

## The Typewriter

In those last desperate hours before the end of the World we wasted valuable time debating who had brought this terrible thing into our lives. *Our* lives. Although it will, of course, take all others as well. But now the five of us can only sit and stare at the Thing that will destroy us.

My life had gone wrong so I camped out in the spare room of some people I knew.

And the camping turned into rented residency even though the spare room had no spare room. I shared it with crunchy dusty obsolete artefacts. Electronics, heaters, framed artwork, wooden boxes and Himalayas of hazardous sheeting. I was clearing floor space for the striped roll-down single mattress when I found the Typewriter.

It was a Beast. Possibly a 100 years old. Dark, heavy, and with an uncompromising dignity. Surely only the most serious documents were worthy of its keys: Foreclosures, Acts of Parliament, Royal Births, Death Sentences, Declarations of War. But I felt sorry for it and out of pity I slipped a sheet of paper into its bakelite roller. Pity is a dangerous emotion.

Testing the heavy keys was hard on the fingers that I took a break to ask my flatmates who owned the Beast. All pleaded ignorance. But when I got back the words *Tanya is a liar. They are really 32 years old* had appeared on the paper! No one owned up to that either. We all laughed. Except Tanya. They slapped the machine and winced with pain. They ripped out the sheet but when they had gone I replaced it. Each night I came back a new Messages had appeared.

They were playful at first:

*GEMINIS STAY HOME TODAY. - Max's haircut is a crime! - Becky watered down the oatmilk. - Becky's drugs are NOT legal highs. - Cathy left the bath running. - Alex can afford the rent. - Tom blocked the loo: he eats too much...*

Then gradually baleful, mean and divisive. They caused rows. Departures. Break ups.

"It's haunted!" said Felipe

"No, it's possessed," said Yvonne.

They disagreed on principle. The principle being that they loved each other but neither would admit it. And while they noisily failed to argue it out four of us carried the Typewriter to the Hall cupboard we used for old coats and cracked footwear.

It didn't like that.

After the Easter break I came back to hear that familiar clacking. And there it was. Alone on the Kitchen table. Complete with a huge paper roll feed and a hopper that caught the typed paper in graceful folds like a fancy French pastry. Again, no one knew how that had happened either.

The first Message was: *I AM COMPLETE - I AM COMPLETE - I AM COMPLETE...*

So it began. *CLACK CLACK CLACK -*

No one knew what we should do.

Then one day Becky burnt her tofu and screamed, "I can't stand any more of this!" She lifted the big cast iron frying pan over her head and went for the Typewriter. There was a purple flash. She disappeared. The pan rattled and rang on the kitchen tiles.

And then things went downhill fast.

The media reported global disasters. Then, increasingly: *Eternal Night*. Then: Nothing.

Methodical Marcus was a mathematician who lived solely on cheese and onion crisps. He'd lined his room with boxes of the stuff, kept strictly under lock and key. Once a source of ridicule, now a cause of envy since the supermarket shelves had long since emptied.

"I know what It's doing," he said. The Thing had allowed him to examine a sheet of type unscathed. "It *wants* us to know. What do you see?"

"Columns – four to a page – in the same format: AA057, AA058, AA059..."

"Look again. See? No errors. Impeccable. It's sectorised the World with Its own code: 2 alpha gives 676 times 100 numeric gives 67600, it's on the MZ's now. At this rate It'll reach ZZ99 midnight tomorrow."

"And?"

"That will be it. There are blackouts around the World. Dense Cloud that prevents light reaching the surface, land or water. But stationary Cloud that steadily joins up with new ones that steadily appear. Impossible. Yet it's happening. I'm not crazy. It's clear from global satellite imaging. Now we've lost contact with those satellites. The internet is dead. By ZZ99 the World will be encased and we'll perish in freezing dark. It must be on the spectrum. Like me. Hail Big Brother!"

"What can we do about your Big Brother?"

"Nothing."

So now we sit in the utter darkness of noon lit by the last candles. It doesn't need a candle to do its work. The keys clack our lives away. Regularly. Slowly. Deliberately. We are at ZZ01.

"Why? And why does it want us to know?"

"It maximises distress. It's malicious."

"But is It the only one? If it is we could..."

The thought dies on the air. We tried. Five of us left. The others gone in a streak of purple.

"But why here?"

Now the other four are looking at me. After all this time...

"It's something to do," says Becky. "It might even work. Go on, you! Rip Its paper up!"

They turn on me with brooms. Brooms? Is this planned? They poke me towards the Thing...

Then the door opens and a Figure enters. It wears a full visor motorcycle helmet, a duffel coat, and yellow marigold gloves. It plonks two boxes down on the floor. It takes a pair of bolt cutters and an assault rifle out of a backpack.

"What fresh Hell is this?" says Titus.

"Ignore the gun. I had to take it off three men in Gillingham who tried to molest me."

"What happened? Did you..?"

The Intruder takes off the helmet but its eyes sweep the room above a cotton mask. Still the Typewriter clacks. ZZ69.

"Never mind them. Stand well back."

The Intruder reaches into the duffel coat pocket and steel glints.

The clacking is louder.

The Intruder darts forward and skips back before the purple streak smacks into the table. The Clack Clack Clack turns into a Clump Clump Clump. Then stops.

"What did you do?" asks Titus.

A marigold-clad hand waves a pair of scissors.

"I cut its ribbon. Simple. Now who wants to take it apart with the bolt cutters?"

"First tell us what's in those boxes," says Methodical Marcus.

"Well, the big one has your friends inside. The ones who disappeared."

"Becky, Yvonne and Felipe? In that small box? Are they dead? Ashes?"

"No. They're mice. In mouse form. Don't worry. They'll be fine."

"And the other box?"

"That's the pickled head of Simon Forman. He's the one behind all this. *Was* behind it. I'll explain later. But first I want to talk to *you*. In your room."

*You* means me.

So we do.

And, as the skies clear overhead, "I owe you an apology," says Dellabonna.