

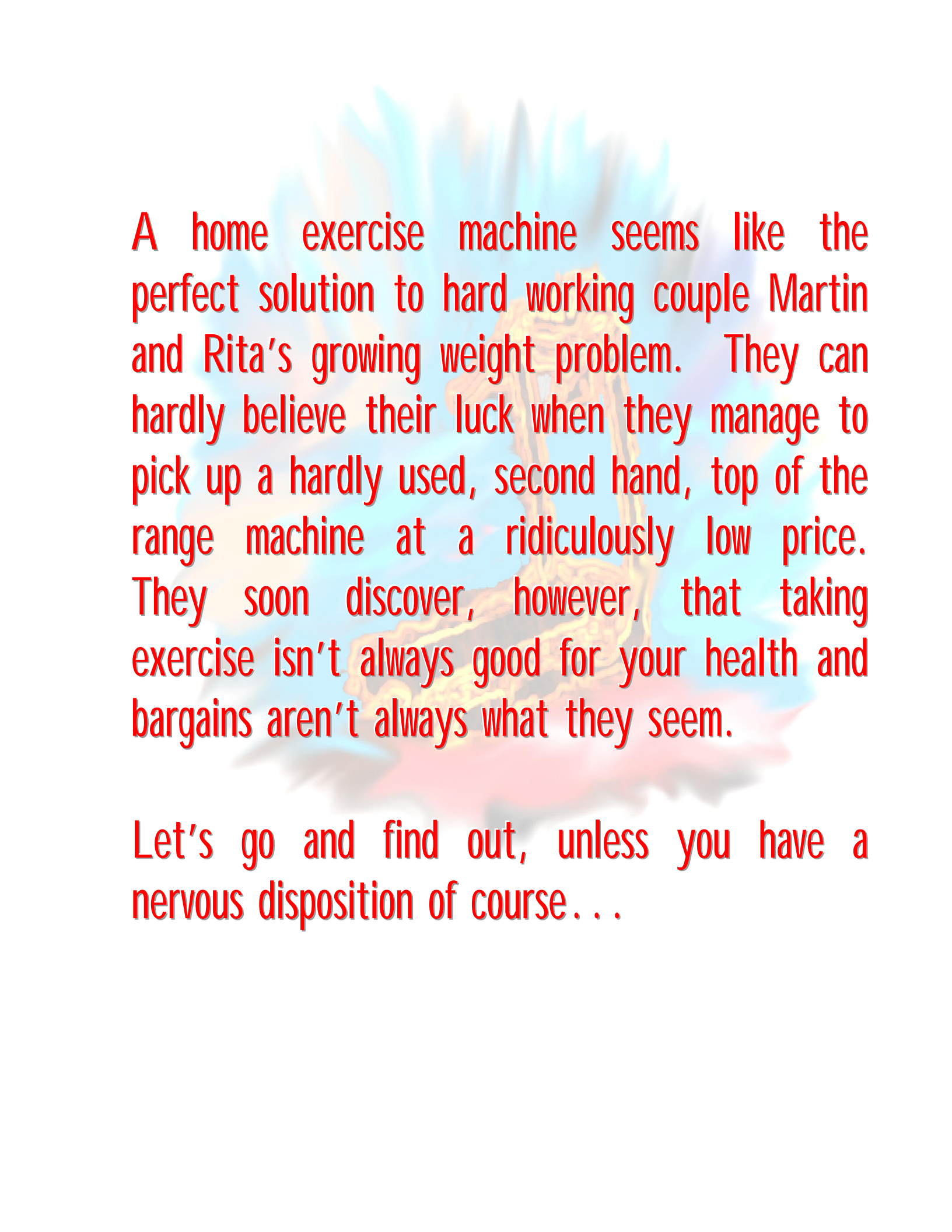


When exercise is bad for your health...

# Sprintmaster 7

A Short Story by Ben Zoof

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A home exercise machine seems like the perfect solution to hard working couple Martin and Rita's growing weight problem. They can hardly believe their luck when they manage to pick up a hardly used, second hand, top of the range machine at a ridiculously low price. They soon discover, however, that taking exercise isn't always good for your health and bargains aren't always what they seem.

Let's go and find out, unless you have a nervous disposition of course...



Another day in suburbia . . .

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**“SO MUCH BLOOD!  
OH MY GOD! OH MY GOD! SO MUCH BLOOD!  
HELP! PLEASE HELP!  
OH GOD!”**

*“Try to tell us where you are madam. We have to know where you are so we can get assistance to you. Do you understand?”*

**“YES! YES! OH GOD, I’M SO SCARED! I’M SO FRIGHTENED!  
OH...OH...I’M GOING TO THROW UP AGAIN...”**

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## Another day in suburbia # 2 . . .

Martin and Rita Williams were overweight. Not seriously you understand but enough to provoke Martin into love handle jokes while Rita would retort with references to Martin's growing beer gut.

"It's no use dieting without doing any exercise Reet", Martin said in answer to Rita's quite sensible suggestion.

"Aerobics?"

"Too energetic Reet."

"What then?"

"Jogging?"

"Come on Marty. When do we ever have time for that?"

Thirties something Martin and Rita both worked in the city and that meant a twenty minute drive to the railway station every morning followed by a fifty five minute uncomfortable ride in a crowded train to London's Cannon Street Terminus. From there, Martin took a westbound Circle Line tube to his office in Paddington while Rita jumped on a District Line train heading in the opposite direction before changing to the Dockland's Light for Canary Wharf. Every evening, Martin waited at Cannon Street for his wife and they travelled back to suburbia together on the 7.22 before finally sitting down for a microwave dinner at around ten past nine.

"Well, we could always find jobs closer to home."

"Oh really?"

"Er...no."

"Exactly Marty."

"Fitness club?"

"Same problem."

"Stay fat?"

"OK."

"OK."

They continued eating their microwaved Chicken Tikkomasala dinner without further comment occasionally grimacing at said dinner's extraordinary lack of food-like taste.

"Exercise machine", Martin said suddenly, breaking the silence.

"Uh", Rita replied through a mouthful of chicken that had all the texture and taste of the cardboard packaging it had originally been contained in.

"We could buy one of those treadmill things that you see in the gym. You know the ones that..."

"I know, the ones that turn you into a kind of human hamster", Rita interrupted.

"Good idea not then."

"I didn't say that."

"So?"

"Maybe."

## Sunday afternoon . . .

Sunday afternoon at the Mall and Martin and Rita were deciding that they couldn't justify the cost of...

"...of an expensive piece of kit that we might just get totally bored with. I mean Marty, over a thousand pounds; we could buy a home theatre for that much."

"Yeah and grow even fatter watching all the movies from our armchairs. We could even consume huge quantities of chocolate and popcorn just to add to the decadent atmosphere. Anyway only one of 'em was over a grand, all the others were..."

"Under a thousand, yeah like ten quid under a thousand."

"Come on Reet, there was a basic model for about five hundred..."



“Marty”, Rita laughed. “That one didn’t have a motor even; you had to walk to make it go. I mean, is the machine exercising you or are you exercising the machine?” That tickled Martin and he laughed quite a lot, so much in fact that that he ended up in a fit of coughing. “And that’s another thing Marty; if you want to be fit enough to even take exercise you’re going to have to quit the fags.” “Yeah and put on even more weight. Anyway Reet, they **are** expensive so maybe we’d better give it a bit more thought.”

It was on the way out of the supermarket that they saw it, both almost at the same time. To Martin it looked like a slowly turning multi-coloured vortex but Rita saw a flickering, electric blue strobe pattern. Neither ever mentioned this to the other but they both walked over to the customer advertising board. Closer inspection revealed neither a multi-coloured vortex nor electric blue strobe but rather a postcard affixed with a small photograph.

“For sale, walking stroke jogging exercise machine”, read Rita. “Top of the range, ‘Super Sprintmaster Seven...”

“Super Sprintmaster”, groaned Martin.

“Sshh! Let me finish.”

“Sorry.”

“Super Sprintmaster Seven, many extras”, continued Rita. £150 or nearest offer. Genuine reason for quick sale.”

“Seems very cheap”, observed Martin.

“Well, shall I phone?” Rita asked.

“It’s probably gone already”

“Shall I phone?”

One hour later, Martin and Rita were loading the Sprintmaster Seven into the back of their Astra Estate having just written a cheque for the one hundred pounds that had secured the deal.. The address they had been given over the phone turned out to be a large, Victorian residence nestling in a leafy suburb of South London. The woman who answered the door was a rather plump, school marmish looking woman of about fifty five. She introduced herself as Miss James.

“They’re not mine actually”, she said gesturing expansively with one arm towards the line up of keep fit apparatus that cluttered the garage leaving no room at all for a car.

“Oh, I don’t have one, a car that is”, she said as if reading their minds. “That’s what I use”, she continued, pointing to a small bicycle standing just behind a set of weights.

“Be careful you don’t sell it by mistake”, Martin said with a smile.

“I’m selling them for the house opposite”, the woman continued seeming not to notice Martin’s small joke. “The poor dear, she went away last week just after the inquest. Beside herself she was. Mind you, more of a blessing I’d say, well to Jason that is, I mean...Well I know you shouldn’t speak ill of the dead but near the end he’d filled his mind with such nonsense...Oh I’m sorry. I know I’m rambling a bit. Of course, you don’t want to know all this.”

Martin and Rita had stood in open mouthed astonishment while Miss James had gone into overdrive.

“Excuse me; are you saying that the owner of this equipment died?” Rita said breaking her silence.

“Oh there, me and my big mouth.”

“No, don’t worry, that explains the low price”, Martin answered quickly, trying to spare the woman further embarrassment. He needn’t have worried, there was something on the woman’s mind and the sluice gates had been opened.

“Look, far be it for me to gossip but I think that mother of his has been just too possessive since his father died five years ago”, she continued, lowering her voice conspiratorially. “I mean, all his strange ideas, I’m sure it was because he spent too much time up in that attic room by himself. Only child you see.”

She spoke the words ‘only child’ as if it were some kind of dirty secret.



"Sometimes I'd see him in the window, that room there see."

She pointed at an upstairs window in the house across the street. Rita couldn't help noticing how all the curtains in the house were drawn and she gave an involuntary shudder as if cold fingers had raked her spine.

"I don't know what on earth he did up there but sometimes I saw a strange blue, flickering light, his television I suppose but..."

She trailed off. Rita and Martin looked at each other. Martin went to say something but the woman spoke again so quietly that they had to strain their ears to listen.

"If you ask me", she continued. "I think he was doing some kind of experiments. The last time I saw him he hardly looked the same boy, he'd lost so much weight see. I mean, I know he was a keep fit fanatic...well used to be when he was normal that was."

She swept her arm again in the direction of the apparatus as she spoke.

"But fit he most certainly wasn't. He wasn't just thin you see, he was so pale...and his eyes, ugh."

She gave a theatrical shudder.

"His eyes were like dark, sunken pits. He didn't even seem to recognise me anymore. Anyway, it was only about three days later when they found him dead in his room. Death by misadventure they said, electrocution, but if you ask me it was deliberate."

Miss James may have been an inordinate gossip who often engaged her mouth before putting her brain into gear but she knew better than to mention that Jason had been found dead apparently electrocuted by the Sprintmaster Seven but, and this was the disturbing part, his body was under the machine not, as might reasonably be expected, on top of it. She didn't mention either what else she had seen in the room after she had answered Mrs Crowther's hysterical shrieks for help; the strange gargoyle like statues in each corner of the room for example and the spreading pool of blood slowly oozing from under the machine ruining the bedroom carpet. She didn't even want to **think** about the remarks she had overheard later when the police were talking about how most of his face had been sliced off like a warm knife through butter. Naturally, the machine had been thoroughly checked and even more thoroughly cleaned after the coroner's department were through with it.

"What, you think he killed himself?" Exclaimed Rita.

"If you'd seen the state of him..."

"Well look, we'll go away and think about it", said Rita rather uncomfortably.

She wasn't sure if she fancied the idea of buying a suicide's exercise machine.

"Come on Marty."

"Hang on a sec Reet", Martin said.

Turning to the woman he continued, "£150 or nearest offer you say?"

"That's right."

"OK, how about £100 then."

"Marty!"

"£100? Oh I don't know about that, it's a very good machine you know."

"Sure. Well OK, perhaps my wife's right, we'd better think about it."

Rita breathed an audible sigh of relief and was already walking away.

"Alright Mr er..."

"Williams", he reminded her.

"Mr Williams, you drive a hard bargain but I'm sure that under the circumstances Mrs Crowther won't mind. I think she just wants to be rid of the unhappy memories."

"Marty, can't we just think about it?"

"Is a cheque OK?" Martin said, surreptitiously winking at his wife.

Rita glared.

"With guarantee card?"

"No problem."

"Can I interest you in the exercise bicycle as well Mr Williams. I could let you have both items for say...£150."

"Well..."



“Marty!”

“No, just the walking machine thanks all the same.”

On the way home in the car they were discussing their bargain...

“She really gave me the creeps Marty, all that bullshit about experiments and suicide.”

“Well if you think it’s all bullshit then you can stop worrying about buying a suicide’s belongings and instead congratulate your astute husband on securing a top of the range walking machine at such an amazingly low price...can’t you?”

## Later that day . . .

It was later that same day when Martin had re-assembled the machine in the bedroom that he realised his purchase wasn’t just an amazingly low price, he had got it at an abso-shit kicking- lutely ridiculous price. To call the Super Sprintmaster Seven an ‘exercise machine’ was like saying the Chief Rabbi is a bit Jewish. This dude had the lot, a digital display that indicated walking speed, jogging speed, distance, even calories being expended at any given time. You could simulate gradients and pre-program it with a choice of walking or jogging styles. And that wasn’t all...

“Look at this Reet; stick this band round your wrist and it even measures your heart rate. Now, that’s smart, probably gives you advance warning that you’re about to drop dead...”

“That’s not funny Marty.”

“Don’t worry Reet, there’s an emergency stop gizmo, see, you wear this cord round your other wrist and when you collapse it pulls this lead out of the socket and stops the machine before it can eat you.”

“Marty!”

That evening, before the light faded, Rita went for a brisk two kilometre walk. She didn’t leave the bedroom and she spent the entire duration of the walk, about twenty minutes, looking down on their small garden as the carefully tended flower beds transformed from broad, sun-kissed splashes of colour to a uniform, twilight grey. The garden was Rita’s pride and joy even though, being so short of time, she did have to pay for the services of a gardener to keep it looking just as she wanted it. What a great way to keep fit, she thought.

“Well, did you enjoy?” Martin asked.

Rita had to agree. It was the ideal solution to the lack of exercise problem and...

“Yes Marty, you are a clever, clever old sod getting it at such an amazingly low price.”

## During the night . . .

That night, Martin was struggling to wake up out of a rather disturbing dream that carried vague undertones of an impending destruction of the entire universe. The onset of absolute cataclysm was characterised by a low humming sound that persisted even though Martin was, by now, convinced of his transition into reality. As consciousness returned and his eyes and ears sent their sensory information to his brain for processing, he became aware that the darkness of the room was punctuated with a flickering red glow that, largely due to his short-sightedness, seemed strangely diffused and somewhat ethereal. The low humming noise continued in spite of the universe’s safe return.

Martin sat up, blinked a few times and then realised that the exercise machine was in motion. Its belt was moving at a lazy pace favourable to maintaining an exercisee at a sedate walking speed but the numbers on the digital display were jumping and dancing like one of those frenzied flight deck control consuls on the Starship Enterprise when it came under attack from some renegade sub-species of alien life form. The machine was plugged into the wall socket, Martin observed, and so either he or Rita, probably Rita, had forgotten to disconnect the power lead. Even so, it shouldn’t just start running like that, maybe there was a loose connection somewhere and what the hell was wrong with the digital display? He reached over and thumbed the left hand stop button. The frantic LED display turned as black as a coal yard cat although its retinal after image haunted Martin’s vision for several split seconds



longer. The belt stopped immediately as the safety brake clamped tight on the motorised driving drum's retarder disc. It was only afterwards and then only in the light of subsequent events that Martin concluded that the machine stopped **before** he actually pushed the button.

"Just have to make sure the damn thing's kept unplugged", he muttered under his breath as he pulled the plug from the wall socket.

Rita rolled over, muttered, "Wassup Mar...", before falling into a largely dreamless sleep.

Her husband followed quickly on her heels.

## That week . . .

Martin didn't want to put the idea of loose connections in Rita's head so he kept quiet about the machine's little peccadillo. He thought it inadvisable also to admonish his wife about her laxity regarding non removal of the power plug and instead decided he would check for himself each night before sleep.

The next three evenings settled into a routine of exercise first, followed by a low calorie microwave meal. Rita took the first session so she could watch the garden wind down from radiant sun glow to mysterious nightfall.

"Won't - be - able - to - see - the - garden - in - about - seven - weeks - time", Rita gasped as she turned up the notches to a fast jogging speed for the last half kilometre of her simulated jaunt.

"Never mind Reet, we can always light it up with the security floodlight", Martin suggested.

## The fourth night . . .

It was on the fourth night that Rita awoke to the sound of the machine humming quietly to itself in its exercise machine language, the endless belt moving smoothly in time with the sound while the LED digits chattered noiselessly and frantically to each other like a swarm of demented fireflies. She quickly came to the same conclusion that Martin had reached four nights earlier, seeing how it was plugged into the wall socket there must be a loose connection in the machine. Loose connection or not, the fact that it had started running by itself in the dead of night spooked Rita considerably and when it abruptly increased speed she jumped so hard she felt the muscles in her neck snap. She let out an involuntary squeal, stumbled forward and nearly landed on the fast running belt. Her heart was pounding like a drop forge hammer as she reached down and pulled the plug from the wall socket, Martin stirred slightly but didn't wake up. There was something about the machine that gave her the creeps and she didn't want to touch it. No, not just the machine exactly but the whole situation, sudden wakefulness, a darkened room and an inanimate object that had no damned business to be doing something it wasn't supposed to be doing at a time it wasn't supposed to be doing it.

She removed the plug and jumped again as a blue spark leaped and flashed momentarily splitting the darkness like a welders torch. That was the point when half awake night-time anxiety suddenly plummeted into the black abyss of icy, heart-stopping, gut wrenching terror.

The machine didn't stop.

Rita felt the reflexive scream rising in her throat, the scream that escaped as a gasp because in that infinitesimal instant, the machine abruptly ceased its motion and the digital display flashed one last defiant...message?

## The next day . . .

There is nothing more certain to chase away the night terrors than blue skies and a golden sun drenched morning, reason and logic once more hold the high ground and machines that switch themselves on in the dead of night once again become nothing more than inanimate objects with loose connections. Maybe in the intimidating darkness of the still night it looked like the word 'SOON' on the digital display panel.



No, not 'SOON', 5004, thought Rita at the breakfast table. Yes, that was what it said, 5004. Just random numbers flashing up because of a loose connection.

*Oh yeah, these 'numbers' were about four times bigger than the normal size display digits...*

"Marty, the machine came on by itself last night; there must be a loose connection or something."

"Impossible", Martin said from behind his newspaper. "It was unplugged, I check it every night."

"Well last night you didn't."

"Yes I di-id", Martin replied in the sing-song, smart arsed voice that Rita always found so irritating.

She decided not to make an issue since it was clear that last night, Martin hadn't done what he claimed therefore there was no need for further comment. Likewise, Martin also saw no reason to tell Rita **he** always checked because she never did. Still, if it did come on again I **must** have forgotten to unplug it, he thought although he wouldn't admit that to Rita. Umm, must be more careful. Anyway, I'd better get it checked, but for now, on with the Chelsea match report.

"Marty, when you switch it off, does it take a few seconds to stop, you know, like when you switch off a radio or television?"

"Uumm."

"Is that a yes?"

"S'pect so."

If Martin had been paying more attention to his wife than the Chelsea match report his answer would have been somewhat different but unfortunately match reports are notoriously powerful attention grabbers and so Rita got the wrong answer but nonetheless, it was the answer she wanted to hear.

## Friday night . . .

That night, while Martin and Rita soundly slept, Steve, their next door neighbour was taking a leak in his back garden. He had got home rather late after a night out with the boys and, given the circumstances, quite naturally didn't want to disturb his wife. Something flashed in the corner of his eye and glancing up towards the source of the distraction he could see a flickering blue light radiating from an upstairs window in his neighbours house. The random flashing made him think of welding and so his alcohol blurred thought patterns packaged up and presented his receptive mind with the neat explanation that next door neighbour Martin was indulging in a spot of late night welding. The observation that people didn't often weld in their bedrooms at two in the morning didn't fit the explanation and was therefore firmly rejected before it even took hold; neighbour Steve had more immediate concerns to take care of.

## Saturday morning . . .

"Ow! Shit! How did that get there?"

"Marty?"

"The exercise machine, how did it get so close to the bed? See, I've banged my foot and my shin."

"Well, you should open your eyes before you start gallivanting round the house", Rita sleepily commented, very unsympathetically, Martin thought.

"Rita, the bloody thing's right next to my side of the bed. What did you move it there for?"

"Move it? I haven't moved it."

Now Rita reluctantly opened her eyes. It was Saturday morning for heaven's sake. Really, men make such a fuss about everything. She had to admit to herself though; it was rather close to the bed.

"Well, I expect it moves a bit when we use it. I mean, it's got wheels", Rita went on, her voice struggling through a languid yawn.

"The wheels are locked and anyway we'd have noticed", Martin said irritably still rubbing the front of his leg where the skin was a little grazed; bruised as well by tomorrow he hazarded to guess. "and look, it's been moved since we used it last. See, the lead won't reach. I can't plug it in."

"Well, it wasn't me."

With that, Rita turned over, closed her eyes and promptly terminated the conversation.



Later, Martin did try to revive the subject at breakfast but Rita was having none of it. Martin, not wishing to spoil the day (it wasn't such a big deal after all), simply moved the machine back to where the impressions in the carpet told him it should go; or at least it would have been simple if the wheels hadn't been locked. It was later that day when they had the big problem but the next morning they solved it, or so they imagined.

## Sunday (the day after) . . .

"Careful pal, you nearly went in after it", said the man holding the rusty bicycle frame while grabbing Martin's arm to steady him. Martin spluttered out a breathless thank you. Yes, the effort of throwing the machine's heavy base into the almost empty refuse skip had nearly carried him down with it and it was at least a ten foot drop from the top of the platform.

"So, what's wrong with it?"

Martin hardly heard the question. Picking up the forward section of the machine, he sent it crashing down after its brother in arms. It landed squarely on top of the base and several components flew off in different directions.

"Are you chucking *that*?" Martin asked the man with the rusty bike frame.

"Yeah", he answered hesitatingly, not particularly liking the look on the other man's face.

"Here, let me", Martin said.

Before the man had chance to speak, Martin took the frame, raised it above his head and dashed it with considerable force onto the stricken exercise machine lying in the bottom of the skip. The impact sent some more small parts flying while the dark face of the digital display console received a mortal crack from one corner to the other.

"Sorry, what was that?" Martin said without taking his eyes off the wreckage. It reminded him uncomfortably of a gigantic, broken preying mantis.

"Well, I was about to ask you why you were chucking away a smart looking exercise machine, Sprintmaster at that, but it hardly matters now does it?" Said the rusty bike man eyeing the broken remains. He wasn't an expert but he knew a Sprintmaster was an OK machine.

"Why I was chucking away a Sprintmaster..." Martin replied almost dreamily. Ha, try this, he thought, because it was possessed by...by what. What the fuck was it possessed by? A ghost? A demon? These were crazy, crazy thoughts sure, but make no mistake, Martin Williams was scared shitless. In fact, since about seven o'clock the previous day, he'd never been so afraid in his entire life.

He turned away from the skip. Rusty bike man had unsurprisingly lost interest in the strange fellow maniacally dumping what appeared to be a perfectly good Sprintmaster Seven exercise machine and gone on his way. Martin headed back to his no longer tranquil piece of suburbia unable to prevent his mind drifting back to the terrifying events of the day before.

## Back to Saturday afternoon . . .

He had been pottering around in the garage so he couldn't be sure how long Rita had been screaming his name when the distressed cries finally penetrated his conscious mind.

"Marteeeee!!"

The screams were coming from upstairs and straightaway for some reason, he connected them with the machine. He felt a heavy sense of dread descending as he raced up the stairs two at a time.

"MARTEEEEE!! QUICKLY!! OH MY GOD!!"

The machine had her! It was pulling her apart! Oh Jesus, it was eating her!

"HANG ON REET! I'M COMING!"

"MARTEEEEE!! PLEEEESE!!"

He literally threw himself through the door and into the bedroom.

The first sight that greeted him was the machine.

It was rippling from end to end in the late afternoon light, moving and yet not moving.

"MARTY, AT LAST, OVER THERE, LOOK!!"

His wife stood in the corner of the room near the bed pointing...



“What...?”

The words died in his throat as he followed his wife’s horror struck eyes. He saw for himself what was causing Rita so much distress.

It wasn’t the machine.

The machine wasn’t rippling at all.

The machine wasn’t doing anything.

Dappled shadows from next door’s birch tree, waving in a gentle breeze, were chasing the late afternoon sunlight to and fro along its length. Everything was perfectly normal...except for the several dark shapes moving listlessly across the sculpted surface of the cream coloured carpet. They were definitely out of place.

She had always been petrified of creepy-crawlies, bugs, worms. It was one of the reasons she employed a gardener because she was so afraid of coming face to face with an earthworm or centipede although she would never admit as much. Right now, she was slap bang in the middle of her worst nightmare. At least five corpulent cockroaches were engaged in a kind of cockroach slow step, antennas waving languorously and menacingly like crustacean’s feelers in an aquarium. but that wasn’t the worst of it, oh no. Martin felt his stomach lurch as he realised that each of the fat bugs were teeming with miniscule lice, their bleached, sightless bodies standing out in stark relief against the dark, reddish brown colouring of the cockroaches. As Martin watched transfixed, one of the large insects lifted a wing and a score of the pallid nightmares tumbled out onto the carpet where they all but disappeared against the light carpet background.

“Oh shit, that’s disgusting!” Martin exclaimed.

“DO SOMETHING MARTY!!” His wife screamed. By now, she was close to panic stricken hysteria.

Martin’s stomach slow rolled at the thought of dealing with the disgusting creatures, he knew how fast roaches could run and if any one of them ran in his wife’s direction...

“MARTEEE!!” His wife suddenly screamed.

He didn’t need Rita to tell him that one of them was unfolding its wings and beginning to take off. Shit, Martin thought, it’s like the Chinook helicopter of the insect world. Scores of lice clung to its back like foot soldiers being airlifted to the battle zone. It rose to waist height before suddenly keeling over and crashing to the carpet, landing on its back with all six legs uselessly flailing the air. That was when Martin realised that he wouldn’t have to chase them after all.. Two bugs he hadn’t noticed relinquished their hold on the wall and fell to the carpet where they lay as still as all the others. Some of the white lice scuttled away but most were already incapable of movement.

“Relax Reet, they’re all dead”, Martin said, unable to keep the relief from showing in his voice.

“S-sure”, Rita stammered.

Mercifully, Rita didn’t notice one of the bugs attempting to roll off its back with a brief but violent beating of its wings before it too expired along with the rest.

## Saturday evening . . .

“So where do you think they came from?” Rita asked for probably the third time since Martin had meticulously vacuumed the carpet for at least as many times. Martin patiently trotted out the same answer. He didn’t know any more than she did but he thought it sounded a logical enough explanation even though the social habits of *Periplaneta Blattidae* were hardly his specialist field.

“It’s been very warm and dry recently so I should think they were looking for somewhere damp and they got into the house by accident. Don’t worry Reet, I’ll spray around with the insecticide before we go to work on Monday morning.”

Rita punched the speed control button a couple of times and increased her walking speed from a sedate stroll to a slightly less than brisk walk. Martin left her to it and went to the bathroom for an early evening shower. Five to seven, he mentally noted as he removed his wristwatch.

He was just about to enter the cubicle when a shout came from the bedroom, not a particularly urgent shout but sharp enough to stop him in his tracks.



"Martin. How do you slow the thing down?"

"How do you usually slow it down? Push the minus button a few times. Come on Reet, you know that."

"I know but it's not working, it keeps getting faster."

"Hang on, I'm coming."

He wrapped a towel round himself and...and in the next instant was running at top speed into the bedroom for the second time that day.

"MARTEEE!! HELP ME!!

His first thought was, 'what the hell is she doing to the machine'.

"Rita, you'll break..."

The words died in his throat.

It was bouncing up and down, no, not bouncing, bucking would be a more accurate description, bucking and pitching and yawing like some crazy bucking bronco. Rita was hanging on for dear life. It looked almost comic the way she was running so hard to stay on the fast moving belt while simultaneously gripping the front bar so tightly that her knuckles had turned as white as the cotton bedsheets.

"MARTY!! WHAT'S HAPPENING??" She screamed.

"GET OFF THE BELT!!" Martin yelled back.

"I CAN'T, IT'S GOING TOO FAST!!"

"PULL OUT THE EMERGENCY STOP!!"

"I HAVE!! WHY IS IT DOING THIS!!?"

The digital display was pulsing and flashing like a discotheque stroboscopic light show.

"Shit! It should be red!"

The words spilled out of Martin's mouth as if he were discovering some great truth about life and the universe for the first time.

The machine's display panel LED's should indeed have been red even if it was experiencing some major malfunction but this was a hellish blue light that danced and flickered as if possessed with...

"This just isn't real...oh Jesus this can't be happening", Martin babbled. He watched with a kind of horrified fascination as the machine's power lead was pulled taught and the plug began to draw out of the wall socket.

"MARTY!! MARTEEE!! I CAN'T GET OFF!! I CAN'T GET OFF!!"

...some kind of...

"Reet! The plug's come out...OH SHIT! OH SHIT!! NO POWER...NOT STOPPING...NOT FUCKING STOPPING!!"

...demon...

*'Sometimes I saw a strange blue flickering light ...'*

"MARTEEEEEE!!"

*'Death by misadventure they said, electrocution...'*

Rita's last desperate scream hit Martin like a stinging slap in the face. He leapt round the bed.

"LET GO REET, I'LL CATCH YOU!"

She couldn't hold on any longer anyway, the belt was, by now, running at an insane, blurred speed an Olympic sprinter would have found it difficult to keep up with. Had she stumbled while holding onto the bar the friction would have probably flayed the skin from her legs down to the bone. With an anguished scream she let go and was immediately propelled violently backwards before being flung with no more effort than you would throw a bundle of rags in the garbage, into the arms of her waiting husband. The force sent them both flying across the room and if the bedroom wall hadn't been there, Martin and Rita



Williams would probably have continued rocketing backwards for another ten feet or more. Martin took the full force of the blow and his back slammed into the wall knocking all the breath from his body.

Rita sat on the floor leaning against her husband's inert form too shocked to do anything except watch in horror as the Sprintmaster Seven continued to buck and jerk violently, its belt and rollers running faster and faster. Electric blue sparks like party streamers began to jump across the gap between the base and front bars, the smell of ozone filled the air like the coppery odour of hot blood. Smoke began to pour from the main motor, the bearing blew with a searing flash of orange light filling the bedroom with the smell of thunderstorms and yet still the Sprintmaster ran faster and faster, its belt and rollers moving at a speed that made them seem to blend and merge and melt. Rita stared almost hypnotised as the machine began to stretch and distort like steel billets in a rolling mill. The smoke rising from the belt took on uncouth, writhing, blue-tinged shapes as if they were hideous lower order demons dancing attendance on some greater, diabolical entity because it wasn't exactly an exercise machine any more; it was still changing and melting.

The power cable was snapped violently from out of its housing and pulled into the main roller...it was as if the thing that it had become was consuming itself. Numbers from the digital display panel floated in the air above mingling and merging with the blue vapours making strange runic hieroglyphics and forming unmistakable words but never for long enough to actually read. For a brief instant two luminous fireballs like glowing lupine eyes full of malignant intent hovered above them and still the machine continued to change. Rita began to scream as the thing seemed to leer at them. Her impression was of an amorphous dark shape towering above them both, a shape with glaring fire ember eyes the size of street lamps, deadlights, she thought briefly for some reason, and a wide open mouth with a moving rubber tongue poised to consume them, destroy them. Electric blue words formed by the dancing vapours changed and wavered in the air around them like flags blowing in a strong breeze. Suddenly, she fell backwards cracking her head on the bedroom wall behind, Martin had recovered his senses and rolled sideways grabbing and hurling the bedside table lamp at the thing in one seamless movement. Rita screamed some more as the lamp crashed ineffectively into the looming shape that was about to fall upon them and exploded into a starburst of coloured glass and ceramic. With a shout of hopelessness, Martin raised himself up onto his knees, the thing was by now towering impossibly higher than the bedroom ceiling could ever allow, and picking up the bedside cupboard, he threw it with a strength born of desperation. The cupboard door flew open as it slammed into the thing the machine had become; there was a blinding flash as cupboard and contents made explosive contact...

"Shit!"

Martin was brought abruptly back into the present as he almost ran into the back of a car that had stopped at a red traffic light. His squealing tyres attracted a frightened glance from its passenger. He held up one hand in apology. If the passenger had given more than just a passing glance he would have assumed that the guy in the car behind was shaking as a result of his near collision. Devil worship, demon possession, ghosts, poltergeists. Oh sure, Martin had seen all the movies. He'd pretended not to be scared shitless by 'The Exorcist' and 'The Amityville Horror' just like everyone else, and then you merely walk out of the cinema and back into your well ordered life that doesn't include such ridiculous fantasies because they simply don't exist, do they? **Do they?**

*'If you ask me', Miss James had told them, 'I think he was doing some kind of experiments'.*

Oh yes! Oh fucking right! He was doing some kind of experiments sure. Oh, abso-fucking-lutely...

**CHRIST!!**

Martin almost didn't see the car slowing down in front of him indicating right and once again he involuntary deposited a little bit of rubber onto the tarmac. He pulled into a lay bye, unable to stop shaking and sat slumped behind the wheel massaging his temples between first finger and thumb. He



had picked up the bedside cupboard and thrown it into the...shit, what the fuck was it? Were they really allergic to bibles and crucifixes? They? Crazy, crazy shit.

The cupboard, like its predecessor the lamp, literally exploded but more with a pffff than a bang. "Fibreboard shit!" Exclaimed Martin somewhat inappropriately given the circumstances and then with a blue flash and a shower of orange sparks like molten metal being poured in a foundry, the thing that was once a Sprintmaster Seven exercise machine was once again just that, an inanimate object made of steel and plastic and rubber. It innocuously sat there surrounded by and covered with charred and broken household debris that had once lived inside the bedside cupboard. Several Tom Clancy paperbacks along with a Jeffrey Archer had been almost totally incinerated although a Stephen King was only charred around the edges and in his shocked state, Martin wondered if this held any significance. A small silver crucifix on a chain that once belonged to Rita's late mother lay twisted and misshapen as if it had been in a furnace and a very old Coronation Commemorative Bible that had been her aunt's was literally blown apart and scorched beyond recognition save for a small piece of binding carrying a picture of the royal crown. Three pewter figurines apparently undamaged were lying on the carpet some three feet away (like they had been vomited there, thought Martin). In that notion, Martin had been unwittingly accurate. The unfortunate Jason, he of the 'experiments' and previous owner of the Sprintmaster may have had some small knowledge. He may have known that bibles, crucifixes and Holy water were strictly for the movies. He probably didn't know that even quite low levels of radiation could cause temporary dysfunctionality of possessive entities.

Tin was once mined in large quantities in the western part of Cornwall in South West England. The Wheal Jane mine in particular produced a high quality metal. It is a fact that quantities of radio-active radon gas are also present in the rocks of this region and by definition in the tin ore also. Pewter is a lead-tin alloy used widely in the manufacture of drinking vessels before the dangers of lead poisoning were appreciated and is considered by some to have been a contributory factor to the collapse of the Roman Empire.

The pewter figurines (much disliked by Rita, they had been a token wedding gift and had never been put on display) were originally manufactured in Birmingham with tin stemming from the Wheal Jane mine. They were minutely radio-active.

And that wasn't the end of it, shit no. Another nasty shock lay in wait. Martin fought down a wave of nausea as he thought about it for what seemed like the millionth time. They had been cleaning up the mess. Martin had partially dismantled the machine before taking it into the garage and, using an application of logic that, given the circumstances, could hardly be relied upon, placed one part in each diagonally opposite corner. (Later that night, neighbour Steve on his way back home from yet another night out with the boys was sure that neighbour Martin was late night welding again in the garage.) He had just walked back into the bedroom and Rita was examining something. Her face suddenly contorted into an expression of total disgust and she dropped the object as if it were a red hot stone. She didn't scream, she didn't jump, she simply turned and threw up her stomach contents onto the floor. Ah well, thought Martin rather incongruously, time to change the carpet.

And I nearly added to the carpet's new-found panache, Martin contemplated to the syncopated accompaniment of a pounding headache. He got out of the car, Christ, I need some fresh air. A large lorry rumbled by adding a cloud of dust to the invisible traces of carbon monoxide and other assorted life threatening substances that invariably permeated the atmosphere around lay-bys on London bound highways. He lit a cigarette (why worry about the pollution). He didn't have to be a member of the medical profession to realise that the object that had provoked so violent a reaction in his wife was a piece of human scalp about three inches square with strands of dark, blood caked hair still attached. There was even a small white knob of bone in one corner just to add to its gut wrenching qualities.

By the time he arrived home he had almost convinced himself that it had all been a very bad dream. "Everything OK?" Rita asked.



Martin nodded wearily, "Everything done Reet."

"Sure?"

"Reet, the tip's over thirty miles from here in Essex and in a few days time when the skip's full the machine will be well and truly buried in the ground. That's why they're called land fill sites. On top of that I smashed the shit out of it. No Reet, let's just forget this ever happened."

"And that other...that..." She couldn't bear to even think about the grisly object.

"I chucked it in a bin in some lay bye and no, nobody saw so let's get on with our lives and just stay fat, OK?"

## The next week and the coming days. . .

"Impossible Rita."

"Marty, I saw..."

"You saw something similar but not that Reet."

"Oh yes Martin, people leave them in the motorway services car park all the time."

"Rita, be logical."

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"This time you come see for yourself. I'm not crazy. It's the same one alright and don't tell me it isn't, I went back to the services and it's not there anymore."

"Well it wouldn't be, would it?"

"Just come Marty, please."

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"Marty. It was here! It was right here!"

"Reet, I believe you saw something but you said yourself that you didn't get that close. Maybe it was a trick of the li..."

"There! Look over there next to the trolleys!"

Martin was a believer now but how the hell could this be possible? Then again, what he had already seen...

There was no doubt it was a Super Sprintmaster Seven exercise machine. No, correction, it was *that* Super Sprintmaster Seven exercise machine. After they bought it, Rita had noticed a long scratch in the paintwork down one side. It looked as if someone had begun to carve a design into the paintwork she said but Martin couldn't see it, to him it was just a scratch. Now he wasn't so sure. The scratch remained but the destroyed fascia of the display console was in the advanced stages of a kind of miraculous transformation and only a jagged hairline crack remained. In fact, the crack was the clincher, the confirmation that the nightmare wasn't over yet.

The third sighting came one week after the first and almost two weeks after Martin thought he had solved a very dangerous problem.

## Another Saturday evening in suburbia. . .

"Oh my God! Oh my God! We've got to get away from here Marty..."

Rita buried her head in her hands and began to sob.

Martin could only stare blankly at the road map of Greater London spread out like a banner across the kitchen table. To him it looked like a giant spider's web and the spider was inexorably closing in on the two flies trapped within its sticky tendrils. Four red crosses marched across the map in a straight line while a fifth black cross marked the place on the map the Williams's liked to call home. A plastic ruler, clear except for a cartoon image of Lolly the rabbit appearing like the antithesis of evil lay close by.



Just a few moments earlier Martin had marked the Essex County Council landfill site at Fullerton Cross then repeated the exercise by highlighting the Bromley Services Area of the A21(M) motorway, the approximate position of the Tesco Superstore at Hobbs Moat and the Bluewater Shopping Mall just five miles or one inch on the map from where he had finally marked the black cross, where they first came across the advert Martin thought ruefully.

He couldn't help but marvel at the almost symmetrical precision with which the ruler bisected the crosses from the first red one to the black one that marked their home. How did it travel? At night like an outlaw? Did it use country roads? What about the river? Did it swim across the Thames or use the Dartford tunnel. How much is the toll for itinerant exercise machines? Did it fly, scoot along on its wheels or simply materialise at will? Maybe it hitched lifts aboard empty flat beds or pick up trucks. He laughed aloud, he couldn't help it but there was no humour in the laugh. "For Christ's sake what on earth can you possibly find so funny?" Rita sobbed.

Martin was too far adrift in dark thoughts to even notice let alone acknowledge Rita's outburst. Even after he was forced to face up to the existence of the impossible in the darkly bleak and drizzly Tesco car park he went into a kind of denial and so, he guessed, did Rita, but today...  
...And the strange thing was that nobody was paying any attention to it whatsoever as if a Super Sprintmaster Seven exercise machine parked precisely equidistant between the lines on the fourth floor of a multi-storey car park was the most normal thing in the world. The fourth floor for God's sake. It hadn't been there when they arrived at the Mall five hours earlier, had it?

"Five miles Marty, just five miles"

Martin simply stared at the map. Even the hairline crack in the LCD display had vanished but the designer scratch remained as if to say, oh yes buddy boy, it's me alright and you'd better believe it. ***I'm back.*** They jumped in the car and drove quickly away and somehow Martin knew that if he had attempted to throw it off the fourth floor it would have been him and not the machine lying broken and twisted on the concrete forty feet below.

Just five miles away, which meant that in two weeks it had travelled over twenty five miles. Twelve and a half miles a week, almost two miles a day...

"Marty we've got to get away! DO YOU HEAR ME!" Rita screamed through her choked sobs. And then, as if reading the shadowy thoughts that echoed along the mean streets of Martin's mind.

"Five miles Marty, it'll be here in two days!"

She was wrong.

Martin could only mumble, "Tomorrow, we'll go to your sister's."

"And tonight! What about tonight?"

She was on the edge of hysteria.

"I don't know, I haven't thought..."

Martin's reply sounded almost trancelike.

"What!"

"Hotel, we'll go to a hotel."

*And find it sitting there in the car park, in the lobby, in the room...*

"Let's go then!"

"What now!"

"Yes Marty, now! Right now!"

"We can't just..."

"Yes we can Marty. For Christ's sake Marty, we have to!"

Martin glanced at the clock, seven thirty. Christ, almost into the twilight zone.

Rita had picked up the phone extension and was already dialling the number that would cause the phone to ring in her sister's home in Waltham Cross.

"She's not answering. Oh shit! Oh shit!"

"She's probably gone out for the evening with Tom, it is Saturday..."



His voice tailed off.

Rita literally threw the phone back into its wall cradle. She leaned against the table as if unable to support her shaking body with her own legs. She looked as if she were on the point of collapse. Martin wanted to reach out to her, comfort her but instead he just stared numbly at the map that was beginning to turn into a horoscope.

“Marty! Now! Now, Marty!”

She pulled him by the arm.

By the time two suitcases had been packed it was already getting dark. The dusk had crept in almost unnoticed and the last remnants of the light of day were fading forever into oblivion. It was to be the last time that Martin and Rita Williams ever saw daylight.

“Come on Martin. God I’m so scared!”

They both became aware of the subtle change in the tenor of the light at the same time. Steve must be doing a spot of welding, thought Martin. The last rational thoughts that went through Martin’s mind were abruptly punctuated by the hysterical scream from his wife who was looking out of the bedroom window. She ran to the door but not to leave the room. Violently slamming the door shut, she pushed in the locking button that was set into the handle. It was her final positive action. She ran back to the window.

“OH GOD HELP US MARTY! OH GOD! OH GOD! IT’S COME EARLY AND IT’S SMASHED THE MARIGOLDS!”

This sentence was so tragically comic, so Pythonesque that Martin was inclined to fall about laughing realising that this had all been a ridiculous joke engineered by some equally ridiculous television station and Rita had been a part of it all the time. He stood next to his wife at the window and was able to confirm that it had indeed come early but of the television cameramen there was no sign.

The Sprintmaster Seven stood among the flower beds in Rita’s well kept garden below. Pulsing blue light and rising vapour turned the gathering gloom into a swirling cauldron of neon confusion. A single word glowing with a translucent orange light hovered above the chaos. The word said ‘ NOW ’.

They barely had time to register the news of their impending death as the window, glass and wooden frame alike, exploded into hundreds of needle sharp splinters.

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“Have you any idea at all what kind of madman could have done this George?”

“Well, I er...”

“No, neither do I George, neither do I.”

Detective Chief Inspector Tommy Richardson lit yet another cigarette and looked into the bespectacled face of his assistant Detective Sergeant George Fretwell. His own reflection stared grimly back at him illuminated by a steadily pulsating blue light as was the face of his subordinate as was the front of the modest three bedroom detached house. In fact, the whole length of the normally quiet suburban street was starkly lit by the flashing blue lights emanating from the line of parked police vehicles. People stood around in small groups, debating and speculating in the now cordoned off street.

The DCI pulled slowly on his cigarette and placed his elbow on the top of the front gatepost. He had been filled in with the details by the senior uniformed policeman, the scene of crime officers were already sifting through the bedlam looking for forensic evidence.

“I’ve never seen anything like it sir, you’d better prepare yourself before you go in.”

He felt his stomach tighten. It always did when it was a bad one. Man’s violent inhumanity to his fellow creature was something you could never get used to. The senior officer had been absolutely spot on; he’d never seen so much carnage in all of his thirty years on the force.

“Who found the bodies?” (Pieces more like, he thought) He’d asked the officer after recovering his composure and re-establishing control of his somersaulting stomach.

“Next door neighbour sir, she heard screaming but she’s not much help at the moment, they had to sedate her and take her to hospital.”

“Does she have a husband?”



“He’s out somewhere at the moment but his mobile’s switched off, name’s Steve.”  
Neighbour Steve’s wife wasn’t the only one who needed sedating thought DCI Richardson as he looked across at a vomit speckled constable sitting white faced on the edge of the neatly manicured front lawn. He dropped his half smoked cigarette through the slot of the storm drain grating and turned to his sergeant, a reliable guy but a little short on imagination he thought,  
“I think maybe they went a little overboard on the old exercise”, the sergeant grinned.  
Add callous bastard to the list the DCI almost said aloud. The look on the DCI’s face warned his assistant, lack of imagination or not, that he came more than a little close to overstepping the mark.  
“Sorry Guv”, he mumbled almost embarrassingly but carrying a slight smirk at the edge of his mouth all the same.  
“OK, let’s just go through the details again. The bodies, or rather the pieces were under an exercise machine in the bedroom right?”  
“Yes Guv.”  
“And the window was completely wrecked, even the frame was shattered.”  
“And part of the brickwork Guv”  
“Yes, and the bedroom door was locked from the inside right?”  
“According to the neighbour yes. We need to check when she’s a bit more compos mentis but she reckoned she had to unlock the door before she could get in.”  
The DCI raised his eyebrows slightly.  
“And where did she get the key?”  
“Oh, she knew where they were kept, some kind of holiday arrangement.”  
“OK, we need to double check that. Right now she’s a suspect.”  
It was the turn of DS Fretwell to raise his eyebrows at his chief’s assertion.  
“But it can only be locked from inside. Is that correct?” The DCI continued.  
“Correct Guv.”  
“So this maniac must have exited the way he entered, through the window.”  
It was said as a rhetorical question rather than a statement and it hung unanswered in the cool night air. The short silence was broken by the Detective Chief Inspector.  
“Let’s go and see if they’ve found the ladder yet.”  
“Ladder Guv?”  
“Yes George, ladder, or are you suggesting our madman took one mighty leap from ground level?”  
Before the Sergeant had a chance to answer, his Chief said, “Did you notice anything strange about the back garden?”  
“You mean the flower bed Guv?”  
The DCI smiled; there was hope for Fretwell yet.  
“Exactly George, the flowers not just trampled...”  
“...but scorched as well”, his sergeant finished for him.  
“Right George, as if someone had blasted a flamethrower across the top of them except...”  
“Except they were damaged in an almost rectangular pattern Guv.”  
“Almost rectangular”, repeated the DCI in a thoughtful tone. “And after he’d cut them to pieces why the hell did he place an exercise machine on top like some kind of weird ritual? Have you got one of those damn things George?”  
“An exercise machine? Well funny you should mention it Guv because only last week I bought an exercise bicycle. Second hand mind, only cost thirty quid. Something wrong with it though. Still, what do you expect for thirty quid? Couple of times I haven’t been able to stop the pedals going round, the last time the damn thing nearly crippled me, it just went faster and faster. I couldn’t get off, wife had to help me. It’s almost as if it’s got a mind of its own.”

The two men walked slowly round to the back garden. DCI Richardson glanced at his watch intermittently illuminated by the blue flashing lights of the police cars parked in the street. Two minutes past twelve, another long night; another weary day in suburbia.

The End (maybe) . . .

