

April. Fool.

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, this rubbish is set on a space-ship and the main characters have the IQ of a potato. It features self-delivering feminine hygiene products and a freakish clone of Donald Trump crossed with a pumpkin. I don't think that's actually possible yet. Maybe one day. We can only hope.

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Rob woke up to an empty room. It didn't worry him unduly—these things quite often happened, and a lack of Dave was the opposite of something to be concerned about. It would probably just mean that he had enjoyed a successful evening of separating a girl from any faith she might have left in humanity. Many such girls ended up giving homosexuality a try, or giving up on men altogether in a different way and just dating people like Rob. Not *actually* Rob though—his dating successes remained entirely imaginary.

Dave might have taken his date back to *her* cabin, or to an escape pod, or they might just as likely wake up on a lower recycling deck behind a row of metal bins. Who could tell with Dave, whose idea of romance was rather like punching someone in the throat as a polite form of greeting.

Dave was not widely known as a romantic person. He was somehow capable of giving exactly that impression in small doses though, up to the point of seeing a girl naked, and then his interest in her usually vanishes altogether. Dave was widely considered to be best in small doses for a whole host of terrible reasons.

He yawned and stretched and let his mind drift, just enjoying the quiet of the darkened room and the last few minutes of peace he had until the alarm went off, plunging him headlong into yet another day of wishing he'd never been born.

Dave had once pointed out the error of such things. Irritatingly, he had seemed annoyingly correct and had clearly put a lot of thought into it. Perhaps even more irritating was that he'd done it with the benefit of a white-board, three different coloured pens, a quite advanced flow-diagram and printed handouts. Even more annoying than that, this had happened in the crew lounge around dinner-time with a live broadcast to his parents. He had demonstrated quite ably that the problem wasn't that Rob had been born—it was that he'd been born Rob.

Rob was ginger. He was an underachiever. He was a waiter with most of a degree in general engineering. He was dull. He was socially inept, and he smelled very slightly of cheese and wet fur for much of the time, for reasons that could not be adequately explained.

Women tended not to be attracted to such things, and no amount of begging seemed to be helping the matter. He couldn't even attract a woman he considered an equal, and had been threatened with a 'polite greeting' once after implying that he and the girl he had met might have something in common. Both he and Dave were often threatened with a punch to the throat, but usually on different ends of a date, and at least Dave's had the benefit of actually happening.

This had all been bad enough, but Dave had made it worse, in the way only Dave could.

That part of the story had all begun three days earlier, and it flashed through Rob's mind as he drifted between sleep and wakefulness.

"Rob!" Dave began proudly. The crew lounge was largely empty, since the shifts hadn't officially ended yet, but Dave's never officially began, for reasons that nobody seemed entirely sure about. "I helped."

Rob sipped at a beer. It wasn't quite flat and wasn't quite cold, which was actually ideal since it wasn't quite beer. As the flavour lit up his senses, he made a sharp hissing sound and pulled his now purple stained lips tightly back in a reflexive grimace. It was rather like being gently poked in the eyeball with a speeding bus, only it left a slightly worse after-taste, and fewer brain cells would be registered as survivors in the long haul.

He cringed, not because the beer was just awful, but because of those words which were just so much worse than awful. Dave almost never helped, and when he did, it didn't help. His version of helping was a lot like Vlad the Impaler's version of peaceful discourse.

"How did you help, Dave?" Rob closed his eyes and waited for it. It could be bad, and frankly, couldn't be good. He hoped against reason that he wasn't going to be the recipient of whatever help that Dave was punishing someone by offering.

"We were talking about how your problem was that you were Rob," he told him. "It seems to me that a huge injustice has been done. Surely nobody could deserve such harsh punishment for their crimes, and it's not as if you're interesting enough to actually commit serious crimes in the first place. It seems to me that for the crime of being you, your punishment is being you, which is completely unfair."

Rob didn't like where this was going. "Dave, thank you for finding a new and exciting way to make me feel even worse about everything in my life than I already do!"

Dave frowned at him. He continued with a very serious tone, "I haven't finished."

Rob sighed. *Of course he hadn't.*

Dave's frown vanished as he sipped at the dreadful free beer which went down largely unnoticed.

"Rob, I've recently become impassioned by complaints, and have submitted one on your behalf."

Rob frowned to himself, adopting a rather curious expression since this made no sense. "What do you mean? *What did you do?*"

Dave smirked, an expression that suggested something unpleasant was coming, in much the same way that a pile of cat skeletons round the back of a curry-house suggested that the dining inside might not be of the very highest degree of excellence—unless of course you lived in India, in which case, cat skeletons was a good sign.

He said, horribly proudly, “I made a complaint on your behalf!”

“You complained about me being Rob?” Rob grunted.

Dave shrugged, nodding slightly back at him. “It didn’t seem fair. We’re English! Writing a letter of complaint seemed the thing to do! It’s something I’ve been thinking about a lot lately.”

Rob wasn’t following the path of Dave’s logic, but if he had any, it was a disused path that lead nowhere; consequently that was nothing particularly new. “Who did you complain to?”

Dave braced himself to deliver the best news of all. “Everyone!”

Rob grimaced openly. Dave wasn’t known to exaggerate—if he had done something awful, that awful thing had been done on a grand scale and there would be no overstating it. “When you say, *everyone*...?”

“The Captain, your mother, Santa Claus, the Prime Minister of Earth, the Queen of Space, your last four supervisors, the Trumpkin—a genetically crossed half pumpkin, half human creation spliced with the DNA of the thirty fifth generation of a clone of Donald Trump that had been created to investigate the upper limits of vegetable intelligence and the lower limits of human, 569 different gods, the star of every reality vid-show from the last 42 years—only 16 of whom have survived their drug dependency, The Glorious Leader of the Free Galaxy, and the superhero team ‘The Archangels’ who have now retired, have their own chat-show, and frequently complain that they rather missed their calling.”

Rob sighed. This had all the hallmarks of being the beginning of something rather than the end. Still, it could be that the matter was now closed and only his embarrassment might remain. He dared to hope.

“Anyone else?”

“Bernard—the head of security, a sentient lemon on Coolytron 4—the lemon planet—who can do a really convincing dog impression, the great robotic brain of Planet Oz—who we all know is really an old man called Gerald, and ‘Clintron,’ the vile war-robot-brain monster from New Chicago, that’s now really rusty and old, clinically insane, and smells of urine.”

“Enough!” Rob said wearily. “I think I’m up to my limit of Dave for now.”

“Are you sure?” he said. “There’s actually quite a surprising amount more.”

“You didn’t really send a letter of complaint to all those people in my name, did you?” Rob knew he

had, and that this was probably going to be even worse than he could imagine.

Dave grinned at him and slowly nodded. “Do you want to know what it said?”

Rob shook his head. He clearly did not.

“It said, Dear universe, and the people that seem to control the little piece of it of which I’m aware.

“As is painfully apparent, I am a horribly wretched person with unnaturally ginger hair. I have the charisma and physical-appeal of a dead rat lying mouldering in a gutter somewhere, and frankly, my sex life is suffering for it. As this whole universe-thing seems to be set up with the clear intention of passing on my cripplingly unfortunate genes so that others can share in my terrible misfortune, I feel the need to complain.

“I’m unaware of any transgression I’ve made that might be terrible enough for this awful fate to be thrust upon me. My only recourse, therefore, is to complain in the hope that someone might be able to rectify whatever error has caused this.

“Yours inferiorly,

“Rob.

“Failure.”

Rob just sat there for a moment trying to find something to say. For a while it struck him that it was actually a quite well constructed piece of writing, but what was more striking was that now everyone who had anything to do with any aspect of his life now had it in front of them.

He grumbled, “Dave, what do you think is going to happen? Why did you do this?”

Dave frowned, and had that annoying expression he often wore when he felt that the reasoning behind his bizarre behaviour should be obvious and immediately apparent to everyone.

“Mostly to annoy you,” he admitted with a shrug. “It occurred to me that I hadn’t done anything really interesting for a while, and that’s just not like me. I briefly considered shaving your head while you were sleeping. I asked the computer to extrapolate what you’d look like without hair, and the results were horrifying.”

Rob was very slightly intrigued. “I looked bad?”

Dave seemed thoughtful for a moment. Finally, he felt he had a suitable answer and said simply, “Worse.”

Rob sighed and wearily just gave in to it all. “You’re an idiot, Dave.”

He nodded happily and said, “I know.”

“I mean, you’re really, really an idiot, Dave,” he insisted, not that it would do much good. Trying to argue with Dave was like hammering a rubber nail into a titanium brick with a glass hammer.

Dave grinned and agreed, “I know.”

“No!” Rob began, facing him directly. “You are the stupidest thing in the universe.”

“I don’t know, Rob! This universe once had the original Clinton and Trump in it, and people voted for them. People are generally really stupid, Rob. I mean, ‘50 Shades of Grey’ wasn’t always a brand of toilet paper—it was once considered literature.”

“Nobody reads toilet-paper,” Rob grumbled and sighed to himself. “Who would you have voted for, Dave?”

“Voting just encourages them,” Dave told him bluntly.

“I still think you’re the dumbest creature in the galaxy,” Rob said firmly, but not too firmly since he remembered Clinton and Trump from history class. It was not one of history’s finest moments.

Dave rubbed his chin thoughtfully. Something was going on in there. It was something unpleasant. “I think there’s a way to prove this. Perhaps some kind of religion, with perhaps some kind of free T-shirt?”

Rob felt a twinge of near panic. “Let’s just leave it and move on with our lives—mine horribly unsatisfying, and yours which is suspiciously good for a man with nothing between his ears but spitefulness towards his only friend.”

Dave nodded. “It is pretty good, but please don’t compare it to yours—that just fills you with false hope and demeans everyone else.”

“You’re an idiot, Dave!” Rob reminded him, as if saying it over and over again might change the fact that Dave was agreeing with him proudly.

His brain was definitely doing something. He gestured with a proud flourish of his hand, shouted rather too loudly, “And I’m going to prove it.”

Rob shook his head sadly. He opened his mouth to speak, but his brain had clearly had enough and was refusing to cooperate.

The alarm went off and Rob sat up sharply. Realisation set in; grim, ugly, dark realisation.

“No!” he hissed to himself. “It can’t be...”

But it could. It was.

He scrambled from the bed, kicking the sheets away so that they fell loosely to the floor where they lay in a crumpled heap.

Suddenly, he picked up his feet, recoiling back to safety. It was too dangerous, just plain stupid to put them down. Anything could be down there on the floor.

Dave had once electrified the panels, just to make a point about people using the bathroom at night, which apparently annoyed him slightly. And so that the point would be especially pointed, he’d done this during the day. According to him, that explained everything that needed explaining.

He’d managed to find a kind of signal pulse that would go straight through the soles of shoes, and have a pronounced effect on the insides of a human; specifically, on that human’s ability not to instantly expel all traces of physical waste in a single, hugely violent spasm. The effect of all this was that the point was quite well made, but an arguably unforeseen side effect was that the ship’s surgeon was sufficiently impressed with the results to have Rob written up in two separate medical journals, and his ruined underwear become quite famous for the experience. It had once been invited to a quite decent dinner-party, which was a significant blow to Rob’s ego, since not only was his soiled underwear more interesting than he was, but he was also stuck serving drinks at a party in its honour.

“Computer. Date!” Rob barked.

“April 1st,” it told him.

The words reverberated around his mind, numbing his senses; his head swam in fear; he could feel the sound of blood as it pulsed through his eardrums in the cold, dark silence of the room.

“No...” he gasped. It was the day of fools. It was the Day of Dave. It was a day when anything could happen, had happened, and almost definitely would happen again.

Supervisor Betty Swallsac watched with a curious frown as Rob made his way dubiously into the upper cafe. She stepped from the kitchen, an expression of bewilderment painted on her careworn face, a face that thought it had seen everything but was fast coming to realise that this was not the case.

Rob’s ginger head peered around the door. He crawled in a few steps, waving his arms around before him. He quickly edged back again. Once more he stalked forwards, feeling his way along the walls with the very tips of his fingers and kicking his feet out ahead of him, his wild eyes darting about fearfully.

In this manner, he slowly made his way along the wall to the entrance to the kitchen. He looked up at her expectant face, smiled weakly, and stood up straight. He glanced around one last time, and then seemed to slump as he let out a tense lungful of air.

“Rob?” she began with a huff. “Have you gone completely and utterly insane?”

Rob nodded sadly—it was an entirely reasonable question. “It’s the first of April,” he told her. “On this ship, we call it ‘the Day of Dave.’”

“The Day of Dave?” she repeated back to him, not sounding terribly convinced that his explanation was convincing, or that it was even an explanation.

“Dave gets worse today,” he explained. “He’s always bad, but today he gets worse. Every year he does something appallingly bad, always worse than before. He often leaves traps for things. He once set me up on a date, and told me to bring a bunch of flowers and wear my finest suit. I had to ask for Rachel when I got there. For some stupid, desperate reason I went along with it. I turned up at the place and asked for Rachel. She turned out to be a 5 year old girl with a very confused look on her face, until her parents explained that I must be the clown they’d ordered for her birthday party from Dave’s ginger clownatorium and financial consultation services.”

She frowned and appeared to fluster. Of course, everyone had heard of Dave, but it was often difficult to believe that the stories were true.

“He really did that? Well at least it can’t get much worse, can it?” Her eyes had a hint of fear about them.

“Last year, he put all my clothes in the automated laundry,” Rob began.

She smiled thinly, a little confused. “I don’t see how...”

“I was wearing them,” Rob said sadly. “Instead of cleaning fluid, he poured in food dye and softener. After 10 minutes, I came out with bright ginger skin under a bright ginger suit with bright ginger soap-suds on my...” He paused, closed his eyes and huffed to himself. He had to say it—he had to say the words Dave had used. “... My bright ginger hair.”

She sniggered.

“He kept saying I was huggably soft and delightfully titian for a month afterwards,” Rob said, cringing. “He didn’t just say it—he posted a Wikiweb advert for me on a dating site as well, looking for fruit-sexuals with a leaning towards overripe oranges.” He hung his head sadly as he remembered. “I had 245 dreadful replies. All of them were men, except for two females who said they identified as farmyard equipment. One of them promised to bring her own rake.”

She tried not to laugh, and somehow managed to keep it down to a snigger. “That’s not so bad.”

Rob glared at her, his eyes flashed angrily. “I thought that too and it was my first mistake. We met for lunch around 11.30am and I was lulled into a false sense of security. I was eating soup when I found out there was more to come. It was still piping hot when my face crashed down hard into a bowl of farmhouse tomato. I was arrested by two crewmen under suspicion of mutiny, which is still punishable by death, I might add. Dave had sent the Captain a note telling her I was madly in love with her, and that I was going to prove it by taking her ship by force and returning it to her as a romantic gesture that I hoped would earn me sufficient brownie-points for a meaningless evening of ‘disciplined ginger fun.’”

She sniggered again.

“I still can’t work out how he tricked me into eating tomato soup. As they pulled my head out of it to put me into electro-shock-cuffs, while serving up a significant beating from their plasma-sticks, Dave just grinned at me and said, “Did your head go in the orange-coloured soup? It’s almost impossible to tell!””

She covered her smile with her hand, and covered the muted sound of laughter with a fake cough.

“Well,” she began. ‘I’m sure it won’t be so bad this year.’”

Rob looked away. “It will. It will be the same. It’s always the same. There’s a Wikiweb page of condolences for the victims of his April fool pranks. It goes back years.”

“So I’m guessing Dave had something to do with the letter I received?” she asked. “The one complaining about being Rob?”

He nodded sadly. “I think he just did it to annoy me, but your guess is as good as mine.”

“Let’s get you a nice cup of tea,” she suggested, ushering him away from the customers, who really couldn’t care less about any of this.

Rob’s eyes widened. “You can’t eat or drink—not on the Day of Dave! There could be anything in there. Anything!”

Bernard slammed open the door to the kitchen. He was wide-eyed with panic, breathing heavily, and was staring around the room with wild eyes.

Rob realised that his initial impression was probably unreliable—it was just that he’d never seen the head of security actually move before. For a moment, Rob was impressed that his imagination had actually done something.

Meanwhile in reality, Bernard pushed open the door, and sluggishly plodded through. He'd slammed it open with such force that he had to kick it a second time just so the opening was wide enough to let him through. The previous description was burned into Rob's brain because Dave used it so frequently to describe his dating prowess in garishly vivid detail, both to Rob and to future dates.

He breathed heavily, sighing as he made his way inside, too lazy to really bother doing the job properly. That sentence also resonated strongly with Rob because he'd heard so many of Dave's exes describe their sexual encounters afterwards in just that way, a way Rob felt was probably more accurate.

Bernard was armed with his pointing stick—a futuristic stick that had been scientifically perfected for the delicate and nuanced art of pointing at things to a degree of excellence unrivalled by any stick before it. It had originally been designed in Germany, scanned with superlatively accurate laser scanning equipment, constructed from fifty three varieties of wood laminated together in precise quantities, layered such that it wasn't just straight, but straight to the extent that it defied quantum measurement at a level that wasn't even considered to really exist beyond a mathematical model. Commercial production however was considerably impeded by the mandatory daily unleashing of an ever increasing number of wild shrieker monkeys into the factories and offices, who attacked the staff, destroyed materials, and ate everybody's lunch without asking. It was subsequently outsourced to China which had no such regulations, but the end result was better suited to pointing around corners, and then falling apart while standing still.

Bernard pointed his stick right at him. "You're Rob, aren't you?"

Rob looked over to the wall where the tip of the stick had veered off to. He presumed Bernard was talking about him, and his hand reflexively pointed up at himself in response, a job it did more than sufficiently without the need for German excellence or the Chinese polar opposite of that.

"I was told you were chubby but rat-like, with wild-coloured but boring hair," said Bernard. "That seems about right. Now that I look at you, I see why you put in that complaint. I don't think there's much we can do about it down in the security office, but as my dad said before my mum left him, 'everything will be fine, so long as we're just trying.'"

"Hello Bernard!" Betty fluttered her eyelids at him and spoke with a soft, girlish voice that bordered on the wrong side of flirtatious and the right side of horrifying, at least to Rob.

Bernard must have felt much the same way, and he began brandishing his pointing stick defensively. "Betty," he said, cautiously backing away. "I thought you worked in that big white room where all those idiots work, that always smells of toilets."

She looked slightly confused as she gestured around the kitchen. “I do!”

Bernard nodded to himself and thought about this for a moment. His brain wasn't what it once had been, which was a biologically normal brain. Most of it had left to follow a very different career path during the war when a piece of exploding bulkhead had provided some of it with a unique opportunity for adventure and travel. Luckily, he lived in a time where technology could cheaply and easily repair such damage with gentle, non-invasive techniques that would safely and easily restore every facet of what a person had once been. Unluckily, he lived in a time when such things were prohibitively expensive. Even less fortunately, the loss of more than 40% of your brain matter meant that the military no longer classified you as a human-being, and cut off all subsequent allowances and benefits, as well as beginning legal proceedings to claim back all previous payments. But in a final piece of fortune, neither particularly worse than good nor particularly better than bad, the merchant fleet had a program to help poor distressed former soldiers who had the legal rights of a tin of canned meat. Interestingly, that was how the rest of him quite literally ended up, since it was wartime and protein was scarce.

“Bernard? Are you OK?” said Betty with a frown.

He continued staring for a moment, and then dragged his mind back to the big white room that smelled of toilets.

“I'm fine,” he told her, and glared briefly at Rob. His mind briefly flashed with what felt like a very important idea as he realised he should never eat the sandwiches from this place. Then the sharpness of ideas left him, and he vanished once more into the vagaries of his imagination.

He had been restored to a functional state with what was laughably referred to as a synaptic-patch. To have that happen, he simply had to sign a legal waiver, which is something of a legal grey area when much of your legally owned grey matter is in a can of ‘Soylent’ chicken curry. He awoke to find a new piece of head where a gaping hole had once been, and a freshly repaired brain, now that someone had poured a bag of computer-active sand into it.

The only minor inconvenience was that 42% of his brain was now the property of the merchant fleet, who also owned everything below Betty's waist and above her knees after she signed up for trails to the highly unsuccessful ‘self-delivering tampon’ experiment.

Bernard's mind did tend to wander, since a good chunk of what remained had been sealed in an aluminium tin. It was wandering back that caused the problems. If he remembered rightly, he was in a place that smelled like toilets with a woman who looked like she might have crawled out of one.

“Betty!” he snapped with some disappointment as his sandy brain registered where it was.

She fluttered her eyelids at him. “Perhaps we can go on another date?” Her face had the consistency of a slab of leather dropped onto a thin mixture of porridge and sadness. It smiled, but the smile was a thing that sent a sliver of ice through his soul, 42% of which had been blended with herbs and spices and then vacuum sealed for freshness.

“*Another* date?” He wondered if there’d been a first one, but it seemed likely that there had. He was quite proud of himself for having worked that out.

Rob just sat there taking all this in, wishing he was almost anywhere else.

“Another date with you?” Bernard, showing the dating prowess of a ginger person, glanced down to her midsection, remembering in vivid detail that it had been augmented with parts that were about as natural as pouring a bag of sand into his head. Fortunately, he had never used his head on a date, but Betty’s shortcomings were more troublesome.

She smiled, pulling her thin lips up and away from her yellowing teeth. “Who else?”

Bernard thought for a moment. If she was thinking of bringing a friend, that might be much better. He asked impatiently, “Who else?”

She fixed her eyes on his, rolled her hair around her finger, and tried to look like her hips weren’t held on with roofing-bolts. “Just us,” she said seductively with a low gravelly voice.

Bernard rolled his eyes upwards. He said thoughtfully, “Then who will bring us the little bread-rolls that I like?”

She sighed, and muttered something under her breath, which Rob suspected might be something along the lines of her being better off dating a bread roll, and what specifically she’d like to do to it, the mental image of which rather spoiled his already miserable day.

Betty grunted at the head of security, “What do you want, Bernard?”

He frowned. It seemed too obvious to answer ‘bread-rolls’, but that was the only thing that went through his mind. Then it slowly came to him, and he told her proudly, “The Captain sent me.”

She didn’t seem overly impressed. “What does she want?”

Bernard looked over to the chubby rat-thing with the bizarre hair and pointed his pointing stick at it.

“Please don’t look at me like that,” said Rob.

“The Captain got a complaint. She referred you to the ship’s councillor for an immediate appointment to find out if your head is mostly sand too.”

Rob sighed—to him that did seem fairly reasonable under the circumstances. “What time?”

“As soon as we find him!” Bernard shrugged. “He got a copy of your complaint too. He locked himself in an escape pod and jettisoned it while we were at superluminal speed. We think he might have survived.”

Rob looked worried. “Why would the man whose job it is to guard our mental health do something as crazy as that?”

“He suspected somebody might ask themselves that very question, so he had the foresight to leave a note explaining his actions, lest somebody might mistakenly think he’d gone crazy. In fact, I have a copy of it right here!

“I have not gone crazy. Dave is up to something—something big! This letter of complaint I received from Rob: alarm bells are ringing. No ginger can write that eloquently, and that can only mean one thing—Dave. It has his handwriting all over it. I know because of the words, and having written a number of letters myself. It’s ominous foreshadowing of something terrible to come. On my last meeting with him I asked him how he was feeling. He replied that he had no complaints. No ‘complaints’. His face was straight, but I could see him grinning wickedly on the inside. Then he told me the story of how last year on April 1st, he had been blamed for an outbreak of alligators coming out of passenger toilets. He claimed it was a misunderstanding caused by the poorly worded instructions that came with his Chinese ant-farm, but my own Chinese ant farm didn’t even come with any instructions.

“I just can’t risk it—I must escape, if there is to be any hope. I have a family to consider, and the only security on this crazy ship is a senile old fool whose brain is mostly sand. Perhaps the icy vacuum of space will finally quieten the wretched sound of these alarm bells I’ve been hearing day in, day out, since I received that cursed letter. Oh why won’t they stop.”

Rob grimaced, and said suspiciously, “*Complaints!* So he *is* planning something. He always drops little hints of what’s on his mind, like the one time I came back to the room when he had a date in there, and found all my stuff piled up in the corridor. Some of it was still on fire.”

Betty sat down next to Rob. She looked worried, which encouraged Bernard a little since the spotlight was away from him.

“I got a complaint email too,” she said softly. “Should I be worried?”

Rob looked at her and nodded slowly. “His tradition is to do it before 12 noon. After then, we’re safe. We just have to make it through to 12. Just a little longer now.”

“It’s no good,” Bernard grumbled. “That Captain has locked down all the escape pods so we can’t eject

them. That Doctor has spoiled it for all of us.”

Rob frowned. “I wasn’t actually...”

Bernard grunted to himself, “And she’s safely tucked herself away. There’s no chance we can get her to release the lockouts.”

Rob looked at them both, worried about the drastic lengths they might go to to get away from Dave. It then worried him that he wasn’t actually in the least bit worried about that and perhaps should be considering it himself? All this gave him a headache.

Bernard rubbed his chin. “12 noon? That’s a problem as well.”

They looked at him expectantly.

“That’s when the Archangel’s chat-show is on—it’s my favourite show. They were superheroes back in the old days when I was young. Captain Breaker could walk through metal security doors, Kid Silence could make security alarms turn themselves off, and Miracle Girl was so amazing that men would just stare at her and couldn’t look away. Together they tried to solve crimes, but actually weren’t very good at it. Personally I think they missed their calling, until they hosted a chat show.”

There was silence, and not the good kind when someone is saying something interesting, but the other kind just before a sniper pulls the trigger.

“The Trumpkin was on yesterday, and the Clintron was live from its home planet. They were talking about a new religion. The Clintron rejected all religion, saying it was illogical since Satan is the one true god, but the Trumpkin was very enthusiastic about it. He said that not enough religions come with a free T-shirt.”

More silence, but sadly no sniper.

Rob rubbed his temples and sighed loudly, “Ficbricktarianism?”

Bernard shrugged.

Betty sat up suddenly. “The belief that the whole universe exists only within the imagination of a sentient brick, and that the brick itself is part of a temporally finite universe that only comes into being when read about in fictional literature? I joined that; I got the T-shirt as well. It’s a quality item.”

Rob wanted to cry out in dismay, so he did, “How can the universe exist in the mind of a brick and then that brick only exist in the mind of someone reading a story about it in another universe? That’s crazy, that could never happen!”

She put a supportive hand on his shoulder and said softly, “Don’t worry. I’m sure it will be fine.”

Rob felt that meant very little from someone who chose their religion based on what garments were

given out free with it.

“I think that everyone got the complaint,” continued Bernard. “Does that mean everyone should be on alert?”

Rob frowned at him and said with a hint of irritation, “You’re in charge of security—what do you think?”

“Calm down, Rob.” Betty patted his shoulder, and as she sat down next to him, there was a metallic clattering noise.

“Perhaps more girls will date you now after reading the complaint, just out of sympathy?”

Betty shook her head sadly. “No, Bernard! There was a picture.”

They cowered in the lounge, the only place of sanctity left that they could think of. They told themselves that there was safety in numbers. Perhaps it was true; perhaps he had targeted them individually, or perhaps he had planned something for them all together? They couldn’t know for sure, but they hoped nonetheless. Crewman, labourers, and even a few passengers who knew of him had gathered there, huddling together in fear.

The clock showed the time as it melted away. There were only a few minutes left before noon, and each flash of the clock, as the glowing red numbers counted down, took them all closer to salvation, if salvation was coming.

Whatever was coming though, it was coming soon; whatever Dave had planned was going to happen imminently.

The barman broke the uneasy silence, asking, “What do you think he’s going to do?” His eyes were fixed on the door as he wiped over a glass, over and over and over again with the bottom of his T-shirt. Rob shrugged. As he glanced round, a host of eyes were looking in his direction. He was the resident expert, the one with the most intimate knowledge of Dave, his actions, his crimes, and his oddly-functioning but functioning regardless brain.

“I don’t know!” he exclaimed. “I think it’s obvious by now that I don’t have any control over him. I actually don’t think he has any control over himself.”

There was tutting around the room.

On the vid-screen, a game show was in progress. A hideous half-pumpkin, half-Donald Trump clone thing grinned at the camera. It began ranting about letters from the public, and how there were things out there that were even crazier than whoever had thought that splicing a brain-dead politician to a

brain-absent vegetable was a good idea.

There was a chuckling sound from the audience, but a warning flashed on the screen that the Clintron was not amused, and was arming local terrorists to have its revenge for his continually pitiful jokes.

Pitiful was also the mood in the room. It was a sombre place, a place of morbid reflection.

Still, despite it all, the clock ticked down towards a moment of calm that they all hoped was coming.

Suddenly and without warning, the doors slid open. Dave strolled in without a care in the world. As he paced over the dishevelled metal floor, the room was plunged into a hushed silence, all eyes turning to watch.

Rob waited, perched at their usual corner, him sitting on a slightly crooked barstool as Dave took his place on the one just around the ledge. They would soon come to know what he had planned.

“Lunchtime!” Dave exclaimed happily. “I woke up in a dustbin on the recycling deck next to Fiona from ‘Complaints.’ She said it was the first time she’d ever ended a romantic evening in so awful a fashion. I took it as a compliment.”

Rob looked around—all eyes were on him with their expectant gazes. “I don’t think it’s a compliment.”

“I don’t get many, so admittedly it’s difficult to judge,” Dave told him. “It turns out that in ‘Complaints’ they actually get paid to listen to other people moaning, if you can imagine anything so awful? I thought they were the ones that did the complaining. In any case, she’d heard of me many times and came to find out if the stories were true. She agreed to a date and said to just be myself. She regretted that when she let me order dinner for her, and she got a bottle of wine with a straw in it, a box of condoms, and a ticket for a ride home that wasn’t valid till the morning-”

“Dave...” Rob stopped him, feeling that someone had to.

Dave looked over, a slight flutter to his lips, a tiny little smile.

“Dave, you’re killing us,” Rob pleaded. “What did you do?” His eyes traced up to the clock.

Dave shrugged and asked, “Last night?” He smiled wider. “Well, she’s got a whole new list of complaints, only this time they’re medical and she won’t be discussing them with her mother.”

“I don’t mean with the girl!” Rob grumbled at him. “Anyone stupid enough to sleep with you gets no sympathy from me.”

Dave began to nod in agreement. He said quite firmly, “That is also my policy.”

“I mean what did you do to us?” Rob gestured with a nod around the room. Faces were turned to them, every ear was listening.

Dave looked around. He saw a face he recognised. “I covered her in cream and licked it off... It turns out that whipped cream and shaving cream are two very different things. Nobody mentions that when they’re selling the idea to you.”

“Dave...” Rob was almost begging now, not least because he had become the acting spokesman of the group. “What prank did you pull?”

“Prank?”

The clock ticked.

“Prank!” Rob pleaded.

Dave shrugged. “I’ve been thinking about this Ficbricktarianism,” he told him. “I reckon there’s something to it, you know.”

Rob looked bewildered, which was precisely what he was. “You came up with that. You only did it to see how stupid people were. You started a fake religion with the dumbest concept you could come up with to see what would happen.”

“Yeah, but I reckon there might be something to it.” Dave rubbed his chin and tried to look smart. “I mean, maybe when Mr Christian came up with Christianity, he might have rubbed his chin and thought, Yeah, there might just be something to this! Maybe some guy really did get nailed to something because we did something bad and not because he did? I mean, maybe in Ficbricktarianism, you could be nailed to a tree? I thought about this and couldn’t find a single objection. What about that other one where they cut off the end of their penis and broke banking laws? Wasn’t there a peaceful one that attacked everybody?”

“What?” Rob said aghast.

Dave rolled his eyes. “I should have known *you’d* find something negative to moan about in my completely innocent comments! You hate religion, that’s your problem.”

“What?” Rob almost cried out. “Should I not complain that you started your own religion, that you want to nail me to a tree, or that you’re sitting there making blasphemous remarks over the lunchtime menu?”

“You can’t really complain now,” Dave explained, irritatingly calmly. “Fiona won’t be working today, and frankly, when she gets back from the clinic, she’s going to have her own problems to worry about.”

There was a rumble around the room, and Rob felt the only adjective that might suitably fit was, ‘murderous.’

“Dave, what did you do?” he insisted.

Dave leant forward. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Rob frowned and said, “It’s April 1st. We all know you played some horrible prank. What is it, Dave?”

Dave looked around and grinned. “Oh, that!”

Rob pleaded one last time as the clock came horribly close to noon. “Dave, please. I know you did something awful.”

Dave nodded very slowly. “Maybe I did. Maybe I did something, just a little something that would get everyone all at once?”

There was an audible gasp and a ripple of hushed conversation. The clock clicked down.

“Rob...” Dave grinned at him. “Rob, shall I tell you?”

Rob didn’t want to know. His mind was reeling, he felt like running away, screaming for his mummy, although that wouldn’t have been very productive since she’d read her copy of the complaint, rolled her eyes and sent back a reply that read, ‘Not known at this address.’

Still, he found himself nodding. His eyes flicked up—the clock had less than thirty seconds left, and Dave was still grinning at him.

“Rob,” Dave began, “I tried something different this year. Something that affects everyone, on both sides of the universe, every corner of every world, every member of the crew and every person through history whose lives might cross mine at this moment. I did the one thing that nobody expected me to do.”

Rob could feel his heart thumping. He leant forward and the whole room joined him. They were as one now, fearfully waiting for it, dreading the awful revelation.

The clock ticked down, only seconds now remained.

“Rob,” Dave said to him. “This time, what I did was...”