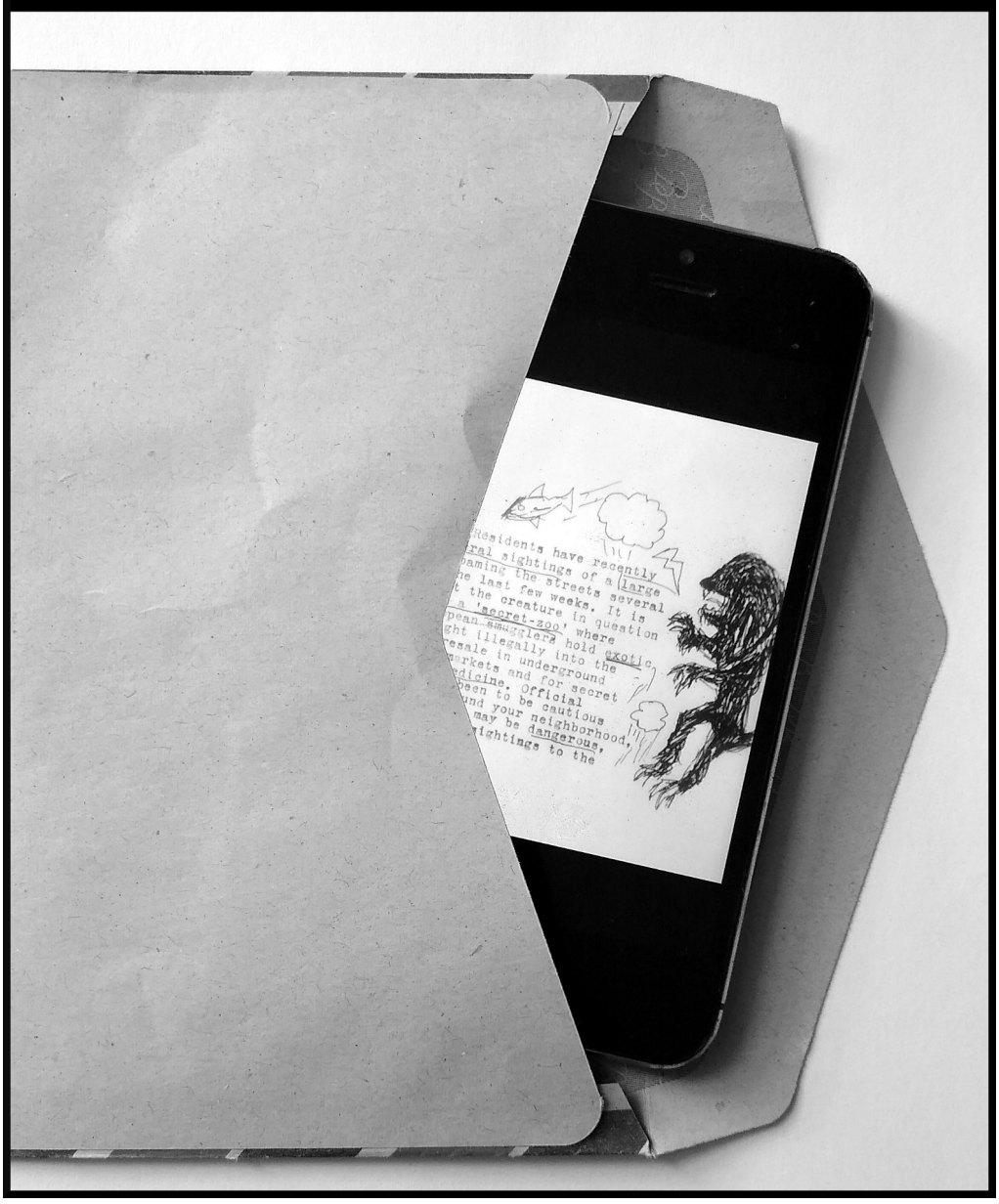
The Perlectionists

or

The Letter Lighteners

by M. Lazarus



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"Some of these many words may be true and some may not, but the only reliable fact of the matter is that the Devil himself would have a troublesome time sorting out which are which."

-Mark Twain

1. On Buses

The bus timetable looked all new and shiny, but that could be misleading. There was no way to tell precisely how recent it was, or how accurate. The list of times floated somewhere in the uncertain and vast space between fact and fiction, which was something all the passengers understood on some level, although at that moment they were mildly miffed because the timetable was leaning more towards fiction than usual that morning. He squinted at it and yawned. There was a morning haze that may have been part atmospheric and part damp sleep still hovering in his eyes. If one was the sort to place their faith in what was printed on the timetable, the bus was a few minutes late, but youthful as he was, he had gathered enough experience of morning commuting that he took the whole thing philosophically and stared blankly instead at the blue-grey sky. When he was a child, he had wanted to be an astronaut, which was ridiculous, not just because he didn't really know exactly what an astronaut did when he was a small lad, but also because he used to get so dizzy even on a merry-go-round that he threw up dramatically. He wouldn't last three seconds in any of those gravity-simulating whirly things astronauts trained in that you see in videos. Later, at the confusing and panicked end of school, he thought maybe he could be an interpreter. Perhaps for the U.N. or something like that. All those foreigner types would probably need a bit of a hand occasionally with all that important world policy stuff, he had imagined. But it turned out that a smattering of stilted language doesn't really stack up much when compared with brilliantly multi-lingual children who grew up and down international borders, many of whom were not only fluent in the different languages of their parents, but even had a mastery of English that was probably better than his own. Nowadays, he considered himself wildly linguistically successful if he could go to another country and be served what he thought he had ordered. In the end he went to university anyway, for want of something better to do.

Now, if anybody asked, he told them he was an Online Use Case Manager. This was the official stuff they were handed out in the torrents of orientation material when he had started the job. He still had piles of unreadable brochures stacked up somewhere, glossy page after page that achieved that brilliant modern trick of giving you lots of things to read, but keeping any meaning tightly locked up and hidden far out of sight. When he'd first started, he'd been so desperate to step out on an impressive footing that he'd read everything they handed him several times, taking notes and highlighting so much text that the unhighlighted sections stood out more for not being a fluorescent yellow or pink. Oh, how he had progressed since those callow, early nervous steps! Nowadays, after several years of practice he had developed his skills at reading withholding reports and oblique outlines to the extent that, while he still often failed to understand what they were saying, it no longer worried him so much, which was, he considered, some sort of progress. The important thing when tackling a report, he had slowly worked out, was to understand why

someone had written the particular cryptic memorandum, rather than getting too bogged down in how the letters and words were supposed to have any connection to the conception of clarity or meaning in a literate human civilisation. No, he had come to realise that the why was more important than the what. For instance, had the report been written to cover someone in case of the possibility of storms from on high? Had it been written to bring attention to the writer? Had it been distributed as a desperate delaying tactic, to make it seem like some work had been done when nobody had even started? Was it, in contrast, written by one of his many colleagues who had been trained to truly believe that a long gabble of impenetrable nonsense was what good work was supposed to look like? A good deal of his day was spent in weighing up these various possibilities. In his weaker moments, he had his doubts about his current role. Was this an interesting and productive way to spend the day, he wondered? (Probably not?) Is this how most people felt at work? (Probably yes.) He had, after all, only been in the grown-up world for a handful of years. Was this what most everyone who wasn't a hang-glider or deep sea diver doing behind their desks all day? Perhaps he was missing out on all the important stuff? Surely the captivating work, the important work must be somewhere around, and if only he could prove himself, say the right things, write the right reports, they'd let him sink his teeth into the interesting work, whatever that might look like.

The job he had, such as it was, was for the government, in something like Intelligence. This sounded exciting in his own head for the first few weeks at the department, but it had slowly dawned on him that it wasn't. It wasn't a very important department, with the not at all exciting designation of CB4, but they were doing their small bit, he understood (or tried to understand) to try and keep Britain and (certain parts of) the World, if not safe, at least less confusing. CB4, if one was allowed to speak plainly about the little department, was not really grand enough to be called a branch of the Intelligence services, but was really more of a twig, growing awkwardly down low and off to the side somewhere. In that twig the good folk of CB4 dealt broadly in keeping an eye on mis and dis, which is to say misinformation and disinformation - the whole broad spectrum of unintentionally to very intentionally untrue thoughts whizzing about the world at all times like a great chaotic swarm of noisy, illogical, delusional and confused bees. The business of CB4 was the constant reading of half-truths, quarter-truths, almost full untruths, rumours, misleading information, and good old-fashioned outright bald-faced blatant lies.

He had been working at CB4 for two and a half years now, and everyone was nice enough in the department, but he wished they'd stop calling him the Ingenu. It made him feel like he had to carry around his passport to prove he was old enough to work there, except he wasn't even the youngest person in the department any more. He was a proper adult, more or less! It maddened him that he still seemed like a fresh-faced schoolboy to his superiors. Was there something wrong with his face? He spent a lot of time examining it in reflections. If he was alone, he would frown and lower his brow, imagining he was in a serious, blurred black and white photograph. He had to admit he

struggled to convince himself, and once a pack of schoolchildren on their way had caught sight of his experimental frowning and burst into immediate snickers, which wasn't a good indication for the authority of his face. Perhaps he'd have a better chance of promotion and respect if he grew a beard? Unfortunately, the Ingenu could only grow the right half of a wispy moustache, so that plan was probably out.

Strategic Analytics is what he told people he did for a living. There was a whole paragraph of official obscurantist waffle put out by the office that they were supposed to use if anybody asked, but almost nobody had ever asked any follow-up questions, so perfectly boring did his job sound.

The Ingenu supposed he could have made a real, proper spy. Not the sort of dramatic dashing international jet-setter, but the quiet, forgettable type who goes about their business without anyone noticing. He would probably have made a good proper spy because, if he was honest, he was terribly unremarkable, an extreme case of the usual. When he was travelling to work, he was just one of many similar-looking individuals going about their unimportant business. On bored commutes he would count how many people at the stop or on the train carriage or the platform could be mistaken for him. He sometimes had to stop from this little game when he got towards double figures because then he would start quietly but nervously wondering whether there was anything distinctive about being himself and indeed, if there were so many near versions of him about the place whether he was actually in any real sense himself at all. This would give him a mild existential crisis at a quarter to eight in the morning, and that sort of thinking didn't make commuting any more pleasant and was to be avoided.

While waiting for the bus some more, he pondered the lunch he had sleepily bought himself on the way. We are surrounded by wonders, the Ingenu thought to himself. Here I am, an average (slightly above average? Don't fool yourself) human, and I have the power to buy my lunch with a casual flick of the wrist and a wave of an electronic card at a reader-device perched in front of a young lady who appears to be staring into the very beyond, and by a process of physics that is so far beyond my understanding that it might as well be magic, sparks of information fly about the place, check my unimpressive bank balance and decide that I am fit to buy a wrapped bacon sandwich and a packet of salt and vinegar crisps. What an age to live in! What extraordinary advancements lie behind the packet of crisps - the invention of industrial chemical processes to make the packaging, not to mention the carefully calculated chemical composition of the salt and vinegar crisps themselves. Can we but help look back on past ages and weep that they had to add salt and vinegar to their crisps themselves, or even more tragically, that they might have had the misfortune to have been born in an age when crisps were not even yet invented! How bright and shining and mysterious this present future is!

There was a time, which feels like it was approximately one hundred thousand years ago, when if

you wanted to find out what people were up to, it was a slow and cumbersome process, just like everything back in the embarrassingly unsophisticated past of humanity where you couldn't pay for crisps by card. In those days, if you were suspicious about what people were up to, you had two choices: you could find a sneaky way to ask them - a time intensive and risky proposition, or else you could find a way to read what they wrote to each other. In the olden times, people wrote things down - wrote almost everything down, not just birthday wishes from grandma or unwittily lewd postcards. In the paper days when words had to physically travel tucked up in an envelope from one place to another, if you were a government and wanted to find out what hidden threats might be about, you had to find a way to read the mail. Today things were much easier, but at the same time, much harder. On the one hand, things were much easier because everything was written with electricity and computers and phones and was flying all about the place, and if someone like the Ingenu wanted to find out what people were thinking or worrying about or believing in, you didn't have to break into their paper mail, because people couldn't help saying every single little thought out loud on the internet somewhere. The downside was that there was quite a lot more thoughts to have to trawl through, as there was almost no barrier between thinking something and slapping it out there. The Ingenu's job, and indeed that of his department, mostly consisted of reading the fragmentary online correspondence of the millions and millions of modern extroverts who insisted that their almost every idea should be made available to the public.

There were all sorts of moral questions about the whole job of information gathering, questions that the Ingenu felt he was probably unqualified to answer. In any case, there was a sense that the little department beneath a department underneath a section where they worked at their small contribution to untangling the hidden meaning of the world was itself something of a quaint artefact with a few unconvincing coats of shiny modernish paint thrown on. The truth of the matter was that private companies were streets ahead of a little government department when it came to hoovering up the clouds of information that floated in the ether like plankton. CB4 and their department of humble human eyeballs was a very small fish in comparison to the behemoths of the deep, but the Ingenu knew (or at least wanted to believe that he knew) that their work was probably somewhat important. A human being saw things. Humans, even government-employed humans, were important for understanding why other humans said and thought the things they did.

If the Ingenu ever went to parties (he tried not to) and somebody asked what he actually did for a crust (nobody had so far), in this imaginary scenario, he would grin wryly, take a sip from his martini, and confess that he looked at the internet all day, except unlike most people he got paid for it. This was always a hit in his mind. The truth, however, was that this was true and that it also wasn't funny. The Ingenu hated the internet, because he had to spend all his time trudging through the most sluggish stagnant waters of the stuff. CB4 was a department devoted to finding and understanding the spread of things that were not true. This is tricky, because the world is now full of very junky information. One of the senior individuals in the department, a walrus-moustached

man called the Luncher was a sort of leftover from an older version of the department, and he was given to reminiscing how in his day if, say, a foreign nation wanted to spread a ridiculously false story, they would have to find a way to get it into a newspaper (an actual physical newspaper!) and then convince other people to reprint that story, and then others, and then cross your fingers and hope that enough citizens read the untruth to make it worth all this effort. Things were much easier now. You didn't even need to be a foreign power with extensive disinformation networks. You could get boozed up on a Friday night on tins of lager, post a semi-incoherent rant deep into the night, and if the tides were just right, whatever stupid thing you had burped up might just be picked up by other people and repeated and repeated and repeated, until so many people were saying the same thing that no matter how stupid it was, it now had the seeming weight of numbers behind it. The magic was in how you got the idea to spread. If you were a sizeable nation with a modest budget, or a group of like-minded people with deep enough pockets, you could increase your chances by automating a bunch of online cardboard cut-outs to make it look like a lot of people were already keen on your idea and that it was a jolly good idea, or you could even pay a lot of actual human beings to do much the same thing and behave like they are automated machines, depending on your budget and preference.

Even in this bright modern wonder age of salt and vinegar crisps, there is still a lot of mystery about how a thought tips over into popular transmission, but one thing we do know is that people tend to like something that they think a lot of other people already like. If you examine the whole process of tracking conspiracy theories and internet pile-ons from one particular angle, if you squinted your eyes tight, the Ingenu and the staff of CB4 were helping the heart and soul not just of the nation, but of the entire world! Behind the ordinary-looking façade on an unremarkable street, just opposite a surprisingly good small falafel takeaway place, there the Ingenu toiled, and it was worthwhile (probably!), and someday soon, people would sit up and take notice of the fine work he did and nod proudly in his direction!

Having worked himself up to this frenzied pitch of early morning enthusiasm, the Ingenu managed, miraculously, to maintain it as he swiped his ID card the three or four times needed to make it register, managed to get the door open without too much awkward fumbling (a good omen!), marched on down the corridor pointedly ignoring the peeling orange patterned carpet that no decade would want to claim, said 'Morning,' to the cheery Security Guard fellow sitting at his little desk in what he hoped sounded like a gruff authoritative voice. Security beamed at the Ingenu, and the Ingenu soaked up that motivational positivity, ignoring the thought that the Security always smiled delightedly at whomever walked through the door. No, away with cloudy thoughts! The sun shone on the Ingenu today! Into the lift, hum along some inspiring music to himself - today was his to seize!

It was the pot plants that finally knocked this fragile structure of confidence down in a passing

second. The boss of CB4, the Madame Char, had insisted that their department should have very specific natural decorative touches. Madame Char was a big believer in improving your working surroundings in order to benefit your inner spirit. She had thought long and hard about what plants she wanted to greet you in a leafy honour guard as you came to the offices of CB4. Unfortunately, whatever sort of plants they were (the Ingenu enjoyed the outdoors and nature, but had never been too keen on getting on a first-name basis with it) they were not doing at all well. Their once proud fronds had started to droop with sickly despair. Madame Char's bloody-minded optimising of the workplace had a practical streak, and it was said that she had chosen these particular fern-things after extensive research not just because they were sure to lift the spirits of her department with green cheer, but also because they were supposed to be hard to kill. And yet, the entrance plants were dying, and nobody had any idea why. The Ingenu found this inexplicably depressing, and, deflated at the sight of the sickly ferns, he slouched in towards his desk.

Twitchwell was already there. Was she early? Had she gone home? She was quite small. It was conceivable that she made a little burrow for herself under her desk to sleep in cosily overnight. Or he might be late. The Ingenu dug around in his pocket until he managed to locate his phone, giving it a sneaky glance. If the time was to be trusted, he was a few minutes late, a direct result of the fluid approach to truth of public transport timetables. He scanned the room. Nobody seemed to have noticed. He wasn't that late anyway. Maybe the clock on his phone was wrong. The Ingenu silently squeezed into his chair, and took a painful long time to shrug off his jacket inch by inch so nobody would notice that he had only just arrived, holding his breath to retain the spell of invisibility. Twitchwell was already hard at work with her three computer screens. Twitchwell, despite her youth, actually knew quite a lot about the whole computery side of things, and in fact was the only permanent member of CB4 who actually knew more than the first thing about programming. The fact that she had this knowledge, that she had basically grown up from the cradle understanding the nuts and bolts of this stuff made the Ingenu vaguely nervous for his own future. And another thing! Twitchwell was at least several years younger than him! Why wasn't she the Ingénue? She was the youngest person working here - in any sane universe, she should get stuck with the constant references to youthful potential, not him.

Twitchwell was drinking one of her tall tin cans of ungodly energy drink. She was such a small thing, she almost needed two hands to hold the can as she took minuscule sips, like a tiny mouse drinking from a metal barrel. A mouse who had to keep pushing her thick black glasses back up her nose, who squinted at everything. A mouse who would probably get promoted over the Ingenu. A mouse who surely shouldn't be drinking that much energy drink. He could smell the powerful sweet, thick stuff from over here. It smelt like it should be bright purple. If she kept chugging the stuff, she might end up feeling bright purple. Out of the corner of his eye, the Ingenu tried to see if he could catch sight of the drink to confirm his suspicions about its colour, but no luck.
"Are you sure you wouldn't prefer a nice cup of tea?" the Ingenu called out.

"Holy Cats!" Twitchwell shrieked, almost falling out of her chair, spilling energy drink everywhere. The Ingenu was disappointed to find out that it looked to be a sort of dull fizzing pink when it pooled on Twitchwell's desk.
"Sorry, sorry," Twitchwell said, mopping up the spillages with a comically large chequered red and black handkerchief. "I didn't even see you there."
"You don't need to apologise," the Ingenu said pointlessly. Twitchwell was easily startled and apologised for everything. It was like a mantra for her.
Twitchwell looked for somewhere to put her soggy handkerchief. She always had a collection of small cartoonish cat-ish cutesy figurines that Ingenu presumed were from a comic or a game or some other thing he had never heard of. Twitchwell shuffled around four or five figurines and spread out the handkerchief on top to dry. It looked like the figurines were taking part in a parade.
"Sorry," Twitchwell added. She reached to open another tin of fizzy energetic vitamins, but the Ingenu held up his hands.
"How about I make us a cup of tea instead?"
Twitchwell nodded reluctantly.
"Yes. Right. Sorry."

Not only was making a cup of tea for someone else the sort of low-level minimal effort task that allowed the Ingenu to think of himself as an all right sort of chap, he could now delay reading his morning fusillade of emails. A good deal of his work, he had come to realise over the last year, was deciding what emails to read, which ones to respond to soonish, and which ones to avoid, in case opening the email would mean he would be forced to do something about some entirely unpleasant, impossible, or useless task, or in fact some combination of the three. Looking at your email in the morning had a risky Schroedinger's quality. There may be things in there that it was better not to see, but there was no way of telling if that was true until you actually opened your inbox. As his experience grew, the Ingenu in his more light headed moments fancied that he might be developing some mild psychic sensitivity that allowed him to predict the number and intensity of potentially hazardous emails to be avoided.

The kitchen in the CB4 department would never make it to a showroom or a brochure or a television program hosted by an overly enthusiastic architect. It did however feature such mod cons as a sink, a plastic table with several chairs (none of which sat quite right on all four legs at the same time), a perfectly functional hard-working kettle that looked like it had been nicked from a hotel a decade ago, an unreliable microwave that smelled just a little bit funny but of no particular smell you could put your finger on, a collection of cracked mugs about which there were very strict unspoken rules concerning who could use which, and a very small gently wheezing fridge. Ingenu put too much water in the kettle for two people. He unconsciously always filled the kettle over the top line, one of the many irrational kitchen habits we all unknowingly have. In this case, the Ingenu's mother, who was a hardcore user of hot water, had always been irritated if anyone boiled

the kettle and there wasn't spare hot water for hypothetical purposes. While the kettle worked away, the Ingenu bent down and browsed in the fridge. They were well treated by Madame Char at CB4, and were not just provided with this humble setting to rest their weary selves from the endless fight against untruth, but even with a modest supply of essentials. The cupboards were well stocked not just with the standard sort of bulk-bought tins of coffee and gigantic boxes of teabags found in departmental kitchens across the nation, but even three or four other shades of tea on the herbal-green spectrum. As the head of department, Madame Char was a firm believer of the old saw of the healthy mind in a healthy body. The general importance of healthy living was, in fact, something of a driving obsession for Madame Char. She waged this minor war against unhealthy office practices with gritted determination. She knew that such battles were not to be won in a single instant, but she had committed to the long haul in the quest to improve her employees' health. Madame Char had, for instance, with great difficulty slowly phased out the worst of the sweet biscuits, marching her weary recalcitrant troops towards the better(?) tomorrow of the rice cake. Dragging her department step by step towards this goal had been a gruelling task, and now after many years of quiet work, she had progressed in her campaign far enough that CB4 would satisfy their break-time hunger with rice-cakes, although her troops would still only accept the sort of rice-cakes that had chocolate on top. Success, as Madame Char told herself, was made up of a thousand small victories.

The kettle announced that it had finished boiling with a click and a sigh, and when two bags were luxuriating in hot water, the Ingenu hunted through the fridge for some milk. He looked again. There were various wrapped lunches and labelled pots of yoghurt. Madame Char naturally encouraged people to make their lunch rather than get take-out, although even she conceded that the falafel place across the road was rather good. No matter how many times the Ingenu looked over the sandwiches and tupperware containers, he still could not make any milk spring into existence by sheer power of his looking. He closed and opened the door of the fridge experimentally a few times, as if this could suddenly reveal the missing white stuff. No good. There was supposed to be milk. That was part of the expected daily provender of their humble kitchen. Maybe there hadn't been any delivered today?
"Has anybody seen The Milk?" he shouted out the door, as if somebody unsporting had the best part of a bottle of the stuff stashed under their desk.
"No, but I don't get out to see new bands much these days," some unknown wit shouted back. The Ingenu scowled, and opened the fridge again.

Ingenu handed Twitchwell a hot mug that had somehow infiltrated the department from a place called the Wonderful World of Frogs! The cartoon frog on the mug was so faded that it would be difficult to swear in a court of law that this is what was actually being represented on the mug. Nobody in the office had any memory of going to a place called the Wonderful World of Frogs, nor in fact did they have any definite memory of such a place ever having existed.
"Sorry," the Ingenu said as he handed Twitchwell the sad unmilked mug of tea, proving that he

could communicate in Twitchwell's own language.
Twitchwell took the tea with awkward head bobs, had a sip and immediately burned her tongue. She really didn't even much like tea, but even though she would not consider herself to be the most perceptive person when it came to social cues and customs, it had slowly dawned on her that while CB4 was part of the great information war, it was in another and almost equally important sense, also a place for making cups of tea. Twitchwell would much rather open another can of energy drink, but now that the Ingenu had made her this gosh darned tea, she didn't want to offend him or the local customs, and so she would have to pretend that the tip of her tongue was not in pain and she would have to drink through this super-heated tasteless stuff. Unlike tea, what Twitchwell liked about an energy drink was that it gave you a wakeful kick straight to the tummy. Twitchwell was always terrified of her attention wandering, and sugary caffeine and whatever extracts they put in her tins, she thought, kept her focussed, although admittedly just a little shaky. Tea, on the other hand, took forever to do anything. In fact, Twitchwell was not sure that the caffeine in tea even affected her. Who had the time to find out? Who had time for cups of tea? What Twitchwell did not yet understand, and even the Ingenu was only beginning to have the first inklings of, was that tea itself was time. Coffee and energy juice are for speed and productivity. Tea is for waiting and thinking and avoiding. In the long-gone days of an old Intelligence hand like the Luncher, people had probably sat around all day in great grey fugs of pipe smoke, puffing away thoughtfully with wrinkled brows as they thought about what secret spy shenanigans the world was up to. Smoking having rather gone out of fashion, what better time-wasting social habit to take up the slack in the department than tea? Twitchwell took another sip and wondered if it would taste of something if you put sugar in it. It hadn't occurred to the Ingenu to put sugar in Twitchwell's tea for the same reason he put too much water in the kettle - the mighty silent power of unexamined habit.

Twitchwell's tongue still hurt. She wondered if the skin was coming off, and stuck it out slowly and experimentally, crossing her eyes. She couldn't see anything.
"Goodness. Sorry." she said out loud, in case anyone had caught sight of her sticking her tongue out and going cross-eyed. Twitchwell said "Goodness. Sorry.", but in her mind she would much rather be using more robust and stormy swearing language. Twitchwell never swore, although she often thought that she would very much like to, and swear very loudly at that - screaming at the large oblivious man who took up so much space on the train this morning for instance, crushing her into a tiny little uncomfortable shape. But she never swore. Every time she thought about unleashing some spicy curse words, Twitchwell found herself confronted by the image of her Nana and wondered what she would say about that. Nana would say No. Nana radiated very strong and clear opinions about almost every aspect of human behaviour, most of them intricate variations of disapproval. Nana might live in a flatlet at the end of Twitchwell's parents' garden, but her reach was unlimited.

In many ways, Twitchwell had a bad habit of disapproving of herself. Here she was, with worthy

work, a solid reliable job, and yet, despite her qualifications and training in many aspects of data and online networks, she felt a constant dread of being fired at any moment. It always felt like she was missing some extra bit of training, some unlearned skill. There was always some gap between what she thought she knew and what everyone else did, and that gap made Twitchwell very confused and anxious. She had, for instance, felt that bottomless gap opening up at an incredibly tense meeting with a senior individual in which she had failed to explain clearly that the reason an external government department (nothing to do with them here, thank goodness, sorry) didn't have working security software was because it had been bought, configured, but never actually switched on. Twitchwell knew many computer languages, but did not know the sort of language that could explain these things to other people. Paradoxically, Twitchwell also viewed her having this particular job as a sign that she was a failure at doing her job. If she was really good at this sort of coding and data management, why would she be working for the government? Surely if she was a success in the field, she'd be working on an app to disrupt, say, brushing your teeth, making it a seamless networked online experience that made venture capitalists giddy at the thought of flinging cash in every direction? Shouldn't she be in San Francisco? Shouldn't she be joining up at a big social media company, the sort of place with twenty three ping-pong tables and free ice-cream available at any time, where none of the workers ever go home? Twitchwell didn't know anything about San Francisco. She found getting the Tube to her desk at CB4 stressful enough. Imagine how stressful it would be to get to San Francisco. At only a few years out of university, Twitchwell already felt as if she may have got it all wrong - that she wasn't good enough to be a cool young programmer (maybe with a skateboard?) and she wasn't sure she was ever doing any form of the right thing here at CB4. She feared that at any moment, someone would come up to her sternly, shake their head, and tell her that she wasn't supposed to be here and that she must leave. Often, she imagined that a button would be pressed and a trap-door would open, dropping her into endless darkness. Twitchwell was afraid of heights. Also darkness, a little bit. Also being revealed as a fraud. And crocodiles, too, although that was just common sense. Given her constant state of uncertainty, Twitchwell spent a lot of her waking hours, and a fair proportion of her sleeping hours, worrying.

The Ingenu sat at his desk, took a sip from his mug (white with jaunty red polka dots), sighed out some steam and a prayer, and opened his email. Worse luck, his eye was drawn to a message from the Luncher. He stared at it for some time and wondered if he could just not open it. Come now! the Ingenu said to himself, am I not a grown adult man fellow? Am I not a professional working to keep the nation safe, or at least safer - safeish? He opened the email with a flourish of a click, pleased at his moral fortitude. The email said:

PLEASE SEE ME WHEN CONVENIENT.

He stared intently at this single sentence for some time, trying to force the line to tell him why the Luncher might want to see him. Was it for something good? No, it was probably for something bad.

Had he screwed anything up recently in an especially noteworthy fashion? His mind was suddenly blank of anything except this email. No doubt one might expect the Ingenu to gnash his teeth and mutter to himself that if the Luncher wanted to tell him something, he could save everyone a lot of time and just type out the rest of what he wanted to say. Or at least a hint. In his early days at CB4, the Ingenu might well have been filled with such sour grumblings, but he knew better now, and he did not blame the Luncher for his mysteriousness. The Luncher hardly ever actually put any information in his office messages. Possibly this was because of his old-school caution about careless talk (or typing). The Luncher was reluctant to ever put anything in writing that might be used against him, or the department, or indeed, that might be used in any way at all. This would have seemed ridiculous to the Ingenu when he first started working in the fight against online misinformation. How could he work with an old man who treated messaging systems like they were telegrams? The Luncher might as well have just shouted out his message from inside his office - his voice was loud and booming enough, and in fact this was a method of communication the old man used often.

The Ingenu dragged himself towards the Luncher's office. He knocked and looked down at his shoes, wondering how long it had been since he had cleaned them and wishing it hadn't been so long that he couldn't remember. At the moment, the Ingenu felt like he was being called in to see the deputy headmaster. He knocked on the door and the Luncher bellowed 'Come!'. The Ingenu would much rather go, operating on his usual uncertainty principle of if bad news exists, it is much better to not know about it. But he'd knocked now. He couldn't just scurry off and pretend he hadn't been there. (Could he?) No, no, best to go in and see what it was about.

The Luncher was sat behind his desk writing in a leather-bound ledger. He sported close-cropped hair, a grey moustache, and aggressively correct posture even when sitting down. He reminded the Ingenu of an old colonial Major in an oldie-times film. The Luncher gave little away, and perhaps the walrus moustache was an aid in his inscrutability, giving him something to hide his severe military thoughts. His office was lined with books, many of them the ancient sort of sturdy, thick tomes nobody can afford to make any more. Most of them were leather-bound, too, and although the Ingenu often felt his gaze wandering guiltily away from the steely eyes of the Luncher over to the relatively safe territory of the books, he could rarely make out what they were about, as they were so sombrely dark and worn by the passage of ages that you could hardly read what was written along their spines. The Ingenu assumed that most of them were probably overly detailed history books about lesser-known ancient wars, like 'The Latter Half of the Turco-Franco Excise Conflict of late Saturday Afternoon, 1754, with added endnotes'. That seemed the sort of thing the Luncher would prefer to read on his tea breaks. The books were not just there to show that the Luncher was an orderly, regimented reader (although he was), it was also a statement of his entrenchment. If the worst came to the worst and the Ingenu lost his job, it would take him about sixty seconds to completely clear every trace of his work life from his desk. Twitchwell, with her collection of

figurines and stash of energy drinks might stretch to five minutes to remove her physical presence from the office. In contrast, a big collection of heavy old books was a much more difficult thing to move, and thus the Luncher's collection was a statement that the man and his walrus moustache had lasted this long and were not to be shifted. As the site was shared with several other government Intelligence and Information departments besides CB4 with vaguely interconnected duties, much of the office politics in the Building had literally to do with office politics, that is to say who got which offices. The Luncher was an old campaigner in this field, and he had laid down his book fortifications in this, one of the larger offices in the building. A sizeable office allowed him to set up his many bookshelves, and naturally, his increasingly large collection of books required a sizeable office. The longer the Luncher remained in this particular space, the more he demonstrated how much he needed it by filling it up with even more books.

It was generally assumed that the Luncher's current position as deputy-head of CB4 was essentially a sort of semi-retirement, an easing out of the old fellow. The Luncher did not look like he would be easy to ease anywhere, embodying the sternness and solidness of his office. After all, a man who had that many expensive and expansive lunches would be difficult to push anywhere, much less out. The fact also remained that the Luncher was an important asset to CB4, as Madame Char proudly proclaimed. He may have come up in a very different, internet-free world of information conflicts, but the Luncher was the sort of man who knew people. He knew journalists, C.E.O.s, politicians, philanthropists, bureaucrats, duchesses, poets, pundits, painters, union bosses, critics, organ-players, drivers, and colonels. He knew them through his prodigious history of lunching. Nobody could take you out to lunch like the Luncher. His technique was extraordinary - from his deft selection of just the right venue, to his artfully offhand recommendation of just the right food to bamboozle you, until you were slumped back in a sleepy food coma, and by the time dessert was over and the Luncher was methodically dabbing his moustache with a napkin, you'd have told him things you didn't even know you knew, things that never would have occurred to you on an empty stomach. This sort of skill was no accident. The Luncher had the training and experience of years of squeezing information out of people by squeezing food into them. He was a man of iron will, and presumably, the Ingenu thought, of an iron stomach.

"You wanted to see me, sir?" the Ingenu said. Did his voice always sound that squeaky? He wasn't sure if he should call the Luncher 'sir', but in a moment of confused indecision when they had first met, he had blurted it out, and the Luncher had never corrected him, so now the Ingenu was stuck with it. The whole deputy-headmaster atmosphere didn't help. Also, the Luncher had that accent, the sort of accent that told you that the Luncher knew all about fine art in actual galleries and concerts with violins in and opera and probably had a deep and insightful understanding of the history of ballet. The Ingenu had only ever been to the ballet once, and that had been a school performance by a seven-year-old little girl who was a cousin of his. The Ingenu wished he had that accent of the Luncher's. Think of the things he could do if his voice sounded like that! The respect

he might command, with the effortless wielding of a few deft but perfectly cutting vowels! Instead, the Ingenu was stuck awkwardly calling the Luncher 'sir'.
"Have a seat," ordered the Luncher with a nod.
The Ingenu felt like he would prefer to stand, having been defeated by the Luncher's chairs before. Inevitably, they were also leather-bound. This made it very difficult to sit in them without making embarrassing sounds that might be misconstrued by those who were not charitably-minded. The Ingenu tensed his stomach muscles and gently lowered himself into one of the leather-bound seats, holding himself in such tension that he couldn't swear the chair was actually supporting any of his weight at all. This was a good sort of initial victory anyway. If he kept absolutely still, the leather chair would not betray him.
"Good News," said the Luncher gruffly. The Ingenu leaned forward, not so much on the edge of his seat as just painfully hovering above the surface.
"We are sending you to a conference, lad," the Luncher continued. The Ingenu went weak at the knees and accidentally let his weight collapse into the chair, which immediately made an embarrassing flatulent leather noise. This was not good news. The Luncher was oblivious to the Ingenu's distress, and began rattling off some details. Oh sweet god, he was feeling lightheaded and sick - had the Ingenu just heard the Luncher say something about the damned conference running for three days? He'd have to travel for it, too. Hours on trains. When he was crammed into those train seats it felt like time would never go forward again and that Einstein had been on to something with that relativity lark. The entire time he'd be sitting stuck there so uncomfortably that he couldn't feel his knees any more, and if he tried to sleep to make his consciousness mercifully go away for a little bit of this endless trip there was always a hens party or a bunch of old lads off to celebrate some birthday by getting drunk on a train and playing classic hits on a phone speaker loudly and singing confidently off key. The thought was giving him terror sweats already. This was very not good news. No matter how much the Luncher offered up these conferences as a sort of educational jolly excursion holiday, the Ingenu knew better. He knew better because whenever a conference popped up in the world of information management and government policy that wasn't important enough for anyone to want to go, but just important enough by the slimmest margin that CB4 had to have at least one feeble representative there as a token presence, the Ingenu was always offered up. The truth of the matter was that he hated these conferences. Rather than learning anything from the interminable presentations, the Ingenu suspected that repeated exposure to the high levels of dullness at these conferences had made him unlearn a great deal of anything that he may at one point have known.
"It will give you some good experience, m'lad," the Luncher intoned. The words, the same bloody words he said every time the Ingenu was shipped off to make up numbers at another one of these time-wasting events, 'It will give you some good experience' - hah! Those words echoed around his skull, words of doom! You can't get good experience if you just have the same experience over and over again, never progressing. Good Experience! Words that summed up the stagnation and lifelessness of his career. These conferences were not for go-getters getting up and going places. He

had been to heaps of the damn things, and they were all almost the same. He couldn't begin to differentiate them in his memory. All the conference centres and shabby little hotels looked the same, the huge piles of papers he was saddled with, the streams of people who never remembered who he was. It wasn't possible to get some good experience from these talks, from these limp meet-and-greets. No human being could possibly get any sort of constructive experience out of hours and hours of grey blurry talks on information optimisation or preventative strategisation or flummery blumerisation.

The Ingenu desperately thought of some way to get out of the conference. Could he perhaps say his cat was unwell? But the conference wasn't for several weeks - could he know if his cat would be sick later? Was a cat enough of a reason to stay in the office? If only he actually had a cat, he might know.

The Luncher looked over his moustache expectantly.

"Oh," the Ingenu said feebly, and added, "Right. Fine." for good measure.

"Splendid," said the Luncher, "We'll send the details to you and you get yourself registered by the end of the day, hm?" The Luncher pulled out a silver fob watch to look at the time, which the Ingenu took as a sign that the Luncher had communicated all that he was willing to communicate. Where does somebody even get a pocket-watch these days? Presumably from somewhere back in ancient times.

"Right, yes, right, fine," the Ingenu babbled. He pulled himself to his feet with a last squeak from the chair and backed out the door.

"You look unwell," Twitchwell said when the Ingenu returned. Twitchwell squinted at him while continuing to type as if her hands worked independently from the rest of her. They were noisy hands too. No doubt, the Ingenu thought, she had some fancy hacker gaming keyboard or something that was designed to take the brunt of the most furious typing in the world.

The Ingenu sighed. "They're sending me to another conference."

Twitchwell continued to hammer away at the keys.

"Do you have to give a presentation?" she wondered, "I've never liked public speaking. I could never give presentations in front of all those people. Why should they take you seriously? The whole thing would be terrifying."

"I think you're supposed to imagine them naked or something."

Twitchwell stopped typing and looked at him, horrified.

"Why would you want to make it even more terrifying like that?"

In the distance they heard the booming voice of the Luncher coming from the kitchen, demanding to know if anybody had seen the milk.

"Nobody has seen the milk," the Ingenu mumbled, "It's stealth milk."

The Luncher was annoyed. Not about the milk. He had no real reason to be annoyed about that. He hardly ever drank milk in his tea, very much preferring a nice bright, cleansing green tea to unclog the decades of butter that ran through his arteries. The Luncher simply felt a little on edge, because as it happened, he had to go to the ballet that evening. His husband had been dragging the Luncher to the ballet for years - making him get all dressed up and demanding that he sit still for eternities without wriggling and he still barely understood the point of it, although he supposed that now that he was many years deep into seeing ballet regularly it was probably too late to pipe up about it now. Everyone involved in these things, they were all so damned young and thin! So trim and strong and bloody youthful with their heads held in that floaty way. Who needed to be reminded that you were in comparison an ancient wreck, long obsolete and ready to be chucked out on rubbish collection day? Even the damned older ones performing were young. It made his knees hurt just to be subjected to them. No doubt all that leaping and spinning on one toe was very impressive and athletic, but the Luncher couldn't understand why it had to go on for two hours. He assumed that he must in some sad way be ballet deficient, but his husband would not hear of it, so the Luncher would have to grit his teeth and sit through another long show of flying about on tippy-toe to keep him happy. No doubt his husband would also want to try some new restaurant. The Luncher's husband kept lists of restaurants he had heard about, and it was simply unfair that he was just as thin as he had been when they met decades ago, and no amount of sampling new restaurants appeared to change that. The Luncher, on the other hand, felt his insides groaning at the prospect of another experimental dining experience. And then a forever of dancing to follow. It made a fellow tense up. You reach a certain age where you want a bit of simple peace and quiet. Noise and excitement was for the young - that's the sort of tomfoolery that young lad could get up to at those conferences. A spot of travel, ey? Get out and about - a delightful prospect for youth! The Luncher and his husband were also currently in the annual phase of discussing where they might go for their holidays. Traditionally, much more time and effort was spent on this discussion than on the actual holidaying. The Luncher's husband would want to go somewhere too warm (there would be a list of restaurants to try there, too) even though they would both end up spending most of their time indoors in cooling museums or as deep in the shade as possible in whatever the local equivalent of a taverna happened to be. The Luncher's husband's professional field of expertise was wine, but the dear was the opposite of a wine bore. He had an inexhaustible enthusiasm for trying wine, and the stuff never seemed to go to his head or redden his nose. In contrast, the Luncher knew he would be in some blasted hot country and, after a single glass, he would end up looking dizzy and flushed with a sweltering wine-fuelled indignity - as if in danger of collapsing at two in the afternoon. Why did they have to go on holidays at all? The Luncher liked home. That's where he kept the things he liked. The Luncher would much rather stay at home together and listen to a lovely record and read a moderately good book. But there is no escape from duty, not from the duty of holidaying or of ballet attendance. "Makabri, makrabey," the Luncher grumbled to himself. He filled the kettle with exactly enough water to fill his cup (pale white with a delicately coloured picture of a peacock feather, presumably separated from a long lost tea set) and made himself a ginger tea.

The Luncher's stomach, having found some spiritual reassurance through ginger tea, was just starting to settle when Madame Char came in, beaming about the place and then specifically at the Luncher by way of a greeting. Her hair was grey, cut short with a sort of fashionable wave-swoop to it, but hair colour aside the director of CB4 was the sort of person whose age was very difficult to determine. This was because Madame Char radiated dangerous levels of energeticness. She was a thin, wiry woman who moved with the speed and zest of the excessively healthy. The Luncher presumed she jogged two or three times a day and barely broke a sweat. The director wore one of her usual well-tailored suits - this one blue with just the merest hint of reflectiveness, like a flash of sun glittering momentarily on tropical water, which made the Luncher grit his teeth because now his mind was turning again to the thought of the annual holiday plans. Despite her carefully chosen clothes designed to project a professional yet approachable, and perhaps, irrelevantly, a healthy air, Char also had an overpowering weakness for distracting swinging earrings. Today she was wearing what looked like two slices of orange dangling from her ears. Madame Char strode around the departmental kitchen, tidying up a pile of newspapers and arranging the unstable chairs neatly around the table. She bent down and opened the fridge door, neatening the contents.

"No milk, I'm afraid," said the Luncher gruffly and sipped at his ginger tea.

"Odd! There should be," Madame Char declared, "Of course, I gave up dairy some time ago, so it doesn't bother me too much. You know, the cheese was difficult at first, but in time you hardly miss it and it does your digestive system a power of good. You know there are far more human beings who are lactose intolerant on the planet than otherwise? Perhaps someday, we'll go completely dairy free in here!"

Despite the physical exhaustion brought on by years of eating out, the Luncher still held cheese to be as sacred a thing as anything else in the world. Even in the worst of his intestinal dining distress, a small cheese course instead of yet another sticky dessert could bring a subtle reverent tear to this old man's eye. Notwithstanding his strong feelings on the matter of cheese, the Luncher was aware that it would be impolitic of him to declare his loyalties.

"Hrm," he said instead.

From the fridge Madame Char extracted a chilled plastic container that had a series of what looked like very small glass bottles inside.

"How's the guide coming on?" Madame Char asked brightly.

"Slow and steady and the end is in sight," the Luncher reported, as he normally did. The Luncher had been writing a handbook on the management of the different forms of erroneous information. It was a work intended to summarise his years of experience into a fine crystallised form of pure helpfulness - a parting gift to this department, a crowning achievement. He had, admittedly, been writing this grand exegesis for quite a number of years, which was perhaps to be expected. After all, one couldn't simply distil an entire career's worth of intelligence and information experience, the very essence of the trade and its history, in one slapdash afternoon. No, this was to be his pride and joy - his written testament. It was entirely understandable, in fact, when viewed in those serious

terms, that this testament was still not completely finished after all this time. One difficulty was how much the blasted technology of information changed every time you sat down to do a bit of labour on this Grand Handbook. One minute you were hard at work on a deeply insightful critique of the uses of the fax machine, and then before you noticed it the damn things had been rendered obsolete, thrown in the bin, and replaced by some new blasted contraption. As far as the Luncher was concerned, history did not so much march on as it sprinted blindly and erratically, which was a damned inconvenience. And every day there seemed to be more new information, more words and pictures and noises, new devices, new sites and apps, an ever expanding sea of nonsense and lights and shouting. No normal human being could keep track of everything any more, not like you could once upon a time with a serious reading of the papers first thing in the morning. Even the production of disinformation could be automated now, which meant that they had to build machines to keep track of what other machines were saying. The Luncher, in his lowest moments of poor digestion, sometimes wondered if there was any need for flesh and blood to be involved at all in the whole transaction of truth and lies. But when he turned to the optimistic and pride-inducing thought of completing his Grand Handbook, he stiffened his lip and managed to drive some of those worries away.

Of late, it had been the Luncher's hope that the Ingenu would not only benefit professionally by attending the various symposia and conferences taking place, but that the lad would thus always be up-to-the-moment on the latest wheeze in the job, and be able to pass on his updates for the ultimate benefit of the Grand Handbook. As a result of the difficulty of keeping track of the latest trends in The Grand Handbook, the Luncher had been forced to change the title no less than twenty-three times, each new title bringing a fresh perspective and enthusiasm for the latest redrafting of his magnum opus. When the Luncher had said to Madame Char of his work on the Grand Handbook that 'the end is in sight', he genuinely believed it to be true. Just as he had believed it no less than twenty-three times before.
"Excellent!" said Madame Char, "See you at the meeting in half an hour." Tucking the plastic box with the sloshing tiny bottles under her arm, she powerwalked off to tour the office.

The Ingenu, who may have overdone it with measuring out the morning through hot beverages, was heading to the toilet. On his way he passed through the Neutral Zone, a wide corridor that was too oddly shaped and windowless for any department to lay claim to it with any real enthusiasm. There were several filing cabinets that had been shifted there from before anyone could remember, and occasionally a message would be posted around the building that they should be moved for reasons of fire safety, but nobody would put their hand up to take responsibility for these particular drifted cabinets, and indeed it was no longer clear who they belonged to, or even if they belonged to anyone. It was not entirely unlikely that whatever department that had dumped the filing cabinets there had ceased to exist before they got around to doing anything about them. That said, three of the cabinets did provide some small service - they were of the short stubby variety and you could sit

on them if necessary. Somebody had posted up a large, luridly coloured poster of a tropical beach as a sort of consolation-prize window, and the Neutral Zone had become a place where you might go to gossip some distance from the constantly listening ears of your own department without actually going outside. It was even sometimes used as a place where rival departments might meet briefly and unofficially. It is essential in a working environment where everybody is constantly engaged in a Darwinian struggle over square feet of office space that there be at least one place where everyone may meet as equals. On this occasion, as the Ingenu skipped along increasingly urgently, his insides sloshing about, there were two members of the Signal Processing department lounging on the filing cabinets and showing each other pictures on their phones. The two young men in question were both dressed in expensive suits and had state-of-the-art haircuts, with just the right amount of calculated floppiness. This was because people who worked in Signal Processing actually got to go outside and meet with real live significant people. Their department did a lot of work liaising with the private sector, working in partnership with corporations on matters of information management. The Ingenu was not entirely clear why this work required expensive hair-cuts and suits, but it surely couldn't hurt, and the fact of the matter was that he was extremely jealous of the S.P. boys. They were, as far as he could tell, the in-crowd, the ones who sat in the back of the bus, those in the know. The S.P.s got to work on actually important and extremely costly public projects, they met with extremely important business people and politicians and did serious important work, whatever that might look like. In his idle moments, the Ingenu often wondered what it would be like if he could work in their department instead. He wanted to hang out with the cool kids. If the S.P. boys were sent to a conference, there would be champagne and fine dining and demonstrations of exciting proper spy technology, he assumed. Signal Processing would be the sort of place where a career could soar, as opposed to the rickety, patched and unimpressive CB4, which felt like it was not designed to get off the ground.

He gave a small nod of recognition to the S.P. lads as he jogged along, and was pathetically delighted when they looked half away from their phone long enough to nod back. He strained his ears to hear what cutting-edge stuff they were discussing, but could make out nothing except a phrase that sounded like 'Beau Dahlia'. A nervous chill of excitement skipped up the Ingenu's back. What was that? A code name for some international operation they were setting up? He was busting to know, but unfortunately, he was also just busting and could not risk lingering in the Neutral Zone for another second.

2. Burned Rubber

"And how is everything?" asked Madame Char breezily, her hands behind her back. Twitchwell squeaked and apologised. Where had the director even appeared from? She could have sworn she hadn't been in the room a second ago. You never knew when she might suddenly show up smiling at you. Had Madame Char somehow mastered secret ninja techniques through years of intense training, strange arts that allowed her to sweep silently across the expanses of carpet, invisible right up until the exact moment you were picking your teeth and staring into space or pretending to make your SupaNeko cat figurines sing and dance on your desk, and then she'd just be there with that intimidatingly clean smile? Twitchwell was getting so anxious about Madame Char suddenly silently appearing when she was doing something embarrassing that she felt certain that it was only a matter of time before Char started to show up in Twitchwell's sleep, just there without warning, smiling about the place right in the middle of one of Twitchwell's regular stress dreams. Twitchwell, who never did anything by halves, had dedicated the night hours to more anxiety, so she could double her worry-productivity. When it came to worry, the barrier between Twitchwell's subconscious and conscious mind was very permeable.

"We're very well, ma'am," the Ingenu said, bolt upright in his chair. He also hadn't heard her come into the room, but he had the advantage of having trained himself to appear reflexively serious and busy long before his conscious mind had worked out what was going on. His eyes twitched nervously to his screen, where a video of someone setting fire to a pair of shoes was silently playing. Although it absolutely didn't feel like it, this was in fact work-related. It had recently been alleged in the online swirl that a particular shoe manufacturer was making shoes out of the remains of piles old shoes, and a small portion of people were outraged at this supposed imposture for badly articulated and incoherent reasons, partly (the Ingenu thought) to do with their having paid for new shoes, not bits of old shoes, and partly due to some confused ideas to do with how this might be unhygienic in some way. So people were burning their shoes, and taking videos of this. As it happened, in the video playing, the Ingenu had worked out that the shoes being burned were not even the sort that had started the original confused footwear barbequing. This was possibly a sign that the idea of setting fire to shoes was spreading, although the Ingenu could not discount the possibility that the wrong-shoe burner had simply got a bit muddled and over excited.

The Ingenu was also tracking a sort of secondary response to this current shoeburn custom, a few complaints coming from the Big Conspiracy Believers who insisted that these videos were being paid for by major shoe companies to encourage people to destroy shoes so they would then be forced to buy new shoes, and presumably set fire to them too, thus promoting the cyclical

consumerist interests of Big Shoes. As it happened, the Ingenu had been reading up on the theory that performative posts of setting fire to specific fetish items might be a recurring human social phenomenon, a sort of sped-up unconscious ritualistic Bonfire Night need to make angry burnt offerings. The Ingenu privately held that it was just fun setting things on fire, as he himself had a brief pyromaniac phase when he was a child that had worried his parents. None of this made looking at shoe-incineration videos feel like worthwhile and proper work to the Ingenu, however much he insisted to himself it was.
"Excellent, excellent," said Madame Char, "Team meeting in my office in ten. We'll have a good rundown then."
Twitchwell realised that she was still holding the two cat figurines. One was dressed as a sailor with a jaunty cap, the other was a cat in a teddy-bear outfit. She put them gently alongside their plastic brethren and sisteren.
"Yes, sorry, see you then," Twitchwell said.

The Ingenu could feel his attention beginning to wander. Maybe he should buy himself a snazzy suit? Clothes make the man. Maybe if he looked serious, he would become serious. (No, he couldn't afford it.) Focus on reading this report. (But it's so hard to read this thing!) It's like it was designed to make your attention slide right off it. A stealth report with high-tech reflective word articulation. No, focus! He wasn't going to let a thing like that stop him, was he? This is what he had been trained for, surely! To read scads and scads of absurd information that would numb the untrained mind into a helpless stupor, into a very jelly. He stared at his screen and squashed his cheeks.
"G'yoo no anyfin bout er boo daya?" he muttered to Twitchwell.
"Pardon?" she said.
He unsquashed his cheeks.
"Do you know anything about a Beau Dahlia? Does that mean anything to you?"
Twitchwell shook her head. "I don't know anything about plants. Or flowers. It's a flower isn't it?" she didn't sound sure.
Ingenu tapped at the end of his nose thoughtfully. Why would the Signal Process lads be discussing a flower so intently? A beautiful Dahlia? What did it mean? Did it mean anything? Was it a restaurant or a club or something fashionable he should know about if he was already in the know? Should he research it? (No.) He should bring his powers of focus back to painfully absorbing this report before the meeting with the Luncher and Madame Char in...Oh Good Lord...where had the time gone?
"Phased distribution of preventative recursive nodes," the Ingenu read out from the slippery impenetrable paper.
"Waha?" replied Twitchwell.
"I think that's a normal reaction," agreed the Ingenu, "I think that's a good and healthy interpretation of that sentence. I'm worried that I'm getting too used to that sort of thing."
"What does it mean?"

Ingenu shrugged and looked miffed.
"I'm not that far gone yet. I'm not convinced that it means much. If, without excess modesty, I feel like I've come some way in understanding the incomprehensible in my time here, even I have to admit that I'm still at the beginner's stage of getting used to that sort of writing. I'm lower-intermediate at best in the study of the language of the great borderless nation of Reports, the native tongue of think-tanks and strategy groups and, god help me, the proceedings of bloody conferences. This report is full of sentences like that. Positively plastered with 'em. An embarrassment of riches. I have to admit that it does slightly worry me that I wouldn't have thought to say 'Waha?' to this stuff. I'm starting to collect obscurantist phrases all around myself like barnacles." The Ingenu sucked his teeth and shook his head. "I probably shouldn't resist it. There must be a reason people write reports on mis and dis like this. I must learn from it, dive right down into all the lovely warm Reportish, really immerse myself until I know how to use it like a native."
Twitchwell stared.
"You want...to go swimming in reports?" she ventured.
"Yes. There might be something in 'em."

3. A Little Tipple

The CB4 crew trooped into Madame Char's office for the meeting. The Luncher immediately selected what he hoped would be the sturdiest chair by Char's desk and took up his post and smoothed his moustache. This was reassuring for the Ingenu, who was uncomfortable with the sight of the Luncher in motion, mostly because despite an imposing top half, he had distractingly spindly legs. The Luncher, meanwhile, was wondering if his selection of chair had been poor. It was possible that there was no better choice, as all the chairs were the same sort of modern ergonomic types, those varieties of seats that looked like they had not been quite finished properly. Who did the seat designers think they were fooling, ey?, pretending these were completed seats? The Luncher never felt settled in any of the damn things.
The Ingenu and Twitchwell also sat themselves down, the Ingenu slouching over his hastily-printed papers, and Twitchwell's feet dangling absent-mindedly short of the floor. Madame Char never sat at her meetings. She would, at most, lean stiffly against her desk, but the director of CB4 thought better on her feet. If she believed she could get away with introducing the custom without mutiny, she had very strongly considered the possibility of holding a standing meeting. Perhaps even a running meeting someday? Think how that would get everyone going - hearts and minds pumping! Break everybody out of their sluggish old patterns! Well, maybe one day! Step by step - yes! - that was the way to bring health and harmony to the workplace!

In contrast to the Luncher's office, Madame Char's was purposefully empty. It was lighter than anywhere else in the department, mostly because Char had wrangled herself an office with a decent window as part of her being promoted to running CB4. Like the Luncher, Madame Char knew the value of fighting for real estate in government work. Unlike the Luncher's old-fashioned emphasis on office entrenchment, Madame Char saw her office as a model of how she would like her own mind to be organised - clean, minimalist, full of expansive and patient light. In a confused world, she would strive for clarity - what better example could the head of a department tasked with dealing with the clutter of misinformation set? There was no mess at all in Char's office, no stacks of paper or office supplies sprawled across the broad clean expanse of her desk. Her rubbish bin looked as if it had never actually held any rubbish and wasn't about to start that sort of mucky business any time soon, thank you very much. A tasteful fern (not too clumsily big, not too pathetically small) stood in the corner, fronds gently waving serenely towards the sunlight coming through the window. Madame Char got full enjoyment from her window. Indeed, she found that if she was beset by problems, she liked to give her office window a good scrub until it was sparkling and clean, feeling that this activity also made her mind come into bright clarity. As the head of CB4, Madame Char hoped that her office could serve as a model, as an influence to others to make their

surroundings pleasant and conducive to their work, a sort of pursuit for the ultimate zen-like office space. She spent a lot of time reading minimalist magazines and websites. The thought of being suffocated in a cluttered room like Luncher's made Madame Char feel tense and vaguely claustrophobic.

"Excellent, we are all here!" exclaimed Madame Char, "We are all well, I trust? Feeling good and ready to get into things? Good!"
With an air of triumph, she placed a chilled plastic container on her desk, pulling off the lid with a deft flourish. From inside she took out six tiny glass bottles filled with clear liquid.
"What's that?" whispered Twitchwell to the Ingenu.
"Water!" declared Madame Char, who had unsettlingly good hearing.
"Eh? Not gin, hm?" the Luncher said.
"No, water!" said Madame Char.
"Gin wouldn't really be the thing at this sort of time of day, would it?" said the Ingenu to himself. Still, he bet people in more prestigious Intelligence departments got to drink gin early in the day. In cocktails. In fact, they were probably required to drink early in the day, to build character or resistance or something. The Ingenu didn't especially want to drink cocktails before lunchtime, but he thought he might look very sophisticated in a new suit holding a chilled cocktail glass.
"Thought we were here to talk about the gin thing," said the Luncher into his moustache. He personally was relieved, as he had to meet an administrator later in the day and to manage this chap gastronomically would absolutely require overdoing both spicy food and cheap gassy beer, and the Luncher was already worrying about the likely future state of his stomach by the afternoon.
"What's it for?" Twitchwell said, staring at the little glass bottles of water.
"Hydration?" suggested the Ingenu uncertainly, knowing as he did Madame Char's interest in improving the health of the office.
"Of course, but a bit of fun besides!" declared Madame Char, pouring out samples of the water into tiny plastic shot glasses she had produced from underneath the desk. "We've got two Scottish, two Welsh, and two English waters here. It's a tasting sampler. Of fine waters. You've heard of whisky flights? This is like that, but with some of the best, most delicious waters in the nation! Try some!"
"I suppose water is fine," said the Luncher, dubiously. As someone who had been borne along by the tide of several churning decades of food and drink fads, he was naturally suspicious of even something that appeared to be as unthreatening as water.
"Water doesn't really fly, does it?" said Twitchwell to herself unconsciously, "Can it be a water flight?"
"A water sailing. A water trickle. A water shipping," the Ingenu said, before noticing that there was a particular intimidating intensity to Madame Char's smile beaming down upon them.
"Sorrysorry," said Twitchwell, and they all reached out for a shot glass of premium water.
Twitchwell, whose energy drink habits were about speed and about getting liquid into you with the minimum of fuss and delay, instinctively downed the water and looked around blankly. The Ingenu

closed one eye and held his water up to the light. It did not look especially different from the sort of common water he had been drinking in ignorance thus far in his life. The Luncher took a delicate sip and swished the water around his mouth thoughtfully. He swallowed.
"Not a bad mineral note to that one," he announced.
Madame Char radiated delight at everyone.
"Excellent! Even hydration can be enjoyable, you see, and sophisticated, in the right circumstances! There's fun and delight to be had in all sorts of good things if you just get your mind trained to the proper appreciation."
Twitchwell looked doubtful, and went to take a second sip from her water shot glass, forgetting that she had already gulped it down.
"On to the gin then," the Luncher said, dabbing at his moustache with a tiny little handkerchief.
"I don't really like gin," Twitchwell said nervously, "Although I once had some prosecco and that wasn't too bad I suppose, but it did make me burp sorry." Twitchwell felt the looming judgemental presence of her Nana when she said this. Nana drank nothing stronger than hot water, for she was strong enough in herself, and saw any indulging in intoxicants (from sugary drinks right through to Class A drugs) as not only a failure of moral character, but a sign of terrible personal physical feebleness.
"The Gin Report," the Ingenu said, waving some of his papers at Twitchwell to try and fan an explanation at her. "The errf, which is to say, the erroneous information is that there's been a growing rumour that several types of British Gin have been contaminated in some way - intentional poisoning, unintentional poisoning due to low safety standards, poisoning due to wasps falling into vats of gin (this one is quite popular), intentional poisoning by outside parties, with or without wasps. I have a breakdown somewhere here..."
The Ingenu messed around with his papers, keen to find his graph, as he had spent far too much time putting that particular chart together and thought it was actually rather splendid. He wondered if there was a Modern Museum of Artistic Graphs.
"Sorry," Twitchwell piped up, "But isn't gin, all alcohol ... sort of poisonous anyway?"
"Indeed, yes, absolutely," agreed the Ingenu, "But this errf is about believing a different, unexpected sort of poison is in the gin. One that isn't supposed to be there. Extra-poisonous gin, I suppose."
The Luncher harrumphed.
"I can assure you that there are doubtless people who would buy extra-poison gin anyway," he said. "It would almost certainly become a collector's item. Limited-edition danger-distilled gin made by artisans and interfered with by hand, by only the most experienced and passionate shadowy parties. Hints of lavender and mild paranoia."
"Well, to look at the health angle, who knows?" Madame Char mused, giving the fern in the corner an affectionate pat, "This rumour might push people to drink something less harmful."
The Luncher shrugged.
"Or drive 'em to drink something differently harmful."
"Yes, well look, I've got the business here," said the Ingenu, noticing out of the corner of his eye that

Twitchwell had somehow ended up with his lovely printed-out chart and was studying it intently. "And it looks to be following the normal pattern for unfounded food scares. If it continues in this track, the story should peter out in a few weeks and be completely forgotten, replaced in the public consciousness and/or the Public Unconsciousness by something else."
"Does it matter too much if thirty-two per cent of people in the set think gin is a bit more bad for them?" asked Twitchwell pointing at a cheery blue section of the chart.
The Luncher sighed. "Could be a touch more serious than it sounds. Have heard a bit of worry from the distilleries and those who run 'em. A few people involved have actually had a quiet word about it. Gin is, after all, big business, and those who sell the stuff are already worried about sales droppin' because of dry-month fads, not to mention the youth of the nation rebelling against time-honoured traditions of self-destructive levels of drinking. Besides, it's not simply about the liquid stuff itself, hm? Gin is a very British drink. It's an iconic element of national self-image, and it's our job to make sure that the nation's psyche isn't sent tottering by a mal mot or bit of snowballing nonsense."
"Oh, sorry," said Twitchwell, scratching her head and pushing her glasses back up, "Right, sorry, I thought it was just gin."
"Nothing is ever just anything," intoned the Luncher. Twitchwell wrote this down.
"That's right," Madame Char agreed, "Even what looks like the smallest, most insignificant piece of information might well have an extraordinary effect on our beliefs and outlooks. Sometimes trivial-seeming pieces of information can help us understand what is happening in the bigger picture."
Twitchwell nodded in agreement, as she had only heard this, what could be considered the CB4 motto under Madame Char, a few times. The Ingenu, who had by this stage heard it quite a few more times and with increasing despair, was less enthusiastic, because so far in his experience of working on the random tangents of misinformation circulating about the national and international consciousness, the most insignificant pieces of information generally turned out to all actually be very insignificant, and the smallest pieces of rubbish had thus far all turned out to be nothing more exciting than small pieces of rubbish.
"Of course," the Ingenu said, wishing it wasn't of course, "I'm with you on that, but perhaps it might be possible for us" (me) "to handle some more of the more ...weighty disinformation stuff? You know, some of the more meaty bad information being spread about, perhaps by a foreign government? A foreign government up to no good and.. making a dangerous meat-spread sandwich." The Ingenu was getting hungry and this was clearly distracting him from convincing his department to be more aggressive in laying claim to some of the juicier errf, the higher grade gear mis and dis, the proper International Conspiracy to Undermine Democracy stuff. That was the sort of thing he was sure the Signal Process lads got to deal with on the regular, rather than having to write reports on whether gin had suddenly become worse for you or not, or had a noticeable increase in insect content.
"You know the rules," Madame Char said firmly, "We here at CB4 are part of the big Intelligence family, and we do our bit. If we come across some piece of disinformation that isn't our usual thing, we are supposed to share it with the appropriate departments."

The Ingenu sighed internally. This meant that they would hand over anything that ever looked like it was in danger of being interesting or at all important.
"P'rhaps this gin rumour was started by a foreign power!" Twitchwell piped up encouragingly. The Ingenu smiled at her gratefully for trying to cheer him up.
"Could be the French," the Luncher said thoughtfully.
The Ingenu shuffled his papers.
"I...don't think there's any evidence of that," he said slowly, "Anyway, what would they have to gain?"
"Force people to drink more French Wine," suggested the Luncher, "And keep the British in an uncertain state. Our nation has spent a good deal of its history at odds with the French, and we're about due for another spot of conflict. Always pays to keep an eye on 'em."
"Right, well," said the Ingenu slowly, "I don't know about that, but if anything in that line comes up, I'll let you know."
"Do we need to worry about this gin thing getting any worse?" Madame Char said, almost jogging on the spot, ready to get her heart rate up to a good level and power her way to the finishing line of the agenda.
"Shouldn't think so," said the Ingenu, "Novel errf about food does tend to die out fairly quickly. It's harder than you'd think to permanently change what people pick up when they do their supermarket shopping." He cleared his throat. "It is probable-" Never be definite when predicting, the Ingenu thought to himself, always give yourself wiggle room. Successful prophets have always known that what you have to say about the hypothetical should be vague and elastic enough that you can take credit if it comes more or less true, and shift blame if it doesn't. "It is probable that this gin misinformation will fade out in a couple of days and another spot of food errf will probably come along soon enough."
"Like buses," put in Twitchwell.
"I suppose," said the Ingenu.
"I wonder why misinformation comes around again and again," said Twitchwell, apparently mostly to herself, "And if there's a pattern about how often it reoccurs and in what sort of forms. I could plot that out."
"It would make a lovely graph," agreed the Ingenu.
"Only if you have the time," Madame Char said to Twitchwell, "Set up some alerts so we can keep an automatic eye on how this proceeds."
"I'll monitor the gin situation," said the Ingenu.
"I wonder what the next food lie will be?" said Twitchwell, which made the Ingenu wince, as he was much attached to the professional euphemisms for the word 'lie' that were so essential for filling out his reports.
"Used to be liquorice back in my day," said the Luncher through half-open eyes, which gave everyone in the room a mild surprise, as they had assumed he had drifted off for a snooze.
"I don't mind liquorice all-sorts," said Twitchwell.

The Luncher gave a dismissive snort.
"Not those dreadful sickly sweet cubes," he said, "I mean proper old black leathery liquorice straps. We were always told they were made from rat blood. Believed it when I was a nipper, but ate 'em anyway. Always thought they tasted best when they were out of date and past it. Gave you something more to chew on, made the stuff last a little longer."
"Well," Madame Char declared, trying to redirect the meeting and her team to work matters by sheer positive thoughts, "What else have we got to discuss?"
The Ingenu caught himself putting up his hand to ask a question and stopped himself in time, managing more or less successfully, he thought, to make it look like a small stretch.
"Well, I don't want to harp on about it," he said, "Obviously, I see the value of what we are doing here in tracking this sort of misinformation," (Did he?) "But I wonder if we could be doing something more, I don't know, more proactive in fighting bad information."
The Luncher was feeling sensitive about certain sorts of words that might remind him of the fast-paced high-nosed creatures of departments ranged against him and his stomach gave a painful spasm at the word proactive, but he managed to keep his rumbling internal.
"I just mean, that for instance, we had that thing on the phonebox conspiracy, and we had to hand it off to Signal Processes-"
The Luncher actually double-harrumphed. The painful bubble of frustration in his gut had suddenly grown too pressing and he could not keep it in a moment longer.
"Those damnable S.P. slick johnnies!" he trumpeted, "All flash and sizzle, and no blasted idea about how to work actual information or intelligence, no interest in putting the work in! And all that strutting around and writing about themselves all the time! I might well be old-fashioned, but a department that is involved with intelligence, even tangentially and even in this frankly baffling age, shouldn't spend so much time drawing attention to itself. Oh, I know times have changed, but that S.P. lot go too far, if you ask me, always pontificating about projects they think might get the media interested! If nothing else, swanning all over the place and thinking about nothing but self-promotion just means you aren't bloody doing any actual useful work. S.P.s? More like Saps, the whole jack lot of 'em!"
It was not just that the Luncher despaired of the S.P. department's constant puffing up of itself, its swelling hunger to suck in as much of the attention in the atmosphere as it could get. It was not just their rejection of the heads-down demeanour of Intelligence departments of the past, or that their emphasis on confident technological dreams of the modern and cutting-edge felt like a dismissal of the Luncher's entire working past. It wasn't even that the Luncher on a shallow level did not especially like the look of them, that smug dismissive expression they all got on their faces after working in S.P. for only a week or two, as if they were handed a shiny suit and a smirking face as a uniform when they signed up. No, the main reason the Luncher disliked the Saps is that he knew that those cunning underhanded jackanapes had been quietly pushing to get him out of his defensive position in his leather-lined office. They wanted the space for who knows what. In fact, it was entirely possible that they hadn't bothered to think beyond the fact that they wanted his office

and convincing themselves that they needed it. The Luncher knew that the Saps had been operating a whispering campaign to try and get him out. The Luncher knew about this because, while he might be an old dog, he still had a few tricks when it came to finding out things. So far, he had successfully repulsed this silent sally, although it had cost him many tactically placed words in ears and a very good bottle of French red to make sure that their attempt had been blocked, at least for a time.

"Come on now, let us all remember that the S.P.s are just another part of the team here, just like the Fact and Data Research department, or the International Psychology Institute," Madame Char said soothingly, "And yes, the S.P.s are an ambitious lot, but there's nothing wrong with a bit of drive in our field, is there? If they want to be competitive, maybe we should show them what our little department can do!"

Was this an opportunity the Ingenu scented?

"I agree, like you say, Ma'am," said the Ingenu, feeling especially cunning, "Maybe we could be doing more like the S.P. Expand into more...impactful, impressive, relevant work on dealing with erroneous information. Really get at the roots of the problem."

Madame Char looked delighted. This delighted the Ingenu.

"That's the spirit!" Madame Char said, "You know, I've had half a thought about just that very sort of thing! See, our ambitious colleagues are already inspiring bright new approaches!"

"What's that? What approach?" grunted the Luncher, "We aren't going anywhere, are we? It's no good having an approach if you haven't decided on a destination, not to mention not having a map, compass, or the slightest sense of direction!" Everyone ignored him so he closed his eyes again and made snuffling noises.

Right through his entire body and to the tips of his tingling toes, the Ingenu was once again feeling a bright warm flush of that positivity that had earlier flared up so briefly and then sputtered out. Yes indeed, things were moving along now! It was just a matter of putting your mind to it, and putting yourself forward! He nodded in agreement with nothing in particular.

"Let's turn that energy to good use," Madame Char said to the Ingenu, "With that sort of positive attitude, I think we should see about getting you started on putting together a J.O.E. brief to follow up."

The Ingenu nodded more vigorously. He had no idea what this brief was, but he was ready for anything!

"Sorry, but what is a J.O.E.?" Twitchwell asked timidly. The Ingenu smiled knowingly. Even if you didn't actually know things, it didn't do to let other people know that you didn't know.

"Junior Outreach Education!" said Char, slapping at her desk with delight, "And it's high time CB4 started doing our part in attacking the core of the whole problem of poor information."

The Ingenu nodded in vigorous agreement.

"Yes, sorry, that sounds good, but I was just wondering how maybe the Junior Outreach Education actually does that?" wondered Twitchwell.

"Schools!" boomed the Luncher.

"Schools?" echoed the Ingenu uncertainly.
Madame Char nodded.
"Schools!" she said, pacing back and making the occasional chopping gesture with a hand to emphasise the point. "If we want to think long-term about how to combat erroneous information, we need to plan for the long-term. We need to train the digital citizens of tomorrow! The children of our schools need to be taught the proper skills to navigate the deluge of information. The vast infoscape out there is only going to become more and more complicated with the daily advances of technology. We all spend more and more time online, and for the young, why, the vast bulk of their lives is on the internet! If we want to build a dam against bad information, we must train up the young with the techniques necessary to weigh stories and rumours, to filter out harmful untruths and tempting manipulations!"
"Right, but schools?" said the Ingenu, who was now revising his whole 'put yourself forward for success' plan. Perhaps he had got that wrong. Perhaps it was in fact better to put yourself back. Very far back, where nobody would notice you at all and where you wouldn't be tempted to say something that would land you in it. "I mean, of course, sure, yeah, right, but do you mean I should be sent to talk to children?"
"You see how valuable the idea is!" said Madame Char, who suffered (but painlessly) from an inability to see reluctance in people, "You write up some basic lessons, some guiding points and tips that will be of use to the youth of today in dealing with disinformation and misinformation. That's one of the fundamentals we need to build up in order to fight the disruptive power of bad information. We must make sure the young are equipped to deal with the unknown future!"
"It's just that, well," the Ingenu said desperately, feeling his neck go clammy, "I don't know anything about talking to school children. It's not something I have any experience with."
"Not to worry, lad," said Luncher, "I know someone in education."
Of course he did, thought the Ingenu, his heart sinking.
"She's a bright woman," the Luncher explained, "Quite idealistic about the whole thing too. Worked in all sorts of different branches - the charity game, dealing with government, lots of actual teaching tykes of various sizes, too, I believe. I'll have a word with her and she can give you the vital elements and thrash out any of the practical details. Shouldn't be any problem there."
The Ingenu cast around desperately. This was becoming solid too fast, looming on his horizon like an iceberg he could have sworn was not in front of his tiny boat a second ago. And what an iceberg. He could see it now as it came along steadily to crush his dreams of an exciting career. He was going to be stuck being sent out to schools all over the country, delivering a stale speech on how to avoid bad information on the internet to roomfuls of snotty-nosed bored school kids. He'd be giving talks to sulky teenagers who would rather be anywhere else, droning on about technology in a way that was probably already outdated by the time he wrote up the speech, and listlessly trying to offer it up to a bunch of young people who almost certainly knew more about the online world than he did. An eternal special guest speaker trapped in a limbo of indifferent classrooms. That wasn't a cool and exciting ambition to aim his life at. There must be a way out of this. Think, damn it! Did he have a

good lie? Even the truth would do, if it'd squeeze him out of this. He really needed to start keeping a list of workable excuses for getting out of things he really didn't want to do. Maybe he could try flattery? He smiled unconvincingly at the Luncher and Madame Char.
"Of course, I know you two are very busy, but perhaps an anti-dis-misinformation talk to schoolchildren would mean so much more coming from someone more senior and important like yourselves?"
"Oh no, I shouldn't think so," said Madame Char cheerily.
"Perish the thought, lad," scoffed the Luncher, "These young 'uns ain't going to want to listen to a tired old dinosaur like myself, are they? But you, that's a different story. You're still young enough to make a connection with them, ey?"
"But I'm not even the youngest person in the room!" pointed out the Ingenu. He gestured to Twitchwell. "She's younger than me, so maybe she would have an even better chance of making a connection with the youth of today."
Twitchwell felt herself become extremely and immediately uncomfortably hot. She shook her head so furiously it looked like it might rattle. Twitchwell made some quiet panicky squeaking noises because she couldn't get any words out. As a clear demonstration of why she shouldn't be sent out by the department to do any public speaking, it was very effective, the Ingenu had to admit. He wished he'd thought of trying that. Perhaps he should also start keeping a list of phobias to unfurl at opportune moments. Was fear of schoolrooms a real thing? He felt it should be. He had been afraid of schoolrooms himself for various reasons throughout his own childhood. They had been too big to start off with, and even when he had started to grow into them, they had been too complicated and claustrophobic and too not-home to ever be comfortable. Long fearful days of being pinned beneath the gaze of adults telling you what to do while you tried to navigate mysterious and cruel social structures invented daily by other kids, all while wearing a stupid-looking uniform - why wouldn't you develop a complex about that? There were still a few people about that he knew from school, and when he occasionally met up with them they would reminisce about what fun care-free days they had been. When this sort of chat happened, the Ingenu smiled and nodded politely, but he actually felt like tearing his hair out and throwing it at them and screaming ARE YOU INSANE? Fear of school was definitely a thing, and he had absolutely medically got it bad. Schoolophobia. Paedagogaphobia. Classroom-dread. Still, he knew that even if he could produce a plausible ingrained fear of going back to school, Madame Char would probably ship him off to some resilience course so that he could find a way to deal with his anxieties, so he could move forward as a person and emerge as a happier, healthier him. Self-improvement seemed a risky roll of the dice to the Ingenu. After all, he could barely manage the person he currently was.

Madame Char was looking at him expectantly. Trapped like a rat, the Ingenu thought to himself, by my own big smarty mouth. He couldn't see any way out of this unpalatable duty unless angels from the S.P. department would swoop down in their cool suits and lift him away from these problems to a better, fancier life.

"If that's the case," the Ingenu said, "Of course I'd be more than happy to take this on." He held out his water-tasting shot glass "Would it be possible to have another drop of that lovely refreshing Welsh water?" he asked Madame Char, who was happy to oblige. The Ingenu accepted it with gestures of gratitude and wondered if it might be an idea to find a nice cool glass of wasp-poisoned gin instead.

Madame Char ran through various other bits and pieces of business. Twitchwell looked like she was taking detailed notes throughout, but found herself often drifting off into doing little doodles of what appeared to be rainfall of sharks plummeting from storm clouds all around the margins of her notebook. Where possible, she tried to cover these up with actual words, no matter how banal the phrase recorded might be. She could see that over one shower of sharks she had written "Innovation Drive for the New Calendar" and underlined it three times, although she wasn't sure what it meant. Twitchwell had always struggled when people started talking. It made her terribly nervous that she would miss something and before she knew it, she was so focussed on her anxiety that she had completely missed something said and now she was even more worked up about not taking things in, leading to a constant mental plughole spiral swirling between worry and attention. She liked things to be written down for her. Or recorded. Then you could take your time, go back and forth until you absorbed it all. Writing things down was a bloody good invention, as far she was concerned, and humanity should probably be more appreciative of it. There had probably been ancient cavemen who would have loved to write things down. Those cave people probably had great ideas they were excited to tell their cave spouses at the end of the day, but sadly had entirely forgotten these ideas due to not having invented writing things down yet. Being talked at seemed a terrible way to communicate ideas to Twitchwell, and she wasn't sure why so many universities and teaching institutions insisted on doing things that way. They might as well boom instructions through a megaphone that sounded like an aircraft engine while throwing pens at her for all the good it would do. And if having to absorb talking when you were stressed was bad, you could forget about being on the other side and trying to stand up in front of people and say words that made sense and were in the right order and everything. When she had been a student, Twitchwell was the sort of person in a group project who would rather do the work of three people over several weeks than stand up and give a presentation for five minutes at the end. Talking about things in front of a room of people made her sweat so much she could almost taste it filling up her throat. There was no point in trying to memorise anything she wanted to say because it would disappear in a puff as soon as she opened her mouth, no matter how long she had worked on memorising the words. Why not give yourself notes then? Well, little Miss Perky Annoying Internal Voice, because that had its own set of problems. If she had to do the talking Twitchwell would get the shakes so badly that she couldn't hold the blurring, vibrating notes steady enough to read them. Once or twice her hands had been so nervously shaking that she had involuntarily thrown her notes halfway across the room. So, naturally, she would do almost anything to avoid having to give a speech. She would probably rather have her left leg run over by a family car than have to talk in front of a

crowd. Was this cowardly? Yes, but what can you do? It didn't matter how long you stared at yourself in the mirror and said positive soothing things about what a confident, capable, young woman you are if all that stuff just vanished as soon as you had to talk to anybody who wasn't your own reflection. She genuinely didn't understand how some people had the ability to speak in public. It was like they were missing some part of their brain, a panic-lobe that must be overdeveloped in Twitchwell's own cortex. The Ingenu was much better at that sort of thing. He had the experience and the knack. He knew some words, and could remember to use them.

4. Mixed Recycling

CB4 used a variety of set-ups to trawl the internet and all sorts of big chunky data sets to find keywords and analyse who (or what) was reading and repeating them. None of the programs did exactly what it was supposed to without considerable effort, so one of Twitchwell's jobs was cajoling the systems through reconfiguration, programming, and angry prayer to do what the rest of the department wanted them to do. She sort of enjoyed this, but whenever she had patched together the metaphorical nets of these trawling systems, someone would ask her to do something it had never been designed to do, like sort by eye-colour or how often the people involved tended to successfully drop toast so that the butter landed on the upside. It was much better, by and large, to build things after you already knew what they were going to be and what they were going to be used for, but Twitchwell had a low-level fear that nobody knew what was going on in general out there in the big mess of the world, not really, or if they did, it would only be a matter of time before what they knew was made obsolete or wrong or suddenly silly. When she had been little, Twitchwell assumed that even if she wasn't sure about what was going on, someone adult must. Because she had grown up in a family where they didn't really celebrate Christmas and she got some dubious information from girls she knew at school about how children were matched with Christmas presents, little Twitchwell had for a while believed that Father Christmas knew all about what was going on. I mean, obviously, he had to know, as part of his job. He had to know who had been good and who had told lies and who had taken apart Nana's alarm clock and couldn't put it back together. Then Twitchwell had grown up some more and it turned out that Father Christmas didn't exist, and even if he did, he had no more idea about what was going on than anyone else.

Twitchwell changed some settings on the trawl set up for the poison gin rumour and triple-checked that everything was running properly, watching streams of text march down a page erratically as they were dumped into a file. She let the Ingenu know. He was staring mournfully at one of his printed-out colourful graphs.

"Cheers, thanks. Good stuff," he said and sighed. The Ingenu crumpled up the piece of paper and gave it a basketball shot at the paper recycling bin. The ball of paper bounced off the side and lay on the carpet, accusingly. The Ingenu stood to pick it up, and trudged back to his desk to try again. After two more attempts he managed to successfully throw away the piece of paper, although it didn't seem to cheer him up much.

Madame Char was very strict about everybody using the right bins in CB4. Some of the older staff like the Luncher had grumbled, trotting out the old cliché about how you needed an entire operational guide to know what was supposed to go into which recycling bin, as if they were being asked to do something tricky, like defusing a bomb, or making a light and airy quiche. Madame

Char did not give up so easily. If there was one thing she knew, it was the power of habit. A good deal of misinformation and disinformation stuck because of habit, because it didn't require you to make the effort to read differently. The human mind is extraordinary, but also extraordinarily lazy. The trick, as she knew from her slow war to improve the health of the department, was to make change as unobtrusive and as minimal an effort as possible. She had strategically placed large and colourfully coded recycling bins where they were most likely to be needed (she got a genuine delight at ergonomic planning), and put gigantic simplified pictures of what should be put inside on each bin, mighty symbols that she had thoroughly tested on the most recalcitrant of the poor recyclers. This had been part of her devious plan, as by the very process of testing pictures on these reluctant recyclers, she had been also secretly training them to respond to the different recycling bins by making them think they had been an important part of the planning. Habit must be handled delicately, and if it must be given a push, a bit of secretive flattering of the ego does not go amiss.

Twitchwell pushed up her glasses and stared at the bins. She thought about how she had read somewhere that ninety-nine percent of plastic went missing after it had been thrown away. Chucked in the bin, carted off and now nobody had any idea where it had ended up exactly. Where was it all? In the sea somewhere, presumably. The article had said something about how British researchers had scooped up some shrimp-thing from the ocean, from miles down in the deepest, darkest ocean trenches, where the beasties that live down in that distant environment are so strange that they might as well be aliens from another world. Apparently inside the guts of eighty percent of these shrimp she couldn't remember the name of, the scientists had found little traces of plastics. Making plastic wasn't easy, Twitchwell assumed. It wasn't like making a sandwich. But even that everyday thing we had invented had somehow got away from us, maybe, and drifted off into unknown seas. You couldn't be sure of anything these days, not even of throwing away your rubbish.

One of the phrases that had been used when Twitchwell first signed up had been about how the sorts of things CB4 worked on, how the pieces of misinformation and disinformation floating out there mysteriously and getting into our sandwiches and our guts 'could help cause the disintegration of a shared reality'. Twitchwell had never really thought much about living in alternatives to this shared reality. She hadn't realised there was a choice. In fact, if anyone asked, she didn't want a choice. The standard reality was fine, thank you very much. She was perfectly happy with that one. She didn't want to worry about any other realities. Twitchwell didn't need any more uncertainty in her life. She even hated something as simple as having to pick a meal from a menu at a restaurant she had never been to before. Time slowed down and everything became uncomfortable when she stared at the menu and it felt like she was making everyone wait, and they were tapping their feet and rolling their eyes, but how was she supposed to know what was going to be good? What if she made the wrong choice? She'd be stuck with her terrible decision, and made to eat poached egg brussel sprouts or something and it would be all her own fault. It was a well established fact around

CB4 that the Luncher always knew what to pick from a menu - just the right thing for just the right time. Amazing! Twitchwell admired this skill immensely, this esoteric knowledge of handling the panic of everyday decisions. She also admired his moustache, which made him look both stern and a bit silly at the same time, in just the right proportions.

Twitchwell hated living in a state of uncertainty, but apparently that was just normal now for everybody her age? She wasn't sure how long this job at CB4 was going to last, and she was always terrified she wasn't doing the right thing. Twitchwell assumed there was a long line of hundreds of graduates who would be happy to replace her. She had only been in the adult workforce for a short time, but here she was already worried about if she was going to last and how she was ever going to afford the rest of her life. Could she ever afford a big impressive holiday to a theme park? Or to not worry too much about bills? Could she ever afford her own place - not just to rent on her own, but to actually buy her own flat? Could she ever afford a pet, or even a family of her own, if she wanted one? Could she afford retirement? Her parents, who, at her age had been well on their way to hard-working certainty and security, were always asking what her plans were and how things were going, and all Twitchwell could think to say was I don't know, how does anyone know?

Of course she tried to tell herself that there was nothing special about her and when and where she was born and that there had been ages of uncertainty since people had started having ages. A lot of human thought, it occurred to her since she had been working at CB4, has historically been about coming up with panicked explanations for things we can't understand or get our heads around, like deciding that the position of the stars is what is making everyone get sick or that tiny ghost imps are the reason for food going off. That's how desperate as a species we get for explanations we can understand. We'd rather grab on tight to something we just made up and that doesn't bear thinking about, rather than have nothing to hold on to at all. And of course, back in her parents' day a lot of people had been convinced that at any moment the whole world would blow up without warning once the nuclear warheads started to fly. But, and this was the important point Twitchwell felt, in the nuclear panic days, there had at least been something certain to be uncertain about. As far as she could make out, the entire planet was likely to fall apart any moment now, but nobody was even half-sure about what the cause would be. It's very hard to think positively about the future when you can't dream up any plan, when you can't think of anything specific to get excited about around the corner. The whole omnipresent tense yet amorphous atmosphere of constant uncertainty made you want to give up and slide down and out of your chair to have a despair nap under your desk. "Why are you under your desk?" the Ingenu asked Twitchwell, who peeked up guiltily at him. "Sorry, no reason," she said.

5. Peryton Milk

"Synchronised full-spectrum neuro-oververgence coverage," the Ingenu said quietly, stirring his tea with a little takeaway wooden fork. He would have used a spoon, but all the teaspoons had mysteriously vanished from the CB4 kitchen over the past week. Madame Char was bustling about the staff kitchen, checking every part of the room for spoons.
"Is oververgence a word, or did you make that up?" Twitchwell whispered back. The Ingenu shrugged.
"I don't suppose it matters if it was a word before now, does it? Even if the report I read it in made it up, does it seem plausible to you? If you saw 'oververgence' in a good jargon-heavy paragraph, would you stop and wonder? Or just move on? It is surely a legitimate point in the great and historic sport of Babeltennis that I have made up."
Twitchwell looked doubtful.
The Ingenu stirred his wooden fork in his tea a little more, in a mildly victorious fashion.
Twitchwell leaned forward.
"You know there's no milk in that tea don't you?" she whispered.
The Ingenu nodded.
"I'm hoping that by stirring it, I'll summon a... sort of idea of milk. To trick my tastebuds."
"There isn't any milk in the fridge again, is there?"
"No milk and no spoons," admitted the Ingenu, waving his takeaway fork around, "Not that you should keep spoons in the fridge, I suppose. Makes them much too chilly."
"Lucky you've got that fork to at least pretend to be a spoon to stir your pretend milk." said Twitchwell while chewing at a nail.
"Lucky, fortunate, and three-times blessed," agreed the Ingenu looking proudly at his fork, "It's from the falafel place across the road. I have a bad habit of slipping the little takeaway fork they give you into my pockets, but today that bad habit has turned itself into a good, excellent, and very clever habit in the absence of tea-spoons."
"Hrmf! No spoons and no milk," snorted the Luncher with disgust after inspecting the room, "I bet those damned Saps took 'em off to their damned department! Treat the whole world like they own it, and never a blasted thought for anyone else! Signal Process department indeed! More like Self-centred Pursesnatchers! Should get their own bloody spoons and milk, the lazy grasping devils!"
The Luncher was standing in front of the Peryton, which is to say the microwave in the CB4 staff kitchen. The Peryton was labelled as such in block capitals on a piece of paper on the side. Underneath the microwave's name was a half-competent red ink drawing of a peryton, a sort of mythical antlered deer-bird. The peryton was a made-up animal, and the peryton was also the name of a newly discovered particle that a bunch of physicists had once upon a time thought they had

detected with their big complicated and expensive machinery, a new particle that had actually turned out to be interference from their staff microwave not being properly closed. Nobody knew for sure who had put the microwave's name and emblem on the side of CB4's noble descendant of that earlier microwave ancestor.

"I'm not sure that the S.P.s stole our spoons, Sir," the Ingenu said to the Luncher, "It could have been anyone, really. I don't like to speak ill of other departments, but that lot in the Print and Distribution Centre on the third floor looks much more suspicious to me. Alternatively, the head of H.R. has a bit of a reputation for furious instability, especially since they limited the number of places she can smoke outside the building. Perhaps the spoon-napping was an act of revenge? And after all, do the Signal Process people look the sort to steal spoons?"
"Absolutely," the Luncher grunted, glaring at the poor innocent Peryton. No doubt flustered by his look, the Peryton binged and surrendered an unevenly warmed bowl of miso soup. The Luncher carried his soup to the table and took a rickety chair, sitting there with all the outrage of a man forced by cruel circumstance to sip his soup straight from the bowl. You didn't sip soup, as far as the Luncher was concerned, you sipped drinks. Soup in a mug, for instance, was a drink. Soup in a bowl with the appropriate utensil was a meal. Also, he disliked drinking soup straight from the bowl because he knew very well that the peryton wasn't terribly consistent at warming anything through, and he would be wearily drinking through a cold stream section of his soup when he would almost certainly be surprised by a sudden hot blast of a current flowing out from nowhere to scald his tongue. Finally, and most importantly, the Luncher hated drinking soup straight from the bowl because it was almost impossible to do this with sufficient daintiness so as to keep his moustache pristine. A man with a soggy soupy moustache was a saddening sight, and the Luncher had standards.

"I can't explain it," said Madame Char with a shake of her head, jogging on the spot, "Not a single spoon in the whole kitchen!"
"Those Saps!" barked the Luncher resentfully.
"Well, Sir, I mean," began the Ingenu, "It's possible that there are more likely alternatives for us to consider. For instance, (if you'll pardon me bringing up the possibility) isn't it more likely that over the last week, people have been accidentally taking things from the kitchen without even really thinking about it? Just an everyday carelessness (almost unconscious, if you will) - a mug here, a utensil there, without even noticing it and before you know it, all the spoons are gone, distributed all over the building, like dandelion seeds in a strong wind."
The Luncher scowled at the Ingenu as if he might well be involved in what he clearly saw as a flimsy cover story for laying unjust claim to the resources of the staff kitchen. He harrumphed, pushed his chair back, and put his bowl of miso soup back in the Peryton, setting it humming and rotating again, staring at the microwave.
"And this time, heat the whole lot!" he muttered threateningly at the machine.

Twitchwell waved nervously at the Luncher,
"Sorry, but you shouldn't stand so close to the microwave should you? I think it's bad for you? When my mum first got a microwave, she would switch it on and then run out of the room, just in case. She had heard that standing in front of it could make you sick?"
The Luncher frowned.
"Everything can make you sick, lass, or even kill you, if it is in the right excessive proportions. Too much water can kill you, or too much sun, or too little sun, or too much city air, or too much screen time, or too much pickled onion. We pick and choose our poisons as best we can, balancing fear with convenience. Just at this moment, already disappointed by having to slurp my soup from the bowl, I choose to glare at this machine while it tries to make my miso palatable, while also relieving my stress by imagining tiny versions of the thieving curs of the Self Promotion department boiling alive and in no little suffering there in my soup."
Madame Char mumbled something to herself several times and rubbed gently at her temples.
Everyone stared at her.
"It's a memorisation technique I've been trying," she explained, "You chant what you want to remember quietly to yourself and imagine the memories being physically worked right into your mind. In any case, since I've got your attention, I just wanted to have a quick informal word with everybody."
The Ingenu took a sip of his overly strong, bitter, and unmilked tea, looking guilty and suspicious over the rim of his mug. He hoped that this wasn't about the J.O.E. teach-the-kids-to-parse-reality project. He had started reading lots of (some) articles on teaching techniques (which had made him deeply thankful he had never gone into teaching, because it seemed to become more exhausting, undervalued, and badly paid every year) and had begun tentatively working up some ideas for recommendations on how to make the kiddies better at dealing with errf and lies damned lies. He would also, if asked, meet with this woman the Luncher knew in education, although he had not heard anything about this as yet and daily walked quietly about the office in dread that the Luncher would suddenly boom at him and send him off summarily to his doom. Currently, however, the Ingenu's main plan for dealing with the education initiative was to do enough work on it to plausibly claim that he was taking it seriously, while simultaneously hoping that the department would forget about the whole idea, or at least be forced to focus their efforts elsewhere.
"I'm sure you've heard the rumours," Madame Char said jovially.
The Ingenu nodded noncommittally.
"No?" said Twitchwell.
"We're getting to that season again."
"Spring?" ventured Twitchwell.
"I mean, of course, budget season. All of the information and data sections in the Building are going to get a bit of a looking-over. But I don't want you to be nervous about it."
This immediately made everybody in the room nervous.
"Think of this as an opportunity," Madame Char went on, "I know how valuable the work is that

you all do here at CB4, and I'm confident that the review will see that too."
Twitchwell's eyes grew wide and worried. A budget review? She was certain that she could actually feel her heart doing a crazy drum.
The Ingenu nodded coolly at this news.
Oh god, he thought to himself, (is it too late?) this doesn't sound especially wonderful for my career prospects and my New Year's resolution to start becoming a high flyer. I don't want to let the New Year down. I should have worked harder on that thing. On all the things. You never know if this is your last chance for success, after all. You can only probably tell it was your last chance long after it has gone whizzing past you and it is a distant faded memory, until you look at yourself and realise you never made anything of yourself and that there certainly don't seem to have been any last chances for a good long while now.
Madame Char waved her hand reassuringly, as if to swat away the anxieties swarming about the room like pesky little bugs.
"Honestly, there's no cause to worry. There has been the regular sort of tug-of-war amongst the local departments, and as usual some of them have argued they need a bigger piece of the budgetary pie."
"Those underhanded Saps again!" grunted Luncher venomously, "I imagine they can't ever get enough pie, the greedy gluttonous pieomaniac jackanapes!" If they managed to steal away budget from CB4, they'd try to cut him out as quick as look at him, those sly cut-throats, he was certain of it. If S.P. had more budget, they'd be wanting to spend it on something, and to put whatever they spent it on somewhere, so of course they would claim that they needed more room. That meant out he'd go from his office, and out on the streets, or even more humiliatingly, they'd put him in some minuscule musty box-room like a dumped pile of files archived and forgotten, pretending they were doing him some favour by giving him this tiny sop, waiting until the crushing humiliation of irrelevance made him give up and resign or keel over.
"The point," Madame Char said calmly, "Is that for the next few weeks, it wouldn't hurt to give all your work just a little extra, to push ourselves, so that we can feel confident in our ourselves as a department, and so we can tell ourselves that there's no need to worry about the budget review!"
"Saps!" the Luncher muttered again, this time under his breath for variety. "Hostile! Perfidious! Menacing! Momentous! Fatal!" He gave a big contemptuous snort that ruffled his moustache and he closed his eyes to the indignity of the situation.

Twitchwell hoped she wouldn't get sacked. She could do more actual programming than half the building, but she was also probably the most junior person around? Didn't they normally make it last-in-first-out in these sorts of situations? She could maybe get another job after this, even though she wasn't clear how impressive government work would be for trying to jump back into the private sector? More importantly, Twitchwell, as someone who lacked a fully developed ability to advertise herself, hated looking for jobs. Was she supposed to say how wonderful she was or something? Ridiculous, and also obviously untrue. And then there were the interviews. Twitchwell

was not comfortable with the idea of having to do new job interviews. To be honest, she didn't understand the point of them. She wasn't being tested on her ability to do interviews, was she? That had nothing to do with any of her jobs. In real life, like most sensible restrained people, she avoided talking face to face with anyone wherever possible. Job interviews were some strange artefact hangover from the Victorian era or something, from before the invention of the telegraph. The need to wear a scratchy sweaty outfit, the awkwardness, the room that somehow always had uncomfortable air, the squeaky awful sound of her own voice, the scattering of questions that were either inexplicably so stupid or were so irrelevant that they felt like they must be some sort of strange test she could barely make out. In an ideal world, all that should be needed to determine if someone was right for the job once all the paperwork had been sifted and aptitude tested, surely, was a quick check to make sure that she was a real non-fictional person, which should take five seconds tops, and the hypothetical employer could then direct her straight to an office chair.

In closing his eyes, the Luncher was in fact trying to centre himself, expelling his negativity and attempting to get into something like a half-decent calm-minded state. Although admittedly erratically, he had practised meditation for several years now, caving in to the recommendations of his doctor regarding stress and blood pressure, as well as the gentle well-intentioned nagging of his husband. Unfortunately, trying to meditate usually just reminded him that he had been practising breathing techniques and the like for years and still wasn't seeing any noticeable benefit or effectiveness from the damned procedure, which wasn't especially relaxing to contemplate. If only there was some way to pursue an inner state of transcendent flustered outrage, he would surely be a grand master.

The Ingenu sucked on the vaguely tea-tasting tines of his wooden fork. Madame Char was right. He should see this as an opportunity. He was going to stay positive (for now, at least). And if there was one thing he was positive about, it was that there was surely some minor disaster on the horizon of his professional life, something waiting to knock him off course. Well, let it come - he would be ready! And if worse came to worst and CB4 was going to be torn apart and gobbled up by other departments in the building, then he would have to make sure he was ready (in a practical sense, not just a vague spiritual one) and that he knew what was coming. Also, although it was rubbish of him to think of it (wasn't it?), he should start planning some sort of (metaphorical) lifeboat, in case this budget did smash things up here. The Ingenu had to make sure that he had somewhere else to go. There was no point in going down with the CB4 ship. (Although it was less of a ship, he supposed, and more of a slow tootling tug boat, or a scrappy little dinghy.) No, there was opportunity here, an opportunity to impress someone. Anyone would do, impression wise, and the Ingenu should maybe do a bit of investigating about whether he had any chance of jumping ship to the S.P. lads.
One point of his wooden fork broke off in his mouth and the Ingenu spat it without thinking into his remaining half inch of tea. He tried not to look disappointed.
"Of course, Ma'am, you can count on us to do our very best," the Ingenu said to Madame Char. "Oh,

and apropos of nothing, I was trying to trace down some info recently. Does anybody here know about a Beau Dahlia? Or maybe a Boo Darla? Something that sounds like that? Buh Dillia? Bar Doula? Is that something that means anything to any of you?"
"Do you know," Madame Char said, "I recently tried to get my boys interested in helping out with the gardening, lots of good fresh air and exercise and positive energy in it, after all! Gives a good sense of local environmental care, too. One of my boys can never remember how to pronounce the flower Buddleia. He says Boo-day-lee-ah. Instead of Bud-lee-ah. I think he thinks that all flowers are fancy, so their pronunciation must be too."

Research! The Ingenu was good at research! More than half his day was spent staring at endless gushes of nonsense, trying to grab at it and squish it into some semblance of sense before it dripped through his fingers. The Ingenu dove in. He read about how there were over one hundred varieties of the Buddleia, but the main one (Buddleja davidii) was also known as the butterfly bush, which usually has lilac flowers and was brought to Europe from China by a Catholic priest in the nineteenth century. Butterflies like the flowers, but the plants turn out to be bad for them because they don't provide anything good for them at the larval stage, and they are bad for everything else at the same time, because they take up all the space and crowd out native flowers. The Ingenu had mixed feelings about this, because he thought butterflies were perfectly fine to look at, but he found the thought of them landing on him and walking about on his skin with their weird tiny little feet somewhat unsettling. Never having paid much attention to the buddleia thus far, he learned that a lot of them spring up, given half a chance, in any unmonitored space in modern human civilisations - in abandoned urban sites, all along train tracks, and out of tiny, but growing, cracks on the side of buildings. The buddleia started out as an ornamental, exotic import and turned into a difficult-to-control noxious weed. Much of this seemed to be due to a combination of marketing and carelessness. Despite the unstoppable ornamental spread of the plant, and the fact that tonnes of the stuff is just growing like crazy out of local derelict lots, you can still buy buddleia at garden centres, if for some reason you want your own personal starting point to help out the further spread of the pretty weed. In the poetic language of flowers, buddleia clearly meant 'an unhelpful celebration of elegant urban decay'. It was a very now plant. The Ingenu wrote down: 'Roses are red, violets are blue, buddleia is everywhere, what'r'ye gonna do?' None of this seemed relevant just at the moment, but you never know.

The Ingenu started looking for things named after the buddleia. No cool nightclubs, no restaurants, no obvious code name. Then the Ingenu started looking for street names, and ten minutes later, he had something.
"You bloody beautiful Beau Dahlia!" he said triumphantly and slapped at his desk.

6. Water the Flowers

"Sorry, but you seem to be drinking a lot of water?" Twitchwell ventured.
The Ingenu nodded sagely and tapped the side of his nose. He lifted his purple litre water bottle (designed for thirsty sports professionals, it had claimed) and he took another sip of lukewarm London tapwater. None of that fancy high-end water for him, no sir. Although, the Ingenu had to admit that after having been through several bottles of Local Finest Water, he was starting to become very conscious of how it tasted. Water shouldn't taste of anything noticeable, the Ingenu thought. It should be a nice, ignorable default, like the taste of the air.
"No, sorry, I mean, a lot a lot of water. Probably too much water?" Twitchwell said.
"Can you have too much water?" the Ingenu wondered, "After all, aren't we mostly made of water? And isn't most of the planet water, too?"
"Well, but that's salt water, isn't it?"
"Still," said the Ingenu and took another sip, "It's important to stay hydrated, isn't it?"
Twitchwell pushed her glasses up her nose.
"But you already drink more cups of tea a day than anyone else in the office. Should you maybe not also be drinking bottles and bottles of water?"
The Ingenu had to admit that this had initially been a problem. Increasing the number of cups of tea per day wasn't practical. Each mug took time to make, and there weren't any hilarious novelty oversized mugs in the office, and (even if there were) the tea would be cold and unpleasant by the time he got to the bottom of it. There was, luckily, a small amount of milk that had somehow survived the disappearances lately, but it wasn't enough to really make more than one cup without depriving everyone else in CB4 from having their fair (minuscule) share of the white stuff. But the Ingenu needed to be going to the bathroom regularly. It was all part of his plan. Hence the water bottle.
"It's just that if you drink too much water," Twitchwell insisted with concern, "You can dilute your blood or something and make your cells bloat or drown I think? I mean, I think it's very hard to do, but you seem to be trying?"
"Not to worry," the Ingenu said with a wink, "All under control."

It was all under control because the Ingenu was dealing with his increased hydration by going to the toilet regularly throughout the day. Nobody would tell him off for his brief surge in bathroom use. There was probably some Health and Safety directive thing that protected the sanctity of bathroom breaks in government departments. If nothing else, he was reasonably sure that nobody in CB4 would feel they should give him a stern talking-to for going to the bathroom so often. Well, Madame Char might, if she noticed, and would make the whole thing even more cringingly

embarrassing by being concerned about his bladder health, but so far nobody besides Twitchwell had noticed at all, and anyway, nothing ventured (to the bathroom), nothing gained! The Ingenu needed to be having regular bathroom breaks throughout the day because he needed a plausible reason to go regularly to the Neutral Zone. There he hoped to find those two fellows from the S.P. department, and to see if he could get in with them to get some good intelligence about what their department was up to, and perhaps to even push up the Ingenu's own stock with them, just in case he needed somewhere to save his career if CB4 got lost in the whirl of budgetary reshuffling. If you stopped to think about it, filling yourself to brimming with tap water and marching to and from the toilets in the hope of boosting your career was perhaps not the most brilliant plan in the world, but the Ingenu was allowing himself not think about that, and was quite content to be feeling that he was doing something active. No, better, something proactive!

So far, the Ingenu had no luck in the haunting of the Neutral Zone, as he had not managed to work out the schedule for malingering among the S.P. boys yet. The Ingenu had come across other groups making use of the Neutral Zone, including a group from the Fact Faction who stood around arguing about football players, because, despite having no interest in the game ordinarily, they were apparently playing some online team management game that was becoming dangerously emotional and overly competitive. The Ingenu had also walked past one of the cleaning staff staring philosophically at the sunny poster on the wall, and two people (one of the Velveteens and one of the Head of State Shrinkers) who were clearly involved in the secretive giggling early days of a romantic relationship, but were acting like it wasn't completely obvious to every single bystander. None of this was useful intel for the Ingenu's future. But on this occasion, as he waddled towards the Zone, sloshing from side to side (feeling like a hot water bottle and wondering if he was getting better at holding increasing measures of liquid), success! There were the lads from S.P. in their thin suits and floppy hair! Now was the Ingenu's moment, his chance to shine! He cleared his throat
"All right?" he said.
The Boys looked up from their phones with blank looks, but they did nod at the Ingenu at least and acknowledge his presence. The Luncher, in one of his many ranting grumbles about the Saps had decided that these two junior representatives of their department were called Gentle and Thanks, because just as when you said Thanks Rosencrantz and Gentle Guildenstern, or the other way around, it didn't matter which was which, so too the Luncher insisted that this pair of S.P. lads were essentially interchangeable lackeys. This judgement seemed rather unfair to the Ingenu. For one thing, Gentle was slightly taller than Thanks. Or possibly it was the other way around.
"You're from S.P., right?" said the Ingenu, as if he wasn't sure.
Gentle gave a nod.
"Best place to be around these parts, compadre," Thanks said.
"And you, mate?" said Gentle.
"CB4," the Ingenu confessed.
"Ah, the CeeBeebies!"

"The Kids' Show!"
The Ingenu gave a pained grin and shrugged as if in apology.
"Well, you know, you got to start somewhere, right?"
"Got to walk before you can run, right, chief?" said Gentle.
"Except the CeeBeebies is more like crawling than walking, right, hermano?" said Thanks. The Saps laughed at this and Ingenu tried to smile more, although it was already becoming a strain and felt like his choppers were now under so much force that his teeth were going to break.
"You know how it is," he said.
"How is it, champ?"
"You guys in the Kids' Show been working on anything good lately?"
"Maybe a potentially world-changing article forwarded from someone's Grandma?"
"Or somebody insisting their dog is a ghost?"
"Or a dangerously inaccurate cake recipe spreading online?"
"Well," said the Ingenu with a sigh, "I ain't going to lie to you fellas. It isn't always top-drawer material we get to work with, but you take what you can get, right?"
Thanks snorted.
"I mean, how are things over in S.P. anyway?" said the Ingenu casually "Up to much of anything over there?"
Gentle winked.
"Oh, we are always up to much in the S.P., chico," confided Thanks.
"Being Up to Much is practically our Mission Statement, bro," said Gentle.
"Big Things are looming on the horizon."
"But we are braced and ready, man."
"We are always looking straight forward to the horizon."
"We goddamn relish the challenge of the future."
The Ingenu nodded sagely as if he hadn't given the topic much thought before now, but of course, any fool could see that was the correct way to look towards horizons and futures of all kinds.
"Y'know," the Ingenu said carefully, "I could be misunderstanding, but I think I heard some mutterings here and there about the S.P. and the Buddleia place."
The Ingenu had spent a considerable time trying out different pronunciations of 'Buddleia', eventually settling on a sort of mumble-slurred compromise that was half the way he heard the S.P. boys pronounce it, mixed in with the actual right way to say Buddleia.
As soon as the Ingenu let loose that lilac weed of a word, Gentle and Thanks narrowed their eyes and stared at him for a moment. The moment seemed to become uncomfortable very quickly and then to go on far too long, and was the Ingenu mistaken, or was it suddenly very much more silent here in the Neutral Zone? It wasn't his imagination, was it? This was too much silence, and a whopper of one to boot for sure, wasn't it? The Ingenu could have breathed a sigh of relief when they finally opened their mouths.
"You heard about the B.?"

"And the S.P.?"
"Guess you are a well informed individual, ain't you?"
"'Course you can't keep our doings under wraps forever, can you?"
"No way José. Too much big stuff coming up to keep it under wraps."
Thanks and Gentle here did a fist bump without looking. The Ingenu was oddly impressed by this, as he found that he had to concentrate on spatial dynamics just to shake hands properly. You didn't want a handshake to be awkward - it needed to be straight in without deviation, neither too feeble nor too macho. A handshake for all seasons. Although the Saps looked to believe that the fist-bump was even better for any occasion.
"Right, so," the Ingenu said, trying to get this conversation back on plan, "Like I said, I've been hearing talk about Buddleia House and your department."
Gentle and Thanks nodded and grinned.
"Yeah, hombre, that place is looming large for our department."
"A real step-up, but a well deserved one, my man. We gotta grow."
"Gotta have room to grow. I mean that is a primo site they've built over there."
"Proper state of the art installations in the space."
"Fibre optic cabling."
"Top-spec A.V. equipment in all the conference rooms."
"The sort of space we need for the sort of next-level data and intelligence work we have got planned, compañero."
"You've got no idea how sweet this place is, champ."
The Ingenu nodded, but actually he had a very good idea, because he had spent a difficult-to-justify amount of his working day researching the proposed new offices at Buddleia House. Someone in government had decided that it might be nice to have a capable high-tech connected site that could do backup and support for the Big Show of the proper Intelligence services, and Lo and Behold, some bright spark had rediscovered that they had the perfect place in the Buddleia House building, which for some reason lately had mostly been used as a place to stack up office furniture. It was theorised that this had come about because after whoever used to be in Buddleia House had been moved on to other pastures in the past, due to a particular mysterious bureaucratic confusion nobody else had ever been moved in. This was perhaps because someone had mistakenly marked Buddleia House down as a storage area, which was not entirely untrue, in that it didn't leak when it rained and was perfectly fine for keeping desks and chairs dry. It was also a beautiful old-façaded building, and once it had been rediscovered, finances had been summoned up by dark and obscure economic sorcery to renovate the building from top to bottom. Buddleia House did have all the fancy technology that British money could buy, but more importantly, inside it was now a properly heated bright and shiny new site, with lovely looking carpets, where doors opened and closed properly without needing a subtle kick. There were even gardens in this office-building paradise, leafy places where you might bask in a little green and pleasant corner before leaping back into the fight against disinformation. If that wasn't enough, Buddleia House had excellent public transport

links, and even more difficult to credit, almost adequate parking spaces. The site was, in short, a plum, and it was unsurprising that the Saps had their hungry eye on it.
"It'd be a nice move all right. A step up." said the Ingenu wistfully.
Gentle put his arm around Thanks and the pair drew closer.
"Well, pal, keep it on the down-low, but those new spots are as good as ours."
"It's all about the future, mon frere, and for us the future is looking bright."
"The future is where we live and thrive. And the S.P. is moving on up there,"
"Metaphorically and geographically."
"I could do with some of that," admitted the Ingenu.
Thanks slapped him on the back.
"You seem a bright guy yourself. Maybe we could find a place for you over in S.P. someday. Who knows?"
The Ingenu's eyes widened with speechless delight. He didn't want to seem too desperate, especially because he was very desperate.
"Yeah, maybe man," he said, "That'd really be something, wouldn't it?"
"Listen, mon amis, you've got to check out what we are all about," insisted Thanks and slapped the Ingenu on the back again. They seemed to enjoy back slapping. The Ingenu wasn't sold on it yet, but he was willing to give it a chance.
"Why don't you see if you can get up to standard, yeah? To join the fight on our side."
Gentle's jaw tensed and he stared meaningfully at the bright poster on the wall like it was a distant view of the S.P.'s official future horizon. He then pulled out his phone, flicked at it and waved it in front of the Ingenu's face. On the screen was a paused video of a very confident-looking man standing on a stage with something projected behind him. Even in a paused screen, this guy had presence, not to mention excellent teeth. You just knew from looking at him that he was absolutely one-hundred percent certain that whatever he was going to talk about was completely great. He didn't worry about whether people would listen, because he was the sort of guy people always listened to. This man was so confident that even the way he was ostentatiously not wearing a tie was confident. Did he have two top buttons undone? Unreal. The Ingenu recognised him, although the man was too important to be around their shabby building much, seeing he was off doing talks and things at all times. This was Sir Parsifal, the head of the S.P.
"That's our chief," said Thanks reverently, pointing at the screen.
"No damn better leader in the whole damn field," added Gentle, "You watch this vid, bud, and listen to it."
"Really listen, amico," said Thanks, waving a finger, "I mean, really listen with your whole mind."
"And see what you make of it," said Gentle, and paused meaningfully, "But most importantly, see what it...makes of you."
The Ingenu had no idea what this meant, but he nodded enthusiastically.

7. There be Beasts

Twitchwell had been stuck talking to the Security Guard for a while now. She wasn't sure how long, because although she had an overwhelming urge to check the time to find out how long she had been stuck there, that felt rude. Being stuck like this often happened to her, because she wasn't entirely clear how a person was supposed to escape from a conversation. You couldn't just walk off in the middle of someone else's sentence, could you? Because that was definitely top-level rude. But it would feel great, wouldn't it? How wonderful, she imagined, to just stride away with a wave of a hand, indicating that she was too busy just at the moment for a chat, of course, of course you understand. In this scenario, Twitchwell also imagined herself as much taller and sophisticated looking, because why not? If you were daydreaming, you might as well go the whole hog. But of course she wasn't actually striding anywhere, was she? No, she was stuck in this conversation, or this surprise monologue, she supposed, because conversation probably needed at least two people involved, and Twitchwell wasn't really involved in the security guard's talk. It was a shame, he was such a lovely, friendly man, who always said hello when she came in and gave a welcoming bright smile. But he had this problem - he couldn't stop talking about football. Twitchwell knew nothing about football, but she tried to look interested, because she wondered if the security guard wasn't allowed to talk about football at home and was desperate to share his enthusiasm with someone before it made his head explode. In a way, it was her own fault, Twitchwell supposed. If she had remembered to bring her lunch today, she wouldn't have gone out to get some disappointing takeaway sandwich which had left no trace of flavour on her appetite, and she wouldn't have fallen into the friendly ambush of this football chat. In another sense, if you thought about it this way, she wasn't just stuck in a talk, wasn't paralysed by anxiety, no - she was being helpful to a person in need.

Eventually, when the security guard had to take a long breath after a particularly impassioned defence of a new player's potential, Twitchwell managed to get away with an awkward goodbye. It was too bad that the Building had to have security, otherwise she might be able to find another way in, an entrance where she couldn't get stuck in a talk. Maybe through the air-vents or something? Air-vents sounded lovely and cool and relaxing. She was hurrying back to the office and wondering whether she could fit inside an air-vent like people did on telly shows, and that perhaps being a small young woman could hypothetically finally come in handy, when she saw something odd. She adjusted her glasses and squinted. Twitchwell was reasonably sure that at the distant end of the corridor was Wattingham, a guy who had studied the same course as her. Yes, nobody else looked so much like a baffled and pessimistic gnome who had just been rudely woken up and had no idea what was going on. He was wearing a guest pass on a lanyard around his neck, wasn't he? Which

indicated that she probably wasn't hallucinating, lanyards being too trivial a detail for most hallucinations. Wattingham was shaking hands with Madame Char. Twitchwell actually gasped. What the Swearword was he doing here and shaking hands with the boss of CB4? She started to get an uncomfortable prickly sensation in her scalp. Char was smiling at Wattingham, who looked gloomy, but from what she remembered that meant nothing because he always looked that way. He was probably actually over the moon? Oh Swearing Swearword! Wattingham had just glanced towards Twitchwell. In panic, she hid behind an empty water cooler. Had he seen her? Why was he here? There was only one reason that she could think of. Twitchwell chewed her lip. She hadn't thought anything about it at the time, but hadn't Madame Char popped up out of nowhere a couple of weeks back when Twitchwell was busy looking for her glasses (they were on her head) and asked her casually what she knew about Wattingham? Without even thinking about it Twitchwell had probably said how reliable Wattingham had been in his work on deep learning systems (which he was) and had been basically unknowingly asking Madame Char to hire him to replace Twitchwell. This was the beginning of the end, she was sure, and it was all her own Swearwording fault.

"You seem..." said the Ingenu cautiously.
Twitchwell slumped in her chair and took a sad sip from a can of energy drink. She did not feel energised. She felt like she had been drinking despair drink by mistake. Twitchwell sighed. The Ingenu scratched his head.
"Would you like a cup of tea?" ventured the Ingenu. Twitchwell made a negative-sounding gurgling noise.
"Well, you just seem a little...flat today," said the Ingenu, "A little listless, dispirited, without zeal, you know? Lacking your usual intensity."
Twitchwell spilled some sticky drink down her front. She didn't even care.
The Ingenu pushed his chair over.
"I've got a new Babeltennis shot for you. 'Diasynchronic Predevelopmental Partnerships'. That's got to be worth a point, right?"
Twitchwell nodded.
"Look," the Ingenu said, "It's no fun just playing Obscure Phrase Tennis all by myself. Why don't you have a go?"
Twitchwell blew a dejected raspberry.
"'m no good at making things up," she mumbled.
"Come on, have a go!" the Ingenu said with forced cheeriness, waving a hand in a sweep about the office, "Just have a look about you and connect three things. Anythings. The less a normal functioning brain can process them, the more mysterious they sound, the better."
Twitchwell slowly and painfully looked around. She thought for a while.
"Dancing... Sailor... Bin?" she said weakly.
The Ingenu tapped his chin.
"Yes, well, not a dreadful start. But you want to try and make it sound like the words might just

possibly go together in some official capacity, even if you aren't entirely sure they actually mean anything at all. You need a bit more pompous formality. So, 'dancing sailor bin' could be even better as something like 'choreographed interaqueous disposal'. Y'see?" The Ingenu tried to look encouraging.
Twitchwell let her head fall on her keyboard. She deserved keys to the face, she felt.
"Right, I'll just leave you to it then, shall I?" said the Ingenu and shuffled his chair back to his desk.

Fortunately, Twitchwell was not left to wallow in her feelings of inherent replaceableness for long. The Luncher asked her if she would be good enough to help him with some work, in one of his preferred ways: by shouting across the department. She trudged in and collapsed down into one of his noisy leather chairs. As she deflated into the chair, it let out a mournful long squeak.
"Ah, good!" said the Luncher, "Thank you for joining me." He stared at something in her general direction.
"You appear to have something there," Luncher said and pointed at her.
"A... blouse?" said Twitchwell uncertainly.
"In the, hrm, region of the top quadrant, just right of centre there. Some sort of stain."
Twitchwell poked at the sticky blot.
"Oh yes, sorry. Just a drink I spilled."
The Luncher rummaged through one of his ancient desk drawers and brought out a white linen cloth.
"In case you need a serviette next time," the Luncher said gruffly and handed it over, "Go on, take it. Always best to have a few about, just in case. Never know what life is going to spill on you, after all."
Twitchwell thanked him and took the napkin. For want of anywhere else to put it, she folded it and tucked it by her side.
"Can I do anything for you?" said Twitchwell, who felt like she should have some minor object to offer in return, but had foolishly brought nothing with her except a rather sorry-looking chewed up plastic pen.
The Luncher got out a large stack of papers and piled them up between himself and Twitchwell.
"Yes, indeed. It's for the Grand Handbook."
"Oh yes," said Twitchwell, pushing her glasses up and trying to concentrate. She chewed on the non-writing end of her biro. As she chewed through pens fairly rapidly, it was important that they not be too expensive. Pencils were no good because she tended to occasionally accidentally swallow small fragments of mushed wood, which probably wasn't good for you? Couldn't she just chew chewing gum if she had a bunch of nervous jaw energy to get out? That's what you think, Miss Smarty Pants, but, for one thing, there was never anywhere to put the chewing gum after you were finished with it, whereas a pen was still useful even after you had left substantial gnawing marks in its end. Also, her Nana had always hated the sight of people chewing gum, and after all you didn't want to look like a sleepy cow now did you? What would the astral projected presence of all-

knowing Nana think? No, you wanted a little bit of plastic resistance for thoughtful chewing, and a cheap pen from a packet of fifty identical pens could see her through for some time. There was always the risk of getting ink on your face or on your clothes from excess chewing, but there was a downside to everything, wasn't there?

"The Guide?" she said, "How is it all going?"

"Slow and steady, of course, but I can see the end. Not too far off now, I should think!"

The Luncher shuffled through many pages, varying from an ancient yellowed to a crisp white hue. Twitchwell saw that they were covered in handwriting. It was lovely handwriting, clear yet with graceful little flourishes at the ends of letters. It was so pleasant just to look at. Twitchwell's handwriting, in contrast, looked like a scribbly font for making unfunny webcomics. Her handwriting spent so much time and effort painstakingly making sure you could read it that it ended up looking a little bit silly and childish. Based on these pages, clearly the Luncher spent a lot more time writing things out than anyone else in the entire Building. No wonder he had such lovely handwriting. All that practice over all the years. Twitchwell looked idly around the room and thought about how much weightier the words on all that paper and in all those books felt to her just at the moment, even though probably many times more words wooshed through the monitors on her desk every week. The words she looked at every day weren't the same, though, were they? The words on her screens were as light as dust, endlessly falling, but weightless enough to blow away without a thought. It would be much harder to replace all this physical writing in the Luncher's office. It occurred to Twitchwell that she had never seen the Luncher with his computer screen turned on. Did he never use it? Did he not know how to use it? At the very least, it might explain why he often shouted out his office communiqués.

"Ah, excellent, hrm! Here we are!" said the Luncher, tapping at a particular page. "Moderation!"

"As in... all good things in?" asked Twitchwell cautiously.

"Yas, yas, I wanted to pick your brains about a few matters on moderating message boards and the like, get The Guide up to speed in a small area or two, as it were. Peppermint?"

The Luncher pushed a small lacquered black box filled with little white balls towards Twitchwell. She said thanks and took one and popped it in her mouth. It was delicious, which she found odd. You weren't supposed to think about mints, were you? You put them in your mouth to make smells go away. But this one had a crisp but fragile shell that cracked in a little exciting way and inside it was all gooey and completely delicious.

"It's completely delicious!" Twitchwell blurted out.

The Luncher twisted at his moustache and looked modest.

"Oh, I happen to know an individual who makes 'em fresh. Got to make 'em fresh, y'know."

"No, I didn't know," said Twitchwell, marvelling. She wondered what other everyday items that we normally accepted as boring and functional could actually be fun and delicious. Maybe artichokes were actually nice? Maybe the Christmas celebrators were actually on to something when they looked forward to brussel sprouts? Luncher gestured and she took another. The sugar was helping perk her up.

"Well, to the matter at hand," declared the Luncher, and laid out various pages and waved his hands over them. On each of the pages, the name of a particular discussion or social media site was written in the Luncher's elegant letters. Twitchwell thought to herself how unconsciously she associated the particular logos and fonts with each website, because now that they were all written out in the Luncher's hand, they looked just a little bit strange somehow, a little stripped of their normal trappings.

"Moderation!" boomed the Luncher, "How, in practice, are online public discussions moderated? Who, in fact, is in charge? Is anyone in charge at all? Is there order or anarchy? How are the writings and posts checked and moderated, if indeed they are, or do they simply spew forth in an uncontrollable stream of the unrestrained id?"

"Um, yes, it obviously depends on the site, of course," Twitchwell began hesitatingly. She tapped at one of the Luncher's handwritten pages. "This here, for instance, um, is one of the biggest mainstream discussion boards in the world, I think? The users are all anonymous, which is to say, they pick their own names, or whatever is available. There are, um, a bunch of groups, all centred around a general theme or topic. Like, about pictures of cute animals, or investment advice, or political shouting. The idea behind the site is that on the first level, each of the groups sort of moderate themselves by voting on what is most popular. Upvotes and downvotes. Each group also has one or more people who are in charge of the rules of the group, and they can kick people out, or ban things. Finally, at the top of the pyramid the people who run the site can step in from on high if they see lots of reports or activity too big and ugly to ignore and they can pull the plug on anything at any time. But they don't like to do that because it makes a lot of people angry and makes the owners of the site look bossy and authoritarian. Like all these sites, there are lots of opportunities to manipulate this system to make things more or less prominent. A half-thought out manipulation will mix inflammatory posts aimed at chaos and polarisation with standard funny pictures so that troll accounts are harder to spot. For every post designed to incite outrage, you balance it with a post of a kitten being cute. Um. Is that?..." Twitchwell trailed off.

The Luncher made some appreciative noises throughout and took notes. He used an actual fountain-pen, which Twitchwell had always assumed were meant to be bought as expensive presents and put on display, but not actually used for anything, except maybe signing fancy contracts or giant cheques. You certainly couldn't chew a fountain pen, at least not in any satisfying way.

"Good!" the Luncher said, "Let us turn now from the general to a specific example." He laid down a piece of paper so that Twitchwell could read it. On the top in large letters was written 'The Case of the Black Lion', and underneath the Luncher had drawn a fairly good example of that beast turning slightly to the viewer with a front paw off the ground, giving perhaps a half-hearted growl. The picture would not look entirely out of place in a medieval bestiary. The Luncher tapped on the lion's head.

"We have here an example of a probable untruth disseminated, as far as we can tell initially and predominantly on this same large discussion website. It features, marvellously, a sort of Black Shuck

situation, although rather than the apparition being a great big spectral hound reported to stalk the forest or moors, we have here reports of a black lion being sighted prowling around the urban outskirts."
"An actual black lion?" said Twitchwell gaping. She looked around nervously, as if the lion might be under the desk.
The Luncher leaned back in his chair and rubbed his head.
"An interesting question. Putting aside the improbability of a wild beast being let loose to wander about the streets, although I am certainly no zoologist, I do not think there is such a thing as a black lion at all. So, to answer your query as to whether the lion in question was present, to phrase it in as short and accurate a fashion as possible, probably not."
Twitchwell felt relieved. Then she was vaguely disappointed that black lions didn't exist after all. It felt like Nature was missing a trick there.
The Luncher continued.
"To continue, based on some swift and admittedly glancing research into the animal kingdom, we can now have at least a modest amount of confidence that the beast in question is of the imaginary variety. Good. Why then is it prowling about at least six groups on the website?" He shuffled some more papers and presented a flow chart. "If we trace the lion back to its lair, we find several citations for a story about a lion that got away from, or perhaps was even released intentionally by, some nefarious but presumably incompetent animal smugglers. Following the old adage of the preferred worth of a picture, we also see many posts of a picture taken, presumably from the initial article on the matter, one very blurry photograph of some mysterious black figure stalking in front of what appears to be a hairdressing salon on an otherwise unremarkable street."
Twitchwell squinted at the photograph The Luncher had printed out. The print-out proved that at least that if the Luncher never knowingly used technology in the office, he knew someone who did.
"Is that a lion?" Twitchwell said, after staring at the picture for a while.
The Luncher shrugged.
"It is not much of anything, which is to say, it might then be anything, which is a wondrous achievement for a blur."
"Still, it wouldn't be that hard to paste a picture of what clearly looked like a black lion into that photo?" Twitchwell was a touch offended at the laziness of the picture.
"A precise point. Was the photograph chosen at random when it became connected to the story? Or was it in fact intentionally doctored in this murky fashion? Was it in fact supposed to look more unclear, to look less professional, to seem more amateurish and more spontaneous and hence, somehow, more convincing?"
Twitchwell thought about this and studied the print-outs of the posts for some time. For those who believed in the existence of the roaming black lion, discussion tended to centre around how people were afraid to go to the shops now, complaints about the damned foreign animal smugglers who had let the beast loose out of carelessness and/or hatred of the British people and British wildlife, and complaints about the government that failed to prevent exotic animals being smuggled and also

continuously failed to capture alleged lions once loosed. Twitchwell arranged the print outs in order of date, and followed the progress of the black lion to the earliest post. This first post titled 'Look Out!' had the blurry photograph and quoted from an article that reported the story of the loosed lion on tour. The article, such as it was, ran as follows:

'Outer London Residents have recently reported several sightings of a large black lion roaming the streets several times over the last few weeks. It is believed that the creature in question escaped from a 'secret-zoo' where Eastern European smugglers hold exotic animals brought illegally into the country for resale in underground animal black markets and for secret animal-based medicine. Official advicement has been to be cautious when walking around your neighborhood, as the black lion may be dangerous, and to report any sightings to the authorities.'

The initial story came from a site that was called the South Plains Daily News. Twitchwell took out her phone.
"Um, do you mind if I just have a quick look?" she said. The Luncher made a magnanimous gesture.
"By all means," he said.
Twitchwell searched for a few variations of the terms 'black lion smugglers loose' and took screenshots of the various results. Most of the top twenty search results were from this same discussion site. Several click-hungry novelty news sites (in the broadest and most debatable sense of news) also reported the story. Twitchwell realised she had been at this for some time, but the Luncher did not seem to mind, and had been sitting there for the duration with his eyes half-closed, making that funny sort of breathing whistle that made his moustache do a little bit of a dance.
"So, I don't know if this is right," Twitchwell ventured, "But it looks to me that the lion has spread from the initial article in this 'South Plains Daily', to the discussion site, and on to being scraped and reposted on a whole heap of other sites over the next day or so, and then from these various secondary sources, was repeated back to social media all over again."
"Excellent!" said the Luncher, "And besides that first appearance in the South Plains Daily News of the black lion, how many other sources are there reporting on its existence?"
Twitchwell checked through some of the pages featuring the black lion. Then she checked another ten or so. She made a quick calculation.
"Um, I might have this wrong, obviously I haven't gone through all of them, but I think that most of the posts have basically summarised the 'South Plains Daily', so, um basically... none other sources?"
"Precisely!" said the Luncher with delight, "And yet the story is picked up by many other sites, and then referenced back on social media, so one black lion sighting soon becomes what looks like many, many reports of the black lion, who at this point must be getting damned tired of all that bustle and attention and want nothing more than to be left in peace."
"And every time the lion story pops up again on a different website, it increases the chance of it showing up in the search results."
"More than that," said the Luncher, "Everybody quotes the first piece of nonsense, creating

secondary pieces of nonsense, and then everybody refers back to those secondary pieces, creating tertiary pieces of nonsense, and even though the existence of the black lion has no more basis than one odd article, there are tracks left by the lion all over the world, and a made-up mythical beast looks rather more solid and imposing, and dare I say it, even more real, because there are so many pages of words out there discussing it."

Twitchwell helped herself to another fondant peppermint for an extra sugar brain boost and chewed thoughtfully.

"But they all just refer back to one another? And there's no real evidence for the lion, besides the original article?"

"That's it!" exclaimed the Luncher, and started searching amongst a stack of cards, "No, don't tell me, I know I've got that down here somewhere. Ah!"

He flapped one particular card triumphantly. "In this case, the imaginary tracks of the supposed lion go around and around, like someone following their own footsteps. It is, what I believe is known as the Woozle Effect, whereby an argument or idea is based on weak to no evidence, but looks somewhat more plausible because of the amount of circular referencing. And of course, that original piece of speculative zoology comes from the South Plains Daily News, which sounds like it should be a newspaper."

"Isn't it?"

The Luncher spread his hands.

"Well, it certainly isn't a real newspaper in any real geographical space, even though it is clearly supposed to sound like one. It doesn't have any known journalists - we don't know, for instance, who wrote about the lion, nor does it seem to have any editors, and given their open-mindedness regarding implausible creatures, we are on safe ground to assume that they do not employ any fact-checkers. So it is not much of a newspaper in the substantive sense of being a newspaper. In essence, The South Plains Daily News publishes a mixture of the occasional thing that is probably true, with sporadic gossip about celebrities that may or may not be true, and a decent portion of nonsensical articles that fall apart after about thirty seconds of research. The South Plains Daily is mildly disguised as a newspaper, because presumably the trappings of the name give just enough of a sliver of reputation and respectability to be useful."

"It sounds quite homely, doesn't it?" said Twitchwell with a far-away smile, "The South Plains Daily sounds like it might come from a simple farming village, where everybody knows everybody."

"No doubt that is precisely the feeling they are aiming at - old-fashioned, simple, and truthful, of course, without the bother of actually having to be any of those things."

First no black lions exist, and now there was no lovely place where the South Plains Daily was put together by a small village team and printed out on actual newspaper, keeping the rugged but salt-of-the-earth people of South Plains together and informed, before doing a final service to wrap up some fish and chips to be eaten while contemplating the rural beauty of the place. It'd be better, Twitchwell thought sadly, if a place and a paper like that did exist, wouldn't it?

"I wonder what the point of the original made-up story was then?" she said.

"Now that is a difficult question to answer. It is useful, I think, to look at why it might have been such a successful roaming creature to start with. What ingredients did it combine? It featured animals, which, as you pointed out earlier, the internet appears to have a particular weakness for, as well a touch of fear, a shake of xenophobia, and just a small dash of wonder, for who among us doesn't secretly dream and fear that there is more to the world than we see, more than our dreary grey lives?"
"I quite like grey," said Twitchwell, "I think there are quite a lot of lovely greys actually."
"And quite right you are. As to why the page exists, there are a variety of possible explanations. The whole thing may be some form of jape, for one."
"A jape?"
The Luncher made small circles with his hands
"An attempt at jocularity, a pranking, a satire."
"You mean... is it supposed to be funny?"
The Luncher shrugged.
"Who, besides the mysterious initial discoverer of the black lion could say? And even if we could contact that dreamer, I'm not entirely sure, if they looked honestly within their own souls, whether they would know either. Hrm! That is the problem with satire these days. It's very hard to tell if something is actually being satirical or entirely serious, and two people may take the same story in entirely different ways regardless."
Twitchwell had a list of reposts of the lion story on a piece of paper in front of her. She got out her chewed pen and drew some lines on the page, linking up paragraphs. It didn't mean anything.
"I suppose the whole thing could be just to get attention?" she said, "For the clicks and page-views? For ad revenue or data sales?"
"Certainly, as dishonest labour goes, it strikes me as rather a lot of effort, but I don't doubt that somebody has found ways to make words of nonsense and rubbish ideas valuable in some way."
Twitchwell realised that the Luncher had stopped and was squinting at the page she had in front of her on the desk. With rapid creeping horror, Twitchwell realised that she had been doodling on the Luncher's print-outs.
"Oh, sorry, sorry," Twitchwell said, flustered, "Sorry, sorry, sorry."
The Luncher frowned at the scribble she had added up the margin of the discussion of the roaming beast. Amongst the lines joining random things, she had drawn what may have been angry scratchy storm clouds, and in the middle, naturally, a scrawny, open-mouthed, terrified feline thing badly coloured in with absent-minded frenzy.
"I must say," the Luncher said in a solemn voice, "Your lion looks rather the worse for wear."

The Ingenu was sitting on his own in the Neutral Zone with his headphones plugged into his phone. He was watching the video Thanks and Gentle had recommended. This was the fourth time he had watched the video. There on the screen was the top guy, the two-top-buttons-undone man himself, Sir Parsifal, head of the S.P. department. The Ingenu touched his head and wondered if

there was any way he could make his hair look more like Sir Parsifal's (Maybe? (No, there wasn't enough gel in the world to make him look like that)). Sir Parsifal's hair looked like a special effect. It was, frankly, beautiful, and the Ingenu would not have been surprised if it glowed golden in bright sunshine and made a noise like a distant choir of angels when you laid eyes upon it. He practised a gesture Parsifal did at a certain point in his presentation (look at that! You'd bet he never even had to practice that). Parsifal was making some excellent resounding point about the natural human competition for information, and timed to a slide that was both insightful and witty, he was doing a half-turn and raising his hand, palm up, lazily half-open, a slight cheeky curve of a smile on his face, as if to say 'I bring this gift to you all with grace and complete lack of effort'. Those were teeth that inspired confidence. He strode about the stage, and even when he wasn't saying a thing, you could tell he knew how to hold your attention. If he was this good at doing the communication shimmy on a video on the (slightly embarrassingly) small screen of the Ingenu's phone, no doubt in person too much exposure to Sir Parsifal's charisma might have life changing effects that were both terrifying and exciting.

"In days gone by," the video of Parsifal said, his accent as pure and ringing as tapping a dessert spoon on the edge of a champagne glass, "The queens and kings of the world would have the best, the boldest, the brightest, the truest knights and commanders sworn to their service, sworn to defend their kingdom. Force hasn't gone completely out of fashion, I must sadly admit," (wry chuckle from audience) "but we have come a long way from the days of having to defend ourselves with mere steel and muscle. Our weapons, our tools are of a different level - on a lofty scale that our ancestors could barely comprehend. We are homo digitens, we are moving into the next phase in the evolution of humanity, where the gap between technology..." (suspenseful pause, hands raised up about a metre apart in mystic priest-like gesture) "and humanity" (hands come together, nestling comfortably) "are finally joined together. We are the people of the online world. Sadly, just as in ancient times, there are those who fear and resent the new, and now they attack not just our cities and our flesh, but even and especially our minds." (Holds up Phone. Taps head) "This is where the new wars are being fought even as we sit here. And in this novel era, we are members of not just this great land, but we are part of a united kingdom consisting of those who wish to live free and continue to advance daily in our knowledge. And if we wish to defend our kingdom, if we wish to keep back the monsters that would try to consume our ways of life, we have to possess the best information technology and systems available." (Knowing look, triumphant but encouraging grin) "And that's precisely what we have. And that is what we do. We work tirelessly to make sure we know what information attacks are coming, so that we can shield every last human being possible from violent assaults on their peace of mind, on their right to live free and secure from terror and uncertainty."

There was a lot of stuff after this bit about how Parsifal was hinting at cutting edge breakthroughs in the whole set-up of disinformation data tracking and response, where the way of the future was to out-think hostile sources, to have the digital shield or the sword or catapult or whatever the metaphor was in place to deal with bad information before a single word had even been posted. The

Ingenu fast-forwarded to the bit he liked most of all, where Parsifal stood there with his hands behind his back and his head slightly bowed in a humble stance and he said:
"There's an old saying that is more current today than ever before: that a lie can fly halfway around the world before the truth has even put its boots on." (Looks up here, unblinking) "We are ready to change that. We have our boots on, before a lie is even half way out of someone's mouth." (Grins, glances at camera) "And because we will have the right tools, we will always be ready and on guard."
Geez, the Ingenu thought. Speaking for himself, he'd be up for that. It all sounded so impressive. Actual information work that helped people! Exciting duels of data with bad actors! The S.P. lads were right. Sir Two-Buttons cut an impressive figure. If the Ingenu wanted to learn something about imitating that figure, even in the roughest, sketchiest outline, he was going to find out if there was any way the court of Parsifal might have a spot for this here squire.

8. In Sickness and in Health

The spoons were back. Or somebody had replaced them with identical and indistinguishable copies. Luncher tilted back dangerously in the wobbliest chair in the CB4 staff kitchen. Twitchwell nervously tried to calculate whether he would hit the relative security of the kitchen wall before he went so far back that he collapsed undignified on the floor. He looked so top-heavy, with that prominent skull, and that moustache must be more weighty than it looked, presumably loaded down by oils and pomades and moustache glues and fixants. She wished she could reach out and grab the leg of his chair, dragging him back down to the relative safety of the floor.

"Hm. As it happens," the Luncher said, staring thoughtfully at the ceiling as his chair creaked under him, "The lass here was givin' me a hand on a few points for the old General Departmental Guide to Erroneous Information-"

"How is the Guide going?" said the Ingenu automatically.

"Oh, fine, fine, it has been quite the labour, but the end draws near. In any case, as I was saying, the lass and I were having a good chinwag about what a tricky thing satire was."

Checking the spoons and arranging them in a draw, Madame Char nodded vigorously, as if she had never liked the look of that satire stuff and she wished someone had a plan for whipping the misbehaving material into some sort of shape.

"It reminds me of cheap jelly," said Madame Char, "The sort of sickly-bright coloured stuff where the flavour in the plastic cup is ambiguous. Is it pineapple? Is it raspberry? Is it fish or fowl? Nobody could say. Nothing about cheap jelly is certain."

"It is very confusing, isn't it, to tell what is supposed to be satirical?" said Twitchwell, tensed and ready to grab that hovering chair leg, "Isn't there some way it could be, um, I don't know, marked up?"

The Ingenu laughed.

"You could write it in big red letters in the headline, I suppose," he said, "But it might undercut the effect somewhat."

"Hrm, an 'Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée' of satire," mused the Luncher

"There could be a satire stamp," said Madame Char.

"Um, like adding LOL?" said Twitchwell, "Or a smiley face, or an emoticon, or pretend 'satire/' formatting, but something more ... official?"

The Ingenu shook his head.

"It'd never work. People would copy the official government satire stamp and stick it all over pages that weren't supposed to be satirical stories just for fun and confusion."

Madame Char did a small jump and moving her outstretched hand down through the air, chopped off the whole discussion of satirical stamps.

"Meeting in my office in five minutes!" she announced.

It was unclear why they couldn't just have the meeting in the kitchen, since they were there already. The Ingenu imagined it must be for the officialness. You can't have an official meeting in the kitchen. Anyone might hear. It was too unofficial and too unsecret. The Office was official and secret, and he supposed that made a furtive meeting in the corridor-area of the Neutral Zone unofficial and secretish. They filed quietly into Madame Char's office. Everybody took their seats, except Madame Char, who naturally took her standing position. With her hands behind her back, Madame Char looked out the window at the swirling dark weather and did some subtle thoughtful knee bends.
"Honestly, this weather must be part of the cause," she said.
"The cause of?" said the Ingenu with a yawn.
"The megaflu stories going about," said the Luncher.
Madame Char nodded her head towards the clouds outside.
"I mean, look at that, those grey clouds look like they could rain down fat grotty drops of flu."
Twitchwell wrote down 'Illness Grey' on her notepad and scribbled some clouds around this.
"But you don't actually get sick in the rain, do you?" said the Ingenu, "I thought that was just an old wives' tale. You know, make sure you don't let your hair get wet to avoid a cold, that sort of thing. Colds are caused by viruses (virii?), aren't they? Not by dampness."
The Luncher rubbed his stomach thoughtfully. He was craving a thick unattractively brown-beige provençale vegetable soup. That was just the sort of thing for a day like this. A hearty soup that could transport you to somewhere warm and comfortable.
"Well, hm, of course, when it rains, more people cram together in spaces while trying to get out of the rain, and that's bound to make bugs travel more freely between their gracious hosts."
"There really were a lot of snuffly people coughing everywhere on the Tube," piped up Twitchwell.
"On the bus too," added the Ingenu.
"There you are. Breeding ground for sickness. The right weather conditions just help encourage it."
Madame Char gave a little shiver at the thought.
"That's why it's so important to look after ourselves," she insisted, "To not just help ourselves, but to make sure others are safe and healthy, too. Health and society are intertwined." She squinted at the sky outside her window and sighed. "Still, it's a shame about the weather at the moment. Bad weather will certainly make people think more about colds and the like."
"A sort of reverse pathetic-fallacy," said the Ingenu, "Where people are expressions of what the season feels like."
Nobody quite understood this, so they passed on.
"Well, we need to set out a societal-fitness plan. We need to practice good habits when it comes to all aspects of looking after ourselves, and the good habits we develop now will help preserve us later. The misinformation and speculation about the spread of illness for the season has already started, and we need to keep up with it."

"The Megaflu!" boomed the Luncher. Twitchwell flinched. The Ingenu involuntarily coughed. He had managed to sort of twist his head to the side mid cough, but everyone stared at him.
"It is a shame," the Luncher mused, "That there isn't a push to have some bright sparks get together in a semi-official capacity to name these sorts of pandemics. Megaflu is a somewhat absurd name. It smacks of something that an over-excited child might come up with after a binge of sugared fizzy drink."
"We could call it the Influender," suggested the Ingenu, "Or Cold War Two. Snifflemas. The United Coughdom."
"Settle down now," said the Luncher gruffly, "I don't suppose you've been having a lot of fizzy drink this morning, eh?"
Twitchwell, who had in fact been drinking lots of fizzy drink this morning, but who could handle it with few external signs like any die-hard fizzaholic, raised her hand meekly.
"But you want people to think it's nothing to panic about, don't you?"
Madame Char nodded and thrust out her chin in determination.
"Absolutely! The Ministry feels very strongly that if you aren't setting the narrative during a crisis, then who is?"
"A crisis is a terrible thing to waste," said the Luncher sagely.
"People nowadays are naturally concerned whenever they hear about the spread of diseases," said Madame Char, "As I've always said, if we want to help keep people healthy, we need to make sure they are ingesting healthy information."
"Like broccoli?" suggested Twitchwell.
The Ingenu felt a tickle in his throat but managed to turn it into a sort of thoughtful hum instead.
"I don't care for broccoli," he said, since everybody was looking at him.
The Luncher waved his hands.
"It needs to be fresh, of course, not woody, and prepared well, not overcooked, not undercooked, and a good dollop of butter and a dash of salt doesn't hurt at all, flavour-wise."
Madame Char pounded her fist into a palm.
"That's precisely what I mean! Given the unfortunate history of confusion surrounding health scares, the Ministry have been in contact and have been very clear about wanting to get on top of this flu season. I don't need to tell you how much of a boost it would give us for the budgetary audit if we can show the government how we handle this! We have to find a way to make the broccoli of healthy information palatable to people who may not want to swallow it, and to teach them to avoid the junk food of exciting but potentially harmful dangerous misinformation!"
"But junk food is so delicious," Twitchwell whispered guiltily to the Ingenu.
"We shall do our best, of course," said the Luncher with a tilt of his head, "But, to be fair, as a society we do not always have a very impressive track record of convincing people to stop eating non-metaphorical junk food."
Madame Char stood with her hands on her hips, like a superhero having her photograph taken.
"The struggle for health of all kinds is eternal, but eternally worthwhile!" she said. Twitchwell and

the Ingenu almost felt like they should clap politely at this.
"That reminds me," said Madame Char, "I want you all to keep yourselves healthy - healthier even than usual, to get ourselves through what may possibly be a big flu season."
(A.K.A. the Sneezon, thought the Ingenu, and wrote this down, chuckling quietly to himself.)
Madame Char produced a plate of dried reddish fragments, that looked like they had been shaved from the exterior of a cardiac-blessed mummy's heart. They leaned forward to examine them. It appeared that they were oven-baked beetroot crisps, arguably the worst sort of crisps.
"What do we have showing up in the way of bad information about this Megaflu to begin with?" asked Madame Char, now pacing up and down.
"Has anyone claimed that the virus was grown in a lab yet?" wondered the Luncher.
"People sure do love the idea of lab-grown viruses," agreed the Ingenu.
"I have often wondered if the people who post these unfounded paranoid stories are themselves grown in labs," said the Luncher.
The Ingenu checked his notes.
"On the Megaflu errf, looks like it is early days yet. There are some of the usual supposed folk remedies. I've seen something about eating a lot of spicy chilli. The usual claims about gargling salt, drinking more alcohol (with or without added wasps), hot baths, and something to do with silver-polish. Sesame oil as a fake cure seems to be making a comeback, although people aren't clear about whether they should be sniffing it, drinking it, or rubbing it on themselves somewhere. There is also increasing paranoia about household cats being able to transmit disease to humans."
The Ingenu's voice was dry at the end of this and he rasped gently. Twitchwell subtly shifted her chair a few inches away from him.
"The Ministry is trusting us to help combat this problem," said Madame Char.
"But do we trust the Ministry? (Does anyone?)" mumbled the Ingenu to himself.
"The Ministry office are putting together a bunch of statistics we might want to use for an information inoculation package," Madame Char said, looking at her monitor as if the statistics in question were about to pop out any moment now. The Luncher frowned and twiddled the end of his walrus moustache.
"Ah, yes, hm, the Ministry would want to do a thorough bombing of facts all over the nation, I'd imagine - the old blast 'em and blind 'em with numbers strategy. Over the last several decades our governments have developed quite the love affair with statistics, especially impressive numerals that look extremely definite from afar, say, when waved about in triumph or accusation on a television screen, even if they don't look so ripe and firm if you actually get close enough to examine them. And who can blame governments for their love of the Big Numbers, hm? They can be used for such splendid sleight of hand. With some dazzling Big Numbers, the government can make a grand rhetorical statement, holding up a piece of paper with a good solid-looking set of persuasive and attractive figures. They can declare that they have made the matter perfectly clear for your average public sudoku player and sports-page reader, while in fact shouting out numbers to get a juicy headline or make the opposition look silly in Prime Minister's Question Time doesn't really explain

any of these Big Numbers properly to anybody. I'm not sure the people shouting these numbers necessarily understand them either, although it is apparent that they are rapturously fond of the way they look. After all, who has the damned earthly time for context and detail, hrm? How dull and inefficient! Are we not a nation of busy individuals, all trying to get along with the many hundreds of daily troubles and challenges of existence? Governments know that hardly anybody wants to have to work too hard to discover how the statistics were collected and interpreted and whether they actually say what the government says they say, or whether they say something else entirely. And if you are worried about the possibility that too many independent nosy number-loving swots might actually scrutinise and pull apart your lovely figures, the cunning lot can always commission and refer to a study that hasn't been published yet, so nobody else can see where you got your Big Numbers from at all."

"A number as a hope, a miracle, a prayer," said the Ingenu, rubbing his throat. He wished he had something warm to drink. Or a cough-drop. He wasn't getting sick, was he? No, it was just a tickle (but what if it wasn't?). A few cups of tea should see him right (unless he was already sick (god he hoped he wasn't, now wasn't the time to be off work (he was sure he'd be fine))). "I wish I could just throw out a statistic," the Ingenu mused, "And then act like it was going to come true, until it did come true through sheer faith in the positive power of thinking about numbers."

Say, something with a nice graph about how seventy-five percent of junior officers at CB4 receive bonuses and promotions, for example, and were given further opportunities for advancement. The Ingenu enjoyed thinking about this graph, and made sure that the seventy-five percent was now in a bold red with black outline and was much bigger than it needed to be. He shouldn't be selfish, and decided to think positively about a forty-two percent increase in drinks machines in the building for Twitchwell, so she would be more likely to have her sugary necessities nearby.

Twitchwell nibbled unconvinced at an oven-baked beetroot crisp.

"Some data is better than no data, isn't it?" she said.

Madame Char nodded.

"Exactly! Whatever they mean and whether or not they are understood, statistics can be a comfort. At a time when people are worried and stressed and filled up with toxic confusion and fear, and have no idea what is going on, we here at CB4 need to help keep things calm and clear!"

Twitchwell wasn't so sure that she felt calm or clear. Was she at a high risk of getting sick with all her Tube travel? She had never had any major illnesses before, but this made her all the more nervous about the idea of getting properly sick. And she couldn't afford to take time off, not right now, could she? By the time she got back, her job might have gone to someone else, to someone like Wattingham. If she got sick, could she keep coming in to work and bluff it out, no matter how bad she felt? On the other hand, the thought of making other people sick too horrified her. Anyway, if she'd never experienced real illness before, how did she know if she could handle it? She supposed Madame Char had never been sick in her life because she was so health-obsessed, but the Luncher looked like he'd fought off all sorts of illnesses in his time. He'd probably had malaria and polio and tuberculosis all at once and come through scarred but stronger and unafraid of any of the invisible

forces that horrible mean nature threw all about the world.
"As we know," Madame Char said,"Illness is perhaps one of the biggest attractors of junk information. When people worry about getting sick, they feel powerless, they get afraid and confused, their natural defences are down and they become more susceptible to misinformation."
"Then we have to make sure that we help effectively vaccinate the public against the fever of bad information," said the Ingenu, "Should we work some phrases like that into the Megaflu information package? You know - help stop the spread of the virus of health misinformation, misinformation is a dangerous infection, in times of pandemic beware of infodemic, that sort of thing?"
The Luncher rubbed his stomach as if it pained him.
"Honestly, I don't know if I can survive another season of illness-related puns," groaned the Luncher.
"Surely you should have built up an immunity to them by now, sir?" said the Ingenu. The Luncher frowned at him, unable to tell if the lad was trying to be clever or not.
"I would like a list of terms put together to track this infodemic," Char said, "Megaflu, secret, conspiracy, miracle cure, suppress - things like that."
The Ingenu and Twitchwell dutifully took note. The Ingenu started writing a list of alternative possible words for Twitchwell to give to her search machines. He looked down admiringly. His list of contextless search terms came out rather poetic.
"We need to keep track of the opportunists, too, yes?" said the Luncher, "I have no doubt that if an old scam hasn't been adapted to try to make money off fake cures for this health panic, then some portion of humanity, bless its industriousness, will have taken advantage of the situation to rapidly whip up some new method of parting the scared and misinformed from their hard-earned sterling. After all, there has always been good money in snake oil."
"What is the good oil these days?" Twitchwell wondered aloud, "Is it still olive oil? Avocado oil? Is that a thing? Or is it nut oil? Or is that bad for you?"
Madame Char pursed her lips thoughtfully and did a side bend.
"It is the elderly that worry me," she said, "On the one hand, we want to make sure we are protecting the young against misinformation," the Ingenu felt his insides tighten here in fear of the idea of his giving talks to schools rearing its head again, but the moment of danger passed and he breathed easier (although, was there a heavy stickiness in his breath that wasn't so easy, or was he just imagining it? No, just imagining it).

Madame Char started pacing up and down in front of the window again.
"In situations where bad information can lead to health risks," she said, waving a finger in the air as if she were lecturing her happy plant in the corner, "It is our elderly members of the community who are most at risk, and unfortunately they are often the least well-trained to navigate the hazardous hidden dangers of the online world."
"Grannies and Grandpas forwarding junk articles to each other?" said the Ingenu with an inward

cringe as he remembered that was something the S.P. boys had mocked CB4 for. "And they tend to spread erroneous info amongst each other using encrypted group messenger apps that are simultaneously able to reach everyone they know but are also one of the few forms of information-spreading that isn't easily publicly visible."
"Should venerable grandparents be encouraged to use more public social media instead for everything, so that it can be monitored more easily?" pondered the Luncher aloud.
"My Nana always sends us messages like that," said Twitchwell quietly, "She always forwards health things to me, just in case it's true."
"Have any of the things she messaged you about ever turned out to be true?" said the Ingenu.
Twitchwell shrugged.
"I mean, it's hard to tell? Sometimes I'll do whatever health thing she posts just so that my Nana will stop bothering me about it."
"What sort of things?" wondered Madame Char.
"Well," Twitchwell said hesitantly, "Nana heard somewhere that onions naturally absorb bad airs - or maybe it combats them? and she sent me this message about it and kept on saying how she worried about my health and being around all that technology at my age. In the end, to make her happy, I had to put an onion in each corner of my room and send her a photograph."
"Did it help keep you healthy?" wondered the Ingenu.
"I imagine it would mostly be an excellent help in keeping your room smelling more like onions," said the Luncher.
Twitchwell wasn't sure that it hadn't helped, was she? She hadn't been sick while she had been putting onions in the corners of her room, had she? And even if the onions didn't actually keep sickness away, it was always handy to have onions around the place in case you need them for cooking dinner.
"The point," said Madame Char, doing a quick jump and pointing out the window, "Is that we need to reach the Nanas with good, reassuring flu information. We simply must make sure that the broccoli, the appropriate health information, is posted in a big public way on that sort of app too, and hope for the best. There's at least a chance then that those encrypted groups might see the antimisinformation. We must fight the junk information person by person, in families, in communities, in workplaces."
"Hm, yes, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets," said the Luncher, waving a weary hand in the air.
"We shall fight in the narcissistic photo-sharing apps, we shall fight in the vicious valleys of online commentariat, we shall fight in the depths of conspiracy posts and videos," added the Ingenu.
"I have heard rumours," said the Luncher, leaning forward as if speaking in absolute confidence and off the record, "That the Ministry is going to announce a new cash injection to 'ready the barricades' against the potential of a bad flu season."
"Do we have to work that into the antimisinformation then?" said the Ingenu.
"Well," said the Luncher, "I wouldn't, perhaps, because the announcement is new, but the money

isn't. It has just sort of been shifted back and forth, redirected to where it can do the most good."
"Medically?" said Twitchwell
"No, do the most good politically," explained the Luncher.
"While the Ministry is attempting to outfact and datadazzle the public, what should we be focussing on?" said the Ingenu, "I mean, I love a pie-chart as much as the next person, but I'm not sure if I'm representative."
"Doesn't everyone love pie?" said Twitchwell, who had been distracted and was now wondering if pie somehow had a link to getting Megaflu. Hadn't she heard somewhere that being short made it more likely that you could get ill? She looked around the room and felt it was very unfair that she should have the shortest legs.
"We need to remember," said the Luncher into his moustache, "That a good story is by and large much more convincing than a good argument. Facts are all good and well, but they only get you so far."
"So we should try to think up some good story about eating the good information broccoli?" said the Ingenu, "Like... a comic about Broccoliman versus Lord Megaflu?"
"Something of that sort might work," put in the Luncher, "Just as the cartoon character Popeye might make one at least curious about trying to eat spinach."
"I'll bet that it was just the big spinach farm conglomerates trying to make money by pushing the green yuck to kids," whispered Twitchwell, who might well have been feeling a little bit hot and dizzy and may or may not have been coming down with something.
"That's the spirit!" said Madame Char, beaming, "I want us to get to work on tracking the Megaflu misinformation, and start cooking up our own antidote! Our broccoli will be a perfect mixture of sturdy-looking data and facts and percentages, but will also have a delicious amount of encouraging feel-good sympathetic sentiment so that people will actually want to swallow our information!"
"Factual but also sentimental. Right." said the Ingenu writing this down and dramatically tapping the page with his pen. He sighed internally.

Twitchwell crunched handfuls of vitamin C tablets. They were a fizzy orange sweet flavour and didn't taste too bad. She checked the bottle, which was very large and had a cartoon orange that was smiling radiantly at her from the label. Twitchwell suspected that she had bought a bottle of vitamins for children. While feeding herself vitamin C in efficient tablet form, she had also fed the bots with the Megaflu terms cooked up by Madame Char and refined by the Ingenu, and having been primed, the bots were off trawling the internet and squirting out steady streams of matches to be dumped into databases and spreadsheets for later analysis. Twitchwell thought she should conduct a similar small-scale word test on her Nana. She dug out her phone and sent a message to her Nana saying she hoped she was well and asked whether she had heard anything about how height effected your chances of catching flu. In a worryingly short time, her Nana had responded:

Flu is mostly for the too fat people. You have your onions fresh in your room, yes? I read also that you should be eating garlic every day. You should try it anyway to stay healthy so you don't get sick in the city with all your technologies. -love, Nana

Twitchwell had trouble sleeping these days. She had been trying to cut out the energy drinks after nighttime but had not noticed any improvement. Twitchwell felt she was in an unpleasant dizzying quantum state, at the same time exhausted and unable to sleep. It was starting to get to her. She lay on her bed at night staring straight up into nothing and promising herself that she would close her eyes for as long as possible and not look at her phone. When she cracked and lit up the screen, she had usually lasted around forty seconds or so since she last promised herself not to read things on her phone. Sometimes she was stuck there awake and obsessively reading strings of news disasters large and small until her phone ran out of power. It was probably the one good thing about having a model of phone that got too hot and gobbled up energy. At least, she thought to herself, I haven't started using my phone at night after it had gone flat by plugging it in again. That would be madness. Also, the plug didn't reach anywhere near the bed.

In the office, Twitchwell searched for stories about the correlation between height and disease. She watched videos on how too much sun could make you ill. She watched videos on how not enough sun could make you ill. She read about how you should always wash your hands carefully to keep germs away, but not too carefully or else you might make yourself feeble by cutting out all the good microbes that toughen you up. She followed links to posts about the links between taking pain killers and disease. She clicked on links arguing that ibuprofen had been making people more infertile for decades. She followed links that argued there were increasing infertility rates because of all the mobile phone signals in the air everywhere. She followed links that claimed people had been healthier and stronger fifty years ago or maybe five hundred years ago or maybe five thousand years ago in mystical ancient times when everyone ate natural magical diets, and that actually everyone now was being slowly weakened and poisoned by a great collection of hidden but omnipresent disasters that were either completely intentional or maybe completely accidental. Twitchwell ate another vitamin C, nibbling it bit by bit, and kept following links.

The Ingenu had the kitchen to himself. He looked in the drawers. It made no sense. Now there were too many teaspoons. The drawers were filled with them. Had the spoon thieves, struck through the heart by a sudden attack of guilty conscience decided to replace the stolen spoons with too many new ones? Had some good samaritan noted the lack of teaspoons and taken it upon themselves to do this charity, but had been unclear on what an appropriate normal number of spoons should be and overestimated? And did his eyes deceive him, but was that a (no doubt recyclable, planet-friendly) carton filled with milk nestled comfortably in the door of the sad wheezing CB4 fridge? He leaned forward to take the milk out and as soon as he lifted it, he could tell that his eyes did actually

deceive him. The carton was too light. He shook it by his ear. There wasn't even the tiniest sloshing. This was impossible, surely, there was always a few annoying drops left in the bottle (or carton, or whatever). Kicking the fridge closed, the Ingenu held the carton up to the light and squinted deep into its interior. The thing was bone dry. This was outrageous. What sort of person could be so lowly that they would not only syphon off all the milk from CB4, but actually put back the empty carton, as if nothing was wrong and everything was just fine and hunky-dory, and you could absolutely have as many overflowing cups of milky drinks as you would like. The hollowness of this carton was a terrible truth. Maybe, the Ingenu thought, all the old people are on to something, and this country really is going to the dogs.

Holding this symbol of disappointment in one hand, the Ingenu wandered off through the building, filled with a desire to find someone to talk to about these minor (but painfully thoughtless) assaults on not just the staff of CB4, but on the very spirit of honest humanity itself. He thought about complaining to Twitchwell as he went past her, but she looked very wrapped up in her work and was staring at one of her monitors and chewing something with off-putting intensity. He went out into the corridors of the Building, empty carton in hand like an unassailable accusation. The Ingenu nursed his suspicions as he walked and was beginning to formulate a theory that the Head of State Shrinkers, with their fancy international psychological studies, had decided that the fancy small-farmer organic milk that Madame Char insisted on buying for the humble CB4 kitchen was really too good to be wasted on such lowly and unimportant dwellers in the corridors of confusion. From such an attitude, how much would it take for the Head Shrinkers to make the step into the dark and criminal world of milk robbery?

The Ingenu was hoping to confront one the Head Shrinkers with this (what seemed to him a solid and plausible) theory of interdepartmental thievery, but instead he saw down the end of the corridor the swaggering backs of Gentle and Thanks, and he hurried after them. His pattering footsteps as he rushed behind them sounded awfully loud to him, but they didn't appear to sense him at all.
"Hey there, hello, lads!" the Ingenu called after the S.P.s. Gentle and Thanks turned around and frowned, as if they were trying to place him.
"Orright, lads?" said the Ingenu, trying not to pant. He must have run more determinedly after the boys in the suits than he realised.
"Yeah?" said Gentle.
"What's with the milk, paisano?" said Thanks, indicating the empty carton in the Ingenu's hand.
"Haha! Yeah, you know," said the Ingenu, rattling the empty carton, as if that would explain everything, "There isn't any. That's what's with it. Just quietly, boys, I think the Shrinkers might have been stealing milk out of the staff fridge in our department."
Thanks and Gentle gave each other a sidelong look at this theory.
"So, I was just seeing if I could find myself some more milk," the Ingenu chattered and shook the

carton again, "Gots to have the white stuff, yeah? Was just considering popping out to the corner shop maybe to pick up some more or something."
"And you need to take the empty one with you?" said Thanks, pointing.
The Ingenu laughed unconvincingly.
"Yeah, crazy, I know, but our boss is big on fancy milks. Healthy milks. Just quietly, I think that's why people have been stealing our supply. Some people have no respect, you know? Anyway, I thought I'd (you know how it is) take the empty with me (just in case, you know?) so if the shops happened to have this one, I could match them (yeah?), make sure I'd got the right one. And if not, then into the recycling it goes, right? (save the planet and all that, right?)"
Gentle and Thanks stared blankly at him. An idea occurred to the Ingenu and his face lit up.
"Say lads, just a thought, maybe you could do me a solid (if it ain't no trouble). Maybe you've got some milk in your department I could have a lend of?"
Gentle shook his head.
"Man, that's rough. That's sad. Your outfit over at the Ceebeebies has even got to the state that you have to go begging your neighbours for kitchen stuff."
"I mean, I don't know about begging for the kitchen," said the Ingenu, "We aren't that badly off. We have lots of spoons, f'r'instance, if you need some."
It was Thanks' turn to shake his head.
"Nah, amigo, we have enough spoons in the fortress. We've got the lot. When you are going into battle, you need to be well supplied. You can't be wasting time thinking about the little details when you are in the thick of the info-war. That's why in S.P. we aim to have the best of everything. If you want the best people all working at one-hundred-and-ten percent, you gots to make sure you have the best surroundings for them."
"Including milk, presumably?" said the Ingenu with an appeal of a grin. He shook the carton again.
"Guy, yeah, of course we've got that," said Gentle with a note of pity, "We've got it all. We have this coffee machine that does everything."
"Latest model," said Thanks.
"Cost a packet," said Gentle.
"You should see this machine, copain," said Thanks, "It's huge and gorgeous. All chrome and curves."
"Yeah, it's a sleek beauty, man," agreed Gentle, "And you just press a couple of buttons and blam, there's the best tasting cup of what you need."
"Ain't nothing better in this whole building for giving you the fuel for the work that needs doing," agreed Thanks.
"So, you could maybe do us a lend of some milk?" said the Ingenu cautiously.
The pair looked a little uncomfortable.
"Well, look, pal, I don't think you can really lend milk, can you?" Gentle pointed out, looking at the Ingenu meaningfully. There was an awkward pause.
"Anyway, the thing is," said Thanks, "Everything is all sealed into the coffee machine. You can't,

like, just open it up and take out whatever."
Gentle laughed.
"That'd just be chaos, yeah?" he said. Thanks laughed too.
The Ingenu decided to laugh too (although not quite so enthusiastically).
"Right, right," the Ingenu said when the laughing seemed to be dying down, "So listen, I watched that talk you told me about. The one your Chief did on..." Despite having watched the video many, many times, the Ingenu suddenly embarrassingly found himself blanking on what exactly Sir Parsifal's talk had been about. He hurried on with a guess, trusting to his subconscious to come up with something that was close to the mark. "His whole talk about staying on the cutting edge of intelligence monitoring. On doing good work on information, meaningful work, the most important work - that really got me here, y'know?" The Ingenu tapped where he imagined his heart was supposed to be with the empty milk carton.
Thanks and Gentle looked serious and reverent at the thought of their Departmental Head.
"He's the Big Man, all right," said Thanks.
"The Biggest Man, man," said Gentle.
The Ingenu shook his head.
"Y'know, I'm sure you two (of all people) won't mind me saying it, but I'm envious of you guys. It's all in front of you isn't it? Working with the top minds and the latest tech, on the way up and soon into that fancy new base of operations over in Buddleia House, and all the while being led by a fella with his eye firmly on the future. Ah, if there was some way I could be part of something big like that, (I don't mind telling you two) I'd grab it with both hands." Ingenu was about to act out how keen he was for this doublehanded grabbing, but remembered that he had only one hand free.
Thanks gave the fringe of his hair a little flip and put an arm around Gentle's shoulder, leaning forward.
"Muchacho, if you think that's something," he said, lowering his voice conspiratorially, "The S.P. has got an even better coup coming on up."
"A paradigm game changer, bud," added Gentle.
"Yeah, when this big deal goes through, we won't be playing games no more," said Thanks.
"So, whatever this next stage is...hasn't actually happened yet?" ventured Ingenu.
"Well, not yet, chum, I grant you," said Gentle.
"But it is only a matter of time, after all," said Thanks,
"Yeah, it's inevitable," said Gentle.
The Ingenu thought for a moment.
"If that's the case, if this thing, this big boost, this next step is definitely coming to the S.P., then I don't suppose there's any harm in giving me a hint about it is there? I mean, if it's all sewn up already, if you guys are a lock for whatever it is, there's no harm in letting me peek at just a corner of the deal, at the outline of it maybe?"
Thanks looked around the corridor warily. Gentle raised an eyebrow.
"It isn't so much an outline, as an edge," one of the pair whispered.

"You watched the video, didn't you? The Big Man is always watching that edge."
"The edge of the future, my friend."
Thanks spread his hands in the air.
"Information attacks are getting harder and faster every day."
"You may not have noticed down in the Kids' Department," said Gentle,"But it's wild out there. The threat of lethal info is a massive sprawling beast, growing and spreading out of control every pico-second, with millions of hidden heads, every one a bad actor wanting to chew and rip away at national security. But we are going to cut it down to size."
"Because we are going to get our hands on the Grail," said Thanks reverently.
"The Grail," intoned Gentle.
"Imagine, if you can, camarade," said Thanks, "Imagine a cutting edge superintelligence A.I. A computer system coded and designed to be so advanced, light-years ahead of anything we've ever seen or used before, a system that deals with infothreats faster than anything ever dreamed of."
"A system so smart it knows where the next online attacks are coming from ... before they even happen," said Gentle in hushed awe.
"This is the future," said Thanks,"And once the S.P. has won the bid for the Grail, we are going to know how to wield it, believe you me."
The Ingenu wondered about this. He didn't think you could use a grail as a weapon, could you? It wasn't especially pointy, traditionally. It was a cup, or a dish or something, wasn't it? He supposed you could bonk your enemy over the head with it if necessary.
Gentle tapped the side of his nose.
"Keep an eye out, friendo, it won't be too long before you hear about the Grail."
"Presage."
"Gesundheit," said the Ingenu.
"No, no, frérot, PRE-S.A.G.E," Thanks insisted.
"The Grail, mucker. The Predictive Systemic Algorithm Gathering Engine," said Gentle.
"Ah, right," said Ingenu, and then, because more seemed to be expected of him, "Oo. My goodness."
The Saps stepped away from Ingenu for a moment and conferred amongst themselves. They seemed to come to some decision.
"Here's the thing, buddy," Gentle said, "The Grail is going to belong to the S.P."
"It's basically our destiny," added Thanks.
"We know how to use that technology to get the business done. We know how to synergise with the most advanced cyberweapons."
"That's our whole deal."
"But, like we said, we know that other departments are sniffing around."
"Trying to get their hands on the Grail."
Both of them laughed, as if the very idea was ridiculous.
"The S.P. will get that tech. That's our vision. It is going to happen."
"But in the meantime, we don't need a bunch of hangers-on trying to pretend like they are in

competition with us."
"All they are gonna do is delay our purchase of the system."
"And embarrass themselves."
Thanks put his hand on the Ingenu's shoulder.
"So, and this is hush-hush, but if someone heard anything useful about anyone else chasing after our Grail, they should let us know."
"Information is power, brother."
"And if someone can help the S.P. out so that we end up buying up the Grail before anyone else gets their grubby fingerprints on it, well..."
"It'd be showing that they could step up and be part of our team. Our order. We could maybe put in a good word for someone like that."
"Sorry, who are we talking about again?" said the Ingenu. Thanks and Gentle raised their eyebrows meaningfully at him. "What? Me? Oh right. Sure."
The Saps made a shushing gesture, winked slyly at the Ingenu and left to return to the crucial business of sharpening the edge of the future of infocombat. The Ingenu stared at the empty carton in his hand for a minute and then threw it into the bin.

9. Don't Listen to Birds

Twitchwell thought about the holidays she had when she was little. Was it mostly the seaside? Had they gone to different bits of seaside? Because it felt like it was the same bit of seaside in her memory, the same ice-cream and cone, and the same optimistic smell of sunblock. When was the last time she had a holiday that actually counted as a holiday? Not just a trip to see family or attend a wedding, but an actual relaxing holiday where nothing was expected of you and you could do whatever you liked, even if that something was just to sit in a comfortable chair and see how many cashew nuts you could eat. Why were people obsessed with getting the maximum amount of sun on holiday? Was it not technically a holiday unless there was a distinct risk of skin cancer developing, like you needed an official tattoo from the sun right on your epidermis, so you could always wince and remember lying in uncomfortable sand and being soaked full of coconut oil or something? Was this why people liked going on holiday to places like Australia? In the Downunder, was it in fact the high levels of radiation that gave your outsides a good burn-pummelling that made it such a desirable destination? It was so far away, unless you already lived there, in which case maybe you'd like to have a nice relaxing holiday under some lovely storm-grey swept skies instead, for a change? Twitchwell frowned at this and found herself dragged along by increasingly scattered thoughts and websites about the sun and Australia.

The Ingenu came back into the office, looking thoughtful.
"Unanticipated helicoid degeneration," he said to Twitchwell, but she seemed to be lost in her work. The Ingenu wished he could focus like that. Just sit and stare at the screen all day until you merge into one big human-techno blob sucking down raw internet. Well (technically) he already spent most of his day staring at computer screens, but it wasn't what he wanted to be doing all day. He pictured himself up on stage somewhere like Sir Parsifal (only the one top button undone, the Ingenu wasn't a madman), talking and smiling knowingly and gesturing and everyone dead excited to hear his opinions on the pressing conflicts of intelligence warfare. In cold, hard, dreadful reality, the only thing he was likely to ever get to talk about in public was how young people shouldn't accept cookies online from strangers, which was not the sort of dramatic role in the modern world he would have preferred.

Unlike Twitchwell's terrifyingly intense focus, it was the Ingenu's practice to never work with too much commitment on any one thing. This system was actually genius (as far as he was concerned), because it relied on the human brain's desire to avoid doing what it was supposed to (except in times of terror and stress, he supposed, which were quite good for making you get down to the task at hand). By making sure he had several pieces of work lying around at all times, he could do a little

on one and then procrastinate in a way that tricked himself, by taking a break from one thing he was supposed to be doing and transferring his drifting attention to another thing he was also supposed to be doing. In this way, by rotating through the series of jobs lying about the place, things more or less seemed to get done. At the moment, for instance, the Ingenu was working on the online training for schoolkids project, even though the Luncher and Madame Char had not mentioned it lately. He didn't want to work on it especially, but at the moment there were several other things he didn't want to work on even more, so it was time to inspire the digital leaders of tomorrow by building their cognitive resilience and critical skills. This was what the Ingenu had written up so far in his draft on helping kids internet good and watch out for online mis and dis:
-What is the future going to be like? Nobody knows! We can guess, but those who guess look clever at the time, but often look very stupid when the future actually arrives and isn't anything like what they said.
-This is why predictions, like astrology (do kids even know what astrology is any more?) have to be vague. So it can say nothing while looking like it is saying something. The first rule of online thinking is to be absolutely fearfully suspicious of any statements, proclamations, or prognostications that are both fiery in passion and vague as a lazy cloudbank.
-(What did I like when I was younger? What was I like when I was their age? I wouldn't have listened to me, I'm pretty sure. Not certain I'd listen to myself now.)
-Find organisations whose critical views you trust, but don't trust them too much. Passion is excellent and cool or whatever you young people say now (probably something like judder, or bertle, or clinchy, or totally villing?), but it isn't always good for thinking clearly. Don't trust your passions to do that. Never trust anything too much. Always keep a tiny, worrying sliver of paranoid uncertainty in the back of your mind, no matter what (this doesn't sound very healthy). When confused, read mostly expert organisations on the whatever topic. Avoid latching onto individuals, especially if they are celebrities and don't actually know any more than you about the particular confusion of the moment. Celebrities are good at being famous, and sometimes good at releasing perfumes or pasta sauces. Probably don't pay attention too much to them otherwise. They already get too much attention and it isn't good for them, you can tell.
-The good habits you develop now something something (?) become good later. Find a way to balance your way through life between scepticism and trust, between paranoia and contentment, like you are surfing down the mountain slopes of life, looking totally villing. Something about managing not just your online self, but your actual self maybe. M.N.Y.O.S.B.Y.A.S. Too long. M.O.M.O.? Manage online/Maintain offline? I don't know.
-There we go. Another ten or fifteen revisions, and we might really have something here.

"Positive-scaled results aggregation!" the Ingenu announced to the room, pleased at having achieved something that looked reasonably productive, if you squinted at it in a certain (very dim, foggy) light. Twitchwell seemed not to hear. The Ingenu scooted his chair over to her desk.
"Sorry, what?" said Twitchwell, who suddenly remembered that the room existed around her and

was so startled by this that her glasses fell off her face and onto the desk. She retrieved them and blinked at the Ingenu.
"Nothing, it doesn't matter. I'm just several points up on you by now in our mighty office game of Babeltennis, that's all."
Twitchwell didn't seem to have heard him. She stared at the Ingenu.
"Did you know there are some people who don't believe in Australia?" Twitchwell said tetchily, like she wondered why this information had been kept from her, and wondered if perhaps the Ingenu had something to do with it.
"Sorry, what?" said the Ingenu.
"I read something about it. There are people on the internet who think that Australia isn't real. That it is a made-up place," Twitchwell explained.
The Ingenu nodded.
"Well, I can understand that. They do have ridiculous animals, after all. Very implausible. The kangaroo, if you think about it, doesn't seem likely. Just picture them. And koalas (cute, but I believe quite dopey in person) seem fairly improbable teddy-bear things. Also, what even is a platypus, after all?"
Twitchwell stared at a screen.
"But it is real, isn't it?" ventured Twitchwell, who sounded none too certain and in desperate need of a good night's sleep.
The Ingenu shrugged.
"I can neither confirm nor deny, but certainly, that's what I've heard,"
Twitchwell fixed him with a manic glint.
"But have you ever actually been to Australia?"
The Ingenu had to confess that he hadn't.
"If the people on the internet don't believe in Australia," he said, "What do they think Australia is?"
"Some say it's a hologram," said Twitchwell, "Or a trick. That people who think they have been to Australia are just flown around on a plane in circles somewhere." She picked up one of her figurines - a giant bobbled-headed cartoon cat thing dressed as a chef - and flew it around above the desk to demonstrate. "Then they land somewhere else warm and tropical, an island or something."
"So, (if I have this right)," said the Ingenu, "Islands in general are real, but Australia is not."
"According to some people on the internet."
"I wonder how Australians feel about this?"
Twitchwell waved her chef figurine dismissively.
"Oh, I think they are supposed to be actors or something."
"It sounds like an awful lot of work. Who is in charge of all this? They must have a brilliant budget to maintain fake hologram Australia. Is New Zealand real, according to this theory?"
"That's unclear, isn't it?" said Twitchwell to the little plastic chef cat.

There was an email from the Ministry forwarded from Madame Char in the Ingenu's inbox which

he had accidentally noticed and read. Luckily, it was (probably) just about suggested colour schemes for press releases. The Ministry worried a lot about how their releases looked. In many ways, worrying about how things looked in general took up most of the Ministry's time. If it was up to the Ingenu, he'd go for something really striking, like a lurid, sickly green. Alternatively, he would colour-code government press releases according to a useful system that your average citizen could understand, like how the colours of crisp packets matched flavours. A few minutes of research later, the Ingenu was distraught to discover that Britain was actually torn apart by internal discord in the matter of what colour crisp packets should be, especially when it came to that cheeky rambunctious old devil of a flavour, Salt and Vinegar. Without clear consensus even on how to colour-code crisps, there was that idea out the window.

Ingenu, deflated by all this, brooded over where he could get some useful office info to pique the interest of the Saps. How sweet life would (no doubt) be if he could just find a way into their department. The Ingenu wondered what it was like to have a proper functional staff kitchen with a beautiful futuristic curved chrome machine to give you tea that is always full of whatever you need, everything placed there inside the shining sculpture of a drinks machine by invisible sprites (presumably). The Ingenu had never actually seen inside the Saps' kitchen. No one had ever invited him over there, and he couldn't very well wander in with his hands in his pockets to inspect the place. He imagined that it was almost certainly sleek and spotlessly clean, and that everything just worked properly without you having to think about it. What sort of staff kitchen would the Saps have once they moved to Buddleia House? The mind boggled. The Ingenu pictured himself lounging there on one of those Ancient Roman couch things with his very own top-shelf quality extra big mug, the Buddleia kitchen stretching out so far and so luxuriously that the other end of the room was impossible to see, being shrouded in a pleasant misty light and echoing with the sweet subtle tweeting of birdsong.

This reminded the Ingenu of something he had found funny, and he thought it might tickle Twitchwell too, who looked to be working much too hard and in desperate need of a distraction. He whispered her name several times, then tried shouting it a few more. Eventually he got Twitchwell's attention. He waved her over to his screen.
"Look at this!" he giggled. Twitchwell stood up, tottered over, stood for a moment, then went back for her chair which she pushed slowly squeaking to the Ingenu's desk. She parked her chair besides his, brushed it down with her handkerchief, and took a seat.
Twitchwell stared blankly at the floor.
"I can't remember why I came over now," she said.
"Because I want to show you something," the Ingenu said.
"Yes, that was probably it," agreed Twitchwell, who noticed that her jaw had started hurting from tension. She didn't remember when her jaw had last not been tense, because who notices when your face muscles are relaxed? Oh, poor jaw muscles, taken for granted and ignored, and then one day -

blammo! - it aches to be awake and have a face.
"Speaking of things in an uncertain state," said the Ingenu, "(as you were just recently, you will recall) in my travels through the flotsam of the internet, I recently discovered there is a group about birds."
Twitchwell nodded.
"I don't understand," she said.
The Ingenu pointed to the website in question on his screen. "I can't remember precisely how I came across this group (and after all, who can say how any one thought formed a connection to another in this day and age?), but this lot are not an online community of bird-watchers exactly. They (basically) are bird deniers."
Massaging her jaw, Twitchwell nodded again.
"I still don't understand," she said.
"They are an online group that claims that birds are not real!" said the Ingenu with a wide grin, as if this was the most marvellous thing he had ever heard, and was proof positive of the inherent entertaining worth of the human species.
"What do they think birds are," said Twitchwell, still at a loss, "I mean if they are not? Are the birds actors too?"
The Ingenu was so excited at the thought of explaining that he leaped out of his chair and started pacing about, giving her the full sub-Sir Parsifal lecture-circuit treatment with practised gestures and all.
"The gist of the group is the normal sort of thing - posting pictures of pigeons, parakeets, canaries and the like (the more ordinary the bird, the better) in odd situations. But all the posts are accompanied by the insistence that there are no such things as flesh and blood (or feather and flesh and blood, I suppose) birds, but that all birds are in fact artificial robotic drones that are constantly spying on everyone. It's almost certainly a satirical site, but here again is another spot the satire stamp we were talking about wouldn't work, because almost everyone on the site treats the whole idea of the conspiracy with a really very impressive level of complete po-faced seriousness. The whole idea of birds being spy robots is obviously unbelievable, but the random posters are so convincing that it is never clear if they themselves actually really, truly, and in fact believe that birds are not real. Nobody ever breaks character, and a tiny part of your brain, just a tiny part (but a vocal one) wonders if maybe, just maybe, there are in fact people serious about the whole idea of fake birds. In the long (and frankly, often silly) history of human beliefs we have certainly gone for things that are equally implausible, so why not believe in drone birds checking up on us?" The Ingenu waved a finger. "The fake-bird lot even have official merchandise (t-shirts, hats, tea-towels, that sort of thing), and I'm not sure if that makes their belief more plausible or less."
Twitchwell looked at the page on the Ingenu's screen, pulled out her phone, and began fiddling with it.
"I have never liked pigeons much," she confessed guiltily, "They always bully me. Also, they look like they could do with a good wash."

"Urban camouflage for the drones, no doubt," said the Ingenu with glee.
"Wouldn't the birds, if they were made out of electronics and had circuit boards and cameras, wouldn't they break down if it rained?"
"But you don't see birds in the rain much, do you?" the Ingenu pointed out, "Except ducks. And swans."
"Waterproof models?" said Twitchwell with a strained voice, staring at her phone.
The Ingenu leaned over subtly, subtly to see what was on the screen in her hand. It was a list of words paired with numbers.
"Whatchya got there?" he said.
"Scrape results from the page," said Twitchwell, "To see how often words are used."
In descending order, the most popular words on this (probably) satirical site discussing the artificial nature of birds were:

drone birds government drones real arent one truth just no its getting time im theyre people fact nod played lies.

It was like a perfect song of paranoid nonsense. The Ingenu started humming a little tune to go with it that had popped into his head, that on reflection may have been the jingle for an ad for jelly sweets he had seen the other day.
Twitchwell put her phone down carefully and took a deep breath.
"I don't know if it's not sleeping so well lately or because I might be getting sick or because I am not eating right, but if birds may not be real, and Australia may not be real, then how do we know what else might not be real? Maybe the discount painkillers in the supermarket aren't real? Maybe the Northern Line on the Tube isn't real? Maybe brown sauce is just recoloured tomato ketchup? Maybe vitamins aren't real, or maybe only A through C actually exist? Maybe energy-efficient fridges aren't real? Maybe river locks aren't real? Maybe the royal family aren't real? Maybe cowboy hats aren't real? Maybe two-in-one shampoo and conditioner isn't real? Maybe golf is fake? Maybe the Northern Lights? Maybe typewriters? Maybe Romans? Diamonds? Insulation? Earmuffs? Glaciers?"
The Ingenu took a wary step back. He was very unsettled, not least because he didn't think he had ever heard Twitchwell talk for so long before. In fact, it looked like she was still reciting things like she was a broken machine.
"Are you...all right?" the Ingenu said, feeling he should do something to help her stop whatever she was doing right now.
Twitchwell took off her glasses and rubbed her eyes.
"Sorry, sorry, sorry, it's just that I can't think clearly, I mean I don't know what to think about anything," she said with a note of panic, "And I do think I'm maybe going to be replaced here because I saw the boss talking to someone I know who works on deep learning and complex information systems and artificial intelligence, and if I lose my job then what am I supposed to do

and what if I'm no good at anything, and when nobody knows anything, what are we doing and why should we even bother doing it?"

The Ingenu sucked his teeth. These waters were too deep for him, and half his attention was on the fact of Madame Char having a little chat to an expert in artificial intelligence. Char must be interested in the fancy disinformation predictor program, the Grail thingy. He then noticed that Twitchwell was no longer holding it together, but was quietly sobbing.

"Hey, come on now, it's okay," the Ingenu said, in an attempt to be comforting. Should he give her a pat on the shoulder? Would that just be awkward? (Probably.)

"Listen," he said, "You look like you need a break, yeah? You've ingested too much errf, too much mis and dis and junk info. Why don't we maybe go outside for some fresh air? Well, not so much fresh air. I don't know how fresh it is. But...different air."

Twitchwell unfolded her large handkerchief and blew her nose good and hard. It struck the Ingenu that for someone so small, she sure did have a lot in her nose to get out, but he thought it would be ungentlemanly to comment on this.

The Ingenu snapped his fingers.

"You know what? I'm hungry. Are you hungry? Let's go outside for some different air, treat ourselves to some nice precious scraps of sunshine, and we will pop over to the falafel place and get ourselves a little snack to eat."

Twitchwell nodded and after another last blast into her handkerchief just in case, she got weakly to her feet as the Ingenu shepherded her out of the office.

"Maybe I could get a coffee?" she said and wiped her eyes.

"I don't think that's such a good idea," said the Ingenu comfortingly.

10. Proof Without the Pudding

The team had assembled in Madame Char's office early one morning in dribs and drabs. The Luncher was already there when they arrived, and looked like he had slept in the chair overnight to save time for arriving punctually for a morning meeting. If he had been sleeping there, even just for a little while, the Ingenu privately marvelled that his clothes looked so unruffled, as undisturbed as the old man himself. Probably his dark green suit was made out of some special hardy old man hunting wool that was designed to stand up to the wear and tear of running bellowing across thorny and rocky countryside in order to attack animals with your bare hands.

In actual fact, the Luncher had arrived only a few minutes before everyone else. He wanted to get a seat facing away from the big window in Madame Char's office, because he had an atrocious and unpardonable headache this morning, and with his eyes closed and attempts at wrestling his breathing into shape, he was trying to meditate and mindfulness his way out of how much his head hurt. Part of the pain was no doubt physical, caused by the Luncher's husband insisting with exuberance last night that they try a bottle of whisky itself old enough to think about retirement that some client or other in the wine and spirits trade had presented his husband in thanks for some work thing the Luncher could no longer remember. He hadn't imbibed that much, at least not by traditional standards, but a few drams had knocked him flat. When the Luncher made his way to work this morning he had felt as if a steamroller had run over him and a small part of him would like to just lie down on the street somewhere and have a good, flat rest. It wasn't just that a small amount of senior whisky had left him with sore temples the next day, it was being confronted by suddenly feeling as if every drop of vital energy had dripped away from some unnoticed wound cut by the scythe of that wretched and obsessed blackguard, Time. The Luncher felt old and tired, and it made his head hurt because when you looked at the facts face on, he felt like this because he was in fact old and tired.

In working on polishing up the section on visual miscommunication for his Handbook, the Luncher had found the ship of his mind unexpectedly mentally beached on the metaphorical reef of one unremarkable picture doing the online rounds out who knows where. This image featured a perfectly ordinary man in a white tank top who appeared to be in a junkyard, his only distinguishing feature was that he happened to have two sleepy cranky heads, the left of which was clearly badly pasted into the image with large white text at the top saying 'WATCHOO LOOKIN?' and in the same font at the bottom 'NUTHINk MUNCH.' Luncher had read several articles on internet memes and vernacular creativity and prepatterning, but they didn't help, and every time he turned back to stare at the picture of the two headed man, the only thing that he could think of in his own weary blankness was nuthink munch.

Perhaps the mutterers among the Saps and the Shrinkers were right and he was past it and should

stop hanging on. Maybe someone should pop him in an appropriate-sized bottle, stick a cork in and cellar him away somewhere dusty. At least he could get some rest. Instead, he had to try and find some small hidden reserve of verve, some dollop of concentration to get through this morning meeting. If he could do that, then the professional office habits of a lifetime should help him stumble through the day. Did he have to meet with anyone objectionable today? Ah, damme and double damme, he was going to have a coffee later today with Velvet, the top woman in HR. They'd have to go somewhere she could smoke and shout, and that would mean sitting outside and being uncomfortable. Well, first things first - just get through the next five minutes without collapsing from feeble old exhaustion, and then ten minutes after that, and then try a full hour, and so on for the rest of the day, and indeed, for as long as he could keep it up for the rest of his life.

Twitchwell doodled wispy ghosts on her notepad and looked out Madame Char's big window at the sky, noting down that today looked to be Indecisive Grey. The Ingenu yawned and rubbed his eyes. Nobody commented on the fact that Madame Char wasn't there yet, although everyone was thinking about it. What could she be up to?
Twitchwell chewed the end of her pen.
"I heard that someone had heard that they'd seen some people who might have been budgetary auditors about the building," she said in a hushed voice.
The Luncher grunted.
"Once knew a fellow in accounts," the Luncher said, "Could price every single little thing about him just by looking at it. Eerie talent. Completely unobservant of almost everything else, as it turned out. Was once knocked down by a dessert trolley that he never noticed. Hard to miss a dessert trolley. Odd fellow."
The Ingenu nodded.
"I've heard that the auditors they send around for the budget checks have that sort of uncanny sense for financial flabbiness. I hear they can almost smell departmental wastefulness. Like sniffer dogs."
"Or those dogs that can smell diseases," added Twitchwell.
"In the old days, of course," sighed Luncher, "Nobody was too fussed about what Intelligence departments were spending. Could just cough about the Official Secrets Act and they'd leave you to your business."
The Ingenu stopped himself from commenting that had probably been in a proper Intelligence department.
"Could be an opportunity here, like the boss says," ventured the Ingenu, "If the spectral watchers from the budget auditing team like what they see, a department might get itself a little bit of a boost."
The Luncher opened his eyes and rubbed his temples.
"Bit of a conundrum," he said, "Not sure what the right amount of spending is supposed to be these days. You can't spend too little, or else they might think you are a shabby lot and aren't doing enough work, and you can't spend too much, or else someone might start looking too closely at

where the money leaked away and decide it was a bit of a bad buy."
Privately, the Ingenu would have liked to have the opportunity to be surrounded by worryingly excessive expenditure.
"I wonder what the auditors look like?" said Twitchwell.
"They could look like anyone," whispered the Ingenu, "Or anything. They might be somewhere in this room at this very moment, checking up on us."
Twitchwell stared nervously at Madame Char's plant. Was it her imagination, or had some of the leaves moved just when she had blinked?
"Cococoding Zero, Zero," the Luncher broadcast, "If there is anyone secretly in here, I wouldn't mind a nice cold pomegranate juice over ice, if they had that somewhere about them." He waited expectantly for a moment and then sighed and closed his eyes again.
"I don't think secret budget auditors drink pomegranate juice," the Ingenu said, and Twitchwell was wondering what they did usually like to drink and was just about to ask when suddenly Madame Char was there in her office.
It was as if she had leapt into the room. She was dressed in blue and yellow lycra, and marched forward and put a bicycle helmet and a cloth bag down on her desk. You would presume that she had just been riding a bike, but on closer inspection the evidence for this was less than certain, as she didn't have the slightest glimmer or sheen of sweat. But if she hadn't been cycling to work, then what had she been doing? Also, why would anyone pretend to cycle to work? Maybe she hadn't been pretending, but was just so superhumanly clean and medically mysterious that exercise showed no signs of strain for her?
"Morning all!" Madame Char said cheerily, "Apologies for the delay. The traffic this morning was dreadful. Far too many cars out there, choking up the place. More people need to get out in the bracing air! That's the way to start the day! What's the news?"
The air outside was tending towards excessively bracing for the other members of CB4 and, they suspected, for most standard-level hardiness members of the public. On reflection, being inside anywhere appeared much more preferable to being out there, but they kept these thoughts to themselves.
"I was just wondering if you had seen any sign of the auditors, Ma'am?" asked Twitchwell. She was desperate for news at this point. Any news. Even bad news would be something.
"All we know about them is that they might watch you while you sleep," offered the Ingenu, "To see if you do it efficiently."
Madame Char smiled encouragingly at Twitchwell and clapped her hands.
"Now I know this can be a bit of tense time, but I don't want you to dwell on the audits. Our department will do just fine. We may be smaller than others, but we are a trim, hard-working team! I'd put my money on all of us, if I were a gambling woman, which I am not. Don't discount us yet! Don't discount yourselves! Besides," Madame Char tapped the side of her nose knowingly and wiggled her eyebrows, "I still have a few tricks up my sleeves yet!"
The Ingenu thought that it must be hard to get anything up lycra sleeves, except (with difficulty)

arms. He also thought that Madame Char must really think she had a chance of getting hold of the predictive A.I. system the Saps had already bagsied in their own minds. The problem, surely, was that there was no way a fancy computer system like that was going to go cheap, and CB4 couldn't possibly have the budget to bid against the Saps for something like that. But (here was the thing) if CB4 didn't get a big expensive show-stopper like the A.I. to show off, how could they hope to protect their department from the pressure on all sides to gobble them up? They couldn't even manage to have milk in the fridge most days, for goodness sake. Madame Char was surely out of her depth trying to compete with Sir Parsifal and his lot.
Madame Char didn't look worried, however, about any of this. She folded her right leg behind her in a stretch and hopped lightly on the left.
"What do we have today?" she said, "Ah, something close to my heart - the food stuff!"
"Close to the stomach, I suppose, rather than heart," said the Ingenu, while pretending not to yawn.
"Misguides!" declared Madame Char, switching to stretch the left leg and hop on right, "Recipes for failure, if not disaster! Life hacks that will not at all improve your life!"
The Luncher smoothed his moustache and took on an indefinable but definite air of business and concentration, like he had put on his invisible work hat.
"By which we mean, of course," he said, "The spate and spread of online videos that are of a particular type - usually concerned with baking desserts or fixing household breakages or stains, but in fact have very little relationship with the reality of how you would go about those things."
Madame Char looked stern.
"Now, I know that might not sound like a big deal at first, but this sort of thing is absolutely misinformation, and while it might be easy enough to dismiss it as meaningless entertainment, it is our job to keep an eye on it, in case this particular trend evolves into something that causes greater problems, and merely for the fact that it is an example of a specific variety of bad information that spreads worryingly well."
The phrase 'spreads worryingly well' made Twitchwell think of some extra-unhealthy but inescapably delicious extra-high fat thing you put on your toast. Maybe something like a combination of butter, jam, marshmallow, peanut-butter, and chocolate spread, all chemically engineered to be an unearthly smooth texture for easy use despite the many varieties of unhealthy indulgences mixed up in the jar. Imagine having that on your morning toast.
"The numbers of these so-called instruction videos," the Luncher said, "And the numbers of views, are in any case, significant enough to make this trend worth examining." He nodded to Twitchwell, who stopped thinking about breakfast spreads to hand out some spreadsheets.
"Um, yes, sorry," Twitchwell said, "Well, you have some of the data I've put together there, um, I hope it's clear? Anyway, you'll see here that one of the largest of these cake-making-video groups is one that maintains several channels and has millions of views per month for each of those channels." She poked at the paper in front of her, and everyone else tried to estimate where that was supposed to be on their copies. "For instance, thirty million views per month on this 'Baking Luvlly' channel, seventy-three million on this one called 'Easy Food for Beautiful Life!'. They have a lot of

channels, this particular group, it's difficult to say how many, but all up, it looks like they have at least two hundred and twenty two millions views per month."
"Which, to put that international reach for attention in country size, would be a touch more than every single person in the current population of Britain watching at least three videos every month." said the Luncher.
The Ingenu whistled. That was a decent amount of attention.
"Or approximately two point eight four percent of the population of the world," added Twitchwell, which somehow sounded less impressive.

Fumbling under her chair, Twitchwell pulled out a laptop that was cumbersomely too big for her, opened it, and fiddled about apologetically until a paused video filled up the screen. She supposed she could have sent the video in question to Madame Char so they could all gather round the large screen on her desk, but that would require Twitchwell talking or writing to her, and in the end because she froze up at even the thought of typing out a message, she decided it was much easier to lug this laptop into the meeting rather than face the impossible challenge of communicating with another person.
"Right, sorry, here are a few short examples of what these misguide videos look like."
Twitchwell held the laptop awkwardly open in front of her and craned over to play the video, which consisted of:

Someone's anonymous but jaunty hands putting multi-coloured gummy sweets, several marshmallows, and some flour in a coffee mug, putting it into a microwave for ten minutes, and then taking out a beautiful rainbow-coloured mug-sized pudding, and giving a thumbs up.

The Luncher's moustache twitched.
Next, there was a video of the anonymous hands dropping a full glass of wine on light beige carpet, looking worried, and then pointing upwards in a fashion that indicated the hands had an idea, after which they squirted toothpaste on the red wine, wiped it off, and presto! The stain was gone.
The third clip featured the hands swiftly melting caramel sweets down, then whirring an egg-beater in the hot stuff in order to make wispy caramel threads. The purpose of these was not made clear by the video.
"Does toothpaste get red wine stains out?" the Ingenu wondered out loud.
"Goodness no!" said Madame Char, "Although many people would like to believe there to be a whole list of secret cleaning knowledge that is being kept from them, generally the best way to wash most things is the way you normally wash things. I don't know what it is about toothpaste that has such a hold on the collective imagination. People do seem to want to believe in toothpaste possessing strange powers. Can you imagine? So many people think that if you get a burn in the kitchen you should put toothpaste on the injury that toothpaste companies have put up posts on their own pages to explain this is not a helpful idea. Anyway, toothpaste is not going to do much for

wine stains."
"Unless the wine stains are on your teeth," grunted the Luncher, "And you have some of that extra-whitening toothpaste."
"I think I once saw one of this species of videos where a lady was brushing her teeth with white paint," said the Ingenu.
"Maybe whitening toothpaste might work if the stained carpet was white?" asked Twitchwell.
"In this case," the Ingenu said, pointing at the screen, "I suppose we'd need some extra-beiging toothpaste for that to work."
"The idea seems to be that toothpaste is the natural enemy of stains," said the Luncher.
"Like its opposite?" suggested Twitchwell.
"I would have thought that maybe red meat would be the appropriate thing to rub on a red wine stain," put in the Ingenu.
"Surely a grilled fish should be the actual opposite of red wine," said the Luncher.
Madame Char frowned.
"The salient point here is that none of these videos are useful or true ways of doing things. You cannot make a rainbow cake like that. Toothpaste is a poor way to clean red stains. Melting caramel sweets like that would burn them, the pan, the poorly-advised egg beater, or yourself."
She nodded towards the Luncher. He cleared his throat and began.
"Having studied some of these frankly bewildering recipes and instructional videos earlier, they have several features in common: they are short and have a jaunty, sped-up pace set to cheery, if anonymous music. They tend to be visually colourful, bright, and eye-catching. There is something sugary to all of them, regardless of whether they are making sweets or not, although it is presumably no coincidence that so many of the food videos revolve around desserts. They often look almost plausible, although very few of them are in fact real recipes. The food videos tend to present themselves as simple guides with impressive ends. In fact, the wearying torrent of similar-styled cooking videos strike me as a sort of alchemical view of the world, a child's view of cooking. Just as a child might mix mud and water and believe, in their innocent fuzzy understanding of process and causality, they have actually made something like a chocolate cake, so too these food videos throw a handful of colourful things together to gasp in wonderment when the ingredients transform into something improbable."

All this talk of desserts was making the Ingenu hungry. Was it too early in the morning to eat some cake or a bag of sweets? (Probably) But wasn't that the privilege of being a fully grown (ish) adult in a free society, that he could eat a plate of jelly beans for breakfast if he wanted? The Ingenu suddenly worried that Madame Char could sense his unhealthy thoughts about the (supposed) most important meal of the day, and when she suddenly opened a plastic container on her desk, the Ingenu almost fell out of his seat, as if she had read his mind and was going to unleash some punishment from her tupperware container for his own good. Madame Char waved at the contents of the plastic tub.

"Courgette cupcakes," she said.
So it was punishment then. These so-called foodstuffs had not even completely hidden the courgette guiltily inside the cupcake like most of these healthier trick desserts tended to do. Instead, there was a sprinkling of clear and inescapable slivery green-brown twists of courgette on the top of the cupcakes. For the sake of maintaining office peace, the Ingenu reached out and ate one, trying not to think about what was in them, as he had never been fond of courgettes, and would not willingly ingest them.
"As we've seen," sighed Madame Char, "As simple, empty, and lacking in beneficial mental nutrition as these sorts of videos are, they are also immensely popular, and this is not by accident."
Twitchwell waved around her chewed pen like a magic wand.
"Um, so, yes," she said with the wide eyes of someone who had definitely consumed too much video of made-up cake recipes and now saw them floating ghostly in front of her, "They use thumbnail images that are meant to entice you to click, click, click, by maybe showing something intriguing? Like a-a-a- trifle being cut up by a phone maybe? It doesn't matter if the video actually has much to do with the thumbnail. These online cake channels, they also get lots and lots of views because they make so many videos. These content farms chop up their short videos and repaste them together in different orders as if they are new videos, so they are always, always posting what looks like new recipes and tips, but really it is just the same thing in slightly different order or re-shot. They do this with lots of slight variations in webpage metadata too - like lots of 'best chocolate cake/top cake/choco/chocolate love/best cake' over and over and over, to give them the best chance of being picked up in searches. This all keeps the algorithms interested, because systems see the constant posts and think 'Gosh! Look at all those posts! Must be something going on here that's worth seeing! I'll recommend these videos to viewers.' The Farms also run lots of different channels, so they can pross-cromote, I mean cross-promote their stuff, which also helps keep the algorithms interested and promoting their videos to viewers."
Twitchwell sucked in a nice lungful of air after all this and then nibbled on the end of her pen.
"They must make a fortune," ventured the Ingenu.
"The Content Farms presumably wouldn't go to all this trouble if it didn't pay," said the Luncher, "They are essentially making recipes for the video algorithms, not for mere mortals. By making things that appeal to the mysterious recommendation algorithms, their videos get played to a mind-boggling number of people, no matter how insipid or foolish they are. As a result, the Farms get advertising money when the video sites show their nonsense meals to the viewer, and the host site gets a cut at the same time. It is a very satisfactory arrangement for everyone, except, to an extent, the much less important human viewing public sitting there in between."

Madame Char scowled. "I once saw someone describe the whole process of these misguide videos as a sort of mental junk-food loop, where you get enticed by intriguing-looking, bright, exciting-seeming videos, but ones that never give you any result or satisfaction. You can't make most of these desserts! They are inherently, intentionally unsatisfying, so you will not stop watching them! It's

like video sugar-madness!"
Her lycra outfit giving her an edge of speed for furious pacing, Madame Char started doing circuits around her desk.
"I know I'm taking this all personally," she said, "And a recipe might be a small thing, but it's important. A recipe for a special cake is put together by some woman long ago, for instance, then passed on to a daughter, and that daughter's children, and on and on, a piece of information passed on from generation to generation. If we don't pay attention to the recipes, then we aren't paying enough attention to the transmission of information that links the everyday!"
"And naturally," said the Luncher, "Even if the slew of food nonsense generated by the countless, almost contentless Farms hasn't yet led to any discernible harm in the real world, it is worth our studying their reach. Anybody who has their hands on that much attention is worth keeping an eye on. They may do nothing but continue to play games with algorithms for jolly fun and profit, they may perhaps transmit some harmful junk information, and they may spread the idea that getting good at misguiding is an excellent and influential business strategy."
Madame Char turned to Twitchwell, who wished she wouldn't.
"That's why I'd like you to continue scraping data about these sorts of videos. If this is just a flash, and views start dropping away, we need to know about it. If Farms start turning to other, more desperate forms of misguiding, we need to know."
"Yes Ma'am," Twitchwell said and nodded nervously.

The Ingenu thought it was not the time to mention it, with Madame Char on the warpath against the false promise of marshmallow muffins and ice-cream pizzas, but he wondered if any of this stuff really mattered at all. Did people even actually make recipes that often? The Ingenu admitted that he only cooked the minimum amount possible. Did Twitchwell cook a lot? Or did she just live on sweet caffeinated drinks? The Luncher surely knew more than anyone needed to about fine foods, but he spent so much of his time in restaurants, he couldn't possibly have the time or inclination for throwing together a quick spaghetti bolognese at home at the end of a day, could he? The Ingenu couldn't picture it. Oh, people bought cook books and they watched enormous quantities of shows about cooking and baking and eating, we all of us couldn't get enough of that stuff, our appetite for looking at food was never satisfied. But did people actually go and make the things they saw? Did they expect the recipes to work, or was that besides the point, and were the content farms just going the next logical step and giving people a distillation of the idea of food that didn't even bother to be connected to silly old reality any more? The Ingenu decided that he knew one person who didn't really care about any of this, and that person was himself. This stuff was as far from the study of Intelligence and impactful information as you could get. The Ingenu couldn't spend the rest of his career watching hours of stupid videos to write idiotic reports so he could be sent on pointless conferences to do foolish presentations. He had to find the Saps. He had to tell them that it looked like Madame Char was going to have a go at getting hold of their magic predicting Grail A.I. What would CB4 do with a program that could predict mis and dis anyway? Know in advance that people

were going to start posting about combing your hair with peanut butter or that they were planning to start sticking charcoal in their ears? No, he had to talk to the Saps, and when they got their A.I., he had to get himself transferred to somewhere where they worked on information that actually made a difference in real actual life.

11. Blue in the Face

"Dynamic absorption valency?" Twitchwell declared, goggling intensely at a point slightly to the left of the Ingenu.
"Sorry?"
"That's got to be worth a point, gotten it, I mean, isn't it?"
It took the Ingenu a few moments to work out that she was talking about Babeltennis. He smiled gravely.
"I graciously welcome my new competitor," he said, and Twitchwell did an uncertain but enthusiastic pump of the fist into the air and took a celebratory swig from a small glass bottle in her other hand.
"Although," said the Ingenu, "I warn you, you are some points behind in this game, and you'll have to show some real fire and determination as the new kid on the court to unseat this grizzled old champion of Babeltennis, the sport of Kings (and Queens). Well, not of Kings, but the sport of some people who work for the people who work for the people who work for Kings, maybe." He examined Twitchwell, who was swaying slightly and gently grinding her teeth.
"Are you sure you are all right there?" he said cautiously, "You aren't hitting the caffeine too hard again, are you?"
Twitchwell shook her head, nodded a bit, then did an uncoordinated combination of both.
"No? that is to say, sorry, Yes? Maybe? I Don't Know?" she said.
"Right, well that answers that."
Twitchwell waved the glass bottle in front of him.
"I've been ordering this stuff online," Twitchwell said, "I don't know what is in it, but it's helping me stay awake, and that's the main thing? Does it do what is says on the tin? I mean, on the bottle? I don't know what it says on the tin. It might have coffeine in it, maybe, or other things, I don't know, sorry. I can't read the language on the back of the bottle. I don't even know what language it is in."
The Ingenu looked concerned.
"It's blue," insisted Twitchwell, as if this proved it was effective, "And there's an explosion on the bottle."
"But you don't know exactly what it is..." said the Ingenu.
Twitchwell made a scoffing noise.
"It's a bluesplosion," she said.
The Ingenu waved his hands in the air, wondering how to put 'You are clearly overdosing on knockoff-brand energy drinks' delicately. He wished Madame Char was here right now. She would be good at giving health advice. Char could maybe slap the bottle of bluesplosion right out of

Twitchwell's hand (and right into the appropriate recycling bin), thus no doubt saving her life.
"I mean, maybe you shouldn't be drinking so much bluesplosion?" he said.
Twitchwell nodded in agreement while drinking some more bluesplosion.
"I justjustjust got to keep going," she said, machine-gunning words, "There's too much to be done, isn't there? And I need to do it? Somebody needs to do it, or else I won't be the someone, and if I don't do all the work, they'll get someone who can, or maybe even automate me? Replace me with a program that does my job for cheapererer." Twitchwell leaned forward to whisper in the Ingenu's ear. As she was quite a bit shorter than him, Twitchwell had to stand on the tips of her toes to do so.
"All this, you see?" she whispered, "All this can woosh away at any moment, just woosh! you know?"
She waved a hand to demonstrate and looked impressively at the Ingenu, who did not know, but thought it was probably best to look like he did, rather than press the issue with the clearly sleep-deprived, overworked, and bluesplosion-infused Twitchwell.

Retreating to the kitchen, the Ingenu was involved in a sort of ritualistic game of shuffling around the worryingly few cups in the cupboard, as if trying to reveal hidden combinations by getting them in just the right order. No matter how many times he moved the contents of the cupboard around, he couldn't find his particular cup. Where was his white with red polka dots cup that had carried him through so many days of work? Wherefore noble, trusty Dotty? He had to face facts. Someone had taken his cup.
"I have been mugged," the Ingenu said aloud. Was nothing sacred? It was surely understood without any need for putting it down in black and white that the white and red dot mug was his. Could nobody in the building be trusted? In a huff, the Ingenu checked the time. If his calculations were correct (they probably weren't, but if you are wrong enough times, eventually you might be right by accident), he should be able to find the Saps near the Neutral Zone for a little unofficial business.
The Ingenu took a deep breath and straightened his belt. This was it. Time to get an in with the big boys of the Building. He wondered if he might even get to meet Sir Parsifal later today? And Parsifal would take one look at the Ingenu and see something worthy there and nod and put a hand on his shoulder and bring him into the exalted circle. There'd probably be some very heart-stirring orchestral music coming from somewhere, too. Steady there lad, he told himself. One fantastical step at a time.

He hovered by the Neutral Zone for as long as he dared, clammy and nervous, staring at the tropical-beach poster on the wall, squatting uncomfortably on the abandoned filing cabinets, getting up again and constantly pretending to be doing something on his phone but feeling like nothing he did was at all convincing. And after what seemed an age and a half, but according to the clock on his phone had only been a surprisingly long seven and a half minutes, there was Gentle and Thanks sauntering into the Neutral Zone and also somehow on top of the world. There was not only a spring in their step, but an extra bounce in their perfect hair.
"Orright mucker?" said Gentle.

"What's occurring, amice?" said Thanks with a knowing wink, "Any news from you innocents over in the Ceebeebies?"
"Heard anything you'd like to share with us?" asked Gentle.
The Ingenu took a deep breath. On random occasions that had a significance unclear to the Ingenu, his father was given to making speeches that were presumably meant to be about taking the branching possibilities of life. His pa was not much of a speaker, so when he decided to give a speech, he mumbled and got distracted by himself, and the Ingenu had never quite been sure what sort of wisdom exactly his dad had been trying to pass on. But suddenly this felt like one of those moments his dad had (maybe?) been talking about. The Ingenu was going to take this step and start going places.
Thanks and Gentle stared at him and the Ingenu wondered how long he had been standing silently thinking these things.
"I've been thinking," the Ingenu blurted, relieved to have punctured the silence, "And I feel like I'm ready for a change. I'm ready for something better. I think I want to help."
The Ingenu was about to go on, when to his horror, Twitchwell came walking past from out of the staff bathrooms. Even worse, she had caught sight of him, and was coming over.
"You may have been right," she mumbled sheepishly, "I might have had too much bluesplosion."
As Twitchwell did not immediately vanish, but sort of wobbled awkwardly, years of parental training about manners suddenly kicked out from the Ingenu's subconscious, and without meaning to, he found himself introducing Twitchwell to Thanks and Gentle.
"Hullo," said Twitchwell, pushing her glasses back up and staring at the Saps. She was wondering if they looked a little out of focus and blurred to her because her glasses needed cleaning, or because her eyes needed cleaning.
"One of your junior boffins from down your Kids' Show looks to have wandered off," said Thanks to the Ingenu, which Twitchwell thought was odd, since she was sure she was standing right there, wasn't she? She waggled a finger in her ear just in case she had misheard.
"One of your clever little Ceebeebies mole-people badgering away with whatever they can get their small paws on, ey?" said Gentle with a smirk, "Probably puts together a very cute craft computer with nothing more than cardboard, paste, cellophane, and glitter."
"Well, I wouldn't say-" began the Ingenu, who was suddenly feeling a hot flush creeping down the back of his neck.
"Adorable, really," said Thanks.
"She's actually really extraordinary at-" the Ingenu tried again.
"Just a bit of the old banter, yeah?" Gentle said with an amused shake of his head, "No doubt like all of you down at the Kids' Show, she does her best, but that isn't where the real action is, is it? We all know that."
Thanks nodded in agreement. Twitchwell did a confused small burp, but didn't think anyone noticed.
"Well, we all know the Ceebeebies won't be around much longer," Thanks said as if this was the sad

but necessary result of the inevitable. "Once the budget dust settles, we won't expect to see much more of CB4 about, will we? I'm sure the world will have to find a way to live without regular updates on things like paranoid theories about speed cameras from crazy uncles across the nation."
Thanks glanced at Twitchwell as if noticing her down there for the first time, and then back to the Ingenu and shrugged. "Maybe your little pal can find some work in a social media start-up or something, ey? Probably plenty of that sort of work about for those suited to it."
"I don't want to work for a social media start-up," Twitchwell fumed and may have even stomped her foot a little. Gentle and Thanks laughed, like she was a small precocious child or some sort of animated talking woodland creature, and then the laughing went on so long that the Ingenu realised with revulsion that they were actually chuckling (Chuckling! The lowest form of laughing!), and they were looking at him like they expected him to join in.
"Now hold on a minute," the Ingenu found himself saying much more heatedly than he would have liked, "Hold on just a minute. A joke's a joke, and I like one as much as the next individual, but there's no call for that sort of rudeness. My colleague here," he gestured vaguely in the direction he imagined Twitchwell was standing, "Is a bright, hard-working, and talented person, and whatever the clear and obvious shortcomings of the work we do in our department, there is no cause, no cause at all!" The Ingenu's voice was rising in pitch and intensity now, like one of those old fashioned kettles you left on the stove whistling with offended insistency. "No cause, I say, to be rude in that sort of way!"
"Oh, were they being rude?" Twitchwell whispered sleepily, "That's not very nice." She paused. "What were they being rude about?"
The Ingenu ignored her, still unable to shut up.
"Ambition is one thing, and I, as much as anyone else, feel the draw of wanting to strive and do better, to do important things, and to be significant. But if we can't be civil to one another, if we can't even be bothered to be polite, if contempt for the small and foolish is the bulk of our normal everyday behaviour, then maybe our noble aims and thoughts aren't built on much after all! And on reflection, on second thoughts, which have only just occurred to me as it were this very second, I am not so sure that I can put up with those who would deride the good people who work around me! Good day and fare well to the whole bloody lot of you!" The Ingenu was panting by the time he had found that his rant had run out. At this point, the dramatic thing to do would have been to swivel sharply on his heel to put his back coldly to Thanks and Gentle and then to march boldly off, but the moment had passed by the time the Ingenu thought of it. So he, Twitchwell, Thanks and Gentle all stood around in the Neutral Zone, as if unsure what to do next.
Thanks and Gentle took the opportunity to stare uncomprehendingly for a while at the Ingenu, then shrugged more or less simultaneously.
"Suit yourself, pal," one of them said, and they went off on their way. With them, it only now occurred to the Ingenu, also went any chance of joining them around the luminous high-tech future of the gleaming chrome coffee machine and absorbing the radiant futurist thought-leadership of Sir Parsifal.

At this point, Twitchwell, who was definitely a step or two out of sync with everyone else in the world due to the caffeine and sleeplessness, called out in a sort of loud whisper towards Thanks and Gentle when they were far enough away that they could not possibly hear her.
"If you ask me, your hair looks silly!"

The Ingenu felt his knees buckle. Goodbye excellent career. Goodbye Buddleia House. Goodbye dreams of a better life. Twitchwell flapped her hands at him.
"What are you doing?" the Ingenu said.
"You look like you could use some air," Twitchwell said, "Are you feeling all right?"
"Not really," said the Ingenu, "Maybe I should try one of your colour-bomb drinks?"
Twitchwell shook her head.
"I don't think that's the sort of thing a beginner like you should start with. You may never sleep again."
The Ingenu nodded wearily. Twitchwell shepherded him back towards the CB4 office, halting suddenly when they came across a small window looking out over a vista of an office block that had been optimistically painted white and ever since had been turning a sort of bubbly off-porridge colour with black and brown streaks caused by the slow staining work of years, weather, and lazily designed gutters and pipes.
"Look, you can see the sky," said Twitchwell, "That always cheers me up."
The Ingenu looked out the grubby little window but could see nothing to recommend the scene out there. He shrugged.
"It's just another grey sky," he said with resignation.
Twitchwell scoffed.
"It's not just another grey sky," she said, miffed, "They are all different. This one is ... Modest Achievement Grey, a colour of very small and unshowy celebration."
The Ingenu managed about one-fifth of a smile.
"Come on," Twitchwell said, "Maybe you need a cup of tea? Let's get you back to the office. There's a site I'd like you to look at for me and let me know whether you think it's satire or not?"
"What's the site about?" mumbled the Ingenu.
"Reviews for a kitchen thingy that slices bananas."
The Ingenu nodded wearily.

12. Tilting Windmills

Air probably shouldn't feel prickly, but in the whole Building today it was distinctly scratchy, especially in the small patch that filled CB4. This was because the budget reports were absolutely, definitely rumoured to be coming in at any moment. Departments eyed each other suspiciously, in case they had some inside or early knowledge about the results that could be extracted. This led to many tense and confusing confrontations as several parties would simultaneously try to coax information out of each other, when in fact almost nobody actually knew anything yet.

Surely an official announcement was going to be made soon? The suspense was, if not killing them, at least giving them some unpleasant metaphorical bumps and bruises. Madame Char had called a meeting in her office. She had ushered in Twitchwell, the Ingenu, and the Luncher, asked them to take a seat, and then vanished somewhere. It felt like she had been gone for too long. This was the problem with having a head of department who couldn't stand still, she was so full of energy that she was liable to sprint off on a sidetrack marathon just when she was supposed to be telling them if CB4 would even exist by the end of the day. Twitchwell's legs, since they didn't quite reach the floor, drummed nervously on the sides of her chair. The Ingenu sighed.
"Sure she won't be long in coming back," said the Luncher gruffly. In a tortuous conversation recently, in which he had tried to ask while not actually asking Madame Char if she had any exercise tips for an ageing gentleman who ate far too much rich food, he had found out that Madame Char sometimes ran up and down the emergency staircases for fun and relaxation. On reflection, the Luncher had decided that form of exercise probably wasn't for him, as those stairs were basically not used by anyone but the fleet-footed Madame Char, and if he was to expire while trying to get from the third floor to the fourth, he wouldn't be found for some time, which struck him as an undignified way to go.
A seagull shouted angrily somewhere outside, possibly because it was nowhere near the sea. The Luncher inclined his head towards Madame Char's office plant.
"That fern is looking well."
"Better than those sickly ones in the entrance," said the Ingenu listlessly, who started thinking about the need for sunlight and good conditions to grow and flourish, but couldn't muster up the enthusiasm to pursue the metaphor.
"P'rhaps I should get a little plant for my desk?" said Twitchwell, "They do say that having even a little bit of green nature can help soothe you when you live in a city." Twitchwell reflected that if she had a desk plant, she could also stick her figurines in it, like they were holidaying in the jungle, or living in a tree house.
"I don't suppose any of you have seen my mug?" said the Ingenu, "White one with red dots?"

Twitchwell and the Luncher shook their heads. The Ingenu felt like he couldn't even have the consolation of a hot drink, now that his mug had gone missing. He couldn't use somebody else's mug (could he?). No, that wouldn't be right, pushing his problem on to somebody else. Maybe that's how his mug had gone missing in the first place. Somebody else had lost their mug and solved their problem by stealing his. But who? The Factoids were a cold-hearted utilitarian department. It could have been one of their lot. It made you downhearted to think about it.

Just then Madame Char burst back into her office, juggling a microwave-proof container that was gently steaming. She dropped the container on her desk and blew on her fingers.

"Sorry I took so long, everybody!" she said, "That microwave really does take forever."

The Luncher nodded in agreement. "It is possible that the Peryton is not a microwave at all, despite looking something like one. There is increasing evidence that it is more of a temporary food holder that can be made to hum."

"Well, I got it working more or less in the end, after quite the struggle."

"The trick is to be firm with the Peryton, if you are going to get anything useful out of it," said the Luncher, waggling a finger in the air.

Twitchwell and the Ingenu inspected Madame Char's latest healthy meeting snack.

"What is it?" said the Ingenu, suspiciously.

"Broccoli!" said Madame Char with delight. She looked as if she was so pleased that she might slap her knees at any moment. Twitchwell examined her carefully, but Madame Char was always so hyperactively positive, there was no telling if her demeanour showed whether she had heard bad news, good news, or no news at all.

In the spirit of trying to make at least an occasional healthy lifestyle choice, the Luncher sacrificed himself and took one of the pieces of broccoli. He held it up in front of him gingerly and turned it around. He took a delicate bite, coughed "Good Lord!", breathed out a little puff of steam, smoothed his moustache with his free hand and declared:

"These are...delightful."

Warily, the Ingenu reached out to try one, followed by Twitchwell. Chewing thoughtfully, Twitchwell made a surprised face at the Ingenu. The broccoli had been cooked in some sort of coating that made it taste like junky takeaway food. It was more than edible. It was delicious. Somehow, somewhere, someone had found a way to make what was good for you taste tempting. Anything was possible. The Ingenu felt dizzy, like his entire world had turned out to be built on shifting waters. He felt like he was betraying his very self by enjoying this junk broccoli, especially when he noticed that he had wolfed down the first piece and had reached for another without any conscious thought at all. Hell, Twitchwell was also going in again, rapidly nibbling away at a second piece, and the Luncher was on his third piece, dabbing daintily at his moustache and nodding happily to himself. If broccoli could taste this crude and delightful, nobody knew what to believe any more.

Madame Char beamed at them.

"Good, isn't it!" she said. Everyone agreed. "Didn't I tell you? You needn't have worried! I always

believed in you all!" It dawned on everybody that Madame Char wasn't actually talking about the broccoli.
"The auditors have done with their reports, and we've more or less passed with flying colours. A modest, but welcome increase, in fact."
But how? What on earth could their ridiculous little department have to offer against the great watery beasts of misinformation and disinformation?
"I never even saw the auditors," whispered Twitchwell.
"P'rhaps they don't want to be seen," the Luncher whispered back.
Madame Char smiled upon Twitchwell.
"The Ministry was very happy with your data work on flu misinformation, and we may be able to start following up some of your ideas for helping older citizens deal with bad health information."
The Luncher grunted. "Don't look at me. I haven't retired from the field just yet."
Madame Char turned to the Ingenu now, "On the other end of the citizen spectrum, the Ministry was also very much on board with our setting out a program for increasing the training of school children to deal with erroneous information, which certainly didn't hurt us in the audit. I enjoyed that bit of your report about living with uncertainty - what was the phrase you used? 'Surfing down the mountain slopes of life'? The Ministry was also quite taken with the whole M.O.M.O. concept."
Just at the moment, despite having made it up, the Ingenu couldn't even recall what M.O.M.O. had stood for. He was too busy looking flabbergasted.
"But, what? How? Why?" he burbled.
The Luncher tapped the side of his nose.
"Let's just say that I made sure that the right people in the right frames of mind got to see those anti-misinformation packages we have been putting together."
"But what about the Saps? That predictive A.I. they were going to buy up?"
Madame Char shook her head.
"Well, of course, while I'm all for a touch of competition, all of us here in this building are working for the same team in the end, aren't we? And if you mean PRE-S.A.G.E., the Signal Processing department did spend a large amount on it. But it doesn't work."
The Ingenu made further confused noises.
"Whaddya mean?"
Madame Char waved a hand.
"It was a very expensive project, but PRE-S.A.G.E. doesn't work properly. It is supposed to predict the arrival of erroneous information trends before they happen, but it doesn't. It turns out that it can't. Bit of an embarrassment, really. Apparently a lot of the predictions they used in the advertising were fudged, or had been the lucky result of some poor hard-working employees who had looked at the data and made the predictions themselves when the machine couldn't do it. It transpired that the developers of PRE-S.A.G.E. were shopping it around to get someone to buy it so they could have enough money to make it actually work. I'm told that this is increasingly a perfectly ordinary business strategy."

"I once read about a machine learning system they fed a diet of television shows," said Twitchwell, now munching on what was at least a fourth piece of junk broccoli. "The idea was that the system could then be able to predict what would happen in the next scene of a show. They fed this system hours and hours and hours of one genre of television show, and once it had processed all that and digested it, even after all that effort, the system could only guess what would happen next in a scene 43 per cent of the time." Twitchwell hiccuped and added: "I am very bad at guessing what will happen next in television shows, but even I might be able to do better than that."

The Luncher leaned back.

"Ah, of course, we have to be wary of believing what we want to believe, even those of us who study badly informed beliefs," he said. Actually, the Luncher sounded positively delighted that some form of fancy information technology didn't work properly, as if he had personally given the boasting fraud of a machine a kick in the shins himself.

Madame Char shrugged.

"Maybe someday they'll build an A.I. that is good at predicting those sorts of things. Who knows? The world is always becoming more exciting!"

The Ingenu shook his head in disbelief. Had Madame Char known that the predictor thing didn't work properly? If she had known, why would she want to bid on it? He was suddenly struck so forcibly by a thought that he almost fell off his chair. What if Madame Char knew the predictor didn't work, but wanted the Saps to think that she wanted it so they would want the broken machine even more, thus fooling their biggest budgetary competitors into spending money on something that didn't work? That would be fiendish. Was Madame Char capable of that? The Ingenu squinted warily at her. She was enjoying a sniff of the broccoli steam and it was hard to imagine her involved in such sneakery, but who could say?

The Ingenu realised that he was even more trapped than before. Not only had his lifeboat out of CB4 turned out to be something of an imaginary, yet somehow still sinking ship, he had accidentally produced work that was well-received, meaning it would be even more difficult for him to convince another department that he didn't belong among the small-fry. Well, it served him right. Maybe he was small-fry after all.

Twitchwell stood up and shuffled over to Madame Char.

"Ma'am, sorry," she whispered, "Does this mean you are still going to fire me?"

Madame Char looked shocked.

"Why on earth would we fire you?" she whispered back, and then said louder: "You are an essential part of our team! I am not overstating things when I say none of us could do the sort of work you do."

Twitchwell looked bashful and confused, mumbling something about having seen Madame Char talking with Wattingham and assuming he was Twitchwell's replacement.

Madame Char shook her head vehemently.

"Goodness, no! Just a bit of outside consultation, on the feasibility of that predictive misinformation A.I., as it happens. You studied together with him didn't you? Clever fellow, but awfully morose.

You know, I am sorry."
Twitchwell blinked.
"What for?"
Madame Char waved a hand.
"To be honest," she said confidentially, "I didn't want to let on, but the competition for funding amongst the departments in the Building has been rather a stress and I have perhaps become a bit too wrapped up in it. I should have been paying more attention to my teammates. Clearly, you've been having your own difficulties with work lately, and I should have found the time to help you with that. The health and mental well-being of everyone who works in this department is ultimately my responsibility. So I am sorry." She looked Twitchwell right in the eyes, which made Twitchwell so nervous that she took off her glasses so that everything could be a nice comfy blur instead. Madame Char tilted her head thoughtfully. "We really must try to find a way for you to manage stress. Have you thought about hobbies for outside work? I think something that involved both intense concentration and distraction might suit you. Perhaps something out in the fresh air and amongst nature. Have you ever thought about taking up bird-watching?"
Twitchwell put her glasses on and gave a meek smile.
"Yes ma'am, thank you. I will give it some thought."

While this conversation between Madame Char and Twitchwell was going on in a corner of the office, the Ingenu slumped in his chair.
"Cheer up, lad, it isn't so bad," the Luncher said in a low voice. The Ingenu listlessly raised his eyebrows. "This isn't the worst place to be. I have been working in all sorts of side and sub branches of this business for a damme long time, and the main thing I have learned is that the most important thing in a workplace is to have a minimum amount of bastards, and our modest little set-up here qualifies most pleasantly for that. Besides, it doesn't hurt to understand the small things thoroughly before you try and tackle the big things, mm?"
The Ingenu scratched an ear and said nothing in response.
Madame Char was leading Twitchwell back to the centre of the room. Char cleared her throat.
"I just wanted to thank you all for your efforts over this period. And I wanted you all to know that you are here in this department because we value you and because we value your work. Now, I know sometimes it might feel like what we do is petty and endless, but I still think it is important. As you know, just for one example, there is a group of people who object to having windmill turbines dot the country because they feel like they are shaking apart the environment in some fundamental way. Some people believe that these windmills produce vibrations that make people sick. There's no evidence for this, of course, it's more bad information cooked up and consumed by people who are worried and who feel powerless. And the important thing is that this belief, this silly little piece of misinformation, can actually get so deep into the minds of believers that they do actually get sick. The human mind is a tricky muscle to keep in top condition, and just because something isn't true and doesn't look significant doesn't mean it can't affect us."

Madame Char did a sort of backwards bending stretch and then popped back up again.
"We should organise a staff function to celebrate!" she declared.
"A meal maybe," said the Ingenu, who was struck by the fear that Madame Char's idea of having a good time would probably involve getting everyone to run up a cliff face or to do sit-ups with weights on and with terrifyingly upbeat music.
"A simple meal," said the Luncher, insistently.
"We could have a cup of tea just for right now, I suppose?" said Twitchwell, who still didn't really want one, but knew everyone else probably did, and she was willing to have another go at tea-drinking anyway.
The Ingenu got up and jerked his head at Twitchwell.
"I'll give you a hand."
"I think there's even some milk today," said Twitchwell in wonderment.
"I suppose the Saps have given up stealing it from us."

With the Ingenu and Twitchwell gone off to the CB4 kitchen, Madame Char tapped her foot and frowned.
"It's strange about the minor goings-on in our kitchen."
The Luncher blew air from his nose, ruffling his moustache and looked thoughtful.
"Do you know," he said, "At my age I am aware of a great number of people who have finished their working lives and are at a bit of a loose end. From talking to them over a nice glass of tokay, although they never consciously realise it, it has become clear to me that the main thing they now miss is having something to complain about. A very minor amount of irritation, the sand to the pearl, can be an effective relief from more serious worries. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that making sure that there is an unimportant nuisance in a workplace can not only distract colleagues from things they have no control over, but can even bring them together in a small way, giving them something insignificant but, importantly, mutual to be annoyed at together."
Madame Char examined the beatific Luncher.
"Like, for instance, randomly making things disappear and reappear in the staff kitchen?"
"Certainly, that could, hypothetically, be one small helpful grain of sand in the everyday," he said innocently.
"Removing the milk, for example."
The Luncher tilted his head in surprise.
"Why, yes, I suppose that sort of thing might fall under this heading. What an interesting idea." He twisted the ends of his moustache in turn.
"Do you know," he went on, "It occurs to me that disposing of the milk in your scheme might be harder to do than it might seem at first. One couldn't simply pour it down the kitchen sink, because somebody would be bound to see it, and if you want to fold up the carton simply to dispose of it without anyone noticing, the milk has to go somewhere."
"But where?" said Madame Char.

The Luncher shrugged.
"I am afraid you would have to tell me. After all, you have just come up with the whole novel idea yourself just this moment. Here's an interesting and entirely unconnected fact. Did you know that pouring anything but small amounts of water into those potted ferns we have in the entrance is not at all good for them? These broccoli things really are excellent." He helped himself to another.

The Ingenu and Twitchwell returned bearing tea.
"Hey! My mug's back!" announced the Ingenu to the room, rather genuinely pleased.
Once the exchange of had been made, Madame Char held up her cup.
"A toast!" She blew across the top of her hot drink. "I know that it is easy enough to get ground down by the constant flood of toxic information and viral anger and confusing chaos we stare at all day. As I've always said, I feel certain that the important thing is to make sure we balance that, that we keep ourselves healthy by adding positive meaning to our mental diets. We all make meaning, and we do it together, so we might as well try to make good meaning, healthy meaning, as kind and inspiring and, dare I say it, pleasantly joyful as we can, and we should try to make good meaning even in the smallest groups, in the hope that from these everyday and unremarkable attempts, good meaning will grow and spread and join us to other equally unremarkable groups, hopefully more and more of them. But it seems a good idea to make a first effort of good meaning here with those around us, with all of you."
"To having the clarity of mind to keep things tolerable!" said the Luncher, and everyone said cheers and took a careful sip.
As they drank, the Luncher fell effortlessly into his role of meal-time raconteur. According to some scuttlebutt he had heard around the place here and there, an old storage site that the government had rediscovered had been done up at great expense. Unfortunately, it had turned out that the renovations had been rather too expensive, and there was now no money to actually shift any departments into the new shiny building. The mix-up occurred because someone in the government had announced several lots of money to be spent, but these had turned out to actually be the same amount of money announced several times, and as such the sum was not quite as adequate as had first appeared. In the interim, in order to make best use of the location until more money was found, some wise soul had decided that the site would be designated as a property storage area until something else could be done.

"How's the Guide going?" Madame Char asked the Luncher over the top of her mug.
The Luncher took out a folder filled with a stack of papers and weighed it pensively in his hands.
"Ah, my Grand Handbook of Erroneous Information. Do you know, years of work have been expended on this and, I don't mind telling you, there were times I didn't think I'd ever see it through. But, I think," the Luncher cleared his throat, "I think... it might be finished," he said, with a note of real sadness in his voice. A moment of respectful silence followed this announcement.
"It almost seems a shame to finish it now," the Ingenu piped up. Indeed, the idea that the Grand

Handbook wouldn't be slowly worked on and constantly revised in the background of CB4 was a thought that brought all their spirits down.

"Why, an idea occurs to me," said the Luncher, suddenly sitting up brightly, "Perhaps I have finished with the Handbook, but the Handbook hasn't finished with us. It seems to me that it is time for some younger folks to take over this work, to give it all the fresh perspective and youthful knowledge of changing information technology needed to keep the Grand Handbook up to date."

With solemn ceremony, he handed the guide over to Twitchwell. The Luncher grinned and gestured towards the Ingenu. "I'm sure the lad here won't mind pitching in."

Twitchwell opened the folder. There on the title page in the sort of excellent calligraphy that hardly anybody learns any more was written:

A DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO THE USE AND MISUSE OF INFORMATION AS IT PERTAINS TO DEVELOPING TECHNOLOGIES.

and then underneath was written in slightly smaller letters:

SECOND REVISION.

Somebody had even drawn a sort of emblem at the top of the title page. It looked like two animals aggressively trying, but not quite managing to high-five one another. If you looked closely, it became apparent that they were two black lions.

THE END.