



proximity

and two short stories

rory haymont

Proximity

and two short stories:

holes

and

the dog's dream

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The young woman spoke to the man sitting on a park bench. 'I know it looks like I've been stalking you, but I've been having these weird dreams night after night. And you're in them.'

'I was enjoying being stalked. Guess that's all done with. Most interesting thing that's happened to me in years'

'Yes. I thought if I told you about the dreams they might go away.'

'I'm sure that saying hello will tidy the whole poor sleep thing up. By the way I'm Tom.' He held out his hand leaving Paige a little embarrassed that she hadn't introduced herself from the start.

'I work as a veterinary assistant over on Clayton Street. Receptionist really. Training to be a Vet, but that's going to take a few years.' It helped to share some small personal details to make it a somewhat normal encounter and then leave.

They both smiled. 'Hope you get better.' He said. And added. 'Had I been forty years younger I would have been able to say I was briefly the man of your dreams.'

She smiled. 'No. You'd still be the man *in* my dreams.'

They laughed, which was easy to do with Tom and Paige said 'Thanks.'

But she didn't get better. The dreams got more intense. Tom was always there to help her and protect her from a danger she feared intensely. It was all pervasive and crushing. And confusing. Improbable.

In desperation she went back to Tom. There were bags under her eyes. She was exhausted from sleeping only a few hours a night. Tom what immediately concerned.

'Paige, you look dreadful. To the extent you're not sleeping of course.' He quickly clarified. 'Are you getting help?'

'The local GP prescribed some pills. But they seem to bounce off me.'

'I blame the Shaman woman I paid a great deal of money so you would want to have coffee with me occasionally, do short walks and share stories. A father daughter kind of thing. She obviously messed up the spell and you've ended up with me in you head every night. Very bad outcome. I'd ask for my money back, but the circus moved on months ago.'

'I don't know why I came here.' She was visiting him in his front garden, which was beautiful. A harmonious combination for fruit trees and vegetable gardens except for some one area, where pumpkins and melons took over the boundary fence and much of the driveway. 'I don't think there's anything you can do. And your lame jokes make things worse Tom.' Paige was dejected. 'That was sort of a joke. You know. A joke from someone exhausted and temporarily has only a very clunky sense of humour.'

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‘Never apologise for being right Paige. I wish I could help you. I really do. We could try a few silly things. I could look into your eyes and tell you to stop dreaming of me. Once we’ve done that I could pretend to be dead and then I’ll disappear from your life forever. Except when you pass me in the supermarket, that kind of thing. But we won’t say hello.’

‘Those are all really stupid ideas Tom. But I’ve run out of sensible ideas. I’m seeing a shrink at lunchtime tomorrow. But we could try your ideas and see if they work tonight.’

‘Let’s go.’ Said Tom.

They sat at the kitchen table. Paige led the processes. ‘Okay. I’ll look into your eyes, and you’ll tell me to stop dreaming. Then you’re going to lie down dead, and I’ll pretend you don’t exist for the rest of my life.’

They held hands and Tom looked into her eyes and told her to kick him out of her dreams and make sure he never came back. She felt like an idiot agreeing to this stupid technique. But he was genuinely trying to help her out. ‘You’re a good fellow Tom. The *only* good person in the dreams by the way.’

‘That’s nice. Goodbye Paige. It’s been nice to get to know you. I’ll fall down on the floor and have a heart attack.’

‘Sure. Goodbye Tom.’ Paige was slightly ambivalent, if the cure worked, she would never talk to him or acknowledge him in any way. ‘It’s been good to get to know you Tom.’ He didn’t make eye contact. He complained of chest pains and fell off the chair.

Paige left. That night she still had the dreams, but wasn't sure she should go and see Tom again. The insecure side of her said the dying ploy may have been his way of trying to get her to leave him alone.

The meeting with the shrink was underwhelming but she got new drugs. He wanted to know about her early life, which was irrelevant she thought. Her father had died. Or her mother alleged not that she cared. From a young age she'd worked hard with her mother to make a good life. They were working class and proud of it. She had never been bullied. She'd had a bit of sexual harassment in her first job. She told her supervisor who did nothing, she went to her supervisor's supervisor and the problem went away. Though she was put off a few weeks later.

She'd always wanted to be a vet. She'd started correspondence school. She got a job in a vet's office as a receptionist, and hence she had to move down the coast. They let her help with some of the animals. She'd had a boyfriend who had moved to Nigeria working for an oil company. They'd kept up a frequent correspondence fooling themselves it could work while both waited for someone else to come along. Which happened for him first.

The psychiatrist's hypothesis was that she was having suppressed memories. And that the man she was dreaming about had assaulted her and used hypnosis to blot out the incident or incidents. But her sub conscious wanted to break out and share the incident with the world and make sure this man receives the justice he deserved.

'Have you come across this sort of thing before?'

‘Not myself.’

‘But there’s lots of cases of it. In the...the literature.’

‘I assume so. I did my training thirty-five years ago. I’m sure there’s been this sort of thing added since I got my degree.’

Paige had heard enough. ‘Do you have drugs that could help me. Blot it out you know. And strong ones. Pills seem to bounce off me Doctor. I can drink anyone I’ve ever met under the table.’

‘Alcoholism could be the issue?’

‘No. I don’t drink anymore.’ She lied. *Why don’t you give me the damn pills will you, she thought. We both know that’s what I came here for.*

He smiled. Sympathetic. ‘I can imagine this is very distressing.’ He said this as he wrote a script. ‘I’m hopeful this will clear things up. And I think you should keep away from that man from now on.’

‘That’s all taken care of. We’ve agreed that he’s dead as far as I’m concerned. If we pass in the supermarket, he’s a stranger to me.’

‘Good strategy. I’d very much like it if you could come back in a few weeks and we’ll see how things are progressing.’

She smiled and thanked him. *At these fees you have got to be kidding.*

As she walked to her very modest car there was a voice from behind her. It was the shrink. 'Oh.' He paused for effect. 'And fuck you.' He said. His tone was angry. She was a little rattled. Maybe he was angry that she didn't make an appointment for two weeks later before she left the reception. She didn't care. She wanted some pills to make her comatose and she had a six-month script.

She pulled up at a petrol station and could fit eighteen pounds worth of fuel in the tank. She went to the counter to pay and handed over a twenty-pound note. The man behind the counter was surly. 'I suppose you expect me to make change.'

'If you don't mind. I can take it in one pound coins or half pounds. A mix of anything to really make up two pounds.' She said this as a customer came up behind her.

'Have you ever heard of a card Luv.'

Paige was reasonably good at deflecting rudeness. She remembered on some occasions she'd been quite rude and tried to remember that when dealing with rude people. Maybe not this rude. She took some time to provide an explanation. 'I do have a card. But I think when you use a card you tend to spend more. Because of that, I take out two hundred pounds a week and pay all my bills and do my shopping and pay for my petrol and I know exactly where I am financially based on how much I have left. It creates a discipline such that at the end of the week I might want to buy myself something nice. And I feel good about it.'

'On what planet could you possibly think that's interesting.' Said the petrol station attendant.

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The man behind piped up. 'I don't have time to stand around and listen to an idiot's financial management scheme. How much is she hassling you for mate.'

'Two pounds.'

'Shit. I would have paid fifty to avoid listening to the load of crap.' Before she could righteously say no, a hand behind had contrived to put two pounds in her hand, which she had been still holding out with the reasonable expectation of change being made. 'Now this is the part of the process where you step out of the line and let someone make a simple transaction.' He quickly paid by card and left.

She was at the door when the attendant said. 'Next time you need fuel, there's a Shell five hundred meters further on.'

'No problem there.' She said.

'You don't need to be rude about it. It's no picnic doing this job you know.'

She didn't want to get into a 'last word battle'. She thought she'd go back to work earlier than planned. It was a calming environment. That's what Janice had cultivated. She had a purpose built veterinary clinic which was set out to ensure the animals had sufficient space and separation for most of them to be happy. The serial howlers or barkers or meowers got special accommodation. Janice was careful with who she hired and that led to a happy team.

She arrived about fifteen minutes early and started to file the clinic paperwork as everything was quiet.

‘What happened to two o’clock?’ Said Janice, walking into reception.

‘Um, you said it was okay if I came in by three.’

‘No it was two, and we’ve been run off our feet with no one to answer the phone. If someone wants their dog desexed, or a chip put in and they can’t get though, they go elsewhere Paige. That probably happened ten times while you were late getting back.’

‘I’m terribly sorry Janice. I got the time wrong. It won’t happen again.’

‘And what are you doing now.

‘I’m putting the hard copy files into the filing system. You showed me last week and said if things were quiet I could keep them up to date.’

‘I’m going to need to *un* say that Paige. I’ve had a lot of complaints from staff who haven’t been able to find things because they have been misfiled or haven’t been transcribed accurately from the soft copy. Stick with the phone and client greetings.’

‘Yes Janice.’ She didn’t want to say anything more complicated

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than that. She was going to focus on getting people in the door with their 'patients' and get them comfortable in the waiting rooms. Of which there were three to separate the bird dogs from the birds or any other combination that needed a separate space. And she would answer the phone. This usually took up about twenty-five percent of her time. The remainder of which she sat doing nothing, which wasn't in her nature. She'd asked Janice if she could study during quiet spells. Janice had said 'sure'. Now Paige decided she was going to try and outsmart those who spewed negativity at her all of a sudden.

Whenever a patient arrived, she used to go and poke her head around the office door. Now she texted, e-mailed and then telephoned the attending vet. She was met with Janice's assessment. 'Too lazy to walk the few yards to let me know in person Paige.'

She was tired of this shit. She wanted to respond to Janice that she could kick her out of the place for trying hard if that's what she wanted to do. There were plenty of shittier jobs for less money around and with even meaner people running them. She changed out what she wanted to say with. 'Sorry.' Instead.

A man with an Irish Wolfhound arrived a month late. He had the day and the time right, only out by a month. Paige knew they were fully booked. Overbooked. And she had been advised this was somehow her fault.

She apologised to the man but told him they were fully booked.

He grew angry. 'Do you know how far I have to come to get here?'

‘Um...no I don’t sir. Are you wanting me to make a guess?’

‘This is how the place is run is it? A comedian at the front desk treats clients like fools. Ex Clients. I’ll go and see if I can find a vet that has a polite receptionist and can make space for a gravely sick dog.’

The dog looked very healthy to Paige, but it was picking up on its owner’s vibe and getting aggressive.

Janice came quickly out from the door behind her. ‘Jonah. How can I help.’

‘At last someone with some intelligence. I made a small miscalculation of the timing for the appointment. I’m happy to wait into the evening if someone’s willing to work back or I can get a hotel and be here first thing.’

‘You don’t need to wait at all Jonah, we can always fit you in. I know how far you’ve had to come.’

‘Thanks Janice. This one...’ He pointed at her with his chin. ‘... was about to send me packing after a smart comment or two.’

Janice glared at Paige as the two went into the treatment area. Paige tried hard to be a receptionist. She asked after some people with a disagreeable parrot to see if there was any special food the bird ate. ‘Is he friendly.’ she asked. Parrots being an animal she was familiar with. ‘Oh he loves people and being petted’ said the owner. Paige was soon bandaging the bleeding parrot bite. The owner laughed. ‘Only nice people. I forgot to tell you that.’

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As they went in, she heard her telling one of the vets that. 'The stupid girl at the front gave Zach a hell of a fright and the bird had to defend himself.'

All of this resulted in Paige sitting in Janice's office around six in the evening. Everyone in the office was expected to work until the last patient was treated. All the Vet's got paid for this time because they had case reports to write up which were duly charged for. Paige didn't get any pay for staying back.

Janice had called her into her office. 'Paige you interviewed well. Good academic performance, various jobs with glowing references, and the first few months here your work has been excellent. Now you can't be at work at the right time, you're upsetting fragile animals, being rude to clients and woefully incompetent at filing. You have an inordinate amount of time to do something productive rather than read novels or whatever it is you do out there.'

Paige could provide an answer to every one of her bosses claims. But she could tell there would be no point. Janice, like everyone else that day, was going to go around and around pointing out her deficiencies. She simply came up with an. 'I'm sorry I've let you down Janice. I'll try to do better.'

'Don't grovel about it Paige, as if that's going to work for me. You might as well finish up early, I think you've done enough damage for one day.'

It was still light as Paige walked home in a beautiful summer evening. She left her car in the staff parking behind the vet

surgery. She had to walk twenty minutes there and back from home each day. She took the amount she saved by walking from the amount of cash to live on and put in an envelope literally under the mattress to save for a deposit for a flat. She did have to walk to work when it was ‘raining cats and dogs’ an observation she had ceased to find funny, but laughed along with people all the same. The exception to her customary frugality was her computer. She always had the latest. She kept in touch with the latest software compared to the dated crap in the surgery. She did this in case she needed another job, which was looking likely. She liked playing computer games, but only allowed herself to buy one new game every two months. Always the outcome of scouting the gaming shops and internet for a genuine bargain.

She had almost reached home when she came across Brian putting his bins out. She said a cheerful ‘hello’. Brian was a nice guy. He worked out on an oil rig somewhere and was away quite a bit. He’d introduced her to her to what was now her ex-boyfriend who also worked on rigs. She brought in the bins and watered the garden for him. He had a nice garden compared to her’s which was some concrete and a small lawn. A few times Brian had asked her to go in and put some fish food in the beautiful aquarium he had. But they could usually get through until he came home. It was the same with the worm farm. He appreciated it when she put some water in once a week. Without him knowing she’d bought a foliar spray which provided only tiny amounts of minerals and nutrients that made the plants much more vigorous. She was sure his garden looked a lot healthier since was putting it on.

Brian didn’t respond with his usual ‘Hi Paige’. Rather he said. ‘Paige can you please stop putting your rubbish in my bin. I often don’t have enough for my own and I come out here to put a bag in before the truck comes and it’s virtually overflowing. I would have thought being a single woman you’d have plenty of space in your own bin.

God knows what you do to create that much rubbish.'

Paige was proud of her rubbish generation habits. Yes. She was rubbish proud. But not a rubbish snob. No one brought up the topic even if she was. She usually produced one small bag of rubbish a week. Sometimes a bag and a quarter. She had a bit more recycling than that, and this was because she focused on recyclables. If she had a compost bin, she could possibly get down to half a bag of rubbish and half the recyclables because she would change her shopping habits accordingly. But her landlord said she couldn't have one because he liked a backyard neat with concrete and grass. And he didn't want any garden beds so there was no point in compost. This was why the small, squat chocolate half of a duplex, was cheap to rent. Which fit into her overall strategy of not having to deal with a landlord like him in the future.'

'I've never put rubbish in your bin Brian.'

'Paige, it doesn't bother me if you deny it. Only stop doing it okay.'

This was one friend turned asshole too far. 'Fuck you Brian.

'Paige you don't have to...'

'Fuck you Brian.'

'Paige I think...'

'Fuck you Brian.'

She was at her door and she was going to have the last word.

'I'm disappointed that you would...'

She looked back with a cheery smile while, she at the opened door, and said. 'Fuck you Brian.' And with that her door closed. But the smile soon vanished. She seemed to have caught a string of people who were having a bad day. It had taken it's toll. She usually only drank when she had friends over, it was too expensive to drink otherwise. The alcohol she had was mid-range, similar to what her friends bought. However, she went to the big bottle shops routinely, to find the specials that were the wines her friends would be impressed by. She bought them when they were being sold at the price of wines they would all used to laugh about, as if Paige was a prankster when she used to bring such a nasty bottle of wine out.

She had a glass of wine, drinking it slowly, and the strangeness of the whole day started to soften. She had a second glass and she felt pretty good. Telling Brian to fuck off several times might have burned a bridge. But he could look after his own stuff if he didn't appreciate what she did.

And she was sure things would settle down with Janice. She wondered if Janice had PMT. Then she thought she was probably too old. Something was making her out of sorts. She knew she should have something in her stomach before drinking. She started cooking, speed dialled her mum and put her on speaker phone.

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‘Hi mum.’ She loved her mum. They had their little tensions and niggles, but she respected her mum as well as loved her. And that tended to keep things in proportion.

‘Oh. It’s you. Finally get round to calling your mother eh?’

‘Um. I called you a couple of days ago mum. Remember, we had a good chat for nearly an hour.’ Paige really needed a good chat.

‘I don’t remember. I suppose you want to dominate the conversation about what’s going on with you. You might as well get started.’

This took any desire to talk about what was happening disappear. ‘I’m still having those dreams and everyone I met this afternoon really hates me. *Really* hates me. Even if I know them well. Otherwise, there’s nothing going on in my life.’

‘Paige, I can’t say I’m surprised about the people hating you. You need to have a good look at how you treat people. And how to speak to them. Also, are you aware you have chronically bad breath and body odour. These things can be fixed very simply. It’s rude not to. But then there’s the casual rudeness. Do you practice it at night to get good at it Paige? I’m sure you didn’t pick it up in our family.’

Paige had gone to get another glass of wine.

‘Are you still there.’

'Yes mum.'

'Unlike you I am busy making arrangements for the funeral.'

'Funeral?' Paige had a sinking feeling. Now realised things *could* get worse.

'Your Uncle died yesterday. Died alone because of you.'

'Uncle Liam died.' Paige's voice turned to shock and disbelief.

Paige had loved her Uncle Liam more than anyone else in the world. Her father had died when she was a one year old. Her uncle had stepped into her life but didn't try to be a father. He was the best Uncle anyone could hope to have. He took her to theme parks and the beach. They spent so much time laughing. To hear he'd died made every other bad thing that happened that day microscopic.

'That's right, he died alone. All because of you.'

What her mother had said was seeping in through the feeling of loss. She knew he was dying, but believed it was some time away. 'How can you...what do you mean? He said he didn't want anyone to see him like that mum. He had a nurse who cared about him.'

'We all know that it was you that put the idea in his head in the first place. He died lonely with no family around him. You haven't made enquiries about him in months.'

The second bottle of wine was brought out ready for action. She had never consumed a bottle of wine that quickly. She could have said nothing, which is what everyone seemed to want. 'I called Uncle Liam every day...*every day*. He was the most important person in the world to me Mum. I was going to call him next'

There was a long pause. If her mother wanted a tough conversation she could get one. 'You loved him more than me.'

'Yes mum. I love you mum...but' The phone was hung up before she'd finished. In all Paige's life, even if there were tensions, they always said I love you. She went and fell face forward on the bed. She was starting to get very unpleasant dizziness and a sliding queasy feeling. She had things in moderation. It was one of the things Uncle Liam had taught her. And she had never been sick. She's been there beside her friends when they were. And she'd never caught a bug that made her throw up, though she'd had lots other illnesses that didn't. Now she made her acquaintance with vomiting a big way.

This inexperience took her to the sink instead of the toilet, which was closer anyway. It confirmed her vomiting naiveté. The drain got blocked and she was closer to the whole awful mess than she'd like to be. Her lunch had decided it didn't like alcohol, or at least not those varietals. It wanted to get away from them via the shorted route possible. But her was breakfast, quietly waiting its turn. Lingering. Then it all came bustling out feeling no obligation to be very nice about it. Paige was too busy shaking and repulsed by the long strings of vile exudate dripping down. They joined the foul mess she hated but couldn't get away from or flush away. She shuddered and ran to the toilet. How could there be so much?

A few minutes after the last retch, she was surprised how much better she felt. Except for what had to be cleaned up. This brought on a good deal of shuddering in itself. She slept in the spare room and woke up early and got ready for work. She'd forgotten to put

the bin out in the downpour of unhappy people. Now she was one of them. The loss of Uncle Liam would hit her in waves and then fade back, only to come again. She knew the waves would slowly get further and further apart. But that was some time away. She thought she'd go to work early and not file anything. Just wait for some asshole with a sheepdog to come through the door.

She walked up the street and saw Brian. He had a cordless drill. She didn't care.

'Do you know what I'm doing Paige?

'I don't care Brian.'

'I'm putting a padlock on my wheelie bin Paige.'

'I think I mentioned to you Brian, that I don't care. Do we have to go through whole 'fuck you' thing Brian? That was *so* yesterday.'

'You don't care about anyone but yourself Paige.'

'Fuck you Brian.' The timing was perfect because she turned the corner.

Two doors along a woman, who looked like she suffered awful anaemia said. 'I wish you'd keep that dog of yours quiet.'

'I don't have a dog.'

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‘Then what’s that sound coming out of your yard.’

‘It’s me. Listen carefully next time. I’m calling out ‘fuck you’ from my yard.’

‘I’m calling the Ranger.’

‘Fuck you.’

She arrived at work, having established that the world had decided to hate her. Now she was sliding down an ever steepening slope of hating it back. Based on the prelude to the day, and with a pounding headache for which she had brought no relief, she got behind the counter desk and started to make herself the shining star of receptionism. Janice arrived. ‘Paige is it too much to ask for you to arrive on time?’

‘I’m early.’

‘That’s right Paige. Eight Thirty is your starting time. I thought that was established in your contract.’ Paige got up, saying nothing and went to the pharmacy, which was merciful close by to get some headache pills washed down with hydrolyte. She stood, two feet from the threshold of her workplace, looking into the surgery. As Janice was taking calls. She was having those waves and waves of grief about Uncle Liam, but in between was a rage she had never felt before.

She looked through the glass door at the Calendar. She had a lunch date today. School friends. These were girls she'd known since kindergarten. They'd stuck together and always watched out for each other. Helped each other through rough times. Broken hearts, lost jobs, occasional homelessness and the need for the bed, Paige always the provider in this department. *Please God let them still like me.*

She went into the Surgery while Janice was still on a call, not work related. Paige started to clean up the waiting rooms and Janice interrupted the call to say. 'We have a cleaner who does that.'

'Not very well.' Replied Paige. Finishing the call, Janice came to her, and seeing the electrolyte said. 'You're not well I see. That reminds me of something.'

'I'm fine. I want to go and sit down while you're a mean, heartless old bitch to me, like you were yesterday.' Paige sat down and the gods of domestic animals provided her with an Janice insult interrupting telephone call. Instead of saying. 'I don't give a shit about your fucking poodle.' She made the most of the fact the owner had never visited the surgery before. After lashings of praise for the Surgery she took an appointment with them for their team of 'poodle specialists'. Then it was establishing whether the poodle had a middle name or not.

'Paige, I think...' The telephone gods were running hot, another call. A Great Dane. Not as active and playful as he was a few years ago.' She thought how Janice would recommend a whole spectrum of expensive tests and checks for a condition called 'Dog Getting Older Syndrome'. She took the booking, but then added. 'This breed is particularly susceptible to the early onset

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of the Masturbation Exhaustion Syndrome. MES. It's the dog equivalent of person masturbating too much.' Paige didn't care. 'Might want an eye test for the big fellow while you're here.'

She had thrown Janice off. 'Do dogs masturbate?'

'Do Popes masturbate in the woods.'

'That's for a of theological ecology specialist Paige. We deal with domesticated animals. But that's not the point. You said some very mean and hurtful things, and it's upset me.'

'Is that all?' Said Paige.

'Yes.'

'Okay. I'd appreciate it if you could vacate my workspace. I have very important phone calls to attend to and important clients with their owners to greet and make them feel welcome.'

'Oh. Paige. I've remembered the thing I wanted to tell you.'

'And what's that Janice?' She asked as if it was going to be a big surprise.

'You're sacked.'

‘And why’s that Janice?’

‘I don’t like you. No one does. We’ve all decided to stop pretending.’

This was all genuinely hurting Paige, but she decided she was going to send a little hurt back. ‘That’s great Janice. I wanted to finish this week anyway. A MegaVet is coming to town. It’s a huge vet chain that comes in and destroys the competition with cheap consulting fees and then jacks the price up once there are no local vets left. They were looking for someone with inside knowledge about how this place works. They’re making me manager. Six figures, my own car and the opportunity to slowly strangle your business and then crush the last pieces left. I can hardly wait to let everyone know that Jeremy puts a horse thermometer up the dog’s asses, and Raymond likes to scream and shout at the cats, using his wife’s name for all of them. And then there’s Janice. Gets a bunch of bullshit tests and treatments done on animals anyone can see are about to die to provide false hope and big bills for soon to be grieving pet owners. It’s got a name Janice. Ripping People Off Syndrome. And of course, there’s Pam. Intelligent. Genuine. Caring. A good person and hence; irritating to those of us without those traits and therefore are unable to find fault with her to make ourselves feel better.’

Paige had cleaned out her desk and was nearly out the door when Janice said. ‘I would like to mention...’

‘Fuck you Janice.’ She managed to toss this, intact, into the Reception as she left. She knew that saying fuck you all the time was a shallow, gratuitous, repetitive use of a swear word. But it had been working for her so far.

She decided to go home and have a nap. However she didn’t realise that this involved running a gauntlet of haters. She had

never met the woman waiting again at the gate before. Based on her pallor, she watched streamed TV all day with the blinds drawn and she'd never seen the sun until now. I've called the Ranger you know.'

'What did you call him.'

'What.'

'What did you call him. Alphonso the Daredevil Chicken. Or did you stick with a Rupert Bear kind of thing.'

'He's going to give you a piece of paper that will make *you* make your *dog* stop barking.'

'Thank you, Almost Albino Woman. And in case I don't see you again. Fuck you.'

Paige was feeling better. She'd found her groove. Insulting people. A not completely unexpected pleasure was an appearance from Brian. 'As I expected Paige. It's a few minutes before the bin truck arrives and here you are. Planning to top up my bin with all of your crap. Look at this.' He pointed to shiny padlocks on each bin.

'Brian, if you have any brains, which apparently you don't, you could walk down to my bins and see a small bag of rubbish in it and a shallow layer of stuff in the recycling. But Brian, you're not very clever. You told me once about the job you do as the assistant

to the second charge of who gives a *fuck*. But because it sounded unbelievably boring, I stopped listening. Also Brian. You can't garden for shit. And when someone comes along to help out, your deep seated insecurities cause you to lash out. Even at a person who brings in your mail and takes out your fucking bins fifty percent of the time. From now on, whenever you see me, can you do me a favour and imagine me saying 'fuck you Brian', that way I don't have to go to the bother of saying it to you anymore.'

He stood there. Swaying from side to side a little. 'That really hurt me. Hurt me real bad. More or less you said my life was worth nothing. Meaningless. And I don't have a single argument to come back with. Bloke might as well go and top himself.'

This solicited the usual response from Paige. 'Fuck you.'

The Ranger's car was parked in the drive that was usually naked of a car. There was no. 'Hi my name is Alphonso, and I'm you're friendly neighbourhood Ranger. It was a bleak. 'Is this your property Miss?'

I want you to call me 'They'.'

Is this your property?

'I rent it.'

'We've had a number of complaints about a barking dog.'

'Dogs'

Proximity

'You have more than one dog miss?'

'It's *They*. I have ten, eleven if you count the wolf, but I'm not sure he's strictly classified as a dog. Lupus...whatever.'

'You're only supposed to have two dogs on a property...*They*.'

'I know that. But they keep arriving. What am I supposed to do. If I took them up to those fucking asshole vets and the top of the hill, I'd need to get a second mortgage to euthanise even one. And I don't have a first mortgage. You should know that one of the people complaining about the barking coming out of this place is *me*. I'm fed up to the back teeth with them. So Alphonso, what are you going to do about my dog problem.'

The Ranger was a little off balance but recovered quickly. 'Do you own these dogs...*They*.'

'No.'

'Are any of these dogs registered.'

'No.'

He was less confident now. Especially since there had been no dog barking from Paige's property, but there was constant barking across the street, and two doors down from there, and another two doors down from that.

'May I see the dogs...*They*.'

‘You can try. But you’ll have to be very quiet.’ He was obediently quiet while she led him through the house. She was a little embarrassed at the lingering scent of vomit, but he could blame the Almost Albino Woman for being there. She opened the glass sliding door. There was a patch of concrete relieved by a patch of grass. ‘There they are. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine...where’s the whippet hiding. Behind the dog that saves people in the snow. Or has the wolf eaten it.’

‘I don’t see any dogs....’

‘Of course you can’t see them! They’re imaginary. Try to imagine them. Now come down here quickly.’ She was on her hands and knees on the grass. ‘Come on. You need to see this.’

He reluctantly got on his hands and knees. ‘What are we looking for.’

‘Dog shit of course. Imaginary dog shit. Wait. I’ve got some. Because it’s imaginary it’s quite insubstantial and it doesn’t last long. And it barely smells. Here. Feel this. Smell it. Are you getting a tiny sensation of the feel and smell of dogshit. This is what I wade through every day. And it gets worse. I went to a shrink yesterday to talk about the imaginary dog infestation and how people had started to complain about the imaginary barking. But he said he couldn’t help me. Do you know why?’

The man gave a little shrug. Starting to show concern about what he’s stumbled into.

She said conspiratorially. ‘Because he has the same problem with imaginary dogs annoying the neighbours. But you can fix

my problem Alphonso. Take away all these imaginary dogs. Take away all this imaginary dog shit and the very real complaints. You can put these asshole dogs in the special dog carrier on your car. It would change my life for ever if you would do that for me. I mean They.'

After much coaxing the imaginary dogs were led away. Goodbye Trumpybum. Goodbye dog that helps people trapped in snow. Goodbye you miserable biting fucking Shiatzu. Goodbye Mister Tinsel the Wolf.' She cast a glance at the Ranger. 'Thank you. You have literally saved my life. Mister Tinsel was starting to look at me in a very strange way. Kill them all any old way you want. Do you have a machine gun? There's a lot of dogs.' She said as Ranger drove off, to the sounds of dogs barking in properties all around him. Paige went inside and went to sleep, failing to set her alarm for the lunch date with her friends.

She awoke and threw on some suitable clothes. She was thinking of going the long way around to avoid Brian, but she was running late already. And there he was, but now kneeling, rubbish and recycling spread everywhere on the road and the verge.

'This is your fault Paige. Yours! I had to put a latch on the bin to stop you from using it and the latch caught on the bin truck long enough to tip the things in the bin everywhere. The truck drivers laughed at me. Just like you planned to do I suppose. First you make me realise what a complete failure I am and now this. The one thing in life I was pretty good at. I can't even get that right.'

Paige knew that sympathy would be a trap. She decided to make a concession to this minor tragedy by walking past without a 'Fuck you'.

As she passed, he said. 'I'm starting to see my life for what it really is. If you hear a loud bang you'll know what's happened.'

She walked on and after twenty yards she heard a loud bang. Her heart started racing, she had her phone out as she ran into Brian's garage. He was putting the gun back on the bench. 'Yes Paige. That's the sound you're going to hear when all of your hate speech and bin tampering get too much for me.'

'Do whatever floats your boat Brian.' At that moment, concern about Brian's survival as part of the human family was at an all-time low.

She walked past the Almost Albino Lady who was at her fence all smug and smarmy. 'I believe the Ranger was at your house and took certain noise making creatures away.'

Paige smiled. 'Yeah. I'm grateful. They were boring me. I'm going to order twenty more from e-bay. All of them are going to be delivered *here*.' Her face recalibrated from smarmy to mean in an instant. 'Also, I think if you got some red contacts and put a rinse through your hair you wouldn't be the Almost Albino Lady anymore. You could pass for what people think an Albino looks like. Politically correct types who don't know fuck all about them would think they should listen to all of your shit.'

She walked into the café. This was a make or break moment. Four girls. Very unlikely they would remain good friends since kindergarten, but they were. Would they be different from the rest of the people she'd been interacting with?

They weren't.

'We're halfway through our lunch. Why bother turning up Paige.' Of the trio, Wendy was her best friend. 'But since you're finally here, Laney has some news and needs support from all of us. She caught her boyfriend looking at porn.'

Paige would usually be sympathetic. But this was a bad day for her also. And it seems her mother was right about her propensity for casual rudeness. But she was certain the body odour and bad breath remarks was the evil zeitgeist talking. She was careful about things like that. 'Ah Newsflash. More than half of the male population look at porn, at least every month, including Christians.' This made her wonder out loud. 'I wonder if there's a Christian porn genre?' She then continued addressing the group. 'You can work with him to make sure he's watching a genre you find acceptable. Or you can *fuck him off and keep going through men until you find one who doesn't watch porn.*'

They were all staring at her. 'That's pretty insensitive Paige.' Wendy said with some justification.

'You know, it was. But maybe the alternative response is the wallowing in self-righteous helplessness you three - and me - usually do. For some context in the last twenty four hours, I lost my job, found out the person I love most in the world has died and I've learned that everyone I come in contact with hates me. Oh, and I had to get my ten dogs put down.'

'You're talking about past events Paige. Can't you see that this is happening to Laney right now.'

She looked Laney in the eye. ‘Change your boyfriend out until you find one that doesn’t like porn Laney. Speed up the process up by going on a dating site and say you’re not into guys who watch porn and you can at least strike off the ten percent who admit to it.’

‘Change my boyfriend is that right Paige. O yes. That’s what you really want. I’ll change him out and you’ll be waiting. *Again*. Don’t ask for my address Paige. Every time I hear the song *Jolene* I cry.’

At that moment the waitress in this case the owner came along. Her approach to serving customers was now; ‘What do you want.’

‘Skinny Soy Chai Latte please.’

‘That’s a pretty complex cup of coffee. Our barista is flat out at the moment.’

‘It’s actually not coffee. Okay, take out the skinny.’

Does that make it better?’ Paige was going to explain that yes, it did, because she could use the same jug to heat milk and froth it for other orders.

‘Okay, take out the soy and the Chai. Could you manage a flat white?’

‘I see. We’re too stupid to make that other stuff you asked for?’

Proximity

Paige smiled brightly and said. 'Yes. You are. I'll have a black coffee and I'll put my own sugar in it.'

'We're too stupid to put sugar in a cup of coffee are we? We're a café renowned for our high quality coffee you know.'

'I want you to look at me while I say this.' Paige waited until she said. 'Yes'.

Paige held her gaze. 'I...want...you...to...bring...me...an...empty... cup. And I will pay three pounds for it. Now don't say anything at all now. Nothing. And don't say anything when you bring me my cup. Nothing.'

After the verbally emasculated woman had left, Rhonda said. 'When did you get so rude Paige.'

'Since yesterday.'

'And what brought that on?'

'Since people started being two parts mean and one-part stupid at me.'

'And are we like that.'

Paige was reluctant to answer. She looked around trying to think of a diversionary conversation starter.

The empty cup arrived, and it was thumped in front of her. The commitment to silence did not extend to muttering loudly about how some people know nothing about coffee.

Paige sighed. ‘Give yourselves some time Rhonda. I got rid of ten imaginary dogs today, after a complaint by a woman who would be only need red contacts and a rinse to get away with inappropriately calling herself an Albino. And yes, I don’t know if they usually have red eyes in case you were going to mention that. I guess the political correctness people will come down pretty hard on me for saying that. Probably kill me. It would be consistent with a man pretending to kill himself because his wheelie bin fell over, which was all *my* fault. In addition to my revelation he was a pathetic loser, which I admit, was pure retaliation for his allegations of bin tampering.’

‘Jesus Paige. It’s all about you as usual. Can we get behind Laney and give her some support. Your boyfriend’s an asshole Laney but we’re here to support you while you work through it.’ Said Wendy.

‘As long as Paige isn’t involved. You boyfriend stealer.’

‘I’m a what?’

‘You know what I mean. That’s why I don’t want you to know where I live or know anything about my boyfriend.’

‘I had dinner with you guys last month. I know Jasper a little because he brings in your cat for check-ups.’ She smiled. ‘As the

ex-receptionist of the place, I had access to your address details. Which are the same, funnily enough, as address I went to for the last intervention for some terrible experience. That intervention was something to do with ‘*a fuck I no longer give.*’

‘There you go. Grooming him for the takeover with all your address finding out and confusing words. You won’t care how crushed I’ll be like I was with Tyler Henderson. I can’t even listen to *Jolene* without it all flooding back to me. The hurt and humiliation.’

Paige rolled her eyes. ‘Virtually no one can listen to that song. It’s horrible. The small cohort who like it are dying out. Funnily enough, of hurt and humiliation because people find out they like it.’

Laney wasn’t listening. ‘*Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, please don’t steal him just because you can.*’ This objectionable line was repeated with all three singing.

She could see that while others were getting two parts meaner and one part dumber, she had gained at least one-part sarcasm.

‘I’ll make a deal with you. I’ll never come within a mile of your boyfriend as long as, when you have children, the first girl is called *Jolene*. No scratch that. Boy or girl. *Jolene.*’

‘I bet you said that to Tyler Henderson after you stole him away and made him satisfied in ways I couldn’t. Then threw him away like some garbage because he meant nothing to you. But for me

he was....’ There were heaving sobs which the two other friends were trying to deescalate into only sobs with ‘it’s okays’. They did this while giving Paige nasty glares.

‘I barely knew Tyler Laney. We were only thirteen. I think we waited for a bus at the same bus stop to get home. I think I took him around the back of the shelter and let him feel me up but that only happened a couple of...hundred times. Other than that, we barely knew each other and he meant nothing to me.’

Paige was trying to remember who Tyler Henderson was. She’d never been an especially popular girl. Maybe he was of the rare few that invited her to a dance. But changed his mind. Came back later and said he’d lined up a better option. She’d been philosophical. At least she’d been *an* option for a while. She’d done a fairly good job at blotting that part of her life out. She wasn’t especially good looking nor had an outgoing personality.

But she had three friends that had looked out for each other and laughed. They didn’t get asked out that much either. Paige had lost so much in the last twenty-four hours. She wasn’t helping herself much. But the person she loved most in the world had died, her mother didn’t say I love you, she’d lost her job and her neighbour had gone insane. She was under no illusions that these cherished childhood relationships were about to implode.

‘I suppose you think that’s funny Paige?’

‘Yeah I do. I could say any dumb shit to you because you three are going to be relentless bitches. I don’t know how long it’s going to last, maybe forever. Which I’ll be sad about. But you can get on with storming out of here with your self-righteous shit. If I could enjoy my cup of air in peace, that would be fine by me.’ As she

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did this she was emptying two sachets of sugar into the empty cup and stirring it. She started to drink as if it was a very hot liquid.

They were now ever more annoyed because she'd anticipated the storming out. They stood. Rhonda said archly. 'I've got it in the bag Paige. *But I might decide to let it out.*'

'You've got it in a bag?'

'That's right.'

'Okay. Let the poor thing out for fuck's sake.'

They stomped off. Friendships of a lifetime trashed in less than half an hour. But there was always more bile to come, as she learned from the throwing up incident.

'You know leaving without paying is illegal.'

'I'm not leaving without paying.'

'Your friends did.'

'They're not my friends. They're a trio of fucking bitches. Now if you would be so kind, and I realise that's a stretch for you, could you go and get the bill for the whole table and I will pay it and then I can leave and that will make *you* happy and *me* happy.' The

woman couldn't fault the logic.

She returned with the bill. Paige extracted a few notes to hand to the woman.

'Haven't you heard of a card. You can pay the right amount. You don't need to be asking for change.'

Paige decided to take the trouble to explain it. 'I take a certain amount of money out of my bank every month in cash. I go to the post office to pay all my bills in cash except for a few which I do via a bank transfer from home but I calculate that within my monthly allocation of cash - which is therefore reduced accordingly. Hence, I never use a card. As an enforced savings measure it's working well, because science has demonstrated it actually hurts more, to hand over cash. Especially in situation like this where people are petty, mean and unhelpful. But on this occasion I have a solution.' She handed the woman the cash who, through force of habit immediately took it. 'What happens now; is if you don't bring me my change back, I'm going to call the police because you have *stolen* that money from me. Now. In summary.' Paige smiled sweetly as the woman glared back at her. 'Fuck off and get my change.'

A triumphant café owner returned. They had cleaned out the till and the tip jar of all of the smallest denomination coins they could. Paige looked at the pile as she poured it in front of her. Paige was immediately sifting thought it. 'I thought I saw this come though as you were pouring them out.' She pulled out a coin and examined it closely. 'My Uncle's an expert in rare coins. This is worth thousands. Tens of thousands.' Paige got up and ran. 'I'm rich, I'm rich.' She cried. Leaving the remainder of the change behind.

Paige hadn't had any lunch and the air coffee was unsatisfying. She was reluctant to go to her still vomit fragranced house to prepare food. She would have to open up all of the windows, spray air refreshers and try not to let herself turn her into a blubbering mess on the bed. But she was running a gauntlet now. Almost Albino Lady advised Paige she had called the Ranger again. There was more barking coming from her house. The woman accused Paige of hiding some dogs in a bedroom.

'I've called the Ranger dozens of times to complain about my barking dogs. I don't think it's acceptable. Do you think it's acceptable?'

'No. I guess not.'

'And *you* are about to have a yard lousy with *Doodles*. Labradoodle, Grooodle, Sheepadoodle, Wienmardoodle. Shnoodle, Dalmadoodle and even the hard to get hold of Idontgiveafuckadoodle. There is one exhausted male poodle out there. You'll be calling the Ranger about your own dogs barking soon as will I. I could have bought you the entire range of Doodles, somewhere between forty and sixty. But I'm on a budget Almost Albino Lady. And I thought twenty was enough. Do you know why?'

'Why.'

'Because I don't like you. Fuck off.'

Approaching home, the ambulance and police in front of Brian's house sobered her mood. The ambulance was pulling away as she reached the house.

A policeman was making notes as he stood in front of the open garage.

'Hello.' Paige said. 'Is Brian okay. I see there was an ambulance.'

'Good morning Miss.'

'It's They. That's the pronoun that needs to be used for me...us. It's They.'

'I see...um. I'm Officer Turner of the local constabulary. Mr Morcambe is in a stable condition. It appears he discharged a firearm and a chip of brick came flying at him. Nasty cut on the cheek. Ambulance fellow said it might need two or three stiches. Called the ambulance partly because he said he'd been handling rubbish all morning and had touched his cheek.'

'I'm relieved he's alright.' She went to walk on.

'Excuse me. I'd like to ask you a few questions.'

'Of course.' She smiled.

'Mr Morcambe said the reason he was making practice suicide shots at the wall was due to a...' He flipped through his notes. 'Paige Grainger.'

Proximity

'I see. I have heard she's a very unpleasant person. My name is Paige by coincidence. And another coincidence is that my second name is Turner.'

The officer smiled. 'We're distant cousins.'

'Yes. They say I'm a real Paige Turner. That could mean a few things I imagine. I wasn't here this morning because I've been away slaughtering penguins for the past three months or so. I haven't bumped into this Grainger woman lately. Very, very unpleasant person. I'm not surprised poor Brian started a suicide practice routine. My sister might have seen something.'

'Oh. And what's her name.'

'Her first name's Paige.'

He looked up. 'I thought that was you're first name.'

'Yes it is. We have to have the same first name because we're identical twins. And that's why we also dress the same.'

'I didn't know that.'

'It's the law. But in this case we have different second names because we have two different fathers. Dark family secrets. By the way, what's the name of the Officer in Charge of your station.'

‘Dick...I mean Sargent Richard Sheffield.’

‘Funnily enough, her name’s Paige Sheffield. Even though we’re identical, she takes more after her father and I take more after my father. Neither of us look like our mother though. My sister might have seen something of that Grainger woman, but unfortunately she’s left for the arctic to slaughter polar bears not long ago.’

‘Ah...They, may I call you Paige.’

‘Please do Officer Turner.’

‘Is it strictly legal and or ethical to slaughter polar bears and penguins?’

‘Absolutely. There are the plagues of the damn things. You’ve seen on the telly thousands of those big penguins looking down their beaks at everyone. All packed in like sardines because there are too many. Bastards. And Polar bears, rummaging through the rubbish piles of every city north of San Francisco. They’re a menace. We get our instructions from the top. Very hush hush. From a man named David Attenborough. He doesn’t mess about. He says once we’ve slaughtered enough of the Emperor Penguins and Polar Bears we’ll move onto those stupid looking Narwhals and then those smug sea lions that look cheerful all the time. Bastards. It’ll take a few years of slaughtering enough of them to keep the populations in balance. Mr Attenborough says that unless we keep ruthlessly killing endangered wildlife, these species could breed exponentially and in a very short time endangered wildlife will start to endanger the wildlife that’s not endangered.’

‘I never realised this was going on. You should publicise this good work.’

‘Sir, we only do it to serve society and I can surmise that this is exactly the same reason you do the work you do. Important work but conducted with humility.’

‘It’s nice to get that feedback. If you come into contact with this Paige Grainger, please let us know. She’s been tampering with rubbish bins and spraying defoliant on a neighbour’s plants, and possibly appropriating his mail, which is a serious crime, if proven.’

‘Very worrying. Should I approach her? Run? Try to kill her.’

‘If you see this... the bad Paige, call us, but don’t approach her.’

‘I’ll be sure to do that officer.’ She walked into her house. The policeman felt something was wrong, but he couldn’t quite put his finger on it. It may have been the ‘Grainger’ on the mailbox.

Paige made a nice tuna and salad sandwich for lunch. Part of the motivation for this was that she could have a beer. This time after the food. All this carnage in her life was piling up. And yet apart from the death of Uncle Liam, which still came in waves, she didn’t seem to care. If people were suddenly going to be total assholes to her, she wasn’t going to take it. She wasn’t going to put up with being treated that way to keep a job or friends or neighbours. However, she was looking at a lonely life. She hoped that if she went somewhere different maybe the people would

be normal. Maybe there had been some strange mass insanity brought on by pesticides or mouldy bread. She was going to recover her car from the vet carpark and start driving to see if there was anyone in the country who was not bent on being rude to her and stupid along with it.

And then she had a thought. The dreams she had of Tom weren't there the previous night. She had only had two small sleeps since this qualified nightmare began and he wasn't in them. And she hadn't taken the pills. Irrespective of that, she wanted to see if he'd turned into another relentlessly rude and stupid person.

His cottage, on one of the larger blocks in the town was a half an hours walk away. It looked like it had been the labour of at least half a lifetime. She'd visited there once before, and although he was a little strange, he struck her as a good person. She would take what she could get in terms of someone being nice to her. Or even disinterested.

He was working in the garden when he saw her approach. He turned and ran into the house and closed the door. Her heart sank. There was no one who she could turn to for solace. The death of Uncle Liam was taking over her mind because there was nothing else to distract it except sarcasm, which she was now better at, but she wished she didn't need to be. She was about to turn away when a thought struck her. She walked up on the veranda and was going to open the door, but thought that would be rude. She went to the window beside it and could only barely see Tom lying down in the 'I'm dead' position he had adopted the day before.

That's dedication she thought. 'Tom. Your idea worked. I've stopped dreaming about you.'

Proximity

‘That’s great news. I’m still dead you know.’

‘I don’t think you need to be dead anymore Tom. But there’s something else going on. No one likes me anymore.’

He got up stiffly and came to the door. ‘How could anyone not like you. They’d need to be mad. You’ve just come across a string of people having a bad day. It happens. People come across me having a bad day all the time. I can be nasty.’

It was hard to imagine Tom having a bad day. An indifferent day maybe. Soon he was setting down a cup of tea in front of her. ‘Tom. You didn’t sleep in the ‘I’m dead’ position last night did you?’

‘The floorboards there are particularly soft there. I often sleep on the floor. I find beds too comfortable.’

Paige realised she was experiencing a building wave of relief. Tom had, for him, a normal attitude to her.

‘Now what’s all this BS about people not liking you. Do I need to get out my semi-automatic or will a pump action shotgun do the job.’

She smiled, ‘We would need a pandemic tactical response team Tom. It’s everywhere.’

‘Ignore that cup of tea. Let’s go and have a coffee and maybe some apple pie. Or whatever you want. I’m like a second son to

the Miriam. Even though I'm older than her.'

As they approached the café Paige recounted her experiences of that morning.

'I brought a Bowie knife in case there's any unacceptable rudeness.'

They took a seat and the owner, incredibly officious not a few hours before, was delighted to see Tom and said. 'And who's your companion today?'

'This is Paige. Like a daughter to me if she would get on board and accept the proposition.'

'And what would you like dear.'

What the hell thought Paige. 'I'd love to have a skinny soy chai latte please. Extra hot. Two sugars.'

'Easy done.' Said the woman. 'And you Tom. Prospective father?'

'A black coffee please. And I'll put in the sugar.'

'Not one to experiment is our Tom. Been drinking coffee that way for twenty years.' They both smiled at each other. 'And how about some cake or one of our pies?'

After a pause Paige said. 'I would love a slice of your apple pie

please.’ Paige looked at the woman’s name badge. ‘Miriam.’ She added.

‘Of course. You know hardly anyone bothers to learn my name even if they come back here time and again. And you Tom.’

‘Miriam, my companion, is insightful in many ways, makes me think I will go for the apple pie also.’

‘A good choice, we just brought out a fresh one that’s nice and warm.’

She wandered off to get the order. Tom said. ‘I have the curse of men, or at least some, that I need to use the WC at a frequency higher than I might prefer.’ He disappeared into the crowded café to a door about twenty yards away.

‘Miriam returned with a tray with two cups on it and laid out Tom’s order with great care. Cutlery sitting neatly over a napkin and two sachets of sugar sitting next to the cup. She turned to leave when Paige said. ‘That’s my order.’

‘No, it’s for another table.’

‘No it isn’t.’

‘Are you accusing me of lying.’

‘Absolutely.’

'This order is for an ordinary, nice person. Not an awful young gold digger trying to swindle Tom out of everything he's got.'

'You give me that chai and pie or I'm going to start screaming obscenities.'

'It's for another table.' Said Miriam truculently.

'Okay. I'm going to follow you around and when you put it on someone else's table I'm going to ask them if they ordered a skinny soy chai latte, extra hot, with two sugars and some apple pie. And if they didn't Miriam, I'm going to jump up on that table and scream out 'Miriam is a lying fucking bitch', and you see if I don't. Now give me my pie and chai and fuck off before start to actually get angry.'

Tom walked past returning to the table. Miriam smiled. 'Oh dear. Must have been some misunderstand. I don't recall what it was about but sorry dear.' Her order was laid out with the same care a Tom's.

Paige drank her beverage. Brooding a little. Tom liked to think he was attuned to people. He let her brood away. She finished her coffee but not her pie. It was left untouched while he, not able to wait any longer for the lady to go first, had nearly finished his and was about to ask if the pie was in some way deficient when she said. 'Tom give me your phone. I'd like to show you something.' He handed it over. A little reluctantly, having heard what some young people used phones for. 'You're such a technophobe Tom. She loaded up a video sharing app. 'Tom, I'd like you to go about the same distance to the ...what did you call it...WC but on the

street and watch and listen.'

His phone was handed back. The app already on. 'The wonders of modern science. I've never found out about this because I've... had no one to do it with.'

With complete sincerity Paige said. 'You'll always have me now. Go out and watch the alter ego of Miriam. It took her a little while to come and clear Tom's things away. 'What is it now? Our pie's not good enough. You're some international pie connoisseur and you're going to go on line and trash our reputation - just because you can.' She said these last few words, disturbingly, to the tune to *Jolene*. It was bad enough as it was without Miriam butchering it.

Paige was all kindness topped off with a dash of bon homie. 'Far from it Miriam. It's that I failed to mention when I ordered the pie that I like to have a dollop of double thickened cream.'

'You what?'

'I'd like some cream on my pie.'

'Cream on your pie.'

'I believe that was the substance of my request. And be assured I will pay a handsome amount as a surcharge for the great inconvenience I'm causing you to supply said cream.'

‘Inconvenience. I suppose you think I have an endless amount of time to rush around getting things for people who were so thoughtless they couldn’t order properly in the first place. I suppose you want me to dance a jig while I’m doing it.

‘The jig is optional, you may choose to partake in that or not Miriam. All I want is some cream, the thicker the better. I’ll settle, reluctantly, for whipped cream if that’s all you have.’

‘We don’t have any cream of any description left.’

‘I see. How about I go to the convenience store three doors down and, if you will leave my pie unmolested, I will get the exact kind of cream I like and I will duly dollop it on my pie. This will relieve the trouble you’re having, jig dancing or otherwise, with your feet becoming sore on my account. And, since we’re such good friends now, I feel obligated to suggest you see a podiatrist.’

‘I can see you’ll be straight onto the internet saying we are such a shambolic mess of a Café we don’t have such a basic ingredient as cream. You’ll probably christen us the ‘Make sure you bring your own cream Café.’

‘By your own admission you don’t have any cream Miriam.’

‘We have cream. O, yes we have cream. But I wouldn’t cream your pie if you were the last dollop asker on earth. And don’t try to bring your own second rate cream in here. Next thing you’ll bring your own coffee and then another bunch of people you’ll pay to do the same. You’d have to pay them because you don’t have friends. We’ll go broke because everyone will bring their own coffee, pie and cream. I’m going to take that pie back because it’s...timed out.’ She picked it up and was about to walk away.

Paige decided her pie being hijacked wasn't something she was going to stand by and permit. She got up on the table and called out. 'This woman is stealing my pie. I paid for it...I mean, I'll pay after I've eaten it because that's the usual practice ... and she's stealing it.'

Miriam was about to put the pie back in place. They were both surprised by the mood of the crowd. One said. 'You don't deserve any pie you bitch.' And another observed 'No one wants you here. You're bringing everyone down. I felt great before sitting near you.'

Miriam was now all superiority. 'You want your pie back. Call the police. I'm a lapsed Catholic, but I'm going home to have a big pray that I never see your ordinary face ever again. You're a heartless, manipulative, little shrew and in addition to stealing boyfriends away from your friends, you're probably slowly poisoning Tom to get everything he has.'

Tom arrived as Miriam had finished saying this. She was momentarily confused. 'Okay. I'm going to get a big dollop of cream.' She squinted. At life it seemed. 'I get the feeling I was a little off hand earlier Paige. Sorry. That time of the month probably.'

It was Paige's turn. 'Miriam, you're way too old to be menopausal, but everything's fine. Don't worry. We all get a bit off hand sometimes. I know I do.'

Miriam smiled. Relieved. 'Thanks for being understanding luv. I'll get this sorted out for you.'

Tom was mortified. 'This is all my fault Paige. I went to the circus and asked a gypsy fortune-teller with one of those round clear balls that I wanted a surrogate daughter. And now like the old monkey's hand story by... whoever wrote that, there's a twist in the tail. Or like Bedazzled, not the new version but the original. No matter what Stanley Moon wished for, there was always some undesirable consequence that came along with it, courtesy of George Spiggot. Who was the devil of course.'

'Tom, I think we're having a major generation gap moment here, but the key thing is, you saw what was going on. What's happening.'

'Do you have a tent?'

'A tent.'

'Yes. For me to sleep in at night in case you have unwelcome visitors. And then through the day I'll follow you around at a sufficient distance, not close enough to be weird and creepy, but near enough to ensure people are nice to you.'

Paige was grateful but said. 'Tom how long do you think you can keep that up for.'

'At least till this malaise comes to an end. If it's permanent, then it looks like I have a job for life. But we're going to have to come up with a viable solution after I snuff it.'

'I don't think I'd want to wait that long Tom. Since yesterday I lost my job, lost my best friends, caused my neighbour to start a

Proximity

regimen of suicide practice. Later I told the police I was a twin sister who took turns in slaughtering wildlife in polar regions. I had the dog catcher take away ten imaginary dogs from my back yard. My mother hung up without saying 'I love you' and... the most special, wonderful person in my life, my Uncle Liam, died.'

Tom was immediately sincere. 'I'm sorry you lost someone you loved so much. That's dreadful enough without all of this confusing unpleasantness.' But he became pragmatic. 'I think we can fix most of that. We can't bring your Uncle back, but we can certainly get you into the funeral. Get your job back. Shouldn't be a problem. Suicide trainee. Easy. Police report. They will have moved onto something else by now. The story's too implausible.'

She couldn't help but give him a disbelieving look.

'Call your friends for a dinner catch up. Miriam can be a pain even without this awful pandemic only you and I are immune to, but I've known her twenty years and she can also be cheerful and generous. Sort of.'

She called her friends and they each said they could not think of a worse way to spend an hour. She told them each that she had some very special news and they reluctantly agreed to come. Unbeknown to her, and without coordinating it, they each decided to learn the lyrics to *Jolene*.

'Excellent.' Said Tom. 'Let's see if your neighbour's back from hospital.'

They walked back. Tom telling her about the virtues of the cottage garden in having bees attracted to your orchard and vegetable patches. Which she found interesting given the nature of her back yard and the fact that her family had been flat dwellers.

They arrived at Brian's house, and he was back in his garage wielding a gun. The police had made no effort to stop his live fire suicide practice. Tom nudged her into the garage. He looked up at Paige, and then looked at the gun. Some confusion now covering his face. 'Hi there Paige, it's good to see you.'

'Hi Brian. How's the face.'

He rubbed his face in a number of places before finding the dressing for the small wound. 'It's fine thanks.'

'Brian, this is my friend Tom.'

'Hi Tom. Good to meet you.' Brian came over and they shook hands. There was an extended, uncomfortable silence.

'Brian.' Said Tom. 'You're never going to think about suicide again.'

'Oh. Okay Tom.'

'We'll get going Brian. Have a good day.'

'Sure. And thanks for all that help with the bins and the mail and the garden Paige. I really appreciate it.'

‘It’s a pleasure Brian.’

Once they were out of earshot Tom said. ‘Probably going to set up motion sensing cameras for bins and the letterbox today’

‘Why didn’t you tell him to be nice to me.’

‘Baby steps.’

She shook her head. They kept walking. Yet again Almost Albino Lady was at her brick front fence. ‘Morning.’ Said Tom. ‘This is my friend Paige.’

‘Good morning. Haven’t we met.’

‘Yes.’ Said Paige. ‘You had a concern about barking dogs.’

‘That’s right. The Ranger came and explained it to me. Your dogs were all imaginary and I’m pretty sure I can’t hear imaginary barking. He said there was lots of dogs all around your house barking all the time. He said he was going to look into it.’

Tom smiled. ‘Ma’am, you are never going to hear another dog bark again.’ They all smiled and Tom and Paige moved off.

‘The Vet is on the way before you catch up with your friends, maybe someone’s still in there. Tom sat on the seat outside where Clients with animals too unruly even for the separate rooms waited.

Paige went in and looked around the corner. Janice was tapping away at a keyboard. 'Paige I'm glad to see you. There must have been some kind of mix up this morning. I think I may have given you the wrong impression. About your employment here. You've made such a big contribution today. Jeremy is not using a horse thermometer, how did you put it, 'to shove up a dog's ass'. He said it was a simple mistake. Raymond realised what he really needed was a divorce and his wife turned out to be delighted when he took her out to lunch to tell her. And Pam. I got rid of her. As you said. She was generous and caring, kind, tolerant and had a good sense of humour. She was really making us look bad. I decided to give her marching orders. And I've decided to reduce gouging my Clients by ten percent a year. In a decade no one will be getting unnecessary tests or treatments in this Clinic. We'll see you at eight thirty, or any time around there.'

'Of course Janice.'

Janice saw Tom was standing behind her. Paige introduced him as 'My potential surrogate father.' Tom's face revealing he thought this was a giant leap forward. 'Sorry for listening in to your conversation but I couldn't help hearing about the decision regarding Pam.' Said Tom. 'I run a specialist course on making people less caring, more thoughtless, reduce their sense of humour and help them to become very slightly unpleasant but still okay to work with. I can make her the kind of person you will like to work with, but also feel superior to.'

Janice nodded. 'Sounds ideal.'

'Why don't you call her now and tell her it was a mix up and you would be grateful if she'd return. And that she will never be sacked and can work at this vet clinic as long as she wants.'

‘Okay.’ Said Janice brightly.

Tom said. ‘Why not do it now while it’s fresh in your mind.’

Janice made the call immediately and Pam, though confused, said she be happy to return. Secretly she hoped Paige wasn’t coming back too. *She’s such a bitch.* Thought the otherwise saintly Pam.

Paige walked along in silence for a while. When they approached the town centre she went into another café and asked them for some of the chalk they used for their Specials board. They asked her what colour she’d like and in spite of saying green she was given one of each colour. She said she didn’t want them to run short but they said they could get more tomorrow. She should have said no to the extra colours. Tom had wandered on to look in a shop window about thirty feet away. At the threshold of the door she heard one of the girls said to the other. ‘How about that fucking bitch. Taking all our chalk like she owns the place. We’re going to have to go with last night Specials now. That’s going to impress people and the boss no end.’

Paige knew it was pointless. But she ran in and put most of it back on the table and ran out. They were a twenty yards down the road when the young woman poked her head out of the door of the café and said. ‘These are all the colours we never use; you asshole.’

‘And may I ask what incited such hatred in those two otherwise vegan pacifists.’

She treated that as rhetorical. 'I want to mark a line when people become mean and nasty. Then I can keep that distance from anyone. I also want to measure if this phenomenon where nasty turns to nice changes each day.' She changed the subject. 'I'm going to Uncle Liam's funeral which is the day after tomorrow. I had to ring around a few funeral home to find out. I'd appreciate it if you'd help me out to go to a shop I can buy a disguise. But nothing too expensive.'

'I'll be there beside you.'

'Tom all of this is too much to ask. It's such a drain on your time. I was going to go and hide in the corner. Try to keep as far away from the service as possible.'

'You belong in the front Paige. This man was so important in your life. And you in his from what I gather. Your relatives will be there, some of whom I assume you haven't seen in years. If it's the only other thing I do for you, I'd like to do this.'

They walked into the café and she told Tom what she'd like him to do. He was dubious about her theory but agreed, holding his phone with the video app on, he lingered around about thirty feet away from their table. He asked Miriam if she could go and take both Paige's and his order. Miriam came over and said. 'Paige is it. Twice in one day.' Suddenly her voice became irritated. 'I thought you would have put two and two together that you're not welcome here.' And then she was all sweetness. 'You bring a lot of business though the door.' There was a pause and a change of tone. 'But I don't want it. They're all like you. Prima Donna's who take up an ordinate amount of time and yet actually order very little which is always as hard to prepare as possible.'

I can write down a list of other places you could go to and ruin their businesses.'

Tom returned after coming closer and going further to observe Miriam's proclivity for rudeness. 'I've lost my train of thought. What can I get you. I imagine Paige is waiting for friends but I could get you a drink.'

'A beer please Miriam.' Paige's tone was flat. 'Guinness. A pint.'

'A great idea.' Said Tom. 'And Miriam. Could you do something for me. That chalk mark I made on the concrete, could you leave it there and freshen it up with some more if starts to disappear.'

'Sure Tom.' Miriam was a little dubious.

'It's part of very important study the National University is conducting. But it's very secret also, I'm unable to give you any details.'

Once she'd gone Tom suggested to Paige he'd bring back a tape measure for the next visit.

'Here they come.' Said Paige. Not suggesting Tom get another table, but letting him know he could if he wanted to. He said he'd go off and read some magazines, which he rarely did because he couldn't afford them, and he thought they were stupid. But that didn't stop him being fascinated by the doings of the rich and famous when it cost him nothing.

Three of what they had once styled themselves as the 'four amigos' walked into the Café and they were angry. They were boiling over with rage. She needed a very good reason as to why they had been summoned to a dinner after an unsatisfactory aborted lunch, which they hadn't paid for. This made them ever angrier. They assumed she'd asked them here to grovel. She had things to apologise for stretching right back to grade four. And then of course the whole 'Tyler Incident'. And she better make that grovel a good one.

They crossed what would be a fully encircling chalk threshold and all of the venom vanished. They came forward friendly and warm. 'Paige it's great to see you. We had to go all of a sudden at lunch. Don't even remember why.' Said Laney.

Laney was excited and had to share something as soon as the drinks were ordered. 'I had a bit of an intervention with Jasper after work. I won't call it a confrontation because it was very calm. I told him I knew he was watching porn but I'd studied the statistics and, to my surprise, it was quite common. Even among Christians, although I don't know if they have their own sort of, Channel. I suggested we watch some together which he was surprisingly very positive about. I advised him that we should find a genre that he enjoyed but that I didn't find...objectionable. He thought about that for quite a long time, and said. 'You know, we're partners, and I shouldn't have been hiding things from you. I think this is going to be great for our relationship.' He's going to take me through a few of the genres tonight. He said he's going to hook up his computer to the television and we'll be able to get an appreciation of the nuances of some these films on a bigger screen.'

The other girls were thrilled. Rhonda asked Paige what she thought. 'A stoke of genius Laney.' Casting around for some

recognition for her lame double entendre. 'Things might get hard as you go along but I'm sure it will all come to a happy ending for both of you.' Lame, lame, lame thought Paige. Surely I could do better than that. But usually all the girls would be laughing and shaking their heads at Paige's pathetic attempts at humour. But these friends, whoever they were, thanked her for the words of encouragement. They embarked on discussions about what Paige hoped were the dull aspects of their lives. Surely there was more going on than what they were sharing. Had she been like that?

Her life was now tremendously interesting, but for all the wrong reasons. At that moment a song was played, at slightly above the usual background for a café. Miriam was on her side of the line. She gave an agreed signal to the waitress on the counter to play *Jolene*, by that big hearted and big busted country singer. For some it reminded them of times gone by, for some it was simply annoying. Three of the four amigos started singing along with it, in loud, untuneful noises that reverted to la, la, la's and de, da, de, da, da dums when they had not quite committed the lyrics to memory, which was most of the song other than the chorus. They got dirty looks. Paige was delighted for once they were not directed towards her.

There was no mention of Tyler nor a fear of further inveterate man stealing on Paige's part. They talked about the streaming shows they liked. She realised that because she wasn't a subscriber to any streaming channels she was locked out of some of their cultural lives. Usually they would critique the shows out of fun, ridicule or genuine appreciation. Now they seemed to have absorbed it all without question.

Paige told them she had a boyfriend who was also a heavy porn user and Laney's brave intervention was very inspiring to her. Soon there was a flurry of excitement. Paige. A boyfriend. She

found their surprised tones a little offensive and hurtful.

‘Yes. He’s late fifties, I hope. Doesn’t have much money so he grows things in his garden to eat. What money he does have is spent on top of the range computers and porn channel subscriptions. I think it’s time for me to sit down and try to find porn that we both find acceptable. Because I don’t trust him, I’ll need to find a way for him to stick to what we agree. I think I’ll need to get an IT guy to hook up somethin that gives him an electric shock if he looks at what’s not been approved by me. It’s baby steps but it’s what we need to grow closer. You’ve been such an inspiration to me Laney. I don’t want to lose him. Like they say. ‘A good man is had to find. My advice is to grab a mediocre one and brow beat him into being a good one.’

The subject was changed rapidly. Rhonda had been asked to be a bridesmaid for someone from work. Wendy was buying a car she couldn’t afford. Laney had changed over to a new personal trainer because there had been one at the gym she loved to have a good long perv at when he wasn’t looking, and she saw no double standard this. All of these conversations were conducted in the kind of girlish excitement of Grease. Not that they used to be highbrow, but they did like to talk about, maybe debate same sex marriage or laugh about politicians and try to figure out who was worst between Britain and America. She introduced some of these topics and they were dropped like a stone.

She’d had a light meal and sat, bored, while the others had expensive deserts, she would usually lie and say she was dieting. Though it was really because they didn’t have a place in her budget. She asked Tom, now sitting near the chalk marks, to allow a cheery mood for Miriam from the service area to the table, and if he’d do something for her after that. ‘Sure.’ He said.

'I can't wait to go and do the porn intervention genre investigation process Laney's shown me. It might work with Tom here.' Now standing next to her. Unbeknown to them she'd paid the bill. 'It's a bit weird but could you girls come out the front of the restaurant to say goodbye.' They did indicate with their body language it was strange. They were all out on the footpath while Tom was standing inside the door. Paige hugged each one of her friends and said 'I'm lucky to have had a friend like you.' And. 'You've been an inspiration to me so many times.' And it was all true.

'Are you going on a trip or something Paige. It's like you're saying goodbye.'

'I might be going away for a while. And I wanted to let you know how special you all are to me.'

There were three synchronised awwws, like they'd seen a cute kitten. Rhonda broke into what had been an uncomplicated final farewell which caused a note of uncertainty.

'Something happened or I did something Paige. Something to do with you. Though I can't remember what.'

Paige shrugged. 'Nice to see you girls.' She walked slowly down the street while Tom waited at the door until they were settled with dessert in front of them and less likely to run after her shouting obscenities.

'Nice time with your friends?'

'Yeah Tom.'

'Happy to help. But how did you find out about my porn addiction.'

She ignored that. 'It was nice to say good bye.'

'Goodbye?'

'They weren't actually there as my friends Tom. Now they're either nasty or vapid. Pseudo friends. I want to remember things how they were. I don't plan on seeing them again.'

'Until you wake up.'

She paused and smiled. 'Ah. This is all a dream.'

'Yes. Of course I don't think you're in my dream, I think I'm in your dream.'

'It's a shitty dream and I want wake up around a day and a half ago.'

'The only other explanation is that it's a gypsy woman you didn't pay enough money to and she's very annoyed with you. She's caused you to forget the encounter and has set the world against you.'

'I do remember her well. She came into the vets with of one of the dogs that save people buried in the snow.' Tom knew not to help her with that. 'Told me to hand over a pile cash or she would get everyone to hate me. It was a month's rent. I told her to fuck off. As I usually do when I met people who are disagreeable. And here I am. Would have handed over my last pound to keep my uneventful life how it had been. The scarf and the gold coins and the big transparent ball should have warned me.'

'There's a lesson in there I'm sure.' Said Tom.

'Anyhow. This is about where we part ways. Don't feel obliged to come with me to the funeral the day after tomorrow. I'll go incognito.'

'Haven't you figured out we're in this together. Come to my place and I'll run you home in the car so you're not the victim of random meanness.'

When had reached Tom's garage, they were visiting a place which was overrun with pumpkins, zucchini, climbing beans and peas making their way all around the nearby fruit and nut trees and the garage door. 'Have to use most of this as mulch anyhow as I can't eat it all.' Tom opened the garage, a process which required several thick runners to be cut away with shears. As they drove the mint Hillman Hunter out, squashing some button squash as they went, it was obvious Tom didn't take the car out much. He said. 'I'll be picking you up from home tomorrow and take you to work and I'll sit down for a while and read the paper and play sudoku and three-dimensional chess in my mind, all at once of course.'

Paige didn't argue. She said 'thanks' for helping her. She got out at her front door to see Brian was lurking at his front gate. Once she went inside a single piece of paper had been slid under her door. When she turned it over it was a coloured pencil drawing of a kitten hanging from a noose.

She made sure she had plenty to eat before she started drinking. Wine was off limits for a while. She drank Guinness. Which her Uncle Liam always told her was a food group in its own right. She was worried that when she tried to go to sleep, all of this stuff would keep spinning in her head. But this time the day receded into a sleep that featured no dreams. Forgetting to set her alarm she woke up to some exploratory knocking. She quickly dressed and let Tom in. He said she'd be late for work unless they left straight away. She shrugged and offered tea or coffee and he chose tea. She had some toast and went to the Surgery while Tom sat on the seat outside in the sun.

Half an hour later Paige come out and sat by Tom. 'It's one dimensional niceness or one dimensional hatred. I don't know which is worse. Actually I do know which is worse. I told Janice I'd come down with a sudden case of pregnancy and needed time off. She said I should have as much time as I wanted on full pay. That little resolution will last until we get to the car. And I see you're an avid paper reader now.'

'Someone dropped it off as they walked by.' He smiled at her. 'We could burn it.'

'I expected to be featured one way or another eventually. Unspeakable rudeness in café, that kind of thing.' She was being ironic. He winced as he handed it over. It was a little worse that she feared.

The Irony – Kitten Hater At Work In Local Vet Surgery

‘The Bulletin has it on good authority that a current employee of the Ladronas Veterinary Clinic is a sworn Kitten Hater. Our source, once a friend of hers or They, does not want to reveal her identity as she fears for her life and those of her pet cat. She said They Paige Grainger expressed a strong dislike for kittens and a desire to harm them from a very early age. Grainger mocked cat and kitten videos as ‘mindless crap’. When we asked our source if They Grainger had ever sexpressed an intention to harm kittens she said. ‘I don’t remember. Maybe.’

The Bulletin was able to interview Janice Diebin, the owner of the practice last night before we went to press. We put to her ‘Are you harbouring a kitten torturer in your midst?’ Her answer was telling. ‘She does sit staring at the door for an inordinate amount of time. And she tends to work strange hours. It’s not inconceivable that she’s been receiving bags of kittens. They might be whisked away to a fate I shudder to contemplate. We’ve never seen bags of kittens being delivered since she started here. Maybe that’s where they’re all going.’

When asked what she was going to do as the Owner of the practice she responded. ‘I’ll be dismissing They on the grounds of unsubstantiated suspicion of animal cruelty. But we’ll also be putting surveillance systems outside the front door, in case They continues intercepting bags of kittens out of hours. And who knows, this unimaginable cruelty might involve puppies also. We don’t see bags of puppies arriving either.

The Bulletin is aware that this story may be bigger than kitten torture, reprehensible as that is. We’ll be providing you more details in the coming days.’

Paige sat in the sunshine. Looking at nothing. ‘Laney was playing cat videos ad nauseum one day when we were kids. I mean Jesus how long before cat videos become grating. We were in the middle of a string of kitten videos and I said the best thing you could do for those kittens is drown them.’

‘Kitten downing was not however a hobby of yours?’

‘Who could? I imagine there are people who abuse kittens but you’d have to be a heartless psycho.’ She sighed.

‘If you’d like to listen to some advice from your replacement dad...’

‘Let’s stick with surrogate.’

‘Anyhow, my advice is a bit of gardening. I find that when something’s going on that brings me down, and you more than qualify for feeling that, I feel better while I’m doing a bit of gardening. There’s always plenty to do and then you eat the produce. There’s nothing like the fresh stuff. And then I’d like you to consider staying in the spare room. Like it or not, that article might lead to a few wierdo’s hanging around.’

Paige knew he was right. ‘I appreciate it Tom. I’d be deep in the shit with no shovel without you. Tomorrow we go to the funeral and after that I think I’ll try to disappear. Go backpacking somewhere I can get right away from people.’

‘Let’s take one day at a time.’

Working in the garden was therapeutic. They were working out in the back where the beds were large and laid out in an orderly pattern. The range of vegetable was bewildering. Often the same vegetable but different varieties. Paige never imagined there were that many different colours of carrots. Tom told her how orange carrots came to be the standard colour. After a few hours they needed a gardening fork which was around the front and Paige said she’d go and get it. She was suddenly furious. Couldn’t she even work in a garden without assholes like Brian perusing her and looking over a fence.

She said he better have a good reason for being there. ‘You stripped away every shed of self-esteem I ever had. Cut me to pieces. Now I know I’m worth nothing. And now you set it up so I can’t even practice killin’ myself which was the one pleasure left to me. Police took my gun.’

Now it was her turn. ‘If one person you don’t know very well can shatter your self-esteem then it must have been damn fragile. But you see I don’t care. We’ve been fed all this bullshit about self-esteem all our lives Brian. Why should we need to esteem ourselves, when we don’t necessarily *deserve it*? I only know of a few people I esteem and I’m not one of them. What you need Brian, is self-respect. Behave in a way that you can respect and others can respect. You can blow your self-esteem out fucking your ass. You come across town to hassle me while I’m at a friend’s house in a garden. Does that generate some lovely bullshit self-esteem for you Brian? It shouldn’t because now you’re a fucking stalker. Go and do something that *you* would respect Brian.’ Paige was now ready for the pragmatic part of her riposte. ‘Brian. I’m going to say something and I want you to *run*, not walk. Are you ready.’ She glared at him. ‘Are you ready to run?’ He nodded.

Mesmerised. 'Fuck Off Brian.' She yelled. And he did run. Fast. His large frame was not used to running. He fell heavily on the road deeply skinning a palm and a knee.

He called over his shoulder once he was up and starting to move. 'Make sure you watch the news tonight Paige.' He kept running until he was out of sight. She was pretty sure he would run all the way home.

The sun was getting low. 'I guess darkness is the signal for gardening to finish.' She'd enjoyed it, but the attraction was starting to wear off.

'If you'll allow me, I could make a home cooked meal with fresh vegetables.' Tom wanted to prepare something special.

'Sounds great. Let's get a beer first.'

'A beer?'

'Chalk mark.' She said.

'I see. You think it's slowly moving away and this brief unpleasant phase of your life will be over. Scientist the world over will study this for decades. It may be some large scale aerosol delivered in a military experiment.'

She ignored that. 'It'll be moving *in* Tom. I'd like to know how fast.'

Tom, always trying to put a positive spin on things said. 'Once they get the information they will bring the whole sorry episode to a close. The alien's experiments that is.'

'Aliens?'

'Yeah you know the ones, grey skin and black eyes like a sideways almond. There is a whole tribe of them running around with clipboards right now seeing how humanity behave in specific situations. Humans are putting up a pretty poor showing to this point.'

'If in doubt script the aliens. That's what all the TV shows do when they've run out of ideas.' Said Paige. 'Might as well do that here. I hope you're right and I also hope they don't find those horse thermometers.'

Walking into the Café was surreal. Nearby most people seemed to know her but they didn't know why. They were saying hello and she had to politely refuse a couple of selfies. They got to the table they'd been sitting at which they found to be occupied. Tom was a little surprised to hear Paige say. 'Guys, we're doing a very important science experiment and we always do it from this table. I'd much appreciate it if you'd move over to that one. And I'd like to get you a free drink for your trouble. They got up smiling and saying it was no problem to move the meals they were halfway through. She said. 'Please ask for a drink on the Kitten Lady's tab.'

Tom asked a very busy Miriam take Paige's order if she could. Tom was inside the line. 'It's Paige isn't it. What have you done with your hair. It looks good.'

'I've stopped brushing it Miriam. You're going to hate me in ten seconds. Will you remember my hair?'

Tom moved out a little. 'I told you. Don't ever come here again. What part of that didn't you understand, whatever your name is. You're ruining my business and I think what you do to kittens is despicable.'

'But is my hair nice.'

'Of course it is Paige. It suits you.' There was one last episode of spleen venting at which time Paige pointed out that the coffee there was shit, if you could actually get any because of the lousy service.' Paige had had enough and gave Tom the wind up signal like they do in TV studios. 'Tom arrived back and they ordered beer and wedges.'

Without needing to be asked Tom said. 'Two.'

'Yards.'

'Inches.'

She gave him a pained look. 'Seventy two of them.' They watched Miriam approach with a look of pure malice on her face and no beers in hand. She would cross the threshold, wonder why she hadn't brought beer and wedges and go back. She had gone back and forward six times. Eventually it became less amusing and more sad and Paige said. 'Perhaps you should go and help that poor woman.'

He stood at the threshold which allowed Miriam to prepare and deliver the order. They ate and drank in a strange and disturbing environment. Those near them were glancing and pointing as if they were sitting near someone famous. Those further away were glaring. One even got up and marched towards them. Upon arriving he said he knew Paige from somewhere. She said it was probably from her work in the Alliance Against Cruelty to Kittens.

They left. Paige said it would be good if he could drop her at home and she could watch the news. Tom suggested that might be a bad idea. She said she'd be interested to keep up to date about what she'd allegedly been up to.'

'That's a bad idea. But going home was the bad idea I was referring to. People are getting unpredictable Paige. I can come and sleep outside in a little tent at your house or you can sleep in the spare bedroom at my house. But whatever's going on. I think we're stuck with each other.

Paige thought of how unpleasant it could get even if those accusing her of kitten torture didn't come to the house. 'You're right. I appreciate your offer. And...a person could do way worse than you to get stuck with you.'

It was nearly news time so they went to Tom's first. It was arduous. Two anchors and a reporter in the field were discussing what must now be an International story, because it was on BBC World.

Namir: *'Leading the news tonight is the story of a young woman living in Irvingsfield who apparently enjoys torturing kittens. That's right. This individual actually enjoys the suffering of cute and harmless little animals.'*

Sara: *'But this story is full of strange twists Namir. The individual who broke the story asked for her identity to keep secret. However, she has now been...incentivised to come forward and give us what experiences she's had with this incredibly callous person.'*

The vision went to a reporter standing next to Laney, incongruously dressed as an S&M Madam. He tried to ignore this.

Leonardo: *'Hello Sara. This is Laney Russell. She was the person who originally found out what this woman; They Paige Grainger, was up to with kittens.'* They were standing in front of Laney's house.

Laney spoke seriously, as if in a witness box. *'We were watching cat videos and there were all these kitten videos in a row. She said she hated kittens and wished they were all drowned and said she'd be happy to do the job herself. Since then, we've seen each other now and again, I wouldn't say we're friends because I could see signs she'd gone way past drowning kittens.'*

Leonardo: *'Disturbing. And yet as heinous as this malice towards kittens is; there's more than that to this allegedly despicable character.'*

Laney: *'She stole my man, just because she could. And then she told me I had to go and get my boyfriend to watch porn and that I had to watch it with him and now we've got our own porn channel.'*

Leonardo: *'Okay thanks Laney.'*

Laney: *'People send us a script and we go and buy the costumes and...'*

Leonardo: *'A troubling tale. Back to you...'*

Laney: That's www.laneythewildchild.com.org

Namir: *'We've had some news of the Irvingsfield Kitten Torturer; we're going to use IKT going forward for brevity's sake. This is a gamechanger. What's happening Sara.'*

Sara: *'Yes it is Namir. Before we go across to a secret location in Irvingsfield, in other news the Pope has 'Come out of the Closet'. He will be the world's first openly gay Pope. But the real the news that is gripping the nation is the stranger and stranger story of the IKT. Leonardo, over to you.'*

The secret locations was in front of Paige's house.

Leonardo: *'Thanks Sara. For privacy reasons we can't reveal the address of the despicable IKT. But I'm with Rufus Badault, he's the Ranger in Irvingsfield, and responded to a call relating to dogs barking at 53 Conrí Street. Rufus you came here. Tell us what happened.'* Rufus was standing in front of Paige's house, leaning on a woman his own age for support with a much older woman standing beside him squeezing his arm.

Rufus: *'She told me to come around the back. She said she had ten dogs and she wanted to get rid of them. She even had a wolf, which she said wasn't strictly a dog and it should be allowed to bark its head of. But the damn thing would only howl. She pushed me along to get rid of those dogs. She told me to...she told me to 'shoot the damn things'. She said a machine gun might make it quicker. I must have been under her mind control influence because I took that full truck of dogs and...'* His voice broke. *'...I didn't take them to the animal shelter, I took to them to a quarry and shot every one of them. After shooting all those dogs, I*

had to wipe some tears from my eyes. And when I looked up.' He eyes were staring out a nothing. 'There was not a trace of a single dog ever having been there.'

Leonardo: 'Rufus, you've seen strange behaviours in people before. You were in a psychiatric ward for eight years and your currently on a 'Pathway to Normal' program which uses local government as a stepping stone from psychotic to normal. Are the behaviours in the IKT you saw familiar at all?'

Rufus: 'I've seen lots of craziness. All colours and flavours and packages it can come in. The woman I met with wasn't crazy.' Rufus's voice fell to a whisper. 'She was evil.' Rufus turned into an embrace and began to sob into what turned out to be his sister's breast.

Leonardo: 'The impact on one man who's had close experience with the IKT.'

Sara: 'Thanks Leonardo. I think we'll be speaking with more local people in the coming days.' She said. 'Namir this IKT phenomena is spreading rapidly. A group calling itself the Kitten Sentinels have begun to stand watch over all kittens and most cats twenty-four hours a day. They're working in eight-hour shifts. They believe the IKT may be able to materialise anywhere, or at least drive a car a long way overnight. Kitten Sentinel Chapters are springing up all over the country for details visit our website.'

Namir: 'Sara that's pretty much the day as it stands. In a late development in China, the massive Three Gorges Dam has collapsed, due to unprecedented rains. This has destroyed the city of Yichang with thousands, probably tens of thousands dead. Estimates are that further down, half of the cities between the broken dam to Wuhan will be declared disaster area with thousands more killed and hundreds of

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thousands losing their homes. The Authorities are investigating whether this event is connected to the activities of the IKT.'

Paige turned the television off. 'That went better than I expected.' Said Paige. 'Thanks for convincing me to stay with you. Being surrounded by delusional dog catchers and news crews is something I could do without right now.' She waited in case he had anything to contribute. 'They'll be here next Tom. I don't want to bring this...insane shit to your door.'

'The aliens will be putting their clipboards down any minute. In any event, this fellow Uncle Liam. A good man. I'd like to go and pay my respects to a good man. As you know; they're hard to find.'

They left early. It was a mid-morning service in the next town thirty miles north where she grew up. Paige was hoping to surreptitiously get into the Chapel, be there for the short service, and leave. And maybe achieve one other thing if the opportunity presented itself. When she saw three cars following her, she knew the thought of trying to disguise herself would feed into the irrational theories springing up all around her. They arrived at the Chapel at nine for the ten o'clock service. Paige gave up on trying to be subtle and they swept through the doors and down the centre aisle. If Paige could touch her Uncles casket and say goodbye she'd be happy with that, even if she couldn't get the other thing she wanted.

As it turned out her mother was part of small group arranging flowers at either end of the casket. Paige knew she would have been there working with them if it weren't for the world going insane. Her mother pulled her into a tight embrace. 'Paige I've been trying to get in touch with you. I was worried you wouldn't make it.' Her mother took her to where she was planning to sit

and moved a card for a cousin further back. 'I'll explain it to her when she gets here.'

Paige found the service cathartic in many ways. Saying goodbye that also gave her cover to allow her to let out how she really felt. The confusion, the anger and the fear. Spreading like a cancer in her mind. She had lost the person she loved most in the world, and now she was losing the rest. Family. Friends. Neighbours. Tiny little relationships where she did a few small things for people like Brian and people did some small thing in a shop or on the road for her. For a smile. Brian's was small, pleasant relationship, but now it was another dark spot in the whole. Old school friends, mentors at work and her mother. They'd been through so much together. They were like clothes that were comfortable. Lived in. All gone. Soon she'd be naked, in the full glare of people who hated her. Strangers who hated her for incomprehensible reasons. Tom was wearing the best clothes he had and stood off to the side. Creating the maximum buffer. Attracting no interest. Paige was preparing to go and came to see her mother to say goodbye, who was surprised her daughter was leaving so soon.

Paige was the same height as her mother, and gave her a tight embrace. 'You remember how it was us against the world mum. We were a team. We had to be. I was proud to be on your team mum. Trying to help out to get us through when times were tough. They were most of the best days of my life. Making things work. Making ends meet.'

Her mother pushed away a little and said. 'We'll always be a team.'

'Mum, could you tell me that you love me, and not the; 'I'll see you later kind of way'. She was crying now. This was the thing

left in her life that she cared the most about. And it would soon be gone.

Paige's mother looked her in the eyes. Maybe closeup, relatives had not yet turned half moronic. 'I love you Paige. I always will.'

Paige smiled. 'I love you mum. I hope if there's one thing you can remember about me, it's that.'

Her mother laughed. 'I'm not off to the dementia ward yet Paige.'

Paige laughed along to ensure that her mother didn't get the wrong idea. She and Tom walked out of the side door. He had parked around the back in the space reserved for the Organist, which probably caused a good deal of ructions among those playing their part in the service. Tom had to drive through a parting wall of newsmen and demonstrators. From a distance there appeared to be a resolved to not allow the car to pass. But when they reached a certain proximity, it was like Tom was Moses parting the Red Sea.

'Beer time?'

'Do you think that's wise. Surrogate daughter.'

'Wisdom is a mirage from what I can tell. Adoptive father.'

'I've really climbed a few rungs on the ladder to father. I've adopted you. Of course we should have a drink.'

'You'll find the word Adoptive is a little more nuanced, I think in a good way. I've been looking things up on the net you see.'

He smiled, relaxed. 'I'm honoured and there's no doubt about that. And this will put all those plans to run away out of your mind.'

Paige was quiet for a long time. 'They'll be in arm's reach not too far from now. Fanatics are forming around the concept of hating me. I can see us being completely surrounded with nowhere to go. If I leave you tonight, you'll be left alone. You've never been their focus.'

'Would you leave me, or say if it was your friend Laney. Consign her to her fate. Paige I'm pretty sure that you wouldn't walk out even on Brian if he was in your fix. If you left, it would be the most upsetting thing to ever happen to me. I have the capacity to help a friend; adoptive daughter even. Friends helping friends, being there for them. Trustworthy. The opposite of what these people are becoming. And I don't want to be like them. If you left Paige, where would I be. I would be stuck mixing with *them*.'

'Thanks Tom. It's only I'm getting more and more afraid.'

'Me too.' Said Tom. 'If we weren't, we wouldn't be normal.'

There was a parking space in front of the café. They went into see the table was vacant. There was a sign saying: 'This table contaminated by the IKT. It's recommended you sit elsewhere. If she comes here to asks you to move, you may suffer unrepairable brain damage.'

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‘I’ll take that.’ Paige sat down and saw Miriam striding toward them. Furious. Bent on venting a huge spleen of pent-up anger. But crossing the invisible threshold, she was all condolences. ‘I heard on the midday news that your Uncle had died. I’m sure that’s very hard and I imagine you were close.’

Paige could have become angry at Miriam inserting herself to her private affairs. But she knew that the ordinary, generally benevolent Miriam would say that. Though she had to cherry pick these sentiments from God knows what other news swirled around Liam’s service.

‘I appreciate the sentiments Miriam. If it’s okay we’ll get a couple of Guinnesses.’

‘Of course, Paige. Coming right up.’

It was the same bizarre sequence of events. Tom would have to return to the table to get an accurate reading. Miriam would cross a threshold, and then turn and say something like: ‘You can shove your beer up your ass.’ This process degenerated. She would cross the line after the order towards the bar and look back in defiance. Depending on Tom’s location, the beers were pulled from the tap, and then ceremonially poured down the sink. Then she would return to tell her that was as close as she would ever get to a Guinness in her café. She’d cross the line wondering why she hadn’t brought any beer. The process would repeat. In the end Tom put them all out of their misery, and quelled his fear they would run out of Guinness. He got them from the bar before she could pour them out in defiance. He had his mark drawn.

But he’d gone been away for too long. Paige was surrounded by people shouting in her face. Pointing, yelling, and making all kind

of threats and accusations. They had surrounded her and started this the minute Tom was getting the drinks. He'd not realised how small the circle had become even though he'd only just drawn it.'

The shouters retreated, but the circle was sufficiently small now that a lot of people were calling out accusations over the heads of an echelon of closer confused but polite diners.

'Let's go.' Said Tom.

'I'll finish my beer if that's okay.'

In the environment of vitriol not too far away, they were drinking their beer a little more quickly than usual. When they'd nearly finished Paige unfolded all the napkins for the four-seater table and placed them in the middle. The tables contaminated anyway. She climbed up and started shouting. The Café was silent but for her young voice. She had never been much good at public speaking and never done any public shouting.

'I don't hate kittens. I've never tortured a kitten or any other animal in my life and I don't plan to. Our cat had kittens once, I was never mean to them, I liked them. We couldn't keep them all of course.' Big mistake she thought. 'But we found good homes for all of them. And I love dogs. I would never ask somebody to shoot a dog. But the dogs the Ranger is talking about didn't exist. I told him I had imaginary dogs because I thought it would be funny. But he believed me. You all hate me because you let yourself believe lies. You're all weak and shallow now.'

She didn't present this as a conclusion and was going to say more. But looking at the eyes behind the first row she knew she was wasting her time.

'Do you need some things from your house. Adoptive Daughter.'

'I think if you called me Paige, the adoptive daughter is a given. And don't ever expect a dad out of me.'

'I think we've found our natural resting place.' He said this as they were confronted by his car ten spaces from the café with all kinds of spray-painted words and paint marker sentences. They ranged from the pedestrian 'How could you' Tom observed they had failed to add a question mark which he found annoying. Then there was the more concerning 'Die IKT Bitch.' Which neither decided to comment on.

'Hop in.' said Tom. 'I always wanted a car all painted up. Let's get some things from your place. I think you're going to be staying over for a couple of days.'

'I could use some things. Perhaps we'll drive past and check out the vibe first.'

The vibe was busy, and negative. There were three police cars a news crew and some demonstrators wearing T shirts with a kitten with a green tick next to it and Paige's face with a red circle with a cross through it. 'Drive home perhaps?'

Paige sighed. 'This is the last time I'll be able to come here and get anything. And I hate being cowed by these assholes. But do you want to run the gauntlet Tom.'

'No gauntlet is runnable enough for me Paige.' He was managing to get the adoptive father tone right in his voice. 'I'll park right between those police cars and we'll make a quick entry, grab whatever you want, and head home. I have quite a bit of home brew laid up, which, while not award winning, is better than drinking at the local now.' The news crew were up the road interviewing Brian. The Ranger was hanging around probably with more dramatic tales for sale. She knew they would have tracked down the Almost Albino Lady. Who now had red contacts and organised 'Albinos against the cat and dog murderer.' She was immediately castigated by the 'Real Genuine Actual Albino Kitten and Various Other Animal Sentinels.' She hit back with the 'Inclusive Albino-like Saviours of Albino Animals Threatened by the IKT.'

They were in the house before anyone really noticed. Paige was throwing things in a suitcase in an orderly panic. Tom was recovering things that were easy to find and putting them in shopping bags. They'd gone out the door expecting to need to have to walk through an angry mob. This was true, and as expected those nearby became friendly. Excited at being close to a celebrity. Celebrated for what they couldn't recall. This held Paige and Tom's attention for only a second. Before their focus rapidly shifted to Tom's car, which was upside down and on fire. As it had been parked between two police cars, this gave them pause as to how serious the situation was becoming.

Tom was fazed only for a moment. 'Hey Reg. Give us a lift home would you.' Reg was a policeman who had been looking on at the car burning process. It was quite probable he joined in as part of the mob.

‘Sure Tom. Haven’t seen you at darts this week.’

‘Yeah Reg. Close relatives come to visit. It’s nice catching up with her. I’m putting a few things on hold. I’ll be back slaying you all soon enough.’

‘In your dreams Tom.’ They drove through town, people with placards sprinkled around randomly now. ‘This is your place isn’t it.’

‘This is the one. Reg could you do something for me.’

‘Sure Tom.’

‘Could you make sure no one trespasses on my property. At all.’

‘Of course Tom. That’s the law. And I’m here to uphold it.’

‘I really appreciate that Reg.’ They were getting out only to see a scrum of cars jostling their way to the front of Tom’s house. Reg laid down the law, primarily to the news reporters who were reluctantly followed his instructions. But it was open slather with drones, which were so thick in the air there were quite a few collisions with the attendant crash landings on the roof and garden.

Inside there was a small disagreement over control of the TV remote. ‘It’s my telly Paige. I could take you to go and get your

telly, I guess in a cab. I only want to filter out a small number of things, otherwise you can let your morbid curiosity about our predicament run wild.'

'You'll admit Tom that I have more than a passing interest. If I feel your censorship is excessive, I'll...I'll...argue to point.'

'Let's make a start and see what happens.' Tom was conciliatory, but held onto the remote.

Namir: *'Sara, the IKT story is exploding further and further outward from this once idyllic small community where real estate plunged yesterday, and is now soaring today. But before looking at the wider ramifications let's look at the local level from where this individual operated They's despicable activities. And stay tuned later in the bulletin from some truly remarkable statements coming from the IKT in a revealing tirade. Our editing staff are now finishing the process of interpreting it.'*

Sara: *'Thanks Namir. Before we go deeper into the IKT story, news to hand advises that the President of the United States is dead. Apparently he died in the arms of, or in some other position with, a nineteen-year-old prostitute. The Whitehouse Press Secretary said in a press conference: 'What do you to expect from an eighty-year-old man who popped Viagra like tick tacks.' A story we'll be keeping track over the coming days. But back to the story leading around the nation, and now around the world, as we'll discuss later in the bulletin. Leonardo, what's the feel on the ground.'*

Leonardo: *'Thanks Sara. There's anger, but there's also confusion. Why is the IKT still at large. The circumstantial evidence is overwhelming in the eyes of most people here. Yet the police refuse to act. Several members of the police force including detectives have approached the young woman but come back with stories of someone pleasant and amiable and guilty of nothing.'*

This all thanks to Tom, thought Paige. Who seemed to be able to suggest something to the intruder into their space and make its stick.

'More on that later. Some unbelievable interviews with local people. The last is truly remarkable. See you after the break. The BBC has allowed advertising, on this one occasion, to pay some of the facilitation costs associated with this story so it is unbiased and you know you can get the things the station decides is breaking news here .'

One of the ads was for 'No Animal Torture Sentinels.' It was calling for people to stand guard over all animals. This could be anything from horses to goldfish. The leader of the Sentinels said. *'We're ahead of the curve. And you'll find out why soon enough. We have two million active Sentinels and we need at least seven million more. Apply at the address below to become a Sentinel or donate to the cause.'*

Leonardo: *'Let's start with someone who lived right next to the IKT. Brian Morcombe. 'Brian it wasn't easy being neighbour to the IKT.'*

Brian: *'Leonardo first of all, I think we should be calling her the Irvingsfield Kitten Torturer. That acronym doesn't remind people exactly what was going on in that house.'*

Leonardo: *'I think that a very fair point Brian. When did you first get an inkling something was wrong?'*

Brian: *'The IKT always wanted to put bags of rubbish in my bin even though They's was nearly empty. If one of those bags They put in there had ever been opened. I can't imagine where I'd be now.'*

Leonardo: *'And what do you think was in those bags?'*

Brian: He gave a little shudder of revulsion: *'I believe there is only one thing it could have been.'* He'd paused as one who had kept silent too long. Almost too long for Leonardo, but it was worth the wait. *'The mutilated and tortured bodies of kittens.'*

Leonardo: *'And did you ever hear actual sounds of kittens being tortured.'*

Brian: *'I can't say I didn't.'*

Leonardo: *'And They took something from you. A personal thing.'*

Brian: *'She...They stole away my self respect. Told me I was worthless in a dozen different ways, took away my hobby, she killed my garden, she got me to modify my rubbish bins and now they fall over and spill all the time. They left me a shell of a man, and...'*

Namir was in Leonardo's earpiece. *'This is as boring as batshit Leo. Let's move along.'*

Leonardo: Thanks for that. *'The BBC has arranged for counsellors to be on site for people like you.'*

Leonardo: *'We're going to some advertisements on the BBC about the BBC.'* When he returned, he was standing in front of a different house. *'We're going to interview a neighbour a few streets back who*

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brought the dog aspect of this story to the attention of the public.’ Almost Albino Lady came on the screen. ‘Ma’am the IKT came into direct contact with you yesterday. Tell us what happened.’

‘She...They said I looked like an Albino and I should order up some red contact lenses. Not that means anything about being Albino. Not sure about that. Now I can hardly see anything anymore. I died my hair white in case she was right. Now I’m getting all hated on the internet because I’m making a mockery of Albinos everywhere. I tell them I didn’t even know what an Albino was until this IKT got me under some spell. Shit. Now I kind of like it and I’m gonna get hated my whole life long. To hell with it, I’ve decided I finally found my people and I’ve started a movement to protect Albino animals. Lions and turtles and what not. Lots of people signing up. Not many Albinos though. The worst thing was she and that fellow with her sent me stone cold deaf.’

Leonardo: *‘You can’t hear?’*

Almost Albino Woman: *‘Not a God damn thing.’*

Leonardo: *In his earpiece Leonard heard Namir. ‘Fruit Loop Leo. Let’s move on.’ He did as he was told. ‘Good luck with your endeavours to protect albino animals.’*

Almost Albino Woman: *‘What did you say. Must have been a dog barking. I’m deaf whenever a dog barks. Thanks to that Kitten Torturing abomination. I like the sound of barking dogs. It was the wolf howling I didn’t like.’*

Leonardo: *‘Ma’am we have counsellors available for those who’ve suffered exposure to IKT, and I imagine in your case a great many other issues. We’ll be sending in a team. Namir now we move onto one of the bombshell revelations in this story. I recorded this with a local Police Officer who was called to the IKT’s neighbour’s house in response to a man who had taken up the hobby of practicing to commit suicide after interactions with the IKT This policeman, showing remarkable bravery, spoke with the IKT one on one. The interview we conducted with the unidentified Police Officer at a secret location near the BBC after which he and his family are being sent on a world cruise to get him out of the reach of this... should we start to call her an Evil Being.’ Leonard hears something in his earpiece and says. ‘Allegedly Evil Being has been approved by the BBC legal department. I’ve also been reminded it’s important to note that we never provide incentives for people to be interviewed in order to outbid our rival networks. We needed to protect this man and his family and we believed a world cruise was the best way to him out of harm’s way. Here’s the interview.’*

Leonardo: *‘Police Constable Rubin Turner. In your own words. Tell us what happened.’*

Turner: *‘Um...wasn’t this supposed to be anonymous?’*

Leonardo: *‘Sorry. Your face is blurred out but because you’ve still got a large name badge on I ...um...viewers to ensure Constable Turner’s complete anonymity, the name I just used was a false, made up name.’*

Turner: *‘She...They tried to convince me there was a twin. Her twin had been up ‘slaughtering’... that was the word They used...Polar Bears, by the dozen. Couldn’t kill enough of them They said. While They herself had been busy killing as many of those pretty looking big penguins as They could shoot or stab or strangle with her bare hands. And They said they were going to swap over. One was going to those northern places*

and slaughtering as many Narwhal's as They could get to. Because of the way they lived They said They'd need a large calibre semi-auto if The was going to kill enough. The other twin was coming down to deal with Sea Lions. They said They would make killing them more of a fun thing, in They's words, and sneak up and slit their throats. But little baby seal pups would be the first to go. They didn't say how. They told me that there were shitloads too many of these animals. Can I say that on the BBC? It's what They said.'

Leonardo. *'You've already done it. Say beeeep next time. This is live. At least when we recorded it. And our editors are flat out.'*

Turner: *'They said a man called David Attenborough told them to do it, and how to do it'.*

Leonardo: *'There are two IKT's'*

Turner: *'No sir. This They has been staying in this town for a few years. Never gone anywhere. Maybe travelling around the local areas trying to get those cruel hands on as many innocent kittens as They can. The other twins are out being cruel on more a global scale. Maybe they change around. But I believe there's three of them. No doubt in my mind. Three twins.'*

Leonardo: *'Back to you Namir.'*

Namir. *'The IKT had a busy day yesterday, They's with a man who's believed to be an unwilling accomplice. He drove the IKT to the funeral service of ...'* The television was tuned off.

'You can watch all that other depressing stuff. But your unwilling accomplice won't let you watch ...'

'Them interview my mother. I know.'

'I'll take a long time for you to get some beer from the fridge and I'll let you know when the chapel scenes are finished.'

She handed out the beer. He said. 'By the way. Did you happen to mention penguin slaughter? Polar Bear genocide and the rest.'

'Not a wise move now that I've had time to reflect on it.'

Tom turned the television sound on to catch them walking into the Café. The vision then cut to Miriam.

Leonardo: *'I'm here with Café owner Miriam Méchant. She's had several interactions with the IKT. None of them pleasant.'*

Miriam: *'Leonardo, They is a very, very unpleasant person, unless you get anywhere near They, and then They's ordinary. Pleasant really. Compliments you about your hair, or They's concerned about your sore feet. That's the power They has. It's only when you get way away from They that you see They's true colours. And that's a mean, nasty, horrible shrew, waiting, eager in fact, to torture the next animal that comes They's way. Now that we know it's more than kittens, I've got a Sentinel standing next to my dog at home as we speak.'*

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'And They's got some power over Tom, a man who used to be well liked and respected. He's been making strange marks on the restaurant floor. There are three curved marks in different colours each about six feet apart. My belief is whatever evil drives a person like this has boundaries within which They can get on with torturing kittens. But outside these lines, people can see what's really happening.'

Leonardo: *'And there was an extraordinary outburst by the IKT in the Café yesterday.'*

Miriam: *'Made my blood run cold.'*

Leonardo: *'Let's hear what They said. It was filmed by several of your patrons. We have edited these to create an improved version.'*

Paige Edit: *In a stilted edit of what she said, Paige's voice was now heard to say: 'I...hate...kittens. I...like to...torture animals. I ... have ...harmed...dogs all my life. I...hate...animals. It's...funny...to shoot them. I...plan to...torture... animals...all...my life.'*

Leonardo: *'Back to you Namir. Even more extraordinary developments I understand.'*

Namir: *'Thanks Leonardo. These revelations have led to a scramble to secure seats on planes to Alaska or North West Canada and boats with the capacity to smash through sea ice. Some very wealthy people have become Sentinels. They're in private jets as we speak and are either buying ice breakers or getting rapid refits so they can bring ships ready to smash through all of the sea ice to where you can see the beautiful, but apparently stupid narwhals getting trapped in ice holes all the time and then attacked by Polar Bears.'*

It's now thought that this occurs due to the malign influence of the IKT.'

Sara: *I think that's common of the stupid Beluga whale. Namir*

Namir: *In such a serious situation Sara, I don't think our viewers want to quibble about whale taxonomy. Continuing the story; There's a similar dash to Sentenalise the Sea Lions. Not quite as many heading to the Antarctic regions, the Falklands and the south coasts of Australia and South America. One Sentinel lambasted those going south 'There's shitloads of Sea Lions and she's going to slit their throats. There's only eighthly thousand Narwhals and she'll have a semi auto. Can't you people do basic maths? We're going to have to make some tough compromises here'. He was later taken to a Sentinel re-education camp.'*

'David Attenborough has come back with a pithy riposte to the IKT allegation that he told They to kill these polar animals. He simply said, and I quote.'
'Hang the Bitch'.

'We're going to get some analysis on the mystery lines in the Café. But first, in a development in the Vatican, based on a press release we now have an openly gay Pope. Unfortunately, he's had a shorter tenure than many hoped. He died in the arms, or in some other position with, what the Vatican has described as a one hundred and seventy-two-month old altar boy. As expected, the Vatican police have announced they will be not be conducting a comprehensive suite of activities to ensure evidence and appropriate enquires are not made. The Vatican is in crisis. The Catholic Church is being accused of being aware of the activities of the IKT for years but failing to act. The economy of Italy crumbles around them causing all of the Vatican's tax free income to dry up. It's been determined they can't wait to have a new Pope in place with what most consider antiquated and boring voting process using coloured smoke signals. They've decided on a process of pairing contenders for the Papacy off for sudden death rock/paper/scissors matches. Some have said. 'At last God will decide.'

Sara: *Nice to have a bit of news not about the IKT Emir, though she now seems to be finding her way into every story. Italy's economy is on the verge of collapse, which it has been for some time, Greece has already gone down, Ireland next. Welcome to our guest Dr Joseph Ibimbo, Don of Economics at Cambridge what's happening to these economies.'* A handsome black man with an East African accent came into shot.

Joseph: *'Economics is an incredibly subtle and complex subject. What's happening here is that many tens of millions of people are leaving their jobs and taking roles for no remuneration as Sentinels. Companies can't provide any goods and services with no one to provide, make or distribute them. Sentinels can no longer pay for or buy them anyway because they can't leave their post. Productivity has crashed along with consumption. Government incomes have fallen to the extent that the crippling debt they hide from everyone as best they can, using accepted falsehoods, are now in a situation in which they can't afford to even pay a small portion of the interest. The bond market is collapsing because people now know what a worthless piece of paper looks like. The only solution is unilateral debt forgiveness, which is even less likely than hell freezing over. Although only a humble economist I think this will lead to a hot war between debtor and creditor nations. And civil wars where a nation is confused because it is both a creditor and a debtor nation. The peak body, the International Economic Data Revisionist Forum, have released their analysis based on recent trends. They've advised: 'The global economy has turned to shit.'*

Sara: *'Dr Ibimbo, after four decades of scholarly studies into economic activity, what advice can you give to the person on the street.'*

Joseph: *'We're all fucked.'*

Sara: *Turning back to Emir. 'Words of warning from an eminent Economist. Millions of people are leaving their jobs every hour. How is this affecting the stock market.'*

Emir: *'I checked my own portfolio quickly while you were speaking with Dr Ibimbo. Yesterday I had nearly five hundred thousand. My shares are now worth eleven pounds and three pence. However, hyperinflation is about to kick in late tonight resulting in my eleven pounds buying approximately one half of one slice of bread. Though the purchasing power for bread will fall by several hundred percent per hour, when, hopefully, I'll still be able to get a crust. However, by morning my savings will have turned to negative equity, and I'll owe the banks at least a cob loaf.'*

Sara: *'And this dreadful IKT 'Alleged Evil Beinge' is impervious to the awful consequences of what They does. A spokesperson for the IKT's family have advised the BBC her mother is 'ashamed and devastated and starting to question if she is the IKT's biological mother.'*

Sara: *'That's it for the story to this point. From here on we chop thing up, repackaging it as Breaking News for the next twenty-three hours by which time we'll have something new to report. Keep watching BBC World for reconfigured developments.'*

The studio lights went down. Sara and Emir had to look like they were having a serious professional conversation while writing important notes on pads as the unnecessarily long dramatic music played out.

Emir: *'What a bunch of grasping assholes those Irvingsfield crowd are. World cruises, redecorating a spare bedroom as an S&M chamber, refurbishing a café to let a crew film three lines of chalk on the floor.'*

Sara: *'Yeah. But we've got to ride the wave of it for our career's sake. The world's going to hell in a handbasket and we need to be avoid the huge layoffs around the corner. We've got to milk this one for all it's worth.'*

Producer: The music finally finished, only to be followed by different dramatic music counting down to the same story but with a very serious presenter who was intentionally not allowed to watch the last hour of the news. *'Don't you idiots know what a green light looks like. We had technical problems and couldn't shut down the feed.'* Sara and Emir looked at each other. They knew were this was going. And they knew who was to blame for that technical fault.

Paige was wiped out. It had been a big day. And the home brew was probably more than five percent, but she had learned the error of her ways and had a meal first and one water for each beer. 'I'm off to bed Tom. Going to try to sleep in till...the day after tomorrow.'

'Sleep late. And then we garden. Unless you want to take a trip somewhere.'

'Gardening sounds good. I'll put my headphones on.' It began to get noisy outside as more and more protesters arrived with police arriving to support them. She went to sleep. It may have been the homebrew but she woke up at eleven in the morning feeling surprisingly good. She knew looking out the window would make her feel surprisingly bad.

Tom had been waiting for her. 'I'll need you to come along on a little errand. The TV people can make of it what they will.' Tom walked out the front gate. The people forming a barrier were in an arc around the front fence. At the far corners, some people had climbed the fence, consistent with where the line would become a circle. This would cut off half the back yard. They walked through the crowd. Paige got sick of the phrase she heard Tom say so often. Every single policeman, person dressed

in camouflage, person carrying a weapon, person wearing a shirt with some reference to the IKT was told. 'YOU will NEVER allow ANYONE to trespass on that property.'

They had reached the front gate and the trespassers were being dragged out already. But not usually by the police.

'Probably should have only said that to the police now that I think of it. Could cause a bit of disharmony if people don't have the legitimacy of a uniform. Anyway. Too late now.'

Paige put the headphone back on, found some channels she hadn't listen to for a while, and tried to pretend the garden bed she was weeding was the main thing going on her life. She was about to take the snails and slugs she found to the chicken pen, but then realised there was probably a high resolution drone watching her and if she was cruel to invertebrates that would be another category of animal she'd be brimming with a hatred for.

Time passed quickly. After a quiet late lunch sheltered from reality in the kitchen and some more time in the garden it was late afternoon and a hand waived in front of her. 'What about some wine and cheese on the front veranda. Watch the watchers.'

'I'm up for that. It's an hour before we find out what we've been doing to the planet. No wine for me though. Had a terrible altercation with it the other night. I'm ashamed to say it won.' She said.

‘Powerful adversary. I’ll get the platter and beer. You go and... arrange the seating to your liking.’

She knew what Tom meant. Half of the veranda was enclosed with a screen covered in creepers and the other half a fully open platform three feet above the ground. She pulled the two old chairs into the open. They could go and watch themselves on the television soon anyway. Tom came and set out the food and drink. They both looked out. There was a sea of people.

Paige shook her head at all the T shirts and banners. ‘Skin heads for Kittens.’ And ‘Reformed Hunters against the IKT.’ But it was ‘Police Union – Bring Back the Death Penalty’ that she found a little disturbing. ‘I wish I had one of the Skinhead T shirts to wear for fun. Might lead to a bunch of Skinheads getting beaten up though I suppose.’ There were food stalls being set up in a random arrangement on people’s front lawns and the various roads in the grid around Tom’s house. A circus troupe, all dressed in costumes from the musical *Cats*, had come to entertain the crowd. Roadies were setting up a stage for bands to play loud music all night. Probably with some crappy IKT inspired lyrics, thought Paige. After a while the crowd was getting mean and it was time to find out what she’d been up to that day.

Kewan: *‘If you’ve only now joined because this is when we start to report something new in the last twenty-three hours, you’ll be seeing remarkable scenes of the crowds surrounding the secret location at which the IKT is currently hiding. Some say They can disappear at any second and her reason for staying where They is, is to take attention away from the real damage being done by They’s evil sisters. I’m Kewan Schlipper and my co-host is the erudite Bridgit Fischer. Sara and Emir have gone to follow their passion in amateur theatre productions and spend more time with their families. They will be missed isn’t that right Bridgit.’*

Bridgit: *'Yes Kewan. I applaud the dedication which led them to leave prestigious careers with the BBC to pursue amateur theatre. I'd like to return to your point on supernatural powers Kewan. We're going to examine this with, I hope...'* Bridgit smiled at her guests. *'...a civilised exchange of views. Earnest Jumbles, you represent the MFE. Which means the Mixed Faith Experiment through which all faiths...'* Earnest was shaking his head slightly.

'Oh. Through which most faiths...' Bridgit was terrified her first interview would be a shambles. Would this story be a steppingstone to greater things or a poison chalice?

Earnest: *'Probably more like a few faiths.'* Said Ernest helpfully

Brigit: Bridgit tried to make it sound more important than it obviously was. But it he was only a foil for the Sceptics the BBC had promised to agree with anyway. *'The MFE demonstrates that a few faiths are able to find common ground and start a positive dialogue.'*

Earnest: *'Bridgit this IKT has pulled some of us together. And we're all convinced that, as the insightful Constable Grainger said, this is not one but three. We know from the three arcs sign in the Café.'*

Bridgit: *'Perhaps we should introduce Terry Basketweaver, head of the British Sceptics and, via a rotating leadership, he's the current head of the World Sceptics.'*

Terry: *'Having a triune IKT is really the same as the Triune God of Christianity. You've got God, Christ and the Holy Spirit. Separate but One, as it were. This 'They' is much the same.'* The way Terry said this suggested he found it all pretty amusing.

Earnest: Earnest was all of a sudden thunderstruck. *'I never looked at it this way. But if this They are three in One working together maybe this is the Anti-Christ were dealing with. But much worse; the Anti-Christ, the Anti-Father and the Anti-Holy Spirit.'*

Terry: Terry was light-hearted. *'Sounds like a spiritual train wreck. Bridgit I've spent half a lifetime making myself feel superior by tearing down what people believe in, and hold dear by ripping it to pieces. We do this in the most insensitive way possible to try get ordinary, gullible people to let go of the falsehoods we sceptics have determined to be wrong thinking. All of this rubbish about some queen of the animal haters is voodoo. It's the same warmed up tripe dished out time and time again through the millennia by the peddlers of lies seeking primarily to line their pockets by gouging the ignorant, hopeful and gullible. No offence Earnest.'*

Earnest: *'None taken Terry.'*

Terry: *'And now we're being told that They's a witch.'*

Bridgit: *'Is that credible Terry.'* Bridgit was ready to bear the brunt on this. A Terry Tirade was legendary and she would be demonstrating bona fides equal to the celebrated but the ill-fated Sara.

Terry: *'Bridgit, the idea of witches was debunked over two hundred years ago. The last witch burned at the stake in the early seventeen hundreds and the Witchcraft Act was repealed after two centuries of*

unspeakable tortures via which these women were put to death. Burning at the stake only one method. We live in a society with a breadth of knowledge and also the capacity to be flexible with the interpretation of facts when necessary. The World Sceptic Society has found, that on this one occasion, and one only, this woman is indeed; a Witch.'

Bridgit: Bridgit was not expecting this. *'They's a Witch.'*

Terry: *'They's a Witch. Our friend Constable Turner, now off on a cruise I believe to undisclosed locations, and well-meaning Earnest touched on the clues, although used them to arrive at a ludicrous proposition. They's a triune coven. A single witch, but three at the same time. Bridgit, when you get a finding like this from Sceptics, it's solid. Not like some mumbo jumbo peddling faith based belief systems filling very long and dull books that we don't even bother to reading while we debunk them. She's a witch. That's all there is to it.'*

Earpiece: Earnest was about to deliver what he thought would be a stinging riposte, but Bridgit heard a voice in her headpiece. *'China's going crazy, get these two old farts off the set.'*

Bridgit: *'Sorry Earnest. We've got more important developments than what you'd like to say in response to Terry. Feel free to go onto our web page and join the conversation. Kewan what's happening with China. We know Argentina, Germany, Poland, Japan and Burkina Faso are all economies in ruins. Oh yes, and the United States of course. But China was seen as too big, and too State Controlled, to fail.'*

Kewan: *'Waving cats is the short answer. Some people love them others think their stupid and irritating. And I'm willing to get hate mail over that. The Chinese government realised that when nearly half their workforce stopped working to become Sentinels to kittens and now all other animals, and this Includes iconic, and then less and less*

iconic animals, as the better Sentineling places are taken up. There are thousands of Sentinels per Panda. Tragically a baby Panda was crushed in the jostling. Leader for Life in China, via universal love and acclaim of some of them, and hence a mandate bestowed upon him over all of his People, has had to make some difficult decisions. He has mandated that the silly waving cats are good enough as sentinels. He said 'whether a peasant or a white collar worker, get back to work for the motherland. Or you'll be going to a re-education camp if you know what I mean.'

Bridgit: 'I think they're called Maneki-neko and although popular in China their antecedent is Japanese. Some scholars say, in the sixteen hundreds, other in the late eighteen hundreds.'

Kewan. 'Thanks Bridgit. We have to pitch our news reporting to a level our audience can understand. They can't say Maneki-neko nor remember it. We'll stick with Silly Waving Cats, possibly shortened to SWC because this story is going crazy.'

Bridgit: 'Sorry to interrupt Kewan, over to the Vatican quickly. The rock/scissors/paper contest designed to decide the next Papacy has become a bloodbath. Many saying their opponent was pretending to be so old and stupid they showed their hand position deliberately a fraction of a second slower. It's turned into Papal ascendancy by street fighting prowess. It's looking very much like we're heading for a Nicaraguan Pope.'

Kewan: 'Now back to China, the country has rapidly split with Sentinels in the hundreds of thousands coming up against the biggest standing army in the world of a million and with reserves over three million. However, we can now reveal there have been hundreds of thousands of deserters coming across to protect the Sentinels. Many of these have taken with them some of the most powerful military hardware in the world.'

Bridgit: *'I believe the loyal army now sporting Maneki-neko on their shoulder or tanks or missile launchers.'*

Kewan: *'Yes Bridgit. And now we're advised the Anti Silly Waving Cat Sentinels are bringing the animals they are protecting into battle, sometimes kittens, sometimes organisms raided from the various live food markets in most cities and towns in China. Some admitting they'd had to raid them a few times. In news just in, The Party is telling people that if they carry the Stupid Waving Cats with sincerity they are certain to survive the attacks of the...ah... 'shit eating peasants'. The conflict is rapidly becoming a class driven civil war. Peasants and proletariat against the Communist Party.'*

Bridgit: *'A moment ago we've received some slogans from each side. They do love their slogans over there. The Anti SWC Sentinels are saying. 'It's time for you running dog capitalist pigs to see slaughter approach you like a wave and then wash over you until there is not even a memory left. Then it's our turn for some cream.' Pretty long Slogan Kewan. Maybe shorter in Chinese. The Party's is a little shorter. 'We're making robots to do your jobs. Die peasant scum.' But they retracted that as a prank for which the prankster 'paid dearly'. The real slogan is. 'Embrace our enlightened forgiveness Re-education awaits.'*

Kewan: *Is this simple class warfare Bridgit?' Kewan had run out of material on the story, and this was a cue for her to help out.*

Bridgit: *'The interesting thing about China is that they're about to declare war on nearly everyone. China is a huge Creditor nation yet at the same time a huge Debtor nation. They are saying to Creditors, forgive our debts or we're at war. To the Debtor nations they are saying they must pay back every penny immediately or consider themselves at war with China.'*

Kewan: *'We can park the China situation for the moment Bridgit as you have some news just in from the Vatican that we have an Ivory Coast Pope.'*

Bridgit: *'I think the people of Côte d'Ivoire will be pleased with a man already known as the 'Fighting' Pope. Some time away yet before we see a female Pope. Especially now that street fighting is the selection criteria.'* This was a cue for some light hearted co-host banter to break up the heavy hour of news that day. But Kewan didn't want to play. He didn't know how to say Côte d'Ivoire. He hadn't heard of the country until it came up on the auto que.

Kewan. *'I must interrupt you Bridgit. We're getting a live feed from Terry Basketweaver sitting a few studios down in front a green screen with the Houses of Parliament shown behind him. The Witchcraft Act of 1723 is to be reinstated for one day and will then be repealed. In an unprecedented vote both houses of Parliament, even though no one asked the Lords to come, returned a unanimous vote. This included the little Parties and Independents who usually argue the point about every damn thing. This was a unified Parliament. There was some niggling about how but ultimately there was no plausible alternative. Burning at the stake was the obvious choice.'*

Bridgit: *'And in other news to hand, a seismic event measuring eight point six on the Richter scale has centred on Tokyo. The Richter Scale is a logarithmic scale in case you are sitting there thinking it's a simple one to nine. Do you want me to explain logarithmic scales to you Kewan?'*

Kewan: *'Let stick to the news please Bridgit.'*

Bridgit: *'This has left Tokyo completely flattened. Another massive quake in the Pacific Ocean between Tokyo and The US western seaboard created the largest Tsunami in recorded history, washed away what was left of Tokyo and has devastated Hu-vie-ee but for a few mountain tops. You may not be aware Kewan but a Tsunami goes in two directions from the sources of the earthquake. In this case Hu-vie-ee has been wiped out.'*

Kewan: *'Thank you. And to help those of you without an inflated opinion of themselves, Bridgit was referring to Hawaii. Incidentally, but not unexpectedly, The United States is now becoming a country torn apart by the 'Second Civil War'.*

Bridgit: *'Kewan I'm exhausted there's been so much going on in this story. Thankfully all this news will go onto the Ferris wheel of the twenty-three-hour cycle. Details will be analysed on different programs so keep watching. We're not going to have the usual fade out of myself and Kewan pretending to talk about something. But this vision says it all about the IKT. They's sitting back with beer and cheese while the entire world careens towards complete destruction. Due to They's callous cruelty her strategic meddling in world politics and orchestration of complete catastrophe in the natural world our world collapses around us. They sees this as a great time for beer and some nibblies.'*

The vision of Paige and Tom certainly was incongruous in the context of the rest of the report. They were chatting and looking out at the crowds looking back at them. There were targeted microphones picking up what they said. Some streamed to the internet, some re edited to an alternative script. Sometimes by anarchists who saw this as the best opportunity ever to collapse all governments and get on with doing whatever the hell is they wanted to. Until they realised the shitters didn't work anymore.

Proximity

Paige smiled. They'd had some sandwiches while they watched the news. 'That gardening really takes it out of you. I'm off to bed.'

She stood up with a goodnight. Adoptive daughterhood had never included hugs. He took her hand in his very calloused one, which is as much intimacy as they'd ever shared. He looked into her eyes. 'No one will ever get into arm's length of you.'

'Thanks.' She said. 'When?'

'Tomorrow night.'

She nodded and went into her room. Tom had offered his room because it wasn't at the front. But she said she'd be fine in the guest room. The night before she'd drifted off. But tonight, the sounds insinuated themselves into her headphones that were supposed to cancel noise. Maybe not that much noise. Such as helicopters hovering not far above the house. And the lights. A dozen police light flashing, and powerful spotlights lighting up the curtains making each crack at the edge and middle shine bright, like some movie about aliens, as the ship lands. She'd given up hoping on the alien angle. But when the gun battles started, it made the other sounds and lights feel like welcome friends.

Tom knocked and stuck his head in. 'Nothing to worry about. Apparently, all those people I asked not allow trespassers are arguing the point with those who would indeed like to trespass. I think in time those who want to trespass will win out due to inexhaustible resources.'

She lay on her belly with pillows over her head. The next morning, she was surprised she'd eventually slept through most of the night.

They had breakfast cereal, Paige not feeling up to eggs and bacon, which were, after all, dead animal bits.

'Gardening?' She said with Faux enthusiasm.

He smiled back. Sadly. 'I think my calculations were optimistic.'

Shit was getting real she thought. 'Second cup of tea on the veranda?'

He nodded, looking out 'It's not pretty.'

She shrugged. 'Neither am I.' She'd didn't want any protestations from Tom. And he knew it.

She walked out there and all of the calls, chants, music solos, preachers talking unintelligibly through megaphones and slogans shouted over the noise all diminished for a second and were replaced by a huge roar. Initially it was of appreciation, not of Paige, but of what she'd allowed them to be a part of. Then it morphed into hate and disgust. A cinema size screen had been erected where a house was the night before. She was walking onto the veranda and saw a giant Paige walking out onto the veranda.

Tom came out and said. 'We're on the telly. And a really big telly.'

They laughed which didn't go down well. Soon the vision cut to Bridgit and Kewan.

Bridgit: *'Kewan in an unprecedented move by the BBC, with similar precedents in news channels around the world, something new will be reported on in less than a twenty-three-hour period. Another roller coaster for the IKT. We're getting vision of her and what some call her warlock and some an acolyte. Some are suggesting he's an undead manservant.'*

Paige and Tom couldn't help but have a good laugh at this.

Kewan: *'There's evidence that this 'Tom' has a power over people, especially those who know him. He can compel them to say good things about him.'*

Bridgit: *'This story keeps resonating around the World. Fortunately, much of the conflict in the world ceased when it was learned Britain had temporarily reinstated the Witchcraft Act of 1725. Rebels, the religions, the IKT Sentinels worldwide and the Anti Maneki-neko soldiers and their adherents have all paused. The Chinese leadership have told all rebels that if they lay down their arms and repent there will be no consequences. 'If you know what we mean.'*

'And now the focus is finally where it should be, on the IKT. There was the anticipated squabbling about where, and when. It's been determined that it will be right where she is. It will take the crowd minutes to tear her Shrine of Evil and add its timbers to wood that has been pouring from every corner of the globe. Some is being hand delivered by foreign

dignitaries, religious groups and rich people donating some of the rarest timber on earth. Some from priceless artefacts.'

Kewan: *'And a group of chinook helicopters are flying in massive section of a huge pine, cut down from national park redwood forests yesterday. This stake, two hundred feet tall and ten feet in diameter has been carved like a totem pole. There will be a kitten, a polar bear face, a Sea Lion, a penguin and right at the top a massive narwhal with its iconic horn. There's going to be a massive pile of wood the IKT will be tied about half way up near where the Totems start. There's been real concern expressed that the IKT will be consumed in flames in a couple of minutes and hence expire far more quickly than she deserves. Relief was palpable when it was announced that there will be fire trucks dousing the flames ensuring the process will be sufficiently slow.'*

Bridgit: *'A correction for our viewers Kewan. You should have said tusk earlier when referring to the Narwal. Tusks are made of ivory and composed of the same material as teeth. Horns are primarily keratin and can be an extension of bones.'*

In the house there was footage of Tom saying. 'Might go inside for a while eh?' He was getting more and more anxious. A state of mind he was unused to.

'Wine?' Said Paige.

'I thought you were off it.'

'No hangover this time Tom. And you're beer is...'

‘Shit.’

‘I was going to say ‘an acquired taste, and I haven’t acquired it yet.’

‘The wine’s cheap.’

‘How I like it. I buy the stuff on two criteria one; cheap and two; I like the label.’

‘A methodology in wine selection that never fails.’

Kewan: *‘Excuse me Bridgit, if I can share some news that actually matters, the IKT and her acolyte are talking about how they choose wine at the lower end of the price range. There are teams of specialist interpreters trying to decipher what their words mean.’*

Brigid: *‘We’ve got Randy Papel-higiênico, representative from the United Nations in the studio. He’s been deputised by each nation on earth, at least the ones that matter, to announce the legal endorsement for the imminent Witch burning. But to be indorsed it needs to be broadcast.’* Bridgit is squinting at the paperwork in front of her. *Our producers have reviewed the script and it’s considered the most boring load of crap they have ever seen.’*

Producer. A producer came in Bridgit’s earpiece. *‘Can’t you tell between the script and a handwritten note in the margin. Jesus.’* Kewan felt justified in his decision to use the Autocue.

Bridgit. *'Hence to listen to Randy Papel-higiênico read he's speech, please go to the hastily thrown together webpage www.RandyPapel-higiênicoreadsaspeech.com'*

Kewan. *'Bridgit we've unexpectedly got Dolly Parton arrive on the huge screen. She's smiling and talking but there's no sound yet.'*

Dolly Parton: *'Can y'all hear me now.'* There was a roar of appreciation. Anyone would get a roar because most people were charged up on drugs and booze, including the police who had gone to recover their stash of confiscated drugs to hand it around. Liquor store Owners had brought over all their stock, set up tables, and people could take what they wanted. The giant Dolly said. *'All the terrible, terrible things this abomination has done to little biddy kittens. But there's more. She's a man stealer. But were talkin' about a man stealer on a global scale. Thousands of men in Hollywood, Royal families and multibillionaires have been coming forward to say they only did it because of the terrible spell this...IKT weaved around them. They let those women steal them just because they could. Making it look like they were unfaithful, but they weren't. There was a female roar. 'And that's why They hates my song so much. It's the song that shows up that They's the biggest man stealer that ever was. Do you want me to sing it?'* There was a roar of 'yes' and one courageous 'no'. This non-conformist was set on by a mob who gave him a beating. The police pulled him out of the crowd. That way they too could give him a beating. As the song got going, Laney was up on the stage dressed as a dominatrix with a placard which read *'She Stole My First Love Away'*. Turing it around it said. *'Now Let Me Steal Yours'*. Followed by a web address.

'It's ironic.' Said Paige. *'I'm an ordinary person. I was mainly a C student, B's if I tried hard. Mum didn't have a lot of money and I was doing some casual work for the household early on. But mum made sure I could keep up with going on trips and*

things with kids my age. She lost her job and I started to work to make sure we had a reasonable lifestyle until she got another one, which wasn't easy at her age. I lost interest the things my friends did, except Laney and Rhonda and Wendy. We weren't religious but Uncle Liam told me that every messiah, prophet or wise man worth their salt all said the same thing. Don't do things to people that you don't want them to do to you.'

Tom laughed. 'It's simple to say and yet we find it hard to do.'

She smiled. 'I think you're the same as me. I try pretty hard to live that way. But I often can't get there. It stayed in my mind because of the man who said it to me. Otherwise it would probably get lost in the crowd of ideas that are smashing into me all the time these days.'

'Perhaps the uninteresting life you've had is the counterpoint for my life of adventure and accomplishments.'

She looked over. Not quick to doubt him.

'A lifetime in the service.' He said humbly.

She realised that she knew very little about Tom. 'What branch of the service.'

'Oh, I had a septic tank emptying service. I knew what I wanted to do from the early years of childhood. I serviced this town removing a startling range of effluent driving one of those

stinking trucks to what was a secret location.'

Laughing Paige said. 'Perfect backgrounds for a witch and a warlock.'

They looked up to see the people shuffled forward as one in what was now a tight semicircle. All the levity left their mood like a vapour of steam. The peoples faces were losing the one third of stupid and migrating to three thirds hate. Paige noticed for the first time that Tom was wearing a coat much heavier than the weather required.

She looked across. 'You want to go for a walk?'

He thought about it for a minute and smiled. 'Yeah. Why not.'

She took his hand and squeezed it. 'There's something I want to get. And then let's head for that truck.'

Pushing close among them there was still a circle of friendliness. They moved though like any two people. Except Paige could not help but make compliments to people as she went along. They were replayed on the huge screen above them. 'Can I have that sir.' She asked this of a policeman.

'Of course. Paige is it?'

‘Yes, it is sir.’ He said handing it over. ‘I really appreciate it.’ She felt bad for the amount of trouble the poor man was about to be in.

‘That truck?’ Tom used his glance to point out the target.

‘It’ll be perfect.’ She said. They walked through a tight circle and arrived at the Tactical Response Team truck which was big and had a flat top. Once they got there Paige asked who was in charge. A smiling man stepping forward, camouflage and his automatic rifle put aside as soon as they arrived. The circle of civility now poised to snap closed. It was a function of geometry that the circle accelerated as it closed. Neither Paige nor Tom had been much good at geometry. ‘Officer could you help us get up there? Maybe give a boost onto the bonnet from here, then someone could do the same up over the windscreen.’

He smiled. ‘I can do better than that. Paige is it?’

‘Yes it is sir.’

‘Don’t worry about that sir stuff. I’m Henry. Tom introduced himself to Henry and the man went and pulled an adjustable ladder concealed under the body of the truck. They were soon standing on a large, flat, camouflage platform of steel. She asked Tom if he could draw the ladder up. Looking around, the extent of the crowd took their breath away. As if to reinforce the point, the big screen provided a helicopter view. The town was completely awash with people overflowing onto the fields and farmland for miles. Hundreds of thousands of people.

Paige was strangely at peace when she lifted the loud hailer. She couldn't know, but billions of people were looking at her 'I know you're going to twist everything I say because you all have some disease. That's what it looks like to me. I'm an ordinary person. Boring. And so is my friend Tom. There aren't three of me and I've never harmed a single animal. Not *one*.' She thought it would not be productive to make a qualification for mosquitos and spiders. 'No one's seen me hurt an animal because I never have, ever, in my entire life. I don't know what the disease you have is, but it's made you all both meaner and stupider than you used to be.' They could see Tom's house being pulled down. The truck was starting to sway. Tom was reaching into his coat. 'You've stolen my friends, my mother, my neighbours and your about to take my life. I wish you'd all just FUCK OFF.'

Everyone blinks about fifteen or times a minute. This was an ordinary eye blink and they were gone. The cars and the placards and the tools that were part way though pulling down Tom's house were all still there. But no people. They climbed down and wandered about. 'Guess you told them.' Said Tom. Sharing her look of utter confusion with Paige.

'There's some really weird shit going on around here. Can't say I'm sorry to see them go. Let's go and see what's going on in other places. I've got some suspicions about where all of this has been coming from.'

'Ever driven in a tactical support truck?' Said Tom

'You're driving.'

‘Can’t be that much different to septic tank truck.’ They both laughed when it roared to life. They needed it to smash through food stands and push aside cars to make a way out. ‘And where might we be headed.’ He asked.

‘London.’ Said Paige. Revealing nothing more but looking briefly on her phone which still had internet.

They were out on the open road and the lanes heading towards the town were a massive traffic jam of every kind of vehicle. Heading to London the lanes were nearly empty. ‘Mercedes alert.’ Said Tom. ‘Ever driven one of those?’

‘My car cost a thousand pounds.’

Once Paige was roaring down the road in a late model Merc, Tom was having second thoughts about having her drive sports cars. He suggested to her that having avoided being burned at the stake, it would be a shame to smear themselves across the bitumen.

Paige took it as good advice from someone who’d done more driving than her. ‘Lamborghini alert.’ She said. They were taking turns, Paige, more restrained. They were speeding into the city at unprecedented speeds. Ignoring every sign and traffic light at the wheel of a BMW’s and old fashioned Mini and a Tesla. They arrived in an eerie London in a Jag till with new car smell without a person in sight. As they travelled Paige was experiencing a creeping concern she was indeed an incredibly powerful Witch that had dematerialised a nation. They changed out the Jag for a London Cab, Paige sitting back and giving directions from her phone. Soon stopping in front of the Studio where BBC World was based. They walked past an empty reception. After some wandering about they found the BBC World studio they had seen from the television side of the relationship.

Paige sat down and Tom found the control room. 'Not that seat.' He said. She moved along. 'Nope.' He said. 'One more. Now you're on the telly. Lot's off tellies back here.'

'Do you think the signal's still going out.' She could not imagine she'd created an empty world. An ironic anxiety flitted through her mind. Who was looking after the kittens now. And then a fear. Had she dematerialised all the kittens too.

Tom poked his head out. 'All the tellies are saying live feed. Each has got a name of a city. Some I can't even pronounce.'

Paige thought she might present herself as a pompous newsreader for fun. But decided to be ordinary Paige. 'I have absolutely no idea what's going on. All I know is I want to be left alone. I'm ordinary. I'm normal. There's *nothing* wrong with me. Whatsoever...' Paige didn't finish the sentence. She gripped the side of her arm in pain.

Tom came rushing around, concerned.

'It's like something stung me.'

'Everything's mad at you. Even the air. I can only think of one thing that might help.'

She nodded. 'I could do with that. Do you think the message went out?'

‘Must have. With such an expert in the control room and all.’

They were playing pool in the empty pub they’d driven to. Paige made some hot chips. They were into their third pint and the pool games were becoming two people taking turns a random, optimistic ball hitting. Mainly getting the opponents ball in a pocket and laughing wildly at the achievement.’

Handing the cue over, Tom had a strange, apologetic expression on his face.

‘I needed a little more time. I’ll come and see you soon.’

He dematerialised.

‘Fuck.’ Said Paige.

She got herself a pint. She was really annoyed at reality now. It was another one of those ordinary blinks and she was in a hospital room. The place wasn’t filled with complicated looking machinery but there was a big grey box with a few esoteric readouts flowing like earthquake monitors. There was a bed next to hers which appeared to have been recently vacated.

A man of African descent with a Yorkshire accent was smiling down at her. I’m Nelson and you’ll remember me in a minute. All your memories will start pouring in.’

'Nelson.' She said this tentatively. 'I'm part of an experiment.'

The man smiled. 'We like to call it a clinical trial. Sorry about the unnecessarily long pool playing and drinking. We wanted get some results before you came back. Doctor Stewart should be back in a moment.' A man arrived and looked at Nelson. Giving him an excited nod and a smile.

'Tom.' Said Paige. She suddenly felt a new kind of dread to the one she'd left behind. 'I've got cancer. I've got a month or less to live and I agreed to a new treatment.'

'Pretty crazy. We didn't know what to expect. Our good friend Dr Keita found that cancer cells could all be orientated when particular vibrations were applied. We've had them lined up in people again and again. And it's like they'd tremble but wouldn't break apart and stop co-opting healthy cells. We'd developed a kind of sonic pulse which was always close to annihilating them. Dr Keita proposed a pulse treatment that aligned an internal 'pulse' in sync with the outer pulse. We tried this with conscious patients, and again we were close but could never succeed.'

While he was talking the memories of her real life were repopulating her mind hence it was difficult to follow what he was saying. 'We decided the pulse had to come from the sub conscious. Powerfully. At key moments. Like when you told the whole world, aligned against you to...ah...fuck off. And later into the camera when you said 'there's nothing wrong with me.' He smiled. 'These were the moment the sonic pulses were synchronised.' The smile became broad. Delighted. 'There isn't a cancer cell left in your body Paige.' He spoke as someone amazed at the news he was delivering. 'We'd hoped to send your cancer into remission. But it's gone. When you tell something to fuck

off it really stays fucked off. Cancer's a trickster though, and there are never any guarantees it won't come back anytime it wants to, but at this moment, you're cured.'

She remembered now she'd been in the middle of the process of saying good bye to everyone she loved. She'd been crying while Tom had been speaking. 'I don't know how thank you. Both of you. I'd given up. My family had given up hope. You were in there with me. 'It was you.' Looking across at the empty bed next to her. 'With me.'

'We didn't know what to expect. Certainly not a full sensory high definition experience. And it took longer then usual for the cancer to align. And it took a long time for this odd story to roll along until you told the cancer to *fuck off* and after that there was *nothing wrong with you.*'

Paige was helped up and the doctors left the room as she dressed. Her clothes were a bit more stylish than the imaginary Paige wore. She was a Vet. And she had a wide circle of friends. She had a loving family. Now that she could reflect on the alternative, she appreciated what she had.

Dr Tom Stewart was by her side as they went towards the waiting rooms. 'We've only now identified there are some very strange side effects to this treatment Paige. Nothing like this has ever been seen before but we're hopeful it's only temporary. We'll be writing scientific Papers about your cure Paige. Unfortunately, the Papers we write about the side effects will be much more sensational. They eclipse anything in medical science. As I say. We're pretty sure this is going to be temporary.'

She walked out into room where the public await news of their loved one and there was a small mob ready to greet her. They were all shouting at her. 'The IKT should be burned at the stake.' or 'Protect the Narwhals.' or 'The evil one is Three.'

They were shouting. Screaming. Her mother was there. And Laney. Brian was there and the Almost Albino Lady who she now knew was her Receptionist Gayle. Rufus was there and he was a dogcatcher. Her practice had a bit to do with him. 'Dog murderer' he was calling. And Uncle Liam was there. 'How could you do this Paige?' read his placard.

The room started to spin. What had she come back to.

'Okay people.' Said Tom. 'I'm sure she's going to find this funny when she looks back on it. Let's have the real welcome. You're Uncle told us you loved a good prank as a girl.'

Soon they were surrounding her. Her mother and Uncle Liam were holding her in an embrace, awkward because it was thrown together so fast. Her mother was crying. 'My baby's cured.' She knew her family and friends intimately now. She and her mother had been a team. Uncle Liam was alive.

'I thought you were dead.' In this world she knew he was alive but she had felt real grief and loss in the other world.

Liam appeared reluctant to discuss it.

'I know why Liam.' Said her mother. 'Tell her what the doctors said planning this thing.'

Proximity

It was awkward. Liam said. 'They made the assessment that you would never believe I'd turn against you. It would reduce the likelihood of success. So they killed me off.'

They were both looking a little guiltily at Paige's mother.

There was a smile with a trace sadness. 'Don't worry. I accepted it years back.'

The other people wanted to break though the inner circle. Laney, Rhonda, Wendy, a neighbour she knew well. He came when he was told he was one of the characters in the treatment. Brian 'hoped he'd helped'.

They were all there. Aligned. For her.

Holes

Holes

The two soldiers knew that the patrol wasn't to find enemies. There were none in that area. They were there to keep the men sharp and get them off the base. It was also a way for an experienced Sargent to explain what patrolling was about to a green recruit. What to do and what not to. The two had walked for several hours over a generally flat, featureless landscape relieved by the occasional low ridge. Peterson asked why they didn't get a drone to do this stuff. Guthrie's reply was tinged with annoyance. 'You won't never get no drone that's better than an American soldier on the ground. Them big companies are tryin' to take our jobs with all them lies about what a dumb ass drone can do. What if a terrorist needs killin' eyeball to eyeball, you need a soldier for that. Specially if there's a decision to be made whether they need killin', or if they gotta be taken to one of them question and answer places they got.' Guthrie shrugged. 'Ends up the same for the terrorist I guess.' He chuckled. 'But they will have got some serious intel out of 'em. You don't hear o' no drone interrogatin' a terrorist an American soldier brought in.'

At that moment a very bright ray of green light hit the ground a few hundred yards away. It slowly took shape as a form about eighty feet high and forty feet in diameter on its flat top, curving down gracefully to the base in contact with the ground where it was about ten feet wide. It was like an elegant lime green flat topped mushroom. It had a beautiful swirl of deeper emerald green on the top facing the sky which the men couldn't see. It looked very much like an operculum which is the door that many molluscs have as an opening into the ocean.

'Look what we got here. Someone thought they could dump one o' these on American soil.'

After a pause Peterson ventured. 'But we aren't at home.'

‘It may not be in basic training, but everyone knows it. If an American is standin’ somewhere, that’s American soil. It’s American airspace above it and if there happens to be something under that American soil, then that’s American oil or gold or whatever else. Occasionally somebody wants to dispute it, but it don’t usually work out too good for them.’

‘I didn’t know that. If we’re standing here how much is American soil.’

Guthrie thought about it. ‘I’ve heard it’s roughly the size of an oil refinery. I don’t know exactly how big that it, but that green fucker there is well and truly sittin’ on American soil, there’s no doubt about it.’

The green ray of light faded away, and the object started to hum.

‘It ain’t one of ours or I’d know about it. I go to them briefings about secret stuff once a week. We know it ain’t Russia because they’re too broke to maintain the shitty weapons they have. I saw a program on it. All these subs and old fucked up navy ships rustin’ away and leakin’ out nuclear shit from their engines. And bombs that ain’t worth a damn no more. The British are broke too, fightin’ among themselves instead o’ doin’ what they should be doin’ which is helpin’ us. Europe’s a big bunch o’ peace loving beatnik pussies. All these raghead countries are still trying to make a nuclear bomb, let alone anything like this. Can’t be one of them.’

‘Only place this can come from is China. I seen a program on all of these tall buildings and fancy technicals, and all the modern shit they have. It’s all curvy and nice lookin’. Now here they are, sayin’ to Americans; ‘We’re gonna start doin’ whatever the fuck we

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want. And what are you gonna do about it?’

‘We got liberals at home in plague proportions. They think they’ll solve a problem by being nice to it. We need somebody in the Whitehouse who’s gonna say. ‘Fuck you China. It’s about time the US of A blew you right the fuck out o’ the water. And we’ll think about all of that human rights shit after.’

As he’d been speaking, the sound coming out of the green shape, that looked like it was made of very dense green transparent jelly, began to become louder and of a higher and higher pitch. When they shone their helmet lights at it, they could see right through it and there didn’t seem to be any bones or a dark shape where a brain might be. The sound began to get louder and louder. It was now like a baby crying or rather lots of them crying. And these were babies that were very very unhappy. They hadn’t been fed, they were lying in an unacceptably large pile of their own shit, or perhaps an especially ugly grandparent had poked their head over the cot and tickled them without their consent.

It was getting very unpleasant for Peterson and Guthrie. The sound was resonating through their bones, all of which started screaming in pain. ‘Perhaps we should move away Sargent.’ Peterson said. Expecting this to be the logical decision. He was surprised they hadn’t moved back earlier. Guthrie shouted. ‘That’s what them Chinese want us to do. Along with all them liberals and progressives and do gooders. Guess what? *Not* today you piece o’ Chinese junk. Here’s a little bit of the USA you can take home with you.’ He gave the thing a short burst of M4 machine gun fire. He’d expected it to try to take off and go back to China. He hoped to crippled it enough that it would be stuck there and the USA would be able get the intel, and catch up with China, with all their smooth shaped technology.

And it looked like it was going to be stuck there, injured. The screaming stopped. The heavy green jelly collapsed and began to flow in all directions until there was a very large disc a foot deep before it stopped moving outwards. And then it started to sink into the ground, not by seepage. Rather, the material beneath was atomised it into a dirty fog which was blasted upwards.

Guthrie looked at the process and nodded knowingly. 'Like I told you Private. The Chinese have developed an oil drillin' machine to take our oil right from under our feet. They'll send it back in that green line we saw before, and they'll clean it all out. I'll call up HQ to get one of them fuckin' drones or a chopper straight out here.' Guthrie walked to the edge while he was calling the base. He looked down and could see only a small circle of green at the bottom of what was already a very wide, deep hole. He had just raised his CO when he heard Peterson call out something about cracking. He decided to describe what he was looking at to his CO before moving back from the edge, but it was too late, a wide crack opened up in the rock behind him and slid into the hole, taking Guthrie with it.

Holes

Ray Jenkins was tired. It had been a busy day. Two mass shootings in one day tended to leave him drained. The Network called. It was Ted Schumann, his boss.

Ray. A guy shot three people in a McDonalds five miles from the last story. Three mass shooting in a day is a tough ask but we've got a good reputation on reporting these things and getting there first.'

'You know Ted, in most circles, three people doesn't qualify as a mass shooting, not counting the shooter of course. It's mainly the FBI says it's three. I always work with four being the threshold. This guy was probably pissed because his burger was taking too long.' While he was saying this, he was looking at a blinding green light coming through the cloudy sky and hitting the ground tantalisingly close like a thick green laser beam. 'Hang on a second would you Ted.' Without a word, the camerawoman, Tessa, had already turned towards it. It was closer than they expected and after a few turns they were in one of the rougher suburbs. A green object was forming mainly on the road though partly over a suburban lawn, which had a large American flag on a pole in the middle of it and another tied across the porch of the house.

Schumann was talking again. *Ray, I get where you're coming from, but our competition are going to call it a....'*

'Sorry to interrupt Ted. I think we've driven into a bigger story. You might want to go live with this.'

The object was about eighty feet high and half that in diameter on its flat top and then its sides fell in a gentle concave curve to its base. People found the shape beautiful as a crowd coming from the houses in the street gathered around and called in friends or

showed it to them on their phones. Not Cyrus Beatty. He had some of the base of the offending visitor on his lawn. And the top overhung even more of his real estate. Jenkins usually tried to find people to interview who would make the audience laugh and feel superior. It had been a winning formula for years. Hearing Cyrus expound on the current situation drew him in like a magnet.

He nodded to Jenkins as he arrived. “They finally sent one out. If this don’t have Agenda 21 written all over it, I don’t know what could. Them fuckers in the U Nited Nations have finally decided it’s time to mind wash all of us suckers who thought we was free. This here was sent to get us to twist our minds into believin’ every fuckin’ socialist thing, turn us all into queers, send our jobs off shore, and o’course the first thing is to take our guns away. Their mind washing will mean we’ll hand over our guns to the World Government like baby lambs. Bad enough we gotta be ready to defend ourselves against our own government. Now we got a fuckin’ World Government to take care of.”

This is interview gold thought Jenkins. ‘And so, your primary concern is that the United Nations has sent this as a mind control device.’

“That’s right. But what they didn’t bargain for is that this is *on my lawn*. On my property. Someone breaks into my house. I just kill ‘em. House defence. You can kill anyone you want on your own property. It’s the law. And it includes your lawn.”

Ray stepped back on the road.

‘Some big green blob sent by people plannin’ to take control of the world. They landed it on the wrong lawn. I can do whatever

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I want to this fuckin' thing. Street legal. These people want to disarm us. I'll show them what it looks like when they try.' Cyrus retreated to his garage. A crowd had gathered encircling the shape. While some remarking on its beautiful proportions, other on the unpleasant sound that was starting to emanate from the dense green jelly, clear and containing nothing. A police car came down the road and parked next to the giant green toadstool.

Jenkins had taken up a position with his back to the stalk giving a dramatic live report. Cyrus returned with a heavy, handheld fifty calibre machine gun and approached the form, now screaming. He shouted over it to Jenkins who swung the story onto him. 'The 50 cal has been one of the greatest innovations to allow America to bring peace to so many countries. We been out to all kinds of foreign places and helped time and time again, with never a thankyou.' He told Jenkins that this example of the fifty calibre machine gun was a rare hand held version. 'I don't need no tripod or vehicle mounting for this bad boy. I do training; special. I can carry it when a day like today comes along. Hear that sound?' He paused to indicate what was becoming a punishing cacophony of noise from the green shape. 'That's the mind washing starting. Well; *Hey you World Government Mind Washing Machine*. GET OFF MY FUCKIN' LAWN.'

Careful to aim over the bystander's heads, Cyrus gave the area under the platform a long burst from the powerful gun. Soon after, a few things happened at once. The crowd ran. The police were out of the car telling the running people to move away. Cyrus turned and walked to his garage to get more ammunition. Tess returned the camera to Jenkins to provide some analysis of recent developments. Then the upper portion of the shape collapsed, and Jenkin was dissolved in an instant. The police and the police car went with him.

The clear green goo, the consistency of thick custard marched outward. Cyrus went down with his front porch pouring fifty calibre rounds into the green slime which was making the hole under him. Tess looked down to see she'd lost a foot.

Holes

‘Mr President we’re right over it as I speak, and we’ve lowered down a man people call the latter-day Chuck Yeager into this huge hole.’ This was the voice of an exited Colonel from a helicopter.

‘Who’s Chuck Yeager?’ thought the President.

‘We’ve lowered him to about two hundred feet into the hole where we can get the best reading possible from our Top-Secret Hole Depth Estimator.’

‘Why is a hole depth estimator Top Secret.’ Said the President. He was known for his pragmatism. Or at least asking simple questions.

‘I don’t know Sir. Like you, I accept what the intelligence community tell me. Apparently, we couldn’t afford the version that gives you the measurements in feet, or actually those God damn meters and centimetres in this case. Because of Democrat budget cuts this Estimator only provides depths in increments of Verys. That is; Very deep. Very Very Deep. Very Very Very Deep and on and on. For another fifty million dollars the military industrial complex would have sold us the upgrade version. And we’d be the only country with one. I think. As usual, Democrat cost cutting meant we had to make do with second rate garbage while China overtakes us technologically.’ There was a pause and the Colonel added. ‘Come to think of it, I’m pretty sure this was made in China.’

The President left a pause. ‘I’m a Democrat.’

‘Ah. I was referring to earlier Administrations Sir.’ There was some

instruction being given in the background. ‘Sir while we were talking, Captain Carter, his nickname is Chuck as you might have guessed, gave the signal to be winched up and I have just now given that my approval for that to occur. He should be back with us in a moment.’ Open airtime made the Colonel uncomfortable. ‘Of course, we’re flying in this beautiful Pave Hawk helicopter. An absolute bargain at ten million and we still haven’t reached the two hundred mark for these multipurpose machines as part of our defence capabilities. I can see Chuck coming out of the Hole now Mr President.’ There was a significant pause in the commentary.

‘What’s happening Colonel?’

‘Unfortunately, Chuck has suffered some burns during his descent.’

‘How badly burned is he?’ The President knew there would be a transcript of the conversation and others were on the call. He wanted to get some information about the depth of the hole. Not the idiot they winched in there for no good reason, but he needed to sound compassionate rather than impatient. ‘Are we talking third degree burns?’

‘Unfortunately, Chuck has been turned into a piece of large, severely overcooked meat. It’s not a pretty sight Sir, and it’s starting to make me regret my decision to allow the media to observe the operation from the rim of hole.’

‘Do you mean...?’

‘Sorry to interrupt to Sir. We’re getting a signal from the Hole

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Depth Estimator. It would appear the late Captain ‘Chuck’ Carter let it go before suffering some burns. We’ve passed the Very Deep threshold Mr President.’ There was a breathless pause. ‘We’ve skipped past the Very Very Deep and we’re getting a Very, Very Very Deep reading. And now Mister President, the machine has gone past five Verys. I believe it’s probably still going but we don’t get accurate data past that point.’

‘And there is no possibility we can convert ...’ A voice in the room interrupted the President.

‘Sir we’ve been monitoring CNN and various countries have made depth estimates that suggest that the holes stop at the earth’s mantle.’

‘So how deep is that.’

‘It ranges between thirty to seventy-five kilometres Sir. Your press office, on your behalf, has hit back at the rest of the world’s depth estimation. You’ve advised them any high school science teacher could have told them that.’

The President shook his head. ‘What’s wrong with these backward countries and their ‘kilometres’. Why can’t they talk in miles? It makes it hard to do conversions in your head. They need to embrace change for once.’

‘Sir we’re also monitoring Fox News. They’re claiming these green creatures don’t exist and claim that they’re a conspiracy filmed in a government studio to takes people’s attention away from...I’ll

get the quote for you.’ The man read from his note pad. ‘The shambolic Administration run by and incompetent President sufficiently mentally impaired he’s just unable to effectively pursue his socialist agenda, leaving the country to be run by a coalition of the United Nations and the Anti-Gun Lobby.’

‘Does that all go on this transcript?’ Said the President.

‘If I could interrupt and provide an update Mr President.’ The Colonel’s disembodied voice carried a trace of annoyance that his project was being undercut by what he considered irrelevant updates from what he assumed was the secret service community. ‘Sir we have Captain Carter back in the chopper. Sadly, he’s been pronounced dead.’ Some buffeting of the helicopter could be heard. ‘Mister President we’re experience tremendous winds above the Hole here, our pilot is doing an amazing job in this magnificent and under-priced machine to keep us above the hole from which we can appraise you of any development...’ The feed was cut off.

‘Where’s he gone?’

The young man, who no one knew, and was later found to be a CNN plant said. ‘Sir CNN are reporting from the rim of the hole, that the aircraft was driven by incredibly strong winds to a height of a mile and then sucked down into the hole. Then blasted up into the sky, and, as a wreck crashed near the media crews recording events. CNN’s technical specialists are calling the phenomena an ‘Earth Fart’.’

The President looked around at his Cabinet plus the man he didn’t know, but assumed was from one of those Goddamn secret

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service organisations *he* wasn't even allowed to know existed. The Secretary of Defence wanted to divert attention from the helicopter debacle. Hence, he now used the words 'world authority' very loosely. 'Sir, as we speak, I have a world authority on holes on his way to provide the latest science and how we might respond to this situation. Therefore, I suggest we relocate to the ...ah... Situation Room.'

Leonard (everyone calls me Lenny except if there's a TV appearance) Papillion was being escorted through the halls of the Whitehouse. He was escorted through by Liddy (never call me Lidia) Barnes and she was having to frequently call out in the hallways 'Expert on Holes coming through, step aside.' Or 'We've got the Presidential Advisor on Holes coming through.' By a strange coincidence Lenny and Liddy had had a long and complex relationship, and it was pure happenstance that she was the person, in a very smart Airforce uniform, having to get the large numbers of people in the hallways, doing what; she had no idea, to move slightly aside.

When Lenny was shown into the Situation Room, he could almost hear the dramatic music in his mind. Only the President introduced himself and asked him to proceed. He thought he'd start with a real crowd pleaser. 'Gentleman, my job has got me in and out of a lot of holes.' He would usually get a laugh, but now that he thought about it, that it was only some of the freshman boys and none of the girl at the University he taught at would laugh. The stony faces behind the big curved desk suggested he needed to move on. Especially since a third of the Cabinet were women.

'Gentlemen I was voted the nineteen eighty-seven Cave Man Magazine 'Spelunker of the Year'. In addition to that I'm a professor of world renown on some of the rarest Troglodytes known to man. What I don't know about limestone cave systems isn't worth knowing. Some people say I've forgotten more about karst systems than the next academic in line knows. Noting though, I don't have anything to do with those remarkably deep flooded holes in which people scuba dive to amazing depths, in such clear water. Then they might dive through thermoclines or chemoclines and it's as if their diving through air. Breathtaking. Of course, I've only seen those sorts of things on documentaries.'

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There was an uncomfortable silence. The President said. 'Do you know anything about these Holes caused by the Aliens?'

'Aliens? Those holes don't exist. It's all over Fox News. I thought you had a need for urgent briefing on limestone caves systems. As I said, excluding the flooded variety.'

'Who let this man in here?'

The Secretary of Defence shrugged as if some idiot staffer had made an unforgivable mistake. Liddy had slipped from the room. Her relationship with Lenny was now much more complicated. A confused Lenny was escorted by two security men who never had to say 'make way' while throwing someone out of the Whitehouse.

'That was a complete waste of my time.' Said the President to his Cabinet plus the man no one knew. 'But I'd like to get a hold of those video's about diving into giant holes. Sounds interesting.' There was a chorus of 'Yes Mister President.' Later that day there were four copies of the same documentary on his desk.

The President looked around. His brows knit. 'Where's the Head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff?'

This had not been a good afternoon for the Secretary of Defence. 'Ah. Yes. Mister President. He's on a day in lieu today. He might be able to look in after he's picked the children up from school.'

The President processed this and said. ‘Okay. Gentlemen, I think it’s time to engage with the rest of the world on this.’

‘There’s four ladies in the room Sir.’ Housing and Urban Planning was tired of this Gentlemen shit.

‘Oh yes. I’m sorry. Now. Gentleman. The countries of the world have no doubt been waiting for us to finalise an initial assessment before we assume the leadership role in response to a serious threat to our planet. That’s right gentlemen, *our planet*. The people sitting around this table hold the future of earth in our hands.’

‘Not to be pedantic, but we are actually sitting in a big arc looking at a screen. It’s not really a table.’

‘Of course your being pedantic. Security throw whoever said that out.’

‘Sir I’m the Secretary of the Interior. Geological survey is in my portfolio.’

‘Okay. Leave the room for fifteen minutes and reflect on how annoying you are.’

‘Can we get the Secretary of, whoever does IT, to connect me with the rest of the world.’ The silence suggested there was not a Secretary for that.

Holes

The man no one knew said. ‘Sir I can help with that. A meeting of all of the world leaders is taking place right now. It’s being broadcast on CNN.’

‘How can there be a meeting with all of the world leaders without the President of the United States involved?’

The man said. ‘Um... the broadcast is very specifically composed of... the world leaders minus the United States.’

‘That’s impossible. Why would they want to have a meeting without the United States?’

‘Sir, the Chancellor of Germany spoke to reporters prior to entering the meeting he said. ‘We are sick of being lectured to by buffoons who think they are the leaders of the world. The current incumbent couldn’t lead people in a campfire rendition of ‘Row row row your boat’.’

The President was incensed ‘I want a full briefing on my desk in an hour regarding what this row your boat thing is. But I’m willing to look past this for the sake of the planet.’ He leaned back to a Security man always positioned behind the President so he could lean forward to hear. ‘Find the Chancellors speech writer and beat him up. No too much. No head injuries.’

‘Gentlemen we need to get into this meeting. These people will create a trail of destruction unless we are there to steer it. Our IT people need to work frantically to crack whatever encrypted meeting platform...’

'It's Zoom sir. They're meeting on Zoom. You have to pay a bit for the business version.'

'Well, while our IT specialists break into this Zoom thing, I need to know how many of these Green...things have landed on US soil and in other countries.'

'CNN there's a running tally. How many in each country and how many have been preserved and how many have been turned into these hole making things.'

'China?'

None.

Russia?'

None.

'Europe...or... that's only one country isn't it?'

'Sir inclusive of Northern Europe, one thousand eight hundred and sixty-two. Only one destroyed. The Alien landed near an active volcano on some flowing lava and melted on contact.'

'How about South America...and I *know* that's a country.' Said the President.

Holes

‘Across that...continent Sir, it’s two thousand seven hundred and nineteen and none destroyed.’ Said the man was staring intently at his phone.

‘You intelligence people are doing a great job by the way. Now how about here in the greatest country on earth.

‘Sir there have been nine hundred and seventy-three alien landings.’ The man was hoping the President was not going to ask for the other number.

‘And the number destroyed?’

‘Ah that would be nine hundred and seventy three Sir.’

‘They’ve all been destroyed?’

‘Yes. A split developed between the Fox News anchors. Some maintained the Aliens didn’t exist and the footage from around the world was coming out of a secret United Nations film studio. Others started to say they did exist, and are in fact brainwashing machines sent throughout the world to establish a One World Government. This Government will be run by the, quote: *United Nations and by gun hating, religion destroying socialists who want to offshore all American jobs and put something in the water which will turn us all into hermaphrodites.* That’s why about half of them were destroyed. Vigilantes.’

‘And the others?’

‘About fifteen rouge helicopter crews mobilised in an unauthorised shooting spree liquidating about four hundred and eighty of the creatures. They were unhappy about what a creature did to the latter-day Chuck Yeager. When they returned to base the Army acknowledged it was and ‘unfortunate outcome’. Those taking part have each been docked a month’s pay, and no one will be permitted to say. ‘Thank you for your service’ to them for one year.’

‘What does the Head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff have to say about this.’

‘CNN’s information is that he’s dropped his children at home, a friend has been asked to look after them, and he’ll be in the CNN studio’s within minutes.’

‘But he should be here?’ The President was becoming annoyed, but at least he had one person in his administration who was being helpful and knew something. The President wanted to get a clear understanding of the situation. ‘So we have nine hundred and seventy-three liquidated. And the rest of the world?’

There was an awkward moment. ‘One sir. Landed on lava in Iceland. But there is some reason to doubt the estimates from China and Russia. Both reporting zero landings. Of course, there was one in Middle East liquidated. By Americans.’

‘Sir the USA’s chief scientist is taking a seat in the CNN studios, the Head of the Joint Staff being bumped down the list of interviewees. The military man indicated he wasn’t happy about that and he’s threatening to go to Fox. Looks like they’ve got him to agree to be interviewed after the Chief Scientist as long

Holes

as there's a little thumbnail of him having a pretend discussion with a senior foreign dignitary at the bottom allowing viewers can know how important the next interview is.' The man no one knew had an earpiece.

The people sitting in front of the huge curved blank screen had their laptops open trying to get past the firewalls for external feeds, while others got through by paying the Fox News and CNN subscriptions on their personal credit card. 'Can't we play it on this hugely expensive curved screen.' Said the President.

All the Secretaries shrugged and looked to what they presumed was a CIA man. He was now furiously juggling a laptop and phone. 'Sir I'm told that all of the energies of the Whitehouse IT people are taken up with the Zoom problem and can't turn this huge screen on to CNN at this time. I'll try to angle my laptop towards you all and put the volume on maximum.' Once he had done this and they were hovering around it, he went to the hugely expensive curved screen and found a button by sliding his fingers along the bottom. A soccer match came on. There was a remote in a cradle at the side. He brought up CNN and there was a wave of relief that they could get some first-hand information. Although they would jump between CNN and BBC World, they only peeked at Aljazeera when the Secretary of Defence left out of the room for a few minutes. The President leaned back to the man that always stood behind him and leaned in. 'Could you get me one of those spin around maps on a ball things. I'd like to know where some of these places are.'

Germany was getting frustrated. 'We've been trying to get the roll call done for the last hour. We need to move on.'

'We the people of Eretria do not recognise the alleged nation of Ethiopia. This non-existent nation has taken out land.'

'Okay, I've had enough. Anyone who doesn't recognise another country is kicked out of the meeting. It's not like you're important countries with meaningful resources to contribute.'

'Yes. But we should be represented in a world-wide issue. That's why we need 176 tiles on the Zoom screen.'

'I was going to mention that.' Said Germany. 'It's like having ten generations of the Brady Bunch on the damn thing. Can we only have those speaking on screen?'

'That means only rich countries will be on the screen. Even if we can't contribute, we need to be allowed to nod or shake our heads and be seen doing it.' Said Mongolia

'But no one will see you doing that with 176 tiles on the screen.' Germany was beyond tetchy.

Iceland tried to be helpful. 'Why don't we have one tile for the speaker and another eight tiles around the speaker. The eight tiles are assigned randomly to countries, so, even if they never say anything, they can be seen to nod and shake their heads.'

Holes

'If it's random some small countries will not be given the opportunity to nod or shake their head and others might get several opportunities to do this.' Mali was concerned.

Iceland was doing the best she could. 'We could do it alphabetically.'

'Not starting with A.' Said Zambia

'Okay let's start in the middle and work outward.' Iceland was always cheerful.

'I still don't like it but in the interests of time our nation will accept.' Said Luxemburg.

'How come Ice-rand a country. Only free hundred thousand people. When China in charge it will be small provincial region in north.' China interjected.

Silence.

'How come no raffing. Funny Chinese joke. You should all be raffing.'

Germany was wearying. 'If we can move along with this now. CNN has provided a list of the 'Green Blobs', which is what the media has dubbed them.' Someone was seen pushing a piece of paper in front of Germany. 'It seems we now have a formal name for the Aliens.' He read. 'The International Alliance of Important Scientists' have negotiated through the night and an appropriate descriptor has been settled upon. *Extra-terrestrial Organism of Dense*

Gelatinous Substance with no Exo or Endoskeletons nor Internal Organs: Green? Germany muttered. 'But in the interests of time we'll...'

A female voice broke in. 'Oh God yes, yes that's amazing Yes...'

'Finland is that you... are you with Norway?'

'Yes. Norway here. As everyone's aware Norway and Finland have close diplomatic ties.'

'You need to untie them for a while or get a frikkin' room. Or why don't you turn you're monitor off.'

After a moment Germany was saying. 'Now if we're all finally to proceed?'

'The Diplomatic Republic of Congo is ready....'

'You don't all need to tell me you're ready to proceed.'

'Yes, yes my god. Right there. Yes...'

'Finland, I think you had two monitors in the same room. One for you and one for Norway. Could perhaps turn them *both* off.'

'Ah. Norway here. Sorry about that. If there's a vote or anything

Holes

we may have to wait until the Vice President of Finland arrives. The President seems to have...ah... thrown her back out.'

'TT Can you shut both feeds down. I don't think the Finnish will have much to contribute.'

'Mines.' Said China. 'Yes. Rots of mines in Finrand. China here to help. Chinese expertise. Long-term helper in Finrand'

Silence.

'This good material. Why no raffing and happy times. Only Chinese joking time. Why no raffing?'

'Will you people shut up and let us get started.' Germany had had enough. They had their Green Blob situation under control, as long as they could keep the Neo Nazi's away from them. Germany organised this meeting and was presiding over it because, in their view, the free world needed a new leader. The incumbent having become a slow motion, self-absorbed train wreck.

'How about we do nothing?'

'Who's that? We do have a loose talking stick thing going on here, and you're not holding it.'

'It's Australia here. These things make a god awful noise, but only the Yanks have been stupid enough to kill them or whatever.'

‘They’re not moving around or doing any harm. Our government has released an announcement which pretty much says. ‘No Worries. We’ll let you know if anything happens. Otherwise take it easy.’

‘That’s all very well for you Australia. But we are dealing with a world that’s culturally conditioned to have lots of meetings and prepare a great number of documents to reach the policy position you’ve described.’

‘Hello. Hello. I can hear voices but my screen’s black.’

Germany was losing it. ‘TT I give you *one* instruction. Only one. Keep that annoying, self-important bastard from America out of the meeting.’

‘You should be referred to the *United States*.’ Said the President of Venezuela. ‘People from South American nations are *also* Americans. It pains us to have US citizens called American. It’s an inaccurate use of the word and...’

‘Shuuuut up. Will you all shut the fuck up!’ Screamed Germany.

‘It’s okay now. I think I’ve got some vision now.’ The unwanted American voice came through clearly. ‘I can see the German Chancellor in the middle of what looks like a multiracial Brady Bunch, but I don’t recognise any of the faces. I see they’re changing around.’ The President was one hundred percent sure they would all be fascinated by his musings. ‘I don’t see Marcia there.’ He laughed conspiratorially. ‘I had a bit of a thing for Marcia.’

Holes

The Chancellor began to wish they had nuclear weapons. Or even a meaningful sized army. ‘Can’t you see the caption rolling across the bottom of the screen. *United States not Invited.*’

‘Yes Chancellor. As Leader of the free world, in addition to everything big, we can have a big sense of humour. Now I’ve received a briefing on the number and location of the Inter galactic, non exo skeleton...’

‘For the sake of time we’re calling them Green Blobs Mr President.’ Germany was realising being Leader of the free world probably wasn’t worth the effort.

‘Okay Chancellor. It’s just that solid accurate science is something the American people hold very dear.’

One hundred and seventy five presidents, prime ministers, dictators and interim Junta Leaders all laughed uproariously.

‘Good raffing. This is good raffing. It’s what China said in the last edition of People’s Daily. Also say that China only ever use science and technology for peaceful purposes and advance the cause of human rights.’

The laughter having trailed off, now reasserted itself, heartfelt and lasting. ‘This not good raffing. No good raffing. Leader for Life no like this raffing. New Guinea. China loan big money to you. No raffing. Laos. Big railway being built. Maybe China go around you. You shouldn’t be raffing. Ethiopia, you know why no raffing for you.’ Unfortunately, the three countries who knew they

needed to stop raffing were drowned out by those who thought they could raff, although footage was very carefully analysed after the meeting.

‘If I can continue...’ The President could hear everyone’s mic was on which he found strange now that he’d joined the meeting. And he had been up on the nine tiles he could see, but only for a moment. Otherwise it was the Chancellor, and the leader of a bunch of countries they hadn’t bothered teaching him about at Highschool. Like Spain. ‘I’ll be meeting soon with our experts on pH, which is also known as Potential of Hydrogen.’ The President was obvious reading this. ‘It’s a logarithmic scale between acidity and basicity. Some less enlightened countries call that Alkalinity. It’s bit like miles. My advisors tell me that miles are actually a much more accurate unit of measure, but most countries want to stay stuck in the stone age with kilometres.’

The laughter was suppressed, mainly because it would antagonise Germany.

‘We know what pH is Mister President.’

‘I didn’t.’ Said Paraguari. Honest enough not go pretending when she didn’t know something.

Most of the leaders didn’t know that pH stood for Potential of Hydrogen. They got to the top of politics in their countries via intrigue or violence rather than the fulsome and broad embrace of knowledge.

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‘Our great scientists, scientists from the greatest country in the world, are estimating the acidity of the Green Blobs as we speak. Unfortunately, to do this we’ve had to Deblob the very last one in order to take a sample. There was one in New England no one had told us about. Soon we’ll have the scientific know how to understand how to neutralise this curse upon the planet. ...Hello, Hello. My screen’s gone blank.’ The walked over to the big screen and tapped it. Hopeful this would fix was causing the disconnect. Can anyone hear me?’

‘What a relief.’ Said Germany. ‘It’s exhausting trying to deal with those people.’

Russia, having had relatively little to contribute up to that point said. ‘If I may. They’re ass...Holes.’ Russia’s pause for laughter at a bad pun was awkward. ‘Da. It is pure co-incidence we got the intellectually disabled President that *we* wanted to win the US Elections. Da. Da.’ Another pause. ‘Which was *either* one of them.’ This did generate some global merriment.

‘Hello. Hello. I seemed to have lost the signal. It’s the US President here. Leader of the free world.’

The German Chancellor was going wild at the CNN IT department but he was yelling at them in German. He was in Washington to see his sister and it would soon be time to catch up with her for an evening drink ‘Okay. World Leaders. Does anyone else have anything to contribute.’ He could see about a hundred and thirty hands in the air that mainly wanted say no in various languages.

‘I think we covered a lot of ground today. Let’s reconvene this time tomorrow.’ The Chancellor had instructed IT that the

thumbnails of all participants went blank all at once. Except one, now permitted full access. The American President could see himself on the full screen.

‘Hello. Hello.’

Holes

Alexia Griffon-Bruxellois felt she had finally made it. In academia she had been ignored because of her passion for Potential of Hydrogen. If she was being totally honest, she had this passion because there wasn't much competition in the field and she could write papers that were often accepted because the publishers felt they should be publishing something about pH, because of its place in science. Even though no one bothered to read them. But Alexia knew that there were two key steps to Academic advancement. Getting your papers published and then getting citations in other papers for your papers. She cited dozens of papers in hers. No matter most didn't really make contextual sense. She would then badger those author sto cite her papers. As it was somewhat of an economy, if people were reminded of this, they generally would, no matter how little contextual sense it made. No one read the citation notes anyway. Most never read the Paper. Especially in the case of Griffon-Bruxellois.

So she was the leading academic on pH in the US. And by definition, the world.

A man leading her though the halls of power was saying. 'Person I don't know coming through.' The halls were full of people walking around or talking importantly to each other or on their phones. 'Please make way for an expert on Potential of Hydrogen. I don't know what that is and I'm only doing this because my boss made me.' He knew what had happened to Lydia.

Alexia followed along, wishing she'd had some friend or ex-lover as a Department of Defence Staffer, no matter how complicated the relationship, to guide her in.

She walked straight into a Situation Room. Without preamble the President launched in and said 'What's acidity? We've been

advised the scientific assessment team that the acidity of these Green Blobs is somewhere below zero on the...ah'

The man nobody knew leaned across and said quietly ...Potential of Hydrogen scale Sir.'

'...Potential of Hydrogen scale. Fox News says the Green Blobs are about negative 10,000 pH. Is that possible?'

'It's believed that pH is a fixed and fundamental attribute of physics everywhere including other planets. However, I suppose anything's possible.'

'So Fox News may be right.' Said the Secretary of Defence

'For once.' Came the unknown man's cynical mutter.

The Presidents mind was working feverishly. 'So, if we get to the other end of the spectrum Mrs...' he looked down at this notes. *Shit*, he thought, *I'm never going to be able to pronounce that.* And a person with some complicated kind of relationship with her wasn't there to help.

'It's Ms.' She believed she'd never had time to marry because of her important work. No potential suitor had ever come forward to challenge her regarding that assumption.

'Thankyou Ms.' The President felt he had skilfully navigated out

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of that one. ‘What is the current number of the upper limit of the Potential of...ah...?’

‘It’s ten Sir. It’s a logarithmic scale of one to ten.’

He had been told what logarithmic meant in High School. And there it had stayed. ‘And could we go higher than ten?’

‘Sir exophysicists believe that the laws of nature very likely apply to any planet or organism in the universe.’ She didn’t know if exophysics was a thing, but it sounded pretty darn good to her on the fly.

‘But since they’ve never been there, it is possible that we could create something of pH 10,000.’ *Nobel Peace Prize*’ here I come thought the President.

Alexia Griffon-Bruxellois’s felt silence allowed her a bet each way.

‘Defence Secretary can you get in touch with the companies most likely to have the capacity to begin churning out a pH 10,000 substance to neutralise these alien invaders.’

The Secretary of Housing thought she had something relevant to point out. ‘Why are we considering these beings as being hostile. They haven’t done any harm where they’ve been left alone. Even when we do destroy them they disappear into a hole. And if we kill them, all that may achieve is they call in more.’

‘These are all issues for consideration at some point down the track, but unless there’s an urgent need to find all of these creatures *Public Housing* I’ll be dealing with the Secretary accountable for Blowing Things Up.’

The Secretary of Defence could have called any number of companies. But because they were on speed dial, he called the company he had been CEO at for ten years before the Republicans tapped him on the shoulder for Defence. He spoke in a rapid series of exchanges on his mobile phone, turned away from the group so they didn’t hear things like: ‘The shares are going gangbuster Mike, good job. Shame I can’t exercise my Options till I leave this job; you better not let them take a nose dive. Remember who your biggest customer is.’ There was a brief exchange on a technical level and the Secretary pressed the red button to hang up.

He looked around the room expansively. ‘I have a long-term supplier who is willing to put aside their production of chemical and biological weapo...oh...um...biological weapons detection machines, and start turning out huge quantities of a pH 10,000 substance to neutralise the Green Blobs.’

His phone rang. A very short conversation took place.

‘I think Mike must have misheard me. He said they can start producing an abundant supply of pH 10 material. Probably closer to pH 9 as pH 10 is pretty hard to actually create in any quantity.’

The President pinned Griffon-Bruxellois in what he thought was a famous stare. His Nobel Prize dream dashed.

Holes

‘Can someone please take Ms *‘Anything’s Possible’* and throw her out of the building for wasting our time with quack science.’

‘I think that more of a medical pejorative Mr President’ Said the Chief Medical Officer. It was his turf to use that word. ‘Maybe Junk Science.’

‘Sounds okay...wasting our time with her junk science.’ Said the President nodding to himself at his capacity to take advice.

Fortunately, the same man who hustled her in, offered to hustle her out promising to meet the standards the President expected. She didn’t appreciate the ‘Make way please. Ms Junk Scientist coming through.’ Or ‘Stand aside please. Time Waster, let us pass please.’ and ‘I have no connection to this person, complicated or otherwise.’

He told her that when the President asked for someone to be thrown out of the Whitehouse, he meant it literally. But if she could do it herself, they could probably get away with it. He said if she could sort of sit down quickly on the pavement and lean over and lay on her shoulder. She could let her head very gently touch the concrete for a second. That would be deemed acceptable.

‘Hello. Hello. I think I can see all of the tiles pretty well. We have such a huge screen here in our Situation Room which is larger and better equipped for...things, then anywhere else in the world.’

‘...esident. What do think you were doing dumping that toxic rain on three Eastern European countries.’

‘Hello. Finally got the sound on. Heard the end of that sentence. Apparently, you’ve been able to survey the results of our remarkable trial. My science experts say that it was a huge success.’

‘How the... how did you come to that conclusion.’ Germany had scheduled a course of four anger management sessions.

‘Well, we now know one thing that doesn’t appear to work. But who knows. A bit of tinkering and we may hit the mark.’ The President was offended at the ingratitude.

‘Do you know there are thousands of people with caustic burns, sheep and cattle dead, crops and gardens, including botanic gardens, destroyed.’

‘I wasn’t aware of the details. Everyone affected can be assured that the United States offers its deepest sympathies and condolences.’

The Chancellor was talking in a voice of one that no could longer be surprised. ‘Our German scientists, who actually *are* the most advanced in the world.’ Much head shaking. ‘Believe these creatures come from an alkaline environment. The destructive

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toxic aerosols you dumped on three countries would be the equivalent of a pleasant rain shower for them.’

The President was expansive. ‘Another opportunity to share our learning and develop unsurpassable firepower in co-operation with our friends and our...ah...acquaintances. Our great and true friend China helped us with the project. Ten percent was generated by...ah... the US with China coming to the rescue for the remainder. They didn’t want me to acknowledge them, but I think people who do good things should be praised. And praise from the USA is no small thing.’

Germany was caught short. ‘China, is this true that you aided and abetted this crime and insult to science.’

The Raffing Chinese Deputy was gone. The new man was more dour. ‘I’m afraid. I’m not going to say anything about that.’

‘Why not?’ Said Germany

This delegate thought his answer was clear the first time around. ‘As I said...because... I’m afraid.’

Germany was exasperated. ‘Mr President why are you bothering with this. You don’t have any Green Blobs that haven’t been Deshaped.’

Unsure what Deshaped meant, The President leaned across to the man who seemed to have answers to most questions – ‘Sir that

means 'Slimed' according Fox News and 'Violated' according to CNN. No US agency has a name for the phenomena. Deshaped is a European thing.'

'Well, that's a fair question. We don't have the insurmountable problems you all face, because we've dealt with ours. We wanted to reach out our hand in friendship and fellowship....'

'I know I'm really only a head shaking and nodding country.' Said French Guiana. 'But do we really have to sit and listen to this. I have better things to do. Which is in fact *nothing*. I have nothing to do, but it's better than listening to this self-aggrandizing moron.'

The President said quietly to the Secretary of Defence. 'Can we scramble the Drones. Is that what you do, scramble drones? Go and bomb the capital of whatever country that was. Make it look like it was somebody else and we'll come out with promises of solidarity and aid. We'll make the money very hard to get to of course.'

The President looked around the table. 'I think that was very productive. We've managed our problems. We've offered the hand of friendship, and that of vastly superior technology, and it has been thrust aside. Let us rest easy, and let the rest of the world go to hell in a hand basket if that's what they choose.'

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‘Can someone tell me why we’re in the Situation Room at five in the morning. I start at seven sharp.’ There were smirks all around at a President who didn’t know the difference between seven and nine-thirty. But every clock in the Whitehouse except the press briefing room clocks were set two and a half hours ahead.

A beleaguered Secretary of Defence tried to hand off the problem to the Secretary of the Interior. She had Geological Survey in her portfolio. The Secretary of the Interior had undercut his manoeuvring when she went on emergency Maternity Leave. In Europe. Citing the fact that she and her husband were ‘trying very hard’.

‘A few of the Green Blobs are starting to lift off Mr President.’ Advised the Secretary of Defence. ‘Of course a bunch of progressive socialist scum are giving them ‘going away parties.’ Like a bunch of Kumbaya singing earth mother loving idiots.’

‘Didn’t we come to power with a very strong environmental platform. Domestic and international focus on long term sustainability. I didn’t understand much of it. I only read what the speech writers put in front of me. Warmer weather on the way or something.’

The Secretary of Defence added quickly. ‘Oh, I meant to say our people. Our people sir, giving the Aliens...farewell parties.’

The man that no one knew was in the situation room again. No one really minded as he seemed to have the latest information. ‘Sir if I may, it’s being reported on CNN that the Green Blobs that had been, ‘Slimed’ or Violated’ depending on who you’re affiliate with may be reconstituting into their original shape. Based on what’s

being observed with the example in Finland, where the depth of the hole to lava was very shallow, the Blob had been sealing up the hole at the mantle to the surface.'

'And what does that mean?' Said the President. Feeling the effects of being roused what felt like four hours early. 'And why haven't we had any coffee brought in. I mean it's early right? I'm the most powerful man in the world. Can I get a coffee?' Half the room cleared to supply the President a coffee and there was some ugly jostling to get theirs in front of him.

The Secretary of Defence took over. 'It means there is a risk, however slight, that of our approximately nine hundred Gree...'

'And for seventy-three.' Said the Secretary of Housing and Urban Planning.

'What are you the irrelevant details police.' Said the President. 'Why do you even come to these meetings.' The only recently coffeed man was only in the mood to hear 'Yes Mister President.'

'Ladies and Gentlemen if I may.' Said the Secretary of Defence. 'The reason we're here is to be provided with a briefing from a leading Volcanologist.'

Urban Planning muttered '*I* come to these meeting to keep a watch on *you*. You plant for the Military Industrial Complex.'

The Secretary of Defence said. 'Our expert should be with us soon. Probably navigating the unnecessarily crowded Halls of Power as we speak.'

Holes

‘If you could make way please. If you could stand aside. I have a prestigious Vulcanologist coming through to give a briefing to the President.’

As to why this many people were loitering around in the halls of the Whitehouse at this time in the morning Sandra Groodle had no idea. She was worrying on the way in as to how her bother was going to perform. As a staffer, she was taking a big risk bringing him in, but her boss needed someone at short notice and he wanted them billed as a world expert on Volcanos. Raphael’s long-term marijuana habit, which had recently migrated to methamphetamines had the potential to be a problem. He assured her he was a functioning addict. He decided not to tell her about the crippling debt. Every second phone call was from a repossession company, or debt collectors. This was now partly resolved by the fact his phone had been cut off and repossessed. But this was his time to shine, and once people heard about the fact he’d advised the President, he might be able to keep his position at the small university where he was a part time lecturer.

Raphael Groodle walked confidently to the middle of the room. ‘Gentleman.’ He looked closer to see that some of the grim, serious looking people were in fact female, ‘and Ladies. I’m Raphael Groodle and I’m an expert in Vulcanology. I was ‘Vulcanologist of the Month’ in Volcanoes Monthly in July 1998. A prestigious Journal which ceased publishing around that time.’

He opened his hands expansively ‘Gentleman and Ladies, what would you like to know about volcanoes?’

The President looked around. He decided the question was simple. ‘Are we going to get nine hundred volcanoes?’

‘And seventy-three.’

‘Thank you, Urban Planning. Are we going to get nine hundred and forty two volcanoes.’

‘Oh yeah. Nothing surer. A soon as those gooey green blankets are gone...hey, you’ve punctured mother earth to the mantle and she’s gonna say ‘Hey, chew on this you turdbags. Bam, it’s volcano time.’ The meth hit in the car park was taking charge.

The group absorbed this. ‘And based on your expertise what kinds of volcanoes are we looking at here.’

‘Depends on the dimensions sir. How long’s the shaft is, how big around is it, and how much of that hot stuff it feels like ejecting you know?’ His eyes were now starting to swim through the room. ‘I really hope I just said ejecting.’

The President again took the part of inquisitor. ‘Considering all of that, what’s range of size estimates which you would say these volcanoes will fall between.’

Groodle knew what his answer was going to be. Yet wanted to appear to be contemplative. However he was too excited to pull that off. ‘Okay, at one end of the spectrum we have, you know the size of a house. Actually, more a mansion. You know like Brad and Jennifer; no, the other one. The one that played Lara Croft. The original not the remake which was not as good in my opinion, but I can’t speak for a new generation right. I don’t want to be one of those people that automatically dislike remakes of films that

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should have been *left alone*. Anyway, a mansion people like that might own. I think they've split up haven't they? Anyway, that's the lower end of the scale. It would include the grounds of course. Pretty big gardens, maybe a little forest. Probably never going to be that small now that I think about it. Then the upper end of the scale, maybe the size of New York. And I mean greater New York. Not only the city itself. Yep, definitely greater New York.'

The president was incredulous. 'We have a Green Blob hole in New York.'

Groodle was hitting the *I feel great* phase of the drugs he had loaded himself up with and said 'Well, if you've got real estate in New York, you better sell it, ideally overnight.' In his addled mind he thought he'd delivered a devastating punchline to lighten the mood.

The President interpreted things differently. He leaned back and said to the man leaning in, and not very quietly. 'I want you to throw this man out. But I want you to literally throw him out. I want to *see* and *hear* his head crack as it hits the pavement; on video. If you have to do it a number of times to get what I've asked for, do it.'

Sandra Groodle was rushing to try and both change her last name and sell the small apartment she'd put all her saving into in New York. She needn't have worried.

The upper estimate Groodle had given was around the middle of the volcanoes footprints that developed.

Some formed where people were sitting in large 'Circles' around the holes. Singing various songs of farewell to the Aliens and calling out their appreciation for the enlightenment they'd brought to planet earth. Some gave into the compulsion to actually sing Kumbaya. These 'Circles of Farewell' as they were called were immediately vaporised when the first rush of lava hit the mouth of the hole. The 'Circles' around intact Green Blobs in Europe fared slightly better. Those gathered to say Bon Voyage suffering between first and third degree acid burns.

Most people in the US had a more pragmatic response. They were running, driving, cycling or flying for their lives. And Groodle had provided no useful information as to how far to run. Some had the misfortune to be running away from one volcano in formation into another. Geological Survey had shut down for a Public Holiday and was therefore unable to be contacted to supply the maps they had of all of the holes.

All the other countries in the world had no new Volcanoes except Iceland, saying it would be a major new tourist attraction as it became the biggest in Northern Europe. Russia and China both maintained that they had not been visited by the Aliens. The six hundred and ninety-five new volcanoes in China and seven hundred and sixty in Russia, were all claimed to be the product of unrelated natural processes. And there was one, in the Middle East. Where it all began.

The Dog's Dream

Epilogue

A week after the Green Blobs departure, the reports on the Rio de Janeiro nightly news describing the state of the US and also the details leaking out of China and Russia were very grim. The rest of the world found it hard to avoid the collective conclusion that the visitors may have inadvertently balanced world geopolitics out a bit. Given the capital of each of the three powers was gone.

News anchors love to be able to finish the program on a high. 'On a lighter note, as our audience is probably aware, scientists were scrambling for weeks to try to figure out what that intense screaming from the Green Blobs meant. Some of the greatest minds of our time were trying to crack the code. It turns out the code was fairly simple. It was simply a letter off set by five numbers A=5 B=6, C=7. It was so simplistic no genius could ever be expected to work it out. It took a thirteen-year-old boy in Auckland, New Zealand - am I saying the name of that country right - make the all-important discovery. He cracked the code the day after the Aliens arrived.' The anchor laughed. 'Unfortunately, he was ignored. As if a thirteen-year-old could figure out something which was supposed to be so complex.'

'And now we know. All they were saying was: *Hi. Dropping in for some oxygen. We'll be out of here in no time.*'

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'Running. A beautiful warm day on the huge flat place with moving water on one side and high steep places on the other. The Pack Leader is throwing a round thing for me. Out into where I'm jumping over the moving water. I know if I bring it back to the Second in the Pack it will make both of them very happy. I do this some of the time. It's warm. Much warmer than it usually is. That's why they have hardly any fur on. I'm a little hot even in the water. I like to swim. But I like to run more. Where we live has some grass to run on. But a steep wall stops me going too far.'

Monique came out of the fourth unsuitable place she'd been looking at in the Village only to be part of an audience to a little drama unfolding before her.

A policeman was writing out a ticket for man who'd come out of the Doctor's surgery to do a few housecalls. The Policeman had waited for him on this occasions to finally get his enforcement issue resolved. He made no effort at pleasantries. He simply said. 'It's not difficult to see that this is a three hour parking area. This car's been here for four hours as you know.'

'Yes. I know what my car gets up to when I'm not driving it. The previous owners of this Surgery said there was an understanding that they could park their car here all day in case there was a medical emergency they needed to attend. That's what they did for twenty years and they said there had never been a problem.'

'I've been here a few weeks and I'm not a party to any agreements, and I don't believe the authority who put that sign up is either.' He pointed with the end of his pen but didn't look up. 'If the sign said a car with your number plate could sit there all day we wouldn't have a problem. Now I could write out five tickets, because I've observed this car parked here all week for more than the permitted time. I thought I'd wait to see you in person to let you know you

were in breach of the parking regulation. I'm writing one ticket but I *could* give you five tickets.'

Andrew's father hadn't imparted a great deal advice to his son. But one thing he recommended was that you should not accept the terms of a bully. His father had been bullied on a few occasions when he was younger. Even in a professional setting. He came late to the decision to stand up for himself. He wanted to make sure his son knew he had choices. He said if people made an ultimatum, make them carry it out. You might get beaten up he said, or end up worse off, but you won't live being cowed by those who misusing their physical stature or position. And if you drag a bully's threats out into the open, everyone benefits in the long term. He did get beaten up by some bullies in school and he did get in some trouble here and there, and he lost an advancement opportunity on one occasion. His father's advice led to what was an otherwise fairly retiring person, to surprise those around him by risking all to hold people to their word.

And so, as the policeman slowly began to write the ticket Andrew said. 'I want five tickets. You saw me parked here illegally five time. I want five tickets.'

'One will suffice on this occasion.' More irritation creeping into a voice frequently occupied by it.

'You can't write me this ticket, unless you write four more. If the law is the same today as it was yesterday, you must write me five tickets. You said you could. I demand that you do.'

'I don't have to write those tickets. I was merely advising you that I could if I chose to.'

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'So, the enforcement of the law is what you choose it to be? In which case you don't have to write this ticket. You're only writing this ticket because you feel like it. You don't have to write it; you *want* to write it.' Andrew was obdurate and was not going to stop.

Monique was a lawyer, and she was absolutely loving this.

The policeman was getting angry. 'Is that your car sir?'

'You know it is. Why the theatre?'

'I am writing this ticket, because *that* car has been in that space for more than three hours.'

'I see. On the other four occasions you are unsure it was my car and hence cannot write me a ticket because it may not have been my car. Can you explain to me why it is that you alleged my car has been sitting there all week, when you're not sure it was mine. If you are sure it was mine, I'd like five tickets please.'

The Policeman was now only slightly below shouting volume. 'I don't have to write you five tickets.'

'Yes. But my point is, you should. If you were doing your job *properly*, I'd have five tickets by now.'

The policeman decided on the silent treatment. He tore of the ticket and handed it to Andrew and turned away. Andrew was

surprised to be given more material to work with. 'Excuse me. This isn't signed. It's inadmissible. Might as well have written it myself. In which case, I would have written out five.'

The policeman stalked back and signed it sitting on top of his pad. He was so rough with it the paper tore. He handed it over and stalked off. 'This is torn. I'd like a fresh one. I'd like five fresh ones. This is inadmissible you know. I don't have to pay this because your signature isn't valid and is only on this top version, not the duplicates below. You need to start all over again on this one and then write another four.' The policeman was walking up the hill from the seawall where the surgery was. The new policeman in the village couldn't help but notice that the dozen or more people who'd come out to see what was going on were smiling. But not with him, at him.

'I won't tell people that they have the flu if you don't start telling them what's admissible and what isn't.' Andrew turned around to see a woman about his age holding her hand out. He shook it and said. 'Andrew. Local doctor.'

'I'm Monique. Would be local lawyer. And I take it that officious fellow was the local policeman.'

'I suspect he's very nice. He's merely never shown it to anyone. Would be local lawyer? Does that mean you would be a lawyer if you were a lawyer, or you would be local if you lived here.'

'Some of my more uncharitable colleuges would interpret it as the former. For me, it's the latter. I've decided I want to get off the blood soaked ladder towards Partnerdom in London and do village law. I thought I'd identified a huge gap in the market, not

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another lawyer for four villages deep and I'd be spoiled for choice, but I can't find an office to work out of. And the house I'd love to rent isn't suitable to work from. I was looking at that old place over there. Pretty grotty.'

'You could make a small fortune out of that place.'

'Oh.' She said. A little surprised.

'Yes. But you'd have to start with a very large one.'

'You're a one man comedy routine.'

'Only very occasionally. Mainly when people of that ilk annoy me.' He nodded up the road. 'I can feel myself receding back to being boring as we speak. Rather of a shame really. I need to get off on some house calls, if you'd like to meet me here in a few hours I might be able to show you what something suitable looks like. I'll meet you at reception at four if that suits.' He went to his car. There was a dog sitting on the passenger seat, having shown only a passing interest in the whole affair, he lay down as the car pulled away.

She looked at a few more places suggested by the agent. They were far enough out of town to be inconvenient to walk to and no parking associated with the properties in the tight little lanes rising into the hillsides. At four she was walking down the road as Andrew pulled up. He was quieter and less sharp witted than during the mornings altercation, but not boring.

He took her in and introduced her to his receptionist Lucy, and showed her around his rooms which were generous and with a walk storage room.

‘You’ve figured out by now I’m desperate for a place to set myself up but I’ll draw the line at a walk in robe.’

‘I see. Well, have a look at this.’ They walked past Lucy and opened a door which let into a room identical to Andrew’s.

It was musty but with similar furnishings. It had been kept clean but not used in some time. ‘The practitioners had a GP and Naturopathy practice. Whoever had it before them gutted two shops to make a pair of consulting suites with a reception between.’

Monica was getting a little excited. The rooms were perfect and the ability to share the cost of a receptionist created a dimension to her business which she didn’t think she’d be able to afford, at least not initially. And it was in the most scenic part of the village. By the sea. It was perfect, even if there was no parking.

‘You think there’s a possibility you could be my landlord?’

‘No. I thought I’d show you the kind of thing to look out for.’ There was quite a sustained silence. ‘I would rent it of course, if I was immune to any malpractice suits.’

She thought for only a second. ‘Okay.’

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They both smiled. The negotiations were smooth. Monique knew if she tried any legalese she'd be shown the door. They used a standard tenancy form and were about to sign it when Andrew remembered something. He said 'My dog must like you as one of the Caveats.' She was a little miffed that she had to be acceptable to his dog. At that moment Patches came out of the storeroom where he'd been sleeping, ignored Andrew, solicited a pat from Monique, and lay down next to her.

'Anything else?'

'Welcome.' Said Andrew.

Andrew already had a busy practice and Monique's clientele built rapidly, primarily because there was a backlog of people wanting to update wills and other legal affairs but they didn't want to go to the larger towns to do it. She took on real estate settlement work and a few legal wrangles between farmers or neighbours. Trying to resolve things amicably, rather than have people with only modest incomes go to court. She didn't do criminal nor family law no matter how much people offered her. This did limit her client base somewhat. Similar to what Andrew had experienced moving from London, her income was lower, yet were her living expenses were also reduced. And she had more free time than she ever thought she'd have as a lawyer, partly because there was no commute but also because didn't have to compete in an 'I can work more hours than you' environment. She loved reading and walking so she started to do more of both. Hence, she and Andrew mainly bumped into each other at Reception and said hello.

Soon it was Andrew's turn to be a little miffed. Patches, when he wanted to avoid a he patient judged unworthy, would walk across the reception and scratch on Monique's door. She would come

over and open it up, even if she was in a meeting, and he would lie down next to her chair and go to sleep. She would leave the door slightly ajar so he could let himself out if she was visited by an unworthy, which did happen. But gradually this pattern slowly changed. Once let out of the car Patches would put his paws gently on the reception desk wall and make the peculiar howling sound he only ever made for Lucy, which made her feel special. He'd spend an hour or so with his master and then disappear into Monique's office for the rest of the day. Sometimes Patches would need to be recovered from there when Monique worked late.

Monique liked Andrew, who was fairly quiet and reserved when not infuriating policemen. It took her a week to petition the Council to have the space reserved for the doctor's vehicle. It took him another week to notice the new sign. He was sincerely grateful. He could now park there without moving his car out for a while and moving it back.

One day when Andrew was going to collect Patches, Monique planned to say. 'Patches has been wondering when you plan to invite me out.' Yet when she thought about it, she was participating in the kind of patriarchy she'd always complained about. It was usually men who were expected to ask the woman out. The man had to take the risk of rejection and the woman made the decision. Although things were changing with the younger set this was still what happened in the majority of instances in her generation. It was a gender inequality some woman seemed to accept because it suited them. She'd always been known to be a maverick and not to be averse to being proactive although, like anyone, no fan of rejections. Hence when Andrew came in, somewhat sad to have lost his dog's daytime affections, Monique said. 'Patches has been wondering when I was going to invite you out to dinner.'

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'Oh.' Said Andrew. 'I have very few nights I'm not tied up in some social engagement but tonight's free. And as it happens, tomorrow night, and the next few thousand after that.' Then he said, as one who'd forgotten something important. 'And I'm delighted to be asked.'

It was Friday so Monique was ready to go. 'Why don't we get on with it? I've had my eye on a restaurant I haven't tried. I'll pick you up at seven.' She said this as she locked the door to her office, patting Patches on the way past.

When a late model yellow Porsche pulled up it was hard not to be impressed. Once he was inside, she said. 'Let's get it over with. My parents gave me this for my twenty fifth birthday. My family has rather a lot of money and yet they are still somehow ordinary people. They don't like my choices as to where to establish a practice as they're both burned out lawyers in London and expected me to follow in their footsteps. It's the only thing they've ever given me but I can't say I mind driving around in it. Because I've got such a great location to work in, I can walk there. Now I'm going try to keep it like new for my old age.'

Andrew could share some similarities. My parents are both specialists in London. That was the track set for me when I finished medical school, they had contacts, all above board of course, to fast track me into gynaecology. A field I wasn't interested in. I wanted to do paediatrics, but they said there wasn't the money in that field. Working as a GP in Cornwall was the last thing they wanted me to do.' Andrew said this as though he was finished but added. 'They gave me a blue Mercedes.' A long pause. 'But it was one of those toy metal ones. When I was six.'

She didn't bother to dignify that with an answer and they drove on in a comfortable silence, which was one of several things, as it happened, they both enjoyed. It was a very pleasant restaurant with friendly owners and good food. They found they were both mainly white wine drinkers after a cleansing ale. And then Andrew said something that gave Monique a chance to be what did well at. Be flippant. He said. 'Is it good?' When he might have said. 'How's your dinner?'

And she said something a little more provocative than she might usually do. Even for her. 'It's been pretty good so far. I guess. For a first date. When do I move in?' She'd say things like that to put people off balance, and follow up with some banter. Everybody blinked. But she'd never said anything quite like this before. She didn't know why. Probably the two and half bottles of wine they'd shared. And the fact was that she had grown to like Andrew long before this date, and now somewhat more. But she suddenly remembered the policeman. And the five tickets.

'Sounds great. How about tonight.' This man, retiring as he might be, never blinked. All of her native confidence was going to be asked to agree to an unconditional surrender wrapped in a veil of comedy as she climbed down. But she decided not to. 'Great. I can't fit much in the Porsche though.' This was 'we can both back out of this together' statement.

'That's fine. I can fit lots of things in the tray of the Landrover and you can move clothes and small items in your car.' Andrew was saying this all calmly as if it was an everyday occurrence. She would blink. He was certain. They always did.

The bastard, she thought. He was accustomed to people blinking, or dissembling to the point, like the policeman, they simply had to

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retreat, skulking away. Was she going to be that person? No. He would blink. 'Well, maybe we should forgo desert even though it's being prepared. We have an awful lot to do this evening.'

'Good Idea. I'll explain what's going on to our hosts and fix up the bill with desert and say will be back again soon.' He gave her a look for a fraction of a second. She was getting an opportunity to laugh and say. 'Well this has been an interesting first outing.' Or words to that effect. But she was not going to be out gunned. She knew he had to blink before her things started arriving in his house. Deep down he was shy, after a fashion. And that would have to break through before a female moved into his house with half an hours notice.

It was one in the morning, and she had moved all her clothes and personal effects and he had done about half the furniture. The police came around once as the neighbours thought they were burglars. When this particular policeman saw who they were he left without comment. They were both pleased to have caused him to be awakened on their account.

Patches had been delighted to see them both when they arrived home together. Monique had never visited Andrew, and Patches began to run in tight circles giving a low yowling sound. Their union already consummated from his perspective.

Andrew had suggested they could either get it all that night or get the rest in morning. But he was very happy to keep going. This did not constitute even a partial blink.

'No, tomorrow will be fine as long as we get it all across.' Not a blink.

‘Well, I’ll take the couch and you take the bed. Only got one you see.’ This was not a blink, it was Andrew not making assumptions and being a gentleman.

What the hell, thought Monique. I started all this, and it was probably going to happen after date number two or three. ‘I didn’t suggest that I move in as a border or someone who usurps your bed you know. Looks like there’s room for two in there.’

She could see his weakness. Andrew wasn’t accustomed to forming relationships, even casual relationships, at speed. Was this her chance. ‘I forgot to pack a nightdress. I hope you don’t mind.’

By the time he arrived she was in bed, naked. He turned out the light and took all his clothes off and slid quietly between the sheets, as if she’d immediately fallen asleep. She leapt up, turned the light on and pulled all of the bedding off. And so it began.

When Andrew woke up Monique was bringing in two cups of coffee. Remembering how he liked it. She got back into bed. They both sipped at the beverage for a while. ‘Do you think things are moving too fast?’ Monique ventured. This question was a test. She surprised herself at how pleased she was with how things had worked out. She knew they were both mature enough to unwind it if necessary, except for Patches, for whom there may be an ugly custody battle.

Andrew shrugged. ‘Or too slow.’ Which was hard to imagine. But it was time for a bit of honesty he thought. ‘I’ve only had three relationships. All of them fairly short. One of them evolved into more of a brother and sister kind of thing. We still keep in touch every two or three weeks or so. Catch up when I’m in London.

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The others didn't last very long. Suffered the atrophy of working long hours in a big city. Being moved around which could make it a long commute if you didn't live together.'

'Doesn't sound like you've been one for casual sex.'

Andrew thought for a moment. 'Well, when you frame it in those terms I suppose not.' He wondered if this was a segue to the fact that they'd be moving everything back to her house before the day was over.

'Well for the sake of full disclose for me it's been. Sex, sex, sex, sex, sex, sex. I'm a bit like a horny Billy Goat really.'

'Well it must be interesting.'

'It's exhausting actually. Things slowed down a bit after I had a massive breast reduction. I'll be glad to give it a bit of a rest for a while.'

'Yes of course.' Andrew thought she was joking but she could be very compelling.

'No. Not really. My relationship history is probably not the same as yours but also fairly boring and pedestrian really.'

'Is that how I described it.'

She ignored that. ‘First boyfriend when I was young was addicted to video games, and later I found, porn. I had relationships with five or six men, not all at once of course, the first few had not fully grown up. They wanted me to do all the things their mother had done for them. Which was everything. Then by the time I was a big city lawyer there was a few relationships with driven work colleagues who really had trouble defining what a relationship was in our circumstances. One hinted that it was time for me to stay home and make his babies. And now there’s you. Where do you fit in?’

‘Well, I am a devotee of some kind of niche porn, I can’t pronounce its name, my mother still comes over and does the washing and prepares a week’s worth of food which I put in the freezer. You’ll be taking that over. And I’m working twenty hours a day healing villagers. I don’t know what a modern relationship would even look like. Although my guilty secret is that I’m supposed to do a clinic on Fridays at some other Village which doesn’t exist. I only work four days a week. Patches and I go on trips here and there.’

She leaned in against him and put her head on his shoulder. ‘I’m only going to work four days too. I think I’ll have Mondays off.’

Andrew advised her that one of the first things she would have to do now was bump Patches down a level to number three.

‘Poor Patches. Forever more he’ll look at me as a usurper.’

Suddenly she was feeling concerned that she was tossing ‘forever’ concepts around on day one. Andrew said. ‘He’ll have no problem at all with it. As long as he knows with absolute clarity where he is in the pack, which is now third.’

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'I see. I'm *Second* on this pack. You might have mentioned that over dinner.'

'Purely in terms of how Patches sees the world. What would you say our standing is as human beings?'

She shrugged and said 'Equal?'

'Unequivocally equal. That's why we can be at peace with the setting. Because we both know how it is, and we're happy with it. Once it's made crystal clear to Patches, he'll be happy. Dogs are hierarchical. Like a lot of animals, they'll fight for the top spot but rarely to the death. The victor generally gets to keep a harem of subservient females. From what I can see these animals may not have a defined continuous pecking order top to bottom, more of a 'we're all happy but I'm not your doormat' kind of thing.'

'He's a very smart and obedient dog but he won't immediately let go of number two.' They'd moved to the kitchen table. Andrew called Patches over and told him to sit. He used a different tone of voice when he did this. He asked Monique if she'd like a cup of tea, she said she did and he went into the kitchen and made one. They sat at the table and Andrew said. 'Come.' Patches came straight over wagging his tail. Andrew gave him a treat. 'I don't give him treats much anymore. But sitting that long was stretching the friendship. Some people like to make their dogs do tricks like shaking hands, rolling over and jumping over or through things. I don't doubt both the dogs and owners enjoy themselves. All I really want Patches to do is to be himself most of the time. But there are times he must obey. Boring as it is, Patches has four commands. Sit. Say. Come and Stop. He can play in the backyard,

play down at the beach, go for walks in the heaths and up in the forests and *it would appear* that he chooses whom he pleases to spend his time with at the consulting rooms. But whenever he hears one of those commands, he must do it. Now it's your turn.' Andrew showed her what to do to make him stay.

Andrew left the room and she asked him to sit, and he did this for a while. When she said stay he was already walking towards her. She thought she should turn into a minor success and say come, which was more of a 'Come on. Come on' in a high voice. He came to her and started jumping up on her which she'd never seen him do before. Andrew came in and said 'sit' with a slight edge of disappointment which left Patches looking balefully at his master.

'Am I a bad second in the pack.'

'Good dog that he is, he was demonstrating to you, that you're number three. You need to remember you are commanding the dog, with a single word, delivered in a tone of absolute authority. And we can't expect too much at once. It won't take long. Why don't I take you out for brunch?'

He took her to a delightful place with a view over a stone harbour. He'd been there before and Patches was given a welcome before they enquired as to who Monique was. Patches sat under the table and if any other dogs came nearby he treated them with complete disdain.

'So how did you come to have him.' Said Monique.

'Two years. It was a close shave for Patches as a puppy. A bitch had a litter on a farm a few miles out of town. The farmer's son

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was thirteen and had been caring for the farm's dogs since as long as he could remember. She'd mated with a neighbour's dog, or a stray, not with the farmer's planned sire on his brother's farm. But whatever the case, he wouldn't have mixed breeds on his place. His son convinced him he could give them away as pets. His father said if he did that they would have to agree to have the dogs 'fixed up'. The boy was happy as long as he didn't have to kill them, or his father would, and he 'wouldn't be wasting a bullet.' After three weeks he'd given two away. There was four left. His father told him not to go to the vet, because he wouldn't pay for any injections. And not to bring them home.'

Andrew went on to describe what happened that day. The boy knocked on my door. As you know, Lucy's sweet natured and couldn't turn him away.' Andrew looked up and smiled. 'I'd seen the boy around but never in the practice. Not much seems to go wrong with these farm lads, other than broken limbs. This one was crying, which was unusual for a boy of that age in the Village. He said he had a little money and was hoping I could 'do the injecting on them.' He said otherwise he'd have to hit them with a pipe.

Andrew had smiled. Which lightened the boys heart. Because Andrew's smiles could be an assuring mix of confidence and compassion. It was only a matter of proportion, which was one of the things his patients like about him. 'I'm not going to inject those puppies. And you're not going to have to kill them.'

Lucy called, now guilty, because the next patient had arrived, and Andrew generally tried to run to time, usually by having longer appointments and less of them. He asked the boy to stay where he was and went to see Jonny Hartley, a septuagenarian in better health than many forty year olds. Jonny lived in walking distance, and he was happy to reschedule as it was a routine check-up.

He knew the doctor wouldn't put him off unless there was a good reason. Andrew didn't mention the reason was puppies.

Back in the surgery Andrew nodded to the boy to wait and he called Darren who was the local Vet. Andrew didn't know him at the time until Patches came along. He laid out the details and Darren said the puppies needed to be vaccinated to sell or give away, and assurance they would be desexed when they were around six months at which time there needed to be a further round of vaccinations. It was quite a bit of money. Andrew asked if there were any other options. The vet said if he was willing to drive an hour south there was an animal shelter in the town which would probably get the puppies rehomed with someone and they would be required to pay enough to cover the costs. He said that there were often people looking for a puppy at the shelter in bigger centres. And they made the checks to ensure they went to a good home. He said if Andrew wanted to call back in ten minutes he could come back with some contact details.

Andrew told the boy, who introduced himself as Ian, that if the vet confirmed a shelter would take them, they could take a drive across and leave the puppies in good hands. He asked how his father might feel about what was being planned and if he thought it would be okay if Ian came with him. The boy asked to use the landline to call his mother. Andrew could hear from his side of the conversation the boy was not having an easy time of it. Ten minutes later his father called and asked to speak to Andrew.

'Doctor Roberts, I'm not pleased with my son that he's turned up to waste your time in the first place, now apparently going to waste more of it.'

'Mr Wheeler it's been no problem in the slightest. I understand

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your dislike of interbred dogs when they might get into the farm dog population, and from what little I know I can appreciate it's a serious matter. But if they become pets in the larger towns and they must be neutered, I think that should ensure they won't be a problem to farmers. I've been busy recently and when this came along, I thought a drive to some parts of Cornwall I haven't visited might be nice. If you're not comfortable with this Mr Wheeler, I won't go.'

'Well doctor, I have no objection if you want to spend your time on this, even though I may not understand it. It would be good for the boy to visit look about some as we don't get around as much as might be desirable.'

'Thank you Mr Wheeler. We'll be back well before sunset I expect. You have a good day.'

'Thank you doctor and good day to you to.'

The phone rang as soon as he put the receiver down. The vet advised there was an animal shelter that they would be delighted to take in the puppies. If they were not going to get there by four, they could drop them off with one of the workers from the shelter.

Andrew looked at the boy and smiled. 'Looks like the stars are lining up for the puppies Ian. I have three more patients and then we should be able to get away.'

'Thanks doctor. I can't imagine killin' em. Especially with no

needle.’ Now that Andrew thought about it, killing puppies without drugs was a ghastly thing to contemplate and he was certain an illegal undertaking. ‘They’re all at a friend’s house.’ He said

Later in the afternoon they arrived at his friend’s house. Ian was looking at Andrew’s car with concern. ‘I didn’t think about this part doctor. We’ve moved them around in the farm ute when my brother had time to help me out. Your car’s too nice for a bunch of puppies to be... well, you know.’

‘No problem. We’ll stop back in at the surgery where I’ve got piles of sheets and blankets and we’ll cover up the seats and the floors as best we can. I suppose we’re going to need to drive with the window open as we get closer.’

‘More than likely doctor, though I did get my friend to try to tire them out. I’m hoping they’ll sleep.’ The car was soon covered with beautifully clean linen from the surgery, which would never return to that use again. But Andrew didn’t mind. The boy was intelligent and compassionate and would be confronting a terrible task without help from an adult. Andrew reflected that it was experiences like these which were the reason he’d passed up on a promising career in London. There would never be an opportunity to help a boy in need with puppy issues. And if there were, time could never be made.

The puppies were mercifully tired out except a male red and tan puppy who insisted on navigating the centre console and plumping himself down on Andrew’s lap.

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Ian moved it back.

After a few moments the puppy did it again

Ian moved it back.

After a few moments it did it again.

This went on twice more times when Andrew said. 'We might as well let him win this battle. I'm okay with him there.'

Andrew had never had very much to do with dogs, nor any animals. He'd grown up in central London in a spacious apartment with his mother and father, both doctors, and his sister. They had no garden and, now that Andrew thought about it, he didn't have any friends with dogs, though a few had cats.

Like his parents before him, he'd trained to become a doctor and was soon living in a flat of his own with no garden and a no pets policy. He was working long hours for a franchise medical practice. It felt like a production line. Both his parents were specialists. He didn't believe that pathway nor what he was doing would satisfy what he really wanted.

He started to look at maps with towns and villages where he thought he might quite like to live. He spent his time off, of which there was not a great amount, getting to know the areas, if not all the individual towns. And then he simply began to call the doctors in villages, assuring them he would never set up in competition

but if they were planning to move on, he would be interested to hear about it. It took thirty calls over the period of a few months. Then he spoke to a doctor in the village who was delighted to get the call. She and her husband were moving to Spain but didn't want to leave the village without a doctor. It was still six months away and they were going to start looking in earnest from around that time. She realised she'd got ahead of herself and said that of course he would need to fit with the needs of the village. This was partly code suggesting 'Only a good doctor would receive their blessing'.

'Oh, I'll come to you and I'm very happy for you to assess my capability but also my suitability. I understand how important the transition will be to you.'

'Thankyou.' She was relieved. 'And you can assess if our little paradise if it's you're looking for.'

There was an initial disappointment replaced by grudging support from his parents who thought he was going through a 'phase' of being the doctor to a village and the surrounding area. He took out a mortgage on the Practice. Removing the agency costs when he came to an amicable agreement with the owners. He rented a nice cottage within walking distance.

And now, having recently finished refurbishing one side of the Practice and closed the other up, he was driving home with a puppy. They had brought the four now wide awake and bounding puppies into the home of a woman who'd been caring for, and rehoming dogs for decades. Valerie was in her late sixties and her house was full of animals of one kind or another including parrots and hamsters, fish, and a few snakes. She hadn't seen one of the snakes for a while in addition to a few of the hamsters. Not

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all of these animals could be rehomed by the shelter. She worked out a future for these herself through the papers and internet. She showed them the kittens and parrots, all of which were fascinating to Ian who quickly bonded with her.

They returned to the pen that Valerie used for the various arrival and was perfect for containing five week old puppies. Ian and Valerie were talking, and Andrew looked down to see the same patchy dog who had come out again and again to sit on his lap looking up directly at him. His siblings were all tumbling about playing games of mock attack or running until they hit the sides. This dog was giving him a strange look. It was a '*When are we leaving?*' look, instead of a plaintive 'Please take me.'

Fascinated, Andrew began to move around the room. It was like a puppy Mona Lisa. Wherever he went, the eyes followed him. '*When are we leaving?*'

Being with puppies for some time Andrew was feeling the same desire most children and many adults experience – 'I want one'. On the drive up, having the little puppy nested contently between his legs, he had gone through a process in his mind to make a clear decision he didn't need a puppy in his life at this time and he didn't want one. Now his thinking was 'Why can't I have a puppy.' He had accepted the latter position with a surprising amount of pleasure when a pair of hands came down and gently lifted the dog up. Valerie brought it under her chin and gave it a rub with one hand, holding it close with the other.

Andrew was surprised at the sudden sense of loss he felt. 'Oh, that puppy. I meant to mention. I was...planning to take that one home.'

Valarie turned her body side on, as if protecting the puppy from danger. She was suddenly waspish. 'Well you can't, he's the best one. And he's mine.'

It was outside Andrew's experience to enter into an argument over a puppy, and as he prepared a very reluctant and insincere capitulation when she turned back laughing. 'Of course it's yours. You and Ian saved all of these beautiful creatures.'

As they were leaving Valerie said to Ian that if it was alright with his parents, he could catch the bus up on the weekends and work in the shelter. She said if he liked the job he could be surrounded by animals all day and also be poor for the rest of his life. When he smiled and said he'd ask his parents, she knew she'd never see him again, irrespective of the remuneration possibilities.

On the way home Andrew stopped, planning to throw some of the sheets and blankets in a roadside bin. Relaying to Ian the fact that no matter how much they washed them, they could not go into a Surgery again. Ian had them bundling in a pile ready. 'But they could go into a farmhouse.' Ian would probably win back some of his father's affection coming home with something to show for it.'

Patches started to whine as they got close to home. Ian advised that if a puppy whines because it wants to relieve itself you get it outside as quick as you can because you want it to learn that's where to do it. Andrew pulled up at a roadside parking area where the road followed a promontory and had gravel parking places on both sides. The parking area at the edge of the promontory provided a good view of their villages to the south, and some of the beautiful coastline to the north. Tour busses usually pulled up for a few moments for the passengers to take some photographs.

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Andrew found he also needed to go also and was soon having a leak looking out at the ocean. He looked down to see the puppy doing exactly the same thing. A concerned flash though his mind that the puppy might run under the low bar of the barrier and disappear, but the little dog walked back to the driver's side, waiting to be picked up and put on Ian's lap, then crawl back across to Andrew once they were driving.

Ian gave Andrew some puppy care advice and said he would come over anytime the Doctor needed help. Andrew dropped him home and Ian gave him an old dog's bed. Andrew thanked him, shared a pleasant fifteen minutes chatting with Ian's parents and went home to prepare a meal and go to bed. The dog sat in the corner of the kitchen on his bed, having eaten the food Valerie had given him. They sat regarding each other. If he could believe a puppy could convey such a thing it seemed to Andrew that he was waiting for a name. Andrew thought a moment and a fairly obvious name came to mind because of his coat. But he like it. He said. 'Your name's Patches boy. He picked the dog up, gave him cuddle and put him back in his bed. Exhausted, Patches went straight to sleep. He lay down and slept on the old bed. Andrew ate with an unconscious dog, which he was grateful for. He didn't want to have a dog that begged at the table' and he would set ground rules after he'd rested in the morning.

The dog was fast asleep, and he was loathe to wake it up. He left it in the kitchen, accepting whatever mess was made in that night would be avoided with whatever procedure he needed to come up with in the future. But he hadn't been asleep for long when there was a whining in his ear. The dog had found the bedroom and had its paws up next to his head. He agreed with Ian's advice to listen to the dog straight away and some will houstrain themselves. Patches completed his ablutions and was deposited back on the old bed, only to be whining shortly after, in a different tone, at Andrew's head. Only two paws visible. He looked over to see a

dog whose eyes were unequivocally saying. *‘Why haven’t you lifted me up there yet? I’m going to whine behind every door you close.’*

Andrew had covered off on the issue in his own head. No dogs in the bedroom, indeed was going to leave it to the morning to decide if Patches would be an inside or an outside dog. Patches demeanour suggested would never stop whining until he was allowed up on the bed. But once he was, he would whine about very little else. And so it was.

From then on, he would lie in a little bed in the consulting rooms, quietly watching proceedings or softly snoring as Andrew went about his business. Andrew had him there, partly because a dog would never be allowed in his consulting room in London. If Patches was invited up on a patient’s lap, he would be as boisterous and affectionate as any puppy could be, then he returned to his bed when asked. There were a few patients that came to the surgery from whom he made himself absent. There was the small linen and supply room off the consulting room and Andrew has learned to leave it ajar to avoid the embarrassment of having Patches scratch on it to be permitted to leave.

As he grew, Andrew knew he’d need more and more exercise and they were soon going down to the beach, along the riding trails in the forest and throwing balls in the local parks. Andrew was getting much more exercise and visiting different places because he had Patches. The kind of thing he was always recommending to his patients.

Monique had listened to the whole story with interest. ‘Well, I scored myself a good man and a good dog in one night. I hope things work out, otherwise there could be a nasty custody row.’ Monique really didn’t know what had gotten into her. She’d now

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suggested they were in a long-term relationship. Oh well she thought. Things could only fall apart. It could be awkward him being my landlord though.

It was six months later that she called Andrew while he was attending at a conference. She'd learned that he attended a few conferences a year. He believed all doctors, GP's or specialists should keep up to date with the latest developments to give the best care to their patients. The conferences weren't cheap, but the people of the village were able to appreciate it when they were being told something based on the latest available treatments.

That's why she was reluctant to call. But this was the second night. It was pouring down as it had been the day before and the rain on the roof was so loud it was a little hard to hear. 'Andrew. Hi. Yes. Sorry it's like the bloody biblical floods here. As well as calling to tell you I love you.' She hoped she was telling him things in the right order. 'There's something going on with Patches. He's sleeping but he's having what must be nightmares in the dog world. He's trembling and doing that running thing, but very accentuated. He's whining and crying like I've never heard him do normally. It wouldn't be a problem, but he won't wake up. I've tried hard to wake him but it's like he's stuck in this nightmare. It was the same last night. I didn't think it would happen again. He woke up after an hour.' She lied. It was two.

Andrew tried not to reveal how concerned he was. 'Well this conference is a bit of a disappointment really. Misrepresented. Only talking about is erectile dysfunction. As if I'll ever need to know anything about that. I'll start heading back now. Should be home around midnight.'

‘No. Please don’t. It’s raining dogs and dogs out there. He’ll be awake in half an hour or so. I wanted to make sure you knew. Sometime before Patches bedtime tomorrow might be nice.’

‘Sounds like the smart thing to do. Been a long day. Love you.’

Patche’s awful dreams went on and on for another hour. Shortly after hanging up she thought an extreme measure might be the solution. She made a slurry of ice water and tipped it from his neck down to his tail. If she’d thought his travails were disturbing before, he was now yelping as if in searing pain, but also with a strange anxiety. She decided Andrew didn’t need to know about the ice water experiment.

To see Patches wake up was to see a different dog to his usual demeanour. His tail was tucked well between his legs and he came to her trembling and leaning on her wanting to be held.

Andrew arrived at the Practice mid-morning. ‘That conference was complete rubbish. But the way things are going with this rain they’ll be closing the roads soon. He looked to Lucy. ‘Does this sort of rain happen often?’

She shrugged. ‘We can get this sort of rain, but generally not three days straight, heavy like this. And they say there’s more to come. Has some of the old timers shaking their heads.’

Patches was laying in his bed. Once Andrew came into the room he came to him, but timid and frightened as if he’d done something wrong. He may have strongly bonded with Monique,

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but whenever they'd been apart for a while, he would be bounding to Andrew, wagging his whole body. Andrew now gave him lots of attention and his mood lightened.

He had no appointments because he was supposed to be at the conference while Monique needed to visit some Clients an hour south. They thought it would be good to take Patches on a trip to see some different things which might help relieve what was bothering him. And they'd missed each other as they now always did when the other was away. They decided to take his car, the weather being what it was. It was raining now, steady, but not pouring. Patches usually took it with good grace when Monique temporarily usurped his place in the passenger seat because he seemed glad she was there, but now he wanted to share it with her.

'Where we're going is near the Shelter Ian and I took the pups to. I was intent on leaving Patches there, but he simply demanded through force of character that I take him home. Second best decision I ever made.'

'And the best?'

'Oh Landrovers. You can't beat them. Look at this. When you had to choose between this and Porsche today, here we are.'

'We're no longer on speaking terms.'

'And you see this point we're coming up to. We call it Micturition point.'

‘We.’

‘Patches and I. We always seem to need to micturate when we’re driving by, even on the first occasion I was bringing him home.’

‘And micturition is a fancy word for?’

‘Having a wee. I think we’ll pass on that on this occasion boy. Hold on to it.’ As he said this, Patches started to whine and tried to circle on Monique lap as if there was a place he could crawl inside and hide.

Monique gave him a tight hug and rocked him like a baby for a while. He settled down and went into the back seat and lay down. ‘How about I call Brett and see if he can come out when we get home.’

Andrew nodded. ‘Maybe we see if he can visit this evening if Patches has one of his extraordinary nightmares.’

‘You know I’ve been thinking about it. We call them nightmares, a mare being a horse, I don’t know why. In the K-9 world it would probably be more species appropriate to call them Night Bitches.’

‘I see.’ Said Andrew. ‘More politically correct for dogs’ As he pulled up.

She said. ‘I’ll be a few hours doing the overservicing lawyer thing

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for these poor pensioners, and we could meet at a nice country pub nearby for an early dinner. You will have been there for a few hours drinking and catching up on all those sports you like on the big televisions they all have now. Hence I'll be driving home.'

'Sounds like a well-conceived plan.'

'Do you want to drop by and see the lady in the shelter and show her what a beautiful dog this half breed has become.'

'I would, but I'm a little bit frightened of her. And the beer and sports screens beckon.'

Monique joined them a few hours later. Patches was more relaxed, established under Andrew's chair. Andrew was working on a laptop with a lemon, lime and bitters in front of him. Probably his first. 'A drunken yobbo hard at it I see.'

Andrew tied to think of something clever but could only observe. 'I'd rather wait for you...um...so we could do that together.'

Monique could only answer that with a hug before she sat down. 'And the other member of the pack is...?'

'Better. Still not himself. Maybe he hates rain. It's drizzled for a while and now here we are in another downpour. Barman's never seen anything like it.'

The menu was the same as every other pub in the region, but the food was good. They didn't stay too long because it was going to be a slow trip home. Patches relinquished the passengers seat and sat in the back but started to whine about half way. Monique asked Andrew to pull over on the 'micturition siding' as she called it, and, getting soaked in the process, moved into the back to sit with Patches which Andrew greatly appreciated.

Inside, the fire had gone out and they discussed the fact they needed to move to a place with a heater. A conversation they'd had every day for the past three days. Each biting cold. Andrew got the fire going and they all sat in front of an eclectic heater simply not up to the task on a night like that. Patches went to sleep between them and the heater. And it happened again. The jerking paws and trembling. Sudden spasms of his legs, panting, whining; sometimes long, sometimes in fast bursts. He was twitching all over but especially his eyes and nose.

'I'll call Brett.' Said Monique.

'I'd love for him to come. But the weather's atrocious.'

'You'd want someone to ask you to come if it was important.' She said as she dialled a number already on both their phones.

She went to the kitchen so he couldn't hear in case she had to plead. Brett was keen to see Patches. Dog owners like Andrew and Monique were always wanting to make sure their pets had all of the shots, worming and whatever else. He liked being a vet for people who cared for their animals. Also, the behaviour sounded very unusual. He arrived to find two very distraught dog owners. Like them, he was immediately full of concern. And naturally he

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thought the simple solution, that a doctor and a lawyer had been unable to divine, was to simply wake the dog up. He had the same amount of success they had.

Tumbling and rolling. I can hear the Pack Leader calling me. I try to go to him, but I'm sliding and rolling and then a weight comes on me, heavy and getting heavier. I hear the Pack Leader calling my name, but it's a long way away. Everything is black. It's hard to breath. A big weight hits me and members of other packs I don't know are all calling and screaming. More weight and more. Muffled sounds now. Hard to breath. Can't open my eyes. I'm crying for the Pack Leader to come. To help me. My paws try to dig but they can't move. Hard to breath. I can't see. I can't breathe anymore.

After some time, Brett said the best he could do was to give the dog a sedative. Monique confessed that the fits went on for longer then she'd told Andrew because she'd through they would go away. He'd been like this between two and three hours. Brett said that if he could calm Patches down, he might be more the dog they were accustomed to during the day.

The sedatives significantly muted what Patches was experiencing, but it didn't go away. They thanked Brett profusely. He advised Andrew what he could give the dog using his own medicinal options should Patches need this treatment again. Brett said he would do some reading as he'd not come across this before and would very much like to know how to cure it.

The next day Monique came marching into Andrew's office. 'I need some uppers. Whatever they are. Do you have some kind of amphetamine? Happy pills of some description. This constant rain is really getting me down and like everything, drugs are the answer.'

‘Well I’ve been clearing the medicine cupboards out and I found two suppositories which were past their use by date. They might help. I could write a script telling you to get more exercise and drink more water. Cut down on fatty foods. That kind of thing. That might have a positive effect which will start to show in a few weeks or so.’

‘You doctors; you don’t cut corners. We lawyers make an artform of it. And then we call it a precedent. How’s the most important patient, whom I noticed has abandoned me in his time of need.’

‘He’s okay. Sill a bit zoned out from the drugs I suspect. The dosage rates for dogs is very difficult to estimate.’

It happened for two more nights. Andrew gave him only light doses of a sedative, not knowing if they might cause some permanent damage. On the morning after the fifth Nightbitch the day that dawned was beautiful and sunny. This was also reflected in Patches mood.

I know what to do.’ He thought.

Patches never left Andrew’s side all morning. Then there was an urgent call for a woman giving birth. It happened to be one of those rare occasions that someone had parked in the parking spot allocated to the surgery and Andrew had parked nearby. The Constable was there, writing out a ticket.

‘Give it to my receptionist.’ Patches was beside Andrew waiting for the door to open.

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'That dog should be on a lead.'

In spite of the urgency Andrew turned and said. 'So you're the Ranger now.'

'I have all of the same powers and authority as a Municipal Ranger. Put a lead on it and it will need to be wearing a restraint at all times while in the car. And that's not a municipal by law. It's a regulation all over the county.'

'Well write out a ticket for that while you're at it and give it to Lucy. I need to attend a woman *in labour* which I think is slightly more important than the officious pettiness which is what you call policing. A small crowd began to gather. The five-ticket story having had circulated. The new Constable seemed to be doing everything he could to be unpopular and disliked and this came as close to street theatre as things got in village.

'I can write a ticket for a regulation on dog restraint, I can't write one for a breach of the law planned and flagrantly about to take place in front of an Officer of the law. I'll need you to move away from the vehicle. I'll call some people from the pound to take the dog based on your stated intention to break the law.'

'Well I'll take the dog back inside. And if you want to restrain me from attending a woman in labour you'd have to do so physically. And we'll see about what my personal lawyer thinks about that.'

The Constable was crafting a reply when Patches seemed to decide to undercut everything Andrew had said. He started barking with

very loud barks directed at the Constable and began to snarl in between.

‘That dog is a nuisance and a danger to the public. It’s going to the pound.’

‘You’re the nuisance. I’ll take him inside.’ Now Andrew was furious at both the Constable and Patches. His mind was overtaken by the urgency of getting to a woman whose birth might be straightforward or involve any of a long list of complications from which she or the child could die of in the process. And she was in a remote location.

Andrew was utterly disbelieving when the Constable produced a choker chain on a short lead. ‘Restrain the animal and then it’s coming to the pound.’

‘I’m taking him with me, and you can like it or not.’

‘Then you’d be obstructing an Officer of the law.’ Andrew turned to drag Patches to the surgery. The Constable reached out and grasped Andrew by the upper arm. And turned him so that they were facing each other. Patches immediately launched himself at the Officer, latching onto the man’s other arm without even leaving the ground and started to shake it violently. He was worrying the arm, throwing his head from side to side but not biting very hard. It was not difficult for the Constable to extricate himself. As he did this, he rapidly slipped the choker chain over the Patches head and reefed it so hard such that the dog was immobilised.

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'This animal has attacked an Officer of the law. This is an extremely serious offence. It might have attacked a child and killed them. It's now under my control and due processes will be followed. If you try to obstruct me again, you'll be in a holding cell within the hour.'

Andrew's phone rang. It was the 'where the hell are you' call from the husband of the woman in labour. He got a status and told the man what to do in the event he was too late but the he was leaving now. He assured him he had called an ambulance also which may arrive before he did. By then the Constable was nearly at his car. He was holding Patches on such a short lead the dog's front feet could barely touch the ground, and hence was Patches choking in between brief respites on the pavement. The crowd that watched were restive. The Constable was going to start to experience what the dislike of villagers really felt like.

Andrew had to make a decision and jumped into his car and took off. He called Monique. She heard how agitated he was and just listened. 'Monique, a load of things have happened, but I'm on my way to a woman to deliver a baby in a campervan half way into the National Park. That Constable was being a bastard as usual and he grabbed me by the arm. Patches latched onto his arm and he's taken him away. He said he'd arrest me if I tried to stop him, and I had to get moving. The man's unhinged. Could you find out where he is and make sure Patches is okay. He was talking about some process. Dog having attacked a policeman.'

'I'm on it. I'm in the canarymobile as we speak. The Village doesn't have a pound and he'd know what kind of reception he'd have from Brett. I'm already over on the south side of the world. Robbing old people. I'll get Patches back and hound that bastard with formal complaints and civil suits for the for the rest of his life.'

Andrew felt he had better odds speeding with at least one Constable otherwise occupied. He passed the National Park sign and expected to see a campground a few miles past it and then a rough track past that. The woman and her husband were in a place only a four-wheel drive could get to and he'd arranged for an ambulance to wait at the turnoff if there were no four wheel drive ambulances available. The phone rang now with a 'are you nearly here' plea. Andrew described where he was and there was mutual dismay to find that there were two entrances to the National Park. It was obvious to each of them they had assumed they were talking about the same entrance.

Andrew had to tell him it was nearly an hour. He'd been frantically calling other GPs as had Lucy. The police had a four-wheel drive, but it was busy taking Patches God knew where and the Police line wasn't answering because the Sargent was briefly out of the small Police Station and the Constable had arrived at the animal shelter which functioned also as the municipal pound regionally. He'd untied Patches from the back of the vehicle and dragged the dog, choking, into the centre. It was lunchtime and there was only one person answered when he called out, the others were in the lunchroom.

He didn't bother introducing himself. 'This dog has attacked an Officer of the police force and displayed threatening behaviour to members of the public. I'm within my authority to have it put down immediately.'

The woman looked over the counter at the dog. 'Really. You want to do it... now?' She said this in a low whisper. 'This is my favourite part of the job, the main reason I work here. No one ever wants to do it when we have to do this. They give the job to me.' She looked down the corridor. 'We better do it now before one of those bloody do gooders comes along.'

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The constable was asked to sit down and hold the dog firmly between his knees with the choker drawn tight. 'What an ugly brute. Stupid too by the look. Now please lean your head sideways.' He felt a wet cotton ball on his neck. 'Now you'll have a few convulsions as you're dying but nothing too serious.'

The Constable pulled away. 'What are you talking about?'

'Oh. I thought you wanted a stupid ugly brute put down. We don't put down dogs, we rehome them. And before you ask, no, I don't think we could find a home for you.' The woman decided that she was outrageously funny and started to have one of those laughing fits during which one temporarily loses the capacity to do anything but laugh.

It was at that moment that Monique's hand came over the Constable's shoulder and wrenched the leash out of his grip.

The woman's laughter had slowed down enough for her to ask. 'Know this fellow do you?'

'Unfortunately.' Said Monique, as she took off the choker chain and clipped on Patches leash.

'I tried to put him out of our misery but he wouldn't be in it.' Said Valerie.

'You are both...'

He was initially silenced because a choker chain hit him in the chest.

‘Shut up. You better get a good lawyer. Actually, get a team of good lawyers and they better be better than me or your careers finished, and you’ll be in debt for the rest of your life. Now get out of my way or another count of assault will be added to the list.’

‘Thanks.’ Said Monique to the woman.

‘It’s Valerie. Can I come to all of the court cases?’

‘Sure. You sit next to me right up front. You can be the star witness if you’d like.’ She said this as she walked past the Constable.

‘I’d love that. You can leave now Mister Policeman. We take hygiene seriously here.’

Meanwhile Andrew was driving fast along the coast road to get to the right National Park entrance. He couldn’t believe it when he had to contend with a bladder screaming to be emptied. He knew he had to respond to nature otherwise it would be a very embarrassing house call. Ironically Micturition Point was a short distance ahead and he pulled off in the usual place. He parked the car where he always did to shield the travellers from the sight of a man and a dog having a leak over the guard rails.

Things had begun to flow when he had the most unusual sensation. He looked at where Patches always went. He thought of the dog’s nightmares, and his uncharacteristic behaviour that day. And that there had been nearly a week of heavy rain.

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It a very strange thing for a man to start to urinate, and then turn and run, completely ignoring what the nether regions are up to. He felt the ground falling beneath his feet. He ran towards the Landrover but found it was tilting sideways towards him. He ran around behind it, and he saw a series of cracks forming in the ground. The closer ones wider. Then along the crack the ground started to slide away. He was running as fast as he could but it was as if he was running up an escalator going down. But the steps were uneven. Usually higher, sometimes with narrow treads, sometimes wide. He felt like he was losing the battle, the original ground level was above his head. He thought the slip would slow down or stop at the road, but he was now climbing up waist high steps of sliding asphalt. Eventually the ground was moving more slowly. He could see the slips were in a wide arc. Finally, he got to ground not moving but he no longer trusted the earth and he ran far into the parking area on the other side of the road until the slipping completely stopped. He was trembling with fear. He thought about his much-loved Landrover buried beneath God knew how much earth and rock. And then he came to a terrible realisation. There was a gaping hole in the road at the point of a blind corner in both directions. Anyone driving would end up over a newly formed cliff before they could possibly slow down.

Andrew ran across the parking bay on the land side of the road where he could see traffic from the village. There was a bus coming. He tried to gauge how long it would take to get there and decided to run in the other direction. If it was taking too long to get to the other side of the slip he would come back and warn the bus. He had to climb a small hill because the road and verge had slipped right to bare rock. He got a view of the road and saw a yellow car in the distance. He knew Monique liked to drive fast. But he was sure if he waited for her the bus would go in.

He picked up the biggest rock he could carry quickly and ran down the road enough to ensure she could stop in time. He

took off his coat and lay in under it. He realised she might drive around it thinking it was a natural rock fall. He quickly put some smaller rocks in a line and ran. All the way he had visions of a bus having driven over a cliff and he could have warned them. He was throwing himself over the small hill heedless of the scrapes and skinned palms. He could hear the bus labouring a little as he ran across the parking bay and got onto the road. Running forward with his hands up the driver threw on the air brakes and every other brake he had, no doubt sending elderly people in all directions within their seat belts. The driver angrily waved Andrew out of the way, but he stood still. The cliff face was fifty meters behind him.

The driver pulled up a few feet in front. 'Are you mad?'

'Yes.' Said Andrew. 'Quickly look at this.' The driver was speechless when he saw the gaping hole. But Andrew was gone running as fast as he could, and knowing a bit more of the terrain of the hill, getting over more quickly. He experienced a massive wave of relief as he saw Monique, stopped at the line of rocks. She was berating a policeman who was getting back in his car.

'Are you intractably stupid? Did a circus elephant sit on your head at birth or something? Those rocks....' Monique was in the kind of mood he enjoyed watching, as long as it wasn't directed at him.

Andrew was breathless. 'Both of you. Come with me.'

'Well, that's rather sobering.' Said Monique, looking over the edge.

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'Is that your car all the way down there.' Said the constable.

Andrew's phone rang. His face was grim. 'It sounds like there are complications. The ambulance crew are walking in. It's ten miles.' He looked to Monique. 'We need get back there and see if I can hire or borrow a four-wheel drive. We could lose both mother and child from what I'm hearing.'

They were turning to walk back to the Porsche when they heard a man say. 'I'm driving a four-wheel drive.'

They looked around and Andrew said. 'That would be such a huge help Constable.'

Andrew picked up his coat and was walking quickly to commence a car journey he was not particularly looking forward to. Monique called to him to come and see her. What she loved about Andrew was that even in a desperate hurry he wasn't irritated at this. His immediate assumption was that she would have a good reason.

'I thought I should mention that your penis is sort of poking in and out of your trousers. I don't mind, not that it's erotic or anything like that. Other people might be, well, disconcerted. Anyhow I'm going to speed in front of you and get you some new trousers. I'll be there at the park entrance.'

Andrew was embarrassed at the smell of urine as he rode with the Constable. He began to explain why, when the policeman said 'I'll look for some other doctor to stitch my arm once this emergency is dealt with.'

Andrew was sad. He didn't really enjoy disliking people. He'd thought he might be able to knock this fellow off his list. He was the only one on it now that he lived in the Village. They drove in silence.

When he arrived he could see it was a posterior birth, and the child hadn't repositioned at all during the fifteen hours of labour so far. Ordinarily there would be a range of equipment monitoring the progress of the mother and the child. She had been lying on the cramped bed in the back of the four-wheel drive camper van. Andrew encouraged them to pull out any sheets, blankets or sleeping bags and lay them on the still damp grass. He told the woman, whose English was poor, that she should get up and choose any position she wanted to adopt in this phase of labour. His bag was at the bottom of a landslip, but he had pain medication from the ambulance at the Park entrance.

A helicopter was ready to go but there was no landing space and the weather was closing in rapidly again. The woman's husband had the better English of the two Spaniards. They were deeply bogged on a track closed to the public with his wife going into labour soon after getting stuck. Andrew could imagine, once the emergency was over, the Constable pulling out his book and giving them a ticket for being on a road closed to the public. The husband, instead of calling emergency, had looked up Doctors on the internet and was put through to Andrew. He immediately called emergency who despatched an ambulance awaiting the return of the Four Wheel Dive Ambulance. Because he thought it was a short distance up the road at the National Park entrance he thought was where the road was, he said he'd come immediately to support the ambulance and should have been there in twenty minutes. It took ten to get away from the police interference and then two hours to finally reach the site with the ambulance drivers three quarters the way there. They were picked up by a Constable, Andrew could see had no experience at this kind of driving.

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He'd examined the woman and advised her husband that this kind of birth and labour might take eight, twenty-four, even thirty-six hours. Andrew called his parents and asked if they could get a specialist to call him. The rain was coming down hard again now and they'd retreated to the back of the 4WD. The Constable sitting obdurately in his Landrover, one of the ambulance men with him, which would have been more spacious with the seats down. One of the country's most highly regarded obstetricians returned Andrew's call. After describing the situation to her, she provided some initial guidance and asked about the stature of the husband and his wife. Andrew now took note that the husband was a large man while his wife was on the petite end of the spectrum. She advised that compounding the posterior birth was a likelihood that the baby was too large for the vagina it was being asked to slip through. She told him he would probably need to do an emergency episiotomy and she refreshed his memory about the procedure.

Andrew had seen this in textbooks but had never done one and was reluctant to start now. The obstetrician said to call her when there were any developments. Neither of the Spaniards English was up to this task of understanding his words. He described what he was going to do to the woman's vagina through a very awkward pantomime. The woman's expression was initially one of fear. Followed by a resigned nod. Andrew was relieved when he got the message a four-wheel drive ambulance was on the way up.

It was awkward in the cramped car. It was pouring again and the road was like a stream. The woman screamed as there wasn't the kind of pain relief a woman having such a difficult pregnancy would usually have access to. It took another hour. The four-wheel drive ambulance arrived and the woman was given some relief. Andrew was trying to distend the vagina all around the side and top, keeping away from the incisions. As sometimes happen, the little girl in this case, decided to come out in a rush. They heard the beautiful sound of the baby crying. Andrew laid the

baby on woman's naked chest. There was a rapid-fire exchange in Spanish of relief and excitement and many 'muchas gracias'. He suggested the ambulance officers who had walked up go back down with the Constable once the woman had been transferred and ambulance had left. He nearly got bogged turning around which was understandable in the circumstances, and all were needed to push the vehicle out in the stinging rain and mud.

The husband motioned that Andrew sit in the front seat. They were both now absolutely soaked. He pulled out a bottle of Spanish red wine and some plastic cups. The wine soon warmed them up and started to stitch up Andrews frayed nerves. The Spaniard didn't feel the need to talk much. Andrew could not think of a better finale to his day. It was dark, and they saw headlight stabbing in one direction and swinging around the other over the torturous track.

'Gran Problema.' Said the man as a police four-wheel drive arrived car arrived. Part of the Sargent's mission was to take them off the hill as there had been no seats left in the vehicles which had left. And the other to discuss how two tourists found themselves in part in the National Park with no public access. Andrew explained that they were unable read English and had come a short distanced along the track and realise it was a road they should not be on. It was so wet they were concerned about damage to the environment and the possibility of getting bogged if they looked for a turning place.

'Muy estúpido' The Spaniard contributed.

Once the woman went into labour, they somewhat foolishly though if they had ploughed ahead they may reach a local road at the far side of the Park. This in fact did occur, but after ten miles

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further of rough travel. The labour pains occurred at such a high frequency they tried to find a local doctor with a four-wheel drive rather than call emergency which Andrew did but also believed he could get there sooner as he had a four-wheel drive and lived nearby. Unfortunately, the four-wheel drive ambulance was delayed on another call, but then had to go the long way around because of the landslip.

‘Soy un idiota.’

‘I was delayed by a miscommunication about the park entry and the slip at the promontory, where I lost my four-wheel drive, and one of your colleuges drove us out here. It all got a bit messy really. But we made it. Thanks to the contributions of the local police.’

The Sargent had been nodding all along. It appeared to be mainly out of interest. ‘I was only ever going to issue them with a formal warning Doctor. However, based on your detailed explanation, I’ll make it a verbal warning.’ There were smiles all around. Now Andrew only wanted one thing. Two things. And they were both waiting patiently in a yellow Porsche out of the way near the entrance. Monique and Patches ignored the pouring rain to run out to Andrew she with hugs and he jumping up which he was not usually allowed to do.

Monique said over the rain as they held each other. ‘Just a few minutes either way and you would have been gone. Or I would have been gone. I would never get over it.’

‘Me either.’ He said.

She said. 'I called Lucy and asked her to get a roaring fire going at home and we can order five kinds of takeout meal and have a little bit of whatever we want. And we'll order Patches a dead cat in case he ever wanted to rip one apart.'

A few days, later the Regional Police Superintendent asked if Andrew could come and give him a detailed description of what happened on the promontory. Andrew thought it was just something that had piqued the man's interest as it was reported in detail to the local police. But he had another agenda.

Andrew hadn't told anyone about the connection with Patches and the slip, but he mentioned it to the Superintendent for some reason. 'You know you probably won't believe what I'm going to tell you.'

Without being rude about it the Superintendent answered. 'Who knows what I will or won't believe. Please go on.'

Andrew described the nightmares and then the strange behaviour of the dog that morning, as if trying to delay him. He was sure that were it not for the intervention of the Constable Patches would have barked on the front seat until around the same amount of time had elapsed.

'I find it difficult to believe myself.' Said Andrew. 'But if I'd been a few minutes earlier I would have driven past the point with no knowledge of what was going to happen. And all those other vehicles on both sides would have plunged over that new cliff. If I'd arrived a few minutes later, I would have been the first to go over the edge followed by the others. I don't know why I've mentioned it. It's too unlikely for even me to believe.'

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The Superintendent had his own story. 'Well dogs are curious animals. My mother-in-law had a little silky terrier. I didn't like the dog much personally. They can be difficult animals when they're attached to only one person and don't get out and socialise much. Sue's mother liked to travel, and the dog would pine. But when she'd left the airport in a taxi coming home the dog would get up and stand by the door for about forty minutes before she arrived, he'd be there to greet her. She'd been fighting bowel cancer for years and had frequent trips to the hospital, the dog always waiting once she was on her way home. But on one trip she wasn't coming home. That little dog didn't eat or drink, nor get out of its bed. It was dead in under four days after the old woman had passed away.'

'I'm not much a spiritual fellow, but I think this is one of the many things we still don't have an answer of. I saw an interesting program about why dogs are so central to many people's lives. It said there were a few Homo species getting about in addition to Homo Sapiens. But we had dogs. At least a relationship with them. We didn't need to post a guard because dogs naturally did that. Our camps were more hygienic because dogs ate all of the scraps and whatever else. We might collaborate with the dogs to catch more for ourselves and so have more protein. And maybe they were kept as pets which made us, possibly for the first time, care about something other than ourselves.'

'The upshot was that we had the luxury to develop a...I think it said a larger frontal cortex and hence develop language which has been the precursor to every development in agriculture, engineer and technology. That's the theory. All because of the humble mutt. Which loves us in a simple way which no human can replicate. Like it or not human relationships are bound to be complex.'

'I like it.' Said Andrew. 'I'm going to believe it whether it's proved true or not.'

They got back in the car and the Superintendent moved on the real reason for the visit. ‘Continuing on the theme of complex human relationships. I have a Constable who’d like us to charge you with assaulting an officer with a savage dog, occasioning grievous bodily harm, obstructing justice and parking in the wrong place. Another woman is to be charged with obstructing justice and attempted murder.’ Andrew didn’t know what kind of response the man was looking for. He gave none. ‘On another front I’ve advised I’m to receive a detailed brief requesting a suite of charges be laid against that Constable. In addition to a list of civil actions against the man, all of which, based on our system, the department will need to provide a defence and costs irrespective of them being civil in nature because they occurred during the conduct of his duties.

Andrew was about to ask what their options were, if not to fight what were vexatious charges. But the Superintendent continued. ‘There have been several complaints about this man. None from you I would point out, although I know you had previous interactions with him. This pattern of counterproductive behaviour was however not brought to my attention until this quite remarkable slip. I failed to mention you’re very admirable management of the situation saved many lives, which not all would have achieved.’ The man was not looking for a comment. ‘Doctor, many of us say that what happened in one’s early life can be left behind if we choose and if we work hard we can make a good life for ourselves. I might have such a story to share as do many. I’m proud to reach the station I have, humble at it is, by overcoming early barriers which felt insurmountable at the time. And yet others, we must admit to ourselves, those experiencing abuse, whatever the nature of it may be, these people have a long and steep mountain to climb. Some do. They’re extraordinary. But what of the ordinary? The Constable’s early life was not especially traumatic. Not more than many. But never once was he fortunate enough to have a positive role model. And he was maintained in a state of powerlessness and constantly reminded of it.’

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'I don't know how he even got into the force, but I suspect this is the first time in his life he's been wielding any power. And as we see, he's doing an exceptionally poor job of it. I've been mentoring and coaching the man one on one a few hours a week, and I plan to do continue this for another month. I've enrolled him for a Community Policing course, and a few others. I've done this on the proviso that he gets some external counselling, which the force will support for at least six months.

He'll be on desk duties and will be out of circulation for a month or so. He's acknowledged many things he's failed at in terms of delivering balanced policing and agrees he needs supports to make changes. Significant changes. I've told him if he can't make it in this community, I'll dismiss him. However, he would need to come into a community which is willing to give a man a second chance. Otherwise, there is not hope for him. I have no idea where he would end up if he cannot stay in the force and improve himself as time goes by, but I don't think it would be pleasant for him or those around him.'

Andrew was not yet invited to speak. 'The one thing he continues to feel aggrieved about was that a dog could leap up and bite him on the arm without any consequence. He acknowledged he took you by the arm, but ultimately you should have been able to control your dog unless *you* thought that it was appropriate for the dog to bite him for grasping your arm.'

Andrew said. 'I'll be honest. I hadn't looked at it from that perspective.'

'Well, there could be charges laid. Valid charges. And your legal advisor could come up with an impressive list of shortcomings in the Constable that might have a legal or civil dimension. Probably at

least some would be successful. Two Parties litigating. Irrespective what lawyers might say or believe, there are no winners in this situation. And what would you have at the end. And what would he have. Vindication. A very expensive and draining resolution for a ten-minute altercation?’

The Superintendent continued. ‘I have, after some discussion, convinced Constable Stuart to change his view on the incident if your dog is enrolled in obedience training. Ideally one session per week for around six months.’

Andrew was about to say light heartedly he would consult his lawyer; but he didn’t want to diminish the thoughtful nature of the Superintendent’s proposal. ‘I think you’re very wise. And we’ve been fortunate to have the benefit of that. I would be pleased if you could pass onto the Constable that we will be training Patches such that he never exhibits those behaviours again. If it’s not too much to add. We hope his arm is healing well.’

They had parked in front of the surgery for ten minutes while they finished their conversation. ‘Well I’m very pleased with the result.’ Said the Superintendent.

Andrew was relieved and said as much sincerely. ‘And I’m relieved by it. Months or more of unproductive activity. A negative mindset. Achieving nothing worth having. You’re a credit to your Service Superintendent.’ Andrew had a new perspective. And he knew, lawyer or not, Monique would immediately see the sense in it.

The Superintendent reached across his hand and said. ‘What a very kind sentiment. Thankyou.’

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It was just over a month later that the obedience training was in full swing. Valerie from the shelter was chosen for the sessions as she had a gift for firm but positive dog management. She quickly commandeered Patches as the dog to demonstrate to the others what to do. She told Andrew she would never forgive herself for letting Patches out of her clutches.

They looked up to see a man was walking towards them in slightly a tentative way. Andrew, Monique and Valerie closed the gap and were very soon shaking hands and, Valerie, taking the advice of the Superintendent in her own fashion, gave the surprised Constable a big hug. 'Sorry for pretending to prepare to kill you.' She said. Soon they were chatting with Constable Stuart about the dog training, and the doings of the village while he'd been away. Monique thought things had gone a little too far when Andrew asked him to dinner. But the words of the Superintendent had deeply affected him.

'But you don't have to of course. Please don't feel obliged.'

'Oh no. I'd like that very much.' It was on the tip of Constable Sturt's tongue to say. 'But don't expect to get away with any parking misdemeanours.' But he had learned just enough to leave it.

Valerie gave a call. They looked around and saw Patches bolting towards them.

'Shit.' Thought Andrew.

'Shit.' Thought Monique

But Andrew could see a tail wagging. He'd never seen Patches wag his tail like that. It seemed to convey *I know you want me to do this so I'm doing it*'. He went straight to the Constable and sat before him wagging his tail and looking up in the friendly way which comes naturally to most dogs.

The Constable reached down and gave his head a conciliatory pat.