

CHRONICLE



2020

Andrew Woodmaker

**On the right side of the truth,
but the wrong side of the law.**

In this seventh year's worth of entries from a diary stored on a futuristic recording device found after a house fire, a new beginning takes Andrew Woodmaker into the journalistic big league.

In 2020, the new British government struggles to return prosperity to the country, but a bold plan could make or break our national ambitions.

Andrew Woodmaker faces unexpected trials, and his life moves in directions he hadn't anticipated, as he ends up on the wrong side of the law.

Nobody knows if this 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 2020

by

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Dedicated to Andy and Stef

The strangest people make the best of friends.

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.

Wednesday, January 1st to Saturday, January 4th 2020

New Year's Day was nice, spending it with Miranda. We both sat up and watched the fireworks for much of the night. We still get the TV pictures of the ones from the States, despite the fact we've closed off diplomatic relations. We still get the news from there, and I imagine that behind the scenes not much has changed in terms of the bureaucracy. I expect we'll still trade with them, and still all go on holidays to each others countries. The only difference will be that we'll have no shared political direction.

Which if you ask me is no bad thing, I don't like the political direction of the States anyway.

The American fireworks were double in purpose, as at 5am UK time, midnight in Washington DC, Puerto Rico became the 51st US state, following their referendum to join last year. From what I read, the population of Puerto Rico is largely conservative and so just who the Republicans are happy to have join the country. I wonder just how much this will tip the balance of power. The US elections are usually really close, but if Puerto Rico gets a few votes, it could make a big difference.

I was pretty unimpressed that Thursday was back to work. I'm not quite as enthusiastic to be returning to work as I used to be at the Daily. I suppose it makes sense, I was there for a long while and I was comfortable there. Here it's all new and scary, so I'm bound to be a bit less relaxed about it all.

Thankfully, I didn't have to leave my bed except for the morning meeting, although I'll be honest, I was sitting at my desk with just a shirt on, and crawled back into bed right after the meeting was finished.

After my morning nap, I was going to put together an article about the government's foreign aid policy kicking in, but of course, no, that's politics and out of my remit now. It was a shame, I could have done a good article on it, but in the end, someone else in the company

did it, and hogged the front page.

The new policy means that as of the start of the year, all cash payments to foreign countries are stopped, and instead we will send British companies to provide infrastructure work to the places we're helping. The government made a lot of sense when they said it'll do more than put a plaster over a gushing wound in a country that's falling behind. It'll provide long term benefits to bring these places back from the brink.

The big initial project that's being funded is a complete sewerage and water system in two Kenyan cities, which will provide work for hundreds of British engineers and builders who're being sent to Kenya to construct it. This is the real advantage of this new policy, the money stays the same, but now UK companies get the benefit. Our economy gets the wages of the staff working on the projects, and still the countries we help get a huge boost. Everyone wins, except the despots who were siphoning off the previous aid cash for new palaces or new tanks.

Thankfully the working week was only two days long, which I could live with, so the weekend wasn't long in coming.

Miranda is back at her parent's place again over the weekend, which is only in Bicester, so not far away, but it means I'm by myself for the weekend. I'd planned to do loads of stuff, but so far, it's now Saturday evening and I've achieved precisely bugger all.

Sunday, January 5th to Saturday, January 11th 2020

Been a fairly quiet week this week. I had to make the traipse into London on Monday morning, which was horrendous. I think the couple of weeks since I'd last had to brave the morning tube had made me forget just how bad it is, and this time it was worse than ever. I ended up standing by the door, and I was so tightly jammed against it that my back was literally curved to the wall of the train, and I had to keep my head turned sideways because I didn't have room to turn my head forwards without jamming my nose into someone's shoulder.

Thankfully, the meeting itself wasn't too bad though, and I was back home by just after midday. I only had time for a brief bite to eat before heading off to sunny Shipton-under-Wychwood, where there were protests that the First Great Western train company had decided to stop all services to the small town, leaving it with no rail link.

Shipton left isolated

The small rural community of Shipton-under-Wychwood is facing the cancellation of its final rail services at the end of the month. Rail company First Great Western (FGW), has announced that the route has become too unprofitable, and they can no longer afford to service it, with only 2,274 people using the station in 2019.

Residents of the small town, population 1,280 have said that the rail companies have brought the low usage upon themselves, with only two trains per day running in each direction from the station, one in the morning and one in the evening, meaning that the service was almost unusable for anyone who only wished to leave for a few hours.

Local residents have complained that the move would further isolate their small community, leading to many being forced to leave to seek homes elsewhere.

Lilly Chadwick, who commutes from Shipton-under-Wychwood to Oxford every day, said she was devastated by the news. "I don't own a car and don't have a driving licence, which means I will have to either move house or lose my job. If there were some buses it would be OK, but the train is the only option."

Local bus companies have said that if the train service is cancelled, they would consider adding Shipton-under-Wychwood to their routes, but until the trains stopped running, such a move would be uneconomical.

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How exciting is that! Of course, it was more exciting that I did the

article in a local pub after doing the interviews and the calls, and then missed the evening train. I felt like a right plonker, I'd been writing about that very subject, only to be caught up in its consequences.

I ended up having to call Miranda to come pick me up, which she was irritated about. It was only a 40 minute drive each way, but she seemed to be pretty grumpy about it. I felt a bit bad, but I didn't really have much choice. She dropped me off at Oxford station and left me there to take the next train back to Didcot. Maybe I'd just caught her at a bad moment, I don't know. As I'm sitting writing this at the end of the week, I still don't know why, but she seems to have forgotten all about it, so I'm not planning to bring it up. I'm not *quite* that stupid.

Midweek saw the US elections officially start, with the Iowa caucus for the Democratic party. I really do hope they can wipe out the Republicans, they've had no way of stopping the whole steamroller of stupidity recently, but I'm crossing my fingers that the US public are as concerned about the government policies as the rest of the world is, and vote for something a little saner this time.

From the way I see it, there are a few decent candidates for the Democrats this time. John Kerry looks to be the frontrunner, and Julian Castro, the only Democratic senator in the whole of Texas, is looking strong. There are a number of stragglers, and candidates who are just there to make a few speeches about things they want to get into the news, but these two look to be the serious runners.

I don't expect I'll mention it much in my dairies, but really, my big hope is that the Democrats will win, and they'll work to repair the relationship between Washington and London. Maybe it's guilt talking, but I'd like to see that fixed sooner rather than later, and the current US government, although they seem to have tried, have lost too much credibility for our government to be able to accept their approaches.

I mean yes, I hope the Democrats win for the fact that they're sane and normal too, I always hope that, but I have new reasons that are more personal this time.

I was back behind the wheel of a car on Thursday, much to my dismay. It was the first of the four lessons I've booked to try and keep

me fresh and ready for my next test. I've already booked the next test, February 3rd, so I have a month till I need to worry again. Maybe this time I'll be more ready for it.

The lesson itself was standard, nothing special, only as scary as normal, but no surprises. That's how it should be I suppose, with me having already done one test, there shouldn't be anything that I've not come across before.

Good job the lesson was Thursday though, not Friday. Overnight there'd been a massive dumping of snow, and I can live without doing a lesson in that. I don't intend to actually drive in snow, I intend to let the computer do it all, so I'll just skip any lesson that has that kind of problem, I think.

By Saturday, the snow was getting deeper. It wasn't as bad as the snows of a few years ago, where it got to half a metre in a matter of hours, but it was a good 20cm come Saturday morning. That meant that Miranda wasn't able to make it over. The roads between Oxford and Didcot were just unpassable, and the trains were never going to be running in that kind of weather. We spent a bit of time chatting on the phone, which made for a nice stress free morning, but we started to wind down on things to talk about after a couple of hours, so we called it a day and promised to meet up in the week as soon as the roads were a bit better.

Even though it was Saturday, I wrote an article for the paper about local problems in Oxfordshire and the lack of snow ploughs, which was political, but definitely local and so in my job description.

I do hate having to worry about that all the time. There have been a few good articles I've just had to ignore because it wasn't what I'm supposed to be doing any more. It's very frustrating.

Still, on the other hand, getting an article done over the weekend will really reduce my workload for the next week, and I like that a lot.

Sunday, January 12th to Saturday, January 18th 2020

CoNN came in on Sunday covered in snow, which was hilarious. I think he'd fallen into a drift or something, and he was meowing his

poor little head off.

I brushed off as much as he'd let me, which wasn't much. He never lets me near his belly, and gets a bit nervous if I go near his tail too. That was when I noticed it. CoNN has his first grey hairs. Not many of them, just a few hidden among the black patches, but they definitely weren't there recently, and they were definitely grey, not bits of his white patchwork showing through.

It's such a horrible thought though, he's my first pet, and I'd never really thought about him getting old, even dying. I really don't like the idea of that. He can't be that old, unless they were way out at the vets when they guessed his age when we rescued him.

I've had him for what, just over five years now though, so I guess he really could be getting a bit old. If he was five when we got him, that would make him ten, and that's getting on for a cat. I always thought he was no more than two though, which would mean these are really early grey hairs.

He seems to be his usual self, though. It's hard to tell if he's slowed down at all, because he never was the world's most energetic cat, and he's spent a good three quarters of his life just asleep or lounging around on his beanbag.

There's nothing I can do about it though, so I won't let it bother me. I'll just make sure to not neglect the time he has left.

On Monday, the government made their announcement about their new plans for schools. £6bn in funding from the 10% tax raise has been earmarked this year to pay for the construction of 200 new secondary schools and academies, which should provide an extra 400,000 secondary school places to help relieve the current overcrowding problems.

They've also announced that next year's £6bn will be spent on 600 primary and younger level schools. As both rounds of schools should be complete in 2022, then the £6bn from that year will be used to pay to equip these schools to the highest standard possible. All these new and well equipped schools should then relieve the burdens on existing schools, and give a better education to pupils across the country.

It sounds like money well spent to me. In essence, the money will go to construction companies who'll have to employ more people to

do the work, who'll pay their taxes, will spend their wages, and in the end it should cost close to nothing to build them. Assuming we hire UK companies to do it, if we outsource it to other countries then the money vanishes overseas.

Of course, that isn't always a bad thing, we need to spend money overseas so that other countries have good economies and so can afford to buy our exports. It's all a big closed system in the end, very little just vanishes.

Interestingly there's no mention on staffing the schools with this new investment. I expect that that makes sense, the £6bn is supposed to be being allocated to improving the country, not simply sustaining a workforce, which would then stop the money being used the next year for other big improvements. I do wonder where they'll find the money to pay the new teachers though.

The snow had stopped by the end of Monday, and had managed to reach a respectable 30cm deep according to the back of my flat. I'm hoping that this is all we get for the year, I don't want to spend any more time than I have to stuck at home with no trains, and me having to work from the news feeds.

Thursday was driving lesson day. The snow was still there, but the roads had been solidly gritted and so it wasn't actually that bad. There had been so many cars going over the roads that they were as grippy as they usually were. The lesson went off without a hitch, and I got to breathe a big sigh of relief. The road outside my house still hasn't been gritted, and because we're, well not exactly a side street but we're a street that doesn't really lead anywhere, not many cars go by, and the roads are just made of ice now. I'd have been in all kinds of trouble if the instructor had found one of those for me to drive down.

My big article for the week was almost like an advert. I tried to keep the name of the company out of it, but when I did that I had to make up more and more implausible sentences to describe what I wanted to write about, that in the end I gave up and gave them the free advertising. It was a fairly cool product, and one I'd like, and very much sciencey, but it still felt too much like an advert for my liking.

HomeHeart is the sci-fi home we were all promised

For decades we've been promised that the sci-fi home is just around the corner. In some ways it has arrived already. If our great great grandparents could see the dishwashers, microwaves, and washing machines we all have, they would consider that to be the home of their dreams.

The future we've all been waiting for for the last couple of generations has been a bit slower to arrive. We've all seen show homes that are computer controlled, where the house responds to your voice commands, but only the ultra-rich seem to have these new features, while most of us are still in a house that is little changed from thirty years ago.

Enter HomeHeart, the new modular controller for any house, allowing you to upgrade just the parts that matter, or the parts you can afford, one at a time, all without digging huge holes in your walls, or ripping up your carpets.

The HomeHeart system is a low cost voice recognition system, which listens for your commands, and then sends wifi signals to the components around the house. For example, when you wake up on a cold winter morning, you can say "HomeHeart, heating on" and it will switch the heating on across the house.

If you want to be more specific, you can say, "HomeHeart, heating on in the bedroom at 22 degrees, and the bathroom at 24 degrees," and the computer will set the thermostats to the requested levels.

Among the modules available are the shower control module, lighting and heating control on a per room basis, the entertainment control module, the pet feeder module, and the "almost home" module, which allows the HomeHeart to talk to your pad or phone, and when it sees you are almost home, it will turn on heating and lights to your preference.

With its modular design, the makers of HomeHeart, a small startup

company in Bristol, hope to be able to add new modules to increase its capability over time.

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I do really want one of those. The pet feeder module looks handy, its specs show that you can just connect to the HomeHeart controller with your pad and tell it to feed the cats. That would be awesome. I mean yes, I can just phone up Simon and Gerald now, but if they're out, I'm screwed.

As if to emphasise that point, I got a knock on the door on Friday evening, and they told me that they'd had enough of the snow and cold, and had booked themselves two weeks in Australia.

Nice if you can afford that kind of thing. To be fair, I wasn't that jealous. I don't really like the heat, and I much prefer British winter to British summer, but I know most people think I'm crazy for that opinion, so I usually keep it to myself, and so I made appropriate jealous noises when they told me.

Really they were there to ask me to just keep an eye on their house, which I was more than happy to do. They've looked after my place, fed my cats and the like, more often than I can remember. I wouldn't even hesitate to do the same in return.

The next morning, I heard them getting into their car and driving off to the airport. I have no idea why they didn't take the train, the car parking for two weeks at the airport would cripple most people. Maybe they have a friend close to the airport and plan to park there, or something. Who knows.

Sunday, January 19th to Saturday, January 25th 2020

Sunday, Miranda came over. We hadn't really seen much of each other for the last couple of weeks, what with the snow and both being busy, but we made up for it.

It was really nice to have her around, I'd almost started talking to

myself recently, with it just being me in the house. I showed her CoNN's grey hairs, and she made a fuss of him, which of course he hated. She said that she'd no idea how many of her Snowflake's hairs were white and how many were grey, her being a white cat and all, but they were starting to get more wiry and less soft over the last couple of years, which I suspect is pretty much the same thing.

This is all quite depressing really, isn't it. Pets getting old and stuff, I don't think I like this at all.

Thankfully the snow had started to go away by this point. The temperature had been above freezing for a couple of days, and all that was left were the drifts against the sides of houses. That meant that on Monday I had no excuse to not go into the office for the meeting, although trust me, I looked long and hard for one.

Unfortunately, even though the conditions were better, the trains were still not great, and so I was late, I arrived when the weekly meeting was already half over.

When I got there it was close to 9:30, and I'd spent the last hour fretting about how bad it would be when I got there late. I'd never seen anyone enter the meeting late before, and I had no idea what the etiquette was, should I just slink into my seat, or do I make a public apology and throw myself on the mercy of the room?

When I got to the meeting room, it didn't really matter, the door was locked. I'd had no idea that the meeting room was locked while we were all in there, and I had no way to get in, my door pass was rejected.

I decided to go find a desk for half an hour and go find my editors right after the meeting.

Sebastian, my science editor, was off sick again, so I grabbed Sam, the senior editor. He was a bit sarcastic, but not nastily so. He said I should avoid local though, my normal editor, Alice, was off today and going to apologise to her boss, Victoria Walton, was an effort in futility, and she'd eat me alive if she realised what had happened.

I erked a bit, but he said that it was OK as I'd talked to him. I should just try and be more on time in the future. He mentioned that

he aims to get in for 8am on meeting days to ensure he isn't late.

That would mean leaving home an hour earlier, but you know what, to avoid that happening again, I'll take it. I won't have to do any more hours in the day, I'll just have to start earlier and finish earlier.

I got out of there before anything else could go wrong, and headed for home.

On the train on the way back home, I went online to see if I could book my beard lasering appointment. I'd decided I definitely wanted to do it, and I wanted to get started right away.

The process for booking was nice and easy, although there was a bit of a wait, and my first appointment isn't for a couple of weeks. I could have got one much sooner, but I wanted to get it done in Oxford, so the wait was a bit longer as there's only one place that does it. I could have been in the next day if I'd picked a place in London.

After filling in my details on the website, the report it gave me said it'll take between three and six sessions, which is about what I'd expected from the information I'd found online. It also told me that my hair and skin combination was a good one for the treatment prognosis. Light skin and dark hair are the best, apparently.

The driving lesson on Thursday was a bit exciting, as there was a rainstorm going on. I'd driven in rain before, but I didn't like it, and this was the worst rain I'd ever been out driving in. The instructor, for the first time ever, allowed me to switch on the electronic assistance, which used small radars on the back and front of the car to tell me how far away other traffic is, using a display on the dashboard. He'd always said he didn't want me to get used to that kind of thing, but in weather like that, where you couldn't really see much past your bonnet, let alone locate the car in front of you, it was definitely the right time to be using it.

It gave me a bit of peace of mind, which is what I needed. When I couldn't see the car in front, it was really quite scary. I didn't want to be barrelling along at 60km/h only to find the back of a Volvo braking hard. Using the radar assistance, I could always see that there was a good gap ahead.

Back at home, the rainstorm turned into a thunderstorm by the late afternoon, and so I invited Miranda over so we could enjoy it together. We went out to enjoy it in all its glory, and parked up beside Edmunds Park in the middle of Didcot. There are some trees along the Newlands Avenue side of the park, and so we hid under them and watched the storm.

Unfortunately, it didn't end well. I don't think there was an actual lightning strike, but there was something, and I got a flash in my artificial eye, and it started to flicker on and off.

Miranda was of course oblivious to this, and she was happily enjoying the show, and I had to grab her arm, and tell her I needed to get back to the car.

She looked really worried, and I think rightly so. Because the eye was flicking on and off, and I couldn't control it, I was getting all kinds of dizzy. Closing my eye didn't help, as each time it flicked back on, it went all white for a split second as the sensors in the eyeball switched back on. Nothing I could do would stop it, it was direct from the sensors to my brain. Covering the eye, putting it in pitch blackness, I still kept getting that white flash every few seconds.

She drove me home, and she helped me into the house. I was so dizzy I needed help up the stairs. NewCat didn't help either, wanting to play as soon as I got in, and pouncing my feet as I walked.

When we finally got past the cat and made it upstairs, she helped me to hunt for the notes from the installation. It had been what, over two years ago, and I had no idea where the instructions were. She told me off at some length for losing them, and I pointed out that I didn't do it on purpose.

She apologised, and we gave up looking. I decided I needed to call the hospital, having it keep flashing would drive me bat-shit crazy if they didn't do something about it. As it was evening, there were no specialists, and I was told that ER couldn't help, so I'd have to wait till morning and talk to my GP.

Great, my GP who is all kinds of useless, and when I was last there they told me they wouldn't stump up the cost for the hair replacement therapy. That GP.

It was definitely one of the worst nights of my life. I got precisely

no sleep at all. You can imagine the problem. Once every few seconds the whole left side of my vision went completely white, and then faded back to black. Miranda stayed with me all night, which was good of her, but I had to tell her it seemed to be getting better, and pretended to be trying to sleep so she'd stop worrying and get some sleep herself.

At about 4am, I had an ingenious idea. I unplugged the inductive charger which lived under my pillow, so that the eye would hopefully give in and run out of power. I knew it wouldn't do it right away, I've spent whole weekends at Miranda's place before, and it's kept right on seeing things, but at least there was a definite end in sight.

Or not in sight. You know what I mean.

Friday morning I called the hospital again. I'd found an email where I'd mentioned the name of the doctor who'd done the installation, and so I simply asked for an appointment with him. I was given an appointment for the middle of next month, which really isn't good, I could have gone mad by then.

I called in sick at work, and explained the problem to them. They said it was fine, and to keep them up to date. Funnily, nobody there had known I had an electronic eye, they'd all thought it was a real one.

After talking to them, I went and secluded myself on the sofa. I guess I was starting to get a bit used to it, as the flashing was still making me feel a bit dizzy, but not so much I was feeling nauseous any more. It was still impossible to sleep though, or concentrate on anything at all.

Ironically, after wanting to talk to one doctor and not being able to do so for a month, I then cancelled my appointment for Friday evening with Dr. Smith, as I knew it would be completely pointless if I was so tired. She said it was fine, and wished me luck fighting the NHS bureaucracy to get a replacement or a fix.

Friday evening, Miranda brought Snowflake round, and told me she was here to look after me for the weekend, to make sure I was OK.

She's good to me, and I was really grateful. By that point I was

coming close to wanting to just stab myself in the eye in the hopes it would stop being able to power up, but chances are I'd just miss and that would get messy.

I finally got to sleep at about 4am on Saturday, and slept till Saturday afternoon. I've been awake for about an hour now, and the eye is still doing it, but after some sleep my brain seems to have gotten a little more used to it, and so I've been able to record my diary at least.

Miranda's been awesome, she's cooked, she's helped me to get around when I was getting dizzy again, and she even nipped out to the shops for me when I needed some chocolate to cheer myself up. I'm lucky to have her, I really am.

Sunday, January 26th to Saturday, February 1st 2020

Sunday was bad again, more flashing, no sleeping, and I think I was pretty close to going mad. I spent most of the day lying on the sofa trying to sleep and failing. I didn't even notice till Miranda asked if it had started to hurt, that I'd started to flinch each time the light flashed. I probably looked like I was having some kind of fit, flinching and twitching every few seconds.

Monday morning and I called into work sick again, I hadn't had any sleep since Saturday, and the flinching was really starting to hurt my face and neck muscles from doing it so much. They ached like crazy, but I couldn't stop it each time the light flashed.

I explained to the boss that I'd be back to work fairly soon, but I needed to wait for the eye battery to run down. He tried to suggest I should just close my eye, and so I had to explain to him it was being fed directly from the eye sensor into the optic nerve, there was absolutely no way I could stop it happening. He seemed to understand in the end, I think, and left me alone.

I tried really hard to be interested in the news for the day, it was full of things that on any other day I'd have been squealing for joy

about, but in the end, I decided to stop trying and just worry about it when I was feeling better.

I finally got some more sleep on Monday evening, although it may have been Tuesday morning, I'm not too sure. All I know is that one moment I was in some kind of daze, and then I was dreaming in flashes, and then I woke up to darkness.

Hoo Fucking Ray.

Excuse my French, but that's exactly what I thought when I woke up and the eye wasn't flashing any more. The battery had run out overnight, and it was just blissful, absolutely blissful.

The 2D vision when I got up off the sofa to get myself a cup of tea wasn't brilliant though. I poured boiling water over my hand as I held the cup, but luckily I didn't do any permanent damage, it was more my ego that was hurt.

I sat back on the sofa, drank my tea, dropped Miranda an email to let her know my eye had finally run out of juice, and went back to sleep.

I woke up again and it was Wednesday at about 3am. I didn't really know where Tuesday had gone to, but I guess I needed the sleep. I was feeling wide awake and refreshed at that point, and so I did the catching up on news that I'd promised myself I'd do on Monday.

I'd missed the government announcement about their £15bn budget allocation for space technology. That was the one I was really interested in, and I'd wanted to do an article about, but I checked and one of the other guys at the paper had already done one.

I could have done a better one. Grrr.

The news was good. They'd announced that they were allocating £2bn of the money to providing launch facilities such as buying space on Ariane or Soyuz rockets, £8bn worth of investment into British space industry such as Satellite production and future launch vehicles.

That last one made me cheer, because it had to mean Skylon and

Sabre, it's the only game in town when it comes to a British launch vehicle. I hope they give it some massive level of funding.

How massively ironic that after all his years working for it, Alan Bond has missed it, when his dream may finally be acknowledged for the genius it is, and given the assistance it needs.

The government also announced a £5bn funding pot for innovation. If anyone, from individual to multinational corporation, has an idea that has a chance of being beneficial to the UK in space, this funding pot will assist with its development.

It all sounded pretty awesome to me. A funding pot like that will attract a lot of the best and brightest to the UK. The chance of landing a big grant to pursue your dream is something that's bound to be appealing. It also means that overnight, the UK will have funding for space science bigger than that of NASA or the ESA, and almost as big as both combined.

On Monday evening I'd missed the launch of the Euclid space telescope. I didn't know much about it, but some reading showed it was designed to fly to the L2 Lagrangian point, and search for dark matter and dark energy.

Is it just me or is the L2 point getting a bit full up? I don't actually know how big it is, but we seem to be putting just about everything we launch up there right now, and I'd hate to see these expensive telescopes all bumping into each other, or floating off into deep space.

I got an email a few hours later from Amanda, my lawyer friend, and I realised I'd been a bad friend, I hadn't actually got round to talking to her since I finished at the Daily. She said she was checking for a pulse, which was fair, I hadn't shown any evidence of life.

She must have been on the train on the way into work as she sent the email, it was about the right time. I replied but I didn't get a response, so I imagine she'd got off and was walking in to work. I suggested a catchup one evening in Didcot, and later in the day she responded that Friday would work best for her.

Thursday, I was fairly sure I was OK enough to get back to work. I had my driving lesson first though, so I headed down to Reading for that. I warned Daniel, the instructor, that my eye had failed, and we

should take it slow. He was more than a bit concerned, and did some depth perception tests to see how well I was dealing with it. I pretty much failed each one of them, and so he sent me home, and said I should either give it a minimum of six months getting used to only one eye again, or let him know when the eye had been repaired.

So that was that. Driving is cancelled for the time being. Just as I was probably only a week away from passing my test. Yet another frustration because of this bloody failed eye.

Friday morning I headed over to Bristol to look for local news. Technically Bristol is its own county, but I checked and I was told it was in my area, as it's kind of part of Gloucestershire, even though it isn't.

I couldn't use my lenstop, so I was stuck using my phone for navigation, which just isn't as easy. I didn't get lost but I did spend quite a bit of time looking at my phone, holding it upside down to angle the map correctly, and wearing a confused look on my face.

In the end I got local opinions about a new large building that was going up in the city, a 70 floor skyscraper, which would completely dwarf the tallest buildings in town at 280m tall, compared to the tallest being less than 100m right now. There was a general feeling that it would be good for the city, but as per usual, people living and working close to the site were all against it.

Is it just me, or has the whole country turned into a bunch of NIMBYs? Were we always like this, where people would complain so much, or is this a new thing? I dunno but I keep seeing it all over the place, and I don't remember it being like this when I was growing up.

I got the article written on the train back to Didcot. It was a fairly long trip each way and so I had plenty of time to do that and have a nap.

I got back just in time for my appointment with Dr. Smith, and we talked for the hour about how I was coping with only one eye again. I told her it wasn't nice, but I could live with it for a while until the NHS fixed it.

She seemed to think it was a big deal, maybe it was revealing my inner vulnerability or something, but honestly, I don't like it, but I can

deal with it. If it was going to be permanent, I'd be upset, but knowing it's just a temporary problem, it's just an irritation, and I'll manage.

I left Dr. Smith's office and went straight to the coffee shop to meet up with Amanda. I put on my apologetic face when I went in, as I'd been a bad friend and not kept in touch, and she scowled in response, but she wasn't really serious, and we spent a couple of hours catching up and talking about our jobs.

I told her all about working in the big smoke, and she told me about a case she'd been on where a guy had gotten away with a blatant drug dealing bust because the cop who arrested him bugged up the paperwork. She said it was happening all the time, because they were so short staffed, and lots of mistakes were being made.

That smelled like a story to me, and so we talked a bit more about that. After a while though, she kicked me under the table, and told me to stop working and do more gossiping, so I did, but I kept the note in my head to do some research next week.

We had a good evening. We grabbed some Chinese food and sat and ate and chatted some more, we talked about the new Middle Earth films that had been announced, but we didn't really know much about, and we spent a good while speculating about those. She mentioned a new film series, Space Rift, that was due out later in the year, which I'd never heard of, but she said that from the looks of it, we'd probably both like.

I had to get back home before it got too late, but all in all, a nice evening to round off a long day in a cruddy week.

Sunday, February 2nd to Saturday, February 8th 2020

Sunday lunchtime, and Simon and Gerald came back from their holiday in Australia. They'd rented a house up in the hills above Perth, and had had an awesome time. They spent half the afternoon when they got back regaling me and Miranda with the stories. One day they'd even had a herd of wild kangaroos just randomly hop through the front garden of the house.

Apparently front garden is a bit of a misnomer. The house was plonked in the middle of about half a hectare of land, and so the front garden was this huge load of Australian bush that just vanished into the distance, not a garden as I'd consider it. Apparently watching that happen from the porch at the front of the house was great, and Gerald dpushed me the video he'd taken with his lenstop. It was definitely pretty cool, there must have been 50 of the things, and they were really moving quickly.

In the end though, a 20 hour flight caught up with them, and they went back down to their place, leaving me and Miranda by ourselves. That's when she asked where I thought that we should go on holiday.

I hadn't really considered it, but I supposed it would be a nice idea. We've been together for almost a year now, so it's about time... I stopped my thought at that point and had a real quick think back into last year, and realised that Wednesday was our one year anniversary, and I'd almost forgotten it. I'd have been in a load of trouble there.

All this happened in a matter of a couple of seconds after Miranda suggested going away somewhere, and so I covered up my thoughts by saying I was trying to think of a good place, and asking if she had anything in mind, while trying to sound enthusiastic. I was enthusiastic, but I was also worried about the anniversary thing.

She suggested the Canary Islands, which sounded way too much like a hot sun, sit and do nothing kind of holiday, which is the kind of thing that would drive me crazy with boredom in a matter of minutes. I decided to give it a chance though, and so we downloaded some bumph and had a look at it on my pad.

The images we got from the web and from travel agents seemed to confirm my worst fears. There were images of blue seas, golden beaches, beach bars, tourists sunbathing, and people waving their arms about in clubs. I was about to veto the idea, but Miranda was so busy oohing and aahing that I didn't have the heart to say no, and so I agreed.

By the end of the evening, we'd booked the entire holiday, for the week off in March that we'd planned to take together.

I'm really not looking forwards to it, but at least I'll be in good company.

Monday morning brought some bad news for the country, as the unemployment rate hit the magic 20% mark for the first time since 1933. It was followed by a press briefing from the Prime Minister, acknowledging that the problem was a serious one, but that the government was bringing in well defined plans to combat the problem.

Of course, the big problem is that if unemployment gets too high, then the additional income they'll get from the 10% tax hike will be lower, and so their ability to act to help the economy will be negatively affected.

Still, they're introducing their new measures in April, that's only a couple of months away now, so I expect that they'll be OK. How bad can it go in two months without some disaster befalling the country?

No, universe, that's *not* a request to show me, that's a rhetorical question, I don't *want* an answer, thankyouverymuch!

Tuesday afternoon I went for my beard lasering appointment in Oxford. After all that I've had done since Mecca, I wasn't in the least bit nervous, and just showed up ready for them to get on with it.

It turns out it was a simple procedure, although time consuming. While all of these hair removal processes are generally called lasering by the uneducated public, myself included, the one I was paying for was a fairly new one, called microwave electrolysis. It worked by heating each individual hair follicle, killing it and stopping it from ever growing new hair. It was the replacement for standard electrolysis, which involved using a tiny needle to deliver the heat to the base of the hair, but could sometimes result in damage to the skin and scarring.

While the old system was usually done by hand, the new microwave electrolysis was all done by computer. They simply lay me down on a chair that was a bit like a dentist's chair, and moved a machine into place. The machine did all the work, examining my face, locating each follicle, and zapping it.

It took a while, about an hour and a half for the whole process. They talked to me as it was going on, and told me that with the old system, I would've been there for hours, and had a lot more pain. The worst I got from this process was a mild irritation, and nothing

actually hurt.

I was home again by the end of the afternoon, with an appointment to go back there in 10 weeks time.

There was a bit of a disaster on Wednesday, for our anniversary. This is what happens when both sides of a couple try and plan a nice surprise for each other, and don't consider the possible conflicts. We both booked different restaurants for the evening, with a plan to take each other there. We met up in Oxford at about 7pm and both tried to surprise each other with our thoughtful gift, and well, then it was all kinds of awkward with 'well, we'll do yours', 'no, yours sounds much better we'll do yours', 'it looks like you've put way more effort in to it than I have, we should do yours.'

In the end, in the spirit of neither of us winning, we picked a third place. I didn't mind that, but it was a bit crap, and either of the places we'd chosen would have been better.

The moral of the story, plan in advance just which person will book the surprise dinner!

The week ended on a positive note though, as I watched a second batch of tourists launch for the Bigelow space hotel. It'd been over a year since the first batch, and I'd been starting to think that there wouldn't be any more, but thankfully I was proven wrong. There were six people in this group, and they're all going up for a week.

Unfortunately, none of them looked at all like me, so I didn't really see much opportunity to hit one of them round the head and take their place.

Sunday, February 9th to Saturday, February 15th 2020

The final details of the government's university funding for students has come in this week, and it's really interesting.

They've said before that they plan to provide loans to students to make sure that they can focus on their studies and not need to get part time jobs to survive. In the past, having to work as well as study has often meant that many poorer people end up with grades that don't

always reflect their academic ability, and gives an advantage to the affluent.

The new system has now been designed so that the government will provide each university student living away from home with a prepaid debit card. The card will have a £1,200 a month loan deposited onto it for each of the nine months a year that they're at university. This money may then only be spent on food, university supplies, rent, and other essentials of living. Things like alcohol will be blacklisted from the card, as will cash withdrawals and online purchases from stores in other countries, where sales can't be monitored.

In return, students, who should now have little need of getting a job to be able to afford to live, are expected to work hard and get the best grade they can get. The better the grade, the less they repay on their loan after university.

Students who get a first class degree will have their loans completely erased and will have to pay back nothing. Anyone who gets a 2.1, they'll have to repay 30% of the loan. A 2.2 result will mean they repay 60% of it, and a third class degree will repay 90% of the loan value. Those who drop out or fail their degree will have to repay 120% of the loan amount.

If you ask me, it's going to really make people work their arses off, and stop the ones who have no ability from even going, and wasting the time of everyone else on the course.

I approve. I just hope it works, we could do with better educations for our top people. I also hope that people who're less well off will see this as an opportunity to get their kids into higher education, and break the cycle of poverty.

After the conversation I'd had with Amanda, I downloaded the entire Oxford district court records for the last two years on Tuesday, to see if I could find a pattern of police screw ups to report on. That would be a good story, and one that would get me some credit in the Independent. I'm painfully aware that I've not really had any massively important articles to report since I started there, and I've managed to provide them with little more than fluff, no really breaking stories. I talked it over with my editors and they said I was doing OK, and that I wasn't in any danger of being fired or anything,

but they'd both agreed they'd hoped for me to provide them with some meatier stories to print.

The court records were absolutely huge. I have no idea how lawyers ever manage to read all of these things. Each case, even small ones, was generating page after page of documentation, and after a quick count, I reckoned that if I printed out all of the paperwork from those two years, I'd have enough printout to fill my flat.

And possibly Simon and Gerald's too.

The files weren't indexed in any useful way. Sure they were all grouped by case number, and there was an index of case numbers, but the index didn't even cover if they were found guilty or not guilty, it just listed the names of each side, not even the names of the judges or the lawyers. Sure from the index I could go from there to each case and find out those things, but there were thousands of cases, and I didn't want to have to go through thousands of entries just to rule out the ones that were found guilty, and then have to go through them again to try and find patterns of police errors.

If only it was like in sci-fi films, where computers are almost sentient and you can give them the thinnest of commands and it would be able to find me the key files I need in a moment. But no, that kind of thing doesn't happen. The closest I've ever seen to that happening was last year when Neil and I were in Argentina and we did a clever search on the planes video, but that was a simple case of a whole load of tail numbers, not complex files full of in depth legal jargon. That just wouldn't work here.

Oh well, I had the files, I knew I could just spend a couple of hours a day looking at them, as I was on the train going between stories. My first task to start with was allocating them to the guilty or not guilty pile.

I put together a voice chain on my pad to at least make it a bit quicker to do. It allowed me to have the pad bring up a case, I could flick through the files, and then just verbally tell the pad to assign it to the correct pile, and the case would vanish and be replaced with the next. It's something I'd never have been able to do with my old pad, create custom controls for voice commands. In that way at least we really are getting into the nice realms of sci-fi, and it was easy to do,

no mucking around doing computer programming, it just worked.

This was real reporting though, as they'd taught at uni. No glory, no sleuthing or Ramboing, just hard work and patience.

Wow, was it *boring*.

Wednesday, the news was full of Saudi Arabia. None of it was science, and obviously that wasn't local to me, so I couldn't cover any of it, so I couldn't report on it, which was frustrating, but it was big news.

One of the big name extremist Muslim clerics had gone with his entourage and TV crews into a shopping mall in the middle of Riyadh, the Saudi capital, and live on TV he'd called for the toppling of the Saudi government, due to their failure to hold the US to account for the bombing of Mecca, and had then blown himself up, killing dozens of people.

His followers had taken up his call and they'd brought thousands onto the streets of the city, where protests were almost unheard of. Crowds had gathered at Deera Square, where the regime performs public executions, and were chanting slogans and calling for the resignation of King Mutaib.

These were the first protests that anyone could remember happening in Saudi Arabia, the country is usually extremely strict in its control of its population. The protests were growing though, and by sundown, which was mid afternoon UK time, the security forces were out in force to clear the streets and the square.

That's when the real trouble started. As the security forces moved in on the Deera Square protesters, a number of the protesters approached the police and blew themselves up, killing at least a dozen police. The security forces retreated, to the cheers of the crowd, but were back in minutes with live weapons, and the shooting began.

Unlike the protests in Egypt and Libya, where the squares the people gathered in were wide open spaces, the one that the protesters had chosen to use in Riyadh was surrounded on three sides by walls, and on the fourth side by a mosque. They were hemmed in by security, and so the protesters retreated inside the mosque, and the police followed.

The news pretty much went as you'd expect, mass killings inside

the mosque, mass protests on the streets immediately afterwards.

The protests ebbed and flowed throughout Thursday, with the security forces regaining control of an area, only to lose another one a few hours later. However, by Friday morning, the Saudi government was showing just why nobody had dared to protest before, as they were bringing in tanks and helicopter gunships for crowd control. By the afternoon, the dead littered the streets, and the city was quiet, with the military in full control.

It wasn't really a romantic backdrop to Valentines day on Friday, all that death and destruction, but I did my best. I invited Miranda round and cooked for her. I'd practised the same meal each day for the last four days so I was moderately capable of cooking it, and it went well. She knows my lack of ability to cook, and she was impressed at my dedication to practising in order to get it right for her. After eating, we took a trip to Didcot's cinema, which for the last few weeks had been running a temporary planetarium on one of its screens, and I knew Miranda had wanted to go, we just hadn't had chance.

The planetarium was actually quite good. They'd erected a temporary hemisphere of screen to give a full 360 degree sky view, and the show went into loads of sciencey things that she enjoyed. There weren't many people there, I expect that the planetarium isn't the top of most of Didcot's Valentines day destinations, but that was all for the better. The whole mood would have been spoiled by having loads of people there, possibly with screaming kids.

Sunday, February 16th to Saturday, February 22nd 2020

We spent much of the weekend planning our trip for next month. When I say planning, I mean we spent time looking at information about all the beaches and bars Miranda wanted to go to, and I had to feign enthusiasm. It was looking less and less fun the more she defined her goals for the trip, which seemed to be go bake herself on a beach all day, and go clubbing and partying every night. If I believed in a hell, this would be the best way to make me afraid of it. I'm

doing my best to sound enthusiastic, and I think I'm succeeding so far, but at some point, if I'm not careful, I'm going to snap and tell her just how much this doesn't sound like fun.

I expect if all she wanted to do was to hang around on beaches I could have managed that. With my pad and a nice place in the shade it probably wouldn't be too bad. But the clubbing, wow, a whole world of no.

Monday, with the quietening down of the Saudi news, I was back on the road, or I suppose technically the rails. First stop London for the weekly meeting, followed by out and about looking for new articles. I spent the early afternoon in Banbury, and the late afternoon in Cheltenham. They were two places where the Science Party hadn't gained much of a foothold last election, and so I wanted to talk to locals about how they felt about the political situation so far.

The responses were fairly negative, even among those who'd voted for the Science Party. The general feeling was that they'd announced a load of cool things, but nothing had been done, and the economy was getting worse, not better.

It's hard to argue with that, they've been in power for nine months now, and so far very little has changed. I suspect that come April, when the new financial year starts and the new tax kicks in, that's when it's going to all start to change, but so far, not so much.

Both places were about the same with their opinions, so the article I wrote was about conformity of feeling instead of differences of opinion. I wasn't too happy writing it, I felt like I was doing a bit of a hatchet job on the party I'd voted for, but my job is to report the news, and the mood of the people, not the opinions I have about things.

It sucks. I want an opinion slot so I can say what *I* think too.

I'd spent my outbound trips working on doing more sorting of the legal files, and my journey back to Didcot working on my article, and so I was pretty tired when I got home.

The news on TV was that Montenegro had announced they would join the EU at the start of next year.

I wasn't really overwhelmed with emotion over this. I don't know any Montenegrins, and they're clear on the other side of Europe so

they're a long way away.

Don't get me wrong, I think it's good that we're coming together as a community, the more we group together and understand each other, the less we'll fight among ourselves, but it was pretty hard to give a damn when I was so tired after a long day.

Tuesday was fairly horrible. I had to go into the hospital for my appointment to have my eye looked at. I met the doctor, and the first thing he did was ask to see it as it was doing things wrong.

That meant I had to let him charge it up and let it power itself back on.

As soon as I let him sit me by an inductive charger, it powered up and started flashing. I'd been so careful to avoid the things for the last few weeks since it started to go wrong, and I'd almost forgotten how bad the problem was.

He kept it by the charger for a good few minutes, even when it had started running again, which worried me. I didn't want to be having the flashes again all afternoon, and all the next day or something. I'd accept it for a few minutes, I can understand why he needed to see it failing, but that was as much as I wanted to put up with.

After a couple of minutes of examining it, he said he agreed it was broken, which made me say all number of sarcastic things in the silence of my head, and said he'd schedule an appointment for a replacement.

He booked me in for March 30th, which was what, five weeks away. I asked if he could make it any sooner, as I really wanted to get back to my driving lessons, but he said that each patient was only considered on clinical need, not on personal requirements.

I guess that that's actually the right way to do it, but it didn't make me any happier.

I had to sit in the hospital restaurant - which is a very generous thing to call it, I don't know for sure that what they were selling would actually qualify as food - for a good few hours while I waited for the charge in my eye to wear out from just that small amount of exposure.

I tried to waste some time working on the court documents some more, but it was just impossible to concentrate, so I found myself a corner and sat and just waited.

Finally late in the afternoon it wore itself down and I could head home. I'm not sure what I'd have done if it had stayed that way for much longer. I'd have needed to get Miranda to take me home or something, as I'd have probably killed myself crossing the roads trying to get to and from the train stations if I'd tried to make it by myself.

I spent the rest of the week at home just working on the wires. I'd done more than enough travelling to suit me this week.

The US elections were getting more and more TV coverage now that they're down to just three candidates left. Kerry is the front runner on the Democrat's side, which I think is a good thing, he seems like a decent enough guy. Julian Castro is still in the race, and the last one is Kiros Welde, a Californian senator.

I'd thought at the start of the race that Welde, whose ancestry is African, was possibly a successor to Obama's legacy, in that now they knew a black guy could be president, maybe he could capitalise on that, but he just doesn't have Obama's charisma. While I'm sure he's good at his job, he just sounds efficient and intelligent. In US politics that's a deathblow to your career. You can be as dumb as a stump and disorganised as you like, as long as you're charismatic and catch the eye of the voters. He just doesn't.

On Friday the government announced their new corporation tax laws, which they hope will boost employment and increase tax revenue by closing one of the big loopholes.

The new rules are that corporation tax rate will be 1% per million pounds of turnover, so small companies will pay none at all, which should be a big help for them, and encourage entrepreneurs to go into business. The increase is limited to 20%, and so that's the rate that all big companies will pay.

The second, and by far the most interesting incentive to create jobs, is that companies who create new jobs will receive a tax

reduction of 1% on corporation tax per thousand new full time staff they employ. There are loads of rules as to how that works, to stop them just hiring 20,000 people and then firing them the next day to get the tax reduction, but they're quite long and boring and so I won't go into them here. The government seems to have closed all the loopholes I could think of, and plenty more besides.

The last bit, and this is the one that will have the big businesses swearing, is that when companies transfer funds overseas, say to parent organisations as a 'franchise fee' or 'royalty payment', those funds are taxable as they leave the country. This should close the huge loopholes that big companies like Amazon and Starbucks have been using to move their money to other countries with lower tax rates, and end up paying the taxes there instead. It's been an ongoing disgrace for years that big companies pay almost no corporation tax in the UK, as they transfer all their profits to other countries, and this costs the country billions of pounds each year.

I'm really pleased to see that one closed down, it's beyond unfair to do business in one country, only to take all the profits elsewhere and in doing so take from the economy that you've been using to generate those profits.

If some companies leave the UK over it, I don't think we'll miss them. Local companies will fill the gaps with no problem.

Sunday, February 23rd to Saturday, February 29th 2020

Sunday started very well. Miranda and I got up early and watched the launch of the first Antares rocket in half a decade. It's a private rocket from a US corporation, Orbital Solutions Corporation. I even managed to get an article out for it before the Sun came up. I don't like working weekends, especially when I'm over at Miranda's place, and have much better things I could be doing, but I thought it was worth it for a space launch. I just won't let it become a habit.

Cygnus heads to the ISS

Orbital Solutions Corporation, a US based space technology

company, has today launched the first of its Antares rockets in six years, carrying a Cygnus resupply capsule bound for the International Space Station.

OSC has battled numerous technical issues in recent years, and this latest mission to the ISS comes over six years later than was originally planned, following an explosion on launch in 2014, which massively set the program back, and led to the bankruptcy of their parent company, Orbital Sciences Corporation.

If the Cygnus capsule is able to successfully dock with the ISS, it will mean that there will be two private companies capable of providing freight services to low Earth orbit, and the hope of NASA is that such competition will bring launch prices down and the efficiency levels up.

The launch happened at 5:06am UK time this morning from Cape Canaveral, and it is expected that Cygnus will move into position beside the ISS early on Tuesday, at which point a final decision will be made whether to allow the Cygnus to dock using its own engines, or if the ISS will grab the capsule with one of its robot arms and simply bring it in to itself.

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I haven't really been following their progress before now, since they had the big failure in 2014, they'd been pretty much written off by everyone. Nobody thought they'd pull it back together, and get up to the ISS again, so good on them for managing it.

After the launch, and then some breakfast, we spent the day going round small back of nowhere towns in the area, going to old shops and buying things we didn't need. Lunch was at a genuine tea room in a small village called Waterperry. Tea rooms just aren't easy to find these days, they all seem to have been replaced by large coffee chains. It was a nice place, with a big garden and no stress as far as the eye could see.

Monday was a bit of a pain. After the meeting in the morning, I was asked to stay at the office and work with a couple of the on-site reporters to try and refine my style a little, as I was apparently a bit out of step with what the paper wanted. They assured me it wasn't bad, just different, and they wanted me to see what I was doing that they'd like to see changed.

It wasn't that bad to be fair, they just wanted me to arrange things slightly differently, put a different emphasis on things, nothing that will kill me to do. I'll just write as I always have, because I don't want to lose my natural style, and then I'll edit it to make it more acceptable to the paper. As I always put stuff into my diary pre-edit, you won't notice any difference.

Tuesday morning, the unmanned Cygnus capsule managed to dock with the ISS. I did another article on it, though I won't put it in here, one article a week in my diary on each subject is more than enough, I think.

When the capsule got to within docking range, the decision was made to allow it to dock using its own engines, instead of having the ISS grab it. I'm not sure what the decision criteria were, maybe if they suspected that the Cygnus may go barrelling into the side of the station, or maybe something more subtle. Either way, the docking was a complete success, and the new supplies it was carrying were delivered.

Its fate isn't glorious, unfortunately. It'll be unloaded of its new supplies, then will be filled with rubbish from the station, and then sent back to Earth to burn up in the atmosphere. Shame really, it's an expensive bit of kit, you'd have thought they'd have wanted to salvage and reuse as much as they could.

Space travel seems really wasteful, doesn't it. Except for Skylon of course, no waste there.

On Thursday, it became clear for the first time that the problems in Saudi Arabia hadn't completely gone away. I'm not sure whether to say unfortunately or not, because the government over there is one of the most oppressive on the planet, they don't even let women drive cars or go outside without a male chaperone. But the people

responding to this call to topple them would probably be even worse. I expect women wouldn't be allowed out of the house unless they were being transported for their new lives of servitude with their new owners. Sorry, I mean husbands.

The reports came in that a small town by the name of Turaif in the north of the country had been taken over by supporters of the protesters, and the local police station had been burned down.

The place was in the middle of nowhere, and so there were no reporters close by to verify anything. Apparently the information came from people who were there posting online about the uprising. I found someone who claimed to have a glass stream from there, and I watched as some guy in a house was timidly peeking out of a window every now and again, watching men with machine guns patrolling the streets, and others with signs that the glass stream translated to being anti-American slogans demanding retribution for Mecca.

I didn't watch for long. It was outside my remit, and so I had other work to be doing, much as I'd have preferred to be following the latest complication from the bomb that changed my life so much. Instead I found some other local stuff to write about. Nothing too exciting, one of the stories involved cats, so that's always good and gets into the paper, but the rest of the things I was working on were so utterly dull, I can't even remember what they were.

I checked back in with the news in the evening, and the glass stream I was watching had gone. Reports were that the Saudi government had suppressed the uprising using jet bombers, and that Turaif had been badly hit, with many dead. Another sign that the government wouldn't stand for dissent.

I wonder how this will go, if it'll calm down now, or get worse. Evidence seems to show that once it starts, it won't stop until the government falls. We've seen it in so many other Middle Eastern countries, and it almost always follows exactly the same pattern.

On the other hand, none of the other countries where this kind of thing has happened, have had a military as powerful as the Saudi one, not even Syria. A few years ago we even sold them Eurofighters. I wonder if that's what they used to bomb those civilians.

Still, all this is hearsay, there's no evidence. They could have sent in troops and only attacked the militants, and all of the civilians were

kept safe.

Yeah right, sure. Because that happens.

On Saturday, Miranda and I went out for the leap year fireworks in Oxford. I don't recall there ever being fireworks for a leap year before, but it's apparently a new thing. It was actually quite good, not as big as New Year's or bonfire night of course, but still worth spending the evening in the freezing cold to go out and watch. We did our best to keep each other warm, and that helped.

Once they were over, we jumped in the car and went back to my place, and got rid of the last of the cold.

Sunday, March 1st to Saturday, March 7th 2020

Miranda had to leave early on Sunday morning, as with no advance planning, she had to go look after her cat, give it its insulin injections, feed it, fun stuff like that.

I spent the day doing my best not to work, but in the end I found myself with the pad in my hand telling it into which pile to assign more case notes.

It was dreadfully dull for a day that had started out so well.

I finally put my work away and played sheet mice with the cats. I got a duvet and moved my hand around under it for them to chase and pounce. A bit like bed mice, but obviously not in bed, so, sheet mice.

They had a great time, but I confess I was a bit bored. I don't know what it is, I never used to have this problem, but just recently I've been bored as anything sitting at home by myself. I suppose I'm still not used to having the house completely to myself for much of the time.

At least I haven't started talking to myself yet, although I do sometimes expect the cats to answer when I talk to them.

Monday came, and the fun trip into London with it. I'm really