

The heavy drone of a siren like noise reverberates in every fibre of your being. Around you, as far as you can hear and as close as you can see, it whelps unapologetically, knocking you, somehow, off balance. Your kinetic motion merely accelerates as does the intensity of the sound, as the sight of the colourful haven in which you were safely wrapped just moments ago, begins to discolour and fade like so much sand in your eyes. Your lungs seem to take oxygen into parts of your body that you didn't even know existed, as your eyelids twitch slightly, mimicking and mocking the drone. The sound becomes crisp, the echo lost to the haven past, and it pierces your ear drums, relentlessly calling upon you to open your eyes and face it head on. In a fraction of a moment your eyes open and focus on the unrecognisable space, which you recognise all too well. The moment dawns on you and, with a sigh, you muster all the strength within your being to raise your hand and slap that infernal alarm clock on to snooze. Who on God's green earth set the alarm on a weekend? You know perfectly well, but in order to justify how bitterly angry you feel, you pretend to forget. Thank the lord for "Snooze". Or thank Casio, whatever. Abruptly and somewhat rudely woken, you close your eyes once more and take a deep breath. But it's useless. The morning light, or what light there is in the room, has caused your eyes to tingle under their lids like tinsel softly brushing round your neck. Ooh, Christmas on the brain, now that cheers you up! But I don't need cheering up damnit. I need sleep! I've all day to mentally flirt with *pigs-in-blankets*, pointlessly entertaining *cracker* games, Grandma's extra-alcoholic *Christmas Pudding*, and whether or not the Queen will smile in her speech this year! Now, calm down, have a quick sniffle, swallow a bit (ew, yer, my mouth does feel a little gluey), and roll over onto the fresh side of the pillow. Well that won't work. Not only have you rolled into direct eye-shot of the only shaft of sunlight in *the entire world*, but how the hell are you supposed to sleep when you're thinking too hard about doing so! So, if thinking be my curse... how do I normally fall totally unconscious? No. No. It's 8a.m. You can't. Just this once? No. Anyway, you're going on a date today. You can't turn up completely plastered - and possibly hung over, depending on how much second-ditch sleep you get. The alarm wins this time, but God bare witness, it shall be the last time! I will have my vengeance and it shall be just!

You're already planning to take the batteries out of it, whilst you begin the quilt-removal countdown. One... two... thr-No. Can't be arsed. It's *way* too cold, just a few more minutes, that'll see me through the day. I've got news for you; no it won't. See that frost on your window? One... two... thr-the forecast said it would be quite reasonable today? I watched it intently; I wanted to go for a run! Don't get "want" confused with "said" or "planned". There's a difference and you know it. One is a genuine attempt to stay healthy, and that's a summer fallacy. The other two... well, one covers your mother's concerns that you're putting on some winter insulation, and the other is your floundering (self)disgust at such an insinuation - denial, wonderful thing. One... two... Another sharp noise, this one longer, slower and twice as infuriating. Move it fatso, it could be your date. Whipping the covers off - without a 1-2-3, I may add - you stagger over to the telephone, which has been strategically placed out of arms reach by an ex whom had no time for wasters. Evidently so.

No matter how quickly you move, there's no way of escaping it; the stale, cold morning-bedroom-air ravages every inch of your body, even those areas covered up. The *Winter-Household* has it's revenge - brief but satisfactory - as goose pimples erupt on every available patch of milk white skin; the cold even rushes into your ears - the *Winter-Household* is pissed at the lack of gas-heating usage, and my God is she letting you know about it.

Hello? "Yes, hello, are you the house owner?" Brilliant. Two hundred and-bloody-sixty work days a year, and the window salesman works weekends. What about your holidays? Don't be silly, I unplug the phone for those rare occasions. In true British "*I enjoy my privacy, and already own a house with fucking windows*" style, you politely tell the salesman to sod off - and have a nice Christmas.

Now, if there was ever a better feeling than jumping into a steamy hot bath on a cold winters day, with a cup of creamy cocoa, a selection of Christmas classics tunefully playing outside the door and, what the hell, some luxurious bath salts - left over from last Christmas from Auntie Wynn - then you can't help but feel eternally disappointed with your three-speed water jet shower, water-infested shower radio (there's a story behind that - hah) and Tesco's finest Orange Shower "Crème". Why did I ever leave home?! Because when you went to University, your Dad turned your room into his study, and your Mum skipped town with the handyman. Ah, now I remember. In true English winter fashion, your seemingly infallible (yet merely satisfactory) shower plans take a turn for the worst when your "recently serviced boiler" decides to call it a day and piss ice cold pain over your body. To make matters worse, and to which *Winter-Household* can't help but point out the comical irony, the sacrificial anti-radiator-pro-duvet-money-saver ploy offeres up a stale, shoe smelling and mercilessly wet towel. Once again, most of the drying shall be done by yesterday's clothes.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if all crockery and cutlery cleaned itself? If, in some *Beauty And The Beast* style turn of events, you woke up, desperately hung over from the wine and cheese party you hosted, in urgent need of a strong black coffee and something overtly greasy to sink your *gnashers* into, and the kitchen unfolded in front of you twinkling with a cleanliness only achievable through industrial corrosive acids, and dynamite (or something of said persuasion) to clear the *crustations* off the inside of the oven. Well, sorry chump, "Wonderful" isn't in your dictionary and Walt Disney doesn't do house calls. Never mind, I have the same breakfast every morning anyway, so some of this crockery is largely reusable. I'll have a black coffee, 3 sugars, and a bowl of *Crunchy Nut* to go... (to the living room) please, and don't be shy with the milk.

You're wandering down the corridor now, still slightly bemused at the sight of half a dozen chicken wings, a few slices of what can only be describes as *kebab pizza*, and a tin foil tray of the remnants of a Chicken Korma placed rather unobtrusively in your fridge. The Friday at work motto slips into your head; "A good scapegoat is nearly as welcome as a solution to the problem" - No, no, the other one. "Eating is cheating". As I recall there were a few empty stomachs last night - besides cheese. I wonder if I had some whacky-stilton-dream last night? Don't you worry, it shall all mentally materialise in time - as will the events of last night. However for the moment let us concentrate on getting down this corridor without spilling... much... milk. The living room door stands slightly ajar, and the unmistakable

odour of wet cigarette butts, sweaty feet and body gasses, assaults your nostrils - and you've not even opened the door yet. You stop, and think better of entering - something about the last smell on that list is warning you to steer clear (for now), and the sheer stench has you almost gagging anyway. So you perch yourself on the toilet lid, staring at the newspaper spread flat on the floor in front of you - and all the while you're straining to read from such a distance. Why do you even bother? Because I can't multi-task, and I'm bloody hungry! No... why even bother having breakfast if you're going to have to eat it on the toilet? Find me a one bedroom flat with a dining room or eat-in kitchen for under eighty pounds a week, in this bank-robbing city, and I'll consider taking classes in hygiene. With that, you take a greedy spoonful of cereal and somewhat unkemptly insert it into your mouth. Then, swivelling off the toilet lid and opening it in one controlled movement, you spit the contents of your mouth into the gaping hole. Sick? No. Peaches? Yes. Bloody fridge. I wish that door fucking shut every now and then. Never mind. Eating on a toilet never really tickled your fancy anyway. At least you've still got the coffee. The one saving grace, and the one thing no-one can take away from you... and then it's gone. Snatched from out of your hand from behind you. If only I could afford a mirror, I might have seen it coming! "Morning. Cheers, just what I needed." Brilliant. Well at least the living room is probably no longer out of bounds. You'd better go and make yourself another coffee, morning is nearly over and you've got a long day ahead of you.

Afternoon, Vicar

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The second coffee never tastes as good as the first. Despite not even having a sip of the first, before it was snidely lifted from your sleepy grasp, you somehow know it was set to be the greatest coffee you'd ever tasted. However, convincing yourself that all was not lost, you loaded the second cup with more sugar. Three didn't sound like enough, so, to be safe, you went with five the second time round. Leaving the shabby thieving stray, *monged* out on the sofa, catching up on the world according to Richard and Judy, you pensively exit the house. In the time between the toilet lid incident and your all too freezing presence on the front door step, an additional; two t-shirts, one jumper, two pairs of socks, one woolly scarf, one bobble hat, one pair of gloves - Thinsulate - and the family's hand-me-down winter coat, have all entered the mix. "Close the door then, it's bloody freezing," comes the cry from the sofa. I hope the T.V. blows a fuse, right when they reach book club. As you pull the door to, and take that much resented step off your welcome mat, you can't help but feel you could have wished something more worthwhile upon the coffee-stealing couch-potato. This bitter cold seems to be freezing up my wit-store, and all my potential bitterness is still lingering with an alarm clock come condemned box of Judas shite. The fact that it is your T.V. barely registers; an attempt to avoid complete self-contempt. Jack Frost's looming presence coats every inch of earth in front of you. You register this fact; consider action accordingly; select action accordingly, and still manage to near fall on your (all too clothes-padded) arse. You get that tingling sensation on your neck, as your face flushes with a burning hot agitation. Instead of feeling lucky or relieved to have not tasted the glittery pebbled concrete, you feel *unlucky* at having nearly come to meet said fate. Everything in the world is out to get you - and only you. Why oh why did I choose to wear the Croatian market's take on Addidas trainers - five euros from a toothlessly grinning maniac who wouldn't stop hounding you

until you purchased the latest in trainer fashion and the (market) official *Sinedine Sidane* football shirt - signed by none other than his grumpily disillusioned wife. Well it did make a decent present for your next door neighbour's son; after some nifty sewing and a quick explanation that "in Spain, their Z's look like backwards S's!" Five euros, and apparently worth every penny.

Ten minutes and six near-falls later, the bus stop looms on the horizon. You try to avoid looking directly at it in order not to remind yourself of the seemingly increasing distance. You've also made a habit of pushing the bus number out of your head. If I don't think about it, maybe it won't pass. Newsflash; as you practice the art of catching a bus you refuse to acknowledge, you fail to see four go past in the space of five minutes. You'd much rather it was the bus service's inadequate runtime to blame, than even consider you could've made it in time for at least one of the passing entourage.

Fact: bus stop seats are officially the most uncomfortable in the World. Two horizontally staggered cylinders complete with enough surface area to accommodate no more than a three year old child or a pet hamster named *Shortarse*. An old lady is perched right in the middle of the "seat". At first glance, she looks so uncomfortable she could quite easily be sat on a bed of (sharpened...) pencils. Your eyes meet and a moment of dissatisfied recognition is struck. She must be mid-eighties you know - bless her, she's sellotaped her bus pass to her coat. Then you remember; your bus pass is neatly tucked away in the smallest coat pocket known to mankind - much too small for a Thinsulate glove to squeeze into. Now why would I do that? Heaven forbid you would have to remove your glove. Jack only needs one chance, and he'll bring your temperature right down to *Teethchattering* Fahrenheit.

After studying the largely useless timetable - a tool for nurturing false hope - your bus arrives. Like the good citizen you are, you help the old lady on to the bus. You watch as she takes a right turn larger than the Titanic's, and saunter past the driver without so much as eye contact. The unmistakable beep of the bus driver's "Travel Pass" button follows, and just for a second the image of him scanning a barcode on the woman's forehead pops into your mind. "Single to town," - "One fifty, please." *Please* my arse. Collecting a Metro you keel into the first available seat, and prepare yourself for the long horse-drawn journey down the pebbled lane.

Happening in the world today: Some moderately famous couple have announced their engagement, and pundits are taking bets on it not seeing out the year. Sad. The odds would be a lot more interesting if it were done by the month. Headline: *Bush Defies U.N. - Again*. Inset: thumbnail picture of Tony Blair; caption: *Whatever he said*.

True to form, the bus journey comes complete with; managing *not* to avoid *any* potholes in the road; a visit to every bus stop ever built - with a side order of Mr and Mrs "Now where did I put that purse dear?" and "Does this bus go to Woolworths?"; an astounding 1/59049 chance of hitting all 10 traffic lights en route burning on red (my maths never was too great); and having the world's sweatiest man sit next to you, before selecting "Music to piss *everyone* off" on his iPod.

The rusting box of wheels finally breaks away from the temperamental traffic and embarks down a large tree-lined open street. Hitting forty - or as near as the relic can get to it - the first warm rays of the day's sun mask your face. The amber sphere hovers low in the cloudless sky, making it impossible to escape its gaze. However, despite the way your day is unfolding, you don't feel bitter toward this minor irritant. The day is about to click into third gear, and your mood is beginning to accelerate and lift with it. Mind, it's this kind of attitude you're going to need; after all, you *are* going to the bank. The sun passes behind the only

cloud in the sky. They really do have a knack for sneaking up on you, don't they? The final corner of your journey is rounded, just as the fat sweaty oaf's music reaches the end of its reign of terror. As the bus begins its descent towards your stop, the faceless mannequins drift by the window in all their pallets of colour, and you feel like greeting each and every one a good afternoon. It hasn't been such a great morning, but then you're not much of a morning person, are you.

I don't really know of any ideal time to go the bank. Do you? It seems no matter how much logic you apply to compare the bank's operating hours, and the average day of the average Joe, you always manage to hit rush hour traffic. You've not even ascended the steps and opened the door, and the air of futility has swept swiftly through your soul. Imagine - you walk into the main foyer, regard the snaky queue for the cashier desks, throw a glance towards the eternally unhelpful "Help Desk", and count the number of staff members, wandering around pretending to be busy, on three hands. You sat in a bank for an hour and a half once, didn't you; Occupying a deceptively uncomfortable chair, trying to make eye contact with every uniformed passer-by, to no avail. All they did was look at you with their mocked up sympathy as if to say; "I feel your pain, but one of us *will* be with you soon." No-one said you could just ask at the information desk for help, and the clerk, whom admittedly assumed you had an appointment and were merely waiting to be seen, saw to you swiftly and with a sweet pity-bestowing smile. Afterwards you met a friend, retold the story, *embellished* slightly, muttered some anti-bank quip you'd heard your dad say, and proceeded to get totally drunk. Bank - one; you - nil.

It doesn't surprise you that, as you begin to climb the steps, you already feel slightly frustrated and ready to throw in the towel. But that new debit card won't order itself! So, bite the proverbial bullet and do what must be done! Now, equipment checklist: Passport? Check; Account Number? Check; Cheque book? Cheque check (hehe); Prozac? Damn. Knew I'd forgotten something. As you approach the slow traffic - *Max Speed 0.1mph* - familiar characters present themselves. Stooped over a large beige handbag, dipping her head, hands, and half her torso inside, ravaging around for the missing pennies to add to her half-ton of plastic moneybags stacked on the counter, is *Mrs Copperjar*. Standing small and hunched at seventy-five-plus, this veteran of slow queue politics has a unique talent for combining senility, near immobility, partial deafness and an endearing ignorance when it comes to there being "a lack of tally men" in modern society. Now, everyone knows the old dear doesn't leave her house for anything less than tea and biscuits with the *Eligible Vicar* (she does have granddaughters to think about, don't you know) or a public encounter with that darling Prince Charles - "Ooh I could just pull his ears off and pinch his cheeks until they go purple!" But after thirty years of waiting for the tally man to show, she's decided to try her luck with "that *Argoose* jobbie, or whatever it's called. Mind, they didn't sound too keen on the idea of all this copper, so I thought I'd give it you lot. It's nice to get out of the house every now and again, 'specially since *he's* been badly with his knees, you know. Ever so grumpy he is these days, he used to be so chirpy you know, just try and wipe that smile off his face!" I wonder what finally did, you muse sarcastically.

Directly behind Mrs Copperjar is the beloved Sir Twentyquestions, or rather Mr Fivequestions, whom apparently has a short term memory disorder aptly named "Fourthtimeluckyexia". The mere proposition of asking the clerk any number of questions, to which there will inevitably be answers, leaves "Nervous" scrawled across his perspiring face. You feel an urge to offer him your redundant Dictaphone or maybe a pad of paper and pen, but then that wouldn't be very subtle, would it. I'm not very subtle anyway. Isn't that

why people like you when they meet you? Today, Mr Fivequestions has a query about Travellers Cheques and cash machines in foreign countries. God, you wished you'd packed that Prozac now. So, you invent a game. Queue fantasies are your forte, and you've been saving one for a special occasion; "If I were a super hero, which would I be?" Only one must survive, and at the moment your money is on the tall wiry seventies throwback, with thinning comb over silver hair, blatant false teeth - possibly out of a cracker - shining with the dullness of a plastic spoon, and eternally bewildered eyes just waiting for the moment a piano will fall from the sky. Yes, you guessed it, Basil Faulty, formerly of Faulty Towers, and presently of Nat West Bank Queue.

"Cashier number four please." Oh sweet sound! I made it, and with almost all of my sanity intact! Which is more than I can say for Basil. You approach the counter to be confronted by a fiendishly over-practiced smile. Over and over in your head, you've rehearsed exactly what you're going to say, and every response required of any possible question they could put to you. It's all about economy of time. I don't want to be in here any longer than you do. "Okay, so let's go through this step" ...pause... "By..." ...another bloody pause. Come on smiley spit it out! "...stttteeeppppp." You wince a smile that sends your jaw muscles ripping out of your skin, as you clench your teeth to stop from screaming. "Have you cancelled your card?" - "Yes." Keep it simple, one word answers - you're less likely to say (shout...) something you may later regret. "And when was this?" - "Yes." - "I'm sorry?" - "Yes" - "What?" - "Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes to all questions, I just need a new card delivering!" Silence sweeps over the room. Well, more silent than before - although the emo-kid still has his impossibly fast drum beats playing to everyone in the room but himself as his earphones dangle over his collar. The cashier is dumbstruck. She blinks a few times, swallows any tears that are dangerously close to welling up and forces a pathetically injured smile. You never really thought you possibly could in a bank, but you feel a little bad about yourself. Avoiding eye contact you slip the passport and account number into the tray and fix your eyes on a point in the middle distance above her head. You become acutely aware of everything that surrounds you, much like, you imagine, a *Spideysense* - Mrs Copperjar scratching around in her purse for any copper that may have escaped her hawk-like-eyes; Mr Fivequestions hesitantly moving away from the counter, only to turn on his heels to ask or reaffirm something yet again; and the help desk clerk flitting over the keyboard as he prepares himself for that catchphrase of catchphrases - "I'm sorry, but there's simply nothing I can do from here. You'll have to call this number." The cashier's hands move slowly and purposefully - too much so - as she replaces the passport and account details in the tray. "Your card will be delivered within five working days to the address specified on the account, also seen here on the account printout." Elated, you take the papers and begin to shove them into your pocket. The end of the tunnel, I can see the light! My card will be delivered within five working days to... shit. Wrong fucking address. "Erm, excuse me? This is the wrong address..." - "It's the account address. In order to change it you'll have to fill out-" She doesn't even have time to finish her sentence. You're out of there quicker than Hoggard at the WACA, screaming all the way back to the bus stop.