

It was just another day at the office, the same as any other. Tim sat at his desk. He had spent the last three hours trying desperately to compile his latest report based on a series of site visits to out-of-town shopping developments ahead of Friday's deadline, but it was proving nigh on impossible. For a start, the buildings were in a poor state of repair: his surveys had uncovered a number of significant structural flaws which were bad news all round. The trouble was, he found these modern prefabricated monstrosities composed of concrete and corrugated iron the most uninspiring of all buildings to assess, and while he had most of the information he required to hand, some of his notes were a little patchy regarding some of the sites, as he had been tired, bored and hungover while conducting the surveys. That said, he didn't really find buildings in themselves all that inspiring. Surveying hadn't been a calling for him, but then, for whom is surveying a calling, a passion? Surveying was a job, which required an even and pragmatic approach to factual data and a grasp of figures and certain scientific concepts regarding the deterioration of concrete, the weakening of iron girders, the flammability of certain

*It's no easy task being a writer. I certainly don't believe one 'chooses' to be a writer – I shan't say 'become' a writer, because the word has implications of evolution. That isn't to say that a writer doesn't evolve or grow – writing requires a great deal of practice and commitment – but a writer doesn't start as something else and then slowly turn into a writer. No, a writer starts out as a writer, and then develops with time, practice and experience. Well, so one would hope, and I'm quite certain that my own output now is almost infinitely better than it was fifteen years ago. But I'd still say I was a writer then. I didn't choose to write. It was a compulsion. Same as it is now.*

*But today my compulsion seems compelled to pursue other things...*

Ant Barker had been staring at the screen for what seemed like hours. He checked the clock on his Microsoft® Windows© XP desktop. He had been staring at the screen for hours. The text was beginning to drift before his eyes as he read it again and again. His narrative was increasingly turning to opinion and editorial. He didn't consider this a problem per se, but he had ground to a halt mid-paragraph as he wondered if he had not wandered a little too far off track and

materials and so on. The appreciation of architecture was not a prerequisite for becoming a surveyor of commercial property. But the modern out-of-town retail park developments were still the worst: once you had seen one, you had seen them all. But feeling tired and grotty made any report on such buildings even more wearisome, and with a tight deadline looming, even more troublesome to a man who was not a big fan of typing long reports, preferring, if possible, to keep communications down to brief notes and bullet-points. Equally troublesome, his phones – landline and mobile – kept ringing, interfering with his train of thought. No sooner had he regained his flow and begun formulating a coherent sentence detailing the defects in the roofing structures or damp coursing than another call would demand his attention and haul him away from the job at hand for just long enough for him to forget exactly what it was he had been about to write next. Tim sat and rubbed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger. His skin felt rough and dry, his eyes sensitive and watery. He was exhausted, and this was reflected in his sallow appearance. He had spent the last week and a half driving long-distance between the sites he was surveying for this report –

simply written about himself at that moment in time. Was he writing a character or was he simply writing himself? He paused to think. There was, to his mind, no point in writing for the sake of it, to produce screes of inferior prose only to delete them again later. He was a writer with a conscience, and also a burning desire to change things.

It was his objective to write the world: he wanted to right the world. Ultimately, he wanted to rewrite the world. The process would be long and arduous. There was no simple or direct route. As he saw it, to write the world, one must live in the world. Then, one must record and exorcise, commit to paper all of the horrors, the ugliness, the hatred, the sickness, record the sights and the smells and the sounds in all of their repulsive vileness. To write the world is to run through the pain and anguish of living, and the writing process requires the reliving of it all, in its entirety, experiencing once more the agony and suffering, only this time with a greater intensity than the first time, than of the actual event, in order to distil it all and encapsulate it – not simply to capture, but to intensify in order to convey with the same intensity through a neutral medium. Potency is otherwise lost in transmission. The

Wednesday last: Sheffield, Thursday last: Birmingham, Friday last: Nottingham; followed by Bath on Monday; Stoke on Tuesday; Newcastle on Wednesday and Norwich this morning – before returning to the office with a sheaf of scribbled notes, digital camera shots, notes recorded on a Dictaphone while on the tops of various buildings, muffled and inaudible due to high winds blasting across the mic as he had mumbled tiredly and unenthusiastically about various joists and joints.

He rubbed his eyes again and returned his bleary pupils to the screen. He had been staring at the screen for what felt like hours. How long it had really been, he was uncertain. The text was beginning to drift before his eyes as he read it again and again. The text was beginning to drift before his eyes as he read it again and again. The text was beginning to drift before his eyes as he read it again and again. The text was beginning to drift before his eyes as he read it again and again. The text was beginning to drift before his eyes as he read it again and again. The text was beginning to drift before his eyes

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page, the ink, will not leap out and physically batter the reader with a crowbar or place its hands around the reader's throat, constricting their larynx and squeezing the air and the very life out of them. The page, the ink, will not verbally abuse and belittle the reader, crushing their soul over a period of several years. In life, there is no closing the cover when one has had enough for one session, there is no returning life to the shelf and walking away, leaving it and forgetting about it forever. No, you must find the words to articulate such things with the vivid intensity that will make the reader unable to leave, make them believe, make them feel that they are experiencing it, perhaps to find such powerful expression that the reader will *actually feel* those same things, experience that very acute and specific pain, not through empathy, not through sympathy, but by drawing them to that same place and making them *actually live it*. You have to make them see through your eyes and walk in your shoes.

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would provide the vital distraction, vital space, that would enable him to return to his undertaking refreshed and reinvigorated. All he needed was a few minutes' distance between himself and this piece of work.

He rose from his chair, rubbing his eyes again. He needed rest. But there was work to be done. He headed over to the coffee machine in the corner of the office and hit the buttons that would yield up the strongest, sweetest brew available.

Returning to his desk, Tim pondered how best to amuse himself and to take his mind off work. Opening a new browser on his desktop, he went to the BBC Sports pages and scanned the F1 headlines. He wasn't nearly the petrolhead he used to be, and didn't even watch all of the Grand Prix races any more, let alone get up at ridiculous times to watch them live on the box, but he still liked to keep up with what was happening. He soon grew bored flicking through the sports pages but had no wish to return to writing his report just yet. His coffee was still too hot to drink. This awful muck definitely had an optimum temperature, which was below the throat-scorching heat at which it was ejected by the machine, but well above the tepid point it usually dropped to all

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He rose from his chair, rubbing his eyes. He headed into the kitchen and fired up the kettle while scooping coffee into his three-cup cafetierre and taking the bag of sugar from the cupboard: he was going to make the strongest, sweetest brew possible.

Returning to his desk, Anthony threw a CD into the disc drive. He had found it increasingly difficult to write while listening to music in recent years and considered it a shame that his two main passions in life, reading and music, both appeared to conflict with his occupation. Not that he could really complain: he much preferred working from home and being able to work in his own environment, in his dressing gown and slippers if he so chose, to being stuck in some shitty office. He sat back and let the strains of Girls Against Boys' sleazecore classic *Cruise Yourself* slither around his being. Opening a new browser on his desktop, he went to the BBC News pages: he liked to keep up with current affairs, and often found inspiration for his own writing within the stories.

too quickly.

Moving from the sports section, Tim cast his eye over a few news stories. He didn't really have much of an interest in current affairs; the news was depressing and politics was shit. But he needed to pass the time and bad news might make him feel better about himself, he reasoned. Should he feel guilty for revelling in others' misfortunes?

Police have launched a murder investigation after the discovery of a teenager's body at a house in Leeds.

Officers were called to the property on Compton Row in the Harehills area of the city at 1545 BST on Monday where they found the teenage girl dead.

Investigations are continuing at the scene and neighbours reported hearing a disturbance before police arrived.

It was all too depressing, and only reaffirmed his prejudices. Death and despair everywhere, fundamentalists bombing the fuck out of one another – and innocent civilians – for no obvious good reason; children and teenagers and old ladies being mugged, raped and murdered in every city, town and village every night; the government

*Real-life: that's what people identify with*, he thought, and working to this adage, he tried to pepper his work with as much harsh reality as he feasibly could. It had been a formula that had worked for him so far, and he liked the way crossing his fictional writing with his reviews and the like served to build some kind of cross-genre intertextuality.

*Sock it to me lifestyle...*

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*I know what happens now...*

Slurping down the last of his strong, hot coffee and deciding he had been a fool to tell his publisher that he had a complete manuscript available when all he had was the first three chapters and a handful of notes – not even a solid plot, Anthony decided that what he really needed to do at this juncture

trying to find new ways of screwing honest, hard-working individuals like himself out of their hard-earned cash by means of new stealth taxes – some not so stealthy, too – while making even bigger handouts to state spongers who were living off *his* wages, damn it; doom-mongers and green liberals all jumping on the global warming bandwagon and spreading panic... Tim didn't like to consider such things. Life was short and life was bleak, he knew this and didn't need reminding, and certainly didn't need scaremongers trying to tell him how to live his life, to stop driving, to turn his heating down or off. If it was cold, he would be warm. Man had evolved to master his environment. It wasn't that he was in complete denial over the global warming issue, he just didn't like to be told what to do. Besides, there was little he as an individual could do. It was down to the large companies and the industrial manufacturers in the developing world to act, and for governments to legislate if they wanted to see real change. Perhaps they would in time, but for now, he was buggered if he was doing to sift through his rubbish to recycle stuff, and besides, it wasn't going to have a significant effect on him. Maybe the next

was to capture the tedium of everyday life. This was something so many people could relate to. It couldn't fail. Yes, Michel Houellebecq had done a brilliant job of doing something similar in *Whatever*, as had Michael Bracewell in *Perfect Tense*, but Anthony considered his style to be radically different from either of theirs, and thus his target audience was different. Besides, there had been something of a trend for 'office' novels during the late 1990s and continuing into the new millennium, as Matt Thorne's *8 Minutes Idle*, Matt Beaumont's *e* and Douglas Coupland's *Microserfs* evidence, and these represented just a small handful of examples.

But he needed an angle. He didn't need to create a character so obnoxious that readers would turn off – even if the obnoxious aspect was done to good effect like the lead character in Irvine Welsh's *Filth* – but he did need to make his character work for him, to provide a vehicle for something.

As the CD spun out its final track, it came to him. Yes it was simple. Oh, but it would be effective.

After an hour's typing, he took another break. He was thirsty. It was time for a cup of tea.

generation, or the generation after that, but not now.

The Foo Fighters' track 'The Best of You' rattled from his pocket for the umpteenth time that day. He loved that song – it rocked – but he was beginning to tire of its polyphonic yet stunted ring-tone version intruding into his life every five minutes. He checked the name on the incoming call. It was Amy, his 'better half.' They had been together almost eight years now – long enough for him to have known almost instinctively that it would have been her ringing this time.

"Hi, Ames," he said, half sighing, half croaking, his voice cracked with fatigue.

"Hey," she chirruped back.

"Hey," he echoed back, as he commonly did. It bought time, breathing space, signalled to her that he was listening, like a call-and-response of 'Copy,' 'Roger.'

"I was just wondering what time you'd be home for tea tonight," she said in her usual even, gentle tone.

He sighed and rubbed his tired, itchy eyes again. Amy liked her routine. Daily, she called around 3.30 or 4pm to enquire when he'd be home, although he was rarely able to give a specific answer. There was the small matter of work to be done, followed by

Sipping his Earl Grey he turned on the television. Flicking through the Freeview channels, he came to The Hits. It was some kind of 'alternative hour,' and the Foo Fighters were on. Anthony hated the Foo Fighters. The first album had been throwaway lightweight guitar pop and inoffensive enough, but hadn't really done much to turn his head around. It certainly hadn't suggested world domination a decade hence. What was it that riled him so? After a moment's contemplation, it came to him: Grohl had sold out. Nirvana had not only been a one-band musical revolution in cultural terms, but they hadn't compromised, musically or in any other sense. Post-Nirvana, Grohl had transmogrified into the acceptable face of corporate rock: acceptable to the kids, because the Foo Fighters made rock music; acceptable to the suits and the mainstreamers because they rocked but not too much, and besides, that Dave Grohl, he's such a *nice guy*.

Disgusted, annoyed and feeling his blood pressure rise, Anthony flicked through a few more channels. Yup, 57 channels and nothin' on. In fact, at last count, he had noted over a hundred channels. And still fucking nothing on. All the quantity and no quality.

the invariably hellish commute home, which could take anything from forty minutes to an hour and a half.

“I dunno,” he replied after a pause. “I’ve got a lot on at the moment.”

“Ok, do you think you’ll be home before eight-ahuh?” she asked, her voice rising at the end and a small not-quite-laugh following the last syllable. He pictured her, smiling as she did, her nose wrinkled a little and her eyes half-closed, an endearing expression which he had been fond of from the outset when they had met some seven years ago. How time flew! He had been in his early twenties then, and having recently relocated following the securing of a decent job in Manchester, Tim had been on the brink of embarkation on his career proper.

“I don’t know,” he reiterated. “I hope so, but I wouldn’t like to say for definite.”

“Ok, well I thought we might have chops tonight and they grill in no time, so I shall wait until you get in before starting the tea.”

“Fine.”

“Call me when you’re leaving work?”

“Sure.”

“Ok, I’ll speak to you later,

Turning to BBC News 24, as he frequently did in times of boredom or exasperation, Anthony decided to check the headlines again and see what new developments there had been, what was going on in the world.

Gordon Brown has been accused of “cynical pre-election politics” over his visit to British forces in Iraq.

Shadow defence secretary Liam Fox said Mr Brown preferred a photo opportunity in Basra to keeping his promise to tell MPs first about planned troop cuts.

He said the PM used the armed forces as a “political football.” Sir John Major also questioned the timing of the announcement and Mr Brown’s visit.

But No 10 said it was “preposterous” to suggest the PM was playing politics. The prime minister’s official spokesman said he had always planned to go to Iraq as part “of the normal process of government.”

During his visit, Mr Brown said that UK forces in Iraq were to be cut by 1,000 by 2008.

The Ministry of Defence has since

bye.”

“Yeah, bye.”

He couldn't help it, he knew he sounded 'off.' The simple fact was that he had been feeling decidedly fractious lately, and it was difficult to pinpoint the exact reasons why. And because he didn't know, he felt he couldn't really talk about it with Amy – what was there to say? It was his problem, and he didn't want to push it onto her. She had her own things going on, namely the fact that she hadn't worked in over three months now. It wasn't that she was unemployable or lacked skills: she had been in a number of office jobs between her degree and her belated MA, but following her second graduation, she had simply drifted through temp jobs and short fixed-terms contracts. It was difficult for Tim not to show any resentment toward her, given that he was carrying her financially, and she didn't even spend her time on the house – or herself – while he was at work, and job hunting didn't seem to have appeared on her agenda in some time now.

He turned back to the screen once more.

“Sod it,” he muttered to himself.

He picked up his coat from the back of his chair and made his excuse

confirmed that figure includes the 500 troops whose withdrawal was announced in July - 270 of whom are already home.

The remaining 230 and a further 500 should be home for Christmas, Mr Brown said. After that, 4,500 UK troops will remain, at the Basra Airport base.

Anthony's attention was cut through by the sounds of the telephone.

“Hello?”

“Alright?” It was Simon.

They went back a good few years, back to their university days. They had enjoyed some good times together, mostly centred around the local pubs and student bars, staying up late, hopelessly drunk and ranting indefatigably about obscure music and cult fiction. On meeting in the first year, it had rapidly become apparent that Simon and Anthony shared quite similar tastes in both. They had spent many afternoon and evenings in one another's halls and houses, listening to the most underground sounds they could find for one another, their audio experiences occasionally enhanced with a joint or two.

Simon hadn't wanted to return to his hometown of Newark,

to Andy Price as he passed him in the doorway into the main office – “yeah, just going to pick up some files... won’t be back in this afternoon now.”

“Alright, mate, see yer,” Andy cheered.

Tim was free. He was going home.

He slowed his pace as he passed through the main office, allowing himself to do something he rarely – never – did: to cast his eye over the others who worked there, some of whom he knew by sight but not by name, many of whom he had never seen in his life. It struck him as strange that he should spend so many hours in this building with all these people, and yet only know a handful of them to speak to.

Heading toward the exit, he spied some quality totty, but his favourite remained the busty tart on reception who did a great line in short skirts and low-cut tops. How he wanted to bury his face in those tits of hers! He never would, of course: he was with Amy and one hundred percent committed and faithful. But she was dependable, reserved, austere even, and Sindy seemed to him to represent everything Amy wasn’t.

He’d not swap Amy for the world, but things had been growing a

embarrassed by the small shithole market town, the name of which was an anagram of ‘wanker,’ and like Anthony, had remained in Sheffield on graduation. And so, despite Simon’s having gone ‘straight’ and selling out to The Man, they had remained friends, and although they saw one another considerably less frequently these days, still enjoyed lengthy alcohol-fuelled discussions about music, books and this and that, this and that, this and that.

“Hey, how’s it going?” asked Anthony.

“Good,” replied Simon.

“Cool.”

Neither had ever been particularly adept and communication by telephone.

“Fancy a pint?”

“Sure.” Anthony knew he had work to do, but a pint or three would probably help loosen him up. He often wrote better with a few drinks in him. “Where, when?”

“Frog and Parrot in an hour?”

Anthony checked his watch. It was ten past four. “Done.”

“See you there.”

Ant put the phone down. Sensibly, he should eat something before heading out. But he wasn’t feeling sensible. He was too busy

little stale of late: maybe to swap for just one night... No, no, it was wrong. He pushed these thoughts from his mind. He gave Sin a nod as he passed and she returned with a saucy wink and he was boning up in his suit trousers.

*What is it about that girl?* He mused as he traversed the concourse toward his sporty convertible BMW. He wasn't sure, but he'd like to take her for a ride! His thoughts were pure filth as looked at the shiny vehicle that was his pride and joy.

Reminding himself that he was a good boy and pulling his jacket across to disguise his embarrassing bulge, he figured he'd have to release his muck back home – preferably with Amy's assistance, but more likely, as had been more often the case recently, with thoughts of Cindy and a box of Tesco mansize facial tissues.

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wrestling with his literary dilemmas to contemplate food. All he really wanted was beer and a good rant. Things usually fell together after – or during – a beer and a rant.

An eternal student at heart, Anthony had remained near the Broomhill area, so it was a manageable walk, if done briskly, to the Frog and Parrot on Division Street in the Devonshire Quarter of the city. It wasn't the best pub in the world by any stretch, but being a Greene King pub, it wasn't too self-consciously fashionable and at least did a reasonable line in real ales. He considered this to be particularly important.

Not liking to smoke in the house, and being forbidden by law to smoke in the pub, he lit a cigarette and started on his way. The beer was calling.

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