

PIXEL

by Vesel Tzankov

translated from the Bulgarian by Peter Skipp

1.

While his workmate completed a standard report, the AntiVirus Realtime Auto-Protect System patrolman minutely examined the guy, coming to the conclusion that he was clearly something.

And he was right.

The guy had on a suit by Jovani (www.high-hat.buy catalogue number J23896, natural silk, natural mother-of-pearl buttons, priced at 49 999 plus VAT, WHAT, WHY, and communal taxes and levies).

The guy had on a shirt by Lake (www.high-hat.buy catalogue number HH8596, natural silk, natural mother-of-pearl buttons, priced at 9 999 plus VAT, WHAT, WHY, and communal taxes and levies).

The guy had on a necktie by Smith (www.high-hat.buy catalogue number R39461, natural silk, hand painted with plant dyes, priced at 5 999 plus VAT, WHAT, WHY, and communal taxes and levies).

The guy had on shoes by El Macho (www.high-hat.buy catalogue number M688, calf skin, priced at 14 999 plus VAT, WHAT, WHY, and communal taxes and levies).

The guy had on socks by Mr Sock (www.high-hat.buy catalogue number S12896, natural cotton, priced at 999 plus VAT, WHAT, WHY, and communal taxes and fees).

And the guy had a hole in his neck by a Colt Peemaker (polycarbonate body, plastic ammunition, undetectable by any sensor, priced at 200,000 on the black market).

x x x

In the background hovered several chunky guys in waterproof dayglo yellow boiler suits and watched their boss. He was kneeling over The Tube and was studying it with the intent of one wondering where to kiss it. The scene was pregnant with the expectation of an

imminent miracle.

Further forward was the blonde reporter girl, also in a waterproof boiler suit (incredibly sexy, if go in for that sort of thing). She held her microphone, stared intently into the camera lens and spoke rapidly, as if anxious to impart her last words:

"Three billion people sharing a multi-level city creates a plethora of problems. Yet, despite what most of us think, the major problem is not keeping these people fed, but coping with the aftermath of their feeding. Is it any wonder, then, that plumbers have modern cities in a wrench stranglehold, or that one cannot even go for a pee outside a plumber-approved schedule? Yes, we may hate them. Yes, we may make them the butt of our jokes. Yes, we may even despise them. But a plumber's a plumber's a plumber, and this is especially evident after the plumbing general strike we dubbed Stink Week..."

Big Boss deactivated his virtual computer screen and leant back into the bath.

The boss of all City plumbers was a clever man. He could have anything, yet he limited himself to living within prescribed limits. Creatively so, of course. For instance, he enjoyed his weekly bath (as prescribed for management personnel in the Potable Water [Preservation] Call) on a daily basis; yet his conscience remained clear, for he had resolved firmly to make up for this over consumption one day. His calculations showed that today's bathe would mean his depriving himself of a bath in 215 years, seven months, three weeks and five days, which would ensure Call compliance. The mere fact that average life expectation stood at 97 was neither here nor there.

He popped a contraband radish into his mouth, for no other reason than to get rid of the evidence.

He had been inspecting The Tube all morning. Any sewer calls for attention, not to mention one that would happily accommodate the *Titanic*, infamous iceberg included. So far, The Tube managed to cope with conducting effluent from the City Sewerage Processing Plant to the bottom of the Atlantic, but at current rates of population increase, capacity problems were a matter of a few years away. Latest data on ocean sulphuric nitrogen levels further added to his worries.

He activated his virtual computer screen and opened the window with work stuff. The lunchtime Board meeting was still in progress. He called his secretary and put away the

screen.

A blonde woman looking like the embodiment of Rubens' teenage dreams walked into the room. The Japanese had not intended kimonos for such generous forms, yet they were indeed part of her charms.

"Tell them to hang on for me."

"Certainly, Big Boss!"

He was sometimes asked why, when he could have had any model he wished for his secretary, he had chosen a walking festival of plenty. When in a cynical mood, he would reply, "Because this way, I get more for my money." He rarely went into intimate details of how comforting she was when cuddled.

The Chief Plumber ran the hot tap and stirred his hairy legs to help warm up the bath.

x x x

Oldfish liked timber furniture. Pine was best, nicely sanded, with the odd knot here and there. Sadly, loyalty to the Plantlife [Preservation] Call had forced him to furnish his office in the standard idiom. Ceramic floor tiles. A desk fashioned from a massive slab of Italian marble. A conference table comprising an unbreakable, fireproof and chemical-resistant black surface on stainless steel legs. Calfskin-upholstered chairs with built-in oil dampers, conditioners and vibromasseurs (the latter deactivated after a nasty virus infection had resulted in Board members being deprived of their virtues during a meeting). The sole whimsy Oldfish allowed himself was a tiny timber cube roughly hewn with a saw, which exuded resin and made an enjoyable plaything for the hands.

The five-minute lunchtime meeting was well into its third hour. Apart from current issues, the agenda included a discussion on the AntiVirus Scanner System budget, but bit by bit they had drifted into City social policy.

"I feel the Board ought to focus its attention primarily on youth," said the Chief Secretary, and he genuinely meant it, for he had a 16-year-old girlfriend.

The Board members nodded approvingly, and genuinely meant it, each for reasons best known to himself.

A bleating made Oldfish glance at the 40 inch 1600x1200 High True Color (128 bit) plasma display on his desk. Several lines at the top of the screen carried running news stories and major world market indices, while across the rest a virtual sheep devoured the icons which thereafter reappeared from beneath its tail and slowly resumed their shapes. Momentarily paused, the sheep had turned towards Oldfish, a balloon over its mouth carrying the message, "Plumb Boss to call on Board meeting." While keeping a calm appearance, Oldfish struggled with the desire to scream and trample the monitor underfoot. Experience told him that such calls meant at least another hour's deliberations, and he had not yet had his lunch.

"Big Boss will call," he reported.

Thirty two minutes later, Plumb Boss entered the room and took the ordinary chair which Oldfish's secretary dragged across for him. Big Boss disliked the senior lady with her grey hair and eyes, but he smiled benevolently at her. Far from just being the Board Chairman's secretary, she had been in the same post for 42 years: 17 Bosses had gone through her hands, a few of them indeed going under her feet. Reason decreed that if one could not count on her as an ally, one must on no account have her as an enemy.

The Plumber set his chair to the side of Oldfish. Apart from despising modern ergonomic chairs, he liked to say that a real man ought always to feel a wall behind his back.

All eyes turned to him.

"So, what brings you over, Big Boss?," smiled Oldfish.

"The Tube. We need another one."

"How long d'you give the current one?," asked Chief Secretary.

"Five years. Eight at most."

"So what's the rush?"

The Plumber sighed heavily, as only an urban plumber knows how to. There was always someone who imagined he ruled time itself; that the calendar advanced merely because he decreed it to advance. Yet, a plumber knew how time raced. Scratch an itch, and five years had gone by. Ask yourself where these years went, and you were another five years down the line. And yesterday's minor drip was today's ugly fountain. And guess who would

have to sweep up the mess for the Board bigwigs? Yours truly, of course!

"Well, as far as The Tube goes, it's not a matter of panic. But it is a matter of inevitability, gentlemen. That is why in the first instance, we have to begin works for a second Tube, and in the second instance, we have to cut down on waste, and in the third instance, I would kindly ask you for a copy of this Board's minutes. Just in case journalists start pointing the finger at me later on, I would have something to shove into their faces to keep them quiet."

"One practically feels we're expected to stand up smartly and salute," whispered the Chief Secretary loudly to the man next to him.

The man next to him was the head of Video Memory, and happened to be blowing his nose into a huge handkerchief. He startled and croaked, "Some people feel they have attained holy cow status!"

After 68 years of working among 1,920,000 pixels, Chief Pixel could only talk sensibly on matters such as the colour fidelity and brightness of individual points on a screen display.

"Gentlemen, The Tube is no laughing matter, and I think we have to trust the expert opinion of Plumb Boss," said Oldfish, "I agree this pits us against a serious problem, but the good thing is, it's a purely technical one, and not a human relations one. Yes, gentlemen! Our strength is that we're not just colleagues. We are fellow thinkers; we are a team, and our efforts are all directed at improving the welfare of the City."

"So, shall I get going on a works budget, then?," asked Chief Accountant, turning to Plumb Boss, "I expect you'll let me have data on project scope."

"You'll have that."

"What about cutting down on waste products?," asked Chief Dietician while mechanically stroking his double chins, "'cause this sounds like a new diet to me. How d'you see me motivating people to stick to it, Plumb Boss?"

"Well, that's your manor," shrugged Big Boss, "You know... 'New sensational diet'... 'taking the world by storm'... 'be more attractive, healthier'... 'maintain potency at a hundred years of age'... All a matter of advertising, really."

"Health and beauty *do matter*, and we shouldn't mock them, Plumb Boss. As to maintaining potency to an hundred, that's just plain impossible."

"Yeah, but not a bad copyline concept," Ad Boss mused.

"Balls," murmured Chief Secretary.

This mention of the organs of doubt clearly upset Chief Promoter.

Big Boss slapped his thighs.

"Look; how you go about promoting your diet's up to you. Just do it fast, because Atlantic sulphuric nitrogen values are getting close to the critical 100 metres below sea level. At the next hurricane, the gas may break the surface and everyone's guaranteed a nasty surprise!"

"How are the Americans tackling the issue?"

"Since they moved over to Alaska, they can't give a toss for our Pond!"

"Some people think they've attained Holy Cow status!"

"C'mon, they give a toss for everything!"

"What's the gas level in their ocean?"

"Well, they're so matey with the Chinese, they've no problem at all!"

"Instead of slumbering here, why not do something and get piping sulphur nitrogen into the Sea of China!"

"The Chinese are over their energy production quotas!"

"Well, do you want to make a thing of it? If they decide to get rid of us, they won't even have to take the covers off their missiles. A wet towel or two will do!"

"Some people think they've assumed Holy Cow status!"

"We've also got missiles, you know!"

"Don't go on about it; do something before it's too late! Consumption must reduce!," Big Boss got to his feet, his gold teeth glinting like a bad CD chucked from the 97th floor, "It

was very pleasant dropping in on you, but I've a lot on."

He strode rapidly to the door, not looking at anyone.

"Keep us abreast of developments, Big Boss!," called the Board Chair after him.

Plumber waved an arm as he exited, leaving them to bicker for what Oldfish's watch told him was 72 further minutes.

After the meeting, while he was seeing Board members to the door, Oldfish grabbed Chief Secretary by the elbow and asked him to hang on.

"I do feel Plumb Boss went over the top," he said quietly.

Chief Secretary looked at him with pinkish rheumy eyes.

"No doubt he does an important job; but he's no more important than other Board members," said Oldfish while pensively rubbing his lips with his thumb and forefinger, "How did Big Boss actually make it onto the Board?"

Chief Secretary recalled that none other than Oldfish had proposed him.

"If you ask me, Oldfish, Plumber's a wonderful practitioner, but we need better quality people on the Board, for the good of the City."

"I'm convinced the time's ripe for us to examine the issue at an early opportunity," said Oldfish while lingeringly shaking Secretary's hand, "And I'm sorry your double got killed. It must be horrible for you!"

"That's the seventh double I've lost, and five have been killed in the last month alone. I'm getting to think someone's out to get me."

"Get *you!*?", Oldfish swept a tremulous hand across his face, "Whoever could have it in for you of all people?! Suspect anyone?"

"No."

"Not that it's your job, really. The services are on the case, so you just concentrate on the City. We've lots more to do, the two of us!"

"I'd appreciate the strictest discretion in these matters."

"I've already sent instructions to this effect. The patrols who discovered the victims have already been sent on peacekeeping missions in southern Europe and the Balkan desert. Their reports have been wiped off the Server. A sole man from the AntiVirus Scanner System is detailed on the case."

"Who's he?"

"I feel it would be in the best interests of the investigation if you were not aware of his identity."

"I'm the victim! I insist on knowing who he is!"

"I suppose you're quite right. I'll look it up and let you know his name."

Chief Secretary smiled. If he had not seen such a display before, Oldfish might well have taken this for a first attempt.

"How inconvenient, you not knowing his name, my dear Oldfish!"

"Well, I've so much on..! Yet, your security, my friend, comes top in my mind!," said he, stretching an arm out, "When are we going to down a whisky bottle, me and you? And no business talk: only woman talk!"

Chief Secretary took his hand.

"Very soon, I hope. Have a nice and productive day," he added, leaving the office.

x x x

The City Chief Secretary was the sole Board member with a male secretary.

Whispers had it he was probably bi, and Chief Secretary had nothing against this. He even encouraged the rumours by frequently stating, "I support the Sex [Equality] Call, and even have a male secretary." Others slyly grinned, "Yeah, support indeed...," and their slyness entirely suited Chief Secretary, whose main concern was to conceal an utter and hopeless technofear concerning any and all gadgets.

The world was full of people who needed but a brief course of instruction or a scan of the tutorial file to operate any machine or piece of software reasonably well enough. There were also those who grasped the use of an unknown mechanism, computer, or software suite

at a mere glance. Yet, in order to balance its scales, nature had also created people who could never grasp which button they ought to press in order for the food mixer to release their necktie.

Chief Secretary had arrived in the City from England's endless wheat fields and would never rise above his first and last contact with a new generation microwave bidet which had forever depilated his aft end while he was a first year Academy student. Ever since then, he had striven to shy away from any piece of technology more complex than a water closet flush. Yet, this striving was a damnation at a time when but a handful of private collections retained water closet flushes, while software-controlled nuclear-magnetic resonance waves purged run-of-the-mill loos. Chief Secretary found salvation in Management Decision Making Theory and Practice: a subject which called of its disciples to master no more complex a mechanism than a paper grip.

Brimming with ambition, naturally intelligent, endowed with wonderful memory and sense of orientation, and devoid of all scruple, he had completed the West Pointer Academy with a gold medal and an invitation to a Board officer posting. In the thirty odd years that had followed, he had managed to elevate himself from the post of a Junior Assistant Expert to the status of Chief Secretary.

Which is where his terror began. The confidential duplicated Board network meant he had to learn to use a desktop computer. This was the very embodiment of his worst nightmares. As distinct from a virtual computer screen that told one just where to click, his desktop also contained software and a variety of devices, a display prone to attracting dust, and a multitude of wires that could probably deliver nasty shocks. Still, every Caesar sooner or later met his Brutus, and Chief Secretary did wind up using a desktop computer.

At this very instance, he was seeking out the file listing his doubles, in order to make the sad entry of 'Murdered' for the seventh time. And also to look them over yet again, and analyse things.

"No such file or folder. Please check file/folder name or spelling. Hint: deactivate autocorrect and autofill. OK," said the screen notice.

Chief Secretary read the notice carefully, and sensibly ignored its advice so as not to complicate things further. He clicked OK to get rid of it and waited a fearful instant before enjoying the relief that, as distinct from most other times, this led to no terrifying

consequences.

Immensely concentrated, he proceeded to tap a very intent single finger over the keyboard before reading what he had written several times over. The filename was right, with a period just where it should be. The file extension was also correctly noted. He pressed OPEN and held his breath.

Sure enough, another notice popped up. It said: "There is still no such file or folder. Try to remember whether it ever existed. Hint: concentrate. OK".

Chief Secretary felt like a monkey who had pressed a button for a banana and received an electric shock in return. He got rid of the notice and considered asking his secretary to step in. He imagined the secretary appearing, looking all concerned and full of good intentions to assist, while every cell of his body swelled with the unspoken word "Dickhead!"

So Chief Secretary tapped the keys and pressed OPEN again.

The notice read: "Nope! No such file or folder, either. You are clearly an idiot, so go hang yourself in order to restart. Hint: use your trouser belt. OK"

Chief Secretary swore the way he remembered his dad swearing many years ago when he had cut himself with his sickle in the field. He clicked angrily to shut down the program. The notice whose question he had often pondered for hours duly came up: "Are you sure? Yes/No/Cancel". This time he cared little, so he chose "Yes."

A three-minute multimedia program came up, highlighting the woes of people who had unthinkingly left a program. At its close, the choice came up again, with him choosing "Yes" again.

A virtual Commissioner for Oaths popped up, offering him to sign a simple statement: "I the user of this Program being of sound mind do choose of my own free will to discontinue working with it and do declare that I am aware of all possible consequences direct and indirect that may stem from this action and further declare that I shall not make any claims for damages moral or material against the makers of the software nor make any claims for omissions."

Chief Secretary gave his assent and the program shut down.

He restarted the computer, giving his assent to the standard statement.

He restarted the program.

He went to File-Open.

He wrote the filename and pressed OPEN.

A notice appeared: "No such file or folder. Please check file/folder name or spelling.
Hint: deactivate autocorrect and autofill. OK."

Chief Secretary coolly pressed OK.

He activated his virtual computer screen and called his secretary over.

Five seconds later the unusually lithe young man was by his desk, ready to help.

Chief Secretary hated his undistinguished suit while adoring his ability to cope with any piece of technology.

"This silly machine seems to have deleted a file of mine," said he while rising, "have a look and see if you can't put it right."

"Just typical of desktops, Sir. Always deleting the odd file. We'll have it fixed in a jiffy!"

His secretary sat by the computer with a concerned face, stroked the keyboard and said,

"And you're certain you remember the correct filename, Sir?"

"Oh, c'mon, you're getting to sound just like it does!"

"Oh, right! Okay, Sir, what we'll do is..." he started a small program, "Would you say a word that is very typical of the file?"

"Double!"

His secretary entered the word, clicked OK and a while later, results began flooding into the window.

"Sadly, Sir, this word features in 92,347 files on your hard disk."

"Never mind, let me cast an eye at them and I'll find it."

"If we assume you devote a second to each file and find the one you are after midway through, doing this will take you a shade over twelve hours."

"All right. Look for 'murdered.'"

"How about 'murdered' plus 'double,' Sir?"

"Oh, right, right! Try that!"

The secretary tried that and reported:

"The phrase figures in 21,850 files, Sir. Would you try and give me a word or a phrase that narrows things down to just this one file?"

Chief Secretary strained to think. He then looked over to his secretary and said:

"Well, have a go with 'Double 1D4C00.'"

Seconds later, the secretary reported:

"Right, Sir! This phrase appears in two files, of which one is an archive copy of another."

"So there it was, after all!," said Chief Secretary with a discoverer's glee. "And this thing would have me think there was no such file!"

His secretary looked at the filename.

"I assume you wrote it with a hyphen, while the filename had a subscript dash. You use the same key as for a hyphen, but press Shift. Can I be of any further assistance, Sir?"

Chief Secretary sent him off and sat facing the computer.

x x x

Oldfish was lying face down on the couch. He was naked and glistened with massage oil. The masseuse was gently pounding the back of his left thigh. She would then go onto his right calf, then the left one, and call it a day.

Oldfish liked his massage. First, massage is a wonderful substitute for sports and

second, he needed it. Just as he needed fine red wine, preferably from a vineyard in the South of Finland, and an aromatic cigar hand-rolled from Swiss tobacco.

Massage, genuine wine, tobacco. Of all three, only massage was legal. Could the Board Chair afford to stray beyond the limits? He clearly could afford to.

The masseuse grabbed his left calf and Oldfish sighed blissfully.

Despite the consensus that Asians made the best masseurs, he had hired a European. He liked her chestnut hair, blue eyes and white skin covered in barely visible freckles. It wasn't an attraction thing; more a patriotic thing, really. Now that Europeans were a meld of predominantly African, Balkan and Asian bloods, a woman who needed no skin whitening had the rarity value of an albino skylark.

The masseuse probably traced her family back to somewhere in Germany. Or possibly England? No, Germany most likely! Though all this hardly mattered now that everyone lived in the City. Apart from English and North European farmers, that is. And apart from rangers in the Central European Steppe and the Southern European Desert. And apart from the Russians, who preferred to be Associate Members of the Union and who veiled themselves in mystery in the rain forests on both sides of the Urals.

Oldfish was European. Just like everyone else in the City, but with the distinction that he knew his history. Long ago, his granddad had told him of how the Polar icecaps melted, sinking Holland and London, and of how the Gulfstream had switched, bringing much needed cool from the Pole, and of how the desert advanced, pushing people into the City. Billions of pages had been written on all this, but true history lied in those personal accounts. One day, he would tell them to his child: little by little, truthfully, as if he himself had seen it all happen hundreds of years ago: the Polar meltdown, the submerging of Holland and London...

One day? Well, whenever his wife could spare a little time from her busy business woman's schedule...

He meticulously chased the thought away, squeezing it from his head like a last drop of toothpaste from an squashed tube...

The German girl massaged his left calf... Nice... There were good things in life, after all... Massage... Red wine... An aromatic cigar...

"We're done, Sir!," said the masseuse.

She covered him in a sheet and left.

"Thank you," said he, looking at her leaving.

A powerful back. A taut behind. Good strong legs beneath the short white apron. His girlfriend came to his mind. Swarthy, almond-eyed, as elegant as fine china. A Mona Lisa on two hours a day in the gym. Whereas the masseuse just needs a larger sword to be fit for a battle of the Titans. Should he make a pass at her some day? She was unlikely to resist. After all, he was Oldfish. And he could still attract an admiring glance, the odd bit of fat here and there notwithstanding...

The acupuncturist entered the room.

"Good day, Sil!," said he amicably.

He was Chinese. When it came to acupuncture, there could be no argument. Chinese it was. Tell him your needs and grit your teeth. Ouch, it hurt, dammit! It was his third procedure and he felt more afraid than last time.

"How you doin, 'wanna smoke?"

"Yeah, dying for a smoke."

"Ah, no smoke! I put needles in and you no smoke!"

The Chinaman stuck the first needle in and Oldfish clenched his teeth to suppress a grunt.

"Smoke, eh?," asked the Chinaman as he stuck a second needle in.

Oldfish managed not to groan.

"No smoke allowed!," said the Chinaman as he stuck the third needle in, "Smoke, no thankyou!"

Oldfish somehow managed not to flee. What kept him afloat was the thought of him asking his wife not to insist on acupuncture any more. He would buy her something; a bracelet perhaps; and would promise her to cut down on smoking. Surely a couple of cigarettes a day were going to be okay.

The Chinese fellow would doubtless have continued with abandon, but Oldfish had barely any free flesh left.

"Hang on a minute and wait a moment, please!"

The Chinaman sat in a corner and seemed to go dormant.

Oldfish felt his body going numb: probably the sole reason why he felt less pain. He tried to relax by going over the Board members in his head.

Himself.

Chief Secretary. He would merit some thought soon enough.

Plumb Boss. A real thickard. Thick as two short planks. And about as useful, too. Apart from digging around water mains, sewers, and vent shafts, he was always waging feuds with hackers or terrorists or the military for innumerable reasons. It was thanks to his intermediacy that the City enjoyed relative peace. Not more than a couple of bombs a day. Well, rarely any more than that, really. Oldfish had co-opted him onto the Board, turning a repairman reporting to Chief Secretary into a Boss. He ought to remember that. Moreover, Chief Secretary openly detested him, so Big Boss would hardly support him.

Chief Pixel. Totally gaga, at least to look at. What went on in his head was a mystery. Who would back him? Impossible to say. They would have to talk.

Chief Accountant. In cahoots with Chief Secretary. A certain vote for him, unless Oldfish did something to tear her apart from Chief Secretary or draw her to himself. Like what? There was always something. Especially with women. He would have to think.

Chief Dietician. He would act just like Big Boss. Big Boss must have a hold on him. Should Oldfish help him get out of it and make him an ally? No. As things stood, if he was in with Plumb Boss, he was in with both of them. He would have to monitor the situation.

Chief Promoter. His wife's cousin. Oldfish was the most popular man in town only thanks to advertising; that was how he managed to rise to head the Board. While advertising has the largest budget in the City, there would be no problems. They would have to invite him over for supper.

Motherboard Chief. Neutral. Looked after his own interests. Chief Secretary could

hardly offer him something more than Oldfish provided. Would have to have an eye kept on him.

Hard Disk Chief. In cohorts with Motherboard Chief. Would have to have an eye kept on him.

Peripherals Chief. Ran all fruit and veg smuggling into the City. Oldfish knew this and has proof of it. No problems with her, then. So far. He would have to adopt a belt-and-braces approach by getting further proof.

Supply Chief. He reckoned himself as being even more senior than Big Boss. It was enough for him to throw the switch and the entire Server would be paralysed. Along with the entirety of Board business. Which is why he would never do it, unless he particularly fancied a speedy reassignment to head the sulphur nitrogen power station on Sicily (0 millilitres annual rainfall per square metre, mean annual temperature 53 degrees C in the shade). All the same, what if someone *did* throw the switch? Go prove it was the hackers... He would have to have a chat with him. A quiet one.

So; four ayes, four unclear, and one aye for Chief Secretary. Not bad, but ensuring no slipups needed a lot of work. There should be eight noes against Chief Secretary. Then Chief Accountant would put two and two together and keep quiet. Plenty of work lay ahead...

“Ready, Sil. Prease no move now!”

The Chinaman took his needles out, smeared him with aromatic oils that warmed him up pleasantly, and carefully covered him with a sheet.

“Prease, Sil, now go shut-eye. And no smoke!”

Oldfish shut his eyes and tried to nod off.

x x x

They lay in Chief Accountant's large soft bed and gasped for air.

Chief Secretary looked at her and smiled. She cuddled up to him. She was okay, excepting her penchant to ride him. About a metre ninety tall, she had a weight exactly proportional to her height. And she was passionate. He thought of his girlfriend: petite and gentle as a kitten. Sex with her was poetry, rather than hard labour.

“That bastard's getting ever more arrogant,” said she, toying with the thin hairs on his chest.

“What else would you expect when nobody stands up to him.”

“Yeah, but you'd stand up to anyone. You won't win over anybody by acting like that.”

“A sharp pebble's useful in a team. Gets things moving every once in a while.”

“Yeah, but two sharp pebbles can churn up any team.”

“So, there's no room for the both of 'em.”

“Yeah, but how?”

“What's he looking to make from commissions for the second Tube project?”

“Anyone's guess. That's why he's pressing the Board. You can't get him on commission grounds: there's no trace of any wrongdoing.”

“Which simply means we don't watch him like we should,” pondered Chief Secretary.

“You know, he's the only person aware of the ins and outs of the sewerage network,” said Chief Accountant.

“You mean, it's not on the Server?”

“Hackers scrubbed it.”

“Clever bastard!”

“They say the hackers keep a copy of the system. So one must liaise with them.”

“A nice rumour.”

“Well, if you find it nice, have a go at getting to the bottom of it.”

She stroked his trunk, kissed his neck, and sat astride him.

He gritted his teeth and faced the inevitable.

x x x

Oldfish sat on a horrible straight-backed steel chair screwed to the floor of the safe house, and surveyed the grubby off-white noiseproof wall coverings. Apart from the chair, the room contained a fridge, a sofa, a table, and a pinup of an innocent-looking nude emmanuelle. Some twat with had bestowed her with a black marker bikini bottom and a bra.

Chief Secretary's secretary entered.

He looked calm on the outside. On the inside, he felt like a hare who had strayed on an active artillery range.

“Good day, Sir,” said the secretary.

“Hi. So what's up?”

“After the five minute lunchtime meeting, he entered his study deep in thought, Sir. Fifty-four minutes later, he called me over to ask for help with his computer. He looked troubled. But then he always looks troubled when he has to use his computer. I helped him find the file listing his doubles and left him to read it. He called me over twice more. The first time, he couldn't decide whether to hit 'Yes,' 'No,' or 'Cancel'. 'Cancel' was the right choice, so I hit it for him. The second time, he asked for a glass of orange juice with caffeine. I squeezed two well ripened oranges and got just over two hundred millilitres of juice. I added a milligramme of caffeine and took it to him, and he asked for an extra milligramme of caffeine.”

“So what's he up to?”

“All afternoon, his computer's been on the doubles file. I took him two more orange juices with caffeine. He was like a malaria sufferer by evening. He asked for yet more juice, but I managed to convince him to have a glass of milk instead. At 19:48 hours, he met his girlfriend. Candlelit dinner. Chief Secretary hardly had a bite. They went on to have nocturnal intercourse.”

“How'd he do?”

“Couldn't get it up second time around. Nodded off at dawn.”

“What's he up to? What's your take on it?”

“He's worried. That's the seventh double he's lost. I assume he's trying to work out who the next one'll be, but in fact he's trying to work out who's after him.”

“Isn't *he* at the bottom of it all?”

“How'd you mean, like a deceit? Seems unlikely to me, Sir.”

“But it is possible.”

“Entirely possible.”

“All right. Notice anything else?”

“I noticed the criteria we sought the file by. 'Double,' 'murdered double,' and 'double 1D4C00.’”

“1D4C00? You sure of the name?”

“Rely on it, Sir!”

“Fine! So what've you brought over?”

“The doubles file after his latest changes.”

“Thanks. The City'll note your help.”

“Can I add a personal observation, Sir?”

“I'm all ears.”

The secretary gathered his thoughts for an instant. Oldfish observed him while trying to conceal his interest. If he could be said to have a hobby, then it was watching the huge variety of people working in the City bureaucracy.

“As one who's almost always close to Chief Secretary, I have to share my impression that he's like treading on thin ice. He's worried, he's losing his rag. He's always trying to cover his back. Natural enough, in view of the attacks he is subject to. But are these attacks random? Would a successful Chief Secretary be subject to attacks? And, most of all, the City needs a Chief Secretary's entire administrative energy and organising ability, which it currently is failing to get. The question is, whether the time has not come for Chief Secretary to take a deserved rest and open the way for a young, energetic, knowledgeable, and capable

professional. One who's observed a Chief Secretary's workload at first hand for years on end, and one who's got to know it all in detail?"

Oldfish decided to let tension mount for a few seconds before speaking. The secretary was looking him in the eye.

"An interesting issue. Not one on the agenda right now, mind you. If things took a good turn for the City, then the time may come when it can be articulated loud and clear. And get an affirmative answer."

"Thank you, Sir."

The secretary handed him an optical disc, turned and left.

Oldfish put the disc in his pocket and started studying the pinup.

x x x

Oldfish twiddled with the pine cube as he observed the computer screen with Chief Secretary's doubles.

The file turned out to be more than a list of names, addresses and brief comments. It was more of a diary in which Chief Secretary had jotted down impressions, projects, and various notes on a variety of topics. Often these were single words or telegraphese phrases. Oldfish was managing to navigate along the maze. It was a bit like doing a three dimensional crossword, and much more useful to boot!

There had been lots of changes since he last examined the file. Oldfish resaved it methodically.

When he was through, he went to the bar, poured himself a finger of malt whisky and two fingers of icy purified water and faced the computer again. He read its screen while periodically taking miniature sips.

"Do consider putting up a fight for a higher energy quota." This was something Big Boss had said at the five-minute meeting yesterday. But why record it? Oldfish leant back in his chair and began going over the meeting in his head. He did not need to look at the minutes, being endowed with yes like security cameras and a memory as helpful as a geisha.

Big Boss: "Do consider putting up a fight for a higher energy quota."

Supply Chief looks at her fingernails and nods approvingly.

Chief Secretary glances at Power Chief, holds back from looking at Plumb Chief, and considers things rapidly.

Chief Accountant: "We would have to estimate the extra ecology costs."

So did this mean Plumb Chief and Power Chief were in league? A higher energy quota meant more power subsidies. In turn, Power Chief would scratch Plumb Chief's back by supporting the second Tube. Chief Secretary considered ways of benefitting from this alliance, and his man hinted they were in for headwinds if no due allowances were made. Where would Oldfish find a chink in this alliance? He would have to think.

What else was in the file..?

A speech draft. Oldfish looked it over quickly. Nothing of interest: a hospital opening. Yet, "new thinking" made an appearance several times. New thinking sounded like electioneering. But there was plenty of time before the elections. So clearly, someone was after the boss's chair and was openly muddying the waters. Too bad it was not going to help him.

There were some brief comments on Board members. Oldfish felt a pleasant frisson, halted a moment to enjoy the feeling fully while taking a sip, and got reading.

"Board Chair. Snake." Why a snake, of all creatures?! Oldfish would have defined himself as a cat: stroke it, and it is quiet; pull its tail, and it scratches. You decide what the cat is going to be like. Whereas a snake... Still, if that's how he was seen, that's how he would play it. He would destroy his intrigue by striking it with his paw like a lion. He would crouch like a rabbit. He would wag his tail like a dog. He would think about it.

"Plumb Chief. A crude victor." Elementary. He could have come up with a better definition. On the other hand, genius is usually uncomplicated. A crude victor. Everyone likes to be in with victors. Absurd though it may appear, Oldfish would have to watch out for signs of a rapprochement between Plumb Chief and Chief Secretary.

"Chief Pixel. Gaga." A coincidence of opinion. Yet this gaga is a Board vote. He would have to monitor who made a play for this vote.

"Chief Accountant. The Tube." Right! So Chief Secretary had something on the

Tube, and had sent his dog sniffing. A project audit? An expert opinion on its financial advisability? Something he could use to keep Big Boss on a short leash? He would have to hurry and act in anticipation.

"Chief Dietician. A Plumber's appendage." Which was true.

"Chief Promoter. Oldfish dog." Oh, really, a dog..!

"Motherboard Chief. Frequency." Ahh, yes: the frequency of the motherboard! The higher it gets, the bigger their budget gets! He would propose it. But whether to table it at a meeting or drop it into a *tete-a-tete* with Motherboard Chief was worth a thought.

"Hard Disc Boss. Capacity." Elementary. Unless he was not thinking of proposing a full Server upgrade. But that meant he was preparing a concept. Once tabled, this would be a clear bid for Board power. Oldfish needed to hurry.

"Peripherals Chief. Proof?" So he was after a hold over her for her smuggling. Perhaps he could offer her defence while also showing her, in private, the proof he already had up his sleeve?

"Supply Chief. Drinks." Right! Why was Oldfish not aware of this? Or was it a new development? He would have to kick the secret services into action.

A nice lot they were, anyway!

Oldfish had another sip of whisky and looked over the list of doubles. 1D4C00 was not among them. He was not among the reserve doubles, either. He came last in the list of possible doubles. So why would he play on Chief Secretary's mind?

Oldfish went to the bar, poured himself two fingers of whisky and a finger of icy purified water, returned to his chair, lit a cigarette, his brain as active as an ant in a sugar bowl.

x x x

Video Memory Chief blew his nose. For him, this simple act took on complex proportions, occupying a significant period of time.

Oldfish watched him patiently. Chief Pixel's file stated he was allergic to all dust. However, the Board chair was convinced the allergy was just a pretext for brandishing a

collection of expensive handkerchiefs. At the moment, Chief Pixel sported a light blue cotton cloth, into which he was imitating a virtual trumpet player hunting for a note.

Video Memory Chief was a textbook example of a cretin. The best way of communicating with him was to adopt Chinese water torture methods: imparting the necessary information or eliciting the necessary reaction by repeating a question as many times as it took for nerve impulses to weave their way through the maze of ill-matched neurons. Oldfish knew, however, that Chief Pixel was not to be underestimated. First, he was suspiciously consistent in his stupidity. Second, he had survived for all of 68 years atop video memory, being the longest serving Board member. Oldfish relished recalling an incident from a past five-minute Board meeting: Peripherals Chief had begun making a long statement in which a proposal for discussing video memory efficiency had gradually crystallised. This probably contained the ill-thought-out gist of an idea of weakening Video Memory Chief, with the idea of installing her nominee in his place.

Head Pixel had heard her out, asked to be heard in turn, elaborately blown his nose, and said, "My wife was offered smuggled courgettes last night! Should have seen the state she was in! I am appalled! I suggest we go on the warpath against smuggling, and we eradicate it root and branch. Some names must be given to the media!"

At that instant, Oldfish saw Chief Pixel more as a master of the martial arts: a barely perceptible displacement, and his adversary was prone on the floor, with several limbs shattered.

Peripherals Chief immediately chipped in something to the effect that she had in fact meant to praise the high efficiency of video memory.

Oldfish asked for the floor and expressed his complete support for their esteemed Board colleagues. Video Memory efficiency had to improve, and he for one proposed the Board vote a three per cent budget increase. This was passed unanimously, with Oldfish walking away with two plus points: one for peripherals, and one for video memory...

"Some people see themselves as sacred cows," said Video Memory Chief, stuffing his kerchief away into his top pocket, "Chief Secretary came to me with a lot of talk about a new management style! 'Leave me out,' I said to him, 'I've got a nervous stomach!' I gave him lemon tea and sent him off!"

“Chief Secretary seems to have some problems of late. It pains me to think his executive capacity may be impaired.”

“Chief Secretary? A huge problem! Massive!”

“I think we must all help him in this difficult pass. We're not just colleagues; we're also friends, a team that works together for the good of the City.”

“More like family, really, as they say!”

“A wonderful way of putting it! By the way, I've been meaning to ask you something. Do you not think admin expenses are overblown? Are we not penalising the hardware units that do the real work? I always feel we must pay more attention to them, and especially to video memory as the face of the Server.”

“Video memory? Ooh, you're right there! Some tea?”

Chief Pixel grabbed a tatty tin flask and poured orange pekoe tea into two well used disposable plastic cups. Oldfish knew the beverage would be horribly sweet, but bravely sipped away without shuddering.

“Tell me something about Pixel 1D4C00!”

“Pixel 1D4C00? Ooh, he's my man! Why?”

“Came across his name the other day; idle curiosity, really.”

“Pixel 1D4C00, eh? He's the last pixel on the screen! Does his job well!”

“Would you let me scan his work file?”

“You mean Pixel 1D4C00's? Okay, don't see why not!”

Video Memory Chief sat an inch away from his computer screen. Everything must be well pixellated at this range, but that clearly did not bother him; with incredible speed, he started clicking and typing something. Oldfish looked closer and saw that half his movements involved hitting 'Backspace' and correcting misspellings. Spelling out a word involved Chief Pixel in three times more keystrokes and occupied twice the time it normally did.

"Each madman has his method," thought Oldfish in his usual manner of passing verdicts on people and events.

Chief Pixel handed him an optical disc:

“Pixel 1D4C00 for you! There's the chappie!”

“Thanks awfully!”

Oldfish took the disc and stretched out a sticky tea-stained hand.

x x x

Oldfish poured himself a finger of malt and two fingers of icy purified water, took a healthy swig, sat by his computer, shoved the optical disc into the drive, and started reading about Pixel 1D4C00.

2.

Waking to *You Break My Display* by Laura Byte, Pixel 1D4C00 opened his eyes, maximised the Retro Music Television window to full screen and watched the tail end of the video. The track was at Number 68 in the 100s of 1000s Chart. He slid his cursor down the list and hit his favourite, *Click It Baby!*, from Divide Overflow's *Divided by Zero* album. Number 17. He pumped up the volume to max, minimised the entire virtual screen and got up.

He took a moist pack with a label stating 'Contains 30 Millilitres of Triple Purified Water: Just What Your Skin Needs!' and inhaled the deeply refreshing aroma of synthetic mint as he wiped his face.

In line with the latest guidelines under the Healthy Lifestyle and Oxygen [Preservation] Calls, as adopted by the Board, junior officers such as bytes, bites and pixels conducted appropriate physical exercise of not more than five minutes a day, leading to not more than 90 heartbeats a minute. This morning 1D4C00 did his usual 30 pushups and 50 stomach bends in groups of ten, interspersed with 20-second breathing exercises.

While wet-towelling his body ("Extract of Spanish Bull Glands Makes A Man Irresistible!"), he looked at himself in the mirror doors of his wardrobe. Sadly, his muscles were on the flabby side, but their outlines were more than satisfactory.

He maximised his virtual screen, opened the window of his alarm system and dialled the fridge door code. He peered through the door sensor and got retinally scanned. The screen announced, "Refrigerator open. Enjoy your snack! Have you tried the new Paradise Stew

aerated beef bites?"

"I haven't, and I've no intention of trying 'em," mumbled 1D4C00 and breakfasted on a chicken quarter with 300 millilitres of purified water.

The last drop he chucked over the grass plantpot. Though the Vegetation [Protection] Call permitted non-edible plant husbandry, the Potable Water [Preservation] Call pointed most people in the direction of mould growths, or moss at most. Grass was technically okay, but tended to be regarded as suspect because, if it was lush, it could easily tempt someone to try it. And, once having tried a bit of green, there was no knowing what one may get up to in future. Lettuce, then cucumber, then a tomato, and the point of no return was in sight: a slippery road that led all the way down to the incurable addicts' hospice. In truth, 1D4C00 had once chewed on a blade of grass, but had not liked it.

The pixel took the box of toothpicks. It wasn't a case of need; more of pot luck. He stuck one in at random. The toothpick handle had an exclamation sign on it. A warning? Or perhaps a token of wonderment to come?

He bit on the toothpick and opened the wardrobe window. He input a grey suit, white shirt, and jet black tie in the search panel, selecting feint silvery stripes for the latter. Just like the necktie worn by James Bond in Bond Movie 2783, *One Backup's Not Enough*. Naturally, the socks would also have to be grey. The monitoring system told him that the suit lay to the left of the door, while the shirt was opposite. The tie hung to the left of the left hand side door, the left sock was in the middle drawer, but the right one was missing entirely. 1D4C00 entered the sock black box LOG-file, examined data relating to the last 24 hours and saw that the right sock's GPS chip had stopped signalling during the nocturnal dry clean. Unserviceable, most likely. The pixel made a Personal Task Manager entry to file a report later in the day, selected black socks, got dressed, and carefully combed his thinning hair.