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Elton has written three hit West End musicals, including the global phenomenon *We Will Rock You*, which he also directs, and three West End plays, including the multi-award-winning *Popcorn*. His internationally bestselling novels include *Stark*, *Inconceivable*, *Dead Famous* and *High Society*. In 2000 he wrote and directed the feature film *Maybe Baby* based on his acclaimed novel *Inconceivable*.

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HIGH SOCIETY
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THE FIRST CASUALTY
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GRIDLOCK

Ben Elton



BLACK SWAN

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For Sophie

GRIDLOCK

AN OFF-PLANET INTRODUCTION

Before beginning this story proper, a story which has its fictional feet very firmly on the ground, it is worth taking a moment to look upwards, high above the teeming masses of rush-hour London where most of this story is set. Above the tired office workers, tired of office working; the tired media lunch-eaters, tired of eating media lunch; the strange cockney philanthropists, who are prepared to offer you not one gold watch, not even two gold watches, but three gold watches for a tenner. Up and away from the deep carpet of burger boxes and homeless people. Up through the dirty air, over the satellite dishes currently receiving fifteen different Italian game shows, some with bikinis. On, up past Nelson, through the flock of pigeons with the telescopic sights on their backsides, past the great crowd of 747s playing aeronautical Russian Roulette on their way to Heathrow. Through the hot, sticky fog of greenhouse gases, sadly no longer through the ozone layer, past the awesomely sophisticated satellite technology currently employed in transmitting fifteen different Italian game shows, some with bikinis. Up up up and out into space, for it is here, in space, that there recently hovered a spaceship.

This spaceship contained a group of television researchers from the Planet Brain in the process of analysing humanity, in order to compile a three-minute comedy item for their

top-rated television show, *That's Amazing, Brainians*, which followed the early evening news.

The researchers were pleased, they had noted much which was amusingly amazing, and they assured each other that Earth had provided the easiest bit of researching that they had done in aeons. Brain is populated by beings of immense intelligence and so far it had taken them only a quarter, of a quarter, of a single second to assimilate and comprehend humanity.

All those things which we on Earth believe to be complex and difficult had been simplicity itself to the beings from Brain. The situation in Beirut; what Hamlet's problem was; how to set the timer on a fourteen-day video-recorder - these things were not mysteries to the Brainians. In that quarter, of one quarter, of a single second they had answered it all. Although, in fairness, it must be added that two weeks later, back on Brain, the researchers would discover that they had managed to record a documentary about Tuscany rather than *Dirty Harry* which they really wanted to watch.

But such slight slip-ups aside, the Brainians had humanity taped. They understood the rules of cricket, how the stripes get into the toothpaste and the reason why there is no word in English for the back of the knee. In that quarter, of one quarter, of a single second the research team had answered all the great philosophical questions. They knew whether an object still exists when you are not looking at it (it does); whether there is a God (if you want); and why people eat Kentucky Fried Chicken even though it makes them feel ill (human beings are stupid).

But then, they were stumped. They had encountered one aspect of human activity which astonished and mystified even those hardened researchers. Researchers who thought

they had seen every illogicality and lunacy that the universe had to offer. On this very planet they had seen pointless wars and pointless destruction; they had visited the Tate gallery; they had listened to modern jazz; they had read the novels of James Joyce; they had seen ice creams which claimed to be shaped like faces but were actually shaped like amoebas - and they had understood it all. But this one had thrown them. This one had them scratching their multiple thought podules in a perplexed manner and saying '*akjafgidkerhs lejhslh hei!*', which translates as 'Bugger me, that's weird!'

The problem was one of transport.

The Brainians could see the long, thin arteries along which the humans travelled. They noted that after sunrise the humans all travelled one way and at sunset they all travelled the other. They could see that progress was slow and congested along these arteries, that there were endless blockages, queues, bottle-necks and delays causing untold frustration and inefficiency. All this they could see quite clearly.

What was not clear to them, was why.

They knew that humanity was stupid, they had only to look at the week's top ten grossing movies to work that out, but *this* was beyond reason. If, as was obvious, space was so restricted, why was it that each single member of this strange life-form insisted on occupying perhaps fifty times its own ground surface area for the entire time it was in motion - or not in motion, as was normally the case?

The super intelligent beings transmitted their data back to the producer of their programme and they received a right earful in reply (which was rather a lot because, although Brainians are only eight inches tall, their ears are the size of wheelbarrows and have to be rolled up like blinds).

'You're mad,' bellowed the producer using his intergalactic portable phone because, like producers the universe over, he was having lunch.

'You're trying to tell me that they're all going in the *same* direction, travelling to much the *same* destinations and yet they're all *deliberately* impeding the progress of each other by covering six square metres of space with a large, almost completely empty tin box?'

'That's exactly what we're trying to tell you, boss.'

'You're drunk,' shouted the producer, and he was so annoyed that the binding on one of his ears snapped and about six square feet of flapping lughole flopped into his pasta.

'We're bloody not drunk,' responded the aggrieved researchers. 'They're all stuck down there, beeping and screaming at each other and working themselves into a frenzy, not getting anything done, not producing anything, just stuck.'

'Oh go on then, let's have another bottle of wine,' said the producer, which naturally rather confused the researchers, but in fact the producer hadn't been speaking to them, his last remark was addressed at his lunch companion. Having another bottle of wine is something else which producers do the universe over – except in Los Angeles where people who, ten years ago, took cocaine in their coffee now give you the phone number of Alcoholics Anonymous if you ask for a beer.

Returning to his telephone conversation, the producer allowed himself to be mollified.

'You mean it's really true?' he said. 'A society sufficiently sophisticated to produce the internal combustion engine has

not had the sophistication to develop cheap and efficient public transport?'

'Yes, boss,' said the researchers, 'it's true. There's hardly any buses, the trains are hopelessly underfunded, and hence the entire population is stuck in traffic'

'Well that's amazing,' said the producer.

'Yes, boss, it is amazing,' the researchers agreed.

'Get your asses back to Brain,' said the producer, 'we got a show.'

Chapter One

THE MAN THEY TRIED TO KILL

LOVELORN EGGHEAD

Geoffrey sat alone in the big open-plan office of the Institute of Industrial Research where he worked. He was surrounded by computers and they all winked and flashed at him, but, despite being intimately acquainted with every one of them, Geoffrey neither winked nor flashed back. He wasn't thinking of computers. He was thinking of a beautiful girl, and how one day in the not too distant future, he, Geoffrey, would set that girl free and by doing so would win her love. He would achieve this end with his fantastic research development. A research development so colossal and stupendous it made penicillin look positively mouldy.

There was a bottle in front of Geoffrey and he was allowing himself a small toast, a little celebration, to mark the imminent realization of all his wildest dreams. Not all of them obviously, not the one set in a nunnery where all the novices turned out to be Dolly Parton for instance, nor the one about the recurring ostrich, but all the ones fit to print. The dreams about success, peer group respect, enormous mountains of serious cash and setting free the most beautiful girl in the world, hence winning her love. If that wasn't worth a sloosh of pop whilst alone in the old research

lab, then Geoffrey wasn't the man he thought he was. And Geoffrey certainly was the man he thought he was, because Geoffrey's was a thorough and precise mind and it wasn't the sort of thing he would make a mistake about.

So there he was, warm glow of satisfaction in his gut, love for a good woman in his heart, a little drinkie on the table, and bent over the arm of his chair staring at the carpet and dribbling.

UNWELCOME VISITORS

There was a buzz from the intercom. Obviously somebody was at the door. Geoffrey was a bit annoyed. He had no wish to be disturbed by anyone, unless of course it was by the girl of his dreams, or possibly Dolly Parton in a wimple, but since these were both rather unlikely, any visitors were unwelcome. Actually Geoffrey had no idea just how unwelcome these visitors would turn out to be. For they were professional killers - which is nearly as bad as having the Jehovah's Witnesses knock on your door.

With difficulty Geoffrey got up, or at least partly up. He managed to get to his feet but it wasn't what you would call a particularly perpendicular performance. None the less, it was the best Geoffrey could manage under the circumstances. He fixed his eye upon the intercom some thirty yards across the room. A room crowded with obstacles. Getting across it was going to take some concentration. There were computers, printers, swivel chairs, kettles, stuffed Snoopies and amusing stickers proclaiming that you didn't have to be mad to work there but it helped.

These stickers were originally developed by psychologists as a test to enable office managers to determine an employee's utter dullness. If, for instance, the manager is

seeking to find a person to whom may safely be entrusted the organization of the coffee-making rota. If he needs a reliable sort who will ensure that a good tin is provided for the sugar so that the office does not end up with a soggy paper bag containing forty-seven congealed brown sugar globules. All the manager has to do is spy out the employees with the sticker on their computer amusingly proclaiming that 'You don't have to be mad to work here but it helps'. That person will be guaranteed dull, dependable and sane as a pair of corduroy trousers.

Geoffrey lurched forward towards the vast expanse of potential croppers that lay between him and the buzzer. His workplace was one of those modern open-plan areas where everything is rendered much more frank and relaxed by virtue of there being no nasty walls to divide people or doors to intimidate them. The actual result of course being that everyone develops nervous tics due to never knowing who's eavesdropping on them and never feeling safe to have a really good bitch.

An added disadvantage of these spaces, especially if you happen to be in the condition that Geoffrey was in, is that plug and telephone sockets stick up out of the floor in the most unexpected places and there are wires everywhere. It was whilst attempting to negotiate a particularly tangled bit of technology that Geoffrey skidded on the bit of pizza that was left over from a leaving bash which had taken place on the previous Friday evening.

THE LEAVING BASH FROM HELL

Geoffrey lay on the carpet tiles, with his head in a waste-paper bin, quietly cursing. The leaving bash from hell had returned to haunt him.

All leaving bashes are awful. Perhaps not as awful as birthday bashes where one is forced to annoy an entire restaurant by singing 'Happy Birthday' whilst a waiter proudly brings forth a mound of whipped cream with a sparkler in it, but pretty bad, none the less - and this leaving bash was worse. The nightmare had started with the card. Geoffrey had barely known Suzy, the lucky recipient of all that office warmth, symbolized, as it was, by a large picture of Snoopy holding a horseshoe. However, he had felt obliged to rack his brains for twenty minutes trying to think of something witty to write. Eventually he had decided on 'I don't know who you are, but very best wishes'. The biro had scarcely come to a standstill when he deeply regretted his decision. Paranoia consumed him, the phrase was too hard, too dismissive. The scrawled sentence Geoffrey had written seemed to dissolve before his eyes and reform into the words, 'Bugger off, nobody'. After all, that was what his message implied wasn't it? In that instant Geoffrey convinced himself that the girl would be very hurt and that the rest of the lab would despise him for messing up their nice card. Already he could feel the icy hand of social ostracism fingering his collar.

In desperation he opened a bracket. Impulsively he wrote, 'Just joking, really, it's been great working with you'. Geoffrey closed the bracket and descended fully and completely into the paranoid zone. Talk about making a bad thing worse! Maybe he should just go have a shit in the poor woman's pending tray! The first joke had been merely tasteless, now he had turned it into pure hate mail. Everything he had written seemed to just deliberately and maliciously draw attention to the fact that he had scarcely ever spoken to the girl and did not care whether she lived or died. Frantically Geoffrey considered a second bracket, a square one, just a simple and affectionate message to repair the damage of the previous two efforts. Perhaps something

along the lines of, 'Actually I want you to be the mother of my children! . . .' or, 'Listen, Suzy, name your price to forget about the whole thing.' Fortunately for Geoffrey reason returned to its throne. He realized that there would not be sufficient brackets in a book of algebra to extricate him from the tact swamp into which he had dived. He would simply have to let it go.

Geoffrey firmly closed the card and, with a weak smile, handed it back to Denise, unofficial social secretary for the whole building and the girl with the 'mad' sticker on her desk.

Denise, who had about as much tact as the Wehrmacht, reopened the card and read Geoffrey's message. 'Oh that's *lovely*,' she said, in a voice that you could have beaten down and forged into drill bits. 'I'm *sure* Suzy will see the joke.'

Attending the 'do' itself had been worse than writing the card. There is a type of white wine which is produced in continental Europe specifically for leaving do's in Britain. It is described as 'an elegant, delicate, fruity dry' which is Euro-plonkspeak for abrasive and it is made by putting sandpaper and lemon juice into a blender. Within two sips from his or her plastic cup the unhappy imbiber's throat becomes coated in a thick layer of bitter-tasting phlegm which can only be removed with a pan scrubber. Unless of course you happen to be talking to the boss, in which case the phlegm will instantly leap out of the back of your neck and cling desperately to his tie.

This wine also contains a special kind of alcohol that cannot get you happy-drunk but can only get you bored-drunk, which was the state that everybody was in when the 'do' finally wound down at about eight-thirty.

This is an appalling time for an after-work social to end. Up until eight-twenty everyone has spent the entire time making desperate conversation and wishing they were somewhere else. Then suddenly, with no warning, people are sufficiently bored-pissed on plastic cups of warm French expectorant to agree to go on for a curry.

It is a strange factor of this kind of euphorically dull drunkenness ('Oh go on then, sod it, why not? The evening's bugged anyway') that it lasts for only twenty-five minutes. This is exactly long enough to get trapped in a curry house between two people you have absolutely no desire to talk to, who are on a different table from the person you have vaguely begun to fancy, while you watch one person order three - no better make it four - popadums each, and someone else order a large brandy. All of which you know you are going to have to pay for a fifteenth of, even though you're not particularly hungry and you can't drink any more yourself because you're driving.

All of this had taken place on Friday night, and now it was late Sunday afternoon and the leaving bash from hell was back. Like some evil curse from a darker age it refused to let Geoffrey be. Having caused him untold worry, bored him stupid and cost him over twenty quid, it had now dumped him down with a thud on the carpet tiles and left him with his head in a waste-paper basket, wherein, a polystyrene cup was in the process of pouring half an inch of cold coffee with a fag end in it, up his nose. How much more could one leaving bash do to a man?

ENGLISH COMPREHENSION

The buzzer was still buzzing, Geoffrey wanted to shout, 'All right, hang on, where's the fire, dick-heads?' but he was a realist and in his condition he didn't reckon he would be up

to making himself understood. If you're going to start being brusque with people, the last thing you want is them looking puzzled and replying, 'You what?' It detracts from your impact.

With some difficulty, Geoffrey extricated his head from the waste-paper bin that the pizza had dumped it in, and continued his uncertain stagger across the room, finally arriving at the intercom buzzer.

On the second attempt Geoffrey managed to press the button . . . 'Yurgh,' he grunted into the microphone. Which translated meant 'Yes, who is it?' However, since no interpreter was available at the other end, the two killers waiting on the pavement had to make do with 'Yurgh'.

'Uhm yeah,' shouted one of the killers, for the traffic was loud in the street, 'we're looking for Dr Geoffrey Peason. He around?'

'Yes, that's me, come on up,' said Dr Geoffrey Peason - or rather he didn't because he was having a bit of trouble getting his tongue and larynx to co-operate with each other. The sentence had departed from his brain in perfect condition, but by the time it struggled out of the intercom into the street it had become 'Urg-ats-mm-uhmonup'.

The two men in the street did not know what to make of this cryptic message. They couldn't see the condition Geoffrey was in so they just presumed that they were dealing with a foreigner, or perhaps a mental defective.

The more talkative killer began again, employing the accepted method of communication employed by the British whenever they encounter someone who does not appear to understand English. He raised his voice.

All over Europe, each summer, can be seen the sad picture of frustrated, purple-faced Britons screaming in the faces of

non-comprehending natives, 'WHERE . . . IS . . . THE . . . PUBLIC . . . CON-VE-NIENCE?' The curious theory that a strange language can be rendered understandable by increasing the volume at which it is spoken is one of the great mysteries of the British abroad.

In Paris the cause of the commotion is slightly different. Most Parisians do in fact speak some English, but out of pure bloody-minded snobbishness they refuse to do so in the company of the British. When accosted by a desperate, sweaty, confused Brit asking, 'Excuse me, but do you speak English?' the immaculately dressed Parisian will raise a languid eyebrow and enquire, 'Yes, do you speak French?' It is a little known historical fact that it was this irritating habit which was the principal cause of the Hundred Years War.

Anyway, in an effort to make himself understood, the man in the street raised his voice. Since he had already been shouting to get above the traffic noise the effort caused veins to stand out on his forehead. He accompanied this tonsil-tingling rant with an elaborate pantomime, this being another aspect of the standard British method of getting your message across to foreigners – scream at the top of your voice and wave your arms about in massive but vague physical gesticulations.

This sad display provides mainland Europeans (again, particularly, the French) with endless entertainment. Outside the Georges Pompidou Centre in Paris, there can always be found a cluster of extremely dull mime artists in tights and bowler hats with flowers sticking out of them, miming walking into a high wind. These irritating performances are invariably accompanied by a clutch of Americans, Brits and Japanese delightedly assuring each other that the bowler-hatted one indeed looks *exactly* like he's walking into a high wind, or quite anyway. The locals, of course, know that far more fun can be had watching a

British tourist attempt to mime 'Can you direct me to the Museum of Contemporary Sculpture please?' and what's more he won't shove his bowler hat under your nose at the end of it.

JUDGING A BOOK BY ITS COVER

So there they were, the two men on the pavement, one of them roaring at the intercom and miming wildly. Geoffrey, deciding that actions speak louder than words, even words as loud as the ones making the intercom shudder, pressed the lock transmission button, thus providing the first clear message of the whole communication.

After the obligatory electronic lock dance, in which a person and door push against each other to the tune of a buzzer going on and off, the door swung open and the men stumbled in.

They took the lift to the floor marked 'Transport, Fuel and Engine Research' and emerged from it to find Dr Geoffrey Peason waiting for them. Geoffrey held out a shaking hand and tried to greet them cordially but he wasn't really up to it and the two men clearly weren't very impressed with him. However, at first they made at least a pretence at the easy good manners which killers are wont to adopt before unmasking themselves as the angel of death.

They enquired again after Dr Geoffrey Peason, stating that they had business with him regarding his recent application for a patent. Dr Peason, also attempting easy good manners but blowing it by dribbling a bit, again replied that he was the said Peason, Doctor of Physics and patent applicant, and what could he do for them? Unfortunately Geoffrey still was not making himself very clearly understood and the visitors' tone became impatient.

'Now listen, sonny, we haven't got a lot of time to waste, so you pull yourself together, all right? And tell us where Peason is.'

Geoffrey was suddenly very tired. He hated being patronized and he hated being dismissed as of no importance. It was always happening to him. He turned his back on the men and staggered back to his chair. Plonking himself down rather heavily he knocked his bottle onto the floor.

'Bollocks,' he said, or rather 'Burgles,' an exclamation which he accompanied with an impulsive-looking gesture of despair.

Faced with this incoherent hurdle to their enquiries the two men's tone became markedly more intimidating.

'Where's Peason?' the talkative one barked. 'This is where he works isn't it? Our information is that he's always here Sundays.'

Again Doctor Peason tried to explain that he was the man they sought, but the men just did not have the patience to listen to him. They had been briefed to pay a visit on a brilliant scientist and inventor. A man who had invented something quite brilliant and scientific. Confronted by this slurring, unpleasant, uncoordinated young man in a leather jacket and torn jeans, they assumed that the doctor was out. However, since the dribbling rocker was clearly their only available source of information they had no choice but to continue their clumsy enquiries.

Advancing towards Geoffrey one of the men slipped on the pizza.

'I just did that,' said Geoffrey, trying once more to be friendly, but still failing completely to make himself understood.

'Don't laugh at me, you disgusting little git,' barked the man. He grabbed Geoffrey's cap from Geoffrey's head. Geoffrey was wearing a cap he particularly liked, it was a comedy cap. It had a stuffed arm holding a hammer emerging out of it which appeared to be beating the wearer on his own head. The man wiped the pizza from his shoe with Geoffrey's hat.

Geoffrey may have been having more trouble than usual making himself understood that day but this last gesture confirmed an understanding that had been dawning on him for some time: that he was in the presence of a couple of potentially very dangerous people.

Pizza-shoe roughly crammed the hat back on Geoffrey's head.

'Where's the doc, zit face?' he demanded.

Geoffrey gulped.

'He can't tell you nothing, can he,' said the other, speaking for the first time.

'Look at the state he's in. Let's search the building.'

And with that Geoffrey's interrogators stalked from the room, leaving Geoffrey rather shaken by his unpleasant encounter. Not as shaken as he would have been if he had realized that, had he not been a spastic, he would have been murdered. But none the less, pretty shaken.

Being a spastic had not done Geoffrey a lot of favours in his life. In fact it could be said to have been a total and utter drag from start to finish. However, in that brief moment, being a spastic had actually made up for quite a number of its shortcomings as a physical condition. It had unquestionably saved Geoffrey's life, because if Geoffrey