

ANYONE

Michael White

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By The Same Author

Paul McCartney's Coat and Other Stories

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Over the Hills and Far Away

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An Unremarkable Man

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Overboard!

A Challenging Game of Crumble

To Jonathan McCulloch

“Who Have We
Come as Today Then?”

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Part One: The Theoretical Cat

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“Blue or Red?” said the tall guy as he rose slightly from his chair to give a brief but firm handshake. It was always the question anyone asked a newcomer in any place of employment on Merseyside and it was always one I dreaded. Not because statistically speaking you always had a fifty per cent chance of getting it right but because in truth I had a one hundred per cent chance of getting it wrong. He had glanced at me; fifty-one going slightly grey and I had assessed him too; big guy, late twenties. Obviously interested in football. It was a thing blokes always do when they first meet.

“Neither.” I mumbled in embarrassment. “Not really into football sorry.” This answer, although perfectly true, always brought colour to my face and a slight feeling of embarrassment tinged with the thought that by not supporting a local football team (and God help you if you revealed that you supported *any* team from outside Merseyside) you were *letting the side down* just a little bit. I had glanced down at the desk where we were sitting and amongst the scraps of crumpled paper, discarded pens and scribbled on notepads there was a coffee stained Everton mug and I could have taken the easy way out I suppose, though I rarely did. The truth will always find you and bite you on the arse.

The reaction of the man sitting facing me, his glasses balanced on his nose as he tipped back his chair (quite a feat for a chair on wheels I thought) was not however the same usual look of disbelief and disdain. He just raised his eye brow slightly and gave a small half grin that if I were to use one word to sum up how it looked then it would be, “mischief”.

“Are you gay?” He smiled and the inflection he used made me realise he wasn’t being homophobic. Not at all. He was actually helping me out of an awkward position on my first contact with anyone on my first day in a new job. I knew all this, and he knew that I now knew all of this and he did it all with a half-smile and one eyebrow. I was impressed.

“Don’t gay people like football either?” I smiled and his smile increased just a little more.

“Of course they do.” He replied. “It’s just that they all seem to support Arsenal.” I laughed at this and pointed at the Everton mug.

“I can name the 1966 cup final team though.” He looked at me doubtfully.

“Go on then.”

“Right.” I said, counting out on my fingers as I racked my brains. “West, Wright, Wilson, Temple, Harvey, Young.” I could see his eyebrows rising even more as I continued to search my memory. “Gabriel, Labone, Harris.” Still two more. I paused before the names jumped into my mind. “Scott and Trebilcock.” I finished triumphantly and with a flourish just to show off added, “Manager Catterick.”

The guy gave a slow handclap. “Well done.” He smiled. “How come you can name the team and yet you’re not a fan?”

“Well when I was a kid there wasn’t much else to do really, it was either football or cowboys and Indians.” He looked at me as if appraising me. I was a lot older than him; fifty one. I had him down for late twenties at best, though I could see even though he was sitting down that he was a big bloke; not fat – not at all, but tall and broad. “Think of it this way. We only had two fucking telly channels. Well, unless you had a posh telly of course and you could get BBC2 as well.” He looked appalled at this. “No internet.” I smiled.

“Christ.” He said, and there was a flash of that mischievous grin again. “Where did you get your porn from?” I laughed aloud.

“From the local newsagents.” He laughed. “You usually had to slip it into the TV times and flash it to the poor woman behind the till so she could ring it up on the register along with a quarter of pineapple chunk sweets.” He laughed aloud at this; a warm laugh; loud but full of humour. He stood at this point and held his hand out for me to shake it again, which I stood and did.

“I thought the nineteen sixties were all in black and white.” He laughed and I joined him.

“Jon.” He said, raising himself off his chair to shake my hand.

“I am Luke.”

“Pleased to meet you Luke.” He said, lowering himself down again.

“And you.” I said.

It was my first introduction to a man who over the course of the next few years would reduce me to tears of laughter on a regular basis. It is an over-used expression I think, but with Jon it was the truth. He once actually managed to make me laugh so much I was nearly sick. He had a knack for it. One mischievous grin and it was game on.

Yet that was in my previous workplace. Six years in a technical support role sitting next to a harried and noisy sales department, of which Jon was but one member. He had made the place worthwhile really, and I counted him as one of my very few friends. Down to the smoking shelter we would go and have a laugh, chew over the day’s news and generally take the piss out of everyone. We were a team and both he and I thought the world of him. There would be football talk too of course which he always referred to as “white noise” because you could almost visibly see me zoning out when he started talking about football with anyone who was out there smoking with us.

“He’ll always give you back a dirty shirt...” I heard him say and so carried on day dreaming for a while longer. Then in October last year I had a really bad water infection and was off work for a few weeks. When I returned Jon wasn’t there.

“Have you heard the news?” asked Debbie who sat on the other side of the desk from me in what the management laughingly called, “pods”.

“No.” I said distractedly, trying to catch up on the hundreds of emails that seemed to have accumulated during my absence.

“Jon has got cancer.” She said and everything stopped.

“What?” I managed, and she told me. It was in his bowel and a few other places too, Aggressive cancer. The Chemotherapy had to work.

I felt sick.

Although we were friends we didn’t socialise outside work – after all, I was nearly twice his age despite everything, and although I knew he wasn’t on Facebook (even though I was) I didn’t have an email address for him or a mobile number. I did know his twitter account though and so I sent him a message.

“I go off sick with a water infection and you go and get cancer. You really should learn to curb your competitive spirit you know.” There was a few minutes’ gap and then a reply:

“Ha Ha! I will be back before you know it!”

He didn’t come back. The chemotherapy didn’t work as the cancer was too aggressive; too advanced. He died two months later on the 31st December 2012.

I was devastated.

I guess really a few years later that I still am. I don’t make friends easily and I felt his loss to the extent that I had to leave. Find a new job. I would look at where he sat and hate whoever it was that sat where he used to. Sometimes I would look up expecting to see him, and he would catch my eye and take the piss out of me in some way.

Sometime I thought I did see him.

I had to get out. It was time for a change.

Chapter One

“We do not belong to this material world that science constructs for us. We are not in it; we are outside. We are only spectators.”

(Erwin Schrödinger)

So here I was on my first day of a new job. I felt lucky to get it if truth is told as it was a definite step up from my previous job. It was still a technical support position, but the wages were considerably more, the hour's nine to five and I also had the option of a residential place on site which I had taken up. That would certainly save me some money!

It had all begun with the advertisement advertising the position of, “technical support person” or something like that. I've forgotten the exact wording of the rest of the advertisement now, it was just over a month ago and I've got a memory like a sieve, but it doesn't really matter how the job was described, for when the job description says, “technical support” then you usually found that the job description had absolutely nothing to do with the actual work itself at all.

So it is an understatement of understatement that the advertisement in The Liverpool Echo had caught my eye the minute my alcohol fuddled eyes slid across it. Not that I'm a regular reader of the Echo or anything. No, in fact I only bought the local rag on a Thursday for the job pages and it was in there that I saw it. The main thing that stood out I am not ashamed to admit is not the fact that the job description was at best vague to the point of non-existent, but the salary, which was enormous.

I waited for inspiration to come for a few days, mulling it over as if trying to convince myself that I had no chance of ever getting a job with wages as good as that, but in the end I wrote up a letter and CV of what I considered to be of particular brilliance if not entirely factual and once done I made a quick trip to the post office and posted it.

You could have knocked me down with a feather when less than a week later I received an invite to an interview with the head of the department, a professor Theodulus Wingnut. You read that right, by the way. That's the prof's full name. These days I usually just call him “Professor” and I think he's okay with that. Never complains anyway. There's no way I could use his real name all the time. I think it's the kind of name that only a parent would ever love, and an employee could never get used to. I pissed myself laughing at the time, and I must admit I read the name two or three times, laughing like a loon as I did so, but I then remembered the salary and resolved to somehow or another scrape the money together to hire a suit for the interview. Oh, and to keep a straight face when I shook the guy's hand too.

I scanned the letter once again, noting the time, date and place. There was a train ticket and schedule included with the letter, and I was surprised to see that I was to be collected by car from the railway station and driven to the company offices where the interview was to be held.

Which I felt was a bit of over-kill really, as the company offices were only in one of the nicer parts of Cheshire and so not too far away. I didn't have a car right then but it would have not been

any great hardship to get there. So: a bit over the top, but nice to feel that a bit of effort was being put into the process on their behalf anyway.

Being a bit of a nosey bugger I was slightly wary when I found out that the building itself did not seem to appear on Google Maps no matter how hard I tried to find it. According to the map page the location given in the letter was simply a big empty field, not in any way distinctive from the other fields that seemed to surround it. Weird. I mean, if he wasn't on Linked-In then who the hell was he? If anything, this made me even more curious but searches for the location and the professors name came up with sweet bugger all every time. Such things I put out of my head and slowly but surely the interview date came around. I will say looking back on it that in all seriousness there was absolutely no excuse for getting completely pissed the night before the interview. I don't mean rolling drunk and staggering home with a kebab at 3am.

I had been completely caned.

The next morning found me lying on the couch with the uncomfortable thought that for some reason the goldfish was staring at me. The kebab rolled greasily around in my stomach and my mouth felt as if someone had sand papered my tongue.

"Luke. For God's sake. Your train is in an hour." The goldfish focused into view and I noticed my mother tugging at my sleeve at the same time.

Yes. You got that right. Fifty-one and living at home, though more out of necessity than anything after my divorce. It could be difficult going back home, but it wasn't too bad unless you actually told somebody that you were still with your parents. Then you were fucked. At this precise moment however I was struggling with the thought that my mum seemed to have turned into a goldfish when I also began to realise that not only was I lying on the couch, but also that the rest of my body seemed to be doing its best to kill me. There were bits of me aching that I'd forgotten I had.

Placed precariously about three feet in front of where my eyes were attempting to focus there seemed to be a bright orange traffic cone, a small pile of loose change and what appeared to be a stuffed penguin. I vaguely remember falling over a park bench somewhere and my aching shins seemed to be trying to remind me of that. Mum shook me roughly again. The loose change swum out of focus, and then swum giddily back into view. I managed a grunt as I heard mum reminding me that the train for my interview was in an hour. Vaguely my brain managed to grasp this and over the course of the next hour I managed to coax myself off the floor, into the shower and down to the train station.

The train was on time and I had to change trains just once to head out into the Cheshire countryside. I took the opportunity to take a brief nap in the hope of feeling more human as the hangover began to kick in. Luckily I had a hangover cure powder in the top pocket of my hired suit, and mixing that with a little cup of flat coke from the buffet car I began to feel a little bit less wrecked. I looked at the letter and studied the station that I was to get off the train. Glancing up at one of the line maps overhead I followed our journey from station to station as rail passengers frequently do, though God knows why, because there are rarely any shocks in store. From small pretty looking station to identical next pretty station we went until finally Alverscot was next. I straightened my tie in my reflection in the window, noticing at the same time that I still looked awfully pale, and made my way out of the carriage.

I dropped the window as the train slowed, made its way over a small road crossing against which no cars seemed to be waiting, and turned the handle on the door as the train pulled past

what seemed to be an old coal yard and came to a halt. I disembarked the train and standing on the platform waited for it to pull out of the station before getting my bearings. The station itself was completely empty, not a soul about at all. As the train rattled into the distance around the bend in the track I looked for the exit. The posters on the wooden boarding around the station seemed curiously old fashioned, and I finally noticed a small wooden footbridge at the end of the platform that led from one platform to the next. About half way along a small wooden gate led into a small car park. An old fashioned black car was parked by the gate, and a tall bald man was stood beside it. As I caught his eye he waved stiffly at me and I waved back, before making my way over the footbridge towards him.

As i got closer I could see that the car was really old fashioned. It looked like something from a mafia film and the chrome sparkled brightly in the early afternoon sun, the black shape of the bonnet almost like a work of art, and on the bonnet a silver Vikings head emblem bearing the words, "Rover 14". To say it looked spectacular was an understatement. The tall bald man standing next to it was also immaculately suited, two large black suitcases sitting firmly by his feet. He stood watching me as I approached, his face completely blank of any emotion. I held out my hand and introduced myself and the tall bald man shook my hand firmly, verging slightly on the over enthusiastic.

"Hank." he said, introducing himself. His voice was deep and emotionless. I said I was pleased to meet him and picking up the suitcases he gestured for me to get into the car and closing the door behind me he placed the two suitcases onto the space beside the driver's seat and got in.

Hank wasn't a great conversationalist though it didn't really matter. The inside of the car was just as amazing as the outside, the smell of leather was strong and the metal surfaces gleamed. The countryside was spectacular too, though the roads were awfully quiet. Hank maintained no conversation at all, despite several attempts to pass the time of day myself, and eventually the car turned off the small road and onto a long drive that wound in amongst the trees ahead. I paid strict attention to how the office itself looked, for after all first impressions are important, but so far all I could see was trees. They did seem to have peacocks running about the grounds but that was it really.

The drive turned tightly to the left and a large old fashioned house came into view. I say house. It looked more like a stately home to me. The car drew up outside on the gravel drive, and Hank stopped the engine. He got out quickly and opened the door for me, the two suitcases once again at his feet. "The professor awaits you in the green light room." he said in his deep voice and gestured for me to follow him into the house.

The entrance was large and imposing, but the doors opened automatically as we approached, Hank leading the way, carrying the suitcases in each hand as he went. We climbed up a little set of broad stairs and approached the twin glass fronted doors that were sufficiently opaque to obscure the interior of the building. Yet as Hank led the way the doors swished open, revealing a large well-lit foyer that more resembled the foyer of a hotel than some kind of office building. As I crossed over the doorstep and entered the building I felt what I assumed was a small discharge of electricity, probably a remnant from the lush finish of the interior of the car, but it soon passed. Following Hank closely the tall man approached the long desk behind which was seated a young man wearing some sort of Bluetooth headset who nodded briefly to Hank and cast a quick curious glance in my direction. I returned the glance but was more concerned with having a real good look at the foyer.

It was a bit weird really. It wasn't anything like what I would have expected. Opulent was probably the right word, but all my mind could settle on was "flash". There was money on display here, and loads of it too. Unlike any form of logo or notice of any kind. Hank put what looked like the keys of the car on the desk and in a vaguely monotone voice said, "1957." before continuing, "Interviewee for Professor Wingnut. Luke Williams." The man behind the desk merely nodded and sweeping what I assumed to be keys from the desktop and stowed them somewhere out of sight before nodding briefly. He consulted a computer screen the top of which was just visible above the well of the desk and motioned off to his right.

"The Green light room. Professor Wingnut is ready for you." Hank merely nodded and motioned for me to follow him. Yet again he hoisted the large suitcases one in each hand and motioned with his head for me to follow him. I got a really good feeling that Hank wasn't a great communicator for so far all he had said to me on arrival and on the journey here seemed to reinforce that opinion. I'd tried a few words of small talk but all I had received in return was either being completely blanked, or at best just a small nod or shake of the head. I could only hope that professor Wingnut was a man of more words, or it was going to be a real bastard of an interview.

We made our way down a brightly lit wide corridor, the walls of which were interspersed with firmly closed wide double doors off to both sides every five yards or so. I found it a bit weird that none of these doors had any signs at all, and yet Hank continued down the corridor at a brisk pace, the two suitcases still clutched in his hands. We swung a left at the end and joined another corridor which ran in both directions before ending about four doorways away at a dead end, double doors forming the end of the hallway here too. The only difference between this set of doors and the others was a row of three small chairs set up against the wall. At the moment they were all completely vacant. Hank reached the double doors and placed one of the suitcases on the floor before knocking twice quietly on the door. There was a muffled sound of what could have been "enter" from the other side and Hank turned the handle on the door, and over his shoulder told me to take a seat before hefting the suitcases up once again and going through the entrance which closed quietly behind him.

I sat myself down, staring at the plain pinstriped wallpaper and began to anticipate the interview. I had only been there for about a minute before the door opened again and Hank popped his head through the gap. "Professor Wingnut will see you now." He said in the same monotone voice and I stood and entered the room, which was surprisingly large. The office was roughly square inside. The far end of the room comprised of ceiling to floor bay windows, through which the grounds outside were clearly visible. A large set of French doors that led out into the gardens stood half open in the wall of glass, before which was placed a large desk. The side walls seemed to be covered almost entirely in bookcases, and a small mobile ladder to access the higher shelves stood off to one side. The books were almost entirely encased in what appeared to be leather of various colours, and there was a definite air of opulence about the room. Behind the desk across the wide room sat a small figure, which I presumed was the professor. Hank stood off to one side, completely motionless, the suitcases at his feet.

"Ah! Luke!" exclaimed the man who I assumed was the professor as I entered, and walking around the desk he approached me and we shook hands in the centre of the room, confirming that it was indeed Wingnut.

Professor Theodulus Wingnut was the perfect embodiment of his name. He wore an almost full length white lab coat, at the lapel pocket of which sat several different coloured biro's. He

appeared to be anywhere between sixty and eighty, wearing a pair of small round spectacles that seemed almost balanced on the bridge of his nose, as if daring gravity to sweep them to the floor. A wide forehead gave way to a shock of thin white hair that looked to me as if the professor had been plugged into the mains just minutes before as it rose wildly in all directions. He had a wide smile though, and a warm friendly handshake, which seemed to last just a few more seconds longer than was entirely necessary, his enthusiasm seeming almost to radiate from him. I smiled in return and noticed Hank in the corner of the room standing as still as a statue. "Come in. Come in!" fussed the professor as he led me to a large chair that was positioned in front of his desk. "Splendid!" he said as if delivering a verdict and made his way back behind his desk. He made a bit of a thing about pulling his chair beneath the table and then clasped his hands together and looked me up and down a few times, pausing only to clean his glasses on his lab coat once. I sat there patiently waiting for the interview to begin, but the professor seemed to be content to continue to beam a warm smile at me as if waiting for me to begin. Awkward doesn't even begin to describe it.

This seemed to go on for at least three or four minutes, but was probably actually only about two before I cleared my throat and said, "Technical support job?" which the professor seemed to either not have heard or even understood. He just sat there beaming at me. From the corner of my eye I saw Hank move and place a single piece of A4 paper in front of the professor and from the corner of his mouth muttered, "The interview" before returning to the same immobile state as before. At this the professor sprang to life and snatched the piece of paper up from the desk.

"Ah yes. The interview. Technical support person." he smiled from ear to ear. "There you are." He glanced at me once more before thanking Hank and then turned to face me once more. He removed his glasses once again, forgot to clean them and balanced them back on his nose again. The thick glass in the lenses made his eyes look twice as big as before. I felt as if I was about to be interviewed by a vaguely eccentric owl. "By the way Luke did you feel a small discharge of static electricity when you entered the building?" I nodded and the professor seemed pleased at this. "Was it rather strong?" he enquired, and seemed to be genuinely concerned

"No." I replied. "Just a tingle." The professor sat bolt upright at this. "A tingle?" he enquired and I nodded again, wondering what in the name of God all the fuss was about a bit of static. "Probably a little over - enthusiastic on the protective radius of the electron capacitor feedback circuit more than anything." he said almost half to himself and I noticed out of the corner of my eye Hank turning slowly to face the professor. "Turn the feedback circuit down 3 Sharples will you please, Hank?" and Hank nodded stiffly once and then picking up the cases strode with purpose from the room. I heard a bit of a kerfuffle as the door and suitcase juggling thing went on and then the door pulled shut and footsteps could be heard fading down the corridor. I glanced up from the desk and saw the professor beaming at me once again. "Wonderful chap is Hank." he enthused. I nodded in agreement before the professor continued, "Well, for an android anyway."

I thought I'd misheard him to be honest so just blurted out a quick, "Sorry?"

"For an android." repeated the professor as if it was a fact that was plain to see. "1963 model. Completely self-determining, of course. Quite cutting edge for the time." He paused slightly, before leaning slightly over the desk conspiratorially. "Cheats at chess though." I nodded my head in a slight daze. Was he really serious? He seemed to be!

The professor almost seemed to hear my thoughts. "All quite foreign to you of course, Luke. I understand that. But perfectly normal around here." He smiled broadly for a second. "Hank is one

of the last generation of androids. But he is as I have said completely self-determining, and been tested in various locales that a mere man could only ever hope to attain." I nodded dumbly, playing along but also keeping a very careful eye on the exit. The French windows seemed to be the best bet. "Yes. Hank here we have tested in various areas that would cause grave discomfort and danger to a normal man."

He leaned across the desk conspiratorially as if imparting a great secret. "He has attended every five a.m. "Next" Christmas sale for the last three years without injury. Quite remarkable." He paused to give me a quick smile before a frown crossed his face. "He has bought quite a few questionable ties though. Still, no accounting for taste. He was indeed extremely advanced technology for the sixties. Quintuple multi-threaded processors working in very close harmony with a titanium positronic matrix makes all the difference." He paused as if thinking of something else. "Knows 53 languages as well." he smiled. "Even Glaswegian." I stifled a small squeal of discomfort. "I know." continued the professor, mistaking my squeal for one of acceptance, which it most definitely was not. "He can run 37 trillion calculations per microsecond and is physically locatable within 0.00003 of a millimetre from anywhere on the planet. Never eats. Never sleeps. Doesn't require payment of any kind at all. Though I do believe he is quite fond of Ginger snaps. We always ensure that the canteen has some in stock at all times."

I gulped, trying desperately to think of a question that would not send the professor off on the by now inevitable axe wielding jamboree, for surely he was some kind of nutcase. There were no such things as androids! I began to look for hidden cameras in case I was going to be the star of a new series of Candid Camera or something.

I asked the only question that I could think of. "What is it with the suitcases?" I said and the professor's face fell.

"Ah." he mumbled, as if admitting a guilty secret. "They are his batteries."

I smiled sickly and the professor seemed a little peeved at having to reveal this. "Shall we continue with the interview?" I nodded in as neutral a way as I possibly could and for the next thirty minutes or so we proceeded along the normal formal routine of an interview. I was quite glad of the return to normality to be honest, and I seemed to be doing okay. Even the professor seemed to be acting relatively normal. Nevertheless I kept the French windows in clear view all the time just in case. Finally, the professor sat back in his chair. He obviously wasn't a poker player because although I felt I had done quite well there was a vague sense of almost disappointment about him. Maybe my answers had been too vague or formulaic? God knows - he had certainly rattled me with whatever all that crap was about Hank. Still, he seemed unhappy about something or another though he was obviously trying to conceal it.

"One final question!" he said, smiling and leaning on his desk. "If you were a bird, what kind of bird would you be?" To tell the truth it was the kind of crazy bullshit Oxford University entrance examination question that I thought would be sprung upon me without notice at any second, so I wasn't entirely fazed by the question. It only took me a second to reply with what was an instinctive answer.

"I'd be a pigeon." I smiled and gave the professor my best smart arse smile. I'll never forget his expression when I said pigeon. If you ever hear anyone say they were deflated, then whatever has happened to them could not even begin to resemble how deflated the professor seemed to be at that particular moment in time. He almost seemed to sag.

“A pigeon?” He almost sobbed. “Everyone ALWAYS says eagle.” He was almost shouting now. “Why on Earth would you want to be a pigeon?” He removed his glasses and stared at me accusingly.

“Easy.” I replied. “Pigeons lay blue eggs.” The professor stood bolt upright as if he had been the victim of an electric shock and so I decided to offer a token of explanation. “Pigeons lay blue eggs.” The professor looked even more confused, if that was indeed possible. “Blue eggs are cool.” I finished.

The professor almost stumbled back into his chair, crumpling into its no doubt comfortable leather covering as if he was a piece of paper being discarded into a waste paper basket.

“Blue eggs are cool.” he almost sighed to himself. He had an almost defeated look about him, staring away into the distance as if in shock. “They are, aren’t they? Who would have thought it?” he mumbled, and I began to think pigeon was most definitely not the correct answer. “Do you believe in ghosts, Luke?” the professor asked and I thought it was another daft question.

“Not at all.” I said. “They have no scientific validity at all. In real terms, no more than a bit of fun.” The professor nodded uncertainly but I was now on a roll and decided to continue. “Science should never be about fun.” I concluded in a serious tone. The professor looked crestfallen.

“Shouldn’t it?” he said, looking worried. “Oh dear.” His mind seemed to drift a little and he mumbled half to himself, “Maybe it was a bit silly to dress those monkeys in the weather balloon at Roswell in alien outfits. My My, what was I thinking?”

We sat in silence for a minute or two and then as strangely as it had begun the interview was over. Hank appeared once again and I followed the suitcase carrying potential android out to the reception where I was signed out and as we went through the exit again there was a static shock again, though this time it was a little stronger. Another half hour with Hank in the car found once again the same dull lack of conversation but soon we were back at the station once more, though I had noticed that this time there did seem to be a little more traffic on the road. The train was waiting for me at the oddly deserted station and leaving Hank standing at the station almost as if to ensure I actually got on the train, soon I was under way.

To my total amazement, shock and yes, I shall also say, unease, a week later I received a letter stating that I had got the job.

Interval:

Fag Break with Jon: "Prison Shoes"

"Just because you have decided to dress more casual doesn't mean you can dress like a teenager." Said Jon having a drag on his cigarette. We were at the smoking shelter again, and a few groups of people stood around in their own little groups, passing the time of day and so on. This day we were joined by one of the managers from the media section, Colin. Colin had just got divorced, an event that had coincided almost exactly with Colin's discovery of Primark. Sadly, this had also coincided at exactly the same time as with his forgetting just how old he was: mid-forties, fine start of a bald patch and the conversational skills of a rock.

"I mean." Continued Jon, a slight smile playing across his face, "Just look at your shoes." I looked down at Colin's dark purple canvas shoes that contrasted somewhat with his off mustard coloured chinos and chequered shirt. He looked like an explosion at a clown convention.

"Nothing wrong with these." Sniffed Colin. He knew there was of course, and there was no malice intended. We were just taking the piss.

"I quite like the shoes." I said. I didn't, but I was curious as to see where Jon was going with this.

"Prison shoes them." Smiled Jon. "All the rage in Walton Prison I would imagine." Colin just smiled. He knew better than to retaliate.

"You have to remember Colin." Smiled Jon. "You're forty-four and therefore logically, not a member of One Direction."

"Or Buster." I said smiling.

"Who?" said Jon incredulously.

"Buster." I said. "Boy band in the seventies." Jon just rolled his eyes.

"Good result yesterday!" shouted one of the managers to Jon, walking across the car park as they passed the smoking shelter heading to the main door. Everton had lost yesterday, and as Jon was the most renowned Evertonian in the building it was obviously him all the Liverpool supporters couldn't wait to bump into.

"Whatever!" shouted Jon back as the manager rounded the corner and disappeared.

"I think perhaps you're trying to achieve "available". Said Jon and Colin looked confused.

"Your clothes." Said Jon, pointing in particular to the shoes. "You are trying to make a statement."

"I just liked the colours really." Smiled Colin.

"Yellow and purple?" I asked doubtfully.

"Mustard, not yellow." Said Colin. "You could hardly say that these are banana pants now, could you?" Jon just raised an eyebrow.

"Well it doesn't say, "Available" to me. I laughed.

"Go on then, Luke – what does it say?"

"More like, "rapist"" I laughed. Jon snorted, putting his fag out in the ash bin.

“Desperate.” Said Jon, smiling. “Or maybe “three years for robbing some newsagents. One of the two.”

“Piss off you two.” Said Colin, extinguishing his cigarette and making to return back inside. “I’ll see you later.” And off he went.

“Poor bastard.” Smiled Jon as he waited for me to finish my smoke. “Probably living off Pot Noodles and Cup a Soups.” I laughed, knowing he was probably right. “Probably be a bright red Ferrari next.”

“And a wig.” I mused, and we both laughed.

“Did you see what bloody Alan has gone and suggested now?” asked Jon. Alan was the latest member of the sales team who was very good at questioning every aspect of what the business did rather than realising that was how it worked and to leave it alone.

“No.” I said. “What’s he suggested now?”

“Well.” Began Jon, grinning. I put my cigarette out and we began to wander back across the car park to the main doors. “He has put a plan forward where if we all chip in ten quid a month for the electric bill then the company gets a tax rebate which would earn us back such a rebate that the company could then reimburse us double the amount.”

“What?” I laughed. “He wants us to pay the company’s electric bill?”

“Yes.”

“Tit.” Laughed Jon as we entered the main door, crossed reception and headed back to our desks.

Ten minutes later I heard my email ping and opening up a message from Jon, in which he also copied Colin, there was a picture of a pair of bright yellow pumps and a ball and chain.

“You’re dead.” Came back an email to the both of us shortly after, to which I replied to the pair of them with an email containing a picture of a pair of bright pink trousers and a cell door. From across the sales floor Jon gave me a thumbs up as he sent an email to both Colin and I containing a picture of a bright red Ferrari.

It took less than a week for the car brochures to arrive on Coli’s desk. They were free to send off for and so Jon had signed Colin up for the newsletter too. We had observed the brochures arrival at reception and the pair of us watched in silence as Colin opened his mail and began poring over the brochures.

Nodding to each other we then established a sweepstake with all of the office as to how long it would be before the Ferrari arrived. One pound a go, soon we had fifty members of the sweepstake, all without Colin’s knowledge of course.

Much to Colin’s disgust, the eventual winner was Laura from the research department with sixteen days.

Chapter Two

“Vague statements are interchangeable.”
(Robert Mager)

“Luke?” the professor asked, squinting at me through his smeared round spectacles across the dining room table. “Do I own a cat?” In all fairness it wasn’t the weirdest question he had ever asked me, not even close. “Prof” as I preferred to call him (never when he could hear me though, that would usually end up with him giving me an over the eyebrows glance, which was definitely in the arse kicking end of the staring scale) had a bit of a talent for either asking or stating all kinds of weird shit. I had come to the decision that he didn’t make any sense at all most of the time. Yet we got on okay. It was almost like looking after a child sometimes, and yes, sometimes he would look at *me* as if I was like some sort of kid. I guess I admired his casual eccentricity, his unique and slightly off centre way of looking at the world sometimes so funny that I had to actually excuse myself from the room.

On this particular day however I was sitting in the professors book lined study at my small desk by the door going through the day’s mail. We had only just started work and it was quite early. The professor always insisted on starting early as according to him before 8am was “the best part of the day”. It took some getting used to. Believe me. Before I started this job I don’t think I even realised that there were two one O’clock’s in the day, never mind getting up early. I think that the entire idea of morning was like an alien concept to me. This job had put an end to that. No problem whatsoever.

“Don’t you know if you own a cat?” I smiled, taking a swig from the cup of tea in front of me that I had made sure I had made. The last one the professor had made for me had been almost undrinkable and vaguely blue in colour. I suspected he had used one of the not quite empty flasks from the laboratory downstairs to fill the kettle. The professor smiled at me from across the table and picked one of the many pens that littered his desk. Almost without thinking he moved it forward about two inches and placed it back down carefully, almost as if moving a chess piece. In an Absent minded way, he looked under the table as if try to spot the cat in question and then smiled back at me.

“Well I’m not quite sure.” he said, removing his glasses and wiping them on his ever present lab coat. “If I do indeed possess a cat then I haven’t seen it relatively recently.” As if to emphasise this he looked under the table once more and then straightened up, pushing his glasses back up his nose as he did so.

“You have a cat bowl and litter tray in the utility room” I pointed out, trying to help him out. This merely seemed to make him irritable.

“Yes yes - but that hardly proves that I have a cat now, does it? Merely that I possess the implements for potential ownership of said cat.”

I sighed under my breath. It seemed that we were about to undertake another one of the professor's rambling arguments that once concluded didn't seem to make much sense at all. I inwardly grimaced as he began to move pens around on his desk once again.

"We must keep an open mind at all times Luke and the evidence here quite clearly dictates that the existence of said potential cat..." he drifted off, and the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece was the only sound that suddenly seemed to swell and fill the room. The Professor suddenly stood up, accidentally knocking the pen onto the floor. "...Or a theoretical cat!" he suddenly exclaimed, and raised his finger in the air as if testing for a change in wind direction. He paused to look at the floor as if musing this over and then repeated his conclusion. "Yes. A theoretical cat, Luke!" With that he dashed from the room, his lab coat trailing behind him as he went. I could hear the sound of things being moved around in the utility room as if he was looking for something. Several exclamations came from that direction as he continued the search for whatever it was that he was looking for, which was presumably what he now was thinking of as his theoretical cat. So it always was with the professor. Since I had taken the job I had as the saying goes, learnt to "expect the unexpected".

I'll tell you what. There's no University education you could take that would prepare you for this job, but slowly but surely over the previous months once I had got used to the professor's ways he had slowly opened up to me some sort of vague indication of what he was working on and possibly what my part in it was. But it had not always been that way. Oh no - at first I was completely in the dark, and the process of getting the professor to open up about what exactly it was that he was working on was akin to peeling an onion - slowly, layer by layer, and usually with tears in my eyes.

I will tell you what, it was a journey alright, and not in any way the boring technical support job that I thought I was applying for. Whether it was a pleasant shock that it was completely different remains to be seen. I suspected that the professor had lots more to reveal to me about God knows what. Yet it was always interesting. Sometimes vaguely crazy too. I mean, this is a man who keeps a spreadsheet for the best time to visit the local barbers, for fucks sake. Colour coded and everything. Weird. Real really weird.

The job itself was relatively easy. The professor's real title or titles to be more accurate was head of Information Technology, as well as being the Director for research and development, and finally the Main product development analyst. The company had several departments, though the main brunt of my work dealt with handling technical support issues for the sales departments, though all of my calls for that aspect of the job were done mostly remotely by either telephone or remote support. There were also visits needed to the sales department to replace faulty equipment of course, but that seemed to be pretty rare. I did rather think that the professor thought that I was also like some sort of personal assistant to him as well, but that was fine because it helped relieve the tedium of the "my mouse won't work" and "Outlook is looking funny today" calls, in which I found the fault usually lay between the chair and the mouse.

So I suppose that my new found job was a triumph for blue egg thinking. If indeed that was what determined my acceptance by the professor. Some days it is quite difficult to tell. Like then, when he was busy looking for his theoretical cat. I know a whole lot more now than I did then of course, but there are still huge swathes of stuff I have absolutely no idea about at all. Of one thing I was certain however, and that was that the professor most definitely did not own a cat. He had a cat bowl, basket and litter tray but no cat. The bowl and litter tray had remained resolutely

empty during the entire six months I had been there. No cat. But this was the best way to approach things with the professor. As a general rule of thumb, he liked it best if you answered a question with another question I found.

Looking slightly hot and bothered, if not to say downright out of sorts he reappeared in the office entirely catless. His lab coat blew out behind him as he reached the French windows and seeing me hesitating gestured for me to follow. "Come on, Luke!" he shouted almost in irritation. "I am not sitting here all day waiting for this theoretical cat to turn up; we will take a trip to the village to clear our heads. The cat can wait for now!" I grabbed a pad and stuffing a biro into the lapel pocket of my shirt followed the professor across the lawns and into the car park. Ten minutes later we were in the small Cheshire village that was the nearest thing to civilisation for miles around. The village was so quiet even Tesco hadn't heard of it, but there was a post office, which was a nice change these days. There was also a barbers, a coffee shop, a particularly quaint little pub called, "The Gym and Splint" for some odd reason.

There was also a butcher's shop as well as a small gifty style shop that seemed to actually stock almost everything. I had yet to catch them out with not having something behind the voluminous counter anyway. It was a bit like a twenty-four hour Asda on Saturday morning, only not quite as big inside, though that didn't seem to stop them stocking absolutely everything. It was all counter service, of course which was very old fashioned and quaint. The shop was run, staffed and owned by Mr Hinnerty who had the curious distinction of being able to produce with no notice at all absolutely anything and everything you could ever want to buy, but was also the biggest teller of tall tales I have ever had the pleasure of talking to in my entire life. If you took Hinnerty at face value he'd been everywhere, done everything, and met everyone at least twice. He was the biggest fantasist I've ever met. I mean, half of the guy's lies weren't true. I still remember the first time I met him. That was on the first week of what the professor had conveniently labelled as my induction week. But that is another story. The induction was, and is, even stranger than the interview. In fact, they don't even begin to compare.

Chapter Three

“I have never let my schooling interfere
With my education.”
(Mark Twain)
(Part One)

“Come in Luke!” said the short broad shouldered man that I now knew to be referred to as “Bridges”, as he ushered me into what was to be my accommodation for the foreseeable future. It was a great perk of the job. No rent, no utilities, poll tax and so on. Coupled with the slightly embarrassing salary I was still pinching myself at getting the job in the first place. “Let me show you how your room works!” exclaimed Bridges, his enthusiasm for what was after all just a room at the end of the day puzzling. I think at fifty-one I was fairly up to speed with how a room worked.

Nevertheless, he flicked the switch and the room lit up. I turned to have a look and I was, I think it is fair to say, impressed. The large king size bed was through a small doorway to the right but the main part of the room itself seemed to be a very large living room. A ceiling to floor bay window filed the far wall, through which sunlight splashed across the lushly carpeted floor. We were three storeys up, and the view across the Cheshire countryside was spectacular. I tore my attention away from that and noticed two other doors off to my left. I strode across the large room and saw a very plush bathroom through one door and a small kitchen through the other. The living area had several chairs placed around a large widescreen TV and a broad metal trimmed desk sat off to one side, upon which was placed a large computer workstation.

I drew in my breath as Bridges carried my cases into the room and placed them off to one side against the wall. He was a strange looking guy, I reflected. He seemed to be all overcoat, shoes and flat cap, with what may possibly have been a bushy black moustache covering the parts of his face that his pulled up overcoat collar and flat cap didn't. His voice was the most imposing part of him, being deep and yet also pleasant. You couldn't help but warm to the man, even if you couldn't actually see him.

“The heating and lighting controls are on the wall here.” he said, pointing to the obvious dials placed by the exit. “There are instructions for the kitchen appliances in the top draw by the cooker, and a leaflet by the television remote over there. The internet is on your computer over there, along with your username and password.” He tapped where I assumed his nose should have been but wasn't actually sure in a conspiratorial way. “No porn.” he almost laughed and I felt my eyebrows rise. “Only kidding.” he continued to laugh in his deep bass voice, “It's not monitored.” he paused to reflect, before seeming to reach a decision to continue. “I wouldn't push it though.” he finished finally and I gave him my best, “thanks, but it's time for you to go” smile. Sadly, it didn't work. He just stood there immobile, staring at me carefully almost as if he was weighing me up. For a second it crossed my mind that he might be waiting for a tip, but then it also occurred to me what the professor had told me about Hank.

"Is the internet here fast?" I asked in an attempt to create a conversational diversion and derail my train of thought completely at the same time, and the small man nodded vigorously.

"Very!" he replied as if he was trying to sign me up for it. "Bandwidth is three Ogden's." he said almost in awe.

"Ogden's?" I asked, no idea of what he was on about.

"Yes!" he exclaimed almost incredulously, "Three!" I decided to leave it at that for now and took a casual glance across the room once again. He returned to his unmoving posture again, and once again I was reminded of Hank.

It had been Hank who had picked me up from the station, of course, just the same as when I had come for the interview. The same car or at least it looked it, and there couldn't be many of those in circulation I would have thought. Way too old. The conversation was as scintillating as usual too, that is completely non-existent. Almost like the level of traffic. The roads seemed even quieter this time than the last! I had watched him as we entered the building, getting the same tingle of static as we entered, the tall man still carrying the suitcases, or possibly batteries, and then he had left me at reception where Bridges had arrived shortly afterwards. He had taken my cases, led me to this room, and now the room was apparently fully explained he stood completely immobile. I decided to take a punt. More for a laugh than anything, really.

"So are you an android too?" I asked him, his response being a loud roaring sound that may have been laughter. His shoulders may also have been moving up and down, but it was quite difficult to tell.

"No." He replied, still making the strange noises that I had now decided was laughter. He held both his hands out horizontally. "See?" he asked, waving his hands up and down. "No batteries." he continued chuckling, and I remembered what Wingnut had said about the cases that Hank seemed to continually have in his presence.

"Ah." I said, trying to remember precisely what the professor had said. "But surely later generation androids have smaller batteries?" I asked, fishing for more information. I figured it would be a lot simpler to know if the person I was speaking to was human or not. That is if I accepted what the professor had said as fact, of course, and not just the ravings of a loon. Bridges continued chuckling.

"Ah well. There are no older generations you see, Luke. No point really."

"Why?"

"Well the planet is filling up pretty rapidly already, don't you think? No need to add to that by making our own occupants." I nodded my head. Made sense.

"So Hank is the only one?" I enquired.

"Yes he is the only one." He paused for a second, considering this, reflecting on something. "Good job too." he finally continued. "We have trouble keeping up with the ginger snaps he eats. Never mind if there were more of them. Finally, he began to move towards the door. "Just let me know if you need anything, Luke. I am more or less the janitor, butler and head cook and bottle washer around her. "He paused for a second before crossing out into the hall. I gave him my thanks and he departed down the corridor, shouting as he went. "Hope everything meets your satisfaction. It's not a bad place to work. Canteen is behind reception, by the way. Just follow the red lines on the wall." and with that he rounded the corner and was gone. I quietly closed and locked the door, and turning around rested my back against it and taking in the room for the first time on my own.

It was enormous. I felt like doing a lap of honour around it, but settled instead for moving my cases into the bedroom and then returning to the desk and switching the computer on. To my surprise it booted up almost instantly, asking for a username and password. I picked the slip of paper up from the desk and entered them. There was the usual request to reset my password and then it was on. I spent a few hours just browsing this and that, and realising that I was not hungry at all, decided to unpack a few essentials and go to bed.

It was a restless night. Like being on holiday and waking up in the middle of the night wondering where you were and why the wardrobes have not only moved from one side of the room to another but also changed in shape, size and colour too. I was wide awake long before sunlight began to stream through a gap in the curtains and fall on the base of the bed. I rose and pulling a dressing gown from my case showered and made my way into the kitchen. I was pleasantly surprised to find that the kitchen seemed to be fully stocked. Fresh milk was in the fridge, bread in the bread bin on the kitchen worktop. I made coffee and some toast and sat in front of the breakfast news basically waiting for something to happen.

Once I had formally accepted the job I received my start date and time but apart from the fact that it mentioned I would have a two-week induction course there was very little in the latter that explained exactly what that course consisted of. I was still none the wiser, and therefore I was more than a little pleased when I heard the rustle of a piece of paper being pushed underneath the door of what I already considered in my mind to be "the flat".

Turning the television off I crossed the room and picked up what I found to be a single piece of A4 paper with my first weeks' timetable typed up carefully on it. Returning to the chair I scanned the list of events. The first three days seemed to be taken up with introductions to the various departments, structure of the office departments, human resource appointments and so on. Tours of the building. That sort of thing. Probably a list of do's and don'ts as well. The usual new stuff. Where the canteen is. Fire drill. Working hours and so on.

By the end of the second day it really was as dull as it sounded. It was all stuff I needed to know of course, but still hardly exciting. The working hours themselves to be quite obscure, but at least I had every weekend off. Not that it mattered much to me. I had a few friends from home and I rarely made the effort of going out of my way to meet up with them. I was quite looking forward to the seclusion to be honest. That and the absurd amount of money they were going to pay me of course.

It was also I found, really vague. I was surprised when the very first thing we did on Monday morning was to sign the official secrets act, but I suppose it made sense as it was related to me that we did handle some government work from time to time. I just hadn't anticipated having to do that but it was kind of cool at the same time. Working hours were next, and seemed fine. Pay scale was pretty bloody spectacular, and the sausage rolls in the canteen were to die for. By the end of the second day I could find my way around most of the building (which seemed to be surprisingly small given the size of the entrance and the grounds) and even work the microwave in the flat. The latter I considered being a major achievement. I had never managed the one at home. I was feeling empowered. Official secrets act and microwave manual in two days, things were definitely looking up. The third day gave a structure of company departments in perspective to where the office I was assigned to was placed. At best it was vague, general stuff. At worst it made my head nod as if it was made of lead after a particularly large canteen sausage roll We

had an early finish on Wednesday quite simply because I think they ran out of things not to tell me.

Thursday was mostly taken up with various checks by men with stethoscopes, running machines and various long needles. They took my blood, a piece of hair, compared dental records and eventually both literally and figuratively took the piss as well. That was an early finish as well. I think they also ran out of things to ask me about my health, which was of course fine by me.

None of this of course involved any communication with Professor Wingnut at all. Various faceless Human Resources people yes, doctors and nurses; all interchangeable. I didn't even see the professor about the building. Not even the canteen. Friday however, was set out for spending the last day of my first week with him. The subject was marked clearly as "On the Job Familiarisation", and as I was to be working in the professor's department assistant then the day was set to one side to spend with him. With the boring but necessary stuff I had had to endure I was kind of looking forward to it. I thought that if nothing else it would definitely be different. So Thursday I had an early night and woke bright and early to get myself ready for spending my day with the professor. I wouldn't say I was excited, as such; more curious. I suppose the French have a word for it as they say, but I'll be buggered if I know what it is. All I know is I got up early, had my breakfast and made my way to what they called the Green light room. I was feeling quite pleased with myself for two reasons: Firstly, I knew where this room actually was, and secondly, I knew how to get to it too. The first time I had simply followed Hank, but now I knew exactly where the Green Light Room was in relation to the rest of the base.

So I found myself approaching the double doors that led to the professor's room with more than a little air of anticipation. Still, I kept an even pace and stopped just in front of the doors, knocking loudly on them. Nothing. I have often wondered in the small hours (bear with me here) some of the more obscure rules of etiquette. How many times for example do you have to thank someone for holding a door open for you if you are following them down a long corridor with lots of doors? (Just the once, apparently. Any more than that is considered vulgar. Right.) Or that awkward moment when you pass the same person in the corridor later in the day. Do you say hello (again) or not? Again, apparently a simple nod or a quick "hi" would do. Or, the one that was most prominent in mind right at that very moment was how long do you wait until you knock again without appearing either impatient or rude. I was definitely the former, but hopefully not the latter. I was thinking about this as there didn't seem to be any response from within the professor's office at all. Nothing. So I knocked again. Still nothing. Awkward.

So I took a seat and waited. The day was due to begin at nine am and although I had been a little early the time had now moved on while I waited. I sat on the same chair I had sat on at the interview and from time to time (probably every thirty seconds or so, but it seemed longer) I tried a long loud series of knocks on the door. Still nothing. I put my ear next to the door and listened. Not a sound. Five past nine came and went and by now I was in a right panic. I knew I was in the right place but nevertheless several times I pulled my copy of the itinerary out of my jacket pocket and re-checked it. Nope. I was completely, definitely sitting outside the right room. It was by now ten past nine and I knocked loudly on the door more in panic than anything, just as I noticed Hank rounding the corner of the long corridor and heading in my direction.

The suitcase/ batteries (whichever explanation you chose to use. I had one for the batteries, but not one for the suitcases. Maybe he was in a perpetual state of anticipation of a holiday. Who

knows?) were still in his hands, but I finally settled on what was peculiar about his walk. I had had a vague feeling of unease since I had first met him but could not quite put a finger on what it was that was particularly odd about it. I got it now as he headed towards me up the corridor. I realised that when he walked his head never moved from side to side. It was as if he was focused on something just on the horizon that only he could see and that he was heading towards it without fuss, at his own pace, but that his attention never wavered from it at all. Eventually he reached where I sat and stopped dead in front of me. He did not turn, but remained in profile. In his usual monotone voice he asked, "Can I help you, Luke?"

I pulled my itinerary out of my pocket and waved it at Hank's side. "I have an appointment with Professor Wingnut at nine am." I spluttered. Hank didn't move at all. "Green light room." I finished. Again Hank didn't move, though I thought I may have noticed his ear twitch slightly. Suddenly he spun to face me and his left eye twinkled slightly.

"The professor doesn't respond to knocks." he said in his same emotionless monotone voice. I looked at my itinerary again almost in accusation. "Just go in." I gave him my best friendly smile and as I went to turn the handle on the door it suddenly shot open, the professor glancing around the corner of the door as if waiting for me, his wild white hair just as crazy and seemingly wind swept as the first time I had met him. As he saw me he waved his arm impatiently, and disappeared from view. His voice from within the room however was loud and unmistakable.

"Come on, Luke!" he shouted, though I now couldn't actually see him. "We have to get a haircut!" I walked into the room and drew to a halt, looking around me. The professor was standing by the double French doors, pulling a small tweed jacket over his lab coat.

"A haircut?" I gasped out of breath, and the professor nodded vigorously before pulling the French windows open more and running out onto the lawn. I gazed around the Green Light room. Everything seemed more or less exactly the same as the only other time I had been in here. The book shelves, the furniture; same large desk. If anything the desk maybe looked a little more untidy than it had before, if that was indeed possible. The professor popped his head back around the large French windows once more, and scooped up a large piece of paper from the desk.

"Come on, Luke!" he exclaimed almost in exasperation. "We will be moving from blue to purple in..." he paused to consult his wristwatch, squinting at it through his small, smeared glasses, "Fifteen minutes!" With that he was gone.

As I stood open mouthed I moved to the French windows and spied the professor pausing at a line of trees across the lawn, gesticulating wildly. I ran out of the door and made a shortcut diagonally across the grass as I suspected that Wingnut was heading for the car park at the head of the drive.

It crossed my mind that if anyone was watching me from the windows then they may have thought I had lost the plot to be honest. I scooted across the lawn shouting after Wingnut to slow down, my shirt tails flapping in the breeze after me. Eventually I caught him up in the car park just as he opened the door of a very old mini and clambered inside. I stopped to get my bearings. This car park seemed to be much bigger than the one I had been used to, but looking around to get my bearings I could see that it was definitely the same car park I always arrived at and departed from. Just a hell of a lot more cars. I stood there mouth open, thinking it also looked a lot more modern than I remembered it. My attention however was interrupted by the professor leaning across the seat of the mini and winding the window down. "Come on Luke!" he yelled.

"The barbers will be red at this rate!" I clasped the door handle of the car and jumped in. I had no idea what Wingnut was on about. And he was driving!

He reversed the car out of its parking space and we made our way out of the car park onto the main drive. There certainly seemed to be a lot more lamp posts than I had previously noted! The professor had folded the piece of paper he had taken from the desk and at the moment it obscured a small square of the windscreen. I searched in vain for a seat belt, and finding that there didn't actually seem to be one, decided to grasp tight hold of the seat instead.

Reaching the end of the drive and turning right we left the office behind us and we were on the main road. I noticed all kinds of details I hadn't on the previous occasions I had travelled on the road. Plenty more traffic as well. Quite busy in fact.

"So how are you finding your first week, Luke?" asked the professor as we passed under a small railway bridge that seemed rusted; old and definitely not in use any more. Vegetation seemed to hang down from the parapet over the edge of the bridge itself. In some ways it seemed quite quaint, and I wondered casually why it was so overgrown.

"Very well thank you, professor Wingnut" I said, smiling at the professor as he negotiated his way along what presumably passed as an A road in these parts. We had turned off the main road and the difference in this lane was quite marked. Bits of it looked more like a goat track to me as we got further and further away from the office.

"Oh no need to use my full name." he smiled, narrowly missing a small duck that seemed to have wandered into the road. I clung to the seat a little tighter as the professor continued to accelerate down the very narrow lane. "Just "professor" will suffice." and he lifted his glasses off his prominent nose and gave a broad wink.

"Okay. Erm... Professor." I said, as the car continued to accelerate. "Nice car you have here." I had noticed just how new and clean the inside of the car was, and although it had no seat belts which more or less made it an original model from the early sixties, it had clearly been well looked after as it was in such a good condition.

"I am a bit of an antique car collector you'll find." He said. "The Rover is mine too. The one you were collected from the station in. This one is much more economical to run though. Three Fairclough's to the gallon you know!"

"Right." I said. "Three Fairclough's, eh? Who would have thought it?" The professor tapped the wheel again, and giving a big proud of himself kind of smile beeped the horn loudly three times. The sheep in a nearby field looked startled as we drove past, passing a sign that read, "Caldecott One Mile" by the side of the road.

The village when we reached it very soon after was a typical sleepy English village. Or more likely, what most chocolate tin manufacturers would consider to be a typical sleepy English village. There was a small circular parking area surrounded by a quaint village green, around which were clustered a few small shops, and then the road leading back out of the village. That was it. I spent the first five minutes looking for a pond, but there didn't seem to be one. The professor pulled the handbrake on and turned off the engine, before snatching the large piece of paper he had brought with him from the dashboard. He quickly unfolded it and placed it on his knee.

It appeared to be some kind of multi coloured spreadsheet. Leaning across to have a look I could see that the days of the week (excluding Sunday) were the fields across the top, and the vertical column seemed to be the hours of the day between 9am and 5pm in fifteen minute

increments. Although there were a few gaps uncoloured on the spreadsheet, most were carefully shades in lots of different colours right across the colours of the rainbow. I read across the days of the week to Friday, then down to 9 am which was coloured red, 9.15 which was orange, 9.30 which was purple, and 9.45 which was blue. 10am followed it, which was back to purple. I glanced at the professor who was busy poring over the spreadsheet, and took note that most of Saturday morning seemed to be red. I looked at my watch. 9.40 am. The professor poked the coloured in cell marked as 9.45am and folding it carefully, placed it in one of his jacket pockets.

“Come on, Luke!” he shouted. “Time for a haircut!” and leapt out from the car, making his way across the village green towards a small glass fronted shop with a red and white barbers pole painted on both of the bright wide windows, and the small red front door as well. I hadn’t expected the professor to lock the car door of course, but I *had* expected him to close the car door. Maybe this was what my job was actually all about, following him round closing doors after him! Reflecting upon this I closed mine and making my way around the car I shut it for him, before following him at a brisk pace across the village green.

Depressingly, the sign above the barbers seemed to be of the same pun filled area of shop naming as all other barber shops, and was called, “Mullet Over”. I have absolutely no idea why barber’s shops simply have to have a pun in the title. “A Cut Above”, “Cliptomania”, “Hair Today Gone Tomorrow”, Though I do have to admit a rather sneaking admiration for the one I had once seen called, “The Grateful Head.” Mostly however it is completely beyond me. Maybe it is some kind of hairdressing tradition? Who knows? I caught the professor up. He was stood outside the barber’s shop, his nose more or less pressed up against the glass window. He tutted loudly to himself, muttering, before pulling the paper from his jacket pocket once again and studying it carefully. He barely noted my arrival, but thrust the paper at me.

“Is this cell here blue, Luke?” he enquired, and I had a look at it.

“It is.”

“Quite irregular!” he muttered loudly, taking the spreadsheet from me once again. “Yet there are three people waiting to get their hair cut!” he said almost in disbelief. I peered through the window and yes, there did seem to be two men seated on the chair beside the entrance. Two hairdressers were busy cutting the hair of a further two customers. One was a small short woman, the other a tall-ish blonde man dressed in skinny jeans and tight T shirt. He was snipping away flamboyantly at the person seated in his chair, hair flying here and there. From time to time he would stop, wave the scissors or comb about, talking to the mirror and then continuing. This routine was quite mesmeric. Almost as if he was dancing. I thought that maybe he looked a little older than his clothes would suggest though. In fact, he looked a little like at least two of the members of Erasure. In fact, the only reason he did not look like all of the members of Erasure was because I was not entirely sure how many member of Erasure there had actually been.

“What is the spreadsheet for, professor?” I asked as he pressed his nose up against the glass again. Inside the shop the tall man finished cutting his customers hair and with a flourish pulled the cover from him, almost dancing behind him with a mirror to show him the cut at the back of his head. The professor tore his attention away from the shop and pushed the spreadsheet into my hands once again.

“Years of observation and recording.” he said, pulling a purple pencil from his pocket and re-colouring the 9.45am slot from blue to purple. “Every time I pass this shop I take careful note of the number of people waiting for a haircut and depending on the number waiting record it on the

master sheet her, old boy.” he said, putting the pencil back into the depths of his pocket. It was the first time he had called me that, but it would certainly not be the last. It never stopped being irritating though.

“So blue is good, and red is bad?” I asked and the professor nodded furiously.

“Indeed.”

“But surely it changes all the time?” I asked and the professor actually looked disappointed.

“Not at all.” he said. “The conjunction of required haircuts is a constant that can only be affected by the availability of said cuttees. Clearly there is an aberration of some kind. I shall check this with my master sheet back at my office.” He looked disappointed, and folded up the sheet and put it in yet another pocket. “Never mind. Still, let us enter.”

“We could wait a little.” I said.

“Indeed we could, Luke. Hence the existence of my recorded data in the first place.” He opened the door and made to enter. “Nobody likes to wait for a haircut, Luke.” he sniffed and entered the shop. I paused holding the door open as a younger man in a “Regulus Telecom” T shirt exited bearing a brand new haircut. He smiled his thanks and went on his way. Grimacing at the professors back - he hadn’t even noticed the departing customer, never mind holding the door for him - I followed him through the door and took a seat.

By now the male hairdresser was snipping away at his new customer, and the girl was pulling the cover off her current one. That left one more for her and then we were next. I had thought that I didn’t really need a haircut, but seeing as how I was there I may as well get it done. Especially if I was being paid to get a haircut. The professor seemed to settle into the manner of most men waiting for a haircut: complete lack of eye contact, reading a paper or fiddling with a mobile phone. The professor did the former though he did at one point pull the spreadsheet from his pocket, peer at it closely before tutting very loudly and then putting it back into his inside pocket.

This drew the attention of the male barber, who looked the professor up and down once, sniffed and then turned back to face the man whose hair he was cutting in the chair, talking to him through the mirror. “Twenty-five years in show business!” he exclaimed loudly, before continuing talking to the captive customer. I couldn’t quite make out what else he was saying, but I did notice the man in the chair squirm from time to time. The girl next to him was well into cutting her customers hair by now. She paused, looking for something below the mirror.

“Have you got the clippers, Les?” she asked and the tall male barber made a dramatic bow and plucked the clippers from below the counter before passing them on to the girl, who was still looking for them below her side of the counter.

“Here we are Sandy.” he said, passing them to her. The professor tutted loudly and Les gave him a look that should have killed, but Wingnut was completely oblivious, and just carried on glaring at the two hairdressers. Eventually Les seemed to decide to ignore him and went back to talking at his customer. Sandy finished before Les and so once done the professor was more or less hopping from foot to foot and once she asked who was next he shot into the now vacant chair and asked for a trim. In my opinion Les seemed to have been taking his time so that Sandy was the first to finish, and once the professor was safely ensconced in her chair then he seemed to suddenly finish with his customer and then it was my turn.

Les settled the cover over me and looking at me in the mirror asked me what cut I wanted. I settled on a short trim too, and Les picked up his scissors and began. There was a short pause

as he began snipping at my hair and then he paused, caught my eye in the mirror and said loudly, "Twenty-five years in acting! Who would have thought it?" Wriggling in my chair slightly I sighed inwardly, caught his eye once again and replied,

"Really?" and then we were off.

Ten minutes later we were both stood outside the barbers. I'll give him his due, Les did a good cut, but I had been subjected to a very precise and exacting account of his long and exciting career in amateur dramatics, the people he had worked with, what he referred to as his stage reviews and so on. I was just nodding in agreement towards the end but he kept checking I was listening by catching my eye in the mirror. There was only one interruption to the listing of his long and illustrious career which was when the professor's cut was done and he left, calling to me that he would wait outside until I was done. Les watched him leave in the mirror, the professor bending over just behind me to retrieve his spreadsheet which had dropped out of his ever expanding jacket pocket and once the shop door closed behind me he poked me on the shoulder.

"Did he not like his hair?" Les asked, staring wistfully into the mirror in front of me, clutching his bright yellow comb like a dagger.

"No idea." I said. "I guess not. He has after all just had it cut." In all truth when I had seen the professor leave the barber's chair his hair did not actually look any different at all.

"Yes." hissed Les impatiently, "But he had it cut yesterday." He paused, the comb held up against cheek like firmly as if trying to draw blood. "And the day before, come to think of it."

"I think he's a little eccentric." I whispered and Les raised an eyebrow, preparing to return to his acting credentials.

"I'll say." he finished, and we were back on to the subject of his thespian tendencies.

Eventually we were done however, and after coughing up a relatively reasonable couple of quid for the haircut I joined the professor who was standing outside patiently waiting for me.

"Where now?" I asked, and the professor pointed across the green to the furthestmost of the small shops that were arranged around the grassed area in a horseshoe shape.

"Guided tour." he said. And off he went. I followed.

"This is the nearest village by far from the office." He said as we walked across the green. He stopped and pointed out the shops in turn. "Handy to know who does what. There is the barbers of course, as you have seen. Then over there the local butchers. He does a nice jellied pork pie." He smacked his lips. "Very tasty. Mr Loin runs that."

"Loin?" I asked, smiling. The professor didn't seem to be phased at all. "Yes. His predecessor, Mr Joint was a nice man too." I felt my eyebrows slowly rising. "Then there is the coffee shop over there." He pointed in the general direction of a small colourfully painted shop outside which sat several small tables. Tully's was the name on the sign above the door, and apparently according to Wingnut their sandwiches were extremely good. Appropriately this was stated on a large chalk covered sandwich board outside the shop. The soup today was tomato. "Mabel is the lady who is the proprietor there." he continued. "Very good with mayonnaise. Then there is the general store over there which is run by Mr Hinnerty. Sells everything, Luke."

"Everything?" I laughed.

"Indeed. Try him. You'll see." he tapped his nose conspiratorially. "Always good for a spot of Helium three in a pinch. Saved many an experiment." I smiled broadly, not entirely sure whether he was joking or not, whilst at the same time being completely baffled as to what helium 3 actually was. Maybe it was the stuff they put in balloons to make them float.

"I will indeed try him out." I said, intrigued. We came to the end of the green and now found ourselves outside the local pub. It looked just as traditional as you could imagine it to be. Thatched roof, broad wooden door, which was of course firmly closed at the moment. Small sweet shop like windows obscured the interior but I thought that I may possibly pop in for a pint over the weekend. A large traditionally painted pub sign hung high over the entrance, and although it was painted in a traditional manner, the pub was rather oddly named, "The Gym and Splint".

"Odd name for a pub." I said aloud, and the professor grimaced at the pub sign above our heads. "Looks nice and traditional." I mused, and the professor continued to sneer at the sign. Dragging his attention away he strode forward, heading towards the cafe, and then abruptly stopped, pointing at the pub sign.

"Nice beer garden." he considered, "Though the pub sign itself could do with a little work."

"What's wrong with it?" I asked. True, it did picture what seemed to be a plastered leg and a set of dumbbells, but apart from that it seemed to be okay.

"The spacing on the sign is all wrong." he said. I glanced at the sign. It looked okay from a distance - I certainly hadn't noticed a flaw with it but up close it looked like the words, "Gym and Splint" were very unevenly spaced. The word "and" seemed afloat in the middle of the two other words. The professor sniffed loudly and we moved on.

"Tea!" shouted the professor and we made in the direction of Tully's. When we entered a bell sounded above the door and a long strip curtain parted at the back of the cafe by the counter, around which I saw a large portly woman peering at us through the curtain. "Morning professor!" called the woman who was presumably Mabel, and the professor raised his hand in greeting, taking a seat just inside the door. Trade was obviously quiet as we were the only customers in there. "I'll be with you in a minute." she finished, and the curtain drew closed again.

"Very good teas here." said the professor as I took a seat facing him. The table was covered in what appeared to be a plastic red chequered cloth. Salt and pepper pots sat in the centre of the table, between which was sandwiched a small hand written menu. I took it up and had a look at it. It seemed to be the usual kind of stuff: beans and bread were available in various different permutations. "Just tea for me." said the professor as Mabel appeared beside the table.

"Me too." I agreed. It hadn't been that long since yet another grease laden breakfast in the work canteen, and I wasn't hungry at all. Mabel nodded and made her way back to the counter.

"Well that is the tour over." said the professor, rubbing his hands together. "All amenities covered. It's a bit of a walk from here to the base though. Just ask Bridges if you require a pool car. Plenty available." I nodded enthusiastically, hardly believing my own ears. This was getting better by the day! Free petrol now!

"Thanks." I mumbled as the tea arrived and the professor leaned back as Mabel placed the steaming cuppa in front of him.

"Excellent!" he exclaimed. "Thank you, Mabel." Mabel assured us it was no problem and then returned back to the counter. The professor turned his attention back to me. "So what do you think so far, Luke? Learnt Much?" I spluttered on my tea.

"Well I know where the canteen is." I laughed, and the professor smiled. "And the Green Light room was as well."

"Ah yes." smiled the professor, wriggling slightly in his chair. A new customer came in and took a seat on the other side of the room, glancing at the menu as he sat down

“But apart from that, not much at all. Nobody seems to be particularly keen to actually advise me of a few things, really.” I said with a deliberate air of disappointment. The professor looked puzzled.

“And what may they be?” he pulled a pencil from his top pocket and began to tap it against the pepper pot.

“Well two things mainly. The first is what my job actually is, and secondly what it is that we do at the office. Nobody seems to want to tell me.”

“Ah.” The tapping stopped, but the pencil remained in mid-air, pre-tap. “Well the answer to the first is obvious. The sales department have shall we say a certain predilection to bugging up their work stations in all kinds of interesting and vaguely unnerving ways. You are here to convince them to desist to do so. It is why our technical support department is so small. Most things are relatively easy to fix.”

I nodded at this. Seemed pretty standard stuff.

“You are also here of course to help me.” I looked puzzled. “Make sure I keep up to date with all correspondence, be where I am actually meant to be.” He paused slightly as if considering if he had missed anything out. “Make sure I don’t fall down any mine shafts.” he concluded with a laugh.

“Have you ever fallen down a mine shaft then?” I smiled, and to my surprise the professor stopped to think. He looked at the ceiling, almost as if racking his memories for anything that involved a mine shaft.

“No, I don’t think so.” he finally said. “Still, you can never be too careful, I should imagine. Nasty things, mine shafts you know.”

I nodded slowly. “Indeed. So how about what the office actually does?” I continued.

“Well that is a little more difficult.” The pencil remained in mid-air, but his other hand now rubbed his chin. The tea seemed to be forgotten. I leaned forward a little in anticipation. The professor seemed to be having difficulty in summarising exactly what it was he was apparently in sole charge of. He began to tap the pepper pot again, and then seemed to reach a conclusion. “We are here to ensure that nothing happens.” he said, and picking up his cup, took a large sip of tea.

“Nothing happens?” I asked incredulously. He nodded.

“Preferably.” he smiled. I felt myself getting angry.

“Is anything in danger of erm... happening?” I asked. I noticed my voice sounded a lot testier than it had done before.

“Oh yes. Indeed. All the time, in fact.” the professor concluded emphatically. “Quite so.” He noted just how confused I looked. “Let me put it another way.” he said, pausing to consider a different approach. “We deal with events.” he said, and sat back seemingly pleased with himself at reaching this conclusion.

“Events?” I sighed, and he nodded enthusiastically. “Professor, that’s just like saying that we deal with “stuff”. It doesn’t actually mean anything. It certainly doesn’t get me any nearer to understanding what you do here. Can you be more specific? These things that are in danger of happening, is there anything in particular?” I asked. The professor looked as if he was struggling to think of anything at all. Then again, I was beginning to get the impression that this was usually the case.

“It is quite difficult to explain without compromising your induction you see, Luke. We are working very much on the basis that we are warming you to the job, as it were.” I had absolutely no idea what he meant by this and told him so.

“Give me a break, professor. Or failing that, give me an example.” Wingnut leaned back in his chair and threw his head back, staring at the ceiling. He began to tap on the pepper pot again. A minute passed. Two. Mabel had by now served the other customer, and was glancing suspiciously at our by now empty cups from behind the counter.

“For example,” I said finally in exasperation. The professor didn’t look as if he was going to reach any conclusion any time soon. “Is Hank really an android?”

The professor looked distracted by this, as if I was derailing his presumed train of thought. “Why don’t you ask him?” he said, and went back to whatever he was trying to remember. He suddenly sat back upright. “Just don’t mention the ginger snaps. He seems a little sensitive about that.” I nodded my head dumbly.

“Okay I mumbled.” just as the professor sat bolt upright once again.

1965.” he said as if struggling to remember all the facts. I found myself drawing my chair closer to the table in anticipation. “Picture the scene, Luke. The whole country was still suffering from the economic effects of the Second World War. The land fit for heroes had yet to materialise. Positively overdue in fact. There were still food shortages. Technology was at best rudimentary. Everything was dull, dark and grey. Even The Beatles had stopped touring.” I nodded as I pictured it. I had been a kid at the time, but as Jon had said, perhaps the past was in black and white.

The government had concerns that the general doom and gloom was affecting morale and therefore productivity throughout the country. So they called us in.”

I waited for the next bit but nothing seemed to be forthcoming, so I pressed on. “So what did you do to solve the situation?” I asked, and he smiled almost as if in triumph.

“We invented call centres.” He said proudly, and smiled broadly.

“But call centres are awful.” I stammered. “Nobody wants to work in one. Certainly nobody wants to phone one. Every single employee, employer and customer despises them and all that they stand for.” I had expected him to be annoyed at this of course, but he simply smiled.

“They are.” He said decisively. “Which was exactly our plan. Call centres are of course sinkholes of despair and gloom. By creating them we concentrated the depression actually in the call centres themselves so that the rest of the country could get on with the business of being happy.”

I was astounded. I’d never heard so much nonsense in all my life. “Did it work?” I half laughed.

“Absolutely.” He smiled. “Productivity rose by 22 and a half percent I seem to recollect. Morale was restored.” he paused as if weighing up his options. “Sadly the Beatles never toured again. Still, you can’t have everything, I suppose.”

“So from the office we run call centres?” I asked. I was vaguely disappointed at this news, but at least I had an answer. Or I thought I did. The professor chuckled across the table.

“No, no!” he exclaimed. “Not at all! It was just an example Luke, just an example.” He probably saw by the expression on my face that I was beginning to consider that I was back to where I started. He leaned across the desk and held me by the elbow then patted me on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, Luke. At the centre of our modern business we sell cloud based solutions to governments and companies around the world, but all will be revealed in time. Come on, break is over!” and with that he was at the counter paying for the tea, for which Mabel looked eternally

grateful. I however was simply in a greater state of confusion than I was before. I have an inherent distrust of any company that has the word, "solutions" in front of it, unless the two words preceding it are "contact and lenses". It just seems a bullshit wankery way of saying absolutely nothing at all; like white noise. I didn't say this to the professor of course.

We made our way back to the car and headed back to the base. I was now in a state of even more confusion as to what to actually call the place where I now lived and worked. Was it a call centre? The professor must have noted my confusion because as we made our way through the static charged entrance again he looked at me almost in sympathy.

"This must have been a long week, Luke." he said, "I have nothing planned for you this afternoon so you may as well take the rest of the day off." I must admit I felt a little deflated as I was looking forward to maybe learning a little more about what the professor actually did. But an afternoon off is an afternoon off, and so as we drove up to the car park the professor made a small detour and let me out at the entrance to the building. Thanking him profusely I exited the car and as I made my way behind it I saw him wind down the window on his side and poke his head through it.

"The pub sign, Luke!" he almost yelled. "Five "ands" and all grammatically correct, you see!" I shook my head. I had no idea whatsoever what he was on about.

"Sorry?" I managed and he smiled.

"The problem with the spacing on the Gym and Splint is that the word "and" is irregularly spaced." I nodded. Up close it certainly looked that way.

"Well then." he said triumphantly, "The space between the words Gym and and and and and Splint are far too wide." He gave a very wide wink, popped his head back inside the window and roared off in the direction of the car park. I just stood there on the drive, my head reeling as the sound of three car horn beeps faded into the distance.

"And and and and and..." I think I muttered.

I decided to spend the afternoon in bed.