

A Guide to the Degenerate Lifestyle in 18 parts
18 short and very short stories

1. HIDDEN CAMERAS
2. CAN'T BE SURE
3. NASTY DAY OFF
4. RESOLUTION
5. DRUGS INCIDENT
6. SCAM
7. LAWSUITS
8. BLAME THE DIVORCE
9. CULT
10. CASUAL APPROACH TO WORK
11. TERRY
12. DAVE
13. ACCIDENTAL HERO
14. OBSCENE SHORT STORY
15. FIRST DATE
16. CHARITY
17. DEATH WITHOUT DYING
18. STALKER

HIDDEN CAMERAS

The hidden cameras were the first bad idea. Sure, you wanted to know if she was cheating, but the way things had panned out, you never would have guessed. It turned out they met up every Wednesday, early evening, when you were supposed to be out at golf. They meet up and fuck in your bedroom: he fucks your wife. You'd been trying to drop hints for a few months since you first suspected her, there was talk of a counsellor but she always said she didn't really want to talk about it.

You knew it would be on a Wednesday but finding yourself trapped in your own wardrobe, in the pitch black, listening to another man fucking your wife is not what you ever had in mind. For a start, you never were a big fan of the dark if you're honest, and she's yelping and groaning. Like she used to with you. They finally finish and you're shaking your head in despair trapped in the wardrobe and then you hear them gently talking and your wife is saying 'He seems to be... stalking... no, not *stalking* me, but it's all a bit strange...' she says glumly, 'I caught him jacking off, wearing my underwear' 'The pervert!!' says the man and your cheeks burn with shame because it's true and it's at that moment the plan crystallises and you make the decision to burn down his house regardless of the consequences.

CAN'T BE SURE

How you believe the birds are following you is you start off getting high as usual and then, wandering around dreamily, patterns start to form and you try to make sense of it in the meantime. You've seen these patterns before. You'd begun paying more attention a few weeks earlier when you'd been watching a night-time flock of birds off to roost, flying in patterns and sequences of what seemed like hundreds of birds, in unspoken formation. As you watched you noticed one bird sort of waver in amidst the acrobatics and you'd watched as the bird sort of careened further out of sync with the others before spiralling a little and then slamming into a telegraph pole.

Everyone around you seemed to be really busy declaring themselves to be artists or film directors or global head of some department. This was happening more on the internet but it was spilling over into real life and it left you sleepless. Recently you've been treating everyone suspiciously. You've seen the police more often and it seems likely that they're deliberately waking you up every morning at 4am, sirens screeching and howling. You have begun committing observations into a notebook. July 23, 6ft man on corner, whistling, nervous, 9.50 – 10am. Blue car parked under tree outside the Mews. You're just busily documenting what's going on around you, paying attention.

Everyone everywhere seemed to be endlessly going to places, meetings, holidays, events. They were networking and forging social networks, busy making themselves a centre of attention. Every building seemed to be under construction, whether they were being built up or torn down and new ones being built in their place. Nothing seemed very steady or certain. Bored of the strip joints you go to you, having upset each and every one of the local girls who danced there, you visited a couple of after-hours seedy swingers clubs in the city but even there nothing really seemed to deserve or demand any particular attention and if you were honest some of the people were a *bit much*.

It gets worse in the park, you sit under a strange smelling tree just as a flock of loud black birds flutter down, chirping aggressively. You can't relax so you head to another tree for shade nearby instead. One after another, with some urgency, the birds fly across to that tree, settling and cawing and chirruping loudly. They appear to be scratching at the bark and one flutters noisily down the flaps moving the wind on your face and the sound is visceral and physical and your heart races and you hesitate but then decide to call it a day and head home to the safety of your room.

NASTY DAY OFF

It seems almost pointless but it's my day off so I have to find something to do. Recently I've been trying to think how normal people think. Since I was thrown out of the local strip joint, I've found myself in a nearby adult cinema pretty regularly. I always considered myself above other people but, sat in the dark in the adult cinema at 11am, I have to admit I'm easily as much of a shitbag as the rest of the men in there in the dark, watching a girl and four guys who really don't seem to be enjoying themselves very much. At some point you notice one of the guys taking instructions and nodding to someone off camera and it ruins the illusion for you.

The film does nothing to squash my nerves. I head to the train station and order a coffee, some water. I take off my sunglasses for a moment, put them back on, preferring the way things look with them on. I buy the same ticket I bought last time I was here, mumbling at the clerk. Gemma was with me last time and I wince at the painful thought. She did not like to fuck and that was a painful situation with painful memories. I'm struck with self-pity before laughing at myself - I had tried to convince her I was a shitbag several times but right now it doesn't make any difference anyhow. Heaven knows how it lasted so long.

I light a cigarette, smoke a third of it, look at it, considering whether or not to finish it. These are the decisions I'm faced with these days. I take a few more drags before stubbing it out and it buckles awkwardly, in an unaesthetically pleasing way. Sitting in the ashtray, it irritates me, though I do my best to ignore it. I slip the ticket in the machine and it whirrs and clicks and I stand on the platform, waiting.

The train I caught last time isn't due for 35 minutes, so instead I take the first one that arrives. It follows a totally different route, heads out of the city in a totally different direction. An unknown train on an unknown route. This is the best I can do these days. Being on the train, the motion of it helps me to feel a little relaxed. My stomach is churned up because I haven't eaten anything and have drunk four strong coffees. I play some music on headphones, but everything sounds drab, dull. I skip through the tracks restlessly, listening to the intros and then listlessly moving to the next track. I look out of the window at the towns and at the passengers on the train. The only place I ever wanted to be was someplace else.

Sat there bored, I split the passengers into those I'd like to fuck and those I wouldn't. Interestingly a few people who were arguably past their best make it into the list. At some point during the journey, a strong wave of nausea washes over me and I'm all of a sudden swept with the urgent desire to get off the train, quickly. I hold my breath, I pinch my arm, I bite my nails, convinced I'm going to vomit any second. Finally - after less than two minutes - the next station homes into view. I'm feeling more relieved than I can remember. The doors open and I stumble out into the bright warm air and I rush to the nearest restroom, head to the toilet. Predictably, nothing happens. It's been like that for a while and I've considered mentioned it to a doctor or other healthcare professional but I've been too worried about where that might lead. I prefer not to know.

Back out on the station platform I'm feeling calm, relaxed. I decide to leave the station and light a cigarette to take stock of the situation. I'm at D- station, I have no connexion to this area of the city so I decide to head for something to eat. At the cafe I order a chicken salad and it arrives and I pick at it, eating the chicken and leaving everything else. It tastes of nothing and I chew the food mindlessly, swallowing at the appropriate moment. I think of Caroline and how fat she got with me. Looking back, the only time she was happy was when she was eating. Even shopping, which she used to love, made her depressed, having to buy bigger sizes each time to accommodate her bulky frame, her refusal to admit that she needed to change slowly crystallizing into sheer delusion.

A voice cries out, 'Holy fuck Jack, is that you??' and I spin around still sat down to see Gary, an old colleague whom I'd once gotten along with ok, we'd smoked weed together after work a few times, a few years ago. As with all my acquaintances eventually an expiration date was reached and I simply stopped any kind of contact. At that moment I can't recall how things had worked out but it definitely wasn't pretty, you can be sure of that. It never is. Later I remembered that he'd owed me some money, which I'd written off and had no wish to attempt to recoup. Gary relates, in bullet-points, the last three years of his life. I toy with the remaining salad and avoid eye contact. He says, 'You never emailed' and I tell him 'Well'. He says 'I'm sure I gave you the new address' and I say, wasn't it something hard to remember, like RJSU1@hmail.com and he says with surprise 'Yes, that's exactly right!'. I'm impressed with my memory, less impressed with how I fucked that up. I pull out my wallet and leave more than enough to cover the salad and tell Gary I need to head to the restroom. His back to the door, I simply walk out and head back to the train station. Back on the platform I vomit the chicken up and wait in the sunshine for a train to take me back to the city.

RESOLUTION

You write what you consider to be a *friendly message* to the guy who shared the lo-res degrading photos of his wife online: 'The pics were ok, and your wife is, kind of cute, but you need to post better quality photos'.

To the man who posts the footage of two Mexican gangsters carrying out a mass beheading you write 'Not bad, but lighting could have been better – try taking an LED soft lamp (they're around \$30 on Amazon) and a reflector next time. Plus sound is low quality, these cameras are just never going to capture professional sound recordings' and you recommend a boom microphone.

Finally you email the woman who posted the footage of her and three guys, that, although you understand she wants it to look as real as possible, a little more thought when planning the mise-en-scene would be appreciated as otherwise it's just wasting everyone's time and the effect just isn't quite 'big' enough, and you offer to help out with a storyboard if she would like.

DRUGS INCIDENT

The way to do it is slowly. You pick up a few different girls and pick the one with the lowest self-esteem. You do the usual sort of things; you know the sort of thing. And you're all calm and gentle and nice and you listen and you reassure her and buy her stuff or at least pay for some stuff. Things take a turn for the worse when you realise she's so easily suggestible. And that's putting it mildly.

You go through a phase of looking at extreme images when you're alone, and you get caught one night; something dopey like you leave it right out in the open on your laptop. And she goes a bit wild and probably feels a little sick but she's not really sure about what to do. Fast forward a few months and the first time you drug her it's incredible, you feel godlike, and she's sort of still *with it* but just not really *up to much*. You do it again a few weeks later, a slightly lower dosage because you definitely *overshot* it if you're honest, and it's almost as good as the first time.

A couple of months later and it's basically turned into a weekend thing, an *every weekend* thing. You feel bad about it but shrug it off. The worst it gets is that sometimes there's quite a lot of blood and it's not like blood in the movies, this stuff is kind of a thin sort of orange colour mixed with pink and it stains fucking *everything*. She says to you things like 'it was a pretty wild night... but I don't remember much about it' and one of her friends tries to convince her to go to a therapist or join alcoholics anonymous or to find God or something; anything. She starts to seem a little shaky pretty much all the time.

And that's pretty much why it comes as a huge shock when you find out later when you wake up in hospital one Sunday morning with a blurred vision and a huge headache to the point where you can only make out shapes and colours as well as being told about some severe internal bleeding and a partially functioning liver. The doctor described it as being like a bloated fish out of water, grey and swollen and flapping around. You admit you didn't suspect a thing but over the weekend she had literally pumped you full of ground up pills the whole time and you can't suppress some admiration for her.

SCAM

Crime does not pay is what they said and you never really believed it at the time. You'd come up with the scam by accident, bored and reading the internet. What you did was, buy three smartphones off the internet, second-hand. You made sure they were all local people, by restricting your searches appropriately. Then what you did was, took the phones to a shifty looking local computer store and spun some lies about how you wanted to restore it and how yes you were the owner and he said ok then mate that'll be \$50. And you said, how about \$30 and he said mmmh ok. You never minded setting out money for a new business idea. *You speculate to accumulate*. So you get home and start sifting the phones. The guy couldn't do anything like hack anyone's email account or whatever but some of the functions still work, and some of them have auto-populated user id's and passwords. In this sort of situation, the problem isn't worrying about whether there'll be anything incriminating, but deciding *which* piece of incriminating evidence to use. By keeping things infrequent and small scale and the demands low, you can stay under the radar of the police.

Susan

The first phone belongs to someone called 'Susan' or 'sunsan' depending on which of the text messages you believe. So you're sifting through the various applications and you notice in her address book is a number called 'New Phone' and you know what you have to do next. So you start sifting through her photos and of course there's some racy ones and then suddenly a photo of her looking very ill but you she's topless for some reason. It's a crazy looking photo.

So you message 'New Phone' from 'Old Phone' and the message reads: 'I have some photos of you and I think you should paypal me some money; smiley-face'. A few minutes later you get a response. 'Creep, get lost'. So you head to her email account and it's locked, won't open. So you return to her messages and pick the photo of her topless and ill and deliberate a moment and then send it to 'Therapist'. A few minutes later another response, 'How much to stop?'. You type \$100 because this whole exercise is really only partially about the money. She messages 'ok' and a few hours later you check the bank account which you've hidden as best you can but evidently you haven't got some kind of sophisticated fake bank account because that isn't what this is about either, and the money's there.

Tony

Secondly, Tony's phone has no such simple 'New Phone' listed in his contacts. It seems to be some sort of work phone, because there's lots of boring stuff about invoices and site visits and mentions of 'the council'. You sift the emails which are mainly boring stuff about access to site and work carried out on site and more invoices. The photos are mostly of half completed buildings. Then you come across an email titled 'Drink' and it was a 'forward' from someone and it has some details about some 'dodgy' wine cheap 'off the back of a truck – winking-smiley-face' and an agreement between Tony and this contact. You screenshot this email and send it in a message to one of your fake email accounts. From there you send it to the work address on the email application. The message you send says 'Came across this – how's \$200 to make this stop' and you copy and paste the screenshots. A few minutes later the reply comes back 'Whats ur paypal' and you're thinking this must have happened to him before and you message back 'lol sales10010101@gmail.com' and he messages back 'ok' and you check a few hours later and there it is.

Clare

Thirdly, Clare's phone has no email access and all her messages were deleted by hand so there's nothing. But you discover there is an old dating app with an inbox. You decide to not go straight for the cash, things have been too *straightforward* so far. So you start messaging some of the people she was chatting with a few months prior. You send the same lewd remark to all of them 'Who wants a threesome with me?' and then you follow this a few minutes later with '...and my boyfriend winking-smiley-face' and mostly everyone's a bit lukewarm about the idea at that point even though by all accounts Clare is pretty hot, at least in the photos.

So you find a couple of girls sort of listed and linked and you think they're probably friends of Clare's so you message them 'I think about you all the time upside-down-smiley-face' and two come back with 'Same here', so you message them 'No not like that, like this' and you send a photo of a girl's breasts. And they don't message back. Then later one of them messages 'That is far out, I always thought you did... looks hot'.

And all of a sudden you realise: you're a man pretending to be a straight girl pretending to be a lesbian on a dating app and that as a direct result several people are uncertain about what exactly Clare is *going through* and would like *answers*.

It's later when the messages come through and you're picking them up and reading them on Clare's behalf. It turned out the vicar of the church which Clare was a member of had somehow been told about all of this and was planning an *intervention*, and the girl who had responded positively had basically 'come out' as a lesbian on the strength of the picture she was sent, and Clare's boyfriend has been trying to deal with his friends, to convince them he doesn't want a threesome, which is what the friends of Clare found out when someone posted links and screenshots of the first message which you sent from her account, up on to Facebook.

You put the phone down and step away and you're wishing you knew Clare's new number so you could apologise because frankly, things had gotten a little out of hand.

LAWSUITS

How it happened was that you were a child of 11 and there was a car accident and you had a stiff neck and a sharp suited lawyer with a straight nose and bushy eyebrows managed to convince a judge that you had whiplash and you made enough money for a drum machine that you never used and a small motorbike which you soon grew out of.

Then later you spilt hot apple pie on your leg as a teenager at a national fast food place and they gave you \$500 to walk away and *not sue*.

Later still you wanted sympathy from a girlfriend who you sensed was going to walk away, you slammed a door into your nose and forehead and told her you'd been attacked. She didn't have the heart to finish it for another 9 months.

The domestic abuse case was interesting because it was more about convincing other people. Burning yourself with cigarettes over time, each time carefully recording with a photo and a note about the events leading up to it. She notices but says nothing. The day you called the police you made a wild slash in your own leg just before she got home from work. Which is, of course, just before the police turned up. Not many courts side with the partner who *hasn't* got a carefully catalogued series of photos and notes especially when faces with someone who does a pretty decent looking job of breaking down. You had warned her after all.

But now, years later, you find yourself sitting in front of the mirror about to snap one of your fingers so that you can claim that your employer didn't have sufficient safety procedures, so you can make some quick cash to pay off an out of control gambling debt and you pause and for a second you're concerned at the *degree of commitment* that this whole approach is demanding.

BLAME THE DIVORCE

You'd never seen anything like this before and you find there's no way you can bring yourself to tell anyone. You're on a walk with your family dog, Jellybean, and two strange things happen.

You've let the dog off the lead to run through the bouncy heather. There's no one else around. The dog comes across a dead sheep, you're kind of watching from a distance. You can't be sure but you think you see your dog try to fuck the sheep, it sort of *mounts* it or at least tries to. You convince yourself that it can't have been that and whistle for Jellybean who hangs around a minute then bounds back towards you.

Stranger things were yet to come, because it happens again on the way back to the car, a smaller sheep this time, it's head kind of caved in and some flies are buzzing around a little and an eye is missing and gluey with blood and your beloved family dog tries to have sex with it and you wince and shut your eyes and whistle the dog and yell 'Jellybean!!' and overall the entire episode left you with more questions than answers and you're thinking to yourself I wonder if this has anything to do with *the divorce?*

CULT

It helps to be really good looking but as long as you can look passable is all that really matters. Being good looking just means people are more likely to trust you, but it doesn't take much to learn some other ways to make people trust you. It really helps if you're amoral and loosely psychotic just to the point of where it would be ringing alarm bells with any mental health professional, but not enough to stop you being a relatively anonymous part of society at large.

What you do first is you have to have somewhere to *worship*. Next you come up with a good name, one that sounds mysterious and serious and captures the imagination. Like 'The Church of the Chosen Sinners of the Weeping Jesus' for example.

You get a house and you get some leaflets printed and put them through some doors and maybe post on a local website about spiritual healing and dream interpretation and an *alternative energy* and sooner or later one or two people will turn up. So when they turn up to a meeting you have to be clear – you have to *make it clear* – that joining the church of the Chosen Sinners of the Weeping Jesus isn't for everyone, only special people who are chosen by God himself approach that sacred chapel! You tell them that sinners are welcome, that all are welcome to worship the small black statue of the Weeping Jesus (which of course isn't actually Jesus, just an olden times shepherd) which you told them you bought on a trip to Madrid. You tell them, you – a sinner – picture this! Walking out of a brothel – yes! A brothel! – and you had tried to buy some cocaine and the guy you tried to buy it off led you down an alley and you tell them how the black marble statue had been waiting there and the man had said you should get on your knees, thinking you're hot shit now KNEEL!! and 16 hours later you came out of a trance and you had vision after vision and you took the statue with you and now you knew you had left that life of gambling and cheap sex and making porn films behind and you were clean and you wanted to help others be clean, in an inclusive non-judgmental environment.

You tell them about the bible of the church of the Chosen Sinners of the Weeping Jesus, which is basically a 'Mark's Gospel' that's been sort of *redacted* so that the original sentences now make even less sense but still have a sufficiently religious tone and the fact that you're reading it from what appears to be a bible makes it somehow more legitimate. You tell them you had a vision and that angels told you which words had been added by 'false witnesses'.

The beginning of the Son of God. It is written in the prophets,

You chant in a low voice,

Behold, my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before paths straight baptize the wilderness remiss sins and out unto him confessing their sins. And he did eat locusts and wild honey stoop down and unloose.

You offer to show them the way and out of the two of them, one of the women breaks down in tears and clings on to your arm and the man sat next to her looks unsure. You say they should come again on Saturday – that's the *real deal* – and they shakily leave.

Saturday comes and you invite a few local homeless people to make up the numbers. You promise them all pizza if they stick around for just two hours. A few other people have seen the advert and the woman who cried has brought a friend. You hand out surgeon-style face masks and tell them to put them on if you're a sinner and you ask them if they've ever done anything they regret. And they mumble 'yes' and you say louder! And they half shout 'yes!' and you say louder!!! And they shout it loud and, in Sales, they say if you get people to say yes to the first question and follow it with another yes then the chances of a third yes, and a sale, are significantly higher. You built this 'call and response – louder and louder' pattern into your regular routine, it's a good way to stop things being so fucking *normal* and amp things up. The facemasks lend a degree of ritual and some sort of cleansing effect or something, and they look strange and the faint humiliation of the act of wearing it really *resonates* with the faithful you've assembled.

You play a cheap Yamaha organ really slowly for a minute holding down the notes. You welcome them to the church of the chosen sinners of the weeping Jesus. A couple of the homeless kids are already getting restless

so you figure you should act faster. You ask the woman who previously wept, onto the stage. You tell her you want to help, you want her to help herself.

Haltingly she makes her way up onto the small stage which is just some wooden box lids really. So you remember her name from the other day which she likes and you start talking about unhappy she is and how she just needs to let it go and just before they arrived you stuck the heating on full blast so it was cool to start with but it's starting to heat up and it's only a small room. She's already sweating and she's quite overweight and you start shouting a little, 'YOU have a CHANCE! You have a CHANCE!! THIS IS THE ONLY CHANCE! YOU HAVE FOUND YOUR WAY TO THIS HUMBLE CHURCH AND NOW ALL YOU HAVE TO DO IS BELIEVE! IF. YOU. BELIEVE! I can make this happen!!' and you pause and you yell really quickly 'ICANMAKETHISHAPPEN!!' and you put one hand on her forehead and angle your fist sort of under her back and you push on her forehead and steady her with your fist and sort of jerk upwards and she collapses really easily and crumples to the ground.

A few splashes of water and she comes to, and the whole crowd is visibly impressed, looking at you in a new light. You say 'Let's all have some pizza' and the pizza delivery guy comes because you pre-booked him and already paid. Everyone there is impressed with this, for no good reason. You tell them to imagine that you're on a space station, and the people on the station are the only people on the whole planet who are saved. You chant the entire redacted gospel for twenty five minutes and hand out some wine, but it's not critical that they drink. You tell them they have to wear a medical mask whenever they're out in the real world. You tell them the rules *become known after some time*.

After a few more Saturday evenings like this, with that same disturbed woman enjoying her time in the spotlight, as well as a couple of unhappy teenage girls who also faint easily, you've built up a few regulars. You're still getting the pizzas in – it's a short term investment. You remind them all that *they found you*, not the other way round. You repeat all of this and build up trust and start to ask for donations – 'Just for the food and drink, for the mass celebrations', you tell them calmly and reasonably.

You ask for money for special courses, for 'one on ones', for community action projects, for celebrations. You make it clear that Weeping Jesus has commanded you to act as a vessel for their money and there are *running costs* after all and they end up having their wages being paid into your bank account.

And after some initial pushback the ones who want to be saved carry out other faintly humiliating tasks in public such as holding up signs or banners without question and indeed will happily argue with whoever wants to tell them they're *in a cult*.

Ultimately it comes down to your character and what your goals are – there are really two main scenarios that play out following the initial set up. If you're mostly driven by a sexual impulse or drive then you can either just pick and choose because whoever you like the look of is already in awe of you, or what you can do is convince the most suggestible people into sexual relationships; that is the people who you think are most willing because they think you're pretty cool, or 'the answer' or something.

Then from there, you leverage that into two things: one, you get some of the others to have sex with you because you give them the line 'I'm just not sure whether you really value your spiritual growth as much as x – *she* sleeps over all the time, for extra prayer and one-on-ones'. They're usually in pretty deep by this point and it's not a question of just walking away, there's too much at stake; not least proving their friends and families wrong. Two, you threaten to reveal secrets about them to the others to 'help them deal with their sense of shame'. Ideally you would have some photos of them in compromising positions to reinforce this plan and to remind them of who is in charge. You back any loyal follower into a corner and they're going to pretty much ask you what you want to do next.

Secondly if you're more driven by money you can run the operation for a few months but just be careful not to get too greedy – if you really like it then just let the whole thing play out, growing the cult and your bank account – make sure you're enjoying it because you can pretty much definitely expect some time in jail at some point.

If you just enjoy manipulating people, you can set up some elaborate scheme where you use some of the easier followers to sign documents to get credit and buy stuff and then run off with it leaving a sorry mess behind. Or you might want to set up one particularly trustworthy person in a 'drug deal gone wrong' scenario where, in a classic sting, you end up with both the drugs *and* the money and a perfect dead fall guy, or you might want to get someone helping out setting up and administering an extreme video website, and when it all falls apart they take the fall.

After a while if you lose interest you can generally just disappear one day, change your appearance a little and the whole thing will be forgotten by your members in twenty or thirty years, provided they don't end up checking out early but that's hardly your fault.

CASUAL APPROACH TO WORK

How the drugs begin to become a part of your life is, it seems like a good idea to convince your doctor that you're depressed. The usual things: no appetite, low self-esteem, poor self-worth, no reason to live, listening to 'The Smiths' and 'Pink Floyd'.

He prescribes Sertraline and you're basically *ok* with it all. You declare it to HR and tell them about your therapist and your *mental health* and they have no choice but to note it and begrudgingly admit that they're there to help, in line with the HR guidelines, and they offer support. You ask them to keep this between you and them.

The drugs sort of space you out in a way you really didn't like at first but eventually you just kind of grow into and things move a little slower. You regularly leave meetings to go for short walks outside, which is very pleasant. You generally time this to coincide with flooding your nervous system chock full of the prescribed chemical dosage and it all works out. Sure, the drugs have a bit of a hold on you, but you get to spend time mindlessly changing your email signature at work and you've been asking your senior management team which they think is better.

You start replying to emails with quotes from some Zen poets you found on the internet, and quotes from the film 'Wall St'. No one dares saying anything, it's too risky. Eventually you just stop turning up all the time: you start out for work but then you just get side-tracked, walking around dazed. Other days you roll in at 11 and no one says anything. Pretty much no one says anything to you in any case, except one woman who says quietly that she thinks she knows what you're going through and how she was depressed too and you raise your eyes slowly and say 'I'm sure you were' and you move past her.

You figure you can keep this up for a while yet and you see no reason to change.

TERRY

When Terry turns up out of the blue yes it's clear you owe him one but here's how things go down. He turns up with a suitcase and asks to stay just a few nights he's just been having some difficulties and needs a hand. You're disappointed with yourself for having ended up owing him one but this is the way things are.

So on the first evening you show him some of the anonymous internet chat rooms you're involved with, some of the pictures you send and receive mostly to middle-aged women, some of the lewd messages you've been sending to any woman you can, and the messages some of them send back. You show him some other fake internet accounts you have on a bunch of right-wing news websites and racist web forums, you tell him this is what you're into these days.

You take his personal space as much as you can stomach. You move closer to him when he says something and every so often, he says something and you say 'what?' even though you heard perfectly ok. You lean across, you keep sort of reaching out in his general direction with those good old long skinny wavy arms. You ruffle his hair two or three times.

You run the air conditioning really cold even though it's a late and wet autumn because you tell him the cool helps you think. You flick the lights on and off three times. You do this every ten minutes for two hours and avoid his questions about it except one time when you mutter 'gets rusty'. The air conditioner is really loud at times and it's freezing cold and when he asks, 'Why is it so loud?' you yell back, 'WHAT?' and he repeats it and so do you and he looks at you and stops asking.

Later that night when you bring him some sort-of damp awful smelling sheets and an old dirty towel you dug out from under the sink, he asks if the door is locked and you tell him 'I never lock my door – anyone wants to come on in they can come on in, free and easy policy here good buddy' and you give him a broad wide grin and hold it for a second then whistle once, a sort of swooping sound, and then back to the grin. You can sense he wants to leave pretty much right away after that and you leave for bed, first flicking the lights on and off three times. He manages to stick around until the morning and that's when you insist on running porn on the TV loud and everything is really cold and he disappears before lunch to 'get some fresh milk' and doesn't return.

DAVE

When you bump into Dave one naive afternoon after three years of not seeing him you visibly pale and fight a physical urge to hide and he sees you and asks you about the money you owe him and the stuff he lent you to get your girlfriend off your back about the DIY jobs she'd wanted you to do and you're not sure if he knows you've been fucking his ex-fiancee Heather. He looks sort of lean and scrawny but tightly wound and your eyes are caught by some nasty looking dots along his left arm, the surrounding skin seems sort of grubby too.

He asks how you've been doing, when you saw Heather last. He's been in prison. Of course he has. You haven't got the DIY stuff or the girlfriend anymore, and you're a bit broke after a day gambling and losing. The thing was, you found a bunch of numbers written on a bit of paper which, blown by the wind, had landed on your lap when you were sat on a park bench and you'd been to the local cheap casino testing out these numbers on the automatic roulette machines; somehow you felt the universe had given you the *right numbers* but you couldn't sequence them properly and in the end the numbers really hadn't helped matters at all.

Dave looks angry and then out of the blue he sees someone else and his attention turns to this tall looking balding man and he runs towards him angrily before shouting 'You owe me!' at him and ruthlessly launching into a headbutt and the guy is reeling, sort of staggering in the sunshine.

You sort of half-heartedly mutter 'Have to run...' and he doesn't hear you because a crowd of angry and concerned looking people has formed, and you half whisper you'll definitely be in touch and strangely enough as you say it he catches your eye a split second but he seems to let you get away with that; perhaps just because he has his hands full.

You change your route to just about everywhere you go in order to try and avoid him and a week later, panicked, you move flat to give yourself the best chance to avoid ever bumping into Dave again.

ACCIDENTAL HERO

You had always harboured dreams of being a hero. So you're in the cinema with a girl who gave you her number when you span her a decent story. You further impressed her when you stole some short stories off the internet and passed them off as your own. You've done the same with music before too, and it works out pretty cool: steal some unknown loser's tracks to get to screw some girl. You figure the losers wouldn't really mind – no big deal - and you figure if *you* had stuff like that you wouldn't mind either: all's fair in love and war.

You're at the cinema and the trailers are running and some guy is kind of agitated towards the front. Some people near him are eating popcorn and he's fiddling with the peak of his baseball cap. You exchange a sort of unseen sentiment with the girl you're with, raising an eyebrow about the guy who's been muttering a little and coughing a lot and the lights go down a little.

The advert comes on to say 'Turn off your phones'. The guy at the front stands up and yells stutteringly to no one in particular 'I fucking swear if I hear one f-f-f-fucking ringtone I'll fucking sh-sh-sh-shoot someone goddamn it I love this film!' and he weirdly flaps one arm for ten seconds or so, grimaces and sits down.

The film starts and the music's playing and then it all goes quiet and the camera is panning real slow over some wasteland and *almost inevitably* someone's ringtone goes off, just a regular sounding ringtone and you can hear a scramble to silence it. So the guy stands up and noisily cocks the gun and says 'All right – I want to know – whose fucking ringtone was it? I mean it! You think you're some *hot shit* well *you're not!*' and you roll your eyes and glance at the girl who looks sort of panicked and the guy is sort of waving the gun around, right at the front, in sort of silhouette.

So you yell out, 'Sit down and shut up you fucking idiot, we're missing the film' and the guy hears this and waves the gun a second more and then, frustrated in the dark, sits down and pulls his cap further over his head and the music swells again.

OBSCENE SHORT STORY

While two of the couples are evidently into it, the girl who reminds you of Marie is sat naked, smoking. The room is really cold all of a sudden and you lean over and ask her if she has an ashtray and she stares at you and pushes the cigarette into your arm stubbing it out and leaning back and opening her legs.

FIRST DATE

How to have a memorable first date is you make sure you're real slick when you ask the girl out, don't use a line from a greeting card, think of something original and funny or even just a default 'how are you doing?'. You ask enough girls, sure enough one of them is going to say ok. Then you take her to a mid-priced restaurant and you're prepared to pay – whatever it takes. In order to make it memorable is the key.

So at first he's thinking she seems nice and he's sort of swept away a little because she reminds him of an actress. Well, someone who starred in a couple of greasy 'erotic thrillers' anyway. He's been watching a pretty diverse range of pornographic works and his mind tends to be pre-occupied with it. She's thinking it's all fine and she's not exactly the brightest spark because she's agreed to a date in the first place. He's asking her questions about her life and she's pleasantly engaged, she's weighing up what she thinks, asks you what you do for a living, so you lie and make it sound ten times better and bigger than it is. You say 'Can I ask you a personal question?' and she looks up and squints nervously and you break the tension by saying 'Is your glass of water cold, because I swear, mine is *lukewarm*' and you both laugh for a while.

You decide to mention a few topics to see how things go. For a flash you picture her naked and squirming with two also naked guys and you snap your mind out of it quickly. After a bit more small talk about the city you live in, you say 'How do you get on with your family?' or some other question that allows her to get emotional real quick. You maybe make up something about how you're the same with your family, to illustrate that you're on *similar lines*. She heads to the Ladies and as she's walking you're imagining screwing her from behind.

This is when you make it memorable without really trying.

So she comes back and you say 'Your nipples look hard as hell... hey, would you ever consider getting fucked *on camera*? The pay isn't too bad' and grin at her a real shit-eating grin. And she looks deflated and confused and says 'Sorry, what?' and you say 'I bet you love sucking cocks don't you' and she blushes and says 'I don't like the tone of this conversation' and you look at her and say 'I'm not kidding, I bet you love taking your clothes off don't you I bet you fucking love the idea of men looking at you' and she looks shocked and says 'What sort of a *sick fuck* are you?' and this is where it gets really memorable because you take her phone which is on the table and put it in the inside pocket of your jacket.

She looks furious and says 'Give me my phone, you *creep*' and you say, 'Not until this date is over, be cool' and she looks at you like you're actually mad and says as though she didn't hear you, 'Sorry what?' and then says 'Give me my phone you moron' and you smile the shit-eating grin again and she's lost for words, processing what's just happened. At this point, you're thinking that at least she's right about it all; after all, you are a creep, and this thought flickers through your mind and makes you smile for a moment.

She sits down, she doesn't really want to cause a scene - after all, it's a mid-price restaurant and she's not quite sure what to do next. You say 'Tell me you're not sexually excited by this'. And weirdly she actually is feeling kind of sexually confused about this but she says 'Fuuuuuuuuck you'. Pause. 'Give me my phone you fucking lunatic'. You look straight at her.

'Freedom's just another word for, nothing left to lose' you sing, and she says 'What?' and you look at her for a second and say, 'it's from a song'. And she looks bored and sulky. And you say 'Have you ever seen Bergman's 'Hour of the wolf'?' and she says 'it's a film for neurotics and bedwetters' and you look visibly shocked. She says 'and I bet you have terrible taste in music and art too. Your online profile suggested you did. The artists you mentioned, I mean. Both modern art and postmodern art is art for art's sake, and dripping in pseudo existentialism, and the worst of it charged with fake insecure masculinity with homoerotic undertones'. This is another direct hit and you're wounded, genuinely shocked. She follows through with 'And I bet you have... a tiny cock. I bet you're terrible in bed'. Things have unravelled much quicker than you would have liked and you reach into your pocket and hand her the phone. You smile sadly and say quietly, 'Memorable, though'.

CHARITY

How you end up getting sacked for your degenerate behaviour is you hit a rough patch – your car stops working, you get fired from whatever lame office job you end up in, your college girlfriend wants to grow up and that includes growing out of you and you move back in with your mum and dad. Your life hits the skids.

You regress to a childlike state, smoking weed and sitting around in your broken car, listening to music on a small hi-fi you ran in there on a cord from the house. So your mum has been nagging you to stop doing that and to quit the smoking too, and as a peace offering one stoned morning you say 'Ok can you get me a job at the charity shop you used to work at?' and she looks suspicious and says 'Mmmh ok'.

The day you start is when you begin putting a plan together. The plan *isn't* how to increase revenue and boost the shops profile. You wander around the store high as a kite kind of rearranging stuff and trying to fix a fan to help get some fresh air in the shop. The till is actually pretty easy to deal with. The CCTV cameras in the shop aren't on except when the regional manager comes in. The manager of the store disagrees with them on philosophical grounds as well as occasionally 'borrowing' items which are brought into the shop. After a few weeks you notice her do this and you threaten to tell the regional manager before whispering 'Unless you want to cut a deal?' and you look moody. She says 'ok' because what choice has she got.

You begin a system whereby stock comes in and you don't record it and then you just pocket the money. The days you're in, she just leaves you to it and hides in the back drinking strong tea and playing bingo on her mobile phone. The days she's not in, you find yourself getting high at the back of the store, some of the regulars have been winking at you. After one particularly heavy day smoking you had taken almost three minutes to ring up and complete a sale. A couple of people remarked on how it smelled nice and 'exotic' in the shop for a change, and one or two of the old ladies had offered to come back later when you weren't '*red eyed and high as a kite – just like my layabout grandson!*'. In addition, the occasional waves of crippling nausea and anxiety you suffer have gotten sympathy from the other shop assistants, all of whom are hypochondriacs.

Sometimes you accidentally overcharge people, sometimes you deliberately overcharge them, sometimes you give them the wrong change, but you don't apply any science to this bit. For a change – and only when it comes to pocketing money which isn't yours - you are immensely focused and determined to make the most of things – you actually apply yourself to the enterprise.

You ask for extra shifts and your mum is pleased because you seem *motivated*.

How it all ends is really not very bright, and ironically nothing to do with the money you've been stealing, and the whole scam. You always were casual about smoking dope at work and one silly time the regional manager walks right in on you smoking a joint in the back of the office and you apologise and later you tell your mum, 'It just wasn't for me in the end mum' and she rolls her eyes.

DEATH WITHOUT DYING

How it all starts, is you find yourself in a shit-ton of debt or maybe you married the wrong woman. You start off and you don't realise it but there's a wild animal coiled up inside you and over time it thrashes around from time to time and you know it's going to get you one day. The significant thing to note is that by destroying your identity you cause a number of administrative issues. Such as, passports, identification, social security numbers etc. From here on in it's you and you alone, pretty much cash payments, until you can maybe get re-married and then manipulate your new wife somehow. Once your old self has been declared dead then at least that's some of the problem out of the way. There is no downside because if you ever want to undo this you can just turn up at a local police station saying you lost your mind and you don't know up from down.

Some popular ways to achieve the endgame of leaving all of it behind and starting again are:

Boat

So you charter some kind of boat or ship, you and a partner; a ferry is ok but there's always a chance someone sees you or if they've got their shit together they might *save* you. So what you do is pay another boat to come and meet you, when it's all dark. Then you have some kind of huge row or you get right under her skin or you sift the bank statements one last time wondering how the fuck you ever fucked it up quite so badly, and then you go to bed, as usual. Then late at night, you go out on deck by yourself, wait for the escape boat to appear and then get on the boat and get off the boat where it's somewhere else. If you have to charter your own boat on your own, this can still work which is good news for single people, it's just less clean.

Car by the docks

So you hire a car and you use your id to do all that, and you give them your credit card details. Then you mysteriously disappear in the middle of the night and drive to the coast. Once at the coast you leave the car parked with maybe a door open and then you throw your stuff in the water and walk off. No need to push the car in, it won't impress anyone. Pretty much what you need to do is make sure you have some way to get away from that spot – a good solution is to buy a car in cash and have that waiting somewhere. Obviously this technique really depends on your ability to get away from wherever you are, whatever fix you're in, so it works best in big countries.

Car by a bridge

If the coast is too far away then you can consider pretending to die by some other method. A popular choice is to use a bridge; the only downside being that the authorities may be suspicious as to why there is no body to be found when they get around to searching for you. If you're really committed to things you could theoretically lose a limb to convince everyone but this is by no means a recommendation and may only serve to deepen the mystery.

Simple solutions, as always, have the highest chance of success. More elaborate schemes such as pretending to be dissolved in acid/ eaten by an animal, or attempting to be the victim of an accident who somehow gets 'lost' on the way to the hospital or something else have high chances of failure. Once you've managed to clear the slate down, you are theoretically free.

The thing to do then, is to try to find someone with bigger secrets than you have and make that work for you.

STALKER

The girl you've been following all morning suddenly feigns like she's forgotten something then marches right over to you and says, 'Are you following me?'