usual quest for help. Yet she had made no demands. No lawyer.

Officer Adams blundered into the cubicle in the crumpled white shirt less lived in, more died in. He glanced at the privacy glass, at the zoomed-in live feed on the huge screen beneath. ‘Any luck?’

Her arms folded, again. That obstinacy was so appealing: the subterfuge of the terrorist as the innocent. Ploy or bluff? Lone wolf or head of tribe? Perhaps—

‘Has she said anything?’

‘Adams, I would really like to say how much I have missed your company.’

‘Really? Thanks.’

‘Yet we both know I can’t, because it would be a lie.’ Flint smiled. ‘A huge Saint Paul’s Cathedral of a lie.’

Adams turned back to the screen. He watched her amid the hush of embarrassment.

Flint leaned back, deeper into his chair. She was stubborn and pretty. Yet lethal. And why the 'fcuk 24/7' T-shirt? Coded message? Who did she represent? The leader or the decoy? Maybe she—

‘Why don’t you, erm, let me have a go?’

“‘Have a go’”? Interrogation is a specialist art, not a public house brawl. It’s an imperative operation for suspects, it’s critical for receiving parcels of information.’ Flint slurped his coffee. ‘And you are not a qualified interrogator.’

With both hands Adams rubbed his gut. Circles, always circles. ‘You can’t interrogate her if she says nothing.’

‘How perceptive of you. And for your future reference, luck has no part in this.’

‘With respect, sir, you’re only receiving parcels marked “ADDRESS UNKNOWN”.’

‘Remember, I am the A2 grade. You’re a B3, a neophyte.’ Flint studied the screen. She was intriguing. There was a restlessness to her yet also a deeper strength; a part of her character demanding exploration.

Shifting tonnes to toes, Adams waddled closer to the privacy glass. ‘You’ve tried to interrogate her five times in five hours. If you’re struggling, let me help.’

Flint yanked his feet from the chair. ‘I have not *tried*, I *have*. And I will not tolerate your continued insubordination. I have an unknown threat that has infiltrated this facility and I must discover her motivations, her objectives.’ He pressed the screen, panned onto her face. ‘It’s a shame her mask of solitude isn’t infectious.’

‘Perhaps she isn’t talking because she’s tired? She *is* a normal person.’

‘Show me anyone normal, I will show you a distorted fake. She’s a terrorist sent here to damage us.’

‘She doesn’t look like a terrorist.’

‘Enlighten me. What does a terrorist look like? Flowing beard? Stereotypical shifty eyes? Scars across the cheek?’

‘She’d look funny with a beard.’ Adams examined her image on the screen. ‘She looks ordinary. Nice.’

Flint jabs at the screen. ‘She is a simulation of ordinary and nice. It’s her counter-intuitive bluff-camouflage technique. Her image deceives you, so the untrained eye sees only what she wants you to see. Would you prefer all burglars to dress in black and carry a bag marked “SWAG” over their shoulder?’

‘It *would* help, sir.’

‘Your “normal person” is the diversionary tactic to frustrate our counter-surveillance activities. She is an experienced and ruthless killer.’ Flint gulped the dregs of his coffee. ‘Don’t you have any doughnuts to shred?’

Adams gripped a chair, spread his buttocks. ‘I captured her facial image and cross-checked the database. She is not a known suspect.’

Flint nodded. ‘She is, but somehow not to us. DNA?’

‘I’ve sent her sample, gloves, mask and backpack for analysis.’

‘I want the analysis and a full dossier on her today.’

‘I’m also monitoring the motorway cameras and listings of ferries and flights, in case the terrorists try to exit the country.’ Adams pressed the screen and the live feed flicked to a wall of black. ‘I’ve analysed the last forty-eight hours of footage from our cameras, including around the fence repair.’

‘Has the sawdust putrefied between your ears? There *was* no power to the cameras. The maintenance team repaired the fence.’

‘The footage *after* the cameras came back online, sir. This is from Sector F. The movement is some distance away from the watchtower camera, but do you see it? The shadow?’

Flint gawped at the screen, at indistinct images. ‘I see nothing other than last night’s relentless fog. Your imagination exceeds your ability, though that is not difficult.’

‘It’s near the left-hand edge. Let me play it again.’

Flint peered closer. Through the fog the shadow moved.

‘It’s an invisible mouse wearing slippers.’

Flint’s plastic cup flexed.

‘I had one of the IT guys enhance the resolution. In their version the shadow is clearer.’ Adams pointed to the edge of the screen. ‘It’s not really an invisible mouse wearing slippers. More, erm, mice. Frankie mouse and Benjy mouse?’

‘I am not in the mood. Not yesterday, not today, not tomorrow.’ Flint focussed on her: stubborn, pretty *and* clever. ‘When did the Professor say he would handover my other suspect?’

‘I’ve called him twice, but still no answer. I’ve tried him at home but, again, nothing. The guards at the gatehouse haven’t seen him leave either. According to the security database he entered the laboratory yesterday and hasn’t left.’

Flint slouched back into his chair. She showed no emotion, no urge for freedom. ‘Whoever these other terrorists are, they must be with the Professor.’ Flint scratched his nose. ‘Question. If you see a rabbit in a drainpipe, what do you send for?’

‘Sir?’

‘You heard.’

‘I . . . suppose I’d send for a psychiatrist, because I must be hallucinating.’



‘Shall we leap the Grand Canyon of fantasy and pretend that you can discriminate between illusion and reality?’

‘Is that your question?’ Adams said.

‘What do you send for?’

‘Still the psychiatrist, sir, because rabbits live in burrows, not drainpipes.’

With majestic grace Flint’s plastic cup bounced off Adams’s forehead. ‘The rabbit does not live in the drainpipe, it enters the pipe to escape. For the final time, if you see a rabbit enter a drainpipe but do not see it leave, what do you send for?’

‘A plumber, because it must be stuck in the pipe. And afterwards I’d send for a vet to have returned it to its burrow.’

‘When a terrorist organisation has breached our security, we neutralise it. To catch the rabbit, Officer Adams, we send for the fox.’

35

*This is probably the best  
button to press*

Doug's 'for now' are six letters of hope. The hope Churchill himself might have taken as daily doses of castor oil, as his nose was pinched shut by a woman in an apron and curlers. But I'm not surrounded by curlers, aprons or noses; I'm standing in a medical bay of glassware and machines. And one frozen girlfriend.

Mounted to the far wall is a transparent box stacked with safety glasses. Above it are more drilled metal posters warning me what I shouldn't do. No smoking. No eating. No fun.

One poster says 'GLP RULES'. What's 'GLP'? 'Giant Lactating Potato'? 'Gravy Licking Pedestrian'?

Doug's opposite me, circling Billie-Jo's chamber. There's a precision to his movements, an unusual delicacy of the limbs akin to a ballerina wearing army boots.

Sometimes Doug examines the 'Y' shape funnel above the chamber or runs a fingertip along the chamber's shut lines; at other times he peeks into the transparent slit at Billie-Jo's face. But he does so in silence. To be always inside his brain might feel excessive; to not be inside it now feels intolerable.

'I know,' I say, 'why not move it? Her, I mean. Then we can take her back home.'

Doug halts. 'Label on the base says "EFFECTIVE CAPACITY 728l. NET WEIGHT 375kg". Can't move this. Too big. Too heavy.'

Our bathroom scales flashed 143kg when Doug last stood on them.

'So,' I say, 'we're marooned in a medical bay that's a biohazard. We've lost Kate. And now my girlfriend's sealed inside some special chamber box thing too big to move. Could this be any worse?'

Doug clocks another slow circuit.

'What about Heather?' he says. 'Defrost your wench here and Heather's off the horizon. And I ain't reversing time as well. You two over?'

'Definitely over. We weren't compatible, but even at the end I felt guilty. I wanted to say, "It's not you, it's me". But I made a teeny-weeny mistake. I said, "It's not me, it's you." She exploded. Never heard so many swear words. Over, definitely.'

The chamber's metallic chill seeps into my fingertips. Billie-Jo seems desolate yet not quite dead, the silence between heartbeats.

'In here,' I say, 'Billie-Jo's frozen, so has no perception of time. She's dormant. Almost hibernating. Is that right?'

'Aye, dormant. Trapped in a mindless state. All conscious mental activity stopped. Same as my old PE teacher. He used to run into goalposts for a laugh. He'd get wrecked then cut his toenails with his axe. Top geezer.'

'So we need a method of defrosting her. Carefully, I mean.'

'Chamber might be alarmed. With thermal differential locks.'

'We need an instruction manual.'

An opened carton in one cupboard offers me 'powder-free nitrile exam gloves' and a row of empty vials with tubes spewing out. On the work surface below is a thick parcel of a stand supporting a tall machine with a glass panel.

Surrounded by this kit it'd be great being a scientist: not only could I wear the safety glasses and look intellectual, but I'd clone myself and make them write my essays.

*THUD.*

I spin around.

Doug's PAUSE button has been pressed: his arms are over his head in the shape of a roof, as if he's regressed to infancy; his hands are clutching a lump hammer.

'Hitting the chamber with my lump hammer,' he says.

'Yeah, I see that, Sherlock. But why? I said defrosting *carefully*.'

'Got bored of careful.'

'You don't do careful, so decided to smash it open with your lump hammer? Well from now on you can do English. Find that manual.'

Doug clears his throat. "'For optimum efficiency please ensure that your unit operates in a clean environment, free from dust".'

'You whacked the chamber to remove *dust*?'

'Top of page three.' He throws a manual at me.

*Congratulations on your new ultra-low temperature biomedical Freezing Unit (FU). This unit has been engineered to provide years of maintenance-free use.*

*For optimum efficiency please ensure that your unit operates in a clean environment, free from dust. It functions most effectively in a sterile area or cleanroom, as per current FDA standards, and should be installed horizontally on an even floor with a minimum ventilation clearance of at least 10cm.*

*This unit must be plugged into a dedicated power source protected by a branch circuit breaker. You are advised to check the local voltage requirements before first powering-up your new Freezing Unit (Recommended Model: GTI).*

‘Yeah OK,’ I say, ‘no dust. But nowhere does this state, “For optimum efficiency please pummel your unit with a lump hammer”.’

‘Reckon it don’t say, “For optimum efficiency please do *not* pummel your unit with a lump hammer”.’

‘Well, it won’t. Manuals never detail what you shouldn’t do. One for an oven won’t say, “Please do not insert puppies under the grille at regular intervals to ensure even browning”. One for a toaster won’t say, “Please refrain from toasting bread in the bath”. Likewise this manual won’t say, “For optimum efficiency please do not layer your unit in whipped cream and lick it all off”.’

Doug snatches the manual. ‘That might work.’

I tell Doug to read the manual again *and* to do the careful by understanding its instructions, otherwise he’ll suffer Pete’s lecture on the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act. Doug shudders.

‘So,’ I say, ‘Billie-Jo having survived MI7’s carbonite freezing process, we can now defrost her using the manual?’

In Doug’s giant hands the manual looks like an infant’s first reading book. ‘It’s about her body coping. The ultra-low temperature. Her cells might have been damaged. Membranes could have dehydrated.’

He resumes pacing around the chamber. Clockwise and stop; crouch and scratch of stubble. Anti-clockwise and stop; prod and booted pirouette.

Doug points to a bulge at the base. ‘Control panel with status screen. List of codes here to check against.’

I sit at the base of the chamber; a humming noise envelops me. The bulge is moulded plastic with a pad of buttons alongside a small rectangular screen.

‘The screen shows the date and time,’ I say. ‘There’s also a dash, the numbers eight and zero and then a capital “C”.’

‘Minus, not dash. Chamber’s at minus eighty degrees centigrade, exactly. Software-controlled to maintain optimum temperature.’

‘Please, not Microsoft software. The temperature won’t be optimum after updating and rebooting. Screens in the library are always doing that.’

Doug strokes the chamber. ‘Lad, she’s safe in here.’

‘I don’t want her in here. There are buttons on this panel. Perhaps I should press one?’

‘Don’t.’

I do: the screen flashes ‘DO NOT PRESS THAT BUTTON AGAIN’.

‘Guesses could kill,’ says Doug.

‘OK, so let’s not.’

The screen is blue and its display is white. There are buttons zero to nine, some with arrows on and ones labelled ‘MENU’ and ‘ENTER’. The screen shows statuses relating to ‘CONTROL’, ‘ALARM’, ‘MODE’ and ‘DOOR’. There’s no button marked ‘FROZEN GIRLFRIEND EJECT’.

Doug flips through the manual.

‘Section 7 Diagnostics,’ he says. ‘Before defrosting reckon we check the chamber’s working OK. Minimise risk. Press the MENU button once. Should be highlighting CONTROL menu. Press down arrow, twice. Should be on STATUS menu. Press ENTER.’

‘The screen’s flashing. Says it’s gone into diagnostic mode.’

Doug turns a page. ‘Select option “RUN SELF-DIAGNOSTICS”. Press ENTER.  
It’ll do a status check on itself.’

Asterisks appear along the screen from left to right, building up with mesmeric regularity into rows.

‘The self-diagnosis has diagnosed itself as not working,’ I say. ““ERROR 003””?  
Only, how do we know *that* is working? How can self-diagnosis software diagnose itself as needing diagnosis?’

I stand. Behind the transparent slit Billie-Jo’s eyelids remain still, lost to time. She looks peaceful. Content, even.

‘Can we trust a machine that asks itself if it’s fine?’ I say. ‘This chamber might be the MI7 equivalent of HAL 9000. Is it completely operational? Are all its circuits functioning perfectly?’

Doug trails down the page. ‘Error 003 means routine maintenance is due soon.  
Nowt serious.’

‘So if HAL isn’t lying, we can start defrosting?’

‘Software’s programmed to monitor the chamber settings. To check if the temperature falls outside pre-defined boundaries. Too hot. Too cold. But there’s also an external alarm.’

The bench desks are cluttered with kit. Everything looks complicated and expensive and purposeful; everything feels interconnected and somehow alive. Doug says the technology towers are HPLCs, systems that separate and analyse components in a mixture. The glass cupboard with the thrusting ceiling chimney is a fume hood with a circular outlet pipe and, apparently, extraction. The Belly Dancer with the transparent twisted legs is an undulating orbital shaker. Kinky.



Cables from Doug's backpack wrap around themselves in a confusion of liquorice. He plugs the decrypter into the interrogator and attaches the interrogator's probe to the control panel. He prods the decrypter. Three LEDs blink. Red.

'Alarm's locked,' he says.

'Don't tell me. Another childproof lock?'

'It's a digital combination. Two point one quadrillion permutations.'

'But all electronics can be disabled. You said. Perhaps something in your backpack might help?' I heave out a mini-barrel. 'Homebrew?'

Doug refuses to look up from the control panel. 'Beer's more essential than them emergency moustaches you ain't wearing.'

'True, but a frozen girlfriend in a secret base surrounded by armed guards is a mere uncontrolled crisis.'

Doug says the white plastic container piped from the sink is a water purifier used in experiments. Its tap water has been filtered to deny all taste and so, presumably, it's used to make London beer. According to him, the purifier generates water so pure it would strip minerals from my body; if I drank enough, I'd die. My New Year's resolution will be to remain forever impure. Forever sober.

Inside Doug's backpack are tins of chickpeas. And lots of tiny black boxes I haven't noticed and don't want to know about. I draw out a stainless steel frying pan, which resonates with a satisfying *clang* when I lower it onto a work surface. Doug's backpack contains weapons and gadgets and equipment but no power converters or magic chamber key.

Instead of the hope I need, I see only the darkness I don't.

'Can't disable alarm,' says Doug. His face lacks expression, but then defeat is never a proud emotion. 'There could be alternatives to software. But risky.'

I want to ask Doug *how* risky, but I can't ask a question if I don't want to hear the answer; I'm not six.

He shows me a grille on one side of the chamber. The grille is about a metre wide and powder coated in the same hideous shade of industrial green.

Doug unscrews it. There are circuit boards and plastic connectors and a metal panel, yet also grey cables and strips of coloured wires wriggling across each other. It's a complicated pit of electronics and digital information and (seemingly) magic.

He points to a row of cylinders. 'Capacitors start it up. They feed into that junction box . . .'

I'm zombie-nodding to stay awake as he explains the functionality of thermal sensors and voltage boosters. The next time he elopes with a technical monologue I won't feel myself nodding to keep awake; I'll feel myself.

I ask how he knows what all this medical bay stuff is. He says when he was at primary school his dad brought tech home and disassembled it to show how it worked. Doug kept asking him lots of questions and wouldn't shut up until he heard all the answers; Doug was six.

He stops explaining. He's smirking. *At me.*

'Let me guess,' I say, 'you want to cut a wire? But which one?'

Doug strides over to his backpack, which soon swallows his entire right arm. 'Always the red wire in them old black and white war films. They cut it to defuse the bomb.'

I point at the exposed chamber.

'Looking at this squiggle of wires,' I say, 'it could be the red one or the blue one or the green one. Or all three. Or none of them. Also, I have a teeny-weeny concern about your use of the word "bomb"—'

‘Cutting the red wire always detonates.’ Doug’s shoulder vanishes into the neck of the backpack, which looks as bizarre as it sounds. He scrabbles about. His face twists to one side.

‘Call me Pedantic Pete if you like, but you’re basing the life or death or bomb-death decision of my girlfriend on films about the Second World War. Old black and white films. And no colour means you can’t ever know which wire *was* the red one.’

Doug snips the air with wire-cutters.

‘Why not do a Pete?’ I drum the chamber. ‘Thinking about it with logic and intelligence . . . you’re wrong. In the films I’ve seen the red wire is the double-bluff. Everyone thinks the red wire detonates the bomb, so they don’t cut it. They cut the green wire.’

‘Nope. S’posed to think the green wire is the one. Green for go. But it never is. It’s a red herring.’

‘A red herring that’s *green*? Have you ever seen a film where they cut the red wire?’

‘Ain’t never seen a film where they *don’t* cut the red wire.’

‘Please, no more grilled puppies.’

Doug scrapes his stubble with the blades of his wire-cutters in slow ponderous strokes.

‘If you’re not sure, choose the safe option: “eeny, meeny, miny, moe”. Or put the wire-cutters back and think this through.’

He circles the chamber.

I need to carve a giant Billie-Jo out of feather pillows and crawl inside.

Doug stops in front of the exposed chamber. He nestles the blades of his wire-cutters around the red wire. He glances at me.

‘Don’t do this.’

He positions the blades around the green wire. He hesitates. Withdraws.

The medical bay might be chilled but my forehead is pure wet heat.

Doug scrapes his stubble with the blades again, only this time in short flicks as though he’s trying to light a match. He slides the blades around the red wire. Tightens his grip. He pauses again.

He cuts it.

The lights go out.

36

scares the willies out of me

The medical bay offers a black silence. No technology towers with flashing LEDs and rectangular panels. No Belly Dancer that is red. Only the distant green glow of the fire exit sign pierces the gloom.

I wait a few more seconds, but nothing happens. ‘Doug, the lights are still out. You cut the wrong wire.’

‘Chill,’ he says. ‘I’ll fix it.’

In the darkness I’m once more surrounded by visions of witches and cauldrons.

There’s a faint hum from the chamber. ‘You hear that? The silver lining is that the chamber still has power. Plus I’m in no hurry to photosynthesise. Only, can you?’

‘Fix it? Have I ever not?’

‘Several times. Like in the first year when you tried to “fix” me up with your chloroformed sister.’ I imagine Doug’s face is scrunched up with disdain. ‘And that Easter when you “fixed” that dog hobbling around our garden. You didn’t need chloroform then either.’

‘Was anaesthetic for the operation.’

‘Which was you chainsawing his two broken back legs into stumps. I know you had to make him mobile again, but you didn’t need to fit his stumps with shopping trolley wheels.’

‘Got him going, didn’t it?’

‘Yeah, in circles. Round and round until the poor mutt was so dizzy he spun off down our road—’

Click. There’s a slight fizz. Now a deep whirring noise.

The lights blink back on. The claustrophobic clutter of the medical bay seems less intense. Brighter than before.

White, the colour of Heaven.

Doug’s still kneeling next to me with the wire-cutters. ‘See? Temporary blip.’

‘But the control panel’s dangling off the chamber.’

‘Must have shorted somehow. Overloaded, bypassing sub-routines.’ Doug prises the panel back onto the chamber using a delicate combination of skill and fisting. He prods the ENTER button: asterisks appear. They start forming rows, one row after another in perfect formation like soldiers on a parade ground.

Perhaps with deep thought HAL 9000 is pondering on the existential question of life, the universe and everything for seven and a half million nanoseconds, before realising the significance of the number 42.

The screen refreshes with a series of menus.

Doug explains that the chamber must be on a separate electrical circuit and thinks cutting the red wire blew one of the capacitors, whatever that means. He re-runs the diagnostics and it highlights the capacitor failure; Doug can fix it. He physically checks the rest of the wires and components and says the chamber seems intact: a complicated pit of electronics and digital information and (definitely) magic.

‘You’ve read the manual,’ I say. ‘How long will the defrosting take?’

He licks one blade of the wire-cutters. ‘Freezing takes maybe . . . ten degrees an hour? With efficient dual compressors. So to minus eighty, best part of a day. But reckon much longer to defrost. *If* you want the careful.’

‘Course I do. So, any change out of two days? Three?’

‘Perhaps. Perhaps not.’

‘That’s your best guess?’

‘Don’t know about defrosting people. My speciality is pepperoni pizza.’

‘Will she . . . you know, survive?’

‘Maybe.’ Doug studies the capacitors and wires. He scans along the chamber. ‘Aye, reckon she should.’

‘I need “definitely”.’

‘She should definitely . . . maybe survive.’

I caress the chamber: its chilled metal leeches the heat from my fingers. Flakes of ice behind the transparent slit hug Billie-Jo’s cheekbones. The contours of her mouth. The inviting curve of her lips.

‘Doug, how do those motion sensors in the corridor work? What activates them?’

‘Motion.’

‘Yeah, funny. But what kind of motion? A rat? Ant?’

‘Nope. Only calibrated for people. Why?’

‘The ceiling lights are flicking on. Coming closer.’



The corridor of white breezeblock walls stretches beyond the solid glass door of the medical bay. Its metres of tunnelled darkness continue to the toilets halfway and then along to the lift.

Yet the corridor is darkness no more: its ceiling lights are flicking into life one after another as a series of electrified dominoes.

Doug is leaning against the chamber with his face in the instruction manual. His dangling black curls are handcuffs.

I cough.

‘It’ll be Pete,’ says Doug after several annoying seconds. ‘It’ll be him, with another question. Always questions, never answers.’

The lights in the corridor are turning on at regular intervals with no pauses; whoever it is, they’re approaching at a consistent pace.

‘You have to do something,’ I say. ‘I’m hungry and tired and can’t think. I’m used to staying in bed until the twenty-four hour clock displays teenage hours.’

‘Stop worrying.’ Doug sucks an oil-stained finger. He flips a page. ‘Who else could it be?’

‘That’s what I’m worrying about. It might not be Pete. It could be . . . I don’t know who it could be. But anyone else spells disaster. As in “D”, “I” and “E”. And if that happens we’ll have a major problem, because it’s only worth four Scrabble points.’

The white strip of ceiling lights continues to grow.

Doug flips yet another page; he’s lining up more seconds to be abducted.

I whip the manual from his fingers.

He gazes at them; he cranes across to the glass door.

‘We can’t take Billie-Jo with us but can’t leave her here, so there’s no escape.’

‘If it ain’t Pete, reckon we got two choices. One . . . fight.’ Doug surveys the medical bay with deliberate and reassuring arcs of his head. It’s obvious he’s assessing every item of kit and evaluating every intelligent option. ‘Two . . . hide.’

‘Really?’

Doug skirts around to the end of the chamber furthest from the glass door.

‘What if there’s a team of them? If they have guns? Grenades?’

‘We’ll be safe behind here.’

‘I mean Billie-Jo. I don’t want any MI7 thugs blowing her up. She has to be defrosted and come back with us. She needs some serious protection.’

Doug draws across the green hospital curtain.

There’s a sound. It’s almost inaudible. And unnatural, somehow. Now there’s a squeak.

I’ve been kneeling behind the chamber for a few minutes. But also below its top edge, so I can’t be spotted. All I can feel are the solid floor tiles and a slab of industrial green.

I’m not moving; not breathing. The chamber purrs a tiny warmth into my ankles.

There’s that sound again. It’s like a . . . like a *whoosh*. The solid glass door of the medical bay has closed.

We can’t be alone; I have goose pimples.

There’s that squeak again. Like an old floorboard, only speeded up.

I tilt my ear. Take short silent breaths.

My knees are aching on the floor. I half-turn. The poster on the wall: ‘GLP RULES’.

There’s a glint. A reflection in the transparent box of safety glasses.

My breathing's too quick.

It's a . . . figure in black. A man. He's holding something.

The air's barbed in my nostrils as an abnormal blend of chlorine and antiseptic. I'm drowning in a swimming pool of science.

He vanishes.

The lab's full of bottles and tubes. The technology towers are stacked and symmetrical, mocking my chaos. There's nowhere to run and there's nowhere to hide; I can't even escape clichés. If only I had a shield. Or a weapon. A Giant Lactating Potato.

There's another sound. Some kind of ruffling noise.

Perhaps he's searching?

I'm trembling. My chest is tight.

Silence.

He must have stopped. Perhaps the thug wants to stay but knows there's nothing here? Yeah, I sense it. I can feel his indecision. I bet he's turned around and facing the solid glass door. He knows this is futile. More stupid admin; MI7 routine gone wrong. I know he's about to leave. I can feel his hesitancy. I can feel—

His gun barrel, in my face.

37

Dish of the Day

17:17 hours. +19°C.

Flint sat in the surveillance cubicle attached to Interrogation Cell 4. Heaped past the height of one ankle were several drained plastic cups, the evidence of his addiction to vending-machine coffee. He counted the cups again and allowed himself a smile; the stack was impressive and yet not *quite* the Leaning Tower of Pisa.

He crossed his legs, leaned back. He suppressed a desire for more caffeine, having gulped down his five o'clock coffee by half past three. Nor was vodka feasible given the detective powers of that weasel Adams.

Through the privacy glass, she loitered at the table, arms folded. Every cell in her body still refused to cooperate. Who was she and what organisation did she represent? What could she know and why didn't she—

Adams blundered into the cubicle, his shirt billowing under a holdall strap. 'Sir, I have news.'

'If it's my ex-wife, tell her I made the payment for the school fees last night.'

'I've taken calls about Brackenbury Road.'

Flint span round in his chair. ‘And how exactly have you “taken calls”? This facility is past Confidential, beyond Top Secret. Historic copies of the Yellow Pages do not list our site address under “Bases, Maximum Security”.’

‘It sounds like the same person each time, but he wouldn’t confirm his identity. He, erm, wants to talk to you and nobody else.’

‘Do not sound so surprised. My rank is Advanced Officer A2, though not for much longer.’

‘Sir, it could be that freelance journalist the reserve seizure squad spotted.’

‘Never mind that. Where’s my dossier?’

Adams reached into his holdall, passed across the dossier. ‘We have the DNA analysis of her sample and also of her gloves and mask. I’ve collated her personal details from our database. Her name is Katharine Watson—’

‘Not that student house?’

‘She lives with that Void character. She’s registered as a research assistant and postgraduate at the University of Snowdon. Katie lives—’

‘“Katie”?’

Adams’s chins wobbled. ‘She, erm, looks like a Katie to me.’

‘Listening to their inane chatter about essays and The Great Stupido was drivel the first time. And yet, you’re now suggesting that one of them has the audacity, motive and method to penetrate this facility?’ Flint stabbed the dossier into Adams’s belly, which sagged like an old balloon. ‘Has your brain cell jilted common sense? Students are not a known terrorist force. They could not pose a threat.’

‘Security did find her outside the power fence.’

Flint perused the dossier. There were sections detailing her addresses since birth, her voting habits, her tax and income records, her assets. He flicked to the Executive Summary. ‘Clever.’

‘Sir?’

‘This is the next generation of terrorists.’

‘Students?’

‘No you fool, terrorists masquerading as students. The organisation and planning required to create multiple student profiles must be extensive. It would take years to plot. Damn clever.’

‘But sir, shouldn’t we explore other options? I think Katie and this Void could be students. I mean real ones, not terrorists pretending—’

‘Officer Adams, I value your contribution when it is silence. Why would students try to infiltrate our facility? What would be their motives, their desires? Also, my fox has gone quiet, presumably missing, and I doubt some students would be capable of overpowering a trained officer.’ Flint looked up at Adams with an expectation of him making a quip about drainpipes or psychiatrists or qualified rabbit-plumbers.

Adams’s mouth was a cave of doubt.

‘However,’ Flint said, ‘to mitigate your concern and to help us shape our strategy, we will create a threat profile using what we know.’ He waved Adams over to the screen beneath the privacy glass. ‘Let’s start with the students.’

Adams tapped the screen: the live feed of Cell 4 dissolved into a keyboard with a flashing cursor. He typed ‘STUDENTS’.

‘Now, what about motive?’

‘Fun?’

‘Since when do people break into a military base for fun?’

‘Students do anything for fun. It could be for a bet. Or a dare.’

‘The universe does not operate on a system of dares. Newton did not sit under a tree daring the apple to drop.’

‘Revenge then?’

‘We are supposed to be making intelligent deductions, not random guesses.

Revenge for what?’

Adams glanced through the privacy glass. She was sitting at the table. She was still, peaceful. ‘What about . . . love? People do anything for love. They steal. Lie. Cheat. Your wife did all three.’

Flint shrugged.

Adams typed ‘LOVE’.

‘The critical fact is that whoever these people are, one of them tried to enter this facility wearing gloves and a mask, in the early hours. It was no accidental visit. This Katie wanted to remain anonymous. Invisible, even.’

Adams nodded. He typed ‘INVISIBLE’.

‘And yet . . .’ Flint lifted the top plastic coffee cup from his stack. ‘And yet we still do not know who they are. Terrorists pretending to be students would make an excellent decoy. But if I’m mistaken and they are students, as you suggest, what are they doing here?’ Pouring the coffee dregs into his mouth, the liquid was cold, thin. He let it trickle the length of his tongue. ‘You’re a recent graduate. What do students like?’

‘Beer.’

‘Yes, cheap beer. Lots of it. And loud music. And also the healthy diet of curry, kebabs and pizza.’

Adams typed ‘PIZZA’.



Flint pointed at the screen. 'What about sex? All those young bodies full of hormones. All that energy, that free time. I imagine they spend days in bed and often not their own. Finish typing up the threat profile and we can review it.'

Adams typed, stepped back.

Flint leaned forwards, squinted at the screen: STUDENTS LOVE INVISIBLE PIZZA SEX.

'Sir, what could this mean?'

The plastic cup dangled. 'It means we have two distinct possibilities. Students masquerading as terrorists or terrorists masquerading as students.'

'Or students masquerading as terrorists masquerading as students?'

'Shut up. If we're dealing with students, our strategy is simple. We negotiate with pizza.'

'And if we're not?'

'If we're not . . . if we're dealing with terrorists . . . then, Officer Adams, our strategy is much more effective. We negotiate with bullets, we negotiate with grenades.'

Flint crinkled the cup. 'And maybe later, pizza.' He slotted the cup back into his stack. 'I want to speak to my fox.'

38

corks from a toy gun

I'm kneeling behind a chamber, in a medical bay of a top secret facility, with a gun barrel in my face; I have a minor craving for Doug's *KEEP CALM* sticker. Or anything else in large, friendly letters.

The gun barrel is large. It's connected to an arm. To a thug from MI7 wearing body armour and a gas mask (not Bugs Bunny).

The thug's eyes are half-closed and crooked. He's staring into me. He's . . . smiling.

He swaps the smile for a phrase I don't understand. It's muffled behind the gas mask: sounds like 'Kit uck'.

I gaze from gas mask to foot and it really is foot: he's wearing socks.

By the solid glass door is a pair of new boots. They must be the source of the squeak; that ruffling noise must have been him removing them.

The thug is still staring at me. There's hesitancy about his manner. A stiffness to his body. He waggles his gun barrel up and down.

'Kit uck,' he says again.

'Sorry, are you South African?'

'KIT UCK.'

‘*Oh, “Get up”.*’ I dust down my knees. ‘*My turn.*’ I pretend to crank an old-fashioned film camera. I stick two fingers up.

The thug shows his preference for the cha-cha-chá over charades by taking a few sock-steps away from me.

He peels off his gas mask.

He’s perhaps mid-thirties. His face is upside-down: where hair should live is a shaved scalp; his jaw hides behind a dense bulb of black beard. Add the parrot and brimmed hat turned up on three sides and he’d be pure pirate.

‘Start talking,’ he says. His voice is guttural as if, after brushing his bedtime teeth, he gargles thunderstorms. ‘Right now.’

‘Oh OK. Have you . . . ever wondered about the big questions? Where do we come from? What is our purpose? What happens when we die?’

‘Quiet. Arms in the air.’

My arms levitate.

I scan the medical bay for escape ideas, but spot only posters, the fume hood and the ‘Y’ shaped pipes above the chamber. There aren’t any escape ideas because there is no escape: one door and one way in; no windows and no way out.

I’m aging as the day’s shadows are lengthening.

I shuffle backwards. The chamber blocks me.

‘Stay where you are.’ He sniffs. ‘Right you, start talking. I want to know who you are and what you’re doing down here. I want answers and I want them fast.’

‘But not so fast you can’t understand them?’

The thug jabs his gun at me.

‘Wait,’ I say. ‘Think of my kids. I mean the future me who has kids.’

‘You don’t have a future.’

‘That’s my point. I want one. A fluffy future full of sunrises and chocolate—’

‘You’re weird.’

‘I’m not. I’m . . . innocent of whatever you think I’ve done.’

‘So what are you doing down here? Stamp collecting?’

The thug is no longer smiling, yet his eyes remain crooked beneath two thick black eyebrows. He has the type of photogenic face that demands a specific level of light to show off its natural beauty: darkness.

‘Get over there,’ he says.

He wafts his gun from side to side. It’s a Heckler and Koch UMP sub-machine-gun. It’s not one of Doug’s luminous pink toys.

‘Over there now,’ he says. ‘Next to that . . . white thing.’

I don’t get over there. I peer over my shoulder: that white thing is the water purifier.

‘I said—’

‘I know what you said, but you’re not being fair. You told me to be quiet *and* to start talking. Now you want me to stay where I am *and* to get over there. What next, keep my arms above my head *and* touch my toes?’

The thug glares at me for a moment.

‘I knew this wouldn’t work,’ he says.

‘What?’

‘You can lower your arms now.’ His face droops. ‘I never wanted to be a MI7 Officer.’

‘But isn’t that every boy’s dream? Footballer or astronaut or MI7 Officer?’

‘My name’s Colin.’ His UMP and the gruffness to his voice fall away. ‘I never wanted to do this. I always wanted to be an accountant.’

For once I'm right: he *is* pure pirate.

'I loved numbers as a child, but after college I couldn't afford the accounting fees.'

Colin shrugs. 'I live for break-even analysis and pivot tables. Don't you?'

'Me? Oh yeah, can't get enough of accounts. Who doesn't live to pivot? And I love tables. Oak's great, but pine's cool too.'

Colin frowns. His black eyebrows are headbutting slugs.

'You don't love accounts,' he says. 'If you don't love accounts, you have to die.'

No windows and no way out and no witnesses; I need some beer goggles to adjust from Reality to Fantasy.

A dark vertical line appears next to the emergency exit.

'You can't shoot me,' I say.

'I can; I squeeze this trigger.'

'But if you splatter my brain across the water purifier, think how terrible that would look. *White*? My blood would never wash out. So you can't kill me.'

'I fire, you stop breathing. Simple.'

'You say that, but think of the admin. The forms. Cause of death, time of death, reason for death. Your delicate accounting fingers would suffer. Plus, I'm innocent.'

'Don't care if you are. My orders are to apprehend whoever broke in here, alive or dead. And as you don't love accounts, I prefer dead.'

Colin aims his UMP. His pupils match the inside of the barrel.

'But I'm too young to die,' I say. 'I still have dreams and ambitions and overdue library books.'

He sniffs at me again. 'One last wish.'

A monster of dark curls creeps out from the emergency exit.

'Well?' says Colin.

The chilled air is sharp in my lungs.

‘Er . . . what about a cigarette?’

Colin flicks his gun at the ‘NO SMOKING’ poster.

I gulp.

‘Time’s up, weirdo. Prepare to die.’

There’s a blur and a scraping sound and a *clang*.

Having deduced that a whack to the back of the head from a stainless steel frying pan is a tad problematic, Colin decides that the most efficient course of action is to drop his UMP and spread his slack body across the floor.

His head is between my feet. His upside-down face no longer appears upside-down. He is, perhaps, a father.

I look up at Doug. ‘I thought you’d disarm him using karate. There was no need to knock him out. He’s an accountant.’

‘He’s a killer,’ says Doug. He kneels over Colin and checks his pulse. He tilts Colin’s head. ‘Don’t recognise him. What do you reckon?’

‘Ugly?’

Doug removes Colin’s body armour. He searches his clothes. ‘Not his looks, his role.’ He holds up an ID card. ‘What is he? Guard, assassin or scout?’

‘He isn’t wearing an “I LOVE SHOOTING” baseball cap, so he isn’t a perimeter guard. As for assassin . . . wouldn’t he have shot me first, without his life story? But then he can’t be a scout either, because I don’t see any badges for advanced bugling. Anyway, why does it matter what he is? He’s unconscious. We’re safe.’

‘Because they’ll send more.’

Doug binds Colin's wrists and ankles so he is immobile, yet not in pain. Colin protests. He says he's an accountant who shouldn't be tied up with anything other than double-entry bookkeeping.

Doug seizes the UMP.

We head along the corridor of white breezeblock walls, back towards Pete in the medlab foyer. Doug marches in front with a determined rhythm. Doug the man who, if he were any more masculine, would impregnate himself.

Ceiling tiles shine white.

This time I don't guard Doug by circling him. If we meet MI7 thugs, what harsh language would we defend ourselves with? 'CUPCAKE'?

Lift. *Ping*.

We pass the sign for the toilets on the ground floor. We enter the foyer containing the lockers, lab coats, tinted glass and the door that opens only from the inside. The work surface has the same clutter of microscopes in the same place, as before. Lockers haven't been opened.

In front of the glass is the bench desk, with the phone and screen. In front of the bench desk is Pete, with the gun and wrinkles.

'Hello, my friends,' says Professor Black. 'I was wondering when you might return, as I still wish to comprehend your motives. I was hoping Officer Bodie would have apprehended you both, but it seems the opposite is nearer the truth. Never mind, I possess the bounty.'

Professor Black is standing near the bench desk. *He* is holding the gun.

Doug aims the UMP. His biceps are tensing.

The Prof is about five metres away. On the wall near him is the transparent cap over the red button: the site alarm.



I put my hand on the metal of Doug's UMP. It feels cold. Somehow detached. I push it, and Doug's taut forearms, downwards.

I face the Prof. 'Let him go. We can talk about this.'

'I have had quite enough of your talk,' he says. 'Your bluff may have worked before, but as you do not possess any real cyanide, this time you shall do as I say.'

I sneak slow steps towards him. I'm four metres away.

'Now,' says the Prof, 'are you going to tell me why you are here?'

'Pete, you OK?'

'He is fine.' The Prof squints at Pete. 'Are you not?' Pete gives a sluggish nod.

'There, you see?'

I sneak some more steps. Three metres.

The Prof jams the gun into Pete's ribs. 'I suggest you stop.'

Up close and impersonal, Professor Black is maybe late fifties. Grey stubble dots his jowls. His neck has more creases than an old dishcloth.

Pete's contorting his face. It's perhaps a mixture of frown, surprise and slither of resentment. Either he's in pain or his bladder is full.

I take another step.

The Prof aims his gun at me: a grey pistol. His arm is rigid.

And another step.

'I said, stop.'

And another.

The Prof fires.

My face is wet.

The Prof's mouth is round and spent and black, like the end of a drainpipe after a storm.

I smile. 'Did you think a plastic water pistol was new technology?'

Doug strides past. 'I'll take him upstairs then get Colin.'

Pete watches Doug and the Prof disappear down the corridor. He clutches his forehead. 'I feel a little lightheaded after standing for so long.' I help him onto the floor. Pete rests against the bench desk.

I sit alongside. I wipe my eyes. 'What was the face for?'

'I was trying to dissuade you from apprehending Professor Black.'

'He had a gun.'

'He had but a water pistol.'

'I didn't realise that. Not at first.'

Pete blinks eyes as yellow as the historian's parchment.

'In that case,' he says, 'why risk your life for me?'

'We're a team, remember? Anyway, why didn't you want me to apprehend him?'

'I was rather enjoying the emotional conflict, for it was furnishing me with insight into the hostage scenario. I shall have to record my feelings so that I may incorporate them into my dissertation.'

I nod. I have no idea what he's talking about.

'Whilst I was guarding the Professor,' says Pete, 'the stench of canine excreta on my shoe became too overpowering. Therefore, I decided to clean it.' He points to the toilet sign. 'Unbeknownst to me, there was a MI7 operative beyond the glass door to whom the Professor was signalling. Upon my return, the Professor had been untied.'

There are no windows. But no chilled air or sharpness of disinfectant either. The scientific whiteness offers a synthetic tranquillity.

For a few moments we enjoy the respite.

I yawn.

Pete grips the bottom of his sweater and pulls it down until it's taut. 'May I ask if you have recovered? Douglas informed me earlier that you had a regurgitative incident.'

'Vomit? Yeah, fine now thanks. Just groggy from lack of sleep.'

'Did you locate your damsel in distress?'

'It's complicated. She's . . . possibly naked.'

Pete's brow tremors.

'MI7 have been playing up, downstairs.'

'Downstairs?'

'In the medical bay below us. So less damsel in distress, more damsel without a dress.' I stand. 'Terrible joke, I know. But then I can't think properly at the moment.'

'A naked girlfriend would tend to elicit such a response. How is she?'

'She's alive but her brain's dormant, so she has no sense of *being* alive. Told you it was complicated.' I stretch my shoulders back. They click. 'But once she's awake, we go home. That's simple.'

The phone rings.

39

Fifteen years of virtual imprisonment

I'm in the middle of the medlab foyer. I'm gazing at the phone on the bench desk and, despite my attention, it keeps ringing.

Pete's still on the floor, resting. His head's dipped to the right. From above, his hair resembles a white 'C'.

'What do we do?' I say. 'Answer it or ignore it again?'

'Now we answer it,' says Doug reappearing next to the lockers. He's holding the UMP. 'We have Professor Black. Flint'll be missing his Colin.'

'You want to talk? Or me? Or—'

'Good afternoon.'

I spin around.

Pete is standing against the bench desk. 'No, this is not Officer Bodie. You may call me Admiral Horatio.'

'Yes,' says Pete. 'Horatio. We have been expecting you, Officer Flint.'

Pete winks at me. 'It is sufficient to notify you that we are in possession of one of your operatives and, of course, Professor Black.'

'There is no need for such language. Good day to you, sir.'

Now Pete's gazing: at Doug.

‘I can only surmise that you are correct,’ says Pete. ‘No one negotiates with MI7 because they are an organisation replete with foul-mouthed buffoons. Whatever has happened to English manners?’

Pete paces about the medlab foyer using slow systematic steps. He could blend in as the proverbial mad scientist with his ring of white hair. Yet add his all-black clothes and he’s more a wandering glass of Guinness.

After some persuasion, Pete tells us that Horatio was the name of his great-grandfather, who was an admiral in the Royal Navy.

After some persuasion, Pete says Horatio is *his* middle name.

After some persuasion, Doug stops sniggering.

The phone rings again. This time the conversation is longer. More polite.

Afterwards, Pete attempts an enigmatic smile. ‘It seems that Officer Flint wishes to trade.’

‘He wants to buy one of your air-cushioned boots?’ I say.

‘Flint wishes to trade our beloved Katharine for Professor Black and this Colin fellow. This Officer Bodie. It is logical, for if Flint has lost one operative, why risk another? Moreover, I imagine that Flint is unaware of our precise number. Gentlemen, we had an early start this morning, so let us discuss this somewhere more comfortable.’

Pete and Doug follow me into the lift. It opens onto the first floor and yet another long white corridor. The corridor herds us around a corner to a recreational room about ten metres square.

We’re spoilt with luxury beyond imagination: the room has windows. They’re the strip windows I spotted yesterday from inside the conifers, only now crammed with sky.

There is also no blinding whiteness, because the room offers sofas, cushions and coffee tables in the same non-scientific beige. Most of the sofas are clustered around the tables, though some have rebelled and are as unchaperoned as a park bench in the winter. The floor is carpeted, blue.

The room's also warm. Possibly even at room temperature. It doesn't smell of disinfectant, bleach or my vomit (yet). There are no posters ordering us to refrain from smoking or to exercise caution with hot water because it's hot.

I yawn.

Pete retreats to one of the sofas. 'I suggest that we discuss Flint's idea and then retire for the evening. These sofas may not be beds, yet they shall provide more comfort than the floor of a scientific laboratory.'

'I'll make us some tea then,' I say. 'Doug reckons there's a kitchen in here . . . somewhere. I'll search for some supper too.'

The back of the recreational room has a pedal bin and a corner desk with a phone and screen.

There are three red doors, in a row.

Doug marches towards the red door on the right.

It's not the door to the kitchen: it's a door to a meeting room. It has a wide oval table and two curved rows of chairs. There's a phone in the middle of the table and, on a far wall, a huge screen. Professor Black and Colin are tied to chairs and with rags over their mouths.

'I've heard of perpetual motion,' I say, 'but perpetual chloroform?'

'And my knockout gas,' says Doug. 'These buggers wouldn't shut up.'

I step around the table to Professor Black. His grey hair covers his ears. His chin balances on his chest. His lab coat, trousers, socks and trainers are all white. I notice his knuckle-less thumb. Freak hitch-hiking accident across the galaxy?

‘He can’t escape,’ says Doug. ‘Tied him up, twice.’

‘We can’t leave the Prof here like this. His arm’s broken.’

‘He ain’t conscious.’

‘But he will be when your chloroform and gas cocktail wear off. Then he won’t know why he’s tied up and gagged. He’ll be angry. You saw what he did with Pete.’

Doug shrugs. ‘We tell the Prof he’s had an accident.’

‘And accidentally tied himself to a chair, twice? I don’t think so. If you tell him he’s been in an accident, when he discovers he hasn’t, there will be.’

I shuffle around the back of the Prof, to Colin. His black beard juts out beneath the rag.

‘I came here to rescue Billie-Jo,’ I say, ‘not to hurt anyone. When MI7 find out about this, there’ll be mayhem. For us. And then what will we do?’

‘Reckon twenty years, to life.’

‘Exactly. So remove their rags and sit with Pete.’

I open the middle red door.

It’s not the door to the kitchen either: it’s a door to a store room. A store room of thick metal shelves from floor to ceiling, each stuffed with bottles and cartons and tubes and packets of silver foil. Some bottles are full of liquid; others are almost drained. Tubes are half-squeezed and scrunched back on themselves like toothpaste. Cartons are stacked. The store room is a palace of pills and potions.

I open the left red door.



The beige kitchen boasts a kettle, microwave, fridge, cupboards and a bread bin.

I'm shocked: the bread bin contains bread.

The non-beige fridge has milk, a lump of cheese and a giant jar of peanut butter.

Yet no dead creatures to offend Kate. No animals such as chickens, which are eaten before they're born and after they've died.

One cupboard has tins of soup, peas, baked beans and chickpeas. And, bizarrely, tins of dog food. I check the soup labels: the Best Before date isn't yesterday. Another cupboard has a tray, some tins without labels and three unopened packets of Jaffa Cakes.

There's no teapot, so I scavenge some coffee mugs. To distract Pete from this faux pas, I create three skyscrapers on the tray using the Jaffa Cakes. Fingers crossed, the kettle is boiling normal water we can drink, not purified water we can't.

I balance everything on the tray. Nudge open the door.

Doug's at the far end of the room, on a sofa alongside Pete. Doug looks up. 'He's ill.'

'Pete? Oh no. Is it serious?'

'Reckon he's quite serious about being ill. He's dead.'

'*What?*'

'Ish.'

'What do you mean, "Ish"? Pete's either dead or alive.'

'He's dead.'

'See, that's better. Oh.'

I lower the tray onto the coffee table; columns of Jaffa Cakes collapse.

Pete's still. His eyes are closed.

'There's no way he can be dead,' I say. 'Pete's the wise one, the father of the house. Plus he still owes me money from last year.'

‘Could freeze him in your wench’s chamber?’ says Doug. ‘It’d preserve his body.’

‘But not his dignity. Pete wouldn’t appreciate his funeral arrangements being made by Iceland. Frozen cod draped across his chest? They’d never match his Sherlock Holmes outfit.’

I sit next to Pete. He’s slumped with cheeks of broken veins.

‘He can’t be dead,’ I say. ‘Not here, not like this. Not after he travelled all that way. He must be . . . “resting”.’

Doug prods Pete’s shoulder. ‘Lad, look at him. He’s all hunched up. Ain’t moving.’

‘He was like that when he was alive.’

Pete’s hands are a paler version of the beige sofa and cushions.

‘This needs something extreme,’ I say. ‘Wave some Jaffa Cakes under his nose.’

Doug crumbles four Jaffa Cakes into careful little pieces. With great kindness and precision, he rams them up Pete’s nostrils.

Pete’s nostrils are chocolate stalactites.

‘I said wave them under his nose, not shunt a whole packet up there.’

‘So he’s got biscuit nostrils? He’s *dead*. He don’t care.’

‘Yes I do,’ says Pete.

‘Holy Jaffa Cakes,’ I say. ‘He’s alive.’

‘He? He?’

‘It’s not funny. You almost scared me to, er, death.’

Pete sits up on the sofa. He sneezes pellets of Jaffa Cake. ‘It is called sleep apnoea.’

‘It’s called shock,’ I say. ‘Or if a lecturer does it, *funny*.’

Pete takes a deep breath. ‘Aaargh . . .’ He starts coughing. He grips his neck.

‘And now you’re choking on Jaffa Cakes. Doug, get some water. And medicine.’

Doug darts back to the store room.

I pat Pete's shoulders.

'De-worming tablets?' says Doug from the doorway.

*'Hurry.'*

Doug shoves a pill into Pete's mouth and a glass of water into his face.

'Aaaaarrgh . . .' Pete swallows. He rubs his neck.

I palm his dripping forehead. 'Pete, you OK? Talk to us.'

'Test him,' says Doug.

'What is . . . cavatelli?'

Pete looks at me.

'Cavatelli is a small shell-shaped type of pasta, with a rolled edge. It is similar in shape to casarecci, yet shorter in length. Cavatelli originates from the verb *cavare*—'

'He's fine,' says Doug, flashing his eyebrow. He stomps off back to the store room.

Pete plucks a handkerchief from a pocket. He dabs his face. He wipes his nose and chocolate crumbs flick off. He takes a few slow breaths. He insists that he's fine.

I slot a cushion behind his back. I watch him for a few moments. I tell him to relax and to enjoy his cup of tea. And to help himself to a Jaffa Cake.

I join Doug in the store room. 'What did you give him?'

'Something to pep him up a bit. In case he has to help us slap down some MI7 guards.' Doug plucks a carton from a shelf. He unfolds a leaflet. 'Says, "Do not take your medicine if you are allergic to aspirin".'

'That's OK, Pete's taken aspirin before.'

'"Or are in the late stages of pregnancy".'

'Not sure. Can a man of seventy be in the late stages of anything other than aging?'

'"Or are breastfeeding".'

‘One hundred per cent *yes*. I often catch him in the library, nipples out. So, his pill, what does it look like? Pill-shaped?’

‘More . . . a lozenge.’ Doug hands me the carton. ‘Was in one of them silver foil packet things.’

The silver foil packet thing has four pills, arranged in a diamond shape. The top pill from the foil is missing: it’s dissolving in Pete’s stomach.

There’s writing on both sides of the pills. One side has italicised letters; the other side says ‘VGR 100’.

I stare.

I stare at Doug. ‘Oh. My. God. How could you? You’ve given Pete some Viagra. Now we’ll have to really watch him.’

Doug’s silent.

‘Because, Victor Frankenstein, it’s been a long time since Pete had any activity “down below”. Maybe not since Queen Victoria was in bloomers.’ I thrust the silver foil in Doug’s face. ‘And you’ve just fed him one hundred milligrams of Viagra. You’ve pepped him up more than a bit. He’ll be slapping down MI7 guards alright, but not with his hand.’

Doug and I scamper back to Pete. He’s relaxing on the sofa with his mug of tea.

‘Sure you’re OK?’ I say.

‘Yes,’ says Pete, ‘for my sleep apnoea is but an occasional concern. Plus I feel somewhat revived after having ingested four Jaffa Cakes, albeit nasally. May I enquire as to what you inserted into my mouth?’

‘A . . . vitamin pill. To energise you. Doug uses them to keep his muscles in peak condition.’

Pete sips his tea. ‘Thank you, you have both been most considerate. Officer Flint’s proposal is to exchange Katharine for Professor Black and Colin. Ideas, gentlemen?’

‘Stay and fight,’ says Doug.

‘With what?’ I say. ‘Our only real weapon is Colin’s UMP. I don’t know how many guards there are, or how many guns they have, but I’m guessing the answer to both is plenty. So us against them would be a ludicrous one-in-a-million idea, like England winning the World Cup.’ I flop onto a sofa opposite Pete. ‘That’s the issue with fighting. The issue with staying is no food.’

Doug frowns. ‘What about her backpack?’

‘Kate’s not here and neither is her backpack. There’s half a loaf in the kitchen, but it needs carbon dating. I spotted a small lump of cheese, but it looks like the stuff used to soak up industrial waste. And I have no idea how old the milk is.’

Pete’s gaze sinks to his mug of milk-laden tea.

‘On the positive side,’ I say, ‘in a few days’ time we’ll have even more cheese. There’s also some peanut butter and tins of soup.’

‘Love soup,’ says Doug. ‘What flavour?’

‘Oxtail.’

‘I’ll pass.’

‘It’s in-date. Though from the label it has so much salt it’d be better used for gritting roads. So, overall, because we’re not stuffed, we’re stuffed.’

‘We do need to be careful with our rations,’ says Pete, ingesting his fifth Jaffa Cake.

Pete enters Historian Mode and tells us about the food shortages endured by Malta during its siege in the Second World War. He talks for more than one minute without hesitation, repetition or deviation. Or repetition.

Yet soon he’ll have a bigger problem than the lack of food. Soon he’ll possess so much animal energy he’ll be able to rip the stripes off a zebra.

I click my fingers. 'If we're not fighting and can't stay here, let's swap. Us keeping the Prof gives us power, but he's dangerous. And we should swap Colin because he's depressing.'

Doug waves a Jaffa Cake at me. 'He *is* an accountant.'

'I mean depressing to look at. You know those protective awnings scientists use when they examine a body? Colin should wear one. He doesn't so much light up a room as clear it.' I sit forwards on the sofa. 'It's Thursday, right? My exam's Monday and I haven't started revising. So I vote tomorrow we trade and tomorrow we leave. Pete?'

'I concur,' he says.

'Doug?'

Doug snaps his Jaffa Cake in half.

Pete stands. 'I shall call Officer Flint to confirm the arrangements and then retire.'

I sprawl across the luxuriant beige sofa; my eyes close.

Tonight, retiring is the one thing Pete will not be doing.

40

Extreme Cleverness

‘Lad, over here.’

I’m blinking at blue. At upside-down carpet. I haul myself up from the horizontal to the vertical: cushions on the sofa doubling as my blanket tumble onto the carpet. The strip windows let in the Friday we need to leave behind.

Doug’s standing at the corner desk and screen.

‘MI7 has data about everything,’ he says. ‘About everyone in Britain.’

I yawn. ‘Everyone?’

‘Some things you pay for, some are free. When you pay, you get that something. When you don’t, *you* are that something. Your data. Your digital ghost. Reckon this screen hooks up to it all.’

A black screen is flashing a yellow cursor in the top-left corner. Doug prods the screen: the cursor jumps down and prompts him for a username.

I rub my eyes. ‘Yeah, but a wrong username or password and they’ll know.’

Doug enters a username of ‘DB’. The cursor jumps down again.

‘See? Now it wants the password you don’t have. Try “admin” or “qwerty”. And if they fail, “Man United”.’



‘Me old man designed this system. He couldn’t trust anyone, so left in a backdoor. An account only he knew.’ Doug focusses on the password prompt. The cursor blinks back, goading him. ‘And backdoor passwords can’t be changed. Ever.’

Doug screws up his fingers as the pianist about to perform. He taps.

The screen goes blank.

The screen refreshes with a series of menus.

‘Time to download MI7 data,’ says Doug. ‘Files, reports, footage, the lot.’

‘Why? We’re leaving once we have Kate.’

Doug pulls a small black dongle from his pocket. He plugs it in. ‘This puppy’ll connect to their network. If their data ever gets leaked, MI7 will be shut down.’ He taps the side of his nose. ‘Our insurance policy on the way home.’

The red door to the kitchen opens: Pete.

He’s holding the tray from last night, which now contains three mugs and an opened tin can without a label. Steam curls upwards.

He sits on a sofa. Pete leans over the coffee table and sniffs his can. He lifts a spoon and tries a mouthful. ‘Not only does this food possess an unusual fragrance, but it has a distinctive taste. What is it?’

‘Don’t know,’ I say. ‘There’s no label.’

Pete spoons more mouthfuls. He sips his mug.

I lean into Doug. ‘*Watch* him. We’ll know that can is dog food if he starts licking his own balls.’

Doug opens the pedal bin: a torn strip of paper shows a photo of a Labrador. ‘MI7 store food here for their guard dogs. Thought you both knew.’

‘Shall we tell him?’

Doug watches Pete digging into the can with the spoon; Doug watches Pete's ever-deeper scoops.

'Too late,' says Doug. 'He's scoffed the lot.'

'Man shall not live by dog food alone,' I say. 'Except would-be historians. So, how was Pete last night? After your "vitamin"?'

'Manic.'

'Are you surprised? From his point of view, sex without Viagra must be like trying to play snooker with a rope.'

'He kept playing Scrabble, against himself.'

'That's still better than trying to pot the pink.'

Doug turns back to his screen. A file transfer count of his data downloads states '1% complete'.

I sit on a sofa opposite Pete and his empty can of dog food.

Pete smiles. 'Last night, I was fatigued, so I took an extra dose of my cod liver oil before retiring. It must have worked, for I no longer feel stiff all over.'

'Perhaps it was your breakfast?' I say. 'You find that half a loaf?'

He wags a finger. 'You are referring to the bread with blotches of mould.'

'You can't be a student, you're far too choosy.'

'For breakfast, I made some soup for the Professor and Colin whilst you were asleep. I also rang Officer Flint and proposed a time for the swap of Katharine.' Pete stacks two cushions behind his back. 'Thanks to my tin can, I feel energetic.'

'Those meaty chunks will give you healthy skin and a shiny coat of hair. Enough energy for a run in a park, maybe? Chasing after a stick?'

‘Indeed. However, whilst we await confirmation of the time, there is a more immediate concern.’ Pete holds up some tattered sheets of paper covered with coffee-ring stains.

‘Where did you find that?’

‘Where is of no importance. You ought to commit some time to it.’

‘Now?’

Pete glances at Doug. ‘Soon we shall be involved with the machinations of the swap.’

‘*Now* now?’ I say.

‘Since Douglas is indisposed, I do not see why not.’

I sit back. ‘OK. But be thorough, otherwise I’ll fail.’

Pete crosses his legs. He starts reading my Karl Marx essay. He turns pages. He backtracks. His silence creates volume.

After a while he returns to the first page. ‘Now, what do you know about dialectical materialism?’

‘Well . . . it . . .’

‘No? Let us try something else. According to your essay, Karl Marx was dot dot dot?’

‘Have you been smuggling Doug’s sugar lumps into your tea? I’ve never typed “dot dot dot” and don’t start spreading any rumours.’

‘It represents an ellipsis, which you should have substituted with the answer. Now, what was Karl Marx?’

‘A . . . Marxist?’

‘Obviously, for he defined the ideology of Marxism.’ Pete points at my essay.

‘However, this states: “Karl Marx was a philosopher and revolutionary thinker”.’

‘Don’t *tell* me, my next guess was “florist”.’

Pete waves the essay. ‘Your specific instruction was, “be thorough, otherwise I’ll fail”. Let us engage. “Karl Marx was a philosopher and revolutionary thinker whose ideas became more pervasive when in . . .” what?’

I sit on the edge of the sofa. ‘When in . . .’

Pete studies his watch.

I pat my palms together, that proven student technique to accelerate mental response. ‘When in . . . 1868?’

‘The correct answer is “Fred”.’

‘You *have* been at the sugar lumps. “Karl Marx was a philosopher and revolutionary thinker whose ideas became more pervasive when in *Fred*”?’

“‘When, in 1868, *Fred*-rick Engels advocated the doctrine of dialectical materialism”.’

I slump back into the sofa. ‘Of course. I knew that.’

‘You patently did not know, for you stated “1868”. Moreover, it is not *Fredrick* Engels, it is *Friedrich* Engels. I do not wish to alarm you, but you shall not pass your examination.’

Doug stomps over.

‘Time to check your wench.’

41

only human

I explain Billie-Jo's condition to Pete on the way to the medical bay. As we follow Doug, I tell Pete about her chamber and the control panel and the defrosting process. I tell him everything I know; it doesn't take long.

Pete strolls around the chamber. He ignores the instruction manual on top and, instead, prods the chamber's metal skin at regular intervals, as if he's not convinced it's real.

'What's your assessment?' I say.

Pete's gaze flitters about. He traces the dent made by Doug's lump hammer. 'It is an intriguing proposition.'

'I mean, what's your guess about what to do?'

'My dear boy, I do not speculate on such matters. I either know or I do not.'

'Well?'

'I do not.'

I peer through the transparent slit in the chamber: my 'wench' is still asleep.  
Dormant.

'Doug, it's not worked. Your stupid defrosting hasn't worked.'

Doug scratches his stubble. 'Might need something else. Maybe more time.'

‘That’s what we don’t have. So how do we open it? *Without* using your lump hammer, blow torch or turbo chainsaw. Prayers?’

‘Aye . . . nope.’

‘Yes no? I won’t be pleased if the last thing you defrosted *was* pepperoni pizza.’

Now Doug circles the chamber, again and again, as though each mesmeric loop intensifies his analytical powers.

He halts. He grips the instruction manual.

‘You sure about this?’ he says to me. ‘There ain’t no turning back.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Defrosting and re-freezing meat can make you ill.’

‘That is not funny. Not now, not ever. Time’s running out.’

Doug flaps the manual at me. ‘Runs out faster with interruptions.’

Pete is surveying the glass bottles and technology towers scattered around us. He’s rubbing his arms.

The medical bay is colder than before, as if its scientific whiteness drains not only colour.

Doug crouches in front of the chamber’s control panel.

‘Chamber should open when the temperature stabilises,’ he says. ‘Reckon about three minutes.’

I have a sudden urge to boil an egg.

Pete monologues about how the chamber is a ‘wonder of modern science’ and how ‘technology has advanced considerably’ since his youth. His youth of candles and quills and letters sealed with wax. His non-Viagra youth.

Billie-Jo’s face is still. Her eyes remain closed: winter petals awaiting the spring.

I scuttle around to the blue screen of the control panel. The status of 'DOOR' is 'Closed'.

'How are her membranes?' I say. 'Fully hydrated? Or—' I gulp. 'Is she . . . dead?'

Doug studies the screen.

'Alive,' he says.

My mind swarms with thoughts of bus shelters and Margaret Thatcher.

Doug pushes the MENU button. He reads the instruction manual and navigates through the options. He presses ENTER. The status of 'DOOR' changes to 'Open'.

He grips the top of the chamber; I clutch it with both hands.

We push: we prise it back.

Inside is Billie-Jo.

My Billie-Jo.

She doesn't have ice around the edges of her body. She isn't naked. She is beautiful.

She's also still.

There's a lightness in my chest. An echo.

Her nose twitches.

Her eyes open. 'Oh, it *is* you. It's me, Billie-Jo.'

'I've . . . been waiting.' I smile. 'Hi. I'm Void.'

'I'm Billie-Jo.'

'I'm going to vomit,' says Doug.

I stare; he retreats.

'Are you a softie?' she says.

'You know I am.'

'That's lovely. I've been waiting for you too.'



I slide my hand into hers: it's freezing. I help her out of the chamber.

She stands. Falters a little.

I cuddle her. Her body is chilled.

'You're here,' she says in a whisper. 'You always do the right things.'

'I'm here for you.'

'You say the right things too.' She squeezes me. 'You're perfect.'

'That's a horrible accusation.'

She giggles.

I hold her waist. 'This is Doug. And this is Pete.'

Pete offers his hand. 'How do you do?'

'The Stoke City fan?' she says.

'Not quite,' I say. 'Pete has a keen interest in the history of Stoke, but not in football. He's more into . . . the intellectual discussions. One in our first year caused major friction. Pete couldn't accept that if Pluto is Goofy's pet dog, how can Goofy also be a dog?'

Doug closes the chamber. It fizzes.

'Air shrinking inside,' he says.

Back in the recreational room, I escort Billie-Jo to one of the sofas. She's still dressed in jeans ripped at the knees, a white T-shirt and the blue sweater at least two sizes too big. She says she was drugged as soon as she was abducted; she assumes she was locked unconscious in the chamber on arrival at the base.

I surround her with cushions; if a girl loves concrete, she can never have enough beige in her life.

She sinks back. Her body sags, as if it's leaking stress.

'Do you need a cuddle?' I say. 'I'm very good. Black belt.'

She smiles. 'That's a high level of cuddling.'

I wrap my arms around her. 'Takes years of selfless dedication.'

The door to the meeting room opens: Professor Black and Colin stumble out. Their hands are tied, but they no longer have rags in their mouths.

Doug shunts them across the room and over to the white corridor, using Colin's UMP.

Pete follows. He nods at us, with no visible effect from the Viagra-and-dog-food combo.

High noon.

I lower a bowl of soup onto a coffee table in front of Billie-Jo.

Using the possibly out-of-date milk, I also hand her a mug of liquid that is almost, but not quite, entirely unlike tea.

I sit alongside her. I explain about our vans and the MI7 base and Officer Flint. I detail how we found her and outline the swap for Kate. I offer her the last Jaffa Cake.

'You know how I first noticed you?' she says, with the biscuit between her fingers. 'I felt your sadness. At the Freshers' Ball.'

'I wasn't sad. Not that I remember.'

'You felt sad about the Ball being your last.'

I gulp my coffee. 'I was happier later.'

'Yes, because of your housemates. Your shared moments. I always travel in a pair. What I know and experience, she does too. Telepathic clones.'

‘Yeah, it does feel like that when you know your friends well.’ I lower my mug onto the table. ‘When we’ve escaped from here, I’ll take you out for another shared moment. Only this time, to a better restaurant. Some place where we aren’t outnumbered by the staff.’

She giggles.

I stand and lift a cushion from the sofa. I pace around the room, twirling the cushion in the air.

Billie-Jo nibbles her biscuit. ‘Do you know why? Why MI7 broke into your house?’

‘I was going to ask you.’

‘MI7 weren’t searching for you. They wanted me.’

I press the cushion up against a strip window. I lean into it.

‘I’m not from here,’ she says. ‘I’m an illegal alien.’

There’s a layer of black rain clouds.

‘From a distant place.’

Below the rain clouds are the courtyard and the buildings I saw before. There’s no one around.

‘Void, did you hear what I said?’

‘Hmmm? Something about being Mexican?’

‘No.’

I glimpse over my shoulder. ‘You said you were an illegal alien. You don’t look Mexican to me. And even if you are, why would MI7 want you? Trapped in Wales, *everywhere* is a distant place. Everywhere’s another country stuffed with the illegal non-Welsh.’

‘I’m from a distant place you wouldn’t understand.’

‘My speciality subject might be cuddling, but I’m also quite reasonable at geography.’

‘Do you know the name of the galaxy beyond yours?’

‘Do you?’

‘Or the galaxy beyond that?’

‘You’re right, I don’t understand. But I’m happy to assume you’re from a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away. Or from any other obscure Welsh village with more consonants than vowels in its name.’

Outside are two figures. One is Kate. The other is a man in black trousers and a billowing white shirt. He’s overweight. Balding. He isn’t the Mark Richard Flint I saw in Doug’s workshop.

Billie-Jo stands next to me. She plays with the ends of her hair, wrapping them between her fingers and over her knuckles in parallel lines of blonde.

‘Void, in the human limbic system, dopamine is a type of alkaloid and acts as a neurotransmitter—’

‘Bit random? Sorry, didn’t mean to interrupt. But whatever that is, can I have the short version?’

‘Dopamine helps control your feelings of pleasure.’

‘Really? OK.’

‘Do you understand?’

‘No.’

She strokes her hair along her forefinger. ‘Intense positive feelings . . . they’re what I need.’

‘I understand *that*,’ I say. ‘Everyone needs kisses and cuddles. To be loved.’

The overweight man is chatting to Kate. There are no guns. And still no Flint.

Billie-Jo looks out of the window at the MI7 buildings.

She seems fine after being frozen. There isn't any trauma or obvious mental damage. Her body seems intact.

The man points at our building. Kate nods.

He stops talking; she starts walking.

Billie-Jo folds her hair behind one ear.

Kate passes the Professor and Colin as they walk.

Billie-Jo's skin looks almost translucent. Her neck is smooth, bereft of veins.

Kate heads closer. She disappears beneath the window frame.

Billie-Jo focusses on me. Her pupils inflate like two black airbags. 'Void, I'm an alien.'

'An alien what? *Oh . . .*'

My cushion plops onto the carpet. Silence parcels the room. Time splinters.

I'm shaking my head. 'An alien? Really? Bur that's impossible. That's . . .'

I fight the weight of each blink.

*'Who is Tarzan? Is she famous?'*

*'It's me, Billie-Jo.'*

*'What is Stoke? A margarine?'*

Billie-Jo is still staring at me.

*Her skin is veinless, almost petal-thin.*

*A white T-shirt pokes out around her moon-coloured neck.*

*Her long eyelashes are shaped like antennae.*

I sigh.

Perhaps she *was* transmitting her cosmic beauty across all known dimensions and languages? Including Welsh.

‘My perfect woman is an alien? A proper alien, from another planet? That’s . . . incredible. Profound. So . . . you can’t be an English student then? Instead, you’re something that’s travelled across the universe. Wow . . . that is amazing. Where’s your postcards? Your “We come in peace, shoot to kill” T-shirt from planet Rupert?’

‘Yes,’ says Billie-Jo, ‘I’ve travelled across the universe. My species feeds on positivity. Are you surprised? Or shocked?’

I stare down into the courtyard again. My breath steams onto the glass, creating an opaque circle.

‘I’m . . . I’m . . . well, I’m surprised *and* shocked. I can’t believe it.’

I gulp. Sandpaper tongue.

‘But I’m also a tad shocked and surprised. I mean, I don’t know what to think. Are you best friends with ET? And what are you here *for*? To eat me or to love me? Do I run away or ask you for a cuddle?’

My head drops into my hands.

‘I guess I should be angry,’ I say. ‘And yet . . . I’m not. Perhaps I’ve always known, somehow? Is that weird? Even possible?’ I drag my fingers from my face. ‘Or perhaps it’s because we’re never together? I don’t know. I can’t explain.’

She curls an arm around my shoulder. ‘I wanted to explain—’

‘Let me get this right.’ I step away. ‘You’re saying you left LV-426 in the “B” Ark of the Nostromo at Warp Factor Five? On Mother’s five-year mission to boldly split infinitives where no English teacher has gone before?’

‘Please, let’s sit.’

‘But now you’ve discovered the ultimate answer is 42? So you need to phone home, to Altair IV, to ask if a Nexus 6 replicant can use the Force to boost his midichlorian

count to capture five escaped replicants? Oh, and also send the latest Arnie lookalike back in time to save your father, who happens to be Darth Vader? Am I right?’

Billie-Jo retreats to the sofa.

‘If not,’ I say, ‘I’ve wasted days watching Doug’s science fiction films.’

‘I tried to tell you on the library bench, but I knew you wouldn’t be ready.’

‘When would I be? It’s not something you mention over cappuccino. And I can’t believe you’re an alien unless you have evidence of special powers. The ability to transfer every Karl Marx fact into my brain.’ I sigh again. ‘But then if you *are* an alien, that explains why you don’t know who Tarzan is. Or have never heard of Stoke. And why you keep introducing yourself as Billie-Jo. You lack certain facts. Social etiquette. Don’t you?’

She pats the sofa.

I fold my arms.

‘Yes, Void, I’m from another galaxy and have incomplete information about your society. And whilst I appear human, physiologically we’re different.’ She retracts her knees until they touch what used to be her human breasts. ‘I don’t have a stomach. I don’t eat or drink as you do.’

‘You ate in the Chinese restaurant. Why don’t you drink?’

‘I told you, I can’t stomach it.’

I feel the release of a smile across my face and tension from my shoulders.

‘I suppose that’s not *too* bad,’ I say. ‘If your species had say, twelve stomachs, you’d have been the first in the universe to have invented a belly-button-fluff removing machine before discovering fire.’

‘The species with twelve stomachs is cultured.’

‘They’d have to be, must be hell going out with them for a curry.’ I sit on the sofa.

‘Though after twelve portions of vindaloo, they’d soon grasp the concept of fire.’

I'm sweating.

'Oh no,' I say, 'what's happening to me? I'm making *alien* jokes.'

Billie-Jo clasps my hand. 'Remember Owen Park?'

'That was you? I thought it was a drunken dream. No, this is impossible. It can't be true. Although . . . it explains why you were always leaving me. All those times you weren't with me, you were . . . feeding? Other people's energy?'

'Positive feelings and emotions, yes. Excitement, pleasure, happiness.' She cradles my cheeks in her palms. 'Love.'

'Please, don't leave me. Not anymore. I don't care if you might be a . . . I want to be *with* you.' I clutch her wrists. 'I love you.'

'I'm your girlfriend and you're my boyfriend.'

Billie-Jo leans in; her freckles magnify.

'Always,' she says.



42

*if you multiply six by seven?*

Pete, Doug and Kate appear at the end of the white corridor.

Pete lowers himself onto a sofa opposite me. ‘Katharine, please believe me when I say that we did not abandon you. It was merely strategic survival, for the needs of the many always prevail over the needs of the one.’

Kate has her backpack over her shoulder. She seems OK. She glares at me. ‘I bet it was his fault.’

I stand. Scan for exits.

‘No,’ says Pete, ‘for it was Void who campaigned to await your return.’

Kate drops her backpack and marches right up to me. There’s a ripple across her eyebrows.

My instinct, my experience and my clenched sphincter insist I back away.

She *hugs* me.

‘Thanks,’ she says. Her voice is soft.

I am not worthy.

‘For waiting.’ She grips me tighter.

My arms wrap around her. ‘Sorry I didn’t wait longer.’ The weight of her body somehow feels right. ‘Are we . . .?’

‘Friends? Of course.’ She releases me with a half-smile. ‘Little sod.’

She spots Billie-Jo. ‘What’s *her* story?’

We sprawl across sofas next to the strip windows. Doug completes his data downloads.

Pete performs his Englishman-and-tea routine (no Jaffa Cakes).

In the swap, Doug and Pete loitered in the entrance to the medlab. Doug never saw Flint; no one did. Doug had to hand the UMP back to Colin.

Kate says she was interrogated by Flint, but remembered the advice from her detective inspector uncle and so never mentioned us or the mission. She describes Flint with coyness in her eyes. The overweight man was someone called Officer Adams. Kate says she was given enough food and water. She slurps her tea. Says she’s fine.

I’m standing by the strip windows and staring into clouds. Thinking about my girlfriend being an alien. It can’t be true. It’s impossible. Wouldn’t scientists know? Wouldn’t they have tracked her ship?

But then, somehow, perhaps it must be true? Billie-Jo is here. Why would she lie? And MI7 abducted her for a reason, so *they* must know. Why am I so stupid?

The phone on the corner desk rings.

‘Good afternoon,’ says Pete. He listens. ‘Yes, I quite understand.’ He sits back on the sofa. ‘Officer Flint demands our surrender. It is an attempt to threaten us and shall not work.’

‘It might,’ I say.

‘We have Officer Flint’s direct number, but only one hour to decide.’

Kate winks. ‘I have his mobile number. But I’m so not up for this. I vote we leave. Is there a kitchen? I need some girlie gossip.’

Doug points.

She extends her hand to Billie-Jo; the girlie gossipers exit.

‘Gentlemen?’ says Pete.

Doug’s sitting on a sofa opposite me. His limbs are tight.

‘We’ve had the conversation before,’ I say. ‘Without weapons, we can’t attack.’

I stand. I look out of the strip windows. The layer of black rain clouds has thickened.

There’s scurried movement beneath its sombre textures.

‘Oh no, guards are outside. Pouring into the courtyard. Clustering around the edges of buildings. Everywhere.’

‘Flint’s so-called “surrender”,’ says Doug. ‘He’s got his people back. Has nowt to lose now. We’ll need diversions. How many guards?’

‘All of them, I think. Everyone’s moving, but if you want exact numbers . . . a lot.’

‘Lad, how many groups?’

‘Between . . . six and eight?’

‘Seven?’

‘Yeah. Pete, how do we defend ourselves?’

Pete claps his hands. ‘Defending a position is what a great leader would orchestrate. We shall therefore need to construct fortifications similar to the Maginot Line. The French system of defences successfully dissuaded a direct attack in the Second World War and proved to be a most effective design.’

‘Apart from the gap where Belgium was,’ I say. ‘The gap at the top of the line which Hitler used to transport his wardrobes of lederhosen into France, thus bypassing the strongest part of the fortifications. That’s what I remember from school history. No offence

or anything, but please no seminars on the Schlieffen Plan or tutorials on the Hindenburg Line.'

Pete stands. He pulls his shirt out of his trousers and, for one dubious moment, I expect him to strip. He holds the shirt above a black belt containing a row of transparent 'pockets'.

Doug throws me a frantic raised-eyebrow look, as if he's double-checked his winning lottery numbers.

'Fear not, gentlemen,' says Pete, 'for my pocketed belt is a cornucopia of splendour for all eventualities, including defence.'

I point. 'What's that?'

'A whistle, for emergencies. I also have a torch, a compass, a small rope and a tin can opener.'

'And that?'

Pete peers down. 'Ah, now that is my Swiss Army knife. It contains various blades augmented by a toothpick and scissors.'

'We're facing the evils of MI7 and you want to defend against the evils of plaque? Whilst having a shampoo and cut?' I retreat to the sofa. Slump back to beige. 'We can't attack or defend.'

'Nor is a policy of appeasement feasible.'

'We have to leave.'

'If we venture outside now, we shall be seen.'

'Can't wait until dark,' says Doug. 'Flint will have captured us.'

I lean forwards on the sofa. I'm on the edge.

'The Prof and Colin have seen us,' I say. 'But Flint hasn't. And neither have the MI7 guards. So when we leave, let's *not* be students.'

Doug, Pete, Kate and Billie-Jo follow me into the lift. We drop two floors, to the medical bay, and put on some white lab coats. Mine trails below my knees, yet Doug's is more of a mini-skirt.

I stand next to Billie-Jo's open chamber. 'We can't fight or defend or leave by the medlab entrance. There's one option left.' I point to the fire exit sign glowing green and white above the emergency door. 'Where that leads, I don't know. So wherever we end up, we'll have to rely on our collective intelligence.'

'Oh dear,' says Pete. 'What steps do you plan for us to take?'

'Bloody long ones of course, otherwise we'll never escape.'

Behind the emergency door is a room about six metres square: the room where Doug hid from Colin. It's musty. Pallid light sneaks in from the medical bay; at the back are eight chambers in two rows, each chamber the same as Billie-Jo's. Only these are upright and, in the light, are gravestone-grey. Empty.

At the back is another door. Beyond that, the gloom of an unlit corridor.

We shamble along as a group. Ceiling tiles flick on. Our shoes patter against the concrete floor, the rain of an impending storm.

The floor inclines upwards.

The corridor has the dry odour of a store cupboard. Spider webs span the white breezeblocks in the walls. There are no toilets or corners. No shortcuts.

After a few minutes we face a pair of doors coloured traffic light red.

Each door has a bar across it and a label: 'Push bar to open'. Above the doors is another fire exit sign glowing green and white, a man with no face forever sprinting towards a door with no handle. Towards salvation?

I push: cold October air surges into my lungs, as though I've surfaced from the deep end of a swimming pool. A panorama of greens and blues replaces the white breezeblocks.

We step out, one at a time, into a field. It's blustery. I smell grass.

The field is empty: there are no big trees to conceal us. Is the best form of camouflage, no camouflage?

Doug points in the distance to the courtyard's low-level buildings. Much nearer are industrial structures in dour hues of granite and black.

'Electricity generators and water filtration units,' says Doug. 'We've come out to the north. Too far.' He pulls a plastic bag from his backpack. He sprinkles some brown blobs over the grass. 'Best keep moving. Pretend we're scientists.'

The inner fence ahead of us is an endless metal strip.

We move towards it in our collective guess at a scientific shuffle; a rambling shuffle of white lab coats where we're trying to cross the open ground with secrecy and haste, without it looking as if we're trying to cross the open ground with secrecy and haste.

Doug keeps sprinkling his brown blobs.

I contemplate circling clockwise to guard the front and the middle and the rear, at the same time.

Seconds pass. Still no guards.

The inner fence facing us has regular concrete posts topped with razor-wire.

Doug stops by it.

'Houston, we have a problem.'

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Approaching him rapidly from his left  
was a knuckle sandwich



Doug's lab coat shoulders are broad and white against the thin grey razor-wire of the inner fence. He patrols along it. He keeps stopping and glancing around.

I fold my arms. 'What is Houston's problem *this* time? The mini-bar's empty? Or there's only one single bed for everyone?'

'Have to cut through the fence.'

'This is way too familiar,' says Kate.

Kate, Pete and Billie-Jo are standing together and watching Doug.

Pete's white hair wafts in the breeze. His hair is a shiny coat. He surveys the fence's hypnotic diamond-shaped mesh. 'Shall you have sufficient time to cut through?'

'Maybe.' Doug scratches his stubble. 'Maybe not.' He nods at the fence. 'Four hundred metres beyond that is the electrified fence. I've checked the readings from my thermal sensors. It's on. But I do have a Plan B.'

'Mooning won't help,' I say. 'Not out here.'

'A different Plan B.' Doug opens his backpack. He hands each of us a plastic bag.

Inside mine are about twenty of his brown blobs. They look like cubes of mud. Or peanut butter from the kitchen. 'What are all these?'

'Peanut butter from the kitchen.'

Some blobs show a patch of white underneath, like a sugar lump. 'The white stuff?'

'Sugar lump.'

'What's in it?'

'Sugar.' Doug shuts one eye and sniggers. 'And lysergic acid diethylamide.'

'Really?'

'Aye. But mainly sugar.'

Doug holds up a blob as if it's a new dietary craze of peanut butter, sugar lump and LSD. He hurls the blob over the fence.

'Reckon we'd need diversions to help us escape,' he says. 'MI7 guards have dogs. They'll eat the peanut butter sugar lumps. Go wild.'

Kate cackles. 'That's so wicked.'

'Scatter them over the fence,' says Doug. 'As far as you can.' He pulls out his wire-cutters from his backpack. 'All around.'

Kate does as instructed and skips along one side of the fence, chucking her blobs over it with glee.

Pete examines the contents of his plastic bag. He strolls off in the opposite direction.

I throw my blobs over the fence.

I grip Billie-Jo's hand. We watch Doug pumping his arms as he cuts through the wire.

There's a figure: in the gap between the inner and outer fence. He's heading towards us.

My panic level rises from code red to code brown.

'Er, Doug?'

'Busy.'

I kneel beside him. 'What would you say if I told you a guard was heading our way?'

He sniffs. 'Why, you likely to say that?'

'See him?'

Doug claws the fence back.

I insist Kate crawls through the gap first. She does.

The rest of us scramble after her; our white lab coats are soiled with grass.

'The guard's still heading for us,' I say. 'This is desperate. Oh, I was only supposed to think that.'

Doug starts us marching. *Towards* the guard.

The guard halts. He's armed and wearing body armour. He could be another Colin, except his brown hair and eyes lack Colin's 'beauty'. The guard tilts his head. 'Scientists shouldn't be out here. You should be with the Professor. Who are you and where are you going? Let's see your ID.'

I wave my hand at the guard. 'You don't need to see his identification. These aren't the students you're looking for.'

'Perhaps not,' says the guard, 'but I still need ID.' He jabs his gun at Doug. 'Now.'

'Sure,' says Doug, 'here's my ID.' He holds up a bronze square with a red button on top. He presses it.

Fizzes and pops and whooshes and bangs erupt around us.

The guard stares at the blanket of black rain clouds.

Comets and rockets and shooting stars rupture across the clouds in sprinkling reds, whites and blues. There's more activity than a Chinese New Year.

Doug sweeps one foot across the path of the other and turns. His spinning side-kick ends not with the blade of his foot kicking the guard's belly, but with his foot kicking through it: the guard arcs through the air and lands metres away with a limp thud.

One cluster of fireworks shoots higher than the others and forms a group of letters: 'LINTF IS A CNUT'.

'Babies planted *and* watered,' says Doug. 'C'mon.'

'But none of this,' I say, 'helps us escape through the electrified fence.'

Doug holds up another square, only this one is silver. He pushes its red button.

He cocks his ear.

There's a distant rumble. A growling, almost primeval noise ahead of us . . . somewhere.

After several seconds there's a grinding sound, as if small metal has fought big metal. And won.

A square is approaching: small and low to the ground.

The growling is becoming louder. Now it's gruffer, like an engine.

The square has . . . things on its sides.

'It's going to shoot the guards?' I say. 'Kill them?'

'Shoot them, aye,' says Doug. 'Kill them, nope. Couldn't afford bullets. It's loaded with chick peas.'

'And the grenade launcher?'

'Auto gen launcher has smoke bombs. Non-lethal.'

Doug's armour-plated lawnmower parks by his feet. The rasping engine cuts out with obedient timing. I half-expect it to roll over to have its metal tummy tickled.

Pete, Kate and Billie-Jo are staring at it, transfixed.

The lawnmower is as I saw in Doug's workshop, with side-mounted machine-guns, three cameras and a seat at the rear. Only now its front is dented and scratched, thanks to headbutting the electrified fence. Doug didn't need more Sellotape and swearing after all.

'You're expecting me to sit on *that*?' says Kate. 'My ride home?'

Doug shakes his head. 'It's mashed the electrified fence to give us time. Another diversion. It was in full auto mode, homing to my signal. I control it with programmed search patterns.'

'Whatever. So, what now?'

Doug scans left and right. '*Run.*' He accelerates away as a flapping lab coat of white (with just the one eyebrow).

We all dash after him, towards the electrified fence.

The horizon judders with each stride.

I hear shouting behind me.

Doug keeps scattering his peanut butter blobs.

The lawnmower growls back into life. Seconds later its gruffness mingles with guards shouting and dogs barking. There are rapid stutters as the lawnmower fires its chick peas: presumably at the guards' kneecaps. They must be hopping about.

There's a watchtower looming in the distance. Are we out of sniper range?

There are several loud bangs; smoke envelops us.

I imagine the guard dogs slobbering over Doug's peanut butter blobs, gulping them down and having LSD-fuelled hallucinations. Hallucinations in which they lick the concrete posts of the fence, as they enjoy their 'bones', and then attack individual blades of grass using only their wagging tails.

My life might flash before me if I stop to watch. And, knowing my luck, I'd be too busy trying not to die to enjoy the highlights. I might even forget the popcorn.

Pete begins to dawdle; I stay back and clutch his arm.

Thanks to the lawnmower, the hole in the now non-electrified fence is wide enough to jog through.

Doug punches at the forest beyond.

The shouting, barking and rapid stutters fade.

We're a few metres inside the forest and the clouded daylight becomes muted amongst the dense trees. We're no longer visible; we're no longer defenceless.

We penetrate deeper, navigating through the trees using the famous 4-3-3 formation of muscular man-old man-dazed man in circles, guarding the front, the middle and the rear.

Doug halts us beside a tree shaped like a gallows. Doug the student who should have studied economics; the student who produces drugs *and* consumes them. The one-man cash-free economy.

We all take deep breaths of the scented forest air.

'Fireworks?' I say. 'They were your remote-activated mini charges?'

'Couldn't afford proper bombs,' says Doug. 'Needed money for my tech. And other things.' He stretches his arm out as though he's a waiter showing us to our table. 'Our chariot.'

There's a van in a clearing behind him.

'White?' I say.

'Have to travel incognito. White's better when we're playing hide and seek.'

Up close, Doug's chariot is a white van so ancient Pete might need to incorporate it in his thirteen-volume *History of the World*.

Half an exhaust pokes out beneath a strip of plastic trim no longer black nor shiny. Layers of grey grime smother the back door; daubed into the grime is 'I WISH MY WIFE WAS THIS DIRTY'.

The sides are no better. The passenger door has a hole in it the size of a fist – Doug’s fist – whilst the bodywork is covered in hundreds of spots of rust: more spots than a pack of Dalmatians with measles. There’s also a minor issue with the wing mirrors; they’ve fallen off.

‘You should’ve gone for a red car,’ I say. ‘Everyone knows they’re the fastest. Though your chariot’s more rust-coloured than white. And it looks so half-dead, your getaway vehicle’s already got away.’

‘Got me here, didn’t it?’ says Doug.

‘Only because it’s downhill from Wales.’

‘It’ll be OK. Chassis is strong. It’s got four wheels.’

I poke a wheel arch: rusting metal flakes off.

‘But are the wheels attached to anything?’ I say. ‘And these tyres, they’re balder than Colin. Driving this will be less hide and seek, more slide and seek. Through the nearest hedge.’

‘It’s . . . character. Got some cutting edge tech, too.’

‘An engine? Or space for feet to run along the ground, *Flintstones* style?’

‘Engine works fine.’ Doug strokes the bonnet. ‘Sometimes.’

He slides open a side door. It’s obvious from its hollow metallic sound that the door offers the same level of side-impact protection as a towel.

Kate peeks inside. She recoils.

Pete investigates without comment.

The rear of the van is a metal cell that would be a struggle for Snow White’s seven diminutive friends. The floor’s bare. There’s a heap of material in one corner and a flashing yellow cylinder in another. It smells of oil.

‘Tents and sleeping bags from base camp,’ says Doug. ‘My uncle packed them.’

‘There’s no proper door, no window and no escape,’ I say. ‘It’s worse than a lecture theatre. And what’s the flashing thing?’

‘One hundred horse shot of nitromethane. Like drag racing fuel. Only nitromethane’s more explosive. Hook this up and we’ll have less an engine, more a bomb.’

Team silence.

Doug hurls his backpack inside. ‘MI7’ll expect us to use the motorways. So we won’t.’

‘Instead of the long way home,’ I say, ‘we’re going the *very* long way home? You’d better have a good reason.’

‘So we live.’

‘That’s a good reason. Isn’t that a good reason everyone?’

‘Motorways have cameras,’ says Doug, before anyone else can speak. ‘Number plate recognition systems. They’d spot us in a minute and arrest us in ten. Then drag us back here, where we’d “disappear”. Reckon we take a longer route, parallel to the M4 motorway. Home via Bristol.’

‘*Hell-oooo?*’ says Kate. ‘That’s, like, travelling from Florida to Alaska, via Hollywood.’

‘Aye. But MI7 won’t expect it. It’ll buy us time.’ Doug taps his nose. ‘Got to make some calls.’ He looks at us. ‘We staying? Or leaving?’

‘Why can’t we go in our van?’ she says. ‘That one was way better.’

Doug whips out a gold square with a red button. He taps it.

One corner of my eye flashes white and orange in an expanding mushroom of fire. A subsonic boom shakes the ground. Smoke trails into the sky.

‘You blew up our van?’ says Kate. ‘For fun?’



‘Nope,’ says Doug. ‘Got my uncle to rig it with explosives, to give MI7 something to think about. To divert their resources. Give us extra time.’ He smirks. ‘And for fun.’

‘I vote we leave,’ says Kate. ‘Right now.’

‘I concur,’ says Pete.

Billie-Jo squeezes my hand.

‘A high security base of mad dogs and Englishmen is the place to be,’ I say. ‘Away from.’

44

wearing silly antennae on their heads  
and making beep beep noises

15:07 hours. +18°C.

Officer Flint was in his office leather chair, behind his desk. His foot was tapping.

The door swayed back. Officer Adams bulldozed past the filing cabinets to the desk. ‘The landing site is north-west Wales, near Snowdon. I’ve checked with Jodrell Bank.’

Flint said nothing.

‘Sir, Professor Black *has* validated the coordinates.’

‘Aliens travel across the galaxy, for perhaps thousands of years, scan our planet for a suitable landing site and from all the possible locations they choose *Wales*?’

‘What can it mean?’

‘Our world will end if the first alien on Earth only speaks Welsh.’

‘But sir, if—’

Flint sat forwards, touched the screen on his desk. A glass panel descended from the ceiling. It glowed green with a satellite map of Britain.

From a pocket, Adams flapped a printout.

Flint **snatched** it. TOP SECRET: UFO ENTERED UK AIR SPACE LAT 53 DEG

4.1 MIN N LONG 4 DEG 3.6 MIN W. He stroked his screen: the map rotated. He

scrolled it left and right. He zoomed in. Definitely Wales. Flint yawned; his ears popped. 'I want a seizure squad sent to these coordinates. As my backup.'

'Officer Bodie and the Professor are collating their reports about their confinement.' Adams smiled. 'I was right.'

Flint's foot stopped tapping.

'They're students masquerading as terrorists.'

'Your thoughts are irrelevant. Whoever they are, they are depraved.' Flint prodded his screen. He watched the glass panel recede into the ceiling. 'Only the depraved eat tins of dog food.'

'Yes, sir. Security let the students escape, as per your order.'

'Are you quite sure the tracking device is secure in Katie's backpack? I'm taking an awful risk, Adams.' Flint sat back in his chair. 'This had better work.'

45

Dent

Doug elects to drive the van for the first chunk of our journey home. There are two passenger seats and Kate offers to keep him company if Billie-Jo joins her; Pete and I are consigned to the rear.

Yet we don't sit in the rear of the van; we more slide on its bare metal floor. And, following harsh turns from Doug, we also endure the van's whining. After what feels like a wide roundabout, the van is groaning more than a haunted house.

Doug makes another extreme turn: now there's a scraping sound.

This van has all the structural rigidity of a three-tier wedding cake.

Pete and I are sealed inside a Friday-afternoon van, something assembled by bored workers pining for the weekend. I imagine the holes of rust growing. Breeding, somehow.

I'm also imagining what my alien girlfriend really looks like. Where she lives. And wondering if I should tell anyone her story. Or if I ever can. Where's the evidence? I must ponder further on the How, Why and Where phases.

Doug's ominous yellow cylinder flashes into the darkness.

I'm sweating, in a cold metallic box. I can hear my heartbeat.

I fumble around. Switch on an interior light.

The rear of the van is a heap of backpacks, tents and sleeping bags.

‘Pete, can I ask you a question?’

‘Indeed you may.’

‘You’ve never talked about your dad much. But then the other day you said he stopped you taking your place at Cambridge. Why?’

Pete sighs. ‘Not only did he believe that university was frivolous, but he was a vehement advocate of the trade union movement such that, for forty years, he squandered his free time on pursuing his union goals. It mattered to him not whether it was a local or a national meeting, for he never cancelled any function associated with his union activities. He saw it as his duty.’

‘Your dad had principles. What’s wrong with that?’

‘It was a craven decision; he spent so much time on his “great” union activities that he committed adultery with one of the volunteers.’

I pull my knees up.

Pete focusses on the metal floor. ‘I respected my father as every dutiful son should. Yet he never allocated sufficient time to myself or to my mother and you cannot imagine my frustration at knowing that my father had chosen the trade union movement over his only child. His only son.’

I nod.

‘Many a weekend I awaited his shadow at our front door but, of course, it never emerged. When it came to the trade union movement, my father was selfish and arrogant, all because he refused to drop anything.’

‘Except his trousers,’ I say. ‘He must have dropped those to have the affair, unless he was into contortionists as well as trade unionists?’

Pete bows his head. His shoulders judder. He sobs.

‘Oh, sorry. I didn’t mean to be so insensitive. Sorry, Pete. You OK?’

After a while, Pete's shoulders are still; the sobs stop.

'If it helps,' I say, 'one of my ancestors was the same. Always moving in those mysterious circles. He had one leg shorter than the other. Blown off in the Second World War.'

Pete stares at me: his old yellow eyes are veined pink.

Pete is tired and lonely. He should be neither.

'You are correct,' he says. 'The best way to confront the memory of my father, to confront my father himself, is through levity.'

'It is?'

Pete pats my knee. 'These are tears of joy. My father is dead. He exists only in my mind. He is, was, and shall always be, a bastard.'

'A tad harsh?'

'A bastard to myself and to my mother. So thank you for making me laugh at him and his foolish ways. That is why, when my father was absent, I resorted to playing board games until my loneliness abated.'

Pete wipes his tears.

He rummages in Kate's backpack. 'May I interest you in a chocolate cookie?'

'Secret stash of choccy? You little tinker.' I pluck a cookie from the packet. 'This is wrong, you know. Chocolate's fattening, full of sugar and has zero nutrition. Wrong on so many levels.' I gobble it. 'And to check how wrong it is, I'm forced to eat another one.'

We all unfold out of the van and into The Full Moon for a toilet stop. The pub has low beams, an open fireplace and lots of copper and brass ornaments on the walls. The pub's empty.



Lady Kate and Alien Lady Billie-Jo scurry off to the Ladies; English Gentleman Pete strolls into the Gents.

Doug and I loiter at the bar and share some peanuts. He tells me he's sick of girly chatter, so suggests I take their place in the front of the van.

The engine splutters back to life. The van's cockpit reeks of oil. Faded invoices are scattered across the passenger footwell. The ride feels harsher at the front, with more sensations of a chassis as crude as scaffolding.

I find a torn road atlas in the glovebox. 'Doug, where are we?'

'Little Kingshill.'

'Where?'

'Near High Wycombe.'

'Where?'

'The south.'

'Why didn't you say?'

Little Kingshill is a wink of country lanes and tree-hidden detached houses.

High Wycombe, I soon discover, offers a different level of excitement: it has a long straight road down, into it, and another long straight road up, out of it.

The van's cockpit continues the thrilling High Wycombe theme, being awash with moulded plastic in various hues of grey. One air vent is jammed shut, the gear knob has had its numbers worn off and, where any source of music might have been, is a letterbox-shaped hole.

Two of Doug's black boxes are gaffer-taped to the dashboard. He says one is a satnav, only it's reconditioned and temperamental. It's off. The other black box is a damage monitoring machine. It's on. Kate's furry Minnie Mouse dice dangle above them, on strings nailed into what's left of the roof.

I wait until Doug's on a deserted countryside road. A road free of walls and traffic he may swerve into.

'She's turned into an alien,' I say. 'Billie-Jo.'

Doug looks across at me.

'Billie-Jo's turned into an alien.'

'Lad, that's impossible. She was only in the Ladies for five minutes.'

'Not in the pub, I mean she turned into an alien before. When you and Pete were doing the Kate swap. Billie-Jo told me she's an illegal alien. What do you think? Are you shocked?'

'Aye, I am. She don't look Mexican.'

'She says she's the not-from-Earth illegal alien.'

Doug's silent.

Trees flitter past.

'Lad, you sure about her being an alien?'

'Yes. No. I . . . I don't know. How could she be?'

There's an occasional *clonk* when Doug changes gear.

He taps his phone without both hands on the steering wheel. Not remaining in full control of the vehicle at all times.

*Highway Code* Rule 160.

'Messaging Gaz, Baz and Daz,' says Doug. 'I asked them to keep watch on our house. They're trainee journalists. Also identical triplets. Mega rare. They were right. That crater ain't no comet. It was her ship.'

Doug says nothing for several minutes.

Yet neither does he follow *Highway Code* Rule 161. He doesn't use all mirrors effectively throughout the journey. He doesn't use his mirrors frequently, so that he always knows what's behind and to each side of him; the van has no mirrors.

Doug looks across again. 'You love her?'

'I met Billie-Jo on Monday and we connected. Different sides of the same coin. With her, it's natural. Effortless. Is that love? I don't know. I've never met anyone who does. Even poets can't agree. But my body aches and I feel dizzy. So either I'm in love or I have man flu.'

'In love with an alien from Guildford?'

'No offence, but your love life hasn't broken world records. Your last two loves were Kate and that headless mannequin in your workshop. One was an object that let you do naughty things to it, whilst the other was the mannequin.'

'Lad, how can you? Billie-Jo's an alien. She's a . . . *thing*.'

'The short version is we danced at the Ball. We left, hand in hand, swinging the swing like teenage lovers. The even shorter version is "we". So what if she might be an alien? No one's perfect.'

Doug stops the van at a petrol station.

'Where are we now?' I say.

'Bath Road. Slough.'

'We've gone *east*? I thought we were travelling west? Reading, Swindon, Bristol?'

'Satnav froze. Near Maidenhead, approaching a roundabout.' Doug looks down.

'Wrong turn.'

He opens the side door to let out Kate, Billie-Jo and Pete. Kate is tapping her phone, presumably in mid-chat.

Doug starts refuelling.

Slough is every town I've seen. A photocopy of a photocopy of a town once vibrant with colour. Bath Road is clogged with rattling trucks and a slothful parade of cars.

Across the road is a row of shops. There's a pharmacy with bars across its window and also two takeaways, the Kebab Express and the Eastern Balti. Rubbish bins outside are spewing cartons across the pavement with each gust of exhaust fumes. Dogs sniff the cartons; people bypass both.

Further along is the Lucky Horseshoe, a betting shop with dollar stickers in its window. There's also another upmarket shop called Appliances 4u, with used washing machines lined up on the pavement. Torn flyers cover cracks in a glass bus shelter.

Slough doesn't boast a cultural quarter like Stoke. More a cultural one-hundredth.

The petrol station has a shop full of magazines, chocolate bars and snacks; the type of sandwiches, sausage rolls and pasties an archaeologist would find fascinating.

I buy some. Pass them around.

Doug's instructions to Pete are to drive towards Bristol, keeping north of the M4 motorway.

Doug says he needs time to make some calls and to hook up his nitromethane. He kneels in the rear of the van, with only Kate and Billie-Jo and a cheese and onion pasty for company.

Pete clambers behind the steering wheel. He studies the dials. He gives the gear lever a wobble, as if he's only familiar with a Model T.

He yawns.

'You're tired,' I say, 'so let's drive in shifts.'

‘You do not possess a licence.’

‘You drive while I sleep, then halfway we swap and I sleep while you drive.’

‘A most excellent idea . . . I think? However, for now I am awake with excitement about submitting my dissertation. It is my personal tribute to Churchill.’

‘Really? Will he like it?’

‘He is deceased.’

‘Difficult read?’

The outskirts of Slough smear into Maidenhead. Yet as we crawl westwards, it’s obvious that Maidenhead is posher than Slough; Maidenhead boasts the more educated skinhead.

I thump the compartment wall behind me. ‘Doug, there’s something wrong with the fuel gauge. Every time Pete turns right, it goes up.’

‘Ain’t it great?’ says Doug’s muffled voice. ‘Full of character.’

I study the road atlas. ‘Pete, next left. Straight on at the roundabout.’

The van lurches along, thanks to slow steering, a slow gearshift and a slow driver named Pete. We should be on Easy Street, but at this pace it’s more like the Road To Nowhere.

I watch the speedometer. There are erratic flicks of its needle, as though somehow it’s scared of itself. I need Pete to hit 88 miles per hour and activate Doug’s flashing yellow flux capacitor in the rear of the van.

‘I know you’re used to a guy waving a red flag in the road ahead,’ I say, ‘but can you speed up? You’re driving like an old git.’

‘I *am* an “old git”, to use your parlance.’

‘Use what you like if it makes you go faster. We’re being overtaken by trees here. And we’ll attract attention in areas plagued with criminals.’

‘Where we are now?’

‘Chipping Norton. No, Chippenham. No, wait. We’re *heading* for Chippenham.’

Villages tick by.

We enter Reading, which is full of endless roundabouts and endless glass buildings.

Luckily, it’s going dark.

The van creaks as Pete lectures me on the social and economic history of canals, roads and railways from the present day back to when God had his first love bite.

The sun slides down.

What should be taking part of an afternoon on the motorway is taking much of the evening off it.

‘Pete, third right.’

‘The Third Reich? I could not possibly.’

‘Third *right*. Blimey, you’re obsessed. Never mind, you’ve missed it now. Take the fourth right. Right?’

Pete gives me the limp parental smile, the one reserved for when parents refuse to admit their mistake.

‘I have something to tell you. My girlfriend, she is . . . well, she’s an alien.’

‘From outer space?’ Pete clears his throat. ‘Oh my.’

‘Before you ask, my only primary source is her telling me. I don’t know what she’s doing here either, but I’m guessing MI7 stole her to experiment on her. That’s why they froze her in that chamber. They were going to dissect her.’

Pete doesn’t say anything for ages.

He peers up through the windscreen. ‘It is such a romantic evening. Shall we take the high road and return home by the light of the silvery moon?’

‘Or use the satnav?’

Nightfall and reading a road atlas are as compatible as farts in a lift; I awaken  
Doug's electronic fairies.

*'S'IL VOUS PLAÎT PRENDRE LA DEUXIÈME SORTIE.'*

No mirrors – some signals – slow manoeuvres, for the next hour or so.

At night, in a roundabout way, Swindon is magic.

Pete becomes 'fatigued', so swaps the driving duty with Doug. Billie-Jo also sits in the front with me, leaving Pete and Kate together in the rear of the van. We're beyond Bristol.

Cars are scattering in the distance.

Ahead of them are several lanes with overhead illuminated signs.

Doug starts braking. 'Toll bridge over the River Severn. Got some dosh in my backpack. Keep the toll collector talking.'

'But won't the bridge have cameras? We don't want any close-ups to shatter the lenses.'

'Saves time. Have to risk it. If I see MI7, might have to do some emergency moves. So keep watch. Shout if they're closing fast.'

'We're now being chased by Klingons?'

Doug slots into one lane and climbs out. There's a barrier in front.

A woman with long red hair leans out of a lit booth. She's wearing a cap. 'Good evening, sir. What is your purpose today?'

'Purpose?' I say.

She holds up a screen. 'Yes, if you don't mind, I need to ask you a few questions to research visitor destinations. To help manage the economic development of Wales. Your visit, business or pleasure?'

‘Pleasure.’

The woman glances along the van. ‘On holiday? Camping?’

‘Yeah, I’m going camping. In Wales.’

‘That explains why you are about to enter Wales, sir. Which part?’

‘All of me.’

‘No, sir. Which part of Wales are you visiting?’

‘Snowdonia.’

‘North-west.’ She taps her screen. ‘Thank you. Enjoy your stay.’

Doug pays; the barrier rises.

The van whines with the acceleration.

There’s a sign after the toll bridge: ‘Croeso i Gymru’.

Our welcome to Wales is Doug’s satnav issuing directions, in French. He reboots it.

*‘POR FAVOR TOME LA SEGUNDA SALIDA.’*

He punches it.

*‘PLEASE TAKE THE SECOND EXIT.’*

Billie-Jo nestles against my collar bone.

My arm curves around her waist. I can hear her breaths.

There’s a rush of heat through my body, as if my blood is being replaced with molten gold. Either that or I have Pete’s bladder problem.

‘So, Doug,’ I say, ‘what are you going to do after graduation?’

He shrugs. ‘Engineering. Computer stuff. Perhaps something to do with security.

Freelance maybe. You?’

‘I might become a vampire. I mean a normal vampire, not a small one who specialises in dentistry. Then I could still sleep in bed all day, like a student.’

‘In a coffin?’



‘Yeah, but vampires are charismatic. They can change into a bat. Best of all, after a savage night out, the next day it wouldn’t matter if you looked a wreck, because you wouldn’t see yourself in a mirror.’

‘More study?’

‘You mean more cut-and-paste education? No. Then again, perhaps I should be a lecturer? Structured routine, endless holidays and the job for life. I’d make one point in my lecture, stagger down intellectual cul-de-sacs and return to my conclusion and second point. Plus the assessment is so subjective. For my last essay it felt like they’d marked it using Pete’s Scrabble points. If only I’d written “QUIXOTRY” more often.’

Doug steers off the main road onto a country lane. We enter a forest as black as a coalminer’s bum crack.

The van’s headlights shine onto a traffic sign: ‘Anaddas i gerbydau modur’.

‘You know Pete wants to do a PhD?’ I say. ‘He wants to know everything about one bullet manufactured in a factory on the second Tuesday of June, in 1943.’

‘More degree certificates as wallpaper.’

‘He wants to study old things. Dead people. I suppose being a historian must be easy; new source material each day means your work could never run out. That’s full employment Marx would have been proud of.’

Our country lane becomes a single track road narrow enough to shave a tractor.

The van vibrates on stones and rutted mud.

‘Can we get off this?’ I say.

‘Nope,’ says Doug. ‘It’s a “B” road.’

‘It’s a disaster. The ride’s too bumpy. Feels like we’re driving over one gigantic teenage face. Do we have a comfort mode, for Pete’s biscuit bones?’

‘Only this . . .’

Doug flicks a switch.

He stabs the accelerator: the world blurs. The steering wheel twitches in his hands.

He rows through the gears; the van scrabbles for grip, sliding on its bald tyres as if on castors.

He turns left and right in quick succession. Stitching corners together.

Doug wrenches hard left; the van slithers across a grass verge.

Into a hedge.

‘OFF-ROAD ROUTE DETECTED.’

46

one small piece of fairy cake

‘ILLEGAL U-TURN. PLEASE RETURN TO THE HIGHWAY.’

Billie-Jo’s strapped into her seatbelt. I hug her; she says she’s fine.

The van’s cockpit of grey moulded plastic is also intact. Unfortunately.

I venture outside. The night air is dank. Everywhere is black and silent. We’re marooned on a single track road in a Welsh forest (somewhere).

Doug’s van is French-kissing a hedge. The van’s only working headlight is shining into what’s left of the hedge: leaves and bits of twigs carpet the bonnet.

Doug leans out of his window. ‘Lad, what’s the damage?’

‘More than half a dent. It’s serious. The front bumper’s hanging off, a headlight’s smashed and the strings on the furry dice have snapped. What’s your damage monitoring machine say?’

‘Nowt. It’s damaged.’

The van’s side door slides back with a metallic scraping sound.

Pete ‘James Bond’ Marten scrambles out with the elegance of a drunken spider: on his hands and knees and with his ~~vodka-Martin~~ dinner jacket shaken, not stirred.

Kate emerges blinking and indignant. She scowls at Doug. She blazes through her monthly swearing allowance with an etymological understanding of Anglo-Saxon roots to impress any lecturer.

At least no one is hurt.

Under Pete's expert supervision, Doug and I heave the van out of the hedge. As well as the broken light, there's also a flat tyre. Doug searches the rear of the van for a tyre repair kit and spare headlight bulb.

'RETURN TO THE HIGHWAY. *DANKE*.'

Billie-Jo stands beside me.

'Sorry about that,' I say. I hug her again. 'You sure you're fine?'

'I am when I'm with you.'

'What a place to crash. It's so black here even the stars have gone to bed. It's . . . nowhere. The centre of nowhere, like those mid-American states with too many vowels in their name.'

'Void, I never told you why. Why I'm here.'

'You don't have to justify anything.'

'I do. I owe you that.'

Billie-Jo clasps my hand. She leads me deeper into the forest. We navigate through scratching branches and perhaps more of Pete's 'special mud' until we find two tree stumps to sit on.

'My ship is a scout ship,' she says in the darkness. 'Sent here to assess Earth. Sometimes we're sent to the same planet multiple times. But that's another story.'

'My assessment is that Earth's an insignificant little blue green planet. But what's yours? Harmless? Mostly harmless?'

‘I mean sent here to assess your levels of positivity. To see if your planet could help support our species.’

‘Being positive, that’s great. And can it?’

‘There’s far too much negativity. Everywhere there is war and desolation. Poverty and starving children. There’s too much fear, anger, hate and suffering.’ She sighs. ‘Your world’s a mess.’

I taste the moistness in the air.

‘It depresses me that you’re right,’ I say. ‘Why can’t I enjoy a world of peace and happiness? One without desolation, because there *is* nothing to fight about. The news is never that, it’s always about people trying to kill each other. England escapes most of the doom, so all we moan about is the weather. I think next year our summer’s scheduled for a Tuesday.’

Billie-Jo giggles. ‘We began monitoring your transmissions. Crude radio waves at first, but then we intercepted more interesting messages.’

‘Really? What did they say?’

‘There were lots, though one originated from Wales. The message read, “Humans nuke mutant star goats”.’

We resume our positions after the repairs: Kate and Pete clamber back into the rear of the van; Billie-Jo hops into the front, next to me.

Doug escapes the single track road and the forest of gloom.

He soon negotiates the streets of Abergavenny, a market town with its own clock tower. The van behaves, though the engine sounds gruffer than before.

It’s raining.

Doug clunks the gearbox through the ratios. He drives with the nitromethane switch in the 'OFF' position; he drives like Pete.

My hand is entwined with Billie-Jo's. She leans on my shoulder.

'Doug, what's our ETA?'

'No idea.'

'You must have some? Can't you give me an estimate?'

'Reckon not for a few hours.'

'You can't give me an estimate for a few hours?'

'Lad, we ain't *arriving* for a few hours.'

Doug drives deeper into Wales. Into villages starting with the name 'Llan' that are locked-up for the night. Villages of sleep encircled by five hundred and ninety-seven thousand million sheep.

I ask Doug if he has enough fuel. He grunts.

A shower evolves into a relentless drizzle. It reminds me of bus shelters and handbags. Tarmac shines beneath the van's headlights and the occasional burn of village street lights. Roads roam through hills and mountains. On some roads, Doug chases the lines in the middle; on other roads, the edges of dirt fade into an unwelcoming gloom.

We enter Snowdonia National Park. The van shudders through its dark corners, the headlights slicing white into a thick gateau of black forest.

Four letters are painted on some roads: 'ARAF'.

The satnav starts giving directions, in Italian.

Doug steers off the road and enters a field.

'This isn't where we live,' I say.

'Was told in Slough to set the satnav for here.'

Billie-Jo squeezes my hand.

The field is black. It seems vast.

The van bobs along, through dips in the field and patches of mud.

In the distance are some lights. And outlines of figures.

Doug drops a gear; there's a *clonk*.

Ahead is a stage framed by flashing lights. Above it are the letters 'E' and 'L' and 'O' within a glowing circle of red, yellow and blue.

The van starts vibrating, yet this time not from stones and mud: from a womb of bass frequencies.

Lights on the stage swivel and pulsate. Spotlights scan across a field crammed with people.

Some people are sitting on top of shoulders, some are holding candles. Others are singing and dancing. Drinking and swaying. Punching the air. Waving banners.

'Like it?' says Doug. 'Gaz, Daz and Baz arranged it for me. Advertised it as a festival with free drugs. They contacted the Vegetarian Society. Anarchy Society. Rock Society. *Everyone*. It's an ELO tribute band.'

I shrug.

'Jeff Lynne? Some ELO albums have a flying saucer on them.' Doug steers to the left and flanks the crowd. 'But the festival's also a diversion, if we were followed.'

Someone is waving a huge 'JESUS LIVES' banner.

'You've even got some of the Christian Union here,' I say. 'What did your mates tell them?'

'Festival with free drugs.'

I want to introduce Billie-Jo to the Christian Union. To those members who still believe the human race is the only intelligent life in the universe, that God created. If he



did take six days, God wouldn't have rested on the seventh; he would have partied. Partied *hard*, into the future and into the past and across all (his) known dimensions.

Doug parks.

There's a huge screen either side of the stage showing close-ups of the musicians. At the front of the stage is a man with a beard and sunglasses, singing and playing a guitar. Behind him are guitarists, singers, a drummer and a string ensemble of violinists and cellists.

I'm alongside Billie-Jo as she leads Doug, Kate and Pete up the side of a hill running parallel to the stage. The night is cold. A wind is harsh against my skin. It's too black to see details in faces.

The stage of flashing lights and musicians is to our right. The stage has speakers the size of wardrobes stacked on top of each other.

Further up the hill is a clump of trees. We sidle past until we're above the speakers. It's quieter.

Billie-Jo halts at the top of the hill. Behind her is a cave. She grasps my hand; we creep inside.

The cave is narrow. It's damp. Cold. Water drips onto my face. Down my neck.

Billie-Jo tightens her grip on my hand. She guides me around a corner. Distant walls of the cave are shimmering.

In the dim light is an oval, levitating off the ground like a magician's assistant. It grows in intensity with each step. It's pulsing shades of blue.

The child in me needs this to be a real spaceship; the adult expects suspending wires from the roof of the cave.

'This is your ship?' The oval is the size of a car. 'It's tiny.'

‘It’s perfect for two,’ says Billie-Jo. ‘Don’t your Earth women say size doesn’t matter?’

‘Only when they’re being polite. Most would say size *does* matter. Bigger the better. And not always just the one either.’

‘Do you like it? It’s been parked here since last Sunday.’

‘I hope you’ve left the handbrake on.’

I meander around her ship. There are no identifying marks: no ‘United Planets Cruiser C-57D’ or ‘NCC-1701’. Instead there’s a high-pitched fizzing sound, as if lemonade is pouring into seashells strapped to my ears. Billie-Jo’s magic trick uses no wires, mirrors or smoke.

‘I do like it,’ I say, ‘though I’d have plumped for a family-sized silver hatchback. Much better for the part-ex.’

The edges of the ship shimmer blue and seem to regenerate in front of me. Crater or not, her ship’s immaculate.

‘Must be fast too,’ I say. ‘Full of advanced technologies. Sophisticated navigation systems and defences. Does a light come on when you’re low on fuel?’

She faces me. ‘Thank you.’

‘You’re *leaving*?’

Billie-Jo attempts a smile. In the radiant blue of her ship, it’s a smile deprived of vibrancy.

I’m breathing in the chill of the cave.

‘But you can’t leave,’ I say. ‘Not now. Not like this.’

‘If I stay, MI7 will always be searching for me.’

‘Please. I need you.’ Staccato breaths. ‘We can . . . go somewhere else. Together.’

‘*Always*, Void. We won’t be together, but we’ll never be apart.’

‘I love you.’

‘I have to—’

‘I’ll come with you then. That way, MI7 will never find us. We can do that. Right?’

She gazes into my eyes.

‘Why not?’ I say.

‘Because your body is too fragile. You wouldn’t survive the journey. I’m sorry.’

Billie-Jo hugs me.

I’m standing in a cave with the woman I love in my arms and cold water dripping down my neck.

Seconds slur into each other.

‘I love you too, Void.’

She lets go.

Somehow, I stagger back to the cave’s entrance.

The others are further down the hill, sheltering in the clump of trees.

Billie-Jo’s ship rises out of the cave, in silence. It glistens in its own blueness.

The ship hangs in the sky in much the same way that bricks don’t.

There’s a cellophane wrapper of a fortune cookie in my hand.

Billie-Jo’s ship is still for a few final seconds. It fizzes into space.

She is gone.

I’m staring at where her ship was. At the impenetrable sky. Its bleak depths.

Liquid trailing down my cheeks isn’t water from the cave.

A numbness burrows into each pore, veins pumping black blood from my dying heart.

Nothing can be worse than this.

‘Anthony Void Wilson, I am arresting you on suspicion of destroying or damaging property, assault occasioning actual bodily harm, kidnapping, unauthorised access to computer material and causing an explosion likely to endanger life or property. You do not have to say anything. But it may harm your defence if you do not mention when questioned something which you later rely on in court. Anything you do say may be given in evidence.’

47

Fook

Professor Black's office was the largest at the facility. It was also the coldest, with his personal air-conditioning unit set at a tropical +5°C. His office was resplendent with a white desk, one white chair and a long white sofa beneath the only window. On his desk were three reports in a row. He was surrounded by photographs of him in his white dinner jacket shaking hands at award ceremonies.

The Professor was sitting in his leather chair. He was dressed in a white suit and tie. 'Officer Flint, I have reviewed the mission summary reports submitted by yourself and Officers Adams and Bodie. I have also spoken to them for clarification. Would you care for some refreshment?'

'No thanks,' Flint said. He was sitting opposite, upright and attentive and shivering.

'Officer Bodie acquitted himself well and in a manner that I expect every officer at this facility to uphold. I was particularly impressed with his calmness under duress from the terrorists. He will remain on active duty at his present grade.' The Professor picked up a report from his desk. He turned a few pages. 'Officer Adams also executed his duties with professionalism and administrative skill, particularly in using his initiative to enhance CCTV footage. He is to be promoted from Officer grade B3 to B1. As you are aware, my grading decisions have immediate effect. Now, to your grading.'

Flint started rubbing his hands. He had no desire to appear obsequious in front of his ‘superior’, and yet he had no desire for hypothermia either.

‘Officer Flint, I have consulted with your colleagues and have prepared a list of your errors of judgement.’

‘My what?’

The Professor swapped his report with another from his desk. He creased back the first page. ‘You consistently ignored the overdue repair of the power fence, as communicated to you by Officer Adams.’

‘I did not.’

‘You wilfully ignored the rulings of the Officer Handbook in regards to the authorisation of the seizure squad and the interrogation of a suspect. Paperwork *does* matter. You have also maltreated Officer Adams.’

Flint swallowed the chilled air. It caught in his throat.

‘You deny referring to his teeth as “fat”?’

Flint leaned forwards. ‘That was a figure of speech. A . . . private joke.’

‘It has also come to my attention that you have threatened Officer Adams.’

‘Damn backstabber.’

‘I shall ignore that remark.’ With his half-thumb, the Professor wiped his centre-parted grey hair from his face. ‘To his credit, Officer Adams has not made any allegations against you. Yet footage from one of the cameras in Interrogation Cell 4 clearly shows you pushing Officer Adams into a corner.’

Flint flopped back into his chair.

‘Your current rank is Advanced Officer grade A2. Given your misdemeanours, I have no alternative but to demote you to Officer grade B2.’

‘*What?*’ Flint said. ‘I’ve worked for MI7 for twenty years—’

‘I have taken your long service into consideration.’

‘But I captured the alien.’ Flint punched his thigh. ‘For your research.’

‘Albeit temporarily, given your misguided decision to let the alien escape.’ The Professor lowered Flint’s report onto the desk, the same as all the others.

Officer Flint sloped back to the office with a throbbing thigh. His watch shone 11:39 hours and +17°C, the only brightness in his life. He wondered what temperature might be required to boil his blood.

Adams loitered next to the coffee machine. ‘I’ve not had any more calls from your wife.’

Flint opened his wallet. He slid out a photograph of a woman with blue eyes and auburn hair. He trudged over to the shredder in the corner, switched it on. He studied the photograph for one last time. He dropped it into the shredder. ‘She’s transferring my son to a new school. They’re moving away.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that.’

‘I want coffee, Adams. Black, three sugars.’

Adams stepped over to the desk. ‘I have a note from Professor Black. It seems I’ve been promoted to grade B1 and you’ve been demoted to a B2. So you mean, “Would you like a white coffee, *sir*?”’

Flint shuffled past his new superior officer to the coffee machine.

Adams sat in *his* black leather chair. After a long and dutiful wait, he was displaying an even longer and dutiful smile.



48

triple word score

A lot happened following my arrest by Officer Flint, the most surprising being my immediate 'unarrest'.

It seems that Kate messaged Flint throughout our journey home, thanks to him returning her mobile phone and giving her his number prior to her swap. So when Doug drove us from the base with Kate and Billie-Jo next to him, he noticed Kate tapping on her phone; he said she was still tapping in Slough and also during his van repairs. None of us knew the nature of Kate and Flint's 'relationship', but it's clear now that, across England and Wales, Kate flirted with Flint by resisting his suggestion to go on a date. Once I was arrested, she agreed to it.

Doug, too, helped. I was expecting him to give Flint an introductory punch or a flying jumping scissor kick. Doug did neither. He explained who he was and who his father was. Flint said that Doug's father *had* died on a reconnaissance mission with him, but that Flint wasn't responsible: Doug's father had been killed in a 'safe' house whilst Flint had been elsewhere. Doug said nothing. He showed Flint his dangle, said it contained all of MI7's secrets and explained how it's odd that, *sometimes*, classified information can 'mysteriously' leak onto the internet.

Pete watched in silence. Maybe he was thinking about *his* loss. Thinking about how he might have prevented the death of Ethel Booth and enjoyed a life with her, if only he'd accepted his undergraduate place at Cambridge. Or perhaps, standing there, the future PhD student with more letters after his name than in it understood how, finally, he was beyond someone who documented history; as a person who'd experienced the emotion of conflict first-hand, he was now creating it.

Kate smiled at Flint. She even held Flint's hand.

Doug didn't smile at Flint. Doug didn't hold Flint's hand.

I gave Flint my evil lecturer glare, the one I use when they hand me back my work.

Flint's shoulders sagged.

So within minutes of Officer Flint arresting me, the teamwork of Kate and Doug and Pete had conquered all by having me 'unarrested'.

I wonder now what real evidence Flint could have. Perhaps only the testimony of Professor Black and Colin? Doug's van exploded on his uncle's farm, whilst the fireworks, smoke bombs and the lawnmower firing chick peas were petty acts of vandalism; Kate's animal rights friends have inflicted much worse.

As well as downloading MI7 data onto his dongle, Doug had also transferred CCTV footage from the base and he later analysed both in his workshop. He invited me along.

'What have you got?' I said.

'Nowt,' said Doug.

'After all the time you've spent in here? You must have uncovered something.'

‘Data has loads of dull mission reports about Flint searching for alien life. And never finding any, until your wench appeared. But I’ve only found this footage.’

Doug played what he’d discovered on a workshop screen. He replayed it.

It was *us*. Me, Pete and Doug at the inner fence, not waiting for Kate. It was grainy and inconclusive night-time footage, yet I recognised our shapes.

‘Maybe that’s why Flint unarrested me,’ I said. ‘That footage by itself wouldn’t have been enough to prosecute us. But what about the hours of Flint interrogating Kate?’

‘Nowt.’

‘Nothing at all?’

‘Nope. No footage of her being swapped either. All erased.’

‘Who would do that?’

‘Reckon only one geezer could.’

If Flint was protecting Kate by erasing all of the MI7 footage of her, he had been thorough. Only, what would MI7’s prosecution of students have proved anyway? That the defences of their base were too weak? Security scandal. And if Flint and MI7 were interested in capturing an alien, our prosecutions would have proved nothing; Flint had been metres behind us and had watched Billie-Jo’s ship disappear too.

Jeff Lynne above the clouds, singing *Mr Blue Sky*, would have approved.

Post-unarrest, the journey from the cave back to Kate’s house took little more than ten minutes, yet somehow felt much longer than the leg from the MI7 base.

I thought I understood pain. Understood endless, stabbing pain; I once typed an essay about Karl Marx. Yet when Billie-Jo’s ship disappeared into space, that stabbing pain was mere foreplay.

I didn't sleep much the weekend after she left. I didn't shower or shave.

So the following Monday morning, I overslept. And missed my exam.

Pete brought me a cup of coffee in bed.

'You do not need to panic,' he said, 'for I have written to your tutor.'

I stared at him. 'You wrote to *my* tutor? Professor F John Williams? Why and when? Old FJ is a professor of sociology, not history. And why? I have to ask you twice because it's important.'

'I informed him that you would be unable to sit your examination this morning.'

I sat up in bed.

'As you may recall, after I left you at the Freshers' Ball I was intending to draft the final chapter of my dissertation. However, once I returned home I sat in the parlour for historical inspiration. I noticed our house motto of "TEAMWORK CONQUERS ALL" and I decided that your needs were greater than mine. Therefore, as a revision aid for you, I wrote a five-thousand word essay on Karl Marx and his theory of value. When you notified me of our impending departure for the MI7 base, I simply posted the essay to Professor Williams before we left in lieu of your probable absence. I hope it shall suffice.'

'Cheers, Pete. You're not a star, you're a supernova. What excuse did you give?'

'I stated that your father was ill and that you had to return to the family home temporarily to help care for him. I informed Professor Williams that you would be delighted to sit the examination upon your return.'

'You lied?'

'No, I did not maliciously conceal the truth, for I merely released selected "facts" that your tutor should contemplate. There *is* a subtle difference.'

'Yeah, so subtle only you can see it.'

‘Nevertheless, I hope you intend to honour your promise to focus on your academic commitments.’

I shook Pete’s hand.

I leant back in bed and slurped the rest of my coffee. I thought about what Pete had done. For *me*.

‘Pete, if you knew I wasn’t going to sit the exam, why did you bother testing me at the base? Why put me through that ordeal?’

‘For my amusement.’ Pete smiled. ‘However, it was also a confirmation of the promise you made to me before we left for the Freshers’ Ball.’

Pete was right; he always is.

Professor Williams sent me a letter. He wished for the swift recovery of my father and also congratulated me on my ‘exceptional’ essay. He stated it was more than sufficient as a substitute for missing the exam, so I didn’t need to sit it after my father was better.

Pete must have dropped two of Doug’s sugar lumps into his tea before he wrote the essay; ‘my’ work was awarded a First.

My tutor also confirmed that I would remain a student at the University of Snowdon and would be eligible for graduation next summer. He mentioned nothing about the outstanding fines on my overdue library books.

The following Friday night, Pete and Doug and myself are settled in the snug of the Horse and Groom. Clumps of old men are muttering into their tin tankards as usual, perhaps about how early the Christmas adverts are this year. Sawdust layers the floor.

Pete takes a sip of his lemonade. 'What an interesting time we are experiencing. It is a shame that Katharine has moved out and decided to live with Officer Flint, but we all face an uncertain future. Where shall I be in ten years' time?'

I tap the side of my beer glass. 'It's an impossible question, but my guess is somewhere else and ten years older.'

'I may be older, yet not necessarily wiser.'

'You should be, as you'll be Doctor Pete. Or should I say Doctor Horatio? Doug will be running his own security firm. Or head of a replica gun manufacturer. And Kate . . . well, Kate is Kate. She'll be happy wherever she is.'

According to Pete, Kate said the combined physical power of famous boxers and men in uniform were mere shadows of the organisational power wielded by Flint.

According to Doug, Kate said three things. One, she still loved him. Two, she forgave him: for pretending that MI7 do animal testing, for stealing her Mercedes, for crashing the van and for everything else Doug has ever done that has annoyed her (quite a lot). Three, she was 'so over' him. Doug said he shrugged. Why, I don't know, as at the time they were chatting on the phone.

According to me, Kate said she felt 'totally in control with Flint'. Less lonely. Good.

Doug managed to buy Kate's Mercedes back from Andy Auto's, though Andy was not too ecstatic about one of his vans having been detonated 'for fun'. Debt cleared.

Kate said I didn't have to move out. I told her it was her house and I'd made a promise, so I should respect both of those ideas by leaving. She laughed, told me to stop acting like a stupid sod and then insisted I move into her old room. So I have; it's big enough for two.

Whether Kate is in love with Flint or whether she threatened him with veggie sausages tasting like the paper plates they're on, we'll never know; it's yet another gap in Pete's thirteen-volume *History of the World*.

But I hope she is in love; she deserves that. We should be told.

Pete pats my hand across the table. 'And what of you, my dear boy? Where shall you be in a decade?'

'Not here. I have things to do.'

'Indeed. Each of us shall have activities to pursue in the future.'

'I mean now. For once, I'm going to use my head. I'm going to find Billie-Jo.'

Pete blinks at me.

I lean forwards. 'She told me when you were doing the swap for Kate. I wasn't listening and she was being cryptic. But I get it now.'

I hand Billie-Jo's fortune cookie to Pete.

"'LOVE IS ALWAYS BEST SHARED'", he says. Pete looks up. 'What do you think this means?'

Doug reads it. 'Means nowt. It's a fortune cookie. A random saying. Meaningless.'

'In my experience,' says Pete, 'most fortune cookies offer an aphorism. Or, if you prefer, an astute observation that contains a general truth. This is no different.'

'It means,' I say, 'that there's another Billie-Jo. She said she always travels in a pair. She told me they're telepathic clones. So what one knows and feels, the other does too.'

Pete hands me the fortune cookie.

I read it again. 'Of course . . . seeing her clone at the Freshers' Fayre. She got to the other end of the Fayre so quickly because she was in two places at once. Don't you see?'

Pete's face has crumpled into the offspring of a frown and squint.



‘Billie-Jo’s spaceship was a two-seater. So there were two identical Billie-Jos. If I find the other Billie-Jo, she’ll be the same as the one I met. The one we all met. She’ll look the same and she’ll know everything *my* Billie-Jo knows. She’ll share her feelings too. Her feelings for me.’

I tap my beer glass again.

‘I know what to do,’ I say. ‘I know where to go to find the Billie-Jo left behind. I know where she’ll be.’

‘You do?’ says Pete.

‘Sure, a traffic cone told me. And not Flint or MI7 or anyone else will be able to split us up, because they’ll never realise that there *is* another Billie-Jo. So they’ll never be looking for her. She’ll be free. “We won’t be together, but we’ll never be apart”.’

Doug stares. ‘Lad, what if you never find her?’

I peer into my glass of flat beer trying to decide if it’s half-full, half-empty or deep enough to drown in.

I stand.

My glass is overflowing with the sweet taste of the future.

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