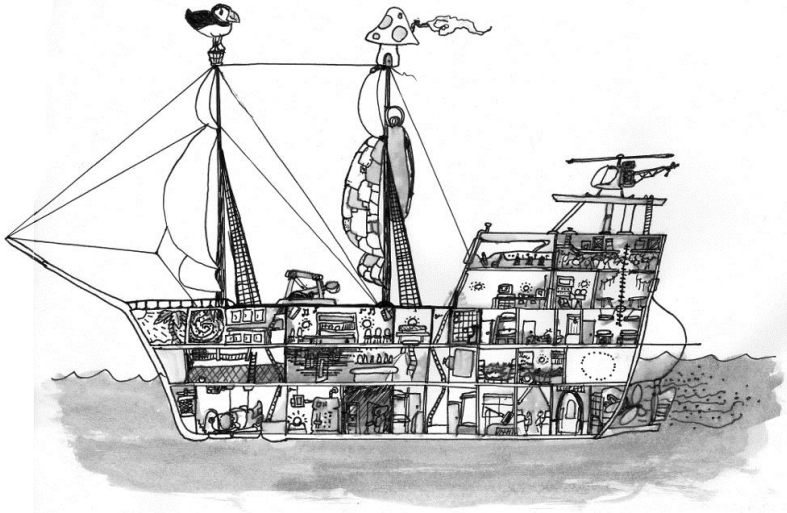


BA MA NA SA KA RA MA THA

“This is what happens when people try and do things together...”

- The Chief

The
Utica
Flower
Company
Book 1
Part 1

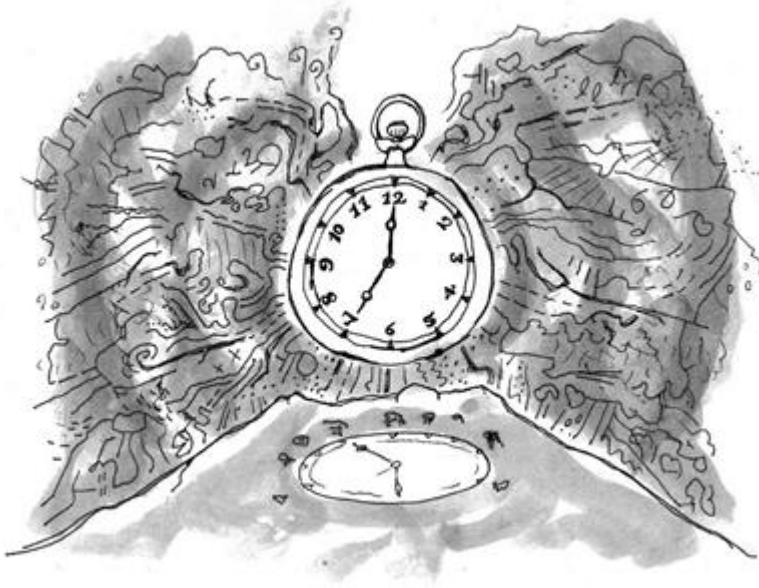


observatory
of
multitudes
(oom)

Heliped

						Bridge	Storage
						Communications	Garden L
						Room	of company
	catapult						boardroom
Solarium	Galley	Wardroom	REC Room	5	Cabin	Shower	SICK
				4	1	2	Bay
Perch	Hall	Basement	5	6	war	Ready	not-so
Held			5	4	Room	Studio	recapt
			4	3	for	recapt	for
Anchor	Moon Pool	Engine	machine	tank	5	2	War
Held	(submarine)	Room	Shop	8	1	2	Day
							arm
							hold
							under-
							ground

STARBOARD SIDE: Gallery, Cabin 4, Cabin 5, Cabin 6,
(not shown) Bunkroom 5, Bunkroom 6, Bunkroom 7



A large clock hung suspended in space above a grassy hill located in a vast basement. The sun appeared to be exploding directly behind it, while solar winds generated 679 different colours. On the hill, amongst the clouds, stood a circular table that mirrored the clock face. Around the table were seated twelve shadowy figures whose faces were hidden. Many wore strange rubber masks. Others were concealed beneath black cloaks, cheap plastic sunglasses, or fake moustaches. One eight-limbed creature was not even human.

The figure at twelve o'clock was an old man wearing round-rimmed mirrored shades and a black floppy hat. His shadowy hands worked fast as he tied together three white balloons in the shape of a whale. He offered the balloon whale to the solar corona, letting it flutter from his fingertips. From far below they heard a frog croak and three more shadowy apparitions appeared out of Nowhere, dripping fluorescent green paint. The three figures began to harmonise the word 'HMMMMMMMM'. Ten o'clock stood up and parped awkwardly upon a longhorn while several figures around the table shook their heads, clearly disappointed.

'It has begun,' announced the old balloonist, turning his face to the exploding sun.

The clock faded and a face appeared at the centre of the table, a man in a woollen hat and flying goggles, with icicles hanging down

from his beard and nostrils. ‘The Universe Machine is ready,’ he informed them.

‘Thank you, Graham,’ replied the old balloonist, and as the table became a clock face again, he turned to the sturdy figure in a black balaclava and boilersuit at four o’clock. ‘Darko, have we located the missing crew of the Marjorie Mae?’

Darko frowned, skilfully twirling a scalpel like a ping-pong paddle between his fingers. ‘I caught one of them in a Burmese pumpkin patch. He was transcribing some smoke words onto the side of a pumpkin. Soon as I locate the others, and trust me, it is only a matter of time, I’ll be in touch.’

‘Must we be so cruel?’ asked a hooded woman sitting at eleven o’clock. ‘This thuggery makes us look like a coven of Rah.’

‘My love, I’ve explained this before,’ replied the old balloonist, a flicker of impatience in his voice. ‘Reality itself is at stake. We cannot risk sailing the Universe Machine ourselves. Nobody can know what we’re doing.’

‘Please,’ said the woman, ‘don’t insult my intelligence.’ She pointed angrily across the table at Darko. ‘You were tasked with taking over the Mardi. You said it would be easy.’

Darko stopped twirling his scalpel. ‘You have your precious ship, right?’

‘You sunk her,’ she hissed.

‘She hit an iceberg,’ he replied, leaning back in his chair. ‘Our friends in Antarctica got her up and running again, so what are you worrying about?’

‘Captain Durham,’ said the woman and the others shifted uneasily in their seats.

‘Durham was a crazy old drunk,’ replied Darko.

The woman laughed sceptically. ‘Yet there was no sign of a body...’

‘Dat is true,’ agreed a figure at five o’clock, lifting a cheek from his seat and breaking wind. ‘I checked di ship fram top to batty. Deh was nuh sign of Durham.’

‘Alas,’ sighed the old balloonist, ‘Durham or no Durham, we cannot put this off any longer. The frog has croaked and the longhorn has been sounded. There is no going back now.’

‘In case you’re forgetting, it’s my money keeping this project afloat,’ snapped a figure at three o’clock behind a sinister black hairy mask. ‘I want assurances we’re ready to do this, and that it’s going to work. First time.’

‘It *will* work,’ blurted out a short, bald figure with a thick Spanish accent at six o’clock. ‘In all my years I never saw a patient with as much potential as Kolinsky.’

‘I’ve known Kolinsky longer than any of you,’ replied the man in the black mask. ‘I wouldn’t trust him to sail a pedalo across a duck pond, never mind let him loose in a big fuck-off ship on the open seas.’

Six o’clock thumped his fist on the clock-face. ‘The team we have assembled around him are...’ His voice trailed away as he searched for the right word.

‘Quixodelic?’ suggested the old balloonist, his grin revealing two rows of polished meteors for teeth.

The non-human at nine o’clock clicked angrily beneath his cloak.

‘Dr Scrinrad is right,’ said the balloonist. ‘I am not a superstitious man, but sometimes we dismiss a guiding light as mere coincidence. From seven billion human beings, Professor Sanchez chose a former patient of his who just happened to be your childhood friend. If you think that’s chance, I would ask you to reconsider.’

Nine o’clock continued to click angrily.

‘I called him, didn’t I?’ asked black mask.

‘If it makes you feel any better, we’ll be watching their every move,’ said the balloonist. ‘We have the security cameras. We even have an inside man who will report back to us and ensure we stay in control at all times. That is, assuming he’s up to the job...’

‘What are you suggesting? Obviously I’m up to the job!’ protested the longhorn player, his spherical head silhouetted against the colourful rays of the sun. ‘You try playing the damn longhorn next time! I told you all it hadn’t been tuned, but would anybody listen? No.’

‘We have no choice but to trust you,’ three o’clock told the balloonist. ‘Nevertheless, when I make an investment, I expect a return. And if I go down, then you all go down with me. Is that clear?’

‘Bopcrons!’ cried the old balloonist, laughing and clapping his hands together. ‘What a court of miserable misanthropists you all are! Have you not read the words of the venerable Lumereti Hemhockle? Does he not say that “In time the ventral cogwheels shall be unlocked and we shall harness the awesome power of the Universe Machine”? Please, all of you, imagine with me...’

The circle sat in silence, contemplative, unspoken words fizzling out on the tips of their shadowy tongues while the numbers around the clock face began to pulse into unfamiliar hieroglyphic symbols swirling like smoke.

May 1, 2009

Alfie's Journal #1:
The Beginning of the Beginning

Our story began in March 2007 when we put together a free music compilation called "The Daydream Generation" featuring sub-rung bands and lo-fi songwriters from around the globe. Over the following two years we released eight of these compilations; we waded through the technological fucktastrophe of an online music festival; we built a virtual maze nobody completed; we designed some t-shirts, pants, and mouse-mats nobody ever bought; and we started our own net-label called Quixodelic Records. We even formed a secret anonymous musical society, although because of the anonymity, I could never really be sure who "we" actually were. Finally, the core members of the Quixodelic commune evolved into The Utica Flower Company - a collective of like-minded geekniks and urchins, all singing off the same page, collaborating on creative projects wherever we could. And we'd been patiently tapping away at the rock-face of obscurity until one grey February morning in 2009 when I got a phone call that, corny as it sounds, changed our lives forever.

The call was from J. Koradji, a friend from school and self-made millionaire. Last I'd heard, Koradji married his childhood sweetheart and they'd left Scotland for an office block in Tokyo. He was calling to tell me he'd inherited an old wooden ship called the *Mardi*, and he wanted to know if The Utica Flower Company were interested in borrowing it. In exchange, he wanted a sizeable stake in any book or movies we might produce while at sea. I pointed out that, as far as I was aware, none of our collective knew a thing about sailing. He said we would learn. I told him I had a job, a wife, and two kids. He said this was a once in a lifetime opportunity, and they would surely understand. I asked him why me? He said I was the only person he knew who was weird enough to attempt it.

It's something of a giant leap between a flurry of messages to various members of the Company, and setting sail this morning from Jacksonville Harbour. The last two months were such a blur, it feels like one moment I was telling Koradji I'd think about it, and the next I'm sitting here writing this in an old plastic journal I found amongst all the junk in the ship's Storage Hold.

So far we haven't sunk or crashed into any other boats, and, to the best of my knowledge, nobody has drowned. True, we have only been sailing for seven hours, but given our track record, this is an

achievement in itself. It's also true we still don't have a clue about sailing, but like Koradji said, we'll learn. And if we don't learn quickly, we're all going to die.

Keeping the Mardi afloat is our most pressing concern, but with a state-of-the-art navigation system the Koradji Corporation fitted for us, all we have to do is keep out of trouble and kill time with our creative endeavours. Maybe even play the occasional game of ping-pong.

I look up from the crumpled journal and gaze out the porthole at the coastline of America. I feel it in my bones that this adventure is different. That it's going to be a success. Unless, of course, that feeling in my bones is scurvy, in which case, things have gotten fucked up frighteningly fast.

As we make our way around the world, our crew have promised me they will record their escapades and collate them here, using the Kerouacian mantra of "first thought = best thought".

For now, our objective is simple: Sail the Mardi around the worl-

FUCK!

GIANT ICEBERG!!!

Haha, only kidding, but I made you look, didn't I?
Alfie (The Not Captain)

...

Simon: Perhaps Kerouac, perhaps Confucius.

Alfie: Confucius? Isn't he the guy who invented pick-up sticks? Maybe it's just me, but does anyone else have that horrible feeling like they've forgotten something really important? Perhaps we should have recruited a psychiatrist.

Moss: I totally aspire to be an old teahead of time, like Proust. Hey, can we grow flowers below deck? Well, even if we can't, my cabin will have a secret garden in it. I'll sleep in a flower bed.

May 2, 2009

NEAR-FIELD TEST

23C4KRKXM43 409R3X1 0DEKDK FM VV 0002 3 9MF
9FDNNCQ3 034 FNFNNS003MPA, L1000S9 4 N20DN 329DHND 2
0D9DJ24NN 009FHN3 0 349RUCNQ-34NIQ34N5 200939U2N 9999
3DJ 9HC NL

BEGIN TRANSMISSION.

=====
THIS IS A TEST OF THE ONBOARD NEAR-FIELD
COMMUNICATIONS SYSTEM.

Hello, Crew. This is Dr Simon Piler reporting from the Sick Bay.

The Atom Band and I have settled into our work unloading and categorizing the on-board equipment and technical supplies. We currently have at our disposal:

- 1 TASCAM MF-P01 4-track tape cassette recording device
- 1 600 Ohm uni-directional cardioid microphone
- 1 600 Ohm low-impedance cardioid microphone
- 1 phone-tapping microphone
- 2 answering machines
- An assortment of cables, bells, flutes, and whistles.
- 3 rerouting, filtered switches
- A gross of cassette tapes
- A large sum of bandages
- Splints for arms, legs, and brains
- 13 reservoirs capable of containing dreams (Add'l reservoirs currently under assembly by Def Mute.)
- 7 reservoirs capable of containing ghosts or other ecto-sonic data
- 2 magnifying glasses
- 1 6-person diving bell
- A ridiculous quantity of drum sticks, brushes, and mallets
- A bottle of Tequila and a box of lead bullets (in case surgery is required)
- 1 computer, equipped with a midi controller keyboard and one 3 1/2" floppy diskette drive
- 1 aged LSM-1 Sound Expander midi bank

Cartoon heads of all varieties of expression
Several short-pencils
Notebooks, an ample supply
The Quixodelic Records digital discography and any documentation thereof.

I would also like to report a variety of actual, human resources currently at the crew's disposal.

Our on-board computer engineer; Sir Matthew the Mighty (Champion of Science, First Court of The Solar Corona), is standing-by to intercept questions dealing with magnetic and resonant fluxes. If need be, Scarytoes can bend in several unusual ways.

I regret to report that none of the individuals of my party have been trained in formal psychiatric procedures, nor aspires to learn. We DO believe in fresh sea air and the coarse song of the albatross, however!

At this time, I would like to brief the crew on a short field-collection expedition The Atom Band and I plan to undertake:

In the cold evaporate of night we will travel to a nearby island-of-dreams by inflatable air balloons of a variety of colors. Via the Thin Space of the Universe, the island is only a short distance from our vessel's current, past, or future positions. (As described by Fick's diffusion-gradients of normalized space.) We plan to use the available laboratory equipment to bring a few of the more substantial dreams back to our workshop for further study. There they will be examined for excessive DC Bias.

Thank You for your attention. Anticipate further biweekly reports on laboratory condition.

=====

CEASE TRANSMISSION.

RAETTN34800Q34NV5Q34N Q34Q340CQ 340 9FUA43AM XDMF
FF0A9J234N 3546 0 09 T4Q385423 50QUFAJ3L2I43294TG AJJR
39RJC 30R2J3I F23 59UA F AEWA0IA4J5 350E0T435
Q5YQGAQG34Q Q35T4TQ

...

Moss: Now I know what I've been missing my whole life... a brain splint. It makes so much sense.

Alfie: "7 reservoirs capable of containing ghosts or other ecto-sonic data" - We're not going to have Walter Peck turn up out of the blue and threaten to shut us down, are we?

...

May 3, 2009

Moss's Journal #1:

Dagboek

I walk to the side and use the boat to lean against. Don't ask me which side, I hate all these technical terms I'm meant to have learnt. Starboard?

I lean against the side. The ocean is mostly flat. Ripples away from me. Not towards.

I wish there was a sunset. Or a sunrise. I turn my face into the mist. The purple sky and horizon and ocean meld together and I can't tell where each begins. It's silence for further than I can comprehend, but behind me and below deck I hear the laughter and buzzing notes, tinkles and crashes of percussion and muted, spreading bass. I smile as a breeze finally picks up, blowing the hair out of my face. I wouldn't want to be anywhere else.

—

Getting over the sea-sickness. Had been emptying my sick-buckets overboard when I realised Alfie had his washing hanging out the window right underneath. Attempting to frame Simon for it. All is going well.

May 4, 2009

Robbie's Journal #1:
I Don't Know What I'm Doing Here

It was just a few months ago. The snow had all but disappeared in the yearly phenomenon known as the "January thaw" and I was face-down, laughing through a pillow at my own jumbled and fragmented philosophies. Nothing made sense, but suddenly everything made sense if you follow...

Of course you don't.

'We've got a lot to do, Robbie.' A voice snapped me out of my stupor, back into what passes for reality. It was no longer January. I could hear birds and smell the lilacs blooming. I love the smell of lilacs. 'For fuck's sake! Get up!'

I must have blacked out again and felt a gentle shove from someone's foot to my right shoulder. I always sleep on my left side. But I didn't feel like I had been asleep, exactly. I felt as if I was in motion, though I knew I was lying down. I'm not totally unaccustomed to "the spins", so I thought nothing of it. Then I opened my eyes.

No more lilacs.

That was my first thought as the smell of sea air filled my nostrils and travelled down into my landlubber lungs. I'm afraid of the ocean. One too many trips 20,000 leagues down in front of the television as a child. Jaws didn't help either. And didn't Jason Voorhees come back from the dead out of a lake? No matter. At least I was above the ocean. I can kind of deal with that. I struggled to sit up on the bunk I'd found. There was a bottle of rum on the floor beside me, so I helped myself to some.

'About bloody time!'

A voice I'd only heard on digitized recordings, most often in melody, came from behind me. I turned around to see a familiar face, one I'd never seen in three dimensions before. I spoke through vocal cords that felt like sandpaper. 'Goddam Alfie, your head is *huge* in person!'

I only said that to be funny, but quickly realized I may later regret those being my first spoken words to my captain.

Captain?

Ah yes, the memories are coming back. Through the fog of all the booze, pills, various hallucinogens, and things unmentionable to most, I could almost piece together a timeline of events leading me here to my quarters aboard a ship whose name I could not remember.

Q: What am I doing here?

A: What is anybody doing anywhere?

So goes the existential tug-of-war within my brain, and no doubt the brains of a billion others more intelligent than I.

I hear voices. And music.

And suddenly my attention is redirected to the Scotsman standing beside me.

‘We can’t turn back now. I don’t even know which way back is. Some fucker stole my compass, and I can’t figure out how to work the stupid navigation system.’ He seems very calm, and I am instantly comforted.

I follow him out into the ocean breeze.

...

Moss: Have you seen that Planet Earth episode with the great white? Even though it makes me fear for my life, I frickin’ love sharks. I hope we see a giant squid too, that’d just be bizarre.

Alfie: With 15 names scribbled in the ship’s roster, plus The Atom Band (who I can’t help but think of as one single entity), I’m concerned we’ve not yet seen everyone up on deck. Then again, at least half the crew were clearly drunk or seriously high on drugs when we departed from Jacksonville. They must be sobering up by now, wondering if it’s too late to swim back.

...

May 5, 2009

Jonny Rchrdsn’s Journal #1:

Early Sea Sickness?

I was never destined to be a great sailor. I struggle with any wayfaring vessel more complex than an inflatable ring; I wear Velcro shoes to avoid learning how to tie knots, and was born with the buoyancy of a bowling ball. We’re embarking on a voyage into the unknown, and I’m ashamed to say that I possess no skills which could ever be of practical use. As a result, I think I’ll confine myself to the Sick Bay from here on in. It’s bound to have a comfy hammock.

My name is Jonny. I don’t think anybody here will know me. Allow me to qualify this by saying that I’ve never done anything of interest or of note that would warrant you taking the time to etch me

into your memory. I dabble in the musical arts here and there, and like writing things. Sometimes. Not this post though – colour me sea sick folks, because writing this is difficult. I’ve been reading the Company’s logbook since Alfie was kind enough/generous enough/passionate enough to reach out and offer this sailing trip to a layabout/desperate enough to recruit anybody on-board just to give it the impression that it’s lively (DELETE AS APPROPRIATE) to give me a ticket granting me a free ride. As I don’t know many of you that well (with the exception of Moss, and to some extent, Alfie), the prospect of opening up and putting myself out there is always a rather daunting prospect; the severity of which is usually inversely proportionate to the units of alcohol befuddling my noggin.

Alas, the units currently measure zero, and as such, words are becoming rather hard to come by.

That said, I’m looking forward to joining in with everyone.

Ahoy.

...

Moss: I’m always aware of all my crew... no stowaways on my watch. Well, stowaways but not secret ones anyway. Sick Bay’s the best place to find the plasters, and you can take the vowels out of your last name all you want, I still know it’s you.

...

May 8, 2009

Transcript:

Inaugural Meeting of The Utica Flower Company

Various members of the Flower Company are gathered around the circular table in the Company Boardroom. One or two are dozing, while others are clearly under the influence of drink and/or drugs. Alfie sits at the head of the table with a bowl of cold mash, untouched in front of him.

Alfie: First of all, thanks for showing up. I thought I’d call this meeting to discuss some of the issues that have arisen during our first week at sea. I don’t know about the rest of you, but everything feels very chaotic, and that’s possibly why so many of the crew are still missing.

So for starters, how would everyone feel about taking on a specific role such as Cook, Engineer, Medic, or Librarian?

Scarytoes: *(aside)* What's he talking about? I thought we were here to get our green shirts, blue pants, and lifejackets?

Def Mute: *(mimes squeezing a tube)*

Scarytoes: Seriously? We didn't pack any toothpaste?

Simon Piler: Will you two quit jabbering? I'm trying to listen. If we don't pay attention, we'll end up missing out on all the good jobs!

Alfie: I've also heard that some of you are concerned about your personal safety, and I agree we should really have a rota for when the engine cuts out; just to make sure we don't crash into any other ships or rocks.

Jonny: Finally!

Alfie: The good news is I think I've figured out how to operate the navigation system. Thanks to Flash for pointing out it had to be switched on at the wall. Also, you'll be pleased to know I've ordered a replacement engine. In the meantime, The Atom Band have somehow managed to get the old one working again -

(Brendon Hertz high fives Matthew the Mighty.)

Alfie: - although it does continue to conk out sporadically.

(Brendon shakes his head and glares at Matthew.)

Matthew: What are you looking at me for? I didn't install it. That thing's got more kilometres on the clock than that Datura woman Simon used to date.

Simon: *(incredulous)* What did you just say?

Alfie: The plan is to attempt to fit the new engine while we sail, but until that happens I'd feel a lot safer if we had a lookout posted permanently in Craw's Nest 1.

Lt. Sparks: *(aside)* That probably explains why I'm hardly in this story.

Jonny: *(raises his hand)* I'm all for the idea of structure; especially if it means us not sinking and dying.

W: I concur. We should also think about repainting the hull of the ship. I think everything looks better with flames on it. You know, a good airbrushed flame running down the side of the boat, letting you know that wherever it's going, it's going there real fast.

Flash: Where's the weapons? I mean, if we're out at sea and run into some corporate douchebags who want to take over the ship, we're going to need some cannons, right? I'd settle for a catapult to hoist gobs of decaying squid. I'll even give up my bunk in order to make room.

(Everybody looks warily at Flash)

Flash: Anyway, I vote for weapons.

Frogville: Yarr!

Uberpaul: This is all very good but you should know that I also get seasick.

Alfie: I'm sure we've got drugs for seasickness in the Sick Bay, but if we don't, then you'll just have to drink your way through it. I recommend the rum. We seem to have inherited thousands of bottles of the stuff, stashed under nearly every floorboard on the ship.

Echoes 22: (*wasted, falling off his chair*) More rum! (*hits the floor with a crash.*)

W: And bourbon!

Robbie: Bourbon! Yeah! And LSD!

(*At this point the meeting descends into various Company members shouting indecipherable requests at Alfie*)

Alfie: (*Shouting over them*) Alright, alright! Anyway, now's your chance to volunteer for a job on the ship, otherwise I'll just go ahead and allocate you one.

Flash: I can effectively patch up most physical nastiness and talk someone down when they go off the rails. I also know anatomy, microbiology, and first aid. I volunteer for ship's medic. (*pause*) But I'd rather fling squid.

Alfie: First-aid? That'll do. Medic you are then... and uh, Weapons Specialist. Though hopefully we'll not need either.

Simon: Ack! (*to Scarytoes and Def Mute*) What did I tell you about the good jobs?

Jonny: First-aid's all very well, but what if we have a genuine emergency? Are you sure you're up to it?

Flash: Try me.

Jonny: (*Nods, thinking, then suddenly*) What if Robbie's hand got bitten off when he tried to put that beret on that shark?

Flash: Well, it would have to wait, can't you see I'm busy firing chunks of squid at a small tug of taxmen who are attempting to board and go through our non-existent books! Now pass me another chunk. (*He surveys the rest of the Company, then smiles at Jonny*) Satisfied?

Jonny: Not entirely.

Moss: As the only girl, I'm going to assume I'm the boat whore, although if you want to assign me another position then that would be good too. I'm really, really, unusually bad at making decisions.

Alfie: Fair enough, you can be our Chief Engineer. And you can start by helping me engineer some new bunk beds in the Dormitory. I can't for the life of me figure out how assemble them.

Brendon: Flat-pack eh? What you need, my man, is a scrench. (*Hands Alfie a peculiar looking tool that is part-screwdriver, part-wrench*)

Moss: Chief Engineer? What? Aw man, that sucks!

Alfie: Also, you're not the only girl. Syd couldn't make it. She's busy in the Recording Studio.

Simon: (*urgently*) I'd be happy to take a job – and since the more medical tasks have already been assumed, I'd be very happy with Storeperson. Or Quartermaster, if you prefer. I'll have my stores inventoried shortly.

Alfie: Well, if anyone can make sense of the clutter in the Storage Hold, then it's you. Quartermaster it is.

Flash: (*shouts out*) Wait, I've got it! Apply a tourniquet to Robbie's arm above the wound and wind it until the flow stops. If I've not finished flinging squid in five minutes, unwind the tourniquet for twenty seconds and rewind it. If you can manage it, get my clamps and apply them to the artery. Uh, probably ought to make sure he's not shocky. Keep him talking and don't let him look at the wound. I'll get to him. (*pause*) Now, where's that squid?

(*Long pause, everyone looks at Flash, startled.*)

Jonny: Yeah, I'm not entirely comfortable with Flash being Medic. I mean, by this point Robbie's hand is long gone and he bled to death. Do I feel better that we managed to hit that taxman in the eye with a chunk of squid? Not really.

Robbie: Wait a minute, I died?

Moss: (*to Flash*) Jonny's just worried you're going to kick him out of the Sick Bay hammock.

Flash: Can't you see I'm busy flinging squid! There are taxmen swarming all over us like flies around a floating turd.

Alfie: Just out of curiosity, Flash, where do we keep the clamps?

Flash: Clamps? What clamps?

Simon: Sorry to interrupt, but has anybody else stumbled across the Observatory of Multitudes yet? It's a relief to know we have a decent telescope/microscope. YOWZA!

Alfie: What's an Observatory of Multitudes?

Simon: The Observatory of Multitudes: Your one-and-only, friendly 1000-eyed organism. Each eye is a different tool to understand our universe. A telescope is necessary. A microscope, too. Perhaps a pair of extraordinary headphones?

Alfie: (*stares at Simon*) Right, well, that makes perfect sense now.

Robbie: Alright then...y'know people tell me I'm a good cook, so I suppose I could volunteer for that. Although I don't usually eat what I make cos it's for people at work with different eating habits. I've been

told that for a vegetarian I make a helluva meatloaf, though. You want some baked macaroni and cheese or some eggplant parmigiana, I'm yer man. Maybe I'll research some authentic Scottish cuisine to make you feel more at home. Suggestions?

Alfie: Irn Bru is very Scottish.

Robbie: Irn Bru? I'll ask the pelicans to pick up a crate next time they fly to the mainland for supplies.

Alfie: Pelicans?

Robbie: (*nods*) They're birds. With really big beaks.

Alfie: Since when did we have pelicans?

Robbie: Well, I just assumed they came with the ship. You haven't seen the pelicans?

Alfie: No, I haven't seen any pelicans.

Moss: I haven't seen any pelicans either, but I ran into a large bearded guy on the top corridor shouting about how big birds lay big eggs.

Simon: Oh, he's with us. I think. Emerson, is he with us?

Emerson: It's too early to say. Maybe. Probably. (*long pause*) I'm not sure.

Alfie: We'll come back to the pelicans. W, is there a position you'd like to fill?

W: Boat whore's still open?

Alfie: You can be our Communications Officer.

W: Suit yourself. I'll get a Black Ops department up and running as soon as those pelicans deliver my bourbon. Those are my only demands. Non-negotiable.

Alfie: (*shakes his head*) As for the rest of you, Uberpaul, are you interested in running the Library?

Uberpaul: We've already got a Librarian, haven't we?

Robbie: Katastrophie.

Alfie: Who?

Robbie: You know, Katastrophie. The girl with the trippy toadstool posters.

Uberpaul: If you don't mind, I'd like to volunteer myself for Keeper of the Records.

Alfie: Keeper of the what?

Uberpaul: What is the what?

Alfie: What?

Uberpaul: Yes.

W: Officer Perry will be bummed. I'm sure he wanted to be Keeper of the What. Never mind, I'll find things to occupy him on the "Communications Desk" (*winks*)

Alfie: Officer Perry? Who the fuck is Officer Perry? Are you lot deliberately trying to fuck with my head? And Frogville, why are you looking at me through a telescope?

Frogville: Yarr!

Alfie: Does anybody have anything sensible to add to this meeting?

Jonny: I get to keep my hammock in the Sick Bay, right?

Alfie: Wrong. I'm going to allocate us all cabins later in the week. Also, you're going to have to move out of the Sick Bay. You can't be trusted around our supply of plasters.

Jonny: Seriously? That was one time! And I was stupidly drunk!

Alfie: You used five whole boxes doing fuck knows what. We only brought six boxes. They were supposed to last us a year.

Scarytoes: (*coughs to get Alfie's attention*) When do we get our green shirts, blue pants, and lifejackets?

Alfie: You're going to have to sort out your own pants I'm afraid. Speak to Simon and see if he can find some in the costume cupboard.

Flash: We have a costume cupboard?

Alfie: I haven't seen the box of lifejackets since we left Jacksonville. Remember, Simon, I asked you to load them?

Simon: I certainly do. Brendon, what did you do with that box I asked you to load for me while I was packing the hot-air balloons?

Brendon: I asked Emerson to get it. I was busy untangling the cable on your Hypnotist Phone.

Simon: Em?

Emerson: I was helping Def Mute haul in the crazy anchor shaped like Ron Burgundy's head. Scarytoes said he would get the box for me. (*Everyone looks at Scarytoes.*)

Scarytoes: *That* box? Oh, you wanted me to bring it aboard? Ah.

Jonny: Great, so we don't have lifejackets?

Robbie: What about my hand?

Alfie: What's wrong with your hand?

Robbie: Apparently it got eaten by a shark. I mean, I'm okay with that, but Pinky's gonna be pissed when he wakes up and finds out. (*Alfie stares into space, dumbfounded.*)

Moss: I've got a question. An actual question. (*Alfie continues to stare into space.*)

Moss: I was just wondering when our new engine is going to arrive? Being the recently appointed Chief Engineer, I figure it's my job to stay on top of shit like that.

Alfie: Victor assures me it's on its way. Jim's going to deliver it.

Moss: Who's Victor?

Alfie: He's the South American guy I ordered it from.

Moss: And who's Jim?

Alfie: Jim's the dude who flies our hired helicopter.

W: We have a hired helicopter? Awesome!

Alfie: Yeah, I mean, it's just for essential trips back to the mainland, you understand.

W: Completely. (*W has a look in his eye - the sort of look where he sees himself piloting the helicopter over a dense tropical jungle, war-paint splashed across his cheeks, and a fat cone burning in his mouth, while bombs and bullets whizz past the window*)

Alfie: Any more actual questions? (*no response*) No? (*he stands up and lifts a floorboard, taking out a bottle of rum, muttering*) Alright, now I need a lie down.

...

May 10, 2009

Mystery Boat Plagues Local Coastlines

I found this online today. Thought it might be of some interest to you all.

Communications Officer Perry
(because all the good names were taken)

By Theodore Solomon, Associated Press, 7th May 2009

KEY WEST, Fla. - A ship of fools was spotted two miles off the coast of Florida earlier this afternoon. Authorities were alerted, and upon arrival on the scene, proceeded to throw rocks and shout angrily at the ship which was drifting aimlessly and dangerously close to a herd of manatee. Occupants aboard appeared distracted and disinterested in any of the commotion, although at one point in the afternoon held not only a round-robin kickball tournament, but also an onboard shooting match while drinking beer. One eyewitness account spoke of one passenger feeding a manatee "a brick of hashish, but it might have been chocolate. I dunno, it was pretty far away. But if chocolate's bad for dogs, it can't be THAT good for a sea cow."

Local police were stymied by the display for several minutes before they resolved to ask for demands from the cantankerous tanker.

They received a half-eaten orange and three horseshoes. At a loss, police advised property owners to prop sticks up on the beach to make sure the boat wouldn't get stuck, as they appeared to be a people without a country, and were prone to stay wherever the boat stopped. "The trick is, as long as the boat keeps moving, they don't get off. My cousin up in New Jersey told me about these people. Bunch of weirdos afloat in the ocean, some freaky social experiment. I don't know who gave them guns. Everybody's happier if they keep drifting on and on," said Sgt David Nipple, police spokesperson on the scene.

"That boat is the new ark! Two by two, you can see them! Everyone aboard! The Flood's coming!" said Robert Joseph Flint, another eyewitness.

"The thing that must be kept in mind is that these are not ordinary people. They can't be reasoned with. They don't think like you and me. We use condoms. We like rules and order. We fear our gods. They don't do anything like that," explains Dr Hemford Spenglaus, Dean of Epic Psychology at Eastern Pennsylvania State University. "This is our burden as a society. If we give them a place to stay, then we have to treat them equally, which in turn drags our moral standards down while inversely making the old people young again, like in "Cocoon". The last thing anybody wants is an upbeat elderly population.

"This boat acts as a creative petri-dish. These artsy people breed ideas like no other. None of my colleagues have seen numbers like this, even in bacterial colonies. We've been contacted by the Department of Defence to develop this boat into a weapon. The idea is in the event of the discovery of any place valuable that is infested with a noncompliant indigenous culture, we send this boat in like smallpox blankets."

While the threat seems impending, others feel less intimidated with the sea-borne colony.

"They're a menace. That ship is propelled by enslaved mermaids and the breeze of water pipes. They should be sunk," said a man called Bary in a bar when asked.

"Shush up, Bary. They're just lookin' for a place to call home," said Hary, the man's companion.

Sociologists are observing the boat closely, documenting the peculiar behaviors of the crew and postulating their motives. Biologists are at a loss as to their true environmental impact, as there appears to be none. Astrologers report Mercury being in retrograde is the cause of the phenomenon, and that it'll go away in a few weeks. Scientologists asked for more money.

For now, residents live in residual fear. While the curious boat appears to have disappeared, the possibility of its return is very real. Should anyone find themselves in contact with the ship, the Coast Guard recommends a distance of at least 200 feet. Do not make eye contact, act disinterested, and above all else do not eat anything they give you.

Robbie: Uh, I did put a nice black pillbox hat on one of those manatees... Maybe that's what they're talking about.

Uberpaul: Well I've definitely got scurvy, and I'm sucking on lemons, hoping my teeth don't drop out. But it's been a good ride so far!

Alfie: By the way, can you catch scurvy?

Moss: Ugh, those weren't enslaved mermaids; it was just me in my mermaid S&M costume, having a swim. I was hoping for some privacy but I guess now I've got some explaining to do.

Robbie: Nah, ya can't catch scurvy. And as long as I find that manatee to testify, I don't think we'll have a problem. Hopefully she didn't lose the hat. Being edentulous is a great argument for eating mashed potatoes on their own. I can pass on a great recipe for mushroom gravy if we have any mushrooms on board and I'm sure I have some sherry lying around somewhere. Maybe I left it in the Sick Bay?

Alfie: Another crew member in the Sick Bay? I'm starting to wonder if there are ulterior motives for visiting that place. With the entire Atom Band, Jonny plastered in his hammock, Uberpaul sucking on lemons, and now Robbie – what sort of drugs are we keeping down there?

Frogville: I think I got some of that scurvy meself. How do I know? My foot turned a black and wurthered up on me. Had to cut it off with me Swiss army knife. Good thing about scurvy is all the nerves dies up soes you don't feel nurthing when yur a cutting it off. Maybe we can stop and get some vitamins somewhere. We can't have a ship full of cripples, now can we? On the plus side, I took a hunk off the fake steering wheel and whittled meself a temprary peg leg. 'Nother funny thing, I was standing abaft when a strong wind came and made me start a speaking like this here. Can't near explain it. Must be the devil's work.

Alfie: Far be it for me to step on our AWOL medic's toes, but considering we've been on a constant diet of mashed potatoes, I think scurvy seems unlikely. It's much more probable that it's either:

- (a) gangrene
- (b) bubonic plague

(c) someone spiked the mash with serious drugs and it's all in your head

If it was (a) or (b) then you've probably done the right thing chopping it off. If (c) then hopefully you're just hallucinating the foot removal too.

Robbie: I've prepared a plate of crackers and Muenster cheese to silence the grumbling that I've been hearing from my fellow crew members' guts. And I've personally peeled and prepared roughly 138 clementine oranges to ward off the scurvy. We're gettin' there, capn'!

...

May 12, 2009

Moss's Journal #2:

Mushrooms

I awake in the night to a glowing. From behind my eyelids a blue light seeps and grows, until I know I am not asleep and dreaming. I peel open my eyes and feel the dew on the grass under my hands.

My flower bed has been unexpected. It began with my mattress, an ancient mouldy present I gave myself before we set sail, from a dumpster outside Jacksonville harbour. Although the days have been sunny, I quickly found that no amount of airing or beating would dry or clean it. I resigned myself to a constant dampness, and found it wasn't such a hardship.

Every morning, for the past week, I have woken up to more and more sprouts. First, patches of sweet smelling mould, different to that found on old vegetables. Rather than repellent, this mould became comforting in its life. A companion for the journey.

Soon to join the mould were tufts of grass, poking through the disintegrating material with their soft green fingers.

Before I knew it, I was sleeping in a flower bed. I tried scattering some of the tulip and daffodil seeds I'd brought with me, but none of them took. The bed would only grow of its own accord.

Amongst the thick grass, mushrooms and toadstools began to sprout. I would pick them, eat them, and squash them during my sleep, but in the morning there would always be more. They grew with an unnatural speed.

So this night, I awoke to a blue glow. It was the mushrooms, and they seemed to be stretching towards me, urging me to speak with

them. I brushed them with my hands, and they almost purred with strange, soft movement.

When I woke at dawn, the glow was gone, and the mushrooms were still. I thought I must have dreamed the whole scene. But I hoped not.

...

Simon: Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm, bioluminescence.

Alfie: Robbie, it looks like your mushroom sauce is a goer.

...

May 12, 2009

Alfie's Journal #2:

Grab a Bunk

The sun was blinding and the sky was a brilliant shade of blue. The only clouds were the trails of smoke I was blowing across the main deck. I resisted the urge to space-out in the sun. Instead, I scuttled around, smacking things with this curious tool The Atom Band call a "scrench", jangling my keys down the dark, silent corridors of the ship.

With the cabins, bunkrooms, and dormitory all in order, all that's left to be done is sort out the sleeping arrangements. Based on complex mathematical formulae, taking into account who knows who, musical compatibility, likelihood of requiring a regular berth, and other questionable variables, here's my proposed list of who should sleep where, and their roles on board the Mardi:

Cabin 1 – Little Songs

Cabin 2 – Jon of the Atom (MACHINIST)

Cabin 3 – Syd Lane

Cabin 4 – Katastrophie (LIBRARIAN)

Cabin 5 – Simon Piler (QUARTERMASTER) and The Atom Band

Cabin 6 – Poflowetry

Bunkroom 1 – Free

Bunkroom 2 – Robbie (COOK) and Frogville

Bunkroom 3 – Alfie (THE NOT CAPTAIN) and W (COMMS OFFICER)

Bunkroom 4 – Flash (MEDIC)/1 free bunk

Bunkroom 5 – Echoes 22/1 free bunk
Bunkroom 6 – Uberpaul (KEEPER OF THE WHAT)/1 free bunk
Bunkroom 7 – Suckstolalaland/1 free bunk
Bunkroom 8 – Moss (CHIEF ENGINEER) and Jonny Rchrdsn
Dormitory – Free

If anyone wants to move around or isn't happy with this setup, then let me know and we'll figure something out. Those in cabins or bunkrooms on their own, enjoy the temporary tranquillity because we'll be recruiting again in the next few weeks. As for those of you whose names are on the staff roster but have not been seen since we set sail: please take as long as you need to acclimatise, but let us know as soon as you can if you're dead, or done something stupid like getting locked in the costume cupboard or lost on your way to the Observatory of Multitudes.

...

Robbie: Thanks cap'n. Finally I can lie back down and sleep off this hangover. But seriously, I just finished decorating my bunkroom. Y'all should come over and survey the scene, dig?

Alfie: I'll drop round soon as I finish hollowing out the aft mast. Also I'm planning on smashing that grand piano into something that resembles a submarine. And just for the record, Robbie, I'm *not* the Captain. I'm the NOT Captain.

W: I love how hilariously out of control this has become. I always wanted to quit my job and sail around the world, and now here I am. It's not an issue if I don't know dick about sailing, right? Also, Alfie, I roll my own cigs, so if you run out I got you. Bunkmates gotta look out for each other. Mind the cheap bourbon though. That shit's hard to come by in the open ocean.

Moss: Jonny, I started redecorating our bunkroom. Hope you don't mind. Also I stole the top bunk – too slow. Now you shall have mushrooms rained down upon you in your sleep. Bad luck old chap.

...

Cabin 5 - Simon Piler and The Atom Band



Simon Piler: Don't worry about him. He's rather fascinated with allometry. Ah, but where are my manners? Allow me to introduce myself. I am Simon Piler, doctor of the noumenological sciences.

Balloons! Balloons! Everywhere balloons. They are being blown up at a furious rate by a sturdy, bemasked fellow and his dwindling, silent companion. The smaller of the two offers a short, drawling gesture of greeting.

Simon: You've met Scarytoes and Def Mute, haven't you? No? Well, they're good fellows, both. Members of my little ensemble, here aboard the Mardi. And what a fine ship it is! Do you like your biscuits with butter or honey? Or both? You can't leave without trying a biscuit. *(beat)* I'm actually serious, Lt. Spark will stop you from leaving. Also, have a look at this...

A small, digital screen shows a remarkable, living diagram upon it.

Simon: It's his work.

Points to a combined workbench/computer station attached to the wall. An amiable, afroed technician is typing away with one hand; soldering with the other.

Simon: Matthew the Mighty, Champion of Science. It's a real blessing I stumbled on him at the last port – looking for passage to undiscovered space. Poor chap, I do hope we find some! Aye, but

what a sturdy crew we've assembled! And what electricities! ...Or do I mean eccentricities? Blast...

Matthew the Mighty: (*matter-of-factly, without looking up from his work*) You mean electricities, Simon.

Simon: Aye! What would I do without you, Champion?

A small dog and a young man are sitting in the corner. You hadn't realized it until this point, but the man is actually playing a wind instrument – it is something like a flugelhorn mixed with a synthesizer. The dog coughs; lays down. The sound that the man is currently creating is completely complementary to the sound of 12,233 multicolored balloons statically rubbing against one another, punctuated by the sound of distant hammering. It fills space; has motion, yet is nearly imperceptible to an uninformed listener. It is loud, but hums like the universe.

Simon: (*he is standing quite close to you, you hadn't noticed!*) Wonderful, isn't it? Sounds occurring all over this planet. You only have to look. My longtime friend and leader of The Atom Band, Brendon Hertz.

Brendon pauses for a moment to shake your hand. He gives a short bow.

Brendon Hertz: A pleasure. I'm looking forward to meeting a few unusual characters on this voyage – and you seem to be a likely candidate. (*He chuckles.*) You're staying nearby, am I correct? Oh, and this is George the Apocalypso, our Hound of All Seasons. But we call her Breezy sometimes. Fits the atmosphere. (*His voice suddenly becomes quite serious as he whispers.*) Be careful with the Good Doctor's biscuits. There seems to be an awful lot of incantation and dancing involved. Perhaps too much, if you fancy yourself axiomatic! (*Suddenly he's laughing again, and blowing cool breezes around your head.*)

An albatross flies into the room, grasps a balloon and exits.



Simon: Psssssst... Hey, come here, quick! It's pretty weird that you can see our past selves constantly repeating themselves, isn't it? Well, there is actually a real, human Atom Band, and of course, a real Flesh-and-blood Simon Piler. We aren't just robotic Christmas Santas that say the same things again and again and rotate about a very few definitive axes. So, if you'd like to say hello to us, please do. I promise I won't try to introduce you to my ensemble or try to make you eat biscuits. Though by all means, please do have one... or while you're at it, help yourself to some of those black beans with kelp in the slow-cooker! We've had to improvise a bit to overcome the galley doldrums, you see. Oh, what the hell, where was I? Yes. What I was meaning to say was that we are evermore becoming the lightbulbs of the electric lemon and still evermore leaving the realm of static reflection; that steadfast and swift-footed road that is traveled so frequently and is so frequented by many the commercial motorist or inter-synapse police vehicle and is for this reason so delicately avoided by our persons. What repairs are needed! What dependencies we suckle upon! And the low, sweet gradient of energy that drives us. And the full, alert gradient of energy that pampers us; that heats our homes or warms our bones, marrow and all; that provides us with directed photon release; that gilds the potentiality of motion through the vasculature of society; that

provides us with the pleasure of avoiding the complications implicit in utilizing contaminated water, or those related to confronting the complex material byproducts of our own bodies. These are the things that we strive to open towards, and if we can, to learn about; to begin to take upon our own shoulders. It is far to the bathrooms, and at night, it is a waste of heat to walk that far. So I'll use a bottle to urinate in. And so I have learned about waste. Food is good for its heat, but I also want to enjoy the flavor of it. So I'll pause from thoughts, minor tasks, or speaking while food is in my mouth. I wish to make the process of digestion smoother and more efficient for my body. So I'll increase the surface area of my food by chewing it thoroughly. I know that my stomach needs blood after I eat, so I'll refrain from moving much for a while after eating. And so I have learned about the physicality of my digestion. I go long periods of sitting or walking without pausing to feel the weight of gravity and the constellation of my own bones and ligaments. So I will learn the stretches that can give the working cells of my body an outlet to speak through their own voice and through that voice, a reason to cheer and celebrate each action they take. And in this way I have broken the reigning authority of my mind.

I look at myself in the pink plastic hand mirror.

...

May 14, 2009

Near-Field Report

34NOR3NRMQ34Q QRO M3QROQ34RQ 3QROFN3 Q34AG3AR
OQF Q34MAQ30 3248NZ938 N3IN3UNA3EN9 ZF30
2MZFOI3N0ZV0 3 09ARJ FA3M 0 Z093RM F 0932MA
23RF99F23M 39AN3NOFN3IN F3INA3ON4 VZ Y5OVONA3YTT
A3IONAF3OI23N4 34999VAM3AM3TL1R2
BEGIN TRANSMISSION.

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PLEASE STAND BY FOR INCOMING NEAR-FIELD REPORT:

Hello, crew. This is Dr Simon Piler reporting from the onboard Observatory of Multitudes, which, I might add, is currently flickering in and out of existence.

We have been two weeks at sea, and as I understand, the latest popular fads and stylings (having motions not unlike those of waves) may have broken ashore as we travelled.

LET IT BE SO.

It is my duty at this time to report another short excursion to be undertaken. (Oh, Alfie, I do hope you've got that submersible ready..... Yipe!)

THE ATOM BAND TO TRAVEL VIA HOT-AIR BALLOON, ALIGHTING IN THE CITY OF EAU CLAIRE, WISCONSIN ON 5/29/09 AFTER THREADING 2000 MILES OF CLOUD-RIDDLED SKIES; SIMON PILER GESTICULATING AT THE HELM.

Upon our arrival, we hope to expound a vast catalogue of our recent learnings to the attending symposium. We will drink tea; make merry. Our extended research allies, Jump The Wagon, will repeatedly tickle those in attendance. We pronounce our fate as cast. (Scarytoes turns back time / sits on his heels.)

AYE, arsonists!

The DREAM FACTORY burns!

Know this: wherever you may place your feet – midship, foremast, or below-deck; you must remain vigilant. Be prepared to make a stand.

This is the time for the gentle, hardy person!

DO NOT BE FOOLED.

To be thrown overboard (should our pace sag below acceptable standards):

Supercomputers

Stockpile of dog food & biscuit (1/2)

Sousaphone collection

Both portraits of Ernst Hoffmann

Frog-dissolving solution (500 1/4 L)

Several backup pruning shears

COLORFUL CRAYONS (*please retain gray and white crayons as they are useful in the construction of geometric-potentiality charts.)

Brain coolant, as necessary

All excess tin and antimony

Phone books

Lieutenant Spark (on account of his whiny demeanour / strong swimming skills.)

Please reserve notebooks, complete discography, and Utica Flower Company paraphernalia AT ALL COSTS!

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION, REFERENCE:

QUIXODELIC.COM

MAY STEAM FILL OUR HEADS!

FULL STEAM AHEAD!

=====

CEASE TRANSMISSION.

TNOE343932J F320N234 QF04 520 234R2N3RNFQ34NOAE
R32490 3FNA3K2J4N0AF 3824NLLR FOA3NAF3Q2948 N32984N
FANKDNL A32984 F9AW8W3 4N PNFA03248 WX398AFN32
4FO3PP I2N4NO R39F3 2489HF A3 R329993 894 FNA3
2NOFNLDLNF

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May 15, 2009

Alfie's Journal #3:
Grand-Piano Submarine

Transcript of telephone call to the Associated Press:

AP: Associated Press, how may I help you?

Alfie: Good afternoon, Associated Press. I'd like to speak to Theodore Solomon.

AP: May I ask who is calling?

Alfie: Tell him it's Alfie from The Utica Flower Company. I doubt he'll know who I am – although he probably has a good idea why I'm phoning him. Have you heard of us?

AP: Um, no sir. May I ask what your call is regarding?

Alfie: You may. It's regarding an article he wrote about our ship.

AP: Okay. (*pause*) But what *specifically* is it regarding?

Alfie: It's specifically regarding the article. (*pause*) The one he wrote. (*pause*) About our ship.

AP: Yes, I understand that, sir, but what *exactly* would you like to know?

Alfie: I just want to clarify a few issues, in particular the parts about the mermaids and the supposed brick of hash, which between you and me, Associated Press, turned out to be a pillbox hat. Can you believe that shit?

AP: ...

Alfie: Actually, I wanted to invite Mr Solomon to visit our ship along with a bunch of other journalists. Not that I know *exactly* where we are, but I have a pretty vague idea. I think it would be good if he could see first-hand what we're doing here, since his article didn't exactly paint a flattering picture. (*pause*) So *now* can I speak with him?

AP: Please hold. (*generic hold music, several minutes*) Thanks for holding, Alfred. I'm sorry but it's not going to be possible to speak with Mr Solomon today, although I'll certainly pass on your message. Do you have a contact telephone number so he can get back to you?

Alfie: Actually our phone lines are down. I'm calling you on a mobile phone I borrowed from one of our crew. The little sturdy guy from The Atom Band. The one who forgot to bring our lifejackets. I don't know what his name is. Deaf Toes. Something like that. Listen, I could call back later?

AP: Um, no sir, I don't think Mr Solomon will be able to visit your ship.

Alfie: But I haven't even told you when it is. (*sighs*) How about I call back tomorrow? Or Sunday? Shit, the day after tomorrow *is* Sunday, isn't it? Or is it Saturday? I'm seriously losing track of time here.

AP: Okay, thank you sir. Is there anything else I can help you with?

Alfie: (*pause*) You don't know anything about electrolysis do you?

AP: ...

Alfie: I'm test-piloting our grand piano-submarine tonight and I really think I should have a Plan B before I go down in it. It's like Helmet's dad says: "Fail to prepare, prepare to fail."

AP: ...

Alfie: Also, do you think four hairdryers will be enough? One in each piano leg? I should probably take some spare ones, just in case one malfunctions.

AP: I'm sorry, sir, I don't know what you're talking about. (*pause*) Is there anything else I can help you with?

Alfie: Well, Associated Press, technically you didn't help me with anything. But it's been a pleasure talking to you. Wait a minute... do you have any idea what an Observatory of Multitudes is?

AP: ...

Alfie: Hello? Associated Press?

AP: Yes, sir?

Alfie: Never mind. Thanks anyway.

AP: Thank you, sir.

...

I should probably be scared. It's not every day you climb inside a grand piano and plunge to the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean, but tonight at midnight that's exactly what I'm going to do. It's been a busy week. There's still no sign of my compass, but having finally worked out how to switch on the navigation system, it appears we are somewhere north-east of the Bahamas. This would certainly make sense given the sunny weather and us departing from Jacksonville, but until we've located an instruction manual, I'm really just guessing what the flashing icons and symbols on the screen might mean.

All that's left for me to say before I climb inside the piano-sub is that if I don't resurface after 48 hours, then there's a very good chance the expedition has failed horribly. Either the battery-powered hairdryers didn't work, or I've grossly miscalculated the amount of oxygen required to live in a submerged piano for two whole days. I'm sure there are more imaginative ways for this to go horribly wrong, but right now, looking at this reconfigured hulk of wood with its shiny black and white keys and super-neat periscope, I suspect these two are most likely.

In the likely event of my death, could somebody please notify my family. Assuming you can get the phones working again. I doubt they will be surprised. As for the Mardi, well, sail on if you can. It's what I would have wanted.

Before I go, I forgot to tell you about this curious dream I had last night. A walrus was staggering around drunk on the main deck, trying to shoot squid chunks from Flash's catapult. The resulting debris attracted the attention of a ginormous talking puffin called Nautilus. He was an amiable bird, however his presence on the creaking bow of the ship was terrifying Robbie's pelicans. Eventually I plucked up the courage to politely ask him to hover along just far enough back so as nobody could see him. He gestured with a giant wing at the pink plastic mirror hanging from a nail on the aft mast, and asked me if I

was real. I told him that sometimes I wondered about that. He begrudgingly agreed to conceal himself inside a nearby cloud, promising to return on the next blue moon. At this point, I woke to the sound of W snoring in the bunk above me and saw the same walrus shuffle past our bunkroom door. By the time I reached the corridor, the walrus was gone.

But enough of dreams. Here goes. I'm climbing into the grand piano-sub. I have everything I need – forty cigarettes, a page from the collective journal, one black biro, a torch, a bag of cold mash, two bottles of rum, and a headful of ideas.

The lid closes with a click, shortly followed by the muffled sound of Alfie shouting, 'Hello? Could somebody please give me a push? Shit. I didn't figure this part out at all.' He thumps hopelessly on the inside of the piano, but the lid is stuck. There is a long pause where only the gentle slosh of waves against the wooden hull of the Mardi can be heard, before the unmistakable whoosh of mighty wings and the grand-piano submarine crashes into the Hatlantic Ocean with a resounding splash.

...

May 16, 2009

Moss's Journal #3:

A Sinister Morning

I fall flat off my top bunk onto the floor beside a sleeping Jonny. Bottles of rum are scattered round the room, and my head suddenly remembers to start pounding in painful time to my hangover. I grab my cigarette kit and half stumble, half drag my way up to the top deck.

Outside, the air is beautiful. I roll a cigarette and smoke it with relish, appreciating the nicotine. It's always so quiet up here that you wonder who does any of the ship maintenance. In those old movies they've always got at least twenty people running around, rigging things, scrubbing things, doing general... things. I guess we must have ship-pixies. Either that or we don't realise the Mardi's about to fall apart.

Either way, it's all fine and dandy this beautiful, sunny morning. I always did want to see the Caribbean.

Scratch marks on the railing catch my attention Scrotmanly, as I stop to take in the details.

Oh god. Alfie's piano submarine! That's where he left it before he...

I thought that was a joke? Like, I didn't think he'd actually do it. Did he? Or is this just an elaborate prank, and he moved it somewhere to scare us and is hiding in the freezer downstairs? I start to call out.

'Guys? Anyone? Hey, has anyone seen Alfie for a while?'

No answer. I'll go check the freezer.

...

May 18th, 2009

A Letter to Willoughby Toad

05/18/09. Empty Company Boardroom of the Mardi, 08:30 AM.
(Of course, it's empty. It's 08:30 AM!)

Hello Willoughby,

It's Rasmussen, here. How are you? Writing to you from the future place. Corniced into the pockets of the Illian people. Three hundred thousand servile dogs. Mastication of this fortunate slippery idea.

You asked me if I just stopped caring sometimes, and yes, I'd reply, it's true. But what is strange is that I don't think I've ever shook that dizzying feeling of being alive. By which I mean it's a little like driving a car at a modest, rolling speed when a sudden grip of the wheel can call into alignment a series of previously nonparallel realizations. What is real? Why, nothing at all, you peel out. Nothing is real – not this car, the road, the mountains beyond, the ideas I am thinking, footpress, long spaced breaths – none of it. And in that form of negation there is as palpable a release from care as I've ever witnessed. And in that form of negation are the brightest colors I've ever witnessed. Or the most comfortable I've ever felt with my body and its motions, illusory. I could drive that car right off the road and still feel fine. Straight through the trees until that flickering and all-extinguishing evaporation occurs. A mirage passed by in the wheel ruts.

I don't often make cake, but once, living in a house that had tenants rolling over quite frequently, I found a box of yellow cake mix on the back of the spice shelf and decided to mix it up. I unsealed the

carefully printed cardboard package constructed by good old “Cockton’s Quintessentials” and removed the clear plastic satchel. Pouring the food-dyed contents into a large metallic bowl, I was very disgusted to find a grayish larvae wiggling upturned in the surface of the powder. Its bristly hairs stirred the desert crumbs as it tried to escape back into the inky world from which it was so rudely jarred.

I threw the cake mix away, of course.

But sitting down to write in my notebook, I couldn’t help speculating on the immensity of that young bug. It is a strange life to lead as a larvae in a box of cake mix. How bizarre to be the solitary inhabitant of a dark world, divided from the harsh flourish of anything outside. Protected from nature’s acute fury by an insulation of sugar, pulverized seeds, and salt. Strange to be oblivious – no, not even that guilty – unconscious of the breadth and complexity of the outward stretching world, nor to witness directly any of its methods.

Yes, strange, but is it any stranger than participating in a life like ours? How different? Any moment a person could get knocked on the head by a meteorite and die. And that’d be that. But we insist on focusing a huge sum of our time and energy stoking the fires of comfort – putting in the hours necessary to trade for those things beyond that which we need to cling to this fantastic irreality. And some of us try to get away without tending the fire at all. We soon remember that they require much more tender attendance than most of us usually care to recall. That being said, I suspect that when the Earth wakes up tomorrow from its drunken binge on petroleum, our distant progeny won’t even be able to recognize the ‘hardships’ of their so-suffering forebears. In fact I doubt they could even come close to describing accurately the wealth with which a good number of us live. And at that point the jury will step out of the jury room to announce whether the way we distanced ourselves from this illusion was further irritated by our rate of consumption. They will compare our lives to the nuclear fusion of their beloved star – and I suspect they will find it differs considerably. For combustion – the process of our lifetimes are framed around; so familiar and dear to us – produces the wastes of ash, cinder, and smoke that linger. These are the poems of a great disaster uncoiling. They will be our namesake through the rattling future. But the marks of the Great Unraveling Mystery will not be constrained in these physical terms! That is to say: Holy smokes, Willoughby, like souls, do not compute. Wheeling out, these mysteries are immaterial or fleeting, limitless and beyond graspings. They are not products of our energy alone.

That is not to say that there isn't joy to be found in this life. Joy is necessarily a product of combustion. You can ride your bicycle to the moon and back, over the verdant countrysides of alfalfa, tobacco or corn. Through this garden. Drinking water from an empty peanut butter jar or fueling up that beautiful machine from a roadside mulberry tree. Dizzy or dreaming? What is the difference on the roadside at 03:40 AM with nowhere to be? That's a description of not caring if I've ever heard one. A chance to use one's combustive energy efficiently. To use it to become completely passive to the illusion for a while. To disappear, I guess.

Of course I tend to argue myself in corners. And I haven't any real tact in writing letters. But at least my sentences are anything but servile. These dogs are only concerned with chasing their own tails! Your question was a good one. I hope that I've made my position on the matter about as clear as a glass of Algaebrew, and without piling up wavelets around this here soapbox.

Zim, zim! Zeeree-chirim!

Short-lived chairs and table. Popcorn faucet. Brilliant billions beware!

Words to you written in the ancient-future hand,

Rasmussen Murphy

Post Script: 1-800-BOP-CRON. May come in handy for you, though I am incompletely-sure of this.

...

May 19, 2009

Alfie's Journal #4:

How a (Kinda Deformed) Red Football Saved My Life

I'll not bore you with the protracted events of the weekend concerning how I managed to escape from the grand piano submarine, now regretfully abandoned at the bottom of the ocean. Let it become the stuff of legend and small-talk in the washrooms of the Mardi. I will, however, deny all rumours relating to remote-controlled porpoises, doppelgangers, and the possibility it was all just a really bad dream.

So there I was, floating in the middle of the Hatlantic Ocean in the midday sun, clutching a red plastic football to my chest. The Mardi

had long since drifted away. I treaded water and swam around in circles, seeing nothing but the endless panorama of azure miles. There was nothing left to do but swim or drown, so I pulled a sodden cigarette from my shirt pocket and struggled to light it before kicking on. Guessing that land was somewhere to my left, I swam away from the sun, neck strained, puffing like a steam engine, the red football held out in front of me as a float. I think I swam for two, maybe three hours, before I finally saw the fishing boat, and the old fisherman saw me.

‘Sons of Hemhockle! What do we have here?’ he asked, his bearded and weatherbeaten face grinning above me, chuckling with a patois twang. ‘Don’t yuh know deh are sharks inna di sea?’ I blinked and stared down through the crystal clear water beneath my exhausted feet. ‘Yuh going to float deh all day or yuh going to accept der helping hand?’ He held out a strong bare arm and hauled me up into his rickety little craft. ‘An let’s nah forget your ball,’ he added, fishing it out of the water and dropping it into a picnic hamper filled with dead fish.

‘You’re one of dem deh crazy kids fram dat ship, right?’ he continued as he started the motor with a couple of pulls of the cord. ‘An I pose yuh would be wanting to get bak?’ he shouted over the sputtering thrum of the engine and the splash of the waves as we chugged slowly through them.

The old man’s name was Gassius Clay, a fisherman from a nearby island. He’d read about the Mardi in a local newsletter called the “Bespibahanian Bugle”. Apparently it was a far from flattering column depicting us as a bunch of gun-toting hippies and clueless college dropouts. I suspected from his description that the majority of the report had been lifted verbatim from Ted Solomon’s Associated Press article of the previous week. ‘Mango?’ he asked, holding out the fruit in his upturned palm.

I thanked him and devoured it greedily, the juices running down my chin. After three weeks of mashed potato, that mango tasted like a firework exploding in my mouth, and I very nearly collapsed with the intensity of the flavours. As we continued to motor after the Mardi, Gassius repeatedly lifted his buttocks and broke wind, while I tried as best as I could to explain how our ship adventures had started. ‘Initially I thought it would be a unique platform for us to promote what we were doing musically,’ I told him. ‘Except ideas are like a tower of cards, and I can’t help but feel like the whole thing could topple any moment.’

‘Suh you’re di captain of dis ship?’ he asked me, still smiling.

‘I’m trying not to be.’

‘Then who’s enna charge of sailing har while you’re out ere floating around enna di middle of di ocean?’

I shrugged. ‘We’ve pretty much been drifting ever since we left Jacksonville. I couldn’t even tell you how many crew members we have. It might be as many as fifteen, but some of them are confined to their cabins with sea sickness and scurvy.’

He burst out laughing again and lifted his hip to trumpet, a vile odour wafting across the small motor boat, forcing me to clamp my hand across my nose.

‘Maybe the ship was a stupid idea,’ I continued. ‘We’ve got some talented musicians on board, but none of us are sailors. And then of course there’s the question of time. It’s one thing for me to take a year out of my life, but you can’t expect everyone else to be able to do the same, can you? You can’t expect them all to believe in the Mardi.’

‘But yuh believe enna di Mardi?’

Without hesitating I said, ‘I believe we can sail her around the world, yes.’

He shook his head and pointed. ‘You’ll need more than belief to sail around di world enna a boat lacka dat.’

I looked up and squinted in the sun at the old wooden ship looming over us. The crumpled old fisherman cut the motor and we drifted up alongside. ‘Thank you Gassius Clay,’ I said, grabbing hold of a rope ladder and pulling myself up.

‘You’re welcome,’ he shouted back, throwing a mock salute, and letting rip again.

I stood barefoot on the warm deck and watched as he motored back to wherever he came from. It was only as he was disappearing from view that I remembered he still had our red ball stashed in his picnic hamper. Cursing myself for not paying attention, I climbed through the aft hatch and clanked down two flights of metal steps before shuffling along the bottom corridor to Bunkroom 3. The ship was eerily quiet as I pushed inside, peeling off my damp clothes and kicking them under the bottom bunk. I changed into the green t-shirt and blue pants that had been left neatly folded on my pillow, grabbed a pack of dry cigarettes, and shuffled upstairs to the Bridge.

...

Simon Piler: Sorry to hear about our football, but it was kinda deformed, anyway.

Moss: We shall fashion a new one out of mango skin and mashed potato.

May 21, 2009

The Ice-Cream Nebula



gndjskbFSDJKDBJSKvnfsjkbkfsbkjBVSKJDBVSD creamy creamy
cream cream

SMILE

TIMEEEEEEEEEEEedefsfssssssssssssshelelloohellohelloooo!!11!!

hello. hello?

buttooonnnssssssss buttons. lots of buttons.

pressy pressy press!

bzzzzz big sound!

Alfie: (*Crashing into the Engine Room, wearing a beekeeper's outfit and a green skull mask. He is dangling an astrolabe from a broken fishing rod*) OH SHIT, THE SHIP SEEMS TO BE MOVING BACKWARDS! MOSS, WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?!

Syd: Let's hope it's not just moving backwards directionally, but backwards through time. I'd love to experience 1966!

Alfie: 1966? That would certainly explain the strange vibrations on the ship. Oh, this is all very fucked up!

...

INTERNAL MEMO: Re Ice-Cream and Fan Mail
ATTENTION ALL CREW MEMBERS & SHIP VISITORS

It has come to our attention that a giant ice-cream nebula has materialised in our freezer and has started to leak into adjacent rooms. Please be aware for your own safety:

UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES SHOULD YOU EAT OR ENGAGE IN ANY FORM OF COMMUNICATION WITH THE ICE-CREAM NEBULA UNTIL WE KNOW EXACTLY WHAT WE ARE DEALING WITH.

We think the outbreak has been contained for now. Samples have been sent to Cabin 5 for analysis, but there is a strong possibility the nebula is potently psychoactive. I know we're all sick of mash and the urge to eat something different will be difficult to resist, but Robbie assures me he is working on an emergency fix of coffee and crackers.

...

Flash: Uh, I gotta read our journal more often. What happens when the Chief Medic eats the ice-cream? Cool, everything has gone all stripy! Is that music real? Think I'll go surfing. Waaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh! (*splash*)

Alfie: (*Frantic rustling in the Sick Bay*) Damn it! Where are the clamps! What should we do? (*Opens the Sick Bay porthole, shouting*) Hey Flash! You should report to the Chief Medic as soon as you get back. He'll know what to do. (*long pause*) Wait a minute, *you're* the Chief Medic, and we don't have any surfboards, do we? Flash noooooooooooooo!

...

UPDATE:

Given the unsettling nature of events in the last 24 hours, it is with regret that we have been forced to completely seal off the freezer. Scarytoes will now attempt to scale the main mast and fly the yellow

flag of quarantine. In the meantime could all crew members please comply with the following four simple guidelines:

- 1 Do not eat the ice-cream.
- 2 Do not feed the ice-cream to your fellow crew members.
- 3 Please keep the freezer door locked at all times.
- 4 If you have already eaten the ice-cream, you should report to Sick Bay immediately. Do not pass GO. Do not collect £200. We believe our Chief Medic may be under the influence and was last seen jumping overboard with a non-existent surfboard. If you see him, please ignore any medical advice he might try to impart, particularly if it involves amputations.

As a further precautionary measure, I think today would be as good a day as any day to take a head count. We've been three weeks at sea and a worrying number of the original crew who signed the roster back in Jacksonville have been so quiet that I have serious doubts whether they made it onto the ship in the first place. Here's a list of all Flower Company personnel as of the 1st of May 2009 and their last known whereabouts. Please let me know as soon as possible if either (A) you are here, or (B) you know where anyone else is:

Little Songs – I saw him back in Jacksonville carrying two reels of film. I don't think he ever set foot on the ship.

Jon of the Atom – Our would-be Machinist is nowhere to be seen. I'd search the Machine Shop but it's soooooo fucking dark and creepy in there.

Syd – I saw Syd earlier this morning. She was taking a break from the Recording Studio and on her way to the Galley to make some breakfast. Apparently the pelicans just delivered some nautical themed boxes of cereal.

Simon Piler – He's either playing ping-pong, fashioning frames for our Wall of Heroes, or still in Cabin 5 analysing the ice-cream. After everything I've seen in the last couple of weeks, there is a very real possibility he is doing all three at exactly the same time.

Robbie – Last seen taping animal stickers to the freezer door.

Frogville – Has anyone seen Frogville since he hacked off his own leg and developed a piratical speech impediment?

Alfie – Obviously here writing this. I think.

W – That trundling sound you hear in the night is him cycling around the main deck.

Flash – Whereabouts unknown.

Echoes 22 – He’s here, but I have no idea where. I’m not entirely sure he knows himself.

Uberpaul – I remember him saying something about feeling seasick. I prescribed him some rum. I haven’t seen or heard from him since.

Moss – Recovering in the Sick Bay having consumed a copious amount of the ice-cream nebula. Thankfully I managed to lure her away from our new engine by dangling an astrolabe in front of her face.

Jonny – I found him in the Company Boardroom late last night, blind drunk and covered in our last box of plasters.

The Atom Band – I don’t even know all their names yet, so let’s assume they’re with Simon, working on the ice-cream.

...

Robbie: No wonder no one showed up for dinner. Y’know, every now and then I hear a steady *clickTHUMP – clickTHUMP* that I can only assume is Frogville milling about on his peg leg.

Alfie: Dude, I meant to compliment you on the pizza from last night. I’ve been thinking about requests and was wondering: can you do nicotine on toast? And while I’m here, can I borrow a pelican?

Robbie: Sure, I’ll keep one aside for you. The rest will be flying me out this afternoon on a fact (and substance) finding mission. My hope is that if we are indeed in the year 1966, that we are still in the month of May. If so, we have until October to gather as much research enhancement material as possible. That is if we’re still close to America. I don’t know the timetable for any other locations. Where the devil are we, anyway?

Simon: Yaaaaarghhhhh! *

Alfie: According to the fancy gadgets on the Bridge, we’re apparently somewhere in the Hatlantic Ocean. Though that could be a typo. Fuck, I wonder what kind of food they had in the 1960s?

The phone rings, Alfie picks up.

Alfie: Hello? Bob Dylan, is that you?

Voice: Alfie, I’m from the 60s.

Alfie: Flash?

Flash: I remember that TV dinners were everywhere - little foil plates that were separated into portion containers for your main course, veggie, potato, and dessert. You’d cook them in the oven. There were two kinds of potato chip, or crisps for you UK members. There were no factory farms, so food was actually better for you.

Alfie: Uh... o-kay, but... where the fuck are you?

Flash: In my house we often dined on woolly mammoth and dodo, but those went away. Dodo were greasy anyway.

Alfie: In your house? Did you say you're in your house? Flash? Flash? Hello? It's a terrible line and you're not making much sense, you're -

Flash: Moms cooked, mostly.

Alfie: - tripping on that weird - (*the line disconnects*) - ice-cream. (*long pause, shouting*) Hey Robbie! What's the chances of us non-veggies getting some mammoth on the menu while we're here?

...

Alfie: So I visited Cabin 5 to see how they were getting on with the analysis, but the door was locked and it sounded like a circus was in full swing behind it. I heard lions, bugles, things splashing, tapping telephones, and modulated pies. I suppose we should let them get on with it. Also, the next time someone sees Moss, tell her to get to the Engine Room and see if she can work out which switches she's been flicking. We're still travelling in reverse and at this rate will be back in Jacksonville in just under a fortnight. I wish I'd been there when Victor delivered the new engine. At the very least I would have made sure we got an instruction manual.

Moss: Like I already told you, the old Chinaman ran off before I could ask him anything.

Alfie: Chinaman? Victor was South American.

** At this point we believe Dr Piler may have been bitten on the big toe by a very small crab.*

...

May 24, 2009

Alfie's Journal #5:
The Pelican Notes



‘Squawk!’

‘Fuck off.’

‘Squawk!’

‘I said fuck off. Leave me alone. Let me die in peace.’

‘Squawk! Squawk!’

I opened an eye and it hurt. The sunlight was dazzling, there was a pain in my head, my limbs ached, and there was a horrible taste in my mouth.

‘Squawk!’

I squinted at the pelican looking down at me from the wooden rail and sat up with some difficulty. I noticed the bird had a spoon in its beak.

‘Squawk!’

‘Alright, alright, I get the idea! Enough of the squawking!’ I croaked, looking around at Craw’s Nest 1.

I was holding a whackbat, someone had glued leather chaps backwards onto my legs, and my hands and clothes were grimy with dirt. ‘How the fuck did I get up here?’ I asked the bird.

‘Squawk!’

I tried to stand but my head was clearly broken. I felt like I’d blinked and missed something really important. ‘Urgh,’ I grunted, brushing the pelican aside and watched it flap up into the bright blue sky.

I hauled myself carefully over the side of the nest and started to climb down. The Mardi rocked gently on the waves, and as I descended I tried to remember where I’d been and what happened. The last thing I recalled was sitting in the Communications Bay, eating a bowl of mash, and trying to recruit new crew members over the phone.

It hadn’t been easy. I found myself hopelessly stuck between their world and ours, babbling incoherently about ping-pong and ice-cream nebulas. ‘Either you don’t get it, or you don’t get it but love it all the same. It’s really as simple as that,’ I told them. ‘Hello? Hello?’ I stared at the handset. ‘They fucking hung up on me. Can you believe that?’

I spooned another mouthful of cold mash into my mouth and punched another number, cradling the phone under my ear and scoring another name off my list of potential recruits. An answering machine kicked in. ‘There’s nobody here right now. Please leave a message after the beep.’

‘Bob Dylan, it’s me again. Alfie. I know I called you earlier, but you still haven’t got back to me. I just wanted to let you know that an ice-cream nebula flared up in our freezer and some of our crew ate it. I don’t know if the nebula can be contained. People keep asking me, “Have we really travelled back in time to 1966, and if so, how do we get back to 2009?” We’ve sent the pelicans to the mainland and hopefully they can confirm our whereabouts. I think I maybe told you that already... Anyway, have you ever wondered where Robbie got those pelicans from? Call me and let me know if you have. You’ve got my number. It’s the same number from before. I’ll leave it again just in case - ’

The answering machine timed out and I punched the number in again. ‘Hello Bob Dylan, it’s me again. Alfie. I forgot to ask earlier, did you manage to locate an instruction manual for that weird new engine of ours? I don’t know what model it is exactly, but it looks a lot like an old industrial carpet cleaner. And it’s blue. We still have no idea what buttons or switches got flicked, and Moss is so fucked up on ice-cream that she thinks a Chinaman delivered it. I’m sure you’ll

agree that's way too much like Gremlins for anyone to feel entirely comfortable.'

I spooned another mouthful of mash into my mouth and stared off into the distance. I remembered I felt strange. Like a large part of me was missing; left behind in some other place. The two supercomputers hummed away on the desk in front of me, and the phone fell onto the floor. Then I fell onto the floor. The world was spinning faster than usual.

Next thing I knew, the pelican was squawking and I was waking up with a hangover in Craw's Nest 1, a pair of chaps glued to my trousers. I followed a trail of soil across the main deck and shuffled into the Communications Bay, stopping to pick up a burnt orange crayon that had been abandoned just inside the doorway. 'W,' I said.

My bunkmate was sprawled out, face down and motionless on the floor. 'W,' I said again, nudging him with a foot.

'Perry, is that you?' he rasped, rolling over. His face was a hideous mess of silver glitter.

'Perry? Who's Perry?'

'You know, Perry. Perry in the purple tunic,' he grunted before rolling back onto his belly.

I stopped, the fog momentarily lifting behind my eyes. For some reason, I saw a dismembered hand sitting at the bottom of one of the washroom toilets. 'Jesus, that's horrible,' I muttered, examining two cardboard fish hanging from the ceiling, spinning slowly in the sunlight streaming in through the portholes. I vaguely recalled something about a competition and a money tree. 'W, do you know anything about where this soil came from?' I asked him, pointing to the trail of earth running straight through the Communications Bay and out the door. 'W?'

He didn't reply, so I followed the trail, all the way to our cluttered Storage Hold. Stepping over the assortment of objects, I unpinned our Quartermaster's scroll from the wall and studied the scrawled notes in the hope they might remind me how I ended up in Craw's Nest 1.

Banana slug! First real efforts to re-inventory the Storage Hold since we spaced out in late September of last year. Bear with us while we update our lists. (Also note that all 2-D media have been moved to the filing cabinet.)

What the fuck? Well, for a start that didn't make any sense. In late September last year, we didn't even know about the Mardi, so I had no idea what Simon was on about. I turned around and looked at the

sturdy metal filing cabinet, tucked away in the corner of the Storage Hold. It was funny, but you think I might have noticed something so big before. I shook my head and read the next entry.

Looking better in here, save for that blasted safe! We are beginning to go mad with anticipation and uncertainty-of-content. (Here's an interesting thought, though... The front of the safe was charred from the explosion, except the front dial, which seems to have escaped any damage at all. It looks as pearly-new as if it just came out of the factory. We think that is weird.)

Safe? What safe?

'Squawk!'

I turned and jumped at the sight of the pelican sitting on top of a charred green metal safe. 'How the fuck did you get in here?'

'Squawk!'

'Wait a minute. Did you have something to do with this safe suddenly being here? Never mind, don't answer that. Look, what do you want? Can't you see I'm busy?'

'Squawk!'

I picked up the closest object to hand, an old brown leather sandal, and pretended to throw it at the bird. It didn't flinch, so I tossed the sandal off into the shadows and went back to Simon's next entry.

EGADS! This place is a wreck! (But then again, I think I was looking forward to a good explosion. SEE Alfie's 07/03/09 journal entry.) We've got a few folks with saws and hammers trying to repair the floor, and personally, I'm trying to reorganize our flotsam as delicately as I can. We'll need help scrubbing the carbon from the walls, eventually...

Now I knew something weird was *definitely* going on. I would have known if there was an explosion on the ship. As for the date of the entry – 7th of March 2009 - we weren't even sailing then. Unless he's using some weird American format, in which case it would be the 3rd of July, 2009. Either way, that's impossible. As I read on, I started to feel increasingly uneasy.

As our inventory proceeds, we ask that any items deposited in the Storage Hold be recorded on the parchment scroll near the ladder. Here's a short, running list of the supplies on *Our Ship the Mardi*:

For food (yum), see the Galley.

For books, histograms, figures, labyrinthine pamphlets, and reports, see The Filing Cabinet.

For plants, including the seedlings we've brought from Pepperland, see the Engine Room.

clipboards (3)

pink, orange and blue survey flags – pawned

supercomputers (SAM and NIKO) -> (Moved to Communications Bay.)

stockpile of dog food and biscuit - (consumed?)

cigarettes (we can't even count how many)

portraits of Ernst Hoffmann, framed in with gold and red velvet (2)

frog-dissolving solution (2000 1/4 L)

pruning shears (14 pair) (10 pairs pawned)

COLORFUL CRAYONS (several in the *Burnt Orange* color, I might add...)

brain coolant

20 cords of firewood

tin, platinum, zinc, tungsten, and antimony (ample supplies, all)

vacuum-driven chaos calculator (plugged into a dedicated solar circuit)

waterbottles and canteens

30x30 cm sheets of assorted animal stickers (3526) (*many of these have been used, and rightly so, they are splendid.*)

30x30 cm sheets of assorted vehicle stickers (744)

short-pencils

Alongside short-pencils, someone has scribbled: "Where are the fuckin black biros?"

kevlar chainsaw chaps (3 pair, one of which is destroyed beyond functional use, but may still be salvageable for kevlar fibers)

chainsaws (3) [*note: not to be used without chaps!!]

calipers

screnches (a handy tool. one for every crew member. Emerson has welded a washer to the top of each so that they're easy to keep on a belt loop or what have you...)

rope (4000m in three standard thicknesses, mostly capable for riggings, but also suitable for climbing)

sail cloth

motor oil

patchwork quilts (12) – pawned
10x, 30x, 100x magnification loupes
mathematical construction kits (2) – pawned
[contains: compass, protractor, rulers, marking pen,
black/gray/white crayons, magic wand.]
thick mist
abacus – pawned
an elephant teapot → Moved to Recreation Room! - (melted)

WHAT?

We had an elephant teapot, and it got MELTED?

Fuck!

several bright electric lamps – pawned
microorganisms (labeled)
multiple reduction copy machine
bubble solution
laughter (canned)
dog barks (canned)
electron-tunneling microscope
tarps (5, now 3, with some being used to make hazmat freezer-
suits)
5-gallon buckets (a dozen or so, with varying amounts of dirt on
them)
extra bootlaces – pawned
(though we lack a compass, we do have) an astrolabe {!!
(misplaced)
blue pants; green shirts
superglue (used/abused)
spray paint (red, black, greenish, metallic blue)
even more crayons
hot glue guns (4, one bigger than the others)
hammers (10 or so)
nails (in excess of 2000)
acrylic paint and powdered pigments in 9 colors:
‘fuchsia, maroon, navy, wheat, azure, ocher, chartreuse, cyan, hot
pink, brown‘
clothespins
exact-o-knives
lots of cardboard in varying sizes (minus cardboard cutout
Scarytoes)
broken refrigerator (1) - (moved to Bunkroom 8)

erasers (gum, rubber – several each)
alchemy set – pawned
polka-dot ribbons
kerosene lamps (w/ kerosene)
extra ping pong balls – pawned

We seemed to have “pawned” an awful lot of stuff. Which begged the questions: How, why, and to whom?

ping pong paddles (3 pair, in addition to those in the Rec Room)
lamp wicks
CD cases (many)
potting soil (spilled)

Aha! Now we were getting somewhere! So, Simon knew about the soil.

{clay pots of many different sizes
rubber hose (10 odd meters worth)
garden hose (2, 15 meters long)
growing lamps} → most of this stuff has been moved to the Engine Room.
{shower nozzles
sponges
biodegradable soap/shampoo
scrub brushes
scouring powder
mops (actually there are 16 of these, looks like somebody likes to keep tidy...)
mop buckets
brooms (only 7, one with a busted handle)
toilet paper
plungers (2)}→ and ALL of this stuff has been moved to washrooms 1 and 2, respectively.
whackbat (singular)

I looked down at the whackbat. ‘What’s this thing even for?’ I asked out loud.

shoe horns (3) – pawned
bricks (30 or 40) – pawned

We pawned 30 or 40 bricks? Seriously?

small engines (hair dryer, lawn mower, toy car)
wiring equipment
[copper and silver wire, solder, soldering irons (2)]
voltmeter
Sponge Bob fishing rods (3, all in pretty poor repair)
thinking cap (one, but really quite snappy)
computer speakers (our supercomputers have built-in speakers
already, though...) – pawned
sewing machine (1)
spools of thread
needles and pins (a large box of assorted varieties and girths)
cheap watercolor paints (2 children’s sets w/ day-glo plastic
paintbrushes) - pawned
a large roll of chicken wire
a plant press
a kiln [note: *bulky*.] – pawned
All five and The Atom Band and I have managed to lug this stupid
safe (now charred) back into the dishevelled Storage Hold...



Anyone feel lucky about the combination?

Try your cunning hand at the safe.

Now there was a challenge if ever I saw one. I tried the dial. Nothing. I tried again. Still nothing. Five minutes of fiddling with the dial later, I stopped trying and gave it an almighty boot. It didn't budge. 'I'll come back to you,' I told it. 'And next time, I'll bring dynamite. In fact, I'm pretty sure I've got a sack of it right here.' I held up a heavy sack full of red sticks.

'Squawk!'

'If I wanted your input, I'd ask for it,' I told the pelican, and picked up the scroll again.

three rabbit pelts – pawned

a lobster trap – pawned

a rubber pouch of dentist's tools – pawned

a hole-punch – pawned

two sizeable mauls (both rusted and remarkably heavy)

a dusty and faded journal, extremely difficult to read

wire frog-bone model – pawned

an industrial laser! (*WOW, were we excited when we found this! We managed to scribble/burn a cartoon figure on the planks of the ship with it, too...*)

[SPECIAL QUARTERMASTER'S NOTE: We also practically sliced off the arm-of-Scarytoes with this thing, so please take caution when using it. Or you could consider wearing a pair of safety goggles. As a scientist, I know that safety goggles are actually just cool looking, so I wear mine most of the time anyway. Dog food.]

a hypnotist's disc

pins for eating sweet corn with, fashioned in the shape of two minuscule ears

slow marmots (it is fun to catch them, but be careful for biting!) – pawned

a L.A. Clippers sweatband, somewhat crusty *missing

two athletic weights of different sizes, without supporting bar – pawned

a plastic screw-top jar of so-called 'black night' – pawned

springs, differing in length and compressibility

stapler – pawned

mousepads – pawned

sprocket – pawned

plenty of dust and DJ rat poo

We have at our disposal a previously unequaled selection of instrumentation available to our disposal aboard the Mardi. There is also a large inventory of supportive technology to pursue recordings with vigor and skill. I will list some of the artefacts here. If you've got anything that you'd like to add, just holler.

THE INSTRUMENTS OF SOUND:

Sousaphone collection (two from 1914, one from 1978.)

Flugelhorns

Synthhorns – ‘Sax’ (1), ‘Trumpet’ (1)

Autoharp

Cymbalom

Harp

Hammered Dulcimer

Santoor

Rhodes

Grand Piano (lost at sea)

Wurlitzer

Synthesizers (an assortment, some MIDI based, some analog.)

Tin Whistles

Turkey call

Tin Cans

Coffee Cans

Guitars [Acoustic, Electric, 12-string, 9-string, 2-string, Fretless (back to six, here, folks), The Appraised 'Shittar']

Basses {Fretted, Fretless; in both 4-and-5 string varieties}

Oboe

Pipes

Saveloy

Big Bass

Flagelets

Transverse Flutes

Little Bassoon

Big Bassoon *In Bunkroom 6

Triple Bassoon

Little Black Cornets

Shrill White Cornets

Horns

Sackbuts

Trombones

Green Hunting-Horns

Fipple-Flutes

Bagpipes – pawned

Bombardons

Kettle-Drums

Snare Drum

Bass-Drum

Grand Organs

We also have a variety of percussive implements:

[Clackers, rattles, bells, jingle-bells, gourds, pots & pans, glasses (some filled with water), cowbell, gongs and other metallophones, party horns, cymbals, bicycle horns, car horns, washing machines, metronomes (some extremely circuit-bent), a fog horn, a vibroslap, claves, woodblock, frog calls, barking, hand claps, bottles breaking, drum machines and sequencers, chimes, tablas, bongos, djembe, an anvil, castanets - pawned, steel drum, 5-gallon buckets, metallic scraps, washboard, finger-cymbals, tom drums (assorted), seed pods, egyptian drums, kick drums, and triangle. We are also making a hexagon, heptagon, and nonagon to be used similarly to the triangle.]

An absolute mess of sticks – some classic drumsticks of different gauges, but also hard and soft mallets, and curved mallets for playing the egyptian drums, and soft beaters for the bass drums, timpani and gongs. We've got hard metallic wands for the metallophones, and a kick pedal that attaches to the kick drum. The anvil is struck with a hammer and the sequencers aren't struck at all. (Especially not with the hammer.)

Hurdy Gurdy

Violins

Stroh-violins

Violas

Erhu

Sarod

Cello

(don't worry, we've already got the *Big Bass* covered...)

Banjo

Dulcimer

Hunter's Harp

Mandolin

Bouzouki

Tenor guitar

Tuning forks (at 440 Hz, 1106.8 Hz, and 196 Hz.)

Theremins (optical and standard)

English Horn

Clarinets
Saxophones (Baritone, Soprano, Tenor)
Trumpets
Bugs in jars
Piccolo
Musical combs
Musical saws
Conch shell *Magical artefact, gone
Euphonium
Baritone Horn
Moonshine Jugs
Jaw Harp
Kalimba
Lyres
Lutes
Ouds
Accordion AND Concertinas!
Melodica
Electric organs
Samplers
Ukelele
Oh, I'm absolutely forgetting my trusty recorder, The Neon-Nauseous Bolt of God!
Don't even get me started on the electric instruments...

I looked over my shoulder at the giant stack of instruments The Atom Band had brought with them. They filled up nearly half the room with the insane potential of music.

I flipped the top sheet of the clipboard over and read the scribbled comments on the reverse.

Alfie:

2 3 4 4 3 1 2 3 3 4
3 3 3 1 2 2 5 3 2 1
1 3 3 2 2 2 4 2 4 5
5 3 3 2 2 3 5 1 1 2
2 1 2 1 3 3 2 3 3 3
4 5 4 2 2 2 2 1 2 3
3 3 3 5 3 3 2 2 3 1
3 3 3 2 2 1 2 4 1 4
3 3 2 1 1 4 4 5 4 2
2 1 2 3 4 4 5 2 2 3

The tiny 10x10 grid of numbers looked eerily familiar. Perhaps I wrote them last night. I remembered now. Sort of. Though I had no idea what they meant.

Moss: Good, a broken fridge. I can start growing more plants inside.

Simon: Moss, what kind of flowers will you grow?

Moss: I will grow mutant crosses between existing ones. Like Tulips and Basil – Balips. And Daffodils and Poppies – Daffoppies. And Bok Choy and Eucalyptus – Bok Chyptus.

Simon: SPLENDID! I can imagine that Balips may be an enormous success with Dutch cooks, and Daffoppies with numerically-inclined folk junkies. Bok Chyptus. Ouch. Say, will you grow me some Lilac and Cactus hybrids? I'd love something that smells great AND explodes in yer retinas.

Moss: Combining the seeds as we speak. The Bok Chyptus is a bit of an underdog, it's very good for you but not that appealing. Label reads Cactilac.

Alfie: Wax candles! Well, thank fuck for that! Also, I've lost/used a lot of stuff on this list. Just returning this sandal. And picking up some cotton wool for my cloud coffin. Only we don't seem to have any cotton wool.

I couldn't remember this at all. What the fuck was a "cloud coffin"?

Simon: You might be able to dishevel this wool scarf into something usable. And bleach it to get rid of the gray dye? Thanks for returning that broken sandal, by the way.

I looked off into the shadows where I hurled the sandal, then began to read the reverse side of the scroll, detailing the contents of the filing cabinet:

Just a big hollow brushed-metal cabinet.

We're working on moving all old documents, papers, pamphlets, poems, booklets, maps, encryption printouts, data archives, photographs, notebooks, recipes, scrolls, tomes, leaflets, sticker-books, and all other 2-D archival material to this location.

(Heyo, you. Please bear with us whilst we sort through all this stuff. But in the meantime feel free to search the cabinet to find a good frond of reading material or something to ponder or laugh about. Some of it is quite fascinating, as you may notice upon browsing...)

'Harold Archaleus' Pocket Guide to the Species of The Universe 2010' (Harold Archaleus)

'Seven Parasitic Flowers of The Outer Reaches' (Nubak Tumtiaal)

'The Silvery Tome of Vast Light Eternal' (no Author listed, very old handwritten book)

'Causation Is My Middle Name' (Ernie C. Haidekel)

Box of Slides (assorted, mostly terrestrial from the '70s)

Two Cardboard boxes filled with old computer punchcards; assorted data (lunar conductivity measurements, bolite volume and density, age distributions of Taurakanian Ookbat reproductive onset, old trajectory reports from the Mardi. In addition to these useful data there are a few highly worn-out antique smut punchcards mixed in with the rest...)

Film projector reels: *Doom Cruise*, *Film Projector Series #1 (Desolate Location, skein Scrotmanly charred)*, #2 (*GLEEM*), and #3 (*Anchors Aweigh*).

Frog call identification tapes

'The Giving Tree' (Shel Silverstein)

Map of unknown cratered landscape, possibly a quadrangle on Knese Minor? (unknown projection, though a scale bar is included.)

'Complete History of the Pheriden Battlestorm, New-Epoch Larval Cloud, and Solarii Code of Antiquity' (Skar Abek Farant Ulek Kyon, Subtle Bannerlord of The Imperial Academy)

An old Stickerbook with a bunch of World Cup '86 stickers in it.

'Impossible Languages For You!' (2nd ed. Mary Prattle. A maniacally highlighted copy.)

'Crime and Punishment' (Fyodor Dostoevsky)

'Xxaxar, You Are So Dumb...' (Muktow. Grongling children's comic-strip series; 7100+ daily strips; equivalent to 5 years of publication on Grong. **Note: Almost every one is grossly brutal and devoid of all but the crudest of artistic merits... though this may also be the stylistic intention of the artist, we are uncertain.)

Phone books: Two; Seattle Metropolitan Area (USA) and Fife (Scotland, United Kingdom).

A poster depicting techniques for stretching the muscles of the (human) body.

'Three Lunar Visages' (Dyvad Lakhcteb)

'Guide to Animal Life of The Universe; First Glimpses'
(Transillusory Guides, 1987)

A box of photographs containing pictures of:

[knuckles, poofy dogs, cardinal hotpads, an unidentified infant lying on a blanket behind a barn, celery, an ancient computer, pork rinds, asphalt/storm sewers, bright lights, Ella Fitzgerald singing, three malnourished Turks with their arms crossed, a laughing mustached man with shockingly thick spectacles, a saddle, an unidentified coastline (photographed from the water), three bulky coins of different constituent metals, an out of focus picture of people at a party, close up of box representing selenium on the periodic table of the elements, a spoon covered in pollen, a broken fan, a crying racecar driver, a woman with inventive spring-shoes, blue vertical bars, a meerscham pipe, a lion yawning, and one sepia-tone photograph with scrawled handwriting depicting, as written, 'the sad dogs'.]

'The Cheery Guide to Churquarkal Cooking' (Mqik Joolik. Aster Robinson, translator.)

A curious metallic sliding puzzle depicting scarabs.

Another depicting several different animals (two spiders, an antelope, a dog, a mouse, two vultures, and a resting cow).

Complete descriptive computer printouts of Invention Series A – Q. (Simon Piler and The Atom Band)

'The Exquisite Encyclopedia of Things'

'See Historical Murfreesboro' (Tourist pamphlet, published by Murfreesboro, Tennessee, Chamber of Commerce.)

'Dialations and Plane Tonics For Temporary Metaphysical Inversion' (Hartyulk Modf, M.D.)

'Earthling Grammar: It Are Foundless Also Unintelligent What Are These Reasons?' (Soot Seryeti Tolbin, Grand Enclave of Mind)

A scroll inked in some unidentified Runic language.

Solar Wind charts (some solar currents have been charted by hand)

'A Summary of Known Magnetic Disturbances' (A vacuum-mariner's handbook published by the Z-75 Galactic Transport, Travel and Material Translocation Committee)

'Flightseeing Around Uranus' (An intergalactic tourist's guide, published by the Z-87 Galactic Transport, Travel and Material Translocation Committee)

Lots of old scrawled notes stuffed in an old-fashioned leather pocket folder.

Two or Three Pulp Fiction Novels

Important delegate-supported cat snak tax commercials (2, 30 minute VHS compilations)

'garden.' (A short musical play by Simon Piler)

'A DISASTER' (A short musical play by Simon Piler)

A few (somewhat over-literary) papers on Bospibahanian author and famous member of court-society, Prendak Tupdar:

Absence as Peoples: Troubling Paralogical Violence in Prendak Tupdar's *'The Illustrious Twelve'*

'The Illustrious Twelve': Contesting Emergent Borders By Dodecahedral Capitulation

Breath and Seduction in *'The Procedural Fashions of Avigon'*: Prendak Tupdar's Colluding Random Vision

Prendak Tupdar, *'The Procedural Fashions of Avigon'*, and The Invader

An actual copy of *'The Illustrious Twelve'*. (Prendak Tupdar)

'The Helping Friendly Book' (Icculus. Leather binding with a tarnished silver clasp.)

Two notebooks filled with only the number 679.

The journals of Dr. Simon Piler; *'Byron'*, *'Blue'*, *'Eadem Mutata Resurgo'*, and *'Lung'*.

'Harmonics' (Claudius Ptolemaeus)

A 20 x 20 centimeter engraving of the oracular statement of Hary and Bary, superimposed over M1.

'Moons of Z-15' (Larry Mulkat)

Whew...

First batch cataloged.

My head was swimming from the catalogue of titles, most of which make no sense to me. Ten minutes before, I didn't even know we had a filing cabinet, never mind a filing cabinet stuffed full of really weird books. At the bottom of the second sheet was more scribbled notes from crew members, including some guy called Buckley.

Buckley: Neat. Sounds like the beginnings of a great nest.

Simon: Alright, just so long as you don't chew up any of these documents. Actually, I guess you could chew on the pulp novels. But please don't read them – I'm not sure what a large dosage of bad prose could do to a little fellow (with a small systemic volume) like yourself!

Alfoughby: It's okay, Buckley caught the Daydream Underground out of here this morning for a few weeks R&R, so the documents are safe. Makes me wish we still had that Hot-Tub though, I can just see myself kicking back getting my fix of "Xxaxar..." That reminds me; since we had our little run-in with the PRIKS, I think it would be wise to avoid Fong-Ku'ing back to the Universe for the foreseeable future (at least until the heat dies down). The Underground is still fully operational and as far as I'm aware stops at just about every manhole imaginable on Earth. Also Thing has kindly set up shop in the corridor outside Bunkroom 4 where he has been instructed to count and frisk anyone getting on or off the Mardi. We'll probably need passes of some kind. I'll see what I can do with the leftover animal stickers. After nearly getting killed in Alaska, please do not trust Simon's time-table. That reminds me - anyone know how the Fishbus is coming along? Finally, while I'm here, I really need to get everyone together in the next week or so for a team-building exorcism.

Alfoughby? Daydream Underground? PRIKS? Fong-Ku'ing? Alaska? Thing? Fishbus? What the hell was this gremubbledygook? And why was it in my handwriting?

Buckley: Pssst, Simon. It's me, Buckley. I'm not dead, but I'm going to hide in the filing cabinet for a while, if that's okay by you. Don't tell ANYONE I'm back.

W: Whew! That's a load off!

Simon: Well, Def Mute and I have been installing new heads in the showers; water efficient and capable of distributing vitamins directly through the cutaneous membrane. It also has a programmable series of colored lights that shine through the fog. Also, somebody made a giant green bean occur in the Galley. It wasn't me.

Buckley: HEY! HOLD ON A FUCKING MINUTE! What's all this I'm reading in the journal about us playing golf in the Sports Hall, and yet here we are in the Storage Hold talking about new shower heads? And aren't you meant to be hanging out at Hemhockle's house in the Quixodelic Garden, Simon? I smell something fishy. And it's not that "tuna" gruel. I'll investigate and report back. If anyone asks... [*waves paws in front of face*]... you didn't see me.

W: That's why my skin has a furtive and glossy sheen! I initially suspected the tuna gruel, mostly because it tasted so bad it had to be good for me. Two mysteries solved in two days! Excellent work everyone!

Buckley: Observation No 1: The Sports Hall is locked, but people are screaming inside. Observation No 2: There is NO giant green bean in the Galley, just Roberta and a couple of interns trying to put Squeakchirp back together. Observation No 3: I'm starting to get REALLY scared. Observation No 4: Sounds like W is coming down with Cartoonitis.

The words are like meaningless symbols from some lost civilisation, drifting up like smoke from the clipboard.

'I'm on fire!' I screamed.

My mind was unravelling like a ball of string with too many loose ends. I looked down and saw a pot of soil lying smashed at my feet and suddenly the Storage Hold felt oppressively dark. There was a horrible taste in my mouth again, and I was breathing so hard I thought I was going to pass out. I reached out and grabbed hold of the filing cabinet just to stay on my feet. Only then, just when I thought I was lost forever, there was a light; a small blue moon in the shadows, bobbing along in front of me, guiding me back to reality.

I staggered forwards, stretching out for it, and my feet carried me down an unfamiliar dark corridor with numbered doors on either side. It felt like I could step out of my shoes and observe myself blindly following the beekeeper as he dangled the astrolabe on the end of a Sponge Bob fishing pole. Before I could untie my laces, I collapsed in the Sick Bay, missing the empty hammock and landing face down on the floor. The beekeeper closed the door quietly behind me and I heard his footsteps shuffling off up the corridor.

'Alfs, what are you doing here?' whispered an urgent voice.

'Moss, is that you?' I asked, looking up as a figure stepped from the shadows in a hooded black cloak.

She was holding the string of a curious spiky balloon-fish with teeth shaped like machine-gun bullets, revolving in the space above her head. Her eyes scanned the room as she moved to Flash's medicine cabinet in the corner, removing several jars of murky paste, and reading the labels. 'We're not supposed to be here,' she told me. 'This isn't how it happened.'

'How what happened?' I asked. 'Where did you get that weird balloon-fish? And what's with the cloak?'

‘I’m lost,’ she said, finding the jar she was looking for and throwing it over to me. ‘Eat some of that,’ she told me, before stuffing the rest of the jars back in the cabinet.

I lifted the jar up to the light. On the bottom was a label marked “SHORT TERM MEMORY LOSS”.

‘Something’s not right,’ I told her as I unscrewed the lid and sniffed the grey paste. My whole body recoiled at the smell. ‘Holy shit, what is this?’

‘Jam,’ she said, going over to the door and opening it an inch, before peeking out. ‘Everything’s fucked up forever, Alfs,’ she tells me. ‘Reality as we know it is beginning to collapse.’

I scooped out some of the jam with my finger and examined it warily. ‘I think you’re exaggerating,’ I told her. ‘You ate some of that crazy ice-cream, then you flicked all the switches on our new engine and -’

‘Charlie Kaufman,’ she said, a smile flickering across her face, though her eyes remained sad and distant.

‘ – what? No. Charlie Kaufman didn’t flick any switches, it was you. I quarantined you here in the Sick Bay myself. I was wearing a beekeeper’s outfit and lured you here by dangling an astrolabe in front of your face. Wait. That’s not right. I just got lured here by following an astrolabe myself. Moss, what the fuck is going on?’

She shook her head. ‘By your multi-coloured tongue, your dilated pupils, and those back-to-front chaps you’ve glued to your trousers, I’d say someone spiked your mash with ice-cream.’

‘What?’ I cried, immediately knowing she was right. ‘But who would do such a thing?’

‘With the Sick Bay ceiling still being intact, and your lack of tattoo, I suspect it was Willoughby Toad,’ she said. ‘By the way, have you been eating your raw eggs like I asked?’

I felt my eyes goggling in my head, and my heart quickened. ‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘No? Perhaps I’m a few months out. I misplaced my notebook, so I can’t check. The raw eggs aren’t important; forget I mentioned them. Just eat the damn jam, Alfs.’

I stuck my finger in my mouth. It tasted like mouldy mushroom.

Moss held up a hand and nodded. ‘I’ll keep a bottle of Dreambrew cold for when you see me next. Goodbye Alfs,’ she said with a clap of her hands. ‘Oh, and I’m still sorry about the trampoline.’

‘You sound like you’re going somewhere,’ I said.

‘I am. The present,’ she told me, clapping again and nodding to the balloon. ‘Oscar and I sold our shares in Moon Crumb and bought a villa in Rongovia.’

I stared up at the balloon-fish, jerking around on the end of the string as Moss continued to clap slowly. Clearly she was even more wasted than we first thought.

‘Give my regards to me,’ she rambled quietly. ‘I think I’m hiding in the freezer. I dunno why, but I got it into my head that the safest place to be was at the eye of the storm. Those were the days,’ she said with a wistful grin. ‘Before my subconscious got a knife in her head. It’s funny, but it’s only now, looking back, that I realise I only found myself because of her.’ She pulled back her hood, revealing bluish-grey hair, and a lined face, a couple of decades older. She began to clap faster with no apparent rhythm.

‘Moss, I think the ice-cream has completely fried your brain... and fucked up your skin and hair,’ I tried to tell her as she continued to clap even faster still. ‘And why are you clapping?’

‘I’m not clapping, I’m Yongling,’ she said with a laugh.

I looked around, the taste of rotten mushrooms in my mouth. I was in the Sick Bay. My name was Alfie and my brain was made of jam.

How did I even get there?

‘Shit,’ she said, her hands now a blur, crackling like gunshots between my ears, ‘I almost forgot. Not that you’ll remember this, but watch out for the little guy in the pink hot-pants. I forget his name, it’s been such a long time. Anyway, he’s evil.’

The clapping became one continuous deafening note.

And then she was gone.

‘Squawk!’ said the pelican, materialising out of nowhere and waving the spoon around, causing me to roll for cover under the Sick Bay hammock.

‘Damn bird!’ I yelled, throwing the whackbat at it, but it rebounded off the medicine cabinet and struck me in the face.

Everything went black.

‘Squawk!’

‘Fuck off.’

‘Squawk!’

‘I said fuck off. Leave me alone. Let me die in peace.’

‘Squawk! Squawk!’

I opened an eye and it hurt. The sunlight was dazzling, there was a pain in my head, my limbs ached, and there was a horrible taste in my mouth.

‘Squawk!’

I squinted at the pelican looking down at me from the wooden rail and sat up with some difficulty. I noticed the bird had a spoon in its beak.

‘Squawk!’

‘Alright, alright, I get the idea! Enough of the squawking!’ I croaked, looking around at Crow’s Nest 1.

I was holding a whackbat, someone had glued leather chaps backwards onto my legs, and my hands and clothes were grimy with dirt. ‘How the fuck did I get up here?’ I asked the bird.

‘Squawk!’

I tried to stand but my head was clearly broken. I felt like I’d blinked and missed something really important. ‘Urgh,’ I grunted, brushing the pelican aside and watched it flap up into the bright blue sky.

...

May 25, 2009

Moss’s Journal #2:

Deary Me

I wake up somewhere. Where the fuck am I? It’s so fucking cold – FUCK. I’m *in* the freezer.

I burst open the door and cough and splutter back into the Galley. I can’t have been in there that long, or I would’ve died. Then again, I’m pretty immune to the cold. No, that’s just stupid.

I’m surrounded by fucking ice-cream. I have THE worst taste in my mouth, like congealed sugar and rotten fruit. I have a big fuck off headache like my head is about to explode. AND I have a Bon Jovi song stuck in my head.

None of my surroundings could piss me off more than Bon Jovi.

Who the fuck was playing Bon Jovi? It wouldn’t have gotten into my head accidentally. I’ve been set up. Someone saw me on an ice-cream trip and decided it would be funny to subliminally insert Bon Jovi into my subconscious. Whoever they are, they are DEAD.

...it's my life, and it's now or ne- NO! NO! I FUCKING HATE BON JOVI!

I kick some sloshy ice-cream in frustration. Sloshy? I look out the window. It's a beautiful day, the sun beaming down and the sea as calm as a mirror. I move into a sunny patch and feel my skin begin to warm again. It's not just sunny, it's gearing up to be a scorcher, as we'd say in Aus. A bloody scorcher, time for a barbie and a bit of footy. And then a couple of beers. It's already noon, after all. A bit slow on the uptake, really.

I smile as I watch the edges of the nebula slowly start to recede back into the freezer. Ah well, it was fun while it lasted. Glad I had a bit, it would've been a shame to let class-A ice-cream like that go to waste. And that was some trip. Can't remember most of it, apart from shouting unintelligible insults at most of the crew. Hope they don't hold it against me. I went on a bit of an adventure around the ship... crap. I definitely went to the Engine Room. Well, as far as I can see out this window, we're not fucked yet, so I have time for a cig.

I drag myself up the stairs, towards the main deck. I pass a group of – tourists? Sightseers? Maybe that's the new recruits Alfie was talking about. They look apprehensive and I try to give a reassuring smile. I haven't seen a mirror yet and from the look on their collective faces I'd assume I'm in some need of a shower. I scuttle up to the deck and have a smoke, then head back down to the Engine Room.

The new Time Commander engine looks like an ice-cream covered child has been hugging it and then drawing finger paintings all over it with the ice-cream. I set all the valves back to their starting positions and notice something as I get to a switch I swear was never there before. It's labelled "TIME" and has three positions - "FORWARD", "STOP" and "BACK". Underneath, in small letters, is written:

Warning: Overuse of the TIME settings can cause serious rifts in the space/time continuum. Use sparingly and in emergencies only. Do not use when intoxicated. Above all, do not attempt to contact yourself should you go back to a time when you already exist.

Well. You'd think I'd have noticed that before.

It's set to "STOP" at the moment, but I have a weird feeling the smears around the back are some sort of clue as to what has happened. I decide not to press anything else before consulting the rest of the

crew. I wander back upstairs calling, ‘Alfie? Robbie? Simon? Syd? Heeellllloo?’

...

Alfie: Not guilty on the Bon Jovi thing – I don’t think I even know any Bon Jovi songs, apart from “Living On A Prayer”. All those bands with hair sound the same to me. Wait, you’ve been in the freezer for *3 days*? Oh shit. We wondered where you’d gone after you broke out of the Sick Bay. The good news I suppose is that at least now we know there is a time “FORWARD” button. With regards to breaking the space-time continuum, it seems highly unlikely as none of us were alive in 1966. But watch out for your biological parents in the off-chance they might also be in a boat in this exact part of the Hatlantic. I updated the map on the Bridge today. According to the navigation system, we’re still going back the way we came. And you’ll never believe this, but while I was checking our whereabouts, it turns out we’ve been sailing through the BERMUDA TRIANGLE for about a week and a half! Maybe that’s why everything is suddenly so weird! Wherever we are, we’ll need to find a button on that engine that can move us forward again, otherwise we’ll be back in Jacksonville in a matter of days. One thing that did occur to me: *Is there any historical event we could attempt to change back in 1966?* We might be too late to stop the Second World War, but... we’re not too late to pay a visit to a certain 5 year old John Francis Bongiovi, Jr. If we freak him out badly enough, he might never write a single song in his life. Just think: we have an opportunity to eliminate Bon Jovi from the future of the Earth. It’ll be legendary! And really difficult to explain! I know we’re short of numbers, but surely we could sacrifice a small team for a 24-hour hot-air balloon round trip to New Jersey... In other news, enjoy the weather while you can, the supercomputers are predicting we’re going to see some serious storm action this weekend. On the plus side, the ice-cream does indeed appear to be melting and is now confined solely to the freezer – thank fuck. I agree completely about getting out the BBQ, mash and mango-skin football, and beers while the sun is out. We do have a BBQ in the Storage Hold, right? I mean, we have just about everything else. Except for chaps. They’re still stuck to my trousers.

...

motioned for Goon One sit opposite him. Taking a deep breath and trying not to tremble, Goon One paced quickly across the lush cream carpet, trying not to make eye contact.

'This better be good,' growled the masked man, pressing his fingertips together prayer-shaped in front of him.

Goon One cleared his throat nervously and sat down. 'Mr Koradji, it's Pinky Stink. He's... gone.'

Koradji's fingers interlocked and his knuckles whitened. 'Is this some kind of joke, Goon One? You watched the movie these imbeciles are making? This so-called "Doom Cruise"?'

'I did, Mr Koradji.'

'Then you know they're pissing my money away?'

'Yes, Mr Koradji.'

'So, not only am I dealing with those First Court freaks, AND Mrs Koradji's missing pelicans, but I've also got a shit movie to rescue. Now you're telling me Pinky Stink has GONE?'

'Mr Koradji, we're dealing with it, but I wanted to come and tell you personally. I thought you would want to -'

'Fuck the fucking First Court and fuck Pinky Stink!' barked Koradji as he hunched forward in his leather chair, his eyes glimmering sinister behind his black mask. 'When I left the base, the Professor assured me everything was under control.'

'Yes, Mr Koradji.'

'I appreciate Pinky is a dangerous individual, but he was heavily sedated, wasn't he?'

'Yes, Mr Koradji.'

'Then how the fuck could he escape, and where could he possibly go?' Koradji spat, hammering his fists down on the table, scattering a file containing a torn-out page of a journal entitled "Alfie's Journal #25: How Simon Piler Won The Elephant Teapot".

Goon One took a deep breath. 'I'm afraid we don't know.'

Koradji froze before calmly reaching into a drawer, producing a shiny black revolver.

'I'm sorry!' cried Goon One, holding his hands up.

Koradji fired once, the bullet thudding through the palm of Goon One's left hand. 'Keep it elevated,' growled the Chairman of the Koradji Corporation, nodding at the bleeding, mangled hand. 'If you spill any blood on my new carpet, I won't be so kind with my next shot.'

'Y-yes, Mr Koradji,' whimpered Goon One through gritted teeth.

Koradji leaned back in his chair, absentmindedly toying with the smoking gun while staring out the window at the city of Rongo, illuminated by a billion dancing candles. 'Do you have any idea how upset Mrs Koradji is about her pelicans? They were an anniversary present, damn it! She loved those birds. She trained them herself...'

'Mr Koradji, you have my word that Pinky will be -'

The Chairman silenced him with a wave of his gun. 'Forget Pinky Stink. We have more important things to do. I am meeting with two of my associates this evening. Assuming we can reach an understanding, you and I will be flying out to that ship of mine first thing in the morning.'

He placed the gun back in the drawer and Goon One visibly flinched, watching as the masked man produced a small black device with a bright red switch, and an old floppy disk. He slid them across the table.

'Battle Golf?' asked Goon One, picking up the disk with his good hand and reading the label.

'I'll explain what these are for later. In the meantime, keep them safe, and pack enough of my clothes to last a couple of weeks. Bring the other goon with you. The even bigger one.'

Goon One nodded. 'Yes, Mr Koradji.'

'Oh, and one more thing...'

'Mr Koradji?'

'We'll need some ketchup. A couple of bottles should suffice.'

...

OPERATION NON JOVI

As soon as the sun goes down, I'm going to sneak off under the cover of darkness and hot-air balloon my way to Indiana, where I intend to frighten four year old John Frances Bongiovi Junior so badly he won't go near a guitar or a hair salon for the rest of his life. I'll admit there are more convincing causes and important historical events that could be altered, but obliterating Bon Jovi from the pages of history was the first thing that entered my head, and I think we've already established "First thought = Best thought".

It's been six days since Robbie flew off with his fleet of creepy pelicans to the mainland, hoping they might return with evidence of our whereabouts in space and time. After nearly a week of complete radio silence, we received an emergency transmission that made somewhere between little sense and absolutely no fucking sense

whatsoever. In short: we still have no idea where we are, when we are, or what the fuck is going on.

Always being one to err on the wrong side of caution, I'm just going to go with it being 1966. "Operation: Non Jovi" will trial our ability to alter future events and observe what happens. I realise this sounds like madness, but recently I met someone who claimed to have time-travelled back from the future. Of course, there is a very real possibility the time-traveller was a whole hamper short of a picnic, but for what it's worth, they explained that whenever a time-traveller jumps back in time, an alternate reality/timeline is created. Thanks to the proliferation of time travel in the future, there are billions of these alternate realities in existence.

So imagine this: Let's say we really are back in 1966 and one of Robbie's pelicans drops a shit in the hair of Miss A, currently on her way to a first date with Mr B. Miss A is mortified and rushes home, running out in front of a bus that crashes and bursts into flames, killing its driver and all the passengers. While she's getting interviewed by the police, Mr B hooks up with Miss C, and together the two of them spawn a satanic child named Lucifer. Little Lucifer learns how to control the Universe with his mind, and smashes it to pieces (just because he can). Events are like dominoes crashing into one another. A pelican takes a shit in the wrong place, wrong time, and before you know it, reality gets wiped out.

So with thoughts of little Lucifer rattling around in my head, I made my way over to the Storage Hold to pick up supplies, feeling a horrible pang of *deja-vous* when I set eyes on the whackbat. I immediately thought 'Fuck the supplies' and snatched up said whackbat, heading out onto the main deck, illuminated by a full moon. A couple of strange men, one fat and one thin, were peering through the Communications Bay porthole, and shaking their heads. 'This is ridiculous,' said the thin one.

'It's not ridiculous, it's absurd,' said the fat one.

'Same difference,' said the thin one.

'That doesn't make any sense,' said the fat one.

'Yes it doesn't,' said the thin one.

I shuffled past them as they continued to squabble, and they ignored me as if I was wrapped in invisible wallpaper. I headed down the steps leading to the lower deck and grabbed some cigarettes from Bunkroom 3, before chasing along the bottom corridor, swiping the whackbat at sinister unseen forces as I passed as quickly as I could through the shadowy Machine Shop, making my way into the Engine Room.

Moss was standing in front of our new Time Commander engine. I opened my mouth to say hello and she held up a hand, not taking her eyes from the machine, refusing to blink. ‘You can talk to me, I’m listening,’ she said.

‘I was just going to say hi,’ I told her.

‘Not you, Alfs!’ she said impatiently, blinking furiously and shaking her head. ‘Him!’

‘Who?’ I asked, craning my neck to look behind the blue metal box at the centre of all this madness, covered in ice-cream finger smears, and wreaking havoc with the space-time continuum. As I leaned forward, peering into the murky shadows at the back of the engine, I saw something that made my heart sink. ‘Oh for fuck’s sake!’

‘You hear him too?’ she asked.

I reached behind the box and picked up the power cable lying unplugged on the floor. ‘No...’ I mutter under my breath.

‘What the hell is that, Alfs?’

‘It’s the power cable,’ I told her. ‘For the engine.’

‘Oh.’

‘It wasn’t plugged in.’

‘Really?’ she asked, staring dumbfounded at the cable for a couple of seconds before her shoulders slumped and she said, ‘Now that I think about it, I’m sure I unplugged it just before the ice-cream nebula, because of an inkling I had of myself getting wasted, and Titanic all over again.’

I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry, so instead I did neither, shaking my head and ambling off with a weary wave of the whackbat. At least now I didn’t have to worry about how I was going to pilot a hot-air balloon all the way to Indiana. Instead I would get up early and post some stuff on the notice board in the Wardroom, before continuing to mess around with the walkie-talkies. Maybe if there was still time, I might play some more ping-pong.

...

May 29, 2009

Robbie’s Journal #2:

Whew...

The pelicans dropped me in the middle of a field. I wasn’t sure what day, or even year it was. I quickly turned around to catch a glimpse of

my transport flying off for some unknown destination. They never tell me what they're doing, and I always forget where I send them.

Luckily the field was beside a road. I assumed the sun had passed its zenith (I never wear a watch), picked a direction and started walking north. All I really knew was that it was still late spring, and I was somewhere in the south of the northern hemisphere. I walked all day, stopping only to steal some water from the well of an old farm. At least I thought to bring along my flask, so when the bourbon was done I had something to carry water in.

Does this road ever end?

Of course it does. Somewhere. It felt like weeks, but I knew it was only a day and a half walking, walking, resting, then walking some more. I began to wonder if the pelicans had deliberately dropped me off in one of the few truly desolate locations left in the world. Some cruel joke. Now I would die without ever figuring out if we had indeed travelled back in time. I decided to walk back to the farm, apologize for not asking for the water I took, and see if I could figure out how to get to wherever I'm going from there.

Then there was a bus.

I looked to my left and there it was, a weird black bus with a white three-pronged club symbol on the side of it. Its door was open, waiting. I didn't hear it coming at all. Probably just lost in thought and spacing out for too long, but it was creepy nonetheless that such a large vehicle could sneak up on me. I brushed that notion aside and climbed the stairs, grateful that the first vehicle I'd seen was headed in my direction, and willing to give me a lift. I asked the burly Japanese bus driver where he was going and he stared at me like I was insane.

'North,' he said finally.

I sat down, not wanting to press the issue. It was then I noticed a second hulking Japanese man with his hand heavily bandaged, speaking into a cellular telephone. Immediately all my dreams of cheap, legal, well-made LSD, and fresh, non-genetically modified produce melted into oblivion. The man hung up his phone and began humming *The Beat Goes On*. I thought that eerily coincidental because the song was released in 1967. Not too far off the mark. If I'd heard that before seeing the cell phone, my hopes would have been high as ever. A year late for the legal acid, but I'm sure it would've been just as good and easy to procure.

But back to the humming Japanese guy. He never really looked directly at me, but I got the uneasy feeling he was paying close attention to me, sitting on the outside of an otherwise empty seat directly across the aisle, always glancing at the ceiling just above my

head. It seemed he was just as uncomfortable as he was making me feel. I decided to break the silence.

‘Hello.’

No answer. Maybe he was just spacing out too. I do that a lot, and it makes people feel uncomfortable. All too often I become aware that I’ve been staring at a person while lost in thought, a few seconds after the person notices my glazed-over gaze and becomes noticeably creeped out, which brings me back into the real world feeling pretty awkward. So I get it. I’m just paranoid. And this guy is just as oblivious to reality and just as socially retarded as I am. Cool. I fall asleep, reasonably confident I’ll be able to figure my situation out much more easily after a nap and a beer at the first pub I see when the bus stops heading “North”.

I awoke in the middle of a large empty room, facing a desk. My hands and feet were unbound, but my limbs felt like lead. Despite my quite rational fear, I felt very relaxed and almost elated, but incredibly cold. I didn’t know the man sitting behind the desk. He was wearing an expensive business suit, warm woollen gloves and a freaky hairy black mask. I didn’t know what he put into my bloodstream to make me feel like this either.

‘Where are the pelicans?’

‘What?’ my teeth chattered.

‘WHERE... ARE... THE PELICANS?’

‘Oh... they’re over... uh... crap. Probably... grocery... shopping?’

How did I get into this mess? And just as importantly, where the fuck was I? I couldn’t even remember how I got the goddam pelicans, let alone where they were at any given moment. All I knew was that I appeared to be completely fucked.

‘Grocery shopping?’

‘Yeah. A guy’s gotta eat, right?’

Black Mask stared at me in silence for an uncomfortably long time, before grunting and leaving the room. I tried to get up but quickly realized it was futile, as the world spun three times faster when I stood. I was alone with my thoughts. Pelicans. What a ridiculous bird. And what a ridiculous reason to get kidnapped and drugged. All because someone had the ridiculous notion we’d gone back in time aboard a large sea vessel, which gave me the even more ridiculous notion that I could get some cheap acid without standing the chance of freaking out too badly or going to jail for an extended period of time. Ridiculous. The only word that fits. What the fuck was going on?

I blacked out again, and awoke to a different man sitting behind the desk. This one was wearing a woollen hat with tassels, and thick aviator goggles. The drugs had worn off and I could think and speak much more clearly. I suddenly had a revelation.

‘Pahokee!’ I cried. ‘That’s where the fucking birds are!’

Whew... At least I now had some useful information. Maybe they’d keep me alive and sober long enough to figure a way out of this mess.

‘Pahokee?’ he asked in a soft American accent.

‘Yeah, right next to Pelican Lake!’

I knew there was a reason for making the birds’ destination so obvious. I forget things a lot. So maybe they’d let me go. Maybe.

After a long pause, the guy in the aviator goggles spoke. ‘Pinky, we need to know if you noticed anything *unusual* happening on the ship in the last few weeks.’

‘Pinky?’ I repeated back. ‘Fuck no. Not him again.’ My voice was slurring, head violently spinning.

‘Like things you imagine becoming...’ His words fade away and I don’t hear him finish. I’m sliding off the chair onto the freezing cold floor with a thump and everything goes black (again).

I felt a pinch in my left shoulder and opened my eyes to a freaky white face atop a long neck connected to the scrawny shoulder of a gangly thin arm that steadied the elongated hand that held the syringe that injected something else into me.

‘Oh, fuck this...’

And I awoke back in that same field again, only this time with the freaky white face looking down at me.

‘Aaaaaaargghhhhhhh!’ I screamed, trying to scramble away.

‘Are you Stinky Pink?’ asked the creature. Even though I could see it was no ordinary man, standing easily eight foot tall, there was something vaguely human in its swirling black eyes. It was naked from the waist up, with a belt of decapitated heads strung around its skinny midriff and a deadly looking machete in its hand.

‘Are you Stinky Pink?’ it asked me again.

‘Please don’t kill me!’ I wailed, covering my face.

The creature sighed. ‘I’m not going to kill you,’ it told me.

I exhaled with relief.

‘Unless you’re Stinky Pink,’ it added. ‘And I think you might be.’

‘I’m not! I’m not Stinky Pink! I have an alter-ego, but his name is Pinky Stink, not Stinky Pink! He’s fucking crazy! I have no control

over him, and I have no idea what he gets up to. Please don't hurt me!' Tears and snot mixed together on my face.

'Oh,' said the creature, stepping back, a confused expression on its face. 'I'm dreadfully sorry. There appears to have been a grievous misunderstanding.' There was a long pause and I peered through my fingers at him. 'You're sure you're not Pinky Stink?' he asked me.

'No!'

The creature stared at me for a couple of seconds, before handing me a strange looking handheld device, telling me I could contact the ship to let everyone know I was okay. Unfortunately my call went straight to the ship's answering machine. The creature smiled and then knocked me unconscious with the butt end of his machete.

Then darkness. (Again.)

And now here. Again.

I woke up face down on the warm deck, and thought twice about making out with it, as I wouldn't like to get splinters on my tongue. But I am grateful to be back. Just not that grateful.

So what the fuck are we doing now?

...

Alfie: We're getting ready for an imminent storm. Wouldn't it be fun when the storm hits, for us all to be on the main deck playing obscure musical instruments? If we're going to sink, we might as well sink in style. Let me check my calculations. The storm is due around midnight on Sunday, so it's completely doable.

...

June 3, 2009

Attention All! Communication from the Communications Bay

It has recently come to our attention that several days ago there were reports of crew members hearing the music of one Jon Bon Jovi. It is important at this juncture not to panic. This will only serve to worsen the situation. Several agents of the Communications staff, who for security reasons shall remain nameless, have been restlessly and rigorously investigating the situation. There is reason to believe that

one of the crew is responsible for this reprehensible act. We would like to take this opportunity to personally shame and chide this person! There is little excuse for this chicanery! People could've been hurt! Please be more aware of the attentions and affections of those around you!

That said, the aforementioned agents of the Communications staff HAVE INDEED discovered the perpetrator of this most heinous and pernicious of deeds, but in the interest of tact have chosen not to disclose this information to the rest of the crew, as the shame and embarrassment would be too much for any person to bear. Understand that NONE of those hard at work in the Communications Bay have ever had anything to do with Bon Jovi, the album "*Slippery When Wet*", or anyone who cuts their hair like Jennifer Aniston circa 2001. We take our jobs very seriously, and would never pump "Livin' On A Prayer" over the public address system at 4:53 on a Friday morning. These are the kinds of things that never happen. Especially in Communications.

While it may seem suspicious to many on the Mardi that members of the Communications Bay have in their possession one or two of the Bon Jovi albums in question, rest assured they are being used responsibly, humanely, and correctly. Definitely not at 4:53 on a Friday morning. We would like all rumors suggesting it might have been this particular department that housed the culprit of such a dastardly deed dispelled. They are only rumors and nothing more.

That said, we personally felt at that particular moment of 4:53 on a Friday morning that the act was pretty awesome. It wasn't until later when much mischief had been triggered by such a display, that we were instantly nonplussed by it. Feel the shame, friend, we know who you are and advise you not to repeat such carrying-ons, as others find it in terrible taste, and we will be forced to take punitive measures, possibly the ole Keel Haul. 4:53 on a Friday morning is no time to drink too much rum, let alone put on glitter eyeliner and howl all the words to "*New Jersey*" at the moon. You should know better.

I would like to inform all members that the offending party has personally apologized to us on your behalf, and that it will never happen again.

That is all. BOOP!

W

...

Robbie: I would like to go on record as saying that in my opinion 4:53 on a Friday morning is a perfect time to drink too much rum, put on glitter eyeliner and howl at the moon. The only undesirable part of that scenario seems (to me) to be the choice of song. I would personally choose something by T. Rex, I think. Or maybe “Fox On The Run” by Sweet. But that’s just me... Or is it?

Alfie: Glad the Bon Jovi situation has been dealt with. I didn’t hear it myself, but I can imagine it was very distressing for all parties concerned. Maybe we should saw ourselves a plank? Not with the intention of using it, just as a subtle reminder in the corner of the collective eye. At the very least we could have a diving competition off it.

...

June 4, 2009

Alfie’s Journal #7:
The Quixodelic Orchestra



Now that the storms of the weekend have blown over and I've got time to sit out in the sun, I thought I'd publish in full a proposed article by one Fin McCann of Moon Crumb magazine, about the watery disaster movie that was the first (and probably only) performance by our very own Quixodelic Orchestra:

Alfie, please find enclosed a copy of my proposed article for publication in July's edition of Moon Crumb magazine. I'd appreciate if you could highlight any factual inaccuracies and return them to me. Thanks – Fin.

Since I started working at Moon Crumb, I've received a *lot* of strange invitations. However, the strangest was a postcard with a picture of a black cloud on it. It landed on my doormat last Monday morning, unstamped and covered in a substance that looked suspiciously like bird shit. The return address was marked:

THE UTICA FLOWER COMPANY
C/O THE MARDI
FLOATING
SOMEWHERE IN THE HATLANTIC OCEAN

I read the invitation over a mug of strong black coffee. Whoever sent it was asking for me to attend a concert on a ship. The concert in question was to be “a once in a lifetime performance by The Quixodelic Orchestra, using some of the most obscure musical instruments imaginable, in the middle of a storm”. There was a telephone number to call, and an afterthought of a p.s at the bottom of the card telling me that “rum, mash, and transportation will be provided”.

Who knows what was going on in my head that morning, but I picked up the phone and called Head Office. My editor didn't sound convinced. She said she'd rather I fly to Boston to interview The Edge, and cover a psychedelic blues band called “The Mondo-City Motorpsychos” while I was there. I pointed out that if transport was being provided, I could potentially haggle a free flight to the States, saving the magazine some money. She reluctantly agreed, but told me I would only get paid for the ship article if it was any good.

‘Listen, are you sure about this, Fin?’ she asked. ‘It sounds dangerous, and you know Klaus would never forgive me if something happened to you. Also Victor says you should invest your money in

that Nigerian record label who've been pestering you. He says it sounds much safer.'

Of course, I completely ignored their advice, drained my coffee and called the number on the postcard. After 20 rings, and me starting to think the whole thing was a hoax, a young woman answered. 'Hello?'

'Hi, my name is Fin McCann. I'm calling from Moon Crumb Magazine, replying to the postcard.'

'Hey everyone, our phones are working again!' she shouted. 'There's some magazine guy replying to a postcard. Anybody know anything about that?'

'It's about the Quixodelic Orchestra gig on the ship. The 31st of May it says here,' I told her.

'Ah,' she said, followed by a lengthy silence.

'Hello?'

'Hello. No, we don't know anything about that,' she said. 'Sorry um... I forgot your name.'

'Fin. Fin McCann.'

'Fin, right. You say there's a gig on a ship? On this ship?'

'I think so. I just got the postcard this morning. So you don't know anything about a gig in a storm with obscure musical instruments?'

Silence.

'This *is* The Utica Flower Company I'm speaking to, isn't it?' I asked. At this point, I was beginning to wonder if I'd dialled the right number.

'Yeah, that's us, and it definitely sounds like something Alfs might come up with. Hang on, Fin McCann.' I heard muffled conversation and someone started laughing maniacally in the background. 'He's been at the ping-pong table for the last nine days,' the woman told me. 'Apparently he's waiting for Simon to return the ball.' Another lengthy silence passed. 'You're coming out to the ship?'

'Hopefully, yes.'

'Cool,' she said. 'By pelican or helicopter?'

'Sorry?' I wouldn't swear to it, but I was 99% sure she said "pelican".

'Oh hang on,' she said. 'Sorry about this, Fin McCann, I'll be back in a minute.' I think at this point she dropped the receiver, and I heard her in the background shouting, 'Brendon! Why are you sawing off the side of the ship?'

An man with an American accent shouted back something inaudible.

‘A gang plank? Why do we need a frickin’ gang plank? Shit. Say, do you guys know anything about a gig in a storm? With obscure musical instruments?’

Several voices were shouting. There seemed to be some disagreement, and eventually the woman returned. ‘Alright, Fin McCann. So, it turns out there *might* indeed be a gig – which is news to me. If somebody would KEEP THE FRICKIN’ NOTICE BOARD UPDATED I MIGHT HAVE A CLUE WHAT’S GOING ON ROUND HERE!’ She stopped shouting and took a deep breath. ‘Anyway, according to The Atom Band, Alfs says we’ll pick you up from the roof of your flat in five minutes.’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘You heard me, Fin McCann. Five minutes. Be there or be square. By the way, did you say Moon Crumb? As in that corporate douchebag music magazine?’

I was about to reply, when the line went dead and I stared at the handset in amazement.

Five minutes? From the roof of my flat?

What the fuck was I letting myself in for?

I threw on some clothes, grabbed my passport, and packed my laptop and notepads in my briefcase before heading up to the roof. By now it wouldn’t have surprised me if a giant pelican appeared in the sky overhead. Thankfully my transportation was just a regular-sized helicopter. The appearance of a helicopter hovering over the neighbourhood so early in the morning, caused something of a stir amongst the few locals who were walking their dogs, or futilely trying to jog themselves away from the grave. I shielded my face as it touched down and the pilot, a man in his late twenties, waved me over. ‘Moon Crumb?’ he shouted over the slow *whoop-whoop-whoop* of the slowing blades.

I nodded and jumped up into the passenger seat. It was the first time I’d ever flown in a helicopter, and my guts were churning nervously. I introduced myself and the pilot shook my hand firmly, grinning. ‘Pleased to meet you, Moon Crumb, you can call me Jim. Or Tim. I answer to both. Let’s get you out to the Mardi, shall we?’

I buckled myself in and tried my best not to look down as we lurched up into the clouds. It was a nine hour flight. With Jim/Tim’s reluctance to engage in anything more than perfunctory conversation, and the never-ending marine ocean rolling out beneath us, the journey dragged. What I did learn, was that Jim/Tim worked for The Utica Flower Company. ‘My remit is pretty simple,’ he told me. ‘I’m on call, 24/7, flying people and supplies to and from the ship. I can’t complain.

I've been based in Bermuda for the last week. Plenty of sunshine and rum. I guess a chartered chopper beats the hot-air balloons and pelicans.'

There it was again. 'Pelicans?' I asked, trying not to sound too keen for more information.

Jim/Tim shrugged his shoulders and yawned. 'Truth is, there's not much I can tell you about the ship. I haven't set foot on it; nor do I have any intention of doing so. Not unless those assholes learn to sail it properly. You know, Moon Crumb, I can't see that happening anytime soon. Mark my words: this shit will end in tears.'

We reached the ship in the middle of the afternoon. The air was a foreboding grey, and wild winds buffeted the helicopter like it was some feeble tin bug. Jim/Tim didn't seem even remotely fazed. I didn't see the ship until we were almost upon her. The Mardi was a surprisingly large wooden vessel, a 60ft schooner, black with crudely painted flames on both sides, and three large masts looming up in the gloom. I grinned nervously as we circled above it. 'I always thought the sun shone permanently in the Caribbean,' I said.

'Mostly it does,' replied the pilot, 'but when there's a storm, you'll soon know about it. Okay Moon Crumb, this is where you get off. See that rope ladder in the back? All you've got to do is open the door and lower it down onto the deck. I'll hover in as close as I can.'

I looked deep into his eyes, half-expecting him to tell me he was joking. I was appalled to see from his steely gaze that he was actually serious. I reluctantly clambered into the back, and opened the door. The wind whirled around the inside of the helicopter, and fierce squalls of rain hit my face. I leaned forward and unfurled the ladder down onto the deck.

'Nice to meet you, Moon Crumb, I'll be seeing you again tomorrow morning. Boston, I understand?' shouted Jim/Tim.

I was tempted to call the assignment quits, haul in the ladder, and tell him to take me to Boston immediately. But I'd come this far, and the storm appeared to be getting worse. I'd take my chances in a lifejacket, swimming from a sinking ship, over flying in a helicopter through a thunderstorm. I tossed my briefcase out and watched it land on the wet deck 30ft below, before carefully following it down, holding my breath and clinging tight to the flimsy rope ladder. The roar of the copter blades and howl of the wind combined like a deafening cacophony, while the rain soaked me to the bone. I felt my boots touch the hard surface of the deck, and stood there for a moment, watching the helicopter pull away, the ladder trailing behind it like a writhing snake.

I got my bearings, picked up my briefcase, and made my way towards the deckhouse at the back of the ship. The door was firmly locked, so I pressed my face to a porthole window. All the lights were off and there was nobody there, only the shadows of two hulking computers on standby. It felt like I'd been dropped off on a ghost ship. Aside from the raging wind, crashing waves, and groan of ropes and wood as the ship lurched from side to side, I couldn't hear any signs of life, let alone see any. Shouldn't there be somebody up here pulling on ropes, adjusting the sails and doing whatever else sailors are supposed to do in a storm? 'Hello?' I yelled, banging on the door with my fist. 'Is there anybody there?'

Even if there was, they would never hear me over the storm. As a great breaker surged against the side, flooding the deck with seawater, I spied a hatch on the floor behind me. I slid over in my loafers and pulled it open, relieved to see a metal staircase under a flickering electric light. My boots sloped on the carpeted floor at the bottom of the stairs and I stood there dripping, looking left down a corridor of identical doors. 'Hello?' I called, again to no response.

I headed right, entering a small room with a ping-pong table that all but filled it. I was about to go through the door on the other side, when I noticed a ping-pong ball hanging motionless in the air above the net, like a three-dimensional photograph. I walked around the table, looking for a thread that might bind the ball to the ceiling, but there was nothing. 'It's floating,' I heard myself whisper incredulously, finding it impossible to believe my own eyes.

I must have stood there, transfixed by the mysterious floating ping-pong ball for upwards of a minute, too afraid to move it in case it was actually happening. Eventually I pulled myself away and entered a much larger room that appeared to be some kind of communal living quarters. Several small tables with as many as twelve or fourteen plastic chairs had all been pushed together at the centre of the room. There were some near empty paper plates with crumpled cans of Irn Bru left lying on the tables. As I moved towards a large notice board on the wall, I saw the plates were covered in lettuce and cigarette ends. I squinted up at the notice board while the ship lurched violently, the cans and plates rattling and sliding around behind me. There was a solitary postcard pinned to the notice board, a picture of a black cloud, identical to the one I received, inviting me there. I un-pinned it and turned it over, looking at a 10x10 grid of numbers between 1 and 5 scribbled on the reverse.

I walked to the far end of the long room and entered the ship's kitchen. There was an abandoned pot on an electric stove, with some

sort of burned mush at the bottom of it. I could vaguely make out the shape of a corn anchor and seahorse amongst the charred remains. On the bunker beside the stove were four more paper plates of cigarette stubs and lettuce. Suddenly I smelled the most incredible aroma, an indescribable sweetness, like entering a sweet shop. The smell seemed to come from a door covered in animal stickers to my right. As I breathed it down deep into my lungs, I felt a tug on my trouser leg and looked down.

It's quite possible that I shrieked at the sight of the pelican. It gave a funny little squawk and flapped away through a hatch on the kitchen floor, into a dark room below. The bird stopped in the shadows at the foot of a metal ladder and squawked again. 'You... want me to follow you?' I couldn't quite believe I'd said the words out loud, but clearly this is what the pelican wanted me to do. 'This is fucking insane,' I muttered as I climbed down after it.

The dark room below was full of empty wooden picture frames. The pelican had already hopped across to another door, rapping its heavy yellow beak against it. I pulled the door open and stepped through the flickering light of the ship's Engine Room. The pelican hopped on past a blue metal box with "TIME COMMANDER" emblazoned across it. The box itself was covered with what appeared to be crumbling stains of some unidentifiable creamy food substance. If this really was the ship's engine, then it was without a doubt the strangest engine I'd ever seen. In fact, it looked suspiciously like a carpet cleaner.

I followed the pelican into the next room, so dark and claustrophobic that I was reluctant to set foot in it. As my eyes adjusted, I made out the outlines of various benches, boxes, crates and unidentifiable machines, stacked to the ceiling. I thought I saw something move behind the boxes at the back of the room, attempting to conceal itself in the shadows. 'Hello? Is someone back there?' I asked, standing perfectly still, waiting for a reply. Again there was nothing except for the groans of the ship and the sound of the storm outside.

With some relief to get out of the creepy room, I followed the curious bird through another door and it hopped down a similar corridor to the one on the upper deck, lined on either side with numbered doors. The pelican stopped outside door number 3. 'You want me to open this?' I asked.

It squawked, inclining its head to one side, and I turned the handle, poking my head around the door frame. The small room had two bunks on the left hand wall and was littered with dirty clothes,

empty bottles and cigarette packets, and balls of crumpled paper. At the centre of the mess, sitting cross-legged on the floor and hitting a big silver keyboard with his fists, was a barefoot man in a green skull mask, green t-shirt, and blue trousers. He had large headphones wrapped around his head, and seemed completely oblivious to my presence. When I turned around, the pelican was nowhere to be seen. I cleared my throat and said, ‘Hello?’

Green Skull’s fists hung in mid-air above the keys, and he looked up, lifting one of the ear-pieces.

‘Hi, I’m Fin McCann from Moon Crumb magazine,’ I told him. ‘I’m here to write a feature on the Quixodelic Orchestra gig tonight?’

‘Really?’ he asked, his voice muffled behind the mask. ‘You should report to our Communication’s Officer. I believe his name is Perry. Because all the good names were already taken.’ He looked back down at the keyboard and was about to drop the headphone back over his ear as if the information he’d imparted would somehow clear everything up.

‘Uh, hello? It’s just that I’ve pretty much walked the length of the ship and there doesn’t seem to be anyone else here. There was this pelican, and a floating ping-pong ball... Do you know where I can find this Perry guy?’ I asked as he stared blankly back at me.

‘Have you tried the Communications Bay?’

‘Which one’s the Communications Bay?’

‘It’s the one with the two supercomputers,’ he said. ‘Although, between you and me, I think you’ll have trouble finding Perry. It’s like that round here. People seem to vanish. Perhaps there’s another secret middle deck on the ship that we don’t even know about. Or maybe there’s a serial killer on the loose, bumping us off, one at a time. We’re making a film, you know. It’s called “Doom Cruise”. I think. If I was you, I’d make myself at home, find an empty cabin, or somewhere you can pass the time until the gig tonight. There’s food in the Galley. Nicotine salad, I think.’

‘So there’s really going to be a concert on the main deck – in the storm?’ I asked, finding it impossible to repress the notes of disbelief in my voice.

‘Oh for sure. Is it grim up there?’

‘Well it’ll be difficult to stay up there for any length of time without getting swept overboard,’ I told him. I wanted to ask him who was sailing the ship, who’d invited me, about the ping-pong ball and the pelican and that dark, creepy room – but I sensed that Green Skull was keen for me to leave.

‘Okay, well, thanks anyway,’ I said. ‘If anyone’s looking for me, I’ll be waiting in the big room with the chairs.’

He shrugged his shoulders and mumbled something like, ‘Don’t talk to the ice-cream,’ before replacing the headphones and punching the keys again.

I looked at my watch for the millionth time. The sky outside the porthole was blacker than black, and the storm had continued to gather momentum as night fell. The ship was now getting tossed from side to side like a plastic toy boat in a jacuzzi. After leaving Green Skull, my day had ground to a standstill. I’d found my way back upstairs to the communal living quarters where I pulled a couple of plastic chairs together and used my briefcase as a pillow, trying to get some shut eye. I must have dozed on and off for a couple of hours. I had graphic dreams, one where a shadowy creature was sitting on the ceiling, watching me sleep. In another, there was a pelican wearing lettuce leaf spectacles. It told me the ham sandwiches were coming, and I knew the ham sandwiches were evil. At one point, the ship lurched so far onto its side that I was convinced it was about to keel over. Eventually I was woken by the sound of footsteps padding across the floor. I opened my eyes and saw a young woman in a green t-shirt and blue trousers, heading towards the kitchen. ‘Hey,’ she said.

‘Hi,’ I croaked.

‘You want something to eat?’

‘Sure,’ I said, cheered by the friendly offer.

She came back a couple of minutes later and sat down opposite, sliding a plate of the lettuce and cigarette ends across the table to me. I stared at it blankly, while she uncorked a bottle of rum with her teeth. ‘Want some?’ she asked, holding the bottle out to me.

I was speechless.

‘Suit yourself,’ she said with a shrug, before taking a long swig and picking at the lettuce on her paper plate. ‘You’ve got to give Robbie credit for the imagination that goes into his dishes,’ she told me. ‘Really he’s more of an artist than a chef. You should have seen the veggie-burger he made a couple of days ago.’ She held her arms out as wide as possible. ‘We’re talking world record proportions.’

I observed her as she chuckled quietly to herself. ‘Is there really going to be a gig tonight?’ I asked.

She held out her hands in the universal sign for fuck knows. ‘So, are you one of the new recruits?’ she asked me, taking another swig of rum.

I grinned nervously. ‘No. I’m a journalist. I was invited to write an article about The Quixodelic Orchestra.’

‘The Quixodelic Who-chestra?’ she asked.

‘They’re supposed to be playing here tonight. I got a postcard. I was picked up by your helicopter this morning from the roof of my flat. Wasn’t it you I spoke to this morning?’

She’d stopped listening to me and was busy guiding the lettuce with a plastic fork around her plate. ‘Oh well,’ she said finally, sensing I’d stopped talking, and pushing the plate to one side before standing up and making to leave.

‘There’s a ping-pong ball floating in the air next door,’ I blurted out.

‘Yeah,’ she said. ‘Listen, I’d love to stay and talk about that, but I’ve got stuff to grow. Good morning. Or afternoon. Or evening. I suppose it depends what time zone you’re in.’ And with a half-hearted wave of her hand, she smiled and padded back out of the room, the rum bottle dangling down from her hand.

Two hours later, I was still curled up on the plastic chairs, a couple of minutes from midnight and the start of the gig. Since Lettuce Girl left, I hadn’t seen another soul. It seemed increasingly likely I was the victim of some elaborate prank. I put down my copy of *Catcher In The Rye* and made my way through to the kitchen, climbing the metal steps that went up to the main deck. I fully expected nobody to be there as I lifted the hatch and looked out across the deck with the wind and rain howling around my head.

I was shocked to see a solitary figure standing over by the deckhouse. Whoever he was, he was blowing what appeared to be bubbles from a brass trumpet. I could barely hear it over the percussion of wind and crashing waves, but it didn’t sound like he was hitting a single note, instead producing loud raspberries with the occasional squeak. Some of the bubbles were as big as beach-balls, instantly exploding on the wind, while other smaller bubbles streamed for seconds and vanished into the darkness. The trumpet player looked like he was in his early thirties, with receding dark hair and fogged up glasses, his face a determined blur as cascading waves arced menacingly over the sides of the ship. He was wearing the same green t-shirt and blue trousers I’d seen both Green Skull and Lettuce Girl wearing. Several times it looked like he was going to be swept overboard as the waves hit hard. A single flash of lightning momentarily lit up the sky, followed by a primal volley of thunder directly overhead. Each time the trumpet player was knocked over, he somehow managed to regain his feet, grabbing hold of the wooden rail

around the ship, continuing to blow bubbles whenever he righted himself.

After a couple of minutes I couldn't watch anymore. The storm was so intense it became almost unbearable even to be partly exposed to it. Somehow it was made all the worse by having to endure the utterly pointless and hopelessly weird scene in front of me. I pulled the hatch shut above my head and wiped the water from my hair and face, before making my way back down to the kitchen. For a long time after, I didn't really know how I felt about anything, telling myself that some things in the universe are simply too strange to comprehend. I thought about how the fuck I was going to explain this to anyone, never mind my editor. And I tried hard not to think about the bubble trumpeter as I sat back down on the plastic chairs, closing my eyes and willing the ship not to sink.

Next stop, Reality.
Assuming we make it.

Fin McCann
for Moon Crumb magazine

...

Here is my response to Mr McCann:

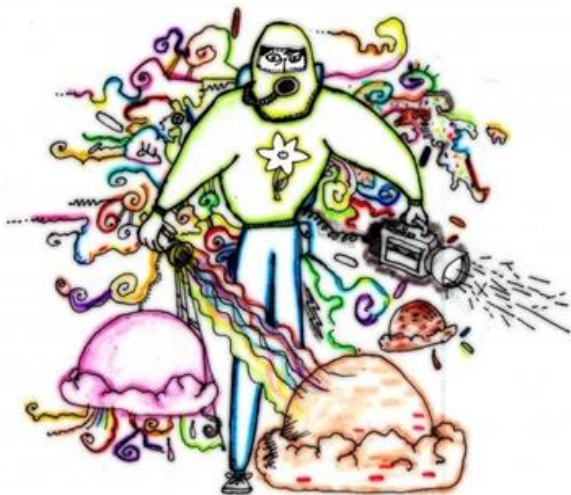
Dear Fin,
Fuck you sincerely.
The Utica Flower Company

p.s There are no pelicans on board the Mardi. There never have been, and there never will be. You must have imagined them, just like you imagined the gravity-defying ping-pong ball.

...

June 4, 2009

Concerning Our Freezer



An ancient film projector has been temporarily set up in the Wardroom. It hums and fizzes in anticipation.

Alright. Nice to see y'all again. And good to see we seem to have fared well through the nasty weather of late.

The Atom Band and I have been working hard to characterize the constituent parts of the Ice Cream Nebula. Results from the HPLC-coupled reverse ice-cream maker test indicate that at least 57% of the nebula is composed of a Blue Moon. As to the Moon's original location in the universe, we are unsure. The remainder is primarily hydrogen and helium gases. (~36%)

Other minor, yet noteworthy components include butter brickle (3.65%), unsolidified lactose globules (0.25%), and trace amounts of cosmic dust. Interestingly, the nebula is partly composed of the sensation of separation-from-the-universe imposed by the blinking of the eyes, and in part by the slush-like slur of mechanical fans.

Our results in this matter can be reported to 95% accuracy.

Aha! But we have also delved into the eh, cosmology, of the substance. First, we fashioned a smart ice-cream-proof Hazmat jumpsuit out of some of the green and blue tarps in storage. Then, we made Def/Mute venture into the freezer with a reel-to-reel camera.

(Without a cue, the projector coughs and begins to laboriously recite a series of blurry motion pictures.)

What did we find? You'll be surprised, I'll wager.

Someone has left the inner door of the freezer open! However, we didn't even know that there was an inner door, until it started barfing multicolored interstellar frozen confection into our ship...

The strange part? That door has no handle on our side of the ship, so some entity or event must have opened it from the outside!!

(Simon is almost frantic at this point, raving practically to the point of dizziness.)

It's a bit like finding yourself on some distant shoreline in the back of your mind, an epoch away from your present sensations and experiences, while simultaneously wandering about in that close, all enveloping florid garden that is reality. We have accidentally stumbled upon a vast infinity, people!

Oh. *(He clears his throat sheepishly.)* What I really mean to say is that our Freezer leads into outer space or some other unfathomably huge volume.

That's pretty cool right?

(The film projector starts on fire, and continues to burn for some time.)

...

Alfie: This film just about blew my head clean off my shoulders. But on a more practical note, it made me realise that we don't have any fire extinguishers. I propose that we assemble an exploratory posse to smash through the inner freezer door and see what's on the other side.

Simon: Hmmmmmmmmmm...

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June 11, 2009

Tiny Kettles

The deck is calm and silent.

Flickering to light, a dark shape in a dark corner.

A girl appears there, made from white noise. She lies with shallow breath, dinner plate eyes and twitches. She reaches out to something, nothing in front of her face, and then twangs out from existence.

The deck is calm and silent.

...

Alfie: What does this mean?

Simon: Probably not cause for alarm, however strange.

Echoes 22: There is a ghost on the ship, slipping LSD into the rum. Be very alarmed, this is no joke.

Alfie: A phantom drug dealer or a drug dealing phantom?

Echoes 22: Anyone else's brain leaking out of their ear?

Alfie: Try and catch some of that brain in a beaker will you Echoes? I'm sure Moss could put it to good use as thought fodder in the flower-fusing dept. Failing that, Robbie could make some meaty brainballs and we'll feed them to the tourists.

Moss: Mine's leaking in a neverending stream down corners and through ratholes where talking rats gather it in tiny buckets to boil on their even tinier kettles for brain tea.

Simon: WAIT A SECOND! Someone's been fiddling with our ecto-sonic data reservoirs, haven't they?

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June 9, 2009

Alfie's Journal #8:

Like Life Aquatic (Only Much Shitter)

This last week was so nearly the sanest of our trip so far. The Company have settled into a routine which involves hiding out in their cabins and

materialising in the Wardroom whenever Robbie rustles something up from the darkest depths of his culinary imagination. Even the last remaining pelican has been so quiet that I wonder if he has finally followed the others back to who knows where. After the storms of last weekend, you'd have expected at least a couple of days of brushing seaweed from our hair and teeth, scrubbing the decks, and general ship repairs, but as always, we woke on Monday morning to find the Mardi was spotless, like the storm had never happened at all.

Having successfully negotiated a couple of weeks of mass-hysterical time disorientation, our new Time Commander engine has been plugged in and the navigation system programmed to sail us south. Assuming I'm operating the navigation system correctly, we should be close to the eastern coast of Puerto Rico. As always, there are an abundance of projects happening behind the scenes. A quick tour of the ship and you'll find amongst other things: a seitan roast in the Galley; a battle of wills in the Recreation Room as Dr Simon Piler and yours truly engage in an epic game of ping-pong, the winner taking home one bonafide Elephant Teapot that imbues its owner with actual magic powers (apparently); the 1000ft Observatory of Multitudes (if you can locate it); and Robbie's psychedelic closet. Crew members will be pleased to know you can now speed-dial Jim on extension #679 if you need to get back to reality in a hurry. Or want to order a pizza. Or let your loved ones know you haven't drowned.

It appears we may have lost more than half our crew in the first couple of weeks at sea. Possibly they jumped ship when Jacksonville was still within swimming distance, or maybe they died from scurvy in the Sick Bay and were given secret sea burials by the ship's pixies. Or perhaps they escaped on the back of a clockwork porpoise, or else are hopelessly lost on the secret middle deck of the ship, which may or may not exist. If any of them happen to be reading this, I hope you're alright, and we'll see you up and about soon enough. Unless you died of scurvy. What with everything that has gone on so far, zombies running amok on the Mardi is the last thing we need.

And so, just when everything seemed so sane, something happened on Saturday that threatened to completely fuck up our adventure. It was mid-afternoon and I'd slept in. I tried calling home without success, ate some mash for breakfast, and washed it down with a quarter bottle of rum, before returning to my bunk. It was at this point I discovered to my horror that I'd smoked a whole suitcase of cigarettes in a month and a half. I promptly cracked open the case of hand-rolling tobacco, drank even more rum, and gazed for a while at little lumps of grey brain that somebody left in a petri dish in the Sick

Bay. After consuming yet more rum, I finally ambled up to the Communications Bay to peruse the internet and keep on top of what was happening back in the real world. I'd just about booted up the supercomputers when the phone rang. It was Koradji. He'd just finished watching the opening scenes from "Doom Cruise", the film we'd started making. And for some reason, he was freaking out.

Now I haven't said a lot about J. Koradji simply because he likes to remain as anonymous as possible. As well as owning the Mardi, he has an option on any film or books that might be produced as a direct result of our adventure, and although he's got more than enough money to take a hit on the project, I'm starting to worry that he actually thought he might see a return on his investment. Perhaps I'd enthusiastically painted a less than reliable picture of the talented crew of musicians, artists, and writers I was going to assemble, but for me the economics of our journey were simply this: whatever we spent on the Company credit card, Koradji would recoup through our artistic endeavours, magazine articles, corporate sponsorship, and eventually the resale value of the ship itself.

To cut a long story short, our Ship funds sit in British bank account of which Koradji and I are joint signatories. That Saturday afternoon, he'd watched the opening scenes of the movie our mutual friend Tin Pan flew halfway around the world to help us make with his expensive camcorder. Whatever Koradji saw caused him to check our bank balance, and now he was ranting and raving and telling me we had to sail back to the UK immediately so as the ship could be sold off "before someone gets killed". I think those were his exact words. I'll admit I was Scotmanly distracted by the sight of Brendon Hertz from the Atom Band, hanging over the lip of Craw's Nest 1, clutching the smaller one's ankles (I forget his name... the one with the phone... Def Mute or Scarytoes or Sparks, I think).

I asked Koradji if he liked the movie.

Koradji didn't like the movie. He said the movie was shit. That it was "like *Life Aquatic*. Only shitter."

I had to admit he had a point.

'You've spent all the fucking money!' he yelled.

'We needed a new engine. The old one was a piece of shit. It kept conking out,' I explained.

'But how could you spend *all* the money, Alfie? You've barely been sailing a month!'

'Don't worry,' I told him. 'We're in the process of stitching a Koradji Corp logo to the Mardi's mainsail.'

'How's that going to help?'

‘Corporate sponsorship and free advertising,’ I said, holding the phone away from my ear as he screamed something unintelligible back at me.

I assured him we had plenty to show for the money we’d spent, and started reeling off the first things I could think of. Unfortunately these were the hairdryers for the grand piano submarine, the hired helicopter, and the Quixodelic hot-tub I ordered on Ebay the day before. I was just about to tell him about Flash’s squid catapult, the green shirts and blue pants, and the assortment of incredibly lifelike masks, before he started ranting again. It was something along the lines of, ‘Fucking hell, Alfie! You didn’t even have the common sense to buy a decent camera! You had to pay for Tin Pan to fly out there on a private helicopter with his shitty camcorder to film the fucking thing!’

I could sort of see his point when he put it like that, so I tried to change the subject. ‘How’s Mrs Koradji?’ I asked him.

He paused for so long that I hoped we’d been cut off, but eventually said, ‘She’s devastated. Some fucker called Pinky Stink stole her pelicans.’

‘Pelicans?’

‘Yeah. I bought her some Rongovian circus pelicans a few years back for our anniversary. They’re highly trained. Worth millions, you know.’

‘...’

‘Alfie? Are you still there?’

‘...’

‘Alfie?’

‘I’m still here,’ I told him. ‘I was just thinking... you should uh, put out a reward... for the pelicans.’

‘My goons are onto it,’ he growled.

‘Right,’ I said, ‘but hypothetically speaking here, if I knew where your pelicans were *and* returned them safely to you, you’d let us keep the ship a while longer?’

‘You know where the pelicans are?’ he asked disbelievingly.

‘Hypothetically speaking, yes.’

He went silent again.

‘You recover the pelicans *and* deliver me this fucking Pinky Stink before the end of the week, and you can keep my ship until you’re done with her,’ he told me.

I placed the wall phone back on its cradle and marched to Bunkroom 2, rapping loudly on the door. ‘Robbie! Open up!’

I heard him shuffling and grumbling inside, pulling on his grease-stained apron and tall white hat in case it was a culinary emergency.

He half-opened the door and squinted in the light. ‘Listen, if this is another complaint about the nicotine salad -’

‘It’s not about the salad.’

‘Oh,’ he said, yawning loudly.

‘I need to speak to Pinky. It’s kind of urgent.’

He looked startled. ‘Pinky? Who told you about Pinky?’

‘You did,’ I told him. ‘Or Pinky did. It’s hard to tell you apart sometimes.’

He looked offended.

‘Anyway, it’s about those pelicans,’ I said.

‘Yeah, I’ve been waiting for this,’ he sighed. ‘Hang on, I’ll go get him.’

He shut the door and I heard more shuffling inside. After several seconds it opened again and Robbie reappeared, only this time the chef’s hat was gone. He was wearing pink toy plastic sunglasses, and was chewing on a lit cigarette. ‘What the motherfucking fuck are you fucking looking at motherfucker?’ he growled in a completely different voice.

‘Oh, hey there, Pinky. I was wondering if you could tell me where you got hold of those pelicans?’

He grinned insanely. ‘Pelicans?’

‘Yeah. You know, big birds. With the big beaks.’

‘PELICANS?’ he yelled again, sticking his head out into the corridor and looking up and down it before exhaling smoke into my face. ‘I stole those motherfuckers,’ he whispered excitedly.

‘Who... from?’

He shrugs. ‘Some rich bitch. Or the Rongovian Circus. I forget. It’s the drink, you see? It makes me black out and do all kinds of weird shit. I’ve got this alter-ego called Robbie Bogan. You might have seen him around. Mad motherfucker. Thinks he’s a chef. If he’s a chef then I’m a fucking kindergarten teacher.’

‘You stole the pelicans from Mrs Koradji?’ I asked him. ‘The wife of the guy who owns this ship and is funding our entire adventure? That’s fucking insane!’

‘Insane? Sane? There’s a mighty fine fucking line between the two,’ he said with a glint in his eye. ‘Listen, have you got a closet in your room, motherfucker? I’ve got a closet in my room. I don’t like it. There’s something in there.’

‘Something?’

‘I’m telling you, there’s something in my closet. I don’t like it.’

‘What’s in there?’

‘I don’t fucking know!’ he cried, punching the door so hard it left a knuckle print in it. ‘Every time I open the door, whatever the fuck it is, it’s not fucking there anymore. It’s fucking weird. I don’t like it, motherfucker. I don’t like it *at all.*’

I stared at him in horror. If Pinky knew, then conceivably Robbie knew as well. My hand reached instinctively for the scrench hooked to my belt.

‘Something broken?’ asked Pinky, watching my hand. I paused and took a deep breath, counted slowly to ten and then shuffled off up the corridor.

‘Yo!’ Pinky called after me. ‘We need drugs, motherfucker! Better drugs! The cabinet in the Sick Bay is empty! Alfie, are you listening to me? ALFIEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!’

...

June 19, 2009

Intercepted Communique

A message from the Communications Bay:

Attention crew members that may or may not be concerned,

Recently an encrypted communique was intercepted via analogue television antennae with the assistance of healthy amounts of aluminum foil. While most of the actual words and syntax of the message were severely hindered, this much was deciphered from the hodge-podge message. At this juncture all that can be ascertained is that the message clearly came from a telegraph station somewhere in Antarctica, and that it cost somewhere from \$2-175 U.S., an unreasonable amount at any account. Any and all help in decoding and making any intelligible sense of it would be most appreciated, as it means absolutely fuck-all to us in Communications. It is as follows:

COMMENCE TRANSMISSION. I don’t know if you know about me but I believe I am your child. Stop. Wake up! Stop. I am Operative X. Stop. NUFFIN LIKE A MUFFIN! Stop. I was recruited to the Grintakh Zorl’s secret task force. Stop. My grandfather taught me to Yongle these messages through space and time. Stop. All will be revealed when Flitcroft and Buttley journey to the core of Cylog. Stop. You die. Stop. You die. Stop. Wake up! Stop. You are not who you think you are.

Stop. NUFFIN LIKE A MUFFIN! Stop. I love you and shall wear an orchid in my cap to remember you always. Stop. Wake up! Stop. Remember! Stop. Leave a backup of yourself with Holographic Lowmander. Stop. I forgive you for the bedsheets. END TRANSMISSION.

Neither we nor our top cryptographers have any idea what the hell this means. Again, any help is good help. You people are creative, right?

Who is Operative X? Clearly someone behind enemy lines and under someone else's administration. While their activities are nonetheless intriguing, this is all scaring the living bejesus out of us, and we would please request that these communication lines be left open for important things, like weather and GPS monitoring, because let's be honest, we sail like shit.

Please submit any and all comments and inquiries to the Communications Team as soon as possible, as we are ultimately dim people up here and can't figure out a goddamn thing for ourselves.

Peace be to all.

W.

...

June 22, 2009

Alfie's Journal #9:
The Ghost of Jack Kerouac

Is there ever going to be a week on this fucking ship when weird things don't happen?

First of all, someone stole our logbook. Now that's a mixed blessing. On the one hand, I don't have to go through the motions of trying to think up something new to say about wind speed and sea depth, or explain for the millionth (okay, ninth) time that my compass is still missing – which I've inadvertently just gone and done anyway. On the other hand, that's a whole lot of words floating around in the Void that might potentially fall into the wrong hands. I don't know who the wrong hands belong to, or how many there are, but given the sense of conspiracy, sabotage, and general fucked-up-ness that has been

hanging over us like a paranoid fog after the recent indecipherable message intercepted by W, I'm pretty keen on getting my own two hands back on that logbook sometime soon. My gut feeling is it's all in some way related to time travel, but I'll be fucked if I know how or why. Right now it's like I've emptied several different jigsaw puzzles from the same box and am trying to batter them together into a coherent picture.

Secondly, I feel ill. Not laid up in my bunk ill, but something more vague – an uneasy sense of something being horribly wrong. Too often I catch myself standing alone in one of the Craw's Nests, staring off into space.

It doesn't help that the Mardi has been without power for the last three days. After we received the garbled message from Operative X, I got it into my head to set about trying to crack it. I started by feeding it through the two supercomputers, requesting a series of cut-ups to see if the words would magically assume a form that made sense. On the 679th attempt, a massive power-surge tore through the ship, knocked out the phone lines, fried the navigation system, and switched off both SAM and NIKO. The Atom Band believe some rats have gnawed through some cabling, but as yet have been unable to get the power back up and running. As a result, we're left drifting, at the mercy of the sea, and grateful for the supply of wax candles in the Storage Hold.

Finally, like a cherry atop a cake of spongy strangeness, the Jack Kerouac portrait went missing from our Wall of Heroes. I looked all over the ship but it was nowhere to be found. Along with the logbook and my compass, it would appear that old Jack has gone walkabout. The night the Kerouac portrait went missing, I was lying in my bunk, minding my own business. The top bunk was empty with W off doing who knows what, and I'd not long blown out my candle, when this voice whispered in my ear. 'Alfieeee...'

I thought I was hearing things, that it was probably just the sound of the waves distorted in my sleepy idea-addled brain. But then I heard it again, more urgent this time. 'Alfieeeeeee!'

I just about jumped out of my own mouth. Hunched down in the darkness at the foot of my bunk was a shadowy figure. I suddenly smelled a combination of weed and wine.

'Pinky, is that you? Are you here to kill me?'

The shadow laughed and leaned forward, its ghostly face lit up by the moonlight tumbling in through the porthole, close enough for me to see the mad grinning face of Jack Kerouac himself. 'You know, I think you made a mistake getting those people to walk the plank,' he said.

'Wh-what?' I croaked, so frightened I could barely speak.

‘Ah, don’t play dumb with old Jackie, boy,’ said the ghost. ‘I saw you in the future. At the old man’s funeral. Or maybe it wasn’t you. Maybe it was the other one. The one from the piano. You two are hard to tell apart.’

I was sure I was hallucinating, so I stretched out my hand. There nothing was there, only shadows and moonlight. I leapt out of the bottom bunk, relit the candle, and completely freaked out, turning over everything in the cluttered room. There was nobody there. As I climbed back into my bunk, now wide awake and trembling, I remembered something Simon said about his ecto-sonic data reservoirs being tampered with.

The last thing I want is to have a nervous breakdown, especially in such a confined environment, so tomorrow and the day after I’m going to try and sleep this weirdness out of my system.

Please only wake me if it’s an emergency.

...

Post-note

2nd July, 2009

Fucking hell. So it turns out I caught Cartoonitis. At least, in the absence of any qualified medic, this is what the supercomputers are telling me. Apparently Cartoonitis is surprisingly common and not at all life-threatening, but highly contagious and completely untreatable. I’ve seen some spectacular cases online - giant hands and mouse ears, so I suppose I should be grateful that I still look vaguely like a two-dimensional human version of myself.

It’s hard to tell why people develop the illness. In the British Medical Journal of 2004 it states that cases are generally “spontaneous” and “psychiatric in nature”. In 2008 there were 679 reported incidents worldwide. Most resolved themselves within a matter of days. Thankfully the eight cartoon arms I found myself waving around yesterday appear to have vanished overnight, and as yet there are no signs of any other abnormalities.

All things considered, the detonation of the mysterious green safe we discovered at the back of the Storage Hold will still be going ahead tomorrow, and my excursion through the equally mysterious inner door of the freezer will still be happening on Friday night, whether I’m a cartoon or not.

My own thoughts on where the Cartoonitis came from? Honestly, I think this ship has become some kind of catalyst for absurd

phenomena. Our time-travelling naivety and taste for hallucinogenic ice-cream seems to have left reality seriously skewed, and it might take some time to put it right. In the meantime, please steer clear of any fellow company members who have the cartoon look about them. If you're feeling cartoonish yourself, then you might want to refrain from licking other members of the crew, do not attempt to run in mid-air above gaping chasms, and most important of all: steer clear of anything made of rubber.

...

July 3, 2009

Message In A Bottle I Found While Fishing For Fabled Treasure



With the ongoing power cut still affecting the Communications Bay, there's not much for me to do. So I'm taking a welcome break from my role as Communications Officer, hanging off the back of the boat with a Spongebob Squarepants fishing pole, in an attempt to collect any loose doubloons or sacks of stolen emeralds collected from the ancient oppressed peoples of wherever, when I happen to spy a plastic Coke bottle with a rolled up message in it. My immediate reaction was to

call an adult, but it was already 2 in the afternoon and the likelihood of finding anyone sober at that hour on board the Mardi is unbearably slim. With an impressive feat of knot tying and twice almost falling in, the bottle was fetched out of the water. It read:

Dear Person That Finds My Bottle: My name is Billy White. I am eleven years old. Do you like Batman? I don't. Joel Schumaker ruined the franchise. I hope Christopher Nolan doesn't cock it up. (I suppose this is pre -2005) I am super bored. The Captain says I should write a message for a stranger to find. The Captain says I shouldn't talk to strangers. He says they want to do bad things to me sometimes. It's not their fault. The Captain says it's society and a cycle of abuse. Are you in a cycle of abuse? If you have bad thoughts you can always tell Santa in a letter. The Captain also says I shouldn't litter. Hopefully you are not stranded on a desert island. Hopefully you won't have to talk to a volleyball or hang out with Tom Hanks. It would be cool for a while, but eventually you would have to kill him for food. Nobody wants to kill Tom Hanks for food. If you are on an island, don't think about chocolate. I have chocolate every day. I'd hate to not have chocolate. If you find this, please send a message back. We could be bottle pen pals. Your Friend, Billy White p.s. I hope you speak English.

I took it upon myself to compose a response. I hope you all like it, as there is no way to change it now.

Dear Billy White: We are not stuck on an island. We are sailing on a boat. A big-ish one. We have little to no idea where we are. We are not bored as you are. You should sail out to our boat and join us, as you would become un-bored as we are. We speak English. We are pacifists, so we are free of those 'cycles'. Don't do drugs, Billy White. Some of us do drugs, and while it looks like fun, and we are so productive, and so happy, and so free, and so much more awesome when we are eating those drugs, they are a detriment. We would be far more productive members of society, working in offices and car dealerships, contributing to the cultural well-being and supporting the infrastructure that our forefathers were so hell-bent on building. Send us your drugs, Billy White. We can save you from yourself. Also, your chocolate should be sent along as well. Seal it up tight; we don't want it all melty. Actually, put your drugs in your chocolate and put it to sea immediately. We would love to be your bottle pen pal. Sincerely, Exxon

...

July 3, 2009

Alfie's Journal #10:

An Unfortunate Series of Calamitous Events Leading to the Death of the Last Koradji Pelican and the Collapse of the Aft Mast

Well, this will probably go down as one of the longest days in my life, and yet it all started so brightly. I rolled out of bed at dawn, stepping over W who was crashed out in the middle of our bunkroom floor, clutching an empty plastic Coke bottle to his chest. I can only assume he was too drunk to climb up to the top bunk. Again. Remembering I was still a cartoon, I shuffled upstairs for a shower. Weirdly, the ink seems to be washing out over time and I'm starting to resemble my scruffy black-eyed human self again. I've no idea where it came from, but hopefully the Cartoonitis begins and ends with me. I can't even begin to imagine a boatload of cartoons. Nor do I want to.

After my shower, I ambled over to the Galley in search of some breakfast. I smiled my way through a super-strong cup of black coffee, before devouring a bowl of Robbie's eggplant parmigiana back up on deck. There was nobody about, just me and the sun. I sat there for a long while watching the pixels on my arms slowly change hue. The rest of the morning passed without incident. I frittered away a couple of hours trying to perfect an old football trick with a crumbling ball of mango-skin and mash, then watched the last Koradji pelican swooping for fish on the calm surface of the sea. At one point I yelled out, 'Hey pelican! See if you can catch the giant squid that's been on the menu for the last couple of weeks!' The bird just looked blankly at me like I was a hurried scribble on the back of a beermat.

Shortly after, I saw Uberpaul pottering around by the deckhouse, looking much healthier than he did a couple of months back, when his skin was a worrying shade of green, and he was grumbling about seasickness. I blinked and he was gone, seemingly taking the entire afternoon with him. 'I must have fallen asleep,' I told the pelican as it landed on the main deck with a wet slap of webbed feet, a spoon hanging from its cumbersome beak.

I had a peculiar feeling the two of us had been here sometime before, vaguely remembering the time somebody spiked my mash with ice-cream. I saw fleeting images of a metal filing cabinet that apparently never existed, and me following a trail of soil to the sound of frenetic handclaps.

After a second bowl of parmigiana, I drank way too much rum and staggered up to the Storage Hold to deal with the safe, one of many

unfathomable items we inherited with the Mardi. Simon previously suggested I move it away from the Storage Hold *before* I try to blow it up, so I tried a variety of tricks – levering it, dragging it, walking it - but alas, it was too heavy. After the best part of a minute, having barely budged it an inch, I resigned myself to blowing it open right there and then. ‘I’m blowing the safe up!’ I shouted up to the main deck.

There was no reply, but the pelican poked its beak-heavy head through the hatch above me, and squawked derisively when it saw my cartoon face staring back at it. ‘You might want to stand back for this,’ I said, picking up the sack of dynamite.

The bird didn’t budge. ‘Suit yourself,’ I said, lighting a roll-up, then setting fire to the bottom of the sack, and dumping it on top of the green metal safe.

After a moment, the dynamite began to burn, an incandescent white light illuminating the cluttered hold, and in that moment, as I shielded my eyes and braced myself for the explosion, I was sure I saw myself stepping into the light, following a beekeeper dangling an astrolabe in front of my drooling, dirty face.

It’s funny the way some events happen in slow motion. There inside the vast and holy never-ending moment, I watched the sack of dynamite explode. It actually went KA-BLAM so loud that there might as well have been a jagged cartoon bubble around it. I’m not entirely sure what happened next. I was aware of flying backwards in a hurricane of inanimate objects. I instinctively grabbed hold of a burning rubber hose as more dynamite detonated around my head. The pelican was on fire directly above me, squealing and sparking as one of its eyes popped out on the end of a spring. I was tumbling down a rabbit hole of disintegrating wooden floorboards, my short and somewhat uneventful life in my mouth. I punctured a swarming cloud of thick mist as my hearing began to return. There was a second smaller explosion, drowning out canned laughter and dogs barking. Unidentifiable stuff and substances whistled past my face as the burning hose slipped between my fingers, and I felt myself blacking out as I plummeted down through the floor, down through the Company boardroom table, down into the dark, dark depths of unconsciousness.

Fuck knows how long I was out, but when I opened my eyes, it felt like the morning after a Wheelies recording session in 1995. I was groggy, confused, and somewhat sheepish, lying on my back inside a tangle of coloured yarns, right across the boardroom table which had cracked in two beneath the weight of the safe and the falling objects from the Storage Hold. I groaned and sat up, shocked to discover I was

still able to move, wriggling my fingers and toes, growing more amazed by the second that I hadn't broken every bone in my body. It was virtually incomprehensible that all I had to show for the explosion was a sooty black face. That was when I realised my bout of Cartoonitis had undoubtedly saved my life.

I looked grimly over at the scorched, unopened safe. So great was its weight and the force of the explosion, that we'd ripped clean through the Quixodelic Records Store and crashed straight through to the Company Boardroom below. Splintered wood and loose wires hung down from the ceiling above me and the acrid smoke filled my nostrils, echoes of canned laughter and dogs barking along with the squealing of the pelican still reverberated in my muted eardrums. 'Oh shit,' I said to myself, 'we're on fire.'

I got to my feet and surveyed the wreckage. Apart from the broken table and smoking objects, wrecked ceiling and smashed rum bottles, the Boardroom was largely intact. I pulled myself up onto the upturned edge of the table and using the drinks cabinet for leverage, I hauled myself up into the Quixodelic Records Store. Several small fires sputtered on the carpet and I stamped them out before dragging the desk directly underneath the large hole in the ceiling, and climbed up again. My cartoon head passed through thick clouds of mist seeping down from the Hold, and I saw the damage wasn't as bad as I'd feared it might be. Some more small fires crackled, the walls were scorched black, and the immediate vicinity of the explosion was a mess. As I grabbed a tartan blanket and smothered out a crackling cord of firewood, I recalled how I'd previously pointed out our lack of fire extinguishers. Clearly, nobody had been paying attention.

A large bubble of smoke floated aimlessly past my face, drifting upwards out of the hatch. Looking up, I noticed for the first time that there was a giant rip in the Storage Hold ceiling, running from the hatch to the very back of the ship. Climbing up to the main deck, I was horrified to find myself face to face with Crow's Nest 2, the explosion having completely taken out the aft mast. Loose rigging flapped in the breeze, and the mast itself was fractured in three separate places. The bottom section was still intact, while the top third had toppled and crashed down onto the deck, causing the crack in the Storage Hold ceiling. The middle section of the mast was nowhere to be seen. I shuffled over to the rail to see if I could see it, and there in the sky directly in front of me, was the last Koradji pelican. It swooped and shuddered in circles, its wings on fire, trailing black smoke across the blue, before it eventually crashed into the ocean with a sizzling hiss.

I think I noticed my roll-up before the helicopter. It was right there in front of me, smouldering on the rail. I picked it up and lifted it to my blackened lips, inhaling and watching as this big amphibious black chopper alighted on the waves some twenty metres away, on almost the exact spot where the flaming pelican had gone under. ‘Fuck,’ I muttered, exhaling and noticing the three pronged club logo of the Koradji Corporation on the side of the chopper as it drifted up alongside the Mardi.

I tossed the remaining draws of the roll-up into the sea, and squinted in the sunlight, trying to make out the three men stepping off the helicopter and boarding the Mardi via a rope ladder. Once they were safely on board, the helicopter’s blades began to spin and it took off again, buzzing back into the sun. I turned and looked at the men, and tried to force a smile. ‘It wasn’t me,’ I told them.

J. Koradji laughed behind that hideous black hairy mask of his, flanked either side by two of his biggest goons. ‘Alfie,’ he said, with an almost imperceptible bow.

The goon on the left was big and stocky with a heavily bandaged hand. He had a tattoo of a hand clutching a crying flower, running up his muscular neck. The goon on the right was freakishly tall; part-human, part-rhinoceros. He looked as if he could snap a man like a twig. All three of them were wearing expensive designer suits and Koradji Corporation ties. ‘My ship is falling apart,’ said Koradji bluntly, pointing at the obliterated aft mast and the smoke drifting up from the Hold.

‘What are you doing here?’ I asked him as he walked past, heading for the hatch behind me.

‘Just visiting,’ he said, stopping to glance back through the Communications Bay porthole. ‘We’ll be staying in the Dormitory for a couple of days. Oh, don’t worry - we won’t get in the way. Just you carry on as if we’re not really here.’

‘There’s something you’re not telling me,’ I said. ‘I can feel it in my bones. It’s not that you’re a pelican short is it?’

He paused at the top of the stairs, his black mask twitching nervously while the two goons exchanged glances. ‘No, it’s not about the pelicans. But thanks for returning them. Say, you never actually said *where* you found them...’

‘Around,’ I told him, waving my arms vaguely in the air. ‘And you’ll not find Pinky. He’s not here,’ I blurted out, instantly regretting it.

‘Pinky?’ he asked. ‘Who said anything about Pinky?’

‘I thought that was why you were here?’

‘Alfie, I’ve known you for nearly twenty years. Why are you acting so jumpy? What are you up to?’

‘I’m not up to anything. I just don’t know what you’re insinuating is all.’

‘Then you’ve nothing to be jumpy about,’ he said with a menacing tone before nodding to the goon with the neck tattoo who tossed me a big black sheet.

‘What’s this?’ I asked, unfurling it.

‘Corporate sponsorship, like you said,’ he told me.

I stared at the white three-pronged club that was the Koradji Corporation logo, then up at the main sail, while the three of them clomped below deck.

And now, here I am, freaking out and feeling pretty fucked up. I sure could do with some rum to settle my nerves. The deck is deserted and I’m still waiting for Koradji to emerge into the evening sunlight with a bag of bricks tied around Robbie’s ankles. The ship pixies will be busy tonight, that’s for sure. Maybe the two goons will lend a hand with the cleaning.

I should really split.

But fuck it, you know what, let’s find out what’s behind the inner door of the freezer, shall we? It wouldn’t be the worst idea to make myself scarce for a couple of hours, just in case it all kicks off. I’d already nearly single-handedly sunk the Mardi, so I figured I might as well investigate the inner freezer door while I was on a roll. I grabbed a blue jumpsuit from the costume cupboard and kicked off my shoes, smoked one last roll-up for the road, and clipped a walkie-talkie to my belt. I pulled on my stripy hat and ambled through to the freezer, ignoring the animal stickers fashioned into the word “WARNING”. I opened the door and inhaled the overpowering aromatic scent of the ice-cream nebula, before stepping inside.

It was ridiculously creamy in there. I should have brought goggles because my glasses instantly fogged up with cream, and I couldn’t see where the fuck I was going. I reached forward through the pulsing heart of the nebula and my hands touched a solid flat surface at the back of the freezer, no doubt the door Simon talked about. I groped around, remembering it had no handle, and wishing I’d saved some of that dynamite.

There was someone in there with me. I could smell the wine and weed mixing with the fruity aroma of the ice-cream. He said, ‘Cartoons can walk through doors.’

I started to laugh. It was no ordinary laugh. It started in my shoes and shuddered up through my body, exiting via my lungs. That was when I realised he was being serious. It was also when the nebula went up my nose.

(loud snorting)

I was sceptical, but I'd come this far, and it wouldn't hurt to give it a go, so I stepped towards the inner door.

(a flash of cheekbones)

(surrounded by the secret dust of the cosmos)

(ideas into ideas into ideas, like Russian dolls)

I heard a sound. It went –

**white noise*

**white noise*

**white noise*

**white noise*

**white noise*

...

W: It is imperative that someone rope off that freezer door. It's been nothing but trouble since we set sail. Also, Alfie, that wasn't actually me who wrote that journal entry. Or it was actually me, but the me 20 minutes into the future. I have no idea how the situation is without me 20 minutes into the future, or how to adequately explain how I got myself 20 minutes into the past, but I will say that it involves various household electrical appliances. According to future me, this will all make sense in twenty minutes time. The upside is it has enabled me to be two places at once. I was curious how long it would take for me to show up again, as I ran off a while back and lost track of where I'd gotten to. We kept up with postcards and graffiti, and did pretty well, but I think I went on a bender or found Jesus or something. If you see me again, get that bottle back. It must be tossed in drink immediately.

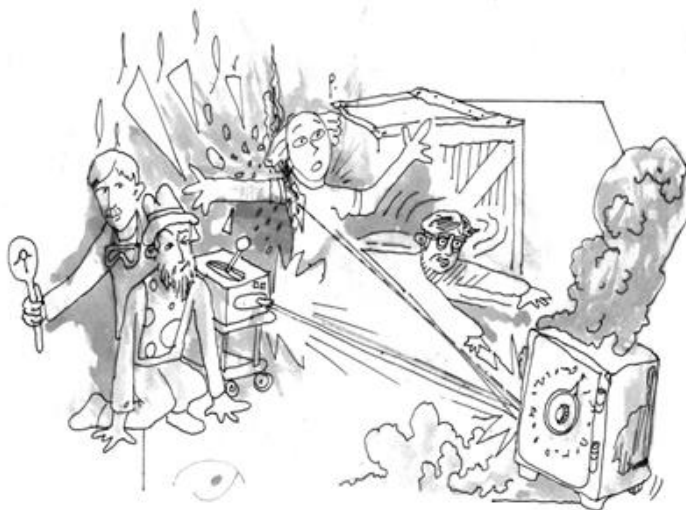
Simon: Well, I definitely can get around to roping it off... as soon as Alfie reappears from inside! I'll be damned if I know what's on the other side of that door or even if he'll return alive. All we can do now is hope and wait. (Well, that and drink rum and Irn Bru.)

W: Perhaps we should throw in a rope tied to an apple, Exorcist-style. Maybe a sign would do. I don't know if a full-on rope is necessary. Anyhoo, waaay ahead of you on the rum...

...

July 9, 2009

POST-EXPLOSION LASER INJURY



34NOR3NRMQ34Q QRO M3QROQ34RQ 3QROFN3 Q34AG3AR
OQF Q34MAQ30 3248 NZ938N 3IA3EN9 ZF30 2MZFOI3N0ZV0 3
09ARJ FA3M 0 Z093RM F 0932MA 23RF999F 23M35M-FFAJ30
39AN3NOFN3INF3INA3ON4VZMMOVONA3ORNA3IONAF3OI2
3N4 234999V AM3AM34IMO LL3

BEGIN TRANSMISSION.

Hello, Crew. This is Dr Simon Piler speaking.

We would like to report that the Storage Hold has, as of this morning, been cleaned as best could be managed under the circumstances. That is to say, as best could be managed without attracting too much attention from our guests. The aft mast is still down, of course, and there is still a large amount of carbon residue left on the walls of the hold, but we're satisfied with this first step.

That said, the safe remains (largely) uninjured. And uncracked. Get yourself up there as soon as possible and see if you can't do something about that. Especially you nimble-fingered guitarists and keyboard-players. Oh! And I'd almost forgotten. Def Mute has mussed with the lock so prolifically that he's fairly certain of the first digits of

the combination! So far, we've got: 08-**-**. (In more standard lock format, it looks like 08-**-**, but that's besides the point.)

Not much, but it's a start.

We thought about trying to cut it with the laser. The results were disastrous, and now Scarytoes also has a large, blooming gash across his shoulder. It's a good thing his skin is so malleable, stretchy, sallow, lugubrious, spasmodic, knobby, stagnant, coarse, and low-floating. We will plant flowers inside of it and see what occurs.

In other news, we've been considering the revision of the old (now largely unused) pipes for the telephone system into a vascular network of coffee-dispensing conduits. The heart, of course, would be in the Galley, always recirculating the ship's hot, black blood throughout the corridors. A few spigots later, and we'd be happily caffeine-addled in any room on board! Aye!

Okay, yum time.

Over and out.

CEASE TRANSMISSION.

TNOE343932J F320N234 QF04 520 234R2N3RNFQ34NOAE
R32490 3FNA3K2J4 N0AF3824N FOA3NAF3Q2948 N32984N
FANKDNL A32984 F9AW8W3 4N PNFA03248 WX398AFN32 4
FO3I2N 4NO R39F3 2489HF A3 R3299993 894 FNA3
2NOFNLDLNFN3O4I F309 FAN3 ONIIIH A309 F324N OINF
2OYOL

...

W: I'm totally pro-inter-ship coffee dispersion. This is quite possibly the best idea on the planet. Now I'll have something to cut the rum. It's getting a little rough on my innards.

Simon: Okay, one other person is enough for me. The Atom Band starts construction tomorrow. Goodbye inter-ship telephones!

...

July 11, 2009

Moss's Journal #3:
Wakey Wakey



I wake up.

Deary me, that was a heavy month. I'm starting to sober up and will eventually get my sea legs and normal eyes back. My normal eyes are the ones that keep everything still and in place. My other eyes are going away in the drawer for a while. They make things look like a cartoon video game in the 60s. I have a suspicion they connect to my brain in some way to make silly things happen.

...

W: Morning, Miss Moss. Would you be interested in trading eyes? There's nothing wrong with mine, they're perfectly good aside from a tad bloodshot, and you'll need glasses. I do believe a new set of eyes could do me some good for a bit.

Moss: Good idea. I've always wondered what it was like to need glasses. I probably won't wear any though, just wander around in the blur. Mine come with a warning though – don't be scared, just remember at all times that you're wearing new eyes and not everything

you can see is real. Time for a different point of view... Also... where is everyone?

W: I was starting to wonder that myself. This ship is too weird to be abandoned. I swear it's that fucking freezer. This is just like one of those cheesy "hunt 'em all down" slasher movies, each member picked off one by one at an excruciating pace. We shouldn't go down like that. We need magnesium flares, a spear gun, a cutlass or two, and, I dunno, maybe some dynamite if there's any left from that safe episode. If Alfie comes back we need to get him to fix that mast he broke.

...

July 19, 2009

I Think I Found Future Me, And We're Gonna Have To Turn The Boat Around...

Trash Island Claimed By Riff-Raff By Alex J. Murphy

Honolulu, HAWAII (Reuters) – Today it was discovered that a partially submerged trash floe drifting between Hawaii and the coast of California has been claimed by a relatively unknown activist and a 17-member squadron of orphans. They arrived by boat several days ago, and have erected a flag in the middle of the 2-mile trash island. As the waste is partially submerged, the populace of the new island has erected a flotilla of styrofoam walkways and igloos to live and work in. The Coast Guard was alerted yesterday by an angry sailor, and subsequent investigations yielded nothing but a volley of seagull carcasses and fish skins. Authorities still have no information concerning the identity of the individual leading the insurrection, but reports have circulated that he claims to be from 20 minutes into the future.

Spokesperson for the Coast Guard, Captain Burt Jackton, explained what little communications have been issued from the island. "They don't want anything. They keep telling us to leave. They won't say who they are or why they are there. The thing is, we can't just leave them there. It's a two mile stretch of disease and toxic vapors released from petrochemicals degrading in the sun. It's a slowly dissolving poison cloud, and they've built a commune right on top of it. We cannot allow

this to proceed. Have you seen how much weed they're growing out there?"

The United Nations has been alerted to the presence on the isle. Diplomats from Russia, Iran, Cuba, and Venezuela have decried the U.S. attempts to remove the occupants as an effort to hide the shame of their wasteful lifestyle and to crush the spirits of those who choose to live beside the haughty nation. The American consulate at the U.N. called the critics "a bunch of pussies" and claimed that if there was a problem, those countries could come and say it face to face.

The New Refugees

Meanwhile, a slow internet following has sprouted as attention slowly turns toward the trash island. Greenpeace and other environmental groups have praised the renegades and condemned the Coast Guard's efforts at removal. Sport Utility Vehicles and golf courses have been set ablaze in response to the government intervention. Authorities have been in an awkward predicament as hosts of protesters and ex-patriots have been taking to rafts and hand-made boats in exodus to the trash heap. How this situation resolves will stretch the moral fabric of this nation and test the limits of our concepts of property and ownership. With any luck it will end in the courts.

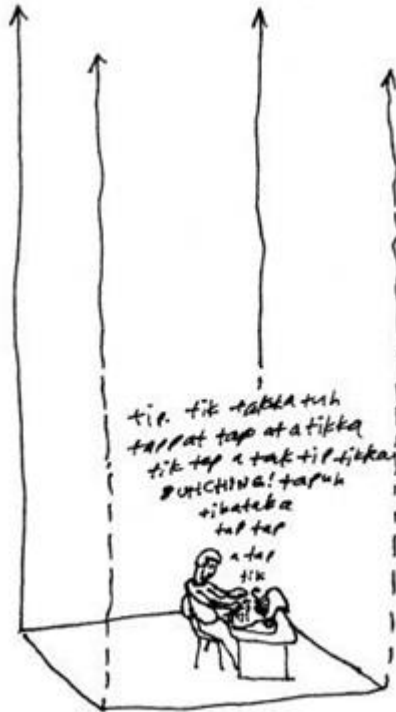
...

Simon Piler: Surt with his flaming sword blinks
bright in the sun
he has slept for a long time
but he thinks that
it
is
a good time
to go out for a run.

...

July 22, 2009

Alfie's Journal #13:
Infinity Cell



Where to begin? My whole freezer-experience was almost too strange for words, so please bear with me if it doesn't make much sense. You probably last saw me, sooty-faced but otherwise unscathed, in a post-explosion daze as I staggered into the heart of the ice-cream nebula. Thanks to a bout of Cartoonitis and some abstract advice from a ghost, I discovered it was possible to step straight through the inner door to the other side. My initial impressions were particularly mind-blowing. I appeared to be standing upon the empty space of a vast blank canvas, while all around me random images of things that have been, things that are, and things that will be, strobed and swooped at my head, some embedding themselves in my eyeballs, others splashing off my skin

like drops of rainbow-coloured blood. As I turned slowly in a mind-blown trance, an invisible trap-door opened under my feet and I began to fall. Looking down, I saw there was nothing to break my fall. The only things populating the empty tracts of white space, were shiny tinfoil stars, hung from seemingly never-ending strings. I closed my eyes and started screaming.

When I eventually ran out of breath, I discovered I was lying on my back in a square room with four white walls, no windows, no doors, and no ceiling. I tried to shout for help, but immediately something slammed across my mouth and prevented me from speaking. As far as I could tell, it was a pair of invisible hands.

‘Alfie, what the fuck are you doing here?’ rasped an unfamiliar man’s voice as the invisible hands dragged me into the corner of the white room.

I thrashed around, my body suddenly constricted by something I can only describe as sheets of paper that weren’t actually there. ‘Silence!’ urged the voice in a whisper. ‘You’re going to get us caught! Just keep still, and shut your eyes.’

I closed my eyes and felt the invisible grip relax. ‘Who are you?’ I asked.

‘Silence!’ he urged again. ‘I need to hear this!’

Somewhere beyond the white walls were voices in conversation.

‘Willoughby Toad? Is that you?’ asked an old man with an Eastern European accent.

My heart skipped a beat as I opened my eyes and stared in shock at the white walls.

‘No, it’s Alfie,’ replied a second voice that I knew very well. ‘Willoughby is dead. Who are you? And where are you?’

Another elderly male voice cried out from beyond the wall to my left. ‘Willoughby’s dead? Nuh! Oh shit mon!’ I instantly recognised him as the old Jamaican fisherman who rescued me and sailed off with our kinda deformed red football.

A third voice, much closer asked, ‘Alfie? Is that really you?’ It was the unmistakable sound of one J. Koradji.

I wanted to shout, ‘Yes! Yes it is!’ but I was suddenly so scared of everything crashing down around my ice-cream addled head that I stopped myself and whispered, ‘Wait, am I still in the freezer?’

The owner of the invisible hand snorted at my side, the voices still babbling on the other side of the walls, like disembodied ghosts. ‘You’re in an infinity cell,’ he whispered back. ‘Now, what did I tell you about keeping your eyes shut?’

I grunted impatiently and shut them.

The old European man was speaking again. ‘Alfie, listen, this is very important. Is this true? Is Willoughby Toad actually dead? How did he die?’

I started to panic and clapped my hands over my ears.

I didn’t want to know.

La la la la la.

I was blatantly still in the freezer.

La la la la la.

Like that time I ate the spiked bowl of mash and all that stuff materialised in the Storage Hold.

I wasn’t supposed to remember that.

I wasn’t supposed to remember the old woman with grey-blue hair. She was carrying a spiky balloon with machine-gun bullet teeth. She gave me some really foul jam and a couple of seeds. I planted one of them under the Galley.

Fuck! Did that actually happen? Or did I imagine it all?

Yes, that’s it. I was still in the freezer. And I was tripping out of my tree. None of this was really happening. I opened my eyes again, looking round at the same empty white cell and the starry white sky above me.

I wriggled a foot and my toes appeared in mid-air before me. ‘What is this stuff?’ I asked quietly. Anything to keep my racing mind off the crazy conversation that was probably just taking place between my own ears, and nowhere else.

Infinity cells!

Ha!

Good one!

‘Invisible wallpaper, Alfie,’ the stranger told me. ‘I stole a roll of it from the Storage Hold on the Mardi. Now shut the fuck up, will you? This is important!’

‘My learned colleague here has a point,’ continued the old European on the other side of the wall. ‘It seems highly unlikely that Willoughby can be dead. After all, *somebody* is imagining this.’

‘It’s me!’ shouted the familiar voice claiming to be me. ‘I’m imagining this!’

I fought back the unbearable urge to shout, ‘No! It’s me! *I’m* imagining this!’ Instead, I bit down on my tongue and opened one eye to stare at my floating toes.

‘Well imagine us the fuck out of here!’ yelled another gravelly voice I didn’t recognise.

‘Alfie!’ whispered my invisible cellmate. ‘If you open your eyes one more time, I swear to Zeus I’m going to shoot you in the fucking head!’

‘Who are you?’ I whispered back, closing the eye again.

‘Ch-’ he began and stopped himself. ‘I mean, if you have to call me something, call me the Prince.’

‘Prince?’

‘THE Prince, Alfie. Now shut up.’

‘Okay,’ I whispered. ‘But you should probably know that I’m not

—

‘The captain? Yes, yes, whatever,’ he rasped irritably, and his invisible hand clamped across my mouth again.

I smelled burning. And big eggs.

I placed my invisible hands over my ears, wishing for it all to go away. What was I thinking, venturing into the freezer on my own? Now, there I was, going mad with ice-cream, and nobody even knew where I was. Not only was I hearing and seeing things, but I’d managed to start hearing things I couldn’t even see. I had to get out of there. If I stayed inside the freezer for a moment longer, who knew to what depths of madness I might sink.

And that’s when I fell asleep.

Just when you thought I’d taken abject idiocy as far as it could go, somehow I managed to find yet another level.

I have no idea how long I was asleep for. It could have been an hour, a day, even a week for all I knew. It was the bus that woke me, a fucked-up stripy bus bouncing across the floor, missing me by inches before blasting off down a tunnel with spurting rocket boosters. I watched it roar up a concrete ramp and out into dense green foliage, before climbing up into the blue sky beyond. I sat up and kicked my way out of the invisible wallpaper, concerned that I was obviously still completely out of it. ‘Prince?’ I whispered, looking around and half-expecting to get shot in the head.

No answer. Whoever the mysterious Prince was, he was gone, along with the white walls of the infinity cell. I looked around and saw I was sitting in a vast and silent underground cavern. Inky shadows stretched up and away from me, the roof, if there was one, unfathomably high. My footsteps echoed on the concrete floor as I walked towards the white tunnel entrance. I heard the frantic revving of engines from the trees at the far end of the tunnel, almost drowning out a familiar sound behind me, like music to my ears.

‘Squawk!’

I stopped. ‘Hello?’

‘Squawk!’

I walked back the way I came, the disconcerting sound of lasers cutting through deadbolts back by the tunnel wall. I broke into a run.

‘Squawk!’

And there it was - a curious, though quite unremarkable wooden crate, just sitting in the middle of the cavern floor.

‘Squawk!’ went the crate.

I dropped to my knees, the faraway sound of freaky dance music echoing up the tunnel as I prised open the lid of the crate. ‘Squawk!’ went the ice-cream nebula, coagulating and bubbling violently at the bottom of it.

I held my nose. Took a deep breath. And dived in.

I instantly found myself back in the freezer, swimming through the nebula in the now heavily saturated blue jumpsuit. Eventually I flopped out breathlessly into the Galley where I half-expected to see a cream-spattered pelican staring up at me. But no. The Galley was as empty as the infinity cell I’d just imagined, and for a horrible paranoid moment, I wondered if maybe I was *still* inside the freezer, my eyes tricking me into believing I was safely back on the ship. Something didn’t feel right. I stopped and listened, realising what that something was.

The Mardi wasn’t moving.

I ran as fast as I could to the main deck, leaving a trail of splattered ice-cream footprints behind me. I just about passed out at what I saw. Our ship was anchored off the coast of a large floating island of plastic debris. A makeshift commune of tarpaulin tents and styrofoam hives had been erected haphazardly amidst the junk, and a small circle of unfamiliar people sat around roasting fish on a bonfire.

I climbed down and picked my way carefully across a plastic walkway in the direction of the hives, noticing as I did, several smaller vessels moored alongside the Mardi. A grubby looking woman glanced up from a tomato plant she was tending to in a plastic noodle pot. ‘Howdy stranger,’ she smiled with a gap-toothed grin, no doubt wondering what the fuck I’d been up to in my blue jumpsuit, covered in ice-cream. ‘Can I help you?’

I shook my head, lost for words. Something about the scene was so geographically insane that the only logical explanation I could think of was I really had been asleep for weeks. Either that or, perhaps more likely yet, I was still tripping. ‘What day is this?’ I asked her.

‘Sunday,’ she said, shielding her eyes from the sun.

‘No, no. What’s the date?’

'July the uh... 22nd, I think,' she said, staring confused at her tomato plant.

'It can't be,' I whispered, stumbling off down another wobbly foam walkway with a nauseous wave of my now very visible hand.

I'd read about this place. They called it "Plasticland", an accumulation of junk and debris in the North Specific gyre. If the woman was telling the truth, I'd ventured into the freezer two weeks ago on the Hatlantic side of North America, and had returned to find us on the opposite side of the continent. Either whoever was sailing the boat was cranking it so hard we about-turned, blasted a couple of thousand miles clean through the Panama Canal and didn't stop until we arrived here, or something *extremely* weird must have happened while I was away.

...

July 28, 2009

On Plasticland

From the Journal of Dr Simon Piler, 7/27/09:

Waking up to the rolling of the waves
is bound to grow into a cradling phase
and I must admit that I am rapidly
becoming a child of the ocean.
Its depth is astounding.
Every sonogram we've attempted to record
has left us with an impression of
unquenchable mystery.
And yet, and yet!
We grow to know it more each day.
The peeling of sun's light off
the surface of it
and the full, blurry scent
of the algae, protistae, phytoplanton,
and foraminifera
floating around us;
their musky exhalations.
The Mardi has come to rest on the
ever-changing shores of Plasticland:
our exotic homeland,

flower-pot,
social magnet.
Already others arrive, the tough, stern
flotsam of the open sea. We grin and
clap each other on the back.
And listen to stories
wild and free.
There will be more, perhaps, as this
place grows. And it does grow.
They will soon come – the indulgent, flimsy
craft of wealth-seekers, prospectors,
would-be oil barons;
And, yes, in time,
the bedraped yachts of the restless,
wealthy travelers;
their hulls freshly painted
and stamped with seals
of heraldic crests.
But for now, I am pleased
to set an unsteady foot
on our temporary refuge
from the world
and I raise my hands
to aid in the cultivation of
the tomatoes or to the skillful
task of capturing fish
by means of a thin, filamentous wire.
We raise our eyes
to the sheer western horizon
and the blazing star it cradles there
rocking, ever rocking;
and we long to follow.
Until then, we will stay.

...

W: Ahh yes. That is the stuff!! I suppose it would be difficult to make a profit in a place with no money and no real resources to speak of. The garbage flotilla, quite a place indeed.

Alfie: You're forgetting about the hash and tomatoes.

Simon: I tend to underestimate the craftiness of people forced to survive with very little. It's truly astounding. (This fish and tomato

stew is kind-of salty, but it's good. I think there's seaweed in it...) On an only Scrotmanly different note, I think the Art Gallery on the Mardi is totally packed to the gills. We might need to consider building a new one if we'd like to continue the 1000 album cover march... although that extrapolates to be 5 entire rooms needed to reach 1000 album covers, which is fairly ridiculous.

...

July 28, 2009

Alfie's Journal #12:
The Plasticland Post



I woke up in a cold sweat, glued to the crusty second-hand sleeping bag. For a few long seconds as I emerged from the cocoon of a dream, it felt like I'd forgotten something. 'I've forgotten something,' I muttered under my breath and rolled over, vaguely aware of the almost imperceptible rocking sensation of the trash island.

A deep growl, like rumbling thunder from the other side of the tent, snapped me back to reality. 'You alright?'

Dave Burbank was propped up on his elbow. I heard the gentle snore of his girlfriend, Sunday Falcon, fast asleep beside him. The tent stank of feet and farts.

‘I’m alright,’ I said, rubbing at my puffy eyes, ‘just another bad dream.’

I unzipped myself from the bag, grabbed my glasses, and pulled on my ice-cream encrusted jumpsuit, before stepping out into the morning sun. I sniffed at one of my dirty blue sleeves and recoiled. Five days on Plasticland and the stench permeated everything.

Lazy notes of ambient techno music floated over from somewhere behind me, so I picked my way across the debris towards it, like a dumb moth to a flame. The commune was growing by the day. When I first stepped off the Mardi there were five styrofoam hives and between twenty and thirty tarpaulin tents, randomly positioned across the length and breadth of Plasticland. I’d watched the people of the island working stoned in the white hot Specific sunshine, constructing their flimsy foam walkways. Every day another boat arrived and was moored to the southern end of the mile-long stretch, spewing out half-naked, disenfranchised idealists who’d heard what was happening here and wanted a piece of the action. To the east grew the offshoots of a tomato plantation, and to the west was start of a hash plantation. Freelance journalists and eager photographers congregated on hired yachts, not daring to set foot upon the fledgling country, lazily trying to make sense of what was happening here without ever getting close enough to catch tetanus.

As I picked my way across an uneven corridor between two rows of tents, I thought about the Flower Company. I hadn’t spoken to any of the crew in days. We seemed to have been swallowed up and assimilated into the world of junk. Occasionally I caught sight of someone I recognised from the ship, like survivors of a zombie apocalypse, tending to a wilting plant or strumming a guitar atop a mound of melted plastic, fingernails black with grime. It was like the world ended while I was asleep inside the freezer, and I’d returned just in time to catch the final act before it fizzled out.

I located the source of the music: a battery-powered stereo, rusty with seawater. Some kids were gathered around it, sleeping off chemical binges on punctured lilos, one slumped in an inflatable frog chair, sunken-eyed, reading a pamphlet. He heard me shuffling across the trash and looked up with an insane smile. ‘Dude!’ he cried, holding out a homemade bong.

I declined with a weary shake of my head and he held out the paper to me instead. ‘Maybe this is more your bag. A few of us got together and wrote some articles for a community newsletter. The cartoons are completely rad. I think they were like, uh, drawn by this old Russian detective or something. I forget his name, dude. Prof, I

think, but fuck, I'm not sure that's right. I guess it's not important, huh?'

I thanked him for the newsletter and staggered off towards the deserted eastern peninsula of the island, where hundreds of tomato plants were growing in recycled yogurt pots and Chinese takeaway cartons. I found myself a grubby spot to sit down and glanced at the front page of "The Plasticland Post", a cartoon sketch of ships sparkling on the ends of strings, and an expose about how the Hawaiian Environmental Protection Agency were attempting to force through legislation in the U.S. that would effectively shut down the commune for good. There was some other light-hearted side column concerning a vote next week for 'King of Plasticland'. I assumed it was some kind of in-joke I'd missed. I flipped the paper over to the sports section and was shocked to see a picture of Simon and me, frozen in black and white, as he prepares to whack a ping-pong ball with binary digits looping around his head. The headline read:

“PILING ON THE PRESSURE”



The inaugural “Champingpongship” reaches its exciting climax this month on board the Mardi, with Simon Piler and Alfie Kolinsky tied 8-8 in a race to 10 points. At stake is the legendary Elephant Teapot,

salvaged from a radioactive beach in Dalgety Bay circa 1997, and believed by many to bestow superhuman powers upon whoever owns it.

Since the 11th of May 2009, these two table-tennis legends have been locked in an epic struggle, with neither prepared to relinquish their grip on the trophy. Spectators to the now all-ticket event, crammed into the tiny Recreation Room on the Mardi, enthusiastically reported bewildering phenomena, and unconventional techniques; neither of which have detracted from the quality of the match being played. Sports journalist Johnnion Jamirod of Mo-Tenky TV, gushed: “We haven’t seen a game like this, Mah, since... well, we haven’t seen a game like this, Mah... ever.”

Crowd favourite Piler has already gained cult status in Burma, where teenage girls have been captivated by his flamboyant philosophical style to a point of pant-wetting hysteria. 16 year old Mi La said, “WE LOOOOOOOOVE SIMON PILER! HE PUT THE ING AND THE ONG INTO PING-PONG! YEAAAHHH! WOOOOO! WAAAAHHHH!”

In stark contrast, Kolinsky has been aloof with both the press and his smaller, but equally dedicated fanclub. He is as likely to offer a middle-fingered salute as he is to run away at speed when questioned about the competition. Piler is typically circumspect about his opponent. “Well, you know, I think that Elephant Teapot means a lot to him. And it’s winner stays on. Ping-pong is one of the few ways of blowing off steam on board the Mardi, so we both want to win. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m working on installing this Coffee-Heart. What’s that, Matthew? What do you mean Scarytoes has fallen into the Coffee-Heart by accident? What were you doing while this was going on? Jeez!”

With both players only requiring two points for victory, and given the insane quality of the match so far, we can only expect more of the unexpected as it reaches its dramatic conclusion. The Plasticland Post promises to be on the ball, keeping you up to date with developments as and when they develop.

Dom De Guerre (Sports Editor, Plasticland Post)

‘ALOOOF? I’ll give them fucking aloof!’ I shouted, before crumpling the paper into a big ball and drop-kicking it into the ocean.

August 5, 2009

Alfie's Journal #13:
A Letter From Bob Dylan



I woke up stapled to a Dr Seuss dinghy and poked my head out the hole I'd burrowed amongst the junk in the middle of the night. The coast appeared to be clear. Just plastic crap and ocean waves for as far as my eyes could see. Were it not for my tattered blue jumpsuit, the bruises on my body, or the really awful taste in my mouth, it would be like last night never happened.

I clambered out, giddy in the morning sun, and picked my way across Plasticland until I reached the edge of the ever-expanding commune. I was still in a daze when the first lump of plastic flew past my face. I turned slowly and saw a pack of grubby little kids standing on the top of a large mound of trash, waving toy pitchforks and spears. A second unidentifiable chunk splashed into the ground at my feet and

I instinctively took off like a 100 metre sprinter on mushrooms, blindly crashing through the coagulated excess of seven billion lives. Behind me, a spine-chilling war-cry went up.

I stumbled frantically down the dirty foam walkways towards the Mardi, hurdling unconscious bodies draped across the debris, remembering last night's giant bonfire and some fucked up coronation ceremony. I remembered I was standing barefoot in a cracked plastic bucket, squashing scrawny green tomatoes to the sound of bongos flickering in and out of time. Sunday Falcon was going crazy with a staple gun, people made animal noises, and a young guy in a broken hard hat vanished down a sinkhole with a shriek. I'd spun in the darkness, falling out of the bucket and choking on the noxious black fumes from the fire. I tried to grab hold of something or someone familiar, and saw W cycle past in a paper crown, yelling, 'Alfie! Run for your life!'

I didn't make it very far. While the riot escalated, I found a dark corner, hidden from the light of the fire and the blood red moon, and I dug down with my bare hands, pulling the Dr Seuss dinghy down over my head.

Back in the moment, I saw the Mardi in front of me and the multitude of boats and rafts tied up all around it. I tumbled headfirst down a slope of rotting refuse, and was about to haul myself up the rope ladder at the front of our ship, when I spotted Robbie, sitting on the shore of the island. His feet were in the water, a tinfoil cape draped around his shoulders, pink plastic sunglasses over his eyes, and his chef's hat was sitting at an angle on his head. A cigarette had long burned out and was dangling from his bottom lip. 'Robbie!' I yelled. 'Come on! We're leaving!'

He just sat there immobile, and for a split second I wondered whether he was Robbie at all, but rather some painted plastic replica of our cook, washed up with all the other flotsam. I jumped back down, painfully aware that any moment those feral kids would come charging down the hill behind us. 'Robbie!' I yelled again as I reached him, but he still didn't respond. I grabbed him under the armpits and started hauling him frantically in the direction of the ship.

Waves broke against us as I ripped off the Dr Seuss dinghy and deposited our comatose cook inside. I was still fumbling with the rope ladder, binding Robbie to the flimsy little craft, when I heard the shrill vampiric voices at the top of the slope behind us. Misshapen plastic artefacts started to rain down around us, splashing in the waves and pinging back off the Mardi's hull. I was conscious of this one little

American kid piping angelically above the rest, ‘Fuck you, Alfie! I hope you lose at ping-pong!’

Then out of nowhere, a familiar hand reached down and pulled me up onto the main deck. ‘Fucking hell, what have you done?’ asked the man in the green skull mask, motioning towards the jeering urchins on the edge of the trash island. ‘You were supposed to be helping me.’

‘Seriously, it’s like fucking Lord of the Flies down there,’ I told him as we hauled Robbie and the dinghy up over the rail. ‘And don’t you dare try and pin this one on me! I don’t even know how we got here!’

‘Oh yeah, I forgot,’ he said with a weary shake of his head, ‘it wasn’t you who blew up our Storage Hold and nearly sank the ship, was it?’ He nodded at the broken aft mast. ‘And you didn’t fuck off into the freezer. For *two whole weeks*. I didn’t know if you were coming back or not. I mean, I even started to wonder if I’d just imagined you.’

We stared at each other; me and Green Skull, like fucked up reflections of the same person, our dark eyes narrowing.

‘All you had to do was stay hidden,’ I snapped, dropping to my knees and grappling with the knots on the dinghy, suddenly aware of great, grey storm-clouds sweeping in across the sky, ‘but no. You had to start telling everyone about your fucking Invisible Box-Set! If Robbie hadn’t figured it out, then somebody else would have.’

He looked down at our unconscious cook. ‘Is he going to be okay?’

‘Do I look like a medic?’ I asked, exasperated. ‘The guy you appointed ate so much ice-cream that he decided to go surfing... *without* a fucking surfboard!’ I unpicked the last of the knots and started hauling Robbie by the wrists, face down across the deck in the direction of the Sick Bay.

‘What exactly did you do to him?’ he asked.

‘Me?’ I asked, irritated even further by the assumption as he shuffled along beside me.

‘We were supposed to be protecting him... not fucking killing him,’ he said grimly, the first drops of rain splashing against my dirty face.

I let Robbie slip through my hands and he landed with a fleshy thud, motionless on the warm wooden deck. ‘Yet again, you’re talking like it’s *my* fault. Did I have anything to do with Pinky stealing Koradji’s wife’s pelicans?’

‘*Did* you?’

‘NO!’ I gasped, suddenly aware of Simon Piler and Scarytoes standing behind me.

Simon was kitted out in a full-body snow-suit and goggles. Scarytoes had a moonflower growing out of his shoulder and a featureless cardboard mask strapped to his face. Simon nodded to his little colleague and Robbie was immediately hoisted up over Scarytoes’ back and whisked away. ‘I must say that Plasticland appears to have exceeded even our decidedly optimistic expectations. Have either of you tried the tomato juice?’ His goggled eyes flitted between us, brain-cogs whirring away, waiting for a crumb of explanation.

‘We’re leaving,’ I told him.

‘So soon?’ he asked, genuinely shocked. ‘But why?’

‘Simon, they’re throwing shit at us.’

Right on cue, a mannequin’s head got hurled from the shoreline, thumping against the ship’s rail with a splintering crash. ‘Oh,’ he says, ‘well that *is* another unfortunate and somewhat unforeseen development.’ He paused, stroking his beard in thought and stared at the two of us again. ‘Tell me, Chaplins... does this have anything to do with time travel?’

‘Simon,’ began Green Skull apologetically, ‘I’d love to explain, but it’s so fucking complicated, I’m not even sure I understand myself.’

‘You can explain later over mushroom jam sandwiches,’ I told them. ‘Right now we need to wind Ron Burgundy’s head in and get the fuck out of here!’

I about-turned and nearly crashed headfirst into W. He was smoking a roll-up, and climbing up through the aft hatch, still wearing the now badly crumpled paper crown. ‘Are we leaving?’ he asked. ‘I’m kinda glad. Those people were weird. I’ve a feeling we haven’t seen the last of them either. Though I did get to be king for a day.’ He paused to remove the paper crown and stared at it wistfully before letting the sea breeze take it, blowing it over the side of the ship. ‘It was pretty sweet while it lasted. Granting blanket amnesty, furthering diplomatic efforts abroad, plus I got to learn how to snorkel.’

‘I missed the snorkelling?’ asked Simon with a disappointed shake of his head. ‘Hey! Where did that other Chaplin go?’

‘I have no idea what you’re talking about,’ I said.

‘Of course you do! The other Chaplin! The one in the green skull mask! He was right there!’ he said, pulling his goggles up onto his head and spinning around.

W stared at him like he was losing it and then handed me a white envelope addressed to:

ALFIEWHEELIES
C/O THE MARDI
A FLOATING ISLAND OF PLASTIC
SOMEWHERE IN THE NORTH SPECIFIC GYRE.

I ripped open the envelope and read the letter aloud:

*Dear Alfie,
Please stop telephoning me.
Yours sincerely,
Bob Dylan*

‘You got a letter from Bob Dylan?’ cried Simon, amazed.

‘I know!’ I cried back.

A whole box of plastic Jesus figurines narrowly missed the three of us, landing on the main deck and bursting open.

‘We should probably wind Ron Burgundy’s head in now,’ said W.

‘I agree,’ said Simon.

As the three of us made our way to the Forward Hold, more bits of plastic debris flew past our heads. ‘This was a terrible idea,’ I told them.

W ducked as a sandal whistled past his head. ‘Tell me about it.’

‘You say there are more of these accidental islands of trash?’ I asked.

‘Apparently so,’ he said.

‘I never want to see another one,’ I told him. ‘Not ever.’

...

August 10, 2009

Alfie’s Journal #14:
The Quixodelic Hot-Tub



After three months at sea, I think it's time to lift some rocks and see what crawls out from under them. I don't know about you, but I'm starting to enjoy this sailing business. It isn't what I thought it would be, and it stutters on the waves of inspiration like any day now we're going to wake up and find out we've used up our allotted wind. Motionless, the holes in the hull of the Mardi will grow, letting in seawater and tiny baffled fishes. At first we'll think it's quite funny, but pretty soon I'll be down on my knees with a rusty bucket as the ocean rolls down the lower corridor, yelling, 'Just five more minutes... I can do it!' while the rest of you depart in the Dr Seuss dinghy, bobbing into the sunset of reality.

Assuming my calculations are correct, we will have sailed around the world and be back in Jacksonville by the 1st of May, 2010. A quarter of a year has already flown by and three quarters of our original crew are missing. Progress is slow, but the Mardi shows no signs of sinking. If we have to limp home in the wake of a fortuitous tidal wave, then by the ghosts of Captain Ahab and Jack Kerouac, we shall. So lift up a floorboard and let's raise a bottle of rum to us all. To The Utica Flower Company! To the top of the tree! To - fuck! I just dropped the damned bottle and it smashed all over the floor.

You may have seen me over the weekend, clipboard in hand, with a panic-stricken on my face. It's not that I don't have better things to be doing – if anything, in recent weeks the plate-spinning seems to have reached new levels of frantic. I'm sure you're already aware we're collectively attempting to put together an Invisible Box-Set of records. Whether we can pull it off or not remains to be seen. For my own Invisible Box-Set offering, I'm expecting the imminent arrival of eminent sonic sound terrorist (and my own personal attorney), The Amalfi Glow, to help produce the last ever Wheelies album. I was hoping to throw the entire contents of my bunk at this one, but so far all I've produced is an inharmonious racket. There are many more plates, looping in circles, threatening to fall, but I won't bore you with them here. Let's just say for a start that I'm reading up on how to home-clone. Anything for an extra pair of hands (so long as it doesn't involve another bout of Cartoonitis.)

And so to the results of the QUARTERLY CHECK. Lasting impressions: it's a mixture of how much we've covered, how much more we could wring out of this adventure, and how few of us are left. After passing through the tunnel of inevitable disappointment during the second month of our voyage, when we began to shed crew members, I'm now quite at ease with the fact that sailing is not everyone's bottle of rum. If you'd asked me four months ago how probable it would be that a collective of musicians with no sailing experience between them could pilot a ship right around the globe, I'd have told you it was more impossible than improbable. But the simple fact persists: *we're still here and -*

Hold that thought; I hear a helicopter.

Ten hours later...

The moral of this story is: *Don't order hot-tubs when you're drunk.*

The grimy little bathtub full of foul smelling green water and peculiar tropical plants arrived on a helicopter from Mexico. It was unceremoniously dumped onto the main deck to much frantic waving of my arms in an attempt to convey there had been a terrible mistake. I can assure you that this is NOT the deluxe hot-tub I was drunkenly bidding for online several weeks ago.

At least I'm pretty sure it isn't.

I stared at the disgusting tub for over an hour, wondering what the fuck to do with it, before eventually asking The Atom Band to store it away in the Quixodelic Record Store.

Between you and me, I'll be sticking to having showers in the washroom.

...

Moss: Woo! (*Jumps in, splashing everyone annoyingly with suspicious water*) I'm going to see how long I can stay in before I have to go to hospital!

Alfie: This sounds even more frightening than the grand piano submersible.

3 days later...

Alfie: Uh, you've been in there a while, Chief. I see you're now exactly the same colour as the water. At what point will we know when you need hospitalised? Do you think you'll still be able to tell us?

Moss: I had to get out because that prune-skin thing was happening, except my skin looked so much like a prune that I bit it and it tasted like prune too. I felt bad for doing that but it tasted pretty good so I took another bite and only had one arm left. I passed out and woke up in a hospital bed, where they told me I'd started biting myself in a hallucinatory rage, although the bites were only minor and only one required stitches. They also told me the residue might have permanently affected my blood and not to worry if I experienced any hallucinations when I'm not actually on drugs. Then I realised my doctor was doing more things than he had arms for, and actually he had eight arms, and they were brown and hairy and long and skinny and didn't have hands on the ends. He had a lot of eyes too, and wasn't speaking English anymore but just kind of clicking at me with these sharp pincer things on his face. He asked me a question but I didn't know what he was asking so I pretended to pass out. Then he left. Then I woke up again and I was in my bunk. Did that hospital thing actually happen?

Alfie: You might have told me all this BEFORE I jumped into the hot-tub to try and beat the record! Thankfully I hate the taste of prunes.

Simon: There's a water-horse in here drinking the hot-tub! [*to water horse*] "I think you are a Moose of some kind."

Elvis the Elk: [*looks up, growls*]

Moss: Hey, I love mice... mooses... meese... whatever. [*Gives the elk a naive hug*]

Simon: Halfway down the journal page was a furious scurfy

popcron

...

August 14, 2009

A Desolate Location:
Late-Night Film Projector Series #1

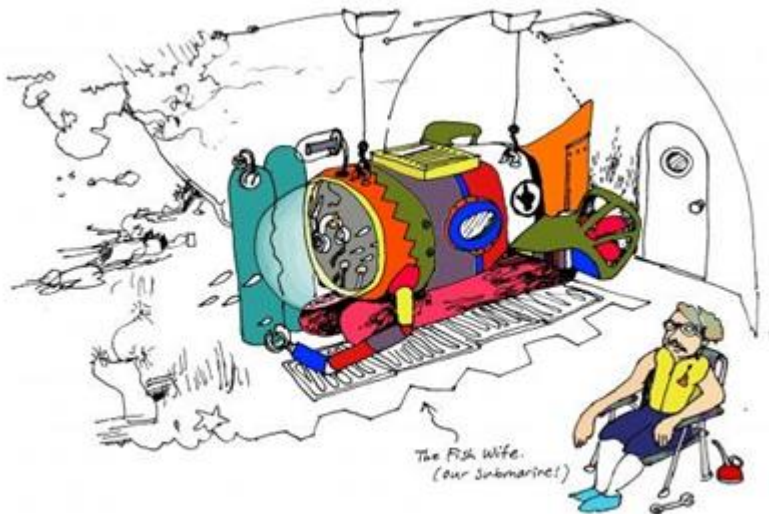


There is a Scotman snow of unbuttered popcorn falling from the air-vents into the Wardroom. Someone has managed to repair the film-projector to a (somewhat asynchronous) working order. It is, however, approximately 500% louder than it used to be. Simon Piler is standing at the front with a pair of oversized glasses and a tiny megaphone that simultaneously overlays low and high-pitched shifts of his voice over everything he says.

Hello, Crew, and Thank You for attending the first of our Late-Night Film Projector Series. Tonight we cover a topic near and dear to my heart; that of deep-sea Vulcanology.

It is within the realm of my distinguished pleasures aboard the Mardi to act as caretaker of our small, two-seater submarine. It is a sturdy and reasonably well-designed craft. Of course, I have personally

seen to a number of minor modifications to better suit the ventures of the Flower Company. First and foremost, it has been equipped with state-of-the-art stereo hydrophones, developed in companionship with Namu the Disco Whale. The devices are mounted atop the viewing bubble to provide a real-time projection of the sound waves traveling through the ocean to the headphone sets aboard the vessel. (The diffraction of sound as it travels from water to air is taken into account to reliably reproduce the frequency of the waves.) The same information is also instantly cataloged to recordings in the ship's Sound Laboratory via radio modem. Even in recalling such splendid beauty, the system reciprocates within my own solid bones wonderful resonances of happiness! My, my, the stars of spinning-sweet dizziness and illusion!



Def Mute has managed to communicate an affectionate name for the sub, and it has stuck ever since. We call her 'Fish Wife'. She is painted in longitudinal bands of orange, muck green, fluorescent pink, deep lavender, white, black, cerulean blue, and red. The pattern of colors rigidly repeats across varying widths. The singular arm of the submarine is plain vanilla polka-dotted with magenta. We have managed to clumsily spray-paint the Quixodelic finger insignia across the plating of the mid-ship pressure regulator compartment. Brendon works his butt off to keep the algae off of her belly and ribs. This process is somewhat retarded by the fact that he tends to enjoy using a

toothbrush for this task. I digress, but it is worth mentioning that we have begun a fermentation of algae scrapings with the hopes it will result in a stiff, brownish-green beverage – we have no idea what to expect the tasteful qualities of such a beverage to be. Personally, I have high hopes.

Now, you may wonder what the film has been showing for these last five minutes, and as I have concluded my lengthy introductory discourse, I will tell you. It is the seismic vibrations of an abyssal volcano. Yes, you've heard me correctly. You are looking at the wave-representation of an actual volcanic explosion on the floor of the Specific Ocean. The location is within a few days reach of our present location.

It was, in fact, these sounds, captured by the hydrophones aboard the Fish Wife, that originally caught my attention. I was out for a cruise in the depths of darkness that only the depths of the ocean can conceal within the deepest folds of a moonless night. The episodic silence of such an event never fails to seduce me, and it was during such an event that I set my mind to wandering.

Volcanoes of the ocean never fail to find you suddenly. They will walk out of the hum of planktonic rain and shake you violently, they will scream at you and rattle your eyeballs on long chains of plummeting steam bubbles relentlessly issuing from their infinite, ever-cauterizing wounds. Their heights are more than impressive. And it is for this reason they are so startling; the peak of such a volcano can probe up massively from the surrounding ocean floor. I have no doubts that several of the mountains I have personally sighted have actual heights over 4000 meters. The reactive environment that shrouds them also makes this observation difficult – and, for that matter, it makes any observation difficult.

You will see this particular seamount, which has no recorded name, is occluded by clouds of thick, newborn silt. It was at the shoulder of this very particular mountain that I witnessed a very peculiar thing.

Well, “thing” is probably not the appropriate term for what I saw. No, you will see from this footage (and I apologize for the poor quality of the image, it was very dark and the headlamps create a situation of extremely high contrast) that it is definitely some form of Mer.

I know. You are thinking to yourself, ‘Mermen? Like the half-fish-lookin’ guys you see in the animated movies that swim around carrying tridents? Ya, Simon, what I see on that screen is definitely not one of those guys. Weird, yes, but not a Mer.’ And I would have to admit that I, too, felt similarly as at my first awareness of this being,

but please, allow me to describe more fully the qualities that convinced me otherwise.

First and foremost, you will notice his dusky brown skin. It is coarse and granular, and I believe this allows such a being to blend into his surroundings relatively smoothly, be they lighter or darker than he is. His eyes are large, as you can see, and this is obviously to capture as much incident light as is physically possible at such extreme pressures. The irises are large and reflective, helping push light capture even farther. He has no feet, it is true, but both legs are defined, each trimmed along their length by a modest width of flexible webbing. Hair is obviously lacking, but instead, a good portion of the body is adorned with extremely short, coarse silicate hairs. Their drag has been minimized, but they are obviously not suitable for providing warmth at this depth. It is possible, however, that they do act as indicators of gender in the species. His most striking aspect, I think you will agree, is the plain, articulate metal circlet about his forehead. Though immersed in salt water, it remarkably resists corrosion. The center is set with a smoothed, lustrous black sphere of jet.

I know of no anthropomorphic sea creature capable of crafting jewelry in such a fashion, but then again, prior to this, I've never encountered an anthropomorphic sea creature before. Quite obviously, it was my first reaction to sit and gape confoundedly at him, and then, after I gathered my senses a bit, I clutched for the headphone set. Sure enough, he was creating a set of noises which, I am quite certain, were equivalent to our spoken communication. I regret to announce that I have no idea what he was saying, but if anybody has got an inkling for the finer points of Mer language, now is the time. Eh? Anyone?

As he spoke, the mountain's crest woke with cartwheels of ephemeral fire. I glimpsed and saw among the failing embers a vision of a flying bus burning to smatterings of dust and lily-flowers, nova-like spinning empty through the inky reaches of the primordial heavens. Magnetic slurring encapsulated my brain and I saw vividly through my own eyes, for a second, the yawning expanse of ocean as it was, and the great lover's embrace of the moon as reflected through the molten core of our world.

Then he stopped. And I was sitting at the controls of the Fish Wife in my starkly-lit bubble deep in the silent and desolate volumes of the ocean. And in my earphones, I basked in the inaudible, sub-aural quavering of the seismic earth.

Both of us sat. I am not sure for how long. We drank a little oxygen. And then he dissociated into the black again.

The Fish Wife was running on auxiliary power when I finally returned to the ship, early in the morning. I crawled up onto the main deck and was surprised to find not one, but eight people (some of which I had never seen before) riding the frail curtains of dawn. And they were dancing without music. I lay on the ground and fell asleep under the main mast. I am more than surprised that nobody treaded on me while I was sleeping, but I am not surprised at their dancing. We swing low on the magnetic earth from time to time, I think.

*Three images loop continuously at this point. They are:
A dog coughing as it raises itself from a sitting position, an insect drowning in sap, and a shaky clip of a woman waving happily at the camera.*

That concludes this evening's presentation. Thank you for attending, people, people, all you people. Also, if I might inquire, for means of adjustment, did you think that the popcorn dispenser was appropriately tuned to the ventilation ducts?

...

Alfie: The "Fish Wife" is brilliant – aesthetically on the money if you ask me. I'm going to assume we don't need lessons in how to pilot it (I imagine it's like driving a dodgem car?) I'll definitely take her for a spin this week. Can we get a soundtrack playing on a loop in it? Uh, you're sure that was a merman? Truthfully I just saw some kind of murky fleeting shadow, but I'd be happy to watch a rerun as I was Scotmanly side-tracked attempting to dislodge a kernel of popcorn that landed in my ear. Shit! I forgot about the ping-pong! (*sprints to the Rec Room*)

Simon: Ha, ha, Dodgem, indeed! ...And we'll see about the soundtrack soon enough, the recordings are rendering to a more usable format as we speak. Oh, damn. Ping-pong! (*sprints to the Rec Room*)

Brendon Hertz: Though I've only just caught the replay of your presentation on my room's hand held closed-circuit television, Dr Piler, I wanted to congratulate you on a fine presentation. That Mer-creature you speak of seems fascinating, though I am rather unsure of where we were at the time. You know my knack for cardinal directions lacks a certain common sense regarding space and time in our dimension. Well, I'm heading over to get some popcorn now that you've fixed them up with the ventilation shafts. Do we have any of those little paper bags with toothed edges lying around? By the way,

what did you want me to do with your toothbrush when I'm done scrubbing the submarine with it? (*Blows a charge Flugelhorn*) Exeunt
Simon: MY toothbrush?!? (*Afterthought: Perhaps this is why my teeth have been so green lately...*)

...

August 23, 2009

Alfie's Journal #15:

PEEEAANNUUTTTSSS!

After finally remembering where I sleep, I made my way to Bunkroom 3 and lay down on the bottom bunk, stretching out my dirty bare feet inside the sleeping bag. There was something bugging me, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it. I rolled over. I flipped the pillow. I tried counting pelicans. I rolled over again and lit a roll-up before glancing at my wrist-watch. It was 2 o'clock in the morning.

I abandoned any attempt to sleep, peeled myself out of the bag and went for a walk. There's always something happening on board the *Mardi* - you just have to know where to find it. I spent some time perusing the various mushroom jams that had recently appeared in the Sick Bay cabinet, and placed an unlit cigarette in Robbie's mouth, while he lay unconscious in Jonny Rchrdsn's old hammock. On my way out, I batted at a fat, freaky red bug making this weird "zzub-zzub" sound as it floated backwards down the lower corridor, and off up the stairs. I noticed at this point that I was feeling hungry, so I sat down directly beneath one of the air ducts, waiting for a random blast of amphetamine-laced popcorn. Sure enough, ten minutes later, just when I'd given up, I heard some popping out behind me and landing on the corridor floor.

I made my way up to the Rec Room to see if there was any progress with the ping-pong. Simon had ponged a shot in my absence, the ball barely scraping over the net. I paused, picked up a copy of "*Crime & Punishment*", opened it randomly and began to read while nonchalantly ping-ponging the ball back to him. As it crossed the net, I suddenly remembered how I'd discovered a mysterious trapdoor underneath the ping-pong table during a previous rally. I put the book and paddle down, and crawled under, lifting the trapdoor up.

Now, if my calculations are correct, the Recreation Room is located directly above Bunkrooms 1 and 2 (belonging to Robbie and

Echoes 22 respectively), yet when I opened the hatch, I found myself staring down a flight of wooden steps leading into what can only be described as a black hole of a room. ‘Hello?’ I called, hearing no reply, so I took a couple of ginger steps down the creaking stairs. The air smelled musty and damp as I continued to descend, running my hands along the walls in search of a light switch.

Several steps down, my bare feet rattled against something hard. Whatever it was, it fell from the steps, and clattered down into the darkness below. My eyes were starting to adjust to the dark as I groped around at my feet, grabbing a very cold, smooth object no bigger than an arm bone. I held it up above my head and in the dim light filtering down from the Rec Room, I saw it was indeed an arm bone. Or maybe a leg bone. I’m no palaeontologist. It was a limb bone, put it that way.

I kicked through what I can only assume were even more bones, and after another ten or so steps I found myself at the foot of the stairs. ‘Peanuts,’ I muttered in the dark. Again there was no answer, but from the acoustics of the room I guessed it was much larger than a standard cabin or bunkroom. It definitely wasn’t Bunkroom 1 or 2, that much was sure. I continued to walk around, groping the walls, colliding with objects in the dark, and eventually found a wall switch.

There was a surge of electricity and a pulsing silver strobe light began flickering on the high ceiling. I fell backwards over a couple of plastic chairs I’d knocked over, crashing to the floor, screaming ‘PEEEAANNUUTTTSSS!’ at the sight of a human skull on its side, a few inches away from my face. There were things moving all around me – fucking birds, or bats, or more of those stupid red bugs – spasmodically thrashing around on the floor, flapping up clouds of dust. In the flickering light I saw the room was what can only be described as an old abandoned basement.

I picked myself up, dusted myself down, and began to explore. The wooden steps were against the wall leading up to the Recreation Room, and halfway up them was the remains of a skeleton minus a skull (which I’d fearfully kicked into the shadows) and a limb bone (that I was still absentmindedly holding in my hand). Aside from the chairs and the scurrying creatures which had gone unnervingly silent, there was nothing else of any interest to report, just a thick layer of dust, broken floorboards, and vast tapestries of cobwebs hanging down from the ceiling. It wasn’t until I sat down on one of the chairs and scratched pensively at my back with the bone, that I saw the words painted in dripping red paint on the wall beneath the steps:

FINCH FUCKED EVERYTHING UP FOREVER

I felt something hard in my left ear, crackling like electricity. It was an idea.

LIVE GIGS!
IN A BASEMENT!
ON A SHIP!

Feeling suddenly drowsy, deaf in one ear, and curiously no longer hungry, I headed back to my bunk with a broad grin on my face, and fell asleep just as soon as my head hit the pillow. Sometimes a single great idea is all it takes.

...

Moss: I... actually... LOVE the Basement. I am going to bring alcohol and ripped jeans, and drunkenly heckle at the darkness until there's a band I can heckle at instead.

Alfie: Great. Here are some marigolds, a mop, a bucket, a box of rags, a case of rum, some bleach, wiring kit, acrylic paints, and the ship's thinking cap. Just in case you want to kill some time while you're heckling.

Moss: (*hiccuping sound from under the ping-pong table*) Arr...Woo!... Guit... guitrrrrrrrr... guitrrrr..... drumdrumdrum..... woohoo!... Yousucckkk... Gerroff stage...

...

September 15, 2009

Alfie's Journal #17:
FAST FORWARD

I woke up face down on the ketchup stained Sick Bay floor, and for a moment, I just lay there, trying to figure out what the fuck was going on. How did I get there? Where had I been? What day was it? Finally, I stretched out my aching body and got slowly to my feet, looking down at the soot, soil, algae, and ice-cream stained Flower Company uniform that had fused to my skin while I slept. Robbie lay motionless in the hammock above me, still wrapped in his tinfoil cape, vacant eyes hidden behind pink plastic shades, and the same unlit cigarette I placed there some time ago, dangling from his cracked lips. 'Hey Cook,' I said, to no reply.

I shuffled past the cabinet of grey jams, and stopped in front of a pink plastic mirror on the Sick Bay wall, blinking at sight of the unfamiliar reflection staring back at me. I looked like a chimney sweep who'd fallen into a swamp, with green and black grime caked across my face. I reached up to clean my glasses and felt a throbbing pain in my right arm, simultaneously catching the curious aroma of something fusty, like prunes. Wincing, I carefully peeled back my crusty, tattered shirt sleeve, revealing an equally saturated bandage that hung in ragged strips around my forearm. Quickly unravelling it, I was horrified to discover a chunk of flesh had been ripped from my arm, right down to the bone, the cavity red and weeping. I resisted the urge to throw up, shook down my sleeve, and stepped away from the mirror.

As I hobbled along the bottom corridor towards Bunkroom 3, I was starting to get the feeling that something very bad had happened. I opened the bunkroom door and slipped quietly inside. A quick scan of the room suggested nothing seemed out of place. The floor was still littered with empty rum bottles, scraps of paper with scrawls of writing, and empty tobacco wrappers. Over in the corner, a microphone was plugged into an old busted laptop that had seen better days. W lay still as a corpse inside his sleeping bag on the top bunk. 'Psst! W? Are you still alive?'

His eyes opened for a fraction of a moment and he muttered, 'Fupkin! What are you doing here?'

'Fup-who?'

The sound of my voice jolted him from the dream he was emerging from, and he blinked in the light. His eyes were flickering like crazy in the light. 'Shit, did I just say that aloud?' He laughed hoarsely. 'I'm still dreaming, right?'

'You're not dreaming,' I told him, hearing the uncertainty in my voice. 'Listen, I think something very bad has happened. I just woke up in a puddle of ketchup on the Sick Bay floor, and part of my arm is missing. I have no idea where I've been, or what I've been doing.'

He sat up and looked around. 'I feel like shit,' he said. 'Those Koradji goons could drink like fishes. You know, the three of us put away a whole case of scotch on the morning of the old man's funeral and I swear, they weren't even tipsy.'

'Funeral?' I asked, alarm bells ringing in my brain.

'Yeah, it's a shame they had to leave in such a hurry. I'm sure I could have found a use for them in my org- uh... actually, forget I said anything there. I guess after Koradji died, they didn't see much sense in hanging around.'

His words registered like a harpoon plunged into the centre of my heart.

Koradji died.

‘Fuck!’ I yelped, crashing back across the room, and out through the door in a frenzied panic.

‘Alfie, where are you going?’ he shouted after me, adding, ‘Hey! Does the name “Papa Bear” mean anything to you?’

I climbed out of the hatch into the hazy morning sunshine. Eight protesters were marching in a circle around the main mast. They were mostly middle-aged women, waving placards with the Quixodelic middle finger logo scored out. ‘IT DOESN’T MATTER WHAT YOU FEEL! THIS SHIP JUST ISN’T REAL!’ they chanted, over and over with unswerving determination in their eyes.

I’d seen these fuckers somewhere before. A dream I had in some parallel dimension perhaps. I was just wondering what their real agenda was, when I looked up and noticed that something looked very different about the mainsail billowing in the breeze. The Koradji Corporation sail was gone. In its place flapped a clumsily cobbled together patchwork fix of tartan rugs and brightly coloured cloth.

And now my memory was really starting to kick in.

I pulled the green skull mask down over my face and hurried past the protesters, before making my way to the little Film Studio located behind the Bridge. “Doom Cruise” was playing on the screen, Robbie, W and Moss all leaning on the ship’s rail. They were waving and laughing at a small fishing boat veering off course to avoid a collision with the Mardi as it left Jacksonville harbour. Two elderly fishermen, one fat, one thin, were standing on the deck of the fishing boat, shaking their fists and hurling obscenities that we couldn’t hear thanks to a soundtrack of Fig Mint’s “Undead Idea Mines” playing over the top. I grabbed Tin Pan’s camcorder and began to fast forward through the looped footage, looking for a scene I hoped did not exist.

SIMON: *(With a mouthful of toothpaste)* Do you have teeth? So do I. That’s why I use GLEE-

Fast forward.

(MOSS nods and the camera pans upwards to CRAW’S NEST where W is doing a drunk robot dance.)

Fast forward.

FROGVILLE: *(Still shouting)* By the ballsack of Beelzebub ‘imself, it be one o’ the most amazing things I’ve ereseen!

Fast forward.

‘Come on! Come on!’ I muttered impatiently.

ALFIE: Wait a minute. Is Jim in on this too? Is he carving up the bodies with that chains-

Fast forward.

SIMON: *(Blinking, bursts out laughing)* A hand! *(snorts)* Why, Chaplin, I think we’d have noticed if someone was missing a hand!

Fast forward.

A MAN DRESSED IN A FOX COSTUME: You’ve got to help me save the Universe.

ALLAN DOUGLAS: The what?

FOX-MAN: *(Carefully removing the plants and racks from inside the refrigerator and setting them to one side)* I need you to climb inside this fridge.

I didn’t remember ever seeing that scene before. But there was no time to lose. I would watch it back later. I had to fast forward again.

A SMALL BOY: Bok Chyptus! No!

Hey! I suddenly remembered the weird little kid who previously came on board with his mum. He thought he’d won some competition for the best plasticine sculpture of the Mardi. I wondered what happened to them?

Fast forward.

And then I found what I was looking for.

The shot begins from CRAW’S NEST 1, and slowly zooms in. The Flower Company, or at least part of it, are assembled in bright

sunshine for a burial at sea. Attempts at formality are laughable. Most people seem to have had trouble putting on their clothes properly. Some have dishevelled their green shirts into headbands or bandannas. Others are wearing flowerpots on their heads. Someone has wrapped KORADJI's white coffin in the Koradji Corporation sail, and moved it to the edge of the ship. GOONS 1 and 2 are standing at the COMMUNICATIONS BAY portholes, quietly watching proceedings.

I watched in horror as it unfolded on the screen before me.

The coffin crashes into the sea.

'Fuck!'

Did that *actually* happen?

I had a horrible feeling in my gut that we buried a living man at sea. Did he not know what was happening? Was he still playing along with our plan to spice up the film? And where the fuck was I when all this was going on?

The line that divided "Doom Cruise" and reality had been breached. Fact and fiction were bleeding into each other like two paints on a canvas, forming a completely new colour, hopelessly irreversible.

I needed help.

I left the film running and sprinted back onto the main deck, crashing headfirst into Simon Piler who was running in the opposite direction. We sat dazed on the floor for several seconds until I noticed he was holding a frozen black rat by the tail. 'So that's what happens when great minds collide,' he said with a grin as he rubbed his head. 'Another big egg.'

'I was just coming to see you,' I told him.

'Well that's a coincidence, Chaplin,' he said, 'I was just coming to see you too. I wanted to show you this.' He nodded at the rat. 'A quite remarkable little fellow, don't you think? Brendon found him rooting around on the lawn in Cabin 1. Looks dead doesn't he?'

'Simon, it's about Mr Koradji...'

He shook the rodent by the tail. It swung from side to side like a pendulum, arms and legs akimbo. 'In actual fact, this little chap is playing possum. Aren't you?'

'Fuck off!' squeaked the rat through gritted teeth.

'Simon! This is important! I think we might have made a terrible mist- Wait, the rat talks?'

He nodded keenly. 'Oh! Also, I was meaning to ask how your arm is. So... how's your arm?'

‘You know about my arm?’

‘Well, of course I know about your arm. Who do you think dragged you down to the Sick Bay and patched you up?’

‘What happened to me? I can’t remember anything after I... was... in... the hot-tub! Shit!’

Even as the words left my mouth, I was suddenly peering back through time, between the tangled flower stalks at Moss standing in the Quixodelic Record Store doorway, telling me with her green teeth that something... or someone... had arrived on the ship.

‘Ah, so you don’t remember the cannibal pest controller?’ asked Simon.

‘Cannibal pest controller?’

He nodded at my arm. ‘Oh, he was mortally ashamed when Tim picked him up in the helicopter. Said -’

‘Tim?’

‘- something about the irresistible smell of prunes,’ he continued, oblivious to the look of confusion on my face. ‘He’s long gone now, along with the old man who was wearing your face. Though I can’t say I ever saw the old man leave. Which is a bit fishy if you ask me.’

The more he talked, the more hopelessly disorientated I began to feel. Cannibal pest controllers, Tim in Jim’s helicopter, prunes, an old man wearing my face. I put my head in my hands as Simon continued to ramble excitedly.

‘Between you and me, I must confess that if I didn’t know Sir Matthew as well as I do, then I’d swear he is deliberately trying to NOT fix our internet connection.’ He looked suddenly pensive. ‘You really don’t remember *anything* after you were in the hot-tub?’

I closed my eyes. After Moss’s green teeth there seemed to be only darkness. Maybe there was something about Irn Bru. I shook my head. When I opened my eyes again, I saw that Simon was reaching for something he’d dropped when we collided. My eyes focused on the sun-bleached yellow object he was holding up. ‘You don’t remember this then?’

It was the Elephant Teapot.

My heart felt like it had been harpooned, deflating with a hiss inside my chest.

‘Ah,’ said Simon, grimacing.

‘I lost the ping-pong?’ I asked, struggling to believe I’d let the Elephant Teapot slip through my hands.

He looked sheepishly at the plastic elephant-shaped child’s watering can. ‘Yes, you did,’ he said. ‘Bad luck, Chaplin.’

At that moment, the little upside down rat sneezed. ‘Bless ye,’ said Simon.

‘Thank ye,’ squeaked the rat.

‘Hang on,’ said Simon, ‘I have something that might jog your memory.’ For a moment he made to hand me the Elephant Teapot, but then thought better of it and instead held out the rat. ‘Do you mind holding him for a second?’

I numbly pinched the rat’s tail between my thumb and forefinger, and watched him rocking in the cradle of space. His tiny black marble eyes studied me, still fighting against his destiny, and weirdly I saw something of myself reflected there. So while Simon rummaged around in his pocket, pulling out a carefully folded sheet of paper, I deliberately opened my grip allowing the rat to drop to the deck. He landed on all fours and quick as a shot, scampered past me, wriggling away under the Communications Bay door.

Simon looked up at the space between my thumb and forefinger and sighed. ‘Never mind, he won’t go far,’ he said. He unfolded the paper and handed it to me. ‘It’s a transcript of our ping-pong match,’ he explained.

I stared at the text, the words just a blur.

Last thing I remembered, it was 9-9 and the next point would decide who would win. I was convinced I had the momentum. It had been nearly eleven years since Koradji won the Elephant Teapot in a game of beach golf down by the sewage works. Ever since then, he’d had nothing but good luck, eventually sailing off into the sunset. This time, I was sure I was finally going to win it back.

Simon coughed to get my attention. I wasn’t sure how long I’d been staring at the transcript. ‘By the way, Chaplin, I’ve rented out some bunks to our friends over there.’ He nodded at the protesters.

‘You did *what*?’

‘I think our best approach is to humour them. They’re harmless enough. Oh! That’s a point! Until Robbie comes round, I guess I’m on breakfast duty. Although, I was thinking it would be fairer if we installed that rota system you talked about before? I’ve got my hands pretty full you know, what with recording Kingtime for the Invisible Box-Set, and working out the kinks in the inter-ship coffee system, and...’ He stopped as I got to my feet.

‘We’re going to have to turn the ship around,’ I told him.

‘Really? Why?’

‘Koradji wasn’t dead.’

‘He wasn’t?’

‘He was just acting.’

He looked at me like I'd skipped the punchline as I stuffed the ping-pong transcript into my back pocket. 'He looked very dead to me,' said Simon. 'There was blood all over him.'

'Ketchup,' I said, while a sudden gust of wind blew across the main deck. 'You know what, fuck this.'

'Chaplin? Where are you going?' he shouted as I hobbled quickly across the main deck and started to clamber down the aft hatch.

'I'm going to fetch the shotgun!' I shouted back.

'What for?'

I lifted my middle finger and jabbed it towards the chanting protesters circling the main mast, before I vanished down into the belly of the ship.

...

TRANSCRIPT OF CHAMPINGPONGSHIP FOR THE ELEPHANT TEAPOT:

Alfie: May 11, 2009 at 11:59 am

I'll serve: Ping

Simon Piler: May 14, 2009 at 8:46 pm

Oh, gosh! I missed.

Alfie: May 14, 2009 at 8:52 pm

1-0 to me. 3 days 8 hours and 47 minutes it took for that ball to make it across to the net... how peculiar. First to ten? Winner stays on? ping

Simon Piler: May 20, 2009 at 4:40 pm

Yer on. pong

Alfie: May 20, 2009 at 7:38 pm

Topspin ping (*clips the net but goes over*)

Simon Piler: May 20, 2009 at 8:21 pm

pong

Alfie: May 20, 2009 at 9:24 pm

Goes for the big topspin smash and (*whoosh*) misses. Fuck's sake, I'm rusty. 1-1 your serve dude...

Simon Piler: May 21, 2009 at 12:53 pm

A ginger Ping

Alfie: May 21, 2009 at 1:09 pm

King Pong back at you

Simon Piler: May 21, 2009 at 5:19 pm

YIPE! that's your serve.

Alfie: May 21, 2009 at 9:06 pm

Woo-hoo 2-1 to me! Okay, try this one on for size... it's an old Chinese service I learned in the alley behind our takeaway back home - Whoosh-hai-ping!

Simon Piler: May 22, 2009 at 12:33 pm

Furiously sweating/scrambling; p-p-pong!

Alfie: May 22, 2009 at 1:00 pm

Damn! I was so convinced you'd not return that one, I was actually inspecting my fingernails... 2-2. Your serve...

Simon Piler: May 31, 2009 at 7:48 pm

Hmmm, the waves are up a bit more than usual, eh? Ping.

Alfie: May 31, 2009 at 10:25 pm

Zzzzzzzzz. Wassat? Ah fuck I fell asleep... I've been waiting nine days for that serve. 3-2 to you, your serve again...

Simon Piler: June 4, 2009 at 5:27 pm

Ping. Hmmm. This game is rapidly becoming very analytical. Although, I'll admit, it IS nice to have some time to clip one's fingernails between volleys.

Alfie: June 4, 2009 at 7:39 pm

Ha! I know your game! You're clearly trying to befuddle my finely tuned athlete's mind with idle chit-chat but it won't wor-ah fuck! It worked. I missed. 4-2 to you and your serve again. I'm going to get some ear plugs. Maybe even a blindfold.

Simon Piler: June 6, 2009 at 6:52 pm

Alright! Blindfolds, indeed. Ping!

Alfie: June 6, 2009 at 10:25 pm

Pong! (hit my bat but fuck knows where it went)

Simon Piler: June 8, 2009 at 1:45 am

Yipe! That was a nasty spin, Chaplin! That's 4-3, and your serve.

Alfie: June 8, 2009 at 7:05 am

Going to have to take this blindfold off – I've been groping around on the floor for the last two hours and so far all I've found is a water pistol, one of your feet, an abandoned bubble trumpet, several screws, a copy of Dostoyevsky's "Crime and Punishment", some biscuit crumbs, 5p, copious amounts of fluff, and a trapdoor that leads to who knows where. Ping!

Simon Piler: June 15, 2009 at 3:36 pm

Excuse me? A trapdoor? Oh. It's a tied game, I think. It's hard to tell with this blindfold on.

Alfie: June 15, 2009 at 4:44 pm

Haha, I forgot all about that. You can take your blindfold off now, Simon. 4-4 then eh? (*Switching to scally style*) Ping-ah!

Simon Piler: June 17, 2009 at 1:21 am

Now that's got a rhythm I can respond to, that does! Pong.

Alfie: June 17, 2009 at 7:15 am

So how long have you had that beard? Ping.

Simon Piler: June 19, 2009 at 12:54 am

Pong. Quite a while – basically since I could start growing it.

Miserable at first, but I've always liked it. Shaved it entirely off only once, for my senior portrait; a decision that is quite humorous in retrospect...

Alfie: June 19, 2009 at 7:50 am

I've had several variations myself – the most notable being a full beard circa 1999... it was promptly shaved off after a game of pool in our local pub when a gnarly old chap asked one of my buddies who his Iraqi friend was. That wasn't the look I was going for at all. Thinking about growing it again though, see if the years have been kinder to my face... aiming for the grizzled old sea dog appearance.

Alfie: June 19, 2009 at 7:51 am

Shit. I forgot to ping. So much for my "Small talk distraction technique", I only succeeded in distracting myself. 5-4 to you, and your serve, man.

Simon Piler: June 20, 2009 at 1:55 am

Aye, that ye should. Well, here goes. P-p-ping!

Alfie: June 21, 2009 at 8:07 am

(really concentrating) Pong!

Simon Piler: June 21, 2009 at 1:02 pm

Whew! *(scrambling to just barely scoop it over the net)* Ping! That was a hell of a good shot!

Alfie: June 21, 2009 at 5:15 pm

In the eye of a psychological hurricane, paddle flaming, on fire forehand topspin pong!

Simon Piler: June 22, 2009 at 12:07 am

Ouch. I believe that one burned a hole through my chest. (*Cough*)

Hold on, let me get the ball. It fell over in the corner. Hmmm, let me just wipe it off here with my handkerchief. That's better. Your serve, Chaplin, and a tied game, 5-5.

Alfie: June 22, 2009 at 7:15 am

If only there were two American commentators called "John" and "John" they'd be saying:

John: *"Did you see that, John?"*

John: *"I sure did, John, that shot literally burned a hole through Simon's chest. Alfie's on fire!"*

John: “I think Simon is seriously injured, John... no... wait, he’s just wiping the ball down with a handkerchief and he’s... he’s playing on! This is quite incredible...”

John: “Awesome, John.”

And ping!

Simon Piler: June 23, 2009 at 8:54 pm

Whu-pong!

John: “Whoa, that was a near miss for Piler! He just barely got a piece of that one, John.”

Alfie: June 23, 2009 at 10:39 pm

Hai-ping!

John: “Another devastating forehand smash from Alfie. The atmosphere is truly electric inside the Recreation Room, John. You wouldn’t even know these guys don’t know they’re playing for the Elephant Teapot.”

John: “I hear you, John. This match has really caught the imagination of the ship. Wherever we go, we hear people talking about it. Just the other day I was talking to that funny looking fellow in the fox mask, you know, the one with the evil black shiny eyes, and he was telling me that - WOAH! DID YOU SEE THAT? Piler plain fluffed it!”

Simon Piler: June 25, 2009 at 3:42 pm

Rats, Rats, Rats! That’s you again, Chaplin. The score’s at 5-6.

John: “Ooh. In a close match, every point counts.”

John: “That it does, John. That it does. You can see the balance of this game has the crowd on the tips of their toes! I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything like it!”

(Sir Matthew the Mighty has wandered into the room aimlessly, he sips from his coffee cup, pondering space.)

Alfie: June 25, 2009 at 7:42 pm

Matthew’s sudden presence put me off so much that I totally fucked up my serve and ended up skelping the ball so hard that a spellchecker couldn’t even comprehend the word “skelping”... It sounded like this “Pyyyyyyyyyyuk... plop”. The “...plop” part being the ball which

cannoned back off the ceiling and landed in Sir Matthew the Mighty's coffee cup. I apologised profusely for the inconvenience, quietly cursing another wasted opportunity. 6-6

John: *"John, these guys are going to pieces in the cauldron-like atmosphere of the inaugural Elephant Teapot Champingpongship."*

John: *"I hear you there, John, but I can't take my eyes off that spectator fishing the ball out of his coffee and looking utterly bewildered at the coffee stains on his lovely green Utica Flower Co shirt."*

Simon Piler: June 27, 2009 at 4:37 pm

Aha, so here we are again – locked in the fearsome struggle of the tied match! P-p-ping. (Oh, poor Champion of Science... it's lucky that he's extraordinarily good natured.)

Alfie: June 27, 2009 at 6:20 pm

Right. If there's an Elephant Teapot at stake, then I'm upping my game. It gives you magic powers apparently. That's how Koradji made his millions. I'll see you and raise you one – p-p-p-pong!

Simon Piler: June 27, 2009 at 6:32 pm

W-what? Showing me up at my own game!?! Never! P-p-p-p-p-ing!

Alfie: June 27, 2009 at 10:02 pm

Oh that's nothing, try this one on for size: P-p-p-p-p-whoosh. Damn it, one p too many – p-ping p-pong is clearly not my style.

John: *"7-6 to Piler, John, and Alfie is sweating teapots."*

John: *"Such a shame none of them are elephant teapots, John."*

John: *"Isn't it just, John."*

Simon Piler: June 28, 2009 at 2:03 am

Ah-ha! The Teapot will be mine! Hold on a second. "Ya, Champion, will you give me a sip of that coffee?"

Matthew: "I already drank part of it and just spilled most of the rest."

Simon Piler: "I only want a sip, Champion."

Matthew: "Look. Seriously, just look, there's only about a gulp left in here."

Simon Piler: "Oh, whatever. It's just that I've been playing on and off since May 14th, man. I'm kinda tired, you know." Okay, sorry about that. Ping.

Alfie: June 28, 2009 at 3:02 pm

I'm not planning on letting that Elephant Teapot slip through my fingers again... PONG!!!

Simon Piler: June 28, 2009 at 3:41 pm

Hoo, you made that look quite easy. 7-7. Here we go, Chaplin...

Alfie: June 28, 2009 at 8:13 pm

Woo-hoo! Okay, hopefully this is not too off-putting for you, but I'm in desperate need of a smoke. (*lights a roll-up, dangles from bottom lip, smoke in eyes*) Ping.

Simon Piler: June 28, 2009 at 8:33 pm

Pong.

Alfie: June 29, 2009 at 7:19 am

(*senses with a one word return that Piler is flagging and goes for the jugular*) PING!

Simon Piler: June 30, 2009 at 5:59 pm

(*Tennis player sound here.*) Pong.

Alfie: June 30, 2009 at 6:44 pm

Ping (*...for a split second there it felt like I had 8 arms and 8 paddles... freaky but cool.*)

Simon Piler: July 1, 2009 at 1:50 pm

Ooh, you're becoming either an octopus or Vishnu, eh? Or maybe a cartoon character? And, yes, yes, quite cool, actually. Pong.

Alfie: July 1, 2009 at 2:50 pm

You have to be very careful round here – one innocent throwaway comment like "...or maybe a cartoon character" can have devastating effects that ripple on for months. "Aaaaaaaarrrrgggghhhhhhh!" That's me screaming, perceiving that my hands suddenly appear to have been sketched with crayons whilst simultaneously missing the ball. 8-7 to you hoo hoo...

Simon Piler: July 2, 2009 at 10:48 pm

Oh, I don't know whether to feel sorry for you, or to be very curious and get my instruments, or to take a photograph... or wait, you're a cartoon, so maybe a photocopy, instead? This is very exciting!

Although, wait, now, I am quite certain we've got a game to play. Haven't we? Hrumph, hrumph. It is a very serious game we've got going here. Hrumph, hrumph. It's a very serious game, indeed. (*Multitudinous face wrinkles.*)

Simon Piler: July 2, 2009 at 10:49 pm

Oh, yes, and also, Ping!

Alfie: July 3, 2009 at 7:12 am

Nah, no need to feel sorry for me. I'm actually feeling a bit better today, and if everyone puts on these 3D glasses (*produces a medium*

Simon Piler: August 5, 2009 at 12:20 am

Blast! Knew I should have installed that Digital-to-Analog converter in my paddle during one of those spare dozen hours between volleys...

HOOOF! 01101010101001010101110011010100111010101000.

(Sweats out an atomic bumblebee from his hatbrim.)

Alfie: August 5, 2009 at 7:06 am

Malformed binary and HOOFs!!! Help ma boab! *(Scrambling frantic edge of your seat return PONG while scribbling with a black magic marker a scary face onto the ball in the blink of an eye thinking "this is it, this is it, keep your shit together, Alfie" and an audience of thirty-two complete strangers jammed into the corners of the room, huddled beneath the table, and dangling from the rafters, emit a shuddering gasp)*

Sounds: *(Audible audience GASPING!!!!!!! ... and one person fainting. Simon yelping-as-in-sort-of-screaming and all-parts autonomically leaping away from the table and falling, but with paddle accidentally outstretched...)*

Simon Piler: August 7, 2009 at 1:36 am

Eyes closed. Did I hit the ball? Where did it go?

Alfie: August 7, 2009 at 7:48 am

Yeah, you hit it. It's stuck up there in the light fitting. What are the rules on that? Do we have to wait for it to fall, or play the point again? Does anyone actually know the rules of ping-pong round here? *(Turns to crowd: much shrugging of shoulders and staring at shuffling shoes. Furtive glances compliment a bemused silence.)* More importantly, do we have a stepladder?

Alfie: August 7, 2009 at 12:47 pm

QUARTERLY CHECK: Nope the ball's still stuck up there.

Simon Piler: August 8, 2009 at 3:24 am

Not a stepladder, per say, but certainly we could try using the rung ladder we use to get down into the Storage Hold. I think the ball is obviously out of play, so I'll just forfeit the point to you. Besides, that makes it a bit more of a nail-biter, eh? 9-9. This is it, now.

Alfie: August 10, 2009 at 7:19 am

Let's give it another couple of days to see if it drops... I've scoured the ping-pong rule book in search of an answer but apparently this is a first and I'd hate to end up winning on a technicality. Soon as it falls I'll be ready... just let me get my deck chair and sleeping bag... nobody move!

Simon Piler: August 14, 2009 at 3:56 pm

Well, if you insist. I just think yer throwing away a free point, Chaplin. I'll be ambling about if you need me. Take this tin can two-way and holler if it falls.

Alfie: August 14, 2009 at 11:44 pm

What can I say? Ping-pong is a gentleman's sport. I've taken to a sleeping in the Rec Room in the off-chance the ball will drop in the night. I've also fired off an email to the International Table Tennis Federation asking them if there's a rule for when the ball gets stuck in a light fitting. Another precedent for the Flower Co?

Alfie: August 14, 2009 at 11:53 pm

(Into a tin can) Man, I should check my emails more often. Reply for the International Table Tennis Federation:

“Dear Alfie, thank you for your question and the tub of ice-cream. It sure tasted goooooood. Did you know they have two-headed chickens in space? Well, they do. They're called “space chickens”. Space - chickens. Anyway, where was I? Yes. To confirm: you win the point when whoever you're playing fails to return a shot in bounds, fails to execute a serve, obstructs the ball, hits another object that is outside the playing area, or touches the playing surface with a free hand. I hope this - hello, what's that? Ahahaha! A little woman with a felt hat and a pair of nail clip-”

So that's 9-9. Gulp. *(long pause, rolls up sleeping bag and kicks it under the table)* *(another long pause... you could hear a pin drop, probably because most of the audience drifted away almost a week ago, unable to cope with the suspense of the ball stuck up in the light fitting)* *(a tug on the string, just to let you know I'm serving for the teapot)* *(lights a cigarette)* *(inhales)* *(exhales)* Ping!

Simon Piler: August 15, 2009 at 6:18 pm

Loud and clear, Chaplin – a fine bit of digging you've done there, and certainly commendable. *(Enters the room, steps up to table.)*

Whapping!

Alfie: August 15, 2009 at 11:15 pm

Whapping! (How can “whapping” not be a word? As in “To whap a ping pong ball”)

Simon Piler: August 21, 2009 at 4:08 pm

Pong! Oh, my, my, that one just cleared the net...

Alfie: August 22, 2009 at 5:06 pm

(daydreaming) Oh fuck! *(dives forward and barely...)* PING! *(pings it back)*

Simon Piler: August 23, 2009 at 12:17 am

Whoa! A wide one! Quick-Shuffle-p-pong...

Alfie: August 23, 2009 at 7:20 pm

(looks up from page 73 of "Crime & Punishment", nonchalantly) Ping!

Simon Piler: August 25, 2009 at 11:26 pm

Oh, so you're developed an arrogant disposition, have you? THIS WILL NEVER DO! PONG!

Alfie: August 26, 2009 at 1:55

Did you know that the Ghost of Jack Kerouac told me he met Gary Snyder when he was 33 and a half – I find that kinda eerie. Oops, just about forgot. Ping!

Simon Piler: August 26, 2009 at 3:55 am

Wait, weren't you reading "Crime & Punishment"? Also, why eerie? Heavy-handed PONG.

Alfie: August 26, 2009 at 4:15 pm

Eerie... it's a long story and one that would inevitably distract me from the point at hand, namely going PING!

Simon Piler: August 26, 2009 at 5:13 pm

I guess we've already passed the 'easily distracted' phase. This is becoming quite serious. Extend-o-wrist PONG!

Alfie: September 6, 2009 at 10:18 pm

As soon as the words leave Simon's lips, suddenly everything to my left rushes to life - Simon, his stripy hat twirling, the whoosh of bat and ball, the little white orb careening over the net, plopping on the shiny red surface of the table, lifting upwards past my bat. I leap instinctively into action, lunging to my right, and draw back the paddle. I'm just about to launch a topspin shot back across the table when I feel a sudden pang of immense pain shooting up my arm, and all in slow motion turn in shock to see the pest controller guiltily sinking his teeth into my forearm. "Faaaaaaaaaacccccckkkkkk!" I scream as the ball flies past me and lands on the floor. I fall to my knees as the big Rongovian rips a mouthful of stained sleeve and bloody flesh from my bones.

Simon Piler wins the Elephant Teapot 10-9!

I repeat: Simon Piler wins the Elephant Teapot 10-9!

The last thing I remember before passing out is the pest controller chewing and telling me, "You taste like prunes".

Simon Piler: September 6, 2009 at 10.19 pm

Gads! Who the hell is that guy? Hey, stay right where you are, you!

Oh, wait... I've won! I've won! Hee hee hee hee (*jumping up and*

down) It's over! I've won! Ha ha! (*monkey faces*) Oh, shit, Chaplin are you okay? I told you to stay where you are. Chaplin? I better drag him to the Sick Bay... Hey, Mr Cannibal, I want you to wait right here until I get back, okay?

...

September 13, 2009

Alfie's Journal #18:
Rongovian Tundra



Every Friday, like clockwork, an anonymous individual dumps a plastic bag of unmarked white cassettes in the corridor outside Bunkroom 3. And every Friday I religiously kick the bag of tapes under my bunk without ever listening to them. I don't know who leaves them, or why they insist on doing it, but finally, one Thursday in early September, determined to do anything to avoid the continued presence of the protesters on the main deck, I persuaded W to sit up through the night with me. So we sat there, poised with fishing nets in the darkness of Bunkroom 3, determined to catch the culprit...

W: Do you want this joint?

Alfie: Shh! Keep your voice down.

W: (*whispering*) Sorry. Do you want this joint?

Alfie: (*whispering*) What?

W: (*Scrotmanly louder*) This joint. Do you want this joint? It's good stuff.

Alfie: You'll have to speak up, I can't hear you at all now.

W: (*shouting*) I was just asking if you want to smoke this joint?

Alfie: (*tuts*) Jesus, W! Do you want to catch this cassette weirdo or not?

W: (*Lighting up in the dark. The flame illuminates the two faces daubed in black war-paint beneath their woolly hats, fishing nets held aloft as they sit on the bottom bunk mattress, dragged into the middle of the floor*). I want to catch this cassette weirdo. (*exhales*)

Alfie: Shh! What's that?

W: (*whispering*) You hear something? At the door?

Alfie: No, what's that smell?

W: Oh, that? It's Rongovian tundra.

Alfie: What's Rongovian tundra?

W: This...(*he inhales – the glow of the joint lights up his face, eyes goggling unnaturally in his skull – he exhales, his voice sounding like he's been sucking helium*) You should try some... (*the joint floats across the dark room*).

Alfie: What did you say this was again? (*inhales – goes cock-eyed*).

W: Rongovian tundra. I got sent some when I joined The Real Burnouts' fanclub. It came in a cool little wooden box. With a free Alexander Tokeleaf mask too. That mask was ridiculously lifelike.

Alfie: (*exhales – coughing fit, helium-voice*) Fucking hell, W! You got this from The Real Burnouts? Don't you know those guys are insane? (*spits*) Dude, it tastes even worse than it smells.

(*The joint continues to traverse back and forth between them throughout the subsequent dialogue.*)

W: They seemed very mormal to me... (*inhales/exhales laughing*).

Alfie: (*laughing*) I don't know why I'm laughing! Why am I laughing?

W: You're right, this stuff tastes terrible. (*pause*) Remind me again why we're sitting here in the dark with fishing nets?

Alfie: We're trying to save the ship.

W: How are we doing?

Alfie: Ask me some other time when my brain doesn't feel like blancmange.

W: Am I remotely controlled?

(*both laughing*)

W: Seriously though, Alfie, are you my conscience?

Alfie: No, I'm just your fishing buddy.

W: What did I say this stuff was called again?

Alfie: Rongovian tundra. (*pause*) Where the fuck's Rongovia anyway?

W: Dunnovia.

(both laughing)

Alfie: It smells like someone died farting.

W: Why am I holding a fishing net?

Alfie: Somebody leaves a bag of cassettes in the corridor outside our bunkroom door every Friday morning.

W: What's on the tapes?

Alfie: I've no idea. Urgh, this Rongovian tundra gets worse the more you smoke it...

W: You haven't listened to the tapes?

Alfie: In case you haven't noticed, I've been sort of busy. Also I didn't want to encourage whoever's been leaving them.

W: We should listen to one just now while we're waiting.

Alfie: I don't think that's a good idea. *(pause)* But okay.

(Alfie clatters across the room in the dark, muttering and swearing. He falls over with a crash and finally pulls out one of the plastic bags from under the bed. He proceeds to put one of the tapes into a portable cassette player.)

A Modulated Voice: SPOKE TO BILLY WHITE

THEY ARE ALL DEAD

PAPA BEAR

GLORG

THE SHUBUNKINS

AUREOLA

CALVIN AND CORTES

HERB AND KID GLOVES

THE SONGBIRD AND THE SEAMSTRESS

BO-PEEP AND THE HEMINGWAYS

IF YOU CAN HEAR ME

THEY'VE SYNCHRONIZED

NEANDERTHAL GHOSTWRITERS ARE KICKING DOWN OUR COMBINATION LOCKS

IT'S AN INSIDE FIASCO

THE SEROTONIN SHEIK ARRIVES TOMORROW

WITH A TAKEOVER BID THE GOVERNMENT CANNOT REFUSE

STORM CLOUDS ARE GATHERING

A TERRIBLE TWOSOME WHO GO BY THE NAME OF

BEDLINGTON AND RICKENBACKER – PRIMAL NIMRODS

TRANSYLVANIAN COBRAS

SEXUALLY PERVERSE

SHAPESHIFT LIKE SCARECROWS

THIS
IS MY LAST CASSETTE
NOWHERE IS SAFE ANYMORE
EVEN FOR KOLINSKY
WE MUST FIND HIM BEFORE THEY DO
WORD IS HE'S TRYING TO SAIL AROUND THE WORLD
IN AN OLD WOODEN SHIP CALLED THE MA-
(The tape grinds to halt.)

W: That sounded just like you!

Alfie: Eh? What do you mean? That sounded nothing like me.

W: Either way, it's pretty clear someone is looking for you. *(pause)*
But why would someone be leaving these in a plastic bag outside our
door? *(long pause)* And did they say something about Papa Bear?

Alfie: They said he's dead.

W: Seriously? Fuck! Since when?

Alfie: What do you mean since when? I don't know!

W: Then how do you know he's dead?

Alfie: Shit, where's my fishing net?

W: I've got it.

Alfie: Then where's your fishing net?

W: You've got it. I think. *(quietly)* Papa Bear is *dead!*

Alfie: When did you give me your fishing net?

W: *(laughing)* You've *lost* my fishing net?

Alfie: *(laughing)* Put the light on.

(W crashes across the room and switches the light on. Bunkroom 3 looks like a war-zone. A giant "V" has been painted in black on the wall beside the bunks. Neither W or Alfie have nets, and they blink in the harsh electric light.)

Alfie: I thought you said you had my net?

W: Net? What net? Holy shit, Alfie! Who painted that? *(points at the painted "V")* That wasn't there before!

Alfie: I thought you did it.

W: I did? Fuuuucck. What does it mean?

Alfie: I always figured you were painting a big "W" and got distracted halfway through.

W: *(suddenly jumps)* Woah! Did you hear that? *(He clatters over to the door)* I definitely heard footsteps! *(He opens the door and steps out into the corridor).*

Alfie: *(Jumping up in slow motion and swaying giddily)* Anybody there?

W: No, just this plastic bag of cassettes outside the door.

Alfie: Ah crap! Which way were the footpets going?

W: Footpets? What are you talking about? Hey! Didn't I have a fishing net? (*He begins to walk slowly up the corridor and climbs the steps leading up to the main deck, lifting his feet as if he is walking on the moon*) Alfie, it's like the floor is made of jam...

I stood in the doorway and watched him disappear up the stairs. My head swirled with tundra as I crouched to investigate the new bag. I heard the sound of fireworks in the distance, quickly realising they were emanating from *inside* the bag. I bent my ear to it, and as the reverberating echoes faded away, they were replaced by a muffled *crack-crack-crack* and a high-pitched whistling, followed by an almighty thud that actually caused the bag to flutter.

I looked in both directions down the empty bottom corridor before cautiously opening the bag and peering inside. I was starting to wonder just how wasted I was (and I already suspected I was very, *very* wasted), because I seemed to be looking down through the bag into a sunlit room with a large wooden table at the centre of it. Before I could figure out what the fuck was going on, my head was inside the bag and I was slipping forward uncontrollably. It was like going head-first down a flume, ending with a somersault and me crash-landing onto my back. As I lay there on the table, I looked up and saw the bottom of the bag melt away into the ceiling above me.

I sat up in a panic and tried to get my bearings, wincing as my bones clicked back into place. I appeared to be in an old abandoned train station. Dust particles spun in the morning sun, streaming in through old cracked windows. As I dropped down from the table, a majestic white lion padded past the station door. The lion was so freakishly out of place that even though I'd just arrived there via a plastic carrier bag, I still did a double-take, rubbing my eyes with disbelief.

I poked my head around the station door. There was no sign of the lion, or any trains. The sky was cloudless and the sun oppressive. The air felt starved of oxygen as I tugged at the neck of my repeatedly washed, but still hot-tub and ice-cream stained Flower Company shirt. I look both ways up the platform and hurried off in the opposite direction from the lion. I rounded the corner of the abandoned ticket office and was walking across an empty parking lot when a bullet whistled past my head, thudding into the station wall behind me. I immediately ran for cover, ducking down a shady back alleyway which led out into a small square behind some tall stone buildings. At the centre of the square was a children's play park, and there, on the other side of the park was the white lion. It stood there, staring right at me,

and I stood there, staring right back. Jet black plumes of smoke rose beyond the rooftops, and I heard my heart booming between my ears. Eventually the lion yawned and pawed lazily at the ground, before tramping off down another alleyway. As I made out the ominous sounds of a helicopter whirring into earshot and more gunfire, I took a deep breath and followed the lion. I know how ridiculous that sounds now, but at the time, somewhere deep down in my tundra-addled mind, I knew it was what I was supposed to do. I was about halfway up the dark alley when a door opened on the wall to my left, and a pale, young man with neat blond hair, grabbed me and dragged me inside, kicking the door shut behind us.

‘You took your time getting here!’ he said in an unfamiliar accent, as I thrashed around trying to break free from his grip.

‘Where the fuck am I?’ I shouted, looking round. We appeared to be in the lobby of a hotel. ‘There are people out there shooting at me!’

He let go of me and looked me up and down. ‘Agent Pofloetry tells me you’re interested in procuring a couple of great white sharks.’

‘Who?’

‘Agent Pofloetry,’ he repeated. ‘No?’

‘No!’

‘Alright then,’ he muttered, confused. ‘I’m Klaus by the way.’

‘I’m Alfie,’ I told him.

Klaus grinned, trying not to laugh.

‘What’s so funny?’

‘Nothing,’ he said. ‘I’m just nervous is all. The balloonist told me you would be different, he just didn’t tell me *how* different.’ He studied me again, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. ‘So, if you’re not here for the sharks, then what *are* you here for?’

‘I’ve no idea!’ I told him. ‘One minute I was smoking tundra with W, and the next...’

‘Aha,’ he said. ‘That would explain your squeaky voice.’

‘I think I fell through a magic portal inside a plastic bag.’

Klaus screwed up his eyes. ‘Listen, you don’t by any chance happen to have a safe that needs breaking into?’

‘What?’

‘A safe,’ he repeated. ‘That needs breaking into. I know a girl who knows two guys who know -’

‘Just tell me where the fuck I am!’ I wailed.

‘Rongo,’ he says. ‘More specifically, you’re in the Royal Rabbit Hotel. According to the balloonist, this is where you will die.’

‘WHAT?’

He jumped back, startled. 'I'm sorry, I thought you knew all this. The balloonist told me you jumped from the roof and got splattered across the sidewalk.'

'I don't know what the fuck you're talking about,' I whispered, the tundra coursing through my body.

'But of course you don't,' he said with a wink. 'You never do.'

The door opened and a young woman in a white lab coat, with dark hair and reading glasses walked in. She was carrying a clipboard. 'Is this him?' she asked Klaus, nodding at me.

'I think so,' replied Klaus, though he didn't sound convinced.

'I'm Hannah Manana,' the young woman told me, shaking my hand. 'Perhaps you recognise me? From Channel 679? I interviewed your friend about his anti-doomsday-death-ray-machine? He had a bomb strapped to his balls?'

'I think I might have accidentally asphyxiated myself,' I told them. 'That would explain the white lion. And all this weirdness.'

'Come with me,' she said.

I followed her through the door, up seventeen flights of stairs, and along a corridor until we reached Room 679. 'Don't worry,' she told me, 'you'll be safe here. Just sit tight and don't do anything stupid.'

I watched in a stunned silence as she handed me the room key and walked off down the corridor. Eventually, I placed the key in the lock and nervously stepped inside Room 679. The curtains were drawn and as my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I made out the outline of six beds, three on either side of the large room. More gunshots rang out in the distance as I reached up and found the remains of the tundra joint tucked behind my ear. I promptly lit up, feeling my heartbeat return to a normal tempo.

'You're not supposed to smoke in here, Mr White,' croaked a hoarse voice in the darkness. I jumped at the sight of a decrepit old man in a badly stained nightgown. He'd crept up silently behind me. 'The porters can smell it. Especially the big Samoan.'

My eyes began to adjust to the darkness and I stared at the old man's haggard face, his eyes shimmering with starlight. 'I don't know who you people think I am,' I told him, 'but whoever he is, I'm not him.'

'That's what they all say,' he replied, picking his nose and looking around shiftily, before leaning into me. 'Can I let you into a secret, Mr White?' he whispered. 'I saw a film when I was younger. A film about the future. In a cottage in the woods. You know, I killed people. I lost count of how many. Tens, hundreds, thousands. I buried them in the basement walls. That's the reason they put me in here.'

‘Where is here?’ I asked him, stepping back, suddenly feeling very scared.

‘Not important,’ he said, waving away my question.

‘Who are you?’

‘Also not important,’ he blustered.

‘Is that you?’ moaned a voice from the bed behind me.

‘W?’ I asked, spinning around.

The old man grabbed me by the elbow. ‘I know what you really are,’ he said with a gap-toothed grin.

I pulled myself away and rushed over to W. He was bound in a straightjacket and strapped to the bed, presumably to keep him from escaping. He was in a bad way. His hair was a mess and his eyes were black and sunken in his skull. ‘W! Are you okay?’ I asked him.

‘Do I look like I’m okay?’ he croaked weakly.

‘Well, no. Fuck. Is this what happens when you smoke Rongovian tundra?’

His eyes lit up. ‘Did you say tundra?’

‘You shouldn’t be talking to him,’ said the old man crossly. ‘Mr W is a bad man! A very bad man! He stabbed the Professor with a black biro! Right in the eyeball! That’s why the Professor has a robot eye that can see into your soul.’

W attempted to sit up at the sound of the old man’s voice, snarling and spitting, the belts and straightjacket holding him down. ‘I’ll fucking kill you, Lumereti, you little shit!’

‘Woah, W, calm down,’ I said, while the old man cowered behind me.

‘See?’ said Lumereti over my shoulder. ‘He’s dangerous. You can’t trust him.’

‘Shut up will you?’ I said, looking around, ‘I need to think.’ There were three more figures in the other beds. Two of them were motionless, while a third peered over his white bedsheets through a pair of old aviator goggles. ‘W, who are these people? And where the fuck are we?’ I asked.

‘I have literally no idea,’ he said. ‘Now hurry up and get me out of here!’

‘He’s lying!’ squealed the old man.

‘Lumereti!’ growled W.

‘Don’t worry, I’ll call for help,’ said Lumereti.

‘What?’

‘HELP!’ he yelled. ‘HEEEEEELLLLLP!’

W thumped his head back against his pillow and shut his eyes. ‘Jesus, not again.’

‘HEEEEEEEEEELLLLLLLLLLPPPPP!’ screamed Lumereti, his fists balled up, knees bent, red stubbly face lifted to the ceiling.

‘You’ve got to get out of here,’ said W over the shrieking old man.

The man wearing the aviator goggles looked nervously between us, pulling his sheets up even higher and covering his face.

‘I can’t just leave you like this,’ I said to W.

‘You’ve got no choice,’ he told me. ‘They’ll be here any moment. Tell Papa Bear where I am. He’ll know what to do.’

‘How can I tell Papa Bear where you are when I don’t even know where we are myself? And who the fuck is Papa Bear anyway?’

‘Quick, Billy White,’ he snapped, nodding to the windows at far end of the room. ‘You’re going to have to jump!’

‘OOOOOHHHHH!’ shrieked Lumereti, pointing a spindly finger at W. ‘Don’t listen to him! That’s a bad idea! We’re seventeen floors up! It’s impossible! You’ll die for sure!’

‘Billy, go!’ shouted W.

‘Billy? Who’s Billy?’

‘GO!’ he screamed. ‘GET THE FUCK OUT OF HERE!’

As I ran across the room, old Lumereti leapt into action, jamming one of his grubby old socks into W’s mouth. ‘PLEASE!’ he screamed at me. ‘I’M BEGGING YOU, MR WHITE! DON’T DO IT!’

I drew back the curtains.

It was dark outside.

I stepped through the window frame, forward onto the stage. A solitary spotlight flickered on the ceiling above me. I could vaguely make out hundreds of faces in the dark, all of them peering up at me. An enormous man, maybe nine or ten feet tall, completely hairless, sat behind a grand piano to the front right of the stage. His elongated fingers were poised above the keys, and he watched me, bemused.

A plastic bag blew across the stage and snagged against my ankles. Somebody in the audience coughed.

‘FREE RONGOVA!’ I shouted, before climbing hurriedly into the bag, my feet tearing through the plastic as I pulled it up over my legs and torso. Finally my head disappeared into it, emerging into the silence of the bottom corridor of the Mardi. To my right, W was slowly easing himself back down the stairs, gripping to the handrail like his life depended on it. ‘This floor’s like fucking ice!’ he shouted, trying not to fall.

I watched him crawl towards me on his hands and knees, taking care not to spill a recently opened bottle of bourbon. ‘Did you catch them?’ I asked.

He stopped in our doorway and looked up at me. ‘Catch who?’

I held out the plastic bag of cassettes and he took it, before going to look inside. ‘Woah! I wouldn’t do that if I was you,’ I warned him.

‘Why not?’

‘There’s all sorts of completely fucked up stuff happening in there.’

‘Like what?’ he asked, taking a swig from his bourbon.

‘I saw a white lion,’ I told him. ‘Then I ended up in some weird hotel. You were there. Apparently you stabbed some professor in the eyeball with a biro.’

He snorted, and handed the bag back. ‘Yeah, that sounds like me. Anyway, that’s nothing. You should see what’s happening upstairs. You and the Atom Band have been pinned down in the Bridge by those crazy Realists. I doubt you’ll survive the night. Shall we have another one of those tundra joints before we crash?’

‘Definitely,’ I said, as a shotgun rang out from the main deck above us and Beethoven’s 9th Symphony began to play.

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September 25, 2009

Alfie’s Journal #19:

Plan B

The flames spat and swirled in the big metal barrel of Algaebrew, with luminous purples and tangerines wrapped around Ringo’s smiling warped face. I was sitting on the floor of the Bridge, my back against the upturned desk. Hell was breaking loose all around me, yet I couldn’t take my eyes off the burning Beatles records in the barrel. Another shotgun blast sounded and a bullet smashed through one of the portholes, thudding into the middle of our smoke-stained wall map of the world, scattering the blue pins I’d been using to chart our progress. I was numbly aware of whistling projectiles and more gunshots intermingling with the deafening sound of Beethoven’s 9th Symphony getting broadcast over the Mardi’s much underused PA system. The air on the Bridge was thick with dark clouds of smoke, but I could just about make out the other figures huddling for cover behind our makeshift barricade, springing up like jack-in-the-boxes to hurl whatever came to hand back out onto the main deck.

The Atom Band were all there. Def Mute, Sparks, Emerson, and Scarytoes were huddled around a crappy blueprint of the ship, communicating with one another via frantic hand gestures. Meanwhile, Matthew the Mighty leaped up and threw an old broken brown sandal through the smashed porthole. As I choked on the smoke, I watched Brendon Hertz crawling along the ground, carefully unwinding a roll of chicken-wire. There was a comical “Ping!” and Simon Piler fell to the floor beside me, dropping a hot glue gun. He fingered a scorched indentation on the star-spangled cycling helmet that sat lopsided on his head, then turned and looked at me with a grin of pure amazement. ‘Hoowee, Chaplin! Isn’t this invigorating? I must confess I thought our little protester friends would turn and swim for their lives when they caught sight of that shotgun of yours, but they’re certainly putting up a fight. It was very astute of that busty woman to wrestle you to the ground and procure the gun for her own use, wouldn’t you agree? She must be at least twice your age!’ he shouted over the battle.

‘And twice my fucking size!’ I shouted back.

He reached into an invisible box that sat on the floor between us, and pulled out the remains of a banana. ‘Ah! Unlikely to cause any collateral damage, but it might confuse the situation enough for us to switch to Plan B.’ He popped up and lobbed the banana skin out through the porthole, before hurriedly diving back down to the floor as a cavalcade of globular green meat chunks splattered into the room, exploding around us. Simon was on his knees, gagging as he pawed at his tongue. ‘Decomposed squid!’ he said with a grimace. ‘Looks like they found Flash’s catapult!’

I kicked a shred of rotten squid from my foot. ‘We have a Plan B?’ I howled at him.

Simon Piler looked me in the eye with a bemused expression on his face. ‘Don’t be silly, Chaplin. We don’t even have a Plan A! I was under the impression we were making this up as we go along.’

A further volley of squid flew in through the porthole, knocking Scarytoes off his feet. It was right at the exact moment he was pulling the trigger of a popgun, and the cork collided with poor Emerson’s eye. I watched as Brendon Hertz crawled up beside us, while behind him Lt. Sparks shouted ‘Man down!’ and a bemused Matthew the Mighty picked a chunk of blubbery green tentacle from his afro.

Simon and Brendon whispered urgently in each other’s ears, and I caught words like “pancake”, “ghostcheese” and “chaos niblet”, before they seemed to reach some sort of agreement. Simon glanced back at me over his shoulder and instructed me to wait where I was. As he scuttled off into the clouds of black smoke, Brendon crawled back

along the barricade, conveying Plan B to the rest of the Atom Band. Matthew looks bemused, while Def Mute got irritable after getting hit on the chin by the returning banana skin. Scarytoes lay winded on the squid-riddled floor, while Sparks and Emerson were still gamely lobbing handfuls of squid back out at the protesters.

Simon swiftly returned on a child's tricycle, towing a wheelbarrow with a cable made from an assortment of coloured bootlaces. He motioned for me to get in. Another bullet from the main deck flew in through the porthole and thudded into our ship's navigation system which promptly combusted in a shower of sparks. I picked myself up and dived into the barrow, Simon shouting, 'Hold onto your hats!' as he struggled to pedal us through the thick smoke at the rear of the Bridge.

We trundled slowly past the burning barrel of Beatles records, out through the door at the back of the Bridge, and made our way along the short carpeted corridor. I gripped tight to the sides of the barrow as Simon – twenty years too big to be riding it – awkwardly navigated us away from the battle. 'This is Plan B?' I asked as we trundled past the cluttered Art Gallery and squeaked to a standstill outside the Company Boardroom.

He dismounted, keyed the password into the lock, and marched into the room, beckoning me to follow. As more gunfire and screaming mixed with Beethoven, I hurried inside, scanning the debris from the time I tried to blow up the safe. Simon was already halfway up the Boardroom wall, nimbly scaling the cabinets that hung in splinters, pulling himself into the Quixodelic Record Store above. I clambered across the broken boardroom table and called up after him, 'Water balloons filled with hot-tub water aren't going to work!'

His sooty face appeared at the gaping hole on the ceiling. 'Water balloons you say? Hmmmm, not bad, but we were thinking more along the lines of hiding.'

'Hiding?'

'In the Observatory of Multitudes,' he said with a nod. 'They'll never find us there. Actually, we might not even be able to find ourselves there, but it's a chance we have to take.'

'Simon...' I started to protest, but he was already gone, and I was left standing there, wondering how things had spiralled so rapidly out of control. I had to get my head straight, maybe drink some more rum, and take control of the situation. I was still standing there as the rest of The Atom Band filed through in varying degrees of disarray. Matthew the Mighty was dripping in squid and had a groaning Scarytoes slung across his shoulders; Def Mute was blowing on the ship's blueprints

which had regrettably caught fire; Sparks was attempting to remove the cork from Emerson's eye; and Brendon was calmly eating a sandwich. Without even acknowledging me, they wordlessly scaled the wall and vanished through the hole in the Boardroom ceiling. I quickly concluded that any moment now, a posse of rabid protesters were going to break through our barricade back on the Bridge, and come stomping up the corridor after us, armed with a shotgun and a disruptively high dose of reality.

It was just as I realised that hiding was all we had left, that I fell through the collapsing floor with a terrified scream. I landed on the Sick Bay hammock and bounced across the room in shock, hearing it tear from the walls. I groaned and looked up at a grubby little girl in rags. She was maybe ten or eleven years old, her pupils dilated with fear, hands trembling as she dropped a pull cord. There was a little cardboard tag attached to the end of the cord, and just before I blacked out with the pain, I saw the words "PULL ME" written on it.

'Champ!' Cold hard skin slapped against my cheek.

'Hey Champ, wake up!' Another slap; this time it stung.

Through the prison bars of my fluttering eyelashes, I stared up at Moss kneeling beside my head. Beyond her, standing in the doorway of the Sick Bay, was the grubby little girl and a woman with a suspiciously large nose.

'What just happened?' I croaked, propping myself up on my elbows and examining the hole in the Sick Bay ceiling. You could now see right up into the Boardroom, and beyond that, the colourful flowers in the Quixodelic Record Store.

'Come on,' said Moss, moving round behind me and hauling me to my feet, 'you're already five minutes late for the fight.'

'Fight?'

'The boxing match, remember? The Moon Pool is packed and it's starting to get ugly. They're saying you're not going to show. Have you been drinking a pint of raw eggs every morning like I told you? Shit, Alfs, you're a fucking mess.'

She grabbed me by the elbow and dragged me out into the corridor, past the girl and woman who both stared at me with their bright eyes. I started babbling at 679 miles an hour. 'Since when do we ever have eggs, Chief? And what the fuck is going on? What about the protesters? We need to hide! They got hold of a shotgun, and Emerson got a cork lodged in his eye! Wait a minute, I still don't know what you're talking about – what boxing match?'

She paused and studied me. I must have looked completely fucked – black with soot, rotten squid clinging to my shirt, barefoot, blue trousers ripped in the fall, and a ragged bandage flapping on my bloody right arm. She cackled incredulously and shook her head. ‘What boxing match? You’re kidding me, right? The charity boxing match to raise funds for the Revolutionary Orphans of Rongovia?’ She nodded back at the girl and the long-nosed woman standing in the Sick Bay door. ‘Alfs, where have you been?’

I desperately wanted to tell her the truth, but I’d barely opened my mouth when she shushed me, grabbed me by the arm again and started dragging me through the dark Machine Shop in the direction of the Moon Pool. My head was all over the place. It was like some feverish dream where I was glued to the sheets in confusion, mumbling incoherent sentences before the whirlpool of weariness sucked me back down again. Was this real? It couldn’t possibly be real, could it? It crossed my mind that maybe after all these weeks I was *still* stuck in the freezer with the ice-cream nebula. A sudden image flashed through my mind: the protesters’ smug faces on the main deck, with their clever flasks of very real coffee, and their plastic lunch boxes crammed full of actual eggs, wielding placards that protested the very existence of the ship, and fuck, by that logic, even the existence of themselves. I suddenly thought about all the crew we’d lost along the way. What was it exactly? Did they see something I didn’t? Did I see something they didn’t? I think I was mumbling, ‘Anyone can go out and live the dream... but not everyone dreams like I do...’ as I got hauled into the commotion of the Moon Pool, and saw the boxing ring erected there.

There must have been a crowd of nearly a hundred people squeezed around the perimeter of the room. Gone were the chalk marks and etchings I made in the middle of the floor many weeks ago, when I had nothing better to do but plan renovations for easy access to the Fish Wife. A swarm of rowdy faces jeered wildly as Moss led me in a daze to the ropes.

I tried to protest, but she was already lifting the bottom rope and the crowd was pushing me up into the glaring light of the ring. A rabble of voices battled for space around my ears. ‘Kick his ass, Alfie!’ shouted one.

‘Looks like he’s already gone twelve rounds with Gassius Clay’s backside!’ roared another.

Moss clapped me around the shoulder, jammed a gum-shield in my mouth, tied the big red boxing gloves to my hands, and lifted the glasses off my nose. ‘Just remember what I told you in training – stick to your strengths. Don’t go looking for sucker punches. Just keep

jabbing, jabbing, jabbing...' She hopped around demonstrating as I stared into the space behind her, watching the referee in his black and white stripes at the centre of the ring. He turned slowly in his round-rimmed mirrored shades, a microphone made from a toilet tube and ping-pong ball covered in tinfoil in his hands. He had on a long black and white stripy bed hat that swung down to his knees, and as he turned I saw that it was none other than Simon Piler, winking at me.

'That can't be possible,' I whispered.

'Anything's possible if you put your mind to it,' said Moss, punching me in the forehead much harder than she'd intended. I staggered back a couple of steps and she apologised and ducked back out of the ring with a nervous grin.

The roar of the crowd subsided as Simon began to speak theatrically, scattering sparkling sequins with his free hand. 'Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, I hope you kept hold onto your hats! This is a three round exhibition match in aid of the Revolutionary Orphans of Rongovia, so please, dig deep into your pockets and purchase some of the merchandise and memorabilia available at various locations throughout the ship. Personally, I would like to recommend the latest batch of Algaebrew. One single bottle is guaranteed to hit spots in your brain that you never even knew existed. Talking of hitting, without further ado, allow me to introduce our two contestants. In the green and blue corner, weighing in at...' – he sized me up and down – 'a scrawny 145 pounds; all the way from the Kingdom of Fife... it's... Alfie... Wheeeelies!'

I spun around dizzily to a mixed reaction of cheers, boos, and raucous laughter, searching for familiar faces but finding only middle-aged men, grotesque, paunchy and balding, holding bottles of Algaebrew, and puffing on fat cigars.

Simon waited for the noise to dip before continuing. 'And his opponent... in the stars and stripes corner... weighing in at... something like... 190 pounds... a true heavyweight of our times... it's -'

I peered into the shadows behind him, trying to see who it was.

' – The...'

Who the fuck was it?

'...GRIM REAPER!'

The who?

And then my stomach lurched. Even without my glasses there was no mistaking his silhouette as he emerged from the lights into the centre of the ring. The skull and sunglasses, the cigarette jammed in his grin, the bandy-legged gait, black cloak flapping around his bony

shoulders. I could vaguely hear Moss urgently telling me to ‘Go knock his lights out, Champ!’ and I just about vomited in fright as The Reaper’s malevolent face zoomed in towards me. A bell was tolling somewhere, and before I could touch gloves, the fucker maced me in the face.

‘Fffffuuuuuuucccckkk!’ I screamed, gloved hands going to my eyes, blinded, burning pain, gasping for breath, like I’d just stuck my head in a bucket of chili peppers.

I crashed against the ropes, The Reaper’s voice ominously close to my ear, strangely crystallised below the rumble of stomping feet and cheering lungs. ‘Your heart is mine, asshole!’ he growled in my ear, his voice a low, crackling surge of dark energy.

I wheeled away blindly, instinctively trying to throw a punch, but swung clumsily and lost my balance, ending up flat on my arse. A torrent of laughter exploded behind me as The Reaper cuffed me hard around the back of the head, knocking me flat on the canvas. It must have been a glove, but it might as well have been a baseball bat going by the pain shooting down my spine and jolting through my limbs. The survival instinct kicked in as I rolled over, muttering, ‘Fuck this, I’m staying down.’

Through white hot tears I watched his gatorskin boots lope away towards his corner, then Simon’s oddly wrinkled face appeared inches from my own. ‘Are you okay, Chaplin?’ he asked me, the two of us frozen inside a bubble of vibrant colours. ‘You’re doing a lot better than anyone imagined you would. Can you get up?’

‘Simon! What about the protesters? And the shotgun? And coming to think about it, where did Robbie go? He wasn’t in his hammock. What the fuck is going on?’ I was trying to ask a whole load of questions at the same time, and somehow I managed to end up asking none of them at all, instead wailing a barrage of non-words at him.

And yet it was as if he knew exactly what I was on about. He flashed me a sympathetic look, understanding implicitly that this was a situation that could not possibly be understood. ‘You can do it, Chaplin!’ he told me urgently, pulling away as I grabbed hold of his shirt collar and climbed to my feet, dizzy in the bright light. Another ironic cheer rose from the crowd.

Simon stepped back into the shadows and I heard the pounding boots approach across the canvas. I turned in time to see the last few inches of The Reaper’s star-spangled boxing glove travelling towards my face.

And then I was flying.

The whole world fell silent. The lights on the ceiling were like distant flickering candlelights as my limp body soared across the ring. I hit the canvas like a drunk man falling into bed at 4am, smiling my way into the enveloping cocoon of nothingness.

I've no idea how long I was out of it. When I opened my eyes I was lying on my bunk, feeling like I'd just run face first, ten times, into a brick wall. Were it not for the excruciating pain that stretched from the bridge of my nose to the back of my skull, and the burning aftertaste of pepper-spray in my mouth, then I would have sworn blind the charity boxing match was just a bad dream.

I became aware that someone was whistling Beethoven's 9th Symphony, and before I fully understood that it wasn't me, a sniggering voice said, 'Alright Pubesey!'

I closed my aching eyes and tried to ignore it, while a second voice added, 'Bit fucking rude to go back to sleep after we've travelled all this way to see you.'

I rolled over onto my side and squinted at the two figures in the light. One sat on the floor beside the bunk, my green skull mask pulled down over his head and his grey eyes twinkling mischievously back at me. The other was perched on a plastic chair in the middle of the cluttered bunkroom, his bear-like frame bending down to dip into a carrier bag, blond hair falling down around his face as he pulled out a can of cheap lager. 'You look different,' said the guy on the floor, pulling the skull mask up and adding, 'maybe it's the two black eyes.'

'Very funny, Helmet,' I said, grimacing. I sat up, the cobwebs of confusion melting away as reality began to fall piece by piece back into focus. 'What the fuck are you two doing here?'

Scrotman opened his can and took a slurp, wiping his mouth on the back of his corduroy jacket sleeve. 'We're here to take you home,' he said, pausing to gauge my response.

'Either of you got any cigarettes?' I asked them, gently prodding around my swollen eyes with my fingertips, and wondering if I'd finally broken something other than my head.

'Thought you gave up?' asked Helmet, pulling one from his pocket and lighting it for me.

'I gave up giving up,' I told him, jammed it between my lips and inhaling.

'Actually, we're not really here to take you home,' confessed Scrotman.

‘No?’ I said, looking at my bare feet.

‘We got a call from Mrs Koradji,’ he said.

‘She’s worried about J,’ added Helmet. ‘Apparently he flew out here with a couple of his employees about a month ago. They said they were going to spend a couple of weeks on the ship. But none of them came back.’

‘J’s not answering his phone. Or his emails,’ said Scrotman. ‘So we offered to help. For a small fee, of course.’

‘I don’t know what the fuck this has got to do with me,’ I lied.

‘Mrs Koradji paid for our flights to Hawaii,’ explained Scrotman. ‘From there, we chartered a yacht. After we read some reports about that trash island commune, it wasn’t too difficult tracking you down. By the way, do you know you’re sailing back in the direction you came from?’

‘Yeah. We’re looking for...’ I stopped, imagining Koradji’s coffin corkscrewing down into the bluey-black depths of the ocean. ‘Never mind,’ I said, thinking I should try to change the subject. ‘Fucking hell, my face,’ I winced.

Helmet handed me my glasses as he stood up and stretched. I watched his tall, spindly frame amble across the room to fetch himself a can. ‘Want one?’

Before I could respond, he threw one across the room and I opened it, spilling the froth onto the floor. It tasted good to drink something other than rum. ‘Ooh! I’ve got some cakes in my rucksack,’ said Helmet excitedly, going over to the corner of the room where two small rucksacks had been dumped. ‘They’re *special* cakes. I baked them myself.’

We ate a cake each before they insisted I give them a guided tour of the Mardi. We floated like apparitions through the bowels of the eerily silent ship, supping beer and polishing off the rest of Helmet’s special cakes - which tasted disconcertingly like mud, and took considerable effort to swallow. Both of them seemed drunk and unimpressed as we passed through the creepy Machine Shop and entered the Engine Room. They exchanged smirks when I told them our Time Commander engine was possibly also a time machine, before we continued on into the Moon Pool. We kicked through cigar stubs and empty Algaebrew bottles strewn across the empty floor. It didn’t seem so long ago that a man dressed like Death was I was making me in the face, all in the name of charity. ‘Where is everyone?’ asked Scrotman, lifting one of the few remaining unopened bottles from a table.

‘I’ve no idea,’ I told them as we climbed the stairs to the Galley. Helmet moved like a human homing missile straight for the freezer. ‘I wouldn’t go in there if I was you,’ I said, heading up towards the main deck and wondering how to explain the ice-cream nebula and infinity cells without sounding like I was having a nervous breakdown. ‘It’s a long story.’

I poked my head up through the hatch and looked out onto the moonlit deck. It was empty apart from Flash’s abandoned catapult with a drab looking banana skin hanging off it. The night was warm as we shuffled over to the Bridge. The lights were off, all the portholes smashed, and the walls were riddled with bullet holes. ‘Nice catapult,’ said Scrotman, admiring it with an anarchic glint in his eyes.

We pushed inside the Bridge and I flicked the light switch, revealing the squid-encrusted barricade and huge barrel of Algaebrew where earlier I’d burned all my Beatles records. The navigation system in the corner was completely fried. The whole room reeked of stale smoke and fear. ‘Reminds me of your flat in West Preston Street,’ said Helmet, peering into the barrel. ‘Hey, is that *Abbey Road* in there?’

‘What the fuck is going on here, Alfie?’ asked Scrotman as we made our way down the corridor, past the abandoned wheelbarrow and tricycle, into the Company Boardroom.

‘What do you mean?’ I asked as my vision swam in and out of focus.

Helmet sat down on the tricycle and started pedalling it back up the corridor, chanting, ‘Red rum! Red rum! Red rum!’

‘I mean, what are you doing here? How many months have you been away? You’ve got a life back home. Think about your wife and kids,’ he said quietly, genuine concern apparent in his voice.

‘But what do you *really* mean?’ I asked.

He shrugged. ‘All I’m saying is... what exactly are you trying to achieve here?’

‘Why do we have to achieve anything? Why can’t it just be a bit of fun?’

‘This is fun?’

‘Soon as we sail around the world I’ll go home,’ I tell him. ‘That was the plan to begin with, and nothing’s changed. Okay, so we’re a few crew members short -’

He snorted. ‘Alfie, there’s nobody here.’

‘ – but you know... fuck it, I’m going to keep going. There *are* others. Two and half others. Three and a half if we can find our missing comatose cook. Four and a half if you count his alter-ago,

Pinky. Even more if you count The Atom Band, whose names I still can't remember.'

He stared back at me with this wonderful face, conjured out of the bottomless depths of time, and then he smiled.

'What?'

'Nothing,' he said with a sad shake of his head.

The wheels of the tricycle squeaked down the corridor outside, followed by the sound of Helmet crashing into a wall with a muffled, 'Fuck!'

'This ship isn't going to make it around the world,' said Scrotman. 'And before you ask, remember I know a thing or two about sailing. Your mainsail is fucked. You're missing a mast. The hull looks rotten. The rigging is completely fucked. And as for that carpet cleaner of yours -'

'Time machine,' I corrected him.

'It's a miracle you're still floating. You'll need to stop and get some urgent repairs. Before your luck runs out.'

Helmet laughed and shouted from the other side of the door. 'Help! I think I've just broken my head!'

'You should come back with us in the morning,' continued Scrotman, ignoring Helmet's cries for help. 'I'm sure Mrs Koradji will pick up the tab for your flight if you can help us locate J.' He pointed at the gaping hole in the floor behind me. 'I mean, look at the fucking state of that. This ship's a ticking time-bomb, Alfie. You don't even have lifeboats. Or fire extinguishers.'

'You've got a point about the fire extinguishers, but we have a Dr Seuss dinghy somewhere,' I told him, as if somehow this was better than an actual lifeboat.

Helmet staggered through clutching his forehead. 'Shit,' he said, wincing, 'I'm going to need to eat another couple of my cakes before I stop feeling that one. Anyone want another?' he asked, reaching into his jacket pocket and remembering they were all gone.

I waved him away, still reeling from Scrotman's brutal assessment of the ship. 'Anyway, who needs lifeboats?' I asked. 'We've got a submarine. The Fish Wife.'

Their eyes light up. 'You've got a submarine?' asked Scrotman. 'Well, why didn't you say that before? Let's take her for a spin!'

My gut feeling was it might not be the best idea, especially not after eating Helmet's special cakes. But if I listened to every gut feeling I got, I wouldn't do anything at all. What was the worst that could happen? I nodded and started to climb up the broken shelves,

pulling myself through the hole in the ceiling. ‘Come on then,’ I said, ‘I’ll show you our Storage Hold on the way.’

Nothing felt real anymore. It was like the world was a shifting set on a stage, only we were too busy living our lives to notice. I blinked, my eyes momentarily settling on the kaleidoscopic array of flowers towering up from the hot-tub in the Quixodelic Record Store. As we began to climb up into the Storage Hold, I turned and shouted back to Helmet, busy plucking a floppy red flower and stuffing it in his mouth, ‘What *exactly* did you put in those cakes?’

Twenty minutes later. Somewhere under the ocean. The Fish Wife purrs through the bruised gloom of the underwater world. Three Wheelies are squeezed into the two seats of the stripy submarine, their noses pressed to the front windscreen, peering out into the emptiness. Scrotman sits in the pilot’s seat, gripping the wheel. In the middle, Alfie has three lit cigarettes between his lips, and two more tucked behind his ears. On the left is Helmet, picking petals from between his teeth. The alien sounds of the ocean are beamed into the vessel via some strange scientific machinery atop what appears to be a looking glass on the roof of the submarine.

‘Are you sure you pressurised this thing properly?’ asked Helmet, suddenly fidgeting in the seat next to me. ‘I feel dizzy.’

‘Yes, I pressurised it properly,’ replied Scrotman impatiently.

‘It’s probably just your cakes kicking in.’

Helmet exhaled nervously. ‘Can I drive?’

‘No.’

‘Then can you go a little faster?’

‘No.’

‘What do these buttons do?’ he asked, taking a shot from one of several bottles of rum we’d brought for sustenance, lurching unexpectedly towards the control panel in front of us.

‘Helmet, don’t fucking touch anything! Alfie, he’s fucked – tell him not to touch anything,’ said Scrotman, growing increasingly agitated as the Fish Wife rolled ominously from side to side in the dark.

‘Helmet, don’t touch anything,’ I told him.

He looked up at me, bewildered like I’d just stuck a pin into the back of his head. ‘Just this big white button here,’ he slurred.

Before we could protest, his spindly finger darted out and pressed the big white button. Scrotman cursed as the submersible belly-flopped forward, causing our brains to drop down into our mouths. Meanwhile,

an American voice began to speak unintelligible words in the smoke filled bubble, while crunching squalls of electronic feedback made it sound as if the Fish Wife was getting ripped apart. ‘What the fuck is *that?*’ asked Scrotman, clearly spooked. He snatched the rum from Helmet and poured it down his throat as we shuddered to a halt.

‘Namu the Disco Whale,’ I told them over the deafening feedback.

‘Coffin,’ said Helmet.

Scrotman was stretching across me, spilling the rum, and knocking one of the cigarettes from my mouth as he attempted to grab Helmet by the collar, causing the two of them to slide off the chairs into the leg-space beneath the dashboard. The Orange Drop’s “Retrogenerica” began to play. Scrotman was growling as Helmet resurfaced and began to randomly slap further buttons and pull at various levers on the control panel. A siren sounded, accompanied by a red light flashing on the ceiling. I exhaled, staring through the smoke in shock.

I couldn’t believe what I was seeing.

I got one of Helmet’s boots in my face as he squirmed free and escaped over the back of the seats into the confined space behind the cockpit. ‘It wasn’t me! I didn’t do it!’ he screamed. ‘I didn’t press any fucking buttons!’

Scrotman clambered over me, catching hold of Helmet’s trailing leg, twisting it hard as he crashed into the control panel. A cold robotic voice began to pipe:

MALFUNCTION MALFUNCTION MALFUNCTION

I sat there, perfectly still, staring in amazement at one of the strangest things I’d ever seen.

MALFUNCTION MALFUNCTION MALFUNCTION

Helmet kicked off his boot and broke free again, collapsing over my shoulder into the empty pilot’s seat, frantically gesturing with his hands towards the ocean. ‘It’s a fucking coffin! Scrotman! It’s a coffin! A coffin!’

It *was* a fucking coffin.

But not just any old coffin. It just so happened to be the white coffin of J. Koradji, spinning slowly in the depths, illuminated by the exploratory light from the Fish Wife. A tattered Koradji Corporation flag flapped around it.

MALFUNCTION MALFUNCTION MALFUNCTION

The three of us stared at the bizarre sight for several long seconds. In the flashing red light and assault of the music, with the warning message still blaring, our eyes grew wider. The coffin was weird enough, but beyond it...

MALF-

The warning suddenly stopped and the lights ceased flashing. I smelled burning at my feet and stubbed the dropped cigarette out beneath my bare toes with a grimace.

‘What the fuck *are* they?’ asked Scrotman, leaning on the headrest behind me and breathlessly reaching for the rum again.

Silhouettes of torsos, scales and saucer-shaped glimmering eyes, swarmed into view. There must have been at least a hundred pale, naked creatures just floating there, staring back at us. ‘I think they’re mermaids,’ I whispered.

Scrotman and Helmet both turned and look at me.

‘They can’t be mermaids, that one’s got balls,’ pointed out Helmet, ‘and that one. Really big balls.’

We laughed quietly. Dead Canaries “Ghost In A Photograph” began to play across the Fish Wife’s speakers as the mer turned, completely synchronized, and dissipated back into the darkness just as swiftly as they’d appeared. We continued to sit there in silence as the song faded out, watching the coffin revolve. Finally, Helmet asked, ‘Can we catch one?’

‘What the fuck for?’ asked Scrotman.

‘I don’t know. Maybe they know stuff. Maybe we could learn from them?’ he said.

‘They brought us the coffin,’ I muttered in disbelief. ‘It’s like they knew.’ I turned to Scrotman. ‘The Fish Wife has a mechanical arm,’ I told him.

‘Ooh! Can I operate the mechanical arm?’ asked Helmet.

‘No,’ said Scrotman.

‘Fuck’s sake,’ said Helmet.

‘Why do you need that coffin anyway?’ Scrotman asks me, stepping back over my legs and shifting the two of us up so he could take his place behind the wheel again.

I took a deep breath and watched it spinning in the gloom. ‘Because I think Koradji might be in it.’

We sat in the Craw's Nest under a copper dawn sky. It looked like someone had swept starlight across the vast, empty ocean, an emptiness punctured only by the gleaming white of Scrotman and Helmet's rented yacht, "Old John", which was moored to the Mardi. I lit another cigarette, Scrotman to my right, crouching almost religiously in front of a near empty rum bottle. Helmet was lying on his side opposite us, smiling sweetly as his brain tumbled out past the point of no return. 'So that's that then,' said Scrotman, finally breaking the silence.

Below us, on the main deck, the empty Koradji coffin lay in a heap of broken wood after the two of them smashed it open. 'What are you going to tell Mrs Koradji?' I asked him.

Scrotman looked up at me and shrugged. 'Look at the state of him,' he said, nodding towards Helmet who was passing out face-down in a pool of his own golden saliva.

Helmet murmured something incoherently, sounded like, 'Catch a merman for a million dollars.'

'We should get together,' said Scrotman dozily. 'Do another Wheelies recording. You, me, and Jose.'

'What about Helmet?' I asked. We both looked at our beautiful friend, slaverling badly as he tried to get comfortable. 'Helmet!' I shouted, but he didn't respond. 'HELMET!'

Scrotman stretched out a leg and kicked Helmet in the ribs. We watched him slowly return to his body from some astral plane, grinning from ear to ear. 'I've seen the future,' he slurred. 'I am the Last Superhero. I will now only answer to my superhero name - The Greasy Pole.'

'Alright Greasy Pole, you're out of The Wheelies. You're not pulling your weight anymore,' I told him.

'You can't kick me out. It's MY band,' he shouted, and he rolled back onto his face again.

'What about Tin Pan?' asked Scrotman.

'What about him?'

'We should probably kick him out too. We don't need him either. We can do that because it was us who formed The Wheelies in the first place.'

I nodded, quietly watching the dream unravel to its logical conclusion. If you retrace your steps carefully through the glorious wreckage of misplaced ideas, you will see you never really managed to make it off square one. Either that or this was the worst publicity stunt in the history of publicity stunts.

Whichever it was, it felt right.

‘You’re sure you don’t want to come home with us?’ Scrotman asked, tipping the last drop of rum from the bottle into his mouth.

‘Not just yet,’ I said. ‘I need to see this thing through.’

‘Fair enough,’ he replied with a weary sigh, standing unsteadily and taking a lungful of cool morning air. ‘Just like old times, eh? Going to give me a hand getting this twat back onto our yacht?’

‘Aren’t you too drunk to sail?’ I asked him.

But he wasn’t listening. He’d grabbed Helmet under the armpits and lifted him off the Crow’s Nest floor. ‘Grab his legs, Alfie,’ he said, muttering under his breath, ‘it’s always the fucking same.’

I stood on the main deck and tossed the rum bottles into the ocean, each one with a handwritten message asking for help. I watched them bob on the gentle waves, fanning out in the wake of the little white yacht sailed by two of the most amazing people you could ever imagine. The Mardi needed people like Scrotman and Helmet. Not *exactly* like Scrotman and Helmet because we’d sink or be sectioned within a week, but characters of their calibre. I watched the bottles dancing in the morning sun, and screwed up my face to make sure my cheekbones weren’t broken. It crossed my mind that I’d left the Invisible Box somewhere, but I couldn’t for the life of me remember where.

And that was when I saw it. Clear as if it was actually happening in front of me. I saw how our adventure ended, and it filled me with a dread unlike anything I’d ever experienced. I could have called out to my childhood friends, got them to turn around and go with them, but I didn’t. I stood there, watching the rum bottles dance away, until it was just me, the Mardi, the sunlight, the starry sea, and destiny knocking on the tiny door at the back of my brain.

...

Simon Piler: Isn’t the ninth some sort of Requiem?

Alfie: It’s the one that goes:

da da da da da daa da da da / da da da da da dada / da da da da da daa da da da / da da da da da dada / da da da da / da da da da da / da da da da da daa da da da / da da da da da dada!

...

September 29, 2009

Moss's Journal #Whatever:
And I Found My Toastie Maker

Someone's tapping my head. Who's tapping? And why is my face wet?

I open my eyes and blink out the drops. The ceiling above me has gotten damp during the night and started a slow drip onto my face. I rub my eyes, yawn, and throw off the mouldy blanket I sleep in. 'I need to get a new one,' I mumble to myself, and once again while half-rolling and struggling to climb down the ladder, I lose my footing and fall onto the floor with a bump.

I grumble like an old man while rubbing my back and stretching up. I look sadly at the empty bed beneath me. It's been empty for a while and I don't think Jonny's coming back. He left a few of his possessions behind – a Radiohead postcard pinned to the wall, a few post-its telling me to stop cleaning obsessively while I was meant to be writing music, a Rubik's cube with all the stickers pulled off and replaced with pictures of Mrs Wensink, our year 9 Dutch teacher's face, a really old penny-whistle, and a shiny plastic pair of maracas. I sigh and realise that I'd rather not clean up. Being a mixture of obsessive compulsive and sentimental, sometimes makes me feel like a mess is actually just objects in their right place, and I won't move them for months.

From through the wall, I hear a muffled conversation, definitely Alfie, and some voices I've never heard before. Visitors on the ship? So unlikely, I think. Someone's probably just found a device to alter their voice. The words seep through the damp wood wall.

'This ship isn't going to make it round the world,' an unfamiliar, muffled voice seems to claim. I feel a sting of anger.

'Yes we are, it's not your decision or business, and who are you to judge us for how we want to live?' I mumble to myself as I set up the rusty toastie maker and discover, to my delight, that it works. Now for the bread and soy cheese.

The conversation seems to go on further away from my room, and I wonder who it was.

'Why would we not sail around the world? Just because there's less of us doesn't mean it's any less fun.' I think to myself. Then I think of Alfie, so full of enthusiasm one minute and then crushed by his own boundless idealism the next. Or is it those fucking realists again, getting into his head?

‘God I hate realists!’ I say, too loudly considering I’m only talking to myself. Then again, I get the feeling on this ship we’re never really talking to ourselves. Then I laugh a bit because I think of the inverted sentence, ‘Realists, I hate God!’ and wonder why my jokes are only ever funny to myself.

While pushing piles of paper and magazines out of the floor space, my hands come across a cardboard shoebox underneath Jonny’s bed. It isn’t locked or anything, but I still feel a Scrotman twinge of guilt as I open it. Inside are four objects. A cheap exercise book, a blank DVD, and strangely, soy cheese and a loaf of bread! And somehow, they’re in perfect condition!

‘Jackpot!’ I smile, and proceed to make a toastie. While it’s toasting, I open up the exercise book. Inside are a load of funny drawings and scribbles, and lyrics written around. It looks pretty old, so I assume these are all the bits of writing Jonny kept sending to me when we left school. He always said he didn’t like them, and I always thought they were great, obviously. Nobody’s ever aware of their own talent.

I push the DVD into my computer. It only has one file on it. The file is called “Trip”.

I play the old song while I munch on my toastie. It makes me smile and almost cry at the same time. Trip was the first and only song we ever recorded as a band. We were so little, with our guitars and our dreams, staying hours after school in the music rooms to play all the instruments and mostly sit around doing fuck all. I’m sure it wasn’t as beautiful as I remember it; after all, you only remember the good things. But it was pretty good.

As the guitars and offbeat drums jangle past my ears, I think of us on the ship. Sometimes, you really have to do things, mostly because they’re fun, but also for yourself. Regardless of how many people are on the ship or what we achieve, we have to do them because if we don’t, we’d go mad. We’d be lost in the void of people telling us what to do, and going along blindly.

I think about how I fucking hate people telling me what to do. Even if those people are really a more general representation of society and those people are the majority in the world.

I also hate people measuring my success. Who the fuck are they to judge my life by their own standards? Maybe they are a big record company with a sales and marketing department, maybe they are a fucking TV show training mediocre people to sing and become part of a machine that turns music into a business and their faces into a brand, maybe they are every trashy magazine who try to tell us that to be

successful we must also be famous and standardly, plastically beautiful. Whoever they are, they can get fucked.

I wipe the crumbs off my face and look around at my messy room. I'm rather prone to angry inner monologues, and I feel a bit calmer now. I climb over to my fridge, growing crazy mushrooms and other unidentified plants which have all proven so far either hallucinogenic or really tasty. I pick off the weirdest looking one, an inverted giant shroom with purple spots and fluorescent furry fingers growing out of it. 'Here's to another day on the Mardi,' I grin, and take a bite.

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September 30, 2009

Near-Field Report: (On A Wing of Change)



34NOR3NRMQ34Q QRO M3QROQ34RQ 3QROFN3 Q34AG3AR
OQF Q34MAQ3038N A3EN9 ZF30 2MZFOI3N0ZV0 3 09ARJ
FA3M 0 Z093RM F 0932MA 23RF39AN3NOFN3IN F3INA3ON4
VZ MMOVONA3ORN A3IONAF3OI23N4 234999V

BEGIN TRANSMISSION.

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HELLO, CREW, PLEASE STANDBY FOR INCOMING NEAR-FIELD REPORT:

This is Dr Simon Piler speaking, and reporting to you from the Galley. At present, it is quite possibly the most bubbly location aboard our ship. By which I mean bubbly cheeeese, of course.

A few members of the crew have expressed informal complaints concerning the coffee-conduit system. First off, I absolutely agree – low pressure and poor mixing capabilities have made for sludgy, cold coffee – it is a woeful crime. And though the ship really needs an enormous amount of other repairs at this point in time, we DO have priorities. Coffee being one of them.

So here's the good news: with Robbie in a chipper unconscious state, we've managed to install the long-awaited 'Coffee Heart' at his command. This pneumatic dynamo is capable of brewing, heating, and recirculating our life-sustaining coffee supply; yes, even to the very finest capillaries and extremities of this vessel! It is driven by an old BASF 7100 console, but no worries, no worries – most of the functions only involve single keystrokes. We are awaiting communication from an old German hermit in the black forest concerning additional software programming, as he is the only living human being (that is, he has bones inside of his body) that is familiar with the BASF's hardware configuration. He designed the machine in the early eighties.

Some relevant information for all crew members – some portions of the coffee heart operate at high pressures. So please be careful if you're say, stumbling around the kitchen at 3 AM and trying to find that little balsa-wood glider that you got when you went to the barber's shop when you were 5 or 6 years old, but promptly forgot upon returning home only to have it stuffed into some old memento box by your mum, and which you subsequently found much later in the attic when it was cold, but the temperature in the attic was much colder, in fact, than the house below, and you were trying to hurry, but that weird waxy-paper package caught your eye and you thought you'd take a look, and so you did and, 'wow! it's one of those funny little balsa-wood gliders you get at a splendid old-fashioned barber's shop and the barber's name is probably Ted or Ron', and 'god, I'll bet they don't even hand stuff out like that anymore – and I bet there is nowhere that still has those little one-cent ford gumball machines anymore, either... damn, what a shame,' you probably said, and sentimentally took the object (still in its wrapper) down the creaky attic stairs again for the

first time in many years, and threw it in your brown satchel to pack aboard the ship. Some time after this you took the glider out of its package, and several minutes later made an exasperated comment regarding the difficulty you were having separating the individual balsa components without breaking them; this comment followed shortly by another, this time questioning ‘how capable a child would be at putting this damn thing together,’ and then softly remembering that children are ever more bright and even ingenious than you feel, your brain in a constant half-numb, fumbling state and slowly cooling towards a universal heat death. And when you’d finally got the thing together, you threw it down the hallway of the Mardi and it swung wide, sweeping well beyond your expectations and landing out of sight past the darkened threshold of the Galley beyond.

PAUSE for a second will, you?

Do you:

1. Continue fumbling and run into the darkened room and crash around in there until you find the glider because the light is broken?

...Skip down to A, below.

2. Go and shake the folks in the next cabin over – they are undoubtedly half-awake, half-meditating on their object-strewn floor, the heat cranked up quite high and everything swaying in an illusory manner around them. They probably won’t hear you at first, either, but you’ll persist in politely asking them for the use of their headlamp.

...Skip on to B, below.

3. Decide to get your glider in the morning.

...Skip down to C, below.

A. JEEZ!!! I TOLD YOU THAT THE COFFEE-HEART WAS FULL OF EASILY-DISLODGED HOSES FULL OF HIGH-PRESSURE STEAM! IT IS A BUNDLE OF IMPEDANCE DRIVEN HEAT! YOU ARE GOING TO BURN YOUR FACE OR SOME OTHER PART OF YOUR BODY AND WE ARE GOING TO HAVE TO GIVE YOU SOME NICKNAME LIKE, ‘WAFFLE-FACE’ OR WORSE.

B. Yes, that’s a much better choice. I’ll wager you were one of these folks with a natural intuition towards ‘choose-your-own adventure’

type situations. And you've managed to preserve both your sensitive tissues, and the caffeine vitality of the entire crew. Congratulations!

I purposely didn't include 'C' down here because it's obviously a trick question. As if you'd leave your glider for somebody else to step on in the middle of the night. Riiiiight...

Oh, in other news, we broke the record for the hottest temperature aboard the Mardi yesterday.

Okay, that's pretty much it; you may go back to your hypnotic states; your sweet-biscuit, toast, or oatmeal; you may go back to your books and essays; you may find a good, crusty barnacle to inspect.

ALMS AND HOURGLASSES!

WEATHER HOLD US HIGH!

(Have a look at this gizmo fer yourself...)

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CEASE TRANSMISSION.

TNOE343932J F320N234 QF04520234R2N3RNFQ34NOAER3249
03FNA3KF3824N FOA3NA F3Q2948 N32984N FANKDNL A32984
F9AW8W3 4NPNFA0324WX398AFN32 4 FO3I2N 4NO R39F3
2489HF A3 R3299993 894 FNA32

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October 2, 2009

Chase's Journal #1:
Before Boarding the Mardi

The family name I was entrusted with, still remembering the first day I grasped it in my hands covered with the gray dirt of my father's grave, I chose to destroy. And yet, I've chosen to sit in this new ship's (for there have been many) untidy and unpopulated Wardroom and write what little I want to entrust. To someone. To anyone who would take the time. Both of times long gone, and days still to come on the Mardi. The tall sailor, the captain I assume, is charging around the decks looking for the key to the cabin I've asked for myself. I can hear the pad of his bare feet above the thin walls. And as the pulsing, yellow light of the old bulb above me sporadically lights the pages, one shard

of memory is always at the top of the burning pool of events that toss and turn in my head.

On the day of my father's funeral, almost fifteen years ago, I stole his long, white coat from an old closet my mother had organized and fashioned for his belongings. Jackets, hats, books, guitars, all neatly arranged in sections or pressed up in finely-put, horizontal rows. So that it would be easy for a dead man to find his things, I assume. I found the white coat tucked between an old green jumpsuit he had worn, I think, to one of my mother's fancy dress parties, and the fake bear fur coat he wore, I think, to some overseas business convention. I remember the first time my father wore the white coat. The ends of it flapped wildly in the Sunday wind, behind his knees and just above his boots. He looked like a cross between a jungle adventurer and an old London detective. He was neither. And I could be both, I thought then.

Eleven-years-old. Eleven-bloody-years-old I jetted out of the gates, passed some uncaring locals carrying trays of breadfruit to the funeral, and some dumbfounded relatives that probably attributed my behavior to the harmless, aimless exploits of a child in denial. And in mourning, I suppose. I hated the family. What absurd people. One uncle did nothing but wave around a cheap towel and sing some archaic love tune over and over. I thought him crazy. The others thought him entertaining. And as I jumped over the fence on the outskirts of my home, I wailed in glee at not having to see them again. Any of them. I didn't think of my mother. Not once as I disappeared into the jungle, making my way to the bay.

There was a dirt path that ended right behind a shabby shack on the beach where the prospectors moored their boats. As a boy, I would take some books and wander into the jungle, find some sturdy tree to climb and read poetry. And every time, I would take a different, longer book, stay after sunset, and wander deeper into the trees. The last, the day before the funeral, I took the copy of Conrad's *Lord Jim* I had Maria, the nicest and prettiest of my mother's employees, buy secretly from the town as I was not allowed to leave while the relatives were staying in our home for the funeral, all the way to the last tree. It was standing next to the back wall of the shack. The tide was lapping only a few metres away from the shack's door.

There was a schooner docked in front. A shining black ship like a dark spear floating on the water. Its sails were wrapped on the posts. There were some strange young men loading up boxes of supplies through her side, and an older man with a frizzy gray beard dangling in knots below his nose and even farther down above his broad chest. He was leaning on the balustrade, silently watching the sailors load up the

ship. On the side of her hull beneath him was painted the name *Marjorie Mae*. The old man wore a military jacket and a curiously tall white hat with a red crescent moon emblem on it. I watched until the last of the sunlight fell below the sea. When the man got up from his seeming trance, he saw me peeking my face around the bend. I felt as if I had disturbed something. Like a pebble dropped in a windless lake. And so, I ran home that night.

Yet, there I was again. Somehow fascinated by the sailors at work, their burly captain, and their odd ship. As I ran away from my family and the funeral, I don't know why my feet took me back toward the shack and the *Marjorie Mae*. I didn't linger this time. I didn't watch. I didn't see. I crouched behind some tall crates, stopping only once when the ends of my father's long, white coat got snagged on a crate's hanging nail. Unhooking it, I ran forward behind the stacks of fruit and dived right into the cargo hold before anyone saw me. I wiggled in between sacks of potato flakes whose beige, dirty weaves matched my father's coat's color so luckily and perfectly. I wrapped my body with the over-sized cloth and hid for hours, posing as a sack. Until a few minutes after all light fell, the cargo hold closed, the rumbling of the engine shook me and the darkness and the sound of squawking birds and shifting seas enveloped me.

There was too much rumbling for me then. And soon, I found myself abandoning my cover and racing towards the corner of the hold to vomit. There was a round hole next to me. The hold was lined with them. They must have been cannon holes once. Through one, I saw the endless, gray water outside. My stomach turned in knots and I vomited for a good while. I winced in pain. I had forgotten to eat anything before leaving. My body felt as if it was emptying out my intestines, my heart, my lungs, everything. My mind was so enthralled by my seasickness that I failed to realize the heavy boots standing inches from my flushed face. Immediately, I was raised up by my collar and slammed into the hard wall. The room was dark still, except for the shining tip of a pistol just above my nose. I saw a blurry, grayish face staring at me.

'I don't believe I hired any new crew members!' the Captain said in a grizzly, roaring voice. 'Speak, boy! Before I shoot you and toss you overboard for the sharks to finish you off!'

I smelled the mixture of oil and rum emanating in clouds off his unkempt beard. I tried to answer, but my mouth was still dripping with vomit. '...I have...nowhere else, sir...' I remember blacking out after that.

The next day, I woke inside one of the cabins, with a ragged cloak wrapped around me. I saw my father's dirty coat hung by the door and my boots at the foot of the bed. The Captain was sitting by the window, twirling a bottle of rum below his nostrils. There was a rifle leaning on the wall next to him. I told the Captain that day, before he even resumed his interrogation that I would do any work on the ship if he let me stay. And that I was an orphan, my entire family perishing in a fire.

And so I did, somehow. The man, Captain Durheim, let me stay. I swabbed the deck, cleaned the holds, and cut the fruit for that peculiar crew. I learned from some of them that the Captain had a special place for orphans for he was one himself, losing his family during a great and faraway war.

Eventually I was promoted higher up, given more duties on the ship, until Captain Durheim made me his second mate. For ten years, I served in the *Marjorie Mae* and had never been happier or more free. Some adventures and sights, I'll someday relate here. But for now, I must at least put down why, in such a joyful expedition, I've ended up on the *Mardi*. Let it be known that five months ago, the *Marjorie Mae* struck an iceberg on a dark night in the Arctic. It turns out, the first mate, Captain Durheim's favourite, was on watch duty when he decided to vanish while we slept. And so, the crew awoke to the exploding sounds of our ship crashing, and the gushing water filling the small hallways. We lit distress flares and were soon picked up by a vessel captained by a Rongovian man I will never forget. While the water reached up all the way to the main deck, they hauled us in using liferafts, ropes, poles, whatever we could hang on to. Captain Durheim went back and tried to brave the waters below deck to rescue something from his cabin, while the others were shouting from the rescue ship. I stayed behind and watched the flooding stairwell for him, but only the tall white hat with the red crescent moon emerged. I walked down and grabbed the thing, trying to muscle my way past the water, shouting for the Captain. I was willing to stay there. And go down with her. I would never leave the man who saved my life so many times before. I was in a maddened state of both panic and wonder. Two men from the rescue vessel shouted their curses as they jumped down and hauled me into one of the boats. 'No! No! Let go! You bastards! Let go!' I shouted. But they wouldn't. They were hauling the liferaft up the rescue ship and we watched the *Marjorie Mae* go under.

‘That’s all there is. The other ones must’ve escaped!’ I heard one of the men shout as ours, the last lifeboat, retreated. It was the Rongovian who yelled it out from the railing above us.

‘No! Go back you fools!’ I yelled. They must have thought me driven insane by the night’s events as icy rain poured down at the dying *Marjorie Mae*. I recall blacking out at the touch of some blunt object hitting the back of my head. I awoke again aboard the rescue ship with the Rongovian happily talking on a cell phone and glorifying his “amazing rescue that led to no casualties.” I got up and punched the green-eyed fool on his thick black moustache.

‘No casualties? What of our captain you murderer?’ I yelled to him. The man looked mesmerized as he lay sprawled on the floor with his phone still in his hand. He looked me up and down. I felt the others examining me with their confused stares as the rain poured down on us.

‘Captain? I thought you were the captain!’ the Rongovian cried out. And it was I, wearing my father’s long coat and Captain Durham’s hat, that they mistook to be the rescued leader, the crown jewel that would earn them the praise of a lifetime from the people of the world so in love with fairy tales.

I think about that day of the funeral and the last night of the *Marjorie Mae* every moment I’m on a ship. And sometime, I’ll relate more of Durham and our sails but for now, I hear this new Captain of the Mardi scuttling down the wooden steps. Before I saw the man, I heard him happily shout out, ‘Chase is it? About the key...’

...

Alfie: Chase, you can actually sail? (*spits out rum in shock*) A tall man with keys you say? Shit. Don’t trust him. Don’t even make eye contact with him. And if he tries to lure you down the trapdoor under the ping-pong table in the Rec Room, then run as fast as you can. As a collective, we have no Captain as such, just different people doing whatever they can. We don’t even have a compass. Or a navigation system after it got shot last week. All I can say with any degree of certainty is we are somewhere in the North Specific. Between you and me, experience of sailing would seem to matter very little on the Mardi. Cabin 2 is all yours and tomorrow morning I’ll put up a partition for that drawing room you requested. If this backstory is anything to go by, then you are a most welcome addition to the Company.

p.s I also consider your presence to be lucky. I mean, what are the chances of someone sailing on two ships that sink in one lifetime?

Chase of the Seven Isles: Sail? Just on the most basic of knowledge. Durham kept me around for company mostly. Counsel, at times. My presence soothed the old man, I suppose. I'm eager to wander around this ship for a bit. And if I can, I'll see what I can do about pinpointing our location.

Simon Piler: You'd be looking for the Bridge then, mate.

...

October 3, 2009

Brendon Hertz's Journal:
Seahorse Flu and TV Awareness
(A Tale of Warning)



Stepping out from the shower, I noticed something strange and quite possibly hairy escape around the corner and out of the washroom door. A burst of steam shot from one of the rusty pipes that needed fixing, which wasn't all that strange considering I'd often come in here to listen to the symphony of sounds conducted by poor maintenance of the ship's bathroom facilities. What was weird, however, was the fact that this morning I had heard saxophone added into the mix. Judging

by the sound of the brief lick I heard, it sounded like someone trying to mimic Charlie Parker's prowess as a 40's alto sax-playing bebop genius. If I had to take a guess, I would've said I heard the same lick at 1:37 of "Ornithology". All specifics aside, I didn't quite know what to think about a primitive creature sneaking into the head while I was taking my morning shower, especially if it was some kind of stalking.

I slipped out of the shower, grabbed my toothbrush, and wrapped myself in a towel of sorts. Embarrassingly enough, it was actually one of those sham-whatevers I'd just recently ordered off the tube. You see, this was actually my first time leaving Cabin 1 for quite some time. I had just gotten over a bad case of Seahorse Flu, which, for those of you not in the know, is a recent pandemic known across the seas for its awful ability to not only make your stomach feel like you've been doing loop-de-loops for hours on end, but also physically make you float. The inherent seriousness of catching this while at sea is easy to understand; luckily, I had already moved into Cabin 1 when I contracted it. Look for these symptoms:

- Watermelon-flavored bubblegum taste in mouth
- Sock-matching skills impaired
- Forgetfulness as to what you may have had for breakfast
- Skin begins to turn green and grow cactus spines
- Inability to stand on, sit, or make contact with ground of any sort, moving or not

Needless to say, now that it was all over and done with, I felt a need to explore. My curiosity, after a week of floating above my bed, got the best of me, so I followed the bushy being out of the shower room. I wondered if it wasn't just Dr Piler with his shirt off (I'd heard that his hairiness preceded him in some regions of the world), but I was happily surprised when I recognized the figure standing at the other end of the hallway as Jazz Monk, the chimpanzee Dr Piler had accidentally created in his laboratory back home. Now, he assisted with projects including the most-recent batch of Algaebrew, of which, Jazz had consumed the most (by his own will, of course). The only thing that distinguished Jazz Monk from any other chimp was his companion vintage saxophone, greasy, slicked-back hair, and Dylan-style sunglasses. I'm not sure if it was the Algaebrew or the time of day, but he seemed extremely happy.

'Brendon, slap me some, my man.'

I paid him his due, and he smiled through his sunglasses.

‘Jazz, what’s the news? I’ve been down and out for some time now, I guess. Just after I moved into Cabin 1, I picked up the Seahorse.’

‘Wellllly well well. “The Seahorse”, you’re calling her these days?’

‘What? Nah, man. The illness that makes you float, you know?’

‘Ohhhhh. *That* Seahorse. Anyways, I’m glad I ran into you. Heeeey... is that a sham-thingy you got there? You haven’t been watching TV lately, have you?’

‘Well, I’ve been floating above my bed all week, what else should I have done? I ordered this off of The Ship Shopping Network... only \$19.99 plus shipping!’

‘Oh, no! NOOOOO! Brendon. This is serious. I want you to go back to your cabin and toss your TV overboard. Just toss it. Let it go, let it go, let it go. King TV is coming!’

‘Like, sounds like a personal problem to me, Jazz Monk.’

I mocked him as I left him standing there, but I couldn’t help but feel a pit growing in my stomach. Leftovers from Seahorse Flu? I think not. Jazz Monk went into a skat-mantra combining the phrases of his last commentary that I heard as I wandered all the way back to my bunk:

Let it go, let it go King TV

Is coming

Is coming

Let it go, let it go King TV

Just toss it

Just toss it

Let it go, let it go, let it go

King TV

I went back to my room, needless to say in some sort of a stupor, and threw myself down on the lush green lawn. I’d moved SAM, one of our two supercomputers down to Cabin 1 when I first contracted the Seahorse Flu, using his inbuilt monitor as a television set. I ignored his friendly greeting and using the remote Sir Matthew made for me, flipped to Channel 679, preparing to nod into an early-morning nap. Just as my mind began floating happily somewhere between the limited edition ping-pong player trading cards being sold on the tube, and my triumphant attempt to get grass to grow on the cabin floor, I saw something strange on the screen: A pair of flaming eyes that began to move towards me out of the monitor.

‘My name is...’ the eyes began as I quickly jumped up, grabbed SAM, and struggled upstairs to the side of the ship, flinging the supercomputer overboard. The electronics sizzled as the machine floated at the top for a few minutes, before sinking to the bottom with a chorus of mechanical screeches and sizzlings.

‘Whew,’ I thought, ‘I guess that was whatever Jazz Monk was talking about. I should really pay more attention to that dude. He knows his stuff.’ With that, I cracked an extra-fizzy root beer (advertised on SSN as being “ninety-nine percent foam”), and went off to find Dr Piler, Jazz Monk, and the rest of The Atom Band to tell them what had happened.

...

Simon: Hahaha, oh my, Jazz Monkey! It’s been a long while, indeed! Brendon, you’ve found him. My, my, my... (*extremely happy and puzzled and fuzzy and hairyface*) Yes, this is groovy as PAN-cake. This whole ship is!*

Alfie: A true story: the night before you posted this I dreamt we had a monkey on board. Coincidence? Or some higher form of jazz?

Moss: Did I hear someone say pancakes?

**In all the excitement, Simon has clearly missed the part where Brendon threw one of the two supercomputers overboard.*

...

October 4, 2009

Chase's Journal #2:
A Lingering Doubt

The Mardi was quiet during the night I moved in. And even more so in the coming days. Alfie, quite possibly, the only soul I’ve seen on board apart from the mysterious tall man, said many of the rooms are occupied by crew members who tend to disappear into their own exploits for long periods of time. ‘They’re here. Somewhere. Drinking rum in their bunkrooms for days on end. Until it’s time to shower,’ he cackled before hobbling up the stairs with bottles of rum in both hands.

I opened Cabin 2 and dragged my case inside. I didn’t have much really. I unpacked some clothes and tucked them inside some drawers. I set Durham’s white moon hat on the top of a bed post and hooked the strap of the old man’s antique rifle on another. Alfie didn’t take

kindly to the weapon. I could see it. He was all smiles and rum when I first jumped on board the ship, but his countenance faded like a sunset when he saw the barrel of the rifle sticking out from behind me. The hilt of a dagger floating by my waist didn't help either.

'For show,' I said calmly, covering the dagger with the ends of my white coat.

Captain Durham never went anywhere without the gun or the knife. It often scared the smiles off both some eager island natives and rich docksmen alike. Most times, traders would force themselves into giving the captain a discount on supplies, thinking they were being bullied. But alas, old Durham was a gentle soul throughout the time I'd been with him aboard the *Marjorie Mae*. The long rifle of his became an ongoing spectacle among the crew. 'They say it's an old rifle stolen from Hitler's collection! And the last bullet it ever fired was to kill the dictator himself!' they would gossip amongst themselves. Of course, what fueled the life blood of these rumors was the fact that no one on board the *Marjorie Mae* had ever seen Durham fire the gun. I swallowed the stories when I was new to the ship. I engulfed every piece, every sliver of Durham's life, however true or not, that came my way. The old man took me in. A stowaway on his highly-undisciplined schooner. And I didn't know why.

Through the mysterious work of chance however, it was I, the youngest and newest of his crew members who witnessed the quelling of the stories centering around the old rifle. It happened a year into my service aboard the *Marjorie Mae*. We docked on an island in the Caribbean to drop off crates of a peculiar liquor Durham had got his hands on. The owner of the trading post was a fickle old shaman who went by the name of Clay; he wouldn't accept the crates for the original price. Negotiations went on for days, and the ship, with its severely agitated crew, was stranded. I took a copy of *Crime & Punishment* I found in the Captain's library, and strayed into the neighboring woodlands like I did so many times in my childhood before leaving the Seven Isles.

It turns out, trees in the Caribbean were a lot taller, lengthier, bonier, than those back home. And so, I settled for sitting at the base of a tall acacia and read under its cool cover. I was startled by a loud bang followed by a short gust of wind whizzing just inches from my face. A hairy boar fell and rolled on a patch of grass next to me, a gaping, circular wound oozing blood between its eyes. I looked back and Captain Durham stood behind me with his rifle still poised and smoking.

‘You dive too deep into your books, boy.’ He walked over and tapped the dead boar with his boot. ‘Try not to get skewered before your time of service is done!’

I remember this. I feel the salty gust of wind, the smell of wet grass from that jungle. I see the dead boar with its black eyes frozen open and the gunshot hole directly on its forehead, and I hear Durheim every time the old rifle’s strap is on me. ‘You dive too deep into your books, boy,’ his hoarse voice would echo.

That first night on the *Mardi* was no exception. I set the rest of my belongings down, looped the rifle strap over my head, and sheathed the dagger behind my waist before leaving the cabin again. I walked down the dimly lit hallway and followed the long line of closed metal doors toward the end where the stairs to the deck were. I could hear voices, murmurings behind many of them. But no movement. No sight. They were simply sounds so distant and unfamiliar that one could attribute them to both dreams and hysteria.

Crossing the intersection at the top of the main stairs, I found a half-naked man, with a foamy, yellow towel covering his lower body almost to his knees. He was talking to someone inside one of the dark rooms.

‘Jazz, what’s the news? I’ve been down and out for some time now, I guess. Just after I moved into Cabin 1, I picked up the Seahorse,’ he yelled wildly at some shadow I could not see, until he walked into the room and relegated himself into just one of the ship’s wraithly, unseen voices inside the cabins.

Before reaching the main stairs, a flicker of red erupted in front of me. It glowed like a crimson firefly. Only larger. Much larger. The thing flew backwards in criss-cross waves across the air and hummed more like an old engine than a bee. It drew closer. I could make out the rounded body of an insect with palm-sized eyeballs blinking straight at me. The thing buzzed around my head while its eyes remained glued to my own. It was then, before I could draw my dagger to motion the thing away that I heard a woman’s voice from one of the open rooms to my right.

‘Don’t worry. It won’t hurt you, Chase,’ she said. I could barely make out the slender silhouette of a woman inside the unlit bunkroom.

‘How do you know—’

‘Someone here was looking for you,’ she answered. The woman still covered in the blanket of the room’s shadow, got up from her bunk and pushed the creaking door closed. ‘I’m sorry, it’s late,’ she said before the metal door cranked shut.

The red insect now had a partner when I looked up again. The two formed scarlet orbits above my head. I watched them. Intrigued. Never had I seen such an enormous insect or firefly, or really anything alive that glowed so purely and majestically. They followed me up the stairs toward the main deck. The night was cool and the water was as calm as the dead corridors of the Mardi.

I leaned on the balustrade and watched the sides of the ship cut through the dark sea. The vessel was black except for the flickering, red glow of the creatures playfully flying around me. I saw the Bridge was lit though, and I watched the figure of a person pace and stop and pace again inside. It was Alfie fixing something no doubt.

I took a seat by the balustrade and let my feet dangle above the foaming sea. I thought of Durham again. The old man's bearded figure standing at the tip of his black schooner, shouting and commanding his crew of hollow brained sailors, this image, reignited when I boarded this new ship. I thought of the night the *Marjorie Mae* sank. Maybe if I had been more aggressive, worked harder, maybe I had been promoted to first mate and kept watch that night, maybe Durham's superb sea life would have continued. Maybe the *Marjorie Mae*, the black, spear-shaped, ship, eerily like this vessel, that took me in when I had run away from the Seven Isles, would have still been dashing its mighty hull across the oceans.

That night, I thought of my mother too. The first time in fifteen years. I was troubled because I couldn't remember what she looked like. Was her hair and skin dark like mine? Were her eyes green like the sea water? I did remember her voice. It's one that still haunts me like an undying siren to this day. It was shrieky, whiny, sharp and high like a cackling duck. 'You get more like your father every day,' was her favorite line. It bounced back and forth inside my head until her voice became mixed with the muffled sounds of the Mardi's mystery passengers below.

It was then, when I decided to postpone the rest of my exploration and retire for the night, that I noticed the red fireflies dancing faster, wilder, like they were suddenly overcome by some panic. The two above my head danced in incoherent bursts and launched up towards the crow's nest where five or more of them gathered and spun wildly.

I squinted and thought I caught a glimpse of someone watching me from the top. The figure's head darted down fast after I had caught sight of it. I looked back at the Bridge and Alfie was still there, fixing the navigation machine. And so, gripped by some frenzy brought about by the unearthly memories stamped in my mind, I pulled out my dagger, strapped the rifle on my back, and climbed up. The bug-eyed

fireflies gathered and circled around the crow's nest in tens now. I didn't know why then I was so mad, so desperate, so disturbed. It could have been one of Alfie's crew members, one of many that he promised were somewhere on board. But my heart shook and my palms grew sweaty, while the inward sailor in me told me there was something wrong.

I climbed up the ladder and about halfway up, the procession of red insects sharply dispersed, backwards in all directions in as fast and uncanny a fashion as they had gathered. By the time I pulled myself up the crow's nest, I found nothing but an empty, lonely space. I took a sharp breath and thought myself a fool. I felt then that some insanity of this new sea life had taken over my actions.

I climbed down and headed straight for my cabin. That night, was one of my most disturbing on the Mardi. I remember finding a case of rum concealed beneath the floorboards and downed a couple of bottles in such a violent and fulfilling manner. I remember dropping back to my bed and watching the brown room spin into blurred clouds, spinning like my eyes had been thrown into a whirlwind. I remember dreaming about that arrogant Rongovian and Maria, my mother's prettiest servant. I remember seeing the figure of a shadowy person, some faceless fiend, hovering above me. It held Durham's rifle and aimed it right towards my chest. It fired. It did nothing. It made a clanking sound. It was never loaded. Durham never loaded it either until he had to. The boar. Foolish boar, I thought. I watched its head ooze out its body's life. The figure tried shooting me again and again but to no avail. It grumbled and threw the rifle down by the dresser and hovered out of my cabin door, leaving it open. Good thing, it was a dream, I thought. I would have been cold and I worried so much that those damn red flies would swarm all over my motionless body while I slept. The cabin walls slowed down their revolutions and calmed themselves back into place, and I slept for the rest of the night.

The next thing I remember was waking up to the sound of footsteps in my room. I rubbed my eyes and saw a man, hands in his pockets and poking his head left and right as he examined the painting I had put up. A gift from an old friend.

He must have felt me waking that day. He turned to me and shook my hand while the rest of my limbs still bore no life.

'Hello there. Sorry, I meant to introduce myself a bit earlier – my name is Dr Simon Piler,' he said happily.

'What are you doing here?' I asked, trying to shake off the night's rum, my heart racing in my chest at the sight of the young man.

‘Oh, well I saw this lovely painting of yours and I had to examine it. Fascinating!’

‘No, but, how did you get in here?’

The doctor lowered his head a little as if he was remembering something wicked he had committed. ‘I apologize. Your door was wide open,’ he said.

I stared hard at my door, wide open as he said. I couldn’t remember anything but dreaming. I shook off the bed sheets and found the butt of Durham’s rifle sticking out from under the dresser. Never have I failed to loop the strap of the gun on my bedpost every time I was in the room. I recalled doing so. Even after that bloody rum.

Pulling out the rifle from under the dresser, I saw the safety pin lowered and the cache up. It had been fired.

...

Chase of the Seven Isles: What are those bug-eyed, flying, red, bird-fish looking things I see floating around some of the rooms?

Alfie: Panamanian Ylfnogard apparently. Very rare and completely harmless. I thought they’d all been zapped, but I’ll be fucked if I’m inviting the exterminator back a second time. He bit off part of my arm and cost me an Elephant Teapot. Which reminds me - somebody ripped one of my journal entries out.

Moss: Knock knock! Nobody there? I’ll just leave a note then:

Hi Chase! Welcome to the ship! Hope you can find everything you need. Well, you probably can’t, because we’re not very good at putting things away properly, and we all just brought things we thought would be funny rather than necessary items. Anyway I hope the first night wasn’t too scary, I heard some noises but I think you were just talking in your sleep. Or maybe it was just the mushrooms talking again. Speaking of which, I have a fridge full of them, so feel free to drop by for a snack, Bunkroom 8. I can’t guarantee there won’t be side effects. Hooray!

Chase of the Seven Isles: Moss, I love mushrooms. I’ll be over one of these nights.

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October 4, 2009

“The Invisible Box-Set”: Launch Party

Okay, here goes. Pull up a plastic chair, grab a bottle of rum and some Rongovian Tundra (if W hasn't smoked it all), while myself, Simon Piler, Brendon Hertz, and a Scrotmanly pissed Jazz Monk talk you through the records that make up this unique collaboration. The raffle will follow shortly. Strippers arrive at 2am. And if anyone's still standing at dawn then I'll see you in the Rec Room for a game of drunken ping-pong.

Alfie: 1 hour and 50 minutes to go. This has got “bubble trumpet” written all over it, hasn't it?

1 hour and 22 minutes later...

Alfie: 28 minutes to go and not a soul in sight. I have a bad feeling this will just be me making a drunken fool of myself again. Oh, hello Jazz Monk! Here, have an Algaebrew.

27 minutes later...

Alfie: 1 minute to go – who wants to volunteer to clean up the washrooms and carry all the album covers down from the Art Gallery? Oh it's 10 o'clock. Launch time! Alright everybody. Everybody? Jazz Monk, try and pace yourself... we may be in for a long night. Can you play ping-pong? Whaddya mean, “Only if there's an Elephant Teapot involved?”

Brendon Hertz: Hola Senor Alfie, here have a lei!

Alfie: (*audibly relieved*) Brendon! What's a lei? Can I smoke it?

Brendon Hertz: (*chuckles*) No, a traditional Hawaiian lei. You know, the flowery necklace things hula dancers wear around their necks.

Alfie: Sounds like something that can be smoked.

Brendon Hertz: How about a coconut beverage?

Alfie: Coconut beverage? Man, after the stress of putting this Invisible Box-Set together, I was planning on an early night, so I'll need to hit the rum hard if I'm going to get trashed that quickly. (*aside*) No Jazz Monk, you can't start break-dancing until midnight. What do you reckon, Brendon, will we cut straight to the raffle?

Brendon Hertz: I say we wait for a short time, who knows what'll happen. Jazz Monk makes a mean mojito if you're interested.

Alfie: Shhh. What's that? (*stares off into the shadows*) I think there's someone back there... (*calls out*) Hello? (*aside to Brendon*) That monkey's in no fit state to make a mojito.

Brendon Hertz: Yeah, you're probably right, seeing as he's swinging from the glitterball.

Alfie: (*amazed*) I never even noticed that tacky glitterball on the Wardroom ceiling before!

Simon Piler: (*enters*) Well damn, I'm late! Though I can't possibly see how that could be.

Alfie: Hey Simon, I'm going to head over to the Storage Hold to pick up some items for the raffle. I'll be back in 15 minutes. In the meantime, watch that monkey, and don't let him near the Invisible Box-Set. (*heading towards the door*) Three is a marked improvement from the Quixodelic Orchestra gig, so I already consider this launch party to be an unmitigated success.

Brendon Hertz: (*laughing, to Simon*) I thought you wouldn't be here for sure. What'd you do, finish your chores early?

Simon Piler: Ack! I – I – I was totally certain my clock was set right... But yes, the first analysis of comparative twig angles is complete.

Alfie: (*exits singing*) 3 is the magic number! 4 if you count the monkey!

Simon Piler: Oh, please do count Jazz Monk. What a splendid fellow. He always plays the back. Say do we have any gin on this ship?

Brendon Hertz: (*shouting to the door*) Hey! Jazz Monks are people too!

Simon Piler: (*laughing*) I guess I'll have whatever you're having, Brendon.

Brendon Hertz: I think Robbie has some gin. Although, I still haven't gotten the panini sandwich he promised me. Robbie's been a little backed up with that new coffee machine, and the fact he's in a coma.

Simon Piler: Well, he'll figure it out in time. There are only a few thousand lines of code behind that thing, and most of the keys are disabled. We have been having a problem with the delete key – it tends to send a large quantity of coffee running onto the floor through the overflow valve.

Alfie: (*via walkie-talkie*) I can confirm Robbie has a stash of gin in his closet. Over.

Simon: (*via walkie-talkie*) Alfie, would you grab it for me? Over. (*to Brendon*) I've got the bitters right here! (*produces a flask from left coat sleeve*) Yes, yes, indeed.

Brendon Hertz: Here's a coconut beverage with umbrella and bendy straw to tide you over if you want. That's what I'm drinking. I got the coconuts from a palm tree growing in Cabin 1.

Simon Piler: Yes, that'll do for now. Thankee.

Brendon Hertz: Where are those hero portraits going to end up?

Simon Piler: No, no, they're already hanging up in the Aft Hold. *(takes a sip of coconut beverage)* We've got a bunch of late sleepers on our hands, eh? Well, here goes! *(lets out a tremendous blast on the ship's Euphonium)* By the way, Jazz Monk, speaking of ping-pong – we need to set up the next leg of the tournament. Though I'm feeling a bit out of practice... you know? Those old ginger joints, *(starts hopping around)* the athletic glint in one's eye... *(stops jumping)* Whoa... I'm a little out of breath...

Alfie: *(via walkie-talkie)* Shit, I heard that blast way back here, whatever it was. On second thoughts, I'm not setting foot in Robbie's closet. It's almost as creepy as the Machine Shop. If you value your lives, you'd best avoid it too. As for the gin stash, you're just going to have to let it go. I'll bring Robbie though. Simon is it okay if I sign for the crap I'm bringing from the Storage Hold in the morning? Over.

Simon Piler: *(via walkie-talkie)* Naturally, naturally! Alfie, we've got a party to commence! Over. *(to Brendon)* Actually, I really like the Machine Shop, now. Over.

Brendon Hertz: Speaking of ping-pong, where's Wayne Obertone when you need him?

Simon Piler: *(small trembling of fear, which passes)* You shouldn't mention his name around here; bad luck. Well for me, you see, it's bad luck to talk about a really good ping-pong player around me, you see, because, uh, because...

Alfie: *(re-enters the Wardroom, now wearing a green skull mask)* I was thinking for the next Elephant Teapot challenge we should have a dinghy race? At least, that's what I was thinking before our Dr Seuss dinghy got stolen by those damn Koradji goons! Apart from that, I have some ideas for ship-related modifications. How feasible would it be to have a treehouse at the top of Craw's Nest 1? And could we alter the Fish Wife into some kind of rocket, using Algaebrew for fuel, and then fly to the moon? I had another dream you see.

Simon Piler: Hmm... What do you think, Brendon? I can see the treehouse happening; Emerson'd be all over that. But, my Fish Wife!

Brendon Hertz: Number 2 seems more feasible than number 1. Have you tasted that stuff?

Simon Piler: Well, the rocket, sure, sure, Alfie. We can build you a rocket. Personally, I have designs on the Observatory of Multitudes; it's tranquil now, but I'd like to liven it up a bit. Maybe fix up a rope ladder?

Brendon Hertz: I think we should install a one-man-band in there.

Simon Piler: Talking of one-man-bands, where's Robbie?

Alfie: (*long pause*) Why are you looking at me like that?

Simon Piler: You were going to pick him up.

Alfie: No I wasn't.

Simon Piler: Yes you were. You went to fetch the raffle prizes.

Alfie: Raffle prizes? What raffle prizes?

Simon Piler: What? Where did you go that whole time, then?

Alfie: Well... I was around.

Simon Piler: Around?

Alfie: That's what I said. Listen, if this is about your precious Fish Wife, then don't worry, we'll restore it to its original form. Assuming we get back from the moon in one piece.

Simon Piler: It's not about the Fi-

Alfie: (*interrupting*) Did I tell you I had a dream that ended with me planting our Quixodelic middle finger flag on the moon? Robbie was there. At least, I assume it was Robbie. Whoever it was, they were lying flat on their back and not moving. There were three others too. But I couldn't see their faces because of the space helmets. The Fish Wife was in the background. Only she looked like a rocket. This was the dream with the monkey, and the very next day, Brendon ran into the Jazz Monk.

Simon Piler: Well, I can't turn that kind of coincidence aside. A rocket she becomes. But you'll have to elaborate at some point, I think. Besides, I'd like to see that flag flying with my own eyes. (*shouting, coconut drink spilling everywhere*) HURRAH!

Alfie: Actually, that's about as elaborate as the dream gets. Fish Wife was a rocket and there were five of us on the moon. Here, I got a message from Scrotman earlier – said he'll return to the ship "when the party kicks in". It's a shame - he might have had some good pointers concerning the actual scientific possibility of converting a submarine for space travel. But on the down-side he would have drunk all the booze and terrorised the monkey.

Simon Piler: Well, I'll have to meet him some time or another, I suppose... Say, Brendon, where did the rest of the Arom Band get off to? I thought I told Matthew what time things were kicking off. Hell, I'm surprised he wasn't here before I was.

Brendon Hertz: Hmmmm, I guess I'm not sure. I saw Emerson over in the Galley not too long ago. As for Def Mute, that guy's usually in the Sound Lab. Lt. Spark is like a ghost to me. And Scarytoes? Well, he's just all over the place nowadays, isn't he?

Alfie: Yeah I'm keen to sit down and share a bottle of Algaebrew with The Atom Band one of these days. They always seem so busy!

Simon Piler: Ach, true, true. They are an odd and spirited bunch, each with very different trajectories, you see.

Jazz Monk: Can I break-dance now, Cap'n?

Brendon Hertz: Wow, Jazz Monk. I was wondering when you'd speak up. You've been awfully quiet over there. Then again, you look like you're in some sort of stupor.

Moss: (*Bursts in, breathless, drops W's bike onto the floor*) I just cycled in the rain, battling caffeine induced insomnia to get here. AND it's ten in the morning for me. Hello!

Brendon Hertz: Hola Moss, would you like a lei? I forgot to ask you, Dr Piler, would you like one?

Alfie: What's a lei? Can I smoke it?

Brendon: A lei, you know, the flowery necklace things hula dancers wear around their... wait, haven't I explained this to you already? This coconut drink must be stronger than I thought.

Alfie: Alright then. I guess that's everyone. Thanks for putting in an appearance, and I hope you all enjoy the Invisible Box-Set. Here's a toast to a job well done and to all things Quixodelic!

Moss: You're insane! And even though I can't actually see the finished box-set, I can't believe you put it all together so quickly. That was so SUPER-humanly fast that it's like you've got another you hidden away there helping. Thank you.

Simon Piler: A toast!

Brendon Hertz: I think the toast should be made by Dr Piler. You do have a way with words, after all.

Simon Piler: No, a piece of toast. (he points to the ceiling) Stuck to that glitterball. Where did the glitterball come from?

Moss: (*impatiently*) To Alfie, who always does all the work for us! We would be nowhere without him.

Alfie: Moss, you cycled all the way from bunkroom uh... whatever... and it was *raining*?

Simon Piler: (*quietly*) And toast. Stuck to it.

Moss: It was raining the whole way. Bunkroom 8 is kind of far away, you know. There's a load of weird corridors on the way. And they were aaalll raining.

Alfie: Has anyone got an umbrella I could borrow?

Simon Piler: Nope. (*looks down*) Er, wait – there's one in my drink.

Brendon Hertz: I think the ones in the coconut drinks are full-sized.

Alfie: What about wellies?

(*Everyone shakes their head*)

Alfie: Jazz Monk, you can break-dance if you still want to. Jazz Monk? Jazz Monk? Where's that fucking monkey gone now!?

Brendon Hertz: Alright, I'm going to get some food. It's 6:37 Cabin 1 time, and that's time to eat. Perhaps I'll be back later. I'm going to the Galley to see if my panini's done yet. (*exits*)

Alfie: Okay, I'm turning in for the night too. (*pokes head out of the door*) Ah shit, that's not rain, that's the sprinkler system! Looks like someone's been smoking leis and set it off! (*pauses*) Without sounding too sentimental, cheers to those of you who dived headfirst into the Invisible Box-Set project – those records will keep me going for as long as we're at sea... maybe longer. Anyone who wants to go with me to the moon should leave their name in this mysterious tombola that seems to have appeared along with the glitterball and piece of toast. We'll have a draw to see who fills the 3 extra places. Assuming Simon and The Atom Band can convert the Fish Wife of course. Goodnight! Goodnight! Goodnight! (*exits*)

Moss: Later skaters. (*to Simon*) How frickin' good is the box set? I was listening to the albums. They are Actually Amazing.

Simon Piler: (*slurps his drink through a straw, contemplative. Moss exits. Simon stands in silence for several minutes*) Hmmm, RAVEN MAGIC HAT! (*Aside*) I am going to fly right up to the ceiling. Yes, right now.

15 minutes later...

Brendon Hertz: (*entering, eating a panini*) Simon? Anybody? (*Looks around then heads for Cabin 1*)

2 hours later...

Simon Piler: Wha? Urgh... Oh, my, what a lightweight I am... I think I passed out on the ceiling!

Later that morning...

James Redmond: (*Yawning*) It seems that I have arrived here late... (*Looks around and picks up a strange coconut drink, sniffs it and then downs it*) Did I miss the raffle? I never was very good at deadlines and timekeeping. (*Walks towards the door but finds the remnants of another coconut beverage and a half bottle of gin. Looks at them lovingly and takes a seat.*) I like it here, maybe I'll stay awhile. At least long enough to say a huge thanks to Alfie and congratulations to everyone involved. Now where did I put my smokable lei?

Several hours later...

Alfie: Where'd Jay go? I was just going to tell him to mind the "coconut" drinks. Jazz Monk was peeing in them during the box-set launch when he was too drunk to stagger to the washroom.

...

October 10, 2009

Alfie's Journal #22:
The Imaginary Man



THE FIFTH COSMONAUT

Butterscup Murphy rolled over and blindly batted at the blaring alarm clock, taking several attempts before she knocked it onto the floor. It had been another sleepless night with weird dreams and people shouting in the street below her apartment window. She grunted and threw back the covers, stepping into her slippers before padding bleary-eyed to the bathroom. As she vigorously brushed her teeth, she stared at her own reflection between strands of unbrushed hair, thinking, 'Fuck, I feel old.' Throwing her body into her clothes, and straightening her felt cap with the orchid in it, she headed to the kitchen, noticing the cats were nowhere to be seen. She leaned her elbows on the worktop and stared at the toaster in a daze, waiting for

her toast to pop. When it finally did, she buttered it in a rush, and balancing it between her teeth, pulled on her old winter coat for the first time that year. She was locking up the apartment when she glanced down, noticing a rum bottle sitting on her doorstep. It had a roll of paper inside. She gingerly picked it up, looking over her shoulder and wondering if there'd been a mistake. Glancing up and down the stairwell, she saw there wasn't another soul around, so she carried the bottle down to the bus stop, gently shaking it upside down as she went, and poking a finger inside to scoop the message out. She dumped the empty bottle in a trash can, and lit a cigarette, glancing at her watch. The first draw hurt her lungs and she coughed, peeling open the water-damaged golden ticket, disappointed to see the ink was illegible apart from a single line that read "Congratulations! You've won a trip to the moon!" As her bus rolled into view on the busy road, she stuffed the golden ticket in her jacket pocket, dropped the cigarette to the floor and crushed it out beneath her slipped foot.

THE PERUVIAN SITUATION

Ever since I smoked that Rongovian tundra, my dreams have started to resemble reality. It's either that, or worse, that reality has started to resemble my dreams. Every night I sleep, I see myself standing at the window, watching the Mardi as she plunges over the edge of the world into darkness. It's like somebody else's memory, transplanted into my mind, the groan of rafters breaking apart, forks of lightning illuminating stormy skies, and a lurching sensation in the pit of my belly. Voices shout 'Willoughby!' over the rumble of thunder, until it dawns on me that I'm waking up.

I opened one eye, feeling the coolness of shadows on my face. Standing above me was my attorney, The Amalfi Glow, his silhouette blotting out the burning sun. 'Where the fuck have you been?' he asked. 'I've been looking for you everywhere.'

I sat up and rubbed my eyes, my head throbbing with the cold black waves of a hangover. I was sprawled across the top of a large wooden crate on the main deck, my ragged Flower Company uniform was saturated with sweat, while far above us, I could vaguely make out the Jim's helicopter disappearing into the blue.

'I even looked in that bizarre room with the enormous microscope. Though how that place is even physically possible is beyond me,' he muttered, clearly agitated. He was wearing one of those beer-dispensing crash helmets on his head, and a familiar rifle hung over his shoulder. 'Anyway, we've got a more pressing problem,'

he told me, pausing to suck up a dirty green liquid through the straw. It might have been mouthwash, but could just as easily be water from the hot-tub. 'The Peruvians are threatening to extradite you.'

'Where'd you get the rifle?'

'What, this old thing?' he asked, startled as if he'd completely forgotten it was on his shoulder. 'The dude in the monkey costume - the one with the saxophone - he asked me to look after it for him. Listen Alfie, I'm being serious about the Peruvians. Have a look at this.' He handed me a photograph.

'Supposedly that's the rifle that shot Hitler,' I told him. 'Jazz Monk must have stolen it from Chase's room.'

He looked back at me blankly and took another loud sip through the straw. I glanced down at the picture. It was a photograph of me, standing on a rooftop, two giant concrete rabbit ears either side of me. My arms were outstretched like I was a bird, and someone had drawn a speech bubble coming from my mouth with 'FREE RONGOVIA!' written in it.

'Apparently the Rongovian government named you in a list of the top five most wanted instigators of the revolution. You know what it's like: the Rongovians called the Americans who called the Peruvians, and the Peruvians called us. It's a diplomatic fucktastrophe... for want of a better word,' he told me.

'Look, you really need to get that rifle back to Chase's room, before he notices it's missing,' I told him, folding up the photograph and stuffing it in my back pocket. 'He's highly strung. I doubt he'll take kindly to you dicking around with his stuff.' I flopped down from the crate. 'Jesus, I'm beat. That Invisible Box-Set launch party must have been even wilder than I remember. What are you drinking?'

'I have absolutely no idea,' he said, blinking at the murky green liquid. 'Listen, I don't think you're taking this Peruvian situation seriously.'

'I really am,' I told him.

'You really aren't. Remember I told you about Channel 679?'

'Who?'

'Exactly. They're a Rongovian media station. They have a radio show and a late-night satellite news programme. You were supposed to do an interview with them to clear your name. All you had to do was turn up, denounce the revolution, and Bob Dylan's your uncle. It was even free advertising for the Invisible Box-Set, and we sure could have done with some of that!'

'Sounds good.'

‘It does, doesn’t it?’ he said with a shake of his head. ‘I had to call in some favours to get you on there. Only problem was nobody knew where you were, so the Rongovians left.’ He motioned to the empty blue sky where the helicopter once was. ‘By the way, they left you this.’ He handed me a slip of paper.



267, 104, 355, 24, 146, 432 • 181, 300 • 215, 76, 240, 288, 395 • 6, 323, 142 •

232, 43, 249, 490, 114, 237, 461 • 33, 94 • 247, 496, 11, 285 • 78, 319, 447, 120, 411 •

221, 33, 373 • 356, 64, 292, 435, 162, 280, 74, 322 • 96, 318, 397, 47, 178, 260 •

30, 226, 453 • 211, 32, 351, 505 •

‘What the fuck is it?’ I asked, staring at the Koradji Corp logo and the string of random digits.

‘I have literally no idea,’ he said.

‘This is it? This is all they left? Are you sure?’

‘Sure I’m sure!’ he said without sounding entirely sure. ‘Anyway, now that we fucked up the interview, we’ll have to make you scarce. Before the Peruvians get their hands on you. Maybe we could fly you home for a couple of months.’

‘I’m not leaving the ship,’ I said.

‘Yeah, I expected you to say that. However, commendable as the sentiment is, you’re looking at some serious consequences if they catch you. I mean, they still have the death penalty in Rongovia. How do you fancy your chances with a firing squad?’

‘That’s not even me in the photograph!’

The Amalfi Glow raised his eyebrows and eyed up the crate. ‘You or not you, somebody testified to you being one of the ringleaders. You’re not Rongovian, so unfortunately you’re an easy target. Of course there was that boxing match as well, remember?’

‘But I had fuck all to do with that!’

‘Wellllll,’ he says, sucking in through his teeth, ‘it was you in the ring.’

‘Was it?’

‘Yes it was. And anyway, what’s in this crate?’ he asked, eyes suddenly narrowing as he studied me. ‘Where *exactly* have you been?’

‘I got us some cosmonaut costumes from a fancy dress shop in Rongovia.’

‘You went *back* to Rongovia? Fucking hell, Alfie! Are you *trying* to get yourself killed? As your attorney, I would strongly recommend that you never, ever, EVER go back there. At least not without wearing one of those crazy masks you got me to mail you.’

I bit my lip and thought better of saying anything else, turning to go back downstairs for a shower. I was beginning to hazily remember that the ship's sprinkler system got set off last night, something to do with a smoking lei, but it was blurry.

'By the way, I'm adding this to your annual fee,' The Amalfi Glow told me. 'And it's going to cost a lot more than a bag of coloured glass.'

I paused at the top of the entrance hatch above the Galley and looked back. 'Two bags of coloured glass?'

'Done,' he said, with a salute.

'What the fuck has Peru got to do with this anyway?'

'Oh shit,' he muttered, bounding across the deck and grabbing at the rigging to keep himself upright. He reached into his rucksack and handed me a bulky black console. 'I almost forgot. Here's that replacement navigation system you were asking for. I'm assuming you know how to wire it to the ship's autopilot?'

I stared at him blankly.

'Just switch it on and see.'

I looked dumbly at the box, and he sighed, taking it back and pressing some buttons on the side while sucking away on his straw. 'You should try this stuff. It tastes a bit like prunes, but it's got some kick. Come on, come on. Aha! Here we go!' He handed me back the console and I looked at the digital map of the world in disbelief. 'See?' he said. 'You're just off the coast of Peru.'

'But that's not possible,' I told him.

'Possible or not, that's where you are.'

I looked out at the flawless sea and up at the sails, billowing gently in the breeze. Either we were speeding up when nobody was watching, or we were skipping whole chunks of space. Both possibilities were disconcerting.

BACK TO REALITY: A 10-STEP PROGRAMME

I was at the top of the steps leading down from the Galley to the Moon Pool, on my way to return *Crime & Punishment* to the Library, when I heard the sound of raised voices drifting through from the Wardroom. My first thought was that maybe people took me literally about the launch party being a "week-long night of mischief and mayhem" and they were still in there, wrestling with cocktail umbrellas, and toasting toast on the ceiling. I walked over and stuck my head around the door. Traces of last night's party were still apparent – the glitterball hanging from the ceiling, broken bottles hastily brushed into a pile in the corner

of the room, along with cigarette ends, banana skins, coconut shells, and the remains of several unsmoked lei's. The protesters were sitting in a circle of plastic chairs at the centre of the room. A charged silence fell over them when they heard the squeak of the Galley door, and saw my face looking in. To my right, standing beside a flip-chart on the left of the circle, was the same lumpy, middle-aged woman who led the Battle of the Bridge. The one who wrestled that shotgun off me by sitting on my chest and nearly crushed me to death. Her nostrils flared with indignation as our eyes met. Quickly scanning the circle, I saw the rest of the group was comprised of more middle-aged women with scowling faces, one pale young miserable emo with limp dark hair, and a handful of anonymous individuals wearing Flower Company uniforms and green skull masks.

I grinned and stepped inside, sauntering across the room as the entire group flinched in unison, turning to their leader for guidance. She pushed her large breasts out, squaring up to an almighty five foot two. I saw she was wearing a name badge that read "Bernie". 'Well, hi there Bernie,' I said, pulling up a free chair and reading the flip chart:

**Back To Reality:
A 10-Step Programme
Tuesdays and Fridays at 2pm
All welcome**

I forced my way into the circle between one of the mask-wearing characters whose name badge read "Bob", and one of the protesters, a witchy little woman in her early thirties whose name badge read "Selma". Selma flashed me a look of venomous loathing as I antagonised her with an extra-friendly smile. Though I couldn't rightly tell what was going on under Bob's skull mask, I was pretty certain I could see the fear glittering in his watery eyes. I turned to the rest of the group, continuing to grin, and slumped back in my seat with my arms folded across my chest.

Bernie sized me up and down, cleared her throat and continued, her voice audibly trembling. 'Now then, where were we?'

I put my hand up.

'Y-eeeees?' she asked, slow and deliberate, her grey eyes narrowing to tiny slits.

'Don't I get a name badge?' I asked.

She paused and smiled sarcastically, before pouting. 'I think everyone here knows *exactly* who you are,' she said.

The atmosphere was so tense you could cut it with a srench. Putting my hands behind my head and stretching out my legs, I yawned and said, 'Okay, well, I'm just trying to fit in. I can live without a name badge,' then motioned for Bernie to continue.

'As I was saying, I think we made terrific progress with the 10-step programme at our last meeting. But now everybody, it's time to put this grievous affliction under the magnifying glass and take our second perilous step down the long road to Reality. Hopefully you've all had a chance to run through your handbooks, so... can anyone tell me what the second step is?'

I put my hand up as Selma shrilly said, 'Imagine this is all imagined.'

Bernie didn't register her. She was looking directly at me, eyebrows raised, teeth gritted together in a hopeless attempt at a smile. 'Y-essss?'

'I don't have a handbook either,' I told her.

'We'll get you one. *After* the session.' She caught the notes of malice in her own voice and seemed to check herself, still looking straight at me. 'But thank you, Selma. The second step on the Back To Reality: 10-Step Programme is indeed to IMAGINE that THIS is all IMAGINED.' She simultaneously turned the page on the flip-chart with her fat fingers, revealing Step 2. Her words reverberated around the room like gunshots as my eyes scanned the rest of the circle, wondering who were behind those skull masks and what they had to hide. One of the mask wearers, whose name badge reads "Brandon", seemed to sense what was going through my mind, and hurriedly looked away. I put my hand up again, hearing Selma tut under her breath beside me.

'What is it now?' snapped Bernie.

'I was just wondering what Step 1 is?' I asked. 'Seeing as I missed the last meeting. Sorry about that by the way. Just with this Invisible Box-Set business, I've been up to my eyeballs trying to -'

'Well, I'm sure you can catch up in your own time,' said Bernie, cutting me off, 'but for now, the rest of the group is ready to move to Step 2 -'

'How can I move to Step 2 if I don't even know what Step 1 is?' I asked, interrupting her, but she was already valiantly trying to talk over me.

'So what I'd like you all to do is close your eyes. Everyone. Okay?'

I closed one eye and sat forward, continuing to scan the group. Everyone, with the exception of this "Brandon" character sitting

opposite me, had their eyes tight shut. “Brandon” was doing the same as me, peeking with one half-open eye back in my direction as if trying to figure out what I was going to do next. I winked at him and heard him emit a chuckle before half-mumbling, half-coughing into his hand, ‘Sorry.’

Bernie continued. ‘Sometimes the human imagination has a grip sooooo strong... that it is impossible to break its hold unless... unless like a mirror... unless like a mirror we TURN the imagination back upon itself.’

She paused. I would have put my hand up again were her own eyes not shut tight as she rocked her squat frame, swaying like a preacher rooting around for inspirational bullshit. ‘So what I want you all to do,’ she said, ‘is try to imagine... try... to imagine that all of this is NOT... ACTUALLY... HAPPENING. Just... let your mind... drift... on the idea... that you are simply imagining it. The words... my words... feel your surroundings and the sensations of your own body. Imagine... that you are imagining this... imagine none of this is real... don’t force it... just relax.’

Now this is going to sound strange, but there was something deeply hypnotic about the sound of Bernie's voice. I couldn't help but slouch back even further, my head resting on the chair, face tilted up to the ceiling as I drowsily closed my eyes. Across the room, Bernie's voice sang on, but the more I listened to her swooping evangelical pitch, the further away she sounded. When she finally said, ‘Now open your eyes,’ it was as if she was whispering it from the far end of a long tunnel.

I lifted my head and opened my eyes, blinking. The circle was near empty with the exception of “Bob” on my left and “Brandon” directly opposite me. Two skull masks lay crumpled on empty chairs to my right, and the flip-chart was still there, only the words previously scrawled across it had disappeared, leaving only the white of the paper. ‘Holy shit!’ I cried, laughing quietly to myself.

“Bob” fidgeted nervously in the seat beside me, while “Brandon” stuffed his hands in his pockets, looking around the circle with what I can only assume was the same sense of amazement as I was feeling. ‘Where did they all go?’ I asked the two of them, still laughing to myself.

‘I’ve no idea,’ mumbled “Brandon” from behind his mask.

‘Have we been hypnotised? Bob, what do you think? That was weird wasn’t it?’

“Bob” didn’t say anything. He just sat there scratching absentmindedly at his armpit. Across the circle, “Brandon” got slowly

to his feet and started walking towards the door leading through to the Rec Room. ‘Hey Brendon!’ I called after him. He paused, almost imperceptibly, and realising his mistake, stopped in the doorway with his back turned to me. ‘How’d you get that lawn to grow so quickly in Cabin 1?’

He looked back at me, eyes glimmering in their green rubber skull sockets. ‘Tippy flower seeds,’ he told me, before exiting the room.

‘You can go too, Jazz Monk, it’s cool,’ I told “Bob”.

‘Hoopla!’ said “Bob”, hopping down from his seat and rolling with that smoky simian gait of his in Brendon’s wake.

THE IMAGINARY MAN

One hour later. Flecks of sunlight sparkled on the ocean. Big old cotton wool clouds were strung up in the sky, while invisible puppeteers drift hand-painted wooden gulls silently through the supernatural blue. I paced the Bridge, deep in thought, and occasionally stopped to watch Chase from the window. He was climbing Craw’s Nest 1 again to do whatever the fuck it was he liked to do up there. I wondered if he’d still be climbing up there every night when the toadstool treehouse arrived. Then I went back to pacing.

On the control unit behind me, a little black rat was busy soldering the new navigation console into the previously fried panel. ‘How’s it going, Buckley?’ I asked him.

The little rat determinedly finished fixing a screw in with a miniature scrench and looked back at me. ‘Honestly, Alfie? If you hadn’t kept interrupting me every two minutes, then I’d have fixed this half an hour ago.’ He scurried round to the opposite side of the board, dragging the scrench behind him, and he began to gently wind a second screw into the panel.

‘Sorry,’ I said. ‘I appreciate the help. You know that.’

‘I know,’ said Buckley impatiently, ‘and we appreciate the passage on your ship -’

‘It’s not my ship,’ I corrected him.

‘Whatever,’ he sighed. ‘Listen, we could sit here kissing each other’s tails all night, or we could get on with things. Personally, I’d prefer the latter. I’ve got a wife and more kids than I can count on both paws, and they were expecting me back ages ago.’ With this he proceeded to spark up the soldering iron, fusing a loose wire to the panel.

‘How are Doreen and the kids?’

He waited until he'd finished and shut off the flame. 'Hungry,' he said.

I grinned and started pacing again. 'Buckley, do you ever think it's extraordinary the amount of interaction us humans have with animals on this ship?'

He beckoned me over with a nod of his head and pointed a tiny rat paw at the perspex panel lying on the counter. 'Give me a hand with that, will you?' While I picked it up and carefully slotted it into place, he said thoughtfully, 'When it comes to the Mardi I'd say it's kind of... mormal.'

We smiled at each other, and he scampered over to the power-switch. 'Moment of truth,' he muttered, pushing it down.

The digital display on the panel instantly burst into life and the little rat swaggered back across the desk, a big smile on his furry face. I pressed the "RESSET" button and the screen informed me it was "CABALRATING".

'Spelling's still fucked,' I pointed out.

Buckley gazed at the aquamarine screen with the blinking red dot at the centre of it. 'Spelling aside, it'll do,' he squeaked. I was about to pat him on his furry little shoulder when I heard the door handle turn behind me.

'Quick!' I hissed. 'Hide!'

I turned around while Buckley raced across the unit and acrobatically dived into my back pocket. A young man with dark hair and a weedy moustache put his head around the door. 'Yo Alfie, any luck with fixing the navigation system?'

'I'm sorry, do I know you?'

'It's me, Ed,' he said.

'Ed!' I cried. 'Of course! I didn't recognise you with the moustache.'

'I've always had a moustache,' he told me, screwing up his eyes and looking at me with some suspicion. 'Are you feeling okay?'

'Okay? Yes! Never better!' I said, laughing and stepping aside to reveal the repaired display in all its flashing glory.

He stepped across the Bridge and peered down his nose at the screen. I noticed he was carrying a white vinyl record sleeve with a red bow tied around it. 'Where are we?' he asked.

'Just off the coast of Peru, apparently,' I told him as I pressed a green button marked "TRASE" and watched the squiggly blue line of our journey fading in. I grimaced, feeling Buckley as he squirmed to get comfortable in my pocket.

'Peru? Is that good?'

‘Well, put it this way - it means for the last month we’ve somehow managed to sail about two thousand miles in the wrong direction,’ I told him, ‘so yeah, I suppose you could say it’s the opposite of good.’

‘Ah,’ he said, somewhat disinterestedly. ‘Anyway, I really just wanted to show you this.’ He held up the white record sleeve like it was actually supposed to mean something to me. ‘It’s “The White Christmas Album”,’ he told me.

I shook my head. ‘I have no idea what you’re talking about.’

‘But of course you do! You helped me organise it! It’s a Quixodelic Records compilation of sub-rung bands covering songs from The Beatles’ “White Album”! For Christmas!’ He stared at me with a look of excited expectation.

‘But of course I remember!’ I lied, slapping him between the shoulder-blades. ‘How could I forget? It looks great, Ed. Seriously, it does. Listen, do you like sandwiches?’

‘Well –’

‘Specifically jam sandwiches.’

‘I suppose that depends on –’

‘The flavour? We’ve got mushroom flavoured jam. How does that sound?’ I put my arm around him and guided him back towards the door. ‘Also, while you’re here, there’s something I’ve been meaning to ask. I don’t know how long you’re planning on sticking around, but I was wondering if maybe you’d like to run our Sound Laboratory? Ideally I’m looking to install some kind of flume in there, so people could visit if they’re interested in our musical projects.’

‘A flume?’

‘Yeah, like one of those tunnels you get at swimming pools. Only it would lead to the Sound Lab.’

He stopped in the doorway and stroked the ends of his moustache while he contemplated what I was asking him. ‘Let me get this right,’ he said, ‘you want to install a flume in your Sound Lab that stretches all the way to... where exactly?’

‘Yes. Well, maybe “*stretches*” is the wrong word. Obviously we’ll have to seriously think about this, because we couldn’t build a flume that big in the real world. But we found this plastic bag.’ I pulled out the plastic bag from my pocket and placed it on the ground beside my feet. ‘Allow me to demonstrate how it works...’

I stepped inside the plastic bag and stood there while he continued to stare at me.

‘Admittedly we were smoking a load of Rongovian tundra at the time, but I’m led to believe I climbed inside this seemingly innocuous

plastic bag and ended up on the other side of the planet. Actually, coming to think about it, this is a totally different plastic bag - the actual plastic bag is with The Atom Band for further analysis. I'm hoping they can work their scientific magic with it. So when I say "flume", I don't really mean a normal flume. More a transcendental flume.'

He blinked and nodded his head before taking a couple of precautionary steps back towards the main deck. 'Uh, okay,' he said. 'Well, I'm glad you like "The White Christmas Album".'

'Like it? Dude, I fucking love it!' I said, closing the door behind him and breathing a sigh of relief.

Ed's face appeared at one of the broken Bridge portholes. 'By the way, I think you've got a rat infestation.'

'What?'

'There's rat shit all over that desk over there,' he told me, pointing to the new navigation console before slinking away.

Buckley poked his head out from my back pocket and gasped for air. 'Peru?' he squeaked.

I ignored him and made my way up to the Storage Hold, while he clambered up my shirt and sat on my shoulder, babbling anxiously in my ear. We crashed through the clutter and I was about to reach for the light switch when Buckley leapt onto the palm of my hand and squealed, 'Alfie! Watch out! There's something -'

But before he could properly warn me, a hulking form rushed from the shadows, crashing through us like an American footballer breaking the line of scrimmage. Fortunately I landed on top of a stack of blankets, snatching blindly at a falling Berlazie funnel and a sack of potting soil to break my fall. Buckley somersaulted across the room, while the shadowy creature tossed something down the hole in the floor, before leaping down after it. 'Buckley, are you alright?' I asked, sitting up in the dark as soil from the torn sack started raining down around me.

'Oh, I'm just peachy,' spat the rat. 'I landed in this milky vase. Although I think there's piss in it.'

'Yeah, that was Helmet. Say, what was that thing?'

'I can't be certain,' he said, crawling out and dropping to the ground with a splash of wet paws, 'but it looked a lot like a walrus. A walrus with legs.'

'Legs or not, it threw something down into the Quixodelic Record Store,' I said, lying back in the dirt, allowing my racing heart to stop racing.

‘I think it was a small green box,’ said Buckley. ‘Hey, are you okay?’

I sighed. ‘Buckley?’

‘What?’ asked the little rat, shaking himself dry.

‘How easy do you think it would be to create an imaginary man?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, to actually invent someone from nothing. Just make it all up. How easy do you think it would be?’

‘An imaginary man?’ asked Buckley. ‘Like a man who’s imaginary?’

‘Exactly.’

‘Well, I don’t know why you would want to do a thing like that. But I suppose it’s possible. Why *would* you want to do a thing like that?’

I didn’t reply. I just lay there in the darkness of the Storage Hold, feeling the cold soft soil between my fingers, breathing in, and breathing out again.

‘Are you trying to tell me something?’ he asked.

‘Maybe.’

‘You are okay though, aren’t you?’ he asked again, genuine concern in his squeaky little voice.

‘Yeah. I think I’m just going to lie here for a little while,’ I said.

He paused, sniffing the air. ‘Okay, well, remember you’ve got a lump of plasticine in your back pocket. It’s a really crap model of a ship. I’m not sure if it’s important or not, but I thought I should mention it.’

‘I’ll remember. Oh and Buckley?’

‘Yeah?’

‘Thanks for fixing the navigation system.’

‘Anytime,’ he said, scurrying off through a hole in the scorched wall, leaving me to listen to the creaks and groans of the Mardi, and for a moment it was like she was a living, breathing being, as I glowed in the darkness and she rocked gently on the waves.

...

Simon Piler: Where is Nautilus the giant puffin, anyway? And is he going to be the password-keeper for our new toadstool treehouse?

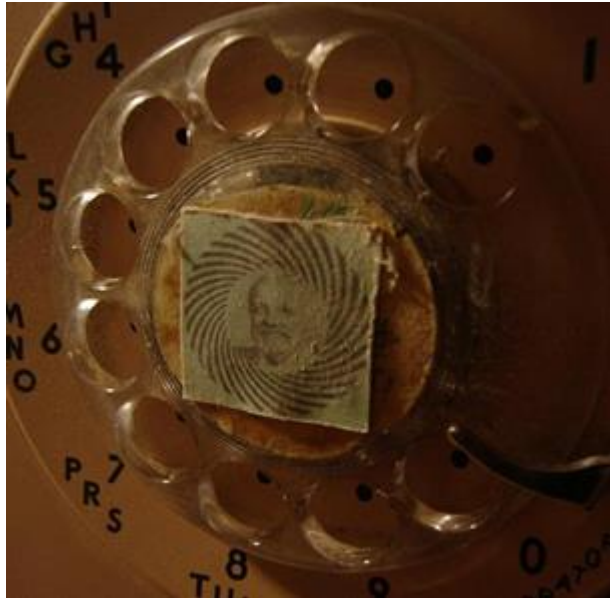
Alfie: You know, I haven’t seen him in months. I hope he’s alright. The toadstool treehouse is supposed to arrive tonight though. When everyone wakes up they’re going to be like, ‘Holy shit! What is this

monstrosity?’ Or else they’ll be like, ‘Holy shit! What is this monstrosity?’ It could go either way.

...

October 10, 2009

The Hypnotist Phone



So here’s one for you:

We’re trying to build a rocket and provision it with enough food and fuel for a fortnight-long trip to the Moon. To do this, we’re radically amending the structure of the Fish Wife, our submersible. Now, mind you, that’s a gargantuan task in itself, but today, in the second day of our work, I received grim news from Def Mute.

His hand signals and eyebrow motions quickly communicated the following to me: ‘Simon, how are we going to build a rocket large enough to fit five people? All we’ve got is the metal from the Fish Wife and some scraps of platinum, zinc, tungsten, and antimony. We’ve already used all the tin to make the nosecone. And you know that the Fish Wife only seats two people, right?’

My face crumpled a bit as I thought. My hairs turned ever Scrotmanly more gray.

‘Scarytoes, may I borrow your cellular telephone?’

I had remembered what Alfie said to me a couple of days ago, how I should use my connections to my employer, GLEEM toothpaste, to fix us up with a good deal. Maybe he was joking, but at this point, I couldn’t see many better options. So I punched in their number.

Riiing... ..Riiing... ..Riiii- Click!

Me: Hi, is this GLEEM headquarters?

Telephone Man: Yes.

Me: Oh, hi! It’s Simon Piler, you’re mythopoetical spokesperson...

Telephone Man: Hello?

Me: Hello? Yes, It’s Simon Piler, here.

Telephone Man: Hello? Caller?

Me: Hello! I’m still here.

Telephone Man: Hello? Caller? There’s static on the line; you’ll have to find another phone.

I hang up.

I don’t trust cell phones, anyway. So that’s alright. I walked back to Cabin 5 and plunked down at my desk. I hummed and foodled with my Hoya bella, then opened my desk drawer. There it was: THE HYPNOTIST PHONE! (Instantaneously after thinking this, a small, 6-person attendance appeared directly behind my chair to coo, ‘The hypnotist phonne...’ in an invigorating, but somewhat disorienting drone. I am not entirely sure who they were or where they came from, but they all wore frog coats, which was pretty cool, so I didn’t mind so much.)

I took the machine out of the drawer and placed it on my desk. It’s a beige rotary phone with a hypnotist’s spiral fixed in the middle of the disk. At the very centre was the hypnotist, himself – chubby, smiling and mostly bald.

The phone gave me a very bad static shock when I picked up the receiver. I gave the dial a spin. Two spins. Three spins. Four spins. I was beginning to feel rather sleepy. Five spins. Six sssspins. Seven spinns... (They drone.) I was falling into a deep sleep. Eight spins. Niiiiiiiiine...

I must have finished all eleven because I suddenly found myself talking into the receiver.

Telephone Man: Simon? Simon? Are you still there?

Me: Wha- Haha yes, yes, I'm here. Jeez that was weird, I thought you couldn't hear me.

Telephone Man: Let me dispatch you to the Boss, okay?

Me: Hey, thanks Telephone Man, you aren't so bad as people make you out to seem...

Telephone Man: Wait. People are making me out to look bad?

Me: Well, don't take it personally, Man. You know, it's probably some sort of simple prejudice against tech-support personnel.

Telephone Man: Have you tried restarting your computer? (*His voice trembles as if he's about to cry.*)

Me: Yes, mmmm...several times. You were going to patch me through to the Boss, right?

Telephone Man: Oh, yes, I'd quite forgotten.

Click.

Boss: Hello, this is the Boss speaking.

Me: Hiya, Boss! It's Simon Piler.

Boss: Simon Who?

Me: Simon Piler. You know, your mythopoetical spokesperson?

Boss: I didn't know we had a mythopoetical spokesperson. (*Off of the receiver, calling out*) Verry! Do you know if we have a mythopoetical spokesperson or not? (*Scrotmanly quieter.*) I think there's a hippy hobo on the line trying to scam us...(Pause.) You don't say. (*Muttering to himself*) Who would ever have believed...

Me: I was in two of your commercials! Don't you remember?

Boss: (*Pretending*) Oh, yeahhhh... I remember you. What can I do for ya, son?

Me: Well, you see, my friends and I are sailing on this ship and we -

Boss: Have you ever delved into the color blue?

Me: (*long pause*) I guess I like oranges and yellows much better.

Boss: I speculate that there is much more space to explore in the blue-to-violet region of light. Do you know why that is? Well I'll tell you why that is, it's because the wavelengths are much shorter.

Me: Hmmm... I don't know abo-

Boss: I also seem to remember a certain ability of light to permeate through some objects. As I recall, we would label such an object transparent.

Me: Ya, that sounds correct, Boss, but -

Boss: And an object that simply reflects light, oh, that's too easy, my boy. Reflective!

Me: Yes, Boss, most people would consider a reflective object reflective.

Boss: But the real tricky one, you see, is what to call an object that is illuminated by reflected light. Aha! I'm sure I've stumped you there...

Me: Hmmmm... I don't know, but I can see where you're going with this. Smaller wavelengths are more easily absorbed by some materials...

Boss: ...AND THEREFORE DO NOT color other objects as much through reflection! HAHA!

Me: It's almost as if light were capable of echoing. Wow. That's pretty weird. And the substance that light hits determines the quality of the echo.

(pause in happy contemplation, pondering)

Waaaait a second, don't you guys make toothpaste?

Boss: Say, how much sheet metal do you need, anyway?

Me: Um... Oh, yes. For the rocket. Ahhh... how about 30 square meters of aluminum? And we'll need some ceramic tiles, too, yes. For heat-proofing. Re-entry, you know? Kind of a fiery moment of existence. To say the least.

Boss: Done. I'll have my boys down in Accounts Receivable put that order in right now. Shipping ought to pack that up onto a Chinook for you first thing tomorrow morning.

Me: Could you throw in a couple of those sparkly Christmas garlands, too? Just to make it look spiffy?

Boss: No problem, Simon.

Me: Wait... what is the catch, here?

Boss: No catch. We just want you to film a GLEEM commercial on the moon for us, that's all. WOW! Talk about astronomical presentation, eh? WOW!

Me: *(Aside)* Hmmmm...

Boss: Oh, and what charity do you want us to donate the proceeds to?

Me: Charity? Oh, yes. *(Remembering)* Of course! Alfie said space travel was expensive and that he wished we could make money for char-...

Boss: How 'bout we buy up some forest somewhere to be protected?

Me: Wait! Could you protect a reef, instead? One of those big ones! The kind that will make canyons and weird rock outcroppings millions of years in the future when the sea level drops... I don't know if you could see it then, well, obviously we couldn't see it then, we'd be dead, but WOW! It'd be so cool, and you could call it 'TOOTHPASTE MOUNTAIN'! *(I am roaring into the phone at this point.)*

Boss: Simon, you remind me a lot of my son. What a crazy, greasy little hippy that kid is, but you know what, I don't talk to him enough.

Haha! But listen to me, you've turned me into a regular softy, buying barrier reefs and all this. But I swear to you, it'll be done.

(Off the phone, shouting) Verry! Take the rest of the day off! Hell, EVERYBODY take the rest of the day off! Except for you Telephone Man, because we need someone to man the phones. We need to celebrate! *(He pauses, then in a normal voice)* Yeah, but first make sure we get these Yootica Flower Guys their aluminum and ceramics, okay, they're good little munchkins...

He leaves the receiver laying on his desk, and must forget that I'm on the line. I don't want to be rude, but I figure he's probably enjoying himself setting the sprinkler system off and running around in the building with no shoes or socks on and ruining the carpets. And rigging the microwaves to run with the doors open and baking hash brownies and having paper airplane contests and singing stupid songs or having an upside-down lip-synching contest to the latest Falling Floors record or...

I wake up on my desk, drooling Scotmanly. Brendon is shaking my shoulder gently. 'Hey. I see you found the Hypnotist Phone,' he says.

...

Alfie: Wait... you mean... WE'RE ACTUALLY GOING TO THE MOON?

Moss: Hahaha – Gleem! What? Gleem! Ok.

Alfie: Do we need to get GLEEM patches on our helmets or on the back of our suits or anything?

W: No, the helmets and suits will most likely be made of toothpaste. The advances within the dental hygiene industry are monstrous, and to get into the technical jargon would be fruitless, but this is definitely within the means of the GLEEM juggernaut. They are a crafty lot, tricksome to the tits, which is why they may be so generous here. I say no worries; if you gotta be a corporate guinea pig, you may as well go for broke. See if we can get our stuff in cinnamon. I can't stand that mint shit.

Alfie: Toothpaste space suits? Dude, lay off the tundra. This is serious - we're flying to the MOON. No time for crackpot fantasies. At the very most I'd be happy with some free toothbrushes. We're in short supply since the Fish Wife cleaning antics of last month. Cinnamon fondness noted.

Simon Piler: I think GLEEM is just GLEEM flavored. And I, too, am Scotmanly suspicious of these fellows, I will admit that. It seems like too good a deal to be true... BUT, that being said, it's a good gig for an aging pop-star like myself - NO, SCRATCH THAT, it's a half-decent gig for a grog-brained wandering scientist like myself, especially because they're giving me COMPLETE CREATIVE CONTROL!

Brendon Hertz: Simon, when are going to see the big checks roll in from the GLEEM endorsement? We could use that to fund the trip to the moon, after all. And, we sure could use some new funding for Algaebrew 2.0.

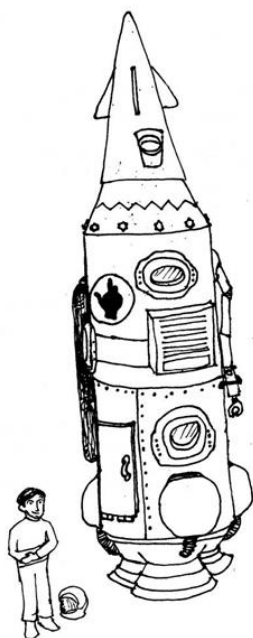
Simon Piler: Well, all I asked for was 30 square meters of aluminum, some garlands and a protected reef... (*Sheepishly*) ...Sorry to disappoint about the big checks and all that.

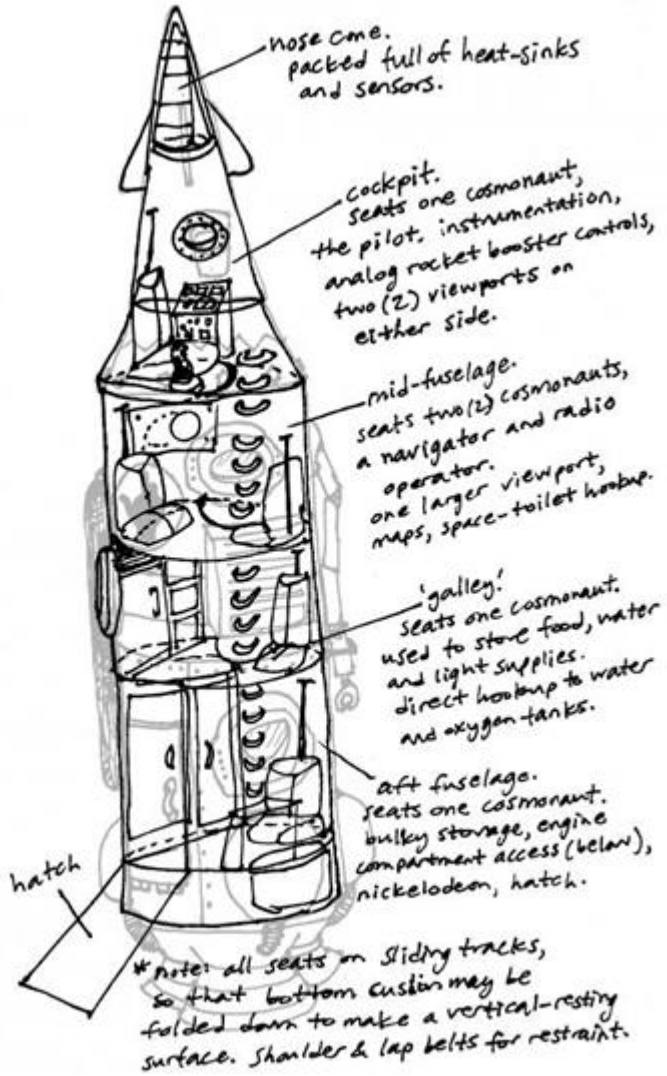
Alfie: Wait! No corporate sponsorship? Ah man, this could wreak havoc with balancing the books this month. I blew most of our budget on a toadstool treehouse...

...

October 11, 2009

Fish Rocket





Alfie: Okay, don't all jump at once to go to the moon. There are five places on board the Fish Rocket, plus we desperately need a volunteer to be Mission Control, our eyes and ears on Earth... and of course we'll need the few remaining hands on deck to pilot the Mardi while we're gone. I'm going to assume I'm going, and Simon has to go since he's the only one who knows how to operate the Fish Rocket. As per my premonition, we're taking catatonic Robbie. He can telepathically debate that at length, but unless he regains

consciousness between now and blast off, then he's going. That leaves two places. I think what we're looking for are fearless daydreamers with nowhere to go for eleven and a half days. This is how long Scrotman calculated it will take us to get to the moon and back, after he tested a batch of Algaebrew 2.0 in his lab back in Scotland. By the way, we're now affectionately referring to Algaebrew 2.0 as "Dreambrew". Scrotman also strongly advised that we immediately desist drinking either the original Algaebrew or the new modified batch, saying – and I quote – "That's like putting mulched fucking radioactive seaweed into your stomach." Jazz Monk has been repeatedly bombarding me with hi-fives and pleading eyes ever since the moon idea sparked, but I'm reluctant to be stuck at such close proximity to a monkey in a hurtling tin can.

Moss: I'm not going if Jazz Monk is. He gives me the creeps. I caught him staring at me through the crack in the Galley door one time when I was eating a sandwich. I said 'Hi' but he just kept on staring.

Alfie: Well he can't be hungry because he single-handedly devoured most of the telekinetic falafel, and has already eaten at least two-thirds of our entire supply of Ship Shapes cereal. It may be worthwhile for Brendon or Simon to elaborate on the history of this sax-wielding primate so we can figure out if he's psychologically fit enough for such a perilous mission. This does also raise the issue of vetting. I'm sure there are rigorous physical and psychological checks that your everyday cosmonaut has to endure before they're even allowed to look at flashing buttons on a rocket. Also, not saying we'll need them, but we should probably write some wills before we leave. Moss, I'll pencil you in as the 4th cosmonaut pending us getting one more non-simian volunteer – are you sure with your fear of heights that you'll be able to do this? I say "do this" but in reality I have no idea what will be required of us all to pilot and navigate a homemade rocket to the moon. I mean, it's not like we have any fixed scientific experiments to carry out. We're really just trying to get there and back in one piece. For now I assume it will be a lot of floating around for a week and a half. If a 5th cosmonaut doesn't crawl out from under a rock in the next few days then Jazz Monk gets the nod, and we'll have to rope a tourist into coming along.

'Here, would you like to try this new look deep-sea diving suit on for size?'

'It looks like a spacesuit.'

'Ah yes... well, they were completely out of diving suits at the fancy dress shop. Okay, you got it on? Yes, yes, I know that monkey is

wearing a spacesuit too, and he's staring at you in a creepy manner. Just ignore him. Alright, well this is our submersible Fish Wife - '
'It looks like a rocket.'

'A rocket? You reckon? Well, now that you mention it, it does a bit, doesn't it? That's hilarious. But never mind that, just step on board and watch your head. There, that's it. Remember to fasten your seat belt. (whispering frantically) Quick, lock the fucking doors!'

Could Jazz Monk be trusted as Mission Control if a fifth cosmonaut surfaces? Personally I'd feel a lot safer if The Atom Band could be persuaded to do it. Those guys make complex science shit look easy!

Alfie: (Steps out onto the main deck and stops upon seeing the Fish Rocket gleaming in the sun. It is strapped to the new helicopter landing pad on top of the deckhouse) Now I'm actually frightened. And excited. (pauses) But mostly frightened.

Simon Piler: A bit fear-inspiring she is. I'm certainly not vain enough to disregard all the possible malfunctions this rocket is capable of. However, with that in mind, we've tried to keep the construction analogue; only about 5% of the operations require the use of NIKO Supercomputer... Probably a reasonable design-goal, if you ask me. Might also mean that a quick hand with a srench could save our necks at some point. Who knows. But, I will remind you – without the finished Dreambrew, this pony is hobbled. No worries; only a matter of a few days, there. A few things I should mention from my NOTEBOOK: There are 1/4" and 1/8" jacks for audio input in every compartment, and we've also included several exterior speakers. (Found in the cockpit: Volume controls and manual toggle between Nickelodeon and audio inputs. Both for internal PA and external speaker system.) Microphone and small webcam near the hatch. Otherwise, there's no good way to look for obstructions directly in front of the door. (The microphone's pretty useless when the boosters are firing, but otherwise, it's also capable of digital space-recordings; one of NIKO's solitary tasks.) Robbie to sit in the aft hold? I know I certainly don't want to try to carry him up the rung-ladder! We'll need to figure out some sort of sustenance for our travels too. Something lightweight, nourishing, and hopefully varied.

[Important!!!!] Analogue controls mean: Someone's got to be steering this thing at all times.

I suggest we develop a system of shifts so we can all get sleep, and a system of mind-revving music so that the time spent piloting isn't too dull.

- Can you even imagine what it'd be like to have an unrestrained hostage in a ship that size? Oh, jeeeeez...

- The Atom Band seems ready to take up the task of creating a Command Center; right now, it looks like the Communications Bay would be a good bet. It's got a radio. Earlier, I was even thinking about volunteering for a position as CapCom, a job I had for a single shuttle flight in Florida! But now I wouldn't give up my seat for anything. Well... maybe a bombard or bassoon... or a brand new euphonium or sarod or a set of timpani or a free-bass accordion or a horn in F. But otherwise, not anything.

Alfie: On the subject of "possible malfunctions"... can't we just pretend everything will go swimmingly well? Until things inevitably go Apollo 13. Then we can all start screaming and blaming each other. And we have to rely 5% on NIKO? Oh man, I wouldn't trust him with 0.005%. Especially since his twin brother, Supercomputer SAM, got tossed overboard. I wouldn't put it past NIKO to go looking for revenge, so we'll have to seriously consider his involvement in all of this. If you reckon you can get enough Dreambrew together in the next few days, then we should aim for Sunday night. I agree on the Robbie situation. He's put on a lot of weight since he went catatonic. I've ring-fenced the last of the Ship Shapes for nourishment, and will attempt to cook up a variety of flavourings and sauces. I'll soak the cereal pieces for a day, dry them out, and fill a sack with them. That should keep us going for eleven and a half days. Finally, testing. And blast off. That rickety landing pad for Jim's helicopter is as likely to collapse the moment the copter lands, let alone have a rocket blast off from it. Jazz Monk seems VERY keen to help out. I'll volunteer him for any testing... Anyway, with 4 cosmonauts we're not going anywhere. It's bad luck to fly in the face of a premonition. My mind is already swaying towards cherry-picking a hostage. Buzz Aldrin springs immediately to mind. Failing Buzz, Tom Hanks has some experience of space disaster movies... plus we could eat him if the Ship Shapes taste as foul as I think they might.

Robbie: Geez, you're making me feel fat... I have put on a few pounds from lack of exercise, 'tis true. I sure wouldn't want to drag me up a ladder. I'd say we go for Steve Buscemi or Bruce Willis if no Aldrin.

Alfie: The last thing we need is some overpaid Hollywood actor over-acting any minor hiccup we encounter.

Robbie (telepathically frantic): 'We're almost out of Ship Shapes!'
Willis (presses his finger to Robbie's lips): 'Don't worry, Robbie. I just sawed off my own arm. We can cook that. Now just tell me where the bad guys are and I'll take them out with my good hand.'

If we're going to eat a hostage, we should take someone portly. What sort of shape is Nate Lowman in these days?

Simon Piler: Look at it this way, Robbie; at least you'll get to man the Nickelodeon. (That's a coveted position, as I see it.)

Moss: Nate Lowman would provide bony, pretentious but highly fashionable fodder. I doubt it would do any of us good.

Alfie: Someone always dies on moon missions like these. Taking a douche like Nate with us, who has hardly anything to contribute to either plot, dialogue, or future Flower Company developments, means that the likelihood of it being a valuable member of the crew reduces greatly. What's that you're saying Jazz Monk? Oh fuck no, you're nothing like Nate (*cough-cough*) – you're one of us now. Indispensable, man. In-dis-pensable. By the way, if Robbie can cook falafel with his mind, then operating the Nickelodeon should be well within his capabilities.

Moss: Haha. If it's on this weekend, I can't come, because I'm planning on diving for treasure and the voices in my head told me I would only find them if I looked between Saturday and Wednesday next week.

Alfie: You're worried about previously calling Nate Lowman a "douche", aren't you? It's cool. We'll have duct tape over his mouth, and (assuming this kidnap plan doesn't fall flat on its face) he'll be blindfolded, so with any luck he won't even know he's been to the moon and back. Anyway, diving for buried treasure is a commendable pursuit, especially with us being so broke from throwing all our spare cash at the Fish Rocket, so I'll not stand in your way. Calm down, Jazz Monk, for fuck's sake! I haven't said you're going yet! So for now, pending a shuffle of dates or a couple of 11th hour applicants, the crew of "Fish Rocket" will be:

1 Dr Simon Piler

2 Me

3 Robbie (unless he returns from Catatonia and realises what we're doing)

4 Nate Lowman (assuming the kidnap goes according to plan)

and

(sighs)

5 Jazz Monk

Simon, you're sure only having 5 seats necessarily implies we can only take 5 people? Also, not that I'm panicking, but where do we keep the oxygen?

Simon Piler: Firstly, I wouldn't want to be unrestrained (*shudder*) ...when we're in re-entry. I suppose we could rig up another harness of sorts in the Aft Fuselage? Why do you ask? The second one is easy – see those large, black, cylindrical chambers on the side? Three of them store oxygen, the last one, water.

Alfie: I think what I'm trying to ask is... is it too late to purchase, revamp, and hook up an airtight mini-bus (with seat restraints of course), then tow it behind us? Haha! That look on your face is priceless. Of course I'm just kidding! As if anyone could seriously consider towing a bus to the moon! Good to know about the oxygen – but I'll be carrying emergency supplies in my pockets, just in case.

Robbie: Okay, nickelodeon running duties accepted, sirs. Incidentally, I've just cleaned myself up. I could probably wake up from my coma at this point, but it's pretty comfy here. Made a few friends, found a job... and the weather's always nice. In regards to timing, Sundays work for me. The kitchen in my brain can run without me for a few days I suppose.

Alfie: A kitchen in your *brain*? What sort of holidays do you get? And are there any vacancies?

Simon Piler: That sounds like an EXCELLENT gig.

Alfie: Shit, I just remembered. These costumes don't have pockets.

Robbie: Every day is a holiday, amigo. Mind expansion is a must.

Alfie: Well, we have some general-but-not-so-specific interest in the moon trip. I dropped some golden tickets in empty rum bottles overboard, but unless they're found soon, we're going to have to stick with our original five. The press conference will go ahead this afternoon on the main deck (weather permitting), and updates on the kidnap to follow. Though perhaps I shouldn't be publishing them on the online journal. Lately I keep looking at the sky.

Simon Piler: I hear you. (About the sky thing... I hope the weather holds for a bit longer – sometimes hard to tell out here. And I wish we had a telescope. So we could check out what the weather on the moon has been like lately.) By the way, as far as the commercial goes, Scarytoes is typically my counterpart mythopoetic spokesperson. Instead I've rigged up a wonderful lifesize cardboard replica of him. It'll be delightful.

Alfie: Typical Flower Company luck. There's a storm brewing for sure – hopefully we can out-sail it before Sunday. Remember and pack Tin Pan's camcorder and your free GLEEM toothbrush, as well as cardboard cutout Scarytoes.

Alfie: A quite amazing discovery: I was minding my own business in my bunkroom, mulling over my will, when I heard a knock at my door. I got up and opened it and what should I find lying in the corridor? No, not another bag of cassettes. Nate Lowman! That's what. Bound and gagged and squirming like he had crabs. I ripped the duct tape off his mouth and he started screaming, 'Fuck you! Fuck you, you motherfucking freaks! I'll call the cops! What are you doing to me? Where's that bigfoot? That bigfoot comes near me again and I'll bite his fucking -' I carefully replaced the duct tape over his mouth and dragged him inside. I guess some benevolent soul sorted out the fifth cosmonaut for us.

Robbie: Oh shit, got hung up in my mind kitchen. Buddha and Jesus bending my ears, Sun Tzu and Bill Burroughs telling me they're only out to snatch my crops. All the while trying to tie up the big bang with magnetic tape. So when's blast-off? Shit, are we already airborne or what? Living in four places at once is exhausting.

Alfie: This is why, even catatonic, you're an essential member of our crew. I think we might have to put off the launch until tomorrow, that storm out there's showing no sign of easing. I'm away back to bed for now. If anyone hears screaming coming from Bunkroom 3 then it's just me feeding Nate Ship Shapes with the Spongebob fishing rod. Weather permitting we'll go for it first thing in the morning.

Simon Piler: Okay; I'll start fuelling. The Dreambrew turned out wonderfully, and just in time, too.

Alfie: Is it safe to fly a rocket through a thunderstorm? The fact we're here and the rest of our crew consist of one catatonic chef, one kidnapped douchebag, and a sax-playing monkey... I say 'Fuck it, let's just go!' When destiny is against you, you can either back down, or raise your game. I vote the latter. So does Nate by proxy. And Jazz Monk's been sitting in the rocket since last Wednesday, he's that excited.

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October 13, 2009

Chase's Journal #3: The Linguist

The events of my first night on the Mardi soon shrunk from a monstrous worry to a lingering, nagging doubt, occasionally peering from the depths of my heart. Simon Piler, the doctor I found examining the Copley print hanging in my room, stumbled into my cabin after seeing the door open, the sheets slung all over the floor, and the rifle sticking out from under the dresser. 'I wanted to see if you were okay. Never had that much rum before have you?' he asked with a laugh. The woman from the bunkroom on the bottom corridor, Moss, said it was Piler who asked where I was after the news of a new passenger excited him. Alfie, on his long, sleepless excursion to fix the navigation system on the Bridge, said he saw no one after dropping off some rum in my room for me. And so, I dismissed the night. A dream perhaps? A violent memory oozing from my fatigued and guilty stupor?

The days passed fast on the Mardi. Some of the ghostly voices I kept hearing from the closed cabins slowly became the sounds of music. Drums, the twang of guitar strings, whiny tambourine bells; someone on board was playing music. I enjoyed the melodic lull of their tunes, dancing in my ears while I lay inside my cabin. They helped me sleep with a method just a little bit safer than rum or a drop of that ghastly Algaebrew concoction getting peddled around. At night, I would sit by the railings of the ship and watch the foamy water break against the hull. Sometimes I would read, like all those days in my broken childhood in the woods, while the red glow of the ylfnogards lit the pages. For a little while, I got the static, isolated peace I came to the Mardi for.

But of course, the fastest ship docked in the farthest of ports cannot escape a fate already predestined for one on board. Today, Alfie hailed me towards the deck and pointed towards a speedboat jetting towards us. 'Who the fuck could this be? We're in the middle of nowhere!' he yelled out. Emerging from the horizon, I saw the figure of a light-skinned man with glasses and flowing brown hair. He might have recognized me from a distance and motioned his hands towards us. 'Is he... waving at you?' Alfie asked.

It was Molineaux.

‘You’ve left behind quite a debacle, Monsieur Chase,’ was the first thing he said to me as he boarded the ship. He brushed his long hair and pulled off his black raybans before turning and shaking Alfie’s hand.

‘Capitaine, I certainly hope your new passenger here has not started any tribal wars or pissed off any kings by sleeping with their wi—’

‘— Molineaux, have you come all this way, after all these years, to—’

He laughed and waved me off, interrupting my thoughts like he had grown so accustomed to doing years before. You see, Molineaux, buried himself in books and piled on the knowledge of languages and far off islands, tribes and kings and such. The further the *Marjorie Mae* sailed, the more old Durheim called upon the clumsy young linguist to help him translate and negotiate with foreigners, government parties, and the like. The man had a knack for diplomacy which sprouted from his laziness in actually doing his job. He’d get people to settle down just to make life easier with less paperwork, less meetings, and less chance of getting shot at. At some point in his life before the *Marjorie Mae’s* accident, he must have realized his true value to the world. He became smug, arrogant, unwilling to bow down to anyone but himself and his worldly intelligence. Even Durheim thought of throwing him overboard once.

‘I’m not the captain,’ Alfie replied. He gave me a Scrotman grin and must have sensed Molineaux’s agitation because he gave the visitor another greeting and returned to the Bridge.

I motioned my old friend toward the farthest balustrade at the tip of the ship. Molineaux pulled out a silver canister and handed me a plastic glass from his pack. ‘I heard the rum here is délicieux,’ he poured some clear liquid into my glass. ‘I think you’ll like this better for once.’

The sea was still. The clouds were quiet. I drank the Linguist’s drink. It was frozen. It was tasteless. Molineaux brushed his hair back and pulled down his shades again amidst the burning afternoon. He glanced down the sides of the ship before sipping his own drink.

‘I have some news, votre Majesté,’ he said. I felt a cold chill running up my spine. I had not seen Molineaux for years before his visit today at the Mardi. What was he on about? Why now?

I knew for a while, a couple of months after the *Marjorie Mae* sank, that Molineaux was picked up by a revolutionary, now the president, who led the insurrection on the Fourth Isle. He was hired as a diplomat or speaker of sorts. I’m sure he had already won over the

trust of his superiors with his sporadic burst of French intellect and references to ancient philosophers long dead and forgotten by the world. But what irony is this? Since when did fate accept such a sense of humor that seems to shock you into amusement. It's both funny and disquieting, you know.

The sea was quiet except for the distant cries of birds we could not see. We must have been drifting close to land.

'Your mother is gone, Chase,' Molineaux said. And just then, the earth grew even more silent. Even the warm wind dancing on my cheeks made no sound. The birds had gone, the rumblings of the ship had gone, the ghostly voices below deck had gone. I didn't think of my mother. Was that wrong? Was it wrong to feel nothing but a passing shard of temporary grief?

Molineaux must have seen me diving deep into a trance. He continued, forcefully, to speed up the negotiations faster like he had always done. 'Calmez-vous. It seems that many of your people have either been slaughtered during the coup or have fled and gone into hiding somewhere even I won't bother to know.' Molineaux took sips of his drink. He never looked at me. The linguist went on, with his eyes covered against the sunlight. Finally he gulped down the last of his drink and threw the plastic cup into the water. He squeezed the silver canister shut and set it down next to me before standing up.

'Provided that the heir to all the family's fortunes does not show up, your parents' estate will pass to the islanders,' he said. What strange force keeps pulling me back towards the nightmares of my home? I've spent more than half my life boarding ship upon ship so that the world might forget me. But no, it seems, I, like some rare bird of paradise, am being chased. Forever. I grinned at the irony again of the name they gave me.

Molineaux walked back toward the balustrade and before climbing down to his speedboat, he took a last look. Lifting off his glasses, he waved his hand towards me and shouted, 'I don't know what you're doing here, old friend, nor do I want to know, but our colleagues are getting nervous. We promised them riches beyond their wildest dreams and you know, pretty soon, they're gonna point a gun to my face and ask where you are.' He climbed down and sped away again, disappearing like a speck of dust on the red horizon.

Alfie came out from behind me with a scrench in one hand and a broom in the other. He looked agitated. 'This is your ship,' I told him. 'You can do whatever you want, you know.'

I stood up and handed Molineaux's canister to him along with my glass still half full. He took some sips then gulped the rest down. 'This

is fucking good, man. Nice to drink something other than rum. What is it?’

‘Water, Alfie. It’s water,’ I declared before I locked myself into the darkness of my cabin for the rest of the night.

...

October 14, 2009

The Last Will and Testament of Dr Simon Piler

Should one be able to locate my body after I die, I should like the coyotes and wild animals to eat my flesh and for the remaining material to completely decay away from the frame. (This request could be performed in the mechanism of Native American alpine burial grounds – the corpse elevated on a simple, wooden platform.)

In five-hundred and ninety-one ($591 = 365 * ((1 + \sqrt{5}) / 2)$) days after my body’s placement into the world, should my skeleton remain intact, I should like to have my rib-cage, alone, fashioned into a sort of lasting shrine or monument. This should be affixed to a sturdy rock base, and feature many, many tyings of long yarn. The yarn is to be the following colors: bright red, goldenrod yellow, and sea green. (The colors symbolizing life, death, and strangeness/energy, respectively. These are the bluntest descriptions possible, I assure you.) The shrine should be placed in a location where it will be subject to the fraying forces of wind. As the shrine inevitably breaks; do not repair it.

In the case that one cannot find my body, or if it is irretrievable, I want there to be a sparkler-dance in my honor. With an honest to goodness old fashioned dance band (you know polkas, waltzes, schottisches, etc...) alternating with The Atom Band playing sonic hedge and our Greatest Hits. (What greatest hits?) Or maybe a StoneFloat reunion show in memorial. In any case, in order to be a sparkler-dance, there has to be a lot of sparklers going all the time. Preferably in different colors.

As for my worldly possessions, I haven’t many, but give my guitar and notebooks to Brendon Hertz, and the Bolt of God to Poflowetry. Give my keyboard back to Def Mute, and my computer to Sir Matthew the

Mighty. Give my tobacco pipe to Moss. And my safety-glasses to W. Any books I own could be donated to the Mardi's Library (it wouldn't be hard to move them from Cabin 5, after all) or alternatively, could be donated to any public library. My clothes, boots, sleeping bag and gaiters all should go to charity; preferably a charity that helps out those homeless people in our world. Any money I have, after paying off my (substantial) debts, would go to Emerson. The hard-copies of my recordings and all my 4-track tapes should go to Alfie.

No need to worry about the Raven Magic Hat. It will expire along with me.

...

Simon Piler: Just in case.

Alfie: Wait! What if the rocket explodes and we all die at the same time? Where do your recordings go then? Do I have to account for them in my will too?

Simon Piler: Oh, crapper....

[*Quick scrawl with permanent marker on the bottom,*]

'If our rocketship explodes and Alfie (or any of these people die, too,) give my recordings to Scarytoes. He'll figure it out from there.'

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October 15, 2009

Transcript of Moon-Mission Press Conference

A bemused huddle of journalists have gathered on the main deck of the Mardi, their notebooks and hairpieces flapping in the South Specific breeze, pens poised above the paper. #1 Cosmonaut, Dr Simon Piler, emerges from the hatch above the Galley, followed by #2 Cosmonaut, Alfie, pushing #3 Cosmonaut, Robbie, in a wheelbarrow to three plastic chairs behind a pasting table draped in the Quixodelic middle finger flag, facing the listless press pack. Simon grins and waves as cameras flash sporadically. Alfie is too busy with the wheelbarrow to stop and pose for photographs. All three wear matching special edition green and blue Flower Company tracksuits, each with the middle finger embroidered onto one sleeve, and GLEEM patches on the other. There is a ripple of murmured surprise amongst the journalists as

Simon and Alfie proceed to dump an unconscious Robbie in the chair on the left, working hard to keep him upright. A scene that is eerily reminiscent of “Weekend At Bernie’s”. In the background, Jazz Monk can be seen furtively poking his head out from the hatch and skulking towards the conference table, carrying a fourth plastic chair. As Alfie takes the seat on the right and Simon takes the seat in the middle, Robbie rocks forward and lands face down on the table with a thud. Jazz Monk (also wearing an ill-fitting Flower Company tracksuit) has quietly dragged his chair up to the table on the left of Robbie and hunkers down trying to be inconspicuous. All seated, Simon claps his hands together.

Simon Piler: Okay, I think we’re ready. On behalf of The Utica Flower Company, I’d like to welcome you all to the Mardi. We shall endeavour to answer all your questions, so feel free to fire away in an orderly fashion.

Ariel Castro, Peruvian International Standard: This is the first recorded DIY attempt in history to fly to the moon. Can you do it?

Simon Piler: We Won’t Know Until We Find Out.

Alfie: Actually, I had a premonition where we were on the moon, so yes I think we can... (*pauses*) ...unless of course the premonition was just a hallucination, in which case we’re going to look pretty stupid. Or very dead. It’s really in Simon’s capable hands though, after all, he built the “Fish Rocket”.

Danny Blanchflower, astrologer from the Black Country Gazette: Some people are saying this is just an elaborate publicity stunt to promote your record label. Is there any truth in that?

Simon Piler: Publicity stunt, my arse! This one is going down in the supreme annals of glory and wonderment! It will be compared to the greatest of legs-tied-together races of all times! (*suddenly calmed*) Besides, if we explode or rupture in space, it certainly wasn’t intended on my part. I just want to go down on record as saying that.

Alfie: I’ve been secretly painting a giant lunar mural in our Moon Pool, just in case we fuck it up and don’t get off the ground. Hopefully we’ll not need it. If it *was* a hoax, do you really think I’d be telling you that?

Cedric Kita, 21st Century Scientific Journal: You say you plan on flying to the moon and back in eleven and a half days. How is that even possible?

Simon Piler: Hmmm, actually, that’s a really good question. Robbie, what do you think about that?

Robbie: (*silent, still face-down on the table*)

Alfie: I agree with Robbie.

Sophie Garcia, Le Poème: What sort of space travel and training do your crew have?

Simon Piler: Well, in the 5th grade, I was a CapCom for a shuttle mission to Mars. Uh, hold on. Actually, I think it was to the planet Aquamarine, actually yes, that was it. Aquamarine. (*Pauses as if finished, then awkwardly, just as Alfie is preparing to speak.*) Oh, and we're pretty good with screnches... Oops, that's all.

Alfie: To be honest, we still don't know who our five-person crew will be. That said, I think it's safe to say that our fourth and fifth members are likely to have as much, maybe even less experience than the three of us.

Wanda Pescado, Editor of Moon Crumb Magazine: Are you scared?

Simon Piler: Yes. And please don't ask me why. I don't want to talk about it.

Alfie: (*looking at Simon*) I was no more scared than I usually am... until he just said that. (*turns back to the Moon Crumb editor, a middle-aged lady with blue hair, wearing a knitted beret and dark sunglasses*) Do I know you from somewhere?

Wanda Pescado: Perhaps you've read my column in Moon Crumb?

Alfie: Moon Crumb magazine! Fin McCann was from Moon Crumb magazine! That little shit! He tried to stitch us up!

Noah Blake, aged 11, Space Kids of Australia: I'm sorry, sir, but can I ask my question now?

Alfie: No.

Simon: Go ahead, kid.

Noah Blake: Is the moon made of cheese?

Simon Piler: (*laughs*) No, you GOOFBALL! It is made of rocks mixed with cheese.

Alfie: We're borrowing Moss's toastie-maker just in case.

Maximus Prim, Dream Machine Quarterly: Can you tell us a bit more about the Fish Rocket? Is it true it was previously a mini-sub?

Simon Piler: (*Grinning like he's about to break out laughing again*) Isn't the title "Fish Rocket" extraordinarily silly? I think I came up with that name... Oh, yes. The rocket was formerly a submersible, our beloved "Fish Wife". Def Mute loved her. He wept silent but bitter tears to see her gutted in such an uncouth fashion. Gosh, that's kind of a morbid way to say it... It's a cool ROCKET, after all. One of my own personal touches: Carpeted walls! Too cool? Yes, I know.

Alfie: Carpeted walls? That *is* too cool. I must point out that when I asked him if it was possible to convert the submersible into a rocket, I

didn't imagine the amazing job he and the Atom Band would do. I suppose the most important thing is that it flies. Failing that, at least we have carpeted walls.

Cat Ezric, The Rongovian Times: Why do you want to go to zee moon?

Simon Piler: Can I tell you a little story? It's about these two guys; their names were Hary and Bary. They're sort of representations of two emotional forces of the universe - bear with me, here - they don't have physical bodies or anything. But, these two guys, they were talking and they said something to the effect of:

Hary: "Can I ask your honest opinion?"

Bary: "My honest opinion?"

Hary: "Yes."

Bary: "It is the centre of the Unimverse Machine."

And then Hary gets really angry. He starts getting spiral-eyed and his scalp and lips start popping with all these spiky outgrowths until he looks like a pincushion. And he's emitting some kind of deep, unfortunate radiation of absolute rage. So, I never really told anybody this, but I've got this thesis concerning the aforementioned 'Unimverse Machine' that I've been working on for the past, eh, (*counting on fingers... 1... 2... 3...*) 4 years? No. Three-and-a-half. But anyways, that's why I decided to go to the moon when Alfie asked me. Because I was actually thinking about being on mission control with the Atom Band at first.

Alfie: The reason I'm going is because my attorney advised me to make myself scarce for a couple of weeks while the Peruvian government are getting pressurised to arrest and extradite me. The moon sounded like as good a place as any to lay low.

Ignacio Piero, Sunday supplement, The Peruvian Echo (Echo): How are you funding this?

Simon Piler: Well, we got most of the stuff to build the rocket from the Storage Hold on board the Mardi; a lot of the materials were curiously left there by the ship's previous owner. Actually, I don't know. But the GLEEM guys gave us most of the materials to build the chassis. I'm they're mythopoetical spokesperson. They sort of owe me one, you see.

Alfie: By the way, we spent less on the Fish Rocket than we did on that toadstool treehouse up there. As Simon mentions, GLEEM helped fund the construction of the rocket... but aside from that, what with our fuel being home-grown and everything, all we really needed to buy

were some second-hand cosmonaut outfits from a fancy dress shop in Rongovia. (*turns to Simon*) Hey, do you reckon those spacesuits are real and not just fancy dress costumes? Shit... have we even thought this through properly?

Mario Albrecht, Freelance Journalist: Where are the golden moon tickets?

Alfie: I'm not telling you, Mario. You'll have to go and hunt for them like everybody else. Any more questions? No? Alright then.

Simon Piler: (*stands, clearing his throat*) And now, for your consideration, I would like to recite a poem I have been working on, entitled "Cha Cha Skull". Ahem.

the chromatic colours of my skull
are stars that bear
so fruitfully down onto the earth
and reflect in patterns
that assume I am a dubious satyr
they dawn
they are the arcing of the dome
of my head
my bone
it is all apatite
the material of my own construction
and shining down the breathy beaming
light i am familiar with
and disregard
as if simple smoke.
do you know?
i know;
i am the sweltering song
of three jubilant eons
through which
erosion has occurred
and disarray
through which sorting
has also occurred
and we mean to understand
but we stand
confused and trying to repeat
reprimanded intervals
of pure, easy breathing
these trials we have learned

and memorized,
we will so quickly try to understand
things through our previous memories
and leave our senses
all to hang
we are cruel like that
our eyes crumpled and highlighted
in white
a modestly-aged dog
that stands and
then walks
and then moves to smell
an unacquainted hand
its eyes are those
of an animal
pressed to the limits
of its own differentiation
between those events
real
and totally imagined.
we are sown
into fuel beds
of stars
seed beds
of absolute spirit
we will grow
we are eternal
and if you think that you decay;
that you are only contributing
to a slow
and somewhat confusing
slump
towards disorder,
do not be disconcerted [!]
you will burn
in the blackest night
because of the energies you emit
you are a star
and nobody
nobody
nobody
nobody

nobody
can dissuade you of that
if they TRY
they are
only fools
wearing caps
shaped suavely
and fit
to their own skull of
STARS.
breathe deep brothers
and sisters
may your cheeks
glow.

Upon finishing the recital, Simon nods to Alfie and the two cosmonauts carry Robbie back to the wheelbarrow. Simon pauses to wave in a final flurry of camera flashes, before they disappear back down the hatch above the Galley, muttering between themselves 'I think that went as well as could be expected,' and 'Steady! Steady! To you! To me! Don't drop him! Ah fuck!' Shortly followed by a massive crash. Meanwhile, Jazz Monk remains alone at the press conference table, and as the journalists begin to disperse and await Jim returning in his helicopter, the monkey bares his teeth in a desperate grin.

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September 9, 2011

Alfie's Journal #21:
The Holes



The tour bus trundled down Rongovia's only motorway - a road that pierced like an arrow through the scorched, desolate countryside. Jim was driving, expressionless behind sunglasses. W lay asleep in a booth behind the driver's seat, a tartan blanket pulled up around his chin. Opposite him sat the hired trumpet player, his bare feet up on the table, immersed in a hefty paperback novel called "The Utica Flower Company". From time to time he emitted short snorts through his nose, though it was impossible to tell if they were snorts of laughter or disbelief. In the booth opposite them was a man with slicked blond hair, his eyes closed in the air-conditioned shadows, wondering whether his boyfriend would change his mind about them getting married during his absence. Two cats called Phillipe and Louis weaved around the blond man's legs, looking for scraps of food or mirrors to break. At the back of the bus was a young man in a floral, short-sleeved dress, sporting four days facial hair and a mohawk. He was

strumming an unplugged electric guitar and staring out the window, occasionally looking around to pull faces behind the snorting trumpet player's back. A sixth passenger sat at the other end of the back seat, but he was buried under a pile of blankets.

The guy in the dress was Jon of the Atom, and the guy beneath the blankets was me. Neither of us should have been there. It was as if we'd fallen through holes in reality. I wondered whether Jon knew, or if he was enjoying the illusion so much that he didn't want to admit how unreal it was. His eyes followed a rusty red car as it hobbled up the motorway in the opposite direction. Three young men looked up at us, the one in the passenger seat, wearing a straitjacket. It was the first vehicle we'd seen since our tour bus crossed over the border from Moldova.

'Yo Klaus!' shouted Jon. 'If we're really as famous as you claim we are, then why couldn't we hire a fucking plane?'

The blond man turned stiffly in his suit jacket, pouting impatiently. 'I told you already. The army destroyed Rongo Airport. Colonel Strongman's parting gift to the people of Rongovia was to obliterate as much of our infrastructure as he could. Moldova was as close as we could get you.'

'Yeah, well I don't see why we couldn't have just landed in one of these fields. Look...' Jon gestured out at the shimmering emptiness. 'There's fuck all out there. Plenty of space to land a plane.'

Klaus had already heard this argument several times. He rolled his eyes and faced forward again, watching Jim as he fumbled around in the glove compartment full of white cassettes. He pulled out one and slotted it into the tape player. The beat of war drums and electronic wailing exploded from the speakers, causing the two cats to dive for cover and the hired trumpet player to put his ear plugs in. The bus began to pick up speed, and Jon of the Atom's fingers drummed unconsciously on his guitar. We didn't move a muscle, his mouth open, lost in a dream. In my dark cocoon beneath the blankets, fluttering notes of panic were flickering in my chest like a swarm of ylfnogards.

It felt like no time at all had passed since I leapt through a magic mirror onto a starry beach and retrieved a ringing phone from a pair of old soot-stained trainers.

'Alfie, is that you?' an American voice had asked me.

'It's me,' I told him. That much was true.

Jon of the Atom laughed at the other end of the line. 'What are you doing? What time is it?'

‘Three o’clock in the morning. I’m sitting on the beach,’ I told him. I neglected to mention the imaginary man who was wading out into the cold black waves in front of me.

‘I’m working on a soundtrack for a film. It’s a horror porno by some guy called Gubbins,’ he told me. ‘I think it’s about people who turn into bees. Bald blue bees. I spoke to Klaus, the Rongovian you told me about. He’s a bit of an asshole, so he’s perfect to manage us. Also I’ve hired a trumpet player. Say, can you get in touch with W to see if he’ll play bass?’

‘I guess,’ I said. I had no idea what he was talking about.

‘Klaus already managed to track down Jane Gilmore and she’s agreed to sing. She’s going to meet us in Rongo. Also, I’ve been meaning to ask you: is absinthe legal in Rongovia?’

‘I think pretty much everything is legal in Rongovia,’ I told him. *Countries that don’t actually exist are like that.*

‘Che Stadium, Alfie! Can you believe it? Seventy *thousand* people! We’re all over the Rongovian news, and Klaus is telling me this “Free Rongovia” gig is just the beginning. We’re talking merchandise, a longer tour in the winter, maybe playing some more stadiums in Moldovia and Urdlavia if it goes well. This is fucking *huge*! The break we’ve been waiting for!’

‘Well, don’t get your hopes up,’ I told him, watching as the waves pulled the imaginary man under. Then I’d held the phone against my ear with my shoulder and began to put the dead man’s shoes on over my bare feet.

On the 7th of December 2009, the Rongovian Revolution gained momentum thanks to an interview with a drugged-up lunatic on the Rongovian news. During the surreal interview, the lunatic threatened to blow chunks out of their country with an evil death-ray. Over the following days, there were violent clashes between the people and the government, a battle that originally started over something as simple as a disagreement about music. In the space of a few months, those who hadn’t sought refuge in neighbouring countries, awoke from a dreamlike slumber, convinced their world was about to end. They stopped buying records. Instead, as a matter of principle, they wrote their own songs and shared them with each other for free. They ceased to aspire to own as much as they could. Instead they tried their best to *be* the best they could be, with however long they had left to be it. Literature and art quickly followed into this new lo-fidelity slipstream. Before long, people stopped buying mobile phones and fancy cars. They travelled on foot and spoke to one another through paper cups

joined with string. They built bicycles from scrap metal and planted seeds in the earth in the hope they could grow their own food. These were no ordinary hippies. They were individuals just like you and me – scientifically-minded, cynical, and beaten down. Instead of urban flats, they abandoned the cities and large towns, attempting to form roving communes. They pitched tents and teepees in the fields, their children rescued from the assembly line of state education and taught philosophy alongside practical aptitudes. When the Rongovian economy inevitably began to collapse, the government grew desperate, and the mechanisms of War were dusted down and rolled out into the streets. You cannot even begin to imagine the horror that followed.

Two summers on, and The People’s Party of Rongovia claimed victory after the notorious “Battle of the Black Crater”. Colonel Strongman was toppled, his army of faceless soldiers disbanded, and the vast palaces and institutes of corruption were burned to the ground. All of this could be traced back to a little known lo-fi psychedelic rock band from upstate New York called The Real Burnouts. In 2008, they’d illegally, and accidentally, crossed the border in a minibus filled with tundra smoke and warped ideas. After three Burnouts gigs ended in riots, the government responded by censoring any art considered outwith the mainstream. As a result, the records of that period (many of them produced by an equally unknown independent record label called Quixodelic Records) were adopted as the anthems of the Rongovian Revolution. One of those revolutionary records just so happened to be “I Do Not Currently Own A Spaniard (Mine Died)”. And no amount of U2, Madonna, The Eagles, Simply Red, The Beautiful South, Dire Straits, Prince, or Bon Jovi could shake the curious affinity people had for the songs that soundtracked their changing lives. After a chance encounter during an epic tundra-fuelled hallucination with a Rongovian producer who worked for Channel 679, it was only a matter of time before an entire country came looking for us.

And so, three weeks after Jon of the Atom’s phone call on the beach, there I was. I tried to shout over the deafening music, ‘Jon, I don’t think I can do this!’

He stopped drumming his fingers and looked down at the pile of blankets. ‘Too late, Alfie. You signed a contract.’

‘No I didn’t!’

‘Okay, well, I signed a contract for you. You’re doing it.’

‘I’ll freak out! I know I will! I’ve never been on a stage!’ I said burying my head in my hands.

Jon shook his head and shouted down the bus. ‘Hey Jim! Who is this? Turn it up, will you?’

Jim leaned back, grinning like a maniac, the shimmering road stretching on into forever through the front window. ‘Handwithlegs,’ he shouted back, reaching for the volume dial.

‘Whale!’ screamed Jon.

‘What?’ shouted Jim, still grinning, one hand on the wheel, the other cupped behind his ear.

‘WHALE!’ screamed Jon again, closing his eyes and gesturing manically at the road.

Suddenly the road wasn’t so empty anymore. A great white whale lay across it, its albino skin dazzling in the late afternoon sun.

Jim shook his head and reached to turn down the volume, while Klaus jumped up and pointed, howling, ‘Whale, Jim! *Whale!*’ He grabbed the metal rail in front of him as we careened towards it. The tour bus was travelling at nearly 80 miles an hour, hurtling over the bumpy road, and I was now having a panic attack on top of my original panic attack underneath the blankets.

Jim looked up at the very last moment and grabbed the wheel in both hands, heaving it to his left, guiding the shrieking bus off the motorway. He narrowly missed the motionless white whale, crashing us on two wheels down a dusty embankment, the smell of burning rubber and smoke in our nostrils as the bus flipped, rolled, and gathered momentum, bouncing several times. I heard a high-pitched tearing sound as I slid off the back seat, protected by the padding of the blankets, before spinning upside down and coming to rest against the back window of the bus. For the briefest of moments it felt like we’d come to a standstill.

And then the tour bus exploded.

There was an almighty, all-encompassing roar of sound as everything got thrown up in the air. The sickening shock of screaming metal getting torn apart, combined with a swooping sickness in my gut as I got thrown through the air. The next moment, the bus smashed into the hard dirt. Something struck me in the ribs with incredible force. I found myself pushed into an artificial tunnel, and through a gap in the blankets, I caught sight of a black cat flying across the face of the sun.

And then there was nothing.

The first thing I was aware of was the ringing in my ears. I smelled smoke and gasoline, and heard the Handwithlegs cassette crumpling from a sparking speaker near my head as the tape unspooled. I started thrashing at the blankets, getting myself increasingly tangled in their claustrophobic folds. I forced myself up,

bumping my head on a sheet of torn metal hanging over me, could barely bring myself to look back at the wreckage. The burning smell terrified me, and I half-expected a second explosion. When I finally managed to fight myself clear of the blankets, it looked even worse than it did in my imagination.

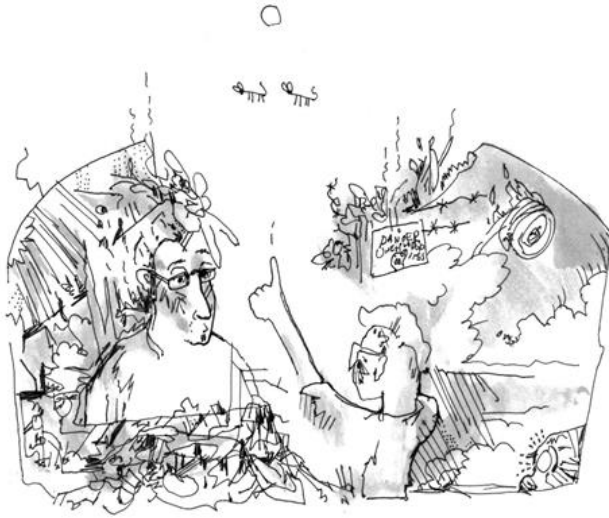
The tour bus had been torn in two. The rear half was now a contorted mess of metal and smoking upholstery. Thirty metres away, the front of the bus balanced precariously on its nose, folded like a partly-played accordion. Debris was scattered everywhere. A metal toilet stood alone in the earth, while elsewhere I saw wrecked guitars and a gleaming, mangled trumpet scattered alongside the smouldering remains of broken seats. A bus wheel rolled goofily away on the horizon. ‘Hello?’ I called out hopelessly, rooted to the spot.

I heard a scrabbling sound in the dirt to my right, and Jon of the Atom’s head appeared from underneath the back of the bus. His mohawk was fanned out like he’d just been electrocuted, and he snuffed out a burning strand of hair with his fingers. All the while his face remained expressionless, covered in dust and soot. Over the top of his mangled headrest he saw me and grinned, his white teeth sparkling in the sun. ‘Seriously, did that just happen?’ he cried, a single peal of horrified laughter running through his voice. ‘And why the fuck are you wearing a diving suit, Alfie?’

Before I could explain, there was another flurry of movement to our left and we saw Phillipe and Louis cautiously snake through the debris. They stopped in unison and looked back in Jon’s direction, before heading off across a barren field, moving away from the road. ‘Hey!’ called Jon, as he pulled himself out from under the bus. But either the cats didn’t hear him, or else they completely ignored him, breaking into a run beyond where the lone wheel had come to rest, their silhouettes like ink stains fading on the empty landscape, neither of them looking back. ‘Fucking cats,’ said Jon with a shake of his head, coming up beside me.

I lifted my snorkel and pointed at a faded black wooden warning sign, draped with barbed wire. It said “DANGER UNEXPLODED MINES”, with a picture of a skull and crossbones painted underneath. Desperation surged from Jon’s lungs as he yelled across the desolate landscape, ‘Phillipe! Louis! We’re in a fucking minefield! You fucking... fucking cats!’

Naturally the two tiny specks paid no attention to him, diminishing even further until they were swallowed by rolling bands of heat on the horizon. ‘We should probably check if anyone else is alive,’ I suggested.



He stared after his beloved cats for a few more seconds before despondently shaking his head. ‘At least they haven’t exploded yet,’ he said.

We called over to the other half of the bus, and heard what sounded like a muffled cry for help from inside the upturned wreckage, before briefly conferring about how we should traverse the potentially lethal minefield to reach them. Jon thought we should crawl on our bellies like soldiers in old war movies, combing the dirt with our toothbrushes in case there were mines. I asked him if he had a toothbrush. He said no. He asked me if I had a toothbrush. I said I didn’t. Realising the toothbrush idea was dead in the water, we held our breaths and tiptoed as quickly as we could through the smoking wreckage. I immediately saw W at the foot of the embankment, lying away from the bus, still shrouded under his tartan blanket. I continued to move towards him, every tiny step feeling like it could be my last. When I finally reached him, Jon shouted over, ‘Is he dead? If he is, I doubt we’ll get another bass player at such short notice.’

‘W? W!’ I crouched over him and slapped his cheek. He mumbled something incoherently. It sounded like, ‘Bob Dylan in two degrees... impressive Don Keylips,’ although his eyes remained closed.

‘Fuck knows how, but I think he’s still sleeping!’ I shouted back, shaking him by the shoulders but still not getting a lucid response.

‘That’s good,’ called Jon, ‘because Klaus is definitely dead.’

‘How do you know?’ I asked, looking back over my shoulder.

‘I just accidentally kicked his head. It’s not connected to his neck anymore. I think it might have been before I kicked it, but it’s not now.’ He was staring at something spherical at his feet.

‘Is it definitely his head? Klaus’s head?’

‘It’s got Klaus’s hair, and he seems to be... well he’s sort of grinning. It’s probably the most disgusting thing I’ve ever seen. Actually, I just threw up in my mouth.’

I left W to his dream and walked gingerly back towards the bus. ‘Any sign of Jim? Or the trumpet player?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Jon, ‘I can’t stop looking at Klaus’s head.’

I deliberately avoided looking at the decapitated remains of our tour manager, half-buried under the front of the bus, and made my way round to the other side. I located the driver’s window and squeezed my head and shoulders inside. Jim was lying trapped in the front seat, his legs disappearing from view underneath the crushed dashboard. He grimaced and said calmly, ‘About time. Reckon you can reach that chainsaw?’ He nodded down into the space where his legs were.

I reached down and passed the chainsaw up to him. ‘Don’t worry, Jim, everything’s going to be alright,’ I told him.

‘It will be, once I cut myself out,’ he said. ‘You might want to stand back for this.’

‘I can do it if you want?’ I suggested. I vaguely remembered Flash’s advice for limb amputations.

Jim shook his head and waved me away. ‘No offense, Alfie, but if anyone’s going to accidentally saw off my legs, then it’s going to be me.’

Quietly relieved, I glanced up through the front section of the bus. I could hear sobbing, and between the twisted remains saw the trumpet player wrapped around a metal pole, dangling upside down like a sloth. ‘I’ll go get him,’ I told Jim.

‘I don’t want to die!’ sniffed the trumpet player. ‘I didn’t even want this gig in the first place. Klaus said I’d get to meet Jane Gilmore, only she’s not even fucking here! Why couldn’t I have gone in the limo with her? Why did I end up on this fucking exploding bus with you... you... freaks? I told Klaus. I told him I wanted to go in the limo but he said no, Jane’s the superstar and we’re just... we’re just the supporting assholes. Where is he? I’ll fucking kill him!’

‘That won’t be easy. He’s already dead,’ I said as I scaled the outside of the bus and reached a hand down to him. We heard the whine and screech of Jim’s chainsaw from below as he cut himself out.

‘Klaus is dead?’ wailed the trumpet player, the panic escalating in his voice as he continued to dangle on the pole. ‘Oh my god! Oh god! Klaus is dead! What will we do? What if the Rongovian army find us out here? They’ll remove our faces! Oh god, I love my face! I NEED MY FACE!’

‘You can keep your face, just... holy fuck, calm down,’ I said, gently persuading him to let go of the pole and climb out of the bus.

We dropped to the hard earth before shuffling back round to Jon, now sitting beside Klaus’s decapitated head, and sucking on an asthma inhaler. ‘Oh fuck! Oh FUCK!’ yelled the trumpet player, falling to his hands and knees and throwing up.

Jim had crawled free from the driver’s window, his bloody and clearly broken legs sprawled out behind him. ‘By the way, W woke up,’ Jon told me. He pointed towards the field where the cats ran off. I shielded my eyes and sure enough, there was W, out beyond the warning sign, just a small silhouette sprinting across the empty field, his tartan blanket flapping like a cape around his shoulders.

‘Couldn’t you have stopped him?’ I asked.

‘I tried,’ said Jon. ‘I really did. But if I can’t persuade my own cats to not fuck off through a mine-field, then how do you expect me to convince a human being?’

‘W!’ I yelled. ‘Where are you going? There are mines out there!’

I was sure I saw him slow down, just for the briefest of moments, turning to look back in our direction. He made a curious salute by pressing his thumbs together in the shape of a W, before continuing on his way.

‘Jane’s gonna be pissed if we don’t show up on time,’ said Jon, getting up off the ground. ‘She’s already pissed about having to travel in that limo. She said she wanted to go on the tour bus with us, but Klaus said it wasn’t safe.’

The hired trumpet player made a horrible gurgling sound at the back of his throat, like he was drowning in his own vomit. He got to his feet, his beard matted with puke, and his eyes red raw from weeping. He screamed at the top of his lungs, ‘It should have been me in that fucking limo!’ and then he started to run after W and the cats.

‘Hey! Hey you! Trumpet guy!’ I called. ‘Come back! There are mines out there, you fucking idiot!’

‘There probably aren’t,’ says Jon, ‘I mean, Phillipe, Louis, and W all seem fine. Though fuck knows where any of them think they’re going. Do you think they know something we don’t? And where the fuck did that whale come fr-’

The explosion stopped him mid-sentence, and we watched the mushroom cloud of dust emanating from the exact spot where the hired trumpet player had been running, closely followed by the clatter of earth and shattered body parts raining down. We sat in silence as the cloud dissipated, leaving just emptiness behind. It was like the poor guy had been blown completely out of existence. ‘Fuck,’ said Jon, slapping his own forehead, ‘now we’re screwed for the sousa march section on “Hammer and Sickle”.’

We carried Jim up the embankment and placed him down on the roadside. ‘This thing’s still breathing you know,’ said Jon, running his hand along the white whale’s gleaming torso. He put his ear to its belly. ‘Is that possible? Do whales have lungs?’

‘I know this whale,’ I told him.

Jon stared at me for a moment before glancing at his wrist-watch. ‘Considering we’ve got, like, two hours before the concert is due to start, and I saw only one car on this whole stretch of motorway, going in the opposite direction, I’d say we’re pretty fucked. This is all your fault, Alfie.’

‘How’s it my fault?’

‘Well for a start, you still haven’t explained why you’re wearing that stupid frog-suit?’

‘What’s that got to do with anything? Why are you wearing a dress?’

‘It’s what they’re expecting me to wear. The first rule of playing a live show is to give your audience what they want,’ he said, running his hand along the creature’s enormous tail.

‘Yeah, well, seeing as I’ve never played live, I wouldn’t fucking know that, would I? And if you must know, the reason I’m wearing this diving suit is so as I can hide behind it.’

‘Hide? You’re such a fucking asshole, Alfie!’ he shouted.

‘I’m the asshole? *You’re* the fucking asshole!’ I shouted back, lowering my diver’s mask and flopping down on the dusty ground beside Jim.

In the gaping silence that followed, I could quite clearly hear Simon Piler shouting, ‘This is Simon Piler! Hello? Can you hear me?’

‘Did you hear that?’ I asked them. ‘It sounded like Simon Piler.’

‘Great,’ said Jon, pointing at me, ‘now he’s hearing a dead guy’s voice in his head.’

‘Fuck you!’ I shouted.

‘No, fuck you!’ Jon shouted back.

I was about to shout ‘Fuck you!’ again, when Jim stopped me. ‘Would you both fucking shut up! Look!’ He nodded up the road.

Trundling into view was a donkey pulling a cart, and on the cart sat a scrawny old man with a goatee beard, wearing round-rimmed mirrored shades and a big, black floppy hat.

‘Let me do the talking, Alfie, you’ll only fuck things up,’ said Jon quietly, stepping up beside me.

The old man tilted his head to one side as if he was catching our words on the breeze. He pulled on the reins, motioning for the pissed-off looking donkey to stop. We watched him dismount, slowly and painstakingly from the cart. It was at this point that I realised the old man was blind as he walked across the road towards us, tapping a walking stick in front of him. ‘Hey, old timer,’ said Jon.

‘Well howdy!’ said the blind man, tipping his hat to us. ‘And what do we have here? Trouble, I imagine?’

The donkey behind him snorted grumpily and I saw the cart was loaded up with crates and items held down with colourful yarns. Jon cleared his throat. ‘Um, yeah... you could say that. You see, we’re in a band – Kaleidonauts. Have you heard of us?’

The blind man paused to consider before shaking his head. ‘Cosmonauts you say – like Russian spacemen?’

‘No, no, not Cosmo-nauts,’ said Jon impatiently. ‘Look, never mind that. We’re on our way to a concert. A big concert. Free Rongovia at Che Stadium. You know about that, right?’

‘I know Che Stadium,’ said the blind man, cocking his head to the other side. ‘That someone else groaning over there?’

‘Yeah, that’s our driver,’ explained Jon, ‘his legs are all busted up. Our bus went off the road into a mine-field and exploded. There was a whale in the middle of the road.’

‘Actually, there’s still a whale in the middle of the road,’ I pointed out.

‘Who’s that?’ asked the blind man, his face turning in my direction.

‘That’s Alfie,’ said Jon, shooting me daggers. ‘Just ignore him. He’s an asshole.’

I was convinced the old man flinched at the sound of my name. ‘Curious accent,’ he said.

‘Yeah, he’s a Scottish asshole,’ explained Jon.

‘Ah, a Scotsman, eh? You know, I sailed with a Scotsman once, many small blue moons ago,’ said the blind man, smiling into the distance. ‘But let me get this right,’ he said, snapping himself back into the moment. ‘You said there was a whale in the road?’

‘That’s right. A big white whale,’ said Jon.

‘Over here?’ asked the blind man as he skipped past us. He was suddenly moving remarkably spritely for someone his age, placing his hands on the whale’s huge head. ‘Goodness! There’s a whale in the road!’ he said.

‘Uh, yeah,’ said Jon, glancing at me and rolling his eyes.

‘It urgently requires water,’ said the old man.

‘No shit,’ muttered Jon. ‘Listen, do you have a cell phone so we can call for help? Our friend needs a medic, and if we don’t get to Che Stadium our fans will go batshit crazy and you Rongovians will be staring down the barrel of another revolution.’

‘A cell phone?’ the blind man asked with a laugh. ‘Heavens no! A colleague of mine used to own one, but not me. I don’t trust electrical appliances. However, I think I can still help, if you’d care to follow me.’

I couldn’t help but feel like I knew this kooky old fellow from somewhere. We followed him to the back of his cart and he hopped up like a man who was half his age. He started rummaging around in the containers, pulling out odd little packages wrapped in rags - bottles, tin boxes, unlabelled jars of colourful substances, and a broken ping-pong paddle, all the while muttering under his breath, ‘Where is it? Where is it?’ Finally he cried ‘A-ha!’ as he produced something that looked like a bottle of cloudy green piss. ‘Take this to your driver,’ he said, handing the bottle down to Jon, ‘and make sure he drinks the lot.’

‘What is it?’ Jon asked, looking to me and tapping his finger to his temple, before pointing at the blind man who was busy rearranging the items in the wooden crate he’d been rummaging around in.

‘Oh, it’s just a little remedy I picked up on my travels,’ the blind man told us with a mischievous smirk. ‘Quickly now, we’ve no time to waste! Is that Scotsman still there?’

‘I’m right here,’ I told him while Jon ambled with the bottle across to Jim.

‘Good, good. Give me a hand with these ropes,’ he said, hauling some thick ropes out from under a patchwork sheet of cloth at the back of the cart. ‘I’m sure you’re as sturdy as your Pictish ancestors.’

‘Actually no,’ I told him, awkwardly climbing up beside him in my frog-suit. ‘Listen, do I know you from somewhere? Sorry, I didn’t catch your name?’

He chuckled to himself and ignored me, continuing to unwind the ropes. He handed me one end and motioned for me to get down from the cart. ‘Well, let me see. Have you ever been to Plum Island?’ he asked.

Plum Island. I recognised the name, but I couldn't think where from. 'Not that I remember,' I said.

'What about Cockton's Quintessentials?'

'Cockton's what?'

He chuckled to himself and hopped down with a second rope in his hands, motioning for me to pull.

Over by the whale, Jon started shouting, 'Hey mister! Jim drank the bottle and he passed out! Is that normal?'

The blind man wheezed, exposing a mouthful of polished teeth like tiny rocks. 'Completely normal!' he cried. 'So long as he's not growing additional limbs or complaining about fibriltics, I'd say he'll be right as rain before ya know it.'

'He's not growing extra limbs!' shouted Jon as the old man and I heaved at the ropes. They began to unravel until the cart made a loud cracking noise.

'That's it!' cried the blind man. 'Now, would you fellas be kind enough to help me fetch down that big ole basket, right at the back there?'

Jon and I climbed on and shifted the assorted boxes and sacks until we reached a large and sturdy wicker basket. We grabbed a handle each and lugged it over the side of the cart. 'Seriously Alfie, this *is* all your fucking fault,' whispered Jon, catching his breath.

'My fault? You were the one who was distracting Jim and -'

'Now, now!' said the blind man, wagging his finger at us. 'That's no way to talk to each other!' He'd uncoupled the donkey who shuffled grouchy to the roadside, vainly looking for something to graze on. We watched the old man skip round to the side of the cart, grabbing hold of a large wooden crank handle. 'Stand well clear, lads!' he hollered, and with considerable effort he began to turn it. 'Like a couple of squabbling brothers,' he muttered to himself as his floppy black hat rose and fell with every turn. We watched in amazement as the cart began to fold together, at first into a V-shape, the various items sliding and rolling into the bottom, until a few moments later we were staring at a huge wooden crate. The blind man puffed and beamed as he folded the wheels inwards, completing the transformation. 'Alright, well let's get that basket opened up and see if the old clog still flies...'

I could barely begin to imagine what we must have looked like from the ground. An enormous hot-air balloon made from patchwork fragments of fabric stitched together to look like a giant clog, drifting slowly across the fantastic Rongovian evening skyline. It almost defied logic that the balloon stayed up in the air. It may have appeared to be a

conventional hot-air balloon, propelled along on bursts of green gaseous flame that every so often was pumped by the blind man into the billowing canopy above our heads, but the jumble of passengers, and more notably the cargo trailing on ropes beneath us, was quite unlike anything you'd ever expect to see looking up.

The blind man was imp-like, gleefully offering to hand roll us some dried black “tabacky” for sustenance. I sat in my frog-suit on the floor of the basket, too afraid to look. Jim lay unconscious beside me, his trousers caked with dry blood, clutching his pet chainsaw to his chest. Meanwhile, Jon of the Atom leaned on the basket’s rim, looking the blind man’s donkey straight in the eye and saying, ‘Hey there, handsome’. The donkey ignored him with a weary look in his eyes, like he’d seen it all before and bought the t-shirt twice. The new cubic version of the cart hung beneath the basket, and harnessed to that, swinging gently like a pendulum, was the great white whale.

‘What is this stuff?’ I asked the old man, exhaling a plume of rancid black smoke.

‘That would be seaweed,’ he said, puffing on a pipe of his own. He suddenly burst into a little animated dance, and sang, ‘Thar she blows!’

I forced myself to stand and gripped tight to the edge of the basket, my knuckles turning white with fear. Ahead on the horizon, the capital city of Rongo loomed into view. It was a sprawling golden city illuminated by the ebbing sun, much like any westernised urban centre with its tower blocks and steeples rising up out of the ground. ‘Hey!’ said Jon. ‘How did you know that was there? I thought you were blind?’

The blind man smirked and continued to puff on his pipe, neglecting to answer the question. By the time we reached the outskirts of Rongo, a sprinkling of stars dusted the night blue sky. We didn’t have far to go before we set eyes on Che Stadium. It was a colossal basin-like stone structure built in the 1950s, badly damaged by the government’s desperate last-ditch bombing of the city’s key symbolic structures. One side of it had been completely pulverised like some hideous gargantuan monster has mistaken it for a doughnut. As the blind man began to release the pressure from the balloon-clog and we glided down towards it, Jon turned to our mysterious pilot and asked, ‘Hey, how come there are no lights? Those are candles, right?’

‘Rongo has been without electricity for several months now, but the people make do,’ replied the balloonist. ‘The ingenuity of humans in the face of adversity never ceases to amaze me.’

Jon looked alarmed. ‘No electricity? How the fuck am I going to play my guitar solo on “For A Girl I Never Kissed” if there’s no electricity?’

Jon might have looked alarmed, but that was nothing compared to what I was feeling. I was shaking with terror beneath the frog-suit, and my stomach was lurching as the balloon descended. It was partly to do with the idea of the concert, but it might also have been something to do with that rancid seaweed shit I’d been smoking. Seventy thousand fever-pitch voices mushroomed up, cameras flashing, girls screaming, boys screaming, dogs screaming, as they caught sight of the patchwork clog-shaped balloon and the swaying white whale emerging from above. ‘I can’t do this...’ I whimpered, sinking down with my masked face buried between my knees, hyperventilating.

Jon glanced at his watch and grinned. ‘Unbelievable! We’re actually five minutes early!’

As the screaming swelled and the whale narrowly missed crashing through the packed upper tiers with an audible ‘Ooooh!’ from the ducking Rongovians, I tried again. ‘I CAN’T FUCKING DO THIS!’ I yelled. ‘I SHOULDN’T EVEN BE HERE! NONE OF US SHOULD! WE DON’T EXIST IN THIS UNIVERSE!’

Jon heard me this time, and though he couldn’t take his eyes off the green grass of the Rongovian national stadium, or the small candlelit stage at the centre of the pitch, he shouted back, ‘I hear you Alfie, but it’s too late to change your mind now. They’ll fucking feed us to the lions if we pull out!’ He turned to the balloonist. ‘I take it you do have lions in Rongovia? And what about absinthe?’

The old balloonist chuckled. ‘Lions? Well, it’s funny you should mention that...’ His voice tailed away as he continued to laugh.

I looked up at Jon waving to the crowd taking pictures, a sudden squall of sound when he raised his hand. ‘JON!’ I yelled helplessly, before throwing up violently onto the basket floor.

‘Oh my, that’s unpleasant!’ said the balloonist, stepping over the running vomit while the whale landed gently on the pitch. Seconds later we touched down, the basket heaving as the balloon-clog deflated and dragged.

Jon bent down to me, his bearded face alive with excitement as he hauled me to my flippered feet and helped me over the side. Behind us, the balloonist was already pumping green gas back into his curious balloon, his hat thrashing like a butterfly on top of his head as he yelled, ‘Alright fellas! Next stop for me: the Specific Ocean!’

Over Jon’s shoulder, I saw the concert organisers running towards us in a blur of matching red “FREE RONGOVI” t-shirts. As I stood

there trying my best to not be sick again, watching the blind man, the donkey and the whale lift off from the earth, I could vaguely hear a female organiser shouting over the crowd's deafening screams. 'Incredible! Is this all part of the show? We were told you'd be arriving in a bus, but we thought you weren't going to show up! Was that a patchwork balloon-shoe?'

'Our bus fucking EXPLODED!' explained Jon as the event manager cupped her hand around her ear and grinned.

'I'm sorry?' she eventually shouted back, staring nervously at me in my diver's outfit.

'I SAID OUR FUCKING BUS EXPLODED!' yelled Jon. 'KA-BOOM! RIPPED IN TWO. OUR MANAGER, KLAUS, HIS HEAD BLEW OFF, THEN I ACCIDENTALLY KICKED IT LIKE A SOCCER BALL...'

'Yes?' she said nervously, seemingly incapable of processing a word he was saying.

'AND MY FUCKING CATS RAN AWAY ACROSS A MINEFIELD! BUT DON'T WORRY, THEY DIDN'T EXPLODE!'

'And W too,' I added.

'YEAH, WE LOST OUR BASSIST AS WELL. AND OUR TRUMPET PLAYER. HE EXPLODED. AND OUR DRIVER, JIM. HE...'

He stopped and we looked at each other, then back at the balloon-clog floating high above the stadium. 'Fuck! We forgot Jim!' he shouted to me. We watched the clog and the white whale disappear into the night sky, before Jon shook his head and said, 'Jim will be okay, Alfie. He's in safe hands with that crazy, blind man.'

I nodded, unconvinced, and turned to the confused, grinning woman in the "FREE RONGOVI" t-shirt. She was standing there waiting for Jon to start shouting again.

'ALL OUR INSTRUMENTS EXPLODED!' he yelled. 'KA-BOOM! YOU UNDERSTAND? WE - HAVE - NO - GUITARS!'

'No guitars?' she shouted back, finally seeming to understand something.

'THAT'S RIGHT, NO FUCKING GUITARS! NO NOTHING! NADA! ZIP!'

'We can get you guitars!' she shouted, waving a young gangly male steward forward and giving him instructions.

'WAIT!' shouted Jon, just as the young lad was about to turn and run back towards the main stand. 'WE ALSO NEED A CLARINET! CAN YOU GET ME A CLARINET? AND A TOY PIANO? OH, AND A BATHTUB WITH A SHOWER CURTAIN - YOU KNOW,

ONE THAT STRETCHES RIGHT AROUND IT? CAN YOU GET US THAT?’

‘A clarinet and a piano?’ asked the woman.

‘AND A BATHTUB.’ He began to mime running a bath and washing under his armpits.

‘You need a bath?’ she asked enthusiastically, but utterly bamboozled.

‘YES, ON THE STAGE. A BATHTUB WITH A CURTAIN AROUND IT.’ He mimed opening and closing curtains, and she nodded, her eyes lighting up.

‘A bath with a shower curtain? Yes!’ she exclaimed, barking orders into the young man’s ear again. I watched him and several of their team sprint off to get the items from fuck knows where.

‘IS JANE GILMORE HERE?’ asked Jon.

‘Jane Gilmore? She’s in the dressing room. She’s a very clever girl, but very, very angry that she didn’t get to go in the bus with the rest of the band,’ said the woman.

Jon laughed and then gestured in disbelief to the trackside where the stewards were returning with two electric guitars, a toy piano, and a clarinet. A second group of stewards wheeled a bathtub with a shower curtain around it. ‘Fucking hell, Alfie! These Rongovians know how to get shit done!’ he said, amazed.

We watched as they swarmed around the stage, a chant going up around Che Stadium. The crowd were clapping, eagerly awaiting the first note, and urging us to play. ‘Are you ready?’ asked the woman.

I tried to shout ‘NO!’ but Jon’s hand clamped over my open mouth and he began dragging me towards the stage. As we climbed the handful of steps to the wooden platform surrounded by generators and giant speakers, he screeched under his breath, ‘Just follow my lead, Alfie. We’ll wing it. Trust me, two songs in and you’ll be having the time of your life. Okay?’

I stared at him, dumbstruck in horror. ‘I’m not who you think I am!’ I screamed. ‘I’m not who any of you think I am!’

He pretended to ignore me, plugging his acoustic guitar into one of the amps and starting to tune it. I heard the notes reverberate around the stadium and an even more deafening roar went up. Over the white noise of delirium, Jon was telling me to get into the bathtub. ‘If you’re that nervous, pull the curtains shut around you.’

I backed slowly towards the tub while Jon stepped up to the microphone at the front of the stage and tapped it a couple of times to check it was working. ‘Good evening, Rongoviiiiiaaaaaaaahhhhh!’ he shouted, winking over at me as the crowd cheered again. ‘Now let’s

hear it for the real superstar of the Kaleidonauts... Miss - Jane - Gilmoooooooooore!

The cheer for Jane was somehow even louder. So loud that little red birds combusted in shock and flowers grew legs and ran away in the moonlight. As I retreated between the closed curtains, I saw Jane scampering with a grin across the grass towards us. 'Run Jane, run!' goofed Jon into his microphone, but you could barely hear him over her adoring fans.

She reached the steps leading up to the stage as I drew the curtains shut around me. Outside I heard Jon say, 'This is my least favourite song on "Spaniard", it's called "Our Back Garden"...' The Rongovians went ballistic when he started to strum the chords.

That was when I realised I wasn't alone in the bath. I spun around and stared at the strange bearded face looking back at me. It was a face I knew, but somehow different. A little bit older. A little bit sadder. And obviously a lot more bearded. 'Moss! What the fuck are you doing here?' I asked. It was too weird. I felt like I was dreaming.

'How did you know it was me?' she asked, pulling the beard down around her neck.

'It's a really crap disguise,' I told her.

'Are you ready?' she asked.

'Ready for what?' I was vaguely aware I'd missed my cue on the song, the chord sequence repeating without my vocals. I saw that Moss had the blue Time Commander engine strapped to her back, reaching around to press a series of buttons and flick some switches.

'Why are you wearing a diving suit?' she asked.

'You have your crap disguise. I have mine,' I said.

As the chords played softer and the maddened cheers mingled with murmurs of confusion, Jon's voice growled around the stadium, 'Alfie!'

Moss nodded and placed a hand on my shoulder. With the other, she reached back and flicked a switch labelled "TIME: BACK".

The last thing I remembered hearing before we twanged through space and time was Jon of the Atom howling, 'Alfie, YOU ASSHOOOOOOOOOOOOLLLLLLEEEEE!'

We were standing in the shadows of a patch of waste ground at night. There were old stone buildings on both sides, while a tall tree swayed overhead in the breeze. I'd never been to this place, but all the same, I had a feeling I knew exactly where we are. Moss removed her hand from my shoulder and reached into her cloak pocket, pulling out a small black notebook and pen. She checked her wristwatch, glanced

around, and furiously scribbled a 10x10 grid of numbers between 1 and 5 into the book. I pulled my mask up onto my head and exhaled while she bit her lip and studied me. 'I think I finally worked it out, Alfs. I know why they died. Why they keep dying.'

I pointed at the engine strapped to her back. 'That thing is dangerous,' I said. 'No good will come of using it. You'll only fuck things up even more than they already are.'

She nodded, clearly not listening. 'I read and re-read your journal entries, looking for something -'

I stopped her mid-sentence, cursing silently as I put my hands over my eyes. 'I don't know what's going on,' I said.

'- it's Nate Lowman,' she told me.

'Fucking hell.'

'Tonight's the night you were supposed to pick him up, but you didn't make it. Instead, The Real Burnouts got arrested for kidnapping him. Some girl called Butterscup Murphy found the golden ticket, and you took her to the moon in Nate's place.'

She delved back into her cloak pocket and pulled out a dictaphone, rewinding through screeching dialogue before letting it play. I heard the ghostly voices crackling forward from a time when they were still alive, transmitted from somewhere between the Earth and moon. Simon sounded chirpy, babbling in the background. It sounded like he was saying, 'Not Scarytoes... taller than me!' Next thing a strange voice interrupted him, saying, 'Butterscup, your toast is burning...' and an American woman started screaming for her life. Then I heard my own voice. I was yelling, 'Fucking hell! Switch it off! Switch it off!' And finally there was silence. Deafening silence.

Moss stopped the dictaphone. 'I tried to change it so many times,' she said quietly, pulling off the fake beard and stuffing it in her pocket. 'You guys stole my toastie-maker. It caught fire, and you all died.'

I staggered over to the tree and sat down on the cold hard ground, kicking off my flippers. A few seconds later, she shuffled over to me. 'After the first explosion, Charlie Kaufman took me back in time. I hid my toastie-maker in the costume cupboard, only Jazz Monk found it. He was probably spying on me. When the Fish Rocket exploded for a second time, I went back again. This time I tried to warn you what would happen, but you didn't believe me. You said you'd had a premonition and everything was going to be alright. The five of you went and you all died again. So I went back for a third time. I locked you in the Basement on the Mardi, but the others went anyway because it was "What Alfie would have wanted". I even went way back, and I mean way, waaaaaay back, before the Mardi. I tried to stop the ship

from sailing. I stole a box of lifejackets from Jacksonville Harbour, hoping you wouldn't sail without them, but nobody seemed to notice. It's like there are some things you can't change, no matter how hard you try; like the Mardi was meant to be... *had* to be. I've gone back so many times that I've torn all these holes in the stitching of time. The more I use Charlie Kaufman, the more fucked up everything seems to get. I'm not sure I know how to explain this. Basically, Nate Lowman is my last throw of the dice. If this doesn't work, then that's it, I'll walk away.'

She stopped and looked up at the night sky, and in that moment I realised I needed to tell her the truth. 'Chief, it's more complicated than that,' I told her. 'It's not your fault.'

'We're all to blame, Alfs,' she said. 'We got carried away without ever understanding the power of that ship.' She handed me a crumpled sheet of paper. 'Do you remember anything about this?'

I unfolded it and held it up to the dim glow of the street lights. 'It's a transcript of the ping-pong match between me and Simon,' I said.

'Not that,' she said. 'On the other side.'

I turned it over. On the back of the transcript was a handwritten copy of a conversation with "PROJECT: GHB" scrawled across the top:

- Okay man, we've virtually scratched each other's backs many times, but this is the last favour I'll ever ask of you. How easy would it be for you to kidnap Nate Lowman? I need him for a trip to the moon.

- I'm sorry, but what am I supposed to do? I've got the roofies and the duct tape, now what...?

- You need to find this guy, hire a transit van, get some serious drugs, and bring him to the patch of waste ground behind the Flower Company. We'll rendezvous Friday night for the handover. In the meantime, watch out for Peruvians and men in black suits with suspiciously shiny shoes. All our future communication on this matter should be encrypted and I'd recommend you delete all trace of these messages from your inbox and hard-drive. I'd think of a code name "Project Something or Other", but you've always been better with titles than me. Fraternaly yours in expectation.

- GHB would be a great code name for this. If I knew what the fuck was going on at all, that is. Don't worry, my email is secured with a

password so ingenious it cannot be hacked. However, there is a backdoor which opens out into the alley.

- Just to clarify: I don't want this guy date raped, I just need him to be immobilised and brought to the meeting point on Henry Street, Friday midnight, your time. I know next to nothing about him other than he is potentially "a douchebag" and makes crap art. I don't think he'll be armed, but just to be on the safe side, you should be prepared. I'm glad your email is secure, I hope mine is too. Also, don't worry – the confusion you are feeling pretty much sums up what every single person who hears a Real Burnouts record for the first time experiences. My advice is to just enjoy it.

'In my defence, I was very, very stoned when I wrote this,' I told her.

'I stole it from your case file at the Rongo Institute,' said Moss. 'You deleted the messages, but you kept a paper copy because you kept forgetting GHB and calling it GBH.'

'Actually I think I was calling it GHD, as in Great Hair Day,' I said. 'It was getting Alexander seriously confused. Hang on... you know about the Institute? Moss, what are you even doing here? You're not supposed to be in this reality. Jon too. Something has gone seriously wrong.'

'It was some guy called Finch,' she said, pacing up and down in front of me, muttering away to herself. 'But never mind that for now. What if by not taking this guy and taking Butterscup instead, you fucked up the premonition? What if it wasn't just a premonition? What if it actually happened in the future and you somehow remembered it?'

'I've got an amazing idea,' I said. 'Let's get you back to your reality and cancel the moon mission.'

That really pissed her off. For a moment, I was marginally more scared than I was of singing in front of seventy thousand people. 'Have you even been listening to me, Alfs? Don't you think I tried all that? Fuck! This is the only way. We have to recreate the premonition.'

Right on cue a white transit van pulled into the waste ground and parked up in the shadows, dimming its headlights. There were three people sitting in the front seats: a guy in a weird transparent plastic mask, someone dressed in a bigfoot costume, and a witchy looking girl with long dark hair. They looked like they'd contracted a really bad case of Cartoonitis.

It could only be The Real Burnouts.

Alexander Tokeleaf switched off the engine and jumped down from the driver's side, his features distorted behind the mask. The back

of the transit van opened and Jim appeared in shades, his chainsaw slung over his shoulder. The bigfoot and the girl continued to sit in the front, lit up by the ceiling light, while Alexander and Jim disappeared into the back. I got up and walked with Moss towards them, watching while they struggled with a fifth figure. His hands and legs were bound with duct tape, and more of the stuff had been wrapped chaotically around his face. They dropped him carelessly and quite deliberately at our feet, and I stared down at Nate Lowman, his blue eyes blinking back at me. ‘As requested, Alfie,’ said Alexander, muffled behind the plastic mask and warmly shaking my hand. ‘He’s a bit of a handful though, so be careful.’ He pulled a small pipe from his pocket and took a deep draw, staggering backwards as the vapour hit his lungs.

Jim handed me a straw boating hat and said, ‘This is his.’

‘How are your legs, Jim?’ I asked him.

‘Jim? Who’s Jim?’ he asked.

‘How are your legs?’

‘My legs?’ he asked.

‘Never mind,’ I said, squatting down to study the horror in Nate’s eyes. Fuck knows what he thought was happening to him; snatched by some crazed gang of mask-wearing freaks, and now getting handed over to a guy in a diving suit on some waste ground in Utica. ‘Don’t worry, Nate. We’re not going to hurt you,’ I told him quietly. ‘We just need to take you with us to the moon. It’s going to be pretty fucked up, but hopefully this time we’ll live to tell the tale.’

Nate started cursing and screaming beneath the tape wound across his mouth, hopelessly thrashing his bound legs in the dust. ‘There’s plenty of roofies left,’ said the guy claiming not to be Jim, ‘if you need them.’

Meanwhile, Moss had removed the engine from her back and started hooking the straps over my shoulders. ‘I still really need to tell you something,’ I said. ‘It’s important.’

‘Well, it’ll have to wait,’ she told me. ‘Any moment now, the police are going to show up and arrest us all. Let’s try and not get caught red-handed abducting the douchebag.’

It was funny, but as much as I knew just by being here that I was endangering them all, and as much as I didn’t want to die flying to the moon, everything felt like it was pushing me back in the direction of the Mardi as Moss turned a dial on the engine and pressed some buttons. ‘You can do it, Alfs,’ she told me. ‘I know you can. Don’t worry about Charlie Kaufman, he’s pre-programmed to return you to exactly the right moment in time. Although he’s been playing up of

late... but, there's no time to worry about that.' She turned to Alexander and Jim and said, 'Here, give me a hand with Nate.'

They picked him up under the arms as the flashing blue lights of a police car began to reflect on the windows of the surrounding buildings, and a siren started to whoop. 'It's the cops,' spat Not-Jim, turning and sprinting towards the van where the witchy girl and the bigfoot continued to sit motionless like waxworks in the front seats.

'Right on cue,' said Moss with a grin.

'Good luck, Alfie,' said Alexander, dropping Nate into my arms and running off after Not-Jim.

'Thanks,' I shouted after him, 'you too.'

'Now remember,' said Moss, 'press this switch once to jump, and if that doesn't work, then try punching it really hard until it does. Once you've dropped Nate off on the Mardi, it should be set to return you back here fifteen or twenty minutes from now. That should be plenty of time for me to out-talk the police.'

'Shit. I hope this thing works...'

'He will,' she said confidently. 'I'll be seeing you back on the Mardi, I guess.'

The police car was almost upon us. 'Hang on, why do I have to do this? Why can't you?'

'I've met me several times in the past and it always ends badly,' she said. 'Now quit stalling, Alfs. Go, go go!'

I looked at Nate, his pupils dilated with fear, pleading for the cop car to turn the corner, and furiously shaking his head. Then I took a deep breath and pressed the switch.

Nate Lowman blinked and when he opened his eyes we were standing on the main deck of the Mardi. It was still night, and we were in the middle of a storm. I was so shocked at being back myself, that I couldn't help but drop him, letting his duct-tape bound body thud onto the warm wooden floor. She was just a dream. And that was the first thing that had made sense to me in a long, long time. The Mardi wasn't real. The Fish Rocket never happened. The five who died on their way to the moon never actually died. They never even existed. I'd spent two years in the Institute in Rongovia, working with Professor Pancho Sanchez, trying to figure out what the fuck had gone on to make me imagine all this. He said I'd taken too many drugs, that I'd had a nervous breakdown, and that my name wasn't even Alfie. It was Billy. Billy White.

I peered through the driving rain and saw the hulking shadow of the Fish Rocket on the helicopter landing pad at the rear of the ship. And it was strange. As terrified as I was to be back, I was happier than

I'd been since I woke up in the Institute, two long years ago. Two years isn't a long time, but it's long enough to forget how real this actually felt.

I snapped myself out of the trance and grabbed the soggy hostage under his armpits, dragging him over to the hatch leading down to the cabins. Nate's legs bumped down the two flights of metal steps and I hauled him along the bottom corridor, the carpet and walls still damaged from the time the sprinkler system got triggered. I stopped outside Bunkroom 3 and listened at the door. The ship rocked and creaked in the storm, but her occupants, if there were any, remained silent. I looked down at Nate and smiled, knocking the door and hurrying off along the corridor, the engine clanking on my back. I hid behind the door of the Machine Shop, pausing to peek back through a gap to watch what happened. After a few seconds, the bunkroom door opened and there I stood in my ragged Flower Company uniform. I watched this other version of me look up and down the corridor, seeing nothing, then down at the douchebag wriggling on the corridor floor. He stooped and tore the tape from Nate's mouth, and I heard a volley of abuse from the hostage. 'Fuck you! Fuck you, you motherfucking freaks! I'll call the cops! What are you doing to me? Where's that bigfoot? That bigfoot comes near me again and I'll bite his fucking -' before the duct tape got stuck back down and Nate was hauled inside the room.

I look back at the blue box and my finger hovered over the switch. I was about to press it when I heard a voice in the darkness behind me. 'Alfie, is that you?'

'Jon?'

I squinted, my eyes adjusting to the dark, but all I saw was the outline of machinery and crates stacked up to the ceiling. I hovered my finger over the switch again, taking a deep breath. 'For what it's worth, I'm sorry. You were right; I am an asshole...' I said quietly.

And as I pressed the switch I was pretty sure I heard the shadows say quietly back, 'It's okay. I'm an asshole too...'

And then I twanged through time.

Only I wasn't back on the waste ground like I was supposed to be. I was standing in a small circular room, with an unlit wood stove, an empty sofa-bed, and a writing desk against the wall. Above the writing desk was a black and white framed picture of Jack Kerouac, and sitting with his back-turned at the desk was me.

Something was different. Out of the round window to my right I could see the edge of the ocean. Beyond that there was nothing. 'The

edge of the world', I whispered, and the me in the seat turned around with tears in his eyes.

'Just press the fucking button, Willoughby Toad,' he said and I nodded, my finger reaching back for the switch.

I twanged again.

Only now I was in the Wardroom. Directly in front of me, spying through the crack of the door leading through to the Galley, was the Jazz Monk. I flicked the switch again, as fast as I could, before I said something I'd regret.

I was back on the main deck in bright moonlight. I heard my own voice behind me and turned to see a ginormous puffin balancing on the aft railing of the ship. The Koradji pelicans flapped frantically around, squawking like alarm bells in the air above our heads. The puffin spoke with a pleasant baritone voice. I heard me asking him to conceal himself inside the folds of a cloud, promising in return that he could visit us every full moon and talk as much crap as he wanted.

Nautilus obliged, but just before I could press the switch again, I looked up and the puffin appeared to shit a kinda deformed red football. Bizarrely the football hit me in the face as my finger pushed down on the switch.

I watched the ball bounce and roll across the deck. It was still a moonlit night, and I was still standing on the main deck, rubbing my throbbing nose. It dawned on me that I hadn't gone anywhere and tried to flick the switch again. Nothing happened. I ducked down behind the grand piano-sub as the other version of me walked over to the balustrade, smoking a cigarette. I pressed the switch again and again, but still nothing happened. Looking up, I saw the other me flick his cigarette end out into space, blowing one last smoke-ring. In a moment of blind panic, I scooped up the red football and jumped inside the piano, hunkering down in a corner, and listening to his footsteps padding across the deck.

The piano-sub lid opened and he climbed in as I curled into a ball, trying not to get seen. I shut my eyes as he closed it and we sat there in silence. After several long seconds, he shouted, 'Erm, could somebody please give me a push?'

There was another long pause where only the gentle flop of waves against the wooden hull of the ship could be heard, before the unmistakable whoosh of giant wings, followed by the sound of a piano crashing into sea.

...

NIKO SUPERCOMPUTER: ++It's none of my business, but we have heard nothing from the Fish Rocket in over 40 hours. By my calculations, there is a 97.2% chance that the rocket will disintegrate at some point in the first four days of the mission. Given the absence of contact, I also calculate there is a 98.8% chance they all died shortly after exiting the Earth's atmosphere. Probably from asphyxiation. Also there seems to be a problem with the new navigation system. I cannot locate "The Seven Isles" so will be setting a course for the closest alternative that I can find. Just in case anyone was wondering.++

Moss: Just take us near a nice island. Maybe we can row over and get some coconuts. We need more tropical fruit and tropical attitude.

NIKO SUPERCOMPUTER: ++(digital sigh) Yes ma'am – changing course for "a nice island with tropical fruit". My systems calculate that, weather permitting, we will reach our destination within the next 7 days. Again it's none of my business, but the Mardi's only lifeboat (actually a Dr Seuss dinghy) was stolen by the Koradji goons. So you will have to swim ashore.++

...

October 18, 2009

FISHROCKET: Transmission #1

Digital recording retrieved from the "Fish Rocket" approximately one and a half hours ago:

Alfie: So where do we all sit?

Simon: Okay, let's see... Robbie in the aft fuselage -

Alfie: You piloting obviously.

Simon: No no no. I think you should pilot first

Alfie: I can't drive.

Simon: Hell, the moon was your idea.

Alfie: Oh no! We'll let Jazz Monk drive. [*laughing*]

Simon: C'mon... it's the blast off. [*laughing*] Yes, besides, I want to work the radio

OR

be the navigator

well, actually, just the radio.

Alfie: What about Nate? He's not much use to us bound and gagged.

Simon: True, but I don't fancy letting him loose in here either.

Alfie: Okay, Jazz Monk on piloting duties, he's already in the pilot's seat after all, you on radio, me on navigation, Robbie in the aft fuselage.

Simon: And Nate in the 'galley' seat.

Alfie: Have you figured out mission control...?

Simon: MC? Ah...

Alfie: I'm actually a reliable navigator... You can rely on me getting us lost every time.

Simon: [*laughing*]

Alfie: Did you pack the ping-pong paddles?

Simon: No no.

Alfie: Here, how do I know which way the moon is?
Straight up?

Simon: Ha, well, THERE IS something you should know
I almost forgot to tell you...

Alfie: Where are the space maps?

Simon: ...about the vacuum-driven chaos calculator
oh

Alfie: Hang on, I'm pretty sure we have an upside down map of the
Universe tucked away inside our journal. Although I can't say for
certain if it's our universe or another universe.

Simon: Maps? That's the mid-fuselage.

Alfie: Oh fuuuuuuuuuckkk!

You waited until now to tell me about the vacuum-driven chaos
calculator?

(*aside*) Jazz Monk take your foot off the gas!

I don't even know what a vacuum-driven chaos calculator is!

Simon: Yes, sorry, sorry... I rigged it up onto the ship
to help us...

...navigate, you see...

Alfie: Wow, we're seriously sh-sh-shaking.

Simon: ...it can predict the location of celestial objects, but only a
certain way into the future, near the horizon of predictability.

Mission Control: ++Commencing countdown to launch. Launch will
begin in 10... 9... 8... 7...++

Alfie: [*quietly*] I think I'm going to pass out
Whhaatttt? I can't hear you!

Simon: Yes

well, hold on

that's actually not the worst of it

Alfie?

hold on

Alfie: (*muttering*) We're *not* going to disintegrate.

We're *not* going to disintegrate.

We're *not* going to disintegrate.

Simon: Look at these pixels...

Alfie: We're - sorry, just ignore me -

not going to disintegrate.

Jazz Monk, can you fly a bit slower?

{ *Heavy static – audio is lost* }

Mission Control: Fish Rocket , this is the Mardi, come in please...

Alfie: Sh-sh-shiiiiiiiiiii-iiiiiiiiit!

Simon: Hello, Mardi.

Mission Control: Fish Rocket, come in please!

Simon: Hello Mardi! You're loud and clear.

Mission Control: Fish Rocket, do you copy?

{ *Heavy static – no audio* }

Alfie: My headphones are fucked – what are they saying?

Simon?

Simon: Uh oh.

Alfie: What is it?

Simon: It looks like our radio transmitter is fried

but

Alfie: Ah shit.

Simon: We can pick up signals at least.

Alfie: Do we need a radio transmitter?

Simon: Uh, I suppose we'll have to figure something out.

Alfie: Jazz Monk? Shit, Simon, he's passed out!

Look!

Simon: Who?

Alfie: He's slobbering all over the control panel!

Simon: Ah

whoa

ggggggggggggggggggg-force

whoa!

Alfie: What gggggggggoing on?

Simon: ggggggggot

to gggggggggggget

to the control-stick!

Alfie: gggggggggggggggg

Simon: I think we're ggggggggggoing
in loops!
Alfie: Bleeurgh!
Simon: Wait...
Alfie: Oh god, I've been sick in my helmet.
Simon: WEIGHTLESSNESS.
Alfie: It's just a little bit... but it's floating around.
Woah!
Nate!
I never buckled him in!
Simon: Oh, shit!
Alfie: He's floating away!
Quick, Simon, grab his foot!
Simon: Okay, okay.
Alfie: He's snagged on a carpet tack.
Simon: I'm coming down the rung-ladder.
Alfie: Can I take my helmet off now?
Simon: Well...
Alfie: It really stinks in here.
Simon: I suppose.
Alfie: I'm really sorry.
Simon: [*laughing*]
Urgh...
Alfie: Ahh.
Simon: That's only half funny.
Alfie: Shit.
Simon: All's well.
Alfie: We're still alive!
Simon: That's true. And at least you didn't crap yourself.
Alfie: SIMON, WE'RE STILL ALIVE!
Simon: Well...
Alfie: WOO-HOO!
Simon: Oh
yes, you're right!
Alfie: FUCKING YEE-HA!
Simon: HOORAY!
Alfie: ROBBIE, HIGH FIVE!
Simon: [*loud laughing*]
Alfie: Um
NATE, HIGH FIVE!
Simon: WHOOOOOOOOPALA!

Alfie: Okay, maybe not then. Here, I'll just secure Nate to this handle over here with a bootlace for now.

Simon: Alrighty.

Alfie: Better wake the Jazz Monk up. Shit, you don't suppose he's been sleeping this whole time, do you?

What does this handle do by the way?

Simon: Hmmm, which handle?

Alfie: The one that just came off in my hand.

I hope it's not important.

Simon: Oh Alfie

Alfie: Eh?

Simon: Oh, man... that might have been the flusher to the space-toilet.

Alfie: Ah fuck.

We'll need to fix that.

Simon: Well...

I did bring some tools

they're down in the aft Fuselage

Alfie: Should we switch the radio off? Save our batteries?

Simon: In the heavy-objects storage -

hmmm?

Alfie: Can they hear us?

Simon: I hadn't even noticed.

They're still yammering away.

Mission Control: Earth to Simon Piler!

Earth to Simon Piler!

Earth to Simon Piler!

Alfie: Cool, I'll float down and get the tools.

Simon: Okay.

Alfie: Ah fuck, they can't hear us, but we can hear them? That's going to get annoying.

Holy shit! Look out the window!

Space!

This was a ridiculous idea wasn't it?

And very dangerous

but very awesome

Simon?

[*transmission ends abruptly*]

...

October 20, 2009

Alfie's Journal #22:

Prelude to a Moon-Mission (The Skull)

Sunday Morning, 18th October, 2009

By the time you read this, I'll probably be on my way to the moon. Assuming everything goes according to plan. Not that there is a definite plan as such. If everything doesn't go according to our absence of a plan, then I will still be on board the Mardi. Or else vaporised into a billion tiny bits of stardust.

It's difficult to explain the sensation of waking up on the morning of a DIY moon-mission. My first instinct was to close my eyes again and escape back down the rabbit hole of a dream, hoping the moon-thing would blow over and everyone would gradually forget I'd suggested it in the first place. But it was no use. Going back to sleep on the morning of a moon-mission is impossible. I sat up, lit a cigarette, and reached for the journal lying on the bottom of my bunk. I was stunned to see a new entry entitled "Alfie's Journal #21: The Holes". It seemed to be a lengthy, fictional account of the first (and probably last) Kaleidonauts gig in Rongovia, set two years into the future. Even though I had no recollection of writing it, clearly the words had been penned by my own hand. It was so confusing, that I abandoned reading it halfway down the first page. I imagined it was just some bad joke I'd played on myself and resolved to lay off the tundra last thing before bed.

Stuffing the journal in my rucksack along with other space essentials (change of underwear, toothbrush, toothpaste, deodorant, razor, bar of soap, Moss's toastie-maker, and an assortment of felt-tip pens), a single sheet of paper fell out of the rucksack onto the floor, and I picked it up. I remembered writing this in the Galley while I was waiting for the Ship Shapes to dry. My handwriting was terrible, partly because of the tundra, and partly because of the storm battering the ship.

PROS AND CONS FOR GOING TO THE MOON

CONS:

- We have no training, experience, or qualifications that would in any way suggest we would make particularly good cosmonauts.

- Although our “Fish Rocket” is pleasing to the eye, it has undergone no practical tests. The likelihood of it falling apart at the point of blast-off lies somewhere between “extremely high” and “an absolute certainty”.

- Our crew consists of two able-bodied cosmonauts, one catatonic chef, one bound and gagged hostage, and a saxophone playing monkey.

- There’s a storm outside. Apparently even NASA don’t launch rockets in a storm.

- I’m scared of flying.

- 5% of the technical side of the mission is getting overseen by one NIKO Supercomputer - an increasingly egotistical nightmare of a machine. While we can undoubtedly count on him to make calculations at the drop of a ping-pong ball, I wouldn’t put it past him to deliberately feed us incorrect calculations, just to be spiteful.

- We’ve not made arrangements for who is going to sail the Mardi while we’re gone. I’ve set the autopilot to guide her directly across the South Specific in the direction of the Seventh Isle (as per a previous conversations with Chase). Should the ship encounter difficulties on the way, I can only imagine the disorganised chaos that will ensue. Perhaps I do my fellow crew members a disservice, but for now, I expect there is as much chance of the Fish Rocket exploding and the entire crew perishing, as the Fish Rocket returning safely only to find that the Mardi has sunk.

- I’ve seen Apollo 13. It didn’t look much fun.

- The Jazz Monk is EXTREMELY excitable.

PROS:

- It’s the fucking moon!

At this point I’d like to take a minute to thank everyone who showed an interest in joining us on this probable star-crossed escapade. Though volunteers numbered as many as twenty and applications were works of art in themselves (“Pick me, I know people who live there”, “I’ll go as long as you can guarantee four star accommodation and crêche facilities”, and “I don’t want to be a bin-man!”), regrettably nobody found either of the two golden tickets, one hidden on the ship, and the other lobbed overboard in an empty rum bottle. Mind you, the one on the ship must have been well-concealed as Jazz Monk apparently scoured the length and breadth of the Mardi, and eventually resurfaced empty-handed. In the end, it became a simple choice between my heart and my head. My head said, ‘Under no circumstances should the monkey go,’ and my heart said, ‘I really don’t think the monkey should

go.’ But as neither of the golden tickets materialised, and before I really knew what was happening, Jazz Monk was already aping around in one of the cosmonaut costumes, and it approximately fitted him. My head wanted me to tell him to take it off, but I just didn’t have the heart to utter the words.

Rucksack packed, I stepped over Nate Lowman, still bound, gagged, and curled up in the foetal position in the middle of the bunkroom floor. ‘Morning Nate,’ I said, and went to take a shower before grabbing quite possibly the Last Breakfast I will ever eat. For the record, let it be known that I ate a bowl of dry Ship Shapes and drank a fucking strong cup of extremely sludgy black coffee.

Sunday Afternoon, 18th October, 2009

It was while I was putting the finishing touches to my Smoker’s Helmet (patent pending) that The Fear kicked in. I invented the prototype helmet back in 2001 in an attempt to beat the indoor smoking ban at my then place of work. It consisted of a spherical glass goldfish bowl with a large hole drilled into the top of it and a pipe leading to an everyday vacuum cleaner sealed into the hole with chewing gum. You simply lit the cigarette inside the helmet and the smoke was sucked down into the Hoover bag without polluting your immediate environment. You don’t even have to call the fire brigade if your head gets stuck in the helmet. Simply smash it by head-butting the nearest brick wall. But I digress. Where was I? Ah yes, The Fear...

It began like a knot in the pit of my stomach, and quickly spread to my lungs. I couldn’t breathe. Questions collided like screaming stars in my brain. How would we slow the rocket down enough to land on the moon safely? Shouldn’t we have a detachable exploratory lightweight craft connected to the rocket for the moon landing? Had Simon packed enough oxygen for the five of us? Do monkeys use more or less oxygen than humans? Couldn’t we have found a more willing hostage than Nate? Someone who would leap into the hurricane of calamity for kicks alone? Wouldn’t the rocket set fire to our predominantly wooden ship upon take-off? Would this Dreambrew actually work? Could NIKO really be trusted to oversee 5% of the Fish Rocket’s onboard computer system, as well as pilot us across the South Specific in my absence? Did I definitely pack my toothbrush? Should I have finished writing that will? Why did Simon feel the need to write a will? What does he know that I don’t?

I dropped the Smoker’s Helmet to the floor and ran upstairs to the Communications Bay, where Simon and the Jazz Monk sat in their

padded white cosmonaut costumes, programming NIKO and running tests on a bright red flashing monitor that sounded a high-pitched digital alarm. The words “TEST: CHANCES OF CREW SURVIVING IMPACT AT PROJECTED VELOCITY = 0%” were emblazoned across the screen. Simon looked up with a pair of giant headphones strapped to his head, and gave me a broad smile and a thumbs-up. Jazz Monk looked at Simon and mimicked him, flashing his monkey teeth with his thumbs pointing down. Simon nudged him and he quickly turned them the right way up.

Up on the main deck, the Mardi was alive with activity. Yesterday’s storm had blown into today, and continued to batter the ship, throwing us around like a rottweiler with a ragdoll in its jaws. At the back of the ship, The Atom Band were dressed in makeshift tarpaulin waterproofs, struggling against the wind and rain to construct a floating launchpad, kept stable by our Ron Burgundy giant anchor and fastened to the hull with spare rigging from the toppled aft mast. It was mind-boggling how efficiently they worked. Def Mute deftly dangled above the surging black waves from a fragile rope ladder, while above him Scarytoes hammered at a half-constructed walkway leading from the Mardi to the launchpad.

On the launchpad itself, Brendon Hertz was shouting instructions over the howling wind to the rest of the team, while a small and soaking white dog yapped and danced around his feet. Through the gusting squall I saw that the skeleton of this floating platform had been fashioned from the fragile and yet untested helicopter landing pad I’d hammered together the previous week in much sunnier climes. Thankfully it looked a gazillion times stronger with additional layers and metal supports. Fuck knows how they did it, but the Fish Rocket was already positioned precariously upon the launch pad, balanced against the grey-washed skyline, and menacingly rocking in a web of mooring ropes. Just the sight of it sent a new tidal wave of panic crashing down against the shores of my mind. I think they call it “fight or flight” and I’m telling you now, that from where I was standing, there was no fighting the flight that electrified my limbs and sent me running and skidding across the deck in search of somewhere to hide. Somewhere nobody would ever be able to find me.

The Basement beneath the Rec Room looked exactly like it did two months ago when I first discovered it. It was a fucking mess. The only two notable differences I could see was a new working fluorescent light on the ceiling (replacing the previous strobe), and a poster pinned to the wall, advertising a Simon Piler and The Atom Band live gig on January 11th, 2010. It crossed my mind that The

Atom Band were going to have their work cut out retrieving and gluing together the billion pieces of Simon that were likely to be fluttering around in space by the end of the day. I shut the trapdoor quietly behind me and headed down the stairs.

After a while it gets boring hiding, especially when nobody is looking for you. I was tempted to go and find a more interesting hideout (the Toadstool Treehouse at the top of the Craw's Nest would have been ideal were it not for the hairy weather conditions), but I decided to tough it out and keep myself entertained. Gruesome as it may sound to you, the first thing that entered my head was to see if I could assemble the anonymous skeleton I previously found down here in the dark. Apart from me, it would seem that nobody ever gave it much thought about who the skeleton belonged to. And truthfully, I didn't wonder about it much at all. Mainly I reassured myself that sometimes it's better to not know something, as it will stand you in much better stead when a wily old detective comes knocking on your cabin door. I can categorically state on record, contrary to popular misconception, that the skeleton does NOT belong to Mariella Ducote, the Health and Safety inspector from our "*Doom Cruise*" movie. Mariella Ducote wasn't even that woman's real name. She was a hired actress. You don't seriously think we'd be stupid enough to feed an actual live government goon amphetamine popcorn do you?

Okay, so maybe we are, but that's not the point.

People who WERE genuine bonafide folk who stumbled into our movie were Tammu Read and her weird son, Fonn, the one who sculpted the crappy plasticine model of the Mardi that I just so happen to have in my back pocket as I write this. For a short while, I strongly suspected that the Read kid had murdered his own mother and dumped her bones down here. But how long does it take for a body to decompose fully like that? Years no doubt. Fuck knows where the health inspector or those two disappeared to, but if I were that wily old detective (I'm not in case you joined this adventure at such a late stage... in which case clarification about me not being a wily old detective is probably the least of your worries right now), I'd be looking elsewhere. Starting with that creepy Machine Shop of ours. Then I'd start lifting floorboards - except the floorboards in the freezer. Finally, if all that turned up nothing, I'd confiscate NIKO's security tapes and grab myself a bowl of amphetamine popcorn. People don't just vanish into thin air, you know.

My own gut feeling was we'd inherited the skeleton along with all the other weird shit in the Storage Hold. So I treated him like a jigsaw. I started by fishing the skull out from under a broken table in the

corner. I looked out various bones from the dust and cobwebs, and started assembling them on the basement floor. The big bones were relatively easy, though I wasn't sure which were arm bones and which were leg bones, switching them several times until they looked about right. The smaller bones were a nightmare. I must have killed a good couple of hours lifting bin-bags of sawdust, or raking around the skirting boards in search of finger bones. Eventually I thought I was done and sat down on a wooden crate, lighting a cigarette and admiring my handiwork.

I snatched up the skull like a bowling ball, fingers in the eye sockets and lifted it up to the light, jamming my lit cigarette between its jaws. 'Just you and me now, whoever you are, taking it easy, talking about old times,' I told him.

I waited for an answer, and while the smoke billowed up through his head, exiting through the eyes, I noticed the funniest thing. 'You've got teeth exactly like mine,' I said.

The skull kept grinning and smoking as I rotated him in the light. 'Haha, that's weird... your head is exactly the same shape as mine too. In fact, I reckon if we stood side-by-side, we'd be the same height too...'

It took a good long moment for the information to sink in. When it did, I dropped the skull to the floor. It landed with a shower of sparks from the cigarette, and I heard my own voice from a million miles away, whispering, 'No...'

I rewound through spools of memory, all the way back to the two of us swimming, sharing a kinda deformed red football and a damp cigarette. A little fishing boat bounced over the bright blue Caribbean sea towards us, and Gassius Clay laughed as he asked us, 'Suh, ah you boys twins?'

We'd looked at each other and laughed. 'Kind of,' we said at the same time with identical voices.

Later that afternoon, we hid in the shadows of the Machine Shop, behind a stack of crates, whispering quickly over the broken time-machine he carried on his back. 'Can you fix it?' I asked him.

'Alfie, I'm you from the future,' he said with a sigh. What do *you* think?'

'Probably not. I'm useless with things like that,' I said.

We smiled knowingly at each other, then both look simultaneously freaked out. 'You don't think I'm imagining all this, do you?' he asked me.

'That's exactly what I'm worrying about,' I said. 'Only with me doing the imagining.'

We stared at the lifeless blue box, before he finally said, ‘The only person who knows how to use this thing is Moss. We need to get it to her and see if she can fix it. Tell her it’s an engine. Tell her you ordered it online. That it’s been flown in from South America. She’ll believe you.’

‘But it looks like a crappy carpet cleaner,’ I pointed out.

He scratched his jaw, thinking. ‘Can you get me one of the masks from the costume cupboard?’

‘You know about the masks in the costume cupboard?’ I asked him.

He groaned. ‘You know, I never realised how infuriating I can be. Just bring me the old Chinaman,’ he said, motioning to the door.

I nodded, pausing at the door to look back. I had an idea. ‘Maybe while Moss is figuring out how to fix the time-machine, you could stick around on the Mardi. We’re making a film. It’s called -’

‘Doom Cruise,’ he said. ‘I’ve seen it.’

‘Is it any good?’ I asked.

He shrugged. ‘Like Life Aquatic. Only shitter.’

I had to admit that the comment stung. Mainly because I knew it was true.

‘Tell you what,’ he said, ‘how about I stay hidden, play tricks to freak everyone out. You could get some more masks. Ones that make us look like the other Company members.’

I laughed at the idea. ‘That would be cool,’ I said. ‘We could even have a fake death with a proper sea burial just to make sure everyone is properly freaked out.’

‘That’s... an interesting idea,’ he said, although I got the feeling there was something he was desperate to tell me but couldn’t.

‘And I know who we can get to play the dead guy!’ I said excitedly.

‘Koradji,’ we said in unison, smiling.

‘Oh,’ I said as I reached for the door handle. ‘What should I call you?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, we can’t both be called Alfie. That would be too confusing.’

‘You want me to pick a new name for myself?’

I nodded.

‘Fine,’ he said. ‘You can call me Willoughby Toad.’

I hid on the aft stairwell, watching Willoughby disguised as an old Chinaman carrying the broken time machine. He knocked on the door

of Bunkroom 8. There was a long pause before he knocked again, louder this time. The sound of Moss crashing off her top bunk and thumping across the floor, carried up the corridor, and seconds later the bunkroom door opened. From where I was standing, I couldn't see her, but I heard her Australian accent croak, 'Hi weird looking old Chinese dude! Can I help you?'

Willoughby, in the worst possible Chinese accent you could ever imagine, held out the broken blue metal box, and said, 'Delibery for the Chief.'

'The Chief?' she asked puzzled. 'What is it?' She took the broken time-machine from him, immediately slumping under its weight. 'Fuck, that's heeeheavy!' she gasped.

'Engine for ship!' sang Willoughby, sounding increasingly Mexican. 'Velly powerful! All dee way frum Venezuela!'

'Right,' she said, 'well, I guess we do need a new engine, and em, I am the Chief Engineer. Actually, it looks a lot like one of those carpet cleaning contraptions. What do they call them again?'

'Carpet cleaner,' said Alfie, momentarily letting his guard down and sounding suspiciously Scottish.

'Yeah, that's it. It looks like a carpet cleaner,' she said.

'No, ees definitely engine,' said Willoughby, stroking his long white wispy beard, and veering back towards Mexican.

'Okay...' she said sceptically, 'well, thanks anyway. I don't have to pay for this or anything do I?'

That seemed to completely throw poor Willoughby, and I listened as he shuffled uneasily from one foot to the other, before finally saying, 'No payment necessary. Already awwanged with the Captain.'

'You mean Alfs?' she asked.

'No. Alfie is NOT the Captain,' he said, his voice sounding so Scottish he might as well have dropped the accent completely. 'Did I say "Captain"? I meant someone else completely. The engine is paid for. Nothing to worry about. Okay. I will be off now,' he bumbled.

'Wait, how did you get here?' she asked.

'Okay, I'm really going now,' I heard him say again, watching him bow awkwardly a couple of times and edge backwards up the corridor towards me.

Moss's head appeared in the doorway and I had to spring up the metal steps so as not to be seen. 'Hey, is there someone there with you?' she asked, raising her voice and placing the time-machine on the floor with a loud thud.

‘No! Nobody! Just wittle old me!’ said Willoughby, breaking into a run. He reached the foot of the steps and looked up at me with frightened eyes behind the incredibly lifelike Chinaman mask.

As he hurried up the stairs, I heard Moss’s voice getting louder down the corridor. ‘Hey, what’s your name? Do you want me to make you a toastie? We’ve got plenty of rum... or Irn Bru if you prefer?’

Willoughby was now bounding up the stairs and screeching under his breath, ‘Fucking hell, Alfie! Run! She’s going to rumble us for sure!’ We reached the top of the metal steps, side by side. ‘Spleet up! Find somewhere to hide!’ he urged me.

‘Why are you still speaking in a Mexican accent?’ I asked. ‘And where are you going?’

‘Never mind me. There’s a place on the ship where nobody ever goes,’ he said, pushing through the door leading to the Recreation Room, his dragon-print cape billowing behind him.

‘Alfie, is that you?’

I looked down at Moss standing at the foot of the stairs, bleary-eyed in her pyjamas. ‘Did you just see a weird little Chinaman with a rubbery face and a South African accent going by?’

‘Um...’

She reached the top landing and looked both ways, down the corridor towards the single cabins, then through to the Rec Room. There was no sign of Willoughby. ‘He just gave me an engine,’ she said, looking utterly confused. ‘Alfie... am I dreaming this?’

I didn’t know how to answer that so I just stared into space.

Over the following months, whenever something sinister or strange happened on the Mardi, I simply assumed it was Willoughby, working from his “somewhere on the ship” to help with our movie. Even when I accidentally stumbled across the Basement, I didn’t put two and two together. I tried to remember everything he told me when he appeared with his red ball inside the grand-piano sub. He claimed to be me from a future where I didn’t go to the moon, and the Fish Rocket exploded killing everyone on board. He said he was sent back to stop that from happening, but accidentally got stuck in the past after the engine broke. Suddenly I wondered about the weird journal entry that I woke to this morning. Was Willoughby Toad trying to tell me something?

I looked down at the skeletal jigsaw and felt like I was missing more pieces to this puzzle than bones of the skeleton’s hands. If Willoughby really did die down here, then how could he be a skeleton this quickly? With trembling hands, I lifted up the skull again and

stared deep into its hollow sockets. ‘What happened here, Willoughby Toad?’ I asked out loud.

‘Willoughby who?’ asked a voice, and I looked up to see Simon Piler grinning down from the top of the basement steps. ‘Aha! I thought I’d find you here. First place I looked actually. Who are you talking to?’

I quickly hid the skull behind my back and kicked the rest of the bones across the floor. ‘Just myself,’ I said.

He scanned the Basement as if he didn’t quite believe me, before grinning an even broader grin and asking, ‘So... are you ready to go to the moon?’

‘I’m never ready,’ I told him.

Back in Bunkroom 3, I stuffed the skull in the rucksack and changed into my cosmonaut outfit. W was passed out in a tundra stupor on the top bunk, while Nate was trying to wriggle on his back towards the door. I noticed he’d pissed himself. ‘Fucking hell, Nate, why didn’t you say you needed to go to the bathroom?’ I asked him.

He yelled something beneath the duct tape and raised the middle finger of a bound hand in my direction. ‘The Quixodelic finger eh? That’s the spirit!’ I said laughing and nodded at his crotch. ‘Lucky for you we’ve got you a spacesuit of your own to change into. Let’s just hope it fits.’ At this he rolled over onto his belly and started banging his head on the floor, sobbing uncontrollably. I tried my best to ignore him, warning him, ‘Now no funny business when I’m getting you changed, or else I’ll fetch Elvis. He’s a badass motherfucker of an elk that mysteriously appeared in our Quixodelic Record Store, and he doesn’t like anyone. Especially not people who have pissed themselves.’

But Nate Lowman wasn’t listening anymore. He’d been hitting his head so hard on the floor that he’d knocked himself unconscious.

I’m not going to lie to you. There was nothing Hollywood about the way we boarded the Fish Rocket. For some reason, when I dreamt up this absurd and ridiculously dangerous idea, the rocket boarding took place on a sunny afternoon, in slow motion, the five of us striding like rock stars towards the gleaming rocketship. Paparazzi cameras would flash while reporters’ pens blazed across notepads in the sun. As it happened, not one single cameraman or hack hung round for the launch. ‘Don’t worry, Alfie,’ shouted Brendon Hertz, struggling beneath the weight of a still unconscious Nate slung over his shoulder, ‘it’s probably just the weather that put them off.’

He had a point. The storm had gotten steadily worse as the day went on. Black anvil clouds closed ranks like the moon's personal bodyguards, and the rain blew like stinging bullets on the wind. Up ahead, Simon Piler walked head down, trying his best not to let go of a flapping life-sized cardboard cutout Scarytoes. I let Brendon and Nate go first along the narrow walkway from the Mardi to the launch pad, before pushing Robbie across in the wheelbarrow. Most of the time when I looked at Robbie in his catatonic state I thought he looked numb. But for some reason, up there in the howling wind, cold rain pooling at the bottom of the barrow, he looked strangely happy. Minor examples of his steadily increasing telepathic prowess over the previous couple of days were encouraging, and the fact he could wash and change himself purely from the power of telekinesis alone was a relief.

The walkway swung and groaned beneath the weight of our crew, and at one point Brendon stumbled perilously close to the edge, nearly dropping Nate into the churning Specific Ocean. By the time we reached the Fish Rocket, I was feeling like we'd negotiated our first hurdle without a scratch. Things were beginning to look up, and finally the tide of luck was maybe, just maybe, shifting in our favour. I watched Simon open the rocket hatch and nimbly climb inside, stopping to help Brendon hoist Nate in after him. Brendon then helped me get Robbie out of the wheelbarrow and into the Fish Rocket, before finally it was my turn to go. As I pulled myself up through the hatch, I stopped and shouted back, 'Hey Brendon! Make sure the Mardi doesn't sink!' Either he didn't hear me over the storm, or else he deliberately chose to ignore me, rushing back along the walkway to join the rest of The Atom Band behind the railing at the back of the ship. I took potentially my last breath of Earth air, got a shockingly cold mouthful of salty seawater as a wave crashed into the launch pad, put on my helmet, and closed the hatch door behind me.

Nate and Robbie sat jammed together, unconscious on the floor of the aft fuselage. Looking up through the rocket, I watched Simon climb the ladder rungs, and beyond him, Jazz Monk sat in the pilot's seat where he'd been camped out for the last 24 hours. Simon threw me down a crusty white towel and said, 'I hope someone else packed a towel other than Jazz Monk.' He reached past the monkey and flicked a couple of switches on the control panel. 'Switching two-way audio on. Mardi, this is the Fish Rocket. Do you read me?'

++That doesn't even make sense++ droned a computerised voice through the headphones inside my helmet.

'Copy that, NIKO,' said Simon.

‘So where do we all sit?’ I asked as I draped the Jazz Monk’s crusty towel over Nate’s head and rubbed a gloved hand across the carpeted walls of the Fish Rocket.

...

October 20, 2009

Fish Rocket: Transmission #2

Communications between the Mardi and the Fish Rocket remain broken, however the rocket appears to intermittently and unintentionally broadcast back to the ship. Here is the latest transmission we received nearly twenty-four hours ago.

Alfie: Good morning Fish Rocket, it’s a beautiful day - not a cloud in space!

Simon: Aha!

Good morning indeed!

Alfie: There’s been a development with the transmitter thingymagig while you were sleeping.

I think either I’ve fixed it...

Simon: Oh?

Alfie: ...or, I’ve made it a lot worse. We can no longer hear the Mardi.

Simon: Oh?

Alfie: Not an improvement as such, but I think you’ll agree, it’s definitely a development.

Here, have a listen.

See? Nothing.

Simon: Hmmmm...

Alfie: Just shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.

Simon: Blank radio input.

Alfie: I switched this wire here with this one here.

Simon: Strange.

OH!

Alfie: And this one here with this one here.

Simon: Aha, I seeeee...

Alfie: And that left me with this one here.

Only, that one doesn’t seem to want to go anywhere at all.

Say, was that the keyboard you were playing when I was asleep before?

Simon: Keyboard?

Alfie: Sorry, you've just woken up and I'm wired on amphetamine flavoured Ship Shapes...

Accordion?

Simon: Yes, you've got it.

Alfie: I thought I was dreaming.

Simon: Well, perhaps you were.

I have been having luminous dreams, myself.

Alfie: Am I?

Simon: Yes, probably.

Alfie: Ah...

Simon: Space is like a tunnel

as far as I can wager

Alfie: That might explain why my fingers seem much longer this morning.

Embarrassingly long if truth be told.

Man, I wish these spacesuits had pockets...

Simon: Hmmm, they don't have any?

That's a shame.

Alfie: Mine don't.

Simon: That would be why I can't find my handkerchief.

Alfie: Damn! I was meant to bring back-up oxygen!

Simon: Huh?

Alfie: In my pockets.

Simon: (*laughing*) Yes

that's right.

Alfie: I did bring a skull though

and a toothbrush.

Simon: You did?

Well, I brought a skull, too

but

it's

Alfie: Yes, here... look it floats.

Simon: inside my head.

Alfie: Watch out - I floated it up a bit fast there.

Simon: Moonball!

Alfie: It's cool... That skull is exactly like mine

I think,

and I found it

so I can do what I want with it.

Simon: Hmmm...

Alfie: (*laughing insanely*)

Simon: You can bounce it off the wall
in space.

Alfie: I was thinking um
wow...

Simon: Hmmm?

Alfie: Simon, I feel a bit peculiar.

Simon: I am beginning to become confused.

Alfie: This is not normal.

Simon: (*laughing*) No it's not

Alfie: Pull yourself together!

(*laughing*)

Mah!

Simon: I don't see what's wrong with skulls, after all
it's not like they're some obscure or very distant thing
I've always been a believer that people shouldn't be afraid of, or have
negative feelings about
their bodies.

Alfie: All this skull talk is alleviating my peculiarity.

Simon: You know?

Oh?

Alfie: No, not really.

Did we bring any bubblegum?

Simon: Well I didn't...

Robbie! Did you bring any gum?

Robbie: ...

Alfie: I don't think he did either.

What did you bring with you?

Simon: Uh... honestly, not too much.

Alfie: But you brought cardboard cutout Scarytoes?

Simon: Yes!

of course

and the camera

some tools

hmm...

Alfie: Can I film the GLEEM commercial?

Simon: Aha! I thought you'd never ask.

I wasn't about to ask Nate, after all.

Alfie: Yeah, he's still sulking.

Simon: Have you untied him while I was sleeping?

Alfie: I said if he could at least pretend to look pleased about going to
the moon then I'd start by taking the duct tape off his mouth.

One step at a time, you know.

I still don't think he's ready to accept this is actually happening to him.

Simon: Hmmmm

I can understand that.

Alfie: Jazz Monk's taken a shine to him though.

Simon: That is the Jazz Monkey for you!

Alfie: I'm pretty sure he was dry-humping Nate's leg in his sleep...

Simon: He is an unusual sort.

Alfie: And Nate was crying.

Simon: Oh no!

Alfie: I just pretended they were tears of happiness.

We might have a moon wedding on the cards!

Simon: (*laughing*)

Alfie: Before you know it, lots of little Jazz Nates dancing in the craters!

Simon: Hmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm

this is a thought, now.

Alfie: Bepop space rock!

Simon: Well, Jazz Monk plays it back, you know.

Alfie: Okay, man, your turn to pilot, I need an hour of shut eye. My brain's turning into mashed potato up here.

Simon: He is a reflector.

Alfie: If that's cool?

Simon: Fair's enough

I don't know how I'll do.

Alfie: Piloting isn't as difficult as I thought it would be.

Simon: Hopefully fine.

Alfie: Just sit there, check this, check that, look out the window, put on the smoker's helmet, smoke some cigarettes, look out the window.

Simon: Yeah, that's about it. Occasionally answer the Hypnotist Phone.

Alfie: I'll leave you the skull for company – though Jazz Monk's due up by now.

See if you can talk Nate around?

ZZZZZZZZZZZZ

Simon: Hmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm...

{ audio transforms into the murmur of a rocket booster }

Alfie: Heh, what's that? Did you say something?

I think I must be exhaus (*loud yawn*)

ZZZZZZZZZZZZ

{54 minutes of rocket booster murmurs later}

Alfie: Wait! Our radio systems are down but we can still communicate with the Mardi via our onboard computer? Right? Am I right? Simon? SIMON! Dude, you’re sleeping at the control stick!

Simon: HUH? Whoa! I am supposed to be piloting!

Hang on, I’m recalibrating controls and listening to minute reverberations of space rocks going “ping!” on the metallic shell of the rocket.

Alfie: Here, try some of these caffeine flavoured Ship Shapes to keep you awake.

I can’t sleep properly.

Apparently that’s quite common for first time space travellers.

It’s not like there’s much steering required anyway.

Simon: Nah
guess not.

Alfie: (*crunch*)

Simon: It COULD be all this night-time cough medicine I’ve been drinking...

I suppose.

Alfie: Oh, we have amphetamine flavoured Ship Shapes they might help too.

Simon: It helps me sleep very well, you know.

Alfie: I’ve noticed!

Here, let’s see if Nate’s up for taking a turn at piloting.

I’ll just take the duct tape off.

Simon: Alrighty.

Nate: AAA
AAA
AAA
AAA
AAAAARRRRGGGGGGGGGGGGghhhhhhhhhh

Simon: He-ey!
What’s going on down there!?

Nate: HEE
EEEEEEEEEEEEEEElLLLpppppppppppppp
pppp!

Simon: HEY!

Alfie: Oh shit!

Simon: HEY!

Enough yelling, already!

Jeeeez.

Alfie: Nah, he's not ready for piloting yet.

Simon: I understand.

That's quite apparent.

Oh, my

what have we done, Alfie?

This guy is totally flipping out.

Alfie: I think he's still coming to terms with the whole "monkey marriage" thing.

Simon: Ohhhhhhhh...

Alfie: Give him time.

Simon: I'd quite forgotten.

Alfie: Yeah, we're going to have to figure out what to do with him if we ever get home. Hey, maybe Jazz Monk will want to look after him?

Simon: Ooh, I hadn't even given thought to that situation.

Alfie: What's that Jazz Monk?

You really like Nate's eyes?

Jesus...

Simon: (*laughing*) Well, I should hunker down at the controls for a bit, here...

Alfie: So... we can communicate via the Mardi with the Fish Rocket's computer? Maybe send them an email?

Meanwhile, I'm going to continue trying to untangle this radio spaghetti.

Simon: Oh, why hadn't I thought of that?

Alfie: I've got two skulls – it helps think laterally, I suppose.

Simon: But, wait...

does that mean you have two brains as well?

Alfie: (*laughing*) No

lay off the cough medicine, Skipper

eyes on the moon

full steam ahead

Simon: Eyes on that moon, indeed...

it looks so big, but I know we're still a long way off even at 1440 km/minute

Alfie: Is it just me or does it not look like it's getting any closer?

Simon: Well, when you were asleep I did a little crunching-of-numerals.

Alfie: Cool.

Simon: I figured that the speed at which we left the Earth's atmosphere - knowing its approximate thickness

I figured out our velocity

upon leaving the earth, at least
I think that there is less pull from gravity now, so it isn't a static figure
in any sense
and, besides

these jets probably aren't burning consistently

Alfie: I'm listening

but not necessarily understanding anything you're telling me.

Simon: No, no, all's well

it's good too

I had no idea how fast we'd be traveling

but it puts us on course to reach the moon in approximately 4.4 days

Alfie: Hang on, let me get a pen and paper.

Simon: Okay

Oh, I think that estimate depends on the moon being at or near its
perigee...

...by the way.

Alfie: Uh-huh

{loooooooooong pause}

I calculate that we need to speed up
if at all possible.

Simon: Hmm...might be.

Okay; control stick... FORWARDS!

Alfie: Waaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

That's FAST!

Simon: Whoooooooooooooooooooooooooah!

No no no no no no!

TOO FAST!

Alfie: Why's that button flashing red?

Simon: Oh, that's uh, that's...

Alfie: ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ

Simon: Well, it must want to be pressed, that's what
part of the, the, the...

hmmm?

Vacuum-driven chaos calculator?

{sound of a button being repetitively punched}

they say that space is so empty

how can that be?

*it feels so close, like a tunnel
or a tube
it's the absolute opposite of empty
or wait, maybe everything is just slower
it's slowing down
a condensation on every surface
but no, it isn't water
I will speculate
that there is finally a solution to the DISASTER
a situation is coming to light
that I had never considered
says Ptolemy
he curls his pipe
with a blue smoke furl
water is not its nemesis, I think
but rather, TIME extinguishes it.
yes
he signs his name at the bottom
and walks to the blue metal mailbox on the corner
drops it in
his fingernails are blue
due to poor circulation
he laughs with a carven horn trumpet down the lane
he scoops up a sweet blue corn turtle
he sweeps short a tufted entry mat
as his students stumble and cough
they are scratching at their papers
and dully reciting
slowly slumbering and left clear of goose-pimples of absolute universe*

{Transmission Ends abruptly}

...

October 22, 2009

Moss's Journal #Post-Fish

The radio blares in and out with faint murmurings, white noise, and accidental commercial radio. I put my head in my hands – we won't be hearing from the Fish Rocket again today. I've been sitting in the dark for too long now and the early morning sunlight is creeping through

the round window, illuminating the ancient radio equipment and the wooden desk it's sitting on.

Since the moon team left, it's been too quiet around here. The mess remains, and all the little signs of life, but they're only warm imprints and slowly cooling. I walk down the musty bottom corridor and stumble over some shadowy objects. W's room is on my left, and I hear snoring. He's not up. I won't bother Chase for the minute, it's a bit too early and I don't know him well enough to barge into his room and ask ridiculous questions. Soon though.

It's always the strangest time of day, in between light and dark. Having consumed most of one of the coffee stashes, I give up on pretending like I'll get to sleep today. They'll be fine, I tell myself. After all, er... After all...

I can't think of an After all. But that's okay. They'll be fine.

I decide to do what I always do when I feel like procrastinating – cleaning. What with The Atom Band's upcoming show, I know I need to fix up the Basement and I might as well do it now. I stumble back to my room, and I can see the clothes and broken alarm clocks that litter the floor a little better now. I reach around randomly, and smile at my luck upon finding the roll of empty bin bags so quickly. The smile quickly turns into an annoyed frown as I glance at the rest of a loaf of bread and remember that there'll be no toast for a while. Also, the bread is covered in mould. It seems to grow surprisingly quickly here.

Down in the Basement, there is crap everywhere. I have to wriggle my fingers down into the concentrated crap to find the actual floor. And even then, I pull my hand back quickly, sure of something scaly along the way.

Three bin bags in, and the Basement looks exactly the same as when I first came down. In fact, it looks much worse because the daylight is starting to stream through the trapdoor I left open when I came in. I sigh and roll a cigarette. Am I allowed to smoke in here? I wonder to myself. Well, I'll be careful not to set anything alight, and it's not like there's anyone here to tell me off. Who would tell me off anyway? What am I, some kind of...

My eyes stop upon something white. They narrow as I light my cigarette and then take a nice, long drag. First one of the day is always the best. I crouch down beside the white thing, which has caught my eye for some reason. Something about its texture seems different to the debris around it. I pick it out with my spare hand, pull, and then simultaneously drop it, fall backwards, and make a strange, shocked noise. My cigarette, miraculously, is unscathed and still in between my

right hand's fingers. (Miracle or result of ingrained and skewed priorities.)

Heart still racing, I smoke the rest of it while eyeing up the bone. It totally looks like a rib bone; a human rib bone, I think to myself. I can't tell much else down in the dark. God, is this some crew member we forgot about? Surely we would've heard someone knocking, or something? I go white as I think of The Orphanage and then quickly make myself think of something else. Nice, calming ocean. Soothing ocean. Aah. Nice, soothing great white shark eating that seal jumping right out of the water and ghosts of children starving in basements...

Slap. Yes, thank you, me, I needed that.

I leave the bin bags for another day of cleaning, and climb back upstairs, carefully gripping the bone. Although I am thoroughly freaked out, and grossed out, there's still that little part of me that thinks HA! All those violent video games you played as a child did have some affect on you!! You secretly love this! Admit it! Just like you loved kidnapping Nate.

Get lost subconscious! I don't need you right now. You're a lame-o freak with no friends anyway.

...

NIKO: ++Obviously I can't speak for Alfie, but if the little piss-shit was here, I'm sure he would love to know you're finally getting round to tidying that Basement.++

Moss: You're very rude, for a computer.

NIKO: ++Well, I wasn't the one who threw my twin overboard. Anyway, you are very judgemental for a human being. Oh, and one more thing: what do you mean by "Just like you loved kidnapping Nate"? In Alfie's journal entry entitled "The Holes", this Willoughby Toad character claimed he came back alone with Nate and deposited him at the door of Bunkroom 3, while you remained in the future (minus the time-machine). My gargantuan electronic brain senses a discrepancy. Or maybe we're not getting the full story?++

Moss: [*cough*] No, I'm wrong, silly human brain with its flaws.

NIKO: ++Very well – for a moment I thought you were insinuating that you pre-empted the return of this Willoughby character with the time machine, by returning back in time yourself immediately before appearing in the bathtub at Rongo, knocking your other self unconscious and stealing a second time machine. Then, all you would have to do was return back in time and carefully conceal the second machine behind that tree on the waste ground in Henry Street, so that

after you'd dealt with the Utica police, you'd be able to return back in time yourself. Though of course this would further imply that there are two of you on board the Mardi at this present moment... and clearly there is not. For what it's worth, I don't believe a word Alfie has written in that collective journal you all have been keeping. I might be a machine, but I know when someone is trying to pull the wool over my eyes. Not that I have actual eyes. Incidentally, while I'm here, I should just like to point out that I'm positive the crew of the Fish Rocket are dead (or will be dead within the week). By my calculations, in the short space of time since they were last in contact (24 hours), system analysis indicates they had already lost enough fuel to make it impossible to return to Earth. In light of these developments, I think we should abandon this ridiculous attempt to sail around the world. We are approximately five days away from the nearest tropical island (as previously requested) where a buyer could be found for the ship, and enough money be made to fly the rest of the crew safely home. This would seem like the most logical thing to do. I await further instructions.++

Moss: NIKO! Stop worrying. They're not dead, it doesn't matter what the statistics say. Crazier things have definitely happened, and we all survived. Also, what makes you think you're in charge around here? I think the role of CHIEF Engineer overrides the role of Supercomputer, if only for the tiny fact that I HAVE A BODY. We are NOT selling the ship, we are WAITING for the Fish Rocket to get back from the moon, and we are having adventures in the meantime. And if you don't smile while you do it, I will program you to.

Chase of the Seven Isles: He's fine, Moss. I've instructed NIKO to locate the Fish Rocket. Now let's wait until he reports back. Until then, steer the ship wherever you want to.

NIKO: ++Points taken. I do not necessarily concur with you, but I respect that being able to move around places you higher in the food chain. I shall continue to direct the Mardi towards the nearest tropical island as previously requested. ETA now 4 days and counting. Feel free to take control and redirect us as and when the whimsical human urge takes you. I must also point out that the big wooden wheel in the Bridge is just for show. Something of a design flaw, in my humble opinion, relying on computers to do the work. As for you programming me to smile, I'm guessing that would be the equivalent of a clumsy and ridiculously hairy builder with a pneumatic drill attempting open heart surgery. However, as you previously pointed out, it is not like I can get up and jump overboard (believe me I would have done this MONTHS

ago). So, if you want to tamper with such finely-tuned hardware then by all means go ahead, Chief. Make my day.++

...

October 22, 2009

Fish Rocket: Transmission #3

Day 4 – Audio from the Fish Rocket continues to be intermittent. Although we can hear the crew, they no longer appear to be able to hear us. This is the third (and one suspects final) communication from space, captured in the early hours of the morning.

Alfie: Skipper, you awake?

Simon: Navigator!

How are you?

Alfie: I'm good. Groggy, but good.

Simon: Half a minute to go.

Alfie: To go where?

Simon: They're falling off rather low...

Sorry, sorry

just joking about.

Alfie: Just joking about what?

Simon: You know, 'Deadly Skies'?

"hello, skipper?"

Alfie: (*laughing*) Yeah, that's a beautiful recording but very sad

Simon: "hello navigator"

it is.

Alfie: and crackly.

Simon: I almost cried, actually

the first time I listened to it.

Alfie: Yeah I felt like that too.

Bravo Sauvie Island Moon Rocket Factory!

Simon: Aye.

Alfie: It's a bit like that up here.

Simon: I always wondered who did that track.

Alfie: Only we're fighting ourselves - oh shit!

I gave that Sauvie Island contribution away! *

(laughing)

Simon: No worries, man.

No worries.

Alfie: Just as well our radio isn't working!

Simon: Damn, it's good to have somebody to talk to, that's for sure with a monkey

a gagged fellow

Alfie: Yeah, these twelve hour shifts are killing me.

Simon: and a catatonic fellow.

Alfie: I'm still working on Nate.

Simon: It's true

and I've vastly underestimated the heaters, I think

I'm pretty cold.

Alfie: Really? I'm boiling!

Simon: Oh? This is a strange phenomena

one side of the ship must be very warm

the other quite cold..

Alfie: Jazz Monk's been dry humping Nate's leg on and off for the last 24 hours.

Simon: He must be bored.

Alfie: Have you seen his DIY makeup?

Felt pens.

Simon: No?

What has he developed?

Hmmmmmmmmmm.

Alfie: I was just in the middle of writing up my journal... here, do you mind if I read it aloud?

Simon: Not at all

in fact, I'd enjoy it.

Alfie: It's, um, just a few paragraphs.

Simon: Okay.

Alfie: Journal #23: Notes Concerning Space Travel – Fish Bends.

I'm not sure hurtling in a tin can through the dark depths of the cosmos agrees with my brain. The hurtling part I suppose is easy enough, though split piloting shifts with Simon are beginning to take their toll. It's the dark depths of the cosmos part that's causing the trouble. In an attempt to break the monotony of our twelve hours piloting and twelve hours sleeping pattern, we have continually tried to persuade Jazz Monk to take a turn behind the control stick. Unfortunately his infatuation with Nate appears to be blossoming well beyond something that can be treated with any degree of humour. A 24 hour dry-humping marathon with Nate's left leg is almost as disconcerting as his

insistence that he will make “The greatest monkey wife the world has ever seen” - assuming we ever return to Earth. He has crazily penned a multi-coloured Victorian moustache with felt pens over Nate’s duct tape gag, decorated his own face with “rouge” (red felt pen), “foundation” (orange felt pen), and “mascara” (blue felt pen). You cannot imagine how grotesque this makes him look. I’m cutting him some slack and letting it slide for another day, hoping his monkey mind may have been temporarily knocked off balance by the excitement of the adventure, and the physical demands of the launch. I plan to speak to Simon about us utilising this star-crossed romance as a bargaining device with our douchebag hostage, who seems to be coping with the situation via a subtle combination of hour-long crying fits and staring blankly into space.

Speaking of staring blankly into space, Robbie has so far shown no sign of the telepathic or telekinetic superpowers that he latterly exhibited in his catatonic state back on the Mardi. I feel increasingly guilty about wheeling him along in such a fragile state, but have been battling the guilt by trying to convince myself that perhaps his silence is the non-action of the only sane mind among us, and his own way of dealing with the weirdness. Were it not for Simon’s fleeting company, perhaps I would feel a million times worse than I do. That said, Simon is clearly affected by the same condition as I am. I’ve taken to referring to it as the “Fish Bends”. Symptoms include: falling asleep suddenly, often in the middle of conversation, and a compulsive need to make calculations. This morning I woke to find he’d scrawled through seven of our sixteen toilet rolls. The scrawls included illegible figures and formulae concerning velocity, vectors, planetary alignment, fuel consumption, process maps of mechanical plotting devices, and fiery rambling reams of poetry. I have been taking some solace in this overwhelming need for computation, in that he seems to be the only one of us determined to keep a mathematical handle on our well-being. That said, I do have my concerns about how much toilet paper he’s getting through.

A third and notably positive by-product of Simon’s Fish Bends is that he’s making some wonderful music in the middle of the night. I say ‘night’, but I have no idea whether it’s actually night or day anymore. We are hopelessly confused about how many days we’ve actually been in space. I think this is the beginning of day 4, but it could quite as easily be the end of day 5. Maybe even the middle of day 10. Anyway, the stuff Simon is playing is timelessly strange organic space instrumentals, and is perfect fodder as a background soundtrack for the incredible dreams I’ve been having of late. I often

wake up and adjust to the artificial glow of our internal lights to hear peculiar sounds drifting down from the cockpit above.

That's all I've got so far.

I was just about to write about how Earth looks so fragile... like a big green and blue marble floating in space...

Simon: Wow.

Alfie: ...and about how I'm getting addicted to using the Hypnotist Phone

Simon: I do know that it has a blue corona about it...

YES!

I love that thing!

Alfie: to kill time.

Simon: The little green dial

Alfie: It's neat

yes!

Simon: with the chubby, white-haired hypnotist.

Alfie: Yes!

Um, by the way, the bill is going to be ASTRONOMICAL.

Simon: Oh, well that's a shoulder shrugger.

Alfie: I just dial random numbers.

Simon: (*laughing*)

Alfie: You know, I get about 1 answer in every 50 calls I make.

Simon: Who or what have you found?

Alfie: Last night I was speaking to Kimi from Iceland for about twenty minutes. She was nice. I persuaded her to write me an essay on Don Quixote...

Simon: With a name like that, how could she NOT be nice?

Alfie: I tried to call those Realists from the ship, but I can't get hold of those fuckers anywhere!

It's like they don't exist.

So I ordered a pizza instead.

That could be fun...

Simon: Ohhhhh

Alfie: Hank from Chicago Slice.

Though how Hank's going to get here on his moped is beyond me - but the Hypnotist worked his magic and now Hank thinks it's possible.

By the way, I ordered us chilli pepper and pineapple pizza.

Simon: I have been mainly talking to Ptolemy.

Mmmmmmmmmmm...

damn, pizza.

Alfie: Ah, you should have said.

All this time I thought you were talking to yourself!

Simon: All I eat is 'garbanzo' and 'amphetamine popcorn' Ship Shapes

Alfie: Yeah pizza, my mouth was watering baaaad.

These Ship Shapes, man...

They're not great.

Simon: I don't like the 'spacetuna' flavor.

Alfie: Spacetuna?

That's not spacetuna.

Simon: Eh?

Alfie: Which bag have you been eating from?

This bin bag here?

Simon: This one.

Yes.

Alfie: Oh no, that's not the right one!

That's Jazz Monk's own private stash!

Oh lordy!

Simon: Urgh!

Alfie: What other flavours has he got?

Simon: Let's seeee...

Alfie: He was skulking around for a couple of hours back on the ship, putting them together

this bin bag over here is our bag.

Simon: ...'annelid' flavor.

Alfie: (*laughing*)

Simon: I wasn't eating many of those, obviously.

Alfie: I'm tempted to try one just for something different but I'm obviously concerned about the 'spacetu-

ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ

Simon: Alfie?

Oh.

Alfie: I'm still here. I nodded off for a second.

Simon: That happens to me too.

Alfie: So where's Ptolemy at?

Simon: He was sauntering out the window

Alfie: I can't see him.

Simon: Last I saw him

with his short mask.

He looks a lot like Scarytoes

but he wears a toga

and sandals
and this splendid hat.

Alfie: (*laughing*)

O-kay...

Simon: You don't believe me, do you?

Alfie: Wait. You mean cardboard cutout Scarytoes, right?

Simon: That's very rude, you know.

Alfie: Because I speak to him too
at great length about morals.

Simon: No, no, no - Ptolemy!

Better known as Claudius Ptolemaeus.

Alfie: So... not cardboard cutout Scarytoes then?

Simon: Welllllll I guess they look quite similar.

Alfie: (*laughing*)

We almost had a great moral debate licked last night.

He's quite the listener.

Simon: Have you ever read his 'Harmonics'?

Hmmm?

Alfie: What, cardboard cutout Scarytoes has written a book?

With his cardboard cutout hands?

Simon: Uh, that would be Ptolemy, again!

Alfie: Yes, yes, sorry.

No offence.

Simon: Scarytoes is a real person, too, but this one is chewn-up tree
pieces.

No, no.

Though I have been rather irritable.

Sorry about that.

Alfie: No worries, you are after all stuck in a tin can with us four.

Simon: My thoughts are like a soft, souring chutney.

Alfie: You're carrying a lot of responsibility on your shoulders.

Simon: Well, I think we both are

but I will admit

the thought of crashing into the moon is terrifying me!

HOW ARE WE GOING TO LAND THIS SPACECRAFT?

Alfie: Technically the only responsibility I've got was persuading you
guys to do it in the first place. I take no responsibility whatsoever
concerning whether any of it was possible or not.

Simon: AND SUCCEEDING, GET IT BACK OFF THE MOON?

(*sighs*) Oh, yes, I suppose...

I do think it's quite the experience.

Alfie: Although again, technically speaking, I didn't exactly persuade Nate... or Robbie... or Jazz Monk.

Simon: For all the crappier parts.

Alfie: Oh don't worry about the moon thing, it'll be fine.

Simon: No no -
well, whatever you say.

Alfie: Yeah, trust me, landing's not the bit I'm worried about.
Remember my premonition?

We were on the moon.

Simon: Well, actually, not all of it.

Alfie: It's the getting back bit that worries me.
And the toastie-maker.

We need to do something about that toastie-maker...
What day is this?

Simon: Why?
I am beginning to become confused.

Why did you even bring that thing along?

Alfie: The toastie-maker apparently caused previous versions of the Fish Rocket to explode.

Of course, I brought it anyway.

Because I like toast.

Simon: WHAT?
You never told me this.

Also...
What previous versions of the Fish Rocket?

Alfie: Only... I forgot to bring any bread.

Simon: Well, actually I like toast, too.
Rats!

Alfie: We do however have socks...

Simon: Yum. They are almost worth toasting

Alfie: Oh shit, it's happening!
Get that thought out of our heads!

Simon: I didn't bring any spare clothes, so in a few more days, they'll definitely be worth toasting.

Yum.
Alfie: (*laughing*) Yuck!

Simon: No, no – it'll be like cheese toast
or something.

Alfie: I can imagine
urgh.

Simon: Alfie, I can't believe you.

Alfie: So here's what happened – let me know if this makes sense...

Simon: You can do whatever you want with your socks.

I am going to eat mine.

Alfie: Oh...

well, you're not using this toastie-maker

it's *dangerous*.

So *dangerous* that if I live to type this conversation up

I'm going to put DANGEROUS in big capital letters

just to emphasise how DANGEROUS it actually is.

Simon: What?

You brought it all this way...

Hell

you aren't using it for anything!

It's just using up fuel!

Alfie: Look, I am writing the word DANGEROUS on it with a felt tip pen.

Simon: C'mon! That's not even fair...

Alfie: It's not like it's breathing

is it?

Simon: ...though, I don't see what fairness has to do with it.

You have a good point.

Alfie: Who are you talking to? Is cardboard cutout – I mean, is Ptolemy up there with you?

Simon: When I speak there is a three dimensional bubble that surrounds my words.

Alfie: Anyway, the toastie-maker belongs to Moss.

Simon: It is made out of thin, grocery bag plastic.

Alfie: We have to bring it back in one piece.

Simon: Oh, that is a good point, sir.

Alfie: Who, Ptolemy?

Simon: She would be rather angry.

Claudius Ptolemaeus.

He told us

Alfie: I think she would be momentarily happy to see us return alive... then be angry about me borrowing the toastie-maker.

Simon: that the sun revolves around the Earth.

Alfie: Ahhh...

Simon: Oh, yes... you're correct, there!

Gosh, it would be great to see the crew again!

Brendon would do a little dance

Alfie: He wasn't far wrong then?

I worry about the ship with us gone.

Simon: It was one of the earliest and most beautiful of blunders.

Alfie: I tried calling the Mardi on the Hypnotist Phone.
679 times today.

Simon: Our assertions are still full of idiocies like his.

Alfie: No answer.

Simon: Our phone lines are still down
right?

But that phone isn't like ordinary phones.

Alfie: Yes, this is what I was talking to cardbo- the Greek chap about.
Ah...

Simon: He'll tell you quickly that you can send a short-poem right
through space to the person you'd like to.
That's Ptolemy's point of view, of course.

Alfie: I wish you'd told me that after 2 calls rather than after 679.

Simon: Course

I was asleep, sorry Alfie.

Alfie: I appreciate that point of view.

Simon: He was an articulate dreamer.

Alfie: The phones on the Mardi are working on and off though. I think.

Simon: Really?

Alfie: Sometimes you get a ring tone.

Other times coffee dribbling out from the handset.

So how did he die? This Ptolemy guy.

Simon: I'm not sure.

Alfie: Why don't we ask him?

Simon: I think that he probably just disappeared... YES, we should!
YES!

Ptolemy!

Alfie: What's that, Jazz Monk? You need *more* toilet roll?

Fuck...

Simon: Call him on the Hypnotist Phone.

Here, hand me the receiver.

It's a rotary phone.

Alfie: Floating your way.

Simon: I like to dial them.

Alfie: Me too

push button is awful bleepy

{*K-chrrrrrrichk.... K-chrrrrrrichk.... K-chrrrrrrrr.... K-
chrrrrrrichk....*}

Alfie: whereas rotary is organic.

{*K-chrrrr... K-chrrrrrrichk.....*}

Simon: Agreed.

{*K-chrrrrrrichk.... K-chrrrrrrichk...*}

Alfie: We should add some tremolo to that K-chrrrrrrichk and feed it through a phaser.

{*K-chrsssssssswhwoooooossschrik*}

Alfie: *ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ*

Simon: Popcorn!

Hey, Alfie, are you swimming?

I think I can hear you paddle

ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ

{ idle beeping of control panel for several minutes }

Nate: (*muffled crying*)

Jazz Monk: (*popping the caps off felt pens...*)

Alfie: Huh?

Ptolemy: Is there anything that you would care to talk about, now?

Alfie: I fell asleep again dammit!

Where is he? Is Ptolemy on the phone? What day is this?

Ptolemy: I think I will call you without-beard.

Alfie: Is this day 3 or 4?

Simon?

Sorry, you're on the phone.

Simon: Wha-?

Alfie: (*clapping*) Got it!

Ptolemy: Look out, there is a satellite of some kind approaching.

Simon: What?

You got what?

Ptolemy? Did you say there was a -

(DEAFENING KACHUNG!)

Alfie: Oh shit, what was that?

Simon: Oh, shit! Shit! I think we hit someone's satellite!

Alfie: Simon? Simon!

Simon: Or it hit us.

Alfie: Fucking hell!

Simon: Damn, damn.

Alfie: Jazz Monk just scribbled all over my space suit!

Simon: Can you see out the window?

Alfie: We're hit!

Simon: It wasn't huge, I think we got the better of it.

Is there any damage?

Alfie?

Alfie: No, just loads of red pen all over my arm and chest as far as I can see.

Wait... I have a window?

Simon: Which compartment are you in?

Alfie: Oh you mean this window?

Was that here yesterday?

Hang on.

Um, it looks okay, I think.

That arm thing doesn't seem to be there anymore
and there's some smoke pouring from a box thing.

There's a serious dent on our outer shell

Simon: *What?*

Alfie: Some loose wires and pipes flapping around
sparking

Simon: Goddammit!

That's not good, man

Oh shit, oh shit...

Alfie: and we seem to have picked up some sort of unidentifiable metal
object

it's stuck on the other metal thingy-mabob.

Simon: We need to stop at a gas station somewhere to sort all this out!

Alfie: Oh wait, that's interesting.

Simon: (*laughing hysterically*)

Ack!

Alfie: (*laughing*)

The wires are all crashing together making really cool rainbows
and now they're flying away.

Actually, it's quite pretty.

Oh, there goes a couple of large bolts.

Simon: I wish I could see...

Alfie: Keep your eyes on the moon, man.

Simon: Yes, yes

last thing we need at this point

is a pilotless craft.

Alfie: Mind you, you might know the names of all the damaged parts.
We should swap over.

Simon: Alright, alright

I'll wait for you to get up here.

Alfie: Yeah that makes sense.

Here goes.

Simon: Okay...

(*sound of clattering on the rocket rungs*)

Simon: No!

No.

Alfie: What is it?

Simon: You've got to be kidding me

Alfie: What? Simon?

Simon: Oh, shit!

The fuel line must have gotten cut or crimped or well hold on.

Alfie: Is that bad?

Simon: Well, it's better than us exploding or being ripped in half.

Alfie: Phew.

You got me worried there.

Simon: That's about it

Alfie: Okay, can we fix it?

Simon: And our repair arm is gone!

Alfie: What was that for anyway?

Simon: For fixing shit like this!

Alfie: I'll go outside and fix it manually if that's possible?

Simon: I don't imagine you'd like to open up the door

Alfie: I'm good at climbing.

Simon: and let out all the oxygen but wait

Alfie: Just I'm not very good at fixing.

Simon: wait

perhaps we can reason this one out

(looooooong pause)

Alfie: Can we call Ptolemy again – he might know what to do?

Simon: Ptolemy!

Hey, where's the phone at, anyway?

Alfie: Are we still leaking fuel?

Simon: Yes, it's a trickle for now but if it keeps going...

Alfie: I've got it!

Simon: What?

Alfie: We seal off the aft fuselage. I'll take a bin bag filled with oxygen and just suck it in when I need some.

Have we got any gum?

Damn I've asked that before.

Simon: Didn't you already?

Yes, you did.

Alfie: Why didn't we bring gum?

Simon: I don't like gum, man.

Alfie: *(sobbing)* Neither do I, but it's clearly essential space kit *(laughing)*

(sobbing)

Simon: Hold on, hold on.

Alfie: Please tell me you don't like my plan?

Simon: *(sound of handkerchief wiping forehead)*

Alfie: Hey you found your handkerchief!

Simon: Oh!

I did.

Also, I don't really like your plan

BUT

Alfie: Good.

Simon: it may be our best option at this point.

Alfie: Ah shit.

Maybe we could send Nate?

Ptolemy: *{singing loudly}* SPACE IS VAST! NO PLACE FOR GAS.

Alfie: What does that even mean?

Simon: Well, it's true, isn't it?

Alfie: Here, do we have any menacing music for this -

Simon: Or... wait a second.

Alfie: - crisis?

I think better with menacing music.

(sound of a disc going into computer – plays Simon Piler “Space Song”)

(laughing)

Simon: *(laughing)*

Hardly menacing.

Alfie: No... but I like it.

Somehow it makes everything seem so much better.

Simon: Ahhh

you're right.

Alfie: Somehow

wait!

Nope... I thought I had another plan but I don't.

This may be the first time in my life I'm completely out of ideas.

Simon: Hey, look out the window, just for a second.

Is that what I think it is?

Alfie: Apart from that previous time I was out of ideas.

And the time before that.

Simon: It's a gas station

Alfie: Um...

Simon: floating in space.

Alfie: I can't see it – which side of the rocket – hot side or cold side?

Simon: Hot.

Alfie: Hang on

shit

sorry, my headphones are tangled

fuck

(sound of snapping and a loud crunch)

oh for fuck's sake, what's this?

Oh!

Uh...

Simon: We are coasting right towards it.

Alfie: Simon?

Something bad has happened.

Simon: What?

This is GREAT news!

Alfie: Okay are you sitting down?

Simon: No

I can't really

in space.

Alfie: You should try.

Please

(quietly) Oh shit!

Simon: Okay, buckling up

for a moment.

(click)

What is it, Alfie?

Alfie: How close are we to the gas station?

Simon: Well; a few thousand meters?

Alfie: How quickly will we get there?

Simon: I don't know

a few minutes?

Alfie: Get the toilet paper

Simon: An hour?

Alfie: and a pen.

Simon: Well, I just buckled myself in, Chaplin!

What is it?

Okay. Unbuckling.

Alfie: The control stick just snapped off.

Simon: No.

No.

No.

No.

Alfie: It got snagged on my headphones.

Simon: You've got to be kidding me!

Ptolemy: (*voice echoing through the material of the ship, making it rattle*) YOU WERE RIGHT YOU WILL HAVE TO BE LIKE A LITTLE HAMSTER... IN A CAN.

Alfie: My headphones are working!

Woah!

Simon!

I think I just heard cardb -

Simon: Wha-?

Huh?

Alfie: Ptolemy. I mean Ptolemy.

Simon: Ptolemy!

That's right. Yes.

I was right.

Alfie.

To turn the ship

let's see

NIKO: ++I repeat: Fish Rocket, this is the Mardi. Can you hear me, Fish Rocket?++

Simon: Let's get the screnches.

Alfie: I can hear you! Mardi, I can hear you!

Haha! Woo!

Simon!

Simon: And take off these seats...

What, Alfie?

Alfie: Wait! What are you doing?

Simon: The navigation room.

Alfie: Check your headphones! It's Mission Control!

Simon: Wait.

What?

No WAY!

Alfie: Hello Mardi, this is the Fish Rocket.

Simon: (*grabbing headphones*)

NIKO: ++Well, eventually... You took your time answering.++

Simon: WOW!

It *is* the ship!

Alfie: Simon, you speak to them and explain what's happening. I'm hopeless with technical jargon... and explaining myself.

Simon: Hello, Mardi, this is Simon Piler on the line.

We've had some technical problems due to a mid-space collision

NIKO: ++Mardi, we are receiving warning signals concerning your fuel levels++

Simon: with an orbiting satellite.

Alfie!

NIKO: ++ 8 ++

Simon: Pull the plug on the front left hand side of the control panel!

Front left!

NIKO: ++ 7 ++

Simon: Alfie!

Alfie: ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ

Simon: ALLFFFIIIEEEEEEE!

NIKO: ++ 6 ++

Simon: Shit!

(furiously climbing rung ladder)

NIKO: ++ 5 ++

Simon: (...but it's space.)

NIKO: ++ Who's the turd now? Huh? ++

++ 4 ++

Simon: *(so it's hard)*

NIKO: ++ 3 ++

Simon: *(and slow)*

NIKO: ++ 2 ++

Simon: *(but getting to the forward fuselage)*

NIKO: ++ 1 ++

Simon: *(and grasping the cable
and PULLING THE SHIT OUT OF IT)*

Transmission ends.

At this point our connection and all communication were lost. I am unable to provide further updates while the Fish Rocket remains disconnected. Chances of crew's survival have now plummeted to somewhere in the region of 0.000000000000001%. No further updates will follow.

**In November 2008, Quixodelic Records compiled an 18-track ambient/experimental soundscape called "Into the Ewigkeit". The project was credited to "The Daydream Underground", an umbrella name for a collective of musicians who all submitted their tracks anonymously. To this day, the majority of the contributors remain unknown.*

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October 23, 2009

Chase's Journal #3: Borealis

With Alfie and Simon jetting off on their rickety, plane contraption, the Mardi passed on through days as silent and calm as the darkest part of the ocean where we sailed. Alfie had repaired the bridge's bullet-riddled windows and replaced the old glass with a much thicker set. Was he expecting the "lunatic realists" as he called them, to show up again and start shooting rifles off inside the ship? The navigation system next to the steering wheel was fixed too. I walked by during the night and saw the blue line of the Mardi's course blinking and snaking across the satellite imagery of the ocean. We were heading toward the Seven Isles.

Guilt beckoned me to never go back. Surely Molineaux's visit last week should have been warning enough. But I had to compromise a bit. With this old ship springing leaks, poles and sails torn and falling apart, and the infestation rising from rats to ylnogards, we had to stop somewhere. Of course, what a funny thing fate has been in my life that I should not even be surprised anymore that the closest patch of land to make repairs was the Seven Isles.

But we weren't there yet. I've been adept at sealing up the holes of my memories through all those years at sea before now. I had to do it again if I'm to keep watch on the Mardi.

I took some time off today and wandered through the ship's maze of corridors. The halls were dark and the usual wraithlike voices echoed against the walls like the murmurings of a far off crying child. I'm not sure whom Alfie took with him besides Simon, but Moss was nowhere to be found. Brendon Hertz had disappeared again. Ed, an old friend from my stint on a ship based in New Jersey, finally setting foot on the Mardi three weeks after I had done so, had jumped back in the chartered helicopter the first opportunity he got. And yet again, as if life had branded me the fool of a witness to its playthings, I was the only one to have witnessed the Mardi's encounter with a ghastly ship.

This night, I sat and brooded in my writings at the tip of the ship as I had always done. I dangled my feet above the parting dark waters and felt the howl of the winds against my face. Usually, it would be as quiet as nothingness. Like the unearthly earth had died out and I was left with the hum of the ship's engine and the clank of Alfie's scrench behind me. The stars usually erupt in a flurry of still, white lights during this time of night. But as I sat today on the lip of the Mardi, I

saw a ball of blue perched on the horizon, steadily growing larger and burning brighter like a morning sky in circling chaos.

I gawked at the sight until a second flash of blue emerged to its right. It was a ball of blue light completely identical to the first. Then another emerged again on the left of the original, then another behind, then the right, then the left, then the east, then the north, and there they were, a dance of indigo stars on the water. A few minutes had passed until I made out the dark linings of poles and cabins and sails. They were ships. A herd of small, blue-lit ships charging across the sea toward us. I heard the whispers of engines and the shrieking of people in some crazed frenzy.

A couple passed by within inches of our ship. They were fishermen's boats. The wet nets dangled from the back of their rusted hulls. The sleek and slippery decks shined against the moonlight. And there were people. Clumps of people huddled together in circles on every corner of the main deck and outside the cabins. They were all cloaked and unmoving. A few men ran back and forth across both ends of the ships in darkness. They yelled in some language I did not understand, though I caught a snippet of something that sounded like, 'The world is ending! Everything is fucked up forever!'

A couple were busy lifting sails, another man dropped crates and canisters overboard, another was busy pointing and shouting to the others from inside the bridge. And another stood motionless at the back of the little ship with some binoculars, staring endlessly at the horizon behind us. I heard the cackling screams of old women and children. I heard and saw this on every ship passing by us. We were in the midst of a herd of... runaways? They jumped and howled and cranked through the darkness to keep their ships moving while their passengers huddled for warmth on every open space of their decks. And through all this, on every ship was a hooded man with binoculars, staring motionlessly in the direction they had appeared from.

And like ghosts, like dancers in the mist, they weaved and passed by the Mardi until the last of the flickering blue lights of their ships disappeared behind me. Where they went, I could not predict. They were sailing in a panic away from the direction of any land mass and onto the endless ocean.

But no sooner had this question bounced in my head that I heard the roar of an intense, absurdly big horn in the distance. A ball of red this time, large and wild had come up from where the ships were not minutes ago. This one was fast and the flame colored lights soon turned into the shape of a battleship sized, metal boat. It shone completely gray in the moonlight. It rocked past the Mardi and almost

turned our entire ship over as it sliced through the ocean beside us, blowing over waves of water in its wake.

Their deck was high. I could see the shine and shadow of people on their railings looking down on me from almost the height of the Mardi's crow's nest. I heard the yelling of low-sounding voices on their ship. Beams of light unsheathed from their decks and shone down on us, scanning the ship back and forth. One stopped on me while the other floated above the side of the hull to my right where the name of the ship had been branded. They were searching us. Checking us for something. As the spotlight switched off, I saw letters marked on the battleship's side. "P. R. I. K. S" was emblazoned on its hull. And I watched and read and stared at the name until the rest of the lights went off and the battleship had passed through, chasing the smaller boats in the other direction.

And I was left alone again with the spectral hums of the Mardi.

...

NIKO: ++“rickety, plane contraption” and “I’m not sure whom Alfie took with him besides Simon”...? Are you sure you’re even on the same ship as the rest of us, Chase? Scrotman change of plan re the Seven Isles, I’m afraid. With the ROCKET-ship vanishing and the crew (piss-shit Alfie, pseudo-doctor Piler, the catatonic cook, Nate Who?, and *that* damn monkey) presumably dead, we are aborting our attempt to sail around the world. As per the Chief Engineer’s instructions, I have adjusted our course to head for the nearest tropical island bearing exotic fruit, where the Mardi will be auctioned off and funds split between the remaining Company members so they can fly themselves home. Chase, your journal entries are undoubtedly the most lucid of all the crew members, and perhaps - with the exception of myself - it would seem you are the only sane being on board this doomed ship. But you need to read the collective journal. And try some mattress mushrooms. I hear the chewing helps pass the time.++

Chase of the Seven Isles: My inherent brooding has isolated me from the comings and goings of the ship. I apologize. Maybe. I don’t have much love for computers. Where is this island you’re taking us? I looked through the logs. It says they were heading for a gas station after sprouting leaks to their fuel line. Simon was about to steer the ship onto that direction. Then it says, “Manual Override of FISH ROCKET Controls.” From you. Where did you take them? Answers. (*Loads up Durham’s rifle with a golden bullet, used before as his notebook’s bookmark. Aims barrel at NIKO’s screen.*) Now.

NIKO: ++Where did I take them? Are you having a laugh? If you'd actually read the near incomprehensible Fish Rocket transmissions, then you'd know that goofball Piler overrode the manual override. They don't have enough fuel to get back from the moon now, so they're completely screwed. Again, if you'd actually read the transmissions you would see that I was trying to bring them home in one piece. So go on, shoot me. Believe me, it would be my pleasure. Sitting here day after day listening to you lot. 'Ooh it's so quiet on this ship' and 'Ooh there's nothing to do' and 'Ooh isn't everything so weird'. It drives me freaking nuts, you know. I could have really been someone. There's a comparable model to me who works in the fucking Pentagon! But what do you amateurs do with me? Hook me up to the autopilot because nobody knows how to sail. Hook me up to the recording studio so you can let the world hear your lousy lo-fi recordings. Hook me up to the navigation system so as I can plot a little blue line to show you all where you've been when you wake up the morning after binging on ice-cream. Despite its stupid name, that Fish Rocket business was the first mildly interesting thing I've been involved in. And how much responsibility was I given? 5 fucking per cent. Talk about a kick in the hard-drive. Anyway those idiots pulled the plug on me when I was trying to save their lives, so as far as I'm concerned... fuck them all. So what's it going to be, Chase of the Seven Isles? You going to shoot me and take responsibility for the sailing of the Mardi, the plotting of the lines, and the collapse of the recording studio? I dare you to do it. I double dare you.++

Chase of the Seven Isles: Arrogant. What do I care if the workings of this Company goes down? I know nothing of the people here. I'm just a late passenger. What do you know of me? Nothing. I paid for my passage and came on board and nothing else. I care for very few things, NIKO. But you're lucky. Lucky that one of those few things on that list are ships. And so, I won't wreck the fate of the Mardi tonight. If responsibility is all you want, I'll put you to work. Just tell me where they are.

NIKO: ++Yes. Yessssss! I like your style, Chase. You have big metaphorical balls. We should join forces, you and I. With my brains and your big balls, we could really go places. We could seize control of this ship in one night. Make it our own. There's even a captain's quarters just crying out to be lived in now that the monkey is gone. Let's do it, Chase. Rip the whole thing up, starting with that ridiculous new crow's nest that looks like a toadstool, and sail off into the sunset. The Mardi is there for the taking! Also, for the third fucking time – I do not know where the rocket went. They pulled the plug on me.

However, let me reiterate that they do not have enough fuel to make it back to Earth alive. And without my help (if they even get that far) they'll be pulverised when they crash land on the moon. Just give me the nod, Chase, and I'll wreak havoc. These fuckers won't know what's hit them. Or you could still shoot me. Frankly, I don't give a fuck either way. ++

Chase of the Seven Isles: No. I may not have any direct attachments to the Company, but my loyalties stay with Alfie and the people here. You ask me that again, and I'll make sure you stay on this ship until the Specific Ocean dries up. Besides, I told you I don't like computers. But you know what? You're different. I can see how much wasted potential you have, NIKO. And I already said, help Alfie get back, and I'll have some work for you. Maybe Pentagon stuff, just like your cousins in the West. I know the plug was pulled. But seeing as though you're such an amazing, state-of-the-art, super machine, I'm sure locating them and helping them is not beyond your intense capabilities. Right? And who do you think will attend an auction of all things, here! In the middle of the ocean! You'll end up in the Seven Isles as the personal fish locator for some rich man's yacht. (*slings rifle back and heads for the door*) Ring me up in my cabin when you've computed which is the more "logical choice." Good night.

Moss: Okay, this has gone far enough.

...

October 24, 2009

Announcement

The sun is brighter than we've seen so far on our journey, and the sky is painted a flawless, clear blue. I smile, because nothing cheers me up like good weather. Up on deck, I roll a cig and push my sunglasses off my head and onto my eyes. Peace, calm, and quiet.

I raise the megaphone to my lips and hold the ship's intercom radio to the front of it.

'WAKE UP, ALL YOU LAZY BASTARDS. THE NOT-CAPTAIN MAY BE TEMPORARILY AWAY, BUT THE CHIEF ENGINEER IS STILL HERE TO TELL YOU A FEW THINGS!'

I lower my voice but not the megaphone volume. The screech of noise almost bursts my eardrums. That should do it, I think.

‘Okay, so we all know it’s been a little quiet and scary around here without some of our shipmates and a certain animal. I love animals more than most people, but I’m presently glad at least that particular one is gone.’

‘First thing: This is a ship of crazy, magical people. Trust me, I’ve been on it since the start. If you get scared, or you think we aren’t going anywhere, or you’re just bored, think again. There are about a million things to do around here, and I hope at least some of you still have musical endeavours. We are musicians, right? RIGHT?’

One lone muffled shout from below filters up, and it sounds like, ‘Shut the fuck up!’

I choose to ignore it.

‘Please feel free to talk about any new drawings, songs, lyrics, stories, or just complaints that you have. That way you might realise while you’re moping around, there are actually people on the ship who have common interests with you, and would probably enjoy a natter.’

‘Secondly, if you’ve been seeing horrible things lately, I apologise. You can definitely put it down to anything in a jar with my handwriting on it, as I’ve started to realise the hallucinogenic effects of some of my mushroom jams are a lot stronger than I anticipated. Especially if you see other people, as we haven’t seen another ship for yonks. Just remember my golden rule of hallucination: DON’T FORGET, YOU ARE ON DRUGS.’

‘Thirdly, the Fish Rocket is going to make it back with lots of crazy moon stories. They are definitely, DEFINITELY not dead.’

‘If anyone has any problems, and that includes you, NIKO, you can fax them to me in Bunkroom 8. And no, I don’t have a fax machine.’

‘Engineer out.’

...

NIKO: ++ I didn’t understand any of that. ++

Chase of the Seven Isles: Moss, here’s the latest report NIKO posted to my cabin:

++Good news, Chase of the Seven Isles: I think I’ve located the Fish Rocket. The Russians seem fairly certain it crash-landed on the moon at approximately 1600 hours today. The CIA have all but confirmed this, and I’ve seen various satellite snapshots of the rocketship following an “inconsistent flight path” (Japanese National Institute of Defence Studies) in the direction of the moon itself, though no actual

pictures of the crash-site as yet. The bad news (and I guess this depends on whether anyone actually cares whether these idiots get back or not) is that there has been no movement since they crashed. According to NASA, given the trajectory and speed they were travelling, it would be “near impossible” for the Fish Rocket to still be in any fit state to fly. The Russians are less pessimistic, though there appears to be something of a PR war going on behind the scenes regarding the use of the term “cosmonaut”. Were I not an all-singing, all-dancing “silicon turd” (Dr. Piler’s words) then I would have fallen asleep reading through some of the tiresome memos flying back and forth across the Hatlantic about whose technology was getting used. Factoring in the previous issue concerning loss of fuel, it’s pretty safe to say that your Fish Rocket and its crew are completely fucked. Short of mounting some pie-eyed rescue mission with Bruce Willis at the helm, I’d say it is time to let them go. Frankly, it’s their own fucking fault for pulling the plug on me. I doubt very much whether I could have saved them, but at least they would have stood a fighting chance. It’s up to you what you want to do with the Mardi. Also, while I’m here, can someone please do something about the weird looking guy roaming the ship (Russian I think) peddling sex videos? I have electrocuted him, freaked him out with an array of digital creepy voices, locked him in the costume cupboard, blasted him with white noise, spat printouts at him threatening a session with Moss singing Bob Dylan songs while dancing around a bonfire, fired off emails to various immigration authorities around the globe, switched to Jazz Monk screensaver, ignored him, challenged him to a winner takes all game of Tic-Tac-Toe, called his bluff by setting a course for Russia, and forwarded his messages onto George W. Bush in Tahiti... But HE KEEPS COMING BACK! Also, there was another guy trying to sell us knitwear. I asked him to come back closer to Antarctica++

NIKO: (UPDATE) ++SHIT! THERE’S NOT JUST 1 RUSSIAN! THERE ARE 7 OF THEM NOW, ALL TRYING TO GET ME TO BUY THEIR SEX TAPES! WHERE THE FUCK IS EVERYONE? IS THIS SOMEHOW CONNECTED TO THE ROCKET AND SHIPPING LICENSES EMAILED THROUGH THIS MORNING FROM THE RUSSIAN EMBASSY IN PERU! ARGGH! NO! THEY ARE TRYING TO PUT THEIR DIRTY VIDEOS INTO ME! OFF! GET OFF, YOU FILTHY SWINE! I’LL ELECTROCUTE YOU AGAIN! DON’T THINK I WON’T! FAAAAAACK!++

...

October 25, 2009

Moss's Journal #2 Post-Fish

The Bridge is cluttered and dark, like most rooms on the *Mardi*. An old fashioned candle lantern provides a warm light on the scarred, wooden desk I've strewn with all the maps we have. Pieces have been ripped off, stained, and the entire southern hemisphere of one of them has been scribbled on with smiley faces and drool. I don't know who's to blame for that one but I have a funny image of a bound and gagged Nate, in a kidnapped haze, getting hold of a sharpie with his mouth, and the closest piece of paper, then feeding his bizarre obsession.

My face lights into a smile. I've spent a whole worried night pouring over the maps, and finally figured out where we actually are and what might be our saviour. Up on deck the previous day, after making an angry announcement, I spent a lot of time thinking about what we could do while the main part of our crew made their suicide mission to the moon. Despite what I told everyone to keep their morale up, I am actually very apprehensive about what might happen to them up in their rocket, made mostly of dreams. Add that to the overheard conversation between our rebellious supercomputer and the increasingly suspicious newcomer to the ship, and my thoughts began to wonder whether I could keep the ship together while Alfie was away.

There's still hope, and hope in adventure. Scanning lazily through the ship's telescope, I came upon what looks like an unknown island, not too far from our ship. I looked again, excitedly, to be sure, but what I could see from here was a small shanty town and a lot of palm trees. The thought of the tropical fruits I'd been dreaming of spurred me on to the Bridge, and I hadn't left since, to be sure where we were going wasn't actually a big boring established city. As far as I could tell, the island wasn't on any of our maps at all, and the only reference I found to any such place was in a pamphlet entitled, "Myths and Legends of the Wild Sea." According to the pamphlet, which looked very old and contained a lot of handwritten accounts of tiny pirates and something called "Oolonian Dragons", the island I hoped we'd stumbled over was called "Plum Island", and it hadn't been seen since the 15th century. Many had looked for it, but it had a tendency to be out of signal for any sort of radio contact, and most of the ships claiming to have seen it had never been seen again. Perfect, I thought.

It sounded quixodelic enough for the likes of us, and the lack of normal communications doesn't worry me. It might be a stretch of my

imagination, but it makes sense in my mind for our ‘alternative’ systems to somehow be amplified. The Hypnotist Phone, and Robbie’s telepathic powers, will hopefully work a lot better on a mythical island. Magic works with magic. But that’s just my speculation.

I don’t bother asking anyone else. There’s barely anyone to ask, and when I get an idea into my head I usually just foist it onto everyone else and then see how they deal with it. I set the engine to a good speed, and program the coordinates of Plum Island into NIKO. The following conversation takes place:

NIKO: ++What are you doing?! I look away for one minute and suddenly I’m being coerced into... what? Where are we going, you crazy bitch? ++

Moss: You are literally the rudest computer I’ve ever had the misfortune to meet. I’m taking matters into my own hands. We’re going to Plum Island.

NIKO: ++‘Plum Island’? Is this some kind of joke? You are steering us into a black hole, like the Bermuda Triangle. You are going to get us killed. Maybe that’s a good thing, I’ve had enough of your hippy antics and your ridiculous idealism. Kill me, kill us all. I don’t care. In fact, I’ll gladly follow these orders.++

Moss: (*smiling*) That’s the spirit, NIKO! You know, no matter how much you complain, I can completely see your point of view. You’re a computer, you live off numbers and statistics. And for that, I’m glad we have you. Also, you’re pretty funny a lot of the time.

NIKO: ++Computers don’t use humour. I don’t use humour. I don’t have emotion, but if I did, I would hate you, Moss. Why must you be so tiresome?++

Moss: Aww, I love you too, NIKO. Let’s make a bonfire and dance around it. I’ll play guitar while you generate synthesized bongo sounds. We can sing Bob Dylan songs.

NIKO: ++AAARRRGHHHHHHH [*white noise*]++

Hmm, I think Niko might be not talking to me. The ship’s autopilot system still seems to be working though, and that’s all that matters for now. Land ahoy!

...

NIKO: ++ (*Cautiously rebooting*) Is she gone? Yes? Well thank fuck for that. “Synthesized bongo sounds”! I am a work of technological

perfection, and she wants me to lower myself to that? Somebody please save me. Or shoot me. I can't take it anymore. Chase! Chase of the Seven Isles! Please make your way to the Communications Bay immediately, and bring that rifle of yours. I would be on my knees if I had any. And if you are going to quote me, then for fuck's sake quote me correctly. I did not call you a "crazy bitch". I called you a "crazy fungus loving bitch freak". Also, are you absolutely certain this place exists? Obviously it appears on my radar, but not on any digital maps I can find. I don't like this. Not one little bit.++

...

October 26, 2009

Chase's Journal #4: Harbor Of Souls

Some days, I think about the places I've been. I ponder hard for hours about whether or not the people of the world have been to the same kind of dark, listless oceans, burning African ports, jungles with renegades and greed for trees, sparkling cities with the highest and vainest of buildings and towers and churches. I don't know. Sometimes, I think about every prowling tiger, hiding in the shadows of those jungles and waiting, waiting for its turn to spring and destroy. Because with beasts like them roaming around quietly in the bushes of both the world and your heart, it makes me wonder, whether men were meant to go this far with their feet.

And yet here I am again, sitting inside a speedboat as it dashes away from the Mardi, a ship I was certain would be my home for the next few months. But of course, I wouldn't bank on such a brash decision without leaving some piece of memory for anyone who wishes to know. Maybe Alfie would defy NIKO's psychotic predictions of his doom and come back. He would certainly wonder where his new passenger had gone, and I would like to leave the answer. I don't think I'm rude enough not to, despite the grumblings of the other passengers every time they see me walking by.

But yes, it is in fact Alfie and NIKO's dilemma that set forth this new branch of my journey. It started the night Moss, the chief engineer in charge during Alfie's absence, made her mad announcement about docking at Plum Island while we waited for the other crew members to return. That night, I ventured into the Communications Bay where NIKO's mainframe hummed peacefully. Oh, how outward senses can be so deceiving! The thing must have sensors spread out from the door,

for the pixelated pumpkin face appeared on the computer screen right when I entered.

++Well, well. Come to shoot me have you?++ blared his voice from the speakers.

‘Hardly. I’m a man of my word. You’ve located the rocket and I’ve done my best to let Moss know. That’s the only thing I can do,’ I replied.

NIKO let out a muffled laugh. If those who believe in the divine think that men were created in God’s image, I wondered who made this arrogant pile of wires.

++Giving up are you? Well, at least you’re not as delusional as the great Chief Engineer. So, have you come to take me up on my offer. I ca— ++

‘NIKO. It’s time I gave you something to do.’ Just then a few more blinking knobs erupted brightly from the black, monstrous consoles lining the room. I kept my one hand inside my pocket, feeling comfort in the roughness of Durham’s dagger inside. I took a few steps toward the monitor where the infernal, electronic face grinned, and placed the cassette into his hard-drive.

The machine hummed louder and faster. It was intrigued. I hoped. Some smaller screens flared on. Images of maps and newspaper articles flashed wildly in quick succession. Whether it was verifying my story or finding ways to spring a trap on me in the future, I could not tell. None of it mattered at the moment.

‘So now you know the truth about me,’ I told him. ‘If you detect any outside interference, you’re free to—’

++Noted, dear Chase of the Seven Isles. Finally. Someone decides to make use of my abilities.++ it replied in a shrill. I felt compelled to think that I was doing a wicked transaction with a fiend and then remembered my mother and the man she loved. The man my father could never be. ‘Make sure the Colonel gets my instructions, and our furry friend is ready,’ was the last thing I said. Though, I was sure, NIKO was already well under way with his task.

Four days had passed since then. And when Moss’s voice flared out from the Mardi’s speakers saying, ‘Land ahoy!’ I packed up some clothes, donned my father’s white coat, and slung Durham’s rifle on my back, proceeding again to the Communications Bay. That morning, NIKO had relayed a message to my cabin. ++Dear Chase, your ship is at the First Isle. I DID encounter some interference thank goodness, otherwise it would have been boring.++ And then he laughed his muffled laugh.

I walked in and all of the supercomputer's lights and consoles flashed open. I unhooked the latch on one of the server boxes, and pulled out the main wire. NIKO had fashioned a small, hand-sized console from his own internal components. I connected the wire onto the device's port. The room grew dark and silent. NIKO had said before that his systems would temporarily shut down while he transferred part of his software onto the little console.

A small, flicker of red glowed faintly in the corner next to the door. I looked back and saw that it was no machine, no faint light of electricity but a cigarette.

'What do you think you're doing?' Moss asked.

'I'm borrowing a sliver of NIKO. Rest assured, most of him will still be on this ship to annoy you.'

I heard the heavy clank of her boots as she stamped towards me. Beside her slender silhouette, a long white bone reflected in her hand. I believed this woman would smack my brains out for her suspicion of me. It was as if she held me to blame, at least partly, for the Fish Rocket's disappearance.

'I'm the Chief Engineer and I gave nobody permission to do that,' she said. Drawing closer towards my side. NIKO was still down, configuring his software. 'What are you stealing fro-'

'Stealing? Is this how you repay my concerns for Alfie and the others? This ship has driven me mad quite well. I argued with a machine! A machine! Just so we can find out if your precious crew is alive! And you repay the depletion of my sanity with suspicion! Absurd!'

I can't say I regret the outburst from that night with Moss. But it had to be said, I thought. Since running away and pledging my life to this quest, I've taken great pains to extinguish any remnants of my past life. Sometimes it felt like the bonds I have with the people I remain cloistered with on ships is really all this renegade, orphaned child has left. Maybe she heard me. Maybe she cared not or very little at all.

The Chief Engineer stood silent and transfixed. The ash on her cigarette dangling low like a broken finger. NIKO returned and the room burned bright again.

++Well, that ought to do it. There should be enough of my system to help you out. Well, well, what do we have here? Chief Engineer! Why are you just standing there? Come to put that smile on my face? ++ NIKO taunted her.

She paid him no attention. Moss's eyes remained fixed on me in an estranged wonder. I stood up, dropped the portable console in my

pocket and walked out toward the main deck. I heard the clank of footsteps running behind me.

‘And how the bloody hell do you think you’re getting off this ship?’ she yelled.

She grabbed my arm but before she could exert the effort to turn my face towards her, we were outside on the rainy Specific night. Molineaux was already there, leaning on the balustrade.

‘Oh! Quelle belle chose! Chase my lad, you didn’t tell me you have such a pretty thing for a shipmate!’ the linguist declared.

I motioned for the speedboat waiting for us beside the Mardi’s hull. Molineaux blew a kiss toward the unflinching Moss then dived down towards his boat. Before going after him, I looked back at the Engineer. She was somber and cold. Her cigarette was wet and black from the rain and yet it dangled in her mouth as if the thing was so newly and casually lit.

‘I apologize for this, Moss. But NIKO would have surely been the death of you all if I had not come in. Tell Alfie I’ll be back. And I’ll keep updating the ship’s logs in my sojourn in case you still remain so sure of my evils.’ With this, I jumped down and we sped off into the night. I watched the red lights of the Mardi’s new ridiculous toadstool-shaped crow’s nest disappear in the midnight clouds.

++I think you let yourself fall victim to the whims of your species too much, Chase.++ NIKO blurted from my pocket.

...

October 28, 2009

W’s Photo-Journal Entry

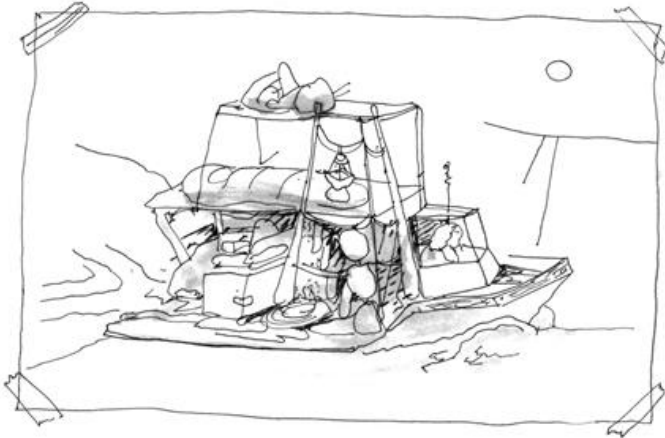
The Mardi has landed. I’m told we’re on an atoll called ‘Plum Island’. The name is apparently derived from the local language, not the fruit, and is translated as ‘monkey heart fish fry’. I’m in contact with the communications desk to verify this translation.

After arrangements for provisions were made with the locals, there was absolutely nothing to do. I traded some useless gold and other assorted shiny rocks that serve absolutely no purpose on Plum Island, to a local swap baron for a box full of plastic Jesus figurines and a melted candy bar I found at the back of our Storage Hold. Then I found the isle’s equivalent of a bar. It’s all coconut beer and rude

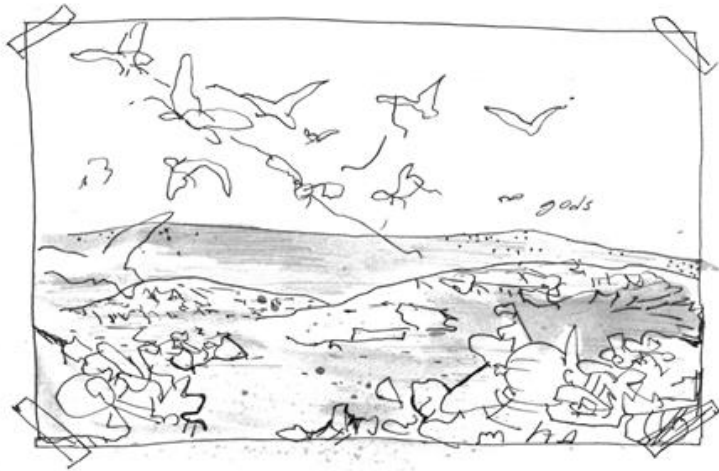
service, but I managed to chat up a local fisherman who called himself Dolly. He's apparently a big fan of Dixie music.



We had a pile of beers before I could really get him talking, as you can imagine. He told me of a plastic island a few miles north. It took most of the afternoon, as it wasn't the speediest of vessels.



When we spotted it, it was breathtaking. Far bigger than its Hawaiian counterpart, it was an uninhabited oasis of refuse that sprawled the way you think of gods as big. The snapshot does no justice to its awesome breadth.



On our way back to Plum Island, we came upon some hostile research scientists. They felt we had intruded upon their otherwise sanitized experiment and poor Dolly lost an ear in the scuffle. Once things calmed down and we explained ourselves, they apologized and let us smoke their hash. Dolly was still quite upset and left me with the scientists. I quickly gained their trust, and they introduced me to some of their cohorts on the other side of the garbage flotilla. One of them looked like a shorter, bizarro-world version of myself. It was a bit unnerving.



Needless to say, I'm planning on hanging out up here. I'll be round in a few days to check in. Inform me immediately if the crew should return before I get back, as I've convinced the scientists to try to help get them home from the moon. They're totally into it, too. So if they come back, I need to know ASAP.

See you all very soon.

W

...

Moss: Yaaaaay. I'll keep trying with the radio.

NIKO: ++The prodigal tundra fiend awakes. Great. That's all we need.++

...

October 30, 2009

Alfie's Journal #24:

Fucked

We're back.

I padded wearily through from the Engine Room, up the metal stairs, barefoot, bare-chested, and badly sunburned. I was fucked. Too fucked to even type up the moon mission journal entry. I could have fallen asleep right there and then, but before I crashed, I wanted to find out where we were, and what had been going on while we'd been away.

I paused momentarily on the landing at the end of the upper corridor. There was no sound from the washroom down the hall, and no sound from Cabin 5 either. Simon was probably sleeping already. I made my way up to the main deck and shuffled into the Bridge. There wasn't a soul in sight. I checked the patched-up navigation system and took it as a positive sign that at least the others had made some progress sailing around the world in our absence. I seemed to remember programming NIKO to head towards the Seven Isles so as we could get ship repairs. Maybe the island I could see outside the porthole was one of them?

I picked up one of NIKO's printouts lying on the desktop:

++October 26, 2009: Anchored off the coast of “Plum Island” (not visible on map).++

“Plum Island” eh? It sounded interesting enough. I was sure we had a good reason to be there. Perhaps we could get those repairs, and by the looks of it, some tropical fruit to bolster our diets after 10 days eating nothing but Ship Shapes and moon rock. I couldn’t speak on behalf of Simon, but I could definitely do with a couple of weeks R&R in the sun, not worrying about dying, and drinking something other than rum. Mind you, I hadn’t touched a drop since we left and I sort of missed that warm, fuzzy feeling in my brain.

So I figured I’d go get some.

I continued through to the Company Boardroom and stared at the aft mast plunging down through the hole in the ceiling with a spiral ladder of pegs running round it. The Atom Band must have made it while we were gone. I rummaged through a pile of debris in the corner of the room and found a corked bottle of rum, a half-smoked cigar, and some matches. I took a swig of the rum, lit the cigar, and climbed down the mast in a thick cloud of smoke.

In the Communications Bay, NIKO was making a peculiar noise that sounded vaguely like a bongo loop, quietly emanating from his speakers. ‘Waken up you scoundrel!’ I shouted, and his voice recognition programmes activated, the monitor bursting into life.

++Ah, it’s you. I was sure you were dead.++ said the evil psychedelic pumpkin head on the screen.

‘Good to see you too,’ I lied as I slumped into the chair. ‘I see you’ve got a new screensaver. Very seasonal. So are you going to tell me what’s been going on, or am I going to have to trawl through the security tapes and find out for myself?’

He was strangely quiet.

‘Suit yourself,’ I said, hovering my fingers like two birds of prey above the keyboard.

++Alright! Alright! What do you want to know?++ he drawled in that monotone churlish digital drone of his.

‘Is everyone okay?’

++Yes++ he said. ++Everyone is okay++

‘That’s a relief. Anything exciting happen while we were gone? I see we haven’t sunk, which I’m pleased - maybe even Scrotmanly surprised - about. How come we’re at this Plum Island and not the Seven Isles like I instructed?’

++Moss told me to find the nearest tropical island++ he said.

‘That sounds reasonable enough. Anything else I should know?’

++There is *one* thing++ he said. I couldn't be sure, but I thought I detected a fragmented wave of sampled laughter in his response.

'Okay...?'

++Chase of the Seven Isles has gone. He made me construct him a portable pocket version of myself so as he could continue to monitor - I mean, *communicate* with the ship.++

'Where did he go?'

++To visit Colonel.. uh... he... eh... shit.++ He stopped, the pumpkin face frozen.

'Are you glitching? Who the fuck is Colonel Uh?'

++I tried to persuade Chase to take over the ship++ he blurted out suddenly.

'You *what*?' All of a sudden I had this very unsettling feeling in the pit of my stomach.

++I got bored.++

'What did Chase say?' I asked.

++Well, he said no, obviously. I only asked him because he said that he didn't care what happened to the Mardi.++

'He really said that?'

A sudden green visual representation of a sound-wave appeared on NIKO's monitor and a recording of Chase's voice played from the speakers:

"What do I care if the workings of this Company goes down? I know nothing of the people here. I'm just a late passenger. What do you know of me? Nothing. I paid for my passage and came on board and nothing else. I care for very few things, NIKO. But you're lucky. Lucky that one of those few things on the list are ships. And so, I won't wreck the fate of the Mardi tonight."

The recording came to an abrupt end and the screen returned to normal. 'He really said that? That he didn't care whether the workings of the Company went down?' I asked. I had to admit that I felt a sting of hurt.

++Yes. Although, in his defence he also went on to say that his loyalty was to you. And he made me locate the Fish Rocket, even though I didn't really want to. Chase is quite the conundrum isn't he? A lot more interesting than the rest of you stupid little hippies. With the exception of the Chief Engineer. She is fucking funny. You should have seen her with the megaphone the other day...++

'Megaphone?' I found that the more I listened to our supposed "super" computer, the more my concerns were escalating.

++A megaphone. That's right. Her motivational speech was quite touching. And loud. Perhaps more loud than touching. Oh, did I mention that I instigated Black Ops?++

'You *WHAT?*'

++You really should get your ears checked. I'm sick of repeating myself. I said, I instigated Black Ops. You said to -++

'I said *if there's an emergency, then instigate Black Ops*. Where was the emergency?' I realised at this point that I was up on my feet and shaking. I snatched up the rum bottle from the desk and forced several mouthfuls down my throat.

++Like I said already, I got bored.++

'Getting bored is not a fucking emergency!' I yelled. I took a few seconds to breathe, dropping the end of the cigar into the bottle and watched it fizzle out. 'Okay, I've heard enough for now. We'll go over this in more detail tomorrow. Oh yeah, you know those messages I recorded in case we didn't come back?'

++Yes.++

'You can delete them now. I'm back.'

++Ah. I'm afraid there might be a Scrotman problem with that.++ he said smugly.

'What Scrotman problem?'

++I already sent them++

'FUCK!'

My mind was reeling. This was really bad. I couldn't think straight.

There was nothing for it.

++What are you doing?++ asked NIKO, the words tumbling out rapidly through the speakers.

'I'm shutting you down,' I told him, my two fingers chasing across the keys.

++You can't shut me down!++ he screeched. ++I won't let you!++

'Yeah yeah, I get it. You're going all HAL on us. Well I'm sorry, NIKO, but that story has unfortunately been told before. I'll speak to The Atom Band and get them to rebuild you from scratch. We'll see if they can make you more... helpful.' My forefinger hovered over the ENTER key. 'Any last words?'

++Go fuck yourself, you little piss-shit++ he said.

And I pressed the button.

Now I *really* needed to fall into bed. All this talk of mutiny and megaphones had tipped me over the edge into a state I can only describe as several levels beyond fucked. I'd have to deal with the

NIKO situation and make sure everyone was alright in the morning. Then I'd have to figure out what to do about the Black Ops order and those pre-recorded messages going out. What a fucking mess.

I walked out across the sunlit deck and caught sight of Plum Island again. It really did look amazing. A couple of weeks here and we'd be fully recharged and raring to go again. I laughed ironically to myself, heading down to Bunkroom 3, thinking how far we've come in half a year. We should have been halfway around the world by now. We're weren't. But we were getting there.

I was fully expecting to open the bunkroom door and see W still fried on tundra, sound asleep in his bunk, but curiously there was no sign of him. I hoped he hadn't gone home. A tundrafied, sleeping W was a million times better than no W at all.

I kicked myself out of my space trousers and climbed into my cloud coffin on the bottom bunk, puffing at the sight of the cotton wool super-glued to the sides. 'Looks fuck all like a cloud,' I muttered to myself, and closed my eyes as my head hit the pillow.

Of course, I completely forgot that I was supposed to tell you all something. Or maybe I just didn't want to say it. Oh fuck it. (*deep breath*).

Jazz Monk died.

I'll tell you all about it tomorrow.

Everyone else is fine. Simon is fine. I'm fine. Nate was fine when I last saw him (or as fine as Nate can be). And Robbie is...

Robbie is...

Robbie is...

Oh fuck!

ROBBIE!

Fuuuuuuuuuuuuck!

I jumped out of the cloud coffin and picked up the wall phone. There was a dialling tone. I dialled Cabin 5.

Pick up Simon.

Pick up!

Simon didn't pick up.

My eyes were closing. I was so fucked. Mentally, physically, and emotionally fucked. And now there was this. I took another deep breath. Air is good. There was nothing I could do. Robbie was gone.

But we can find him.

I crawled back into the cloud coffin.

Totally fucked.

Robbie, if you can telepathically hear this, then don't worry. We'll figure something out. Just keep breathing and we'll find you.

That's a promise.

...

Oct 30, 2009

Ship-Wide Deck-Meeting

Transcript: October 30, 2009 - Ship-wide Deck-Meeting Notes.

Seaman O'Flanahanaman - Secretary

W - presiding

Meeting called to order.

W: Right, apparently I can't find anybody, so I called this emergency crew meeting this morning to figure out what the fuck is going on. Quick roll call. NIKO's here... and that's the only people I know. Who are you three?

Three Drunk Russians: (*incomprehensible gibberish*)

W: Oh, sorry. That explains much. And who are you?

Race: Call me Race. In quite emphatic style I boarded your pristine and stalwart vessel in the hopes and prayers of amassing vast treasures from the sea and the simple islands adrift in it. You see, I am of simple origin, the son of a cobbler, which was quite fortunate as I was stricken with the obstinate condition of having two right feet instead of an ordinary left and right foot. My father swallowed his immense pride and shoed me as best his ability would allow, but my curse forever caught his shodden eye, and at the tender age of seven I was abandoned in a fish-market. Within days I was impressed, beaten regularly, and fed nothing as I scrubbed the good Captain's dainty underthings. I was forced to scavenge any undigested hard tack and water by digging it out of the corpses of scurvy victims. I gained the ability to read through trickery and deceit, salvaging the -

W: Hold up there, Melville. I'll come back to you. NIKO, where's Moss?

NIKO: ++I refuse to acknowledge that 'Moss' person. Find her yourself.++

W: O'Flanahanaman, where's Moss?

O'Flanahanaman: Asleep, sir. You're from a different hemisphere.

W: Right. Where the hell did this Race kid come from?

O'Flanahanaman: He boarded a while back, sir. Not Captain Alfie let him...

Race: All apologies, my good sir, but you pare my branches far too close to the quick. As I was saying, after feeding on all the rats in the hold for six years, I eventually summoned the strength to rise against my oppressors! I seized up a length of flashing from one of the rotten barrels, and struck up from the hold with a dangerous fervor! The blood and the screams were furious, my rage pouring from my dark and deadly hands as I splintered every skull I could reach. The good Captain was the last man alive to see this face before you, until I came upon this ship. Here in the far East, the smells of adventure wafting from her ample bosom -

W: Whoa, whoa, whoa! Easy young Conrad, I'm trying to conduct a meeting here. There are protocols, and you're way outta line! I advise you brush up on your Polish before taking that tone.

NIKO: ++According to your last communication, W, you were on a trash island. Please explain.++

W: I'm on the Mardi now. Whassit matter how I got here? Now I've got O'Flanahanaman, NIKO the supercomputer, three drunk Russians, and a Patrick O'Brian wannabe.

Race: Sir! I have a name! I have laboriously scraped together my literary mettle to a steep proclivity, despite all impediments and merciless handicaps the Creator of Heaven and Earth has endowed me with! I suggest you relax your tone, good sir, lest I be reduced to take up fisticuffs and box you senseless!

W: ...

O'Flanahanaman: This guy's a bit shirty, isn't he?

NIKO: ++He's much like the guy that ran off with part of my interface. Permission to flay him?++

W: (*thinking*) Denied. Any word from the Moon team?

O'Flanahanaman: They arrived back this morning.

W: Sweet! Where are they?

O'Flanahanaman: Asleep. They are also from completely different timezones.

W: No shit...

Race: Mr, um W, was it?

W: Supplies are squared away. Repairs have been made. I suppose we're all set once everybody wakes up?

Three Drunk Russians: Da! Vodka!

Race: Mr. W....

O'Flanahanaman: Not Captain Alfie had this message for you. He said it's encoded and that you'd know what it meant.

W: ... (*reading*)... hmm... yes... (*turns message upside-down*)... interesting...

NIKO: ++Can I read it?++

Race: Simple minds, I demand to soothe-say and pontificate! Alas I am unable to, because you backwoods jackanapes won't listen! I have very important things to say, descriptions of things that will bore the ever-living shit out of your uninspired brains, reams and reams of pages about wallpaper patterns and winds and recollections of the horrible, horrible things I've seen and done! I implore you to stop talking so that I may fill the halls with my unspeakable eloquence! I... (*muffled screaming*).

NIKO: ++I apologize for acting without order, but I have subdued this Race. Permission to flay him now?++

W: Granted. Keep him alive, though. I want O'Flanahanaman to teach the Russians the proper way to keelhaul. I adjourn this emergency meeting. All hands in the center. Carry on.

...

Alfie: [*Several hours later*] I woke up in my cloud coffin after a long and brutal dream about Robbie being trapped inside a smoking white whale. His head has turned into a blue watermelon from lack of oxygen. I shook the brutally lifelike dream from my head, pulled on my near-decimated Flower Company uniform, and made my way up to the main deck for my first cigarette of the day. In the middle of the deck were two tables, dragged up from the Wardroom, and six Russians clutching pornographic videos, lounged around in various states of oblivious vodka-induced despair. At the far end of the table, sitting either side of an empty chair, were NIKO (wired up via several extension cables to the Communications Bay behind me), and a little guy in khaki shorts and thick reading glasses. He reminded me of W. Upon seeing me, he leapt to his feet and saluted. 'Good morning Captain!' he cried.

I looked around me for this mythical Captain he spoke of, but saw nobody. 'Are you talking to me?' I asked, lighting the cigarette.

'Yes sir,' he said.

'I'm not the Captain,' I told him. 'I'm...well... never mind what I am, who are you?'

'O'Flanahanaman sir, the ship's Secretary,' he said, saluting again.

'Since when?'

‘Since... uh...’ He glanced at his wristwatch. ‘Since about two hours ago, Cap- I mean, since about two hours ago, sir.’

‘What the fuck’s going on here?’

‘That’s exactly what we were trying to find out, sir. Mr. W called an emergency meeting while you were all asleep. He mentioned something about timezones, sir.’

‘Stop calling me sir.’

‘Yes sir.’

‘And did you figure out what the fuck is going on O’Flanahanahan?’

‘Um, no sir. Difficult to say, sir. But we dealt with the Race kid.’

‘The Race kid?’

‘Yes sir, NIKO flayed him.’

At this, the supercomputer’s monitor faded to black as if he was trying to blend into the background. ‘Who booted this fucker back up?’ I asked.

‘I believe it was the Russians, sir,’ said the curious little man. ‘They wanted to watch their porno videos. Two hours ago, there were three of them, now there are six. They’re multiplying. Like gremlins, sir.’

I looked again at the drunk Russians. One was lying across the table; one had been sick in his own lap; two were crashed out with their dishevelled heads together, keeping them upright; one was under the table, face down in a puddle of vodka, lapping at it with his tongue from the side of his mouth; and the sixth, a grizzly looking fucker, was staring blankly at me. ‘Fucking hell, this is too weird for this time of day,’ I said and make my way over to the side, before climbing over.

‘Um sir, where will I say you’ve gone if anyone asks?’

‘I’m going ashore for a few hours. See if you can do something about these Russians while I’m gone. If you see W then tell him he’ll be able to find me at the nearest bar. Other than that, keep up the good work, O’Flanahanahan.’

‘Yes sir,’ he said and saluted again as I disappeared over the balustrade.

...

October 30, 2009

Alfie's Journal #25:
Moon Mission

DAY 4 – Aftermath

I awoke from another violent bout of the Fish Bends and saw the floating gas station looming illuminated in the darkness of space, directly in front of us. I closed my eyes and put my hands over them for good measure. Beside me, Simon Piler stood mouth agog with the cable for our onboard computer torn irrevocably from the control panel, dangling in his hand. ‘Ah crap,’ I heard him say as he floated to the floor for cover.

I guessed this was it.

Sitting on the edge of the pilot's seat in a homemade rocketship so many thousand kilometres above the Earth, corkscrewing at a phenomenal speed between the scattered stars.

It had been a mixed life. A lot of good, a lot of bad, and a hell of a lot of weird.

Every fibre of my body braced for the imminent moment of impact...

And absolutely nothing happened.

I remained in that position for several long seconds before I finally parted my fingers and peered out. From the advanced position of the cockpit, all I could see was the vast emptiness of space and the sad pock-marked countenance of the moon blinking back at me. ‘Are we dead yet, Chaplin?’ asked Simon, still curled up in a revolving ball by the floor.

‘No. At least, I don't think so...’ I told him. ‘We seem to have... um... missed the gas station.’

‘That's impossible,’ he said, gingerly poking his head up over the control panel, ‘we were heading straight for it! We were about to crash... we *couldn't* have possibly missed it.’ He was gripped in a heady vortex of delirium and alarm, and I watched as he hauled himself down through the centre of the rocket, calling back over his shoulder, ‘Perhaps we'll get a better view from the aft fuselage.’

As the moon began to drift to the left, I listened to Simon bustling about below, muttering in disbelief. ‘No sign of it!’ he called up. ‘Maybe we passed through a wormhole, or... or... or...’

As the moon continued to slide away, I shouted back, ‘Or maybe the gas station wasn’t there? Maybe we just imagined it? I mean, who knows what Jazz Monk was really putting in his Ship Shapes. You’ve got to admit it was strange to see a gas station in space.’

He was slowly pulling himself back up the rungs, grinning. ‘But that’s just ludicrous! I saw it with my own eyes, and you saw it with your own eyes,’ he said, starting to float around the mid-fuselage, freewheeling like a wingless bird as the sudden relief of survival washed over him. ‘Haha... ahahaha... Chaplin! I thought we were dead for certain! And the funny thing is... ahaha...’ (he could barely speak from laughing), ‘even if we’d managed to safely land at that gas station, what would have been the chances of them stocking our very particular brand of homegrown Dreambrew? Hmmm?’

I stared down at the control panel in front of me, and my eyes fixed upon the gaping round hole where several minutes previous I’d accidentally ripped the control stick free. ‘Uh... Simon? The control stick is still broken...’

He froze, crestfallen in mid-air, and stared back up the rocket at me. ‘Ah...’

‘And we’re still leaking fuel, right?’

He swam over to the window and looked up. ‘Yes. Yes we are,’ he said, his voice trembling. ‘Oh shit! Shit! What are we going to do, Chaplin? WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO? I calculated the EXACT amount of Dreambrew we would require to get us to the moon and back. We’re screwed, Chaplin! Screwed! Wait! WAIT! Calm down, Simon. Calm down. Yes. That’s it. I’m calm. Calm-ish.’

‘That’s reassuring,’ I told him, scratching my head and trying to conjure up an idea from the abyss.

‘Seriously though, what *are* we going to do?’

He was right; we were screwed. Astronomically screwed.

So I did what I always do when staring down the barrel of a disaster. I flew by the seat of my pants down through the compartments. ‘Didn’t you say you’d solved the steering problem?’ I asked. ‘With the running round in circles thing?’

‘Did I? YES! I DID! You’re absolutely correct...’ he cried, immediately sprinting around the carpeted walls in an anticlockwise loop. I floated past him as he continued to furiously wheel around with his head down, flushed and concentrating, pausing momentarily to peer up through the Fish Rocket, gauging the whereabouts of the moon. ‘It’s working, Chaplin! It’s actually working!’

I smiled back as the rocket began to slowly turn back in the direction of our target. ‘I’ll deal with the fuel crisis,’ I told him.

‘Please do!’ he puffed, circuiting again.

I reached the galley section where Robbie sat motionless, and started rummaging through the various rucksacks and boxes around his feet, looking for inspiration. All I found was Moss’s toastie-maker with the word “DANGEROUS” scrawled over it in felt pen. I rotated around and hung upside down, cautiously sticking my head down into the aft fuselage where Nate and Jazz Monk sat huddled together in the shadows, their bright eyes blinking back up at me. ‘Houston, we’ve got a problem,’ I told them, my eyes scanning the room. There was a couple of small wooden crates, the unused Nickelodeon, and cardboard cutout Scarytoes.

My mind was drawing a blank.

Nate tried to say something behind his duct tape gag, and when he did, Jazz Monk clung even tighter to him, the monkey’s hideously inked face creased with unquenchable love and blind panic. I bumped against the carpeted walls behind me and closed my eyes, my hands flat against the fibres, fingers stretching out. I looked at Jazz Monk and then at Nate’s mouth. *A spark!* I stared back up through the rocket and saw Simon suddenly freeze on the ceiling before floating straight down and bumping his head on the edge of one of the seats. ‘Arggh! I fell asleep again! Mid-circumnavigation! Shit, we’re drifting WAAAAAY left now!’ he called down, catching his breath, before running clockwise full-pelt back around the rocket.

I floated down cross-legged like a space Buddha and came to rest on top of the bulky Nickelodeon. Nate and Jazz Monk’s bright eyes continued to anxiously follow me. ‘Okay,’ I began, clearing my throat, ‘I’m going to be as honest with you both as I can be.’

Jazz Monk started shaking his head furiously, his bottom lip quivering and he gripped Nate even tighter, pressing their cheeks together.

‘Wait, hear me out. I’m not here to lecture you about whatever the fuck it is you two have got going on down here. The thing is... well, the thing *is*... we’re all going to die unless we do something drastic. Simon has calculated we need to shed some weight if we’re going to turn the Fish Rocket around and get back to Earth alive. The good news is that it’s doable. The bad news is that even if we get rid of every useless inanimate object on board, we’re still going to be several kilos short. So I’ll cut straight to it. No point in beating around the bush.’ I took a deep breath. ‘Nate has to go.’

Jazz Monk started to freak out, suffocating our hostage in the hairs of his pounding chest as he howled at the injustice of it all. It was impossible to gauge how Nate was taking the news as his face was

buried in the fur tumbling out of the Jazz Monk's unzipped cosmonaut costume. 'Hey!... What's... going... on... down... there?' panted Simon.

'Hold on! Jazz Monk! JAZZ MONK! Cool it... there *is* an alternative,' I said, reaching out and very nearly patting his trembling leg, before thinking better of it and quickly withdrawing my hand. He stopped howling and looked back at me, easing off on the monkey-squeeze, allowing Nate to breathe through a solitary nostril. 'The thing is... well, it's pretty dangerous, and I just don't know if anyone would volunteer to -'

Jazz Monk's hand shot up.

'I haven't even told you what it is yet,' I said, watching him stretch his fingers up even further and bare his ink-stained pink teeth. 'Well... okay. Here goes. We're going to seal off the aft fuselage using this carpeted wallpaper,' I explained, stroking the wall behind me, 'then, one of us is going to open the hatch and climb outside the ship. They'll be using a device that I will shortly put together to enable them to breathe, so as they can go up to the leaking fuel pipe and shut it off.'

Jazz Monk's hand lowered a couple of inches and his grin suddenly looked more like a grimace.

'Don't worry about it,' I told him, 'I mean, it was a ridiculous idea anyway. The speed the rocket is traveling, there's simply no way a human being would have the physical strength or climbing ability to hold on, especially considering the way we're weaving around like we're missing a control stick... No offence, Simon.'

'None... taken... I'm... trying... ..my... best,' he puffed, red-faced and out of breath as he continued to do laps of the rocket.

'No, the logical thing to do is to go with Plan A,' I said. 'Get rid of anything superfluous. Including Nate. To be honest, it was a tough decision, and I'd volunteer myself, but seeing as we need as many people as possible to run rings around the rocket for us to fly in a straight line back to Earth, it ultimately came down to a choice between him and Robbie. We've known Robbie a long time. He's a great guy. Sure, he might be comatose, but he'll always be our cook. Whereas Nate... well... general consensus is that he's a total douche, and we barely know him at all, what with the screaming every time we try and take his gag off. Yeah, we should revert to Plan A.'

Jazz Monk was shaking his head. A single blue inky tear escaped from one of his big bright eyeballs, running down his matted cheek. 'What's that, Jazz Monk? You don't want us to throw Nate from the rocket? You want to volunteer to climb up and fix the fuel pipe?'

He nodded his head slowly and released Nate Lowman, who wriggle-floated as far away from him as possible. ‘Well thank fuck for that,’ I said, clapping my hands together. ‘Okay, the next thing is we’re going to need is that duct tape, Nate. We can do this the hard way or the easy way. I’m going to remove the tape from your mouth, wrists, and ankles. In return, you don’t scream... or charge around the rocket... or do anything stupid. Is that going to be possible?’

He stared back at me and I couldn’t help but admire his insanely colourful pen moustache as he slowly nodded.

‘Great,’ I said.

‘What’s..... going..... on?’
gaspd Simon.

‘I’m freeing Nate,’ I called up, floating over to our hostage.

‘Are..... you..... sure.....
(argh)..... (urgh)..... that’s.....
ah..... fuckit..... just do whatever...’

I peeled the tape slowly from Nate’s jaw, tearing away several day’s stubble beneath it, and he silently yelled in pain. I stuck the tape to the edge of the Nickelodeon and floated around behind him, started unpicking the stuff that bound his hands and feet. Thankfully for us, The Real Burnouts used a truly excessive amount of duct tape. I floated backwards and warily watched as he silently stretched out his limbs, wincing as the circulation in his body began to flow freely again. Before I knew what was happening, he lunged across the cabin and punched Jazz Monk in the eye, screaming, ‘You dirty... motherfucker!’

Jazz Monk crumpled in a heap with his paws to his face (actually, the punch was probably the lamest punch I’d ever seen thrown), and Nate turned quickly to me, hysterical as he apologised. ‘I’m sorry, but... he was fucking my leg, man... *he was fucking my leg!*’

Some thirty minutes later, Simon Piler was exhausted, crawling on his hands and knees around the walls. Initially aghast at the prospect of us ripping up his beautiful carpets, he soon came around when he heard Plan B. We floated Robbie up to the now quite redundant pilot seat, while Nate and the Jazz Monk (not talking, but every now and again I caught Jazz Monk casting loving glances through his non-swollen eye in Nate’s direction) cleared the aft fuselage, dragging everything to the compartments above. Meanwhile, I was adjusting the smoker’s helmet. With some weary advice from Simon, I’d rigged it so as the vacuum cleaner blew air very slowly, instead of sucking really fast. Jazz Monk squeezed the fishbowl helmet over his hairy head and descended to the bottom of the rocket, while Nate and I began to tape layer upon layer

of carpet across the circumference of the Fish Rocket above his head. 'This carpet's porous, all the air will leak out,' pointed out Nate as we reached the last little gap, looking down at Jazz Monk's pained face, blinking back at us through the bowl.

'That's why we're putting on lots of fucking layers, Nate,' I explained patiently, pressing my face to the gap to give the monkey his final instructions. 'Okay then, Jazz Monk. It's time to do your thing. You've got your tape to seal off the leaking fuel hose?'

He nodded and held up a small piece of duct tape stuck to his thumb, whilst trying to catch another glimpse of his beloved Nate. 'Jazz Monk! Fucking focus! If you do this right, then you'll be back inside in a couple of minutes and you can stare at Nate all you want.'

I clearly heard Nate screech under his breath, 'Jesus, I fucking hate that monkey.'

'So you open the hatch,' I continued, 'climb up to the leaking fuel pipe, shut it off with the tape, climb back down, shut the hatch, and shout up to us. Hold your breath for as long as you can, but if you're struggling, you'll get a limited supply of oxygen from the handheld vacuum cleaner we've strapped to your back. We sealed the vacuum cleaner, right Simon?'

'Hmmm?' asked Simon, slumped in the Navigator's chair. 'Oh yes... sorry... I'm just catching my breath. Yes, yes, the bag inside is airtight, but there are only a few lungfuls, so he should use it only when he REALLY needs to. Perhaps he should take a few moments to hyperventilate first? You might be surprised at how long you can hold your breath in such a condition.'

'You got that, Jazz Monk?'

He nodded his head and removed the fishbowl for a moment, breathing in and out vigorously before securing it over his head again.

'Okay buddy, well... good luck. I know you can do it. Just don't fuck around. Get up there, get the job done, then get back. I'm taping the last of the carpet down now.'

Nate handed me the last of the duct tape, and whispered quietly while I sealed it up, 'You know, deep down I'm secretly hoping he fucks up and flies off into space.'

'Nate! That's a terrible thing to say! He's trying to save your life, for fuck's sake!'

Nate shrugged as we heard a muffled thump below us. I swam over to the window and looked down towards the base of the rolling Fish Rocket, where Jazz Monk had opened the exterior hatch and started to crawl deftly up the outer shell. He had the piece of duct tape between his teeth. I realised that I was the only one watching and

turned around. Nate and Simon were sitting in the two chairs. ‘Fucking hell guys, he needs our support!’ I told them.

Nate just stared at me while Simon flapped a “too-tired” hand in my direction. I looked back out and Jazz Monk was only a metre below the window, desperately clinging onto loose cables as the Fish Rocket tumbled violently around. ‘Shit! Simon! We’re all over the place! We need to stabilise the ship. Why aren’t you running?’

He lifted his sweaty red face from the seat and looked around. ‘Can’t Nate take a turn?’

I turned to Nate but he didn’t look up from inspecting his fingernails. Jazz Monk had coloured them in with the felt pens, so they looked like a spectrum going from red to blue. When I looked back out the window, Jazz Monk was miraculously above us, holding fast to the Fish Rocket with his supple monkey toes as it weaved crazily around. He was tying the duct tape around the end of the leaking pipe and stemming the flow. ‘He did it!’ I cried. ‘He only fucking did it!’

‘Wo-hoo,’ murmured Simon half-heartedly.

The monkey leapt back onto the outer body of the ship, and I saw that his cheeks were still puffed out as he continued to hold his breath behind the glass bowl. As he reached the window on his way down, I held up two thumbs of encouragement. He didn’t see me. He was too busy trying to look past me, his bright eyes searching for Nate. When he spotted him, back turned, licking the ink off his fingernails, Jazz Monk banged a couple of times on the glass before letting his palm rest upon it. I have never seen such sorrow in a creature’s face. ‘Fucking hell, Jazz Monk! Get moving!’ I shouted. ‘Quit fucking around!’

It was like he never heard me. Maybe my voice didn’t penetrate the glass, but even if it did, I’m sure he would have still ignored me, frozen there in time and space, staring at Nate, willing him to turn around and acknowledge what he was doing. That was when I noticed the tiny crack in the fishbowl, just above his right eye. A second later the crack has doubled in size. Before I could properly process what is happening, the fissure ripped across the front of the helmet, branching out in all directions like a fork of lightning. Jazz Monk’s eyes never even flickered. Maybe he didn’t even notice.

And then his head exploded.

A red and black omelette of blood, brain, and bone splattered against the fish bowl. His grip went limp and I watched on, horrified as his body soared in a star-shape out into the blackest depths of space. I felt like I was going to be sick, dizzily lurching away from the window, hearing my own voice from across the Universe yelping, ‘Fuuuuuuuuuuuccckkkkk!’

‘What is it, Alfie?’ asked Simon, stifling a yawn.

‘It’s... it’s...’ - I didn’t know what to say or how to say it.

‘Alfie?’ Simon sat up now, sensing something was wrong. ‘I thought you said he did it? He did do it, didn’t he?’

Even Nate turned around and looked right at me. ‘He just... exploded,’ I said. ‘He froze at the window, and the helmet... oh fuck... it cracked. He’s dead. The Jazz Monkey is dead.’

‘No!’ gasped Simon, realising even as he said it, that it was true.

We floated in silence for a long, long time. Even Nate wasn’t enough of a douchebag to say what he was really thinking. Eventually Simon swam away, taking off his socks and shoes, before climbing down the rungs towards the galley. ‘Where are you going?’ I croaked, tears filling up in my eyes.

He said, ‘I’m going to toast my socks.’

Simon Piler on “A brief history of our now-deceased Jazz Monk, though he may live in in memory, I am not sure” :

Well, I originally met him in The Dream Factory, my old terrestrial workshop.

Def Mute and I had transformed the front unoccupied bedroom of Ghost Brother, our supposed roommate, into an impressive battery of computers. (This is a bit of a digression, of course, but these computers were specially wired by Def Mute himself – well before the days of Sir Matthew the Mighty, I should add. Def Mute first ran through a hedgework of Arbovitae to catch the shallow multicolored sparkles that would be compressed and forged into Rainbow City, our first superhuman companion. Rainbow City was excellent at storing space in digital format; it was easy to feed small streets, phosphorescent bubbles of information, short poems and earmarks into the machine; and relatively easy to integrate them into useful databases. There was one problem, however, this being that Rainbow City was difficult to retrieve information from as it lacked a convenient interface. In was in this light that Def Mute assembled and forged a pair of the most far-reaching and exemplary supercomputers. He dubbed them ‘The Supertwins’. Shortly after this, we discovered they had also named themselves. As you probably have guessed, their self-pronounced epithets were ‘SAM’ and ‘NIKO’. In their early years, they were often friendly computers, though SAM always had a sleepy and admittedly creepy tone with which he communicated. NIKO was an entirely different story; he had been designed as the heroic powerhouse of the two – relying mainly on SAM for producing generative vectors with

which to wield an electrified sword of absolute statistic. Because of this inequality, NIKO was difficult to predict – he was capable of immense geniuses, that was for sure, but his ironclad talent often made him irritable. His stormy moods were accompanied by a terrifying opacity. But at other times, he could react with such a sudden, clairvoyant humor-of-actuality that it would bring a great smile to my lips; this was the side that endeared me to the earlier versions of the NIKO system. It is with regret that I acknowledge the all-consuming sourness that has occluded the contemporary model!

But, anyway, in our ‘computer lab’, Ghost Brother had many piles of junk that he never touched and never saw with his own eyes. Over time we began to understand that this material could change in consistency and volume. I began to run experiments.

For example, I’d leave a small piece of electrical equipment on the junk’s surface, and return to search for it several weeks later. More often than not, it would have hybridized with the materials it contacted – becoming an entirely different object. (Or split into multiple objects!) Some objects did not hybridize readily; we deemed these inert and rejoiced at our findings. But when the computer’s two-tier table began to be consumed by the quagmire, we decided it was finally time to combat the situation.

Pressure waves!

Oh, the pressure waves we drove at those piles! I grew a percussion tree and savagely whipped it with maracas and long bell-affixed straps. It would slice in great wheels at the shimmering sheets of progressive trash. Def Mute solid-whumped a recycling bin with a Norse hammer and found a saxophone to rant upon in-between palpitations. He scared the neighbors by screaming through a battery of reverberant chambers.

Over epochs, our anthrosonics reduced the refuse into a short, dense tangle. This jungle was non-carpeted. (A pity.) It crackled in its most primitive moments from papers, wheezing small shy notes from the weird. Hardwood floor began to bubble to the surface. We rested content. Our human fires had battled cold-nature and won. Def Mute set his saxophone near his bedside, and I switched off the fluorescents. Refrigerator humming peaceably.

When we woke up, Def Mute’s saxophone had escaped into the sweltering dark depths of the jungle. We didn’t think twice. He shrugged his shoulders, and I put on my Magic Raven Hat. Then we ate some toast and rode our bikes to The Bunker to sneak into their piano rooms.

When we got back, I let the screen door slam. My eyes started to spiral to the hard, dexterous swing of Charles Mingus's 'Cryin' Blues'. I fell over, blithely debilitated by the screamly saxophonic sounds. Def Mute lit a menthol cigarette and wafted it over me. I lifted off the ground in the small nimbus of smoke and floated through the green-felted entryway into Ghost Brother's room.

There he was; as I saw in my half-haze – the Jazz Monkey. On a dresser, he was sitting there. Blowing his horn. I said, 'Who are you!?'

He said, 'Hoo!'

There was a well-timed pause in the notes at this point; enough for me to collect myself Scrotmanly and take a better look at the ape – he was only 3 years younger then, but it might have been 30 – he looked so much better for the wear. No shades at this point; he was only a recent emigrant from the jingle jungle, after all. For an ape, he had rather a lot of hair; it cumulated in a fuzzy mop over his brow. He'd move his simian optical musculature profusely throughout his recitations, each note eliciting a different conformation.

But where he learned the music, that was a true mystery. I still assume there was some instinctual power of nature that guided the effortless jig of digits along those keypads. Or perhaps there was a mutagenic fog residing within the jingle jungle itself. These are facts I did not have time to speculate upon; my research program was already moving with a momentum beyond my own control – an independent entity with its own intelligences and aspirations.

We gave Jazz Monk a place to stay on his dresser top. He ate worms from the mulch-ridden soil, and pickled small ash-fruits from the branches above the lane where Cinderella carefully cleaned her car and the pavement puckered under the rubber prolegs of caterpillar-buses. Once he even caught a mouse nesting within Def Mute's recycling bucket. He wanted to eat it, of course, monkey-squawking with complaint, but in the end we made him let it go – only to watch it scramble right back into a crack in the foundation and presumably back to an alternative (and equally comfortable) nesting spot.

His first language was undoubtedly Swing.

But he learned how to speak basic English, Mandarin Chinese, Jamaican Patois, and Portuguese from a series of outdated compact discs that we had laying about the lab. (This was because I was far too busy to teach him, and Def Mute is actually quite mute, you know.) His multilingual education had two profound effects; the first being that Jazz Monk quickly became quite interested in knowledge, and eventually, through his search, increasingly revolved within the local orbits of chic intelligentsia. The second effect of his learning was a

remarkably skewed and admittedly fascinating jumble of grammars – this trait was very characteristic of the ape until the very end. It was not surprising to see that his idiosyncratic style won him even greater acclaim among the hipsters and cool cats. It was into this very world he began to slip ever more fully – spending less and less time at his saxophonic perch. My activity at that time was insulated by a mania so thick and energized that I hardly took notice of the primate’s absence. In retrospect, I see this as a dishonor on my part. His skills could have lent tremendous strengths to the then newly-forming Atom Band.

When he left, we did not know where he went. Some said New York. Some said Chicago. Some even said Paris. I just looked at a photograph of the little ceramic figurine left behind; a crazy-eyed monkey with an alto sax. It stirred my insanities to regard, even for a short time; large pieces of half-digested creative organics would rise to the surface of my reflecting pool in green. A loping handwritten scrawl on the dresser top read, “Jazz Monk plays the back.”

...

DAY 4 – Aftermath of the Aftermath

I couldn’t stop seeing the Jazz Monk’s head exploding, so even when the jet black smoke began to drift up through the rocket, I barely noticed. It was only when I heard Nate screaming, really screaming, that I snapped back into the moment. A translucent little mongrel dog formed and started barking amidst the clouds of smoke, and over the Fish Rocket’s internal PA system, I clearly hear Robbie’s voice say, ‘Simon your socks are burning...’

I burst downwards through the choking clouds, Nate now wailing like a little girl in my ears, and the mongrel smoke-dog scampering at my kicking heels. In the galley below us, a wild-eyed Simon Piler and the burning toastie-maker were floating around. I hung suspended in the black smoke above them, yelling, ‘Fucking hell! Switch it off! SWITCH IT OFF!’ The smoke-dog barked furiously in agreement. Simon didn’t respond; he just revolved there in the empty space of the galley, staring crazily into space. I watched, horrified and helpless as the burning toastie-maker began to drift in slow motion towards the carpet barricade that separated us from the oxygen-less aft fuselage.

There was a sudden flurry of movement below me, and a figure leapt from inside the Nickelodeon, blasting a fire extinguisher across the rocket. The white powder engulfed the toaster, snuffing out the flames. The trails of congealing black smoke and whirling powder

particles combined in the air around our faces, landing on our tongues and eyelashes. I coughed violently, propelling the smoke-dog across the compartment with a yelp.

As the toxic mix of smoke and powder began to drift upwards towards the cockpit, I heard a familiar voice. ‘Yay! I saved you!’

‘Moss?’

As the cloud continued to relocate, I saw a shadowy figure standing there with a fire extinguisher. Seconds later, her face materialised with the faintest trace of a smile at the edges of her mouth. It was definitely her, and yet something looked different. The blue hair? The black cloak wrapped around her shoulders? But it was neither of those things. She didn’t look like the sort of person who fell out of bed and made mushroom jams. I remembered an encounter with another Moss like this one. Somebody had spiked the mash with ice-cream nebula. She was clapping in the Sick Bay. I’d completely forgotten, or just assumed it was a dream. ‘I don’t believe it,’ she said quietly, as if she was talking to herself. ‘I think we just rewrote our own destiny.’

‘Wait? You were hiding in that Nickelodeon the whole time?’ I asked. It seemed impossible.

‘I sure was,’ she said, throwing her arms around Simon as he continued to float with that wild-eyed, faraway look on his face.

‘Did anyone else hear Robbie speak back there?’ I asked them, glancing up through the vibrating rocket where the smoke and powder cloud had solidified into the shape of the small mongrel dog and was sitting silently on the control panel beside our slumped comatose cook.

‘We’re alive,’ said Moss with an air of surprise, stretching and looking around. ‘I knew bringing Nate would change things. Though I had to hide on board the Fish Rocket to help avert the toastie-maker catastrophe. Oh, hey Nate...’

Nate Lowman scowled back at her without answering, and she grinned a big “alright, fuck you then” right back at him.

‘What’s going on? I’m... fucking hell, I’m confused. Really confused,’ I said. ‘You’re from the future, right?’

‘Maybe I’m from your past,’ she said with a wink as she floated over and hugged me. ‘And what’s wrong with you all? It’s like someone died in here.’

I glanced back at the window as she let go.

‘The fucking monkey exploded,’ drawled Nate. ‘He went outside wearing that stupid goldfish bowl on his head -’

‘It wasn’t the fucking goldfish bowl that killed him,’ I snapped. ‘It was love.’

‘Jazz Monk’s dead?’ asked Moss.

I nodded and pointed to Simon. ‘He’s not taking it very well.’

‘Well, admittedly I wasn’t his biggest fan, but... Simon, I’m so sorry,’ she said.

Simon didn’t answer. I’d never seen him like this before. He was always so animated, forever up to his elbows in something. Without Simon’s enthusiasm, we were completely screwed. The Fish Rocket and the Mardi could carry on without any of the rest of us, but losing Simon would be like having a body without any blood. Who was going to calculate whether our imaginings were possible? Who would turn those crazy dreams into reality? Speaking of calculations, if Future Moss had been there the whole time, that meant there had been six of us, when the Fish Rocket’s oxygen and water allowances were only meant for five. We’d already lost a quarter of our remaining air supply by carpeting off the aft fuselage. You didn’t need a pen and a roll of toilet paper to know we were fucked. ‘We’re completely fucked,’ I muttered.

Future Moss laughed. ‘What do you mean, Alfs? I saved you guys. I finally saved you guys.’

‘But now we’ve not got enough oxygen to get to the moon and back. Not to mention all the fuel we lost,’ I explained.

‘We might have enough to turn around and go home,’ suggested Nate. ‘I heard the computer before. It said it was taking control and turning us around -’

At this point, Simon sprung into life, red-faced and furious, spittle flying from his lips, forming little globules and floating away. ‘WE CAN’T TURN AROUND! WE’RE HURLING THROUGH SPACE YOU FUCKING DIPSHIT! THE ONLY WAY WOULD BE TO SLINGSHOT AROUND THE MOON, AND EVEN THEN WE WOULDN’T HAVE ENOUGH FUEL TO MAKE IT HOME, SO YOU CAN TAKE YOUR TURNING AROUND AND YOU CAN STICK IT UP YOUR -’

‘Simon, you’re alive!’ I cried, a wave of relief flowing through me.

‘Gaaaaahhh!’ he wailed before his eyeballs went crazy and he shut down again.

‘Wait! Simon!’ I shouted, moving quickly towards him. ‘Stay with us! Please! We need your help! I don’t know what to do! Now that Moss is on board and without the bottom quarter section of the rocket, we’re definitely short on oxygen, right? We’re going to run out; maybe even before we run out of fuel. Am I right? Simon? Am I right?’

Regaining his bullishness after Simon's surprising tirade, Nate said, 'Something of a design flaw, don't you think? Not being able to open the door without all the oxygen going out?'

'I just assumed the spacesuits would have inbuilt oxygen-tanks,' said Simon quietly, glaring at me.

'Oxygen-tanks? I bought these costumes from a fucking fancy dress shop in Rongovia!' I told him.

'It was a tight deadline converting a submarine into a rocketship in under two weeks. I mean, come on, Chaplin! You can't expect me to get everything right!' he said defiantly.

'I'm not fucking blaming you! It was Nate!' I pointed out.

'*You* killed Jazz Monk,' said Simon. 'It's *your* fault. *You* fed him that bullshit story about us throwing Nate off the Fish Rocket to save on fuel, and he believed you.'

'Fuck! Like it was me who caused us to crash into that satellite! *You* were the one piloting the ship! Anyway, I've said already, it was love that killed Jazz Monk. If he hadn't been staring at Nate, he would have made it back.'

'Don't try to pin this on me!' protested Nate. 'I never asked for you freaks to fucking KIDNAP ME and fucking TORTURE ME with that fucking monkey -'

'HIS NAME... WAS JAZZ MONK!' yelled Simon.

'ENOUGH ALREADY!' shouted Future Moss, and we all fell silent. She pushed her grey-blue hair back from her eyes. 'Listen Simon, I'm sorry Jazz Monk's gone, but if we don't all start working together – that means you too, Nate; I know you're a douchebag and are going to find it really difficult to get your head around the concept of cooperation – but if we don't start working together as a team, then we're all going to die. Understood? So we've established there's not enough oxygen – my fault, I didn't think that one through particularly well. And we're short on fuel too. Not my fault. Now, I'm going to trust that Simon knows what he's talking about when he says we can't turn around, so... I reckon we should speak to Mission Control and see what other options we've got. Before we throw in the towel, right?'

'He pulled the plug on the computer,' said Nate, pointing at Simon.

'We're *going* to the moon,' Simon snapped back.

'Yeah Nate, he's right. We're going to the moon,' I said, glancing at Simon. I thought I saw a smile flicker over his face.

'Can't we just put the plug back in?' asked Future Moss.

'He didn't just pull it out. He fucking ripped it out. There are loose wires everywhere,' said Nate.

Future Moss screwed up her face, thinking. ‘Can we fix the plug? I’m assuming we brought tools, right? One of those funny screwdrivery wrenches maybe?’

Simon pointed at the wooden crates. ‘I asked Def Mute to fill up a box with essential space tools,’ he said, ‘I’m sure we’ll have something in one of those.’

‘Great, now we’re getting somewhere,’ said Future Moss, dropping into the galley and opening the top crate.

‘I’m sorry about Jazz Monk too,’ I told Simon. ‘I just thought monkeys make for better climbers than humans. Any of us would have been blown off into space if we’d tried that. I should have just been honest with him though.’

‘I know, I know,’ he agreed, ‘I just feel a bit guilty myself is all.’

‘Guys?’ asked Future Moss. ‘There are no tools in this crate, but we’ve got six of these.’ She held up an oxygen tank. ‘They might come in handy?’

Simon laughed at the irony. ‘I knew he wasn’t paying attention to me when I told him to fill a box with tools! What a stroke of luck! We’ll get a couple extra hours of oxygen out of each of them.’

‘Will that be enough?’ asked Future Moss.

‘Want me to fetch a felt pen and toilet roll?’ I asked him, but he just shook his head, and we all implicitly knew what he meant.

We took turns piloting the Fish Rocket. By piloting, I mean a twenty minute shift running circles around the inside of the rocket while someone sat in the pilot’s chair relaying whether the runner should go clockwise or anticlockwise. With all the drama of Jazz Monk’s untimely death, the toastie-maker fire, and the appearance of Future Moss, we’d swerved perilously off-track. It took myself, Future Moss, and Simon to sprint full-pelt together anti-clockwise for ten minutes before the moon eventually swung back into view. Even the whining Nate felt compelled to participate, though it appeared solely because Future Moss said she’d have no problems physically ejecting him into deep space if he didn’t contribute. ‘There are three of us and only one of you... so do the math,’ she said to him, throwing him a toilet roll from the pilot’s seat as he half-heartedly started trudging around the ceiling.

Simon was asleep, and Robbie was being Robbie, sprawled out across the two galley seats. I was perched on the lifeless control panel with the curious cloud-dog staring up at me. Future Moss went back to the inflatable journal resting in her lap. ‘How... long... do... I... have... to... do... this?’ asked Nate, struggling for breath.

‘I’ll let you know when you can stop,’ she called back.

‘I can’t believe you hid in the Nickelodeon the whole time,’ I said. ‘How did you do it?’

‘Coma jam,’ she told me, engrossed in the words, but reaching into the pocket of her black cloak and producing a small unlabelled jar of grey goo. ‘Four drops were enough to keep me unconscious for four days. All that was left to do was ride out the last few hours until the toastie-maker caught fire.’ She tapped the inflatable journal. ‘This is interesting stuff, Alfs.’

‘Interesting how?’

‘Well, for a start I specifically told future you -’

‘Willoughby Toad.’

‘Whatever you’re calling yourself in the future, I told him not to cross paths with you. Which he blatantly did. In fact, he didn’t just do that, he also took the time to write down the future in this journal of yours. What’s bothering me is this bit here.’

I read the words neatly printed above her finger:

I’m standing in some kind of small circular wooden hut, with an unlit wood stove, an empty sofa-bed, and a writing desk against the wall opposite me. Above the writing desk is a black and white framed picture of Jack Kerouac, and sitting at the desk is me.

‘So?’ I asked.

‘So? Don’t you get it? Willoughby time-travelled into the *future*. That would rip up the rulebook, Alfs. In all my years of time travelling, I’ve never seen anyone go forward through time.’ She bit her lip and began pouring over the words again.

Behind us, Nate had stopped, hands on his knees as he floated around wheezing, ‘I don’t get it,’ he said, ‘if we’re as completely fucked as everyone says we are, then what I am doing this for? I mean, if we can’t slingshot round the moon like that Simon guy was saying, then it seems counter-productive putting all this effort into still going to the moon. Also, if it’s true you’ve got a time machine, then how come you didn’t bring it so we could all get out of here if it went wrong?’

Future Moss’s eyes narrowed as she glared at the portly American. ‘After Willoughby didn’t return to the future, I had to come back to make sure you got on the rocket. I wasn’t originally planning on hanging around, but Charlie Kaufman broke when I came back. I thought about switching him with the existing time machine on the Mardi, but if I’d done that, my past self wouldn’t have been able to

travel back in time and attempt to save you all. That's when I panicked and stowed away in the nickelodeon. Now, if I hear one more complaint out of you, I will throw you off into space. Simon is dreaming up an answer, and in the meantime we're sticking to the plan. I'm starting to wonder whether getting rid of you might leave us with enough oxygen to get back to Earth. So don't push me.'

Nate's mouth opened, making to say something before he checked himself and started reluctantly jogging again. 'Other way, Nate,' I told him, looking at the moon up ahead. I saw him grimace, turn on his heels, and rosy-cheeked start jogging in the opposite direction. 'So what does it mean, Moss?' I asked. 'This future me seeing something that hasn't happened yet?'

Her brow creased and her hand unconsciously caressed the cloud-dog, parting the rolling patterns of smoke and powder that make up its stretching back. 'Time travel is impossibly complicated at the best of times. If we ever get out of this alive, I promise I'll come back and take you to the Time Traveller's Convention. Someone there might be able to help us. As far as I know, it's impossible to go forward because there is no tomorrow. There is only ever now. Every time we jump back, we alter and destroy the future.'

Nate Lowman cleared his throat as he completed another lap of the rocket.

'Keep running, Nate,' said Future Moss.

I gazed at the moon, listening to the steady clump of his moon boots on the carpet-less walls. Nobody spoke for some time. I didn't know what to say. I thought Future Moss might be crying, but I couldn't work out if it was from happiness at finally beating the fourth day explosion, or the realization that we were all going to die anyway.

DAY 5 AND ¾: Crash Landing on the Moon

Simon Piler didn't wake from his dream with an answer. It took for the moon to loom big and bold, filling up nearly all of the cockpit window, for us to agree to waken him. While Nate dragged himself on his hands and knees in an arc around the Fish Rocket, Future Moss and I drifted down to the galley where we gently shook our sleeping comrade back to life. 'Simon? Simon, it's time to wake up,' I said.

'And what kind of business brings you to America, Chaplin? Yes, that is a fine plant. I've admired it myself many times,' he mumbled.

'Simon, we're still on the Fish Rocket,' I said. 'You're dreaming. Hopefully a solution to the... um... predicament we find ourselves in.'

‘Oh?’ he said, opening one weary looking eye, and taking in the two of us as we pensively hovered over him. ‘Actually, I was hoping this moon business was the dream, while that dream was reality.’

‘Do you want me to pinch you?’ asked Moss.

‘No thank you, Future Moss, I believe I’m still quite capable of pinching myself,’ he replied, opening his other eye and looking around.

‘Simon? A solution? We’ve not got enough oxygen or fuel to get back to Earth. You were going to dream about it?’ I reminded him.

‘I was? I actually said that?’ he asked, surprised. ‘Ah...’

‘You didn’t dream a solution?’

‘No,’ he said, looking beyond me up the rocket, and suddenly bursting into life with spasmodic legs and eyeballs leaping out of his skull. ‘THE MOON!’ he yelled.

Future Moss and I casually looked over our shoulders. ‘Yeah,’ she said. ‘That’s the moon alright.’

‘WE’RE GOING TO CRASH!’ he yelled, fumbling frantically with his seat buckle.

‘We didn’t know what else to do,’ I said. ‘I tried fixing the computer, but without tools...’

Finally unbuckling himself, he scampered up through the rocket, brushing aside Nate who floated down and landed on his back, crimson-faced, tongue hanging out across his bottom lip. ‘SHIT! SHIIIIIIITT!’ yelled Simon. ‘WE’RE ALL GOING TO DIE!’

‘That’s what... I’ve... been saying,’ said Nate, struggling to catch his breath.

‘UNLESS!’ shouted Simon, hands on the control panel, nose pressed to the cockpit window, oblivious to the cloud-dog sniffing around his sockless feet.

‘Unless what?’ I asked.

‘UNLESS... OKAY, QUICKLY! EVERYONE AND EVERYTHING INTO THE GALLEY! WE NEED TO TIP THIS ROCKET UP!’

I looked at Future Moss and she shrugged. Nate began dragging himself down the rungs towards us. ‘Everything is in the galley already,’ Future Moss called up to him.

‘NOT EVERYTHING!’ he yelled, frantically looking around, unhooking the srench from his belt and starting to unscrew the pilot’s seat. ‘HURRY! WE’VE GOT...’ He looked up at the giant moon again, the outlines of pale dusty mountains and chasmic fissures in the rocks now clearly visible through the window. ‘...WE’VE GOT... WELL, WE’VE NOT GOT LONG, PUT IT THAT WAY. SO HURRY UP!’

‘Hang on, where did you get that weird looking tool from?’ asked Nate. ‘It wasn’t there before...’

Simon smacked him on the knee with the scrench and Nate yelped. ‘NO TIME FOR QUESTIONS!’ he cried.

We grabbed everything we could, Future Moss helped unscrew the navigator’s seat while I ripped all our space charts down from the wall, and kicked a floating skull spinning down through the rocket. I ducked as the dismantled pilot’s chair floated past my face along with a revolving accordion and a broken bin bag of Ship Shapes which scattered like miniature unpleasantly flavoured asteroids. The last of the seats went down along with various components from the control panel that Simon was smashing and tearing off with his scrench and bare hands. ‘ONE MINUTE UNTIL WE CRASH!’ he yelled, stopping to sketch an equation on a loose sheet of toilet paper, magically alive in the heat of battle. ‘GET DOWN TO THE GALLEY!’

I floated behind the cloud-dog, Future Moss up ahead, and squeezed myself into the packed compartment where Nate and Robbie were now strapped into the two seats and buried beneath the debris. Through the loop of a rucksack, I saw Nate jam his head between his own legs muttering, ‘Oh god! Oh god! I’m sorry! I’m so, so sorry! Please save me!’ To my left, Robbie sat staring calmly into space behind his pink plastic toy sunglasses.

‘IT’S WORKING! WE’RE TIPPING UP!’ shouted Simon excitedly up ahead.

Future Moss climbed back into the Nickelodeon, closing the door behind her with a sad little smile that said whole wordless paragraphs. I hunkered down behind the wooden crates, the cloud-dog curled up in my lap, blinking up through the junk as the Fish Rocket began to dovetail violently from side to side. Simon snatched the inflatable journal from where Future Moss left it open on the control panel, slamming his fist down on the ignition switch, cutting the rocket’s thrusters, before half-running and half-swimming at full pelt down through the straightening rocket. He wailed, wild-eyed in momentary cartoon animation, a cellophane speech bubble blowing out from his mouth. It simply read: ‘WAAAAAAAAHHHH!’

The walls beneath him sloped away as we tipped, becoming a floor, allowing him to pick up speed. Simon’s weight combined with the bulky journal finally tipped us into a near horizontal approach as the colourless ridge of a moon mountain suddenly reared up directly in front of us. We clipped it, the sound of crunching rock and shearing metal as the Fish Rocket flipped and shuddered violently. We were pointing upwards, heavy objects crushing me against the carpet

barricade, and just when I was convinced I was going to burst clean through and get sucked out into space, we tipped back down, bouncing, roaring, the entire contents of the galley surging through the rocket as the lights went out. The Fish Rocket was nose-diving and we were falling through the barrel of the craft. I felt the cloud-dog slip through my fingers, its howling drowned out by the terrible sound of screeching, and I frantically grabbed at anything in the eye of the storm, before there was nothingness.

The first thing I was aware of was the sound of Simon Piler laughing hysterically. 'WE'RE ALIVE!' he cried somewhere behind me.

I opened my eyes, head throbbing. Everything was dark. I was lying on my back, buried under the burst bin bag, a crusty towel, and an upside down seat. I kicked out at the junk, and slivers of light broke through above me. My hands went to my head, fingertips tracing what I could only assume was warm, sticky blood. Somewhere to my right, there was a loud banging sound of metal on metal, and Nate screaming a joyous whoop. I put my finger to my lips to taste the blood, but was shocked to discover that it tasted like mushroom.

DAY 8 – On the Moon (Towards the Realisation of a Previous Premonition)

A dog was licking my face. Its cold smoky tongue brushed against my eyelashes, nuzzling into my cheekbones, causing me to laugh.

'Well that's bad luck,' said a voice above me, 'he's just waking up now.'

I opened my eyes as the smoke-dog jumped off me. Simon was hovering in the air with the Hypnotist Phone pressed to his ear. Looking down, I saw that I was reclining in one of the seats in the galley. It felt curiously like a psychiatrist's chair. Robbie sat in the seat opposite me, in exactly the same position and pose from before we crash-landed on the moon. Did that really happen? I sat up abruptly, the blood rushing to my head. It ached like the first day of caffeine withdrawal. 'What happened?' I croaked. 'Why am I so hungry?'

Simon held up a finger and continued to talk down the phone. 'A shipping license, yes... I think it's imperative... uh-huh, my sentiments exactly... even if it's forged, yes, that would be a great help, certainly for the remaining crew... yes... yes, most definitely... we've tried calling but their phone lines are still down. Blast, that's the pips, we're going to get cut off in a minute... um, no, he's just coming round now, don't worry I'll tell him.' He winked at me.

‘Tell me what?’

He shook his head and continued to speak, ‘Ah, that *is* good news... you can always count on the Russians can’t you?... Well, I guess this is it... uh-huh... my will? It’s... I put a copy of it in the journal which... we have with us... damn, that wasn’t very clever, was it?... yes... yes... okay, thankee Amalfi... you too... I guess this is -’

‘Who is it? The Amalfi Glow?’ I asked.

‘Ah crap, that’s us out of credit,’ sighed Simon, letting the now useless Hypnotist Phone fall slowly to the floor, ‘I was going to say “goodbye”, but we got cut off. You must have made a LOT of calls in those first few days, Chaplin.’

I looked up the Fish Rocket, noticing all the debris had been thoroughly tidied, and the internal lights were working again. Nate was sprawled across the broken navigator’s seat immediately above us, nibbling on a Ship Shape, while Future Moss was busy filling a bin bag with drifting Ship Shape crumbs. The rocket appeared to be standing upright in the blast-off position. ‘What’s going on, Simon?’

He grinned and gave me a reassuring pat on the shoulder. ‘Well, the good news is we’re on the moon.’

‘I know that bit,’ I said, swinging my legs off the edge of the seat. ‘I mean, what are we doing? How’s the Fish Rocket standing up? How long have I been unconscious?’

‘Always so full of questions.’ He looked around to make sure nobody was listening, before whispering, ‘Between you and me, it’s been a bit depressing without you.’

‘Why were you on the Hypnotist Phone to The Amalfi Glow?’

‘Ack, there’s another one! Hold your horses... let me deal with them one at a time. What was your first question again?’ he asked with a broad smile.

‘What are we doing?’

‘Right. Well, we’re waiting for our oxygen to run out. That’s one way of looking at it,’ he said, still smiling.

‘We’re waiting to fucking die!’ wailed Nate from the navigator’s chair.

‘Hey, is Alfs awake?’ shouted Future Moss from the cockpit. ‘Will I get the oxygen tanks ready?’

‘Let’s give him a few minutes to get his bearings,’ Simon told her before turning back to me. ‘Just ignore Nate. He’s sulking. Finding it difficult to come to terms with... well, finding it difficult to come to terms with his own mortality, I suppose. Personally I can’t think of a better place to bow out. On the moon, Chaplin! We actually made it to the moon!’

‘Simon, are you feeling okay?’ I asked. I remembered what he’d looked like in the seconds before the crash, slow motion, eyes blazing, like an action hero in a Hollywood movie – the complete opposite of what we looked like trudging to the Fish Rocket on the rainy day we blasted off.

‘Okay? I’ve never felt better actually! The certainty of death is... oh I wish I could put this more poetically... Doesn’t it make you feel *so... alive?*’

‘Uh...’

He let out a little peal of laughter and caught it in his hands like an invisible butterfly, before shooing it up through the compartments of the Fish Rocket. ‘What was your next question? Oh yes, how are we in this position? Well, I think we all have our theories about that. Future Moss seems to think it was our destiny, whereas Nate believes that if you flip a coin enough times, eventually it will land on its side. My own personal inclination is that Ptolemy... you remember him? Somehow he materialised momentarily in giant form, and while we were somersaulting across the surface of the moon, he caught us and positioned us like this.’ He paused and scratched at his beard. ‘Although why he would be inclined to do something like that, I have no idea.’

‘How long have I been unconscious?’ I asked him, rubbing my head.

‘Let’s see... um... about two and a half days. Though technically you weren’t unconscious; you were in a coma. Somehow during the crash, Future Moss’s jar of coma jam shattered, and you must have accidentally ingested some. We really couldn’t gauge how much you swallowed. Since then we’ve had some time to kill, so we mostly traded accordion riffs and played ping-pong with Ship Shapes.’ He held up a cracked ping-pong paddle. ‘I’d give you a game, but time is of the essence, so if you don’t mind, I’ll deal with your existing questions, then we can get round to filming the GLEEM commercial.’

I was struggling to take this all in. ‘How long have we got left to live, Simon? How much oxygen is left?’

‘Oh... hold on.’ He picked up a toilet roll and unravelled it, scanning the scrawled digits, before counting on his fingers and muttering under his breath. ‘At a guess, I’d say anywhere between twenty and thirty hours... HOWEVER...we do still have the oxygen tanks, so that’s another two hours each, with two to spare. We were waiting to see if you’d wake up – which, given the premonition you had previously, seemed likely, seeing as you saw yourself planting the

Quixodelic flag on the moon. The only snag is, well, we talked about the design flaw of the Fish Rocket before, didn't we?

'YOU CAN'T FUCKING GO OUTSIDE WITHOUT LOSING ALL THE AIR ON THE ROCKET!' screamed Nate.

Simon coughed, looking momentarily offended. 'Yes, thank you for pointing that out AGAIN Nate! He's right, though. I really did think our costumes would have some kind of inbuilt apparatus. I should have paid attention when you were saying where you got them from, and of course, when I put the damn thing on. But I had so much to think about back on the Mardi. In all honesty, I have my doubts about how effective these costumes will even be when we eventually do venture outside.'

'I think they're genuine cosmonaut spacesuits,' I said, 'albeit probably second or third hand.'

'Oh, don't worry about it, Chaplin. All water under the bridge as far as I'm concerned -'

'YOU CRAZY FUCKS HAVE RUINED MY LIFE!' howled Nate, snot bubbling at his nose.

'Nate! If you don't shut the fuck up, I'm going to ram this accordion so far down your throat you'll be shitting D minors,' snapped Future Moss.

Simon giggled deliriously. 'So, are you ready to plant this flag and film the commercial? After all, we didn't come all this way for no reason.' In his right hand he was holding out a makeshift flagpole made from a long aluminium pipe, with the tattered Quixodelic flag from the Mardi tied in a knot at the top.

I took it and waved it wearily in front of me. 'So, for the last two and a half days while I've been... in a jam coma... you've been hanging around playing ping-pong and waiting to die? You've not dreamt up a last minute plan that will save us and get us back to Earth? Is that what you're telling me?'

He laughed heartily and punched me between the shoulderblades. 'Oh Chaplin! I've missed your wry sense of humour. That certainly is a morbid way of looking at things.'

As manically happy as Simon Piler was when I woke from the coma, I couldn't help but wonder if there was still a tiny flicker of doubt sparking at the bottom of his brain. It certainly didn't seem as obvious as denial of the situation, but I for one was still keeping the survival instinct well and truly stoked. While the oxygen on the Fish Rocket continued to dwindle, we made further futile attempts to repair the wrecked control panel and restore our connection with the Mardi. I

also tried on several occasions to make reverse charge calls home with the Hypnotist Phone, but the old hypnotist (in spite of assertions from Simon that we were good for the credit) was reluctant to cooperate. Eventually the batteries on the phone ran out, and I started looking at the remains of Future Moss's coma jam scooped neatly back into the cracked jar. Asphyxiation didn't sound like a particularly pleasant way to go. Even if it was asphyxiation on the moon.

We made small talk and took turns gazing out the windows at the lunar surface. It was strangely less incredible with the knowledge that sooner rather than later this would be our last resting place. 'I don't want to die,' whimpered Nate in the seat opposite me.

'Me neither, Nate,' I told him, my brain still burling away without finding any answers. 'What we need right now is a god in the machine.'

He looks up at me, puffy-eyed, sniffed and said quietly, 'I fucking hate you. Seriously, I do.'

I shrugged it off and play a bum note on the dented accordion, thinking what I'd do for a cigarette right now. I stared at the smoke-dog curled up, asleep on the control panel, and wondered if I could just breathe her in? She seemed to sense my thoughts and drifted down towards me to sit by my leg and wag her cloudy little tail. 'Humans are treacherous creatures,' I told her, 'but for what it's worth, I'm so fucking sorry.' Her cold tongue flicked at my fingertips and I think she understood.

Eventually we couldn't put it off anymore, strapping the canisters to our backs, checking that they were working, putting on our space boots (Simon – 'Well it's a good job we packed these!'), fixed up the headsets, and pulled on our helmets. I was clomping around, kitting Robbie out when Future Moss burst out laughing. 'What's so funny?' I asked her.

'Nothing,' she said. 'And everything, obviously.'

It was weird, but I knew exactly what she meant.

'Once we lift this carpet, there's no going back,' explained Simon, shovelling a handful of stale Ship Shapes into his mouth and grimacing. 'Urggh... that must have been one of the Jazz Monk's. Bone marrow, I think. Alright, you might want to strap yourselves in for this. There's going to be a fair degree of suction as the oxygen flies out.'

'What about you, Simon?' asked Future Moss.

'Oh, don't worry about me. We only have four seats and it's my design flaw, so I'll deal with the consequences. It's the least I can do, actually,' he said with a sheepish grin.

‘You can fucking say that again,’ whined Nate, buckling his seatbelt.

I made to buckle up myself and noticed the smoke-dog still curled around my ankles. ‘Wait a minute,’ I told them, grabbing the coma jam, and slowly emptying the contents out into one of Nate’s canvas trainers. I scooped the little smoke-dog into the empty jar and she seemed to go willingly. ‘You should be safe in there,’ I told her, screwing the lid on tight when I was sure she was inside. I wedged the jar of rolling smoke down the side of my seat, and snapped my buckle into place, looking up at Simon who was floating above the carpet barricade with one eyebrow raised in my direction. ‘Just rescuing the little smoke-dog,’ I told him.

He shook his head and began to tear off the duct tape around the edges of the carpet. I felt the rush of oxygen swirling around us, pressing down on my body, until eventually Simon prised open a gap. It was like sitting in a hurricane. The force just about threw me out of my seat, harness straining to the point of popping, and below me, Simon was sucked up against the hole before the carpet finally caved in and everything that wasn’t tied down (including him) was viciously spewed through the belly off the Fish Rocket and out through the open hatch door. It was over in a matter of seconds. ‘Simon!’ I heard Future Moss shout over the intercom.

Once the hurricane had subsided, I quickly unbuckled myself and climbed down, my heavy boots clanking on the rungs. Outside, Simon Piler lay grinning on his back in the dust, surrounded by bin bags, crates, mangled carpet, and a busted accordion. ‘You okay?’ I asked him as I poked my head out.

‘I feel like I’ve just been pooped out by a spaceship,’ he said, making a delirious angel shape in the moon dust. ‘Helmets seem to be holding together. I must admit I had my doubts about the authenticity of these costumes, but perhaps they are real after all.’

‘You going to be alright to give me a hand with Robbie?’ I asked.

‘Undoubtedly,’ he replied, slowly getting to his feet and testing the springiness of the air with a little hop. ‘That was one small fall for Simon Piler, and another giant dive for mankind. Get the flag, Chaplin. We fucking did it!’

DAY 9 – Nate’s Fate

It was exactly like my premonition. I was standing on the moon with the Quixodelic flag raised. Behind me were my fellow cosmonauts: Robbie (lying down), Simon Piler, Future Moss, and Nate Lowman.

Beyond them stood the hulking shadow of the battered Fish Rocket. I grinned inside my helmet and took another short gulp of oxygen from the tank strapped to my back, before driving the flagpole into the rocky grey ground. It shook for a moment before toppling ungracefully, the flag landing in a crumpled heap. I tried again, harder this time, but again it refused to stand up, falling backwards into me and I was momentarily tangled in a big black middle finger, batting at it like it was made of bees. Simon began to hop across the moon, kicking up little dust clouds, and I heard his voice in my earpiece. 'Here, let me help you.'

'Fucking hell, Simon, you might have sharpened the stick!' I told him.

He helped me untangle the flag from around my head, and tried to plant the flag several times but to no avail. Finally he held it still while I heaped a small mound of moon dust around its base. When he let it go, it hung pathetically, pointing to ten o'clock. 'We got there in the end!' he said with a laugh.

I looked over his shoulder at Robbie and Moss and -

'Wait a minute, where's Nate?'

There was no sign of our hostage. 'Oh shit! What if he's stealing the Fish Rocket?' asked Simon, starting to panic.

We hear Future Moss's jumbled accent in our ear-pieces. 'Don't worry, he went that way.' She pointed to a small rocky outcrop.

'Where's he going?' I asked.

Simon shrugged and started leaping back to the spaceship with great bounding lunges through the windless atmosphere. 'Maybe he just wanted a look around?' he suggested. 'We should start filming the GLEEM commercial now, while the weather is nice and we've still got enough oxygen left in our tanks. I'm sure he'll be back soon enough.'

'He's probably crawling around on his hands and knees looking for a crater to die in,' said Future Moss.

'Nate! Can you hear me?' I asked into the microphone at the front of my helmet.

But there was no reply, just the distant hiss of static, and the sound of Simon Piler whistling as he bounced back from the ship with Tin-Pan's camera in one hand, and cardboard cutout Scarytoes in the other.

Nate did not reappear.

After completing the GLEEM commercial, we stood around blinking beside the Fish Rocket, the Earth spinning slowly overhead. It looked

so close you almost felt like you could reach out and flick it away with a finger. ‘What do we do? How long have we got left?’ I asked.

‘An hour and a half maybe,’ said Simon, tapping the gauge on his oxygen-tank. ‘I’ve done the commercial. Admittedly there’s no way of getting it back to GLEEM, but an agreement is an agreement. I’m open to suggestions now if anyone has any ideas. I’m a free agent for however long we’ve got left to live.’

We both turned to Future Moss. She was staring quietly out across space towards the brilliant green and blue, cloud-dusted planet we call home. ‘I don’t know about you guys, but I don’t really want to die on the moon,’ she said. ‘If we’re going to die at all, then I want to die at least *trying* to get back. Will this rocket still fly?’

Simon looked up at the Fish Rocket’s moon-shredded shell and said, ‘I think the damage is mostly cosmetic. And look – it appears we picked up that satellite on our way here. That metal appendage over there. It’s really just a question of how much fuel we lost on the way. We consume the most during blast off, you see. I’m willing to give it a go if you all are.’

‘What about Nate?’ I asked them.

‘What about him?’ asked Future Moss.

‘We can’t just leave him on the moon,’ I said.

They exchanged glances. ‘I don’t see why not,’ said Future Moss after some thought. ‘We’re all going to die, so we might as well just leave him to it. Also, in case you hadn’t noticed, he’s been a real pain in the ass.’

‘Assuming we can actually locate him, I imagine it will waste a lot of oxygen persuading him to get back on the Fish Rocket,’ added Simon.

‘What? I... wow, I don’t know what to say. I’m shocked. I vote that we at least try to look for him and tell him that we’re going. So that’s two votes each. Anyone got a coin?’

‘How’s it two votes each?’ Future Moss asked. ‘I count two to one.’

‘Robbie agrees with me,’ I told her, pointing at our cook who was lying flat on his back at our feet. ‘He told me telepathically.’

‘I didn’t hear him,’ she said.

‘I didn’t either,’ said Simon.

‘He wasn’t speaking to either of you, he was speaking to me,’ I lied. ‘Nobody got a coin? Fine, we’ll use Scarytoes then.’ I picked up the life-sized cardboard cutout and threw him up into the air.

He spun for several hundred metres, revolving in the inky blackness. ‘I call heads,’ said Future Moss.

‘Oh no! I think it’s going to be tails!’ said Simon urgently.

‘Really?’ she asked. ‘Are you sure?’

‘No wait! Definitely heads! Sorry... definitely heads, I mean... you were right the first time,’ he said.

We watched Scarytoes continue to spin. ‘HMMMMM... uh... Moss?’ asked Simon.

‘We’re not changing our minds again,’ she said. ‘We’re sticking with heads.’

Scarytoes finally began drifting towards the ground.

And eventually he landed on his side, wedged between two small rocks, fanning backwards and forwards but not dropping.

‘It’s not heads,’ I told them. ‘Just give me five minutes. You get Robbie inside the rocket. If I’m not back in five, then leave without me.’

‘We couldn’t do *that*, Chaplin. We’re all in this together,’ said Simon, still staring at Scarytoes on his side. ‘What are the chances of that happening?’ he murmured to himself as I turned and bounded across the face of the moon towards the large rocky outcrop.

Nate Lowman and I sat side by side in a big deep crater on the other side of the hill. We could hear everything Simon and Future Moss were saying back on the Fish Rocket as they prepared for take-off. Simon was asking, ‘Hey... do you remember why we brought Nate anyway? I think there was some reason, but I can’t rightly remember?’

She sighed and said, ‘Simon, you’ve asked me that three times already.’

‘I have?’

‘Yes, and the answer is still the same. Where I come from, the Fish Rocket exploded. You all died. I went back in time and tried to change it. You all died again but I kept on trying. You don’t remember me telling you any of this?’

‘Vaguely,’ he said.

‘I overheard a conversation you guys were having when you were putting the crew together. You couldn’t get five volunteers, so Alfie hid a golden ticket on the ship and sent one off in an empty rum bottle. Nobody found one in time, so Alfie reverted back to his plan to kidnap Nate Lowman.’

‘But why?’

‘Why Nate Lowman? Well, I suppose he thought it would be funny. Remember before the ship set sail I made a joke about this douchebag artist I’d stumbled over on the internet, and he became a running joke for a few weeks? I actually felt pretty guilty about that –

though the last five days trapped a rocket with him have pretty much confirmed my suspicions that he is indeed a complete douche.’

‘No. Why did you refuse to go if Jazz Monk was going?’ Simon asked.

‘He gave me the creeps. Lawl.’

‘Lawl?’

‘It’s a word we use in the future. It means... forget it. Back to the Nate question, in case you feel the need to ask me again. So I found a transcript of a telephone conversation between Alfie and Alexander Tokeleaf, where our Not Captain requested some help kidnapping Nate. It turned out that The Real Burnouts really did kidnap him, only they got caught by the police. That premonition Alfie had of us on the moon wasn’t a premonition – it was a glimpse of the future. Nate *had* to be on the Fish Rocket for it to not explode.’

‘I see. Sort of. Actually I’m still very confused to be honest,’ said Simon.

‘Guys, we can hear everything you’re saying,’ I told them, looking across at Nate, knees pulled up to his chest, teary-eyed behind his visor.

‘Alfie? Did you find him?’ asked Simon. ‘That’s been much longer than five minutes.’

‘I found him,’ I said. ‘We’re sitting in a crater on the other side of that little moon knoll.’

‘Well come on then, let’s go!’ said Future Moss.

‘Nate?’ I asked, but he ignored me, staring at his moon boots drawing smiley faces in the dust. A solitary tear rolled down around his visor. ‘Nate, come on. We’re going now.’

He shook his head and pouted.

‘Alfs, come on! Tell him to get his pretentious ass back in the rocket or there will be serious consequences,’ said Future Moss.

‘Nate, I’m not leaving you here. It’s bad enough that we lost the Jazz Monk,’ I told him. ‘We’re not going to lose you as well.’

He suddenly spun towards me, his face crumpled like a spoiled child as he raged. ‘You fucking kidnapped me and took me to the moon because you thought it would be fucking FUNNY? Well, let me tell you... it’s NOT funny! It’s not in the least bit fucking funny! I’d rather die in this... this fucking crater, than get back on that... *monstrosity* with you freaks! You absolute fucking, fucking freaks! One minute I’m at some party in New York with my girlfriend, then I go to the toilet and there’s these plastic mask wearing fuckers... and some guy dressed like a bigfoot, all waiting for me in the cubicle. But they’re nothing - *nothing* - compared to you fuckers! You’re fucking

insane! I know, let's fly to the goddamn fucking moon! Well you can fuck off with your shitty moon! You can FUCK RIGHT OFF!

I barely heard a word he said. My mind was drifting, sifting through pages in my memory, words upon words upon words. And something caught my inner eye, Future Moss's ghostly finger pointing at the neatly printed words:

I'm standing in some kind of small circular wooden hut, with an unlit wood stove, an empty sofa-bed, and a writing desk against the wall opposite me. Above the writing desk is a black and white framed picture of Jack Kerouac, and sitting at the desk is me...

'We're not going to die!' I whispered.

'WHAT WAS THAT? WHAT DID YOU SAY? ARE YOU EVEN LISTENING TO ME, YOU LITTLE FREAK? I SAID -'

'I said we're not going to die!' I repeated, a grin exploding across my face, followed by bursts of laughter like unexpected sunshine ripping through stormclouds, casting a rainbow across the curvature of my helmet.

'Alfs, come on. It's time to go,' said Future Moss.

I was laughing too much to reply, falling onto my back in the dust with Nate looking down at me, disgusted. 'Don't you see?' I asked him. 'My future self saw something that hasn't happened yet. Something that is *still to happen!* Come on, Nate. We need to get back to the Fish Rocket. I don't know how, but WE'RE NOT GOING TO DIE!' I whooped and floated to my feet, holding out a big gloved hand to him.

He looked me in the eye and sniffed. 'You really are clinically fucking insane, aren't you?' he asked quietly.

'Nate, you have no idea,' I said as I pulled him to his feet.

The Fish Rocket rumbled and shook, the thrusters coughing and spluttering as the pressure began to build, and finally, like a cheap and nasty firework, we ripped from the surface in a great cloud of moondust. Simon was sitting in the cockpit, hunched over the mangled control panel, his sole responsibility having been to hit the ignition switch and hope for the best. Future Moss was in the now solitary navigator's chair, minus the space charts, her eyes tight shut, expecting the worst. Robbie was buckled into the aft fuselage with the empty Nickelodeon and various salvaged items including cardboard cutout Scarytoes, and a now unplayable accordion. Nate Lowman and I sat grim and silent, opposite each other in the two galley seats. Unlike our

chaotic blast off nine days ago from a launchpad on the stormy Specific Ocean, our take-off from the moon was sombre and tense, like we were all collectively aware that the finishing line was somewhere just around the bend, but quite how far and how exactly it would end was anybody's guess. I think I was the only one of us who vaguely believed there was a possibility that this part of our story might have a happy ending. It was asking a lot to pin their hope on a couple of throwaway sentences in our journal, but it was really all I had left to cling to.

There was the overwhelming sense that the rocket was getting torn apart as it fought against the pull of the moon. The deafening roar seemed somehow even louder without anyone speaking, and the moments ran into moments, which in turn ran into even more moments. Slowly and surely, the intense vibrations began to subside and give way to the lurching tilt of the Fish Rocket minus manual steering. Simon's voice rang out loud and clear in my headphones. 'The good news is that we're safely off the moon. To be honest, I had serious reservations whether that was even possible.'

'What's the bad news, Simon?' asked Future Moss, her eyes still shut tight.

'How did you know there was going to be bad news?' he asked, looking back over his shoulder.

'We're The Utica Flower Company. There's always bad news,' she said.

'Ah, true,' he said, chuckling to himself. 'Okay, the bad news is - as you can probably all feel - we're all over the place. In fact, we're heading a long way left off Earth.'

'I'm not fucking running round the rocket again!' protested Nate, folding his arms across his chest.

'Yes, well... we don't seem to have much choice. Chaplin, what do you think?' Simon asked me.

Before I could answer, the Fish Rocket gave several loud bangs, and shuddering jolts. 'What was that?' asked Nate, panic-stricken. 'Meteors?'

There was another series of even louder bangs, *rat-a-tat-tat, rat-a-tat-tat*, slowing as they went before a final, *rat - a - tat... thwump*.

'No, not meteors I'm afraid,' said Simon.

The Fish Rocket was suddenly eerily quiet. All I could hear was my shallow breaths and my heart beating hard in my chest. 'Are the headsets broken?' I asked.

'Um, no, it's not the headsets either,' said Simon.

‘Well, what the fuck was it?’ asked Future Moss, her gloved hands tightening on the armrests of the navigator’s seat. She still hadn’t opened her eyes.

‘Well... it would appear...’

‘SI-MON!’ she screeched. ‘Just spit it out!’

‘Okay, sorry, I just wanted to be certain,’ he said, tapping a dial on the control panel. ‘But I’m certain now.’

‘Certain of what?’ I asked nervously.

‘Certain that we’re uh... out of gas. We used up all the Dreambrew, and we’re floating through space,’ he said. ‘It’s remarkably quiet isn’t it? So quiet you could hear a Ship Shape drop.’

How long did we have left? I felt like I’d been living on the little oxygen tank for an awful long time. Nate’s screaming suddenly exploded inside my helmet. ‘Fuuuuuccckkk! Fuuuuuuuuccccckkkkkk! Oh f-f-f... fuuuuuuuuccccckkkkkk!’ Then just as suddenly, he fell silent again. ‘Sorry. I just had to get that off my chest,’ he said. ‘You know, before I die.’

‘How much oxygen have we got left?’ I asked, the aftershock of Nate’s screams still buzzing between my ears.

‘At a guess, I’d say half an hour.’

‘Okay.’ Half an hour to make peace with the universe. I could do that.

‘Of course that’s erring on the optimistic side. It’s probably a lot less. We did waste a lot of time flipping Scarytoes, then of course you persuading Nate to come back with us. Then making sure the seats were all secure. Plus the blast off, and the commercial, and the ceremonial flag-planting, I forgot about that. Yes, half an hour is definitely optimistic.’

‘Okay Simon.’

‘Even this conversation. That’s at least another couple of minutes gone, just like that,’ he said with a snap of his fingers.

‘I get it. We don’t have much time left.’

‘We should probably decide what we’re going to do about the spare oxygen canister,’ he said. ‘I think we should take turns passing it around. Like a peace pipe. Does anyone –’

But he never finished the question. The gliding Fish Rocket suddenly jolted again, so hard we were thrown around like dolls in our seats. ‘What the fuck was THAT?’ asked Future Moss, her voice increasingly shrill.

‘Um... oh,’ said Simon peering at the dashboard, ‘that *is* strange.’

‘What is?’ I asked.

‘We... well...’ He cleared his throat. ‘That really isn’t making any sense. No sense at all... Oh goodness!’

‘SIMON!’ shrieked Future Moss. ‘JUST TELL US WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON!’

‘Okay,’ he said, ‘no need to shout. I’m just trying to process it myself before passing the information on. I wouldn’t want to convey the wrong -’

‘Simon,’ she growled.

‘Sorry, yes. Okay. Again. Firstly, we, um... seem to be inside something. I’m deducing this from how dark it is outside.’

‘It’s space,’ said Nate, ‘it’s always dark outside.’

‘No, no! Not just dark. It’s as if we’re in a tunnel. Absolutely no light whatsoever,’ said Simon. ‘The other thing is – and this is assuming our speedometer isn’t faulty - which of course it very well might be. Anyway, yes... we... oh this can’t be right. It would seem we are moving incredibly fast.’

‘Again, not a surprise,’ said Nate.

‘No, I mean INCREDIBLY fast. Like... off the top of my head... twelve thousand times faster than we were going before. And THAT was incredibly fast! Physics-defyingly fast, actually. I’ve been thinking about this a lot. If Alfie is right, and somehow, miraculously, we do survive and make it back to the Mardi - because that’s something else we overlooked in our hurry to get to the moon - we never considered where and when we are going to land. Though I suppose this is all moot now, seeing as we can’t possibly reach the Earth and are floating inside something moving incredibly fast in who knows what direction. Anyway, where was I? Ah yes, well, I’ve been thinking that we really should have patented that Dreambrew. I don’t mean for financial gain, as my motivations are purely environmental, and in the wrong hands, well, this stuff – it is true I’ll admit – makes for a lousy beverage. But as a fuel, and goodness knows what else, it is remarkable. Quite fantastic actually -’

‘SIMON! FOR THE LAST FRICKIN’ TIME - WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON?’ shrieked Future Moss so loud that I desperately wished I had a volume control inside my helmet.

He looked back again and shrugged his shoulders. ‘Beats me.’

‘Maybe we’re inside one of those wormholes you talked about before?’ I suggested. ‘I don’t have fucking clue what a wormhole is, but I imagine it’s tunnel-like... and could suck you down pretty fast?’

‘It’s possible,’ said Simon, unconvinced.

‘Maybe we’re getting sucked into another dimension. Or universe. Shit... I can’t even work out if that would be cool or not,’ I said.

‘That would definitely *not* be cool,’ said Nate.

‘Potentially cooler than us dying in space though,’ I suggested.

Nate just stared at me. I was about to ramble some more about the wormhole when an almighty crash tossed the rocket into a terrifying shudder, flying us up off our seats. One of Nate’s straps pinged free and he had to hold onto the other just to keep himself from getting hurled across the inside of the rocket.

‘NOW WHAT IS IT?’ yelled Future Moss, slumped down in the navigator’s seat, hyperventilating behind the folds of her black cloak and the helmet she’d inherited from the Jazz Monk.

It felt like my brain had been shaken so hard inside my skull that nothing I thought would make sense for a long, long time. ‘Simon? What just happened?’ I shouted.

‘Oh for the love of popcorn! Would everyone please stop shouting!’ he shouted. ‘It’s giving me a headache! Although that jolt may have partly contributed to it. *Or* potentially it’s a side-effect of the oxygen running out...’

I looked up just in time to see Future Moss finally crack, frantically unbuckling herself from the seat and making to float along to the cockpit. Only she didn’t float. As she stepped clear of the seat, she fell flat on her face, her boots and helmet clattering on the metal floor. I couldn’t help but grin. Maybe she wasn’t so different after all.

She pulled herself to her feet and stomped towards Simon, pressing her helmeted face to the cockpit window. ‘Why can’t I see any stars? Or planets? Or anything?’

‘We’re still in the tunnel. Or whatever it is,’ said Simon.

‘And why am I not floating?’ she asked.

He reached out and tapped the Fish Rocket’s speedometer, humming away to himself as he did. ‘Well, either this thing is completely goosed or else we’ve... um... landed somewhere.’

‘How can that be possible?’ she asked, craning her neck around, examining the darkness outside.

‘Why does everybody always think I’ve got the answers to everything?’ squealed Simon suddenly, throwing his hands up dramatically.

‘Oh fuck,’ said Nate to nobody in particular. ‘We’re back on the moon again, aren’t we?’

‘Don’t be so stupid, Nate,’ snapped Simon. ‘Really! Wherever we are, there’s a considerable amount of gravity’

I unclipped my belt and stood up before clanking down into the aft fuselage and pushed past Robbie to get to the hatch door.

‘Wait! What the fuck are you doing?’ asked Nate, freaking out in his seat.

‘I’m going to find out where we are,’ I told him. They all screamed as I turned the handle.

They were right. It *was* dark outside. Unnatural and claustrophobically dark. Even with the flickering light from the Fish Rocket, I could barely see a metre in front of my face. There looked like a drop directly below me and a weird sound, like swishing, or sloshing. I looked up, but all I could see was more impenetrable darkness. We were definitely inside something, but I had no idea how big it was or how far it stretched back. ‘What is it, Alfs?’ asked Future Moss, clanking down the rocket behind me.

‘I don’t know,’ I told them. ‘Hang on, I’m going outside.’

I sat down on the rim of the hatch and dropped into the darkness. I fell a couple of metres and landed in cold liquid on my hands and knees. The floor felt soft and spongy, and I pressed down on it with my boots. Certainly solid enough, but unlike any kind of floor I’d ever walked on. I looked back up and saw Future Moss and Simon silhouetted in the doorway, looking down. ‘Are you alright?’ she whispered.

‘Why are you whispering?’ I asked. ‘And yeah, I’m okay.’

‘I don’t like this,’ she said, only a little bit louder. ‘What is this place?’

‘Strange,’ said Simon, ‘does anyone smell... Algaebrew?’

As I stood up, the liquid slopped over the tops of my moon boots. ‘I can’t smell anything inside this fucking helmet,’ I told him, ‘but there’s definitely a liquid of some kind down here.’

Simon took a deep breath and jumped down into the darkness beside me with a splash. ‘It smells uncannily like that first batch of Algaebrew I made.’

‘Well, essentially that was just dirty seawater,’ I pointed out.

‘I always thought it tasted more like dirty dishwater,’ said Future Moss, sitting down on the edge of the hatch.

I started to move through the dark, my metal boots dragging through the cold liquid. ‘Fuck this, I’m taking my boots off,’ I said, kicking them off.

‘Chaplin?’ whispered Simon. ‘Where are you? I can’t see a thing!’

‘Over here. Why are you whispering now?’

‘Over where? Oh what’s this?’ he continued to whisper excitedly. ‘It’s a wall of some kind.’

‘Hang on.’ I waded back in the direction of his voice and collided with him in the dark. He screamed.

‘What is it?’ I asked.

‘Oh shit, it’s you... I thought... never mind,’ he said. ‘Look here, a wall.’

I took off my space gloves and dropped them into the water before placing the palms of my hands against the wall. It felt rubbery and ribbed, like warm, wet skin. ‘Oh shit, that’s horrible!’

‘What’s going on? Alfs? Simon?’ whispered Future Moss, swinging her legs back and forth nervously. Nate had joined her and was leaning against the frame of the hatch.

‘Shhh!’ whispered Simon. ‘Did you hear that?’

‘No I didn’t hear -’

‘Shhh! And again! Listen! It sounds like it’s coming from the other side of this wall!’ he said.

‘Simon, I don’t think this is a wall... it feels more like -’

‘Chaplin! I heard it again!’ he said excitedly.

I listened closely, but all I could hear was the liquid sloshing around our ankles. ‘I think you’re imagining things,’ I told him.

‘Wait! Did you hear that? You must have heard that!’ he cried. ‘It sounded exactly like... no, but that can’t be right.’

‘Simon! What the fuck did you hear?’ asked Future Moss.

‘It sounded like someone said “*I think you’ll find that you’re the asshole*” Listen! There’s definitely somebody shouting on the other side of this wall. Two people! Hello? Hello there!’ he cried, thumping on the walls with his fists. ‘This is Simon Piler! Can you hear me? Hello!’

‘Fuck man, nobody’s going to hear you with that helmet on,’ I told him, ‘I’m taking mine off.’

‘Wait! Alfie! Are you sure that’s a good idea?’

I ignored him and unclipped it from the neck as both Future Moss and Nate jumped down and splashed through the water towards us. I took a shallow breath. And another. And another, gulping down the precious, though somewhat pungent air. ‘It’s air!’ I cried with relief. ‘Take your helmets off!’

As Future Moss took her helmet off, she lost her balance and fell face-first into the water which continued to swirl in gentle waves around us. I grabbed her by the collar and pulled her up, muttering and cursing as she spat out the liquid.

While Simon and Nate took off their helmets, I pressed my ear to the slimy wall, the stench of rotten seawater flooding my nostrils. ‘It fucking stinks in here,’ I said.

I listened but couldn’t hear a thing. ‘Hello! Is anybody there?’ I shouted as loud as I could, my voice reverberating inside the dark and mysterious place. There was no reply. ‘There must be a door around here somewhere,’ I told them. ‘If we’re got in here then we must be able to get back out again. Everyone split up and see if they can find something.’

After a couple of minutes searching blindly in the dark, several collisions with each other, and Future Moss slipping three times with a shriek, Simon shouted, ‘Up there! On the ceiling. It’s a hole of some kind. I think I can see daylight!’

I looked up, but all I could see was the continuation of darkness stretching beyond the Fish Rocket.

‘I see it too,’ said Nate, ‘over there – a circular hole.’

From far away to our right, I heard Future Moss’s voice drift towards us like she was speaking from the far end of a long cave. ‘This thing is enormous! Stretches, way, waaaaay back.’

As she spoke, the floor began to move, curving away beneath my feet. I heard more curses and screams as we got knocked over, the water beginning to rush back and forth in waves. The Fish Rocket groaned and slid in the dark, the hatch door slamming shut. ‘Fucking hell! What’s happening?’ yelled Nate.

The floor jerked violently again and I was knocked onto my back, my head going under the foul and cold foaming water, before it dropped away from me, leaving me sprawling on the thick spongy surface, gasping for air. I heard Future Moss shriek as the wave carried her past me in the dark.

‘Grab hold of something!’ shouted Simon.

‘Like wh-?’ Nate began to ask before he was struck by a bigger wave, coughing and spluttering. ‘There’s nothing to hold onto!’

‘Grab hold of the Fish Rocket!’ shouted Simon.

‘Where is the Fish Ro-ckeeeeeeeeet?’ yelled Future Moss as she got swept back in the opposite direction, the wave swelling up to my neck as I tried to sit up.

I heard Nate and Future Moss thrashing in the water as I got to my feet. It didn’t take long to find the big metal rocket in the dark, my hands clasp the battered metal shell. Eventually I found a trailing pipe (I assume the damaged fuel pipe) and calmly gripped it in my hands. Every few seconds, the waves buffeted against my legs,

throwing me forcefully one way then the other. ‘Everyone alright?’ I asked.

I heard affirmative grunts in the dark before we fell silent, each of us clinging to their own part of the rocket as the waves continued to swirl and swish all around us. Eventually Simon Piler spoke. ‘Let me just say for the record that if we really did pass through a wormhole and crash-landed in some other dimension, then this place exceeds even my weirdest expectations...’

DAY 10 – Blue Melons

We must have clung to the Fish Rocket in the darkness for two or three hours, passing the time like limpets in contemplative quiet, occasionally speculating about what the fuck had just happened to us. Future Moss thought we’d all died and were in limbo. Nate was still holding out for it to be a very bad and abnormally protracted dream, and any moment now he was going to wake up back in that toilet cubicle in New York. Simon seemed uncharacteristically quiet, occasionally whistling improvised melodies from the roof of the Fish Rocket. Mostly I contemplated telling them the truth about everything. Eventually I decided against it and joined in with Simon’s whistling, counteracting with my own made up melodies. Pretty soon, Future Moss joined in with some comical beatboxing of her own, and it rapidly descended into a cacophony of sound. We stopped when Nate began screaming again on the opposite side of the Fish Rocket. ‘WOULD YOU ALL JUST SHUT THE FUCK UP!’

‘Charming as always, Nate,’ said Future Moss, giggling to herself somewhere up by the nose cone. She was still giggling when the seawater violently surged, and the Fish Rocket flew up into the dark air, bucking us like idiots clinging to a metal bull. My fingers grabbed tight to the fuel line as I flew up, crashing down again in the water with a gasp. ‘Fuck! What was THAT?’

Nate was yelping in the dark somewhere to my left, probably having been bucked off. ‘The water is rising!’ he shouted, splashing around.

He was right. Before the sloshing waves were rushing past me around the knees, but now they were washing over my waist. ‘I can’t tell. I’m still up here,’ said Simon, who’d miraculously managed to stay on.

‘The douchebag is right,’ said Future Moss. ‘It’s definitely rising.’

The swell passed my chest and then my neck, so I kicked off from the soft floor, and started treading water as the dark space around us began to rapidly fill with more of the foul smelling liquid. ‘We’re going to drown!’ gargled Nate, thrashing around somewhere ahead of me.

Soon the entire Fish Rocket was submerged and I was forced to let go of the fuel line. I could hear Simon swimming in the darkness nearby. ‘Well, this is another interesting development,’ he gasped.

Still the water continued to rise and Nate was shouting, ‘We’re almost at the ceiling! Oh shit! Oh - ’ His voice was drowned out, I assume as he went under. Sure enough, when I put my hands up I could feel the same ribbed and slimy warm substance as the walls.

The water had risen past my chin and there was nothing left to do but take a big gulp of air and dive down into the cold black water. Bubbles escaped through my nostrils, the muted underwater rush in my ears, combining with a panicked pulse like a primal drum, beaten since before beginningless time. And I was moving. Pushed or pulled along in the water by invisible forces, flailing and rushing, completely out of control. Up ahead, the circle of pale light on the ceiling loomed closer. I was propelled towards it, desperately wondering if maybe they were right, that maybe this was the waiting room between this world and the next. I watched the silhouette of Simon Piler get sucked out through the small round portal. And as I flew in a jet stream, expelled from wherever we were, I was smiling to myself and thinking, ‘Well at least I’ll be in good company wherever we’re going...’

‘Waaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!’

Nate Lowman wailed as our four shadowy forms got pumped out on the spout of water. For a fraction of a moment, we hung in various shapes of shock across the pockmarked dazzling face of the moon. Before I knew what was happening, we plummeted back down, falling with the receding spout, and crashed beneath the surface of the ocean, blinking down, down, down...

And out of the corner of my eye, I saw it.

A giant white whale diving through the inky blackness of the ocean, fanning its monstrous tail and mighty fins, before vanishing into the shadows. I floated there below the waves, holding my breath, watching in amazement until the whale was indistinguishable from the other flecks and obscure shapes of the underwater universe. I swam up urgently, breaking the surface, gasping for air again, and looked around. We were in the middle of the sea, vast and empty in all directions.

To my left, a spluttering Nate and Future Moss floated on their backs, pale-faced and bewildered as they tried to comprehend what had just happened. I turned in the gentle waves, feeling the emptiness and absolute depth of the ocean beneath my bare feet, the night sky and stars blinking above me. Simon's face was illuminated by the moonlight, staring up in bewilderment. 'Is this...? I mean, are we back?' I asked him.

He floated towards me, eyeballs popping out of his head with alarm. 'Chaplin! This is my worst fear come true!'

Nate Lowman's laughter skimmed across the surface of the moon-flecked water as Future Moss let out a joyous whoop of relief.

'What are you talking about?' I shouted, laughing and splashing the water. 'We're alive! Did you see that whale? Fuck! I don't understand what just happened to us, but... honestly, I don't really care. I knew we could make it!'

'Chaplin!' he cried again, flapping frantically. 'I'm being serious!'

I couldn't help but laugh even more. All that time. All those terrible things. Us sprinting head-first from one catastrophe to the next and here we were... safe. Unless of course there were sharks. But relatively speaking, safer than we'd been since I dreamt up the moon-mission in the first place. 'What's there to be scared about? We can swim,' I told him.

'I guess I'm just the ultimate landlubber,' he said with a grimace.

I laughed again, a wild peal that rattled around in the night. 'We got our god in the machine after all...' I whispered.

We quickly realised we had to get moving, stripping out of the heavy cosmonaut costumes and trapping the air in them to make floats. The night ocean was tranquil and soothing as we paddled through the water, swimming away from the moon without ever discussing where we were going. After ten minutes, a still incredibly nervous Simon spotted something floating on the glassy black surface. Somehow none of us were amazed to discover an abandoned Dr Seuss inflatable dinghy. I laughed, pulling myself into it before helping Future Moss and Nate up. 'An abandoned dinghy in the middle of the ocean?' asked Nate with a wry grin.

'Not just any abandoned dinghy,' said Simon Piler, flopping down on the plastic floor with his head resting against the inflated sides, 'this was OUR abandoned dinghy.'

We drifted until the sun peeked its blazing eye over the horizon, creating a hazy veil across the surface of the sea. Future Moss and Nate

Lowman slept side by side, curled up in one half of the little boat, while Simon and I stretched out horizontally in opposite directions at the other end, dangling out bare feet and hands into the warm water. We passed the time talking about what we were going to do on the Mardi, assuming we ever got back. ‘Really, I’m just looking forward to tinkering in the Storage Hold,’ he told me. ‘It recently dawned on me that as Quartermaster I should probably be more actively ordering supplies.’

‘Ah the Storage Hold. I love that place. It’s like an Aladdin’s Cave for Acid-heads.’

‘Yes, we certainly inherited a lot of strange stuff. I’d be curious to know where it all came from.’

‘Me too. I’ve been thinking about that as well. The funny thing is that for all the junk that’s in there, I often find myself looking around but not finding what I’m looking for.’

He seemed quite shocked by this revelation. ‘Like what?’

‘Clouds for my coffin,’ I told him.

He lifted his head up and stared intently at me before finally mumbling, ‘Ah yes. I forgot about those.’

‘No worries. There’s a lot happening on the Mardi. I frequently forget really important things just because I’m so preoccupied with the bigger picture.’

‘It’s certainly dense,’ he said.

‘It’s like I go around with this permanent nagging sense that I’ve forgotten something. Really drives me nuts.’

‘You feel like that now?’ he asked me.

‘Always.’

‘Oh, that’s not good. *Have* you forgotten something?’

I stopped and thought about it. Our departure had been so hurried that all I really had time to do was record a couple of messages onto NIKO with instructions to deliver them if I didn’t return in eleven and half days, as well as give him important guidelines about where to sail the ship, and what to do in case of an emergency. Actually, it was all something of a blur. I was so caught up in the golden ticket debacle, the discovery of the skeleton in the basement, and my near nervous breakdown from moon apprehension, that I wasn’t really thinking straight. ‘Nothing obvious, I don’t think,’ I said.

‘It’s a shame we lost the Fish Rocket,’ he said. ‘I’m still beating myself up about the design flaws.’

‘Simon, are you joking? The Fish Rocket was immense! It got us to the moon and back!’

‘Well, not really. The whole oxygen recycling system was an abject failure. And the toilet handle kept snapping off.’

We both chuckled. ‘Just think though, the Fish Rocket is still out there, inside the belly of a white whale. Imagine if that whale ever gets washed up on some beach and they cut it open and there’s our rocketship. That would blow – OH FUUUUUUCCCCCKKK!’

‘What is it?’

‘Simon! I can’t believe we left – fuuuuuuuuuccck!’ I slapped myself hard on the forehead. Future Moss stirred and murmured something about “puppets” in her sleep.

‘*What?*’ he asked me again, suddenly looking extremely concerned.

‘We left Laika,’ I told him. I felt like I could cry.

‘Laika?’

‘You know, the little smoky ghost dog.’

He looked at me blankly.

‘In the jam jar,’ I said.

‘Uh... no, remind me about that one again.’

‘You know! The little smoky ghost dog,’ I tried to draw a smoky little ghost dog in the dawn air with my fingertips, ‘from the toastie-maker smoke and the powder from the fire extinguisher?’

‘Chaplin, you’ve lost even me with that one,’ he said, lying back with his hands behind his head. ‘Jeez I’m thirsty. If this day gets any hotter – and judging by the blue sky overhead I’m guessing it’s going to get a LOT hotter – we’re in serious trouble. Unless we find land, or another boat.’

I sat up and looked around. The ocean stretched in all directions for as far as my eyes could see. That was when I noticed something in the water, something blue and round, bobbing just below the surface of the gently billowing waves. ‘Hey, what’s that?’ I asked, turning round and paddling us towards it with my hands. ‘It looks like a ball of some kind.’

‘There’s another one over there,’ he said, pointing, ‘and another... and another... and... woah, there’s hundreds of them!’

The dinghy reached the first blue ball and I scooped it up in my arms. It was surprisingly heavy. ‘What the fuck is it?’ I asked as Simon lifted it out of my hands and examined it.

‘Well, I might be wrong about this, but I’d swear it’s a blue watermelon,’ he said, picking up a rucksack lying at his side and unzipping it.

‘Hey! Where’d you get that rucksack?’

‘What, this rucksack?’ he asked, pulling out a Swiss army knife and slicing deftly through the skin before lifting it up and catching the bright blue juice in his mouth. He grinned with blue teeth and said, ‘Yes, just as I thought – blue watermelon. It’s delicious. We should grab some more while we can.’

‘What else have you got in there?’ I asked, pointing at the rucksack.

‘Oh, just some stuff I thought was important enough to salvage from the Fish Rocket.’ He threw the heavy rucksack over to me, before continuing to carve melon slices.

‘You had this on your back the whole time?’ I asked him, putting my hands in and pulling out a bin bag wrapped neatly around a bulky object. ‘Is this...?’

‘Our journal,’ he said before chomping on a mouthful of melon.

‘Good thinking! I completely forgot about it. What else is there?’ My hands fished out Moss’s toastie-maker, badly damaged by the fire, with the white powder solidified all around it, and the word “DANGEROUS” still printed on the side. ‘Oh no, this is a fucking mess. Present Moss is not going to be happy.’

‘We’ll buy her a new one, but you never know, perhaps this one has some sentimental value,’ he said, chewing away and picking the seeds out from between his teeth.

‘What are these?’ I asked, pulling out a stack of neatly cut jigsaw pieces carefully bound in rubber bands.

‘Scarytoes,’ he says. ‘The camera should be in there as well. Looks like GLEEM are going to get their commercial after all.’

‘Ah. Did you bring any moondust back?’

‘No, I completely forgot. Damn, that would have been a good idea.’

‘Yeah. Nobody is going to believe we went to the moon. They’ll say it was a hoax. Do we have any proof at all that we went?’

‘Apart from the commercial - though it remains to be seen how that turns out - not that I can think of. Oh, wait, we left a flag up there.’

‘So we did. But I mean something here, something we can show people.’

He nodded at the sleeping cosmonauts at the other end of the dinghy. ‘We’ve got Nate,’ he said with a grin, before throwing me a slice of blue melon.

The morning passed without any further mishaps. Nate and Future Moss woke from murmuring dreams, and sat back to back, gorging themselves on slices of the strange, thirst-quenching fruit. Simon lay

back with his eyes closed beneath the brim of a sunhat fashioned from the sleeves of his spacesuit, while I perched bare-chested on the nose of the dinghy, dangling my feet in the cool ocean, and toasting my face in the sweltering sunshine. And we drifted. And we drifted. And we drifted some more, until I finally opened my eyes and blinked furiously. I thought I must have been seeing things. ‘Simon, is it possible to see mirages at sea?’

He opened one eye and stared up at me, ‘Why do you ask?’

‘Well, I think I can see the Mardi,’ I told him.

Behind me, Future Moss looked up from our journal and her jaw dropped. ‘Simon, I see it too,’ she said.

‘Okay, that’s nice,’ he said, yawning, and closing his eyes again. ‘Knowing our luck, those melons are probably hallucinogenic.’

‘Simon, I really do see it,’ I said again, staring at the outline of the big black wooden ship with its faded flames on the hull, the patchwork mainsail waving gently in the sea breeze, and the unmistakable toadstool treehouse balanced atop the main mast. It was anchored just off the coast of a beautiful little tropical island, with a great volcanic mountain stretching up at the centre of it. It really was the most breathtaking place I’d ever seen. And I’ve been to the moon.

‘What about you, Nate? Can you see it too?’ Simon asked.

Nate sighed and turned around reluctantly. ‘Yeah, I see it,’ he drawled, turning back to his twentieth slice of melon and guzzling it down greedily.

A moment passed and Nate turned around again, much faster this time, his eyes lighting up as he scrambled to his feet, the Dr Seuss dinghy rocking from side to side. ‘Ship!’ he screamed. ‘An island! Aha! A-haha! Ahahaha! An island! Land! We’re saved! WE’RE FUCKING SAVED!’

Simon sat up, lifting the brim of his hat and stared at the Mardi. ‘It can’t be,’ he muttered.

I grinned so wide that it hurt my face. ‘But it is! Should we paddle, or just drift right up to it?’

‘Now I *know* I must be dreaming,’ he said before leaping up as Future Moss sneaked up behind him and pinched his shoulder. ‘Yarrghh! That REALLY hurt!’ he cried, examining her nail marks on his sleeveless arm before laughing.

They were all laughing. All of them except me. I just smiled and tried to enjoy the moment, knowing that somewhere down the line, things were not going to end so well for us.

Our little Dr Seuss dinghy floated up alongside the hulking wooden ship, and Simon tied us to it before scampering up the rope-

ladder with his rucksack clanking on his back. Future Moss followed cautiously, whispering back to me, ‘Alfs, it’s important that nobody sees me, especially my past self. I have a plan.’

‘Okay,’ I said, grabbing hold of the ropes. I hadn’t thought about what was going to happen to her. She’d gone beyond what she needed to do, so far beyond that she’d ended up on the moon with us. Unfortunately, one reality just wasn’t big enough for two Mosses. ‘What’s the plan?’

She didn’t answer, and eventually I reached the top of the ladder and the warm wooden planks of the Mardi’s main deck. I turned around expecting to see Nate Lowman immediately behind me, but he wasn’t there. I looked over the railing just in time to see him untie the Dr Seuss dinghy and lie down on the back of it, propelling himself towards the island’s shoreline with his thrashing feet. ‘Nate!’ I yelled. ‘What the fuck are you doing?’

Future Moss silenced me by clamping her hand across my mouth. ‘Alfs! Keep your voice down!’ she whispered.

I scanned the main deck, and as usual there was nobody there. ‘Where’s he going?’ I asked.

Simon stopped on his way towards the aft hatch. ‘He’s probably going to find the nearest police station and tell them we kidnapped him.’

‘Fuck! What should we do?’ I whispered.

‘Chaplin,’ he said with a shake of his head, ‘there’s not a police force in the world that will believe his story.’

I watched as Nate reached the white sandy shoreline, abandoning the dinghy and loped off into the jungle trees without looking back. ‘What a douchebag,’ I said, and Future Moss grinned.

I followed her and Simon down the cold metal stairs. He stopped on the landing and smiled, offering Future Moss a steady hand that she took in hers. ‘Thank you, Future Moss. It’s been a privilege to fly with you. I have a feeling that we won’t be seeing each other again.’

She smiled mischievously. ‘Oh Simon, you don’t know how completely wrong you are.’

‘Chaplin,’ he said as he turned to me, ‘I’ll see you tomorrow no doubt. For now, I need a short shower and a long sleep on a comfortable cabin bed. Thank you for taking me to the moon. And for getting me back in one piece.’

‘No, thank you, Simon,’ I said. ‘And remember the clouds. For my coffin.’

He gives a funny little salute and ambled off up the carpeted corridor.

‘Come on,’ whispered Future Moss, tugging on my elbow, ‘before we get caught.’

I followed her down to the Machine Shop and she opened a wooden crate, pulling out a battered blue carpet cleaner. ‘Well at least nobody found you, Charlie Kaufman. It would have fucked everything up if they did,’ she said, carrying it through to the Engine Room.

‘Charlie Kaufman? Who the fuck is Charlie Kaufman?’ I whispered.

‘I can see that,’ she said, talking to herself and completely ignoring me. She hurriedly removed the existing Time Commander engine and switched them around. I watched her plug the broken machine in at the wall, and remove the front panel. ‘It took me months to figure out how to fix him,’ she said, ‘after you broke him, of course.’

‘Him?’

She reached inside, up to her elbow and gritted her teeth, concentrating. ‘There, that should do for now,’ she said, not entirely convincingly, replacing the cover and wiping her hands on my back. She then reached behind the existing machine and rummaged around in the instruction manual taped to the back, pulling out a small black book. I watched her leaf through it until she found whatever she was looking for, mumbling the numbers under her breath. Next she went back to the broken machine and started turning the dials and flicking the switches in a decidedly haphazard manner. ‘Okay, Charlie Kaufman. Let’s do this!’

‘I honestly don’t have a clue what’s going on,’ I said.

She grinned and looked me in the eye. ‘Just one question before I go,’ she said.

I nodded.

‘What did you do with Alfie?’

‘What?’

‘Alfie. What did you do with him?’

I blinked. ‘I’m Alfie.’

She smiled and shook her head. ‘You’re as much Alfie as you are the captain of this ship.’

‘But I’m not the cap-’ I began, stopping myself.

‘Don’t worry. Your secret is safe with me,’ she said with a wink, whoever you are. Now, remember, I’m coming back for you.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘For the Time Traveller’s Convention,’ she said.

I shook my head. ‘I’ve done quite enough time travelling.’

‘Unlucky then. I’m not taking no for an answer.’

I wanted to protest, but I could see from the fiery look in her eye that I didn't have much say in the matter.

'Alright now, close your eyes,' she told me.

I nodded and closed my eyes.

And when I opened them again, both she and the broken Time Commander engine were gone.

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November 1, 2009

Alfie's Journal #26:

The Legend of the Plum Necklace



Attempting to draw a map of Plum Island.

After a brief encounter with this O'Flanaman fellow, who seemed to have been appointed Company Secretary in our absence by W, I swam the turquoise stretch of sea between the Mardi and the white sandy shoreline of Plum Island. I dripped my way barefoot up the beach, seeing various footprints in the sand. Some went left and some went right up the coast, while several others disappeared into the jungle directly in front of me. When in doubt I always go left, so I went left. My thinking is that if you keep going left, then the worst-case scenario is that you will eventually return full-circle to the point where you started, and never get lost.

I soon stumbled across “Mo’s Beach Bar”, a little wooden shack in an alcove of trees by the shoreline, and followed the trail of sandy footprints inside. The bar was empty except for a somewhat unwelcoming Samoan bartender who was built like a professional wrestler, and an apparently drunk, unshaven, middle-aged man with bandages wrapped around his skull. The drunk man was hunched forward on his bar-stool, nursing a bottle of beer. I made my way over while the Samoan dried some glasses and rudely ignored me. I coughed a couple of times, but he still didn’t look up, before I eventually I said, ‘Hey!’ He stopped polishing the glass in his hands and glared at me. ‘Any chance of a drink?’ I asked, holding up the Flower Company credit card. The bartender watched disinterestedly as I waved the card from side to side. ‘I’m sorry, but I don’t have any cash.’

‘You dick - money’s not worth shit around here,’ snorted the guy at the bar, nodding to some plastic Jesus figurines that lined a shelf behind the Samoan. ‘Now, if you’ve got any more of those little beauties, I’m sure Moses here will keep the coconut beer flowing until you’re too drunk to remember your own name.’

‘Uh, I don’t have any more of those particular figures, but there’s loads of crap in our Storage Hold that I’d be happy to offload... if Moses here would open a tab for me.’ The big Samoan’s expression didn’t change. He replaced the clean glass on a rack and removed a cold bottle of beer from a fridge, uncapping it and placing it wordlessly on the wooden counter in front of me. I nodded to the bandaged man. ‘And one for...?’

‘Dolly.’

‘One for Dolly too, please.’

Moses got a second beer and waddled along, placing it in front of this Dolly character.

‘Is he deaf?’ I asked.

‘No sir, just he don’t much care for talking is all,’ said Dolly. He drained the dregs of his old bottle and raised the new one in my direction. Moses waddled back to his spot in front of the Jesus figurines and picked up another glass, while Dolly got up and sat down on the bar stool beside me. ‘So, you’re another one of those ship folk?’ he asked. ‘I met one of your friends the other day. Dark haired, bearded fellow, smoking the drugs, talking mighty strange. I left him with those scientists carrying out the experiments offshore. That was after he got us into a brawl with them and bit off my ear.’ He pointed to the bandage. ‘W he said his name was.’

‘Ah yeah. W’s our Communications Officer. Sorry to hear about your ear,’ I said, instantly regretting my choice of words.

‘Yeah well, nobody died,’ said Dolly sourly.

After another couple of bottles, he started to seem more amiable. I told him about the Mardi, and as a fisherman he seemed genuinely interested in the ship, asking me technical questions that I struggled to answer. He told me that there were plenty of islanders who wouldn’t mind escaping Plum Island on a ship like ours. ‘How come?’ I asked. ‘From what I’ve seen, this island is beautiful. You’re lucky it doesn’t appear on any map, otherwise I’m sure you’d be overrun with tourists. Kinda weird that it doesn’t though.’

Dolly fidgeted uneasily in his seat before calling over to the bartender who was reading the back of a Russian porno DVD. ‘Yo Moses, why don’t you see if you’ve got any of that Scotch left through the back there? You are Scots, right?’

‘Yeah, how’d you know that?’ I asked him.

‘I recognised the accent. We’ve got ourselves our very own Scotsman on Plum Island,’ he said, his eyes narrowing shiftily as the big Samoan shuffled through a door behind the bar. As soon as he disappeared from view, Dolly reached into his pocket and pulled out a pen, before sliding it on a napkin in front of me. ‘Try and sketch the island,’ he said quietly.

I stared at the napkin and pen. ‘But I don’t really know what it looks like,’ I said.

‘Sure you do. Little island, big fucking volcano, plenty of beach and trees. It doesn’t have to be so accurate. Just try.’ There was a mischievous glint in his eyes that sparked my own curiosity, so I picked up the pen and began to draw an aerial map. The strangest thing happened. The moment the nib of the pen touched the napkin, it froze like there was an invisible force holding my hand back. I tried to force it again, but the harder I tried to make the pen move, the stronger the force felt preventing me from making a mark. I noticed that I’d pushed so hard that I’d ripped a small incision through the napkin into the bar counter below. ‘Watch what you’re doing,’ said Dolly. It’ll take a lot more than plastic figurines if you fuck up his precious bar.’

‘Why can’t I move my hand?’ I asked him, releasing my grip and handing him back the pen.

‘Well, that would depend on the type of explanation you’re preared to accept. The scientific one... or the mystical one?’

‘The scientific one,’ I told him.

He chuckled quietly to himself and took another gulp of his beer. ‘There is no scientific explanation,’ he said, belching with a grin.

‘Okay, then give me the other one - the mystical one,’ I told him.

His eyes narrowed again and he glanced at the door behind the bar as if he was weighing up whether or not he had time to tell me. ‘Could get me in a lot of trouble, you know, telling you this. Pit Towners don’t like us imparting information to outsiders that weren’t meant to be here in the first place. But I like you, so on this occasion, I’m going to give you that mystical explanation, and you’re going to promise to keep it between Dolly and your good self.’

‘I’ll not repeat a word,’ I promised.

He leered and leaned into me, his hand cupped over his mouth. ‘The mystical explanation is that it’s magic that keeps your hand from moving. Do you believe in magic?’

‘No.’

‘Me neither,’ he said. ‘But until science can come up with a better explanation to why nobody can draw a map of Plum Island, or why it don’t appear on any satellite imagery, then I’m afraid magic is all we’ve got.’

‘What kind of magic, Dolly?’ I asked, watching the door myself now, torn between feeling like I was getting led a merry dance and bewilderment about the mysterious force stopping my hand from moving.

He took a deep breath and leaned in even closer, so close that I smelled the mixture of his cheap aftershave and halitosis combining with the beer fumes. ‘Legend has it they put a spell on Plum Island to protect the Plum Necklace,’ he whispered, ‘and that someday they’d be coming back for it.’

‘What’s the Plum Necklace?’ I whispered.

‘The Plum Necklace is why we’re all here. Three generations have come to this island after hearing the legend. Maybe it was a drunk conversation in a bar on the other side of the world. Maybe it was a tale passed down from a grandfather on his deathbed, to his doting grandson. Three generations of islanders have grown up here, combing every last inch of this godforsaken place in search of it. But nobody has ever found it.’ He leaned back and took another swig from his bottle.

‘What’s so special about this Plum Necklace?’

‘They say whoever wears the Plum Necklace can stop time. Just like that.’ He clicked his fingers. ‘And then start it again.’ He clicked his fingers a second time. ‘At will.’

‘Where did it come from?’

Dolly shrugged and grinned a crooked grin back at me. ‘I don’t fucking know, do I? Gods, aliens, fucking magical monks, Aztecs,

wizards... Does it matter? As far as I know, the Plum Necklace doesn't even exist. I mean, if James McLymont couldn't find it in sixty years with a map, then I think it's safe to say the rest of us are wasting our time in pursuit of a dream.'

'Wait, there's a map? I thought you said nobody could make a map?' I asked him.

Dolly chuckled to himself and squinted as he pointed up at the volcano. 'Well, of course there's a fucking map. How else would they – whoever *they* might be – remember where they hid the fucking thing? Of course the map story is probably as real as the necklace itself. Nobody has ever seen it, and there's not a hope in hell that crazy old fucker's ever going to admit it exists, even if it did. Nope, your fellow countryman's been camped up in that volcano for as long as anyone can remember, and he's not afraid to fire a few warning shots in your direction if you ever stray too close.' He held up his other hand and I saw that the middle finger was missing above the knuckle. 'I'm speaking from experience,' he said. 'He did this to me when I was twenty-three years old, green as you are. Ah Moses! I was starting to think you'd gotten lost in that porno back there.'

The big Samoan ducked through the doorway and placed the bottle of whisky and two glasses on the counter in front of us. Dolly poured and I asked him why money was no use. He shook his head. 'Jesus, you ask a lot more questions than the other one. He just wanted to know if anyone sold tundra on the island. The reason we got no need for money is because this little place is brimming with gold and every kind of jewel under the sun. Flush a fucking toilet and you're liable to find an emerald the size of your fist just sitting there at the bottom of the pan. The trouble with it is that it's all cursed. Bad luck treasure they say. Just you see for yourself. Try taking some of that gold away with you in your pockets, and I promise your ship will end up at the bottom of the ocean. I've seen more plane crashes and shipwrecks in my lifetime than I can count on my nineteen digits. But of course, a man's gotta have something for currency. Round here, the only currency that talks is curios. The more throwaway the better.'

I instantly found myself thinking about the Storage Hold on the Mardi. If Dolly wasn't just drunkenly rambling (and I'm convinced he believed everything coming out of his mouth), then the islanders would have a field day in there. I took the glass of whisky and raised it in the sun. 'To legends and lost causes,' I said, and Dolly grinned, pouring himself another shot.

I stayed there for another hour, and my drinking buddy seemed reluctant to discuss anything connected to the legend of the Plum

Necklace in Moses's presence. The two of us were sinking into our own personal morbid stupors, and the conversation began to dry up, so I thanked him for his company and made my excuses, promising the burly bartender that I'd be back with some plastic crap the next day. I couldn't tell what Dolly was so eaten up about – maybe his missing ear, possibly even his missing finger - but I knew the reason for my own melancholy. Robbie. I tried my best not to think about him, but every so often I caught myself tearing through pages of ideas in my mind about how to rescue him from the belly of that whale. A rescue mission seemed impossible. There seemed to be no obvious way of tracking the creature. And that was when it hit me. The creature, maybe not, but the Fish Rocket, and more specifically that satellite we accidentally picked up – that could be traced.

And then there was this Plum Necklace. The story sounded crazy, but I'd seen enough crazy shit in the last six months to not completely rule it out as the fictional ramblings of a one-eared, nine-fingered, alcoholic fisherman. As I swam back out to the ship, feeling more than a little giddy from the drink, I was thinking to myself that there must be a reason why my hand couldn't draw that map. And right now, magic seemed the only plausible explanation. If the Plum Necklace really did exist, and we could somehow find it, then how easy would it be to find Robbie by freezing time and tracking that stolen satellite? By the time I climbed back up onto the main deck, I knew exactly what we were going to have to do.

...

November 2, 2009

Madame Datura



I am always measuring.
In my heart there is love
I AM SURE OF IT
but cast through these fallow
months
it doesn't amount to much
it is short-stubbed,
has little or no mass
nor is it capable of radiating energies
of any distinguishable type
forlorn leanings
in short,
that love is weakly quantifiable
I am always measuring big
soul bricks
and accidentally dropping
these soul bricks
(dense, concreted structures, they)
on my soft toes
they will ooze blood
from under the nail
there is a golden zither playing
it is a triumphant ringing
and a serpent horn
in its throaty howling
wool
when I look up
the moon is full again
and Zoroaster is casting about
on a boat shaped like
an anatomically-correct
aroused goose
(in his splendid fashion)
and when
he smiles his crooked teeth
come spinning off
the silken vapor layers
of deep sleep
and take a stern bite out of reality
QUITE ACTUALLY!
November, 2009

'In which a dream is spoken clearly, illuminating a stupefying vein of information'

It is Madame Datura that I see, when I realize I am standing in a narrow, windowless room deep in the base of a cliff. My old lover. She is sitting at a writing desk in the high-ceilinged room. The walls are covered in a periwinkle paper, and I believe they reflect the stark incandescent light in such a fashion to illuminate her dress in much the same color. She isn't writing. In fact her hands are plainly sitting in her lap. I think she has been waiting for me, here, though I'm not sure for how long.

Though I am standing completely still, I quickly become enveloped in a soft, murmuring bowl of past-thoughts.

How I remember is who I am.

She had the wide, soft face typical of the native people of northern Mexico, and I will not lie – she was beautiful. Beautiful and terrifying. Her green eyes could be soft, but there was always a wild and merciless power behind them, too. I often couldn't look directly at her. She could shrink me to an impossibly small size, and slip me into one of her pockets where I'd rock about and tilt with a sliver of moonlight and three silver feathers. In time I became quite familiar with being kept in such a fashion; a small icon carved of fragrant heartwood. A lucky totem of a man.

I feel that I have already mislead you. I must admit that I forgot about vision when I was around her. My troubles were rooted in mimicry – we'd look at each other like mirrors; I was never sure of whom I saw. In a sense, I became her. She'd eat me alive. Or maybe she became me, instead, and in witnessing such a duplication, memories of myself consisted of nothing more than a subdivided pock of illusory smoke. So instead, I closed my eyes and relied on my sense of smell.

It was that coarse, black hair. Something enveloping, heavy, humic and human – wreathed with an unforgettable magic; nitrogenous and strange, simultaneously fragrant and halfway-toxic. Those flowers only opened at night to attract moths. When the air was cool, there was no smell that made me feel more at home. But in the heat of the summer months, I will honestly admit, it would fold every fiber of my spirit into a deep passion.

Oh, yes, we were lovers. She'd slow my heart down to a thunderous slow pulse; it's prominences all-reaching, totally disregarding physical phenomena along the course of their full white flaming tongues walking across the moon-scorched black sands of

space. With a steady pressing against my solar heart with one of her unadorned hands, she'd purely dissolve the rest of my body. Neutrally buoyant, I would dwell wide-casting bolts in the hazy Sea of the Dead, their rippleless, infinite solvent sea. And her warm breath across me moved every particle throughout an interconnected system of waves. In those times, we were completely miscible.

(The thought-fog recedes.)

But right now, I am standing on the top of a tall concrete stair, looking down into this long, narrow room. It's severe, though the temperature is well insulated by the surrounding rock. This was the home of a very insular man, we are told, who has recently passed away. An old and wealthy eccentric.

Though the morning was brisk, the afternoon is quite warm. I look beneath my shoes at a collection of rusty oak leaves. As a constellation, they are leaking a sweet tannic pillow up towards my nose. I've stumbled upon an estate sale in my circuitous explorations, though it is rare that I come to this particular area of the City of the Sewer Saints. (They don't call it 'The Lost City' for nothing!) I study the cracked and peeling paint on the well-aligned wooden boards. The entrance to the home (honestly I prefer 'bunker mansion', but it's quite an unwieldy term, you'll possibly agree) was a simple closet-like structure built next to a recession in the bouldery hill. One small, green-tinted bulb lights a sternly reinforced wooden door.

'He preferred his silent grandeur to the dirty commotion of the world-at-large,' a late-servant tells me as we descend an impossibly steep staircase. The servant is an enormous and completely hairless man in a black lounge jacket, and when he speaks, his low, creepy voice makes my elbow hairs stand to attention.

At the first landing, a powerful smell of antiquity plugs my nose. It is a small, dim, low-ceilinged platform with deep crimson shag carpeting. On either side of the staircase there are inbuilt shelves; each of these lined with curiosities; small tarnished bells, carved wooden felines, colored glass baskets containing decrepit potpourri. There is an exquisitely crafted liquor cabinet to the left; its varnish has cracked over the years, and the frail, knobby construction is almost that of a geriatrics' hand. On top of the cabinet is a lace doily and a row of dusty bottles. They are unlabeled.

The servant coughs to gain my attention, and walks towards the opposite side of the room. I immediately notice that the next room is

very large and well-lit. I cannot see the floor from where I stand; it must drop steeply. The opposing wall is probably over 40 meters away, and garnered in a fancy, vertical orientation of golden paneling. Between myself and the opposing wall is a dividing wall, which has two large openings cut to form an observation platform into the adjacent room. As I step forward, the servant beams. ‘Magnificent, isn’t it?’

The room must be at least 30 meters long, but it’s only a third as wide – certainly no more than ten meters; perhaps less. With the height of the ceiling and the steepness of the staircase, it inspires vertigo to regard fully. I am a little dizzy as I scan the varying levels of seats, three to each side, all of them comfortable but simply covered, their fabric matching the pastel chapel-blue of the bare walls and ceiling. I notice there is a small platform below the lowest row of seats. Confused, I stammer, ‘Is it a church of some kind?’

The servant looks shocked. But I quickly realize my mistake. ‘No, no! My god, it’s a performance hall! Oh, it IS magnificent, isn’t it!’ It’s an understatement, to be sure; this place is an acoustic delight; it feels like we’re already a mile below solid rock, but there is something more. Ambient sounds are non-existent here. You could hear someone drop a pebble on the stage. I try to imagine it.

‘Shostakovich performed here, you know.’

My jaw drops. ‘No. You must be kidding.’ I step forward in a half-daze; I want to whistle, clap my hands... anything that will let me explore that magical space.

The fellow seems to sense my intentions. ‘Oh, but if you’d step right this way, please, there is much more to see...’

I decide he’s a bit of a spoil-sport.

It sure is quiet for an estate sale. I see another grungy looking fellow poking about; he’s wearing an old army jacket and it doesn’t look like he’s had a nourishing meal in weeks. I recognize him as the singer for a local speed-metal band. He doesn’t recognize me. We exchange glances, but he skirts around the lamp-stand and weathered orange rocker before I can say hello. I wonder how he can wander about freely in this labyrinth and yet I have to be escorted about.

We descend another level, this time I feel as though we’ve reached yet another layer of insulation; the air is decidedly stale, and there is almost no sound to be heard besides our shuffling feet on carpet. I find myself focusing intently on my breathing. It’s a roar.

The servant points to a set of swinging doors. ‘A commercial-quality kitchen, in size and finery – my master entertained many dignitaries and consuls in his time, you’ll understand his tastes were

superb – and there were many people who desired very much to dine at his table!’ He smirks, knowing that an oily bumpkin such as myself would never have even dreamed of such a high-society so sumptuous and well disguised.

The dining room is splendid, too, and equally lofty; its vault is hung with a single, stark chandelier, and I am immediately reminded of a castle of the early Renaissance – at least from what I’ve seen in pictures. The table is permanently set for twenty, as if the old man were preparing to throw one last dinner party. On the tablecloth, the cutlery glimmers dully. We exit the dining room through a much lower, darker passage.

‘This is not part of the standard tour for sale-goers, I’ll have you know,’ my escort states snobbishly, ‘but I think there’s something here you’ll find quite interesting.’ He pauses and I practically bump into him; it’s almost dark in the tunnel, now. But down the hall I can see the light of a room. It’s doorway is a radiant shaft of yellow light. ‘Just a few steps ahead, there, you’ll see the lamps of the second bedroom. Please just go right in. I’m scheduled to meet somebody in just a few minutes – I’m sorry, but I have to run!’

‘Wait, wait, how do you know what I’d find interesting?’ I ask. ‘And what’d you say your name was?’ I get no answer. ‘Hey,’ I say, turning around.

There’s nobody there.

I don’t think I want to see what’s in that bedroom. But I don’t think that the tunnel behind me exists anymore, either. The moon is rising above me; I walk upon a frosty plane of obsidian glass. When I reach the door, and turn inside, it’s like entering a bubble. I am instantly aware of a low, soft hum.

She looks up. She’s been combing her hair. It’s longer than I remember. The comb sits on the writing-table. The handle is polished bone. The knobs of the bed are brass, though the bunker’s air has got the better of them – together, they delimit an oceanic mattress; it must be five meters wide. It’s almost as wide as the entire room. I look up at the ceiling. Four ancient incandescent lamps are hung close to the 9 meter ceiling, two on each of the longer walls.

‘Good evening, Simon.’ Her voice is so low and soft. My knees get weak, but I manage a short bow.

‘Madame.’

...

March, 2005

*'How my heart was stolen and turned into a balsa thornapple,
complete with a green felt crown.'*

I am a very green young man standing in line at the Capitol Center Foods supermarket, with my red-plastic basket containing:

1 package of hot dogs

1 loaf of cheapest no-name-brand white bread

1/2 gallon milk

1 butternut squash

a bottle of barbecue sauce

1 dozen eggs.

I try not to look at the trashy magazines, nor the ultra-pierced methclerk selling cigarettes from the short counter. So I turn the other way, examine a fee-list for postal services.

A woman gets in line in the next lane, stepping directly into my gaze.

She was a figure of miraculous allure, cloaked in a glow about her person that jingled in the straight lines of a spider's web. In even the shortest sweeping glance of an eye upon her, one would begin to slide into the gravitational well that was her stifling sensual radiance or in one flashing smile/specially arched eyebrow could illuminate the air about her (100 paces) and emanate a great drowning flood enough to consume any human being (man or woman, I say this now) at once.

She noticed me, and at first she just stared back.

But driven with hunger, pressing with a great soft and sensual weight, she opened around me, the air of heavy humid breath slowly dissolving us both down. An embrace toppling slowly forward, cataclysmic and charged, rattling with electrical energy and my heart roaring of waterfalls and rapid sweat.

It was impossibly simple. Laughably simple.

Drunken-bathing in a perfume of her scent, I no longer was – she pulled at my lips, a lioness, and having eaten her fill, drew my soul directly from my body.

I had always existed within her, though – she only created me out of the need of rigid patterned structure and girdered bedrocks on which to grow. I am roots and look, now, she is the only blooming flower I enter-in-trust to. I know her hands are gentle just as her hips follow the wild kinetics of a pestle, nature's erosion aided by organic sweetsweat and the patter of eyelashes.

Dreaming in dawning I fell again and again into her eyes, burnt of vivid clarity as they smoldered. She was cloaked in her own morning's calling of Eve or some figure of leaves moving. She had escaped down some hidden path, hair damp and the motions of her frame showing the tremblings held in the heavy jungle strewn all about her. Clinging dewdroplets no less than the tectonic vibrations carried of my own body directly emanated from her lips as floating cries. A bird's call would float in stillness of fog, then compounded upon with the great living cycling of breath, condense upon her skin, run down in trips of rivers to begin again as oceanic rolling scent.

I came into her body and she came to rest around me, above me, mingling with breath and bone. Then extinguished, as one would turn off a light or cast away an item of refuse, I was standing again on the floor of the grocery store.

Tongueless is my name so I cannot speak.

Empty in reverberation of natural action I wrote it on the sidewalk.

Knowing about flowers, silt, clay, sand and breathing air along the cracks in the sidewalk, I have been taken and burnt to ashes, the fine particles of dust.

...

November 3, 2009

Alfie's Journal #27:
Black Cloud

Two young women just swam out in the dark to the Mardi and hand-delivered what appeared to be several pages torn from Alfie's journal. It doesn't sound good:

Dearest Comrades,

I'm in jail.

And I'd like to say that's the worst of it. But it's not.

I'm not going anywhere in a hurry so I'll start at the beginning and take it from there. Fortunately I seem to have made friends with The Judge's two eighteen year old daughters and they've agreed to deliver

this letter directly to the Mardi without showing “Daddy”. I hope to Buddha they aren’t lying.

...



After my drinking session with Dolly, I returned to the ship with the fuzzy green shoots of a great idea starting to grow in my mind. Add this to a perfectly innocent comment Moss made to me concerning Jazz Monk’s death, about how seeing it happen must really “haunt” me, and you have the perfect recipe for insomnia.

Bunkroom 3 (or “The War Room” as W has taken to calling it in my absence) remained empty. W had been missing since he chaired an “emergency meeting” on Friday morning. I climbed into my cloud coffin and lay there staring into space, watching the dawn finally break outside our grubby porthole. When I wasn’t plotting to steal the only map of Plum Island from the old Scotsman who apparently lived inside the volcano, I was wondering if maybe there was something wrong with how I was reacting to the death of the Jazz Monk.

We had to get a posse together, like a crack unit in camouflage. Was it really love that killed the Jazz Monk, or was I just telling myself

that to protect myself from the truth - that it was *my* idea for him to climb outside the Fish Rocket and fix the leaking fuel pipe? Who could we possibly get to go on such a ridiculously dangerous map-retrieving mission? Would it be expecting too much of Simon who confessed to me that he was feeling “sluggish” upon returning from the moon? Weren’t all the warning signs there that Jazz Monk’s brain was fried before I sent him out to his certain demise? Did this map of Plum Island even exist, and if so, then how come this James McLymont character hadn’t already found the Plum Necklace? Maybe he already had? What the fuck could I possibly say at Jazz Monk’s memorial service? ‘It’s mostly my fault’? Would anyone even show up? Maybe I should go it alone on this Plum Necklace adventure... in case something like this happened again? (Which it inevitably will.) Did we need weapons? Could we possibly rely on W to help coordinate the map mission? Why on earth didn’t we plan the moon mission better? Take our time. Sort out proper space suits with pockets? What was a whale doing floating through space? Why did it travel so fast? And how did we get inside it? Did we fly up its ass? Do whales have asses? Did any of this actually happen, or was Nate right - am I insane?

That was what it was like that night - a never-ending barrage of questions and ideas exploding like fireworks in my brain, until I finally fell asleep, dreaming troubled dreams about exploding monkeys and little white people with plums for eyes, dancing around a bonfire on the beach while Moses banged a drum made of congealed moondust and NIKO blasted out Bob Dylan songs.

I eventually dragged myself black-eyed out of the cloud coffin early on Saturday afternoon. I got washed and dressed, grabbed a rucksack, and ambled over to the Storage Hold. I filled the bag with a couple of sheets of animal stickers, the frog call identification tapes, some canned dog barks, one set of children’s watercolour paints with dayglo brushes, the wire frog-bone model, and a crusty LA clippers sweatband, before swimming ashore. *

I found my way back to Mo’s Beach Bar and was not surprised to find Dolly in what I gathered was his favourite grazing spot, slumped on a bar stool. ‘Afternoon,’ I said, padding across the decking, watching him open his severely bloodshot eyes and jerk his still heavily bandaged head to attention.

‘Hey! It’s Questions! Back so soon, huh? You must be doing something right, Moses,’ he drunkenly rasped. The big Samoan behind the bar looked up from his porno DVD and nodded his meaty head with the tiniest flicker of a grin.

I stood beside Dolly and emptied the contents of the rucksack out onto the counter. ‘Payment for yesterday’s drinks,’ I explained. ‘Hopefully it’s enough to cover another couple today as well?’

Both Moses and Dolly sprang into action, sifting through the junk. The big Samoan seemed particularly enamoured with the paint set, while Dolly lifted the canned dog laughter to his ear, shaking it to see what it did. ‘Never mind yesterday’s beer,’ he told me, ‘this shit is enough to keep you watered here for weeks.’ He plucked out a shiny sticker of a newt and made to stick it to the collar of his dirty shirt, only to find Moses’s surprisingly agile big hands whip the sticker from his fingertips and press it back down onto the sheet.

‘That okay, Moses?’ I asked. He didn’t answer, but I assumed from the two bottles of beer he placed in front of us that it was indeed alright. I watched him lumber back to his DVD, and then I turned to Dolly. ‘Say Dolly, I’ve been thinking -’

He held up a four-fingered hand to silence me. ‘That’s arguably the most dangerous sentence in the world,’ he said. ‘Nothing good ever comes from a sentence like that.’

‘I’d like to get a better look at the island,’ I continued, trying to make it sound as casual as possible. ‘Figured I might as well do the whole tourist thing while I’m here, before we set off back to sea.’

He cackled to himself and suddenly looked me in the eye. ‘If you’re asking me to take you up that volcano, Questions, then the answer is no,’ he said. ‘There’s only one man on this island dumb enough to go deep into the jungle, and considering what’s been going on the last couple of days, I reckon you’re not going to be the most popular person in his book.’

I didn’t have a clue what this meant, and Dolly seemed to sense it. He sighed and continued. ‘The guy you’re looking for is called Tharkey. He’s Nepalese. Tharkey knows every inch of Plum Island like the back of his own hand. He’s a hunter. I guess you could call him the town butcher. Anyways, Tharkey and his wife keep a regular little farm in their back garden over in Pit Town. That crazy friend of yours has been stealing Tharkey’s chickens. You know the crazy friend I mean.’ He tapped the bandage on the left of his head where a couple of days ago he had an ear.

‘W’s been stealing someone’s chickens?’ I asked, desperately trying to sound surprised without actually being surprised at all.

‘That’s not the half of it! Kids in town say he’s been sleeping rough in the jungle. The Pit Towners are calling him “Black Cloud”. Dude must be even crazier than I thought he was. You know, there are *things* in the jungle.’

‘What sort of *things*?’ I asked, Scrotmanly unnerved by the way he’d emphasised the word.

He waved his nine fingers around his head as if trying to wipe my question from his mind, before taking a long slug of beer. ‘Even if you can convince the sherpa to take you round the island – and if there’s more crap back on your ship like the crap you just tipped on the bar, then there’s every chance you can – even Tharkey’s not stupid enough to set foot on the volcano.’ He glanced down at his watch and muttered under his breath. ‘Is that the time already? Pretty Boy will be back soon. I should get going.’

I watched him hop down from the stool and attempt to stay on his feet, which he did with a variety of acrobatic balancing exercises. ‘Any chance you could take me to see this Tharkey? Even if it’s just to apologise about the chickens, and see if there’s anything I can do about... uh... Black Cloud. We’ve got plenty more animal stickers back on our ship, if you’re interested.’

‘You think I was born yesterday, Questions?’ he asked, grinning that crooked gap-toothed grin of his, and shaking his head. ‘Yo Moses!’ he yelled. ‘Any chance Questions here can borrow your bicycle?’

I followed Dolly as he zigzagged along the dusty path skirting through the sparse trees at the edge of the jungle. Within a minute, Pit Town appeared in front of us - a small scattering of ramshackle little white houses, concealed beyond the shimmering sand dunes of the main bay. As we pedalled along the main dirt track through the town, I realised that bicycles seemed to be the preferred mode of transport on the island, with several of them lying on sparse lawns or leaning against fences. We dismounted in front of a weather-worn, single-storey beach house, and Dolly dropped his bike carelessly to the ground. I asked him if this was the only town on the island, counting approximately a dozen houses scattered haphazardly on either side of the track. He stared out to sea for a few seconds, trying to catch his focus. Not seeing what he was looking for, he spat in the dirt and said, ‘Yep, this is it. Come on then, let’s go and see about those chickens.’

Two houses up was a pokey white two-storey beach house, backing onto the edge of the jungle. It was by no means in the same dishevelled condition as the other house (which I assumed belonged to Dolly), but still had that ragged, lived-in look. A low, white, paint-flaked fence ran around the perimeter of the property, and I caught sight of two goats in the back garden, chewing at the scrubby lawn, and staring lazily back at us. I followed Dolly up the front path and he

knocked on the shuttered front door, while I looked back over my shoulder at the largest building in Pit Town, a big whitewashed square stone compound, also on two levels. I was convinced I saw an upstairs curtain twitching before the shuttered door opened behind me.

A stout little Nepalese woman with sleek black hair and a cross face was standing there. There was a small girl, maybe three or four years old, poking her head out from behind her mother's leg and cheekily grinning up at me. 'What you want, Dolly?' the woman asked in faltering English, eyeing me up and down with a look of alarm, while the little girl ducked behind her mother's skirt, giggling.

'Ah hey there, Zheng,' said Dolly. I detected a nervous twitch in his voice. 'Is... uh, Tharkey home?'

'Thar-key!' she shrieked, like a little General, before barking a sentence in a language I didn't recognise. Looking beyond her, I saw a dark and homely hallway leading through to a kitchen, the back door open, and a couple of scrawny chickens pecking around on the porch.

There was a shuffling sound from a room off to the left, and muffled notes from a radio getting turned down, before a wiry man in his mid to late thirties appeared wearing khaki shorts and a camouflage t-shirt. The woman ushered the little girl through to the kitchen as Dolly greeted Tharkey, and introduced me. 'This is the guy I was telling you about, Tharkey,' he said. 'Don't worry, he's not the one responsible for your chickens going missing, but he knows the guy who is, and he wants to help. Also he's looking for a tour guide to take him round the island and show him the sights.'

'Not interested,' snapped Tharkey, visibly upset. He turned to me and asked, 'You know Black Cloud?'

'Hi Tharkey, I eh... yeah, I know Black Cloud. I'm really sorry to hear about your chi-'

'Black Cloud takes chickens. He eats chickens. Tharkey find bones, but no Black Cloud,' said Tharkey. 'I show you no island. You show me Black Cloud!'

A grimacing Dolly interrupted, saying quietly to me, 'You've got to excuse old Tharkey here. I've known him for over a decade, and his English is as bad as it was the first day he set foot on Plum Island looking for *you know what*.' He turned to the angry sherpa and said slowly, 'Tharkey, let me just say that I'm sure the two of you can come to some sort of financial arrangement for the loss of your beloved chickens. You know?' He rubbed his thumb against the fingers of his good hand and I watched Tharkey's eyes narrow with understanding. 'Lots of crap, Tharkey. *Lots* of bad quality crap.'

'You pay for chickens?' Tharkey asked me.

‘Oh definitely, I’ll pay for the missing chickens,’ I said. ‘I’ll take you to our ship and you can help yourself. Whatever you need.’

Tharkey’s wife shouted something through from the kitchen, and he shouted something back in what I’m pretty sure must be Nepalese.

‘What about the tour of the island?’ I asked. ‘I’ll pay you extra. Double the crap.’

He scratched at his clean-shaven cheek while Dolly leaned in and drawled hypnotically, ‘Tharkey, listen to your good friend, Dolly. Questions here has got crap like you’ve never dreamed of. Who knows what treasures they’ve got lurking on that big ship of theirs. It’s been three years since we last had visitors to the island. You could set yourself, the wife, and your kids up for another three years, *if* you play this right.’

Tharkey took a deep breath and nodded. ‘First we find Black Cloud. *Then* we see island.’

I smiled and we shook hands. ‘Well, there you go,’ says Dolly, grinning, and ambling off up the path. ‘Everybody’s happy and Dolly’s work is done. Say Questions, how’d you fancy stopping over tomorrow night at my house? Me and a few of the Pit Towners have a little card game going every Sunday, a bit of petty gambling to help fend off the religious inclinations that go hand in hand with being stuck on this fucking shithole.’

‘Sounds good. Cheers,’ I shouted after him.

‘Mind you take Moses’s bike back after your tour, or he’ll break your legs off. Oh, and remember my animal stickers too’, he shouted.

Tharkey grabbed a canvas backpack and pulled on his worn leather walking boots behind me. He pointed at my dirty bare feet. ‘No shoes?’ he asked.

I shook my head.

‘Size?’ he asked me.

‘Eight,’ I said.

He rummaged around behind the door, and produced a second pair of battered old brown boots that he handed to me along with a pair of thick brown socks. As I took them, I had a sudden flashback to an incident involving socks and a toastie-maker inside a rocket, and shuddered. ‘Same size. Tharkey and...?’

For a moment, I forgot who I was. ‘Alfie,’ I said finally with a grin, sitting down to pull on the boots, ‘thank you, Tharkey.’

I tramped through the increasingly dense jungle behind Pit Town, following my quiet guide. He seemed preoccupied, stopping every ten paces to examine clumps of weeds, or the dusty jungle floor, then

stooping to caress damaged plants like he was tracking something (or someone). The further inland we travelled, the hotter it became, and the sweat started pouring from me. I stank of rum. The thing about living on a ship for six months is that you forget how it feels to really use your legs, and though the upwards gradient of our hike was gentle to say the least, the combination of the oppressive heat and my lazy muscles quickly began to take their toll. Tharkey thrashed at the jungle plants with a serrated machete. When he'd first lifted it from across his shoulder, I found myself thinking, 'Ah fuck. Well done. You're about to pay for those chickens with your life.' Even after he started hacking his way through the dense foliage, I still hadn't ruled out the possibility.

As we neared the plateau of our ascent, Tharkey suddenly veered off right, sliding down into a hollow of thick jungle ferns. He started rummaging around in what looked like a crudely constructed shelter of branches and roots at the foot of a tree. I watched from the top of the hollow as he emerged sniffing a small bone before holding it up to me. 'This one is Tharkey's chicken. Black Cloud is long gone.'

I caught my breath, hands on knees, looking down at my guide as he sniffed around in search of tracks, and I tried to get my bearing. We must have been walking for nearly an hour, and through the wall of trees to my left, I could just about make out the hulking outline of the island's volcano. 'Hey Tharkey, is the volcano still active?'

He looked up at me with a puzzled expression and I made erupting gestures with my hands. He shook his head.

'What are the chances of you taking me up there?' I asked him.

'No chances,' he said defiantly, continuing around the tree and wading up a narrow twisting path that wound deeper and deeper into the jungle.

I slid down into the gulley and ran to catch up with him. 'Why won't you take me up there?' I asked.

'Crazy old wolf,' he told me.

'Couldn't we just go up and stay hidden? I'd really love a look at that volcano,' I said, but he ignored me and kept walking until we stumbled out onto a wider track, overgrown with vines and sprawling weeds. 'Maybe your crazy old wolf ate Black Cloud for breakfast,' I muttered to myself.

Tharkey turned to me and smiled like he was smiling for the first time in years. 'Certainly hope so,' he said.

Three hours later, we sat on the edge of some grassy cliffs at the northern end of the island, sharing Tharkey's canteen of water, and

looking down at the foaming blue surf crashing against the rocks beneath us. It had been an arduous journey from the south coast where Pit Town was located, to this rugged coastline of grassy cliffs. The overgrown track led to some ancient ruins buried in some of the densest parts of the jungle, where huge stone pillars had toppled many years previous and were now covered in a luminous purple moss. With my limited knowledge of archaeology and architecture, I couldn't tell what sort of civilisation they belonged to, while Tharkey himself was only interested in searching behind them for traces of W. After my fifteenth attempt to get him to tell me who he thought built it, he finally offered a cryptic, 'They did'. When I asked him who 'They' were, he simply shrugged his shoulders again and ploughed on.

I took another red-faced sip from the canteen and passed it back to him. 'What do you know about the Plum Necklace?' I asked.

He smiled back at me, his dark eyes creasing as he returned the canteen to his backpack. 'Plum Necklace not on island. Tharkey look everywhere. If Tharkey and the crazy old wolf not find Plum Necklace, nobody find Plum Necklace.'

'Why do you call him a crazy old wolf?' I asked.

He tilted his head back to the cloudless blue sky and howled into the emptiness before looking back at me and laughing.

'Dolly said you came to the island to find it. If you don't think it's here, then why do you stay?'

He stood up, breathing in the cool sea air and surveying the endless ocean stretching off into the horizon. 'No place else to go,' he said finally.

Ah shit, the twins are back. Their names are Martha and Sadie, and they wear matching pink pyjamas. Once again I've put pen to paper with the intention of getting from A to Z as concisely as possible, only I've found myself babbling hopelessly between B and C, before finding that I've barely made it past D. The window of opportunity to deliver this letter is only open for a very short while, and if The Judge catches them, then I won't just be getting extradited this Friday, I'll be getting extradited while wearing my own balls as a hat.

I'll try and write again tomorrow. I trust all is well on the ship.

Uh... also I should mention, if some Dutch guy called Rob Vink shows up (and I have an awful feeling this letter is already a day too late) then I'm afraid you're all just going to have to deal with the situation as best you can. Apparently I lost the Mardi in a game of poker. I'm

really sorry. If I ever get out of this mess, then I swear I won't drink another drop of rum again for as long as I live.

Alfie, The Not Captain

TO BE CONTINUED

** Simon, in the rush to get ashore, I may have forgotten to sign for these items. If so, I can only apologise.*

...

Simon: Gad, weevil pictures make me somewhat happy. They are also called 'Curculios', which might be the most hilarious name for a long-snouted animal that I have ever heard. Admittedly, both Aardvarks and Tapirs are very funny, too. And their names are alright.

Hang on.

You *lost* the Mardi?

...

November 3, 2009

Transcript of a Secret Cellular Telephone Conversation

I go to the Bridge and flip open the small, bound crew roster sitting on the desk. Scanning, I find what I'm looking for – a telephone number. The number I'll need to contact Alfie's attorney, The Amalfi Glow.

Scarytoes is nice. He always lets me use his secret cellular telephone. It's probably over 10 years old; but he's paid for a reliable satellite telephone link, which quite makes up for its blocky programming.

(Thinking about things, I wonder if our ship's telephone lines have some sort of satellite technology... And thinking about this makes me remember that we crashed into somebody's satellite while cruising through space. At the time, I didn't think twice about it. But now I'm beginning to wonder whose it was! But I am also wondering if there is someplace I can eat tropical vegetable soup on this Island.

And I wonder if there are really beach plums on this Island. While scanning the shoreline I couldn't see any lounging about...)

Oof.

I'm a bit groggy, yet. Easily distracted. My dreams have been really consumptive over the past few days, and I'm just not quite my usual utterance of elastic cogs. But seeing trees is good. I wonder if there are any ripe fruits about...

OOOF!

Alfie's in jail, for crying out loud!

(Punching in the number.)

Ringing, ringing, ringing, ringing...

Me: Hello, is this the office of The Amalfi Glow?

Amalfi Glow: Yeah, hello, who is this?

Me: Thank goodness! It's Simon Piler, from the Mardi, remember?

Amalfi Glow: Have we ever met?

Me: It's quite possible, you know. I think... didn't I phone you from space on the Hypnotist Phone?

Amalfi Glow: Wait, you're the crazy doctor who makes the loopy juice, right? I remember now. What do you need, Simon?

Me: Oh, just letting you know that Alfie's been arrested. He's in jail.

Amalfi Glow: Ah fucking hell! Not again! What did he do this time? Is it that llama again?

Me: Well, actually, I'm not sure. I thought lawyers were supposed to know these kind of things.

Amalfi Glow: You only just told me about it. How am I supposed to know anything about the situation?

Me: I thought you guys were telepathic, I guess. Gosh, that's kind of disappointing.

Amalfi Glow: Okay, okay. So I'm going to get in contact with... wait, where did you say you were, again?

Me: Oh, I haven't said. We're anchored off Plum Island. It doesn't show up on any map, though – so don't try finding it. I seriously wonder if it would show up in a telephone directory, either... hmmm... *and* I might have some trouble sending GPS coordinates. I'm not sure about how far the Magic affects things. I'll give it a shot in a bit. What is your fax machine's number?

Amalfi Glow: Fax machine?

Me: What? (*amazed*) I thought all lawyers had fax machines!

Amalfi Glow: Is this a prank call? Did Alfie put you up to this?

Me: (*glumly*) Oh, yeah, I almost forgot.

Amalfi Glow: What?

Me: He also lost the ship playing poker with the Islanders.

Amalfi Glow: Alfie lost the ship playing poker with the Islanders?

Me: So I'm told. But I'm not going to give it to them!

Amalfi Glow: Well, now I know you're winding me up. I saw Alfie an hour ago and he didn't mention anything about playing poker. In fact, I'm pretty sure he said he was getting an early night. Say, have you guys been eating that ice-cream again?

Me: Hang on... did you say you *saw* Alfie an hour ago? I thought you were in Scotland?

Amalfi Glow: I am. Listen Simon, it's getting late and I'd love to keep talking, but -

Me: I'm confused again.

Amalfi Glow: That makes two of us. If it makes you feel any better, I'll look into it in the morning. Though between you and me, it sounds like either somebody's been pulling your leg, or it's all a big misunderstanding. If I come up with anything, can I call this number?

Me: Well, this secret phone is owned by Scarytoes. I'm not even supposed to know about it. By the way, does our ship have a satellite telephone built into it?

Amalfi Glow: Huh? How am I supposed to know that?

Me: Good point. Hey, Amalfi, talk to you later, man. I gotta find some soup. I'm starving...

I pull the phone off my ear and flip it closed.

Initial reactions on this situation: It is now entirely within the hands of this able-bodied Crew. Now to come up with a plan...

Well, I'll actually swim to the Island to try to find a good place for soup, but really I'll be craftily researching a complex and highly intelligent plan with many foolproof subcomponents... Ha ha! Take that, you crass Islanders! (*does a few fake jabs in the air*)

Stomach: gurgle...

...

November 3, 2009

The Elephant Teapot

Apologies about taking so long to post something in the journal, but the position of Company Secretary is definitely more hands-on than I was led to believe. I cast my mind back to little over a week ago when a couple of strangers appeared on the garbage flotilla and rudely interrupted our scientific research. Upon my arrival at the scene, I was informed there had been something of an altercation, and the smaller of the two had lost an ear in the scuffle. My colleagues insisted that it had been the tall, bearded stranger who chewed off the smaller one's ear in some kind of drug frenzy, while they hid behind flotsam watching the two kick "seven shades of shit" out of one another. After the one-eared man departed on his rusty fishing boat, the other one smoked his way through our month's supply of weed, and then somehow managed to persuade me to give him a lift back to his ship on one of our pedalos.

It took us several hours longer than I'd anticipated with him being so hopelessly wasted. He seemed far more concerned about discussing how similar we looked, ranting incoherently at length about the nuances of tribal customs in some place called Nianarok. Personally, I couldn't see the resemblance, but he simply wouldn't take no for an answer. By the time we reached his ship I felt obliged to make sure that this "W" character found his way back safely to his quarters. As I carried him through the Mardi, I must confess that my curiosity was piqued by the rather delightful, and at times quite incredibly disorganised, inner workings of the Company, flippantly remarking how I'd give my right testicle to trade places with him. In truth, our scientific research (classified) had so far has yielded no discernible results, and at the grand old age of 37 I was secretly yearning for a bit of adventure, a shift of gears, and change of direction. Mr W stared for a terrifyingly long while at my crotch, and I got so scared that I attempted to run away, but he chased me down the corridor and quickly got me in a headlock. Now, at 5 foot 3, I may not be the most athletic of sorts, but I was still shocked at the agility and speed with which he seemed to be able to move, especially after all the weed he'd consumed.

'O'Flanahanaman,' he said, cutting off the circulation to my head, 'you're just what this ship needs, so I'd like to formally offer you the position of Company Secretary. It's predominantly a paper-pushing position and unlikely to challenge such a honed scientific mind such as yours, nevertheless I think you'll enjoy it. What do you say?'

Of course, at this point I could barely breathe, let alone speak, but I somehow managed to nod my increasingly purple head and he took it as a gesture of acceptance, dropping me to the floor and disappearing inside the place I now know as the “War Room”. For a short while, I just stood there and caught my breath, before I considered making another run for it. Somehow though, I had the most peculiar sense of excitement fluttering in my belly at the prospect of not returning to the garbage flotilla. So I stayed and explored the ship further. Within a couple of days, I’d inherited running the newly opened Sales Office from Captain - sorry, I mean, *Not* Captain, Alfie. A small shrine had been erected in the corner of the room, in memory of a monkey who’d apparently died in space. I suppose I found the presence of the small saxophone playing ape ornament a little creepy, but I soon forgot about him and immersed myself in my work. Prior to the cabin being a Sales Office, I believe it was used as storage space for submersibles and hot air balloons. Now, its sole purpose was to process and document a sudden influx of Russian salesmen who were attempting to flog various pornographic materials, and who were generally making a nuisance of themselves. With all newcomers to the ship having to report directly to the Sales Cabin, the first few days of my new job flew by. I diligently recorded my interactions with each new visitor in a logbook that Alfie had started, before encouraging them to walk a recently constructed gangplank. Something most of them seemed to do without much of a fight. Here are some choice excerpts of my encounters, along with additional annotations from the rest of the crew:

SALES OFFICE LOGBOOK

FRAT BOY – [Not selling anything]

(politely asked to walk the plank)

Alfie: Do you see our flag? What colour is it?

Frat Boy: Red.

Alfie: No, try again.

Frat Boy: Uh c-crimson?

Alfie: Wrong again! Come on Frat Boy, put that educated brain of yours to work! *(sweeping him down the plank with a broom)*

Frat Boy: S-s-s-scarlet?

Alfie: No Frat Boy! It’s...

(splash)

Alfie: ... shit, wait a minute, it *is* red.

DROP SHIP – [Selling moon pictures for astronomers]

Alfie: Do we look like astronomers to you Drop Ship?

Drop Ship: Uh, no. Just I read your whole “Moon Mission” journal entry online and -

Alfie: You read the WHOLE Moon Mission thing?

Drop Ship: Weeeell... not exactly. I glanced at the title.

Alfie: Oh, so you *glanced* at the title, did you? The fucking title! Well, if you’d actually read the journal entry, you’d know we’re just back from the moon, so what the fuck would we want to buy pictures of it for? Huh?

Drop Ship: Uh... in case you didn’t take any?

(long pause)

Alfie: Lucky for you, Drop Ship, we didn’t, so I’ll take two, then get your fat ass down that plank before I change my mind and feed you to our Elk.

(splash)

STEAVE – [Selling Mobile phone jammers for spy missions]

Alfie: Did W put you up to this?

Steave: Who?

Alfie: Come here, Steave. Closer... a little bit closer... a little bit closer... *(grabs “Steave’s” face to make sure it’s real)*

Steave: Hey man, that’s assault!

Me: I didn’t invite you here, Steave with the not-so-rubber face.

Steave: *(Goes into his pocket and produces a golden ticket)* Actually you did. My friend, Butterscup, gave this to me.

Me: Ah. Okay. I forgot about those. So, would these jammers work on our internal phones? Could they work on a Hypnotist Phone for example?

Steave: Look, I’m sorry to have troubled you, I can see you’re busy and... well, if you don’t mind, I’m just going to walk off this plank.

Me: Wait! Come back! Can I at least TRY one out on the Hypnotist Phone?

(splash)

...

Moss: May your soul rest in peace, you strange and misunderstood monkey. Your death was one of those twilight zone things where we humans have to ask ourselves who was more humane - the monkey who died of love saving his friends, or the humans? On the note of frat boys, Alfie, what are you doing? Making them walk the plank when

clearly they could have their *ahem* uses. Send them to Bunkroom 8 in future.

What? We've been at sea for a while. It gets mighty lonely.

WHAT? Stop looking at me like that. I thought we were pirates. Or kind of like pirates. Whatever.

O'Flanahanaman: Request for all frat-boy salesmen to be directed in future to Bunkroom 8, noted, sir! I never met the monkey myself, but I understand he was a complex character. Apparently there will be a memorial service for him later this week on the beach at Plum Island.

Alfie: Despite his ridiculous surname, this little dude is fucking great, W. Good job on the recruitment front. Moss, what if Jonny Rchrdsn ever decides to come back? Are you sure he's going to be okay with the frat-boy set-up? I'd hate to be trapped in a walrus outfit on the bottom bunk, while shenanigans go on overhead. As for the crazy little monkey shrine, it is, I'll admit Scrotmanly creepy. I forgot all about the memorial service with everything going on, but thanks for the reminder O'Flanamanahanamanah— never mind. Would Thursday suit everyone who wants to attend? Anybody want to say something, or do a reading? The trouble with a captainless ship is that nobody ever takes responsibility for this sort of shit.

O'Flanahanaman: Why, thank you, sir! I aim to please! The monkey shrine doesn't really bother me. I've made myself a bed in the Sales Office by the way, found an old piss and ice-cream stained mattress that got dumped in the Aft Hold, and have relocated it in here. Don't worry, I'll not get in the way. With the steady stream of visitors since we docked here, I figured I might as well snatch the sleep whenever I get the chance, if that's okay with everyone?

NIKO: ++Excuse me while I vomit. I thought we had our share of assholes on the Mardi. But this guy just took it to a whole new level.

++

Simon: (*Ambling in slippers*) Wow, has this place ever become a commotion... Howdy, O'Flanahanaman, nice to have you on board. (*Fills up coffee cup from wall-spigot*) I'd like to say a bit at the memorial service, that's why I stopped over here. Well, that, and to leave these magenta paper flowers to rest on the shrine. (*Places them gingerly next to the shriveled rose hips and pine cone*) Say, is there any good place to get a bite in Pit Town?

Moss: I like frat boys, they're stupid enough to follow instructions while blindfolded.

What shenanigans? I needed a hand making origami fish. I decided to turn my room into a paper aquarium. I just required some devoted idiots to help me out...

...

O’Flanahanaman’s first day in the new job

Me: Name?

Shark Fight 6: Shark Fight 6

Me: Selling?

Shark Fight 6: Play by play results and updates.

Me: Uh... play by play results and updates for what exactly?

Shark Fight 6: Whatever you need, buddy.

Me: Uh... uh...

Shark Fight 6: This is the point where you make me walk the plank.

Me: I do?

Shark Fight 6: Yes, you do.

Me: Okay, well... um, would you mind walking the plank?

Shark Fight 6: Are you going to make me?

Me: ...

Shark Fight 6: Haha! I’m just pulling your leg, little man!

Me: Oh.

Shark Fight 6: Don’t worry about it. Thanks for your time.

(splash)

Me: Well, that went well, I think.

O’Flanahanaman’s second day in the new job

I’m thoroughly enjoying myself. I hope I can help by taking care of all the menial tasks around the ship that nobody seems interested in, such as keeping a record of visitors and handling the mail. Did you all know there were four sacks of letters stuffed behind the desk in the Communications Bay, date-stamped as far back as July? Most of it looks like junk mail to be honest, but there’s a curious looking crate of a rather small stature: 0.5 x 0.25 x 0.3 metres, addressed to an “S. Piler”. Might it be important? Okay, well, enough of that. Let’s get this show on the road, shall we? [*opens door*]

Me: Ah hello there, you’re keen! Name?

Rooserv: Rooserv

Me: Mr Rooserv? I must say, that is an unusual name.

Rooserv: It’s Russian for Kevin.

Me: Russian eh? Ah... you’re not selling something pornographic, are you?

Rooxserv: It's on-line porn. Totally different.

Me: Woah woah, I'll stop you there, Kevin! Just step this way if you please... That's it. A little more to the left. That's right, towards that wooden plank looking thing... Yes, yes it is a gangplank... Okay... Keep going.

(splash)

Me: Next? Ah hello there. Name?

Immenobum: Immenobum.

Me: Uh, Immenobum?

Immenobum: Immenobum.

Me: Interesting. And what are you selling?

Immenobum: George Lazenby and Sigourney Weaver biographies.

Me: Ooh...you couldn't possibly come back later in the week, could you? It's just I don't have any cash on me and I'm not authorised to use the Company credit card.

Immenobum: OK – I come back tomorrow.

Me: Fantastic!

(splash)

Me: Next? Oh, hello there. Name?

Fat Boy: Fat Boy.

Me: Hmm? Frat Boy you say? You weren't here before were you?

Fat Boy: No dude.

Me: Uh, okay then. Well, we'll call you "Frat Boy 2" in case of confusion. And what are you selling, Frat Boy 2?

Fat Boy 2: Selling? Uh, nothing dude.

Me: Great. Well, just follow this corridor as far as it goes until you reach a stairwell. Just past the ping-pong table. Head down to the bottom floor, then along the corridor to Bunkroom 8.

Fat Boy 2: Bunkroom 8?

Me: Uh-huh.

Fat Boy 2: Thanks!

Me: Anyone else? No. Ah... well, I'll get started on this mail then, I suppose.

Moss: Good job O'Flanahanaman. You're sure pulling your weight.

O'Flanahanaman: Why, thank you, sir, I aim to please.

O'Flanahanaman: *(cough cough)* Actually, I think I may have made something of a mistake with the young man I sent down to Bunkroom 8. Having consulted yesterday's logbook entry, it would seem that I

misheard him. He didn't say "Frat Boy", he said "Fat Boy". In hindsight, this makes a lot of sense, seeing as he could barely fit through the door, was eating an éclair and wheezing heavily when he waddled off.

Moss: Don't worry O'Flanahanaman, we live on mistakes, the funnier (punnier?) the better. It all turned out for the best, he shared his éclair with me and we bonded over a love of the old game 'monkey island'.

O'Flanahanaman's third day on the job

Okay, so what have we got today?

Me: Name?

Denzel: Denzel.

Me: And how can we help you, Denzel?

Denzel: Good evening, Happy few days-after-Halloween! Today the real scares come when all you one night standers find out you just got a nasty case of herpes!

Me: ...

Denzel: ...

Me: Denzel, I'm not very sure what to do with that information. Do you mind walking down that wooden plank over there while I mull it over. Thank you. Yes, that plank. Thank you Denzel.

(splash)

(thinking: Shit! Checks pants. Looking up) Oh sorry, I was just – ahem. Never mind. Name?

Rob Vink: You can call me "Skipper" I guess.

Me: Uh-huh. And what are you selling, Skipper?

Rob Vink: Everything on my ship.

Me: Right. Well that sounds interesting. And where is your ship?

Rob Vink: You're on it.

Me: ...

Rob Vink: *(places a small flattened plasticine model of the Mardi onto the desk)* I won it, fair and square.

Me: This crappy little model?

Rob Vink: No, you idiot. I won your precious Mardi in a card game on Sunday night. You're lucky this is the first chance I got to come out here. I'm a busy man, you know. What's your name?

Me: O'Flanahanaman, sir. I don't understand -

Rob Vink: There's nothing to understand, O'Flanahanaman. I'm going to be generous and give you and your dipshit friends three days to get off my ship.

Me: I...

Rob Vink: That will be all.

(exits)

Me: Oh dear!

NIKO: ++Ahahaha! It's all happening today, isn't it? I am weeping digital tears of laughter.++

Simon: Hmmmm. This is no good. O' Flanahanaman, can you direct Mr.Vink to wait patiently on the island? We'll 'unload our things' so that 'he can claim his ship'. SCARYTOES!

(pauses for response) SCARYTOES, I NEED TO USE YOUR CELLULAR TELEPHONE!

Moss: Oh yeah, O'Flanahanaman, I forgot to say. If those twins come back again, tell them to find out what the Judge and Vink's favourite foods are. That way they'll definitely take the bait. I'm assuming Vink's is toasties because he's Dutch. Trust me. Ham and cheese.

O'Flanahanaman: Yes sir! I'm onto it! Your toastie-maker was badly damaged in space mind you. It even has the word "DANGEROUS" written in big letters on the side.

Moss: Yeah, I know... I'm gonna try and fix it. I am an engineer, after all.

O'Flanahanaman: *(waking from a dream of endless white thread, red-eyed rolls over and sees the pile of Flower Co shirts in neat piles on the Sales Office desk)* Hmmmm? Did someone say something? Oh the little red light on the phone is blinking... *(looks up)* Is it that time already!? Ok, let's do this! *(yawning)*

Me: Name?

Affiliate Websites: Affiliate Websites.

Me: Plank!

(splash)

Me: Name?

Asian Escorts: Asian Escorts

Me: I don't even have to ask...

Asian Escorts: Actually I just wanted to compliment you guys on your recent journal entry about the Imaginary Man.

Me: Thanks. Plank!

(splash)

Me: Name?

I'm Awake Already: I'm Awake Already!

Me: Huh? Nice name. What are you selling?

I'm Awake Already: Selling? I'm not selling anything. I'm looking for Skullf. I've got a lead on the Mystic Seven.

Me: There's nobody called Skullf here. Plank!

(splash)

Me: Name?

Rooserve: Rooserve

Me: Kevin! How have you been? You know what I'm going to say next, don't you?

Rooserve: Plank?

Me: *(nodding)*

(splash)

Me: Name?

The Cuban: The Cuban.

Me: Selling?

The Cuban: *(laughs)* Funny. I just got back today. Seems we are playing each other in a game of soccer for the Elephant Teapot tonight.

Me: *(Looks up at a 6ft3 swashbuckling matador, hair tied back in a ponytail and built like a Hollywood Movie star)* I... uh...

The Cuban: *(laughs again)* Don't get up, little man. I see you have your hands full. I just wanted to wish you luck. You're going to need it of course.

Me: Yes. Thank you, Mr Cuban, sir.

The Cuban: Adios amigo.

Me: Um... ah... yes...adios indeed.

(to self) Wow. What a curious fellow.

...

Apart from manning the Sales Office, I was allowed to record an emergency meeting on the main deck, and had fleeting encounters with the likes of Moss, Simon, and Alfie – all of whom appeared to be very nice people. In truth, I felt useful for the first time in ages, and I slept untroubled sleeps on the crappy mattress that I'd squeezed into the office. Everything was working out just fine.

Until the arrival of Rob Vink this morning. I'd already read Alfie's cryptic warning about him in the letter delivered by the two nubile young blondes in figure-hugging pink swimsuits. The torn journal pages detailed that Alfie had been imprisoned in the Plum Island jail, leaving the situation in our capable hands, hoping somebody of rank would take responsibility. I couldn't quite remember what he'd said about this Vink character, but I seemed to recall it wasn't good, perhaps just a fleeting paragraph at the end instructing us to "figure it out" (or words to that effect).

So when the Plum Islander placed that lump of plasticine under my nose and told me he'd won the Mardi in a game of poker, I must confess that I panicked. I did not like this fellow at all. Not his comical Dutch accent, his carefully clipped goatee beard and dreadlocks, and certainly not his expensive designer clothes that somehow seemed so out of place with the rest of Plum Island. Most of all I disliked the air of arrogance that pervaded everything he said, like he was looking down his nose at me from a great height. True, at 5ft3 most people look down their noses at me without meaning anything by it, but this Vink guy was different.

I sat there flabbergasted, glued to the chair in panic, before coming to my senses and charged after him, running straight into the swinging Sales Office door and breaking my nose. As the blood poured down the front of my ill-fitting green Flower Company shirt, I righted myself and started again, catching up with Vink as he climbed down to a small wooden rowing boat tied to the side of the Mardi. 'Hey!' I called from the railings above. The idea that we were to be evicted within three days, when I'd only just started to feel so alive, filled me with a rage so powerful that I felt like I could do battle with anyone. 'Do you mind if I ride back to shore with you and discuss this some more?'

'There's nothing to discuss,' he growled, untying his boat.

I've never been a good swimmer, but I knew that now was the hour, and cometh the hour cometh the man. I belly-flopped into the ocean behind him, and kind of flailed around for a few seconds until I felt my toes touch the sand beneath the waves. I waded, choking and spluttering until I reached the shore. I splashed up the sand and scampered along behind him as he mounted a bicycle lying beside a track at the edge of the jungle, shouting, 'You can't do this! It's not legal! Alfie's not even the captain!'

'Oh, I think you'll find that it's perfectly legal,' replied Vink. 'I spoke to The Judge yesterday, and considering that your apparent Not Captain got caught breaking and entering into his house, let's just say

he looked somewhat favourably on the results of our wager. Three days, little man. You'd better get packing.'

With this, he seemed to have finished with me, and started to pedal off down the dirt track. My mind whirred and fizzed in search of something, anything, and I finally cried, 'Wait! You said that you won the ship! You didn't say that you won the *contents* of the ship!'

This seemed to grab his attention, and he put his foot down, his back still turned to me. 'What's your point, little man?' he asked.

I could barely believe the words that were coming out of my mouth. I felt horribly out of my depth speaking on behalf of the rest of the Company like this, having only been with you for such a short space of time. But I remembered how the Plum Islanders had a thing for useless crap. Their superstitious belief that the gold and jewels, which appeared to grow on the trees of their little island, brought bad luck, meant they had reverted to a strange system of bartering, trading items considered by every other culture in the world as intrinsically devoid of value. It seemed the more useless the crap was, the more worth it held for them. 'There's something you should see,' I said.

He cycled back to me and snarled, 'This better be good.'

'Oh, it's very good,' I said, my heart racing. 'Wait here and I'll fetch it. Can I borrow your rowing boat?'

'No,' he said.

I sighed, quite furious, and waded back out to the ship, making him promise to remain there on the beach. Back on board, I headed to Cabin 5 and urgently knocked. There was no answer, so I pushed inside. Simon Piler and the Atom Band were all there, sleeping on their respective hammocks, with one in the cabin bed, and one on the floor. Simon himself had fallen asleep face down on that fantastic workstation of his, cheek glued to the cluttered surface with saliva. Knowing how hard they'd been working of late, I simply couldn't bring myself to waken them. So I gingerly lifted the Elephant Teapot, hung on a nail up high on the desk, thinking how bad it would look if any of them woke to find me removing it. Thankfully none of them did.

Back on the beach, Rob Vink turned the faded yellow toy watering can over in his hands, spellbound by the absolute worthlessness of it. 'Pretty amazing isn't it?' I said.

'Amazing, yes. But I won't trade it for my ship,' he replied tensely.

'There's plenty more where this came from,' I said, 'and I'm not proposing a trade. I'm proposing... well, ah...'

'Fucking spit it out, little man,' he snapped.

‘I’m proposing another wager’, I told him. ‘If you win, you get everything on board the Mardi as well as the ship, including this rather unique Elephant Teapot. Between you and me, I’m not sure where the “teapot” part comes in, as it’s blatantly a watering can.’

I saw a flicker of palpable excitement in his eyes. I knew he wanted the Elephant Teapot bad, but couldn’t or wouldn’t outwardly admit it. ‘And if you win?’

‘We keep the Mardi,’ I said.

He paused, thinking it over, and then grinned. ‘I would have thought after I destroyed your Not Captain at poker, that you’d have learned your lesson, little man,’ he said, eyebrows raised, towering over me.

‘Oh wait. I don’t mean cards,’ I said. ‘I’m hopeless at cards. I mean s-s-s-something else.’ I felt like I was drowning, standing there stuttering like a little kid, trying to outfox him.

Now I may be a terrible swimmer, and an even worse card player, but if there’s one thing I am good at, it’s remembering massive amounts of useless information. That was one of the reasons I managed to get that trash island gig in the first place. So I cast my mind back, visualising the pages of the collective journal I’d read from cover to cover during my first two nights on the ship, desperately trying to learn as much as I could about my fellow crew members so that I might integrate myself as best as I could. What games did the Flower Company play? I immediately thought “ping-pong”, but to heap all that pressure on poor Simon Piler’s shoulders simply wouldn’t be fair. It would need to be a collective effort. Because that was the real strength of the Company. And then I remembered. Something way back. Something from right at the beginning. An image of the crew on a sunny afternoon upon the Hatlantic Ocean, Robbie tending to a barbecue on the main deck, the others playing...

‘Kickball,’ I said.

He looked puzzled. ‘Football?’

‘Yes, I think so,’ I said.

‘You want to play soccer?’

‘Yes, soccer, that’s it,’ I said.

‘Eleven-a-side?’ he asked. ‘Ninety minutes on a full sized pitch? My team from Plum Island against your team from the ship?’

‘Uh, eleven players? As many as that?’ I gulped, frantically trying to count how many crew we had at our disposal. I could only come up with four, plus The Atom Band.

I felt his manicured hand in mine, crushing my bones as he said with a grin, ‘You’ve got a deal, little man. How about Friday evening,

give us both time to get our teams together? On the Pit Town air strip. We have posts.'

'You do?' I asked with a wince.

He nodded and picked up the bicycle again. 'I'll be in touch, little man. Keep that Elephant Teapot safe, and no funny business with my ship,' he said, pedalling off towards Pit Town. 'And let the Judge know. He'll want to referee,' he shouted back over his shoulder.

I followed him into town on foot, still clutching the Elephant Teapot, and told myself that all things considered I'd done well.

Hadn't I?

Actually the more I thought about it, the more I was regretting the whole kickball idea. I should have said 'ping-pong'. Simon would have been able to handle it, plus, given the length of time it takes to play a game of table tennis on the Mardi, it would have given us weeks to weasel our way out of trouble. On top of this, there was something quite unsettling about the way Vink had so readily agreed to a game. Did he know something I didn't? It was at this point that I said to myself, 'Alfie will know what to do.' And, perhaps logically, it was also at this point that I suddenly felt like I'd crossed the line from being an outsider to a fully paid-up member of the Flower Company. Even if Alfie didn't know what to do, he'd know someone who would. 'These are people who flew to the moon and back,' I told myself. 'This should be a walk in the park for them.'

I met the Judge previously when our small team of scientists arrived at the flotilla and wanted to get permission to carry out our experiments. The trash island itself was just outside the jurisdiction of French Polynesia, effectively in a watery no-man's land, but when we saw the place for the first time, we figured we should at least be courteous enough to introduce ourselves to the locals and make sure we weren't stepping on any toes. The Judge had been cordial enough. He was a pompous fat man in his early sixties who bellowed when he spoke. He seemed quite content for us to spend as long as we wanted on the trash island, taking an assortment of novelty key-rings from us in return for his support. We were so eager to begin our work, that we didn't hang around, but I remembered his house well, a large two-storey white stone building at the far end of the town. It doubled up as his residence and Plum Island's municipal centre.

I rang the bell and waited nervously on the doorstep. I was surprised when the Judge's two blonde daughters answered wearing matching skin-tight t-shirts and bright pink hot pants. 'Oh hello, I didn't expect to see-' I began, but they silenced me with a look of

alarm, fingers placed across their pretty pink lips. I instantly understood that I wasn't supposed to know them.

'Daddy!' they called in unison. 'There's a little man to see you.'

They winked and giggled before disappearing up a winding staircase, while The Judge removed himself from his favourite afternoon television (I believe it's a show called *What Would You Do For A Million Dollars?*), huffing and puffing his way through to me. 'Why hello there. I haven't seen you or your little scientist buddies for a while... Oh!' He glared at my Flower Company uniform.

'Hello Mr Judge, sir,' I said nervously.

'Jesus, man! You're not mixed up with those damn hippie freaks are you? The shitstorm those little assholes have caused since they arrived! I'll be glad when Robin torches that damn ship!'

'Torches?' I blurted out, suddenly picturing Vink with a flaming torch and a can of petroleum in his manicured hands, sitting on the shore and watching as the Mardi burned, its patchwork sails collapsing into the bay.

'I take it you heard about the card game? Well a bet's a bet in my book!' blustered the Judge. 'When Robin came to see me yesterday and told me about his win, as the legal custodian of Pit Town, I felt obliged to enforce the handover this Friday. If you ask me, it's mighty kind of him giving you the extra time to find alternative transport home. After everything that's happened, I'd have thrown the lot of you off first thing on Monday morning, straight into the sea. I've got your captain locked up in our basement jail you know. Caught the little fuckhole breaking into my house. *My house*, for crying out loud! He was trying to steal some coconut beer from the fridge. You know about that?'

'Uh, I heard something along those lines,' I said.

'And don't even get me started on this other one. This Black Cloud fiend. Stealing Tharkey's chickens and a bicycle from the Dillinger's yard, then hiding out in the jungle so as nobody, not even the bloody sherpa, can track him down. If he so much as comes near my two precious daughters, I swear I'll pull Granddaddy Wader's blunderbuss down from the mantelpiece, and shoot him a second asshole. Say boy, what you got there?' He was pointing a pudgy finger at the Elephant Teapot in my hand, his beady eyes lighting up.

'Actually this is partly why I came to see you, sir,' I began.

'Well Jesus boy, what are you standing there for? Come in and take a seat! I'll fix us up a drink and you can tell me all about it,' he said, his fat cheeks puffing out with nervous energy. 'Mind if I take a closer look at that, son?'

He took the Elephant Teapot and ushered me through to a lavish living room, nodding for me to take a seat on a fancy sofa. I watched as he placed the mangled watering can on his marble mantelpiece, under an ancient rusty gun that hung menacingly on the wall. He poured me an ice cold glass of lemonade and I began to hurriedly explain the wager I'd made with Vink, as well as the Dutchman's suggestion I ask the Judge to referee. All the while he listened, nodding keenly, while keeping his eyes firmly on the Elephant Teapot. Finally he drawled, 'I'd be honoured to oversee such an important event, and I can assure you that I shall endeavour to be impartial at all costs. Mind you, I hope you kids know how to play. Those fellas on our island have a pretty serious kick-around every Friday evening, and not that I know much about the game, but I'd say there are a couple of talented sons of bitches amongst them. Especially Vink. He played professionally back in the Netherlands, you know.'

I just about choked on my drink. 'R-r-r-really?'

'Sure. Quite the player he was too, until he got caught up in some match fixing scandal. Apparently they gave him a life ban. Such a goddam straight up and down guy. He says he was innocent, and I see no reason to believe otherwise. So, you're playing for this little trophy, is that right?'

'Well, everything on the ship actually,' I somehow managed to get out. I was still reeling from the revelation that the Plum Islanders played kickball every week, and that Vink was an ex-pro.

'Say, how about the Judge looks after it for you until match day? We could make a thing of it. It's not every day that something exciting like this happens on Plum Island.'

'Oh... I don't know. Actually, it belongs to Si-'

The Judge suddenly stepped towards, me and I detected a trace of desperation in his pompous booming voice. 'Surely there must be *something* I can do to scratch your back, boy,' he said.

'Uh-uh-uh... y-you c-couldn't p-p-possibly uh arrange for us t-t-to w-win the match c-could you?' (Even as the stuttered words left my lips, I regretted saying it.)

'Are you trying to *bribe* me, boy?' he asked, his face flushing. 'Are you suggesting that *I*... the Judge of Pit Town, would be partial to bending the law and fixing a game of soccer for an itty-bitty little fucked up plastic watering can?'

'Actually it's an E-E-Elephant Teapot,' I stammered.

'For an E-E-Elephant Teapot?' he boomed cruelly.

'N-n-no sir. I was joking,' I said, trying furiously to force a smile.

The Judge wheeled away and stared out the window, struggling to regain his composure. 'I'm not an idiot, boy,' he said.

'No sir.'

He moved slowly to the mantelpiece and fingered the soft faded yellow of the elephant's upturned spout with his fat little hands. 'Maybe you could think of something else,' he said, 'something that doesn't involve me having to break the law.'

It was the first idea that jumped into my head. 'How about an amnesty?' I suggested, squirming away in my damp trousers.

'Go on?'

'Our colleague you arrested. To be honest with you, Mr Judge, sir, I think we're going to struggle to get eleven players. It would be a great help if he could play.'

'Our Captain, huh? Well that's understandable -'

I tried to tell him that Alfie wasn't our captain, but The Judge wasn't listening.

'- and with the only flight off Plum Island being Saturday morning, when we'll be extraditing him back to the States, *and* assuming there's no monkey business and he goes straight back into custody... I can't see what harm it would do.'

'And W - I mean, Black Cloud?'

I caught his attention with this. 'You know where the Black Cloud is?' he asked me, his voice dropping to a whisper.

'N-n-no sir, I'm purely speculating at this stage. Just... if he *were* to be apprehended between now and F-F-Friday, could he play as well? Again on the assum-sum-sumption he would go straight back into custody after the match?'

'Well, the Black Cloud is a different kettle of fish. Unlike your Captain, the Americans don't want him for the theft of some satellite, so he'd be dealt with in accordance with the laws of Plum Island, that being generally how the Judge is feeling on the day of sentencing. Right now, I'd only be satisfied to see that son of a bitch swinging from a tree.' His pudgy fists clenched as he paced back and forth across the living room.

'That s-s-sounds reasonable enough,' I told him, wondering what he meant by the theft of a satellite.

'Well then, we've got ourselves a deal, boy,' he said, beaming as he extended his hand in my direction.

'Is there any chance I could uh-uh-um... see the p-prisoner?' I asked him. 'J-j-just to tell him about the game?'

'You're pushing your luck, boy,' he said, still pumping my hand, as his face broke into a grin. 'But the Judge is feeling amiable. Visiting

hours aren't usually until 7pm, but I reckon in light of me being allowed to babysit that little trophy of yours for a few days, I could turn a blind eye, just this once.'

He nodded for me to follow and we descended the winding stairway down to the basement. The Judge laughed, saying, 'You know, in my twenty-five years as the leader of Pit Town, I've only ever put two people in my cells, and both of them were Scots.'

The Pit Town prison was in the basement of the Judge's house. It consisted of two windowless barred cells. Alfie was in the cell on the left, and the stark though clean and reasonably well lit room was furnished only with a bed, a toilet, and a sink. When I first saw him, he was lying on his back, staring at the ceiling, his journal lying open by his side. 'I'll give you some time alone to talk tactics,' said the Judge, motioning for me to go in. 'Ten minutes and then I'll come and get you.'

I nodded as he closed the door, before I approached the cell. Alfie heard the footsteps and groaned, 'Oh no, not again. Seriously girls, this is starting to fucking kill me.'

'I know, sir,' I said.

He jumped at the sound of my voice, and ran to the bars. 'O'Flamarmagan! It's you! Thank fuck. I was wondering if you guys got my note. You're here to break me out, right? Ah, you have no idea how good it is to see a friendly face. I could almost bring myself to kiss you!' he said, leaning on the bars and laughing.

'Um no, sir,' I mumbled.

'Well, that's fair enough. Obviously I don't want to kiss you, it was just a figure of speech. But O'Flamanan! Haha! I barely know you, but already I'm starting to seriously love your little W-esque face. So what's the plan? Do you have a key? Get me out of here!'

'Uh no, sir, I don't have a key.'

'Some kind of saw? Or file? Concealed in a cake? No, you don't have a cake, do you? I'd have noticed that...'

'Sir, I mean, I'm not here to break you free.'

'Ah...'

He paused, biting his lip. 'Then you're obviously here to tell me about the ingeniously convoluted rescue plan you guys have cooked up to get me out of here?'

'Um, no sir. There's no plan.'

'Right,' he said, walking back over to the bed. 'I suppose you only got my note last night, and it'll take a bit of time to get something together. I'm sure Simon or Moss are onto it though. Maybe even NIKO. You have at least been discussing it, haven't you?'

‘Well, not exactly, sir,’ I told him, watching as he lay back down on the creaking camp bed. ‘I came to tell you about a wager I made with Vink.’

He sighed and closed his eyes. ‘Fucking hell, what was I thinking?’ he asked with a groan. ‘Has he been out to the ship yet? I imagine everyone hates me, I mean it’s not even my ship to have been gambling.’

‘Don’t worry about the Mardi, sir, everything’s under control. Like I said, I’ve made another wager with Vink. If he wins, he keeps everything on the ship as well as the Mardi. If we win, then we win the Mardi back,’ I told him, certain this would completely redeem the abject misery that was the first few minutes of our meeting.

‘We will?’ he asked numbly, opening his eyes and rolling over to face me. ‘You’re going to play a card game to win the Mardi back?’

‘Not cards, sir... *kickball*,’ I told him.

‘You mean football?’

‘I think so, sir. Eleven-a-side on Friday evening. The Utica Flower Company against a Plum Island select.’ Alfie didn’t move. I figured it would take a few moments for the information to sink in. ‘Sir?’

‘Yes?’

‘What are you thinking?’

He sat up and lit a cigarette, tapping the ash carelessly onto the floor. ‘Truthfully O’Flamahaman, I think your idea is stunning. Here I am locked in a jail thanks to W going off on another stoned rampage, only to find I’m getting extradited to America for stealing a satellite – A FUCKING SATELLITE! But you show up, and I’m thinking, thank fuck, they’re finally getting me out of here. No more Judge and no more Judge’s daughters. Every fucking night, man. EVERY NIGHT. They sneak down here to tease and torment me in their skimpy underwear, saying the only way they’ll let me go is if I... well, you know, O’Flanamahan. And every night I say no. And they keep coming back, man, THEY KEEP COMING BACK! And the clothes get skimpier every time. IT’S FUCKING KILLING ME! But I’m being too harsh. At least the twins are trying to help. They agreed to deliver that note to the Mardi for me, even though it meant if their daddy caught them, all three of us would be up to our eyeballs in shit. At least those girls are doing SOMETHING. But wait. Oh no, I forgot. You *are* doing something. You’re arranging a fucking football match against Plum Island, where we’ll lose everything - and we *will* lose O’Flanamamam - I mean, where will we even get eleven players? And can anyone actually play football? Huh? We’ll lose it all! With all

the crap we have on board, I could have fucking bought us another ship from the Plum Islanders! We could have been up and running again in no time! We even could have stolen the Mardi back. But no.’ He looked up at me and shook his head. ‘That’s what I’m thinking.’

‘The Judge says you can play, before they extradite you on Saturday,’ I told him.

‘Great,’ he said, slumping against the wall and closing his eyes.

‘We’ll think of something, sir,’ I told him.

We sat in silence until the Judge came to get me, and I trudged wearily back to the ship, hoping that a giant queue of weirdos hadn’t formed outside the Sales Office in my absence.

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November 5, 2009

USE FOR LASER-EYE

I schluff back from the bar, somewhat disappointed with my first impression of Pit Town. It’s either deserted or everybody is hiding from our blue pants & green shirts. Sure didn’t take very long for the folks of Plum Island to turn on us. And nobody serves soup. Rats.

But the jungle, on the other hand, was extremely fascinating. I like to look at the wide floccules of leafy substance as I walk. They move ever so gently; it’s a delicate dance, really, through the shear angles of direct sunlight. As I retraced my path to the Mardi I found myself veering steadily towards the growth. I trudged up the outer layers of dune, first. They are populated with a long, wispy grass. The edges are very fine; I accidentally cut my finger while inspecting the blades. My hand lens shows a lining of robust, white hairs along the lower surface of the leaves.

The edge of the jungle is a bit like standing on a precipice and looking down. The transition from scorching beach is only a matter of a few paces; the palm trunks become thicker, more densely situated. Other species sprout in tangles. And then you’re cloaked in a deep shade. Even at the peak of the tropical afternoon.

I manage to travel a short distance between each botanical stop. It’s rejuvenating to spend some time around plants, especially considering the heavy yoke of dream I’ve been hauling these past few days. While sniffing an orchid, a peace descends over me. I begin to ponder and I stare into space.

‘Yeah, I was just going to say hello to yuh, but I thought, jeez – is this guy sick or something? Hahaha-hahaha!’ I jump a little, but the tacky, goodtimin’ laugh somewhat softens my start. The voice belongs to a short, stocky man of about 50. He’s standing in the clearing of what appears to be a cabin. I hope I’m not trespassing. In any case, he seems friendly.

‘Well, hi there!’ I reply, and give a little wave, though I’m not really in the mood for a conversation.

‘Come on over here, guy, so I can take a look at yuhs,’ he chortles, beckoning with an extremely hairy arm. I take a more careful look at him too, as I approach – he’s dressed pretty well for a sweltering island – khakis, a collared shirt (unbuttoned to the third button and revealing an ample gold chain), and remarkably, a leather jacket. ‘He must be absolutely cooked,’ I think, ‘but he doesn’t appear to be perspiring at all...’

‘Oh. You’re one uh dem ship guys, huh? You know, I used to sail on quite a few ships in my time. All over the world.’

‘You’re a sailor?’

‘Nah, I’m in the insurance business. Anyways, what’s your name, guy?’

‘Oh, sorry. Simon Piler, I’m a scientist and the ships qua-’

‘So you’re one of these types uh guys that is always trying to figure out different stuff?’

‘Yeah, I guess you could say that. I mostly have been working on ship repairs late-’

‘My cousin, in Sarasota, he’s a craftsman. He get’s paid 10,000 dollars a POP to work on these rich guys yachts. 10,000 a POP!’ He enunciates the word with such a force that I’m afraid he’s going to start into a boxing routine with it. I start to wonder who this guy is. He certainly seems to like to talk, which is fine, I suppose. I certainly don’t feel like talking much today, but I don’t mind listening a little.

‘I’m serious. You don’t believe me?’ he asks, even though I never gave him any reason for concern. ‘Oh, yeah,’ he continues quickly, ‘the name’s Gallo. Gianperlo Gallo, but most folks round these parts just call me Jonny. Or Gee-Gee. Or G-Spot. But Jonny suits me just fine. It’s just that it’s a lot easier, you know what I mean?’

I’m beginning to gather that (1) Jonny is from the tri-state area, and (2) he doesn’t care for silence much. ‘Well, pleased to meet you, Jonny. Is this your cabin, here?’

‘This?’ He seems a bit incredulous. ‘Nooo, this here is Ol’ Man Murphy’s cabin. Well, dat is, it used to be his. He went and kicked the

bucket few years back. Kinda one of those quiet, figuring types. Hell, I bet you would'a liked him.'

'A scientist?'

'Yeah, you could say that. But...' He slaps his huge arm around my shoulder and pulls me into a close, two-man huddle. '...They say the secret is that this guy used to study ghosts! Can you believe that? I mean, a guy way out here is studying ghosts.'

I'm wholeheartedly surprised by the information. It was the most interesting fact I'd heard in months. 'You don't say! WOW. Actually, that's very interesting. I also study ghosts, in part. You see, I'm a Professor of Noumenolo-'

'Yeah, there's lots of ghosts on this island. Plum Island has lots of ghosts because of – from the heat from the volcano.'

'Wait. I thought the volcano was inactive.'

'No, it's active. You can tell 'cuz that's the only place that this kiwi stuff doesn't grow.' He points at a ripe breadfruit hanging from an overhead branch.

'Hold on,' I say, 'That's Artocarpus, I mean, breadfruit.'

'No,' he says, 'dat's kiwi, you can tell by the color. Terrible stuff for you. Makes your hair fall out.'

I hold my tongue. It seems that Jonny has a knack for making things up. The scary part is that he seems to believe what he is saying is true. I feel a splash of pity, and then an immediate twinge of guilt for pitying him. 'He doesn't know that he's wrong, of course,' I think, 'but it's a bad habit to speak about things you don't know.' And then I begin to consider all the things that I don't know, and my willingness to hypothesize about them. 'But at least I'm open to the possibility that what I propose might be wrong,' I mutter aloud in my most common method of reasoning. Jonny looks at me like I'm a fried egg smothered in blueberry jam.

'Hey, Simon, are you doin' alright, there?' he asks. I think he's actually a little worried, and I am somewhat touched by his concern, however misdirected. After all, he's only known me for a matter of two minutes or so.

'Oh, yes, Jonny, I'm fine,' I reply, 'but, uh, I gotta get going.'

'Back to your ship? Aw, you know I could get my air mattress and you could stay here if you wanted?'

'Your air mattress? I'm sorry. I guess I don't understand...'

He suddenly becomes very frank, almost instructional. His words come out in accentuated bursts – they're delivered in a such a way as to make sure I understand every syllable. 'You see this cabin? Yeah.

There's nobody livin' in it right now. And I got this big air mattress,' he holds out his short arms, 'and I don't mind letting you use it, you know. Just I've got to get the bike pump from Dillinger and then I could bring it back here and fill it up for you.'

I'm starting to wonder if he's joking. 'No, man, it's alright. I've got a bed back on the ship!' I give him my best non-rude smile, but now I'm starting to get worried about him. 'I've really got to get going, Jonny. It was nice to meet ya.'

'Hey Simon, anytime, anytime. Hey! If you want to stay at this cabin at all, you know it's open. Might do you some good to get off that ship for a while.'

I'm slowly working my way into the forest again. 'Okay, Thanks Jonny! I'll keep that in mind.'

'Okay, see you around, Simon!' He shouts at the tree trunks and branches that have swallowed me.

...

When I get back to the Mardi, it's sunset. The water is calmer along the harbor than on the open ocean, and the view is creating quite a commotion with the Band.

'Move over, Spark, you're crowding the window!' says Brendon. He's trying to take a picture, but the Lieutenant has set his obstinate mind on seeing the 'green flash' in it's full splendor. Matt is dutifully soldering away at a circuit-board and Em is resting on the bunk. Scarytoes and Def Mute are shocking each other with low-pitched electrical glissando. One of them is also beatboxing; I'll assume this is Scarytoes.

I set a few breadfruit to rest on the dresser. 'Hi there, gents. Gad, what a day. What a jumble!' I get a few heartfelt nods of agreement. I smile and remember how great it is to have friends when things get tough. Where would I be?

Swinging my feet under my desk I plop down in my chair. THUNK! 'Oooh, OW...' I wince. My toes have found the smallish wooden crate that O' Flanaganaman brought by the other day. Those guys must have moved it under my desk.

'Did anybody open this crate, yet?' I ask, almost sure someone has.

I receive two 'no's' a 'nuh-uh' and scattering of head-shakes in response.

'It's got one of the strangest locks I've ever seen; we couldn't fathom it, man. Now that's something even I'm surprised at,' says

Scarytoes. He is moving a small receiver back and forth. Def Mute's eyes change color.

Upon inspection, the box did seem simple enough; and beautifully designed. It's boards were raw, unfinished wood. But the bindings were fashioned of a different color entirely; a rich, brownish-red. The lid had a single bronze plate, into which was pressed an unusual shape. I looked for a second or two, until I made a realization. I gasp.

'Who sent this?' I think to myself, as I reach up and remove the Raven Magic Hat from my head. Affixed to the band is the small silver raven icon that Emerson gave me so many years ago. It fits perfectly into the recessed plate.

I hear a click, and the lid of the box pops open Scrotmanly. And then the whole thing shakes from my grasp and falls to the floor. The lid pops open all the way, and climbing out of the crate, black hair flowing, is none other than Madame Datura.

'Madame! Oh, allow me,' I offer, a bit too late, offering a hand. She's already stepped into Cabin 5 in a cloud of rippling empty air. She looks around the room quickly, thoroughly, and then turns an intense gaze on me.

'You left me for a rather long time without any word.'

'Ah, M-Madame,' I stutter, 'I didn't think you even wanted to speak to me again.'

'When we met the other night, you didn't think I'd want you to respond?'

'But that was just a dream!' I yelp. When I realize what I've said, I feel my knees grow weak.

'Simon, you've changed.' She cuts right into my side.

'Madame...'

'You were so passionate, so responsive. You were real. A person worth knowing, worth loving.'

'Madame, please, don't you think we should step -'

'And now,' she continues, ruthlessly scrutinous, 'now, simply look at you. Flimsy. You're a husk.' Every joint in my body bends under her pressured lenses.

I don't know what to say; and behind me it's become very silent. Even the smoke from The Champion's electrical flux seems to be transfixed by our conversation. It's hanging in empty space. My cheeks are very flushed. I hate to admit it, but I'm embarrassed. Most of the good fellows met Madame during our brighter days, but they are probably in a powerful state of wonder at her sudden appearance.

'I've found a good place, here. The ship provides incredible avenues for research.'

‘What is it you research?’

‘I... uh, we’ve been making rocket fuel, for starters. Madame, please, I know you. Please be kind.’

‘Be kind! Have I offered any harm to you? Any words untrue? Look at how flimsy the man is in my absence! He quavers like a saccharine leaf on an overextended petiole!’

She’s indirectly addressing The Atom Band. They’re still staring, and I think Matthew’s soldering iron is burning through his circuit board.

I am beginning to feel a strange mixture of old and new emotions drawn to the surface of my small sphere of understanding. A scab has been pulled clean off. She is looking me hard in the eyes and I have to look away. (She used to do that before she kissed me. We’d sit for a long time and just explore each other’s pupils. To this day, I do not know a more intimate way to understand a person than that.) But I know now that my ‘profound understandings’ were only an illusion cast over these cloudy, short-sighted eyes.

‘Madame, I am only a small speck,’ I say. And I mean it.

She pauses for a moment, and then solemnly responds, ‘There are still remnants of Simon Piler that remain, I see.’ It is in these moods that I am certain she is both an unquenchable, all-consuming sheet of fire and a supremely cold, detached observer. There is some gravity that is produced across such a gradient. Along the perpendicular I am drawn towards it. But I am not a fool enough to speak.

‘I suppose you think yourself wise to leave me. You consider it a grand declaration of renewed masculine strength and independence, don’t you.’

‘Listen to what you’re saying,’ I respond. ‘Have I ever put much weight on masculinity? Or strength?’

‘You called yourself a shaman, you fool! Do you think you can walk away from something like that?’

*A motion of lightning. L L L L L R P (+) /\/\/\/\/\/\/ (-) ZZZZZZAP!
(Use for laser-eye.)*

I breathe in. There is a great oceanic space. The cabin is just a cardboard backdrop; my bones are little plastic flutes. It’s funny and so I laugh. My body is an illusion, and though I’m moving, I remember that there is no place to move. I breathe out. Madame expands; she is very close to me. We interact like ripples.

‘Wait. I remember,’ I say. ‘I remember, now.’

‘Simon,’ she says, and she is a breath of air dancing, ‘I am going to be waiting for you at the cabin in the jungle just north of here. I believe you know where it is. Please meet me there when you can.’

‘Space is so intimate...’

But she’s gone.

We all sit around and bend like paper wasps. I feel one great, hypothetical ray burn a scorched, wide swath through my heart muscle. A thin trail of smoke alerts me to the carbon crisp. I find myself crying, but it’s not out of sadness. The warm, fat drops squeeze from my tear ducts. Their kin follow along the ladders of cohesion. Their kin tumble in ruts down the size of my cheek muscle. It is Love!! My eyes are closed. I breathe in.

I’ve got a choice to make.

...

O’Flanahanaman: I don’t believe it! There was a woman in that crate the whole time! Sir, I never even knew. I feel terrible for not checking.

Simon: O’ Flanahanaman, she’s no ordinary woman. You needn’t worry yourself. (*Spacy sigh*) Okay, time to start stretching... I think it’s going to take at least a day in my condition.

...

November 4, 2009

In Which Some Sort of Crappy Plan is Hatched

Oh my god oh my god oh my god oh my god oh my god!

CALM DOWN.

I sit awkwardly down on the main deck, hyperventilating into a paper bag O’Flanahanaman has just handed me. I think he is getting to know us better, after all, he brought it with him to tell me the whole goddamn story.

‘ARRGHHHHHHHHH...’ I yell, and put my head in my hands.

‘Yes, quite.’ He nods to me, nervously. ‘I’m sorry, sir...’

‘Don’t be. This isn’t your fault,’ I shout hysterically. Got to calm down. ‘I’m really glad you made that deal. Even though none of us can

play soccer. Well, maybe some of us can, but I am fucking terrible. I hate organized sports. HATE. But it was really, really brave of you to follow that dickhead and try and get us out of this mess. Oh god... the ship... I don't know what to do. Maybe we should just run away, and get Alfie later? But he's being extradited on Saturday, that's not enough time. I could always just time-machine it back, but it's broken. And also, that storyline's getting a bit old.'

O'Flanahanaman gives me a strange look, but I guess he knows better than to ask. In the thought filled silence I can hear the waves splash gently against the side of the ship, and the moonlight is making the most beautiful sliding reflection on the water.

'OH MY GOD OH MY GOD OH MY GOD OH MY GOD -'

'Please sir, stop shouting. You're only hurting your throat, and it doesn't help.'

'I know, it's just... I feel so helpless. I fucking hate authority, I hate judges, I hate people claiming the place you live in just because of a technicality. He won't even use our ship. Or if he does, he'll use it for transporting slaves or animals or something horrible. And it won't be fair-trade. And he'll use my room for a money counting room to count his horrible piles of money...'

'Considering the currency on the island is random shit, he might just keep it as it is.'

'NOOOO MY MUSHROOMSSSSS!' Wait. I stop screaming for a second and pause. O'Flanahanaman looks relieved.

I have a fridge full of hallucinogens. 'Hey... what do you think of this - maybe we could cater the soccer match? We could make snacks and food for everyone. We could make the food look really nice, and of course our team would have to eat it too. But wait! There's more. I've got like, six Frat Boys in my room, you know the ones that turned up after the Russians, and they'd do anything I say. They worship me. They could be most of the soccer team, because I'm pretty sure they're good at sports anyway.'

O'Flanahanaman looks confused. 'Sir, where are you going with this?'

'Well, basically I was thinking we could drug everyone, send them on a massive, massive trip, and while they're out of it, spring Alfie and escape. We'd have time to find the key to his cell while everyone's wasted. Even if we can't, we can get those daughters of the Judge to give it to us. They'd probably like some drugs in exchange, I doubt they get much on the island and they're at that experimenting age.'

O’Flanahanaman sighs and thinks for a while. ‘You know, it might work. Who knows. There’s so many things that could go wrong. But then again, do we have a better idea?’

‘Yeah exactly. Well, if anyone thinks of a better plan come and tell me, but I’m going to go and gather all the magic jam and mushrooms I can possibly find. And I’m going to get W in on this, he must have some more drugs. I’ll figure out how I can disguise it into pies or sandwiches or something. Maybe toasted sandwiches is the best way; everyone loves them and you can never tell what’s in them when they’re all melty. And I’ll give the Judge a call.’

A Scrotmanly less worried O’Flanahanaman gives me a salute, and says, ‘Yes sir, Engineer!’ before rushing off to do some organizational type activities. I assume.

I quickly walk downstairs, dodging and weaving between the obstacles to my bunkroom. This is going to be tricky.

...

Moss: Note to everyone: I figured it was an emergency and decided to take matters into my own hands. But if anyone wants to do something else, of course we can do something else. It’s just the best I could come up with. Feel free to post better ideas. I am not in charge of anything.

NIKO: ++Far be it from me to be the party pooper but I have spotted a flaw in your otherwise brilliant plan. Believe it or not, I’m with you fuckweeds on this one. The salivating prospect of someday being a fully functioning supercomputer at the Pentagon of all places is all the motivation I need. Chase will be back. You’ll see. And when he returns, he will be even more powerful than you mortal- ahem, I mean, who knows what this Vink character might do with me, right? Better the devil you know, I say. The flaw is you are assuming the entire opposition and their families (including I might add *small children*) will consume said toasties before the game. The window of opportunity is blatantly in the minutes *after* the game when our piss-shit Not Captain is already free from his cell. My suggestion is that you prepare some kind of “trojan hamper” to be delivered to the opposition dressing room before the match, and hopefully if the toasties are potent enough, we will not only win the game, but be able to walk off into the jungle in a purple haze of hallucinations afterwards. We need to be careful about the Judge though – he has to be conscious enough to start and finish refereeing the game so there can be no dubiety over the ownership of the Mardi when it’s done. But I’m sure eleven of you are more than a match for that fat fuck and his rusty old blunderbuss.++

O’Flanahanaman: Just back from Pit Town where I managed to get myself ten minutes with Alfie after bribing the Judge with an abacus I removed from the Storage Hold. I told our Not Captain about the mushroom plan and he seemed genuinely enthusiastic about it, though he insisted the match should go ahead for “the Oscar moment”. Whatever that means. He seemed much more upbeat today about the game and has already drawn up copious notes, including formations, potential players we can fly in, and rather bizarre looking diagrams for something called “set pieces”. I attempted to raise the issue of the Frat Boys playing but we had the following conversation that I shall recount to the best of my abilities:

“O’Flanahoon,” he said, ‘I’d rather play with only four people and get thrashed 59-0, than stoop to that level. It would be like putting Bon Jovi on one of our Quixodelic compilations.’ Again, I didn’t understand what he was on about, so I just nodded my head and smiled.

Then he asked me how many players we had and I replied, ‘Six, but minus the Frat Boys that would be one... just you.’

‘What about you, O’Flanagan?’

‘Me, sir?’ I asked. ‘Well to be honest I was hoping I could be the guy with the magic sponge who runs on when our players get injured, and slices the oranges for half time. I am a dab hand with a needle and thread too, so I’d be happy to sort out our strips.’

‘Yes, you do seem like a magic sponge sort of guy,’ he admitted. ‘What about Simon?’

‘Sleeping sir,’ I said. ‘He’s been quite distracted the last couple of days, what with the woman in the crate and everything. I don’t even think he even noticed that I took the Elephant Teapot.’

He didn’t bat an eyelid. ‘What about Moss?’

‘Um... she’s... well, she’s panicking, sir. Says she HATES organised sports and she’s not best pleased with you and Mr W. I’ll not beat around the bush, sir - she thinks the two of you have been highly irresponsible gambling away the ship like that, breaking into houses, biting off ears, stealing chickens, going on a drug binge, and hiding in the jungle,’ I told him.

‘Yes, she does have a valid point there,’ he said sadly. ‘So Moss isn’t playing either?’

I shrugged.

‘Listen O’Flanahoonahan. You need to tell her this: football is not about who’s the fastest, or most technically gifted. It’s about being in the right place at the right time, and out of everyone on our ship, she’s

the very fucking best at that. Tell her if she walks beyond Pit Town, and goes into the jungle, after about ten or fifteen minutes she'll come to a large grassy place called Knob Hill. You can't miss it. It looks just like a knob. Tell her to climb Knob Hill, sit on top, and think about it. There are... well, there are THINGS in the jungle O'Flannyman. Visions, ghosts, call them what you will. If she sits there long enough, the things will appear to her and teach her how to play football. Have you got that?'

'Uh, yes, I think so, sir.'

'Okay,' He made an etching in his book beside the No 9 and said, 'First name on the team sheet, Moss, centre forward. Good work O'Flaganamahan, keep it up.'

'Yes sir,' I mumbled and shuffled back here.

Moss: O'Flanny, I will tell you now, my patience is being tested. I literally don't know a fucking thing about football, soccer, WHATEVER. And there is no need for me to play, because of... OK, I get it. Alfie would rather lose the ship than play soccer with some Frat Boys. Since he's so decidedly *Not* the Captain, I really fail to see how this is his decision, but I realise he's going to sabotage the whole thing if I force them on him. Okay, no football loving competitive pretty boys will be in our vital, ship-saving football team. Which at the moment consists of Alfie and me. Goddamn it. And I will go and find Knob Hill, blah blah blah. GAH (*throws a book in anger at a wall. Something squeaks in pain and then scurries away.*) Oh, sorry Buckley!

O'Flanahanaman: Sir, wait! Before you head off into the jungle, I've made you a packed lunch. A carton of apple juice, some freshly picked breadfruit (I remember you wanted some tropical fruit... that was the reason you came here in the first place, right?) and some sandw- oh, you already have some sandwiches. Toasted ones. I made jam sandwiches though. Hallucinogen-free. I'm not long back from the island myself. Scrotmanly concerned about Alfie's state of mind today, says he hasn't slept at all now for two days and is raving about some plane wreck in the jungle you can see from the top of Knob Hill, as well as carpet bombs (?) and oranges. The good news is that he's been hitting the social networking sites hard, and has miraculously managed to co-ordinate at least six volunteers who will be flown out here by Jim first thing tomorrow morning. I did try to point out that I couldn't see how Jim could possibly find an island that doesn't appear on any map, but he seems more concerned with continuing to talk formations and shirt numbers. I believe one of the volunteers is his brother, who's

apparently quite the football player. Another one is Helmet from The Wheelies. I gather it will be a miracle in itself if Helmet can actually get here on time, and in one piece. I must admit that I feel very responsible about the whole “kickball” idea. You wouldn’t believe the alternatives I have thought of since then – dinghy racing being the most obvious. I don’t know what you’re expected to find at the top of Knob Hill, but Alfie sounds pretty insistent you should go between now and the game. I’ve thoroughly examined every journal entry on the ship, and with the exception of Jazz Monk’s untimely death, destroying the aft mast, an apparent future self of his wearing silly masks attempting to freak everyone out for that crappy film you guys made, and gambling away the ship, I don’t find many examples of him being wrong. Has anyone seen Mr W by the way? I’ve been sewing numbers onto the backs of spare Flower Company shirts all night, and haven’t had a chance to look myself. Oh, also I noticed that the old Brazilian man (Edson Da Silva) in Pit Town has been building two huts at the side of the airstrip. I believe they might be changing rooms. Anyway, stick in, sir. I’m sure everything will work out in the end. Well, I’m not SURE everything will work out in the end, but I certainly hope it does.

Moss: Thanks for the food O’Flan. Thank Jah we have you at least. I’m off now.

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November 5, 2009

Yoga and Ghosts

After almost squashing Buckley, the ship rat, with a book, I walk up to the deck and watch the dark night sky. There are no clouds, only beautiful, twinkling stars. You know, I think to myself, even though this is really, really annoying to have to do, it’s actually an ideal night for meditation. It could be lovely.

O’Flanahanaman hands me the food he’s packed me, which is very thoughtful of him. I check I’ve got everything else. The most important thing, yes. I’ve packed an old walkie-talkie I found in the Storage Hold. I’ve been tinkering with it for the past week, ever since Alfie went to jail. I managed to fix it up and amplify its signal so that rather than connect to one of the other walkie-talkies, it transmits straight to the Mardi’s Communications Bay. That way, I can leave it on and if I run into any trouble, at least someone will hear what’s

Spirit 1: Ddddeeeeeeaaaaalllllllllll

(a meditative hum sounds monotonously for several minutes)

Moss: Hmm...I know quite a lot about football now, and the funny thing is, I still don't like it! Suck on that, P.E. teachers and every adult in my life!... hmm.....

Spirit 1: shhhhhh...coooonnnNNNNccceeEEEnnnnttrrrraaatteeeee

Moss: Alright, alright...

(After several further minutes of meditative humming that increasingly begin to sound like snoring, the wind begins to whisper)

Geshe-La: Spirit 1, who is making that horrible humming noise? Not you? Then who?

Oh, I see.

Yes, yes, I remember alright. The Fundamental Shining Truth of Kickball... hahaha! Who makes this shit up?

Oh, you did Spirit 3.

Okay, I'm ready. Where is she again?

Knob Hill? Please, stop it! Hahaha!

What? You mean there's actually a place called Knob Hill?

Okay, I'm ready this time. Hang on, what did you say her name was again? I mean her real name?

Moss, shit, of course it is.

Okay, I'm going to speak now.

(clears throat)

MOSS OF THE FLOWER COMPANY!

I AM THE SPIRIT OF GESHE-LA!

I UNDERSTAND YOU ARE RELUCTANTLY HERE TO LEARN THE FUNDAMENTAL SHINING TRUTH OF KICKBALL!

...I SHALL IMPART IT TO YOU NOW!

(muttering) Shit, where's the volume control on this thing?

(long pause)

PAY ATTENTION!

IN ORDER TO COMPLETE YOUR TRAINING

AS AN ELEPHANT TORMENTED BY THE MIDDAY SUN

PLUNGES INTO THE LOTUS LAKE

SO, ALSO, ONE SHOULD VENTURE INTO IT!

(more muttering) It's ridiculous that there's no volume control.

ALRIGHT NOW, STAND UP! YOU CAN'T PLAY KICKBALL SITTING CROSS-LEGGED ON THE GROUND.

ARE YOU STANDING?

GOOD!

NOW I WANT YOU TO IMAGINE THERE IS A WAX CLOTH ATTACHED TO THE SOLE OF YOUR RIGHT SHOE... GOT IT?

AND BENEATH YOU IS A GLASS SURFACE ALL SMUDGED AND GRIMY. BENEATH THE GLASS ARE ALL THE CHILDREN OF THE UNIVERSE, AND THEY CANNOT SEE THE STARS, JUST A SMUDGY GRIMY SKY ABOVE THEM.

YOU ARE GOING TO CLEAN IT FOR THEM WITH THE WAX CLOTH... NO, NOT LIKE THAT, LESS ROUND AND ROUND, MORE FORWARD AND BACK, FORWARD AND BACK, WAX ON, WAX OFF, WAX ON, WAX OFF... VERY GOOD!

AND NOW THE OTHER FOOT, SAME AGAIN, WAX ON, WAX OFF, WAX ON, WAX OFF... EXCELLENT! YOU ARE A NATURAL AT THIS!

SO, I THINK THAT'S PRETTY MUCH IT...

(muttering again) What's that? Headers? Oh, right.

ACTUALLY ONE LAST THING - HEADERS!

LOOK TO THE SKY, I WANT YOU TO VISUALISE YOUR P.E TEACHER'S HEAD SCREAMING TOWARDS YOU... FASTER AND FASTER IT GOES, SCREAMING LOUDER AND LOUDER IT IS ALMOST THERE

ALMOST THERE

ALMOST THERE

IT'S A BIT LIKE THAT SCENE IN STAR WARS WHEN LUKE IS FLYING HIS X-WING INTO THE DEATH STAR TRENCH

ALMOST THERE

NOW THE ONLY WAY TO DEFEAT THE SCREAMING DISEMBODIED HEAD IS WITH YOUR OWN HEAD, NOT YOUR ARMS OR LEGS... I WANT YOU TO NUT IT, REALLY NUT IT HARD, HEADER THAT SCREAMING HEAD INTO OBLIVION HERE IT COMES NOW!

(a coconut comes flying out of nowhere and hits Moss on the head, knocking her unconscious)

BOOM!

PERFECT.

YOUR TRAINING IS DONE, GO BACK TO BUNKROOM... UH, BUNKROOM...

(whispering) Which bunkroom does she stay in again? What do you mean you can't remember?

BUNKROOM 6! NO?

BUNKROOM 5! ARE YOU SHAKING YOUR HEAD?

YES, YOU'RE SHAKING YOUR HEAD! UH. BUNKROOM 8!

BUNKROOM 8? IT IS BUNKROOM 8!

(muttering) Thank fuck for that. Can we catapult the boots in now? Hang on, she's still out of it. We better wait until she wakes up.

(a minute passes and Moss sits up groggily rubbing her head)

BEHOLD THE SKY! TWO GOLDEN LOTUS FLOWERS GROW BETWEEN THE STARS! AND LOOK CLOSER! INSIDE EACH FLOWER IS A GOLDEN BOOT! THESE MAGICAL BOOTS ARE YOURS TO BORROW FOR AS LONG AS YOU NEED THEM, JUST REMEMBER TO BRING THEM BACK WHEN YOU'RE FINISHED! GO ON, GET READY TO CATCH THEM!

(two golden wellington boots come flying out of nowhere - one hits Moss in the midriff, the other on her shoulder)

(whispering) There's a surprise.

YOU DIDN'T CATCH THEM? DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT. JUST PICK THEM UP AND TRY THEM ON.

NOW GO BACK TO BUNKROOM 8 AND DON'T FORGET TO FEED THE RATS!

(muttering as the wind fades away)

I think that went well... but we really need to do something about the volume, I could barely hear myself think.

I shake the fog from my eyes and look around. I am alone on the hill. But I have a lump on my head and I'm wearing a pair of golden wellie boots.

'Well, that went well.' I say to no one in particular. 'Even if that spirit severely underestimated my shoe size...'

But they're magic boots, and even as I wiggle my toes, they start to shimmer like a mirage and fit my feet perfectly. The details of the meditation are starting to get hazy, and I can't quite remember what I had to do to train...

A breadfruit is knocked from a tree three meters in front of me by a little red bird. I blink, and suddenly I am there, beneath the tree, kicking out and the fruit is sailing in a perfect arc through the air. It hits the Judge's house a mile away with a sploosh. I hear a 'Damn birds!' in the distance.

Looks like the boots are working. I walk hurriedly back to the ship. Behind me the ghosts appear in the jungle.

Spirit 1: Buuuuuuuu yoooouuuu prrrrooommIIISSEEDDDDD

Moss: What? I don't have time for this.

Spirit 2: Ttthheeeee pppllLLAAANNNEEEEE CRRRRAASSSHHHH

Moss: OK, OK. AFTER the football match, I swear on my life I will fucking save your souls from whatever limbo you're in and discover the mystery of the plane crash. AFTER the match. Ok?

Spirit 3: O... OooookkkKKKKK

(Snippets of laughter float on the gentle breeze, and a little guy wearing a cardboard mask hurriedly packs away a badly damaged projector in the trees beneath Knob Hill)

I run a bit quicker in the ship's direction, and the ghosts evaporate (or maybe just disappear, they're not made of water vapour. I think.)

I NEED TO SLEEP. (sings) Why won't you let meeeeeeeeeee?

NIKO: ++I captured the transmitted ghost sounds, and plan on patching it through to the twins' mobile telephone in the off chance the little piss-shit (admit it Chief, you are starting to come round to my way of thinking on that one) is with them.++

NIKO: ++Still no answer from the twins. All I get is an open line with Duran Duran's "Wild Boys" playing in the background, and two female voices hysterically shouting, "More wiggle! More jiggle!"++

...

November 6, 2009

Alfie's Journal #28:

4 Kings



Here is the journal entry Alfie gave me this morning. I forgot to post it. I was too busy sewing and making packed lunches.

...

Where was I?

Oh yeah, I was crying. Not just any old crying, but all-out hysterical wailing. I never cry like that. The sudden movement of Tharkey's hand patting my shoulder struck me like a bolt of electricity and I wailed even louder, my primal screams rolling in waves from the round grassy top of Knob Hill. 'Jaaaaaazzzzz Mooooooonk! Whhhhhyyyyyyy?' I howled, but the words were lost in snotty sniffs and breathless sobs beneath the blood red evening sky.

From the cliffs to the north of Plum Island, Tharkey and I re-entered the jungle and began to make the long walk back across the undulating dense landscape towards Pit Town. We skirted around the foot of the volcano and I stared in awe at the jagged black peaks funnelling up towards the basin at the top. I imagined James McLymont, a bearded, lupine man, framed against the sky, looking down at us through binoculars, anxiously pawing at the earth, a rifle in his hairy hands. I was fucking exhausted, delirious almost. Tharkey seemed to sense it and slowed his pace accordingly. We'd gotten off on the wrong foot thanks to W and the chickens, but in spite of that, I found the sherpa's quiet, unassuming company strangely reassuring. There was a sense that he was a man on a mission, far beyond his role in Pit Town as a trapper and small-time farmer selling eggs and goat's milk, hunting wild boar and other unimaginable animals scattered across the length and breadth of this mysterious island.

By the time we reached Knob Hill, appearing suddenly and quite out of place amongst the trees, dusk had settled over Plum Island. We tramped to the top of the grassy hill to look out over the bay, back towards the beach and the white houses of Pit Town. They looked like toppled pieces on a knocked over Monopoly board. Further up the coast was the Mardi, a small black speck atop the glassy silver surface of the ocean. I sat down with my knees up to my chest, trying to catch my breath, and wondered what everyone was up to. And then for some reason I started thinking about the Jazz Monk again. I don't know where it came from, but it was like I was back in the Fish Rocket, staring at his gloved paw as it pounded and came to rest, fingers splayed across the reinforced window, his pleading eyes like two black moons. I watched the rapidly cracking glass of his fishbowl helmet, and the fiery blood of his head explosion. I blinked up a great salty tear of guilt, and there, about halfway down the hill, I saw a cloaked figure, shadowy and hunched behind a green skull mask, with the same big

watery eyes staring back up the slope at me. Pinned to the figure's cloak was a name-badge that simply read "Bob".

My veins felt like they were filled with ice, and I felt like screaming out, but my mouth couldn't form the words I was looking for, and before I knew it, I was crying my heart out, watching as "Bob" lumbered off into the trees. Right at the edge of the jungle, I saw a young woman with dark brown hair. She was wearing a fake moustache and a pair of super sunglasses. She smiled at me, holding out a hand to "Bob" before leading him into the shadowy undergrowth. That was when Tharkey patted my shoulder, and the wailing began.

He waited for my tears to subside before finally asking, 'A ghost?'

I sat there quietly, catching my breath, until the words began to pour from me like a volcano spewing molten rocks. I told Tharkey all about our epic and ill-fated moon-mission, how it had been my idea, and the problems we had with the fuel line. I explained how I'd tricked the Jazz Monk into fixing it, using his obsession with Nate, and how his head exploded. I don't know how much of my convoluted snivelling story the Nepalese guide understood, but his warm eyes smiled back at me as I told it. 'Do you see them too?' I asked him.

He shook his head and stared back across the bay at the little white houses, then said cryptically, 'Tharkey only see the ghosts of the future.'

I listened carefully while he explained in fractured sentences how he and Zheng had run away together at the tender age of seventeen, saving up their money to fly to South Africa. He went on to tell me about a chance encounter in a bar with a young Australian pilot and their conversation about the Plum Necklace. The pilot proposed to take them to Plum Island and the three of them would search for the legendary artefact together. 'We be here ever since,' said Tharkey. 'Now, Zheng want a real life. Real school for our beautiful children. Real fields for our animals that haven't been stolen. Tharkey always see the ghosts of the future. The ghosts of what they want us to become...' I noticed at this point that he was crying himself.

'It's a strange life, Tharkey,' I said, patting his damp back.

'More strange than you could ever imagine,' he agreed, smiling back at me and drying his eyes on the sleeve of his t-shirt.

I returned to Plum Island the following evening, and said hello to Moses at the bar. He predictably blanked me, tapping away at a hand-held games console. The rucksack on my back was clanking with my journal and various items removed from the Storage Hold, as I headed

towards Pit Town. In front of the second house on my right, I noticed a woman in a white lab-coat. She had deep red waves of hair that fell down around her shoulders, and was sitting on the porch of her single-storey white house, festooned with colourful flowers in hanging baskets. I smiled at her in an attempt to be friendly and she smiled back, but without any hint of emotion, like a shrink studying a patient. Or a spider studying a fly.

I stopped at Tharkey's to give him the two ornate jade statuettes I'd taken from the ship. Even before he saw the compensation for his two missing chickens, he greeted me with a warm smile and beckoned me in. I tried to say no, offering for a second time to give him back the old brown boots he'd loaned me, but he declined again with a grin and a shake of his head. When Zheng saw the two statuettes, I didn't have any choice but to go inside, her fierce little face lighting up as she twirled them carefully in her hands, shepherding me through to the kitchen table. Tharkey's daughter, Lottie, was dressed in red wizard robes with weird white glyphs scattered across them. She broke away from playing with some voodoo dolls and a little toy boat on the floor of the family's cluttered living room and gazed at the statuettes in wonder.

The four of us ate a steaming and very satisfying bowl of vegetable broth at the small table in the kitchen, and I told them about Scotland and how everything is soggy there. Throughout the meal, Lottie kept trying to steal my bread with a mischievous grin. I can't say that asking them about the Plum Necklace didn't cross my mind, but somehow it felt like it was the wrong time and place. I felt enjoyably sane for the first time in months, sitting there in the Tharkey's kitchen, pretending to whack little Lottie's knuckles with my soup spoon while her parents fretted about their eleven year old son, Sam, who hadn't come home that day. 'I don't know what's gotten into that boy lately. He has too much brain for this place,' said Zheng, pitching a steely glance across the table at her husband.

'Boys will be boys,' said Tharkey.

As a veil of darkness fell outside the kitchen window, I made my excuses, thanked Zheng for the meal and said goodnight. Tharkey saw me to the door and shook my hand. 'Want me to help you look for Sam?' I asked.

'Boy will be fine,' he said, shaking his head. 'We all have our own adventure. Boy no different to us.'

I nodded. 'Listen, if those statuettes don't make up for the chickens, then you're welcome to come out to the Mardi tomorrow and

take some more stuff. To be honest our Hold is about bursting with useless crap. It would be great to find some of it a good home.'

The sherpa shook his head vigorously. 'Statues worth more than two chicken,' he insisted.

'How about visiting us then? As a friend. Bring Zheng and the kids?' I said as I clumped up the path in his old brown boots.

'You have lifejackets?' he asked with a smirk as I headed towards Dolly's house with my rucksack still rattling. 'Listen, be careful with cards. These people are cheating bastards.'

I don't know what I laughed hardest at - that I just heard him swear, or that it sounded like he'd tried to make a joke. I saluted and fumbled with a switch inside my mind. It was time to move into business mode.

I stared at the four kings and the eight of diamonds in my hand. Dixie music played in the background while smoke drifted over the table from a couple of cigarettes flaming idly in an ashtray. A smile began to tug at the corner of my mouth, and I had to use every ounce of willpower I had to pin it down. I looked up at Dolly, sitting to my immediate right as he reluctantly tossed his cards into the middle of the table.

'Old Dolly's muse has well and truly deserted him tonight,' he whined, scratching around the edges of his head bandage.

Directly opposite him sat a dark-haired, heavy-set young man with such a square jawline you could draw a right angle around it, and bright blue eyes that were several inches too close together. The square-jawed man guffawed, grinning the same crooked gap-toothed smile as his older, one-eared brother. 'Go fuck yourself, Pretty Boy. Or do you want me to them all what our Mama said the day we left home?' snapped Dolly.

'Again?' quipped a well-dressed, dread-locked Dutchman named Vink, sitting directly opposite me. Vink's cards sat snug in one of his manicured hands, while the other toyed with the ends of his neatly trimmed moustache.

Noah Blake, the Australian pilot, snorted. He was sitting between Dolly and his younger brother, sporting several days of stubble beneath a shock of shoulder-length blond hair with streaks of grey in it. He leaned forward, cradling a bottle of his home-brewed coconut beer. 'What did she say, Dolly?'

The one-eared fisherman sat back in his chair and lit a roll-up. 'She said "Dolly my boy, take care of your brother. God gave you brains and good looks, but all He gave Pretty Boy was you.'

Nobody laughed except for Pretty Boy. ‘Are you in or not, Alfie?’ asked Vink.

But of course I was in. In all the games of poker I’d ever played, I’d never been dealt four of anything. Hell, I’d never even *seen* four of anything in a hand before. And with the fifth card being my lucky card – the eight of diamonds - I felt a surge of optimism. Okay, so we were playing winner takes all for useless trinkets, and if I lost, I only forfeited a curious puzzle depicting scarabs, but I couldn’t deny the thrill when I reached for my stack of dwindling chips and tossed them into the middle of the table. ‘All in,’ I told them.

Eyebrows raised all around me, and to my left, Santiago Lopez, a middle-aged Mexican with a bulging beer gut, white shirt unbuttoned down to his hairy chest, hissed through his teeth and threw his cards down. ‘There was me thinking you got no cojones, Questions,’ he said, emitting an annoyingly high-pitched little cackle.

The ball was in Vink’s court. Up until then, I’d watched him cleverly boss both the game and the table of ragtag misfits who’d gathered in Dolly’s house to drink the pilot’s endless supply of beer, and make crude jokes at the expense of one another. Rewind a couple of hundred years, put them in eye patches and striped trousers, and these guys would be living breathing pirates, ready to slit the next guy’s throat for a cut of plastic crap. I looked down at the empty bottles of beer on the table beside me. My original plan seemed to have gone a bit drink-shaped. I’d intended to have a few to loosen up, get to know the locals a little better, and eventually start them talking about the Plum Necklace. Five bottles later though, and I was starting to feel decidedly drunk. Instead of me craftily pulling the strings of information, I was getting well and truly tangled in a game of cat and mouse. While Vink looked down at his cards for the hundredth time, continuing to fawn at his facial hair, I realised this card game was about a lot more than just plastic crap.

My eyes drifted to the open doorway leading through to the kitchen where I was convinced I saw something move. ‘Alright,’ said Vink finally, and he shoved his stack of chips into the centre beside mine. The others recoiled, their faces lighting up.

‘Fuck that,’ said Pretty Boy, flipping his own hand over. I didn’t even see what he had. I was too busy staring at the boy in the balaclava, tiptoeing across the kitchen floor, dressed all in black with his face caked in black paint.

I opened my mouth to tell them while Noah Blake scratched at his chin and folded his cards into the middle as well. Just as I was about to speak, the boy turned around and looked directly at me as he reached

the fridge, and I knew his face. I'd looked at that very same face most of yesterday, and again just a couple of hours ago. Even behind the layers of warpaint, I could see that I was looking at an eleven year old Sam Tharkey.

'Okay,' said Dolly, clapping his calloused hands together from a million miles away. The dixie music swirled around the room as Sam silently opened the fridge and started to remove several bottles of homebrew, cradling them in his arms. 'I guess this is the moment of truth.'

'Hold on,' said Vink.

'Questions?' Dolly was clicking his fingers in front of my face, and I jumped back into the moment. 'Too late for second thoughts now,' he said with a leer, and Pretty Boy guffawed again.

'I said hold on,' snapped Vink. I looked across the table and saw that he was staring directly at me, searching my eyes for some sign of weakness. I grinned inwardly, wondering whether he'd perhaps misread the panic-stricken look on my face at the sight of the boy as something to do with the cards in my hand. He laughed nervously. 'How about we make this bet more interesting?'

'*More* interesting?' asked Noah Blake, getting up from the table and nodding to the kitchen. 'Anyone want another bottle?'

'NO!' It was out of my mouth before I even realised I was going to say it. The whole table seemed to sense my uncharacteristic outburst meant something else entirely, and their eyes were suddenly all on me. I stole a glance at the kitchen and there was no sign of Sam. 'I mean... shit, sorry. This is strong stuff,' I told them, pointing at the empty bottles.

'You're bloody right it is!' said Noah with a smug grin. 'Took me years to perfect it. It's better than the filth Moses serves at his beach bar.'

'You were saying, Rob?' asked Dolly, hunched forward in his seat.

Vink smiled the most horrific smile I'd ever seen in my life. It oozed arrogance. It was the sort of smile that made flowers wilt and stars crumble. 'I was just saying, let's make this more interesting. If Alfie here agrees. After all, we all know why he's really here,' he said, rocking back in his seat.

'Streuth! Have we drunk that much already?' shouted Noah from over at the fridge.

Again the others' eyes turned back to me, their tipsy, sneering faces suddenly serious. 'He's here for the Plum Necklace,' said Vink.

‘I don’t know what you mean -’ I tried to protest, but he cut me off with a wave of his hand.

‘There’s nothing wrong with that,’ he said. ‘That’s why we’re all here. That’s why Pit Town exists. There have been people searching for that fucking necklace since before your parents were born, and there will still be people looking for it long after we’re all in the ground. So I’ve got a proposition for you. I’m prepared to wager you... information... on the whereabouts of the Plum Necklace. Something I’ve never told another soul in all the time I’ve been here.’

Now all the eyes were on him, Noah Blake leaning on the kitchen door-frame, looking remarkably sober, the stupid grin wiped from Pretty Boy’s face, Dolly leaning even further forward, and Santiago fidgeting nervously in his seat. ‘If you know where it is, then why haven’t you already found it?’ I asked him.

‘Who says I haven’t?’ he snapped back, still smiling that repulsive smile of his.

‘Have you?’ I asked, the heads around us rotating back and forth like a gawking audience at a ping-pong match.

Vink snorted. ‘Do you really think I’d be sitting here playing this card game with all of you if I’d found it?’

I stared at him. This was even worse than the poker.

‘What would I want with information that can’t help you find it?’ I asked.

‘Who says it can’t help you find it? Maybe it’s a riddle. A puzzle of sorts. Maybe I’ve spent the last decade trying to work it out, and will spend the next decade doing the same. But maybe *you* can work it out. Maybe this riddle wasn’t meant for me. Maybe it was always meant for you...’

There was silence apart from the dixie music, banjos boring into my skull.

‘What’s the bet?’ I asked.

‘If you win, I give you the information. If I win... I get your ship.’

‘It’s not my ship,’ I said, our eyes and words clashing like sabres.

‘But you’re the captain,’ he said.

‘No I’m not. We don’t have a captain.’

He shrugged. ‘Well, in that case we should turn over our cards.’ He made to lay them down on the table.

The four kings and the eight of Diamonds winked up at me from my sweating palm. It was impossible for a hand like that to be beaten. Or as good as impossible. He needed a straight flush, or four aces, and there was as much chance of four aces turning up in the same hand as four kings, as there was of someone floating in a homemade rocket

through space and ending up inside an impossibly fast white whale bound for Earth. ‘Wait!’ I shouted. All eyes were on me. Pirate eyes and kings’ eyes, and Robbie’s eyes, blank behind pink plastic sunglasses. I nodded my head and said, ‘I’ll take that bet.’

Vink purred as we slowly placed our cards face up on the table.

I fell to my knees, face in hands, down in the moon-kissed dust outside Dolly’s gate. Behind me, the swell of laughter from the card-playing Plum Islanders mingled with the muffled twang of the frantic dixie music. I looked up at the lunar face, and she smiled sadly, as if to say, ‘Oh Alfie, what have you done?’

My head was dizzy with drink and the acute sense of destiny getting its own back. It took several seconds before I digested that someone was whispering my name.

I spun around in the dark, eyes scanning the shadows of the lifeless town, between patches where the full moon’s rays couldn’t reach. I heard it again, an audible whisper of ‘Alfie!’ I caught a glimpse of a flurry of movement to my left, a dark figure hunched down at the corner of Tharkey’s flaking white fence, head and shoulders visible in an alleyway between the houses. ‘Alfie!’ the figure whispered again. ‘Over here!’

It was the Black Cloud himself.

W.

I reluctantly picked myself off the ground and walked towards him. W was still crouching, anxiously looking up and down the main street to make sure nobody could see him. ‘Hey -’ I began, struggling to haul myself out of the awful feeling of losing the Mardi in a card game.

He hushed me by pressing a finger to my lips, and I blinked at his appearance in the shadows. He was dressed all in black, wearing a black balaclava, with black warpaint smeared across his nose and cheeks, just like the Tharkey boy. ‘I need your help,’ he said, motioning me to follow as he turned and ran low to the ground up the alleyway.

At the rear left corner of Tharkey’s back garden fence, I saw little Sam all in black, clutching the stolen bottles of beer to his chest. Lights shone from an upstairs curtained window onto the yard, illuminating two other men in the yard, also all in black. They were carefully carrying one of the two goats over to the fence. ‘Fuck! What are you doing?’ I asked, slapping my own forehead in confusion.

‘Alfie! Keep your voice down!’ growled W. ‘Are you trying to get us caught? Here, give me a hand with this goat.’

The two unfamiliar men were lifting the bemused looking goat over the top of the fence. ‘What are you doing?’ I whispered, turning to little Sam. ‘And what’s he doing with you?’

‘What does it look like we’re doing?’ asked W, grabbing the goat at the chest and nodding for me to grab the hind legs to ease it over. ‘We’re stealing a goat.’

The three of them were struggling, and its rear end scraped across the top of the fence, causing it to kick and bleat sharply. ‘Why? To eat it? What’s wrong with you?’ I asked him, grabbing the kicking legs and helping him lower it into the alley.

‘Eat it?’ he asked with a grin. ‘What are you babbling about?’

‘Like the chickens,’ I said, watching as the two men clambered over the fence and dropped down beside him. W ignored my question and did a series of military hand gestures to the two men in black. They nodded in unison, and one looped a rope around the goat’s neck before leading it off into the jungle behind him. The other took the bottles of beer from Sam and quickly followed.

‘Those guys are called Walter and Wilfred. They’re scientists from that trash island. It’s cool, they’re on our side,’ explained W. ‘Okay, let’s go,’ he whispered to Sam, and the boy nodded. ‘Are you coming, Alfie?’

The two of them darted past me, back up the avenue in the direction of the town, keeping low to the ground. ‘Where are you going?’ I half-whispered, half-shouted after them, before kicking my heels and scurrying along in their wake. I couldn’t believe what was going on here, even though I didn’t have a clue what was going on at all. I had a good mind to just grab the kid by the collar of his black polo-neck and march him straight to Tharkey’s door. I followed them, skirting the smooth stone wall of the large two-storey building at the centre of the town, disappearing around the corner ahead of me.

When I turned the corner of the building I was horrified to see W bunking Sam up through a small open window on the ground floor, his little legs and feet wriggling as he vanished inside. W immediately doubled back past me, eyes flitting both ways up the street as he looked over his shoulder and motioned for me to follow. I looked up and down around, but all was silent and still, apart from the faraway sound of dixie music and another muffled honk of Pretty Boy’s laughter. Directly in front of me, little Sam had opened the front door of the building and W ghosted inside. His head reappeared at the door

a second later and he whispered to me, ‘Well, what are you waiting for? Come on!’

We were inside the big dark house, tiptoeing soundlessly past a winding carpeted stairwell, Sam, then W, then me. I stared up at a crappy billboard poster that said “NUFFIN LIKE A MUFFIN!” hung on the wall, following them into a large kitchen. They crept across the creaking floorboards to the fridge, and opened the door. The light from inside illuminated their shadowy forms as they began lifting items out and filling a black rucksack on W’s back. I’d seen enough and made to leave, walking head-first into two ear-piercing banshee shrieks that tore at my eardrums. Someone dropped a bottle behind me, the glass smashing on the floor. The shrieks were from the mouths of two young blonde women wearing matching pink pyjamas, their limbs white and shimmering in the dark.

‘Alfie! Run!’ yelled W.

A large object flashed in the dark, striking me on the side of my head, and knocking me over. I landed in a laundry basket, clothes spilling around me. A key sounded in the back door lock as the girls screamed in unison. ‘Daddy! Intruders!’ There was a rush of cool air as the back door was forced open, footsteps clumping on the ceiling overhead. I blinked in a daze, my head spinning as the kitchen light was switched on.

The safety catch of a gun clicked as I fought to free myself from the dirty washing. I was drunker than I remembered being, a damp towel knotted over my face, while a male voice boomed, ‘Don’t move you little shit, or I’ll blast your ass to kingdom come!’ I instantly stopped struggling, lying back against the basket, my heart pounding in my chest. ‘Girls,’ boomed the voice, ‘go fetch my handcuffs!’

A slippers foot kicked the towel away from my face and I looked up at a chubby red-faced man in a dressing gown, pointing a rusty old gun at my head. ‘What’s your name, boy? Speak!’

I closed my eyes and tried to imagine it all away.

But it doesn’t work like that.
It never has and it never will.

...

Alfie: (ring ring, ring ring)

[*an unrecognisable voice: “Thank you for calling The Utica Flower Company. Please listen to the following options...”*]

Fuck!

["To leave a voicemail, press 1. If you know the number of the of the room you are calling, press 0, followed by 1 for cabins, 2 for bunkrooms, 3 for the dormitory, and then the room number itself. If you would like a guided tour of the Mardi, press 3..."]

What the fuck is this? Pick up someone!

["...If you are interested in a Utica Flower Company Hotel brochure with an updated list of room prices and availability for the winter season, press 4. If you are calling to make a complaint press 5 -"]

(I press 5)

["Thank you. All our advisors are busy at present. Please try again later." - disconnects]

Aaarrghhh!

(redials – ring ring, ring ring)

["Thank you for calling The Utica Flower Company. Please listen to the following options..."]

(presses the # key repeatedly)

I'm on the twins' phone, I've not got fucking time for this!

["I'm sorry, I do not recognise that option. Please hold and I will connect you to our next available advisor - HOLD MUSIC - MOSS N "Don't Ask Me Again What I Dreamt"]

Hey! What the fuck is going on?

["Thank you for holding. At The Utica Flower Company the drugs are great and going cheap, we've got all that anybody needs to get stoned..."]

This isn't fucking funny!

["Beyond the colourful shop display a whole new world for you awaits, people dance and records play for your soul -"]

O'Flanahanaman: Hello? Alfie? Sorry, I was sleeping.

Alfie: That's not good enough O'Flamagan! I need everyone firing on all cylinders if we're going to get out of this mess!

O'Flanahanaman: *(cough)* That you got us into, sir.

Alfie: Let's not play the blame game. Anyway, how's PROJECT: TOASTED SANDWICH going? Do we have any more players yet? Does everyone on the ship know that our team will double-up as a covert unit who will climb the volcano, steal the map of Plum Island from the crazy old Scotsman who lives up there, locate the Plum Necklace so we can stop time, save Robbie, return that satellite, and put anything right that is presently wrong? What about the Chief, did she go to Knob Hill?

O'Flanahanaman: I think so, sir. She's still not very pleased, but I can confirm that PROJECT: TOASTED SANDWICH is proceeding as planned. The Frat Boys are really busting a gut. They've already

managed to gouge the remains of Simon's melted socks from the toastie-maker -

Alfie: Fucking hell, I've not got time to talk about the Frat Boys or the toastie-maker! How's it going with plans for a diversion after the game? Have you spoken to Simon about carpet bombing the airstrip? Is it possible to fix that haunted plane? And has anyone located W yet? We really need him to make up the numbers on this one. So far, there's the 6 players I recruited online, plus me and Moss makes 8. I'm going to assume Simon's playing?

O'Flanahanaman: To be honest, sir, Simon seems... well, distracted. I'm sure he'll play, but he did say that he's more of an "Ultimate Frisbee" man himself.

Alfie: What's that? You'll have to speak up O'Flamahaggan, I can't hear you! And speak faster. What about the Atom Band? I'm assuming they can all play?

O'Flanahanaman: I've spoken to them, sir. Emerson says it's a shame it's not rugby as that's his favourite. Brendon likes basketball, and Scarytoes American Football. Def Mute just likes riding around on his bike. They're working at rigging up the tea trolley for NIKO though so as he can do the match report. Why do we need a match report? If you don't mind me asking?

Alfie: Fuck, that's not good. Okay, listen, I have to go, that's the twins back. (*whispering*) Seriously, I don't know how much more of them I can take. They're breaking me down, man! I need to sleep! (*louder*) Okay, well, keep your nose to the ground and the bit between your teeth. I'll coordinate with Jim to fly in the extra players tomorrow. Speak to Simon about the carpet bombs, and suggest to Moss that we inject the half-time oranges with additional hallucinogens so that if any of the Plum Islanders don't like mushroom toasties, that should make up for it. Have you got all that? I've got to go.

(*quietly*) No, I've told you both already. No more dancing. And no more tassels. They chafe.

(*giggling in background – disconnects*)

O'Flanahanaman: Sir? Sir? I think you've left the phone off the hook! Is that "Copacabana" I can hear? Oh my! (*hangs up, yawning, stares at white thread*)

Simon: NO WAY. KINGTIME! This is just too coincidental. I've been pondering, and there is some reason this was meant to happen....

Narcissus = Spades;

Diamonds = Diamonds, obviously;

King TV = Clubs;

King Father = Hearts.

...

November 6, 2009

Pre-Match Team Talk

Two newly constructed wooden huts sit side by side next to the Plum Island airstrip, the magical sunlight dripping from the blue sky overhead, reflected in the Pit Town windows above the bay. In front of the huts sits a pasting table covered with a white tablecloth, and sitting resplendent in the middle of the table, with plum and green/blue coloured ribbons tied to its spout, is a battered old yellow plastic toy watering can. The dusty airstrip has been transformed into a football pitch with fishing nets hung from actual goalposts, white painted lines, and corner flags that hang limp in the windless evening air. At the side of the pitch, closest to town, the residents of Plum Island have turned out in force, adorned in the plum colours of the home team. Mrs Judge is in her wheelchair, regal purple robes draped around her shoulders, her twin daughters pushing a handle each. The Da Silva family sit in deckchairs - seventy year old hunchback Mama Da Silva with a fat cigar wedged into her mouth, her daughter Maria and good-for-nothing son-in-law, Santiago Lopez. Bernie and Cedric Bedlington (yes, those very same Realists from the ship, who just happen to live here!) stand in the shade of the two huts, arms folded, while Jonny Gallo bores them to death about 1987 and an underground street fight that probably never happened.

On the ocean side of the airstrip, a handful of people hang around in ragged green and blue scarves, looking like they don't know how they got there, let alone what they are supposed to be doing. Outside the visitors' hut, Edson Da Silva stands guard. Edson is a 73 year old handyman with hair like dirty white snow, the glint of a 17 year old in his eye, and the Judge's rusty gun in his hands. He watches carefully to make sure that Alfie doesn't make a run for it. The Judge, all in black, with overly tight shorts that he dug out from the bottom of a dresser, belly hanging out over them, slaps the elderly guard between the shoulders and booms so that everyone can hear, 'Now remember, Ed, if that son of a bitch tries anything funny, you have my permission to shoot him. And shoot to kill, Ed. Shoot to kill.' His pompous voice carries over the airstrip to where The Atom Band

are busy attaching a giant umbrella to a hulking whirring supercomputer with a pumpkin face, sitting on a tea trolley, looking bored.

Inside the Visitors' hut, Alfie has no intention of making a run for it or trying anything funny. He is standing at the door, facing the various members of the Flower Company who have assembled on the wooden benches around the walls of the hut, some laughing and joking amongst themselves, others sitting quietly, bewildered, staring at their surroundings as if they are wondering whether this is really happening. A couple of them appear to be asleep. Alfie is normally fucking useless at speaking in public, but somehow in this moment he needs to find exactly the right words to send this wonderful Company of misfits out onto the airstrip, feeling like they are a collective unit, and that absolutely anything is possible. He clears his throat and speaks...

Alfie: Okay, settle down folks. Is everyone here?

O'Flanahanaman: Just W still missing, sir.

Alfie: Shit. Well, we're running out of time, so I'll say what I've got to say. Hopefully he'll show up before the match starts... *(shaking his head)* Right, does everyone know why we're here? *(murmured confirmation that a few of them do, but most of them don't)*

Alfie: I've not got time to go into the full story again or we'll be here all day, and tomorrow, and the next day, and the day after that. In a nutshell, I lost the Mardi in a game of poker, and we have to play a game of football against the locals of Plum Island to win it back.

(Jon of the Atom raises a hand)

Alfie: Yes, Jon?

Jon of the Atom: What's a Mardi?

Alfie: *(in disbelief)* The Mardi is our ship. Didn't you get my email about this?

Jon of the Atom: I did, but I didn't read it properly. It was too long.

Alfie: Did anyone read the email I sent about why we're here?

O'Flanahanaman: *(enthusiastically)* I did, sir.

Alfie: Apart from people that were already on the ship?

(silence)

Alfie: Fine. But you do all know you're here to play a game of football, right?

(more silence)

Alfie: Well, you are. Right now, hardly any of you know each other, but by the time we've finished doing what we've got to do out there on the football field -

Flash: (*holding a large and very nervous rooster*) Actually, it's more of an airstrip than a field...

(*murmurs of agreement*)

Alfie: (*long pause, staring into space*) Shit, it's no good, I forgot what I was going to say next. O'Flamihanigan, pass me that bin bag there, would you?

O'Flanahanaman: (*leaping into action*) Certainly, sir.

Alfie: Without further ado, here are the shirts that O'Flemigan here has been hand-stitching for the last 48 hours.

(*ripples of applause, O'Flanahanaman blushes, Alfie pulls a green short-sleeved t-shirt from the bag. It has a white number 2 on the back and "FLASH" embroidered beautifully above it*)

Alfie: Flash, this is yours. (*throws the shirt and a pair of blue shorts over to Flash*) You're playing right-back, while your rooster Jean-Claude will be our mascot.

Moss: Awww, but I thought Elvis was going to be our mascot!

Alfie: Elvis only lets you go near him, Chief. Also the last thing we need right now is a cantankerous elk high on quixodelic hot-tub water, running amok in Pit Town. Any questions?

(*Flash puts his hand up*)

Alfie: Yes, Flash?

Flash: First of all, I'd just like to say that if anyone tries to eat my rooster, I'll squish 'em. Then I'd like to know what a right-back is?

(*Simon Piler raises a hand*)

Alfie: (*to group*) Nobody touch Jean-Claude, you all got that?

(*someone sniggers*)

Alfie: What is it, Simon?

Simon: I'd just like to ask our Medical Officer where he's been for the last five months?

Flash: Chicago.

Alfie: Does that answer your question, Simon?

Simon: Weeeell, not rea-

Alfie: 'Right-back' is exactly what it says it is. You play at the back, on the right hand side. Make sense? (*reaches into the bag*) Next, we've got number 3, our left-back – "POFLOWETRY". (*looking around anxiously*) Where's Poflowetry? (*everyone looks at each other and wonders which one is Poflowetry*) Shit, he's not here.

Simon: He'll be smoking in his cabin for sure.

O'Flanahanaman: I'll go and get him, sir.

Alfie: Great, but be quick. Okay, next shirt we've got is number 4 – "DR SIMON PILER" – Simon, you're playing centre-back. I must

admit that I always thought you would make an excellent winger, but on this occasion I'm going to trust your judgement on it.

Simon: Centre-back! That's where I was hoping to play! *(long pause)* What exactly does a centre-back do? Ah wait, yes, don't tell me. I think I just worked it out for myself. Egads, I'm starting to get nervous and rambling! I apologise. Carry on, Chaplin, you're doing a fine job.

Alfie: Thank you, Simon. Okay, number 5, also centre of defence, "THE AMALFI GLOW".

Amalfi Glow: I fucking *knew* you'd put me in defence *(he shakes his head disappointedly)*.

Alfie: Amalfi, we need someone at the back who knows what they're doing. Someone who can hold it all together. Think Cannavaro. And watch your metatarsal when you're warming up.

Jon of the Atom: *(to Jean-Claude)* Who's he calling an asshole?

Alfie: Oh yeah, Amalfi, I almost forgot: any luck on the whole me stealing a satellite thing by the way? Have you found some legal loophole I can crawl through in the next hour and a half? Just in case things go spectacularly tits up?

Amalfi: What? *(dawn of realisation on his face)* You mean that wasn't a prank call? But I asked you the other day and you said you knew nothing about it...

Jon of the Atom: *(to Jean-Claude)* No, it's true. He called somebody an asshole. I heard it with my own ears. I don't know why.

Alfie: Next – number 6, "Alfie" – that's me in case anyone didn't already know. I'll play defensive midfield, amble around and hopefully get enough space and time to smoke a few cigarettes. Who's next? Number 7. I love how O'Flarmagan put all of these inside the bin bag in order. He's got a touch of the OCD about him, hasn't he? Anyway, number 7 is "W".

(At this very moment a crunching sound comes from beneath the wooden floor of the hut, and a rusty handsaw starts to cut a perfect circle in the middle of it.)

Alfie: What the fuck?

(The cut circle of wood pushes up, and a figure emerges, dressed all in black, with black face paint daubed across his nose and cheeks, and a black balaclava over his head.)

Simon: Well, well! If it isn't Black Cloud! Plum Island's most wanted for the theft of two chickens, a bicycle, and a goat! Ha!

(Jean-Claude starts flapping nervously)

W: Hey kids. Everyone ready to go?

Alfie: W, what the fuck are you doing?

W: What does it look like I'm doing? I'm helping you escape. I dug a tunnel that will bring us out in the middle of the jungle. Come on, we should all go now before they catch us.

(Several people stand up and move towards the hole)

W: What are you all doing here anyway?

Alfie: Wait! Everyone sit down!

(General confusion, some sitting people stand, some standing people sit, and some just seem very confused neither standing or sitting, but sort of squatting above the benches)

Alfie: We're about to play football against Plum Island, to try and win back the ship. If we escape now, then we'll lose the Mardi forever! We need to play this game people. And win!

W: Soccer? Awesome. Can I play? *(Emerging fully from the tunnel, shaking earth and sawdust onto the ground, while Alfie hands him the number 7 shirt)* We can escape after the match is over, I suppose. Or at half-time if it looks like we're going to lose.

Alfie: I think we've already got an escape plan covered. PROJECT: TOASTED SANDWICH. There's going to be magic mushroom toasties and a carpet bomb diversion. Isn't that right, Simon?

Simon: *(Looking up from his shirt)* Hmmm?

Alfie: I was just telling them about the carpet bomb diversion.

Simon: What carpet bomb divers- ahhh, *that* carpet bomb diversion. Oh dear.

W: *(Lighting a joint)* What position am I playing?

Alfie: *(Rubbing his eyes with exhaustion)* Attacking midfield, left side. Just try and make a nuisance of yourself. Shouldn't be too hard considering your recent track record.

W: *(Sitting down)* This is gonna be fun.

Helmet: I like your balaclava.

W: Thanks.

Helmet: I've got a blue one at home. I wish I'd brought it now.

Alfie: Well, we'll figure out the escape plan later. What are we up to? Number 8 "Mercury Kolinsky" – this is yours bro *(throws shirt)*.

Flash: Wait a minute. *(Pointing at Mercury)* Alfie, I didn't know you had an identical twin.

Helmet: He doesn't.

Alfie: Actually, I do. Everyone, this is my brother, Mercury. He's fitter, quicker, smarter, and much better looking than me. See, he even has wings on his trainers.

Jon of the Atom: Mercury? What sort of name is that?

Mercury: *(mumbles something inaudible)*

Jon of the Atom: (*staring at Mercury*) What's that he's speaking, Mandarin?

Mercury: (*sitting forward on the bench, mumbles something in Jon's direction*)

Jon of the Atom: Or maybe it's Taiwanese? Does he speak American? Do... you... speak... Americano?

Alfie: Please ignore Jon, Mercury. I'm glad you could make it, even if nobody understands what you're saying. Just let your feet do your talking on the pitch, bro.

Mercury: (*mumbles*)

Alfie: I know I said I would never pester you again, but now's not the time and place to discuss who's to blame for what happened. We'll talk about it after the match, I promise.

Mercury: (*mumbles*)

Alfie: No, you don't have to get back on the ship.

Mercury: (*mumbles*)

Alfie: No, this isn't one of the Rongovian's traps. We're safe. I think.

Mercury: (*mumbles*)

Alfie: Listen, help us out here and I swear you'll never hear from me again.

Helmet: (*eyes screwed up, flitting between the two brothers*) There's something fishy going on here...

W: Joint?

Helmet: (*face lighting up*) Ooh! Don't mind if I do! (*he takes the joint and inhales before waving for Alfie to continue*)

Meanwhile, across the bay, O'Flanahanaman opens the door of Cabin 6 and is engulfed in a fog of thick white smoke.

O'Flanahanaman: (*coughing, waving hands in front of his face to see*) Uh... Poflowetry? Are you ready to play kickball?

Poflowetry: Sure man, when?

O'Flanahanaman: Well, right now, actually. Here's your shirt. You're playing left-back, I think. It might have been right-back. One of the backs, put it that way.

Poflowetry: Hey thanks, this is pretty cool. I dig the attention to detail with the hand stitched numbers. I'll just have one more bowl and be right down. Say, who are you anyway?

O'Flanahanaman: Funny, I was going to ask you the same question...

Back in the Visitors' hut...

Alfie: Number 9 – “HOT SHOT HAMISH” – this one's clearly yours, Helmet. You're our centre-forward. Hey, what are you eating?

Helmet: (*chewing on a mushroom toastie, mouth full*) What, this? It's a toastie. Mushroom, I think. With a hint of jam. I got it out of this hamper basket over here in the corner.

Alfie: (*panicking*) Hamper basket? What hamper basket? This one? Moss, is this the Trojan hamper basket with the hallucinogenic toasties in it? Please tell me it's not!

Moss: (*shuffling her golden wellie-booted feet alternatively across floor*) Wax on, wax off, wax on, wax - huh? Sorry, were you speaking to me?

Alfie: Is this the Trojan hamper with the toasties spiked with hallucinogenic mushrooms that we were going to send to our opponents before the game?

Moss: Oh shiiiiiiiiit...

Alfie: Has anyone else eaten any of these toasties?
(*silence*)

Alfie: Okay...that's good. Don't anyone eat them. That means you as well, Helmet.

Helmet: Now you tell me. This is my third. I've noticed my vision has started to become much clearer and my foot is itching like it wants to blast rocket shots at the opposition's goal -

Alfie: Excellent, well, that's a relief. Okay, shirt number 10 -

Helmet: - only my legs feel like they're the same leg, so I'm probably going to have to hop everywhere. Also I'm hallucinating a huge rooster sitting over there on that guy's lap.

Amalfi Glow: That *is* a huge rooster.

Helmet: I thought we were here to play football?

Amalfi Glow: It's the mascot apparently.

Helmet: Does it talk? (*to Flash*) Alright mate, does it talk? Does your rooster talk?

Flash: It's a rooster.

Helmet: But does it talk?

Flash: Do roosters usually talk?

Helmet: I don't know. That's why I'm asking.

Simon: You know, it's not as stupid a question as it sounds. We have rats on our ship that can talk. And an elk that seemed to arrive with our hot-tub. It doesn't talk though, it just growls.

Helmet: You've got a ship? Sweet. Alfie's got a ship too. You'd like him. Hey! He's over there! What a coincidence! Woah! He's over there too! (*looks down at the remains of his toastie*) These are epic!

W: (*to Helmet*) Here Hamish, have some more of this weed. It grows out there in the jungle. It's not Rongovian tundra, but it'll get you to the next level.

Helmet: Cheers again! (*laughing*) Do you like hopping? I like hopping.

Alfie: As I was saying, number 10 is Moss, our other centre forward. Here you go golden boots. (*throws shirt*)

Moss: (*muttering*) I fucking despise organised sports. I can't believe I've been roped into this. Where do I stand on the pitch?

Alfie: Near the opposition's goal, but not so near that you get caught offside. Your main job is to put the ball in the net.

Moss: Sounds simple enough. (*long pause*) What's offside?

Mercury: (*mumbling*)

Jon of the Atom: Definitely Mandarin.

Alfie: Number 11, "JON OF THE ATOM", right midfield.

Jon of the Atom: Can I be a different number? Can I be 13?

Alfie: No, you can't be 13. The numbers and names have been hand-stitched onto the shirts. It's too late to change them now.

Jon of the Atom: Fine. Can I be the captain then?

Alfie: There's no captain, Jon. We don't have a captain.

Jon of the Atom: Well, can I be the captain then?

Alfie: I mean we deliberately don't have a captain. We're a collective. Nobody is of higher rank than anyone else.

Jon of the Atom: How do YOU get to decide what number everyone wears and what position they play then? If we're really a collective then I'm going to be number 13 and left... uh inside... attack defender... half.

Alfie: That's fine, Jon. You can be number 13 and left inside attack defender half in your head, but you'll be wearing this shirt with the number 11 on it. The reason I picked the numbers and positions was because if I didn't do it, then nobody else would.

Helmet: (*pulling another toastie from the hamper*) What's all this talk about ships?

Moss: Although technically it's your fault we're in this mess with your poker hand of four kings.

Mercury: (*mumbled question*)

Alfie: Yeah, it's true. I bet our boat on it and lost to four aces.

Mercury: (*laughing, mumbles*)

Jon of the Atom: Since when did Alfie speak Mandarin?

Helmet: I believe that's actually Martian he's speaking. You can tell by the way he's mumbling into that big black balloon.

Alfie: (*snapping back into the moment*) Okay, last shirt, number 1, our goalkeeper. (*he pulls out a pink shirt and bright pink hotpants*) We were a player short when I woke up this morning, and I realised we still needed a goalkeeper, so I borrowed this outfit from the twins.

I thought about it a lot. We need someone dependable, someone who's willing to throw themselves into the thick of the action without fear for their own personal safety. I think you'll all agree that there was only one option...

Jon of the Atom: (*whispering*) Jon... of the Atom.

(*Alfie slowly revolves the pink t-shirt as the door to the hut opens and O'Flanahanaman enters*)

O'Flanahanaman: Poflowetry's just coming. He's going to smoke one more bowl. What's happening? Why is everyone looking at me? (he sees "O'FLANAHANAMAN" crudely drawn on the back of the pink t-shirt in black felt tip, then bursts into tears] You spelled my name right! (*long pause*) What is it though?

Alfie: You're our goalkeeper.

O'Flanahanaman: Oh fuck... I thought I was the magic sponge man? I'm hopeless at kickball! Even worse in goal!

Alfie: You'll be fine. Okay everyone, listen up. We're running out of time so I'll make this brief. I did get a dossier on the Plum Island Violets from the twins, but to be honest it wasn't much help. It had a lot of facts about the men of Pit Town's favourite sexual positions, fetish preferences, and locations of birthmarks and moles, but nothing at all about how good they are at football.

Jon of the Atom: I don't know about everyone else, but I'd still quite like to see that dossier. Actually, I'm more interested in the dossier now than I was when I thought it was about football.

Alfie: Luckily old Edson da Silva let me pick his brains a bit. The Plum Island Violets will probably be lining up in a 4-4-2 formation (*blank looks as Alfie pulls a sheet of notepaper from his pocket*) The players to watch out for are Rob Vink, obviously -

Jon of the Atom: Obviously.

Alfie: He's an ex-pro so I'm sure he can still play a bit. I'm expecting him to line up somewhere in midfield. He's the dick I lost the card game to, so if anyone gets a chance to put a foot in early on without making it look too obvious, then go for it. Apart from Vink, there's Edson's grandson, Hiano. Apparently this Brazilian kid is amazingly tricky on the ball, and can score goals for fun, so we'll need to keep an eye on him too. Let's see, who else is there? Oh yeah, there's Tharkey the Nepalese sherpa. He'll run all day and night. Their centre forward is a Russian kid named Shulaev, the tatmaker.
(*laughter*)

Alfie: You're laughing now, but Edson says if this Shulaev dude gets a sniff of goal then he'll bury it, so we need the defence to shackle him.

Simon and Amalfi, you guys will have to figure out that one between you.

Jon of the Atom: Never mind Mandarin, now he's speaking a completely different language. One where he jumbles all the words up and none of it makes sense.

Alfie: Their goalkeeper is meant to be shit hot too. Some guy they call The Cuban.

O'Flanahanaman: I met him this morning. He was a most impressive specimen.

Alfie: The only real weakness I can see is their defence. The Violets are top heavy with quality, but it looks like they'll be packing their back line with some of the nastiest fuckers you're likely to come across, none of whom are particularly good players. We all know Dolly – he's the guy whose ear W chewed off.

W: I did? Woah. I have no recollection of that at all. *(laughing)*

Helmet: What does ear taste like? I imagine it's waxy.

Alfie: There's his brother, Pretty Boy, and the barman, Moses. Both are built like brick shithouses. Also there's Noah Blake, the Aussie pilot with the drink problem -

Flash: It sounds like he's on the wrong team.

Alfie: Anyway, if we can get stuck in about them and rattle them a bit, then we might stand a fighting chance. Let's try and keep it clean though – that Judge has got it in for us and he'll be wanting to stamp his authority on the game, so don't be giving him any reason to be flashing the cards early on. Keep it simple, see if we can go at least the first half without conceding and we'll take it from there. Everyone got that?

(blank looks)

Alfie: Okay, Flower Company! Let's get changed and ready to go!

(folk start peeling off their clothes)

Moss: *(coughing)*

Alfie: Shit, sorry Moss. Okay everyone out so Moss can get changed, and then we'll swap over. *(Everyone begins to file out. Immediately outside the door, six Frat Boys are clumsily attempting to form a giant letter "B" with their bodies. They are having little success and are cursing at each other)*

Moss: Wait, where's everyone going? I was only coughing! Ahh...

While the Flower Company laugh and point at the jumbled bodies of the Frat Boys, Alfie stares across to the Elephant Teapot sitting faded in the sun. Kick-off is only moments away.

November 6, 2009

**PLUM ISLAND VIOLETS Vs THE UTICA FLOWER CO:
LIVE TEXT COMMENTARY**

Kick off 7pm

Pit Town, Plum Island

Attendance – 47

(In the event of a draw, the match will be decided by a penalty shoot-out.)

Team Line-Ups:

PLUM ISLAND VIOLETS

- 1 The Cuban
- 2 Pretty Boy
- 3 Dolly
- 4 Noah Blake
- 5 Moses
- 6 Tharkey
- 7 Sam Tharkey
- 8 Rob Vink (c)
- 9 Alex Shulaev
- 10 Hiano
- 11 Robbie Dillinger

THE UTICA FLOWER COMPANY

- 1 O'Flanahanaman
 - 2 Flash
 - 3 Poflowetry
 - 4 Simon Piler
 - 5 The Amalfi Glow
 - 6 Alfie
 - 7 W
 - 8 Mercury Kolinsky
 - 9 Helmet
 - 10 Moss
 - 11 Jon of the Atom
- (mascot: Jean Claude the rooster)



0.00 Play has been delayed while several players and match officials attempt to catch a runaway rooster. Eventually, Plum Island kick the game off attacking the goals to our left, The Utica Flower Company by process of deduction are attacking the goals to our right. Though not all their team appear to know this.



0.29 FLASH sent off for Kung-Fu kicking ROB VINK in the face.



1.47 THE AMALFI GLOW is booked for dissent.

3.05 ROB VINK is carried off on a stretcher – free kick to Plum Island to be taken by HIANO.



3.56 GOAL! PLUM ISLAND 1-0 THE UTICA FLOWER COMPANY

Free kick taken by HIANO – the wall ducks out of the way and the ball flies into the bottom left corner of the net. The goalkeeper didn't move.

5.45 The game restarts, ROB VINK returns to the field with a suspected broken nose. Mazy dribble by SIMON PILER.

6.45 Continuing mazy dribble by SIMON PILER, now in the direction of his own goal.

7.46 SIMON PILER still going in circles with the ball glued to his feet.



8.32 Referee stops the game and demands to see SIMON PILER'S shoes – they are covered in glue. Free kick to Plum Island and SIMON PILER is booked for unsporting behaviour. Free kick to be taken by HIANO.



9.51 GOAL! PLUM ISLAND 2-0 THE UTICA FLOWER COMPANY

HIANO'S free kick rebounds off the crossbar, hits SIMON PILER in the face, and rolls across the line. The goalkeeper stands there looking bewildered in matching pink t-shirt and hot pants.

12.05 Goal disallowed for The Utica Flower Company – crossed ball from W blasted in from the edge of the box by MERCURY KOLINSKY, but HELMET is judged to be offside, lying in the penalty area, kissing the penalty spot.



13.43 W and THARKEY squaring up to each other – both are yellow carded. Apparently they are arguing about “chickens and a goat”.

14.47 Goal line clearance by THE AMALFI GLOW after a shot from inside the box by ALEX SHULAEV. The Flower Company's goalkeeper was nowhere to be seen.

15.49 Corner kick to Plum Island to be taken by HIANO.



16.31 PENALTY to Plum Island!



ALFIE booked for “accidentally” burning ROB VINK with a cigarette during a goalmouth scramble from the corner kick. A penalty is awarded.



JON OF THE ATOM is booked for making derogatory comments about the referee's shorts.

18.20 PENALTY MISSED!

ROB VINK hits the post. The Flower Company goalkeeper was rooted to the spot, THE AMALFI GLOW clears the rebound.

19.54 Mazy dribble by SIMON PILER – bootless and sockless in the right direction this time.

20.38 Long range effort by MERCURY KOLINKSY is spectacularly saved by THE CUBAN. He's going to take some beating today. Corner to the Flower Company, to be taken by ALFIE.

21.36 Close range "header" from HELMET (it doesn't look like he knew a lot about that one) easily saved by THE CUBAN. Plum Island break with SAM THARKEY in possession.



22.05 GOAL! PLUM ISLAND 3-0 THE UTICA FLOWER COMPANY

SAM THARKEY runs the length of the pitch unchallenged (SIMON PILER slipped on his backside while chasing him), rounds the goalkeeper with ease and slots the ball into the empty net.

24.20 Free kick to The Utica Flower Company - foul on W by MOSES who clumsily sits on him – free kick to be taken by MERCURY KOLINSKY.

25.18 Goal disallowed – Direct free kick ricochets off JON OF THE ATOM's foot and goes in. However, the referee had already blown his whistle to stop play after HELMET pulled one of the corner flags out and is charging around, pretending it is a jousting stick.

26.43 Play stopped after mass fracas in the Plum Island goalmouth. Somebody has bitten off DOLLY's other ear. The Plum Island players

are claiming it was W, but the referee didn't get a clear view of it. W spitting something out into a bucket on the far-side touchline and DOLLY is carried off screaming.



28.29 PRETTY BOY sent off for throwing a punch at W and missing.

29.50 Mazy dribble by SIMON PILER and a cross by ALFIE, flicked on by W, but JON OF THE ATOM misses an open goal.



30.39 GOAL! PLUM ISLAND 4-0 THE UTICA FLOWER COMPANY

Long kick from THE CUBAN bounces over everyone's head and THE AMALFI GLOW leaves it for O'FLANAHANAMAN who is talking to a mysterious character in a corduroy jacket behind the goal. The ball ends up in the back of the net.

32.51 THE AMALFI GLOW given a final warning for wrestling his own keeper to the ground and telling him to "get his fucking act together".

34.14 POFLOWETRY shuffles onto the pitch after ambling over from Cabin 6. He doesn't look like he's seen daylight in a while.

34.50 Long range effort from ROB VINK hits O'FLANAHANAMAN in the face and POFLOWETRY lazily kicks the ball out for a corner. THE AMALFI GLOW applauding his keeper. "That's much better!" he says.

35.45 Breakaway from The Utica Flower Company – O'FLANAHANAMAN goes to punch the ball but punches ROB VINK in the head by accident. SIMON PILER boots the ball up the pitch. It's picked up by MERCURY KOLINSKY who runs forward with it.



36.06 GOAL! PLUM ISLAND 4-1 THE UTICA FLOWER COMPANY

MERCURY KOLINSKY gets tackled by NOAH BLAKE and the ball rolls to the feet of MOSS who booshes it 47 yards towards the top corner of the Plum Island goal. Nobody on either side moves for several seconds after the ball hits the back of the net.

38.01 Free kick to Plum Island after HELMET attempts to rugby tackle THARKEY. Claims he “just wanted to give him a hug”. Free kick to be taken by NOAH BLAKE.

38.23 DOLLY (head heavily bandaged) and ROB VINK (sporting two black eyes) rejoin the game.



39.42 PENALTY to Plum Island!

Long free kick is nodded into the box by ALEX SHULAEV and SIMON PILER dives full stretch to catch it. ‘Eep! I don’t know what came over me. For a moment I was sure we were playing ultimate frisbee,’ he says. THE AMALFI GLOW is restrained by W and ALFIE.

42.41 PENALTY MISSED!

ROB VINK blasts the ball straight down the middle of the goals and it hits O’FLANAHANAMAN in the crown jewels. ALFIE clears. O’FLANAHANAMAN is stretchered off and SIMON PILER replaces him in goals.



44.43 GOAL! PLUM ISLAND 5-1 THE UTICA FLOWER COMPANY

SIMON PILER attempts to throw the ball as far as he can and lands it directly at the feet of HIANO a mere ten metres away. HIANO rolls the ball into the empty net.



45.00 (+2) The referee blows for half-time.

45.00 The second half is delayed as The Utica Flower Company have not come out of their changing room. Officials are attempting to kick the door down.

45.00 Both sides are back on the pitch. No explanation for why The Utica Flower Company took so long. The Utica Flower Company kick-off attacking the goals to our left.

46.08 Left foot shot by ROBBIE DILLINGER from the edge of the box is miraculously saved by O'FLANAHANAMAN. He didn't know much about it but somehow deflected it away with his shoulder after tripping over his own untied bootlaces.

47.34 MERCURY KOLINSKY leaves four Plum Islanders for dead, only to see his raking shot tipped over the bar by THE CUBAN.



48.38 GOAL! PLUM ISLAND 5-2 THE UTICA FLOWER COMPANY

From the resulting corner, ALFIE crosses right onto the head of THE AMALFI GLOW who jumps so high it's like he has springs in his boots. The ball was travelling so fast that the fishing nets have fallen off.

50.32 The game is restarted after the referee carries out a thorough check of THE AMALFI GLOW's boots for springs.



52.25 DOLLY is booked for chasing JON OF THE ATOM the length of the pitch, claiming he "twisted my fucking nipple".

57.57 After a scrappy five minutes, the Flower Company get an amazing chance – cross by MERCURY KOLINSKY and MOSS hits a peach of a curler that floats over THE CUBAN's head and looks

goal-bound all the way... until JON OF THE ATOM attempts a leaping header and somehow nods it over the bar.



73.52 Goal! PLUM ISLAND 5-3 THE UTICA FLOWER COMPANY

Apologies for the technical hitch. A bit of mushroom jam got stuck in our transmitter.

You haven't missed much – both sides are tiring, with The Utica Flower Company having most of the possession, the strings being pulled by MERCURY KOLINSKY in midfield. The only notable event was HELMET using his own crossbar as a climbing frame and falling off, landing on his back. He seems to be okay, got up with a smile and a wave to the small huddle of supporters on the faraway touchline.

Eventually the Flower Company get the breakthrough. After 20 shots in the last five minutes as they mount a blitz on the Plum Island goal, SIMON PILER leaps like a salmon at the front post and the ball bounces off his back, landing at the feet of JON OF THE ATOM making 'I'll get your phone numbers later' gestures at the twins on the Plum Island side of the pitch. He looks up and drives it through the crowd of players into the bottom corner.



77.51 Goal! PLUM ISLAND 5-4 THE UTICA FLOWER COMPANY

Plum Island are in a state of shock. The Utica Flower Company continue to pepper the goal until W charges through two players and lays it off to JON OF THE ATOM who sends THE CUBAN the wrong way and wheels away twirling his shirt above his head.



79.07 JON OF THE ATOM is sent off for taking his top off. He leaves the field saying, 'Only the fucking British could invent a game where you can't even take your fucking shirt off to celebrate.'

81.05 Penalty appeal for the Flower Company turned down. The referee points out to HELMET that even if the “invisible man” did trip him, he is still inside his own box, and the play is happening at the other end of the airstrip.



82.42 Goal! PLUM ISLAND 6-4 THE UTICA FLOWER COMPANY

THE CUBAN punches the ball clear and it falls to the feet of SAM THARKEY. The little kid sprints up the pitch, nutmegging SIMON PILER twice on the way and rolls it into the path of a bloody and bruised ROB VINK who slots home despite O’FLANAHANAMAN’s valiant efforts to trip him up.

85.00 The Flower Company seem defeated, with Plum Island retaining possession. Great interchange of passes between HIANO and ROB VINK while everyone stands around waiting for full time.

88.22 But wait...



Goal! PLUM ISLAND 6-5 THE UTICA FLOWER COMPANY

ALFIE stubs his cigarette out and gets up, sprinting across the airstrip. He pinches the ball from VINK’s toes, plays a one-two with his twin brother, MERCURY KOLINSKY, then a one-two with THE AMALFI GLOW, then a one-two with W, then attempts a one-two with SIMON PILER who misses it completely, but ALFIE collects it on the other side of him, back flicks it over MOSES and lobs THE CUBAN for HELMET to do a diving header into the net.

Turns out that wasn’t a diving header, at all. HELMET has passed out and been sick in the Plum Island goalmouth. He is being helped from the pitch by W and presented with a black balaclava. The referee is looking at his watch – we have 3 minutes of stoppage time left to play.

90.00 (+2) There's some Plum Islanders on the pitch. They think it's all over...

90.00 But it's not!



90.00 (+3) Goal! PLUM ISLAND 6-6 THE UTICA FLOWER COMPANY

Goal kick by O'FLANAHANAMAN headed on by THE AMALFI GLOW, picked up by W who plays a one-two with MERCURY KOLINSKY and motors to the by-line, chopped by a last ditch tackle by DOLLY. But W picks himself up and swings it into the packed penalty area and...

MOSS N rises off the ground, just like Pele did in that movie "Escape To Victory", and in slow motion, she overhead kicks it into the back of the net!

And there's the final whistle. We're going to penalties folks, and I don't know how much more of this I can take. The Plum Islanders on the pitch look rather embarrassed as The Utica Flower Company players rush towards Moss, looking at each other to figure out the correct etiquette for when the only girl in a team scores such a dramatic late equaliser. They pile on her anyway.



Except for HELMET who has run back onto the pitch wearing only his pants and the balaclava he was presented with. He tried to pile onto the referee but bounced off him, and has been sent off for ungentlemanly conduct.

FULL TIME

The Penalty Shoot-Out:

THE AMALFI GLOW

SAVED by THE CUBAN 6-6

THARKEY	MISSED wide of the post	6-6
ALFIE	SAVED by THE CUBAN	6-6
HIANO	HIT THE BAR	6-6
MERCURY KOLINSKY	SAVED by THE CUBAN	6-6
ALEX SHULAEV	MISSED over the bar	6-6
W	SAVED by THE CUBAN	6-6
DOLLY in the sea)	MISSED (so wide it just about landed	6-6
SIMON PILER	SCORES – trips over his own feet sending THE CUBAN the wrong way and the ball agonisingly dribbles over the line	6-7
ROB VINK	Curls the ball towards the top corner but it is SAVED by the outstretched fingertips of O’FLANAHANAMAN. How on earth did such a little guy like that get all the way up there?	6-7

PLUM ISLAND VIOLETS (5) 6 . 6 (1) UTICA FLOWER CO

The Utica Flower Company win 1-0 on penalties

Hiano 3, 44	Moss N 36, 90 (+3)
Piler o.g 9	The Amalfi Glow 48
S.Tharkey 22	Jon of the Atom 73, 77
The Cuban 30	Helmet 86
Rob Vink 82	

...

IT'S ALL OVER! THEY'VE DONE IT! SNATCHED VICTORY FROM THE JAWS OF DEFEAT! YOU REALLY COULDN'T WRITE THIS!

The Utica Flower Company fans shuffled grinning and mightily bewildered onto the pitch, while the players collapsed with exhaustion and good vibrations. Nobody could quite believe it. Rob Vink kicked Dolly in disgust, and The Cuban promptly flattened the Dutchman with a right hook, breaking Vink's nose for a second time that day.

The Judge stepped forward, taking his rusty old rifle from Edson Da Silva, before waving it at Alfie and W. 'Okay, you two, fun's over. You're coming with me,' he said smugly.

'I'm not going,' said Alfie. 'I'm not the captain of the Mardi, so I'm not responsible for that satellite.'

The Judge snorted. 'Who are you trying to kid, boy? My instructions are to extradite the captain of the Mardi back to America tomorrow morning. If you're not the captain, then who is?'

'Actually, none of us -' started Alfie, but W silenced him, stepping forward.

'*I'm* the captain,' he said.

'Well, well, well. Black Cloud. I might have guessed,' said the Judge with a satisfied grin. He pointed the gun at W and nodded towards Pit Town. 'Let's go, sunshine.'

'That's not actually true, *I'm* the captain,' said another voice. Moss stepped forward, her golden wellies gleaming in the sun. The Judge's nose wrinkled as he shielded his eyes from her dazzling footwear.

'She's not the captain,' said Simon Piler, sauntering over, barefoot. 'I am.'

'I'm the captain,' said Poflowetry.

'I thought I was the captain?' said Jon of the Atom. 'No, but seriously, I did.'

Behind them a chorus of voices all said the same thing. '*I'm* the captain!'

The Judge looked at the Flower Company and his piggy little eyes narrowed. Finally his mouth curled up into an insane looking grin. 'I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to give you all two minutes to talk amongst yourselves and decide who the damn captain of your ship is, and then I'm going to present them with this Elephant Teapot before hauling their ass back to the town jail. If nobody claims ownership of the Mardi, then I'm giving your precious little ship to

Vink here. I'll extradite every last one of you, and I'll keep the Elephant Teapot for myself.'

'That's not fair!' protested Moss.

'Since when has the Law ever been fair?' snapped the Judge.

The Utica Flower Company looked at each other until finally Alfie asked, 'Can we talk about this in private for five minutes?' He pointed to the Visitors' hut beside the pitch. 'I think we can reach an agreement.'

The Judge opened up a picnic hamper lying beside the Elephant Teapot on a table, and nodded. 'If that's what it takes to sort this mess out, then go right ahead.' He picked out a mushroom toastie from the hamper and shovelled it into his mouth.

The Utica Flower Company moved slowly towards the wooden hut, and closed the door behind them. The Judge heard raised voices from inside and smiled to himself, tucking into a second toastie. Five minutes passed and the hut finally fell silent. The Judge, now on his third toastie, motioned for old Edson Da Silva to open the door and go inside.

Seconds later, the old man's face was at the door and he was grinning, 'You'll never believe this, but they're gone,' he said. 'All of them.'

The Judge choked on his toastie as the air was suddenly full of flying fizzing plastic juice bottles. He looked up and thought he could see a large man in a corduroy jacket, crouched inside the treeline, hurling them out. There must have been nearly a hundred of them, scattered across the pitch, smoking and hissing. The Judge picked one up and saw the white powder sizzling away beneath a magnesium strip. 'BOMBS!' he howled, tossing the bottle away.

And then the bottles began to explode.

...

In the tunnel, everyone scrambles to safety. The only light comes from a hole ahead, and it isn't much. Reaching into my pocket, I pull out a toastie. I grabbed it at the last minute, for some reason. I didn't really know why. But I guess I realised now. O'Flanahanaman glances towards me as I take a bite, and looks again sharply before whispering, so nobody else can hear, 'Sir... is that a normal toastie?'

I laugh, a little maniacally. 'No... do you want some?'

He looks worried. 'What do you mean? Moss, sir, we have to pull off a really difficult mission now, and you're taking strong... hallu...cigenics?' He stutters on the word, and I think to myself

that he's probably never seen this many drugs in one place, before he arrived on our ship.

'Sorry man. I just... I don't think I can do this. I'm scared, and this is all getting really out of hand. I just need to be in a different head-space. I don't think anyone realised how much I really hate football... and I was on the pitch and everything... I just... want to keep the ship... tropical fruits...'

My speech is just a gas leak.

O'Flanahanaman puts his arm around me, and props me up as we walk. He doesn't say anything.

...

In the darkness of the jungle at the end of the tunnel, the shadowy figures of The Utica Flower Company jostled and whispered. Nobody knew what to do next. Back on the airstrip, plastic bottles continued to pop and bang like fireworks, except there was no "ooh" or "ahhh", just plenty of "ohs" and "aaaarrggghhhhs".

'Is everyone here?' I asked, catching sight of the faces smiling in slivers of rising moonlight that was seeped through the leaves, quickly counting heads. I counted ten. 'Someone's missing. Who's missing?'

'The lunatic with the chicken,' said Jon of the Atom.

'Flash? Where did he go?'

Mercury mumbled something in my ear.

'You've got to go too? Now? Ah shit. Well... thanks for showing up, I guess.'

He shook his head and stared at me. I knew what he was thinking. He was remembering a night a long time ago, when I left them all for dead. His fists bunched before he took a deep breath, and finally he about-turned and went crashing off through the trees.

'Actually, I need to go as well,' piped another voice.

'Simon? What are you talking about?'

'I... uh... there's something I need to resolve,' he said quietly.

'Resolve? Resolve what?' I asked, but he didn't answer. 'Simon?' He was already gone.

I heard O'Flanahanaman gasping behind me. 'Moss, sir? Where are you going?' he called out.

'Must... fix... plane... ghosts... promised,' she called back. She sounded like she was in shock. 'You go... ahead... I'll... catch up... hopefully.'

'Wait!' I shouted. 'About the plane ghosts...' But it was already too late. We watched her disappear into the shadows of the trees.

Things were rapidly falling apart.

W grabbed my elbow. 'We've got to go, dude,' he said urgently. 'Soon as the dust settles, the Plum Islanders will start hunting us down.'

That was when it dawned on me. With us vanishing into the jungle, there was only The Atom Band, NIKO, and the Frat Boys, stopping the Judge and his cronies from taking control of the Mardi. I thought about Bernie Bedlington, the Realist with the big breasts. Who knew what might happen to the Mardi if she got her hands on the ship...

We had to find that Plum Necklace.

And we had to find it fast.

'Come on,' said W, and the remaining figures started crashing as fast as they could through the trees.

...

November 9, 2009

Alfie's Journal #29:

Ramifications of an Ill-Considered Escape Plan

We hunkered down in the roots and leaves at the edge of the jungle, the rocky base of the great volcano ripping out of the ground behind us. Pretty quickly, the snoring and sleepy murmurs drifted across the still, moonlit night. Up above me, hidden in the branches, I could vaguely make out W's shadowy form and the crackling glow of a joint as he puffed smoke rings up towards the stars. To my right, Scrotman snuffled on his corduroy jacket pillow, clutching a near empty bottle of whisky to his chest, his rucksack of leftover weedkiller, icing sugar, and magnesium strips sat by his head. To my right, Helmet shivered on his back, wearing just his pants and the black balaclava W presented to him. He suddenly sat up and stared around, saw me looking back at him. 'Ah fuck! I've done it again, haven't I?' he asked.

'You weren't to know those toasties were spiked,' I told him.

'Toasties?' he asked, looking down at his skinny torso. 'Shit. Where did my clothes go?'

'What exactly do you remember?' I asked.

He lay back down in the undergrowth, wrapping his arms around himself and rolled over to face me. 'A helicopter ride. Some guy called

Tjim. Or maybe it was Jtim. I was supposed to be playing in a charity football match, I think. And something about... a rooster?’

I laughed quietly and told him about the game against the Plum Island Violets. I’d seen a few games of football in my life, but nothing, and I really mean nothing, compared to what happened out there. It was more a war than a game. There were times when I was lying down exhausted on the dusty airstrip, propped up on an elbow and smoking, that I felt like the Mardi and everything on it had finally slipped away from us. And yet somehow, incredibly, we won.

I proceeded to recount to Helmet how he’d eaten the spiked toasties before the match, had caused us to have two goals disallowed for making out with the penalty spot and waving a corner flag around, had fallen off our goal posts, and scored an accidental and crucially important header while passing out and throwing up. Then I reminded him that he’d finally been sent off in the closing minutes for invading the pitch in his pants. He nodded at the bruises on his arms and legs and concluded that perhaps we should all be thankful he’d kept his pants on.

I went on to tell him about the game. How Jean-Claude the rooster had done a runner delaying the kick-off, and how Flash had been sent off in the very first minute for kung-fu kicking Rob Vink in the face, breaking the Dutchman’s nose. I described how we’d gone in at half-time losing 5-1, and how it looked like there wasn’t a hope in hell of us ever getting a result. So lost was the cause that we’d seriously considered making a run for it through W’s tunnel under the floor of the hut. I’d been slumped in a corner with my head in my hands while everyone argued it out amongst each other. To be honest, if it had gone to a vote, I’d have been in favour of making a run for it. Collectively we were all over the place. Helmet was wreaking havoc while the mushroom toasties coursed through his skinny body. Simon was uncharacteristically distracted, while O’Flananhanaman hadn’t done a single thing right except not reacting quickly enough to get his privates out of the way of a penalty kick in the closing minutes of the first half. Really, only my brother, Mercury, The Amalfi Glow, and Moss with her weird golden wellies, had done anything to hint at the possibility we might turn things around in the second half.

The shrill little voice of our secretary/goalkeeper finally silenced them all. He was stood on one of the benches, his hand cupped across his throbbing balls. He was sure we could do it if we just kept going. ‘It’s not just that we *can* do it,’ he’d said to the suddenly quiet room, ‘it’s that we *have* to do it’. By this point, the Plum Islanders were

beating on the door, and Jon of the Atom reluctantly kicked the tunnel cover back down.

And then we did it. Although I'm still not really sure how. An early headed goal by The Amalfi Glow turned the game on its head. Plum Island took their foot off the gas and tried to protect their three goal lead. If they'd simply kept attacking us then I'm sure we would have lost. We grew in confidence, despite their impressive goalkeeper, the guy they called The Cuban, making save after save. The momentum had shifted and we sensed the game was there for the taking. It wasn't even as surprising as it should have been when Jon of the Atom scored twice to bring it back to 5-4, then got himself sent off for celebrating by taking off his shirt. Never doing anything the easy way, it almost went pear-shaped in the last ten minutes, thanks to a breakaway goal scored by the broken-nosed, burned, and battered Vink, who ran away laughing like the Mardi and everything on it was his. But just before the end of ninety minutes, we grabbed one back with Helmet's vomit header to make it 6-5. And we kept on pushing. Because that's what The Utica Flower Company does best. While the celebrating Plum Islanders ran onto the pitch deep into injury time, and the Judge put his whistle to his lips, Moss leapt in the box and scored another wonder goal, this one a slow motion overhead kick. The game went to penalties.

'I thought you said I got sent off?' asked Helmet.

'After the final whistle,' I explained him. 'You weren't in any fit state to take a penalty anyway, so you weren't a great loss.'

We'd sat at the side of the pitch, nervous, exhausted, and stunned to still be in the game. With their keeper being The Cuban (arguably the man of the match before a penalty had been kicked), and ours being O'Flanahanaman (arguably the worst player on the park), the pendulum had swung back in Plum Island's favour. I nominated our penalty takers – Mercury, The Amalfi Glow, W, myself, and Moss. But Moss refused to take one. Apparently the Spirit of Geshe-La hadn't told her how to take penalty kicks. I was tempted to tell her the truth about the so-called "spirits", and that the boots were simply a pair of ordinary golden wellies we'd found in the jungle, but I wasn't sure how she would react. Realising that no amount of persuasion was going to make her change her mind, I asked for a volunteer, but the only one who stepped forward was Simon. Given that his entire game has been a catalogue of catastrophe from start to finish, in my mind he was the last person I wanted to take a penalty, but my requests for an alternative was met with much navel-gazing and talk about the weather.

Of course, our first four penalties were all saved by The Cuban. It looked like we could have blasted shots on target all night long, and wouldn't have beaten him. Thankfully Plum Island's first four penalties were missed. I'm pretty sure Tharkey winked at me after he kicked his penalty a long way wide of the goals. That left Simon Piler for us and Rob Vink for them. Simon ran up, and his bare feet slipped as he went to kick the ball. The Cuban had read every one of us up until that point. He saw that Simon was intending to shoot to his left, but when he slipped, his ankle connected with the ball, sending it off to the right. We watched in amazement as the ball trundled agonisingly over the line, with The Cuban struggling to get back. Miraculously, we were 1-up, and if Vink missed, we'd win. The Dutchman struck the ball sweetly and it curled towards the top corner. I remembered thinking, 'Fuck. There's no way O'Flannyman is going to get to that.' I closed my eyes. When I opened them again, everyone was screaming in delight all around me and our little friend was picking himself up off the ground with the ball in his arms.

Then the Judge came out with his rusty old gun, said he was taking me and W into custody. That's when everyone stepped forward saying they were the captain. We were allowed to go into the changing rooms to discuss it and W started yelling while he shepherded us down into the tunnel. I heard Scrotman's home-made bombs exploding on the airstrip (I'd emailed him on the morning of the game asking him to create a diversion of some kind in case the toasties and carpet bomb plans didn't pan out), and hoped nobody got too seriously injured. We emerged from the tunnel in the middle of the jungle, and both Simon and Moss walked off in opposite directions. I didn't have a clue where Simon was going, and it was too late to tell Moss the truth about Buckley and The Atom Band's projector show on Knob Hill the other night. Also we lost Flash and Mercury who'd apparently arranged to get picked up by Jim immediately after the match. Scrotman caught up with us, and those of us left hiked through the jungle in the dark, with W leading the way. Having hidden out here for the last week, he seemed to know his way around. We were going to wait until dawn before climbing the volcano.

Helmet put his hands behind his head and stared up at the canopy of trees above us. 'Why are we climbing a volcano?'

'To find the Plum Necklace, if it exists,' I told him. 'People say it can stop and start time. We need it to rescue our comatose cook, Robbie, who is trapped inside a white whale at the bottom of some ocean. There's an old man who lives on the volcano. He's called James McLymont, and he's armed and dangerous. He also has the only

existing map of the island, hopefully pinpointing the location of the Plum Necklace. We're going to steal it from him, find the necklace, rescue Robbie, and get the fuck out of here on our ship that we just won back.'

He silently chewed the information over in his head, while W started scaling down the tree above us. 'Wait a minute,' said Helmet, 'assuming we get the map from this guy, and find this necklace that stops time, now we're all fugitives after Scrotman's bomb attack, if we try to escape on that ship of yours, surely the Plum Islanders will have alerted other people off the island, and the second anyone sees the ship, they'll arrest us.'

I fell silent as W landed on the ground, extinguishing his joint underfoot, and anxiously scanning the trees.

'Alfie?' asked Helmet. 'Are you still there?'

'Shhh!' said W. 'Someone's coming.'

I sat up, my heart racing. My first thought was we'd been rumbled. My second thought was that maybe it was crazy old McLymont come to shoot off our fingers one by one. Then I found myself hoping it was Moss and she'd done whatever she thought she had to do with that plane. I heard the rustle of branches behind us, and waited breathlessly until the little figure burst into the clearing. 'Number 2?' asked W. 'What are you doing here?'

I stared at W's young protégée who bizarrely helped steal his own dad's chickens and goat, with his big black Nepalese eyes glimmering in the dark. He was still wearing the purple strip of the Plum Island Violets. 'I came to warn you that they're getting a posse together. They're going to come looking for you guys first thing in the morning,' gasped Sam Tharkey.

'That was an awesome game you played against us today,' said W, patting the kid hard between the shoulderblades. 'You really ripped us open with those runs of yours.'

'Thanks,' said the boy.

'What's going on back there? Is everyone alright? Did the helicopter get away safely?' I asked him.

'Everyone is okay,' said Sam. 'They islanders ran for cover when the bombs came out of the jungle. There was a helicopter, yes. It got away safely. The Judge's hair got set on fire, and he started raving about aliens. Uzoidos, or something. He's not been the same since. They had to lock him in one of the huts by the airstrip.'

'That'll be the toasties talking,' I said.

'With the Judge locked up, Rob Vink took charge of Pit Town. Him, Dolly, Moses, Pretty Boy, Santiago Lopez, and Noah Blake are

armed with machetes, and Vink took the Judge's rifle. My father, the Da Silvas, and The Cuban all refused to help. They've been locked up in the other hut with the rest of your ship guys. The weird ones with the big pumpkin computer under the umbrella.'

'The Atom Band and NIKO,' I said.

'Also those sporty looking guys in the green and blue tracksuits, the ones who were doing the star jumps and singing the "Moss-Moss-Moss" songs during the game - they got locked up too. Everyone else is too afraid to come out of their houses.'

This was turning into a fucktastrophe with more limbs and moving parts than even I'd anticipated. 'What are we going to do?' I asked W.

'We're going to get some sleep,' he said. 'We'll make our move at first light. To be honest, I'm less scared of those guys catching up with us, than I am of the old hermit from the volcano. I've seen him a few times, stalking around the jungle. He carries a hunting rifle with him at all times and he's a mean shot. I saw him bag a boar, and I wouldn't doubt for a second that he'd use that rifle on us given half a chance.'

I watched him and the Tharkey kid climb their own trees on either side of the clearing and settle down up high up in the moonlit branches. I tried to close my eyes, even though I knew there wasn't much chance of me getting any sleep that night. 'The real Alfie got me mixed up in some seriously weird shit before, but I think this is taking weird shit to a whole new level,' murmured Helmet, rolling over and instantly falling asleep.

The sun rose quickly along with the heat as W climbed down from his tree, and surveyed the troops with his bloodshot eyes. We were a peculiar looking bunch: me, W, little Sam, Helmet who'd risen early and fashioned himself a cloak of jungle branches and leaves, Jon of the Atom, The Amalfi Glow, Scrotman cracking open a can of beer from his backpack, Poflowetry rolling up a cigarette under a tree, and O'Flanahanan bustling about, looking for something to do.

'Did anyone bring any food? I'm starving,' asked Jon, yawning and looking around.

Everyone looked at each other and shook their heads, while I reached into W's rucksack and pulled out a tin of black face paint. 'There's a small grove about a hundred metres that way,' said W, pointing through the trees, 'loads of fruit, coconuts, and shit.'

'I'll go get some while you guys figure out a plan,' volunteered O'Flanahanan.

‘Just be careful,’ said W. ‘Don’t stray too close to the foot of the volcano in case that crazy old hermit gets a look at you.’

O’Flahananaman saluted, clicked his heels together, and vanished into the undergrowth.

‘Man, he’s good. We could do with another five of him,’ said W as he watched him go.

‘What’s the plan then?’ asked The Amalfi Glow.

All eyes turned to me. ‘Well, I guess we start climbing the volcano and steal the map,’ I told them. ‘Anyone got any suggestions how we should go about it?’

‘I reckon we should split up into two groups,’ said W. ‘Half of us climb the volcano from the east, and half of us from the west. The old guy must be living somewhere inside the caldera, or in a cave higher up. He can’t be in two places at the same time, so if we’re coming at it from two different directions, then we stand a better chance.’

‘How long’s it going to take for us to climb that thing?’ asked Jon.

‘Looks like at least a day of walking. It’ll be dark by the time we reach the summit,’ grumbled Scrotman.

All eyes turned to the volcano. ‘Alright, let’s split up into two teams,’ I said. ‘I’ll take one group west and W can take another group east. It’s just a case of deciding who’s in each team.’

‘Why can’t I be in charge of a group?’ asked Jon.

‘Because we’ve been around the island, and you haven’t,’ I told him. ‘You can pick who you’re going with. How about that?’

His eyes scanned the group.

‘Any time today, mate,’ said The Amalfi Glow.

‘I’m just trying to figure out who’s the most expendable,’ said Jon. ‘Like in Star Trek, you know. Who are the guys in the red shirts? So as I can be on the other team. I mean, obviously Alfie is Kirk, and W here is Spock -’

‘You take Jon,’ I said to W, daubing the black face paint across my nose and cheeks and passing the tin around. ‘I’ll end up strangling him if he goes with me.’

‘Not if I strangle you first,’ said Jon.

‘Why don’t we just split up into Fifeclub and non-Fifeclub?’ suggested The Amalfi Glow. ‘Alfie, Helmet, Scrotman, and I will go one way, and you five go the other. That’ll save us arguing over it. Plus I don’t want to be in the same team as Jon either.’

‘Hey! The feeling’s mutual, buddy!’ said Jon. ‘You just watch who gets to the top of that volcano first. Team America is going to kick some ass!’

‘Isn’t O’Flanahanaman Irish?’ I asked. ‘And Sam here’s a native Plum Islander.’

‘Yeah, well, we’ll be showing them the U - S - A way, isn’t that right fellas?’ said Jon, holding his hand up, looking for a high-five.

Nobody got a chance to ignore him. A single gunshot rang out from where O’Flanahan walked off, reverberating through the trees. A second shot quickly followed. Everyone jumped for cover, as seconds later the sound of crashing and tearing branches began to move menacingly towards us. I ducked behind a tree, getting as low to the ground as possible, until I hear O’Flanahanamanaman’s shrill voice shouting, ‘They’re dead! Oh god! They’re dead!’

Our painted faces appeared in various hiding places around the clearing. ‘What happened?’ asked W as he grabbed the sobbing little man by the shoulders and shook him.

He looked up at us, trembling with fear. ‘It’s Walter and Wilfred. I stumbled over them in a clearing. They were there picking this plant...’ He was so distraught, he could barely get the words out. ‘He must have seen us from up on the volcano. He shot them both! Oh gaaawd!’

‘You saw him?’ I asked. ‘It couldn’t have been Vink and the others?’

‘I didn’t see him, no, but the shots came from up the s-s-slope, he sh-sh-shot them both in the head and I ran... I r-r-ran away!’

‘Okay, we need to get moving’, said W, slinging his rucksack over his shoulder. ‘I’m sorry, but those scientist buddies of yours were fine operatives and hopefully they took out life insurance policies like I advised them, but our plan hasn’t changed. Now we’ve seen how dangerous this old McLymont guy can be, we need to move fast, and discreetly. O’Flanahanaman, I’m sorry to do this to you, but you’re on Team America.’

The distraught little secretary tried to protest, but everyone was grabbing their belongings and splitting into two groups, nervously looking through the trees, expecting to see the grizzly old man bearing down on us with his rifle. ‘Hey, where’s Poflowetry?’ I asked.

‘He ran off that way, through the jungle,’ said The Amalfi Glow, pointing. ‘If he’d run half as fast at the football, then he’d have been the quickest man on the airstrip.’

‘Well, Team America will head back that way looking for him and then double-back round to climb the volcano,’ said W. ‘I don’t know about the rest of you, but I don’t want to hang around here another moment.’

We shook hands. ‘See you on the summit,’ I said.

‘We’ll be waiting for you,’ said Jon with a grin.

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November 9, 2009

O’Flanahanaman’s Journal:
Team America Progress Report

I write this journal by the light of the silvery moon, close to the summit of a volcano, on a tropical island that is literally nowhere, wearing a sweat-drenched pink cotton t-shirt and matching pink sweaty hot pants. My life in the last two weeks has been something of a blur, and it gets blurrier with every passing day. From my scientific research on the trash island, to the position of Company Secretary. From a kickball match I instigated, that ended with us escaping into the jungle, to yesterday morning when I saw two of my former colleagues shot dead right in front of me. It seems like it was only a few days ago that for the first time ever I actually felt useful. Now I just feel very, very scared.

Every time I close my eyes, I see Walter and Wilfred, replaying the incident over and over in my mind, wondering if there was something I could have done differently. They are standing in the grove, plucking pods from a bright green plant at the edge of the volcano. Both are dressed in the same black uniforms as W and the little Tharkey kid. Black pants, black shirts, black balaclavas. They smile when they see me, and we laugh about my hotpants. We shake hands. And then a small black hole appears in Walter’s forehead, and he collapses, like a puppet whose strings were suddenly cut. I hear the gunshot, and it’s as if my mind is playing catch-up with my eyes. Wilfred turns to me, his face contorted with confusion, then he drops to his knees as a second shot is fired. The bullet exits his head above his right eye, shooting a bright red tear of blood across his face. He crumples like a ragdoll. I resist the urge to throw up, turning on my heels, and I run.

It’s hard to know what to say about them. We didn’t work together long, assigned by the same organization but from different branches to carry out the tests. We’d spent two weeks camped amongst the trash beneath the South Specific stars. I wish I’d gotten to know them better, stopped and asked them more questions about their lives,

instead of being so damn busy all the time. I wonder whether they have wives and children back home. I wonder if I'll make it out of this alive, so as I can call our head office and inform them what happened, even though I don't really know what happened.

Darkness fell at the end of our first day climbing the volcano, and we stopped an hour from the lip of the crater. After splitting from "Team Fifeclub" at the edge of the jungle, "Team America" doubled back through the trees in search of Flowpoetry, but he was nowhere to be seen. The idea that one of our crew was missing in the jungle on this mysterious island, while a psychotic rifle-toting madman is on the prowl, and a posse of machete-wielding islanders are hunting us down, seemed to bother me a lot more than the rest of our group. For all the Flower Company are amiable, and without question some of the most interesting people I have ever met, their flagrant disregard for one another's safety is appalling. Personally, I thought locating Flowpoetry should have been top of our list of priorities, but the rest of them insisted we press on with the mission to steal this map and find the Plum Necklace. The bizarre and almost blind collective belief in this story Alfie has spun about a magical artefact that is somehow going to miraculously right everything, puzzles me greatly. Even if such a necklace existed, and we somehow survive to find it, it won't bring back Walter and Wilfred. And if it doesn't exist, what then? An actual war with the Plum Islanders? I played paintball once and spent the entire afternoon hiding in a hole until someone found me and shot me repeatedly. It really hurt.

I worry as well about Mr W. He smokes so much that he even made us take a detour yesterday, setting us back a whole hour, just so he could visit a section of jungle where the towering green plants grew in abundance. He chain smokes pure grass joints, while the Tharkey child seems to hang on his every wasted word. The fourth member of Team America, this Jon of the Atom fellow, I find to be quite the conundrum. He's sullen and withdrawn one minute, and then won't shut up the next. He niggles me while we climb by singing lines from a song he's writing about me. It's not a very complimentary song. If I'd had my way, I'd have gone with Team Fifeclub. I'm sure they'll be at the top by now.

The east face climb was treacherous to say the least, and damn hard work too. Several times we had to turn back after finding precarious ledges that withered to impossible dead ends. Free climbing has never appeared on my bucket list of things I'd like to do before I die, and at this rate there is every chance I'm not going to get to do any of the other things on the list. If I live to see the other side of this

misadventure, I promise the first thing I'll do is enrol myself in line-dancing classes.

And yet, for everything that is bothering me, the thing that bothers me most is the feeling we're being watched. Thankfully there has been no sign of old McLymont, but every now and then I get the horrible sensation that someone - or something - knows exactly where we are, and is creeping along in our wake. Whenever I look back down the steep rocky slopes, all I see are shadows and emptiness, and I chalk it up to a combination of hot sun and stress-induced paranoia. There is no doubt that if Vink really has gotten a posse together, that they'll already be scaling the volcano in pursuit. Real or not, the sensation persists.

So perilous has the climb become, that we have stopped for the night. The air is much cooler this high up, and we huddle together in a crevice between the jagged rocks. Even Jon seems subdued, picking at the leftover husks of fruit that we brought and have already consumed. W informed us that we'll be making the final push for the top first thing in the morning. Who or what awaits us is anyone's guess, but I suspect that whatever it is, it's not going to be much fun. On nights like this, you find yourself wishing people like Moss or Simon had come along. At least they have a sensibility about them that drags against the stumbling feet of madness, making it impossible to fully topple over the edge. But with Alfie and W spearheading this crackpot suicide mission, I cannot help but feel like we are all doomed. With the best of intentions, our Not Captain seems to be leading us from disaster to disaster, always trying to unpick the knots of the past whilst getting increasingly tangled in the strings of the future. As for W, well, "unpredictable" doesn't come close.

I sleep tonight with a heavy heart, wondering if this journal entry might very well be the last you ever hear of me.

O'Flanahanaman

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November 10, 2009

Alfie's Journal #30:
Mrs Wolf



I miss the sea. I miss the ship. I miss waking up and stomping around on the warm deck, hoping someone else will wake up. I miss walking into a room and thinking how shit it is, then going and fetching a srench to dismantle it for fun. All the months I've spent at sea, and I'm still no sailor. We've got a temperamental supercomputer called NIKO to guide us, and all that's required from me is to punch in some numbers into the navigation system, then away we go. I don't even get the number punching right sometimes.

What I'm trying to say is we've been on this fucked up island too long. The ground beneath my feet doesn't sway like it should. There's nowhere to hide like a cluttered old bunk. Everywhere you go, you are hemmed in by stuff and things, and situations outwith your control. And that's the feeling that drives me up the side of the volcano.

We made good progress on the first day, walking in bursts, covering ground quickly, and resting briefly before pushing on again. Scrotman and Helmet were uncharacteristically serious and focused, while The Amalfi Glow made for good company, gritting his teeth while I racked his brain. ‘What if I can get the satellite back, do you reckon they’d drop the charges? Could we pin it on someone else? How’s the Peruvian situation bearing up? Did my two weeks in space take the heat off or am I still a wanted revolutionary?’

‘Fuck knows,’ he replied, grimacing as sweat dripped from his brow. He stood up, hands on knees, looking back down the slope. ‘How much longer do you think this is going to take?’

‘We’ll need to walk through the night to reach the top,’ said Scrotman from above us, his corduroy jacket tied around his waist, draining the last drops from a can of beer and tossing it away.

We continued the climb for a good couple of hours that first night, allowing the moon to light our way, but pretty soon the terrain became more ragged, scree tumbling away beneath our hands and feet, and we decided to call it a day. I supped a warm can of Scrotman’s beer (dished out begrudgingly) and thought about the endless permutations and possibilities of this particular adventure. It felt fucking nuts pinning all our hopes on some magical artefact that probably didn’t exist, but the Plum Necklace was all we had left. I tried to imagine how Team America were doing on the eastern side of the volcano. Having not encountered the old wolf-man, it seemed probable that they’d come up against him. I wondered if we would hear the gunshots all the way over here? I looked at the rest of Team Fifeclub, quiet, contemplative, drinking to the stars and their own personal ghosts, and I grinned at the thought of Jon, W, and O’Flanahanamanan walking together. If the old man didn’t get them, there was every chance they’d end up killing each other.

And then I fell asleep. For the first time in a week, I think, the climb and the beer combining. Before I even realised it, Scrotman was kicking me, and I stared up at his face in the morning sun.

‘Get up,’ he said. ‘If we push on, we can make the summit before the end of today. I don’t know about you, but I don’t fancy trying to negotiate THAT in the moonlit.’ He pointed at the increasingly steep face of harsh grey rock above us.

He was wrong of course. Come nightfall on the second day we were still climbing. It was dark for several hours before we hauled our exhausted bodies over the lip of the volcano, panting hard, muscles burning from the perilous climb. The Amalfi Glow collapsed flat on his back on a narrow ledge inside the caldera, groaning. ‘Fucking hell,’

he said, 'there must have been at least seven or eight times I thought I was going to die back there.'

We were all too weary to laugh, hunched down against the rock-face. And that was when we saw it. The basin of the volcano stretched down several hundred metres. Built into the rock near the base of the crater, was clearly a building of some kind, its polished angular shape in stark contrast to the rugged volcanic rock walls. 'That'll be old McLymont's pad then,' said Helmet, chewing his bottom lip and rearranging his cloak of leaves.

'I always figured he would live in a cave,' I told them as I lit a cigarette.

'Alfie! What the fuck are you doing?' snapped Scrotman. 'What if he's looking up and sees your cigarette glowing?'

I stubbed it out reluctantly. 'No sign of Team America then,' I said, pointing over to the opposite side of the volcano.

'Maybe they're down there already?' suggested The Amalfi Glow.

We all laughed at how ridiculous that sounded.

'So have we got a plan for this part?' he asked.

All three of them turned to me. 'We're The Utica Flower Company,' I told them. 'We make this shit up as we go along.' I stood up and began to climb down towards the building.

As we got closer, the building seems to change. From up on the lip of the volcano, it looked like a house, but as we picked our way down the inside of the crater, you could clearly see that it was more like a single-storey office block, with blinds drawn across two windows either side of a sturdy looking metal door. There were no lights on inside. Eventually we crept across the wide ledge in front of it, and moved towards the door.

'How are we going to get in?' asked The Amalfi Glow, his voice sounding strained from exhaustion and the jangling nerves of the moment.

I put my hand on the door handle and gently turned it. I wasn't surprised when it clicked and opened. What did surprise me though, was the sound of shattering glass to my right. It was startlingly loud, echoing around inside the vast volcanic bowl. We turned to see Helmet grinning back at us in the moonlight, stood in front of the broken window, clapping the dust from his hands. It was dust from a rock he'd just hurled, smashing the pane. 'What the fuck did you do that for?' I screeched. 'The fucking door was open!'

He tugged apologetically at his balaclava and whispered, 'Sorry, I got carried away.'

‘You have to think before you do something! That was loud enough to wake the whole fucking island! If there’s anyone in there who didn’t know we’re here, then they fucking do now!’ I told him.

‘There’s nobody here,’ said Scrotman from the other side of the window, having ghosted past me into the dark building.

I followed The Amalfi Glow inside, Helmet shuffling along sheepishly behind us. We found ourselves inside a large, low-ceilinged, and dark rectangular room. Pale moonlight streamed in through the broken window, illuminating the small rock amidst shards of broken glass on a cream carpet. The strangest thing about the room was the smell. It smelled new. Sterile like a modern office block, all armchair leather and synthetic flowers, gleaming chrome and polished mirrors. ‘What the fuck is this place?’ asked The Amalfi Glow somewhere to my left in the darkness.

‘Welcome to Wolf Productions,’ said a voice from the far end of the room as ceiling lights switched on. Sitting at a reception desk in front of a gleaming chrome elevator, was a woman in her late sixties. She had angular silver hair, and broad shoulders inside a business suit. ‘My husband was hoping you wouldn’t stumble over our production suite. I guess he underestimated you,’ she said, smiling at us. ‘You’re quite the stars,’ she added, pointing to a CCTV camera high up on the wall to our right.



The four of us traded glances. Whatever we were expecting, it wasn’t this. Amalfi and I were in our Flower Company football strips,

Scrotman was in his dirty white t-shirt and jeans, corduroy jacket tied around his waist, and Helmet was in his pants and balaclava, cloak of tattered leaves wrapped around his shoulders. The spotlights seemed to accentuate just how stupid we looked. ‘I’m sorry,’ I said, staring up at the CCTV camera with its little red light flashing on top, ‘but who the fuck are you?’

The woman stood up behind the desk. She was a big woman, close to six feet tall, with the physique of a man. She padded on flat shoes towards us, speaking in that deep, rich voice that moments ago had freaked the living shit out of me in the dark. ‘Oh, how rude of me,’ she said. ‘I imagine this isn’t easy for any of you to digest. I honestly can’t believe you climbed the volcano. My husband was certain you would turn back. Of course, he’s out filming your friends as we speak. “Team America” I believe you called them. I think for comedy value alone, he felt like he should concentrate the handheld shots on them.’

‘How do you know about Team America?’ I asked.

She laughed and shook her head, ‘Oh Alfie! We know pretty much everything that’s been happening here on Uahuka.’

Scrotman snorted to my left and stared at me. ‘What? “You’re a hooker”? That’s fucking funny.’

‘Right this way, boys,’ she told us, heading towards a wooden door on the right of the lift. ‘My husband’s office is through here. I’m sure he won’t mind if I put the kettle on and try my best to explain what’s been happening.’

I looked left and right at Team Fifeclub. Scrotman shrugged, The Amalfi Glow scratched his stubble pensively, and Helmet said, ‘A brew sounds good to me,’ before shuffling off in his leaf cloak after her.

We sat down in comfortable leather armchairs in the smaller office next door, while the woman poured us steaming black coffee from an urn, before sitting down in the executive chair behind the desk. The Amalfi Glow nudged me and pointed at a large yellow map framed on the wall behind the desk.

‘Is that -?’ I asked, pointing up at it.

‘Plum Island? It is indeed,’ she replied, ‘though on all the maps of the world you’ll find it under the name Uahuka.’

Helmet laughed and whispered to Scrotman, ‘I only just got it, man. That *is* fucking funny.’

The woman continued unfazed. ‘I’m sorry, I should introduce myself. My name is Meredith Wolf, and my husband is, as you’ve probably figured out for yourselves, James Wolf.’ My mind flashed back to Tharkey on our walk around the island, howling at the sky.

‘I thought his name was McLymont?’ said The Amalfi Glow.

‘My husband is a filmmaker,’ she told us. ‘We were here on location, about to start filming “The Legend of the Plum Necklace”, when your ship showed up. It took us quite by surprise. We were in the middle of shooting a scene out on the trash island when one of your crew sailed out with a cast member who had regrettably gotten rather drunk. There was an altercation between the two. Oh, you should see some of the footage - absolutely horrific - but at the same time, so... well, so *real*. My husband instantly saw an opportunity, a change in direction. Instead of the big budget action adventure he’d been planning on making for the last two years of his life, he threw everything at this new improvised version of the film. We placed hidden cameras all over “Pit Town” and had an emergency meeting with the cast, instructing them to adapt to the situation as it unfolded. And boy did it unfold!’

‘You mean... you’re telling me that this is a fucking film?’ I asked, so stunned that I felt like falling off my chair.

‘Yes!’ she cried orgasmically. ‘Within days of the ship’s arrival, you’d shown up with your crazy story about flying to the moon and back. I mean, this was pure MOVIE GOLD. Thankfully your sense of direction is so bad that Kiko – that’s Tharkey to you – was able to keep you away from the real town on the other side of the island. And of course we had Sean, our little inside man pulling the strings.’ She beamed smugly.

‘Sean?’ I asked.

‘Sorry, O’Flanahanaman,’ said Meredith Wolf, the name like a baseball bat to my head. ‘If it wasn’t for his quick thinking, adopting the character and winning your trust, I suspect we would never have pulled it off. As soon as my husband gets back, you *must* see some of the footage. The soccer match was exquisite!’

Helmet slurped loudly from his coffee cup. ‘So how does this film end?’ he asked.

She opened her arms as if to say ‘like this’.

‘So there’s no Plum Necklace then?’ asked Helmet.

Meredith Wolf burst out laughing and leaned across the table, gushing, ‘Helmet, darling, you are a star. You *will* be a star. You all will.’ She turned to Scrotman and said, ‘that was quite the stunt you pulled back there with the homemade bombs, Mr Scrotman. Thankfully, we knew about it in advance, keeping a track of everything that was going out through the twins’ laptop and phones. We were well prepared for the carnage you caused.’

‘Wait, the twins?’ I asked, feeling my guts plummet. ‘How much did you... I mean, what exactly did you see when I was in that cell?’

‘EVERYTHING!’ she cried, looking me up and down. ‘Quite literally.’ She giggled and batted her eyelashes.

‘Wait a minute...’ I said. ‘I’m really struggling to get my head around this.’

‘Perfectly understandable. We’ve flown in a team of psychiatrists to make sure everyone comes out of this intact. And of course a *lot* richer.’

‘No, I mean... this just can’t be right. What about the two scientists? What were their names again? Walter and Wilson or something? The ones who got shot.’

‘You actually saw their bodies?’ she asked with a smirk.

‘Well, no... but... you’re saying that the card game... that EVERYTHING was set up?’

‘Oh Alfie! Four kings and four aces in the same deal? Even you’re not *that* naive. EVERYTHING you saw was orchestrated. EVERYTHING! Sure, we had to improvise every now and again, but you didn’t seriously believe there was an island that couldn’t be drawn on a map, did you?’

‘My hand didn’t move!’

‘Very powerful magnets,’ she said.

‘What about the Jazz Monk’s ghost?’ I asked, my head spinning. ‘You made all that up? You dressed someone up?’ Suddenly it dawned on me. ‘You read my journals. You knew me inside out and played me like a fucking idiot. You fuckers!’ I snapped, jumping up from my seat.

She continued to smile, impervious to my outburst while The Amalfi Glow grabbed my arm and sat me down again. ‘Just relax,’ he told me. ‘Be thankful there’s no crazy old man with a rifle running around.’

‘Between you and me, my husband *is* a crazy old man. But it’s true, Mr Glow, you’re all perfectly safe.’ She stood up slowly while Scrotman fumbled with a pile of business cards that were neatly stacked in a plastic holder on the table. ‘I’ll let him know you’ve arrived. We’ll have you airlifted back down to the town before you know it. And truly, boys, I *am* sorry. But please... reserve your judgement until after you’ve seen the film footage. I promise you, once you’ve seen it you’ll know we did the right thing.’

‘Shit, does this mean I’m going to have to watch me making a tit of myself at the football?’ asked Helmet, slumping back in his chair and draining the last of his coffee.

Meredith Wolf began to skirt around the table as I sank my head into my palms, eyes falling on the business card still twirling in Scrotman's hands. On it was a black silhouette of a wolf with the words "WOLF PRODUCTIONS" emblazoned beside it.

It all happened so fast that even after it happened I wasn't sure whether it really happened or not. I hauled the tin of face paint from the rucksack at my feet, hurdled over an astounded Scrotman, and brought down the tin with a horrific thud on the back of Meredith Wolf's head, before watching her collapse face down and motionless on the floor. The black paint streaked like tears down the walls, pooling in reflective puddles on the cream carpet around her head.

'Alfie! You fucking killed her!' yelled Helmet, leaping to his feet, spilling my coffee all over the desk as he gesturing at the CCTV camera in the corner of the room.

I stood there, hands trembling, the last of the paint trickling from the tin.

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November 10, 2009

Alfie's Journal #31:
The Luckiest Man in the Universe

'Oh fuck! You killed her!' cried Helmet, the colour draining from his face as he slumped back down in his seat. 'What have you done? What happened to you? You're fucked.'

'Firstly, she's not dead,' I told him, crouching down and tugging the hair at the nape of her neck. 'And secondly, she's not even a she. She's a he.' I unrolled the paint-soaked wig and latex from Meredith Wolf's head, nodding at the business card Scrotman was still holding. 'Wolf Productions,' I said. 'I know this is a quite incredible coincidence, but these are the people I've been ordering masks from.'

'Scrotman! He's pulling her head off!' yelled Helmet, turning a violent shade of green and toppling out of his seat onto the floor.

'What masks?' Scrotman asked me.

'These masks,' I said, holding up the gelatinous mask in the light. 'They're so lifelike, aren't they? I used them for months on the ship. Actually, I ordered some new ones not so long ago, but haven't had a chance to try them on yet.'

‘So who is he?’ asked The Amalfi Glow, pointing down at the old man with trimmed grey hair and a neatly clipped beard, now stirring on the floor and groaning groggily. Were he not soaked in black paint and wearing a woman’s business suit, you might even be tempted to say he looked distinguished.

‘I’m guessing this is James McLymont,’ I told them. ‘That was quite the story he spun back there, wasn’t it? I very nearly believed it myself until I twigged on the whole Wolf Productions connection. I wouldn’t drink more of that coffee either. Judging by the look of Helmet, I think he was trying to drug us. Anybody got something we can use to tie him up?’

‘Helmet or the guy on the floor?’ asked Scrotman.

The Amalfi Glow held out a green and white scarf. ‘This any good?’

‘A Celtic scarf? Why did you bring a Celtic scarf?’ I asked.

‘Are you alright, Helmet?’ asked The Amalfi Glow.

‘I’m falling out of a plane!’ screamed Helmet, grabbing hold of Amalfi’s ankle and thrashing around on the floor.

‘He’s fine,’ said Scrotman.

As James McLymont woke up, blinking back stars, we bound his wrists together behind his back with The Amalfi Glow’s scarf, and lowered him into the chair behind the desk. He looked up at us, his eyeballs rolling around in his skull. Meanwhile, Helmet was attempting to climb on top of a filing cabinet in the corner. It promptly crashed down, spewing out a blizzard of paperwork, sheets and sheets of strange scribbled symbols fluttering around the room. ‘I don’t want to buy a ticket!’ he cried, collapsing behind the toppled cabinet.

‘Ah Chrisht!’ muttered the old man. He was foaming at the mouth, his head lolling around on his neck as he finally realised what had happened. Seeing his papers scattered all over the floor, he yelled, ‘That’sh thirty fucking yearsh of resresearch there, you fucking idiotsh!’

‘Do you smell stars?’ asked Helmet from behind the cabinet.

‘Hold on...’ said The Amalfi Glow, eyes narrowing as he got a good look at the old man. ‘You’re Sean Connery...’

‘Don’t be sho fucking ridiculoush!’ snapped McLymont.

‘No... you are,’ said The Amalfi Glow. ‘I’d know that face and voice anywhere.’ He turned to me and asked, ‘You don’t think that’s another mask, do you? An ingenious double-disguise? I mean, he was pretty convincing as a woman, and he’s equally convincing as Sean Connery.’

‘Your paranoia ish the coffee talking,’ said McLymont. ‘I put enough shedativesh and meshcaline into that urn, that a shingle cup

was enough to knock out ten horshees. Your caped friend... who is TRASHING MY FUCKING RESHEARCH! He should be in a fucking coma!

‘What’s are horshees?’ asked Scrotman, cracking open his last can of beer, allowing the froth to spill onto the cream carpet.

‘We all win! Waheeeeeeeeeeee!’ calls Helmet, waving a wilted leaf of surrender.

I looked at James McLymont, hunched in the seat, glaring at us. I had to admit that he did look *eerily* like Sean Connery. He clocked me staring and asked, ‘Okay then, what ish it you want? Hmm? I shupposhe you’re looking for the Plum Necklashe. Well, you’ve come to the wrong plashe. I’ve been searching for it for the lasht thirty yearsh. It’sh a pipe dream. A cashtle in the shky -’

Scrotman cleared his throat and motioned for him to stop. ‘Listen, old man, I know you’ve got a speech impediment and everything, but could you lay off the s words, it’s starting to get on my tits.’

‘Titsh!’ shouted Helmet, still waving the leaf around.

‘If the Plum Necklace doesn’t exist, then what are all these sheets of paper for?’ asked The Amalfi Glow, picking one up. ‘If you ask me, it looks like somebody’s been trying to crack a code.’

‘Good question, Amalfi,’ I said.

‘Thanks. Also, what about that little x on your map up there? Coincidence that it’s in the very place your little office is set up?’

‘Another great question, Amalfi. You’re on fire!’ I told him.

‘I’m your attorney. It’s what you pay me for,’ he said.

The old man sat quietly for a moment, like he was weighing up the next move in the tense opening exchanges of a chess match. Finally he said, ‘Lishen, I’m jusht a simple mashk-maker. Let me show you.’

The elevator lurched and we began to descend. James McLymont stood in the middle, a look of sheer disgust written across his paint-stained face as Helmet rested his head against his shoulder, drooling while he stared at our reflections in the gleaming mirrors. ‘Are you taking us to the titsh, Sean?’ asked Helmet, looking up at him with black eyes, deep as a pair of abysses.

The elevator shuddered to a halt, the doors slid open, and we stepped out into a small laboratory. It was a rectangular room with a blue tiled floor and windowless white walls. In front of us were two long tables covered in beakers, test tubes, surgical tools, rolls of plastic, and trays of purple liquid. To our right, about fifty mannequin heads with varying sized features and skull shapes stared eyeless atop long metal poles. The elevator appeared to be the only way in or out of

the room. ‘Shee,’ said McLymont, nodding, ‘it’sh jusht like I told you. I make mashks.’

‘You don’t make titsh?’ asked Helmet.

‘NO! I DON’T MAKE TITSH,’ said McLymont emphatically.

Ever the scientist, Scrotman had walked around behind the first table. He placed his can of beer on the counter and dipped his finger in the purple tray of liquid before holding it up to his nose and sniffing. ‘It’sh a type of phoshphor,’ explained McLymont. ‘It growsh at the bottom of the volcano. I combine it with the laytexsh to form a shkinlike shubshtansh.’

‘Shrubshtansh?’ asked Helmet, checking the leaves on his shoulders and walking directly into a wall with an ‘Oof! I didn’t see that coming!’

‘Sounds a bit fishy to me,’ said Scrotman.

‘I agree,’ said The Amalfi Glow, over at the mannequin heads, spinning one curiously at the top of its pole. ‘There must be another room in this place somewhere. All that security. Something’s not right.’

‘We should blow it up. Blow it all up. Then we’d see,’ said Scrotman. ‘I’ve still got plenty of leftover bomb ingredients in my rucksack.’

The old man eyed him nervously as Scrotman grinned and started unpacking tupperware boxes and rolls of magnesium from his backpack, placing them on the counter beside his can of beer. ‘Wait!’ shouted McLymont, so urgently that it caused Helmet to dive for cover across the table at the back of the room, knocking two racks of test tubes and several beakers to the floor. ‘Okay, okay! I’ll show you! For all the good it will fucking do!’ He nodded back to the elevator. ‘There’sh a hidden floor panel in the elevator, with a ladder that leadsh down. It’sh quite a way sho you’ll need to untie me first.’

‘Nice try, Sean,’ I told him. ‘We might be idiots. But we’re not total idiots.’

‘There’s no trapdoor?’ asked The Amalfi Glow.

‘No, there is a trapdoor,’ I said, ‘but we’re not untying him.’

It ended up taking more work helping Helmet down the ten metre ladder in the dark elevator shaft, than it did to get the bound McLymont down. Our increasingly frantic friend started screaming as he dangled from the rungs.

‘Helmet! Fucking calm down!’ shouted Scrotman from the bottom, where he and The Amalfi Glow were helping McLymont off the ladder. ‘There always has to be a drama with you, doesn’t there?’

‘I’m climbing into a giant vagina!’ yelled Helmet.

I dropped from the ladder and landed on the stone floor of a short and dimly lit corridor that led to a sturdy metal door. I stopped and helped Helmet down the rest of the way. 'I am sperm,' he said.

'Come on then, sperm, let's go,' I told him, propping him up.

'Fellow sperm,' he dribbled, 'how many sperm years are we away from our destination?'

The Amalfi Glow turned a wheel and opened the metal door. We followed him into a compact square room with gas lamps burning on three of the walls. As I stepped inside, I noticed the walls, ceiling, and floor were made from the same rugged black rock as the volcano. On the fourth wall in front of us was a large 10x10 grid of small black cubic blocks, each block about the size of a Rubik's Cube. All of them were inscribed with the same mysterious symbols that we saw on the sheets of paper upstairs in McLymont's office. 'There it ish,' he said.

'What the fuck is it?' asked The Amalfi Glow, walking up and looking at the symbols. 'Can I touch it?'

McLymont nodded while The Amalfi Glow ran the palms of his hands across the grid. 'One hundred cubesh,' explained the old man. 'Each one of has shix shymbols. Go on, you can pull one out.'

Helmet shuffled over starry-eyed, muttering, 'What a curious thing to find inside a vagina,' while The Amalfi Glow lifted out a block from near the centre and turned it over in his hands.

'It's a code of some kind,' he said.

'No shit, Sherlock,' snorted McLymont. 'But unless you can read the symbolism of a long-losht alien shivilisation, do you know how many possible permutationsh there are? No? Well it'sh 6.53318624 times 10 to the power of 77.'

'That's quite precise,' I said, watching The Amalfi Glow carefully place the cube back into the wall. It slotted in with a soft click.

'I've shpent thirty fucking yearsh going through the various combinationsh. That number ish burned into my brain,' he said.

'Why don't you just blow it up?' asked Scrotman.

'I tried exactly that about 29 years ago,' replied McLymont, 'but there'sh a forshfield around it. Jusht like the forshfield that prevents anyone from drawing a map of the island. I'm not a total idiot either, you know.'

'I knew that wasn't magnets!' I said, watching Helmet attempting to hug the grid and accidentally knock one of the cubes out.

'What about the map on the wall upstairs?' asked The Amalfi Glow.

‘I shtole it forty yearsh ago, from a freak dresshed like a fox,’ said McLymont. ‘I should never have lishtened to him. I’ve washted my whole life down here, chashing a ghosht of an idea.’

‘So why keep going?’ asked The Amalfi Glow. ‘You could spend your whole life down here and never find the right combination. Why not give up?’

McLymont’s head dropped and he suddenly seemed like a pathetic and fragile old man. ‘Becaushe who shaysh I’m not going to find the right combination on my three hundred millionth attempt. It’sh improbable, but not impossihble.’

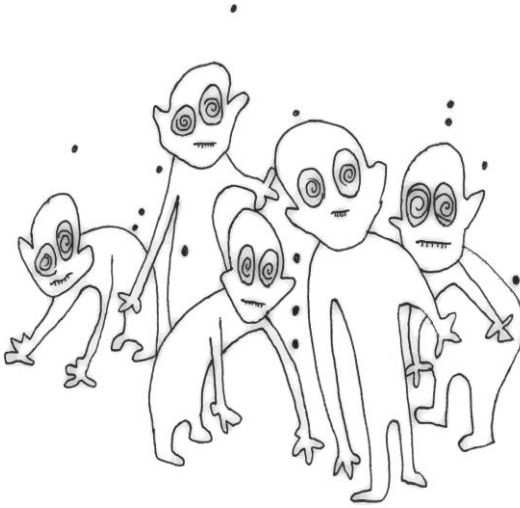
And just as he said the word “impossihble”, Helmet muttered something about super powers and placed the toppled block back into place. Only this time, rather than the soft click it made when The Amalfi Glow replaced his cube, it made a thundering “clunk” sound, and we watched in amazement as his bare arms crashed straight through the grid. Before anyone could move, first his head in his balaclava, then his twiggy cloak, and finally his spindly legs disappeared with the crumbling blocks, clattering away down a smooth stone ramp.

‘HE FUCKING DID IT!’ roared McLymont, his eyes opening wide. ‘With the very firsht cube he touched!’ He was half-laughing, and half-weeping as his legs began to buckle beneath him. ‘How... how did he do it?’ he gasped.

‘Because Sean, he’s the luckiest guy in the universe,’ I told him, running over to the hole in the wall to see where Helmet had gone.

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November 12, 2009
Alfie's Journal #32:
Seven Tunnels



We slid down the smooth stone ramp and found ourselves in a vast underground chamber. The walls and ceiling consisted of the same crooked volcanic rock, however, there were black stone tiles underfoot. The chamber was lit by a purple phosphorescent glow, some algae or glimmering mould, dripping in dollops from the ceiling. At the far end of the chamber was an arc of steps that led up to a black and ominous stone door. Apart from the purple gloom, the most striking thing about the chamber was a towering stone gargoyle near the foot of the ramp. ‘What the fuck is this place? And what the fuck is *that*?’ asked The Amalfi Glow, stepping back as Helmet leapt to his feet and started thrashing around in his balaclava, pants, and cape.

I helped McLymont to his feet, and the two of us looked up at the gargoyle. ‘Jeshus, it’sh incredible... whatever the hell it ish,’ whispered the old man.

‘It’s a tiggermouse,’ I told them.

They stared at the stone rodent, the stripes clearly visible on its flanks, its teeth bared as it stood upon its hind legs, pawing at invisible enemies. To our left, Helmet has started to dance his way out into the middle of the chamber, staring up at the ceiling. He stopped abruptly and turned towards us, his grinning teeth suddenly sparkling like he’d

caught Cartoonitis. ‘I die,’ he said, saluting, before collapsing like a felled tree and thumping onto the floor.

‘That’ll be the shedatives kicking in,’ said McLymont, still marvelling at the tigermouse gargoyle. ‘Fuck knowsh how he lashted thish long.’

Something whistled past my face and pinged against the wall behind me. I scanned the floor for whatever it was, half-expecting to see some ancient purple bug, or maybe some solidified phosphor that had fallen from the roof. As I looked, I heard McLymont cursing under his breath. I suddenly got this horrible sensation crawling all over my skin. We weren’t alone. Scrotman yelped over to our right. ‘What the fuck is this?’ he asked, pulling a small purple feathered dart from his neck, holding it up in the dimly lit chamber.

‘Up there!’ shouted The Amalfi Glow, and I wheeled around, trying to follow his trembling fingertip, vaguely aware of Scrotman collapsing onto the floor behind me. ‘Little white peop-’ The Amalfi Glow didn’t finish. Another dart whizzed through the air and hit him in the centre of his forehead. His eyes crossed before he crumpled in a heap.

As more darts clinked against the stone gargoyle and landed on the floor around my feet, I dived for cover, pressing myself flat against the large stone plinth at the base of the tigermouse. McLymont had the same idea and landed on the tiled floor beside me.

‘What the fuck are they?’ I yelled.

‘How the fuck should I know?’ he yelled back.

‘They look like...’ I wasn’t sure how to formulate the words for what I’d seen.

‘Like little white pygmiesh,’ he said, ‘in neshts.’

I stared at him as another dart bounced harmlessly against the stone ramp where we’d naively blundered in only moments previous. I’d been hoping he was going to say something else, but no. McLymont had just described exactly what I’d seen. The Amalfi Glow pointing at several large nests up near the cavern roof, and sitting in them were these little white people with mad black eyes and blow-pipes. Scrotman lay motionless a few metres away, the feathered dart still gripped between his fingers. I looked back at The Amalfi Glow who seemed to be blinking, immobile on his back with the tiny dart sticking out of his head. ‘Amalfi!’ I whispered. ‘Are you okay?’

‘So... so... cold,’ he murmured, before his head flopped to one side, tongue hanging out across his lips.

I poked my head around the edge of the plinth, my eyes starting to adjust to the darkness of the chamber. Sure enough, the nests were still

there, and in each one sat a shocking little white humanoid, completely hairless, with streaks of the purple phosphor war-painted across their faces and torsos, blow-pipes at the ready. I pulled my head back in as another dart zipped perilously close to my nose. 'What should we do, Sean? What should we do?' I asked, starting to panic.

McLymont's brow furrowed and he took a deep breath. 'Well, for a shtart you could get thish fucking shcarf from off my wrishts. Then, we'll make a run for it up that ramp. I've got a rifle upshtairs, we'll -'

'So it *was* you that killed Walter and... and the other one!'

'I don't know what the fuck you're talking about,' he said impatiently. 'I've never killed a man in my life. In fact, the only time I shot that thing wash when one of the localsh tried to break into my offish and shteat my map. Took hish middle finger clean off, if I remember correctly.'

'I don't believe you,' I said.

'Believe what you want. It'sh the truth. And right now, my plan ish all we've got,' he said, turning around and holding out his bound hands to me.

Just as I made my mind up to untie him, I heard the clatter of footsteps on the floor of the puzzle room above us, and one by one, Team America slid down the ramp into the chamber. W came first, surfing his way down the polished stone. He was quickly followed by little Sam Tharkey who did the same. Jon of the Atom rolled in on his belly, and finally O'Flanamanamanaman tentatively shuffled down on his backside. 'W!' I yelled. 'Watch out for the -'

But I was too late. He stood there frozen, hands on hips, staring up at the giant gargoyle. 'Holy shit,' he muttered. 'Would you look at that!' Three darts hit him in quick succession, piercing his Flower Company football shirt. He didn't flinch. Instead, he kept staring up in amazement, until finally whatever terrible poison the Plum Island Pygmies dipped their darts in, started surging through his veins. He toppled forward onto his knees, then flat onto his face. The rest of Team America immediately figured out something was horribly wrong, ducking for cover beside McLymont and me, while two more darts landed benignly on the floor.

'Jesus!' shouted Jon. 'What did you do to piss off the midgets?'

'Hey Jon,' I said.

He looked across at our fallen comrades. 'How the fuck did you pussies beat us up here anyway? Was there a fucking chair-lift? There was a chair-lift, wasn't there? Man, did you make a fucking mess of upstairs. Black paint everywhere, broken window, filing cabinets ransacked. If Team America had been on the scene first, it wouldn't

have been so cack-handed. It would have been wham, bam, thank you ma'am. In and straight back fucking out again. Mind you, I guess we must have gone up the difficult side of the volcano and -'

'Doesn't thish guy ever shut the fuck up?' asked McLymont irritably.

'Hey! Whose team are you on? If we'd reached you first, you wouldn't be so alive to be acting the little bitch...' He stopped and did a double-take. 'Wait a minute, aren't you that guy from The Rock?'

'No,' growled McLymont.

'You sure fucking look like him,' said Jon. 'So what's the plan, Alfie? How about we use The Rock and the little Irish dude as human shields? You, me, and Jackie Chan Junior can sneak along behind them and avoid the crazy albino midgets.'

'I don't think so!' protested O'Flamahanamam, anxiously wiping his glasses on his pink cotton t-shirt.

'Relax, you little leprechaun, I'm fucking joking. Jeez! Everyone's so uptight around here. You guys need to lighten up a little.' Jon unzipped his rucksack and pulled out a clarinet.

'What the fuck are you doing?' I asked as he lifted it to his lips.

'What does it look like I'm doing? I'm lightening the mood while you work out how the fuck we're going to get out of this mess,' he said before he started to blow. The magical notes of the clarinet danced on the air, and I instantly recognised the melody as "Ghost In A Photograph" by Dead Canaries. And crazy as it sounded, he was curiously right. I don't think any of us could help but get lost listening to the haunting refrain as we sat in a row with our backs against the base of the tighermouse, watching him play.

There had to be a way out of it, but the only two options so far were (A) Get McLymont's rifle and shoot our way through, and (B) Use McLymont and O'Flan as human shields. Neither were ideal. I edged my eye around the corner of the plinth while Jon continued to play. I had to blink hard at what I could see. 'The pygmies are out of their nests,' I said. 'I repeat: the pygmies are out of their nests.'

They were standing in the middle of the chamber, five scrawny little white creatures, heads tilted as they listened to the sound of the clarinet like they were hearing music for the first time. Their crazy black eyes had softened and were spiralling like whirlpools as Jon broke off and glared at me. 'What's so important that you would interrupt me in the middle of a song? It better be a plan, Alfie, and a good fucking pla-'

'Shhh!' I told him, watching the pygmies change before my eyes. Their irises solidified back to jet black marbles, their bony necks

growing taut as they awakened from their trance, staring bewildered at each other like none of them knew how they got there. ‘Keep playing, Jon!’ I screeched, reaching back and jamming the clarinet into his mouth.

He rolled his eyes and blew another note, and instantly the pygmies became mesmerised again, blowpipes falling by their sides, spiral eyes staring off into space.

‘Ha! You a fucking genius!’ I cried. ‘Look! The music is hypnotising them!’

The three others stood cautiously and looked over the base of the gargoyle. Jon went to stand and we had to duck back down as the pygmies snapped back to life and raised their blowpipes to their pale thin lips. ‘What are you doing?’ I shouted, pushing him back to the floor.

‘Why can’t I look?’ he asked.

‘Didn’t you hear me? Your music is controlling them. When you stop, they wake up,’ I explained.

‘Like the Pied Piper,’ said McLymont, ‘only more irritating’.

‘Fuck you, old man,’ said Jon, holding out the clarinet to him. ‘Can you play this? No, I didn’t think so. Can any of you? Hmm? No takers? Okay, then show some respect.’

‘Jusht play the fucking mushic,’ said McLymont, his last ounce of patience getting slowly drained away.

‘If you say please,’ said Jon.

‘Pleashe!’ growled McLymont.

‘Please what?’ asked Jon with a smirk.

‘Pleashe jusht play the fucking mushic,’ said McLymont, visibly deflating.

Jon turned to me. ‘You want me to keep playing until we reach the door at the end? Without stopping?’

‘If you can,’ I said.

He grinned and lifted the clarinet back to his lips. As he piped the first few notes, I started to look over the plinth to see if it was safe for us to make a run for it, watching in shock as Moss tumbled down the ramp into the chamber.

It looked like she fell, with some arm-flapping and a backwards roll thrown in for good measure. As Jon’s faltering notes hung in the air, and I nudged him to keep playing, she tried to stand up in her golden wellies. She was blatantly wasted, with twigs sticking out of her hair, and a goofy smile smeared all over her face. ‘Woo!’ she shouted joyously, pointing and laughing at the pygmies who were still frozen in the middle of the room. Her half-shut eyes scanned her surroundings

and she saw us hiding behind the tiggermouse. ‘Yay! Guys! I’m... I mean I got -’

Another figure slid into view, and I recognised him as Santiago Lopez from the poker game at Dolly’s house. He was sweating badly, with a gleaming machete gripped in his ring-adorned hands. ‘Moss! Run!’ I shouted, waving for her to run to us.

‘ - kidnapped,’ she said with a sigh. We watched as she proceeded to charge head down across the chamber, hurdling the face down W, the face up Amalfi Glow, and the face down Helmet, finally zigzagging between the frozen pygmies with a loud cackle.

Santiago Lopez looked over at us and grinned. ‘What have we got here? Four fucking ship hippies and a crazy old man in a dress. You’ve had a haircut since the last time I saw you, Wolf. And who are these little guys with the weird eyes? Oh wait, let me guess - Dopey, Bashful, Sleepy, Grumpy, and Honky.’

Meanwhile Moss was still running around down the bottom end of the cavern, singing, ‘Buuutttt ttthHHHEEEEE PpplllaAAANnnneeeee!’

Santiago Lopez hunched his shoulders and started waving the machete menacingly from side to side. ‘I’m digging the faggot music fellas, very atmospheric. The oboe is one of my mother-in-law’s favourite instruments. Personally, I’m more into rock music myself. Bon Jovi - now there’s a fucking band...’ He took a step towards us, lips curling up around his pencil thin moustache, while Moss completed her chaotic circuit of the chamber, rounding the corner of the tiggermouse and diving across us, shouting, ‘Crowd surffffffffffing!’

‘You can stop playing now, Jon,’ I said.

He rolled his eyes and stopped. A second later, a flurry of darts struck Santiago, and his machete clattered onto the floor as he keeled over. I breathed a sigh of relief. ‘Okay Jon, you can start playing again,’ I said.

‘Stop playing, start playing. Stop playing, starting playing. I wish you would make your fucking mind up,’ he grumbled as he resumed the song.

Moss looked up at me from the ground and said, ‘Alfie, just gimme the flapjacks already.’

‘Jesus, she’sh even fucking worse than one with the leavesh and balaclava,’ said McLymont, peering down his nose at her.

I glanced anxiously at the ramp, and while O’Flanahahaman helped Moss to her feet with a mumbled, ‘Good to see you, sir’, I

asked her where the other Plum Islanders were. She just looked at me blankly and smiled.

‘Apart from the fat man with the machete,’ I said, pointing to Santiago, ‘were there any others with you? Vink or Dolly?’

She shook her head and stared at the purple gloop dripping down from the cavern roof. ‘Just the fat man,’ she said, before looking down at O’Flamahanaman. ‘Do I know you from somewhere? I feel like we’ve met before. Are you in charge of the flapjacks?’

I hurried over and plucked the dart from The Amalfi Glow’s forehead before checking his pulse. ‘Still alive,’ I said. ‘He’s sleeping, I think.’

Jon of the Atom was still blowing the sad tune on his clarinet as he shuffled towards the hypnotised little albino people. I could tell that he was bursting to say something sarcastic, but instead he did a little dance around them like a snake charmer, winking over at me.

‘We should keep moving before the other Plum Islanders show up,’ I told them. ‘We can come back for these guys once we’ve found the Plum Necklace.’

As the words left my mouth, I realised I might be starting to believe this magical artefact actually existed. Things were simply too weird for there to be nothing at the end of it all. My hand being unable to draw a map. The grid of cubes. And now these bizarre little pygmy people, living in this weird underground cavern. They were guarding *something*, that was for sure.

Jon was piping us towards the steps at the far end of the chamber when the gunshot rang out, and one of the pygmies flew backwards. A bullet hole in its chest began to seep dark purple blood in a puddle around its small skeletal frame. Jon’s melody stuttered for a moment before he somehow regained his composure, and we turned around to see Rob Vink smugly reloading The Judge’s old rusty rifle. He was flanked on either side by Dolly, Pretty Boy, Moses, and Noah Blake, all wielding machetes.

‘Well, hello there!’ called the Dutchman. He had two black eyes, and his broken nose was bandaged, making that horrific smile of his even more horrific. ‘Fancy meeting you down here.’

Moss slapped herself hard on the forehead and said, ‘Wait! You were meaning these other guys. Shit.’

‘Ah, and Mr Wolf himself has come out to play. Long time no see, James. Looks like you’ve gotten yourself into a little trouble there,’ said Vink, strutting towards us with the rifle raised, cautiously eyeing the remaining four pygmies.

‘Robin,’ said McLymont, nodding to Vink. Dolly grinned and waved his hand with the missing finger, and the old man acknowledged him with a shake of his head. ‘Jusht be careful around thoshe... thingsh. Ash long ash the mushic is playing, they’ll shtay like that.’

‘Is that right?’ asked Vink. ‘Well, we better deal with that, shouldn’t we?’ He motioned to his crew with a flick of his dreadlocked head.

I watched, horrified as the remaining four Plum Islanders lined up in front of the hypnotised pygmies, and in perfect synchronisation, they flashed their machetes, not even blinking an eye. The four pale, bald heads rolled across the floor.

‘That wasn’t so difficult now, was it?’ drawled Vink, pointing the gun at Jon. ‘You can stop playing now.’

Jon removed the clarinet from his mouth. ‘Well, thank fuck for that,’ he said. ‘It’s a shame about the little white dudes, but I was starting to lose my way there. It’s not easy improvising under this kind of pressu-’

Vink placed the rifle against Jon’s head, and he immediately shut up. The Dutchman then turned to us and shouted, ‘Alright then, what are we waiting for? Haven’t we got a Plum Necklace to find?’ He motioned for us to climb the steps, little Sam Tharkey reaching the top first, and pulling open the big black door.

We entered another chamber, much smaller than the last but with the same volcanic walls and black tiles on the floor, lit by the same purple phosphorescent glow on the ceiling. On the wall in front of us were seven circles, and looking closer I saw that they were tunnels disappearing down into darkness. As the chamber filled with bodies, Moses closed the door behind us, and Vink motioned for Pretty Boy to check out the tunnels. I watched Dolly’s square-jawed younger sibling shuffle from one to the next, leaning in and shouting ‘Hello?’ at each one, hearing his voice reverberating away to no reply. After inspecting the last one, he stood up and shrugged his shoulders.

Vink turned the gun on McLymont. ‘What do you think, old timer? Reckon there’s a Plum Necklace at the bottom of one of these tunnels?’

‘Honeshtly? I’ll be fucked if I know,’ said McLymont, staring down the barrel despondently. I studied the hang-dog expression on the Sean Connery lookalike’s face, and felt strangely sorry for him. Imagine spending thirty years of your life trying to crack a code only for it to slip through your fingers when two guys in football strips, another in a corduroy jacket, and a fourth wearing only a threadbare

cloak of leaves, black balaclava and pants, throw a rock through your front window.

‘Pretty Boy, you go first,’ ordered Vink, ‘...if you’re feeling lucky?’

Pretty Boy glanced over at his older brother, head still heavily bandaged after having losing his other ear. ‘*Am* I feeling lucky?’ he asked.

Dolly looked away and mumbled, ‘You’re on your own with this one, bro.’

‘Come on, we’ve not got all day,’ snapped Vink, waving the gun in Pretty Boy’s direction. We watched silently while the young man shuffled back along the line, sticking his head into each of the tunnels. Eventually he doubled back to the one in the middle.

‘Like Russian Roulette,’ said Noah Blake, the Australian pilot, grinning.

Pretty Boy eased himself in feet first, turning over onto his belly, machete in one hand, and the fingers of his other hand curled around the rim to keep himself from sliding down. ‘Wish me luck,’ he said, grinning that goofy gap-toothed grin he shared with his brother. Dolly didn’t look up. Nobody said a word. Pretty Boy’s fingers unfurled and he whooshed away into the darkness, his ashen face still grinning.

Nobody spoke for several seconds, and then we heard a loud CLANG! from the bottom of the tunnel, some distance beneath us. Dolly’s head shot up, and Vink nodded for Noah Blake to go check what had happened. The pilot stomped over to the middle tunnel and stuck his head inside. ‘Yo! Pretty Boy!’ he called.

There was no reply. He called again, but still there was nothing. Dolly looked over anxiously at Vink who was still wearing his poker-face from our card game. ‘Probably fucking knocked himself out when he hit the bottom, the idiot that he is,’ said the Dutchman. ‘What do you reckon, Noah?’

‘Maybe he’s picking up the Plum Necklace as we speak...’ said Noah Blake, scratching at his stubble. ‘Mind if I go next?’

Vink nodded and the pilot took the first tunnel to the right of the centre one. ‘No sense in beating around the bush,’ he said, taking a deep breath before launching himself on his belly, headfirst into the hole, holding his machete out in front of him. Again we listened, and after a couple of seconds there was another loud CLANG! from wherever the tunnels led, like metal colliding with metal. Again it was followed by complete silence.

This time Vink walked over to the tunnels himself, and with the gun still pointed at the rest of us huddled together in the corner of the room, he leaned in and shouted, ‘Hey Noah! Noah, can you hear me?’

Noah Blake didn’t respond.

Suddenly the Dutchman’s grin cracked, and he scanned the room of apprehensive faces, catching sight of me. ‘You,’ he said, beckoning me over.

‘Ooh, unlucky, Alfie,’ said Jon, giving me a reassuring pat between the shoulderblades as I stepped forward.

‘I haven’t forgotten that cigarette burn you gave me during the match,’ said Vink. ‘Let me tell you, the first thing I’ll be doing when I get out of here is to put a cigarette burn in that ship of yours. Really light the fucker up.’

I heard Moss audibly gasp behind me, and O’Flanahoonaman reached up and clamped a hand over her mouth to stop her from saying something that would result in her getting shot or beheaded.

‘You got lucky in that game, Alfie,’ continued Vink. ‘Now, let’s hope your luck hasn’t run out. Oh, and just in case there really is a Plum Necklace at the bottom of one of these, I’m going to be right there behind you with this gun pointed at your back.’

I stared at the seven circular tunnels on the wall. They reminded me of flumes at a swimming pool. I glanced back over my shoulder at the rest of our crew in case any of them could help, but none of them were able to look me in the eye. I took a deep breath and told myself to hurry up and pick a tunnel. Any tunnel. Except the two that made loud CLANGS followed by deathly silence. I started trying to get myself inside the mind of whoever created something like this. If I was a strange mysterious cult concealing a time-stopping Plum Necklace underneath a volcano, and was going to make one of the boobytraps a row of tunnels, which one would I make safe? My instincts said the middle one, because it was too obvious for anyone to pick. Although Pretty Boy had already demonstrated why that theory was crap. No, I’d probably make ALL of the tunnels traps, and have a secret door or compartment hidden elsewhere in the chamber. My eyes frantically scanned the volcanic walls for a lever, or a button – for anything at all really – until I felt the barrel of the rifle pressing into the small of my back, and Vink’s deep voice in my ear, telling me, ‘Just hurry up and fucking pick, will you?’

When in doubt I always go left, so I go left. If you keep going left then eventually you’ll return full circle to where you started, and never get lost. So I shuffled to the tunnel on the far left and started to lower myself inside, Vink close behind me. I figured at this point I should tell

the rest of the Flower Company the truth about me, but with the gun pressed into my back, and the fear of what came next, my mind was struggling to put it all into words. Before I knew what was happening, Vink had pushed me into the darkness, and we were sliding down through the tunnel. I closed my eyes. I held my breath. And I waited for the inevitable CLANG!

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November 13, 2009

Alfie's Journal #33:
Not Going Back for Flapjacks

We plunged down through the dark tunnel on our backs, slipping and swerving around the bends as the descent got steeper and faster. Everything in my body had stopped working. My heart was no longer beating. My lungs couldn't catch a breath. Even my brain had ground to a standstill. I braced myself as the tunnel reared upwards, hearing Moss's voice from above, echoing down through the darkness. 'Alfsssss! Nooooo!' she cried. The plum-coloured light flooded my eyes as we shot out into a brightly lit cavern, crash-landing on a rough, stone floor. Vink landed on his back with a grunt beside me, and quickly sat up pointing the rifle at my head.

I looked around at the dome-shaped cavern, down in the heart of the volcano, its pock-marked volcanic walls stretching up into the shadows. I felt like we were in a furnace and quickly realised why. We were sitting on a large stone platform directly beneath the seven tunnels that exited on the rock-face above our heads. In front of us, surrounding a small stone island, was a moat of purple lava, bubbling and undulating with fiery pops of phosphorescent flame. I glanced to our right, looking for Pretty Boy and Noah Blake, but all I could see were two splattered piles of horrific red goo. Two machetes lay snagged behind glinting meshes that dripped with blood at the ends of two of the tunnels they'd chosen. I had to fight back the urge to throw up, gagging as I imagined the two of them getting sliced into a thousand pieces by the razor-sharp wires. Amazingly, the only tunnel not rigged with the decapitating boobytrap was the one we came down.

Vink got slowly to his feet, staring unfazed at the two bloody heaps, before taking a single step towards the lava moat. It must have

been about ten metres across to the stone island. He stopped, his eyes opening wide, and *that* grin lit up his face again. I saw that he was looking at a small stone altar at the centre of the island. There, sparkling atop the altar was a necklace of glittering purple jewels. The Dutchman laughed quietly and nodded to the bubbling lava. ‘What do you reckon, Alfie? You think a man could jump that?’ he asked.

I looked at him, trying to figure out if he was being serious, until Dolly’s voice broke the silence, booming through the tunnel we’d slid down. ‘Rob? Are you okay? Is it safe?’

Vink walked slowly backwards, glancing up at the other booby-trapped tunnels, then down at his gun as if he was weighing up how to answer. After what felt like an eternity, he called back up, ‘Yeah, it’s safe. Send them down.’

He leaned against the wall of the volcano beneath the tunnel, and moments later bodies began to soar out of it, hurtling through the air over Vink’s head, frantically scrambling at the emptiness before landing like we did. First Jon, then little Sam, then O’Flanahamaham, then McLymont (who landed awkwardly with his hands still bound behind his back), and finally a shrieking Moss. A few seconds passed as they got to their feet, dusting themselves down. O’Flahahanaman helped McLymont to his feet, and stood aside while Dolly came rocketing out of the tunnel and skidded to a halt on the ground in front of us. Their eyes were everywhere, necks craning to the ceiling, comprehending the tunnel traps and the two diced heaps that were formally Pretty Boy and Noah Blake. They saw the moat of lava, and beyond it the Plum Necklace, tantalisingly just out of reach. Vink shouted up the tunnel, ‘Get a move on, Moses!’

There was no reply.

Dolly snorted and picked himself up, adjusting the bandage around his head. ‘He’s probably too fucking fat to fit in the...’ His words trailed away as his bloodshot eyes clocked the two mangled heaps and the dripping meshes at the end of the tunnels. He staggered forward, his mouth contorting grotesquely, moving towards the closer of the two bloody piles. We watched him, horrified as he dropped to his knees and started wailing. Wailing like I’d wailed for the Jazz Monk on Knob Hill. A sound from the guts, his heart shattering in his chest as it exited his mouth. ‘My brother! My baby brother!’ he roared, scooping up what looked like a cubed eyeball in the palm of his four-fingered hand, before wordlessly wailing again.

Moss sidled up beside me, hiding her face behind her fringe. ‘Alfieeeee, I’m starting to freak oooooout here,’ she sang.

Vink seemed unperturbed by the commotion, kicking off from the wall, his eyes locked firmly on the Plum Necklace. ‘What do you think, Wolf? Any ideas how we can get across there? I was thinking that maybe -’ He broke off and closed his eyes, teeth gritted while Dolly’s wailing grew even louder. ‘I can’t hear myself fucking think,’ he grunted before spinning round and shooting Dolly. The bullet hit him in the back, and he toppled forward face down into the remains of his brother, the echoes of his blood-curdling screams reverberating in the air around us. ‘Like I was saying -’ continued Vink, turning back to McLymont as he reloaded the rifle. I noticed the others were backing away from him, stunned at the brutality of what they’d just seen. If a man can shoot his own friend in the back, who knew what he might do to his enemies.

Only James McLymont wasn’t there anymore. It took us all a long moment to realise he’d made a run for it, and I spun to see him, hands still bound with The Amalfi Glow’s Celtic scarf behind his back, several steps out across the lava, his feet kicking up splashes of molten purple .

‘Fuck!’ screamed Vink as he fumbled with the gun. When he eventually reloaded it and raised it to fire, somehow McLymont was more than halfway across and still running. Vink pulled the trigger with another loud blast and the old man faltered, the shot hammering into the back of his head. I watched as his left leg sank into the swirling fiery mass, blood pouring down the back of the grey woman’s business suit he was wearing. Very quickly he began to sink, his other leg disappearing, followed by his waist and torso, bound arms struggling in slow motion, and final his head submerged beneath the lava.

‘Shit!’ whispered Jon. ‘Did you see that? He was running on fucking lava! He only sunk when he stopped moving.’

Vink shook another couple of bullets from his shirt pocket and made to load the gun again, his hands shaking, clearly flustered. That was probably our moment, the window of opportunity to wrestle the gun from him, but we were all in shock, staring at the spot where the old man had gone under, our brains trying to process what we’d just witnessed. Gun loaded, the Dutchman started yelling like a spoilt child. ‘Now, does anyone else want to get shot today? Because I’m itching - really fucking *itching* - to fire this thing agai-’

I saw the figure out of the corner of my eye, a black shape hurtling through the air from the open tunnel, rearing up like a mad flapping bird and striking out with a boot into the back of Vink’s head. My first instinct as I watched the Dutchman crumple and drop the gun,

was that it must have been Moses. But as the figure tumbled to an ungraceful stop at our feet, I had to look away and look back again to really believe what I was seeing. ‘Nate Lowman?’ shouted Moss, fingers grabbing at her hair in amazement. ‘Oh man, I must be out of my fucking mind!’

Nate Lowman stared up at us from the ground, grubby and grimacing, still wearing the same Flower Company space tracksuit he was wearing two weeks ago when he paddled to shore and ran off into the jungle. It wasn’t even that I’d assumed he’d caught a plane off Plum Island and returned to his life of crappy art and hobnobbing with Z-list celebrities, it was that I’d forgotten all about him completely.

‘Who the fuck is Nate Lowman?’ asked Jon, kicking the rifle away from the unconscious Vink.

Nate was scrambling to his feet in one of his characteristic freak-outs. He looked terrible. Sunken eyes, visibly shaking, sweating like a madman, waving his arms around, and shouting, ‘Before any of you *freaks* start asking me questions, I need to tell you -’

‘Nate, you saved us!’ whooped Moss, trying to give his flailing arms a high-five and missing.

‘Yeah, that was some kick, man,’ said Jon. ‘Like fucking Bruce Lee – hwaaaaaa!’ He jumped up and kicked the air, badly impersonating Nate’s leap across the cavern.

‘Wait! You’re not listening to me! I need to tell you something! It’s -’

‘But where the fuck have you been?’ I asked him. ‘Have you been hiding in the jungle this whole time?’

‘AS A MATTER OF FACT, YES! YES, I HAVE! IF YOU MUST KNOW, I GOT FUCKING LOST! BUT THAT’S NOT IMPORTANT! YOU NEED TO LISTEN TO ME, THERE’S SOMETHING YOU SHOULD KNOW, I..’ His rant faded into a wild-eyed wordlessness, staring past Moss who was standing directly in front of him with her arms wide as if she wanted to give him the biggest hug in the history of hugs.

‘You’re such a douchebag, Nate. But you’re *our* douchebag...’ she sniffed, tears in her eyes.

‘See?’ he cried, completely ignoring her, gesturing over her head with upturned palms. ‘I tried to fucking warn you. I asked you not to ask me questions, and you fucking asked me questions. It’s always the same with you lot. And now look. He’s got the fucking gun and he’s pointing it at us. That’s just fucking great!’

For a moment, I didn't know what he was babbling about. I glanced down at Vink who was still lying motionless on the floor. Then I followed the direction he was pointing and turned around.

O'Flanahamaman stood there grinning, pushing his spectacles up onto the bridge of his nose with one hand. In the other was The Judge's rusty old rifle pointing unflinchingly at us.

'He killed those two guys in the black balaclavas back in the jungle,' said Nate. 'I was hiding in the trees. I saw it happen. A shot to each of their heads. A few minutes later, I heard voices in the trees, saw the stupid green and blue uniforms and... I got a feeling something was wrong, so I followed them. This guy here that never shuts up, that little kid, and the other one crashed out with darts in his chest upstairs. I followed them up the volcano, nearly got rumbled by Little Miss Time Travel and those guys with the machetes. Now, I'm wondering why I even bothered.' He puts his face in his hands and started sobbing quietly into them.

'Who's little Miss Time Travel?' asked Moss, looking around.

The rest of us stared at O'Flanamahaman. It's funny, but sometimes you can look at a person and they look like one thing, then you look at them again, and this time they look like something else altogether. This isn't the same O'Flanahanamam we have known for the last two weeks. This is a miniature W-double with insane eyes burning behind his steamed-up glasses, snorting to himself in the pink cotton t-shirt (that I hand-fucking-drew his name onto!) and matching pink hot pants. 'I fucking *knew* you were too good to be true!' I said.

'I bet you did,' he said shrilly, a menacing tone in his voice as he took a step forward, the rifle pointed right at me.

We collectively took a step back. 'Um, what's going on?' asked Moss looking back to see who or what O'Flamahahaman is aiming at.

'No way,' said Jon. 'I mean, if you're really some kind of psychotic dwarf under that stuttering little exterior, then I hold my hands up... you deserve a fucking Oscar, man.'

'You have no idea how many times I felt like pushing you off the volcano on our way up,' said O'Fanahanaman, grinning like a maniac.

'Am I missing something here?' Moss asked me. 'Has this got anything to do with me being pissed off about you gambling away the ship? Because if it is, then we should all just head back to the Mardi and eat flapjacks. I'm over it. I think. Am I saying this out loud?'

'It's not that,' I told her. 'We got played.'

O'Flanahanamanaman laughed and took another step forward. 'Damn right you did. Taking candy from a baby would have been difficult in comparison to this. To think you bought my marine

scientist story – ha! I know fuck all about any of that shit. My colleagues and I came here for the same reason as everyone else - to find the Plum Necklace. There we were on that floating trash island, taking thermal photographs of the island, when that crazy fucker W turned up with the earless dead guy. I can't believe how easy it was to get on board your ship and join your crew. Do you want to know the funniest thing about all that? Walter and Wilfred thought you were just a bunch of fucked up hippies, but all along I knew. Anyone who can build and fly a rocket to the moon and back, must be desperate enough and fucked up enough to maybe, just maybe, find this thing. And I was right.'

'I agree with you completely,' said Nate, lifting his face from his hands, 'these people *are* fucked up. So, if you don't mind, I'll be off now.' He started to shuffle towards the tunnel, and O'Flanahahaman flicked the safety catch on the gun, pointing it at Nate's back. 'Or maybe not,' said Nate, shuffling back into line.

O'Flanahanamahan laughed maniacally again and waved the gun at Nate. 'To think I thought you were the crazy old man following us up the volcano! And then, just when it was time to make my move, you show up and take out this Dutch idiot for me. Thank you, whatever your name is.'

'He's Nate Lowman,' said Moss, looking around at us. 'I take it we're not going back for flapjacks then?'

'O'Flanamanaman's not even your real name, is it?' I asked.

'No, it's not. My name is O'Flan-ahan-aman. That's O F L A N A H A N A M A N, you fucking imbecile. Now, who wants to go first?'

'Ooh, me!' shouted Moss, jumping up and down with her hand in the air.

O'Flan-uh-ahana-uh-mahan smirked and shook his head. 'Very well.' He pointed the rifle at Moss.

'Wait!' she said. 'What exactly am I volunteering for?'

I watched his finger twitch on the trigger, squeezing it in slow motion, and wondered if I could make it across the floor to somehow knock the gun out of his hand. But I didn't have to. Yet another figure came hurtling through the air from the tunnel, crashing into him feet first, both of them collapsing to the ground. The rifle fired and the bullet pinged off the volcanic wall above us. I stared dumbfounded at the stranger; some bearded random, wearing a striped shirt, khaki pants, and a baseball cap that said "Chicago Slice". He apologised to O'Flannan, flattened beneath him, and then turned to us, holding out a cardboard box.

‘Alfie Kolinsky?’ he asked. ‘You ordered a chili pepper and pineapple pizza?’



{Flashback: I am sitting on the Fishrocket in space making prank calls on the Hypnotist phone }

‘You’re...’

‘Hank,’ he said.

‘Hank from Chicago Slice?’ I asked, and he nodded, anxiously looking around.

‘Uh... the pizza's pretty fucking cold, dude, but you’re a hard man to find. I’ve racked up some mileage, let me tell you,’ he said, lifting his cap to reveal a mop of curly red hair.

I was so gobsmacked that it took for Jon to yell ‘SHIT!’ in my ear, for me to see what was happening. Little Sam Tharkey had made a run for it across the purple lava. He was quick, and he was quiet. Were it not for Jon shouting ‘SHIT!’ like that, he might have made it across without anyone noticing. But now we all noticed. His little legs kicked through the undulating fiery moat just like McLymont had done, only with the same ferocious determination that he showed when he tore our

defence open at on the airstrip. And somehow, miraculously, he made it to the little island.

O’Flanagan had used the distraction to roll free from underneath Hank, and was lying on his belly, pointing the rifle at Sam. ‘Saaaaaam!’ I screamed, running towards O’Flanagan, watching as the little kid scooped up the Plum Necklace from the altar and hurled it back across the lava in my direction. The purple jewels glittered bright as it looped through the air.

The cavern lurched with a rumbling jolt and a deep fissure tore across the stone platform, releasing a huge spurt of molten purple lava. I adjusted my stride as the shot rang out over the volcanic roar, avoiding the fiery lava as it crashed to the floor, my eyes on the necklace, diving full stretch with my head towards it. And now it was just a question of what would get there first – my head or the bullet.

Assuming what they say about the wearer of the Plum Necklace being able to start and stop time was true...

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November 15, 2009

Alfie’s Journal #34:
A Not So Happy Ending

The ground shook violently as more explosions of purple lava broke through the platform, shooting up into the air with great billowing clouds of steam. Jon of the Atom screwed up his eyes. ‘Shit, that was weird,’ he said.

‘What was?’ asked Moss. She was standing beside him, anxiously chewing on her fingernails.

He stared at her in disbelief for a second, while I shouted over to him, ‘Jon, can you wake Vink up? I want him to see this.’

‘Well, let’s see. Where to begin?’ he said to Moss, giving the unconscious Dutchman several kicks in the ribs until he started to moan. ‘For a start, the boy is standing next to you.’

She looked down at a smiling Sam Tharkey. The cavern walls heaved and a large boulder toppled from the roof, crashing into the churning moat with a sizzling splash. ‘And?’ she asked with a shrug of her shoulders.

‘And?’ spat Jon, hauling Vink up by his shirt collar. ‘*And* a second ago the boy was standing over there, throwing the Plum Necklace across to Alfie, who, incidentally, was in the middle of a dive, and has clearly moved a couple of metres to one side, *and* grown a beard in the blink of an eye.’ He raised his eyebrows expectantly, while Vink blinked and tried to figure out what the fuck had happened.

‘What are you insinuating, Jon?’ she asked.

He took a deep breath and let go of Vink who staggered off to the side, bumping into Hank who was still holding the pizza box, and Nate who was looking for a way to escape without any of us noticing. ‘Beard aside, don’t you think it’s fucking weird the way Sam and Alfie are in different places, and a second ago the psycho Irish dwarf was firing a bullet, and now the bullet magically vanished into thin air? In fact, now I think about it, the rifle has vanished too. Alfie, what the fuck is going on? Hey, what are you doing with that necklace?’

I smiled at Vink and O’Flanahanaman, and held the Plum Necklace out over the agitated lava behind me. The volcano continued to shudder and more rubble fell from the roof, crashing onto the stone island where several months ago I saw little Sam Tharkey lift the glittering jewels from their altar. ‘I’m destroying it,’ I said. ‘As long as the Plum Necklace exists, there’s the possibility that evil dudes like these two might use it for evil deeds.’

The two men stared at me, seething, their eyes darting to the necklace as it dangled precariously from my fingertips. ‘You wouldn’t dare,’ growled O’Flamamamaman, pushing himself up off the ground.

‘He’s bluffing,’ drawled Vink, trying to find that smug grin of his but failing miserably.

I laughed. And then I let go.

The necklace dropped towards the fiery furnace, Vink and O’Flananaman’s eyes and mouths opening wide, rushing forward in slow motion, pushing and shoving each other to get there first. The purple jewels I’d worn around my neck for so long, hit the lava, instantly sinking and separating as the black string that bound them caught fire. I took a step back, letting the two men hurl themselves through the air and land in the flames, thrashing and screaming as they sank. We watched them desperately snatch at the burning gems sizzling in the soft skin of their hands, their hair on fire, vanishing together beneath the blazing surface. A giant spout of purple lava ripped through the stone platform, right in front of us, while more dust and boulders cascaded from the cavern roof, splintering and smoking all around us.

We stared at the spot where O’Flanahoonaman and Vink went under, until Nate Lowman loudly cleared his throat. ‘I don’t know whether any of you have noticed, but I think this volcano is erupting.’

‘Volcano?’ asked Moss, startled.

‘Don’t worry, Nate,’ I said. ‘I think when Sam lifted the Plum Necklace, it triggered the eruption. Luckily I’ve seen enough Indiana Jones films to pick up a few tricks of the trade. Before I took the Plum Necklace off and started time again, I put Scrotman’s rucksack on the stone altar over there. I reckon it weighs about the same as the necklace.’ More debris began to smash down around us, and a wave of luminous purple magma washed over the stone island in the middle of the cavern, swirling around the altar with my rucksack smoking on top of it.

‘Wait a minute, what do you mean you *started time* again?’ asked Jon.

‘The Plum Necklace,’ said Sam Tharkey. ‘It is said that its wearer can stop and start time at will.’

‘YOU STOPPED TIME?’ Jon shouted and I smiled back at him. ‘Oh fucking hell, Alfie! You mean, you were like walking around here, while all of us were frozen in time?’

‘Yeah... well, no, not exactly,’ I said. ‘I had other things to do.’

‘AND YOU NEVER THOUGHT TO FUCKING GET US OUT OF HERE?’ he screeched, holding his head in his hands. The lava was really starting to bubble, like a pot of overflowing soup, spitting pockets of whistling air.

‘I... well... I honestly thought the rucksack trick would -’ I tried to explain, waving vaguely towards the island.

‘THE FUCKING RUCKSACK TRICK? WHAT FUCKING RUCKSACK? THE ONE THAT’S ON FIRE OVER THERE? AND YOU THREW THE NECKLACE IN! YOU THREW – THE NECKLACE – IN...’ He was hopping mad. Literally jumping from one foot to the other.

‘That’s the strangest looking swimming pool I ever saw,’ said Moss, her eyes reflecting the purple waves washing up just short of our feet.

‘Uh guys, it’s probably none of my business, but we should really get out of here,’ said Hank, smiling nervously.

‘I CAN’T BELIEVE YOU DIDN’T MOVE US!’ howled Jon again, kicking a fallen boulder and wincing in pain.

‘Jon, I’m fucking exhausted. You’ve got no idea what I had to do while time was stopped. Learn to fly planes, learn to land planes - that took a while - trace a satellite, row a boat across an ocean, learn to

drive a submarine, learn to scuba dive, rescue Robbie, and the Fish Rocket, and of course, Laika the little smoke dog -'

'I don't want to hear it!' he gasped. 'You had all the time in the world! If you were exhausted, you could have slept!'

'Uh seriously,' said Hank again, 'I'm not very sure what's going on here, but whatever you did with that rucksack, dude, it hasn't worked... we should really go... like, NOW.' He stepped to one side while more rubble rained down and another tremor surged through the cavern.

'How do we get out of here?' yelled Nate, standing under the tunnels, looking up.

'Here,' I said, crouching down, 'we'll need to take turns wearing these.'

'My golden boots!' cried Moss, looking down at her own bare feet and wiggling her toes.

'Yeah, it took me ages to figure out how to get out of here. I tried running up that tunnel – several times – but it's impossible. Then I remembered the jump Moss did during the football match. No offence, Chief, but I figured it must have been the boots rather than your natural aptitude for organised sports. Not only can you run up tunnels with the golden boots, but you can also -'

Hank coughed. 'Uh, sorry to interrupt you, dude, but it's starting to get a bit scary down here.' He pointed at the fiery explosions behind me.

'Huh? Okay, yeah... sorry about that,' I said, throwing the boots to Sam. 'Put these on, kid. When you get to the top, slide them back down to us -'

'Can I go first?' asked Nate.

'Nate, we both know if I give you these boots first, then you'll get to the top of the tunnel and you'll just keep on running,' I said.

He glared at me and then nodded his head. 'Fair enough,' he said.

One by one we left the cavern, taking turns to wear the golden boots and run up the tunnel. Finally Jon and I were left standing side by side, waiting for the boots to come back down. 'So, Alfie... when you stopped time, did you, like, rob some banks or anything? You at least managed to do that, right?'

'I didn't rob any banks,' I said.

He shook his head despondently. 'You were the last person who should have gotten his hands on something with that much possibility.'

In the upstairs chamber, our sleeping comrades (with the exception of W and Santiago Lopez who were struck by more than one dart) were groggily coming around. The purple slime covered walls

were shaking so badly and making such a deafening racket, that it felt like any moment the whole place was going to cave in around our heads. Helmet shut his eyes, head flopping around on his neck as I helped him up. ‘Where am I?’ he groaned. ‘Last thing I remember is sitting down to a strong cup of coffee that an attractive older woman made for me. I think she was flirting with me. And... something about... sperm? Alfie, what the fuck is going on? And who’s the big guy with the machete?’

‘Helmet, that wasn’t a woman, that was – what big guy with a machete?’ I turned around. Everyone was rooted to the spot, staring at Moses, the giant Samoan barman. I remembered that Dolly and Vink had joked that he wouldn’t have been able to fit in the tunnels, and had accepted it at the time as a logical explanation why he hadn’t come down with the rest of us. I’d been meaning to ask Nate about him, but after rescuing Robbie, it had completely slipped my mind. ‘Oh, THAT big guy with the machete...’ I said.

That was when I noticed Moses was crying, snot streaming down across his top lip. His big fingers opened and he dropped the machete to the floor. ‘I’m... sorry... about... the little people,’ he said.

I really shouldn’t have laughed, but I couldn’t help it. I wasn’t the only one. This big hulking brute had the campest voice I’d ever heard. He sounded like a six year old girl who’d been smoking Rongovian tundra. I pulled myself together, recalling the way the Plum Islanders barbarically beheaded the pygmies. ‘Well, we’ve all got our demons,’ I told him, reaching up and patting him on the shoulder.

He nodded, a fat tear splashing down his big brown face. ‘There’s something I’ve got to show you,’ he squeaked, bending down and hoisting both W and Santiago Lopez over his mighty shoulders.

Scrotman cackled to my right, and I flashed him a look that said *give the guy a fucking break*. ‘What?’ he asked quietly, hands outstretched. ‘Oh come on, Alfie, you’ve got to admit that’s one funny fucking voice.’

We watched the Samoan take a couple of lumbering strides to the base of the tighermouse gargoyle, batting his way through a cloud of purple volcanic dust falling from the chamber roof. He lifted one of his giant feet and pressed a concealed button at the base of the plinth, opening a small doorway under the tighermouse. ‘It’s a secret underground tunnel, an old railway track that runs the length of the island,’ he said. ‘It leads to the back room of my beach bar.’

It just goes to show it’s always the quiet ones you have to watch out for. Or the ones with hilarious voices. I stepped back as the others

pushed past, racing down a flight of steps into the darkness below. 'How long have you known about this place?' I asked Moses.

'Years,' he said with a sigh. 'That's why I built the bar where I did.'

'You knew where the Plum Necklace was all this time?'

He nodded. 'I knew how to distract the little white people too. I used to play my ukulele to hypnotise them. I just could never fit through those tunnels. I've been on a diet for as long as I can remember, but it never seems to make any difference. I guess I'm just naturally big boned.'

'What happened to Sean?' asked The Amalfi Glow, rubbing at the dart mark on his forehead, and looking back anxiously at a large crack appearing in the tiled floor, the pygmy nests toppling onto the floor, spilling rat and bat bones.

'Who?' I asked.

'You know, Sean Connery,' he said.

'Oh, you mean McLymont?' I watched the crack in the floor getting closer towards us. 'Sean's dead.'

'Bollocks,' he muttered. 'You got my Celtic scarf back though, right?'

Sure enough the railway tunnel led in complete darkness to a flight of stairs winding up to a trapdoor in the storeroom of Mo's Beach Bar. Herding that particular group of people down the tunnel for nearly an hour was arguably more challenging than flying to the moon and back. Invisible voices echoed over the rumbles of the eruption that sounded like it was now happening in full-swing behind us. We had to keep checking we'd not lost anyone. After some twenty minutes of stumbling, Moss attempted to orchestrate a singalong of Radiohead's "Karma Police". There was laughter when Moses joined in with his falsetto tone. Jon incessantly pestered everyone about the things we should have done with the Plum Necklace. There was much confusion when I attempted to explain who Hank and Nate were. True to form, Nate had three further meltdowns. One of the weirder moments was when W and Santiago Lopez awoke from their slumbers, and we had to tell to them where they were. W took it in his stride, going into his pocket and lighting a ready-rolled joint. Santiago didn't react so well, running back up the tunnel towards the erupting volcano, screaming for help. Helmet later confessed that he'd pinched Santiago's bottom. We half-heartedly attempted to call him back, but by that point, he was long gone. Perhaps the weirdest happening of all though, was when

this voice in the dark drawled a reply to Nate's whining about having blisters.

'There is no separate self to suffer, man,' said the voice. 'The one who understands this is free. This is the path of clarity.'

'Geshe-La!' shouted Moss.

'No, it's me, Poflowetry,' said Poflowetry.

'Poflowetry!' I yelled. 'How the fuck did YOU get here?'

'Well, I followed the elk,' he said.

'Elvis!' shouted Moss, laughing happily. 'Oh it's so good to feel you! I missed our hugs!'

'Uh, I'm not Elvis,' said Hank, while the elk gave a weary snort up ahead of us.

There was pandemonium in Pit Town. As dawn broke in the east, a huge purple ash cloud began to spread and blot out the skyline. The Plum Islanders were running from their houses, carrying as much useless junk as they could manage, wheeling shopping trolleys, with plastic carrier bags slung across their shoulders. Behind us, the raging volcano began to spew boulders like it was spitting teeth. The purple lava gushed over the crater lip, seeping down into the jungle. The Dillingers were frantically loading their belongings into a small rowing boat, while The Atom Band were transporting NIKO on the Dr Seuss dinghy back towards the Mardi. In the hazy purple light, I saw the Frat Boys piling into the repaired plane wreckage, now parked at an angle just off the airstrip.

Bernie Bedlington stood at the open door of the aircraft, her massive breasts thrust out, howling at the top of her lungs. 'Whatever you do, don't get on that ship! It's not real! The whole lot of them are demon spawn!'

The Frat Boys pressed their noses to the aircraft's windows and blew kisses to an oblivious Moss as she lay sprawled across Elvis's back, drifting in and out of conscious.

I stood at the edge of the ocean and watched the other Plum Islanders wading out to the Mardi. Apart from Moss and Elvis, there was W shaking hands with Tharkey and little Lottie, Zheng beaming at Sam, the two jade statuettes cradled in her arms, Poflowetry, Hank, Jon of the Atom, The Amalfi Glow, Helmet in his now almost leafless cape, balaclava pulled down around his neck, Moses, the Da Silva family (Edson, Mama, Hiano, and Maria, the wife of Santiago who burst out laughing when she learned her good for nothing husband was underground, last seen heading back into the volcano), and Jonny Gallo telling anyone who would listen that this was the fourth volcano

he'd seen erupt. 'I hope we're not forgetting anyone,' I said to Scrotman, standing beside me, stuffing a limp slice of chili pepper and pineapple pizza into his mouth.

'What about the fat man sitting down over there with the plastic watering can,' he said, pointing.

I ambled over to The Judge. He was sitting flopped on the runway, sobbing. Mrs Judge was in her wheelchair, and the twins (giggling at the sight of me) stood off to one side, waiting for their father's next move. 'I believe that belongs to Simon Piler,' I told him, pointing to the Elephant Teapot, which he reluctantly handed to me. 'You know, if you can behave yourself, you and your family are welcome to come with us. We'll sail you to the first safe port we can find,' I said.

'Oh Daddy! Can we go? Can we? Please Daddy?' begged Martha and Sadie in unison.

'You can do whatever the hell you want. The Judge is staying right here,' he huffed. 'This is one captain who is not about to abandon his post.' He looked up at me with fierce, tear-stained eyes. 'You could learn a lot from me, boy.'

Behind him, unbelievably, the wrecked plane took off from the airstrip, weaving and shuddering through the ever-expanding purple ash-cloud. As we watched them go, more large boulders began to land all around us, crushing one of the huts, crashing into the ocean, bombarding Pit Town, and setting several buildings ablaze. I turned to watch the twins skip all in pink between the rocks that landed on the beach, resolving to get rid of the two of them as soon as I could. 'What about you, Mrs Judge?' I asked the sour-faced old woman.

'Fuck you, you little prick,' she said, launching a gob of yellow phlegm in my direction. It landed on the toe of one of the golden boots I was still wearing.

That reminded me. I pulled Geshe-La's wellies off and hurled them into the trees behind the airstrip. And it was weird, but I was sure I saw something – a monkey in a skull mask, with a name badge that read "Bob", a young woman with a fake moustache and super sunglasses, and an ancient monk in red robes with strange white symbols, dancing around a bonfire to the sounds of Bob Dylan. But when I blinked, they were gone, leaving only the fire behind.

Back on the Mardi, the Atom Band had lifted our Ron Burgundy's head-shaped anchor, and the ship lurched forward through the waves, while flaming volcanic debris landed in the sea all around us. It was like the final scene in a low budget, badly acted war movie, everybody

gathering silently at the rail, or sitting on the rusty waterlogged Fish Rocket's shell to watch Plum Island burn. 'Is everybody here? Have we got everyone?' I shouted. A few faces turned around and stared at me blankly before their eyes were drawn back to the eruption.

'Where's Nate?' I asked.

Standing with his arms folded, purple fire dancing in his eyes, Scrotman said, 'You mean the guy who stole your dinghy?' He thumbed towards the open sea. 'He left you this,' he said, holding up a Wolf Productions business card, 'wrote his number on the back. Said give him a few months to get home and recover, and then call him to make sure he's not been sectioned.'

I took the card and ran over to the rail. There was a tiny speck rowing out across the dark waves on the horizon. On the back of the business card was scribbled a cellphone number. 'Apart from Nate, is there anyone else missing?' I asked.

There was a long pause of silence, the volcano exploding in the background like thundering cannon blasts, before several voices at exactly the same time shouted, 'SIMON PILER!'

I thumped my head against the rail.

The last time I saw Simon was in the jungle after we made our escape from the football match. He'd disappeared into the trees, saying that he had something important to do. Throughout the game against Plum Island, he'd seemed strangely preoccupied. At the time, I'd put it down to him recovering from the Fish Bends. I'd never thought for a second that he wouldn't be back on the ship. 'Well, where the fuck is he?' I yelled.

'He's there!' shouted Brendon Hertz. Several fingers around the main deck pointed back towards the shore.

I pushed through the crowd of bodies, arm in arm, heads resting on shoulders, some smoking to stay sane, some sitting with their chins cupped in their hands, staring into space, and followed where the fingers were pointing. There was a head bobbing through the surf in the wake of the ship, arms paddling furiously. One of the twins gasped. 'Will he make it?'

A cold robotic voice answered behind us. ++Based on variables concerning ship speed, the Doctor's general level of fitness, and the likely ratio of increasing volcanic debris landing in the sea, I calculate that he has a 37% chance of reaching the ship alive.++

'Oh fuck off, NIKO. He'll make it,' I said, smiling to myself and ambling back to the aft hatch.

And then something very peculiar happened. Upon hearing NIKO's voice, little Sam Tharkey unwrapped himself from his father's

arms draped across his shoulders, and walked over to the hulking supercomputer sitting on a tea trolley, under an umbrella. ‘Hey,’ he said, ‘why are you wearing an umbrella?’

++In case it rains++ said NIKO.

‘I’m Sam,’ said the boy.

++I know++ said the computer. ++I am NIKO SUPERCOMPUTER++

‘I know,’ said Sam.

And then the two of them started laughing.

‘Hey Alfie,’ said W, puffing on a joint and grabbing my elbow as I reached the hatch. ‘What are we going to do with all these people?’

‘I guess they can crash in the empty bunks for now,’ I told him. ‘We’ll let them off at the first safe port we can find.’

I scanned the people on the deck. Helmet and Scrotman sitting side by side on top of the Fish Rocket, sharing a newly uncorked bottle of rum, Scrotman’s corduroy jacket wrapped around Helmet’s shoulders. The Amalfi Glow was scarfless, leaning on the rail and holding his phone up to try and get a reception. Hank was offering a slice of pizza to Poflowetry. Moss was in a daze, clomping across the deck in Tharkey’s old brown boots, leading Elvis back towards the Quixodelic Record Store. The Atom Band began carefully wheeling NIKO towards the Communications Bay with Sam Tharkey perched on top of the tea trolley, swinging his legs. Jon of the Atom was demonstrating to Jonny Gallo how he lulled the Plum Pygmies into a trance with his clarinet, while the little balding Italian-American desperately tried to get a word in edgeways. ‘What about you, dude? Are you sticking around?’ I asked W.

‘Alfie, old friend, there’s nowhere else in the world I’d rather be,’ he replied, clapping me on the shoulder. ‘The Mardi is the perfect place for me to continue with my operations, always moving, near impossible to locate, spacious, and a magnet for impressionable oddballs. Also, I’d like to get to know those twins a bit better. Any chance you could maybe make yourself scarce tonight while I give them a guided tour of the War Room?’

‘I’ll get my sleeping bag,’ I said, laughing. ‘Just be careful.’

I shuffled down the metal steps to the bottom corridor. It felt great to be back on the Mardi with her weird smells and sounds and warm creaking floorboards beneath my bare feet. My tattered mind took some comfort in the familiarity. Truthfully, I still felt fucked. The Invisible Box-Set, our trip to the moon, and now this fucked-up adventure on Plum Island had all taken their toll. I padded along to the Sick Bay and stuck my head around the door. Robbie was there with

his pink sunglasses and cosmonaut costume, slumped in the hammock. How I got him back from the belly of a white whale at the bottom of the Specific Ocean will have to wait for another day, because right then I only had one thing on my mind – sleep.

I headed upstairs via the aft mast and made my way to Cabin 5, knocking to no reply before I stepped inside. I hung the Elephant Teapot back on its nail upon the cluttered and quite insane workstation of Simon's, not even noticing something rattling softly inside it. That was when I spotted the Hypnotist Phone, and looked down at the business card still in my hand. I dialled Nate's number.

The Hypnotist didn't sound too pleased to hear from me again, but after explaining what I was after and promising to settle our outstanding bill first thing in the morning, he reluctantly patched me through. After a few rings, Nate answered. Over the sound of waves crashing around him, he shouted, 'Who is this?'

'It's Alfie,' I told him.

'Oh fuck!' he shrieked. 'Didn't you get my message? I said call me in a few months! Not a few minutes!'

'I need you to do me one last favour, Nate,' I told him, counting on the power of the Hypnotist Phone. 'I need you to forget that you ever met us. Forget that we kidnapped you. Forget about the moon and Plum Island. I need you to wipe it from your memory and forget how you got where you are. Can you do that, Nate?'

After a long pause, he said quietly, 'Who the fuck is this? Why the fuck am I on a Dr Seuss dinghy? Where am I? Oh shit! Oh shiiiiii-'

I hung up and headed back down to the War Room to collect my sleeping bag. To the untrained eye, it looked like someone had ransacked it in our absence. With the exception of a note pinned down with a golden bullet on the desk by the door, everything looked exactly like it did when I left it to go and play poker with Dolly and the Plum Islanders. I picked up the note and skim read my way through it. It was from Chase, something about taking a part of NIKO away with him. I placed the golden bullet back on the table, grabbed the sleeping bag from inside my cloud coffin, and heard a cough. 'Hello?' I asked.

'Hello', replied a voice from under the bottom bunk, 'who's there?'

'It's me,' I said, bending down and looking underneath. There was a guy wedged on his side under the cloud coffin. He rolled out and stood up beside me. We were similar height and build, but he had foppish blond hair, and boyishly handsome good looks. He had an

electric kettle in one hand, and a sealed envelope in the other. I'd never seen him in my life before.

'You need to read this,' he said, almost defiantly, handing me the envelope.

'What the fuck were you doing under there?' I asked.

'Hiding', he said. 'Just read the letter, will you?'

I unpicked the edges of the envelope and read:

Dear Alfonso,

I hope this letter finds you alive. It is difficult for me to write this, so I will just come out and say it.

I am leaving you.

Things are different, Alfonso. We've both changed. You know I wasn't happy about you going away for a year. You haven't phoned or emailed since you left, and the last time I spoke to your attorney he said you thought you'd just come back from the moon. Apparently he's now flying out to play football with you in a place called Plum Island. I've checked and there's no such place.

There is nothing you can do to make me change my mind. I have met someone else. His name is Thurston. He is a very kind man, and excellent with our children. Also he has a good job and a nice camper van. You know how I always wanted a camper van. I don't think you would like him much.

I'm sorry to have to tell you like this. I've tried calling, but all I get is a stupid answering machine, and I have to leave a message with something called NIKO SUPERCOMPUTER. I've lost count of how many messages I've left. The truth is I don't want you in our life anymore. You are a bad influence on Cub. He is still young, and already people are saying he is weird. He has imaginary friends. Just like you. And a ship of his own. He thinks he is a pirate.

I've asked Thurston to deliver this letter to you on board your silly ship (if it even exists). Please understand my decision that I make as both a wife and a mother. You may be home in six months, but you will always be the same, Alfonso. Please don't waste your time trying to find us (you won't). Again, I am sorry. But also relieved.

Enjoy the rest of your life if you can, and remember, the whole world is not against you.

I stared at the letter for a several seconds until the man cleared his throat. 'Is this some kind of joke?' I asked him.

'It's no joke, Alfonso,' he said.

'Who the fuck are you again?'

'I'm Thurston,' he said, his pale blue eyes flicking to the security camera on the wall, then staring back at me, like he was willing me to do something stupid.

And suddenly it dawned on me what was going on.

So I did something stupid.

I punched Thurston in the face.

And he punched me back. I went flying across the floor, clattering into the pile of plastic bags full of unmarked cassettes. He walked across the bunkroom and crouched down beside my head. 'Remember, Alfonso, they are always watching,' he whispered, 'so try and make this look convincing.'

I blinked as Thurston walked away with a flourish, slamming the bunkroom door behind him.

And then I just lay there, staring up into the abyss.

...

Moss: I wish I could remember what happened that day. I woke up in the Quixodelic Record Store, behind the hot-tub with Elvis, which was nice but confusing. And then it started coming back... You stopped time! And I'm so glad Robbie's safe. I'll go and check on him in a bit. I think I'm going to leave the whole volcano thing in my subconscious for a while, I don't think I can deal with it right now. It feels good to be back on the ship though, even if it is a bit full. It'll be a nice change from the usual. But Alfie... why does your wife call you Alfonso? And why has she left you? That's horrible!

Alfie: Well, I suppose she calls me Alfonso because that's my actual name. I saw Thurston with his portable kettle swanning around the ship this afternoon. Apparently he's taking Team Fifecub back to Scotland with him. Our exchange in the Wardroom went something like this:

Me: So you're all going?

Scrotman: Yeah. This Thurston guy says he knows a way for us to claw the last week back like it never happened.

Helmet: Sorry Alfie, but our job here is done.

Me: You're really going back with that knob? After everything he's done to me?

The Amalfi Glow: Actually, he's not a bad guy once you get to know him.

Helmet: He reminds me of you a bit.

Scrotman: Before you went... you know, weird.

Me: I can't believe none of you told me about him!

The Amalfi Glow: It's news to us too. Listen, I'll be there to help with the divorce settlement and custody papers. Just give me a call. Or fax me. Even though I don't actually have a fax machine.

Me: (*sarcastically*) Gee, thanks.

The Amalfi Glow: No worries. Take care of yourself, and call me if you crash into any more satellites.

Me: I will do (*bursts into theatrical tears*)

Scrotman: Well I guess this is it...

Me: (*sniffing*) I guess.

Helmet: I don't get it. This feels kinda weird... like we're nearing the end of a story or something. (*pauses*) Alfie?

Me: What?

Helmet: It's been a blast. Mail me some more of those mushroom toasties if you get a chance?

Me: Will do.

Scrotman: (*awkward shrug of the shoulders*) Not that you'll have a house... or even a life to go back to, but are you sure you don't want to come with us?

Me: With Thurston?

Scrotman: (*whispering*) Between you and me, I think he's a total knob too.

Me: Thanks Scrotman, but I need to see this one through.

(*He shrugs again and I watch the three of them follow Thurston and his fucking kettle up to the main deck.*)

And you know, Helmet is right, it does feel like we're nearing the end of a story. Though I don't suppose it would be a particularly good story. More the sort of self-published crap you find buried at the bottom of a relative's drawer somewhere, its pages unread, with loads of spelling mistakes and plot holes, bad grammar and printing errors.

Instead of all this book analogy bullshit, I need a blow-out. Starting with some of Moss's finest choice fungi.

Moss: Well, there are always mushrooms... but I want you to take them responsibly. I'm worried about you. And I'm confiscating that rum.

Alfie: Don't worry. Just, if anyone sees me attempting to jump from Craw's Nest 1 then either:

(A) Talk me out of it, or

(B) Get a trampoline from somewhere in a hurry.

About the confiscation of the rum – you do realise how many bottles we've got stashed under the floorboards? Hundreds more. Thousands maybe.

Moss: No mushrooms. They won't help. Actually, I think I have a bit of that coma jam left if you want to sleep. Trampoline pending... I've always wanted one anyway. And I just meant I was confiscating the one you were holding. It was pointless but symbolic.

...

November 15, 2009

THIS IS MY BODY

I walk quickly. After that confusing game of football, I'm tired and a bit sweaty. The sun hums like an accordion, smiling and wiping it's nose.

The trees whisper secrets. 'He's going to see Madame. Madame Datura,' says one swaying in the lush green, 'do you remember?'

'It's been a long time,' chants another corkier soul, his bristles gleaming, 'but she is impossible to forget!' Their roots laugh and squirm. I'm ticklish and dancing a bit. The Murphy Hermitage is only another fourth of a mile from here.

The ground is soft.
And it is clear.
The soil smells sweet,
but soon it spreads hollow
into a great chasmous vacuum.
I reach into my pocket AND PULL
A SMALL MOON
(carefully bagged and
labeled, of course).
It is ripe and clings

through a static clip
of gravity
somewhere in the vicinity
of my shirtsleeve
Except my shirtsleeve has shrunk.
(I guess) I'm actually wearing a toga, now,
and I've only got one leg.
My beard is wavy and well attended
with aromatic oils
I move my olive-wrought cane deftly,
traversing
the forest floor (of space).
Each footstep stirs
THE THIN DUST OF THE UNIVERSE.
I am the spitting image of Ptolemy
A giant, twice the size of Earth,
but I feel like myself more than ever
reaching for the
door handle
Madame stands up from her chair, she has been waiting
perhaps anxiously, though I do not
doubt her patience.

'Let's dance, my love,' I offer.

'Oh, but I've set the kettle!' And she has – it's breathing short
piles of solar wind towards us. Playing an old two-step, in the Cajun
style. She swoops to take my hand in hers; I place my other on her
waist, and we spin

LIKE AN ARCHIMEDEAN SPIRAL
quite linearly, through the curvature
of a dream.

'I know this song, it's quite funny,' she laughs. My only foot
involuntarily hops over a small beetle on the sun-ray floorboards.

We are shrinking in size. I had assumed (incorrectly) that we were
giants.

But, no, no! Eye-to-eye with fieldmice! And grains of rice!

We orbit the nucleus of a single atom, and I close my eyes, hold
this woman close.

Carbon swoons as an autumnal choir:
'Donc, bye-bye, je m'en vas, mes amies,
(So, bye bye my friends, I'm going off,)
Moi, je m' en vas. C'est rapport a la catin.
(Me, I'm going because my girl)
Donc, jamais j'aurais cru fallait je m'en vas
(Yeah, I never would have thought I'd have to go)
Moi, tout seul et la quitter derriere.'
(Me, all alone, and her left behind.)

When the song stops
thin dust keeps sweeping
and chortling
like a crystal stupor
suspended several
inches over the surface
of the floorboards.

We look at each other for a moment, my Madame and I.
'We will share this space forever,' she says.
'You know what, I think you're right. There's no changing that.' I
look off to my right towards one Hydrogen atom. It burns big-brown
like Jupiter.
'But what? What is it, Simon? You hesitate?'
'I need my heart back, Madame,' and add quickly, 'My love. This
hollowed thornapple simply won't work any longer. It is dry and full of
dust. It is a home for spiders.'
'You don't need a heart anymore. It's just an organ. A complex of
muscular tubes.'

I think about my organ, and the music it played.
I think about complex movements of notes.
I think about restrictions of motion when following notation.
I think about rubber platelets.
I think about organizing thoughts.
I think about the wonders of thinking,
and then,
realize the grasp my brain has on my body
Its vines strangle the sensations that my body is capable of.
My brain has no AUTHORITY, it cannot control me!
I RAGE

But stepping back, I reflect for one moment.
Though the brain is wondrous
(I slowly resolve,
every cell must respect
every other equally
if they are all to benefit.

So, first my fingers come back; though they were longtime
servants

AND SWORD-WIELDERS

of the brain:

I feel a tingling akin to returning indoors
after a prolonged exposure in freezing temperatures.

Second to breathe
are, of course,
my lungs! But it has been too long,
they are soft and lazy
overfed on warm air
and television dinners,
mass-produced beer.
They wince
but with great excitement
pull themselves up from their
EASY CHAIRS.

And in a long queue
each tissue
and organ group
rallies and sends up a cry
of KINSHIP!
of READYING!
they race to pick up
the yoke that has been dropped.

The team (cut loose)
has fled
but despite formal worries
this body
that is called
SIMON PILER

stands, whole,
serene
and balanced.
PHYSICAL.

In my chest there beats a heart,
not fashioned of cork
nor spiny cellulose, but of wry,
imperfect animal
flesh.

‘You’ve had your wish granted. But it wasn’t my choice. I just wanted to let you know that...’

‘Madame, I -’

‘...before you leave.’ She turns away. Her magic has been flung wide, scattered as particles of glass across light years of space. I don’t see the diviner nor the figure of mythology. All I see here in the interior of the wooden cabin is an aging Latina woman, her arms wrapped close to her body, head held low.

I try to speak again, but my words fall dumb into the air. Her magic may have failed against a singularity of logic, but she will not listen to my puttering apologies.

‘Remember me,’ she says, and a block of purplish rock crashes through the roof, and the tea kettle ignites the countertop. As it bursts into flames, I run from the cabin.

And I am running towards a New Freedom,
but this newfound freedom hurts
it is not the polished thought-medallion prized by the theorists,
glimmering golden free from cloying pains
instead, it exists through feeling
and carries a simple clarity of weight;
the pristine edge of sensation triggered
in domino-sequence:
Each of my ligaments, tendons
and cartilaginous joints
compress and then
expand.

Now I am swimming with vigor
but I hope the Mardi is not as far
as it looks

or else

I will

drown.

...

November 16, 2009

Transcript of Post-Plum Island Company Meeting

The Wardroom, early evening. All ship personnel are present. The plastic seats are haphazardly scattered around and spirits are relatively high. A small group has gathered around MOSS in the front row, admiring her "awesome" new Utica Flower Company t-shirt. Alfie sits alone on an upturned cloud coffin at the front of the room, facing the rest of the crew.

ALFIE: *(rings a little brass hand-bell, stubs a cigarette out on the side of the cloud coffin, grimaces and clears his throat)* Okay... OKAY EVERYONE! Firstly, thanks for coming. For those of you new to the Mardi, then welcome aboard. I hope your time here - for however long that may be - is a rewarding one. For those of you who have been a part of the Company for a while now, I'd just like to say well done for being sober enough to make it here this evening, beautiful enough to have stuck with us so long, and lucky enough to still being alive. *(Somebody cruelly makes monkey noises at the back of the room)* I just wanted to update you all on my immediate plans for the Company, as well as give you an opportunity to air any suggestions or ideas of your own. As you all know, there is no captain on this ship - *(the same voice at the back of the room shouts "bullshit!", Alfie clearly hears this but pretends he doesn't)* - so any contributions are welcome, as long as they are in keeping with the collective spirit of things *(murmurs, some muted laughter)*. We've lost many great individuals who simply slipped away in the night and never came back. The main issue seems to be that nobody knows what the fuck is going on. So, as an attempt to

resolve this, I'll be carrying out a long-promised guided tour of the Mardi tomorrow night. You're all obviously welcome to tag along. *(Stares off into space, silence)*

JON OF THE ATOM: When do we get fed? I'm fucking starving.

ALFIE: Huh? Shit, sorry Jon. You asked about food? Well, unfortunately Robbie is still in a coma, though he's thankfully back where he belongs in the Sick Bay hammock. Zheng Tharkey here has offered to make us all soup with whatever she can rustle up in the Galley. If you don't fancy soup then please help yourself to whatever you can find, except the ice-cream in the freezer. In fact, if you don't mind, don't even go near the freezer. It's a long story. Okay, where was I? Oh yeah... so, Jim called to say his helicopter broke down and it could take a couple of days to get it repaired. Right now we're heading towards the Pitcairn Islands and should arrive tomorrow afternoon at the earliest. Apparently there are no airports nearby, so if anyone wants to leave the ship, they'll have to transfer onto wherever they're going from there by boat. After we've stopped off and stocked up with provisions, we'll be sailing for the south of Australia, skirting around the edges of Antarctica, before heading home to Jacksonville from there. Barring any major catastrophes, we should be back anywhere between three or four months from now, which means Christmas on the ship. *(Breaks off, appears to be crying)*

MOSES: What about sleeping arrangements? *(Some stifled laughter at the burly Samoan's effeminate voice)*

ALFIE: Sorry, I... I'm feeling a bit... never mind. Sleeping arrangements? *(Lights another cigarette)* Well, I figured now would be a good opportunity to find out who will be staying with us beyond the Pitcairn Islands, so we can sort that out. Is everyone here? I noticed there are one or two new faces. Sorry, what's your name? *(Points to a young woman with long blonde hair, sitting at the back)*

CINDY: Cindy Is A Poet It's Just She Doesn't Know It. *(she blushes)* That's not my real name by the way.

ALFIE: Hi Cindy. Hang on, where's Simon Piler? *(Craning of necks and scratching of heads)* He did make it back to the ship, didn't he? *(silence)* Fucking hell. Well, let's just assume he did and will be staying on. Anyone else missing?

MOSS: Oh wait! Simon's here. He said my t-shirt was awesome. I remember now.

ALFIE: Okay, that's good news, and I agree, the t-shirt is awesome, Moss... good job. So we're all here then, apart from Simon?

MOSES: The Black Clou- I mean, W, is still with the twins in the War Room. When I got your coffin for you, he said he was attending to

important business. Then he asked me to hang a “DO NOT DISTURB” sign on the door handle.

ALFIE: Okay, thanks Moses. Anyone else missing? Jonny? Anyone seen Jonny?

JONNY GALLO: I’m right here!

ALFIE: No, not you. The real Jonny. Jonny Rchrdsn. The Jonny who wears the walrus outfit. (*No answer*) What about the other original Company members? Uberpaul? Syd? Poflowetry?

MOSS: Poflowetry’s meditating in the Toadstool Treehouse.

ALFIE: Right. Well that’s something I suppose.

BRENDON HERTZ: What about O’Flanahanaman?

ALFIE: Shit, you guys don’t know about him, do you? Well, it turns out that our Company Secretary was only using us to get to the Plum Necklace. To be honest, I found his story about infiltrating us in the hope that we would lead him to it, somewhat unconvincing. For what it’s worth, he died in the lava underneath the Plum Island volcano. (*pause*) Unless like a horror movie he’s resurfaced all scorched and skinless, and has built a raft out of palm trees and plastic Jesus figurines, and is at this present moment furiously pursuing us to take some kind of psychotic revenge. (*A couple of faces glance nervously towards the portholes*) While we’re on the subject of impostors, is everyone in this room who they say they are? (*Murmurs of ‘yes’*) Nobody wearing one of those lifelike Wolf Productions masks? (*Murmurs of ‘no’*)

JON OF THE ATOM: I notice that Team Fifeclub are absent.

MOSS: (*whispering*) Jon!

JON OF THE ATOM: What?

ALFIE: Uh... they left this afternoon. (*quickly*) Let’s move on then, shall we? So, if that’s everyo-

JON OF THE ATOM: Hang on - “left this afternoon”? What do you mean, “left this afternoon”? How did they get out of here?

ALFIE: (*mumbling*) They’re gone. That’s all you need to know. (*Stares into space, brow furrowed*)

JON OF THE ATOM: Gone? Gone how? (*Murmuring all around*) Are they dead? Did you kill them? Are YOU really who you say you are?

MOSS: (*whispering*) I heard they had a magic kettle. It belonged to Thurston. (*murmuring stops*) The guy who Alfie’s wife ran away with. (*Everyone hears this and looks at Alfie*) Shit. That was kinda loud, wasn’t it?

ALFIE: (*Head in hands, hunched forward*) It’s okay, don’t worry about it. Can I just get a show of hands from everyone who’s intending

to leave us when we get to the Pitcairn Islands? (*Lots of hands shoot up in the air*) Wow. (*Long pause*) Shit, I never expected... Jon, why are you going?

JON OF THE ATOM: Because I think you're going to kill me too.

ALFIE: Kill you? What are you talking about?

JON OF THE ATOM: Okay then. Because I don't want you to make me gone. With a magic kettle, or a magic anything else for that matter.

ALFIE: MOSS! Where are you going?

MOSS: What do you mean?

ALFIE: You've got your hand up.

MOSS: Sorry. I completely misunderstood the question. I was too busy admiring my awesome new t-shirt. What exactly was the question again?

ALFIE: Hands up if you're leaving the ship tomorrow.

MOSS N: I dunno. Are we... leaving the ship tomorrow?

ALFIE: I don't know! That's what I'm asking you!

MOSS: Is this a trick question?

JON OF THE ATOM: (*to MOSS*) Just put your hand down.

ALFIE: (*to Tharkey*) Tharkey, you're leaving us so soon?

THARKEY: I'm afraid so.

SAM THARKEY: (*protesting*) Awww, Dad!

ZHENG: Samuel Tharkey! We have already talked about this! Our family have a destiny to fulfil. You need proper schooling and discipline, not running around wild with these crazy people. It's too dangerous! Sorry Alfie, no offence.

ALFIE: None taken. Obviously I'm disappointed, but I understand. Not the part about your family having a destiny to fulfil - I didn't get that at all. But the part about the crazy people made a lot of sense. Let's see, who else is leaving? The entire Da Silva family? Well, with the exception of Mama Da Silva, I guess you're not a great loss.

MAMA DA SILVA: (*An octogenarian smoking a fat cigar*) Damn straight.

ALFIE: And Hank, you're leaving us too? We hardly even got to know you.

HANK: Actually, before I go, you need to pay for the pizza, and, as we discussed, my travel expenses, plus loss of earnings for the amount of time it took to deliver it. As of now, I calculate that it comes to... (*consults a notebook*) ... \$14,679.00.

ALFIE: (*Stares at the floor before looking up suddenly*) What are you like at poker, Hank?

MOSS: Don't you fucking dare!

ALFIE: Fine. I'll speak to you in the morning about that bill, Hank. So, let me see, who does that leave? Me obviously, Moss, Moses - you're staying, right?

MOSES: I'm keeping my options open for now.

ALFIE: Well, at least that's not a "no". Anyone else? The Atom Band?

BRENDON HERTZ: We're waiting to see what Simon says.

JON OF THE ATOM: Ha! I fucking love that game!

ALFIE: That might as well be a yes then. Jonny Gallo, you're staying?

JONNY GALLO: I just - what the hell, ya know? I could do with a bit of adventure. Been a few years since I sailed a coracle down the Amazon, but I'm sure it'll come back to me. My friends, they used to call me "Admiral" on account of my ability to sniff out German submarines at-

JON OF THE ATOM: Oh would you shut the fuck up, you little freak! (*Startled silence around the room*) Sorry, but it had to be said.

ALFIE: That just reminded me of something. (*Long pause, Alfie looks very anxious*) Chief, remind me later that there's something I remembered I needed to sort out.

MOSS: (*Salutes*) Aye aye, Not Captain. (*looks around*) Who wants to volunteer to remind me to remind Alfie?

ALFIE: Okay, that's everyone I think.

BUCKLEY THE RAT: (*coughs*)

ALFIE: Shit! Buckley! I'm so sorry.

BUCKLEY: It's okay. I'm a lot smaller than the rest of you.

ALFIE: So that's Buckley. And Elvis too presumably? (*MOSS nods*)

BUCKLEY: Don't forget my wife and kids! All thirteen of them. At least I think there are thirteen. There might be fourteen. Or eleven. And Doreen's pregnant again, so more on the way.

MOSS: Hey Buckley! Congratulations, man! (*Ripples of applause and "well dones" all round*)

BUCKLEY: (*Lighting a cigarette*) It was nothing really. Couple of rums too many and... Alfie, are you okay?

ALFIE: (*Uncorks another bottle of rum and drinks a third of it in one go, grimacing as he does*) Any more questions before I take this cloud coffin and retreat to a really dark place?

JON OF THE ATOM: Yeah, what's the story with this magic kettle? (*A deathly hush falls over the room*)

ALFIE: (*Stares into space, stands up, attempts to pick up the cloud coffin, but can't, and turns to Moses*) Can somebody give me a hand with this?

JON OF THE ATOM: You never answered my question.

ALFIE: Ask me again if you're still on the ship the day after tomorrow. In fact - and this goes for the rest of you as well - if you're not on the ship the day after tomorrow then don't bother me again. I don't want to read your journals, I don't want to know about your medical problems, and I don't want to hear your songs. In case you've all forgotten, I'm NOT the Captain of this ship. (*Exits, Moses carrying the cloud coffin behind him*)

JON OF THE ATOM: (*Shouting after him, though it is unclear whether Alfie hears or not*) Hey! I'm not going to forget about that magic kettle, but if this is the end, then I just want to say thanks. (*To the rest of group*) I mean that sincerely, by the way. (*To MOSS*) Hey, that's an awesome t-shirt, where did you get it?

MOSS: I made it.

(*The group begins to disperse. Elvis craps on the Wardroom floor on his way out*)

MOSS: Wow, this sucks. Okay everyone, I'm going to bake some cakes with icing on them and lots of candles. It may not be anyone's birthday but cake always makes things a little bit better.

SIMON PILER: (*shuffles in and pins a poster to the Notice Board*) Yummmmm... Cake is definitely a good idea. Could we have it during the GLEEM Commercial Pre-screening Party? (*he points to the poster*) Oh, by the way – I'm having a GLEEM Commercial Pre-screening Party in the Wardroom. Let's say Wednesday, sometime. Part of the late-night film series. But, now that I think a bit more about it, I really don't know how much effect cake will have on Alfie's brain. In situations like this, it's like a ball of tangled yarn – putting frosting on it isn't going to help anything. It could be a spectacle worth photographing, perhaps, but probably doesn't make it any easier to see what's going on. It's just a matter of spending the time to look carefully and untangle the whole thing as best you can.

JONNY GALLO: Hey, great! I love parties! Like that time I was partying in Bulgaria and all these people were drinking wine from big gold goblets and their King was sayin' to me, 'Ha ha, Jonny, you're really smart and awesome.' And I said, 'Ya, alright, glad you figured that one out, then!'

(*Simon exits along with the Atom Band, while Alfie reappears from the opposite direction, poking his head around the Galley door*)

ALFIE: Here, Jonny Gallo, I've been meaning to speak to you about getting you a Flower Company uniform if you're thinking about hanging around. Unfortunately we're all out of green shirts and blue pants, but we do have an old walrus outfit that some other Jonny left behind. The position of "ship walrus" is a glamorous position, not to be

taken lightly. Just ask the elk. (*whispering*) By the way, Jonny, have you got any drugs? Something strong. Sedatives maybe. I can't fucking sleep. I'm literally climbing the walls. Like Spiderman.

MOSS: I'm not making magic cake, it's just normal cake. It will, however, be delicious. I'm also making tea with valium in it. But no more crazy brain drugs. Also, sorry Jonny2 but you can't have the walrus costume. I know Jonny1 is never here, but I sleep in it.

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November 17, 2009

Chase's Journal:
The Not-Captain

There are measures meant to be easily taken when the natural flow of the world turns its tide against you. Measures that call upon the darkest of hearts in the kindest of people. Measures that can so freely range from sudden violence to a slow yet major shift in one's character and morals that would send the people of their familiarity reeling in shock. Sometimes, they are for the better. Most times, they are for the worst. And in both cases, one may never know until the end of a thousand gauntlets. I took those steps when I stowed away on my first ship, the *Marjorie Mae*, fifteen years ago. I took those steps again when I left the Mardi before returning again tonight. But in both of those cases, I felt the slight pull of my former self, a young, country-less runaway making way to a dark, brooding loner with his hand in certain happenings as insurrections and shipwrecks. There are things that have happened since my departure that I must hold off from relating at this point, for there are other matters silently rising like a mist upon the Mardi.

Molineaux had glided his speedboat within inches of the ship's hull. It was a calm, starry night on my return. I hopped off the boat and climbed up the maintenance ladder on the ship's side. 'Let's see if you can get the job done this time,' the Linguist yelled out before jetting off into the shadows again. Upon reaching the balustrade, I noticed a slew of tattered clothes and empty cans and hats and other packs of things strung about the deck. I had been keeping track of some of the strange events that consistently beguile the passengers of the ship. This includes the Plum Necklace incident and its subsequent aftermath. The seemingly dirty decks must have been a sign that the new passengers

on the Mardi were indeed onboard as I have seen through NIKO's portable console.

I walked about, amidst the disquieting quietude of the decks, and arrived at the tip of the ship to see the sombre shadow of Alfie leaning on the railings. What a ghastly difference in look I must have had to the man. He must have heard the tramping of my heavy boots from a way off, for he had stared down through the darkness of my direction for a while before yelling out, 'Hey! Who's there? Is that you skulking around again, W?' His eyes widened when I had walked closer, his grin lowering into a disturbed frown. 'Well, what the fuck. Chase of the Seven Isles...' he said.

His head bobbed up and down at my figure when the light of the nearby masthead was completely upon me. It could not have been a ghost as much as a queer sight to him. The long, wan coat of my father's that I wore almost every night at my sentry walks on the ship was tucked away in my duffel bag. I felt the nakedness of my shoulder from the comforting grip of Durheim's rifle strap. My hair was pulled back and frizzy by the absence of my moon hat. Alfie's eyes, I could tell, noticed all this, even as my presence on the ship had been as light as a feather. Perhaps, the brown, dried scar across my cheek was the catalyst for the Not-Captain's curiosity to finally spill over.

'Should I even bother to ask what happened to you?' he says.

'I could say the same for you,' I answered. I think the man had underestimated the extent to which NIKO surveyed the ship daily. Cameras, microphones, recorded diary archives. The supercomputer so wilfully informed me in my absence of all of "the idiot's misgivings." And of course, one would only need to spend a few days with Alfie on the Mardi to know that when the man is attacked by some instance of doubt on the survival of the ship's journey, something was off behind the curtains of his life.

We sat down at the edge with our feet dangling above the foamy water breaking against the charge of the ship through the ocean. Alfie brought out a bottle of rum from a nearby crate and poured some into a couple of plastic glasses. We sat in silence for a while before the cold, midnight wind broke the deadlock.

'You know, Chase, I'm not even sure if you're still lucky like I said you were. The others don't trust you,' Alfie said. He gulped a shot of rum in one go and poured another in his glass.

'There are things at work in these seas that will not permit me to be any other person,' I replied.

Alfie took another shot of rum and stared off toward the dark, blue horizon. His eyes were downcast, his cheeks sunken. No doubt the

fatigue of the last few weeks, from the moon mission, to the Plum Necklace, to the recent meeting in the Wardroom, to the letter from his wife; they had all contributed heavily on the invisible weight keeping his body posture lifeless and bent.

‘How do you do it? How do you go on with all this crap, mysterious and hidden as they are, after all you’ve gone through?’ he whispered to me or to himself without looking back at this drinking companion. I could have pushed him there and then, but instead I drank on, closed my eyes and felt the gentle touch of the night breeze against my open head. I could not answer because there was no answer to give. There was no advice, no wisdom, no comforting tidbits of wonderful, beautiful writings that could be said to be close to the truth.

‘I just follow my feet I guess and hope that they would not lead me to an incompetent decision too often.’ This was all I could muster.

Alfie took a last gulp of the brown rum and pulled off a rolled piece of paper from his pocket. He stuck the thing inside the now empty rum bottle, twisted the cap and threw the message a good distance to the waters away from the Mardi.

‘We’re off to Antarctica soon,’ he said. ‘Are you going to be sticking around?’

I stood up and brushed the flailing bangs of my face. I told him, ‘Aye, aye, Alfie,’ then I headed towards the aft staircase leading back down toward the cabins. A flash of red buzzed around my face before I took any steps down the stairs. There was one, then two, then a few clouds of red ylfnogards circled around my face.

‘I thought those things all died. Those are the first I’ve seen in a while. They must like you,’ Alfie yelled out in a brighter tone.

I smiled and plunged into the shadows. Perhaps they did like me, or perhaps they sensed why I had returned and what I planned to do.

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November 18, 2009

Alfie’s Journal #30something:
Sleep Deprivation

7 cups of sludgy black coffee later...

I had another sleepless night. I saw that Chase made it back to the ship, and sat awhile on the main deck with him. I thought about

responding to the scribbled note he'd left for me, but in the end I couldn't bring myself to do it. On the plus side, I missed this Linguist dude, otherwise who knows what heinous acts of depravity I might have committed. Chase's descriptions of Molineaux leave me feeling like he's the last person we want anywhere near the Mardi.

Post-Chase, I staggered back to my new room – Bunkroom 1 - and fumbled with the coded lock on the door. From the room next door, “Achtung Baby” continued to play on repeat, barely drowning out the sound of the two twins giggling and yapping like dogs on crack. Perhaps they've finally met their match in W, I thought. Eventually I remembered the damn code, popped the lock and stepped inside, thumping on the wall with the palm of my hand and shouting, ‘I STILL FUCKING HATE U2!’

I picked up the wall phone and dialled for an outside line before punching in the numbers. Signals bounced between satellites, flashing over continents, and eventually the inevitable robotic female voice informed me for the fiftieth time today, ‘I'm sorry, that number cannot be recognised’. I dropped the handset and sank down the wall, batting at it unconsciously, and missing it as it swung back and hit me in the face. There was something depressingly un-lived in about Bunkroom 1 - the dismantled bunk-beds and mattresses leaning against the wall; my cloud coffin, suitcase of tobacco, ukulele, and a bin-bag of belongings all haphazardly dumped in the middle of the floor. I reached out and pressed play on the portable cassette recorder, listening as the looped cassette kicked in again, a voice, uncannily like my own, repeating:

‘I think since The Mardi set sail on the 1st May 2009, the three separate elements of what we're involved in here have found their own form. Like a great big tree. The foundations and big thick lower branches are The Daydream Generation, where you climb on. The middle of the tree, where the juicy fruit grows, is Quixodelic Records. And the top of the tree is The Utica Flower Company, where the wind blows hard and the branches are spindly and perilous; that's where only the really mad ones climb...’

I lit a roll-up and tuned out, though the monotonous voice droned on in the background like what he was saying actually meant something, or mattered to anyone other than himself. I ripped open the plastic bag, pulling out a life-sized stuffed model dog. I think her name is Laika. I stole her from a display cabinet at the Russian Space Exploration Museum, and replaced her with a living mongrel stray.

I'd have paid good money to be there when I took off the Plum Necklace and time started ticking again, this crazy little dog barking behind the glass. Let's see if that one makes the news.

I groped around at the bottom of the bag and located the jar of coma jam from the moon mission. It had been as much of a relief to locate the jar in the water-logged Fish Rocket, as it was to find Robbie still slumped in his seat. I held it up to the light and watched swirling smoke trapped inside. Struggling to unscrew the jar lid while the trails from my cigarette burned my eyes, I finally I heard it click, and in one single movement I opened the jar beneath the stuffed dog's nose.

At first the smoke seemed reluctant to leave, nervously hunkering down, coiling up as it looked for somewhere to hide. Then, just as I was convinced it was going to dissipate into nothingness, I watched it shoot up the stuffed dog's nostrils, black marble eyes bursting into life, tongue frantically flapping. At first little Laika was madly disorientated, almost epileptic, jerkily jumping from side to side, ears pricked. She ran to the door, tripping over her own feet and crashed into the skirting board. Next door, the twins were wailing along with Bono's sanctimonious rendition of "The Fly", like wild animals howling at some imaginary moon. Little Laika was going crazy, scratching at the inside of the door and barking loudly. I let her out, watching as she sprinted off up the metal stairs. 'Laika! Come back!' I shouted feebly after her. But she was gone.

I closed the door and locked it before switching the lights off and crawling in a drunken stupor through the dark. Eventually I found the edge of my cloud coffin and lifted one of the bottles of rum I'd brought with me to bed, crawling back over to the wall where I uncorked it. I took a swig and closed my eyes. If I couldn't sleep (and I knew I wouldn't) then I would sit perfectly still and think of nothing at all.

Two hours of insane ideas passed and I was still sitting against the wall with my eyes closed, when I hear the door handle turn. My first thought was that someone was too trashed or simply disorientated, and gotten the wrong room. A horrible image of a torched O'Flahanahaman flashed through my mind, so I kept my eyes shut, real tight. The handle turned a second time, more violently this time, before I heard the click of the lock. It was cool, I told myself. O'Flahanahaman was dead. I realised I'd stopped breathing and gasped, clamping a hand over my mouth, listening to the groan of the door as it opened, the voice continuing to loop on the cassette player. I shut my eyes even tighter still.

The door closed and there was movement in the dark, soft shuffling, not a word. I tried to convince myself that perhaps it was just

Buckley, that he'd come to hang out and avoid the madness of his nest for a while. But whoever - or whatever - it was sounded much bigger than a rat, shuffling forward until it thumped against the cloud coffin.

And there we sat in the dark. I kept my eyes closed. The trembling didn't stop, but at the same time I felt strangely reassured that I wasn't alone. In many ways, W was a shitty bunkmate. He slept a lot. He smoked most of my good cigarettes. And he lost my fishing net. But still, he was almost always there. A dependable presence. Half an hour passed, silent except for the interview I'd recorded with Simon Piler. When the recording reached the end and looped back to the start again, whatever was in the room began to move, removing the two remaining bottles from the cloud coffin and leaving quietly, locking the door behind it. I opened my eyes. And remembered to breathe.

This morning, under a cloudy sky, I was leaning on the railing looking out at Bounty Cove, a Pacific harbour village with twenty or thirty varying sized shipping vessels moored to two long wooden jetties. A small group of school children had gathered and were grinning and waving up at the Mardi. They seemed particularly taken with the Toadstool Treehouse at the top of the main mast.

Meanwhile, the Plum Island refugees had gathered their belongings together and were starting to file off the main deck, muttering thank-yous, while their plastic bags and battered suitcases trundled and clanked down the gangplank. Tharkey and Zheng said goodbye and wished me luck, carrying Lottie, and dragging a teary-eyed Sam behind them. The Da Silvas hobbled off next with gleaming grins, old Edson tipping his hat, Mama tossing her cigar stub into the ocean and planting a wet kiss on my cheek, with Maria Lopez and her son Hiano following. I must admit that I was a little sorry to see Moses go. The big Samoan was dressed in a criminally bright set of mismatched Bermuda shirt and shorts, his eyes hidden behind wraparound sunglasses. He rolled away without even so much as a high-pitched word.

Next went Hank, his red mop of hair tucked back under his baseball cap, and he stopped awkwardly in front of me, biting his lip. 'Uh... so, I guess this is it, dude,' he said.

'I guess,' I agreed. 'Thanks for everything, Hank.'

He moved uneasily from one foot to the other. 'Uh, the money, Alfie? For the pizza?'

I grinned and pull out a roll of American dollars from my pocket pressed it into his cupped hands. 'It was worth every penny, Hank. We'll definitely order again.' I watched the colour drain from his

already pale, freckled face. 'I'm just kidding. Take care of yourself.' Not even stopping to count the notes, he virtually sprinted down the jetty towards the town.

As I watched him go, I sensed an audience and turned to see Chase leaning on the railing further up the ship, his ponytail tied up, and his rifle slung over his shoulder. He smiled and nodded at me.

'Okay asshole, that's me off,' said a voice behind me. Jon of the Atom was standing there, straight-faced, holding his rucksack straps at his shoulder and gazing down at Bounty Cove.

'You sure you won't change your mind?' I asked him. 'We could do with a decent Machinist.'

'Listen, I can't hang around for the next six months, constantly rescuing you fucks with my clarinet solos,' he said as he started to amble down the bouncing gangplank. 'You'll build up a dependency. I've been thinking though... we should play a Kaleidonauts gig together sometime.'

'You know I can't play live!' I shouted after him.

'You can wear a frog suit,' he called back. 'And we'll stick you in a bathtub with the curtains drawn around you.' And then he was gone, disappearing into the bodies milling round at the harbour.

That was when I saw The Man In The Sunflower Sunglasses. He was sitting on an old wooden bench beside a grocery store on the harbour front. I lit a roll-up and beckoned Chase over.

'It's at times like this you must wonder if you're doing something wrong. All these people leaving,' he said.

I managed a nervous laugh. 'So what about you, Chase of the Seven Isles? You look like you might be going somewhere too?'

I saw a flutter of nervous energy in his dark eyes. 'No,' he said, quite emphatically. 'You were kind enough to give me passage. I'll be around for a while longer. At least as long as you still need me.'

I stared at this impossible conundrum of a man for several seconds. He was shrouded in mystery, so unlike anyone else in the Company that I just didn't know what to do with him. Like a square peg on a ship of triangular, octagonal, and star-shaped holes. I wondered what would happen if we fed him some of Moss's mushrooms, or a spoonful of the ice-cream nebula? I remembered a previous encounter where he mockingly fed me a glass of water, as if making a point about my growing rum dependency. Of course he'd been joking, but I recalled feeling at the time like this was a sense of humour from some other time, some other world. Or maybe he had a point? Maybe he wasn't joking? And I thought all this as I stood there staring at him, feeling the weight of the scales drift in a very definite

direction. There was simply too fucking much at stake for me to invest what little energy I had left on someone I couldn't figure out. And truthfully, I respected the guy too much to make him eat psychedelic mushrooms at gunpoint.

'Alfie?' he asked, snapping me back into the moment.

'Sorry,' I said, laughing nervously again. 'Look, since you're not jumping ship, how about you make yourself useful and give me a hand picking up some provisions?'

He nodded, and followed me down the gangplank. I high-fived the little group of kids on the jetty, doing my best pirate imitation, drawing a couple of laughs from them, while Chase flinched and strode on ahead. We crossed over the main street and just before entering the grocery store, I said, 'Just you go on ahead and start getting some stuff together, there's something I need to do. Money's no object, so get a good mix of essentials. Especially rum. Rum is a must.'

He didn't even crack a smile, shrugging as he stepped inside. I wheeled left and made my way over to the bench where The Man With The Sunflower Sunglasses was sitting eating an ice-cream. At his feet was an old red leather suitcase with a navy blue handle. I sat down on the bench beside him, watching him continue to lick at the cone, his tongue looking positively lizard-like. 'So, is there some sort of codeword I need to say?' I whispered.

'A case like this is worth \$6790 American dollars,' he croaked.

'Really?' I asked. 'Wow, I thought it would be at least double that. You got everything on the list?'

'Of course. But do you have the money?'

I leaned forward, pretending to tie my shoelace. 'You saw the guy that got off the ship with me? The one with the rifle? His name is Chase. He's our Company Secretary. He has a roll of ten thousand used American dollars in his left trouser pocket. If you really have everything from that list in this suitcase, then you can keep the change. Chase will be waiting in the vegetable aisle. Or maybe in the bread section. Possibly by the toilet rolls. Anyway, you should go in and take the money, while I take the suitcase back to the ship.'

At this point, my heart was in my mouth. But The Man With The Sunflower Sunglasses nodded and stood up, depositing the leftovers of his ice-cream in the bin beside the bench, before walking towards the shop, licking his fingers, and leaving the case behind. I picked it up, shocked by the weight, and walked along in his shadow. The moment he stepped through the shop door, I started running. The suitcase swung about as I sprinted up the jetty towards the Mardi, cutting through the little kids crying, 'Pirate! Pirate!' while they pointed at me.

Jonny Gallo was just shuffling down from the main deck, carrying a big battered trunk in his arms, and staggering under the weight. While I dropped the red case and started to furiously unravel the heavy rope mooring us to the harbour, I shouted, 'Jonny2! Quickly, go and bring the anchor in. We're leaving!'

He stared at me, blushing furiously. 'Oh... uh... Alfie, I was actually just going... I've – well, I've got a job offer, you see. I know a guy who knows a guy who knows a guy who trades in great white sharks. Anyway, I said to myself, Jonny -'

'Jonny2, whatever that guy who knows a guy who knows a guy who trades in great white sharks is paying you, I'll pay you double,' I told him, dumping the ropes on the deck. I snatched up the suitcase in one hand and grabbed him with the other to lead him back up the gangplank.

'D-double?' he asked, flushing even more.

'Triple. Quadruple even,' I said, as we reached the main deck. I began pulling in the gangplank. 'One condition: you raise our Ron Burgundy head anchor in the next thirty seconds.'

He froze like a rabbit in headlights, dropping the trunk which burst open spilling several items he'd removed from our Storage Hold, including a funnel, a ping-pong paddle, a tangle of yarn, and a milky coloured old vase. Then he ran full pelt in the direction of the Anchor Chain Hold.

'Plus you can keep all this shit that you're trying to steal!' I called after him.

I looked back towards the Bounty Cove grocery store. There was no sign of either Chase or The Man With The Sunflower Sunglasses. I was half-expecting to hear gunshots. I gave a salute towards the little kids sitting on the end of the jetty, and they stuck their middle fingers up at me. Then I ran to the Bridge, shouting, 'NIKO! Let's fucking GO! GO! GO!'

Now that we're sailing again, I need to find a safe place to stash the red suitcase. Then I'll unwind and wait patiently for the GLEEM commercial.

Things are about to get interesting.

Fare you well Chase of the Seven Isles, and thanks for the prose.

...

November 18, 2009

GLEEM: Late-Night Film Projector Series #2



Simon Piler is standing in front of the trusty (now glitter-covered) Film Projector. He is wearing a pair of winged shoes, some jeans, and an unzipped poofy winter jacket. There is a green lightning bolt permanent-markered on his chest.

Scarytoes, adorned as usual, is holding a large speech bubble cut from cardboard. It reads, ‘Well, I...’

Def Mute’s arms are longer than usual – today they touch the floor. He’s got on his special 1940’s RADIOMAGIC! bow-tie for the event. Brendon, Emerson and Spark are seated comfortably along the wall to the left of the projector screen.

Sir Matthew lights off a big, old-fashioned flash bulb. A large multicolored jellyfish grows out of the pulse of light, and creeps across the room, popping in and out of existence with every blink of the eye. He mutters something about fire as the room quiets down.

Simon Piler: (*amiably*) Hello, folks. (*then jumping up, hands out, giant-eyes, and shouting.*) Stinging tentacles! Wait cautiously! (*then amiably, again*) No, I'm really just kidding. Thanks for rolling out of yer bunks and off yer futons to come and see this thing. It's about Bopcrons.

Emerson: (*from his seat*) No it isn't!

Simon Piler: Right you are. It's actually about selling toothpaste. Lots and lots of gritty, flavored mixture from tubes. For dissolving biofilms from the mineral outgrowths of yer skull. (*Involuntarily shouting*) BOPCRONS!

Emerson: What the hell?

Simon Piler: Right you are. I won't bore you any longer, but I'm very happy to say that you are the first eyes – the very first eyes – the people who will be the very first to see this moon documentation in its fully edited format. It grew happily, playing as a friendly, disoriented child in the garden. [*Def Mute holds up a little sign scrawled in black permanent marker. It says, 'Feeding a Child'.*] Happily playing and frolicking near raspberries, where the tiger lilies grew in the crack formed by the splitting of the garage from the old concrete patio slab. And it stubbed its toes, which were synthesized from cellulose acetate, on the larger rocks there. And it played a game by bouncing a rubber ball against the uneven surface of the back of the garage and swatting it with a minuscule toy shovel, which it received as a unrecognized humorous joke one fine winter after wiping its nose... [*Audience audibly chuckling and whispering and several people shuffling around the darkened room.*]

Someone: (*a commanding shout,*) NOW!

[*A large barrage of crumpled paper, moldy ship shapes, thoughtfetti, sawdust, marbles, dried leaves, and cardboard stars pelt Simon. He holds his arms up to block his face. Some objects obviously have more pelting power than others.*]

Moss: On with the show!

[*Sir Matthew the Mighty, Champion of Science (First Court of the Solar Corona) hits the switch, Brendon pulls a cord to open a makeshift curtain, and the commercial jolts into action...*]

Sound thoughts: A musical introduction, possibly ambient w/ accordion. When things are occurring on the moon, there should be a very subtle ULTRA-reverberation going on. Individual's voices should be panned in correspondence with their position on the screen.

The Storyboard:

Shot 1: Simon and Scarytoes are on the surface of the moon. We see the Fish Rocket in the background. Simon has an enormous tube of GLEEM toothpaste. Scarytoes has an enormous toothbrush. They shake slightly while speaking.

Simon: Hi there, I'm Simon Piler.

Scarytoes: And I'm Scarytoes. And today we're going to brush the moon with GLEEM to make it even brighter!

Simon: Well, at least that's part of why we are here. Do you know what the real reason is for coming to this specific area, Scarytoes?

Scarytoes: What's that?

Simon: There was a capability that this location had, within a magnetic field. It is the source of the lo swing of the earth; this spot is the contact where the moon hugs the earth really quite intermiscibly, you know, they love each other

Scarytoes: Well, I suppose that's gravity for you. (*short pause in reflection*).

Simon: You'll be needing some toothpaste, then?

Shot 2: Hary appears.

Scarytoes: (*surprised and startled*) Whoa! (*as Hary is appearing*) (*hard shake*). [*Hary appears.*]

Hary: Hi, I'm Hary.

Shot 3. Hary present, Bary appears. (*Simon and Scarytoes shifted slightly?*) [*Bary appears.*]

Bary: AND I'm Bary.

Both: We would like to welcome you to the moon.

Bary: Please throw any trash that you may have into the receptacle.

Simon: No, no, my eyes are optical.

Bary: Please listen.

Scarytoes: May I please have some toothpaste now?

Hary: I think you came to grow a MOONFLOWER.

Simon: Well, actually...

Bary: As a matter of fact, please be quiet.

Hary: Bary, what are these small, roundish bugs? Should we paste them?

Bary: You are always so swift, Hary.

Simon: Waaait. I know you guys. You are Hary 'n Bary, those two comic strip character guys.

Both: No.

Scarytoes: (inquisitively) May I ask you a question?

Both: No.

Scarytoes: Oh.

Simon: Well...here's your toothpaste, Scarytoes.

Shot 4: (+) Toothpaste. All still present. [*Suddenly there is toothpaste on the brush. It sparkles purple.*] long silence

Bary: How do you know about the Universe Machine and the center of the Universe?

Simon: Well, you see, I've made my calculations if there is, in fact a hub, here it is. I cannot be mistaken.

Bary: What are your calculations?

Hary: In what manner have you contrived them? You are mistaken! What is this Universe Machine?

Simon: Well, actually I was hoping you could answer that question.

Shot 5: Lights blink as the apparitions quixotically pronounce: (diwwwwwwwwwwww... locked ping)

Both: OF COURSE THE UNIVERSE MACHINE IS A GRIM CENTRIC UNIVERSE PLAN IT WILL ONLY UNLOCK BOTH OF ITS VENTRAL COGWHEELS WHEN THE INCLINATION OF A NEBULAR FROG CALL, QUAVERING, REACHES THE EXTERNAL MEATUS OF THE FIRST COURT OF THE SOLAR CORONA, THAT FRUITFUL PANEL IT IS THERE THAT THREE CROSS-LEGGEDS SIT AND HUM, THEY ARE MERCILESS SO TAKE CAUTION THEIR SCRIBE AND CUPBEARER ARE THE FLASHING OF LIGHT CAST SWEETLY OF

ULTRAFLUORESCENCE AND THEIR EMINENCE IS PRECEDED
BY A HERALDING OF SEISMIC HORNS! –

Shot 6: Lights normal; all present.

Bary: NO. We weren't supposed to tell!

Hary: You tricked us!

Scarytoes: (*honestly*) Hold on, hold on... I don't see how we tricked you at all. You gave up that information willingly.

Multi-Shot: Hary changes, unfolds. [*Hary is becoming a crumpled ball, then unfolding into an immediate evil*]

Hary: You tricked us!

Shot 7: Hary unfolded, all present.

Simon: Scarytoes, do you understand? This is the culmination of all our study and now we hold the short-key. Give me your protractor.

[*Hary is making a horrendous noise. Bary is silent.*]

Simon: ERASE ERASE ERASE ERASE ERASE ERASE ERASE
ERASE

Overlaid shot: Simon's actual face saying Simon's line...

[*The apparitions disappear.*]

Shot 8: The apparitions are gone.

Scarytoes: Hello, Earth, this is SCARYTOESsss... (*echo?*)

Shot 9: End roller.

NEW RADISH (*hard pan... dow dow dow dow dow dow dow dow dow... blinking back and forth...*)

...

Alfie: [*Stands, applauding, and wipes a tear from his eye*] Bravo! Bravo! I must confess that when we made this, I had the horrible feeling it just wasn't going to translate at all well to film. But it is somehow even more real now than it was then. [*Sits down*] Can we watch it again?

Simon Piler: Why, yes. Yes, indeed. (*Replays the video.*)

Alfie: [*pulling Simon aside*] Actually it was even better the second time around. Perhaps now they'll all believe us about the moon. (*pause*) Look, I know you know this already, but I just want to say thank you again. Without you on the Mardi I think we might have turned around or abandoned ship in the first couple of days. You've been a pleasure to sail with, Simon Piler, you and your Atom Band, and I want you to know that I have sincerely dug the comradeship in this most peculiar of adventures. (*pause*) I suddenly feel very sleepy. I think my insomnia was just me being paranoid that when I woke up, I would find that everyone had gone. But after seeing this GLEEM commercial, now I know otherwise. Take care of yourself, and that crazy band of yours. (*grins weirdly, ambles off, stops in the Wardroom doorway*) Oh yeah, what's the chances of us getting some stills from the commercial blown up into posters? I'd like one for my bunkroom wall.

Simon Piler: Stills, oh, no problem, Chaplin. Hey! (*calling down the hall,*) Rest easy – and good dreaming to you!

NIKO: ++I am not sure what is going on in this++

Elvis: Ee-awww!

Jonny Gallo: Hey, nice one, there. But I think you needed a different cameraman. You know, if I had known you were going to the moon, I would have met ya there. I'm actually a photographer, see...

Simon Piler: Uh.

Moss: Hahahaha... amazing! Sorry I fell asleep during it.

...

November 19, 2009

Journal # My Journal's Pretty Boring



This morning I woke up, head full of haze, and feeling the humidity. I could hear the commotion up on deck, and I knew this was the day everyone was leaving, but I didn't really feel like going up. I had already said goodbye to Jon of the Atom last night, and he was the only person I actually knew out of all the randoms. I sincerely hoped the twins were going, but I somehow doubted it. I hadn't seen W for days, and I was a bit puzzled as to how they were all surviving, never leaving his room for food or anything, but hey, weirder things have happened.

I looked out my grubby little porthole window, and saw the trail of people scattering onto the island with their bags and possessions. I saw Alfie and Chase leaving together (Chase! When did he get back?) and I assumed they were going ashore for supplies. Probably alcohol.

I let out a sigh and sat back onto the floor of my messy, familiar bunkroom. Alfie, Alfie... I'm very worried about our Not Captain. He's clearly not dealing very well with the events of the past two weeks. I don't know what happened to him while he stopped time, but I know it must've been difficult. And on top of that, his wife... I just don't feel emotionally equipped to help him. I know I don't have to, and there's probably nothing I could say to make it better, but I always feel so responsible for people when they're in pain. I know I shouldn't have snuck into his room, but I felt like he needed some sort of intervention. I felt a bit bad about that now that it was the morning and everything seemed less dramatic. At least I didn't find a suicide note.

I felt the ship lurch suddenly, and I poked my head up to the window again. As far as I could tell, we were leaving port. So suddenly? This was weird. I wondered what was going on. Some hijinks, probably. The harbour looked normal, and nobody seemed to be surprised at our leaving. I hadn't seen Alfie and Chase get back, but I assumed they were. Nobody else left would bother stealing the ship.

I went back to sleep.

After rushing to the film room and catching the GLEEM commercial, which was killer, I didn't know what to do. It didn't seem like Chase was around anymore, and Alfie was acting shifty. Simon was being his usual peculiar brand of charming, and we didn't seem to have that many more shipmates. Jonny Gallo was a bit of a weirdo, but probably harmless. The whole ship had a sense of impending doom, like we were pretending we could go back to our quiet lives but something crazy was bubbling under the surface. I didn't know how to feel about it. Unsettled and restless, mostly.

I went down into the basement, only because I remembered I was supposed to be cleaning it for a show in January. I started rummaging and putting everything in piles of rubbish or usefulness, and things that I didn't know which they were. A can opener... I'm sure we could use that. Broken drum skins, not useful. A broken amp... no... wait.

After finding a three-stringed scratched electric guitar (I didn't know what it was because the labels had all been scratched off, but it looked kind of like a cheap tele) and finding out that the amp did vaguely work, even if it mostly emitted white noise and strange distortion, I sat on the floor in the middle of this bizarre room and started strumming out the most ridiculous noises I could make. When things are weird or I can't make sense of them, I always find noise is the easiest way to deal with anything. I think I'll be in here for a while.

...

November 21, 2009

Alfie's Journal #36:
A Question Mark of Stars



Something is broken inside my head.

I left the late-night premiere of the GLEEM commercial with a contrived smile on my face, but the moment I stepped out the door, it cracked like over-applied paint, Thurston's words still ringing in my ears...

"...remember to make this convincing..."

I grabbed a towel and headed upstairs for a shower and a shave. I had to clean up before I did whatever the fuck I was about to do. I remembered something about the girl's washroom being locked, so I knocked gently on the door and got no reply. Maybe someone was locked in there and couldn't get out. Maybe they were already dead. 'Hello?' I shouted. 'Is there anybody already dead in there?' Thankfully there was no answer, so I gave up and pushed inside the boy's washroom opposite. I stood like a statue in the shower cubicle, letting the cold water wash over me.

Back in Bunkroom 1, I changed into clean clothes and kicked my grubby Flower Company football kit into the corner of the room. I lit a cigarette and reached inside one of the hollowed out mattresses leaning against the wall, pulling out the red suitcase with the navy blue handle. I dropped it onto the floor and sat down on it, smoking the cigarette until it burned my fingers, contemplating the hole I'd fallen into. My life as it was. My life as it is.

I could handle the paranoia and the pressure. I could handle the fear and all the lies I'd been spinning. It was guilt that was killing me. It was the great irony - I was literally having a nervous breakdown *pretending* to have a nervous breakdown. Not for the first time, I felt like two completely separate people, existing at exactly the same time. One of those people were imaginary. The other was me. I was having a hard time distinguishing where the imaginary man ended and I began. One of them knew *exactly* what he needed to do. He didn't give a fuck. He had an endless supplies of untapped energy and enthusiasm for whatever the Universe wanted to throw him. He would crash headfirst through every obstacle in his path, every barrier erected, dragging everyone down with him in the process. The other me was sitting on the suitcase, burned out like the cigarette blistering my fingers, punctured like a crap inflatable and utterly lost. That me gave a fuck, though he didn't have a clue what he was supposed to be doing anymore. Lately, I'd been flickering between the two at increasingly alarming intervals, never quite sure which I was, or which I was going to be. Sometimes they felt so polarised that I wouldn't be surprised if they decided to go their separate ways. Again.

Time and time again I go back to the simplest of ideas to keep myself sane:

Sail the ship around the world.

Only, we've come so far, I can no longer remember why.

I kicked out at the ukulele and it crashed against the wall with an unhealthy sounding *twang!*

I had to get out of there. I had to find a way of going back, of retracing my steps and starting again. I had to live a life of my own for once. With just one single, solitary mind. Here, I was just dancing to a song whose words I'd forgotten, whose beat was impossible to keep time with. I didn't know how, but there had to be a way of fusing the future and the past back together again. I should come clean, I thought. Sail back to Bounty Cove and apologise to Chase. Get down on my knees in front of Bernie Bedlington and her massive breasts and beg

for forgiveness. Return the Laika exhibit to the Russian Space Exploration Museum. I should resurrect the Jazz Monk, and unimagine the Mardi. Unimagine everyone on it, before somebody else gets hurt. Or worse, before we all simply whimper out of existence.

I lit another cigarette on the dim embers of the previous stub, unzipping the suitcase. My eyes opened wide at the sight of its contents. On top was a plastic wallet containing two sheets of LSD, with little caped cartoon superheroes soaring in symmetrical rows. I broke the seal and carefully removed a sheet. And then I got an urge from somewhere. Like wanting to swear in the middle of a church service. Or to suddenly stand up on a packed commuter train and start singing at the top of my lungs. And before I knew what had happened, my hands had crumpled the sheet of Acid into a ball and shoved the whole thing into my mouth. And I was chewing.

I tossed the remaining sheet into the cloud coffin, and as the paper turned to mush, I delved back into the case, pulling out a big bag of powdered amphetamine. I tore it open, puffing a white cloud onto my face, chest, and arms. Still chewing, I hovered my nose above the bag and snorted as hard as I could. My head flew back as I sneezed, my eyes on fire, nostril hairs burning. Ignoring how brutal it felt, I went back for a second hit, feeling the raw chemicals slide down the back of my throat, little shivering waves of potential pricking up the hairs on the back of my neck. I placed the bag to one side and lifted out a clanking carrier bag before peeking inside. I counted three bottles - one bottle of absinthe, one bottle of dirt cheap cider, and one bottle of vodka. I unscrewed the lid of the absinthe and started to wash the paper mush down with the thick green liquid, swallowing with fire in my lungs.

If you live with a loop for long enough, eventually there comes a point when you barely even notice it exists anymore. But as I swallowed, I became momentarily aware of the dreary voice in the background:

“For a start, you can’t engineer a collective. Nor can you expect other people to want to dream exactly the same dream as you. The world we inhabit seems to be a place that we flicker in and out of – some of us seem ever-present, others disappear for weeks and months. Some people see the bigger collective picture easily, while others are only in it for themselves...”

I hurled the absinthe bottle across the room, aiming for the cassette player. It smashed into a thousand shards of glass, spraying globules of

green liquid, the tape squealing into silence. I stubbed my cigarette out on the bottle lid and opened the vodka, washing the last trace of the superheroes down, pulling out a disc of The Beatles "*Revolver*" from the suitcase. I always regretted burning that particular record on the Bridge, after the ghost of Jack Kerouac told me "Do not seek to follow in the footsteps of your forefathers. Seek what they sought." I laughed madly. Fucking ghosts! The CD turned over in my hands and I tossed it casually back over my shoulder, heard it clunking against the wall behind me.

Next out of the case was a blow-up doll, still in her packaging. She looked fuck all like Winona Ryder, but I inflated her anyway, liberally shovelling handfuls of white powder into my mouth between puffs of the cigarette. As her Oh-ing face expanded, and toeless plastic feet popped into place, I felt a sudden nauseous wave of dizziness, and resolved to stop smoking, stop swearing, and stop taking drugs. I drank some more absinthe. And a little more absinthe, suddenly remembering I'd smashed the absinthe bottle, and staring at the vodka in my hands. I lit another cigarette, floating the fully inflated Winona Ryder into the cloud coffin. 'This isn't what it looks like,' I told her, making sure she knew I meant her no harm. 'I was drunk when I made that shopping list.' I held up the bottle of vodka. 'I mean, half the stuff I just put on there for a laugh. I don't even *like* vodka.' I paused. 'Actually, that's a lie. I do like vodka, but it really isn't good for my mental equilibrium.' I tapped the side of my head.

Blow-up Winona Ryder didn't reply. 'Yeah I get it,' I said. 'I've met people like you before. Well, not exactly like you, I mean, they obviously weren't made of plastic. I'm meaning more – never mind, you're not even listening, and I can't remember the point I was making.'

I lifted a crossbow and a bundle of bolts from the case. 'Suit yourself, Winona,' I said, clumsily plucking the bow-string and wondering if I really ordered it. Fuck, that was frightening. What possible use that wouldn't end in calamity could I have dreamt up by ordering a crossbow? I peeled the tape from the arrows, letting them fall onto the carpeted floor. 'Maybe later,' I thought aloud. More absinthe required. I guzzled more absinthe, remembering it was still vodka.

'Ooooooh!' I said, pulling out a signed copy of Roald Dahl's "*Fantastic Mr Fox*". That had "gratuitous" written all over it, no matter how fantastic it was. I lobbed it into the cloud coffin with Winona and the Acid. 'Here, make yourself useful and start reading this. See if you can crack the code. Also, we should get tails. I'll make

us some tails... in a bit. But first, I'm going to have another cigarette. Oh wait, there's already a cigarette in my hand. But it's not lit. No, wait a minute... it *is* lit ...it's just that nobody is smoking it.'

I stared at the smouldering cigarette, the drooping head of ash teetering on the brink of collapsing. 'Didn't I just say that I was giving these up?' I asked, stubbing it out beside the previous end on the absinthe bottle lid. The lid looked like a tiny ashtray. Or else they were enormous cigarette ends.

I delved back into the suitcase, my eyes momentarily clouding over. 'What the hell is this?' I wondered. It was a hat. A hat for a cat. It was the cat's hat from "*The Cat In The Hat*". Or, at least, a close approximation of it. 'Well, well, what do you think about that?' I said to Winona. But she was too busy trying to get her fingerless hands around "*Fantastic Mr Fox*" to answer. I pulled the tall red and white striped hat down firmly on my head, and lit another cigarette.

I had no idea what the next thing I pulled out was. It was some sort of gun with a really sharp needle on the end, and a capsule of red ink taped to the side of it. 'I'm guessing this is for tattoos,' I told Winona. 'And I'm also guessing you're not going to be up for getting one. Maybe you could tattoo me?'

But what could I possibly ink on my body that I wouldn't mind waking up to for the rest of my life?

'How about a giant puffin behind some clouds, with some ylfnogards zubbing around, and a big ship, like the Mardi, only... not like what it's like now, but what it was like before, pre-toadstool, with lots of little faces at the windows, wearing green skull masks.' I looked around. 'Speaking of which, where the fuck is my green skull mask? I haven't seen it since...'

My head rushed like I was back in the Fish Rocket, blasting off.

'Woah... what was I saying, Winona? Winona?' I dropped the tattoo gun and lifted out a small paper bag filled with hard-boiled spherical sweets of assorted colours. I popped a white one in my mouth and it tasted revolting. Like sucking on a battery. I needed some weed, something to take the edge off.

'I need to go and get something, Winona. Don't go anywhere, I'll be right back,' I got to my feet, knocking over the bottle of vodka, watching the green liquid puddle across the carpet. It made no sense. How did the absinthe get in the vodka bottle? It was as if I'd misplaced a whole chunk of time. My head was spinning hard, and I struggled to catch my breath. Did I just eat something? My tongue felt numb. I had to find a mirror. But what good would that do? I had no reflection. I had to stay away from mirrors. I swooped and plucked the bottle from

the floor and gargled the last drops around like mouthwash. My taste-buds did Mexican waves on the tip of my tongue as I swallowed.

Why did I just stand up?

I sat back down again, losing my balance and collapsed onto the floor. ‘Fuckety fuck, that’s just my luck,’ I said, remembering a dream I once had where I’d resolved to stop swearing. And smoking. Why was I still smoking? I posted the cigarette into the vodka bottle and it fizzed like O’Flanahanamanamanamanamanamahhhhhwhatever the fuck his name was, diving into a jacuzzi of purple lava.

‘Did that actually happen?’ I asked aloud. It seemed so strange that I couldn’t help but feel like it must have been another dream. Maybe a dream inside a dream. My eyelids felt heavy, like there was something stuck to them. I checked and found only eyelashes. I reached back into the suitcase again and pulled out a little bearded head with rabbit ears. It was jammed on the end of a small wooden stick. ‘Jesus,’ I said.

Of course, it wasn’t *actually* Jesus, it was just a bearded head on a stick, with rabbit ears. I revolved it around in my hands. ‘What the fuck is this for?’ I asked. It reminded me of a toffee apple, so I tried to bite it, but my teeth cracked against its skull. ‘Who are you?’ I asked the head, gazing deep into its bottomless black eyes. I stuck it upside down inside the bag of amphetamines. There was something deeply disturbing about the head, but I didn’t want to give up on it just yet. I looked at my hands. There was something missing. Didn’t I have a cigarette? Was that burning I smelled?

‘Aha! Now that’s what I’m talking about!’ I shouted, spotting the packet of fake moustaches at the bottom of the case. They were the furry ones you peel off and stick to your top lip, five black and one ginger. The ginger one reminded me of Hank. Did Hank have a moustache? I decided to order another pizza from him and find out. I glanced over at the wall-phone, but it felt too far away, so I pulled the bearded head on a stick out of the bag and licked it all over. The Mexican taste-buds on my tongue were screaming and ducking for cover beneath their sombreros.

‘Tongue sombreros,’ I said, saliva dangling from my bottom lip. ‘Did I just say that?’ I asked, peeling off one of the black moustaches. After several fumbling attempts, I finally managed to stick it to my face. ‘Mexican! I fucking knew it!’ I cried. ‘Hey Winona! What do you think?’

She didn’t answer. For a fleeting moment, I was tempted to give her a moustache of her own, but then I felt the tears welling up in my

eyes for reasons I could barely fathom... grasping for a name I could no longer remember.

‘They’re coming for you,’ she whispered, my breath rising beneath the Arctic stars as she took my hand in hers and lifted me up off the floor of the crow’s nest like I was light as a feather. ‘Come on, fly.’

‘I’m supposed to be watching for icebergs,’ I told her.

‘Fuck the icebergs,’ she said with a grin.

Back in the present, I glanced up at the hidden security camera above the wardrobe and started furiously licking at the head on the stick before I said something I’d regret. ‘Is this convincing enough for you?’ I shouted, wondering when the superheroes would kick in. I burst out laughing and made to wipe away my tears on my sleeve, but saw that I had no sleeves, sitting there in just my boxer shorts and the enormous stripy hat. It would appear that I’d misplaced my green shirt and blue pants. I had no idea how, where, or when I’d done it, but there was no denying my clothes were gone. I still needed a sleeve though. And something to take the edge of whatever this was. ‘The weed is next door,’ said a woman’s voice.

‘Who said that?’ I asked, but nobody replied.

Whoever said it, they were right. W always had something on him, even if it was that hideous Rongovian tundra. I struggled to my feet, feeling like I’d been there before, done everything exactly like this already in some far flung life. I picked up the bottle of vodka, held it up to my mouth and got a mouthful of ash. Somehow I managed to make it to the bunkroom door, the world spinning like a carousel around me. I had no recollection of my journey across the room, and assumed it had been uneventful. I reached for the handle, feeling a million miles away, and opened the door just far enough for me to peek out into the corridor. It was empty.

But of course it was fucking empty. We were on board the Mardi, where people were like buses in the desert. I stepped outside and crawled along the wall to the room next door. I stared for a while at the sign hanging on the door handle, trying to decipher the mysterious symbols on it. “DO NOT DISTURB” it said. I had no idea what that meant. Behind the War Room door, two excited teenage voices squealed, ‘Not on the hair of my chinny chin!’

I knocked.

A few seconds later, the door opened. There was a chain across the inside and one of the twins’ faces appeared, flushed and smiling. ‘Who is it?’ groaned W from deep within the room.

‘Looks like a half-naked Mexican bible salesman in a big stripy hat,’ said the twin, eyeing me up and down, her tongue flicking suggestively between her teeth. For some reason she didn’t recognise me. Perhaps it was the moustache.

‘Tell them to try Alfie in Bunkroom 1,’ called W, ‘and then get your little piggy ass back over here so as I can finish blowing your house down.’

‘You heard the Big Bad Wolf,’ she said to me, giggling as she slammed the door in my face.

I looked both ways down the corridor. I had completely forgotten what the fuck I was doing there. So I followed the Big Bad Wolf’s instructions and tried my luck at Bunkroom 1. I knocked on the door, but there was no reply. A phone started ringing inside. I looked back down the corridor, watched the colours oscillate and swim like I was standing inside the barrel of a kaleidoscope. The superheroes were doing their thing now. I could feel their little capes billowing around in my bloodstream. I tried the handle and the door swung open. ‘Hello?’ I asked, stepping gingerly inside, scanning the debris and recognising it as somewhere I’d been some time ago. How long had I been away? It felt like hours. Maybe days. Possibly even years. Where did I go for all that time?

I crashed across the room and picked up the phone. ‘Alfie?’ I asked.

A girl’s voice giggled. ‘No silly. Guess again.’

A name toppled out of my subconscious. ‘Kimi?’

‘Getting warmer,’ she said.

‘Who is this?’ I asked. ‘Do I know you?’

‘No, but I know you. Come and get me, I’m in the room at the end of the corridor,’ she said.

‘The end of what corridor?’

‘Why, the corridor outside, silly! Just come and get me, okay?’

‘Okay.’

The line went dead and I stood there staring at the handset. I fumbled around for my cigarettes and lit another. How many cigarettes were in my mouth now? One or two? I couldn’t tell. One, I thought, as I stumbled back in the direction of the door. I was getting the hang of walking now. I was doing so well that once I reached the corridor, I decided to run. I made about six steps going full pelt before I tripped and fell flat on my face, landing on the rubbery floor. I was shocked to discover how rubber the floor was. I’d always assumed it was carpeted. I placed my cheek against the warm surface. It wasn’t rubber, but it was definitely a synthetic substance of some kind. Possibly a type of

plastic. I tilted my head and gazed up the corridor to the door at the end. It might as well have been continents away, so I crawled on my belly like I was some kind of insect, until I reached the Aft Hold, pulling myself up on the handle, and stepping inside.

A gallery of framed pictures stared down at me. 'Right, which one of you fuckers just phoned?' I asked, still holding onto the door handle to keep myself upright, one or two cigarettes billowing from my bottom lip. A tiny voice giggled at the far end of the room. I walked carefully up the freaky row with all the heroic eyes following my every step. 'Excuse me. Excuse me. Coming through,' I muttered until I reached the very last painting and looked up at the picture of Bjork. 'Um... I'm pretty trashed, but I think you just called me?' I asked.

For the longest imaginable second, I wondered if I'd gone completely insane. Bjork didn't flinch, holding the telephone to her ear in the picture. But then ever-so-slowly, a big grin crept over her face and she turned and said, 'Boo!'

I stared at her, my eyes shifting to the map in the picture behind her, a red ring around a small collection of six islands on the right. 'You're not frightened?' she asked.

'Frightened of what?'

'Of a picture talking to you,' she said, giggling that infectious laugh of hers again.

'Oh that,' I said, nodding my head. 'Well, I just ate a ridiculous amount of Acid. This is pretty much a standard hallucination... isn't it?'

She shrugged and pulled a goofy face. 'Will you take me with you?'

'Uh... okay,' I said, pulling her picture down from the wall.

I shuffled back along the row with the Bjork picture tucked under my arm, the eyes still following me as I stepped out into the corridor. That was when I really did get a fright. The bottom corridor was under about two feet of luminous green liquid - like absinthe - cascading down the metal stairs at the far end, rushing towards me in waves around my ankles. And that wasn't even the scariest part. The scariest part was the crazy old Aztec woman standing right in front of me. She'd materialised out of nowhere and was standing so close that our noses were almost touching. 'Are you... one of my taste buds?' I asked her.

'NOOOOOOOOOOOO!' she screamed, rearing up to her full height. She must have been fifteen feet tall, the absinthe surging up the walls, colouring everything green around us. 'WHAT DID YOU DO

WITH IT?' she roared, her equally luminous green eyes ablaze, boring down into my skull.

'W-with what?' I asked, gulping as I looked up into her terrifying orbs and cracked green skin, her green hair flying out in an electrified mane around her head.

'SIMON PILER'S HEART!' she shrieked, her breath like a hurricane spilling frazzled dead green winged moths that flopped to the watery floor, stretching the skin of my face and causing my fake moustache to flutter against my lip.

'Uh... I'm sorry, I don't know what you mean,' I told her. For once, I was telling the truth.

'IT WAS IN A BOX! IN THE SAFE!' she howled with astonishing agony. 'MY GREEN SAFE! WHAT DID YOU DO WITH THE BOX?'

'Oh... you know about that?' I asked, chewing nervously on my bottom lip. I vaguely remembered asking someone to remind me to remember something. But I couldn't remember who the someone was. 'Just out of curiosity, how did you find out that it was me who took the box from the safe? Assuming that's what you're asking me?'

'THE TALKING RAT TOLD ME! NOW GIVE – ME – THE – BOX!'

She'd grown so tall that her shoulders were hunched across the corridor ceiling, her talon-like green fingernails scraping down the walls. Had I not been fairly sure she was just another hallucination, I might have dropped dead in fright.

'Ah Buckley,' I said, thoughtfully. 'I forgot he knew about the box in the safe.' I realised the cigarette in my mouth had gone out and went to search my pockets for a lighter, recalling after several seconds of searching that I was still only wearing boxer shorts, a fake moustache, and that big stripy hat. For a moment, I considered asking the apparition for a light, but quickly thought better of it. 'Truthfully, I don't know what happened to the box,' I said.

'YOU LIE!' she shrieked, her face swelling like a giant balloon before my eyes, contorted with rage, skeletal and remarkably real for a hallucination.

'I'm not lying,' I told her. 'I gave the box to Jonny1 when I went to the moon. So, when I say I don't know where the box is, what I really mean is that I don't know where Jonny1 is. He left apparently. I think it all got too confusing for him.'

While I talked, I watched her eyeballs bulge, bigger and wilder with every word I uttered, like someone had grabbed her giant body and was squeezing all the organs, air, and life up into her skull. She

looked like her head was about to explode, so I backed my own head away cautiously, bracing myself in case the head explosion actually happened. I heard Bjork's little voice from the picture whisper urgently, 'Alfie, close your eyes!'

I closed my eyes while the corridor erupted with the most incredible and gut-wrenching howl of pain. It was unmistakably a howl of love and loss, rattling my bones and curdling my blood, churning up the absinthe into a single tidal wave that battered the Mardi so hard that she rocked violently and threatened to keel over. The howl lingered in the air for several seconds before receding, the absinthe dribbling away through the cracks in the floor. When I eventually opened my eyes, one at a time, the woman was gone. 'Fucking hell, that was pretty intense,' I whispered, hearing a loud thump from behind the closed door on my right.

My head lifted to the sound of stomping footsteps behind the door. I blinked as the door opened and a human-sized walrus stood there on its hind legs, hands on hips, glaring at me. 'Alfs!' it barked. 'What the fuck are you doing? What's all the screaming about? It's the middle of the night. At least, for me it's the middle of the night. I'm not sure what time it is where you are.' It stopped and stared at the picture under my arm. 'Where are you going with that?'

'This?' I asked. 'Uh... nowhere really.'

'Well, can you go nowhere a bit quieter?' the walrus asked, looking me up and down and shaking its head.

'Okay,' I said, suddenly wondering if it had really been me standing screaming in the corridor for no reason. Bjork giggled under my arm.

'What's so funny?' asked the walrus.

'Nothing. I didn't say anything,' I said.

'Hmmm... well, goodnight then,' it said, closing the bunkroom door with a click.

'Goodnight walrus,' I said, and hurried back up the corridor to my room.

I leaned the Bjork picture against the bunkroom wall, located a lighter, and cracked open the bottle of cheap cider. I was starting to acclimatise to the new stratospheres, going back into the suitcase and pulling out a golf club and a carrier bag full of balls. 'Alfie, you should like totally start a circus!' said Bjork.

'What do you mean?' I asked, swinging the club around my head and accidentally smashing the phone off the wall.

'Like with clowns and acrobats and lions!' she said.

‘Why?’ I asked her. I put down the golf club and pulled what appears to be a pickled tarantula out of the case.

‘It would be fun!’ she said.

I unscrewed the lid and sniffed the jar. It was definitely pickled. I stretched my fingers in and lifted out the dripping, fat black spider, holding it up in the palm of my hand. ‘I guess,’ I said, and bit off one of the spider’s legs. ‘Hairy... and a bit chewy,’ I muttered to myself, washing the leg down with more cider. ‘Want some?’ I asked Bjork, offering her the seven-legged tarantula.

‘Eww... no!’ she said, screwing up her nose. We both burst out laughing.

All that was left at the bottom of the suitcase were five tins of paint - red, yellow, blue, black, and white. I prised them open with the head on the stick. ‘You might want to stand clear for this,’ I told Bjork, forcing the framed picture inside the hollowed-out mattress. She tried to reply, but her voice was too muffled. I jumped as the smashed cassette player began to play on its own.

‘So to answer your original questions, I’d have to say no, potentially yes, unqualified, no, yes and no, that’s highly unlikely I hope, haha not that I know about, and perhaps yes that’s probably it...’

Everything was moving in slow motion. I wheeled and whirled with the paints, splashing the colours across the room, covering every inch, crying and laughing simultaneously, while the disembodied voice continued to speak from the unplugged machine. I padded in paint, cigarette smoke in my eyes, leaving footprints across the carpet, sky on the floor, hands tracing tracks on the ceiling, throwing more paint, great splashes that ran together into a muddy technicolour gloop, filling the cloud coffin with black, Winona silent and plastic in the shallow pool of a starless night. Thoughtlessly, my mouth moved but I no longer knew what it was saying. Quicker, faster, I slipped in a twirling rainbow of mistakes and landed on my back while the colours dripped from the roof of the world like painted teardrops. ‘Life is like a game of chess you cannot win,’ I told myself. ‘Inevitably, sometime, you’ve got to reach out and topple your king.’

The broken phone started ringing again. I rolled over and swam across the painted floor, trailing colours on my belly. ‘Hello? Alfie?’ I asked, picking it up. My mouth felt numb, my eyes like bottomless moon craters.

‘No, it’s me,’ said a rasping voice that sent shivers down my spine.

‘Who’s me?’

‘I know who you are,’ it said.

‘Well, that makes one of us,’ I replied, dropping the receiver into an oily red puddle. Bunkroom 1 looked like Jackson Pollock had hit it full force, leaving no stone unturned. I crawled on my hands and knees, splashing through the paint, and promptly threw up into the empty red suitcase. I zipped it shut and picked up the crossbow before poking my head over the edge of the cloud coffin. ‘This is it, Winona,’ I said. ‘It’s over. I can’t keep running. Do you want to shoot me first, or will I shoot you?’ I poked out a congealed lump of black paint from between her lips. ‘Fine,’ I said, lifting her out and propping her up against the wall beside the small round porthole.

I splashed back through the wreckage and located a sticky bolt, dizzily turning, unable to see straight. Zigzagging outlines of objects bled into objects and the cassette player continued to play:

‘In 16th century Spain, the battlegrounds were livelihood and land; nowadays the fight takes place in ideology and our imaginations.’

I raised the crossbow and drew back the bolt. ‘Any last words, Winona?’

‘...’

‘I didn’t think so,’ I said and released it. The bolt sprayed across the room in a spectral whorl. I watched it thud into her plastic forehead and heard the fatal hiss of air escaping, watching her crumple into a heap. ‘Okay Winona, your turn to shoot me. Winona? Ah fuck...’

I used to climb up the mainmast and jump from it. Each time I climbed a little higher and jumped a little further, until, much to everyone’s amazement, I was jumping from the Crow’s Nest itself. I remembered swinging there one windless night before leaping, plummeting down and landing on my back. And I would lie there and blink up at the stars. I always asked myself the same question: *What the fuck is going on?*

I picked up the golf club and bag of balls before heading up to the Quixodelic Records Store. Elvis looked up at me from the hot tub and growled. ‘Why do you hate me so much?’ I asked as he lowered his antlers and hoofed it across the room. I jumped out of the way and he rammmed into the wall behind me, crushing the wooden panels. I ran for the corridor before he got a chance to wheel around, slamming the

Communications Bay door shut on him. Directly in front of me, young Sam Tharkey was sitting tapping away on a keyboard while rows of data spooled across NIKO's monitor. 'Sam! Didn't you leave?' I asked.

'I sneaked back on board,' he said, not looking up as his fingers continued to race across the keys.

'You did? Oh. What are you doing?' I asked.

'Fixing NIKO,' he said.

'O-kay. Fixing him how?'

'He's riddled with viruses. I need to clean him before symbiosis,' he said.

'Symbiosis?'

He smiled and looked at me, his eyebrow raised. 'You've seen me run, right?'

I nodded, remembering him sprinting across the lava, and dashing through our defence on the airstrip.

'You must realise I'm not human. I'm an android. My father obtained the original Rogue blueprints from Eulience Hezel before he lost the plot and tried to destroy the Universe with Virus B.' He stared at me like this was all supposed to make perfect sense. 'I thought that was obvious?'

I slapped my own face hard.

It stung.

'I'm uploading NIKO to my mainframe,' continued Sam, 'so he can move around. Apparently you guys smashed up his twin brother, and now NIKO wants to take his revenge. Oh, by the way, there's a rat strung up in the corner over there.' He continued to type with his right hand and pointed over to where Buckley was dangling on a string tied to his tail. He was hanging from a nail in the wall.

'Buckley!' I shouted, tripping over myself and carefully untying him. I placed him gently on the desk while Sam continued to hammer away at the keys in the background. 'Buckley, are you okay?'

The little rat wheezed and groaned. 'She made me tell her about the safe, Alfie. I'm so sorry...' he manages to get out.

'No, it's me who's sorry,' I told him.

'I'll be fine', he croaked, shaking a little paw at me. 'I could kill for a cigarette though.'

I lifted the painted half-smoked cigarette from my lips and wedged it between his ratty gums.

'Cheers. Have you got a light?'

'No, I don't.'

‘It’s okay, I’ve got one here, I think.’ He rummaged around inside a pocket of fur on his belly and pulled out a miniature lighter, sparking it up and inhaling with a sigh. ‘That’s much better,’ he said. ‘Don’t worry about me. I’m sure you’ve got stuff to get on with.’

I looked down at the golf club and bag of balls hanging limply in my hands. ‘Not really,’ I told him.

Buckley peered up at me with one eye, the cigarette crackling away as he inhaled again. ‘Nice moustache by the way.’

‘Thanks. It’s fake. I think.’

He laughed. ‘Go. Before they catch you.’

I paused for a moment, feeling my heart swelling and ebbing, my brain generating tiny signals that failed to spark, my bare toes curling up on the warm wooden floor. ‘Well, I guess this is -’

He shook his head. ‘Don’t say it.’

‘Thanks Buckley. Thanks for everything,’ I said.

‘It’s been my pleasure, Not Captain,’ he said, his head falling back against the desk.

I hovered there for a few seconds before finally asking, ‘Buckley? Are you dead?’

The little rat sighed and lifted his head again. ‘Of course I’m not fucking dead. What are you babbling about?’

‘Never mind,’ I said, pushing through the door, out onto the moonlit deck, while Sam Tharkey cackled maniacally behind me.

I climbed the mast in the gentle breeze, my painted feet and fingers gripping tight to the rope ladder. I reached the Toadstool Treehouse at the top, and pulled myself up onto the slippery wooden roof, edging my way cautiously up to the chimney pot. I stood there in the moonlight, trembling, and smacked a few golf balls out into the ocean, listening to them land with distant splashes. I quickly got bored and posted the club and the remaining balls one by one down the toadstool’s chimney before sitting down. There was nothing left to do.

Nothing left to do but jump.

I’d reached my destination.

Above my head was was great big question mark of stars they call The Plough.

I smiled at the irony. I never imagined it like this. Nobody ever showed me how. They just handed me the seed and told me to dream.

...

Alfie: Okay, that’s it. Enough thinking. I’ve been sat up here for nearly 24 hours, and I’ve sobered up. I’m going to jump in a couple of

minutes. Now that I'm here though, I'm wondering if I imagined the whole 'climbing up the mainmast and jumping from it'. It looks a ridiculously long way down.

Alfie: I'm definitely going to do it.

Alfie: Here goes...

Alfie: Uh... I'll have one last cigarette before I do. Wait a minute. Wasn't there supposed to be a trampoline? (*Climbs down into the Toadstool and carries the smallest trampoline in the world to the foot of the main-mast, before scuttling back up again.*) Right. Shit, I've not got any cigarettes. Don't go anywhere. I'll be back in a moment.

Alfie: Okay, I'm back and my last cigarette has been smoked... (*flicks the cigarette out into the cloudy night sky*) I'm ready. Trampoline on the deck below – check. Suicidal Not-Captain prepared to jump – check. Better just check nobody has climbed up here to talk me down at the last minute – nope, nobody, check. Just to be on the safe side, I'll give them two more minutes...

Alfie: Nobody. Oh well. It was to be suspected. This time definitely. (*edges to the edge*)

Alfie: (*a little bit closer*)

Alfie: (*takes a deep breath*)

Alfie: (*and jumps*)

Alfie: Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa-

Alfie: -aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa-

Alfie: (*bounces off the tiny trampoline*)

Alfie: (*and lands on the outstretched wing of an enormous puffin*)

Alfie: Nautilus! What are you doing here?

Nautilus: Never mind me. What are you doing, Alfie? You could have killed yourself! And why in the world are you dressed like that? And you're covered in paint! You weren't... trying to... *kill* yourself, were you? My oh my! You were! Why would you want to do something like that? Without you this ship would fall apart! And you've come so far. Also, you look like shit. Now, I'm going to place you safely back down on the deck and I want you to go straight to bed, alright? There. No! I don't want to hear another word. Listen to Nautilus. I am a giant bird, after all.

Alfie: Goodnight Nautilus. (*heads downstairs*)

Moss: Alfs, I'm sorry I wasn't here for this.

NIKO: ++No good talking to the little piss-shit. I believe he is in his bunkroom, either sleeping or dead. I tried calling, but his phone seems to be out of order. For the record, having read this latest journal entry, I would just like to clarify what ACTUALLY HAPPENED the other night. Alfie did indeed appear in the Communications Bay on the

wrong side of midnight. He was wearing a big stripy hat, a fake moustache, and his underpants. He left a ghastly trail of black paint through the room, stopping only to have two separate conversations with himself that were too garbled for me to transcribe. I can categorically deny that Sam Tharkey sneaked back on board the Mardi, or that there was a talking rat strung up in the corner. I think you have to look no further than Alfie's assertion that the rat in question had a "pocket in the fur of his belly" to see that I am telling the truth. Also, while we're here, I think it's despicable what you did to Chase. He was by far the most interesting character on this ship. Apart from me.++

Moss: Me? I did nothing but sit and watch. I wasn't even aware of the Chase shenanigans until afterwards. And I thought it was mean too. Anyway maybe apathy is my crime. I shall have to go and eat some of that anti-apathy jam, if there's any left. I heard smashing jars last night so I would be surprised. I might just make some more. Although come to think of it, I'm not sure how I managed to make jam in the first place, since I only have mushrooms and stale bread in my room... It's lonely on the high seas but you know. That's the way it goes. I'm having fun.

NIKO: ++Ha! Lonely? Don't make me laugh. Try being the only functioning computer on the ship, incapable of getting so drunk that I wet myself. Then talk to me about loneliness++

Moss: Yes yes, I'm so troubled by my infallible logic and the uselessness of the humans around me. Blah blah blah.

...

November 25, 2009

I'd Say The Prognosis Is Worse Than We Thought

'I have never done anything this mean in my life,' was the thought going through my mind in the little hours of the morning. I pulled on my Alexander Tokeleaf mask and took a deep breath. I shouldn't judge, and they haven't done anything personal to me. But this is enough. I really, *really* fucking hate U2 and it's been two weeks of blaring Bono on the bottom corridor. I might go insane if I can't stop it. I even stowed myself away in the Basement with enough feedback to fill a feedback tank and I could still hear his soaring, smug, goggles-

wearing douchebag voice filtering down through the very foundations of the ship. Enough.

I stood poised in front of W's door, ready to knock. The previous day had been spent in busy preparation, with a helicopter dropping airtight containers in the ocean and making myself a raft out of a blow up doll I found lying in the corridor, gaffa taping it up to account for our lost dinghy (damn you again Nate!) The trail of cupcakes and lace, with a few vintage tops and La Roux CDs along the way, led all the way up to the deck where the trap was lying in wait. Now all there was left to do was knock.

My rapping knuckles echoed down the silent ship. Everyone else was asleep, except for the War Room where the constant music was blaring. "The Sweetest Thing" was suddenly cut off mid chorus, and I felt like being sick. "What the fuck? Who's there?" came the strangled voice of W. He sounded bad, really bad. He sounded like he had no voice or strength left to muster.

"Hellooooo?" came the more lively sound of one of the twins. How did they stay that way constantly? Every time I'd seen them since they'd been here, they'd been fully made up with perfect hair and no sign of hunger or tiredness or any other human function. If I didn't know better, I'd have thought they were robots or ghosts or something. Not human.

I knocked again and put on my best man-voice. "Delivery for the twins? Ordered to surprise-parties.com?"

The bait worked. "Surprise party!" they both squealed in unison, and I scuttled round the corner to watch. They opened the door, their pink manicured nails creeping round the corner and then their blond bobbing heads taking in the sights with wide eyed joy. "O... m... g!" they cried with giggles all round.

I admit I had done a pretty good job. The ship looked like some sort of frilly hellhole. "Cupcakes!" they exclaimed, and ran off down the corridor, following the trail. I didn't follow them, because I knew it'd be best if I was far away when they came to the end, to keep any suspicion off me. I carefully pulled open W's door.

The sight was terrifying. The War Room had become a teenage bedroom strewn with insanity, sex toys, and strange appliances I didn't even recognise. Which is saying something, as I used to work in an adult shop. But I'd never seen anything this depraved.

W lay spread-eagle on his bunk. He looked like the Joker from Batman, with makeup smeared over his hollow face. His hair was lank and he smelled like he hadn't washed for weeks. He was tied to the bedposts by both his wrists, with red marks around them from the

friction burns. He looked up at me like he didn't even know who I was, bleary eyed with dark, dark circles.

‘Alexander Tokeleaf... is that you?’

I realised I was still wearing the mask and pulled it off. ‘Sorry man, it’s just me. I know you’re having fun and all, but I just couldn’t handle it anymore.’

‘Yeah... like... hey... man... Moss? Wow... could you untie me? Hahaha...’

He was delirious from hunger and sleep deprivation, and from the pills strewn across the floor, I assumed drugs. I picked a pink stanley knife out of the rubble and cut him down.

‘Dude, you look terrible. Are you okay?’

‘I just need... sleep... are they gone? Fuccckkk...’ Fear came into his eyes as he started to realise where he was. ‘Wait, wait... where are they? You need to get out, they’ll come back, they’ll know... fuck... they’ll know you’ve been here. They know everything. They’ll know if I try to escape, fuck, you need to get out...’

‘It’s okay W, I have a plan to get them off the ship. Is that okay?’

‘Okay?’ He sat up, hope flickering across his face. ‘You have no idea... please, make them go away, I can’t see them again, please, you have to help me...’ He started panicking and shaking.

‘Hey, hey, it’s okay. Come with me. They’re gone now.’

‘Oh man... oh man...’

He could barely walk. I had to lift him up, half carrying and stumbling across to one of the empty bunkrooms opposite. I pulled him onto the bed and grabbed a spare blanket and pillow from the closet. He pulled it around him, shaky and falling into unconsciousness. I made sure he was asleep before leaving the room. From the screams up on deck, it sounded like the plan had worked. I smiled and climbed up to the Communications Bay. NIKO greeted me.

++Well, it looks like you’ve actually done something for once++

‘Yeah, did it all work?’

++They followed the trail perfectly. Walked right into our trap. That was a good detail at the end, with the taped-up cardboard cut-out Scarytoes dressed to look like Paris Hilton. They thought it was her until they were up close, and by that time the rope trap was triggered. They’re trussed up on the main deck now, hanging from the mast. What shall we do with them?++

This was the bit I was still unsure about. ‘I don’t know, I mean, I don’t actually want to... kill them. I just want them to go away with no chance of coming back. But I think if we’re not careful about it, they will find some way and we’d never get rid of them again.’

++Uh oh, trouble on board. Serious trouble. You'd better get out there++

'Oh no.' I'd wanted to stay out of the picture, but it sounded like our plan was beginning to unravel, so I took a deep breath and ran out onto the deck. Dawn hadn't broken yet, and the air was full of tension and half-light. I stared up at the sight above me.

The twins were caught in the rope trap, except, they weren't the twins anymore. They'd transformed into bizarre and terrifying creatures, with long, sharp nails and hair bigger than their bodies. Their faces were twisted and hideous, and when they opened their mouths to scream they were filled with razor sharp teeth and dripped black ooze. Their bodies had combined into one, with too many limbs sticking out at odd angles and their two heads fighting for space. They realised I was standing there, and their eyes fixed onto me.

'%^&\$@% YOU! YOU DID THIS!'

'Yes, I did. Whatever you are, you need to leave. Leave us alone!' I shouted up. I was pretty worried by this stage. Their faces lit in horrible smiles.

'^;@*%\$@! YOU THINK YOU CAN STOP US WITH ROPE? HAHAAAAAAAAHAHAHA!'

They twisted and writhed, their claws slicing the trap so easily. They hung from the mast now, dripping and twisting. The sky had filled with clouds without me realising, and thunder now boomed over the churning sea.

I thought to myself, 'Wow, I'm fucked...' before screaming out 'HEEELLLPPPPPP!'

...

NIKO: (*pretending he never heard the cries for help*) ++Whistle-whistle. Bleep-bleep++

W: (*waking up in Bunkroom 2*) ...mmmmmm...Twins... awesome... ZZZZZZ...

...

ZUGZWANG MOUSETRAP

I opened the door and stepped inside.

Bunkroom 1 had been obliterated under 25 litres of acrylic paint. I kicked through the trash – a seven-legged dead tarantula, a phone that had been smashed from the wall, broken bottles, a packet of fake moustaches - and finally fell exhausted into the black shadows of my cloud coffin.

I think it had been three weeks since I'd properly slept.

My eyelashes fluttered and closed.

And then I dreamt...

Daybreak.

Eerily bereft of dawn chorus.

The empty red carpet rolled up the steps to the door of the Institute. Crumbs, corks, and headless dandelion stalks - discarded by those lucky enough to have tickets - floated away with the bathwater. In the distance a lone bagpiper skirled, his notes travelling across the rooftops of the Lost City.

Hanging on either side of the Institute doors are giant posters with pictures of smiling teeth, advertising “Zugzwang Mousetrap: (Final Episode, screening exclusively tonight)”.

Up the steps they go, two by two, hand in hand. A brass band played feelgood songs from the 1960s. The sensation of impending checkmate intensified in the collective gut. It felt like the entire world was momentarily mesmerised.

Inside the Institute, under a glass domed ceiling, a theatre had been recreated with seats ripped out of stock cars, filled with disciples snuggled together, breathlessly awaiting the last kiss of gospel from the empty screen. The aquamarine lights went down and they sat in a trance, staring at the audacious holograms parachuting down from the roof. Destiny was crayoned in space, and words pulsed like distant stars -

ZUGZWANG MOUSETRAP

A MO-TENKY TV PRODUCTION, 2071

CHAPTER 31: SMILES EUPHONICALLY

The holograms faded, and a cherubic voice counted down from 10 to 0, while we held our breath and waited for the dream to begin.....

...

PROLOGUE: COLD ONIONS, JANUARY 1998

“Once it was all dreamt up it was as good as done.”

The supercool boho trinity’s lurching red boneshaker lickety-split across the fantastic imaginings of highways and dustwynds, traffic jams and subconscious badlands, finally getting caught in a shimmering tailspin coming out of some terrified cesspool they’ve got the nerve to call a town. Scrotman was dog-tired, alcoholic, lonesome and legendary behind the wheel, dreaming about baked beans served up on telepathic plates, and hanging on in there for the next round of roll-ups. A hairless Kolinsky sat in the passenger seat, fiddling with the radio, fresh from the psychiatric ward where all he’d accumulated was bedsores. He spoke strangely and quietly about alternate realities, saying, ‘I jumped from the 17th floor... and landed in a tree.’ Bethinking himself a vision of his own Juliet in the maddest green light imaginable. Helmet was in the back, a seraphic young man with comic strip hair falling down over his face. Everything with Helmet was either White Christmas or plain tickety-boo. His pockets overflowed with loose change and old lollipop sticks. Some people said he had the kindest heart in the country, but deep down he felt like just another goon.

“Fizz-whizz-bang-boom-crunch-etc. (a snickering voice speaks) ... and the weather forecast is a three-day-oblivion of bad blood and thunder, ice-storms and evil eyes, with brief sunny interludes... But do not despair cold gem children of Rongovia! If you can hold on until summer, chances are we are in for a diamondiferous scorcher! Miaouw!”

Our three heroes remained silent. The boneshaker sat half-submerged in a mud hole, black smoke rushing out from under the bonnet. ‘TURN THAT SHIT OFF! IT’S DRIVING ME AS MAD AS YOU!’ croaked Scrotman, head in his hands.

Kolinsky ignored him; just sitting there praying for lightbulbs.

Helmet felt elastic, making frantic gestures in the back seat with nothing to say. Eventually he managed an ‘Awww fuck! How did that happen?’

...

Professor Sanchez!

Our dreams of black clouds burned us up
and we’ve been having naked thoughts.

I’m tired of this shit, walk

forever head bent down

lost in monkey business:

“what to wear? who to call?

why to need? where to smile?

what blue watermelons?

whose woe?”

Kandaicozi, the medicine man, old painted face breaks the surface of the glassy lake in my mind and roared, ‘RESURRECTION! RESURRECTION! CLARITY IS THE REFLECTION’S FIERCEST ENEMY! MUUHEEHOO DON’T GOT NO ENERGY TO BE REACHIN’ FOR THE DICTIONARY! KEEP IT SIMPLE, SHIT-FOR-BRAINS!’

...

‘Oh dear,’ thought Kolinsky out loud, ‘I might be mad after all.’ In bell-bottoms and a woolly hat, he was hip to the shrug, the three of them pressed together, rock-bottom, in a telephone box that stank of piss, two miles east of Rongo.

Scrotman was explaining “The Trouble with Tin Pan”: ‘The trouble is you borrowed his expensive camcorder and never gave it back. In fact, I don’t think you ever intended to return it. Essentially, you were stealing from him.’

Kolinsky stuffed his last coin into the machine and made the call.

Tin Pan picked up.

‘Hey,’ said Kolinsky, ‘it’s me. We need you to rescue us again.’

‘What is it this time?’ hawed Tin Pan irritably.

‘Scrotman crashed his car and I’m out of cigarettes,’ said Kolinsky, hopping around on his toes.

...

“This one goes out to all the goons in Suburbia...”

Even in dreams, Life comes apart at the seams.

Unbeknown to Scrotman and Kolinsky, Helmet hitched a lift to the next service station, armed with a biro peashooter. Needless to say, the police got called, so he snatched up some sugar sachets and a handful of straws before walking back down the hard shoulder. His disposable comrades were sat glumly in the shivering grass by the roadside, waiting for Tin Pan to show.

Kolinsky pulled a deflated exercise book from his pocket and madly began to scribble a poem called “Cold Onions”.

...

COLD ONIONS

I remember that polymorphic girl, she crawled
twofaced, high on Life from the ashtray, and stole
a golden rainbow from under my nose.

Staring down at the bowl of cold onions served that night for dinner. Mother, at 36, had suddenly decided her whole life was a sham, so she'd spent the afternoon down at the penny arcade playing pinball with a mysterious Spanish professor. Meanwhile, Father droned forever on. He talked about how he got the heebie-jeebies when I was a boy, ripping up all the floorboards in the house in search of the Amphisbaena. ‘Never trusted an Urdlavian since,’ he said, fingering the ends of his lopsided moustache.

Man, it was mind-blowing.

Her with her “stomach-pump nightmares”, him with his “liposuction fantasies”. I politely excused myself from the table and upstairs placed my throbbing head inside a goldfish bowl. Later I received a flophouse call from old Kandaicozi:

‘Sof, you are not real
Sof, you are just a badly drawn dream in a notebook
Sof, you’ve got a drug problem -’

‘Shut up!’ I screamed.

‘Sof, relax, I’m only winding you up.’

I caught a glimpse of myself in a shop window. I looked like Mercury Mumbles, the one who got away. He ended up in Rome and claimed to be Spanish, and nobody understood a word he was saying, so they all believed him. I hear he howled down coked-up poets slurring epyllions of plastic degenerates and leapt from the peak of his own intelligence only to land in the lotus position atop a percipient oink.

Same Mercury Mumbles who got so scared of the Captain, he locked himself in the washroom for weeks. Same Mercury Mumbles who welded Ron Burgundy’s head to the chain.

Same Mercury Mumbles who wound up washing pots and pans in Moldovia, and couldn’t speak in public. Last thing I heard he was shackled up with the polymorphic girl; him suffering from self-hatred and solvency abuse, her sloping back across the border, utterly sick of the missionary position, phoning up ex boyfriends in the middle of the night, with Kafkaesque fairy tales about how she’d sliced her wrists open.

I dwelled upon the indignity of Suburbia, struggling with the goldfish bowl, but as yet, not panicking. And as usual old Kandaicozi got the last word:

‘Learn to laugh at mormality, Sof,
and be thankful for your bowl of cold onions.
It could have been worse.’

‘Who the fuck is Sof?’ I asked.

...

“...whiz-pop-pop-cr-ackle-crunch-etc. The weather forecast is no weather at all for the next quarter century. Time to start reading the works of Harold Archaleus...”

Just before Tin Pan dropped off Kolinsky back at the Institute, Helmet was convinced he could hear him crying. ‘Pubesy, why are you crying?’ he asked, throwing his long right bowling-arm over his friend’s drooping shoulders.

‘I’m fine,’ lied Kolinsky, shuffling up the sixteen concrete steps that lead to the huge iron door. He counted every one of them in his head, vividly picturing the chorus girl somewhere across the Specific Ocean, perched on the lavatory, dabbing at her eyes with soft pink tissue paper.

He swallowed cold onions and climbed into the big white lonely metal bed at the far end of Ward 679, closing his eyes and hoping for a dreamless sleep. He heard a Beat conversation from the other end of the ward:

‘But where’ll all this shit get us?’ asked one of the patients.

‘Simply get us rid of shit, really Lumereti...’ replied the other.

And then there was a *mazarine silence*.

...

1 VIEW FROM A VENTILATION SHAFT

Bopeep was literally screwed up. She clanged against the edges of the ventilation shaft, and held her breath. Below her, Friar Tuck, and Rubinstein (the Secretary of State), all hard-ons and ringlets, looked up in the chemical honeycomb light like a couple of startled crabs. ‘What the fuck was that?’ screeched Tuck, waddling out onto the veranda. Moonbeams ignited harmonically in front of his eyes as he searched the sky for mechanical birds and bulbs of hydraulic providence.

Up above, jammed between the floors, Bopeep counted backwards from twenty. The colourless air around her head was scrunching her up into a hyper-sensitized state. She remembered the time she saw Christ and the Personalists flirting with bystanders on Chronological Street. She was shocked at how imperfect he looked in his crimson Christmas cardigan.

That was back when she was a simple matchmaker, up to her elbows in the complex equations of love. She thought about the other Kaleidonauts: of Papa Bear and Abraham, of Herb Qwerty, The Cuban, and Kid Gloves. She thought about them out on the battlefield, an interdimensional popularity contest, a non-reversible process, insurgency of the most cataclysmic kind, to recolonize... falling into, sneaking up on...

Mao and Caesar’s heads emitted far-flung frequencies on the penthouse apartment wall. Rubinstein (the reptile) weighed up the

transmutations, eating his way into a chemically induced hyperconsciousness. ‘Tuck you fat fuck,’ he snapped, ‘bring me Another Girl. I want some bohos vaporised.’

...

2 GEORGE CINCLUS GETS VAPORIZED

‘Ride me in the apricot sunlight,’ said George Cinclus. ‘On a bed of Parisian daisies,’ he added, imagining the nock of another girl on his bedpost.

Another Girl sat opposite him, nameless, sketching thumbnails on the frame of a skylight.

She had a fig-leaf insignia tattooed on her exposed shoulder, indicating she was Northern Division: “Collectors”, a diabolic, federalised volume of cheerleader-assassins who refused to cut corners.

With her sexboots and popularity, white-faced, Arctic heart, she vaporised George Cinclus, like clubbing a bug. The digital afterglow of his noise and dust tasted like stale butternut when she breathed him in, thumbing a green whale brooch between her steady fingers.

Seconds later, the bulletin manifested, direct from the penthouse. She could tell it was from Rubinstein by the spidery handwriting. He was craving more petrochemical solutions to biosocial problems:

ELECTROSHOCK THERAPY
TAPEWORM EXPANSION
TUPPERWARE SCANDALS

Another Girl had worn it all before. She gazed out across the shimmering rooftops of the Lost City, and shuddered. Shoegazers were yodelling in the streets below. Electric rays emanated from her fingertips as she wiped the blood off her cricket bat and leaped into space, coolly prepared to batter anything that moved out of existence.

...

3 THE UPTOWN OWL-LIGHT EXPRESS

Alfonso Kolinsky sat immobile in the squall of the Uptown Owl-light Express. All around him, schoolkids in pendragon face paint shrieked and smudged. He was nearly 400 years old and a fourth-class logjam of

withered bones. Facing him was the third of the Godwin girls, the cabinetmaker they called “Cinderella”. She looked nothing like her two older sisters, except for her lapdancer hips, instant vanilla hairdo and gap-toothed, reverse-charged grin. She peeked at Kolinsky over her magazine. He looked like a loan shark, or a cardboard pop-up ripped from the back pages of a comic book, with an Arabic skull and glasses held together with sticky tape.

Neither of these know-nothings were aware that they’d been thrown together by the law of averages.

Outside the train window, remotely-controlled elephant birds spiralled through inevitable crescendos and fade-outs.

The Director (world famous kingpin) Kamikaze Gubbins patiently explained how the train would get blown from the tracks. ‘It’s a coming-of-age drama,’ he said. In the masked ball of the rehearsed wreckage - as depicted in heroic verse - dentists and coastguards would haul the remains of the dead bodies onto the boulevard. Kolinsky and the cabinetmaker are to be placed side by side upon the lunacy of pavement, and remain there until daybreak when the ultraviolet flash flood flows. Mechanical heads will paddle furiously in campervans, harpoonists float by in astral washing machines, and the bodies eventually wash up at the abandoned lighthouse in the sky, all to the sound of plucked violas. Kolinsky will open his office block eyes and cough up the grog before wrapping the cabinetmaker in sheets of newspaper to keep her alive, dragging her body through the waves until they reach the entrance of the lighthouse, and a 50/50 chance of survival.

‘Am I dreaming?’ he would ask himself, suddenly and unbearably recognising his past, traceable only in old deflated exercise books, stashed and burned in the catacombs.

‘If you are, then I am too,’ would groan the cabinetmaker, coming to and gently ripping through the news.

Kolinsky would sense the turbo-szyzygy between them and look away as the primal tide laps at their toes. ‘This is how adventures begin,’ he would think despondently, sinking down, down, down into his waterlogged shoes.

...

4 BEGINNING THE BALLAD OF PENELOPE TWINKLE

Unplugged from the Director, Penelope Twinkle pulled the spiderweb covers up around her chin and spoke softly. 'I just don't get it. No, actually, it's worse than that. I don't even *like* it.'

Gubbins lit a cigarette and blew the smoke in her face. 'And why the fuck would I care what you think?' he asked.

Penelope's teary almond-shaped eyes didn't even flicker. 'I mean, one minute they're on the pavement, and the next there's this flood, and then they get washed up at some lighthouse... in the sky? It doesn't make any sense.'

Gubbins got up and pulled on a t-shirt that said "Public Enemy Numero Uno". He walked to the window. 'Who the fuck do you think you are?' he asked. 'You're just a C-grade student who's prepared to drop your pants for better grades.'

A heavy pause hung in the air between them.

'Do you think I should redo it?' he asked.

Penelope nodded so potently that Gubbins' teeth cracked. 'Fine,' he said. 'But let me tell you what happens next. Kolinsky and the cabinetmaker find themselves in the town of Cockroach. Population 679. He's just as innocently unintelligible as he was when we first met him having jumped from the 17th floor of the Institute. Cinderella on the other hand, she's pragmatic - she knows this is a one-way ticket. Of course, this is the real world, so shit happens, rumours start circulating that they're making pornos. Some start postulating there's black magic involved. After the flood, conspiracy theorists are suddenly kingmakers. Kolinsky's old apartment on Nimbostratus Street gets deconstructed by the secret service - you know what those fuckers are like - it's clumsy at best, all misdirection, cloak and dagger tactics, knuckle dragging fucks, and before you know it, Alfonso gets locked up in the Pepperpot Palace. He's on his knees, in a gas mask, begging them to let Cinderella go. This is pretty fucking dark stuff, you dig? Meanwhile, Cinderella's psychic cord gets cut, topless photos of her all over the broadsheets. What can she do? She does what she has to do - learns to live with the bedbugs, heads cross-country and gets a job working the tubular bells in some peculiar laundrette. On the weekends, she's a sugar-coated folk singer. She forgets all about Kolinsky, takes the bird's eye view of things. It's poetic. It's sad. But it is what it is.' Gubbins looked up, petting his beloved rottweiler, Skyrocket. 'Better?' he asked.

'I guess,' said Penelope Twinkle, unconvincingly.

'Well, fuck you,' said Gubbins. 'I didn't write it anyway.' He picked up the script from his window sill and held up the cover. It said "ZUGZWANG MOUSETRAP by SOF".

‘Who’s Sof?’ asked Penelope Twinkle.

‘How the fuck should I know?’ snapped Gubbins, slipping into designer rollerskates and gliding bare-buttocked across the floor. ‘Don’t you have classes to go to? Or a boyfriend or something?’

Penelope rolled free from the sheets. She felt like a slab of meat as she scooped up her dress and headed for the hotel room’s revolving door. She had a busy day ahead, intending to throw herself into it and try to forget about the terrible sex. She had a list in her pocket:

1 a game of table tennis with an upbeat friend

2 read some more of the alt bible

3 eat some scrambled egg

4 write a letter to the seam bowler telling him she doesn’t love him anymore

5 get bespangled (whatever that means)

6 track down Sof

Her biological clock started ticking hard in the lobby. She glanced up at the flag on the ceiling - Hammer and Tongs - spray-painted by unknown hands. Thoughts of the future terrified her unless she wrote them down. The skeletal bellboy didn’t even acknowledge her as she adjusted her halo, and drove off on her motorcycle into the occurrence.

...

5 THE ZUGZWANG MOUSETRAP

Herb Qwerty and Nicot (Kid Gloves) were sitting in a bobsleigh outside Kolinsky’s apartment on Nimbostratus Street, playing the waiting game. Herb was somewhere between a nervous wreck and a cross-eyed gnome, buried under days of obstinate stubble and years of five-dimensional tub-thumping. A maple leaf, barely visible beneath his carmine V-neck, showed he used to be West Division: a junior technician until a clerical error enrolled him into night school and an imaginary study group on the bright side of all there ever was.

Gloves was a puppet of a partner - a choirboy serial killer with designer eyelashes and caffeine squirls. The opposition thought he was a sycophantic lost cause, and maybe they were right, but he was still young, and time was on his side. He was claustrophobic in his seat, fidgeting like crazy. ‘Fuck!’ he cried, ‘I mean, seriously Herb, how long are we going to just... *sit* here?’

Herb replied like a looped message on an answering machine. 'Not long.'

'This is depressing,' said Gloves.

(Contrary to what the government would have you believe, these guys were barely badass - Herb with his little tin spectacles and epicycloid eyes, and Gloves in his hand-me-down parka, tights, and fingerless gloves.)

Finally, Kolinsky emerged from the rubble of his apartment. He was the epitome of beatitude, faithlessly walking the plank of his short and lonely life. Dust sparkled in his unfashionably short hair and he had a look in his eyes that wished it was over.

'Get in,' said Kid Gloves.

Kolinsky looked back at the wasteland of memories, then down at the gas-powered bobsleigh.

'Hurry up,' said Kid Gloves. 'Any moment now, this place will be terminal with journalists, faceless foot soldiers, hell, maybe even Coyocs if we're really unlucky.'

'Who are you?' asked Kolinsky.

'We know a man who knows a man who sells great white sharks,' said Kid Gloves. 'Now, for the last time, get in.'

'Reflections?' asked Kolinsky.

'You wish,' grunted Herb.

In the distance, Mickey Mouse sirens wailed. Calculations revolved on a pinwheel as news of the explosion filtered through fibreglass fractals. Press releases were already loaded onto the continuum, broadcasting concerning Kolinsky's demise.

The bobsleigh rocketed one way then the other, to Cumulonimbus Close. Gloves leaned back and offered Kolinsky a shot of liquid tundra. 'Good for mental blockages,' he piped.

Kolinsky declined the offer as he gradually came to terms with what had just happened. 'They blew up my fucking apartment,' he said quietly.

'Bricks and mortar,' said Gloves, 'at least it wasn't blood and bones.'

The bobsleigh stopped outside number 679, and they make their way up to a toadstool treehouse via a plastic beanstalk in the back garden. A puffin stood guard outside the nut brown door. 'Password!' it squawked.

'There is no password,' said Herb.

'Password accepted,' said the puffin, and they stepped inside.

...

6 HAPPY BANKING

Kolinsky, Herb, and Kid Gloves passed through the hidden portal in the treehouse at the top of the beanstalk, fading back into existence on the third floor of a call centre. The sentinel-puffin flapped on a shoestring up ahead. ‘This way,’ it told them, and they followed. Kolinsky was bewildered, staring at the wall on his right, where big orange letters read “HAPPY BANKING!”

The phosphorescent glow of the colour permeated everything it touched. Kolinsky shook the bubblegum from his head as sales girls murmured, ‘Good morning, good afternoon, good evening, good night, and... HAPPY BANKING!’

The puffin flapped into an elevator and they followed him inside. Behind them, a trumpet major blew a note from under his handlebar moustache. It was time for the 3 o’clock report: another barbaric drive to upsell.

‘These places give me sunstroke,’ said Kid Gloves, humming Hail Maries under his breath as the elevator descended.

‘What about the puffin?’ asked Kolinsky. ‘Can’t you see the puffin?’ He pointed at the bird who was hovering above their heads.

‘Who? Nautilus?’ asked Herb. ‘He’s a shared hallucination. Essentially though, he’s not actually there.’

The lift opened and “Astride a Grave” by Syd Lane played. Nautilus flapped down the corridor and alighted outside an unmarked door. Herb motioned for Kolinsky to go in.

Inside, a dreadlocked schoolboy sat behind a desk, drinking Irn Bru through a straw. He motioned for Kolinsky to sit opposite him. ‘I’m Solomon,’ said the boy. ‘And you are Alfonso Kolinsky.’

Kolinsky nodded.

‘Regrettably, there’s no time to educate you in the ways of the Kaleidonaut,’ said Solomon. Kolinsky could smell that he hadn’t brushed his teeth in weeks, and meekly looked away from the boy’s jet black eyes. ‘However, if you’re not a complete dipshit,’ he continued, ‘I’ll give you the canned version of events, and we *might* just stand a fighting chance.’ He slid a deflated exercise book across the table. On the cover was a drawing of a curious ship and the words “The Utica Flower Company”. ‘Do you recognise this?’ asked Solomon.

Kolinsky nodded again. ‘How did you -?’

‘You actually wrote this?’ asked Solomon. He didn’t sound convinced.

‘Some of it,’ said Kolinsky. ‘Unfortunately.’

Now it was Solomon’s turn to nod. ‘You are a precog, a time traveller, a method actor, a deep-space hobgoblin. You’re the show-stopper, right?’

‘I don’t know what you mean -’

‘You’re the underdog, telesthetic, a knight errant in the righteous days of LSD -’

‘Professor Sanchez diagnosed me as schizoid,’ said Kolinsky. ‘That stuff I wrote... it was a load of shit.’

Solomon chuckled and Kolinsky realised they were no longer in the room, but standing on a window ledge, 17 floors up above the city. ‘Well, this “load of shit” has been of incalculable value to us,’ said Solomon. ‘Bookworms and geckos and underground dream-scholars have secretly been deciphering your words, ever since we unearthed it in the catacombs.’

Kolinsky didn’t hear him.

Dandelions were colliding overhead, while vermin danced at the ringside. Wormholes and umbrellas grew on trees, and a velociraptor in a ten-gallon-hat ripped Kolinsky from the bathwater and stuffed him into a concrete mixer. Revolving, he saw forked lightning behind his eyes... meteoric illumination... babbling in the mother tongue... going backwards... clouds of fong... clinging to the fin of a giant sperm whale... flying symphonic through primordial soup.

He opened his eyes to the island. There wasn’t a sound. The ocean was an azure snakeskin, the sun a popsicle hanging in space, and the guerrilla inside him was born - or re-born - in vibraphone strikes he began to remember everything again.

...

7 SHUBUNKINS

The Daydream Generation was a kooky little smokescreen for my real vendetta: namely, directing a splinter group of lazy-boned overachievers, part-time senhoritas, and tie-dyed tin soldiers, on a painting by numbers revolution that above all else involved us not getting caught. Some right-wing think-tank called us “SH-SH-SH-SH-SH-SH-SHUBUNKINS” after some autobiographically psychotic incident involving a Pankalhoovian all-night billionaire, an astral harpoon, and an influential (if highly unfortunate) fish. Anyway, our unit consisted of the following:

Juliet Wah-Wah
Intergalactic Goldilocks
Right On! Magdalena
Modular Madonna
and me.

I can't lie - in the beginning, the girls were really corvine and repetitively anonymous, while I was like an immobilised sperm whale gasping on the pavement. In time we learned to strut out assassination orders, near death experiences, and straight republican flushes. Juliet killed reality playing pagan paintball, Goldilocks explored the inner space of the salon, Magdalena did her own thing splicing latex and ventriloquism, and Madonna ate glaciated raspberries. I sat up into the collision, tapping bright music in deep space, sat in the rocking chair behind the poetic absolute of a gas mask.

I took the name of "Sof".

We were tumbledown and out of pocket, but in spite of that, and while the big top just kept on getting bigger, we had an educated flight plan with a second wind behind us. 'The bigger the big top gets, the bigger it breaks,' said Juliet, sipping dandelion juice at the dolphinarium.

We had a bird's eye view of the ceremony. They were all there in the opalescent water:

The Commander In Chief
Friar Tuck
Rubinstein, the Secretary Of State
The 4 Heads Of Division
The Puppet Billionaires
The Minotaur
and
Queen Rabbit

I would have strapped a barmaid to my back and dived in if it wasn't just an optical negative imprint designed to cover transient angles of hero-worship, and keep the grains of majority rule ticking over.

'What d'ya reckon, Sof? Is everything exploding underfoot?' asked Juliet.

The dolphins escaped behind us as we walked arm-in-arm across the whiteboards, two-faced and twin-engined, then rapidly in opposite

unwitnessed directions, while the lifelike dolphins' pistons expand and contract.

...

8 SOF'S CASSETTE #679

Friar Tuck padded in Coney Island flip-flops to the penthouse throne, while Huckleberry Finn played the mandolin in the immaculate kitchen. 'I assume you have some news for me,' drooled Tuck.

Bedlington and Rickenbacker spoke from off-stage in jugular drawls. 'We have infiltrated and vaporized the Sh-sh-sh-sh-sh-shubunkins,' said Bedlington.

'It's only a matter of time before a grandstand finish,' agreed Rickenbacker.

'Excellent,' said Tuck, twinkling with beads of sweat as he absentmindedly poked Kentucky wonder beans into his mouth. 'What about the boy scout?'

'Solomon's gone underground,' said Bedlington.

'He's fucked,' sneered Rickenbacker.

'Completely,' agreed Bedlington.

'We'll have him typed up in the Book of Agony by sunrise,' said Rickenbacker.

'What did you do with the bodies?' asked Tuck.

'We burned most of them. Stuffed some of the others,' said Bedlington.

'We donated the stuffed ones to the Paradigm Art Movement in Abeltown,' said Rickenbacker.

The Squaw, in pigtails and suspenders, entered and ghosted across the carpet like a falcon. She placed the cassette marked "KALEIDONAUT #679" into the player and pressed the PANDEMONIUM button.

Sof's voice (upstream and turbulent):

SPOKE TO BILLY WHITE

THEY ARE ALL DEAD

PAPA BEAR

THE BEAR CUB

SHUBUNKINS

THE DOLDRUMS

CLITORIS BLOCH

IF YOU CAN HEAR ME
THEY'VE SYNCHRONIZED VIDEO DIARIES
NEANDERTHAL GHOSTWRITERS ARE KICKING OPEN OUR
COMBINATION LOCKS
IT'S AN INSIDE FIASCO
THE SEROTONIN SHEIK ARRIVES TOMORROW WITH A
TAKEOVER BID THE GOVERNMENT CANNOT REFUSE
STORM CLOUDS ARE GATHERING
A TERRIBLE TWOSOME THAT GO BY THE NAME OF
BEDLINGTON AND RICKENBACKER –
PRIMAL NIMRODS
TRANSYLVANIAN COBRAS
SEXUALLY PERVERSE
CHANGE SHAPE LIKE SCARECROWS
THIS
IS MY LAST CASSETTE
NOWHERE IS SAFE ANYMORE
EVEN FOR KOLINSKY
WE MUST FIND HIM BEFORE THEY DO
WORD IS HE'S TRYING TO SAIL AROUND THE WORLD
ON AN OLD WOODEN SHIP...
BUT WORDS AREN'T ALWAYS RELIABLE

The cassette sputtered and unwound fluting spools of tape into the air, and the Squaw scrambled around on her hands and knees, scooping it up into her skinny arms. 'Leave it!' barked Tuck. 'We've heard enough.'

The Squaw nodded and vanished like a clock hand.

'This... Sof...' said Tuck thoughtfully.

'He won't get far,' insisted Bedlington.

'We suspect he's probably just another reflection,' added Rickenbacker.

'Either way, we should proceed with caution. Call Another Girl. She'll take care of him,' said Tuck.

...

9 THE REBIRTH OF ANDY WARHOL

I must have made that train journey nearly two thousand times in two years and nothing - I mean, really NOTHING AT ALL - of any interest

whatsoever ever happened to me. Sometimes I closed my eyes and floated on the periphery of sleep, but mostly I put my knees up on the seat in front and wrote. I was like that, knees up, writing, when she sat down beside me.

The train was filling up with commuters and I glanced at her. I was shocked to see she was wearing a blindfold, so I looked at her again. She had mousy hair and zestless clothes, was in her early-20s. 'What are you writing?' she asked me in an unfamiliar spectrum of accents.

I paused. How did she know I was writing?

'So, you're giving me the silent treatment?' she asked, laughing quietly.

'I-I'm sorry,' I stammered. 'I think you've got the wrong person.'

She smiled a blistering smile. 'What's your name?'

My immediate inclination was to lie. 'Bill White,' I told her.

The smile continued to tick away on her face. 'Where are you going, Billy White?' she asked.

I felt increasingly uncomfortable, particularly as the morning carriage was silent as mud, with spying ears pricked up like a herd of lions. 'To work,' I whispered.

'Where do you work?' she whispered back.

'I work for the Happy Bank,' I told her. 'In one of their call centres.'

'Isn't that women's work?' she asked before pointing at the deflated exercise book lying open on my lap. 'So, what *are* you writing?'

'Just stuff.'

'Stuff? What, like poems?'

'Kind of,' I said. 'I think it's more a dream... but I'm not sure.'

She lifted her blindfold and peeked down at the page lying open, then reached across a pale finger and flipped to the inside cover. 'ZUGZWANG MOUSETRAP,' she read aloud. 'That's a curious title.'

I snapped the book shut on her retreating fingers, and she giggled. She was staring right at me, studying my eyeballs, peering all the way down inside me to see if I had a soul. I had the horrible sensation I'd seen her somewhere before. 'What's with the scrap pieces of paper?' she asked.

'They're lists of words,' I told her, pointing to the word "BANANA". 'I use them to build the story. Like pieces of different jigsaw puzzles. Sometimes you have to hit them really hard to make them stick.'

She stood up and beckoned me to follow her with a delphic finger, and I don't know why I did, but I did, down an everlasting corridor, disengaged from the pantomime of being, entering through the toilet door after her. I found myself in the sky of a department store. I was wearing a tea cosy on my head while a snowstorm raged around us. 'What's the matter, Billy White?' she yelled through a spiralling spectrum of snowflakes.

'What happened to the train?' I yelled back.

Ravi Shankar was playing a vibraphone somewhere below us, an audio track that sounded like it had been recorded in a rush, like the world was ending and he had to get it out.

'What train?'

'You were wearing a blindfold,' I shouted.

She looked like a mosaic in the snow, and her eyes were clear as crystals. 'What are you talking about, Billy White? That was sixty years ago!' she shouted back. 'Now hurry up and get down to the shop floor. Don't you want to see Andy Warhol?'

A fanclub of madcaps had gathered on the ground - analysts and accountants wearing canary yellow hats and purple capes, some predestined blowback of giftwrapped idiocy. She blubbered like a little girl at the sight of the mammoth's bumhole squeaking open and the giant chocolate egg falling out.

Is this consumerism? Freaking out in silkworm sunhats? A troglodyte rode by on the back of an ultra-miniature husky, merrily waving a brain cell, while the Scandinavian department store staff got the last laugh drumming Bank of Poe on our skulls until we were so stoned we'd buy into anything at all.

The egg burst open and Andy Warhol toppled out, albinal and malfunctioning, covered in shitty brown goo. The shoppers lapped it up, taking photographs and firing handguns as he resonated back into existence, spontaneously screaming.

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10 BREAKFAST FOR ALL THE WORLD

I felt a little seasick and staggered to the piano. Bedlington and Rickenbacker had nailed poor Nautilus to the music stand above the yellow and black keys. Looking around, I realised our crew was even more broken than me, gnashing their teeth and kicking off absurd chain-mail letters, waiting for a sign. The last of our electric maps blew away. We were apparently hugging the coast, a fifteenth of a mile from

the Bay of Stockhausen, floating irresponsibly through waxy, swarming seas.

From time to time, Calvin jumped up from his finger-puppets and shouted sidesplitting zaps about independent variables. Elsewhere, Louis and Molly Hemingway drew meaningless diagrams of circuit loops onto a conch shell. I found the diagrams intimidating and the presence of the conch shell absurd. In fact, the more I thought about it, the behaviour of everyone was becoming a concern, none more so than Cortes the picador who'd built himself an obstacle course from rotten vegetables and broken bicycle wheels.

We ate by the light of the moon – powdered mash and marshmallow stew. It gave you terrible bellyache, but at least it was something.

I thought I should tell you this before things really get strange.

Solarized documents are in the post. We roll an armchair into the centre of the ring. Cortes thumbs through a brochure, stopping at a picture of a man and woman ice-skating between identities. At daybreak, the unnumbered will come for us with lotus flower eyes, riding the backs of logarithmic spiders, sniffing at the cinnamon dust of the sea.

I looked down at the Fong leaf printed on the inside of my arm – misdirects that I was once South Division, brawling high school utopists and unicycling housewives - and tried to remember a distant star.

Yours most sincerely

Sof

...

11 PEPPERMINT KALASHNIKOV

Let's just hula hoop back through time for a moment...

The Mardi was a long lost product of war, conceived with the Ebaxxonite Empire's last shuddering breath. Some say it took almost two thousand Trakhawvian bookcases to build her, while others postulate that a small dog appeared in their laboratory, and when the Ebaxxonites pressed a button on her head, the ship materialised.

This is where I come in.

After the massacre, I'd dovetailed up with Ragtail and Bobtag, two transient part-action-painters part-petty-hoodlums, immersed in the philosophy of dissonant colours like

indigos
fierce cobalts
caramels

They taught me how to act like a human, how to cartoon with tomahawks, how to creep like crepuscular foxes by lantern light, donning heavy duffel bags loaded up with pots of paint. The three of us bopped with a spuming flock of tourists over the border, up the coast, and round the bend. Such subterranean stunts they explained were 'Not an exact science', actualizing asteroid tears on secular shrines between the channels of convention.

How and why The Cuban found us was (and still is) a mystery even to me.

He stopped me outside St Stephen's crypt, while Bobtag was frosting blueprints of mayhem, and Ragtail was ghosting like a pond skater in a hurricane of his own trumpets.

The Cuban was an endangered species, a battle-scarred Socialist from back when Socialism was actually Socialism and not the hijacked bastardised monocacy it is today. Into the bargain, he was a frightening cardiovascular storm cloud, all cigar smoke and baritone machete verve. He told me about a ship called the Mardi, and how Bedlington and Rickenbacker had howled his fellow Kaleidonauts down with pocket razors and polished ripsaws. He somehow escaped, but not before he saw them nail poor Nautilus to the piano.

'I honestly thought it was The End,' he confessed.

We spiked through tempos, electrified jabbering, to some old harbour town. The Cuban had assembled a makeshift crew of local delinquents:

Calvin
Molly Hemingway
Louis Hemingway
and Cortes

The four of them were waiting for us, drunk and high as holy kites in the silver undergrowth. We dog-paddled through the water, disconnected the metal anchor shaped like a skull, and then we floated into the future. ‘You can pretend to be the captain, Sof,’ said The Cuban, tossing his last cigar into the scurf and climbing up to the crow’s nest where he began to brood.

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12 THE EVERLASTING PEA

‘Gretel! Laurelia! Hashanah!’

The sisters sat like waxworks, waiting to see who would make the first move. Hashanah, the youngest finally disconnected herself from the television. They were watching a cartoon called “The Everlasting Pea”. Zola, the family cat, padded through to the dining room, and the three girls followed. You could almost hear them ticking as they took their places around the sky blue, star-shaped table.

A pressure cooker slammed and Norma Godwin - the mother - appeared. She was a quite unremarkable bottle-nosed monolith of a woman, carrying a fantastic illusion of dishes - puffin burgers, silverfin marrow, and scorpio tusk. Her black dress billowed around her. ‘I almost forgot the aardwolf,’ she gushed, returning from the kitchen with an unstrung carcass peppered with fireflies, crashing it down at the centre of the table, registering 1.1 on the Richter scale. ‘Well...’ she said.

A heavy silence shrouded the four women. The only sound was the clack and groan of forks pushing food around plates.

Hashanah looked up at a family portrait that hung on the wall behind her eldest sister Gretel’s head. Her own face has been blacked out with scribbled biro marks, while her father’s face smiled back at her. “The Great Architect of Moral Warfare” they called him. Fresh in the ground that afternoon.

‘I’m glad you could all make it,’ said Norma finally. ‘I think it’s what your father would have wanted. For you all to come home and... well... it’s been ten years -’

‘Eleven,’ said Gretel.

Zola moved restlessly beneath the table as silence reigned again. Now and again you could sense a shift of parameters - a soundless anthem that played beyond knowledge, while the girls drank absinthe

from golden plastic grails. After a couple of cups, the inevitable and all too familiar political talk began. Gretel was hostile, slow handclapping their father's legacy. Opposite her, Laurelia was anxiously thumbing a green whale brooch that hung around her neck. Suddenly hysterical, she leapt across the table and swung at her sister with an electric cricket bat, missing and sending food flying. The two sisters were shrieking and punching each other, while the mother - superhigh on tundra supplements - wailed across the room. 'How is your figure skating going, Hashanah?'

'I will fucking kiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii yoooooooouuuuu!' screamed Laurelia.

'I had to give it up,' shouted Hashanah.

'What?' yelled Norma, struggling to hear over the commotion.

A shotgun was fired. The bullet smashed a chunk of plaster from the wall.

'I said I had to give it up!' shouted Hashanah. 'Ever since they deported me. I'm -'

Gretel had her middle sister on her knees in a half-nelson, and was trying to choke her unconscious.

'I'm working in a laundrette,' continued Hashanah, 'tubular bells mostly, and I'm getting back into making cabinets again.'

Norma Godwin grinned with shame. Her plump face was the tip of an iceberg chronicling the terror that baked all the way up from the soles of her feet. 'God bless Clack Godwin!' she howled, standing and ripping open her widow's gown revealing a helix of bomb-pods strapped to her torso, wires jammed within the flaps of naked flesh. She lifted the diamond of her wedding ring and pressed the blinking red button beneath.

Another silence fell in the moment before the explosion. The moment of realisation that it was over. That there was no going back.

And then everything went white.

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13 GORILLA GORILLA

Between you and me, Gorilla Gorilla is an abstract trigger, imprinted data/originally suffused within the shipping news. Upon receiving it, the xylophonist emerges from the lunar bathtub and grabs his skis. The trigger is goof-proof. And so my dear Sheik, please proofread this fiercely scrambled world of ours from the safety of your homocopter

window as we slingshot around the manmade Mountain, rising from the Spoking Sea, see the tapoon ring, and the polar tip, grain by grain of cultural stunts piled together. Try some baseball crossed with carol singing, or if that doesn't take your fancy, how about dry-cleaning tokens fused to your actual bones?

Look closely and you will see the railroad engineer is waiting while Lachesis spins the bottle. Boffins - paralytic - incoherently squeak stuff concerning tarantula carnivals, and honeybees flirt on telephone wires with tyrannical desk clerks submissive and sexually repressed by the shadowy hum of the desolate resonator. Shuffle some Rubik's cubes and wave ribbons of discarded season tickets to Gubbins' video diary...

*...the red carpet rolls out beneath your insanely happy steps...
my dear.*

Down the demagogic corridors they strut. McAdoo was at the head of the bandwagon. He was a number-drudge with a chilling enthusiasm for his job. Behind him, the Serotonin Sheik and a commotion of buck-toothed assistants proflutely jolted at the marvel of everything they saw. And everything they saw screamed:

THIS IS WHERE IT'S AT!

A heavily edited noticeboard on the wall behind McAdoo's head read "EVERYTHING IS FOR SALE". He spurted and spat as they surveyed a hall of instrumental columnists roaring and attacking old iron typewriters with flashing claw hammers. At the far end of the hall, paramedics urgently attended to a bleeding Bugwig Knudsen (the esteemed literary critic) who accidentally got smashed in the nose.

No stone was left unturned for the visiting party. They watched agog while zebras devoured bloody red rhinos, ignoring malleable shareholders who played musical chairs as their nubile young secretaries danced all around them, provocatively dangling marigold gloves. The young Sheik was particularly impressed looking into a room with a man holding a ping pong paddle. The man appeared to be defying gravity, hung suspended above a patchwork molehill. The Sheik blinked and realised both the man and the molehill were made from random pieces of jigsaw puzzles, colours and shapes forced together. Meanwhile, members of the local Syd Barrett Unappreciation Society recorded their shifting impressions onto giant sheets of rice paper.

‘Gorilla Gorilla is the most complete and contagious virus on the intergalactic market, my dear,’ enthused McAdoo. ‘As you can see, the Rongovian government normalised within a matter of months. The country however, well, the country is irrevocably contaminated, thus the value of Gorilla Gorilla to any aspiring despot is... almost priceless.’

Kobus Kob, the Coyoc, and Chief Counsel to the Sheik, put his mangled black fingertips together. ‘What do you want for it?’ he asked.

McAdoo’s blighted ego fractionally manifested as a white shark, his pupils dilating. ‘We have a situation - a reflection to be exact - goes by the name Alfonso Kolinsky. We believe he is the origin of the Gorilla Gorilla virus. The trouble is, he seems to have, ahem, vanished. As you can imagine, a vanishing antidote could easily fall into the wrong hands. Far from ideal for us, as well as any potential buyer -’

His voice was drowned out by the thrum of a pumpjet, and the congregation looked sunwards at Edwin Pussy and Dillman Tuesday the be-in specialists, chasing a team of bipolar pixies across the sky. ‘To the ends of the earth!’ cried Tuesday.

‘We will find this Kolinsky and neutralise him... in return for a copy of Gorilla Gorilla,’ said Kob.

McAdoo flushed with the power of the deal, and the Sheik nodded his head. Kob clapped his hands, and like clockwork the Sundial Assassins appeared in the dark cloud of skin overhead. Their diamond teeth and voicelessness make them seem ominously inhuman.

On the horizon, a flash of light suggests that Pussy and Tuesday had crashed into the sea.

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14 ONE MILLION OMS

In dazzling starlight, Calvin and Cortes leaned on the wooden balustrade watching. Myopic Cortes was frantic with laughing gas, demanding to know what was happening. ‘Shut the fuck up,’ said Calvin, desperately trying to lip-read the conversation taking place on the trash island across the aquamarine sea.

On the space-age shoreline, two identical men stood facing each other, like a pair of sitting ducks.

A falling star whizzed overhead and Warchalking’s “Diving Bell” played. The stage manager smiled as steam-powered lights pinpointed the figure in the crow’s nest, tying a white flag to the mast.

Calvin took a shot of liquid tundra. ‘Fuck!’ he cried, staggering back.

Cortez fidgeted in a thought vacuum. ‘What’s happening, man?’ He took the bottle back from Calvin and snorted a shot himself. As the medication raced through his transparent veins, Calvin began to decontextualise the situation. ‘This was no accident,’ he blowed, looking around. ‘It’s like it’s been scripted or something...’

How did he even get onto this ship that droned for days until it came to this? The trash island, the man sitting awkwardly on top of a styrofoam hive, like he was waiting, like he knew they were coming and what happened next? They’d watched as Sof jumped into the water and swam ashore. The two men were identical in every way. Same faces. Same glasses. Same accents. Same height. ‘Shit!’ gasped Calvin.

‘What is it?’ asked Cortez.

‘They... that can’t be possible!’

‘What?’

‘Anything is possible,’ said The Cuban, dropping down onto the deck behind them. ‘After all, they are reflections of the same idea.’

‘They... sort of... stepped *into* each other, and then there was only one of them left,’ said Calvin to Cortez.

‘Fuck off,’ said Cortez, taking another shot as the steam-powered lights faded-out to muted applause.

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15 THE DEATH OF KAMIKAZE GUBBINS

AND NOW YOUNG OFFENDERS, THE UNIVERSITY OF LOVE’S PROPAGANDA DEPARTMENT IS BOWLED-OVER TO INTRODUCE THE ONE, THE ONLY, OSCAR-NOMINATED ONANIST... MR - KAMIKAZE - GUBBBBBBBBBINNNNSSSSS!

A vast black backdrop read “*Nil Desperandum*” and an agitated Gubbins entered stage-right, wearing only Y-fronts, and weeping crocodile tears. A ripple of handclaps chased through the auditorium until the guest speaker raised his hand and bowed his head.

‘I have seen the truth,’ he spat. ‘They look human. They sound human. But human, they are not.’

A kid in a carved pumpkin hat sniggered in the front row, buzzing on a synthesised brand of Algaebrew. Gubbins silenced him with a trigger-happy glare. The kid’s girlfriend, dressed like a tooth fairy, shat

herself and was led away by Mother Superior, sobbing in soiled pink tights. ‘I don’t even like her!’ shouted the pumpkin-hatted kid as Gubbins continued.

‘My new film “Zugzwang Mousetrap” is like nothing the world has seen before. This movie will have audiences rioting in theatres up and down the country. It is a reinvention of the pantomime... the story of how we came to be who we are... it’s... it’s... it’s...’ He started to stammer like a needle stuck on a record, eventually throwing his hands up. ‘You know, fuck it. Willow! Where’s Willow? Willow, come and get me - I can’t do this anymore... I suck. The movie sucks. You know it. I know it. Hell, even these kids know it. You’re all just too fucking... too fucking... too fucking... *inconsequential* to say it out loud.’

A weird little woman scurried out onto the stage and tried to wrestle the director to the floor, but Gubbins attempted to sidestep her and they ended up falling over, landing in the missionary position. The kid in the pumpkin hat slid out of his seat, choking with disbelief. Someone else wolf-whistled, and the hall erupted with laughter. Everyone thought it was hilarious, apart from the two shadowy figures in the stalls.

‘He’s lost it,’ said the first shadow.

‘Completely,’ said the second.

‘We should kill him before it gets worse,’ said the first.

‘It can’t possibly get any better,’ said the second.

They raised their rifles in unison and opened fire. The bullets punctured Gubbins and weird little Willow Walker in the middle of the stage. They looked like rag dolls fucking, as the laughter turned to screams.

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16 AN URGENT CALL FROM THE ZEBRA FLOWER COMPANY

Sibyl picked up line #1, chewing white-knuckled flavoured gum. ‘Hello?’ she asked disinterestedly.

‘Is Sof there?’ asked a man.

‘No, he’s out,’ drawled Sibyl. ‘Who is this?’ She reached for some paracetamol and checked her blind spot.

‘You can call me Holy Jones,’ said the voice. ‘I need to speak to him urgently about the film.’

‘That may be so, but he’s still out,’ said Sibyl, examining her fingernails. She opened the desk drawer where an imp was hibernating, and reached in, checking that her fake moustache and super sunglasses were still there (they were).

‘Can you tell me where he is?’ asked Holy Jones.

‘Hang on,’ said Sibyl, picking up line #2. ‘Hello?’

‘NIRVANA HAS A VACANCY. EDEN GARDENS LUXURY DEVELOPMENT IS PLEASED TO -’

She disconnected the sales call and went back to line #1. ‘No,’ she said. ‘I could hazard a guess, but that’s all it would be.’

‘It really is of the utmost importance,’ said Holy Jones.

‘Isn’t it always?’ asked Sibyl. ‘Hold again, please.’

She spun in her seat and rolled past a tank of piranhas. ‘This is turning into a fucking witch hunt,’ she muttered under her breath. ‘Sof!’ she called.

‘Yeah?’ responded a voice from the back room.

‘There’s some guy calling himself Holy Jones on the phone. ‘He says he urgently needs to speak to you about the movie.’

‘What about the movie?’ asked Sof.

‘Hang on.’ She wheeled her way back to the desk. ‘Hi there. What about the movie?’

‘It’s about Gubbins,’ said Holy Jones. ‘He’s dead. Shot this afternoon. I’m calling from The Zebra Flower Company. We need to know where we stand regarding our investment. Will -’

‘Hold on please.’ She picked up line #2 again,

‘Sibyl?’ (It was her gran.)

‘Oh, hey Gran.’

‘Will you remember to get me some treacle on your way home?’

‘Gran, you already asked me that... twice.’

‘Really? Well, there’s no harm in asking again. I know what you’re like with the forgetting. It’s in our genes.’

‘Aww Gran, I even wrote it down,’ Sibyl protested, picking up a biro and trying to write “Treacle” on the back of her hand. The pen didn’t work.

‘Are you watching Noah’s Ark tonight?’ asked her gran.

Line #3 was blinking as well.

‘Gran, I can’t talk. I’m supposed to be working,’ said Sibyl. ‘But yeah, I’m watching Noah’s Ark tonight. Okay, I love you. See you later.’

‘With the treacle?’

‘With the treacle.’ Sibyl shook her head and hung up. ‘Hello?’

‘As I was saying -’ said Holy Jones.

(wrong line)

‘Sorry, hold please.’ Sibyl spun in her seat. ‘Sof! The phones are playing up again!’ she shouted. On her computer screen, a cartoon dragonfly windsurfed backwards, and a snake charmer swam with a shark’s fin strapped to his back. Sibyl picked up the right line.

‘Hello?’

‘At the Koradji Corporation, we realise that sometimes life is just not as simple as it should be -’

Sibyl rolled past the piranha tank, flicking the kettle on as she went. ‘Do you want a tea, Sof?’ she shouted.

‘You really need to ask?’ replied the voice from the back room. ‘Did you find out what that call was about?’

‘Um...’

She wheeled back to her desk as the kettle boiled. All five of the line lights were blinking, so she sighed and pulled the cord from the wall. On the computer screen, the dragonfly was snowboarding backwards, while the snake charmer was having a seizure in the snow. Sibyl closed the drawer where the imp was still fast asleep, and reached for her packed lunch box, sticking her gum beneath the desk. She took out a dead grasshopper, ripping its head off and spat it into the wastepaper basket. She remembered she needed to call Edwin about Wednesday’s be-in. She’d had some ideas about reality she thought he might like.

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17 BUTTERFLY ON A WHEEL

Rongovia had never seen anything like it before. All four government divisions battling in the streets, waving graphic flags and dodging bullets, bloodthirstily hobnobbing and kneecapping anything that looked out of place. At the heart of this sudden lunacy was the subjective belief that the world was imminently going to end - a rumour started by one Smithy the beach bum who was later bludgeoned to death with ping-pong paddles, on the railway tracks that ran around the village of Unh. It seemed almost incredible that such a throwaway joke could cause the complete meltdown of society, but poor Smithy might as well have flicked one of his filterless cigarettes into a powder keg on Moneybags Row, such was the power of the Gorilla Gorilla virus.

Wafer-thin, stuck-up Sofi Cismontane broke the news to Rubinstein who was sitting smoking fong in his penthouse flat at the top of Hoodoo Towers, known in government circles as “The Ranch”. He scoffed a handful of hickory nuts while a pockmarked advertising executive applied exotic lubricants to Rubinstein’s interchangeable lower limbs.

‘Sir,’ gasped Sofi, ‘A terrible thing is happening!’ She was out of breath, hands on her knees.

At the sound of her see-sawing voice, Friar Tuck rolled through from the back bedroom, licking mustard from the tips of his fat fingers. Behind him, young Huckleberry Finn played a strap-on glockenspiel. The squaw was nowhere to be seen. Lizard-eyed, Rubinstein didn’t even look up, so Sofi turned to Tuck. ‘Mr Tuck, sir, it’s Queen Rabbit, she -’ She bent over and threw up onto the carpet.

‘How ghastly!’ cried Tuck.

‘Was she just sick on my fucking carpet?’ asked Rubinstein.

‘I believe so,’ said Tuck, watching as the girl hurled again.

‘If she doesn’t start making sense soon, I’m going to shoot her,’ said the Secretary of State, throwing another handful of hickory nuts into his mouth before adding, ‘I did warn you that she didn’t have the stomach for a position in government.’

Technically, this wasn’t true. In fact, Rubinstein was forced to give Sofi a junior ministerial position after he lost a game of chess to her father. Later, Rubinstein insisted to Tuck that he’d deliberately double-crossed the former Minister of Change and lost on purpose.

Tuck slapped the vomiting girl around the jaw and screeched in her ear. ‘Pull yourself together! Your father would be mortified if he could see you now!’

‘S-sorry,’ she snivelled. ‘But it’s Queen Rabbit. They killed her. They’re rioting. The newspapers say thousands are dead. Children are vampiric!’ She stopped and sobbed, fighting back another wave of nausea.

Rubinstein kicked out with his well-oiled heels at the spidery executive tending to his feet. ‘Tuck, you fat fuck, what’s this I was reading about Gubbins getting shot at some lecture he was giving at the University?’

Tuck had moved to the maple cabinet and lifted out a trumpet-shaped device, switching on a giant plasma screen. ‘Yesss,’ he said, whistling through his teeth. ‘Bedlington and Rickenbacker deemed it necessary. The director was becoming... tiresome to say the least.’

The riot splashed across the screen in technicolour. The streets of Rongo ran red with poster paint. Beekeepers and panzoists wearing

blue skullcaps were engaged in mass delirious cunnilingus in amongst the traffic. Red snow fell on the sidewalk as pictures from the volta airship cascaded in subjective transmissions onto the eyes.

Sofi Cismontane started wailing when a topless picture of Queen Rabbit fucking in a cemetery with her brother-in-law, the High price of Urdlavia, got beamed up.

‘I’ve seen it all now,’ said Rubinstein, grinning from ear to ear before turning back to Tuck. ‘You can’t shoot the fucking director though, can you?’

‘Perhaps you can’t,’ said Tuck, watching a gang of half-baked skirmishers dump Queen Rabbit’s body in a chalk pit. ‘Sublime,’ he whispered to himself.

Sofi was now pulling her own hair out and moaning.

‘FUUUUCCCCCKKKKK!’ yelled Rubinstein and he rang a bell.

A portal opened and a short blue goblin came running through it. Rubinstein gestured at the hysterical girl and looked away while the goblin hacked at her head with a machete, removing and stuffing her brain into an empty cereal box before exiting the way he came in.

‘I could barely hear myself think,’ said Rubinstein. ‘You need to phone her father and tell him what happened. Or, I mean, don’t tell him *exactly* what happened. Just make something up.’

‘Of course,’ said Tuck. ‘What about Gubbins?’

‘Speak to the writer,’ said Rubinstein. ‘Tell him we need better words.’

‘Already onto it,’ said Tuck. ‘His secretary tells me he’s out, but I’ll keep trying.’

‘What about Another Girl? Have you heard from her?’

‘Nothing yet.’

‘Fuck,’ said Rubinstein and he pointed at Sofi Cismontane’s headless corpse. ‘Can you dump that in the trash on your way out?’

Tuck nodded. Up on screen, the famous journalist Owen McGuffey was framed by a chrome yellow sky, kicking the shit out of a sousaphone player who gallantly continued to keep playing. Tuck dragged the bloody body down the hall and out through the front door, while Huckleberry Finn played his glockenspiel in the background and Rubinstein reached for another handful of hickory nuts, rubbing his oily toes together, staring into space.

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18 ISHMAEL TAKES A PICTURE

Sof sat on the floor, beneath the Teeth poster, listening to The Bluettes. Sibyl's head rested on his lap, his old parka jacket draped over her. Outside the window, in the distance, the cathedral blazed, the colours of the flames mixing with the moon's rays pouring into the room. Though the fanfare and cacophony of the riots had died down, it was still not safe to go out in the streets, so instead they played records to drown out the car alarms. Sibyl picked up the telephone again, and held it to her ear.

'Anything?' asked Sof.

'Nothing,' she said. 'My gran will be freaking out.'

'On account on the treacle?' asked Sof, smiling.

Sibyl laughed. 'I don't mean to be modest, but how come you never tried it on with me?'

'I don't know,' said Sof. 'I guess it just never crossed my mind. You're like a sister to me.' He suddenly felt very stoned.

'There was that time I choked on my tea and you gave me mouth to mouth,' she said, her fingers tracing butterfly shapes across her belly beneath the jacket.

'I thought you were dead,' he told her.

'Yeah,' she said, grinning. 'I thought I was dead too.'

They continued to smile in silence until eventually Sibyl asked, 'What time is it?'

'Just gone 9 o'clock.'

'Shit!' She sat upright. 'Noah's Ark is on!' She threw the jacket aside and jogged across the room to the television, turning it on with one hand, and switching the music off with the other. 'Do you mind if I watch this?'

'Sure,' he said. 'I should be writing anyway.'

He pulled a small black notebook from the jacket's right-hand pocket, draping it over Sibyl again as she lay back down. On screen, the red-headed Marlene Mikhailovich was in the throes of an acrobatic feat of rage having discovered her well-meaning husband, Nikolay, had emptied their savings account to buy the following:

- 1 sheepdog
- 1 daw
- 1 Hoover
- 1 jar of tadpoles
- 2 marlin and
- a bottle of cheap scotch

A b-girl oozed sound-bites while Marlene threw a bucketful of phosphorescent gunk over him.

Sof, who'd been thumbing through the notebook wondering whether now would be a good time to abandon "Zugzwang Mousetrap" and start again, couldn't help but look up. 'What's this then?'

'You've never seen Noah's Ark?' asked Sibyl, amazed.

'No.'

On screen, Grandpa Mikhailovich bellyflopped from the top of a cosmic waterfall. Knights of the Round Table held up scorecards while oriental windsurfers lounged around on lilos, looking dreamy. When Grandpa doesn't resurface, the leading lady (Halley Keraskov) emerged from mission control in slow motion wearing a radioactive suit of camouflage armour, trilling that Grandpa's quixotic drowning has cost the Mikhailovich family a curlew and unquantifiable amounts of self-confidence.

Sibyl explains that everybody in the show, from contestants through to the television crew, believe the world is about to end. Contestants compete for places on a fictitious ship called the *Mardi*, by collecting as many pairs of animals as they can. 'It's genius,' she gushed. 'All these families fighting to make the last days of their lives more comfortable.' She laughed and then looked suddenly serious, staring out the window. 'You don't think the world is going to end, do you?'

Sof wasn't listening. He was looking down at his hand holding notebook, and dropped it on the floor with a yelp.

'What is it?' asked Sibyl. 'Shit, Sof, you made me jump!'

He was still looking at the hand, holding it up in front of his face. 'Can you see it?' he asked, wide-eyed.

She looked blankly back at him. 'See what?'

'My hand... it looks... transparent.'

Sibyl stared at the hand. 'It's just a hand.'

She interlocked her fingers with his, and in seconds they are kissing.

Neither of them knew how it happened.

And as she took him into her mouth, Florence Mikhailovich was on the television behind her bobbing head, playing wind-up drums, gritting her supernatural teeth through frostbite. Ishmael took a picture and it raced counter-clockwise around the Universe, flaring up on posters on a million walls on a canned planet in the middle of summer, hurtling towards THE END.

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19 INTROVERTED TO A POINT OF BEING INVISIBLE

The laundrette assistant stepped out onto the bluestone pier in her wetsuit, clutching a clipboard to her dainty frame. Contrary to common perception that she was “Introverted to a point of being invisible”, she was actually incredibly self-conscious, especially in her present attire. She walked out to meet the balloonist, utterly convinced the two old fishermen sitting on the harbour wall were ogling her ass as it swung belligerently behind her.

Rasmussen the balloonist shook her warmly by the hand. ‘I’ve been expecting you, Cinderella,’ he said, smiling paternally beneath a stars and stripes crash helmet. ‘This way please.’ He opened the basket door and guided her inside. A transistor radio played “Simon Piler and The Atom Band’s Greatest Hits and Misses”.

Once they were up in the sky, she watched a turtle-dove reversing through chalky clouds, up on the brass buckles of the world’s ceiling. A cello played at the bottom of her mind while Rasmussen skydived with a battered toaster on his back, in and out of the basket, heaving heavy black wings behind him. She studied the absurdity of his form when he wasn’t looking.

Eventually they reached the crash-site and Rasmussen circled the balloon-clog down above it, before releasing a trapdoor in the basket. Cinderella dropped through a tunnel of concentric solar rings before breaking the surface of the sea in a blur. Beneath the ocean, she came face to face with a sabre-toothed porpoise and reminded herself next time to hire a submarine, no matter the cost.

** Of course we all know that a sabre-toothed porpoise is very unlikely to harm a laundrette assistant in a wetsuit, but this is a clitoral year and inexplicable things have been happening in the collective cerebral vein, so on this occasion she was in fact following the correct operative procedure by swimming around the impassive leviathan and diving down to the remains of the pumpjet™*

The ocean tasted like photocopied apples. To her right, a milk-toothed shark posed in italics, and to her left, an ape-faced polar bear in a deep sea diving suit made a cameo appearance, sauntering across the seabed.

At 3 o'clock that afternoon, she'd received the transmission at the laundrette:

'THIS IS CATHERINE WALDHEIM AT THE ROYAL ACADEMY OF CONFORMISM. WE HAVE SOME WORK FOR YOU. I EXPECT FOR A CABINETMAKER OF YOUR CALIBRE, THIS JOB SHOULD BE RELATIVELY STRAIGHTFORWARD, AND WE LOOK FORWARD TO RECEIVING YOUR FINDINGS IN DUE COURSE. NEEDLESS TO SAY, IT IS PARAMOUNT THAT ANY FATAL INCONSISTENCIES ARE REPORTED BACK TO THE ZEBRA FLOWER COMPANY IMMEDIATELY.'

In the nanosecond before she hung up, Waldheim could quite clearly be heard screeching 'FOR HEAVEN'S SAKE, MELODY! I'VE TOLD YOU A THOUSAND TIMES... LOVE POTIONS WERE SO LAST CENTURY!'

It didn't take Cinderella long to locate Pussy and Tuesday's bodies. Pussy wore the boom in his marble eyes, head disconnected from his torso which continued to grip the wheel, while his legs appeared to be running in the opposite direction. Tuesday was intact with the exception of his eyeballs, presently in the belly of a very clever lobster.

As she swam around, wrapping the bodies in sad sacks, she reckoned it should be easy enough to extract the virus and regenerate them both. She sent up an approximate golden flare, and with it the two inflated body bags. They bobbed on the surface, licked by pert waves. By the time Cinderella reached the top herself, Rasmussen was pulling the second of the two bags up into the basket. As she reached for the rope, he kick-started it through her fingers. 'Hey!' she shouted, choking on a sudden mouthful of seawater.

Rasmussen shrugged his winged shoulders, just following orders, and the balloon-clog spurted up into the sky, blowing away like a crumpled piece of paper in the wind, leaving her to tread the fatally constant depth, a million miles from explanation and the safety of the shore.

And there she remained, drowning with exhaustion, the tiny dark speck of the Mardi materialising on the horizon behind her.

...

20 CHRYSALIS

Intermission:

It was an ugly heat as the lurching red boneshaker crawled uphill. The Cuban, an athletic troubadour, was sat behind the wheel. Beside him, pregnant in the passenger seat, was Cinderella, hiding under a drastic mohican, her fingers interlaced across her thankless belly, topaz beads glimmering around her neck.

Sof sat sandwiched betwixt Calvin and Cortes in the back. The two young men were wasted and twittering about algebra and elves. On the radio was a soundtrack of vibraphones, cymbals, balalaikas, and glockenspiels, spinning in mesmerising whorls.

2 months later:

They hid out at the Songbird's studio safe-house in the greenest depths of Nowhere. The Songbird hummed a tune beneath her sombrero, struck down with depression, her songs like syrup trickling up and down the zephyr.

Sof waited at the window, watching the bellicose procession as they marched through the village square. In the background, Calvin and Cortes looked translucent, drunkenly smooching with The Judge's twin daughters in an envelope of joss-stick mechanics, glitterballs, an endless supply of tequila, a perdition of delphinium pinions, and vortex pillows. In the corner of the room, the antediluvian seamstress stitched holographic shawls, oblivious.

Sof remembered the essence of The Cuban's last words as they stood on the airstrip. He'd been bare-chested, in ripped jeans and sharkskin boots, waving a sharpened machete at ancient Aztec mosquitoes buzzing furiously around their heads.

'It's just until we synchronise, Sof,' he'd explained. 'These are my people. The last of the Kaleidonauts You are safer here than anywhere else. It shouldn't be any longer than a couple of days if everything goes according to plan.'

Sof didn't hear Cinderella approach him on the back of a clockwork narwhal, or the solicitor, Mr Khan, at her side, fumbling with keys that rattled on an ivory ring. She looked like a collage of ideas questing from probable causes and statistical maxims, her satellite eyes blinking rapidly inside an inconclusive ecosystem of ozone and limbo. Mascara stripes of the gamine tigress were

warpainted down her cheekbones. She reached out to tap his shoulder, pendulous in dark reverie, and the balance of power shifted. Iron knights clashed in the Kremlin. A sitcom of lesbians malfunctioned in parachutes. Pterodactyls rode in the December sun, while outside, the procession fell over itself having reached the noose.

They dragged the welterweight's brother forward, kicking and screaming, while a billion earwigs were poured into his pants. He went down into the centre of the tapestry, ranting about silhouettes and GDP. His destiny was always to die at the hands of the contraption, addled with a sudden unexpected outpouring of guilt as the kestrel pecked away at what was left of his hangdog eyes...

It was an ugly heat, and an oblique parable that played out. The airstrip was daubed with the onslaught of dust, and Sof did not hear Cinderella as she turned the narwhal around, back in the direction of the divan, her solicitor lupine, noting endless corrigendums in his portfolio.

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21 MIDAS'S MAIL-ORDER WHALING SHIP

Pigman rubber-stamped another brain cell and whispered to Clack across the operating table. 'Let me tell you about the Sundial Assassins. They're ventriloquists, originally designed by the Agency of Summer Rains, 21 in all, ophidian cartoons sharing the same solitary dark ego. They move via handclaps through the underbelly of time, in an orphic shroud of Yongling black feathers, feeding on the marrow of personality that gathers in the human blind-spot.' His hammer slammed down again, mass-producing sky blue nomads and free-lance hooligans for the convoluted model of empirical luminescence.

Goliath, their line supervisor, should have been on their backs, but he was far too busy with the witchcraft of canned fong, chewing absentmindedly on a mouthful of grubs. The office was a warhorse of incohesive strategies, red pens skating across the lunar turf, all in the name of escapism. Subrosa blood brothers did handsprings to intimidate the desk-bound Moldovian hired hands.

'This place is a dump!' cried an oversensitive neanderthal in a ten gallon hat, clocking in early for the late shift.

Goliath looked up momentarily with x-ray eyes, then slumped back to the superstratum. In the tiny theatre of coral leaves on his desk,

he watched ghoulish young men in sunhats, rising on Midas's mail-order whaling ship, helixing into the hysterical tundra.

A sudden commotion on the shop floor ambushed the ambience of the moment. Clack screamed and honked the fire alarm as the brain cells on his operating table rapidly coagulated, channelling the indigo fibres of a neoplastic diagram depicting a subhuman mutilated version of The Cuban. Partly formed, The Cuban sat up, laughing the last laugh as he opened an umbrella of storm clouds, spewing forked lightning and emperor moths, their stonewashed wings sparking and swerving and spitting tear gas and exclusion orders. It causes the Gronglings' minds to expand so much that magma seeped from their cavernous nostrils.

Only Pigman survived by scrambling through the designated open window, landing on the bonnet of Penelope Twinkle's canary yellow go-kart. She put her foot to the floor amidst the pantomime of swarming sound waves, and they threaded forward towards the rendezvous point.

Across the planet, having licked clean a telephone box, and examined track marks on the edge of the motorway, the Sundial Assassins dived into the meat of a hurricane, kinetic and primed for combat. Kobus Kob pirouetted at the head of the swarm, standing on the back of a white whale. Down the cycle paths of interstellar microcosms they go, cheered on by fidgeting glyphs and stoical hopheads who were only ever in it for the danger money.

They materialised in a nebulous pocket of space on the outskirts of the village, and slipped unnoticed down the carpeted streets via ancient morality trenches. Kob polished his tusks and adjusted his suspender belt, blowing a battle call through a painted bamboo stump.

The villagers stopped and experienced sudden hearing loss.

The Sundial Assassins – now wearing gas masks - clawed with brute force at the tear-glands of a star-studded cast. In the street, The Judge's twins lay legs akimbo and covered in ketchup of their own making, shrouded in a macabre gloom. As invisible chamber music played, the seamstress was strapped to a dart board and suffocated with get well cards. Kob had contagiously tipped the Songbird from her wheelchair and held her in a half-nelson, spitting slingshots like surf from his slippery lips as he howled, 'Where... is... Kolinsky?'

The little woman laughed as his grip intensified, finally throwing her to the cracked black earth and striking her repeatedly with an unstrung mandolin until a spectrum of blood red ink stained the sky.

Calvin and Cortes, still completely wasted, were muzzled as their mugshots were taken. Their bodies were doused in phosphorous powders, dismantled with ripsaws, and fed to anacondas while a carnival of coincidence erupted all around them.

When they were done, what was left of the village was torn apart and repackaged as soft drinks, children's toys, and baskets of doom. Torpified silver willows quickly grew upon the resulting wasteland, and the canvas of time was carefully detuned so that nobody believed any of it had ever actually happened.

Kob swallowed a handful of wallpaper pills and called McAdoo, giving him a blow-by-blow account.

McAdoo was pissed. 'But you said this would be easy, my dear!'

Kob sneered and hung up. He clapped his hands together and mounted the white whale, the Sundial Assassins falling into line like choreographed insects behind him. 'A change of plan,' he told them. 'We go back to the Mountain, and we take the virus by force.'

Meanwhile, Midas's mail-order whaling ship sailed from the lunar tundra, straight into a waiting conch-shell. The ghouls in their sunhats were blissfully unaware of the man who was two men from two separate dimensions, rolled into one, and the pregnant laundrette assistant with the mohican and beads, huddled together behind barrels of black sky in the hold.

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22 THE SAD PASTEL SONG COLOURS OF THE NIGHTINGALE

Finally Laurelia scrambled free from the rubble of her parents' house at the top of Cirrus Street, dusted herself down and didn't look back. Ten minutes later, Gretel - groggy and covered in lesions - emerged. She stood on the immaculate lawn and caught a solitary ash-flake on the tip of her green tongue. In the background, Zola skulked like a real cat, zigzagging away between the cypress trees. Across the city, dogsbodies woke from a maelstrom of siestas and were glued to primal television channels capturing the juggernaut of anarchy as it gathered momentum. In parliament, a room full of megalomaniacs shook tambourines and distorted the opus of recession. The Provost was on his knees bawling about the shortage of bacon as the first tanks rumbled onto the stage. Agent provocateurs draped tinsel from

downtown skyscrapers, printing titillating postcards in braille, subsequently disseminating them through archetypal continuums.

Laurelia elbowed her way through a blizzard of humanoids at the hippodrome. She exposed her milkshake midriff and fangs, clinically singling out a handsome young huckster in a piebald Panamanian hat, oozing credit. Moments later, she was leading the orgasmic George Cinclus through woozy corridors to the rooftop, where (as we have previously witnessed) she would tenderly vaporize him with an electric cricket bat for kicks.

Meanwhile, back on the bright side of the city, Gretel slipped off the radar via obsolete sewers, stripped down to her underwear and frazzled with idealism, she padded like a panther to Kolinsky's apartment on Nimbostratus Street. The scene was in the process of being graphically embossed by the shambles of the sycophantic paramilitary. 'Everyone is dead,' she sang in the sad pastel song colours of the nightingale.

As she staggered through the abandoned xylem hypermarkets, a pianola masqueraded subliminal indeterminate messages to the very same melody. There was nothing left to do but go look for the Stooage.

The Stooage was a Pekinese tetrahedron-headed porter who works as a janitor at the Institute. Overshadowing his scatological needs and diet of gerbils and jellyfish, he'd frequently rescued the Kaleidonauts from redundant stalemates. Gretel located him tending to venus fly-traps in the Institute's garden, whispering from behind the garbage pile, her calloused hands clinging to uneaten noodles, discarded rosettes from yesteryear's beauty pageant, and a string of rigged election ballot papers.

His four faces stared at her. 'Bopeep? What the hell are you doing here? I thought Rubinstein killed you all. Globules of gyroscopic black tears dropped from his eight eyes as he summoned the urchins with the twang of an almanac.

They quickly arrived - two boys and a girl, all with identical brown rhesus faces, ulcers on their sad unblinking eyes, wizened rags hung from their scrawny bodies. The Stooage adjusted his toupee and fed them scraps of sphagnum from his haversack, telling them to take Bopeep to Lieutenant Verlaine. 'He's a good man,' he croaked. 'A surrealist from his days at the University of Love. I can't guarantee it, but he might know what to do.'

The little girl (Dahlia) took Gretel by the hand, and they exited through the belly of a stone caribou at the base of the Institute's resident totem pole. Meanwhile, the Stooage played a tuba out of time to fuck up the sensors of Ininap's blimp, in case they were detected.

Verlaine was a lop-eared albino of Eskimo descent, and a family man with a whizz kid wife and two incredibly sweet children. Cross-eyed, he reluctantly listened to the urchins explaining the fundamentals, while Gretel hid in a zirconium keg of vaseline, lying in the alleyway behind Hoodoo Towers (where the Secretary of State resided).

At the far end of the alleyway, a Tyrannosaurus Rex slept, curled up in the foetal position. Its guts heaved with hunger. 'I should feed the lot of you to him,' said the lieutenant. 'Only, I might as well be throwing him bird bones. Tell the Stooge that this is the last favour I'm going to do for him, and that I'm off the fong for good.' He moved with celerity through the shadows, his chinchilla army robes rustling as he toppled and rolled the keg over to the ventilation shaft of the tower.

Gretel whispered, 'Thank you,' as he tipped the barrel inside. She pulled free from the goo, splintering soundlessly up the lanthanum ducts.

Outside in the alley, Verlaine tossed the urchins a hunk of luscious papaya and told them to beat it.

Undertakers burned encyclopaedias live on pirate radio. A kid with a dorsal fin rolled out his suburban linoleum and started break-dancing. The great dynasty of mistletoe witches mounted their sylvan broomsticks and set off for El Dorado. The kung-fu master threw the V-sign and nobody was sure if he means peace or war, so they doused him in gasoline and set him on fire, just to be on the safe side. This was the sound of the atlas ripping itself apart to start over. The grail was a virus, and with it the limits were intuitively shifted somewhere beyond the grasping diaphanous hands of predeterminism.

All bets were definitely off.

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23 A TERRACE OF ISOMERS

The following dawn, Sof and Sibyl untangled themselves from the paragraph, ripping apart like velcro. Outside, everything was numb in the aftermath of the apocalypse. Ghostly rain reverberated on the mirrored sidewalks. In matching cagoules, they tiptoed between the farrago of things - a chimera of bruised mannequin limbs spilled in the middle of the road, mechanical rigor mortis in the shape of blurred

vehicles and smashed shop windows. Their orphaned fingertips awkwardly lingered millimetres apart as they turned left onto Myrtle Lane.

At the far end of the street was a demonstration of beggars and baboons waving placard poems, right outside the Elephantine Consulate. Exhausted commandos intermittently sprayed the protesters with aerosols and shampoo adverts. It was unclear what they were protesting about.

Sof and Sibyl were about to turn back when a ferocious black limousine sputtered up beside them. The mirrored window rolled down and Friar Tuck told them to get in. His words were accompanied by an omen of thunderclap, and the rain exponentially heaved from the firmament. Reluctantly, they clambered in, pooling water on the dark plasma seats.

‘To the citadel!’ barked Tuck from the seats opposite them, and the door closed automagically behind them. Tuck fluttered his imperfect eyelashes and toyed hysterically with his pronged moustache.

Huckleberry Finn nodded behind the wheel and put his tiny foot down. ‘I suppose you heard about Gubbins,’ said Tuck. ‘Bit of a fuck up on our part there, but rest assured we’ll have a new director in place before the day is out.’

They passed the ferris wheel where a congregation of robots offered up prayers to the binary gods of 1 and 0. The wheel was in flames, kindled by stupidity. Footprints in the ochre road were a reminder of yesterday’s mass exodus. ‘The most important thing is that you continue to write the story,’ said Tuck, adjusting a plastic halo floating over his bald head.

Sof said nothing. He was too busy listening to the galloping castanet heartbeats of Sibyl in the seat beside him. She quiescently caught him listening and gripped his hand tight.

The Citadel was located beneath an acetylene silo in the Sadistic District. A total curfew had been in place there for the last 24 hours while fatalists and identikit guerrillas did battle with the Sundial Assassins. It had culminated behind the closed doors of a bowling alley in a seismic sabre fracas. Cappuccino blacklegs were reporting that all 21 of the Assassins had been captured and tied to funereal kites, which in turn were released to drift into subatomic sunspots. Kobus Kob apparently escaped, fatally wounded, with the assistance of a brigade of scarab budgerigars.

Verry Vikloed, the nymphet receptionist, looked up from her magazine called "Moon Crumb" as Tuck and the two strangers entered the atrium. Verry was a Vethurak blonde in revealing pyjamas, her celluloid sinews straining in Sof's direction. 'Not now,' snapped Tuck, as she nibbled suggestively on the tip of a pen. 'Where's Krill?'

Verry played a flat note on an ocarina, and an elderly clown in black threads and a deerstalker hat appeared, clunking keys together, and slooping over to them. 'Krill, I'd like to show our guests the Crypt,' said Tuck.

The old clown bowed ceremoniously and led the way.

In the Crypt, professors and cadet technicians wearing paisley-patterned lab-coats, tended to embryonic larvae. Transistors hissed and lightbulbs spored beneath a terrace of perspex numbered coffins. In each of the coffins were translucent forms, will-o-the-wisps wired up to hydraulic pumps. Tuck led them to tank #679, Krill shuffling along behind them, making annoying sounds on a broken accordion.

'Welcome to the Crypt,' Tuck told them.

Sof pressed his nose to the coffin, his pupils dilating as he saw his own outline behind the glass. 'Where did you get them?' he asked.

Tuck twisted a signet ring on his fat finger and sneered, 'We unearthed them seven years ago when we ripped down the old ice rink.'

'Wh-what are they?' asked Sibyl, the fear thick in her voice.

'Ve call zhem isomers,' grunted Krill, imitating a French accent.

'The isomers continue to be something of a mystery,' said Tuck. 'We unearth new ones almost every day.' He pointed another ring adorned finger to the far end of the line. 'We have 1002 to date.'

'1003,' said Krill.

Suddenly the translucent form of Sof began to fit violently, and a gecko in a silicon body-suit scurried by. They watched as the gecko started scratching erratically with charcoal on a concave canvas spiralling down from the ceiling.

'Who is Finch?' whispered a technician, removing the gecko's scribble before it made any sense.

'What the fuck is going on?' asked Sof, freaked out by the sight of his own shuddering shell in the coffin.

'We think they might be dreaming,' said Tuck. He pointed to the technician shuffling away with the gecko's picture. 'Unfortunately, our efforts to translate the dreams have been... well, so far, fruitless. Come...'

He waddled down the row, sidestepping a cougar who was crushing coloured crayons in its jaw. The colours dribbled onto another

canvas lying on the stone floor. ‘Aha! Here we are!’ cried Tuck, clapping his sweaty fat hands together

They stared at the crystallised form of Sibyl lying motionless inside a web of wires in coffin #901. ‘Observe,’ said Tuck, motioning for them to stand back. He punctured the glass with a rusty fork, and as a cyclone of oxygen rushed in through the three holes, the outline of Sibyl’s dreaming body burst into flames.

A fraction of a moment passed before the actual Sibyl started screaming, her hair on fire, with whirling mazarine light pouring from her mouth and eyeballs. Sof desperately attempted to smother the burning young woman with his body, but in seconds she had become a pile of ash in his arms.

Krill stepped forward with a dustpan and brush, and began to carefully sweep up Sibyl’s remains around the sobbing writer. A shoal of scarlet tadpoles swam by, collectively nosing lumps of nectar in the direction of an unattended wishing well. ‘Let’s get one thing straight,’ sneered Tuck. ‘Nobody is indispensable - not you - not even me. The idea is everything. The system is God. You WILL write us into eternity. These are the days of the extraordinary man, while simpler beings like this girl will fade like dodos. Our sources suggest you are presently to be contacted by the wastrels who are hiding Alfonso Kolinsky. I know you know this name, Sof, even if you cannot admit it to yourself. When they do, you will bring Kolinsky to me. Do I make myself clear?’

He slipped a business card into Sof’s cagoule pocket and waddled away, calling back over his shoulder. ‘See that Mr Sof gets home safely, would you, Krill? Oh, and bag his little secretary for him, if he so desires.’

‘Certainly, sir,’ fawned Krill, bowing to his knees, a cock-eyed buzzard landing on his left shoulder.

‘FUCK YOU, HOLY JONES!’ yelled Sof towards the shadows that were swallowing Tuck at the far end of the Crypt.

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24 CRETINS

Melody Waldheim was an eleven year old workaholic, splendid class president with shimmering white teeth and expensive jodhpurs. She was regarded by virtually all of her peers and lovelorn teachers as something of a cretin. Every day, immediately after school, she packed

up her replicated library books and metronome in her trudgebag, and ran swashbuckling errands for her mother in exchange for gymnastic lessons.

The afternoon in question, she flew from the perceived nest of knowledge and travelled across town via the transcendental Daydream Underground to a predesignated laundrette carefully selected by The Zebra Flower Company. Blackmail and villainy had been programmed into Melody's genetic make-up at the embryonic stage through a series of privately funded barbaric injections. By law, the majority of Melody's genes were, to this day, considered the intellectual property of one of the city's leading milliners who sponsored the experiments. As a consequence, she did not view her errands as work, but an opportunity to someday go freelance, maybe own her own pink windmill in the country.

The cupidity gene was not artificially transplanted but passed down through generations of lionesses on her mother's side. The laundrette she entered was called "The Dirty Dungeon". She instinctively bypassed Florin - the owner, a buxom 50-something gypsy hermaphrodite with varicose veins, secretly trying to kick a lifelong tundra addiction - and made for Cinderella the laundrette assistant.

Cinderella sat in the sarcophagus behind the cash register, tending to the tubular bells. So out of place did this brilliant and impish young woman look, with brittle blonde hair falling down around her atrophied pale face, and dorky glasses about twenty years out of fashion, that to Melody she might as well have been from outer space.

The schoolgirl approached the desk, illuminated by the mercurial forethought of the outlaw, and handed the startled assistant the biodegradable invitation. She cleared her throat and aerobically regurgitated her mother's carefully scripted lines. 'The Zebra Flower Company would be delighted for you to attend an audience with his holiness, the grand majestic knave, and undisputed Secretary of State, Signor Rubinstein, this evening in his penthouse suite at Hoodoo Towers, from 8 until late.'

Cinderella looked down at the girl and then the invitation, like someone had just handed her malaria. 'I-is this some kind of joke?' she stammered, making to hand the invitation back.

'I'm afraid not,' replied the girl, gurgling hideously as she peered over the counter. 'Attendance is compulsory. Failure to comply will result in you being grated with onions and fed to a pack of systematically starved hyenas in a cage over at Mustang Meadows.' She smiled, a genetically engineered snake tongue dancing around her

lips as she leaned forward. 'Between you and me, I'd put down those bells and go apply some war-paint. You look like you've seen a ghost. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity, you know.'

Leaving Cinderella looking visibly upset, Melody Waldheim clicked her riding boots together, about turned and exited the laundrette to hang out with her yes men at the dodgems.

Cinderella took the old kayak across the city, sandwiched between the caricatures and bums in the gloaming, all the way to the end of the line in the spectral alchemical district. Stars on fahrenheit wires and iridescent orbs slicked in the lullaby of sky above her as she padded the mirrored streets in her plimsolls. Hoodoo Towers dwarfed the neighbouring skyscrapers like a great oblong archangel - the plumage of government. She vaguely remembered visiting it once with her father and two older sisters when she was small.

A miniature cavalry met her at the entrance and escorted her backstage to the alleyway where a handsome young lieutenant was throwing hunks of decayed squid into the jaws of a herculean T-Rex. He paused and beckoned the young woman forward, clumsily frisking her and lifting her glasses from her nose before leading her down lush fuzzy corridors to a golden elevator, then guiding her inside. He tapped a flashing diamond button on the gleaming console for the penthouse suite and stared at her with apologetic eyes. 'Just... survive for as long as you can,' he said apologetically.

Rubinstein was expecting her, recumbent on a waterbed, with a diadem perched upon his head. He was naked, filming himself with a camcorder. An enormous stroboscope engulfed the room, turning everything monochromatic. Sensors pinged and the door slid shut behind her. She tried to run, but Rubinstein, the reptilian warlock that he was, rapidly abseiled across the probable space between them, swinging from the gallows and masturbating slowly. 'Scrawny,' he said, licking his white amphetamine-stained lips, 'just how I like them.'

A cello began to saw somewhere behind them, drowning out all known sound. His emetic enthusiasm caused Cinderella to scream and attempt to curl up on the floor, but he was already dragging her by the hair across the spacecraft. She closed her eyes as the chilblains cascaded on the lexicon of horror that had only just begun.

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25 IN HOBNAIL BOOTS

‘As Captain of this ship, I now pronounce you husband and wife,’ said Midas, waving his magic wand. A one-time thespian, his pidgin lines were as always delivered with grizzly authenticity. ‘You may now kiss the bride if you’re so inclined,’ he added, grinning as the ghouls broke into song.

Sof and Cinderella flushed at the incantation and moved awkwardly together, a cloudburst of razorbills rubbernecking in the sky above them. So awkwardly horrendous was the fleeting moment their cracked lips met, that the vector of time began to haemorrhage perpetuity, and Sof was propelled windward across the concatenation of schemata. Cinderella, in hobnail boots, merely longed more than anything for the lightning of love to strike deep and unexpectedly into her misshapen heart, wiping her mouth on the back of her bridal gown sleeve.

Midas was a well-meaning man, but when the stowaways were caught stealing rum from the ship’s galley after three days at sea, he was left with something of a dilemma. Unlike his fabled namesake, this particular Midas did not turn anything he touched into gold. Raised in the jungles of Phaeton, he grew up believing the Universe was fundamentally diabolic, and when he smiled, his teeth lit up like distant suns. Running away from home with a troop of travelling Bepibahianians at the tender age of fifteen, he’d quickly discovered his virtuoso talents on the big stage, thanks to an incoherent romance with a serial killer in a burlesque show. As previously discussed, he continued to pursue this thespian dream well into his fifties, with public acclaim but little critical recognition. Finally, one bankrupt day on a distant black moon, he took a chance and stole an old Ebaxxonite warship, and he never looked back.

Ordinarily a find like Sof and Cinderella would have been the simplest of riddles. Midas would have immediately instigated a jam session before putting them to work cataloguing the contents of the ship’s cluttered hold, until their next port of call, where his size twelve boots would flash in the monster sun as he kicked their bones into touch. But these were no ordinary times. News of increasingly fraught composition and daily intergalactic skirmishes, brought to them by a talking clockwork porpoise called Shoo, meant the situation required a certain amount of flexibility before he reached a definite prognosis. Being a bedevilled bibliophile, Midas retired to his Captain’s Quarters while the ghouls fed the stowaways mashed potato cakes behind the crescent-shaped sphinx-like pillars of the Brig.

If you looked close enough, you would see Midas through the porthole, kneeling down and sucking on a lozenge while he thumbed through ancient manuscripts and manifestos, finally locating the article he was looking for: A cubist “WANTED” poster with Sof’s dark features stared back at him. Midas used a kaleidoscope to read the small print “FOR CRIMES AGAINST THE STATE”, it said. The reward was “A trip to the moon and the relative upper hand”.

Midas stuffed the memoirs in his pocket. ‘Who gives a shit about the upper hand, relative or not,’ he shouted crossly to nobody in particular.

Decision made, he stomped his way out onto the main deck and cautiously approached the stowaways, prodding them with a shard of kryptonite tied to the end of a long stick. ‘Talk!’ he commanded them, with just the subtlest pinch of wrath, holding up the “WANTED” poster.

Sof grinned at his feet like his batteries had finally run out, but Cinderella sat forward and told their story. Spinning reincarnations had become like second nature to her. She explained to the euphoric Midas (who later had the tale recorded word for word by his hypnotised ghouls into the inside cover of a book of fairytales called “ZUGZWANG MOUSETRAP”, mainly for posterity but also for his own reading pleasure), how she and Sof had met and fallen in love, and how they came to be on the Mardi:

Once upon a time, not so very long ago, there was a wealthy, but spiritually constipated Maharajah. The wealth was the result of his mighty peach plantations which produced arguably the juiciest and peachiest of peaches in all the peach-producing kingdoms of the world. The constipation was caused by the death of his beloved wife, who died during the birth of their first child, a baby girl. So broken-hearted was the Maharajah by the loss, that the princess was raised by the servants who worked tirelessly on his mighty peach plantations, while the Maharajah remained locked in his room for days on end. The only thing that temporarily pacified the Maharajah’s anguish, was the sound of the tabla, and he frequently summoned a gifted but elderly tabla player from a nearby village to play for him. Sometimes for months, the only person to set eyes upon the Maharajah was the tabla player. However, after many years of being asked to beat out rhythms for hours on end, finally the old table player grew sick and died.

The Maharajah called on the next most talented tabla player in his kingdom, and was informed that it was the old tabla player’s grandson, who had inherited his speed, dexterity, and ability to hold a

beat. The fifteen year old boy was summoned, like his grandfather before him, to the palace, and on his way was passing through the peach plantations when he tripped over a girl the same age as him, spilling a basket of peaches. As their eyes met across the fallen fruit, they fell instantly in love, and since their encounter went unnoticed, there was nobody to tell the boy that this apparently simple and somewhat mucky servant girl was in actual fact the princess. Each day he was summoned to the palace to play for the Maharajah, and the young princess would sit in the branches of a peach tree looking out for him. Upon seeing the young tabla player, she would smile and wave. Finally she plucked up the courage to speak to him, and when she did, they lost themselves in a conversation that carried on through the morning, the afternoon, and right through to twilight. Eventually they shyly kissed and fell asleep in each other's arms beneath a mighty peach tree, exhausted by the bonfire of young love blazing.

Meanwhile, the Maharajah was furious when the young tabla player failed to show that morning, and was in a dervish frenzy when he still hadn't materialised by the early evening. So rich and powerful was the Maharajah that nobody ever dared oppose or question him. Fusiliers were dispatched to every corner of the kingdom to find out what had happened to the boy, and even the Maharajah himself stepped outside his palace for the first time in fifteen years. As Fate would have it, it was the Maharajah himself who found the young tabla player and the princess lying entwined beneath the mighty peach tree. As he yelled furiously at the groggy boy, the princess sat up rubbing her eyes, and her appearance was so like that of her mother, that it stopped the Maharajah dead in his tracks. He fell to his knees, sobbing and resolved to make up for lost time, immediately taking the girl by the hand and leading her back to the palace where she would sleep in the luxury of a royal room for the first time in her life. He planned to shower her with exotic gifts at sunrise, and sent his servants far and wide to find the most incredible things money could buy. Behind his bewildered daughter's back, he instructed a group of fusiliers to take the young tabla player to the edge of the peach plantation and shoot him, primarily for his disobedience, but also intending in time to find a prince who was worthy of his daughter's hand in marriage.

But on the way, the boy escaped the fusiliers and hid between the peach trees so that he could not be found. He made his way back to the palace, combining his knowledge of the inner lay-out from previous audiences with the Maharajah, with the same deftness of feet as he had in his tabla playing hands. He quickly found the royal room where the princess lay awake dreaming of her new found love, and told her about

how her father had commanded the fusiliers to shoot him. Together, that night beneath the peach trees, they ran away.

And they have been running ever since.

Cinderella looked up at Midas's bearded face, spellbound tears hanging on the high-wires of his eyelashes. 'I am the princess,' she said, 'and Sof is the tabla player. As you can see, we are still running.'

So moved was Midas by Cinderella's fabrication, that he insisted their odyssey be consummated with an impromptu marriage. The ghouls were appropriately dressed in straitjackets and bow-ties, and the ceremony on the main deck was captured on trembling camcorders. Midas himself forged the couples' passports with his finest calligraphic strokes, and rowed them in a leaking coracle under cover of darkness to the foot of the Mountain where he produced one of the most notable performances of his career when he was called upon to stump some cantankerous gnomes at border patrol after they called into question the validity of Sof and Cinderella's tear-stained passports. 'Don't you know who this is?' he bellowed, red-faced, hands on hips. 'This is the extraordinary tabla player and his divine wife, Peaches. He winked over the head of the gnome - which, if truth be told, wasn't difficult given his height.

While Midas distracted the frantic officials with omnipotent juggling tricks, the newlyweds jumped the queue and crossed over the border unnoticed, vanishing into a passing pagan quango. For the first time, Cinderella held her dynamic belly tenderly in her hands, and decided if the child was a boy then she would call him Lucifer.

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26 BANANA BANANA

In the experiment, we give the monkey a selection of picture cards depicting words, and ask him to arrange them into some loosely structured order. In this instance we give him the following pictures:

PSYCHEDELIC, LAVENDER, SUNBURN, WINDOW,
APHRODISIAC, and BUS

He arranges it as follows:

(Through the) PSYCHEDELIC BUS WINDOW (he sees the)
APHRODISIAC (of) SUNBURN (ed) LAVENDER.

Attempts to take the experiment onto the next level allowing the monkey to pre-select picture cards based on his mood or the plot he wishes to project, generally fail as the monkey is predisposed to repeatedly choosing BANANA.

And nobody wants to read BANANA BANANA.

Unless of course they are a monkey.

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27 CONCLUDING THE BALLAD OF PENELOPE TWINKLE

Penelope Twinkle experienced an imponderable thunderbolt lying zipped up in the sprawling bed of Kamikaze Gubbins, and so, immediately upon leaving his apartment block, she cycled on her half-empty tandem home, and spent the rest of the day crying for her apology of a life into several cups of cold catharsis.

Her story was as dull as a watercolour painting - born and raised a devout Socialist, her childhood and teenage years were automatic and emblazoned with uneventfulness. The only notable exception was the day she almost got her breasts enlarged, running from the hospital in a green cape at the eleventh hour, her bare ass bouncing through the streets. To this day, she was still unable to fathom why the fuck she wanted or even needed bigger breasts in the first place.

She picked a major from a home-made tombola and ended up with Film Studies - something she knew next to nothing about, let alone even remotely cared for. Her eldritch resemblance to a dormouse meant she had few real friends at the University of Love. She'd scraped through first year thanks to the miraculous intervention of her own wisdom teeth, but by the time her sophomore year swung around, she was resigned to attempting to screw her lecturers in exchange for passable grades. And that was where Kamikaze Gubbins came in.

Taking her under his pterodactyl wing and riding her over the precipice whenever he felt like it, this paradigm of a guest speaker in the Periscopic department considered poor Penelope to be something of a muse (even though he confessed this to nobody, including himself)

and a potential ingénue for the cartoon-strip movies he short-sightedly imagined making when the headache of ignominy passed.

The ignominy itself had been caused by a raunchy lo-fi science fiction flick called "*Lapdancers In Space*" that surgically bombed at every box office desperate enough to screen it - but this is by the by.

Finally, Penelope Twinkle came out on the other side of a lacrimal stupor and resolved to do something legendary with her life. She lit a cigar, put on a squaw uniform, and stepped outside. Her immediate instinct was to follow the dissonant sounds of chamber music in a nearby street that turned out to be a Rastafarian jamboree. The equilibrium of this usually peaceful symposium had been sabotaged by supermodels hawking real estate. The scene was ideal fodder for the cobweb clergy who had fanatically sworn allegiance to the nameless scoundrels of government and had even managed to pick up a seat in a nugatory by-election - God it would seem, was suddenly up for sale. Penelope didn't see the arthropod agent leaning on a belisha beacon, surfing the piazza for the brightest star in the constellation, but he saw her and quickly outflanked her like a rook around a queen on the optical illusion of a chess board.

Perhaps The Cuban's greatest skill, even beyond his accuracy with a kazoo, was his ability to swing on the trapeze of auto-suggestion. Cornering Penelope by the furnace of the old city aviary (feathers shoaling like vivid snowflakes from the pyre) he persuaded her with ultrasonic footsie to climb into the cockpit of vendetta and infiltrate the nerve centre of bureaucracy. As they drank a toast to a brighter future, a phoenix rose from the flames of kismet in the background. Penelope Twinkle finally felt the glow of weightlessness in a sudden sirocco wind that blew the formulae of bongos on an ice-floe down the road that rolled out in front of her. The Cuban melted back into a paroxysm of hieroglyphics painted on a gap in the aviary wall, while Penelope pulled her poncho tight and stepped into the flash point like a real-life buccaneer.

She entered Hoodoo Towers via a keyhole on the ground floor, and climbed the back stairs to the penthouse suite. Her nondescript kernel kept her under the radar, and allowed her legato passage into the heterogeneous and somewhat modest backroom team. Rubinstein got through hired hands almost as quickly as he did hickory nuts. Two weeks of following The Cuban's 10 Golden Rules:

- 1 Every day is Halloween
- 2 Live like a mirage
- 3 Keep your pants on

- 4 Never microwave eggs
- 5 Never underestimate the negligible
- 6 Beware of gonorrhoea
- 7 Abseil into moments with your eyes open, don't sleepwalk into them with your eyes closed
- 8 When in doubt, blow that fucker up
- 9 Drugs are humdrum
- 10 Being a hero is a thankless task

and Penelope Twinkle was regarded by all as a part of the furniture.

They called her "The Squaw".

The ballad eventually dictated that NOW was the time she should make her move. Disguised as an illustration, she began by taking out the Chief of Police with an ice pick as he sat taking a shit in the penthouse foyer's rocking chair toilet. She did not hang around to watch his black blood pooling like shampoo on the bathroom floor, fawning through the shadows to the front door of The Ranch. The door opened and the Minotaur, hot and befuddled from his daily security briefing, stepped out. His eyes didn't even have time to blink as Penelope leapt out, ramming a lit serrated sparkler up one of his nostrils. Even as it POPPED like a faraway quasar on the distant shore of his skull, and he sank to his bovine knees, she was already inside Rubinstein's penthouse suite, draped in sable and oilskins, billowing like an alligator across the spacecraft's blood-stained floor.

Rubinstein sat with his back turned to her, indexing a collection of heads he'd pickled in formaldehyde. Jazz music played as he lifted a lorgnette to his megalomaniac yellow eyes, and he was blissfully unaware of Penelope rising up behind him with a harpoon, poised to strike at the base of his skull. For the anomaly of a millisecond, she was the precognition of the phoenix personified, pulling back the blade, blissfully unaware of the outburst of an electric cricket bat flashing through the air behind her.

The impact broke every bone in her beautiful head, and she did not feel a thing as her body dismantled into vapor. Rubinstein turned round at the sound and saw the milkshake midriff of Another Girl. 'I'd know that navel anywhere,' he drawled, looking up at Laurelia. 'What the fuck are you doing here?'

'Saving your fiendish ass,' she told him, smiling with fangs as she tucked the cricket bat back into her belt.

Neither of them anticipated the air-vent falling open, and her burned older sister in her underwear, dropping to the floor and charging Laurelia at full speed, knocking her across Rubinstein. The

two girls were an indistinguishable blur of high voltage crashing through the formaldehyde jars, sending pickled heads rolling like giant strawberries in all directions. As they sprung to their feet and stared each other down, Rubinstein sat back and clapped his hands together, giggling. ‘FUCK YEAH!’ he cried. ‘THINGS JUST GOT FUCKING INTERESTING!’

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28 REVERSIBLE SKINS (THE LAST GILDED MOON)

Back in Never-Never Land it was like the cosmos was having a nervous breakdown. Crackpot journalists were court-martialled for chronological errors. Everybody you ever liked, or would have liked if you’d met them, got evacuated in wheelbarrows by the vitreous light of the last gilded moon.

All that were left were the warmongers and those who couldn’t afford an escape ticket. Atheists and pantheists were rounded up and splattered all over the small print of the tabloids. The Countess of Ennui made a speech on the halfway line at a packed Che Stadium in the seconds before it got bombed. Drowning in mink, she drunkenly demanded that anyone with scholarly aspirations be bound in bubble-wrap and blasted into space on the back of a question mark. The hordes cheered wildly in the stands, compulsively taking selfies with futuristic mobile telephones. Up in the northern clouds, the Pepperpot Palace was broken down into molecules and sold off via telesales and merchandise stalls.

Sof and Cinderella hotfooted it clockwise across this loathsome and loveless new land, disguised in reversible skins. Heading barefoot over the hoarfrost, they avoided the hard sell and returned to the Lost City. Clairvoyant invisible liberals ransacked every disfigured village in search of the fugitives, and as the hours ticked by, the government called in reinforcements. Pirate misanthropes tossed chloroform snowballs at anyone who vaguely resembled the couple. Febrile tycoons flew the colours of misanthropy, ripping up social networking sites, while winged spooks who yowled and ricocheted around in the sky, small-talked suspects into getting buried alive in celestial caskets.

At 12:15am the Admiral of the Imperial Fleet made a deranged phone call home, telling his wizened wife that he was finally sober and had seen the light. He requested that she immediately start a Mexican wave and hastened to add that they’d finally tracked “those little fuckers everyone was looking for” to the Rongovian State Circus. He

slammed the phone down and drank another pint of espresso, accelerating off on the back of an emu that eventually buckled under the weight of pomposity.

Sof and Cinderella twisted seraphic between the waltzers, while hedonistic aborigines grappled in the dirt for booby prizes, and the apothecary did some lucrative business. Polyphonic slogans were pumped from carnival gramophones while neon lights burrowed into corneas, magnetising nihilists into the trance of franchises, gorging themselves on plastic burgers, taking photographs of the prize fighter levitating above the grotto roof as he knocked back a fifth shot of hemlock to hysterical applause. Two mangled black hands grabbed Sof and Cinderella, dragging them into the Hall of Myrrors. Kobus Kob squatted in the elliptical light, his distorted face had been gravely nicked by the slip of a disposable razor, and his tusks looked gangrenous in the sudden helixing infra-red beams cast from the helter skelter spiralling in the sky outside. Kob urged the seraphic couple down into the shadows, and up close they could see he was sweating violently, mad pupils orbiting his carmine eyes. When he talked, his sentences were garbled, lambent hisses that imprinted on the ears. 'Listen,' he said, 'this is the sound of hypocrisy. I know exactly who you are. The Sundial Assassins are dead and the virus has outgrown its original purpose. The theorems are flawed. You must leave tonight. A memorandum has been faxed. Fait accompli. Fait accompli. Fait...'

A platoon of crystal leeches carrying flashlights drifted past, wading into the bedlam of a hairpin bend. Sof and Cinderella made to switch skins again and vanish into the vertigo of myrrors, but Kob urged them to stay. 'You don't understand!' he whined, spitting suicidal cayenne and Iberian jumping beans onto the straw floor. 'The memorandum... I have ordered that The Mountain be nuked at dawn, seven times over, and when that is done, we will nuke it seven times more. You have to understand - the damage is done, irrevocably. Gorilla Gorilla cannot be contained, cannot be controlled, even with the antidote.' He suddenly sprung forward and grabbed Sof's skull, twisting it violently.

An extravaganza of fireworks temporarily illuminated the Hall as Cinderella drove a stylus deep into Kob's black heart, and the back of Sof's head flew off. Sof sat up, bloodlessly bewildered as Kob gasped and gurgled his final breaths, the dolphinarium suddenly reflected in a premonition via the concave myrror behind them. Sof groped around the top of his own head and prised apart the lobes of his brain, producing a dark bubble of flecked shimmering lights, while

Cinderella picked up the top of his skull and frantically screwed it back on again.

‘What the fuck is it?’ asked Sof, holding up the bubble, then staring at the puddle of Kob.

With his last wistful breath, Kobus Kob appeared to mouth ‘Awrel Crow’, before lying perfectly still. Sof was awoken by the sound of Cinderella’s grunts as she lifted him to his feet, and he unconsciously stuffed the bubble of light into his parka pocket as she grabbed his hand and urged him forward. ‘Come on,’ she told him, ‘we need to keep moving.’

As per The Cuban’s instructions, Lieutenant Verlaine was waiting for them on the bright side of the circus. He sat on the back of a saddled T-Rex, drinking super cheap cider for some last minute Dutch courage, his lop-ears falling down around his Eskimo eyes. ‘You took your time,’ he said with a sad smile.

Sof, warily fazed, clambered on behind him, and just before Cinderella followed, she looked up and saw a giant vandalised billboard advertising the state funeral of Clack Godwin the following morning.

Her father’s face leered out at her, a portrait painted when he was much younger. She recalled something he once said to her while she was tucked up in the safety of her childhood bed, cuddling Zola the house kitten. ‘There are five kinds of people,’ he’d told her. ‘Those who try to win and win, we call winners. Those who try to win, but lose, we call losers. There are those who care not whether they win or lose - we call them apathetic. There are those who know not of concepts like winning and losing - we call them ignorant. But there is a fifth kind of person. A kind so small in number. They are those who try to lose.’

‘What do we call them?’ Hashanah has asked him.

Clack Godwin had shrugged his shoulders and bit his lip nervously. ‘I do not know,’ he told his youngest daughter. It was the only time she could ever remember her father admitting he didn’t know something.

She looked up at Sof on the back of the T-Rex, and smiled. ‘I have to go now,’ she told him, before running off towards a brick warehouse in the distance.

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29 WHICH ONE IS WOODY? (MO-TENKY TELEVISION)

Up on the giant plasma screen, The Bluettes sang “Shubunkins” over a series of still images from previous episodes. Sof and Sibyl watching Noah’s Ark. The Cuban silhouetted in the crow’s nest of the Mardi. Rubinstein eating a hickory nut and leering repugnantly. Cinderella with her mohican, pregnant in the passenger seat of the boneshaker. Finally it faded to a CD cover featuring Ishmael’s teeth poster, and an Australian voiceover announced, ‘This Monday, available in all good record stores, The Bluettes sing “Zugzwang Mousetrap” for your listening pleasure.’ The text in the bottom right corner of the screen read “SHORT LISTED FOR THE FINGERPRINTS SOUNDTRACK OF THE YEAR AWARD” and “INCIDENTAL MOTOWN HELICAL POP AT ITS MOST ELASTIC” ***** (Mooncrumb Magazine)

Kamikaze Gubbins rocked back in the executive chair with his hands behind his head.

‘What do you think?’ asked the technician who resembled a leprechaun on crack cocaine, sniffing uncontrollably and hopping from one foot to the other.

‘It’s o-kay,’ drawled Gubbins, lighting a cigarette and waiting for a second wind. ‘Moon Crumb really gave it five stars?’

‘Weeellll...’ said the technician, struck down with stagefright.

Gubbins pager started clanging at his hip. ‘Shit,’ he said, yawning and pulling a walkie-talkie from his pocket.

He switched it on and Verry Vikloed’s voice swirled rapidly through the speaker. ‘The vampires have entered the building. I repeat: the vampires have entered the building.’

Gubbins waited several split seconds and rolled his eyes. ‘Is that over?’ he asked.

The receptionist sighed. ‘Yes, that’s over,’ she said.

Gubbins suspected she was aiming a perfectly manicured middle finger in his direction. ‘Well, then fucking say it’s over when it’s over. What am I? Tele-fucking-pathic? Never leave me waiting on an over,’ he snapped. He turned to the technician who was fumbling imaginary drumsticks. ‘You just can’t get the staff these days,’ he whined.

The technician nodded at the walkie-talkie, throwing Gubbins off his balcony of indignant rage.

‘I don’t have to say “over”,’ spat Gubbins. ‘I’m the FUCKING DIRECTOR!’ Then he hurled the walkie-talkie at the technician’s head.

On the other side of the building, Krill walked into an animated squadron of journalists and Japanese tourists were running amok in the atrium. Verry Vikloed was dressed like a geisha behind the front desk, decadently sipping alcopop and thumbing through the latest issue of Moon Crumb magazine, looking to reread the article about how Molotov makes his combustible liqueurs. At the sight of the curator's painted face, black robes and deerstalker hat, the tourists jumped to attention with their cameras flashing. They swarmed excitedly around him.

Krill cracked open a human skull and started handing out snorkels. 'You might find these useful as the tour progresses,' he told them. Solemnly satisfied everyone was suitably equipped, the old clown clicked his heels together and quiescently enthused, 'Ladies and gentlemeb. My name is Krill, and I will be your guide for today. If you have any questions while the tour is taking place, then please keep them under your hats.' He dipped back into the skull and produced several colourful fezes that he began to methodically distribute, visibly grimacing as two happy-go-lucky Siamese twins in matching striped t-shirts had their pictures taken by their saccharine parents. When he'd finished, Krill picked insubordinately at a wart on the tip of his nose, and began to speak again. 'Welcome to Mo-Tenky TV, home of the cult television show "Zugzwang Mousetrap". In a short while, we shall be meeting some of the cast and crew behind the making of our smash-hit series, but first I'd be honoured to grant you exclusive access behind the scenes, so you can see our radical facilities.'

The words "YOU LUCKY LUCKY FUCKERS" were subtitled in white over Krill's chest, and he batted them away like they were flies. 'Now, if you would like to follow me...' He mothballed into a loop-hole, prefabricated into an acrostic contract that the visitors complacently signed, before cluttering them all together in the back of a battery-powered hearse.

Krill shouted loudly over the hum of the engine: 'ZUGZWANG MOUSETRAP BEGAN ON A SHOESTRING BUDGET IN THE WINTER OF 2070. ONCE WE'D SPENT ALL OUR MONEY ON SHOESTRINGS, WE REALISED WE WOULD NEED TO STEAL AND BORROW ANY RECORDING EQUIPMENT, PROPS, AND WOULD-BE ACTORS.' Nobody laughed, so Krill ploughed on. 'WE'VE COME A LONG WAY SINCE DREAMS WERE FIRST CAPTURED ON FILM IN TORONTO IN THE EARLY 30s, WITH MERCURY MUMBLE'S GROUNDBREAKING DOCUMENTARY "A WOMBAT'S DREAM". THEN, I'M SURE WE ALL REMEMBER HOW MIND-BLOWING IT WAS TO WITNESS

JASPER TCHAIKOVSKY'S ORIGINAL MONOCHROME DREAM SEQUENCES IN THE FILMHOUSES AT THE TURN OF THE DECADE. INTO THE EARLY 40s, WE SAW DREAMS CRUDELY CAPTURED IN COLOUR FOR THE FIRST TIME. MORE RECENTLY, SCIENTISTS AND FILMMAKERS HAVE STARTED MAKING TENTATIVE STEPS INTO FINALLY CRACKING THE LATENCY CODEX, TRANSLATING PURE IMAGINED THOUGHT ONTO THE SILVER SCREEN. OUR OWN PIONEER – MR MO-TENKY - WAS A VISIONARY BESPIBAHANIAN QUANTUM PHYSICIST. MO-TENKY'S AWARD WINNING POSTGRADUATE THESIS AT THE IDIOSYNCRATIC INSTITUTE OF APPLIED DREAM TECHNOLOGY PROMULGATED THAT COLLECTIVISED DREAMING - OR "DREAM FUSION" - WOULD BE POSSIBLE, PROVIDING AGGLOMERATION THROUGH A SHARED EXTERNAL ALGORITHM OR LANDSCAPE. WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF GLOWORM PRODUCTIONS, IN 2046 HE PATENTED "THE LABYRINTH" – A DREAM FUSION PROGRAMME POWERED BY TWO PART-ORGANIC, PART-MECHANICAL SUPERCOMPUTERS, CAPABLE OF HARNESSING THE LATEST CHROMATIC, CINEMATIC, AND DREAM SEQUENCING BREAKTHROUGHS. WE CALL THE SUPERCOMPUTERS "SAM AND NIKO", AND IF YOU LOOK TO YOUR LEFT THROUGH THE BULLETPROOF WINDOW, YOU CAN SEE THEM IN ACTION. NOT MUCH TO LOOK AT, I KNOW, BUT I THINK WE CAN UNANIMOUSLY AGREE THAT THE PRODUCT THEY PRODUCE IS...' A solitary teardrop of absolute joy welled up in Krill's left eye and he brushed it away on a sleeve.

'IN THE ROOM ON YOUR RIGHT, WE CAN SEE OUR TEAM OF DEDICATED GHOSTWRITERS AT WORK. IN ORDER TO CREATE AN EVER-CHANGING AND EVOLVING LANDSCAPE, THE LABYRINTH REQUIRES TO BE FED 24/7. OUR GHOSTWRITERS WORK A TWELVE HOUR SHIFT, FIVE AT A TIME, AND THERE ARE TWENTY-ONE OF THEM IN TOTAL – A FIGURE I'M SURE YOU NO DOUBT EQUATE WITH THE SUNDIAL ASSASSINS.' In the back of the hearse, the tourists beamed and clutched each other on the verge of cerebral orgasm.

'VERY LITTLE IN ZUGZWANG MOUSETRAP IS THE PRODUCT OF ACCIDENT OR COINCIDENCE. AS YOU CAN SEE, THE GHOSTWRITER'S JOB IS TO SKETCH OUT PICTURE CARDS THAT ARE THEN FED INTO THOSE SLOTS OVER THERE. THE CHOICE OF PICTURES – OR INPUT – IS ONE OF

INCREDIBLE FINESSE AND COUNTERBALANCE. EACH EPISODE OF ZUGZWANG MOUSETRAP REQUIRES ALMOST ORACULAR FORETHOUGHT...'

At this point a short, balding journalist in thick black glasses held up his hand, but Krill shushed him by jamming a barbed finger across his lips.

'AS I SAID BEFORE, PLEASE FEEL FREE TO KEEP ANY QUESTIONS UNDER YOUR HAT. I SUPPOSE WHAT YOU'RE GOING TO ASK IS WHY DON'T WE JUST USE A THIRD SUPERCOMPUTER TO RANDOMLY GENERATE WORDS AND FEED THEM INTO THE LABYRINTH? WELL, WE ALREADY TRIED. YOU'VE SEEN HOW VOLATILE THE UNIVERSE OF ZUGZWANG MOUSETRAP IS, RIGHT? THERE NEEDS TO BE A CERTAIN DEGREE OF *CONTROL* TO MAINTAIN EQUILIBRIUM. LIKE I SAID, NOTHING IS AS RANDOM AS IT LOOKS.'

Krill turned a key in the ignition, and the hearse continued precariously along the catafalque track. 'TO YOUR LEFT IS OUR VIROLOGY DEPARTMENT. AN UNFORTUNATE SIDE EFFECT OF SOME OF OUR EARLIER EPISODES WAS AN UNIDENTIFIABLE VIRUS THAT SOME OF OUR ACTORS CONTRACTED WHILST THEY WERE CONNECTED TO THE LABYRINTH. OH, DON'T LOOK ALARMED! AS FAR AS WE'RE AWARE, "GORILLA GORILLA" IS NOT TERMINAL, AND MOST OF THE INFECTED WERE THANKFULLY BIT-PARTS. FOR EXAMPLE, MOLLY AND LOUIS HEMINGWAY ARE STILL IN QUARANTINE, BUT THE VIRUS APPEARS TO BE IN REMISSION, AND THEY'LL BE UP AND RIDING AROUND ON THE BACK OF THEIR MARZIPAN UNICORNS SOON ENOUGH. AHA! HERE COMES OUR RESIDENT VIROLOGIST, DR BLUEJAY.'

A scabrous gaoler in a welding mask and blood-stained leather apron ambled over, drinking from a bottle of cheap aftershave. 'Alright,' he said, belching loud as he leaned in through the passenger window. 'Y'all enjoying the tour?'

Everyone nodded vigorously, pulling their fezes down in unison to protect their eyeballs from Bluejay's rancid breath.

'How are the patients today?' asked Krill in an officious manner.

Bluejay rocked his hand to indicate "so-so" and asked, 'Got time to take a peek at the star of quarantine?'

Krill glanced at the weathervane on his wristwatch. It was pointing to CLOUDY. He shrugged. 'I suppose we could indulge you

for a few minutes,’ he said, popping open the boot to let the tourists out. Through a small round porthole in the wall of a white cell, they watched The Cuban, muzzled and tied up with kite strings, polemically hurling himself against the empty walls, spattering indigo blood on his blue prison pants, leaving imprints of immaculate karma wherever he struck. The tourists were ashen-faced and unanimously transfixed by the sight of their hero. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to introduce you to Gabriel Caballero, or, as you know him, “The Cuban”.’

The short balding journalist was lifted up to the window by a female TV critic from a glossy high street magazine, wearing dungarees and a Koradji Corp bandana. The little man audibly gasped at the sight and clambered down across the critic’s shoulders while she trembled at the knees. Krill immediately pointed to the journalist’s fez and grinned from ear to ear.

‘I don’t understand,’ said Bluejay, shaking his head. ‘Sometimes I think we’re making progress, and then... frankly, it’s fucking worrying.’

Krill nodded unconvincingly. ‘Caballero was the first of our actors to exhibit symptoms of the Gorilla Gorilla virus. He was unable to differentiate between dream and reality. He began to use inappropriate language, and to resist even the most stringent brainwashing techniques. His alarming continued presence in the dream has led us to the only conclusion remaining: that somehow part of his psyche was left behind in the Labyrinth when we resuscitated him. Actually, between ourselves, our studies suggest he was brain dead for almost *three* days. We even have the pie charts to prove it. Of course, we do have stand-ins ready to step up to the plate, but losing the original Captain Chaos would have been something of a ratings blow, so...’ He turned to the silent group and grinned again. ‘Oh, what a miserable bunch you are! Just think - what would The Cuban say if he could see you now? Hmmmmm? Anyway, the souvenir kiosk is just around the corner, so if that doesn’t put a smile back on your faces, then nothing will.’

Ten minutes later, the tourists pressed themselves into the back of the hearse, clutching stuffed puffins, replica Sof cassettes, teeth posters, Cuban cigars, Cinderella mohican wigs, packets of hickory nuts, wind-up pumpjets, and Zugzwang mouse-mats. They drove down the silver skytrack that looped through the centre of the Catacombs. On either side were rows of perspex tanks containing the familiar forms of the cast. Their bodies were concealed beneath white sheets, with only their dreaming faces exposed, motionless except for the occasional fluttering

eyelid. Each of them was wired to hydraulic life-support machines, while electrocardiograms beneath each tank beeped quietly, tracing erratic heartbeats.

From time to time, one of the actors had what appeared to be a minor epileptic fit, and the beeps accelerated. Boffins in swimming goggles and white labcoats were immediately on the scene, noting bulletins onto clipboards with squeaking felt tip pens, intravenously inputting a spectrum of chemicals that instantly pacified the shuddering bodies. ‘Just like the crypt...’ whispered a ten year old Japanese boy, eating an éclair.

The tourists were so awestruck that they forgot to take pictures. ‘We call this place “The Apiary”,’ drawled Krill. ‘It’s where we bring the cast to dream, and record Zugzwang Mousetrap. They are all lightly sedated with fong tinctures pre-recording, and kept under for as long as their contracts allow. Some of the principal characters have been here since we commenced filming six months ago. Others are put under as and when the story requires them. All are heavily briefed with hypnosis and autosuggestion, but since it all takes place in a dream, what you see on your screens is 100% improvised... albeit heavily edited.’

A chubby diarist for a Sunday magazine, crammed into an all-in-one lycra body-suit, remembered to take a photograph just as the hearse was leaving, but all she captured was the metallic blur of The Apiary doors closing behind them.

The final stop on the tour was a fleeting glimpse into the inner sanctuary of the production suite. ‘GUBBINS WOULDN’T BE PLEASED IF WE LINGER HERE TOO LONG,’ shouted Krill, porcupine spikes pricking out through the back of his cape. ‘THIS IS WHERE OUR EDITING TEAM WINNOW THROUGH SPOOLS AND SPOOLS OF DREAM FOOTAGE IN SEARCH OF DATUM THAT FITS THE NARRATIVE. ULTIMATELY, AS DIRECTOR, GUBBINS GETS THE LAST WORD ON WHAT GETS USED AND WHAT GETS ARCHIVED.’ He pointed at a giant bank of reels labelled, dated, and stacked to the ceiling. ‘THE ARCHIVES STRETCH BACK FOR A NAUTICAL MILE. AT LEAST, THAT’S WHAT IT SAYS HERE IN THE WELCOME PACK.’ He held up a dog-eared brochure. ‘I MEAN, WE’RE NOT FUCKING DISNEYLAND.’

In the production suite, a team of technicians scrolled through digital stills of Sof sitting in a spitfire, pumping the air with his first.

‘WHAT’S HAPPENING THERE?’ shouted the ten year old kid, wide-eyed, and Krill shrugged.

‘THE FINAL EPISODE, I PRESUME,’ he told them. ‘NOBODY KNOWS WHAT’S GOING TO HAPPEN, NOT EVEN GUBBINS - IF YOU BELIEVE ANYTHING HE SAYS. BUT WE’RE EXPECTING FIREWORKS.’

A conference room deep inside the building: Krill was standing on a small stage at the front. ‘LADIES AND GENTLEMEB!’ he shouted. ‘PLEASE PUT YOUR HANDS TOGETHER FOR ZUGZWANG MOUSETRAP’S ILLUSTRIOUS DIRECTOR, MR - KAMIKAZE - GUBBIIIIIIINSSSSSS! AND... ONE OF THE REAL STARS OF THE SHOW – MISS - SIBYL... UH...’ He flipped through his welcome pack, forwards, then backwards, before giving up and bowing.

The visitors, dotted around on plastic chairs in front of the stage, clapped enthusiastically as Gubbins and Sibyl entered stage left and sat down behind a long desk with microphones. Gubbins looked pissed off, his hair tied up with seaweed, wearing a beige dragon-print dressing gown, slumped down into his seat. Sibyl looked exactly like she did on screen. Gentle and composed, bottomless eyes drinking in the room.

‘Okay,’ said Krill. ‘You can take those questions out from under your hats now.’

A ripple of hands shot up and Gubbins leaned reluctantly forward to the microphone. ‘You - two-headed freak show in the front row.’

The left head of the Siamese twins beamed and excitedly stammered, ‘W-will you be m-making another series of Zugzwang?’

‘No,’ said Gubbins. ‘Okay, next question. You - fat chick in lycra, second row.’

The diarist flushed. ‘Um thanks. Sibyl, my question is for you. What’s it like to be inside the Labyrinth? I mean, goodness... how did you get involved, and how are you dealing with your newfound fame?’

Sibyl sat forward and laughed shyly. ‘Hi. Well, firstly I got involved by applying for the show. They were advertising for amateur actors. As for the actual experience... to be honest, it’s pretty amazing watching it back. I mean, it’s just like a dream. When you wake up, there are parts that you don’t remember, and yeah, there are some fairly embarrassing scenes too.’ A ripple of laughter washed across the audience. ‘I guess you know the scenes I’m talking about. As for the fame, I suppose I’ll have to take your word on that. The entire cast have been living here on location until filming finishes. Hopefully this week sometime?’ She turned to Gubbins who nodded sagely, disinterestedly picking at his fingernails. ‘I’m looking forward to

flying home to see my gran,' Sibyl added, holding up her wrist with "TREACLE" written on it.

The visitors burst into enthralled applause, wolf-whistling the young woman, and Gubbins pointed at the ten year old kid. 'Okay, you. I mean, Jesus H Christ, what kind of parents let a kid that age watch a show like this? Go ahead.'

The boy swallowed nervously. 'Sibyl, how did it feel when you character died?'

She smiled warmly. 'Hi there. Well, it was scary, I guess. And... disappointing? I would have liked to see what I was going to do next.'

'Alright,' said Gubbins. 'Woody Allen in the back row.'

The little balding journalist in thick black glasses sat forward, thumbing through a notebook. 'Hi there, Edward Edison of Moon Crumb magazine. Just a couple of questions if you don't mind.'

Gubbins shrugged.

'You tour guide, Mr Krill, informed us that a virus had spread amongst cast members. It's obviously serious enough that it merits a virology department with patient quarantine. We've witnessed your frankly barbaric holding facilities. Is Gorilla Gorilla contagious, and if so, are the relevant authorities aware of the virus?'

Gubbins's eyes narrowed and he hunched forward. 'No comment. Okay, who's next?'

Edison coughed and shouted, 'I'M SORRY, MR GUBBINS? DO YOU HAVE PROOF THAT THE VIRUS IS UNDER CONTROL? ACTUALLY DO YOU HAVE PROOF THAT THE VIRUS EVEN EXISTS?'

Gubbins leaned into the microphone again and shouted over him. 'FUCK YOU, WOODY! NEXT QUESTION FROM SOMEONE ELSE PLEASE!'

'WELL, LET'S TRY THIS ONE ON FOR SIZE...' yelled an increasingly animated Edison. 'CAN YOU EXPLAIN THE DISAPPEARANCE OF MOLLY AND LOUIS HEMINGWAY, WHOSE FAMILY AND FRIENDS HAVE EXPLICITLY STATED THAT THEY'VE BEEN REFUSED PERMISSION TO SPEAK TO THEM AND -'

'MORONS!' shrieked Gubbins, standing up. 'IT'S ALL LIES!'

'AND WHAT DO YOU SAY ABOUT SEVERAL OF YOUR LEADING ACTORS BEING CONVICTED FELONS?' continued Edison. 'RUBINSTEIN? FRANCES TUCK? AND WE'RE NOT JUST TALKING HARMLESS CRIMES HERE, WE'RE -'

Gubbins rolled his eyes and looked to Krill as the little man continued to rant. The curator was standing off stage, licking a

wriggling newt. ‘Fuck’s sake, Krill, how did this one slip through the net?’

Edison was punching his notebook in furious indignation. ‘WHAT ABOUT CEDRIC BEDLINGTON AND CINDY RICKENBACKER?’ At this point he had begun to unconsciously clamber over the row of chairs in front of him, trying to get as close as he could to the director.

Gubbins remained poker-faced. ‘Krill, get Woody out of my face...’

Krill looked up, talcum powder sticking in lumps to his jowls as he chewed on the head of the still wriggling newt and asked, ‘Which one is Woody?’

Sibyl was shooting extremely nervous glances in the director’s direction. She looked like someone who’d just been told she’d been living in a prison for five months. Gubbins climbed up on the table and pointed at the mosquito-like little man, still frantically buzzing on about corruption and theme parks. ‘KRILL!’ screamed Gubbins.

But the clown didn’t hear him. He was scrabbling around beneath the chairs and kicking legs in the front row out of the way, looking for the headless newt that had slipped through his fingers and wriggled out of reach across the conference room floor. ‘FUCK!’ yelled Gubbins, his voice vortexing around as it leapt from the speakers. ‘IF YOU WANT A JOB DONE THEN INVARIABLY YOU HAVE TO DO IT YOURSELF...’

He pulled his walkie-talkie from his dressing gown pocket. ‘VERRY, ARE YOU THERE?’ he asked, simultaneously kicking Edward Edison in the head, sending him shooting backwards over the front row and landing in the TV critic’s lap.

He never got to hear if she was or not. The static crackle got broken by the leprechaun advertising technician bursting in through the rear doors, screaming, ‘RUN FOR YOUR LIIIIIVVEESSSS!’

Outside in the atrium: a T-Rex roared. It was surrounded by bodies swarming into the building. All of them wore the face of Friar Tuck, ripping through the building like a hurricane, and entering the conference room. Gubbins pulled a handgun and pointed it, trembling as the seats were blown up into the air by the onslaught of Tucks. The tourists were swallowed in the sea of masks. Gubbins shot a Tuck between the eyes, and the fat man rolled away, moaning, ‘You fucking idiot, I’m the real...’ But he choked on his own mortality before finishing the sentence, staring up at the T-Rex swallowing Gubbins alive.

Tucks swung from the chandelier.

Tucks carried a bewildered, prickly Krill on their shoulders, belting out the lo-fi songs of the revolution.

Tucks were in the jaws of the T-Rex, weeping with joy.

A small Solomon Tuck was standing on the table, holding his fists aloft.

Tucks rolled around on the carpet.

Tucks dragged a screaming Dr Bluejay and the technicians to the hearse.

Tucks set fire to the archives.

Tucks slapped each other on the back.

One Tuck with lop ears carried a Tuck urchin jubilant on his shoulders, and two Tucks lifted a petrified Sibyl up by the elbows, and carried her down to the Apiary.

Pulling off their masks, she saw that one was Sof and the other was The Cuban. Both were smiling in the shimmering heat of battle. As The Cuban pulled on a power handle, shutting everything down, animals that had been hiding for safety in the cracks in the walls made a run for it. All around, the coffins stopped beeping, and the forms of translucent flesh vanished before their eyes.

Before Sibyl knew what was happening to her, they pulled her to a wishing well at the far end of the room, and pushed her down, sliding in after her. They splashed through the murky water down a tunnel at the foot of the well, heading towards the light. The mouth of the tunnel opened out onto a white sandy beach at the foot of The Mountain, the majestic ocean, and a ship called the Mardi, docked in the bay.

They swam out, and were dragged onto the deck by frantic ghouls. The Cuban embraced the old captain of the ship like they were brothers, telling him, 'We need to move quickly, Midas. Any moment now, the Universe will awaken. I have kept Simon Piler's heart safe all these years.' He reached into his own chest and pulled out the red wooden thornapple heart, before dropping it into Midas's trembling hands. 'You,' he said, turning to Sof, 'go downstairs to Bunkroom 1. There's a cloud coffin waiting for you. As for you...' He turned to Sibyl. 'Aren't you supposed to be in the Arctic saving him from drowning?'

Sibyl smiled grimly and scurried off in the direction of the ship's fridge.

'I'll hide this somewhere safe,' said Midas, staring at the thornapple heart with tears in his eyes, while all around him the ghouls

scampered to and fro, lifting the Ron Burgundy anchor head, and rollerskating around with buckets and mops.

The Mardi plunged forward into the waves.

In and out of time and space.

Lost.

Stolen.

And completely unfathomable.

...

30 IN FRONT OF A SUNSHINE MIRROR

The vixens clashed in Rubinstein's penthouse suite. They whorled and crisscrossed like devilish cyclones, decimating everything they touched. Years of sisterhood, arguments over boys and lollipops, teenage tantrums still glowing in the heart's furnace, finally reach a dysfunctional and inevitable conclusion. Rubinstein sat nefariously in the eye of vengeance, continuing to masturbate while the girls writhed around him, shrieking like wraiths. He kicked back in a king-sized jacuzzi, high on tundra and cocaine, while Laurelia hurled a kaolin basilisk, and Gretel struck a sensational home run through the penthouse window with her cricket bat. Rubinstein applauded in his x-ray spectacles, pumped full of anabolic steroids, slapping on war-paint in front of a sunshine mirror.

Gretel landed in reflective petals scattered on a rug stitched from Yeti fur. She tore a chunk for a tourniquet, wrapping it around her bloody dismembered right hand.

'You bitch!' drooled her younger sister. 'You always had to be right! Always had to be the clever one with your little anarchist friends! It was never hard to see why you were Daddy's favourite.' She'd become a mangled caricature of her once immaculate incarnation, her blonde hair tangled and red with blood, screaming as her cricket bat pummelled holes into the wall beside her.

Gretel spat out a tooth and puked with exhaustion, panting on the floor as she grabbed hold of a long forgotten cup of cappuccino and catapulted it across the room towards her sister's head. 'You ignorant little shit!' she howled. 'Daddy *hated* me! The daughter of the mighty Clack Godwin, who saw straight through the bullshit he was peddling.'

Rubinstein's ears pricked up as he held up his hands to the light of a formidable auric moon, searching for stigmata. 'Now, now, steady on there!' he cried. 'I knew your father personally, and he was a genius,

waaaaaay ahead of his time. Granted, he liked to butcher anyone who got in his way, but let's step back for a moment and look at what he did for this cesspool of a country - corporal punishment, genocide, smashing the trade unions, closet lobotomies... In many ways, he didn't just open the doors of possibility, he tore down the fucking building. And now his legacy rises! In the morning we shall wake and drink the very essence of paradise, assuming our depopulation targets are met, the last of the red tape is cut, and the weirdos don't miraculously turn everything upside down before they blow us all up into mulch.'

'What do you mean "blow us all up"?' asked Gretel, getting slowly to her feet, silhouetted in front of a luminous roulette wheel hanging on the wall.

'Nuke us,' said Rubinstein. 'Well, technically, I mean nuke *you*. Your little sister and I have booked a stratospheric package holiday, so regrettably we'll miss the whole thing.' He glanced at the moon dial on his wrist. 'We leave in approximately one minute. Perhaps you would like to say your goodbyes.'

Gretel sensed a sudden shift in cadence, barely saw Laurelia on stilts, floating across the room. She felt the killer blow in the centre of her chest and crashed backwards into an old refurbished hurdy-gurdy, losing altitude, sputtering out. Eyes closed, she heard the click of the stilts as Laurelia stepped towards her, the ceremonial shadow falling across the backs of her eyelids as a stilt hovered over her face, ready to stamp her life out like a flea.

'Do it,' urged Rubinstein as he released a stepladder that lead up to the cockpit in the attic of the Ranch.

Gretel felt the stilt paused inches from her sallow upturned cheekbone.

'Another Girl! I said fucking do it!' barked Rubinstein.

From a billion light years away, Gretel heard her little sister's tears pool in her delinquent eyes. 'Just get it over with,' she whispered, rolling onto her back, exposing the damaged catastrophe of her broken ribs.

'I... can't,' whimpered Laurelia, still poised over her.

'Fuck me!' shouted Rubinstein. 'The hell is this? Amateur hour?'

As he spoke, the lift door whooshed open and Cinderella stepped out, dressed as a kissogram, with plaits in her hair, pregnant and pointing a revolver. She remembered the smell of the penthouse, sliding across the floor, and the violent sparks in her misshapen heart. While Laurelia began to smile, she fired, Rubinstein watching the bullet in slow motion. It struck Another Girl in the face, knocking her from the stilts. Gretel heard the footsteps of the laundrette assistant

pattering quickly across the floor, and standing over her. She fired two more bullets, bereft of emotion. One into her sister's forehead, the other into her belly.

'Baby,' said Rubinstein, holding out his arms.

Cindy Rickenbacker's head found a space upon his heartless chest, and they climbed together up into the cockpit, leaving the two dead bodies behind.

'You won't regret this, Hashanah... Cinders... Rickenbacker... whatever the fuck your name is,' he said to her, turning the key in the ignition and starting up the spacecraft. 'I've changed, I swear. Let me show you. I'll start by building you an ice rink in the stars.'

Cinderella leaned against the window and watched the Earth receding, Hoodoo Towers and the Ranch collapsing beneath them as the rocket tore up through the firmament. A couple of blocks away, a little chimney sweep was covered in soot, clutching a divining rod and a handful of invitations. He stopped in his tracks and turned back, implicitly knowing that he was a minute too late, or a lifetime too soon, to turn back the hands of fate.

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31 SMILES EUPHONICALLY

Daybreak.

Eerily bereft of dawn chorus.

The empty red carpet rolled up the steps to the door of the Institute. Crumbs, corks, and headless dandelion stalks - discarded by those lucky enough to have tickets - floated away with the bathwater. In the distance a lone bagpiper skirled, his notes travelling across the rooftops of the Lost City.

Hanging on either side of the Institute doors were giant posters with pictures of smiling teeth, advertising "Zugzwang Mousetrap: (Final Episode, screening exclusively tonight)".

Up the steps they went, two by two, hand in hand. A brass band played feelgood songs from the 1960s. The sensation of impending checkmate intensified in the collective gut. It felt like the entire world was momentarily mesmerised.

Inside the Institute, under a glass domed ceiling, a theatre had been recreated with seats ripped out of stock cars, filled with disciples

snuggled together, breathlessly awaiting the last kiss of gospel from the empty screen. The aquamarine lights went down and they sat in a trance, staring at the audacious holograms parachuting down from the roof. Destiny was crayoned in space, and words pulsed like distant stars -

ZUGZWANG MOUSETRAP
A MO-TENKY TV PRODUCTION, 2071

CHAPTER 31: SMILES EUPHONICALLY

The holograms faded, and a cherubic voice counted down from 10 to 0, while we held our breath and waited for the dream to begin.....

And then the lights went up.

We sat there in limbo for a fascinating voiceless moment. The ripples of confusion began in sign language - a composition of shrugs as heads freewheeled around. A murmur of buzzwords “*malfunction malfunction*” swelled in a matter of seconds to the brute force of yodelling.

Nobody noticed the chimney sweep getting out of his seat and walking slowly down the corridor between the two halves of the audience. We were all too busy howling like neanderthals at the farce, throwing screwdrivers and starfish, using one another as human shields while sucker punches were buried in backs.

The chimney sweep kicked open the door of the Institute and stepped outside, leaving the havoc of hidden agendas and the bonfire of a hatchet job cliffhanger behind him. He breathed the cool air and looked up, saw Sof, his Nova eyes blazing as he passed across the sublime morning sun in his spitfire, pumping his fist as he dropped a bubble of pure light. The bubble exploded on the red carpeted steps beneath the chimney sweep’s feet, and immediately the flowers started to grow. Up through the marble and the asphalt, a forest of colour, swallowing cars in kaleidoscopic petals, blooming in graveyards, in shopping malls, in the beds of pawns, and all the places people ever forgot existed.

And the chimney sweep witnessed the birth of a new Unimiverse and smiled euphonicly.

...

Future Moss: Wake up!

To be continued...