Maybe It's About Time

NEIL BOSS



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To Mena

You have been next to me for every single word of this book.
That's why it's dedicated to you.
Truly, this man's best friend.

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Chapter 1
Points Failure

The concourse at Waterloo Station was rammed as Marcus Barlow emerged from the warm cocoon of the Underground like a pupating moth. Thousands of Monday evening commuters were awaiting their fate at the hands of South Western Trains. He took his AirPods out of their case. For years he had resisted, insisting they looked like hearing aids. Now they were as much a part of his uniform as his Cartier cufflinks and Ferragamo tie.

His smartphone came to life. A picture of his family taken the previous year on holiday in the Maldives. Four tanned bodies, squinting into the sun waist-deep in a turquoise ocean. A happy picture taken at a happy time.

Marcus started The Sequence, a ritual he performed multiple times a day, checking his collection of apps grouped in labelled folders. If a new app didn't have a folder, he created one. Outlook told him he had twenty-five new emails. He inhaled deeply and rolled his eyes. He would read them on the train.

He opened Stockwatch and checked the closing price of the FTSE 100. Green days were good, red days were bad. Uncertainty over Brexit meant there had been a lot of red days recently. Everything was green and it made him feel less anxious. WhatsApp pinged. A message from Alice.

Hi M. U on time? Lmk if u going 2b late. Pick u up at stn. Veg lasag 2nite.

Lots of smiley, yellow faces. His wife liked yellow faces, smiling ones, laughing ones, crying ones, ones with their tongues sticking out. Along with her fondness for text speak, he loathed them and wondered WTF had gone wrong with her? He opened the last app in The Sequence, Spotify. Marcus believed that music only existed in physical form, vinyl and CDs but Sonos and Spotify had changed that.

'You should sell the lot on Discogs,' said Andy, his AV man, scornfully. 'Now you've got Spotify, you'll never listen to another CD. Trust me.'

Marcus found it hard to trust a man who boasted he had been in the SAS, had lost two fingers in Operation Desert Storm and been a personal

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bodyguard to Dodi Al Fayed. Installing high-end AV equipment in the plusher neighbourhoods of Surrey seemed a bit of a comedown for an ex-war veteran with an ego problem. But Andy was right. Spotify now ruled Marcus's life with its powerful search engine and massive back catalogue. He selected his 'Classic Punk' playlist and turned up the volume. The thudding drums of the Damned's 'New Rose' pummelled his eardrums.

He looked up at the iconic, four-sided clock, made famous in the classic 1945 film *Brief Encounter*. He wondered what would have happened if Laura Jesson and Dr Alec Harvey had started their love affair in 2020?

South Western Trains' incompetence would have given them a bit more time to nip round the back of the station for a snog and a grope, he thought.

The commuting congregation was staring up at the departures board like pilgrims outside St Peter's Basilica at Easter. He half expected the Pope to appear on the balcony to bless the frustrated hordes, but all he got was a row of 'delayed' signs and a tannoy announcement. Points failure at Clapham Junction. Groans of despair, a mass shaking of heads and rolling of eyes. The crowd continued to stare at the screens hoping it was a cruel hoax. But it wasn't.

Having commuted in and out of Waterloo for the best part of twenty-five years, Marcus had heard every excuse. 'Points failure' was up there with 'signal failure' and 'an incident on the line'. The latter was railspeak for a suicide, attempted or successful, and would mean at least a couple of hours' delay to clear up the mess. Years of commuting had numbed his senses, making him intolerant of human tragedy.

The option of going to his pied-à-terre flat in Queensway was scuppered by not having a clean pair of underpants for the following day. Marcus was fastidious about his underwear and berated himself for not having sufficient clean clothes at the flat. There was no alternative but to sit it out. With a bit of luck, Network Rail would fix the problem before he resorted to dossing down with a tramp who was happy to share his soiled sleeping bag, a bit of stale croissant and the warmth from his dog.

Alice's news that dinner would be 'veggie lasagne' filled him with dread. With the Christmas turkey barely cold, his daughter, Olivia, had persuaded her mother that the consumption of red meat accelerated the onset of colon cancer. Sunday roasts and steaks were now history. His son, James, had buggered off to university leaving him to fight his own battles. He had been happy to compromise on chicken and fish, but as soon as Olivia had shown Alice videos of battery chickens and turtles with plastic straws up their noses, they were off the menu too. He knew dairy was on death row too when he saw the carton of oat milk and packets of vegan cheese in the fridge.

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His thoughts about food were distracted by 'London Calling' by the Clash. It was one of his Desert Island Discs, although he accepted he was unlikely to be invited to share them with the programme's listeners. Marcus worked in corporate finance and nobody was interested in that. If he had discovered a new species of tree frog or been the latest winner of *Strictly Come Dancing*, Lauren Laverne and the BBC might have come knocking, but he knew they wouldn't. He let the final words of the Clash's masterpiece fade out before calling Alice.

'Hi Al. It's me.'

A photograph of Marcus looking pompous and self-important appeared on her phone like it did every time he called.

'Hi Marcus, I know it's you. Everything okay?'

'Not really. Shit day at work, boring meetings and too many emails. South Western Trains have fucked up again. Points failure! Fuck knows what time I'll be home.'

His liberal use of the word 'fuck' was one of the many things that had irritated Alice throughout their twenty-three-year marriage.

'Marcus, why do you have to swear every time something doesn't go your way? I know it's frustrating but I'm sure they're doing their best.'

Her lack of empathy annoyed him. The only frustration in Alice's day was discovering her Pilates class had been shifted from the tranquility of the 'Be the Best You' room to the 'Let it Rip' suite immediately after the spinning class had ended and its walls were dripping with sweat and pheromones.

'Any idea when you'll be home? I can hang on with the veggie lasagne? Or you can warm it up when you get in?'

'Not a clue. Go ahead and eat and I'll get a cab from the station. That's assuming I get to the fucking station before Easter.'

'Why don't you go to the flat?'

'I don't have any clean underpants.'

'Can't you wear the same ones for another day? Or have you crapped yourself or something?'

'That's disgusting. You know I never wear the same pair two days running.'

'Fine. I'll leave the veggie lasagne out. See you later.'

'Fine' meant that it wasn't fine.

A decision on food was becoming urgent, he was getting hungry. Expensive lunches, usually charged to a client, had become a thing of the past. A series of corruption scandals and accounting frauds had put a stop to them. Now anything more than a sandwich and a few cold samosas was seen as bribery. He reviewed his options.

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A sit-down meal wasn't feasible if Network Rail got its act together and he had to move quickly. Yo Sushi, with its continually moving conveyor belt, didn't appeal to him. Marcus was not a decisive man. By the time he had made a selection, somebody further up the food chain had stolen it and he was back to square one. The only option was fast food.

He had often been tempted by the intoxicating aromas wafting from the little booth of the West Cornwall Pasty Company. He approached the warm glass cabinet. He was instantly horrified. Next to the row of traditional pasties was an array of other fillings that would make a Cornish tin miner turn in his grave. Marcus had eaten enough 'fusion' meals to know what worked and what didn't. Mince, carrots, potatoes and spices worked. Thai green chicken curry didn't. He was greeted by Craig, a young man in an over-washed, black shirt.

'Yes bruv? What can I get you?' he said in an urban slang accent.

'Where in West Cornwall are your pasties made?'

'Dunno,' said Craig with a baffled look. 'All we does is heat them up.'

'So it's not Penzance then?'

'Where's Penzance? Na, what can I get you?'

Craig's lack of product knowledge had disappointed him. There seemed little point in discussing menu options.

'Thank you very much, Craig. Perhaps another time?'

Marcus turned and walked back into the crowd, which was still waiting for an update on the points failure. Behind him, Craig made a gesture.

It came down to Burger King. Growing up in an era when a trip to the Wimpy Bar in Staines was the highlight of his school holiday, he had witnessed the demise of Wimpy at the suffocating hands of the ubiquitous McDonalds. When Burger King entered the market, he hoped the new underdog would give the bully a bloody nose. He preferred a flame-grilled Whopper to a Big Mac. It had more in common with a Wimpy. He also thought Ronald's 'special sauce' tasted like puke.

He was greeted by a smiling, enthusiastic girl in a crisp, well-pressed, blue uniform. Her name was Britney.

'Are you named after Britney Spears?' said Marcus, trying to build rapport. She nodded.

'It's American,' she said, proudly.

'Although you don't sound very American,' he said. She laughed.

'I ain't. I'm from Balham.'

Marcus thought that in fifty years' time, there would be a whole generation of pensioners called Britney who could be carbon-dated by their name back to the year 2000.

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'What would you like?' said Britney.

'I'll have the Double Whopper with bacon and cheese, large fries and a portion of onion rings, please. A bottle of water, some extra ketchup and salt.'

She tapped his order into the keypad using her recently manicured nails, which resembled a vulture's talons.

'That'll be £12.80, please?'

He reached into his breast pocket, took out his Mulberry wallet and gave her a twenty-pound note. Marcus still used cash, convinced that the overuse of credit cards was a major cause of cybercrime. Two years earlier, he had returned from a family holiday in Acapulco to be informed by American Express that someone had been running wild in Miami with his credit card and had run up a bill of £7,500. It turned out it had been cloned in a beach taco bar. Amex refunded the money, but it was three weeks of stress he could have done without.

He sat down at one of the tables on the concourse in a good position to hear any tannoy updates and run to the platform. The previous occupants had left the remnants of their meal, and he cleared away the half-eaten chicken burger, some cold, limp chips and two fried mozzarella sticks. He hadn't noticed them on the menu, and made a mental note. They looked great, if a little greasy.

From the side pocket of his Tumi laptop bag, Marcus took out his bottle of melon-scented hand sanitiser, squirted a blob on his hands and rubbed them together. Taking the Underground or 'the Drain' on most days, he was paranoid about germs. Nobody in his office sanitised their hands as frequently as he did. He carefully laid out his food in front of him. Everything was going well until he leant forward and dipped the cuff of his white Turnbull & Asser shirt in his extra pot of ketchup. Despite plenty of spit and wiping, it had left a stain.

By the time he finished his Double Whopper, it was 7.35. Still no news from South Western Trains. What to do next? Check his emails, read the *Evening Standard* or update Alice? Calling home wasn't a good idea. The 'veggie lasagne' would be at a critical point and the last thing he needed was being blamed for a burnt bechamel.

He checked his email. There were thirty-one unread emails in his inbox. Twenty were from Mason Sherwin, all with the same title: 'Project Spearmint – URGENT'.

Fuck it. It can wait, he thought, *Sherwin is a bellend.*

Marcus disliked Mason.

He took out his copy of the *Evening Standard* from his laptop bag and unfolded it.

'WE'RE ROYAL DISRUPTERS', said the front-page headline.

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The nation was in a state of hysteria over the decision by the Duke and Duchess of Sussex to step away from public duties and seek independent lives away from the royal family. Questions were being raised about the survival of the monarchy. Marcus didn't understand what all the fuss was about. If Harry and Meghan wanted to bugger off to Canada, he wouldn't stand in their way.

He turned to the back pages which, for once, weren't covered by a full-page advert for a mobile phone operator. His phone was paid for by The Firm, and data usage or iCloud storage meant nothing to him. Marcus supported Crystal Palace, one of the capital's less fashionable clubs, whose ground was in a dingy part of South London. Newspapers rarely devoted column inches to the Eagles, unlike the club's swankier and wealthier London neighbours. Tonight was no exception, bugger all news.

He returned to the body of the paper and was attracted by a headline.

LONDON WATERLOO NAMED UK'S BUSIEST STATION FOR SIXTEENTH YEAR IN A ROW.

Apparently, 94.2 million passengers had used the station in the past twelve months. *Poor suffering bastards!* he thought. *Suckers for punishment.*

With time on his hands, he read more of the newspaper than usual. On *Love Island*, Mike had dumped Jess, and the Mayor of London's latest campaign to stop knife crime in the capital was going nowhere. Marcus looked up. The departures board hadn't changed, a clean sweep of 'delayed' signs across every destination. Platforms of backed-up trains, lights out and doors closed as if they had gone to sleep for the night.

'World News' was a part of the paper he rarely read. If there was anything important, he would see it on television or online. He flipped from 'Londoner's Diary' to global events. The bushfires raging in Australia dominated the pages.

Koalas are cute, thought Marcus. *Getting public support for an ecological disaster is much easier with a picture of a toasted koala.*

It was a headline tucked away in the bottom right-hand corner that caught his eye.

CHINA REPORTS FIRST DEATH FROM MYSTERIOUS OUTBREAK IN WUHAN

A 61-year-old man in the Chinese city of Wuhan had died from an unidentified pneumonia-like virus and seven other people were in hospital. Forty-one people

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had been diagnosed with the pathogen. Chinese health officials were ruling out common respiratory diseases, such as influenza and bird flu.

Marcus didn't know where Wuhan was but, as China was a big place with a massive population, forty-one people getting the flu didn't seem such a big deal. The station tannoy crackled into life. The points issue had been fixed and services would be starting in fifteen minutes.

He looked at his watch, it was 8.30. He stared up at the departures board and saw that the train to Weybridge was leaving from Platform 5, directly opposite his table. He stuffed the newspaper in his laptop bag, buttoned up his Burberry raincoat and made his way to the platform. It was already three deep and his train would be making additional stops. As a first-class season ticket holder, he would get a seat, as long as there were no gate crashers from second class. The doors opened and he squeezed his way into the carriage. It was almost full but he got a seat by the window, facing forwards. Facing backwards gave him motion sickness. At least he had a double seat to himself.

He saw him coming down the gangway. A squat, fat man wearing decorator's overalls and a hoodie was squeezing his way through the narrow gap between the seats, bumping his ample backside into people's heads. He had a large, square head with a navy-blue cap with 'NYY' in white letters on the front. The adjustable strap was on its last hole and was cutting into a roll of pink fat on the back of his neck. His face was a blood red, purplish colour, like Sir Alex Ferguson's nose and he was sweating profusely, little rivers of salty juice running down his cheeks into his chins. Marcus prayed he would find a seat before he reached him but his luck ran out. Beetroot Man swivelled and plumped his sizeable buttocks on the seat next to him, squashing Marcus against the window and sitting on his raincoat.

'I'm very sorry!' said the man, wheezing and out of breath. 'I had to run for the train.'

Marcus thought the man hadn't run anywhere in years. He tugged at his trapped raincoat and the man lifted his left cheek to release it.

'Sorry again!' said the man, still panting.

'No need,' said Marcus, being polite 'We all just want to get home. It's been a long wait. You're here now.'

Marcus wished he had been kinder. Perhaps the man had Type 2 diabetes and couldn't help his obesity? Maybe it was congenital and he had always been fat, the kid who was last to get picked for the football team? The strong smell of turpentine vaporising from the man's paint-stained overalls was making him feel queasy and he decided to call home.

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'Hi Al, I'm on the train now. I'll be getting into Weybridge around 9.40. How's everything with you?'

'Not good. I've got a splitting headache and I've taken two Nurofen. I'm going to bed soon.'

Since the menopause, Alice had started to suffer from regular migraines which HRT had failed to alleviate. He tried to lighten her mood.

'Sorry to hear that. Are you sure it wasn't the veggie lasagne that brought it on?'

It was a daft thing to say and he regretted it instantly, but it was already out there.

'Oh fuck off, Marcus! I don't need your sarcasm right now. I feel like shit.'

Alice could swear like a trooper when a bad mood caught her. Now wasn't the time to point out her hypocrisy about swearing.

'Sorry, it's been a long day. I was only trying to cheer you up. Don't worry about picking me up from the station. I'll get a taxi.'

'That's big of you, thanks very much. Have you eaten?'

'Yes.'

'What did you have? KFC? Nando's?'

Marcus felt guilty so he lied, saying he went to the Natural Kitchen and had a halloumi salad with quinoa and spinach. He suspected she knew he was lying but didn't have the energy to interrogate him.

'I've left the veggie lasagne out for you. You can microwave it if you want. Don't leave it out, put it in the fridge. It will do me for lunch tomorrow.'

'Thanks. I'll see if I'm hungry when I get home. How's Libby?'

'She's fine. In her room, revising for her mocks. I hope she's working and not spending all her time chatting on WhatsApp or Instagram.'

There was little chance. Olivia was a model student. Deputy Head Girl, fiercely competitive, academically bright and captain of the First XI hockey team. Her ambition was to be a vet and she was studying hard for her A levels to win a place at Bristol University in the summer. Apart from the occasional glass of wine, drugs, boys and Jager bombs hadn't distracted her from her objective.

'She'll probably still be up when you get home,' said Alice. 'Honestly, Marcus, I'm really not feeling great. See you later. Glad you got the train in the end.'

Beetroot Man lifted his giant buttocks and got off at Surbiton giving Marcus ten minutes to recover from the smell of turps and re-inflate his squashed body. The train pulled into Weybridge and around twenty people got off. He and Alice had moved to the area seventeen years earlier, just after Olivia was born. Weybridge had a Waitrose, which was important to Marcus. He called it The Temple.

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Like most nights after nine, the exit barriers were open. He wondered if having a season ticket was worth it and why he didn't simply dodge the fare? However, being charged with fare evasion by a Revenue Protection Officer in front of one of his neighbours would definitely be an item on the agenda for the next Neighbourhood Watch meeting. If the shame wasn't enough, Alice's position as Treasurer would become untenable.

He approached the dingy cabin next to the station with its flickering neon sign, 'Ace Cars – 24 Hours'. There was nothing 'ace' about Ace Cars. Parked outside was a row of Toyota Prius cars and Marcus wondered if minicab drivers drove anything else. Ace Cars had none of the technical gimmickry of Uber. It was cash only, no accounts and no credit cards. He went into the cabin and stared through the little window into the control centre. The temperature in the cabin was stifling as two fan heaters circulated warm, stagnant air.

Sat in front of him were three drivers all eating home made food out of Tupperware containers. The sofa they were sitting on looked like it had been reclaimed from the local recycling centre. Sagging, frayed and dirty, it contained enough human DNA to keep Dr Nikki Alexander from *Silent Witness* busy for a month. Marcus had a secret fancy for Emilia Fox, beauty and brains. He peered through the hatch where the controller was staring at multiple screens and speaking into several telephones simultaneously. He could have been guiding a Boeing 747 into Heathrow. He looked up.

'Yes mate. Where do you want to go?'

''Twin Gates, Brooklands Avenue.'

The controller looked straight past him and yelled into the aromatic smog.

'Kareem, Brooklands Avenue!'

Kareem levered himself out of the collapsed sofa, took a spoonful of rice, wiped his mouth and his beard with his sleeve and gestured Marcus outside to his white Toyota Prius. Inside, the car smelled of pine air freshener. They pulled away from the cabin silently.

'It's very quiet isn't it?' said Marcus making 'taxi chat'.

'It's a hybrid electric,' said Kareem proudly. 'Very economical.'

The driver turned up the volume on the car radio. Smooth FM, not one of Marcus's favourites.

'Celine Dion is great, isn't she?' said Kareem, as the pointy-chinned warbler belted out the theme tune from *Titanic*.

'Not really my taste,' said Marcus. 'More of a Sex Pistols man myself.'

'Never heard of them,' said Kareem.

Not on Smooth FM, you wouldn't, thought Marcus.

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Kareem turned into the driveway and pulled up outside the front door. Marcus and Alice had bought their house before he became a partner at The Firm and Alice was working as a corporate lawyer at one of the City's Magic Circle firms. Although it was a stretch for two incomes, they had embarked on a major renovation project which saw them living amongst rubble and debris for the best part of a year. Now they had one of the nicest houses in the road. On the drive was Alice's black BMW X5 and Olivia's Fiat 500. She was learning to drive.

'Nice place,' said Kareem, looking up at the façade of the house.

'Thank you. How much do I owe you?'

'Eight pounds, please.'

Marcus handed him a ten-pound note.

'Keep the change.'

The Prius departed silently as Marcus turned the key in the lock of the immaculately painted double doors, still adorned with the Christmas wreath, which Alice ordered every year from their local florist.

Eighty pounds for some old cinnamon sticks, pieces of dried orange peel and twigs! Better take that down at the weekend before it brings us bad luck, he thought.

He walked into the kitchen and inspected the 'veggie lasagne' left on the large granite island. The bechamel had congealed to the consistency of wallpaper paste and the broccoli had disintegrated to a mush. Alice had a flair for including a random ingredient in every meal, so the addition of diced cornichons was no surprise. Still full from his Double Whopper Meal, he sealed the dish and put it in the fridge.

The fridge was full of boxes of meat substitute products with names such as 'Like Meat Soya Based Chicken Bites'. He had recently read an article in *Metro* which revealed that men who regularly consumed soya in preference to meat had a lower concentration of sperm. Staring into the fridge, he imagined veganism was a plot by women to take over the planet by eliminating fertile men. In his mind, he role-played confronting Alice with his theory.

'Marcus,' she would say patronisingly, 'we're quite capable of surviving on this earth without men.'

'But even with IVF and turkey basters, you're still going to need some sperm to fertilise your eggs. Or are you planning to clone women so they all look identical? Droids with tits and fannies?' Marcus could see the appeal of a world full of Emilia Fox clones. 'So whose jizz are you going to keep? Gary Lineker's?'

Alice had a not-so-secret crush on the *Match of the Day* frontman. It was the only reason she watched it, peering over the top of the *Daily Mail* when he was

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summing up. Marcus had suggested growing a small goatee beard like Gary's but Alice dismissed the idea, saying he would look ridiculous.

'And what are you going to do when your spunk stocks run low and Gary's balls have dried up?'

'We'll keep a few fertile men fed solely on wagyu beef to top up our stocks. And then we'll kill them!' Alice laughed maniacally.

'A bit like mayflies? Born, fly, mate and die?'

'Exactly!'

The beeping alarm from the open door snapped him out of his fantasy. He closed the door and took a mug out of the cupboard. He put a spoonful of coffee in the mug and turned to the Quooker, the instant hot water tap that every designer kitchen had to have. Marcus hadn't seen the need for one, but Alice had insisted. Now he wouldn't be without it.

He sat down at the oak kitchen table and stared out of the bifold doors into the garden. It was glistening with the night frost. He took his phone out of his pocket. Outlook was now up to forty-eight emails. Mason Sherwin was still working.

Oh, piss off, Mason, thought Marcus as he closed his phone.

He took out the crumpled copy of the *Evening Standard* from his laptop bag and returned to the page he had read earlier.

CHINA REPORTS FIRST DEATH FROM MYSTERIOUS OUTBREAK IN WUHAN

The word 'mysterious' was playing on his mind. Flu happened everywhere, every year, so why was this mysterious? He closed the paper, put his empty mug in the dishwasher and turned off the kitchen lights. As he climbed the stairs, he could see the light on in Olivia's room. He knocked gently. She was sitting at her desk, lamp on, surrounded by open textbooks.

'Hi Libby. How's it all going?'

As a toddler, her older brother hadn't been able to say her name properly, and Libby had stuck ever since.

'Hi Dad. Not too bad. Got my Biology mock exam tomorrow. Up to my eyes in parasites at the moment.'

'Bit like working for The Firm,' said Marcus, and he laughed.

She got up and came over to him. She put her arms around his neck and kissed him on the cheek. She had recently showered, her hair was still damp and he could smell the perfume of her moisturising cream.

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'How was your day at work? You're home late. South Western Trains fucked up again then?'

In spite of Alice's best efforts and a public school education, Olivia had inherited her father's flair for expletives.

'Yes. Wankers, I fucking hate them! Work was okay, same old, same old.'

'How's Project Spearmint going?'

Olivia was always making fun of his projects and the lack of originality in their names. Usually colours, gods or planets.

'It's fine. Mad client doing mad things.'

'You love it!' said Olivia, winking and tweaking his cheek.

'Maybe, maybe not. Don't work too late. If I don't see you in the morning, good luck tomorrow. You'll smash it.'

'Thanks Dad. You're a star.'

The bedroom was dark and Alice was asleep. Apart from when he was drunk, he could navigate his way to the ensuite in his sleep. He switched on the cabinet light and looked at himself in the mirror. His fifty-fifth birthday was looming but everyone said he looked forty-five. He didn't feel it.

He slid under the duvet next to Alice, feeling her warmth as she stirred. Her shoulder-length hair draped across the pillow and she snuffled. He wanted to spoon up to her, to feel the curve of her body next to his but waking her with a migraine would start a row. He turned on to his back, pulled the thin duvet up to his shoulders and stared at the ceiling. The menopause had given Alice flushes and she was always hot, even in winter. Marcus now had to make do with a four-tog duvet in the middle of January.

He set the alarm on his phone for 6.20 and plugged it into the charger by his bed. One last check on Outlook. His inbox was now up to fifty-five emails. He was still awake. He thought about going downstairs and doing some work but instead he lay on his back, breathing quietly through his nose, feeling his heartbeat in the tips of his fingers.

'First death from mysterious outbreak.' The words kept going around in his head.

It was Monday, 13 January 2020.

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