

Chewy Benskins

Alice Hooper had decided at a very early age, that she would never be a concert pianist. Her fingers were far too short and stubby. However, this self-perceived deformity, allowed her to keep goal for her college footy team and type at incredible speeds. Her PhD thesis on water resource management was typed up over a single weekend. With university out, she joined the Environmental agency.

Recently transferred and promoted, she diligently put the finishing touches to the daily actions report. It was now Alice time. She could check out what was going on in the world.

The BBC's website hadn't refreshed so she tried her luck with the unfamiliar Watford Observer's.

Medical gas stolen from Watford General.

Lorry driver from Mr Tuxedo transport, killed in unexplained M25 crash. Police investigation underway as they ask for info on unidentified good-Samaritan and for any dash-cam footage.

Her phone rang. A rare summons from her Area Director, who operated an E-mails only, shut door policy.

Alice knocked on the etched glass door and trepidly pushed her way into the bright and airy, dual aspect office.

The AD waved his deeply tanned arm over the vista. 'The most expensive commercial real-estate outside of Docklands. Clarendon Road; our new London bureau. Negotiated the deal myself.'

'Nice one. Warner Bros pitch Harry Potter World as London to everyone, even though it's further out than we are. Doesn't everything inside the M25 count as...?' Alice sniggered, '*...London, Baby!*'

He ignored her. 'How are you settling in? It's a big step-up from provincial Exeter. Glad to have you on board. How did you come up country? You can always tell a lot about a blo... person by whether they use the A303 or the Motorway.'

'I actually caught the train; less CO2 emissions and I could bring my bike too.'

Alice noticed him glance down into the carpark and fight back a scoff. On her EA wages she could barely afford slime inner tubes, let alone run his SUV.

'Grapevine says you're a bit Extinction Rebellion! Vegan too?'

Alice countered. 'My old AD taught me never to mix office Realpolitic and the canteen does far too good a bacon and smashed avocado on sourdough.'

'Amen. Now I've got a job.'

Alice's ears pricked.

'The Hornets micro-brewery down at the bottom of town. Owner's been complaining about his water quality. Says his beer is being ruined. Real ale; pah! Only fit for rigger buggers. Give me a cheeky South American merlot any day. I need you to pop down there and sort him out. You know the score. Here, these reports; hot off the press, say there's nothing amiss. It must be down to their dodgy firkins.'

'Shouldn't the waterboard have first dibs?'

'The brewery has a private bore-hole, that he insists is contaminated. Unfortunately, that's our jurisdiction and easy tiger; there's an internal inspection coming up. I don't want too much energy spent on a piss up in a proverbial. The priority is getting our own house in order. Just a slap and tickle, then report back to me.' He reached for his mobile.

Alice nodded. The Bozo no longer required her presence. She lingered. Caught snippets of his conversation... sorted... west country bint... thrown her a kipper.

WTF was he on about?

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Alice cycled past Watford's Museum with its Benskins archway. Was beer still king? She turned the corner expecting the multi-level Victorian hop asylum, that had popped up on google, a hangover from a past epoch. She was however met in modern reality, with a sleek, contemporary, industrial unit.

Alice harangued a very tall man opening the roller-shutter.

'Is the manager around?'

'Who's asking?'

Alice flashed her EA ID. 'It's about the borehole.'

'Freddie Taylor. Chief cook and bottle washer,' he held out his pudding hand.

Alice smiled and shook it, then immediately fished her pocket for the sanitiser she always carried.

They were quickly ensconced next to the offending borehole. Freddie waxing lyrical about Watford Water. His voice echoed through into next-door's underground bottling plant; the hop asylum's other last remaining physical antiquity.

'Fifteen meters deep, the original Benskins supply.'

'So, whats wrong then?'

'Something down there is Donald-ducked. My beer is as flat as Bedfordshire; as mad and as bad as any Luton Hatter.'

'Chewy Benskins!' Alice chuckled. 'Can't you use tap water?'

Freddie glared as he thrust a sheaf of papers into Alice's hands, 'Proof. Independently verified by Affinity water. I keep complaining, but your team just palms me off with old data I've extrapolated my up-to-date numbers. It's exponentially not good!'

Alice scanned the graphs and tables.

'Dioxins, mercury and a little I know not what. All building. I'll give you that. In two-to-three weeks the whole water-table will be shafted. None of this matches my EA reports.

'I told you! Mutton data; all fur coat, no knickers.'

'So, where's it coming from? Any run-off takes years to soak through the chalk, which should filter most of the contaminants out.'

'Well... I have a theory.'

'Shall I sit? Jackanory time?'

Freddie ignored her and hypothesized.

'Old Watford ledge says that one of Old father Thames's daughters, a nymph called Watta, set up shop in the nether world below the town-pond. Her influence keeps the water pure. They say that if you listen closely. You can hear her dance with her beau, the Harlequin; as she preps her cleansing elixir. Now I think this fable manifests itself as an underground river that flows along the strata where the chalk meets the impermeable clay. More importantly, that is how the contaminants are being moved. They are being flushed through as if it were a sewer.' Freddie looked straight at Alice. 'If I'm pulling an all-nighter, I sometimes put my ear to the borehole and can hear a far-off tango, deep in the earth.'

'Too much of your wares, if you ask me.'

'I wish.'

'So, tell me where it's coming from. Please. Something to go on.'

Freddie's shoulders dropped.

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Alice's sneeze shook the archive. She'd bullshited Bozo that she was prepping for the inspection but in truth, was combing the back-catalogue of daily action reports in a quest to hunt down any nefarious activities.

Bozo had called this, 'woman's work.' Any other day she'd have immediately called him out. But by ignoring him this once, she could slip under his radar. But trust her; Elephants never forget.

The data was pretty listless. Alice kept motivated by quaffing copious mugs of Gretta grade coffee, eschewing substantial sustenance till she found something tangible.

The buses, taxis and commuters of Watford ebbed and flowed along Clarendon Road reaching a crescendo about five-and twenty-to-six. Anyone looking from the top deck of the

one-four-two into the office, would have seen a despondent Alice. She'd succumbed to hunger. Could they please help her decide what to order on Deliveroo?

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Alice slammed on the brakes and skidded into the lamppost that was Freddie.

Breathlessly she whispered, 'I've found something!'

Freddie moved mugs, a crate of bottles and a spanner, then spread out Alice's map on the board-room table.

Alice took a deep breath. 'Theory one: The Buncefield Oil Depot explosion. Theory two: a reference to a whistle-blower saying there was illegal dumping of liquid waste on a mega scale. Probably have to discount that one. There is only one reference in the archive. My predecessor who was dealing with it, got sacked and the lead was never followed up. Allegedly, she's now claiming unfair dismissal.'

'Hmmm, Buncefield the culprit. Wasn't it pegged as the biggest peace time explosion ever?'

'I have the actions report here.' States that another colleague was tasked to walk round the site with a Fire Officer, to assess if there was any run off from the firefighting media. Turns out that there was no discernible pollution. All the contaminated water was stored in the bunds designed to stop any oil spills from entering the drains. It was then tankered out and dealt with at a separate water-treatment plant.'

'Barking up the wrong tree then.'

Not quite. There's mention of a smoke plume.'

Freddie pointed to Buncefield on the map. 'If I remember the smoke all went to the South-West. That would take it down the Gade Valley. Sorry, but I think the underground river flows East-west mirroring the Colne catchment.'

'Gotcha. Look at this picture. The wind changed directions during the incident and as you can see; this weather report shows it. Two plumes emulating cow horns.'

'Show me. Blimey, right where it should be.'

'The Watford Observer has several ambiguous reports about dodgy milk yields and contaminated dairy products from farmers over the next few years. Nothing substantial but it could be fallout from the plume, that's had time to soak through.'

Freddie pointed to the papers. 'Fair play, come on you Orns! Let's doublecheck the chemical makeup of the contaminants. I can't remember seeing any large doses of hydrocarbon.'

Alice scanned the readouts, shaking her head. 'Not a sausage. Your shite beer's not down to Buncefield then.'

Freddie frowned. 'This is worse than playing snakes and ladders.'

Alice calves tingled. She'd skipped the bacon and avocado for a ride along the bridleway that ran alongside the Colne. A pumping station, camouflaged as an olde worlde cowshed, locked up with an oversize padlock and moss strewn stepping stones across the river, were the only blots on a muddy, rutted landscape. Nothing doing here. No clues. Just a near miss with some idiot in a lorry traversing the lanes far too fast. Funny, the driver was the spit of Bozo. It couldn't be. Alice could vouch that; she'd left him pontificating back at the office.

Hiding back in the archive, she reviewed the whistle-blower file, which only got further up her nose. The single A4 sheet, foxed at the edges, simply stated. 'Anonymous caller. Hung up before they could be questioned further.'

How stupid. Alice whistled. She had the date and time, stamped at the top of the sheet. All she now needed was the number. How hard could that be? Incredibly; as despite the EA having a state-of-the-art telephone exchange, they couldn't match the call for toffee.

Alice held up the paper under the neon strip-light. What was she missing? There, lightly embossed numerals waltzed diagonally across the page. Her colleague had written a number across a top sheet; its indent etched underneath. Could she get a viable copy? With an old school 2B pencil, Alice gently smudged graphite across the sheet. The imprint came to life, in how many shades of grey. 'Spank me'. She was on fire.

She keyed her phone. 'Mr Tuxedo transport can't answer your call at the moment...'

The recall of a logo incorporating a bowtie, on the side of the lorry being driven by looky-likey, furrowed tyre tracks outside the pumping-station and a topical news report sent her head spinning.

Alice cut and dialled another number. 'Sorry Freddie can't... She looked around. Bozo was on his phone. He turned and looked her straight in the eyes.

She grabbed her bag and fled.

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Alice leant out over the parapet to scan Watford's cathedralesque skyline. Behind her in the twilight, a train screamed through Watford Junction and on up the west-coast-line. High up on the YMCA, a lit up cross spread its benediction over brutalist architecture.

Alice scratched the concrete. Waiting on the top floor of Sutton carpark for Freddie, she was surrounded by Diwali fireworks as they shattered and turned the air a sepia brown.

Her mobile span in her hand as she shrank from chrysanthemum detonations. Worryingly there was still no contact. Down on the ring-road a horn squeezed the night tighter.

A vintage Mini pulled up at the lights by the bus lane. It had to be Freddie driving. How on earth did he fit?

A BMW smashed into the back of the mini.

Alice watched on in horror. Tyres squealed as the BMW reversed for a second shot.

Alice screamed. 'Drive Freddie! Drive!'

He must have heard her because the mini snaked along the ring-road, pursued by the blacked-out four-by-four. Bystanders looked on in awe, phones already primed.

Assumption the mother of all...she flew down the circular exit-ramp. At any other time, she'd have flared out her legs and shouted wheeeeee; but she was now in hot-pursuit. SUVs don't kill people but their drivers do. Alice had the most awful inkling as she scraped past the barrier and onto the ring-road. Almost airborne as she passed the blue glow of the pyramid, she arrived at the brewery completely hanging.

The two cars were skewed across the path, engines running. Smoke wafted from under the BMW's crunched bonnet.

A tin dustbin being hit echoed from the back of the unit. Alice edged along the wall and peered round the corner. A fire door flapped in the breeze. Above her, further fireworks, filled the void.

Cautiously she sidled through; inky blackness enclosed. Muffled moans emanated from down in the bottling plant. Alice stepped into the breach.

Light from a phone clawed the darkness; moon-shadow on the puddled floor. Alice backed against the wall and the light switch. She squinted, then flipped it.

'Wow, a double act.'

Bozo and surely it was his twin were leant over a supine Freddie, running a tube from a brightly coloured cylinder.

'So that's how you killed the whistle-blower, spiked his cab with medical gas. Oh, that's priceless! Which one played the good-Samaritan? Helped out and then salvaged the smoking gun.'

Alice pointed, her own finger now a gun-barrel. 'You're dumping shite at the pumping station and you're covering it up. Do you know that it's leaked down the borehole; contaminated all and sundry. Corruption and murder. Worth it?'

Bozo, finger mimed filthy lucre. 'Damn straight. Can you prove it?'

'Yes! Freddie's had a new set of data commissioned and the water utilities are so concerned, they have instigated a proper investigation; not just a slap and tickle.'

'You're going to get more than a slap, you supercilious west-country bitch.' Bozo launched the cylinder.

Alice calmly plucked it out of the air. 'Is that all you've got? You wouldn't last two minutes on any woman's football team. You misogynist fuck-tard!'

Bozo charged. Alice just made out a hand, karate chop his heels. Thank God, Freddie was still in the land of the living. The moon-shadows converged. Freddie grappled Bozo's twin as

Alice advanced towards the fray. She bided her time, picked her moment. Gas squirted, coughs spluttered and she swung. A crimson tide flowed across the floor.

Alice made like a crutch to help Freddie limp across the bottling plant. They slipped through the door, slammed it shut and slid the bolt home.

Sirens piqued on the ring-road.

Leant against the bore-hole, she swore she could feel a deep rhythm and beat,

'Hang on Freddie. I think we caught them in time. Watta's preparing her elixir right now. Your beer's going to be epic and I could murder a pint, right this second.'