

GRANITE UNIVERSITY

Granite University is a light-hearted story in 41 episodes about a Department of Applied Metamagical Anthropology in a fictional Scottish University.

It was written in 2011 by Ruth Aylett, Mòrag Burgon-Lyons, Greg Michaelson and Judy Robertson (in alphabetic order). The authors were working in Computer Science at Heriot-Watt University at the time, and Granite University was conceived as a collaborative story. Each episode was written in rotation by a single author with some simple rules to provide some continuity and structure. We leave readers to judge how effective this was.

The story was conceived as a way of advertising the website and work of an EPSRC-funded research network on the design of effective research spaces: the legacy website (minus Granite) is at <http://www.spirenetwork.org> as of Jan 2014.

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Episode 1: Introducing Granite University

It was raining again. Everything was grey: grey sky, grey buildings, grey institutional chairs and now he came to notice her, even his student was grey around the edges. Professor Jenkins peered more closely, causing her to flinch. He liked to position visitors next to his window so he could gaze slightly above their left shoulder in a disconcerting way. That, combined with the fact that he had adjusted his own chair to several centimetres higher than the visitor's chair, gave him the upper hand in most encounters.

On further scrutiny it did appear that Teresa was looking rather worse for wear this week. He tuned into what she was saying briefly.

“Oh Professor Jenkins, I'm so worried about this chapter. Is it good enough? You don't think it's too long do you? And what about the literature section you told me to revise last time? Is it OK now?”

He vaguely remembered a discussion about Smith and Hodge's results at the last meeting. On the other hand, it could equally well have been with Simon Slater, his other PhD student. He tended to mix them up, which was entirely understandable given that their thesis topics were almost identical. Neither Teresa nor Simon had realised this yet but he was looking forward to the day they did. It would lead to a Darwinian struggle to find the mentally fittest PhD student which would be amusing, but also lead to higher quality work from the triumphant but terrified survivor. Today his money was on Simon winning out. Teresa was looking at him with those big puppy dog eyes, clearly waiting for him to say something. He glanced at her references section – ah yes – Smith and Hodges was there.

“How can you justify your interpretation of Smith and Hodges argument on p6?” he asked, selecting a page number at random. As he had hoped, this caused a great shuffling of paper and hasty reading. He was free to pursue his contemplation of the weather once more. It was still raining. It always rained in Granite University.

His secretary Gwen popped her head round the door with an envelope.

“Mail for you, Prof dearie!” she said breezily and bounced away again.

Teresa looked up, aghast at this term of address but Jenkins had ceased to notice anything his secretary did many years before. For her part, she turned a blind eye to his appalling rudeness to other people as long as he was polite to her. They suited each other very well.

The Professor opened the envelope and withdrew a letter from the Research Council. At that point he realised that the letter was not in fact addressed to him at all. It was intended for the newly appointed Dr McGee. He swiftly read the reviews of Dr McGee's grant proposal.

“Very interesting” he said aloud.

Teresa stopped in her stumbling attempt to come up with a sensible answer to what seemed to her to be an odd question. “Really?” she gasped. She blushed a vivid pink and returned to her monologue with renewed hope.

“At least she's not grey any more” he thought idly before returning to his colleague's mail. So – Dr McGee seemed likely to get this large grant based on these glowing reviews. Just one or two minor changes to make to the proposal and the money would be hers. Assuming of course that she made the changes in time. Assuming that the Research Council letter reached her in time.

He looked out the window with a smile. The sky seemed brighter already.

Episode 2: A new day

Professor Jenkins' office door swung open. For a moment the bulk of the cleaning trolley almost hid the person behind it. He used it to wedge the door open and wheeled an industrial vacuum cleaner into the room. Then he pushed the trolley out into the corridor and let the door shut again.

Ian – or Ian-the-cleaner as he thought of himself in this guise – felt that the trolley outside and the noise of the vacuum cleaner inside should convince anyone passing that only cleaning was going on. He shuffled quickly through the pile of papers on the desk. Some kind of review of a project proposal – hmm, not Jenkins' either. A letter of complaint from parents about their son's recent exam grades. An invitation for Jenkins to give a talk at a conference in Denmark. The University newsletter.

Ian ran the vacuum cleaner across the carpet a few times. He pulled a duster from a pocket of his blue overalls and flicked it over the keyboard. The computer screen lit up. Ah. Once again Jenkins had forgotten to switch it off the night before and his email window was revealed. Revealed was the right word Ian felt. He clicked quickly and read. There were people who would be very interested when he told them what some of these emails said.

Outside in the corridor staff were just arriving for their new day. One or two nodded at Ian or said 'Good morning' as he pushed the cleaning trolley down towards the toilets, his next task. They got mental good conduct stars. But the majority treated him as if he was invisible: Ian-the cleaner. Well, they'd all get a shock one day.

He parked the trolley outside the Ladies and unfolded the yellow 'toilets being cleaned' stand to put by the door. Suddenly the door was pulled open with some force and a woman came out so fast that she almost knocked both Ian and the sign over.

"Very sorry" she said in an Eastern European accent, giving him a radiant smile from within a simultaneous wave of strong perfume. She had golden earrings with a flashing crystal in each, dangling almost to her shoulders, luxuriant black hair, intelligent brown

eyes and brightly coloured clothes. Ian felt his Ian-the-cleaner disguise being blasted away and for a moment stood there staring like a rabbit caught in headlights. Then he forced his eyes down to the ground.

“No problem”, he said in his colourless cleaner voice.

Irene swept off down the corridor, filing the slightly peculiar cleaner away for later thought. When you came to a new place everything was odd, and it took time to establish which oddities were significant. Perhaps all the cleaners here looked as if they were only pretending.

She thrust open the door into the departmental office. There was just one secretary there who flinched as the door hit a badly positioned cupboard with a clunk and a pile of envelopes on top of it scattered.

“Very sorry”, Irene said breezily. “I am Dr Irene Popescu from Báthory-Eötvös University, Hambleton Fellow. I just arrive. You take me to my office please?”

Gwen frowned.

“I’m Professor Jenkins’ secretary actually”, she said in a chilly tone, “but the Professor hasn’t mentioned your arrival to me. I think you will need to see him first.”

“This is fine. Where is his office? “

“Professor Jenkins is not here yet. And I will need to book you an appointment. He has many important commitments.”

“I am Hambleton Fellow. This is prestige award. I think Hambleton Foundation will not want to hear that I have no office. Which office has nobody in it? I go there and see Jenkins later. Or maybe I wait outside Jenkins office and talk quick when he gets here.”

Gwen tried to imagine what Professor Jenkins would say if she allowed this Popescu creature to ambush him before his first cup of coffee.

“I expect I can find you somewhere temporary,” she said with a sigh.

Episode 3: Observant Participant

Henry Hawkins sat cross legged on the desk. As an easily bullied child, he had thought of himself as "The Hawk", superhero, defender of the weak and powerless. At Granite, everyone called him Hawko, not always so affectionately.

"Right!" said Hawkins. "Action research projects! Whose up first?"

The students looked embarrassedly at each other and avoided his gaze.

"Come on!" said Hawkins. "I'm sure you're all bursting with ideas. Let's start with group A. Melissa?"

A pig-tailed young woman, wearing a lumpy grey sweater that looked as if it had been woven out of muesli, slowly stood up.

"Well," she said, hesitantly. "We'd wondered about exploring thirteeness."

"Sounds promising," said Hawkins. "Do go on,"

"Well," said "Melissa. "Maybe we could get people to do a repetitive task, you know, over and over again, and see if they got it wrong more times on the thirteenth go."

"Right," said Hawkins. "Can anyone see any problems with that?"

An older male student, dressed in a grey tweed suit that looked as if it had been woven out of muesli, put up his hand.

"Serge," said Hawkins. "Always there with an answer. tell us about it."

"Culture," said Serge.

"Culture?" said Hawkins.

"Culture," said Serge. "How do you control for whether or not thirteeness is culturally mediated?"

"I thought you were going to suggest that maybe there might be people whose idea of counting was one, two, many," said Hawkins.

Nobody laughed.

"Let's move on," said Hawkins, quickly. "Group B. Raymond."

A gangly young man, sporting a lumpy grey beard that looked like it had been woven out of muesli, looked up from his mobile phone.

"Black cats," said the young man. "We set black cats loose and see how people respond when they cross their paths."

"I don't think we'll get approval for live animal experiments," said Hawkins.

"Hmmm," said Raymond. "Maybe we could use virtual cats?"

"Maybe virtual cats are only virtually lucky," said Hawkins. "Group C? Yvonne?"

A spruce woman with cropped hair, clad in a bright orange bolier suit, came to the front of the class, her tackety boots clattering on the lino. She unfolded her laptop, turned on the data projector and moused up a diagram.

"Group C proposes to investigate ladders," said Yvonne. "We place ladders in the main corridor here, here and here."

She pointed at then slide.

"Note that the first leaves a wide passgeway, the second cover half the corridor and the third spans the whole corridor. Then we ask people to walk down the corridor and we watch how they behave."

"Interesting!" said Hawkins admiringly. "Any comments?"

Serge put up his hand.

"Serge," said Hawkins.

"Culture," said Serge.

"Yes, culture," said Hawkins. "I'm sure we can control for that. Ladders it is then. I'd like you all to work up an experimental design for the next tutorial."

"We've got one here," said Yvonne, distributing sheets of A4 around the class.

"Right!" said Hawkins. "We better find some ladders..."

Episode 4: On top of the world

Shona reached up and felt about with her left hand. Her fingertips were dry and her grip on the rock was firm and sure. She stood up, straightening her legs and pulling on her newest handhold. The muscles in her back and arms felt wonderfully stretched. Warm sunlight kissed her shoulders. She felt like she was in heaven.

Her gaze wandered out over the water. Absently she felt her hip for the next bit of gear; a quick-draw came to mind. They were not there. She looked down at herself seeking the security of her harness and rope. The baggy legs of Shona's shorts flapped unfettered in the breeze.

As the realisation set in – that she was free climbing, her focus shifted to the ground, some 45 metres below. Fear welled in her stomach and chest, quickly followed by panic. Shona clung to the rock, thrusting her body forward. Sweat sprung from her fingertips and palms. She felt it trickle down her spine. Her legs started to shake uncontrollably.

Desperately trying to master her fear; failing and flailing; she slipped and fell. Her heart was pounding in her chest. Disbelief mixed with the exhilaration of free fall. That was when it occurred to Shona that she was dreaming.

Knowledge became power as she slowed her decent, turning over in the air. She flew out across the lake. Despair turning to elation as she realised it was possible to be aware and in control during a dream. If she could do it, then she saw no reason some student lab-rats couldn't learn too. There may be a research grant in this after all...

"Mummy, I think I've had an accident", came a dainty little voice on a special frequency capable of piercing her deepest slumber.

Freddy Mercury sang "Don't stop me now", as a whisper in her ear.

Dazed and disoriented Shona heard herself say "Lets get you sorted out, poppet".

Episode 5: Coffee Time

“Where did the cat come from?” asked Dr McGee through her tears.

Gwen handed her another tissue from the box which she kept for occasions such as this.

“I don't know, Gillian dearie” she said “I think Hawko might have mentioned something, but I wasn't listening.”

The cat jumped into Dr McGee's lap and pushed his furry black head into her hand, purring loudly.

“Oh, how sweet!” said Dr McGee, charmed. “We should keep him as a departmental cat. I shall call him Magic.”

“But what will Professor Jenkins say?” said Gwen, scandalised.

“I'm sure he won't mind. After all, he's bound to know the literature on luck as well as the rest of us. Only maybe I don't know it well enough! Maybe that's why...”

This thought set off another wave of tears. Gwen patted her shoulder absently, and tutted as she watched Dr Popescu flounce into the coffee room in a cloud of perfume.

“There's that woman again” she said. “Come to cause trouble again, I'm sure.”

“Why you cry?” demanded Irene enveloping Gillian in her arms, displacing Magic who hissed sulkily.

“It's my grant proposal. The research council sent me a letter telling me they rejected it because I didn't respond to the reviews in time. But I didn't get the reviews! The letter didn't arrive. They wouldn't believe me and I think maybe the proposal was so bad they just bi-i-i-ned it!” Her last words were swallowed in a wail of anguish which only a researcher who has spent months of her life polishing a funding application can emit.

“My darling! This is outrage! Outrage! I write to council and tell them they made grave mistake! I tell them they must reconsider. I tell them you write the most important proposal this year and they must fund”. Irene's earrings rattled in emphasis.

“Why would they listen to you?” asked Gwen.

“I am Hambleton Fellow. It is prestige award. They listen to me.” said Irene with certainty. Gillian looked at her gratefully.

“Would you really? Thank you very much.”

The man at the other end of the table looked up from behind the latest issue of “The European Journal of Parapsychology”.

“Ask Professor Jenkins what to do” he muttered in Gillian's ear as he passed her on the way to the door. He wheeled his yellow cleaning cart out of the coffee room door savagely aiming it at Magic's tail. Professor Jenkins was forced to step aside to let the cart through. Ian gave him a grimace which could pass for a smile and retreated a little way up the corridor to listen.

“Professor Jenkins” said Gillian timidly “I had a letter from the grant council telling me they rejected my proposal but they didn't send me reviewer comments. Can I complain?”

Professor Jenkins looked round in surprise at the tear stained woman addressing him. Who was she? And who was the other woman, the one with the perfume? And the figure.

“On no, I wouldn't do that.” he said. “Young ladies get their grant proposals rejected all the time, there's nothing new in that. Why don't you try applying for one of those nice grants specially for ladies instead? No point in trying to play with the big boys if you're not up to it.”

Gillian stared at him open mouthed. Gwen handed him his cup of coffee, nearly tripping over the cat.

“And what is that wretched animal doing there?”

“It's Magic, I thought he could be a mascot for the department.” replied Gillian, who was still trying to digest Professor Jenkin's previous comment.

“Gwen, call building control and have them poison it, will you? What's your name, young lady?” he asked, watching her tears well up again at the thought of Magic's fate.

“Gillian McGee”

“McGee! Ah. Ah. Well don't worry. I'll help you write the next one. You're bound to get it with my name on it.”

“No! No! You must tell funders to award this one!” said Irene fiercely. “You are head of department, it is for you to make this right. Her work is good, very good. She is best researcher you have here until I visit.”

Furious brown eyes met watery blue ones. Jenkins' pulse raced. Who was this woman?

“Now look here, Miss... Errrr”.

“Not 'miss'! I am Dr Popescu! I am Hambleton Fellow.” said Irene.

“Thank you for the suggestion, Dr Popescu” he managed. “I shall certainly look into it. And it is good to meet you at last. Perhaps we should go for lunch later in the week and you can tell me about your research?”

Gwen rolled her eyes. Irene looked at him assessingly.

“You buy me lunch on Thursday” she said, flashing him a brilliant smile. Professor Jenkins smiled back.

“Oh, can't we keep the cat?” asked Gillian, seeing her opportunity and arranging Magic neatly on her lap.

“The cat... well, why not?” he said. Irene purred her approval. So did Magic.

Episode 6: Pigeon Post

A commanding voice came from the Building Maintenance Office as Ian drew level with his cleaning trolley.

“Hendry, come in here a minute will you?”

“Yes, Mr Thompson?” said Ian-the-cleaner. This was a lot more polite than Ian’s internal response.

“You’ve been covering the main corridor offices haven’t you? I’ve got Jenkins complaining he’s missing some vital bit of paper or other. You didn’t bin anything that was lying around on the floor did you?”

The piece of paper burned a hole in Ian’s pocket.

“No, I wouldn’t do that Mr Thompson. Only empty what’s in the bin, that’s what you told me.”

The phone rang.

“Building Maintenance, Darren Thompson.... Oh, Jimmy....Yes, I do need four ladders, that wasn’t a typo..... No, no, not for maintenance...You wouldn’t believe it if I told you..... OK, OK, just get someone to bring them round will you?...Yes, right away!”

He put the phone down hard and picked up a mug of tea, sipping reflectively.

“Hendry, have you ever wondered if academics are totally off their heads? I get Dr Hawkins in here telling me he needs four ladders for a student project! I tell him I have to clear it with Jenkins, and when I go and ask Jenkins he just mutters something vague because he’s talking to that Dr Popiscle that’s just turned up”

“Popescu you idiot!” says Ian silently, but Ian-the-cleaner just nods.

“If you ask me she’s some kind of witch – Jenkins looked as if he was in a trance. Do you know she told me she’s some kind of mind reader? Gets it from her gypsy grandmother or something back in Romania. She comes in to get a key to the PhD

office and when she finds out she's been put in with the students she practically puts a curse on me. Claims she can tell that I'm thinking something disrespectful."

There was a sudden yell from the corridor, running feet, and a small black creature streaked past the cleaning trolley with a large flapping object in its mouth. They both ducked as the flapping object flung itself straight through their doorway and a large pigeon knocked Thompson's tea all over his desk.

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"You bad bad Magic, I've finally got you" cooed Dr McGee when she finally managed to scoop up the exhausted cat well outside the main entrance.

"Such a fierce hunter! But you can't bring birds into the department you bad animal!"

Magic snuggled into her neck purring as McGee walked up the steps, avoiding two men manoeuvring a long ladder through the double doors .

"Maybe you'd better come into my office for a bit and lie low."

She waited while the cleaning trolley was wheeled past her, and then unlocked her door with one hand holding on to the cat firmly.

"Oh, what's this I wonder?" A piece of paper lay on the floor.

Episode 7: Hot Tin Roof

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in!" shouted Hawkins, lost in cyberspace.

"Have you got a minute?" asked Shona, standing in the doorway.

"Shona!" said Hawkins, mousing furiously. "Sure... Just hang on... Do sit down... "

"Aren't these a fire hazard?" said Shona, carefully shifting a tottering pile of unopened copies of the Slavonic Symposium on Superstition Studies off the nearest chair into an unlikely space on the floor.

"You're beginning to sound like Thompson..." said Hawkins, scrolling studiously.

"How can I help..."

"Eye contact!" said Shona, sitting down.

"You're a hard woman," said Hawkins, turning off the monitor and swivelling round.

"Hope so!" said Shona.

She quickly recapped her troubled night's sleep and her ideas for exploring lucid dreaming.

"Sounds like fun," said Hawkins. "And there could be a link into beliefs about foretelling the future. Maybe we could persuade people that if they can control their dreams they can control their destinies?"

"Persuade?" said Shona. "That's not very scientific."

"You know what I mean," said Hawkins. "How do you want to kick it off?"

"I'll draw up a protocol," said Shona, getting up, "and run it by you."

"Sounds good," said Hawkins. "See you later."

He turned back to the computer.

"Have you seen her yet?" asked Shona, opening the door .

"Seen who?" said Hawkins, absently.

"Your pal from Transylvania," said Shona. "The stakeholder."

Hawkins, double took, sat bolt upright, and turned paled.

"Irene?" said Hawkins. "Here?"

"Large as life!" said Shona.

"What the hell's she doing here?" said Hawkins.

"She's on some Fellowship," said Shona. "Gwen says she's already ensnared Jenkins."

"Christ on a charabanc," said Hawkins. "That's the last thing I need. How long's she here for?"

"I've no idea," said Shona. "I didn't see any announcements."

"Can we come in?" said Thompson, pushing past Shona. "Where do you want these?"

Just outside the office, Ian was unloading ladders off a trolley.

"That's a fire hazard!" said Thompson, pointing at the piles of papers, as a black cat dodged between his legs. "And where have all these cats come from? They're a health hazard! Someone's going to be unlucky..."

Episode 8: A New Hope

Jonathan Spence checked the piece of paper in his hand, a printed email from Professor Jenkins with directions to his office. Having worked at the university for over a quarter of a century, Jonathan thought he knew every department and what went on in it. However this particular one had him baffled. Google held only cryptic hints about the occupants and their research and teaching pursuits. In a way he supposed it might be a good thing, there would be plenty for him to do, which meant his rolling contract would roll some more.

A strange wheezing noise greeted Jonathan as he stepped through the double doors into the department. At the other end of the corridor there was a man, kneeling on the floor, gasping for breath. A grey cat sat impassively, just beyond the half collapsed figure, regarding him with solemn eyes.

Jonathan hurried forward. He managed a brisk walk before the sweat began to bead on his forehead and his chest hurt.

As he closed in on them, the cat fled.

"Are you ok?" he panted.

"Asss mh maa att att attaaacck", wheezed the gentleman.

Jonathan spotted a blue inhaler that must have tumbled out of reach when the man fell on all fours. Passing it to it's owner, and guiding it to the intended destination he steadied the man as he took three puffs.

It took a few minutes before he regained his composure, but once he had, he introduced himself as Henry Hawkins. The puce-faced man indeed bore a slight resemblance to the only profile picture Mr Spence had found online for the department.

"Does that happen a lot?" asked Jonathan.

"No, not really. I'm not sure what triggered it. I have been a bit stressed lately, and there was that cat, but I'm not usually allergic to them."

Jonathan looked down where the cat had been. A fine talc-like powder covered the carpet. Bending closer and sniffing he exclaimed "Flea powder".

"Beg your pardon?".

"That looks like flea powder. My sister has about a dozen moggies, most of them are strays and there's always at least one of them getting treated for the little blighters. Could you be allergic?"

Hawkins took a step backwards, "That would make sense. I wonder who treated it? Looks like they used enough for a whole menagerie."

While Hawkins pondered the implications Jonathan introduced himself as "A web and systems developer. I'm employed by central services, but loaned out to departments to help get their web presence looking pristine, and help out with any code development you might need, or systems advice. If I don't know the answer, I can always find out."

Hawkins beamed. Not only had this man saved his life, he was going to help fight the good fight. To right one of the terrible wrongs of the department. He was going to get the academics to use their computers properly.

Episode 9: Avoiding the loneliness of thought: a departmental meeting

The academics were slouched over the desks in quiet desperation when the students arrived at the meeting. Dr McGee and Magic were snoozing together, her face resting on the thick fur of his back. Hawko was hunched over his laptop typing furiously. The new visitor to the department – Teresa couldn't remember her name - was doodling with a green fountain pen, drawing elaborate spirals which curled into infinity. The room was stuffy and overheated.

Only Gwen looked up brightly when they arrived and said “Oh hello dears! Thank you for coming. I'm afraid we're running about”, she consulted her watch, “90 minutes late. We're at item 1 on the agenda. Actions from the last meeting”.

Teresa's heart sank. They had been invited for item 6 on the agenda. How could academics possibly talk so much? This seemed to happen at every meeting.

“Say hello to the students” said Gwen in the manner of one addressing a roomful of recalcitrant children. “Teresa and Yvonne are here to give the student feedback.”

The staff remained indifferent. They had lost the will to live some time ago. Shona, who hadn't been a lecturer long enough to object to students, patted the seats next to her.

“There's coffee” she whispered. “Help yourself”.

“That's not coffee” Hawko snorted. “It's the sediment from the bottom of Ian's cleaning bucket.”

“Shhhh” said Gwen.

Professor Jenkins continued. “So as I told the Principal the other day, the only way to raise our standing the REF is to create a prestigious new Chair.”

Hawko pricked up his ears. “I think that's an excellent idea. Maybe in Divination Science? Or Superstition Studies? We could get sponsorship from industry.” He started designing his new web page in his mind's eye. “Professor Henry Hawkins. Daily Mail Professor of Superstition Studies.”

Jenkins ignored him. “And so we decided to recruit a top flight professor from abroad. An international superstar.”

Hawko's face fell. Several other academics sighed. They had heard that idea before.

Irene voiced the thoughts of many “But if they are so brilliant why would they come here?” she said brutally.

“You came here.” Gwen snapped.

“This is true” Irene agreed, unperturbed. “But I have my reasons.” Her gaze alighted upon Hawko for a moment. He shuddered, and retreated behind his laptop screen again.

“So I want everyone to keep a look out for candidates for this post. Action on everyone to find at least one possibility by next week. Action on Hawkins to write the advert. And emphasise that only external candidates need apply” said Jenkins.

Gwen wrote in her minutes “Professor Jenkins discussed the possibility of appointing a new chair but no agreement was reached.” She did not approve of recruiting a new professor. Professors drank too much of the coffee supply and never did what they were told. She was certainly not going to encourage the recruitment of another one by minuting a candidate search.

The afternoon wore on. The coffee grew cold and congealed in pools of tar in the bottom of the cups. The sun moved slowly from window to window in the baking hot room. Magic woke when his patch of sunlight faded, and patted Dr McGee's face to wake her. Teresa, who sat opposite her, couldn't help noticing that she kept glancing furtively at Professor Jenkins, sometimes angry, sometimes confused. She was crumpling and un-crumpling a piece of paper in her hand. “What's going on there?” wondered Teresa. “Does she have to work with that awful man too?”

“Item six on the agenda. Masters students' feedback first” said Professor Jenkins finally. Shona squirmed in an agony of indecision. If she left right now, she would make it to the nursery in time to pick up her son. But wouldn't it be rude to the students who had waited so long to have their say?

Yvonne stood up confidently, smoothing down her boiler suit. “The student body wants to raise some important matters. We feel that the department is not offering value for money to students. We pay these huge fees but what do we get back? Not very bloody much. The teaching's a joke!”

Hawko whimpered and ran his hand through his thinning hair in a gesture of defeat.

“Apologies, I have another appointment” Shona said, dashing for the door. She couldn't bear to witness the mauling which might ensue. Yvonne had the look of a lioness closing in for the kill. Hawko looked more like a geriatric wildebeest.

“And?” said Professor Jenkins. “What do you expect me to do about it?”

Yvonne did not pause. “And the resources are crap! All we asked for was ladders to do our project and it took days for them to arrive. And the cat has fleas.”

Magic looked offended.

“You should consider yourself lucky you got ladders at all.” said Professor Jenkins.

“Don't you realise how much the government has cut our infrastructure budget? Right, we're moving on the item 7.”

“What about the PhD feedback?” asked Teresa timidly.

“You don't have anything to report” said Jenkins firmly.

“The students raised the usual issues of staffing and resources”, wrote Gwen. “The staff took due consideration of their feedback and will look into finding solutions ASAP. Action...” The question was, who should she action to do it? No point in getting Hawko to do it. The students would eat him for breakfast. How about Shona? She usually got things done, and she wasn't around to protest.

Gwen took her responsibilities as the power behind the throne seriously. “Someone has to”, she told herself grimly. “This lot couldn't organise a sacrifice in a goat shed.”

Episode 10: Making an Impact

“So an expanded web presence will really raise your department’s profile” Jonathan finished eagerly. There was a pause. Jenkins seemed to be staring into the distance at something behind Jonathan and he had to force himself not to turn round too.

“And it’s bound to help with the REF”, Jonathan added hastily. He wasn’t sure what this acronym meant exactly, but other academics had responded with an almost magical increase in attention when he’d used it.

Jenkins turned a cold gaze on him as if he’d said something improper.

“It’s not clear to me that a technician has anything of worth to contribute to our REF policy. Tell me, do you feel lucky?” Jenkins smiled as if he had just made a joke, though the smile did not get as far as his pale blue eyes.

“Lucky?” Jonathan wondered if the stories about Professors becoming mentally unhinged over time were actually true.

“Smith and Hodge hypothesise that serendipity plays a substantial role in creating impact, or ‘profile’ as you called it. What is serendipitous about – what was it? – a ‘publications database’? Perhaps if you *feel* lucky, this might increase the serendipitous potential of your work?”

Jonathan could tell this was one of those questions you weren’t supposed to answer. But he wasn’t sure what else to say. The silence lengthened and Jenkins stared into the distance again.

“Oh. So perhaps we can talk about this another time?” Jonathan said at last. And fled.

Halfway down the corridor to the next office on his list, a ladder propped up against the wall almost blocked his way, sticking out across the corridor. He hesitated, wondering whether to walk round it or under it.

Did he feel lucky? After Jenkins? Certainly not. He walked round it.

The office he was after did not seem to have a nameplate beside it like Jenkins'. Instead, stuck to the door was a picture of a cartoon cat with a magician's hat on it, captioned "Magic!!"

Luck? Magic? Maybe they were all unhinged. Still, a job was a job. He took a deep breath and knocked.

"Oh, I can come back if you're busy" he said, now trying not to breath so deeply as a blast of perfume made his nose twitch. There were two women inside, looking almost conspiratorial, clearly in the middle of a discussion. One of them had a cat on her lap and a crumpled piece of paper in her hands.

"You are web profile person!" the other woman announced in a foreign-sounding accent. Jonathan felt his eyes begin to water, either attacked by the perfume or maybe by the vivid almost fluorescent red of her jacket.

"You come in, we help you with profiles."

She looked at the other woman, the one with the cat.

"Why not we create special profile for department and its oh-so-illustrious head Jenkins?" she asked in a meaningful tone.

"Oh Irene!" the other woman replied. "What a good idea!"

Episode 11: Blowing bubbles

The office was very dark and very quiet. Hawkins, sitting back in his desk chair, untensed his muscles and tried to clear his mind. He visualised a bowl of fruit, then the fruit without the bowl, then no apples, then no bananas, then just one clementine. Finally, making a supreme effort of what passed for his will, he dispelled the clementine's form, leaving an all pervading sense of orangeness. Which quickly reformed into a baggy orange boiler suit, which swiftly constricted into a body hugging orange lycra cycling costume...

There was a loud banging on the door which flew open.

"Henry! Henry!" shouted a strongly accented voice. "I must speak with you! Now!"

Hawkins, momentarily blinded, stood up and turned to the door, knocking Irene Popescu's mug out of her hand and splashing tea down the front of her trim red suit and his grubby checked shirt.

"Oh Henry!" said Irene, taking off her jacket and stepping out of her sodden dress to reveal a lacey orange camisole. "You were always so clumsy!"

She hung the jacket on the back of the door, draped the skirt across the radiator and perched on the edge of the chair .

"What's so important?" said Hawkins, removing his shirt to reveal a grubby Incredible String Band singlet.

"That poor Gillian!" said Irene. "That monster! He seeks to steal her research! We must stop him! You must stop him, Henry! For me!"

"What poor Gillian?" said Hawkins, wringing the shirt out over the wastepaper basket.

"Gillian McGhee of course!" said Irene. "What a lovely girl! How can you ask what monster? There is only one monster! That awful man Jenkins!"

"So what's Jenkins done to McGhee?" asked Hawkins, putting the crumpled shirt back on.

The door flew open.

"Hawko! Hawko!" called Gwen, entering the room followed by a train of cats. "The Prof wants to see you immediately! It's about..."

She started, briefly glanced from Hawkins to Irene, turned and fled.

Episode 12: The Gathering Of The Clouds

Gwen was not the sort of lady who ran anywhere except, Ian considered, perhaps in a ladies-only gymnasium. Therefore it was easy to deduce that her burst of speed down the corridor was due to some monumental event. The cleaner thought for a moment. The options before him: follow Gwen, and hope she divulges what she has just seen within earshot; or search for the source himself.

Engaging his best Jedi invisibility disguise Hendry pushed his trolley along, retracing the secretary's steps. It was not long before he noticed Hawko's door slightly ajar. Abandoning the cleaning cart for fear of alerting his quarry he sidled up to the office, duster in hand.

"I had better get down to Jenkins office, before Gwen gives him completely the wrong idea." Hawkins said resignedly.

"You will challenge that devious creature, you will expose his clandestine ways!" Irene insisted passionately.

"With what evidence? Whilst I can quite believe that he has got something to do with it, we haven't a shred of evidence. If I go in there throwing accusations about, I'll be out of a job before you can say rufous orangutans".

"But the letter.." pleaded the Transylvanian.

"Is not enough. I'm sorry Irene.". Henry, clothed once more, left the office. Ian, squatting to dust the skirting board, kept his head down as the lecturer passed.

At that moment, Shona entered the corridor. "Hawko, can I have a word?".

"Would love to, but the demon awaits", Dr Hawkins gestured up the corridor to Professor Jenkins office.

"I'll just be a sec then. I've had an email from the prof over in neuroscience. She's willing to hear our suggestions for a joint proposal. I've got a meeting with her next week."

As the two doctors left the corridor, Ian pondered what he had heard. Irene, looking dejected and slightly soggy left Hawko's office. Ian was nearly caught in her disarming gaze when two students barged through the doors.

Simon and Teresa marched shoulder to shoulder towards Jenkins office. Their faces displaying a symphony of emotions - though anger and despair were most prominent.

Dr Popescu stepped aside to let them pass, then followed on behind.

Ian froze, then scurried unseen to a special place he could discreetly view the showdown in Jenkins office.

Episode 13: Of PhD students and cats

“Come in” said Jenkins absently. Hawko entered, trying to smooth down his crumpled soggy shirt. Jenkins looked at him with disdain.

“What is it, Hawkins?” he demanded wearily.

“Gwen said you wanted to see me”, Hawko replied with a touch of indignation.

”Wanted” is putting it strongly” said Jenkins dryly. “But as you are here now, let me tell you that you have a new PhD student.”

Hawkins beamed. He saw a montage of happy scenes unfold in front of his inner eye in slow motion, as persuasive and untrustworthy as a commercial. He saw himself scribbling equations on the whiteboard, with the student looking on in admiration. The student clapping wildly at his inaugural lecture. Drinking beer together on a Friday evening, talking over research and politics (the student would share his communist leanings, naturally). Collecting a conference Best Paper Award together. In fact, collecting a Nobel prize together..

. “The student is from Bahtar. He hasn't studied in this field before, but his family is eager for him to escape the current political unrest.

“Oh” said Hawkins. Where was Bahtar exactly? It didn't matter. He and the student would become friends, overcome any cultural, religious or political differences in their shared love of research.

“He doesn't speak any English” said Jenkins.

“Oh” said Hawkins again. “But he must be bright, right? Or we wouldn't accept him...” His voice trailed off. Jenkins sniffed.

“He has paid double the usual international students' fee”.

“Oh”.

There was a knock on the door and Hawkins took the opportunity to sidle out. Simon and Teresa came in, having screwed their courage to the sticking point.

“Ah, Slater! Err.... Tessa. I wanted to see you anyway. About this conference” said Jenkins.

“Professor Jenkins. We must see you. It's about this conference” said Simon simultaneously but mutinously.

“I have the review comments here” said Jenkins, gesturing towards a large stack of papers. The reviewing process was entirely digital but Gwen always printed out Jenkin's emails and reviews. She considered the notion of him using email as dangerous and refused to allow it.

“We're doing the same PhD!” blurted Teresa. “We can't both research serendipity.”

“You're not.” said Jenkins. “Simon is looking at happenstance.”

“We are”, said Simon. “They mean almost exactly the same thing. I looked it up in the dictionary.”

Jenkins regarded them coldly. A student using a dictionary was not an event he had anticipated.

“In laymen's terms, perhaps, but not according to Smith and Chesterfeld, 2003” he said, choosing likely sounding names at random. Tessa automatically scribbled it down and he wondered how long she would search for it before giving up.

“The reviewers think our papers are too similar. They say we're doing the same study! They told us to resubmit one paper between us.” she said anxiously. “Whatever shall we do?”

“That's clear enough. We can only fund one conference trip anyway. You must both run your studies and the one with the better results will resubmit the paper. The one with the poorer results must act as assistant.”

“And which of us would be first author?” Simon asked the sixty-four million dollar question.

“Me of course” said Jenkins.

Ian emerged from his listening post as Simon and Teresa left Jenkin's office.

“I'm going to get started right now!” said Simon. “Your experimental design was weak anyway. I bet I get to go”.

“But Simon, I thought we agreed we would stick together until he heard our side of the story! What happened to “I'm not leaving his office until he apologies to us both for misleading us?” Can't we help each other?”

“It's a dog eat dog world. And vice versa.” said Simon, who liked latin

. “Quisling” said Ian under his breath as Simon pass him without a second glance. Teresa was so busy rereading her notes that she walked straight into Ian's cleaning cart. “I'm so sorry” she said, looking at the puddle of water she had spilled. “Let me clean it up for you!”

Ian smiled at her. She had several good conduct stars already, to his recollection. It was time to act. Later that evening, when the staff and students had gone home, Ian put his plan into action. He rounded up as many of the moggies as he could find.

“Here, pussy pussy pussy! Come here you rotten big flea bag!” he cooed at Magic, imitating Dr McGee's sickly sweet tones. Magic glared at him but joined the line of cats trotting after him. He stole into Jenkin's office like a feline Pied Piper. Five cats, a cat nip toy in the in-tray, no food, no litter tray, no escape. Ian nodded in satisfaction and locked the door behind him. The first stage of Operation Revenge was underway.

Episode 14: Food for thought

“May I call you Irene?” Jenkins asked ingratiatingly, as they sat down at a table for two in the elegant little bistro he had selected.

“Why you late?” Irene asked, avoiding his question. “This is not polite when you ask Hambleton Fellow for lunch.”

“I can only apologise. I was held up by the Bahtari ambassador – you know how long-winded these diplomatic types can be.”

Irene stared at him coolly.

“Looking in your eyes I see this apology more like boasting. Yes?”

Jenkins tore his eyes away nervously in case Irene could see even more. Luckily for him they fell on an advancing waiter.

“Some wine I think. How about the Chateauneuf du Pape?”

“Wine at the lunchtime very bad for brain. I take the spritzer water please.”

Jenkins was grateful for the pause while food was ordered.

“So – ah Iren - ah Dr Poperscool...”

“Popescu!”

“Ah, yes. What brought you to Granite for your fellowship? Tell me a little about your research.”

Jenkins knew of no academic who could resist an invitation like that.

“I see whether Mind-reading down to good ability to read body or extra-sensory perception. Some peoples have high mind-reading such as Roma and Celtic Fringe. My grandmother was Roma. Maybe when I look in your eyes I read your mind?”

Jenkins subjected the steak just delivered by the waiter to a sudden examination, going a little pink.

“I come to Granite for many reasons. Some is private, but most of reason is your Dr McGee, Gillian. She is most brilliant researcher. I tell Hambleton that when she and I research together we make revolution in field. Jenkins, you must stop your bad attitude to McGee!”

“Bad attitude? Goodness me, Dr Popeyesul..”

“Popescu!”

“..ah, yes.. whatever gives you that idea? Gillian is a respected colleague.”

Irene leaned forwards, her earrings glittering fiercely.

“Jenkins, no mind-reading is needed here. Her proposal reviews you had and did not give her. We know this, has your handwriting on back!”

Jenkins choked on his mouthful of steak.

“You stop your bad attitude or I tell Hambleton that fellowship cannot be carried out down to your actions. And maybe you get negative serendipity which is very bad luck or even curse!”

She pushed her chair back decisively.

“I leave you to think hard Jenkins. As we say in my country - Don't sell the skin of the bear from the forest.”

In a flash of emerald and turquoise she was gone, leaving Jenkins with his cooling meal.

“That’s odd,” said Shona to Dr Priestly from Neuroscience, at their table over by the door. “I thought our Professor Jenkins was going to make a dead-set for the new Research Fellow from Transylvania. But it looks as if it may all have gone a bit wrong..”

Episode 15: Not by bread alone

After lunch, Shona set off towards the loch. Why, she mused to herself, did so many Universities have lochs, or the vernacular equivalent. Tsinghua, ANU, Granite... But then Universities more than 150 years old mostly didn't seem to need them. Rounding the William McGonagall Memorial Bandstand, she spied a sullen Henry Hawkins staring dejectedly at the waterfowl. Shona sat down on the bench beside him, took a bag of crusts from her havesack and started to toss them to the ornamental ducks.

"They've got an easy life," mused Hawkins distractedly, without looking round. "Eat, sleep, swim, fuck..."

"Word on the street has it that you've been up to a spot of the latter," said Shona. "Have some bread. It's ever so calming."

"Bloody Gwen!" said Hawkins. "I've tried to explain. But she won't even make eye contact."

"Explain what?" said Shona, disingenuously. "Don't you always say that what competent people consent to do with their bodies is no one else's business?"

"No competence or consent required," said Hawkins, taking a crust from the bag and systematically shredding it. "Not when bodies aren't involved."

"So you weren't both in a state of undress then,?" said Shona. "Don't forget to throw the bread!"

"Yes, of course we were!" said Hawkins, scattering crumbs in the general direction of the ducks. "Nothing unusual there."

"Nothing unusual?" said a puzzled Shona.

"No, not at all unusual," said Hawkins. "That wasn't the first time."

"Not the first time?" echoed an incredulous Shona. "How long have you two known each other? How well have you two known each other? Were you lovers?"

"Far less than that," said Hawkins, sadly. "Legally at any rate."

"You were married!" said Shona. "But you weren't lovers? How convenient!"

"Exactly," said Hawkins. "Boy, how I've lived to regret it."

"So what happened," asked Shona. "More bread?"

"We were both postgraduate students," said Hawkins. "We met at a summer school on her campus, just before the Wall came down. She had an offer of a postdoc in Oban but couldn't get an exit visa without an UK entry visa, and couldn't get an entry visa because her country was on a list of evil empires. Marriage to a Brit cut through all the red tape in those days. Now they're in the EU, no one cares."

"That was noble of you!" said Shona. "Are you sure you didn't fancy her?"

"That was never a consideration," said Hawkins. "She's gay."

"Ah," said Shona thoughtfully. "Ah. Doesn't look like Jenkins knows yet. Bread?"

"Good luck to him," said Hawkins taking another crust, "Doesn't the wean like doing this?"

"He certainly does," said Shona. "So do I!"

Episode 16: A Dream Implosion

Dr Shipley pulled her shoulders back and took a deep breath. For many reasons she hoped the meeting with Prof Rose Stephen would go well. Interdisciplinary grant applications were always considered more favourably than those for a single subject area. As a proper Research Fellow, she would have the security, respect, and control denied her as a lowly part time post doc. She would also have the money and job security to prevent her ex-husband selling the house from under her.

She knocked on the professors' office door. As a voice bid her enter, David Coverdale whispered "Here I go again on my own" in the depths of her mind. Ignoring her subconscious, Shona entered the office, and with a winning smile proffered her hand.

Rose and Shona were both 44, but the neuroscience professor looked rather less worn. Polite and pleasant, she made her potential colleague welcome and listened to her spiel.

Dr Shipley outlined the preliminary research that she had undertaken with Hawko, and the initial results. Her research was a collection of lucid dreaming experiences. They detailed how and when students were most likely to have a lucid dream. She then went on to the information she had collected on different religions and philosophies on the meaning and importance of lucid dreaming and the links to out of body experiences.

Prof Stephen's interest appeared to wane.

Tori Amos and her piano sang quietly inside Shona's head, "Got a bowling ball in my stomach, and a desert in my mouth. Figures that my courage would choose to sell out now".

Shona tried to recover the lost connection, clearing her throat and willing some saliva back into her mouth, "Of course that would not be the focus of our joint research. We would be interested to discover what actually goes on inside the brain while these experiences are happening. It would also be of great scientific interest to find out if the brains of those few who describe out of body experiences are doing the same thing as the regular lucid dreamers. Are they able to observe their surroundings despite being

asleep? The results so far complement the work of Dr Pern Priestly. I met him earlier today and he has been most helpful."

Rose's face clouded at the mention of Priestly's name.

"Are you aware of the allegations that have been levelled against Pern Priestly"?

"No. Are they serious?"

"They involve the supply of hallucinogenic drugs to students participating in his research. It would be prudent to leave any mention of his work out of our discussions until the after the trial."

The disembodied voice of Thea Gilmore proclaimed "Is this drama? Is this comedy? You know my character witness just went down for perjury".

Shona scrambled for something positive to say to disperse the palpable cloud of negativity in the room. Some free-thinking neurons fired off on a tangent about getting the Physics department to measure if there might be differences in the electric field of a room based on the moods of the occupants. Maybe the Scientologists would share their research on the subject? The voice of Kate Bush replaced Thea's whispering that she still dreamt of Orgonon.

As the silence grew, the professors eyes seemed to focus on the wall behind Shona.

Bowling for Soup, true to their punk origins, upped the volume, "It's like a bad movie, she is looking through me, if you were me then you'd be, screaming someone shoot me". Silently Shona cursed her oldest daughter's taste in music, and the fact it had taken root in her brain.

"Thank you for coming to see me Dr Shipley. You have certainly given me lots to think about. I will get back to you with my answer within the week. Good day."

Episode 17: Infrasound

“Have you seen this?” said Hawko. “It's gone viral on You Tube. Why are cat videos so popular anyway?”

Dr McGee looked over his shoulder. “Cats have been with us since ancient times. They represent our connection to the other world, to everything that is dark and mysterious. In Celtic mythology...”

“Other world is right!” interrupted Hawko. “What are the beasties doing now?”

They peered more closely at the video on Hawko's monitor. There was a flurry of claws and paws in a snow storm of paper. It was as if an infinity of cats were shredding the contents of the Library of Congress. Every so often, one of the cats would stop shredding to miaow in triumph. A large amber eye loomed closer and closer until it filled the screen. It winked, solemnly, and moved away.

“Magic!” exclaimed Gillian “I would know him anywhere.”

“Hang on” said Hawko. “I know that office.” He pointed at the bookshelves. There were neatly ordered rows of “The Journal of Applied MetaMagical Anthropolgy” lining the shelves. Several gilt edged framed degree certificates hung on the walls.

“It's Jenkin's office. It must be. He edits MetaMagical whatsit. No one else reads it”

They watched in fascination as the cats started a game of three dimensional tag over all available surfaces and fabrics. The largest of the cats periodically stopped, backed against a surface and quivered his tail with a great air of satisfaction.

“Oh, Magic” said Gillian in exasperation. “If you keep on spraying I'll have to take you to the vet.”

“Not if he only does it in Jenkin's office” said Hawko with a grin.

The door opened and Ian sidled in to empty the bin.

“Good morning Ian” said Gillian.

Ian smiled at her benevolently. "Can't put empty food wrappers in the bin" he said officiously to Hawko, handing him an empty packet of bombay mix he fished out of the bin. "Ants".

"Where do you propose I keep them? The filing cabinet? Under "R" for rubbish? Or would you prefer "F" for food so the ants can find it easily?"

Ian stared at him blankly and totted up another black mark against Hawko in his mental black book.

"But how did the kitties get into Jenkin's office?" Gillian pondered.

"Saw that student outside his office last night" said Ian. "You know, that dodgy PhD student. Simon."

"Simon's not that dodgy." protested Hawko mildly. "Still, I wouldn't have credited him with such a good idea."

"Listen, Henry. The reason I'm here. Have you read this paper? It arrived by internal mail, but whoever sent it forgot to say who it was from"

Ian bustled out with his bin bag, a grin of satisfaction on his face. Hawko looked at the paper.

"Oh yes, Tandy (1998)*. I always loved that paper. That's the one where the author thinks his office is haunted and then he realises that it's a new ventilation system which emits infrasound."

"That's right, and it turns out that the infra-sound vibrates at a frequency which makes one's eyeballs vibrate slightly which gives the perception of a figure in one's peripheral vision. The whole body vibration causes hyperventilation which causes anxiety and fear, but the victim can't hear the sound."

"Victim?" said Hawko. He looked at the passages Gillian had highlighted. "breathlessness usually at rest, often accompanied by light-headedness, muscle cramps, fear of sudden death and a feeling of difficulty in breathing in". "It would not be

unreasonable to suggest I was terrified. V.T. was unable to see any detail and finally built up the courage to turn and face the thing. As he turned the apparition faded and disappeared. There was absolutely no evidence to support what he had seen so he decided he must be cracking up”.

“Gillian, what are you suggesting?” said Hawko, a glimmer of an idea dawning.

“Do you know any electrical engineers?” she said, avoiding the question.

“Yes, why?”

She borrowed his browser window and brought up an article “How to build an infra-sound generator circuit.”

“Are you thinking we should build a.... but where would we put it?”

“There's a cleaning cupboard next to Jenkin's office” said Gillian, meeting his eyes with a sudden steely intensity.

“Wouldn't want to be on your enemy list” said Hawko. “But count me in. We can go and see Ted in engineering right away. I think he'll enjoy a new project.”

As they walked along the corridor they noticed Jenkins unlocking his office, briefcase under his arm. There was a series of ear splitting miaows and a stream of angry cats issued forth into the corridor. An incoherent bellow of rage followed.

“Poor Professor Jenkins seems to be having a bad day” observed Gillian brightly.

- Tandy, V. (1998) The Ghost in the Machine. Journal of the Society for Psychical Research 62(851). Retrieved 20/3/11 from <http://www.psy.herts.ac.uk/ghost/ghost-in-machine.pdf>

Chapter 18: The Ghost in the Machine

“I want my office industrially cleaned at once,” Jenkins told Gwen in a tone of cold rage. “And get the Building Maintenance Office to find a way of rounding up the cats. Tell Thompson his job is on the line if they aren’t out of the building by first thing tomorrow.”

“Yes, dearie,” said Gwen calmly, resolving not to put it quite like that to Darren Thompson, one of her more useful contacts. “I’m sure he’ll get the cats under control before the Principal turns up tomorrow. Professor Findler isn’t due until 11.”

Jenkins went pale.

“Findler! Here! Why didn’t you tell me before?”

“But I did, dearie. I printed out the email at the start of the week. And you knew he was inspecting all the departments personally before the budget round because you told me that last week.”

“The accursed cats! All my correspondence is in there, either shredded or pissed on or both.”

Gwen’s fingers had been busily moving over her keyboard, and she efficiently collected the two sheets that slid out of the printer in the corner. Jenkins almost snatched them from her hand, inserted his reading glasses low on his nose, and peered fervidly.

“Arrives 11, departmental tour, meet representative students, sandwiches at 12, address all staff at 1,” he muttered to himself. “Circulate this to everyone” he told Gwen. “Tell Hawko to have his Applied Superstition students lined up in the meeting room for 11.30. Get Dr Popeye, she’s bound to impress him”. He shuddered slightly. “And order the grade 3 sandwiches, the ones with the smoked salmon and the sushi.”

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Darren Thompson regarded the VC’s party with a glow of satisfaction. “Use a bit of psychology” was one of his favourite phrases, and he’d proved that this even worked on

cats. A large catnip mouse on a string and several plates of cat food outside on the bandstand had done the trick. The cats had gone. Oh – nearly gone.

In the corridor just outside Jenkins' office, Professor Findler stopped in mid-step. In front of him, just by the cleaning cupboard, crouched a large black cat. Fur stood on end all along its back. An eerie moan welled up from its throat as its head swung from side to side and its large eyes stared wildly at something that was not there.

“Jenkins, is this animal suffering from rabies?” Findler asked crisply.

“Ah, Principal, ah, no, just an experimental subject from.. from...my colleague Dr Hawkin's Lab.”

“Does your department have a permit for animal experiments? Have you considered the security issues, animals rights groups and so on?” Findler's voice trailed off, and he suddenly looked from side to side.

“That's funny, I could have sworn for a moment...No, surely not.”

Episode 19: Carry On up the Khyber

Henry Hawkins sat back in his chair, trilling D/E on a Clarke's tin whistle, trying to catch the epiphanic point when the D changed to the E. Or was it vice-versa?

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in!" shouted Hawkins.

The door flew open and a tall young man in a Brooks Brothers suit entered the office, hands behind his back. His skin was the shade of the finest Swiss milk chocolate and his straight jet black hair tumbled down his shoulders.

"My dear old chap!" he said, in a perfect Oxbridge accent. "So you're to be my supervisor! I'm sure we'll be the greatest of chums!"

He drew his hands forward and proffered Hawkins an opened 1.5 litre bottle of "Loch Lomond" whisky.

"I brought this for you!" said the young man, "but it looked so good I thought I might sample it first. I hope you don't mind!"

"I'm not supposed to take presents from students," stuttered Hawkins. "Who did you say you were?"

"That's a shame!" said the young man, withdrawing the offer. "More for me, what! I'm your new student! From Bahtar!"

"But I thought Bahtar was in the Punjab?" said Hawkins. "That's what it says in Wikipedia. But you're not wearing a turban and you seem to drink alcohol."

"With alacrity!" said the young man. "My name's Colin Campbell. I'm the great grandson of Bahtar's British founder. I suppose I'm really a Presbyterian but I never had any time for any of that nonsense. Fancy being back in Blighty! It's every bit as bad as I remembered."

"Aren't you here escaping from the political unrest?" said Hawkins.

Colin threw back his head and laughed.

"Utter balderdash!" he said. "I'd much rather be back home. The polo season's about to start. I've been sent into exile because they say I'm too much of a playboy. How can one possibly be too much of a playboy, I ask you?"

"So are you qualified to do a PhD?" asked Hawkins, doubtfully.

"Of course I am!" said Colin. "A bloody good one too if a first from Lady Thatcher College is anything to go by."

"So what's your topic?" asked Hawkins.

"Dreams," said Colin. "When I was studying psychotropism for my Honours dissertation at Lady T, I had some ideas about how maybe it would be worth revisiting dear old Freud and taking his patients dreams literally instead of figuratively."

"Very interesting!" said Hawkins, thoughtfully. "I think we may have some common ground. You must meet Shona. So why are you paying double the usual fees?"

"Only double?" said Colin. "They got off cheap. It's a bribe of course!"

"Why would anyone want to bribe Granite?" asked Hawkins.

"Haven't they told you?" asked Colin. "You're going to open a campus in Bahtar."

"A campus in Bahtar..." said Hawkins.

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in!" called Hawkins.

The door opened slowly .

"I can come back if you're busy..." said Gwen. "But the Prof wanted me to tell you. The Principal's here. And he's visiting your lab right now."

"Who is this charming lady?" asked Colin, taking Gwen's right hand and kissing it.

"Someone important no doubt!"

"Oh no," said a flustered Gwen, the tips of her ears glowing pink. "Just a secretary..."

Episode 20: Do androids dream of electric sheep?

Shona sat despondently in her office, retracing the meeting in her mind, painfully reliving the moment it all seemed to go pear-shaped. Why hadn't that bloody Dr Priestly told her he was under investigation? Though Shona knew deep down she was mostly cross with herself for letting her nerves get the better of her. There was a knock at the door, and a large, friendly face appeared.

"Hello, Dr Shipley?, I'm Jonathan Spence from Central Services. I'd like to arrange a time to work on your web presence."

"Oh, hello Jonathan, come in. Call me Shona. Henry has been extolling your virtues." Shona replied as she shook his hand, giving him an electric shock. The phone rang. Whilst she answered it, Jonathan let his eyes wander over the well stocked bookcase. It contained dozens of books by Carlos Castaneda. He recognised one or two of the other authors by reputation - Aldous Huxley and Hunter S. Thompson. He glanced again at the harassed looking post-doc as she listened intently to the caller. She didn't look like the sort of person who messed around with mescaline and LSD, but given what he'd seen so far in the department, Mr Spence did not feel inclined to make any hasty judgements.

"Sorry about that. My daughters' school."

"Nothing serious I hope?"

"No, not this time thankfully.", she smiled. "So I'm guessing you'll want to know what I'm researching and put it onto a web page?"

"That'll do nicely to start with, but I would like to go a little bit further if I may? Given the current economic climate and all the cuts, it's more important than ever to disseminate your research on all available outlets. Facebook, twitter, start a blog, that kind of thing."

"How long will it take?" Shona inquired.

"Well, to get you up and running, not long at all. Then it just takes as long as you want to spend each day, letting people know what you're doing. You can also read about what other people are doing too. It's a great way to network."

Shona looked skeptical. Time was something she usually found herself short on. Jonathan pulled out his pride and joy. On his LG Optimus Big he opened up Twitter.

"Now we just need something to search on, and you can see what other people are saying about your subject right now".

"Lucid Dreaming" she suggested.

Jonathan typed in the concatenated hash tag and held up the phone so Shona could see. Her eyes widened as she noticed the messages were all written within the last day.

"Can I contact these people?"

"Yes. Once your account is set up, you just need to hit reply - like an email that anyone can read."

Instant access to practicing lucid dreamers all over the world. It would give the proposal a whole new angle and save months on training students up! Absently Shona reached to take the phone. It crackled and the screen went blank. Jonathan looked as though he might cry.

"I'm so sorry, I tend to carry a lot of static. I'm not too good around machines. Will you be able to get it fixed?"

"I hope so. This model isn't officially out yet, and I sort of got hold of it through a friend of a friend. Does that happen when you use your computer?"

"Yes, but I have a workaround. I take off my socks and shoes, lean out the window and touch the lightening rod cable before turning it on, and then switching it off when I'm finished before I leave my chair. That usually works. "

"Oh." Jonathan made a mental note never to let Shona touch anything of his ever again.

"That's going to make it pretty tricky to use social media effectively. There's got to be a way around it. I'll bring you an antistatic bracelet, that might work."

The Dresden Dolls answered in Shona's mind, "I don't necessarily believe there is a cure for this, so I might join your century, but only as a doubtful guest."

Episode 21: The Principal's faux pas

The Principal still looked a bit green about the gills. Gwen, having rounded up the staff and students who ought to be at lunch, was solicitously offering him some of the less curled up sandwiches.

“Have this one, dearie” she said. “I don't think the fish is off this time.”

Professor Findler, a veteran of many grade three university lunches, sniffed the sandwich carefully before committing it to his mouth. He hadn't had a very good morning. He always dreaded coming to this department. He was convinced the staff were mad. Barking mad. In Jenkin's case, dangerously so. Today it seemed worse than ever. There was something about the place which was making him profoundly uneasy. In the corridor he had been sure he had seen something out of the corner of his eye. He was sure that wretched cat had seen it too, but nobody else had.

“It simply couldn't be” he thought unhappily. “Ghosts aren't real. And what would old Professor Murgatroyd's spirit be doing in this department?”

One of the few things the former Principal and his successor agreed on was on the sheer worthlessness of the department of Applied MetaMagical Anthropology.

“If he's anywhere, he'll be in the seventh level of hell...Hello” his thoughts were interrupted in a most welcome way by the arrival of a vision of Romany loveliness clad in a purple velvet scarf and bronze earrings.

“Professor Findler! I am Irene Popescue. Hambleton scholar.” she seized his hand with both of hers and grasped it warmly. He inhaled her dizzying perfume and gave a weak smile.

“Charmed, I'm sure” he said.

“But what is wrong? You look fatigued. You are quite well?”

“I...errr..”

“You have seen something!” whispered Irene dramatically. “You have been touched by the Other World. I have seen that look on a man's face once only. He died soon after.”

Findler turned paler. “Nonsense...” but his voice trailed off under her intense gaze.

“But do not be alarmed” she crooned, squeezing his hands tighter. “Only those with the highest intelligence can brush with the Other World in this way. It is a mark of the gifted. Those who burn the brightest, they burn for shortest time”.

The Principal gulped and reached for another sandwich, mostly to escape her piercing eyes. He bit into it and choked.

“Rotten fish” he muttered and ran for the toilets.

“Where's the old boy off to then?” inquired Colin, taking a swig from a paper cup filled with an amber liquid.

“Dunno” said Yvonne “He didn't stay long did he?”

“Thank goodness” said Teresa. “I was so worried that the rumours were true and he would close the department.”

“What? Surely not?” said Colin. “I only just got here.”

“S'all right” said Yvonne complacently. “I'm wearing my lucky pants. Nothing can go wrong today”.

Colin looked at the curves under her boiler suit appreciatively. “They are lucky, your pants.” he said.

She grinned back at him but neatly intercepted his hand on the way to her behind. “Don't push your luck, new boy” she said.

The Principal came back into the common room at a brisk trot. He had just about pulled himself together after getting rid of the bad fish sandwich, but on the way back he had tripped over the stray cat who was still wailing outside the cleaning cupboard. He had seen the shadow again out of the corner of his eye. This time he was sure Principal

Murgatroyd had been trying to tell him something. With a supreme effort, he put this at the back of his mind and went to stand next to the projector.

“Right” he said. “It's very nice to be here today at the Department of Applied MetaMagical Anthropology. As you know, I am visiting all departments to personally inform staff about how the next round of budget cuts will affect you. We find ourselves in a difficult position. Our government teaching funding has been cut by 15% and our research funding has also reduced by 30% since the last RAE.”

He pointed at a slideful of pie charts.

“Your slides are a year out of date!” said Yvonne indignantly. “You could at least have updated them” She pointed at the time stamp Powerpoint had inserted at the bottom of the slide.

“But the research funding in this department increased by 20% last year because we did so well at the RAE” said Jenkins.

“Thanks to hiring Dr McGee and her 4* papers” said Hawko under his breath.

Jenkins was looking more closely at the slides.

“Principal, those graphs are for the Department of Psychology.”

“What? Oh, yes. Same thing. In fact, I was just going to explain how your two departments were going to merge” said Professor Findler airily.

A sudden silence filled the room. For once staff and students of the Department of Applied MetaMagical Anthropology were united. Everyone glared at him in outrage. Jenkins spoke for them all.

“That is simply egregious. Anyone with the slightest grasp of either subject would realise that is ridiculous. The very fact that you suggest it tells us that you are not fit for your post. You think I don't have influence at Senate? You think I wouldn't raise a vote of no-confidence against you if you try this? Try it, Findler! Just try it!”

Jenkins was on his feet, jabbing his finger at the Principal. Behind him, an array of angry students cheered. A motley collection of staff clapped, standing united behind their head of department. Far at the back of the room a shadow moved. The shade of Professor Murgatroyd mouthed the words

“I know where you keep the real auditor's report”.

Profesor Findler opened his mouth to speak but nothing came out. He tried again.

“The proposal was for consultation merely.” He started walking quickly for the door. “I have another meeting. I will contact you next week...” his voice trailed off.

Jenkins waved the V sign at his departing back.

“Gwen, fetch the wine from the office store cupboard. This calls for celebration.”

Episode 22 Bad eggs

Ian sighed as he pushed the cleaning trolley into the PhD student's open-plan office, narrowly missing the base of the ladder propped up near the door. Of all the burdens he had to bear during this assignment, cleaning in here was one of the heaviest.

Each student had their own cubicle made of grey screens, which meant that the room was a sequence of revolting surprises. He shuddered, remembering the coffee mug with the blue fur growing inside it. That had been next to a box containing a week-old slice of pizza from the Italiano Fantastico outlet in the student's union. His complaint to Darren Thompson had produced a large notice: "NO FOOD AND DRINK IN THIS LAB. Students are reminded that poor hygiene creates Health Risks' for everybody, signed Building Maintenance Office."

Today there was a half-eaten egg sandwich on the table next to the notice, and, oddly, an empty wine glass.

As he donned his rubber gloves and dropped the sandwich into the black bin bag on his trolley, he heard voices from a cubicle near the back of the room.

"But your research is fascinating, Teresa. Serendipity is such a hot topic. And your study seems so well-planned and thorough."

"Oh, do you think so? My supervisor – Professor Jenkins - isn't very encouraging about it."

"He's probably jealous of your ability. My dissertation supervisor at Lady T was like that - a mediocrity too insecure to deal with real ability when he met it."

"But you got a first anyway."

"Unfortunately the poor man confused his cup of coffee with the psychotropic dose for one of my experimental subjects. He was found wandering the quad entirely naked playing 'My love is like a red red rose' on his flute. Temporary rustication was the inevitable outcome. However the head of department was most understanding and I

believe he told my friend the Governor General that he had never read such a good submission. But that's enough about me. Tell me more about serendipity Teresa.”

Ian frowned as he heard Teresa giggle in a most uncharacteristic way.

“Ooh, Colin. All that wine Professor Jenkins handed out has made me feel a bit fuzzy.”

Ian switched the vacuum cleaner on so he wouldn't have to listen to any more of this nonsense. He fingered the black balaclava in his pocket as he raged internally against the Colin Campbells of the world with their money and their arrogance. Their time was ending! Bahtar liberation was coming.

Episode 23: Telling Talk from Bahtar

Henry Hawkins sat back in his chair and softly chanted: Om Mani Padme Hum, Om Mani Padme Hum, The Jewel in The Lotus, In the Orange Lotus Blossom, In the Orange Boiler Suit...

There was a knock at the door.

"Can I come in?" said Professor Jenkins, closing the door behind him. "Oh, are you asleep?"

"No, no..." said Hawkins hastily clearing a chair. "Just meditating."

"Do people still do that?" said Jenkins. "I thought that went out with the Beatles."

"It's action research," said Hawkins. "Everyone says introspection'll be the next hot meta-magical methodology. Anyway, what's up? That was one hell of a show you put on for the Principal. What's the come back?"

"No come back," said Jenkins. "Thanks to that fiendish device you planted in the cupboard. It was you, wasn't it!"

Hawkins said nothing, and stared anxiously at the floor..

"Come on Henry," said Jenkins, "never let it be said that I'm not a good sport."

Warning signals sounded in Hawkin's subconscious. Jenkins never called him Henry. Not unless he wanted something.

"What exactly do you want?" said Hawkins, resignedly.

"Well," said Jenkins. "There are cuts coming and we can't escape them. Merger with the rats and stats brigade is completely out of the question. So we have to expand. The Funding Council's already cut our Home/EU quota, and we can't go on trading on the Harry Potter factor to attract overseas students for ever."

"What's the plan?" asked Hawkins. "And how am I involved?"

"If Mohammed won't come to the mountain..." said Jenkins.

"So the rumours about a campus in Bahtar are true?" said Hawkins.

"Oh yes," said Jenkins. "It's an exciting new dimension for us all. And Meta-Magical Anthropology is going to be right there at the start. All the material for the MSc in Credulity's on the Actual Teaching Environment, isn't it?"

"Well..." said Hawkins, guardedly. "'All' is maybe an exaggeration..."

"We'll get someone in to clean it up," said Jenkins. "We'll need to. We're going to rebrand it. As an MSc in Advertising."

"Advertising?" said Hawkins. "Won't that upset the School of Expectation Management?"

"I hope so!" said Jenkins, vehemently. "Besmirching our insights with their pseudo science."

"And I'm the programme director so you want me to organise the new MSc?" said Hawkins.

"Not only that," said Jenkins, brightly. "We need someone out there on the ground, flying the flag for Granite. Gwen will give you all the briefing material. There's a daily flight from Machrihanish. Have you got a current passport...?"

Episode 24: Murphy was an Optimist

It was a beautiful morning. Sunlight streamed gloriously into the staff common room. Birdsong heralded the arrival of Ēostre of the dawn. Though usually one to acknowledge most deity's and their effect on the planet, today was an exception for Shona who was looking somewhat less bright-eyed and bushy-tailed than usual. Her lucid dreaming explorations had taken a turn for the worse last night, and she wasn't quite ready to examine the memory yet. Her main priority this morning was avoiding a migraine. Much as she wanted to pour a giant mug of coffee to throw off the cobwebs, chances were, it would rip her vision in two, and stomp on her brain until she could no longer stand.

Opting to keep her sugar levels up instead, she took the last emergency Danish pastry from the freezer compartment of the fridge, and popped it into the microwave. Her thoughts drifted off in a dozen directions then reality descended.

'Ping!'.

Shona was just in the process of retrieving her breakfast when the jam seeped through and burnt her hand. "Ow!" she yelped as the pastry leapt out of her hand and flipped over on it's way to the floor. A couple of unlucky ants experienced something akin to a lava bath as they were enveloped in the boiling jam.

Shona pondered the mess on the floor as she sucked on her injured palm. She thought about luck. Then about the cuts and the money worries felt inside and outside the university. She thought about business, and the promise of a way out of the problems so many people were facing. She thought about Murphy and Reilly and swiss cheese models. A corner of her mind quietly began chanting "O Fortuna, velut luna, statu variabilis...". She thought about reversing it. The threads converged and the pattern became clear.

Dr McGee entered the room "Oh dear, what happened?".

"I just had an idea. Would you be interested in working on a Knowledge Transfer proposal to overhaul business practices to incorporate all the research that has been done so far on luck?"

Episode 25: Make room for the Mushrooms

The morning's sunshine had been doused by a flurry of rain by lunchtime, and it remained damp, though it wasn't actually raining. Granite University's rugby pitch glistened serenely. Shona wore a thick wool coat and knee-high leather boots that kept her warm and dry as she took a short cut across the grass from the Department of Applied MetaMagical Anthropology, tucked away on the edge of campus. A figure at the edge of the field straightened up inspecting something. Recognising Hawkin's new PhD student Shona decided to investigate.

"Ah, Shona, how lovely to see you. You look radiant, and so do these little beauties!"

"Hello Colin. What have you got there?"

"Ingredients for some top class research. What! I've never seen such an abundance of psilocybe semilanceata. The climate here is perfect."

"You do know that every year we have some students who take it upon themselves to try out those liberty cap mushrooms? The lucky ones get them mixed up with Inocybe geophylla, and after they realise that they are not going to die they go completely off wild 'shrooms. The not so lucky ones, once they have finished feeling like gods and assuming they don't have a bad trip usually end up on a mental ward for a while."

"Whilst I'm told you are as wise as you are lovely, I find it hard to believe you haven't investigated these in your research. A guaranteed waking lucid dream that is only a pot noodle away?"

"Nothing is guaranteed, Colin, except trouble if you follow that route. Neither Henry nor myself condone the use of psychotropics. The resulting research would be useless, and the risks are unacceptable."

"Ah, so the doors of perception haven't been opened for you yet?"

"Actually they have, and without the use of drugs. Do you know why Hawkins sits in his office doing upside-down contemplations, using windows as doors with his mind? The whole point of research is knowing what is real, and what is fanciful conjecture

whilst finding the gaps that conventional science paper over. It's a bit hard to retain your objectivity if you're off your head don't you think? Besides, I'm of the MacKay bloodline. I have never needed any hallucinogenics to do out of body research. "

Lady Gaga sang "Baby I was born this way", on the cusp of Shona's hearing.

"Conventional science, eh! That's a new word for it."

"Lord Kelvin infamously said 'There is nothing new to be discovered in physics now, All that remains is more and more precise measurements.' That was before Einstein was born and relativity discovered. It is our duty to root out the false assumptions, the illusive, like the imaginary part of a complex number equation. Without it the answer is wrong, but conventional thinking won't accept anything that isn't concrete and tangible. To do that you'll need your wits about you!"

With that Shona continued on her journey, leaving Colin to make his fungi decision.

Episode 26: Crisis averted

Teresa looked gloomily around the PhD offices. Colin was sitting with his feet on the desk, rhythmically tapping his pen on the desk in time to whatever he was listening to on his iPod. It sounded like a sitar compilation, judging from the jangling escaping from his ear phones. From time to time he would noisily slurp from a flask of what smelt very like mushroom soup. Simon was typing busily, consulting his field notebook with an air of industry. Even his typing sounded confident. Teresa hated him. She hated the way he left used coffee mugs all along the window sill to grow mould. She hated the way he answered every question at the lab meetings a split second before she did. She particularly hated the fact that he seemed to have experimental results before her, which no doubt meant he would win Jenkin's challenge and get to go the conference instead of her. And to really rub it in, she would have to be Simon's assistant. Simon, with his greasy hair and his God complex.

"I have to get out of here" she said suddenly, and grabbing her notebook headed outside to the duck pond. The men waited until she was safely gone and then raided her desk drawer for biscuits.

"What's eating her?" asked Colin idly.

"I think she's pissed off with me again" grinned Simon. "I'm trying to freak her out about this conference thing. She thinks I've got results from my experiments already."

"Well, what are you typing up then?"

Simon showed Colin his notebook which consisted of closely written pages. Colin read a sample: "Luck, luck, luck. Black cats. Clover leaves. Rabbits' feet. Why are rabbits' feet lucky? Is it both feet or just one? Luck, happenstance, serendipity. Cross fingers. Break a leg." Over the page, there were a series of signatures all the same name, but with different flourishes: "Dr Simon Slater, PhD".

“What's this, old boy? You haven't done anything at all, have you? You're just pretending to be busy to wind poor Teresa up so she gets flustered and doesn't submit anything to the conference”

“No I'm not” said Simon indignantly. “I'm winding her up so she works extra hard and then I write up her experimental results and submit them before she has a chance to.”

Colin looked at him thoughtfully over the top of his flask, but chose not to say anything. Outside, Teresa was tearing page after page out of her notebook and throwing in the pond. The duck, having established that the paper was not edible had lost interest in her and had turned their attention to some nearby undergraduates who were getting rid of the mouldy bread from the halls of residence kitchens.

“Even the ducks ignore me” thought Teresa morosely.

“Teresa! Teresa! What are you doing?” She felt a hand on her arm, and realised that someone was calling her name. It was Dr McGee.

“Hullo” she said in a small voice, not meeting her eyes. Dr McGee firmly extracted the notebook from Teresa's grasp, rounded up some of the sodden pages from the edge of the pond and steered her towards the campus coffee shop. She recognised a Phd student crisis when she saw one, and knew that caffeine, sugar, sympathy and a bracing pep talk were required.

“Now”, she said, setting a hot mug of latte and a gingerbread muffin in front of the student, and discretely placing a packet of tissues in easy reach, “What's the matter?”

“How ever hard I try, I can't do enough work. It's never good enough. I'm never good enough” sniffed Teresa.”Everyone else is getting on so much faster than I am. I'm never going to finish it.”

“There there” said Dr McGee, kindly patting her hand. “I remember feeling exactly like that when I was doing my PhD. But you know what? I did manage to do it. Almost everyone who does a PhD feels like that at some point or other. The trick is to work away at it steadily – treat it like a 9-5 job instead of a life work. Don't work huge long

hours now or you'll exhaust yourself later. A PhD's more like a marathon than a sprint. You need to pace yourself. You need to set yourself realistic expectations of what you can achieve too. But your supervisor can help you with that.”

“But Professor Jenkins never thinks I have done enough. He always thinks I should have read something else. I just can't keep up”

“Professor Jenkins is your supervisor? Ah. Well, at any rate, you shouldn't worry about your progress in comparison to other students. It's not as if you're competing with them. You get your PhD when it's ready, and they get theirs when they're ready”.

Through crumbs of gingerbread and sniffs into her tissue, Teresa explained the situation with Simon and the conference. Dr McGee seethed inwardly. How dare Jenkins put his student in such a demoralising situation? Sadistic old toad. She didn't normally like to interfere in the delicate relationship between student and supervisor, but in this case she was going to intervene.

“Tell me about your experiment. Maybe I can help.”

Teresa brightened. “It's about serendipity. I want to see whether people who rate themselves as lucky are more likely to take advantage of opportunities when they do arise than people who rate themselves as unlucky. I think that maybe people who feel lucky, act lucky and then become lucky because of their behaviour”.

Dr McGee did not point out the previous work which had been done in the area, as Professor Jenkins would have done. She nodded and said briskly: “Excellent. That sounds plausible. How are you going to get people to rate their perceptions of luckiness?”

Teresa wasn't used to having her ideas accepted so readily, but she had already thought through what she might do for the experiment. She explained, and Dr McGee listened with interest, interjecting comments and suggestions from time to time.

“This is why I wanted to do a PhD” thought Teresa, feeling happier than she had for a long time.”I wanted to have discussions about my work and get new ideas from it”. For

the first time, she began to realise that her desperate struggles to get Jenkins to engage with her work might not be her fault. “I can put this right” she thought. “I can do this.”

Episode 27 Administration of things

Jenkins entered the admin office at an alarming speed. Gwen sighed, recognising the end of the unparalleled period of near sweetness-and-light that had followed his triumph over the Principal. It had been good while it lasted.

“I want you to print out – what is it? – my web profile?” he snapped.

“Of course dearie. Can it wait for an hour? That nice Mr Spence knows where the profiles are and I ought to finish your report for the Working Party on University Reorganisation you told me was really urgent.”

“Nice Mr Spence! Incompetent, illiterate and insulting Mr Spence would be closer to the mark! “

“Whatever has he done dearie?”

“I’ve just had Gribonacci from Paris 15 on the phone. Spence has my web profile saying that the Journal of Applied MetaMagical Anthropology is the *only* significant one in the field.”

“And is that not right dearie? Isn’t that the thing you edit?”

“Of course it’s right! Gribonacci’s rag is hardly worth the paper it’s printed on. But you can’t say that kind of thing in public! And this web profile thing seems to be very public indeed. Gribonacci is threatening to get me thrown off the steering committee for the next International MetaMagical Directions conference! The profile thing has to be changed. And I want to see what else that pea-brained oaf has written about me. Make sure I have it in half an hour!” He was gone as fast as he’d appeared.

“Poor Mr Spence,” Gwen murmured. She had wondered when his all-too-obvious ignorance of academics and their ways was going bite him in the bum.

Before she could get back to the report, the office door swung open hard and crashed into the cupboard behind it. Gwen’s face hardened. She didn’t need the blast of perfume that assaulted her nose to know who this would be.

“Gwen, the travel approval form I need, most urgently” Irene announced, her vivid purple jacket with gauzy gold scarf making Gwen blink involuntarily.

“I think I may have mentioned that I am in fact Professor Jenkin’s secretary”.

The expected fierce look crossed Irene’s face and Gwen waited for her to come out with her usual ‘Hambleton Fellow’ stuff. Instead Irene’s expression changed completely.

“Oh Gwen, who are these so wonderful babies?” she demanded in a strange voice, staring at Gwen’s photo screen-saver.

Gwen was taken aback for a moment. “Oh, these? That’s Tommy and Davie, my little grandsons. They’re twins.”

“They are so beautiful!”

Gwen stared at Irene suspiciously, wondering if this was some kind of soft-soap tactic. But Irene seemed quite genuine.

“They’re my first grandchildren. My daughter Kirsten’s. Worth the wait.”

“Why was there waiting?”

“Oh, the usual story. She and Graham were trying for years and nothing happened. They went for the treatment in the end, and now she has double the prize! A handful I can tell you. They’ve just started crawling and they’re forever off in opposite directions. Apples of our eyes all the same.

Och, I could talk about them all afternoon, but I must get on with Professor Jenkins’ report. The travel approval forms are just over there, third slot down in the wall-rack.”

“You are so lucky!” Irene said quietly as she went to collect a form.

Episode 28: Looking for Fun and Feeling Groovy

"You're late!" said Henry Hawkins, as a battered looking Colin Campbell shuffled into the room.

"Rough night's research?" said an unsympathetic Shona Shipley.

"Dr Shipley!" said Colin. " I wasn't expecting to see you here. What a treat!"

"You need a second supervisor ," said Hawkins, "so I've asked Shona along. You want to work on dreams and Shona has ideas about lucid dreaming."

"What a splendid arrangement!" said Colin, proffering his right palm to Shona.

"Welcome aboard! I've read all your papers!"

"I bet you say that to all the girls," said Shona, shaking his hand.

"Only the brainy ones," said Colin, flopping down onto a lab stool.

"Where do you find them?" said Shona to Hawkins, sotto voce.

"They find me," said Hawkins. "Anyway, I've an idea for a research project."

"Do tell" said Shona.

"Business process re-engineering," said Hawkins.

"Wow!" said Shona. "I've been thinking about that as well! Serendipity!"

"Cosmic!" said Hawkins.

They both laughed. Baffled, Colin looked from one to the other.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

"Sorry," said Shona. "Private joke. Our Head of Department has been working on serendipity since the last century, if not the one before. Come on Henry, what's the gag?"

"Well," said Hawkins. "Lots of animist societies believe that there's a real land of dreams that people visit when they're asleep. Like native Americans. Supposing we could get business people to share the same lucid dream."

"Cunning!" said Shona. "That might just work."

"What was your idea?" said Hawkins.

"Mine was a bit different," said Shona. "I was wondering about trying to maximise collective luck."

"But there's no such thing as luck!" said Colin.

"People think there is," said Hawkins. "And that affects how they behave. That's the key to meta-magic. It's all about how people think things ought to be, not how they actually are."

"'Actually are'?" said Shona. "That's a bit problematic isn't it?"

"You know what I mean," said Hawkins hurriedly.

"Maybe we could squish the two approaches together," said Shona, thoughtfully.

"Could we use lucid dreaming to enhance shared ownership of luck within a business?"

"Sounds good!" said Hawkins. "What do you think, Colin? Do you want to give it a go?"

"You know," said Colin. "I think I might."

"You'll need to survey the literature," said Shona. "We'll help with that."

"And you'll need some subjects," said Hawkins. "Shona? You've got good business contacts?"

"I think that's a wee bit premature," said Shona. "We should start with a pilot study."

"I know just the thing!" said Colin. "The Centre for Wealth Enhancement has just launched the Enterprise Impact Futures Challenge. There are posters all over the shop. I'll talk to the other students and drum up a team."

"You'll need to book the sleep lab well in advance," said Hawkins. "And try not to rub Thompson up the wrong way..."

Hawkins suddenly sneezed. Magic scuttled between the piles of papers and clambered onto Shona's lap.

"Magic!" said Shona, scratching him behind the ears. "What have you been up to?"

"He's a real mess," said Hawkins. "Has he been fighting?"

"Oh," said Colin. "I found him lapping at my mushroom soup. I chased him away but I don't think it can have agreed with him..."

Episode 29: Waltz Round the Cycle

After Colin had left Hawkins' office Shona turned to Henry.

"Didn't want to mention it in front of Colin, but I have a few reservations about our research plans. Have you ever experienced sleep paralysis?"

"No, I've read about though. I take it you have?"

"It was awful. I couldn't sleep, and then eventually I was awake but couldn't move. It felt like someone was crouched on my chest. Whenever I tried I heard a hideous rushing noise in my ears and there were either hallucinations or something else moving in my peripheral vision. I was utterly terrified. When I realised I couldn't fight it I tried to relax and eventually it stopped. I can understand where all those alien abduction accounts come from now."

"So you are wondering about the ethics of asking our students to do this?"

"Indeed. Not just because it was an unpleasant experience. What if Carlos Casteneda's account in 'The Eagle's Gift' is accurate, and by lucid dreaming we are opening ourselves up for exploitation by otherworldly beings?"

"Fear not, I've been following the blog of a student in the US who has a work around. According to Rose Walker, the one thing you still control is your breathing. She suggests taking longer or shorter breaths to make your body yawn. Eventually you will automatically take a deep breath and the movement is enough to reconnect you to your body. No one will ever be alone in the sleep lab, and the sleepers will be in groups of 4, so no-one should be dreaming alone either."

Shona shifted in her chair as she thought about it. Paul McDermott gently crooned "Words poured like wine, over an open wound". It was true, she was very relieved to have a defence against any further attacks of sleep paralysis, for herself and any students who experienced it.

"Excellent. That is good to know. One last thing, I got a reminder from Gwen to arrange myself a TRAP."

"Ah yes, Training Review and Assessment of Performance time again."

"Jenkins has you down as chief TRAPper, I would rather not be TRAPped this time if it's all the same to you? Most of the stuff I've worked on this year hasn't been published yet, so it would be a bit of a waste of time."

"That's fine with me, but Jenkins may have other ideas."

"Thank you, I shall keep a low profile for the next few weeks. Failing that, if he gets really cantankerous, I'll mention the Union, and ask him if he would like another chat with the rep."

Both academics giggled as they recalled the last run-in between the two. After gently placing a still woozy Magic on the warm patch under Hawkins monitor (being exceptionally careful not to short it out in the process) Shona left the office. The voice of her undergrad roommate sang softly to the tune of Waltzing Matilda, "Once a jolly pyruvate, enters the matrix, of a mitochondrion, so they say, A decarboxylating, complex dehydrogenase, Converts it to acetyl co-enzyme A."

Having learnt to trust the guidance her subconscious provided through it's many musical offerings, Shona was suddenly stumped. What could she possibly be trying to tell herself this time?

Episode 30: The Zen of the Zone

Teresa was in The Zone. She was one with her paper. She didn't hear Simon's ostentatiously loud typing. She didn't smell the rancid mushroom soup which Colin spilled last week and forgot to clean up. She didn't even notice Magic head butting her ankles to demand his morning petting session. Or was that his evening petting session? She didn't know. She had lost track of time. She wasn't worried about whether her results confirmed her hypothesis. She didn't care whether they were consistent with the literature. She wasn't anxious about whether Simon's paper would be accepted rather than hers. She hadn't thought about Jenkins in days. All that mattered was making sure her results were accurate.

Her world had shrunk to her SPSS output, a highlighter pen and her word processor window. Her eyes ran down columns of figures, looking for that magical .001 figure. She pounced, marked a row in green and continued her hunt. She was a predator on the Serengeti. SPSS gave her the claws to rip into the wildebeest that was her data. She would tear it to the ground and consume its entrails. She absently took another sip from the mug of fragrant liquid Colin kept permanently topped up on her desk.

After a while she finished the analysis. It looked like her intuition had proved correct. People who rated themselves as lucky did indeed make their own luck. People who rate themselves lucky are simply better at spotting opportunities. Her fiendishly clever experiment was reaping rewards. She had asked her participants to rate their luckiness on a five factor likert scale. Then they were then asked to perform a simple task while she timed them. They had to count the number of photos in a newspaper. The lucky people were significantly faster, her figures told her. Why? Because a notice she placed on the second page of the newspaper said "There are 43 photos in this paper. You can stop counting now and collect £20 from the experimenter". The self-rated "lucky" people were more inclined to spot this and take advantage of the opportunity.* She might be a hundred pounds or so out of pocket, but she had a great set of results. She

started an email to Dr McGee to share the exciting news. At this rate she would finish the paper in good time for the conference deadline.

Colin regarded the Teresa's motionless form with admiration.

"She's working even harder today" he remarked to Simon.

"What's she whistling now?" grunted Simon, who was not as pleased as he had expected about Teresa's new found industry. Somehow Teresa's enjoyment took the fun out of his master plan of stealing her work. She would probably just redo it all with a vacant smile plastered on her face.

"Ode to Joy" grinned Colin. "Sorry, old boy. Looks like you're not getting to her after all."

*Author's note: This study was originally carried out by Richard Wiseman, reported in "The Luck Factor", but I am rewriting history in Teresa's favour. What, you don't think she deserves a break?

Episode 31: Go east young man..

“But what is a Ganzfeld experiment?” Gillian asked Irene.

They’d spent half an hour already talking about whether there could be a relationship between “lucky” individuals and those scoring high on tests for ESP, and Irene had just suggested a three-way methodology of self-assessment questionnaire, brain activity recording and a Ganzfeld experiment.

“Cut out real-world distracting with white noise is Ganzfeld. Senses deprived gives more evidence for extra-senses.”

“I see. Hawko told me he put in an infrastructure bid for a sleep tank. Maybe that’s what he had in mind. He said the grown-ups threw it straight out because they were afraid students might go crazy in it and they’d get sued.”

“But Hawko is not a child I think?”

“‘Grown-ups’ is what he calls the people that run Granite – Findler and the rest of them. I don’t think it’s a compliment. It’s probably coming out with that sort of stuff that’s got him sent off to Bahtar.”

Irene went pale.

“He is going to Bahtar? Why he go there?”

“Granite are going to set up a Bahtari campus and Jenkins wants us to be there from the start. I suppose Hawko could end up in charge over there – there should be scope for some interesting fieldwork on meditation at least.”

Irene leapt to her feet, earrings rattling.

“Gillian, we finish this talk later. I have urgent task right now.”

“When shall we reconvene...oh”. Gillian found she was addressing a rapidly closing door

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“Dr Hawkins, you do have to fill in the risks form,” Gwen said patiently. “Otherwise your trip to Bahtar will not be covered by the university insurance policy.”

“The only real risk is a surfeit of official dinners,” Hawko told her. “Why doesn’t Jenkins want to go?”

“Professor Jenkins has to present his report to The University Reorganization Committee. He tells me that he has to convince them that the Department should remain independent.”

“So while I’m being stuffed with regional cuisine by my PhD student’s relations, the committee will be dining on Jenkins. You’d better send me an email if we get merged while I’m away.”

He missed Gwen’s uncertain expression at the mention of email by heading crossly for the door. It shot open as he got there, missing him by inches.

“Henry!” Irene was framed in the doorway. “Gillian has said to me that you go to Bahtar to set up new department. This is true?”

“Only if my invited talk ‘MetaMagical Anthropology, Origins and Directions’ really wows them. Oh, it’s just a short but turgid smiling and schmoozing trip. Back in time for a double helping of jetlag.”

Irene fixed him with one of her most intense stares.

“Henry, I wait for you to respond. I look in your eyes, I see you still have not decided.”

Hawko quickly looked down at his battered sneakers.

“Henry, you must respond!”

“The butler did it. And Darth Vader turns out to be his father. Irene, not now and not here.”

Irene watched him walk down the corridor to his office before turning towards her own.

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An unattended cleaning trolley was standing at the door of Irene's office. Inside Ian was dusting her keyboard while examining the open browser window on the screen above it. To his irritation it was nothing very interesting, just a product listing for kitchen equipment from Mouli Graters to Turkey Basters. He tried to imagine Irene as an expert cook and felt his heart quail as it always did when he thought about her.

The door crashed open behind him.

"What you do? " Irene demanded in a furious tone. "You sneaking around in offices. I know you not just cleaner from first day I see you. I look in your eyes Ian and I see spy not cleaner."

Ian felt as if he was going to faint. A desperate impulse to run filled him but his muscles would not obey it.

Irene was standing far too close. A wave of perfume filled his lungs. He could not tear his eyes away from hers.

"I know you help Gillian, is why I not denounce you yet. It's you that takes letter from Jenkin's office? Yes! So, you hate Jenkins? Hmm, I see not quite that. You hate something Jenkins does? Yes! So what Jenkins does that you hate? Ah! It's Bahtar campus. Yes! You have some Bahtar thing in your mind, I see it."

Her voice dropped and became almost gentle.

"Ian, maybe we not enemies after all. Now, we talk about Bahtar."

Episode 32: Eight Miles High

Hawkins scanned the departures board. The flight to Bahtar was on time. The next flight, to Goose Bay, left five minutes later.

“Dr Hawkins?” said the commanding English voice.

“That’s me,” said Hawkins, looking up at the man in the black suit.

“Could you come with me please?” said the man.

He showed Hawkins his identity card: Scottish Frontier Agency Counter Terrorism Division.

“I suppose so,” said Hawkins. “But what about my flight? It’s supposed to leave in ten minutes.”

“Don’t worry,” said the man. “If you’re cooperative this won’t take long and we’ll make sure you get on your plane.”

Hawkins followed the man across the concourse, back through airport security, and along a corridor he’d never noticed before. The man opened a door labelled Plant Room: Authorised Staff Only.

The room was windowless. The floor was covered in green linoleum. In the centre of the floor was a table and two chairs; all grey tubular steel; all bolted to the floor. On the table was a cassette recorder and a telephone.

“Have a seat,” said the man. “I’m going to record our conversation.”

“For quality assurance and training purposes?” asked Hawkins.

The man ignored Hawkins, took a folder from his brief case, arrayed a pack of photos across the table top and started the recorder.

“Do you recognise any of these people?” asked the man.

Hawkins started to work through the pictures.

“That’s Colin Campbell,” said Hawkins, surprised, holding up a photo. “He’s my PhD student.”

“He’s one of us,” said the man. “Anyone else please?”

“‘One of us’”? echoed Hawkins.

“Please continue,” said the man.

Hawkins quickly looked through the rest of the pictures.

“No one else,” he said, sliding the photos back across the table to the man.

“How about this one?” asked the man, extracting an image and showing it to Hawkins.

Hawkins scrutinised the picture.

“Hang on!” he exclaimed. “That’s our cleaner! I think he’s called Ian.”

“Exactly!” said the man. “Ian Hendry. Have you ever talked to him?”

“I don’t think so,” said Hawkins. “The cleaners tend to keep away from my office. It’s so full of stuff, I won’t be able to find anything if anyone tries to tidy it.”

“And Hendry’s never approached you?” asked the man.

“Not that I recall,” said Hawkins.

“Have you ever seen him acting suspiciously?” asked the man.

“Suspiciously?” said Hawkins. “Cleaners don’t act suspiciously, do they. What’s he suspected of?”

“BLF,” said the man.

“BLF?” said Hawkins.

“Bahtar Liberation Front,” said the man. “We think he’s a key contact.”

“Come on!” said Hawkins. “He’s as Scottish as you or I.”

“Which isn’t very Scottish,” said the man. “Is it.”

“Well,” said Hawkins. “I hold a Scottish passport.”

“So do I,” said the man. “So does Hendry. But his mother was from Bahtar. She was a refugee from your student’s family dynasty.”

“Didn’t we help them return to power?” said Hawkins. “After they lost the elections.”

“Exactly,” said the man. “The opposition was soft on terrorism. We needed someone we could rely on to defend our interests.”

“So we’re directly responsible for the BLF, then?” said Hawkins.

“That’s the sort of twisted sophism I’d expect from you academics,” said the man. “But we’re not here to chop logic. I assume you’re against terrorism.”

“Of course!” said Hawkins, hastily.

“So if anyone approaches you in Bahtar with a message for Hendry, you’ll let us know?” said the man.

“Well...” said Hawkins.

“Good!” said the man. “That’s settled then. We better get you to your flight.”

“Shouldn’t I go back through security?” said Hawkins.

“No need,” said the man.

He turned off the recorder, put the cassette and photos back in his bag and led Hawkins back out to the corridor. They went through another door, down a flight of stairs and through yet another door out onto the apron. Lost in the haar, Hawkins could make out the looming grey bulk of a Boeing 797.

“Come on!” said the man, walking swiftly across the tarmac to the ramp. “They’re waiting for you. Up you go! Don’t forget to write!”

He waved goodbye as Hawkins ascended the staircase.

“Dr Hawkins?” said the flight attendant at the entrance to the aircraft. “Follow me please.”

She turned left into Ibis Class.

“But I’m travelling Camel Class,” said Hawkins.

“Not any longer,” said the flight attendant. “Your friend arranged the upgrade. Here’s your seat. Enjoy your flight.”

Beyond caring, Hawkins stowed his backpack in the overhead locker. As he strapped himself into seat, the disembodied voice on the cabin speaker proclaimed:

“As we’re just about to depart, please ensure that all mobile devices are turned off.”

Hawkins took his mobile phone out of his pocket and stared at it in puzzlement. It was off already. Surreptitiously, he turned it on.

“1 message. Gwen.” said the screen.

Quickly, Hawkins selected “Read”...

“Meeting cancelled! Don’t go!”

As Hawkins anxiously looked round for the flight attendant, the aircraft began to reverse away from the pier.

“Fasten your seat belts,” said the disembodied voice. “Air Bahtar flight AB 1001 for Goose Bay is about to depart.”

Episode 33: The inmates are running the asylum

Jonathan Spence stared morosely at the screen in front of him. Jenkins had been nearly incoherent with rage as he dressed down the website work. He was obviously extremely unhappy with the content, but the problem was, Jonathan still had no idea what the Department of Applied Metamagical Anthropology was for, or how they wanted to market themselves. He sighed, retrieved his giant Gurista coffee mug and sloped off towards the staff common room.

Shona was deep in thought. Prof Rose had sent her a polite email declining the lucid dreaming joint research proposal. She felt a bit down about it, but nothing major. Perhaps the knowledge transfer angle would get the neuroscientist back on board? Shirley Manson whispered "Maybe I should write a letter, to help me with my self esteem.". Her eyes lost focus as she began to draft the email in her mind. Her eyes alighted on Ian as he slowly pushed his trolley along the corridor outside. Shirley continued "You should get to know me better, no one's ever what they seem".

As Shona tried to figure out what that meant a despondent web admin filled the doorway. "Hello Jonathan", she smiled. "What's up? You look like you bought the winning lottery ticket then the washing machine ate it."

"Hi Shona. Jenkins wasn't very happy with the website. I have no idea what you people do, or how your work should be presented to the world."

"So you need a crash course in AMA? That I can do. Take a seat and imagine there is the world you can see, and superimposed upon it, another world that you can't see that underlies and affects the physical world. AMA is about modelling as many aspects of the other world as we can, through history, literature, anthropology, and experimentation."

"Okay, I'm with you so far."

"Generally the subconscious mind is far better at picking up patterns than the conscious mind. The problem comes when the subconscious tries to communicate that knowledge

to the conscious mind. Some people have a natural talent for it, such as psychics and successful fund managers. Other people get good through training, such as the Tibetan monks, yoga practitioners (the ones who go beyond the physical disciplines), Yaqui indians and the like."

"It's a bit like physics, and indeed many people believe that one day there will be a unified theory of everything that encompasses the world of high energy physics and AMA. We all know about nuclear fission and how for a given weight of radioactive material, a certain amount will decay. By how do you know which bit is going to go? It all seems random, just like in life - some people live long and prosper, and others don't. A lot of what we are looking at from a macro perspective, the string theorists are looking at from the other side. One day, we'll meet in the middle."

"Okay. That sounds, erm, interesting. You seem to know a lot about Physics. I didn't think that was the sort of thing this department did."

"Oh, my ex-husband is a phenomenologist. There are a few parallels, it's all about figuring out how to look for something that can't be seen, when we have a strong gut-feeling it's there."

As she thought about Kyle and how he'd betrayed her and their family Glen Danzig's voice silently booming "Die, die, die my darling!". Shona pushed the thought aside. Much as she hated everything he had done to her, to all of them, he was her children's father, and contemplating his end was unseemly.

"Erm, excuse the non-AMA perspective, but correlation isn't always causal is it? Some patterns are just co-incidence aren't they?"

"No. There is always a reason things happen, and AMA has ways of finding out what those reasons are. Let me show you an example. Shona picked up a paper on the coffee table., "This study looks at the percentage of twin mums , twin dads and twins who were born under the Gemini star sign. The study uses this data to consider the fact that star signs may have moved over the last few hundred years, and plots the most likely

range for the Gemini star sign, and where the others should be in relation to the new dates."

As Mr Spence took an awkward swig from his mug Robbie Rotten whispered cheerfully to Shona, "Yar, har, fiddle-de-de, being a pirate is all right to be".

"Right." Jonathan didn't know what else to say. Shona was pleasant enough, but mad as a box of frogs when it came to her subject. They all were in this place. It already seemed like the longest secondment in the history of the world.

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Jenkins considered the funding options for a visit from potential Chair candidates. The SPIRES travel budget offered support for research on Physical, Digital and Social research spaces. It wouldn't be too big a stretch of the imagination to include Ethereal research spaces in that description surely? Now could they be persuaded to hold a workshop on Ethereal Spaces at Granite that would co-incide with the Chair interviews? Jenkins was sure they could be.

Episode 34: Exam Bored

Philip Greenfield groaned inwardly. He had drawn the short straw this year and had to sit in on the Exam Board for the loonies down the hall. So here he was. Four hours of unrelenting boredom, infighting and petty arguments to go, in the knowledge that he would have to catch up on his own exam marking when he went home.

Professor Jenkins rapped the table. “Welcome to the Department of Applied Metamagical Anthropology exam board and progression board. Thank you to our external examiner Professor Gribonnaci for attending” here he inclined his head at his rival and attempted a smile. “and to Philip Greenfield from Physics who is here to make sure we dot our “i”s and cross our “t”s. Got to follow university regulations, you know.” Philip winced as the deathly grin was directed at him.

“Joining us on Skype is Dr Hawkins, director of the MSc programme, who is travelling to our Bhatar campus and cannot be here in person.”

Gwen switched on the projector to reveal a bleary eyed unshaven Hawko peering at the assembled company. “I'm in Labrador” he said with a hefty buzz of static.

Gillian glanced at her laptop screen to see that she had an incoming request to text chat on Skype from “GraniteMan”.

“It's me” typed Hawkins. “Can't get through these meetings without someone to complain to. Solidarity and all that.”

“GraniteMan???” replied Gillian.

Jenkins continued “I shall now read the marks for each candidate and our recommendation for their degree classification or progression to the next year. I remind colleagues that our job is to keep standards high, not be kind to students.”

“Yeah right” typed Hawko to Gillian. “We all know professors get bonuses based on how many firsts we award.”

Gwen was busy handing out pages and pages of closely printed documents.

“Progression code bingo!:-) :-)” typed Hawko.

“What?” typed Gillian, who was new to the ways of Exam Boards at Granite.

“All of these codes are a fate for a student. Like “11 – resit required”. Or “63- progress to next year of study”. The aim is to be first to circle all of the codes in your table.”

He paused, then typed some more. “But that's hard because you have to stay awake. Even harder if your flight has been delayed for the last 9 hours and the airport is out of coffee due to unforeseen supply chain problems”.

“Aitken, Tim. Recommend 14. Arrow, Barbara, recommend 11 for F21AD” started Jenkins at speed.

“Hang on!” said Philip, “ Haven't you got the year groups mixed up? Aitken is a first year but Arrow is 3rd year.”

“We do it alphabetically for all students” explained Gwen patronisingly.

“But that's crazy” Philip protested. “It makes it harder to compare quality of the final degree students because you can't see them ranked together.”

“Yes dear” said Gwen “But it's not fair to age discriminate against the students. The first years need our attention too.”

“What she means” typed Hawko “Is that she doesn't know how to make Excel do anything but alphabetical sorting”.

Gillian laughed out loud, earning herself a black look from Gwen.

Streams of names and marks followed. Names were mangled. Degrees were awarded. Students were booted out. Students were allowed to proceed against the better judgement of their lecturers.

“Jones, Matilda: 61” said Jenkins. This caused a buzz and a flurry of paper flipping as people tried to work out what that decision code meant.

Philip found it first. “61 – student forgot to attend exam. Resit. Acquisition of diary required.”

“Forgot to attend an exam? This is outrage!” exclaimed Irene. “At home such student would be finished. No further chances.”

“This is not Latvia, Dr Pop.. um... We strive to be fair here” said Jenkins.

“I am not from Latvia! I tell you once, I tell you many times!” said Irene furiously.

“Shouldn't we “42” her then?” asked Hawko from afar.

“42? Temporary suspension of studies. Common sense required”.

“You're just saying that to fill up your bingo card” typed Gillian.

“ I got it first. Paws off” he replied.

“That fits. Minute that, Gwen.” said Jenkins impatiently, mindful of his golf game at 6pm. “Joyce, James: 23. Karamah, Sirinya: 11. Lennon, Robert: 55.”

“He's one of the ones with the medical certificate” reminded Gwen, passing it to him.

Jenkins read it. “Leprosy. Covers the period from semester 1 till now.”

“But I saw him in class last week!” protested Dr Singh, who taught Psi Studies. “What if he infected the other students? What if he infected me?”

“You show a lack of concern for the student's welfare” said Dr Smith loftily.

“You're only saying that because all your stuff is distance learning and you never have to meet your students.” glared Singh.

“Distance learning is entirely appropriate to the study of telekinesis” Smith snarled back.

“If I may interject...” said Philip.

“No, you may not” said Jenkins. “Lincoln, Cameron, 11”.

“It's against university regulations to reveal the student's medical details in an open meeting this way. It's sufficient to say the student has a medical cert.”

“But dearie” said Gwen, “It's not as if it's a scandal. Not like Amanda Nairn's cert from the STD clinic. Anyone could get leprosy, even if they were well behaved. Not like that tramp.”

Philip stared at her open mouthed, wondering where to begin. Jenkins moved on to “Lui, Xi: 99”.

Gribonnaci stood up. “I will not allow this student to receive a first class degree” he said firmly. “The standard at Granite is far too low. It is a clear 2:1”

“But he's one of our best students!” typed Hawko, moved from his lethargy by this unfairness.

“Best at Granite does not mean much” sneered Gribonnaci.

“I notice he failed your module” said Singh to Smith. “Obviously the teaching wasn't up to much”.

Smith sniffed. “It's a topic which requires The Gift. Mere hard work will not suffice.”

“Pansy” said Singh under his breath.

“What this means: “pansy”” asked Irene innocently.

“Right, that's it! I've had it with you, you second rate piss pedlar” announced Smith. Getting to his feet, he slowly and deliberately poured his cold scummy coffee down Singh's impeccable white shirt.

Singh gave an incoherent bellow of rage and punched him full in the face.

“Move the web cam so I can see, will you?” typed Hawkins.

“WTF?” typed Gillian, horrified.

Jenkins glanced up. “That's your call, Greenfield” he said mildly.

Philip sighed and ambled over to where the men were circling each other like scrawny boxers. He caught Singh by the scruff of the neck, Smith by the ear, marched them into the corridor, closed the door behind them and returned to his seat.

“Shame” typed Hawkins. “I was enjoying that. They do it every year you know. But my money was on Singh this year because of Smith's sciatica.”

“Right, Lui, Xi: 99” said Jenkins briskly. “I'm taking Chairman's action to give him a first. Don't pout, Gribonacci.”

Gillian, having returned to the spreadsheet she had been working on now the distraction was over, felt she had to speak up.

“Err. Mr Chairman”, she said loudly, not giving him a chance to ignore her. “I've been checking the marks. They're not right!”

Gwen tutted loudly. “Rubbish! My mental arithmetic is as good as it ever was. Of course they're right.”

“You surely don't calculate the marks in your head?” asked Philip in horror.

“I've just checked them in Excel” said Gillian apologetically to Gwen. “And it looks as though you've sorted the student names alphabetically but not their marks column at the same time. So the marks against the names aren't the right ones. Its all hopelessly jumbled.”

Philip put his head in his hands. He didn't want to do this, but he had no choice. He was going to have to suspend the exam board, thus disappointing hundreds of students who would be waiting their results, not to mention making a life-long enemy of Jenkins.

“As representative of the university, I am afraid that I must call a halt to the meeting until such a time as we can be confident the marks are correct” he said, trying for a magisterial tone.

Jenkins looked at him, and then at the clock. It was 5.35. If he left now, he could be on the green in 20 minutes.

“How unfortunate” he said. “I believe Greenfield is correct. This meeting is adjourned. Gwen, take the usual action. Thank you all for coming.”

Philip and Gillian sat bewildered as the other academics unconcernedly filed out, chatting among themselves.

Jenkins clasped Philip warmly by the hand and escorted him out the room, chatting jovially.

“Again: WTF???” typed Gillian.

“Watch Gwen” typed Hawko with a yawn.

“Good night!” he switched off his webcam.

As soon as Philip was out of the door Gwen gathered up all the student files into a huge stack on the desk.

“Could you, dearie?” she asked Gillian, indicating she wanted help to climb onto the table. Gillian assisted in astonishment.

Gwen lifted the pile above her head and dropped them on the floor. “There we are” she said as they landed scattered across the floor. “The ones which land closest to the portrait of Jenkins get firsts, the ones closest to the bin fail, and the ones in between go in the order they land.”

She caught Gillian's look of consternation. “You mustn't worry dear. It's perfectly fair. We do it every single year.”

Episode 35: Little twisty passages

Shona felt as if she'd slipped into a nightmare of endless corridors going nowhere.

“Corridors: Where we hide the instruments of the fear, where doubt resides.

Corridors: Estrangement walks endless corridors”: Sieges Even crashed through her head. This corridor went from JF3-11 to JF3-30, so JF3-27, where the Staff-Student meeting was going to take place should be there. ‘Going to take place’ five minutes ago she noticed with one more frantic look at her watch. Why did the numbers suddenly jump from 24 to 29? “It’s a rat trap Billy, but you’re already caught,” Bob Geldof assured her.

She went back to the landing in front of the lift. Third floor; surely that’s what the ‘3’ meant? “They’re all trying to kill me, I’ve seen the walls moving, They’ve all heard me screaming, screaming” Elton John crooned.

Suddenly there was a ping as the lift arrived. The doors opened, and the end of a ladder emerged. To her joy, it was followed by Darren Thompson.

“Oh, Mr Thompson, I’m so glad you’re here!”

“That makes a change. Most of you academics make off in the opposite direction when you see me coming.”

“I’m supposed to be going to the Staff-Student committee in JF3-27 and I can’t find it anywhere. And I’m late. And I can’t find the students either.”

“Ah, 3-27. Now when James Fraser opened, I told them this was going to be a problem. It was old Prof Woodward then, well before Jenkin’s day.”

“Can you just tell me where it is? I’ve been all down that corridor and the numbers jump from 3-24 to 3-29. And I’m late.”

Thompson sighed and pointed down the opposite corridor.

“Down the end there, take the stairs back to floor two, turn left through the double doors, up the stairs and you’ll find it. Woodward had it put in as a researchers’ retreat. It was meant to be hard to find..”

But Shona had disappeared down the corridor before he could finish the sentence.

“I’m so sorry I’m late” she gasped, halfway through the door to 3-37, which did indeed have a label ‘Researchers’ Retreat’ on it in a faded flowery script. “Before it gets too late, I want to testify” Melissa Etheridge sang gently.

Faces turned towards her without a great deal of enthusiasm. Yvonne looked up from the keyboard of her laptop and Teresa and Colin moved from their mutual contemplation of the view over the lake. An older male student that Shona didn’t recognise, dressed in a shapeless grey tweed suit, surreptitiously stuffed two packets of biscuits from the pile next to a thermos marked ‘coffee’ into a capacious pocket before coming to sit down.

“Dr Shipley, how nice to see you”, Colin said warmly. “We’d been wondering whether we’d have to turn this into a student committee rather than a staff-student committee.”

“According to the staff list,” Yvonne said critically, consulting her screen, “you don’t really count as staff. Aren’t you a post-doctoral fellow?”

“Professor Jenkins can’t come” said Shona, still out of breath. “And Dr Hawkins is away. So you get me.” She could feel sweat trickling down the middle of her back. Gwen had insisted nobody else was free and Shona knew she couldn’t afford to annoy Gwen.

“Hurry past the people staring, Hurry hurry hurry hurry” Brian May told her through a blitz of guitar.

“And what are you doing here, Colin?” Shona asked, trying to regain the initiative.

“According to this list, Teresa is the rep for the PhDs.”

“Don’t you think we should get started?” Yvonne said briskly. “I’ve got the agenda up on the screen. Would you like me to take minutes?”

“Oh, er, yes, thanks”, said Shona.

“OK” Yvonne said. “We all ready guys?” She looked round at the other three. “Right then: Item 1, resources for MRes projects.”

Before they could get any further, the door suddenly opened again.

“So sorry to interrupt your nice little meeting dearies”, said Gwen. “I have a message for Dr Shipley.”

“Can you feel it in the air? Danger (Such a strange emotion) Can you feel it in the air?” Def Leppard screamed into her ears.

“It’s your daughter’s school, Dr Shipley. There’s a problem it seems. I think you’d better come and talk to them.”

Episode 36: Smithsonian Institute Blues

Henry Hawkins stamped the snow off his boots and went through the revolving door into the lobby of the Centre for Tundra Technologies. The woman behind the desk looked up as he approached.

"Votre chaussures!" said the woman, pointing at his feet.

"Pardonne moi," said Hawkins, stopping dead in his tracks, bending over and taking off his boots. "Pouvez vous aider moi, por favor?"

"Sure, I can help," said the woman.

"Oh!" said Hawkins. "I thought you spoke French."

"I do," said the woman, "but you obviously don't. What's the problem."

"It's my latop," said Hawkins. "It's costing me a fortune using the cell phone service for the Internet. I wondered if I could use one of your machines."

"So why would we let you do that?" said the woman. "Who exactly are you?"

"Sorry," said Hawkins. "I should have explained. I'm an academic. I work at Granite University in Scotland. I think some of our people collaborate with some of your people. The Ice Nine project."

"I wouldn't know about that stuff," said the woman. "This is just a place to base before my study leave."

"What's your area?" asked Hawkins.

"I'm an Anthropologist," said the woman. "Meta-magical."

"You're joking!" said Hawkins. "So am I!"

"No!" said the woman. "That is so unlikely!"

"That's so meta-magical!" said Hawkins. "What are you working on?"

"Right now I'm finishing up field work," said the woman. "I'm researching the windigo(1). There used to be far more reports but it's more or less disappeared in the last few years."

"Isn't that when native people turn to cannibalism?" said Hawkins. "They think they've been possessed by a malevolent spirit?"

"I'm surprised you've heard of it," said the woman. "And that's not a bad cocktail party explanation. Of course it's a lot more complicated than that."

"So why do you think it's declined?" said Hawkins.

"It was rooted in small isolated communities," said the woman. "So maybe urbanisation. Maybe better transport and telecommunications and healthcare all contributed. Of course, some people think it was invented by racist anthropologists to justify dispossessing the native peoples. I think there are enough credible reports to make it worth taking seriously. But I'm not convinced by any of the explanations for the decline."

"So what's your take on it?" said Hawkins.

"Fast food," said the woman.

"Fast food?" said Hawkins.

"It's all the additives," said the woman. "They're highly addictive. You just don't get the same hit off raw human flesh."

Hawkins looked aghast.

"Come on!" said the woman. "I'm joshing with you. Have you got any suggestions?"

"Hmmm," said Hawkins. "How about seasonal affective disorder? That's common in Scotland and Scandinavia. Why not at high latitudes here?"

"That's ingenious," said the woman, "but I don't think indigenous peoples get SAD. Anyway, what's your own area?"

"I'm a theorist," said Hawkins. "I'm interested in constructivist accounts of meta-magic."

"That sounds totally dull," said the woman.

"Oh no!" said Hawkins, hastily. "I'm interested in real people with real beliefs. Right now I'm looking at the social construction of superstition. For example, there's a whole new set of rituals growing up around personal computer use. That makes lots of sense if you think of superstition as a socialised response to unknown agency."

"Such as?" said the woman.

"Well," said Hawkins. "Lot's of our students put tape over the camera above the screen on their laptops. They say it's to stop other people spying on them. But they can just disable the camera using the settings. And they don't cover up the built in microphone."

"Well that is interesting!" said the woman. "I'll look out for that. Where exactly is Granite? Maybe I could visit with you?"

"I'm sure we could arrange something," said Hawkins. "So could I use one of your computers, please?"

"Happy to oblige!" said the woman. "What exactly are you doing in Goose Bay?"

"It's a short story," said Hawkins...

(1) Ann Tracy, *Winter Hunger*, Virago, 1990.

Episode 37: Show No Mercy

Shona offered her apologies to an unimpressed Yvonne and strode for the door.

Joe Elliott's voice slipped forward an album, "No serenade, no fire brigade, just pyromania".

Shona turned to Gwen. "Thank you. I've got the school's number, I'll give them a call on my mobile".

As the secretary disappeared, Shona earthed herself then took out her phone and contacted the school. The small matter of her children's father not signing a consent slip for a school trip was soon rectified with a verbal agreement. She phoned the school back again twice, once to leave consent on the school's voice mail so that they had proof, and then to confirm they had received it. All the while, De La Soul sang "Hey how ya doing? Sorry you couldn't get through."

Within 6 minutes she was back in the meeting.

Yvonne had stirred up strong feelings in her fellow students. The mood had turned distinctly rebellious.

Queen played "Fight from the inside, attack from the rear" in Shona's mind. She chose a seat near the door with a wall directly behind her.

"Dr Shipley, the MRes course is woefully under-resourced. Out of the seventeen books required for the course, the library has two copies of three of the books. There are two ancient, virus-ridden PC's available for student use, and the printer is always out of ink. If this lack of IT resource is to encourage us to purchase our own laptops, then the department should at least provide wifi access. "

Yvonne paused, but as Shona prepared to respond, she ploughed on. "As I am sure you are aware, an MRes is a research masters degree, with taught elements, but the focus on the dissertation. Both the teaching resources and the research support are not up to the task. Our course leader, Dr Hawkins, has missed over a third of the lectures this year.

The substitute lecturers have been ineffectual at best, incompetent at worst. They were all clearly unfamiliar with the course content or how one would go about teaching it."

Ian Anderson whispered "My name's the teacher, That is what I call myself".

"Hang on a minute", Shona interjected, "I've covered your lectures twice."

Yvonne, pulled no punches, but swept on with her annihilation of the course, "As preparation for our careers as researchers, we should have access to published papers in our field, either online, or in the library. The library only holds one relevant journal, Anthromagical Quarterly and there are no free online subscriptions available to students."

Shona rallied, "Well, it's so much nicer to build up your own collection of real journals and papers. There are social and networking advantages to swopping articles with your peers and the research staff. You can always photocopy them."

Yvonne continued, "Which brings me on to the photocopier. The repairman arrives every Tuesday at lunchtime and spends 3 hours working on it. By the following Thursday afternoon it has invariably given up the ghost."

As the student paused for dramatic effect, Shona considered her response, only to be waylaid by her own subconscious as Roger Waters instructed "No dark sarcasm in the classroom"

The onslaught began once more,

"The crush area is dismal in both decor and seating layout. Are there any improvements planned for the area?"

Shona began to feel calmer, quietening the music in her mind. This was really about the departmental shortcomings not her own. "I am unaware of any plans at present. I will make enquiries and report back at the next meeting."

Yvonne was about to launch another assault, however Colin stood up and offered Yvonne a flirtatious smile.

"What an ass--", his eyes dipped and then met Yvonne's once more "-set you are to the student committee. What! Good job, I say! But of course we cannot lay this all on Dr Shipley, she is here only representing the institution. "

Shona stood up to engage the students,

"I will feed back all the points you have raised to the head of department. We want our students to get the most out of their time at Granite. I will ensure the student voice is heard. Is there anything else anyone would like to say?"

Yvonne flipped out a memory stick, deftly applied the rubber lid and passed it to Shona. She managed not to yelp as a small bolt of electricity leapt from the post-doc to her proffered hand.

"Thank you all for coming. The next meeting is in two weeks time. I hope to see you all then."

With that, Shona made her escape.

Episode 38: The Perils of Peer Review

“You open it” said Teresa nervously.

“Are you sure?” said Dr McGee. “It's a big step in a girl's life.”

“Is pregnancy test?” asked Irene, drifting past wistfully with a cup of coffee.

“First reviews” said Dr McGee.

“Ah. Even more frightening, I think” said Irene, sympathetically patting Teresa's shoulder.

“Go on then” said Dr McGee, nudging the laptop towards Teresa.

“I can't!” she wailed, burying her face in her hands.

“Alright”, said Dr McGee. Having surreptitiously checked her bag for supplies of hankies and confectionery, she double clicked on the email from the conference chairs and scan read it.

“Good news!” she said, smiling broadly. “It's accepted as a full paper.”

“Congratulations!” said Irene. “This is great honour. You are now published academic.”

“Phew” said Teresa. Then: “Hooray!” She leapt up and starting jigging around the coffee room, disturbing Magic who had been dozing in his customary position under the toaster. Irene intercepted her and turned the jig into a victory waltz round and round the common room.

“What on earth?” said Hawko, watching bemused from the doorway.

“Teresa got a paper accepted for the conference in Sweden” said Dr McGee proudly.

“That's great, Teresa” said Hawko shaking her hand. Irene stopped dancing and looked at Hawko intently.

“You have decided?” she asked.

“Irene, not now... we can't discuss it here... “ He saw the pain in her dark eyes and decided right there and then.

“OK, maybe. I think so. Yes.”

She looked at him for a second, unable to believe her good fortune and then solemnly stepped forward and kissed him gently on the forehead.

“We will be blessed” she said.

The silence was broken by a tall slim woman with very short dark hair entering the coffee room.

“Henry, is there any coffee around here? I need a latte after that flight.”

Hawko turned distractedly to her, and back to Irene.

“Irene, Gillian, everyone. This is Kathrin Anne Wheeler from the Centre for Tundra Technologies in Labrador. She's here visiting for a month”.

Irene was staring at the new comer in horror. Kathrin Anne offered her hand, but Irene shrank back in fear.

“No! Is wrong. Is very very wrong. Why you do those things?” she cried and hurried from the room.

Katherin Anne smiled, showing her even white teeth. “What got her goat?” she asked.

“I'm so sorry” said Hawko. “I can't imagine what is the matter”.

“She's a bit odd sometimes” offered Teresa. “Would you like a biscuit?”

“I could murder a bacon sandwich” said Kathrin Anne.

“Right” said Hawko, “Best go to the canteen for that.” He hustled his visitor down the corridor. She took one last look at the room and its occupants, almost assessingly. Dr McGee thought. Magic hissed and lashed his tail.

“What on earth was all that about?” wondered Teresa.

“There's no telling in this place.” said Dr McGee. “Let's take a look at these reviews.”

Reviews were odd things, Teresa decided. She had three reviews, all blinded. One was very short, only a few lines long. Its main comment was that she has misused a semicolon on p3.

“That's not much use, is it?” said Dr McGee. “Why bother reviewing at all? Probably he got roped into it at the last minute and didn't know the area.”

“But he ticked the “accept” and “I am an expert in the field” boxes.”

“Oh well” said McGee, “Could have been worse then.”

One of the other reviews was very helpful. It complemented the cunning of Teresa's experiment and noted that the statistics were carefully reported. It had various encouraging suggestions for further work which Dr McGee and Teresa agreed would be sensible new directions for her work.

“Brace yourself for this one” said Dr McGee, who had read ahead.

The third review was blistering. It made even Dr McGee screw up her face like she was eating a lemon. The reviewer thought the work was insignificant, shoddily conducted and poorly written. He had no suggestions for further work, apart from a whole stack of papers to read, as if he thought there was really no point in bothering.

“I bet all those papers were written by the reviewer himself” said Dr McGee. “They don't seem relevant to me.” She passed Teresa the emergency muffin. “Don't let it bother you. The paper was accepted and that's the main thing. Take your time and think about the second reviewer's suggestions and if there are any constructive suggestions or specific criticisms from the third reviewer, think about them carefully too. You can wait a few days until you feel less bothered by it if you like. Remember it's not about you, it's about the work. You need to distance yourself from your work and consider whether the reviewers' comments will help you improve the work. If not, ignore them. But be honest with yourself. That's the best way to improve as a researcher.”

Just then Simon and Colin came into the coffee room.

“Did you get your paper accepted Simon?” said Teresa brightly.

“Nope” said Colin.

“I did” said Teresa, and watched Simon's face crumple.

Episode 39: So long and thanks for all the fish

Ian stopped his trolley outside the PhDs' office and hesitated, summoning the reserves of energy and resilience he would need to deal with its sordid contents once more. But before he managed to reach for the door, it opened anyway, and the elegant figure of Colin Campbell emerged. Ian waited for him to pass, secure in his invisible cleaner-persona.

To his shock, Colin looked straight at him for the first time, and gave him a charming smile.

“Do pass my best regards on to dear old Ayza Khawfi-jii,” he said.

Ian felt his jaw drop and stared at Colin's smooth features, shocked by the use of his mother's name. Then he felt a surge of anger.

“How dare you use her name as if she was a friend of a parasite like you,” he hissed. “She spent her whole life in Bahtar fighting you and your family of millionaire blood-suckers and if it wasn't for the Yanks and the Brits you'd be the one in exile not her.”

“Come on, dear boy, don't take things so personally. Anyway, this seems a perfectly spiffing place to be in exile, except perhaps for the little matter of the temperatures. In a manner of speaking I'm in exile too, so now we do have something in common.”

“You're after something, aren't you? You came here on purpose!”

“And there's another thing we have in common. Don't tell me you are working here because you like the cleaning. Or are you saving up for a triumphant return to Bahtar? Yes, you could say I came here rather than somewhere more prestigious because of Khawfi-jii. Open up channels of communication, what? Though until some – let's say, 'friends' – recently dropped the info into my shell-like ears I hadn't realized I'd bump into Khawfi-jii's son cleaning the corridors. Not for much longer I fear.”

“What do you mean?”

“It seems my friends are a little alarmed by our everyday proximity. Think you might attack me with a mop, what? They are going to ask you to leave. I think you should. My friends may well have more lethal resources than mops and a much less cheerful disposition than my own.”

“Is that a threat?”

“Certainly not, dear boy, merely an observation. I must tootle off now – my supervisor has just returned from distant parts and I will be late for our meeting. You know where to find me. Remember, channels of communication!”

Ian stood silently by his trolley as Colin disappeared up the corridor. At least if they were going to sack him he wouldn't have to clean the PhD office again.

Right on cue, he saw Darren Thompson bustling towards him.

“There you are laddie! What have you done? I've just had a call from HR – you are to go up to the Claverhouse building right away to see them. I'm to tell you right away, just leave the trolley here. I hope you haven't been bugging the Principal's dog, HR sounded quite rattled.”

Ian forced a colourless cleaner expression onto his face for possibly the last time.

“Search me, Mr Thompson. But of course I'll do as you say and go up there. Right away.”

Episode 40: I'll see you in my dreams..

Henry Hawkins stared at the dot stereogram, squinting and crossing his eyes. Try as he might, all he could see was criss-cross rows of fuzzy shapes fringed with colours, which stubbornly refused to coalesce into three dimensions.

There was a knock at the door.

“Come in!” shouted Hawkins, rubbing his eyes and trying to re-focus.

Irene Popescu came into the office.

“I am come to say goodbye,” said Irene. “I leave this afternoon.”

“You can't be going!” said Hawkins, surprised. “You only just got here.”

“I have what I come for,” said Irene, cradling her midriff. “Thank you.”

“You won't stay?” said Hawkins, relief mingled with regret. “I told you I could maybe help with the wean, maybe once in a while.”

“You make good source of DNA,” said Irene, “but can be terrible father. I send photos. You send cheques. As agreed.”

“But what about your Fellowship?” said Hawkins. “What about your research?”

“Research is completed,” said Irene. “I am writing report now.”

“How can it be complete?” said Hawkins. “You haven't had time to do any experiments, let alone analyse them.”

“Is action research,” said Irene. “Is participant observation. You say is best meta-magic methodology.”

“What exactly is your research?” said Hawkins, suspiciously.

“You,” said Irene, proudly.

“Me?” said Hawkins. “Me?”

“All of you,” said Irene. “Department. I study social construction of beliefs in closed community. I study meta-meta-magical anthropology. You all are experiment.”

“Blimey!” said Hawkins. “Does anybody else know?”

“Of course not!” said Irene. “Is whole point.”

“Isn’t that unethical?” said Hawkins.

“Where is bad ethos?” said Irene. “You all think I am visitor. I am visitor. You all think I am researcher. I am researcher. I drink terrible coffee. I listen to strange intercours. Is usual for researcher visitor.”

“So what did you find?” asked Hawkins, hesitantly.

“I send you report,” said Irene.

“What did you find?” asked Hawkins, again.

“I find you very British,” said Irene. “Usual gender, age, status, class hierarch. You have beliefs exactly as predicted by stereotype. But I think you decent people. Mutually supportive. Like each other.”

“What about Jenkins?” said Hawkins. “He crap supervisor,” said Irene. “He crap boss. He crap in bed. But he stand up for you when pull come to shove.”

“What about our beliefs?” said Hawkins.

“All mostly sceptics,” said Irene. “But all believe meta-magic is serious discipline. Have big personal stake. Is source of mutual support.”

“No skeletons in the cupboards?” said Hawkins. “No blood on the carpet?”

“You see when I send you report,” said Irene. “What you do next? I think you like this American, this Kathrin Ann Wheeler. Maybe she good for you.”

“She’s Canadian, not American,” said Hawkins. “And I do like her. She doesn’t take me too seriously. I might go back to Canada with her.”

“But you bedrock of Granite meta-magic!” said Irene. “How can you leave?”

“I’ve been here far too long,” said Hawkins. “We all know each other far too well. I need more surprises.”

“Well,” said Irene, leaning over and hugging him. “You good friend to me, Henry Hawkins. You come and visit daughter whenever you like.”

“How do you know its gender?” said Hawkins. “It can’t be more than forty-eight cells big.”

“I know it girl,” said Irene, firmly. “I hear her thoughts. I know.”

“Did you really not have any unexpected findings?” said Hawkins.

“I not expect you believe my English so bad,” said Irene. “Actually, I speak it almost as well as any of you. It’s really hard work trying to sound like the British conception of a foreigner all the time. Goodbye.”

Episode 41: The times they are a changin'

Magic approached on silent paws. Observing the human, it did not appear she had plans to move anytime soon. Her breathing was heavy, and her eyes stared off into the distance as though some answer lay just beyond the horizon. With a deft leap, the cat found a resting place on the post doc's lap.

Shona stroked the cat absently without looking down. Magic licked at her other hand, which made her feel slightly reassured until the voice of Momus whispered "If your pleasure turned into pain, I would still lick for my personal gain, la la la". The cat glanced up unapologetically, and continued to lick.

"Well, at least you're honest about it".

There was a knock at the door. Jonathan appeared, "Hi Shona, I just wanted to say good bye. I've been recalled to Central Services."

"You too? I thought you had another couple of months here?"

"Well I did, but there's a project about to start over in Physical Sciences that's more up my alley. Jenkins took little persuasion to let me go."

Paul Smith sang softly, "I know you'll be content, in the right line of employment".

"Hawko, Irene and now you. If the rumours are true, Jenkins is considering retirement. There will be nobody left!"

"Doesn't that mean more chance of tenure for you?"

"You know, I'll miss your optimism Jonathan. "

Gently lifting Magic onto the desk, Shona rose, and accompanied the computer scientist through the corridor. When they reached Hawko's office, Shona bid Jonathan farewell and knocked on the door and entered.

"Hello Henry".

"Hello Shona". Hawkins looked at the floor.

"I just wanted to wish you well and let you know I'll look after Colin."

"Thank you. He's a bright lad, should do us proud.", after a pause Hawko continued, "It's funny, all along I thought you and I were on the same page. Your research methods are rigorous, but your focus is subtly different. You wanted to find the cracks, the little places the unexplained still persists. I wanted to find out what people would believe."

Brad Majors whispered, "To find the truth, I've even lied".

"Perhaps I should have been a guinea pig, rather than a researcher?"

"We have all been guinea pigs, Irene has written all about us!"

As Shona wondered what the Hambelton visitor might have said, Dave Pirner mumbled, "Standing in the sun with Popescu, anything is possible".

"That should make an interesting read. Well, look after yourself, and enjoy your adventures."

As they parted Shona couldn't shake the chorus from her head.