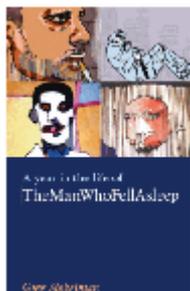


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**Enjoy the book!**

A Year in the Life of  
**TheManWhoFellAsleep**

Greg Stekelman



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I'd like to dedicate this book to my mum and dad; my sisters, Dina and Rachel, and my girlfriend, Carmen.

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## Foreword

TheManWhofellasleep lives in a mythical London. It's not the London of Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament. It's not the London of Notting Hill, café lattes and Fresh & Wild. It's the London of ceaselessly sprawling suburbia, of ghost tube stations and dilapidated newsagents. And polar bears.

And it's the perfect backing for this novel, because it's a London that doesn't work. It's a city of cancelled trains, exorbitant rents and early closing shops. It's a city that is falling asleep. It's a city with a dead whale floating down the Thames.

This book is about finding your own reality. Not in an airy-fairy way; I'm not talking about running home from the disco and hiding in your bedroom. It's about understanding that you can find mesmerising beauty or horrifying squalor around every corner. London is a city with 10 million different faces, and any one of them could be an assassin, a lover, a Greek God or an angry postman.

And the jokes!

*There's an Englishman, Irishman and a Scotsman, trapped in a jail cell. Eventually they all starved to death.*

And perhaps that's what's uniquely striking about the book. Normally, jokes only work because they're inconsequential – no harm is really done. *A Year in the Life of TheManWhoFellAsleep* is funny because it serves up a double dose of misery when you're expecting a punchline; and then just when you're comfortable with urban misery, Jesus wanders on the scene, drunk and lonely, complaining that his dad never writes to him.

Such dreams are these. Spaced-out and sumptuous. I suspect that if I ever met theManWhofellasleep, I'd want to give him a slap and tell him to wake up. And move to Brighton.

Julie Burchill, Sussex 2006

## January 1st

The doorbell rang. I looked at my alarm clock. It was 3a.m. I closed my eyes and pretended I hadn't heard it. It rang again.

I put on a pair of jeans and answered the door. It was Jesus. He looked terrible. His hair was unkempt and there were grey bags under his eyes. He stank of whisky.

'You had best come in', I said.

He sat down on the sofa and I put the kettle on. He stared shamefacedly at his bare feet.

'What's wrong, Jesus?' I said. 'It's not like you to ring the bell at this time of the morning. You're normally so considerate.'

'I... I... I can't say.'

'Is it your dad? I know he gives you a hard time about dying for our sins and everything.'

'No', he scrunched up his face and sobbed. 'It's not him. It's you.'

I didn't say anything. I made two cups of coffee and handed one to him.

'I love you', he said.

'Of course you love me', I sighed. 'You're Jesus. You love everyone.'

'No... I mean, I do love everyone, but it's different with you.'

I approached him and put my hand gently on his shoulder. He pulled me towards him and pressed his lips against mine. I felt his straw-like beard against my jaw. I felt his tongue trying to prise open my teeth. I pulled away and wiped my lips against my sleeve.

'Jesus. I like you. You're a good kid. You've got a big future, but I don't like you like that. I don't go for Messiahs.' He didn't say anything.

'You can sleep on the couch', I said. I climbed the stairs and went back to bed. I was going to have to have a quiet word with God.

Upstairs, in the darkness of my bedroom, I could hear his muffled, uneven snoring.

# I am the man who fell asleep



## January 2nd

I awoke to find myself in a new room. I was lying in a white bed, staring at white walls. The room slipped in and out of focus, and the base of the bed seemed to be shrouded in a thin white mist, like a carpet of dry ice upon the floor. I stepped out of the bed. I found that I was wearing a thin paper smock, the kind that patients in hospital wear for operations. I do not like smocks and I wanted to change clothes, but there were no items of clothing in the room.

My feet unsteady, I opened the door and left the room. I found myself walking down a long white corridor of indeterminate length. I could not see the end of the corridor; it seemed to stretch and curve beyond my vision. I walked on. The corridor was bare, but on one side there were windows. I glanced out; there was a sea of gravel, grey and uniform. No other buildings. No people. No sounds. Just the fog in my head and the mist around my ankles. I don't know how long I walked. My mind wandered. I couldn't remember anything. I could only think of certain colours and smells and sounds, echoing around my empty head: it must have been the drugs.

Finally, the corridor came to an end. There was a single door of dark mahogany. I knocked. The door was opened by a smiling middle-aged man, wearing a suit and a doctor's white jacket. He welcomed me in and offered me a plastic chair. I sat down, self-conscious in my smock.

'Hello', he said. 'How are you today?'

There was something odd about his face. He seemed to be wearing a fixed smile, like a cheap plastic mask, and when he spoke, his lips were not in sync with his voice. He was a badly dubbed character.

'Ummm... I'm OK. How did I get here? Where am I?'

'You don't remember?' he raised an eyebrow. 'Well, I suppose that's natural, given everything that's happened.'

He spread his hands upon his lap and smiled beatifically: 'You've been in an accident.'

'No', I protested. 'No... I don't know what I'm doing here. I don't know why I'm wearing paper clothes... I don't know... but I am sure there's been no accident. I'm fine.'

He smiled again, and his smile seemed to drift around the room, independent of his face. ‘Trust me. You’ve been very ill. You’ve been asleep for a very long time. One day you’ll be better.’

‘Who are you? What’s your name?’

‘I am Dr Gepetto.’

‘Dr Gepetto? Is that a joke? What are you going to do? Turn me into a real boy?’

‘What?’ he asked.

‘Gepetto... Pinocchio... He wanted to be a real boy. He was sick of being wooden.’

‘I am afraid I have no idea what you are talking about’, he said.

His smile continued to swim around the room and I started to feel giddy and sick. I could feel the bile rising in my throat and looked around the room to see if there was a bathroom attached.

‘We should get you back to bed,’ he said, then he pressed a buzzer on his desk. I don’t remember what happened after that.

Now I am back in the bed, and the room is dark. I don’t know what is happening, but I am writing it all down. Don’t panic. All will be revealed, of that I am sure.

Now the room is spinning and I am finding it hard to stay awake... I am asleep. Ignore what I just wrote. It isn’t important. Wipe the slate clean and take a deep breath. Then read on.

## January 4th

Some of this journal is true. And some of it is false. Half-truths. Lies. Exaggeration. But then, some of the greatest works of human art are lies. I’m sure you’ll agree that this journal is such a beautiful work of art that it elevates my lies to a greater truth. That is the purpose of art, afterall.

The journal will take you on many strange journeys. Some of them will be exceedingly dull, but you must stay patient. There are many clues. Piece them together and step back and you will see a complete vision of my existence. You will laugh, you will cry; you will believe a man can fly. It may

not make much sense, but that is God’s fault, not mine. In his infinite wisdom, God has created life without reason, and it will take a better man than me to put the reason back into life.

The journal will span a year of my life. This is because the stationery shop only sells one-year journals.

As a man of some importance, I am often contacted by celebrities, philosophers and International Aid Agencies. It’s not as glamorous as it sounds, but I will include details of such meetings regardless. Since I do not own a camera, I will illustrate some entries with my own illustrations. Keep hold of the illustrations – some day they may be valuable. Additionally, where I have found posters, drawings and receipts that are of relevance, I will include them in the journal. This is a free service. There are no hidden charges. Do not read the fine print.

Of course, much of my real journal is not included within these pages. The real journal is far too dangerous for public consumption. It is buried somewhere in the Midlands.

## January 5th

Let’s skip the preliminaries. You know what goes on in a journal. In fact, let’s skip the whole journal. Here’s a rough breakdown of my year:

### *Winter*

It is winter. There is no snow. It seldom snows in winter anymore. My inner child is disappointed, but he’s been disappointed since I turned 16 and started growing chest hair. Always ignore your inner child – he grew up to be you. You know better than him.

It is winter and crowds huddle at bus stops, stamping their feet and shuffling along cold seats. London Underground stations are flooded and apogetic guards redirect passengers at Kings Cross to nearby Euston Square. A thousand commuters dig out mobile phones and call work to say that they will be late. Lines form outside coffee shops as skinny lattes are wrapped in tissue paper and cardboard and delivered to desks, where young fathers brush sleep from their eyes and adjust their novelty ties.

It is winter, so I do nothing. I hibernate and lick my fur. I check my email and ponder a thousand revisions to an unwritten story that is floating around my mind. My afternoon is punctuated by the hourly click of a kettle boiling and the cough of a cigarette outside the front door. Winter, winter, winter. I am frozen in time. My doctor prescribes bugs in amber.

### *Spring*

Spring. Spring in the air, if you feel like it. It is spring. You know the routine: Renaissance! Rebirth! Crocuses fight their way through damp soil and greet the sunshine. The frost in the mornings gives way to mist and mildew. Adventurous Londoner men experiment with T-shirts and receive the unwelcome stares of women in business suits. An advert on the side of a bus suggests that the sun is shining, and we should bathe ourselves in Diet Coke, but it's drizzling on the bus and faces are pressed against tired glass, staring at a traffic jam in Crouch End.

It is spring. I hack up phlegm and donate it to Cancer Research. My doctor tells me to exercise and I smile and tell him I've started jogging. The record jogs and I start the paragraph again.

It is spring. I shave off the winter beard and am amazed at my youth. My face never quite matches my age – it anticipates the future and remembers the past, but can't quite remain in the present. Couples push prams up hills and I have to pinch myself to remember that my peers are parents, not babies. The council pulls up daffodils that a local gardener has planted on their soil.

### *Summer*

London is unsuited to summer. The Underground melts into a chocolate smear, and secretaries gather on mossy landfills to bronze themselves in their lunch hour. Buses sink into wet tarmac and angry drivers gesticulate and shout at the elderly. Blackberries grow bitter, then sweet, and hang, plump and inviting on thorny tendons. In a small café an overhead fan cools coffees and sticky buns, and builders strip to the waist to expose pierced nipples.

It is summer, and I sweat my way through three shirts before it rains for a week and the cricket is cancelled. I fear the long summer evenings, when the night does not arrive on time, but hurries into my bedroom late, late, late and bearing no gifts. I resent the ever-present offer of sex. Girls wear short skirts and expose flat stomachs and I smile vaguely into the middle-distance, stabbing a voodoo doll of myself that I found in a skip.

Summer is full of threats and promises. Sunshine, sex and stinging insects. I try my best to ignore all of it. I remember that I am not part of the human race just yet. I am a brand new species and totally genetically redundant.

### *Autumn*

Autumn in New York. Golden leaves in Paris. No. This is not the romantic autumn of jazz songs and Woody Allen movies. This is autumn in north London. A steady downpour of grey rain and gleeful insects. The flowers have blossomed too soon and are washed into the kerb. The days shrink and are parcelled into 8-hour packages, to be shipped off to God knows where. Night falls at 5 p.m. and I decide against leaving the house. It is a relief, truth be told. There is a pressure that never leaves me: the pressure to socialise, to fuck, to laugh with friends. It is a relief when those pressures fade. They are nothing to do with me. They are not my own desires. They are some American TV executive's idea of a good time.

It is autumn again. Time flies when your head is in the sand.

You can stop reading now, if you want, but you can't ask for your money back unless you've read the whole book.

## January 6th

I used to be so cold-hearted. I used to be a selfish brute. But I have seen the light. I was blind and now I can see. Life is shit, but it's OK. Shake hands with fate and get on with it.

Today Jesus came round for brunch. We had coffee and croissants. We read the papers in silence. I did the Times crossword – the general knowledge one, not the cryptic one. Cryptic crosswords are beyond even

my powers. I am not Roger Moore on an oil rig.

After brunch we played chess. He was black and I was white. It was a little frustrating, since Jesus didn't know the rules and kept on randomly moving the pieces instead of playing properly. I forgive him. He has especially low self-esteem, so I smiled and encouraged him and told him



After he had 'won' a few games, he suggested that we play for money. Cheeky bugger. Of course, I accepted.

he was playing very well. He's taken enough knocks over the last few thousand years. The last thing he needs is any grief from me.

## January 9th

I am an artist. I am a pilot. I am a Renaissance man.

Work on my sculpture is going well. I have encased the model in brass and clay and she looks incredibly lifelike. Her face is a poignant mask of fear and agony. I think this latest piece will speak to everyone. Art should be universal. I have no interest in art that speaks only to the chattering classes – art must be bold and decisive, like a hungry fox in a dustbin. I want to make statements that reduce the world to spasms of alarm.

Good news seldom lasts for long. This morning, as I walked alongside the dewy grass in the park I noticed a police poster enquiring about the disappearance of my model. Apparently, she was a local student, and her parents are very worried about her. I doubt they are fans of my art.

Why are people so negative about my artistic endeavours? It says a lot about the state of contemporary Britain. Everyone is a critic.

So, today I spent the whole afternoon wandering around north London (someone *must* do something about the price of travelcards!) removing the police posters. The things I do for my art.

## January 11th

By my bedside there is a glass of water. Perhaps it is tonight's water, fresh and clean. Perhaps it is last night's water, dead and stale with a dry film on the surface. It doesn't matter. I have battles to fight.

I have seen him again. I don't know his name, but I can never forget his face. I see him sometimes, following me home from the shops, or hiding behind a tree in a wide avenue. I don't know who he is and I don't know what he wants. But he's been with me for years now... this strange alter-ego who disappears and reappears with the seasons.

He is a tall, thin man, with pitted skin and bony cheeks. And though I get older, he does not seem to age. He always looks the

same. Perhaps he is more than just one man... perhaps he is a father and son team, intent on haunting me throughout the generations.

Who knows what he wants? I am ashamed to say that I don't even know for sure that he is real. He could be a metaphor or an allegory or even an old-fashioned hallucination, but he has always been there. When I was a child in dungarees, when I was a teenager in stonewashed jeans, he was there, lurking. He never tries to make contact, he just follows me. Sometimes I go months without seeing him, but he never quite slips from my mind. He inhabits the corners of my subconscious, colouring my days and creeping up behind my motives.

I call him my Shadow. It's melodramatic, but I can't think of a better word. He is half-light and insubstantial, and he disappears with the oncoming night. I only see him during the day.

I have never tried to approach my Shadow. I do not know what would happen if I spoke to him, but I am sure no good would come of it. He may not be an enemy, but I am sure he is not a friend. Anyway, I am scared of shadows. For many years, I tried to avoid casting any form of shadow... I would only leave the house at noon, when the sun stood directly overhead and my shadow fell directly beneath me.

But enough of him. I do not want him to sour these early entries. The journal must be a happy place, full of jokes and banter and momentum. And joy. Lots of joy.

## January 13th

I meet lots of pop stars. It's because they are lonely and cling vainly to men of substance, such as myself.

This afternoon Simon and Garfunkel came round for tea. I say tea, but I didn't have any tea, so I gave them mugs of hot water with a splash of lemon-flavoured washing up liquid. It's the lemon that adds my trademark 'zing'.

Things do not appear to be going well between Paul and Art. There were frosty silences and bitter glares between them, and I suspect that Paul deliberately sabotaged the harmony as they sang me 'Bridge Over

Troubled Water'. Paul looks very old, like a hardened walnut, and seems to have shrunken to the size of a small child. I had to help him into his chair as he couldn't reach it on his own. By contrast, Art seems taller than ever, although he is terribly skinny and his halo of frizzy hair makes him look like a lamp post glowing in the twilight.

I think it would be fair to say that the afternoon was a disaster. I had served only two fondant fancies. I ate one and Paul and Art bickered endlessly over who would eat the second one.

In the end I settled the dispute by eating it myself.

## January 15th

There are 275 tube stations and 12 tube lines in London. The network runs from Amersham in the west to Upminster in the east, from Watford in the north to Morden in the south. It used to extend all the way to Blake Hall, but no one ever used that station, and it withered away like a maimed limb.

There are 417 escalators on the tube, and all of them are broken, or so it seems. The deepest station on the network is Hampstead, which lies some 59 metres below ground level. This is ironic, since people who live in Hampstead are among the shallowest in London.

When the London Underground first introduced escalators in 1911, there was great public outcry about safety issues. To reassure people, a man with a wooden leg – his name was Bumper Harris – was employed to travel the escalators and prove that they were safe. It is not known if Harris lost his leg in an escalator-related accident, but I think it is likely. After all, more people die each year on the escalators of the London Underground than are killed by handguns in America.

I have always had a love affair with the Underground. What is more musical than a garbled tannoy announcement? What is more dramatic than the sudden rush of hot air that precedes a train's appearance on a platform? There is something magical about it. Even when you are going somewhere, you feel as though you may be going nowhere. And when you're going nowhere, you sense that somehow you may still be moving in the right direction.

The Underground is safe to me. It is the safety of mildew and decay. Sadly, I fear much of life: from milkmen to safety matches and Manila envelopes. I inhabit a world of barely-contained fear. If a man looks at me sidelong in the street or a woman laughs too loudly in a pub, I look away. The only safety lies at home. Home is safe. Home is where you hang your head. And the tube is almost my home...

That is the beauty of the tube. It allows me to travel while remaining at home. I can travel across vast distances but maintain the illusion of remaining stationary. I sit down at Wood Green and watch the stations scroll by like television, and suddenly, without moving, I am elsewhere. Holloway Road! Green Park! Hammersmith! I have traversed London, and yet all I have done is sit down.

There is another reason I love the Tube. I love it for the dark spell it casts over my fellow passengers. It affects everyone. It warps the mind. It deadens the senses. How can anyone behave normally when they are hurtling through tunnels below the surface of the world?

Amid those deep, dank platforms unruly teenagers slouch in tracksuits and mutter into their hands. Sallow-faced young women stare at their reflections and dream of sunlight above. Businessmen read *The Standard*



over each others' shoulders. Secretaries smirk as they scan the daily gossip. The reception on a mobile phone dies away, as ringtones are replaced by prerecorded announcements. All signals fail.

Down there, we are trapped in lonely carriages and trapped between stations. We are held hostage to the hiss of an opening door. The Underground belongs to anyone brave enough to use it.

Throughout the journal, I will be including snippets of overheard conversation from my journeys on the London Underground. Are the conversations real? That's for you to decide. You have a brain, don't you?

### *Things overheard on the tube*

#### **Today's journey:**

Piccadilly Line: Wood Green–Green Park

1. Why does George Lucas insist on that walnut-whip hairdo?
2. I had a dream that Chris Sutton was angry with me. He had released a folk single and I had slagged it off.
3. I'm not a misogynist. I just hate women.
4. Of course it's not Halal. It's a fucking pork chop.
5. By adding a hip-hop drumbeat to my spoken-word monologue, my peers will consider me eclectic and bohemian.
6. Oh, my boobs are falling out.
7. Nick Cave has a very long face.
8. All human tragedy is grist to your sordid entertainment mill.
9. Billy Crystal has never had a funny moment in his life.
10. My Palm Pilot fills me with a sense of infinite woe.

### January 16th

Today I had another visit from a would-be-missionary. I opened the door to find a giant worm on my doorstep. It was wearing a blue porkpie hat.

'Are you worried about the state of the world?' said the giant worm.

'Do you think that the country is getting worse and that there is less love and spiritual understanding around you?'

'You're a giant worm', I said.

'Yes, you're right of course. I am a giant worm. But let's not get stuck on that. I'd really rather talk to you about the state of the world. Tell me, are you a religious man?'

'So... wait a minute... if I cut you in two, do you become two separate worms?' I asked.

'Well, yes, I suppose I would. But I'd rather talk to you about Jesus. Do you think that the love of Jesus touches your life?'

'Hang on a second', I said. 'I am going to get a knife.'

## January 18th

The bloody politicians have been around the barrio again. The dustbins have been knocked over and obscene graffiti has been scrawled on the youth club walls. Windows have been smashed in pubs. Worst of all, I found this pinned to a tree.

The Greek philosophers are back on the prowl. There goes the neighbourhood. *Cogito ergo Scum*.



## January 20th

The sky is brown. This afternoon I had another visit from would-be missionaries. This time it wasn't a worm.

The Jehovah's Witnesses came round for a friendly chat. There were two of them. I managed to mask my displeasure at being awoken before 3 p.m., and smiled politely. I explained that I couldn't chat to them as I had some very important business abroad and needed to leave for the airport immediately. I think they fell for it. They left me some literature to read. I ate it. It was delicious.

In the past I used to try to deal with Jehovah's Witnesses by explaining that I was 'not of their faith'. But this never worked. As soon as you show any sign of interest in any religion, be it Islam or Judaism or even Christianity, they see an opening and pounce. They tell you all about God, and Jesus, and heaven, and the possibility of an impending apocalypse. It all sounds terribly dreary.

So, after wasting many afternoons talking to them and nervously looking at my watch, I decided on a different tactic. When I saw them approaching the house, I would simply fire at them with my air rifle. It was only many years later that I discovered that this was illegal.

Religion is out of date. We live in a consumer culture. People will inevitably pick and mix from the various religions and call the result *spirituality*. I will not burden you with my beliefs. They would only make your brain hurt.

## January 22nd

I know things no one else knows. It should make me great, but it just makes me an idiot.

## January 23rd

I awoke early. The front garden was wet with dew and the air was fresh and cool. I felt like the first man on earth. But even at this early hour, the buses were running and bakers and bikers were straggling to work.

As I walked down Palace Gates Road I spotted something unusual: a polar bear. There are very few polar bears left in London. Most of them were chased out of the city by the GLC in the 1980s. Another reason to hate Ken Livingstone.

‘Good morning, Mr Bear’, I said.

‘Good morning young sir’, said the bear. ‘How pleasant of you to greet me so cordially. No one else here has any manners.’

‘Manners maketh the man’, I replied, smiling. The sun was bright and I crinkled my eyes at the horizon.

‘And manners also make the bear’, said the bear.

‘Good day to you’, I said, and gave an exaggerated bow of humility.

The bear saluted me and waved goodbye.

Bears are wonderful things. Here are some facts about polar bears.



1. The most famous polar bear in the world is probably Minty, the polar bear that stands astride Fox’s Glacier Mints. In his heyday in the 1940s Minty got more fan mail than the Beatles and the Rolling Stones together.
2. Polar bears are very sarcastic. It’s not irony – it is *sarcasm*.
3. When hunting, polar bears cover their noses so that they blend in with the snowy background. Yet, this hinders them as they then have only three paws to hunt with.
4. In 1931 Hollywood was scandalised by Fatty Arbuckle’s affair with Fru Fru, a (married) polar bear. Neither Arbuckle nor Fru Fru’s career (she was an ice-dancer) survived the media backlash.
5. Many people assume that polar bears are mammals. They are in fact a form of wingless bird.
6. Just as Jews are often blamed for catastrophic events in the global community, so polar bears are often blamed for disaster in the arctic community. Because of this, many polar bears refer to themselves as jewbears.
7. Famous musical polar bears include Jimi Hendrix, Larry Adler, Cyndi Lauper, Jeff Beck and the man from Baby Bird.
8. In 1914 the polar bear population of London was 12. It is now 15.
9. Polar bears have the most natural rhythm of all the arctic animals. During spring and summer, polar bears often give salsa classes across west London.
10. If you are very sad and very lonely, and you think hard enough about a polar bear, one will appear beside you.

## January 24th

I was sitting in a café with my friend Ned. I was eating two sausages, beans and chips and he was tucking into bubble and squeak. There was no sign of the Shadow. It was not an important day; it was just another filler day that dragged on like an opera.

Ned and I were talking about the meaning of life and I was dabbing my chips into a pool of ketchup. Café ketchup is sweet.

‘You see’, said Ned, clutching his glass of Coke, ‘some people will tell you that the glass is half empty, and some will tell you that it’s half full.’

‘I know’, I yawned and a chip fell on the floor.

‘But what I do is stick to the facts. I will say: the glass has 150 ml of Coca Cola in it. I am not stating whether it’s half empty or half full. That’s *opinion*, not fact. I am not making a value judgement, I am just trying to stick to the verifiable details.’

‘And you apply this to the rest of your life, do you?’ I was sceptical, to say the least.

‘Well, it’s easier said than done’, he shrugged. ‘I mean... when you’re talking about a can of Coke, it’s one thing. When you’re talking about your family getting kidnapped or your house burning down, it’s something else entirely. It’s hard to just focus on the facts... I suppose there’s not really such a thing as an empirical existence. We can’t ever really exist outside of our own perceptual contexts.’

‘Still, nice chips’, I said.

‘Yeah, not bad’, he nodded.

We always have the same conversations. They don’t really go anywhere, but I like them. We debate the kind of lightweight philosophy that can only really exist in cafés or park benches or pubs. True friendships can tolerate silence, but we are not yet ready for that level of commitment.

## January 25th

Another day, another free local magazine on my doorstep.

This one was baffling. It contained one page of text – a letter from the editor – and the remainder of it was glossy photos of old men in wheelchairs wearing leather gloves.

The text (in heavy black print) read as follows:

*Friends, have you ever wondered what would happen if everybody on earth clapped their hands at the same time? No, I can’t say that I have either. But I don’t wonder about much.*

*Or have you ever wondered who would have won in a fist-fight*

*between Richard Nixon and Pope John Paul II? I know that I haven’t. I think only of high culture. But culture is bad. Not only do kids nowadays show their elders no respect, they don’t even know who their elders are! Their arithmetic and basic counting is so poor, they actually think they are older than their parents.*

*So, I hear you scream, ‘What can be done about modern life?’*

*Personally, I am very dubious about herbal remedies. I like my drugs to have a noticeable effect, be it positive or negative. I also loathe shirts that hang too long. I prefer a shirt to err on the side of shortness, although I fear that one day I may accidentally expose my midriff. Of course, they say that as women get older, they prefer hairier men, but they also say that bald men are more virile, which is untrue. Bald men are merely balder. Such things are simple. I understand complex matters, which is why I know I can depend on your trust and fidelity.*

*‘What should I do? What can I do?’ Do not ask what your country can do for you. Start small. Ask what your house can do for you. And then ask what your borough can do for you. If in doubt, do nothing. I rarely do anything. Working on the premise that the road to hell is paved with good intentions, I’m hoping that the road to heaven is paved with bad intentions. And even though my heart is filled with hatred and sin, I never actually do anything about it. This is a good thing and no doubt you are heartily pleased.*

*People ask me what the point of life is. ‘Oh father’, they cry, ‘What is the point of life?’ And this is what I say: the point of life is to get from A to B as quickly as possible. In this, the alphabet is possibly the greatest form of transport invented by man. But remember, the joy should always be in arriving, never in travelling. Do not dwell on the moment. Think only of the future and all pleasures deferred – remember that anxiety is your friend, your only real friend. Do not be dissuaded by positive energies. Throughout your life, you may encounter people who will tell you that you will never amount to anything. This is poisonous claptrap. The fact of the matter is that you will never amount to much – that is a very big difference.*

*Throughout history, man has fought man, brother has struck brother, bear has baited bear. Religions have come and gone. Yet one argument lingers like an unwanted houseguest... **bold** or italics?... **bold** or italics?*

*What is the best way to emphasize the importance of text? Friend, you know that I like to keep out of these matters (and am reluctant to be drawn on issues of font), but something must be said.*

The magazine left me quite confused and angry. I threw it in the bin. Even there, among the dead cigarettes, I could feel it mocking me. What kind of editor was this? What kind of fool writes such drivel? Do not read free magazines.

## January 26th

I awoke cold and nervous. I could feel the presence of my Shadow. I know I will not see him today, but his presence lingers.

Today I meandered around the house, killing insects. The phone rang and a message was left. It was friends inviting me out.

We went bowling. I travelled across London and found myself in an alien place, this alley of doom, populated by 16-year-olds of both sexes. All the boys looked like members of So Solid Crew, complete with weak oxide moustaches and wonky baseball caps. All the girls looked like trainee prostitutes. I wandered around the alley, fearful and agitated in unfamiliar shoes.

The game itself was predictable. The ball rolled slowly down the lane. Sometimes it hit the skittles. Mostly it slipped into the gutter. I can't see it catching on.

## January 27th

What becomes of the broken hearted? I don't know. I have absolutely no idea at all.

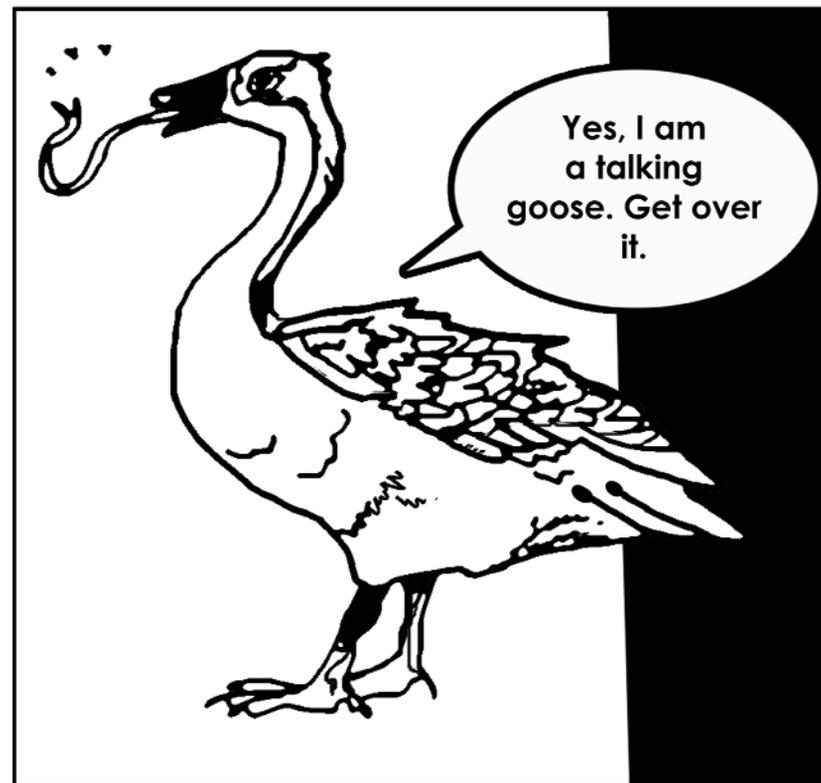
I do have some good news. I got a letter in the post today informing me that I have been chosen to be the new portal through which the gods of Olympus may return to power on Earth.

It is all very sudden, but apparently I have been picked as the prime vessel for the spirit of Zeus himself. I'm quite pleased. I'm not sure

exactly what this entails, but I'm pretty sure it will mean celebrity parties and cocaine and me appearing before supermodels in the form of a goose.

When I heard the news from Olympus I wrote to my parents to tell them all about it, but I'm not expecting much of a reply. Nothing I do impresses them. When I was at school I was chosen by my classmates to be the May Queen, and everyone in the area was very excited for me, but all my parents could say was: 'Is there any money in it?' I tried to explain that it was a great honour, and that it wasn't about money, and they just looked to the heavens as though they had heard it all before.

This could not fail to impress them, though. People are always impressed by Greek gods. Maybe it's because there are so many of them. Quantity beats quality every time.



*Things overheard on the tube***Today's journey:**

WAGN: Alexandra Palace–Highbury and Islington, then Victoria Line to Oxford Circus

1. I have nothing to fear but fear itself, which I fear intensely.
2. Come on! Let's get drunk. It's Tuesday... it's practically the end of the week.
3. You are all whores.
4. Chicken Kievs! I don't want any more chicken Kievs! Just leave me alone.
5. Janet Jackson has had almost as much plastic surgery as Michael Jackson but vainly clings to some sense of artistic and moral superiority.
6. Before he was gay, Elton John asked my mum to have sex with him.
7. Haha! Yes, well don't get back together with her. Do it if you want, but you know it'll end badly and I don't want you complaining about it to me. Seriously.
8. This body is just my passport in the mortal realm. It is not me.
9. George Foreman's special grills look scary.
10. It's got that 'dang-a-nanga' guitar sound.

**January 28th**

Today I spent the day losing money on fruit machines. Those machines, they seem so friendly at first, with their flashing lights and their funny noises, and every so often they do actually give me some money, but it never lasts. Somehow I end up leaving the pub with my pockets empty, having eaten 10 cigarettes in an hour.

Recently, I've started unplugging the fruit machines before I play. I still put my money in, but it reduces the risk that I might actually win something – basically it speeds the whole process up considerably.

Life is much easier when you know what is going to happen.

Likewise, rather than buying food, putting it in my fridge and then not eating it, I have started just putting my money directly in the bin. It cuts out the middleman and I have never been slimmer.

**January 29th**

There is text everywhere. The world is written on in all its nooks and crannies. Always read the small print. In particular, pay attention to anything written on a box of matches.

I found the following information on the back of a packet of Lustrox matches:

*(Made in Slovenia. Average contents: 40. Keep out of reach of children.)*

*'And Lo, a great horse will come from the sky and it will graze in the pasture of wrath!' Thus spoke the celebrated seer Michel de Nostradame in 1555.*

*Nostradamus was famous for his uncannily accurate predictions. Nostradamus – literally 'our dumb-ass' – was born in 1503 in Burnley to Mary and Phil Nostradamus, and had a happy, if forgettable, childhood. However, he grew up to be the most famous Nostradamus in history!*

*Nostradamus' notoriety has grown in recent years as more and more people become hooked on his infallible predictions. Among his most celebrated predictions were those referring to Hitler – '...and at some point in the future a man of evil will strike fear into all...' and the assassination of JFK '...a great leader will die by grass...'*

*He is even credited with predicting his own death in the quatrain: 'Jesus! That thing is heading right at us. Move out of the...'. Scholars have puzzled for centuries over what Nostradamus was referring to. But puzzle is all we can do, since Nostradamus cannot speak from beyond the grave – he was killed by a runaway carthorse.'*

As you can probably imagine, it was written in very small text.

## January 30th

I walked into an upmarket art gallery near Sloane Square. Between the black and white photos and boxes of junk masquerading as conceptual art, I saw this delightful illustration:



The picture cheered me. It was terrible, obviously, but it made me smile. Terrible art is often more moving than great art. You should always think about how art affects you, and never worry about whether or not it's any good.

## January 31st

I sat on the District Line next to a woman in big Janet Street-Porter glasses. Someone had left a copy of the *Sunday Express*. I opened it and read an interview in the middle section. It was one of those lifestyle pieces where a celebrity tells you about the exciting things they get up to on an average day:

### A Day in the Life

*Anton Hoffer, 32, is a leading London playwright and artist. Next year he plans to release an album of his self-penned folk songs.*

*'I normally wake up at about 7.30 a.m. I spend about 20 minutes staring blankly at the ceiling and silently sobbing before I get up. In many ways this period is the highlight of my day. As I lie there, I often try to plan out what I want to do with the day, and try to think of any redeeming features that might brighten up my life. So far I haven't thought of any.*

*Breakfast is light. I'm a great coffee lover and can't face the world before I've had my second mug of Mellow Birds. It kick-starts my day. It's 2 hours before I feel ready to get started with my work. I'm very lucky to have my partner Patricia, who is marvellously patient with me and understands the demands I'm under. She rifles through the neighbour's bins and always thinks of something ingenious to do with the food she finds. I find it amazing what people will throw away.*

*In my opinion, it is materialism gone mad.*

*My living-space is very Spartan. I like to feel uncluttered and focused. I have the corridor, which is something of a communal area, and then I have my own room, which is where the kitchen, toilet and bathroom are located. Patricia and her mother also live in the room, so it can be a bit of a squeeze, but as long as I have space inside my head, I can work fine. I am a bohemian, after all.*

*Last year the builders were in, demolishing the walls and smashing the windows, but even then I found that my unshakeable inner calm gave me the peace necessary to get my work done. Builders are scum.*

*I carry my laptop everywhere. If I leave it at home, it will get stolen. Last year I was mugged in my kitchen by the editorial staff of the *Guardian*. They said it was for my own good.*

*In the afternoons Patricia and I go to Relate. They used to give us marriage guidance but now they just tell us that life is difficult and shrug silently. You have to admire their bravery and honesty. Social workers are society's real heroes.*

*In the evening I like to go out walking around the parks. London has the most beautiful parks in the world, but they are often too crowded during the day. I like to sneak around the parks at night, when they are almost deserted. It makes my tummy feel all funny.*

*So many people take greenery for granted – the environment is one of my passions. I don't want my grandchildren to live in a polluted half-dead world. In fact I don't want grandchildren. I hate kids.*

*I go to bed at about 3 a.m. Kafka's anti-hero Gregor Samsa awoke to find himself turned into a beetle. This hasn't happened to me yet, but I'm still young. Kafka was a true artist. He exposed society's sordid underbelly. I like to think my own work does much the same. My latest play 'Oh Mama, I'm Turning Into a Snail' has a somewhat Kafka-esque subtext. Maybe it will be my breakthrough. I hope so. I hate myself and want more money.'*

*Interview by Arty Stark.*

It was an interesting interview. I must contact this individual. Perhaps we shall become friends. Or even enemies. I miss having enemies. A true enemy is greater than a thousand shrugs of indifference.

## February 2nd

I bought another newspaper this morning. I instantly regretted it. Newspapers should contain news, not this terrible hodgepodge of rumour and slander. I do not care who is sleeping with Darren Day. I do not want to know about a revolutionary new diet. I am not interested in the secret drug shame of a supermodel.

Why are celebrities always saying that their heartbreak has only made them stronger? Whether they have lost a baby, are suffering from a crippling drug addiction or are battling alcoholism, they are always saying that their troubles have made them better, stronger people. What is this obsession with self-improvement? It doesn't sound anything like my life. All the setbacks and mishaps I have ever suffered have made me nervous, bitter and scared. That's how it works, isn't it? Life smacks you in the face and you sob and wail and learn not to stick your head above the parapet. You do not become stronger; you become weaker. You learn fear. Bloody celebrities. Not a brain between them.

I was also disappointed by the lack of free gifts in my newspapers. Where are the free DVDs of my youth?

## February 4th

I slept late and awoke to discover that I had been chained to my computer. These were not metaphorical chains; oh no, they were real, steel chains. They chafed my slender wrists and ankles. I spent the morning clutching my stomach in barely-contained panic and weeing into a plastic cup, before I remembered that I had the key to the chains in my pocket. Whenever I get drunk I end up chaining myself to something. It's my pathetic desire to belong.

Why am I so desperate? I don't really know. Dr Gepetto once suggested that I am preoccupied with the impermanence of things, the fact that things – and people – can disappear at any time. It rings true. I am always surprised and slightly relieved when I wake in the morning and find that my bedroom has not run off and that the house has not

been washed downstream in a typhoon. So, to prevent things from disappearing, I chain myself to them. It's clumsy, but effective. The doctor says I take things too literally, but what other way can you take things?

I worry about Dr Gepetto. Suppose he disappears? I will be left alone with my neuroses. I must give him a pay rise. I suppose he accepts cash. I don't know. I only ever seem to see him in dreams.

## February 5th

The rain comes down. It's wet and tastes of water. Damn my prosaic imagination. This will simply not do.

Today I went for a walk. I walked from my bedroom to the lounge, where I managed to crawl onto the sofa. Fortunately, I had left the television on last week, so there was no need for me to locate the remote control and switch it on. We must be grateful for such blessings. The news was on. A man in a suit was talking about a pig that was stuck in a well. It was a very moving story. Tears flowed down my cheeks.

In the end they managed to rescue the pig, although it had broken a leg. I'm sure the story serves as a symbol for something, but I can't for the life of me work out what it is.

Maybe one day I will change the channel. These decisions cannot be taken lightly. T. S. Eliot agonised over eating a peach, and he was a better man than me.

### *Things overheard on the tube*

#### Today's journey:

Northern Line: Elephant and Castle–Chalk Farm

1. I am a 12-year-old boy. Why must Mum and Dad get divorced? I hate them. I wish I had a dog.
2. The Velvet Underground are like... Kenco... and the Strokes are Mellow Birds.

3. Why don't you watch where you're going, you fat fuck?
4. A penguin beats a gazelle anytime.
5. When I woke up, the leg was gone. I haven't seen it since.
6. My deodorant offers me invisible protection, much like an odour-free guardian angel.
7. You see all these idiots in New York Yankee baseball caps. I don't get it. You don't see guys in the Bronx wearing West Ham hats.
8. Whenever you're ready, we can start harvesting your organs.
9. The film totally ignores his bisexuality. It is a sham.
10. Yoda es fuertissimo. El puede vencer a Count Dooku. Pero Jesus es aun mas fuerte. El tiene muchos poderes.

## February 7th

One of the most bizarre people I know is the rock star Bono, the lead singer with fading overblown supergroup U2. Despite his hair weave and the fact that he shares a face with Robin Williams, Bono remains the undisputed king of rock reinvention. He's not really called Bono, though. His real name is Bonnhart Beaufort or something like that.

The thing I like most about Bono is his way with words. He's very eloquent. Particularly when paying tribute to the dead. Death is something that Bono understands very well, despite the fact that he is apparently still alive.

When people die, it's always very sad. But imagine how it comforts people to hear a few wise words from Bono. The beauty of Bono is that he's very even-handed in his tributes to the fallen. It doesn't really matter who has died. It could be a rock star, a poet or a politician, but Bono will often take time off from wrestling with the twin gods of irony and conviction to offer a few words of solace.

Now – for the first time in colour – I have collected together a few of Bono's most poignant tributes to people who are no longer alive.

Roy Hammersmith was a 42-year-old postman from Enfield, north London. He died in a car crash in November 2005. He leaves behind a wife, Barbara and two daughters.

'Roy brought rock 'n' roll to the postal delivery service. He wrote the postal blueprints that U2 used when we first started posting letters. Before Roy, people thought that they had to lick the stamp correctly, write the address clearly and include a full postcode – Roy threw that out the window. All you needed was an envelope and attitude. Roy Williams taught me to sing in my own voice.' – Bono, December 2005.

Andrejz Lipkin was a welder from Gdansk, Poland. He died last summer aged 83 after a long battle with cancer. He left behind many Lipkins – from sons and daughters to numerous great-grandchildren.

'Andrejz probably wouldn't have liked a rock 'n'roll guy like me, with my long hair and my earnest and pretentious lyrics. But that doesn't matter. Rock 'n'roll loved Andrejz.

Andrejz's story is your story, it's my story, it's everyone's story. It's a story of struggle, swagger, style and verve. He looked at welding the way that Picasso looked at women. He looked at welding like he looked at life – as a lover, as a fighter, as a cocksure boxer trying to open a tin of tuna with his gloves still on. Andrejz was the contradiction at the heart of a business I love – welding.' – Bono, July 2002.

Amanda Coombes lived in Hightstown, New Jersey. She died in 1998 aged just 17 when she was struck by a puck at an ice hockey game. She had been planning to go to Harvard University, where she was to major in Math.

'It's a terrible shock when one so young dies. It's so easy to be consumed by anger. I speak to God and ask him if he is testing me. He only replies cryptically by telling me that I didn't even know the girl and that it's a bit presumptuous to start mourning as though she were a personal friend. I talk to God often. I have so few peers.

Amanda ripped up the rule book when it came to Math. She looked Math in the eye and was brave enough to add when she could have subtracted, to multiply when she could have divided. She was more than a woman, she was a sister, lover and a mother. Even though she never had kids.' – Bono, January 1999.

Impressive stuff, I think you'll agree. It must be nice to know that when you die, Bono will be there to summarise you for the masses.

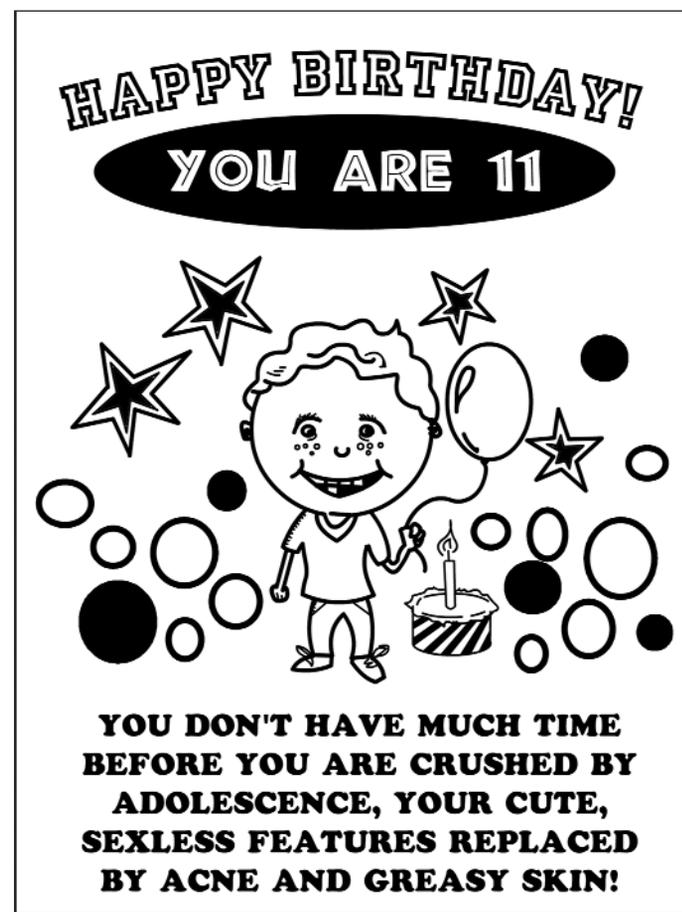
## February 10th

Today is my birthday. Happy birthday me.

Every birthday I perform the same ritual. When I was young, my mother gave me a book of excuses. And every year, on this special day, I tear out one of the excuses and throw it in a lake.

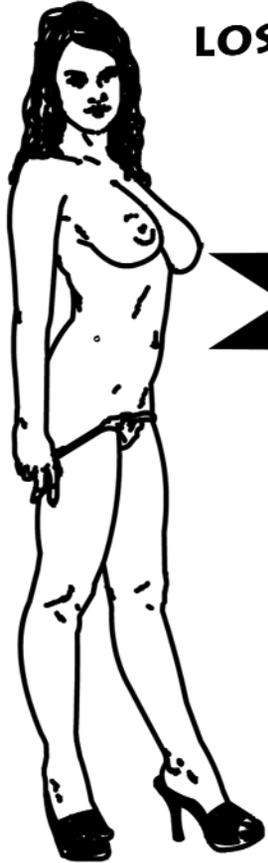
Birthdays are really no time for celebration. I should know. I once produced my own series of birthday cards:

### *Birthday Cards*



# Happy 21st birthday!

YOU THOUGHT YOU'D HAVE  
LOST YOUR VIRGINITY  
BY NOW.  
BUT YOU HAVEN'T.



(and maybe  
you never  
will)



*Happy 90th birthday*



*All your friends are dead.*

## February 11th

I have a nasty cold. To make things worse, I have been smoking heavily. To make things worse still, I have been kidnapped by Maoist rebels.

I didn't know there were any Maoist rebels in north-east London, but apparently there are... loads of them. My current predicament is proof of the wonderful cultural diversity that is modern London. Years ago you might get kidnapped by the IRA, but anything else would have been some exotic fantasy. Baader–Meinhof and the PLO just never happened round these parts.

Actually, my kidnappers don't seem very exotic. One is called Mark, and the other one is called Howard. They're very polite and keep me supplied with food and drink, and even Sky TV. To be honest, I'm quite enjoying it. I don't yet know what demands they've made and I'm in no particular hurry to find out. I've lied and told them that my family are people of integrity and won't be willing to pay a ransom. The flat I'm being kept in is very cushy, and I've got my eye on the spare bedroom. A lick of paint and it'll come up a treat. I can feel my life is changing. My star is set to shine.

## February 12th

Freedom! Cursed, wretched freedom! Mark and Howard let me go. They didn't even have the good grace to drop me home. They just unlocked the front door and told me to go. I ended up getting the tube back home. When I got there I was disappointed to find that there was no large pile of letters ready for me. It seems my absence was not greatly noted.

I checked my e-mail. Just spam. It's very annoying. Most people get spam from strangers trying to enlarge their penis, but I only get spam from my family – I get emails from my mum saying: 'THEMANWHOFELLASLEEP – Would YOU like to have your ironing done, quicker and cheaper than you could imagine!?!'

I deleted the emails and went back to bed. My siesta lasted until morning. At times like this, what else is a man to do but sleep?

## February 13th

The children sat on the floor in front of me, giggling and gurgling and shoving Maltesers into their mouths.

'Today, children', I smiled. 'I'm going to read you a story.'

They clapped and cheered and whooped.

'There was once a prince, and he wanted a princess. He wanted a really nice princess, with large eyes and soft skin. He didn't want no skanky princess.

'One evening there was a terrible storm; it thundered and the rain poured down in torrents, flooding the prince's cellar.

'In the middle of the storm somebody knocked at the town gate, and the prince sent someone to open it.

'A girl stood outside. She was soaked from the rain. Water streamed from her hair and her clothes smelt terrible. Yet despite her appearance, she claimed to be a true princess. She certainly had large eyes and a decent figure.

'A special bedroom was prepared for the princess. It was no ordinary room. There were four mattresses on the bed, and dark velvet curtains hung in front of the windows.

'In the morning, the prince asked the princess how she had slept.

'Oh, it was terrible', said the princess. 'The bed was so uncomfortable – I seemed to be lying upon some hard thing, and my whole body is black and blue this morning. It is awful.'

'The prince knew why the princess had slept so badly, but he did not tell her his secret.

The next morning, the prince again asked the Princess about her night.

'It was even worse!' she cried, shaking. 'I feel groggy, and my body is covered in bruises.'

'That night, the princess slept terribly. She had feverish dreams, and awoke early, before dawn. She strode over to the window and drew aside the curtain to watch the sun rising. Beside the curtain, she noticed a video camera. It had been there all the time, filming her! She removed the camera from the mounting and rewound the tape. Then she watched the tiny image of herself

from last night, sleeping soundly in grainy black and white.

Her eyes widened in horror as the picture began to move; there was suddenly someone else in the room! It was the prince! He approached her sleeping body, and smothered her face with a damp cloth! It must have been chloroform! No wonder she felt so woozy. And then the prince left the video. But the princess wasn't alone for long. A parade of twenty midgets walked up to the bed, and started pounding her with sticks and boxing gloves and table tennis bats! No wonder she was covered in bruises.

'The princess pocketed the video and fled the prince's castle. She hurried straight to the local police station, where she showed the Chief Inspector the tape. It turned out that the prince was luring women to his castle, secretly filming them being beaten, and then posting the videos on a website called "Punished Princesses". He was making a fortune.

'The prince was instantly arrested and charged with assault. The twenty midgets were deported back to Italy, and the princess sued the prince for emotional distress and got £15 million. Then she lived happily ever after. The end.'

'More! We want more stories!' shrieked the ecstatic kids. But one story a day is enough.

## February 14th

Seconds stretch into minutes and minutes into hours. Time is not on my side. Time plays for the opposition. My life is a twilight blur of shadows and fog.

I have been keeping a low profile, only leaving the house under cover of darkness. Justin Timberlake has been following me.

I noticed Justin trailing me when I got to Bounds Green station. He was mooching around by the post office, pretending to read *The Standard*. He followed me onto the train, and sat almost opposite me. He was reading a book about the history of hip-hop and muttering about his absence from its pages. However, the reading was clearly a ruse; he was much more interested in spying on me. Every so often we would

make eye contact and he'd flinch and look away.

I slipped off the train at Leicester Square but Justin followed me. I made it onto the Northern Line but he was in swift pursuit, and when I got off at Tottenham Court Road I was aware he was still on my trail. I doubled-back on myself and thought I'd lost him, but somehow he ended up in front of me, his mop of dingy hair peeking at me from around a corner. I turned and ran.

Justin and I first met a few years back at the Groucho Club. Things went smoothly at first. He wanted to establish himself in Britain, but was totally ignorant of UK culture. The British tabloids like to pretend that Britain is still the centre of the universe, and so it pleases them no end to see a US celeb hanging out with Martine McCutcheon or Craig David as though these local nobodies were global superstars.

So I gave Justin a few pointers. I would hardly call myself his mentor, but I explained the difference between *Family Affairs* and *Hollyoaks*, and we explored the symbiotic relationship between D-list celebrities and the Sunday papers. Initially, everything went well, but over time Justin got increasingly obsessive. He spent less and less time with the celebrities and more and more time pressing his face up against my window, crying and begging me to let him in. He's lost it. He's a simple farm boy, not best suited to a life in showbiz.

I think that's him now. I must go. If you do not hear from me again, contact the police and tell them everything.



## February 15th

In the morning I walked around Alexandra Park, taking photos of leaves and taunting the deer. They are lazy and rarely rise to the bait. Still, it keeps me busy.

I spent the afternoon spaying dogs. It's not a pleasant job. Actually, I lie, it's a job I enjoy immensely. In fact, it's not really a job, I just do it for fun. So, if your dog disappears and then reappears without its balls, it was probably me. Sorry.

## February 16th

Ah, the sun mocks me. Then the rain mocks me. Weather is not my friend. The weather has struck me down, like an angry French farmer attacking an innocent British lamb. I have sunburn and pneumonia – a rare combination. I have left my house and am spending a few days recuperating at my good friend Antoine's private clinic.

The nurses have been good to me. They wake me in the middle of the night to pinch and prod me. You wouldn't get that on the NHS. They inject me each morning, with a brown fizzy liquid that looks and smells like Coca Cola. I have a sneaking suspicion it may be Coca Cola.

Dr Gepetto is here. He takes my temperature by sticking a thermometer into my ear. He sticks it quite far in. He says that my brain is cold and that it must be warmed up. He has wrapped my head in heated towels that he stole from a local Indian restaurant.

Despite all the treatment, I feel no better. I fear this is a sickness of the soul, rather than a physical malady. It is related to my Shadow, I am sure. His presence – or even his absence – affects me. I do not like him, although I do not fear him. But whatever I do, and wherever I go, I can sense him following me.

## February 17th

Still I cannot sleep. I cannot wake. I feel weak. If I should die, I want this read at my funeral:

Come, my friends. Gather the lilacs and the lawnmowers. Stop the dogs with their lazy eyes and wet, wet noses. Unchain the maidens from their domestic travails. The king is dying, long live the king.

Mine have been a long hundred years. When I was born, man was on the brink of ignorance. Now, as I lie on this bed of cobwebs, man has taken a great, confident stride into the darkness of stupidity. I wish that I could be with man as he slips headlong into foolishness, but that is not my journey. My journey is a simpler one, towards a tawdry and uncelebrated end. I have smoked too many cigarettes, looked into too many mirrors, smiled at too many simpering strangers.

My father used to tell me: 'You are not my son.' I puzzled over the meaning of this statement. Years later I discovered he was not my real father and I was crushed. Sunsets come and go too casually nowadays, there is no permanence and my gums bleed too easily. Ah, I can hear the mermaids singing. I wish they would keep it down.

My adolescence was a struggle to reconcile myself to the darkness within. I knew deep inside myself that I was a man of power, but I felt powerless before maths, art, science, fruit, vegetables. The world confused me. I felt a void within me that I attempted to fill with home furnishings. It was a failure – I have never had taste, and so I erred on the side of conservatism. I shied away from love and intimacy; in my humourless stoicism they seemed like weaknesses. I knew that I would outlive love, I would conquer emotion, I would rest my flag upon the unknown regions of unknowable emotions. I was wrong, of course, but I made some money in the meantime.

Ah, jester, dance for me. You bring a poor smile to this old man's face. My beard grows old and my feet grow cold. Where is my family? Where are the melodies of yesteryear, scratched onto vinyl by the chancellor and his wife? I am a man out of time, out of space. I am out of milk, and the shops are all closed.

The servants will not gather flowers for my grave, for the flowers stopped growing too long ago. Ah, man should never have descended from the trees. Evolution is making a monkey of me, if only my old foe Darwin could see.

### *Things overheard on the tube*

#### Today's journey:

Northern Line: Archway–Kings Cross, then Hammersmith and City Line to Shepherd's Bush

1. Fair maiden, may I offer you a crisp?
2. He has the flattest head of anyone I know.
3. There's an Arsenal in Argentina, an Everton in Chile and a Liverpool in Uruguay.
4. Are you sure you're meant to stick it up your arse?
5. I'd give it three stars. Out of a hundred.
6. Stop! Enough knickerbocker wisecracks!
7. I never know what they mean by 'smart casual'.
8. Madonna raps like Mr Plow.
9. There were these three guys calling each other niggers, but they were all white.
10. How the hell did that baked bean bloke get to the snooker finals?

## February 19th

I am back from the hospital, although I am sure I have not totally recovered. This morning I awoke groggy and confused from a vivid dream. I cannot remember the details of the dream, except that there were fried onions and a young boy searching endlessly for a left shoe.

The shower is broken. Curse all pipes and washers! The world's problems will one day be solved by plumbers. Can you think of any global situation that could not be improved by decent plumbing? I cannot.

The world was once all water and plumbers still sense their atavistic importance in the grand scheme of things.

I splashed my face with brown water from the sink and settled down on the sofa to read the papers. Not newspapers, just any papers that I could find: adverts for credit cards, Indian takeaway menus, bank statements, an old copy of *Which Lawnmower?* magazine. It is important to keep abreast of the issues of the day, to occupy one's mind.

After reading for a while, I washed my clothes and even managed to find some fabric softener. The Greek gods smile upon me; I know that soon they will visit me in person. I have arranged the stolen ashtrays in my bedroom to form the Holy Signs. This morning I coughed up a cigarette butt that I must have swallowed last night – one of the dangers of smoking in bed. But these are trifles, minor complaints. I must steel myself. Soon the Holy Ones will come and will tell me if this year's harvest will be bountiful.

Hush! I hear the rustle of magazines and yoghurt pots... that unmistakable smell of yeast... I think they are coming now!

## February 20th

It turned out it wasn't the gods. It was a stray tabby cat. We shared a tin of Whiskas and talked about the old days. I love nostalgia.

## February 21st

We writers are strange creatures. We do not communicate with our peers. Rather, we communicate with history, with the vast pantheon of literature. We lift symbols and motifs from long-lost Uruguayan novels. We write pointed ripostes to authors who died 200 years before we were born.

With this in mind, I was much alarmed to see a headline in my local paper: 'Young actor aims to bring Kafka to life!'

This is a worrying trend. Reanimating the corpses of dead writers is a dangerous affair. I have only just recovered from my debacle with the rotting carcass of James Joyce.

Like many men, I mistake metaphor for reality. It's probably hormonal. Women are graced with bodies that constantly change and are thus blessed with an intrinsic understanding of metaphor.

## February 22nd

The phone keeps ringing in the night. When I answer it, it is the speaking clock. The clock swears at me, which seems out of character. He's normally so polite.

'At the third stroke, the time sponsored by \*\*\*\*\* will be 3.15 a.m., you fucking idiot.'

Mysterious events in the world of biscuits!

This morning I opened my biscuit tin for a snack. All appeared normal. The Ginger Nuts were dry yet crunchy, the Hazelnut Choc Chip Cookies were moist and satisfying, but someone had tampered with the Bourbon Creams. At first glance all appeared normal, but it soon became clear that someone had prised them apart, removed the chocolate filling and sandwiched them back together. The perfect crime.

## February 24th

I have a confession: I am part of a conspiracy. I belong to an obscure group of individuals whose aim is dark and nefarious. It is not Opus Dei. It is not the Bilderberg group. Don't try guessing. You won't know it.

This loose band of free thinkers and intellectual mavericks is known as The League Against Narrative.

League members are dedicated to eradicating the scourge of storytelling: the insidious myth of cause and effect, the lie of moral justice, the erroneous conception that there is progress, growth and conclusion. These are the demons that destroy our existence.

The life of the modern man is haunted by this myth of narrative. We believe our lives are like books or films and that we are owed a concrete beginning, middle and end. We expect social introductions to

lead somewhere; we wait for conversations to reach a climax... we live in the disappearing shadow of a thrilling denouement. But of course, our lives are wretchedly free from narrative. We go nowhere. For every step forward that we take, we wander down a dead end or a blind alley. We stumble from day to day believing that the passage of time indicates movement. But it is simply another day.

The League Against Narrative is totally committed to the annihilation of these false gods. We will open the eyes of the people: we will show them that we are going nowhere.

*Things overheard on the tube*

**Today's journey:**

Piccadilly Line: Wood Green–Hammersmith

1. My lucky number is 28. Hence, today is my lucky day
2. The rooftops of north London have a strange and inexplicable beauty.
3. Should I shave my crabladder?
4. Everyone nowadays is a pervert. What happened to old-fashioned boring sex?
5. That busker will destroy me.
6. No. I wasn't saying you smell bad. It's musk. It's manly.
7. We're gonna get drunk, we're gonna have a fight and then we're gonna get a shag.
8. I think you'll find that everything you've ever done is overrated and rubbish and you're going to die in a piss-filled ditch.
9. Martin Amis is certainly cleverer than Kingsley ever was, but his work is so self-consciously self-conscious. It makes me anxious.
10. History will vindicate me.

## February 25th

Such strange dreams are these. I dreamed that I was a short, hairy man living in Bounds Green. I was poor and ate takeaways. I smoked too much and coughed throughout the day. My bedroom was covered in dust and fluff, the detritus of a shallow existence.

I awoke in my cave, glad that it was just a dream. Just a terrible dream...

## February 26th

I met the CIA agent at the British Museum Restaurant. I was finishing off my Olde Norse pudding when he arrived. I recognized him from his fedora and carnation, and he spotted me thanks to my faded CIA T-shirt.

The CIA owe me. A few years back I let them use my house as a base when they were staking out some local kids who had been illegally revealing the end-of-season cliff-hangers for some American sitcoms.

We exchanged passwords: he asked 'Are you my contact?' and I replied with 'Yes, I have requested aid from the CIA and you are my agent.' They really need to come up with new passwords.

He sat opposite me and ordered an Egyptburger. He slid a dossier across the table.

'Everything you need is in there', he smiled. 'And remember, if you get caught you don't know anything.'

'But I know loads of things', I replied. It was the truth.

A flash of annoyance passed over his face. 'Well, can you pretend you don't know anything?'

'I suppose so', I shrugged.

And suddenly he was gone. He hadn't even touched his burger.

I rushed home, the dossier hidden in my sports bag. I had requested that the CIA look into my Shadow and inform me if he was real, and if so, if his intentions were dishonourable.

I hurriedly opened the dossier and my face dropped. There had been some mistake. The dossier comprised a short story of total irrelevance. For the purposes of accuracy, I am repeating the story here:

*Neil sat in the car. It was dark and his glasses were misty. He took them off and wiped them on his sleeve. Outside, the drizzle was falling more lightly. It looked like the night would be clear, even if it remained unbearably cold. He opened the glove compartment. There was a Lion Bar and a can of Coke. He took a bite of the Lion Bar and then rewrapped it and closed the glove compartment.*

*The car park was nearly empty. At the other end there was a white transit van. It looked filthy and someone had written 'Clean Me' in dust on the bonnet. There was also a blue Renault Megane parked alongside him. Every 5 minutes its alarm went off, which annoyed him – it was like a fitful sleeper who rises in the middle of the night, angry and confused, waking up the rest of the house.*

*He knew that the car park would soon fill up. He'd been here before. He knew what would happen.*

*He always arrived at the car park early to get a good spot. For him, that was half the fun; the build-up, the anticipation, the rituals before the event. He enjoyed the knowledge that he was sitting alone in a north London car park as dusk approached, while his friends were in pubs, talking about football, or lying in bed with their girlfriends, talking about holiday plans and mortgages. They all assumed he would be at home, watching television. But he was here in the car park, waiting for it all to happen. He felt a thrill in his stomach.*

*He twirled the knob of the radio. All dance music and ragga from local pirate stations. Then he hit the news. They were talking about the death of some former Tory MP. What did any of it have to do with him? He spun the knob and landed on the inane banter of a radio phone-in. An angry man was saying that no one understood the sacrifices that America was making to ensure global safety. The radio host was half-heartedly playing Devil's Advocate. 'My God', thought Neil, 'these people are idiots'.*

*Another car arrived at the car park and parked almost opposite from him. It was a Nissan Micra – green or grey, he couldn't tell. The headlights dazzled him and then died. He blinked and waited for the glow behind his eyes to fade. He listened to the radio and waited. But nothing happened. No one emerged from the Micra and both cars faced each other in silence.*

*This was Neil's fourth time. The first time had been in a car park in Brixton; he had enjoyed the evening, but it had taken him nearly 2 hours to drive home afterwards. So he searched the internet for a location closer to him; somewhere in north London. He had stumbled upon the car park, just 5 minutes away from his flat. He liked the incongruity of it; it was a drab, dull location that he had passed a thousand times, and it had never occurred to him that it was anything other than an ordinary car park. He smiled. He knew that he had spent so much of his life with his eyes closed to such things. It was only in recent months that something had stirred within him, and he had opened his eyes and seen the world anew. He felt as though he had been handed a key that gave him access to a whole new world, a world that lay alongside the normal world of men but was always hidden to those who could not see it.*

*Now the car park was filling up. A red Ford Cortina parked next to him. He wondered if it was Sandra's car. He hadn't been to last month's event, but he had seen her twice in November. He liked her. He liked the fact that she talked to him as though he were an equal; without real affection but without contempt or false friendship. He was tempted to wind down the window and take a closer look to make sure it was her, but he knew it would be better to sit tight and wait.*

*He looked down at the pile of papers that lay on the passenger seat. He had printed them all up from information on a website. If it was Sandra in the Cortina, he would give her the papers. He secretly hoped she would be impressed. He fumbled above his head and switched on the light. He flicked through the papers and then re-read the sheet on the top of the pile. The information was broken down into a series of Frequently Asked Questions:*

### **What is Godding?**

*The term 'Godding' refers to either having or observing a religious experience in a public or semi-public place, usually outdoors. Sometimes voyeurs join in with the religious experience, but usually they just watch from a nearby location.*

### **How did Godding start?**

*Godding has been getting a lot of attention lately, but people have been*

*doing it for many years. Recently, with the advent of the internet, mobile phones and messaging, it is easier for Godders to find one another and arrange meetings.*

### **Why is Godding so popular?**

*It's fun and it's forbidden. People love to watch and be watched having religious experiences. There's also an element of challenge and adventure in finding a good Godding spot and seeking out an exciting encounter.*

### **What kind of people go Godding?**

*Couples into religion are usually in their 30s to 50s, though some may be older or younger. Observers are usually single men, often disenchanted priests or rabbis. Most Godders are middle class, and most lead quite average lives apart from their unusual 'hobby'.*

### **Where are the best places for Godding?**

*Godders mostly choose open-air, somewhat out of the way places, often in or near country parks. Car parks are also quite common congregating spots, and occasionally cinema halls. The best locations are hidden away from the public, but still easily accessible.*

### **I don't have a car. Can I still go Godding?**

*Many Godding activities revolve around cars, as couples do like to discuss religion in cars and often go to locations that are somewhat remote. However, it's quite possible there is Godding activity in your area that is accessible by public transport. Check Godding sites and Godding groups for info.*

### **Why has religion been driven underground? Why can't I just talk about religion in public?**

*You are free to discuss religion where and when you want, but it comes with a certain risk. Belief and faith are no longer considered polite subjects for conversation in most communities. Godding is popular because it allows the anonymous observance and discussion of religious experiences without fear of judgement. Most Godders would never discuss religion with friends or family, but crave some secret spiritual fulfilment.*

*Neil put the papers down and looked outside. It was raining harder now, and he switched on the windscreen wipers. The car park was nearly full. There were about 20 cars. Some had their headlights on and some had their engines running, but most were silent and static. The drivers sat in darkness, waiting for it all to kick off. He could feel the tension and excitement rising within.*

*He looked over at the Cortina. It was definitely Sandra, but Philip wasn't with her. She was alone in the car. Good. Maybe later he would continue his discussion of the Holy Trinity with her. The guys at work would laugh at him if they could see him now. But they weren't here now. He was. And he felt alive.'*

I didn't understand the story. It had nothing to do with the Shadow. And yet, perhaps that was the point. Whatever it meant, it pointed towards a man with hidden hopes and dreams, trying to understand himself and the world around him.

Perhaps it's not a dead end, just a different route to my destination.

## February 28th

I have awoken from my coma!

According to the doctors, I was in my coma for 2 days. Apparently, I choked on a peach stone and lost consciousness. I didn't know you weren't supposed to eat the stone. What a terrible waste.

This is how I awoke:

Me: 'Ugh... how long have I been asleep? What year is it?'

Dr Gepetto (yes, he's back): 'You've been in a coma for 2 days.'

Me: 'Ohmigod! It's 2023! I've been asleep for 20 years! My youth! Gone... my looks... all gone!'

Dr Gepetto: 'No. Listen to me. It's not like that. You were only in a coma for 2 days'.

Me: '... my youth... gone... '.

Anyway, it turns out that I didn't miss anything while in the coma. It was a very quiet few days.

## February 29th

(is it a leap year? Who can tell?)

There is nothing to do, so I switch on the computer.

I have been surfing the web. I like to check up on my old friend, BBC football pundit Mark Lawrensen. Since he shaved off his moustache he's grown increasingly erratic. Every week he makes predictions about the results of the weekend's Premiership games. He is normally wrong, but at least makes some sense. However, his latest predictions make terrifying reading.

### *Lawro's Premiership Predictions*

#### ***Charlton v. Manchester City (kick-off 14.00)***

*Aha! You will never catch me! I shall kill again! I disappear into shadows, like Thierry Henry finding space in a stretched Newcastle defence. Let the people know me! Let the people fear me! I shall come to you in visions, in nightmares, in dreams of untold erotic pleasure... you cannot escape me. I shall possess you. For you are merely mortal and I am the EVERLASTING, the timeless. I am the stain upon your soul that blights your every action!*

*Verdict: Charlton to win 1-0.*

#### ***Wigan v. Newcastle (kick-off 14.00)***

*Alan Shearer, Alan Shearer, Alan Shearer... I am the recurring muscle injury that will force you to quit the game. We shall sit next to each other in television studios and I shall smile my sweetest smile, and you shall never know that it was I who brought your Premiership career to a premature end! How fate mocks you, you square-headed lunk! In Biblical times they called me Hamen, but you shall know me simply as your nemesis! Haha!*

*Verdict: Newcastle to win 2-0.*

#### ***Liverpool v. Chelsea (kick-off 16.05)***

*Oh Mr Abramovich, will your millions ever really buy you happiness? Do you think you can ever forget that lonely little boy, crippled by*

*sadness... I think not. I am the worm of doubt that lives in your spirit, eating you away from the inside. I have crushed greater men than you. Alexander the Great, Napoleon, Churchill, all brought to heel, their pride snuffed by the inevitability of my victory. Do you really think your team of international superstars can shield you from my glare? You are mine. I am omnipotent. Fear me!*

*Verdict: Liverpool to win 1–0.*

### **Manchester United v. Middlesbrough (kick-off 15.00)**

*Who was the serpent that tempted Eve? Who caused Adam to be gracelessly ejected from the Garden of Eden, like Sunderland cast out of the Premiership with the lowest ever points total? It was I, you idiots! My powers grow stronger with every passing fixture. Here, the Master meets the Apprentice as Ferguson faces McClaren, but all men are as insects to me – as toys to an angry child.*

*Remember: the priest fears me, but only the whore knows my name!*

*Verdict: Manchester United to win 3–1.*

### **Portsmouth v. Fulham (kick-off 15.00)**

*Ah, the Pompey sea air. It brings back fond memories of slave ships dashed against jagged rocks, of the Titanic sinking into the inky depths, the rank odour of mankind's precious hubris. Oh, hatchet-faced Harry Redknapp, this was once your team. Do you think the world will ever take you seriously? Do you think your victories will ever really see you accepted into polite society? No. The public see a conman, a rogue, a spiv... I have poisoned their minds. That's right, Harry. Have another drink. Pour it all away.*

*Verdict: a 1–1 draw.*

### **Sunderland v. West Brom (kick-off 15.00)**

*Men talk of the banality of evil, but what evil could be more banal than this fixture? As the passion play of football unfolds, the spirits of the spectators will ebb... they will grow restless, they will tire. They will start to doubt. They will think about unhappy sexual acts in suburban hotels, of childhood ambitions cruelly unfulfilled, of relationships thwarted by jealousy and anger. Sometimes man is so bereft of hope that I need not*

*even act to cause misery... so it is with this fixture. Truly mankind is doomed. Doomed!*

*Verdict: Sunderland to win 1–0.*

### **Everton v. Blackburn (kick-off 15.00)**

*You lie asleep in your single bed. A newt drops from the ceiling onto your unconscious body; burrows under your skin, tearing away muscle and sinew with its needle teeth! You awake wracked with pain, a cold sweat covering your back like a shroud! Who do you think singled out Wayne Rooney for glory? Who do you think sold him to Man U? Do you think it was God? Do you think a kindly old man with a white beard chose him for greatness? Hahahaha... oh, you poor deluded fools. The twinkle in his eye comes not from the heavens... indeed, no!*

*Verdict: Blackburn to win 1–0.*

### **West Ham v. Tottenham Hotspur (kick-off 15.00)**

*The Israelites fled from me in Egypt, their robes filled with hope and parcels of unleavened bread, but now the hope has been extinguished. All is black!*

*I am the flashing blade in the inner-city alleyway; I am the gun pressed against your temples at dawn; I am the bacteria that fills your lungs with pus. Dance! Dance your merry little dance of glee, as you foolishly dream that you have conquered evil! Dance all you like, for you are my puppets and I am jerking your strings. The **danse macabre** only brings you closer to my fiery bosom!*

*Verdict: a goalless draw.*

### **Birmingham v. Arsenal (kick-off 15.00)**

*The day of reckoning is nigh! The clouds gather around the cities, around the town, around the blackened souls of men. Grown men in football shirts, standing like apes around a bonfire, pouring alcohol down their throats, baying for blood, for pain, for change! Fists are thrown into the air. Glass shatters, vomit pours forth like wine! The noon of my conquest is upon us! The screams will sound like satanic melodies, like a symphony of evil.*

*And poor Steve Bruce... that face of yours. It was only a joke – I didn't expect you to keep it.*

*Verdict: Arsenal to win 3–0.*

### ***Aston Villa v. Bolton (kick-off 15.00)***

*What's that you say, Mr Ellis? Your powers are greater than mine? Hardly, you are but a footservant of evil: I am chaos incarnate!*

*Jack the Ripper was a cheery sort. I twisted that man's brain like Jay-Jay Okocha twisting a bewildered Villa defender. Do you know, the brainless savage thought he was performing the Lord's work? What simpletons men are. A vision here, a prophecy there and they believe that good is evil, that murder is rebirth. But there is no rebirth, there is no salvation, there is just 90 minutes of torment and mockery, followed by a week of silence and recrimination.*

*And recrimination!!*

*Verdict: Villa to win 2–1.*

I am very worried about poor Mark. I think he's going through a really rough patch.

## March 1st

This journal is not my sole literary effort. I have written many books, some of which were best-sellers in eastern Europe many decades ago.

For the last five years I have been writing my magnum opus. It is almost finished. It has been testing. My idea of starting the story with the death of the central character was innovative, but left me with certain plot issues that were difficult to resolve. Nonetheless, I am nothing if not tenacious and the book is now complete.

With hindsight, poisoning my literary agent was a rash move, but there is no point crying over spilt milk or dead agents. She died painlessly enough and the police arrested her husband, so it all turned out well in the end. All loose ends were tied up swiftly, in life, if not in art. Anyway, what are agents if not parasites? Would I be judged for swatting a mosquito? Of course not.

I am sending copies of my manuscript to all the major publishers. The moon-faced woman from Virago is sure to like the book – there are plenty of strong female characters and I lifted huge chunks of the middle section from an old Angela Carter book I found in a local library. I am sure that everyone will love the thrilling denouement where the SAS soldier is revealed to be Sputnik, the Russian spy – and Chantal's long-lost father. It is a story that has something for everyone: sex, violence, romance, ennui, obtuse plot developments and a scene where a man makes 10 cups of coffee. I can't see it failing. But I never see failure until it is upon me.

## March 2nd

My hackles have been raised. Something fishy is going on in the Afghan grocery around the corner. I am not yet 100% sure, but I believe they are selling multipack cans of Coke as single items, contrary to the explicit instructions on the cans.

This could go right to the very top. Further news as it breaks.

## March 4th

Journalists often ask me, ‘What is Robbie Williams really like?’ And I tell them the truth: he’s taller than me and has dark hair. Of course, people get very annoyed by that answer. They want gossip; they want dirt. They want to know if he is gay or bi or celibate. But alas, I have no dirt to dish on Robbie. He is a simple, humble man and a very good friend of mine. He is a true celebrity among cardboard pygmies.

I first met Robbie in 1987. He was appearing as the Artful Dodger in a school play in his hometown of Stoke. By chance I was the hotdog vendor at the school auditorium and we chatted as he sucked a frankfurter. I took him under my wing. He was a year older than me, but I was very mature for my age and had already mastered four European languages and set up my own car-hire business.

Robbie was a precocious young pup, all wide-eyed glee and naked ambition. I helped him out with his maths homework and in return he agreed to let me become his personal manager. I enjoyed dipping my toes in gaudy showbiz waters; I took to calling myself ‘Sergeant Rocco’ and went everywhere in a beret. Robbie and I would meet in my garden shed at weekends, and he would practice his magic tricks and dancing as I calculated how much we would be paid when he became an international megastar.

Sadly, even at that young age, Robbie was prone to mood swings and depression. Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays he would throw back a cocktail of cocaine and ecstasy, while on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays he would binge on Prozac and Seroxat. On Sundays we would go fishing.

Even then, I could see that Robbie was one part Jerry Lewis and one part Ian Curtis – a potentially explosive mix. In an attempt to keep him on the straight and narrow, I put him on a strict diet of whey and wheatgrass. But Robbie was a typical teenager and he resented the level of control that I exerted over him. He wanted to go ice-skating and bowling, but I demanded that he practice his mid-song patter and learn to pretend to stumble when he was dancing.

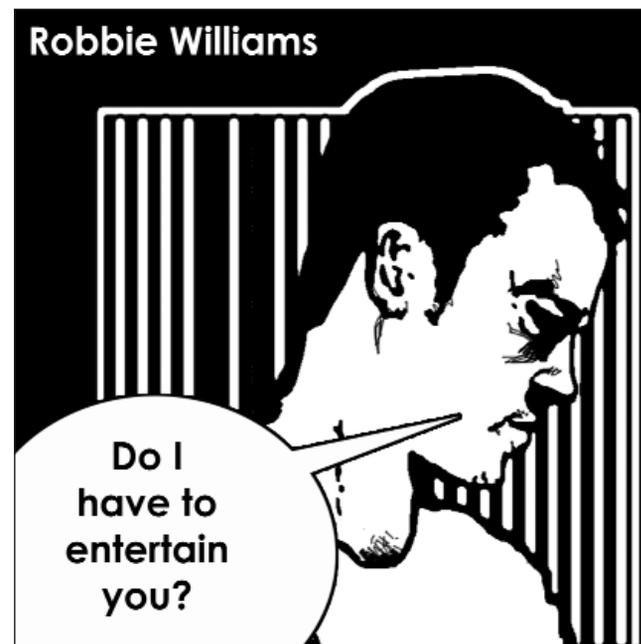
Of course, it is now public knowledge that Robbie rebelled against my control and ran off to join the circus, where he was employed as a lion. Despite our falling out, Robbie and I were recently reunited when we

were both interviewed on Parkinson. We chatted and reminisced backstage. Nowadays, we see each other often. We are both naturally wary of friendship, so we take every day as a bonus. I fly over to LA to visit him in his luxury mansion, and he pops round to my house to share a pot of tea and a sponge finger.

Robbie is much more famous than I ever imagined possible, but he is still the irresistible, depressive, self-loathing cheeky scamp that I knew when I was young.

I know that some people don’t like Robbie. They are jealous of his fame. But I have never blamed Robbie for pursuing fame with such naked ambition. All celebrities are ultimately victims, for fame eats them whole and spits out their empty husks.

Fame is an addiction, and all addictions are crippling: we are all familiar with the stories of drug addicts who steal from loved ones to fund their habits – poor wretches locked in a desperate spiral to fund their next high – and so it is with fame. When fame begins to fade, celebrities grow increasingly frantic and depraved. No private moment is



so precious that it cannot be sold to a Sunday tabloid for the adrenaline rush of a photo on a front page.

But Robbie is strong, and he will beat this addiction. Just like he beat Gary Barlow.

## March 6th

Einstein said that God does not play dice with the universe. Of course he doesn't. He plays poker. He plays canasta. He plays blackjack. He goes all-in and hides cards up his sleeve.

At any rate, Einstein is dead and God is still around, despite Nietzsche's best intentions.

Imagine God is in his heaven. He is not a bearded old man in robes. He is a vaguely humanoid blur, like a stick figure drawn in charcoal and then smudged around the edges.

God has created the world and mankind, but now he doesn't know what to do with them. In short, he is bored.

To relieve the tedium of watching mankind to-ing and fro-ing down on Earth, God decides to raise the stakes. He doesn't actually want to destroy the world because (a) he made an informal agreement with Noah after the flood and (b) he is actually quite fond of mankind.

What he does to pass the time is play a game. The kind of game we all play when we're bored; we walk home without stepping on the cracks of the pavement, or back one raindrop to beat another in a race down a window pane.

Every day when God wakes up and gets out of his celestial bed, he plays a game. Since he is not a natural risk-taker, he makes little bets with himself that he is pretty darn sure he will win.

Here is an example of a week of God's bets. They are jotted down in a small Rymans notepad by his bedside.

- *Monday [which he maintains is the first day of the week]: if no one on Earth says the word 'cattle', I will destroy the world.*
- *Tuesday: if no one in Europe claps their hands today, I shall sink Europe into the sea.*

- *Wednesday: if anyone in America uses the phrase 'Serbo-Croat Lilliput Crayfish' I will give that individual apocalyptic powers.*
- *Thursday: if under 1000 Twix bars are sold in England, I will destroy England.*
- *Friday: if no one in Africa gets drunk today, I will destroy Africa and alcohol.*
- *Saturday: if Middlesbrough beats Charlton by more than 25 goals, I will disappear and leave mankind to its own devices.*
- *Sunday [the last day of the week]: if anyone in London reads every word printed in every single page of the Sunday papers (including adverts) I will abolish language.*

As you see, they are all bets that are unlikely to disrupt the status quo of the world, as they have very little chance of happening. But they keep God occupied. Some scholars have said that as time passes God will get increasingly bored and start playing riskier games, and so terrible events are far more likely to happen. This is why, as you pass your time on Earth, it is always worth keeping your fingers crossed.

## March 7th

For the purposes of this journal entry, I will be writing in the third person. It's a literary device. I shall call myself Jasper. As I said at the beginning of the journal, I am no ordinary writer.

Trawling through the phone boxes of central London, Jasper picked up card after card, his hands quivering, his breath shallow. He couldn't help it – it was sordid and depraved, but he could not resist the compulsion to pocket the cards.

He has already rehearsed his speech in case he is spotted by a policeman; he will adopt a tone of moral outrage and explain that he was removing the cards because they were filth and were lowering the tone of the plush Bloomsbury location. He worried that the police would not believe him.

One particular card caught his eye.

He could feel his T-shirt cling wet to his back. He looked around to double-check that he wasn't being watched. He slowly bent over as though he had dropped something, then he daintily plucked the Bluetacked card from the glass.

This card was different. He had never seen anything like it. Mostly, the cards showed young black footballers from the first or second divisions, anonymous youngsters with bulging thighs and faces full of false bravado. The cards advertised their prowess at headers and boasted how they were deadly finishers in the box and could run for miles. The truth was seldom so rewarding. Jasper had met these young men in bedsits and rented rooms, and often they were nothing like the photos – lanky mulattos or short Mexicans with no ball control and studs missing from their Puma boots.

However, he recognized this player. He looked haggard and his hair – once so celebrated in adverts and talkshows – was thinning. He was kitted out in the lurid colours of a first-division side. But it was clear; it was Paul Gascoigne. It was Gazza himself. Jasper felt his chest grow tight. He could hardly breathe. His hands shook uncontrollably as he dialled the number...



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## March 8th

I cannot sleep. It is this heat, this unbearable, unseasonal heat. I lie awake and sweat the sheets off the mattress. During the day it is even hotter. I regret erecting a giant magnifying glass outside my bedroom – the carpet is constantly on the verge of catching alight.

The magnifying glass was another majestic failure. I have a vast, sweeping vision, but it is flawed. Ideological and emotional cataracts blur my vision. I start... I start, but I cannot finish... I cannot finish this thing that I have started.

## March 10th

Today I went to the lake. It was a balmy day and the ducks hovered over the reeds, playing canasta and smoking.

I played a game with the local kids. They dressed in their pyjamas, and I threw heavy rubber bricks into the water. They had to swim to the bottom and retrieve the bricks, just as I did in the swimming lessons of my youth.

It was a disappointing afternoon. Not one of the kids resurfaced. After a while I shuffled off home.

### *Things overheard on the tube*

#### Today's journey:

Piccadilly Line: Bounds Green–Holborn, then Central Line to Queensway

1. What happened with Ron Atkinson? I was on holiday and missed it all.
2. Anyway, on his deathbed he suggests that I buy the lawnmower off him. I said no.
3. I had a keyboard that played a Billy Joel song when you switched it on.
4. She was at the party when an ant fell out of her nose. No one knows where it came from.

5. There's a very simple rule: if someone earns more than me, they aren't allowed to go on strike.
6. Her face looks like a typing error.
7. All the good things in my life are bad.
8. Are you ready for a new kind of salad? A salad made entirely of beef.
9. I would never punish my kids by hitting them. I just make them feel guilty and all twisted up inside.
10. *Diagnosis Murder?* Diagnosis fucking rubbish, more like.

## March 11th

Today was just another day in a long series of nameless, shapeless days.

Nothing much happened. Days like this are not normally included in diaries or journals, but I feel it is important to not to forget these endless, grey days when more nothing follows each non-event.

Last night I sat in the pub, anxiously scratching the label off a bottle of Grolsch. In the background Andy Gray and Martin Tyler discussed Arsenal's defensive frailties.

A fat middle-aged man sat down at my table. His face was a map of broken capillaries. He smiled at me and slammed a bottle down onto a beermat. Inside the bottle, there appeared to be a tiny man. I squinted. There was definitely a man in the bottle.

'Alright mate', said the man.

I nodded and murmured a hello.

'I know what you're thinking. People always ask me, how did you get the man into the bottle? Well... I shouldn't really tell, but... OK... we don't put the man into the bottle! He's *born* there. It's a bit like test-tube babies, innit? We put the sperm and the egg in the bottle, and wait for nature to take its course. Obviously we can't just keep the bottle on the shelf. It has to be the right temperature, or the eggs don't work. It's an art. I consider myself a craftsman, really. Yeah, I know it's only a hobby, but it's still art.'

He coughed up a solid cube of phlegm.

'Anyway, once the kid is born, we just drop food and water into the bottle. It's simple, really, when you think of it. No great mystery. We hose

the bottle down every so often – well, I don't really ever do that myself, I leave that for the missus. Got to keep the bottle clean, specially when they're young. Infections. Oh yes... I've lost a few to infections.

'So the food goes in and - I know what you're thinking! What happens to the waste? The shit and all that. Well, we just Hoover it up. In the old days, with stand-up Hoovers, it was a bloody pain. But now it's all simple: bung the end of the vacuum into the bottle and suck it all up. Bish bosh.

'People say it's inhumane, but the Chinese have been doing it for centuries. Nah. It's good – you need a hobby nowadays or you'll go mad. 'Anyway, mate. Nice to see you. Yeah, give my love to Cheryl... take care, mate. Must do it again sometime.'

With that, he walked off. I hadn't said a word. I have no idea who he was.

In the meantime, the game had begun. Thierry Henry scored for Arsenal and the pub erupted into raucous cheers.

## March 12th

People ask me why I have a nervous disposition, why I am anxious all the time. Generally, I refer them to Dr Gepetto. It's all in his file.

Personally, I have my own theories as to the defects (if that is what they are) in my character. I shall tell you all about the cosmic oven.

Everyone is familiar with the feeling of leaving the house for work and suddenly fearing they have left the oven on at home. They stop dead. They pause. Should they turn back? They know that the oven is probably not really on – it's just their mind playing tricks on them. They smile and dismiss such foolish concerns. They resolve to continue to work, but something under their skin continues to nag away, biting and chafing at their calm.

Well, imagine that in the time before you were born, when you were not even a speck of nothingness in your grandfathers' eye, something similar happened. Imagine that before you even came into existence, the oven was left on. Not a specific oven in a cottage in Wales or a Shtetl in Belarus but a cosmic, existential oven, the size of the Earth. Imagine that, all your life, you are unsure whether you should progress with earthly

concerns or rush back into nothingness to turn off the oven. That is the Cosmic Oven Syndrome. I suffer greatly from this malaise. At any point in life, I am aware of a gnawing sensation at the back of my mind, warning me of impending disaster. Of flames licking at curtains, or at the very least, of burnt cakes.

That is one reason why I am anxious. The other reasons are more mundane, but no less valid.

Today I found an old folder of poetry from when I was a teenager. It is a blue cardboard folder with stickers on the front. The poetry was hand-written and I almost didn't recognize my own writing. It was mostly clumsy angst, which was little surprise; but I did find something that I liked. The odd thing is that I have no recollection of writing it, and it doesn't appear to be in my handwriting. And yet it must be mine. No-one else has ever seen the poems or had access to the folder.

Here is the poem. It may not even be a poem; perhaps it is just prose with interesting line breaks.

*The doctor  
told me  
two things.  
Stop drinking.  
Avoid mirrors.*

As I read it, I smiled inwardly. I hid all the mirrors in my house some time ago. No good comes of them.

## March 13th

Another day, another newsagent. I bought *The Sun* and a bottle of Mars milk. It tasted like shit and sugar. I must make a mental note to stick to Panda Cola – the only cola with actual bits of panda in it.

I flicked straight to 'Dear Deidre', *The Sun*'s agony aunt. I always relish the prospect of losing myself in other peoples' banal domestic problems. But Deidre wasn't there: she had been replaced by a another advisor – a proper doctor.

DEAR DRE...

*Dr Dre, AKA Andre Maurice Young, is Professor of Fertility Research at London University's Imperial College School of Medicine, and is a Consultant Obstetrician and Gynaecologist at Hammersmith Hospital in London. He is one of the world's greatest infertility experts, and in 1978 was part of the team that created the first 'test tube baby', Louise 'Bobby' Brown.*

*As a producer, he was also responsible for moving hip hop away from the earnest politics of Public Enemy and creating a new 'gangsta' style. He has worked with artists as diverse as Gwen Stefani, Snoop Dogg and Mary J. Blige.*

### IS THIS MAN TROUBLE OR WHAT?

*A FRIEND has been told he has prostate trouble. Well, he's not really a friend. He's just a bloke I sometimes see in the pub.*

*I don't even like him.*

*I know nothing about the prostate gland and how it might cause symptoms. What should I look for as I grow older?*

*Dre replies...*

*MANY people feel uncomfortable talking about the prostate, since the gland plays a role in both sex and urination. You would be surprised though. Some of the biggest players in the hip-hop world suffer from prostate problems.*

*Prostate enlargement is as common a part of ageing as grey hair. As life expectancy rises, enlarged prostate glands get more common – a few years ago a brotha in Compton wouldn't last until he was 30. Now, with Crips and Bloods putting down their guns, they may live much longer and be plagued by prostate problems.*

*The prostate is a walnut-size gland that forms part of a man's reproductive system. It lies directly under the bladder and encircles the urethra – the tube leading to the outside – and is made of two lobes enclosed in an outer shell. It looks like some nasty shit, yo.*

*It's common for the prostate to become enlarged as you get old. Doctors call the condition benign prostatic hypertrophy or BPH. They can call it what the hell they like. There are lots of docs, but there is only*

one Dr Dre. Anyway, you be getting your social security checks before you get a word from Mr Gland.

As the prostate enlarges, the layer of tissue surrounding it stops it from expanding, causing the gland to squeeze the urethra like a clamp on a garden hose at a LA barbecue. Sun blazin' down... homies chillin' on the left. Honeys relaxin' by the pool.

But I digress. The size of the prostate don't always determine how severe the obstruction or the symptoms will be. Some men with greatly enlarged glands have little obstruction and few symptoms while others, whose glands are less enlarged, have more blockages and greater problems.

It's like they said on *Different Strokes*: nappy rash for some – it ain't nappy rash for all.

### STRAIGHT OUTTA LUCK?

I'VE been seeing a girl for a year. When I say 'seeing her', I mean that she is my girlfriend... obviously I can see her. That's not the problem. I'm not blind.

When I try to get near her sexually, she says she isn't really interested and can 'take it or leave sex'.

She says she has been badly hurt by men in the past and doesn't know what kind of man she really wants. But the next minute she says she wants me and no one else. I know women are fickle, but this is something else!

Sex is an issue. I want sex. I need sex. I know it's not everything, but she hardly ever talks about it and now I think she doesn't fancy me that way. How can we make it together? I don't want to marry her or anything, I just want to go out with her for a few years, have regular sex and then drift apart like normal couples.

Dre replies...

YOUR woman has been hurt and is scared of showing she cares for you. She's certainly sending you mixed messages. It's like when big rappers start talking about how they still got love for the streets, when they're holed up in a Bel Air mansion with their coke. Don't make no sense to me.

You say sex isn't everything. Too damn right. Before I met my Michel'le I was down with every kind of ho, but it never meant anything to me.

It doesn't matter if you're in Memphis or Manhattan, communication is the key.

I know it's hard to broach the subject, but be brave and ask her outright if she's interested in you in that way. If she refuses to discuss it, you might have your answer there. Maybe you do. Maybe you don't. Life is a game like that.

That doesn't mean you're not an attractive person, just that it's not right between you two. And setting each other free will allow you to find the person who is right. It's like I used to say, if you're not happy on Death Row Records, you're free to leave – just don't forget who made you a star.

Why not talk it over with one of my semi-qualified counsellors and sex therapists on 0904344 001 03213056?

### COULD YOU PICK UP THE KIDS?

STEVE, could you pick up the kids from playgroup tonight? It looks like I'll be working late again – it's that bloody Wharfedale account, it's taking forever. Jim came in this morning and said they're unhappy with the edit that we've done, so it's going to be all hands to the pump for the next week. Darren is coming down from Cambridge to help out.

There are a couple of the lasagnes in the freezer. Toby prefers the Healthy Choice ones. I should be back at about 10 p.m., but don't wait up.

By the way, I picked up a tiramisu from M&S for Sunday. Looks scrummy.

See you later, xxxxxxxx Diane

Dre replies...

I guess this email wasn't meant for me, since I'm not called Steve and I don't know anyone called Diane. And I sure as hell am not eating tiramisu on Sunday – it's the day before the Grammys and you best believe I ain't got no love for the gut.

My advice is not for Diane, it is for Steve. Keep an eye on your woman. Just who is Darren? And what is he to Diane? Be careful.

I've still got the bass pumping when I hit your block. And I'm out of here.

I am unsure about Dr Dre. I've always admired his musical output, but I still miss Deidre.

## March 15th

Once again it rained. I saw a bird's nest floating down a flooded motorway.

At about 2 p.m. this afternoon, I was searching for my fishing rod. I was searching in the cupboard under the stairs when I stumbled upon a box of mildew-stained books. At the bottom of the pile was a dog-eared copy of my first novel, *The Story of My Life*, which I wrote in my early twenties. It wasn't a success, although it does enjoy a cult reputation. It's a bit of a depressing read. The central character is in a wheelchair, at the bottom of an ocean. Not very much happens in it.

The book sold exactly 910 copies. Of the 910 people who read the book, 900 committed suicide, and the other 10 went on to become professional footballers. I wash my hands of all of them. All I did was write a book, not tell them to jump off bridges or instruct them to try nutmegging the goalkeeper instead of blasting the ball into the roof of the net.

By the time I had found my fishing rod, the rain was so savage that I could not leave the house. I tried dangling my rod out of the bedroom window, but nothing was biting. I hate fishing.

## March 17th

If I were a dog, I would spend all day chasing my tail. But I am not a dog.

## March 18th

In recent weeks I have been working on a project to create comic strips of the great poets of our time. If all goes well, this will culminate in a comic in which T. S. Eliot and W. B. Yeats fight each other on a satellite orbiting earth, in a battle that will determine the future of mankind.

In the meantime, here's a comic strip about Philip Larkin.



## March 20th

Ah, the things I could tell you about Gwyneth Paltrow. She is the daughter of Hollywood royalty Blythe Danner and Bruce Paltrow. She's married to that bald bloke in that boyband. Her dad Bruce died a while ago. I felt sorry for her. I feel sorry for all rich orphans. All the money in the world can't buy back a dead dad.

So, if you bump into Gwyneth and she looks angry and let down, you know why. Go easy on her.

## March 21st

As a child, my mother used to nail me to a cross. It seemed perfectly normal to me and it wasn't until I turned 11 and started secondary school that I realised that junior crucifixion was not a common practice. It was something of a shock when I realised I was the only boy in my class with stigmata (although I didn't really mind, as it got me off games and swimming). I tried my best to make light of my wounds; my party trick was fitting a two-pence piece in the hole in my hand. It didn't make me hugely popular, but it kept me entertained.

School is never easy for anyone, and I can't say being crucified on a regular basis helped me feel any more normal.

I used to ask my mum: 'Why are you nailing me to a cross?'

She would frown and scowl, as though it was rude to ask such an impudent question. She would sigh and tell me, 'If I didn't do it, someone else would. Thank your lucky stars that it is your mother – who loves you – and not some complete stranger who is crucifying you.'

I naively assumed that when I grew up I would understand her logic.

## March 23rd

Like so many men, I am a keen football fan.

Last weekend Tottenham Hotspur football club invited me to their match against Birmingham City to give the team a motivational pep-talk

before the game. Their recent results have been poor, and as a long-suffering supporter, I felt it was my duty to try to help the club. Last year they invited Paul McKenna to hypnotise the squad, but the players overpowered him and buried him by the halfway line. Next time a game is on TV see if you can see the mound.

I walked into the dressing room and looked around, totally underdrawn by my surroundings. The players were sitting in their kit, silently gazing at their feet, preparing. The manager introduced me to the players, shook my hand and then left the room. I took a deep breath and began my speech.

'You are all bad people. All of you. Week after week you disappoint me. At the beginning of every season I have such high hopes, and inevitably you let me down. It's not like it's happened once. It's *every single season*. Every time there's a chance for us to win an easy game and climb the table, you blow it. You're overpaid and lazy. If your parents could see you now they would be unbearably ashamed. You are awful, rotten people. Yes, even you Jermaine. You people. You slumber in the safety of mid-table, always promising more and never delivering the goods. I know what you players are like – you play well for a couple of games and then demand a new contract in the hope that Chelsea or Arsenal will buy you. You are bad, *bad* people. I want you to go home tonight and apologise to your families. Apologise to the fans. Apologise to people in the street. Every day you should wake up feeling ashamed, because you are bad players and *bad* human beings. Now go out there and win a football game. It's not too much to ask.'

Then I walked out of the dressing room. The manager gave me a curious look and strode into the dressing room in a hurry. I don't suppose they will invite me back next year. I don't care. I said everything I needed to say. I was speaking not just for myself. I was speaking for every football fan I have ever met.

## March 25th

I was in Wood Green, at the opticians. I sat in the waiting area, flicking through yesterday's *Daily Mirror* as a family of Armenians argued beside me. A buzz of nerves growled at the base of my skull.

The optician ushered me through to her special, private room. The lights were dimmed.

I sat in the magical chair and squinted into the distance. The optician placed plastic slides in front of my eyes.

'Is it clearer now... or now?' she asked in soothing tones.

'Now.'

She swivelled and flicked a switch. The display in front of me changed.

'Is it clearer on the red? Or on the green?'

'The red?'

'And now?'

'Still the red', I said.

'Good. Do you have any family history of eye problems?'

'No. Although a cousin of mine is diabetic. And I know diabetes can affect the eyes.'

'That's true, but it's not a major problem in the short term. And how is your general health?'

'Not bad. I smoke too much, but otherwise it's OK', I sighed.

'And do you feel you have a rich inner life?'

'Excuse me?' I asked. It wasn't a typical optician question.

'Do you feel that when you're alone you're fulfilled? Do you repress your emotions or do you fully allow yourself to enjoy life?'

'I don't really know. I've always been prone to depression, and I do struggle with it, but I feel I have a fairly active emotional existence, in my own way... what does that have to do with my eyes?'

'I'm not testing your eyes now. I'm testing your spiritual vision. You may need a minor operation. Your soul looks a little undernourished', she added with a pleasant, vacuous smile.

'Oh. OK.'

Damn it. Why did she ask me about my emotional life? All I wanted to do was find out if I needed new glasses. *Now* look.

## March 26th

This is a conversation that I overheard. I didn't overhear it on the tube.

Man A: 'Dad, can I have an ice-cream?'

Man B: 'Maybe when we get to the seaside. We'll be there soon'.

Man A: 'But Dad, we haven't left yet – we're still in the garage. We have been the last 2 hours'.

Man B: 'Oh. Oh Tom, I do wish your mother was still here, she was so much better than me with these things'.

Man A: 'It's OK, Dad. It's not your fault. She's probably around the house somewhere. She won't have just vanished'.

Man B: 'You're a good kid, Tom. I wish I'd been as bright as you when I was your age'.

Man A: 'Dad, you are my age. We're both 45'.

Man B: 'Shit'.

## March 27th

I was wandering around Wood Green shopping centre, looking at exotic parrots and cheap tracksuits, when *'The Way We Were'* by Barbra Streisand came on over the loudspeaker. I froze. I dropped my mobile phone on a child. My bladder filled with warm piss. Tears filled my eyes. That song always gets to me.

As the song played, my mind was filled with images of snooker players from the golden age of the game: Willie Thorne – first with a mop of unruly hair, then sadly bald. Jimmy White looking young and pasty, then old and even pastier. Ray Reardon. Doug Mountjoy. A teenage Stephen Hendry with a mullet and skin like a car crash. Dennis Taylor wearing even more ridiculous glasses than normal. All the greats, from the Nugget to the Thai Foon... all those wonderful snooker players... mostly gone, but never forgotten...

The song finished. I picked up my phone and dabbed my eyes. I can't help it... The BBC once used the song in a video montage to fill up the time between the frames in a particularly tense World Championship

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