

David Meadows 1971 - 2018



As most of you know, we were stunned to lose Dave in September after a tragically short battle with cancer. He was only diagnosed at the end of August, and, as any of us would, he made plans for the things he wanted to do while he was still able. In the event, he just never had the chance; three weeks later, he passed away.

To all of you who sent your kind wishes and sympathies to us and to his family, we truly thank you. It meant more than you could know.

We've amended this piece several times since his passing to try and arrive at the right words, but looking at his picture here throws us off our stride every time, no matter how many weeks or months have elapsed. It's just all wrong. The best we can do is repeat some of the sentiments that were offered up at his funeral. They suggested that sometimes life shouldn't just be measured in length, but also in depth. While Dave may have left us far too soon, everything that mattered to him in life, he embraced with a passion. He was fiercely loyal to family and friends, and bursting with enthusiasm about his sports, his cooking and hiking, everything. It can never be said he didn't live his life to the absolute full.

Bless him, he always did like to get first crack at the quizzes we made up for the newsletter (he was sort of my guinea pig). I wish he could've got a look at the one for this issue, as when I concocted it so many months ago, I was

already anticipating the cry of disbelief when he turned the page and saw it ("Musicals?! Aw, c'mon now, Arlene!")

Rest in peace, Dave.

The Aspect Xmas Diary



Where to start? Things certainly happened that we could put in this diary, but they've all been overshadowed by the one defining incident (above) that has shaped these last few months for us, making them seem trivial by comparison. But these newsletters have always made a virtue of triviality, so here goes nothing....

We had to do an online Health & Safety questionnaire recently, comprising a stream of (what appeared to be) yes/no questions. Except they weren't. Typical question:- "Are fire exits clearly marked?" Easy one. Tick 'yes'. It then says we must add a comment. What? What can you add to 'yes'? "Yes ... they are."?? "Do you have sprinklers?" Tick no. "Please add a comment." "No, we don't!" 55 questions that won't take no (or yes) for an answer.

Email from a prospective new supplier - "I phoned earlier but you was unavailable". Oh I were, were I? Go directly to jail, do not pass go, do not get a reply. Someone should've warned them I eat grammatically-challenged people for breakfast.

On a job in London, we found ourselves short of a broadband micro-filter. But hey, it's the heart of London, bound to be able to pick one up somewhere, huh? Ah well. Had we wanted a picture of a micro-filter tattooed on our arm, no problem. A micro-filter fashioned out of tofu? A breeze. The outline of a micro-filter swirled into the top of our designer latte? Coming right up. We could probably even have had a facsimile of one run up in chartreuse silk with contrast piping & had someone teach us to play the saxophone while we waited for them to finish it, but to buy an actual micro-filter? Sigh. We did manage to get one (from a most unlikely source), but honestly, why is it so hard to find 'normal' stuff in London?

Well that's about it for this issue. A bittersweet toast to finish this time. We do of course wish you all a very happy Xmas, but if we can urge you to join us in a resolution for 2019 without putting too much of a downer on everyone, it's this - aim to make the most of each & every day.

Our very best wishes to you all.



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Merry Xmas Everybody!

Welcome to the Aspect Christmas newsletter.

We confess we didn't really know what to do with this edition. The jollity of the season and our typical Aspect humour seemed wholly incongruous with the shock and sadness of losing our colleague Dave since the last issue. Although we'd written a proportion of this issue already, writing the remainder was hard. We did consider skipping this Christmas edition altogether, but decided not to. It gives us the chance to acknowledge the kindness, sympathy and patience extended to us by our clients, for which no words are really adequate.

Our story this Christmas is *The Mystery of the Blue Screen of Death*. (And yes, in hindsight, we might wish to have chosen a better subject/title, but it'd already been many months in the writing). As usual, the collected tales are available on the website for a limited period.

We always make a point of thanking you for your business at this time of year, and this year is no exception, but the last few months have served to remind us that we're fortunate enough to have some of the best customers in the world. Thank you all.



Christmas Wishes

Aspect Business Communications Ltd

Unit 14 Brynmenyn Business Centre
St Theodore's Way
Brynmenyn Industrial Estate
BRIDGEND
CF32 9TZ

Tel 08458 277 328
Email enquiries@aspectbc.co.uk
www.aspectbc.co.uk

Registered in England & Wales
Co reg number 6476805

Aspect BC FAQs

How do I find out my computer's name, if I'm asked?

For anyone reading this who's thinking "my computer has a name?", yes, it does. Not a Tom, Dick or Harry kind of name, but a name nonetheless. (And let's be honest, in the lexicon of weird names, it takes a lot to beat some of the poor nippers being born these days).



There's a handy screen that collects all the pertinent info about your PC. In either Win 7 or 10, just hold down the **Windows** key (that's the one with the Windows symbol on it) and press the **[Pause]** key - it might take you a minute to locate that, as you likely don't use it often. And if you have a laptop, you may not have one at all **. (On a PC keyboard, it generally lives above the **Insert**, **Home** and **PgUp** keys). On the resulting screen, it'll tell you the operating system first, then stuff about the processor and memory, and then the computer name.

** If you don't have a **[Pause]** key, you'll have to do it the long way, which means clicking on **Start**, right-clicking on **Computer** and choosing **Properties**.

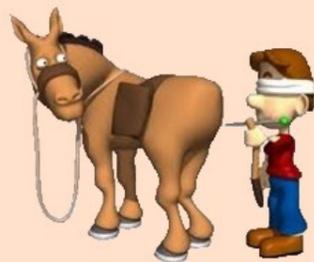
How did they get my email address?

This is a question we get asked a lot by clients who have been hit by spam or whose addresses have been spoofed. As we tell them, a lot of the names of people in your company are out there in the public domain or splashed all over websites. But they still ask how these people hacked in to latch onto their *precise* email address.

Well the thing is, it's very unlikely they had to hack anything.

Google any company and you'll get pointed to its website if it has one, so that's the domain name worked out. Now you just need to have a few tries at what goes in front of the @. And let's be honest, there aren't usually that many variations, are there? Typically, we've got *firstname@*, *firstname.lastname@*, *firstinitial.lastname@* .. Sometimes there's no dots in between, but OK, what, half a dozen likely ones? Easy for a spammer to try them all. You get one and think they know your address. Well by now, they probably do, because all the others bounced back to them. By a process of elimination and almost no effort, they found you.

It's not hacking. It's more like Pin the Tail on the Donkey.



What is Number Porting?

If you switch to a VOIP phone system, then you make your calls over the internet, not across traditional phone lines. But your phone number(s) relate to physical phone lines. So how do you keep them?

You port them.

Porting means your call provider moves your existing phone number(s) into the Cloud. They can then be pointed anywhere, usually to the trunks carrying your call traffic.

But as you're probably realising, if you can point them anywhere, then does a dialling code actually mean much anymore? Obviously it's great for businesses who relocate to a new town and want to keep their old number. But it also means people can present just about any number they like when they call out, regardless of where they physically are. Scammers have used this facility to present a Reading number when pretending to be 'Microsoft' ("you have many errors on your computer" ... yeah, yeah, whatever).

Before you get all excited and decide to ditch all your physical phone lines and move all your numbers into the Cloud though, give a thought to your broadband line. It needs a physical phone line with a phone number. Be especially careful of ditching a fax line ("Oh, we never get faxes anymore") ... no, but you may well discover your fax line is your broadband line.



The Helpdesk of HORROR ...

Once more unto the breach, dear friends! Once more!



"OK, shut your computer all the way down and then restart."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"It's not a laptop."

"No, I meant shut down the computer, not close the lid."

"Did he say why he called in sick?"

"He hasn't beaten his video game yet."

"I heard that's been going around."

"I need help changing my voicemail."

"OK, you just need to login to your voicemail and select option 4."

"How do you do that?"

"You press 4."

"I don't know how to do that. Can I get an onsite visit?"

"Yeah, I've got one of these IP phones, but I can't login with my password. It's supposed to be 123456, right?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Huh. 1-2-3-4-5-6 ... no, doesn't work."

"That's weird. I can login from here."

"1-2-3-4-5-6 ... Still nothing."

"Try restarting it?"

[Client restarts it and tries again]

"1-2-3-4-5-6... no, it's just not working."

"Well I'm going to have to schedule a call out."

"OK. Guess technology isn't as advanced as they claim, huh?"

"Sorry?"

"Oh, just you'd think this voice recognition stuff would work a bit better."

"... You're supposed to *type* the password."

"Oh."

"Our internet isn't working. We've tried restarting the router."

"OK. Have you looked at the online help?"

"Um... no."

"Next time you should. Often that solves the problem."

"I would, but since the problem is that my internet isn't working, that might not help."

"Oh ..."

"OK, last step and then we're ready to program your recorder. Can you tell me the manufacturer?"

"Oh yeah, it's a Hitachi."

"Great, let me just check codes for Hitachi. Give me a moment."

"Did you need me to spell it for you?"

"No, it's fine - you said it's a Hitachi."

"Yeah, but it's spelled with a B."

"Sorry, did you say B? As in Bravo?"

"Yeah. T-O-S-H-I-B-A, Hitachi!"

"Ah, that's what's wrong, see? The password doesn't have any O's. They're all zeroes. You'd just misread it."

"Yeah, I know the first time I tried it, I used Os, and then I tried circles. I didn't think to try zeroes."

[Circles? Where did you find circles?]

"I can't pick up a wireless signal."

"OK, how many connections does it show?"

"There's two other networks, but they only have one bar on each. Those are my bad neighbours."

"So the good signal isn't there?"

"No, he moved."

"My computer's not working properly. It stopped working when you were up here doing whatever you were doing, so you need to fix it."

"I was writing down names. I wrote your name on a Post-It note. I'm not sure how that broke your computer."

"It's asking for a username and password."

"OK, it's *admin* and *admin*."

"In that order?"

"I just submitted a new ticket. It's very urgent, so please make it your top priority."

"Uh, I've got about six tickets from you, and most of them are marked urgent. Which one do you want me to work on first?"

"All of them."

"I want a computer where I can type in Russian and it will print in English."

"I'm afraid we don't have Russian keyboards."

"That's OK, I'll just tape Russian letters on."

"But it'll still be an English keyboard."

"How about if I glue them?"

"My speech commands aren't working."

"What are you trying to do?"

"I keep telling my computer to turn on, but it won't."

"No, the speech commands only work once the PC is already on."

"Then what's the point of them? How do I get my computer on if it won't listen?"

"Just turn it on like normal."

"I don't want to!"

"How do I know if my computer is working?"

"Well ... can you open a program for me?"

"I don't know how to do that."

"So you don't use the computer to play music, or games or anything?"

"No."

"What do you use the computer for?"

"Well I just watch it to see what it does."

"Is it doing anything right now?"

"No."

"Then thank you for calling Tech Support." [click]

"Can you give me your phone number please?"

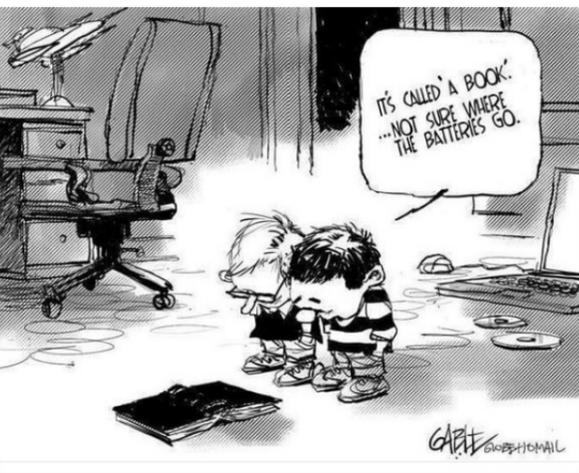
"OK, it's *****"

"And the area code?"

"What?"

"What state are you in?"

"... sober?"



We'd love to hear your comments and feedback.
Just email:
newsletter@aspectbc.co.uk

(Recent issues are on the website if you missed them).

What to do with a Deleted Item : Let It Go, Let it Go ..

...turn away and slam the door.

The point (and we're sure you're wishing we'd get to it instead of having a *Frozen* moment) is that emails end up in your Deleted Items because - correct us if we're wrong - **you didn't want them**. If there was a folder that was the equivalent of an incinerator chute, no doubt they'd have been consigned there. But instead, all you have is your Deleted Items folder, and it never quite gets rid of them. **You have to do it yourself.**

So how many emails do you zap in a day? Ten? Fifty? Just watch that folder grow. We've seen clients with tens of thousands of messages in their Deleted Items.

Is there a problem with a Deleted Items folder whose size rivals the national debt of a third world country? Well yes. Mailboxes can only get so big. There's limits set by Microsoft. And when it comes to totting up the total size of your mailbox, the Deleted Items count too.



Time for a clear out?

Combatting viruses - the more the merrier?

If having anti-virus software is so important, then surely the more you have, the better, right?

Wrong.

They actually cancel each other out. So don't go installing every package under the sun - just pick one and keep it up to date.

By the same token, if you run an older version of Microsoft Office but fancy having Office365, you need to *choose*. You'll run into all kinds of conflict problems if you try running both together.



Vassilly's Xmas Blog

Mon 15 Oct

Payrolls lady is cross today (maybe because she is year older now than when she is go home Friday?!). No, she say she is cross with lots of phone callings from sales peoples. No one is want to be talking to sales peoples on a Monday. She say if they is not want to be grumped at, they should be phoning on other days. Sundays maybe. (I am still say she is grumpy because she is older than IT Boss Man again).



Wed 17 Oct

We are have leak in Aspects kitchen. Payrolls lady is send me under sink "because I am small". I am point out Bogdan is smaller, but she say he is apprentice, so he is need supervising. Hunh. Is anyone else notice that I am also need supervising on every job unless is wet, cold, mucky or all of above? Then is "oh no Vassilly, we are have faith in you, you is the 'kat for the job'".

Wed 24 Oct

Telecommmms Boss Man is ask if I am want to go reddish next month. What? Is hideous Santa suit not reddish enough?! He say no. Not reddish. Red-ditch. Is place where we are have job for cabling. I am think Red Ditch is sound like mucky job with no supervising again, but he say no, is town near Birmingham.

Wed 31 Oct

Is Hallowe'ens tonight. I am give Aspects colleagues the sad whiskers face and say I am forget to be buying sweets for little trick-or-treaters. What am I do? Colleagues is full of excellentness and is give me many sweets for them.

Thurs 1 Nov

I am not see any trick-or-treaters last night, so I am think is best if I am eat sweets in case they is go off. Maybe no-one is come to door because it is cold? (Bogdan say maybe is because I am sit all night very quiet with lights off). Whatever. I am get many sweets, so is all good.

Tues 13 Nov

Peoples, I am make complainings. No-one is tell me when we are go Redditch that we are have to go in middle of night!! Telecommmms Boss Man is tell me to set alarms for 5 of the clocks!! My clock is only know about one 5 o'clocks in the day and is not this one. Hunh. Telecommmms Boss Man say if he is stuck with grumpy 'kat all day, why for is it not one that is make lots of money on internet?

Wed 14 Nov

More complainings. IT Boss Man say we are get pie today. I am like pie. And then little box of technobobs is arrive! Box say is raspberry pi, so not only is this false advertisings, is bad spellings too (Payrolls lady is mutter about pots and kettles, but I am not understand - is we still cooking filling for pie?) Is lucky we are have Kit-Kat (oh and we are have many, MANY type of Kit-Kat. We are have orange, lemon, cookies, minty ... even dark chocolate (blech!) which Payrolls lady is like).

Tues 20 Nov

Things is looking up, loyal fans. Today, I am go with IT Boss Man to brewery! I am full of excites, but he say we are just go to look at computermabobs. He say is not a jolly trip. (Oh please! I am know this from moment he say he is coming along).

Wed 28 Nov

Payrolls lady say I am have invites to Aspects Xmas party!! Yaaaay!! Is big list of rules though. Boo! (1) Only crackers on Aspects table is for pulling. (2) If I am not like toys or jokes in Aspects crackers, I am not to steal from other tables. (3) Only leftovers on Aspects plates is for eating - is not matter how much other peoples is leave. (Addendum to 3) If someone is put down knife and fork to have sip of drink, is not mean they is finished. Addendum is difficult! How am I know? We are do much arquings and eventually colleagues is agree to hold one bit of cutlery at all times till they is done.... I am nearly say 'simples' there, but I am not immigrant 'kat fresh off boat anymore. In fact, peoples is often take me for educated British 'kat now. Payrolls lady say is sad indictment of education system.

Tues 4 Dec

Never mind Miracle on 34th Street! We are have Miracle on Brimn ... Brumnin ... Brimnun ... is no wonder no-one is make film on this estate. Anyways, we are have Christmas miracle at Aspects! IT Boss Man is buy mince pies for everyone!!

Merry Chrismassabobs loyal fans!

Songs from the Shows Quiz!

Ah, we can hear the groans from here! Oh come on! It's Christmas - at least give it a go. You might surprise yourself. We've given you three songs from a variety of famous musicals. Put their names into the grid (no, we haven't given you any markers for the ends of words) and the blue squares will spell out a very seasonal song and the musical it comes from.

Answers on the website (follow the link on the newsletter page).

B *Oh what a beautiful morning!*
People will say we're in love
The surrey with the fringe on top

U *Feed the birds*
A spoonful of sugar
Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious

H *Over the rainbow*
If I only had a heart
Ding Dong the witch is dead!

G *Some enchanted evening*
Happy talk
There is nothing like a dame

N *If I were a bell*
Luck be a lady tonight
Sit down, you're rocking the boat

X *Sunrise, sunset*
If I were a rich man
Matchmaker

L *All I ask of you*
The music of the night
Think of me

A *Ol' man river*
Can't help lovin' dat man
Make believe

D *Tonight*
Maria
Somewhere

J *So you wanna be a boxer*
My name is Tallulah
You give a little love

I *You've got to pick a pocket or two*
Consider yourself
Food glorious food

K *Deadwood Stage*
Secret love
Black hills of Dakota

W *Getting to know you*
I whistle a happy tune
Shall we dance?

E *Anything you can do*
There's no business like show business
You can't get a man with a gun

M *Lay all your love on me*
Dancing queen
Take a chance on me

R *The night they invented champagne*
Thank Heavens for little girls
I remember it well

V *Bring him home*
Empty chairs at empty tables
I dreamed a dream

P *You'll never walk alone*
June is bustin' out all over
If I loved you

C *Another suitcase in another hall*
Oh, what a circus
Don't cry for me, Argentina

T *Sandy*
Summer nights
You're the one that I want

O *If my friends could see me now*
Big spender
The rhythm of life

F *All that jazz*
Cell block tango
Razzle Dazzle

S *Climb ev'ry mountain*
Do-Re-Mi
My favourite things

Q *I could have danced all night*
Get me to the church on time
Wouldn't it be lwerly?

A
B
C
D
E
F
G
H
I
J
K
L
M
N
O
P
Q
R
S
T
U
V
W
X

The Mystery of the Blue Screen of Death

A Benji Neer Investigation

Cast of Characters:

Benjamin 'Benji' Neer Private Investigator
 Lady Pentium 'PC' Chipps The Intended Victim
 Old Mother Board Housekeeper
 'Chip' Memree Lady Chipps' Nephew
 C P Pugh Chip's Tutor
 Win Dawes Chipps family Factotum

Hardy Drive
 Anne Vidia DVI, VGA (Hons)
 Dee V DeWriter
 Penny Drive
 Cable
 Mrs Powers

Chipps family Archivist
 Painting Lady Chipps
 Secretary to Lady Chipps
 Hardy Drive's Niece
 Butler
 Cook

Benji Neer mustered a look of polite interest as he waited for his client, Lady Chipps, to get to the point. Beside them, Cable, the butler, fussed with a tea tray. "Someone," she finally announced, "is trying to kill me." She leaned in towards Benji and loudly whispered, "I think it's Cable..." *Chink!!* The suspect in question smacked the teapot against a cup.

"I see," said Benji carefully, as the butler caught his eye and rolled his own heavenwards. "May I ask why?"
 "Oh. Isn't it usually the butler?"
 Anyway, it'd be so easy to replace Cable."

As Benji reached for a mince pie, a menacing growl made him pause, and he saw Lady Chipps' chihuahua eye him up with a manic gleam in its eyes.
 "Oh, don't mind Jumper," she said fondly. "He's just a little softie."
 The little softie promptly struck like a rattlesnake, just missing Benji's hastily retracted fingers, while Lady Chipps continued, oblivious. "Lately I've been plagued with these odd dizzy spells, you see. I'm told I turn quite blue and spout gibberish." She frowned. "I usually recover within a few minutes, but this morning, I had to rest for quite half an hour before I was able to get up. I do worry that one of these attacks will prove fatal."

Benji ventured towards his teacup, but was driven back by another warning growl. He swore inwardly. He really *wanted* a cup of tea ...

"Umm, I hate to mention it, Lady Chipps, but there's a little bit of a *smell* in here," said Benji, radiating wide-eyed innocence. "Do you think maybe your little dog has rolled in something?"

"Oh no! Do you think so?" Lady Chipps rang the bell for Cable, who promptly reappeared. She passed the protesting pooch across to him, cooing, "Iz my widdle baby needing a bath? Izzy den?"

Jumper knew damned well he wasn't, and as he was borne ignominiously from the room, he glared back at Benji, who raised his teacup in a cheerful salute.

"As I was saying," continued Lady Chipps, "I really think it must be someone here who's responsible."

"Then I'll have to question everyone. I'll

start with the most recent addition"

Anne Vidia, Artist

The artist peeked around the edge of her easel as Benji came in.

"Scuse me if I don't shake hands," she said, waving her paint-spattered fingers. "I'm first for the inquisition then, am I?"

"Well the attacks do seem to have begun just after you arrived ...?"

"Ah, right, enter the suspicious stranger. Well, I have only been here a few weeks. Lady C decided she wanted a picture and nobody here was capable of any decent quality, so I ended up installed in the household, God help me. Nuttier than a squirrel's lunchbox, the lot of 'em. But look, without Lady C, I'm just a spare part." She regarded Benji levelly. "Just because the others have been here longer, doesn't mean one of them hasn't been corrupted, you know." She picked up a cloth and wiped her hands, then before Benji could stop her, she'd leaned over and snatched his notebook and pen.

"What are you doing?" asked Benji peevishly, as he watched her making notes in *his* notebook.

"Helping. Artist's eye for observation, if you like." She treated him to a dazzling smile. "You'll find my input invaluable."

"Oh I will, will I?" he grumbled as he stepped around the easel to reclaim his property. Looking at the canvas, he saw it depicted Lady Chipps seated on a velvet-upholstered chair. She was perfectly captured, from her faded periwinkle eyes to her softly-waved white hair. In her lap, glaring out at the world as if it personally affronted him, sat Jumper. Benji drifted to the right of the picture, then the left, studying the dog as he did.

"It's true," he remarked. "The eyes really do follow you around the room."

"So do the teeth," muttered Anne darkly.

Mrs Powers, Cook (to which Anne had added "*blows up without warning*")

As Benji entered the kitchen, the cook glanced up, and then pointedly took the head and tail clean off a haddock with two swift strokes of a butcher's knife. Benji

wincing, and then recoiled as the knife suddenly appeared right under his nose. He gingerly moved it away with his fingertip.

"I'm ..." he began.

"Oh, I ken fine who ye are. Pokin' yer snotty wee nose intae everythin'. Well let me tell ye somethin' - this place wouldnae run at a' if it wisnae fer me. So gawn an' look elsewhere. Gawn, get away with ye, ya snotty-nosed wee runt that y'are!!!!"

At six-foot, 16-stone and dry-nosed (he checked), Benji felt this was unfair, but since the knife gave her argument a definite edge (and sharp pointy bit), he opted for a tactical withdrawal. Pausing in the hallway to make a phone call, he failed to notice the shadow of a psychotic chihuahua creeping up the stairs beside him. Jumper was bathed, blow-dried, be-ribboned, and consequently about as jolly as a sack of pit vipers. Reaching throat-level, he aimed, crouched and launched ...

Still talking, Benji glanced down and saw a pin on the carpet. Being a firm believer in "see a pin and pick it up", he did just that, leaving Jumper to sail unnoticed over his head, collide with the wall and slide to the floor on a trail of drool. While Benji finished his call and headed off in search of his next suspect, Jumper shook himself and slunk away, muttering.

Old Mother Board, Housekeeper ("*a regular chatterbox*")

The housekeeper had chosen the most uncomfortable chair in the room, and sat rigidly upright on it, staring at a point six inches above Benji's head with her mouth fixed in a grim line.

"You've been here right from the start, I understand?" ventured Benji.

"Sir."

Benji waited... but evidently nothing else was forthcoming. He pressed on.

"And you've witnessed these dizzy spells Lady Chipps has complained of?"

"Sir."

After a few more minutes of this scintillating badinage, the only thing Benji managed to deduce was that Anne Vidia wasn't a stranger to irony. He drew a line through the housekeeper's name and gave up.

'Chip' Memree, Nephew ("*just begging for a good slap*")

"... and I didn't do anything! Why is everyone picking on me?! It's not *fa-a-ir!!*"

Benji suppressed a sigh. He'd only said 'hello'. Five minutes of whining later....

"Mr Memree. *Please,*" he pleaded.

"Nobody's accusing you of anything. I'm just trying to gather information."

"But it's nothing to do with me! Aunt Pentium probably just did too much and got overheated. Why does everyone blame me?! It's so *unfa-a-ir!!*"

C P Pugh, Tutor ("*BO-ring*")

"No, Chip is far from a good pupil," C P Pugh scoffed. "You teach him something one day and it's gone the next. You'd think someone wiped his brain while he was asleep. Why, look at that lesson we did last week on Thermopylae ..."

"Uh-huh, so would you say...?"

"... now everyone just thinks of that film, *300*, but actually there's a lot of really *quite* interesting facts about the Persians that people don't realise. For example, Mr Neer ..." He leaned forward to better engage Benji's attention, but it'd already wandered off in search of something more exciting. Currently, it was counting the leaves on the flock wallpaper....

... *seventy-eight, seventy-nine...*

"...now - and this is interesting - *some* scholars are of the opinion ..."

... *one hundred and four, one hundred and five ...*

"... Fascinating. Quite fascinating. Don't you think so, Mr Neer?"

Benji snapped back to attention.

"Absolutely. Oh my, is that the time? I must get on. But thank you so much."

Dee V DeWriter, Secretary ("*bitter old spinster*")

"Dee V DeWriter. *Miss,*" she was at pains to point out. "I'm PC's secretary."

Miss DeWriter was utterly bland. Straight, greying blonde hair, and an unflattering beige suit with boxy 80's-style shoulder pads, conspired to make her look like Spongebob's rather faded aunt.

"I'm close to retirement, Mr Neer. What would I have to gain? I was just hoping to hang on till I was pensioned off." She sighed. "To be honest, PC hasn't needed me in months. I wouldn't be at all surprised if she eventually forgets I even exist."

"I'd have thought there was always work for a secretary," said Benji, confused by the artist's notes on her. She didn't seem at all bitter, just sad.

"Oh there's plenty of *work,*" she spat, (*ahhh, there it was*). "But PC doesn't want anyone but Pen these days. It's always Pen, Pen, Pen."

Benji referred to his notes. "That would be Penny Drive?"

"Pen, yes. Oh Pen is younger, Pen is quicker and she's so *terribly* practical." The words came through gritted teeth.

Win Dawes, Factotum ("*control freak*")

"Mr Dawes, I'm not exactly clear what it is you do here." Benji tapped his notebook with his pen.

Win Dawes blinked from behind rimless

glasses. "Well ... everything. I'm the person who makes this place run."

"Ah, and there was Mrs Powers telling me it was her," said Benji jovially.

Win removed his glasses and polished them carefully with a cloth. "Really? How odd. No, Mr Neer," he said, without a trace of humour, "it's me. I'm the one who deals with everything. I handle all the enquiries, give everyone their instructions for the day, arrange and supervise everything. This place is a well-oiled machine now, and I'm the one who operates it." Noticing Benji peering around the room, he asked, "Is anything the matter?"

Benji had been aware for a good few minutes of a low-level '*hhrrrrmm*' noise, and frankly it was putting him off a bit. He made a few more notes and, thanking Win for his time, pushed his chair backwards and stood. He failed to hear the startled '*yip!*' from below, as Jumper, who'd just made it to within striking distance of Benji's ankle, now found himself pinned between the leg of the chair and the base of an occasional table. He snapped and squirmed impotently as Benji's trouser leg moved out of range.

Hardy Drive, Archivist ("*a sweetie*")

"Been here years, of course, building up all that information on the Chippses. Go on, ask me anything. It's all stored up here, y'know." Hardy Drive tapped his forehead, and then gave a heavy sigh. "Can't always retrieve it lately, though. Getting old, I expect."

"So if anything happened to Lady Chipps," asked Benji, "could you move on somewhere new?"

"Oh no. No, I don't think so. Nobody wants an old archivist. We get stuffed full of one family's history, y'see. Hard to wipe it all out and start over. No, got to be realistic - I'd be in the rubbish bin." He nodded towards a bin by the Christmas tree in the corner, and then became very flustered when Benji followed his gaze.

"Ah, and what do we have here then?" asked Benji, pulling some crumpled brown wrapping paper from the bin. A skull and crossbones decorated the address label.

"I keep throwing them away!" Hardy Drive wrung his hands. "But they won't stop coming!" He hung his head. "I answered an advert a few weeks ago. It looked so genuine! And then I started getting these parcels of poison in the mail. I didn't know what to do, so I just kept binning them! I would *never* use them against PC!!"

"All the same," said Benji thoughtfully, "I thinks someone has."

Penny Drive ("*slicker than a wet otter*")

"Penelope Drive?"

"Just Penny is fine."

Benji assessed the young woman in front of him. On the surface, she was immaculately turned out and oozed efficiency, but Benji couldn't shake the impression that she was *all* surface.

"Really, Mr Neer," she marvelled, "I doubt this place has seen an update in years. And they all actually believe in a job

for *life*. Can you imagine?"

"And I take it you don't?"

"Well hardly. Can't wait to go somewhere more modern."

"Oh? And just what might you be willing to do to achieve that?"

Suddenly realising she was doing an excellent job of incriminating herself, Penny made a dash for the door. Benji sprang up to intercept, but her attempted escape was foiled by Jumper. *Finally*, he'd got close enough to smell Benji's blood, and then just as he leapt, he got tangled up in Penny's legs. All three of them crashed to the floor. Caught between the two struggling humans, Jumper's tiny psychopathic brain reset to "Bite". He snapped his jaws shut on the nearest available appendage.

Penny Drive shrieked.

Everyone came running, and as Penny tried to shake Jumper off, a small bottle labelled 'Poison' flew from her sleeve and rolled across the floor. All jaws dropped (including Jumper's, who fell off Penny's arm). Pulling a lace handkerchief from her pocket (which sent another poison bottle sailing across the room), she artfully dabbed at her eyes before turning accusingly on her uncle. "It wasn't me! *You* brought them into the house! I just found them and I was .. disposing of them for you?" she concluded lamely. She peeked through downcast lashes to see if there was the slightest chance anyone was buying this performance. There wasn't. She flung the handkerchief aside and snarled at them. "Well you're all so *past* it! And you'd have kept me dangling till I was old and useless too! Well I want a life away from here!!"

Lady Chipps drew herself up regally. "Then go and have one, by all means. In fact, I think it's safe to say you can remove yourself immediately." She watched impassively as Penny Drive was ejected, and then approached Benji.

"The hero of the hour," she said warmly. Benji ducked his head shyly. "Oh. Well. All in a day's work you know."

"What? No, not *you,*" said Lady Chipps derisively. She reached past him to pick up Jumper and hugged him. "Did my widdle baby find the bad lady? Diddy den? Who's Mummy's clever, *clever* boy? *You,*" she flicked her hand at Benji, "may see yourself out." She carried Jumper triumphantly from the room.

"Wow. You actually got *fired.*" Anne Vidia was shocked. "Nobody *ever* gets booted round here."

"Oh. Lucky me," said Benji glumly.

"What'll you do now?" she asked sympathetically.

He shrugged. "Move onto the next case, I suppose." He checked the messages on his phone. "Huh. Office with mail going missing, apparently."

"Oh... interesting," she said politely.

"No, it'll be in the next drawer down from where it's supposed to be." Benji sighed. "I really thought this was a case I could get my teeth into."

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Lying in his basket, blissfully replete with finest fillet steak, Jumper was thinking the exact same thing.