

Madness Served with a Hint of Crazy

By Dante Harker

Madness served with a hint of crazy ‘You, Seer! Stand before me and tell me of this book,’ the king said, as he gestured for the old woman to move to the centre of the room.

The old woman gave the flies one last swipe and then, after wrapping her long, tattered cloak around her, she started to move to where the king was pointing.

Holding her cloak tight made her look like a huge bat, an image helped by the seer's weather-worn features and dirty black hair, that stood on end giving the impression of pointy bat ears.

‘Come on, you old hag, don't keep the king waiting,’ snapped Dent, as he watched the seer hobbling forward.

Noting that the woman's pace hadn't increased, regardless of his chiding, Dent – hungry now as he could smell the inviting aroma of lunch drifting through the palace, took The

Good Book out of the scribes' hands.

And, as the seer took her place in front of the king, he thrust the book into her arms.

The instant the book reached her wizened fingers, the seer screamed 'NO!' Her word filled the room, bouncing off the walls and giving the impression that the word was repeated over and over.

The seer clutched the book in both hands and held it high above her head.

'Excellent,' thought the king, he loved a seer who could put on a good show.

'This book must be destroyed – it's EVIL! No good can come from these words.' The king looked over at one of his guardsmen, who read the king's expression and took a step forward towards the seer – don't let the woman destroy the book.

The king, almost imperceptibly, raised a finger to let the guard know, that for the minute, he wanted the seer watched, not killed.

'Don't keep me in suspense, seer; tell me why you're creating such fuss,' the king demanded.

Like an angry volcano the seer erupted, her words a mixed up torrent of things yet to come.

Millions will die because of these words.

Women, made out of a rib, will be hailed as second class.

Men will be tortured and killed for not accepting this imaginary God.

Women will be called witches for doing nothing more natural than to bring children into the world and for this great good they will be burnt alive.' The seer's arms were shaking under the weight of the book but she didn't abate.

'For thousands of years, wars will be started in the name of this God.

Man will divide; find new ways to worship and each time they will want to destroy anyone who doesn't worship their way.

One church will become many, one religion will split and contort and names will be given to every new branch, each

one longer than the last.’ The room was silent, or at least no one could be heard over the seer’s screaming.

With each new sentence she seemed to raise the volume a decibel.

‘Man will be controlled.

They will no longer live for this life, no longer enjoy the time they have, they’ll do everything in the hope that things are better in an imaginary heaven.

They will ignore innovations in science, ignore what can be proven; instead they will create a delusion that will infect the simple-minded masses.’ The king watched, enthralled by the seer’s passion.

He didn’t understand everything she said, but he was getting the gist.

‘A man will be appointed as a speaker for God, and through his words, millions across a great continent will die of a devastating disease.

Through this man’s lack of action and his devotion to the words of this book, our world’s population will grow to catastrophic levels.

People will suffer and starve and die!' On the word 'die' the seer dropped to her knees; her strength almost gone yet still she held the book high.

'Has she done?' the king wondered, but as if to answer his questions the seer managed a last few sentences.

'This book will force people into marriage, force love on those who aren't yet ready.

It will punish women who have children without a husband.

And it will cause the death of thousands of men for doing nothing more natural than loving another man.' The seer's breath was coming hard and fast now, as if she was trying to draw in enough air to make one last statement.

'But of all the evil this book will bring on our great planet, the worst will surely be how the book will cause us to JUDGE one another.' The words were now falling from her mouth, the seer was gasping for air, but she needed to finish; her words had to be heard.

She took one final breath and said: 'And from these judgements the worst sins will be committed!' As the last word dropped from her lips the seer fell to the ground, dead, the book hitting the ground in front of her with enough force

to create a sound like a clap of thunder right there in the room.

The king waited for the brief commotion to subside as the seer's body was dragged out of the room and then said: 'Well, it's a shame you scribes couldn't put on such a show – if you had we might have been done ages ago and I could be sat feasting right now!' At the king's words a scribe stepped forward and offered, 'I wouldn't worry, my king, the seer's talking rubbish.

We've built fail safes into The Good Book.

You will be the one acting for God, no one else would be allowed, so that last part about judgement doesn't make any sense plus, ultimately the only person who can judge is The One True God and you'll be sending people up there to meet him.

The woman was clearly insane.' The king let the scribe finish.

He wasn't worried.

He understood that this new book was his to control.

He knew why so many things had been put in there as being bad – it just added to his ability to control the masses.

He doubted the book would ever take off, but if it did, so what if things got out of hand? That wouldn't be in his lifetime, so why should he worry? What he did worry about was the use of 'my king,' it made his stomach retch in indignation.

The king reached down the side of his throne and pulled out a gilt-handled knife.

The weapon was weighted perfectly for such occasions as this.

With a violent throw, the knife left the king's hand and before the scribe had chance to duck, the blade hurled through the air and pieced the scribe's windpipe.

On entry it sliced through the neck's artery which sent jets of bright red, oxygen-rich blood shooting into the air.

The scribe fell to his knees, his eyes finding the king, looking for a reason why he was about to die.

When he didn't get an answer, he dropped face first onto the marble floor, the impact forcing the point of the blade to

crack out of the back of the scribe's neck, causing the enraptured onlookers to gasp in horror.

'That,' Barkus screamed 'is the fate of anyone who feels it's ok to use "my king" instead of "my lord", a trivial matter, I admit, but I'm sure you'll agree, one not worth dying over.' The king again waited for the corpse to be dragged out of the room.

He even waited for a servant to clean up the small pool of blood that had collected around the scribe's throat.

Though he wasn't actually sure why he was waiting, given the mess that was coming.

But if nothing else it gave him time to take a few breaths and calm a little.

When all traces of the body had gone, other than the faint odour of death that clung to the heat of the room, the king stood up and said: 'my loyal servants, you can't honestly think that I'd listen to the words of a mad woman.

I am the king, and now I am the speaker for the One True God.

I will have order throughout my kingdom and I will reap the rewards of being a king!' The king's stomach rumbled, he felt a little dizzy in the heat and his head had just started to bang.

He wanted this little party over and done with, but first there was some cleaning up to be done.

Sometimes after Boy had proved entertaining he would get his slave to tell him any gossip from the palace.

Not that he was really interested but servants would often overhear things that could prove useful to a king.

If Barkus's father had spoken more to the servants he perhaps would have heard what his son was planning – given that Barkus had talked his plan out with his advisor while they were in the company of several servants.

Last night, while listening to tales of the palace, Boy had told the king about Dent's visits to the kitchen staff's quarters.

It seemed that Dent would often make such a mess of the younger kitchen girls that they wouldn't be able to work for weeks.

This consequently put added pressure on the rest of the team.

Time to try out my new powers, thought the king, as the brief recollection of last night's gossip passed by his mind.

'Dent, my loyal servant,' Barkus said as he walked towards his advisor, 'you do realise that if this book gets out, and becomes the word of God, then you'll have to stop your nightly pleasures.' Dent wanted to step back but his back was already against the wall.

There was something about the look on the king's face that he found unnerving.

'I'm sorry, my lord, I don't understand what you mean.' Dent made his voice as servile as he could muster and bowed his head as the king approached.

'Well, Dent, all those little virgins you get such pleasure out of defiling, all that will have to stop.

You will have to choose one and marry her, and that would be your lot, this one woman, for the rest of your life.

And any virgins you defiled after you were married would count as adultery, and that would be a sin – a sin for which

you could surely be punished.’ Dent wasn’t sure how to reply, but the king looked expectant, so he knew he would have to say something.

‘I’m sure I’ll be able to find a good woman, my lord, and love her how The Good Book says.’ Dent’s words repulsed the king, well not so much the words, more the way Dent said ‘The Good Book’ as if the work of fiction had already taken on a certain reverence.

‘Really?’ the king asked, to which Dent replied without thinking, ‘yes, my king, really.’ It was only when Dent had finished speaking that he realised, to his horror, that his answer had questioned the king – not something anyone should do.

Before Dent had time to worry further the king pulled another knife out of his belt and with a force that lifted Dent off his feet the king brought the eight-inch blade up and under his servant’s ribcage piercing his heart.

Barkus then gave a second quick thrust of the knife, turning the blade to destroy what remained of Dent’s heart, before shaking the dying man loose and letting him fall to the floor.

As blood trickled from Dent’s mouth he uttered, ‘wow, my king, how many knives do you have?’ and then died.

These hadn't been the deep meaningful words Dent had hoped to say as his last, but through the shock of his sudden demise, they seemed better than nothing.

'Guards!' Barkus screamed.

At his command the room was flooded by his royal guard.

They followed a plan that had been put in place the night before.

They came in number, knowing that it would take several men to overpower two generals of the king's armies.

It actually only took one man to get the better of Lekk, but seven of the king's guard's died before General Durian was finally silenced.

King Barkus and General Score stood in the corner of the stateroom and watched the massacre.

The king had pulled Score over to one side when the carnage had begun.

Given the sheer number of soldiers that had rushed the room, the outcome was inevitable, but still the two men

chose to watch the thrill of the fight.

Watching his fellow Generals get hacked to pieces forced General Score to ask: 'And where does that leave me, my Lord?' the General instinctively moved his hand towards his sword, an action not missed by the king.

'There's no need for that, General; I trust you, as much as one man should trust another.

And I need a general.

Someone is going to have to take over from Durian and Lekk – Durian was too stupid to be trusted and Lekk too slimy.

So I'm going to need you.

I'm sure some people are not going to take kindly to our God, and they will need to be dealt with – the quicker the better.

Satisfied, and rather smug at being the one general saved, Score said, 'I take it you had this planned all along, my lord?' His voice raised over the screams of pain as swords found their victims.

'I did, General.

I instructed my guard last night.

I decided a long time ago that for this plan to work everyone who was part of its creation must die.

That's the only way I could really stop anyone talking about what really happened.

Talk of God is already out there, it's spreading throughout my kingdom and I don't want anyone to stand in its way.'
'Very good, my Lord.

But can I ask, have you actually read the entire book? There are a few dodgy things in there, giant scorpions, burning bushes, men with wings – were the scribes on something when they wrote this?' As the General spoke he kicked off a dying scribe who was clinging to the General's legs and begging for his life.

After watching his guards finish off the last man in the room – by severing the slave's head – the king gestured for him and the General to leave.

'I wouldn't worry about what the book says; it's all open to interpretation.

The scribes have made it sufficiently vague that from this point on we can do and say whatever we please in the name of God – what more could a king ask? There are good times ahead, my friend, good times.’ And with that the king and his number one general went for lunch.

From this point on the world became a different place that only the deluded would argue was better.

Everyone believed in the new God.

There was no reason not to.

They had his words in a book, they had scrolls and tablets proving the book true and there was no one alive who would say otherwise.

Now, remember, these events took place far from this world.

They didn’t happen on Earth.

Surely nothing like this story could ever happen on our green pastures? Still, like all good stories, proving them true or false is rarely the name of the game.

The game is getting people to believe – do you still believe? Rochelle and Dave A wave of excitement rushed through the mass of people in the waiting crowd as, at 10:02am, the doors finally opened on the UK's premiere, and only, Crime and Punishment Expo! The crowd resembled penguins in the zoo at feeding time; bobbing heads, bodies clambering forward, arms discreetly and not so discreetly doing what they could to get their owner nearer to the arena's doors.

Dave and Rochelle didn't have to rush; they had been here hours and when the security guard finally pulled open the huge glass doors, they were the first in line.

Even when they stepped inside Birmingham's cavernous National Arena, the pair took it easy.

They had come here for one thing, and one thing only, to see Jessica Fletcher, and she wasn't due to arrive until 2pm.

'Can we go and eat now?' Rochelle whined.

The nineteen-year-old's distinctive northern accent distorted her words so when she said 'go' it sounded as if the word had extra 'o's and her 'now' had been pronounced 'narr', with the final 'r' being dragged out for several seconds to emphasise her need to food.

She had taken Dave by the arm and, using her considerable bulk, she'd ushered her similarly-proportioned boyfriend through the mass of cooing fans and off into a safe corner.

'Can we just work out where in the hall she will be first? It won't take a minute.' On the walls around the entrance hall were a variety of posters advertising the prestigious guests who were signing autographs that day.

Dave's gaze leapt from one to the next, trying to find his heroine.

'But we've been queuing for hours!' Rochelle said, this time she managed to sound like a spoilt ten-year-old.

'Yeah, 'Elle, but your mother made you a whopping breakfast before we left, and I got you a burger to eat in queue!' Rochelle wanted to whine further, so what if her mother had made her beans on toast for breakfast? And, of course, there were the cheese and ham sandwiches she'd been packed off with, and already finished on the train – while Dave had been away at the loo.

And so what if she'd had a burger? She was soooo hungry! Still, sensing this was a losing battle she said, 'fine, yeah, anyway, let's go see what time 'Mrs, "everyone dies the moment I enter the room" is on.' 'It is what we're here for,'

Dave replied.

He was getting increasingly annoyed that he couldn't find any 'Murder, She Wrote' posters, surely given that Jessica Fletcher was the star of this murder mystery extravaganza, the show's poster should be everywhere.

'It might be what you're here for! It's you who loves that old show.

Me, I only came for the day out.

Plus, it was fun getting my dad up at stupid-o'clock to drive us to the train station this morning.' Seeming to speak without the need to take a breath, Rochelle dropped her tone into something deep and gravelly, mimicking her father's, and said, 'I don't know why you have to go all way 't Birmingham, 'Elle', there's nowt there you can't get here!' 'Except Jessica Fletcher of course; you can't find her in our scrod-bucket of a town!' Dave snapped, his annoyance at not being able to find any posters was reaching the boil.

'Where the fuck are the posters? I don't understand, surely, she's the star?' Dave began pointing at the various posters and said, 'look, there's that no-name from CSI, and the one who died five seasons ago in, oh God, what's the name of that stupid show?' 'Crime and Punishment,' Rochelle

offered, her voice quieter now.

Partly due to the fact that most of the other attendees had gathered up timetables and maps, and made their way out of the entrance hall, and partly because she had started to feel nauseated.

She knew that if she didn't get to the toilet soon, she would lose her breakfast, the sandwiches and that burger.

And if that happened she really would feel hungry! 'That's the one, "Crime and Punishment", and look, they've even got people from "The Bill".'

Who wants to see them? It's only watched by old grannies anyway – where is she?' Dave demanded; a question that gave Rochelle a means of escape.

'I tell you what darlin', why don't you go and ask someone while I nip off to the loo?' Dave liked that idea; he nodded an ok and then stalked off to find out what the hell was going on.

In the toilet cubical, Rochelle fought to get her dark blue leggings up past her knees.

The lycra cut into the acres of fat on her thighs and gave the impression of string tied around bags full of congealed yogurt.

Dropping to her newly bared knees, Rochelle pulled back her streaked blond hair and retch after retch she said a second 'hello' to the partially digested contents of her stomach.

'I can't keep this up,' she said to the empty bathroom once she'd finished.

After wiping away the remnants of vomit from around her mouth, swilling to get rid of any remaining chunks in her teeth and the smell, she then splashed her face with water, and made her way back out into the entrance hall.

Dave greeted her return; his face bright, his demeanour that of an excited puppy.

'There's no need to worry, follow me.' Rochelle did, though she wasn't worried – not about this at least – in fact she kind of hoped the "Murder, She Wrote" woman wouldn't show up, then they could go off into the city centre and do some shopping.

‘Look, see...’ Dave said as he dragged her out of the entrance and into the main hall.

Dave had dressed up for their trip; he’d broken out his best trousers.

But as an apprentice bricklayer, in a tiny Yorkshire town to many Dave was very much a stereotype.

His ‘best’ trousers only saw the outside of their drawer once or twice a year – mainly Christmas and Easter, or for the odd wedding that might come along.

And this particular pair of trousers was now a few years old, and judging by the fatty overhang, they had been bought back when Dave was still a size-38 waist.

Originally, Dave’s mother had laid out a crisp white shirt for him to wear with the black trousers, but it had quickly become clear that he would need to leave the trousers’ top button undone, and wear a belt to keep them up – which negated a tucked-in shirt.

So in the end he’d gone with his favourite green polo shirt.

Which though it looked smart, it barely covered the bottom of his belly, which protruded out like a hairy beach-ball, and

from the side the shirt made him look like a large, and probably dull sounding, bell.

The main hall was a vast square cavern.

Its domed roof was made out of diamond-shaped pieces of frosted glass, which made it seem like everyone was standing on the inside of a fly's eye.

Lining the outside of the square hall were hundreds of vendors: comics, action figures, books, puzzles, collectors' cards, posters – a fan's wet dream.

On the inside of the square there was a second tier of stalls, these formed a broken circle; effectively two semicircles, again containing stalls, with two parallel row of stalls running down the centre of the hall, breaking up the circle.

On the far wall, opposite the entrance, there was a long podium above which posters of the attending stars had been placed.

From where they were standing it was hard to make out any of the other star's faces.

Still, Dave wasn't concerned about anyone other than the woman who was going to take centre stage.

And her poster was clear enough, a huge, ten-times' life-size head shot, dominated the hall.

It looked down on proceedings like Zeus watching over ancient Greece.

'Wow! Could they have got her head any bigger? Surely they could've shown her body too? That thing's frightening!' Rochelle said; she was trying to scan the room for any sign of an eatery, but with little success as her eyes kept being drawn back to the iconic figure holding court in the hall.

'How perfect is that? Right up there where she deserves to be!' Dave said, his face a picture of star-stuck awe.

Oblivious to the grunts, moans and the small scene made by a woman with a pushchair, Dave stood right in the middle of the main thoroughfare.

His 6'4 frame held enough fat to keep a chip shop in business for a week and, as he'd chosen to wear clothes just slightly too small, he looked like a skinny man with bags of potato's strapped to all sides.

To the people trying to pass him in the centre of the pathway, his bulk was like trying to pass a dump-truck on a single-lane highway.

‘I tell you what she deserves – hanging! If a woman like that had been around a hundred years ago she would have been burned as a witch – so many dead people – to her, dead bodies are like flies round shit!’ Dave looked down from the poster and said, ‘crude and nasty.

That’s my girl, always there with a heart-felt word! Now shut up for a minute and let’s get a closer look.’ Then noticing that she was about to protest, he added ‘once we’ve got closer, we can go and get some food.’ That did the trick and a rosy smile broke across Rochelle’s perpetually sulky face – a smile that didn’t last because two steps further into the hall and a man accidentally bumped ‘Elle’s’ shoulder.

‘Watch were you’re going, geek!’ Rochelle snapped, her round pudgy face screwing up and giving her the impression of a ripe apple that had been left to rot for a week.

The man apologised, though his tiny frame had suffered far worse from the impact than Rochelle’s.

The impact was the first of many.

The hall was heaving, though Rochelle continued to get bumped into because she refused to give way.

And like a baby rhino she barged her way down the central runway, leaving bruised shoulders in her wake.

‘I don’t see why you need a closer look – that thing must be twelve metres tall!’ Rochelle said as they approached the podium.

‘I told you before, whine-a-lot, this is what we came for.

I’ve been saving months for this – I said you didn’t have to come along – you insisted.’ Dave replied.

This trip had cost him more than a week’s wage; he wanted to enjoy it.

Since boyhood, he’d loved ‘Murder, She Wrote.’ As a young child, he’d sat in his Nan’s arms and listened to her do her best to guess who’d done it.

His Nan’s cunning tactic was to work her way through every character, declaring they were the one.

She would then sleep her way through the middle section, and when she woke, and the murderer was revealed, she could legitimately claim that she was right all along.

Dave missed his Nan; she’d passed away two years now.

His Nan had been at the centre of his upbringing; always there when he'd needed her, a place to run when life got too difficult – which with alcoholic and often abusive parents, it often did.

He missed her huge Sunday dinners, the house's roaring coal fire – red face, cold back – and the way she made tea in a pot, and left it to stew so long that you could almost stand a spoon up in it when it was poured.

As Dave looked up into the face of Jessica Fletcher, her kindly eyes watching over him, and the rest of the hall – keeping an eye out for any clues the incompetent police department were sure to have missed – he felt safe again.

He felt free of the worries that spawned with the onset of adulthood.

'You're twenty now, it's about time you thought about doing the honourable thing with that girlfriend of yours – not wasting money gallivanting half way across the country to see some TV woman!' These had been his dad's words when he'd told him he couldn't do any overtime in the family building firm, as he needed the Saturday off to see his childhood idol.

In his boyhood, playing in the garden at his Nan's the world had offered so much promise.

But now, with her gone, and 'real life' upon him, he felt lost.

Somewhere in the periphery he could hear Rochelle moaning – she did nothing but – but he managed to blank her out as he looked at that warming face.

Five years they'd been together, met at school, in detention.

Dave had got a week for faking letters to get him out of P.E.

and Rochelle had thrown another girl out of a window – it had only been from the a first floor, which is why she'd got a week's detention rather than getting expelled or a prison sentence.

By the end of the week, Rochelle was the first, and still, only, girl he'd had sex with – he was her fifth boy.

Rochelle wanted to get married – their names were already on the list for a council house – have babies, watch TV all day long and not have to work.

Dave guessed at this last part, but if Rochelle's three older sisters where any indication, this is what the future would

hold.

Dave wanted to travel, 'your mind's like a balloon,' his Nan had told him once, 'it might be ok and pretty the way it comes out of the packet, but it doesn't reach its full glory until it's filled.

And travel is to your mind as air is to the balloon.' She'd also told him that it was bad luck to cut your nails on a Friday and Sunday, that children over two shouldn't have dummies and you should never trust anyone the colour of night.

This last, racist, remark, he'd put down to his Nan's advancing years, rather than any actual malice.

Marriage would not allow him to travel, or at least marriage to Rochelle wouldn't – not unless he went first and left her a trail of cake to follow.

Plus, there was the other small matter of the new trainee at work – Gavin – shy, handsome, Gavin.

This wasn't the time, Dave thought, though he knew he had to make time with Rochelle soon for what he knew would be a difficult conversation – still, not now.

Dave pulling his gaze away from the poster, and turned back to Rochelle.

‘ ... I never understood what people saw in that old show, some old woman roaming the countryside solving murders – stupid.

Just think how many people’s lives they’d have saved if they’d locked her up at the end of the first episode!’ ‘Wow, your mouth never stops working does it?’ Dave said, but Rochelle was on a roll.

‘The police would never let some old granny near a crime scene, “scuse me Mr Policemen, I’ve written some murder books, could I please have a look around, I might tamper with some evidence, spot a clue you’ve missed and give a knowing look to the camera, but at least I promise to be quick”, it’s all bollocks.’ Several people from the surrounding stalls were glaring at Rochelle’s rant.

Dave noticed them, but thankfully Rochelle hadn’t and before she could, and cause an even bigger scene, he ushered her off to the food hall.

‘You could go shopping you know? It’s not that far into the city centre from here.’ Dave offered, after ordering two plates of chips and a couple of burgers.

‘But I don’t want to go on my own, can’t you come?’
Rochelle replied in her customary whining tone.

Taking their completed orders they worked their way through the throng of people who, though it was still before 11am, had decided they were in need of fast-food.

Rochelle raced a much smaller woman to a newly vacated seat in the window – she didn’t win, but that didn’t stop ‘Elle taking the table's other seat and glaring at the women until she went elsewhere.

‘So, can we go shopping?’ Rochelle asked again, Dave having failed to answer her the first time round.

‘You can, I’m not! You know how much I’ve been looking forward to coming here – I don’t know why you have to ruin it.’ ‘Oh don’t start that again, you always say I ruin stuff – I’m sick of you treating me like shit.’ Rochelle took a bite of her burger and chewed.

The mushy slopping sound she made with each over enthusiastic chew, grated on Dave’s already fried nerves.

‘How do I treat you like shit? I spend all my money on you, and what I don’t I have to save up cos you want to buy “pretty things” for our flat – if the council ever give us one,

which I'm sure they won't given we're bound to be at the bottom of the list!' This was how it always started, for the last year now; they had not been able to spend more than a few hours in each other's company before the arguments had set in.

Rochelle didn't understand why all her friends were either married or at least living with their boyfriends, while she was still at her parents.

At this rate she'd be stuck working, part-time, in 'Superdrug' for the rest of her life! Dave knew what he wanted, to travel, and to work out why he was having feelings for Gavin – sweet, handsome Gavin – and the last thing he wanted to do was get married.

Rochelle finished stuffing her burger into her mouth and then added a couple of chips.

Dave could see from the look in her eye that she was stalling for a second to give herself time to think of a suitable response.

Before she'd fully emptied her mouth, her reply came to her, Dave braced himself and as her first words shot from her mouth, so did small lumps of burger.

‘Well, I’m sure we won’t be on the bottom of the list for long; at least not in seven or eight months or so.’ Rochelle was as subtle as an Eastenders plotline – her favourite soap.

‘What?’ Dave snapped, though he’d heard her clear enough.

‘I’m pregnant! In a couple of months we’ll be at top of that stupid housing list!’ ‘Elle’s voice raised as she announced her status, it was as if she’d been waiting for the right moment to tell him, and now that she’d found it, she’d decided everyone should be in on her secret.

‘How the hell can you be pregnant?’ Dave asked, wiping a small lump of chip off his cheek.

‘Shit Dave, I know you’re a bit slow at times, but I thought you’d at least know where babies come from!’ At her sarcasm Rochelle looked around to see if anyone was listening in, she wanted someone to collude with, have someone appreciate her superior wit.

No one was interested and anyone who was, quickly looked back to whatever action figure, or comic they’d bought, not daring to catch her eye – a storm was coming.

‘Yeah, you smart bitch, I know perfectly well where babies come from – I mean, I thought you were on the pill?’ Dave

was reacting rather than reasoning.

He couldn't think.

She couldn't be pregnant.

How could he have a child with her? He didn't love her, wasn't sure he ever had, he wasn't even sure he could ever love a woman.

'Well you know I don't take it all the time – it gives me stomach ache.' Rochelle had always seen Dave as a fish caught at the end of a line, over the years she'd done what she could to reel him in.

She'd gone from a size 24 to a size 12 and back up again, but it hadn't made a difference.

But now, she felt like she had the reel in her hand and she was bringing her catch home.

'I never knew that.

Surely if you weren't taking them we should've been using something else.' Dave felt like he'd been dumped in a giant oven-top kettle.

At the start of the day he'd felt warm and excited, just the odd bubble here and there as he'd argued with his dad about him going today.

But then the boil had started, 'Elle's whining, her need to be fed continually, like a baby walrus, and now this.

Now the kettle boiled away, the bubbles all around bashing him against the sides.

And Rochelle's voice was like the screeching whistle announcing the kettle was about to explode! 'Like you'd ever wear a condom, and anyway, it's not like we have sex that often – you're always too fucking tired.

So I thought we'd be all right! And you don't even sound like you want this baby?' Before he gave himself enough time to think through his reply, Dave just sort of screamed, 'I don't!' And if that wasn't enough to wipe the smug look off of Elle's face, he added 'why the hell would I want a child, I'm twenty, I don't want to settle down, plus there's Gavin!' Rochelle's mouth dropped open.

In it Dave could see half masticated lumps of chips and burger clinging to her filling encrusted teeth.

‘What the fuck do you mean “plus there’s Gavin”? Who the shitting hell is Gavin?’, then as if a distant memory had hit her in the head with a spade, Rochelle’s face contorted as she spat out, ‘are you talking about that manorexic freak at your work – don’t tell me you have a thing for him! What are you, some kind of fucking queer?’ Dave wasn’t sure what he was, he’d been trying not to think about it, but he couldn’t have Gavin talked about that way.

‘He’s not a freak, and if manorexic means skinny then not everyone wants to be the size of a blimp you know!’ Dave’s voice had risen to the same level as Rochelle, and he knew that more and more heads had turned their way.

He looked for the door, looked for an escape route – but all the time in the back of his mind was the reason why he’d come here – to see Jessica Fetcher – and he couldn’t go without meeting her.

Still he knew what was coming and it wasn’t going to be pretty.

‘How the fuck can a man like you be a homo? You’re a sodding bricklayer for Christ’s sake!’ Rochelle’s tongue was sharp and doing its best to draw blood.

‘What’s that got to do with anything?’ Dave asked, hoping that his newly lowered voice would help to lower Rochelle’s.

But it didn’t, as she wasn’t listening – her words just kept on flowing.

‘And look at you, poofs are meant to be fit, the only thing you fit into these days is a bin bag, you’re growing fat on your fat!’ Dave wanted to retaliate, call her a fat cow but less useful as she couldn’t even produce milk.

But he knew it wouldn’t help.

What he really wanted now was for her to leave him, storm out, and then he could see his idol and face whatever trouble she’d cause another time.

‘Look, I’m not saying I’m a poof, or that I won’t take care of you and the baby, it’s just I’ve been having feelings for this guy at work.’ Dave said, trying to build an apology into his tone – it didn’t work.

‘Do you think you’re getting your dirty homo hands near this baby?’ She asked, holding her stomach, ‘there’s no way I’m having you touch the little thing after you’ve been sticking your cock up God knows whose arse – sick! Wait till your dad finds out!’ As full of venom as Rochelle’s words were,

somewhere inside her she felt a sense of relief.

All she wanted out of life was to sit and watch talk shows all day long, and at night settle down and watch an evening of soaps.

She knew, like her sisters, that she could palm her kid off on her mother.

And now it looked like she'd be able to get Dave to pay for it all, without actually having to make any of the compromises that would surely come with living together.

'You can't tell m'dad.

Shit he'd kill me!' When Dave had mentioned Gavin, he'd seen his revelation as a step forward, a way of moving towards actually telling Gavin that he had feelings for him, but that's as far as he'd thought it through.

His life would be over if his dad found out, he was sure to tell the lads at work and then if he wasn't in a living hell already, he soon would be.

'Well, you should have thought about that before you started bumming around!' Rochelle looked longingly at her empty plate.

Her stomach was still aching for more – well she was eating for two – and her hunger wasn't helping her mood.

'I haven't been bumming around, I didn't even know I had a thing for guys before Gavin started working, and that's only a couple of months ago.' Rochelle's face screwed up still further until it took on the features of a fire-damaged Spitting Image mask, 'you have a "thing for guys"? That makes me feel physically sick.

What's your mother going to say down church on Sunday, "I'm sorry Vicar, my son won't be coming today he's decided he likes cock!" It's a sin you know!' Dave felt the heat under the kettle, the flame had been turned back on and the temperature rise started to make him forget he was in a packed cafeteria, surrounded by people all staring at them intently.

'It's only a sin if you believe in all that bollocks and quite frankly any fool who believes in a man sat on a cloud shouldn't be listened to anyway.

Plus, I haven't been to church in years!' 'Well maybe that's the problem, if you had, you might have realised that what you are isn't normal, it's sick, and whether you believe it or not you're going to burn in hell.' And the kettle boiled.

'Listen here you rancid, hog.

Like you're ever going to get a place in heaven, apart from the fact you're gunner be an unmarried mother – a big fucking no-no – you've had more pricks in you than a pin cushion.

And I don't think God lets whores in heaven!' The look on Rochelle's face told him he'd gone too far, her face and the shocked expressions on everyone around them.

This included the counter staff on the other side of the room who had stopped serving to listen.

Without thinking Rochelle whipped her arm up and smashed her palm across Dave's face.

The slap hit him like a horrific storm crashing waves against the rocks.

The violent movement forced Rochelle's enormous thighs into the underside of the table which sent their empty plates tumbling to the floor.

The white crockery shattered, the noise of which echoed around the now whisper quiet cafeteria.

And as the plates broke so did Rochelle.

Tears vented forth and as she got to her feet and tried to speak, she could manage nothing but a blubber.

Everyone had stopped eating, they were waiting for Rochelle's next move and she knew she only had two real choices – cause an even greater scene or save her dignity and run for the door.

She wiped her face, sucked back the tears and never one to let an audience down she bellowed, 'YOU SICK.

FUCKING.

QUEER.

I CAN'T BELIEVE I LET THAT NASTY LITTLE KNOB OF YOURS INSIDE ME WHEN ALL YOU REALLY WANTED WAS TO STAB SOME FUDGE! WELL, YOU'LL REGRET THE DAY YOU EVER MET ME, I PROMISE YOU THAT!' Rochelle's face shone red, her eyes demented and then with one last lurch forward, sufficient enough to make Dave think she was going to hit him again, she thundered from the room.

Of course Dave was already regretting the day he met her.

And now, as a hundred eyes rested on him, all desperate, he was sure, to see him break into tears, too.

He calmly got up from his seat, looked around for a different exit – well away from Rochelle – and then after finding one, he left the room.

All the time he kept his head held high and his hand away from the tormenting pain that throbbed from the strike on his cheek.

Once he'd made his escape, he found the nearest toilet, locked himself in a cubical and cried.

He cried, cried, and then cried some more.

His tears were for his lost childhood, his Nan and how he knew his world was going to change forever.

He knew that by the time he made it back home that everyone would know he was gay, even if he wasn't a hundred percent sure himself.

Rochelle would make sure his entire world knew what an evil person he was; a pariah of the highest order.

Dave felt like his tears would never stop, but then this was the first time they had ever been allowed to start.

At the death of his Nan, his father had told him to ‘suck it up, men in our family don’t cry.’ And he hadn’t, he’d been strong, done the manly thing.

And when he’d realised what the strange feeling was whenever Gavin spoke to him, feelings he knew he’d been capable of for many years, he didn’t cave in, even though he knew how much they could potentially change his life.

But now, sat here, in the dank-smelling toilet, reading messages off the wall written by the rainbow-loving brigade he was soon to join, he had no choice but surrender.

And he was going to be a dad, a realisation that sent another stream of tears rolling down his cheeks.

He didn’t know what to do, he wanted to sit here forever, to die here.

Then in the background he heard the muffled sound of a PA system.

The words ‘Murder, She Wrote’ – he listened intently, and though the words weren’t entirely clear he managed to make

out, 'starting early,' 'question time', and 'five minutes' – enough words to stem the flow of tears.

'Shit, shit, shit, must look a mess', Dave said to the empty cubical.

New baby, evil girlfriend and home-life ruined or not, Dave thought, there's no way he was going to miss what he'd come here for.

After two minutes in front of the bathroom's mirror, he'd managed to reduce the puffiness from around his eyes.

At least now he didn't look like a psycho fan who'd been crying at the thought of seeing his idol.

The crimson hand print on his left cheek was another matter.

He cupped cold water to it in a vain attempt to bring down the bruising but like his battered ego, it was here to stay.

Still, no matter, Jessica Fletcher awaits.

Back in the main hall, ten rows of chairs, 25 chairs per row, had been set up facing the central, spot lit podium.

By the time Dave arrived, most of the chairs were filled.

Fortunately, they had filled from the front backwards, which allowed him to sit where he'd already intended, at the far back corner.

He knew people were going to stare – he was the queer who'd got his girlfriend pregnant – but he could at least force people to have to turn around if they were going to do that.

As he took his seat a few disapproving eyes caught his, but they soon looked away as a celebritard from a local radio station spent several minutes running through upcoming star's credentials.

Dave watched as his beloved idol made it to the stage.

She looked older than when he'd last seen her on small screen.

But that just added to her Grandmotherly charm.

Her smile was warm and bright and the whole audience erupted as she said her first hello.

Dave watched in mouth-open awe as the actress breezed through question after question.

She was witty and smart and even when the most die-hard 'Murder, She Wrote' fan asked an obscure question relating to a confused plotline years before, she didn't falter.

To Dave, the question and answer session felt like a dream; each word that flowed from her lips seemed like a lullaby drifting on the wind.

Her answers soothed him and her warmth and compassion made the events of the day vanish into the ether.

But soon enough it was over, Dave heard the compere say, 'that's about it folks, there's just enough time for one last question' and as an action without thought, Dave shot his hand into the air, 'you sir, you at the back'.

'Shit, shit, the bouncy compere's talking to me,' Dave said under his breath when he realised what he'd done.

'Come on son, don't be shy, come on, stand up, we can hardly see you back there – what's your question.' Dave looked at the compere's eager face and did as he was requested.

'Oh, you have been in the wars, you poor dear,' Dave's idol said as he got to his feet.

'I'm sure I'll be ok,' Dave muttered, as he reddened at the kind words.

'I'm sure you will, now what's your question?' the compere asked, doing his best, and his job, to keep proceedings to time.

Dave wasn't sure what his question was, he had so many, and so he just took a deep breath and let the words flow from him.

'Well Mrs Fletcher,' the audience laughed at the use of the actress's screen name, but his idol just smiled and nodded for him to continue, 'over the many years the show has been running, you must have met and worked with hundreds of people.

I was just wondering, either on the show or off, what is the best piece of advice you've been given.' 'Well done kid, what a great question to end the proceedings with,' the compere said, seeming genuinely pleased that Dave had managed to sum up such a good, almost rehearsed, question.

'That is a good question,' the actress agreed, then looking up for a second as if to retrieve some gem of knowledge locked away in the deepest part of her mind, she continued 'year's ago on the show, I think in the very first season,

there's an episode where I'm debating going travelling, I'd been invited on a book tour but it meant leaving Cabot Cove.' Dave liked that his idol was talking in the first person, and hadn't bothered to say 'my character' because as he saw it, the woman in front of him was Jessica Fletcher.

'I remember that there was a heartfelt moment with an old friend – a dear woman who's long passed now.

We were sat in front of a roaring fire – faces warm, backs cold – having a nice cup of tea and she told me a little thing about a balloon.

She said our minds were like balloons, they look ok out of the packet, but only through travel do they expand to their full glory.' At her words fireworks seemed to explode inside Dave's head.

The idea that this wonderful lady would give him the same advice that he'd been given from his Nan was sheer heaven.

And of course he didn't consider for a second that his Nan many have actually got her quote from the TV show, why would he, in his eyes his Nan was perfect, and so too was the wonderful Jessica Fletcher.

The crowd again erupted in applause as the star stood up, took a bow and was then ushered into another room where she was signing autographs.

Dave debated joining the queue for an autograph but he decided that his encounter had been perfect and he didn't want to ruin it if perhaps she only gave him a passing 'hello'.

Plus, he'd already bought a signed photo off of Ebay and the compere had said that signings would be limited to the first one hundred people due to time constraints.

And by the time Dave had snapped himself out of his delirium there was easily more than that in the queue.

Leaving the arena he felt renewed.

His idol's words filled him with hope.

The memories they invoked warmed his heart, and gave him the strength to tattle whatever his homecoming would throw at him.

Out in the fresh air, Dave made his way over to the train station but, as he approached, his eyes met Rochelle's.

She was a hundred yards in front of him, a king-size Mars bar in one hand a bottle of full-fat Coke in the other.

Her face was a mess of tears and smeared makeup; she looked pitiful and very much alone.

He wanted to run off, catch another train, but he knew he would have to face his fate at some point so it might as well be now.

Walking over to his ex-girlfriend, Dave took the empty seat at her side.

He half expected Rochelle to move away, or worse, start screaming again.

But she did neither.

Instead she forced the rest of the Mars bar into her already full mouth, chewed, swallowed, swilled around some Coke, and when it was gone she said, 'I'll be a laughing stock.' Her words were quiet, almost a whimper.

'What do you mean?' Dave asked, matching her voice's level.

‘Think about it, people might have sympathy to start with, but soon enough people are gunner say that I turned you queer.

Or worse, they’re going to say that the thought of you having my baby turned you gay.’ Dave wanted to disagree, but the ‘people’ she was talking about, ‘Elle’s friends and family, her sisters in particular, could be real bitches.

They already mocked her for being unable to ‘land her man’, so they’d have a field day with all of this.

Dave saw his chance; part of him wanted to reassure his simpering ex, but it was clear her pain could work in his favour.

‘What a nightmare that’d be, you know how nasty your sisters can get at times, they’d never leave you alone.’ Dave’s words caused a tear to run down Rochelle’s face.

He knew she’d had enough; it was time for him to be the hero.

‘Of course we don’t have to split up, you know?’ Dave said, offering her a gentle smile.

‘We don’t? But you’re a poof?’ Though Rochelle offered up a valid point, she was taking the bait.

‘Yeah, but only you and me know that.

We don’t have to tell anyone and, given you’re having my baby, that changes things a little.

Not that we have to stay together forever.

Not long after the baby's born I'll be a qualified bricklayer and there's really good money working aboard these days.' 'You'd go away,' noting Rochelle's reservation, Dave quickly continued.

'I would, but think about it, I'd be in a really good job, earning good money – money that I can send back to you and the bairn.

You could lead the life you want, I could do what I wanted and, after a certain time, you could say that you dumped me because you wanted a man at home – win, win.' 'But surely people will find out you're a homo eventually, and what about this Gavin lad?' It was clear that Rochelle liked the idea, her face had brightened, she was gulping rather than just swilling her drink and she was now just clearing up some loose ends.

'Well if they ever do find out, and let's face it, I'm not about to rush and tell my family or anyone else for that matter, then

that'll be years from now, and well after we've split up.

I could always claim that I couldn't find another girl to match up to you, so I turned to guys.' Both parties were getting into the idea; it appeared to be an acceptable solution for both.

'And what about this Gavin, can you keep your hands off him?' 'Elle asked, the last thing she needed sorted.

'Well, firstly, I'm sure he's straight, and secondly someone like me would never be able to pull a guy like that,' Rochelle's eyebrows raised at the idea of her huge, manly, bricklayer boyfriend talking about another guy.

But she knew it was something she was going to have to get used to if their plan was to work.

And she wanted it to work; it meant money for nothing, and all the chat shows she could watch.

'And even if those first two things weren't enough, the idea that I'd act on anything under my dad's nose is just crazy, he'd string me up!' Dave added, of course if Gavin did turn out to be gay, and a 'chubby chaser' at that, then what his dad or the rest of the world thought wouldn't matter, and this new, ill-conceived plan wouldn't stand in the way of his happiness either.

But this latter eventuality was unlikely and, as he'd been hiding his sexuality well enough for the last twenty years, he thought that there was a good chance he could manage it for another year or so.

Then he'd be off, filling his balloon and the tiny minds of his mining town would be long behind him.

Dave looked into Rochelle's bloodshot eyes and smiled, she returned the gesture and the plan was set.

'That's quite a bruise you've got there, we'll have to come up with a good story for it on the train home.' Rochelle said, the sense of quiet satisfaction could just about be heard in her tone.

'I'm sure we'll think of something.' Dave answered.

'So how was she, the "Murder, She Wrote" woman?' Elle asked as the train pulled into the station.

'Fantastic!' Dave said as they walked hand-in-hand for the train.

And, as they stepped into the carriage, Rochelle looked back at the arena and couldn't help but ask, 'has anyone

died in there yet?’ Going postal ... well, more council Jake was bored again.

He sat staring blankly into space, praying for something to fill the void that seemed to be his entire life lately.

He looked at his computer.

He counted.

He had six different internet windows open, random shit that meant nothing.

Jake had read once that if you were bored with the internet then you were bored with life – was this true? Realising that the blank space he was staring into was still blank, Jake knew that it had to be.

‘What am I going to do? I can’t do this every day – I’m so fucking bored’.

Jake’s voice echoed around the empty, open plan office.

Jake’s department in the vast council building was devoid of life.

There was a team meeting taking place on the other side of town but Jake hadn't been able to bring himself to go.

Instead he had faked an emergency deadline that he, 'just had to meet'.

Of course he didn't have any work to finish.

Jake just couldn't bear another team meeting about 'council business'.

Meetings which seemed to cover everything from the increase in council tax to the cost of wheelie bins.

And it was typical of the council to arrange a half-day meeting, covering 'general issues' on the morning when the Christmas party was planned for the afternoon.

Jake just couldn't face it.

He had decided that staring into nothingness was a far a more suitable alternative.

Nobody would miss him and they would all be back soon enough with thoughts of buffet food, and the free glass of wine would surely put them in high spirits Jake thought about this time last year, before his 'promotion'.

He never felt like this back then.

He had felt useful, not empty.

His life had had meaning, or at least his life had been busy enough that he had never had to think about it one way or the other.

Jake's wife had been insistent.

'You're 35 now.

You're not getting any younger.

You can't stay a supervisor forever.

This policy management job would be fantastic, just think about what we could do with the extra money.

Christopher needs new football boots and Nicky is growing at such a rate that she is going to need a whole new set of clothes soon.' She had gone on and on.

In his head, Jake had screamed, 'thanks, you bitch, thanks for pointing out that I'm not getting any younger.

'I'm amazed that you haven't pointed out I'm not getting any thinner either – you usually do – though I wouldn't have this beer gut if you didn't drive me to drink or, for that matter, if you let me play footy with the lads once in a while.

'And maybe if you got off your fat arse and went back to work, I could keep a job I really enjoy, rather than having to take the most boring job man ever invented, just so that you can sit at home on your fat lazy arse.

Plus, it would be handy if when you did bother to drag yourself away from Trisha.

You don't need to spend my hard earned money on stupid football boots for Chris, especially when we both know that he would rather have a Barbie doll.

'And the only reason that Nicky is growing so fast, is because she takes after you – I mean, does she really have to stuff the entire packet of biscuits down her throat? If she stuck to one, she might still be able to tie her own shoelaces.' Of course none of his rant ever left his tired brain.

Jake chose to go with, 'yes dear'.

He knew this would save a lot of fuss.

Jake looked around his partition to make sure that the vast open plan office was still empty.

A five-grand rise and grey partition was all his promotion had really amounted to.

That and now he was trapped at his desk the entire week because, as a policy manager, Jake got the choice of either researching policies or writing them.

Oh, no, as Jake began to flick once more through his bunch of random websites, he realised that he also got to re-write policies, because very little of what he put on paper ever made it to the final draft.

And generally, his new boss, the policy director, would get to write the final version of the policy or, if nothing else, the lazy shit would just put his name to it.

Jake looked at the policy he was meant to be working on now.

At the top it said 'Draft 19'.

This was a new record, the last being set by the 'staff smoking policy', which had been sent back from high,

seventeen times.

At the thought of the smoking policy, Jake could almost taste the bile building in his throat.

He had sworn the day he had sent off draft eighteen, that if this one was returned he would knife the policy director in the face.

It was a reaction he had realised was a little strong, but necessary.

After taking a second look around his partition, just to be doubly sure that it was empty, Jake took out his car keys and located the small flash hard drive that was attached to the key ring.

Once plugged into the USB port, Jake waited for it to be recognised and then clicked on a file marked simply, 'The end'.

The file opened in Word and was entitled: 'How to deal with my fucked up life!' One - Release some tension.

One A - Wank, a lot.

One B - Have sex with the wife (though remember that this requires a lot of drink).

One C - Curse God every day for my wretched life
One D - Cut myself (remember to keep them small, so no one notices)
Two - Get another job Interview 10th Jan – didn't get it
Interview 12th Feb – wanted someone with less experience
Interview 15th Feb – didn't get it.

Interview 2nd March – didn't understand why I wanted to take a pay cut.

Interview 5th March – didn't go down to well, when I called one of the interview panel a wanker.

Interview 20th April – called back for second interview.

Second Interview 25th April – didn't get it, they thought with my "experience" I wouldn't stay long.

Interview 8th May – didn't go, rang in sick, spent the day watching 24.

Giving the applications a rest for a while
Three - Leave the wife
Three A - Sat down and talked with her, told her that I didn't think things were working.

She said that we should work on it and then went to bingo.

Three B - Tried to have sex with her sober, she wasn't interested.

I told her that I thought we were supposed to be 'working on it'.

She told me I needed to work on my beer gut first.

Three C - I told her I thought we should get a divorce.

She said that there was no way that we were splitting up while the kids were still in school and, if I tried, she would take every penny I have.

Four - Have sex with someone in the office.

Four A - Started talking to Jackie, she's the office bike and should be good for a bit of entertainment.

Spent ten minutes flirting with her at the cooler.

She seems up for a bit of fun.

I asked her if she wanted to meet for a drink on Tuesday.

Four B - Went out for the drink.

Went well, had a good laugh.

Meeting her again on Thursday for some dinner and a bit of a drive – not that the wife cares but I'll start talking about late meetings anyway.

Four C - Dinner was nice, drove somewhere quiet, kissed.

I got a nice feel of her tits, but then she reached for my knob and it just ignored her.

Worse, she went to suck it, but it just lay there like a dead slug.

'Don't you fancy me?' she asked, but given that she has told everyone in the office about what happened now, all the excuses I gave her on the drive back obviously didn't answer that question satisfactorily.

Five - Kill them all Five A - the poison arrived today, the wife nearly opened it and I had to tell her that it was clear paint for my model airplane, she believed me and left it for me but not before she called me a "sad, fat bastard".

The internet site said that the bottle was big enough to take down an elephant though, given that the container is only the size of a small pill bottle, it might only work on small elephants.

I can do it at the Xmas party.

I need to get a bottle with a spray on it so it'll spread over the food.

Either that or I could just mix it in the wine and water jugs, which they should have if everything is the same as last year.

Five B - Kill them at work, go home and kill the family and then sort out myself.

Five C - if the above fails, use the gun - GO POSTAL! Jake read over his words.

The bitter insults from his wife stung and jarred his emotions.

Every time he read over his list, made notes, added to it in anyway, it was like the events had taken place for the first time.

Like he was back standing in front of his wife, looking at her sagging body, wondering where the slim, fit, princess of a woman had vanished to – who had stolen her and replaced her with this eighteen-stone, fool-mouthed tyrant? Most of the time he managed to put all thoughts of his wife out of his mind.

He had been with her nearly sixteen years and, over that time, he had managed to make her all but an irritating blur.

Jackie, on the other hand, he couldn't blank out.

Mostly because he couldn't walk from one side of the office to the other without someone making a derogatory remark or, if nothing was said, there was always the sound of laughter suppressed as he approached and breaking out again as he left.

He was stressed.

He couldn't believe that he hadn't been able to get an erection.

When he was by himself, practicing, he was able to get hard.

And he did lots of practicing.

So, maybe he just didn't fancy the office bike after all.

Jake reached over and unlocked a drawer in his desk.

He took out a small bottle of clear liquid and a compact black, faux-leather toiletry bag and placed them on his desk.

He looked at the bottle and smiled at the fact that such a small container was going to bring an end to his pointless life.

Better than that, it would bring an end to those people who made his life what it was.

Jake put the bottle to one side for the minute and picked up the toiletry bag.

He unzipped it and took out the items it contained.

Jake carefully positioned the five items next to each other in size order.

First a small plastic tray, second a packet of tissues, then an anti-septic wet-wipe, a packet of plasters and last a packet of razor blades.

The ritual brought Jake a feeling of comfort.

The familiarity of the items, the noise of the tissue packet being torn open, the rough texture of the plaster and finally the feeling of cold steel between his fingers made the blood leave Jake's head and course down to his other head, which was rapidly increasing in size.

Placing the inside of his forearm over the plastic tray, Jake then took the razor and with a practiced hand made a short, deep cut into his flesh.

Jake no longer feared the insertion.

The inch-long cut offered little or no pain.

The agony came when Jake forced the wound apart.

With his finger and thumb Jake worked the cut until it began to ooze blood.

He watched it fill the base of the plastic try.

As the dark red fluid ran from his body, Jake clenched his teeth against the pain and imagined the emptiness of his life draining from his body.

He pictured his obese wife, his spoilt kids, Jackie the whore, Draft 19, Jake saw it all and with perfect clarity he watched it run from his body.

When the blood had reached the mark etched into the side of the plastic container, Jake let go of the wound and then after giving it a once over with the anti-septic wipe, he covered it with a plaster.

The wound sealed, Jake placed all the contents, except the tray of blood back into their bag, and placed them neatly in the draw.

From the same drawer, he took another small plastic container, this time with a lid.

He took it and the tray of blood to the toilets.

The blood washed away, Jake locked himself in a cubical and dealt with the throbbing in his pants.

Three minutes later he was back at his desk.

He placed the tray into its case, and then after checking that the lid was on tight, he tucked the pot of cum in the draw between a couple of files so that it couldn't fall over.

Jake liked to collect any cum he produced at work – normally one or two pots a day – and then stay late after work so that, when no one was around, he could throw his sticky seed over his boss's desk.

*** At midday, the caterers began to set up the party.

To Jake there looked enough food for a hundred people, though his office had fifty at most.

Jake could see his target, the drinks' table.

Six large jugs of wine, two each of red, white and rosé and, for the drivers (and dull), a couple of jugs of water.

Jake waited diligently for the caterers to finish setting up and then when they had disappeared for a coffee break, he made his way over to the drinks.

With much considered precision Jake opened the bottle of poison and shared the contents nine ways, the last portion being left in the bottle – he would need that for himself and his family.

The small portion that went into each jug, didn't seem like enough but, from what Jake understood from the website, a

few drops of the poison would be enough to kill hundreds of people.

‘Starting early? I thought you were meant to be back here working hard.’ The voice belonged to Vince, a wanker from HR, who thought he was a god just because he’d had to make a hundred staff redundant last year.

‘If he is working hard, that’ll be a first!’ This second voice was that of Steve, one of the managers from the IT department, and self-titled ‘office comic’.

Jake didn’t want to exchange any words with them.

He mostly just wanted them dead.

The website had promised that one drop was enough to bring a man to his knees.

The death was said to be horrifically painful, the poison eating through the stomach lining and allowing the stomach acid to eat away at the internal organs.

Desperately Jake wanted to stay around and watch, see them gasp their last breaths.

Watch blood drip from their eyes as they begged him for help.

Instead, he laughed off his colleague's comments and then, after making a suitable excuse, went out to sit in his car and wait for the ambulances.

As Jake watched partygoers continued to arrive.

He looked at his watch, hoping that no one would die before everyone had chance to have a glass of wine.

He doubted anyone would touch the water, his office being a bunch of work-shy lushes.

And no one was allowed to touch on the booze until the party had officially been started by the section manager, who in this case was his boss, the policy director.

Ten minutes passed, each minute being filled by more happy people arriving.

Jake cursed their smug faces, all of them in little cliques, none of which was open to him.

Jake wondered if he would hear the screams.

He hoped he would, he had been planning this day for over six months.

It had taken days of research to find the right poison.

Who would have thought it was so hard to find something undetectable when mixed with liquid and one that didn't kill straight away? Jake specifically needed a poison that took around twenty minutes to start working – he had to make sure everyone inside had chance to take in a killing dose.

Finally, Jake watched his boss arrive in his new Five Series BMW.

Rumour had it that he had wanted a Three Series Sport, but the seats hadn't been big enough to accommodate his fat arse.

Jake watched him fight his way out the car and then sweat his way across the car park.

At 5 foot 2 and at least fifty-percent body fat it wasn't a pretty sight.

'Not long now,' Jake said to the empty car.

He looked at the contents of the bottle he was clutching in his hand.

There was just enough to take out his family, then settle in front of the football and pour the last few drops into a nice cold beer.

Jake tapped his fingers on the steering wheel of his people carrier.

It was a car he hadn't wanted but his wife had told him that they had to have for 'the school run'.

The fact that the school was two hundred meters up the road didn't seem to matter.

A people carrier was the 'must have'.

He thought that slim, fit children was a far better 'must have', but his wife hadn't agreed.

'Come on!' Jake shouted, bashing his hand down on the dash.

His watch had just clicked past the twenty minute mark since his boss had arrived.

Time was getting on and the football kicked off at three.

Another ten minutes passed and there was still no sound of screaming, and Jake had wound his window down just to make sure that he wasn't missing anything.

'Fucking poison, stupid internet crap bollocks!' Jake raged as yet another ten minutes passed.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jake noticed a door open, someone had come out for a fag break and the newly open door blew a wave of vocal enjoyment across the car park.

'Fuck it.

Useless internet crap.' Jake yelled, then, as he opened his car door to get out, he said in a more considered tone: 'Time for Five C!' A New Dawn.