

The Shift of Numbers

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“The country was founded on the principle that the primary role of government is to protect property from the majority, and so it remains.”

Noam Chomsky

Michael adjusted the looking glass with his thin nimble fingers. Each one seemed perfectly designed for the task at hand. He peered through the bronze magnifier attached to his glasses and with expert movements removed another tiny butterfly-shaped piece of metal. He sat in a huge circular room with bare white-washed walls and no windows. The ceiling was domed and melted into the walls, giving the impression of an underground chapel or mosque. In the centre, dwarfed by the space around it, stood an intricate mechanical device about the size of an elephant and a sturdy wooden desk that Michael sat dutifully at. The only echoed sound - an occasional whir or buzz - came from the cameras attached high on the walls as they zoomed and moved around, each placed equidistantly around the lofty circle. He stopped for a moment lost in thought, his mind reliving the events of the morning...

As was his routine, he had caught the train from Aldgate, an opulent area in the suburbs close to the capital. Then it was a short walk through the lively bustling streets to the vast government building he was now in. It felt to Michael, fighting through early morning befuddlement, marching, hunched and automatic through the footsteps of his everyday route that the warm rainy drizzle was bleaching the life out of the walls surrounding him. Pools of vibrant colour mercilessly washed down into the dank and extremely effective maze of tunnels and pipes beneath his feet, like someone was rubbing energy out of the city and depositing it in a river heading swiftly towards the sea, to be further diluted. Only until the sun goes down, he mused, as he passed another half-finished watercolour of a coffee shop, until the neon glow of night reignites the city and the walls are repainted, energised and refreshed.

At the edge of his consciousness, through the whoosh and sputter of the wind and rain, he could hear the latest 3-minute overplayed wonder offered up by popular music culture. This tinny insubstantial offering came from an open taxi window that crawled along besides him at walking pace. The window opened presumably to offer

the world a morsel of this musical marvel, a moving stage made complete with swirling bitter smoke from the cabby's tapping fingers. The song tried to offer him a glimpse into a world filled with meaning, a whole relationship squeezed into verse. He didn't get it, being spoon-fed other people's feelings in bite-size chunks, never living the dream but realising what it is via song, sensation creating the need to listen again and again, all the while subconsciously learning to desire the feeling it creates, all available at the push of a button.

...Snapping out of his reverie, he noticed a shrill woman's voice some distance ahead calling his name. As he walked, peering through the human traffic, an elderly looking woman was upon him, grabbing at his arm.

"MICHAEL," she exclaimed in a disbelieving voice, "I can't believe it's you!"

"Hello," replied Michael, vaguely recognising the face (or, at least, its origins before it had been covered in a mask of wrinkled, papery skin).

"What ar..." she managed to say before a loud bang originating from the direction of the road momentarily deafened them both. Before he could look round to find its cause, he found himself on the floor, being pressed downwards by what felt like a very large person. Out of the corner of his eye, cheek pressed onto the grimy wet concrete, he saw several children running away from an expensive car, watched speechlessly by all on the street. (Later he realised that despite all the commotion he still placed a value on the car in an instant and transferred that meaning firmly onto the unfolding situation: cheap car, transporting illegitimate kids to school - maybe a misfire; pricy car equals mafia bombs, excitement and, perhaps, a touch of intrigue.) Glancing back he caught sight of the woman he was just speaking to being quickly led away and placed unceremoniously into the back of a car (black and valuable). Suddenly he felt himself lifted onto his feet by strong arms. Quickly looking around, he saw the back of a muscular gentleman in a suit jogging swiftly away. As he unconsciously patted himself down to check for any injury and searching for something to wipe the street off his face, he realised everyone was looking at him.

"Michael...Michael?" Awoken from his reminiscence, he looked up to see the tea lady pointing at a cup of tea expectantly.

Michael worked as a master printer. His primary job consisted of making printing plates by hand. These plates were what the government used to print money. It was an intricate and delicate job that took up 6 hours of his day. For his service to the company, and indeed the whole country, he was paid, on a yearly basis, 120 thousand

of the pounds he made so well. By far the most important part of his week began as soon as he arrived; even with today's intrigue he still made it in on time. In fact, he prided himself on his punctuality; he hadn't been late in 13 years. The last time was when his wife had gone into labour causing him to miss the 8:04 from Aldgate.

This special job only took 15 minutes but was the glue that bonded his country together. He received a red envelope, delivered by armoured car at exactly 5 past 9. In this envelope was a letter telling him the amount of currency the government would need producing over the next week. Not 1 note above or 1 note below this number must be produced, or the whole country's monetary system would be thrown into chaos - well that's what he was told regularly.

The number in the envelope was then programmed into a wondrous looking machine. It could only be described as a large lurching mechanical insect that spat out sheets of money at regular intervals. Michael's beautiful plates comprised a small part of the exotically designed innards and had to be replaced every few months, keeping his nimble fingers busy. Every piece of valuable paper printed in this way had to be counted and packaged, ready for another armoured car to pick it up. Interestingly, if the money was stolen on the way to the bank, it was still circulating in the community in which it was intended to be spent and as such would be of little consequence to the country as a whole. On the other hand, if the red envelope was intercepted and the number in it changed, the correct amount of new notes would not be produced, creating chaotic waves in the equilibrium of the monetary system.

*

Joan worked across town from Michael in a factory. Her job may well have been as important to the country as Michael's, but for her 8 hours a day she was paid 13 thousand pounds per year. Joan destroyed the money that was so carefully made across town. She and a 43-strong workforce did this, as the money got dirty, torn and soiled. Money was delivered in an armoured car every 12 hours to the factory. Michael knew why the money was delivered to the factory in an armoured car and in his social circles it was considered as a bit of a joke. (It was so as not to devalue the perception of the worth of the dirty little pieces of paper, rather than to keep the robbers at bay). You see, due to the skill of Michael at making his plates, it was nearly impossible to counterfeit the notes and this was the basis on which the whole

system worked. So, at any given time, a small computer in the basement of a high security government contained two numbers. The first was the most important of numbers and today it was 13,324,284,734.65. This number was the amount of currency in pounds that the country had in circulation. The second number was the total amount of money in the country, both electronic and “real”; this was a very large number.

In this country, like many others, the government taxed its people’s wages and it taxed everything they bought. For example, a carrot that was grown by Bill would be sold to a shop for 8p; Bill would have to give 5 percent of his 8p to the government. The shop would then sell on the carrot to Michael for 16p and give 5 percent of this to the government. Subsequently, Michael would eat the carrot. So the carrot Bill grew would have earned the government 1.2p and, for some time, Bill was the only person who grew carrots. This meant that, if he made too many carrots, they would be worth less and this was due to the fact that there were only so many carrots people would buy. To sell a greater number of carrots would require either reducing the price to make them more attractive to the consumer or spending money on advertising to increase consumer awareness of his product. Bill had been known, on a number of occasions, to destroy quantities of carrots with this very thought in mind.

Bill’s problem arose when John - another farmer - started up his own carrot farm convinced that it was a good way to make money, but placing him in direct competition with Bill. The upshot was that both of them had to make their produce appear more attractive to consumers like Michael. They did this by lowering the price of their carrots and making better looking carrots. So, in consequence, they both strived to produce more handsome carrots in a shorter time than ever before. And Michael had never bought a cheaper, more beautiful carrot in all his life.

Unfortunately, living in a small country that could only sustain 1 commercial carrot farm, both farmers had a problem: they were both working extended hours to produce exquisite looking carrots and were both skint. Bill was even having marital difficulties affected by this state of affairs – his wife had no money.

Both Bill and John realised after some time that things couldn’t go on as they were; both had very little money and even less free time. So, they organised a meeting in a local pub to put their affairs in order. After a lot of shouting (mainly by Bill about his wife) and a large quantity of ale, John had an idea. Its simplicity was foolproof - they would get a respected scientist to tell the newspapers that carrots contained

special chemicals that prevented blindness and actually improved eyesight. The only stumbling block would be the scientific community; but, by using all their combined savings and finding, via some dodgy business types, a suitably malleable scientist, the plan was set in motion.

Before long the words of the 'respected' scientist reverberated around every shop in the land and everyone wanted carrots. It worked a little too well and the demand for carrots outstripped what both of them could produce; consequently, the price of carrots went through the roof. Bill and John both needed to expand their farms in order to grow more carrots to meet demand but they needed a lot of money to do this, as land is expensive.

Bill decided to sell shares in his farm to raise the money for the land. He created the Carrot Corporation™ and sold 49 percent of his company in 3,920,000 shares of 1 pound each. The demand for carrots was so high that most dabblers in the markets saw this as a sure thing and all the shares sold quickly. Joan even got caught up in the fever of making money and re-mortgaged her house to buy shares in Carrot Corporation™.

John, never 1 for too much hard work, decided not to expand his farm and instead sold it to another would-be farmer for a large sum of money. He married a woman he met on the internet and moved to foreign lands.

After getting the investment money from his shares, Bill purchased a large plot of land next to his farm and hired an additional 12 people to help him grow carrots. After some time, the farm was producing a huge amount of carrots and Bill was able to meet the demand of the consumers with the share price rocketing from 1 pound to the now current price of 192p. If you wanted to buy carrots, fortunately they were now back to their normal price and ordinary uninspiring appearance, although most people did now like to buy more of them, just in case it was true what they said. Also - for the moment at least - Bill's wife was very happy with the amount of money that was now available to her and the amount of time her husband was away in the fields. She was even trying to talk Bill into renewing their wedding vows overseas.

*

Richard pulled his car, or as he put it his 'ride' into the valet parking lot and handed over the keys along with an unnecessarily large gratuity. As was his custom,

he added the words, "Take care of her," in a firm but gentle voice, keeping hold of the keys until the valet replied in the affirmative. He was adamant his morning ritual guaranteed her scratch-free survival, 'her' being his oversize metallic slice of decadence, his shiny, chromed and air-conditioned leather clad mistress. He exited the car park into the morning drizzle. The light specks of water landing on his spectacles immediately destroyed his good mood and reminded him where he was heading. As he walked, the light began refracting over each of the droplets creating a myriad of unwanted colours and distortions in front of him. With a sigh, he removed his spectacles and wiped them with an expensive monogrammed silk handkerchief and the world blurred out of focus. He had tried contact lenses (until repeated corneal infections had forced him to rethink) and toyed with the idea of laser surgery. The thought of lasers cutting, penetrating his eye, while they were held open by metal contraptions made him physically shudder. The only way he could go through with it would be if he were kidnapped and drugged, something he had more than once considered organising.

Without thinking, he sneezed into his handkerchief before attempting to cross the road, realising angrily that he had spoiled the only item on his person that could wipe his glasses. He peered left then right through the growing blur, just like the TV adverts had instructed him as a child, when he caught sight of a group of what his peer group would describe as 'youths' across the road from him. One of the young lads shouted something incomprehensible to another, which was followed quickly by a deafening bang. As the street stopped to look, what looked like pieces of a schoolbag and torn paper rained down like a ticker tape parade in honour of stupidity. What Richard and most of the speechless throng had noticed with interest though - after quickly dismissing the loud bang as a prank - was a tall grey-haired gentleman outside 1 of the shops who had been rugby tackled to the ground. As Richard watched with curiosity, the tackler lifted the gentleman up, turned and jogged away. Within a minute, bystander apathy had kicked in again and everyone started going about their daily business, most likely thinking of ways to make the story 'you'll never guess what happened to me on the way to work' more interesting for their work colleagues. Richard, shaking his head, crossed the road and made his way to the greengrocer's via a coffee shop, noting in the window a special offer on carrots.

Richard works on the stock exchange. He went to university for five years of his life and his parents re-mortgaged their house to allow him to do this. His job consists

of receiving phone calls from his clients, who then tell him how much stock they want to buy or sell. He then goes out onto the trading floor and buys or sells these stocks for the best price he can. Richard's parents live next to Joan and her husband Pete and he has known them all his life, so Richard was more than happy to help out Joan in purchasing 150,000 pounds' worth of shares in the Carrot Corporation™, as he saw the company as a solid investment. He also liked the fact he got 1 per cent of the value of every trade he facilitated. So he got his hands on 15 hundred pounds of Joan and Pete's carefully saved money.

*

Michael, after standing up and noticing all eyes were on him, checked his watch conspicuously and walked on down the street, making his way into his usual array of shops, ending in the greengrocer's. In front of him, in the queue, a 'business type' was animatedly chatting with the storekeeper. Drawing closer, Michael overheard the exchange.

"What do you mean? All of them!" exclaimed the apron-clad man behind the counter.

"I want all the carrots you have. It's quite a simple request really."

"Okay, okay. Whatever you want. Never heard the like of it, that's all." The man, shaking his head, started emptying the remaining carrots off the display cabinets into carrier bags.

"Erm... would it be possible for me to have a few?" interjected Michael politely.

"I need these I'm afraid," replied the business type turning towards Michael and fixing him with a look of recognition. "Were you on the street earlier when those kids let off that firework?" he said, quizzically.

"I didn't hear anything, so no..."

"Could have sworn it was you... Ah well..." Turning his head with a raised eyebrow he opened his wallet, placing a card on the surface next to the till.

"Don't do cards, mate," said the shopkeeper. While the 2 men discussed this point in ever-increasing detail, Michael glanced around the shop, taking care to notice reflections in the many mirrored surfaces. He spotted 1, and then another, standing by the door with a pineapple in his hand. They were supposed to be secret, but he had

known about his bodyguards/watchers for some time. Only this morning did he realise just how seriously they took their job.

“Well I’m NEVER coming in here again,” shouted the man loudly before sneezing into a posh looking hankie and exiting the store. Michael watched him leave, then ordered his groceries.

“Credit cards... never trusted ’em.”

“Me neither, me neither,” replied Michael with a chuckle, removing a creaseless 5-pound note from a large wallet.

“The slave begins by demanding justice and ends by wanting to wear a crown.”

Albert Camus

Gordon didn't notice the smell of fried food etched into his nostrils, he was so used to it. He tried not to let a look of disgust or the absolute boredom he felt show on his face when he cheerily said, “Who's next, please?” or “Yes, mate, what can I get for you?” Standing behind the counter, he imagined that it was impossible for others to understand the soul-destroying numbness that comes from a job of this type.

“Who's next, please?” A fat man, jowls dripping with congealed bacon bits and ketchup, stumbling under the weight of his hardening arteries, walked slowly to the counter, grinning happily, his fatty drug injection already taken this morning. The counter he had wiped only seconds earlier was subjected to the fat man's greasy hand putting all his money down on it, separating coins from used shreds of tissue with stubby hairy fingers.

The contempt was hard to conceal, as was the rising level of bile.

“I want another cup of that shite you call tea in this place,” he exclaimed, pushing the coins along the counter, leaving a trail of something. A muffled snigger came from the other people in the queue.

The only reason they should be laughing, thought Gordon, was if it were half-price to join Weight Watchers. Even then they wouldn't have let them through the door without soaking them all in bleach first. He thought of accidentally tipping over the tea urn on the counter. That would teach them.

“That's 45p, please.” Smile, look at the floor.

“Keep the change young 'un.” said the chubby grin as Gordon counted out exactly 45 pence in filthy change.

“Cheers...Who's next please?” he said as he handed over a mug of lukewarm brown liquid. The man scooped in 3 or 4 sugars, spilling most of it on the counter before moving to a nearby table.

Another fat man changed places with the first one as the drink from the previous night that helped numb the pain of this tedious life started to get its revenge. Sharp familiar twinges in the stomach brought life back into focus, along with the reality that this was going to be over soon, in only 6 more hours. That's how he spent his time, serving customers, punters, other human beings he had no interest in or desire to please. But it was understood, he thought, that all those customers knew he hated working in this job. But then he supposed, why on earth would he do it...

It started as a stop-gap, a filler, something before doing something else. He didn't know what the other something was, but he figured it would come to him. In the meantime, put the hours in and get a bit of cash.

But it disintegrated, that knowledge that he could do anything, replaced by nothing more than fear. It was a vicious circle. The job creating low self-esteem, feelings of helplessness, then contempt, all followed by a dessert of high cholesterol fear, fear of not being able to move on, brought about by the low self-esteem, repeat, repeat, repeat.

All Gordon wanted to do when he was a little boy was retire, no police chases or trips to the moon, just retire, as soon as possible. He watched his grandparents do what they wanted to do, whenever they wanted and it seemed like a dream lifestyle. All the while, his parents struggled to make ends meet in jobs that quite clearly chipped away at their sanity. It wasn't that he had a difficult upbringing in the slightest, just that from a very early age he had subconsciously grown to despise working. If the opportunity was there to do nothing, then why on earth - he thought - do anything at all, especially if there was no joy in it.

Gordon worked in a café just down the road from the Carrot Corporation™. He had worked there for 4 years and didn't like to talk about what he earned. His job had suddenly become a lot harder as now he had to wash up 12 more cups and plates and 24 more knives and forks every breakfast and lunchtime. He hated carrots and had never eaten one in his life and his eyesight was perfectly fine. He was getting very annoyed with the amount of work he was now expected to do and the way his boss, Ted, didn't seem to want to pay him any more money for this extra work.

These feelings were mirrored up the road by the majority of Bill's new workers who, at first, were glad to be in gainful employment, but had become disillusioned with the amount of extra hard labour that Bill expected of them, and wanted more

money. Their discontent had quickly spread through the original workforce like a grumpy plague and, after several weeks, the mood on the farm was at breaking point.

That night, after declaring: "I'm off to the pub, you lock up," Gordon's boss had gone. This left Gordon alone with a veritable mountain of washing up and a very muddy floor to mop. Gordon had never been this angry in his life and after much debate with himself, he acted. Not one plate in the café was left unbroken, nor one fork unbent. He left, vowing never to return.

*

Bill awoke to the sounds of silence. "Must be early," he thought and closed his eyes. Some time later, he was frantically shaken awake by the expensively adorned hand of his wife who informed him that he needed to go down to the fields sharpish. Throwing on his clothes, Bill made his way outside into the cool morning air and began searching for his workforce. He was by the barn when he spotted them in a neighbouring field. The majority of them had buried themselves waist deep in the earth and had painted their faces orange. The remaining workers, including the foreman were shovelling earth around them, securing them snugly in the ground. Bill strode over to them with a puzzled look on his sleepy face.

"What's going on here? Have you gone mad?" exclaimed Bill.

Upon hearing this, the foreman jumped into a hole up to his waist like the others and shouted, "Strike, strike, strike!" as loud as he could. The workers and the foreman all put their hands by their sides and started swaying in unison, shouting "Strike!" over and over again. Bill scratched his head and walked back to the house.

The note was attached to his door by 4 sturdy-looking nails and simply said, "We are on strike from this day forth until an hourly rate more suitable to our working conditions is agreed upon and breakfasts are again provided." Bill read and re-read the note, all the while slowly shaking his head. He jumped into his new 5-speed tractor and drove down to the café. Upon arrival, he was greeted by the owner sweeping broken crockery out of the door.

"I thought we had a deal with the breakfasts. What's going on? Why are you not serving my lads?" demanded Bill.

"Nothing of the kind," said the owner in his most reasonable tones. "It's that bloody lad. He broke all my crockery. I can't get any more till this evening. I will be

opening tomorrow at 7 o'clock, on the dot. I hope you won't cancel the deal with the breakfasts."

Bill appeared slightly less angry and asked the café owner what had happened earlier in the morning. The owner recalled the events to Bill and told him that all the workers had turned up just after 7 for their free breakfast and, when he informed them that he was closed for the morning, they started ranting and raving.

"They were all talking at once," he told Bill. "All I kept hearing was that they were entitled to a free breakfast and that it was the last straw. Then they left, but not before stealing 3 tubs of my orange paint."

"So you will be open tomorrow?" asked Bill, staring intently at the owner, daring him to say no.

"Tomorrow as normal," came the reply.

Bill jumped back into his tractor and headed back up to the farm.

"That paint was expensive," shouted the café owner up the road after him.

*

Richard was having a bad day. He was perusing a cookbook in an attempt to find some carrot-related recipes when his phone rang, and didn't stop ringing all morning. The strike at Carrot Corporation™ was affecting the share price and lots of angry people were phoning him to complain about his lack of foresight in predicting it and to try and sell their shares before the price dropped any further. Carrot Corporation™ shares currently sold for 112p.

*

Joan was also having a bad day as she had heard the news of Carrot Corporation™ on the local radio show. After much discussion with Pete, and several cups of tea, she decided to get Pete to call her stockbroker, Richard.

"Hello. Shure Stock. Richard speaking. How may I help you?" said a deflated voice.

"Hello. Is that Richard? It's Pete, Joan's husband."

"Hello, Pete. How may I help you?"

“Well, it’s Joan. She’s worried about her shares. What’s happening? What should we do?”

“Well, Pete, I have been looking very seriously at the goings on at Carrot Corporation™ today. You must believe me that this is a very minor setback. Both you and Joan stand to make a lot of money if you just hang in there,” came the well-rehearsed reply.

“But the share price is going down.”

“Have you ever traded before, Pete?”

“Well no, but...”

“Well I have Pete...” interrupted Richard “...in fact I have been trading in stocks and shares for almost 12 years. All we are experiencing is a minor dip on an otherwise pentatonically transverse upward curve. I’ve been over the figures with several of my colleagues and computed the results. It’s on an upward spike.”

“So it’s on the up?”

Richard didn’t need to see Pete to know that he was scratching his head. “In a manner of speaking... yes, it is, my friend. The strike will end soon and the stock price will rise again. You and Joan will both be very rich. I would only give the best advice to friends of my parents. Was there anything else, Pete?”

“Well...no. I suppose everything will be okay.”

This was Richard’s last phone call before the stock market closed for the day. He had a full evening planned too. He was trying out a new carrot risotto and he had just bought a juicer to make carrot milkshakes with. Richard’s fiancée was getting a little concerned with his new-found obsession with all things carrot. It seemed to her that in the last 2 weeks Richard hadn’t had 1 meal that didn’t contain at least 90% carrot.

*

It was official: after 2 weeks the strike was over. The share price had dropped to a new record low of 79p, but in Bill’s eyes things could only get better. Over the last 2 weeks all of his 27 staff members had arrived every morning, covered their faces with a fresh coat of orange paint and climbed back into their holes. It was agreed in the long and difficult negotiations that the workers new hourly rate would increase to 4.98 pounds per hour with a new overtime rate of 5.23 pounds per hour. The foreman was particularly clever in his inclusion of an overtime rate as he knew there were no

carrots in the field at the moment and the workers would be called upon to work extra to rectify the problem. Bill's current problem was that he needed to grow a large amount of carrots in a very short amount of time otherwise he would be dangerously close to going bankrupt. In the spirit of goodwill that had descended upon the farm he had decided to push all his current worries to the back of his mind and take the workers to the local pub to celebrate the end of the strike.

The local pub had a slightly damp smell to it and was constructed to look like an affable non-descript version of every other public house in the land. The builders had succeeded admirably and were awarded a contract by the brewery to build 14 other pubs in the country, all absolutely identical, apart from the name.

The workers were enjoying the drinks Bill had bought for them in the lounge while Bill, who had more pressing problems to think about, sat at a table on his own in the bar. Nursing a large brandy, Bill stared into the empty ashtray in front of him and considered his lack of carrots and what that spelled for the future: no wife, no farm, no money, no job, no prospects.

"I know who you are," came a voice from the gloom. The face attached to the voice belonged to a middle-aged man with very red cheeks and overgrown eyebrows.

"I would appreciate being left alone, please," Bill responded curtly.

"I know all about your problem." The face came a bit closer and the owner of the face sat down opposite Bill.

"What's it got to do with you?"

"Well," cough, "I know you need a lot of carrots and quick."

"Well, friend," said Bill leaning forward and looking as menacing as he could, "most people around here know that. What's it to you?"

"I have a solut..." cough, "...ion"

"A what?"

"A solution."

Puzzled, Bill looked on. "How could you have a solution? What'ya mean by that, squire?"

"I'm a scientist. I have a..." extended bout of coughing, "... a batch of super growing formula, especially for carrots."

"You mean like a fertiliser?"

"A bit like fertiliser, only better. It will reduce the growing time of your average carrot by a half."

“Really? Seems a bit far-fetched to me, does that.”

“I can assure you that, excuse me,” the Scientist noisily cleared his throat while Bill looked on with interest, “the formula (or fertiliser, as you put it) works perfectly well.”

“Well, how much would it cost me?” said Bill sceptically with a glint in his eye.

“I know your situation and it wouldn’t cost you any money as such. The share price as it stands is very low. All you would have to do is give me 50 thousand shares. Either from the half million you own or buy them for me.

Bill looked on bemused then pulled out a pen from his top pocket, writing something on the back of a beer mat. “So you want me to give you nearly 40 thousand pounds for a fertiliser that may or may not work. Thanks, but no thanks,” Bill laughed.

“No, no, perhaps I...” coughs repeatedly, “...didn’t explain it right. You keep hold of the shares until you see how well the formula works then you give them to me. You give me nothing up front.”

“Oh, I see. That seems a bit too good to be true. What’s to stop me from keeping the fertiliser and not giving you the shares after I’ve grown me carrots?”

“I will go to the press and tell them you have been using my formula.”

“What difference will that make to me?” said Bill, puzzled again.

“While the formula does work, and I can assure you of that, it’s not exactly been tested properly.”

After 2 hours of further debate, the Scientist held out a scarred hand, which strangely had no fingernails. Bill spat in his palm and with a handshake the deal was struck. Bill settled back in his chair and winked at Gordon’s boss who had just entered the bar.

“Drink, Bill?” he shouted, wiggling his hand in the air.

A thumb in the air replied. “And one for my new friend.”

*

If anyone had looked to the west on his or her walk home from the pub that evening, they would have seen a figure silhouetted in the moonlight. The shadowy figure seemed to be digging a small hole in Bill’s garden. Occasionally, a glint from what looked like gold bounced playfully off the figure’s hand.

*

“Would you believe it?” exclaimed Richard for the 100th time that day. The recipient of Richard’s astonishment was his bored looking fiancée. “I can see properly again. I told you that the carrots would work, didn’t I?”

“Yes, you did, Richard,” replied his fiancée without looking up from the television guide.

“What do you want for dinner? I’ve just got this new cookbook,” Richard effused.

“I thought we could eat out for a change.”

“We can’t go out. Nowhere caters for my dietary requirements.”

“So we’re never going to eat out again?” came an exasperated response.

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As Gordon waited for the bus he became acutely aware of the endless stream of cars going in the direction he wanted to go. It was a quarter to 3 in the afternoon and he was on his way to the job centre. He was the only person at the bus stop, the only person it seemed without his own means of transport. He passed the time by staring up the road past a distant hedgerow, expectantly waiting to see the top of a red double-decker bus. As he waited, it suddenly struck him the sheer amount of money that was speeding past his eyes: each car, from the clapped-out old banger to the luxury sports car, was worth something. On average he figured each car must be worth a few 1000 pounds, not to mention the money spent on fuel. Every few seconds, a different model sped its way past him, some with air-conditioning, others with furry dice.

As he waited, growing colder and considerably later, he wondered what the odds were that 1 of these cars would stop and offer him a lift. In all his years of waiting at bus stops it had never happened, so the odds must be quite low. He then thought about all the money that went into building these cars and the money individuals spent on them. Then there were the roads themselves, snaking all over the country with no real plan, connecting up everyone, haphazardly avoiding hills and water, like veins. Every evening, human cargo pumped out from tired cities to their homes on ever-narrowing roads. He wondered what would happen if all the vast amounts of money that went

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