

Starless & Bible Black

Steve Haddon

Against The Rules

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For my wife, who has patiently read this manuscript, many, many times; provided endless encouragement; and inspired me to complete this project.

1

Is it me? (Or is it Mu?)

*If you've been bad
Taking more than you need
Pillaging the earth
Ravaging the seas
Mother Nature won't forget
Won't forget the disease
The disease in your head
Filled with greed*

Planet B - Cosmic Puzzle. 2002

"What the fuck!" exclaimed Martin, as he paused one of his favourite tracks and stepped back from his telescope. *Nah, that's not possible! They don't just go out. I've got that wrong. Fucking stupid.*

Martin King is the unlikely hero of our story. He is a middle-aged science teacher, carrying a few extra pounds, with a passion for astronomy. Nerd? Maybe. But he would prefer words like "intelligent", "knowledgeable" and "enthusiastic". He is in awe of the Universe. Even with a degree in physics, he still can't get his head around it. It just seems too... big; too complicated; too unfathomable. He doesn't have a better explanation about what the Universe *is*. But he's not convinced the experts are anywhere close. And he tells himself, a serious scientist should always remain sceptical and be prepared to challenge everything.

Whilst his friends had been out celebrating on New Year's Eve, Martin had taken advantage of a crisp, clear night, to spend a few hours looking up at the stars. Alone in his back garden in

deepest Wales, outside the small village of Llareggub, it was just past one a.m. when the inexplicable happened. He had readjusted his telescope to point at one of his favourite night-sky objects – the Andromeda galaxy – when he had seen something... that wasn't quite right.

Time for another beer, he decided.

With headphones around his neck, he went inside, took a bottle of Peroni from the fridge, rolled a cigarette and returned to his back garden. He had enjoyed a good beer since his Uni days, but smoking was a recent addition.

Martin didn't consider smoking an addiction. He justified it by telling himself it helped him stay calm and remain focused. And, more importantly, it got him off the antidepressants. Martin took it badly when his wife, Jane, confessed to having an affair and left him two and a half years ago. Very badly. He had never been diagnosed with depression, but for most of his adult life, he had quietly struggled with anxiety; self-doubt; and the occasional panic attack. And he didn't see this coming. Not for a moment did it occur to Martin that he had marital problems – although more objective observers were already taking bets on how much longer it would last. So his wife's departure lamped him – and resulted in an escalation of panic attacks, and being prescribed antidepressants.

The drugs worked – inasmuch as they introduced a calmness he had never before experienced. But Martin had also headed off into a numb, detached, couldn't give a fuck world. "Laid back" went nowhere close to describing it. When taking lessons, the normally "*stick to the curriculum Martin*" had gone completely off the rails. And his pupils soon realised they could easily steer him onto pretty much any tangential topic. Science had become the kids' favourite lesson. Unfortunately, science didn't get much of a look in. It was now a pupil-driven free-for-all - which included:

I don't see how physics is actually useful, sir. Do you use it at home?

Was University fun, sir?

Sir, is it true that you were in a rock band?

Sir, could you explain how a lightsabre works?

Do you think science will save the planet, sir?

In the battle between pupil cunning and chilled-out teacher, the pupils had had a resounding victory. Which Martin was completely oblivious to. However, he was sufficiently in touch with reality to realise it was a step too far when he told the RI teacher: "All this God shit is total bollocks!" Martin went back to the doctor and explained that his permanent state of '*chilled-out man*' was not ideal, and he needed to get off the antidepressants. He asked the doctor if there was any medication that could be prescribed for him, to take as and when he needed it.

"Something that would provide an instant calming hit," he suggested.

The doctor smiled and replied, "There's stuff that will do that, but it's not available through the NHS."

Shortly after his visit to the doctors, one of Martin's colleagues introduced him to the wonders of nicotine, and he had never looked back.

By the time Martin had finished his cigarette, which had countered the adrenaline rush, he had convinced himself he must have been mistaken. He wasn't the sort to be trusting his own eyes.

Schoolboy error, he told himself, as he walked back to his telescope.

He readjusted his telescope, to account for the Earth's rotation, and took another look. "Where the fuck is Mu?" he said, quite loudly. He retraced his steps, and...

Fuck!... fuck!... fuck!... What the actual fuck?

Another beer, another cigarette and a stern talking to himself. *Don't be so bloody stupid, Martin*, didn't help. Still no Mu. He spent the rest of the night watching every available news channel, and trawling the internet for confirmation of what he had discovered. He tried all the obvious websites: from NASA, to astronomy.ru.

"Nothing. Sod all," he mumbled.

At just past five a.m., he posted on Twitter “Anyone know where Mu went?” and exhausted, fell asleep on the sofa.

Martin was awoken just after midday by the angry meows of Captain Cat. “What the fuck am I doing here, Captain?” he asked, realising he’d not made it into bed.

Captain Cat responded with several more insistent meows.

“Alright, alright. I’m coming. You need to be more patient. It’s not the end of the world, is it?” replied Martin.

Captain Cat thought differently and escalated the meowing further. Whilst feeding the cat, Martin remembered something...

Shit... bollocks... I’m supposed to be at The Triangle.

The Triangle Inn was a public house in Llareggub, and he had arranged to meet up with his regular drinking buddies at midday, to, in their words, ‘*get the New Year off to a good start*’.

Martin arrived at The Triangle nearly ninety minutes late. Until five years ago, he had spent New Year’s Day – with his wife – disrupting the local fox hunt. During his final New Year’s Day outing, Bill, the organiser of the protest, had warned Martin about posting any pictures on social media.

“They are tracking us,” Bill had said.

“What? They! Who’s ‘they?’” asked Martin.

“The Secret Service”, Bill whispered.

Martin dismissed this as another Bill conspiracy theory, but made a mental note to remove all the pictures taken at previous hunt protests from his Facebook account. Particularly those tagging Bill. He totally forgot about deleting the ‘incriminating evidence’ from Facebook, until three weeks later, when he received a shocking call from Bill’s wife. Her husband had been involved in a tragic accident. Apparently, Bill – one of the most cautious drivers Martin had ever sat in a car with – had suffered a blow-out on the M54, whilst travelling at almost 90 MPH in the fast lane. Bill was pronounced dead at the scene of the accident. Martin put the phone down, deleted everything from his Facebook account, and informed Jane they wouldn’t be doing any more fox hunt protests.

“Yeah, right! Well, fuck the foxes. They can fend for themselves from now on!” he had replied, when Jane had suggested, “It’s just a coincidence”.

And since then, it was New Year’s Day at The Triangle.

“Fashionably late as ever Martin,” Gerwyn Jones shouted across the bar.

Martin smiled, waved, and as usual, headed over to the jukebox. Ever since The Triangle had put in a jukebox that streamed any song you could think of, from the cloud, Martin had been on a mission to provide a musical education to his less-well-informed friends. He selected a few interesting tracks, went to the bar, got a round in, and headed over to the table.

“What shite have you put on for us today?, Gareth asked.

“Hey Dude,” Martin replied, “but that’s not important.”

“Whoa!”, “What?”, “Strewth!” “Eh?” was the chorus of replies.

Martin smiled, “Yeah. I know. Shock horror. But last night a star went out–”

“This isn't Hey Jude,” interrupted Rob.

“Dude! Hey Dude. Kula Shaker. Did you guys hear what I just told you? Mu just vanished right in front of my eyes.”

The ribbing started immediately...

“A bird probably shat on your lens.”

“Were you having a few beers to see in the New Year?”

“Neo’s been on the blue pills again.”

Martin had earned the nickname ‘Neo’ after expounding some fairly far out theories about the Universe and existence – which were, admittedly, inspired by The Matrix.

“Look. I’m absolutely certain. I checked everything. This isn’t a once-in-a-lifetime event. It’s mega-annum-level shit. Did you guys not see my Twitter post?”

“Erm no,” they all replied.

“Do any of you follow me on Twitter?”

Again a unified “No.”

“Why the fuck would we follow you on Twitter?” asked Greg.
“We have the pleasure of experiencing you in real life.”

"If there is such a thing as '*real life*,'" Rob added, with a wry smile.

"Seriously guys. If I'd had my eye to a telescope for a million years, I would be lucky to see something like that happen. It's absolutely mega! What I don't understand is... how come there's no mention of it... Anywhere! I checked all the news channels; social media; and every astronomy, space and science website. There's nothing." It piqued their interest, but not enough to prevent them from continuing to take the piss.

"First thing tomorrow Martin, you need to get yourself off to an optician, that is," suggested Gareth.

"Nah. It's too late for that. He needs to get on the phone to the RNIB," countered Rob.

Martin knew when he was beaten. The guys had elevated piss-taking into a fine art-form. And if anything, his speculation about the impossibility of the Universe over the years, was now working against him. Why would they take it seriously? He hardly believed it himself. No. Enjoy a few beers with his mates; make wild and unrealistic plans for the year ahead; solve the world's problems; and try to avoid any talk of football. By late evening, Martin had pushed the disappearance of Mu to the back of his mind. "Who's round is it?" he asked as he listened to another of his selections on the jukebox.

*One Man's truth
Is another man's lie
Reality is blurred
By the hate in your eye
When asked, "don't you see?"
You closed your mind
To magical thinking
And what you might find*

Magical Thinking – Cosmic Puzzle. 2003

"Magical Thinking" was a track Martin played regularly – and it seemed appropriate today. He rolled up a cigarette and headed

out – “*for some fresh air*” – with Gerwyn.

“I don’t know why you go through the faff of rolling your own,” Gerwyn said, as they were lighting up. Gerwyn, who taught at the same school as Martin, was responsible for Martin’s nicotine habit. He had suggested smoking, to counter Martin’s bouts of depression. Martin didn’t blame Gerwyn. He was grateful for his help in getting him back on track.

“Yeah, I’ve never really cracked it,” replied Martin. “But, for a start, it’s a lot cheaper. And I prefer menthol, so it’s my only option. I still can’t figure out why the government banned menthol cigarettes, but still allows menthol filters to be sold. What kind of–”

At that moment, Martin thought he saw another star disappear. He was pretty sure, in fact. He was about to tell Gerwyn, but then thought better of it. *Nah. I’m just going to be subjected to more piss-takes.* Gerwyn took a drag from his cigarette; looked at Martin; and waited. Martin drifting off mid-sentence was a normal occurrence.

“...strategy is that?” Martin finally said.

It was a long session at The Triangle, and on the slow walk home Martin thought about what had happened earlier. He wasn’t sure about much, but the lack of anything in the public domain seemed pretty odd. Actually, very odd. As he neared his cottage, dark storm clouds were gathering – but he was too tired to quicken his pace. He stepped through his doorway as the heavens opened. Captain Cat raised his head briefly, from his cosy spot on the sofa, and immediately went back to sleep.

“That was lucky, Captain. Maybe God is looking down on me.” Martin commented to the supremely disinterested cat. Before going to bed, Martin checked for responses to his Tweet. It had been flagged as: “Inappropriate content”.

“What the fuck?” he muttered, but was too tired to pursue it further. He headed for bed, with a whirling mess of thoughts about Mu; the lack of any reporting; and nagging doubts about what he had seen. But the combination of lack of sleep; one too

many beers; and the walk home, meant he was asleep within minutes.

Is it me? He wondered, as he drifted off.

2

Life's Too Short

No, it wasn't just Martin. Two days earlier, the world of cosmology and academia was already in turmoil. Observatories and academic institutions across the world had all spotted something odd was happening. And not "*interesting*" odd. "*Scaring the shit out of people*" odd.

"Stars were," as Professor Rosie Probert put it to the Deputy Director, "erm... going out!"

"Going out?" asked Freja Simmonds.

"Yeah.... Quite a lot of them... And quite quickly," replied Rosie.

"OK, I want you to calm down..." - Rosie was actually remarkably calm considering what she had seen - "and explain in plain English, what you mean by that."

Rosie was pretty sure she had, not only been using plain English, but at a level that most five-year-olds would understand.

She shrugged and tried again: "Lots of stars that should be there, aren't there anymore. In fact, we're seeing them disappear in front of our eyes."

Freja was still struggling to process what Rosie had just said.

"I'm sorry. Maybe it's because I've come into the middle of some... erm... system malfunction, practical joke, or whatever, but this is still not making any sense to me. Stars don't just go out."

Rosie abandoned her calm approach.

"No shit, Sherlock!" she replied quite loudly, waving her arms. "Why the fuck do you think everyone is running around like

headless chickens, shitting bricks? It's because actual stars are actually going out."

Freja, reaching for some calming words, began. "OK, OK. I'm sure there's a simple and logical explanation for—"

"No!" interrupted Rosie, "There's actually not! There's no simple *or* logical explanation. In fact, there's not *any type* of explanation. It's up there with: 'how did we get here' and 'is there a God', on the unexplainable chart."

Freja considered challenging Rosie's assertion that 'how we got here' was unexplainable, but thought better of it. And mumbled to herself, "Is it unexplainable or inexplicable?"

"What was that?" asked Rosie.

"Nothing," replied Freja, thinking life's too short. "OK, OK. Give me a couple of minutes to catch up with where we are at, and process what you've just told me."

Freja went into '*take stock of the situation*' mode. She was good at taking stock. It was one of the factors that had landed her the role of Deputy Director at the Kavli Institute for Cosmology, at Cambridge University. It was also a quality many of her colleagues found quite annoying. Not that that troubled her in the slightest. In fact, Freja wasn't troubled by her colleague's, or anyone else's opinions about her. Life's too short to be worrying about stuff you have no control over, she would tell herself.

The truth was, Freja was an obsessive control freak and since her early twenties, her "life's too short" mantra had been her coping-mechanism for things she couldn't exert any influence over. And it had worked. Repetition of that phrase, and what she considered to be a charmed life, had resulted in an almost unshakable self-confidence. Her charmed life was evidenced by her rise to the position of Deputy Director – which had been almost effortless. And without the back-stabbing or internal politicking often found in academia. She was, therefore, very confident this '*mix-up*' could soon be solved.

"OK, everyone. Gather round," called Freja. "We need to take stock of the situation. First off, let's remove some variables. We are obviously heavily dependent on technology these days. Can

someone check if there have been any system updates in the last few hours. And, either way, can we get the system rebooted? Interference from the weather is also a possibility. Check with the Met Office. And have we heard from any other institution or agency? I'm confident we can very quickly get to the bottom of, what is clearly, a mix-up. Any questions?"

Toby Donovan raised his hand. "Um, yeah. Unless the technology you are doubting is a glass lens, a polished mirror and a metal tube, we still have a problem."

He pointed out of the window to a plain old telescope in the courtyard. "We decided to go route one, and '*take stock of the situation*' the easy way."

"And?" asked Freja, her confidence slipping.

"We can confirm that our super-duper, ultra-expensive technology is bang on," replied Toby, who never missed an opportunity for sarcasm.

Freja went out into the courtyard and looked through the telescope. It only took a few seconds for her to spot that stuff was missing. But she wasn't going to let the situation get away from her – just yet.

"OK, I think we can all agree that what we've observed is impossible. I think we can also agree that, if this was really happening, it would be all over the news and social media; and we would all have received thousands of emails, texts and WhatsApp messages from the world of cosmology. So, right now, our base point is we are mistaken – and this doesn't go outside of this room. We don't want to look like idiots, do we?"

Toby chipped in, "An alternative view of '*our base point*' might be: Stars are actually going out... We do a three wise monkeys... And still look like idiots."

"Whatever! But until I've got Director Scholes up to speed, we adopt strict radio silence," demanded Freja.

"Hi Paul," Freja said, as she walked into Director Paul Scholes' office.

The Director was the polar opposite of footballer Paul Scholes – probably, the most gifted midfielder to put on a shirt for Manchester United and England. Director Scholes had absolutely no interest in sport – although for most of his life he had faced a barrage of football related comments about his namesake. A few people thought there might be a connection, but the majority just couldn't resist the urge to chip in with "*something funny*". Most of the comments would not have ranked highly on the "*funny scale*" in their own right, but the stark contrast between the two Pauls – and the constant repetition of the "*jokes*" – elevated them significantly. Paul always took them in good spirit, usually letting them pass without comment.

"We have a situation," Freja continued.

"Yes, situation would be one way of describing it," replied Paul, with a weak smile. "I've just got off a conference call with the Home Secretary, the Secret Service, and anyone who's anyone in astronomy. We need to get the whole department together to explain what we've been instructed to do. Which is to assess the situation and discuss it with no-one outside of the team."

"It's not just us then?" asked Freja as they walked to the lecture theatre, where everyone had been instructed to gather.

Paul nodded, "The whole world of cosmology is scratching their heads right now – and we also have the attention of both MI5 and MI6. The Prime Minister is even cutting short his Dubai trip."

Paul took to the stage: "I'll keep this short. There's no mistake. The events we are witnessing are real, unprecedented, and without doubt, completely at odds with our understanding of how the Universe works. Well, certainly at odds with my understanding of how it works. I am genuinely at a loss as to even speculate about what is happening. But, as you may have guessed, we are being pressed to provide an explanation. No, don't laugh... Just get your textbooks out; go to the stars disappearing chapter; and tell me what it says. Sorry. I don't normally resort to sarcasm, but I've just spent an hour on a

conference call with a bunch of people who know nothing about cosmology, insisting I give them answers. So yes, I'm feeling a little weary, and - I suspect like everyone of you - completely bewildered by what is happening. There was one important thing that did come out of the conference call: we have been instructed to not communicate with anyone outside of the team about this event. That's absolutely no-one. There will be serious consequences for anyone not adhering to that instruction."

"Red card?" asked Toby.

"If a red card would result in being taken away in the back of a police van and never being seen again, then yes," replied Paul - who hadn't missed the football reference. "For now, we need to continue monitoring and recording every anomaly we detect. You now know as much as I do - so if anyone has any thoughts, feel free to pitch in. And apologies, I seem to have managed another football reference."

"Why are the government and the Secret Service involved?" asked Rosie.

"That's a good question Rosie. You probably know my thoughts about politicians... and it's probably best I don't voice them right now. As for the Secret Service. My understanding is, they are concerned about public reaction to this event, and want to buy as much time as possible. They are hoping we can provide some answers before it gets into the public domain. I can't say I blame them. I would imagine people are going to be a little worried by this."

"I don't think '*a little worried*' quite does it justice Paul," suggested Toby. "The scoreline is currently, The Universe: 1 million - Scientists: Nil. And our chances of scoring - apart from an own goal - are zero."

Paul laughed, "Brilliant as ever Toby. Not only have you perfectly summarised the situation, you've managed to get us back to football. So, staying with that theme, can I ask that we ensure there are no own goals. And on that note, I know it's late, so I'll let you get on with what's left of your day."

Rosie, along with half the team, headed out to the courtyard.

"Any chance I could bum a ciggie?" she asked Toby.

"Yeah, sure," he replied, "I didn't know you smoked."

"I gave up about ten years ago, but now seems like as good a time as any to start killing myself again," she shrugged.

"I didn't know you were Welsh either," said Toby, handing her a cigarette.

"Really?"

"Yeah. The first time I noticed, was when you were yelling at Freja."

"Well, I've lived half of my life in Cambridge, so I guess my accent has mellowed. And I wasn't yelling," replied Rosie.

"Sounded like it to me."

"What's that weird shit you've got playing?" Rosie asked in an attempt to change the subject.

"You Ain't No Spaceman, Z Space," he replied, and they stood, smoking in silence, listening to the song.

*Don't give me no shit
You gonna get hit
Decimated, and fixated
On what's on your screen
This ain't no dream man
They got your soul man
You ain't no spaceman
You their slave, man*

You Ain't No Spaceman – Z Space. 1996

"Well that didn't do a lot to lift the spirits," commented Rosie as the song finished.

"Yeah, normally I would say it's quite an upbeat song, but – and I've never noticed it before – the lyrics are actually quite depressing. Maybe I should have gone with Uptown Funk?" he smiled.

"No, it fits my mood," Rosie replied, "I'm struggling to find any positives with what's happening right now. It defies any

explanation. It's got me a little spooked and questioning my whole world view. In fact my whole Universe view."

Toby laughed, "Good word, spooked, It is a little spooky – *Lock Stock* – and I'm beginning to think the only explanation is that some highly advanced extraterrestrial civilisation is... Whatever... Fuck knows?"

"What?" she asked.

"Maybe it's extraterrestrials," he reiterated.

"No. In the middle of rambling on about aliens, you said 'Lock Stock'. What's that about?"

"Rambling on?" said Toby in his best faux hurt voice, "That was a concise summation of where we are at. And you must know what 'Lock Stock' is. Surely? Lock Stock And Two Smoking Barrels. The film. Brilliant film. There's a scene where Spooky – Dusty Springfield – is playing in the background. Cool song."

"No, I don't think I've seen it. Or heard that song," she admitted.

"Oh my God, Rosie. We need to get you some cultural education. You have clearly spent way too much time doing science stuff. I've got it on DVD. We need to get a movie night organised. In fact, you may be in need of lots of movie nights. To get you up to speed with what's happening in real life."

"Hmm. Maybe. But back to the aliens. Maybe they're sending us a message," suggested Rosie.

"Yeah, let's go with that. I haven't really thought my theory through to the 'why' bit." he replied.

Just then Freja walked over to Rosie and Toby and asked for a cigarette.

"You don't smoke," pointed out Rosie.

"I do now," said Freja.

"So, what's happening?" Toby asked.

"We sit tight until the Government tells us what to do," replied Freja.

"No, I mean what's happening to the Universe?"

"Toby thinks it's aliens," added Rosie with a smile.

Freja took a long drag on her cigarette, "Who knows. Whatever the cause, it's not looking good. It looks like the Universe is shutting down and we're all--"

"Fucked?" suggested Toby.

Freja nodded.

Toby, sensing an opportunity, half-jokingly, pitched in with "Well, as we're looking at the end of life as we know it... Fancy a shag?"

"Yeah. Why not," replied Freja. "Rosie?"

"Erm, I've got an early start tomorrow. I'm heading back to Wales to see in the New Year with my family. So, I think I'll pass," stuttered Rosie - who was shocked at the dramatic transformation in Freja.

Most people, including Rosie, considered Freja to be straight-laced - and yet, in the space of five minutes, she had taken up smoking and, if Rosie had understood correctly, suggested a threesome. Toby wasn't complaining and quickly suggested they head back to his place, stopping off at the Off Licence for a couple of bottles of wine.

As they headed off, Toby beamed "Well this is a very pleasant surprise."

Freja laughed and replied "I keep telling myself that life's too short. And it looks like I was right."

3

Anyone For Government?

“Are they bloody serious Pen?” asked Dimitri Pale. “Why do I need to be there? Is there no-one else in Government that can deal with even the smallest of issues? Seriously! I really shouldn’t have to be spending my every waking minute on the minutiae of government. Call the Home Secretary and ask him to deal with it”

“Oh, I absolutely agree, Prime Minister, and I’m dreadfully sorry,” replied his PA, Penelope Maxwell-Smythe. “I’ve already spoken with the Home Secretary, and he was very insistent that you needed to attend. Apparently MI5 are demanding you be there. I’ve checked flights from Dubai and there are seats available on the next flight back to Heathrow, in four hours time. Should I book it?”

“MI5? For goodness sake! OK. Yes, go ahead, and make sure it’s first class,” confirmed a frustrated Dim.

10 Downing Street, the following morning.

Dim Pale, asked Penelope to bring him a cup of tea and call his top advisor, Dominic Tucker. Penelope, as ever, was happy to do his bidding - which is exactly why Dim had hired her. He enjoyed nothing more than fawning servility. Dim Pale was probably the only person in the country who was not surprised he was now PM. Whilst he, with a supreme – and totally unfounded – level of self-confidence, had moved into No 10 as if it was his God-given right, everyone else was asking: “How the fuck did that happen?”

Dim had done a John Major - and had come from almost nowhere to land the top job in the UK Government. Following the Liz Truss total fuck up, Rishi Sunak had been favourite to get the job. But after his back-stabbing manoeuvres whilst serving under Boris Johnson as Chancellor of the Exchequer, too many of his party's MPs distrusted him. Dim had entered politics nine years earlier after the surprise resignation of his local MP in Woking. His skill set - lying, cheating and bull-shit - proved to be perfect for politics and he quickly rose to Business and Trade Secretary.

In an earlier life, Dim was a relatively successful computer salesman. He went on to validate the 'Peter Principle' by being hired as the CEO of a billion-dollar, international IT company - and completely fucking it up. The company went bankrupt and, eventually was sold to an asset-stripper for one dollar. He then once again proved the 'Peter Principle' by becoming PM.

The Peter Principle

People in a hierarchy tend to rise to a level of respective incompetence: employees are promoted based on their success in previous jobs until they reach a level at which they are no longer competent...

It takes a special kind of delusion to believe, after wrecking a very successful company within a few years, you are qualified to lead a country - but Dim had that special quality in abundance.

"Hi, Dim", answered Tucker.

"Dom, Dim", began the PM.

Tucker was instantly annoyed. Every time he got a call from the PM, he would answer with "Hi Dim" and every time Dim would still insist on saying "Dom, Dim". He was close to spitting out: "Yeah, I know it's you Dim. I just said 'Hi Dim' for fucks sake!"

Dim continued, "We have a situation. Something about some stars going out. I can't see why that's a problem, but apparently we've got to have a bloody COBRA meeting. Which is very annoying, as I had to cancel my round of golf over in Dubai. But

anyway, it's due to start in about ninety minutes and I thought it would be useful for you to sit in on it. Oh, and by the way, keep the golf thing between you and me. I was supposed to be in Dubai doing stuff for the country."

Tucker, as ever, was succinct, "Yeah, no problem," he replied – and hung up.

Dominic Tucker was surprised, when shortly after Dim Pale was appointed as PM, he had received a call from Dim's PA, asking if he'd be interested in coming back as a senior advisor. Since being booted out by Boris Johnson, three years ago, Tucker had spent his time shit-stirring, and back-stabbing pretty much everyone in government. He wasn't sure if the new PM was too stupid to have realised that, or saw it as a good thing. Probably the latter he thought – but anyhow, a job's a job, so he had accepted the offer.

COBRA Meeting

The head of MI5 kicked off the meeting: "As you have already been informed, we have become aware of some alarming events in space in the last 24 hours. Our experts have estimated we are currently seeing around two thousand stars disappear every hour. No-one in the scientific community, in the UK or elsewhere, is able to explain what, or why this is happening. It has been agreed with our counterparts worldwide that, to prevent a public panic, we should inhibit all reporting and discussion of the issue outside of the scientific and intelligence communities. As such, we have instructed all broadcasters, news and social media platforms, internet providers and mobile networks to suppress any communications which make reference to this event. We have been in touch with intelligence agencies across the world and all have agreed to this approach – even the Americans."

Since the USA had become a dictatorship in 2021, diplomatic ties between them and the rest of the democratic world had been virtually cut off. The same was true of intelligence sharing. On January 6th 2021, an insurrectionist mob, incited by the

outgoing president, Donald Windass, had stormed The Capitol building and halted the certification of President-elect Joe Biden. Following the hanging of VP Mike Pence – to prevent further bloodshed – Biden had agreed to a stay of the certification procedure. Windass seized his opportunity and, using the Insurrection Act, declared a national state of emergency. He then ordered the Army Chief of Staff to send in troops to The Capitol, to take “the traitors” into custody. When this was met with resistance from the Army Chief of Staff, Windass installed “General” Michael Crook into the post – who immediately enacted Windass’s orders. He also appointed Roger Pebble as Attorney General and Stephen Shirtz as Director of National Intelligence.

“The Americans?” asked Dim, seeing this as an opportunity for some sort of contact with President Windass, who Dim considered to be out of the same mould.

Many others saw similarities too: incompetent; careless; short attention span; narcissistic; callous; pathological liar; megalomaniac... the list went on.

“Maybe I should arrange a call with President Windass? Or maybe a visit?” continued Dim.

“How the fuck is that going to help?” asked Tucker, without any attempt to conceal his disdain for the PM.

As ever, it went straight over Dim’s head. Many of the No 10 staff had, very quickly noticed Tucker had no respect for the PM, and speculated he was trying to get himself fired. In fact, Tucker was trying to get himself fired. He had hated working for the PM from day one, but Dim was too stupid to realise. To mitigate his discontent, Tucker ridiculed the PM at every opportunity.

After a few minutes of discussion, Dim had reached his attention-span threshold. “Look. We have crackpots claiming they’ve seen strange goings-on in space on a daily basis. I don’t see why we’re wasting our time on this.”

“It’s not crackpots that are telling us this. It’s our scientists,” replied the head of MI5.

“OK, well, what’s the plan?” asked Dim.

No-one volunteered an answer to that.

"Maybe we should start with an easier question. One that only requires a yes/no answer." chipped in Tucker, "Is there a plan?"

A chorus of "No" and shaking of heads was the response.

"Have we tried asking ChatGPT?" asked Dim.

Some in the room thought the PM was joking, but Tucker knew better. He had quickly realised that for someone who had spent most of his working life in IT, Dim was totally clueless about technology.

"It looks like we have a plan then," Tucker replied sarcastically. "We'll just get ChatGPT to deal with it."

Dim, oblivious to the sarcasm, was feeling pretty pleased with his "genius" suggestion. He also couldn't see how he could profit, politically or personally, from the situation, so declared, "OK. Brilliant. Let me know what ChatGPT suggests and if you need any more help from me, just give me a bell."

Apart from Tucker, the other participants of the meeting had remained seated, assuming it wasn't a serious suggestion. And they sat there in stunned silence as the PM stood up and walked out with Tucker.

He was overheard saying, "Well that was a bloody waste of time. I could have stayed in Dubai."

"Yeah, a round of golf would have been far more productive," Tucker replied.

The White House

In the USA, the situation was being treated even less seriously. Donald Windass had decided a round of golf in Florida was far more important than travelling back up to Washington, for a stupid meeting about stars disappearing. His Vice President, Millie Tylor Greade was instructed to attend the meeting at The White House. MTG wasn't a surprise choice for VP. Her fealty to Windass was only matched by her stupidity. The two main qualities Windass demanded from all in his circle. There was also

much speculation that her devotion to Windass extended to the bedroom.

Steve Shirtz, the Director of National Intelligence, chaired the White House meeting and began by explaining: The star disappearing “rumour” was completely unverified and most likely a plot by deep-state activists in the scientific community and intelligence agencies to undermine the Windass Government.

No-one questioned his assessment. In fact it was greeted with a unanimous agreement that his theory was correct. Which wasn't really a surprise, as Windass had removed any last vestiges of normal people from The White House and surrounded himself with MAGA nutjobs.

Shirtz continued, “I'm bringing in my own experts to do a proper evaluation of the situation.”

MTG asked who he was bringing in and he replied he had been speaking to Doug Regan, CEO of The Ninja Cyber Security Foundation. The meeting was interrupted by the arrival of The Secretary of State.

“Heyyyyy. Dudes,” beamed Donald Windass Junior, with a raised, clenched fist.

“What's going down? ” he asked, as he sat down and rested his feet on the table.

Don Jnr. was already back up, practising his golf swing as they began to explain the situation.

“Yeah. Cool,” he responded when he was informed Ninja Cyber Sec would be taking a proper look. The meeting wound up as Don Jnr. walked around the table helping himself to leftover snacks.

Similar meetings had taken place around the globe. And whilst most had treated the situation seriously, none had any answers. Opinions about the cause varied wildly – and included: complete denial; scientific incompetence; interference from foreign states; the wrath of God; and just normal stuff that happens in the Universe.

Self-belief is a predictable – and possibly essential – trait to be found in world leaders, but the UK and USA had found themselves being governed by delusional narcissists. And a few stars going missing wasn't high on their list of priorities. That didn't bode well.