

ARTHUR

The first thing that Arthur notices upon waking is the lingering taste of garlic in his mouth. The second thing he notices is that he is lying on the floor of an unfamiliar basement. The first event can be attributed to last night's microwaved garlic and pumpkin soup, but the latter? Well, that's rather a different story altogether.

The basement occupies a territory somewhere betwixt clean and dirty, a sort of Switzerland in regards to its neutrality to affiliation with either side. This causes Arthur a great deal of consternation, owing to the fact that he falls only very slightly outside the range of behaviours and thought patterns that would see him diagnosed with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. There are days that Arthur wishes that he actually were certifiably OCD, as he feels that this kind of quirk might make an interesting badge to add to the beige cardigan of his dreary existence.

Right now, however, no such thought occupies his head. As the clouds of whatever drug has kept him unconscious for the last...(how long has it been? Minutes? Hours? Days?) clear from his consciousness they part to allow clear skies filled with fear, anxiety and the overwhelming desire to locate the nearest clean toothbrush.

He scans the basement for possible exits, but finds only an obstinately barred window and a trapdoor at the top of the stairs. The cynic in him whispers *'well that'll OBVIOUSLY be locked, you dolt!'* in a disdainful leer. Even in these unusual circumstances, Arthur's years of bureaucratic training compel him to begin itemising the basement's contents:

1 A small wooden desk and chair, one leg of the former slightly too short and propped up by:

2 a dusty, leather-bound copy of the King James bible.

3 An old rotary phone, placed upon the desk, looking almost

Hitchcockian in its incongruity.

4 (Next to the rotary phone) a manila folder.

5 One fountain pen (blue).

Arthur rises and stumbles awkwardly, his limbs bleating complaints about being forced to move whilst under the residual influence of as yet unidentified narcotics. He moves gracelessly towards the desk and opens the manila folder.

The first document appears, at first glance, to be a formal business letter.

He reads:

Dear Arthur P. Pinkerton,

We regret to inform you that as of 9:15am this morning (being the 6th of March) you, Arthur, (hereafter referred to as 'the Perpetrator') have been injected with an amatoxin obtained from the amanita genus of mushroom. At the dose that you have received, extremely painful death is likely to occur within 2-3 working days, although this can vary depending on the subject.

Please additionally be aware that side effects including, but not limited to; dizziness, nausea, diarrhea, blurred vision and paralysis of limbs are likely to occur within the next 10-12 hours although this, also, varies depending on the individual to whom it has been administered.

Should the Perpetrator wish to receive the antidote, simply fill out the forms attached, (in triplicate), and we shall make all efforts to provide this as soon as possible. Please note that the average processing time for antidote requests is 3-4 working days, but may take longer.

Should the perpetrator feel that their request is urgent, please fill out the Urgent Request Form found in section 2a of this folder and address it to the attention of Martin Fairweather (hereafter referred to as 'the Victim') by enclosing your message in the attached prepaid envelope and sliding it under the upstairs trapdoor.

Please note that the standard response time for urgent requests is 5-6

working days, but may take longer.

Should the Perpetrator require immediate assistance, simply dial the info hotline using the provided phone between the hours of 3.30 and 3.31pm Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. This line shall be unavailable for outgoing calls at all other times.

Arthur P. Pinkerton places the letter back down and trembles in the manner of an unheroic man involuntarily placed in a situation that so obstinately demands heroism. He lets out a dull whimper, and pushes his glasses up his nose. He tries to think about what to do. He is not a man who is overly fond of surprises at the best of times, and his unwaveringly monochrome existence has left him ill-equipped for such a scenario. Arthur sits sullenly on the floor. A mild tingling pain starts nibbling at the fringes of his cerebral cortex, much like a school of Chinese feet-cleansing fish.

II

MARTIN

On the various internet dating profiles that Martin utilised he described himself thusly:

Appearance: Brown hair, blue eyes, athletic build, 180cm tall.

Likes: Mountain climbing, long walks on the boulevard, bushwalking, music.

Dislikes: Iguanas, French (the language, not the people) and smoking.

Employment: Hoffman, Wills & Stark law firm.

Personality: _____.

Of course, much like the overwhelming majority of the content on such sites, Martin's profile was a patchwork conflation of half-truths and hyperbole. His hair and eyes were indeed brown, but his build would not

ever be described by anyone as 'athletic' unless the observer in question were a Mongolian village child who had learned to speak English as their fifth language and had confused this descriptive with the word 'pathetic.'

The closest Martin had ever come to mountain climbing was watching a documentary on Everest, during which he had fallen asleep and spilled a bowl of Cheetos on his pants. He had written 'long walks on the boulevard' after deciding that 'long walks on the beach' was a tad too generic. Music, he had reasoned, was a safely generic choice, unlikely to alienate anyone save perhaps the deaf.

His dislikes had been fairly candid. He hoped, however, that he did not scare away any potential French suitorettes, as in general he found French women to be quite attractive, (save for their unfortunate aversion to shaving their armpits). He did, however, think that the French language resembled the sound of someone attempting to sound pretentious whilst simultaneously regurgitating several kilos of canapes.

He was quite accurately employed by the prestigious law firm of Hoffman, Wills and Stark, but in the capacity of a night cleaner. He spent his evenings dusting, vacuuming and polishing the interiors of the renowned firm whilst listening to audiobooks of autobiographies. He was no fan of fiction, as he found it hard enough to understand the world that was without attempting to additionally comprehend worlds that might be. His all time favourite book was 'Tom Jones: A Life in Music.' Not because he was a Tom Jones fan (he wasn't) but because he'd always had a strange fascination with Wales, the country where his grandmother had been born but he'd never managed to gather the requisite funds or courage to visit.

Martin was unable to attempt encompassing his personality within the confines of text based communication on any of the dating profiles he used, so at this juncture we are left with no choice but to do it for him. Martin was mild-mannered and courteous to the extreme. He was charitable, soft-spoken and eager to please. He exemplified, to a near-surrealistic degree, the kind of man that mothers desperately desire their daughters to date and the daughters in question wish to avoid as resolutely as the plum plaid summer

dress they received for Christmas from their mother the previous year.

He had done well in school, but felt no compulsion to pursue further education, reasoning quite soundly that the tens of thousands of dollars in debt that he would likely incur in order to gain a bachelor degree in some trivial passing interest would be better spent placing a deposit on a modest apartment and commencing work immediately in order to pay it off and thus ensure a quiet, comfortable retirement. After all, information could just as easily be obtained for free through libraries and google searches with the added bonus of avoiding the possible threat of crushing academic failure.

Martin had been cleaning the interior of the office windows (*spray, wipe, check, repeat*) and was halfway through chapter eight of his 9th listening of *Tom Jones on Tom Jones* when his phone rang. The time was, at that exact moment 3.30am. There is an old adage that states 'a phonecall at 3am is always bad news' but in Martin's case, being a night worker, this was much less applicable. This thought made him chuckle as he reached into his pocket for his phone, but he was somewhat distressed to see it was his father calling, given that his progenitor lived in Guangzhou, China and was a famous spendthrift who wouldn't dream of making a long distance call to a mobile except in the most dire circumstances.

Martin Jr. Answered.

"Martin?" Martin Jr. was one of those peculiar individuals who made a habit of addressing their parents by their first names.

"Martin?" The other answered.

"Yes?"

"Martin is that you?"

"Yes Martin it's me."

"How are you?"

"I'm good Martin, how are you?"

"I'm...good." A slow, 6.5c per second pause lapsed between them before

he continued. "I'm sorry Martin that was a lie. I'm not at all well. Quite the opposite I'm afraid. Turns out the ol' ticker doesn't have too much left in it. The doctors say I might not have long at all. Months, at best..."

"And...at worst?"

"At worst? Long enough to half-boil an egg I expect."

"Martin! That's terrible!"

"Well, yes, I dare say that's an accurate summary of the scenario."

"I'll come see you immediately."

"That would be splendid Martin. I promise I'll stay away from the light 'til then."

"The light?"

"Yes, you know, at the end of the tunnel. Just a little joke. I'm your dying father you are under obligation to laugh at that one."

"Ha. Right. Of course Martin, the light. Ha. Classic."

"Alright, alright no need to be obsequious. See you shortly Martin."

"Goodbye Martin."

"Goodbye."

Martin hung up the phone, dropped his headphones to the floor and then sat down beside them. He stared out at the quiet, dull galaxy of city lights that shone tepidly back at him. He felt suddenly empty and quite tired. On the floor next to him, he could just make out the tiny, tinny speakers in his headphones saying:

"Chapter Nine: Next Stop Las Vegas!"

The next 5.5 hours were dull and lugubrious and as such will not be described here. Much like when you quite wisely avoid sitting next to the old lady on the bus who wishes to detail to you every one of her grandchildren's life histories in mind-numbing detail, we shall skip forward to exactly 10.05am, when Martin enters the Chinese visa office on George st.

Martin had been waiting for seventeen and a half minutes when the doors finally opened. He had been pondering how George st. was an amusingly archetypal anglo name for the location of such an office, but then felt immediately guilty for being amused by such a triviality when his thoughts should rightfully be concerned with sadness for his ailing father.

The doors slid open and Martin made every attempt to be the first inside but was thwarted by both a small Chinese man and a morbidly obese blonde-haired woman who prevented his thoroughfare by virtue of his inability to defy the fundamental laws of physics. He sat next to the very very fat woman and listened to the Chinese man exchange rapid fire Mandarin (or was it Cantonese? He could never tell the difference) with the attractive young lady behind the counter.

"My son lives in China. He's a MISSIONARY." Said the very extremely large blonde woman next to him.

"Oh. How nice." Said Martin, trying (as always) to be polite.

"He teaches the heathens about the way of the lord and how our lord Christ said that homosexuality is a sin and that abortions are for devil-worshippers."

Being a lapsed catholic (which, oddly enough, provided Martin with infinitely more frequent sources of guilt than being a practicing one) Martin knew the bible quite well, and resisted the urge to point out to the woman that she was

- 1) Completely incorrect.
- 2) Clearly bigoted and offensive.
- 3) Preventing the circulation in his leg by way of crushing it with her

gargantuan thigh.

4) Covering him in a scent which waddled somewhere in between 'hospital disinfectant cheesecake' and 'high school cafeteria fondue special.'

So he simply smiled and nodded, as was his usual diplomatic response in these situations.

"Can I help you ma'am?" The query came from a second attendant who had just appeared from the back room. The second attendant greeted the very very fat woman with a bearable facsimile of smile.

He had glasses so large that they seemed to be taking his face hostage, hair that was fastidiously brushed and wore a light blue business shirt coupled with a light blue tie. He was the kind of man who wouldn't stand out in a crowd unless someone forcibly restrained him, covered his face in lipstick and attached both a copious quantity of explosives and a stereo blasting 'God save the Queen' to his chest.

His badge read 'Arthur P. Pinkerton.'

III

ARTHUR

Arthur P. Pinkerton had one talent and one only: bureaucracy. He had a near supernatural flair for it; filing, forgetting, filibustering, finger pointing. He did everything in his power to make sure that he did everything in his power to avoid actually getting work done. As a teenager, when his classmates had resorted to such vulgar and unimaginative homework avoidance excuses as 'my dog ate it' Arthur had instead replied,

"Oh didn't you get it? I placed it on your desk this morning. You can call my father to confirm that I got it done, but he's currently in Dubai for a conference so it'll be forwarded to his voicemail which will be quite expensive, and there's the time difference of course. You could call my

mother, but she has laryngitis so while she'll be able to hear everything you say you may have to wait a few days for a written response, and she also has carpal tunnel syndrome you see and holding a pen is quite difficult for her, alternatively..." At which point his teacher would wearily wave the explanation away and try return to the blackboard with an ennuaiatic 'harrumph.'

Arthur had always known he would end up in a bureaucratic position of some sort. For the longest time he had of course hoped to be employed in some almost nameless auxiliary government department; receiving a fat paycheque and benefits in exchange for 6-8 hours (plus 2.5 hour lunch breaks) working in an air-conditioned office. The kind of job where buck passing was not only passively permitted, but heartily encouraged. Plus you'd have to basically beat a superior employee to death with their own shoes before they could ever fire you.

His course had been diverted however, when he had fallen in love with a beautiful young Chinese woman named Mei in his economics class. He had pursued her with flowers, chocolates, the stolen words of poets and promises of fidelity and fiscal security, but she had spurned his advances and instead coupled up with a young American man named Jack who had a nose piercing and a motorcycle.

At some level of his subconscious Arthur had arrived at the conclusion that if he worked in the Chinese visa office, she would, at some point, be bound to cross his path again. This hope had long since withered and died, like a once bright and beautiful flower left unwatered and neglected, and in its place sprouted a prodigious garden of angry, bitter weeds.

Arthur didn't like people and people didn't like him, (so at least it was mutual). He let the words of the very very fat woman flow over him like water, allowing his mind to only occasionally reach out and pluck at a few disparate key words, the bare minimum that would be required in order to process her request.

"My _____ China _____ visit for a few weeks _____ in June _____ possible? How much?"

“Fill in this form. We need 2 passport photos. Average processing time is 4 – 5 working days but may take longer. Make sure your passport is valid for at least six months after departure. The cost is \$60 for a single entry visa.”

Arthur estimated that he had uttered these exact words, verbatim, somewhere between five and seven thousand times over the last ten years. By now it was an almost unconscious reflex. A muscle memory. He pronounced them without conscious thought like a drunken guitarist playing a well-rehearsed solo with effortless perfection.

The very very fat woman grinned at him and said,

“Thank you _____ goodbye!”

He waved her away, making sure to employ the minimum amount of effort possible in order to be clear without emphatic. He thought about the egg salad sandwich he was going to have for lunch and then glanced at the clock. 10.07am. Shit. Oh well,

“NEXT!” He announced.

Martin sat down with his trademark friendly smile.

“Hello there, how are you?” Martin always made an effort to greet service people and ask about their well being, to emphasise the fact that he wasn’t just using them for the services that they provided but that he valued them as human beings.

“Tourist visa?” Asked Arthur, having only heard ‘Hello _____, _____?’

“Well, yes I suppose so. You see I need to visit my father, he’s very ill, and I need my visa processed urgently.”

The word ‘urgently’ sent a series of klaxons blaring in Arthur’s mind.
10:08am and ALREADY one of these?

“What is your reason for requiring an urgent processing of application?”

“Well, I believe I just told you. My father is very ill.”

“Standard processing time is 4 – 5 working days. If you are desperate I could note that you have requested a priority application and it may only take 2- 3 working days. However, if the priority application department is busy, which they almost always are, your application may take 5 – 6 working days, possibly longer.”

“But, ah, I don’t mean to be rude, but isn’t that LONGER than the standard time?”

Arthur sighed dramatically. It was a well practiced gesture and he was quite proud of the awkward, apologetic result it elicited in his bothersome clients.

“Sir, are you telling me that 2 working days is LONGER than 4 working days?”

“No, but, that’s best case scenario isn’t it?”

“Mr...Fairweather, I see it says there on your passport. Believe it or not, I actually don’t run this ENTIRE department myself. I do not make the rules, I merely inform you of the requisite information to acquire your visa.”

“Okay, right, I understand. Honestly, I meant no offence. Listen, is there anyway that I could, I don’t know, pay a priority application fee? My father really is quite seriously ill.”

Arthur sighed again, it had been some time since he had to use this little maneuver twice in one sitting.

“If you are *desperate*, I COULD call the high commissioner’s office.”

“Yes?” Asked Martin, his eyes brightening like a model in a toothpaste commercial. A silence sat between them, fat and ungainly.

“Well, is that the course of action you wish to take?”

“Yes! Yes of course!”

“Very well. The High Commissioner’s office is open 12-5pm Monday and Friday. I will call as soon as I am able.”

"But...it's Tuesday?"

"Yes, THANK YOU Mr. Fairweather I am able to deduce what day of the week it is. I am, after all, a proud graduate of the 1st grade thank you very much."

"No, I just mean that if you don't call until Friday that's already 4 days, and then it's the weekend, so again it'd take more than 6 days..."

"Well what do you expect me to DO? I can hardly request that the High Commissioner change his work hours now can I? He is a very busy man!"

"Well, no, of course not, I didn't mean to suggest..."

"Mr. Fairweather, as you can see there are a *great many* people waiting to be served." Arthur gestured angrily and emphatically at the three people dozing, drooling and reading in the lobby behind him. "I'm *sure* you don't want to waste their time *or* mine. Now do you want me to do a standard tourist visa request, which will be ready in 4-5 days, an urgent request, which will take 2-6 working days, or a high level request to the high commissioner which will take 3 – 10 working days?"

"I...um...I guess..."

"Good heavens Mr. Fairweather would you hurry up my patience is wearing so thin it may soon be malnourished!"

"A...a...standard request, I suppose?"

"Very well. Fill in this form. We need 2 passport photos. Average processing time is 4 – 5 working days but may take longer. The cost is \$60 for a single entry visa. Make sure your passport is valid for at least six months after departure."

Martin walked away, defeated, and opened the door to a sky that greeted him with uncharitably blue splendour. He phoned his father and told him that if fortune smiled upon them he would be on a plane in a few dozen hours. His father grunted his thanks and then hung up, too weak to talk any further.

IV
MARTIN

One day passed. Another followed. A further followed these two. It is, of course, certain that multitudinous events transpired during this time period. Wars were being waged, children being born and dying, marriages being confirmed and destroyed, art being created and critiqued, scientists uncovering great new universal truths and so on and so forth but for Martin each moment was simply the dull and weary drone of insufferable moments passing, no more distinguishable from one another than individual raindrops collected in one muddy puddle.

He called the visa office on an almost hourly basis and was at first requested to simply sit and wait as no further news of his visa was available. When his calls persisted they threatened to have his application denied if he continued to harass the workers. Martin desisted and begged the moments to fly by faster.

He continued to work, staring out at skyscrapers that looked back at him like the ugly steel teeth of some angry metal giant. He no longer listened to his audiobooks. Nothing seemed to hold meaning for him anymore. He called his father regularly, but Martin Sr's voice had been reduced to a mere whimper and the sounds of it brought him far more misery than consolation.

At last it was the fourth day. Martin, fearing that the threats made earlier would be acted upon, sent the most politely worded yet urgent email he could conceive.

To whom it may concern,

I am very sorry if i bothered you by calling you lots of times yesterday, and the day before that, and also the day before that. Although perhaps whoever is reading this is not at all the same person that i spoke to on the phone. If this is the case please ignore what I just said.

I am really worried about Martin's (my Father's) health and need to purchase a ticket to see him straight away, I am afraid he may die very soon and of course you can understand that if i do not get to see him before this happens I will be very sad.

Please think about how you would feel in my situation, I know that you must have a Dad or maybe your dad is dead already or maybe some kind of alcoholic or a person that you don't actually know. If so I am very sorry but please think about another person that you love instead and I am sure you will understand how you feel.

I am a nice person and I rarely feel angry but please understand I really really must see him and I am starting to feel quite mad and also frustrated.

Kind Regards

Martin Fairweather.

Martin hit 'send,' then waited 3.5 seconds before hitting 'refresh,' then

another 7 seconds before doing the same. He was about to repeat his action a third time when he realised the futility of his endeavors and decided to distract himself by watching television. He watched 13 seconds of *Wheel of Fortune*, 11 seconds of *Judge Judy*, 1 minute 18 seconds of *Baywatch*, 45 seconds of an MTV documentary on Crosby, Stills & Nash, 2.3 seconds of what appeared to be German erotica and 12 seconds of a Mexican telenovella before running back to his computer and hitting 'refresh.'

*** 1 new message! ***

He clicked open without a moment's hesitation only to read:

From: misclara46784@hotmail.com

To: martin.fairweather@gmail.com

how are you today i hope that every things is ok with you it is my great pleasure to contact you through this media requesting for a relationship and i know that you will grant my request in good faith and understanding while we see what happened in future. i will be very happy if you can contact i will attach my picture and details about my self when i here from you, you should remember that distance, color, language or race cannot be barriers.i am expecting your response if possible with your pictures (if any) i will be waiting to hear from you
Your new friend.
Mis clara.

Martin always read spam messages all the way through, just to be polite. He always felt somewhat guilty deleting them. What if one day there really was a Nigerian prince who desperately needed help escaping his country? But today he clicked 'delete' with only a fleeting sensation of guilt. He had more pressing concerns. Martin stared at his phone. Willed it to ring, focused all his effort, all his energy, every thought and fibre of his being into willing it to bring him good news about his visa.

How incredible that a tiny piece of paper no larger than a credit card could hold such indomitable sway over his entire life. He went to the pantry to prepare his favourite misery food; peanut butter, nutella and marshmallow sandwiches.

Just as he was taking his first simultaneously awful and delectable bite his phone rang. He dropped the sandwich to the floor and dived for his phone, his peanut butter smeared fingers smudging the touch screen as he answered.

“Hello? Yes? Yes?”

“Mr...Fairweather isn't it?”

“Yes?”

“This is Arthur P. Pinkerton. I'm calling in regards to your tourist visa application for China.”

“Yes? YES!”

“I regret to inform you that your application has been rejected. I'm sorry for the inconvenience and hope that this does not discourage you from visiting the People's Republic of China in the future. Goodby-“

“WAIT! Please! My father, I told you, he might die at any minute! Please, surely, surely you have someone you love that you would do anything to be by their side if they were about to die. What on earth went wrong?”

“I'm afraid I don't have that information to hand.”

“Please, have mercy on me, tell me what I did wrong. I need to re-apply immediately, I MUST get to Guangzhou!”

“One minute.” The minute seemed to last an age and change, at last Pinkerton's weary voice returned. “Are you there?”

“Yes!”

“It appears that...ah...yes, here we are. It appears that you made a mistake on the start date for your visa. You asked that it be available as of

February 29, but this is not a leap year, therefore there will be no February 29 and so your application is invalid. If you would like to re-apply you will need to come into the office at your earliest convenience and-

Martin hung up as angrily and aggressively as is humanly possible with a touch screen phone and ran into the kitchen to grab his keys, tramping on his peanut butter, nutella and marshmallow sandwich as he did so. He ran out to his car, hurled it out the driveway and drove faster than he had ever driven in his life. If traffic was kind to him, he guessed he could make it to the office in just under fifteen minutes.

He had nearly hit two dogs, one pram and a 'no speeding' sign when his phone rang again. He pulled his car sharply over to the curb, invoking the doppler-affected rage of a passing motorcyclist yelling

"Hey watch where you're going *youstupidjerk!*"

Various excuses and explanations barrelled around in Martin's brain like kittens in a cement mixer.

It's all a mistake. It was a different Martin Fairweather. I didn't fill the form out wrong. It is a leap year. There are 29 days in every February. The Prime Minister has been made aware of my plight and has personally intervened. China has decided to allow all Australian tourists to gain visas on arrival. The chinese government wants to personally provide for my transport to Guangzhou...

His phone rang, the screen read PRIVATE NUMBER.

"Most honourable Fairweather?"

It's true! Oh my god it's true! This must be the Chinese President! Or Emperor! Or whatever they have over there!

"My name Dr. Lin. Most regret to inform you that your father he die. His heart cease to be operate. Please come get body or will be disposed of by most honourable government service. We have great sorrow for your lose of him. Goodbye."

Martin hung up the phone. It was exactly 3.30pm. The symmetry of the

fact that his father's original fateful call had occurred at 3.30am struck him still for one brief moment, but then slid silently aside. He heard the sound of something inside him being irreparably broken, it was not the fast and heavy crash of a breaking vase, but the slow, groaning, unstoppable growl of metal tearing on the hull of a submarine. He felt lost, defeated, angry. Martin watched as though from a great distance as his hands turned the keys in the ignition and pulled back out onto the street. He felt foreign, dark thoughts swarming in his head. They snarled and snapped. They groaned and growled. Martin's normally all prevailing conscience and sense of social grace timidly listened to what these strange new inhabitants had to say and apprehensively replied that such a course of action might potentially be, well, you know, not the BEST idea. Not to say that such concepts shouldn't be *considered* of course but just, well, perhaps we could all have a nice calm cup of tea and talk this over? At which point both conscience and social grace were gagged, bound, beaten and shoved back into the most dusty, dank regions of Martin's psyche.

They watched helplessly as Martin drove to the visa office, double parked his car, stormed inside and yelled at Arthur P. Pinkerton:

"HE. IS. DEAD!"

Arthur, quite used to people furiously yelling at him but comparatively unaccustomed to this particular phrase could only reply,

"I beg your pardon?"

"He's dead. Moments ago. I should have been there. THIS. IS. YOUR. FAULT!"

"I'm sorry sir, do I know you?" Arthur asked, genuinely befuddled. He had so many frustrated clients screaming at him from day to day that it became genuinely impossible to distinguish between them, and after all this man had a particularly forgettable face.

Martin screamed. It was a deep, primal scream. His face grew red like a freshly plucked tomato. He scanned the room quickly for something to throw, decided on the nearest chair, and proceeded to hurl this furiously at

the wall. Deep within his psyche, his conscience and sense of social grace huddled together for warmth, terrified by the unprecedented events that were occurring.

A security guard appeared and dragged Martin away, his eyes remained inexorably transfixed on Arthur as he struggled helplessly against the burly, blue uniformed guard. Arthur turned his eyes quickly to some paperwork which he suddenly found entirely compelling and urgent, but he could feel Martin's stare burrowing into him.

Whatever did I do to that poor maniac? He thought to himself, shuffling a form 26b over the top of an office memo and back again.

V

MARTIN

Arthur picks up the phone. There is no dial-tone. He hammers at it furiously.

Nothing.

"Hello? Hello?" He yells futilely into the uncaring receiver. He may as well write sonnets to Santa Claus for all the good it does him. Arthur looks at his watch. It is an expensive Lacoste with has no numbers that was given to him by his father some years ago.

'The truly successful find functionality a tiresome bore.' His father had joked. He stares at the watch face, his addled mind straining with the effort of computing the information offered ambiguously by the three golden hands. *2? No, 3. 3:15. Maybe 3:16. And it's the 6th. Let's see, the 1st was a Tuesday so that means...hell's bells! It's Sunday, the line won't be open for over 24 hours.* Arthur swallows.

His hands start to shake. Is this due to fear, or is it simply the neurotoxin

having an early onset? Perhaps it is merely psychosomatic and he should forget all about it. Wait! His phone! What a preposterous thing to overlook! Thank goodness for modern technology! Why he'd only just invested in a 4G upgrade, he would be able to pinpoint his location, phone the police...rescue would be mere minutes away! He removes the phone from his pocket, turns it on. He has never felt so comforted by anything in his entire life as those three warm start up tones.

Directly thereafter, he has never felt so utterly destroyed as hearing that harsh bleeping tone accompanied by the message 'SIM CARD READ ERROR.' It disappears and shows him the screen's wallpaper. Where previously there had been a picture of his Cat, Oscar, there is now simply a white on black text message that reads:

NICE TRY PINKERTON.

He throws the useless \$700 clump of plastic and metal to the floor and watches it shatter. He screams.

"HELP! HELP ME! HELP ME!" This carries on for around fifteen minutes or so until the utter futility of it all hits Arthur like a bag of broken bricks.

Arthur suddenly becomes aware of the fact that his bladder is quite full and needs to be promptly emptied. He shoots his eyes around the room. He sees no sign of anything even remotely resembling a lavatory, not even a bucket. Arthur is the kind of man who avoids public bathrooms at all costs, often preferring to endure considerable discomfort in order to wait to empty his bladder in the comfort of his own home. If he is forced to endure the unspeakable horror of utilising the municipal amenities, he never, EVER uses the urinal. The thought of exposing himself in front of a slew of micturating philistines is unbearable. He prefers to wait, performing an awkward rocking dance, trying to look at nothing at all until a cubicle becomes available.

The situation that now faces him is therefore all the more hideous. He tries to find a particularly well concealed corner of the room but nothing offers even the slightest glimmer of hope. It is after all a giant, open space. He walks towards a corner, each step the heavy walk of a death row

prisoner, unzips his pants, flops out what he refers to in his head as his 'little soldier' and waits.

Nothing.

Years of social conditioning have rendered it impossible for him to release in such an environment.

"Come on, come on..." He mutters. His penis flaps about pathetically, maintains its state of noncompliance in a manner that no real soldier would ever deign to do. *Think about waterfalls. Rain. Showers. Jugs of water. Relax, relax, relax...*

Dear god how abominable! The foul smelling yellow stream spurts forth, splattering on the cement and on his shoes. Arthur retches in disgust but can't stop now. He watches as the last of it pours out of him into a dirty yellow pool on the floor.

The stench is putrid.

He returns to the farthest corner of the room and lays down, defeated. He doesn't even have anywhere to wash his hands! He glances at his watch. 3:34. Just under 24 hours before he can call. Arthur pulls himself up to his feet. He pushes his glasses up his nose, scratches his head and whimpers, like a dog unjustly denied its treat.

He stares around the room in search of hope, but only cement and the smell of his own piss come back to him. He walks up to the top of the stairs, bangs on the door. Pushes. Hammers. It does not budge. Not an inch, not a fraction. Arthur has encountered very few situations in the last 17 years which have required any use whatsoever of physical strength. His motivation to attend a gym has been roughly parallel to his desire to take up recreational trigonometry. He has less chance of opening the clearly locked and bolted trapdoor through brute force than Barack Obama has of becoming the grand dragon of the Klu Klux Klan.

Arthur returns to the basement floor. He places his fingers to his eyes and finds salty discharge streaming from them.

“Tears?” Arthur gasps. It has been years since he has had cause to cry. He has experienced the full gamut of emotions it’s true; loneliness, anger, frustration, horniness without source of relief, game-show-correct-answer frustration, but all of this has been experienced to a lukewarm degree. The movie of his life is a made for TV b-grade at best.

Arthur weeps.

He falls to the floor. It is cold and slightly dusty. He stares at the ceiling.

The phone rings. He jumps up and runs towards it, rips the handset from its cradle and yells,

“Hello? Hello? Martin? I’m sorry! I’m so so sorry! I’ll do anything! I have money, how much do you want? \$10 000? No! Ah, wait...\$9 000!” Even in pleading for his life Arthur is frugal. After all, he still hasn’t paid off his plasma screen or his new laptop.

There is a snicker from the other end, followed by a dial-tone, followed by silence.

“Hello? HELLO? HELLO?” Arthur slams the handset down and weeps into his hands. He is more miserable than he can ever remember feeling in his life. He sits down at the desk, and slumps his head forward onto the wood. He closes his eyes, opens them. Stares at the letters running out in a tiny sea in front of him, distorted because of the strange angle of his glasses.

He sits up, rereads the document in front of him.

“Fill out the following form in triplicate.” Arthur clicks open the fountain pen, and does what he does best.

7 minutes and 37 seconds later Arthur has completed the antidote request form (in triplicate) and the urgent request form. He places both of them in separate envelopes and addresses these to ‘the Victim.’ He wishes over, and

over that he had made a different choice with Martin's form. That he had just corrected the obvious clerical error, or processed it immediately, or contacted the High Commissioner.

However, Arthur knows that if the same situation presented itself a hundred times, a thousand times over, he would have done the same thing. Now of course, circumstances are somewhat different. He takes the standard form in his left hand and the urgent in his right. He weighs them. Swaps them. Places them back down. Then removes his glasses, curls up on the floor and falls asleep.

Arthur wakes with a smattering of drool on his face, the smell of piss in his nostrils and dirt in his eyes. He performs a powerfully graceless twisting, face swatting action and rises to his feet. He realises he has fallen asleep without 'posting' the request form, thus losing valuable moments. He grabs them both in his hands, prays that his captor will show mercy and consider them both rather than invalidating the presence of one by the existence of the other.

"Martin? Martin are you there? I've filled out the forms! You were right to punish me! I'm an awful, callous person! I've learned my lesson! Please, I beg you, let me go! My wife and children will be so worried! And...and my daughter needs me to get her medication, for her...ah...cystic fibrosis!"

There is no response.

He looks at his watch. It is 3:23pm. He runs back to the phone and picks it up. Silence. He waits. The old adage 'a watched pot never boils' undulates in his head but he swats at it mentally, knowing this to be untrue and waits for the moments to pass.

Time.

Goes.

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3:30 arrives at last, and, with punctuality that impresses Arthur even in his current tortured state, he hears the dialtone hum to life. He places the phone down quickly, waiting for his captor's call. For one horrible, agonising moment there is no sound at all, and then the phone rings, he feels the vibration almost before he is conscious of the sound. Arthur snatches at the receiver with hands made deft by desperation and yelps,

"Martin? Martin is that you? I'm sorry. Please, tell me what I need to do. I'll do anything!"

“Sir, please slow down. Are you telling me that you are making a request for an urgent application?”

“Yes, look I appreciate the poetic justice you’ve served me here, it’s all very Edgar Allan Poe, but I’ve learned my lesson now, please, please give me the antidote.”

“Usually antidotes can be arranged within 3-4 working days. However, sometimes, sometimes...they may take longer...”

“Alright, fine, yes I’ll play along. I’ve filled out the form but I need the antidote NOW. I’m going to DIE!”

“Would you say your application is

1 unimportant

2 mildly important

3 important

4 very imp-“

“6! 6! Maybe 7 or 8! I need that antidote immediately!”

“I’m sorry, 6 is not an option, please allow me to repeat the choices-

1 unimportant-“

“Fine! 5! Please Martin please have mercy!”

The feigned calm, professional tone drops from Martin’s voice and suddenly Arthur recognises the pained, distraught sound of the voice he first heard in his office just a few days ago.

“My father died alone because you couldn’t be bothered inking up your stamps. You don’t know what mercy is.”

“Oh god...I’m sorry...I truly am s-“

“ And you’re a LIAR. You live alone in a one bedroom apartment.”

“You’re right, I was lying, I don’t have a wife or children. I am awful but I’ve learned my lesson I promise! Please d-“

Dial-tone. Silence.

“SHIT! SHIT! MARTIN! PLEASE I BEG YOU!” He screams at the ceiling, to no avail. He looks at his watch. 3:31pm. Another 23 hours and 59 minutes before he is given the chance to plead his case again.

Arthur collapses to the floor and screams, weeps, wails. The trapdoor opens, light streams in, bright and beautiful. Arthur scrambles to his feet and runs towards it, a green grocery bag is dropped down onto the stairs and the door is slammed shut. He hears the sound of bolts being bolted and locks being locked.

“MAAAARTIN!” He screams, banging at the wooden planks, separated from freedom by virtue of a half a dozen flat pieces of dead tree. He grabs at the bag and tears it open. It contains a bottle of water, a packet of sanitary tissues, a peanut butter, nutella and marshmallow sandwich and an envelope.

Arthur tears the envelope greedily open, forsaking the food in spite of the fact that his stomach is screaming in remonstrance. The envelope contains a single one page letter.

Dear Arthur P. Pinkerton,

We wish to advise you that your request for an antidote has been successfully processed. This will be provided to you within 1 –2 working days. We request that you do not contact us before this time.

Kind Regards,

Martin.

Arthur giggles. He titters. He laughs. He guffaws. He chortles. He grabs at

the sandwich and shoves it impatiently into his mouth, devouring the first half in a single mouthful, in spite of his mild peanut allergy that will shortly produce an irritating skin rash. He gulps down the water, spilling much of it over his shirt, then realises he should, by all accounts, have washed his hands with a sanitary towel before putting his grubby mitts all over the sandwich. He does this quickly and then devours the second half.

The ridiculous combination of tastes is more delectable in that moment than anything that has ever previously passed his lips. "Thank Christ. Buddha, Krishna, Allah, whatever! Oh god I can't wait to get home, I'm going to shower with the hot water on full blast, eat everything in the fridge, use my own pristine bathroom, sleep on my Egyptian cotton sheets..."

And then a terrible thought enters Arthur's head. The letter promised only an antidote, it spoke nothing of freedom. And furthermore what if, as had been mentioned was possible, the toxin affected him earlier than most? He'd always had a fairly weak constitution, why, he was practically a walking flesh puppet filled with allergies and hay-fever.

Arthur gulps down more water, and sits down on the cement stone floor.

By the time 3:30pm comes around, Arthur been sitting with his hand resting on the phone for 19 minutes and 32 seconds, just on the off chance that Martin would pick up early. When his voice finally came down the line, it is sweeter than the siren's song.

"Arthur."

"Martin! How wonderful to hear your voice! I really, truly mean that. Thank you so much for, uh, approving my application! I've really, truly learnt my lesson. And if I may say so, what an ingenious method of reveng-"

"Arthur, I have never particularly liked suck ups. However, yes the antidote will be delivered to you later this evening."

“This evening! Oh fantastic! I think my limbs are already losing feeling, and I have this rash on my skin, and the most frightful headache...”

“Goodbye Arthur.”

“Wait! One more thing! Once I have the antidote I can go free, right?”

“I don’t really think I want a stupid, filthy, lying bureaucrat in my basement. Or in any part of my life.”

“Ha! Yes, well, very good then. Thank-“ His obsequious gratitude is cut short by the line going dead. “Ah, ah good lord. Thank heavens...”

The trapdoor opens and a small brown package is placed on the top stair, before the door is quickly closed. Arthur dives at it, tears it open and finds a vial of custard coloured liquid nestled amongst bits of torn up newspaper waiting for him. It is the single most beautiful thing he has ever seen. No Monet, Miro, Madonna or Mona Lisa could ever hope to compare to its resplendent beauty. He removes the cap and hurls the liquid down his throat.

It tastes like eggs and liquorice.

He sighs a deep and cathartic sigh of relief, leans back into the stairs and smiles. His body relaxes, his limbs fall loose. He stares at the ceiling and feels peace swallow him like a three year old child swallows a marshmallow. He stares at the floorboards above him. Considers their colour. Their texture. Even wonders what they might taste like. He has never felt so alive.

If he had a lover, he would ask to marry her. If his parents were still alive, he would send them gifts and flowers. He wants to dance and sing in the street. He smiles and then notices that the slackness in his limbs has not yet abated. He wills his arm to move. His leg to twitch. They remain obstinately

flaccid.

He coughs, and coughs again. Feels his eyes roll into his head. Feels darkness consuming his consciousness. A foul taste rises in his mouth and his head begins to feel as though it is being pierced by a tiny storm of heated needles.

Arthur P. Pinkerton gasps for air, and collapses.

The tongue licking his face is rough and wet. His eyes flutter obstreperously open to find themselves processing the confusing image of a shabby alley cat whose various scars and missing patches of fur tell a series of war time tales. Arthur is far too worried about ascertaining where he is and what has happened to be concerned the legions of bacteria that are indubitably assaulting his face.

He pulls himself upright and feels hot sun stabbing at his halogen light tempered skin. He is the middle of the city park being regarded with bemusement, fear and confusion by a variety of by-passers. Arthur stumbles clumsily to his feet, which appear to have regained compliance. He scans around him, assess his bearings and realises that the city police station is just a few blocks away. His stomach feels as though it is hosting a necrophilic orgy. His mouth tastes like the air of a killing field.

His walk breaks into a run and he bursts in through the station's front doors. The police clerk greets his wild, disheveled, cat-spit adorned appearance with a combination of disdain and weary resignation.

"HELLO! I've been kidnapped! And poisoned! I just escaped! I can tell you his name, he must be arrested immediately!"

The police clerk in front of him raises an eyebrow and Arthur and then shoots his colleague a dubious look.

“Is that right eh? Well you’d best come with me.” Arthur is aware of the fact that his manner and appearance no doubt denote him to be some kind of raving lunatic, but there is little he can do to help the fact.

He follows the policeman into an office cluttered with paperwork and a collection of photos of smiling blonde children. Arthur sits down in front of a stern faced detective and, in an effort to appear human and relatable says,

“Your daughters are very pretty.” then grins politely. The detective glowers suspiciously at him and places the pictures in a draw, then says,

“So, you say you were kidnapped?”

“Yes. And poisoned. I just escaped and found myself in the middle of the city park.”

“Uh-huh, and you say also that you know the name of the man who did this to you?”

“Yes! His name was Martin...Martin...ah, ah! I don’t know! I don’t recall his last name...”

“Very well. We’d best get as much information as we can from you. Please take this form and fill it out. In triplicate.”

Arthur snatches the form eagerly from the detective’s hands. He stares at the form, almost excited by the opportunity to exact revenge using his formidable clerical skills, but the numbers and letters in front of him dance and blur like some drunken musical watched through a fuzzy broken television.

“Uh, sorry, I’ll just find you a pen...” says the officer.

Instinctively, Arthur pads at his pockets in search of a pen. He feels the edge of an envelope jutting out of his trouser pocket. He removes it slowly, ignoring the policeman’s consternation.

“Sir, are you alright? Here’s a pen. Please fill out the form.”

He ignores the detective’s words completely, he may as well be reciting ancient Greek instructions on how to treat gestational diabetes for all Arthur

cares. The envelope is labeled simply 'To the Perpetrator,' He removes the letter and reads,

Dear Mr. Pinkerton,

We regret to inform you of a clerical error. Due to an unfortunate mix up with our administrative department, the amatoxin that was intended for you was never actually administered, although it is more than likely you experienced some psychosomatic effects you were in fact quite healthy. It was accidentally filed in our 'antidotes' storage area. This means, regrettably, that the antidote provided to you was in fact an exceedingly potent dose of amatoxin that will kill you in as little as four or five hours.

Unfortunately, this error cannot be rectified.

Our apologies for any inconvenience.

Yours Sincerely,

Martin Fairweather Jr. and Martin Fairweather Snr. (Recently deceased).