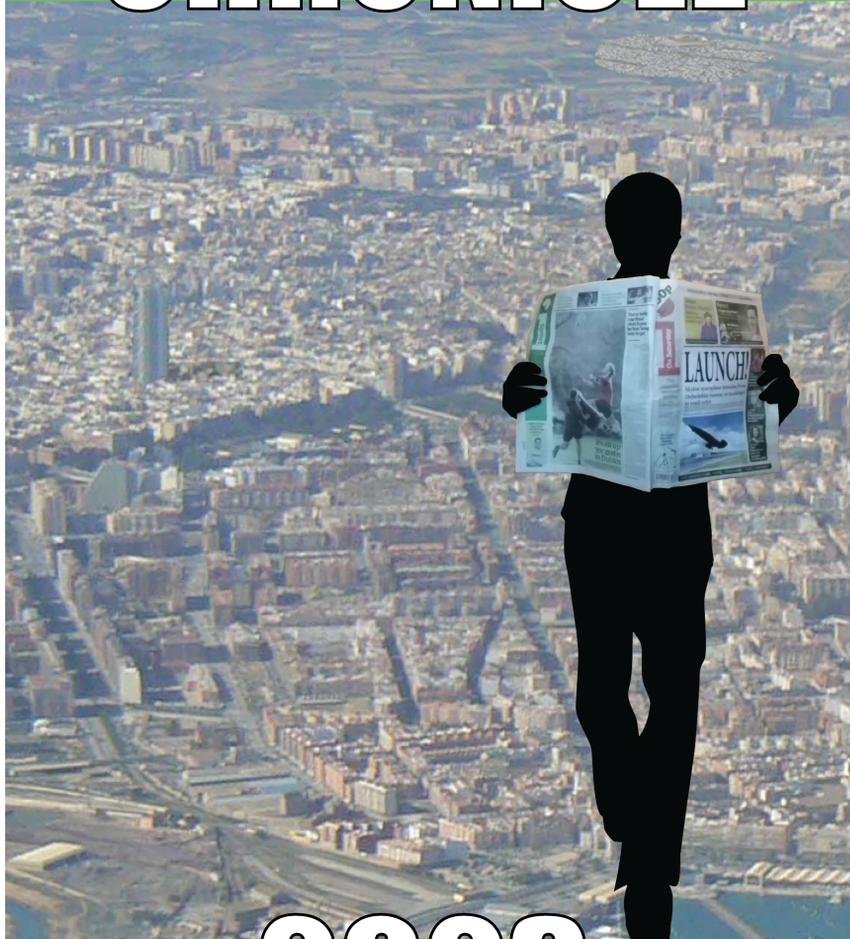


# CHRONICLE



2023

Andrew Woodmaker

**A humorous suggestion,  
leads to a gruesome discovery.**

In this tenth year's worth of entries from a diary stored on a futuristic recording device found after a house fire, Andrew Woodmaker investigates the patterns of a serial killer, and ponders a life-changing decision.

In 2023, Middle Eastern tensions spread, as the Americans become involved in the conflict. On Mercury, the Russian mission makes a surprising discovery, while the British Skylon finally attempts its first mission into space.

Andrew Woodmaker is persuaded to begin a new investigation, but at work his hopes are dashed as an important job goes to someone else.

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 2023**

by

ANDREW WOODMAKER

Edited from recording device by

Michael Simms

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Dedicated to John

Remember not to drink the biscuit.

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 1<sup>st</sup> to Saturday, January 7<sup>th</sup> 2023

I missed the start of the fireworks on New Year's Eve, as I was being soundly kissed by Evie for the start of the year. Funnily enough, I could live with that.

We came up for air in the end though, and watched the second half of them. They were pretty good, although I still preferred the kissing. I'm glad we didn't go to London for them though, the weather forecast was spot on, and it was raining and cold.

I always wonder how it is that fireworks still work in the rain. Surely they'll get all damp and not go off. I mean, evidently not, they worked just fine, but I don't know how. I'll have to check at some point, I'm sure the answer's online somewhere.

We'd planned to watch more fireworks as the new year rolled west, but we were tired, and ended up just going to bed. What a pair of wusses, really. A few years ago I'd have managed it, and wouldn't have slunk off to bed like an old fart.

Obviously, Evie is a couple of years older than I am, so she can be forgiven.

Ow, hey that's not nice! She just came into the room and heard me say that, and thwapped me for it.

OK, I suppose I deserved it :-)

Anyway, rest of the week.

The whole Middle East situation is at a standoff. The air war seems to have cooled down a bit, probably because neither side is able to make much difference. Israeli planes weren't able to make a lot of headway outside of their country in the face of eight combined opposing air forces, and those eight countries have had little luck in penetrating the Israeli air defences, which have been bolstered by assistance from an American carrier battle group in the form of the USS *John C. Stennis*.

Nobody is willing to push land troops across the border in big

numbers after what happened to about four thousand Syrian troops who were hit with nuclear artillery, and Israel has said they have no interest in pushing into other countries with land forces.

It's going nowhere, but there are about a million angry soldiers who could spill into Israel at any time, on the assumption that Israel probably can't use its nuclear artillery everywhere.

Around the world, various countries have announced unilateral sanctions against either Israel or Iran, or in the case of most of Europe, including the UK, against both. The US and Russia are still paralysing the UN, and so it's left to individual countries to act with their conscience, and that's not going to have a huge amount of effect. When the EU refuses to trade with Israel, they'll take their business to the States, and give the Americans a nice little economic boost as reward for supporting them, while Iran will keep on trading with the rest of the Islamic world, who will get the benefit. Very little pressure is put on the countries when they can just go elsewhere for their business. We need the UN deadlock to be broken, so proper global sanctions can be used.

On Tuesday, Evie and I were in town. We were just browsing shops to get a bit of fresh air, as the shops aren't too far from her house, now our house but I'm still not used to calling it that yet.

We saw Hayden while we were there, walking hand in hand with some woman who wasn't Amanda. That obviously proved her point that he was being less than honest with her when she dumped him a little while ago. He didn't see us, so I didn't see any need to cause a scene, but if he'd have seen us and said hi, I was more than ready to try and make his life a bit harder by just conversationally asking him some uncomfortable questions.

I don't like it when my friends are messed around.

I've finally finished Assassin's Creed this week. The ending of six is obviously just waiting for at least one or two more sequels, so I'll look forwards to those. I'm tempted to go back through the six I've completed over the last few months, so I can see what I missed. I've mostly been sticking to the central storyline, and from what I've seen

online, there are loads of side quests that I've never even heard of.

I probably won't do that soon though, I seem to have way less spare time for gaming on my hands than I used to, what with two jobs, and spending so much time with Evie.

Back in the real world though, and on Thursday, the first pole for the Scottish wind farm was set into the floor of the ocean. I wrote a brief article on it, but nobody bought it, as I guess it wasn't really any different from the same thing that happened in Cornwall recently. Same story, different place names. I'd tried to make it as different as possible, but I guess it didn't matter. I'll learn from that for next time, and I probably won't be writing an article when the Northern Irish wind farm gets that far.

That was about all that happened this week, except for lots of time enjoying spending a week off with Evie. Oh, we moved most of the remaining stuff I want to keep over to here too. My old place still looks quite inhabited, my bed is still there, my sofa, most of the big things. Evie already had a sofa and bed, so there was no point bringing more of them over here just to clutter everything up.

The only real downer about living here is that Evie's rooms aren't as well shaped for the Xbox full room projection system. Her wallpaper isn't white, it's patterned, and she has alcoves all over the place, which means there are breaks in the images. It's a shame, I liked using it, but it's almost useless in the new house.

Still, the benefits of living here, more room, less chavs, more Evie, more than outweigh the lack of games console bonus features. I think I'll live.

## **Sunday, January 8<sup>th</sup> to Saturday, January 14<sup>th</sup> 2023**

We enjoyed our last day of holiday together by going to see Simon and Gerald, who had their New Year's barbecue a week late.

Last year, they'd invited loads of people, all of whom had found excuses not to come over in the depths of winter for an outdoor gathering. As such, only us and Amanda were invited this time, as

we'd been the ones to show up last time. To be fair, Amanda hadn't made it last year either, but she still got an invite.

The temperature managed to get up to only 'bloody cold' instead of 'fucking freezing' as it had been the day before, which helped make the day a success.

We cooked in the conservatory, but Kylie was in and out through the dog flap all day, and so that helped keep the temperature down for us. She's such a considerate dog.

She also probably ate more meat than the rest of us. She has this look of absolute misery, she sits there and her heart is all over her face, showing you how rarely she gets meat, and how much she'd love you if you gave her some meat, and how starvingly hungry she is.

It's all a lie of course, but we couldn't resist. I can't even resist CoNN or NewCat when they beg like that, and Kylie makes them look like amateurs.

Monday was back to work, and it's fair to say I was less upset about that than Evie was. I really love my job, where she tolerates hers as a necessary evil until she gets enough clients from her web design business.

I think she already has enough, she earns almost as much from her work at home as she does from her day job, and I've suggested a few times that she should take the leap, but she's not ready. I think it's half genuine concern over money, and half fear of the lack of safety net if it all goes pear-shaped.

I can't talk. I mean, I don't earn as much as she does from sales from my website, I think I made about £3,000 last year, so not nearly enough to live on, but when the time comes, I'll probably be as reluctant as she is.

But anyway, as I was saying, back to work.

I hadn't missed much in my two weeks off. Work pace had fallen off a bit, with lots of people being off for the Tiltmas break, and those that were still there being distracted by the events in the Middle East. Still, things *had* progressed, and we'd made some aerodynamic changes to the Skylon canards and added some small fins to the rear

vertical wing. It wasn't worth a press release, but it was interesting to see. The project notes described them as a stability increase, which I can only imagine is a good thing. You don't ever want an unstable spaceplane.

That evening I got home from work to find a letter on the doormat, my first snail mail at the new house.

OK it was addressed to the old house and redirected, but still, it still counts.

It was the response to the FOI request I'd sent to Eynsham School, and it had a complete list of the current teaching and administrative staff currently employed there.

I checked it over with my list from Rush Common school, and there were no overlaps.

I had a moment of gah, before I realised I'm an idiot. Obviously nobody would be working at both schools at the same time, would they. I needed the list of previous teachers too.

I felt really dumb, and Evie did say that yeah, I was a bit thick for not thinking it through properly in advance. That meant I'd need to send off another FOI request, a pair of them actually, one to each school, to get a list of all past teachers.

How far back to go, that was the question. I had to balance it between as much information as I could get, against a request that the school would consider unreasonable, and would be able to refuse to deliver.

In the end, I decided on fifteen years. If the killings at the schools were related, and it was someone holding a grudge, I doubt that they'd hold it in for even half as long, especially if it was a grudge big enough to kill someone over.

Assuming it was a staff member. It could be a student, and I know there's no way I'd be able to get a list of all students for the last fifteen years at both schools, they'd just refuse point blank.

It may not be either. I'm working on guesswork here, and it may end up going nowhere.

I sent off my requests on Tuesday morning, which involved actually going to a postbox and posting them. I'm glad of the new post box thumb scanners, they saved me a big queue at the post office.

Thumbscan, insert letter, letter gets stamped by the postbox, money is taken, job done. The queue inside the post office was about half a kilometre long and there were at least a quarter of a million people in it, so I could have been stuck there for weeks.

Once I'd posted my letters, I was off to the hospital. I had my appointment for my skin evaluation, to see if the NHS thought they could help me.

I got there at around 2pm, which was early for my appointment. I sat around watching the news on my lenstop, just to distract myself. It didn't work too well, this was such an important thing for me that nothing was likely to distract me for long. If they couldn't help me with the skin on my arm and body, I'd never get my face restored. If they could, I'd have hope for the future.

The doctor called me in at about half three, which was only half an hour late, so not bad for the NHS, as understaffed as it still is.

He told me to show him my complete set of burns, which involved a lot of fiddling with lowering just the left side of my jeans as I wasn't in the mood to strip right down right then and there in front of a stranger. He may be a doctor, but I still prefer not to do that.

Thankfully my burns don't go down much beyond waist level, apparently because of the wall of the hotel which had protected my lower half from the blast. Only my top half, which had been exposed by the window, had been ruined.

The doctor checked my medical records on his pad as he poked and prodded me. 'Six years ago, I see you got these. They did a fairly good job, considering the advances they hadn't made six years ago. Especially considering the extent of your burns. I see they were caused by the Mecca bomb, you've come out quite well, all things considered.'

I thanked him, but I didn't want to seem too blasé. I'd been warned by Gerald, the resident expert in manipulating the NHS, to play up the pain I get from my injuries. I mean yes, they hurt fairly often still, especially in the morning when I get out of bed, but after six years, you kindof get used to them.

Obviously it can't be that bad, I don't remember whinging in my diary about it too often.

‘Yeah, I think I was lucky compared to a lot of other people. I’d rather have pain than death.’

The doctor nodded, and carried on prodding and poking me.

‘Any other problems from the burns, any cracking of the scars, any soreness, blisters?’

‘None of those. Well, soreness yes, no cracking or blisters though, not since I came out of hospital.’

‘Good, that’s a good sign.’

He took some blood, but I don’t know why. How can he get anything more from my blood when he can already see my skin? But he’s the doctor, who am I to argue. He took a scar sample, which *really* hurt, and he took a sample of normal healthy skin, which I didn’t enjoy either.

He told me I was done, so I put my T-shirt back on, and asked him what next.

‘Well, I’ll send these samples off to the lab in Edinburgh, which is where the specialists are based, and they’ll send you more information in the post.’

‘How long do you think I’ll need to wait?’

‘To be honest,’ replied the doctor, ‘I don’t know. This is a new procedure, and we don’t offer it here, so it’s all based on the schedules of other hospitals. I’d expect no less than a month, no more than three.’

I thanked him. Another three month wait after my last three month wait. I was pretty disheartened, but there wasn’t anything I could do about it. I headed home, and just crossed my fingers that it would be one month, not three.

Evie was sympathetic when she got home from work. She told me that it didn’t matter, I was still me regardless of skin. It was a kind thing to say, true or not, and if she can put up with it, I guess so can I. She’s the one that has to see my face and skin even more than I do, so that gave me a bit of strength and resolve.

On Wednesday, I was watching a TV show on my pad as I drove over to Goring, a small town about 10 kilometres south of Didcot, to investigate the progress of the maglev.

The show I was watching, it was just some trashy daytime home

renovation show, and I only caught a few minutes of it, but Channel 4 had done some weird stuff to it. Loads of the objects on the screen had yellow rectangles around them. It was kindof getting in the way of watching the show, rubbish as it was. I tapped on one on my pad's screen, and immediately, a new window took me to Amazon to buy, what turned out to be a brass doorknob, which I believe is what I'd tapped on.

I tried it out a few times, and indeed, these yellow rectangles were showing I could click on dozens of things on the screen, and be taken to various shops to buy them. Even the main presenter's tie and suit were clickable.

I found out how to turn the rectangles off, but the clicking ability remained. I suppose that this was inevitable really. It's been happening in Asia for the last decade or so, and it was bound to get here in the end.

I don't think it's a bad thing in itself, but it's going to really encourage people to use product placement in films, and that's got the potential to ruin things.

Actually it's also going to probably harm sci-fi films, isn't it. You can't product place many things in a futuristic film, as by definition the things don't exist yet. It's going to hurt their budgets if product placement starts to become a bigger part of film financing, and that would suck. They already often get smaller budgets in sci-fi because it's still considered a bit of niche genre, we don't need any more barriers to new good films.

Once I got to Goring, I could see that the maglev was progressing well. The pylons were being built about half a kilometre ahead of the metal maglev lines they carry, which meant that they were up as far as South Stoke. It was getting really quite close to Didcot now.

With the maglev starting to get closer, I'm quite glad to be at Evie's house. Apart from all the other myriad of reasons I'm happy, the fact that they're doing the maglev construction day and night, and that it wasn't that far from my house, well, I can imagine how much sleep I wouldn't be getting. With the new housing project still going on all day every day, I can imagine that my old area will be populated by zombies soon.

Still, not to be a NIMBY, it's an important project, and it'll make

things much better for the local environment *and* the country as a whole, when trains are faster and not all diesel and noisy and polluting.

The BBC did an analysis on Friday about the attack on Tel Aviv. They had experts in to give their opinions on the bombing, and the result was a bit of a surprise.

The bombs, the experts believed, were about 50 kilotons, which is tiny really, it's 5% of the power of the Mecca bomb. Of course, as the power of a bomb dissipates based on the cube root of its yield (I worked that out all by myself, go me!), it affected an area with just over half of the radius of the one I'd experienced.

For such small bombs, the effect had of course been devastating. The Iranians must have known exactly how big the explosions were going to be, or they wouldn't have sent two bombs into one city, they'd have just used one and hoped for the best.

Or the worst, as is probably the better phrase.

It was interesting, in a morbid kind of way. We already knew the yield of the Israeli bomb, we'd been told that by the Israelis after they nuked Tehran, and that bomb was much bigger, almost a hundred times the power.

Tel Aviv had caused the deaths of around 120,000 Israelis, Tehran's death toll was over 4,500,000 Iranians.

## **Sunday, January 15<sup>th</sup> to Saturday, January 21<sup>st</sup> 2023**

Stupid bloody bureaucracy, that's all I can say. I'm sitting waiting for the FOI letters to come back from the two schools, and they're probably sitting on them, waiting till the last minute to give me the information. Seeing as the police aren't even admitting there *is* a serial killer, if I could get the information back, I may have a chance of solving this Alphabet Killer thing. And now, there's been another murder.

## Alphabet Killer strikes again

A possible sixth murder attributable to the Alphabet Killer has been discovered in a house in the small village of Farmoor, just outside of Oxford on the B4044 road.

Ms. Isobel Griffin, a 56-year-old housekeeper, was found by her husband on Saturday afternoon, when he returned home from a business trip.

Ms. Griffin was found in her bath, which was found to contain remains of the chemical compound methanediol, which is most commonly found when formaldehyde is dissolved in water.

Police believe that the murderer attempted to use a quantity of formaldehyde in an attempt to preserve Ms. Griffin's body, for an unknown reason, and when there was not enough, they added water to the bath, causing the formaldehyde to dissolve into methanediol.

The murder of Ms. Griffin using unusual chemicals fits with pattern of two of the earlier murders by the Alphabet Killer, where cyanide was used in Cholsey, and Arsenic was the weapon chosen in Abingdon.

The murder by electrocution of Aidan Kerr, headmaster of Eynsham primary school, was originally thought by police to not be related to the serial killer. But the progression onto the F murder does seem to indicate that the E murder has been completed, and Mr. Kerr was indeed a victim of this ruthless killer.

With the murders following a predictable pattern, villagers in Goring-on-Thames would be well advised to lock their doors at night.

\*

It's only been a week so I probably can't expect the freedom of information letters back for another three weeks. The murders aren't happening that often though, that's six in a year, so I expect there

won't be another one too soon.

The middle of the week was fairly uneventful, I spent my days at work watching the Gantt chart, and looking at future trends of how I expected projects to pan out.

I made myself a good list of future press releases, and did a few outlines for them, but there was nothing solid. We're so close now, we're just literally running through the formalities on the Skylon final flight approval.

Work is going on on the Skylon successor already, catchily named Skylon 2. There's no way I can announce anything about it yet, even its existence is a company secret, but it doesn't mean I can't write about it in my diary. It's a wide body Skylon, capable of carrying bigger cargo, but its launch system is a bit different.

The new spaceplane designs are showing that it launches from an underground tunnel. It's placed on a ramp, and then like a roller coaster going uphill, it's pulled up the ramp using an electromagnetic launch system, which will propel the Skylon to over 300km/h vertically by the time it reaches ground level, and its engines kick in to continue the acceleration.

This initial kick forwards will give us an extra 2,000kg of payload capacity.

I would say it's a shame it needs special launch facilities unlike the Skylon, but then, the Skylon needs them too, hence the new runway we've got curing outside the building right now.

On Friday, the government officially surrendered to the Bloomsbury Square protesters, and abandoned the plan to build the final London Skyway terminal there.

Instead, the new terminal is now planned to be built inside the front grounds of the British Museum, which is why it was going in Bloomsbury Square in the first place, as it's just round the corner from the museum.

The terminal will be put on the south corner of the museum grounds, just to the left of the front gates. This will give arriving tourists direct access to the main entrance, and shouldn't end up being too disruptive to the classical look of the front of the building.

I called the protest leader, William Pugh, who luckily didn't remember I'd asked him awkward questions last year, and he was all saying how it was a disgrace that they were going to build right in front of the museum. I asked him if he understood that this was a direct consequence of their protest, and he said that there were plenty of other locations they could have used.

I asked him where he would have suggested, and he reeled off a number of suggestions.

I had my pad plot the locations as he said them, and each and every one of them was some distance away, and would have meant that the whole project would be impossible.

I asked him his opinion of that fact, and he just said that I 'didn't understand anything', accused me of being a 'government stooge', and hung up on me. Again.

That guy has no patience or people skills.

Anyway, I did another article, and it was picked up moderately well, in as much as I sold about £200 worth of copies. A year ago, that many sales would have had me squealing for joy. This year it's just moderately good.

That's a good sign, I think.

That's about it for the week. It's been a quiet one, and with the way things are in the Middle East, I consider this a rare and good thing.

*Saturday, late*

I had to go and open my big mouth didn't I. 'It's been quiet in the Middle East. Isn't that awesome.'

Well it was, until this evening.

We've had a report on Sky news that they've been told by 'unnamed sources' that there was an incident this evening in the skies over Iran.

American aircraft flying from the USS *John F Kennedy* were attempting to engage planes which they believed were on their way to attack Israel, when they themselves were engaged by stealth aircraft

believed to be Russian PAK-FA fighters.

The Russians locked missiles on the US aircraft, but didn't fire when the American planes withdrew.

This was the one we've all been afraid of. The Russians and the Americans directly engaging each other's planes. If they start shooting at each other, I dread to think where this will all end.

I think I'm gonna go dig a big hole to hide in.

## **Sunday, January 22<sup>nd</sup> to Saturday, January 28<sup>th</sup> 2023**

### *Sunday*

The Americans have issued a warning to the Russians today, to not even consider engaging their planes over Iran. The Russians in response have told the Americans to not forget who they're dealing with, and they won't be bossed around like lesser countries.

They've declared that they won't take part in any hostile actions against Israel, but that if their ally, Iran, is attacked, they'll defend Iranian aircraft from any aggressors.

This really ramps up the stakes. Russia isn't the power it once was, but they still have a scary number of very big bombs. Even if their weapons have become a bit old and half of them aren't properly maintained any more, they could still wipe out the rest of the world with the random missiles they do manage to launch.

Let's not piss them off too much please, America?

The Americans have pulled back from Iranian airspace since the engagement yesterday evening. I don't know if it'll be permanent, but whatever they do, I hope they don't give the whole world a problem caused by their testosterone poisoning.

### *Rest of week*

The big thing this week, the American and Russian thing, has escalated, but only a little.

The Americans are still breaching Iranian airspace on a regular basis, but their strategy is now, according to press releases from the Russians - and who thought we'd ever be using them for press information on the Americans - is to fly quickly into Iranian airspace, and engage the Iranian aircraft. If they catch a sight of Russian planes, they run for it.

I suspect that the Russian angle of 'they're scared off' isn't quite accurate. I suspect it's more that they don't want to fight Russia and risk it turning into a nuclear war. It's just not worth it just to shoot down some antiquated Iranian MIG fighters from the 1990's that are just going to be shot down anyway as soon as they get over Israeli airspace.

So, now we know that the world isn't ending, at least this week, what else have we had going on?

On Sunday it was the Chinese New Year. We'd booked again at the same Chinese restaurant in Oxford that we'd gone to last year, that had a volumetric display of a tiger in the middle of the room.

Well, they still had the display, but it looked a bit silly with a giant rabbit in the middle of it.

The rabbit was pretty much just sitting there, occasionally lowering its head to nibble on some simulated grass, but that's it. It was about a metre tall, which makes it possibly the biggest rabbit on the planet.

The tiger had looked awesome and a bit scary. The rabbit was a bit of a joke.

The food was good though, and so the evening was a success. Inside however, I just couldn't stop laughing.

On Tuesday the bank sent me a little present through the post. It's a small personal thumbscanner. Apparently it's to allow me to make online purchases from the shops that support it, and I'll never need to enter my card details on a strange website again.

It talks wirelessly to the pad, and when I order anything online, the thumbscanner never talks to the website I'm buying from. I just put my thumb onto the scanner when it tells me, enter my PIN, and the signal to authorise gets sent straight to the bank, who then send a

signal to the online shop that I've paid. Completely secure, completely risk free. I really like it.

Precisely zero online shops that I use actually support it.

Typical. Still, I doubt it'll be too long. The thumb scanners are becoming more common in shops now, but it did take a while to catch on. It was months between when I first had my thumb scanned at the bank, and when I first paid for anything in a shop with it. I'm in no real rush, I've been buying online for years with no problem, although that's probably because I usually only shop at places I know and trust.

Towards the end of the week, the Chinese were doing a new space launch. Not many other people were covering it, so it was a perfect opportunity for an article.

### Chinese mission launches to Martian moons

Early on Friday morning, just after midday local time, the Chinese space agency launched their most ambitious exploration mission to date, the Chang mission.

Chang is a mission to explore the Martian moons, which has never been done before. It carries with it two landers, Fat and Tan, which will land on the moons Phobos and Deimos respectively.

The primary goal of the mission, apart from the proof that Chinese technology is advanced enough to perform such a difficult feat, is to examine the origins of the moons.

Opinions of scientists are divided about the origins of the Martian moons. Many believe that both moons, due to their small size and mineral composition, are simply captured asteroids which were once members of the asteroid belt.

Others believe that the two moons accreted from the same dust cloud which formed Mars, while a third group believe, as some believe for Earth's moon, that Mars was struck by another large object, which

ejected the moons into orbit.

The two landers, which are quite different due to the different sizes and gravities of the moons, will perform tests to try and either verify or discount each of these hypotheses, in the hopes of reducing, ideally to just one hypothesis, the number of possible formation methods for the moons.

The mission lifted off from the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Centre in the Gobi desert without any reported problems.

Due to the nature of the current launch window, the probe was launched with a heavy load of fuel, and will reach Mars in just eight months, which is several months shorter than is usual. This was planned to allow optimal conditions for the moon landings, as well as for interplanetary transit times.

\*

The article sold well, which was good. I'd hoped it would, as I didn't expect many papers would devote much time to a launch on the other side of the planet while there was a war going on, but yet they all wanted something to report which was positive, to make their papers happy and positive places for news.

It made £475, which wasn't anywhere close to a record, but it made it definitely worth the couple of hours I spent researching and writing it.

That was about it for the week. In the evenings, Evie has been finishing *Assassin's Creed 4*. As I'd had way more chance to complete it than she had, and so she'd fallen way behind. She finally finished it this week though, and declared that she'd enjoyed it.

On Saturday, we spent some time going to visit Amanda, who's been a bit out of sorts recently. She was hit pretty hard from breaking up with Hayden last year, and even though it had been her decision, she hadn't liked it.

She seemed glad of the company, and in fact seemed to be much

better than last time we'd seen her, which had been just before Tiltmas, when everything was looking bad in the Middle East. Since then, she'd apparently spent a fair bit of time visiting her family, and it seemed to have helped.

She told us that some of her better mood has come from winning a fairly big case at work recently, and that had done wonders for her confidence. She'd had a drug dealer put away for nine years. It isn't uncommon for her to win a case, but this particular dealer had been a right scumball, and had beaten up customers who couldn't pay, and other nasty stuff.

She'd taken a good bit of pride in his being locked up, and so she should. She does a good thing each time she takes a dangerous criminal off the streets.

## **Sunday, January 29<sup>th</sup> to Saturday, February 4<sup>th</sup> 2023**

There was a fairly decent sized uproar on Monday, when the government announced they'd ordered an investigation into the quality of teaching, and the teaching methods, of so called 'faith schools', where religion plays a key part in the general educational curriculum.

The Church of England and the Catholic Church in the UK both issued complaints that their religions were being unfairly targeted, which is fairly typical if you ask me. As soon as something happens that they don't like, they scream religious discrimination, especially if it's something that would make them act like responsible members of the community instead of special privilege cases.

The goal of the investigation, the government has said, is to ensure that standards of education are met, and that schools aren't used as places of indoctrination.

If you ask me, and you're reading my diaries so I assume you want my opinion, this is one of the most important things we could do. Religion in itself isn't a problem, but forcing a religion on people, especially young impressionable children, is obscene. If you're so confident of the persuasiveness and merits of your religion, you don't need to brainwash young children who're too young to understand the

facts.

This is the age of enlightenment, it's about time we started acting like it.

That evening, we got snow. The first snow in a couple of years, although it was only light to start with.

Over the next few days, the snow continued on and off, never getting too heavy, but it did start to settle at last on Wednesday. That made me start worrying about my car again, as I've never enjoyed the idea of driving in the snow.

It's not so much that I don't trust the car, because it's proven it can do the job. I'm more concerned that it'll encounter a situation it isn't designed for, just an unexpected slip it doesn't know how to handle, and it'll give control back to me, and I'll die. Because really, while I do have a driving licence, I haven't driven a metre since I passed my test. It's all been the car, and I have no real clue how to drive any more. Those skills have all dribbled out of my ear.

Thankfully, it's got me to work every day so far, and in the past it's driven all the way to London and back in far worse, so I should probably start to get a bit of confidence in it. I just can't help myself. I'm a worrier.

Thursday was fairly interesting as the NHS made a really cool announcement.

### NHS to test new robotic assistants

While the NHS's financial restrictions are somewhat less pressing since certain investments from the 9% supplemental tax have begun to reduce their costs, it is still an organisation that is in dire need of cost savings and efficiency improvements.

As a trial of methods of saving money in the long term, the Sheffield Hospital Trust has been given a grant by the government to pioneer robotic assistants in hospitals.

A total of six specially designed robots from companies in the UK will be evaluated in various scenarios over the next twelve months,

allowing for the possibility of wide scale roll out next year.

Each robot is specifically designed to perform a task that currently requires a healthcare professional, but really is a routine task that can be automated.

The prime example of this is the pillbot, a small robot which will travel a hospital ward, and dispense pills at the times that the doctor has designated they need to be dispensed. The pillbot, with the efficiency that is characteristic of computers, will be able to ensure it is always on time, and always dispenses the correct pills for each patient.

Another robot will go around the wards emptying bedpans, an unpleasant job that really doesn't require several years of medical training to be able to do.

It is hoped that as technologies advance, basic robots will take up more and more of the routine work in healthcare, allowing doctors and nurses to concentrate on where we need them the most - curing the sick, diagnosing problems, and providing compassionate assistance where needed.

\*

The list of bots is quite impressive. As well as the pillbot and bedpanbot, they have the washbot, the injectionbot, the clothesbot, and the cleanbot. They're all amazingly imaginatively named, but I guess it really makes sure there's no doubt as to their function when people talk about them.

It makes sense, though. All of those things are jobs that nurses do, and none of them require years of training and medical knowledge. The nurses will be able to spend more time making sure patients are doing well, monitoring them, talking to them about their symptoms, and generally caring for their health, instead of wiping arses and giving bed baths.

I got a grumpy message from Amanda on Friday morning, as

she'd discovered that Oxford station was about to be closed for the next five weeks for refurbishment and building of the new maglev platform. She asked if I could write an article and stir up enough complaints that they'd keep the station open, so she wouldn't have to catch the bus into work, but I had to disabuse her of the notion that I have quite that much influence.

I'm almost certain she was just kidding.

In work that day, we got the good news that Allied Combustibles had agreed to supply us with high purity hydrogen at the price we'd originally agreed with our last supplier, Element One Solutions. This was a big relief, as without *someone* to supply us with hydrogen, we had a really expensive lawn ornament instead of an advanced spaceplane.

I suppose if the worst came to the worst, we could have just made it ourselves. It isn't that hard to create hydrogen, I don't know the exact process, but I think that they just extract it from water, and how hard can that be?

I asked around, to see why it is we don't make our own, and apparently the reason is the same we don't mine our own metals and make our own computers. We want to focus on what we do, and do it well, rather than try and be an end-to-end Jack of all trades.

I suppose that makes sense. I think in this one instance though, we should at least give it some thought.

That evening, I picked up a letter that had come through the door while I was at work. It was one of my freedom of information replies, the one from Rush Common school. It had exactly what I'd asked for, a list of all the teachers who'd left or arrived at the school in the last fifteen years.

I didn't read through it in detail, it'd be pointless without the list from the other school, and I didn't want to become too familiar with it. I wanted to make sure my brain was fresh, and seeing the information for the first time when I looked at both lists together. I just knew if I tried to work it out from that one list, I'd start making assumptions that may not carry weight when I looked at both lists

together and tried and spot some patterns.

The IAEA announced on Saturday that they believe the Tehran area should be safe for people to move back into.

The announcement was greeted with a large amount of disbelief, as it's only been a few weeks since the bomb, and yet Mecca was bombed six years ago, and is still hazardous.

The IAEA had to release more statements, explaining that the bombing of Tehran was done with an air burst nuclear weapon. This would mean that very few ground particles were sucked up into the explosion to become radioactive, and so fallout from the weapon was much lower than the massive fallout from the smaller Mecca bomb, which had been detonated on the ground.

I did a little reading, not that I didn't believe the International Atomic Energy Agency, but I wanted to understand more about the process.

There's a lot of evidence to say they're right. Hiroshima and Nagasaki were both the same, air burst bombs, and in both cases, radiation was close to being back to normal in less than a month. As Tehran was a much bigger bomb, they'd given it an extra few weeks, but yeah, apparently readings from investigators on the ground in the destroyed city have confirmed it's safe to go back to.

I doubt there will be queues of cars, millions of people desperate to go back there, but I expect there will be some, and I expect that like the two Japanese cities, Tehran will be reborn.

## **Sunday, February 5<sup>th</sup> to Saturday, February 11<sup>th</sup> 2023**

### *Sunday and Monday*

On Sunday, Evie and I spent most of the day just relaxing in front of the games console. It was still too cold and snowy to do much else, so we were happy to huddle inside. She was playing Assassin's Creed 5, and I was doing my best to avoid telling her what to do.

Watching games is actually a lot more fun than it sounds. If you've never done it, give it a try. It's like an interactive film, where

you can relate to the main character because you know who it is. Even though I know it wasn't actually Evie running round and climbing buildings and other way more energetic things than either of us would ever get up to, it was still her brain behind it all, and that made it fun to watch.

Monday was a really busy day, which is why I've recorded today today, if you see what I mean. I wanted to record the day soon after it happened, so I could keep it all straight in my mind. The revelations of the day may have changed by the end of the week, and that may colour how I record it, so I'm doing it at the time, uncoloured.

So, what's the big deal? Well, I got my second letter in the post on Monday, the freedom of information request from Eynsham primary school. They'd included a quite snotty letter asking that I stop wasting their time with more FOI requests, as it costs them time and money to process each one, and while they have no idea why I'm asking for the information, they're sure it can't be worth the effort it's costing them.

I resisted the urge to send them a reply telling them that as a taxpayer, they work for me, and they have to conform to the law, whether they liked it or not. But I didn't. I was good, and I held my tongue, and just jumped up and down on top of their letter a couple of times.

Once I'd got that little fit of pique out of my system, I placed both lists on the table, and looked at them. I added the two lists of current staff members, ruled out any female teachers, as they'd likely not be physically strong enough to have committed the drowning murder, and cross referenced them to see if there were any correlations.

There were. Three male teachers had been at both schools within the past fifteen years.

Archie Hicks is the current music teacher at Eynsham primary school, and used to work at Rush Common, until he quit in 2012. He started at Eynsham in 2019, so he did something else for seven years in the middle.

Daniel Griffin left Rush Common primary school about a year ago, and before that had worked at Eynsham until 2018, when he'd

been fired for negligence in a chemistry lab leading to the injury of a student.

Asepeweta Shahedbaz hasn't worked at either school for over ten years. A quick search for his unusual name indicated he'd retired in 2011. I ruled him out right away as he'd likely be too old to have committed the hosepipe murder, which I reckon must have needed large amounts of physical strength.

That left just two possibles. Archie Hicks, and Daniel Griffin.

Daniel Griffin was a chemistry teacher, and three victims now have been killed with chemicals. His last name is Griffin, where the latest victim was Isobel Griffin.

A quick check of the public records didn't take long. Those are all online and easily searchable. Isobel Griffin was Daniel Griffin's stepmother.

Oh come on, that's so blindingly obvious that I can't believe he hasn't been caught yet.

Investigating in private is one thing, but keeping information like this from the police is something I won't do. This may help save the life of someone in a G town around here, and I can't keep it to myself.

Didcot police station closes in the evening, so I'll go round there first thing in the morning. Hopefully there won't be an incident overnight. I really hope there won't be. I don't want to call the Oxford police, I'd feel stupid dragging them all the way out here at 9pm on a Monday evening, but if someone gets killed this evening, when I could have told the police what I know, I'll feel like shit for the rest of my life.

*Tuesday*

I went to see the Didcot police this morning. I was there at 9am when the first one pulled up at the police station in his car.

As he unlocked the front door, he asked me what he could help with, and was it important, or could it wait till he'd had a cup of

coffee and got the front desk running.

I'd known him, kindof, for several years, although I have no idea what his name is. He knew who I was, and we'd chatted occasionally. He was the one who'd helped me catch CoNN when I had to evacuate my house last year cos of the gas leak. I just pointed to the paperwork I had in my hand. 'I think I've identified the Alphabet Killer,' I said to him.

He raised an eyebrow. 'If you were just a random member of the public, I'd probably have that cup of coffee first, but as it's you, let's see what you've got.'

We walked into the station, and sat down at a side table. I laid out the information I had, linking Daniel Griffin to three of the murders. It wasn't proof, of course, but it was serious evidence.

'You missed that Sarah Banks, the vet in Cholsey failed to keep his dog alive after it had been run over, and that Molly Cooper was his ex girlfriend.'

I blinked. I looked at him. 'You know? How the hell is this not public knowledge that you know?'

'We were hoping to not spook him, get him out in the open. He hasn't been to his house in about three months now, and we have plain clothes police in all towns and villages beginning with a G to look for him.'

'We only knew for sure ourselves when Isobel Griffin died. Before that all we had was circumstantial, but on the last one, he left some DNA samples.'

'They won't help you in the house his father lives, will they?' I asked.

'Actually, they will. DNA tests are easily good enough by now to prove an individual not just a family.'

'I know that,' I said. 'I mean, if he was family there, isn't it normal that his DNA *should* be around the house?'

'Not really, he didn't get on with his stepmother, evidently, and so never visited there.'

'Ahh, right.'

'Look, I know we can't stop you from publishing the story, but we'd really prefer to not alert him if we can avoid it. We want to try and get him before he gets anyone else.'

'I can understand where you're coming from,' I replied, 'but what

if he walks past someone on the street who'd otherwise have recognised him, and then later on he kills someone if your guys miss him?

'I came because I have a moral obligation to tell you what I know, but I don't have a legal one. I couldn't live with myself if my silence led to another death, so no, unless you can do better than "it would be nice", I'm publishing.'

'I understand. To be honest I don't disagree too much, but I have to tow the official line. Look, do me a favour, I helped you with your cat a few weeks ago, you help me back. Give me four hours, and we'll announce it ourselves at 1pm today. You can run your article as soon as you hear us, and we won't look like idiots for being outed by the press.'

'1pm? Sure I can do that,' I told him. I shook his hand and headed off home. I hadn't written the article at that point anyway, so 4 hours was fine with me.

I'd just got home at half nine, when I got a message from Reaction Engines. They needed me in, urgently, to do a press release.

I sat there in complete indecision. I had four hours to do a story, and it would be a huge one, and now my job needed me. I didn't know why, but they'd never called me in before, so it was obviously important.

I always knew that one day I'd have a conflict with my day job and my journalism, I just hadn't expected it to be on some massive story like this. When it came to it though, the company has been great to allow me to be flexible with when I worked and when I did my own things, so I wasn't about to let them down now.

I got back into my car and told it to drive me to work.

Of course, I did an article outline in the fifteen minute drive to work. It wasn't great, but it would do to start me off. I was kicking myself that I hadn't spent yesterday evening working on it, but I'd just assumed I'd have more time today. Once I got to work, despite wanting to hang around in the car and do some more writing, I saved it, got out of the car, and headed straight in to the meeting.

The news they needed me to do a press release for, was that

Element One Solutions, our old hydrogen supplier, was suing us for breach of contract.

Typical, they lose the business, and now they think that they can just get back on our side by taking us to court? That's *obviously* bound to make us all feel warm and fuzzy towards them.

We discussed the issue for over an hour. I was getting more and more fidgety, as I knew my other deadline was looming. By the time the meeting was over, it was almost 11am, and I had two hours to get my story out there.

I wasn't going to let Reaction Engines down though. As I said, I owe them, so the first thing I did out of the meeting was to start work on the press release. Thankfully, when someone was suing us, I didn't really need to research technical issues, talk to engineers, and decipher their sentences into things that normal people can understand. It was just a case of announcing that this has happened, and that we're the good guys.

I passed the press release over to Larry, who said it was good, and I sent it to the PR company we use, as well as sending it to our own mailing list.

I had about 50 minutes left before my deadline. I took my lunch break and did the article in record time.

### Police seek man in connection with Alphabet killings

Police are hoping to question 38-year-old Daniel Griffin, a former schoolteacher at Rush Common primary school in Abingdon, in connection with the Alphabet murders that have plagued Oxfordshire for the last year.

Mr. Griffin was last seen some weeks ago, and it is hoped that some of his friends or family will know of his whereabouts.

Links have been established between Mr. Griffin and several of the Alphabet Killer victims.

Victim 1: Ms. Jodie Simmons was a colleague of Mr. Griffin at Rush Common primary school.

Victim 2: Toby Harrison has no known connection Mr. Griffin.

Victim 3: Sarah Banks was Mr. Griffin's vet, and had recently failed to save his dog from dying after being injured in a traffic accident.

Victim 4: Molly Cooper was the ex-girlfriend of Mr. Griffin.

Victim 5: Aidan Kerr was the headmaster at Eynsham primary school, and fired Mr. Griffin in 2018.

Victim 6: Isobel Griffin was the stepmother of Mr. Griffin.

Police are urging members of the public to not approach Mr. Griffin if they see him, but ask that they immediately call 999 and alert them.

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It was a really weak article, I could have done so much better with more time, but time was a luxury I didn't have. I called around in my last ten minutes, and told all of my biggest customers I was about to expose the Alphabet Killer, and to be ready at 1pm to get the story.

Right on the dot, I published the article, and within minutes I'd made almost a thousand pounds on it.

The police didn't make their announcement till 3pm. I could have screamed. I could have spent two more hours on the article and made it so much better.

I looked like a hack, a sloppy journalist. I added a note to the site explaining my poor work and the need to get the article out in under an hour. I then proceeded to make it better throughout the afternoon.

By the end of the day, the article looked much better. I'd added a video of the suspect, a rotating head shot to show him from all angles, and I'd added in more information and tidied it up a lot.

I'd made over £1,700, and the hunt was on across the county for Daniel Griffin.

I got home that evening to find Evie was taking me out to dinner to celebrate breaking the story. She took me out to an all you can eat

pizza place in Oxford, and we gorged on pizza all evening.

It was a great way to end the day.

*Wednesday*

You remember how yesterday was awesome? Well, today wasn't. Israel caught the Iranians sneaking a new nuclear bomb into West Jerusalem. There was a fire fight, and the Israelis killed the Iranians who were probably planning to blow up the bomb and destroy the entire Israeli government.

That's when it got even worse.

In retaliation, at about midday UK time, Israel launched another nuclear missile at Iran. We don't know where it was targeted, because as promised, we didn't let them. HMS *Duncan*, one of the two air defence destroyers we've moved into the international waters off the coast of Israel, shot down the missile as soon as a nuclear signature was confirmed.

The Israelis are furious at us, the Americans are warning us to keep our noses out of the 'dispute', and the Iranians publicly thanked us, to which our government responded that they find the actions of Iran reprehensible. Their attempt to try and detonate another nuclear weapon was unacceptable, and we certainly didn't shoot down the missile to assist the government of Iran, we did it to save the people of Iran.

And so then Iran's government has announced that they could have intercepted it themselves, and they didn't need British 'interference'.

So, who knows how many civilian lives the Royal Navy just saved, but all we got for it was criticism.

Actually that's not true. Just about everyone who isn't involved in the conflict sent us messages of support, especially the Japanese, who're obviously a country intimately familiar with the result of nuclear weapons.

The French, Germans, Russians, even the Argentinians, all sent us messages saying they supported our actions. It's probably not going to

be too helpful if the Israelis decide to attack us, I expect they could sink two unprotected destroyers, but it's nice that everyone sent us a thank you note.

I think we did a really good thing today, even if it made us some enemies. We saved a lot of lives, and most of them will be the lives of civilians. It happened quite early, so I skipped work for a bit and did some polling in Oxford, to see what people thought.

Generally, the responses I got were a mixture of 'we did the right thing' to 'I just don't want us to get involved'. There were a few 'We should be on the side of Israel', and one who said we should just 'let the towelheads fry'. He looked like his IQ was smaller than his shoe size though, so I didn't take him too seriously as a representative cross section of the public.

I bet he'd have had a nose bleed if he'd tried to say 'representative cross section'.

### *Thursday*

They've gone and done it again. They've detonated another bunch of nukes. Israel has fired another missile, and this time, HMS *Duncan* wasn't there to stop it. I don't know why, but it wasn't.

Thankfully, kindof thankfully anyway, the Israelis didn't target a major population centre this time. The missile was one known as a MIRV, which is a missile with multiple warheads, each one of which can hit a different target. They've targeted Ghiyam Air Force Base, which is about 100km south of where Tehran used to be, Omidiyeh Air Base in the south of the country, and an army base south of the city of Isfahan.

Three Israeli air bursts later, and the bases were gone, and 2500 Iranian military personnel were dead, and also an unknown number of civilians in the Isfahan bomb, which wiped out a small town just beside the army base.

Even though they were all air bursts, and even though they weren't over any major cities, I can't help but think of all the radiation people in western Iran are getting. Not to mention the fallout over Iraq, Kurdistan, Syria, and who knows how far it'll spread.

That's going to be cutting down the life expectancy of millions of people, just for revenge, and to destroy a few military bases. They could have used conventional weapons for that, if they really had to do it, and maybe Sepahan Shahr, the small town south of Isfahan, would still be there.

It scares me, probably scares everyone, just how freely these people are using nuclear weapons right now. I can't really believe how easy it comes to them, and how ready they are to kill by the million. I know these are the more unstable regimes in the world, but still, nuclear weapons. We'd gone 70 years without one going off in anger, and now these two are throwing them around like they're toys.

And what about global winds? This is going to affect everyone in the northern hemisphere. Maybe the southern too, though I admit I don't really know how the winds go. Maybe the southern hemisphere will be affected, maybe not. I'm sure it won't affect us too much in the UK, but it's going to have *an* effect, some days or weeks knocked off of all of our lives, all for the sake of Israel's revenge strike.

### *Friday*

The University of Chicago moved the Doomsday Clock to two minutes to midnight today, citing the instance of a US backed power detonating nuclear weapons against a Russian backed power, with the US and Russia both actively opposing each other in the area.

Russia has claimed that one of its planes was affected by the Ghiyam nuclear explosion while in the air, and only its hardened avionics had saved it from crashing and killing its pilot, although an unofficial comment from the Russians was that the Americans were so scared of their fighter pilots, they had to get their allies to try and nuke them from a thousand kilometres away instead of engaging them head to head.

OK, it's not the kind of fighting talk we want to hear, but that was kind of funny, in a morbid sort of way.

Despite all of this, I still managed to pick up some science news. I wrote an article on that, because really, I wanted to not be writing about wars and crap. I want to be positive, look what we can do as a

species if we stop screwing around and killing each other.

### Russian *Wotan* rover reaches its first goal

The Russian rover, *Wotan*, which is currently on the surface of Mercury, has managed to achieve its first goal of reaching the shade of the rim of the Wang Meng crater it landed in.

The goal, which means it is now safe from being destroyed by direct sunlight at a temperature of 450 degrees Celsius, was achieved with just 6 days remaining of the 88 it had started with. Failure to find shade within the next 6 days would have led to the electronics on the rover being destroyed within minutes once the Sun had risen over the horizon.

Now it is safe, the *Wotan* rover will continue to head towards the wall of the crater, in the hopes of finding significant quantities of ice to examine.

Although the temperature in direct sunlight is extremely high, and there's no atmosphere so any ice would be in a vacuum, neither of these facts are expected to be a problem for finding ice on the planet.

Heat can only be transferred in three ways, convection, conduction and radiation. Convection on Mercury is impossible due to lack of an atmosphere. Radiation from the Sun in the shade of a crater is impossible, as it requires line of sight, and so that only leaves indirect radiation from the ground, and conduction, the heating of the ground and allowing that heat to spread into shaded areas.

Anyone that has ever sat in the cool shade of a tree knows that the ground is very slow to pass on its heat. You can sit on cool grass, while a few centimetres away, the ground is scorching in direct sunlight. The same holds true on Mercury, and it is expected that while some amount of thermal transfer from conduction will have prevented the ice from forming close to the edge of the shaded area, it will not have been able to prevent all ice from forming.

Satellite images have confirmed the presence of ice with a high degree of confidence, and so it is expected that *Wotan* will locate ice within the next days or weeks. The biggest unknown is whether the ice is on the surface, locked in rocks, or under a thin layer of dust or rock.

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### *Saturday*

No further major war news today, for which I'm glad. Evie and I spent the day chatting, about how we both felt, how stressed we were about what was going on, what we'd like the other to do to make each other's lives a bit easier, stuff like that. It was a really helpful conversation, the kind that all couples should have once every so often, especially in a crisis.

We didn't even pick up a computer or turn on the TV for about four hours. It was amazing, and possibly the longest either of us has been without internet access while awake for years.

We're both really concerned with what's going on, and even more concerned that it may spread. On the other hand, we're both finding that we're getting a good level of support from the other. We're both being as conscientious for each other as we can be, and that's making a difference.

We can't save the world, but can do our best to help each other to survive in it.

### **Sunday, February 12<sup>th</sup> to Saturday, February 18<sup>th</sup> 2023**

We spent Sunday with an impromptu get together with all the gang, and we watched mindless comedy films all day. We watched the first three *Despicable Me* films, and finished with *What Happened to the Elephant?* We all needed a bit of a cheer up, and I think we all ended up in better spirits because of it.

That's also why we didn't watch *Despicable Me 4*, we wanted to be laughing, not cringing.

On Monday, the snow was starting to melt and there were clear patches on the ground, which I'm not taking as a promise that spring is on the way, but it's better than falling over on the icy paths all the while.

The MOD announced that initial findings on the nuclear missile that was launched last week showed that it was launched from a submarine. Everyone had suspected that Israel had those capabilities, but had never proven it until now. The real surprise was that the reason that HMS *Duncan* had failed to shoot down the missile, is that it had such a low radar footprint that it was almost missed entirely. In other words, it was a stealth missile.

While many analysts had expected Israel to have submarine nukes, they were surprised to hear about stealth missiles. As far as they were all saying, they hadn't heard of anyone with stealth missiles, not even the Americans or Russians. Stealth coatings, not to mention designing the missile profile to be hard for radar to spot, are so expensive as to be prohibitive. They were saying it would turn a ten million pound missile into a twenty million pound missile, and that's a lot of extra money to use on one missile, nuclear or not.

We had a newsflash on Monday evening, that I hadn't picked up a single moment of warning from my feeds on, which was most unusual. A BBC reporter was on the scene in the MOD, as the press was busy being herded out. It was worrying, if they're moving the press out of the Ministry of Defence, was something big going down? The BBC guy put us all straight fairly quickly though, by letting us know that he believed they were all being kicked out because some new bug bugs had been detected.

The new bug bugs, which were like the ones found in Downing Street a few years ago, had been smaller and more devious than the last lot. These new ones were inspired by termites, and so were tiny, much smaller than the cockroaches of the last batch, and more importantly, they acted like termites.

They'd literally got into the walls of the MOD.

A scan using some kind of magical MOD snooping scanner had

detected dozens of them, they were in the walls, the floors, wherever there was wood or plasterboard for them too dig into and hide themselves.

They were all drawing power from inductive chargers all across the MOD building, and who knows how long they'd been there. You don't expect spying devices to burrow into the wall and hide from you. Well, I don't anyway, which probably explains why I'm not a spy.

One of those would be awesome though, I could snoop on anyone and get some really good articles!

And when I say snoop, of course, I mean in the best interests of humanity at large, not for petty gossip. Honest!

The US made a slip on one of its news broadcasts of the war in the middle of the week. Usually they're so careful, but this time, they really screwed up and let a big secret out of the bag.

### US railgun project no longer in testing

For many years, the railgun has been a weapon in the province of science fiction. A weapon capable of firing solid projectiles, such as bullets, at incredibly high speeds, up to six times the speed of a bullet from a normal gun.

When fired at such high speeds, the projectile has an incredible amount of energy, and where a bullet from a gun could be stopped by a bulletproof jacket, a bullet from a railgun could shoot through half a metre of toughened steel, and a projectile the size of a golf ball could easily be used to penetrate the protective armour of the strongest tank, killing all inside with the energy of the impact.

The railgun uses a powerful electromagnet to propel the projectiles at such high speeds, and where a gun uses explosive gunpowder to propel its bullet, there is no explosion in a railgun, just a magnetic field.

The railgun has been tested for many years, with early examples

stretching back to the 1980's. It was believed, until now, that they remained a purely experimental device, until a news crew onboard the USS *John F Kennedy* inadvertently caught an unknown weapon being fired from the side of the ship, below the level of the deck.

While the weapon has never been seen, only the wake of the projectile was visible to the news crew, audio analysis of the sound of the shot being fired was an almost exact match for commonly available video footage of railgun tests from several years ago.

The US Navy has so far refused to confirm or deny the weapons they may or may not have in the field of combat.

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I didn't get many sales of the article, I think it was a bit niche, but it's still really interesting. Not so much from a military point of view, I don't care about that, but if they can accelerate bullets to stupidly high speeds, why not rockets? They could have rockets launched from underground, and fire them up into space, no fuel needed, very light and efficient rockets.

Actually now I think about it, that's partly what we're looking at in Skylon 2 isn't it. We partially shoot the spaceplane from underground using an electromagnetic launcher. Duh, how could I forget that!

Just checking back on my notes, we're accelerating to 300km/h right now, which is what, oh, just 0.08km/s. We need almost 11km/s to escape into orbit without any fuel at all. Wow that's like, almost 40,000km/h, that's crazy speeds. No wonder nobody's ever done that before.

The NHS approved use of a really interesting new invention on Friday. A company in Norwich, Lifesigns Biotech, had used a government grant from the untargeted medical research budget to develop a new type of personal health monitor.

The new monitor, which they're calling the EHM, Embedded Health Monitor, is placed under your skin, and monitors things like pulse, blood pressure, levels of blood sugar, breathing rate, and if any

of the levels get too low or too high, it'll call an ambulance to your location, based on your GPS position. It looks exceptionally useful, but also a bit big brotherish. Although then again, our phones track our locations all the time, so do lenstops, so do pads, so do CCTV cameras, what's one more, especially when it may do so much good.

I'm not going to get one just yet, but who knows, maybe one day if I feel I need to, I will. Right now though, I feel pretty fit and healthy.

OK, no, that's not true, I haven't exercised outside of the bedroom in months, so I'm probably not fit. I do feel healthy enough.

## **Sunday, February 19<sup>th</sup> to Saturday, February 25<sup>th</sup> 2023**

The news on Sunday was bad, but yet, not half as bad as it could have been.

The Americans and the Russians confirmed that their planes had been involved in a live fire incident, where the Russians had been escorting Iranian aircraft, and the Americans had opened fire, allegedly not realising they were Russians.

Both sides described what happened next as a three minute lucky break. Each side had fired missiles at each other, but as both sides had highly stealthy fighters, both kept on missing, their missiles losing radar locks, or being fooled by decoys. In the end, both sides retreated, and no damage was done, but how bad is it that they opened fire in the first place.

It's beyond typical for the US military to shoot at the wrong target. In the last few wars they've been involved in, they just keep on doing it. You'd think with all their technology, they'd have the ability to not do that kind of thing.

Or maybe it's their reliance on technology that causes it. They don't know what it is that they see on their radar, so obviously it's not theirs, so it must be a threat.

Russia has issued a warning to the States to not engage their aircraft again, and the Americans have warned the Russians to stop protecting the Iranians, or more accidents could happen.

At least they didn't shoot each other down, or things would be another step closer to direct conflict between those two, and none of us want that. I don't think even they want that, but with testosterone poisoning running rampant in both of their governments, I don't want to count on common sense prevailing.

On Monday at work, I dropped everything to write a new article as quickly as I could. I wasn't working from the wires this time, someone in the office had told me that as they drove into work, they'd seen it all starting, and so I drove over to Garsington to get a first hand story.

Reporting from the wires is fine, but a first hand report, that's much more fun to do.

### Suspected Alphabet Killer captured

Daniel Griffin, the suspected Alphabet Killer, has been arrested after being spotted by a member of the public in the Plough Inn in Garsington, just to the east of Oxford.

When he was arrested by police, he is reported to have been in possession of a handgun, which would fit the pattern for his next potential attack, of a gun in Garsington after the formaldehyde in Farmoor.

Mr. Griffin surrendered without a fight after armed police surrounded the Plough Inn, and demanded he surrender himself. Other members of public were allowed to exit, and Mr. Griffin spoke to police by phone for almost an hour before he left the building, looking unperturbed and calm.

Police have hailed the observance of the public as being key to the capture of Mr. Griffin, and police were on the scene within 90 seconds of the report, as plain clothes officers have been patrolling all Oxfordshire towns and villages with names beginning with a G in the hopes of catching the Alphabet Killer.

Thames Valley Police spokesperson, Inspector Maria Baier, said that

the operation, which involved over two hundred officers, had been “one of the largest in Oxfordshire history,” and she was “delighted with the outcome.”

Mr. Griffin, 38, from Oxford, has been wanted for questioning by police for over two months, since the murder of Aidan Kerr in December.

\*

I was so relieved when they got him. Partly because of the whole issue of him killing people, but more personally because my name was out there on the articles. I wasn't sure he'd be able to find me, and even if he did, I didn't know if I was on his hit list. But even so, I hadn't been overly comfortable with him on the loose.

Don't get me wrong, right now I'm far more concerned about the shitstorm in the Middle East spreading, but still, it's nice to have one less thing to worry about.

Assuming he's guilty of course. I think he is, but I could be wrong.

There was a really unexpected announcement on Wednesday. The Israelis showed a video of the bomb that the Iranians had sent to Jerusalem. It had taken them a while to extract it from its case, in case there had been booby traps on the device, but once it had been removed, and the outer casing of the warhead itself was visible, everyone was in for a shock.

The writing on the side of the warhead was in Korean, proclaiming the glory and everlasting rule of Kim Jong-un.

It looks like the Iranians *didn't* have the capability to make their own nuclear weapons. They'd just obtained some from the North Koreans.

Of course, the next question became did they get them from North Korea before or after China took over, or was this China helping them? Experts agreed it probably wasn't China. They'd have little to gain by helping Iran, and so the general theory was that it was a secret deal between North Korea and Iran, or possibly even a personal deal

between some of the escaping North Korean nuclear scientists, who may have just stolen a number of bombs and taken a boat to Iran with a massive bargaining chip in return for their protection.

Nobody knows. Iran isn't telling, they're claiming that the Israeli images are fake, and their weapons have Iranian markings, but it really makes too much sense. They didn't bother to cover their tracks because when you blow up a nuke, there isn't usually much left.

The rest of the week quietened down after that, thankfully. There were no more incidents between Russia and the States, and the standoff between the Israelis and the whole Arab world seemed to be continuing, with nobody willing to move. If you ask me, that's the best way for a war to be. Nobody gets hurt.

Work seems to be enjoying the fact that I get the news first from the feeds on my pad. I give them the gossip before they hear it elsewhere, and they lap it up. It's small scale, but it's another reason I'm reminded why I'm a reporter, even if only part time for the moment. I love to know what's going on, but I also love to tell people what's going on. Seeing people gain new understanding, new views, new information, or even just giving them the gossip first, that's a cool thing to see, and knowing you helped them to gain that new knowledge, that's really rewarding.

The weekend couldn't come soon enough though. I love work, but I wanted to just relax with Evie for the weekend.

On Saturday, as the last of the snow had gone, we finally decided that the cats probably viewed their new home as being home, and so we unlocked the cat flap so they could explore outside.

Actually, we also opened the back door too, so they could just poke their nose out while still staying in the safety of the house if they wanted. We decided that even though it made the house a bit cold, it'd be better than just offering them a hole in the wall.

I think it was the right decision, because they both spent quite a bit of time sitting in the kitchen, sniffing the air from outside, and walking up to the back door, before backing away again.

NewCat was the first to be brave enough to go outside, though she was cautious as she did, sniffing the air, checking all around her for

new dangers, and going slowly.

She didn't worry for too long though, after about five minutes she saw a bird and was off after it.

CoNN stayed in the kitchen looking out, and after a while, went back to his beanbag. I guess he'll do his own exploring when the humans aren't around to bother him.

It was an anxious couple of hours for me, but NewCat did eventually find her way back home. I don't know how far she'd gone, but I was relieved when she popped up over the fence, and stood there looking down at me as I sat on the back step waiting for her. I thought I'd be best to be there so she recognised the house was the right one.

I got a meow, followed by her trotting back into the house, without even a pause for a stroke after I'd sat there for two hours. In the cold.

*Bloody cats.*

## **Sunday, February 26<sup>th</sup> to Saturday, March 4<sup>th</sup> 2023**

I haven't seen CoNN go out all week yet, but NewCat has been in and out all the time. She's even brought us a rat, or possibly a big grey mouse. I'm not sure which it was, and I didn't investigate too closely. I just thanked her and threw it away when she wasn't watching. I don't think it was completely dead.

On Tuesday, the ACLU's court case against the Muslim Registration Act collapsed. The Supreme Court ruled that while the Constitution did indeed give a right to privacy, there was no loss of privacy with the tracking cards that Muslim and Arab citizens were required to carry. Accessing the data was still subject to a court order, and so unless reasonable suspicion was present, nobody would ever see this information. It was the equivalent of CCTV or ID cards, nothing more.

As for the requirement to invade people's homes and search them on a regular basis, they agreed that this was a violation of the Fourth Amendment of the Constitution. However they ruled that they

believed that there were reasonable grounds, due to the number of attacks against the country, and the de-facto state of aggression between the USA and the majority of the Arab and Muslim world, to consider it to be fair to believe there is reasonable suspicion for anyone who's covered under the act to possibly be an enemy of the state.

In other words, we'll let the government carry on for now.

There wasn't much of an outcry. By now, people had become more used to the law. Nobody had been carted off without evidence being found that they were involved in terrorism, and the number of attacks *had* gone down, so a lot of the population were starting to think that this aberration was the right way to do things.

Me, I think it's disgusting. Enforced searches of people's houses based on religion or ancestry, that's not right. It can't ever be right. Base it on someone's actions, sure. If they've made themselves a person of suspicion they deserve to be spied on, but not because of where they were born or the religion of their parents.

At least they admitted it was a violation of their constitution. Even though they didn't do anything about it, apparently it opens the door to more possible oppositions to the policy, and so maybe, some day, it can be overturned, or weakened somehow. The ACLU was looking pretty dumbfounded and defeated after the verdict, and their lawyers didn't really seem to know what to say. If they could lose such an obvious case, what was the point? The legal landscape had changed.

Unemployment was down again on Wednesday, the first time I'd actually bothered to check it in six months. For the last few months, everyone had been too wrapped up in what was going on in Iran to really care, and so the figures just hadn't made the news. Now things were looking like, sure they may affect us one day, but it won't be today, they actually managed to get a timeslot.

It was down by 0.2%, which equates to around another 60,000 jobs in the economy. That's a slowdown in the job creation numbers, but I guess with a lot of uncertainty about the war going on, it's not surprising really.

I'd enjoyed going out to do some first hand reporting when I went to watch and report on the arrest of the Alphabet Killer, and so I decided to do some more of it this week. I went over to the main Oxford train station, which was still closed, and talked to some of the engineers there.

Obviously it wasn't as exciting as the capture of a serial killer, but it got me out of the office, and it was a nice bit of fresh air.

### Oxford station redevelopment

Oxford train station has been undergoing extensive redevelopment for the last few weeks, much to the annoyance of commuters.

All trains that were due to stop at Oxford have been replaced by buses, and while through trains still pass through the station, nothing is stopping there.

The reason for the closure, as most in the area know, is the new maglev platform which is being built there, and which it is hoped will give Oxford residents access to London in around 15 minutes, as opposed to the hour it currently takes.

The maglev is planned to be operational by 2026, but some campaigners have been hoping to have the Oxford line open more quickly, with trains running between Oxford and London by early 2024.

The new platform is being built to the west side of the station, and a number of buildings on that side of the station have been knocked down to accommodate the maglev. The British Transport Police will be housed in a new building close to the station, and Oxford's youth hostel has been demolished and may not be replaced.

Oxford will be the main stopping point for the London to Bristol maglev, and half of all maglev trains will stop there. The other half, which are non stop between the two cities, will instead continue west through Didcot and never branch up to Oxford.

Engineers working on the project say that the new platform is running to schedule, and the station should reopen on time on March the 13<sup>th</sup>.

\*

I think Amanda will be the most relieved person on the planet when it reopens. She's been having to catch the bus to work every day, and it's slow, smelly, and annoying, apparently. I've given her a lift in a couple of times when my schedule has coincided with hers, but that doesn't happen very often, and so she's been quite unhappy with the whole situation.

The Iraqi government issued a statement on Thursday, saying that the radiation levels in Baghdad had risen significantly since the Israeli nuclear strikes on Iran. They were nowhere near the levels that have been seen in Basra after the meltdown of the nuclear plant just across the border, but they're still worryingly high.

They've requested international assistance in trying to combat the problem, and a number of countries, including ours, have announced they'll try and help. To be honest though, I don't know what we can do. We can help them scrub things down, we can help them replace topsoil, but really, there isn't much anyone can do other than to wait it out and hope it's got a short half life.

I suppose at least our experts can test that. Is it something with a half life measured in weeks or millions of years? I'd expect weeks, but if there's any uranium 238 fallout, that's not going anywhere for the next 4.4 billion years.

On Saturday, there was a really interesting day of TV that Evie and I watched. OK, I watched, as she looked occasionally out of the corner of her eye as she worked.

It was an all day marathon of the best episodes of *The Sky at Night*, to celebrate 100 years since the birth of Patrick Moore. There were episodes from back in the 1960's, about things we now know are wrong, there was the *Apollo 11* Moon landing episode, the discovery of Charon, loads of them. They didn't show any of the newer ones, as it was all about Patrick Moore, but I really enjoyed it. It's a real shame the BBC didn't keep the very first ones, they would have been

really interesting to watch. Even so, the earlier ones were full of Patrick Moore running round, doing this that or the other, and the later ones were all a bit depressing, with him sitting in his chair, sometimes not seeming to even be aware what was going on. It was sad, though not altogether unexpected, when he died.

He really did lead the way for all of the other great TV science communicators though. Sagan, Cox, Tyson, they all owe a whole lot to him.

## **Sunday, March 5<sup>th</sup> to Saturday, March 11<sup>th</sup> 2023**

On Sunday, it made a bit of an internet splash, but didn't make the main news, when Linden Labs, the creators of the game Second Life, announced they were closing down, and that Second Life would be offline effective immediately.

Nobody was really too surprised. I used to play Second Life back in the day, but it'd been shrinking for years. I got bored with it, and ended up just not going back one day. I think a lot of people had the same experience, and so in the end, it was bound to die.

It had been the first big online community I'd been part of though, and I'd made myself a house, a really nice one, and so I was a bit sad to see it all go.

Well, sad nostalgic, not actual sad.

The week at work started slowly, thankfully. There's not been much news from the Middle East either. It seems that both sides have lost so many planes that air combat is becoming rarer. It isn't like World War 2, where a plane is made in a few days, and a ship in a couple of months. These things take months or years to make each one, and so realistically, your war is what you have at the start plus what you can buy. You'd need a long war to have what you can build make much of a difference.

We had a bit of a shock on Wednesday, when there was news from the States that Arnie had died. I don't think anyone expected