

Stressed out. At the Interview.

By

Jack Brewhouse

This is a work of literary fiction. Names, characters, places, events and incidents are all quite obviously the product of the author's imagination, and very clearly the result of crippling mental illness. I mean, seriously, it's set on a space-ship and the main characters have the IQ of a potato.

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Please visit my website for more of this type of thing, including free short stories and novels.

WWW.JackBrewhouse.com

This short story follows the average daily lives of Rob and Dave, the galaxy's greatest heroes as they do things so stupid that you wish you could meet them in real life just to try and beat some intelligence into them.

Read 'Serves. No Useful Purpose.' to see how the legend began, available for the appallingly low price of .99 cents on Amazon, but you get what you pay for, of course.

On the site you will find 'Blips,' short, sharp science-fiction stories which are all free to read online. Rob and Dave's short adventures are listed for free, as are other longer short stories.

You will also find 'Hawk-Eye,' which is a nostalgic re-imagining of the 1980s action TV shows, dragged kicking and screaming into the modern age.

There's also several novels about riding motorcycles over appallingly long distances, which is something I do to keep from going completely insane. After reading this, you might think it's already far too late, and you'd probably be correct.

Thanks for reading.

Jack

Dave Brown glared at Gregory Grayson. It was the glare of a rat in a trap, the gaze of someone who would sooner be somewhere else, even somewhere eating toenail clippings out of a filthy dustbin.

Opposite him sat 26 executives from the passenger services primary management level, an illustrious group of elite operatives who were known to manage at a level so illustrious that it barely qualified as management at all. It was widely suspected that people at this level of management barely qualified as people at all. Still, life was occasionally unpleasant and Dave had come to accept this. He had also come to realise that life was occasionally quite amusing if you could force other people to accept the occasional unpleasantness on your behalf. This was largely why he was here, at least in his own mind.

It was a huge meeting room with a gigantic sweeping semi-circular table behind which the executives languished. He was sat in a single chair in the middle of the room where all eyes could bear down on him. To describe the setup as friendly was not entirely accurate but such trivialities couldn't, wouldn't and shouldn't phase him or distract him from his goals and ambition in life which currently didn't extend beyond getting very drunk later on that evening.

The first executive smiled at him with a smugness that made his skin crawl. He was an odd looking man with grey hair cascading from his leathery scalp and down his even more leathery neck. Dave presumed that he was fairly high up the executive ladder from a position so elevated that he couldn't hear anyone shouting at him to get a better haircut.

"My question is this," he paused for effect before breaking into a wide grin that showed off teeth that could only have come from a factory production line specialised in polishing. "What didn't you get a chance to include on your resume?" he asked, scoffing at his own brilliance. He sat back as if he had dropped a bombshell that was about to explode in an effervescent blossom of absolute genius.

Dave just stared at him and began very slowly shaking his head.

"My resume," he said finally. He turned to scowl at Grayson who was sitting tapping his chin with an amused smirk forming across his lips.

"Well I was obviously very keen to discuss my thoughts on the political structure of the galaxy. I'm particularly amused by the interconnectedness of finances and political power and how both flow in equal and opposite directions. I'm interested in the inter-dynamics of the political infrastructure and how it correlates to the complexities of socially conventional behavioural normality," he said, stringing together just about every long word he knew in a way that may or may not have made any sense. Good

sense didn't appear to be of primary concern. "I also have a theory that the meaning of life, the universe and everything is actually cheese."

The executive tapped his pen on the desk, nodding slowly, "Cheese, you say?"

Dave narrowed his eyes suspiciously, "Cheese, yes. You see, I like cheese."

"And so how is cheese the meaning of life the universe and everything?"

"I haven't quite worked all this out yet, obviously," he told him quite seriously, "I was at a bar one night, pondering the deeper questions of philosophy after a rare dating failure which had left a deeper and more meaningful pain in the place a man least likes to experience anything other than a gentle cupping sensation."

"Yes, yes!" he began scribbling notes for some unfathomable reason.

"It was this very cupping sensation and a suggestion that it should happen sooner rather than later that lead to the aforementioned pain. You see, suggestions of this kind have to be measured quite carefully against your intake of free beer. There was also a certain amount of offence taken at the fact that certain names weren't entirely remembered."

"And the cheese?" the executive beamed.

"I ate some cheese!" Dave shrugged as if such a question was utterly ridiculous. "I was thinking about the universe and I ate some cheese. Do you not see the elegant simplicity of how all this works?"

The executive smirked, looked to Grayson with just a minor flicker of doubt and glanced back.

"Of course your question is a loaded one," Dave continued for reasons even he couldn't quite fathom. "What I didn't put on my resume was largely the reasons why I shouldn't ever be considered for any job *ever* by any sane and rational human being. Fortunately you don't appear to be one. I carefully selected the best, or least worst things to say about myself to give a certain impression. Anything I didn't get a chance to add would be things I didn't want you to know, even though most of those things are available in picture and video format clipped to the crew-lounge toilet wall."

The executive stopped smiling and started looking a little worried. His face wasn't ideally suited to that and Dave got the sudden vivid impression of Tarzan, raised by apes and then moving to the big city. He later went to business school, one that exclusively employed apes as educators but, rather oddly, had a

cleaning staff that was made up of two humans and a dog with three legs. He later became an executive, presumably of a company selling bananas. He married a woman that looked very much like an ape and had incredibly hairy children that everyone presumed were Turkish. At a later point in his life he sat back in his wooden tree-top house and while the sun was setting he pondered his life. He realised that it had all been a horrible, awful mistake and all he ever craved was the freedom to eat bananas and fling his faeces at passing women without fear of judgement. Dave shared this insight with the interviewer to a largely horrified set of expressions and a silence that filled the room.

“You could have asked me pretty much any other question and actually got more and better information, instead. The outcome of all of this is that I have a far deeper impression of the fact that you’re an idiot and you now know I like cheese, drink too much beer and don’t enjoy interviews.”

“I see,” he tapped his pen worriedly on the desk and frowned. He glanced around at the confused, worried, irritated and even stunned expressions on the faces of those around the room.

Dave looked to the 25 other expectant faces on the interview board who diverted their eyes and tried to look busy, in some cases for the first time in their entire lives, “I’m going to go out on a limb here and suggest rather optimistically that this is the stupidest question I’ll hear today. I actually doubt it will be but I’m the kind of guy who believes the glass is always half full unless I have to pay for it.”

Gregory Grayson wrote some notes on his terminal and pointed to the next executive. A man in an inappropriately terrible shirt smiled at him with a poor attempt to seem likeable.

“Welcome,” he said, nodding to himself and pressing his fingers together before him, staring away into his own thoughts, a world in which he was a legend. It was not a particularly well-inhabited world. “I’d like to ask, on a scale of 1 to 10, how weird are you?”

Dave glanced to Grayson who was trying to suppress the urge to laugh. He failed quite spectacularly. Dave grunted, “Well that is a tough question. I presume you’re hoping I stay well clear of the number one and ten or else you’ll draw some specious conclusion from the first page of a psychology magazine where people advertise home-lobotomy kits.”

The executive nodded vacuously.

“I’m going to thoroughly excite you on this one and answer that on a scale on 1 to 10, I’m zero. I’m actually not weird at all.”

The head sticking out of the horrible shirt made an impressed noise and began scribbling notes with a sense of rampant urgency.

“You see, I’m not even close to weird. I’m sane. I see just how crazy the rest of the universe is. I see people who are utterly dense put in positions of authority and respect and everyone blundering about thinking that the best way to cope with a world run by hopelessly inept morons, who blur the line between very stupid people and very clever animals, is to drink too much free beer. I’m not weird at all, I’m just trying not to take you all too seriously, certainly far less seriously than you all take yourselves.”

“Good answer,” he finished scribbling his notes and beamed an overly confident smile.

Dave nodded in satisfaction of a job well done, “Can I go now?”

“Number three, please?” Grayson said.

Dave looked over to a relatively attractive older woman with an unusually thick layer of makeup that was inexpertly applied. Her smugness was even thicker than the makeup.

“What would the closest person in your life say if I asked them, ‘What is the one characteristic that they totally dig about you, and the one that drives them insane?’” she dived straight into her question, the grin smeared across her leathery features.

“I’m Dave!” he said simply.

“Hi, my name is Katrina.”

“I don’t care,” he told her, and really, really meant it.

“I’m sorry, you don’t care about what?”

“I don’t care what your name is. I didn’t care what the names of the last three girls I dated were. I sometimes forget my own surname. The only thing I want from you is for this humiliating travesty to stop. On careful consideration, I don’t even care if that means that you drop dead after turning completely inside-out, surviving for several minutes as a puddle of red stuff lying outside a very smug skeleton.”

“But...” she flustered.

“I’m Dave!” he said again.

“Hi, my name is...” she began reflexively with her smugness slightly tarnished but the grin hanging on for all it was worth. “I don’t understand...”

Dave grumbled under his breath.

“I think that’s his answer,” Grayson intervened helpfully, “I think he’s saying that the characteristic that people dig is that he is who he is and it’s also what drives them insane.”

She stared back in wide-eyed wonder, “Well yes,” she flustered helplessly. “That’s obvious, isn’t it? I mean it’s an acceptable answer, I just feel that it was just too simplistic to really *be* an answer.”

Dave looked angrily back at Grayson who smiled knowingly. He looked at the flustered executive, “Next.”

Next was a man in a jumper, flouting tradition completely to really show the world he was different, and he was doing it by wearing the same thing as a very large slice of the population, but being somehow different by being the same.

None of this really worked in practice and he just looked like a complete idiot.

“My question is this...” he paused dramatically, his hands chopped about in random gestures that added up to less than the sum of their parts. “You are standing on the surface of the Earth. You walk one mile south, one mile west, and one mile north. You end up exactly where you started. Where are you?” He nodded to himself, grinning widely.

Dave just stared.

“It’s a riddle, you see. I like to test your intelligence, I like to throw curve-balls at my prospective employees to see how they cope. I like to see if they can think on their feet,” he seemed totally satisfied with Dave’s lack of an answer, as if perhaps he had outsmarted him completely. “Not everyone can answer this question, you see?”

“Can I ask you a question?” Dave said without a hint of apparent emotion.

He nodded, he oozed with confidence.

“Did you know that they teach very small children that if you stood at the magnetic North pole then you can only go South in any direction?”

The executive shrugged. He carried on oozing confidence, he nodded, he smirked and then he did something else. He stopped, he stopped dead in his tracks and just stared. "Oh, I see," he grumbled.

"Oh, I see!" Dave repeated sarcastically. "I think that anyone educated to a basic level, up to an including gifted monkeys know that. Presumably you were having indigestion from eating too many bananas when they were doing that lesson in your school?"

"You're quite rude!" he quite rightly pointed out.

"Any question like this is going to come down to the fact that there are two points on Earth which have a geographical significance. However there isn't a single point anywhere on any planet where that isn't a silly and very condescending question."

Grayson wrote something on his pad. The executive looked around with a horrified expression, "Next."

Dave turned to a woman who actually didn't look like a complete idiot. Her hair was normal, her makeup hadn't been applied with a shovel or unloaded from a cargo shuttle. She was dressed fairly formally and there wasn't so much smugness to her that she looked to be in danger of literally drowning in it.

"Hello, Dave," she said evenly, making a business-like expression of authoritative formality, "I'd like to ask you a question if I may?"

Dave shrugged apathetically, "I've lost the use of 84% of my will to live. I don't see how you could make it any worse, even if your question was about the mating practices of penguins."

"Thanks, Dave," she said.

"No problem, 'overly informal executive who insists on using my personal name without asking permission to do so who, even though she is considerably older than me, I would consider having intercourse with so long as I had more than half a dozen beers and she was paying for them.'"

She blinked incredulously, staring at him in sudden surprise.

"Erm..." she said, her brain appearing to reel in horror and disconnecting momentarily from her mouth.

"Can I call you, Mum?" he asked, his face taking on an uncharacteristically thoughtful expression.

“Do I remind you of your mother?” she gasped, even more taken aback than she thought was humanly possible.

“No, I mean later, after half a dozen beers and during the intercourse, providing you pay for them of course. I recommend your room, mine has a ginger person in it and he’s made several requests in writing asking me to refrain from bringing dates back while he’s trying to sleep. Also I think he might be videoing them. I certainly know for a fact that one of us is and it’s easier all round if I assume it’s someone other than me.”

She looked to Grayson, her face fixed in a horrified frozen expression of someone mid-scream but silently wordless.

“I thought you said you told the candidate to be on his best behaviour,” she said, somehow recovering the ability to speak, to a limited degree, of course. She would never fully recover the ability to speak directly to Dave ever again.

“I did,” Grayson told her. He pointed to Dave with his plastic stylus. “This is his best behaviour.”

Dave smiled to her and gave her a tiny but suggestive wink.

“On your very best day at work – the day you come home and think you have the best job in the world – what did you do that day?” she looked down to her pad, avoiding all eye contact and asked haltingly, almost afraid of the answer.

Dave pondered this for a few moments, while also contemplating the mating practices of penguins, “If I had the best job in the world, why would I be at an interview trying to get a better job?”

She opened her mouth to speak but nothing much came out.

“I had one day once. I was delivering a towel. I deliver a lot of towels, you see. This was a blue one, it was warm and fluffy,” he said, staring away wistfully, recalling a fond moment.

“...and?”

“That’s it,” he said with a shrug. “I deliver towels. It’s hardly a deep emotional journey of self-discovery. Sometimes I get to see passengers naked but that’s actually a minus since it’s mostly men and people who have worked hard to own their natural, and occasional unnatural unattractiveness,” Dave explained, slightly concerned that he was using words that might be a little too long.

She looked to Grayson and then looked down, writing some cursory notes.

“Would you like my number, Mum? It’s 84!” he told her, trying his very best to be seductive.

“That doesn’t sound like a phone number!” she frowned, looking anywhere but straight ahead.

“It’s my personal number. It the thing I live by, cheese and the number 84. This is a spaceship, I don’t think we have phones anymore,” he said. For some reason all this reminded him of something that had happened earlier that week.

“Why are you eating toenail clippings out of the dustbin?” Rob said in what would once have been abject horror some time ago, when Dave was still a novel affront to his humanity, but had now been reduced to just idle curiosity, since it wasn’t even the most unpleasant, odd or inexplicable thing Dave had done that day.

“They’re not toenail clippings!” Dave told him grumpily. “Well not all of them. What do you think I am, some kind of animal?”

“Well can we at least agree that it’s a dustbin?” Dave looked up from where he was sat on the floor with the small cylindrical object in his hands. The facts were undeniable but he was going to give it his best shot anyway.

“It’s a receptacle, Rob. It’s a thing designed to be a holder of things. What we chose to use it for is rather up to us. I think you should think very carefully in future before you pass judgement on inanimate objects,” Dave said grumpily.

“Bit it *is* a dustbin. You *are* eating out of a dustbin,” Rob just sat on his bunk and followed along, just interested to see where this was all going.

“Just because it’s a dustbin, that doesn’t mean it has to be full of rubbish,” he said as if revealing a pearl of great wisdom.

“But it is full of rubbish!” Rob pointed out the painfully obvious. “For one thing it’s got toenail clippings in it and you appear to be eating them.”

“Not just toenail clippings!” Dave told him, quite proudly. “But I do confess that they are a taste that grows on you, which did surprise me at first.”

“Are they yours?” Rob cringed inwardly. Dave just shrugged, to which Rob cringed quite a great deal more.

“The finer points of life are more your department,” Dave told him with a serious expression while he crunched down on something particularly hard.

“What has all this got to do with phones?” Rob said, watching him chewing vigorously which made his stomach churn, showing him what *vigorous* really meant.

“Phones? What are you talking about?” he said. “What the hell is a phone?”

“You called me earlier on the ship’s intercom system!” Rob frowned. “You said to come straight here as it was important!”

“I might have said that I want to moan about the bone I ate alone on the throne. It was next to my own stone but had grown towards the zone,” he explained as if his mouth, brain and the universe were in some kind of sync.

“No, I’m pretty sure you said, ‘what’s a phone and do we still have them on space-ships?’” Rob huffed in annoyance. “Dammit, Dave. You said this was important.”

“Oh that?” he slapped his head as if remembering this all perfectly. “I just wanted to know if these toenails were yours or mine. It’s not important anymore; I’ve eaten them all now.”

“Dave...” he began but there was really nowhere the sentence could go and consequently that’s exactly where it went.

Dave was slightly surprised. The executive had two almost identical heads. He briefly considered the time-honoured concept that two heads were better than one but the maths didn't seem to bear this one out.

The two headed/not quite two brained creature spoke in stereo, not quite perfectly in sync which was off-putting and left Dave wishing that it was an accountant and the law governing their treatment wasn't as strict as it was.

"What was the last costume you wore?" the two heads spoke at once, each grinning inanely.

Dave looked around the room at the expectant faces that were, for some inexplicable reason, pointing at him. "Can we address the larger issue here?" he said uneasily. "You appear to have two heads."

"Yessss," they hissed at him in unison.

Dave waited but it appeared that no explanation was going to be forthcoming, "Most people get by with one."

"We have two."

Dave cringed and it briefly occurred to him how uncomfortable it must be for normal people to encounter the kind of strangeness he enjoyed deliberately forcing upon them. He quietly resolved to be far stranger to people and apply a good deal more force.

"Well I'm wearing a tie. It's effectively pointless. It serves no useful purpose, but mass delusion holds that it looks smarter. Moreover, it looks ridiculous if you stop to think about it and therefore it qualifies as a costume."

The two heads nodded at him.

Grayson shook his head in agreement, "Next," he said.

Dave turned away, shuddering inwardly and then outwardly.

The next executive didn't seem at all interested in being next. In fact he seemed largely the opposite, fidgeting quite awkwardly, he looked around to the others on the panel as if wondering if there was any way to pass his turn on. The spotlight was on him, there was no escape.

Dave just smiled, he looked him over, sizing him up. He wore a grey and boring suit, a blue and boring shirt and had what amounted to the worst, and most boring comb-over he'd ever seen.

"I'd like to ask you a question if I may?" he asked quite shyly before breaking into a massively artificial smile that his face seemed to be trying to rebel against.

"You just did!" Dave told him. He started guffawing politely while Dave stared incredulously back at him. It was a cringeworthy and embarrassing display in every sense.

"Give me an example of a time when you solved an analytically difficult problem," he said, almost wincing at the prospect of speaking.

"That's actually a pretty good question!" Dave nodded in appreciation. The executive breathed an audible sigh of relief.

"It's nice to see someone isn't trying to collect 'meta' data or whatever the latest meaningless business-language buzzword is," Dave added rhetorically while the executive shifted in his seat awkwardly.

"I had a problem once. "

Rob woke to find a note. Dave was nowhere to be found which was odd as this was morning and Dave rarely ventured very far from his bed until forced to do so by means stronger than legal requirement, which had failed more times than anyone could count. He found the note fairly quickly as it was stuck very firmly to his forehead, which was far from ideal.

He swung himself from his bed and over to the dispenser which was fixed to the bulkhead wall. "Super-glue remover," he ordered blearily and it duly complied, pouring him a small cup. He dabbed it on and after several minutes was able to remove the note and read it.

He growled angrily at the contents which weren't much worse than what Dave usually included on notes, certainly notes he deemed important enough to stick to his friend's head. This was one of many

reasons why Dave had so few friends. This was also one of many reasons why Dave got so many death threats although the number had declined since they had replaced the captain.

“Dear Rob,” it said, “I hope this note finds you well and didn’t leave such a bad mark this time. You’ll be pleased to know that I need you to do a favour for me. I know how much you love to do favours for me and consequently I’ve paid Bernard from security to lock your personal identity out of every computer terminal on the ship. Until you complete your mission it is not possible for you to get food or drink, to sign in to your work shift, have toilets work for you or buy bottles of perfume from the gift-shop.”

“Every damn week,” Rob grumbled.

In place of Dave there was an additional note with a crudely drawn cartoon man putting plans into what was either a wall or the back of an elephant. Rob angrily, but not angrily enough, snatched up the sheet and prepared to head out.

The bar was oddly quiet, in as much as Dave wasn’t in it. Rob sat at the bar, briefly pausing to watch other people eating and inwardly cursing Dave for being Dave which was really more than enough provocation.

He looked up the details on the wikiweb. They were design plans for some kind of ancient technology. Dave had instructed that such a thing must be constructed and left on his bed. Of course, this wouldn’t be possible with modern technology. It would be like constructing a brick wall out of computers. This was obviously ridiculous since everyone knew that computers were made from brick walls. There was simply nothing compatible in existence, nothing so crude still remained. Except Dave.

“No Dave today?” the barman asked, making polite conversation as he wiped down the bar surface. Rob grumbled and muttered under his breath. The barman craned forward and saw the red discolouration on Rob’s forehead. “Oh, he needed a favour again, did he?”

Rob simply shook his head in reply, “I get a bit fed up with waking up with his notes glued to my head. I did try reprogramming the computer to not let the dispenser give him super-glue but I found him with a piece of paper, two nails and a claw hammer as he climbed into bed. I like to think he wouldn’t have actually done it.”

The barman stared at him, blinking occasionally as his brain appeared preoccupied with the complexities of certain details. "Best not to take chances," he said finally.

It was difficult for Rob to argue with that.

"So what's he got you doing this time?"

Rob sighed, "I don't know, he wants me to make something. Its ancient technology, I can't possibly get this thing printed on this ship."

"What is it?" he looked at the plans which made no sense to him.

"I don't know, he's just given me the diagrams, there's no words attached. He said he thinks that challenge helps me to grow as a person," Rob grumbled. "I think I can find bits on board that will fit but I don't even really know what this thing is meant to do."

"Does it really matter?" the barman shrugged.

"This is Dave, nothing about him really matters."

There were blank silent stares. Even Grayson seemed slightly confused by that particular story. The executive fondled his pen nervously, smiling at nothing in particular while sweat beaded his brow.

"But..." he stammered, "that story wasn't even about you. It was about someone called Rob."

"It was about how I solved a problem," Dave explained as only Dave could.

"But you didn't."

Dave grumbled in annoyance, wondering why this was so poorly understood. "That's how I solve problems," he explained, "I get someone else to do it for me. Usually someone ginger."

"Um, next, I think."

A woman sat scowling at him, then with a deliberate force of pure will, she pulled a beaming smile. Dave eyed her up suspiciously, reminding himself that she was the enemy and the thing that stood between him and killing both his brain and liver with free beer. She was dressed over-fussily in a blue business suit with the collar popped up for some inexplicable reason.

“You have a boyfriend but you’re not proud of him. He’s attractive but unsuccessful. He reminds you of where you’re from and that in the terms you actually care about you’re largely unsuccessful yourself.” Dave guessed.

She frowned at glanced around awkwardly. She smiled broadly enough to dazzle him with a set of highly polished robotic teeth that were mounted on micro-servo motivation units. They tapped into the owners optic nerve and scanned in the direction that they were looking so they were able to make minor adjustments to optimise the reflection of light directly back to the person you were talking to for maximum effect. All this had the added benefit of removing trace quantities of spinach.

“What makes you think that?” she looked away and giggled nervously.

“Your collar is up to hide a love-bite. I once dated a girl who wore a suit to work and she did the same. She wasn’t always proud of me and used to describe me as her dirty little secret.

Of course I have many dirty little secrets of my own and it often occurred to me that I should put up a camera in my room and film myself to find out what they are, because I actually think I might have forgotten them.”

She stared, wide eyed, somewhere between total confusion and shock

“That couldn’t really happen, could it? I mean, not to an actual person?” she finally managed to say, swallowing hard.

Dave smirked and nodded. Grayson nodded too as such things were quite well documented in his personnel file.

She looked back to her notes and asked her question with looking up, “Tell me about your background.”

“That’s really more of an instruction than a question,” he said thoughtfully. “I didn’t always deliver towels you know. I was once a man with dreams before the weight of the world crushed my spirit with freely available alcohol and laws to prevent the murder of accountants. I grew up, filled with dreams and

aspirations which is why I studied hard in the hope of one day becoming the Prime Minister of Belgium. In the pursuit of realising my dream I learned everything there was to know about chocolate, after a slightly misheard conversation in a sweet shop and a near total misunderstanding of how politics actually works. After three years of eating every kind of chocolate I could find, a medical professional told me I had to lose 50kgs or I would have type 4 diabetes for the rest of my life. This, of course made me realise the folly of my actions. I also realised that, probably, politics was not for me. I was now massively over-weight, obsessed with chocolate, clueless about what was actually going on in Belgium and had to have strict controls over every aspect of my life if I didn't want to have my small intestine drop out of my anus. This was when I decided I was now qualified to be the emperor of Germany, which I thought was a small town in Southeast Asia. After a further misunderstood conversation at a travel agent, I began on my quest to learn everything there was to know about towels. This is, of course what led me become the passenger services professional that I am today."

She refused to look up from her pad and grumbled something about him not taking this seriously.

"Check my personnel file, it's all true," he told her. Grayson looked up and nodded his confirmation that indeed it was all quite correct.

She muttered something like 'thank you' and began gesturing wildly for the next person in line to take over from her.

Dave looked over to a grinning woman whose eyes pointed in totally the wrong direction, not even both in the same wrong direction but who sported a fairly amazing beard. He was actually quite impressed, "Sir or madam while I'm utterly sure you're of less value to society than what I most recently flushed away in the bathroom, I would like to compliment you on a very fine array of facial hair."

"It's madam," she told him, her eyes rolling around the room seemingly at random. He briefly wondered what exactly was causing this and whether the substance would be available to guests later on.

"I had the beard added in support of the Menimism movement, which I support thoroughly. I feel men have been the downtrodden underclass for far too long and it's about time someone stood up for their rights to free expression."

"Bless you, Sir or Madam," Dave said. "And in the interests of expressing those rights, I would just like to say that I would still consider dating you even though you are appallingly unattractive."

“I completely support your rights to find me appallingly unattractive,” she nodded, almost bowing to him. Her expression was that of a person who had been licking the back of an entire pond full of poisonous frogs dipped in heroin in the hope of finding a prince in there somewhere.

“Please ask your question,” he said, “I’ve a feeling it’s going to be a good one.”

“If you were an animal, which animal would you be?” she, or he, rolled his, or her, eyes around gesturing madly with her oddly muscular arms, covered with even more oddly smooth skin. “I mean, what do you identify with? What is your spirit animal?”

Dave thoughtfully rubbed his chin while the monstrosity stared all around the room at nothing in particular.

“I don’t have a spirit animal because those of us who live in the real world employ a thing we like to call *science*. You see science is a way in which we gain a deeper understanding of the universe through observation and the careful, methodical testing of theories until we’ve proved that something is true, at least as far as our understanding of the universe currently extends.”

It made a gurgling noise while playing with its hair.

“You see, religion varies quite largely from science in that it requires no proof, no real observation of the universe, no careful testing of anything and not a single rational thought anywhere in your head. It’s a proven scientific fact that even a complete idiot can be religious. Ironically, perhaps, it’s a religious theory that a complete idiot can be a scientist.

What’s really annoying about religious people is the way in which they often don’t actually stick very closely to their own dogma but vary off quite wildly as the mood takes them.

As a person who thinks that people share an unconscious connection with a creature who probably eats its own faeces then please feel free to wear animal skins and chew on decaying bones. When I lose the very last shred of respect I ever held for you is when you wilfully enjoy the fruits of science’s labours while looking down your nose at people who think we’d all be better off if you’d been strangled with your own umbilical cord.”

“I’m sorry, what animal was that then?” it said with a slightly confused expression that was something exactly like you’d expect to find on such a person looking at its own reflection in a mirror.

"I am a pomegranate!" Dave glared at it.

"Oh, how exciting," it squealed with manly delight.

"Please... Next..." Grayson quickly moved things along.

"Tell me something that's true, that almost nobody agrees with you on?" said a man with an unfeasibly large nose but who otherwise seemed quite normal.

"You're an idiot!" Dave ventured hopefully.

"No," Grayson called out. "Please reply with something that nobody agrees with you on."

"Oh, I am sorry," Dave replied. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully for a moment. "You see that's a difficult question since most people disagree with me on an awful lot of things but most people are either less intelligent than a dog, utterly psychotic or plainly too lazy to think of anything for themselves. In fact, that's my answer, most people are either less intelligent than a dog, utterly psychotic or plainly too lazy to think of anything for themselves."

"I don't agree," the executive frowned at him, rather proving most of Dave's point, the rest proving itself by virtue of the question having been asked in the first place.

"Very good." Grayson looked up, tapping his stylus on the desk. "Who's next please?"

Next was a woman wearing a pink suit that had no place in anything outside of Swedish porn.

She looked very serious for a moment as if waiting for just the right opportunity to reveal her glittering gem of pure wisdom. "Are you ready?" she said condescendingly without realising the irony of the situation.

"I doubt it," he grumbled.

"How would you describe yourself..." she paused dramatically, just waiting to let the tension build before she could reveal the last, final shock, the twist in the tail, the game changer that was going to turn the whole interview on its head with its sheer original brilliance, "... in just one word?" She sat back as if the effort of revealing such things to mere humans had exhausted her.

"Bored."

“Next.”

Dave looked over. He was a slightly ginger man, dressed in a black shirt that must have been borrowed from a Turkish waiter, he assumed. He looked pale and nervous, he had the expression of a man who had just accidentally soiled himself and hadn't yet decided how to proceed.

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” he said softly, reeling back as if scared of his own question.

“I imagine someone asked you that question once. You replied that one day in the future you hoped to be a condescending idiot, asking stupid questions to people with far better things to do than waste their time playing children's games. Right now in the staff bar there's a pack of cards waiting and every time an even number is dealt, I have to drink a beer. You're keeping me from that kind of serious adult work.

Plus, men never grow up so the only suitable answer is 'a woman,' I guess?”

Dave looked over to where the bearded woman-type-thing was rubbing its face on the desk and sniffing the air rather too loudly, “No offence intended.”

“None taken!” it replied.

Dave looked back to the slightly ginger executive and finally lost the internal battle he'd been fighting since he'd first seen him. Consequently he asked, “Have you ever had a girlfriend?” The man stared back incredulously. “I don't wish to be rude, it's just that you're ginger.”

“I have!” he said flatly.

Dave nodded as if accepting the fact but not quite able to make sense of it. He vaguely heard someone shout the word 'next.'

A very serious man with a very serious suit glared at him. He looked like he'd had his entire sense of humour ripped out through his anus. This was still considered fairly minor surgery if done in a good quality hospital, although it did have a curiously long recovery time and required the use of a specially developed cushion that made a farting noise when you sat on it. If you smiled, the operation wasn't considered a success.

He looked at Dave seriously and as he moved around in his chair. Dave was sure he heard the unmistakable sound of a small squeak. Since there was no smile, this could only confirm his worst fears.

“I have a question for you, son,” he said in a thick accent that sounded suspiciously like he came from the place that used to be known as North America, where it was now only considered polite to speak to normal people if you held up a flag with ‘We’re sorry’ written on it. The flag was present and correct and social convention allowed Dave to acknowledge him with a curt nod.

“Son, I want to ask you what someone would say about you if they didn’t like you?” he said, waving his flag robustly.

Dave held his hand up to the previous executive. “Sir, what do you think of me?”

“I don’t like you.” he said simply with an apologetic shrug.

“As you can see, someone who doesn’t like someone else often has negative things to say about them. In consideration of the fact that personal judgement is frequently drawn from a personal projection of how the world is viewed by the individual rather than based on verifiable fact, this is often unreliable. You would actually know more about me if you’d asked if I liked unicorns.”

“Dave, do you like unicorns?” Grayson called over.

Dave nodded, “They were serving them in the staff canteen last week, absolutely delicious with spicy sauce and a little freshly squeezed leprechaun oil.”

Grayson nodded in agreement and scribbled something on his pad, “I preferred the griffin sausage.”

Dave looked up to the next woman on the panel. She was dressed in something quite appalling as if style and taste had been surgically removed with a blunt instrument and then fashioned into clothing with a very thorough bludgeoning against a dirty rock.

She was old, old enough to know better.

Dave said as sympathetically as he could, “I don’t like anything you’re wearing. Was it designed by a blind person, perhaps?”

She cast an angry glare to Grayson who by now wasn’t even bothering to look up. She seemed highly offended so Dave continued more tactfully, “It’s not that it’s bad exactly. It might look alright on an attractive person.”

“Tell me about your failures,” she told him, tapping at the desk in irritation.

“I don’t really have failures,” he said, “I have opportunities to try harder.”

She looked suddenly very impressed and there was a sound of many members of the panel gasping in awe.

“Nah, just kidding. I have many, many horrible failures. For instance, only this very week a young woman was struggling to come to terms with her feelings for me.”

“I would rather eat a dustbin-full of my own toenail clippings than date you!”

She was quite attractive, especially when she was angry, which Dave could only assume was going to be rather a lot. To Dave, a girl losing her temper and shouting at him was a vital step in the courtship process and he was put-off not in the slightest.

“You could do both!” he suggested flirtatiously, but the overall effect was only flirtatious within the confines of his imagination and just slightly disturbing to everyone else. “I usually suggest going out for dinner so that would save me some money and we could go straight from the shouting stage to the ‘weary resignation that this is actually going to happen’ stage.”

She frowned, considering the fact that such words couldn’t come from a rational person unless there was some hidden, underlying cleverness that she hadn’t quite spotted yet. This didn’t seem to be the case, even for, and perhaps especially, Dave.

“So...” she almost choked on her own rage. “You’re suggesting that I stop shouting long enough to eat my own toenail clippings and then skip straight ahead to feeling bad about an upcoming romantic interlude with someone dumber than my own hair?”

“Yes!” he replied simply, relieved that they were finally understanding one another. “You know it would have been funnier if you’d suggested I was dumber than your toenail clippings. That would have added a nice piece of closure to your earlier comments. It also might have been more factually accurate. Of course, with this opportunity lost, we’ll never truly know, will we?”

She paused for a moment, still not quite sure what exactly it was that she was missing about this whole conversation. She was much more certain what he was missing, and it appeared to be a considerable chunk of his brain.

“Do you always walk up to complete strangers and ask them if they have low standards, a sketchy relationship with their father and poor self-esteem because you’re interested in dating them?” she dug her balled fists into her hips angrily. “Do you think that’s appropriate?”

Dave briefly thought to himself that this was going rather well, at least better than usual, “I prefer a sketchy relationship with a step-father, that’s almost a guarantee that she’ll put out on the first date.”

“How are you allowed to walk free aboard this ship?” she glared at him.

“I don’t know,” he shrugged. “I don’t really know how these things work. I mostly just deliver towels.”

“You deliver towels!” she still looked quite angry which added to her attractiveness as far as Dave was concerned, but his expression indicated that he actually wasn’t, he wasn’t concerned in the slightest.

“And unblock toilets!” he added, proudly. “I actually have a number-2 rating. At least, that’s what the captain said I was at the last meeting.”

“Would you like to know what I do?” she leant slightly forward, trying and failing to be threatening.

Dave thought to himself that the only possible answer could be ‘no, not particularly.’ He couldn’t care less in the slightest. She continued anyway, so he assumed it must be important to her.

“I’m the ship’s phonics specialist. I work to process information to extract reason from communications. I have one of the most important jobs on the whole ship.”

Dave stopped smiling just long enough to look slightly confused for a moment, “And yet you seem to be having trouble understanding that you’re being offered the chance to go on a date with a very attractive towel delivery specialist with a number-2 rating in the unblocking of toilets?”

She muttered something under her breath, rolled her eyes and looked away, “You are a pitiful little man.”

“I know,” he agreed with quite a lot more enthusiasm than anyone would have expected. “But maybe you have a burning need for a towel, a blocked toilet or a boring evening with no very handsome man to

say cheesy and often blisteringly illogical things to you in a fairly romantic way that will seem increasingly romantic and decreasingly illogical the more drunk you get.”

“You seriously think I would date someone like you?” she tapped her foot on the ground, her face flushed red, steam very nearly came out of her ears.

“You can consider it a favour,” he told her. “I accept payment in beer, for the most part.”

She seemed even angrier than before. “I’ll tell you what, I’ll date you,” she grinned slyly. “If you can show me that I should consider you an equal then I’ll go out with you.”

“You want me to shout at you angrily for no apparent reason?” he offered.

She rolled her eyes in what he had been told was exasperation, such things were of so little concern to Dave that they frequently failed to register, “You show me you have a deeply profound understanding of galactic phonics. You unscramble any message held in the buffer marked ‘unreadable’ and I’ll go out with you, so long as you can also do something to make up for your appalling behaviour, by way of an apology.”

“What was that first part again?” Dave wasn’t giving her much to worry about.

She just grinned.

“And how am I supposed to make up for my appalling behaviour?” he wondered what part of it actually should be considered appalling or even behaviour, come to that.

“That’s your problem!” she told him.

The women made some notes on her pad and made a sort of disapproving noise from the back of throat like she was drowning in a bathtub full of anxiety-flavoured custard.

“Next, I think!” said Dave as he moved along the panel.

“Are you the smartest person you know?” he had a face that was puffy and bloated from eating too much junk food, his skin was red from high blood pressure and he had a beard that made him look like a total idiot. Dave looked closer and realised it that the beard really wasn’t the problem.

He was snorting with his own sense of superiority.

Dave nodded, “More than that, I’m the smartest person you know and you’re not even smart enough to realise it.”

“What?” he frowned. “I don’t think you understand the question. Furthermore, you have no idea who I am, young man!”

Dave nodded and continued, “I knew you were going to say that. I can predict with a high degree of accuracy every move you make and every question you’re going to ask.”

“I don’t think so!” he said, stifling a sarcastic laugh.

“Well that was highly predictable, you were obviously going to try to counter in that way. Of course, you have only three options from here. Please try to show some intelligence and don’t say, ‘tell me what I’m going to say next then’ because that gets boring very quickly,” Dave said, sitting back and grinning smugly.

“I don’t...” he frowned, he flustered. He began rubbing his unusually large nose as his hand covered his unusually closed mouth.

“Ah, you’ve narrowed your options down to one. If you’re to challenge me in any way there’s only one thing left you can do and not look hopelessly ridiculous to everyone,” Dave told him.

He seemed to be vibrating with rage. He sat back in his chair and glared silently.

“Silence. Then that leaves me with only one thing left to say...” Dave grinned. The man shrugged and kept his mouth shut. “Next!”

“Just a second...” Grayson called out. “How *did* you know what he was going to say?”

“I had no idea what he was going to say!” Dave smirked. “If you accuse someone who thinks they’re better than you of not being as good as they think they are, they’ll naturally have an irresistible urge to do something stupid. I once played this game with a child of five so I was pretty sure it would work.”

"I see," Grayson said evenly. "Next."

Dave looked over to a female executive. He thought that she would have been quite attractive with a completely different face and body.

She smiled awkwardly and leant forward towards him, "How old were you when you had your first paying job?" she said after a slight pause.

"That's not a bad question," he nodded in approval, "I was 84."

"84?" she frowned. "You don't look that old."

"I'm not, but thank you for noticing," he adopted a sad expression. "I will one day die aged 84. I retired seven years earlier and was living on a farm raising wild free-roaming carrots while surrounded by my seventeen loving teenage wives. When the banks foreclosed on my mortgage for political reasons, I took additional work selling my body to science, since specimens of my level of attractiveness command a very high price. In a horrible accident, my memories are sent back in time and into the body of my younger self of age 8. The trauma sent me quite mad and I voted for the clone of Donald Trump in the next Earth Prime Ministerial election.

I have always known of my death aged 84, the first job I ever had, as an 8 year old boy."

"My god!" she said. "Is that true?"

"No," he replied simply. "Next."

He winced at the crystal blue eyes of the next executive, the weird face and bizarrely white teeth.

"I would like to ask..." he said slowly with the enthusiasm people usually reserved for the funeral of a relative leaving them a large sum of money. "What motivates you to get out of bed in the morning?"

"My alarm clock!" Dave frowned as if such a ridiculous question was a ridiculous question. "The captain said it wasn't motivating enough and had an engineer measure my bunk so that an electric cattle-prod grille could be installed. That was oddly highly motivating. Nobody wants engineers in their rooms. I already have one and that's more than enough."

Dave looked to the next one. He looked her over, she had thin, pale white skin stretched sternly over bony features. She was grinning and had a look of something not quite right going on in her head. Dave quite liked her.

“Are you an animated corpse?” he asked. Her grin never faltered. “My uncle Derek was an animated corpse. When he died, my aunt had his brain scooped out and replaced with a simple computer that allowed him to breathe, keep his heart pumping and made him shout at the neighbourhood kids every five minutes to get off his lawn.”

“Really?” she grinned while speaking by some miracle of makeup, cosmetic surgery and snake venom directly injected into her face.

“Yes, actually. The family were against it until they discovered that he had always dreamed of a career in local politics and he was suddenly eminently qualified. As far as I know, he’s still serving on the bench of the regional council.”

“That’s fascinating,” she grinned and her eyes moved very, very slightly.

“I think that says more about you than it does about me,” he mumbled, “so what about your question?”

“Yes, yes!” she might have enthused, it was difficult to tell with her face frozen like a Halloween mask.

“If I were to say to a bunch of people who know you, ‘give me three adjectives that best describe you,’ what would I hear?” she grinned for all she was worth, which was probably quite a lot as the galactic economy made no sense whatsoever.

“My immediate guess is that you’d hear adjectives from each of them that they think describes themselves, since you worded the question that way,” Dave told her. “Then it occurred to me that you’re talking to people I know so it’s unlikely you’d hear adjectives at all since it’s doubtful that they were educated beyond walking upright, and perhaps not even that in some cases.” He rolled his eyes thoughtfully. “My guess is that you’d actually hear a lot of burping and farting sounds and some awkward laughter as someone mumbled that your face looked oddly like it died several years ago and was hanging around until the rest of you caught it up.”

She grumbled and grinned and grinned and grumbled, “Then what three adjectives would people say about you if they were educated, intelligent and actually knew what adjectives were?”

“That is a better question,” he agreed. “My guess would be that my friend Rob would say that I probably don’t know what adjectives are, my supervisor would say ‘horse’ and my Uncle Derek would shout at you to get off his lawn. I hope that gives you a deeper insight into my life.”

“It does actually tell me rather a lot,” she added sarcastically.

Dave gave her two thumbs up on a job well done, “I think we all know a bit more about you as well now.”

Grayson by now was looking rather fed up, “Next, let’s move this along shall we?”

“Can you tell me the story of your prior successes, challenges, and major responsibilities?” said a man-child who looked like his mother had dressed him but given up half-way through.

“No, I deliver towels,” Dave told him. “Next.”

Dave looked to where an attractive woman was looking over at him, but seemed to be lacking any sign of romantic interest. He hated it when that happened and it happened a lot, “You’re a very attractive woman but you seem to be lacking any signs of romantic interest in me,” he told her as though he was detailing a very specific problem to a person whose job it was to fix it.

“You’re very perceptive,” she told him sarcastically.

“How dare you!” he cried out angrily.

“*Perceptive* means that you understand what’s happening,” she told him, not quite as confidently as she probably would have liked.

“How dare you!” he cried out angrily.

“It was a sarcastic compliment...” she tried again.

“How da...” he stopped in his tracks. “Compliment, you say? That’s more like it. I’m thinking that after this, we could get a drink or two, or three? I get some free beers and you get something to brag to your friends about while you struggle to get over the emotional upheaval of our breakup after an amazing

but ultimately meaningful evening. You should probably get yourself checked out at a clinic too, mistakes have been made over the years and it would be a shame if your nose dropped off.”

“I think I’d rather just ask my question and move on with my life,” she told him, staring blankly and yet directly at him.

“Seven,” he told her and she looked confused. “My shift finishes at seven. I might be a little late, of course. There’s a toilet on deck three that keeps backing up. We never managed to quite get it working again after a very large passenger managed to block it twice. The engineers haven’t found anything actually wrong with it and have diagnosed the issue as ‘emotional.’ If I have to unblock it then I’ll need to quickly head back to my cabin for an extra lick of the under-arm deodorant which I’ll later describe unconvincingly as a shower.”

“What?” she scowled.

“Your question was going to be about what time I finished work, right?” he seemed confused and yet strangely over-confident.

“My *interview question* then, is this...” she seemed sad, her faith in humanity not entirely dead but on a ventilator in a poorly equipped hospital with a large rat gnawing on the power cable. “...Can you tell me about a time you ran with a project from start to finish?”

“Certainly,” Dave said rather proudly. There was a lengthy pause. The room descended into expectant silence.

“This morning,” he said, his attention fully turned towards the group, building to some grand revelation, “I took a towel from the store to a customer’s room...”

There were significant groans around the room.

“I keep telling you this, I deliver towels. I’m not saving the universe, I don’t uncover galactic conspiracies, witness the face of god or reveal terrorist plots.”

“Are you an idiot?” she frowned at him, glancing over to Grayson as if she didn’t really understand any of this.

“Finally!” Dave shouted in exasperation that at last someone was listening, really listening to him. “I’m socially classified as someone who shouldn’t be able to do simple things for himself. That’s why I have to keep hanging around with smarter people than myself. It’s also while I feel so awkward when I’m surrounded by executives.”

She grunted and shook her head, “Next.” She gestured along the line, moving things along or at least away from her.

“Why only this week, I had to ask a favour from my friend Rob.”

“Next!” she insisted but it was already too late. It was far too late. It had always been far too late.

The wikiweb was a huge repository of information, a vast integrated pool of wisdom that stretched throughout the known galaxy. For some inexplicable reason it didn’t come with a set of instructions.

Dave stood in the crew lounge with a pad, pouring over the details of an index page that made less sense to him than washing regularly. This wasn’t an idle boast, he’d gathered facts that support his argument that washing was nothing more than a scam created by soap companies and backed by the government to use up your valuable free time and keep you distracted from matters of cheese.

He preferred to keep his deodorant in his back pocket just in case the smell should become too offensive to tolerate (again). As his favourite brand of deodorant had chosen a genetically engineered rat, augmented with the tongue of a large dog as a delivery system, the deodorant preferred to be anywhere but his back pocket.

“Rob...”

“This had better not be about phones again!” Rob told him angrily. Dave sat down next to him at the bar and made an expression that was meant to inadequately convey innocence. Dave had little understanding of the concept and Rob had failed to adequately explain it, even with diagrams and a special ‘explaining stick’ which was used to hit him as a form of negative reinforcement. Dave had quickly learned to enjoy the experience.

"I don't know what your obsession with phones is. I mean, this is the future, we've probably not used phones for centuries," Dave shrugged.

"Why do you say things like that?" Rob grumbled. "Sometimes your lack of grasp on reality gives me a literal headache."

"I'm so sorry that you chose me to be your best friend out of the hundreds of people lining up to have a drink with you," Dave said sarcastically.

Rob glared back at him. "I didn't choose you. Nobody would choose you in anything other than a selection of who they'd like to see fed into a food processor feet-first."

Dave just smiled. "Thanks, Rob. That means a lot."

"So what do you want?"

"What makes you think I want anything?"

Rob huffed a weary sigh, "You always want something."

This was true, entirely true and Dave made no attempt to disguise it, "Can you make sense of this?" He handed Rob the pad with the open index page.

Rob looked at him with eyes filled with apathetic venom, "This is all about phones!"

"Yes!" said Dave.

"You said it wouldn't be about phones."

"You said it *shouldn't* be about phones," Dave corrected. "It is though. That's not my fault, is it? If it is, then I don't really see how."

"Yes," Rob told him. "You've been going on about phones all bloody week. You're annoying enough on a good day, you don't have to work this hard at it."

"That's nice of you to say," he smiled, one of them missing the point entirely.

"The headache is getting worse, Dave."

“Thanks,” he shrugged. Rob just grumbled and rubbed his temples. Dave continued sympathetically, “Would a bowl of macaroni cheese help?”

Rob just stared at him incredulously for a moment, “Has this got anything to do with why you were eating toenail clippings?”

“It may have started out that way but I’ve developed something of a taste for them,” he stared away for a moment thoughtfully. “I’ve come to realise that I’m quite different from most people.”

Rob just stared at him incredulously for another moment. He began to nod very slowly.

“Are you going to help me or not?”

Rob sighed wearily, knowing he would eventually and that resisting fate would only make it worse on him when he finally gave in, “What do you want?”

“Phones.” Dave pointed to the pad as though that might explain everything. Rob shrugged at him since it actually explained nothing. “Phones,” he insisted, “I met a girl and she’s a phone. I think that’s what she said.”

“Nobody is a phone,” Rob told him. “You must have misheard or got it wrong.”

Dave nodded that this was quite likely, “By the way, while we’re on the subject, are you recording everything that happens in our room?”

“Yes!” Rob told him with another, even wearier sigh.

“Why?” Dave asked, grinning but frowning at the same time.

“Because you told me to,” he shrugged.

“Did I?” he struggled to remember, a struggle he appeared to be losing. Rob seemed angry but struggled to control his temper, a struggle he appeared to be losing right along with him.

“You woke up with a very overweight girl covered in hair who smelled like wet dogs,” Rob began, Dave nodding as he followed along, mostly. “You said you couldn’t remember anything about who she was and insisted that I record everything that happened from then on for your own sake, in case you woke up with a ginger girl.”

“A ginger girl?” Dave frowned quite seriously. As if alarmed by such a suggestion.

“Yes, I actually did explain to you at length that they do actually exist.”

“But should they exist?” Dave added philosophically.

“I take it you don’t remember any of this which rather proves the wisdom of it in the first place, I suppose.” Rob’s headache was approaching the point where macaroni cheese was starting to feel like a good idea.

“So we have proof of me eating toenail clippings?” Dave enthused about something that only Dave could enthuse over.

“Because that is the kind of thing people often lie about...” Rob said sarcastically.

“This is all working out perfectly,” but of course it made no sense whatsoever, even to Dave at this point.

“If we’re sitting here a year from now celebrating what a great 12 months it’s been for you in this role, what did we achieve together?”

Dave looked over to the source of the question. A middle aged, and quite boring looking man was staring back at him, “Well nobody has told me what the role actually is. I’m going to go ahead and assume, for the sake of argument that you’re looking for someone to teach you how to relate to real people in the really real world.”

“Erm, no,” he huffed, looking around in confusion.

“Yes!” Dave told him with the same degree of certainty to which he clung to the theory that cheese answered every question it was possible to ask. “We’d be sitting in a place where there were lots of people. Nobody would be pointing and laughing at you in public any more. You’d actually miss it since

you'd convinced yourself that they just didn't understand you really, and that you were actually more complex and sophisticated than everyone else.

Still, you'd accept it as progress after seventeen meetings in which you'd discussed what constituted progress and come to the decision that things only qualify as progress if the progress is considered important enough to have a meeting about. Consequently you'd be taking notes ready for the next meeting.

I'm not a miracle worker and we're happy to leave things at that for now. You're no longer ordering French sparkling water with a twist of lemon in a glass shaped roughly like a penis. You're drinking beer and have actually begun to like it, and the consequence of all this is that your testicles have started to grow back.

You're telling me how you recently held an interview and nobody stared at you, struggling to stifle a laugh because your questions were so far removed from normalcy that they thought you were either joking or that a piano had quite recently been dropped on your head.

You just asked the applicants normal questions and had a normal conversation during which you got to know them as a person. You see, you finally understood that you'd already established through their CV, references and qualifications that they were suitable for the post so the interview process was merely an informal thing to see if their personality fitted your workplace. Nobody tried to trip the candidates up with stupid questions all of which could be best answered with a kick to the head from a horse. Everyone was consequently much happier about things and almost everyone in upper management had been demoted to cleaning staff where they actually belong.

Grass is greener, skies are bluer, food tastes better, beer makes you even drunker and women are actually attracted to me for my mind instead of my devastating handsomeness. It's a better world we've built, and I'm proud of it."

There was an awkward uneasiness around the room. Dave watched in silence, quite proud that he'd caused offence without having to resort to picking on the usual easy targets of groups of people who so believed in their entitlement that they'd reached the point where they remained in perpetual childhood. He was growing as a person.

After an even longer period of silence Gregory Grayson moved things along, "Next."

An older blonde woman was shaking her head vigorously and muttering things that sounded like 'no, please no' and 'no, I don't wanna.'

Dave grinned like a vicious predator that had seen a lame creature and was very, very hungry, "Madam, do you have a question for me?"

She shook her head and was muttering to herself loudly, pushing back away from the desk before her, "I've got everything I need!" she shouted out, yelling like a crazy person. Dave smiled to himself happily. This was turning into a good day.

"Just for fun," he shrugged, "ask me an interview question, come on, I'm on a roll here."

She stopped struggling and glared at her notepad accusingly, "Well..." She looked away, rubbing her temples anxiously and sweating like a leaky drainpipe.

"Please!" Grayson added firmly, trapping her, although, from the look of her face she already knew that she was trapped and was more than happy to chew off her own head to escape.

"What's your favourite part of your current job?"

"An excellent question," he pronounced sarcastically. "As I may have mentioned, I deliver towels. To many people that would sound more depressing than trying to get a Scotsman to pay his bar tab, or watching any ginger person talking to literally any female, even a female dog.

However, as many of you might have noticed, I'm a people person. I revel in contact with my fellow people. I am myself, a person, you understand, despite what my current legal status says after I was recently classified as *cargo*. I enjoy relating to other people, I enjoy meeting them, hearing their stories, learning what it is they have to teach me."

She almost smiled. A look of cautious relief washed over her, "That's a good answer." She said softly, then more loudly, "That's a very good answer."

“Many times I’ve had the opportunity to see the weary and toweless traveller completely naked, which I have explained to the captain many, many times is an educational experience. It also offers me the chance to distribute my leaflet entitled, ‘Tips are required on this ship and a bottle of beer is the absolute minimum that you should offer if you don’t want anyone to think that you’re Scottish.’ Since I’ve been handing them out, I’ve been offered a 100% increase in beer-related tips. I’ve also convinced the gift-shop to double the price of beer to passengers and share the additional revenue with me. It’s a win-win.”

“Oh...” she looked sad.

“I hope you get this job,” Grayson told him, sounding slightly bored but less slightly angry. “It seems you might be getting fired from your current one quite soon.”

“It’s fine!” Dave assured him. “I didn’t get fired for running my wikiweb site, ‘Toweless babes.’”

“I presume that’s because the captain didn’t know about it?” he huffed.

“I’ve said the quiet part loud again, haven’t I?” Dave grumbled to himself.

“Why don’t we move on to the next question?” Grayson pointed to a young executive who looked to Dave as if his mouth was on upside-down. The executive smiled. He smirked. He began to chuckle to himself.

“What would you do,” he began, struggling to stop himself from chuckling at the wickedly clever humour of his own question, “in the event of a zombie apocalypse?”

“Another one?” Dave shrugged.

“No, Dave,” Grayson said firmly. “I keep telling you, North America wasn’t wiped out by an actual zombie apocalypse, the people were just considered mindless zombies by the rest of the world.”

“My apologies for my lack of historical understanding about which we can all agree is a very minor point,” he said insincerely. “Well we’d obviously need to get rid of all the zombies so perhaps we could get them all working as executives? They don’t actually need a brain for that, do they?”

“Apparently not,” Grayson agreed. “Good answer.”

“Hi. I’m Jeff!” said an executive with his shirt buttons open to reveal the greying hairs of his chest. He seemed more confident in his dubious sexual attractiveness than Dave, and he found that instantly disconcerting.

“Hi, I’m not and I’m proud of it!” he said, glaring at the ageing man accusingly. He flustered slightly but continued behind his veil of confidence.

“I’d like to ask you a question,” he told Dave.

Dave shrugged, crossed his arms over his chest and grunted something incoherent.

The old man continued, “It’s tricky so don’t worry too much if you can’t work out the answer.”

Dave grunted again.

“A hammer and a nail cost \$1.10, and the hammer costs one dollar more than the nail. How much does the nail cost?” he said with a sudden increase in smugness by what Dave estimated was at least 84%.

“Is the answer cheese?” Dave asked quite reasonably. “Of course it is, the answer is always cheese. The answer to everything is always cheese.”

“It’s a maths question,” he corrected, his smugness decreasing by an almost imperceptible amount.

“No it’s not,” Dave laughed. “It’s a trick question, you want me to blurt out that it’s a dollar which is obviously the most reasonable answer if you don’t bother really thinking it through. Of course once you pause for a moment then you realise that the hammer costs a dollar *more*. You simply take the dollar away which leaves 10 units which covers both items equally so the nail costs 5 units.”

“Well done,” he smiled as if he’d hoped that Dave would find the right answer but the disappointment was very clear on his face.

“But that, like all these questions actually tells us a great deal more about you than the answer tells you about me,” Dave told him, he looked up and the smugness reduced a little further. “You see, you think that’s a tricky question. You think you’ll catch people out with that but actually it’s so easy that it’s

laughable. That means you can't figure out questions this hard. This tells me that you're an idiot. Do you see?" Dave smiled for all he was worth. "Do you see? *Do you see?*"

The man grumbled and looked away, "Well done again!"

"Well done on the answer or for knowing you're an idiot? If it was a secret it wasn't a very good one."

"Next, please," Grayson called out.

A blonde woman looked up. She was older and looked like a mum, but with a look in her eye that suggested that she was actually entirely motivated by self-interest to such a degree that if she had wanted to be a mum, she'd have sold her children in order to buy better children.

"What's your favourite quote?" she asked.

"A hammer and a nail cost \$1.10, and the hammer costs one dollar more than the nail. How much does the nail cost?" Dave said, beginning to laugh to himself. "I'm going to be telling that story tonight at the bar and dozens of ordinary working people are going to be laughing at the sheer stupidity of a person who thinks that's a tricky, brain-teasing question. We'll get good and drunk and try to find someone who can't work out the answer. I'm sure we'll find an executive somewhere."

Jeff gritted his teeth, his hands balled into fists, his eyes flared angrily. Dave laughed some more.

The last one made dubious eye-contact with Dave. Dave made confident eye contact back with him, confidence far in excess of his ability to do stupid things for almost no reason whatsoever.

"Your face looks like a bag full of snooker-balls," he said. It didn't, not especially. He wasn't really sure why he'd said it, just for a moment that thought had flashed through his mind and it had fluttered out of his mouth due to a totally inadequate filtering process of which he was immensely proud. "Do you like cheese?"

The man seemed to take a perfectly reasonable dislike to Dave which was the only really reasonable course of action for most people to take, "I have your last question, it seems," he said, glaring at him in slight annoyance.

Dave could almost see the thoughts going through his head as he assured himself that his face looked nothing like a bag full of snooker balls. "Maybe not snooker balls. It's like in hamsters, when they cram things into their cheeks and walk home with a bulging face," Dave said thoughtfully. "That's it. Your face looks like a bag full of hamsters."

"So my question," he grunted, obviously taking quite some considerable offence.

"Happy hamsters. Not dead ones. It's a big bag, plenty of room for them to move around."

"My question!" he growled loudly, obviously taking a growing amount of very serious offence.

"Hamsters like cheese!" Dave told him.

"My question!" he shouted, standing up suddenly and roaring as loud as his aged, tired old body would let him.

There was a very awkward silence.

"I wish you'd get on with it," Dave said finally, "those hamsters are going to need the bathroom sooner or later, you know."

He growled. He sat down, chewing his flushed red face in sheer rage, "If you were a consultant what would the sign on your door say?"

Dave nodded thoughtfully, making a big show of trying to take this seriously.

"Go away," he shrugged. "Oh no! I'd have it say 'abandon hope all those who dare to enter here.' No wait, that's what my room-mates last girlfriend had printed on her necklace."

"Will you please take this stupid bloody thing seriously?" he roared angrily.

"Oh that's good!" Dave nodded in agreement. "Yeah, I'd put that. I mean, it's an executive position, nobody would take you in the least bit seriously, even your own parents. Yeah, I like your style, that's what I'd put on my door. Thanks."

"Impossible man," he grunted.

Rob and Dave sat at the bar, where they often sat. It had been a long and difficult day for Rob since he had spent some of it with Dave.

“How was your day?” he asked conversationally without much investment.

“Shut up, Rob,” he replied.

Rob sighed to himself. Was this really his life now?

He was going to weakly protest, which was all a part of their well-worn routine now but then as he looked over he saw the chief of customer services heading over with his personal secretary taking notes, walking respectfully behind a few paces. The very sight of him plunged the bar into a muted hive of background chatter as the people dotted around feared they might lose their jobs, which in many cases would be the best thing that could happen. This fact wasn't lost on Rob.

Mr Grayson was wearing a suit that had come out of a tailor instead of a hole in the wall that accepted coins, as his own clothes had. He had a confidence that inspired a certain respect, a presence Rob could never hope to emulate without carrying a large automatic weapon and randomly firing it into a crowd. Rob was moved to silence, even though he objected since it was what Dave wanted.

“Is this about my performance at the interview today?” Dave asked sourly. Grayson stood before him, he dragged out a bar stool and sat down. He nodded slowly his reply that indeed it was. “How did I do? What did I do?”

“It was actually one of your better performances,” he conceded although that wasn't saying very much. This fact also wasn't lost on Rob. He watched transfixed as if forced to observe a horrible accident exploding in slow motion right before him. He found it an oddly uplifting experience.

“I swear they're getting worse!” Grayson said with a sigh of weary resolution.

Dave was moved to agree. "I agree," he said to really hammer the point home. "They were literally the worst and stupidest questions I've ever been asked, give or take 'can I get you another beer' and 'do you love me?'"

"Unfortunately it's a part of my job to test their interview technique," he sighed. "I still can't find a better way than to just let them all interview you. It's almost like testing a battery's ability to hold a charge by dropping it into a nuclear explosion."

By now Dave wasn't really listening as someone in the room had breasts and had made the mistake of smiling at him. His attention was now entirely focused on Grayson's personal assistant who had noticed his relentless staring and rewarded it with a coy smile while giggling to herself flirtatiously. Grayson couldn't have failed to notice all this and looked back with a sternly admonishing glare. Dave grinned.

"She's a close friend's niece," he told him, a warning that they both knew was going to go unheeded.

Dave shrugged and looked back over to her where the bulk of his attention was set to remain until breakfast.

"What's going on?" Rob finally managed, summoning up a tiny little bit of courage.

"Mr Grayson is just explaining that he owes me 26 beers and that he fully understands that my fee is rising by 20% to cover the cost of inflation," Dave said, making things absolutely no clearer.

"You!" a piercing voice called out from the entrance and a very angry woman seemed to be the source of the shouting.

Grayson looked over at Dave and then with a smile, he leant back on the bar in amusement, making no attempt to hide the fact that he was planning to enjoy this. "I like where this is going!" he said to Rob who awkwardly nodded back, slightly intimidated. Despite all that, he also liked where this was going.

The angry young woman came over with a small box that she slammed on the bar counter. Dave simply smiled as if all this was not just completely acceptable, but a welcome interruption from things that were just getting a little too normal there for a moment.

"What the hell is all this?" her voice screamed from her reddened face.

Dave peered inside. "I'm not sure I know, or really care," he commented with a happy grin. "Do I know or really care? Should I know or really care?"

The very angry woman looked briefly at the faces of those who seemed also to share a degree of interest in all this. She turned her attention back to Dave where she seemed to believe it really belonged.

“You sent me a recording of you eating toenail clippings out of a dustbin!” she shrieked at him, clearly in the quite naive belief that this was the worst thing he’d done that day.

“Did I?” he smiled. He turned to Rob, frowning and shrugging. “Did I?”

Rob just shrugged back but the frown had left his face and his headache was feeling a little better.

“What could you possibly be thinking?” she growled but it didn’t seem to be getting through to Dave who seemed perfectly happy with all this.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “I like toenails. Maybe that was really all there was to it? I don’t know how these things work. I presume they do work. Rob?”

Rob preferred to stay out of it for now.

“And what’s this?” she flung a small black object onto the counter from the box. It was a flat black slab with a hopelessly out-dated screen and buttons with numbers on it.

“That’s a phone!” Rob said, remembering it from the many wikiweb articles he’d been recently and unwillingly exposed to. He regretted his involvement instantly.

“I remember that,” Dave said. “I think.” He struggled for a moment with or against his brain, “I had it made for you since you’re a phone of some sort. The whole thing didn’t make much sense to me but women don’t make much sense to me, if the truth is told.”

Rob and Grayson both winced at his tasteless but perfectly honest statement. The woman grew angrier than she had ever imagined possible as he continued talking.

“It’s powered with space-electricity and uses the latest inter-galactic something-or-others. It’s all very complicated, even compared to women.”

“Give me that...” Rob snatched it up. He examined it briefly. “This is what you made me print for you. It has a sub-space relay built into it because I had to modify the plans to use conventional technology we

had aboard. You can't just carry it around or use that near you without shielding. It could cause temporary memory loss, and even a loss of brain function..."

They all looked over to Dave who had started to drool a bit.

"And you sent it to me???" she screamed.

Dave shrugged and smiled, "Mystery gloss?"

"I just presumed you'd been drinking too much beer, as is so often the case," Rob shook his head as some of the parts fell into place.

"Too much beer!" Dave frowned at him angrily as if such a sentence had no place anywhere near his ears.

The young woman began protesting to Rob who tried with some difficulty to explain that this had nothing whatsoever to do with him and that Dave was an idiot. That did seem to resonate with her and she calmed down significantly.

Grayson stepped forwards as the situation had grown increasingly less interesting now that Rob appeared to be dealing with it, "As entertaining as all this is, I have work to do. I can only thank you again for participating in the interview process and helping us get rid of the very worst of the candidates. In fact four have since resigned all by themselves."

"What interview?" Dave smiled back absently.

Rob finished up calming the woman down and brought her over for what he hoped against reason might be a forthcoming apology, despite them being incredibly rare and usually not very good, since Dave preferred to blame everyone but himself for essentially everything.

She dug her fists into her sides and glared at him angrily. "Well..." she said.

"What?" Dave stared back emptily, looking from her and over to Rob as if he was entirely clueless which also happened to be exactly and entirely the actual case. This fact again wasn't lost on Rob.

"What?" she turned to Rob with an expression somewhere between confusion and wanting to tear off Dave's face with her bare teeth. He sighed and enjoyed his headache.

“Which one are you, Rob or Dave?” Dave asked with an increasingly lop-sided smile. Rob just sighed again, like a man whose arm had just been torn off, looking down at his brand new shoelaces.

“I’m off for a date with this... girl...?” he snapped his fingers quickly, struggling to recall her name, which was a losing battle for a man struggling to remember his own. “She has a very poor relationship with her stepfather so I’ve effectively lost all interest with everything else for the time being. It means she’s almost guaranteed to do something I like doing. I can’t remember what though; I think it has something to do with cheese.”

“What?” the angry woman glared at him, then at Rob and back and forward between the two.

“Bye!” Dave got up to leave with Grayson’s personal assistant, who presumably did have a name. “Oh, a phone!” He pointed to the little black object, “You probably shouldn’t use that. I was recently warned that they can cause exemplary rental floss. I don’t know what that is, you should ask a ginger person, that’s what I usually do.”

Rob and the woman watched him leave with Grayson’s personal assistant. They remained in silence until the door closed behind them, after all, what was left that words could actually express?

“He actually never remembers girl’s names,” Rob said finally.

She seemed to have calmed down significantly. She looked at Rob for a moment longer than was socially acceptable. “And you?” she asked just on the right side of flirtatiously.

“No,” he assured her. “He actually doesn’t usually remember my name either.”

Rob slept alone that night.