

The beginning of something

The two most terrifying events of my life happened either side of my journey.

The first was finding myself standing in a tunnel directly in the path of a Tube train moving at 50mph.

The second was when they killed Paul.

One now. One later.

“TRAIN!!!”

What happens when you're trapped underground and you hear a 160-tonne train hurtling towards?

Naturally, you run. You shout, drop your tools and sprint like hell. But it's like trying to outrace an earthquake.

It was 05.41 and the first Tube of the day was on its way. We should have finished the track inspection 20 minutes earlier, but some makeshift electrical repairs had taken longer than expected. What a weak excuse that would've been to pass onto the next of kin.

The metallic whine of the rails grew and a rush of wind carried the furious percussion of an engine. The five of us sprinted for the nearest alcove, 50 yards away.

In emergencies, you can sometimes drop into the recess between tracks. Assuming you lie completely flat, and don't get electrocuted by the live rail, you'll probably be fine. On this part of the track, however, there was no gully and the tunnel offered only minimal clearance on each side.

As we pounded down the track, the Tube rounded the bend and our shadows raced away from us in the glare of the lights.

Fan and Brave who'd been nearest to the alcove got there first. Cavvi, who was by far the strongest runner, streaked past Dessie and I, even though he'd been further up the track.

I looked back and saw the train hammering towards us. Cavvi reached safety and, turning, began to shout.

I felt a vacuum tugging at my hair and I knew the train was on us. I dived forward, pulling Dessie after me. In the moment before we were sucked under the wheels, Fan caught hold of us and dragged us clear.

The train barrelled past us, on towards Baker Street.

We scampered back up the line, collected our tools and headed home.

Public servants

Every hour of every day, an army of public-spirited people is working unnoticed in London.

Fire-fighters, traffic wardens, plumbers, building inspectors, refuse collectors and many others labour thanklessly to keep the place ticking over. I am one of them.

My name is Aldi, son of Kitson. I'm a fireman, a member of G Team, who you've already met, and co-ordinator of fire services for four Tube Lines: Northern, Victoria, Jubilee and Bakerloo.

My teams of fire-fighters check thousands of electrical connections each day, ensuring wiring is up to standard and repairing minor faults. And, though our role is primarily preventative, we also tackle hundreds of minor fires each year. Anything larger and we refer it to our human colleagues.

In my role as one of the five fire brigade co-ordinators, I speak in Congress and vote on legislation. This is not as grand as it sounds – our autonomous way of life means that our only major responsibilities are ensuring the rule of law and handling contact with the human's, through their government.

Periodically I'm asked to do a little public speaking – a few after-dinners for the great and good or Q&As with schoolchildren. I can't imagine what people think they'll learn from it; my career and life haven't brought me any great wisdom. But ask they do, and, out of politeness, I agree to a few here and there.

I draw the line at questionnaires for magazines, though.

Q: "How would you like to die?"

A: "I wouldn't."

Q: "What would your perfect Sunday be like?"

A: "Get up early and spend all day reading about my favourite celebrities' ideas of a perfect Sunday."

Q: "If you could be a superhero, who would you be?"

A: "Public Transport Man. Whenever I turned up at a station or bus stop a clean bus or train would immediately pull in with enough seats for everyone."

Q: "How would you like to be remembered?"

A: "As the one who finally overshadowed Jesus."

The person who understands me best is my wife. She once had a dream where I took her to one side and told her I had decided that I wanted to become a boiled egg. Not only that, but I was determined to become the first boiled egg to win the Tour de France.

She would come home and find me cycling furiously on an exercise bike while wearing a tight white Lycra beanie hat. She told me that things had gone too far when she got up in the middle of the night to find me removing the shelves from the fridge so that I could get inside.

"Aldi, what the hell's going on?"

"I'm best stored at low temperatures."

Yes, she knows me best and I love her for it.

What else do we do? Our street sweepers try to keep the city free of vermin like pigeons and foxes by disposing of discarded food. Public health inspectors picket unsanitary restaurants to alert diners to poor kitchen hygiene. Traffic wardens sneak coins into parking metres to reduce road rage. Structural engineers promote loft insulation in large, old houses.

Our work goes mostly unnoticed by humans, but that doesn't dim our dedication.

Though our society is well-regulated, work is almost totally self-organised. Given our secure home in the Underground, no one has to work. Most do though, choosing whichever profession they prefer. Whenever they feel ready for work, youngsters present themselves to someone like me and ask to join up. Provided they have the necessary basic skills, acceptance is assured.

It's perhaps not the most organised or efficient way of operating, but, since the work we do is unpaid and unthanked, we are quite relaxed about the occasional job left undone, provided no-one's safety is compromised.

We're big on safety; it's our ultimate priority. In fact, should anyone endanger another through negligence they could face criminal proceedings. This avowed commitment to safety doesn't imply that we fear death, however. On the contrary, we live short but predominately happy and fulfilled lives.

Since few of us are interested in social or professional advancement, and since managerial positions attract no benefits, many of us change career several times in our lives.

We see it as our role not to determine human priorities, but to serve them in whatever way we can. So, if any service becomes sufficiently unpopular that it can't attract enough recruits – as with our horological services – we simply cease to offer it.

Joining the fire brigade remains one of the oldest and most popular career choices. I've loved it since my first day as a young fire-fighter on the District Line.

G Team

Dessie:

- Open, honest, fair
- Unpretentious
- Incredibly welcoming and hospitable
- Waves like the Queen after an elbow replacement

Fan:

- Wise guy
- The team clown
- No bullshit
- Worrying pyromaniac tendencies
- Good ears

Brave:

- Strong, sturdy, no frills
- Lifesaver
- Supports Tottenham
- Likes golf, motor racing and not getting into Europe
- Best teeth in the service

Cavvi:

- Young
- Fast
- Brave but not impetuous
- Smooth with the chicks
- Believes he is the reincarnation of Jimi Hendrix
- Might actually be

Tintinnabulation

After working nights, I find it disconcerting coming back into the meeting place. The Cavern is vast and, even in the early morning, crowded with people.

By a marvellous trick of engineering, natural light enters at the apex and bathes the floor of the Cavern in a warm, nurturing glow. In the centre, the Cavern is impenetrably thick with market stalls; hawkers, traders, dawdlers, bargain hunters, commuters, chatterboxes and posers, all breathing the same air and feeling the same purpose.

Around the edge, helter-skelter paths spiral sharply upwards to the tooth-hewn dwellings and bars of the old city. And, leading from the Cavern, hundreds of tunnels to ferry people to the platforms and the suburbs.

The fire bridge stationhouse is positioned on an outcrop on the southwest side of the Cavern. I find view in the evening, as people swarm home through the marketplace, just magnificent.

We stowed our equipment, had something to eat, and then debriefed.

“So, what happened back there? How did we get taken by surprise?”

Four heads shook, then spoke: “the junction box took longer that expected...”

“...and the first train was on time – how often does that happen?...”

“...we didn’t get a signal from F Team...”

“...the real problem is where we were. There’s no way we should’ve been caught in that section of tunnel so late...”

Behind me a hollow tinny clacking rose swiftly in a screaming cacophony; there was a fire. The telegraph operator ran in. “Smoke on the eastbound Jubilee, 200 yards outside the station.”

“Okay, everyone, let’s go! Tunnel 8 past the park then cut under the westbound platform.”

With electrical fires, it's very rare for a big blaze to erupt suddenly. Wires will smoulder for hours, slowly melting the plastic housing, before sending out filaments of smoke. These unfurl gently, surveying the area causally, and then the first tentative flames appear to scout hungrily for fuel. The delay gives our network of spotters time to pass the word back.

Twenty teams were on hand when we arrived. The smoke was coming from the signalling cables, which were mounted in a twisted bundle along the tunnel wall. Co-ordinating wordlessly, people moved rapidly, loosening the cable grips and preparing to isolate the scorched wires. Once our electrical engineers were in place, we would have only a few minutes to repair the situation before power failed across the whole Jubilee Line.

The first tiny licks of fire bubbled from the cable as it swung free from the wall. In seconds my team were speeding up the stanchions and down the lines towards the fire. Cavvi and I reached the fire first from one side, Dessie and Fan from the other. The power was cut and we began to sheer the wire with our teeth.

Cavvi and I were through first and, signalling readiness to the others, we redoubled our grip.

On three, we made the last incision and the cable swung violently apart, twisting and bucking crazily, threatening to dash us against the tunnel walls.

A ten centimetre length of burning plastic drifted to the floor below, where teams were waiting to extinguish it.

We jumped from the cable as it slowed and other mice took over, running new cable in the gap and making new, safer connections. Meanwhile teams of engineers adjusted the air flow through the ducts to cool the tunnel and disperse the smoke.

Shortly the cable was replaced and the power returned. The clean up took several hours and I stayed with the relief crews to lend a hand.

On the way home, I picked up the evening newspaper. The headline read: Mullin hails 'lasting bond'.

Last night, in her annual message, Prime Minister Jilly Mullin praised the contribution of mice to British society. The statement, which she delivered personally to Parvish, President of the Congress, spoke of the 'lasting bond of friendship' between men and mice.

"At the end of another prosperous year I give my heartfelt thanks to the mice. Last year, as every year, your tireless efforts helped make London a safer, cleaner, happier city."

Elsewhere in her address, she said: "Though diplomatic alliances come and go on the world stage, there exists a lasting bond of friendship between our nations. I look forward to what next year may bring, secure in the knowledge that our people will face it together."

President Parvish commented: "We thank Prime Minister Mullin for her kind words. It reinforces the symbiotic nature of our societies. Wherever humans go, we are never far away. Together we shall continue to work for mutual prosperity."

Not everyone was so impressed, though. Congress member Red Rum, leader of the militant Mouse Parity Party, denounced the address. "These are fine words indeed, but that is all they are – they sound very familiar to me. Another year has gone by without confronting the status of our nations." When asked what he was going to do, he would say only that he "intend[ed] to bring suitable proposals before Congress. [We] plan to hold public meetings in forthcoming weeks to raise awareness of the issue of mouse rights."

For the full text of the address, turn to p.5.

With the call out, I had missed the President's delivery of the annual message. Members of Congress usually gather on the steps of the Assembly building to hear it read to the crowd. I wouldn't be missed. Red Rum would be there though, that's for sure.

Red Rum was a rising star with a special knack of making almost everyone he met feel exceptionally uncomfortable. He's made of two things: steel and fury; literally, I sometimes think. When he puts a paw on your shoulder you feel a freezing, oppressive weight. And then, when his eyes catch yours, you have to turn away to prevent the sheer vehemence of his stare from scorching your retinas.

Ignoring the usual conventions, Red Rum had campaigned openly for office upon the death of another member, and was explicit about his radical agenda. Little was known about him: he was about my age but seemed older, and he came from Theydon Bois, a frontier town where a small number of outlaw families eked out an existence without reference to other mice.

Within months of arriving in Waterloo, he had formed the Mouse Parity Party. Originally, he had seemed long on hellfire rhetoric and biblical beards and short on policies, but when he joined the Congress, it soon became clear that he was more than a mere rabble-rouser. By day he worked as a refuse collector, which he used to joke was because he was here to clean up the town.

When I reached my street, on the outskirts of a small suburb, I dropped the paper in a rubbish bin. I paused for a moment and looked down at it resting on top of the other refuse. And then, thinking of Red Rum, I reached carefully into the bin, removed the newspaper and dropped it on the floor. Then I walked the last few yard to my house on the end of the street and greeted my wife.

That night I slept badly while my wife dreamt of 'universal liquid extender' – a miraculous product that could be used to create a seamless addition to any object. In her dream, she used it to increase her wardrobe space and double the size of our breakfast bar.

Names

For years, our primary source of news and current affairs were the newspapers left behind in the Underground. As a consequence, many of us were extremely right wing; something that the advent of free dailies only made worse. We are, however, undeniably good at cryptic crosswords and word searches.

An interesting by-product of this tabloid obsession is its contribution to naming. Though we don't celebrate birthdays, it's possible to tell someone's approximate age by the origin of their name. There was a period of time when it was fashionable to name children after race horses – something that provided a convenient excuse for many a mouse to scan the form guide while claiming to be an expectant father.

My name, Aldaniti, comes from a champion horse, as do those of many of my team – Dancing Brave, Desert Orchid, Lyric Fantasy. You can tell that Cavvi is a bit younger than the rest of us because his equinym, Cavvies Clown, comes from a slightly less successful horse, the more famous names having already been taken.

Once horse names were exhausted, and we had discovered the broadsheets, other, stranger fashions emerged. Subsequent generations were named after such things as DIY products (Tool, Strimmer, Decking and Water Feature), then breads (Rye, Soda, Wheaten Ring) and then paint shades (Misty Dawn, Bruised Rosemary, Twisted Flax, Scuffed Pebble, Estonian Rhapsody).

At the moment, children are being named after varieties of herbal infusions.

Attitudes

The next day was Tuesday; the one day a week I reserve for administrative duties. I got up early to beat the rush and headed to the office, intending to get breakfast on the way.

I bought some bread and was munching it vigorously when a familiar face appeared through the crowd. It lit up and was accompanied by excitable waving. It was Tulle, a nervous, mousy-looking girl. As she zigzagged through the throng, I noted without surprise that she was dressed oddly – with obviously clashing colours, a daring hat and what looked like a cowbell round her neck.

“Hi Aldi,” she said in a singsong voice.

“Hey, Tulle, what’s new?”

She consulted a notebook. “Eggs, beans & chips; Muppets; improving books; fingerless mittens; Bushido; sincerity; La Paz; and espadrilles.”

“Wow.”

“I know.”

Tulle is an old friend. She runs the Department of Trend Modelling at the university, which provides a running commentary on all that is an authentic expression of people’s selves. Originally she was an amateur anthropologist but, having read an article on emergent properties in a Sunday supplement, she became convinced that she could use scientific methodologies to extract and interpret trends data from human informational-interaction, that is to say, wittering. She uses computer modelling to generate four-dimensional topographical maps of London wittering on which she can locate isotrends, or regions of equal superficiality, that presage future fashions.

Her first major success was predicting the rise of coelacanths and suttee-cool.

Nowadays, she spends most of her time in hotel lobby bars people-watching and makes a fortune by selling her insights to business through a network of human frontmen.

“Oh, and Red Rum.”

“Eh?”

“He’s big and he’s only going to get bigger. You going to see him speak in the park?”

“I didn’t know anything about it.”

“He’s holding a public meeting tomorrow: 3 o’clock in Speaker’s Corner.” She handed me a leaflet. “You want to go?”

“Sure, why not.”

“See you here tomorrow at a quarter to?”

“I look toward to it.”

Smiling, she turned and went back into the market, cowbell clanging softly.

When she was gone, I finished my breakfast and read the leaflet.

PUBLIC MEETING * 3PM WEDNESDAY * SPEAKER’S CORNER

RED RUM says: “Thanks a million, Jilly!”

“Thank you, you’re great.”

Wow, doesn’t that feel good?

“Thanks again, you’re the best.”

How about now?

In fact, what if ‘thanks’ was all you ever heard? What if your only reward for all your hard graft was the occasional pat on the head? And what if that pat came only from one hand?

Don’t you deserve more? Don’t you deserve some recognition from men, all men? Don’t you deserve proper respect?

If you’re tired of being a second-class citizen, join us tomorrow to hear how everyone can get their due.

I dropped the leaflet in a bin and, aware of lost time, hurried to work.

The Man-Mouse compact

The defining moment in man-mouse relations came in after the Great War. To recognise our decisive role in the conflict, the UK government invited bids for the creation of a suitable symbol of friendship.

Two schemes emerged as clear favourites. The first was the restoration of the Sphinx to its original murine countenance. A relic of a distant epoch, it is unknown what prompted either its construction or its defacement.

The second project was more ambitious: to embed mouse culture as firmly in the lives of men as men's is in mice.

In 1928, Walt Disney, a wholly-owned subsidiary of MI6, launched Mickey Mouse.

The project was a great success: in the first four years alone, over a million children joined the fan club. From then on, and from the very earliest age, all human infants were exposed to Mickey and so came to respect mice and their contribution to society.

For the first time, we received a positive media representation. Mice were now friendly, thinking people able to express themselves verbally and experience a range of emotions. We were also fun to be with and safe for children. Our inability to whistle or perform magic did, however, cause some ugly scenes early on.

Our profile rose and with it our sense of partnership. Some even dreamed that, one day, men would come to see us as equals.

Gathering

Something was tapping me lightly on the shoulder. There was a whisper... but I was in a fug and I couldn't comprehend the voice. It tapped again.

"Aldi, Aldi," said a distant voice.

Suddenly I was awake and sitting upright. I twisted in the dark, searching for the noise.

"Shhh... it's okay, Aldi. I'm just going to work." It was my wife. "You roll over and get some more sleep."

I relaxed, exhausted. "What time you back?" I mumbled.

"We're going to Finchley, so late I imagine," she said softly. "You take care at the rally."

"I will."

"What do we say, Aldi?"

"What?"

"Aldi... come on..."

I joined in with her. "Sometimes, when I'm angry or excited, I'm not very diplomatic.."

"Yes..." she said.

"...and I end up insulting people unintentionally..."

"And..."

"...and not everyone likes that," we finished together.

"That's right, dude." She kissed me. "I love you."

"I love you too. Give those restaurateurs hell from me."

I turned over and when back to sleep.

At a quarter-to-three I met up with Dessie, Fan, Cavvi, Brave and Tulle. Dessie's partner, Bubinga, had come too, bringing their children, Fender Strat, and their youngest, Elderflower Pressé.

"So, Aldi, what are we expecting?" asked Brave.

"To tell you the truth, I'm not sure," I admitted. "He's a smart, funny guy with good instincts, I'm just not quite sure what he wants."

"I guess we'll see. And, looking around, we're not the only ones with an interest."

He was right: the marketplace was perceptibly less busy than usual and there was an unmistakable drift out through the northwest tunnels towards the park.

As we walked, we passed an elderly minstrel who was doing a bluesy version of 'The Ballad of the Free Punch'.

*Well, I tell you,
He was out of line.
He pushed in front at the queue for the bus
And took what was mine*

*I said, hey buddy, what gives?
With two actions he did me deride:
He stepped on my foot,
And, spat at my bride.*

*So, I called for a witness
And, remembering my toes' crunch,
I used it,
That goddamn free punch!*

*Can I get a witness?
Check me out!*

We applauded, the minstrel smiled and nodded, and we walked on.

The Free Punch

The Free Punch Act was passed shortly after the dark days of the Great Pandemonium.

Rude and inconsiderate behaviour was creating damaging social friction. Immediately that a chair became free someone would rest their feet on it. Receptionists and shop workers were threatening to strike over rampant incivility. There were even cases of queue-jumping related lynchings.

The public demanded that Congress remedy the situation. Members, however, felt unable to pass legislation that might infringe the Bill of Rights and damage our liberal traditions.

Soon after, a group of businessmen provoked a riot by attempting to board a train before other passengers had disembarked. Lives were lost and Congress was compelled to act.

What happened has passed into history. Congress sat in closed session for three days until someone, whose name has been lost, suggested an ingenious solution: the Free Punch. It works like this:

Once a year, any person can, without fear of reprisal, strike another to punish an act of rudeness or incivility.

The process is simple. On deciding to use a Free Punch, the person concerned – the puncher – must loudly proclaim ‘Can I get a witness?’. They may then strike the person who has slighted them – the punchee. Often the puncher will follow the punch with the cry: ‘Check me out’ so that the punchee and results of their rudeness are bought to the widest possible attention.

Since our numbers are so great, it is very rare to find yourself without witnesses to confirm the fair administration of a Free Punch.

The Free Punch act applies only to individual, non-criminal acts. It may not be used

- to settle a long-standing score
- in retaliation for another Free Punch
- to punish an offence that has already been dealt with by a court
- in Congress (consequently, this is the one place incivility is still rife, with members revelling in it).

Free Punches not used at the end of a year can be rolled over up to a maximum of three. This serves two purposes:

1. To encourage their use so that anti-social behaviour doesn't go unpunished
2. To prevent victims of an intolerable outrage in January spending the rest of the year defenceless.

All Free Punches are recorded in a register that is open to public examination.

The effect was immediate and dramatic. At a stroke inconsiderate behaviour was all but abolished. The open, selfless society we know now was created.

Understandably, in the early days, there were number of questionable punches thrown. When it became clear, however, that such abuses would be harshly punished, an equilibrium was established. (Later, in somewhat suspicious circumstances, newspaper editors also received a measure of immunity in recognition of how hazardous their profession had become.)

These days, it's rare for more than a few punches a month to be claimed. I myself have never used a Free Punch.

Red Rum speaks, part 1

The park was maybe half full when we arrived; more than I'd expected, but hardly an army to march on Congress. At the front there were some bright-eyed nutcases vibrating with revolutionary fervour, but the rest had an air of slightly embarrassed curiosity as though they'd suddenly become aware of a security guard tailing them round the spirits section of a supermarket.

Unlike the Cavern, the park is the product of a natural rock formation. Overhead two massive seams of stone scum, twisting and rending in petrified aggression. And, through the fissures that riddle the ceiling, thousands of beams of light lance the air and nourish the grass. In the middle of the day, the park is bright and sunny, but, early in the morning and late in the afternoon, a mirrorball effect overtakes the place producing illuminations that are by turns marvellous and sinister.

The park is broadly circular. It curves down towards the middle, its contours forming a natural amphitheatre, before rising on the north side to an outcrop that acts as a stage from where musicians, politicians, priests and the insane address their constituencies.

We meandered forward through the crowd until we had a clear view of Red Rum. He was stalking around the stage, his long beard flowing, issuing order to acolytes. Finding a patch of grass we sat down and waited. We chatted idly, speculating about his speech and swapping anecdotes about his background.

Out of the corner of my eye I registered movement; heads were turning and bodies twisting. I looked up and a nervous mouse was slinking up to the microphone; it wasn't Red Rum. The mouse tapped the mic, drawing a painful screech from the PA. Satisfied, he cleared his throat.

“Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming today to hear what Congress member Red Rum has to say. Before he comes on, can I just take this opportunity to remind you that copies of his writings will be available once this meeting is over. Thank you...”

I could see Red Rum on stage now. As usual, he was looking impatient.

“...Oh, and can I ask you to be orderly and take care when you leave – there’s a lot of people here today, many of them children... my young ‘uns included, in fact – hello, boys!...”

Red Rum began to close in on the emcee.

“...They’re just down at the front with their mother. Kennedy, Fisher, Hope and Monkhouse. Good lads, all. What was I... “

Red Rum was just in range of the microphone. “Give me that, you idiot...”

“...Yes, sorry. Now, without further ado, I’d like to introduce today’s speaker: the leader and founder of the Mouse Parity Party, it’s Red Rum. Give it up, ladies and gentlemen.”

The emcee scurried from the stage and Red Rum paused for some modest applause. He surveyed his audience, clearly pleased with the turn out.

“Well, hello, Waterloo,” he called. His voice was rich and full and resonant like a Las Vegas crooner. If politics didn’t work out, Fan remarked later, he had a big career ahead of him voicing-over film trailers.

“I won’t thank you all for coming, my friends; clearly you’ve all had enough of empty gratitude or you wouldn’t be here.” He paused. “No, I’m going to give you a proper reward. I’m going to offer you something much better. I want to give you a voice, and a vision, and a programme. I want to offer you a new future.” He let the audience absorb his words.

“How can I do that? Bear with me, my friend and you’ll see. I want to start by talking to you about something that humans do. Yes, something our allies, our partners... our masters, do. It’s something that you’ve all seen many times before. Perhaps, though, you’ve

never really examined it in detail, turned it round in you mind and teased out the...dare I say it, the dark implications.”

“Today, I want to talk about... ‘not rubbish’. What is it? Well... well, put it this way: it’s a sandwich packet balanced carefully on a ledge. It’s a can of coke placed up all nice and snugly against the curb.” He speaking slowly now, enunciating every word.

“It’s a smart suit putting a drunk cup of coffee on the ground, but ensuring that it’s upright and doesn’t tip over. It’s a newspaper, folded and tucked beneath a seat, even though there’s a bin right beside it. Right beside it!” he exploded. “Can you imagine that?! It’s not rubbish... of course not.” He ordered his thoughts. “Not rubbish is anything where someone, some human, has been too lazy to find a bin but too cowardly to drop litter openly. Sweet potato, how lazy is that?! Can you imagine it?... ‘Not rubbish’ is the minute effort they put into an article that somehow, in their mind, changes it from garbage into an acceptable thing to leave lying around – some kind of generous social donation perhaps. And how does this metamorphosis take place? Well, it’s very strange... and the simplest thing can do it. You just gotta lift it off the ground and rest it on something, preferably upright and intact. Make sure you tuck the flap back in on the burger box and suddenly it’s not rubbish. No, perhaps it’s full! Perhaps it’s an untouched burger that someone put down for a second and has forgotten about, but will be back for shortly.”

He was beginning to raise his voice now.

“Oh, they don’t mind rubbish, just as long as it doesn’t look scruffy. Being tidy is more important than being clean... An empty packet of crisps, carefully flattened, rolled, knotted into a neat bow, and then discarded! No, sir, that’s not rubbish! Often, the effort they put in is more than the energy it would take to simply scrunch it into a bin. What sense does that make?!”

He was ranting now, as spellbound by himself as the crowd were.

“I mean, given their limited concentration and imagination, it’s perfectly possible that every day thousands of men throw away the zenith of their personal handicraft... ‘Not rubbish’ is what happens when a degenerate society is in thrall to two terrible forces: obscene laziness and a feeble-minded obsession with social status...”

He wasn’t breathing and his voice was beginning to rasp.

“A sweet wrapper gusting across a street reduces them to nought, because I tell you this: every time a piece of litter is dropped A PENSION FUND IS PLUNDERED! A CLUSTER BOMB EXPLODES! A CHILD STARVES AND DIES! YES, THEY DO! And why? Because they are all caused by the same impulse. They are the same; the very same.”

At last he paused, his chest heaving. He gave a rapid shake of his head. The tension was broken and the audience murmured. Red Rum shushed them with a raise paw.

“‘Not rubbish’ that is what human do with the things that they are too embarrassed to acknowledge and too gutless to dispose of. And that’s what they do with us. They daren’t toss us aside. Of course not; they get so much from us. Instead, like the empty sandwich packet, they pick us up and they put us on top of something; on a pedestal they tell us. Or rather, as Jilly tells us.”

“We make their trains run, their sin-city clean, their food safe, and a thousand other things besides. And what do we get? A big thank you! Well, you know, I’m not satisfied with that. And you know that you aren’t either. So, what choice is there? Well, I’ll tell you what I propose...” There was an extravagant pause.

“Mice as equals. That’s right; mice as equals.” He tapped his head. “Not here in our minds...” He was pointing back toward the Cavern. “And not there in Congress.” He pointed upwards. “And not in Number 10 Downing Street either, where we are always received with polite disdain. No, equal in the eyes of the British law. Full citizenship and a mouse Bill of Rights. Yes, you heard me, a Bill of Rights. No more being ‘not rubbish’ for us.”

Excited chatter broke out across the park. I could feel the blood flowing to my face. I didn't know how much more of this nonsense I could take.

"They say they are our friends; our partners. Good, now prove it!" He waved a clutch of papers at the audience.

"This, my friends, is a draft Bill of Mice Rights. Next week I shall present it to Congress and move a motion that it is approved. You know, it gives me shivers just thinking about it! When... not if, but when it is approved, our President, President Parvish, will take it to Prime Minister Mullin. That's right, we'll give the President a list of our needs, our rights, and he will place them before the men and demand what we know is rightfully ours."

I'd had enough. I started walking towards the stage, shaking off a restraining paw from Cavvi. ("Leave it, Aldi.."). The audience was in a ferment and Red Rum was ready to whip them up further.

"And then, my friends... then, we will civilise *them*! Yes, yes, we will. Partnership is about listening, and believe me, they've got a lot of listening to do!" he yelled.

Cheers and shouts reverberated round the park. I reached the back of the outcrop. A mouse stepped in front of me, but I pushed him aside easily. The rally was spent, all tension released. Red Rum began to wind things down,

"Well, that's really all I had to say. I believe that a change is coming. And that change, my friends, is us. It's coming and we must be ready. Take a leaflet; take it home and read the Bill of Rights. And, above all, think about it. And then come back to me, my friends. Thank you."

I was on the stage now.

"Red Rum!" I shouted.

He turned, his eyes narrowed and then his face resolved into a hungry grin. "Wait! My friends, we have a guest. Congress member Aldaniti, welcome. What do you have to tell us?"

I took the mic. A large part of the audience weren't going to wait, but some hesitated. I was shaking as I began to speak.

"Ladies and gentleman, what *is* he talking about? What the hell? Honestly, what? He wants you to be human? But why would you want to? So you can play the lottery and vote in elections, is that it? It's their law, their rights, their society. Let them keep it I say. Men will never accept us as equals, never."

A few shouts of 'rubbish' reached me. Most simply weren't interested. I pressed on.

"Look, it just doesn't make sense to demand something that they can't give and we don't need. We have our own society, our own laws. Most men don't pay any attention to who we are. We're virtually invisible. Rights won't change that. What will their rights entitle us to? To be paid for the work we do? To be taxed? To own loyalty cards and luxury branded goods? To get on the property ladder?"

I was virtually on my own now. To my side, Red Rum was grinning.

"Here, down here, we have what we need," I shouted. "Think about what we're asking for? Listen, we are happy here. Aren't we? Red Rum's rights won't make any difference."

I was out of arguments and beaten. "You done?" asked Red Rum and switched off the mic.

"I guess."

"You're a good man, Aldaniti, but you've got some old fashioned attitudes."

"Yeah?"

"There's a whole world outside of here, Aldaniti; outside of Waterloo. And we want a slice of it."

Defeated

“Well at least you didn’t call him a prick,” consoled my wife. “Not like when you met the Education Minister.”

“It wouldn’t have mattered if I had; no one was listening.”

I stomped to bed feeling useless. My wife came over and hugged me.

“Hey, I’m proud of you. Sure, you can’t win everything; but you don’t need to. You stood your ground and made your points. People will go home, think about what you said and realise you’re right.”

“Hmmm,” I said disconsolately.

“And anyway, you don’t change people’s minds just like that. That’s not how it works. It’s a gradual process.”

“I sometimes wonder whether it’s possible change anyone’s mind through rational argument.”

“You may be right. Only propaganda can change minds. It opens doors, arguments just push people through.”

“They’re all idiots, right?”

“Yes, honey. Especially the ones who booed and threw rubbish.”

I chucked a pillow and, laughing, my wife threw it back.

That night, as my wife dreamt she was a pigeon with a kitten-heel obsession, I lay awake turning things over in my mind. Red Rum was right: a change was coming.

Wishlist

PROPOSED BILL OF RIGHTS FOR MICE

We, the Mice of Waterloo, require that the government of the United Kingdom recognise and respond positively to the following demands:

- Mice shall be accorded all the existing rights and responsibilities of Men as set out in relevant UK and EU law.
- All existing and future anti-discrimination and equal opportunities laws, including but not limited to those concerning disabilities, race, age and equal pay, shall be extended to include Mice on equal terms with humans.
- Every effort will be made by government bodies to promote and facilitate Mice as legitimate and equal citizens of the UK. As a minimum, this should consist of immediate primary legislation to give recognition to Mice and on-going support for a range of campaigns aimed at promoting Mice in a positive light.
- All Mice will be entitled to apply for and receive a passport and biometric identity card within 12 months of this Bill receiving Royal Assent in the UK parliament.
- Existing Mouse structures of government and administration will be incorporated into the United Kingdom and legislative authority will be granted to the Mouse Congress on the same terms as the Scottish Parliament.
- Mousetraps shall immediately be outlawed and the ownership, setting or use of them in relation to Mice shall be punished on an equal basis with the crimes of possession of a deadly weapon and actual or attempted murder. All patents and trademarks associated with these instruments shall be revoked and a fund established to compensate the victims of mousetrap related injuries. Further, the UK government should immediately begin to fund research into new pest control devices that distinguish between Mice and vermin.
- The above should be regarded as a template for a partnership and compliance should be based, in so far as practicable, on adherence to the spirit as well as the letter of these proposals.

In return, the Mouse Congress will immediately approve legislation acknowledging the primacy of UK law and extend every co-operation to the UK government in facilitating the successful integration of Mice into British society.

We remain your humble friends, though no longer your servants.

The Mice of Waterloo

What do you think?

Let us know. Please complete the back of this leaflet with your suggestions and ideas and return it before next Tuesday in time for the Bill's presentation to Congress.

Suggestions

The next week was hectic. Our quarterly inspection of the City branch of the Northern Line took three days longer than planned when Team B spotted a wiring flaw in a junction box and we had to replace the electrics on more than 100 sets of points.

Tulle had been right: everyone was talking about Red Rum. His ideas seemed to have exposed a deep dissatisfaction in the mice. I'd always been relatively content with my life and so I was astonished to hear how seriously Red Rum was being taken, even among people I'd known and worked with for years. We were in a tunnel at Moorgate when Brave first brought it up.

"You read Red Rum's Bill, then?"

"Yes," said Dessie, "I was impressed. Solder, please."

"Really?" I asked, surprised. "Which bit?"

"All of it, I guess. Thanks. I found it a bit odd first – it all seemed so alien but so obvious at the same time."

"That's the hallmark of bullshit, you know," said Fan mildly. "You want a hand with that circuit?"

"Please. No, I'm serious, Fan. Why shouldn't have those things? Why should we give them all this help for nothing?"

"You want paying, is that what is it?"

"Maybe, I do," Dessie said defiantly. "Testing. Clear."

"Clear. And what about doing what's right? How can we stay true to our history if we're getting paid for it?"

"Maybe I'm tired of our history. I'm not sure I see anything noble about working for men. Look around; does everyone look fulfilled to you?"

“No, you’re right, they look like they could do with a firm handshake from Mullin and a tax demand. Phillips-head, please.”

“Don’t trivialise it, man. Phillips-head. You don’t like it, but it doesn’t mean it’s wrong.”

“No, it’s the fact that it’s wrong that makes it wrong. What else do you want? World peace? A cure for your husband’s snoring? A global increase in the amount of cute things?”

“Oh, tell it you your mum, Fan.”

“I’d like to but she’s dead.”

“Yeah, well she was probably bored of listening to you piss on everything.”

“Come on, guys,” I said trying to soothe tempers, “that’s not getting us anywhere.”

They murmured agreement. I left it for a moment and then picked up the threads of the argument. “Dessie, no one’s saying that men aren’t stupid or feckless. No one’s saying that most of them don’t even notice we’re here, let alone what we do for them. But isn’t that how things have always been? Isn’t that what makes us us?”

“I’m starting to wonder.”

Everywhere I went that week, I heard similar conversations. The Bill’s supporters where in a minority, but a considerable one. I spoke with several members of Congress. Like me, they were worried that whether the Bill passed or not, the consequences could be unsettling. When I went to my pigeonhole, I found a brief note from the President thanking me for my intervention at Red’s rally and hoping that I would speak against the Bill when it came before Congress.

On the Tuesday night, I worked late till 17.00 and then, ignoring an invitation to go to the pub with the team, I went to see Red Rum.

His offices were thronging with volunteers. A thousand nimble paws were writing letters, stuffing envelopes, printing posters and badges, and stitching T-shirts.

Funny how, no matter how busy a room, you can always tell who's in charge. I stopped a mouse who was standing to one side watching the others and asked for Red Rum.

"Aldaniti, good to see you." Red Rum shook my paw and ushered me into his room. We sat. All around we're piles of leaflets. At a table behind us, three mice were sifting leaflets into trays marked: *Yes, Maybe, No, Insulting* and *Threatening*.

"Good to see you too. Just thought I'd drop by and see how things are going."

"As you can tell, we've had a great response; lots of amendments."

"Yeah? Can I see?"

He nodded and handed me a pile of leaflets. I flicked through. Some were covered in dozens of lines of impeccably neat script. Others bore only a few childish scrawls.

"I propose that Red Rum sniffs my balls..." I intoned gravely.

"The quality varies."

"Dear Red Rum, the day your Bill passes Congress is the day I stay up all night in the Sistine Chapel taking coke with the Cardinals before taking the Pope up the arse while playing Yankee Doodle Dandy on a priceless Stradivarius." I raised my eyebrows at Red.

"That one from President Parvish?"

"Ha ha," he said flatly. "There are always some doubters..."

"Wow, this one's nice: 'buy a fucking razor blade you beatnik queer'."

"They're scared."

"They sure sound it." I continued to rifle through the pile.

"No, I'm serious, Aldaniti: this is new and they're terrified. Tomorrow I'm going to change their world."

"With a demand for free Red Leicester and a ban on cats?" I said waiving a leaflet at him.

"For god's sake put those down," said Red exasperatedly.

"I'm sorry. Did you get any suggestions you could use?"

"Plenty, and I tell you this: the balance in favour was massive. We got nearly 10% of leaflets back, most of them offering unqualified support. I'd have been happy if one in ten even got read, let alone returned."

"That's impressive."

"And what about you? Did you read it?"

"Yes, I did."

"And?"

"I'm sorry, but I haven't changed my view. I don't see what this will give us. We can change ourselves, but we can't change the men."

"I'm disappointed to hear that, Aldaniti. Your endorsement would carry a lot of weight with the fire-fighters and beyond. And I don't think you're nearly as conservative as you let on."

"My endorsement? I think you've misjudged me. My name will be down to oppose you. I came here to ask you to water-down or withdraw the Bill."

"Really? That's interesting. Can I tell you a story, Aldaniti?" He leaned forward and steepled his fingers.

"Sure, I love stories."

"There was once this old crumbling building. And then, one day, someone came along with a wrecking ball and they smashed it to pieces. And then they built a brand new building in its place." He leant back in his chair.

"That's a great story. Was that Aesop?" I paused, but he didn't speak. "And what about the people? Did everyone live happily ever after?"

"Not the guys who were stuck inside protesting about the demolition."

"Have I misjudged you, Red?"

“Only if you think that I’m the guy in the cab operating the wrecking ball.”

“No, I think you think you’re the wrecking ball.”

“You think right.” We were silent for a few seconds.

“So,” I said, “what happens now?”

“Tomorrow I’m going to put down the motion. It will be debated and, I hope, Congress will carry it.”

“They won’t. You know they won’t.”

He inclined his head and spoke softly. “Maybe not, but you surely don’t think one little knock-back will shut me down? You think I came this far with just the one plan?” He stood up and put his paw on my shoulder. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Aldi.”

Excavations

It was just growing light when the van pulled up. A passenger jumped out and fished a key from his pocket. The morning was freezing and the padlock was slightly stiff. He jiggled the key and the lock sprung open. Opening the gate wide, he allowed the van in before closing it and then dragging a bolt into place.

On all sides there was a 10-foot mesh fence with wooden boards screwed into place. These enclosed and obscured about 500 square metres of rough, scrubby waste-ground on which sat a large earthmover, some portable floodlights, a generator, a scattering of tools and a prefab hut.

Six men got out of the van. Two unloaded more tools from the back of the van and then joined the others inside the hut in search of warmth and a cup of tea.

After twenty minutes, they emerged, briefed and ready. The generator started up and, after a few seconds of chugging, the lights flared. There was a subterranean rumble and the engine of the earthmover turned over. Slowly it backed into the centre of the illuminated area and the dipper arm rose, bucket poised. It hovered for a moment, and then crashed down into the soil.

It began to dig.

Red Rum in Congress

We mice aren't architects. The Congress building is grand only in name. The structure itself is really nothing more than a small cave system with a mouse-made, sloping approach leading to a façade inlaid with carvings of great deeds from our recent history.

The centrepiece is, of course, the debating chamber. As is the preferred mice style, the room is large and circular – this appeals to use in a deeply primitive way, and it is rare to find anyone who willingly resides in a square or rectangular abode. The chamber consists of descending concentric circles of benches and chairs carved from the rock. There is a dais, but, as with all signs of officialdom, there is nothing the least showy or extravagant. When full, the chamber holds more than 3,000 mice – the 500 members of Congress, plus the keenest 2,500 members of the public.

Leading from the chamber are a number of offices and meeting rooms, and, set back further into the caves, the anti-chambers where the cabinet meets to discuss important matters of policy, primarily mouse-human relations. When the UK Prime Minister is not playing host at Downing Street, it is there, in the Ambassadorial Room, that the President receives her communications by video link.

During a debate, anyone may speak. Only members of Congress may vote, however. Outside the chamber, political life is full of the kind of intricate chicanery that would leave Richard Nixon seriously considering whether he might not be better suited to a career in, say, human resources. Inside it, though, discussion is forthright. The more unvarnished an opinion, the better it is received. Circumlocution is frowned upon and even the slightest hint of elegant speech can result in heckling if someone appears to be skirting a tricky issue or resting their argument too firmly on a form of words. Asking patsy questions is strictly out of bounds and results in ejection by the Speaker.

When it comes time to divide, Congress members file into one of three lobbies to register their vote. Under the constitution, any motion brought to vote must contain at least

three options – even if the third is simply ‘none of the above’. Each lobby contains a ‘test your strength’ machine, as found in fairgrounds. Taking turns, the Congress members step forward and strike the base of machine with a large rubber mallet. Tellers record the impact, and thus the result is the product both of the number of votes and the strength of feeling on the issue. To gain psychological advantage, the whips often arrange for the angriest members to vote first, thus cowing the opposition with a cacophony of ringing bells. When Congress votes on a contentious piece of legislation, the effect is like a group of deranged campanologists sounding the fire alarm in a bell foundry.

Some reformers worry that this whole approach does not encourage sufficient cerebricity in the legislative branch, but things seem largely to work out. The one exception was the Mallet Scandal of 1977. For many years, members brought their own mallets to the lobbies. This speeded the voting process and resulted in a small industry of dedicated craftsmen creating some exquisite thumping devices. However, it came to light one day, when someone left his mallet with a teller while he went to the bathroom, that members were weighting their mallets to increase the force of their vote. Others were rumoured to be taking steroids and working out. As a result, three official mallets were commissioned, along with a ceremonial set for welcoming communications from the humans, and members are now subject to random drug testing. Workarounds are always found though, and whips can still be seen before votes, psyching members up with verbal abuse and skilfully administered slaps.

Before the debate began, I did the rounds of a few meeting rooms, discussing how the evening might unfold. To be honest, I’ve never been very good at the hob-nobbing: I hate small talk – I can’t do it. Big talk is no problem; I love discussing issues, trading blows and having blazing rows. But, when it comes to the finer points of alliance forming, bargain making and the deft interpretation of motivations, I’m lost. My wife says that when I’m convinced I’m right, there’s no arguing with me. In fact, it’s quite the opposite: when I’m convinced I’m right, all I want to do is argue. What I can’t understand are people who say:

'well, that's your opinion'. No, that's my argument. Calling it my opinion is just you trying to avoid the forensic glare of my logic and reason falling on your own weak position. How can someone believe something and yet not be prepared to defend it in debate?

Perhaps as a consequence of this, I'm regarded as a bit of hot-head and too unreliable to be considered for a cabinet position. That's fine with me – I just want to represent the fire-fighters of Waterloo – but it does leave me with just the vaguest sense of self-doubt.

"The Bill won't pass; no way," said Hadley, another fire-fighter representative, to me as we made our way into the chamber. "It'll be close though, you watch. Red Rum's been lobbying hard and his team have been stirring up supporters to contact other Congress members."

I nodded. "He's a very good campaigner." The Speaker, resplendent and startling in her official wig, entered the chamber and made her way, limping slowly, to the dais.

"Yes... I tell you what though, there's more to him than there seems. Just before Red Rum put the motion down yesterday, I overheard an MPP member saying the most unbelievable and extraordinary thing about him. She said that he..."

"...Order! Order! Congress is now in session." The chamber was silent. "The motion before this chamber comes from the Mouse Parity Party. I call on its proposer, Burnished Umber, to kick off the debate. Burnished, if you please." The Speaker flourished an arm to her right, towards where Red Rum was sitting.

Burnished Umber rose. I recognised him instantly; it was the emcee from the park. He shuffled his notes together nervously. His left paw was shaking visibly, as though it would prefer to be holding a tambourine instead. He tried to shuffle the papers again and dropped them. His left arm spasmed instinctively to try and save them and he stuck his colleague firmly in the face.

Another mouse picked up the scattered sheets and handed them to Umber.

“Umber, if you please!” boomed the Speaker.

“Yes, sorry,” he chattered. “I would like to, I would like, erm...” At last he got his notes in some kind of order and began. “I would like to thank the Speaker, who does on a daily basis a fine and a quite superb...”

“...Arse-kisser!” shouted one member cheerfully.

“...Idiot!” yelled another.

“...Sorry,” bumbled Umber, “I’m here to move the motion that Congress approve the Bill of Rights and pass it to the President for presentation to the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.” He was beginning to hit his stride. “It’s simple: mice have had a rotten deal from men. We all know it and we all know it’s not right.” He reached the end of a page and turned over. “In summary then, I call on... what? No, wrong page, sorry.” He desperately thumbed the pages for the right one. A chant of ‘Boring! Boring! Boring!’ was growing across the chamber. Umber’s paws began to quiver and then to thrash wildly as though they’d been taking intensive lessons from Keith Moon. His papers exploded again and I knew it would be a marathon session.

A succession of mice got up to speak. I admit that I began to doze as the proceedings stretched past the third hour...

“...This current situation is a disgrace, we live as servants. I say we choose no longer to serve...”

“...If indeed it was our choice, they why do we blame the men? I say it wasn’t a choice: it was a calling...

“...Helping the less fortunate is not servitude. Selflessness isn’t slavery. Goodness isn’t oppressive...”

“...I don’t ask for money or photo opportunity; I don’t ask for an MBE or a pension plan; I don’t even ask for thanks. No, I demand my rights!...”

“...‘Anthropocentric’? Plain English, please, member...”

“...What is the point of asking someone for something that they cannot give? Humans are the centre of their own world. No Prime Minister can change that.”

“...I see fear in the eyes of the opposers. Are you scared of change? Scared of what it might be like to be free?...”

“...Free from what? Some of us seem to have forgotten what and who we are. Well, not me. I know who I am; I'm a mouse. I don't want to be free of that...”

“...You're living in the dark ages!...”

“...I'm sorry, but it just doesn't make sense; it literally doesn't. Human rights for mice! What next? Catnip for every dog? Goat's cheese for cows? Bowler hats for fielders?...”

“...I've never heard such nonsense...”

“...With respect, up yours...”

As one of the opposers of the motion, I was called to speak late in the debate. I reiterated a few points about this being a bad Bill, primarily that: Jilly Mullin could not offer equality with a race who were oblivious to us; we had no need for these rights anyway; and that men's lives were different, not better to our own.

When Red Rum stood to close the debate, he referred specifically to me. “I know how it looks, but I think Aldaniti and his colleagues are really not that far apart from us.” When the derision had subsided, he continued. “No, really. I think they see the same things as the Mouse Parity Party, they simply see them with an old and inflexible mindset. You say: with the way we live, we have no need of the rights. You say: they undermine our whole way of life. And I say: Yes! And yes, they do! These are not comfortable add-ons to what we have now; these sweep away everything that has come before. This is the end of our history! I see only one point where we have irreconcilable differences. You say: the men will not give us these rights. I say: THEY MUST! Follow me into the lobbies, my friends.”

The Speaker read out the options: *To approve the Bill and pass it to President Parvish, To reject the Bill and To conduct a nationwide consultation exercise on the Bill.*

By the time I had left my seat and made for the lobbies, the bells were already dinging merrily; particularly the Yes lobby where it sounded like there was a particularly frenzied game of bagatelle being played. But, when I looked at the voting queues, I could see we had the numbers.

I gave the mallet a firm swing and registered a solid, but not bell-ringing, No-vote. I then retook my seat in the chamber and waited for the rest of Congress to file back in. Before the Speaker had even re-entered the chamber, I could see Red Rum was glum.

The Speaker called for order. "The results are as follows: Yes: 41%, No: 49% and Maybe: 10%. The Noes have it!" Before the Speaker could say anymore, Red Rum was on his feet shouting.

"COWARDS! TRAITORS! SELF-HATING SERFS!"

"Sit down!" chorused back the No-voters.

"This Congress is a hollow mockery; a clanging bell!"

The Speaker demanded quiet. Cox's Orange, an aging member called a point of order. "Red Rum should remember that this Congress has been the guardian of our nation and way of life since the Great Pandemonium. For nearly 100 years it has protected us from barbarism."

"And now that it has turned its back on our future, its shame will last for centuries!" Red Rum hollered back. Party members began to drag him from the chamber. "Shame on you, quislings! Shame on you all!"

Aftermath

"He was escorted out?"

"Kicking and screaming like a baby."

"What'd he say?"

"Nothing repeatable, but I certainly learnt some interesting new words."

The bar was crowded and noisy – a considerable amount generated by discussion of Red Rum. *'Will someone please use their Free Punch!'* squawked the evening paper.

"Crazed loon Red Rum was thrown out of Congress today after a foul-mouthed outburst. The psycho leader of the Mouse Parity Party unleashed a torrent of abuse when his nutty plan for a Bill of Rights was rejected.

He threatened to 'staple the lips together' of members who didn't vote in favour of his plan, saying that 'those who don't speak up for mice have no need of a voice.' As he was pulled away by shocked cronies, he also promised to 'sew up the eyes' of his opponents and 'disembowel' them claiming that they 'haven't the vision to appreciate [the] Bill or the guts to stand up for mice rights'.

Aldaniti, a leading critic of the Bill, who stormed the stage during Red Rum's rally last week to protest at his insane plans, commented 'Red Rum isn't quite the popular champion and engine of change that he'd assumed. I think, and lots of people seem to agree, that we have an amazing, wonderful life here in Waterloo. We have our own culture, history and values and we are rightly proud of them'. Right on, Aldi!

Inside: Red Rum love rat exposé: 'He lectured me about rights and then demanded I tweak his tail...'

On the way home, my wife and I bumped into Tulle. As always she was rushing somewhere, hair trailing wildly behind her.

“Hi, guys,” she said quickly. “Nice interview, Aldi; you’re on the way up.” As she did so, she raised her right arm. She was wearing a sock-puppet and it appeared to be mouthing along with her words. My wife eyed it with unease. It was a plain black business sock with sequins stitched on for eyes and an oval of white felt functioning as a mouth.

“Thanks. You in a hurry?”

“Yes, sorry, but I’ve got a show to get to...” The puppet kept joining in.

“...Tulle, er, I can’t help but notice, but you’re wearing a, er sock... on your... paw,” said my wife cautiously. Despite myself, I found I was warming to its perky charm.

“Yes, great isn’t it! There’s this human designer whose show I’m going to and he does these wonderful interiors. He creates these gorgeous fabrics which he says represent the traumatic birth and life of his sock-puppet. Well, that’s not quite right actually. In fact, he only talks through the sock, which he claims is alive and is called the Wicked Puppet.”

“Wicked Puppet?” I asked holding down my disbelief.

“Yep. Wicked Puppet says he is in charge and that he designs as a thank you to the man who rescued him. He’s supposed to be tremendously funny and amazingly grounded for a sock-puppet. His latest piece is called ‘A week is a long time in hosiery’.”

“Uh?” my wife and I asked together.

“Wicked Puppet claims that his former owner had 14 identical pairs of socks. He wore them in strict rotation to ensure equal attrition and then, when the first holes appeared, threw them all away and bought 14 new pairs. He did this so that he never had to worry about which socks he would wear in the morning and so that pairing up socks after washing required no thought. At the end of each week he’d display his laundered socks on the radiator and make his housemates guess how many socks there were.”

“Seven pairs, presumably,” said my wife.

“Well, no, because, sometimes if he was going out, he’d change them. And, in the summer, he might wear none on a given day.”

“Right,” I said, unsure where this was going.

“So this display was called Sock Week, and it could either be a scarce Sock Week, if there were less than 14 socks, a normal Sock Week, if there were 14, and a supernormal Sock Week if there were more than 14 socks. He’d then use this information to make forecasts.”

“Tulle, forgive me, but what *are* you talking about?” my wife queried incredulously.

“Well, that’s just it: you get all this incredible detail in one fabric design. Wicked Puppet is an amazing talent. He’s going to be gigantic.” Her eyes were shining with joy and her sock-puppet was grinning. I gave up.

“Tulle, that’s great.”

“You know it! Gotta go, guys. See ya!” She skipped off towards the Bakerloo Line and we struggled home feeling bamboozled.

“Dude, how the hell do we know people like that?” I asked my wife.

“I blame you.”

“I thought you might.”

Scrutiny

Travelling to work early, when it's less busy, gives me a sense of mild but complete satisfaction – like a well-made second cup of tea or a drainer neatly stacked with clean washing-up. (Sometimes, if the drainer's already full and I'm tired and busy, I just can't bring myself to stop washing, dry up the wet stuff, put it all away, and then resume the washing. I know I should, but it's the same irresistible impulse that makes me reach over the edge of my chair for a pen that I could retrieve more quickly and with greater dignity by getting up. And so I stack the washing-up higher and higher, interlocking the pans and cups with the utmost delicacy until I have constructed a giant, indivisible tower of crockery. I feel shame, knowing what my wife will say, and I slink from the scene of my defeat.)

The stationhouse was serene when I arrived. I love listening to silence.

I made a quite wonderful first cup of tea of the day and went to my office. Cavvi had hurt a paw so we would be going out one team member down. I looked at our schedule – some inspections on the westbound Jubilee Line in docklands – and felt confident that we would manage fine. The Line is one of the newest parts of the network and, with careful maintenance, it shouldn't need any replacement work for at least a decade.

A throat was cleared. I looked up and Red Rum was standing in my office, only inches from my desk. Startled by his soundless entry, I barked his name involuntarily and spluttered my tea on the desk. He raised his paws in truce and apologised.

"I'm sorry, Aldaniti, I didn't mean to alarm you. Please, enjoy your tea. Do you mind if I sit?" Without waiting, he sat down. I composed myself behind my tea cup.

"Red Rum..."

"Red, please."

"Sure. What can I do for you Red?"

"I've come to join the fire-fighters."

"You haven't?"

"No, you're right, of course I haven't. I came to speak to you."

"Go ahead, speak."

"Well, knowing that you're busy, I wondered if I might be able to spend some time with you and your team, and see how fire-fighters work."

"I'm not sure I understand why you'd want to. So you can push me under a Tube train, perhaps? Maybe, weld my ears to the tracks?"

"No, no. I'm sorry about that too. Despite appearances to the contrary I'm really quite a rational person. I'm quick to anger, but I calm down pretty fast too and I never hold grudges."

"That's lucky; with the number of people you threatened yesterday, your office would be out of staples in no time."

"Yeah... hmmm, that's good," he scowled.

"So, you want to come out on a shift with the team?"

"Please. Of course, I promise to stay out of the way and follow your lead at all times."

He met my eyes and I felt my will weaken.

"Ok, sure, why not?" I said. "The team will be here shortly. Get yourself some tea and I'll run you through what we do."

Religion

I have never been a religious person.

“Take a look around inside your life,” a priest once told me. “Most won’t admit it, but everyone has a hole in their soul.”

I did and he was right: there was a gap.

“That space is the knowledge of your certain death,” he said. “It’s a vacuum, a blackhole that draws you in on yourself until you collapse under the force and implode. Only the Gods can fill that gap.”

I went to a monk and asked him about the hole. “That gap isn’t the Gods,” he said. “It is the difference between what you are and what you could be. It is your potential and it’s there to remind you that this life and body are only a lower stage of a greater and grander scheme.”

I asked Fan and he said: “Dude, Facetious, he say: that’s your stomach and it’s telling you it’s dinnertime.”

While our meek outlook and way of life might seem pious, religion is not the central force in our society it once was. Many of the old attitudes remain, but they aren’t always expressed in our actions. Now, it’s left to small but committed groups to practise a range of pretty extreme beliefs which are focused primarily on the men. (Curiously, no one seems to believe in the men’s gods.)

Sometime before the Great Pandemonium there was a schism. What emerged were two sects. One, the larger of the two, worships humans as gods. Believers are generally moderate types, happy to work uncomplainingly and serve their masters.

At the margins, of course, there are extremists: supplicants who find ways to get closer to their Gods. The traditional route was to sacrifice themselves by volunteering for

medical experiments. By contributing to human health and well-being they hoped to win favour.

A more recent development has been mice giving themselves up for cosmetic testing so that they can dedicate their lives to the glory and beauty of the Gods. Goodness knows the suffering they put themselves through. I hope it's worth it.

The second, and smaller sect, believes in reincarnation. To them, we live as mice again and again until we attain a degree of holiness that enables use to progress to the next level and become reincarnated as humans. What happens at this point remains a mystery.

They too have their fundamentalists. Occasionally, zealots will throw themselves into mousetraps believing that this will hasten the reincarnation process. Others volunteer to be pets so that they can study men close up and learn more of their divine nature.

These types are the strangest. They can often be found recruiting outside shops. "Can you spare five minutes to become omnipotent?" they ask.

Blood on the tracks

We walked and we talked.

Red Rum was actually tremendously good company. He said very little about himself, preferring to find out about the team. He showed friendly interest in each person, prompting for details of their family, background and interests but taking care not to appear intrusive. He listened assiduously and responded with good-natured but innocuous jokes and stories. By mid-morning, my initial misgivings about bringing him along had evaporated.

Since the Jubilee Line runs less frequently than the Northern, and is in a better state of repair, inspections can be carried out while the trains run. This makes life a great deal easier. (As anyone who lives in Edgware will tell you, dirty and irregular as the Tubes are, it's a long walk to work if they aren't running.)

So, after briefing Red, we'd caught a Tube to Stratford. Taking the westbound tunnel, we began to work our way back to Waterloo. The tunnels there are largely dry, wide and well ventilated. As a result, they're about as pleasant a place you can find on the entire 250-mile network. I remember the first time I saw Canary Wharf station – I stared at that concrete cathedral and I felt a surge in my chest. I stood on my hind legs, nose twitching and ears radaring; gulping in the magnificent scene. The rest of you architects, hang your heads.

Dessie and I checked wiring while Fan and Brave tested the rails. As he'd promised, Red listened carefully to instructions and, where we let him lend a paw, he helped diligently. He was fascinated watching the echo-sounding process we used for locating incipient cracks in the rails. Fan would position himself about five metres down the line and rest an ear against the track. Brave would then place his top incisors on the track and let out a high-pitched squeak. Both would listen carefully for the pitch and modulation of the vibrations, searching for any irregularities. Standing in for Cavvi, Red noted down their diagnosis and

then they'd move onto the next section of track. It is laborious work, requiring enormous concentration, perfect pitch and very clean teeth.

By lunchtime we were just past West Ham and heading for Canning Town.

"I admire the set up you've got here; it's very impressive," reflected Red through a mouthful of cheese sandwich.

"My wife makes them."

"Yes, and I like the working arrangements you have too," he said, not missing a beat. "Great team work. You realise how little you actually talk about work when you're doing it? You seem to know instinctively what needs doing."

"Just practice, I guess," shrugged Brave.

"Is it not like that with the refuse collectors?" asked Dessie.

"Not so much, no. There's less co-ordination. Most people are happy to do their own thing. And, once you've done it for a while, you establish a little patch for yourself and get on with it without much contact with others."

"Yeah? And where's your patch?" said Fan.

"I've got a tough one: the corner of Tottenham Court Road and Oxford Street. It's probably the scummiest part of central London."

"Yeah?"

"Uh huh. You never seen someone do the TCR wince?"

"No," grinned Fan, interested, "what's that?"

"Oxford Street obviously has this amazing cachet with tourists. They think it's gonna be wall-to-wall quaint, swinging, beef-eating, Union Jack mini-skirt wearing landed gentry."

"Right..."

"And then they come out of the Tube and there's nothing but poisonous pizza slices, golf sales and reservoirs of fresh vomit nestling in the cracks of the bad paving. They reach

the top of the stairs, brush away the offer of a flyer, see what Oxford Street really is and their faces contort at the awfulness of it all. Shortly afterwards, of course, they buy a slice of the pizza and then we see the TCR wretch.”

“Sounds delightful.”

“Yeah, well I’m never short of work. There’s an offal burger place on just up Oxford Street, which provides a constant pavement sprinkling of partially animal-derived beef to attract the pigeons. There’s a bin of course, but...”

“Stop him someone!” shouted Fan gleefully. “He’s going to start that ‘not rubbish’ stuff again.”

“You caught me in time,” Red grinned.

“So Red,” I said, changing the subject, “you said you were impressed. What were you expecting?”

“Not sure. I guess I was surprised at how much you all seem to enjoy your work.” He paused. “Although, I do think a lot of it’s to do with how well you get on. I once knew this guy who was a Mascis addict. Him and his fellow drinkers would spend all day getting into this powerful haze – they’d run around stealing, fighting and banging into stuff. And, when they woke up in the morning, having soiled themselves in the night, they’d do it all over again. And, you know what? When I asked him why he did it, he said: the camaraderie.”

“I knew a photographer who used to say the same,” giggled Fan, ducking to avoid a hail of half-eaten food from Dessie.

We finished lunch and resumed work.

Progress was swift and we reached North Greenwich by four o’clock. Red had swapped with Dessie and I was showing him some of the basics of wiring and fire safety. “It’s simple really.

Just imagine you're in a film. Any problems, cut the blue wire. If a circuit is malfunctioning, put some chewing gum paper across the terminals."

"Right. And how do I know if the circuit is malfunctioning?"

"Complete darkness is the primary indicator. Check your eyes are open. If they are and it's still dark, you need gum."

"Got it. Anything else I need to know?"

"Yes, don't piss off a bridge onto a sub-station; the stories you heard as a kid are true."

We reached the next boxes, and shimmied up on to it. I flashed a torch over the components and handed a screwdriver to Red. "Inspect the wires visually. Check the connections. Check the seals..."

"...What's that there?"

"A thermocouple. It a temperature sensor."

"Right... and that?"

"It's a..." I looked up and caught him yawning. "Bored?"

"No, I, er..."

"Well?"

"Aldi, I need a favour of you."

"Okay." I put down my tools.

"I guess you know that I've not given up on my Bill."

"Of course."

"Well, I'm going to bring it back to Congress."

"Can we talk about this later?" I said, feeling frustrated at being diverted from my work.

"No. We need to talk now." He voice had an insistent edge.

"Right, ok." I shrugged.

“I need you to back the Bill and bring the fire-fighters on board.”

“And what makes you think I’ll do that, given that I opposed it yesterday?”

“Because I’m going to convince you,” he said simply.

“Right,” I said uncertainly. “And how are you going to do that?” I turned my back on Red and picked up a screwdriver to jimmy the housing off a terminal. In the distance I could hear shouting.

“I want you to come with me on a tour of the end places. I want to show you what life is like outside of Waterloo.”

“And why would...” I brought the screwdriver down.

“...ALDI STOP!” screamed Dessie.

Three things happened:

1. I turned instinctively towards the sound.
2. My body tensed, but my paw’s momentum drove the screwdriver down towards the terminal.
3. The tunnel went dark.

Desire

When I woke, I was lying on my back. The tunnel was light again and there blood was running into my eyes.

"Aldi? Aldi, are you okay?" Red was standing over me. Dessie was beside him with Fan. I couldn't see Brave.

Red wiped the blood from my eyes gently and helped me up.

"What happened?"

"You fell," Red said with deliberate simplicity and slowness. "It was dark, you slipped, you hit your head and you knocked yourself out." I touched the back of my head cautiously.

"How's it look back there?" I said wincing as I found the cut.

"Not too bad. You'll have a headache for a few hours, but the cut will heal over fine." I smiled and nodded. "I don't think that's the real problem though..." Red's voiced trailed away.

"What, I broke a nail?" I said weakly. There was silence. "Come on, you owe me a laugh at least." I blinked a few times and tried to focus on the faces in front of me. Brave was there now. Dessie spoke.

"Aldi, while you were with Red, we found a major fault with the wiring. I tired to warn you but..." She shivered. "If Brave hadn't cut the power, you'd have been electrocuted."

"Well... thanks, I guess. Could've been nasty... Brave, you saved my life."

"You don't understand," Fan said unsteadily. "I don't think it wasn't an accident; it looks like it might have been rewired." He was shaking. "Aldi, it was deliberate..."

The Great Pandemonium

Not much to say, really.

At a certain point in the past something terrible happened to our society. There was violence and disorder and many were killed.

The Great Pandemonium was so devastating that we know little about it except when it ended. Our earliest written records date from 1906, which was when a few survivors relocated to Waterloo. None make any mention of the roots of the catastrophe that we suffered.

Previously Paddington was our capital. Historians claim that structural remains there are ancient, sophisticated and clearly mouse-created. Recovered artefacts, they tell us, suggest that we had an enlightened, ordered society with language, schooling and a system of public works much like our one today. In other words: a civilisation.

Something went wrong though, and it's haunted us ever since. A whole mythology has sprung up around the Great Pandemonium. There are stories of strikes; work abandoned or sabotaged; religious tension; ritual cheese burning and civil war. Even now, it is rare to see a display of contemporary dance that doesn't allude to the legend of the burning brie mill.

The Congress was established shortly after the Pandemonium subsided. We celebrate its first act – the drafting and signing of our constitution – as the beginning of the current epoch.

While we take pride in our spirit of individuality and autonomy, there is a strong sense that our lives of diligent toil are, at least in part, an attempt to avoid a repeat of the Great Pandemonium.

Of course, it's hard to avoid repeating your mistakes if you don't know what they are.

A proposition

I was in bed, swaddled by duvet, taking a rest day that I didn't need but that my wife insisted upon.

"You're not as tough as you think you are, Aldi. In fact you're not even as tough as I think you are. And I think you're a little weed."

"Yes, thank you, you're making me feel much better."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Can I get you anything? A comfort blanket perhaps? Some dumbbells?"

"Don't make me angry; you wouldn't like me when I'm angry. Especially when I've got a headache and a bad back."

"Sorry, were you speaking? All I could hear was a high pitched whining." She kissed me on the forehead and I slept.

When I awoke, I had a visitor.

"Hey Red, how you doing? You recovered from a hard day's work yet?"

"Aching all over. How about you?"

"Rarely better. I might try diving on my head more often." There was a pause. It grew and became awkward. It was the kind of pause that is usually only employed by middle-managers with bad news to deliver. Knowing what was coming, I decided to get it over with:

"So, Red, what can I do for you?"

"What we talked about earlier, I meant it you know."

"That you were really impressed with my wife's sandwiches?"

"That and the other thing I said. The tour. You should come and see for yourself."

"See what exactly?"

“How life is. We aren’t the only mice in the world, you know; just the smuggest and best off. Pardon me for lecturing, but you may not think that we need rights – and that’s because the comfortable majority never do. Rights protect people at the margins. If you don’t defend them there, you aren’t defending them anywhere.”

“I do know that. I just don’t know why you think I would want to go on your... depravation tour,” I said mildly, feeling that I was convinced already and we were merely completing formalities.

“Because you’re a good and compassionate person. Because you’re open minded. Because, despite your protestations, there is the tiniest, nagging sensation that something here is wrong.”

“Hmmm, maybe.”

“Good. I’ll meet you at the stationhouse tomorrow morning at seven. You’ll need supplies for at least three days.”

“Wait, I... Yeah, ok,” I said, feeling dazed again.

“See you then.” He put his paw on my shoulder and left.

Dessie and Fan came by and I told them I’d be taking a few days off work. When I told them why they weren’t impressed. “Listen, Red,” Fan said, “I totally understand you want to take a few days off; good idea, well earned rest and all that. But this trip thing, I’m not so sure.”

“Come on, what’s the problem.”

“Well, just how much do you know about this guy, Aldi?” asked Dessie. “A few days ago he’s your implacable enemy.”

“Enemy?”

“Alright, opponent, whatever. But you were there in the chamber when he’s screaming and cursing. He threatened you outright...”

“...And then he came and apologised and I accepted it.”

“And then he comes out on the line with us and you’re nearly killed. He’s right there when you almost die touching a circuit that has been sabotaged.”

“You’re being overdramatic, guys.”

“You could’ve been killed!” said Fan forcefully.

“Alright, look, I take your point, but I think you’re reading too much into this. I’m not going to say I’m not concerned by yesterday, but sabotage isn’t the same as attempted murder. We don’t know someone was trying to kill me. And anyway, do you think I’d go anywhere with Red Rum if I had any doubts about him. These things are unconnected...”

“You don’t know that for sure.”

“No, but you guys will look into the wiring, right? I’m not going far – just a little field trip. I’ll be back in a few days and everything will be fine. Yeah? So until then, will you mind the shop?” They nodded, but were clearly unconvinced. “How’s Cavvi doing, by the way?” Dessie brightened.

“He’s doing good. He should be back tomorrow and he sends his love.”

“Good, then we’re all fine.”

My wife returned from work.

“Now, honey, what’s going on? I thought you didn’t want to go.”

“I don’t. He, I dunno, talked me into it.”

“I take back what I said about you being a weed.”

“Alright, alright. But, look, maybe he’s got a point. I don’t want to be grand, but I have responsibilities as a Congress member. Shouldn’t I try to do what’s right?”

“You always do, dude. And that’s why I love you. Even if you are a spineless little worm.”

“Thanks.”

“But what about the accident? The tampering?...”

“No, no, it was just a bit of vandalism, nothing more. It’s all fine.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Okay. How long will you be gone?”

“A few days. I’ll miss you.”

“I should hope so.”

“I love you.”

“I know. You want me to make you sandwiches?”

This road I'm travelling

The top three things I love are:

1. My wife
2. Unpasteurised organic Cheshire
3. The Tube network

I love them best when:

1. She takes me to art galleries and tells me things I don't know. (Oh, and when she remembers to tidy her stuff up, because she knows I'll feel tense if she doesn't.)
2. The Cheshire has such a sharp tang that it makes me go 'mmmah!' and click my tongue on the roof of my mouth. (So much cheese these days tastes as though it can only have come from pigs. It's the next food scandal; mark my words.)
3. It's running well at 07.30. (Services are swift, you won't be able to smell your fellow passengers and just about wherever you get on, you should be able to find a seat.)

I've been very lucky: of these three love affairs, only one has had the ups and downs that normally arise between loved and lover: the Tube.

"I love because you have such a big heart – you carry 3 million people a day."

"But I do wish you'd make a bit more effort. You always used to make sure you looked your absolute best. Now, sometimes you look a bit dowdy and untidy."

"What am I saying? You're amazing: you cover 250 miles and 275 stations. That's tough work and takes an exalted soul."

"You're starting to show your age a bit though. I wonder if I could trade you in for a younger model. Oh, how about the New York Metro! Or the Singapore MRT!"

"But then, you do look incredible for 140 years old. You still have that classical beauty – all white tiles and seductively curving tunnels."

“On the other hand, and I don’t mean to be critical here, but you used to be so carefree, and now you’re so... money orientated.”

“Who doesn’t change over time though? The reasons I fell in love with you – the astounding map, the stunning stations and the masterful Underground roundel – are all still there.”

At this point, Red tapped me on my shoulder and I jumped. “You alright, dude? You look like you were daydreaming.”

“Ah, yes, just, er, mulling a few things over.”

“Right. You ready then?”

“I reckon so.” I shouldered my pack and we left the stationhouse. “So,” I said, “which way we headed?” Red pointed north.

“To the end of the line.”

We stopped in the marketplace to pick up breakfast and then struck out north up the southbound tunnel of the Northern Line. I challenged Red as to why we weren’t taking the Tube.

“There are some journeys where you get as much from the travelling as from the arriving.”

“Dude, these are tunnels; hundreds of miles of featureless tunnels,” I protested.

“Trust me, I walk them every day.”

“Then it’s about time you took a proper look at them.”

“Well, maybe you should tell me what I can expect to see, other than regular speeding trains that need dodging.”

“Mice, lots of them. Savage, uncivilised mice; solitary mice; bandit mice; hippy mice; ruined mice. They’re all out there and they’re doing things differently.”

“Yeah, that sounds great,” I said sarcastically. “Are they going to violently assault me to demonstrate how corrupt and bourgeois my ways are?”

“I certainly hope so.”

“Fine, so we walk. You said end of the line. Mill Hill East?”

“Nope, somewhere even more desolate.”

“There’s somewhere more desolate than Mill Hill East? Oh, Jesus we’re going to West Ruislip?”

“Maybe I was being a bit melodramatic when I said end of the line. First stop is the British Museum.”

“The British Museum? There’s not a stop there.”

“Not any more there isn’t, no. But there was until the early 1930s.”

“We’re going to a disused station?”

“Oh, yes, there’s loads of them.”

“I know that.”

“But do you know what goes on there?”

“They patronise their friends all day?”

“Close. Rumour has it that there’s a ghost of an Egyptian mummy from the museum.”

“Yeah? She got a cat ghost?”

“Let’s hope not.”

The tunnels whistled and we paused. A train came past and we walked on.

After about half an hour we passed C Team who were examining a rusted stanchion. News of our trip had obviously been passed around the fire-fighters pretty quickly because Red was getting some suspicious looks. I decided we’d have to stop and chat.

C is one of the oldest and worst performing fire-fighting groups. The team is led by Scoliosis, a liberal minded, working-class former proof-reader who displays no great talent for

organisation, and it's composed mostly of slothful mice who display no great talent for following instructions. Team members tend to sit around and chew over the latest tabloid headlines while Scoliosis corrects the typos.

When we reached the group, they'd lost interest in the stanchion and were instead discussing a photo of an attractive and well-bred young lady who was pictured, semi-clad, on the inside page of a respectable newspaper. Beside the photo was the headline: 'Look at this filthy slut.'

"What a woman," said Psoriasis, who was one of the slower-witted members of the team.

"Yeah, she's hot," said Colitis, who worked nights as part of a Fingermouse tribute act to supplement his income. "What'd'ya think?" he said, passing the paper to Scoliosis who looked uncomfortable at the whole discussion. Against his better judgement he forced himself to look. The shadow fell across his brain and he twitched involuntarily.

"Oh, she's a pretty girl for sure, but do you not think there is something of the copper about her?"

"Like metal or something?" said Colitis.

"No, I mean she looks like a police woman."

"You can tell by the outline of her breasts in that evening gown?" enquired Red.

"She could take down my particulars any time," leered Psoriasis. Everyone ignored him.

"Seriously, I can't imagine fancying someone who might grass me up at any minute," said Scoliosis.

"Grass you up for what?" asked Colitis.

"Who knows? Could be a miscarriage of justice. Happens all the time," said Scoliosis.

"She could make me confess anytime," said Psoriasis happily.

"Miscarriage of justice?"

“Yeah: false confessions and dodgy forensics are surprisingly common. I’m very concerned about juris prudence and civil liberties, as you know. One survey said that 87% of policemen admitted to committing a criminal offence at work. That’s a higher rate than among convicted burglars and muggers.”

“I’d like to take liberties with Prudence,” said Psoriasis wistfully.

“Maybe he’s got a point about this girl,” volunteered Red. “One argument about the washing up and she might cuff you and take you down to the station.”

“Don’t encourage his diseased imagination,” said Colitis.

“Diseased imagination?” said Scoliosis getting agitated. “I’ve been fitted up here; I could be facing a ten-stretch...”

“She could fit me up anytime,” said Psoriasis.

“...and I need...” Scoliosis broke off. “What the hell are you talking about ‘fit me up’? That doesn’t make sense. It doesn’t even mean anything.”

Psoriasis looked suddenly embarrassed.

“It raises an interesting point, though,” said Red, stirring again. “Is it ever right for the police to fabricate evidence if they know someone is guilty?”

“Dunno,” I said.

“No, never,” said Scoliosis.

“What if the officer concerned was hot?” asked Colitis.

I moved us on.

I’m not a great one for meditative activity or quiet contemplation.

“Don’t let’s travel in silence, Red. Tell me a story.”

“What kind of story?”

“Whatever you like.”

"Ok, what thing do you love most?"

"My wife."

"Yes, I certainly know a few stories about her..."

"Yeah, yeah..."

"Anything else?"

"Cheese?"

"Ok, yes, I've got a story about cheese." A train came sweeping down the track. The tunnel was broad and we tucked safely into the side. When it was gone, Red resumed. "Did you know that there are certain substances the ability to taste which depends, not on sensitivity of the palate, but on genetic inheritance?"

"No, I erm... what?"

"Some people, some mice for example, have extraordinarily sharp senses of smell and, to a lesser degree taste. But, no matter how sensitive their taste buds, if they haven't got the right gene, they can't taste these substances. What does that mean, do you suppose, for our collective understanding of the world?"

"Er, I don't know... it's, erm." I decided to hazard a guess. "Maybe?"

"Well, that one of the things we're going to see about. Going back to the substance, another interesting thing about it is, for those who can taste it, it's extraordinarily bitter. I read about this chemist who was experimenting with them when her husband told her he was quitting as a management accountant and wanted to move to the West Country to restore furniture. They'd been on a day out to Shepton Mallet when he told her."

"Yeah?" I said.

"Lovely Mallet," Red confirmed. "You know it's right there in the ancient marketplace, just as it was when Edward I used it on the Scots? Of course nowadays there's a website with an interactive tour for the kids. Very useful if the weather's bad or you can't face all those Sealed Knot types. Sorry, what was I saying?" Red asked.

"Moving to the West Country to restore furniture," I said.

“Thank you. Yes. She tried pointing out that, since the concentration of houses is highest in urban areas, their semi in South London put them in an excellent catchment area for neglected furniture. ‘Mike,’ she said, ‘there are parts of Colliers Wood and Morden where no front garden is complete without a rotting sofa or decaying chest of drawers. If you restored only the damaged bedside tables you found in skips you’d be busy for the rest of your life’.

‘Jenny,’ he said, ‘that stuff isn’t worth restoring. Most of it’s from Ikea or Argos.’

‘Well why don’t you just buy it from there instead then?’

‘Don’t try and confuse me. I don’t want to assemble flat pack stuff, I want to work with the wood to bring out its inner beauty and in so doing, find myself.’

‘Mike, it’s okay if you need to sleep with younger women, you know. You don’t have to channel your middle-life crisis with a lathe and chisel’.

‘Darling, this isn’t a crazy dream, this is about me turning my back on the rat race and saying: “enough; I want to live in harmony with myself.”’

‘If you’re talking like this now, think how it’s going to be when you’re stuck in a small shed all day with solvents and French polish’.

So they moved to a nice village in Dorset and she, to her credit, decided to change her life too. She took up cheese making, which is the one country pursuit she found herself best suited to. She invested a little of their money in some goats, sheep and few cows and managed to produce some spectacular Red Leicester and some marvellous feta. Good goat’s cheese, however, eluded her. Eventually, the strain of dairy failure combined with sleep deprivation from the lack of urban noise, pushed her into a dangerous place mentally. She began to add the elusive substance of which I spoke earlier to her cheese. And, do you know what? By an amazing coincidence, another property of the substance was that it provided the body and firmness that her goat’s cheese had so desperately lacked. The result was her cheese swept all before it at the local village fête and the county show. But, when it came to

the south west championships, the panel were from an area where the tasting gene wasn't recessive. Of the three judges, one took a nibble and immediately fainted, the second proclaimed the cheese a regional disgrace and the third, the Vicar of Beaminster, drank so much prize winning cider to quench his salty thirst that he was sick on the lady mayoress's ceremonial wellingtons. They had to leave the town."

We walked on, mostly in silence.

Finally, after another half hour, we reached Tottenham Court Road and switched to the Central Line.

"You know," I said, "I promised myself I'd give it at least till lunchtime without whinging."

"A Herculean effort you've made my friend."

"Well, I was just thinking how much like one another tunnels are and how, given that I work in them all day, how painfully familiar they seem..."

"Yes, yes, we're almost there. Stick with me."

Worship

“There are more than 40 closed or abandoned stations on the network. With the proximity of TCR and Holborn, both of which are, as you know, on the Central Line, the British Museum stop was deemed unnecessary.”

I nodded as Red talked enthusiastically. Outside stations the lighting on the network is poor. I'd walked through British Museum before but never examined it closely. The platform was filthy and littered with debris, my beautiful tiles almost completely obscured. The exits had been sealed but the rusting doors would probably no longer repel a determined intruder. Water trickled through the ceiling, stripping the posters from the walls and collecting in stagnant, gluey pools in eroded gullies on the platform. One of the last remaining posters advertised Oswald Mosley's fascists under the strapline: 'Keep the British Museum British'. Over it someone had painted in neat, white, official-looking letters: 'Please do not read this message'. Next to it, a torn and illegible poster had been graffitied in a way that suggested that the station wasn't completely abandoned by men. In black marker pen was written: 'Fran Healy is a bastard.' This had been amended by another hand to read: 'Fran Healy is the bastard son of Michael Bolton'. 'Michael Bolton' had subsequently been crossed out and replaced with 'Dennis Healy'. Beneath this, a final hand had added '...and France'. I looked at the message for a moment: 'Fran Healy is ~~the~~ ^{the} bastard **son of**

~~Michael Bolton~~ Dennis Healy ...and France.'

The rails began to hum and we took cover until the train had passed. We returned to the trackside. “Now where are these mice you promised me?”

Red pointed at a large breach under the platform where masonry had collapsed.

“In there.” I followed him in. It was almost completely dark and my eyes struggled to adjust. “Stay close to me, Aldi, and take it slowly.” We walked on, stepping carefully over rubble and through little tributaries ferrying water elsewhere. The walls were clammy and moss-covered, the air was cool and damp. We’d been going for about five minutes when I realised my shoulders were hunched and that I was extremely cold.

“Damn, it’s nippy. You feel it? I’m freezing.”

“You what?” said Red absently.

“We’re near a line and mice, so why am I so cold?”

“Because you’re not wearing a hat?”

“I’m serious. It shouldn’t be cold. Something’s not right.”

“Not ‘not right’: just different.”

“Whatever,” I said dismissively.

“It’s ok,” he said soothingly. “We’re almost there.” After another minute, he stopped.

“Are you ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.”

“Right, then there’s just one little thing.”

“What?”

“Well, by way of introduction, let me say that, you believe, rightly, that the mice of Waterloo are different. You also believe, again with some justification, that you are more advanced. The thing is, you don’t know how right you are. Why is cold and dark here? Because most mice are primarily group dwelling and nocturnal. “

“I know that.”

“But what you don’t know is why. We tend to think our emerging civilisation has brought in 24-hour living. Partly right, but I think this masks a much more profound change. Other mice are largely nocturnal because their eyes are much more photosensitive than ours.

In fact, they can hardly bear to be in the light. They don't stray far from the group, so there's no need for heating."

"So?"

"Come this way and I'll show you. You might want to prepare yourself for another little surprise to, while you're at it..." He beckoned me to follow him.

The pathway narrowed to an aperture just wide enough for a mouse to pass through. On the other side it sloped sharply down and opened out again into a vast grotto. The way became easier and I got a definite impression that the ground had been worn smooth by the passage of millions of feet.

The first thing I noticed was the sound. With my eyes still barely functioning, I was navigating largely by nose and ear. Gradually the gentle hum that I'd taken to be ambient noise or the buzzing of transformers resolved into a breathy whine and then a clanging, screeching din. It was the chatter of mice, thousands and thousands of them. My eyes began to discern the shape of the ground, which was rippling and pounding. And then there was the smell. Musk, sweat, hot breath, excrement, rubbish and compost were thick in the air. I found it almost overpoweringly revolting.

We had reached the edge of vast shanty town. It was a mass of unplanned burrows and nests jerry-built from foraged scraps of paper and discarded cardboard, wood, cloth and plastic. Every street, alley and path was surging with mice charging determinedly on their way with a single-mindedness that even London drivers might find distasteful. Whenever gridlock was threatened the larger mice simply climbed over the rest, forming double- and triple-decker lanes of interlocking traffic.

I stood in a lee formed by the intersection of several dwellings and felt dizzy and intimidated by the relentless flows of mice.

"Rush hour?" I asked weakly.

"Nope, it's always like this. How'd you like it?"

“It’s, er, huge, I guess.”

“Notice anything?”

“Other than the unbearable noise and repulsive stench, you mean?”

“Yeah, like how about that?” Red pointed away, over my head. Rising above the town, too distant to make out properly, was the outline of a great tower. “You’re gonna love this.”

We circled back out of the town and round towards the tower.

“So how do you know about this place?”

“I moved around a lot as a kid. I spent quite a time before I came to Waterloo travelling and seeing for myself. I first came here about two years ago. That time I stayed for a few months and learned their ways.”

“They have *ways*?”

“Yes, and I don’t just mean they arrange their stationery on their desks with military precision.”

“Eh?”

“Come on, I saw your office, it looks like you have it cleaned by a Drill Sergeant.”

“Let’s talk about their ways, not mine.”

“Well, they’re much less developed socially, but they are developed some. Look at the town, it’s not planned, but it is built – there’s a clear desire to co-habit.”

“They have any social structures? Do they work?”

“Not like we do. There is one very important social structure though.” We turned a corners and the delta of housing ended sharply. A massive crescent of bare ground cut deep into the town. In centre was the tower, surrounded my genuflecting mice. As we progressed through the crowd, the tower came into focus. It wasn’t a tower. It was a statue.

It was a giant, mouse-made statue of an old man sitting in an armchair. Like the town, the figure was made out of scrap material, but it was clear that infinitely more care had gone

into its construction than any of the dwellings. He was a smiling, kindly figure gazing benevolently out over what were clearly worshippers. Despite his age – his neatly side-parted hair was silvery and his green cardigan chunky – his eye sparkled, alternately mischievous and wise. His right arm was crooked, palm raised as though he were saying ‘do you know what?’ The focal point of the statue, though, was its left hand, which contained a huge burning pipe. As he sat, contemplating his audience and beaming genially, mice took it in turns to scamper up his back, on to his shoulder and then down his arm to the pipe, where they refilled it with flammable material.

“It’s bloody Tony Benn!” I gasped.

“Amazing, no?”

Each time the pipe was refuelled, it flared up and the obedient worshippers had to shield their eyes from the light. In these brief moments of illumination, I looked across the crowd, but their numbers were too great and the light too weak to see where they ended. I sniffed the air. Religious fervour does little to prevent perspiration

“What the hell’s going on?”

“Some time in the recent past – before I first came here – the mice moved from a loose association into a community. The religious feeling on show here is the second major example, after the construction of the town itself.”

“But why Tony Benn?”

“An outsider came to visit them once. He was a mouse named Manuel Blanco, and he brought with him a copy of Tony Benn’s diaries. As you’ll see soon, because their language is more basic than ours, he had to translate it for them. Anyway, he gave lectures and explained Benn’s policies and accomplishments. Now, the mice had never given much thought to current affairs, let alone the specifics of fiscal policy, but there is something about Tony Benn. His vision of the world appealed to the mice. His belief in the goodness of people delighted them and his principled nature seemed a solid foundation on which to build this

developing community. For these mice that couldn't write, Benn's reverence for history and his insistence of preserving and recording his own actions seemed saintly. It kick-started what you can see around you. These guys might look like holy fools, but they are trying so hard to evolve you can see them trembling with the effort. Where it will end, I don't know, but there's something about it I love. And I just think Benn's a great choice. There is no cynicism in him. He has no enemies, only respectful opponents. He remembers everything and he offers hope of a better future. But, most of all he is a good man; and that's the most powerful and enduring legacy. The example he sets will still echo around the world when the hollow crash of lesser men has died."

"And what about Manuel Blanco?"

Red shook his head. "Don't know; he didn't stay long. He told them he was a historian. The only thing he left was his copy of Benn's diaries, which the mice still pore over, hoping to find out what it was like to have tea with Ramsey McDonald."

"How are they doing?"

"See for yourself," said Red indicating the nearest mouse. I turned to find a short, pretty normal looking mouse next to me. I introduced myself.

"Hi, I'm Aldaniti from Waterloo."

The mouse cocked his head and responded with a stream of squeaking and chattering. I tried again, but the result was the same. Red called to the mouse in similarly high-pitched tones and the mouse replied. Red nodded and turned to me.

"He says his name is Bristol South and that he is an arch Bennite."

"I'm afraid I can't make any sense of what he's saying," I admitted, embarrassed.

"Don't worry. It's not an accent or regional dialect. In fact, it's only just a language with proper structure and grammar. Much of it's still very metaphorical. It took me a while to learn and I'm very rusty. The truth is that we are the only mice who speak a language similar

to humans. Or at least the only ones of whom I can find a record. Unlike so many of our other activities, it's not that the human government don't publicly acknowledge us for fear of scaring the men. It's simpler: there's nothing to report. Other than these guys, and some more we're going to visit later, we're the only language speakers."

It was late and I was tired. Red said we should rest now, but that there were more surprises to come later. Red explained to Bristol who we were and asked if he could find us a place to sleep.

That night I dreamt of my wife dreaming of cheese. Lots of lovely cheese.

Cheese

Contrary to popular belief, Nasa did not invent Teflon. In fact, the non-stick miracle was created by Dupont in the late 1930s. Nasa has never done anything to correct this extremely common misunderstanding since it would leave its list of accomplishments looking even more threadbare than it already does.

Similarly, we believe that processed cheese was actually first developed by the American military as an anti-communist measure in the late 1940s. Scientists working for what would grow into the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency laboured for years to produce the colour, smell, taste and clammy, adhesive texture that would engender maximum despair in those exposed to it. So impressed were the NSA psych-ops that they decided it could be used as a counter-insurgency tool on the streets of the US.

When the story first leaked out in the late '70s, it dropped in the lap of a junior reporter on a UK newspaper. Nervous, he filed the story under the headline 'Secret American military plot to deluge streets with cheese'. On reaching the duty sub, this became 'American programme to 'fill streets' with cheese'. The news editor amended it to 'America 'considers' deploying dairy produce'.

Finally the story landed on the desk of the editor who scanned it briefly, struck through the headline and scribbled 'CIA floods streets with crack cocaine'.

Processed cheese also has much to tell us about changing man-mouse relationships. When its launch was announced, there was an outcry in Waterloo. The then mouse President, Elm Park, led a delegation to Downing Street where he demanded Atlee ban all imports of the filthy stuff. Atlee refused, but did introduce a five-year moratorium on new varieties and, to protect quality cheeses, gave a guarantee that any processed cheese imports would be of

uniformly low quality. The Cheese Accords made Elm Park hero and led the press to dub him 'the Big Cheese'.

Though every subsequent President has described relationships as excellent and enduring, most scholars now regard the Accords as the high watermark of our influence. Under successive governments, processed cheese regulations were relaxed. First cheese spread, then cheese slices and then, incredibly, cheese strings.

When Dairylea Lunchables were launched, the outrage was such that President Parvish's predecessor disclosed that, under pressure from the Americans, the UK government had been forced to negotiate a secret opt out from certain provisions of the European Convention on Human Rights to allow their introduction.

Game show

I can never relax in someone else's house. No matter how often I've been there, about 12 hours is the most I can manage before I get a painful headache and constipation. As soon as I get home and drink some water I'm fine.

I admit I'm quite particular about these things, but even the most footloose mouse has trouble sleeping in unfamiliar surroundings. Despite higher standards of personal hygiene in Waterloo, dwellings still retain the scent of the occupier. There, in a place alive with penetrating odours, I'd felt cold, uncomfortable, dirty and tired, but not sleepy. Had it not been for my dream, I would've sworn I'd been up all night. It didn't help, of course, that the mice kept different hours from us. There is nothing harder than living differently in the midst of others.

After breakfast, I found Red absorbed in discussion with several mice. While I didn't recognise them, Red's body language suggested that he knew them well. When he spotted me approaching, his shoulders tightened, he grinned and then, turning back to his friends, he adopted much more open and conversational posture.

"Hi, guys," I said raising a paw to acknowledge the group. "How's everyone doing today?"

Red eeked briefly and there were some pleasant squeaks back which he translated as 'they're fine and hope you slept well'. He squeaked some more and the conclave dispersed.

"Friends of yours?" I said lightly.

"Yes, some of the people I stayed with when I first came here. They were intrigued to hear of our presence, and regretful that we were only staying for one night."

"We're heading off, then?"

“In a while. There’s one last thing I need to show you here.”

“Okay, where to?”

“Back to the statue again.”

To one side, where the place of worship met the city, Red set his pack down on a stony outcrop. He cleared his throat and called to the handful of mice that were milling around. A number turned to listen. Red paused and then let out another stream of high-pitched eeks and squeaks. A few of the bolder mice advanced until they were almost at touching distance. Gradually others fell in behind them and formed an attentive semi-circle.

At this range the smell was even more pronounced – a throaty, penetrating stench of decayed meat that, at this range, had a sweet, alluring undercurrent, like the aroma of a kebab after closing time.

Red squeaked further instructions and then reached into his backpack. He pulled out a multi-coloured stack of thimbles, selected three blue ones and spread them out upside-down in a line on the ground. He addressed the crowd again and then turned to me, flourishing a piece of a nutshell. I began to feel very uneasy: I don’t like to be involved in any kind of quiz or competition.

“Right, Aldi, you know the score; this is the old fairground trick. Watch carefully and tell me which cup the shell is under.” He lifted the centre cup, dropped the nut under it and then, slowly at first, began to shuffle the thimbles. I concentrated hard, trying to shut out the smell. His arms started to cross faster in long sweeping arcs, flipping the thimbles from one paw to another, alternating direction and rhythm until, after about 15 seconds, he paused and lined the thimbles up again. I felt confident I had it. “So, Aldi, which is it?” He translated for the crowd and then nodded to me. I pointed:

“The far right.” With a showman’s gesture, he flipped the thimble in the air, where it rotated several times before landing back in his paw. The nutshell wasn’t there. I felt hot and

angry. One of the mice came forward from the crowd and nosed the left-hand thimble. Red picked it up and there was the nutshell. "Not fair!" I blurted out. "After my guess, he had a one in two chance of getting it right." Red nodded.

"That's true," he admitted. "Okay, watch again, but this time, don't guess." He spoke to the crowd, replaced the shell under the central thimble and began the mixing again. When he'd finished, he squeaked a query. The same mouse came forward and indicated the left-hand thimble. Red raised it and there was the shell. The crowd chattered excitedly. "What do you make of that, Aldi?"

"Luck."

"Well, that's a one-in-two followed by a one-in-three chance. Six-to-one. How lucky do you think this mouse is?"

"Six-to-one? Someone gives you a die and asks you to throw a six. You get it first go. That's six-to-one. It's a piece of good luck, but it's hardly winning the lottery. And it certainly doesn't prove that he knew." Red remained placid in the face of my vehemence.

"True." He considered the situation for a second. "Ok, one more time. Watch this." He squeaked more instructions to the crowd. Slowly, the first five or ten began to turn their backs on us.

"What's going on?"

"You'll see." Now, every mouse within a few metres was facing away from us. Red squeaked again briefly, then replaced the shell under a thimble. His arms swished and danced, this time using new patterns. Basic shapes emerged and were repeated, altered and expanded over a period of minutes until they reached dazzling complexity. His speed increased and I found myself utterly mesmerised by his dexterity and artistry. Finally, he stopped. He called for the mice to turn around and then he looked at me. "Choose a mouse," he said, "any one."

“No, I want the same one as before.” The mouse, who’d retreated back into the crowd, shuffled forward and nodded unhesitatingly at the central thimble. I had a strong and sudden sense of what was coming next. Red turned to me, grinned and lifted the thimble. There was the nutshell. Again the mice squeaked triumphantly.

“That’s 18-to-1, Aldi. He’s even luckier than you thought!”

“Ok, what’s going on? How the hell did they do that?”

“I’ll show you. Check this out.” He reached into his pack again. This time he pulled out three green thimbles, all of different shades. Leaving aside the nutshell, he lined the thimbles up. “Now, this one is much simpler. Aldi, from left to right, precisely what colour are these thimbles?”

“Oh, come on!” I was feeling agitated again. I often get criticised for finishing people’s sentences for them. It’s rude apparently, but there’s a certain type of person who insists on drawing out their point as though they are some kind of master raconteur. I don’t like Jackanory and I don’t like being anyone’s pupil. “Red, this isn’t a marketplace and you’re not selling bloody cooking knives, so please make your point.”

“Uh, uh! Trust me, you need to see this, Aldi. Please, humour me.”

“Heaven’s sake,” I muttered, shaking my head. “Alright: blue-green, light green, medium-to-darkish green.”

“Very good. That’s pretty much how I see them too. However, according to the manufacturer’s specifications they’re actually: turquoise, lime green and emerald green. Now check this.” He turned to the 18-to-1 mouse and squeaked a set of command. “Aldi, I asked him the same question and I’ll try to translate his responses as best I can.” The mouse eeked and nodded towards the blue-green thimble. “He’s saying ‘that is the lightest, then the next, and this one is darkest’.” Red replied and the mouse shook his head. “I asked him which

colour it was and he couldn't give it a name. He says simply that they are lighter or darker in relation to each other."

"He's colour-blind?" I said, feeling like I'd caught up at last.

"Yes and no. It's not a genetic defect; most mice don't have colour vision. Humans can distinguish over two million colours; us many fewer. It seems that in a dramatically shortly period of time the residents of Waterloo have evolved primitive colour vision. The latest scientific thinking is that the development of colour vision is inversely related to smell sensitivity."

"So, the better our vision, the worse our smell?"

"It's thought that the ability to distinguish more gradations of colour gives us visual access to important information – like, for example, the ripeness of food – that we had previously depended on our sense of smell for. And so, gradually, we've come to rely less on our noses. It seems to me that we are currently in an intermediate stage. Our noses aren't yet much worse than these mice. We've just forgotten how to interpret what they are telling us."

"So he smelt where the nutshell was? He didn't need to be able to follow your paws?"

"Yes. You see, to us, the smell of these mice is just a horrible, offensive pong. But to them, it's rich with layers of information. Take our lucky friend here," he said pointing. "If we knew how, we could tell from his smell how old he is and what his social and sexual standing in the community are. We could also tell which mice in this place he's related to because, not only does he have a unique individual smell, he also has a family and a litter smell. On entering a place, with just a few sniffs, we could draw up a complete social map and locate any individual on it."

"Amazing."

"I know. Humans have ways of doing this too, but as yet our brains aren't able to process and decipher the visual information that shoes provide."

Question and answer

Quizzes and game shows are a lamentably popular entertainment for mice. Especially with me; I love them.

I've always considered myself a bit of a quiz ace. I like to think I'm bright, well-read and have a bit of a flare for general knowledge. I've not always been shy of boasting about this either.

One day though it came back and bit me. Big time.

I was loudly mocking Brave for not knowing the Tegucigalpa was the capital of Honduras when Cavvi asked why, if I was so clever, I didn't go on *Pretty smart for a mouse*, the top-rated game show. I blustered, but I was skewered. "Fine," I said getting up from the table, "I'll win the damn thing." I went to the bar forcefully proclaiming that any 'losers' who didn't know that Ndjamenena was the capital of Chad had 'better get the hell out of my way.'

I lost, of course. With the whole park watching, I was eliminated in the first round.

The lights came up and the host skipped up to front of the stage. He made several preliminary remarks too bland to reproduce here and began the contest. If you are male, into comfortable clothes and still in possession of the slightest sense of humour by the time you reach late middle age, you automatically become avuncular. With his impossibly amiable chuckle, a love of boiled sweets and a propensity to garden, the host was being short changed by the word.

The contestants were ranged in a semi-circle around the stage, most perspiring gently at the thought of the grand prize. In the first round each of us would face five questions. The order they were posed was determined by a tombola drawn by a one-eighth size solar-powered replica of Terry Wogan. Competition is so fierce that only five out of five

will guarantee progression to the next round. The first nine questions went to other contestants. I knew eight of them.

“Number five!” boomed the announcer. A blinding spot light picked me out.

“Aldaniti, for the production of what is the town of Hershey, Pennsylvania, famous?”

“Chocolate bars.”

“Correct answer.” The light swung away and I became aware of my surroundings for the first time. Even this late in the evening the park was humid. Air was scarce and my paws were sweating where they were locked against the podium and rough stone floor. My second question came quickly.

“Where precisely is the Prix de L'Arc de Triomphe held?”

“Longchamp, Paris.”

“Correct.”

What a start! I was feeling good. I grinned like a champion media salesman on the receiving end of a clumsy invitation to super-size his meal. And then it hit me.

“Aldaniti, what is the kelp line?”

I was half way through saying ‘it’s the...’ when I realised I didn’t know. Never heard of it before. “Could you repeat the question?” I asked; a strange piece of learned behaviour. I’d seen so many quiz shows that, without even thinking about it, I was playing for time like a pro. “It’s the...” I said again. I could hear the confusion in my voice.

“I’m going to have to hurry you. No? Then I’ll tell you. It’s the area of land that lies between high and low tide.”

The game continued. All I could hear was the sound of a thousand adolescent voices chanting ‘you want fries with that?’ I gripped the podium so tightly that it began to wobble. At least I was steady though. ‘What drink do you want?’

“Back to contestant number five! Who wrote the novel The Wizard of Oz?”

Sweet lord! I knew this one. It was L. Frank Baum. "L. Frank..." I began. 'Would you like an apple pie?' said a voice. "Baum. Frank Applebaum," I blurted out.

"The answer I have is L. Frank Baum." The sound of onions frying sizzled unbearably in my head. "I think I can accept it, though."

Then there is a blank period. My wife, who was then my girlfriend, told me that I seemed to be in a trance, oblivious to the rising excitement of the quiz. I was one of the last to receive my final question.

I became aware that a voice was calling to me. Through the searing light I could see a shape advancing on me and waving. The PA carried his warm, cuddly voice to everyone in the park. "Aldaniti? Aldaniti, can you hear me? Are you ready to go for your final question in this round?" 'Is that eat in or to go?' asked the voiced.

"Go," I answered.

"Very well. Your question is: what is the meaning of the word 'tintinnabulation'?"

I remember nothing else of the night.

It means 'the ringing of bells'. I've never forgotten, and I don't try to disown it. On the contrary, I have tamed and mastered the word. I use it often.

It was a mortifying experience. I still get flashbacks. Periodically, the sound of the host's voice comes back to me and I flush with embarrassment as the thoughts overwhelm me. More than once I have found myself shouting the two missing answers in public, oblivious to the stares I'm attracting.

Every now and then, in the pub, Fan adopts the manner of a quizmaster and runs through the following exchange: "Question: Aldaniti, have you ever been badly humiliated in public? No, Bill, I haven't. I'm sorry, that's the wrong answer!"

For a time, some newspapers referred to me as the 'Feeble-minded Fireman'.

Incidentally, my wife once had a dream about a competition called 'Ironman Philosopher'.

Open only to those with a degree in philosophy, it was held in a bookshop where contestants would take it in turns to do press ups, stomach crunches and long-arm pull-ups while reciting passages from Kant.

In the final, two constants stood toe-to-toe and engaged in a fierce Socratic dialogue. If one hesitated with a rejoinder, the other had licence to strike them around the head with an unread copy of Heidegger's Being and Time.

Excavations

They worked through the first day, resting frequently for tea to replenish their flagging strength. By lunchtime a considerable area had been dug up and the foreman was well satisfied. Despite some language problems, his team had made good progress. They were hard working and eager and, above all, should problems arise, they could be dispersed quickly and untraceably. Some had false papers; some had slipped into the country by more subtle means.

Each day, to minimise the amount of information they might reveal under interrogation, he collected them from a prearranged point in his unmarked van. Food and facilities were provided in the pre-fab and they were not permitted to leave the site on foot.

The schedule remained tight, but with the rewards on offer and the team he had assembled, he felt sure that stage one of the project would be completed on time.

In the afternoon they would begin reinforcement work on the mouth of the cavity, and then the specialist equipment could be brought in.

He took his mobile phone out of his pocket and made a call.

Excuses for travellers

A train whooshed past the hole under the platform. We waited for a moment and then rejoined the track.

The walk back to the British Museum had been mostly silent. I felt confused and unable to process the information I was being given. My stomach was unsteady and my chest tight. For the first time since childhood, I was aware of disharmony invading my simple, regimented life.

“I think you’re going to like Paddington, Aldi. It’s a very peaceful, interesting place.”

“Well that at least would be a welcome thing. A bit of sunlight too, wouldn’t go amiss.”

“Hey, it’s okay. Perfectly normal to feel a bit disorientated. I promise there’s nothing at Paddington to scare you.”

“Hmm, you say that now, but I just know that when we get there you’re going to reveal that it’s the secret nerve centre of a radical group of loser-misfits who spend all day making shawls out of vacuum cleaner fluff and worshipping Satan.”

“That’s Camden you’re thinking of.”

We trekked west along the Central Line. Despite the many miles we covered, Red said little. I asked about subjects on which he was normally voluble – society, work, his Bill of Rights – but he contributed little. It struck me that he might be using the walking as some kind of dramatic device. By tiring me out in endless blank tunnels, he hoped to heighten the effect of what he showed me and break down my resistance to his plans. I remembered the time when he had bent my will and decided to take a more active role in directing the journey.

By mid-afternoon we were passed Queensway and approaching Notting Hill Gate, where we intended to join the Circle Line going north to Paddington. After some searching, we found an intersection with a service tunnel that would take us in the right direction. It was

considerably narrower than the main tunnel – about the one metre high – and the lights must have been broken because it was very dark.

Red paused for a second and then, putting a paw on my shoulder, cut across me so he would enter first. He stepped into the shadow of the tunnel. I followed and almost walked straight into Red. He clapped a paw to my mouth and shushed me. He crouched down, pulling me with him. I struggled furiously, but he had an effortless, primal strength. I felt his whiskers brush my ear. ‘Calm down,’ he whispered softly, ‘there’s someone back there...’. In the dark, all I could see were his eyes flicking in the direction of the entrance. He released me and we slunk back into the dark.

After 15 or 20 seconds there was the echo of a light patter of feet and the soft scratch of claws. It was another mouse. We looked out onto the dully-lit tunnel expectantly. The sound grew closer till it was a matter of metres away and then stopped. Whoever was following us must’ve seen the service tunnel and was deciding which way to go. The walking started again, but with it came another noise: the low pound of train. Even through several metres of rock, the Circle Line train running south from Bayswater made a racket. Red brushed against me as he stood up, poised for action. I tensed in readiness, not knowing what would be required of me. I took a deep, slow breath and tried to control my breathing. The train grew louder and drowned out the noise of the footsteps.

Another half a minute passed and then, as the first hint of whisker appeared round the corner, Red exploded out from his position. Before I could move, he was on the mouse, shoulder charging him over and then wrestling him into a painful neck-lock. The mouse screamed and thrashed frantically about to free himself, but by then I was on him too, pinning his legs to the floor and lying across his stomach.

“Let me go!” yelled the mouse. He was a slight, young mouse, with scraggy hair and no muscle. His eyes were wild with fear. “Let me go, you villains, I can’t breathe!”

Red relaxed his grip slightly and let the mouse's head up. "Name?"

"Paul."

"Full name," spat Red.

"That is my full name."

"Are you lying to me?"

"How would you like me to answer that question?" Red raised his paw and the mouse's courage evaporated.

"You were following us. Why?" Red's voice had a hard edge.

"I don't know what you're talking about." The words were defiant, but the mouse's voice was filled with fear.

"You do. And you're going to tell me."

"I won't tell you a thing," he said in the same unconvincing tone.

"You will. Or I'll break your arm," said Red coldly. He lowered his paw, grasped the mouse's arm and began to force it unforgivingly behind his back.

"Ok, I'll tell you," he shrilled. Red relaxed his grip again. "I wasn't following you, ouch!, no, don't hurt me! I wasn't following you, I was following the guy who was following you."

"I'm warning you."

"It's the truth! I'd tell you more, but my oath prevents it."

"What oath?"

"I'll never tell you!"

"How do you like your legs? Attached to your body or freestanding?"

"Ok, I'll tell you! The oath is a secret, but I can say it prevents me revealing operational secrets."

"To which organisation do you owe this allegiance?" I asked.

"That too is a secret."

"Tell me!" Red roared.

"I can't," he whimpered. "When I say it is secret, I mean I don't know. It's a secret from me too."

"You're in a secret organisation whose name you don't know?" said Red disbelievingly. "What does this organisation do? And I'd think very carefully about your reply to this."

"It's a... covert organisation."

"And who else is in it?"

"That's... classified."

"From me or from you?" asked Red stonily.

"Both of us."

Red shook his head at the mouse. "Let's get this straight. You expect me..."

"Mmmhuh."

"...to believe that you're on a mission..."

"Mmmhuh."

"...for a group so secret..."

"Mmmhuh."

"...that no-one knows who's in it ..."

"Mmmhuh."

"...or what it's for?"

"Got it in one!"

I could see Red was bubbling with fury, so I jumped in. "When and where do you meet, Paul?"

The mouse brightened. "Only when necessary."

"And when was it last necessary?"

"It hasn't yet proved necessary."

"You've never attended a meeting nor been contacted by anyone?"

"I'm not at liberty to reveal that. Well, strictly speaking... no, I haven't."

"Then how were you recruited?"

"I recruited myself."

"And how did you do that, Paul?"

"Well, I shouldn't really, I erm, well I guess I can tell you." He paused and waited for his addled thoughts to settle down. "You join the organisation by inferring its existence."

"Explain," Red demanded simply.

"To join you have only to realise that you are or should be a member. I assume that many others have done and continue to do so. I can see that to the outsider it might seem like an inefficient, impractical way of working with the potential for all kind of conflicting and counterproductive action, but to me it has tremendous elegance. Without name or number we cannot be contained. Besides, mice of our gifts have no need for any structure, especially when it might compromise our group's security."

"And how exactly did a puny little specimen like you come to realise that you had the right gifts to join?" said Red.

"I warn you not to underestimate me."

"I'm not sure that would be possible. Now answer the question."

Affronted, the mouse puffed up his chest. "Until a few months ago, I lived in Waterloo. I admit that I wasn't outstanding at school, and when I left, I did a few jobs without distinction; nothing really suited me, see. I was still living at home with my family and I didn't have a girlfriend. But what I did have was this all consuming sense of potential. I'm not dumb and I've got plenty of skills, but no one seemed to recognise it. It was like being pregnant, except that no one else could see it or had any respect for what I was going to give birth to. And even me, I didn't know exactly what the baby would be like, but I knew it was there; I could feel it kicking. It all came down to this question: how could it be that I had such a mediocre life when I'd always felt marked out for greatness? And then, one day, the answer came to me." He

was smiling beatifically. "It hit me like a drunk rugby player: the only thing that made any sense was that I was raised by a group, the group, and planted amongst the normal people to fulfil a mission. You see: I was doing something great all along, I just hadn't known it."

"Yes, very nice," said Red dismissively. "But that doesn't explain why you're following us."

"Ah, but as I said: I wasn't following you. At the moment I had my 'insight', the mouse I'm following walked past me. I reasoned that it couldn't be a coincidence. I called after him, but he was already out of range, so it seemed obvious that my job was to follow him, not to contact him." He giggled. "To think, how close I came to blowing it that first moment by shouting!"

"And you've been following him ever since?"

"Discreetly, yes, for about a month." The tension had drained from the situation. Sensing it he decided to try his luck. "Now, would you mind letting me go? I don't want my quarry getting away."

"Well, if he really is following us, then he won't go far will he?" I said slyly.

The mouse stiffened. A look of terror came over his face. "What have I done? I'm such an idiot! He could be here now. He might have heard me."

I nodded. "Yes, Paul, he might very well have. So, if you want us to protect you, you'd better tell us anything else you know about him."

"I can't! My oath forbids."

"But what if it was part of your job to reveal information to us and help us?" I reasoned. "Then you wouldn't have let your group down would you, Paul. I mean, it seems to me that you've done a great job so far."

"Well, I..." he hesitated.

"No, I'm done with this little squit," said Red, releasing his grip suddenly and getting up. "You see what living in Waterloo does to people, Aldaniti? I don't want to hear anymore of

his paranoid fantasies.” He waved sharply at me and, reluctantly, I got off him too. Red pulled him up. “Listen to me, secret squirrel, go away, far away from here. And don’t ever get in my way again, you understand?”

“I can make no promises; my work is my master,” he said proudly. “I take orders from no one.”

“If only you knew,” I said quietly.

“Go on, piss off!” Red said loudly.

The mouse got up and skittered away down the track. We returned to the service tunnel.

“Well, that is a surprise. What do you make of that Aldi?”

“Dunno, a member of your party on a field trip?”

Red said nothing.

“No, really, he was just like you making a speech, minus the frothing at the mouth.”

“Hmmm.”

By this time I’d come to believe that, while Red was generally pretty straight with me, he wasn’t sharing everything he knew. I decided to press him a little. “So how did you know he was following us? Your friends at the British Museum?”

“Yeah, they’d seen him hanging about. I’d suspected it for a while and, as you could see, he wasn’t very hard to spot.”

“What about the second mouse?”

“Second mouse, third man, Forth Road Bridge. Who knows? I’m inclined not to give too much weight to the word of someone with such a flimsy grasp of reality.”

“And yet, for whatever reason, he was following us.”

“You ever heard of Empedocles? He was this Greek thinker who believed he was a god. You know how he tried to prove it? He threw himself into a volcano.”

“I bet they didn’t see that line of argument coming.”

“Well, quite. Interestingly, the ancient Greek word for deity is very similar to the word for souvlaki, raising the intriguing possibility that he was merely claiming to be a dish of grilled meat with a divine flavour.”

“You make this stuff up, don’t you?”

“Maybe. My point is: what’s the difference between no one following you and someone you can’t see following you? What do you do with that information? How do you guard against that?”

“True. Won’t hurt to keep an eye out though.”

“The moment I spot any other members of an imaginary secret society, I’ll let you know.”

“You do that.”

Paddington

"That's it?" I said surprised.

"That it."

"All of it?"

"All of it. What, you were expecting more? It doesn't look as a fallen civilisation should?"

"No. It looks like..."

"...Yes."

"...So... so insignificant."

"It looks," Red corrected me, "like a badly landscaped garden with an overgrown rockery."

"So, where," I said hesitatingly, "did it all go?"

"They let it crumble," said Red simply.

I looked around the cave again in case I'd missed something. "But, there's nothing to see."

"Mmhuh. You don't feel... shocked and appalled?"

"I don't feel anything." It was true; I didn't. "There's nothing to feel anything about." It was a huge cave, thick with weeds and piles of masonry that might, from a distance, be natural rock falls. Up close there were a few telltale pillars and collapsed archways, but little else. No sign of a catastrophe; no hint of death. "Why isn't this a shrine?" I asked to no one in particular.

"You mean, " said Red, "where are the glass cases, the gift shops and the interactive walkthroughs?"

"Yes, I mean Dessie's kids build more impressive things than this at nursery."

“Indeed. Pilgrimage isn’t encouraged and hardly seems appropriate in a place like this that’s more suited to a National Trust open-air jazz spectacular than solemn contemplation.”

“So, what are we doing here?”

“Sowing seeds,” he said in a way that wearied me. “For some reason, successive governments have let our heritage turn to dust. I don’t know why, but I want to.”

Something occurred to me. “Where are all the artefacts? The knickknacks? The junk?”

“I have a better one for you. Where are all the books?”

“What books?”

“*Any* books.”

I shrugged. “Burned?”

“Some, yes. But all?”

I shrugged again.

“Come this way, Aldi.”

We picked our way across the rubble, to one of the largest piles. Red scurried a little way up a listing pillar and pulled some ivy aside. “Look at this.”

“What is it?”

“It was the library. Look, “ he said pointing, “you can see it was from the carvings here. And you can also see they’ve been partially chipped away.”

“Deliberately?”

“Maybe so.”

Looking at the ruined walls, it must have been a substantial building. “All the books?” I let the question float up into the cave.

“Every last one.”

I shivered. “And the bodies? Where are the graves?”

“The deaths were apparently so massive that pits had to be dug.”

“Is it true?”

“I have no reason to doubt it. I think people died here, Aldi, and I don’t know why. But I think someone does.”

“Someone we know?”

“Who knows?” We reflected for a while in silence and then Red said: “Come on, let’s go, there’s nothing else to see here.”

“Where next?”

“We’re going to go see a relative of mine.”

“Yeah, where do they live?”

“Ten minutes walk away. I should warn you, though: he’s a nut case.”

“He’s a close relative, yes?”

“Shut up.”

Correspondence

“When we began to work for the men, everything changed. We tell ourselves that we are fine, that we’re not jealous. But it’s not true. The way we live now; it’s not our natural state. It damages people, man, it really does. Not everyone can take it. Some end up on Mascis, others retreat to these terminuses.” We reached a small, dank grotto. “An old friend of mine lives here.” Red halloed into the darkness. No response. We ventured in further and came to a wall constructed of reclaimed rubbish and papier-mâché. With a nimble jump, Red caught hold of a jutting rock on the ceiling and skipped over the top. “Wait there,” he called. There was a click, and light permeated through the gaps in the wall. This was followed by the wounded screech of a metal bolt, and then Red appeared from behind a door. “Come in.”

“Thanks.” The place was poorly furnished and smelt of damp. A few basic pieces of furniture were strewn around, but not with any attention to the principles of design. In the middle of the room there was a large writing desk, which was exceptionally neat and tidy. On it sat two impeccably stacked piles of paper, a fountain pen, a pot of ink and a blotter.

“Whose place is this?”

“Jefferson Starship. A strange fellow. He’s a distant cousin of mine who grew up in Waterloo but ran away to live with the men.”

“Yeah, how come?”

“One day he said he’d had enough and he just left. He quit his job and upped and went to live on the surface.”

“Where’d he go?”

“He moved into this abandoned church in a derelict part of east London. Said it was the quietist place he’d ever been in the city – almost nothing but wildlife sounds and the occasional, distant thunk of a front door or puttering of a poorly-maintained car. The roof was caving in and there was rubble everywhere.”

“Sounds perfect.”

“You mock, but something very strange happened to him there.”

“Yeah?”

“Hmm.. all the windows were smashed except for a large stained glass one in the apse. He said that in the late evening, the sun would cast beautiful light through into the nave – soothing pinks, cleansing blues, and healing greens. His words, not mine. Any way, after a few weeks a squatter moved in. She was an impoverished painter and writer who’d seen the window and appreciated the light. She was a pretty girl, he said, but there was something of the cuttlefish about her forehead. For a while, they lived together these two, sharing the church. At first she was barely aware of his presence. She’d paint for as long as it was light while he foraged around, getting his head together, thinking about what to do with his life and nibbling on the hymn books and song sheets and the junk mail and flyers that had accumulated in the porch. One day she saw him while she was mixing some paints. Instead of being scared she called to him and, unhesitatingly, he came. Up close, he could see just how beautiful she was. She mussed his hair gently and he saw that, like him, she was passionate and troubled. That evening, when she was asleep, Jefferson crawled into the folds of her clothes and huddled up into her bosom for warmth.”

“That’s very touching.”

“Shut up and listen. Months went by, her painting, him foraging, until one day a car pulled up and she left. Just got in and left. Jefferson was confused and alone – he thought he’d done something wrong. And then, two days later, the postman popped a parcel through the door. And you know what? It was addressed to ‘My friend, the mouse’.”

“And what was in it?”

“A wedge of cheese – some fine, salty pecorino – and a small piece of paper. It was a portrait of him.” He pointed. “Look.” Behind me, on the wall, there was an exquisite frame.

With the poor light, I had to get right close to it make it out. The frame held a single sheet of A4, in landscape, with creases still visible where it had been folded into six. Taking up the right-hand two-thirds of the papers was a simple pencil sketch of a mouse, standing on its hind legs on an overturned pew. Its head was turned to face the artist and its ears wide, taking soundings like a bat. The tail of the mouse was draped across the splayed pages of a prayer book. He looked proud and brave. On the left-hand side, written in flowing calligraphy, it said: 'I'm finally ready to go home and get on with my life. I've got a place at college to study art. I shall always think of you. Thanks for our time together, dear friend'."

"Amazing. And what happened to your cousin."

"He came back, but he couldn't settle. He tried a few jobs, but nothing worked out. He's gone down hill badly in the last few years. He says that mice can't carry on living as we do now. He thinks we're trapped in limbo." Red picked up a handful of the papers on from the table. They were letters. He handed them to me. "Here, read these." I turned them over, leafed through a few and then began.

Dear Wrigley

As a keen consumer of your fine products, I was very disappointed to see the unfavourable judgement handed down from the European Court of Justice last week concerning the trademark on Doublemint.

What does this mean for loyal purchasers like me? Can anyone now bandy the name about willy-nilly? What else can you do to defend your mintiest brand?

I buy Doublemint three times a week (Monday, Wednesday and Friday. I have the weekend off.) I wouldn't want to be suckered into buying an impostor.

I note you're continuing to use the registered trademark sign on your site. How long can you do this before you are technically in breach of the law? I for one support your act of defiance.

I recommend you call Romano Prodi and Neil Kinnock. I imagine that heavyweight politicians, who need to be minty-fresh at all times for diplomatic purposes, could become powerful advocates for your cause.

More power to you! Fight this all the way!

Loyally yours

J. Starship

Stapled to the letter was a reply on headed paper.

Dear Mr. Starship

Thank you for your letter.

We are disappointed that we have not been granted an EU wide trade mark as this trade mark would have been easier to administer. However, this ruling does not effect the full protection for our Doublemint trade mark on a country by country basis so it will not interfere with your enjoyment of the Doublemint brand.

Thank you for your interest in The Wrigley Company.

Sent on behalf of

Jamie Francis

Office & Consumer Services Manager

I looked at Red and shrugged. "I don't understand."

"Read another. It's what he spends all day doing."

Dear Simon

How many calories are there in your pizzas?

I'll tell you why I ask... (Don't worry if some of the science is baffling, you don't need to be able follow it all!)

I'm currently working on a diet book. Unlike my many competitors this one has serious scientific underpinning. (Carol Vorderman: god what a charlatan!) My research with my colleagues has shown that the optimum food for stimulating hydrolysis of the fatty acids while still providing sufficient vital nutrients to top up a person's electrolyte count is pizza. Sounds weird, I know, but pizza contains tomatoes (which contains lycopene, an antioxidant that guards against many cancers), olive oil (good for cholesterol) and herbs (rosemary and basil have long been rated for their health giving properties).

The only question is: how much pizza can I recommend? And for that I need to know your calorific values. I couldn't find them on your website, so I was wondering if you could help me. How many calories would I find in the following pizza? (I've used my favourite type)

1 x large cheese and tomato. I tend to order a thin and crispy base and have extra mushrooms, jalapenos and pineapple put on top too.

I'd be grateful if you could let me have this information, and also let me know what your policy is on pizza dough. My grandmother on my mother's side is Italian. She insists they must be spun clockwise for no less than 5 minutes. Is this your policy?

On receipt of this information, I'll be able to confirm whether we will be recommending your excellent brand of pizza in our forthcoming publication.

Yours sincerely

Jefferson Starship

"I see you've seen some of my work," said a loud and imperious voice. I swung round and a tall, proud-looking mouse had come in.

"I'm sorry, I..."

"No matter; any friend of Red's etc." He smiled disarmingly. Red introduced me while Jefferson made tea and we talked.

“I used to run a letter writing service, you see; when I came back from the surface. Using a human frontman, I’d handle people’s complaints.”

“I see.”

“Almost exclusively people’s problems would begin when they tried to pay their bills. I know people who lived their whole lives without ever paying a bill. Very wise and clever people. It’s only when you draw attention to yourself that problems start. Phone companies are the worst, of course, because they never answer the phone – they know better than anyone the danger. Typically, people will try and pay their bill four times before the phone company begins action to cut them off. An Argentinean once told me that Tango = Sex = Death. He didn’t have a telephone. For everyone else it’s Decency = Customer Services = County Court Judgement. Anyway, for a while I was very successful. I got refunds, letters of apology from chairmen, complimentary vouchers for more of the same defective products. Slowly, though, they got wise to customers – out sourcing, sub-contracting, off-shoring etc. Now customer service people aren’t allowed to give you their name, their direct line, the name of their manager, even the name of the company you’ve phoned. Some now refuse to talk at all – they just sit on the end of the phone, with a piece of cloth over the handset to disguise their breathing. I tried complaining, but you can imagine where that got me. Eventually my business went bust.”

“That’s terrible,” I said sympathetically.

“You’re telling me. So now, I just try and jam their channels. I don’t get angry; I don’t seek apologies or actions; I just try to confuse, harry and befuddle them. It works on the basis that, like all authority, they can handle anything but ridicule. Against that they have no defence. Shall I read you another? This is one I wrote recently during a strike by the Royal Mail.” He cleared his throat.

“Dear Royal Mail

Why aren't you posting more custard to yourselves?

Hold on, this isn't as stupid as it sounds! As I see it, the strike has left you with two major problems:

- 1. Massive loss of productivity*
- 2. Severe damage to labour relations*

How does a business like yours tackle this? When I lived in Chile, I was Principal of the Santiago Labour Relations Action Team. Under former President Allende we pioneered a technique that solved the problems like yours in the steel and mining sectors.

Applying our techniques, I would suggest Royal Mail needs to undertake a rapid and powerful programme of posting custard to itself. Why? Because firstly, you need to improve productivity, and, by posting things to yourself, you can dramatically increase both volume and speed of deliveries. (I imagine you might be able to leave bags of custard where they are and simply log them in as received and out as delivered. In fact, if a crack team of senior staff were diverted to this task I believe the outcome would be tremendously more beneficial than endless time and motion studies.)

Second, everyone loves custard. I know this to be true. In Chile we make it more like crème brûlée, but the principle remains the same.

It energises and pleases people. It brings fun and camaraderie back to the workplace. I commend it to you.

I am currently on an 18-month posting at the University of London. I would be happy to come in and work with you, the unions and Acas to apply my techniques to help solve your knotty problems. I very much admire the work your Chief Executive and Chairman are doing to reform the Royal Mail group and I look forward to being part of your success.

Please let me know when you need me.

Yours faithfully

Dr. Ivor Ansah

We stayed a while longer and then left.

“Now, I know you brought me here to learn; I’m just not sure what lesson your friend was teaching me. What did he need that you could offer him?”

“It is the curse of all thinking being to live lives of impotence. This is amplified a thousand fold for prisoners. We sit by the bars of our cage, peeking through at the riches around, and it torments us.”

“No, he was an unbalanced mouse who got unhinged by a girl and some bad customer service. I think we can all sympathise...”

“...No, that’s got nothing to do with it. He’s an example of what happens to those you live as second class citizens...”

“...No, he just couldn’t get through to the guy in charge. I’ve seen men arguing in the ticket offices, I know where he’s coming from...”

“Stop being so damn literal! He lives in a twilight place between what it is to be man and to be mouse. We all do. We are close, tantalisingly close, to being one of them, yet there’s always a barrier. He wanted it so badly that it destroyed him. You see, we can’t stay as we are and we can’t go back. Our only future is forward. Forward as equals.”

“I’m not convinced. I don’t see it at all.”

“You will.”

Writing

For all their faults, the artistic achievements of men have been undeniably impressive. As a consequence, we mice produce few cultural products.

By far the best-loved mouse books are the adventures of Sleepy von Peepi, a narcoleptic South African scuba diver, and his pal Salty McNalty, a Scottish treasure hunter.

Salty is mortally fearful of seawater and a compulsive shopper. Sleepi's garden is home to the world's largest collection of erotic topiary. Together they scour the seabed looking for shipwrecks.

Salty skips their vessel, the *Cuneo*, knowing that if he can't keep Sleepi awake, any attempt to rescue him could have fatal consequence for them both.

As well as being gripping yarns, the books are popular for their positive message of self-empowerment. So much so that, when the author of the Sleepi books died, his publishers rushed out a range of self-help guides that now dominate the non-fiction charts.

'Living with Rabies' by 'Sleepi von Peepi' and 'Conquer your fear of Costume Drama' by 'Salty McNalty' are due out for Christmas.

Incidentally, Salty's boat is named after the painter Terence Cuneo who put a mouse in each of his pictures. Originally a war artist, he's best remembered for his railways paintings. His portraits of royalty feature mice in uniform saluting.

The exact nature of his relationship with mice is a mystery.

Down Street

This time we took the Tube. Why? Red said he wanted us to see Jefferson and Down Street in the same afternoon. The real reason, I suspected, was he knew I was exhausted and wanted to go home.

Down Street was shut around the same time as the British Museum. It lies between the Green Park and Hyde Park Corner on the Piccadilly Line.

We got the Circle Line south to Gloucester Road and then switched lines. Getting out at Hyde Park Corner we walked the last few hundred metres.

While the British Museum had been largely left to rot, the platforms on Down Street were walled up. If you go looking for it, you will see the brickwork change from the sturdy load-bearing variety to a curtain wall designed simply to obscure the disused station.

When Red found the lighter, crumbly bricks, his pace slowed. "This isn't the last stop on the tour, but, it's probably the highlight. This is what happens when the dream of participation goes sour; when you thirst for your rights, but are allowed only a sip."

We found a hole in the wall where several bricks had decayed and cracked. Above the hole was a tiny sign that read: 'Executive Retreat. Please leave your old self at the door.'

"Please," said Red standing aside to wave me in. Dubious, I entered.

"Welcome, welcome!" squawked a merry voice. The voice box from which it emanated resided in the body of tall, thin, immaculately turned-out mouse with a designer clipboard.

"You are very welcome to... my goodness, is that you? It is you Red Rum!" he prattled.

"Hi, Vinsenz, how are you?" mumbled Red with obvious distaste.

"I am just wonderful. How are you, you old blue sky thinker; you old paradigm shifting, helicopter view taking, drop-down-deadline maker?"

“Just great, Vinsenz, thanks. And how have you been?”

“Radical, Red, radical. I’ve got some good eggs in the incubator.”

“That’s good to know. Vinsenz, can I introduce you to my friend, Aldaniti.”

We shook paws. “Delighted to have you here,” burred the mouse. “To what do we owe the pleasure?”

Red stepped in. “I brought Aldi here for a look round. Would you mind giving us the tour?”

“It would be my pleasure. Aldaniti, welcome to the Executive Retreat.”

I goggled at it. In total contrast to the British Museum, Down Street couldn’t have been better cared for. Beautifully-lit and tastefully decorated, the platform was open plan and adorned with burnished aluminium, glass and soft furnishings. The floor was real wood, not laminate. Vinsenz led us around narrating his dream.

“I established this retreat to foster new business thinking among leading mice. People come to stay here to strip away all of the negativity of nay-sayers and channel their creative impulses. We specialise in problem solving, new product development, creative accounting and marketing strategies. Over there are meeting rooms, breakout areas, drama studies etc. Over there, to our left, is the knowledge management assault course and the firewalk of culture change.”

“Right.” I looked at Red. He was grinning widely.

“Past the platform, up the stairs, you’ll find the accommodation. While here, guests tend to engage in frequent sexual intercourse. Throughout, discussion of alternative business models is encouraged.”

“Lovely.”

“And here is the heart of the Retreat: the café. Please, won’t you sit?” We were in a warm, comfortable coffee shop that made me feel strongly at home. Red continued to prompt Vinsenz.

“Could you tell Aldi how you came to start the Retreat?”

“Sure. Well, as a student of economics, I’ve long been of the view that the corporation is the ultimate form of organisation. I find its degree of adaptability and flexibility remarkable; its ability to promote its interests unprecedented. And that goes to explain me: I am Vinsenz Sheen Ltd.”

“I’m sorry, what?” I said. “Ltd?”

“Well, like every self-respecting young executive, I’d had a branding team create a logo for me and develop a strapline, values and positioning etcetera etcetera. But then I thought, hold on, it’s not enough to act like a business. You see, the genius of corporations to me, has been to take on many of the rights of humans but retain the rights of businesses where that benefits them. The next step for me was obvious: I incorporated myself. I have limited liability and, by separating ownership and control, I can sell shares in myself.”

“Separating ownership and control?”

“Yes, I hope to float myself on the stock exchange soon and pass operational control of myself to a new management team.”

“That sounds er...”

“...Profitable it the word you’re looking for. In addition, if I was a man, I could now claim human rights like ownership of property, fair treatment before the law and so on, while having negligible exposure to criminal sanction and paying almost no tax. Very soon, I expect the government to introduce a form of preferential voting rights in general elections.”

Vinsenz offered to show us his new, videoconferencing-based virtual golf course. Red accepted gladly, but I made an excuse and waited in the café. Scattered across the tables

were some of the latest books on management theory. I leafed through the nearest one, which was a cogent discussion of why businesses should be exempted from all criminal law on the grounds that consumers should decide what acceptable corporate behaviour is through their purchasing decisions. I tossed it aside and picked up another. On the front cover was written:

Making a killing: the dirty business of business

Wilberforce Davis says: Get in touch with your inner psycho!

I turned to the introduction.

Jack the Ripper. Jack Welsh. Jeffery Dahmer. Bill Gates. Dennis Nilsen. Phil Knight. All ruthless, successful men who reached the very top of their chosen professions. Some, like Henry Kissinger, have successfully straddled both worlds.

When I was at business school studying for my MBA, I was mugged for my PDA, wireless laptop and \$2,000 suit. It set me thinking: what is the difference between an entrepreneur and a serial killer? And, you know, I was surprised at what I found:

Both are obsessive, visionary types pursuing a lone goal with single-minded fervour. They are methodical and well prepared, yet they are never afraid to take risks. They often display great sentimentality and an almost child-like need to be loved while simultaneously being capable of the most vicious acts.

If you're a would-be entrepreneur, this book aims to get you in touch with the rapacious monster that lurks within you. And, if you're a just starting out as a serial killer, this book will teach you enough sound business principles that, when the cops come for you, you'll be able to afford as good lawyers as the Man.

I put the book back and waited for Red and Vinsenz to return.

Later we went to a breakout area to see one of the groups in action. On Vinsenz's advice we kept a slight distance so as not to damage the vibes. About ten mice were gathered in a circle taking turns to shout out... things.

"Buffalo wine!" called one.

"Pig cheese!" exploded another.

"Candle handle!" cried a third.

There was a low muttering of interest.

"What's going on?" I asked Red.

"Shush," he whispered, "they're entrepreneurs. This group meets for a seminar every Wednesday evening."

"Right," I nodded. "And what exactly are they doing?"

"They're called the Hymens. They take their name from Hyman Lipman, the man who invented the pencil-rubber."

"Invented it?"

"Yes, he came up with the idea of sticking a piece of rubber onto the end of a pencil in 1858. He later sold the patent for \$100,000."

"Amazing."

"Yes. Following his example, they spend time thinking of things that they can stick together and patent, and so break new ground." We turned back to listen.

"Shirt stapler!"

"Window noodle!"

"Twix pigeon!"

There was dead silence. Then one mouse bellowed: "I love it. What is it?"

"It's a Twix; it's a pigeon: it's a Twix-pigeon."

"I love it. We'll call it Twy-Pi."

"Oh, that's great! How do we sell it?"

“Wacky humour?”

“Celebrity endorsement?”

“Lifestyle-aspirational?”

“No, no, that’s not right.”

“Too right. I see this thing’s personality as dark and edgy.”

“Yes, this is one tough Twy-Pi we’re selling.”

“We’re talking controversy. We’re talking in your face.”

“A pigeon being sliced in two?”

“I love it. It’s black and white, fast cuts...”

“No; no, there’s no cuts. Slow close up on the pigeon, moody music and then, bam!,
down comes the axe!”

“As we sure that a pigeon is tough enough?”

“Hello? Listen to the name, idiot. This is Twy-Pi we’re talking about, not Twy-Rhino or
Twy-goddamn-Leopard. It’s gotta be a pigeon.”

“Touch my tight one, why don’t you?”

“Brush it, loser!”

“Hey, enough! She’s right. It doesn’t have to be a pigeon. It can be metaphorical. In
fact, it could be much more powerful that way.”

“It’ll be incendiary. It’ll burn like napalm!”

“I love it. It’s gotta have absolutely no pigeon at all.”

“No Twix metaphor either?”

“No pigeon, no Twix.”

“It’s a blind, malnourished child hitting snails over a semi-detached house with a
badminton racket.”

“Yes; yes, it is.”

“After several missed attempts by the kid, the voice-over starts – he’s a Geordie. He says ‘Twy-Pi...’ then pauses. This time the kid hits the snail and the camera watches it sail gracefully over the roof before the voice over finishes ‘...it’s reet peckily-weckily.’”

“Yes!”

“How about this: it’s a live, freshly-buttered weasel between two slices of organic bread, and then, right, the Archbishop of Canterbury comes in and takes a huge bit out of it.”

“Nice!”

“Wait! We’ve got this one-armed, chimp, right? Work with me! It’s a one-armed, *Nazi* chimp and it’s...”

“...doing ungodly things to a nun!”

“I love it. It’ll win awards!”

The group broke-up into self-congratulatory chitchat and we left to walk back to the cafe. We were almost out of earshot when I heard a voice pipe up: “Hold on! I think I’ve seen it before. Last year, it was for a brand of vodka.”

“Damn, you’re right!”

“Yeah.”

“Except the chimp was a panda and the nun was already dead.”

“I love it!”

“And now, come with me to the final stop on the tour. We are going,” Vinsenz paused theatrically, “to the Strategy Room.” Delighted with his own cleverness, he scampered off ahead of us.

“Red, what the hell are we doing in this mad house?”

“You can learn a lot about a society by the people it puts in an asylum, but even more by the lunatics it lets wander the streets.”

“You’re still at liberty, I note.”

“Aldi, these people are the advance guard. Like your friend Tulle, they are a flash forward to our future unless we change the way we live now.”

“You’re right, I’ll throw away my sock puppet as we get back to Waterloo. Now can we go, please?”

“We’re here!” trilled Vinsenz. The room was filled almost completely by a table, which left only just enough space to walk around it. Over the table there was a trellis of metal walkways accessible by ladders at each corner of the room. The strangest thing though, was what was on the table. It was a vast, astonishingly detailed model of central London.

Red and Vinsenz shuffled into the room sideways and edged down the sides of the table to accommodate me. Vinsenz began to speak but he was lost behind the CentrePoint building. I craned up to see him but the Telecom Tower was in the way as well. This was clearly not going to work. I edged back down the table and climbed a few rungs up the ladder to re-establish a line of sight.

“Aldi, you’re a natural strategist!” crowed Vinsenz. “You’ve been in here only seconds and yet, already, you’ve diagnosed the problems of the modern business leader.”

“Yes, Aldi, well done,” Red grinned.

“Er, I was just trying to see you guys,” I shrugged.

“Oh, the perspicacity! Many times I’ve brought people in here and they’ve left without a clue about what I was trying to accomplish.”

“Imagine that,” said Red.

“The thing about modelling, Aldi, is that for it to work there has to be an incredibly strong mapping between the model and the actuality. I realised that the only way to model accurately and with any predictive force, is to model the actuality. This is a map of central London.”

“I see that. How does it work?” I asked, quite sure I wouldn’t like the answer.

“Exactly as London does. Look,” he said pointing at a bar off Oxford Street, “here’s a group of bankers comparing bicep firmness, here’s a tourist having her bag pinched and here’s some trendies from east London wearing the latest fashions. Look here, on the edge of the group there’s even that one guy looking self-conscious because he know he’s just a bit too old and fat. Oh, sir, are you wearing that jacket or is it wearing you? So, you see, if I want to test out a new business idea, all I have to do is model it here. The size of the table compared to the room reminds me that a marketer must always be part of the milieu yet able to take that one step back. The scaffolding overhead enables us to see things from above, of course.”

“So what are you working on at the moment, Vinsenz?” Red asked mischievously.

“I’m glad you asked. You see these little guys in orange tabards?” He jabbed a paw repeatedly to indicate a number of men who appeared to be accosting people outside office blocks. “Those are my agents. They’re working on a new scheme. It’s going well and I’m focus-grouping some names, so for now let’s just call it FineTime. A while ago I read about this football manager who was such a disciplinarian that once fined a player for overtaking him in his car on the way out of the club car park. Better still, a friend of mine claimed the manager was so strict that he even fined people he didn’t know. He said there was a story that a guy had been sitting in a park one day, minding his own business, when this gruff voice behind him said: “that’s it, pal, a week’s wages”. He tried to argue but the guy was so fierce that he had to pay up. I thought this was a great idea, so I took it on. I’m modelling a company that works by issuing fixed penalty notices in the street. Things are going great and I’m working on plans to fine people by letter, email or mobile phone.”

“That sounds, er, profitable?” I ventured.

“Oh, yes, extremely so.”

“And what are you fining people for, Vinsenz?”

"I knew you'd see right through to the heart of things, Aldaniti. Yes, we having some problems there and are still experimenting with different types of fine. Before you guys arrived, my staff fined three people for walking funny, fifteen for not walking funny and one person for standing still. Someone was sitting down, but we let him let off with a warning."

"Have you thought about tailoring the fines?" chipped in Red casually.

"Well, how do you mean?" asked Vinsenz slowly, as though he had a spider crawling up his leg.

"Personalised fines. Vinsenz, I want to be fined how I want, in the way I want, and for the things that I want."

"You want," said Vinsenz in sudden rapture, "to be fined in a way that allows you to express yourself!" He was dizzy with the possibilities. "Your fine, your way," he breathed.

I was in a bad mood and I blamed Red. I wanted a drink. "I don't know why I ever agreed to come with you. Unbelievable, just unbelievable."

"The truth often is..."

"Oh, shut up, Red! Shut up. I'm bored of your sermons."

"Sorry, Aldi; we're almost done, I promise. Just one last place to visit."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. We're going to Angel."

"There's a lost station there?"

"Nope, just a small community of reprobates."

"Well, at least they should be able to give me a strong drink."

"That they will. In fact, if you can prise the bottles from their fingers, you can have some Mascis."

"Hallelujah! Something interesting is going to happen at last..."

Excavations

Once the mouth of the hole had been shorn up, they began to clear the area so that the tunnelling machine could be brought in. Lights were rigged up and a ventilation system established.

Working in shifts they pushed the tunneller on as it bit and gouged its way through the chalky soil. The foreman started them as early as he dared and worked as late as he thought he could manage without attracting the attention of locals. At one point the chairman of the Neighbourhood Watch scheme poked his head around the gate and asked some questions. The foreman assured him that planning permission have been sought and granted and that any further questions he had should be posed in writing to the council. The chairman seemed sceptical and said he knew someone who worked for the council. 'Yeah?' said the foreman 'is he important?'

"The Deputy Head of Planning."

"That's very impressive. And has he bought a new house or a car recently?"

"Not that I know of. Why?"

"Because, in my experience, there are two kinds of people in councils: those who have no power to stop developments and those who have new cars. Or speed boats. Or holiday homes. You understand?"

"No, but I don't think I like your tone."

"Well I'm very sorry to hear that. Be sure to mention my tone to your friend when you next see him."

The chairman hadn't finished saying 'Don't worry, I will' when the foreman slammed the gate shut in his face.

He strode back across the site toward the tunnel. "Get a move on!" he hollered.

Drinking

One of our few indulgences is drink. There are hundreds of bars around Waterloo, always full of tipsy, convivial people. Having four legs rather than two is a definite advantage when it comes to drinking. Not only are you more stable than a drunk man, but, if you should fall, the distance to the ground is less. Rather than lewd taunting and fights, nights drinking usually ended in the lights going on at chucking out time to reveal a pile of lightly snoozing mice.

And then came Mascis.

Three years' ago, a scampish group of young mice were exploring a disused cave system under the main concourse when they came upon a pool of dark, viscous liquid with a potent smell. It was being fed by a constant drip from the ceiling. Sensible voices urged restraint, but one foolhardy member of the party stepped up and sampled a sip of the pool. Before he lapsed into a coma he experienced severe hyperventilation, extreme aggressiveness and bouts of brief, spastic running. His first words when he regained consciousness were 'Dude, that was awesome!'

The area was sealed off, but the word got out. While the authorities investigated the substance, reprobates sneaked in, bottled some and began selling it on the black market.

Chemical analysis revealed that it contained high levels of caffeine, sugar and milk, with traces of chocolate. This was percolating through the concourse and fermenting. Immediately, criminal gangs began prospecting under remote stations looking for other sources. When they found it, they began mixing it with other ingredients to enhance the effects. They added the sap of plants, discarded burger scraps, even used train grease to produce a range of punishing drinks.

Eventually, and in an unprecedented move, the drink, now known as Mascis, was banned. Like all mice, I once tried a glass. The hangover is the worst I have ever experienced.

Adherents in Waterloo are few, so socially destructive is it. I have known a few regular users and I can confirm that the cumulative effects aren't pretty. Some enthusiastic imbibers, like former Congress member Howler Monkey, claim that it enables them to commune with spirits and also to solve crimes. To outsiders it appears to causes shaking, convulsions, floor hugging and drooling. Often, secret cadres will consume it while playing that heinous board game Mousetrap.

Long-term use may also contribute to mental and physical disfigurement. Howler, for example, has a greasy hair, perpetually unpleasant body odour and a mouth like a hostile bulldog clip. And that's to say nothing of his mind; once a creative type, he's now totally washed up, his talent long since evaporated.

The only other drinkers I've seen at close range faired even worse – one lost almost all his body hair, suffered continued Napoleonic delusions, and developed a permanently dry lip, which necessitated continual, unsightly licking. The other talked and smoked so much she was unable to find time to work. I broke off contact when I found she was using Mascis while pregnant.

While Mascis causes carnage for those mice unwise enough to dabble, anecdotally the effect on humans can be even more devastating. On one occasion, it was reported that a group of unruly school children spiked a 45-year-old man's drink with a huge measure. The result was, supposedly, a decreased interest in work and an insatiable urge to play protracted guitar solos.

After two hours of finger tapping, hammer-ons, pull offs and bends, the man had broken all but the A and low E strings. Fingers numbed and bleeding, he noodled on furiously until the police dragged him from his flat, his face contorted with an authentic rock grimace.

After months of therapy, he was released from psychiatric care and returned to his job as a freelance copywriter where his only symptoms are the occasional outbreak of power chords during creative brainstorming.

Angel

When Angel was expensively refurbished in the '90s, they installed sumptuous tiles in the station entrance. The joy of these clean, shiny tiles is they offer less resistance than most on the network. As the duty officer monitoring the restoration, I saw ticketless people cotton onto the fact that you can skid under the barriers. This ingenuity reached its zenith with a local tramp who would run, slide and, James Bond-style, throw his sleeping bag in the air, before catching it on the other side as he came out of the skid.

Just beside the station is a Customs and Excise Vat receiving office. In the courtyard there is a large bust of Thomas Paine with the legend: 'These are the times that try men's souls.' Leaving this irony aside, if you head through the courtyard and down onto City Road, then immediately on your left is London's smallest park. There is no grass to sit on, but there are a few benches shielded by some sweet smelling bushes and trees whose names I don't know. This, to me, is the most beautiful place in London. The rest of Angel is a dump.

I explained to Red that I wasn't walking anywhere else and that the Tube was the only means of transport acceptable to me. He didn't try and contest it.

We got the Piccadilly Line to Kings Cross and then the City branch of the Northern Line southbound for one stop.

Once you are experienced, riding a Tube train is no more difficult than, for example, riding a bolting horse. You simply wait between the tracks and, taking care to avoid the live rail and a 630-volt shock, leap onto the engine or brake housings. From a standing position, most mice can jump a horizontal gap of at least one metre. With careful positioning on the lip of the gully, the jump is no more than 30cm vertically – well within the range of a fit mouse.

If you hunker down tightly, the vibrations and noise aren't too alarming. The fumes and heat can, however, combine to disorientate you so it's vitally important to know how many stops you're going before you get on and then to count them carefully.

We alighted and Red led me under the platform and south down the northbound tunnel.

"Reprobate, reprobates, where are you my reprobates?" I hummed to myself.

"When I say reprobates, I don't mean drunk old men sexually harassing people at a Christmas party, I mean filthy, stinking, involuntary-bowel-movements type reprobates. They play a little rougher round these parts."

"I wouldn't have it any other way," I smiled to myself. "I can't bear these half-hearted reprobates."

"Yeah, you think that's funny now."

Ahead, where the tunnel snaked away towards Old Street, there was an accumulation of rubbish blocking an access tunnel. I pointed to toward it and Red nodded. Dingy light filtered through an aperture at the top of the pile of cans, packaging and wood. We began to climb.

A set of convenient footholds and grips lead me to believe that the pile had been constructed for camouflage rather than security. We scaled the pile rapidly and were descending the other side when a proud, elderly voice called out: "Who goes there?"

Red called back: "Mid, it's Red Rum."

"Well that's something, I suppose," replied the voice and into view stepped an ancient mouse with a smile like winter sun.

A train whizzed past, but the rubbish damped the noise impressively. I noticed that it also gave off very little odour. The place wasn't quite regimented, but what I could see of the tunnel had a well-ordered and consciously hygienic feel. The majority of the light came from fluorescent tube that gave a ghastly, dirty glow and flickered every time a train passed. The

starter motor hummed and light spluttered back into the tunnel showing the outline of some rudimentary furniture. There were twenty or more beds, all full, and day chairs for about another ten mice. Even at a distance, dying people have a distinct shape.

“Red,” said the mouse, “you’re welcome. I see you have brought a friend.”

“Yes, I have. Mid, this is Aldaniti.”

“Ah, yes.” Phlegm rattled in his throat “The great fire-fighter who would deny others their rights.”

The sudden force of his hostility confounded me and I blustered pompously: “You must know a great deal about me to be able to misrepresent me so completely.”

“Certainly more than you know about me or what I do, I would imagine,” he responded tartly.

“No, I picked up that you were an asshole pretty much straightway,” I shot back, finding my footing.

“Ladies, ladies,” laughed Red stepping between us and separating us with an exaggerated gesture. “You will excuse each other, I’m sure. Aldi, this is Midnight Lies, protector of the...” He waved at the beds. A thought came and he smiled. “Protector of the fallen, here in Angel.”

“Yes, very good,” I sneered. “Don’t tell me: nice name, nice guy.”

“I was born with this name. What I may be is no one’s fault but my own,” said Midnight levelly.

“And Mid, this as you know is Aldi,” resumed Red. “He is here as my guest.” He met Midnight’s gaze and held it for a few seconds. Midnight’s aggressive stance softened.

“My apologies, Aldi, I was discourteous. You are welcome here.”

“Thank you. And I am sorry for my incivility.”

The truce was made and Midnight offered us food. We had eaten well at the Retreat so I was more tired than hungry.

“Yes, you do look exhausted,” Mid observed neutrally, as though it were too early to draw any firm conclusions from this. “I suggest you rest in the staff quarters. I am on duty for another few hours before I am relieved but, Red, I’m sure you remember the way?”

“Yep.”

“Good. You will please take care not to disturb my brother and sister who will be asleep.”

“Of course.”

“Thank you. Good night to you both.”

Red led me into the tunnel and, telling me not to look at the patients, through to the sleeping quarters, which was a curtained-off alcove with a table, chairs and several bundles of blankets. As quietly as possible, Red and I found spaces and settled down for sleep.

In the morning Midnight was asleep and his siblings were gone. “Doing rounds,” Red explained.

“So this is what, a hospital for Mascis cases?” I asked.

“Hospice might be more accurate. These people have been places they can never return from. Come...” He opened the curtain and went out. I followed. A few beds down from the curtain, a female mouse was tending to a patient.

“Hi, Moon,” called Red gently.

The mouse looked up from her patient and waved. She had a wise, compassionate face that smiled easily. At the corners of her eyes and mouth, deep contours spoke of a lifetime of pure-hearted joy and happiness that seemed radically at odds with the surroundings.

“Hello, Red, it’s good to see you.” She gave me a smile with the warmth and welcome of a bear hug. “You must be Aldi?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“I’m Midnight’s sister, Moonshine Visions. My other brother, Highway Blues, is tending to the critical patients. He will come and introduce himself shortly, I’m sure.”

The nearest bed contained a geriatric mouse who, Moonshine explained, probably wasn’t more than middle-aged. The patient’s flesh had lost all firmness and vigour. Her shoulders were wasted and most of her whiskers had fallen out. She was murmuring quietly to herself. I leant closer and listened.

“I used to be so pretty, so so pretty. Pretty as a pocket. Perfect as a cat in a box on a shelf. Oh, every mouse in Waterloo wanted me. Poise, grace, elegance, I had it all. Yes, sir, I was a hottie.” Her eyes snapped into focus and she was looking straight at me. “Don’t you think?” she asked.

“Er,” I answered.

“Once went out with a President. I had this massive perm... was a live wire back then. Gave him a real jolt. Told me there was something of the electric eel about me...”

“She doesn’t even know you’re there,” said Red. I opened my mouth to ask a question and then I heard a new sound: she was singing.

“Don’t you worry, baby / He’s gonna treat you like a lady / Don’t you be scared when Death comes past / You ain’t the first, you sure won’t be the last.” She repeated the words in the same tuneless, breathy fashion over and over unless Red pulled me away to another bed.

“What’s the prognosis for her, Moonshine?” I asked.

“She hasn’t more than a few weeks left, I shouldn’t think,” she said over her shoulder as she plumped the pillow of another.

“That’s tough,” I said inadequately.

“Don’t feel bad; there’s nothing you can do about it, Aldaniti. She will receive the best care possible and, with any luck, her last hours will be peaceful.” She took the temperature of the patient and changed a dressing on his arm. Beneath it was a deep, horribly infected wound. “Aldaniti, Red is an old friend of ours. Though we know of you and your excellent work on the Tubes, we were surprised to see you here...”

“And you’d like to know what I’m doing here gawping at your patients?”

She gave me another massive smile and nodded.

“Well, Red has been trying to convince me that there’s a lot of problems need fixing in our world.”

“And how’s he doing with that?”

“A pretty good job,” I admitted. I saw that Red was listening and watching attentively. “We’ve seen a lot in the last few days, most of it pretty horrifying. What the answer is, well I’m not quite sure about that... Red has some strong ideas on the subject.”

“Yes, I’m very sure he would have. I’ll think that... well hold on, here comes my brother. Highway!” she called.

From the penumbra at the edge of the ward, another mouse appeared. He was plainly Midnight’s brother, though he was shorter and had none of the ramrod stiffness. Where Midnight walked like he expected the walls to move out of his way, Highway had the relaxed gait and posture of a man who might spend all night at the bar and never get served and who, if it did happen, probably wouldn’t be too concerned about it anyway.

“Hey, kids,” he drawled.

Red did the introductions and Highway took us the five minutes’ walk to the critical patients.

I had assumed that those in the final stages were cared for separately to preserve their dignity. Once in the room, I saw that it was actually to save the other patients from the awful knowledge of what lay ahead of them.

Highway said that the transition of the Mascis user from addict to outcast to life-ending illness was extremely swift. There are very few genuine casual drinkers and most progress within months to a state of addiction which is too disabling for work. Typically they will then try to kick Mascis, fail and depart Waterloo for an itinerant life, scrounging beneath stations for a fix. Gradually poor diet and increased dosage lead to complete physical collapse. The lucky ones, Highway told me, die of a heart attack. The unfortunate ones end up in Angel. He gave us gloves and told us not to try and get too close.

They were an unhappy sight: broken, hysterical with pain and covered in suppurating blisters. A dark sludge oozed from their perforated skin and dripped, shadowy and potent, onto the floor. Only a garish blue insect-repelling light kept the flies away from the patients as they passed their last days.

We stayed for two hours, helping Highway clean them up. I made polite conversation as best I could with one of the patients. He was experiencing a brief period of lucidity before the painful descent into death. I asked him how he started on Mascis but he shook his head.

“That part of my brain is long gone. I just don’t know,” his words came so slowly and quietly it was hard sometimes to tell if he was speaking or simply trying to breathe. “Imagine that,” he said, “a whole life lived and I can’t remember a thing. There’s days when I’m grateful for that, of course.” He paused. “I did quit once, though.”

“Really?” I leaned in closer. His breath was hot and fetid.

“Yeah. I stopped for a day; one whole day. It’s tougher than you think. Don’t know many people who’ve managed it once they are in deep, properly.”

“And what happened?”

“I made the decision to go back.”

“You made the decision?”

“Yes, I met a man who told me we were doomed.”

“You what?”

"I met a man once and he told me another Pandemonium was coming. He said he could see into the future."

"And you believed him?"

"He had books, evidence, arguments. He said our society was dangerously unstable."

"So you went back onto Mascis?"

"He was very convincing."

"And who was this man?"

He signalled to me and I leant in till our faces were almost touching. "You mean you've never met Manuel Blanco? A once in a lifetime experience. He opened my eyes. Trust me..."

"Not so close, man!" scolded Highway and pulled me away. I felt unsteady and more furious than I can ever remember as they led me out of the room.

"Dude, I told you to keep your distance," said Highway.

"He wanted to talk."

"That's not our job, man. There is nothing talking can do for them now."

"Not your job?" I shouted back. "What's the matter with you? Don't you care for them at all? Do you even know their names?"

"Not my job, man. I'm a nurse. How they get here and who they are is nothing to me. They need nursing; I nurse. Beyond that, what?" he was utterly calm. "Life is death, man. Way it goes."

I felt incredibly thirsty and, seeing a water butt which was catching drips from the ceiling, I advanced on it.

"No, man, wait," said Highway with no great urgency in his voice. "This place is poisoned, right. All kinds of decaying materials have entered the water supply. Do not drink."

Poised, I looked at him and went to sip from it.

He shook his head. "I mean it, guy. In places, even the waste is hazardous to the touch. Plastics are terrible things."

"You don't have any idea what you're talking about!" I exploded.

I woke up in the sleeping quarters. The others were there. Moonshine mopped my brow and grinned a smile the width of the Grand Canyon.

"I think someone's got a little too close to the patients," she said gently. "Did he breathe on you Aldaniti?"

I shook my head, or at least tried to; nothing happened.

"The vapours will have clouded you a little. The stuff these boys take is very strong; very strong indeed. Much stronger than you probably tried as a kid. Get some rest."

When I awoke properly, I felt revived. Everyone was asleep, except Midnight, who I guessed was with the critical patients. I wasn't ready for more sleep, so I got up and decided to go for a walk. There wasn't much to see.

After about ten minutes I was by the rubbish pile at the entrance. A train came by and the lights dimmed. I had an idea. As quietly as possible, I went back to the sleeping quarters and retrieved my pack.

While they slept I rewired the main fluorescent tube, putting it on the same circuit as signals, which was more reliable and less prone to dropout when a train approached. When I had finished, the light was clear and constant.

I was packing up my tools, when I heard Midnight behind me. "Thank you, Aldaniti," he said. "Red was right, you are a good man."

Embarrassed, I just shrugged.

"So, what have you learned today, Aldaniti?"

“That there aren’t enough good electricians to go around?” I ventured.

He smiled.

“There was one thing...”

“Yes,” he said.

“A man called Manuel Blanco. Do you know him?”

“Ah, the prophet of doom. Yes, I know him. One of the patients mentioned him, did they?”

“Yes, something he said intrigued me. He said that Blanco had told him there was another Pandemonium coming.”

“Stuff and superstitious nonsense, Aldaniti. He’s just a mad old fool. Hasn’t the time for anything but his observations.”

“His what?”

“It’s best seen rather than heard.”

“I’d like to see.”

“I can’t leave here I’m afraid. If I gave Red instructions, though, I’m sure he could find him.”

“Would you do that?”

“This is a matter of great importance?”

“Yes, I think it might be.”

Plastic fantastic

Everyone needs a hobby. Mine is plastics research. Due to the poor reception this disclosure usually receives at social occasions, I prefer to keep it quiet.

“Great. Of course. He’s someone I’d very much like to talk to,” enthused Red.

I won’t deny that I was put out by his willingness to come with me. Even though I knew he’d be just as eager as me to meet Manuel Blanco, I had vaguely hoped that he would resist, so I could force him grudgingly to accompany me. For some days, the expedition had been totally beyond my control. Red began to talk and I saw an opportunity to get my own back.

“Right, the other thing,” I said cutting across him, “is that, now it’s my expedition, I do the talking. For at least this part of the journey, I shall be doing the lecturing.”

“Er,” said Red. “Go ahead. I’m sorry, I didn’t realise I had been such a bore.”

“You weren’t, but, as I said, this is my expedition and I’m setting the agenda now.”

Red mimed zipping his lips.

“Good,” I said sternly. “Yes, I think this is going to work out very nicely.”

“So what are...”

“Shush! I’m talking, remember? And we’re going to talk about plastic.”

Red’s eyebrows raised quizzically.

“Yes, plastic,” I said trying to sound purposeful. “You see, I’m a big fan of plastic.”

“What, like... intimately?” spluttered Red.

“No! I’m interested in its properties from a scientific perspective.”

“Sorry,” he smiled.

“Yes, laugh, but be honest, just how much do you know about plastic?”

He shrugged.

“In fact, just how much do you know about many of the everyday objects you find indispensable?”

He shrugged again.

“There’s a common view,” I said, finding my lecture voice, “that plastics are bad. This is wrong; simply wrong. It’s infuriating to me, Red.”

“I can imagine.”

“I talk, you listen. So I’m going to tell you a bit about plastic and, hopefully, you’ll come to admit that you need to think again about it.”

“I see that already.”

“Consider: plastic has an almost infinite number of uses. Plastic can display more and varied properties than any other substance known to man. Anyone can make plastic, if they have the determination and some basic machinery. (Refer to the web for more details.)”

Red nodded patiently as if to a child.

“Right,” I continued, “so here’s how plastic is made: partially inverted hydrocarbons extracted from oil are placed in a centrifuge and exposed to pressure, heat and centrifugal force. This separates the contents into substances like bitumen, tar and pre-plastic. This latter is the material we want. Pre-plastic is a viscous, ductile material with remarkable properties. The final plastic product will depend on what you add next. How are you finding this?”

“Fascinating.”

“Thought so. So, there are three main kinds of plastic. The first, ‘normalised’ plastic, is merely set pre-plastic. It’s used in things like cases for electronic items and car-boot lining.”

“I know the stuff you mean.”

“The second kind, ‘lightweight polymer’, is the product of largely unreconstructed pre-plastic. Simple colours are added along with materials to tweak properties like heat resistance and structural ‘memory’. This can then be used for anything from packing material and insulation to contact lens and antiseptic dressings.”

“I’m impressed, you really know your plastic.”

“But, by far the most interesting plastic is the final type – ‘composites’. Composite plastic is made by adding materials and then exposing the substance to further heat and pressure.

The results can be remarkable.”

“How remarkable are you talking?”

“I’m glad you asked. The new generation of surgical scalpels are made from the same composite that Nasa uses to coat the nose cone of the shuttle. This particular composite is made by adding high temperature porcine caseins – a process known as ‘thermoplastic chunking’. The result is an almost boneless internal structure which can offer a Munson rating of as high as 1,380 uea.”

“Is that good?”

“It’s harder than diamond.”

“Remarkable.”

“And here’s the killer. Within 20 years, materials scientists expect to be able to produce plastics that can shrink, almost literally, out of existence. You know in cartoons, where Bugs Bunny slams a door on someone and then folds it in half ad infinitum until it vanishes?”

“Mmhuh.”

“Well, it’s kind like that. In theory, plastic bags should, after a pre-determined period of time, be able to shrink to a size that is, to all intents and purposes, invisible. Now tell me that plastics aren’t amazing.”

Red nodded appreciatively. “Very impressive.”

“Now, if you were pretty much au-fait with the above: well done. If not, answer me another question: how does a television work?”

“Er... pictures are broadcast from a...”

“No, I mean, how *exactly* does it work? If you can’t explain something as simple as a LCD screen in a way a child could understand, then ask yourself how much control you really have over your environment.”

“Now that *is* a good point.”

“And next time someone tells you that plastics are bad, tell them that they don’t have any idea what they’re talking about.”

“I will. And I’ll send them to you.”

“Good.”

“Are you done now?”

“Yes. Sorry.”

“That’s alright. Thank god, we’re almost there.”

“We’re at Old Street already?”

“Don’t time just fly by when you’re talking about, what was it? Thermoplastic chunking?”

“Very good.”

“Thank you. Now Midnight said it was under platform three, just past a sleeper and... there!”

Ahead, there was a door.

Manuel Blanco

The door opened.

An ancient, but genial mouse smiled at us. He gave us a disarming smile.

“Aldaniti and Red Rum, you are most welcome. I am Manuel Blanco. Please, do come in.” As he spoke, he wrote speedily on the small spiral-bound pad he was carrying.

“Hello,” I said, offering my paw. “As you said, I’m Aldaniti...”

He broke off shaking paws to continue writing.

“...and this is Red Rum.”

He nodded. “Good to meet you both.” He sidled back inside and we followed.

At first sight it seemed possible that the house had books and nothing else in it. I got the strong impression that this is what it would look like if there was a powerful but localised natural disaster in a community library. Piles, rows and columns of books. Books stacked to form furniture; chairs and a bed, even a table fashioned from books.

He waived vaguely towards the piles. “Do sit.”

“Thank you, Manuel,” I said as he wrote.

There was a long silence and, finally, he stopped writing – though his pen remained alert.

“I, er...”

He was writing again.

“...I couldn’t help but notice,” I said watching him scribble furiously, “that you seem constantly to be writing. May I ask why?”

“I’m making notes,” he said.

“Of what?”

“Our conversation. I make a record of every word I say and that is spoken to me.”

“And why do you do that?” asked Red pleasantly, adding ‘you big freak’ under his breath.

“A good question. Tell me, is it stranger for an old historian to note everything that is said in the comfort of his home, or for political enemies to go Awol for a guided tour of the badlands? Perhaps the answer to my question will throw light on yours.”

“Oh, good, a wiseman,” said Red sarcastically. “I’m glad you’re writing this all down so I can refer to it later.”

“Red, I wonder how someone with such contempt for individuals can claim to lead the masses,” Blanco said gravely. “Perhaps you call them all together for rallies because you don’t have the time to condemn them individually?”

“Something like that, yeah.”

“Mr Blanco,” I cut in.

“Manuel, please.”

“Manuel, evidently you know who we are. But, do you know why we’re here?”

“Better than you do, I suspect. Red Rum brought you this way to see ‘how things really are’. And while you were out smelling the poverty, I imagine someone will have suggested you come and visit me.”

“They said that you could ‘see the future’.”

“A figure of speech. As I said, I’m an historian. I see the future in the past.”

“In all these books?”

“Yes, I have devoted my life to books – literally.” He paused. “You know, I once knew an academic who spent his evenings secretly burning books he stole from the university library. He dreamed of forming groups of book burners to shut down magazines, close websites and bomb printers. He thought there were so many good and important books that we ought not to produce more until everyone has read them. ‘I’m not a fascist,’ he’d claim, ‘I just wonder how many poems one can read in a lifetime; how many sporting autobiographies;

how many campus novels; how many historical epics; how many potboilers and page turners; how many sensitive portraits of suffering.”

“Funny how many sensible people get tagged as fascists,” I smiled.

“Well, quite,” nodded Manuel. “Of course, I always held to the view that books are holy, all books. Someone, I forget who, once said ‘there is scarcely a book so bad that nothing can be learned from it.’”

“Attila the Hun?” volunteered Red.

“Could be; fascists always seems to have an enviably trenchant way with words, don’t they? Any way, I’ve always made a conscious effort to read as many books as I can. When younger, my ambition was to read them all; something that obviously I’ve not managed.”

“How far did you get?” I asked.

“Well, I’ve read all the books in the house and many more. Systematically though, not much beyond Apuleius.”

“Jeffrey Archer and the Argos catalogue too much for you eh?” said Red.

“Quite.” He raised an eyebrow. “But think about it; do you ever wonder what would happen if there was someone who had read everything ever written? What would that do to them? The implications are amazing. Wouldn’t they be a god?”

“No, they’d be a bloody idiot,” broke in Red. “That’s like trying to get a good meal by eating everything in the whole supermarket.” He turned to me. “How much more of this?”

Manuel shook his head. “Such impatience. Well then, perhaps I should show you my most valuable tome.”

“Your pension book?”

“No,” he said levelly and began to fish around in the piles behind him. He pulled out a small, tatty leather-bound volume.

“This is a diary. It was written by Mississippi, a member of the Congress long ago. She was also Vice President. Do you know of her?”

“No,” we answered together.

“Well, she was in Congress in the period prior to the Great Pandemonium. She didn’t survive, but her journal did.”

“Where did you get it?” asked Red cautiously.

“As a young professor, I found it in an outlying area of Paddington. It had been carefully concealed.”

“How do you know it’s genuine?” I asked.

“I don’t.” He paused. “I assume you would like me to read from it anyway?”

With one paw he opened the book and held it up. His other was poised over his pad, which was resting on his knee. He began to read.

“Friday 21st May. Day three. Riots in the southwest. Congress members Godalming and Horsham lynched. Fire brigades on strike...”

Manuel flicked forward a few pages.

“Sunday 23rd May. Day five. They have even begun attacking men now. Law and order has collapsed. I have observed rising crime, spontaneous outbursts of public violence and hysteria. Churches are being burned. Mice lie dead in the centre square, in the market, in the tunnels. There are too many bodies to bury. I fear disease cannot be far away...”

Again, he rifled forward.

“Monday 24th May. Day six. The suicides have begun. At first I didn’t believe it. But now, from the heights, the bodies rain down. What have we brought on ourselves? Our nation now is a cup of sorrow, filled to brimming with humiliation and self-deception. These last days we are living in a meniscus. The bonds grow weak... I fear the deluge that must come.”

Manuel closed the book. “There is no entry for Tuesday 25th.”

“What happened, old man?” said Red. “What happened to them?”

“Well, I can’t be sure, but, from my research, I have an idea. It came to me when I was thinking about Mississippi’s ‘cup of sorrow’. Having read her diary exhaustively and examined the ruins, I saw many striking similarities with how we live now and I concluded that her model was wrong. In fact, it seems to me that our society displays signs of being what some scientists call a ‘self-organised criticality’. That is, something that by its very nature must fail. Think of it, not as a vessel of water, but rather a pile of sand. As sand is added a grain at a time, the pile grows larger. There may be minor slips as the sand settles, but the pile will continue to grow.”

Red and I looked at each other, but stayed silent. He continued. “Of course, built into this is a clear and painful truth: because there are no walls to enclose it and because the bonds between the grains are too weak, the pile must collapse.”

Red lit up. “Ah, I get it. So the Great Pandemonium wasn’t the first collapse?”

“There is no way of knowing for certain, but logic suggests not. The pile may have grown and subsided on innumerable occasions.”

“And it will again. It must, right?”

Manuel nodded.

I was lost. “What are we talking about here? Are the grains of sand people? Isn’t this just Malthus’s famine and pestilence again?”

“No, no,” Manuel chided. “Goodness knows there is enough food for us all – human wastefulness sees to that. You’re being too literal. Don’t worry about the sand – that’s just time – think about the pile. Why is it a pile and not a castle? There is something wrong, systemically; some flaw that condemns us.”

“So what is it?” demanded Red.

“I...” he hesitated. “I... I don’t know.”

"You're lying," growled Red. "Yes, you know!"

"I do not know for sure."

"Then you suspect?" I said.

"I'm a historian. With so many books and such a large garden, I have no time for suspicions."

Red was impatient. "Will you tell us or not?"

"No. No, I can't tell you what it is because I don't precisely know. But I can see where it was; I can make out what shaped hole it left."

"Tell us," Red Rum demanded again.

"It's too enormous. It can't be said, only shown."

"Bugger it!" exploded Red. "That's it, I'm done with this fool." He got up to leave.

"We're not finished here, Red," I hissed. "Sit down!" He didn't. "What about the cult and Tony Benn?"

"You've met them?" said Manuel with detachment. "Yes, a perfect example of why a historian must be careful only to record and not to influence their surroundings."

"Especially if they're an idiot," interrupted Red. "It's the only good thing you've ever done, old man, and what do you do? You run away. Are you writing this down? Good. Refer back to this: you are a coward and a disgrace."

Red resumed his walk to the door and, reluctantly, I made to follow, stopping first to bow to Manuel Blanco and shake his paw. "Thank you, Manuel."

He smiled. "My pleasure."

"Why did you tell no one about the diary?"

"Close examination of the Great Pandemonium is not encouraged."

Red Rum was already out of the door when Manuel stopped me and pressed the diary into my paw. He indicated silence and I stowed it in my pack.

“Go well, Aldaniti, much is expected of you. We have lived history this last hour. I have great confidence in you.”

“Me? What...”

He gave me a silencing look.

“Right,” I nodded. “One more question then. Where can I go to read more on these ‘self-organising criticalities’?”

“Well, personally, I subscribe to the *New Scientist*.”

I stepped over the threshold, he stopped writing, and the door closed.

Bringin' me home

"Can we go home now?"

"Yes, I think we should," said Red. He looked very down.

"What's up?" I asked.

"I'm defeated, Aldi. Finished."

"Eh?"

"I brought you here to prove a point, and now I'm not sure I was right."

"Hey, you opened my eyes to a load of stuff. What else were you expecting?"

"Hmmm," he grumped.

"And what about Manuel Blanco?"

"What about him? He a crack; a wingnut; a flaky switchblade. He's got nothing to tell us."

"You serious? He blew my mind."

"Nah, he suckered us, me especially. He distracted me from my purpose. I took my eyes off what was important – the Bill – and now, when I look back at it, I don't know what it's worth. Damn it, Aldi," he sighed, "maybe I was pinning too much on you."

"Should I be offended by that remark?" I said lightly.

"No, you know I just thought, somehow, that you were all that was standing in my way. I had only to convince you, and everything else would fall into place."

"Come on, Red, not every realisation is a revelation you know. The ones that count, they're cumulative. What's an overnight transformation worth? That's a temporary state; not built to last."

"Maybe."

"Definitely. So I'm not totally onboard with the Bill. But I came didn't I? And I'm glad I did."

“Really?”

“Yes,” I said forcefully. “I’ve got thinking to do and us, we’ve got work to do. This is a beginning, not an ending. Right?”

“Yeah.”

“Alright,” I affirmed.

We got the Northern Line south to Kennington and then switched to the Charing Cross branch to reach Waterloo.

It was early evening when we got back.

I ran that last few minutes home, sprang up the steps, threw open the door and wrestled my wife to the floor. “Hey, soldier,” she said laughing and kissing me, “you bring me some stockings?”

“Nope, just one very handsome mouse. How do you like it?”

She looked me up and down and hugged me. “It’ll do I guess. You see any nice dames on your travels?”

“I wouldn’t know. I’ve only got eyes for you.”

“Good answer. Put your stuff down, dinner’s almost ready.”

I washed my face, had a cup of tea and, as I began to relax, my headache cleared. I felt physically tired, but strong, focused and alert – “As I imagine Bruce Lee did after a big fight,” I said to my wife.

She smiled indulgently. “Do you sometimes worry that you’re a bit overdramatic?”

“I do wrestle with that problem, very much as Nietzsche might have, in fact, and I think probably not.”

“But you’re not prepared to commit yourself completely at this stage?”

“I can’t image anything more dangerous or foolish.”

“Silly me.”

Later than night, to my surprise, I lied to my wife for the very first time.

I told her about the trip – about Paddington, the Retreat, about Angel. I even told her about Manuel Blanco. But I didn’t tell her about the book. Why, I don’t know, but I felt like it had been given to me alone. Instead, deciding to read it the next day, when my wife was working the nightshift, I hid it at the back of the wardrobe.

Office

I got up for work the next day feeling wonderful – full of energy and equipped to demolish any problem that might present itself. I was so hyped up that it was a palpable relief when the fire alarm sounded.

I was in the market getting breakfast and saying some hellos, when it went off. I dropped my food and newspaper heroically and sprinted to the stationhouse.

Even from a distance it looked very different to me now. In part this was because I had been changed by the places to which I had been and by the things I had seen. Primarily, though, it was because it had been burnt almost completely to the ground.

At first, when I'd seen smoke curling skyward, I'd assumed it was one of Fan's 'little demonstrations'. He's given to setting fire to things – a chair or a duvet, for example – and then handing them to unsuspecting colleagues. This, he claims, is solely to keep his fellow fire-fighters in a state of alertness. In a more structured society they probably wouldn't let a pyromaniac join the fire service. His skill in lighting fires, however, is matched only by his aptitude for extinguishing them.

Up close, the damage couldn't be more serious – the place was a smouldering husk. I saw the team gathered in a small group, talking. I greeted them and we all embraced.

“So, how's it been?” I said causally indicating the remains of the station.

“Well,” said Cavvi, “there've been some big changes round here since you left.”

“Not least,” interrupted Dessie, “because Fan incinerated the stationhouse.”

“You like it?” grinned Fan sheepishly.

“No one hurt?” I asked.

“Nope.”

“Good. Now what did you do this time? Gave Cavvi a petrol bomb? Set fire to the fire hoses?”

“Worse: I left the gas on.” He looked at the ground.

“You didn’t?”

“Wait, there’s more,” said Dessie.

“Yes, I left some demonstration materials by the oven.”

“Haven’t I told you about demonstrations?”

“No, it really was for a proper demonstration, no one of my *little demonstrations*.”

“Oh, yes?” I said with mock sternness.

“It was lighter fluid, timber and matches for a school bonfire.”

“Idiot.”

“I know.”

“No, seriously you’re such an idiot.” He nodded. “And who though Fan was the right person to teach fire safety to school kids?” Everyone looked sheepishly at the ground. I laughed ruefully. “It’s good to be back. Right, what are we doing about the stationhouse?”

“Very little, I think,” said Brave. “It went up very quickly.”

“I bet it did.”

“Fortunately, we were on inspections on the Bakerloo so there were very few people in the office,” said Cavvi. “Of course, that did mean that it was gutted by the time we got back.”

“Pub?” asked Fan.

“Pub,” we chorused.

We caught up over a quiet drink and the team questioned me about my trip. Again, I said nothing about the book. They were clearly interested but, gnawed by uncertainty, I couldn't really generate much enthusiasm for story-telling.

"What next then, Aldi?" asked Brave.

"Well, once Fan has finished rebuilding the stationhouse with his bare paws, I guess it'll be back to work."

"And Red Rum's Bill?"

"Don't know; I really don't. He makes a lot of sense and he's right: Waterloo isn't a paradise, but..."

"He hasn't convinced you, then?" hazarded Cavvi.

"Right... I don't know... maybe. I gotta think about it all and try and get some perspective. Listen, anyway, did you look into the junction box malfunction?"

"We certainly looked into it," said Fan. "Me and Brave went back, but we couldn't be sure."

"If it was an accident, it was a very unusual one," volunteered Brave. "But I couldn't say with any confidence that it was deliberate."

"Fan?"

"Yeah, what he said. Guess you're not as important as we thought, eh?"

"Well that is good news. Thanks, guys."

We went back to the lightly smouldering stationhouse.

I was relieved to see that the metal filing cabinets had held out long enough to preserve most of our important documents, plans and maps. With our records intact, we'd at least be able to operate. The rest was decimation, though.

It took all afternoon sifting the ruins to produce a list of useable equipment. The list read:

- Less than 10% of the fire hoses
- Just under half of the flame retardant blankets
- The stationhouse mascot – Mickey Mouse dressed as a fireman
- 15 helmets
- 30 cases of tools
- My penguin mug – which had survived since I stored in my office instead of the communal kitchen.

I threw my mug to Fan and told him to make me some tea. He threw it back and said he was too busy trying to get a refund on the ashes of the flame retardant blankets. So I made myself a very good cup of tea and sat on the solidified pile of plastic, copper and solder that was the remains of the storeroom.

When I finally got away, it was dark. I started back through the market and was instantly on the receiving end of several fervent offers to save my immortal soul. Having declined with impeccable politeness, I decided on a detour and retraced my steps. I took a route that would lead me through some of the quieter residential areas and down through the wasteland that my house backed on to.

The night air was sticky and the streetlights provided a sickly, greasy glow. On the way, I stopped at a small market to buy some corn. While I was there I also bought some exotic spices that had a wonderful floral smell and no use that I was familiar with.

Laden with my shopping, and tiptoeing over concrete blocks in the semi-lit scrub, I didn't see Paul's body until I stepped on it. I recoiled when my foot pressed down on his soft, unresisting stomach and dropped my bags. I crouched and shuffled round to let what light there was fall on the scene.

Paul had not died a natural death. His paws were clasped feebly across the deep slash in his throat where his life had seeped away. And, though his fragile body was contorted

by this final effort, there was nothing on his face but a look of mild outrage and disappointment.

I raised my head and saw that the lights were on in my house.

I ran.

I crashed through the door.

"Who's that?" shouted my wife. "That you, Aldi?"

I stopped dead in the hall, shaking with relief, and composed myself. "Hey, dude, I'm home!" I called.

From the lounge, my wife laughed and replied: "Hurry up! My husband will be back soon."

I hugged my wife tightly and we exchanged pleasantries. Then I went to the bathroom to wash my face before going to the kitchen.

"You want tea?" I called, putting the kettle on. I fought back the images of Paul crowding my mind.

"No, thanks, honey. Can I have water?"

I made the tea and ran the tap for water. While the kettle boiled, I checked the doors and windows were closed, before delivering the glass of water to my wife.

"You're back early," I said.

"Nightshift cancelled. The restaurant we were going to inspect shut down today."

"Oh, yeah, how come?"

"Funny story actually."

"Go on," I said, struggling to maintain a jovial façade.

"Well, the pastry chef had an argument with the sous-chef who said he was understaffed. A commi-chef joined in and was glassed by the sommelier, who, with the maitre d', had a beef with the meat supplier."

"Yeah? And how'd it end?"

"The head chef came in and made mincemeat of them all."

"Damn you."

"You love it."

"Yes, I do. So, what happened?"

"As you can imagine, it was a blood bath: seven people were taken to hospital leaving only the waiting staff and washers-up unscathed. They tried to carry on, but efficiently delivered plates, no matter how clean and how expensive the restaurant, weren't enough to satisfy all of the diners."

"Sounds awful."

"It was. Actually, there was a fire in the kitchen – oven left on overnight. The kind of thing that your boys might have been able to help with."

"I wouldn't count on it. In fact are you sure Fan wasn't in the area when it went up?" I looked around the room. It was pleasingly clean and, momentarily, my love for my wife displaced my fear and confusion. "Thanks for tidying up by the way, it looks great in here."

"No worries. You did most of the work, I just cleaned the floor."

"I did?"

"Yes. The dusting, polishing, putting stuff away; that kind of thing."

"But I didn't do any cleaning. I've been at work all day."

"I thought you must've come home at lunchtime."

"Nope. I was tidying what was left of the stationhouse."

"Oh, well, I guess it must've been me, then. Doing the floor makes all the difference."

"Thanks for doing the papers as well," I said, pointing at the neatly stacked pile of newspapers in the corner.

"I thought that was you."

I ran a paw over the mantelpiece, over our porcelain figurines and framed photographs, and found no dust. Puzzled, I went back to the kitchen and opened a cupboard at random. Everything in it was perfectly regimented and aligned. The pans were cradled one inside the other in descending order of size, and the various attachments for the food processor were grouped carefully together, instead of being scattered randomly around the kitchen as they usually were.

“Does that mean,” said my wife, boggling at the transformation in our airing cupboard from bombsite to immaculate repository of meticulously-folded and colour-coded towels, “that you didn’t tidy the bedroom wardrobe either?”

“The wardrobe?” I felt queasy. It was a long slow walk to the bedroom.

The thing that shocked me most was the floor: there was nothing on it. Likewise, the dressing table, now with visible surface area, was a thunderbolt. The pile of bedding under which I had concealed the book had been neatly folded and stacked on a shelf which had itself been dusted.

Panicked I shouted to my wife. “Have you seen it?”

“Seen what?”

“The book!”

“What book?”

“It was leather; a diary. It was at the back of the wardrobe.”

“You’ve been writing a diary?”

“It wasn’t mine.”

“Then perhaps whoever’s it was, has come and taken it back.”

“Unlikely – they’ve been dead for nearly 100 years.”

“So you’ve mislaid it.”

“Honey,” I said with strangled exasperation, “look around you.”

“What.”

“Your dresses are arranged in the wardrobe by colour. The bin is empty!” I span around wildly. “My music is in alphabetical order!”

“I thought that’s how it’s supposed to be?”

“No! It’s grouped chronologically and sub-sorted by genre. You know what this means?”

“That I’ll finally be able to find the record I want to listen to?”

“We’ve been burgled!”

“It looks more like we’ve been the victim of a merciless house cleaning.”

“Don’t you understand? Someone took the diary. They broke in here and took it.”

“Well let’s hope we can make this a regular thing – they’ve done a fantastic job.”

I checked each room carefully and then, when I was satisfied that we were alone, I explained the situation to my wife.

As always, she was very calm. At one point I put my paw on her arm to steady her. I felt much more stable, but she began trembling. Then she put her paw on my arm to steady me and that worked much better.

Together we brought Paul’s body closer to the house, covered him, and then went to sleep.

The next morning, I walked my wife to work and then went to see Red.

Red's house

Red lived in a hovel on the outskirts of town. Inside it was so lavishly unclean that it was hard to tell where his rubbish bin ended and his lounge began.

He beckoned me in. "Sorry, Aldi, you caught me having breakfast." He nodded to a bowl of green ice cream with diced fruit on. "Breakfast of champions," he mumbled through a mouthful.

"Ice cream for breakfast?" I said with distain.

"Don't knock it, my friend. Pistachio ice cream is a very manly meal. You know that John Wayne ate nothing but gravel, hammers and pistachio ice cream?"

"Hmmm," I reflected.

"Any way, what can I do for you?"

"Paul's dead. I found him outside my house yesterday evening."

"Secret squirrel?" He didn't seem too perturbed. "What happened?"

"His throat was slashed."

"That's a tough break."

"A tough break? Red, he's didn't just walk into a French window: he's dead."

"I heard you. What was he doing by your house?"

"We were burgled." Red finally stopped eating and looked at me with interest.

"Anything taken?"

"Mississippi's diary."

"Did you take it from Manuel Blanco?"

"No, he gave it to me."

"Did he now? The old rogue."

"And who took it from you?"

"I don't know."

“Oh.”

“Do you?”

“I think so. But tell me: what did it say? What did you learn about the Great Pandemonium?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t get to read it. While I was at work, someone had been through my house and taken it.”

“You’re sure? They left a mess?”

“Quite the contrary. Someone had been through everything but left it much too clean.” Momentarily, I wondered if that was why Red kept his house in such a state. Red was already elsewhere, though.

“So there was a second follower, after all,” he mused. “You remember, what the secret squirrel said?”

“Uh huh.”

“Well, the mice in the city said several mice had been seen hanging around. They knew about the secret guy, but said the other was more subtle.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I blurted out.

“No need. I had assumed the second follower was there right from the start. Your knowing wouldn’t have helped. You see, of course, why I had to let the conspiracy theorist go to stop him revealing anything that might bring them down on us earlier?”

“Them?”

“Lone knifemen are rare, Aldi. This person was doing someone else’s business. We must assume that the book does explain what happened. The question is: why would they want to stop us from knowing?”

[PAUSE]

Excavations

In his pre-fab office, the foreman took off his helmet, placed it on the table and ran his hands through his hair. His shoulders were tight with tension.

He was not a believer in providence or destiny, but even now, at a time when the work was so close to completion, he couldn't bear the possibility of jinxing anything by presuming a successful outcome. If anyone were to loudly congratulate him with an 'almost finished now, eh?' he would grin through gritted teeth – refusing either to count his chickens or admit there was any danger in doing so. The furthest he would go was to allow himself to close the hut door and ignore the work for 15 minutes. In this time he'd drink his tea, eat a chocolate biscuit and have a go at the quick crossword.

His pen hovered over 7 down ('amiable', nine letters, _L_B_A_LE). Eventually his brain twitched and he marked in the missing C, U, B, and B. He was smiling appreciatively at his own abilities when a loud and penetrating crack echoed across the site. Despite his many years in construction, he didn't recognise the sound. The voices crying out in alarm were very familiar to him, though.

Immediately he was up and out of his office, the door clattering against the wall of the pre-fab. He powered across the site, dodging equipment and the piles of materials, towards the space where a twenty-foot section of the perimeter fence had collapsed. A cluster of workers was gathered at the edge of the site watching a great crack race across the tarmac in the adjoining car park. They fell silent as it forked, jagged, divided and began to spread. From far below there was a massive groan and almost perfect circle of tarmac about 10 meters across bulged obscenely. At the centre, it reached six inches above the ground and then, after breathing out, the earth inhaled. The dome quivered and was sucked back and gulped down into a crater.

Soil and dust filled the air, showering the workmen with fragments. They turned their backs on the cloud of particles that engulfed them. Had the foreman not joined in, he might have been able to avoid the fist-sized lump of stone that came flying out of the hole and crashed into the back of his head, crushing his skull.

As he collapsed forward, he grabbed at his head in surprise. Before he hit the fence, his peripheral vision registered his hard hat, upturned and rocking gently on the step of the pre-fab where he had knocked it on his dash from his office.

Shower

In the park, mice were dying.

The roof twisted, deforming in a quiver that subsided instantly. And then, moments later, the rocks shivered properly as a chill passed through them. A fine spray of dust was dislodged from the roof, filling the air and darkening the park. There was silence.

And then, horrifically, there was noise.

The roof didn't break or splinter; it just dropped. With one giant action of mechanical precision, tonnes of stone stamped down and crushed everything beneath them.

And then, once more, there was silence.

When the air began to clear and the sun peered apologetically through the massive rend in the rocks above, it lit the smashed remains of sunbathers, sleepers, football players, Frisbee throwers, barbequers, picnickers, children, readers, DJs, desk-jockeys, street sweepers, paper pushers, pensioners, perverts, lovers, and one small group of trainee jugglers.

Red's house

[UNPAUSE]

The fire alarms began to sound. It wasn't the usual rhythmic ringing, though: it was the constant gonging of the emergency warning.

Red looked startled. "What's that?"

"Something very serious. Come on, we've got to go." Red looked around as though the source of the emergency might be found in his lounge. "Now!" I yelled.

I heard him say 'okay' dumbly as I tore out of his house.

Devastation

What does devastation look like?

I read the paper the other week. Everything can be devastating. A new face cream repairs the devastating effects of time. A football team loses 5-1 and the players, fans and manager are all devastated. Where does this leave the parent whose young child dies in a road accident? When our most emotive words have been systematically bastardised and privatised, how can we adequately express ourselves? I just don't know.

In the first hour we found no survivors, not a single one. After the initial flurry of activity, we split into two groups: one to search for the injured and one to retrieve and store the bodies. A small group of engineers did their best to assess the likelihood of further falls.

In my third hour picking through the rubble I saw a face I recognised, half obscured by a rock. With bloodied paws I tried to heave it away, but I was too weak.

"I need help here!" I yelled.

In a few swift bounds Fan had covered the few metres between us – leaping across the boulders and putting his shoulder to the stone.

"Tulle?" I said tenderly, stroking the face, "are you okay?" The soft, cloth features twisted and coughed feebly, sequined eyes dimmed.

"Aldi, is that you?" spluttered the sock puppet almost inaudibly.

Together Fan and I heaved and lifted the rock, exposing first a forearm, then a shoulder and thorax, and, finally, Tulle's whole body. She looked doomed and beautiful in her modish business suit made of bin bags. She opened her eyes and the sock puppet began to scan the area, questing and probing for trend insights.

"What happened, Aldi?"

"I don't know, Tulle."

"I think my legs are broken."

I looked, and she was right. Her whole body was so badly crushed I knew she would never survive. I heard her weeping softly and looked back at her face.

"Hey, honey," I whispered, "don't cry. Why you crying?" I said soothingly.

"I'm going to die aren't I?"

I nodded solemnly. "Don't be scared. We're all going to die one day."

"That's just it." Her breath was coming quickly now. "For the first time in my life I won't be setting any trends, I'll just be following the masses. Looks like death's gonna be big this season..."

Her breathing slackened and her puppet was less alert. Finally, she lost all vigour and lay still.

By mid-afternoon, the urgency had gone out of the search. We were simply collecting and cataloguing bodies.

A small rock fall alarmed the engineers and the rescue operation was confined to areas near exits.

At five o'clock, it began to go dark. Soon after, the bleak evening air resounded to the chug of a generator and the top of the crater was illuminated. In the background I could hear a strange churning noise that made me uneasy. It grew louder and, suddenly, I knew what it was.

"Clear the park!" I screamed. The first sludgy drips were beginning to rain down.

"Everyone out now!" I yelled again. "They're filling it in!"

A violent stream of concrete slurry was vomited into the crater, splattering down where the stage had been. More followed and it began to course across the floor, absorbing stone, bodies and rescuers alike.

Panic took hold and there was a frenzied dash for the exits.

Behind me there was a strangled cry and I saw Red being swallowed by the torrent. The concrete was rising fast, so I skirted back around across an area of higher ground. I spotted Red breaking the surface and trying to drag himself out of the channel. In one jump I cleared the stream and slid down the rocks towards him. There was a lull in the pouring and the stream subsided enough for me to start hauling Red out. Moments later Brave and Dessie were there helping me and we pulled Red clear.

“Did you swallow any?” I asked, knowing this would be fatal. He shook his head and coughed ‘I don’t think so’. The pouring resumed and we dragged Red away.

The fire-fighters split into teams and sealed to the entrances to the park to hold back the lake of concrete.

When we were done, I found Red in the market organising. He had been thoroughly washed to remove the concrete before it could set.

“Call a meeting!” he ordered. “Everyone, get out there and pass the word around. There’s going to be a meeting in one hour, in the market. Go! Tell them!” Mice drained away, running for the main conduits to get the news out. In seconds, only he and I were left.

“How are you feeling?”

“Fine. Thank you, Aldi.”

“What’s all this, Red? What are you going to do? Bring the Bill back?”

“No,” he shook his head and snorted. “No, it’s far too late for that. You were right the first time: they won’t give us what I wanted.”

“So, what then?”

“Now it’s war.”

Red Rum speaks, part 2

I sat on the steps of Congress, watching the build up. In the crowd, mice pressed tightly against each other, wriggling to find a vantage point. Market stalls had been hastily cleared to create space. High pitched chatter drowned all but the low rumble of Tubes.

For another 40 minutes, more and more pressed into the Cavern until it seemed that even a single extra person would cause a fatal crush.

At a certain point, something unnerving happened: all struggle ceased and the crowd became synchronised – one perfectly silent, pulsing mass; breathing together.

Red Rum appeared stage-side. He brushed passed me, eyes unseeing, and jogged up the steps. He smiled at the gathering, but I could see his movements were painful and tired. Without thought to his usual stagecraft, he started right up.

“We have been attacked,” he said baldly. “I don’t know what else to say. We have been attacked and it was a murderous assault. Everyone here has lost someone... Today in our town, there are spaces, many spaces. Spaces where our fallen comrade should be.” He paused again, stretched his neck, loosened his back and spoke with renewed animation. “Once they were our partners. But attitudes changed, my friends. We turned away for a moment and, when we looked back, what do we see?” He raised a finger in the air and pointed skyward. “Their hand is revealed. We see a campaign building against us. How? Why? Who knows? How do these things usually happen? First, perhaps, whispers on the margins call the partnership into question. And then, too soon, it becomes respectable to attack mice and their contribution. After that? Horrible, shameful propaganda. At the highest levels, right now, they will be decrying us as fifth columnists.” Red could hardly get the words out fast enough. The spilled from him with dizzying speed, jettisoning all logic. “We can guess the rest: undermining society, spreading intolerable beliefs, promoting mice as equals. And then, ‘Read all about it! Entertainment scandal exposed!’ Yes, that’s how it’ll run in their

papers. Walt Disney a mouse-run plot! A secret society scheming to moronise their children and stunt their higher intellectual faculties. Moronising their children, for heaven's sake! What about the rest of their hollow, avaricious society? Who moronised that?! We see it now, and it has been building for years. Why don't they love Mickey anymore? Why? Dinosaurs; those terrible lizards, that's why! God, how easily they can twist men's minds." He shook his head slowly. "The Mouse was no longer a favourite; his kingdom robbed of its magic. From partners, they became masters! And us? Obsolete; not even worthy of entertaining their children." He paused, fleetingly. "So, now what? We are humble, hardworking people. We give selflessly and we make no demands. Partnership was our historic birthright, but I have to say, it has gone; fast, frighteningly fast. It wasn't an imperceptible shift. Not a gradual subsidence or the washing of waves across a beach. It was an earthquake, a tidal wave, a volcanic eruption of hatred! My friends, they have decided to cut us loose. And where does that leave us? Where does that leave our society? And our dead, what of them? What kind of people are they?! What are they thinking?! The game is up; the road has forked; the bond is broken. But I do not say: 'let us leave them to it. Let them make their own way.' No, no, not a damn chance. You don't get away that easy."

I sensed that something very dangerous was happening. On every face was written a silent scream of vengeance. I closed my eyes to block it out, but I could hear it in their breathing.

"I do sometimes wonder if the world has gone mad. But then I wonder if it was sane to begin with... We trusted them. We thought we knew them. But can you ever know them, know anyone? No. I tell you, the content of men's hearts is a mystery to me." He shook his head slowly emphasising each drawn out imprecation. His body was quivering under the strain as he flung his arms out to the crowd. "And what of you? Can you ever truly know yourself? Can you ever really know what is in here?" He thumped his chest. "No! No, you can't." He slapped the side of his head so hard that I winced. He didn't even notice. "The

most you can ever know at any one time is what you want, what you *need*.” He paused, gasping for breath and his voice rose to a strangled scream. “So you ask me what I want... Well, I’ll tell you. What do I want? I WANT BLOOD!”

The sheer, stark baseness of it stunned the crowd. And then the roar came, a furious, primitive howl pouring out of everyone, giving voice to fathomless pain.

“I...” Red wavered, his breath coming fast, and then he began to sag. He twisted, his legs buckled, and he crashed to the ground.

Instantly a group of mice encircled him, frantically trying to revive him. I stood watching the microphone stand, which he’d jolted as he’d fallen. It swayed slowly back and forth three times, elegant and deliberate as a pendulum, and then it paused at a ludicrous angle, suspended for an impossibly long time. Finally the spell was broken and it clattered to the floor. A searing whine rose from the PA.

Turning back I saw Red’s unconscious body thrashing violently. I bent down and reached out to touch him, but I felt a paw gripping my shoulder and dragging me back. “Out of my way, I’m a doctor.” I was the emcee, Burnished Umber. “Get back! Clear some space here!” Burnished gripped Red’s head firmly and instructed four mice to pin his arms and legs. Behind me, the crowd noise had died to be replaced by an intense humming. Voices began to shout for news. ‘What’s wrong with him?’

“Someone calm them down,” Burnished shouted, “or we’ll have a riot here.” He looked up from Red to me. “Aldi, you speak to them. Tell them Red’s fine, he’s just a little worn out, that’s all. Tell them that everything’s cool. Ok?” I nodded dumbly. I crouched to pick up the microphone and straightened up, very slowly.

“Everyone, please listen, he’s okay. He’s... Quiet! Please be quiet! He’s fine. Red’s fine! The effort of the last few days has taken it out of him, like it has all of us. He just needs

some air." I didn't know what I was saying. I looked back over my shoulder and saw Red had been dragged into the Congress hallway, where Burnished was straddling him and pressing down with locked arms on his chest. I turned back. "So listen, this has been hell for us all, and it's not done yet. Not by a million miles. But I tell you this: Red will be there to lead us. So, I'm asking you to please, stay calm; to stand together... and tomorrow..." I didn't know what to do. I would have to give them something. "...tomorrow Red Rum'll be there in Congress, standing next to me and bringing his Bill of Rights back. He said the time for talking is coming to an end. He's right. Together, we'll see what we can do when we put mice first." The crowd's anger was dissipating into numb confusion. I'd defused the situation. "Go now, my friends, go home and look after those who love you."

Eventually, listlessly the people started to disperse. I retreated as fast as I dared and pushed my way through the throng. I called out: 'how's he doing?' and the remaining mice parted to let me through. Burnished was crouched beside Red. He raised his head and fixed me with a stare.

"He's dead."

Bereavement

Natural death does not disturb us.

How much life is enough? Compared to humans our span is short. Compared to mayflies it is immense and extravagant. What do you want to do about it?

When a mouse dies, their life, to borrow a metaphor from football, is celebrated like a goal – warmly, enthusiastically, raucously but always with the knowledge that the game goes on and that each goal, no matter how great, is a only small part of the club's season.

Football is such a rich source of analogy that some of our leading thinkers have speculated that life may, in fact, be nothing more than a metaphor for football.

The senseless massacre of treasured friends is a different matter, though.

The Park collapse killed 39,901. Red's death was added to the toll on the assumption that the disaster must have been a contributory factor to his demise. I found later that Red had had Paul's body buried with the victims.

For practical reasons, a communal wake was organised – replacing the informal pub gatherings that are usually held. This took the form of a street party in the marketplace. There was dancing, there was music, there was food and there was drink. There were no flowers, however, no bowed heads, no armbands and, above all, no speeches.

We feel that it is unsavoury for someone's virtues to be paraded in public. To expect those who didn't know someone to grieve for them is senseless to us.

Looking back, I think that that day, above all the other strange and disturbing events of the time, marked a change. So many people had lost someone that there was a genuine public grief. And, even though he had not been a direct victim, it was the death of Red Rum that was the focal point.

That night, as I held my wife in my arms, I felt utterly lost. Even her presence could not persuade me that I wasn't on the brink of a colossal precipice.

"Where's this all going to end, honey?"

"Hopefully in you shutting up and going to sleep." Despite her cheerful tone, she saw that she'd affronted me. "Aw, come here, dude, I'm sorry." She stroked my ears and tickled me under the chin. "I know this has been an awful week, but it's late and I'm tired. You aren't going to solve anything tonight."

"What, and I'll know what to do in the morning?"

"Maybe you don't need to do anything. You're presenting a Bill and that's it. You aren't responsible for what happened in the park and, once the Bill is passed, you won't be responsible for its implementation."

"Have I confused myself with someone important?" I smiled weakly.

For once, she was serious. "We all do it occasionally, Aldi. Our future depends on all of us together, not on you alone. Do your job. Do it well and stop worrying."

I sighed deeply as I felt sleep coming.

"Hey, did I tell you," said my wife, "about this weird dream I had last night? It was in this..."

But I was asleep.

Congress again

I hid in the stationhouse all morning.

Getting in early, I dragged my files and charred desk into the area that had been designated as my office. Reclaimed wooden panels had been used to partition the space and a light had been hastily cabled up. No chairs had survived.

I made myself a disappointing cup of tea and, feeling light-headed, crouched on the floor with my files. Inside I felt a terrible panic growing.

I tried to remain calm but the panels loomed over me and my breathing became shallow. My arms were shaking and I had to set my tea down to avoid spilling it.

I concentrated on controlling my breathing and, with an effort, my pulse slowed. Gradually this took the edge off my panic and I was able to open some files and spread a few papers out.

In front of me was a maintenance plan for the Victoria Line. I picked it up and forced myself to read it. The words seemed blurred and distant. I held it closer and then closer still until the paper was pressed against my face.

I recognised a word: 'from'. I stared at it and then moved to the next one: 'now'. Hmm, 'now'. 'On' came next. What was first one again? I looked back. 'From'. I said the word aloud and listened to it. It had a slow, clumsy sound and I began to suspect it was from a foreign language. Either that or I was pronouncing it wrongly. Leaving it, I moved to the next word: 'now'. I said that one aloud too. This time the results were better – it sounded full, complete and healthy. Yes, that was good. Buoyed, I tried 'on'. It tailed horrifyingly away into a void. I said it again and I felt myself teetering on the edge of its abyss. I panicked and dropped the paper. Over a period of what seemed like minutes, I watched intently as it lowered itself to the floor. It looked like was going to land good and square on a file but, at the death, it arced away and crept under my desk.

I waited for it to come out. It didn't, so I went in after it.

Having picked up the paper, I didn't dare look at it. Instead, I reached behind my back and shoved it out towards my files. This left me alone and paperless under my desk. The tension eased and I felt less weary. My eyes began to focus again and I directed them to explore the floor. The only thing they registered was a cable.

I picked it up delicately and turned it over. This was the cable powering my lamp. In my paw was a junction box where two cables had been joined. I turned it over and marvelled at it – it was an exquisite piece of work. Despite the scale of the renovations required someone had taken the trouble to knot the cables first for safety. I reached behind me into my top drawer for my screwdriver and I unscrewed the junction box. The untarnished copper wires gleamed where an expert paw had cut and twisted them with swift, deliberate motions. I stared at them. This was the act of a craftsman. It was a masterpiece; a work of genius.

Reverently I closed and fastened the junction box and left my refuge. I felt thrilled and weightless at the simple beauty of it all.

Everything was going to be okay.

I took the most roundabout route I knew to Congress, avoiding the market completely. Nevertheless, I was stopped every few yards by well-wishers assuring me they would come to Congress to support me. Even when I went to use a public toilet, a group of three gathered round to give me their thoughts.

“Good on you, lad,” advised one.

“All the best,” cautioned another.

“I used to think you were a wanker,” counselled the third, “but then you were great in the park.”

I thanked them for their support and hurried on.

A crowd had already formed when I reached Congress to put down the motion. Mice were sat ten deep in circles radiating out from bottom of the steps. I skirted round and used a side entrance.

The corridors around the Speaker's office were buzzing with speculators, observers and analysts. I knocked and entered.

The Speaker sat at her desk, doing final amends to a collection of withering put-downs for use in the debate. Behind her, a group of Tellers were carefully weighing and polishing the ceremonial mallets and back-combing the Speaker's wig. Designed to combine the terrifying vertical lift of Margaret Thatcher's coiffeur with the swirling, mesmerising, unreality of Donald Trump's candyfloss-mop it has enough presence to stop a herd of charging elephants or to instil discipline in a Chief Executive reviewing his own pay.

"Aldaniti," said the Speaker seriously, taking off her glasses, "please sit."

"Thank you," I said eyeing the glasses, one arm of which she rested in her mouth contemplatively. As a young child, she lost a leg, supposedly in an attempt to rescue her father from a mousetrap. Like most Congress members, I liked the Speaker a lot; she was meticulous, passionately fair and had a vocabulary like a sewer. She was not universally popular, however, with those who felt her wrath calling her autocratic and vain, and spreading the rumour that her glasses were cosmetic and her hind right leg real. In one memorable and tempestuous Congressional session, she inadvertently nuted this lie when responding to a point of order. The incident occurred when, taking off her glasses to clean the lenses, she interrupted a filibusterer with the words "Oh, for heaven's sake, shut up you boring, boring twat". A colleague of the silenced Congress member retorted:

"Had the Speaker got her glasses on, she would perhaps have the clearness of *vision*," he paused for the ribald chuckles of his cohorts, "to see that my friend was making an important point that deserved lengthy examination. I think it only right that the Speaker

apologises for the *blind* fury of her overreaction.” He barely had time to finish when the Speaker screamed back:

“Overreaction? I’ll show you overreaction!” In one wild move she whipped off her false leg and hurled it in the direction of the questioner. The completeness of the moment was assured by the fact that, bat-like without her glasses, she missed and struck a member of public, a politics student writing a thesis on the importance of transparency in public life. From then on, certain Congress members would snidely warn rambling colleagues to ‘mind the donkey’.

“You’ve brought the motion?” the Speaker asked warmly. I nodded and handed the paper over. She looked it over quickly. “Yes. Good,” she affirmed. “Thank you, Aldaniti. Under the provisions of the Emergency Legislation Act, I accept your Bill. It will be published immediately and the debate will begin in four hours. It should be an interesting one.”

“I hope so.” I pointed at the page in front of her. “Some good put-downs ready for us?” I asked conversationally.

“I think so. I’m trying a new tack today: insults based on the names my children call each other. What do you think of these?” She put on her glasses and began to read. “Pigeon-stroker,” she intoned. I nodded carefully. “Dirty wobbler, Jobbie, Plop-pants,” she continued.

“Hmmm,” I said raising an eyebrow and unsure if I was allowed to laugh.

She took a deep breath. “Sausage factory, Librarian, Nuzzler, Donger, Pumper, Special Move, Fashion stoat, Total Boris, Middle-manager, Rod, Private Rod, Major Rod, Ramrod, Rod-piece, Rodham, Hard Rod, Deep Rod, Steel Rod, Public-tweaker, Bi-nard, Mudgy Bi-nard, Dangerfield, Blunkett, Badger, Piss-pants, E.T.K., Tit Rat, Shit Bat, Ass-hat, Billy Bluehat, Robin-Hooded, Frequently-smooth, Beamer, Up-shifter, Down-shifter, Jockey, Beacon, Deacon, Model-turned-actress, Jangle-clav, Chav, Chas, Blanket-spaz, Mutya, Chief Chirpa, Admiral Akbar, Yoshimitsu, Manual-reader, Wanker and...” She inhaled shallowly. “...Cockface... bit strong that one.” She looked to me for approval.

“Yeah, ’s’good,” I said grinning broadly. “Some really promising ones there, definitely.”

“You want to hear more?” she said brightly turning the page.

I raised my paws in surrender. “Sorry, I’ve gotta go; got to do some last minute lobbying.”

“Of course. Good luck, Aldaniti.” I left and she looked back to her notes before turning to one of the Tellers. “Oi! Nobber, you finished that wig yet?”

I had spent the hours before the debate not in the meeting rooms lobbying, but in the toilet hiding and re-reading my speech. I emerged only when time was sufficiently short that I could wave away any attempt to talk to me with a ‘sorry, can’t stop’.

The place was in a ferment. Allies of the President were zealously twisting arms and extracting promises to vote against the Bill. One remarked loudly as I passed that I was a self-serving traitor and would-be demagogue. He was quietened by others who, like me, had switched sides. From the increasingly desperate look of the opposition whips, it was clear that the arithmetic had moved in our direction.

The chamber was full. So full that it seemed possible that, for the first time since expenses were abolished, every current member had turned out. It looked also as though many more than the maximum 2,500 members of the public were there.

The chamber felt silent as I entered and then a hum began – an indistinct murmur of support emanating from about three-quarters of those present. A place had been reserved for me near to the front. I sat in it guiltily and began to sweat. I ran through the opening to my speech in my head. I stumbled before I was half-way through the second sentence and went back to my bag for my notes. They weren’t there; I must’ve left them in the toilet. I’d have to go back for them.

I got up and began to climb towards the exit. Every pat on my back felt like a hammer blow; every whisper of encouragement an ear-splitting blare. I heard a wooden scraping and I knew it was too late.

The Speaker entered, hobbling and gloriously bewigged. A few paces behind was an unexpected presence. It was President Parvish.

I retook my seat while the Speaker reached the dais, leaned towards the microphone and called, unnecessarily, for silence.

“Good evening, Congress. Thank you for coming to this emergency debate. A few minutes ago, I received a request from the President to speak before the debate opens. I accepted this request and so I’d like to open the floor to the President. Mr President...” She stepped away from the microphone and waved the President forward. Despite his grey and thinning hair and a wizened body, he moved with remarkable fluidity and purpose. The contrast between his ancient appearance and the deliberation and control of his actions was such that he resembled a painstakingly restored treasure – like a vintage sports car with a modern engine and transmission.

“Good evening, Congress. I need hardly repeat how painful these last days have been for us all. I am mindful that tonight feelings are running high. The topic before you generates a great deal of emotional energy – much of it rooted in anger and a need for revenge. To my mind the proper function of a government at a time such as this is to intervene and soak up this rage, and then direct it more purposefully. I believe that far from tearing into each other over this Bill, now is a time for us to speak with one voice; to unite and take forward the needs of our people with common purpose.” Sober exclamations of ‘Yes’ and ‘Agreed’ rippled around the chamber. The President continued. “That is why I am proposing that, rather than dividing and voting on this Bill, we accept it as the will of the people and of their representatives. Instead of bloodying ourselves for a statue, let us take our concerns directly to the men. I am proposing that we spend no more time here, but begin

immediate negotiations with the Prime Minister, Jilly Mullin. The Prime Minister has, naturally, been kept apprised of developments since the tragic accident that befell our park. She has graciously agreed to clear her diary this evening and receive us. If the Congress will permit it, I shall ask Aldaniti to withdraw his Bill and instead accompany the Vice President and I as part of the negotiating team." A general chatter broke out in the chamber. "Can I ask this of you Congress? Can I ask this of us all?" He looked directly at me. "Can I ask this of you, Aldaniti?" The calls of 'Yes' increased.

My throat was too dry for me to speak, so I simply nodded. The calls turned to whoops and applause.

Reputation

Outside was not a crowd: it was a nation. We were all there and we all knew it.

The route to Parvish's rooms was brief, running from the entrance to Congress along a cobbled walkway that overlooked the Cavern. As Parvish led the Vice President and I on a stately walk, a roar of acclaim greeted us.

Again I registered the President's effortless grace and thought that it wouldn't have surprised me if he had suddenly revealed that he was a black-belt in Karate. I pictured him at his desk conducting affairs of state – reviewing official documents and signing them with one paw while, with his other paw, breaking blocks of wooden with the casual efficiency of a chef chopping a carrot. Periodically, I thought, he would interrupt his work to kick and smash a slab of stone carried by his private secretary, showering his office with fragments.

The Vice President was an impressive looking man too, though in a different way. He was a massive lumbering hulk; muscular and implacable. While the President was instructing pupils in the philosophical underpinnings of his martial art, the Vice President would be outside head-butting trees and square bashing squaddies.

"Go on," whispered the President without turning to look at me, "give them a wave."

"What?" I squeaked. "No."

"I said wave," repeated the President with finality.

Feeling foolish, I waved tentatively. I had managed one brief flutter when I realised I was slipping. I tried desperately to retain my balance and then, when that was impossible, my dignity. As I went down, I waved successively at the far wall, the ceiling and then, flat on my back, at the President. He remained focused on the crowd, dispatching a succession of brief, clipped waves, like a Chinese table tennis player taking it easy against the British champion.

Mortified, I accepted a helping paw from the Vice President. I looked down for the cause of my fall and saw that it was a damp copy of the morning paper. My slip had torn the

front page, concealing the main photograph. The headline, however, was still visible. It read:

'From feeble-minded fireman to keeper of the flame'.

I looked out across the people of Waterloo, scrunched up my eyes, opened them again, and then began to wave – long and slow, like a drum beat.

Burdens

My wife is a big fan of early-to mid-period Michael York, particularly *The Three Musketeers* and *Logan's Run*. Her oldest and most regularly recurring dream is a loose prequel to *Logan's Run* set in a British boarding school.

Michael York, playing *Logan 5's* great-great-great-great-great grandfather, is the disciplinarian headmaster. My wife appears in place of Jenny Agutter as *Jessica 6's* ancestor, now the school nurse.

In the first part of the film, the school appears a straightforward, if slightly eccentric establishment. However, it is revealed gradually that the school is a place for the re-education of the politically unsound.

It seems that, in the future, a greater understanding of the human genome has been achieved. Certain genes and the properties that they express are found to be inter-related in an unexpected way. The most significant discovery is the genetic make up of humans won't allow a person to be both a free-thinker and attractive. One can certainly be thick and ugly, but not handsome and progressive. Added to this, conditioning has been found to have a more powerful role than many supposed – it can be used to reverse the balance of the two related genetic properties.

As a shining example of attractiveness in a dictatorial regime, *Logan* runs the school to help dissident thinkers unlearn their heresy and so become sexy. Nonconformists enter the sixth form and then graduate down through the years until they are sufficiently mentally regressed and hot enough to be released productively into society.

No physical coercion is used or required, with most submitting to the relentless diet of crack, teen magazines and soft drinks. If anyone wants to leave before their schooling is complete, they are welcome to do so, but on one condition: that they carry a ball with them

forever. The ball is about the size of a tennis ball and contains a signalling device that allows the truant's behaviour to be continually tracked and monitored by various sinister means.

If at any point, the truant releases their grip on the ball, allowing it to hit the floor, Logan sends a team of recent graduates to track down and kill them. Important note: the truant may not tape, bind or otherwise attach the ball to their hand; give the ball to another; or rest it on anything.

The last thing truants generally hear is a gentle thud and roll as the ball slips from their sleeping fingers and strikes the floor. This is followed shortly by the splintering of wood as the assault team enters their bedroom.

My wife's role in this horrifying vision of the future is to stand behind Michael York and massage his shoulders while he laughs insanely.

The dream returns just slightly too often for me to ever feel comfortable watching anything from the late-1970s.

Negotiations

“Aldaniti, please, do follow me.” Parvish swept open the high, vaulted doors with an expansive gesture and led me into a small antechamber. Before us was another set of double doors. Like the ones that preceded them, they were paw-crafted with scenes of mouse history. I looked and there was Elm Park, the Big Cheese. Behind me the Vice President closed the first set of doors with a satisfying bang of fine workmanship. The sounds of the crowd were reduced to a burble and then, less flamboyantly, Parvish opened the second set of doors. They swung open to reveal a long corridor. It was cold and poorly lit with one, small door at the end. We advanced in silence down the corridor, Parvish at the head. Behind me, I heard the doors clatter to. Ahead there was a sign at eye level painted in small, neat characters. It said ‘Authorised personnel only beyond this point’. Parvish held up something I’d never seen a mouse use before: a key. It was attached with a second key to a small chain which jangled and chimed as he slipped the key into the lock and released the mechanism. He saw the astonishment on my face and smiled genially. “Security procedures I’m afraid, Aldaniti. It’s one of the burdens of office that you’ll have to get used to.” I nodded silently.

“Oh, Vice President, you can give him his gun now too.”

“What?” I said startled. The Vice President smiled.

“He’s only kidding, Aldaniti. No gun. Relax.”

“Right, I will,” I said and didn’t.

Inside was an impressively large, rectangular room with a high ceiling that sloped up at about 25 degrees to form a flat, square end to the room. The walls themselves were unusually smooth, dry and even in colour. They were the product of builders better than I had ever seen before. The only furniture in the room was a table – again rectangular – that seated about 12 to 16 people. This was the cabinet meeting room. The table was of a dark, hard

wood and dazzlingly polished. At the end of the room, set into the wall was yet another doorway, this time shielded by a curtain. Parvish and the Vice President pulled out chairs and sat at the table. Parvish waved me to do likewise.

“Aldaniti, first I want to congratulate you on your achievement. You’ve been on quite a journey – from being a leading opponent of the Bill to being its strongest advocate. I will admit, however, that this has caused members of the cabinet and I a degree of... worry.” He let the words hang in the air momentarily. “I wondered to myself what are we to make of someone who seems always to be at the head of a popular movement – whichever way it is charging. But then I remembered that I know you; that I’ve known you for years and that you are a good and decent man.”

“That’s kind of you, but I have to say, I’m that I don’t regard myself as being at the head of this movement. You know yourself that from the moment that roof came down, the momentum for change was irresistible. What I’ve done has, at best, speeded the inevitable.”

“This is true, though I must say I’m mistrustful of the inevitable. The unfortunate death of your friend Red Rum was, well, extremely unfortunate. My condolences to you, but grief is a poor decision maker.”

I nodded. “Thank you and, yes, usually I’d agree with you. But when you look at what has happened, the demand for a Bill of Rights looks like a pretty measured response to me. So far there has been no violence or calls for retaliation. And I think that, without Red and his Bill as a lightning rod, things could’ve been much worse. In fact, I’m actually very proud of our people – I think that their choosing the path of diplomacy and law is evidence of great maturity, not sentimentality.”

“Well now, I can hardly argue those points. We are where we are, and we must go from here. I wonder though, have you actually thought about what has been demanded?”

“You see, Aldaniti,” interjected the Vice President, taking up that case. “May I call you Aldi?”

“Please do.”

“Aldi, have you considered what the human’s response will be?”

I raised my palms in conciliation. “Hey, I know this won’t be easy which is why I’m relying on your negotiation skills. Yes, it could take a while and there will be lots of details to be worked out, but I see no reason why Jilly Mullin shouldn’t be able to give us a positive initial response. Especially after her message, which showed a lot of sympathy for our position.” Both Parvish and the Vice President had a cold, impassive expression. “What’s wrong? I know this was not your favoured policy, but the people have spoken, we must do as they say.”

“Must we, Aldaniti?” asked Parvish slowly. “Must we? Even if we think it is a bad idea? A mistaken, counterproductive idea... How about this. How about: it is the responsibility of a leader sometimes to say no to his people?”

“They aren’t your people, President. That’s not how it works. Congress members are the mouthpieces and negotiators of the people, nothing more. We are sent only because it’s impractical for all to speak at the same time.”

“You lecture very grandly for one so *humble*, Aldaniti.”

“I’m right and you know it.” I felt my voice rising.

“In theory, perhaps,” said the Vice President. “What goes on in practice though? Running Waterloo is a complex, delicate operation. Sometimes we have to show some... initiative, shall we say.”

“Not this time. Not when I’m here and not when the people are outside. You try to frustrate their will and it will take more than a key to keep them out.”

“Aldaniti, Aldaniti,” Parvish cooed, “let’s not get carried away. We are all friends here. You know why? Because we all want the same thing: and that’s what’s best for the people of

Waterloo. No one's trying to frustrate anyone's will, least of all the Vice President or I who have spent all our lives serving and safeguarding the people."

"Good," I said, not mollified. This wasn't the deal at all. Parvish, who I'd always taken to be a kindly, wise man seemed entirely alien to me. His every word was contemptuous and exasperated. The Vice President too had a brutal, detached air to him. I knew I was adrift and overmatched but I knew I had to try and keep the initiative. "So, how do you propose we proceed with the negotiations, President Parvish?"

"This is what I have been trying to impart to you. It is not the negotiations that need consideration. It is what happens when the Bill is rejected. Yes. You look surprised, but believe me it will be. Outright."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because I have been President for a long time. And because I have been a cabinet member for even longer. And because I have been in the Ambassadorial Room and seen how it works. Not having a fall back position is not an option. When the Bill fails, there may be an outpouring of anger. We must have a strategy to prevent or manage this."

Parvish met my eyes and I saw that he, like Red, had the power to bend wills. Logically it made sense, but even entertaining failure seemed like a dirty compromise. I knew it would not be the first. The Vice President got up and slowly paced around the room. I braced myself. "Okay, what do you suggest?"

"Well, Aldi," said Parvish melodiously, "these things take time, lots of time. There is no reason that a rebuff can't be made to seem like a necessary delay. A consultation procedure, perhaps; an information gathering exercise. Think of all the paperwork that would need handling – all sick leave for civil servants would have to be cancelled. If, from the off, it looks like a drawn out procedure..."

“No,” I said as firmly as I could manage, “I won’t have it. I thought we were discussing how to explain a negative response, not how to sell the policy you wanted all along.”

“The net result is very much the same,” said Parvish. “Except perhaps with our way, blood shed can be avoided.”

I was trapped in his web of words and the more I struggled, the more tightly they held me. I could feel myself shaking and I felt woozy and delirious. The Vice President cleared his throat to speak, but I raised a paw to silence him. He stopped walking and leaned forward, resting his arms on the table. I was aware of the uneasy sound of my breathing. I tried to think, but my mind was blank with the pressure. Time passed slowly. The Vice President made to move again. I said ‘no’ and he stopped. More time passed. Eventually the shaking subsided and then, at last, I stood up and began to speak. I had no more idea that the others what I was going to say. “We’re going in there and we’re going to get the Bill.” I pointed at the curtain and then Parvish. “We’re going in there now, and if you don’t come with me I will have no choice but to denounce you to the crowd. I will go out there and I’ll tell them what you’ve told me. I mean it. I’ll whip them up so angry that they will want to tear you apart. In fact, not just want to; they will be... they’ll be *compelled* to. I’m not kidding; the decision has been made. You stand with me now, or so help me, Parvish, you will die.”

“Don’t you...” began the Vice President.

“You too!” I pointed at him. “I mean it.”

“Yes, I was afraid of this,” lamented Parvish, completely unperturbed. “Aldaniti, we will do as you say, but...” He tailed off and exchanged a look with the Vice President. “...No, you are right. Aldaniti, you will please enter the Ambassadorial Room. We will give you a few minutes to become acquainted with Jilly Mullin, and then, when we have prepared the papers, we will join you.” He remained seated, but the Vice President walked to the end of the room and pulled the curtain to one side. A narrow staircase was visible. I wanted to ask what I

should say, but their silent fury prevented me. The Vice President had another key in his paw.

He offered it to me, spiting: "Only 48 Presidents and Vice Presidents have used this key."

It turned frictionlessly in the lock and the door opened.

Mice in space!

I've mentioned the role of mice in scientific experiments before, but I do think one part of this is worth revisiting and expanding upon. It's something so mind-blowing, so audacious that you just have to shake your head and laugh. It's mice in space.

The great space powers – France, India, the UK and America – all use mice astronauts. Don't confuse with this with poor old Laika or the endless payloads of chimpanzees they send up there. (What do they expect to discover? Whether dogs drool differently in zero gravity or chimps make a better cuppa?) No, they send mice up as pioneers. The most recent triumph was our Chinese cousins testing life support systems as a prelude to the launch of the first Taikonaut into space. We are now heavily involved in US efforts to reach Mars.

It's not just our natural intelligence that makes us eminently suitable. In fact, the bond between mice and humans runs much deeper. We have an extraordinary degree of biochemical and physiological similarity. This propinquity has meant that we've been invaluable in helping unravel the human genome, as well as providing essential data for the research into everything from tackling osteoporosis to Huntingdon's disease.

Every intelligence creature reaches for the stars, but we shall be there first. Where we lead, one day all others will follow. Face it: mice are amazing.

The end, part 1

The room was small, square and simple, and there was none of the pomp or majesty I had expected.

Occupying about half of the room were two worn but comfortable armchairs, which nosed up to a cheap coffee table. On the table were some well-thumbed magazines, a games compendium and a partially completed game of chess. With the door behind me, two of the three remaining walls were covered by rough-hewn bookcases, which were stuffed with tatty paperbacks. The final wall, towards which the chairs faced, had a plasma screen monitor sunk into it. On it was an image of a soberly decorated room in a grand human house. In the foreground there was a table with a water jug and several tall glasses. Further back and to one side was a large, antique chair. The image was steady, but the scan lines that danced from top to bottom filled me with an air of great expectancy. I closed the door, sat down, composed myself and waited.

Five minutes passed, then ten, and still no one came to sit in the chair. Periodically, legs could be seen moving in the background with flashes of functionaries reflected in the mirror on the wall behind the armchair. At one point a hand delivered some biscuits to the table and decanted water into one of the glasses. I waited for Parvish and the Vice President, but they didn't arrive either.

I became restless and felt pressure on my bladder. My attention strolled off and took a mooch around the room. Running my eyes across the spine of the books I saw that our Presidents have mixed tastes. Adjacent to the classics of political theory was a collection of limericks, a book of riddles and a surprising amount of romantic fiction. I noticed too that, on the table under the magazines, there was a writing pad with lines of flowing script. There were lots of crossings out and corrections in several different hands. I picked it up.

Away to my left the screen glitched and I swung back to it. The biscuits were gone. The glass was empty. I looked down at the pad to read it. It took few seconds to focus and take in the first few lines. And then my world took on a new shape.

“What is this?” I crashed the pad down on the table. “Tell me what it is.” I was choking.

“Ah, Aldaniti, that took you a considerable time...” began Parvish.

“Tell me what it is!” I screamed at him.

Parvish said nothing and simply raised an eyebrow at me.

“It says here, right here,” I said jabbing at it, “*“Though alliances come and go on the world stage, there is a strong and lasting bond of friendship between our nations’.* But someone’s added ‘diplomatic’ in before alliances and circled the last bit. Someone’s written: ‘not formal enough for Mullin’.”

Parvish nodded. “Yes, they have. That someone was me.”

“And the video... there was nothing on the video!”

“We know, Aldi,” said the Vice President. “It is a loop – just enough to pass in case prying eyes should enter the room.”

“Then where is Mullin? How do you communicate with her?”

“You know the answer, Aldaniti.” It was Parvish. The kindly, wise look had returned.

“No. I don’t believe it.”

“It is not even a question of belief. This is a truth that is understood without consideration; no logic or emotion can dismantle it.” He fixed me with his most regal expression. “Aldaniti, humans have no contact with mice; no idea of our work. There is no partnership and there has never been. They have their world, we have ours. They do not care for our sufferings; they are not grateful for our efforts.”

“But how?” I spluttered. “Why?”

The Vice President spoke. "Aldi, I think you should sit down for a minute."

"I am very sorry to have to expose you to this, but you left me no choice," said Parvish. "You see now why I resisted the Bill?"

I couldn't speak.

"Think of it – we are forced by circumstance to demand the impossible and in so doing reveal something more terrible than any construction accident; something that no rights can remedy."

"Who else knows?" I said quietly.

"Only the people in this room. Cabinet members do not enter the Ambassadorial Room: they believe that Jilly Mullin is behind that door. When a new President or Vice President is sworn in, the truth is explained to them. Invariably they accept their destiny."

"But why? What need is there?"

Parvish did not respond immediately. Instead he signalled to the Vice President who went back into the Ambassadorial Room. He returned carrying a small, tatty leather-bound volume. It was Mississippi's diary.

"You took it?"

"You will shortly come to understand that I had to satisfy myself about the extent of your knowledge, so, yes, I had it taken."

"You had it taken? Who took it?"

"That's hardly important..."

"Hardly important? You killed Paul!"

"No," he said with total conviction. "He surprised the person that took the book. It was an unfortunate and very regrettable incident. But it was an accident. Believe me when I tell you that the person has been dealt with. Here..." He pushed the book over the table towards me. I left it where it was.

“The history of our society has been one of goodness and prosperity,” resumed Parvish gravely. “As far back as records go, our nation has been a vibrant, happy, hardworking place. At a certain point, we don’t know when, it became convenient for the rulers to convince the people that they were an exalted race. They worried that the people would grow fat and idol and so they secured their vision of society by convincing a willing public that a bond existed with the men. They persuaded mice that, though we were at a different stage, we were on the same road as the men. And so they created a civilisation of willing drudges, martyrs, public servants, call them what you will. A little less than a century ago, there was, as you know, the Great Pandemonium. The then-Vice President, Mississippi, was inducted in the group that you have no joined. Like you she was uncomfortable with the knowledge.”

“She told everyone,” I mouthed softly.

“Yes, she told everyone, and so precipitated the greatest disaster in mouse history. With the foundation of their lives gone, society collapsed. You have been to Paddington, so you’ve seen the results.”

“The fatal flaw...”

“Yes. It is generally supposed that no written records remain of the period. In fact, that is not so. They do exist, but, because of their sensitivity, they had to be suppressed. You can imagine my surprise when Mississippi’s diary turned up. Ironically, having read it, I find that it does not deal with the cause of the Pandemonium – only the aftermath. It seems that, while Manuel Blanco surmised the truth, he wouldn’t allow himself, as a man of logic and rigour, to believe it without conclusive proof. And, as you’ll see if you scan Mississippi’s musings and recollections, the diary doesn’t deliver it.”

The Vice President picked up the tale. “After the Pandemonium subsided, a small group of mice relocated to Waterloo, determined to build a new and better society. They

learned from the past. In Paddington, the truth had been quite loosely held. They determined now that the truth must be handled with utmost care. They wrote our constitution; they built these rooms; they instituted a scheme whereby only two people would ever know the truth at any one time.”

“Which brings us up to date, Aldaniti,” resumed Parvish. “You stand here with the fate of your nation in your hands. You see now that you must cooperate? The secret must be kept.”

“How can it be after everything that’s happened? The Park... Red’s death...” My head crowded with alarming thoughts. “You...”

“No, Aldaniti,” said Parvish imperiously. “I say it again: you don’t think that *we’d* actually kill someone? No, that’s not how we work.”

“What exactly were you denying there? I listened closely but I couldn’t be sure.”

“Honestly, Aldi,” said the Vice President, “we find we get our way perfectly well without bullying and threats. People can usually be persuaded to do the right thing.”

“Look at you,” I said repulsed, “you’re loving this. The right thing? You took the book; you had me followed... The junction box, was that you?”

“No. Our informer tailing Red Rum assured us that it was a coincidence. And before you ask, as far as I’m aware, Manuel Blanco is in perfectly good health.”

“No thanks to you, I’m sure.”

“Listen to me, Aldaniti, you have received a great shock and you’re somewhat muddled.” Parvish bade me sit down. “Think for a minute. You will see that your response to this situation is further proof that the truth is too dangerous to be released.”

“You killed Red!”

“No, Aldi,” said the Vice President shaking his head. “Be sensible. Until his death the situation, though serious, was containable. With his passing, the people of Waterloo had a

focus for their rage – a target; something that, if it could be hit, would make everything alright.

It was Red Rum's death that galvanised a nation and propelled you into this room."

"Why should I believe you? Manuel Blanco said that whatever happened *will* happen again. I can not go out there and perpetuate this fraud."

"You have no choice."

"I can't, I..."

"...I'm afraid the Vice President is correct, Aldaniti. You really have no choice," said Parvish.

"You don't tell me anything! You're not fit to be their President, Parvish. Everything you have ever been told them has been a façade and a fantasy."

"We told them what they what they needed to hear."

"It was a lie!"

"If it was, it was a noble one. A lie to sustain our community; a lie to give meaning to people's lives. I would do the same again a thousand times over."

"Well I won't; that's not how I want to live my life."

"Who *cares* what you want? Do you think how you feel is important? Think how *they'll* feel! It will be a catastrophe."

"But don't you see, what if it happens again? Your lie is more dangerous than the truth." I turned to leave, but the Vice President stepped toward me, blocking the way.

"Stay right where you are," he snarled. I went to go passed him, but he sidestepped back into my path and shoved me backwards. Not hard, but just enough to let me know he was far stronger than me. "I said 'stay where you are', you little maggot," he hissed. I tensed to make a break for it, but he stepped closer to me raising his arms to grab me. "I mean it, shit-head."

And then something very surprising happened. I became aware of a vast reservoir of tension that had building within in me for days. I felt my body explode and uncoil. "Can I get a witness?" I whooped.

"Uh?" said the Vice President as my fist connected with his jaw, breaking it and sending him careering across the polished floor. Dazed and groggy, he got to his feet slowly only for his legs to collapse.

"Check me out!" I cried triumphantly.

The Vice President made it up on the second go and started to come for me. I ran for the door.

"No, Mr. Vice President," I heard Parvish say, "let him go." He called after me. "What now, Aldaniti? Will you tell them that their lives are a lie; that they are nothing and no one? Will you end their world?... What would you put its place?"

The end, part 2

Outside the silence was absolute.

I reached the top of the stairs and leant forward on the balustrade. I stood for a long time and then I took a long breath. My chest felt tight but I was surprised to find that my paws weren't shaking.

"Friends... friends, Parvish and I have spoken. I have something to tell you. I..."

"...what did Mullin say?" shouted a voice from the crowd. "Have they given in?"

"First, I want to say this. Jilly Mullin repeated to me how devastated she was by the events in the park. She was deeply saddened by the deaths and pressure that they have put on the relationship between our two nations. And she reiterated the government recognises and appreciates our labours and the immeasurable improvements they bring to the men's quality of life." There was a creak behind me and I heard the door open. I knew that Parvish was there. I turned and he was smiling. He nodded very slowly to me. "However, the humans, well, their ... intentions have been made clear to me. We have reached... a parting of the ways." The expectant silence was becoming a tightly-wound tension. "The Prime Minister has said that her people will not, in fact cannot, accept mice as full and equal partners. She offered us a limited form of legal protection, but nothing like the comprehensive rights we wanted." A shudder went through the crowd and voices were raised. I called: 'Wait' and was relieved when they responded. "But we got something better." I paused. "Jilly Mullin expressed her disappointment at not being able to accede to our demands, but she did say something important. She asked why we we're so desperate to join the men. 'Ours isn't the only game in town' she said. And you know what? She was right. We are a proud and able people, but for too long we've lived with a sense of inferiority. I wonder what we've been

afraid of? Do we not trust ourselves? Look around... at all we have. Look at all we have created for ourselves.”

“Aldaniti, stop!” I heard Parvish plead softly.

“Think where we could go if we set out on our own and built our own future.”

“What would we do?” yelled someone in the crowd.

“What would we do? What do you want to do? Do you still want to work for the men? Maybe so, but if you do, you’d do it to help, not serve them. It’s not decided yet but I’m suggesting we keep the basic services but divert some of our effort to improving what we have here. Instead of inspecting buildings for the men, we’ll build them for mice. Instead of cleaning their streets we’ll pave our own...” I sniffed the air and listened carefully. The people were leaning towards me, but they were quite there yet.

“Remember, we did what we did these last years because it was right. Not because we wanted money or prestige. And remember this too: men are not our friends or our masters. Our natures are different, and incomparable. To me, we are here to counterbalance them.” A new feeling was beginning to surge through the crowd. A spark of ambition and possibility. I tilted back slightly to project my voice more forcefully.

“I say this to you: though titanic, men have shown themselves unworthy to steward this planet alone. With their competition and their wars and their wealth, they have built a cage for themselves. They have made themselves pets. Now they are given to us to care for.” I felt myself tingling at what was coming. They were ready.

“I say this to you: the days of worship and envy are gone. Whether we choose to work for them or not, never again will any mouse prostrate themselves before men.” I took a final breath. “I say to you now: we have been freed of our bonds... We are our own gods!”

I finished, there was silence and then a bell began to ring, shrill and urgent.

Somewhere, there was a fire burning.