

Midsummer Night's Wire Up

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It was the dullest of times; it was the most magical of times. The world's oil had almost run out. This had not been in time to stave off a three degree rise in global temperatures. In England's post-green and less than pleasant land, where drought ruled, there were still rainy zones which occasionally flooded small towns; these odd downpours were jealously siphoned off by multinationals who sold water to the entire country. There were still Satanic mills, containing the last stockpiles of coal. Without electricity, water could not be pumped. The electricity grid worked for 8 minutes a day. This enabled the Watering Time, a temporal oasis in which you could switch on your taps. Foolhardy folks headed for the reservoirs and temperamental streams. But these watery havens were guarded by eco-troops called the Green Helmets. Intruders were shot.

After nine, incessant years of grid collapse, in which there would be no electricity for months, the internet surrendered. A drought in digital connections led to what was termed, the 'electrical desert'. There would be no more SMSs, no emails, no smart phoning. People would prospect not just for undiscovered wells and hidden streams, but for the detritus of civilisation's batteries. The Green Helmets jealously guarded the country's LEDs. Civilians who made their own DIY solar panels or wind mills were evicted and arrested.

When the grids came down, there was no more television and no more film. What flourished instead was a mass of small theatre companies. In some, wilder natures burgeoned in the form of anti-government freedom fighters. As mobile phones became useless, the rebels left each other coded graffiti messages on walls, often from Shakespeare plays. "The rain it raineth every day" was code for "water source secured." "Smooth runs the water where the brook is deep" was written on pieces of cardboard box and posted into people's broken windows: security forces would make an unexpected strike to confiscate stolen water or solar panels. "Let they hair stand on end" was a call to riot. It had become impossible for the authorities to tell the difference between actors and terrorists.

Military intelligence was quick to spot what became termed, 'Shakespeare code.' Books were being burned for fuel; but even in those days of Kindles, i-pads and PDFs, people still loved their hard copies. The Green Helmets plundered people's books and burned the lot. One time, the Helmets ransacked the home of an elderly and once famous theatre actor, who was also a rebel sympathiser. As the Helmets burned his treasured Shakespeare collection on the street, the actor threw himself into the flames. This poetic defiance caused a riot, and curfews ensued. No one could leave the house except for a walk around their own street. Graffiti was made illegal. Those were caught sending written messages had their finger tips put to the razor. But then, no one could do anything about the power of memory.

At 73 years of age, a deteriorating memory was all that Emily had left. She lived in a state of nostalgia for her hard copies of Shakespeare, her first editions of Harold Pinter and Caryl Churchill; she so missed her copy of Peter Brook's *The Empty Space*. Her life as a theatre director was long gone. She lay on her stinking mattress recalling her halcyon days at the Manchester Royal Exchange and her famed production of *Midsummer Night's Dream*. She staged a forest of new media that lit up in fairy lights. Sea level rises were core to her production of *King Lear*. Lear handed over his corporation to his two avaricious daughters who exiled their father from their dry lands, floating him away on a rusting oil tanker. After the shows, Emily would shower in musk rose of L'Oreal shampoo, followed by a bath of wild thyme. But there would be no more baths, no more showers.

Emily's days were made from simple tasks: turn on your house's central cold tap for the Watering 8 minutes; put chlor-floc in the drinking water. It was at Watering Time that the elderly were most vulnerable to burglars. *Homo sapiens* had evolved into a species determined to wash. Few were prepared to return to the Middle Ages. Outside, the town criers could be heard delivering a megaphone message: "Body Odour is the New Sexy."

Seven years earlier, the Hair Act had been passed. There was hardly enough water to wash. To ensure that no one washed their hair, the Act specified that having any hair at all was a criminal offence. There was a practice called 'dry scalping' which involved foam and a hand razor. Emily never forgot her first scalping, nor the daubing the blood from her head. As was the case with everyone else, her hair was used to stuff pillows.

Through her smashed bedroom window, Emily surveyed the tepid and contagious bog of Clayton-le-Moors. This small town in the North of England was wrapped in moors almost bereft of trees. Its cobble stones were rheumatic with humidity. The moon's lidless eyes looked exhausted. Emily started to cough and cough. She was not, however, willing to die. Not yet. Not until she found her last copy of the complete works of Shakespeare. Encroaching dementia and the fear that the copy might be discovered had left her incapable of remembering exactly where she had hidden it. All she knew was this – her Shakespeare works were neither stolen, nor lost nor destroyed. Emily bedded down into her thoughts and its entanglement of cowslips; here she might find an answer.

Then her recurring dream began. In it, she had one light, provided by the iconic illumination of her favourite smart phone relic, a Samsung Galaxy S III. She wandered through a forest of black and spiky branches. Then she heard rustling and running and shouting and her lungs were being torn open; she fought to the surface, she woke up. Emily pulled her aching body out of bed, and coughed in spasms. A wire stuck out of the wall. A spider danced at its edge, spinning in an upside down world. Was there a space behind those wires? Had she hid her *Complete Works* behind the wires? She didn't know how long she would live. She must find her only copy.

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There were six of them, and they cycled by night. They flew along the broken lanes between the folds of the moors. When they reached the edge of Whalley Banks, they found a wider road.

"This is it," whispered a man's voice that still had traces of a northern accent. "I remember it now – two hours to Clayton-le-Moors."

"This old woman of yours better be worth it," said a woman's voice.

"Sshhh," whispered back the man. "All of you, silence, you never know where they are."

These night riders continued, under canopy of dark, with only the whirr of their bicycle wheels. Cycling was a treacherous task as the roads were carbunched with damage. No cars and curfews had returned the wilderness to itself. As the straight line of bicycles drew an invisible line through mystic space, the clouds turned in their sleep, making room for moonlit surveillance. Under its curious gaze, the cyclists shimmered like black butterflies. They were now vulnerable. One of them pointed towards a clump of trees which would provide a canopy to protect them from the moonlight. Under the trees, their wheels slowed, gently landing in gravel.

"Wait for the clouds to give us cover" came another whisper. From an opening in the trees, something scuffed the soil.

"What's that?" asked the woman's voice.

"Be silent as the grave," returned the man's voice. The group waited. Someone breathed through constricted nostrils. Someone whisked back their long hair. Someone's starvation stomach bubbled. From the trees came a clink.

"We're out of here," commanded the man. But it was too late. From the fracture in the trees charged the unforgiving lights of a green khaki, army range rover. The Helmets had the last of the oil. Their LED powered search lights blared into the faces of their new captives.

The leader of four Green Helmets announced that they would shoot to kill. The rogue cyclists stood proud in their night-goggles. The soldier's aimed their Kalashnikovs. The Helmet in command had a fist-face full of bristles. He held his scanner over the eyes of a woman. Crowned in a temple of raven and knotted hair, she pulled out a strand and from its dead end and extracted a flea.

"Ill met by moonlight, proud Helmets," intoned the woman.

"Yer number," demanded the Helmet in a thick northern accent.

"Dame Cate Blanchet," she responded calmly. A certain class of people never used their real names. Nor did they surrender a number.

"Pardon me, Good Helmet," said the man with blonde dreadlocks, "her true name is Dame Tits, Tits by Name and Tits by Nature."

"And in addition," added Dame T., "I have several MA degrees, and one in quantum physics."

The Helmet stared at the Dame's breasts and the crowfeet under her eyes. His slender fingers opened her left eye. He beamed his scanner at her iris and collected her data. If the scanner failed to bleep, the subject was automatically illegal. The penalty was internment in a local hard labour camp; it was an experience that few survived.

Not a sound from the scanner. The Helmet stood and looked Dame T. up and down. Then he walked up to the man with blonde dreadlocks and proceeded to sniff him.

"Smelly bugger, aren't ye," said the Helmet.

"I am a man of many odours." Under the Helmet's handheld light, the man's facial lines revealed a visage, forty something.

"Talk proper, ye twat, or else you'll be blowin' my Kalachnikov. Now open your eyes wide, and tell me the first three digits of yer number."

"Oberon."

The Helmet scanned Oberon's eye, which the scanner turned into tiny neon algorithms which danced with elfin precision. And no bleep.

The other three Helmets started to kick the large buttocks of a fat man in his corduroy trousers, his black T-shirt covered with an array of wires and old smart phones, some which were clipped from his waistband.

"Steve Jobs, Steve Jobs..." said wheezy voice of the fat man.

"You lot," commanded the Helmet to entire group "make a straight line, hands behind yer 'eads." The boss Helmet's three comrades pointed their guns at the line.

The glare of the army lights revealed a scandalous cast of characters sporting outrageous hair and clothes. Dame T. had a rat's nest of black hair; her leather jacket, combat skirt and dock martins were reminiscent of the Goth style from the first decade of the twenty first century. Oberon's long, blonde dreadlocks contrasted with his black leather tail coat, tight T-shirt and multi-zipped trousers. Indeed, he could have walked in from *The Matrix*. Next to him was the fatter man, Steve Jobs, probably only 90 kilos. But in these times of little food, 90 kilos was a genetic mutation. The many pockets of his corduroy trousers were stuffed with wires and smart phones; an old computer keyboard was swung over his shoulders; croc-clips and miniature bicycle lights garlanded his neck. His baseball hat, cocked sideways, shadowed his bushy eyebrows and the hair growing out of his ears. The Helmet walked up to this man who called himself Steve Jobs and levelled his question again.

"I asked you for yer number, fatty."

"It is not Fatty, it is Bottom; Bottom is your name, Nicky Bottom," yelled Oberon, overdoing his consonants."

"That's my line dude," said a steady American voice. This came from the young man in his twenties who stood next to Steve Jobs or Bottom or whatever his real name might be. The young man had a pirate haircut dyed turquoise. His torso looked elastic in a turquoise T-shirt. He had completed his retro style with a pair of jeans that carefully revealed his turquoise lycra underpants. His ear glistened with a purple fish hook.

"Who the hell are you, turquoise boy," asked the chief Helmet.

"I be Lysander, and that Oberon stole my cue."

"American Rogue," returned Oberon, "Demetrius left our troupe because of you stealing all his best lines"

"I am not American," returned the camp Lysander, "I am Canadian. And that faggot Demetrius left because I wouldn't let him inside me."

The Helmet motioned for backup. One of the soldiers put the end of a Kalashnikov in Oberon's mouth and placed a handgun between Lysander's teeth. The second soldier held his Kalashnikov at Dame T's forehead. The third soldier pointed his gun at Bottom's throat.

"And what 'ave we 'ere," intoned the chief Helmet as he looked at the two women standing next to Bottom.

"Hermia and Helena," they said in overlap.

Looking both women up and down, the helmet checked some unseen gear in his trouser pockets. Helena's hair was a Turkish carpet of red and gold that flew in the wind-chill breeze. Hermia's overgrown chestnut hairs stood on end as though powered by static electricity. The Helmet looked and looked. He then addressed the vagabond crew.

"I don't need to digitally scan you lot. Yer all criminals. And you 'ave no idea what I am goin' to do to the lot of you. But there is time for a bit of foreplay, right?"

The bristle-faced, chief Helmet placed his Kalashnikov on the ground. Carefully, he placed his scanner next to it. Neatly, he put his helmet next to both. His scalp was oily naked. He took his time fingering Helena's hair, taking deep inhalations as he ran his nostrils up and down Hermia's locks. He unbuttoned the top of his shirt. Oberon and Lysander gagged on the guns in their mouths. Dame T. spat in the face of her guard. He bloodied her nose. Bottom looked at Hermia and Helena and started to cry.

"If anyone tries to interrupt me," said the Helmet without raising his voice, "or if these two knee me in the bollocks, them three and her over there," he said pointing at Bottom and Oberon and Lysander and Dame T., "blow their 'eads off."

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Emily went over memory hill, down recollection vale, but she could not remember. She must be suffering from the first stages of dementia. She had checked the basement. She had changed her glasses. She even looked under her urine soaked mattress. She dreaded what would happen if her Shakespeare were lost for eternity. Too often, she lost precious things because she hid them too well.

Whoever was to be entrusted with this magical text would have to understand the guidelines. She coughed blood over her duvet. At least she had aspirin for the fever. This was not the usual bronchitis. This had gone on for too long. Pneumonia had set in, and no one would give her antibiotics. Focus on the breath. The Shakespeare was not under the floor boards, as much of these had been used for fuel. It was not behind the walls, as she had already slammed into the plaster with her broken off metal bedstead. Emily had only two asthma inhalers left, and they were both ten years old. She grabbed the green cylinder of one and pulled back the slide. As she inhaled the ventolin she lost herself in memories of her production of *Midsummer Night's Dream*. The moon is so crucial to the poetics of that play, she thought. When the next door neighbours had been arrested, had she buried the Shakespeare in the back garden of her semi-detached cottage, under the watchful eye of the moon?

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The Helmet had done his worst. Hermia had vomited down her dress; Helena was broken on the floor. All around them was their hair. There were patches of blood on their scalped heads. Their Helmet wiped his large scissors on his khakis; he ceremoniously raised his other hand, bearing the razor.

"Who's next?"

"Then I must be thy lady," lisped Dame T., blood staining her nose and chin, the scissors and razor approaching.

The Helmet who guarded Dame T. lowered the gun as his boss identified his next of prey. Dame T. placed her hands caressingly on the bristle of her would-be assailant's face:

"but I know,

When thou hast stolen away from fairy land...the somethings or other of jealousy....prompt!"

Oberon tried to say "snares," but his mouth was full.

The other Helmets began to snigger; the point about an Apocalypse was that people either conformed meticulously or went insane. As the Helmet started to pull at knots in her hair, Dame T. detached something from inside her bodice; surreptitiously, she pulled out a small metal bottle with a spray cap attached. She made a jet-spray arc which infected the soldier securing her and which steamed over the chief Helmet's bristly face and eyes and nostrils. The soldier fell dizzily to the floor. The eyes of the ferocious barber lit up, and then he too fell to the ground. As the other Helmets aimed their guns to shoot her, Oberon and Lysander kick boxed their weapons away and smashed them unconscious. Lysander whipped out two more sprays from his holsters, and finished off these last two Helmets, who lay drugged.

Bottom ran towards Hermia as she grabbed a Kalashnikov and was about to blow off absolutely anybody's testicles. Helena used a bare palm to daub the cuts on her head.

"I'm going to tell that bloody woman you're obsessed by, I'm going to tell her what she put us through," spat Dame T. at Oberon.

"I am the one who put you through all this, not her. And you just remember, that old witch is mine."

"Is this about revenge?"

"If you had been on top of your cues, we could have got those bastards quicker. How many times have we done this show without you messing it up?"

"You kept cutting off my lines."

"You forgot your lines."

"How can I get the lines right if I've only ever had a couple of pages of script, because obviously, they burn Shakespeare under the baked beans, 'cos Bert darling, in case you forgot, there's a bloody Apocalypse on."

"Don't you dare call me Bert, it's Oberon."

"When do we get to change it to Mistress Quickly, to explain your premature ejaculation?"

Hermia was crying out and slapping at Bottom's wide chest, him repeatedly telling her it was over, and that everything would be alright. Lysander ransacked the range rover, and found a first aid kit; he started to daub Helena's head as she curled up in embryo position on the back seat.

"Get the goggles and guns, leave the bicycles," commanded Oberon "We're off to find that witch."

As Dame T. revved up the engines of the range rover, Nicky Bottom collected the mass of Hermia and Helena's hair. In the rear-view mirror, Oberon re-did his mascara.

"What did you whisper in the ears of the Helmets, after you have most magically sprayed them?" demanded Oberon.

"When you awake," intoned Dame T., "fall in love with anyone, man or woman, who has long hair."

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In the moist heat, Emily lay on top of her puckered mattress. At least her life had been devoted to working with artists. She had brought people together. Under the indifferent moon, Emily had a rare moment of peace. Maybe her life had not been in vain.

It was then that she heard the violation of wooden slats. As they were being smashed out she heard the entrance of hell. She could hear the front door flying down the vestibule. This was not the Watering Time. Emily no longer had the energy to cough. Please God, she thought, if they are going to kill me, then at least let it be fast. She had heard of people being burned in their beds, and their flesh cooked on bed springs.

She pissed herself.

They surrounded her in the lurid light of their stolen LEDs: Dame T. and Oberon, Hermia and Helena emaciated and scalped like concentration camp victims. In her heightened state, Emily thought Lysander looked like a young Johnny Depp. Bottom was draped in wads of blonde, red and chestnut hair. Emily's nostrils filled with their sweat.

Oberon grabbed Emily by the throat. She whimpered.

"Remember me, Emily?"

She looked at him, fighting to recall.

"How could you ever forget me, Emily? Listen like your life depended on it. Because it does. Oberon inhaled ready for his piece:

Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,

Such shaping fantasies that apprehend much more than cooler reasons comprehend,

The lunatic, the lover and the poet, of imagination are all compact,

One sees more devils than hell can hold, that is the mad man...

So how good was that Emily?

"Beautiful," she mumbled through tears.

"So why did you say I couldn't do Shakespeare, you creativity-raping bitch?"

She remembered. Bert Birtwhistle, from Oswaldtwistle, a 30 year-old straight out of East 15 Drama School in London, who had spent his twenties saving money to go there at all. Bert had auditioned for her production of *Midsummer Night's Dream*, a

spectacular success at the Royal Exchange, in which the audience were allowed to keep their mobile phones switched on, and text message parts of the stage, designed with a forest of wires, which lit up with the help of audience participation. Bert did not get the part of Oberon, his biggest dream. He stalked Emily for days, cursing her at several bus stops.

Now hardly able to breathe, Emily held on to her role as a professional: "I didn't say, I didn't say.... you couldn't do....."

"Yes, you did."

"I said.... Shakespeare..... I just said... you needed some time....some time to get, to get... the verse right. You came....came too quickly.... through the iambic pentameter. But you can do the verse...now you can...you....are....so talented."

Oberon let go of his strangle hold, and covered his face. Dame T. stroked his hair. She then turned to Emily and asked tenderly:

"Do you have your Shakespeare?"

Emily subsided into a coughing fit. Bottom lifted her up and let her use his wide chest as a pillow. She opened the ventolin and drew in her last medicine, which settled like fairy dew inside the branches of her lungs. Her thoughts floated and wrapped themselves around the words she had heard: lunatic, lover, poet; the room was bathed in moonlight; the words and the light all collided. Oberon's performance had led her into some woods in her mind's eye. Now she remembered. Now she re-found her secret hiding place. She pulled one of Bottom's commodious ears towards her and with what breath she had left, gave him the information.

The gang descended to the basement. Bottom had requisitioned two of the Green Helmet's giant LEDs. His torch found the crucial cables. With this torch, Bottom's peeling trainers found their way across thick roots. Turning his torch up, everyone followed as he led the crew between barnacled trunks, their roots having burrowed through the floor; they twisted upwards into barnacles and knots, with leaves hardly to be fathomed. When Bottom hit the switch and the zombie media flared into life, these trees were revealed to be the stuff of twisted black wires, their governance of branches touching each other like hands reaching into time. There was an efflorescence of antique smart phones, their icons designed as fairies, blossoms and pucks, all shimmering in prismatic lights. There were Apps of planets, galaxies and whales swimming through the universe. Oberon and Dame T. held each other as they gazed up at the whales, trod on a bed of flickering cowslips and felt the fleet-footed wings of digital fairies touching their faces. As they gazed around them and above them, caught in wonder, Oberon whispered in his lover's ear "stranger, yet more true." Lysander lay on his back and stared into the wiry cosmos. He stared at the whale. They used to have whales in Vancouver, his birthplace. Would he ever see a whale again? Hermia looked at a distant moon, phosphorescent in its suspended iPad 4. Her revenge would be her success. In the aftermath of her violation, Hermia vowed to be the best English speaking actress in this time of Apocalypse. Helena bathed her wounded head in the lunar light. She had always wanted to build an archive of left-over books, her library being her family to be, only of course if Hermia would marry her. Helena followed Bottom's hairy hands as they

followed a trail of wires; he pushed his way through a knotted mass of plastic connections until he reached a Samsung Galaxy S III. The phone's icons revealed a dolphin in a moonlit ocean. Behind it was an Apple iPhone 5, with a sole icon of the moon. Bottom felt around the back of the phone and extracted the duck tape, to which was attached a Kingston memory stick. Bottom found an old Apple laptop, and plugged it into another LED. Dame T., Oberon, Lysander, Helena and Hermia, made a halo of faces around Bottom's downy features, lit up as they all were by Apple's antique lights. They were all beholding a PDF: *The First Folio of Shakespeare: The Norton Facsimile*. Bottom opened it. He scrolled and he scrolled. It was all there. Next to it was another PDF. It said "Guidelines on Iambic Pentameters and Shakespearian Verse by Emily Caldwell." Bottom made what digital copies he could with the last of the battery.

Emily died that night. They wrapped her in some of her forest wires and ceremoniously placed her in her front garden, ready for the next day's patrol. Oberon wanted to speak a few rhyming couplets over her delicate corpse, but there was no time. The elfin band disappeared into the night, poets, lovers and madmen all, in search of a working printer. They planned to form a theatre company, and on their travels, gather a motley and talented crew. But to do this they would have to head north, beyond the Green Helmets, beyond the Multinationals and their Emergency Laws, all the way to the greening Arctic. Actors, nomads, hunter gatherers of the soul, survive Emily's pneumonia, take Shakespeare to the globe.