

Awkward Phrasing

Copyright 2022 Marcel M du Plessis
Published by Marcel M du Plessis at Smashwords

Smashwords Edition License Notes

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your enjoyment only, then please return to Smashwords.com or your favourite retailer and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

Table of Contents

[Special Interest: How I Started at the Bright Report](#)

[An Introduction After the Fact](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Other Books by this Author](#)

[Connect with Marcel M du Plessis](#)

Special Interest: How I Started at the Bright Report

By Calliper Print

The awkward silence passed.

“Thank you, Ms Print,” said the interviewer. He looked like every interviewer I had ever met. Perhaps they shared a gene, one that made them humourless and unreadable. “You’ll hear from us shortly,” he lied. They all said that – it must run in the family.

I said my thank yous and my platitudes – things that had the same power as wishing someone good health – and left the grubby little office. Outside, a row of desperate faces greeted me. Fourteen nascent journalists vying for a single position at the *Timely Journal* – an internationally renowned publication that covered more than just the news. To write for the Journal is to write the history of humanity itself. A single feature and you were set for life.

At least, that is what all the fliers said.

I did not meet the eyes of the waiting interview victims. They were assessing my every movement, trying to intuit how things went and what to expect. *Disappointment* – that’s what. The horrible realisation that you are not what they are looking for. It was one of those things where they expected you to be in your early twenties and have thirty years’ worth of experience. Former – yes. As for the latter, I was head editor of a student newspaper for a while. In a little town where the ins and outs of the petting zoo were topics of high gossip, two years felt like thirty.

But I guess that didn’t count.

I trudge down the immaculate carpets and the gleaming glass-walled offices. I would not be one of their rushing writers. My name would not be stamped by their press. I found myself in the gleaming entrance hall – it was full of clacking tiles and squeaky-clean windows. I could not take another step. My phone was in my hand and my favourite contact – *Dad* – was ready to be dialled.

He would say something supportive and maybe insult the company if he thought it would make me feel better, but I would hear it in his voice. The disappointment. The hidden worry.

I needed a job.

“I promise you! It happened. I can take you there now! It’s standing there as one of the crowd, making horrible weeping noises.”

There was a man pleading with two journalists. He was dressed in a golf shirt and shorts – everything pockmarked with grease stains. He was underdressed for the setting, for at the Journal, even the shabbiest hack wore a jacket and tie. As such, everyone rushing in and out looked at the man with their noses turned up.

The two journalists he cornered seemed equally disgusted with him. One was a woman with a square-cut bob and a square-cut pencil skirt which walked a dangerous line between professional and – well – not. She was caked in makeup, perhaps in an effort to appear as young as she dressed. The other was clearly her assistant. Young, square jawed and shouldered, and

carrying an arm-full of files. He also clutched a paper coffee cup with *Miss Barbra* scribbled on it. Assistant – am I right?

“Please, ma’am, no one else believes me,” said the man. “It just pulled itself out of the wall and said it was going to start life as a professional mourner.”

The snooty journalist raised her nose even higher. “You’ve mistaken us for a gossip magazine, sir. Or worse, one of those special interest pulp numbers. They gobble up stories like yours.”

“Yes,” said her assistant with spikey enthusiasm. “They did a whole piece about a brownie that thought it was Elvis at the *Telescope*.”

The man grew redder. His fists clenched and his back grew rigid as the words bubbled up. They were boiling to escape, and they burst out at once: “Bah!” He steamed off.

Onlookers gawped. The journalist and her assistant laughed. Well, they did until they saw the look on my face.

“What, dearie? Go ahead, write his story then. They won’t print it here.”

The assistant backed her up with a scowl. “She’s not even a reporter, just a hopeful intern.” It was meant to be an insult, but it turned out to be an upgrade.

A professional would have kept her mouth shut. An eager jobseeker would have tried to make a good impression, no matter what. I was probably one of those things, but I could not stop the words coming out. They didn’t leave me as a whimper or a “bah”.

“Don’t you think you should hear him out? Even if it is ridiculous, there might be something human –”

The woman waved me into silence. “*Don’t you think?* The nerve. You’re not going to make it here, girl. Ink is money. You cannot waste it on tall stories. If you want to write sentimental rubbish, you can pack up your desk right now.”

“Yeah,” said the assistant. “Go write for the *Telescope* or something.”

“Richard, dear, that’s a tad harsh. She was looking for the human in the ridiculous, remember?” Her crimson lips spread into a cruel smile. I hoped that the wall would absorb me. “There’s only one place for that nonsense.” She gave a knowing smile to her assistant – who returned it.

“I thought they were out of print,” he said.

She shrugged. “Out of print – obscure – what’s the difference?”

They moved on. Amused by their own cruelty, they sniggered their way to their offices. It was laughter that capped off a magnificent failure of a day. The weight of it was starting to hit me as I watched the reporters go. The world beyond the glass was abuzz with wild memos and clicking keyboards. Those keen eyes and frantic fingers had something I didn’t – some mystical trait I was yet to learn.

Wait.

“Wait!” I called after the cackling duo. “What’s that *one* place called?”

*

The bus hissed. The door creaked. Passengers complained. I stepped onto the sidewalk. No one was waiting at this stop.

I did not know Greater London very well, but, as it turned out, few people knew about the corner of Palindrome and Trypo. Even the bus driver was surprised when I informed him that I wanted to get out here. The Barbadian gentleman – who had driven the 188 Bus for over two decades – had never stopped here before.

“No one eva gets out,” he said. “Ye supposed to stop, but the customers complain.” He had to shout to be heard over the eclectic insults that only a disgruntled group of London commuters can produce.

But anyway, here I was. I looked up at the leaning old buildings. Their sooty walls and peeling shutters bent over the street like barren trees lining a dusty path. Curling mist and a headless horseman would complete the image, but the constant hubbub of the busy metropolis kept shattering it. The closeness of the droopy apartment blocks made this forgotten slice of London gloomy and cold. It all seemed rather archaic – like a lost historical section of the city.

Several old-town shops lined the right-angle of forgotten streets. Their signs were faded, and their windows were dark. Most appeared to be antique dealers who sold dusty relics and faded dreams. There also appeared to be a boarded-up pub on one end. The faded sign proclaimed it to be the *Burly Policeman*. I shaded my eyes and peered into the glass – trying to see beyond my shabby reflection. I could not make anything out. In fact, there was no one around. And – as the bus hissed off to re-join the traffic – there were no cars.

The only feature that did not seem as dead was a lit alley. It was illuminated by drooping lampposts so ancient looking that I was sure that I could hear the hiss of gas. I drifted towards it. Smooth concrete gave way to uneven cobblestone. The shops here were even more quaint – if there is such a thing. Their doors and wide windows were just as faded and dusty as the shops along the main streets, but there was something different. It is hard to explain, but perhaps the word “charm” might be applicable here.

A black storefront with peeling gold trim proudly proclaimed it to be *McKinley & Co. Hatters* (est. 1677). It was only open on Tuesdays and only by appointment – according to the sign. Hats of every description sat neatly on smart, square shelves in the window. And I do mean every description: top hats, bowlers, gamblers, fedoras, boaters, and hats I cannot even name. There was even a fez. Marty – a friend from uni – would have loved a place like this. He was into steampunk, you see.

Next was the sweet shop of my dreams. *Tanner & Grump Confectioners* looked just as old timey as the hat shop. They were closed (no operating hours on the door), but even in the gloom, I could see the bright wrappers and colourful tin boxes that lined the shelves. Polished wooden counters were lined with gleaming scales and old cashier machines.

I began to think that I’d wandered onto a soundstage for some late Victorian film. It was primed to be the backdrop of some overly romantic story. This is also when I realised that I had my nose pressed up to the glass. I backed away and wiped the smudge off with a sleeve.

That was when I noticed it.

There in the reflection, between *Szyborska’s Barber Shop* and *Hagel’s Bespoke Umbrellas* was a yellow sign above a narrow doorway. I turned around.

The Bright Report, it read. Beneath the coat of arms which seemed to contain a hot air balloon of some description (among other hard-to-make-out things) was a Latin motto: *Homo in Absurdum*.

As I advanced towards it, my foot found a piece of scrap on the cobblestones. I looked down to see a set of skid marks – something anachronistic in this quaint setting. I had inadvertently kicked a loose wingmirror. I picked it up and examined the chipped maroon paint. Looked expensive – carbon fibre, maybe. It seemed wrong to leave it there, perhaps someone inside was looking for it.

I walked up to the door. It was polished mahogany with a large brass knocker in the centre. It was shaped like the head of a cat – the lever dangling from its mouth. Pasted next to it was a handwritten note:

No hawkers, snake people, kale people, or people named Augustus. If your name is Alcub, you are six five years too early – please come back later.

As I was pretty sure that I was not one of those things, I reached out and pulled the knocker. Okay, this is going to sound ridiculous (much like everything else that you are about to read), but I'm sure I heard the cat head purr. The knock echoed.

I waited...

...and waited...

...and waited...

London traffic hissed and honked in the distance. A pitter patter of rain was starting to filter through the narrow opening between the buildings. Here I was, standing in some unknown street, knocking on the door of a journal with a dodgy reputation. What had I gotten myself into?

Still no answer. I tested the shiny brass doorknob – *open*. Fighting my nerves, I slipped in, wingmirror in hand.

I emerged in a stuffy entrance hall that smelled strongly of furniture polish. The wood-panelled walls, creaky floorboards, and tables stacked with dusty knickknacks made the place feel like a museum. A filigreed grandfather clock stood to attention next to a wall of silhouette miniatures. The latter were predominantly people, but I also counted a horse, three cats, a dachshund, and what looked like a snail among them. A brass angel sat cross-legged on a low shelf. She had a quill in hand and an inkwell waiting at her delicately carved feet. Suspended next to her in a brass frame was a blank piece of parchment – a fancy attendance list, maybe? One wall was covered by a large painting of a disgruntled bulldog reclining on a bed – as regal as a king.

There was only one door leading out of this room – locked. I gathered my courage and knocked again.

The grandfather clock chimed – the sound was deep and hoarse like the resurfacing of a forgotten memory. A tinkling bell joined it – soft as fairy laughter. It came from the ornate angel. Jerking with clockwork motion, the angel's dusty hand lowered its quill into an inkwell. In a frenzy of clicks and whines and whirls, the angel wrote a question on the vertical piece of parchment.

Name?

There was a satisfying swoop to the question mark. I stared in open-mouthed wonder, not realising that the question was directed at me.

"Calliper Print," I said. "Cally for short, but only my mom calls me that. My dad calls me Smudge."

Okay, don't judge me – there was something about the vapid stare of the angel that made me want to recount my life story. I wanted to tell her about the disappointingly unoriginal interviewer and the judgmental journalists who turned the man away.

I nearly forgot about the poor man.

The angel wrote my name down: *Calliper 'Cally' Print*. Impressive for something so ancient-looking. There was another series of clicks, the pen was dipped, and new words were inscribed.

Reason for visit?

This was a tricky one. *Please, for the love of God, give me a job, I'll do anything* – seemed a tad desperate.

“It’s complicated,” I sighed.

The quill was dipped, and the angel wrote. Its half-smile – forever frozen in brass – looked slightly homicidal as it carved at the page. The nub squeaked as it made a full-stop.

Complaint against Monsieur Bord.

“What? No. I don’t know a –”

The interior door snapped open and a tall man wearing a beret peered out. He looked like a forlorn and slightly hungover Émile Zola.

He lent out further, his feet never leaving the room beyond. He glanced first at me, then at the parchment, and then back at me. He relaxed slightly – his crazed expression giving way to a melancholy baggy-eyed stare.

“You look too cheerful to be an author,” he said as he lit a cigarette. “Damn machine has it in for me. What do you want?”

It took me a moment to take it all in. “Cheerful?”

“You’re wasting my lunch break,” he said, cigarette bobbing in the corner of his mouth. “I prefer my cognac slightly below room temperature, you know?”

There was a crash and clatter of shattering crockery behind him. The echo of the sound seemed to suggest a room much larger than this one. I tried to peer past, but the imposing figure obscured my view. He sighed elaborately as he glanced wearily over his shoulder. He gave me one last despairing look and backed out of the doorway. The door of opportunity was closing.

“Monsieur Bord, I presume?” I blurted. It sounded as if I were about to break out in song. Is this what desperation sounded like?

He paused. The name and the tone seemed to brighten him up slightly. This was not saying much – it was like trying to illuminate the dark depths of the ocean with a match. “I see my reputation precedes me,” he said. “Are you a...a...*fan*?” The final word was wheezed, as if he were blowing cobwebs off it.

“Um...you could say that,” I ventured. Again, don’t judge me, I didn’t technically say yes. I knew that I could not leave it there – he might ask what my favourite article is or something. “In fact, I was hoping to be more than a fan” – okay, okay, too creepy, back out, back out – “perhaps a protégé or even, time willing, a colleague.” Wow, I really went for it. I suppressed the urge to throw up on his shoes.

Monsieur Bord looked equally shocked. “You...,” he began, cigarette dangling, “...you want to work here? At the Report? With me as your *mentor*?” This is when he started laughing. It was a disconcerting sound that started as a posh honking – a laugh that one might imagine coming from a member of the royal family had they been caught off-guard by a jolly good joke. The honk gradually devolved into a semi-sober snorting giggle.

I started laughing too. Here I was in the middle of who-knows-where giving a sombre man a good laugh merely by suggesting that we work together. I’m not proud of it, but this is when my laughter turned into crying. Okay, it might have started out as crying, but it quickly became full-blown wailing.

This stopped Monsieur Bord in his tracks. He stared at me wide-eyed as if I were about to explode.

Through my tears, I could barely make out his words: “*Pash, Pash, we have a crier – help!*” I fell to my knees.

A moment later, I felt a hand awkwardly tapping on my shoulder. I looked up into the bespectacled face of an Indian woman. Her hair was pulled back into a bun with two coloured pencils sticking out. She had a pen behind each ear as well.

“Did the man make you cry?” she asked, her eyes massively magnified by the spectacles. There was something odd about the way she asked the question – her tone was anything but soothing. It was almost as if she was asking about the specifications of a bridge.

“Oh, for Tolstoy’s sake, why does everyone just assume that I’m to blame for...?” said Bord. He stormed off, slamming the door behind him.

“No,” I sobbed. I was ugly-crying – not my finest moment. “I’m sorry. I don’t normally... not in front of... it wasn’t that man... *I’m sorry.*”

Wide eyes watched me. Her hand squeezed my shoulder – not tentatively this time. “We’ve all been there,” she said. “Especially, before we find this place.” She kneeled next to me. Her dark eyes seemed bigger still now that we were on the same level. There were crinkles around them making her seem older than I first guessed. “Have you had lunch? You know, I am prone to melancholy and controlled bursts of rage right before lunch too. Or before I’ve had a good primal scream. Come along.” She straightened up and pulled me up with her. “Fan can sort you out. It’s exactly two hundred and forty-six steps from here.” She adjusted the pen behind her left ear and studied my feet. “That depends on your gait and just how hungry you are, but it’s something to work with. Now, come along and bring your wingmirror.”

She glanced at the angel’s parchment before advancing on the door. “Cally,” she said. “Can I call you that?”

I nodded. I wiped my nose on one sleeve while she pulled me along by the other.

The heavy door opened onto a narrow set of stairs leading down. The panelled walls were lined with framed awards dating back to the early Twentieth Century.

“You here for a job, dear?” she asked.

“Are you hiring?” I asked.

“Better to be sure,” she said. “Lunch first, I think.”

We emerged in a spacious hexagonal room dominated by a large tree in its centre. It was gnarled and knobbly like a Halloween decoration. Apple-like fruit dangled from the branches giving off a faint purple glow.

“Matilda,” said Pash. “The tree. Not that you should name plants, if you ask me.”

“Right,” I said.

“Don’t eat Matilda’s fruit,” Pash continued. “Not sure what will happen, but if the story is to be believed, it is very cursed. Don’t ask me what the precise difference is between ‘cursed’ and ‘very cursed’, but perhaps it is better not to know.” She opened her notebook and took a pencil from behind her ear. She was about to scribble something when she caught my stare. “Sorry,” she said. “Force of habit.”

It wasn’t why I was staring.

Each side of the hexagon featured a cut-in section – an alcove, if you will – cluttered with shelves, desks, dusty old trunks, and miscellaneous writing equipment. The space stretched upwards for what appeared to be six or seven storeys – each floor ringed with a tarnished brass railing. On the other side of the tree, a lanky old man was sweeping bits of broken ceramic into a pile. He was muttering grumpily under his breath.

“No,” said a male voice from an alcove. “I can’t keep telling you this. Play literally any other record, just not this one.”

“It’s been ages since I’ve had a new jam, darlin’,” said a female voice.

This particular alcove was a seating area lined with rock band posters and shelves of records. The first voice belonged to a curly-haired man with rose tinted glasses. His unkept hair and his bushy beard were red. He was wearing a turtleneck. The woman looked like she was straight off an art deco movie set – dressed like a flapper girl, hair all dark ringlets.

They were fighting over a vinyl.

“Yes, yes, well, this is only here for archival purposes,” said the man. “A few bars of this and we’ll be at each other’s throats.”

Pash cleared her throat. “Murky Dishwater?” she asked.

The two of them stepped away from each other as if they had been caught in the act of some nefarious undertaking. The man nodded sheepishly.

“This is Cally,” said Pash. “She’s here for an interview.”

“Are we hiring?” asked the man.

“I will find out,” said Pash. “Anyway, this is Arden Stanswobble, music desk.”

We exchanged hellos.

“And this is Dolores Ray, jazz desk.” Pash caught the confusion in my eyes. “Yes, they are two different things, apparently.”

Dolores walked up to me, hips swaying. “Friends call me Sunny.” She extended a gloved hand – every movement was a moment of theatre. I shook it awkwardly. “What’s your area of expertise, honey?” she asked.

“Umm,” was the best I could manage.

“Don’t we already have a young one?” Sunny asked Pash. “What’s his name? The sweaty cat with the dice?”

“Nigel,” said Pash nodding.

The man called Arden stepped forward and gestured to the wingmirror. “Excuse me, may I?”

I had almost forgotten that I had it. Something like that seemed boring in comparison to what I’ve just seen.

Arden inspected it, the lights of the room glinting off his tinted glasses. “That will be the Maserati then,” he said.

“Jameson,” the three of them said in unison.

“Mr Balding won’t be happy,” said Arden.

“At least it’s not Jacques again,” said Sunny.

“Yes, but Jameson is running out of chances,” said Pash adjusting a pencil. She bit her lip. “Actually, could I have that. I’m planning a memento mori and from that angle...yes, just like that...it doesn’t look like much at all.”

Arden shrugged and handed it over. “It’s all entropy, man, so whatever.”

“Good luck with your interview, honey,” said Sunny. She sauntered over to the record player – she seemed to have lost interest in our conversation.

“Break a leg,” said Arden. He snapped the record he and Sunny had been fighting over from the coffee table and hastily placed it back on the rack.

I followed Pash back into the central space. The lanky man had finished clearing the broken dishes. He was now hauling them in a clinking bag down a set of stairs. He had it slung over his shoulder, making him look like a skeletal Santa Clause who would not deliver much cheer.

“Not down there,” said Pash as we followed the man into the stairwell. He went down. “Don’t think anyone has time for that.”

We took the stairs up. They were wonky: each step a slightly different height. In the glow of this strange interior, I could make out faint footprints on the tiles. The to-and-fro of a different kind of journalist. Here there was not the rushing insistence of ringing phones or pinging messages. These were the measured meanderings of people looking for something else.

The second floor was the same hexagonal shape, but instead of alcoves, the side rooms contained offices. One or two glowed with soft yellow light through window blinds. The rest were dark.

“They’re out on assignment,” Pash explained. “Well, eleven of them are, to be precise. Ten are here at the moment, Bord, Stan, Sunny, me, Car, Quintest, Geist, Dumont, King, and Mr Safely. Eleven if you count Adé. Two are missing. Another is in trouble – the much-discussed Mr Jameson who left you a wingmirror. And the last one is dead, missing, or temporally displaced. You know, the usual.”

“Right,” I said. “The usual.”

A crackling rendition of *Peggy Sue* filled the lower floor as the Music Journalist and the Jazz Journalist seemed to come to an accord.

“They seem interesting,” I said. “Which department are you?”

“Art desk,” she said with a smile. “I wouldn’t call myself an art critic exactly. More of a keen participant.” Her phone buzzed. She fished it out of a pocket. The cover was flaked with paint. It was strange to see such a modern thing in such a fantastical setting. She clicked her tongue. “This again. Can never get a straight answer. Kitjovistinope indeed.”

A scratching noise from behind one of the office doors caught my attention. I wandered along the balcony to get a closer look. A brass plaque read: *Quintin E. Quintest, Curiosity Desk*. The scratching sound intensified. I nearly jumped over the railing when a thin finger wormed out of the keyhole.

Pash hurried over and put a comforting hand on my shoulder. “Don’t worry, he does that every time there’s someone new in the building.” She spoke with her voice slightly raised as if she was addressing someone hard of hearing. She gently tapped the finger. “It’s alright Mr Quintest, it’s only a guest.” She winked at me. “Might be more than a guest, actually. You can ask her all the questions you want later.”

The finger withdrew. There was muffled, incomprehensible mumbling from the other side. The keyhole, which was rather large and unusually positioned in the centre of the door, was now occupied by a large swivelling green eye.

“Don’t worry, Mr Quintest,” Pash continued – still speaking loudly. “It’s Thursday, you remember what that means, don’t you?”

Mumble. Why? Mumble. Where? Mumble.

“Yes, your report is due, Mr Quintest,” Pash continued patiently. There wasn’t a note of condescension in her tone.

After a few more mumbles, the eye withdrew.

“Kitchen is one more floor up,” said Pash as if nothing had happened.

“Is he...?” I began, not entirely sure how or what to ask.

“Late, yes,” said Pash. “We might not publish every month, but we still run a tight schedule. It might seem slightly ... illogical, but you’ll get the hang of it.”

“Right,” I said. Again, this was not exactly what I asked.

“Come along.”

We ascended the stairs, possibly taking more steps than Pash had intended. Kitchen sounds became clear as soon as we arrived on the next floor. The hissing of steam. The sizzle of a pan. The clink of a cup being stirred. Somewhere on the floor above a door slammed.

“Monsieur Bord,” Pash explained in a whisper. “You’ll get used to the sound of that slam pretty quickly.”

She led me to the kitchen. It was a surprisingly spacious room with checkerboard floor tiles and gleaming counters. A vintage fridge was buzzing in one corner while an assortment of shelves overgrown with wild and slightly monstrous-looking vegetables hung from another.

At the far end of the room, a rotund woman sat at a table glancing over a placement of tarot cards while sipping from a dainty teacup – pinkie extended. Her grey hair was gathered in a braided bun. She glanced at Pash and I over her smudged half-moon spectacles and muttered something under her breath.

There was only one window. The light of which filtered through a set of blinds and outlined a figure occupying a barstool. He stirred as we approached; the shadows of the blinds fell across his face. He was old – maybe mid-sixties – but you could still see the last vestiges of handsome chiselled across his face. I swear, I heard a saxophone play somewhere.

“Afternoon,” he said tipping his fedora towards me. “Don’t believe we had the pleasure.”

“This is Cally,” said Pash. “And no, she doesn’t know anything about the fourteenth of December nineteen-eighty-six.”

“I wasn’t even born yet,” I added, but I wasn’t sure why.

The man shrugged and pulled up his trench coat collar as if protecting himself from a draft. “The right person is bound to walk in here one day,” he said. “It’s only a matter of time.”

“Frank Safely,” Pash whispered.

“Noir desk?”

“Close. Crime desk.”

“I didn’t choose crime, kid,” he intoned gruffly. “She chose me.” He tipped his fedora once more, hunched over his steaming cup of coffee, and stared meaningfully into the middle-distance. Apparently, this was the end of our conversation.

Pash navigated the maze of tables and chairs towards the tarot woman. “Madam, have you seen...”

“I have seen everything, dear,” she said in a loud soprano. “I have pierced the veil and beheld the eldritch machinations of the Great Beyond. State your mortal enquiry and I shall entreat the Powers.”

“Where is Fan?” asked Pash.

“In the back, dear,” said the woman. She was about to return to her cards when she leaned her head to one side. “Hmph? Ah.” Her grey eyes fell on me. “A new journalist?”

“Cally, this is Madam Geist, paranormal desk. Madam Geist, this is Cally Print. Hopeful applicant.”

Madam Geist put her teacup down with a clink and shook her head. “Oh, no. No hope required, dear.” She made a sweeping gesture over the cards on the table with a stubby hand. “It has been foreseen. Hmph?” She leaned her head to one side again. “Oh, do shut up Adé.”

I glanced at the cards. They were faded and frayed at the edges. “Are you a psychic?” I asked. It seemed like an absurd thing to ask.

She smiled brightly at me. “Most believe, dear. Adé, however, does not,” said Madam Geist.

“Her spirit guide,” whispered Pash spotting my confusion. This did not lift the fog.

“Your spirit guide doesn’t believe you’re psychic?” I asked.

Madam Geist gave a heavy sigh that made her bosom wobble like a rough sea of jelly. “Bad karma from a frivolous youth, I think. A sceptical spirit guide. Oh well. At least everyone else is convinced.” She frowned as she brushed crumbs off one of the cards. “Ah, a five of cups, not a six – you were right, Adé.” She glanced back up at me. “Oh well, dear, a fifty-fifty chance is better than no chance at all.”

I felt my stomach lurch.

There was the clatter and thud of falling books. Someone had emerged from a back room to the kitchen – a pantry or something. She was a stocky woman with short salt-and-pepper hair and heavy eyelids. “Merde,” she said as she bent to gather the fallen books. They were large tomes that exhaled a breath of dust as they were slammed onto the counter.

“Fan Dumont,” whispered Pash. “Cuisine desk.”

We hurried over to help her.

“Merci beaucoup,” said Fan as I retrieved a book from underneath the stove.

These seemed to be ancient cookbooks in an array of languages.

“Ze cooking books of Señor Tocino de Esperanza,” said Fan. “Zey were in ze back after all.”

“The famed food artist of the early Twentieth Century,” Pash explained.

I had the urge to say “Ah, of course”, but no bells rang.

“Have you decoded his message yet?” asked Pash. Her bespectacled eyes glinted eagerly. “Perhaps we can sit together and uncover the secret location of the famed *Tesoro de Cerdo*.”

I cleared my throat.

“Oh sorry, later. Fan, this is Cally Print. I’m taking her to see the Editor.”

“Bien rencontré,” said Fan. She shot me an appraising look as I tugged at my sleeves self-consciously. Her heavy-lidded eyes widened. “Mon Dieu, she looks half starved. ‘old dis.” She handed me a heavy cookbook and sprang into action in a clatter of pots and pans. “Where are all ze plates?”

“Ah, Mr King was cleaning them, I think,” said Pash. She bit her lip as we exchanged glances.

“Don’t go to too much trouble,” I said. “I would be grateful for a sandwich or…” my eyes fell on an assortment of cakes stuffed in the fridge as Fan riffled through it. “…or a cupcake.”

A spoon clattered to the floor. An eerie silence fell over the kitchen – a silence broken only by a weary sigh from Mr Safely.

“No cupcakes,” Fan snapped.

The strange moment passed, and sound returned. A few moments later, she placed a sandwich on the bar. “My invention. Mustard, peanut butter, fried egg sandwich,” said Fan proudly. “Also, a pinch of Himalayan salt – zat is a hassle to get, trust me.”

“Thank you.”

I won’t lie, it was one of the most awkward sandwiches I’ve ever had. Yes, the flavours were strange. Strange, but rather interesting – I would recommend giving it a go. The awkwardness came from the fact that everyone was watching me eat it – even Mr Safely. I was also sure that Pash was counting how many times I chewed each mouthful.

“Tell me, girl,” said Fan finally. “Is it…how you say…catastrophe?”

I shook my head, still chewing on the last mouthful. “No,” I said after a large, dry swallow. “Maybe the Himalayan salt is a bit much – seeing as the peanut butter is already –”

“Mon Dieu, she’s here to replace me,” said Fan with a hand on her chest.

“No, no,” said Pash. “She has a good point though.”

There was a collective shrug from all four journalists. They each took out a notebook. Madam Geist produced a frilly pink journal from her knitted handbag. Fan flipped open what appeared to be a handwritten recipe book. Mr Safely took a small notebook from his jacket pocket – one of those that flip up, like policemen in the movies have. Pash paged through an ink-blotched sketchbook, trying to find an open space.

Pens clicked. Pencils scratched.

“Merci,” said Fan. “Come back later and we will try once more.” She stacked the dusty Esperanza cookbooks.

“You’ll break your back,” said Pash. “Get King to help you.”

Fan shrugged. “Too many books – it is a good problem to have.”

“Can’t you get them digitally?” I asked.

“Quoi?”

“Like an eBook,” I said.

The entire kitchen fell silent again – as if I mentioned cupcakes.

“I would not say that word too loudly,” said Pash.

“Jacques might hear,” said Madam Geist. “It will severely imbalance his humours.”

Mr Safely sighed the kind of sigh that only a man with a past like his could sigh. Yes, I don’t know, something about the man made me hear jazz music in the back of my mind. He was practically in black and white. Anyway, let’s focus.

I apologised, but not entirely. “I love real books, don’t get me wrong. Printed books are like friends, family members...”

“Lovers,” said Fan distractedly.

“Yeah,” I said. “But if you’ve got a long commute in front of you, then a couple of titles on your device can make the trip much more bearable.”

Mr Safely placed his fedora on his grey head and slipped off his barstool with the slickness of a fox. “She’s speaking in code, obviously,” he said matter-of-factly. “I will leave it to the likes of the rest of you to uncover her secrets, the winds of destiny blow me to other parts of town.”

Fan rolled her eyes.

“Ah, do tell us about your exploits upon your return, Mr Safely,” Madam Geist swooned. “You do live a most exciting life.”

The man nodded at her, tipping his hat slightly. “Until we meet again, Juju Woman.”

The kitchen seemed less like a “downtown joint” once he stepped out of the door. As I watched him leave, I noticed Pash studying me with her magnified eyes. I’m certain the woman was measuring the shape of my head. I self-consciously tugged a stray piece of hair behind an ear.

“Don’t mind them,” she said after a slightly uncomfortable pause. “I think you might have an angle. Our sales are down lately. Mr Balding has been pulling his last remaining hairs out over it. Perhaps a new approach is called for.”

I thanked Fan for the sandwich as Pash and I left.

We ascended two more flights of odd stairs. Here, instead of offices, the walls were bookshelves. Dusty tomes and bits of curled paper stood guard. In the centre of the space, the branches of the (apparently) cursed tree ended here. There was a dart board crisscrossed with cobwebs on one wall. “We don’t play that anymore,” explained Pash. “There’s no point when Charline is in town. Also, when she isn’t, there’s a lot of lingering war trauma. Come along.”

She led me around the walkway. Every now and then, the wall of books was interrupted by a portrait – the largest of which caught my eye. It was a full-length depiction of a woman. Her

posture defied the ornate style of the painting: one hand on a hip, the other resting on a raven-headed cane. Instead of the austere expression formal portraits have, her lips were parted in a lopsided smirk – determination glinted in her sapphire eyes. Most surprising, perhaps, was the fact that she wore trousers. The background was slightly harder to make out – there was an airship and a view of a cliff or something – hard to say.

“Yes, our founder, the Late Lady Bright, 1881 to 1928 – approximately – or 1965 if you believe the sightings,” said Pash spotting my interest. “Mr Balding is the only one who actually met her. Intensely interesting woman. They never found her body – or her airship for that matter. If you are hired, you must ask Balding to share her journals with you.” She dropped her voice to a whisper. “And then share them with me – then we’re even.” She glanced at the painting again and sighed. “She lived a magnificent life apparently. One of the surviving stories is that she reached the south pole on a makeshift sleigh drawn by a waddle of penguins. Did you know that’s what a group of them are called on land? A *waddle*. I love words as much as I love art.”

I admitted that I didn’t know that a group of them were called that. “What do you mean about us being even?”

Pash shrugged. “Mr Balding listens to me about people. Maybe I can get him to listen to you.” Her magnified eyes examined me. “That is what you want, isn’t it?”

I nodded. “Just a fair chance.”

“We all deserve at least that,” said Pash. She gave the portrait one last look.

“If he listens to you, why don’t you ask him to show you the journals?”

Pash sighed. “I have. I’m not *that* persuasive. Part of me thinks that he worries that I’d make her story too...precise. No, Mr Balding is waiting for the right journalist to write her story.”

She led me to the only door on this floor. The brass plaque proclaimed it to be the office of *Lazen F. Balding Jr. III, Editor-in-Chief*. Raised voices came from within. The door snapped open.

“For heaven’s sake, Car, take a plane! You cannot...” a voice shouted from inside.

What could only be described as a well-dressed Victorian gentleman rushed out of the office. Coat, vest, waste-high pants, shiny shoes, walrus moustache – all he needed was a monocle and a top hat. Several rolled canvases – maps, perhaps – were bundled under his arm. “Poppycock,” he said as he pushed his way to the staircase. “It is common knowledge that one cannot pierce the heart of the Quadratic Sea by conventional means – common knowledge, I say!”

He hurried towards the stairwell. He paused when he reached the first step and turned back. “Terribly sorry,” he said bowing his head slightly. “Carmichael Carmichael, explorer.”

“Cally Print,” I said.

“Pleasure.” He nodded at my guide. “Ms Tensing.”

“Car,” said Pash.

With that, he rushed down the stairs.

“Quadratic Sea?” I asked.

Pash shrugged. “Half of the time, I have no idea what the man is saying.” She knocked on the doorframe. “Mr Balding?” She gestured for me to wait and slipped into the office. The door closed.

For the first time, I was alone in this strange place. I glanced over the railing. The tree with the purple fruit blocked most of my view, but I could see the journalists of the Bright Report milling around. Sonny was enjoying a cigarette on the ground floor – leaning against the trunk in a feline pose of nonchalance. She looked up at me and winked. Madam Geist and Fan left the

kitchen. The food writer strained under the weight of the books while the clairvoyant read her horoscope. On the floor below this one, an office door snapped open to reveal a disgruntled Jacques Bord. He was waving a note above his head.

“Unbelievable! Lovecraftian fiction? What’s next? *Gossip magazines?*” He glanced up at me through the bare branches of Matilda. “You there, girl, is Balding in? Has he finished with our bewildered explorer?”

“Jacques,” snapped Fan from the level below him. There was a cascade of books. Madam Geist continued her reading undeterred. “Jacques, she is our guest – be nice,” said Fan. She began collecting the cookbooks. She sighed. “Ellie, mona mi, could you take at least one?”

“Oh, certainly not, dear,” said Madam Geist. “My tea reading last eve revealed that I was one heavy lift away from total oblivion. No amount of crystal healing can heal oblivion, dear.”

“You ‘ave an ‘and-sanitising station at your crystal stall – zey cannot heal anything,” said Fan. “Take a book.”

I felt a hand on my shoulder. “He’ll see you now,” said Pash. “I’ll talk to Jacques.”

A moment later, I was in the Editor’s office. It was cluttered with so many books and old volumes of the Bright Report that some of the shelves sagged.

“Here,” said the Editor in a rich, booming voice that belied his diminutive stature. “Are almost a hundred years’ worth of Bright Report stories. Journalists from around the world who uncovered the human in the strange – more strangeness than other publications can boast, I guarantee it!”

Lazen F. Balding Jr. III was a round little man with a large round face. He wore thick round spectacles. A whisp of white hair sat above each ear, but the top of his head reflected the light of the desk lamp. He wore a fetching black waistcoat with red trim that gave him the air of a circus ringleader. Said coat had several pockets wherefrom a golden chain dangled. Each of these chains – in turn – ended in a pocket watch – each with different times and/or a different number of hands. He checked them from time to time.

As he took to the chair behind his desk, I had the sense that his feet were dangling, rather than touching the ground. His belly tested the strength of his buttons.

Upon his desk was an assortment of papers (a few were crawling with red marks), a weathered typewriter, a quill resting in an inkwell, and a strange brass desk toy. At first glance, it looked like an intricate carrousel in painstaking miniature, but as I took my seat, I saw that it was more. Instead of stylised horses, the device had several airships and the roof and floor where curling clouds.

Another device – which I later discovered was a telegraph machine – began clicking away in a corner.

“Oh, we’ve been getting a few of those. Not sure what they are all about. Just random numbers as far as I can tell,” said Mr Balding. “Junk mail – as they say.”

“Yeah,” I said more to fill the space than anything else.

“Oh, I am terribly sorry that you were witness to the disagreement between Mr Carmichael and myself,” he said. “I would hate to give the impression that we run that kind of shop – as they say.”

“Not a problem.”

He shook his head sadly. “I do worry about the man. He’s never been the same since Bly went missing,” he said as he slumped further back into his chair. After a moment, he seemed to remember himself. He gave me a bashful glance, the light glinting off his perfectly round

spectacles, and then became rather involved in rearranging the papers on his desk. “Ms Print, is it?”

“Cally,” I said. I felt my cheeks warm.

“Pash tells me that you might help us get into the Twenty First Century,” he said. A smile sprouted on his chubby face. “Kicking and screaming, I hope. I’ll not mince my words, Ms Print, the Bright Report is in trouble. Our sales are down to single figures – and those are the good weeks – a lot of similar publications have snapped up our market share. Our loyal readers have – for the most part – passed on. The younger generation prefer – how should I put it – more rational stories.”

I stared at him for a moment. Rational stories? “With respect, sir, I don’t think so. I think most people are concerned with their *own* stories nowadays. Those are anything but rational.”

“Well, nothing we can do on that score,” he sighed. He half-heartedly set his desk toy spinning.

“Not nothing,” I said. “Most people expect articles to be about things they’ve heard before. I’m sure most are about important things, but boredom has a way of switching us off – if you know what I mean. But the unexpected ... the uncanny ... that’s a shortcut to our full attention without us noticing.” I stood and pointed at the door. “Like what I’ve seen out there. What’s the deal with the tree? What’s up with Pash and her obsession with detail? Who is Mr Safely waiting for? Also, what caused the sadness in Fan’s eyes? Does it have something to do with cupcakes?”

Mr Balding watched me through his glinting glasses. “Your curiosity reminds me of someone,” he said. There was a distance in his eyes just then. “Sit down, Ms Print.”

I sat, feeling the downward pull of disappointment again. There was something in his tone that reminded me of the generic interviewer that started off my day. “Before you say anything else,” I blurted. “Sir,” I added. “There is something here. The stuff your staff write about – the atmosphere here – everything – it feels like... It’s the kind of awkward strangeness that I’ve not seen anywhere else. I won’t fit in anywhere else. But here...”

The desk toy stopped spinning.

“Ms Print,” said Mr Balding. “You have sharp eyes and voracious curiosity. These are qualities that will stand you in good stead in any respectable journalistic establishment. At the Bright Report, we can only promise meagre pay, long hours, and limited exposure. Are you sure that is what you want?”

I thought about this. “Meagre pay” sounds like something that would inspire a long speech from dad. Would it be better to be a polished columnist at a place like the Timely Journal where they turned the voiceless away?

“I have a story,” I said. “A story that other publications wouldn’t even consider. I don’t know how good my writing is, but I’m willing to learn. Plus, I can help you kick and scream into the Twenty First Century, like you said.”

Mr Balding watched me for a long moment.

*

“Reception is spotty in here – lay lines or something if you believe Madam Geist.”

Pash let me out. The angel ticked as I rushed through the entrance hall. *Please rate your visit from ten (good) to one (Bord), it scribbled.* Its brass face smiled menacingly.

Once outside, I dialled my favourite contact. There was a worry in the voice that answered – I was calling later than I promised.

“Dad. I have a story to write.”

[The End – Or Just the Beginning]

###

An Introduction After the Fact

I'm rather bad at introductions. This is a slight inditement against me, as it is my principal writing obligation. The trouble is that I do not care for them. I know that most people skip the introduction and jump right into the meat of the story in question. I do this too.

As such, I believed that the best introduction to this free preview and our organisation at large is Ms Print's personal account. It not only captures our journalists in a manner that they cannot capture themselves, but it also stays true to our core tenant: Homo in Absurdum – finding the human in the absurd.

I hope that this story has interested you in our work here at the Bright Report. If it has, I urge you to have a look at Volume 1 and see where that takes you.

We have great plans for the future of this publication as we venture into the digital frontier. Until next time,

L.F. Balding
Editor of the Bright Report

###

About the Author

Marcel du Plessis is an English teacher and university tutor who has had jobs in copy editing, content writing, blogging, and freelance odds and ends. He's been making up stories since preschool days. When he isn't running his friends through an RPG session, he is toiling away at the typewriter using his imagination. He would very much like to make a living on the words and worlds he comes up with. Besides the *Bright Report*, Marcel has written a long dystopian novel. Find out more at <http://www.calliopesprisoner.co.uk/>

Other Books by this author

Please visit your favourite ebook retailer to discover other books by Marcel M du Plessis:

Bright Report Stories

Awkward Phrasing

Volume 1

Volume 2

Volume 3 (coming May 2022)

Novels

The Silent Symphony

Connect with Marcel M Du Plessis

I really appreciate you reading my book! Here are my social media coordinates:

Follow me on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/CalliopeWriter>

Connect on LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/marcel-du-plessis-b4251033/>

Visit my website: <http://www.calliopesprisoner.co.uk/>