

Foreword

This novel is not just the joint winner of the inaugural Terry Pratchett Prize, but the joint winner of the inaugural Terry Pratchett *Anywhere But Here, Anywhen But Now* Prize. Which meant we were after stories set on Earth, but perhaps an Earth that might have been, or might yet be, one that had gone down a different leg of the famous trouser leg of time (see the illustration in almost every book about quantum theory).

We were looking for books set at any time, perhaps today, perhaps, we imagined, a today in a world where two thousand years ago, the crowd shouted for Jesus Christ to be spared, or where in 1962, John F. Kennedy's game of chicken with the Russians went horribly wrong. We hadn't considered the possibility of a world in which cows became ruthless, libidinous killers, but it is a tribute to Michael Logan's imaginative powers that he was able to do so, and serendipitously, to come up with one of the best bovine puns in literary – or should that be cinematic? – history.

The key to creating an alternative world is that it has to be believable – on another variant of Earth, there might be some unusual goings-on, but you still recognize that it is Earth. The physics will be the same as ours: what goes up must come

down, ants are ant-sized because if they were any bigger their legs wouldn't carry them. *Apocalypse Cow* has stayed true to that – the world it portrays is so slightly removed from our own that it could almost be teetering on the crotch of time, threatening at any moment to change its mind and tip down our own trouser leg. Think about that the next time you tuck into a steak.

Terry Pratchett

March 2012

The beginning of the rend

The man in the sharp blue suit stood atop a wooded hill, dangling an expensive pair of leather shoes from one hand, and watched grey smoke belch from the burning abattoir below. A dozen figures in white biohazard outfits ringed the grubby old building, flame-throwers and automatic weapons pointing casually at the ground. He dialled a number on his mobile as the report of cracking glass echoed across the small valley. A great tongue of flame licked from the freshly broken window to caress the underside of the abattoir's gabled roof.

'It's dealt with,' he said with no preamble.

'Are you sure?' a nervous voice asked in response.

The wind changed direction, carrying tendrils of smoke to the watching man's nostrils. It stank of burning flesh. 'I'm sure.'

'If even a single one of those things escaped, we're finished. And so is this country.'

'Stop being such a worrywart. They're all dead, and currently getting nice and crispy in the barbecue.'

'What about the abattoir workers?'

'All dead too, save for one lucky individual. We're bringing him in.'

'Any idea how the virus got out?'

'Not yet.'

A heavy sigh flooded the mobile's tiny speaker. 'What a balls up. Just make sure you're gone before the emergency services arrive.'

'That won't be a problem,' the man in the suit replied.

He hung up and looked over the treetops below, to where the long abattoir approach road branched off from the main thoroughfare linking Glasgow with a spray of rural towns. Two fire engines and three ambulances were bunched together, lights flashing furiously, and fruitlessly, at the jack-knifed lorry blocking their path.

'Oh, I'm so good at this,' he announced to the empty hillside.

He set off down the grassy slope to herd his clean-up team into the waiting Chinook helicopter that would ferry them the few miles back to the facility. Halfway down, his foot sank into something squelchy.

'Shit,' he stated, pulling his foot out of an enormous cow pat.

His first concern was for his H. Huntsman suit, which he hadn't had time to change out of after the call came in from the monitoring team. Fortunately, his foot hadn't gone in deep enough to taint the hem of the silk trousers, and he'd had the foresight to remove his shoes for the clamber up to the viewpoint. Only the sock was ruined. He could live with that.

Disaster averted, he considered the significance of the cow

THE BEGINNING OF THE REND

pat. Pools of dark blood slicked the surface of the generous dollop of dung, which the coated sole of his foot told him was still warm. He raised his head, and scanned the tree-line. The smoke was growing thicker and darker as the flames consumed flesh, plastic, wood and metal. It drifted between him and the wood, obscuring his view. He thought he saw a bulky body moving among the tree trunks, but when it melted away he dismissed it as a clump of smoke. Then he heard it: a long and shuddering moo, emanating from deep within the trees. The moo came again thirty seconds later, quieter this time. It was moving away, towards the rolling fields where thousands of dairy cows grazed in blissful ignorance, and the suburbs beyond.

‘Oops,’ he said, and hopped down the hill as fast as his unsullied foot could carry him.

Of rice and Zen

Geldof Peters had never encountered a hemp plant. If he did he would kick, punch and stamp on it until it lay in a ruined pulp beneath his shoes, which were made of hemp. The ignominy of being beaten to death with a product made from the corpses of its brethren would escape the plant, but he would revel in it.

While an innocuous plant may seem undeserving of such vitriol, Geldof had good reason for his vendetta. For as long as he could remember, he had been dressed in hemp. His shirts, trousers and underwear were all made from the fibre, to which he was horrendously allergic. Every part of his body itched furiously and his neck and wrists, chafed by collar and cuffs, were ringed with a scabby rash.

He laid the blame at the door of his mother, who was upstairs pottering around as he sat on the sofa reading the latest Iain M. Banks sci-fi epic and trying not to claw himself raw. He had tried to convince her that the rash was hemp-induced. She refused to believe him. Instead of going to a

doctor like a sensible parent, she had dragged him to her spiritual advisor – a wizened old man who had swapped the soaring mountains of Nepal for Cumbernauld, where the only thing soaring into the sky was the ugly 1960s concrete block of a shopping centre. The mystic had diagnosed a severe case of spiritual malaise and advised him to seek his true path in life. Geldof had been hoping for some kind of cream.

Non-hemp solutions were unacceptable to Fanny Peters, environmental campaigner and humongous pain in the arse. Leather and suede, by-products of the meat industry, were forbidden in the vegan household. Nylon was out because it was part of ‘humankind’s relentless march away from Mother Nature’ and denim was deemed too mainstream. Geldof was allowed Fairtrade cotton, but since Fanny had a deal on hemp clothing from one of her friends, he only owned a few cotton items – which had anyway become contaminated by hemp fibre and were almost as bad.

It was all right for her. She wasn’t called ‘Scabby Peters’ at school. She didn’t suffer the embarrassment of scratching her neck in class and having a large piece of skin fall off, only for Malcolm Alexander to spear it on a pencil and parade it around the squealing girls. She wasn’t the one who couldn’t get a partner in Scottish country dancing class and had to stumble around with Mrs Flaxton, the geography teacher-cum-dancing expert, who reeked of mothballs and gin.

While the rash was the main target of abuse at school, it wasn’t the only feature to provoke teasing. Geldof wore glasses, had been born with the curse of ginger hair, and was incredibly scrawny due to his habit of tipping half of his unpalatable vegan meals down the toilet when his mother

wasn't looking. These invitations to bullying negated the fact that the rest of his face was rather well put together: his eyes were a shade of blue that would be called 'icy' or 'piercing' if anybody actually bothered to look beyond the obvious, his nose was on the cute side of pug, and he sported dimples that had prompted unrestrained, and unwelcome, cheek-tugging by passing middle-aged ladies when he was younger.

Once you added in the fact he was English in a country of rabid English-haters, had been saddled with a ridiculous name and was in the habit of carrying around far more books on maths than strictly necessary, it was clear why Geldof was miserable, even by pubescent boy standards.

Life had its small consolations, though, and one of them was baiting Fanny at every opportunity. As his mother's calves appeared at the top of the stairs, Geldof fell to his knees, clasped hands and began to pray loudly with his eyes squeezed shut.

Fanny sighed when she stopped in front of her son. 'Praying again. You know Christianity is responsible for the worst atrocities to disgrace this planet.'

Geldof broke off to say in a neutral tone, 'I'm just trying to experience all religions to see which one fits. You told me I should stay open-minded about my spirituality.'

In the ensuing silence, he suppressed a grin. There was nothing more satisfying than throwing Fanny's own words back at her, particularly when it justified his fake Christianity. He had even considered joining the priesthood, but thought committing himself to a lifetime of Mass, alcoholism and playing Snap! with nuns just to annoy his mother might be overkill. Plus the Catholic Church was fervently anti-masturbation, as his English teacher Sister Maria was fond of

ramming home when she was supposed to be introducing them to literature. This policy clashed with his frantic rate of fiddling, which was only gathering pace as he approached his sixteenth birthday.

Only a few things could dampen Geldof's libido. When he opened his eyes, one of the chief culprits was hovering six feet away: the jungle of black hair sprouting from between his mother's legs, even more unruly than her dreadlocks. Two long hairs protruded from the thicket like the antennae of a Madagascar hissing cockroach. Even though her penchant for nakedness meant he had seen it all before, it was still an unnerving sight. He hopped back up onto the sofa.

'You're right, I'm sorry,' Fanny replied eventually. 'Please just pray quietly. I'm about to meditate.'

'I'll be quiet if you and Dad stop running around naked,' Geldof muttered. 'It's embarrassing.'

'I only want you to be comfortable with your body,' Fanny said reasonably. 'If you stop wearing clothes at home too, you won't feel embarrassed.'

'In the changing rooms last week, the PE teacher said I looked like a skeleton draped in tissue paper,' he snapped. 'Why would I want to put that on show?'

Maybe because you wouldn't be as itchy, a little voice in his head told him. He ignored it. He would rather flake away to nothing than be naked in the same space as his parents. That was wrong in every way imaginable.

'Your PE teacher is misguided,' Fanny replied. 'Your body is just as beautiful as anybody else's.'

She reached for Geldof's hand. He ignored the conciliatory gesture and pointedly reassumed the prayer position. Her drooping smile prompted a small pang of regret, which he

quickly suppressed. She wheeled away, and within seconds of her disappearing upstairs, whale song kicked in, setting the Chinese lampshades dotted around the room vibrating. Geldof gritted his teeth. Fanny's yodelling mantra began. If he had had anything else to grit it would have been firmly gritted.

He crossed to the mantelpiece and began stacking the statuettes of Buddha, Krishna and other gods into a pyramid. Like most of the knick-knacks around the house, the figurines came from the shop of new-age tat Fanny ran in Glasgow's West End. Had she located it anywhere else, the business would have closed in a week. But the proximity to Glasgow University meant hordes of drink- and drug-addled students frequented the shop to blow their loans on dragon-shaped incense burners, ethnic jewellery and books on lucid dreaming.

When Geldof was satisfied the tableau would be sufficiently annoying, he stood at the window and ran a finger around the inside of his collar, trying to ease the nip. His father, James, was in the back garden, impervious to the misty spring rain drifting through the air to speckle the windowpanes. He was watching a squirrel shimmy across a rope towards a pillar with a transparent plastic tunnel fixed to the top. James virtually lived in the back garden, either in the shed, devising new obstacle courses for the squirrels and taking notes on their performance, or tending the vegetable garden that provided the ingredients for many of the family's meals – all accompanied by continuous spliff-smoking.

James looked just like the animals he studied. His grey ponytail kinked up and down like a squirrel's tail and his face looked as if somebody had grabbed the end of his nose and

pulled his features forward a few inches. Even his eyebrows were grey and bushy, like squirrel fur. Only his slow movements, and the fact he was six foot and clad in cords, sandals and a parka, differentiated him from the twitching rodent scurrying through the tube towards a pile of mixed nuts. Geldof was convinced his father's obsession with setting up assault courses derived from his army days, before he was reborn as a peace activist. Not that he had ever discussed the army with his father. James's mind was always somewhere else – probably in the void, given the amount of Gold Seal he smoked each day.

Geldof opened the patio door and stepped into the garden to escape the racket for a few minutes. The smell coming over the tall wooden fence Fanny had erected to keep the surrounding middle classes at bay captivated him instantly. He stood on a stone tiger and peeked over. Through the pulled-back flowery curtains of the next house, he spied Mary Alexander – his neighbour, maths teacher and love of his life – contemplating two steaming plates of mince and potatoes.

He closed his eyes and sucked in air through his nose. The glorious, forbidden meat smelled as divine as Mary looked. Her little paunch was pressed against the table top and her dark-framed glasses sat halfway down her nose as she twirled a lock of wavy hair, staring at the plates. Geldof could almost hear her massive brain whirring. She was probably calculating the forces of attraction between each globule of mince or pondering the mathematical complexities of the vortices of steam that rose from the food. She scooped up a lump of mince with her index finger, sucked it and ran her tongue the length of the digit to clean off the gravy. The blood in Geldof's legs rushed off, urgently required elsewhere. He fell off the tiger.

Once he had recovered, Geldof stood up and headed for the gate. His mother had settled into her meditation, while James hadn't even noticed him collapsing to the ground a few metres away. He didn't intend to eat anything, as Fanny had a nose like a drug-squad dog. If she detected meat on his breath, his computer privileges, and thus access to the recreational maths websites and chat forums he frequented, would be withdrawn. That would be a punishment too horrible even to consider. He simply wanted to bathe in the rich aroma of the mince. The Alexanders didn't mind him coming over, and the twins would be at football practice or lurking in the park smoking, so he wouldn't get any grief from his chief tormentors.

Geldof crossed into his neighbours' property and tapped on the door. A few seconds later, David Alexander threw it open.

'Hello, son,' he said. 'The wails of the banshee driven you out, have they?'

With a non-committal shrug, he followed David into the living room just as Mary came through with the food. Geldof eyed the meals with the despairing look of a de-clawed, toothless cat tracking a fat mouse.

'Want some?' David asked, balancing a plate on his large stomach.

Geldof looked away guiltily.

'Mum will be making dinner soon.'

'What you having?'

'Rice cakes in a tomato and red pepper sauce.'

'Sounds fucking disgusting,' David said, and spooned a large pile of mince into his mouth. Some of the meat clung to his beard, while more plopped onto his Led Zeppelin

T-shirt, surrounding Robert Plant's head like a beefy halo.

'You sure?' he asked between mouthfuls.

'Stop torturing him,' Mary said. 'You know he doesn't eat meat.'

'Not by choice,' David retorted.

Mary waved a dismissive hand at her husband and smiled at Geldof. 'So, are you ready?'

Yes, take me now, Geldof thought. Alas, that was not what she meant.

'Today I want the proof for the infinity of prime numbers,' she said.

'Easy!' Geldof blurted out. ' P is a prime number, and n is a number defined as one plus the product of all prime numbers less than or equal to p . So if n is prime then there is a prime greater than p .'

'Are you even speaking English?' David interrupted.

Mary shushed him and indicated Geldof should continue.

He rattled off a procession of acrobatic ns and qs and ps and rs even though Mary's approving gaze left him feeling slightly flustered.

'My head hurts,' David complained once he fell silent.

When Mary ruffled Geldof's hair, his heart lurched.

'Correct again,' Mary said. 'One of these days I'll catch you out.'

She turned to pick up her fork, and Geldof, so softly even an elephant with an ear trumpet would have struggled to hear him, whispered, 'I love you.'

Mary began eating as David turned his attention to the tail end of *Countdown* on the Bang & Olufsen flat-screen TV that filled half of the far wall. David shouted out his own solutions to the word quizzes, which were mainly four letters and

not likely to win any prizes for intelligence or originality.

Geldof could not fathom why Mary had married David. He was as loud and crude as she was quiet and refined. Until three years ago, when the Alexanders won the lottery and moved in next door, David had been a technical studies teacher renowned in school for his instability. Once he had clamped an unruly boy's ponytail in a vice and left him there for a whole lesson, periodically hitting him on the head with a T-square. And then there was the time some youths on scooters broke a school window at break-time. In front of a playground packed with cheering pupils, David hurdled the fence and punched one of them clean off his ride, breaking his knuckles on the startled biker's helmet. Geldof was pretty sure he would have been fired eventually had he not struck it rich and quit. And that was another thing: while David could not wait to dump teaching for a life of loafing in front of the television, Mary had stayed on despite her new-found wealth, displaying her love of mathematics. All the more reason to adore her.

The show ended, and David switched to the early-evening news. The screen showed a fleet of ambulances, police cars and fire engines parked outside a burning building.

'That's more like it,' he said. 'You can't beat a bit of blood and guts.'

'These were the scenes earlier today when tragedy struck at McTavish & Sons abattoir near Milngavie,' the newsreader announced. 'Preliminary reports indicate at least twenty-three people died in a fire and stampede.'

'Christ, that's only a few miles away,' David pointed out.

The cameras cut to the fire chief. His face was reddened from the heat, and he had to raise his voice above the roar of the flames.

'The police received a call around one p.m. from a hysterical employee who said the cows were attacking. We believe this means the fire provoked a stampede,' he shouted. 'Our units were hampered by an overturned lorry on the approach road. By the time we got here, the building was fully ablaze.'

'Doesn't your cousin Terry work in an abattoir?' Mary asked.

'He was working on the other side of town last time we spoke,' David replied.

'And when was that?'

He shrugged. 'Dunno. Ages ago.'

Mary furrowed her brow and seemed about to say something. She was interrupted by a knock on the door. The chaotic images so entranced Geldof that it took him several seconds to register that the new voice, which was growing louder, belonged to his mother.

'Oh fuck, it's the dreadlocked crusader,' David muttered.

'I would just like you to keep the window closed when you're cooking,' Fanny was saying in a voice still a few steps down from full-on haranguing. 'It's hard to meditate when the smell of murdered flesh is—'

Fanny, thankfully clad in a silk kimono, broke off as she stepped into the living room and saw Geldof.

'What are you doing here?' she asked.

'I just wanted to . . . er . . . umm . . .' he stuttered.

'He wanted to ask me a question about quadratic equations,' Mary chipped in.

Fanny ignored her. 'Have you been eating meat?'

She didn't wait for an answer. Instead she marched over and thrust her nose at Geldof's mouth, taking several deep sniffs before coming away satisfied.

'No. Well that's something.'

She glared at the TV screen, which had cut to the building's burnt-out carcass. 'You know I don't approve of you watching television.'

David snorted, sending Geldof catapulting off the sofa. His neighbour knew just the right buttons to push to send Fanny ballistic, and he delighted in ramming his big fingers at them at every opportunity. The only hope of stopping the coming argument was for Geldof to get his mum out of there. He was too late.

'Come on, love, TV's magic,' David said, lighting the touch-paper with glee.

Fanny rounded on him. 'Don't call me love. TV fills people's heads with the ideals of consumerist society and promotes violence.'

'That's hippie shite.'

'Don't start, David,' interjected Mary, who was now attempting to herd Fanny from the room with fluttering hands.

'She started it, coming over here to complain. Which is a bit fucking rich if you ask me,' David continued, not taking his gaze off the screen. 'She sticks her opinion down everyone's throat, banging on doors and handing out leaflets. Even the Jehovah's Witnesses won't talk to her.' He picked up his fork and brandished it. 'And if I have to hear whale song one more time I'll burst a fucking gasket.'

Fanny sidestepped Mary. 'You have no right to complain. You cook meat for breakfast, lunch and dinner and I put up with the stench. Can't you give up your filthy habit even occasionally?'

'Humans are carnivores, love. A meal isn't a meal unless it

has meat in it. Christ, I'd eat you if lentils were the only alternative.'

Fanny ignored the remark. 'It takes four kilos of grain, a hundred kilos of hay and a hundred thousand litres of water to produce one kilo of beef.' She jabbed a finger at David's empty dish. 'The equivalent of what you've just eaten could have fed a family in Africa for weeks.'

'Bollocks,' David said sagely. 'Look at that boy of yours. He looks like a starving Ethiopian, plus he has scurvy. He needs burgers, not grain and hay.'

Geldof, although irked his affliction had been used to illustrate David's point, salivated at the thought of eating a burger, imagining biting into a thick, juicy lump of meat nestled within a crumbly bun.

'He gets tofu burgers and is far healthier for it,' Fanny said.

'It's not healthier. It's a well-known fact vegetarians die young.'

'Nonsense. Name me just one.'

'Linda McCartney.'

'She had breast cancer!'

David shrugged and replied, 'She probably wouldn't have got it if she ate meat. Heather Mills then.'

'She isn't dead.'

'No, but she's only got one leg.'

'It didn't fall off because she was a vegan. She got hit by a motorbike.'

'Well, all that tofu must have affected her peripheral vision. If she'd eaten meat, she'd have seen it coming.'

Fanny harrumphed. 'Do you have any real examples? Perhaps someone who wasn't married to Paul McCartney?'

'Gandhi!' David exclaimed.

He folded his arms across his chest and nodded.

'Gandhi?' Fanny spluttered. 'He was assassinated. When he was almost eighty.'

'Well, my point still stands.'

Geldof thought David's point wasn't so much standing as lying curled up in a corner, rocking itself and drooling. But David was just winding Fanny up and she, as ever, was falling for it, almost choking on her outrage.

'You're talking nonsense,' Fanny said. 'We will never kill cows, will we, Geldof?'

He imagined himself in a field, knife in teeth, sneaking up behind an unsuspecting cow. Quick as a flash, he killed and butchered the animal and was soon roasting a huge hunk of meat over an open fire. He almost moaned with pleasure.

'No, Mum,' he responded dutifully.

David gestured at the TV. 'They'll do you in if they get the chance. Your precious bloody cows killed twenty-three people in that abattoir. Strike first, that's what I say.'

Fanny looked at the screen as the camera zoomed in on a body bag being slid into the back of an ambulance. She listened to the newsreader recap the story, and then shook her head.

'You are odious!' she shouted. 'How could it be the cows' fault? Did you expect them to sit still and burn to death?'

'I'm guessing "yes" would be the wrong answer,' David said. 'But that's what I'm going for. Do I win a tenner?'

'We're leaving!' Fanny announced.

Thank God, Geldof thought and scuttled off behind his mother.

'Cheers for dropping by!' David called after them. 'Do come again.'

Mary followed them into the hallway and caught hold of Fanny's sleeve.

'Fanny, I promise we'll keep the windows closed when we're cooking from now on,' she said quickly. 'I respect your beliefs and I'll try not to offend them. But if you keep the noise down it would be appreciated.'

Fanny was silent for a moment, then nodded.

'I know we have our differences, but we should stick together,' Mary continued. 'You know what the rest of the snobs on the street call us: New-age and New-money.'

The sneakiness of Mary's argument blew Geldof away. There was no better way to heal divisions than by uniting against the common enemy, in this case the staid middle classes who populated the suburb of Bearsden. It was common knowledge that the Peterses' alternative lifestyle did not sit well with the neighbours, particularly the large and unsightly wind turbine on their roof, and the Alexanders would always be considered working-class oiks trying to rise above their station, no matter how large the house or shiny the car.

Fanny's lips unpuckered. 'I'm sorry. I shouldn't have got so angry.'

'It's fine. If you have a problem in the future, please come to me.'

Fanny nodded again, her shoulders relaxing, and stepped out onto the path. Just before the door closed behind them, Geldof took one last lungful of the lingering meaty smell. His stomach unleashed a long rumble. The evening's meal would not be able to tame the monstrous appetite now broiling within him.

'I'm still disappointed in you,' Fanny said, although her anger was now half-hearted. 'I should send you to your room with no dinner.'

Geldof perked up. He would rather go hungry than force the tasteless rice down his throat with the memory of real food still prickling his taste buds. Disappointingly, when they got back into the house, Fanny decided since she had already prepared most of the ingredients it would be a waste if he didn't eat.

It took over an hour before Geldof could flee to his room, where he planned to tug one off while imagining Mary was punishing him with a light, flirtatious spanking for getting the decimal point in the wrong place in his solution to a particularly hard calculation. Just as he conjured up Mary scribbling the problem on the blackboard, rising up on tip-toes to reveal her stocking tops, his parents' grunts sounded through the wall – one set high, one set low, in an absurd harmony. Their tantric couplings usually lasted at least two hours, although since his father was fifty, a whole fourteen years older than Fanny, Geldof didn't know how he had the stamina.

With his parents indulging noisily in the real thing, Geldof couldn't get his fantasy going. He looked out of the window, hoping Mary would be in the kitchen. Instead he saw David raiding the saucepan and greedily cramming the last few morsels of mince into his mouth. It was not quite the erotic image he was searching for. He sat down heavily at his desk and switched on the computer. With his fantasy ruined, the only thing left was recreational maths. He logged on to one of his favourite websites and tried to lose himself in formulae as his parents' bedstead knocked monotonously against the wall. It was going to be a long evening.

Tip for twat

Lesley McBrien, journalist extraordinaire, if she did say so herself, laid her fingers on the keyboard and prepared to start typing.

The key to a good article, she thought, is a strong start that captures the reader's imagination.

She hammered out, *Colin Drummond is a twat.*

She leaned back and admired her work. Short, sharp and to the point. But it didn't tell the whole story. Lesley half stood and peered across the cubicle jungle of the *Glasgow Tribune* office, where Post-it notes clung to partition walls like vines, phones trilled like tropical birds and journalists hunched over their keyboards like the hairless monkeys they generally were. Colin sat in the office of Alexandra McMillan, the news editor, one leg slung casually over the arm of the chair. Alexandra said something and Colin threw his head back to let out a laugh so loud and brazen in its bum-lickery it resonated through the office window.

Colin Drummond is a smug, ingratiating, self-serving twat who

should be strung up by his tiny little dick and left to twist gently in the breeze, Lesley typed.

She sighed and pressed *delete* before anybody saw she was writing rude, albeit true, things about the *Glasgow Tribune's* star reporter. The jolly conversation in Alexandra's office was no doubt linked to the big scoop Colin had been alluding to all morning. It was something to do with what happened at the abattoir yesterday not being what it seemed, but Colin was being infuriatingly coy about it.

Unfortunately there was no denying Colin was a talented twat, and she was jealous. Lesley had worked at the *Tribune* for three years, arriving straight from journalism school with visions of spending a few months at the bottom of the food chain before her talent shone through and propelled her to the top. Yet after three years of toil, not once had she made the front page. Not once had she interviewed a mysterious source in the halls of power. Not once had she taken a minister out to a trendy bar in order to tease out sensitive information and knock back as many bottles of Smirnoff Ice on expenses as physically possible.

No, Lesley was stuck asking the grieving relatives of car-crash victims how they felt in the immediate aftermath of their loss, and often getting an earful of abuse for her trouble. She was the one sent out to shiver on Sauchiehall Street's pedestrian precinct on bleak winter mornings to pluck vox pop quotes from the scurrying stream of office workers and shoppers. Basically, she was the mug who did all the shitty jobs considered beneath her more senior colleagues.

Lesley blew a wisp of hair out of her eye. If only Colin would suffer an accident: just a little mishap that would render him unable to write and allow her to take over his juicy

gigs. Perhaps if she tinkered with the shredder she could arrange for him to lose most of his fingers. That would do it. She closed her eyes and enjoyed a pleasant daydream, in which Colin staggered in a wobbly circle, spraying the Journalist of the Year award perched rather too prominently on his desk with blood from his stumps.

She was still immersed in her fantasy when a hand fell on her shoulder. An involuntary shriek escaped her lips and she opened her eyes to see Colin leaning over her, his fingers unfortunately all still attached.

'Hard at work?' he asked.

Lesley shrugged him off and leaned over her keyboard, silently thanking her lucky stars she had hit *delete*. 'Just thinking about how to start my story.'

Colin looked at the blank screen. 'I would help, but I'm going for a working lunch. I've forwarded my calls to you. Anything urgent comes in, give me a tinkle.'

'I'm not your bloody secretary,' she snapped.

'That's true,' Colin replied. 'You can't type fast enough. Cheerio!'

He zipped off before Lesley could respond, his fifties-throwback quiff dangling before him.

Working lunch, my arse, Lesley thought. Colin was en route to the pub for a few beers and a game of pool with the features editor. She'd seen them hunched over the table on many occasions as she hurried round to Pret A Manger in the pissing rain for a sandwich to eat at her desk.

She was just about to go over to Colin's desk and reverse his mouse controls in a petty act of revenge when her phone rang. She snatched it up, convinced it was for Colin. Nobody ever called her at work.

'Sorry, the twat is out brown-nosing at the moment. Please leave a message and I'll make sure it doesn't get to him,' she intoned in her politest telephone voice.

After a brief pause a digitized voice began to speak.

'Mr Drummond, you may like to know at least part of the cock-and-bull story you are being fed is true,' said the caller, who sounded a lot like Stephen Hawking. 'A virus was let loose in that abattoir, turning those cows into killing machines, but terrorists are not responsible.'

Lesley froze. What was this? Virus? Terrorists? Killing-machine cows? This sounded like a tip-off and somehow the caller hadn't realized she wasn't Colin. She stayed perfectly still, not wanting even to breathe in case she gave away her identity.

'Do not attempt to speak,' the voice continued. 'This is an automated recording, created and broadcast through a computer with a time delay. I am already on my way out of the country. Once I tell you what I know, you will understand why. If you have a recording device, I suggest you turn it on now.'

The voice paused. Lesley scabbled in the desk drawer for her voice recorder, which was buried beneath half-empty boxes of cigarettes, tatty old business cards and a dusty framed picture of her and her father Charles standing outside the *Glasgow Tribune* offices. She got it out just in time and managed to press *record* on her third excited stab.

'What you are about to hear is a conversation, recorded yesterday evening, between Professor Jonathan Martin, a renowned virologist, his colleague Professor Constance Jones, and the head of security at the facility where the leaked bio-weapon that caused the carnage was produced, one

Alastair Brown,' the voice explained before cutting off.

Almost immediately, a human voice crackled down the line.

'What's the latest, Alastair?' the man Lesley assumed to be Professor Martin asked in a plummy, slightly lisping voice.

'The good news is the fire destroyed most of the evidence,' Brown responded. 'The bad news is the paramedics spotted us taking off, and the fire services are already talking about arson. Normally that wouldn't be a problem, as we can just pressure them to shut up. But one of them has already blabbed to Drummond at the *Tribune* about fishy goings-on. He's sniffing around. My preference would be to kill him, although that might be a little obvious.'

No it wouldn't, Lesley thought.

'You're saying the stampede story won't hold?'

'No, particularly when they see the bite marks on the bodies. But we've prepared a backup. We're going to claim terrorists released a virus into the food chain. After the Glasgow Airport attack, it shouldn't be a difficult sell. I'm sure I can scare up a suspected al-Qaeda member or two: there are plenty of Muslims to choose from. We'll leak it to Drummond through a friendly politician later today.'

'For God's sake, if the virus is out there, we shouldn't be worrying about a cover story, particularly one that accuses innocent civilians on the basis of their faith,' an elderly female voice, presumably Professor Jones, chimed in. 'We need to hope we've contained it, then work out how it got out so it doesn't happen again.'

'Alastair assures me we've nipped it in the bud,' Martin said.

'Yes, about that,' Brown interjected. 'I suspect one of the cows may have toddled off before we arrived.'

There was silence from the scientists.

'Don't worry,' Brown continued. 'I've got teams scouring the countryside looking for it.'

Jones was the first to recover from the bombshell. 'And you haven't found it yet? What is it, some kind of ninja cow?'

'There are a lot of woodlands out there,' Brown replied, sounding uncertain for the first time.

'Sorry, my mistake. It's Rambo cow. I suppose it has smeared itself in camouflage paint and is fashioning traps out of spiky logs for its pursuers as we speak.'

'Sarcasm won't get us anywhere, Constance,' Martin chastised.

'Pardon me for being upset. This is a disaster.'

'She's right,' Brown broke in. 'I deserve the criticism. It was unprofessional of me to let one escape. But believe me, I take a great deal of pride in my job, and I will do whatever it takes to make up for this mistake.'

'I hope so,' Jones said. 'You know how virulent the virus is, what the infected animals can do. If that cow starts infecting other animals, I'm getting myself and my family on a plane.'

'You can't jump ship,' Martin replied. 'We need you to work on the vaccine.'

'What use would that be? It isn't even half-ready. By the time we got it together, it would be too late.'

'Let's hope it doesn't come to that,' Martin said. There was a brief silence. 'What do we do with this abattoir worker – what's his name?'

'Terry Borders. We're keeping him sedated for the moment. I'll wake him for a chat when I get the chance,' Brown explained. 'If he remembers everything, his story would fit in

with the terrorist angle. But it would be neater if he were to die from his injuries, so to speak.'

'Let's just hold off on that until we see what happens,' Martin said.

'My God!' Jones exclaimed. 'Neater? Hold off? This is a human life you're talking about. We're scientists, not murderers.'

Lesley could hear the coldness in Brown's voice. 'I'm sure many animal activists would call you a murderer, Constance. My job is to ensure the secrecy of this project, and I can only reiterate that I will do whatever it takes to meet that objective. Whatever it takes. Do you understand?'

'Are you threatening me?'

'Not at all. I'm merely reminding you of what I am tasked to do, and the importance of keeping cool heads at this critical juncture.' There was the scrape of a chair being pushed back. 'And now I'd better get back to that task. Enjoy your evening.'

A door closed. For a short while there was only the heavy breathing of the two scientists.

'I knew I should have retired when I had the chance,' Jones said in a small voice.

The hiss cut out, to be replaced by the computerized voice, which said, 'The facility where this was recorded lies three miles west of the abattoir, masquerading as a vet school research centre into cow herpes. I suggest you visit it. Carefully.'

The line went dead immediately. Lesley sat there slack-jawed. While the caller hadn't explicitly revealed that the government was involved, it must be. This was the kind of story that brought down leaders and made careers: a

bio-engineered virus accidentally released into the food chain. She immediately googled the three people in the recording. Martin and Jones were real people, with plaudits as long as her arm in their respective fields. Brown's name scored no hits. She hurried to the toilet and locked herself in a cubicle, where she listened to the conversation again, foot tapping against the tiles the whole way through. There was no way she was going to hand this over to the twat. She had started recording after his name was mentioned, and could claim the information came from her own contacts. Not that she had any.

As she left the cubicle, a voice in the back of her mind – way back, in a cobwebbed room with boards nailed over the door – whispered that what she was about to do was unscrupulous. She mentally hammered up a few more boards until the voice fell silent, and then rushed to Alexandra's office.

In her excitement, she burst straight in. Alexandra jumped as the door thudded off the wall. 'Bloody hell, Lesley, haven't you heard of knocking?'

'Sorry, but you're going to love me when you find out what I've got for you.'

Lesley sat down with a flourish and waited expectantly. Alexandra shuffled some papers, glanced at her screen, scratched her chin, and then looked out of the window.

'Lesley. Yes. I've been meaning to talk to you,' she said, staring intently at the blank grey wall of the building on the other side of the alleyway.

Clearly she hadn't listened to Lesley, which was a fairly normal state of affairs. This time she would have to pay attention.

Lesley was leaning across the desk, ready to relate the gist of

the tip-off, when Alexandra turned to face her and blurted out, 'We're letting you go.'

'What?' Lesley asked, wondering how on earth the editor knew what she was about to ask. 'You're letting me go to the facility?'

Alexandra ignored the question and launched into what seemed like a well-rehearsed spiel. 'You know the paper's been having problems. Online news, bloggers, the global recession: they've all cut into our market. Circulation's down and we're haemorrhaging money. We need to cut costs. Unfortunately, you've been selected for redundancy.'

'Oh. You're letting me go.'

Lesley shook her head. This wasn't supposed to be happening. This was her big moment, the scene where the plucky hack talks her boss into letting her do something foolhardy, not the scene where the superfluous loser gets the boot. Sure, she had known they were reviewing the paper's operations, but the newsroom had been assured only support staff would be cut.

'You're joking, aren't you?' she asked.

Alexandra shook her head.

Lesley's lips, which only seconds before had been tingling with the anticipation of revealing her big break, flapped numbly as she croaked, 'Who else are you letting go?'

Alexandra coughed. 'Well, three in accounts, five from distribution—'

Lesley cut her off. 'How many journalists?'

The editor once more studied the side of the building, which had not become any less featureless in the past few minutes and seemed undeserving of such close attention. 'Just you.'

To call the resulting silence uncomfortable would be like saying having your eyeballs prised out with a spork stung a little. The numbness that had started in Lesley's lips spread down her neck.

'Just me? Shouldn't it be last in, first out? You could fire Stephen.' She waved at a skinny youth who just happened to be hurrying past the window. 'He's only been here a year.'

'It doesn't work that way.'

'Why me?' Lesley asked, unable to keep the plaintive tone out of her voice and hating herself for it.

Alexandra blew out her cheeks and cast a last longing glance at the wall before meeting Lesley's gaze. 'To be honest – and I'm telling you this because I think it will be good for you long-term – you're not very good. You only got this job because your old man called in a favour with the managing editor.' She shrugged. 'I wanted to hire someone else.'

There it was. The truth – as naked as a fat German naturist and just as welcome in the small room. Lesley kept her face expressionless.

Alexandra must have thought she was holding back an emotional outburst, for she babbled on in an attempt to mitigate the blow. 'Not that I'm saying you're a bad journalist, just not a very good one. At least, not good enough for the *Tribune*, which has exceptionally high standards. I'm sure you would fit in well on a free paper. Or maybe a lifestyle magazine.'

What Alexandra didn't realize was that when Lesley showed no emotion, she was usually holding back a desire to inflict bodily harm, rather than tears. Being made redundant was one thing, and it had certainly throttled the life out of her excitement. Being told she was a bad journalist was something else

entirely. Lesley closed her fist around the voice recorder and wondered if she would have the speed and strength to whip down Alexandra's trousers and jam it up her bum before her colleagues intervened. Lifestyle magazine. Cheeky cow.

Then she remembered the revelation on the voice recorder and smiled. It was perfect. Alexandra had never given her a fair crack of the whip. Now she was letting the biggest story in the rag's history slip through her fingers.

You're going to regret this, Lesley thought. *You'll be like the record executive who rejected The Beatles or the editor who decided not to buy the Harry Potter books.* She relaxed her fist, allowing blood to flow back into her fingers, and slipped the voice recorder into her trouser pocket. 'You're right, Alexandra. I don't belong here.'

Alexandra smiled back uncertainly. 'You don't?'

'No. You're doing absolutely the right thing.' Lesley's smile broadened.

'Well, I'm glad you agree,' Alexandra said, clearly discomfited by the unexpected turn in the conversation. 'Let's keep this between us for the moment, until the details are finalized, OK?'

'No problem,' Lesley said, climbing to her feet.

She hurried back to her desk, feeling Alexandra's bemused gaze on her back. Over the following half-hour she planned her next steps. The first move would be to organize a stakeout – the very word generated a thrilling shiver – and ask residents near the facility if they had seen or heard anything odd. She would also have to establish a link between the abattoir and the facility and find out how the virus got out. Then she would make a few calls to other newspapers – *The Times* or the *Guardian* probably – with her exclusive.

She was looking at the facility's website, noting down its exact location, when Colin returned, his cheeks flushed and pupils dilated.

'How was the lunch meet?' she asked as he strolled over to her cubicle.

'Oh, you know,' Colin replied vaguely. Lesley caught a strong whiff of mints with an undercurrent of lager. 'Any calls while I was out?'

The question seemed casual enough, but something about the way he asked it gave Lesley pause. Suddenly it occurred to her the tip might be a sick joke Colin was playing on her. After all, the call did come in suspiciously soon after he'd left the office. He probably already knew she was for the chop. The swine knew everything. It would be just like him to put the boot in when she was down. She searched his face for any hint he was up to something. His lip was curled up at one side, although it could have been just everyday smugness.

'No calls,' she said, picking up a pen and twirling it. 'None whatsoever. Not a single one. Zip. Nada. Zilch.'

'Are you sure?' he asked, frowning.

That was it. While he often transferred his calls to Lesley, he had never questioned her if there weren't any. He was probing, which meant he was trying to figure out if she had got the call. She should have known better. A virus that turned cows into killers, what an idiotic idea. And she had almost swallowed it. All of her dreams fell away, and she was left with a vision of morosely shuffling along with other undesirables to sign on at the dole office.

'I suppose you think it's funny,' she hissed. 'One last joke at my expense.'

Colin's frown deepened. 'I'm not sure what you're talking about.'

'Well, I'm not falling for it, Knob-end.' Lesley jabbed her pen towards Colin's groin. He skipped back into the narrow corridor between the cubicle walls. 'You've got five seconds to piss off back to your own desk, otherwise this pen and your left ball will enjoy the same relationship as a pickled onion and a cocktail stick.'

Colin threw up his hands. 'Fine, I'm going. You're losing it, Lesley, you know that?'

He sauntered back to his desk, casting glances over his shoulder as he went. Lesley stuck two fingers up at him. Once he was out of sight, she dropped her head to the desk and banged it a few times experimentally, just to see how much it would hurt if she really went for it.

Too much, she thought, and slid open the drawer to retrieve a packet of cigarettes.

She was greeted by her father's image.

'Just what I need,' she said. 'Your ugly mug.'

To the casual observer, the picture would look like a typical family shot: a proud father with an arm slung around his daughter, a slim young woman with poker-straight brown hair dressed up in a brand-new business suit for her first day at work. A closer study revealed the cracks in the image of family unity: the daylight between their bodies; the way his hand was hovering above her shoulder rather than resting on it; the fixed grin on her face, so wide and false it pushed her large green eyes into slits and revealed every tooth, including the slightly brown incisor she had never got fixed after being hit in the face with a hockey stick at university.

They had been forced to pose by Lesley's mother, who was

delighted her daughter was following in Charles's illustrious footsteps. When her mother dropped the picture off at the office a week later, Lesley had dumped it straight into the drawer. She didn't want anyone to think she was trading on her father's reputation. She had known he'd put in a word for her, but had been determined to show she deserved the chance. Now she had blown it, he would try to bail her out. As soon as the news of her redundancy reached the old sod in his retirement villa on the Kenyan coast, he would be on the phone to his cronies. Not because he cared about her; the famous McBrien name, renowned through generations of journalism, must not be besmirched in such a way. She didn't want him to save her. If she was going to make it, she wanted to do it herself. And if she was going to fail, which at the moment appeared the more likely scenario, she wanted to do so with dignity.

Lesley closed the drawer and headed out for a smoke. Colin's ridiculously phallic quiff protruded over the top of his cubicle as she walked past. She briefly considered setting fire to it – with the amount of hairspray he employed it would go up like a torch – but decided a few months in jail was not a price worth paying for the brief burst of savage pleasure she would derive from watching him run to stick his flaming head under the water cooler. All the same, she could not resist aiming a slap at the mound of hair, prompting an 'Oi!' in protest.

'Urgent newsflash: You're a wanker!' she told Colin, who had stood up to glower at her.

'Seriously, Lesley, what the hell's up with you today?' he asked, readjusting his hair.

'Like you don't know.'

'Look, whatever paranoid fantasy you've cooked up, leave me out of it,' Colin responded.

The apparently genuine confusion on Colin's face gave her pause. What if the story was real and she didn't look into it because she thought she was being mocked? That would be far worse than taking a ribbing. She turned away from her nemesis and thumped downstairs. What she did know was her head was buzzing and she was in no condition to make a decision. She needed time to think, and to listen to the recording a few more times. Then she would decide whether to chase the story or make good on her threat to skewer Colin's nuts.