

Small Stories



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Me and other people
we know

Desert story

Of all the bars in all the world, she came into mine.

I suppose she was after her wallet.

“Thief!” she said.

I calmed her down by handing over the stolen item and compensating her with a drink. It was pretty hot out there, but then again, it always was.

“I’m playing with you,” I said. “I knew you’d follow me.”

Of course I didn’t. She must have checked a dozen bars before reaching this.

“I don’t trust you. Why should we share a drink?”

I made a sad face, like I’d been hurt. “That makes two of us because I don’t trust me either.”

She shook her head. “I don’t get you. What are you doing here?”

“The same as you,” I said. “Absolutely nothing.”

She scowled at me from behind her drink.

“Absolutely nothing,” she said, “apart from stealing other people’s property?”

“I apologise,” I said. “It was a prank. I was going to give it back.”

She managed a thin smile.

“In the desert there’s an old temple,” she said. “The entrance is carved into a rock wall. Deep underground there’s a spring which, if you take a sip, gives you supreme self-knowledge. I want to go there.”

“I’ve already been,” I said.

Lists

Walter Stevens started making lists to help with his shopping. When he forgot to meet someone for a coffee he noted down his appointments. One Thursday afternoon in late March he accepted his memory was going. He could feel his mind emptying, his life becoming less familiar.

He wrote lists to remind himself what to do. Sometimes he worried they were incomplete. Without them he was lost. He was afraid, even if he didn't know what to be afraid of. He started doing things solely because they were on his list.

One day he became paranoid his wife was altering his lists to play tricks on him.

He lay awake at night figuring out grand lists of the things he'd forgotten to include in previous ones.

Walter started arguing with his wife so he asked her to write a list of the ten things that bothered her about their marriage. When she asked him to do the same he

got stuck at three because he couldn't remember what to complain about. He made up the remaining seven points. A few hours later he saw his 'grievances' and began to feel them as if they were real.

Every night before going to sleep he writes a list of things to do in the morning. As soon as he wakes up he jots down his feelings so he won't forget what mood he is in.

He's started a list called, 'Walter Stevens'. He hopes he will recognise himself before he gets to the end.

Sentence

I was standing at the edge of the road thinking about my uncertain future, fighting back the tears, putting on the warrior face and generally praying I would not crack, when it suddenly occurred to me, which was not an unreasonable thing in itself considering my circumstances, that I could hardly focus on anything or anyone, that although I had never been a brain surgeon or an aircraft designer or, come to think of it, anything remotely as glamorous, respected or, frankly, half as well paid as either of those professions, my fate was not entirely lost, my fortune was not completely without favour, because I, little old me, had in many small and insignificant ways achieved genuine goals, even if they were modest, and that people would respect this, even though I was a man of ordinary achievements – not that I have the slightest thing against ‘ordinary’ people or those who have nothing much of interest going on in their lives because that makes me look mean – but,

nonetheless, I have to proudly look people in the eye as I have genuinely succeeded in some peculiar and obscure avenues of endeavour and this fact must be celebrated for all it's worth, in spite of my never having been blessed with supreme intelligence or bundles of cash to sweep me though my little life, nonetheless, I have been able to do this one precious thing and I can do it quite well and if you're wondering what it is you're witnessing it right here, right now and you may have guessed it's my ability to think up exceedingly long sentences because I'm terrified what will happen when I get to the full stop.

Invasion of the office snatchers

They took his body away, I'm sure. I don't know where they took it to or what they did but he's back. When I say 'he' I mean someone who looks like him, not Robin Matthews the guy I used to know.

It always happens the same way. The victim gets a phone call or an email telling them to attend a training course. They're gone for a few days and when they come back they're not the same. It's like they have been reprogrammed. Lazy people return obsessed with productivity. Intelligent people come back stupid. Foolish people use complicated words. Selfish people talk about how they want to contribute to the team. A dozen people have been through this programme. Soon it will be my turn.

There's an email in my inbox. It says I've been asked to enrol on the Vision Orchard training programme starting Monday next week.

I return to work on Thursday morning. The guy who works down the corridor gives me a strange look. I ignore him. We used to have a joke on our breaks but now everything he says is pathetic. I don't want to associate with him.

I sit at my desk and glance through my journal. I can't believe I've written such nonsense. I draw a line and write:

Plans for facilitating workplace improvements.

- 1. Cut out unnecessary breaks.*
- 2. Avoid talking to losers.*
- 3. Take job seriously.*

The big wobble

It happened when I was forty. My friends joked I was at a dangerous point in a man's life when everything begins to change and the body falls apart. They called it the big wobble. It's not just the physical aspect, it's the whole life wobble – career, relationships, aspirations, motivations, etc. People say, "It's all downhill from here."

I was preparing for my life to screech to a halt. That would be it. Suddenly I'd turn into that annoying old man in the supermarket who can't find the exit. I'd be the one writing to the newspaper bemoaning the state of the nation. I'd spend my lonely evenings in front of the television talking to my cat.

Of course, by that time I'd have had a dozen failed relationships. I would be tired and cynical, eager to express my bitterness where I could. I would become a master of

the miserable. I'd remind people in checkout queues how things were so much better when I was young.

People would shy away from me. Fearful I might hurl abuse at them.

But then something unexpected happened. I discovered my mid-life charisma.

The journal

I write my journal every day – but something unusual is happening. Someone has been writing in it while I'm out of the house. *Here I am again you fool.* I live a secluded, some would say reclusive life and I'm security conscious. *Not secure enough. I get in without a problem.* You see what I mean? And now this person can invade my private space even when I'm in the house. *You're so slow anyone could do it.*

Why are you doing this to me? Oh, and I suppose not answering this makes you feel good, does it? Very clever.

Still nothing to say for yourself?

Hello?

Are you there?

It looks like things have returned to normal. I can write my thoughts down without interruptions.

Your thoughts are worthless.

So you're back. Am I supposed to be impressed?
What kind of a loser are you?

The same kind as you.

You don't know anything about me.

*I see the things you keep in the house. I read your journal
where you record your dreary thoughts. What is in the box
under the bed? Why is it locked?*

There's more to me than you will ever know. There's a
lot more to me than this journal.

Why bother writing it then?

It's sunny in the garden. The sky is a lovely deep blue.
I'm going to cut the lawn this afternoon.

What's in the box?

My old notebooks.

Why do you hide them away?

To forget you.

Minimalist

There wasn't much to say about him except he called himself a minimalist. He liked a lot of

space

around things. He liked it around the ornaments on the smoked glass table and around his miniature Zen garden and especially relationships.

Don't copy this at home

They fired me for misconduct. I'd been dating my manager and there was a big fuss about how our relationship broke company rules. I'm a reasonable man. I know the difference between right and wrong and I wasn't harming anyone.

Amanda was a career girl looking for promotion. She was bored waiting. I was the distraction before her career got going.

They treated me differently to her. It all came down to one thing – the company needed her and they didn't need me.

I took it hard when they sacked me. I was kind of shocked, couldn't believe it really happened. I hadn't done anything wrong. I suspected the senior management had been trying to get rid of me for a while and this was the perfect excuse.

“We're a family business,” the manager said as he showed me the door.

I guess they expected the worst. A man from security escorted me out of the office. He glared at me with narrowed eyes. I got the impression he wanted me to make a move so I'd make him look like a hero.

The last I heard Amanda married a lawyer. She got her promotion and a perfect life. Four years later she got a perfect divorce.

Me? I'm fine.

Of course I went back that weekend and firebombed the building.

I'm joking.

I learnt my lesson - don't sleep with the director's ex-mistress.

Housemate

My old housemate had a lot of arty friends. Sometimes I'd see him drinking tea with an attractive woman. He liked bragging about his talents and what he was going to do with this or that project. Everything he did was a 'project'.

He didn't have a meal with someone he was 'discussing a project' with them. It was all talk of course. He was one of those people who say things.

I'm sure he never rated me because I didn't like weird music. He said I was 'too normal'.

"You wouldn't understand," he said, "because you're too normal."

Sometimes he used to call me 'the suit' because I worked in an office. It didn't bother me that much, only when he went on about it.

We spent two years in the same house but I never got to know him.

I came back one afternoon and he'd gone. His room had been cleared out. He'd taken everything. I opened one of the drawers and found a notebook. It was filled with short stories. I don't know how – but this was one of them.

You

You said you were doing the only thing you knew. You went off in a huff and called her to say the relationship wasn't working how you expected. She was surprised and upset but you told her she was in the wrong because she'd been moody. You said it even though you suspected she was depressed. You exploited her weakness for your selfish needs. You thought only about your happiness.

You were having an affair with another woman. You boasted to your friends telling them how great it was. You joked about your wife even though you knew she was having troubled times. You invited your girlfriend to the family house when your wife was away.

You lied to your wife. You promised her you were not having an affair. You argued and pretended to be upset when she accused you. You were distant when she cried.

You moved in with your girlfriend on your wife's birthday. Then the guilt piled up. You didn't know where it came from because, deep down, you never cared about anyone.

The shame built up. Nemesis, call it what you like. It ruined your life.

It didn't last with your girlfriend. You lived alone and began to drink. Eventually you despised yourself so much you couldn't accept this person was me.

The idea

I got the idea in the shower. It happened in an instant – the most incredible idea in a hundred years. I had to write it down before I forgot.

I jumped out of the shower, wrapped a towel around my waist and ran downstairs.

Halfway down I slipped. I tried to grab a banister but missed. I flew through the air reaching out to break my fall. I heard a cracking sound as I hit. I'd broken something. I lay on the ground unable to move. Then I saw the pencil on the side table. I stood up, my left arm hanging limply by my side. I forced the pain out of my mind. I picked up the pencil. Now I needed something to write on. I couldn't see anything so I decided to write on the wall. The best idea anyone had had for a hundred years – unbelievable! It would make me rich and famous. It would change the world forever.

The pencil was broken. I ran into the kitchen. My wife kept a pen there for shopping lists. I grabbed it along with a notepad.

The pen was dry.

I remembered the pencil I used for carpentry. It was in the toolbox I kept in the shed.

The kitchen door was locked. I didn't waste time looking for keys, I kicked it down. It flew off its hinges.

I marched into the garden and used an axe to break down the shed door. The pencil was exactly where I expected it.

As I started writing I forgot my idea. I have the rest of my life to imagine what a genius I could have been.

Night vision

Carrots

Lal woke up with a craving for carrots. He phoned in sick saying he had the flu. He took a shower, dressed and drove to the supermarket. Along the way he had to pass seven sets of traffic lights. The first set was red. He had to wait. The second set was red. He had to wait there too. To add to his frustration the third was also red. All he could think about were those tasty carrots.

If the lights were red at the next junction the supermarket might run out of carrots by the time he got there. Someone was probably picking up the last bag right now. The thought sent him into a panic. He put his foot on the accelerator and sped through the fourth set of traffic lights.

A patrol car happened to be at the crossroads. After a dull morning the two officers were itching to get some action. They gave Lal the full works: flashing lights, blaring sirens.

He saw them in the rear view mirror. They were after his carrots. There was no way he was going to let them pass.

He floored the accelerator, lost control of the car and drove into the path of an oncoming delivery truck. It swerved and tipped over. Lal crashed into its side. The windscreen shattered and a heap of carrots poured in, burying him in his seat.

No one was injured.

As he sat in the back of the patrol car Lal realised he'd lost his appetite.

The box

They left a box outside Mr Khan's house. He saw it from the living room window. He was convinced he hadn't ordered anything.

When he inspected it he found no delivery label. He tried lifting it but it was too heavy. He couldn't push it either.

There was a sound coming from the box. Mr Khan thought it sounded like a cat.

Unsure what to do next he went into the house. As he glanced across a concealed door opened and a small boy appeared.

"Are you all right?" Mr Khan called.

The boy spoke a language Mr Khan didn't understand. It sounded vaguely Eastern European.

"Do you speak English?" Mr Khan asked.

"Yes, of course I do," the boy said.

“How did you get in the box?”

“What a stupid question,” the boy said.

Mr Khan frowned. “I’m trying to help. Do you understand?”

“I’ve been in there for hours,” the boy complained.

“Why don’t you go in and see what it’s like for yourself?”

He felt sorry for the boy and hoped it might calm him down.

As soon as he entered the boy shut the door.

“Let me out!”

No one could hear him scream outside.

Mr Khan felt it move. There was a tiny peep hole from which he could see. Two men loaded the crate onto a lorry.

The journey took two and a half hours. The men dumped the box in front of a house and drove away.

Zettler

Zettler woke in the morning with a headache and went to the pharmacy. The shop assistant greeted him with smile and suggested he buy vitamin supplements. “They’re brand new,” she said. “Very effective.”

“How much?”

“They’re on the house.” She smiled. “It’s a promotion for special customers.”

Naturally he was delighted to get something for nothing.

As soon as he’d taken one of the vitamins he felt better. His headache went and a pleasing tingling sensation buzzed through his body. He began to feel energised and wanted to exercise. He rushed out of the house and sprinted down the road. The further he went the better he felt. Suddenly he felt incredibly thirsty. He stopped off at a shop and bought a bottle of water. Then he headed for the park. To his amazement he spotted a naked women dancing on the grass. The rest of the park was deserted.

She beckoned him over and offered a plate of chocolate biscuits. He took one and started dancing.

“Take your clothes off,” she said.

He shook his head.

“Take them off,” she insisted.

“Okay.”

Just then three policemen came out of the bushes and rushed across. One of them had a bunch of grapes. Another had ice creams. Zettler took one of the ice creams. The policemen started dancing and stripping off. After a while they all felt tired. They stopped and put their clothes on.

“See you all next week,” the woman said, waving as she left.

Different species

“It’s time to celebrate,” Jake said.

“Celebrate what?” his housemates asked.

“Being single.”

He poured a large measure into each of the glasses.

“Knock it back,” he said.

They downed it and gasped.

“I got it on holiday,” he said with a smile. “Strong, huh?”

It didn’t take long to feel the numbness.

“Was it an amicable break up?” his housemate asked.

“Yeah . . .” He looked at the carpet. “Hunky-dory.”

He found an old sci-fi horror film. The perfect distraction. It was rubbish so they watched it with the Turkish soundtrack.

A marooned space ship, on the edge of the known universe, was being attacked by a savage alien. In the climax, the monster chased one of the crew along a corridor linking

two sections of the ship. He was screaming in badly dubbed Turkish. The gnashing alien was closing in. Just as it looked like he was about to be eaten he turned around, whispered something and blasted the creature with a flame-thrower. The alien shrieked out like a squealing pig. He fired again. The monster exploded.

It was like he was running down that corridor, Jake thought. He was the one turning round with the flame-thrower. He was the one expecting to fry the monster. But when he turned around it was no alien. It was his ex-girlfriend. She was standing there shouting at him in Turkish and he had no idea what she was going on about.

Detention camp sixteen

I should have woken up in bed at home. Instead I woke up in Detention Camp Sixteen.

A guard ordered us to get dressed. He marched us to a building near the perimeter. The work room had twenty desks with twenty chairs. There was a typewriter on every desk. A guard handed out sheets of paper. The man two desks in front of me threw his on the floor.

Two guards rushed up and started beating him. They must have smashed his nose because the blood was everywhere.

“Please!” he screamed. “Please, don’t hit me.”

They carried him outside.

Everyone in the room acted like nothing had happened and began typing. I didn’t know what to write about so I sat there waiting. It didn’t take long for a guard to spot me.

“What do I do?” I said.

He readied his stick to beat me.

“I haven’t done this before. Please, tell me what I’m supposed to do.”

“Write something funny,” he said. “It’s got to be light and comical, no bad language.”

I was so shocked I felt like laughing, but the expression on his face showed he wasn’t joking.

“Why?” I asked.

“Because!”

Then he beat me unconscious.

I woke in my bed, snug and safe. What a nightmare, I thought. I felt exhausted but it was good to be back at home.

I drifted off to sleep.

When I woke I was in the detention camp again. The guard was hitting me.

“Get writing,” he screamed.

The truth

My friend Jonas discovered a special powder which, if consumed, makes the victim incapable of lying. I was immediately interested and convinced him to lend me some to try on my girlfriend.

“The truth can be a terrible thing,” he said. “There are some things people are better off not knowing.”

I laughed it off because I believed in the truth. The truth is beautiful, I’d always thought.

Back at home I slipped some of the powder in my girlfriend’s tea. Jonas said it took about thirty-five minutes to work. I was convinced my prank was going to be hilarious. Of course I’d tell her about it in a day or two and we’d have a good laugh.

She wasn’t in the best of moods that evening.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“I’m having an affair,” she said.

“What?”

“I’m having an affair with Jonas. We’ve been seeing one another for about a month.”

I couldn’t believe it.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “It was one of those things, it just happened.”

“But he’s my best friend.” I said. “How could you?”

“It was pretty easy,” she said. “He’s got a great body and he’s a wonderful lover.”

“I don’t want to hear this.”

She started laughing.

“What!” I said, taking a sip of tea. “What’s so funny?”

“Jonas and I are playing a trick on you. The only thing that powder does is cure indigestion.”

I didn’t believe her. In any case I’d put some in both our drinks.

“Jonas is a loser,” I said. “I’m bored of you anyway. I fancy a girl at work and tomorrow I’m asking her out.”

The lake

I went into the woods to get away from it all. After a long walk I discovered a beautiful lake. The sun shone as I sat down to eat my sandwiches. I spotted a woman on the other side. She was very beautiful and I couldn't resist glancing at her. She noticed my attention and smiled.

“It's a great spot,” I said. “Have you been here before?”

“I come here often,” she said.

She looked wonderful and her voice was cute. I really fancied her.

“How about I come over?” I said.

She smiled.

It was so hot and I was crazy about her, so I took the direct route. I ran into the water and started swimming. For the first quarter of the way I was laughing. This little stunt would make the perfect ice-breaker. At the halfway mark I was getting tired. Then I got cramp. I couldn't move. It was like my legs were paralysed. I sank into the murky water,

desperately trying to get air. Luckily the cramp eased off and I struggled to the surface.

She watched without showing any concern.

I was shocked.

She didn't even ask if I was all right.

I turned around, swam back to my side of the lake and walked home.

Trees

Mrs Holloway was the cleaner at the Woodcraft and Forestry Museum before it, and Cookham Wood, burnt down. Whispers in the community claimed a UFO landing had caused the fire. Equally mysterious was the way in which the land's conservation status was revoked and permission given for development.

They built a supermarket, a shopping mall and a car park over it. Mrs Holloway walked past the building site every day. She saw the bulldozers and the cranes. When the grand opening came she was there. As she walked around the mall she imagined it as it was before. She remembered the breeze rustling the leaves and the smell of damp earth.

The shoppers walked like zombies. They stared aimlessly into shop windows. All those people laden with bags stuffed with things they didn't need.

Mrs Holloway knelt down and put her ear to the floor. At first she heard footsteps. But when she concentrated she

could hear the trapped life beneath. She could hear the seeds unable to reach into the air. She wept. This temple of selfishness had ruined everything. The supermarkets had sucked all the poetry out of life.

Security guards approached her and asked her to leave. A scuffle broke out when she refused. The police arrived and took her away.

She lay back in the cell and stared at the ceiling. In five thousand years, she thought, all this would come to nothing and the trees would grow back.

The corridor shuffle

There's a castle in the Scottish highlands called 'Castle Hopplesh'. All the people in it are doomed to spend eternity walking its damp corridors from 9.30 in the morning to 5.30 in the afternoon. They get an hour off at lunch and two fifteen minute breaks either side. They're only allowed to drink water and eat cabbage soup. No one can sleep at night in the winter because it's so cold. Unauthorised visitors are not welcome, especially during corridor shuffling hours.

These condemned people walk the corridors every day except Tuesdays, when they also get an extra half portion of cabbage soup. On Tuesdays they can do whatever they like so long as they don't venture out of their dorms. Tuesdays are really boring because they don't have books or television. No one bothers to speak because there's nothing to talk about.

How did these wretched people end up in this hole?

They chose to be there.

Of course they thought they were going on a luxury holiday. Worse still, they can't get their money back (even though the pictures in the brochure look nothing like the real thing).

One Friday at 2.49 pm the castle doors opened. The occupants rushed out promising it was their last vacation.

Two men in a lift

The president was sharing the lift with the head of the world's most wanted terrorist group, when the lift got stuck.

“What do you do for a living?” the President asked.

“Oh, I go about causing death and mayhem for a cause no reasonable person would ever agree with.”

“Me too,” the President said.

“I'll give you a tip,” the terrorist said. “Use an abstract idea as your ‘just cause’, make it as implausible as you like – the more ridiculous it is the more likely people will fall for it – and, hey presto, there you go.”

“What do you think I've been doing,” the President said.

They laughed.

“I bet you could teach me a few tricks,” the terrorist said.

The president grinned. “Have you heard of the three ‘D's’?”

The terrorist shook his head.

“Deceit, deception and denial,” the President said. “If you’re ever held responsible for anything just say you don’t recall having been notified about it.”

The terrorist roared with laughter.

The lift lights flickered off and on as the power was restored. The lift continued to the ground floor and the doors opened.

“Who was that?” the terrorist’s assistant asked.

“I didn’t see anyone,” the head terrorist said.

“Who was that suspicious man coming out of the lift?” the deputy President asked.

The President said, “He’s a children’s magician lost on his way to a birthday party.”

The plan

He spiked my drink and drove me to a deserted house in the middle of nowhere. Of course I never saw it coming.

Jerome Gordon was an old school friend. When I say friend we weren't exactly close, but somehow we kept in touch. We hadn't seen one another for eleven years. He just called me up – said he found my name on the Internet. And being the nice person I am (even though we had different lives), I agreed.

So there I was on the floor, my feet and arms bound with rope.

“I hate you,” he screamed. “I've always hated you!”

I had no idea what he held against me. After many years, he was the one who'd been the most successful. While I'd languished in middle management he'd opened a chain of popular restaurants. He'd played the property market and made a fortune.

“Do you have any idea what I’ve done with my life?” he said. “I’ve achieved incredible things.”

“What do you want?” I said.

“You think you’re better than me.”

I blinked.

“You think you’re better than everyone,” he said.

“That’s not true.”

“You thought you were so smart beating me at school.”

I stared at him.

Suddenly – exactly as planned – the police smashed the door in and took him away.

I bet he never saw *that* coming.

Visitation

Paul closed his eyes and tried to clear his mind. The light had disturbed him and he no longer felt tired. His mind had been throwing him unwanted thoughts. He thought he could hear whispering.

He opened his eyes and to his horror saw two men standing at the foot of his bed. They were identically dressed in business suits. They looked like a couple of insurance salesmen. One of them carried a metal briefcase, the other wore glasses.

“Can he hear us?” the man with the briefcase said.

“He’s sleeping,” the man with the glasses said.

Paul pretended to be asleep.

“Does he know about the device? Does he know where it’s located?”

“Negative,” the man with the glasses said. “He knows nothing.”

“What happens if he finds out?”

“He won’t . . .” The man with the briefcase paused before continuing, “It’s not going to happen.”

The man with the glasses lent over the bed. “It’s time to leave.”

A shaft of intense light appeared from the ceiling. Paul squinted as the two men stepped into the brightness. When the light dimmed both of them had gone.

The chamber

I opened my eyes when I became conscious. All I could see was darkness. I got to my feet and used my toes to feel around. The floor, if that was what it was, appeared to be hard and smooth. I hit my hand against it to hear what sound it made. I couldn't deduce what material it was made of. Its temperature was neither warm nor cold.

I shuffled to one side, using my arm to guide me in case I bumped into something. After seven paces I came into contact with a vertical surface. Its texture was the same as the floor. Again, it was neither cold nor warm.

The room, for want of a better description, had no noticeable odour. The only thing I could smell was my body.

I thought I sensed something moving.

"Hello?" I said. "Who's there?"

There was no reply.

I put my ears to the wall and floor. I heard nothing.

I got angry and started shouting. When I calmed down I hummed songs. Then I cried.

Once I'd accepted I was hostage to this place I began to wonder where I might be. It was some kind of chamber. Were the limits defined by what I could touch or by my imagination?

I felt lonely and isolated. I comforted myself someone knew of my existence, someone who was kind and understanding. That person would rescue me.

Enemies

There are a million ways to kill a man. There are ways that cause pain, ways that dispatch the victim speedily or slowly. Some of the methods are complicated, others are simple. Some are brutal, some are devious.

Ivor Bugvinch wasn't fussy which one killed his neighbour – if it was painfully slow or mercifully fast, if it was complicated or simple. He just wanted one outcome – Mr Manesh dead.

The feud began ten years ago when Mr Manesh moved in and started growing flowers in his garden. They gave Ivor Bugvinch hay fever. Ivor reacted by cutting down the branches of an oak tree that crossed the fence.

One day Mr Manesh invited Ivor over for a meal to celebrate their ten years as enemies and neighbours. Ivor decided he would murder Mr Manesh.

The food was excellently prepared and cooked using only the finest ingredients. Mr Manesh provided expensive red wine to go with it.

They talked about the only thing they had in common, and interest in women's beach volleyball.

The next day Mr Manesh died of what the coroner described as 'a massive and fatal heart attack'. There were no suspicious circumstances.

Ivor couldn't believe it. His life felt empty without his neighbour to hate.

The torturer

In an underground complex deep below a military outpost the torturer was preparing the tools of his profession.

On the other side of the room, tied to a wooden chair, his victim was regaining consciousness.

The torturers' trade demands creating the most pain, while keeping the subject alive and capable of talking.

The man in the chair had been accused by a snatch squad of working with the enemy. It was believed he held information, secrets if you like, which would be of interest to military intelligence.

The man in the chair came around and saw a masked figure. He could barely see due to the bruising on his face.

He had been taking a walk to clear his head, when a van pulled up in front of him and the soldiers bundled him into the back.

"Tell me the names," the torturer said, walking across with a pair of pliers.

The man in the chair knew a lot of names. The names of his family and friends, the names of the people he worked with, the names of his son's school friends, but none the torturer was after. The only secret he knew was that his nephew was getting a bike for his birthday.

“I don't know anything.”

The torturer hit him.

“Evil man!”

“Don't be so cynical,” the torturer said. “There's one thing I can't stand and that's cynicism.”

The television

The television was on when he woke. Alfredo had no idea of the time. He rubbed his eyes. It must have been early morning.

Something strange was happening. A man was trying to get through the screen into the room. The glass stretched like rubber when he pushed against it.

Alfredo didn't know what to do. He sat on the edge of the bed squinting. The man in the television rammed his head into the membrane.

Alfredo was both curious and afraid. He moved closer in spite of his fear.

“Hello?” he said. “Can you hear me?”

The man gripped the side of the screen and pushed himself through the glass. First his head, then his shoulders squeezed through.

“My hand!” the man said, reaching out.

Alfredo helped him.

The man fell to the floor. He wasn't wearing any clothes.

“Hi there,” he said. “I’ve got an exciting message to share. Follow me inside and I’ll show you incredible deals and bargains you’ve never seen before.”

Insect apocalypse

The phone rang at 5.27 am.

On those hot summer nights she lay awake in fear of bugs flying through the window. Large bugs with ugly faces, buzzing in the darkness. She was scared they would infest the house. They could take over the street if she didn't act.

Maybe the phone call was a warning?

It rang again. This time it came from her neighbour's house. She had to answer it to save herself and the neighbourhood. She pictured the headlines:

WOMAN SAVES WORLD FROM
INSECT APOCALYPSE

She staggered into the garden. Her neighbour opened the door. She rushed past him and grabbed the phone. But all she heard was static.

She woke in a brightly lit room with a steel door at one end. She was lying on a bed wearing a green smock.

A doctor walked in.

“Good morning,” he said. “You’ve been with us for a week.”

“Where am I?”

“Please,” he said. “No questions. I’ll come back later.”

As he reached for the door the room filled with a buzzing sound. A fly circled around his head. His mouth opened and a lizard-like tongue shot out, caught it and flicked back in.

“Irritating things,” he said, “aren’t they?”

The revelation

He had been in training for twenty years. Only the chosen few ventured inside the temple. Everyone wanted the chance to pass through the portal and live in the next world, a higher domain.

The guards escorted him to the outer chamber for the purification ritual and then to the second chamber where priests chanted sacred texts. He was given an ornate belt and a golden staff. Then they showed him to the inner chamber.

The high priest sat on a throne. They bowed in respect.

“Has he been purified?” the high priest asked.

“He has my Lord.”

“Leave us!”

When they had gone the high priest took him down a long corridor. He opened a golden door with a large key.

“What you see beyond here is unspoken. You will never see me again. Do you understand?”

“I understand.”

He went inside. The sacred portal was in front of him. He pushed it open and walked through. It closed behind him.

He fumbled his way down a cave only to discover he was back outside the temple.

A group of men approached wearing ceremonial robes.

“This is the next world,” one of them said. “You have transcended the portal.”

“Nonsense,” he said. “I haven’t gone anywhere.”

The men looked aghast, pulled out knives and murdered him.

Pocket studies

Pancakes

Cornelia liked pancakes for breakfast, freshly made with honey and a drip or two of lemon. Her husband, Calvin, went to work early. She enjoyed having the house to herself with a cup of tea and a delicious pancake.

Some mornings she sat on the patio writing poetry. She had written a lot since they moved. Mellville was nice enough as small towns went. Calvin didn't mind where they lived. For him every town was the same, just another place to work. He came back late most evenings. She wasn't sure if he had to do the extra hours or it was an excuse. He usually returned smelling of alcohol. When she objected he would say, "It's just a work drink." The next morning she'd write another poem and try to forget about it.

With little else to do (Calvin didn't like her working) she would go into town to buy paper and packs of HB pencils. Occasionally she'd buy a watercolour set, even though she couldn't paint.

The shop assistant at Gerry's always smiled when she appeared. There was something about him, a certain friendliness beyond good service.

"Have a wonderful day," he said.

"You too," she replied.

He smiled. "Thanks."

"See you later."

"See you later," he repeated.

She walked home thinking about his smile. Maybe he liked pancakes?

Mr Reception Desk

He went to the room to check a fault with the mini-bar.

“Hey, Mr Reception Desk . . .” she said.

He glanced at her.

“Have you got a girlfriend?”

He shrugged.

“Is that a yes or no?”

“That’s private,” he said.

“Are you in love?”

“What kind of a question is that?”

“A direct one,” she said. “How come you’re so shy? Are you hiding something?”

“I’ve got nothing to hide.”

“What’s she like, this girl of yours?”

He shrugged again.

“Come on.” She ran her hand through her hair. “Why are you so bashful?”

“What about you?” he said.

She sighed. "I was seeing this guy. It didn't work out. He was fun. Not shy like you. I don't think we were matched."

He nodded. "I can't see anything wrong with the mini-bar. The temperature gauge was turned down. I turned it up again. It should be okay."

"Why do you work here?" she said.

He laughed.

"No, really?" she said. "Why?"

He glanced at his watch. "I've got to go."

"You can't leave without answering," she insisted.

"I just have," he said, walking to the door.

New friends

They took my mind. I didn't see them coming. One of them was wearing a dark suit with a name badge. The other had the casual look, cotton trousers and a blue shirt.

I didn't invite them. They just sat on the other side of the table with their bottles of mineral water.

I didn't greet them. I was waiting for my date. I met her in a supermarket. We got chatting and one thing led to another. I'd asked if she was free for lunch and she said yes. So there I was, keeping an eye on the clock behind the counter.

"Have you got a minute?" the casually dressed man asked.

I tried to figure out what he wanted.

"Sure," I said.

"Waiting for someone?"

I shrugged.

"We want to tell you about the Light of God. Have you

heard of us? We're a growing organisation."

I shook my head and glanced at the clock.

"We look out for our members," he said. "We believe we can give you a helping hand." He passed me his card. It said: The Light of God. Jeff Harnesh. His phone number was underneath. "You're welcome to come to one of our meetings."

I was angry at having been stood up. These guys were giving me sympathy. They seemed like decent people. Maybe I'd have better luck hanging out with them? I could wear a suit with a name badge or wear beige trousers and blue shirts. I could meet lonely people in cafes and be their new best friend.

The big D

The young lad opposite me had a sad expression. He had that look of desperation.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.” He stared into his drink. “Women . . . You know how it is?”

I didn’t reply.

“She was such a mess.” His face twisted with pain. “We got on like crazy. It was perfect.” He stared glumly at his drink. “Things were going to happen between us. Then my friend moved in. He’s a sweet talker. Next minute they were going out with one another. He thought it was funny. She was such a mess and he took advantage. She had no idea what she really wanted. I’d been giving advice and guidance. I could have ignored her or told her what I thought.” He rubbed his face. “When I saw her I was polite. I was really proud of myself because I could have

been angry. But that wouldn't have helped. I'm really sorted out. I know who I am. She's so confused. I feel sorry for her. It's lucky I know myself."

I finished my drink.

His hand was trembling.

"Please . . ." he said. "Tell me it gets easier as you get older."

"It gets easier."

The celebrity

Tina's house had seen better days. Duke, the odd job man, repaired broken roof tiles. He told Mike she'd been a singer in a band. She had been famous fifteen years ago. Mike hadn't heard of her or the band.

He'd been hired to cut the grass. The ancient two-stroke monster had three wheels. It growled like a demented hyena. When it started it only needed a small squeeze on the handlebar and it lurched off dragging him behind.

It took him four hours to mow the grass. He took his breaks by a silted pond, watching insects glide across the water.

One afternoon Tina appeared in a long coat and sunglasses.

"You've done a wonderful job," she said.

"Duke said you were a rock star."

She glanced at the pond.

"That was a long time ago. Now I'm just an alcoholic."

The wind blew through the weeping willows.

“It’s so easy to float through life,” she said, “and not know who you are. It’s so easy to lose yourself. How does it happen?”

He wasn’t sure what she meant and felt bad for asking.

She smiled. “One day you’ll ask yourself that question. Maybe you’ll remember me?”

Meeting Dr Zorgoff

“Do you think it’s going to snow?”

I looked through the window. “Maybe.”

“Maybe?” Dr Zorgoff said. “Are you one of those people who say maybe, possibly and perhaps?”

“Probably.”

“How long have you been a lecturer?” he asked.

“Not long,” I said. “I’m all ears if you have advice.”

“Before I was Dr Zorgoff, the renowned academic.” He gave me a dry smile. “I was plain old Enos Zorgoff, a skinny kid who read too many books and the other kids ignored. They called me Professor Zarkov. If anything complicated cropped up in school they’d chant, “Ask Professor Zarkov, he’ll know.”

“From Flash Gordon?” I said.

“Exactly.” He sighed. “Everything I know can be summed up like this. A person is waiting in an anonymous

room. The door opens and a nondescript person enters, stays for a moment and then leaves. What does the person waiting think? In another scenario a person stands by a busy road and spots a baby in the middle. What does he do?”

I waited for him to answer.

“Think nothing,” he said. “Save the baby.”

Bunker

Somewhere deep below the earth, buried beneath the acoustic microphones and concrete shell, J. Abrahams was in the process of being honourably discharged from the military.

A cargo plane collected him from the bunker and took him to an airfield on the other side of the island. The plane flew to a larger island located somewhere in the Pacific and then back home.

It felt strange wearing civilian clothes. He was used to combat trousers and army shirts.

He got a taxi from the military base to his home town.

Nothing had changed while he'd been away. It was strange seeing so much normality when, for months, he'd been practising for Armageddon. But the apocalypse never came. The defence shield had worked as a deterrent and tax payers' money had apparently been well spent.

He went to his parents' house. He slept in the same bed he'd slept in as a child. Nothing had changed. Not even the musty smell. He slept, woke, showered and walked into town.

He met some old buddies in a pub. They talked about the old times. He spotted his ex-girlfriend. She was engaged to an estate agent.

Everything was familiar and at the same time strange. He longed to be back on the island in that bunker deep underground.

Notice to all employees

Due to unforeseen circumstances beyond the control of Evertex Soft Toys and its management, this business is closed. These premises are off limits. No further business will be carried out by EST or its former representatives at this or any other location.

Unfortunately, due to the nature of the closure (owing to the bank's termination of facilities), no advance warning could be provided.

Please do not approach ex-EST managers for further information. If you do not have suitable employment lined up you are advised to present yourself at the nearest employment centre.

In answer to the factually erroneous allegations in the newspaper we would like to stress the former proprietor of EST has been emotionally devastated by the company's closure. Unfortunately, any money owed to former employees cannot be paid due to unforeseen circumstances.

Mr Colin Peters, the former CEO of EST (currently on vacation in the Caribbean) does not, it should be stressed, have any connection with EST, its former management or its facilities on these premises.

Thank you for your hard work as former employees of EST. All the best for the future.

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Vanessa Hardy

Let me tell you a story about a girl I knew called Vanessa Hardy. We met a long time ago.

You can guess what happened.

I'm a private person so I don't feel comfortable talking about it. We fell for one another and, as you can imagine, it was incredible.

Come to think of it I really don't want to tell this story.

If I did I might get the anger out. I've been thinking about her all these years. I can't get her out of my head. I can see her brown eyes. I can picture her smile. I can smell her perfume. I remember her laugh.

Sometimes when I'm at a party I hear her talking. When I turn around she's not there.

I wonder what I'd do if she was?

I was married for seven years to a woman with similar

brown eyes and the same smile. She also wore flowery perfume and had a big laugh. Everything was in its place, as it should be. But I couldn't stop thinking about Vanessa Hardy.

There are times when I can't help myself. It's like a drug. I play games with myself and imagine how her life might have turned out.

I'm learning to forget.

Barbecue chicken

Joseph Marantz liked barbecue chicken, jacket potatoes and coleslaw washed down with cold beer. He led a quiet life until Tanya Zujemski turned up.

One night after a good many beers, they met in a bar. They flirted for a while. He bought her a drink. They talked and danced. Everyone watched.

The night continued. Joseph had more drinks. Tanya hugged him. They held hands.

“What do you want to do?” she said. “I’m bored here.”

He was so drunk he could hardly stand.

“Come back to mine,” she said.

“Okay,” he mumbled.

They shared a taxi. She made him a coffee. She was all over him.

They kissed.

“Take off your clothes,” she said.

Just as his trousers dropped to the floor the light went on in the hallway. A large man appeared.

“Who the hell are you?”

Joseph blinked. “Who are you?”

The man punched him. “Her boyfriend!”

That was the last he saw of Tanya or her boyfriend.

He often invites friends over for a barbecue. Somewhere along the way they laugh about that night with Tanya Zujemski.

Not flying, not ending

They spent the afternoon drinking, moving from bar to bar when they met me. I'd been chatting up a girl without any luck. John cracked a joke about my humiliation.

I laughed. "Thanks but that was one of my better attempts."

He bought me a beer.

A bunch of us ended up at their hotel at three in the morning. We wanted to do something memorable. We decided on a naked dash around the block. If we sprinted fast enough no one would see.

The streets were empty. We got the hysterics as we ran and couldn't help laughing.

I remember the breeze across my skin. It's stupid the way something so simple makes you feel. I felt free.

We sat on the balcony and watched the sunrise. John leant against the railings. He smiled as we shared

stories. He started telling me a funny one about his sister's boyfriend. Suddenly I heard a grating sound. I looked around but couldn't work out what it was.

The balcony railing gave way. It happened so fast. He slipped over the edge. I peered down and saw his body on the pavement. He was dead.

Years later I couldn't get it out of my mind. I got that memorable event but it wasn't the one I was after.

The return

When Mark Foster revisited his old hangout, a pub called the Red Lion, he was surprised to find no one recognised him. It had only been eighteen months since he'd moved away.

“How are you?” he said to one of his old drinking buddies.

“Do I know you?” the man replied.

“It’s me,” he said. “Don’t you recognise me?”

He shook his head and made for the bar.

Mark grabbed his arm. “Malcolm! It’s me. Don’t you remember? I know your name! How would I know that if didn’t know you?”

“Look mate, this is a pub, people talk loudly. Anyone can overhear a conversation.”

Mark decided his old friend must have been ill. He decided to stay for a while and order a meal. He was driving so he only had a lime soda.

While he was eating he spotted another of his old friends.

“Jack!” he called out. “How are you?”

The man stopped and stared at him and then continued talking as if nothing had happened.

“Jack,” he said. “It’s me!”

The man ignored him.

Mark ate the rest of his meal quickly.

As he walked to the car he glanced around for one last look. He saw Malcolm and Jack peering through the window.

Important note

The holder of this letter doesn't speak English. She was previously employed doing odd job work. She is a hard worker.

Firstly, if she is under stress, please tell her to be calm. It may help even though she won't understand. Then if you can give her a cup of Earl Grey (she only drinks this variety), that would be very kind. I would also be grateful if you could offer her something to eat.

If you are beginning to wonder how she found you, then you will probably realise this is no accident. I arranged it to happen.

I have given her instructions (on a separate piece of paper) detailing how she can travel to you. You appear to be a kind and warm hearted person. I hope you will be able to offer her sustenance and shelter.

In return she will work for you. She can perform

simple duties. She can cook and clean around the house. I understand you have other responsibilities and that you may have a busy life. I can only repeat that she is a helpful person to have around. And she needs your help.

If you cannot accommodate her, please do not call the police. She is an illegal immigrant. Send her to someone you know, someone with a big heart and make sure she takes this letter.

The plumber

Philip Wellman called a plumber to fix his bathroom tap. The man came round forty-seven minutes after he'd put the phone down. His quote was impressive too.

“It won't take long,” the plumber said.

Philip went to the kitchen. He was surprised to hear so much noise. All that just to change a washer?

When he investigated he was shocked to see the plumber had removed the basin and bath taps. He was sitting cross-legged on the floor eating a custard tart.

“What are you doing?”

The plumber smiled. “I'm taking a rest.”

“Why have you removed the bath tap? That was working fine.”

“I'm doing additional checks.”

“I don't want 'additional checks',” Philip said. “Please, just put the bath tap back and finish the sink. Okay?”

The plumber shrugged.

Philip went downstairs and tried to relax. He heard more banging.

He rushed upstairs to see what was happening.

The plumber had ripped out a row of wall tiles.

“Huh!” Philip stared in disbelief. “What are you playing at?”

“I come here in good faith,” the plumber said, “carry out extra work for free and this is how you react!”

Women

Hector Lopez enjoyed watching women put on makeup. He'd noticed the way they develop routines for preparing themselves for the day ahead or a night out. These routines are like private rituals.

Some women are meticulous. Others apply makeup hastily. Some of them use expensive cosmetics. Some of them use whatever comes to hand. It's part of the ritual of being a woman.

There was one who made herself up like no other. Her name was Jennifer. She had a petite body and enjoyed showing it off with tight fitting clothes. She loved getting attention.

She did her makeup on the bed by the window using a hand-held mirror. She'd kneel in her underwear, studiously checking the quality of her work, continually asking the time.

He would lean over the bed and kiss her goodbye.

Jennifer used to give him those sultry looks. He always went back for another kiss.

“I’m late,” she’d say. “I’ve got to rush.”

Then she’d giggle for no reason. She was strange like that. Sometimes she said exactly what she was thinking. At other times she was mysterious. He never knew what to expect.

Looking back he must have been in love.

The lie

“What do you think?” she asked. “I bought this outfit yesterday.”

“It’s nice,” he said.

She slapped her thigh. “Try bothering to look in my direction when you say that.”

She did her catwalk routine again. “Tada!”

“Stunning,” he said.

She went to the bedroom. A minute later she was out again.

“Notice anything?”

He looked her up and down.

“Have you done something to your hair?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“You’ve put make up on?” he said.

“Uh-uh!”

He looked confused.

“I’m wearing a completely different outfit!”

“Oh . . .” he said. “You look amazing.”

“Say it like you mean it,” she replied.

He glared at her. “What’s wrong with you?”

“I want to know what you’re thinking.” She skipped to the mirror. “Tell the truth. I want your honest reaction.”

“Okay,” he mumbled. “It’s all right but it doesn’t grab me either way.”

“You’re horrible!”

“You told me to be honest.”

“I didn’t say be horrible. I said, tell me the truth!”

She stormed into the bedroom.

He followed.

“Don’t act like that,” he said, putting his arms around her. “It looks amazing on you.”

It was the first time he’d lied to her and she was pleased because of it.

Remixes

Invasion

A foreign army invaded the King's realm. Word got around the enemy was ruthless. The King sent out scouts. None of them returned. He sent out more scouts. None of these returned. He knew his army was weak and started to panic. His royal guard had been too busy persecuting their own people. His ragbag military was poorly trained and liable to betray him.

He asked his advisor what he should do and his advisor said, "We can either muster our strength and fight them to the last man or we can send out a team to negotiate surrender."

The sentries opened the city gates and the negotiation team trundled off into the distance. Two days later there was no news. Three days later, nothing.

Meanwhile, the King was getting nervous. The mysterious enemy terrified him.

The next morning, still no news from the negotiation team, the King couldn't take it anymore and decided to run. He took his trusted security team and a van packed with loot.

When they arrived at the border they saw an old man with a placard that said, 'Formidable foreign army – be terrified!' A small child by his side held up another placard that said, 'Weep in fear!'

"What on earth is this?" the King said. "This can't be the formidable army."

The king and his body guards laughed.

"Run them over!" the King ordered.

The vehicles sped towards the old man and child. Just before they hit they crashed into a concealed pit. All the occupants were killed.

The child looked up at the old man.

"It's great when a plan works," the old man said.

The man from beyond

In a far off land, high in the mountains, there was a kingdom which had been cut off from the world for centuries.

One day a priest travelled across rivers and through forests until he found this land.

But he was sad to learn they worshipped idols. He told them about his God and the locals listened.

They were impressed with his appearance and the intricate gold jewellery he wore. He was educated and read books. He came from a land where the people lived in wondrous cities and dressed in fine clothes.

The priest stayed with the locals for many months. He taught them useful skills to improve their lives. He cured a sick child with medicine. He taught the locals to read and gradually word spread about his new religion. The King was impressed with the stranger and assumed he must possess extraordinary powers. Soon the King and his people had accepted the priest's God as their own. They stopped worshipping idols.

One day the priest returned home. He left them his most prized scripture book. The locals were keen to prove their dedication to the new faith. They invaded a neighbouring kingdom and forced its people to follow their religion.

Many years passed until the priest returned. The mountain people were elated to see him but he was angry.

“What is wrong?” the King asked.

“I gave you the book to worship God,” he said. “But you worshipped the words as if they were statues and acted with hatred to your neighbours.”

Royal advice

A king returned victorious from a war with an enemy to the west. Although many had died to gain this historic moment he was not jubilant. His beloved wife had died while he'd been away. His people had been exorbitantly taxed to fund the campaign, rioting had broken out and the countryside was impoverished.

“What victory is this?” he asked his advisor, as the celebration parade marched past.

Immediately after the parade a message arrived from a spy that the kingdom to the east had sent an army to invade.

His people were exhausted, their morale low. What should he do?

His top general said, “We should make slaves of the westerners and use them in our fight to the east.”

The high priest said, “We must build a new temple, the largest in the known world. We must honour our gods and in return they will reward us with victory against the barbarians.”

Next the king turned to a man wearing a cheap suit with a name badge that said, ‘Danny Martin. Champion Double Glazing’.

“What do you recommend?”

“If we double glaze the whole palace we wouldn’t hear the sound of the army’s trumpets signalling defeat.”

Latte storm

There's nothing like a storm in a cup, the captain of the tiny origami ship 'The Colossus' mused. To add to this the paper cup they were sailing in had sprung a leak. The captain looked across the coffee ocean and then up at the sky.

As he did a hailstorm of sugar rocks descended on them.

"Hold steady!" he roared.

The rocks almost sank the ship. The crew screamed in terror. Somehow he kept his nerves and managed to persuade the men not to jump overboard.

"Set sail full ahead," he ordered.

He had had enough of this terrible place. They needed to venture beyond its confines.

When they arrived at the edge the crew clambered over the rim. They lowered themselves onto a chocolate brownie.

The captain scanned the horizon. "It's not safe here," he warned.

They ran as fast as they could. When they got to the bottom they rested on a giant cookie.

“Come on lads,” he urged. “We can’t stay here. We’ve got to reach the safety of that apple and cinnamon pastry.”

Just then the ground shook. It was an earthquake. Their escape route was blocked by a marshmallow.

“Please, God!” the captain cried out. “I’ve lost my ship, my crew are about to mutiny and now you expect me to climb a giant marshmallow?”

Goldilocks

Goldilocks was in a foul mood. She was having one of those days from hell. Her face was spotty and her hair was lifeless. She hated looking rough because she was supposed to be sweet and glamorous. The seven bores were going through an irritating phase as well. All of them had annoyed her: Tedious, Repetitive, Lecture, Dreary, Incomprehensible, Angry and Mumble. They were spending the day at a fairground on the other side of the Enchanted Forest.

This place isn't enchanted, she mused. It's dull. At least the seven bores were out of the house.

There was a knock at the door.

"It's us," Tedious said in his usual drone.

Mumble said something inaudible as they entered.

"Ja bah lah muh ha," Incomprehensible said.

"Why are you back so early?" Goldilocks said.

"Because we feel like it," Lecture said. "And we don't

need your permission. Who do you think we are – your children? You’re just a helper, Goldilocks. Don’t get any big ideas and think you’re something special, because you’re not! You’re some dumb girl who got lost and had nowhere to go so we let you stay.”

“I get the point,” Goldilocks said. She opened a kitchen cupboard and grabbed a chocolate bar. “I’m going upstairs.”

“What’s the matter with you?” Angry shouted.

She didn’t reply.

“Muh lat chi wah wo?” Incomprehensible suggested.

“There’s no need to be so grumpy,” Repetition bellowed.

“There’s no need to be so grumpy.”

Makeover

Vlad the Impaler was worried about his image problem. He called a meeting of his closest associates: Strangler, Hangman, Pillager, Plunder and Torturer.

After some light refreshments they started talking business.

“Listen,” Vlad said. “We’ve got a crisis with our public image.”

“People are afraid of us,” Torturer said. “I can’t understand why.”

“I know,” Pillager said. “When I’m walking around town people shy away from me. They’re terrified.”

“No one sits next to me in the coffee shop,” Plunder said in a sad voice.

Hangman nodded. “It looks like we’ve got a communication problem on our hands. We need to inform people about what we do because the message is clearly not getting across.”

“Absolutely,” Vlad agreed. “How are we going to solve it?”

“We need a makeover,” Hangman suggested. “I could brighten up my scaffold by painting it yellow.”

“Yes but what kind of yellow?” Strangler asked. “Would that be lemon yellow or custard?”

“Let’s not get into the technicalities,” Vlad said. “Any more ideas?”

“I could play music while I throttle people to death,” Strangler said.

“I could give people a chance to buy back the goods I’ve stolen,” Plunder said.

“That’s a great idea,” Vlad said.

“And how about informing people we carry out our business without discrimination?” Pillager said.

“Perfect!”

The last living Bangdanng

Deep in the mountains past a clear but fast flowing river, beyond a forest which is forever in winter, there is a cave. This dark and foreboding hole is the home of the last living Bangdanng.

The Bangdanng is about the size of a man or woman. He stands mostly on his two back feet. He has hair all over his furry body and a single horn protrudes from his forehead. The Bangdanng is a clumsy creature and always bumps into things. He is a vegetarian and likes to eat moss and, most of all, fruit. He loves to pick blueberries when they're available. When he is not eating blueberries he likes to sit and dream of eating blueberries.

One day a hunter went far into the mountains. He brought with him a high powered rifle to bag a great trophy he could boast about. But when the hunter spotted the Bangdanng, quietly eating one of his prized blueberries,

although he had a perfect shot, he couldn't press the trigger.

The hunter watched the clumsy Bangdanng every summer until the creature died of old age. Then he wrote a book, 'The Life of the Last Bangdanng'.

Of course no one believed him – a hairy monster with a horn coming out of its head, a monster that loved blueberries – who would believe that?

Tired of being ridiculed he took a team of eminent scientists to the cave and presented them with the Bangdanng's bones.

"Look what you've done!" the scientists shouted. "The last of a extinct species and you kept it secret. How irresponsible! We could have put him in a laboratory and experimented."

Rematch

The hare was annoyed with the whole tortoise thing. If anyone mentioned that story again he'd punch them. To put things to rest he organised another race. He invited the local television station to cover the event.

Months before the competition he went on a special diet and exercise regime. He made sure he took his vitamin supplements and hired a trainer.

Meanwhile the tortoise watched television and ate pizza every night. He took no exercise.

Many years had passed since the initial race and everyone wanted to know who would win a rematch.

The crowd cheered as the two contestants made their way to the start line. First the hare and then, a couple of minutes later, the tortoise.

“Get ready to lose,” the hare said.

The tortoise ignored him.

“I’ve made sure I won’t go to sleep this time,” the hare said.

The hare was telling the truth. He’d taken a bag full of stimulants and high energy drinks.

The two contestants took their mark at the starting line. The pistol fired and they were off. The tortoise hadn’t moved by the time the hare leapt into the air and sprinted fifty meters. But an instant later he fell to the ground suffering a near-fatal heart attack.

The crowd watched in horror as the tortoise plodded on, refusing to stop when the stewards signalled.

“I’ve won again!”

The crowd booed.

The hare recovered in hospital and although he hadn’t won he got sympathy. The tortoise acted smug and people commented behind his back.

Day trip

Count Dracula went on a day trip to Brighton. He took a walk along the beach and bought an ice-cream. While he was eating it he bumped into Werewolf. Count Dracula couldn't stop laughing at the hairy man. He looked like an overgrown monkey.

“Excuse me,” Werewolf said, “but it's rude to laugh at someone for the way they look.”

“I'm sorry,” Count Dracula said, “but I can't help it. You look ridiculous.”

Werewolf growled and walked on.

Count Dracula went shopping and bought some sandals, shorts and a baggy T-shirt. He was glad to get out of his stuffy vampire outfit.

While he was in a vegetarian shop an assistant came up and asked if he needed help.

“I'm not a vegetarian,” Count Dracula said. “I eat people.”

The assistant laughed. “Very amusing, Sir! Are you a vegan? We have an excellent selection of vegan products.”

“I’m a vampire,” Count Dracula said.

The shop assistant laughed again. “Please help yourself to a complimentary vegan chocolate bar.”

Count Dracula took the gift, thanked the man and left the shop. He unwrapped the bar and tasted it. He’d never had anything quite so disgusting.

Just then the Werewolf appeared with his Mummy.

“This is the man who was nasty to me,” he said.

“Please,” Count Dracula said. “Take this chocolate and accept my deepest apology.”

Strangers in our midst

The engineer

8.57 am he sits on the bench, his refuse cart parked at his side, a mobile in his hands.

People walk past ignoring the cart, ignoring him and his uniform, ignoring his expression.

He doesn't care. He's down on his luck in what could be described as a 'transition period'. It's a buffer zone that will take him from this 'temporary situation' to a high earning job.

The people walking past don't realise. They're stupid enough to only notice what's on the outside. They're blind to his future. He pities them. They are rushing here and there, going nowhere. It's always the same, people reaching for infinity, always wanting, always demanding more. He knows their pointlessness. He feels it, touches it, picks it up from the street and fills his cart with it. He breathes in the odour. He was once like them. The lies of that world are no longer his.

He checks the phone – still no messages, no missed calls. He has a degree in Aeronautical Engineering. The aeroplane company will get back to him. He's waiting. He's been waiting for a while.

He drops his mobile on the pavement. It smashes apart.

A man passes by and picks it up. He hands it over with a strange look because it has no battery.

Training session

Duncan watched the presentation from the back row. A message on the screen read, 'Being is Doing: Doing is Being'.

"Once we know our present reality we can become the role and strive towards our goal. First this requires a change of behaviour," the trainer said. "I'm talking about behaviour with a capital 'B'."

Someone put up their hand just as the presenter was about to make another point. The presenter looked agitated, coughed and blinked.

A man in a crumpled suit got to his feet. "I want to share something with the group."

"By all means," the presenter said.

"I've had a moment of insight," the man confessed. "I've gained an understanding into myself. I know where I'm going wrong. I'm not becoming the role."

"Excellent. And now if you don't mind –"

“Just one more thing. I haven’t learnt to be me.” He mimed quotation marks around the word ‘me’. “I need to move from doing to being.”

“Great stuff,” the presenter said, blinking three times and coughing.

Two of the managers started clapping. They looked at the rest of the group and they started clapping.

Duncan knew something important had happened but, for the life of him, couldn’t work out how he was going to apply it to his work on the supermarket’s fish counter.

Merrow's world

Daniel Merrow switched off the television in disgust. He'd had enough of murder and mayhem. Why was there no good news in the world?

He sat back in his comfy chair and played with the remote. Civilisation was on the brink of collapse. He prophesied that years ago. Standards had fallen. The education system was a joke. Today's so called 'academic qualifications' meant nothing, they weren't worth the paper they were printed on. The world was falling apart, dissolving into a cesspit of depravity.

The room was silent except for Ernie, his pet greyhound, snoring in the corner. Ernie knew more about the real world than all those politicians put together. And he was more honest.

A wave of anger swept through him. The world, he suddenly realised, was full of hatred, Jews against Arabs,

Protestants against Catholics, whites against blacks, Muslims against Hindu. If they just executed anyone who showed any kind of hostility that would bring an end to it. They could set up a commission to oversee it. Anyone who got in their way would be punished. To maintain this organisation every tax payer would contribute a little extra. Anyone who refused would be shot.

Leaving

Her husband was snoozing. Only his face was visible from under the duvet.

Her fantasy affair kept her going. She felt guilty even though it wasn't real.

She thought about her imaginary lover every day. She couldn't help it. Even though her husband was reasonable and she loved the children. Sometimes she sat on the balcony talking out loud, making up conversations. It was stupid. Her greatest fear was her husband coming back from work and catching her.

"Why didn't you wake me?" her husband called. "Is breakfast ready?"

She walked onto the balcony and stared at the horizon.

"I'm going out," she said.

"What for?"

"Croissants."

"Uh-huh," he replied. "Can you get the paper?"

She was walking to the shops thinking about breakfast when she turned into Addison Road and crashed straight into him. It was her fantasy man – he existed.

“Excuse me,” she said, in a sarcastic tone. “Don’t you look where you’re going?”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Do I know you?”

“That depends.”

“On what?” he said.

“On how powerful your imagination is.”

The price of friendship

Mr Meelan was not mean or ungenerous. As an assessor for an insurance company he liked precision.

Some children see pictures in their heads, they think in images. Others understand music or words. Mr Meelan understood numbers.

When he was a child he looked into his Rice Krispies bowl and calculated how many were in it. Then he calculated how many it would take to fill an Olympic swimming pool.

Grown up, he liked a quiet and predictable life – no surprises. He wore the same suits to work and had ten identical shirts, socks and boxer shorts.

One day he thought something was missing. He tried to figure out what it was but gave up. He didn't know what kind of calculation to use.

One of his colleagues suggested he socialise outside work. That evening Mr Meelan went home and made a simple calculation.

Lunch x2 £50.00

Coffee x2 £ 7.00

Total £57.00

That was the price of asking someone out for the day, to have a meal in a restaurant and go for a coffee. He calculated the price of friendship to be £57.00 per meeting.*

*Average meeting, in an average environment, with normal menu expectations, on a limited basis, subject to change, in selected venues only, excluding unforeseen circumstances and acts of God.

Family

My brother disowned the family because we weren't classy enough. He said we acted like peasants. Naturally we were all shocked.

“You people are too common for me,” he said. “They must have swapped me with another baby in the hospital.”

Sure enough everyone in the family had dark hair and he was blond. He spoke with a posh accent and liked to go to the theatre and drink expensive wine. His girlfriend, Desdemona, came from a rich family and she didn't hide the fact she looked down on us.

He changed his name to Ignatius Windsor, moved into an expensive neighbourhood and ignored our calls. Times were good. He earned loads of money.

Then he got fired for fixing his sales figures. They wanted the staff to get ahead by any means possible – other than cheating the company. His reputation was destroyed. Everyone knew everyone in his line of work. He was finished.

He took it badly and spent months in his bedroom with the curtains drawn, eating pizza, drinking Dr Pepper and repeatedly watching ET.

His girlfriend left him for a plastic surgeon. He was forced to move back home. Of course we all joked he wasn't so fancy any more.

I took him to a restaurant. He stared at me with a doomed expression.

“They've got a job going here,” he said.

He spoke to the manager and walked back to the table with an application. I gave him my pen. In the 'First' and 'Surname' boxes he wrote 'Kevin Smith.'

Cedric Peterson

Cedric Peterson wasn't very good with women. He was too serious, never joked.

"Why don't you lighten up?" someone said.

"I don't need to lighten up, thank you very much!"

He went shopping one afternoon. Two teenagers stood in the queue.

"Oi, Robot!" one joked. The other giggled hysterically.

Cedric turned round. "I'm not a robot, thank you very much."

He fell in love with a woman called Melinda. She worked in the accounts department.

Cedric never mentioned her but it was obvious he was in love.

Every time she went near him he became awkward. He knocked things over and coughed. Each morning he came to work and made a special effort to greet her.

His colleagues hid their smirks.

Melinda used to laugh about it.

“Why are you laughing?” Cedric asked.

“Because everyone is laughing except you.” She smiled.

“Don’t you think it’s funny?”

Cedric didn’t have the slightest idea what she was talking about.

Now he lives a quiet life with a rescue dog called Bobo, no callers welcome, thank you very much.

Invisible CEO

Henry Collins was a homeless man who sat on a park bench. He wore an old coat and a baseball cap. He was very proud of the hat. He used to sit on the bench for hours, even when it was freezing.

He had a beaten up briefcase with him and delved into it to gather the necessary documents for the day ahead. In his head he was a high profile business man and that bench was his office. The passing shoppers were employees.

People looked at him with uncomfortable expressions. They didn't know him or his work. He was the CEO of a large corporation. He kept it hanging together. Investors placed their faith in him to bring in the dividends. He was the man who would be giving the company the future it deserved.

He opened his briefcase and pulled out yesterday's copy of the Sun, which he found in a nearby dustbin. Ah, he mused contentedly, there was a feature on their expansion

into the Chinese market. He turned to the sports pages: Chelsea 1, Manchester United 0. The company's share price was rising nicely.

He took out an old pen which hadn't worked for years and circled the football result. He needed to alert the board of directors as soon as possible. His secretary would have to schedule a meeting.

"Elenor," he said out loud, "we need to get the Board together."

"Yes, of course, Michael."

A woman strolled past with her toddler. Neither had any idea of the historic moment that had passed.

Dealer

He buys low, sells high – nothing personal, just business. He's not a charity.

Dressing well and showing style is important for creating the right impression. A nice car with some sort of enhanced performance modification shows you're made of the right stuff.

If he had to sum himself up in one word it would be 'energised'. That's the buzz he gets from life. There's so much to do.

He has an attractive wife. They're thinking about starting a family. They'll see how it goes, while the money is good – you never know what happens in the future. There's always an element of chance, a small slip-up could end his career. It happens. He's watchful though. Don't cross him or he'll take you down. Aggression is part of the game. Sometimes

you bluff and sometimes you play for real. It's their choice. You go by the rules. Sometimes you break them. You do what it takes to survive, even if it means getting your hands dirty.

It amuses him people don't know what he does. They assume he's a stock broker or a drug dealer. Half the time they're right and half the time they are wrong. He keeps a straight face, never says which.

Mr Perry

Mr Perry worked at the software company on Winthrop Road. He had a house with his wife and two young children. He used to shout, 'Good morning!' to the gateman. He was never sure why he was so friendly. Was it politeness or pity? The man looked like he needed cheering up. It was nice knowing he was the one with the decent job.

Time went by. Another year. Another promotion. He witnessed the baby grow into a child.

The company was bought by a competitor and they decided to merge R & D. The press report said, 'There will be a rationalisation of operations where duplication exists'. The office on Winthrop Road closed.

Mr Perry lost his job. He relocated with his family and looked for work in his specialist field. He was told there was an oversupply of people with his skills.

He used his redundancy settlement to pay for a 'gap' year. A year to find himself. A year to come up with a

plan. He thought about doing something else, something unexpected. One of his 'crazy ideas', as his wife called them, was opening a restaurant.

His wife was anxious. She wanted them to be happy. She didn't want to worry about the future.

He wasn't the man she married.

The happiness tick box

Dan, a twenty-seven year old commodity broker from London, sat on the beach overlooking the Pacific Ocean. He was struck by sadness.

He had more money than he knew what to do with. He lived in a roomy house and drove a sports car. But underneath this he wasn't happy.

There he was lounging in the tropical heat ordering drinks from the bar when he noticed the bar staff were happier than him. He presumed they'd been through a gruelling customer service program and been trained to smile for the customers. The more he studied them the more obvious it became their expressions were real. There was a difference between a polite smile and a genuine burst of happiness.

And yet they had unexciting, low paying jobs, probably working terrible hours and living in shacks without air-conditioning.

Why were they happier than him?

He had always been a dynamic person. He looked for the good in everything. Why had life been unfair?

Dan liked to win. He liked to achieve goals. He set himself targets to be fought and won. He liked to feel he was going somewhere. But these people weren't going anywhere.

He couldn't help thinking although he was ordering them to fetch his drinks they were the ones having a holiday at his expense.

Naomi

Naomi lay in bed clasping a bottle of Chardonnay. White wine had to be chilled but this bottle was nowhere near cold enough. She'd instructed the maid to bring it in an ice bucket but the woman hadn't. Some people were stupid. She rang the kitchen. No one picked up so she slammed the phone down.

Daylight streamed in through the curtains. She sure as hell wasn't leaving the house today. Now her husband was at work it was safe to unlock the door and go to the swimming pool. This was where she spent her days killing boredom. She didn't know how it happened but their marriage had turned into a corporate joint venture. He made her feel like an employee.

The bottle was empty. She grabbed the phone and called down.

This time it answered.

“Yes, Madame?”

“Where were you? I’ve been calling for hours. Why haven’t you answered?”

“Sorry, Madame.”

“I need a drink. Put some ice in the bucket this time. Do you understand English?”

“Of course, Madame.”

She sprawled across the bed. It was such a chore getting things done.

The maid returned.

“Enter.”

She placed the fresh bottle on the bedside table.

“Is there anything else?”

“Is there anything else?” Naomi said dryly. “You think you’re so smart!”

The butterfly collector

They sat in the kitchen staring at the patio his mother in-law called a garden.

“You haven’t been out there lately,” he said.

“You haven’t visited lately.”

“Not as much as I’d like.”

She stared through the window.

“We’ll miss him,” he said.

“It’s really quite silly,” she said.

“What is?”

She raised her hands. “Eight fingers and two thumbs, just like a monkey. That’s all we are . . . monkeys.”

“And those?” He pointed to a bottle of pills next to cookery books.

“They’re from the doctor.”

“Uh-huh.”

She forced a smile. “I used to think you were a strange one.”

He looked surprised.

“You never seemed to fit in,” she said.

He laughed.

“I was wrong.”

“I’ve never pretended to be anything I’m not,” he said,
“or to control people.”

She nodded. “But you like to collect them. Is that what
I am . . . part of your collection?”

The dream

He spent his early years in front of a television. His world was a flat rectangle and the sound from its speakers.

When he grew up he wanted to be on television. His dream was to escape from his life.

He went to university to study journalism. While he was there he worked on a news slot for the local radio station. Radio was good but not good enough. He had his dream. One day he would be on television.

He wore expensive clothes, always copied what the newscasters wore. He got his teeth fixed so he could have a television smile. He had his hair trimmed every week.

After university he got a job working as a junior presenter on a children's show. This would be his first step in what promised to be a momentous career. He longed for his first shot of airtime. He couldn't sleep the night before. When it happened he felt nothing. He felt none of the buzz.

He left television to work for a business start up. Although successful it never satisfied him. Nothing did.

That was fifteen years ago.

Today he sits on the bench down Tennyson Lane drinking vodka from a lemonade bottle, shouting obscenities at young mothers.

The daughter

“She was only eleven when her equipment arrived. And look at her now.” That was what her father used to say.

Her mother used to dish out warnings she was “throwing her life away”. At other times she admitted she’d been the same at her age.

Their daughter wasn’t enjoying college. She hadn’t kept up with her Leisure and Tourism assignments. She imagined herself as a holiday rep. It sounded exotic.

“Teenagers are difficult,” her mother complained.

She hardly went to college. She ate her lunch in the park, away from other students. She had suffered intermittent bullying from a group of girls at school. They’d been jealous of her looks and made fun of her. College reminded her of being humiliated, even if the boys seemed to appreciate her. She hung out with them because they weren’t bitchy.

Her life wasn’t going anywhere, not that she was bothered. She didn’t want to end up like her mother working at the hardware shop.

For a time she fell in with the wrong crowd and experimented with drugs. They were losers but the closest thing she had to friends.

After a string of useless boyfriends she met a decent guy. They got married and had two children.

Her parents seemed disappointed she'd turned out all right.

University

The campus accommodation was smaller than expected. A room in a shabby apartment block.

The lives of previous students had moved through the building, brushing against the hard corners and smearing the walls with finger marks. Individuals entered that place and left.

Now nothing remained.

Luke unpacked his things and sat on the bed. In the corridor he could hear people greeting one another. This place excited them. He wondered how they would feel in a year's time. Soon their lives would be reduced to dust and scuff marks. Their presence would be little more than marks on windows. He imagined what might happen: the laughter, the sadness, friendship and fighting.

And then what?

They would move on and be done with it. He wondered if any of them shared his thoughts about how temporary this was. He wondered if everything would feel the same.

He stared out of the window watching them arrive. And yet with all this transience there would be so much to celebrate.

The schedule

Mr Watts planned one of those productive Saturdays. He'd sort things out, get those annoying odd jobs done and tidy the house.

If he got up at 6.00 am and took an hour for lunch and finished at 5.00 pm that would give him ten hours.

The alarm woke him in the morning and he immediately switched it off. Just two minutes lie in.

He fell asleep and woke at 8.21. He felt exhausted. He decided to stay in bed a little longer.

9.03. He couldn't be bothered to start. He would begin the clear up at 10.00.

9.59. He got out of bed, made a cup of tea with two slices of toast. Then he went upstairs and switched on the television.

At 2.37 pm he felt hungry. He went to the kitchen and heated up a microwave meal. He ate slowly. When he was finished he dumped the plate and cutlery in the sink.

His stomach felt bloated. He went to bed just in time for the afternoon movie at 4.00.

The movie finished at 5.30. He forced himself out of bed and took a shower. It wasn't such a bad thing he hadn't done any work. Tomorrow he'd make up for lost time.

Passing through

Twenty year old Nick got a job at Baylis-Morgan, the cleaning supplies company on Thornmere Road. Rob, a grey haired man, twenty-two years experience, acted as mentor.

“Selling is people skills,” Rob explained, “it’s about maintaining relationships.”

Nick listened impatiently. He wasn’t going to be working in that crummy business long.

The first call of the day was a ‘pushover’ as Rob put it, a wholesaler only stocking their range.

“Let me do the talking. Watch what I do.”

Nick nodded.

When the meeting was over they got into the car.

“Why didn’t you sell more?” Nick asked.

“That guy trusts me. I know how much he needs. If it doesn’t sell it’ll clog up his warehouse. This business is about repeat business.”

They ate lunch in cheap pizza restaurant.

“Let me tell you about the Three Rule,” Rob said. “If you stand within three feet of a person try and acknowledge them with eye contact. If you see someone three times, say hello. If you say hello three times on three separate occasions and they don’t respond don’t greet them again. If people reply to a greeting with three or less words don’t initiate a conversation. If they give you more than three words it’s okay to talk.”

“That’s formulaic.”

“People like predictable.” Rob smiled. “That’s what we rely on.”

Nick yawned. “How can you do this boring job all your life?”

Rob reacted calmly, like he’d heard the question a million times before. “Don’t get too comfortable,” he said. “We’re only passing through.”

The fix

He woke on the floor by the bed. It was early afternoon. He had no recollection how he got there. He had been drinking the previous evening – that was all he knew.

He rubbed his face, smelt his breath. He hadn't washed in days. The whole place stank of alcohol and cigarettes.

There was no money in his pocket. No money to buy vodka. No money to buy cigarettes. No money to buy iced buns.

He looked at his hand. Still fixed to his finger was his wedding ring, the only remaining mark of his former life. He could sell it to buy enough vodka, enough cigarettes and iced buns to keep him going for . . . He wasn't sure how long. Long enough to seem like forever.

He tried to pull the ring off. It wouldn't budge. He spat on his finger and worked in the spit. It didn't move. He

tried cooking oil but that was no better. As fiddled with it he became convinced it wouldn't come off. He needed that drink. He needed that smoke. He needed that iced bun.

The urge turned to desperation. He had to have that drink and smoke. The craving was powerful. He staggered into the kitchen and found a chopping knife. He put his finger on the bread board.

It came off clean. He tied a dish cloth around his hand to dress the wound. Now he really needed that drink.

Blood dripped on the pavement as he walked to the pawn shop. He exchanged the ring for cash and went to the supermarket. His hand was a mess but he was looking forward to the drink.

The customer comes first

Mr Gregory Meesh worked for JMS. He managed the ‘Department for Competitive Strategy’. JMS sold and licensed software. The company had a ninety-two percent market share in its specialist field. They’d been able to achieve this by regularly updating their software with bug fixes and minor improvements to the interface which, in fact, merely crippled the competition. They’d made a lot of money making their products incompatible.

“We dig holes and if people walk into them . . .” Mr Meesh joked.

The DCS worked in conjunction with the legal team. Together, they warned users about the risks of using alternative software and how such products might infringe JMS’s numerous patents, thus rendering them liable to prosecution. The department had been kept busy during the previous year by the take-over of a smaller company, which had produced a simple program that would (once

completed) emulate JMS's technology for a fraction of the price. Its R & D department was closed and its staff transferred to other projects.

Gregory sat in his executive chair and took in the view. He was going to be interviewed on television that evening. It was his job to talk-up the business, to inform the public about the challenges of operating in a free market where the customer comes first.

Ricky

Ricky was one of those children people expected to go to the top. He knew he was better than the rest of us. There was no doubting he was clever. His father, a successful businessman, pressured him to achieve.

The summer exams were the gateway to the future. Our lives rested on our performance. We could be a winner or a loser. Please God, I thought. Don't let me be a loser.

Ricky was destined to be a winner. He was prepared to do anything to succeed.

None of us did as much revision as we should. We weren't the college's best hope of upping its academic ranking. Ricky stopped hanging out with us because he was an 'achiever'. The few times I saw him after the exams he was puffy eyed and exhausted. He refused to acknowledge me.

Later we discovered what had happened.

His mother found him on his bedroom floor. He'd collapsed while revising. He'd been using amphetamines and caffeine pills. He had been so out of it he hadn't turned up to his exams. He hadn't slept in weeks. He thought he'd taken on special powers.

He didn't go to university.

I saw him a few years later. He gave me a blank look and walked on. I felt this terrible shame. Thank God it was him, I thought, and not me.

Just in case

Mrs Patel from number twenty-seven worked as a psychiatrist. She liked to get things right. When she prepared a picnic for her children she calculated the exact nutritional value of their meal (including the drinks). Everything had to be worked out and planned in advance. She worried her children might choke on an apple so she cut the apples into tiny pieces and packed them in an airtight container. She toasted their sandwiches (bread tasted better that way). She used a low fat spread instead of butter. The children weren't allowed crisps, sweets, chocolate, chips or readymade meals. She kept a constant monitor to see how much salt they consumed.

Mrs Patel kept the back door locked in case a burglar was on the prowl. She kept an eye on the children when they played in the garden. She was an active member of the local neighbourhood watch scheme.

Television was always a cause of anxiety. She kept a firm control over what they watched. Soap operas were not educational and spread selfishness. They portrayed negative moral values. The violence and sexual references were unnecessary.

Every time she left the house she carried out rigorous checks. It was important to ensure the windows and doors were locked. She had a thing for switching off electrical sockets and removing plugs. Cats liked to rub themselves against walls. It was possible a wet one might creep in and get electrocuted.

Computer games

Emotional contract

If my life was a computer game it would be simple. I can see it now, casually walking down the street in a suit carrying a leather bag. I glance around to check I'm not being followed and turn down an alley. It only takes a second to pick the lock and slip inside the building. I jog to the top floor. My position gives me a perfect line of sight across the park. I remove my jacket and rest it on a chair. I take the rifle out of the bag, assemble it, load a single round into the chamber and click off the safety.

The telescopic sight gives me a magnified view into the kitchen. She's drinking coffee.

I breathe in and exhale. The cross hairs are dead centre between her eyes. I press the trigger.

The force of the bullet catapults her body across the room. She hits the wall.

Adios sweetheart.

That's how it would be – breaking up with her – if I was an assassin. No guilt. A professional hit man is a machine. Emotion slows him down.

There's no movement on the street below. If anyone was there they wouldn't have noticed anyway.

The cartridge ejects from the chamber. I disassemble the rifle.

Then I disappear, who knows where, assume a new identity and resurface in a small bar in Mexico wearing mirrored sunglasses.

It would be that easy.

The assassin

Dusk on a cool winters evening. I throw the grappling hook over the brick wall and climb.

I know from my briefing the target is located in the mansion a kilometre and a half away. I have to pass a narrow strip of woodland. An electronic device on my belt scans for booby-traps. It's clear. I double check the silenced .22 pistol. Everything is in order.

I choose a path through the trees. I stick to the shadows at all times. The ornamental garden is trickier. I crawl along the hedge. At the end there's a stone patio with classical statues.

I've been informed by radio the target is having a drink in his study, which adjoins the library.

I use a small bottle to squirt oil into the lock and hinges. The door opens without a sound.

My luck is in. The target is facing away from me. He's sitting in a high-backed leather chair. I aim the pistol and press the trigger.

Phut! Phut! Phut!

I walk around to examine my work. The body is slumped over a computer game controller. He's been playing the same game as me.

Respawn

I examine myself in the window. I'm wearing a dark suit with a white shirt and a black tie. I'm holding a briefcase. The handle creaks as I grip it. The air smells damp and lifeless. This place feels familiar. There's a piece of paper in my pocket. I check the address.

Satisfied I'm not being followed I use the skeleton key on the door. It opens without a problem. I take the stairs and set up by the window. I have an excellent view into her bedroom. It's one of those hot summer nights and the window is open.

I open the briefcase and assemble the rifle. Through the lens everything has a luminous blue-green cast.

She's sleeping. I play the cross hairs up and down her body. Then I zoom in on her head.

"Goodnight," I whisper as I press the trigger.

I put the rifle away and leave.

On the street I see my reflection in the window. I'm wearing a dark suit with a white shirt and a black tie. I'm holding a briefcase. The handle creaks as I grip it. The air smells damp and lifeless.

The mission

I woke up on the beach holding a 9mm.

Then I remembered.

My plane had been shot down and I'd escaped by parachute. I'd been investigating the island, looking for my brother. This time I knew I was heading for trouble – and that's exactly what I wanted. I picked myself up and ran down a trail, which led into the jungle. A bunch of mercenaries came out and I popped them with head shots. I snatched an assault rifle from one of the bodies.

There were loads of them coming from every angle. I kept on firing.

Reloading.

Firing.

Reloading.

Firing.

I found a rocket launcher and went into the bunker. It appeared to be some kind of research laboratory. I found a card key and used it on a door marked, 'Research Personnel Only'. Inside, men in white coats were busy experimenting on humans. I saw my brother among them. The mutation they'd injected had already taken hold. He didn't have long.

I killed the guards, the technicians, the mutants – everyone.

I found the guy in charge. He was attempting to escape on an underground train. I dispatched him with a head shot. After that I fixed explosives to the central generator. I left through a ventilation shaft. I sat on the beach watching the complex blow sky high.

Then I looked out to sea. Somewhere out there was reality.

Level 18

He should have gone home and slept. Instead he went to the café and bought a double espresso. It was 8.45 am.

He'd just finished a night shift. He played computer games to stave off boredom. His favourite was Luna: Extreme.

Everything in his life was inside-out, back to front. Days merged into nights, weeks into months. He'd developed a routine: a Tube journey, a walk, a meal, sleep, waking up, showering, getting dressed, a drink, a bite to eat, a walk, a Tube journey.

Around him fresh-faced workers were starting the day. He caught sight of Luna. She was strolling past and came into the café. She bought an iced coffee with an almond pastry.

She looked stunning in her Safari outfit: a khaki shirt-jacket, hot pants, a webbed string backpack stuffed with high-impact grenades, lace-up knee-boots, a low slung

ammo belt with a 9mm snug in its holster. He watched her as she sipped her drink. He marvelled at her incredible body, the tucked in waist and long black hair. She took off her zebra bush hat and rested it on the assault rifle.

He tried to catch her attention but the place was busy. The next time he looked she'd gone.

All these people and none of them had noticed her.

Level 19

When he got home Luna was sitting on a kitchen stool. She was wearing her Tahiti outfit, his favourite. It consisted of a tasselled leopard skin bikini and a cartridge belt across her shoulder.

“Hello,” she said. “How are you?”

“Tired.”

“I just came over to say I love you.”

“How can you?” he said. “You’re not even human.”

“Don’t I arouse you? Wouldn’t you like to feel my polygon algorithms and slip inside my perfect mathematics? I know you would. You’d love to touch the creamy smoothness of my modelled textures.”

“You’re . . .” He sighed. “I don’t know what you are.”

“I’m almost real,” she said. “Real enough. You can do whatever you like with me. I’ll do anything to please you. I could exist solely for your pleasure.” She ran a finger down her ammunition belt. “Anything you desire.”

He shook his head.

“I can alter my appearance. I can be any women you want. I can be Luna, I can be someone else.”

“I don’t love you,” he said. “You’re a character from a computer game.”

“Is that all I am?” she said. “You make me love you but you won’t love me back.”

The story is the story

The help pack

I ran out of inspiration and sent a letter off to this advert in the newspaper claiming it could solve my problems – writers block and procrastination – as well as give me valuable tips for character creation and plot twists.

Great, Bartholomew thought. This was exactly what he needed.

The help pack was a little expensive, but the sales consultant was friendly and sounded like he knew what he was talking about. He mentioned the package was selling like ‘hot cakes’ so it had to be good.

Of course being a reasonable man, Bartholomew took up the offer with its five percent discount.

The help pack arrived. I was surprised to see a slim A4 envelope. When I opened it there were only two pages

inside. One of them was a letter from Jimmy Wiseman, the CEO of Giraffe Creative Solutions. The other was mostly blank except for instructions:

1. Drive somewhere you have never been before
2. Put on a joke mask and get out of the car
3. Select a house in which the occupant(s) are out
4. Break in through the back door
5. Use household objects / documents to create a profile of the person(s) living there
6. Use your profile(s) as material for your story

Bartholomew bought a Spider-Man mask on his lunch break. But when he got home that evening his house had been broken into. He couldn't believe the coincidence.

Neither can I.

Dead end

I found the body at the end of the first sentence. They say it's good to start with a bang. And if Roger Malthorpe hadn't he certainly ended with one.

Me?

I'm just a lonely cop living in a crummy apartment on the edge of town. I've got a lot of scars but that's okay because I'm here to make you feel better about yourself. My wife left me ten years ago. She couldn't stand the hours I put in. She said I was married to the Homicide Department. She took off with a chef – said he was a better lover than a cook. He worked in one of those fancy restaurants.

I hate fancy food. I hate fancy places. They make me uncomfortable. I bet that chef of hers was real fancy. I'm a simple guy with simple needs.

Back at my crummy apartment I'm listening to a train rumble past. A police siren fades in the distance – another lonely cop answering the call.

I bet that corpse Roger Malthorpe – or whatever they called him – wasn't fancy enough. Or maybe he was?

I'll find out. I always do.

The next time we meet we'll pretty much experience the same story all over again. Someone will die and I'll dig up the dirt. But you'll get to know me even better. And reading about my despair will make you feel less lonely.

Story manager

Good morning and welcome to this short story. My name is Colin Greenwood and I'll be guiding your journey through this piece of text. Please save any questions for later. I'll be only too happy to answer them at the end. Now if we can please move to the second paragraph.

Short stories are by their nature brief and consequently there's a limited word count to play with. This story is a perfect example. We've finished the first part and we're already in the middle.

What does the middle do? It follows the opening and precedes the end. It's traditionally regarded as the part where our attention is most likely to dip and it's for this reason I am going to SPEAK LOUDLY and VARY the TONE of my VOICE to make it seem MORE EXCITING that it really is. *I can even use a different font. Don't worry if this is ANNOYING because we're almost at the end.*

Here we are tidying things up. We can finish it off by showing what's been achieved. This is the part where the hero wins and the bad guy is punished.

Any questions?

None?

Okay – my name is Colin Greenwood and this one was called, 'Story Manager'. Now if you'd kindly turn to the next story. Thank you.

Thrilling and original

We pay for everything in the end. They make things cheap by cutting corners. When we buy cheap things we're not buying the same thing. We are getting something similar but inferior.

If the process was applied to stories a lot of commas would get cut out and then the full stops they would miss out capitals at the beginning of sentences too

they would use the same plot in different stories and rehash the same old characters one story would sound like another and before long we'd get really bored because everything would look the same

eventually jek lack nahioo watt longen for sitch ongoon bat latter gripfen laston nothing would make sense

and then they would –

We pay for everything in the end. They make things cheaper by cutting corners. When we buy cheap things

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they would use the same plot in different stories and rehash the same old characters one story would sound like another and before long we'd get really bored because everything would be the same

– mindlessly repeat stuff from the beginning of the story hoping you'll skip it anyway

finally they'll market the whole thing with loads of hype telling us it's thrilling and original.

Saving the world

An aeroplane crashes into a luxury liner. Somewhere else in the world a meteor smashes into the earth causing an earthquake – this is without doubt the most amazing story ever. It's an incredible action-packed experience.

And now after our brief introduction let me refer to what the critics have to say:

“Astounding.” – Nowhere Herald

“A must see!” – Obscure Magazine

“Gripping.” – Horber Moberg

The story continues . . . Elsewhere, a hard working taxi driver believes he has the answer to the origins of this chaos, but no one takes him seriously. By chance, his passenger is Professor Elaine Egghead of the Redemski Institute and

she has been predicting such a calamity for years but no one has been listening because of her neurotic personality. They must work together on one final mission to save the world. They must persuade all the nations of the earth to aim their nuclear rockets at the scriptwriter, producer, and director and only then will the future of mankind be safe.

Interruption

Gerald Cowthwaite was reading a novel in bed when he let out a cry. He'd reached the middle of the book, nothing much had happened and suddenly there was a pointless sex scene. It annoyed him when writers threw in needless sex scenes that said nothing about the characters.

He snoozed for a while.

The the doorbell rang. He went down to investigate.

When he opened the door he saw an attractive woman in a long coat.

"My name is Misha," she said in a foreign accent. Her coat fell to the floor. She was completely naked.

"Kiss me," she said. "Please! Kiss me."

He couldn't resist. They started kissing. Afterwards they held one another.

"I find you very attractive," she said.

He stepped back to admire her. "You're incredible!"

Suddenly she put on her coat and ran into the night.

Gerald went into the kitchen and made himself a cup of hot milk. Thank God writers' put pointless sex scenes in the middle of stories, he thought. He went to his room and continued reading. Nothing much happened for the rest of the night.

Drying up

I sat down to write but my mind wasn't there. I didn't know where it was but I had to write.

It had been a bad week and I couldn't concentrate. I looked up at the ceiling for inspiration but nothing came to me.

Time went slowly.

It was just me, a pencil and a sheet of paper.

I waited for thirty-five minutes.

I began to panic.

What if I never wrote again? That happened to people. One day they had something to say and the next they didn't.

At least, this time I knew I'd make it

to

the

next

page.

Everything done

Luke Berringer sat down to write. He was having difficulty because everything he wrote was being written by other people. It was as if they could second guess his ideas before he'd written them.

This depressed him. What was he going to write about if everything he did had already been done?

After hours of contemplation he came up with something interesting. He was going to write a story about a writer who was having difficulty deciding what to write. He wondered if he should write it in the first or third person. Writing in the first person made it seem more direct but he didn't want people thinking it was autobiographical. He opted for the third person viewpoint.

Then he thought about the tense. Should he set it in the present or past tense?

He felt a sense of relief. He had a subject, a point of view and the tense. All he had to do was think of a beginning and an end.

As he sucked on a mint an unusual idea hit him. He started typing:

Luke Berringer sat down to write. He was having difficulty because everything he wrote was being written by other people.

Agent

My agent called. I thought I'd given him the shake, but here he was joking I'd signed a nine-hundred and ninety-nine year contract.

"What do you want?" I said.

He knew I'd given up the material world for meditation and philosophy. I'd bought a cottage in an out of the way part of the world and I was hoping people like him wouldn't find me.

"You should come back to the city," he said. "It's time to write that blockbuster you've been talking about. Come back. You know you'll love it."

I realised I was talking to the devil so I ignored him.

"What are you doing now?" he said.

"I'm taking time out," I said. "It's a creative gap."

"A creative gap," he echoed.

"I need time to think."

I didn't know what I needed to think about. The only thing I did know was that my phone was bugged. I jumped into my Ferrari and sped up the motorway. I was being tailed by two black Mercedes. A man wearing dark sunglasses lent out of one with a machine gun. I put my foot down but they caught up. I slowed down to dodge the spray of bullets. It hit the other car, which exploded in a ball of orange fire. I fooled the remaining driver into thinking I was going straight but turned off. They had an eye in the sky, a helicopter gunship. I used the missile launcher to shoot it down.

I was just in time to save my agent. He winked at me as the criminals fled.

“Well done!” he said. “Here's your cheque.”

Agent 2 (the return)

PROLOGUE: ONE WEEK PREVIOUSLY

Wednesday 2.52 am. He sat in a darkened room, blinds drawn caressing the cold metal of the pistol, one thing on his mind.

A WEEK LATER

As I reach for a pencil a man bursts into the room pointing a handgun at me. I leap onto the floor with my notepad. I'm writing this for you even though I've only got a few seconds . . .

I hear a voice in my head. It's my agent. "Make your stories commercial," he says. "Plot them with a clear beginning, middle and end. And don't forget to be specific."

. . . I crawl across the room. The Beretta 9mm fires. Bullets whizz past my ear.

I tackle him while he reloads and wrestle him to the ground. The pistol flies through the air. It hits the floor with a clatter.

He reaches for it but I get there first.

“That’s enough,” I shout. “Who sent you?”

“Your agent,” he says. “Please! I’m a writer. He wouldn’t give me a contract unless I kill you.”

I force him to my agent’s office. I won’t tell you what I did but neither of them will bother me again.

EPILOGUE: TWO WEEKS LATER

I’m lying on a beach drinking coconut juice. My bag is by my side. It contains fifty HB pencils, a sharpener and ten pads of wide lined, yellow, A4 paper.

Agent 3 (nemesis)

I thought I killed him but the surgeons were able to transplant my agent's brain into another body. I got the word he was out for revenge. He had hired five of the world's most deadly assassins.

They broke down my door while I was writing. I was surprised to see them. The ninja threw a death star at me. It embedded in my forehead. The second assassin fired an M16. I got a clip in the chest.

Another had a sub machine gun. He emptied that into me. One fired a rocket launcher. It clean blew off my head. I tell you it was grizzly. My body was scattered all over the floor. Well . . . the bits that weren't stuck to the walls and ceiling.

"That's from your agent!" one of them said. "You just got rubbed out."

The others laughed.

So there I was dead on the floor. I wasn't in the mood to comment on my misfortune. But things weren't as bad as they could have been. They'd forgotten one thing. I was the one writing the story. And even if they rubbed me out I could pencil myself back in.

All new, amazing

Today's special is 'The Deal'. Buy one hundred and fifty words and we'll throw in another one hundred and fifty for free. For a small premium you can upgrade to Story Plus. This provides fifteen per cent additional story for the same word count.

Do you ever feel the story you're reading is going in the wrong direction? Do you ever feel out of control, anxious or have 'butterflies'? If you do then how about the opportunity to alter the ending the way you see fit? Does this sound like a dream? Well with Story Master you're the boss. You decide what happens.

How?

It's simple. Call our free number and register with one of our Story Master consultants. They will send an envelope to post your book to us. We will adapt the ending of the story

to your specification (in the style of the original author). We'll reprint the results in a rebound version of the book and return it by post.

With Story Master you get whatever you desire. If you want the hero to have a happy ending – we make it so. If you want the villain punished – it happens. Simply fill in the details and let us do the rest.

As a strictly time limited offer we also have the 'Special Deal Bonus Ten'*. This gives you the same benefits as 'The Deal' with an even more generous ten free words. That's an amazing one hundred and sixty words for free!

Be sure to sign up for one of our once in a lifetime deals.

*Actual word count may vary from advertised length.

[Insert title]

```
<play: shortstory.script
  'random story generator'
  insert: {character: situation}
  {unexpected event}
  factual info for authenticity: {Topic}
  'random story algorithm'
  go to: 'generated results'
  insert: 'random story solution'
  go to: 'outcome'
  'plot twist': setting "average" believability: "medium"
  insert: 'something unexpected'
  'something more unexpected'
  hidden: *marketing tie-in*
  'romantic encounter'
  protagonist's fortune rating: "2"
  insert: {element of chance}
```

[INSERT TITLE]

{the big comeback}

protagonist's fortune rating: "9"

satisfying solution: happiness: "7" realism: "4"

hidden: *theme*

add-on: {potential for sequel}

stop/>

Summer mist

I wanted to write a story about a man who goes to the woods where he played as a child. He takes a walk along the stream where he used to hang out. He spots the old car tyre hanging from a branch, which they used to swing across the stream.

This situation could provide a deep insight into his mind. I could use it to call on haunting and poignant memories.

Then I got a message asking me to ‘change the emphasis’. They wanted something more commercial ‘but with a heart’. They told me I only needed to ‘tweak it’.

In the revised version they wanted the following products woven into the story: Summer Mist detergent, Speedmark Tyres and UltraSure Insurance.

I worried the ‘change the emphasis’ would ruin my integrity but I succumbed.

I went away, worked hard and 'came up with the goods' as they called it. In the final version the froth in the bubbling stream reminded him of washing up foam. The tyre hanging from the tree was a Speedmark tyre, which came off his father's car. The town had been flattened by a hurricane. Although it destroyed all the houses his parent's was quickly rebuilt because it was insured by UltraSure.

That's perfect they said. Now all you have to do is wrap it up with heartfelt emotion. They noticed my lack of enthusiasm. Think of this as a challenge they said. If you can fake emotion you can write about anything.

Oscar

I found a short story wandering around the neighbourhood and took him in. After I fed him I took him for a walk around the block. He sniffed about and peed at the end of the street.

“Come on,” I said. “We’ve only got a couple of hundred words to play with. You can’t waste them here.”

The short story sniffed the air and walked on.

When we got home he started jumping up and down.

“Calm down,” I said. “There’s nothing to get excited about. We only went for a walk around the corner.”

The short story found an old tennis ball and brought it over. I wasn’t in the mood to play fetch but didn’t want to let him down.

Then he tried to climb onto the sofa.

“Down!” I said. “You’re not allowed up here.”

The little chap looked offended. He gave me a sad frown.

“Okay. Come on,” I said.

He jumped up and was so excited he licked my face. I pushed him away. Then I realised he didn’t have a name.

“I know,” I said, “I’ll call you Oscar.”

It goes like this

I don't like stories where I don't know what's going on. If I wrote a story I'd make absolutely sure everything was straightforward and clear.

THIS IS THE STORY ABOUT HOW I FELL IN LOVE WITH A WOMAN AND SHE RAN OFF WITH ANOTHER MAN.

This is where the problem starts. You see, she ran away with my best friend. I couldn't forgive him or her. I suppose I should be honest enough to admit I was having an affair with his wife at the time – although she was the one that seduced me. (Really.)

The rest is history. He got drunk one night, broke into the house and threatened me. Luckily, I had my mobile and called the police.

I know I should have told you earlier but it didn't seem like the right moment. Before all this happened he was also my business partner. He'd been covertly siphoning money into his private account. I found that out when I was in his

office making out with his secretary.

He promised me the money. I met him at a disused timber mill. He'd gone there to kill me. We had a fight that spilled onto a conveyor belt. He lost his balance as he was about to shoot and got mangled by a shredder.

I ran off with the money and a woman I'd met the day before at the train station. This is the story about how I fell in love with her and she ran off with another man.

Prisoner

Robin Mayor woke up to find himself trapped in a short story.

As soon as the shock passed he realised he had about two hundred and fifty words left, or was that about two hundred and forty words? No, make it about two hundred and thirty.

He ran into the street and screamed, “Help me! Please somebody help me. I’m trapped inside a short story. Let me out!”

No one was listening and he was burning through words so fast it would have been foolish to continue. He could feel the word count mounting. He didn’t have long – a hundred words or so.

He went onto the roof of a large building and decided enough was enough. He didn’t want to linger on knowing

his time was running out and there was nothing he could do to change it.

His life would end when this short story ended.

He decided he would do it his way and make it happen as fast as possible. He would control his destiny.

“Get me out of here,” he shouted. “Get me out of here! Get me – ”

The catcher in the narrative

The first thing I should tell you about is my crummy childhood and how I nicked this start from a famous book – I can't remember what it's called. It's about a guy who goes berserk, although nothing much happens along the way. A lot of people think it's great because you feel what he is going through. It's so damned real.

I hate stories about stupid people doing dumb things and it's supposed to be funny. I don't know what they call that kind of stuff but it's lame. I want to read stories about people trying to figure out what they want and how they fit in. It's nothing big, it's about life. I hate stories which involve stupid plots to take over the government or people with superhuman powers.

My theory is that ninety-nine per cent of everything is crap. And out of the one per cent that isn't crap ninety-nine per cent of that is junk (which is only marginally better).

The more television and magazines and websites they put out the worse it gets. There's not enough good stuff to go around.

I see a lot of people copying other peoples stuff and it's sad because not only are they completely unoriginal but they've got no idea they're copying crap.

Oh, and I tried reading that goddamned book but I couldn't get into it. I got bored after the first paragraph. Like I said, even the good stuff is ninety-nine percent junk.

Telling it like it isn't

I was stuck in the middle of the countryside, green grass for as far as I could see and a blue sky above. All I had on me was a pencil and paper.

I was writing a short story – this short story, in fact – a short story about writing one. It was only then I realised how dishonest I was.

I feel compelled by guilt to admit to you, and the world, I'm a fraud, a fake, a liar, a cheap sleight of hand magician. And what's more I'm not doing anything as impressive as pulling rabbits from hats.

I'm a worthless cheat. I have to confess this and shout this from every window in every house in every city the world over.

I'M A LIAR!

Forgive me!

You do?

Thank you.

To be honest I can't do this anymore. It's too much. It goes against everything I believe in, every grain of truth. I'm sick of lies. I'm ashamed.

The truth is I'm not in a field in the countryside. I'm in a cheap hotel room and it's three o'clock in the morning.

Now I'm even more ashamed. I've cheated again. I'm not in a hotel room. I'm in a boat.