

In a better world, *Imagine* would not have been written. But here we are, having to listen to this dreary nonsense, **again**. Jason Sanders was decidedly grumpy as he considered his coffee. The twins had kept him up all night and, now, in the space of a 20 minute tube ride, he had no fewer than four voice mail messages from his answering service, each one more whiny than the one before, and each one insistent that the situation was more critical than a very critical thing. Sanders did not like computers; he did not like computer networks; he particularly did not like most of his clients: small-business owners whose effort to understand the barest principles of their computer installations was zero but whose attempts to transfer the blame for every consequence of their own IT illiteracy was awe-inspiringly brutal. *Imagine no possessions...* Imagine John Lennon with no possessions, yeah, yeah. He had to admit, though, that his own copy of *Imagine* kept its place in his extensive vinyl collection. He just couldn't stand the title track. Sanders was beginning to enjoy his grumpiness. At least it would be Molly's turn to twin-sit tonight. Quite why Molly put up with him was a mystery whose remedy he did not intend to disturb. She absorbed his crap and she loved him. He would take her flying tomorrow. She enjoyed flying. That was, after all, how they had met.

The first of his messages he would ignore: four rarefied women who had previously forced him to drop everything, such was the threat to their little universe, only for him to discover that the cleaner had unplugged their server. They hadn't even had the good grace to pretend to look ashamed. "Annabel, you'd better put a note on the plug for the cleaner, in capitals I think, saying DO NOT UNPLUG. Put it in Polish as well". The most rarefied one of all, the one with her name on the door, had cackled mirthlessly, the sour sound testifying to her racism.

Two of the messages were routine, easily dealt with remotely. The last was promising: hysterical but promising, despite emanating from a PR company referred to him by a friend and colleague. In ten years of IT work he had found, with some consistency, that financial services companies were deepest in the pit of unpleasantness and PR companies sat right on top of them. Sanders rang the number supplied and was immediately put through to the boss, an inarticulately verbose individual of indeterminate origins called Bob.

"I'm Bob. Thank God you've called."

"How can I help?"

"Everything I click on doesn't work and our email is here but nothing new and it says it's printing but nothing happens and Word can't open my documents. Jim Davies said you'd help us."

Sanders knew Jim Davies. They'd been at Alcester Grammar together and both had read Computer Science at Bristol. JD was a bright boy.

"Did Jim put your system in?"

“Yes, he configured everything a few months ago and I’ve been meaning to get a contract with him but we’ve been so busy and everything has been working perfectly so you know how it is you just put it on the back burner. Anyway, can you help?”

Sanders could see it without even needing to look. JD had put it in alright and that was a good thing because at least it would have been done properly. But JD had not taken a fancy to Bob and even if Bob had roused himself from the comfort of his back burner, JD would have melted into that invisible space known to computer consultants as a “long term contract” and suggested that Bob rang, well, Jason Sanders. Sanders blamed Enzo for taking a bite out of JD’s ankle one Sunday afternoon way back; JD blamed Sanders and his entire family for mocking him when his proffered bitten ankle turned out to be no different to the unbitten one. JD was good at holding grudges, in a good-humoured way. Sanders often thought of those early days when he and JD would sit in the summer grass, strumming their three chord creations and thinking of pretty girls; well, girls if the truth be told.

He wrote down the address.

“Come in, come in, Jason, thank you so much for coming, our data is really, really important and if we lose that we might as well shut up shop, it’s just so critical, I dread to think what our situation would be. You are a hero for coming.”

Sanders knew all about heroes. For the first quarter of an hour you are the hero. Then as time passes so the standstill becomes more and more your fault until, finally, even the original shutdown is your responsibility. He had never understood that.

“Your data is absolutely critical?” Sanders asked.

Bob looked somewhat nonplussed as though he had just been asked a very, very stupid question. His resulting peroration on the importance of his data, systems, email, client list, database, accounts, blah, blah was impressive for the length of time it took and the volume at which it was delivered. Bob no doubt invoiced more hot air than those PR companies less exceptional than his.

“Oh, that is good news.” Sanders sounded relieved.

Bob moved from nonplussed to rather more menacing, but still polite, realising that his grasp of computer matters was woefully insufficient and the assured, confident-looking man in front of him, while under-dressed in jeans and t-shirt, represented his most immediate chance of extricating himself from what he considered to be nothing short of a catastrophe.

“Why is that good news?” Bob spoke slowly.

“Because data as critical as that is always backed up. If you would like to show me where you keep your backups I’ll have you up and running in no time.” Sanders knew full well that the likelihood of Bob ever having moved a backup tape from his back burner to a more

profitable place such as the tape drive was zero. He also knew that his observation was likely to lead, once Bob had calmed down, to a new, improved Bob whose attention to backups in the future would become nothing short of religious.

Bob barked orders at his secretary, and then at various members of his staff, each order countered by shrugs, each order more obnoxious than the one before in his eagerness to divert the blame for his own dereliction. Bob's attention to futility reminded Sanders of his own father's observation of the indignity of substituting futile for usefulⁱ, and he wondered what pithy phrases he, in turn, would pass on to his twins or any other little ones that might come along. Observing Bob's frantic descent into caricature, Sanders was alert to JD's motto "Protect them from themselves", and he knew that once he got his hands on Bob's server, JD's professionalism would become apparent. But for the time being he was enjoying himself. He was beginning to feel really rather well.

Word count: 1174

ⁱ Jose Marti