

The Facility

I'm standing outside in the Yorkshire rain, ducking to keep dry beneath the pink-tinted bell of Liz's see-thru' fashion umbrella. Ducking, because Liz is holding the umbrella by its stem and Liz is somewhat shorter than I am. She should give the umbrella to me to hold. Me being the taller, larger and all round sturder of the two of us, it's my argument that I'm altogether better suited as an umbrella trunk. But Liz says the primary objective is not the overall efficiency of the system. Liz says the primary objective is the maintainance of Liz's hair in its present, perfectly dry condition. If I do not understand the reason for this primary objective, Liz explains, it's because I do not use hair straightener, and therefore do not understand that the application of moisture to one's straightened hair will result in a transformation of said hair from current state of straightness to a state of sudden and unrestrained frizziness. Which would not be good.

But this, I try gently to point out, would not occur under my scheme. Under *my* scheme, we would the both of us stay dry. Taking 'the both of us' to mean Liz, Liz's hair and me.

'Maybe so,' says Liz, 'but the hair situation is far too critical and delicate.'

'Too critical and delicate for what, exactly?'

'Too critical and delicate to even think about messing with. Too critical and delicate to allow another authority input and control. The potential for disaster is just far too great to contemplate.'

When Liz talks like this I know she's doing it deliberately, to wind me up. It winds me up.

'Too critical and delicate to allow this person's input and control.' I say, thumbing a thumb in the direction of my chest (a chest Liz once unforgettably described as 'cuddly').

‘Maybe.’

‘Right. Precisely. Meaning I have to stand here, without a coat, getting soaked, while you get to have dry hair *and* a dry body.’

The dry body bit is an issue here, as Liz is not wearing her own coat but one that Andrews threw over her shoulders as he co-ordinated the evacuation of our floor. If you can call it co-ordination. Andrews is our department head but if you ask me he couldn’t supervise a goldfish bowl let alone a military-grade satellite control systems coding operation, which is what our department is. Standing in the corner calm as an air steward and about as camp, chanting: ‘Please leave the building and assemble at the assembly points,’ and: ‘Please remain calm,’ and: ‘This is not a drill,’ while smiling the kind of worried smile you’d expect to find hanging off the face of a stressed-out kindergarten teacher and clenching his buttocks with delight that he’s got yet another chance to order us around... it doesn’t exactly take a genius, does it? It doesn’t *exactly* call for gallantry of the coat-unfurling variety? And it certainly doesn’t merit the grateful and downright simpering looks certain female members of our staff were giving him. I mean, it’s not like he’s a fucking fireman or war hero or anything.

‘It’s not my fault you don’t keep a raincoat at work,’ says Liz. ‘You should be grateful I’m letting you get any umbrella space at all.’

I’m seeing red. I am. I am literally seeing red. Liz is smiling, I know that. I can’t see it through all the red I’m seeing, but I can sense it.

Fuck this, I think, and removing my head from beneath the plastic carapace I stand up and face the weather.

‘You know, it’s not that bad,’ I say as raindrops sting my face, though all I get by way of response is a theatrically indifferent cough.

‘It’s not, it’s really not.’ Water bombs explode across my glasses and obscure my view. Some kind of bunker-seeking precipitation missile tunnels down inside my collar and obliterates secret forces bivouac-ed along the wind-scoured cliffside of my neck.

'Why d'you think there are many goddamn guards?' Liz says quietly. 'They're everywhere. I've never seen so many. Where do they keep them all? It's like they've drafted in a whole extra division.'

'I think they have.'

'No wonder we pay so much tax. Is it really necessary?'

I laugh at this because the answer is so obvious. 'Er, like, given recent events, I'd say that's a yes.'

Perhaps wisely Liz ignores the patronising sarcasm. 'But so many?'

'What I want to know is,' I say, ignoring back, 'if they could please turn off that fucking alarm? Or at least turn it down. It's driving me insane. Why does it have to be so loud? It's not like we haven't got the damn message. I mean, we're all standing out here getting pneumonia aren't we? Do they have to rupture our eardrums too?'

'Calm down, will you? What's got you so worked up, all of a sudden? I hope you're not going to sulk because I won't let you hold the umbrella.'

'I'm not sulking! Christ. I've left my inhaler inside, that's all.'

'You can live without your inhaler for a few minutes.'

'No, Liz, I can't. That's why I've got one, see? Because if I have an attack I might not last a few minutes.'

'So don't have an attack.'

'What d'you think it is? A decision?'

'No, of course not. I just think you're getting worked up for no reason. Just breathe. And while you're breathing, think about this. Even if a *grand mal* epileptic seizure reduces you to a quivering heap on the floor at my feet, I'm still not going to give you the umbrella.'

I sniff a bit at this and go quiet. It's not defeat – I'm just biding my time. While I'm doing that, I take a look around.

He gathered by now that Liz and I are not alone out here. We are not the only ones standing around, miserable in the rain and cold and wet. Out here in the car park with us are the entire staffs

of Sectors 7 to 10. Here are all the people I work with, all the people I see from day to day. Here is Pauline. Here is Simon. Here is Josie. Here are Suhail, Damian, Bruce. Suhail, Bruce and Damian are programmers, Simon is a sys admin, Josie's personnel and Pauline's too important for me to know exactly what it is she does. Alongside them are maybe two hundred faces belonging to people I've never met. A few I vaguely recognise but the vast majority I've never even seen before, which is not exactly impressive when you consider I've been working on this site for three years now. But RAF Featherbrooks is hardly a magnet for the socially gregarious, which I suppose is one reason I've been so happy here.

And you couldn't say that mixing in the ranks is actively encouraged. Quite the opposite. My bet is that these tight groups in which all of us are standing, talking in low voices, looking miserable, smoking cigarettes, rubbing hands and stamping feet perhaps, but mainly just blinking like freshly-woken moles in the wan excuse for daylight that's being served up as an accompaniment to this tediously energetic late-September rain, all these groups are made up of the six or eight people who happen to sit together at adjacent desks. That's all anyone really gets to meet, round here. Those are your colleagues. That's your team.

And fair enough. The only difference I can see between most of them and me, is that most of them are carrying umbrellas. Why is that? How come they're all so damn prepared? Maybe that's why they all seem so calm, the bastards, while I'm in a state of some distress. Look at them. They could be waiting for a fireworks display.

'What are we doing out here?' I ask of no one in particular. Some of the faces turn towards me. Most of these faces are smooth. Most of the butts are fat. Most of the accents are American. Liz is American. Bruce is American. Pauline is Anglo-Dutch. Suhail is Indian-American (as opposed to Amer-Indian, or Native American, or whatever the correct term is these days). Damian and Simon, they're English. They're the odd ones out, like me.

The facility is a little piece of America in England. The cars are

American. The clothes are American. People have no choice but to live in English houses scattered in and around the nearby town of Whitby, but they waste no time in replacing everything they can with imported American fixtures and fittings: refrigerators the size of mortuaries, specially wired 120 volt electrical sockets, waste-disposals, jacuzzi-bathtubs, power-showers. Their kitchens are stocked with American groceries that you can buy from a special supermarket here on the base. Satellites beam in special American TV. It's a home away from home, is the idea.

All of which is just fine by me. The way I see it, these days we're all Americans. I mean, I might have been brought up in this country, but I don't consider myself English, not particularly. I don't consider myself anything. And you know what? I do not have a problem with this. I'm just not interested if you want to stand up there and tell me this is somehow wrong of me. You want to do it, you go ahead. I'm just not going to listen.

'Does anybody know *anything*?' I say again, marvelling (as I've done many times before) at my companions' apparently innate ability to ignore me. 'Someone must know something? Surely?'

'It's just a drill,' says Simon, who takes it as a point of honour to never let anything bother him.

'Could be a fire,' suggests Pauline.

'So where's the smoke?' Simon again.

'I just hope they sort it soon. I'm totally freezing.' Typical Liz, that is – always thinking of herself.

Then, as if on cue, the sirens stop.

'That's it,' says Simon. 'All over. A false alarm. Another fifteen minutes, we'll all be back inside.'

'Fifteen minutes! Jesus.' Liz. Moaning.

The crowd falls quiet as individuals align themselves with the growing mood of optimism and anticipation, keener than ever now to get back inside now that the rain has now turned into an unseasonably icy sleet. We wait bravely, all facing towards our building, trumpeting small cornets of condensing breath, looking up at the nearest of the eleven geodesic spheres that are clustered

in the centre of the facility like God's golfballs on some kind of preposterous eighteenth tee as if an answer will be transmitted to us directly, psychically, from within.

Then an answer comes, albeit in a somewhat more prosaic fashion. It comes over the Tannoy, in the form of a digitised female voice, in the form of 16-bit sound waves that propagate with tiny overlaps, interferences, and delays into the gaps between the buildings, into the gaps between the domes, into the gaps between our ears.

'Will employee Cooper James please report immediately to Security Office D. That's immediately. Without delay.'

I'm not sure who they mean at first and look around to see. What I see is Liz, giving me a 'wakey wakey' wave, six inches from my face.

'Go on then,' she says. 'Go and find out what they want. Then maybe they'll let us back inside.'

She's right, you know. I'd better go. Because 'Cooper James'. That's me.

I can't tell you what my job is. The reason I can't tell what my job is, is, I don't know myself. That's one of the things that having a security clearance means. You may sign a security agreement form but it doesn't put you in a position where you have knowledge. What it does is put others in a position where they're permitted to keep you in ignorance. But that's a pre-requisite for the job. And it's not as if it's a major secret that we're all working on either electronic surveillance or Nuclear Missile Defense. All those giant spheres: they sort of give the game away.

The only one who makes any kind of a fuss about all this is Liz. Liz is a cynic – or at least she likes to think she is. Only this morning she was going on about how we are all peons on the Death Star. That we're exactly the kind of people Timothy McVeigh regarded as expendable. Which is easy for her to say; being an American she's got a higher security clearance than me and therefore has

access to actual information. She denies this of course – it's in her contract that she has to – but it's true. It must be true, she must know stuff. Why else would she have to file a PS-6 – a lemon-yellow security form to you – every time she has an off-base conversation with any person (yours truly, for example) with a lower clearance than the one she's on? Time, place, interlocutors, content. It all has to be logged. The files must be groaning with conversations we've had about *ER* and *The X-Files*. Especially *The X-Files*. I must like her, or I wouldn't put up with it. But it drives me nuts all the same. I mean, can you imagine have to write down every chat you have with one of your friends? And you wonder why no one on the base talks to anyone who's not on their team.

The only consolation to this ridiculous practice is that you only have to do it when you're off-site. This presumably means that we're so heavily surveilled when we're at work that it doesn't matter what we say, it's all logged and recorded anyway. But one of the things Liz no doubt knows is that no one's likely to look at anything but a fraction of the footage, so she takes the opportunity to pretend she's cooler and more anti-establishment than we all know she in fact is.

It really annoys me, when she does this. Hence my somewhat belligerent response. 'McVeigh was an madman,' I said. 'A rabid animal who deserved to die for what he did.'

She gave me her matter-of-fact face: eyes square as square things, lips straight and flat as strips of Sellotape. 'When Luke Skywalker got his missiles down the air intake, don't pretend to me that you didn't cheer.'

'I hardly think there's a comparison to be made between McVeigh and Skywalker.'

'Okay then. You're from Nottingham. How about Bin Laden and Robin Hood?'

I glanced around the office and suppressed the urge to ask her to lower her voice. 'You are joking, right?'

'You tell me. All I know is, if Robin Hood were alive today, he'd be cluster-bombed. They'd napalm Sherwood Forest. They'd

smoke him out, him and his evil band of Merry Men. The argument, see, would be that all that feeding the poor stuff is not only a sinister plot, a prelude to seizing power. Worse than that – it's short-termism. This Hood guy, what he's in fact doing is destroying the long-term interests of the poor by disrupting the mechanisms of the state. He's damaging trade routes, breaching mead pipelines, impeding tax collection and hindering the successful promotion of the crusade to cleanse the Holy Land of barbarian influence. We have to take the long term view, the Sheriff says. It's only by ensuring the free functioning of the markets that the poor will ever be helped to clamber from the mire. Hood is an enemy of the people and we will stop him at any cost. It will be total war. Justice will be done. Sherwood will be freed of this menace. If it means cutting down each and every tree, the forest will be saved. Whatever it takes.'

'If that's the way you feel I don't see why you're working here, of all places.'

She shrugged. 'Maybe they like me for my ability to think outside the box.'

I started rearranging the coloured Post-It notes stuck around my screen, suddenly deciding that the three lime greens belonged together; that they shouldn't be broken up by the pinks and blues like that. But after I moved them I couldn't seem to get them perfectly realigned, plus one of the limes had lost its stick and kept floating loose onto my desk, which meant it would have to be rewritten. 'Or maybe you're an agent provocateur, trying to entrap me into saying something I shouldn't,' I said.

She smiled back, teeth white and fine as expensive bathroom fittings. 'Maybe.'

I hate offices; no job or conversation ever gets properly concluded; everything you do is always left half undone, hanging in the air like a half-built bridge and leading nowhere. Case in point: this is the moment that Andrews chose to walk in on us and interrupt. 'What's bugging you, Cooper?' he said. 'Someone rearranged the pencils on your desk?'

Liz sniggered. I blushed. I knew that somewhere out there in the space of all sentences there was a killer retort waiting for me, but I was too upset to search for it. Instead I made the elementary mistake of actually answering his question. 'Liz has been talking crap about Robin Hood. But she's got it all back to front. She's making the guys who build the castles out to be the villains, but it's thanks to them that there isn't complete anarchy out there.'

I'm like this with conversations. If I start off on a topic I'm not happy till the topic has been argued through. I can't settle down. I can't let it go. I don't know why I should be that way – other people don't seem to care. It used to make me angry but it doesn't any more; now it just worries me. Perhaps I'm missing something. Being around Liz sometimes makes me feel like this. Being around Andrews always makes me feel it.

'Well that's a very admirable sentiment, Coops,' Andrews said, then let out this sighing little laugh. *You are pathetic*, this laugh said. *You are pathetic, with your plans and schemes and your ideas. You'll never amount to anything. You're so small and limited that I can read you like a book. I know every move you make before you make it, every thought you're going to think, every word you're going to speak. Every moment you're in my presence you reveal yourself. This is why putting you down comes so easily to me. I don't have to think about it, it comes so naturally. And the only reason that it do it is, it amuses me.*

'Piss off Andrews,' I muttered. But he and Liz had already left the room.

'He is such a creep,' I said when Liz returned.

'I don't know why you just don't stand up for yourself,' was her considered analysis. 'If you let him walk all over you, of course he'll take advantage. You make it easy for him.'

'He's a bully.'

'You ask for it.'

'I don't see why I should have to lower myself to his level.'

'You're scared of a fight. Doug's actually a decent guy, if you get to know him.'

'Yeah, well, you seem to like him well enough.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'The way you laugh at his jokes and all, the way you are around him... you fancy him, I know you do.'

'I do not.'

'You do too. Look. You're blushing.'

'I am *so* not blushing. How can you tell I'm blushing?'

'You've gone a darker shade of black.'

'What total crap. I do not fancy Douglas Andrews.'

'You said he was a decent guy, when you got to know him.'

'Exactly, I said he was a decent guy. I know a lot of decent guys. I don't want to sleep with all of them. Or most of them. Or hardly any of them, in fact.'

'Except for Andrews.'

'Cooper, fuck off.'

'See. Now you're swearing. You wouldn't be swearing if it wasn't true.'

'Look. I do not fancy Andrews. I'd sleep with you before I'd sleep with him.'

'You'd sleep with me?'

'It's a figure of speech. Don't get any big ideas, okay.'

'You'd *sleep* with *me*? I'll remember that.'

'You'll remember nothing. It meant nothing. It was a figure of speech. Get back to work.'

'I remember everything. I'm stupid that way.'

'I know you are. Get back to work.'

Even though I know Liz would never sleep with me, I sensed I'd scored some kind of victory. But Liz is my direct superior, so ultimately I have to do whatever she says. I turned my attention to the code I've been working on. It's very complex. I know that it's a servo-motor control sub-routine, but beyond that I didn't know what it does. It could be designed to control the electric sunroof on a car, or change the focus on the laser range finder of a military satellite. I wish this made debugging it more difficult, but the sad truth is it doesn't. To do my job I don't need to know which of these it is. Though I have my suspicions, obviously.

Two minutes thirty seconds later the alarm went off.

Before I even get to the security office two guards fall in to accompany me. They step up the moment I walk forward from the crowd, my right hand raised in a limp *mea culpa*. One minute I'm totally, horribly alone, the next I've got a pair of brand new friends. They say nothing but the way they shadow me, one at either shoulder, it's a bit like I've just sprouted a pair of giant blue wings. My body starts to feel all tingly and light and I begin to feel that at any second I might float away – and preferably not come back.

I've no idea of the way to Security Office D. I ask the right-hand guard and he motions straight ahead with the muzzle of his gun. For some reason I am scared, which is completely irrational, seeing as how I've done nothing wrong. It's Liz they should be arresting if they're arresting anyone, for all that nonsense she was spouting back at our workstation. Maybe that's why they're calling me, to inform on her? Or maybe they're going to give me some kind of award for not taking any of her shit. Or maybe a promotion? Maybe they're so impressed they're going to give me a higher clearance level. Then when I talk to Liz outside the base we'd both be equals, and she wouldn't need to fill in forms reporting on whatever we've been saying. Then we could relax.

Inside Security Office D are several men I haven't seen before, plus Andrews. None of them look at all pleased to be there except for him. He's trying to look serious but it's obvious that he's pretending. So. No promotion, then. The man sitting facing me I also recognise. He is Chief Security Officer Daniels; on the facility, his word is law. I know this because he reminds us of it at our regular weekly security briefing session. These briefings were only monthly until 9/11, since which time CSO Daniels has been very busy what with the increased risk of air attack and all the new protesters who've joined the camp outside the gates. Heat is rising off his cheeks in waves and his eyes hover and bounce like water droplets on a stove. I've got this urge to try and turn down the heat, stop

them burning up, but that's a crazy person thinking, my secret inner me. I can't say I've ever liked CSO Daniels very much, though I certainly admire him; he's like someone in a Gap ad, the sort of perfect human specimen you can't help but hold in a minor kind of awe. If he hauls Liz in for questioning, she'll probably come back and tell me he's a decent guy as well.

To my rear the two members of my personal entourage are standing rat-faced and to attention; Andrews is hovering over to my right. He's set his teeth in this peculiar way I've never seen before, I think to try and make his jaw look squarer, which presumably means that Daniels's presence is making him feel insecure. Daniels is in uniform; the two suits sitting either side of him are not. They are either middle managers or lawyers, it's difficult to tell. The one on the right has sharp features, waxy; the other's face is rubbery and swollen like a basketball – or like he likes a drink. I presume they're both American –that self-righteous glow, it's unmistakable. They couldn't look more serious if they were stepping up to impeach the President. Suddenly I feel quite important. I wonder what I've done?

'Are you Cooper James?'

'That's correct.'

'This anything to do with you?' Daniels voice is calmer than his face. Daniels' face is funny; his voice is not. His voice says: *Take me seriously*. It also says: *Do not fuck about*.

'What?' I say. I have no idea what he is talking about.

'This!' he says, pointing to a sliver canister the size and shape of a freeze-dried coffee tin of the kind they stock in the General Stores here on base to make the Americans feel at home. I think, in fact, it is a freeze-dried coffee tin. Any label that there was has been removed, revealing the spaced corrugations common to such tins. The lid isn't the original lid. It's a metal one that's been fixed with three neatly soldered catches like mini-versions of the ones you get on bottles of Grolsch. A simple symbol – a sort of square inside a circle – has been crudely engraved into its centre, a symbol that looks like this:



'I don't drink coffee,' is what I say. It's true. I don't. Coffee gives me stomach cramps. If I want caffeine I have a Coke. When it comes to hot drinks I'm strictly a tea man.

'What do you think this is, James? Do you think this is some kind of joke? We've had to run evacuation drill for the entire facility because of what's in this canister.'

'Whoever sent it has committed a major offence under US Federal Law,' says one of the lawyers, the sharper, thinner one.

'Why? What's in it.'

'Why don't you take a look-see for yourself?' Daniels says this like I am a child. I am not a child. I may be an employee, but I am not a child. I am, however, beginning to feel more than slightly short of breath.

I walk forward to the desk and pick up the canister. It's pretty heavy, heavier than you'd expect a coffee canister to be. At a stretch, I can just about hold it in my left hand without help from my right. Tucking it into the crook of my arm, I unclick the catches one by one. After that, the lid's still quite tight and, again, unaccountably heavy. Gingerly, trying to keep the opening pointing as much away from me as I'm able, I start to ease it off.

The looser it gets, the tighter my lungs become. I don't know what I'm expecting to find inside. Maybe a dead man's finger, or a tarantula, or a joke jack-in-the-box that will give me a minor heart attack when it springs out into the room. But the lid comes away and nothing happens, so I unscrunch my eyes and untense my neck and take a look at what the canister contains. Which is nothing really, just this weird and lumpy dust. Sort of grey in colour, like dirty sand. With orange streaks.

'It seems to be some kind of dust,' I say.

One of the guards takes the canister, replaces the lid, and puts it back down on the desk. The irises in Daniels' eyes spin like twin propellers. 'Some kind of dust?'

I don't know whether or not I'm angry. Certainly I'm feeling

scared. 'What's this got to do with me?'

Perhaps Daniels is not in charge; perhaps he's psychic; perhaps the lawyers are capable of independent thought. But one of them – the left hand one – now holds up a huge and battered Jiffy envelope. On it is the address of the facility, handwritten in purple marker pen; three Airmail stickers, randomly distributed; a grimy mosaic of US stamps. And my name. 'It came in this,' he says, as he places the envelope on the table.

'Someone sent this canister to me?' I ask pathetically.

Andrews has been bouncing around on his toes during all of this. Now he speaks. 'Anthrax hoax,' he says.

Daniels' irises stop spinning and ratchet back to reveal the nose cones of twin ICBMs. He points them first at Andrews, and then at me.

'Who do you know in the United States who might have sent this package?'

'Nobody. I've never been to the United States.'

'So the name Jack Reeve means nothing to you?'

My lungs, which have been struggling with the task of breathing anyway, now try to swallow themselves. 'Did you say Jack Reeve?' I say.

'Jack Reeve. That's correct.'

My lungs are full of sand. 'I need my inhaler,' I manage to say.

But Daniels doesn't seem to hear me. At least, he doesn't answer me. He just repeats the question.

'Yes,' I gasp. No one reacts to this except for Andrews, who nods violently, sticks his hands into his pockets and flexes his thighs like he needs to take a piss. I feel terrible. I think I'm going to pass out. Daniels signals to one of the guards who grabs my hand and bicep and holds me rigid and upright. Then he whispers something to the lawyer who'd produced the envelope.

'What about the initials D.E.C.D.? Do you know of any organisation going by this name?'

I shake my head. Daniels leans across to the skinny lawyer and confers again. Then he picks up the canister and holds it towards

me so that I can see its base. On it, written in the same purple marker pen as used on the envelope, are the words:

REEVER, Jack

D.E.C.D.

'Dad,' I say. And faint.