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*Thank you for reading this extract of Weed.*

# Weed

**Chris Page**

This is weird.

The tv seems to be getting closer. It is creeping across the room during lapses in Warren's concentration like an ingratiating dog or a stealthy predator. It also seems to be sprouting leaves.

The tv, blaring primary tones, is showing men stuffing wriggling, living sardines into their swimming trunks and chasing wailing bunny girl sirens around the studio while the audience howls, delighting in its own lobotomization.

Outside the flat, in the sodium-stained night, the city pulses about as low as it ever gets: the police sirens are distant moor wraiths, and the screeches and growls of the elevated railway might be the distracted ruminations of Hell's teeth.

And the tv just shuffled a bit closer.

The guy watching telly in this dingy little cubicle of a home is Warren. He needs sleep. The week as usual has left him without rest, and this fast Sunday night is nearly done. Back to work in the morning. However, he is not going to sleep, he is not going to let the bastards take even more time from him. His employer, Daikon AirCon International, already has a great deal of Warren's time and has a contract to take much, much more in the future. It's not just Warren: they sap time from everyone they use; they are hungry for time — but then they are a growing concern and, time-wise, their nutritional needs are great. They have now taken so much time from Warren they have left him like a rusted and seized old fob watch. So now Warren is

stealing back time by petulantly refusing to go to bed at a proper hour and condemning himself to a miserable Monday dragging his hangover and exhaustion round the office. He's going to squeeze out the last of this weekend, he's going to wring it dry; he's going to leave the weekend like Daikon AirCon left his friend Bob Weed: all wrung out.

The monitor in the police Alpha Squad unit parked down the street is cruelly razored by a deluge of gamma emissions so that they have no idea what's going on. They have called for backup to get some triangulation going.

'Beats hell out of me,' confesses sergeant Testosteroni, fingers ineffectually skidding in the sweat-slick on his forehead as he tries to scratch himself. 'Either the whole damn city's sitting up and reading Grisham's latest or there's a hunk of plutonium nearing critical mass up there.'

Warren pops his thirteenth black bomber of the day, chases it with half a pint of vodka and hangs on for dear life, white knuckles on the chair's arms, bruising consciousness into his brain. Indistinct things scuttle the peripheries of his vision as if the room or his brain is infested with rats. The walls breathe laboriously and gush sweat.

'Wrrronnnggg!' booms Sam Smiles, the game show host, from his ivory lectern. *Bwaab bwaab bwaab* hoots the studio's sound system. The bunny girl has got it wrong. Her part in the quiz is to guess just how many sardines the guy has in his trunks. To be fair to the lass, it's a bit tricky, blindfolded and with your hand down the front of the contestant's shorts, telling what's what with all that wriggling going on down there.

Warren wouldn't mind playing one kind of sardine game or another with the bunny girl. At a push he could even go for a game with just the sardines. Instead he snarls a big yellow-toothed snarl of derision at the tv and punches a finger through the tab of another beer.

Three floors above Warren the tv screams barely penetrate. On the bare wood floor is a fine detritus of tobacco and cigarette papers, flakes of ganja that missed. The occupant is relaxed, muscles uncoil from his bones and hang from his frame like untied ropes. Distinctions dissolve and he melts into the ether or the other of his self.

Warren's television is definitely getting closer, but that's ok, just makes it easier to focus and facilitates the omission of the world beyond the box. He is rocking

violently in the armchair, bouncing the casters off the floor. There really does appear to be a whole bush bursting from the back of the machine. But that's ok. It doesn't seem to be after any of Warren's time.

The third Alpha Squad has arrived outside Warren's tower block and is reporting what the other two have already told Testosteroni, that the gamma emissions are overwhelming. However, together they have located the source in the Heavenly Estate, a brutal convolution of residential concrete blocks. Now they are hoping that the power of their combined suppressors will refine the signal enough to determine in which building and in which flat the interference is being generated. The Alpha Squads edge like cockroaches between the pillars of the estate. Headquarters is curious and has quietly positioned an Executive Action Group in the vicinity. Their dense, light-absorbing APC is like another shadow in the web-like fracture of streets around the Heavenly Estate. Inside sit the executives in stone silence — visored, cradling M16s between their knees; poised and priapic.

Three floors above Warren, our subject Robert D. Weed — Bob Weed, Weed, Bob — has finally keeled over under the enormous weight of his head. He is semi-foetal, half on, half off the thin mattress on the floor, his shoulders cloaked in the greasy grey-ochre huddle of his much unwashed quilt. His eyes are open but he does not see the living green patina on the damp plaster and the skirting board.

Weed has had a hell of a week too. While Warren is stealing time, Weed is simply all timed out: Daikon AirCon has taken so much time from him he has none left for himself. Being exhausted of his time potential, Daikon has thrown him away. Weed has nothing. Weed is nothing. He really is coming into his own.

He has successfully remained stoned and immobile for the whole week. He was expecting to be picked up by the Alpha Squads in the hour of the first smoke — the same Alpha Squads that cruise our cities for us, monitoring the alphas and gammas of our mind states, assessing our potential for riot, crime, our peace with our lot and everyone else's, our satisfaction with our jobs and our dinner, our contentment with the Alpha Squads themselves, and generally running to ground any unauthorised mental states that might suggest drug or literature abuse or just an exceptional sense of fun. However, the squads have so far overlooked Weed, and right now when he is traversing the starlit inner spaces of his mind and when his signature should show like

a huge warm glow over the city on the police monitors, he is being shielded by Warren's frantic emissions.

In his present state Weed is primarily smile. He is good at smiling, he has been trained to smile properly, trained meticulously and thoroughly. He has been trained by his employer Daikon AirCon, who, in case you've never heard of them, make air conditioners.

Weed was the lucky recipient of this invaluable training because he was an actual salesman. Well, perhaps the term 'actual salesman' is a slight overstatement. He was actually an actual *trainee* salesman, and not a very good one at that. For part of the week Weed worked on what the company liked to call the front line, on the floor of their big central showroom, the Daikon AirCon Human Communication Venture, but for most of his Daikon week he was required to work in the riskier, more challenging, and consequently more exciting spaces of no man's land — which meant selling door-to-door. In both these tasks, smiling was essential and the company had in the interests of maximising the satisfaction of the sales experience for both their staff and their customers — about whom they care deeply — altruistically incorporated smile lessons in the training schedule.

Recognising that the world contained an uncountable variety of cultures, races and individual types, Daikon's elite Human Communication Enabling Group had formulated four smiles which could be used safely and effectively in any nation on any continent — and were, daily and to great benefit for the coffers of Daikon AirCon. Behind this was the Otherness Overcoming Approaches Project who, after much painstaking research, identified four broad human types, each deserving its own special smile. The four groups were: people who clearly wanted an air conditioner, people who were unsure whether they wanted an air conditioner, people who were under the impression they did not want an air conditioner and people who thought they themselves did not want an air conditioner but who may know someone who did — into which category fell all children, hunter-gatherer tribes and domestic pets.

In each room of Daikon AirCon's huge, nebulous and space-age training complex deep in the countryside, overlooking an industrial estate and conveniently located to take full advantage of the copious rail and road links to the capital and other significant centres — Camp, it was called — were to be found four giant plastic smiles, each mounted on its own stick. Each smile was different from its three

siblings; each set of four was identical to all the other sets. These were the models to which each of the student sales people, all the Joyful Encounters Division hopefuls, aspired — with varying degrees of success.

‘Why are you snarling, Bob?’

‘I —’

‘Please, Bob,’ complained Ms. Wap, his trainer. ‘Smile, please! Take it from me, snarling does nothing for sales. It puts people off. And then they don't want to buy anything from you. I think you'll find that holds true of most products, Bob.’

‘Yeah, I —’

‘Do you have many friends, Bob?’ asked Ms. Wap, full of concern.

‘Well —’

‘You'll find,’ continued Ms. Wap, ‘that people who smile a lot have lots of friends, Bob.’

A big blob of pink, gelatinous concern oozed over her collar and dribbled gloopily over the breast of her uniform. ‘And when you have a lot of friends, Bob, the world seems a much brighter place and we find less and less cause to snarl which brings more friends and more happiness until we wonder why we ever bothered to snarl in the first place. And when we smile we make other people want to smile, and when they smile, still more people want to smile. Smiles are exponential, Bob. Do you know what exponential means? It means something gets bigger quicker than you would expect. And when eventually everybody in the world is smiling, Bob, there'll be no more wars. In this way Daikon AirCon is making a unique and meaningful contribution to world peace and harmony and understanding between races. Because we do business on all known continents.’

She cocked her small and perfectly oval head to one side and flashed a big number two smile, the one for people who were not sure whether they wanted an air conditioner. ‘Ok, Bob?’

Concern in large pink jelly tears were evident on Ms. Wap's knees just below the hem of her skirt and were edging down her shins and calves.

‘Ok,’ said Weed, ‘it's just —’

‘Yes, Bob?’

‘It's just that —’

‘Why are you snarling again, Bob?’

‘I’m not snarling, this is a number one,’ the smile for people who were sure they wanted an air conditioner.

‘It’s not a number one, Bob, it’s a big, ghastly, insane snarl. Trust me, Bob. I’ve been working at Daikon AirCon since I left school.’

Twenty-two, thought Weed, twenty-three? She had previously said she had been working at Daikon for six years. Did this mean she didn’t actually go to college? Did she actually complete school? Anyway, he was getting her age pinned down. Not that much younger than himself.

‘And all that time I’ve been working with smiles, Bob. Please trust me when I tell you that’s a snarl, not a smile. Learning the difference can be awfully useful,’ she said, ever so reasonably.

Weed honestly did want to smile — if only so they could get this interminable training over with. However, whenever he tried, his face would contort into a foul rictus. It was just that these smiles did not seem to fit him; different smiles grew on Weed’s face. And this he was going to explain to Ms. Wap.

‘The thing is, Ms. Wap — ’

‘Oh, please call me Ms. Wap, Bob,’ said Ms. Wap, ‘there’s no need to stand on formality here. Just Relax.’

‘Why can’t I just use my own smile?’

Ms. Wap looked at him with all the sympathy and compassion she might show a child dying of starvation. Specifically, she beamed at Bob all the compassion she would show a child that was dying in a country totally lacking modern infrastructure, which was ripped apart by internecine warfare, and whose population was almost entirely without air conditioners; a child that could have made the more sensible and considered choice of being born to different parents in a stable, wealthy country; a safe, middle-class country. It is all about choice: we are exactly what we choose to be and we should pity the poor souls who are unable to grasp this simple fact.

‘Because I’m afraid your smile doesn’t apply, Bob. I mean, it’s a wonderful smile in its own way, but it isn’t a three or a four and it most definitely isn’t a one or a two. And it’s just one smile, Bob.’

The luminous up-welling of concern evident at her collar and cuffs and hems had become a torrent, a slow-motion Niagara of pink blancmangey care.

‘But mostly, Bob, our smiles have been developed in that most human of environments: the sales environment. Our smiles have been created and tested for your convenience, Bob. They're meant to help you. We just want you to be happy.’

‘Yes, but — ’

‘You do want to be happy, don't you, Bob? You do want to work as a salesperson in the Joyful Encounters Division, don't you.’

No. Bob did not really want to be a salesman of any kind but right now the alternative was unemployment, being a non-person, and a slow death by starvation.

‘You know, this is a most wonderful opportunity, Bob. There are literally millions of people around the world dying of rickets and scabies because they can't eat, who'd happily chew off they're own right arm to be able to be in your shoes now. You are select, Bob, you are chosen. Don't underestimate these smiles.’

She gestured at the big, shiny plastic models behind her on the presentation table. ‘The Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence — and others I'm not at liberty to mention even the existence of — are interested in our smile programme here. Anyone who can master these smiles will have the world at their feet. And it really isn't that difficult, Bob. Smiling is one of the most natural and simplest of human activities.’

Ms. Wap went on. She genuinely could not understand that Weed was trying, that he knew what he should do but that he was simply incapable of smiling like he was supposed to.

The concern was dripping off her extremities and had escaped from her shoes to form a big sticky puddle on the floor. The other trainees would now be making mental notes not to step in this pink drool on the way out. They would be leaving translucent footprints all over the building and it would take ages to scrape off their shoes come the evening, catastrophically consuming homework time, and sleeping and eating time, and living and breathing time.

Yes, Weed wanted to be happy, he really wanted to be happy. He wanted to be so happy he could happy away all the wars in the world and then happy people into buying non-military and socially useful air conditioners, earning himself the while a big, robust commission which would make him happier still. But mainly he wanted Ms. Wap to be happy. He wanted to happy Ms. Wap. He wanted to happy her onto her presentation table and sweep away the big, red balloon smiles and the oral hygiene/sales fulfilment comparison graphs. He wanted to happy himself up her

thighs and under her skirt, happy her out of her tight, corporately exciting uniform, happy all over her breasts, and happy inside her with all his new colleagues in serried ranks standing to attention, smiling happily on. That's how bored and fed up he was. He was so bored and fed up he wanted to get publicly intimate with a woman who had no apparent respect or affection for him, and with whom he had absolutely nothing in common. That's the kind of stuff that happens in a seriously bored male brain.

Weed became aware that, standing a pace forward out of ranks, he was standing to attention in more ways than one — and conspicuously so. Corporate trousers, without vents or pleats, and bottom-hugging tight, seemed to be designed to throw the smallest event inside your trousers into the sharpest relief. His face twisted in a big agonised smile — one that possibly deserved Ms. Wap's label of foul snarl — he wearily thought, nice one. Is this what Ms. Wap meant by exponential?

Weed thought that the main obstacle to his or Daikon's happiness as it touched Bob Weed was the company's own munificent concern for his happiness, and the planet's happiness, and its own happiness. Training had squashed and pulped every trace of enthusiasm he had for anything. In the pursuit of happiness nothing was left to chance by the company. The way you smiled, how you shined your shoes, what you said to the client and in what order and with what timbre of voice, was all bound by procedures and rules that were detailed in a seventeen-volume employee manual and were practised in training until they were second nature: or, more accurately, until they had entirely replaced the trainee's nature. The training programme was utterly comprehensive and attempted nothing short of a clean install of the individual's operating system. Weed felt he had rigor mortis while still alive: disillusion, frustration, and ennui had ossified his mind and every muscle fibre within him — Weed's happy johnny being the most blatantly ossified part at the moment.

'Do you?' repeated Ms. Wap, happily.

'Uh?' inquired Weed.

Wap had been talking to him through his reverie and he had lost his place in the conversation.

'Do you?'

'Of course I do, Ms. Wap,' he said sincerely and automatically.

For a moment, just the merest twinkle of a moment, the unfazable Ms. Wap seemed to fumble the strings of her smile but her recovery was immaculate.

‘Well, I suggest you have a word with Mr. Stonewall in that case,’ she said.

Weed wondered what he had admitted to doing as Ms. Wap announced an end to smiling for the day and suggested everyone stand at ease. The mannequins around him burst into a frenzy of massaging, trying to erase with their fingers and palms the imprint of winning smiles that Ms. Wap had neglected to cancel while lecturing Weed. Meanwhile, Ms. Wap made a note in the training log.

‘Get it right will you, Weed,’ hissed a voice in his ear. ‘You’re putting us all in the shit.’

‘Right,’ said Ms. Wap. ‘Sluicing,’ she announced.

Weed’s interest perked up.

‘First, underarm sluicing, then we’ll move on to sluicing other hard-to-reach body regions.’ Sluicing was almost as important as smiling and oral hygiene, and there were more graphs to prove it. Sadly, many people, however thorough about bathing, were unaware of the techniques of proper sluicing to the detriment of their careers and their standing in the community. The great thing about sluicing, Ms. Wap energetically informed them, is that all you need is a sponge, some soap, and lots of water. Weed’s interest sank.

‘I’m here,’ said Sergeant Testosteroni’s radio. The caller did not identify himself. He didn’t need to. ‘I’m going in.’ Only one person announced himself in this fashion.

‘Understood. Will keep you informed. Out.’

It was Inspector Yard. Yard had arrived. Testosteroni was awed. Yard himself — whose catchphrase “c’mon, punk, make my tea” was so popular even Hollywood stars wanted to use it — was in the manor.

‘Shape up, you worthless scumbuckets,’ barked the sergeant to his crew. ‘Man on the ground. Let’s do it!’

In the boll of the night, by Shangri-la Heights, round Olympus Towers, past Avalon Hall and veering left before Elysium House, strolls a man: a round man, a big ball of a man with a football head, red cricket ball cheeks, a golf ball nose, and ping-pong ball eyes. He walks — or rolls — nonchalantly and slowly, going where the

ramps and stairs and walkways and the rucks in the tarmac take him, silently between upended supermarket trolleys, skirting charred and mouldering mattresses, avoiding the heaps of black bin bags, ignoring the novas of paint and the dead cat under his feet. His head is happily cradled by his ample, rugby ball shoulders, and a quiet smile is recumbent on his comfy face.

He is carefully ignored. A Community Cruiser — half bicycle cop, half main battle tank — ignores him, gliding away into the deep galaxy of Cuckooland Mall, with only the barest crunching of glass under its six wheels. Several of the smaller shadows ignore him, sidling without glances — suddenly empty hands thrust into deeply innocent pockets — into alleys and niches even the architects of the estate knew nothing of. Two dogs humping in the bones of a burned out Mini ignore him. The cateracted apartment windows overlook him.

On and around he aimlessly rolls on Dr. Bovver soles pounded by long use to the motherly consistency of old mattresses. He pauses to broaden his smile and to unwedge something from between his teeth with his right pinky. He looks up at the sour yellow sky while his big cheesy lips retain their moon. His brow divides and caterpillars over his eyes as if suddenly aware of something above or below or to one side of the usual range of human perception. In an instant he unslings an Uzi from beneath his left armpit and aims up at the still, blank facade of Nirvana Heights. There is a crash of breaking glass, normally as natural in this concrete massif as lark song in a forest, but this time too momentous to be a bottle or a car window. Some part of the estate's stressed structure has burst, and before the cascade of glass has splashed down, the round man has bounced out of its way. A siren bays and the stroller, over the barrel of his gun, with his bright, swift eyes has picked out in the city's foul aura, high on the wall above him, something like drying laundry or a stray tree flapping in the hot wind.

Struggling vainly to get out of his seat, Warren swears horribly: his vodka is mysteriously out of reach. It is well beyond arm's length across the room. Or at least, so he thinks — it is getting difficult to see anything amid the thick animated shadows in here, and lying on his back, as he apparently is, he is suffering no little disorientation.

He pauses in his thrashing to get a handle on the situation and decides the main obstacle to getting up and out of the toppled chair is the tv, which is lying on top of him across his face and chest. Lying like this, he finds that he is cheek to cheek with a cow that is serving hamburgers in a burger joint. He is wondering whether he fancies the cow when he is invited to join a family who are wallowing in a bath of blancmange, and has to start wondering whether he fancies the mum and notices how the blancmange makes her look kinda multi-breasted like a dog or a pig. Something for the internet fetish pages, for sure. Next, he sees hairs tumbling from their follicles like Amazonian hardwoods and destroying the life of a perfectly respectable man as he is left bald. There was an advert for unemployment, a condition which could apparently be alleviated by having a job. Warren didn't fancy either condition very much. However, if he was worried about his health he could take these complimentary pills that are as good for you as — and have been cleverly processed from — cabbages. One kind of pill will give you all the vitamins and minerals and the other will encourage regular and robust bowel movements. Saves you the bother of eating cabbages. If he needed some affection he could buy himself a baby. It comes in a miniature computer, and you can watch it thrive or starve on a tiny grey screen. It's as expensive and demanding as a real child, especially when it gets to school age and there are fees to pay and it wants its own pony and you have to buy extra software to stop it becoming delinquent but it doesn't look after you in your old age. The baby also comes in chicken shape or fish shape. There's a quick recruiting spot for astronauts. It seems people no longer want to go into space, and there's a computer-generated image of what space might look like if it didn't actually look completely different. Warren hasn't decided whether he fancies any of the heavenly bodies when along comes that cow again, now hanging out with the blancmange family, all basking in the breeze and a lot of sunshine generated by a funky little air conditioner on the living room wall. Makes flowers sprout on your carpet and fills the room with flappy little butterflies. He didn't fancy the cow or the bugs much, and especially not the flowers — not in his gaff anyway. His carpet already had enough problems with things growing on it. The daughter is way too young, but suddenly the cow looks pretty good. Uh-oh! In quick succession there are adverts for cheese, for plastic nose clips, for love, and for adverts. Better do something with the tv.

It turns out that this is no easy task because of the convolution of greenery that is filling the room and weighing on the box, but he finally succeeds in slipping out from beneath, only gashing his face on the knobs a little and denting his head on a suddenly lurching corner. Once free, he burrows his way through the plate-sized leaves and thick stalks, gathering as he goes his cigarettes and stray beers, until he finally arrives at his bottle of vodka. He removes a limp and happy tendril of root from the neck of the bottle and wedges himself in a less cluttered niche where he possessively finishes what the plant has left him. Finally he lights a cigarette, thinks 'Weed' and abruptly succumbs to unconsciousness.

The round man handed the long thing back to the pyjama man with a big cheery chuckle.

'But what is it?' asked the small irritable man whose face was as grey as his flannels.

Vegetable, Inspector Yard had thought when the near hysterical fellow in the jimjams had given it to him. About a yard long, very hairy, pale and rooty in colour, one main trunk bearing several smaller offshoots and obscenely divided at the thin end. The thick end was roughly savaged with a sharp implement, a detail consistent with its finder's claim to have to have hacked it from a much larger growth with a kitchen knife.

'Know any wooden cats?' Yard asked.

'No . . . '

'Well, it's not his tail then.'

'But what am I going to do?'

Yard had never seen such despair over a length of root before so he ceased chuckling a second and offered, 'Well don't try to pin it on the donkey cos I happen to know the donkey's got a cast iron alibi. You could take it over to the park and ask the trees there if they're missing any bits and pieces but they may send you to another branch.'

'Nah, come on . . . '

'If you're going to beat the wife with it, remember to tie her up first,' chortled the big policeman. 'There're laws about that sort of thing.'

‘But there's hundreds of them growing through my kitchen ceiling,’ repeated Mr. Pyjamas. ‘They're all in the cupboards and the fridge. They're all through the canned food and they've drunk the milk. Weren't there when I went to bed.’ The man's lower lip was trembling. ‘The wife's in a right tiz about it.’

‘Better get it back to her then, eh?’ Yard was about to turn away when he was overwhelmed by a sudden upwelling of compassion. He put his big oven glove hand on the small man's shoulder and said in warm, supererogatory tones, ‘Nothing to do with me, innit. Go see the estate manager in the morning.’ He squeezed the man's shoulder and added, ‘eh?’ because it was friendly and he had forgotten to append it the first time through. Then he was off humming a little number about *ratatouille* and bubonic plague and rolling with his jovial gait into the black patches and tired lights of the tunnel under Nirvana Heights.

His breast crackled, ‘Inspector Yard?’ The big man hoicked the walky-talky from under his raincoat.

‘What?’

‘Alpha one, here. There's something you should know. Gamma's stopped. Back to normal. Just disappeared. No tail off — ’

‘Nah, the tail's off here,’ tootled Yard, giving the grey flannelly man a conspiratorial wink.

‘Erm . . . ’ continued Sergeant Testosteroni. ‘Yeah, but now we've got something else: alpha. Abnormal alpha. Deep. So deep. So far off the screen we're having the same problem as before, only but the other way round.’

Yard re-pocketed the radio and treated himself to a full, derisory snort. He turned back to the small flat dweller, still uselessly dangling his yard of root at the tunnel's entrance. There was another sharp report from high up in the quadrangle outside, followed by the brittle glissando of glass. The worst occurred to Yard.

‘You! Stay!’ He shouted happily at the root man. ‘And while you're waiting, don't hang yourself with that thing.’ Then on the radio, ‘Nirvana Heights underpass, west side, man with a yard of root. He's very unattached to it so be nice to the old git. Anyway, you might ought to want to have a word with him. No sirens. I'm going up.’ And with a gleeful snigger, up he went.

Weed was in the office of Slater Stonewall HND, MF. The office was a transparent cubicle smack in the centre of a vast open-plan floor of clerks perched on high stools intent at computer terminals. So vast was this one floor, Weed could not see the far walls. Nor could he see the near walls. Every so often in the unendingness Weed could see other glass cubicles similar to Mr. Stonewall's or an occasional lift shaft or utility duct encased in perspex showing the pipes and cable mass that carried cool air, the data-blood of the company, power and sewage from one echelon of the organisation to another. There was a general hum of doing things, spiced with that ripping sound peculiar to office machinery. People conferred on telephones, sometimes apparently with their neighbours.

When he had arrived, Weed had found no sign of a door or a doorbell. He had knocked on the perspex wall.

'Always open,' was the reply. Mr. Stonewall was engrossed in a terminal display and was tapping keys on the keyboard without looking down. Weed could tap keys on the keyboard without looking down too, but never the right ones.

Uncertainly, Weed knocked again.

'Always open!' Then, by way of elaboration, 'the door!'

It seemed to Weed they were getting dangerously close to impasse when Stonewall finally looked up and smiled a number one at him. 'It's always open, my door. Come in, come in!' Weed went in.

'Robert Weed,' he said, 'I —'

Mr. Stonewall leapt to his feet and sped round the desk with outstretched arms. 'Bob! Hi! So good of you to come!' He vigorously shook Weed's hand and slapped him about the shoulder a bit. 'Come in, come in! Sit down, have a seat! Take the weight off! No sense in senselessly wasting energy. We at Daikon AirCon are proud of our environmental sensitivity and commitment to sustainable development.' Weed stood while Mr. Stonewall shuffled chairs around, unclear which was intended for him. When one was finally prodded into his hamstrings he sat.

'Drink? Tea? Coffee?'

'I'm fi—'

'Gravity?'

'Oh, gravity please! Zero-G makes me throw.'

‘Ah! A man who likes to keep his feet on the ground!’ said Stonewall with delicious originality, and leaped energetically backwards into his own chair. ‘I like that! You’ll do well in business. And you *will* do well in business.’

Weed was not sure whether that was a prediction or a command.

‘But,’ exclaimed Mr. Stonewall earnestly, and earnestly flopping forward over his desk, ‘all work and no play makes Jack a wee bit dull. You do play don’t you, Bob?’

Weed wondered whether pocket billiards counted because that was the closest he had come to fun in the months he had been at Daikon AirCon. Fun just was not in it. The previous night was a frightening repeat of the many nights before it: he had arrived home late because Ms. Wap had graciously overrun a session on sitting appropriately when talking to clients. She felt that this was a crucially important skill and that the trainees would appreciate the extra practice. Huddled alone in her grey and empty little flat, the thought of all the selfless help she had bestowed on the peppy young trainees was the one little fire that warmed her spirit through the chill and solitary night until it was time to go to work again. Weed had gone straight home and arrived at eleven with a greasy fist of kebab to eat while he was doing his assignments. He found the meat was so hard and knobby he had to eat the kebab like a fly, first drooling over the thing to start a pre-digestion process, and then sucking vigorously on the tough knobs of meat and salad to haul the nutrients into his body through his own saliva. His assignment was to write an essay titled *Proximity in interdepartmental, intra-discrete-functional-entity or colleague-targeted communicative expeditions; authorial consciousness of the same (a non effort - producing initiator is an unfocussed progenitor of corporate or personal initiatives); its concomitant circumcision; and the elimination of other imprecise things*, and it was due in the very next morning.

Weed passed out at two in the morning. He unpassed out at five still sitting at his living room/dining room/kitchen table with a charred cigarette butt under his tongue, covered in dismantled kebab, and clutching the sheets of his assignment which he still needed to finish.

At seven, Weed lurched out of his chair, still wearing the same clothes and overcoat he had been wearing the previous night when he had come home, and barged out the door to get back to work.

The train was impossibly crowded and as the doors closed they sliced off any protruding bags, brollies or arms, creating a clean, lean, no frills sausage of packed meat to deliver into town.

The crush inside the train lifted Weed's feet off the floor and as the train lurched on a bend his cheek made contact with that of a woman against whom he was crushed. Instantly, she screamed as if groped and turned an incandescent and very allergic red. It was then that Weed realised that he had failed to shave for the third morning in a row. Weed knew from Ms. Wap that not shaving was as conducive to a fulfilling and satisfying sales experience as having a poo down the client's windpipe. He had meant to shave; he really did not like not shaving and he wished not to antagonise Ms. Wap any further, but there it was: black, spinily loony evidence of his contempt for Daikon AirCon, or, in the better scenario, evidence of his pathetic incontinence.

And then there were his bowels. If Weed's relationship with Daikon AirCon was strained, then his bowels were at war with the company, and Weed was being shredded in the crossfire. In this routine of hurtling from one thing to another, his tubes just didn't have a moment to themselves. With horrific reliability they needed to do their thing five minutes after he left the house. He travelled to work with an industrial hydraulic pump installed in his person which would leak on the train, seep in meetings, and become effusive in the face of clients. It seemed to Weed that even his biology was incompatible with Daikon AirCon.

'Because a sense of fun is crucial to the career of a successful salesmanperson, Bob. Crucial! Unadulterated seriousness dilutes the spirit and the customer thinks "what kind of colourless fellow do we have here?" They can sense it, it's almost tangible . . . '

Mr. Stonewall had screwed up his face and was making clenching gestures in the air to demonstrate tangible but was better demonstrating unspeakable acts performed on an invisible little boy.

'Graphs show a clear correlation between spirit and sales fulfilment, Bob,'

Now Mr. Stonewall was tapping keys again with his eye on Weed who once again found himself impressed. Not only could Mr. Stonewall operate a keyboard without looking but he could also read a display without looking.

'You do want fulfilment, don't you, Bob?'

‘Oh, abso — ’

‘You do want a satisfying and productive life? You do want to be able to sit back in the twilight years and say I did the best that I could and that I wouldn't have done anything different, that I — I mean you — made the best of the one big, huge, unique opportunity that came your way. Life; Daikon AirCon. No regrets, no failed adventures, an index-linked pension, which represents thirty-three point three percent of your finishing salary here at Daikon AirCon. Don't you.’ This was presented to Weed in the commonsensical way that one might suggest a band aid to a man who has just cut his head off shaving.

‘Well, I — ’

‘Because a human being is a special and unique thing, Bob. Have you ever thought about that?’

‘As a matter — ’ Weed had a lot of thoughts on the subject.

‘Have you thought about the thousands, the millions of years of evolution — ever since the Big Bang in 1987, and even before that: physical, spiritual and intellectual evolution — that have gone into each member of the human race? Or should I say huperson race? Have you thought about the sheer, dumb unlikelihood of life at all, let alone intelligent, sophisticated life such as hupersonity, a species that can build bridges and tall buildings, fly to the moon, make computers and free market economies? I mean we have even harnessed the power of creation itself, the power of the atom! I mean, atoms, Bob! Things so darned small — ’ he illustrated how small with his fingers and a crunched-up eye, ‘things so darned small you need a scientist to see one.

‘And right now, each and every one of us is the sum total of all that's gone before. We are born and we live with the advantage of this incredible wealth of natural history, because that's what we see here, Bob, the distilled pinnacle of nature; life and geology's competition of strength — cooperative conflict you would probably say — all this groundwork which has been done for us. And that gives us our own wealth of possibilities. We are each choc-a-block with talent and privilege because one of the most valuable of huperson achievements is the ability pull ourselves up by the bootstraps. Somewhere after the primordial ooze, somewhere after the fire and the wheel’ — unspeakable acts on little girls — ‘and probably about the time we

understood what it meant that Christ had died for our sins, we learned what it was to bend down take a firm hold of our bootstraps and give them a really good yank!’

‘A what?’

‘Yank, Bob, a really good yank!’

‘Oh, I —’

‘When you think about this, Bob, you see we were born to achieve. Don't you see that? We have so much possibility, so much ability: oodles and oodles of talent. We really are quite privileged. And we are each of us a nascent business empire with long, empty, yawning warehouses just waiting to be stocked with success and achievement — crammed to the high rafters with boxes and crates of the stuff because that's how we become fulfilled, that's what living life to the ceiling — I mean the full — is. That's where the word fulfilment comes from. It means being filled up.’

Weed thought of Doughnutland where he would take lunch.

‘And isn't it a crime, Bob, when people let all that wonderful talent, that ineffable opportunity go to waste? Some people just can't see it. They don't get it. They laze away their lives in dreadful poverty and never do anything to better themselves. There are laws against it, Bob, natural laws: the laws of natural selection for a start. For example, the law that says that if you don't try, you betray humanity, give the finger to all the people in history who did try and who succeeded, who laboured and sweated so we could have Daikon AirCon. And another law says quite simply, if you don't try, you don't succeed. Are you aware of these laws, Bob?’

‘I sup —’

‘I can see you're a trier, Bob. A born trier and you'll go far. I know these things about people. It's a gift. Some people are born with these abilities. Some people aren't. Quite uncanny really. Sometimes I frighten myself. But for goodness sake, Bob — may I speak frankly?’

‘Y —’

‘Cultivate yourself as a well rounded person, Bob. Of course work is important — the most important thing in your life. But don't forget there are many aspects to spirit — soul, that indefinable core of huperpersonity; that which makes you you and not another person, that which makes you you and not a field mouse or a bat or an umbrella; that which makes you a salesmanperson — a darned good salesmanperson — rather than a workhouse flop.’

The description of Weed as a darn good salesmanperson inspired the following memory. It was Weed's first day in the field, in No-Man's Land. That morning he had been tested to see whether he had memorized his pitches and had stunned himself by passing. A Daikon AirCon van took them out to the Heavenly Estate — or as near as the driver would dare go. Weed hadn't yet moved there, he still had that to look forward to. It was a cold day, a very cold day. Weed was shivering inside his light summer jacket. It was June. Sales operatives in No-Man's Land were not allowed to wear warm clothes until September the fifteenth. People rolled around lagged six inches deep in duck down and polystyrene while Weed shivered and scuttled across Satori Plaza through the broken glass and dog poo, hugging files and catalogues, looking and feeling like a missionary among cannibals.

His beat for the day was Nirvana Heights and Transubstantiation Tower at opposite ends of the estate — four thousand and sixty five flats in total. Weed politely wondered of Mr. Scourge the field supervisor whether it was possible to get through four thousand and sixty-five flats in a six hour working shift. He was told that six hours gave him five seconds per flat, an allotment that would increase because some people would be out. Weed was just about to be impressed by their mathematics when he realised that the time it would take to walk the kilometre to the first block had not been factored in. Nor the time it would take to walk up twenty-seven floors of stairs when the lifts were found to be not working.

Weed then figured that the time it would take to get from the first block to the second and climb the stairs to be in the right place for the second part of the shift reduced his lunch break to about ten minutes, and we were here ignoring the inevitable overrun on the first block. Then the supervisor took him aside and gave him a five-minute lecture (sixty flats) on dedication and flexibility in endorsing targets, which Weed took to mean he would stay here until the job was done even if it took all night. In fact, Weed estimated it would take thirty-three point nine hours to finish the assignment. His colleagues were either less mathematically alert or entirely unbothered. Weed expressed none of these computations aloud but his supervisor put an attitude hazard symbol next to his name in the roll book then cheerfully reminded the group that since this was their first time out and since this was demographically very much a F region, a more than fifty percent success rate was not mandatory but

twenty percent was expected. On minimum wage fixed at six hours or twenty percent of total sales, whichever was lower, Weed was looking forward to the day no end.

On the exposed walkway at the summit of Nirvana Heights, puffed and with the climb-induced sweat freezing on his body, Weed had his first lucky break. Seven hundred and eighty-five flats behind schedule, the very first one on his list was a burned-out shell. Five seconds saved.

He leapt the few steps to the next and hit the doorbell. He looked at his watch counting off seconds. He rang again. There was stuff in the manual about ringing again.

‘There's nobody here!’

Initial resistance: do not be deterred. There was lots of stuff in the manual about that too. Initial resistors always look difficult but they can be among the most grateful of customers. Go straight into the pitch.

‘Hello. My name's Robert Weed and I wish to speak to you on a matter of some impotence. Importance.’

‘You're another fucking air conditioner salesman, aren't you!’

‘No — yes — I . . .’

‘Piss off, I don't want one. I've got no money.’

Is that a number three or a number four smile in this situation, Weed wondered trying to see through the peephole in the door.

‘In these days of uncertain climatic conditions and less than pristine air, is it not worthwhile investing in a little security and reassurance? We at —’

‘Look, I told you! I've got a gun here and I'm not afraid I know how to use it! Do you know how many air conditioner salesmen I've had round here this week? Why can't you bastards just take no for an answer? It's not as if we live in a hot country either. It's minus fucking twenty degrees out there and you're queuing up at my door morning, noon and night. Well, I'm not taking it any more, do you hear me, I'm not taking any more.’

‘In the stifling dog days of summer when your natural biorhythms are disturbed and your appetite is impaired, and all your hard-earned income —’

The surface of the door erupted but centimetres from the end of Weed's nose. Reflexively he toppled over backward in a dead faint as the occupant of the house put several more bullets through the door in a professional bracket pattern that would

surely have caught Weed had he taken standard special forces avoiding action instead of his farsighted lapse into unconsciousness.

Weed was lucky. He suffered only minor shrapnel scratches on the face. The sole was entirely torn off his right shoe.

When he finally crawled out of Nirvana Heights on all fours covered in blood and crying, his supervisor put another attitude hazard symbol next to his name and an actual black mark just to be sure. He then leapt up the stairs three at a time and sold the gunman an A-100 SoopaKoola air conditioner, powerful enough to refrigerate an entire beef mountain.

‘Take time off occasionally, Bob. Let your hair down. Sit down and watch a bit of tv from time to time for goodness' sake! Are you with me Bob?’

‘One hund —’

‘Good man. Now —’ Stonewall was not only operating the keyboard and reading the display without looking, he was also apparently absorbing a weighty report lying the desk in glances between sentences. Weed was more impressed than he would consider decent to admit.

‘Ms. Wap informs me that your performance in both training and sales is wholly inadequate. Shape up Bob or you're out of a job. You can go now. And once again thank you very, very much for coming to see me, because here in Daikon AirCon Human Resources and all over Daikon AirCon we care very much for you personally, Bob, and appreciate the tremendous work you are all doing in helping to shape the future as Daikon AirCon sees it.’

He was flashed a number one, his hand was shaken and was suddenly out of the cube and into the general office where he decided he really needed to use the toilet.

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*Thank you for reading this extract of Weed.*