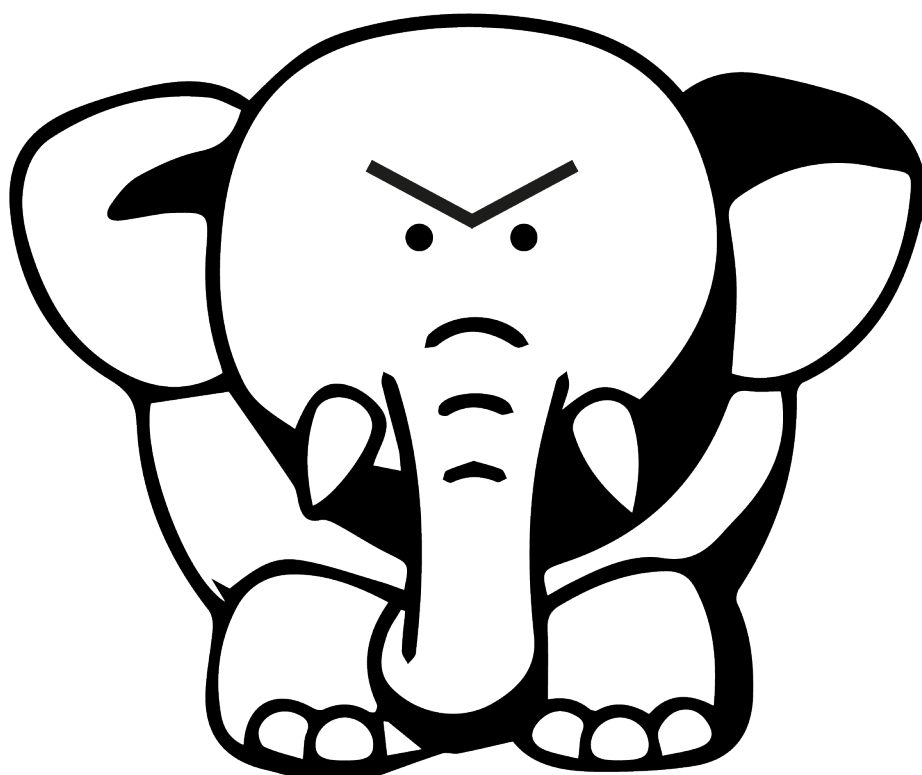


The Trouble with Elephants



John Le Drew

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This book is for sale at

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This version was published on 2018-11-01



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For Theo and Felix.

1. 24 May 2018

I think a spiritual journey is not so much a journey of discovery. It's a journey of recovery. It's a journey of uncovering your own inner nature. It's already there.

Billy Corgan

Jenny // Breakfast - jenny1

He sits opposite her. Staring up at him, she picks up her queen, grins and places it down.

She leans back in her chair, the warmth of the wood burning stove pouring over her like a loving embrace.

Checkmate, she says smiling, holding his gaze.

He stares at her, a big proud smile forming across his face.

Ahh! You got me! he cries jokingly, clasping his chest.

She giggles. Time around them freezes. The flames in the stove are suspended, the loving warmth is replaced by air frozen solid.

His face pales. The smile changes to a grimace, his eyes glisten. A single tear runs down his cheek, landing on the old wooden chess board.

In that moment, the room disappears, now just cold, empty, black.

He falls away from her. She is frozen in place, a helpless observer. He keeps falling away until nothing but a distant blur remains.

She cries out to him, but she has no voice. Her heart is beating like battlefield mortars. Boom. Boom. The sound reverberating through her body. Boom. Boom.

He is gone now. Blinding white light burns through the blackness, she shields her eyes.

Boom. Boom. Boom.

Jenny wakes, half off the bed, the sheets drenched

in sweat. Dad, she mumbles, still only half awake.

The room comes into focus, the early morning sun casting long shadows through the wooden blinds onto the aubergine walls.

She turns on her side, pulling herself back round onto the bed and the covers up to her chin. Her fiancé Simon lies asleep with his back to her, his dark skin exposed down to the rim of his boxers.

She smiles, appreciating his presence and reaches over to him. She runs the back of her hand slowly through his hair, down his neck, over his bare shoulders and down his arm. His hand comes up to meet hers, and pulls her into an embrace. They lie there, not saying anything for a moment.

Beep! Beep! Beep! It's 7am, time to get up!

A small round ball on Simon's bedside table leaps into life, beeping loudly then rolls off and scuttles under the dresser. The recently opened packaging is lying on the floor.

WakeUpRobot: The alarm clock that will

run away! Get up energised and ready to face the day, say goodbye to the snooze button!

Beep! Beep! Beep! It's 7am, time to get up!, it declares from its new place of refuge.

Jenny leaps to attention, jumping out of bed and running over to the dresser, getting down on all fours she reaches underneath.

Beep! Beep! Beep! It's 7am, time to get up!, it cries, then promptly rolls out and past Jenny who, spinning round on her knees, throws herself onto the small rubber fugitive.

Bee-, she silences the beast.

Got it, shouts Jenny, holding her trophy above her head. Well, it seems to work.

Yeh, Simon agrees wearily, I guess so. Doesn't help me get up if it's always you who chases it round the room every morning though!

Oh, it does. Because now I'm awake, I can do this.

Pouncing on him and tickling, they both laugh and fall into an embrace, then kiss and stare at each other, enjoying the moment.

Jenny's phone rings, the vibration causing it to slowly slide along her bedside table and onto the floor. Rolling off Simon she leans down and grabs her phone.

It's Mark from work, she says with a sigh.

And, why would he be calling you at this time?

It must be something urgent, I guess. She brings the phone up to her ear, Hi Mark, what's-

Simon grabs the phone and hangs up.

Fuck him. You haven't even had breakfast yet. It's 7am.

Simon. Jenny shouts. I can't be bothered with him whining at me when I get in.

The phone rings again.

Give me the phone, Simon.

Simon stands up and moves away from Jenny,

then smiling at her, he drops the phone down the front of his boxers.

You might have to come and get it, in his best porn star voice.

His hips sway his suggestively, although what precisely they are suggesting is a little lost on Jenny, who gives him The Look.

Simon. Really, it's my job. I can't just ignore him. Pleads Jenny, surprising herself with how desperate she sounds.

Simon turns his back to Jenny, his buttocks swaying suggestively from left to right. Jenny pauses for a moment to appreciate the display.

Then, walking up to Simon, she hugs him tightly from behind, kisses his neck, her hands slide down the front of his chest, into his boxers, and she swiftly retrieves her phone. She brings it up to her ear, while keeping her other hand in place.

Simon realises and pushes her away, staring at her in irritation.

It's 7am, we were going to have breakfast together before-

He whispers in that way people do when they are not trying to be quiet at all.

Morning Mark, wait a second.

She holds her hand over the receiver.

Simon, sorry, I will be two minutes.

She brings the phone up to her ear again.

Hi Mark, I'm here.

Simon shakes his head and walks through into the kitchen, the sound of Mark warbling from the receiver behind him.

Sorry Mark, can I stop you? My day starts at 9am, that gives me 2 hours. Can we discuss this when I get in?

More warbling.

Look, I want to have breakfast, take a shower, you know, the normal things people do in the

morning? Is there something specific I can help you with?

Warble, warble, warble.

Ok, I think that answers that question. Mark, I'm going to go now. I will come and speak to you when I get in.

Warble, Warb-

She hangs up, throws her phone on the bed and walks through to find Simon. The phone starts buzzing as she closes the bedroom door behind her.

Paul // Feeling Good - paul1

Paul wakes up to the rich sound of Nina Simone playing loudly in the kitchen, and the voice of Nitesh singing along.

Still bleary eyed, he looks round his room as it comes into focus. The room is a typical Georgian style, a large ornate ceiling rose, with a decidedly

less ornate (and somewhat dusty) IKEA lampshade in the middle of the ceiling.

Over the grand mantelpiece there is a large world map, covered in pins, and all around it are photos from all of their many adventures.

Paul's eyes find a photo of Nitesh sat in a small boat. That was the day he proposed to him on the Kabini river in Southern India.

To Nitesh's fathers surprise, Paul had asked his permission while they were visiting them in Bangalore before they headed west for a week on safari. He got his blessing, but was told firmly that he wasn't to expect a dowery.

Paul tipped a local to let him take the coracle (a small round traditional fishing boat) out for an hour. He found a quite spot, and then fell to one knee and dropped the question. At the same time, he dropped the oar.

They were stranded out there for over 3 hours until they were able to wave down a safari boat

with 20 tourists. They survived, but Paul was badly sunburned as he insisted he didn't need sunscreen. Nitesh still teases him about this to-day. Paul smiles to himself as he remembers.

He slides out of bed and grabs his dressing gown from the floor, putting it on to cover up his nakedness.

Paul smiles to himself then says, Hey Google, turn off the kitchen lights.

Oi! I'm trying to cook your breakfast in here, Nitesh shouts.

Paul walks through to the kitchen of their basement flat, dark now the lights were off. Nitesh stood cooking by the stove, silhouetted against the blue morning light shining in through the small frosted glass window. This also housed an extractor fan that hadn't worked since 1981.

Birds flying high, you know how I feel

Walking behind Nitesh, Paul wraps his arms around his topless body.

Good morning.

He whispers, bringing his mouth close to Nitesh's ear and giving it a little bite.

Sun in the sky, you know how I feel

You're making it very hard to cook our breakfast. Nitesh says, turning so his face so their noses touch.

Breeze drifting on by, you know how I feel

I love you.

Love you too.

Nitesh kisses Paul on the mouth.

It's a new dawn, It's a new day, It's a new life for me

Then he briefly slides his hands under Paul's gown, running them down his chest and, pushes him away.

Hey Google, turn on the kitchen lights.

Nitesh shouts loudly.

Now, you bugger off while I finish breakfast.

He smiles at Paul as he leaves the kitchen.

And, I'm feeling, good

Looking round at Nitesh, Paul blows him a kiss.

Mark // Professional - mark1

Mark's mobile phone vibrates under his pillow. He opens his eyes, and slowly the bare light bulb hanging from the ceiling comes into focus.

It's a small room, mostly consumed by his large double bed, and a small chest of drawers that sits in the corner by the only window. The chest is currently decorated by a small collection of birthday cards.

One card, shows an arty photo of a cheesecake full of candles. It was part of a range his parents developed, when they had a chain of restaurants, inside it reads:

Happy 24th, Love Mum and James x.

She has been using these cards since the businesses folded, Mark is sure she still has friends that have no idea, despite it being nearly 15 years ago. She has to keep up appearances.

Another card, with a photo of Edinburgh Castle read:

Happy birthday baby brother! We are overdue a catch up! Love you Marilyn x

His older sister Marilyn, who moved to Edinburgh for university, and never quite left. He was 12, it was just after his Mum, his brother James and him moved to live with his Grandma in St. Albans. Just after his Dad left.

Another card was a black and white photo of a man standing atop the fallen ruins of a building, on the front. The text on the front reads:

A successful man is one who can lay a firm foundation with the bricks others have thrown at him. – David Brinkley

This was from Marcus. Not long after they moved to St. Alban's, Mark got into a fight at school. The other boy came out with a head injury and Mark ended up in juvenile detention for about a year. Marcus was his teacher there. He was just what Mark needed, and has been a close friend ever since.

Finally, the last card, typed with a photo of the management team smiling.

Happy birthday from all your colleagues
at Analytical Intelligence.

He appreciated the thought, but, not really sure if anything could be less genuine.

He stretches and reaches behind his pillow, grabs his phone, shuts off the alarm and checks his notifications.

Email from Steve:

Mark

LogicSys has given us the go ahead. Have committed to a three month timescale. Sam is on my arse about this so need the team on this like flies on shit.

Steve

Mark reaches down to the floor by his bed and grapples around, finds his laptop and pulls it up onto his lap.

Reply to Steve:

Steve

No problem, will speak to Jenny now and get the team on it right away. See you when I get in.

Mark

Mark swings his feet round onto the floor and gets up, the covers sliding off the bed into a pile. Grabbing his phone, he walks through to the kitchen in his boxers.

His kitchen is a tiny square of wooden floor surrounded on three sides by kitchen counters hiding built in appliances behind glossy white doors. There is a single window above the sink looking down onto the shared garden below. Ever kept in a perfectly bland state by the building caretaker.

He puts a large mug into the built in coffee machine on the kitchen wall and hits the double espresso button. After a some loud grinding and buzzing, dark coffee starts to pour into the mug. He hits the button a second time, find's Jenny's number on his phone and brings it to his ear.

He hears Jenny for a brief moment then then it goes dead. His quadruple espresso is waiting for him. He picks it up, takes a sip and calls Jenny again.

She answers and then her voice sounds muffled.

Jenny are you there? He says getting frustrated.

Hi Mark, I'm here. Says Jenny finally.

Hi Jenny, we have had the sign off from LogicSys

so we are ready to get started. Could you arrange a meet-

Sorry Mark, can I stop you? She says, asking permission but not waiting for it.

Jenny, I want to clarify the details with you so that we can be ready to start as soon as the team are in. Can I just-

She cuts him off again, but this time Mark isn't taking it and stops her.

Jenny, sorry, but I need you to be a professional for once and listen. The LogicSys thing is make or break for us. If we screw this up-

Again she stops him, Mark sees red.

For fucks sakes Jenny! He shouts into the receiver. Just let me finish will you? I just want to discuss this so-

The phone goes dead. He takes a deep breath and redials.

Hi this is Jenny, if you really must leave me a

message after the tone I will probably get back to you by the end of the year. Thanks!

Jenny. He pauses for a moment to catch his breath. Sorry for shouting. Could you be in for 8:30 to go over this? Thanks Mark

Like sodding kids. He says to himself. Downing his coffee, he heads to the shower.

Paul // Potatoes - paul2

Paul and Nitesh sit at the small dining table in the main living space of their flat, the summer sun pours in through the large glass door out onto their modest paved garden. The door is ajar, letting the cool morning breeze blow in refreshingly. The Essex Road traffic hums in the distance.

Paul stares at Nitesh, smiling to himself. As he eats, his mind wanders to their long train journey in India, from Mysore to Chennai. They had

been engaged for two days (his skin still burned from their boating adventure). They took the 7 1/2 hour train journey across India to meet some more family before flying from there to Sri Lanka.

Paul had woken on the train, sitting next to Nitesh, his head resting on his shoulder, hand in hand. He lifted his head and stared at his fiancé as he slept. Behind Nitesh the rice paddies shot past the window, drenched in the mid afternoon sunshine.

Hey. Nitesh breaks Paul's daydream. You know, sometimes it's nice to talk at breakfast. Some couples even do it every day.

Sorry, Paul replies. I was just thinking of our train journey.

Didn't realise the East Coast Main Line left so much of an impression on you. Nitesh jokes.

Two weeks before, they had travelled to see Paul's Dad in Leeds. It was always a somewhat difficult trip.

After his Mum died, Paul's Dad really struggled. He used to be a miner before they shut down the mines and he lost his job. His Mum was the main breadwinner. For the traditional Yorkshire man that he was it *Just wasn't the way it's meant to be!*.

He had grown to accept the *gay* thing. After the wedding he worked out that it probably wasn't just a phase. He had even grown to like Nitesh, he always loved a curry and had been won over through his stomach.

I mean the India trip, Mysore to Chennai. Was just remembering your snoring. Paul retorts. Nitesh picks up his spoon loaded with marsala potatoes and aims it at Paul.

In slow motion, Paul brings his hands up in a defensive position, at the same time, Nitesh unleashes marsala potato hell, delicious spiced potatoes zoom over the table hitting his arms, and chest, leaving orangey, yellow splashes all over.

Oh God, Paul shouts, briefly irritated.

Come on, it's not God's fault, I did it. Get that off, and let me get you a clean shirt. Nitesh says with a smile.

Jenny // Smoking - jenny2

Jenny sits down at her desk at 8:40am, 20 mins early. After finishing breakfast with Simon, he had left for work (he was a journalist at the FT). Mark had left her a voicemail asking her to get in early for some reason she listened to him.

She was thankful that Simon didn't know though, she knew she wouldn't be able to explain it to him and still make herself sound sane. He didn't understand why she was still at Analytical Intelligence at all. Neither did she, if she was honest to herself.

She sips her coffee and her gaze finds the photo on her desk of her and her dad. She was 10, and he was helping her climb over the gate on their farm. She grew up on their small farm about

15 miles north of Glasgow in the Stirlingshire countryside.

They were both wearing green wellies. She remembers insisting her wellies matched her Dad's.

Mark's reflection appears in the photo. She frowns and spins round in her chair to face him.

Hi Jenny, thanks for getting in early.

She stares at him blankly with no response. Mark goes on.

Urr... Yeh, like I said, thanks. So can we talk about the financial projections feature we are building for LogicSys?

We can, but my response it is unlikely to be any different than the last time we spoke about it. Unless of course the requirements have now changed into something that's possible without actual magic?

Jenny didn't know why she was so off with him. It seemed to be the mode she switched into automatically when any past or present product

managers sidled over to her desk. She was so tired of it all.

Mark went on, ignoring her cynicism.

So, as you know, they need to be able to analyse the previous quarters results and use our projections AI to-

See into the future? Jenny interrupts. Yes, like I said, unless you have a flux-capacitor in your back pocket this isn't actually a reality I can create for you. Perhaps drugs might work?"

Mark sighs, his shoulders sink back. Jenny thinks she might have broken him.

Jenny, another sigh. Do you think, for perhaps 5 minutes, we could pretend that we're both adults?

Jenny stands up and starts walking to the door. That was just about enough for now.

Mark, that may well be possible. But only once you get your head out of your arse and listen to something other than your own digestion. I'm going out for a smoke.

She turned and didn't look back at him. He might have said something, she wasn't sure. She steps into the elevator, when it gets to the lobby she walks to the door and out onto Canada Square, finds her bench, and lights up.

She had given up smoking 10 years ago after her Mum had moved to London. She just called Jenny and said, I'm selling the farm and moving to London.

Suddenly, a month later, she could wave to her Mum while making her morning coffee, she had moved into an apartment literally over the road from her, they could see each other through their kitchen windows.

A few weeks later, she found the wig in her Mum's bedroom. She had breast cancer, she was already at the end of her first course of chemotherapy, but had kept it quiet so as not to cause a fuss. As if Jenny would have minded!

She hated that her mum didn't feel she could just tell her. But, she had always been like that. 25

years earlier, it had taken them over a month to properly talk about her Dad.

When Jenny found out about the cancer, she quit right there. Then, in the last couple of years, she would have one, then another. She knew it was stupid. But, somehow, she just needed it. She couldn't tell her Mum, she would smoke on the way home and chew down 1/2 a pack of gum to hide the smell.

Her Mum went into remission after her second course, and she's been clear for 8 years, but, who knows what might happen and the thought of losing Mum as well terrifies her. Simon hated it as well, but he knew better than to lecture Jenny on anything.

She throws the stub in the bin next to the bench and heads back. How can she even have a serious conversation with Mark about this? He just won't see reason.

Mark // Bullshit - mark2

Jenny walks away from Mark and heads to the elevator.

Jenny, for gods sakes! He shouts after her. But it's no use, the elevator doors are already closing.

He heads over to his desk and sits down. He was fuming. How the hell did she get promoted to development manager? She was, it would seem, utterly incapable of anything resembling professional discourse.

They had 3 months, and everything was on his head.

He takes a deep breath, picks up his phone and dials Daniel Rhys, the CFO of LogicSys.

Hi Daniel, it's Mark from Analytical Intelligence, can we just go through the details of this feature before I head into a meeting with the team. Just want to make sure we have your requirements down.

Daniel starts to explain and Mark begins to take notes, he spots Jenny coming in through the door and signals her to come over. Thankfully, she starts to head over to his desk.

Daniel, sorry to stop you, says Mark. I'm just going to pop you on speaker as Jenny our development manager has just joined me.

Morning Jenny, thanks for joining us. Daniel says with that corporate tone that is so cold and ingenious it could freeze you on the spot.

Hi Daniel, can you hear us alright? asks Mark

Morning, says Jenny, as if expelling her last ounce of energy.

Yes, I hear you both clearly. Shall I continue?

Go ahead Dan.

So, as I was saying, our goal is to utilise our previous year's financial data to make projections for the following 12 months, adjusting for that year's new product lines and their revenue.

Are there any more inputs required?asks Mark

Well, we would also like it to adjust for the projected sales of competitor lines, both new and existing, taking into account our projected market share.

Daniel. Jenny finally speaks. Are you expecting our AI technology to generate all of these projections?

Yes, obviously. Daniel crackles from the speaker phone.

You would like us to make projections based almost entirely on projected data? So we will *guess*—

Take a position on, Mark interrupts, correcting her.

Guess. Jenny persists shooting him a sharp look. What new products your competitors will produce and *guess* how successful they will be? Based only on the last 12 months performance for your organisation?

Exactly, I think, but when you say *guess*, what

level of accuracy can we expect? requests Daniel.

Jenny shakes her head in disbelief, and Mark gives her a stern look.

Daniel, Mark replies. Now that we have a shared understanding, can I take this to the team and get back to you with some exact figures later this week?

Oh, there's no need for that, Jenny says. I'm 90% confident that the reports it generates will be almost completely bull-

Mark swiftly hits the speaker button and hangs up the call.

-shit. Jenny finishes and stands up.

I'll see you in the boardroom. She adds dryly.

She walks away as Mark picks up the handset and redials.

Hi Daniel, sorry about that our phone system has been playing up. Yes. Yes. No, no, Jenny doesn't have any concerns. She can just have that tone,

you know what the geeks can be like!

Jenny // Lunatics - jenny3

The team sit round the large oval table that fills the meeting room. The bright fluorescent lights hum, the clock ticks cutting into every silence, then it stops.

This, is a single moment, frozen in Jenny's imagination.

Mark, sits frozen at his keyboard, staring down at his laptop screen with a constipated expression developed after Michael let him know that apparent urgency does nothing to reduce real complexity, and no, it almost certainly wouldn't be completed on time.

Michael was almost forty, looked almost fifty. He's smoked since he was twelve and hasn't noticed (or doesn't care) that his shirt hasn't scaled with his gut, his untidy stubble only adding to the

overall effect. He moved to London with Jenny 20 years ago when Analytical Intelligence bought up the company they were working for in Glasgow.

He leans back in his chair, arms crossed, resting on his stomach, with an expression to indicate just how much respect he had for the naive, suited whippersnapper in front of him.

Sat next to Michael, Paul a clean cut, attractive man in his late twenties. He was new to the team and they didn't know much about him. Although, she wasn't sure she was going to learn much more about him as his motivation seemed to fall through the floor not long after he started.

Paul stares down at a small pen mark on the table around which he absentmindedly slides his ring finger round in a figure-eight, it bears a ring shaped as the waveform of his wedding vows. Jenny always thought that was quite romantic, but she would never say it.

Jenny, what do you think? Asked Mark, destroying her frozen scene, the action whirring up to

full speed like someone hand winding an ancient record player.

Sorry? Which part? Asks Jenny. Irritated at being brought back to a present moment that proved to have few redeeming qualities.

The analysis system? We're discussing the generation of financial projections. Are you OK Jenny? He would appear to have actual concern in his voice, but she wasn't sure who for.

Ahh right, *financial projections*. You mean the impossible feature that will never work? Yes I remember. Surprising that you don't, as we were only discussing my position on this an hour ago.

Well we have committed to deliver it this quarter, so-

Yes, about that. Jenny cuts him off. I don't remember committing to anything? Pretty sure I told you to-

It's not for you to make the commitments, Steve and I have promised the customer we will have

the feature completed so they don't switch over to Intellistats.

Mark, you know the world doesn't actually work like this don't you?

I don't have time for this Jenny, I need you to get your team into gear.

I need a bit more clarity Mark, how exactly should I get my team *into gear*?

At this, Mark slammed closed his laptop, stood up and walked up to the door.

You need to sort this Jenny, it's critical to the organisation.

He walks through and closes the door.

Which gear do they need to be in? Jenny shouts after him.

Well you certainly got on his tits!

Michael watches Mark walking across the office through the glass wall of the meeting room. He catches Mark's eye and finds a frown and a head

shake.

Yep. Straight into Steve's office.

Steve wouldn't fire me. Jenny states with a sigh. I've been here longer than him. And she had, she was made Development Manager by Steve's predecessor.

She had, for some reason, been with Analytical Intelligence (or Anal Smarts as it's affectionally referred to internally) for over 20 years.

You might get a bollocking though. Quips Michael.

Nah, Steve still sees me as a *delicate flower*.

Ahh, come on, doesn't Steve know? You're not a woman, you're an engineer!

That stung. She knew it was meant as a joke, but Michael always went too far. She never understood why it mattered? She was an engineer, she was a fucking brilliant engineer. Why couldn't she be that engineer *and* Jenny, the woman.

Oh, shut up Mike. She forces a smile. So team

leads, what do we do, now that we have been *committed*?

Why have *we* been committed? Thought Jenny. It's the management of this place that like lunatics are so certain of their own reality.

Then again, she's still here isn't she? Perhaps she likes her comfortable room in the asylum.