

CHRONICLE



2016

Andrew Woodmaker

**In 2016 the world will change,
and lives will never be the same.**

In this third year's worth of entries from a diary stored on a futuristic recording device found after a house fire, world politics will take centre stage.

In 2016, hate will bring a great nation to its knees, and fear will bring another to the edge of a precipice.

In Oxford, the British spaceplane finally has new funding, and Andrew Woodmaker must control his nerves and face the terror of his impending wedding!

Nobody knows if it is a work of fiction or a true record of how things happened, and will happen. By reading the diary, some things may have already begun to change, and the future is not what it was.

But it could be that this is how it would have been.

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by

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Edited from recording device by

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Dedicated to my friend Gareth

Who is often a way better friend than I deserve.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Friday, January 1st to Saturday, January 9th 2016

Friday, stupidly early

I only closed my last entry a few hours ago, and already I've almost killed the cat. We got back from London on one of the new late trains they run all night on New Year's Eve, and as we climbed up the stairs to our flat, before I knew it, CoNN had run under my feet. Of course, I had some heavy shoes on, and he was within millimetres of being squished, so I lifted my foot. Unfortunately my other foot was still in the air at the time, so I fell arse over tit, straight back downstairs, dropping the can of coke I'd been drinking, and then having it land on me, pouring its contents all over me as I lay at the bottom of the stairs.

Taima was ahead and looked round and thought I was dead, I thought CoNN was dead, and CoNN was located on his beanbag happy as anything, completely at ease.

I hate cats sometimes.

OK, I don't but please, CoNN, don't try and trip me up again, I'd really appreciate it. And next time, you may be dead if I don't spot you in time. Horrible cat.

Time for bed. I'm full of adrenaline after my fall, and I'm never going to get to sleep.

Rest of week

OK, I did sleep in the end, though it took a while.

Anyway, New Year's Day we spent at home watching some films, and just lounging on the sofa, relaxing, the kind of day you need as often as you can get it. Unlike most years it carried on being relaxed for a bit longer, as the weekend immediately followed the day off for New Year's Day. All in all, a nice three days. I spent a lot of the time making a fuss of CoNN. He may drive me nuts sometimes but I

wouldn't want him squished.

Monday and back work, and my first thought when I got in was one of despair. The US election was still eleven months away, and already they were starting to do their campaigning.

It amazes me that anything gets done in that country at all, when a whole year out of every four is completely taken up with their election. Maybe that's one of the reasons they're having problems over there, their politicians spend too much time worrying about their own jobs, and not enough time worrying about the jobs of their constituents. Maybe I'm oversimplifying it.

Anyway, I got in and there was a big US flag on the wall, and a countdown clock reading the number of days to the election. We didn't get this much for our own election. I know I wasn't working for this company at that time, but I was working in this building during the Didcot Gazette refit after the break in, and it was a far more muted affair.

We covered the results of the first caucuses in Iowa and Wyoming. In Iowa, the first of fifty states to choose who would be their presidential nominations, Hillary Clinton easily won for the Democrats, current vice president Joe Biden was an unexpected second, and a fair way behind in third was Julian Castro, the mayor of San Antonio, Texas. On the other side of the field, the Republican winner was Mitt Romney, with Paul Ryan in second place, and in third was perennial also-ran, Ron Paul.

Nobody was really surprised that Hillary had won for the Democrats, she's really expected to be a shoe-in for them, and nobody seriously expects to beat her. I was personally happy to see Paul Ryan end up not winning for the Republicans, if I was over there, I'd vote for a used condom as president before him. Excuse the expression but it's my diary and I'll express it any way I like :-). Not that you'd see many of those over there if he got in and started throwing his weight around, with his Catholic views and willingness to force them on others. You know how the Republican party is, they're all in favour of small government, because they need it to be small enough that it can fit inside everyone's bedrooms.

Wyoming was next, and for some reason, only the Republicans were being voted on this time. The Democrats are scheduled to do

their Wyoming vote in March. It seems most most odd to do it in that way, but hey, it's an odd system, especially when all this voting is just to decide who gets to be voted on, so all these votes are just a first round. They should just have the party pick someone, save a billion dollars in advertising, and just go vote already, get it out of the way.

Paul Ryan won this second one, and by a considerable margin too. Still, I don't think it really matters. When it comes to it, when the Democrats choose Hillary, as they almost certainly will, she'll butcher any Republican candidate on the basis that Democrats will vote for her, and then many of the Republican women voters will vote for her, just to get a female president in the White House. I can't really see any problem with her being the first female US president this time round.

After this entry, I plan to record as little as possible about the US election in my diary. I just don't care, and this is about me and the things I'm interested in, not a blow by blow daily account of everything that happens to everyone across the world. I'll mention it again when there's something worth mentioning, and not before.

Sunday, January 10th to Saturday, January 16th 2016

Tuesday afternoon.

My article for today. Horrible events, and a quickly thrown together article for the afternoon print run.

Terrorists strike London

London is in shock after a suicide attacker killed himself and up to 400 other people, after a high speed intercity train hijacking.

The hijack happened on a service due to arrive into King's Cross station at 8:15 from the east of England. The report is that the driver was told to radio the control centre and report a hijacking about two minutes before the crash.

While the exact details are unknown, the next thing that happened was that the train reached the station at top speed, hit the buffers at the end of the track, and derailed. The crash caused many deaths on board the train, and many more deaths on the packed platforms, which were filled with rush hour commuters. Once the train derailed, the carriages slipped sideways across the platform areas, leaving the commuters nowhere to run.

The train's engine derailed with such momentum, that it ended up out of the station, and on the Euston Road, causing more fatalities as it hit busy morning traffic.

A statement came almost immediately from a group calling itself al-Qaeda in the West, believed to be the same group that had attacked and destroyed the Seattle Space Needle in America last year. They announced a war on London, and promised a new strike every day at the heart of the capital.

A police statement was released within the last hour, saying that Londoners tomorrow should be aware of their surroundings, but shouldn't change their schedule.

King's Cross station, and the adjacent St. Pancras International station, are both closed for the time being, as is the Euston Road between Euston Square and Caledonian Road, and all connecting roads. Police have asked people to stay away from the area while they continue the search for survivors. The injured have been taken to hospitals throughout the capital, and scheduled operations have been cancelled all across London as the NHS provides treatment to the many injured. Anyone with any information, or who is worried about someone who may have been involved, can find the emergency contact numbers on our website.

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That's it. That's what's been going on today. The worst terrorist attack in London's history, it makes the tube bombings look like a picnic by comparison.

I didn't like the part of the article about "carriages slipping sideways", that's purely speculation. We haven't seen video footage, and only a little bit of aftermath footage from inside the station, but it was one of the key lines I was asked to include. It seems a bit sensationalist to me, but then, maybe it did happen that way, there were a lot of deaths in the station, more than on the train, so that could account for it. I almost feel relieved that it was King's Cross, not Paddington, as Paddington is the station that trains from here go into, so it's unlikely that anyone I know was hurt.

But that isn't the point, is it. We're all British, and we've all been attacked.

Evening

I don't know why it is that we sat and watched the news all night. There's something wrong with sitting and watching reports of people being hurt and killed, but we both did it, and we barely spoke a word all evening. Thankfully, I think Taima is in a better place than she was last year when the Space Needle was attacked. She seems to not be in any imminent danger of a relapse into her disassociated state, but I'll keep an eye on her just in case, and talk to Dr. Smith on Friday.

Wednesday

I don't think anyone expected there to actually be an attack today, we all thought it was just bravado and bluster. Thankfully this one had fewer casualties than yesterday, although probably only because the fear caused by yesterday's attack had kept people off of the streets.

Today the London Eye was attacked. A truck was driven up to one of the big metal supports and exploded against it, another suicide attack. Thankfully, the eye stood, at least for a while. I guess it's made of strong stuff, and designed to hold up to stresses caused by accidents. There were a number of deaths in the queue to board the Eye, but after yesterday's attacks, I guess there were less tourists than usual, which is a small relief. Emergency workers managed to rescue all the passengers from the Eye, before the supports gave way and it collapsed into the Thames.

Estimates from today are that thirty people died, with about a hundred wounded. Compared to yesterday it isn't many, but - how can I say this is a good day, it's a horrible day, but it could have been so much worse. If the wheel had collapsed, it would have killed hundreds more, and if the queues had been bigger, many more would be dead. Sometimes, I guess you have to be thankful for the small mercies in life.

We ordered food in tonight, neither of us wanted to cook. Well, Taima didn't want to, and I shouldn't be allowed to, cos I'm crap at it unless I get really lucky and manage to not kill it.

We spent the night again watching the news. Again, the same group had claimed responsibility, and warned that they would attack again tomorrow. Their website was mocking, claiming that even knowing when they would attack, we were powerless to prevent it.

Thursday

TV reports from London showed it was a ghost town today. Comparatively speaking anyway. Instead of the average 3.8 million tube riders on any given weekday, there were less than a million today. I expect everyone who could was working from home, or just staying away. I can't blame them, but this is just helping the terrorists to win. They can see that with two attacks they've scared three million people into avoiding the capital.

Don't get me wrong, I wouldn't have gone into London today if you'd paid me to, but where's the Blitz spirit? Where's the 'keep calm and carry on' mentality? We had thousands of bombs dropped on London back in the 1940's, and Londoners just picked themselves up and went into work the next day.

There was no attack today, we all waited all day, pretty much holding our breaths, but nothing happened.

It was a much lighter mood this evening at home. I'd gone into town before coming home and bought one of the new remote controlled mice, and CoNN loved it. We played with that with him for most of the night. It was good to relax after the tension of the last

couple of days.

Friday

It didn't last. Maybe the police stopped the attack yesterday, I don't know, but we all thought it was all over, and it was back to business as usual. Everyone went back to work. At about ten past five, when everyone was streaming out of work, a new truck bomb exploded. This one was apparently packed with glass, nails, drill bits, stuff to cause injury. It blew up on Threadneedle Street, outside the Bank of England, just at the time when hundreds of bankers and financiers were leaving their offices after work. Dozens were killed, and many hundreds were injured. This one, while there was a certain amount of cynical talk of 'it's only bankers, we can live without them,' was worse because of the nature of the bomb. It was designed to wound and maim, not to kill. Hundreds of critically injured people were rushed to London hospitals. All non-emergency hospital visits were cancelled across the whole south east of England in order to cope with the casualties. The rumour is that the military will deploy in London tomorrow, even going as far as to set up checkpoints to stop more truck bombs entering the city.

Everyone at work is looking a bit frayed around the edges. We've all done extra hours keeping the articles rolling out, and we've all seen some fairly terrible things and had to report on them.

My weekly visit to Dr. Smith tonight was more intense than usual, and she listened while I told her about the week, the things I'd seen that were considered too shocking for news broadcast, but that the press got to see so we could report on it.

It was a relief to talk about it. I couldn't expose Taima to that kind of information, and I needed to talk to someone. Not for the first time, Dr. Smith was my outlet. I used to think people who visited psychologists were weak and pathetic individuals, but sometimes, you just need someone to talk to that will listen and not judge, and who isn't close enough to you to make you worry about what you should or shouldn't say.

After the events of this week I'd be in a much worse state than I actually am without Dr. Smith's help. As it is, I'm doing OK. Not

great, but OK. Without her assistance over the last 18 months, I expect I'd be behind the sofa yelling at people to leave me alone. Either that or in a nice room decorated with rubber wallpaper.

Taima was worried about her parents, even though they lived in north London, well away from the areas being attacked. Personally I wasn't worried about them at all. After the way they've treated her, and me too come to think of it, I wouldn't lose sleep if they ended up as a statistic. However, I know that Taima still loves them despite their despicable treatment of her last year. And so I did the supportive thing, told her they'd be fine, there was no sign of danger in their area, and all that kind of thing. She just seemed to need to hear someone say it, I guess. Still, she worried enough to call them, only to discover they were in Spain, had been all week, and were in no danger. She yelled at them, I was proud of her, she so rarely stands up to them, but she gave them a good piece of her mind about how they could have called her to let her know they weren't still in London, so she wouldn't have to worry. They even looked apologetic. I was ecstatic to see her finally stand her ground with them.

Of course, not enough to avoid the trip to Saudi Arabia in September, but it's a start. Maybe one year, in the far distant future, they'll accept her opinions as valid and treat her as an adult. One year. Maybe.

Saturday

We sat watching the TV most of the day, waiting to see if we'd get the weekend off from the next attack.

Apparently not.

It was around 2pm when it happened, and it was the most audacious attack yet, although this time, nobody was hurt.

A car had stopped at the roundabout just outside Buckingham Palace, and four men had jumped out, armed with machine guns and an RPG launcher. They'd climbed up to take positions on the statue that faces the front of the palace, and had fired their RPG at the front

of the building.

That was pretty much the only shot they got off. Those guys in the big funny hats who stand guard outside the palace aren't just there for show. They're proper military through and through, and I don't know why the terrorists hadn't worked that out.

We saw it all on the replay from security cameras. It isn't often that the BBC will show people being killed on TV, but I think they decided that the country could do with a victory after the week we've had.

Those guards sprang into action, stupid hats came off, guns up, and within ten seconds, all four of the attackers were dead. Not a single injury to anyone else, just some damage to the front of the palace.

It was a huge boost to morale, everyone on TV was smiling, the Prime Minister made a statement congratulating the work of the soldiers, and even in the middle of a weekend, a time when tourists always crowded around the palace, not a single scratch on anyone except the terrorists.

Those soldiers were made of awesome.

Sunday, January 17th to Saturday, January 23rd 2016

Sunday

Today, the army was called in. For the first time in many years, we had armed soldiers on the streets of an English city. I don't like this, I really don't. One week of attacks and we've rolled back civil society by a hundred years. They've set up checkpoints, they have bomb detection equipment, although the jury's out on how useful those things are, apparently there have been dozens of false positives already and no finds of bombs. We aren't using those stupid fakes that that corrupt businessman sold to Iraq which led to hundreds of deaths, but they still seem to be based more on luck than science.

But saying that, the streets have been quiet, no attacks today. More of the public have decided to brave the city, seeming to gain

confidence with the presence of the troops. Shops are doing a roaring trade, as people who've avoided the city during the attacks make the journey in for the first time in a week. If you ignore the soldiers on every street corner, it all looks normal from the TV pictures.

Monday

Work was fine today until a colleague of mine, Miranda Dobson, who sits a few desks over from me, took a call that completely freaked her out. She literally screamed and ran out of the office.

The manager recalled the call from the phone system, and it was a call from someone claiming to be from the terrorist group, announcing a new attack. Quickly he called the police, and transferred the call log to them. They confirmed it was genuine, the caller had used the recognised code-phrase (I never found out what it was) and was claiming a new attack was due in the next ten minutes. We were all shocked, knowing it was coming, not knowing where or how. It was a terribly long ten minutes, which turned into twenty, before the attack came.

It seems that the roads had checkpoints, but not the river. Security cameras later showed an old clapped out tugboat chugging slowly up the Thames, before it stopped outside the houses of parliament, and blew itself to bits.

Thankfully, again, nobody was killed, and only a few people injured, nobody seriously. Some windows in the river facing side of the Houses of Parliament were blown in, and the injuries all came from broken glass. The boat couldn't get right up to the edge of the building, thanks to a buffer between the river and the wall, so the damage was much less than it could have been. Even so, the fact that they got so close was incomprehensible. The government was in session at the time, and about 200 MPs, including the Prime Minister, were at most a hundred metres away from the blast. It was more of a shock than the attack on Buckingham Palace, that they could get so close, and make such an attack on the government.

Between us, we put together an article to cover the attack. We didn't say in the article that we'd received the call about it, as the last

thing we wanted is for other people to get the idea they could call us and make threats.

Miranda came back after half an hour, and apologised to us all. We pretty much unanimously said she had nothing to apologise for, and the manager gave her the rest of the day off. If it had been me, and seeing the look on her face at the time, I'd have given her the rest of the week.

The police showed up shortly after, and took away the original recording of the call. I'm not sure why, it was a digital recording and we'd already transferred an exact copy to them, so it was nothing they didn't already have, but I guess they're just doing their job. Maybe transferring a call log modifies it to note it's a transfer, or something, I don't know. They seemed to think they needed it though.

I didn't tell Taima that we'd taken the call at work, she doesn't need to know that. She seems fine, but I can't forget how she was last year. I'm not doubly happy that she has to work closer to London than I do, but still, it's a good 45 minutes from the nearest trouble.

Tuesday

There were no attacks today, but London was so quiet you could hear the footsteps of the TV crews we were watching. I've never seen anything like it. The Tube reported less than half a million users today, which is unheard of, even at the quietest times.

Reports came in later, that the website of al-Qaeda in the West had been updated to make a new announcement, that their work in London was done, but they were going to expand to other cities in England, starting tomorrow. I have to admit it was a scary moment. When we all knew we were safe by avoiding London, we'd felt safe, and now suddenly we didn't.

Taima and I had a bit of a 'discussion' about it this evening. I suggested she should stay home instead of going to Reading tomorrow. She told me in no uncertain terms that I was an idiot, and she wasn't going to let her pupils see terrorists win by keeping her home for a single minute. And of course, she then suggested I should stay home to which I pointed out that that was ludicrous, it's my job

to report on these things. She nodded and said 'Exactly, so don't go telling me to stay home.'

So it wasn't really an argument, more a suggestion that she shot down.

Wednesday

Today, it was over. News came in first thing of a raid in Luton, with armed police capturing half a dozen members of al-Qaeda in the West. Nobody knows how they were tracked down, and I expect that nobody will be saying, but we got them.

London's 'Week of Terror' over

Armed police, acting on an intelligence lead, today stormed a four bedroom house on the outskirts of Luton, where six alleged members of al-Qaeda in the West were preparing to conduct more attacks against the country.

Police caught the suspected terrorists while they slept, and all six were captured alive, and have been taken to separate locations around the capital.

While the identity of the suspects isn't known, police have confirmed that all are from North African or Arabian Peninsula countries, and none were born in the UK. All were male and between the ages of 19 and 40.

Guns and bomb making equipment were found at their address, and a vehicle, believed to contain a viable explosive device, was removed by police in the early hours after the area had been evacuated.

Police have sealed off the surrounding streets while they ensure the area is safe, and no further explosive devices are present. It is expected to be a number of days before local residents are allowed to return home.

Suicide videos were found at the premises for all six of the detained men, and a number of others, believed to be the people behind the attacks in London over the last seven days. The exact content of the videos has not been revealed by the police.

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I have to say it's a relief, I know it's so utterly unlikely that I, or anyone I know, would be caught up in an attack, but you never can be sure. Someone, somewhere, will be the victim, and it's as much chance of being me as anyone else. I don't think I'll carry that thought on to its conclusion.

Rest of the week

The army stayed on the streets for another two days, keeping order, keeping public confidence steady, and making sure Londoners knew they were safe. No further attacks happened, and London quickly returned almost to normal.

Not completely though. The London eye was still face down in the Thames, and repairing the damage to King's Cross station is likely to take months. Whilst Londoners, in avoiding the city during the crisis, failed to quite show the blitz spirit they're famous for, in returning so quickly, they've shown a resilience that makes me proud to be British.

Sunday, January 24th to Saturday, January 30th 2016

Everyone seemed to be taking a breath, just taking stock of their lives and regrouping this week. In total, the attacks had claimed the lives of 487 people, and a further 612 injured. There were funerals every day on TV, and many people all across the country were wearing black armbands. It became a standard for the TV presenters and news reporters to be wearing them, in the same way as the poppy in November.

But while England mourned, the rest of the world moved on. They sympathised with our pain, with messages of solidarity coming in from across the world, but they didn't share it, and so life went on around us.

The first thing to break the news cycle was the launch of the ESA's *ExoMars* mission, the first of two launches to Mars designed to try and detect if life had ever existed on the red planet.

ExoMars on the way to the red planet

This morning, Stage One of the European Space Agency's *ExoMars* mission launched into space on the back of a Proton-M rocket, launched from the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan.

ExoMars is a project designed to determine if life ever has, or possibly still does, exist on Mars.

The *ExoMars* lander will touch down on Mars in November, and will prepare instruments in advance for the second stage of the *ExoMars* project in two years time, enabling detailed local weather analysis and other atmospheric readings.

The second stage of *ExoMars* will land in June 2019, and will deposit a rover onto the surface. The rover will have a new drilling tool, which will begin to bore into the Martian surface. Once it reaches a depth of two metres, it will begin to analyse samples from the bottom of the shaft.

Scientists are hoping that new discoveries may be made at this depth, as anything above a depth of two metres is likely to have been irradiated over time by the Sun's radiation, from which the surface of Mars has little protection. At the target depth, however, it is believed that the surface will have absorbed enough radiation to allow life to possibly survive, or at the least, for chemical traces to be found that could indicate whether life once existed.

The radiation on Mars is caused by the lack of a magnetosphere,

which protects the Earth from harmful Solar radiation. Around four billion years ago, the core of Mars began to cool and solidify, leading to the failure of the magnetosphere, and the stripping away of large portions of the Martian atmosphere.

Due to the radiation and the low pressure atmosphere, if any life is found on Mars, it is much more likely to be very simple microscopic organisms, rather than the type of life we would be able to talk to.

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On Saturday we got evidence that despite everything, the bureaucracy carries on. Heavy equipment started to show up at the site of the Didcot-A power station, to begin the first stages of construction for the new geothermal plant on the site. I went to have a look, see if there was anything I could make a story out of, but it was mainly just people driving up in diggers and bulldozers, and lots of men carrying around sheets of paper, looking at them and pointing at things. Some of them were doing level sighting, but that was as exciting as it got. I got bored after about ten minutes and went home.

Sunday, January 31st to Saturday, February 6th 2016

As the UK started to get back to normal, a pair of important international environmental projects made the news. On Tuesday, the first residents started to move into Masdar City, in Abu Dhabi. Masdar City is touted as the first completely carbon neutral city. No cars are allowed, all transport is via mass transit, and the whole city was designed from the ground up to be environmentally friendly. Power is provided by wind and solar energy, and all houses will have solar cells fitted to their roofs, and a wind farm lies just beyond the town boundaries.

I suspect it'll take a while for them to sort out their systems and become really carbon neutral, I mean, a whole city with zero environmental impact is hard to imagine, but good on them if they can do it. We need more projects like this.

Wednesday's news was that construction had begun on a massive solar farm in the Sahara Desert. A company called Desertec is building it. It isn't using solar cells, which will reduce the environmental impact of the construction, as solar panels are notoriously bad for the environment to actually build them. Instead it's using mirrors. Thousands of mirrors will angle the Sun's energy towards a number of central towers, the heat from which will be used to generate electricity. The plant is being built in Algeria, and should be big enough to power a large city. Desertec's plans on a longer term are to build enough solar power plants in the Sahara so that North Africa can become power self sufficient and begin to export electricity to Europe. This will not only aid in Europe's ever growing power problems, but will give an important new source of revenue for African countries, vital if that continent is ever to lift itself out of poverty.

We had to take CoNN to the vet on Friday, as he's been throwing up a lot, even more than cats usually do. The vet said he seemed to be fine, and asked what food he'd been eating, and if we'd changed anything in his diet. We told him, and he said it was likely to be the dried food we were giving him. It was sold as 'Turkey and Chicken with Vegetables', and the vegetables bit is what made him suspect it. As cats can't digest vegetables, some of the food that manufacturers sell can upset the stomachs of some cats. It seems that CoNN is one of them. We've switched him to a different brand, so let's hope he feels better now.

Saturday, we both went into town and opened a new joint bank account, and symbolically put a pound each in to open it. We're going to use it for saving money in to pay for the wedding. Once we'd done the symbolic thing, we went home and transferred the remaining £4,000 from my big bonus last year (yeah we spent some of it, it was bound to happen). The plan is to try and get twenty thousand in there, which according to Taima (who's bought a wedding magazine every month for the last few months), is about the right amount to save. I have no idea what we could possibly spend so much on, I really don't. Surely we could do it for about three or four thousand, tops, but there's no way on Earth I'm going to suggest that. Can you imagine

the death and pain I would suffer if I suggest her idea of a wedding is too expensive? Wow, I'd rather buff my testicles with a cheese grater I really would.

That pretty much rules out the wedding this year, which makes me a bit sad. But they do say anything worth it is worth waiting for. I just know we can't save that much in a year. I doubt we can save it in three years to be quite honest, unless I manage to topple a couple more governments and get some more bonuses. I can't see that happening though. I expect that last year is the one and only topple I'll manage.

You never know, though. I'll keep my eye open, maybe I'll get another one some day.

Sunday, February 7th to Saturday, February 13th 2016

I actually didn't get out of bed at all on Monday, the first day of my week off. Taima told me off for it when she got home from work, but I'm almost sure she was amused. I just napped and read all day. That's the nice thing about the electronic age, you don't have to get up to get a new book or to check the news, you can do it all from in bed.

OK, I got up a couple of times, to do the necessary biological functions, and to feed CoNN, but apart from that, I was horizontal all day.

Tuesday I got up though, as Taima had told me that I had to clean the house if I was just going to lounge around all day. Most unfair. I'm almost tempted, now we have a decent amount of spare income, to get a cleaner, so I never have to do cleaning, but each time I think of spending money, I think it could be money put into the wedding account, and so I got up and did the cleaning.

I did have a break for a while though, as I watched on TV as they started to remove the wreckage of the London Eye. I would've liked to have seen them raise it back up and restart it, so the terrorists had

one less victory to celebrate, but apparently it wouldn't be possible with the damage it'd suffered.

The rest of the week, I did as little as possible. I think CoNN has started to avoid me. He never was an especially fussy cat, but now I think I've paid him way too much attention this week, and he's hiding from me so I'll leave him alone for a bit.

Sunday, February 14th to Saturday, February 20th 2016

Back to work this week, and the news was slow slow slow. I did a lot of coverage on the US election due to lack of any exciting local news. Paul Ryan seems to be ahead on the Republican side, which is bad. Hillary is so far ahead on the Democrat's side, that half the competition has dropped out already, and it's only a month into a six month race. Literally the field has gone from eight to four candidates already. The Republican side has gone from ten to seven, so still plenty of scope to have someone overtake Ryan. Still, I don't really care too much, whoever wins will never beat Hillary, and so they can do whatever they want.

Tuesday I started to come down with what I suspected was a cold, and Wednesday I was in bed with the flu. I defended myself vigorously against accusations of manflu, this was a real flu, I could have died from it. And did I get any sympathy? No, not one jot. I didn't even get a cup of tea in bed, I had to go make my own.

The neglect continued all week, and I was forced to do all kinds of things for myself that no sick man should ever have to do. I'll remember this the next time Taima is sick, she'll have to make her own lunch and all the other stuff I had to do.

On Friday the news was full of an attack by the 'Anonymous' hacking group. They'd managed, somehow, to break in to the computer systems of the Chinese aircraft carrier, the *Liaoning*, and disable its engines. The *Liaoning* was adrift for some time in the

Pacific Ocean, about a hundred kilometres from the Chinese coast, before tugs arrived to tow it back to port after attempts to restart the engines had failed.

I expect that right now, the Americans are desperately trying to find out who did it, so they can offer the guy a whole shedload of money to tell them how he did it, so they can do it too. I can imagine the Chinese are massively embarrassed, their pride and joy reduced to useless floating metal, probably by a 17 year old kid still living at home doing it for shits and giggles. Now if that kid could also do the same to the American carriers, that would be even more hilarious.

Sunday, February 21st to Saturday, February 27th 2016

And on the subject of carriers, my latest article, from Wednesday this week.

Americans show off newest defence

The US Navy today invited the press to see its demonstration of the new point defence systems on their new supercarrier, the USS *Gerald R Ford*.

Point defence is a system designed, as its name suggests, to defend a point, in this case, the carrier. The new weapon they were showing off was the ability to shoot down incoming missiles that threaten the ship with a high energy laser.

Up until now, point defence has consisted mostly of the CIWS (pronounced sea-whiz) system, which uses bullets to try and shoot down incoming missiles. While effective, the new laser point defence is faster, and able to destroy an incoming missile at greater ranges.

The demonstration began by watching the lasers destroy a floating buoy. Unlike in films, you can't see a laser, it is invisible to the unaided eye, and so it seemed that the buoy simply caught fire for no reason.

The second demonstration involved a US destroyer the *USS Porter*, stationed a few kilometres out to sea, firing missiles at the carrier. The destroyer fired half a dozen missiles in quick succession to simulate an actual attack, although the missiles were blanks, and had no explosives in their warheads.

Before the missiles had reached half way, they had all been destroyed by the lasers, and the demonstration was over.

With these new systems on board the new generation of US aircraft carriers, it seems to negate the Chinese threat of the ‘carrier killer’ missile that they have been testing for the last few years, and tips the balance of Naval power back towards the Americans.

The US Navy was unwilling to discuss the effect that rain or fog may have on its new defences. Traditionally, fog especially would render a laser useless, scattering the beam over a wide area and leaving it unable to affect an incoming projectile.

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Of course, I wasn’t there to see the demo, I wrote the article from a video report from the US Navy that was released shortly after the event. We’re a small paper still, and we don’t send reporters around the world, no matter how nicely I ask them to send me to see rocket launches. I’m sure I could do a better report on them if I’d ever actually seen one first hand!

Friday was a demo I was able to go to though. After their publicity last year, Reaction Engines had received a new round of funding, and had finally been able to complete their full sized test and demonstration unit of the Sabre Engine. They’ve taken an innovative new idea for funding. Instead of selling shares in the company, which is the traditional way to raise new funds, they’re selling shares of future launches. Someone that wants to invest in the Sabre Engine could do so by, for example, buying the rights to the entire payload of the twelfth launch, or just 10kg of it, or however much they want to invest. This is a clever way of raising capital without losing control of

the company, which would obviously happen when a small company tries to raise seven billion pounds based on a couple of million in equity.

If you aren't a financier, just trust me, it's a good idea.

I went down to their unit in the Culham Science Centre, the first time I'd been there in almost two years, and was impressed at the change. They'd taken over an adjacent unit, and seemed to have more staff working on things. Alan Bond was pleased to see me, although he has no idea whatsoever that I was responsible for last year's revelation, he knows that I've been supportive of the project. He didn't look well, to be quite honest, he looked to be about ten years older than when I last met him. I don't know if it's the stress of suddenly having too much work to do now he has some funding, or the previous stress of not being able to get the funding. Either way, he didn't look good.

I didn't say anything, of course. I'm sure he has a mirror, and I'm sure he knows how he feels, and I don't know him *that* well, so I just kept my mouth shut.

The demonstration was the first test-firing of the Sabre Engine on the ground. Previous iterations of the project had a test-fire of just the air-breathing section, testing to see whether the key element, the heat exchanger, worked as planned. This was the first firing of the complete engine. Of course, it would be done on the ground, bolted to the concrete floor, instead of on a plane.

Again, only the air-breathing section would be tested, the goal being to ensure that the engine works as expected when it has the components for the space engine also in the mix. The previous atmospheric only engine could have been compromised by the design decisions needed to allow it to convert to a rocket engine at high altitude, and so this needed to be tested.

I was surprised how big it was, I was expecting to see a much smaller engine. It was bigger than the engine of a 747 plane, and those things are huge.

I was told that actually this demo engine was much larger than full sized version. It had been built to be able to easily access parts of the engine for tuning and modification. It would be a poor test engine, I

was told, if they had to spend a week taking it apart just to change a single screw in the middle of the system.

I hadn't thought of that.

We were all ushered into the control room, and they started their countdown to firing. Nothing fancy, they just started at ten, and a computer spoke the numbers down to zero. Only the company directors, and us from the press, were looking out of the window, everyone else was watching their screens to monitor the performance.

The engine fired to life, and emitted a huge high pitched whine. Almost immediately, a jet of blue and orange flame shot from the back of the engine, and the windows in the control room shook a bit in their frames. After about six or seven seconds, there was a warning beep from behind us from one of the monitor stations, and the engine shut itself off.

It turns out that one of the segments had overheated, but we were told that this wasn't unexpected. The first test-firing is never the first success, and it would take months or more of modifications to fine-tune everything to be perfect.

Even though it wasn't a perfect test, the mood was good in the control room. People were clapping and the general atmosphere was one of success. I clapped along with them, but I'd been hoping for more success and less flashy warning beeps, I have to admit. I wasn't expecting them to say 'right, that's it, space suits on everyone, we're off to space right now,' but I guess somewhere in between would have been nice.

The development, they said, will take a lot longer. After the complete success with the air breathing stage, they then have to successfully run the rocket mode, which is apparently much easier. Then they have to be able to switch modes while losing as little thrust as possible when switching, and once they've done that, they have to do it all over again in the final engine configuration which is an enclosed system with four Sabre engine cores in each engine.

Only after that's all successful can they even begin to consider test flights.

Of course, to do a test flight they need to have a plane to test it on,

and Skylon isn't even off of the drawing board yet. It's going to be a long time till this gets into space, I think. And the US Air Force is already doing test flights with their scramjet engine.

Although, I guess that the Americans are still just testing the air-breathing side of things. The common belief is that they're planning to perfect that for use in long range missile technology before they even think of space operations, and so I wonder if we aren't closer behind than it looks. Not to mention the fact that the US scramjet can't seem to fly in a straight line for more than about three minutes before it dies a death. So just maybe there was a good reason for the Americans to worry about us beating them.

That would be nice.

Sunday, February 28th to Saturday, March 5th 2016

Monday, we got a call in the office that someone had crashed one of those stupid drone copters into a car on the road coming into Oxford. My editor tapped me on the shoulder and told me to go out there and get the story.

I have to admit, I froze. I had a bit of a panic attack. Last time I reported on a car crash I ended up needing therapy and still get nightmares about it sometimes, despite 18 months of seeing Dr. Smith. I knew I had to do it, you can't hide from your fears, especially if you want to be a reporter.

I put it aside, I didn't really have any choice. I forced myself to get out of my chair, and Carl, one of the photographers, drove us down to the area to investigate. I do need to pass my driving test one day, I really do.

We got there in just a few minutes, it wasn't too far away and Oxford isn't that big a place. I can't describe how relieved I was that nobody had been hurt. There were no arms lying around dismembered this time, just a shaken up woman, and a quad-copter buried in her windscreen.

Drone causes traffic accident in Oxford