

LAME DUCK: YOU'RE FIRED



WILL HAYNES

Tuesday evening. I'm just hanging myself. The phone rings.

It's Her. This is awkward.

'I'm busy' I say, 'not the best of times. Is it urgent?'

For some reason I still take the call and the obligatory hand-in-hand abuse. Whoever said that it's better to have loved and lost than to never have loved at all was a total chump... She tells me that I'm a fraction of the man she thought I was and to go ahead and think I'm a little Kurt Cobain. It hurts but she's right. I'm simply a lame duck that had been masquerading as a Golden Eagle and I got found out, or taken out-shot from the sky by cannonball. Bloodied feathers still littered over everything else I see, taste, smell and touch... I couldn't even hang myself particularly successfully. I'm still alive, for a start. All I've managed to do is create a bit of a friction burn around my neck that will take some explaining at work and my throat feels like a silverback gorilla's been pounding on it. I swallow a couple of times to test it out. Maybe not a gorilla... Perhaps a small colobus monkey? I should probably leave a note too. That's the decent thing. Something poetic. Mostly because if I hang myself without one it might look like I did it by accident. One of those wanking experiments gone horribly wrong? Michael Hutchence, sans talent. Just another wannabe wanking himself to death... How embarrassing. I decide not to hang myself. I'll think of something else for another day. To be honest, I'm just quite pleased to have heard from her at all, regardless of abuse, and so I'm definitely going to sleep on it.

Maybe she still cares?

## Week 1

Work again and everyone's talking about that fucking Apprentice programme on TV last night. There's general amusement that the guy from it's got the same name as me. I pointed out that it's spelt differently the first few times they cracked the joke but any reaction at all on my part merely encourages further contribution. The mentality at the UK's six thousand, seven hundred and eighty-seventh most popular phone-upgrade store is hardly the nation's hotbed of comedic talent. Any talent. Why am I surrounded by cretins? This telephonic boiler room: a clutch of middlemen in the excreting bowels of Service Land, a claustrophobic loft office in Manchester. That's why. Hardly Oxbridge material that end up in this bargain bin at the budget supermarket of last-chance careers. At least this keeps me reasonably secure. I'm Premier Sales Boy here. Scoreboard Champion. Market leader. King of the Jungle. Of course, I've been cheating but nobody's got the chutzpah to sniff it out. I'm simply hacking in to the re-sales accounts for last year's transactions, rather than cold-calling like we're supposed to be. That's ninety-nine per cent of the battle won, rather than disturbing total strangers with a script- carefully worded so that they wrongly assume you're from their network and it's time for their free upgrade. They will either shout abuse at you, ignore you, hang up immediately, or perhaps if you're very fucking lucky one in a hundred might stay on the line, with one in ten of those that do naively divulging their security details. You then call the network "on their behalf" and pocket the commission. The ones that go for it are typically the obvious examples: the young, the old, the weak, the sick, the poor, the needy, gullible, desperate and stupid... all of nature's typecast victims. It's not exactly a Ponzi scheme but if they dealt with the network directly they'd get a far superior phone on a much shorter contract. It's hardly what I'd call ethical trading. Sometimes I want to scream: DON'T FUCKING ACCEPT. HANG UP. NOW. DIAL 1 ON YOUR MOBILE, SPEAK TO YOUR NETWORK IMMEDIATELY AND GET A BETTER DEAL

THAN WE COULD EVER OFFER YOU... EVEN IF YOU WERE SIGNING AWAY YOUR SOUL IN YOUR BLOOD, WRITTEN ON THE SKIN OF YOUR FIRST BORN. THIS. IS. NOT. FUCKING. WORTH. IT.

Haven't actually done it yet. Still on my bucket-list if decide to croak. Make an appointment. Schedule it into the diary. Perhaps tell HR Guy to GO FUCK HIMSELF too.

Awareness of impending death does have its advantages...

HR Guy comes in and makes the Apprentice joke, pointing his finger at me, doing a terrible cockney impersonation before bursting into hysterics. HR Guy: a shrill, lanky creep of a man, a small fish in a tadpole bucket, mercilessly aware that the small power he holds in this stagnant goldfish bowl makes him a "player" his tiny, sad world. He resembles an overly libido'd-up skeleton, sporting an 80's flat top in a Primark suit. I sigh inwardly and try to chuckle outwardly, unconvincingly to any sentient being, but satisfied with my response, he moves along to the new attractive Polish girl and makes some comments that in any other company in the First World would end in a cut-and-dry lawsuit with handsome compensation payoff for the recipient. Around here it's merely par-for-the-course. She also chuckles unconvincingly at his hilarious-cum-rape-alarmingly, chilling remarks. I'm not sure which of us HR guy likes more. We're obviously this week's favourites. I bring in more sales, however she is undeniably attractive. And HR Guy thinks he's in with a chance. He thinks I'll make more sales. Either way, we're both safe for now. New Somalian Guy isn't. He's underperforming his targets so he's for the chopping block three days in to his unpaid, legally unjustifiable, grace period. Poor fucker. They'll definitely keep him on until Friday though. I know none of us would do nearly as well as him if we were just getting to grips with our Somalian in a depressing new land of "opportunity". We'd have to resort to piracy sooner than he would. Once I've exhausted the re-sales supply I'll be in every bit as much danger as our new Somalian friend. Once Polish has knocked HR Guy back at the first post-work drinks bash, so will she.

This was only supposed to be temporary until the band took off. Somehow it's become a full-time gig, with the band merely a slip-show for the weekends and things. A few small pub "concerts" here and there. Pocket money if the promoters choose to pay us, which they inevitably don't. I'm twenty-seven now. What did I want to be when I grew up? Kurt Cobain. Jimi Hendrix. Jim Morrison. Janis Joplin? Hmmm... Ian Curtis, maybe? Not him... He was too young. Not actually part of the Twenty-Seven Club, though he often gets lumped in with them... Where did it all go wrong? For Ian it was topping himself as Joy Division was just on the cusp of superstardom. For me? It started so well: Music Scholarship to Cheetham's. Met my True Love there. Set up a band. Hotly tipped by NME on the "Ones To Watch" list. Shot a few music videos, one of them in that old condom factory (that is now flashy, overpriced loft apartments that gloat at me from the window of my ex-student digs...). A few trips to London. Did some blow. Went nowhere. True Love doesn't love me any more. She seems to hate me. Now I punch numbers in a hot room. Perhaps it would have been better to go at twenty-two like Ian and to have been remembered while I still had potential... and She still loved me.

When things are good I hear music all around me. I can compose a symphony from the orchestra of rapping keyboards in the office, soft tones from phones in the background, wind rattling against the windows like percussion. Tubular bells of heavy Manchester rain ringing from potholes in hard concrete streets; sweeping slushes of car-driven puddles, baritone hums of car engines and the rhythmic gudder, gudder,

gudder of pneumatic drills splitting tarmac. I even see the noises. I project these resonances from my mind on to passing objects: billboards become musical scroll, objects form shapes of notes, chords and scales: clouds become C-minors, E-flat majors, people appear to be humming backing vocals as they go about their day-to-day business and harmony is all around me... but when it's bad it's very bad... there's nothing. An empty hole, left raw and gaping, a vacuum to be filled only with unfulfilled promise. Music and hope will never return. Today, Polish girl seems to be humming into the phone and I hear a basic melody from some tormented soul scratching nails against the target board. It's not exactly Beethoven, closer to the Sex Pistols, but at least there's something. It's because I've had word from Her that there's at least some form of melody as the score to my life. It's very dangerous to base your entire happiness on another person, but at least I'm not feeling like sucking an exhaust pipe or shotgun barrel right now.

## **Week 2**

There's a movie on. Colin Farrell is being a total bastard to Pocahontas and then he buggers off and ditches her. She's heartbroken. Later on Christian Bale turns up and he's very nice to her. She gets with Christian Bale, forgets Colin Farrell, moves to Buckinghamshire to a big country pile and is happy there, has a few dinner parties with Royalty, and is touted around high society when she visits the West End. Then Farrell turns up again, like the scoundrel that he is, and it screws her up and she gives Christian Bale his marching orders. It's all very close to home but I can't work out if I'm the Farrell character or the Bale one. Or maybe even Pocahontas? I change channel and it's the bloody Apprentice again. That cockney geezer with my name is still ranting on about how nobody's going to make a fool out of him, he's been in business forty years, blah, blah, blah, but he's already making a fool of himself by even considering giving any one of the desperate Muppets that can't even boil an egg a job... I'm pretty sure one of them is a guy who got fired from my boiler room last year. I can imagine HR Guy on it, a talking head by the Thames or some other iconic London landmark, crapping on about how he's in charge of the Premier Sales team in Europe or something and earns squillions but for no apparent reason he wants to jack it in and move to Essex to boil eggs for a questionably applicable 1980's ex-computer salesman...

Haven't heard from Her for over a week now... If love is a drug it's the most dangerous addiction of the fucking lot. Last week's call was like another hit of the hard stuff, Big L, however distorted, and now I'm back to a suffering slow withdrawal of wondering if we'll ever speak again. Cold Turkey is in the post and music is slowly fading out from my world... I've been poring over it all again and again. That look in her eye when I knew it was all fucked plays matinee in the theatre of my mind.

## **Week 3**

Music has stopped entirely. Really should stop watching this bloody show. It's always on Wednesdays that I feel the absolute lowest. Weepy Wednesdays. Apprentice Day. I'm not even looking at the TV. I'm on the Internet looking up relevant quotes for love and life and death and whatnot- but the volume's up and a cockney accent in the background is screaming 'This is an absolute bladdy disgrace. You lot couldn't boil an egg between ya. An absolute shambles. A bladdy shambles. Ya fired!' Then a bit of a preview about next week's episode and then the theme tune: Dum-dum-dum-dum-

dum-duuum-dummmmm... Dance of the Knights. What's the preview of where I'll be this time next week?

#### Week 4

Sitting on top of Affleck's Palace looking down at a steep drop. Is it seventy floors down from here? Something like that... The grid-like streets below look like the early version of Grand Theft Auto on the Sega Master System, before it got all high-tech and 3-D on street level when it evolved to Sony PlayStation. You know, the birds-eye-view one, but the traffic now all looks much smaller than that. People are more like atom-size dots rather than ants... I'll make a hell of a splat. Doubt I'll feel a thing. Haven't written a note. Can't be bothered. No chance of wanking mix-up with this method anyway... Christ, I've always hated heights as much as I have death. Actually, I think I will write a note. I'll go back and watch that bloody programme instead. See who's for the chopping block?

#### Week 5

Have started the note. It's rubbish. Why did She fire me? WHY!

#### Week 6

WHY? WHY? WHY? WHY? WHY? WHY?

#### Week 7

Still haven't written the note. Can't see any musical ones anywhere either... Don't want to speak to any of my friends. Not sure if I actually have any. Don't want to watch that fucking programme. Hate Wednesdays so much I've actually decided to work late. I'm the only person in the boiler room. Only sound is a tuneless drone from the overheated fan of this prehistoric desktop piece of shit. I drudge through the re-sales accounts: sold, easy. Sold. Sold. Piece of piss. Sold. Climbing the scoreboard. Sold. Commission earned. Reputation sustained. Sold. Sold. Sold. Kerching. Kerching. Kerching. The sweet sound of minimum-wage commission is the only melody that exists now. I scroll down to the next name on the re-sales list: Mr G. Brennan.

I punch in the digits and a familiar nasal voice floods my earpiece.

'Hello, Mr Brennan?'

'Yes'

'I'm just calling from Top Phones4Me with regards to your **Orange Mobile Phone** and I'm pleased to tell you that it's time again for your **Free Upgrade.**'

'Allen?'

Eh? Alarm bells ring! G. Brennan... Gavin Brennan? It's HR Guy!

'Err...'

'Are you logged in to the re-sales or something?'

Fuuuuuuuuuuuck!!! Rumbled.

'Weeeelll... erm...'

It's not like it's a firing offence...

## Week 8

Still here... but the old re-sales password isn't...

## Week 9

Work has been harder since they've changed the access code for re-sales. My sales have plummeted, but I'm still selling more than most, though hardly the former Lion status I held in this increasingly threatening jungle. To make matters worse, HR Guy's been even more unbearable than usual since Polish Ex-employee knocked him back at Friday's post-work drinks shindig...

I've now tried to call Her a couple of times and they've both been unanswered. The silence is the worst thing of all and I wonder where she is, who she's with and if she's even thinking of me at all? Or if she's simply shacked up in a love nest with her new beau... It's the demotion that kills me the most: a demotion from being the love of her life, potential father of her children, to little more than a social embarrassment, a regret, a stain to be bleached from the bed-sheets of history. In silence I know that I'm permanently fired.

And so to the note I've had my writer's block in regards to composing this past however-long-it's-been... it's in my pocket. It's the best I could muster. It'll have to do. Hardly the perfectly poetic suicide note I'd have liked, but at the end of the day I'm not a writer. I'm a failed musician. I just scribbled it out now after work and so I've not given HR Guy both barrels like I'd wanted. The next life, perhaps... The 19.36 from Stockport should be hurtling through any second now at however many miles an hour. Shouldn't feel a thing.

I hover past the safety line, toes just nudging past the platform's edge, looking down at the steel track. I'm ready to leave this place. I'm certain that the note will still be legible... it's no great literary loss if it's not. Token gesture. No mix-up of what my intentions, no rumours of experimental masturbation gone wrong at the wake. I doubt there'll be many attendees anyway. Not for a fucking also-ran like me. Ok. Ready. Where's the fucking train? Should have been here by now...

What's the time?

Fucking British Public Transport... so fucking unreliable. Been here for an hour now waiting for the train and still no sign of it.

End up cabbing it home instead and watching The Apprentice.

It's the final five.

## Week 10

Turns out some guy threw himself onto the tracks at Stockport, which is why the train was delayed. Note in the pocket, the works... For some reason got me thinking and I had an epiphany. Realised we're all going to die one day anyway, so what's the rush? Whether it's good or bad, pretty soon we won't know the difference anyway, so just keep on living. Decided that what I was going to do instead was to keep on living my life and do the things I'd liked to have done and damn the consequences. If they work they work, if they don't they don't, I'll just try my best not to hurt anyone in the process, and the music's quietly creeping back into my life again. Once that happened it got me thinking about everything that happened with Her, and I realised that she didn't fuck it up... I did. All I can think about are all of the good times and good

things and do you know what... sometimes it just doesn't work out, but there's no need to be bitter, no need to wallow in self-pity, and I wish her nothing but the best. She deserves it. I will always love her but I realise I'm not right for her. And I understand what she was trying to tell me, I didn't listen to her at the time, and I made it all about me, me, me, me. But there's no time for self-flagellation here. I'm going to compose another note...

## Week 11

I've put in writing what I now believe the situation to have been, and apologise for my actions. I hope that it helps to heal the raw wounds and her to be happy. It gives me some inner peace before my next journey too.

I head into the boiler room, posting the letter along the way, and as I arrive HR Guy shoots me the look of a teacher at an errant child that's left a turd on his desk instead of an apple. I'm no longer Premier Sales Boy. Far from it, and the further I plummet on the target board, the higher I'm climbing up his shit list of Non-Desirables. I couldn't care less. He's leching over a new desirable, an attractive nineteen-or-so-year old New Eastern-European Girl, who's not reached the first post-work drinks to test her suitability, in his eyes, for the position.

I'm hitting the cold calls and haven't made one sale yet. Through the office humdrum I make out a faint melody building from the instruments around me, the creaky floor, the tapping of keyboards, the rapping of rain on the windows, the hums of phones, wavering pitches of pleading voices... and it's not a bad tune. I can make something of it. HR Guy is giving New Eastern-European Girl an unwelcome shoulder rub, crapping on about the need for relaxation in the workplace to achieve maximum target sales. The tune takes a darker plunge, stripping back to a deep bass with sharp violin jabs when his claws grip her skin. I'm Googling a number as one of my cold-callees answers: an old lady's trusting voice jingles from the receiver. I deliver the script slowly and very unconvincingly as I'm scribbling down the number, but she doesn't hang up and even though I'm doing my best not to sell the product she still sounds interested. I start going the other way but she seems almost impossible not to sell to, and so I loudly say.

'Actually madam, I've just looked at your details and it appears there's a much better option for you. Whatever you do, DO NOT TAKE THIS DEAL. OR ANY OTHERS LIKE IT... UNLESS IT'S DIRECTLY WITH YOUR NETWORK...'

HR Guy's attention is snapped immediately away from the girl as several more heads in the sweatshop snap from their phoney calls, mostly perplexed, some admiring. The expression on his face is that of a tiger that's just had its prey snatched from its teeth by a housecat, and is currently stunned into inaction.

'...IF YOU DIAL 1 ON YOUR HANDSET NOW AND SPEAK DIRECTLY TO YOUR OWN NETWORK, YOU WILL BE ELIGIBLE FOR A HANDSOME NEW PHONE AND SIGNIFICANTLY CHEAPER TALKPLAN. THIS IS A THIRD PARTY DEALERSHIP, AND NOT YOUR OWN NETWORK, AND WE, LIKE MANY OTHERS THAT WILL TRY TO CONTACT YOU, CAN ONLY OFFER YOU INFERIOR PRODUCTS ON GROSSLY EXTENDED CONTRACTS THAT WILL TIE YOU IN FOR THE BEST PART OF ETERNITY, IN WHAT IS A CASE OF BORDERLINE FRAUD...'

HR Guy's paws are off the new girl, and he's bounding over but I've thanked the lady and have hung up by the time he's at my station. The lanky creep is bearing

over me, swinging his pelvis, and the vein above his pulsating eyeballs resembles a knotted hosepipe fit to burst. He's scrabbling, but before he's found the words he's trying so very hard to place, I'm out of my chair. I say:

'AND YOU, SIR... ARE A CUNT. I'VE ALWAYS WANTED TO TELL YOU THAT AND NOW I HAVE'

Sweet release. He tries to incredulously spit it out, but it's so stammered:

'You're f-f-f'

'YES. YES. I KNOW, I KNOW. I'M FIRED. GOOD'

I march over to the new girl and hand her the piece of paper I've scribbled on to. I then persist at even greater volume. People in surrounding offices, buildings, towns, villages and countries should be able to hear me.

'THIS IS THE NUMBER OF AN EMPLOYMENT LAW SPECIALIST THAT MAY COME IN HANDY BY THE WEEKEND... IT'S NO WIN, NO FEE, BUT I'M SURE YOU'LL HAVE A SOLID CASE, SHOULD ANYTHING HAPPEN THAT YOU FEEL MAKES YOU UNCOMFORTABLE OR SHOULD YOUR CONTRACT BE TERMINATED UNJUSTIFIABLY. I'M SURE THERE'LL BE PLENTY OF WITNESSES SHOULD YOU NEED TO PURSUE IT, AND A GOOD PLACE TO FIND THEM WOULD BE ANY NUMBER OF COLLEAGUES ON UNPAID GRACE PERIODS WHO WILL BE LET GO AT THE END OF THIS PERIOD. THESE PEOPLE WILL ALSO HAVE VERY STURDY CASES OF THEIR OWN'

I stroll out of the office to a drum roll and the slam of the door behind me is like the dramatic crash of a cymbal. What next? I'm not watching that bloody show tonight. I'm getting the first flight out of here to anywhere in the world. Last chopper out of Saigon. Doesn't matter where... I'm going on holiday to have a think about everything.

## Week 12

I'm sitting in a bar on the Kao San Road in Bangkok. It's raining heavily. Tourists' sprint for shelter, the monsoon pelting down like ruddy stair rods. Hawkers continue to tout, unperturbed, beneath fragile but determined paper umbrellas. Drains overflow, as rich aromas of chilli and lemongrass from food-stalls mingle with an undercurrent of sewage from the submersed drainage system. It's bliss. I see a few B-majors bouncing off a fat, wet German man in a wife-beater, and a couple of D-sharps spring along the backpacks of a few fleeting gap-year students, evading the C-minor of a strung-out geriatric hippy as much as they're avoiding getting their MacBook's soaked. I smile at a girl sitting alone on the table next to me, and she smiles back. All the sounds and sights and smells and senses and emotions build together in symphony to form Sergei Prokofiev's Dance of the Knights. I'm thinking Romeo and Juliet rather than The Apprentice. Music is all around me. Life is all around me.

It's beautiful.