

CHRONICLE



2017

Andrew Woodmaker

**Lives have been shattered
and the world is in turmoil.**

In this fourth year's worth of entries from a diary stored on a futuristic recording device found after a house fire, Andrew Woodmaker begins a journey of personal recovery.

In 2017, suspicion grips the world, accusations fly, and tensions rise, as the investigation into the Mecca attack begins.

Andrew Woodmaker must adapt to his new life, and come to terms with his losses, but the world continues around him. In America, the new government begins to reshape the country, and an unexpected adversary declares war.

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.

CHRONICLE 2017

by

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Edited from recording device by

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Dedicated to Kirsty

She's a bar of chocolate who makes me smile.

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.

Sunday, January 1st to Saturday, January 7th 2017

Spending the new year in hospital isn't what I had in mind, but, new year, new me, I guess. Time to try and think positive.

OK, scrap that. I'm fed up, I'm in hospital, I look like a monster, I only have one eye, and my fiancée is a pile of ash six thousand kilometres away. Being new me and all positive is probably a bit naive to even try, so let's instead try and do the best with the hand I've been dealt.

That I can do.

New Year's Day was a bit blah, though. I stayed awake and watched the fireworks in London on TV, but it wasn't the same as going and seeing them. I looked out the window, but didn't see much firework action. My ward overlooks an exciting car park, and then other bits of the hospital. There are some houses out beyond that that I can't see, but I know from looking at an online map that they're there, and there were a few fireworks from them, but just the cheap and cheerful kind. Nobody has any money to spend on fireworks right now.

I spent the early morning trying to think up a New Year's resolution that was better than 'get out of here'. I gave up in the end and watched people celebrating around the world in different cities, up till 11am when the dateline hit New Year's, and the celebrations were all used up.

That's one nice thing about being here, I can lie back and watch some films, or some TV, and not have to worry about running out of time and having to get back to work. I can do the odd article for my job, but I don't have to. I just have to relax and get better.

Monday morning at 5am, there was a bit of a disturbance in the ward which woke me up. I wasn't best pleased, but it happens sometimes. When you have eight people in various states of medical desperation in one room, there'll always be something going on.

This was different though, the police were there, and the curtains on the bed next to mine were drawn, so I couldn't see what was going

on. There was a fair bit of moaning and a fair bit of the police saying 'stay down.' I was wondering if the doctors had medicated me in my sleep, and I was imagining being in the middle of an episode of some cop show on TV. The happy pills they give out have some strange effects sometimes.

It took a while for everything to settle down again. After the guy had been sedated, it all went quiet again. I shut my eyes expecting it to all be over when I woke up, if I even remembered it at all.

However, not so much. In the morning, the police were still there, real police, not hallucinations. Looking at the next bed was a bit problematic from my position as it was to the left. The nurses had helpfully put me at the end of the ward next to the window, with my remaining eye on the window side, so I had to sit up a bit and look over.

The patient was handcuffed to the bed by both arms, which was a bit of a shock. It took me a moment to think it through, but it was really quite obvious that prisoners have to go to hospital sometimes too.

I got a double-take from the policeman who was sitting beside the bed. There were two of them, I guess in case one had to go to the loo, or fell asleep or something, so that the prisoner was always watched. I was used to the double-take, as people just see I'm there, and then file me away as 'someone in the area', before their brain tells them to look again because something isn't quiet right. Give him his credit, the guy didn't stare, as some have. I guess the police see people in various states of injury, or indeed decomposition, on a regular basis.

I may look bad, but I'm still capable of holding a conversation, so I said hi, and asked what was going on. He told me that the prisoner had tried to kill himself last night. He'd murdered his wife on New Year's Day last year, and they thought it was some kind of anniversary of the crime suicide attempt.

I don't have much time for men who hurt women, least of all who hurt their wives, people who should be able to trust them most of all. I found myself with little pity for the injured man in the bed. I didn't even bother asking his name, I didn't feel it was worth personifying him beyond the fact of him being a really bad piece of work.

I talked to the police on and off for the rest of the week, though.

They seemed glad for some conversation that wasn't the prisoner abusing them verbally. They were surprised I was one of the survivors of the bomb, they hadn't heard there were any in this area. Some of them have been on TV, getting slots on talk shows and meeting celebrities, and they asked if I was planning on doing that kind of thing when I got out of hospital.

I told them I wasn't, I was just here to get better, and I wasn't really interested in being in front of the cameras. As a reporter, my job should be telling the news, not being the news. They seemed to understand. If anyone would, the police would. They do a thankless job, and the only time they seem to get recognition is when they make a mistake, never mind the millions of people they help each year.

The news later in the week was a bit close to home, and made me feel a bit ill. There were fires in the Australian bush, in the north of the country. There were some shots from the TV crews that I didn't need to see, people with burns being rushed to hospital, and I could feel their pain, I really could. I could feel their burns right to the bone.

It was horrible, but partially my own fault for watching the news on my pad instead of on TV. I get the news from around the world, which is often from channels much less filtered than the BBC, and they show some horrific stuff. I know the BBC is safe, and I can watch it and never see anything too unpleasant, but after months of BBC news I'd started to get itchy feet. I'd needed to see some different presenters, see a different style, or I'd have gone completely hatstand by now.

The fires down under were completely out of control, and some towns had had to be completely evacuated. It's quite spectacular how big that country is, and how big the fires are. They were talking about something like a million hectares being affected, and I had no idea how big that was, but when I discovered that Wales is around two million hectares, it gave me a good comparison. That's a lot of land. Not much in the grand scheme of Australia, but half the size of Wales on fire is a scary thing to think about. The bomb's blast area, I was told, was about 43,000 hectares, so tiny by comparison.

I watched on the news as they dumped water onto the fires from helicopters, and there were drones out mapping the fire, so the fire service could devise strategies, and locate people who were in the

path of danger. The Australians have a lot of experience at this kind of thing, they have a lot of fires over there, but this was becoming a big one, even for them.

Sunday, January 8th to Saturday, January 14th 2017

I was given some awesome news on Sunday, when the doctors said I'd be able to leave the hospital in a month or so. I was elated. Home at last. I could make my own food, see CoNN, and sleep in my own bed. I couldn't wait, a month was too far away.

I watched the news reports with a bit more optimism, and even a half smile on my face (to be fair a half smile is still all I can manage with just half a set of lips). The reports from Australia of the fires being more contained was just good news getting better.

It didn't last, good news has a way of being forgotten the next time a crisis pops up.

I get the news feed alerts on my pad for work, and they show the news way before anyone else gets it. The BBC gets a lot of their news from the feeds, and it can be several minutes before the stories reach the presenters, and so when they cut in with a newsflash, I already knew what was going on.

A group of people had driven into the Pakistani capital Islamabad in a bunch of pickup trucks, maybe five trucks, and were driving through the streets firing machine guns and mortars at anyone in their way. People in the city were scattering, and the reports were saying that the attackers were heading right towards the Parliament House building on the east side of the city. By the time they got there though, they didn't stand a chance. Several units of the army were waiting for them, and they were dispatched without much delay.

It seemed like a victory for the good guys, the terrorists hadn't managed to do any damage to the Pakistani parliament, very few people had been killed by the shootings and explosions, and all of the terrorists were dead. News channels quickly started to get bored of the whole situation, and went back to covering the fires in Australia.

That was the good news.

The next day, Friday, I woke up and checked my pad, and in my half awake haze I thought they were reporting old news, as the Islamabad attack was back on the front pages. I woke up quickly enough though when I worked out they were bringing in new news. The previous day's attack had been more than it seemed.

Even before I was fully awake, I was putting together an article, I had to go through it a couple of times to fix my half-asleep mistakes, but it was so early in the morning, I knew nobody at work would be covering this yet, and so it was something useful I could do to help out.

Dirty Bomb attack in Islamabad

Yesterday, a group associated with the Pakistani Taliban attacked the country's capital, Islamabad, in the middle of the day. Analysts yesterday had considered the attack to be badly planned, and a failure. By driving into the city from the west side, driving through the middle of the whole city before reaching the parliament building on the other side, they gave defence forces time to prepare, and were outmatched when they arrived, seemingly failing to attack their main target for a chance to randomly shoot at houses and throw mortar bombs.

Unfortunately, with the new day in Islamabad, the true nature of the attacks became clear, as investigations got under way.

The group had deliberately driven through the centre of the city to enable them to fire as many mortar shells as possible, as each were laced with caesium 137, a radioactive element that they had obtained through unknown means.

Up to a hundred dirty shells had been detonated across the capital, and while the effect of a dirty bomb isn't likely to cause many deaths beyond the initial explosion, and people unlucky enough to inhale radioactive contaminants in the minutes after the explosion, panic is already spreading across the city, as residents pack their belongings and evacuate along the main roads towards neighbouring towns.

Local authorities have appealed for calm, assuring residents they are in no danger, and a clean up operation has already begun, but the spectre of radiation brings with it a certain level of fear that the assurances of the government can do little to assuage.

Offers from the UK, US, and other governments have been made to send specialist teams to assist in the clean up, but so far, the Pakistani government has rejected these offers, stating they have the situation under control.

Coming on the day of the memorial for victims of last year's 'Week of Terror' in London, calls for international solidarity against terrorism are louder than ever. But with every country having a different idea on how to tackle the problem, it seems a solution may be a long time in coming.

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It made me feel weird to write that one. One of the causes of my radiation burns was apparently caesium 137, and to talk about other people suffering from it was hard to do. Thankfully I expect that the effects of this will be negligible, but the psychological damage of having a bomb that contains radiation thrown at you is pretty severe. Trust me, I know.

So far this year the news has all been close to the bone for me. Fires and burnings, radiation, I'm not sure I want to know what's coming next. A reality show for people who're nuclear survivors maybe? Makes me shudder to think about it.

Later, the Pakistani government had announced that they expected the clean up to take a few weeks, and had called in the military to remove all of the contamination. They'd promised local people that they're in no danger, but people were still fleeing the city. There was one telling interview with a guy on the road who talked to local reporters, who was asked why he was leaving when he'd been told it was safe.

'If it's so safe,' he said, 'why are the army who're cleaning it up

all wearing protective clothing?’

Good question.

Personally I think that it’s because there’s a big difference between living close to a radiation source for a few days, and going round looking for it, picking it up, maybe breathing it in, so I can see why they’d need more protection than people just living there.

This morning, Saturday, the police guarding the prisoner in the next bed all left. I won’t go into detail as to exactly why, but let’s just say that the guy who’d tried to kill himself, finished the job when he was unhandcuffed to go to the loo, and had both hands free to do some damage to himself. It was horrible. He did a lot of screaming before they rushed him away to surgery. Even the police looked shocked. After it was all done, one of them just sat there looking all white. I guess even they can have their limits, trained as they are, and like me a couple of years ago, they can sometimes see something that catches them off guard.

I got the guy a glass of water from the tap on the ward, as the nurses were all busy doing clean up. He was definitely shaken up, he said he’d never seen anything like it. Nor had I, but I was going through my detachment routine in my head to stop myself freaking out too. I do wonder sometimes if I do myself more harm than good with that kind of thing, not letting it get to me. It must all build up somewhere in my brain. I’ll probably turn into a psycho killer later in life.

His colleague led him away after a while. I guess that the prisoner died, or was at least moved to a different ward, as I didn’t see any of them again.

Sunday, January 15th to Saturday, January 21st 2017

Thankfully this week has been quiet in terms of new horrible news. Nothing nasty has happened all week, nobody died on the ward, just normal stuff. I was starting to wonder just what was going on, I

really was!

The fires in Australia were finally being brought under control. The final area destroyed was about three quarters the size of Wales. There were only a handful of deaths, but a lot of people injured, mostly from ignoring evacuation warnings, or firemen rescuing people who ignored evacuation warnings. That makes me angry, firemen being injured helping people who refused to help themselves. Let the buggers burn and don't risk the lives of good people. OK maybe I don't believe in being quite so callous, but it's so out of order to put firemen in danger when you could avoid it.

The rout from Islamabad has subsided. About 300,000 people have left the city, leaving just under a million left there. That's a sizeable chunk of population relocated. They seem to have been absorbed by the communities they've evacuated to, mostly by friends and relatives, but probably also hotels and hostels I expect.

On Wednesday, we got our first new science of the year.

Higgs Boson mass confirmed

The Large Hadron Collider, which has been running for a year at peak power, has finally confirmed the existence and properties of the Higgs boson.

Since the results in 2012 from the LHC that showed two possible masses for the Higgs, there has been a lot of speculation as to whether this was in fact two different Higgs particles, as predicted by the supersymmetry model of physics, or if there was simply an error in the ATLAS experiment that produced the variant results.

Final evidence, gained from almost a year's worth of data, has shown that the upgraded ATLAS experiment now reports results consistent with the other two experiments, which means the result fits in with the standard model of physics.

This means that the Higgs Boson can be finally confirmed to be 126.0GeV, and is a particle with no spin or charge.

The LHC has come under a lot of criticism over the years by people who believed the experiments were too dangerous, after internet rumours falsely stated that the machine could form black holes which could destroy the Earth.

The £8 billion price tag of the LHC has also been criticised, with many wondering how we can afford to spend so much money in Europe with massive austerity programs being introduced.

The answer to this lies in future benefits from the science being discovered. While at this moment there is no known use of identifying the Higgs Boson, the same has been said about many scientific discoveries, such as the electron and the photon, which have gone on to be major parts of everyday life in the form of electricity and radio.

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Friday I was determined to not watch TV, knowing it would all be about the US inauguration, and I didn't want to see the beginning of the collapse into barbarism for the USA, but I know what my job is, and so I swallowed the bile and watched.

The inaugural speech sounded almost OK, until you read between the lines of 'equality for everyone' which I expect means 'we won't help anyone who needs it', and 'respect for traditions' which I wouldn't be surprised means he wants to stop women voting and put black people back onto plantations.

Maybe I'm wrong, but I have a really bad feeling about this. I hope I'm wrong. I don't really know any Americans, except a few who were at uni and they seemed nice enough. It's just concerning on a national level though, the UK and US have been mostly on the same side for a long time, and it's never good to see friends have bad things happen to them.

Sunday, January 22nd to Saturday, January 28th 2017

Oil and gas are starting to become a real issue. On Monday, the

government ordered the shutdown of a number of gas and oil power stations, to ease the demand, which will hopefully cut the market prices. They've urged the public to avoid unnecessary power use, and have asked people to turn off equipment when they aren't using it, switch off lights when they aren't in the room, that kind of thing.

They've also fast-tracked the authorisation to build new nuclear power stations around the country. The stations have been through the process of design verification, and had been stuck for some years in public consultation hell, and seemed to be getting nowhere. Today though, the government declared it to be in the national interest, and cancelled the public consultation. I can imagine the protests are starting already, but this is what happens when we over-rely on oil from nations that were never our best friends to begin with. It won't make a blind bit of difference for about six or seven years though, so, yeah, a bit late to be planning ahead.

Tuesday started as a good day and ended up made of rubbish. I watched the early morning launch of the *SOLO* probe, which is designed to fly really close to the Sun, and measure things like the solar wind and magnetic field. The launch went well, but I didn't see the end of it as I managed to lose breakfast, and started feeling all light headed. Turns out I'd developed an infection, and the damned doctors said I wouldn't be leaving next week any more after all.

I suspect they love my company so much that they arranged this.

Grrr. Bad doctors.

I was in a fair bit of discomfort for the rest of the week. Food wouldn't stay down, so they put me back on a stupid feeding tube up my nose, which I hate. I can still walk around, and at least my leg seems, while not better, it can support my weight now, and I can walk at almost full speed. I just have to walk around with a mobile stand which holds the other end of the tube going up my nose.

My burns are looking to be as healed as they'll ever get. Still no hair growth on the left side of my head, and my skin is pretty much all scar tissue, despite the grafts and other fun surgery they did. I think I could still go home, but they're saying no.

I'm so so so bored in here.

Friday the news was full of Pakistan again. The Pakistani president had announced that they were mounting a military operation to wipe out the Taliban in Pakistan once and for all.

I can imagine their ISI allies aren't happy. While there's never been proof, it's widely believed that the ISI, the Pakistani intelligence service, backs the Taliban. I expect that a dirty bomb attack was the last straw for the government putting up with them. The only question is, can they actually do anything about it? That's the problem with dealing with terrorists, they look just like civilians, and they don't stand still and shoot back, they hide and come back later.

Sunday, January 29th to Saturday, February 4th 2017

Sunday answered the ISI question, as the Pakistani government had all top members of their intelligence service arrested. I have no idea what the repercussions from that will be, it's like the Prime Minister arresting everyone in MI5 or MI6, although in this case with plenty of just cause. But still, it's risky to do it.

They took my feeding tube back out that afternoon, which cheered me up no end. I immediately demolished breakfast and had a nap, now that I wasn't hooked up to any machines. I'm still on antibiotics for the infection, but that's the only thing they're giving me now.

After my nap, I watched SpaceX launch their first manned mission into space. Since 2012, they've been the main supplier of US transporter rockets to the space station, but this launch means the Americans can now send astronauts up there again, without having to cede a ride with the Russians. This will be a nice boost to American pride, as they've been a bit embarrassed about not having their own low Earth orbit capability since they disbanded the shuttle fleet. SpaceX also managed to do the launch at a lower cost than NASA was doing it for, although they're using basic lowest cost highest profit technology, whereas NASA always was trying to develop new technologies all the time, so was always going to be more expensive.

The launch went well, and on Tuesday they docked with the ISS. It always makes me laugh how not like sci-fi real space travel is. It takes them about two hours to go the final couple of hundred metres towards the space station, just crawling their way closer, instead of the quick fly up, dock, done in 15 seconds you see on TV. It's quite quite dull, but it was also the most interesting thing going on at 4am on Tuesday morning, so I watched it on my pad, and didn't complain.

Friday saw the final demise of the music and film shop, HMV. It's always a shame when old British institutions die, but they didn't move with the times, and nowadays most music and films are bought online, and so they'd been losing market share for years. They almost collapsed back in 2013, but they were bought out. Weak Christmas sales seem to have finished the job though, and they'd finally had enough and closed their doors for good.

I had another visit at the weekend from Simon and Gerald. I think, knowing what to expect, they were a bit more comfortable around me this time. We talked about pretty much everything, from the bomb to the cat. They've been keeping an eye on the house, and are sure it's still there. I expect they'd have noticed cos if my house was stolen, they'd get wet next time it rained. They complained a bit about the snow, and I laughed cos I hadn't even known it'd snowed. I may be next to the window, but unless I get up and look out, all I see is sky, and so I've tended to not take much notice unless there's been a thunderstorm, and I've only seen one of those since I came in here. Five damned months ago.

Still, five months in hospital after getting nuked isn't too bad. A hundred years ago, I'd have been in for a year or more :-)

Gerald has said he may be able to help me with my eye, as he works in insurance, and has a fair bit of experience in fighting the NHS system. He said he'd check up and see if he could find out which paperwork to fill in to increase my chances of getting the NHS to approve an electronic eye.

I had no idea he could do that, and was extremely grateful. Simon, who's a therapist himself, asked me about what Dr. Smith had been

doing with my regular sessions and so I went over it, telling him she was still coming in twice a week, and she said I was doing well, all things considered. Simon seemed to think that Dr. Smith seemed to be doing the right things, but he made the point of not trying to second guess her. As long as I felt it was going well, that was a good indication it probably was.

I hadn't really noticed, but after they mentioned the snow, I looked around, almost everyone else on the ward was elderly, and I started to wonder if they were all in here because of the cold. It's a disgrace that we still haven't solved the problems for winter heating bills, and how bad must it be for them now, with fuel costs being double what they were last year, and no help in sight from the government. I boggle that they don't do the maths and see that it costs them a lot less to give old people some money to warm their homes than it does to have them in hospital for weeks on end due to hypothermia. It isn't hard to work it out, it's basic common sense!

Though yeah, it is the government, they don't get accused of common sense too often, do they.

Sunday, February 5th to Saturday, February 11th 2017

Sunday this week saw the decommissioning of HMS *Illustrious*, the oldest active ship in the navy.

HMS *Illustrious* retired after long career

After 35 years of service, the carrier HMS *Illustrious*, former flagship of the Royal Navy, has finally lowered her colours and retired from active service.

Previously an aircraft carrier, the vessel was refitted as a helicopter carrier in 2011, after the retirement of the UK's Harrier Jump Jet squadrons.

Although *Illustrious* just missed the Falklands war in 1982, she was

the Royal Navy's early presence in the region after the war, until RAF Mount Pleasant was completed on the islands. Since then she has taken part in action in Bosnia, Sierra Leone, and the Middle East.

Her most recent active service saw her providing aid to refugees in Syria in 2014, where she distributed several hundred tons of food to displaced people after the bombing of Damascus.

Originally planned to be retired in 2014, *Illustrious* was kept on active service due to delays in building HMS *Queen Elizabeth*. With the new carrier nearing completion, and due for launch in June, the crew of HMS *Illustrious* will begin training on the new carrier's systems, and will be ready to begin sea trials soon after launch.

HMS *Illustrious*, unlike its sister ships, *Invincible* and *Ark Royal*, will not be scrapped, instead ending her days as a tourist attraction and floating museum.

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Wednesday came as a bit of a shock to the country, when the government announced that despite requests for people to be frugal with electricity use, power demand had gone up instead of down, and the only response left, after a failure to purchase sufficient supply from already overstretched sources overseas, was to implement rolling blackouts across the country. In effect this would mean that at any one time, 2% of the country would be blacked out, for one hour at a time every two days.

Thankfully, the country remained calm. The police had been out in force to ensure nobody took advantage of the power outage to loot the town centres, but that didn't happen. It seemed surreal though, when it got to us the first time. It was night, and of course, the hospital was unaffected, but we could see street lights go out all of a sudden all across Oxford.

By this time I was allowed to go pretty much wherever I wanted in the hospital, and so I went to the front doors and stood outside for a while. I was hoping to get a nice look up at the stars, but not so much. The hospital lights were still on, and I wasn't prepared to risk walking

any distance from there to get into real darkness. That would have been stupid on many levels, and so just for once, I obeyed the common sense part of my brain, and went back inside before I froze to death in the car park.

Sunday, February 12th to Saturday, February 18th 2017

On Sunday, I got another visit from my parents. Their visits have been coming further apart, which is fine. It's a long trip, and I'm getting much better, but I do get bored quite a lot.

They told me family gossip, though it's a small family so that didn't take long. I showed them some of my recent articles, they mentioned they'd seen them all. I was surprised, I hadn't known they had a subscription to my paper sent all the way up there. That was quite nice actually, and made me smile.

I asked them to check in on my flat on the way home, and they did, I got some photos from the kitchen emailed to me by my mum, and it was fairly horrid, the kitchen had started to gain a life of its own, it looks like one of us had left a half eaten sausage sandwich in the kitchen. It had grown, and mould covered the surface it was on.

Lovely, looking forwards to that when I get out of here.

On that note, the doctors have told me that that'll be soon, end of this month if all goes well, so not long now. I really can't wait, and any infections that plan on dropping by again, NO, you aren't welcome! Bugger off somewhere else!

There was more bad news this week with a couple of airlines going out of business. One of the big US ones, Continental, had apparently not done enough to protect itself against high fuel prices, although it was only in bankruptcy protection and I expect the US government will bail them out again, like last time they didn't run their business properly. The other was a small UK one with about four planes, the kind of small business that can't protect itself. Shame, and it would be nice if our government helped out small but growing

companies that aren't to blame for their problems, instead of propping up the ones that are huge but entirely responsible for their own mistakes.

Monday, the news was all about the completion of the controversial Dibang Valley dam in India. I'd done a bit of advance reading on it, and so I was prepared, and got an article out for it quite quickly.

Dibang Valley dam generates first electricity

The Dibang Valley dam in India switched on its generators for the first time today, producing around 3GW of electricity, badly needed by the underpowered Indian electrical grid.

Controversy has dogged the project since construction began several years ago, after objections from local villages and people were ignored, and protesters were branded as Maoists for exercising their right to protest against losing their homes and lands.

The Maoist label allowed the police to arrest any protesters, and ignore the local population of the valley, clearing the way for construction to start.

Since relocation, opinion of the former residents has been split. New houses with electricity supplies and modern facilities have led many of the younger generation to welcome the move, while most of the older generation resent the loss of their ancestral homes and lands.

The Indian government has defended its handling of the situation, saying that the addition of the new power to the grid was essential for the continued growth and development of Indian society, and projects that benefit millions have to take priority over the inconvenience of hundreds.

It is unlikely that the age old debate of the needs of society over the needs of the individual will ever be resolved, and in this case, the needs of society have clearly won out.

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Tuesday was Valentines day, and it was as depressing a day as you could ever imagine. Not only did it make me think of Taima, pretty much all day, it had a sting in its tail from the US government, where the Republicans got what they wanted, and repealed the Obamacare package, which guaranteed affordable healthcare for the US population.

It beggars belief that the most advanced country in the world is the only developed nation where the poor will regularly die due to lack of healthcare, because they can't afford it. Obamacare was starting to address this problem, by forcing insurance companies to provide coverage for everyone. Even that had seemed backwards, I mean, cut out the middle man and just have the government do it, it would be so much cheaper than having a middle layer which just exists to make profit over people's fear of illness. However, it was better than letting people die for lack of money, which is what had been happening before.

Obamacare, essentially had several components. The major ones were that insurance companies couldn't charge people more because they were already ill, and couldn't prevent people transferring policies from one provider to another. This was a huge step forwards, as it meant that sick people didn't die because they lost their job which provided their insurance, and it meant that people didn't have to stick in jobs they hated or were badly suited for, because the insurance policy locked them in, when no other companies would insure them because they had a known condition.

Before Obamacare, if you got sick, you were screwed, you couldn't change jobs, you couldn't get new insurance if you lost yours, and so you just died.

On the flip side, it forced people to buy insurance, because if you only had to buy it when you were sick, nobody would ever buy it, and it would become pointless. This was the method that the Republicans first went after, with their belief that you can't legally force someone to buy a product they may choose to take a gamble with and not buy.

That was thrown out by the courts, and so they had to wait. Now they're back in power, they've simply removed the whole system and taken it back to how it was a few years ago. They say it's fairer, it

allows people to not buy healthcare if they choose not to, it allows everyone to have freedom of choice, and, most importantly for Republicans, it allows the insurance companies freedom to do business as they see fit.

That's the big one for them, the insurance companies make less profit, so it must change. More profit is better, and they don't care how many people die to get it.

But that's the way the US is going right now. They voted in the Republicans, and gave them control of all branches of the government, and the people of the country will begin to pay for that mistake. I boggle, I really do, that their population can vote in the Republicans so often, but they do. It's like they have some masochistic self-harm compulsion or something.

The week ended with more news coverage about Mecca. The Russians had offered to send a team to Mecca to investigate the bomb, to see if they could possibly determine its origin, and the Saudi government had agreed. Russia is about the only nuclear country with the technology to investigate the site that Saudi Arabia doesn't hold responsible for the bombing.

I'd like to know who supplied the bomb too. My guess is it was either Russia or the States. The US because the church was an American one, and Russia because, well, when the USSR broke up, the common belief is that they just lost hundreds of nukes. I personally doubt we'll ever know, but maybe the Russians can answer it. I guess it could have been India, but the blast was apparently around one megaton, and India doesn't have any nukes of that size to the best of my knowledge. I could imagine them doing it to piss off Pakistan though.

Sunday, February 19th to Saturday, February 25th 2017

Sunday

Apparently the US has just kicked off complaining that the Russians are doing the site examination of Mecca, as they could be

one of the guilty parties. They're demanding the right to send their own team of investigators. Saudi Arabia has refused, and has as much as said they trust Russia more than the States. It's a pretty big turn around for the country that was a close US ally up until six months ago, but then, it was a pretty big bomb that blew up.

The diplomatic exchange was quite funny, nonetheless. The US said it would consider sending a team with or without permission, protected by marines if need be. Saudi Arabia responded that they obviously didn't have the military to prevent a US incursion, but said they'd simply let everyone know where the Americans were if they did send a team.

The implication was, no matter how many marines you have, a crowd of a million angry Muslims showing up trumps them.

Rest of week

The US seemed to take the hint, but the threat to ignore Saudi sovereignty seems to have had a knock on effect in the region. The next day, a joint statement from Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar was released, asking the US to close all military bases in their countries within 90 days.

This is a big blow for the US, who can either refuse and have a war, or at least a massive diplomatic incident, or they'll lose some key strategic bases. Personally, I find it quite amusing, they push other countries around, but they forget that they don't own them, and occasionally, they'll be pushed back.

Within a couple of days, the US had confirmed it would honour the wishes of the nations involved, but as they'd purchased long leases on the land they were using as their bases, they'd demand compensation, which the three Arab countries agreed to.

I think they were just surprised that they hadn't been ignored, I mean, the entire Arab world probably couldn't dislodge even one of the US bases if they decided to stay. I expect that the US is quite desperate to get access to the oil again, as news from the States is quite bleak, with the economy really struggling without OPEC oil. They're willing to sacrifice the bases if it makes OPEC a little more friendly, rather than argue about it and risk them being even more

hostile.

The rolling blackouts have continued over here, and have apparently ensured that there's enough electricity. I think this is a strange definition of 'enough' but I guess when there's a shortage, and nobody is selling oil, we have to just be glad for what we get. The sooner OPEC reinstates the supply, the better. Assuming they ever do, I mean, look at the damage being caused to the west. Pretty much every western economy is in a steep economic nosedive because of the oil shortages, China has overtaken the USA as the biggest economy on the back of the hugely cheap oil they're buying from OPEC, and the Middle East seems to be the big winners. They get China as a closer ally, a weaker west, and unless the US forces the issue of oil, no real down side for them.

Later in the week, the US announced they'd come to a deal with Bahrain to keep their base, but that the bases in the other two countries would close. I think that the Bahrain one was the most important to them, it's where they keep an entire carrier battle group, and I expect they really do want to keep a carrier in the vicinity, just in case.

Sunday, February 26th to Saturday, March 4th 2017

Monday was the date for the launch of the CHEOPS space telescope. I wanted to be impressed, as it's a planet-hunter, and that's an awesome thing to be doing, but I just couldn't make myself say wow. It's an optical telescope with a diameter of just 30cm, about the size of something you get in any high end telescope shop for a few thousand pounds, and the only special thing about it is that it's in orbit.

The goal isn't a bad one, to help confirm the existence of unconfirmed exoplanets, and to try and give more detail to the ones we already know about.

Their website lists their biggest benefit as being able to point in any direction. I'm sorry, I love space and science, but when your