

Chapter 1

HELLO WORLD

8:08

In The Open Comedy Club the guest band Reeno finished their first performance of the evening to a good amount of applause.

The compere, Mike, tapped on the microphone causing two thuds to boom from the P.A. speakers much to the annoyance of most of the hundred or so people crammed around the performance area.

It wasn't a huge stage but enough to hold the four-piece band that ambled away as Mike started to speak.

'Ladies and Gentlemen let's hear it for Reeno there with that track called Hello World, I'm sure they're gonna be huge one day'. Another ripple of applause came back from the audience.

He started to mop his brow as the heat from the stage

lights started to have an effect on the rather short but stocky man.

‘Welcome again to The Open Comedy Club and now please put your hands together again for one of our regular comics who goes by the name of Output Jack, let’s hear it for him’.

The audience started to applaud again as from the wings of the stage a tall slim man in his mid twenties appeared and gave a casual wave as he took the microphone from Mike. He started his performance.

‘Hello everyone’. ‘Thank you’. He began with an upbeat tone.

‘Technology’. ‘I love technology, it’s great, I can do amazing stuff, get things done quicker and now nearly everything’s becoming wireless’. ‘Those software developers are amazing in what they can make happen’.

‘But’. He paused.

‘Those are the same people who also create pointless and annoying things that drive me mad’. He shrieked.

‘Why, when you turn something on does it have to display “Hello” or “Welcome” or sometimes they even work out what time of day it is and display “Good Morning” or “Good Afternoon” ‘. ‘Or they show “Please” and “Thank you”’.

‘What is the point? Am I supposed to respond? Am I rude if I don’t? Does the machine know?’

The audience reacted, the laughter had started, Jack was finding his flow and was now making use of the stage area by walking around and engaging with the onlookers. He continued.

‘I was in the supermarket the other day and I used the self service checkout’. ‘As I approached it, it detected I was there and said “Hello”, so I smiled at it as if I had to respond somehow’.

He rolled his eyes and shrugged his shoulders to animate his story to the audience.

‘I followed the instructions, scanned the stuff, swiped the supermarket membership card, paid with my bank card, picked up my shopping and started heading towards the exit.’

‘As I reached the exit, I heard a man shouting behind me, bellowing “Come On, I haven’t got All Day!”’.

‘I turned round to see a very angry faced man shouting at the checkout I’d just used. Its words that were meant for me were preventing the man from using the checkout’. Amidst the shouting I could just make out, “Please take your items” followed by “Thank you for shopping with us”, “Goodbye”’. ‘See what I mean?’

The audience roared with laughter and applause gradually spread around the room.

At the rear of the performance area was a bar lined with high stools most of which were empty since their previous occupants had moved towards the stage when the

entertainment had started.

Two barstools were still occupied, one by an old man who had drunk too much already and was asleep with his head on the end of the bar. He was there every week in much the same place and state.

On the other barstool was a man with a notebook and he was occasionally scribbling in it during Output Jack's routine.

He was also there regularly and would also be doing the same thing each time, arrive for the band, listen to Jack while scribbling and enjoying a pint of smooth flow beer and then he'd leave shortly after.

His name is Theo Nelson. He always arrived for the band because he liked music and he only listened to Jack because he wrote jokes for him. The notebook was where he recorded the audience reaction to his jokes.

He'd give them a score of between 1 and 8. Why not 1 and 10? 8 was his lucky number and that's the rule he'd made up for himself that 8 was a top joke.

A joke scoring between 1 and 3 would get scrapped and anything between 4 and 7 would be re-worked for another show.

He wasn't a professional joke writer it was just a hobby. He was actually a professional software developer so tonight he was the butt of his own jokes.

Theo was in his late 40's and had been a software developer working for many different companies since he

was 22. He liked problem solving and working with logic and had been involved in various projects over the years, some high profile, others that got scrapped when budgets ran out or where the project designers had got it wrong.

He'd had to travel occasionally with his work, some of it had been fun like being flown places and staying in flashy hotels with mini-bars and all expenses paid, but there had also been times of long commutes with early starts and late finishes.

He'd found a comfortable balance in his current job of flexible hours and being based from home. Current technology meant that all he needed was an Internet connection and he could be connected to his companies' network from anywhere.

Like the time he'd been to Edinburgh for the weekend and missed his train home on the Sunday evening, he worked the next day from a Holiday Inn sat in bed with several helpings of room service.

Theo had been in his current job for almost 2 years now and had been head hunted by his current employer following a recommendation from a colleague he'd worked with previously.

3 years ago an international body was formed in order to bring standards to the software industry. Theo had been selected to work in the field of software message standardisation. This meant that any new or existing software would have to use only messages that were held in The Official Message Bank (T.O.M.B).

If some software needs to display a message such as “Press any key to continue...”, it would be sourced from T.O.M.B. using a message code. Updates to T.O.M.B would be available as downloads to keep all users of it up to date.

The other reason for this standardisation was to eradicate those messages that software sometimes display that are useless, such as “symbolic stack dump”, “System Error”, “Access Violation at H000678945%%!!”, and of course, “An unexpected error has occurred”.

The transition would take some time but all software would have to use these standards in order to be accredited with a world recognised quality certificate.

Theo’s experience was well suited to data organisation, managing software to deploy updates and report writing for statistical analysis. He actually found the work quite straightforward compared to some past projects so he was in a comfortable environment with little stress.

Logic:

IF ProblemDoesNotExist THEN

LET LeaveWellAlone = TRUE.

When Jack had finished his performance he walked over to Theo and ordered 2 pints when he got there. ‘How’s it going mate?’ he asked Theo, hoping he’d scored well.

‘Not bad’ came a slightly strained reply, ‘I think we can keep most of it in but I’m definitely dropping the one about the Wireless Knobs, the groan from the crowd was just too much’.

Jack laughed. 'I like that one, you've got to have a bit of corny filth in somewhere' he said.

They both laughed and got stuck into their fresh pints of beer in the most laid-back fashion.

Theo had met Jack about 4 years ago and they'd become quite close friends. They didn't spend a lot of time together but it always felt like Jack wasn't very far away if Theo needed some company, a favour or if he was in trouble.

When they first met, Theo was having a crisis about his life and where he was heading. He was on the brink of making some rash decisions such as quitting his job, moving abroad, giving all his possessions away.

He ended up in a pub drinking his sorrows away. At one point he'd gone to the gents and in a drunken wobble had ended up slipping in his own urine and landing on the floor. Jack walked out of one of the cubicles, picked him up and got him back to the bar.

Theo and Jack spent the rest of that night laughing as though they'd know each other for years and it settled Theo back down enough for him to get over his crisis.

When they got to know each other better Jack's interest in standup comedy came out and with Theo's encouragement and joke contributions, they got him trying out at the comedy club. It was early days really but it was going in the right direction.

In the Comedy Club, Theo and Jack finished their pints

and went their separate ways for the evening.

* * *

Several Weeks Later:

The alarm in the High Street branch of The Peoples Savings Bank was ringing at full volume, cutting through the sound of emergency service sirens outside.

The Blue flashing lights from Police cars and Ambulances were causing strobe like effects inside the bank adding to the feeling of fear and panic.

Theo was crouched under a table at the side of the banking hall where loan applications were usually being made, but right now it was his protection. Around him, customers and staff were reacting to the single gunshot that had been heard not 15 minutes earlier.

A woman seemed to be screaming constantly just behind Theo, how was that possible, maybe it was two women taking it in turns, overlapping each other between breaths.

One man was praying in a corner, others had run out of the bank already in case of another shot.

Theo was shaking like never before, sweating and breathing heavily. He knew he was clutching something very tightly but couldn't remember what it was. His mind had gone into auto panic and wasn't allowing him to think about any one thing, not even what to do next.

As the next few minutes went by he could sense the Police presence from what their highly trained voices were saying

and see customers and staff being ushered out of the building. Why hadn't anyone come for him yet?

* * *

Several Weeks Earlier:

Theo returned home and started to settle down for the night before work the next day. He lived in a one bedroom flat in Greenwich, London. It was his home and also where he worked.

His company, Coding Standards Ltd, was based in Leeds but his work didn't require him to be based in their offices, he could work remotely and use conference-calling facilities to communicate with his colleagues.

He'd set aside some space in his flat to use as an office in order to separate his work life from the rest of his life. He would work religiously 9:00am to 5:30pm with an hour for lunch, that way he had control over his work time and his free time. He had however started to irritate himself at the end of each working day when he'd leave his office space and walk the few steps to the Kitchen and the words 'Honey I'm home!' would pop into his mind. It made him tut but smile at the same time thinking about how lucky he was to be able to work like that and that his commute from work was only taking its toll on his slippers.

As Theo got into bed and started to drift off to sleep, his mind started, as it often did, to home in on his life now and his ambitions for the future.

In Theo's life so far, he'd never truly settled, he was always

eager for change and felt that he'd not yet reached his full potential. He was clever but with a few confidence issues. He liked to try new things but could hold himself back through fear of failure if he tried them.

He was also happy in his own company but forced himself to be sociable because he knew he needed to be in order to feed his brain with new ideas, facts and scenarios. He had to keep in touch with the world around him otherwise he might never reach the potential he felt he had in him.

As all his thoughts melted into one he fell asleep and the corner of his mouth took that as a cue to open and leak saliva.

While Theo slept, an email dropped into the inbox on a computer screen in a North London flat.

From: J.P.

To: Cem

Subject: Our Boy!

Hi Cem, How's our boy doing? Just give me a quick update.

J.P.

With the sound of some late night radio show in the background, Cem clicked the reply button and started typing.

From: Cem

To: J.P.

Subject: Re: Our Boy!

All good right now, he did the usual visit to the comedy club, watched the stand up with a few beers and then went home.

All stable.

Cem

He clicked send then shut the computer down.

* * *

Theo started his work the next morning at exactly 9:00am, first he'd look through his e-mails and quickly bin those irrelevant to him and then he'd go back through the rest of the new ones.

This morning he had a new set of software messages to be added to the message database. They were for a company who had developed some software to be used by estate agents so they could manage their property sales, organise viewings and could also be used by buyers and sellers to track the progress of their property purchase or sale.

He quickly looked through the list of messages to be included and read a few out loud.

'Your Sale is Complete, please contact your agent at your earliest convenience'.

'No Purchase Details Found, please re-enter your reference to try again'.

'Your property photos have been uploaded, click Next to

return to your home page’.

As he read them out he noticed how many of them were telling people to do something, click this button, phone your agent, enter a number. He realised how powerful some of these messages could be if they were tampered with. Most computer users follow instructions they’re given by the software with no hesitation or question. The question that formed in his mind was how manipulative could they be.

What if the message came up as “Your Sale is Complete, re-start your computer to continue”. Would people do that without wondering whether it was even necessary?

How about, “Your property photos have been uploaded, please do them again because they make your house look terrible”. What would the reaction be to that? Re-take the photos? Complain to the agent? Surely there would be some sort of alternative reaction.

Theo’s mind was now working overtime and it sparked an idea for some more stand-up material for Jack.

It also dawned on him that he actually was the keeper of the power of the computer message in his very job. Certainly any message that had been submitted to T.O.M.B. was his responsibility. As he carried on with his job for the rest of the day, he couldn’t help but think about the potential power at his fingertips.

Just before the end of his working day, Theo had pretty much done all he needed to do on his work schedule. He leaned back in his office chair and put his hands behind his

head, interlocking his fingers through his brown wavy hair. His mind was working in the background and gradually invading his consciousness providing him with an idea to satisfy his curiosity about messages controlling behaviour. The idea was suddenly fully formed and Theo jerked forwards again in his chair, his hands stopping just above the top of his computer keyboard.

The computer messages in T.O.M.B. were of two types, those that were distributed as periodic downloads for large corporations running internal systems where updates to any messages were not critical, and those that were instant, pushed to mobile devices as soon as the message in the database was changed in any way.

Theo scrolled through the latter of these messages in the T.O.M.B. database, “Message Sent”, “Battery Low”, “Updates are Available” and then he saw “1 New Message Received”. His thought now was what if the message was changed to display on somebody’s mobile phone as “1 Corrupt Message Received, Turn off Phone, Remove and Replace SIM to rectify”.

It wouldn’t be true but would it make them do as it instructed?

Theo couldn’t resist testing it out, but how, and on whom?

Theo’s own mobile phone then played its own text message ringtone. Theo had it set to a heavy rock guitar riff that made him automatically pretend he was playing it. When he looked at his phone it was a message from Jack asking if they were still meeting for a beer later. So that answered the question of whom, what about how.

Theo worked out that he could write some program code to automatically alter the message in the database for a short period of time before changing it back to its original content. As soon as the message was changed, it would be pushed to the mobile phone networks and become immediately in use.

During the time it had been altered he could send Jack a message, which would show the corrupt version, and observe what happens.

He replied to Jack saying yes to the beer later and told him to be in the comedy club for 10:00pm.

Theo finished setting up his experiment, double checking it to make sure it couldn't go wrong and then signed off for the evening.

* * *

Theo arrived at the comedy club at 9:50pm. He waited inside the doorway but round the corner slightly in an alcove where he would see the back of anyone coming into the club but they wouldn't see him. He'd know Jack when he arrived by his long slim build, beany hat and laid back walk.

Theo checked his watch, 9:59pm, his computer program would kick in after another minute, altering the message in the database. He nervously shuffled around in the alcove, a quick thought arrived. 'What am I doing?' but before he could answer himself Jack entered the club and swaggered towards the bar.

It was now 10:01pm. Theo located his prepared text message on his phone that just read, “Your Round Mate!” and pressed send.

He left the alcove and slowly made his way nearer to Jack, he recognised Jack’s ringtone when it rang.

Jack snatched his phone out of his pocket and the display read “1 Corrupt Message Received, Turn off Phone, Remove and Replace SIM to rectify”.

‘What the hell?’ said Jack under his breath.

Theo was now staring intently at Jack looking down at his phone, willing the desired reaction to happen.

10:04pm, Theo heard another phone receive a message just to his right, at the same time Jack held down the power button on his phone for a few seconds and started to remove the SIM card, ‘Yes, Yes, Yes!’ was shouting in Theo’s mind, his grin and eyes getting larger at the same time.

Jack re-inserted the card and switched the phone back on, the altered message had disappeared and the normal looking message from Theo was showing as unread. Jack opened the message and looked behind him to see Theo grinning like a fool at him.

10:05pm, Theo’s program code would now have switched the message in the database back to its original wording and sending it back out to the network as though nothing had happened.

Out of the corner of Theo’s right eye, he caught a glimpse

of a woman fussing about something. He turned his head to see her holding her mobile phone in one hand and a SIM card in the other. 'Something about a corrupt message' he heard her say to the man sat next to her.

Gulp! Theo swallowed hard and started to wonder how many other text messages actually got sent in that 5 minute window, how many people were stood right now with a SIM card in their hand? What had he done?

He wasn't grinning anymore. He looked to be slightly in shock as Jack pushed a beer into his hand and said, 'What's up with you? Bad day at work?'

Theo slowly shook his head, 'No', he said, 'Maybe tomorrow though!'

* * *

8th August 1970

In the late evening light of summer, a man and a woman are sat on a bench in a quiet corner of Hyde Park in London. They're sat upright, expectant and looking at the dwindling number of passersby.

The woman eventually nudged the man and nodded in the direction of a younger man holding a small boys hand walking towards them.

The couple stood up from the bench as they approached.

The younger man was dressed all in black and had a suitcase in his other hand that had some stickers on it of cartoon animals. He was about 20 years old and slim with

blonde wavy hair.

The young boy was about 4 with a pudding bowl haircut, stripy shirt and shorts. He also had odd socks and plastic sandals on his feet. He was looking up at the man holding his hand wondering what would happen next.

The younger man spoke first in an American accent. 'Here's our boy' he said, 'I've got all his gear in the bag, ready to go'.

The woman took possession of the suitcase and held out her hand to the little boy. He turned to look up at her.

She lowered herself to his height and took his hand, 'Come on' she said. 'Let's go home Theo'.

The woman nodded to the American and her partner said to him 'I presume we'll be hearing from you J.P.'

'Oh yes!' said the American. He winked at the boy before turning back in the direction he had come and walked away.