

Talkin' Squirrel Blues

Pádraig Hanratty

For the koala

Also available:

A Blanket of Blues

Everybody gets the blues sometimes. Fingers Flaherty had them all the time. He lived the blues and sang about his every ache.

Flaherty's blues gave him nothing but hardship, sore feet and a shattered heart. Every one of his songs told a fraught story. His characters walked many a dark path and twisted lane on their troubled journeys.

And now they get to share their tales, wrapped in dark humour and a blanket of blues.

A collection of short stories inspired by Flaherty's songs, A BLANKET OF BLUES presents its varied cast at turning points in their lives. Some yearn for change, whereas others seek self-improvement. And others want nothing more than a little peace of mind, even for just a few hours. Each character struggles through the daily conflicts and irritations of his or her life, fighting back with proud confidence, caustic wit, mule-headed defiance and a dash of reckless optimism.

Dimestore Avenue Blues

Jesse believes that the future will be better. One day, he'll make up for all his mistakes and achieve perfection.

He still has some bad days as he lives out his autumn years in Dublin. But his worst days were in New York in 1976. After that city had nearly crushed him, he'd fled to Dublin, a broken man. But he was determined to rebuild himself, brick by brick, improving day by day.

Back in the 1970s, Jesse was a successful young ad man on Madison Avenue. He'd succeeded because he was willing, indeed eager, to do anything to advance his career. It all seemed like a good plan, right up until the day he brought a pistol to work. For years in those offices and meeting rooms, they all thought they were kings, living it up in their high palaces of power. As it all fell apart for Jesse in 1976, he realised they were all just fumbling in the dimestore.

Jesse knows he isn't perfect. He's made many mistakes and will probably make more in the future. Now, with the possibility of contentment finally within his grasp, will he be allowed one final chance to be happy? Or will the ghosts from his past once again refuse to lie down in their graves?

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Prologue

Teddy Bear Bites Moses... Bear Unhurt

*She's chopping my vegetables, she's cooking my meat.
I can't even stand on my own three feet.
I've burnt my fingers on her body heat!
Protect me from the Edgy Woman Blues.*

*Edgy Woman Blues
Fingers Flaherty*

"You're not even listening to me, Moses!" Natalie threw the small Oxford souvenir teddy bear at the inert figure on the sofa. "I'd get more attention from this bear."

"Hmmm?" Moses McNamara was not one of life's great multi-taskers. In fact, a single task was often beyond his abilities. For now, his attention was more or less riveted to the newspaper obituary he was reading. Nothing, not even a flying teddy bear flung by a fraught girlfriend, would distract him. However, he realised that he was still expected to make some token contribution to the conversation. "Um... sure... eh?"

Fingers Flaherty
Singer, songwriter, outlaw
1938–2012

Fingers Flaherty's drunken death last night in a car crash will come as a shock to his few fans. And yet, for him to die inebriated behind the wheel of a smashed Ford was disappointingly predictable. A predictable shock. Flaherty's death, like everything else about him, is a contradiction. As he said in his 1963 debut album, *Fingers on the Blues*: "Ashes to ashes, sand to sand/Both sides of the coin in my own hand."

Flaherty's life was a contradiction of his own making. When I last interviewed him, he still claimed to be devoted to his integrity. We both knew he would do anything for a few more seconds of fame. In his constant quest for commercial success, he tried on one ludicrous mask after another. He completely lost his way in the process. "I'm not always sure which part of me is hiding," he said in a 1986 interview. "I can't remember if this is the real me or if I'm in disguise."

"What the hell am I doing here?" Natalie sadly shook her head and then gathered her energy for the full verbal assault. "You've changed, Moses. I hardly recognise you anymore. We're in the land where teardrops fall now. It used to be so much fun. Jesus, the last time we had a really good laugh together was at Wino Wally's funeral! Six months ago! You're nothing more than a moody, selfish twenty-five-year-old adolescent. With all the personality of sour _"

"Can't you turn down the volume?" Moses just about managed to switch from one task to the other. "I'm trying to read the bastarding paper."

"You care more about Fingers bastarding Flaherty than you do about me!"

Although Moses wouldn't admit it, Natalie was right. This time, anyway. The death of Fingers Flaherty, his shabby idol, pushed all other matters out of his field of vision.

In all his years as a blues singer, Fingers never got to eat the commercial cake. He'd nibbled it once in 1964 when his comic ballad "Backseat Blues" became a minor hit. It was a love song, of sorts: "I don't want to be cured, sugar, I won't swallow your pill/If your sweet love don't kill me, sugar, then your bitter hatred will."

His *Mississippi Money Blues* album had sold well on the back of that single. He seemed to find a welcoming audience among the acid-stoned university students of the time. "None of this is real to me," he once told *The Irish Chord*. "I feel like I'm making the whole bloody thing up as I go along. Every song tells a story. And none of the stories are true. Are they?"

"Tony from Accounts is always giving me the eye." Natalie decided to attack from another angle. "And he's real fit too. At least *he* notices me! To think I've been giving him the brush-off because of you. I look back and wonder if I've been tripping this last two years."

"Why is there a teddy bear on my lap?"

"The bear gets more attention than I do!"

"Sure. Whatever."

For the most of the 1960s, Fingers was a respected blues singer. In his songs, he told of his quest for the ideal woman. His career, however, was a quest for an audience. He ploughed a solitary furrow and managed to appeal to just enough people to be able to stay on the road.

In the 1970s, his tiny audience outgrew him. Fingers desperately tried to appeal to the market, any market. "I'm yours for a dollar, babe," he begged in "Hollow Whorehouse Blues".

"All the girls at work tell me I'd get a better catch for a few euros down at the pet shop. Or the graveyard."

"Suppose so... Any chance of you staying quiet until I've read this article?"

"If you're not going on about that dead blues singer, you're whinging about this performance appraisal you have coming up next month. You need help, Moses."

"I need help getting some peace and quiet."

In the mid-1980s, Fingers had a tiny renaissance. Ballybaboon Butter used one of his songs, "Spread Your Love On Me", in an advertising campaign. His battered voice croaked across the national airwaves every evening for about two months.

His record company desperately patched together a compilation album in an attempt to rekindle interest. Maybe fifty people got interested. Fingers disappeared as suddenly as he had reappeared. His comeback album, *A Blanket of Blues*, failed to rekindle enough interest. He continued to play tiny halls and pubs all over the country, but fewer and fewer people seemed to care. At one show, he got into a fight with members of the audience and ended up in hospital.

“Look, Moses, I think it’s best if we take a break for a while, before we kill each other. I think we just need to get off this train and see where exactly we are.”

“What are you looking for a train for? You going somewhere?”

“I don’t know where I’m going with you anymore.”

“I think there’s a timetable in that drawer over there. Hidden in with all the other shit I dump in there.”

“Goodbye, Moses!”

Last night, Fingers drove his battered Ford into a street lamp. He had just finished a gig in Cork and celebrated by polishing off a bottle of whiskey.

Earlier that evening, he sang his “Bloodshot Blues”: “There’s a strange thin man knock knockin’ at my door/Pass me that bottle quick, I don’t wanna be sober no more.”

For once, it seemed that he could see exactly where the tracks were leading.

Moses glanced up when he heard the front door slam.

He looked down at the Oxford teddy bear.

“Do you know where she’s gone to?”

She’s stabbing my chest with her bedroom eyes.

She throws everything at me, even her lies.

She nibbles my ear and chews me down to size.

Protect me from the Edgy Woman Blues.

Edgy Woman Blues

Fingers Flaherty

Moses tried to put Natalie out of his mind as he sat down for his performance review.

His light-brown hair was styled into an executive cut and his clean-shaven face radiated inner energy. He wore a blue “power suit”, stretched by taut muscles. The office sparkled in the reflection of his polished shoes.

Moses’s voice rang out as he explained his achievements to his boss, Coconut Fred. He’d never sounded so confident in his life. This was a winner’s voice. A voice that trampled over self-doubt and threw indecision in the ditch.

Coconut Fred listened to that voice, rapt. At thirty-nine, Fred had played the corporate game for fifteen years. By now, he’d become jaded by the office dramas and pointless politics. Today, however, he nodded in eager agreement with Moses, smiling at the clever witticisms.

When Moses stopped talking, Fred cleared his throat.

“That’s very impressive, Moses... Gosh, I’m almost lost for words. Ha ha ha.”

“I try my best, Mr Hearty,” Moses said with a corporate smile. “Though I am sure that I can do even better.”

“Yes, I’m sure you can continue to impress us. The spark that has got me this far, I can see it in you too. If we had more people like you, this company could march through any recession and still blow away the stock market’s expectations. Now, if you don’t mind, there are just a few questions I’d like to ask you. Let’s start with this one, then.” Fred picked up a card from his desk and smiled. “What can you tell me about the economic policies of King Richard II?”

Moses stared at Fred.

King Richard II? What the hell has he got to do with anything?

But Moses suddenly remembered that King Richard II was a vital part of the review. He’d simply forgotten to do his homework. His heart began beating frantically as he realised that it was now too late. Beads of warm sweat trickled down the back of his neck.

“I... well... I think it’s... em... like, you know... I don’t know... I’m sorry.”

Fred’s face darkened dramatically. Without warning, he threw a coconut at Moses.

Moses yelped as the coconut smashed into his stomach.

“We’ll try another question before I decide whether to fire you.” Fred’s voice quivered with menace. “Identify some of the distinctive cinematic devices used in early Elvis Presley films.”

“I’m sorry, Mr Hearty.” All the self-confidence had evaporated out of Moses’s voice. He could almost see the steam escaping from his mouth. “I... I...”

Panic surged through him, making his chest heave in raw gasps. His armpits were soaking. His neat haircut uncombed itself into a dishevelled bird’s nest.

“Are you stupid, you pathetic little prick?” Fred roared, flinging another coconut at him. “I devour useless bastards like you for breakfast!”

The coconut struck Moses on the forehead. Blinding pain erupted inside his head. The room spun around violently.

“Here’s an easy one for you! Explain why Natalie left you, McNamara.”

Moses’s clothes began to disintegrate. When he tried to speak, he bit his tongue. He looked up at Fred in shivering despair, blood drooling down his chin.

“Don’t you know anything?” Fred launched another coconut. “Why did she leave you?”

“What are you talking about?” Moses began weeping as the coconut struck his knee. “She only went out to get the papers.”

The last of his clothes collapsed to the floor in a puff of blue dust. He shivered there, naked, clutching his stinging knee. Shattered bone crumbled beneath the flesh. He looked up at Fred, through blood-soaked eyes.

Oh shit!

Fred had changed.

Completely.

Fred had turned into a large teddy bear. A savage teddy bear in a brown suit. The stench of the teddy bear's breath hit Moses like a wet towel.

The teddy bear clenched a coconut in its hand.

"Please," Moses begged, "I'll tweet the best marketing copy in history."

The teddy bear flung the coconut.

Moses woke up with a bolt. The bedside clock said 4.15 am. It took him ten minutes to calm down after the nightmare. Eventually, he slipped back to shivering sleep.

And then he dreamt about Natalie... again.

*The clock is striking thirteen, she must be back in town,
Wearing her razor-blade stockings and barb-wire gown,
Stabbing the teddy bear, cuddling the clown.
Protect me from the Edgy Woman Blues.*

*Edgy Woman Blues
Fingers Flaherty*

Always On My Mind

Anonymous Blues

Maybe I didn't treat you like a warrior queen,
You know it's true, I probably didn't treat you like a warrior queen.
My hose was way too dry, Lord, to turn her garden green.
There ain't no name for these blues.

Take that woman off my mind, Lord, kick her out of my head.
Take her off my mind, dear Lord, kick that woman out of my head.
She's drinkin' from a different cup, she's sleepin' in a lanky stranger's bed.
There ain't no name for these blues.

Blues jumpin' out of the bush, blues crawlin' on the floor,
Blue's drippin' down the walls, blues knockin' on the door,
Blues scratchin' at my leg, blues ringin' in my ear,
Blues smokin' my cigarette, blues drinkin' up my beer.

Santa's crawlin' up her chimney, Lord, the monkey man is sneakin' out her
back door,
Santa's in that chimney, Lord, the monkey man's out that back door.
I'll be your salty dog, baby, sleepin' on a pallet on your floor.
There ain't no name for these blues.

The judge cleared his throat, he said he didn't want to condemn me.
The judge, he cleared his throat, sayin' he didn't want to condemn me.
The blues sat on the jury, Lord, sayin' they could never set me free.
There ain't no name for these blues.

Chapter 1

Going Forward To The Promised Land

*The sun shone on the silver water.
My wife just left me for the fisherman's daughter.
I look up in disbelief,
Nothing I say will bring relief.
God gave us famine, God gave us slaughter,
God gave me the curse of the fisherman's daughter.*

*Blues From A Fisherman's Daughter
Fingers Flaherty*

"I saw a squirrel walking into work today," Moses said, shuddering as the coffee slithered down his throat and sizzled its way to his stomach. "Imagine that!"

The coffee blend this morning was a frisky mix of Java beans, kerosene and sulphuric acid. In the latest round of panic-stricken budget cuts, Aztech Software had changed its coffee supplier. Rumours persisted that the new coffee was smuggled out by moonlight from underground laboratories in Iran.

Apart from Coconut Fred, the entire Marketing division were at the breakfast table in the Aztech canteen. In the harsh morning sunlight, the canteen always looked like it had been designed by some spiteful feng shui consultant on acid. In reality, it was designed by Gobsmack Design, Dublin's most "cost-effective" (in other words "cheapest") interior space consultancy service. Gobsmack was run by Xavier, the Aztech finance director's brother. Unfortunately, the morning Gobsmack started the contract, Xavier's wife ran away with Sister Amy from the local convent. Xavier was understandably distraught by the unexpected result of his wife's dabbling in spiritual yoga. The Aztech canteen became a visible manifestation of his inner turmoil.

The dark blue plastic tables were chaotically scattered around the red and green floor tiles. The sinister 3D abstract graphics and etchings that dotted the grey walls dared employees to interpret them. Instead of inducing a warm inner calm, the canteen décor conspired with the food to induce a constant sense of sea-sickness.

The Marketing division looked particularly sea-sick this morning. Lydia Maguire, twenty-eight years old in a navy-blue blouse and black skirt, delicately buttered her toast, frowning at the tiny crumbs that collapsed on to the tangerine table.

Beside her, Roger Flanagan, his razor-sharp bottle-green suit glistening in the sunlight, munched his breakfast cereal. He was thirty, with receding ginger hair, and was an expert corporate player.

Paul Ryan, the twenty-three-year-old new boy in the office, reluctantly sipped his orange juice, his hands trembling. His cream suit looked like it had been slept in and his unshaven face looked like it had been hanging on a clothesline all night.

Sandra White was drinking a cup of coffee. Her eyes darted around the canteen, trying to pick up any careless crumbs of gossip. She was thirty-four and had worked for Aztech for seven years. Her loyalty to the company amounted to a grudging acknowledgement that the wages helped to pay for the 100%-financed mortgage on her 100%-overpriced tiny apartment in the city centre.

"I said, I saw a squirrel walking into work today," Moses reminded everyone. "Does nobody care about anything I say?"

"Listen to Moses." Lydia sniggered. "The coffee must have corroded his brain. He saw a squirrel walking into work! I thought you studied English at college, Moses. Don't you know where to place your modifiers?"

"I know where I'd like to shove them!" Moses was in no mood for work today, let alone listening to Lydia's jibes. "What's your point?"

"You saw a squirrel *when you were* walking into work. The squirrel wasn't walking into work, was he? Was he wearing a little suit? Or is it dress-down day in his company?"

"Or maybe," broke in Roger, laughing his formal laugh, "he was on his way to college to learn how to construct his sentences correctly."

Lydia and Sandra started laughing. Paul was still too shattered to muster up a smile. His face settled instead into a death's head grimace.

Moses sulked in silence, hoping his colleagues would be mugged by baseball-bat-wielding squirrels on the way home.

To cheer himself up, he recalled his singular encounter with the squirrel...

It had been on Cartright Road around 8.00 that morning as Moses made his reluctant way to work. Turning the corner into Cartright Road always felt like turning the corner into another world. It was Dublin's suburbia at its most paranoid. The lawns were always perfectly presentable and the residents' minor misdemeanours and intriguing little fetishes were always perfectly hidden behind exquisitely curtained windows. The very air seemed to crackle with nervous tension. The leaves fluttered timidly, afraid to disturb the quiet. Locals called it Mahogany Row.

Moses stood alone on the road. All was as silent as a Zen vacuum.

Suddenly, something rustled in one of the hedges.

A small furry creature jumped out in front of Moses.

A squirrel! On Cartright Road! Good God, who'd ever think you'd meet a squirrel here? I thought they executed rodents by lethal injection on this road.

The squirrel stared at Moses.

Moses stared back.

For a few fuzzy seconds, Moses thought that the squirrel was actually smiling at him. A furry, benevolent smile. Telling him to lighten up, that life is not so bad after all, that today might end up being one of the best days of his life. Its eyes glowed with inner warmth.

The squirrel started looking around and then, as if suddenly remembering some important date, scurried down the road, its tail swishing playfully after it.

Moses gazed after the squirrel. It was the friendliest, most lovable little creature he'd ever seen. He hadn't been so attracted to a fellow creature since that afternoon long ago when he'd first seen Natalie jogging in the park. He could imagine taming the squirrel, taking it home as a pet. Giving it a goofy name. Like Ernie. He pictured himself talking to it in the evening, telling it all his problems.

We'd have a blast together!

"And you should have seen the wine they were serving," Lydia was now moaning. "It was so –"

"Oh, shut up about your stupid bloody dinner party, Lydia," snapped Sandra. "The only dinner parties we'll be going to are down in the soup kitchen! Is there nothing more interesting to talk about? Like why Paul looks like a torn sack of shit this morning. Our balance sheet looks healthier than he does."

"Leave me alone." Paul noisily rubbed his ashen face. "I didn't get home until 5.00 this morning. We were at a reunion of the college class in Sexy Sadie's on London Street. I don't know if I'm coming out of a hangover or falling into one. One minute I was dancing with this hot little yoke in the moonlight and drinking some cocktail that's on fire, the next I was waking up in bed on another planet at 8.00 this morning. Jesus Christ, I think I'm still drunk."

"It looks like he was burning the candle at both ends last night," said Roger.

"He looks like he was burning his face at both ends," Sandra replied.

"Leave him alone, Sandra," said Moses, pushing his caustic coffee cup away from him. "He can do without you poking your two cents into his eye. It's not as if you've never come in hungover. Remember that hen night you were at last week? You came into work the next day looking like you'd slept in an electric chair."

"Oooh, someone's in a twitchy mood today." Sandra laughed. "Easy knowing you're shitting a bucket of bricks about your performance review. You'll be playing the mangled martyr all day."

Moses had his annual performance review with Frederick Hearty in the afternoon. He had filled out his review form last night, rehearsing his lines until they began to lose all meaning.

"I'll be fine." Moses didn't convince even himself. "No bother."

I asked for coffee, she gave me water.

She's dancin' in the moonlight with the fisherman's daughter.

I'm gonna get drunk on turpentine,

*Petrol, bleach and rosé wine.
She's in there chewin' with the teeth I bought her,
I hope she bites the hand off the fisherman's daughter.*

*Blues From A Fisherman's Daughter
Fingers Flaherty*

Moses sat in his mauve cubicle, listening to his Fingers Flaherty mp3s. Flaherty was roaring about a fisherman's daughter. Listening to personal mp3s was, of course, strictly against company policy so Moses, of course, ignored this policy and listened to as many mp3s as possible before going home. These tiny, insignificant acts of rebellion helped get him through the day. Unfortunately, his audio player's tendency to crash after every third song dampened his rebellious fervour.

On Moses's computer, the Oxford teddy bear sat contentedly. As usual, it was having a more productive day than Moses was.

An e-mail arrived from Coconut Fred.

Moses, I need an eight-point bulleted list explaining why DA15 is suitable for college students. Say something about how we're trending towards helping them leverage their studies. Action ASAP. Frederick

Moses aimlessly gazed at the e-mail for some minutes.

Everything's a bloody bulleted list with him. His autobiography would probably be just a series of list items.

Over in cubicle 7A, Paul was phoning friends, trying to piece together what happened in Sexy Sadie's last night.

"Well, what did she look like? ... Only sixteen? ... Jesus Christ! Did anything happen? ... How did I screw it up? ... No way! I'd never call anyone a corpo slut. ... Oh, I see. ... No, I don't suppose I'd normally call you a lousy, deceitful, two-faced wanker. Sorry, man. I was drunk. Well, I suppose you know that. ... I actually feel like I've been poisoned. ..."

Moses started typing.

Domestic Accountant 2015 will help you fail your exams more spectacularly than ever because it will

- give you muscle pains where you never thought you had muscles
- make you go blind (and deaf, if you are using the audio-compliant version)
- drive you to crack cocaine
- destroy what miserable little sex life you have

Moses deleted the document. It was a bad day to test Coconut Fred's sense of humour.

Oh well, must look on the bright side. When you get an e-mail from Fred, you always know it's going to be the worst e-mail of the day.

He turned off the audio player and spun gently around in his swivel chair, deciding it really was time that he started pretending to be busy.

However, before starting on his project, he clicked on a news website to see whether anyone else in the world was having a thoroughly miserable day already. The one-minute news video would enlighten him and put his own wretchedness into perspective.

It was then Moses noticed that a new e-mail had come in.

This one was from Natalie.

“And now,” the newscaster was saying, “the latest financial news.”

Moses took a deep breath and opened the e-mail.

Hello Moses,

I really hope you are keeping well! Things have started to pick up with me. I’m beginning to get my life back together.

“And the euro is down slightly against the dollar but, as you can see, up somewhat against the yen...”

Sorry I haven’t been in touch much this last month. But anyway, the time has come to bury the past. I think that we’ve both got over all that shit that hit the fan a few weeks ago. I realise that the day after Fingers Flaherty died wasn’t really the best time for me to call it a day, but that’s the past now.

Time to move on. Time to get going.

“In other news, the Italian Prime Minister finds himself waking up to another political scandal this morning following the discovery of an ostrich in his...”

Bear with me. This is a tough e-mail for me. But sometimes I find it easier to put the words into an e-mail than try to explain my thoughts to you in person. You know I always prefer to think before I let the words loose. Unlike you!

I suppose what I am trying to say is “Goodbye”. I don’t think we ever said that to each other in the end. We said enough other stuff, but never that. Well, maybe I did, but I’m sure you weren’t listening.

I know that this comes as no shock. I mean, we’ve both moved on from that place. But I think we need to bury the ghosts. I don’t want to be haunted forever.

“Prince Philip has said that his controversial remarks about hairdressers were taken completely out of context...”

I got promoted to team leader on the Red Wolf project at work. You know how long I’ve been trying for that! I didn’t think they’d promote anyone because the company is still licking its wounds after the disastrous e-cookery initiative. Talk about biting off more than we could chew!

“Two missing pandas have been found safe and well in a butcher’s shop in Brighton...”

I’ve sort of started kind of going out with this guy at work. You may remember him. Tony Lyons? The guy in Accounts. You said he looked like he’d been used as a rope in a tug of war contest. It’s nothing serious. Yet. We’re just having a laugh together. It’s good to remember what that feels like. Have you found someone special yet?

Anyway, I hope you are keeping well. Like me, you’ve been backwards through the blender. But I’m sure you’ve managed to piece yourself back together. You were never a Humpty Dumpty.

Let’s move on. Take good care of yourself.

Natalie

Moses had enough to worry about with his review later in the afternoon. He was determined not to think about Natalie.

Don’t start thinking about all that shit today. Time to empty my mind. Meditate on the sound of one paw clapping.

Moses found himself thinking about Natalie. His surroundings faded into a blur of white computers, mauve cubicle walls and chipped grey ceiling tiles. The noise of the printers was a hypnotic fuzz.

All that was in focus was Natalie’s face.

Pale skin. Faint freckles. Ginger hair. Dark coffee eyes. Smiling a smile that could drag the sun out of the darkest, sulkiest cloud.

What harm can a quick phone call do?

Moses took his phone out of his pocket and scrolled to her number. He’d probably get round to deleting the number some day. But not today.

“Hi, Natalie,” he said when she answered. “It’s Moses.”

“Moses?” She sounded disappointed. Then wary. “What... do you want?”

“Er... I just read your e-mail.”

“Oh! I see... Well...”

“I... em... just wanted to congratulate you on the promotion.” Moses began to suspect that the phone call was a mistake. “Fair play!”

“Thanks.” She sounded like she was searching under her desk for a hole that would willingly swallow her up. “So if that’s –”

“That’s all I wanted to say. Thanks for... you know... letting me know and all.”

“That’s fine... How are things with you?”

“Great! Super! Maybe we could meet up for a drink? To celebrate your promotion?”

“I don’t know, Moses. It might –”

“Just a drink. Nothing else. You know, just to...” Moses’s voice trailed off hopelessly. “Whatever.”

“I don’t think it’s such a good idea.”

“Oh...” *Be like that!* “Okay.”

“It’s best that we stay out of each other’s way for a while, Moses. Like, this thing with Tony is still in the early stages –”

“How is Tony anyway?” *I bet the big, long, lanky, bandy-legged, ugly rake of a thing’s useless in the sack!* “Is he... treating you well? Can he even get it –?”

“Goodbye, Moses.”

Moses listened to the dead hum of the phone as the teddy bear stared at him accusingly.

Has she found out what Tony is like in the sack? Has she even... Oh, fuck this! I need to get away from the desk for a while.

He got up and walked to the office bathroom.

He splashed cold water on his face and blindly reached out to grab a paper towel. Drying his face, he assessed his reflection in the mirror.

“Although I say it myself, Fred, I believe that I have been an outstanding employee. I have successfully achieved all my allocated vague pointless deliverables in a schedule-compatible manner that enhanced our economic engagement with the market turmoil. I am a leveraged human capital resource utilising my personal energy cycle... so don’t start throwing coconuts at me, you bastard!”

Moses wasn’t entirely happy with his reflection. Although of average height and slim build, his slumped gallows-bound posture made him look insignificant. He stretched himself into a more erect, imposing stance.

That’s better... Slightly... Try not to look so condemned...

His hair was tidily parted. He had shaved carefully this morning, but his face still didn’t look refreshed. His mouth drooped slightly. A veil of tiredness hung around the eyes. Even his ears seemed to hang listlessly.

Jesus, I look like I haven’t slept in weeks! That squirrel had more zest for life than I do.

Just over two years ago, Moses started working for Aztech Software, in the Marketing division. The job involved writing marketing literature he didn’t believe in for software packages that he didn’t fully understand. His current projects included DataBasics XI, Domestic Accountant 15 and Scribbler Prof. Before joining Aztech, Moses had written a thesis about existential dilemmas in Shakespeare. His college supervisor, a Chartreuse-soaked martyr to perpetual toothaches and sexual harassment claims, told him that it was the most “original, unusual” thesis he’d ever read. Even when he graduated, Moses wasn’t sure whether this was a compliment.

“Let’s talk about these software packages, Fred... I have personal experience of Domestic Accountant. I have interfaced with it in real time. It is the most useless, pathetic little spiteful bastard of a program ever created. And now that the whole economy has collapsed, no one will buy the fucker! People don’t need a stupid computer package to tell them they’re broke.”

Natalie had taught Moses many things. She taught him that he wasn't the centre of the entire universe. Indeed, she often reminded him that he wasn't even the centre of *her* universe. She taught him how to apologise graciously. She taught him how to cook a curry without reducing the kitchen to a charred shell. She taught him how to use the new DVD player.

Moses thought that the most useless thing she taught him was creative visualisation. Natalie was an enthusiastic believer in positive thinking; she once remarked that she had to be, given whom she was going out with. For her, yoga and meditation were precious opportunities to briefly retreat from the chaotic currents of life and relax on the blissful shore. She tried to teach Moses how to meditate, but his chronic inability to stay awake during the sessions led to the whole enterprise being abandoned.

Instead, she tried to show him the benefits of creative visualisation, a process of creating a detailed mental image of your goal in order to motivate yourself to achieve it. One night, she became suspicious when Moses refused to tell her what he was visualising. Moses was impressed at how detailed he could make his fantasies, even when it became obvious that Natalie wouldn't be helping to achieve that particular goal that night.

Figuring he had nothing to lose, Moses decided to give creative visualisation another go. He pictured himself giving the performance report of his life. He pictured Coconut Fred's jaw bouncing on the floor in awestruck admiration. He pictured a squirrel smiling at him, friendly encouragement twinkling in his eyes.

Get a clear picture of it in your head. Picture that bastard's face. Picture him wetting himself in his admiration. Picture him raiding the pension fund in order to give you a raise. Picture him –

Paul stumbled into the bathroom, his hand to his mouth.

"Hi, Paul! Feeling any better?"

Without even trying to answer, Paul ran over to the sink beside Moses. He closed his eyes tightly and gripped the sides of the basin.

And braced himself.

Then he vomited into the sink. Still-warm coffee and spit and chewed bread gushed from his mouth. His face turned skeleton pale. Tiny beads of sweat broke out on his forehead as the first wave subsided.

"Jesus Christ, Paul! Did you have to do that?"

"Yes." Paul let out an agonised groan. "I did."

"I've got my review this afternoon and the last thing I need to see is you puking your ring up in front of me. I saw enough of that at the office party."

Paul gingerly splashed warm water on himself. After some seconds, the blood crawled back to his face.

Moses turned his attention to his reflection. He needed more creative visualisation. He tried to picture Coconut Fred nodding his head, telling him what a fantastic job he'd done.

However, all he could picture was Paul walking into the review at a crucial moment, just when Moses was about to deliver his killer punchline.

All he could picture was Paul walking up behind Coconut Fred and vomiting all over him.

*My wife cast her net and she caught her,
Fell hook, line and sinker for the fisherman's daughter.
I'll phone her up and ask her what she's doing with my wife,
I'll phone her up and ask her why she wanted to ruin my life.
Time to get up and take a walk down by the water,
And see if it will drown the fisherman's daughter.*

*Blues From A Fisherman's Daughter
Fingers Flaherty*

At 2.00 that afternoon, Moses knocked tentatively on the open door of Fred Hearty's office.

Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt land. Tell ol' pharaoh let my human resources go.

Fred looked up from his pathologically tidy desk.

"Come in, Moses."

Fred seemed to be in a good mood. He was in casual dress, with black slacks and a short-sleeved blue shirt, open at the neck. His black hair was slightly dishevelled and he appeared to be making a genuine effort to suppress his instinctive contempt for Moses.

Sitting down, Moses noticed that Fred's open collar exposed some of the hairs on his chest. He also noticed that Fred's arms were quite hairy. Apart from that, Fred did not really look like a teddy bear.

"Well, Moses," Fred said, indulging in a carefully practiced smile, "you know the drill, as the dentist said to the bishop. I just want to remind you that you are not on trial here. I'm no judge or anything. No one is going to be fired... today. This is to be an open exchange of views, a co-operative attempt to map out your career path in the current challenging climate. We are going to recognise your achievements over the last twelve difficult months and identify opportunities for improvement going forward within the necessary confines of our cost-containment initiatives. We'll table ideas and run them up the flagpole. Is that all clear?"

"Yes, Fred. It's crystal clear. In fact, I think –"

"This year is a key year for us. Going forward, we will be transitioning into an aggressive sales strategy in order to incentivise the materialisation of our vision. Our sales have had a disconnect with expectations this last few months, but you sometimes have to go through the desert in order to reach the Promised Land. We must put our ducks in a row and manage their expectations. But, needless to say, they're not fish in a barrel."

“Of course not.” *What the fuck is he talking about?* “It has been... a challenge.”

“We don’t have to cover everything today. We can take some of the issues offline and park them on the sidebar. For now, let’s concentrate on organic growth. So tell me what you think you have achieved over the last year.” Fred leaned back in the chair and folded his arms. “Identify some key actioned deliverables.”

Feeling like he was about to deliver a speech in a foreign language to a deaf camel, Moses began listing his accomplishments.

“I believe, Fred, that since my last review, I have taken the core goals identified in our department’s mission statement and applied them successfully to my own job-specific deliverables. This has obviously been a challenging year, with redundancies and restructuring and the radical realignment of skill sets. However, I have remained a pivotal player, bringing proactive solutions to the party.”

Part of Moses was patting himself on the back as he spoke. The rest of him was throwing up. But he had learnt the code. He knew how Fred wanted his words salted.

The creative visualisation was beginning to work. In the back of Moses’s mind, a mental image was forming while he talked. He saw a squirrel carrying a bulky sack. The squirrel was standing in front of a giant Oxford teddy bear. The teddy bear looked frightened.

The squirrel emptied the sack, revealing a large pile of coconuts. The teddy bear started to cry. The squirrel was laughing and began pelting the teddy bear with the coconuts.

Moses had to concentrate on the sound of his own voice to make the image disappear.

“Although I would, of course, be interested in learning about areas where my performance could be enhanced, I really do believe, as I say in my review form, that I have achieved an above-par level of quality and productivity in carrying out my duties.”

So quit being a prick and show me some action! This wage freeze is beginning to feel like an Ice Age.

Fred nodded his head. He stared at Moses for some moments, twisting his pen in his hands as he formulated his words.

“Interesting speech, Moses.” The contempt had crept back into Fred’s voice. “You certainly have tried to take on board at least some of the ideas that we discussed this time last year and have made a recognisable effort to implement them. In many regards, your performance has been, as you say, somewhat above par in certain small aspects. You’re probably not a candidate for lateral external movement... just yet.”

Moses stared at Fred expectantly, trying to work out whether Fred meant that his job was safe.

“You’ve successfully identified your tangential involvement in some key projects over the last year and you’ve adapted well to our aggressive strategy of proactive downsizing and resource redistribution,” Fred continued. “You have even managed to curb the more extreme manifestations of your tendency towards paralysis by self-analysis. I’d like to take this opportunity to float that on the table. On the other hand –”

“The other hand?” Moses felt his temperature plummet.

“I do still think that there are issues in the area of nondeliverables. I think we need to discuss some of the more intangible aspects of your performance.”

The squirrel stopped flinging coconuts at the teddy bear.

Moses suddenly realised that the window in Fred’s office was open. Although the sun was shining outside, he felt a chilly draught coming in and creeping up his spine.

“To be honest,” said Fred, leaning forward like a cat about to chew a piece of discarded mouse, “I have concerns about your attitude to the job. You say that you have studied, understood and, on a personal level, implemented our mission statement. That’s well and good. But, honestly, do you really care your job?”

“Well...” Moses had to clear his throat before continuing. “Er... I’m afraid that I don’t quite follow you.”

Moses’s brain went into overdrive. He frantically tried to guess exactly what Fred was referring to. The only image his brain threw back was of Natalie and Tony, lying on a bed, naked.

“Well, Moses, if you don’t internalise the mission statement, it doesn’t really matter how many deliverables you achieve. Because there is no bedrock of commitment at the foundation of your performance. You must internalise in order to externalise.”

Tony was lying on top of Natalie, making love to her. In the background, the squirrel and teddy bear watched them, fascinated.

“How do you mean, Fred?”

“I have noticed a certain nonchalance in your attitude to our products.” Fred slowly furrowed his brow before continuing. “Now, listen carefully. I don’t want any pushback going forward from you on this. We need to leverage our cutting edge by optimising some intangible resources. We are the Marketing division. We have to make people want to, need to, buy our products. We send out the umbrellas or sunglasses, depending on what the economic climate is. Can we do that if we ourselves do not believe in the product?”

“With all due respect, Fred, I think that you are wrong.” *And possibly insane.* “I do believe in the product, be it Dom Acc or DataBasics. I believe that they serve their purpose, more or less. They do what they are supposed to do...” Moses hesitated for some seconds. Then he plunged in. “But, at the same time, I believe that we have to keep things in perspective. Domestic Accountant is not

going to formulate a roadmap for world peace, is it? These are just small computer programs.”

On the bed, Tony and Natalie twisted their bodies. They were lying side by side.

The teddy bear raised its eyebrows.

“Just small computer programs, Moses?” An edge was beginning to scrape in Fred’s voice. “With all due respect, do you think that is the sort of thing you should be writing on your marketing literature? With all due respect, is that how you help to deliver shareholder value?”

Moses tried to keep the tremor out of his voice. He could feel the reins of the conversation slipping out of his hands.

“No, not at all. You said yourself that I write good copy. That doesn’t necessarily mean that I have to believe all the... um... hyperbole I use to get the customers’ attention.”

Natalie was kneeling above Tony. Looking down at him. Twitching her body.

The squirrel wiped some sweat from its brow.

“Moses, how on earth can you market what you do not believe in? What sort of messiah would Jesus Christ have been if –”

“Surely you are not comparing us to Jesus Christ!”

“... if He didn’t really care about loving thy neighbour. If He thought the whole forgiveness lark was a bit overrated? Do you see what I’m saying?”

“That we should move into the loaves and fish market and manage the expectations of the multitudes?”

Moses regretted it instantly. The image of Tony and Natalie kept distracting him. He tried to banish them from his mind as he waited for Fred’s reaction.

On the bed, Tony and Natalie stopped moving and glanced up.

“Now listen here, Moses!” The scrape was deafening now. “I won’t take that sort of insolence from anyone. You waltz around the office every day thinking the job is nothing but a bit of a laugh –”

“Well, I don’t think that’s a fair –”

“– and that we produce programs that are a joke and then you have the bloody nerve to get sarcastic about it. And this is supposed to be your performance review!” Fred paused to catch his breath. His hand clenched his pen, as if trying to strangle it. “Just what the hell is your problem? Do you want an individualised downsizing? Do you want to make a lateral move to the dole queue?”

My God, he’s not threatening to fire me, is he? He couldn’t be that vindictive!

Moses knew all too well that anything was possible with Fred. Because reckless incompetence was just one of Fred’s flaws. He was also capable of holding grudges for years, even if he sometimes forgot the original reason for the grudge. And he was prone to irrational actions in the fury of the moment. He

would think nothing of firing Moses on a whim and would then spend the rest of the day creating a policy-compliant case for dismissing Moses.

“You are blowing this out of all proportion,” Moses said in an attempt to pluck his career from the fire. He tried to assert some confidence back into his shattered voice. “All I said was that our programs perform a fairly limited... function... in the greater context of... of things.”

Tony and Natalie got up off the bed and walked out of the room, holding hands.

The squirrel threw a tiny coconut at the teddy bear. It bounced harmlessly off the teddy bear’s hairy chest.

The teddy bear’s eyebrows furrowed.

“I think that it would be best if we terminated the meeting at this point, McNamara.” Fred carefully returned the pen to its designated position on the desk. “The company has enough issues on its plate without having to deal with your attitude problems. You’re lucky that it’s just this meeting that I’m terminating!”

The teddy bear glared down at the squirrel. The squirrel was trembling.

The teddy bear opened its mouth.

Tony and Natalie closed the door behind them, laughing.

The teddy bear began to vomit on the squirrel. Streams of warm coffee and spittle and chewed bread poured out of its mouth, drenching the squirrel.

“Er... Okay... I’ll see you later... Just give me a call when you think it’s a good time to continue our... em... discussion.”

“Close the door on your way out!”

The teddy bear started laughing at the soaking squirrel. The squirrel shook himself dry and slouched away, crying.

“I’ll see you later then.”

Moses stood up and walked out of Fred’s office. He closed the door carefully behind him. Without thinking, he wiped his nose, to make sure that it wasn’t bleeding.

He wished Natalie would be waiting for him at the cubicle. Ready to console him. He’d actually be happy enough if the friendly squirrel were there.

But he knew there’d be no one waiting except the teddy bear.

*The demons were busy with the tricks they taught her,
Working their magic on the fisherman’s daughter.
I spoke my mind, I broke my heart,
I watched the whole thing fall apart.
I burned the bridges and poisoned the water,
No shadow could follow the fisherman’s daughter.*

*Blues From A Fisherman’s Daughter
Fingers Flaherty*