

Disarticulated Fragments from *The Shenanigans*



Brian Marley

You may be wondering why, from a cohort of nearly one hundred inductees, only six of you have been asked to attend this session. A tap on the shoulder, a whispered invitation, am I right? — I thought so. It's the modus operandi of the security services. That's how our headhunters in Personnel do things, too. Strictly hush-hush. Akin to being groomed, minus the sexual element. If you noticed it happening, you were probably flattered, slightly puzzled, but definitely intrigued. It's what we expect of you. Your special qualities have been noted, your potential duly assessed. I'll wager fifty chocolate ducats wrapped in edible gold foil that the headhunters know you better than your family knows you; better even than you know yourself.

You've been deemed top-drawer material, compared to which the other inductees are, not to put too fine a point on it, makeweights, cannon fodder, destined to occupy an enquiry desk in a Jobcentre in a bleak Northern town from which all hope has fled. Unless, against your better judgment, you choose to visit Wigan or Keighley or British West Hartlepool, you're unlikely to bump into any of them again.

Let me make my intentions perfectly clear:

The keynote I was asked to deliver today – bland, sickly sweet, and given the seal of approval by my line-toeing line-manager Jesus Rodriguez – has been binned, or, more accurately, shredded. If I'd read it aloud my teeth would have rotted down to blackened stumps. So what you're about to receive (and may the Lord make you truly thankful, as Rodriguez doubtless would say) is the unauthorised version.

Rodriguez is on unpaid leave at the moment, but were he here he'd do what his fellow managers always do after lunch: make themselves scarce. They're probably in a meeting of some kind or finding some other way to kill time meaninglessly, confident that they've left the running of this session in the hands of a trusted subordinate.

Their confidence is misplaced. Now that I no longer see the world as they do, I'm not to be trusted.

But rather than dwell on diagnosis and prognosis, let's crack on. The sooner I finish the sooner we get to go home.

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Those who toil in the bowels of this building have to sign the Official Secrets Act on their first day at work. Standard procedure. It's what all civil servants have had to do for a century or more. But U12 goes one step further: we swear a solemn oath – not to the Civil Service, but to U12 exclusively. We also expect new recruits to undergo a brief initiation ceremony which, I admit, may cause a certain amount of physical discomfort and psychological stress. It's not a hazing ritual per se, despite superficial similarities, such as the possibility that you'll sustain injuries, minor ones, usually nothing worse than a few abrasions and bruises. However, in the spirit of full disclosure, I should tell you that once, in the late 1980s, in the heat of the moment, things got a bit out of hand and someone's teeth were knocked out – three, as I recall, one of which was already badly chipped from (allegedly) levering the tops off beer bottles in a display of drunken bravado. A young initiate by the name of Muat, who has since become our keenest initiator. Again, I'm honour bound to tell you that he's a waterboarding enthusiast, though that's a technique we no longer practise at U12, much to his disappointment, Guantanamo having brought it into disrepute. Pushing small boys' heads down

toilets was his favourite pastime at school, and waterboarding is, as he puts it, ‘just an adult version of that – pure nostalgia, really’. He’s acknowledged by one and all to lack self-restraint. Muat acknowledges it too, shamelessly, with a smile. Needless to say, we paid the full whack for his restorative dentistry, so no lasting harm was done.

Please don’t get me wrong: humiliation is not the ceremony’s principal aim. That said, a complete absence of humiliation cannot be guaranteed.

Nor, with intimidating body language, collective parade ground barks, madhouse shrieks, and sewer-fed streams of vile invective, do we wish to break your spirit and remould you in our image. If, however, you’re particularly susceptible to influence of that kind – which, by the way, I wouldn’t go so far as to call bullying, though I appreciate many do – you could be eligible for the *U12er of the Year* award, of which I’m a three-times winner. The gold buttons on my blazer are actually winner’s medals. Impressive aren’t they? And what’s mine could so easily be yours if you’re shown to be made of the right stuff. Think of it, at the very least, as a character-building exercise.

Nor do we seek to emulate our Japanese cousins, the yakuza, who we admire for their extraordinary self-discipline. Yakuza’s willingly chop off the first joint of their pinkie (left hand if they’re right-handed, and vice versa) to show fealty and atone for misdeeds past, present and, if naked ambition outstrips caution, as it nearly always does, future.

All we ask is that, for identificationary purposes, you agree to have a small black dot, indistinguishable from a mole, tattooed on a specific part of your body. If you’re particularly dark-skinned, a negus-like red dot may be substituted. Surely that’s not unreasonable, now, is it?

So, with the yakuza in mind, the point of placement we’ve chosen for the tattoo is the topside of the webspace between pinkie and ring finger. Can’t quite visualise where that is? Between the two most outlying digits. In the connective tissue at the base of both, knuckle side up. The tattoo you’ll receive is a dot no bigger than a tardigrade. Still can’t visualise it? Here, take a look at mine and you’ll see what I mean.

Unless, like I just did, you splay your fingers – an uncommon

gesture in the UK, used almost exclusively by stage magicians when they're doing the abracadabra – it won't be noticed by anyone but a fellow U12er, and if someone else does notice it, no matter, they won't know what it signifies.

Look, the initiation ceremony is really no big deal, but I appreciate that's not how everyone sees it. If you find the idea worrying, by which I mean distressing, and don't wish to continue, feel free to join the other inductees in the lecture theatre ... far end of the hallway ... near the main entrance. Or, if you prefer, you can sail through the entrance and out into the street with, as they say, nary a backward glance. No-one will try to stop you or consider you in any way deficient if that's what you decide to do. Your choice entirely.

[...]

Okay, so we're one inductee down. Notice how he crept out of the room, eyes downcast, shoulders slumped, as if ashamed. As indeed he should be. His parents will be mortified – even his father, an armed robber currently serving eight to ten in HMP Belmarsh. He'd hoped for better things for his son, and those hopes have now been crushed like a jailhouse bedbug. Ah well.

I confess, from the moment I read the transcript of his job interview I had doubts about the lad.

By the way, just so you know: there is no initiation ceremony. Never has been nor will be. It was a ploy to test your staying power – a test you've passed with flying colours. Well done!

But ... there really is an oath.

Though incredibly wordy and wholly immemorable, it boils down to this:

Thou Shalt Not Steal.

If, after hearing what I have to say, you decide to take up a post in our department – *as indeed you should* – I warn you: temptation will be your shadowman, dogging every step you take.

Most of us are, to some degree, light-fingered. No, don't shake your head like that, you're shedding a veritable snowstorm of dandruff. What I've just said is true. About light-fingeredness, I mean. If that's your inclination, or, even worse, your tendency, the odds in U12 are heavily stacked against you, more so than in any other Civil Service department. We're fastidious about such things, and for good reason. Any department wishing to test the financial probity of any other department has to be seen by the Central Accounts

Committee to be scrupulous to a fault. Every ballpoint pen and staple in U12 has been fully accounted for. Paper is doled out by the sheet rather than the ream.

Sorely tempted you may be, that's understandable, acquisitiveness is a fundamental part of human nature, encoded in our DNA. But no matter how weak your resolve, remember:

Thou Shalt Not Steal.

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It's time I gave you a flavour of what we in U12 actually do. Although the case file I've chosen is far from typical, it's much more revealing than the everyday Holmesian gradgrinding we engage in. I'll let you draw your own conclusion as to whether I handled it correctly.

Please bear in mind that my liaison oppo at the Met, Sergeant Richard Aerosmith, has a quirky sense of humour. Every now and then he sends me a conundrum, something he expects me to try to make sense of, if I can. This is done as, I think, a joke, though sometimes, because I have an insufficiently developed sense of humour (so I've been told, by – who else? – Muat), I fail to get the joke. But not always.

That worries me less than the feeling that subtle attempts at one-upmanship are being made. Not by Aerosmith. Not directly. That's not the kind of man he is, nor the kind of thing he'd do. I have no evidence to back this up, but I suspect he's being leant on by his immediate superior, Inspector Rickets, who holds U12 in contempt. It's worth noting that Aerosmith thinks the same about Rickets.

In a nutshell, I think Aerosmith has been ordered by Rickets to put me to the test. If I fail the test, which he hopes I will, that small-scale failure will be flagged up as typical large-scale incompetence at U12. During negotiations for the scant resources that are shared between the Met and U12, the Met will then have the upper hand.

I may be wrong, of course. But how would I know, one way or the other?

Perhaps it's a conundrum you can solve on my behalf.

ITEM: 71424/DEP.c/WB*ag*

A prosthetic limb. A leg, to be precise. One of extraordinary length.

The average human femur is, from the medial condyle to the greater trochanter, 47cm in length, the shaft circumference 9cm. The lost limb differed considerably from that: length 79cm, circumference 8cm. The small circumference of the prosthesis relative to its length was made possible, one assumes, because of the material from which it was manufactured: carbon fibre, stronger than bone.

It was found at low tide near Wapping, lying on a bed of rotting seaweed. The foot was encased in a battered, salt-bleached shoe, a man's shoe of enormous size, similar to those worn by circus clowns. The style: brogue. Red leather. Handmade but without the benefit of a maker mark. Because of the state the shoe was in, it was probable that the prosthesis had been in the water for some time.

Obviously it must have belonged to someone very tall, a veritable giant. Assuming that all his limbs were in proportion, and this one, though artificial, was indicative, he would've had to be more than eight feet tall, perhaps as tall as Robert Pershing Wadlow (1918-40), who to this day, at just over eight feet eleven, is on record as the world's tallest man. Wadlow's coffin was more than ten feet in length and it jutted out of the rear door of the hearse. It's said that twelve strong pallbearers were required to carry it from hearse to graveside.

Having established that no-one of exceptional height and minus a left leg had been reported missing, and having no reason to believe a crime had been committed, Aerosmith forwarded the prosthesis to me.

As I was inspecting it, I felt hot breath on my left ear, accompanied by a waft of garlic mayonnaise. That spineless snoop Muat, who has the office next to mine, had entered the room like a sneak thief and was peering over my shoulder. He'd taken off his shoes so he could slink around without making a sound. Not that his approach could ever be totally silent. Had I not been paying such close attention to the prosthesis, I would have heard the crackling, distant thunderstorm of static that had built up between his cheap nylon socks and the needle felt flooring. But on this occasion ... He pointed out something that Aerosmith had apparently failed to notice. Arrogant as ever, he assumed I had, too. There was, he said, no means by which the prosthesis could be attached to the human body.

I'd just that moment noted in my official report that there was,

quote: *no implant connector, no flexible inner socket or laminated frame, no fleece- or gel-lined stump holster, no straps or couplings.*

I shot Muat a withering glance and showed him what I'd written. The keenness of my observation seemed to stun him. Or was he faking it? — *Of course he was!* He always is. "Well, Bagley, old son," he said. "Looks like you're not such a knucklehead after all."

Irony laced with venom and delivered with a smile.

As he turned to leave I couldn't restrain myself: "Goodbye, good luck, go take a flying fuck! In other words, *don't come back!*" He chuckled, as if it were a joke, though he knew it wasn't. We've toiled in this department for many a year, working side by side, separated by only a thin partition wall, but we've never shared a joke and never will.

It's frustrating. No matter what I say, or how often I say it, I know that during my next comfort break he'll be in my office doing something he shouldn't. How he manages to gain entry I've no idea. I've added an extra lock to the door (at my own expense; the standard model supplied by Estates Management wouldn't have kept a criminally inclined toddler at bay) and I always double-lock the door behind me, even if I'm only going to the water cooler, barely a hop, skip and jump away.

While walking to the cooler, the door to my room is out of sight for perhaps eight or nine seconds, fewer than that if I run, though for health and safety reasons running in the corridors is forbidden. But that's all the time it takes for mischief to take place. I've been told it can happen in the blink of an eye, so I try my damndest not to blink. Easier said than done. My left eye twitches when I'm tired or feeling stressed, and attempting to control it by will power alone seems, if anything, to make matters worse.

Cameroonians and Hawaiians both believe that a left eye twitch means someone will visit your house unexpectedly.

It's also a sign of ill omen.

Sometimes I hold the eyelid in place, in the open position, while walking backwards to the cooler, so the door to my room remains visible at all times. If my antics cause my fellow toilers to raise a collective eyebrow, so be it. Let them snigger. Or sneer, if that's their preference. At least I can congratulate myself on having taken every possible precaution. Yet when I return to my desk, flimsy blue plastic disposable cup in hand, brimful with chilled water, I

find my papers in disarray and words inserted or deleted from the computer files I'd been working on. Sometimes I discover live folders inside dead ones that earlier in the day I'd consigned to the trash. There's really no accounting for it, but I'm sure Muat is to blame.

It has to be him. Chubby Emtex in Security is the only other keyholder: the official key custodian of our basement kingdom, the so-called King of Keys. He's a loyal employee on the cusp of retirement, and I know he wouldn't under any circumstances put his well-earned reputation and pension at risk. I trust him implicitly. Added to which, he hates Muat almost as much as I do.

No favours there, then.

Perhaps Muat oozes under the door like the slug he is.

As for the prosthesis ... that problem was more easily solved. It was a prototype. An exhibit. Lost by British Airways two years earlier while in transit to a conference of prosthetics manufacturers in Antwerp. How it ended up in the Thames is something of a mystery.

When I made enquiries at the Intellectual Property Office, I was told that the rights to that particular design were held by a Mr Michael Meikle, managing director of Stand Proud Prosthetics, Stroud. It seemed reasonable to assume that he was the prototype's owner. If not, he'd know who was. But when I gave him a call, our conversation didn't go according to plan – neither my plan nor, I should imagine, his.

Most people are gushingly grateful when you identify yourself and say you've found something they've lost, particularly if that something is, as with the item in question, rather special. Not him. After a slight pause, he said, "The shoe is still attached, I hope." Brusque. Not a murmur of thanks. That's what made me suspicious. What was so special about a knackered old shoe? Surely the prosthesis itself was the principal item of value, the shoe a mere accessory. But no, he kept banging on and on about the shoe. "It hasn't fallen apart, has it? None of the seams have split?" Quite the worrywart, Mr Meikle. He was rushing his words then hesitating, as though trying to work out whether what he'd said was what he should be saying. He seemed, if anything, more troubled than pleased.

After several minutes of being bombarded with questions, I managed to squeeze in one of my own. "If you don't mind me asking, Mr Meikle, why is the shoe so important?"

"Oh for Heaven's sake!" he said. "I don't believe I'm hearing

this. Surely it's obvious! Even someone in a persistent vegetative state could work it out."

I bit my tongue and let him continue. Not that I could have stopped him, even if I'd tried.

"Cast off your petty-bureaucratic bean-counter mindset, Mr Bradley –"

"Bagley."

"If you say so."

"It's my name."

"Well, it's immemorable. Ditch it and choose something better, as I have done. To get on in life you need a memorable name and a mind like a vacuum cleaner. Do you consider yourself a man of advanced sensibility, Mr Bradley, attuned not only to the extreme registers of the human condition but beyond, into other realms of consciousness and states of being? — Well, do you? Then show some humanity."

Shoemanity came to mind and I stifled a laugh.

"Empathise with that poor, badly injured shoe, Mr Bradley – or whatever your name is. Consider its plight. Surely that's not beyond even a witless office drone such as yourself. — But to answer your question as unequivocally as possible: the shoe's sibling is in my workshop waiting to be reunited with its twin. For business purposes I need both of them. But my needs are, and always will be, secondary to theirs. For emotional support and spiritual comfort they need each other."

As crackpot explanations go, that wasn't likely to be topped; not soon, anyway. But because he'd annoyed me, and, to be honest, for entertainment value, I decided to string him along.

"You do understand, Mr Meikle ... the shoe, though holding together, is in poor condition. Very poor. There's a strong possibility its sibling won't even recognise it, or on recognising it will become distraught. It's been pounded on the rocks, nibbled by fish, and become so swollen and softened by sea water I'm sure I could strip the leather from the prosthesis as easily as peeling a ripe banana."

"No, please, I beg of you, please don't do that!"

Whoa ...

Touched a raw nerve, that, didn't it?

I confess, I had no intention of doing anything of the sort until he begged me not to. That's what swung it. He really should

have kept his emotions in check.

As you're bound to be unfamiliar with our procedures, let me explain. We're permitted to dismantle an item only if it *will* or (wiggleroom word) *may* help us to identify its owner. For example, the serial number etched on the inner case of a watch from the luxury end of the market (Rolex, TAG Heuer, Cartier, Lange Sohne, Richard Mille, etc.) might enable us to track the watch from manufacturer to retailer to customer, and the customer might, just might, be the person who lost it. But there's an important caveat: the item has to be capable of being dismantled and reassembled without damaging it cosmetically or causing it to malfunction. Removing and replacing the back of a watch is standard procedure, a doddle, I could do it in my sleep and on occasion have actually done so. But the shoe ...

While I was talking to Meikle, I began to prod it with the tip of a biro, pushing the pen gently between the outsole and the upper (the vamp, I think it's called), seeing how much it would give. My banana analogy was correct: the glue and the stitching had lost all integrity. I slid the pen along from instep to toe at a depth of approximately one inch, meeting little or no resistance. But when the barrel of the pen reached the toecap, it struck something hard, unyielding. Was the toecap steel reinforced, like a workman's boot? That seemed unnecessary, therefore unlikely. I tried to wrinkle it out, whatever it was, first with the pen then with a pinkie, but I couldn't quite hook my finger round it. Wedging the receiver between my shoulder and ear, and kicking the office door shut so what I was doing wouldn't be observed, I placed one hand on the toecap, fingers slightly spread, and another, likewise, on the outsole. Then I gripped both tightly and, with a violent jerk, pulled them apart.

It was a reckless thing to do and I regretted it immediately. There was also a wet tearing sound, which Meikle overheard.

"What was that?" he said. "Was that what I think it was?" The register of his voice was creeping up and up, edging towards hysteria.

"Nothing, Mr Meikle. Nothing to worry about. Just the death rattle of the coffee machine in the corner of the room. I made a good, strong brew half an hour ago and drank it soon afterwards, just before I rang you, but the appliance doesn't always complete its task until some time later. Its memory chip has developed the electronic equivalent of Alzheimer's disease, and, Sod's law, the guarantee

recently expired. But I'm sure my consumer woes are of absolutely no interest to you. — I thought not. — No, but — Of course. — Yes, I realise your time is extremely valuable, Mr Meikle. As you say, much more valuable than mine. So let's not waste a second more of it, eh? When — Yes, the business world is, from what I gather, cut-throat, and every second counts. — So — So when would — When — When would you like to pick up the prosthesis? — Yes, of course, the shoe. Prosthesis and shoe, neither one without the other. — And some identification, driving license and/or — I quite agree. As you say, only a congenital idiot would fail to realise that identification of some sort would be required.”

That last comment seemed to placate him. He managed an almost sincere “Thank you” before ending the call.

Out in the corridor footsteps were fast approaching. I leapt to the door and slid the bolt to. In the nick of time, as the thriller writers say, hoping to add zest to a flagging narrative. The handle was jerked down once, twice, the second time more violently than the first — then a bomb went off. The door shuddered and jumped on its hinges. Someone had given it an almighty kick, a proper toe-breaker. Thwarted, the kicker stomped back along the corridor to his own or someone else's room, some distance hence. Too far away for me to tell who it was, though I had my suspicions.

It was imperative that neither Muat nor any of my fellow toilers were able to barge in, as they tend to do, favouring the element of surprise, even though I have a Do Not Disturb sign hooked over the door handle. The shoe was ruined, and if they saw what I'd done to it, I would be, too. Upper and sole had parted company, but not cleanly. Parts of the upper were torn, ragged-edged, and still attached to the sole. Also, my thumb had gone through the leather, leaving, as one might expect, a thumb-sized hole. No amount of effort with stapler, glue stick and sellotape, the only tools at my disposal, would enable me to make a workmanlike repair.

Oh, but this was bad.

Really really bad.

What I'd done amounted to an act of gross misconduct that was bound to result in a stern reprimand. It might even ruin my career, which is, I freely admit, my life, my whole life, *without which I would be as nothing*. I'm sure you know the feeling, or think you

do. It's all theory at your age, isn't it? You haven't had sufficient experience of life to acquire the lines of bitterness that start at the corners of the mouth and descend chinward. Nor the disgruntlement that results in deep vertical creases from mid-brow to bridge of nose, pulling one's eyebrows closer together and drawing out one's increasingly elephantine ears, African rather than Indian.

While frantically trying to work out what to do for the best, I reached into the toe of the shoe and yanked out the obstruction. Not a steel toecap: a semi-transparent plastic box with rounded corners, its lid welded shut. The box contained what looked like grubby pebbles embedded in a block of polystyrene.

Pebbles?

Surely not.

But if not ...?

There was only one way to find out, and that involved a further act of destruction.

Taking the Swiss army knife from the top drawer of my desk, I selected my favourite tool, the marlin spike, and plunged it into the side of the box. I twisted the spike round and around, making the hole bigger, levering upward, putting as much force into it as I could, trying to get the lid to separate from the base. Suddenly the box shattered and flew out of my hand. The stones skittered and bounced across the desk. One fell with a soft plop into the wastepaper basket. When I stooped to retrieve it, I still wasn't sure what it was. But when I held it up to the light ...

These were, I realised, very valuable pebbles indeed.

Diamonds.

Uncut diamonds.

Blood diamonds, in all probability. Mined in Angola, Ivory Coast or Sierra Leone.

I rang Aerosmith, explained what I'd found, and was told that Meikle would be apprehended when he came to retrieve the prosthesis. If the situation was as I said it was (which, I assured him, it most certainly was), Meikle would be arrested on suspicion of diamond trafficking. I then sent a carefully worded email to Rodriguez, scrupulously avoiding any mention of the damage I'd done to the shoe. He'd assume the police, a notoriously heavy-handed bunch, were responsible. At least, I hoped so.

Seconds later an *Out of Office* message pinged back.

Good.

No. Better than that: perfect.

It was common knowledge that when Rodriguez was away from his desk he rarely, if ever, accessed his work email. What he did when he wasn't at work only the snoops in Personnel knew ... though often I pictured him on his knees, in prayer, or mortifying the flesh to remind himself (as if he'd need reminding) of his irredeemable sin, depravity and vileness in the eyes of the Lord his God. A particularly hard taskmaster, God, never satisfied with his human playthings, especially the more gullible ones.

No matter.

It gave me valuable time in which to consider my options and, indeed, prospects. The latter were, I have to say, all things considered, looking up. Was I just imagining it, or had victory been snatched decisively from the jaws of defeat? Suddenly there was every reason to believe that, were Meikle to be arrested and charged, I'd be given a much prized acrylic display frame containing a commendation certificate signed by the head of the Civil Service, Sir Jeremy Heywood – something to place prominently on a shelf in my office, to be admired and envied by all.

Perhaps there'd even be a promotion in the offing.

Actually, the more I thought about it, the more promotion seemed not only possible but ... probable.

Don't get your hopes up, Bagley, I thought.

And yet ... and yet ...

This sudden reversal of fortune was dizzying. Many things triggered dizzy episodes in those days – still do, for that matter – but in its ferocity this one was without precedent. I slid to the floor and stared up at the ceiling, at the naked bulb revolving without apparent volition at the end of its cord, until, after half an hour or so, my internal gyroscope steadied.

By then I'd decided how best to deal with my fellow toilers: Avoid them at all cost. (Business as usual, in other words.)

When that wasn't possible, be meek and modest. 'All in a day's toil,' I'd say. 'Frankly, I got lucky.'

Congratulations (patently insincere, spoken through gritted teeth) I'd acknowledge with a shrug and a sheepish grin.

Sheepish.

Not smug.

Definitely not smug!

I made a mental note to practise that distinction in the mirror when I got home.

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Did I happen to mention tardigrades a little while back? Sometimes known as moss piglets or water bears? I did, didn't I? If not, I should have. They're extremely hardy creatures. Tiny but tough. Much tougher than you and I, that's for sure. But as luck would have it they do us no harm. If you accidentally drank several hundred of them in a glass of water, trust me, you'd be fine.

Another thing worth noting: we don't seem to impinge on tardi consciousness. They act as though they're oblivious to us. Presumably we're too big to be seen clearly, just as they're too small. (Analogous to the gulf between Whitehall mandarins and lowly clerical assistants.) But if, in retaliation for having been snubbed and humiliated by tardigrades, we humans – not all of us, just those with rampant paranoia and genocidal tendencies – set about trying to eradicate them, we, or rather they, the paranoids, would fail. Come the apocalypse – and come it most certainly will, and soon, if John of Patmos and his fanatical fanboy Jesus Rodriguez are to be believed – tardigrades will outsurvive us. They and that inveterate landlubber the cockroach.

About cockroaches, least said the better. Ugly, disgusting creatures. Tardigrades, by comparison, are cute and wholesome. If only they were a tiny bit bigger (average length less than a millimetre, a mere dot) they'd be quite cuddly. They're appealing nonetheless, though you have to use a magnifying lens or suchlike to see what the little scamps are doing.

Could there be a pet more suitable for people like me who don't like other people knowing they have pets?

I adopted my tardigrades by accident, and all because of Michael Meikle's misplaced shoe. When, in a moment of madness, I ripped the sole from the upper and revealed the box containing the blood diamonds, a surprisingly large quantity of water that had been trapped in the toecap trickled out and pooled on the desk. Using the flat of my hand as a squeegee, I swept the water into an empty drinking glass. Needless to say, I had no intention of drinking

from the glass, not until it had been thoroughly washed. That meant going to the lavatory, rinsing it in the washbasin, drying it under the roarer (the automatic hand dryer) and refilling it en route to my office from the dribbler (the malfunctioning water cooler, its nipper valve behaving like an eighty-year-old's prostate).

As mentioned earlier, I was unsettled (to put it mildly) by having discovered the blood diamonds. And the explosive kick at my office door did nothing to soothe jangling nerves. I knew I had to dispose of the evidence of my misdeed, and pronto. I was in a blind panic. If not that, I really don't know what possessed me. Before placing the glass on a nearby shelf, I bottoms-upped the sandy, salty water it contained.

For the rest of the day I hid in my office, studiously ignoring the phone's intermittent bleat. The door remained locked – strictly against the rules. But, in my experience, once you've broken one rule, no matter how trivial, there's really no going back; rule after rule gets broken, or shunted aside irrespective of the consequences, which are, more often than not, dire. Yes, dire. But not always. Sometimes, before you know it, you're experiencing something you'd previously been denied, something you hadn't thought possible. Which, truly, I hadn't. Not only was I breathing deeply, I could feel my ribcage flex with every breath. That hadn't happened in a good, long while.

Imagine what it must feel like to be laced into an iron corset. Hard, I know, but give it a try. — Dear oh dear, is that the best you can do? Screwing your face up like that suggests concentration but fools no-one. You might just as well place an elbow on your knee and knuckle your neanderthal brow.

Anyway, because of a childhood trauma (the details of which I won't go into; let's just say that the man I was instructed to call Daddy played musical beds and applied the rod vigorously), and the lightning strike I mentioned earlier (a wild-eyed horse trying to trample me underhoof, its mane and flanks ablaze, smoke and flames streaming out behind it like rocket exhaust), I began to suffer from sleep terrors. They arrived tumultuously, night after night, and still do to this day.

Because of that, or rather those, and other traumas too numerous to mention, that's precisely how I felt: corseted.

Nevermore.

And all because I broke a rule, breathed deeply and busted my stays. Blood was oxygenated, brain stimulated. Eureka! – a moment of revelation, though probably not the kind Rodriguez would approve of.

As if I care a hoot what he thinks.

All my life I'd been a conformist. I simply did what others did and thought nothing of it. But thinking wasn't really my strong suit. Because of chronic sleep deprivation I stumbled around in a permanent fog of bewilderment. If I'd been raised in a family of safe-crackers, in a community in which safe-cracking was considered as good and honorable a way to earn a living as any, I'm sure I too would have become a safe-cracker.

Hang on, that reminds me ...

Something Muat said that might, for once, be pertinent.

He said the Korowai say ... now what was it? — “Among cannibals one eats like a cannibal.” And and and ... something else. Yes: “Cannibals eat missionaries even though they taste horrible.” I suspect that's a rough translation from whatever language the Korowai speak; though not by Muat, he's no linguist. But that's what he said they said. He also said the Korowai say: “What spoils missionary meat, even the choicest cuts, is a surfeit of Christianity. The more fervent the belief, the greater the spoilage.” Also: “Drowned sailors taste salty, sometimes too salty, and only those who've drowned that day provide good eating.”

I mean ... it's nonsense, isn't it? Typical Muat nonsense. Though I suspect he's so deluded he believes every word.

The facts are these:

The Korowai live a long way inland, almost a hundred miles from the coast, and they haven't practised cannibalism for decades. Moreover, even the most zealous members of the Mission of the Reformed Churches eventually (late 1970s or thereabouts) gave up trying to convert them, thus avoiding the risk, negligible though it was, of being pot boiled or, more traditionally, spit roasted.

Pah! Enough about Muat. Let's stick to the topic under discussion: Unthinkingly doing what others do, i.e. conformism.

My parents were career civil servants, so, surprise surprise, here I am, a career civil servant. Other careers were dangled enticingly before me, but I took the easy option, the path of least resistance – precisely what a muzzy-headed, white, middle-class

suburbanite lacking pluck and ambition would be expected to choose. Don't get me wrong, I love my job, it's more than what I do, it's what I am, my *raison d'être*, but ... I've come to realise how restrictive it is and how jaded I've become.

What can I say that hasn't been said before by millions of dead-eyed workers shuffling zombie-like towards retirement? Routine gradually wears you down. The familiarity that once proved comforting causes stress and, eventually, distress, something a luxury spa break in the Cotswolds or a month spent chanting OM in Dharamsala won't fix. And in my case, certain deep, dark yearnings came to light. After the conversation I had with Muat about the Korowai, I realised I had an overwhelming urge to taste human flesh, roast missionary in particular, rank taste notwithstanding. Or, better still, that of a certain born-again Christian of my acquaintance, currently driving a truck in an aid convoy in some strife-stricken dusty hellhole. Yum yum.

I can guess what you're thinking. What's that got to do with tardigrades and a locked office door?

Transgression, laddies – that's what.

When I gulped down that post-shoe sea water, it contained dozens, perhaps scores of marine tardigrades, not that I knew it at the time. Hours later I was lying on the floor, bent double, in pain, bladder full to bursting, in imminent danger of wetting myself. But I was reluctant to leave my office to visit the lavatory in case I bumped into one of my fellow toilers, snoops and snitches to a man. They'd be bound to ask why, strictly against the rules, I'd closed my office door and locked myself in. To which there was no satisfactory answer – not one that would do what I desperately wanted it to do: allay suspicion. And pretending to selective mutism wouldn't work; I'd used that excuse once too often.

There was nothing for it. I unzipped, snatched up the empty drinking glass, and after the first irrepressible gush, which made me moan with relief (handkerchief clamped over mouth to stifle the sound), I filled it, in tricky fits and starts, almost to the brim.

It was obvious at a glance that something was wrong. The urine I'd produced was as dark and murky as ditch water. It didn't have the usual golden hue that looks like liquid sunshine and brightens up a room (as any interior designer worth his salt will tell you); and I mean any room, not just lavatories, bathrooms and en-

suites. I wondered whether this presaged a recurrence of the bladder infection that, several years earlier, ran spectacularly out of control and kept me hospitalised for almost a month, initially on life support. As my vital organs began to fail, not one by one, in an orderly fashion, queueing up politely as we Brits famously do, but all at once, pell-mell, in a race to extinction, I experienced what I later realised were hallucinations – an alligator prowling the corridors at night, nurses with two heads and many arms like Hindu gods, giggles rather than electronic beeps from the heart monitor – though at the time they seemed like aspects of everyday reality, perfectly normal.

Were the wiggly black specks in my urine a hallucination? At first I thought so. But when I sucked several of them up into an eye dropper, squirted them onto a glass slide, deftly inserted the slide under the eye of the microscope (one of the most important tools in our investigative arsenal) and twirled the knurled focusing knob, I saw them clearly, in extraordinary detail, and realised what they were.

Just that week I'd read an article about tardigrades: how they can survive for years trapped in sea ice, or, at the opposite extreme, remain unscathed by the boiling flux from hydrothermal vents; how they're able to fast for inordinate lengths of time; how they can withstand pressure of up to 6,000 atmospheres, more crushing than a car crusher operating at the bottom of the deepest ocean trench; how even the cold, irradiated vacuum of outer space probably cannot kill them. Scientists have speculated that if they manage to reach another planet on which there's liquid water, they'll survive and almost certainly thrive no matter how hostile the environment. Remarkable creatures. And, as all but the churls among us would agree, cute.

Apparently they have a primitive dorsal brain capable of thinking inscrutable tardi thoughts. Not complex thoughts; but that's true also of most humans. Are they blessed with distinct personalities? Do they form friendships with others of their kind? Having worked my way through the extant literature on tardigrades and given every scrap of evidence careful consideration, I'd say, on both counts, albeit tentatively, yes. In which case we're morally bound to act in accordance with their best interests and should treat them with the respect they deserve.

To that end, each of my tardigrades has been given a first

name, by which I mean a different one to that of its fellows, although, of course, as adopted family members they share my surname. I bought *The Really Big Book of Boys' Names* and have been working my way through it. I reached the Ds in less than a month, and I'm currently deep into the Ns. Once all the Ys and Zs have been exhausted, I'll go back to the beginning and start again.

When tardigrades are in an active rather than a tun (dehydrated, hibernatory) state they rarely live for more than a year, so a book as big as this should be capable of providing a name for each and every one of them without risk of duplication and, thereby, confusion. If, however, some of my tardis live longer than expected, or their numbers increase exponentially and I exhaust the alphabet without having named them all, then, when I start again at the beginning, I'll bestow on the newbies a middle name, usually the next one in the book. For example, if Aaden Bagley is still among the living, rather than give his name to another, probably younger tardigrade, the youngster will be dubbed Aaden Aaron Bagley. Likewise, the tardi elder known as Bailey Bagley will be joined in unholy namelock by Bailey Baldwin Bagley. You get the picture. One could, of course, use the suffixes snr and jr, but it isn't always possible to tell which tardigrade is the older of the two. There's also the numerical system our American cousins favour, whereby Cosmo Bagley's firstborn son would be known as Cosmo Bagley II, and the firstborn son of Bagley the second would be Cosmo Bagley III. A neat solution, if unimaginative. But what disqualifies it isn't that, or not principally that, it's that it doesn't chime with how we Brits have gone about naming our children for, well, forever. Otherwise known as tradition. Such things matter, to me if not you.

You're probably wondering whether it's hard for even an experienced surrogate parent such as myself to tell the members of his tardi brood apart. Am I right? 'Betcha phat ass, bub!' as one of the callow Cosmo Bagleys might say. And monitoring tardi breeding habits is harder still. Although they'll all eventually be granted a name – male, as stated – I'm aware that some of them will undoubtedly but unidentifiably be female. Every evening for hours on end I watch them, eyes glued to the microscope (yes, I also have one at home, a scanning electron jobbie bought at knockdown price in a forensics lab yard sale), but I can't say I've witnessed a single instance of sexual congress. Not one. Nor even a suggestion of courtship or

foreplay. Yet still the births outnumber the deaths by a ratio of 3:1.

You may also be wondering whether I have a favourite tardigrade. Actually, I do. I know it's wrong to play favourites, but one quirky specimen immediately caught my eye. Because of his antics I can pick him out of a crowd without any trouble at all. Quite honestly, were I to be reincarnated in tardi form (which I really wouldn't mind, I'd consider it an upgrade) he's the one I'd most like to be like. There's a bond between us, indefinable on his part, but there, I'm sure, nonetheless. You'll just have to take my word for it. It may amount to nothing more than a faint awareness of being observed (known to those in the know as the Hawthorne effect), of being singled out, i.e. favoured (if he's an optimist, as I think by nature most tardigrades are), instigating a series of unconscious behavioural shifts in a blind search for more of the same (the feelgood factor). But it works both ways. Whenever I see or even just think of him, I experience an endorphin rush. A warm glow swells in my chest and filters through to my extremities. In that moment I feel more alive than I've ever felt. It's love, I suppose. That's why I gave him the benefit of my own name: Buster Bagley.

What? — What's that you're mumbling? — *Everyone knows that tardigrades can't survive passage through the human digestive tract. The acid in our gut would kill them.*

You're wrong, young man. About that and, presumably, many other things.

The arrogance of youth.

Sopping wet behind the ears.

What could you possibly know about anything at your tender age, you're barely out of nappies?

What's your name, son?

Michael Santos, eh?

Oh, *Miguel Santos. Miguel.* My apologies.

Well, Señor Smartypants, let me tell you — gut acid weakens tardigrades somewhat, but only somewhat. Survive they most certainly do. No matter what you and the pointy heads in the scientific community say about tardi gut deaths, my thriving colony of tardigrades proves you're wrong. Although tardigrades are unable to bear witness, and probably wouldn't wish to do so even if they could, preferring to maintain a dignified silence, *a strategy you should consider adopting*, the facts speak for themselves.

Actually, when I say colony, that's misleading. There are two colonies, one at home, the other at work. Hence I'm *doubly transgressive*. The home colony consists of Buster and those of his fellow tardis whose names run the gamut from A to M. The Ns onward are housed in a small perspex tank in my office, tucked away on a high shelf behind a row of ancient lever arch folders. The folders themselves contain nothing of interest to anyone now living; and the dead, for whom such things once mattered, are beyond caring. Of all the folders in my office, those are the only ones that never get touched, except with a half-hearted flick from a feather duster.

It comforts me to know that my tardigrades are safe from harmful scrutiny. By which I mean, of course, Oaf – have I mentioned him? Principally Oaf, because he's there in my office nearly all the time, spying on me. But Muat, too, who's almost as bad.

Speaking of the Hawthorne effect: that's probably what Rodriguez is suffering from. The poor deluded fool thinks God is watching over him 24/7, giving him the kind of gimlet-eyed scrutiny that would, in any other circumstance, be considered not just invasive but downright creepy. Stalkers aspire to that kind of thing but, by dint of occasionally having to sleep, they fall short of their own high expectations.

Quoth Rodriguez:

“Since that miraculous day when, with God's blessing and under His close personal supervision, I was – *Praise the Lord!* – born again, planes have crashed and ships have sunk in greater numbers than ever before. Not to mention workmen falling off ladders or electrocuting themselves or both. Car crashes. Accidental overdoses. Trips, slips and spills. A million different ways to die a million times a day. In the last year alone the loss of life has been heavier than at any time since the First World War dovetailed with the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918, and” – his voice cracked piteously on a sob – “*and it's all my fault!*”

That's what he said. Deadly serious. No hint of irony. He said he'd been keeping tabs on things, especially merchant shipping in the so-called Bermuda Triangle. Also in another large maritime area, the absurdly titled New Bermuda Triangle, which he described as a 'psychic dead zone in the East China Sea'.

“And something similar is happening just off the Isles of

Scilly. Small scale by comparison, as you'd expect in that part of the world. Devourer of rowboats, pedalos, jet skis, and most recently a blind canoeist who paddled in circles for nearly a week before, dehydrated, exhausted and frustrated to the point of tears, tears which wouldn't come, he died. His sonic compass was giving him scrambled instructions because of the zone's powerful magnetic ambivalence."

Powerful ambivalence, eh? That's a first.

"The canoeist story was all over social media a couple of weeks ago, but within hours the posts had mysteriously been taken down."

Hmm.

Anyone of sound mind and rational thought will conclude that divine scrutiny, no matter how loving, is all but indistinguishable from divine punishment.

I think Rodriguez, though unsound as a cracked bell, was beginning to realise that, too.

"I feel a burning sense of guilt for all those deaths," he wailed (yes, wailed, that's no exaggeration). "Lives lost because, during the time I was being adored – which was, basically, all the time, even while I slept – God was neglecting his other duties. And I wallowed in it, *actually wallowed*, as if in a warm, soothing bath enriched not with aromatic oils or crystals but love, unconditional love. *Oh, the shame! How can I ever forgive myself?*"

I confess: I laughed in his face. A heartless cackle. Come on, admit it, you'd have done the same thing, too. But Rodriguez looked stunned. He'd solicited sympathy – not much, just a quantum – from an old colleague. And what did he get? What he richly deserved, in my opinion. Drenched with Godly love as he was, or thought he was, he seemed to have forgotten that I hate him, have done so since the moment we met, and he in turn has always hated me. We not only hate each other, we also hate our fellow toilers. That's how it is in workplaces; all of them, not just branches of the Civil Service. Which is why, in the USA, there are so many workplace shootings by disgruntled employees, current or ex. Easy access to guns is a contributory factor. But even in the UK guns can be procured without too much trouble, especially here in London. Adolescents with parents-in-crime or weekend and holiday gang connections waltz them through the school gates, wrapped in their gym kit, and swap

them for shoplifted Xbox shoot-'em-ups, Nike trainers and iPhones. There's one in my briefcase right now. You don't believe me? No? Because I have a mischievous twinkle in my eye? — Oh, but you should.

We'll come back to that in a moment.

Hatred, not love, is what binds us together. Without it, society would collapse. It's super-concentrated in prisons because of the inability of inmates to get, in stir crazy parlance, 'the fuck away' from each other, but the death toll remains low because combatants have to rely on makeshift weapons.

As for politics: the electorate hate MPs of all parties, and the MPs hate each other and, to an almost pathological degree, the electorate.

Hatred makes the world go round in an eccentric orbit that swings us nearer to Mars than Venus.

So I laughed long and loud, without the slightest hint of mirth, and the self-pitying look on Rodriguez's face was replaced by something baleful. That, I thought, is the Rodriguez of old, the pre-rebirth version, as unlikable a man as any I'd met but infinitely preferable to the one he'd become. His born-again manner was treacherous and odious. It, therefore he, reeked of insincerity. He'd even taken to smiling now and then, if you can call it that. Cold, cold eyes and a baring of teeth. What TV reality stars and apes do when all the warning signs have been ignored and they're about to launch a vicious attack.

Much better to get hatred out in the open.

Like now, with you.

I could tell Rodriguez was thinking ugly, unChristian thoughts — perhaps of roasting me alive and tearing into my flesh with his remarkably vulpine teeth. Even if I tasted like the kind of person he thought I was: vile.

Or if you prefer your letters lightly shuffled: evil.

But it gave me pause. The way God looks at Rodriguez (according to Rodriguez) is similar to how I look at Buster — and I'm no god, not by a long chalk, unless there's a god of schadenfreude.

Perhaps there is.

If not, perhaps there should be.