

# ***Time Out***

***By Martin Avis***



***A collection of short stories and poems.***

***For those rare moments when busy people can take  
time out from their busy lives.***

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Any comments or suggestions are most welcome and should be addressed to the author at the following email address: <mailto:timeoff@BizE-zine.com>

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## **Introduction**

We all live busy lives. Sometimes it is hard to grab even five minutes to relax and unwind.

This short collection of poems and prose is designed to fit right in with your busy life. I claim no particular literary merit. The sole raison d'être is to entertain and, in that, you must be the only judge.

The short stories cover very different topics, from the business-focused 'High-Risk Strategy' to the poignant 'Eighty-Five'. None will take you long to read. The shortest, 'The Moment' and 'The Casino' are examples of flash fiction: a single idea or event encapsulated in the minimum length of prose to convey the message. The longest, 'Time Off' might take you ten minutes or so. Save that one for the train journey to work – you might just identify with the main character.

All the poems are short and to the point. Some are for fun, and some will make you think. But all can be read in a minute or two. Dip in, dip out and enjoy.

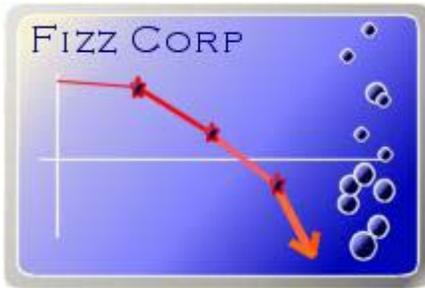
Although nothing in this book is intended to be offensive, it should be noted that both 'High-Risk Strategy' and 'Time Off' contain a small amount of strong language, and that the final poem, 'Girl on a Train' is mildly sexually suggestive.

Writing fiction is a hobby and a pleasure. In my real-life world of management and marketing, there is little room for flights of fancy. I think that is a pity. The world might be a better place if we all indulged our imaginations and emotions a little more. I took time out to indulge mine. I hope you enjoy taking time out as well.

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## **High-Risk Strategy**

*Warning: this story contains strong language.*



“Settle down, guys. How're we gonna explain this mess to the client?”

Jim Thompson looked from face to face around the table, his bulldog brow redder and more wrinkled than usual.

“Come on, come on. This is what you get the big bucks for. Get creative.”

His dark eyes bore into each of us in turn, willing us to give him a flash of inspiration that would save our jobs, and his reputation.

Peter, dressed in the Creative Director's uniform of black Armani was, as usual, the first to speak up.

“How about we do a vox-pop with the positives, turn it into a big video presentation and bury the bad news in the appendix?”

“Right now, no idea's a bad idea,” Jim answered, “but have you actually looked at the numbers? Only three people out of two and a half thousand said that Fruity Fizz was even drinkable! That's a fucking short video.”

Peter sensibly shut up and looked down at the polished walnut table, trying to look as if he was thinking hard and avoiding eye contact with everyone else, especially Jim. The air-conditioner hummed quietly above our heads.

“Bob! Come on, come on. Waddya think?”

Bob was very tall, very thin and very analytical. As Head of Client Services he was supposed to be in charge of all contact with the agency's clients, but everybody knew Jim kept him at arm's length where Fizzcorp was concerned. He slowly picked up his pencil and tapped the tip against his chin. He was stalling, poor bastard.

"Well...lets look at the facts. Between these walls," he waved his pencil around, "Fruity Fizz sucks. The creatives," he gestured dismissively at Peter, "have spent three months trying to come up with a credible pitch and have run out of time. So we sold the client on spending a wad of dough on this research to find out what Joe Schmo likes and hates about the stuff."

"Come on, come on. What's your point?" Jim was beginning to turn purple as his famously short fuse burnt out.

"My point is that we have blown a quarter of a mill finding out that half the country has never heard of Fruity Fizz and nearly everyone else thinks it tastes of cat's piss. And there are three weirdoes who like cat's piss."

"Great! Like none of us noticed! We know the story, Bobby boy. What's the answer?"

"The research is the answer. So they all hate it. So what? We knew that from the lousy sales. Why shouldn't we turn this round into something good? Use this as a reason to push for reformulation, new packaging, more bucks for advertising."

Jim pushed himself to his feet and everyone around the table inwardly groaned. When Jim starts pacing you know that the volcano is about to erupt.

"This is what I pay you for? Look on the fucking bright side? Don't you think we've spent enough time looking for a goddamned silver lining?"

As he spat each sentence his voice got louder and sweat sprayed from his flabby face. Each jab of Jim's finger seemed to burst a little more of Bob's confidence. Jim slammed his meaty hands on the table and opened his mouth to carry on his rant, but the fight seemed to suddenly drain from his body. He closed his eyes and lowered his head. "That's just fucking dumb," he said to the table before lapsing into an uncharacteristic silence.

The unexpected quiet was more frightening than Jim's rage.

"Okay guys, listen up." He ran his thick fingers through his wiry silver hair and turned his back on us. "Fizzcorp didn't want this research but I persuaded them to fund it. I stood up and promised that it would solve their problems. I guaranteed that it would steer the product back on course. But you know me guys, it wasn't them I was thinking about, it was the hundred grand profit that we'd make on the job. Who would've thought the figures would turn out so badly?"

"Now we're looking at two possibilities – they'll refuse to pay or they'll fire us. Probably both. Either way we can't afford the hit. The agency ends up in the can." He turned back to face us looking six inches shorter. "So you see – we've gotta find a way out of this or...well, we just gotta."

"Jim...there might be a solution."

"So," Jim looked across at me and I felt the other's eyes follow, "at last, Mark. Let's here what our strategy guru has to say. God knows you can't be dumber than everyone else."

This is it, I thought, will he buy a high-risk strategy or will he kick me out on my ass? "The truth is that only the four of us in the agency have seen the interim report, right?" Puzzled heads nodded around the table.

“And,” I continued, “Stephanie Green at the research company is probably the only one there who has seen the whole thing.”

“Bullshit,” Jim said quietly, “I’m two steps ahead of you and it won’t work. They’ve got field researchers, secretaries, managers: we can’t buy them all off.”

Peter and Bob’s heads came up like synchronized swimmers. “Whoa, Jim,” Peter spoke for both of them, “who’s talking about buying off?”

“Grow up.” Jim said. The aggression had gone from his voice leaving a tired and frightened man to pick up the pieces. “Mark is at least thinking around the problem. Shame it can’t work, there’s fuck-all else left.”

“Don’t be so sure,” I said, “there might be lots of researchers but they only see their own bit of it. The only person who sees the whole picture is the one who collates it all and writes it up. As this is a preliminary report, I bet Stephanie has worked on it alone.”

Hope crept into Jim’s eyes. “Whadya think it’d take to get her to change the report? Didn’t you date her once, Mark? How greedy is she?”

“She’s a classy lady and well paid too, but everyone in this town lives above their income. I doubt if she’d be cheap though.”

Jim seemed to come to a conclusion. “Look, we’re dead in the water if we don’t do it and I can’t think of any alternative. Mark, call her and set up lunch - just you, me and her, somewhere discreet. Let’s sound her out.”

I called her from the boardroom phone. Jim paced the long room while Bob and Peter sat looking miserable. “Stephanie? Hi, it’s Mark Arnold. How’ve you been? Listen, Jim Thompson and I have been going over the interim Fizzcorp report you emailed us and we wondered if the three of us could meet up for lunch to go over a

couple of points. You're free? Fantastic! Luigi's on Belling and Arizona at noon? Great, see you there."

Jim was almost friendly as we waited for Stephanie. His normal bullying arrogance was re-emerging as he psyched himself up for the job ahead. "Leave the talking to me, Marky-boy. I'm gonna offer her ten grand. If she takes it, great, but I'm willing to let her beat me up for twenty."

I sipped my Perrier and nodded. By the time Stephanie finally arrived, fifteen minutes late, Jim had finished his bread roll and two fierce Bloody Marys. She was tall, elegant and well dressed in a pale blue silk dress, which complemented her startling eyes and short blonde hair. I don't know how we got through the meal without talking business, but Jim seemed to sense that the social niceties had to be observed.

Finally, over coffee, he got down to the issue. "Stephanie, we need to talk about the Fizzcorp report. I gotta tell you, it's rather disappointing."

Her eyes hinted at a smile as she nodded in agreement. "I must say, I have seen better. What did the client have to say about it?"

"That's the point. We'd rather not expose the client to this level of negativity if we can help it."

"Ah." Stephanie let the word sit quietly on the table. "And?"

"And we wondered if you could suggest anything to help."

I felt as if I was at a tennis match, my neck was swiveling from one to the other.

"Jim, we wouldn't be sitting in a restaurant miles from anywhere if you just wanted some minor rewording. Tell me straight what you are after."

“Okay Stephanie, I'll lay it on the line for you. We want a new report. One that tells us enough people love the product to make it worthwhile trying to sell the stuff and with enough suggestions for range improvements that the client will think they got great value for money from my agency and from your company. And I'm willing to make it very worthwhile for you personally.”

She glanced at me before staring at Jim for a long few seconds. Then, enumerating her points on her slender fingers she said, “One. You are asking me to defraud Fizzcorp. Two. You are suggesting that I risk the reputation of my company. Three. If I did as you ask I could ruin my own career. Four. I am sure that what you suggest constitutes a felony. Five. Thank you for lunch, I think it is time I left.”

Jim's shiny face was like a fish out of water as he desperately tried to think of something to keep her talking.

“Please give us another couple of minutes, Stephanie,” I said, “Jim really is prepared to make it worth your while.”

“All right. For old time's sake and out of academic interest, I'm still listening.”

“Ten thousand dollars.” Jim jumped right to the point.

“Goodbye.” Stephanie pushed her chair back and started to stand.

“Twenty. For fu...for goodness sake, nobody will ever find out, we'd be the only ones to know.”

Stephanie slowly sat down again. “So. We are negotiating are we? Right now, Jim, I'm offended that you value my professional integrity so cheaply.” She took a Montblanc pen out of her purse, wrote something on a napkin and folded it up, placing it on the table in front of her. “Do you have any idea what this would entail? All the

questionnaires and interviews, all balanced by state and demographics?

“I really am going now. Read this after I leave. If you agree, phone me this afternoon and say yes. You will get exactly what you want in forty-eight hours. If not, then this conversation never happened.” She turned as she walked out of the door. “Nice to see you again Mark.”

I reached out to pick up the napkin, but was stopped by Jim’s hand grabbing my wrist. “Don’t fucking touch it.” He released me, scooped up the paper and opened it inches from his face. “Sweet Jesus! The fucking greedy bitch.”

“What does she want?” I asked.

“Blood,” he said, ashen, “eighty grand. And you know what? She knows I don’t have a choice. Phone her and tell her yes. Shit! At least we won’t lose money and well keep the business.”

Later that evening I was thinking about how many ways the high-risk strategy could have gone wrong, when the phone rang.

“Hello darling, had a good day?”

“It’s been interesting.”

“I want to go out and have fun. Can you pick me up in half an hour?”

“Aren’t you working late tonight?” I said

“What, to get Jim’s report done?” Stephanie said, “Don’t be silly, I’ll just send him the real one. It’s been ready for days. The hard part was making up the bad one - I really thought I had overdone it. Now, how are you going to spend your forty thousand?”

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## ***How I Love You!***

How I love you, how I care  
to smell your fresh and shining hair.

How I love you, how I yearn  
to feel your smile's warmth start to burn  
my icy fears and frightened tears,  
my night-time dread, my ruffled bed,  
my beating heart: woke with a start.

How I love your caring grace  
as you stroke my sweat-drenched face.

How I love to hear your voice  
drive out the demons I'd no choice  
to usher in. Their wrinkled skin,  
their bloody growl, and stealthy prowl,  
retreat. They heard your magic word.

“How I love you little one,  
Mummy's here, the nightmare's gone.”



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## **Eighty-Five Years**



If I stay completely still, the pain isn't so bad. Breathing hurts a bit, but I can cope with that as long as I keep it shallow. Stupid! You'd think that by my age, I'd have learned to watch where I am going.

I've never really looked at this rug before. Rose bought it years ago.

"What do you want a pink rug for?" I'd asked a bit too harshly.

"It's pretty," she'd said as if that was all the reason she had needed. "It cheers the place up."

It feels kind of rough and tufty. Like newly mown grass. My dad loved his grass. His little patch of lawn was always immaculate. Two, sometimes three times a week, he'd be out there cutting it with the old mower. Trimming the edges with his shears. I loved to watch him. I'd sit on the little wall at the end while he pushed up and down, filling the green tin box on the front with the finest clippings, and leaving perfectly straight lines behind him. My job was to empty the grass box.

"Bobby, come and get it!" he'd call out to me.

He always seemed to end up at the other end of the lawn to where I was, so I would have to run like the wind to get it from him. I can't have been more than six or seven and I would struggle to empty that box out, just bursting with pride that I was helping my dad.

Funny what you remember. It only seems like yesterday.

Ouch! That hurt. I shouldn't have tried to move my head. Rest a moment. Try again in a minute: I can't stay like this forever.

What's that smell? Sweet, like flowers. Something I was spraying round. Floral bouquet air freshener. Smells like roses. My Rose had such a big bouquet. The war was on and everything was rationed: no cake, just a cardboard model iced with plaster; her dress made up by the lady down the road out of an old parachute. I had my uniform on and she said I looked very smart. But the flowers! Even Mister Hitler couldn't stop the flowers from growing. She carried a huge bouquet of pale pink roses.

"Not one of them's as pretty as you," I whispered to her at the altar.

"You don't look so bad yourself," she said with a glint in her eye.

We didn't get much of a honeymoon, with me going straight back on duty, but we had years ahead of us. Happy years, mostly. I never ever stopped loving her. I wish she would give me a hand now.

"What have you managed to do to yourself, you old coot?"

"Rose? I was just thinking about you. How did you get in?"

"Just try and relax, love. I'll help you in a minute."

It's good to know she's here. Comforting, somehow. I can't feel my hip anymore. I'm glad of that: can't feel the pain in my leg either. Look at all that dust under the cupboard! I can't have cleaned under there in years. Reminds me of that old filing cabinet when I was in the bank. Mr. Cooke, the manager, wanted it cleared out. He'd never get himself dirty, and all those young lads in their trendy flared trousers and long hair would have just laughed at him, so who else could he boss around?

“Robert. When you’ve got a moment, I want you to clean out those old files. Some of them have been there since the forties. You might have worked on some of them.”

So I got to clean out thirty-odd years of dirty, dusty files. Every manila folder that I opened sent up a cloud of dust. That had everyone in the office howling with laughter. When I finished, my black suit trousers were filthy and my hands were covered in grime. I came home and Rose helped me brush most of it off and sponged the rest.

“Why do you always let that awful man order you around?”

“I haven’t got much choice, love. I can retire in five years and then to hell with the lot of them.”

But I couldn’t afford to retire until I was sixty-five, five years later than I had hoped.

“You still there, Rose.”

“Of course, Bob. Where do you think I’d go?”

“I’ve missed you, love.”

“I know. I wish I’d had more time. We’d had more time.” Rose bent down and stroked my face.

“I had so many plans. I wanted us to see the world, do all the things we’d dreamed about. But what was the point without you?”

“It was just my time, Bob. Like this is yours.”

“You look so young. Am I just imagining you? Are you real?”

“As real as you are, my darling. Take my hand...it won’t hurt now.”

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### ***The Mall at the Weekend***

Careless, crushing, callous crowds,  
Music blaring much too loud.  
Bulging logo'd bags held proud:  
That's the mall at the weekend.

Empty wallet, aching feet,  
One more shop, one more treat,  
Try on clothes in sweaty heat.  
That's the mall at the weekend.

There's nowhere to sit, the benches are few,  
The stores want you moving constantly through,  
You can't take a break: there's shopping to do!  
That's the mall at the weekend.

Teenage girls in huddled chat,  
Serious talk of this and that,  
Pretend to ignore the boy in the hat.  
That's the mall at the weekend.

'There are pickpockets here', say the signs on the wall.  
The guards go in pairs to each distress call,  
And shoplifters don't see the cameras at all.  
That's the mall at the weekend.

"Its the best mall around" - shout the ads on TV,  
"All that you want and there's coffee for free."  
"When your credit is gone we've twelve movies to see!"  
That's the mall at the weekend.

*Continued ...*

With brass, chrome and glass reflecting your gaze  
Your vision is dazzled as neon lights blaze,  
But the cost doesn't matter - flash decor still pays.  
That's the mall at the weekend.

Toddlers escape and hide in clothes rails,  
Twelve year-olds sulk and hang back like snails,  
Old folks drink tea and exchange ancient tales.  
That's the mall at the weekend.

The mall at the weekend is crowded and vast:  
The modern-day version of markets long past.  
The set may have changed, but it's still the same cast.  
Long live the mall at the weekend.

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## **The Casino**

Every time I draw an ace so does the dealer, and it's pissing me off.

"Do you wanna take insurance?" She intones like a curse.

I shake my head, or make a tiny, grudging nod. Whatever. The trouble is, I care: I hate to see my small pile of chips slowly dwindle. The dealer doesn't give a damn if I win or lose, stay or leave, live or die. I'm just another player in a long, long line. Just another loser.

The old man on my right is getting me down too. Clouds of blue cigar smoke hang around him as he tutts and sighs over my play. Maybe he's some kind of counter and thinks my game is messing up his system. I don't care. He could always find another table.

A hard-faced waitress brings me a free drink, which costs me a \$5 tip and tastes more of water than JD. Her eyes never meet mine; there is no smile as she sets the glass down on its paper disk.

A win at last. My soft eighteen against the dealer's queen, five and deuce. Was that a scowl I saw on the dealer's face? Even the pit boss looking over her shoulder seems to resent my good fortune.

Kerchung! The slots pay out three feet behind me. An old lady who is feeding her machine like a mother bird with her hungry chick elbows my back yet again. I'm glad she won at last, but wish she were a few feet further away. How long would it take her to put all those quarters back, I wonder.

So many things I don't like about this place. So many ways that the player could be made more welcome, more at home, more willing to stay and play. Come Monday, when I take up my new job as General Manager of this hotel, I'll be ready with a long list of suggestions.

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## ***The Man***

The man takes off his rain-drenched mac,  
put down his case, his cash, his phone.  
Kicks shut the door with no glance back,  
and settles in to his warm, dry home.

Inside he feels quite safe and sound.  
Soon settles in his old routine:  
Kettle on and radio's company all around.  
The bathroom leaves him soapy clean.

He loves to feel his leather chair  
softly strong under his hand,  
and sometimes feels he'd like to share  
his world, which seems to him so grand.

He'd bought carnations days ago,  
Their clove perfume now reach his nose.  
Such beauty is a joy to know:  
Cut grass, fresh bread, a single rose.

His book - still where he'd left it last,  
picked up. He really loves this tale.  
He feels he knows the writer's cast,  
as his fingers run across the braille.

At eight next morning, fortified,  
He walks four blocks to catch the bus.  
His life is lived with faulty eyes,  
But otherwise, just like us.

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## **Historical Precedent**



“If I can get here on time then I’m damned sure you could,” the professor called with just a hint of a French accent.

Bells, summoning the faithful, guided my pace as I gasped slowly up the steep hill towards the old church. The narrow, cobbled street glistened in the fierce morning sunshine. A slow trickle of sweat ran between my shoulder blades and my briefcase seemed heavier with each step I took.

An old man nodded casually from the church steps. He flicked his cigarette into the road, then turned and pulled open the heavy door allowing the muffled sound of a hymn to escape from the shadowy interior. Opposite the church, an enterprising street vendor busily roasted chickens on a rotisserie. The smells wafted through the narrow street to tempt the worshippers.

I wasn’t destined to begin that day by giving thanks to God. A far more earthly task awaited me. Standing by the rusty railing, in a crumpled cream suit, was the reason I was there. The old professor impatiently wiped his face on a handkerchief. He didn’t look particularly daunting, but I knew not to keep him waiting. I quickened my step.

“Sorry,” I panted, glancing up at the clocktower. “I’m only a couple of minutes late, and it is so hot today.” It was 10.03. I had traveled overnight from London, then 150 kilometers from Paris to meet him in

his village in the middle of nowhere; I thought I had done incredibly well.

“Never mind, never mind,” he flapped his damp handkerchief at me, “look at the state you are in. Why do young people always complain so much?”

We shook hands and he waited while I caught my breath. At the bottom of the hill a stooped old lady, dressed all in black, began her slow, painful ascent towards her weekly act of salvation.

“She doesn’t complain, you know. Ninety-two years old and she still struggles up here twice a week. Madame LeClerc puts you to shame Monsieur. Anyway, now you are here we can get out of this wretched sun.”

He guided me across the street towards a dilapidated building. Bare wooden shutters disintegrated at the windows. The once red-painted walls had faded to a peeling, dusty pink. It was an ordinary country house in an undistinguished rural village. A lonely pot of scarlet geraniums adorned the windowsill. No true Frenchman willingly spends money beautifying the outside of his home: that would be far too bourgeois. Inside is what matters. The professor’s home was neat and well kept.

He waved me to an upright wooden chair beside the kitchen table and poured two small glasses of red wine. Drinking so early in the day was strange to me, but I sipped it slowly to avoid giving offence. Eventually, he eased himself into the chair. My heart beat at double time as I looked at the legend opposite me. Professor Janneau had retired suddenly ten years before at the height of his profession. Since then, nobody in the academic community had heard a whisper from him. I needed his voice, though. Needed him to agree with my analysis of what I had found buried under years of neglect in the storage rooms of the British Museum.

“Professeur, j’ai une probleme ...” my London-accented French was abysmal but I made the attempt out of respect. He quickly interrupted.

“You have a problem. Yes, yes, Monsieur Johnstone, I already know that. And you want my help. Speak in English, it will be easier on both of us.”

“I’m sorry. Your publisher in London agreed with me that you need to see my discovery and so contacted you on my behalf. I certainly didn’t want to go public without your knowledge.”

“He can be a little ... melodramatique. He sells more books that way. But as you are the first person that he has sent to me in ten years perhaps you have something. What have you discovered?”

Archeology is grounded in theories. The history we work with is often so fragmentary that a true picture of events is impossible to extrapolate. In the end, the story that is most widely accepted is that postulated by the most eminent figure. Even when contradictory evidence is later uncovered there is a universal distaste in proving a respected colleague wrong.

To stand even a small chance of having my ideas taken seriously, or any chance at all of being published, I had to demolish one of the most long standing and utterly convincing theories of Ancient Egypt. It was the theory that had made Professor Janneau’s reputation nearly forty years earlier.

The Ancient Egyptians pose modern scholars two huge problems. The first is that they were such obsessive record keepers that the sheer volume of material available for analysis is almost overwhelming. The second is that their society and way of thinking was so completely different from our own that interpretation of the mass of documents, carvings, stele and wall paintings is fraught with difficulties.

I had two obvious routes open to me: ignore my find, rebury it in the store rooms and let it become some far future historian’s problem, or,

write it up as persuasively as I could and pray that my peers would allow it to be published. The idea of writing a popular ‘alternative’ history book as so many disenfranchised researchers have done didn’t even occur to me. Instead, after considering the problem from as many angles as I could, I decided on a different solution. I would try to persuade the Professor to support my idea.

I took a deep breath. There was no point in trying to work around to the subject subtly; he was far too clever and irascible to allow me that luxury.

“Professor, I have found a fragment of a previously unknown stele which seems to show that the Pharaoh who began the movement which became the Exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt was Amenophis IV.”

“Seems?” He said quietly, without inflexion. A man in his position, confronted with evidence to shatter his life’s work, doesn’t bluster. First he analyses, then, if possible, he demolishes.

“The hieroglyphs are quite clear,” I passed a glossy black and white photograph of the carved stone tablet across the table, “my translation reads *‘In year eleven of the reign of Akhenaten after the city ‘Horizon of Aten’, was completed, the people’s leader was summoned. Pharaoh spoke: The God is powerful and my lands have suffered enough. Gather your people from every corner of the two lands and settle my beautiful city of light. The palace must remain for Pharaoh.’*”

The Professor took out a huge magnifying glass from a drawer in the dresser. He silently studied the photograph of the carved symbols. I simply sat and waited for his pronouncement.

Eventually it came.

“This is sloppy work. You have made three errors of translation, plus one of omission, one of addition and one of supposition. The royal cartouche has been damaged and so an unequivocal translation of the

name Akhenaten is impossible. Second, the glyph for God could be singular or plural, so the piece may not refer to a single deity at all and could read *'the Gods are powerful'*. Thirdly, the word for settle could also be read as 'go to'. Not necessarily a command to colonize. Your omission is to fail to translate the damaged glyphs signifying the name of the 'leader'. Your addition is to name the city as Akhetaten when it is not directly named. And your supposition is to create a history in your mind based on your previous knowledge. If you did not know something of the story of the Exodus, this passage would mean nothing."

I felt like a student again. Although I was certain of my translation, the Professor spoke with such authority that I began to doubt my convictions.

"The royal cartouche is damaged, I agree, but not obliterated. There is enough of an outline to be pretty certain that it is Akhenaten, as Amenophis IV called himself. Besides, most stele, which referred to him, were damaged in the same way after he became a non-person. Egypt never forgave him for promoting faith in one God above all others."

The Professor shrugged and poured himself another glass of wine. He waved the bottle at me and raised his eyebrows, but I shook my head and put my hand over my glass.

"I agree with your reading of *God* or *Gods* and *settle* or *go to*, but I don't believe that the alternatives necessarily change the interpretation of the event, only the details. As for the mysterious leader - I could have easily put the name Moses in to the text, but you would have picked me up on that immediately. The fact is that the name has been deliberately mutilated, probably in antiquity and any translation of what remains would be pure speculation. Akhetaten was known as the 'city of light'. I have used the name to augment the description, but all Egyptologists know it as such. As for my previous knowledge of an historic context to place this passage in, that is how all history is sorted and ordered. I make no apologies for that."

“Well done, mon brave. You have passed the first test. You are not so overawed by my towering reputation that you are unable to argue your case.”

“So, do you believe I have found convincing evidence?”

“Slowly, slowly, young fellow. I based my theory that Ramses II was the Pharaoh of the Exodus on rather more than one stele. I am not going to let you tear down my years of work quite so fast. Besides, even if we accept your translation at face value, it is not saying that Akhenaten oversaw the Exodus, merely that he gave a city to some people.”

“But we do know that he moved his court to the new city - upsetting the religious leaders in the rest of Egypt. If this new evidence proves that he had already filled the city with the Hebrew people, it is, at the least, an indication that Akhenaten sowed the seed of hope, gave them a sense of identity and homeland. In that sense, he initiated the Exodus, even if it took generations before the Hebrews finally left Egypt.”

“Oui, oui, I see your logic. But their freedom in Akhetaten would have been short-lived. If this all happened in his eleventh year, he died less than ten years later.”

“Quite. And his son, Tutankhamen, was forced to abandon the city of light. But my point is that this event may well have been the catalyst which made them hanker after leaving Egypt altogether.”

The old man closed his eyes. As he sat there at his kitchen table, trousers pulled up to his chest over his huge stomach, thinking through the arguments, I was struck by the absurdity of the situation. Here we were, old and new academia, discussing such minutiae of history as if our lives depended on it.

“Young man, I wish you luck. You have got a mountain to climb, but I cannot be your guide. I am too old to fight for a new truth. If I support you now, all of my work will have to be rethought and I don’t have the inclination to do that any more. I chose to leave your world ten years ago – I feel no yearning to return.”

I was bitterly disappointed. We continued discussing ancient history for another couple of hours, but his mind was made up. He would not help me. I trudged back down the hill under the noon sun, cursing the heat, the journey and most of all, Professor Janneau.

Two weeks later I received a letter.

*“Mon Brave,*

*Do you remember old Madame LeClerc, struggling up the hill to church? She faced her mountain twice every week and won.*

*I told you that you must face a mountain in proving your theories. I have come to realize that my complacency is a mountain as well.*

*I will guide you to climb yours, if you will help me in conquering mine.*

*Would you consider collaborating with an old man to write a new book - introducing your theory and updating mine?*

*Incidentally, although I do not share her faith, it occurred to me that Madame LeClerc might appreciate a lift up the hill, so I took it upon myself to offer. She is a remarkable woman. You will enjoy meeting her next time you visit.*

*Prof. Janneau.”*

That was fifteen years ago. The academic community accepted our book and I made my reputation. More importantly, I forged a

friendship with the old professor that endured until his death last summer.

Now you come to me and tell me that you have ‘new evidence’ and you need my help in proving it. Don’t you realize that if I help you I will have to rewrite my life’s work as well as that of old Professor Janneau?

Ah well, he left me some strong ropes. So get your climbing shoes on, this one has got snow on top.

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## ***The Professional***

Outward calm with inner dread,  
Unwanted pictures in his head.  
Steady hands, granite glare,  
Man of steel without a care.

Deep slow breaths, pounding heart,  
No learned craft this defusing art.

Moisture gathers in helmet's screen,  
Kevlar vest in army green.  
Tools laid out in neat array,  
Praying he will pack away.

Acrid smell the final proof:  
The coded caller told the truth.

“Don't try to move it,” said the voice,  
“And evacuation ain't a choice.”  
“The school goes up, if you don't comply.”  
“Meet our demands, or kids will die.”

So he'd had to get inside  
Unseen. Then find the bomb and hide.

The device he found was small and neat,  
But hard to fathom, tough to beat.  
All its failsafes must be found.  
He studied it from all around.

When at last he removed the case  
Sweat was running down his face.

*Continued ...*

Inside it was a complex sight:  
Wires shone in his torches light.  
But the thing that gave the greatest fear,  
Was the radio strapped on to the rear.

One false move, one tiny sound,  
And they'd all be buried in the ground.

His heartbeat slowed, his sweating stopped,  
His mind sped up as his stress rate dropped.  
Doubts, that in every mind must lurk,  
Vanished, as he went to work.

His hand was steady as he raised his pliers  
And without a doubt cut through the wires...



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## **Visiting Time**



Lucy and William were in two minds about visiting their great-grandma. She was very old and frail and the nursing home had an odd smell. They didn't enjoy having to sit still through their fortnightly visits: eight and ten-year-olds wanted to run around, play and make a noise. For all that though, Nanny Maud could be quite fun.

“Children, your great-grandmother is nearly a hundred. Just sit quietly and let her talk,” their mother said, “the time will pass quickly enough.”

Sometimes it did. Sometimes, when she dozed off and they had to be extra quiet not to disturb her, it didn't.

The old lady was asleep in her usual chair by the window when they arrived. The sun filtered through the net curtains, creating a shimmering aura around her fine silver hair. Lucy and William hardly dared to breath; the silence was so thick in the visitor's room.

“It's quieter than the library,” whispered William, anxious to make some sound – any sound.

They settled into hard institutional chairs and waited for Nanny Maud to rouse. Five minutes passed, each taking an hour to go by for the children. Lucy, unable to sit still any longer, slipped from her chair and peered closely at the old lady. She turned her head to her mother:

“Is she still breathing?”

Maud's eyes slowly opened and focused on the small girl. She smiled with lined lips and yellow teeth.

"I'm not dead yet! I was just resting my eyes."

"Hello Nan," said the children's mother, "how are you today?"

Lucy and William took this as a sign that they could release some of their pent up exuberance.

"Nanny! Nanny!" Two small bodies ran to either side of the old lady's chair and little arms stretched out to compete for hugs. Old Maud feigned irritation at the fuss, but secretly loved every minute.

"Hello everyone, how nice to see you all." She then told them all about the people who hadn't visited that week and how awful the food was and how uncaring the carers were. Until eventually, she ran out of steam.

"Would you mind terribly getting me a nice cup of tea, dear, I'll be alright here with the children."

When their mother had gone, Maud beckoned the children closer to her and put her spindly, cardigan-clad arms around them.

"Now we are alone, I want to tell you about something that happened to me many years ago. Something I have never told a soul about. I have kept this secret all my life, but now I want to share it with the two of you."

Certain that she had their attention, she continued.

"I was about your age Lucy, and my parents were quite well-to-do. They decided that we would go to America. Do you know how people went to America in those days, William?"

"By airplane?"

“No, dear, that came much later. We went by ship. As a birthday surprise for my mother, father booked us passage on a very special, famous ship. The Titanic.”

“They made a film about the Titanic, Nanny,” Lucy interrupted.

“I expect they did, dear. And I’m sure they got it completely wrong too. Oh, what a time we had. I can still remember the wonderful meals, the red carpets and the chandeliers. It was all so luxurious.

“Then late one night, everything changed. Our wonderful cruise suddenly became the biggest nightmare anyone could imagine.”

“What happened?” Lucy and William spoke together, eager to hear old Maud’s story unfold.

“Mother had taken me back to our cabin after dinner and I was tucked up in bed while she sat in a big armchair and read a book. Father had kissed me goodnight and then gone off to listen to one of the orchestras that were playing. Our cabin was warm and cozy and before long I went off to sleep.

“Then, just before midnight, I was awoken by a jolt that nearly knocked me out of my bunk and a deafening screech of ripping metal. The ship seemed to rock backwards and forwards a few times before the engines stopped. Mother screamed, and I remember starting to cry. The lights in our cabin flickered and the ship felt wrong somehow. We didn’t know what to do, so we decided to wait for father to come back.

“A bell kept right on ringing in the distance, but we didn’t know what it meant. After about an hour, when father didn’t return, mother quickly dressed me and pulled me out of the cabin. ‘We must get up to the deck,’ she kept saying, over and over. But there were hundreds of people trying to do the same thing. My tiny hand slipped right out

of Mother's and immediately we were separated. There was nothing she or I could do; the press of bodies was just too strong.

"I didn't know where to go. People were running around everywhere and I was lost and frightened. Can you imagine the confusion, children?"

Lucy and William nodded.

"By the time I managed to get on deck, the ship was leaning over to one side quite a bit and I saw that people were in lifeboats bobbing in the sea below. A man tried to grab me to put me into a lifeboat which was hanging from ropes over the side of the ship, but I was too terrified and I ran back inside the ship looking for my parents.

"The noises deafened me. The whole ship groaned like an animal in pain. Nobody seemed to know what to do or where to go. Everyone was so frightened. Suddenly, I found myself walking uphill. Fortunately I was near a doorway to the outside deck and so I went back outside. I couldn't see anybody. The whole ship reared up into the sky and I couldn't find anything to hold on to. I simply slid down the deck until I reached the water where the back of the ship was going under.

"Was it cold, Nanny?" Lucy whispered.

"So cold I couldn't feel anything. People were shouting again, but I couldn't see anybody. The ship's lights had gone out and it was pitch dark. I felt certain that I was going to die then. All I could think of doing was calling out for my parents, but of course, they weren't there.

"The huge ship slid beneath the water, sucking me down with her. Deeper and deeper I sank, holding my breath and struggling for dear life, but it did no good. Then, almost as my lungs felt as if they would burst, I felt a hand grab mine. I didn't know what was happening, but I was pulled at a great speed through the icy water.

“When you are about to drown, children, you know that your next breath will kill you, but you still try to wait as long as possible. And somehow, I held my breath longer than I would have ever thought possible. But even my young lungs gave out eventually, and I opened my mouth to gasp in icy water, but instead I tasted cool air. I could breathe!

“ ‘Open your eyes,’ said a voice in my ear, ‘try not to be frightened.’ I opened my eyes and saw the most beautiful creature. I suppose she was a mermaid. Her skin glowed with a silvery light, which lit up the icy cavern I found myself inside. I realized that I didn’t feel cold anymore. Her glow was warming the water around me.

“ ‘Where am I?’, I said.

“ ‘Inside the iceberg. Your vessel has damaged the poor thing, but she should heal. I am afraid that your vessel will not.’ Her voice was like a thousand tinkling bells.”

“Weren’t you scared?” Lucy stared at her great grandmother with serious eyes.

“Shhh, Lucy. Don’t interrupt.” William was hanging in every word.

“No, I don’t think I was scared at that moment. Somehow she made me feel happy, despite all that was going on. Anyway, where was I? ‘I want my parents, are they alright?’ I asked the mermaid. I didn’t really expect her to know, but I had to ask anyway.

“ ‘I can take you back to your own kind, but you must make me a solemn promise. You must promise me that you will never tell anybody about me. Your kind must never know about mine.’

“ ‘Why not? You are pretty and you’ve helped me.’ I was young and naïve.

“ ‘One day you will understand, child. Our peoples are too different to be friends. Now make me that promise.’

“I did promise the mermaid that I would never tell a soul about her, but now I’m old and near the end of my life, I just have to share my secret with someone. Will you children promise keep the secret for me? Not even tell your mother?”

“Yes Nanny, we promise.” Lucy and William nodded their heads solemnly. “What happened next?”

“The mermaid took my hand again, and told me to close my eyes and take another deep breath. Then she pulled me back under the water. I knew she was swimming fast because the water rushed against my face. After a few moments we came to a stop and her hand squeezed my wrist one last time before pushing me towards the surface.

“My head bobbed above the waves and all the noise and horror assaulted my senses again. The freezing cold numbed me to my very bones. People moaned all around, the boats creaked, women and children sobbed, and everywhere there were voices in the darkness calling out for help. ‘Please save one more soul,’ I heard, ‘make room for one more.’ But none of the boats would turn back and slowly the cries died away.

“ ‘There’s a child in the water,’ I heard a woman’s voice. ‘Grab her, pull her aboard.’ Hands came over the side of the lifeboat and pulled me in. I think I was nearly gone because I wasn’t even cold anymore and I didn’t even have the strength to cry out.

“ ‘Maud! Oh my darling, it’s really you, thank the Lord!’ I opened my eyes and looked straight into my mother’s tear-streaked face. She hugged me to her as I gratefully took some heat from her body. Her arms never stopped holding me until long after the Carpathia rescued us. We never saw father again. And I have never set foot on another ship to this day.”

“Sit back down now children, your mother is coming back with my tea. Remember your promise now.”

Lucy and William stared wide-eyed at their great grandma, neither knowing quite what to say.

“Here’s your tea, Nanny Maud,” what have you all been talking about?

“Oh I’ve been telling them some stories about when I was a girl. Just passing the time.” She surreptitiously winked at the children and brought her gnarled finger to her lips.

When the visit was over and Lucy and William were safely in the back of their mother’s car, William whispered to his sister.

“Nanny must have been so scared.”

“Yes, and she was only our age.”

“Well she was even younger when she stowed away aboard the Wright brother’s first flight, and that must have been scary too.”

“Shhh. Mother will hear us.”

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## **Casino Conundrum**



Green Baize,  
Expert plays,  
Turn the card,  
Thinking hard.

Should I hit?  
Make the fit?  
Double down?  
Bet the town?

Eight and Ace  
Against a Face.  
Tough to guess  
What is best.

Dealer grins,  
Lifts her chin.  
“Stand or draw?”  
Think some more.

Count the pips.  
Dwindling chips.  
Cash or pride?  
Now decide.

I could hold,  
Not be bold.  
- Dealer pulls ten -  
And lose again.

*Continued ...*

Double down?  
Thoughtful frown.  
All of use -  
One solo deuce.

Or just draw:  
Play some more.  
Hope and trust  
That Dealer busts.

What to do?  
What would you?  
Weigh the odds.  
Beseech my God.

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## ***The Moment***

Helen knew that she could never resist him. With a sigh she stared deep into Tom's eyes. So blue, so expressive. Every tiny wrinkle around the corners meant something to her. A reminder of each smile shared, each tear shed.

How she loved that face: its jawline square and rough with day-old bristles; his nose strong, straight and proud; eyebrows a couple of shades lighter than his short, dark brown hair; lips full and gently curved into just the hint of a smile. She knew the taste of those lips so well from the hundreds of kisses that she never once felt tired of. If only she could kiss them now.

Just looking at him brought a flutter to her stomach and a lump to her throat. She could feel the tears rising, knew that he would hate to see them, let them fall anyway.

With the heel of her hand she wiped away a solitary teardrop that had splashed onto the glass and, as she did every morning, put his photograph back on her nightstand, next to his medals.

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## ***A London Double Decker Bus***



From the buses top floor you can see so much more  
Of the world as it passes below.  
You're just like a spy looking down from the sky  
At the things that no-one should know.

Look down at the stores with their 'come inside' doors,  
And bright windows that hard-sell their wares.  
But the shoppers can't see the filth and debris  
Through cracked windows in damp rooms upstairs.

Take that blonde girl down there - with the fly-away hair –  
And the dress that so amply displays.  
She waits in the queue without any clue  
That my eyes are drawn down to appraise.

I'm alone like a crow, with the driver below,  
Surveying the life on the ground.  
It's a feeling divine: all this - its all mine!  
Like a movie without any sound.

Look over that wall, built thick, wide and tall,  
Creating a secret enclave.  
Well, I can see clear from way, way up here  
The sunbathing wife and her maid.

*Continued ...*

The driver behind can't make up his mind  
To overtake or just to linger.  
So he sweats in the heat all alone in his seat,  
And unpacks his nose on his finger.

I wish you could see the things so clear to me:  
Like a carving high up on a wall,  
A bird on a twig, an ill fitting wig.  
Stuff you see when you're fifteen feet tall.

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## **Time Off**

*Warning: this story contains strong language.*



Alan looked around the tired office walls and sighed. The metal-framed partitions and functional gray furniture wore their scuffs and finger marks with resignation. Yellowed glue from long-removed Scotch tape clung tenaciously to the pale walls. Heaps of papers surrounded his desk like dusty tombstones commemorating his passing years. His watch said 3:05.

How much longer can I keep doing this, he thought bitterly, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his palms. And for what? Work for years in a job that bores me rigid, retire on too little money, then die. Mourned only by a wife and kids who are disappointed that I didn't have more cash to leave them.

He ran his stubby fingers through what was left of his hair and blinked. The numbers on his computer screen meant nothing and he couldn't be bothered to spend the next two hours making sense of someone else's finances. It was 3:07. He felt like crying.

Nobody leaves college planning a lifetime of boredom. You have plans, ambitions, and hopes, even expectations. They don't tell you how mind-numbingly long forty-odd years are. Nobody warns you about the constant worries: security and money and the mortgage and the tiny savings and the children's clothes and vacations and the car repairs and all the other grown-up things that you have to live with. Nobody says how fast you wake up from your dreams.

At forty-nine, Alan knew that he had peaked: a middle-ranking accountant in a medium-sized firm looking forward to sixteen more

years of gradual decline. Unless he got downsized, of course: that was the specter that hung over his life. Welcome to the world of corporate disloyalty. Suck ‘em in, bleed ‘em dry and spit ‘em out. There are a hundred cheaper bodies eagerly waiting to take your place.

It was 3:11, and he just had to get out of there. He guiltily got to his feet and slid into his suit jacket. Willfully leaving his computer and office light switched on - despite the inter-office power-conservation memo - he sidled over to his boss’s pretty-but-vacant secretary.

“Becky, I don’t feel at all well. I need to go home and lie down for a while. Tell Bob I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Okay Al,” Becky said with a knowing look, “I hope you feel better soon.”

The clock above the elevator said 3:05, but everyone knew it was set ten minutes slow to make people feel bad about leaving on time. Alan felt like a naughty schoolboy playing truant. He was relieved when the bell rang and the door slid open. Now he really had escaped - nobody could stop him now.

He pressed the button for the parking lot in the basement and leaned back against the worn brown-carpeted wall. Lights above the door marked his descent to temporary freedom: 4...3...2... a sudden jolt and then nothing. Silence. The whirring of the motor had stopped, the door was still tightly shut and Alan knew he wasn’t going home as early as he had hoped. A feeling of panic gripped him and he repeatedly jabbed the red alarm button. There seemed to be no effect. A little door with a torn label that read 'EMERGE Y ELEPH' swung half open in one wall. Maybe it had a phone that worked inside. His mind visualized the dark, cavernous drop inches below his feet. Was the floor really solid? Instantly cautious, he edged his way around the sides and ripped open the little door. Sure enough there was a red telephone.

“Hello, hello, anyone there? For God's sake, answer me. Someone...”

A ringing tone, crackles, then a surly voice: “Who is this?”

“Alan Peterson. I’m stuck in the elevator. Can you get me out?” He looked at his watch, “It’s 3:17.”

“Don’t worry, it’s just the cut-out switch, it keeps cutting out today. Hey! I guess it’s only doing its job.” The voice laughed. Alan wasn’t in the mood.

“Can you cut it in again? I’m trapped in here.”

“Don’t panic, I’ll get you out in no time. I’ve got to go up to the 6th floor and reset it. Then you’ll be just fine.”

“Can you hurry? I was just on my way out.”

“Well, I can’t fix it while I’m talking to you, can I? I’ve had to walk all the way up those stairs four times already today and the elevator company can’t get here to change the part until Monday. I’m not supposed to do stairs with my back, you know. Why do you people keep busting the elevator?”

“But I didn’t know it was faulty. There wasn’t a sign or anything. Look, why didn’t you close the system down?”

“It only happens when someone presses the button to the basement. You’re supposed to get off on ground level and walk the rest of the way down. I told all the receptionists. You should have known.”

“Well I didn’t, okay!” Alan felt like he was going round in circles. “Please can you just let me out?”

“Yeah, I’ll let you out, but don’t expect me to rush. My back isn’t up to it.”

The phone clicked and the voice disappeared. Alan tried to estimate how long the voice would take. Then he tried not to think about his bladder, which had seemed comfortably empty only moments earlier. He also tried not to think about the cable holding the elevator car up and about how the brown-carpeted walls seemed to be getting closer together. To take his mind off it he tried to think about Becky, naked and willing, trapped in this little space with him. He failed at each attempt. His bladder, the snapping cable and the crushing walls were too much even for an imaginary Becky.

A trickle of sweat ran down his back inside his shirt and his heart felt like it was beating time to a quickstep.

The second's digit on his watch slowed right down, making each minute seem like ten, but eventually, at 3:33 and 31 seconds the elevator gave another jolt and started to descend. He felt an irrational twinge of disappointment that it hadn't waited 2 seconds longer. When the door finally slid open he was in such a hurry to get out that he didn't notice the car had stopped three inches too deep. The toe of his Oxford caught the metal edge and his arms instantly began a frantic semaphore as he launched into an inelegant dive towards the concrete floor.

The palms of both his hands were scuffed and as he sat himself up he noticed a rip in the knee of his pants. Damn, he thought, can't I just get home quietly? His hands and knees hurt and he wished he'd stayed at his desk. Dust from the floor coated his suit. He flapped at his backside and legs in a futile effort to clean himself, but it hurt his hands too much. Mentally shrugging, he gave up and headed for his car.

His old Toyota felt like a limousine as he gratefully fell into the driver's seat. He turned the ignition key and the car suddenly lurched backwards. Shit, I left it in reverse, he almost had time to think, before feeling, then hearing, the crunch of metal.

Shakily, he eased himself out of the car to see what damage he'd done. Oh fuck! Oh shit! Oh God ... Bob's brand new Lexus LS 430 was right behind him. It looked immaculate: showroom shiny, deep-wax polish over blue onyx pearl paintwork. Alan felt he knew the car intimately, the amount Bob bragged about it. The Toyota had pushed the wheel arch metal tight against the 16-inch tire.

On the good side, the Toyota hadn't suffered a scratch. Maybe it was just thumbing its nose at its rich relation. But Alan didn't fancy explaining that to Bob.

Alan looked guiltily around the parking lot. Nobody was there. The security camera that should have kept watch dangled from its one remaining wire. Maybe he didn't have to explain anything. He ran round his car and threw himself back into the driver's seat, gunned the engine and, with squealing tires, sped off up the ramp to the street. He didn't look back.

The traffic was light as he pulled on to the freeway. His hands shook as he wiped the sweat out of his eyes. The dashboard clock glowed 3:44. Only fifteen minutes to home, he thought gratefully. Annie would be surprised to see him early.

The car lurched and veered across two lanes. Alan fought the wheel to get it to run straight, narrowly missing a Mack truck and an old lady in a Beetle. He braked hard and managed to pull over to the inside, leaving a trail of rubber on the road. Horns roared all around him as impatient drivers assumed he had fallen asleep. 'What the fuck?' He said out loud.

Three minutes later, a middle-aged, sweating, shaking man with bleeding hands and torn pants stared disconsolately at a shredded tire as early rush hour traffic sped past him at fifty. After he'd sworn at himself, his life, the traffic and God, he checked the trunk for the spare. It was flat. He pulled out his toolkit and a small piece of card came out with it. He read it: "Towerly Tow Trucks. We'll tow you to town."

How much is this going to cost, he thought as he dialed the number on his cell phone.

“Towerly Tow Trucks.”

“Hello, I’ve broken down on the freeway going south just past exit 6. Can you help me?”

“The office is closed at present. Please leave a message after the tone... Heh, heh, just kidding feller, bet you smiled at that one. You gotta smile, ‘specially if’n you got a dead auto.”

“Okay, I’m smiling. Can you take me somewhere to get a new tire? Mine’s blown.”

“Sure feller, no problemo. Billy can be with you in about a half hour. You gotta credit card?”

“Yes, MasterCard. Is that all right? What will it cost?”

Beep... beep... beep. The battery died and Alan was left holding a lump of black plastic to his ear. Shit. Now what? Would the truck come or not? The first spits of rain landed on his head.

Alan sat miserably in his car, watching the rain run down the windows and the minutes crawl past. 4:32...4:33...He closed his eyes. Images of Becky swam through his mind like they did sometimes late at night. But his heart wasn’t in it. Too much had happened in the last hour to be made better by absurd fantasies. Why couldn’t he have just stayed at work?

Thunder rocked the car, jerking him back to real life. The clock glowed 4:54. It wasn’t thunder. A huge man stood next to the car slamming his hand down on the roof.

“Come on feller, wakey wakey. Time is money.”

Alan wound down the window. The rain blew in and soaked him.

“Where d’ya want to go, feller? Jesus, you look like shit. Havin’ a bad day? Give me your credit card and I’ll get you hooked up to my truck in no time.”

Alan handed over his plastic. Minutes passed. The big guy came back waving a slip of paper.

“Here, sign this and we can get moving.”

The credit card slip was made out for \$250.

“What is this? This is extortionate!”

“I don’t set the rates, feller, that’s my brother’s job. He says its 250, that’s what I charge. If’n you don’t like it, I can always go home. It’s turning into a piss awful night anyway.”

“Okay, okay, I’ll sign it. Just get me to somewhere where I can get this tire fixed.”

“You come and sit up front in the truck. I’ll get you hooked up.”

Just walking to the truck’s cab soaked Alan to the skin. The rain was pouring down in sheets. Billy, who was only wearing shorts, a filthy leather jerkin and steel-toed boots didn't seem to care.

“How far away is the nearest tire shop?” Alan asked when they were on their way.

“Not far, coupla miles, I guess. Owned by my cousin Jim. He’ll sort you out, no problemo.”

“A couple of miles? I’m paying \$250 to be towed a couple of miles?”

“Like my brother says, it’s not the length that matters, it’s how good it makes you feel. The length of the journey, that is. Heh, heh, Ya gotta smile, don’t ya?”

“I suppose so,” said Alan, trying not to show his irritation and distaste for Billy.

The rattling truck pulled up outside a dilapidated autoshop. The sign read “Jim’s Repairs. We can fix it.”

“Hey Billy! How they hanging cousin? You done brought old Jimmy some business?”

“Jimmy, you old bastard, you’re looking better’n a bitch’s ass to an old hound dog.”

The two big men playfully punched each other under the torn awning while Alan stepped down from the truck and up to his ankle in a muddy puddle.

“So, looks like you need a new tire for your Toy-ota. And a nice new suit as well.”

“Yeah, and maybe a shoeshine,” Billy joined in.

Billy and Jim seemed to find this extraordinarily funny. Alan tried to smile, but the muscles in his face didn’t want to move that way anymore.

“Reckon old Jimmy can’t help much with the fine tailoring,” Jimmy said, “but I can get you a new tire easy enough.”

“That would be great,” said Alan, relieved. “How long do you think it will take to fix it?”

“Not long, maybe twenty minutes. Course, I gotta get the tire first. Don’t keep non-standard items like that around the place.”

“When will it be ready then?” Alan’s ray of hope flickered and died.

“Should be able to pick it up about 5 tomorrow.”

Jim’s tone didn’t leave any room for argument, and Alan didn’t have any fight left in him anyway.

“Can you tell me where I can get a cab home, then?”

“A cab? Don’t have no cab offices round here, feller. Even if’n there were, you’d never get one in this weather. What do you think Billy?”

“Reckon I could give you a ride home in the truck. Gonna have to charge you cab fare though, this baby eats gas.”

“But I just gave you \$250 to get me here.”

Alan just caught the look that Jim shot at Billy, but decided to let it pass.

“That’s business money. I can’t mix business and private. Give me \$50 cash and I’ll take you straight home.”

Alan mentally counted the bills in his wallet and decided that he could just afford the ride. All he wanted was to get home and for this day to be over. The rain was easing. Too late to make a difference. He glanced at his watch. It was 5:32. Far too late to make a difference.

He gave Billy his address and climbed back into the truck. The idea of trying to talk to this ape was too much for him to take on top of everything else.

“Look, Billy,” he said, “Do you mind if I take a nap while you drive? I’m bushed and with the traffic building up it’s going to take a good half hour to get there.”

“No problemo, amigo. You get your precious shut-eye and I’ll wake you up when we get nearby.”

Alan closed his eyes and felt the world recede. Then Billy’s huge hand shook him awake.

“Are we there?”

“Sorry feller, I got an emergency call from my brother. Had to take a short detour. We’re just gonna sort out some guy’s Lexus that won’t start.”

Alan’s eyes opened wide just in time to see the entrance to his office building’s basement parking lot pass them by.

“You’ve got to take me home first. I can’t go here.” Alan tried to hunker down in his seat, but the clutter in the cab made it difficult. His hand mashed into something soft and a searing pain shot through his scratched palm. Mayonnaise and mustard glued a Subway wrapper to his fingers.

“What’s your problem amigo? You look like you’re shitting sausages. It shouldn’t take long. I’ll get you home afterwards.”

“You don’t understand,” said Alan, wiping the glop onto his pants leg. “That Lexus. It’s my boss’s car. And I’m supposed to be at work.” Alan knew the excuse sounded lame, but didn’t want to have to explain himself further.

“Don’t want you getting’ fired on my account, feller. You slide down there and keep outa sight. I’ll sort him out. No problemo.”

Alan twisted himself awkwardly and painfully down below the window height, while Billy went to see what needed to be done to the Lexus. Something stank that he didn’t want to identify. He could hear mumbling, but the words weren’t clear.

“Hey, feller, get outa there quick.” Billy pulled open the truck door and pulled Alan out. “Your boss has just gone upstairs to get his briefcase. I can’t fix it. The wheel arch is too badly pushed in. Gonna have to tow it to old Jimmy’s to get it properly bashed out so’s the Lexus people can fix it up good.”

“What about me? How am I going to get home now?”

“Your boss is gonna have to sit in the truck, so you’d better vanish. Tell you what, why don’t you hide in the trunk of the Lexus. I’ll let you out when Jimmy takes your boss inside to sort out the paperwork. Then I’ll get you home like I promised.”

Alan knew this was stupid, but today was a day for doing stupid things. He climbed into the trunk of the Lexus and Billy closed it after him. A few minutes later, the front of the car lurched upwards as Billy attached it to the tow truck. He heard Bob and Billy talking, and then he was rolled backwards as they started to move.

It was hot, dark and cramped, but at least it smelled better than Billy’s truck. Soft leather, deep carpet and walnut: all the smells that make a new car such a sensual experience. Right now though his main experience was of a half set of golf clubs competing for what little space he had, and winning. Wondering if there was a way of getting some more air he pushed against the back of the trunk. A flap eased forward and a strip of Velcro ripped apart. He had pushed down the armrest in the back seat. It didn’t give him much extra room, but he managed to push his arm through and got a little more comfortable. He could even get his head through.

The back seat of the Lexus was smooth ivory leather. Soft as a baby’s breath and far better than any car seats Alan had ever sat on. A brown envelope rested on the seat. Idly, without any real curiosity, but for something to do, Alan played with the envelope. It wasn’t sealed, and he could see through the opening that it contained some papers and what looked like photographs. Probably the old man’s vacation snaps, Alan thought as he slid them out with his one free hand.

What he saw was a far cry from any vacation he had ever been on. One picture was of Michael Arnold, the firm's biggest client, naked and tied to a chair. His hairy, bulging belly covered little of his modesty. A naked young woman seemed to be in the process of attaching clothes pegs to some very sensitive places. In the next picture, Arnold was on his hands and knees wearing only a dog collar around his neck. What shocked Alan even more, though, was that the naked woman smiling brazenly at the camera, holding the other end of the lead in one hand and a ping-pong paddle in the other was Becky, Bob's secretary. Even in his wildest fantasies he'd never imagined her like that!

There were seven pictures in all. Each one showed Becky and Arnold in more and more compromising poses. Alan looked at the rest of the papers in the envelope and the penny dropped. They were Bob's personal bank statements. The balance was enormous. No wonder Bob could afford a Lexus. He was loaded. And every month another big chunk of cash seemed to be paid in. Alan could see that it wasn't his salary check - that was there too, bigger than Alan's, of course, but far smaller than the other regular credits.

You sly old bastard, Alan thought. No wonder Michael Arnold keeps his business with us when every other firm in town is courting him. You've got his ass in a sling. And he is paying you off too. Nice deal. Alan went back to the photos, concentrating on Becky. Even in his confined space, felt himself getting aroused.

The journey came to an end suddenly. Impulsively, Alan folded the best picture of Becky and Arnold and one of the bank statements into his inside pocket, and pushed the rest back into the envelope. He just managed to close the armrest hatch before Billy quietly opened the trunk.

"Come on, feller. He's gone inside with Jimmy. Get into my truck while I unhook the Lex, then I'll take you home. Jimmy'll sort out your bossman I 'spect."

Alan could hardly move. His legs had gone to sleep and his back was cricked from the awkward position he was in. Also, he didn't particularly want Billy to see the effect that the pictures of Becky had had on him. He uncurled as best he could and, half-crouching, ran to the truck.

"Don't need to try to hide, feller, they can't see you from inside."

As he got into the truck and ducked down, he looked at his watch. It was 6:51.

By the time Billy's truck pulled up outside his house, Alan was almost grateful to the tow guy. He handed over the \$50.

"Hey! No tip? Just kidding feller. Keep on smiling." Billy waved a meaty hand out of the window and rattled off down the road.

"I'm home, Annie," Alan called to his wife who was watching TV.

"You're late," she said, not looking up from the screen. "I ate already, but there are some cold cuts in the fridge if you are hungry."

She glanced up.

"Oh my God! What on earth happened to you? Are you okay? You look awful."

"I've had a bad day, darling. I'm wet, tired and sore. The car tire blew out and now it's in the shop until tomorrow and I just want to take a long hot bath. Things are all right now, though." Alan shuffled through to the kitchen, crammed some cold meat into his mouth and made his way to the bathroom.

If he had bothered to look, he would have seen that it was 7:37.

An hour later, clean and warm and wrapped in his favorite toweling robe, Alan made himself a large Scotch and settled in front of the TV with his wife. Thoughts of Becky and clothes pegs and dog collars kept jumping into his mind while they watched another rerun of X-Files.

“Annie, do you fancy an early night?”

“It’s a long time since you asked me that. Are you sure you feel up to it?” She answered.

Next morning, Alan felt amazingly refreshed. His hands were still sore, but not as bad as he had expected. After an extra long shower, he dressed with more care than he had taken in years. Best suit, best crisp white shirt. He even polished his best brogues.

Annie had just finishing making breakfast when he walked into the kitchen.

“My my, you look sharp today. And aftershave too! What's the occasion?”

“I’ve got a big meeting this morning and I want to feel my best.”

“I had that pleasure last night,” she giggled. “I’m glad the kids weren’t home.”

At 8:43 the cab he had ordered for 8:00 honked its horn on the drive. For once, Alan didn’t care about the time.

“Sorry, man. Traffic,” the driver shrugged.

“It's not a problem. Relax.” Alan smiled at the driver. “Can you take me to the instant print shop on 34th first?”

At 9:35 Alan walked out of the elevator and into the office, over an hour late.

“Good morning, Becky, you look lovely this morning.”

“Hi Al, are you feeling better? I hope you are because Bob’s really steamed about you being late. Did you hear about his car? It’s put him a horrible mood.”

“Tell Bob I want to see him, please Becky.”

“He’s too busy this morning. I can fit you into his schedule around 4 this afternoon.”

“Becky, you didn’t hear me straight. Tell Bob I want to see him. Now.”

Her head jerked up at the unexpected steel in Alan’s tone.

“And if he doesn’t get the message, give him this one.” Alan wrote a series of numbers on a yellow Post-It note.

Becky looked astounded that meek old Alan would give her orders.

“Wait here, I’ll see what he says. But I warn you, he is in a bad mood.”

Minutes passed and Alan simply stood and waited. Everyone else in the office tried not to stare. Eventually the door burst open and Bob stood in the frame.

“What are you playing at? Where did you get that number? Come in here, right now.”

Alan smiled and walked into the office.

“What is this all about?” Bob demanded as soon as the door was shut.

“Nothing that you will feel uncomfortable with, Bob. Sorry to hear about your car, by the way.”

Alan opened his briefcase and took out a color photocopy of the picture he had stolen. He laid it on the desk in front of Bob.

“Where the hell did you get that? That’s private. Give it to me right now.”

“It’s yours Bob. Take it. I’ve got lots more. I particularly liked the one with the dildo and the whipped cream.”

“This has got nothing to do with me. What are you showing this filth to me for?”

“Do you really think that Becky is going to keep you out of it if I send these to head office, or the police? Anyway, the bank statements would take some explaining.”

He laid the second photocopy on the desk.

“What do you want? Where did you get these things?” Bob knew he had to negotiate.

“Doesn’t matter where. I don’t want much. A promotion, a raise, a new car, job security. You can keep the money.”

“How do I know you’ll keep your word?”

Alan delivered his speech slowly. “What reason would I have not to? I’m not ambitious like you. All I want is a regular income, and a reasonable lifestyle and no stress. Is that so bad? So you are going to give me the easy accounts to work on, and keep me happy in my job. That way it is in my interest to keep you happy in yours.”

“What about Becky? I’m sure she’d be willing ...”

“What about her? You think you can use her against me like you have poor Mike Arnold? No thanks. I am quite happy with my Annie, thank you.”

Bob sat at his desk, beaten.

“I think we have an understanding now, don’t we Bob?”

Bob nodded.

Becky looked up questioningly as Alan passed her desk.

“Everything all right, Alan?”

“Everything's fine, Becky. No problemo.”

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## ***Girl on the Train***



Girl on the train, girl on the train.  
Staring in vain at girl on the train.

Girl on the train, I'm going insane.  
Please let me explain, girl on the train.

Wheels rushing round - metallic, the sound;  
Fast-moving ground. Love, maybe found?

The sad fact is true: I'm nothing to you.  
You're looking right through, admiring the view.

My eyes come to rest on the swell of your breast.  
Can you feel my caress? You seem unimpressed.

Your book is unread, sleep nodding your head.  
We should be in bed together, instead.

*Continued ...*

Your skin is so clear, your warmth is so near,  
Your stockings so sheer - my station is here.

Your breathing is slow. I want you to know  
I bask in your glow; I don't want to go.

I'd love you for sure; I want so much more.  
Respond, I implore! Ah. Opening door.

I gaze back at you still sleeping, no clue  
Of the dragons I slew when you vanished from view.

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