

Flanagan's Running Club – Issue 84

Introduction

The first rule of Flanagan's Running Club is everyone should be telling everyone they know about Flanagan's Running Club! After all, sharing is caring. Details of how to sign up is in the epilogue.

There is no need to panic, there is no actual running involved, it is not a running club in that sense. The title is made up from extending the title of my favourite book – Flanagan's Run by Tom McNab.

So, sit back, grab a cup of coffee (or beer, wine, rum, port, Pepsi, or whatever), and enjoy the read.

On This Day – 29th June

1613 – The Globe Theatre in London, built by William Shakespeare's playing company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, burns to the ground.

1620 – English crown bans tobacco growing in England, giving the Virginia Company a monopoly in exchange for tax of one shilling per pound.

1971 – Prior to re-entry (following a record-setting stay aboard the Soviet Union's Salyut 1 space station), the crew capsule of the Soyuz 11 spacecraft depressurizes, killing the three cosmonauts on board. Georgy Dobrovolsky, Vladislav Volkov and Viktor Patsayev are the first humans to die in space.

2007 – Apple Inc. releases its first mobile phone, the iPhone.

Engineer's Day (Ecuador)

Independence Day (Seychelles)

Veterans' Day (Netherlands)

National Statistics Day (India)

Births

1944 – Gary Busey

1958 – Rosa Mota

1978 – Nicole Scherzinger

2003 – Jude Bellingham

Deaths

1520 – Moctezuma II

1861 – Elizabeth Barrett Browning

1940 – Paul Klee

1967 – Jayne Mansfield

2002 – Rosemary Clooney

2003 – Katharine Hepburn

Number 1's

Number 1 single in 1987 – The Firm – Star Trekkin'

Number 1 album in 1968 – The Small Faces – Ogden's Nut Gone Flake

Number 1 compilation album in 2002 – Various – The Very Best Of MTV Unplugged

#vss365

A short story in 280 characters or less, based on a prompt word on Twitter

It takes a certain level of skill to be able to #scull properly. One that I never was able to master. The coach would berate me on a daily basis.

When he disappeared, the others went to another coach, I gave up.

My last act with a #scull was to cave the coach's skull in.

#vss365

Joke

A little old lady sits at the luncheonette counter and orders a hamburger. The huge guy behind the counter bellows, "One burger!" Whereupon the chef grabs a huge chunk of chopped meat, stuffs it in his bare armpit, pumps his arm a few times to squeeze it flat, and then tosses it on the grill. "That's the most disgusting thing I've ever seen," the old lady says. "Yeah?" says the counterman. "You should be here in the morning when he makes the doughnuts."

Drabble

A drabble is a complete story that is exactly one hundred words long.

Twin Troubles

Dan hurt all over. He had been involved in fights before, but he had never been given such a good going over as the one he had just been on the end of. And he had no idea what had prompted the other bloke to lay into him, but it had been a sustained attack.

He was about to go to the hospital when his twin brother, Mark, rang, "Alright Dan, I've just found out the married woman I'm seeing, Kate, well her husband is a boxer, and I think he might have found out about us."

"He definitely knows."

Flash Fiction

Something between the 100-word shortness of a Drabble, and the short story, these are works of fiction somewhere between five hundred and seven hundred words.

In Training

Bill never could wait to get out of the barracks. As part of the 42nd Regiment of the Royal Highlander's they were stationed at Perth. It was never quiet in the barracks. The huge railway station and goods yards were only a street away. There didn't appear to be a time of the day or night when there wasn't a locomotive hauling passengers or freight through the city.

And then there was the smell. Whenever the wind blew from the west, which it did more often than not, the stench of the chemicals used in the neighbouring dye works filled every nook and cranny of the barracks.

Any excuse to get out and away from the barracks was taken with vigour. Even if it was only the short trip across the tracks to the west of the city and the huge, relatively new Welshill cemetery. It was as close to the railway tracks as the barracks were, but somehow it was so peaceful here. The sounds just disappeared up into the ether here. Whereas to the east where the barracks were the sound was amplified, as it bounced off the red brick buildings of the factories, terraced streets, and the barracks themselves. The land between the railway and the River Tay was packed full of the rebuilt city.

The cemetery gave a good view of the whole city laid out beneath where Bill stood. They loved placing cemeteries on the hills above towns. They claimed it was closer to God that way, but to Bill there was no such thing as God, and he just thought it was a chance for the bodies to finally be able to look down on the city which so often looked down on them.

He had seen colleagues and friends buried here and other similar places over the years. But today wasn't another funeral. And it wasn't only the peace and quiet that had led him here to stand amongst the dead and the monuments to their lives. He was meeting someone. He didn't know their name, or what they looked like. It had been arranged by coded telegrams and the small ads in the Perth Examiner. And it wasn't just the frigid westerly winds that was giving him cold feet.

Bill had agreed to meet the man to take on a contract. To be paid to use the skills taught to him by the army in a private capacity. He was here to get a bundle of cash and a name of the person he would agree to kill.

There had been whispers of others in the regiment doing the same thing, and from Bert, he had gotten details of how to earn some additional money on top of the measly corporal's pay he currently received.

But, stood between a moss-covered angel and a black marble cross, he realised he didn't really want to be adding to the population of this or any other cemetery. He had seen enough death in South Africa. And that wasn't his only worry.

The hint of money for hired killers wasn't the only thing doing the rounds in the shadows. The police were on the lookout for these people now. The people he was here to become one of. And as this was Bill's first assignation in this new to him world, he couldn't be sure it was a legit meeting and not a trap.

It was his familiarity to the cemetery that gave him a head start. Although the trains couldn't be heard here, all other sounds carried and bounced around the gravestones. There were footsteps. Not from a single person, but multiple ones from different directions. It was too late for a burial, and no one in their right mind came here as darkness approached, let alone so many.

It appeared he was right to be worried. Something was wrong here. And so, he ran. And as he did there came a whistle. He knew that sound as well, the familiar blast of a policeman's whistle. They had come for him.

But Bill knew the cemetery well and he rushed through the memorials heading east and scaled the wall out onto the street of Feu Wynd. There were lights to the south where the road led to the bridge over the tracks. He would be caught that way soon enough, so instead he crossed the road and went down the embankment into the goods yard.

He ran, carefully picking his way over the multitude of tracks. More of them than he had imagined there could be. Bill could see the chimney of the dye works getting closer. He carried on running with the rush of blood pounding in his ears.

How could he have not seen or heard the engine? Thirty-six tonnes of locomotive made short work of what was left of Bill's life. He would be adding to the cemetery's population after all.

Leicestershire

Donington le Heath Manor

Donington le Heath Manor House Museum, now 'The 1620s House and Garden at Donington le Heath' is a surviving example of a manor house built over seven hundred years ago in Donington le Heath, near the town of Coalville, Leicestershire. It was once owned by a relative of one of the Gunpowder plotters, and is now managed by Leicestershire County Council.

The museum is based in a medieval manor house, believed to date back to around 1290. From the style of the architecture of the parts of the building and from tree-ring dating of some of the timbers still present, the present house at Donington was probably built between 1288 and 1295.

A house on this site and the present building were owned by the Charley Priory, then Ulverscroft Priory until the 1530s and several tenants are known to have lived there during this time, including Robert and Isabella de Herle, who probably built the present house.

Some of the features of the house, along with tree-ring dating of the timbers in the roof, show that the Manor House was heavily modernised around 1618. It appears that at this time, the downstairs storerooms were converted into a kitchen and a parlour. A new roof was put on and the rooms upstairs were remodelled with a new internal staircase. Externally, the most obvious addition from this period are the large rectangular mullioned windows. At this time, the house was probably owned by John Digby of Seaton, whose nephew, Sir Everard Digby was a friend of Robert Catesby and was executed in 1606 for his part in the Gunpowder Plot.

From 1670 to 1960, the house was rented out as a tenant farm, with proceeds going to support a hospital and Orphanage in Osgathorpe. Leicestershire County Council bought the Manor House in 1965 after it had become a pig farm and fallen into disrepair. A large project was then undertaken to preserve the building for future generations. The Manor House was opened as a museum in 1973.

Donington le Heath Manor House was tenanted by members of the Digby family from the early 15th century, and they owned the site and its lands from the 1530s until 1627. The Digby's main seat was at Tilton on the Hill in east Leicestershire, but they held land in many other parishes. Sir John Digby fought at the Bosworth Battlefield in 1485 for Henry Tudor. When Henry defeated King Richard III and became King Henry VII, he would have rewarded his supporters and it may be the case that he gave back the lands that the Digbys had lost in 1462 for their opposition to the Yorkist King Edward IV. In the early 1600s the property was owned by John Digby of Seaton. John was a known recusant Catholic and he and his family were regularly fined and excommunicated from the Church of England. While John himself had been imprisoned in the Tower of London under suspicion of involvement in the Babington Plot against Elizabeth I, his nephew, Sir Everard Digby, had moved away having married a wealthy heiress in Buckinghamshire and had become a friend of Robert Catesby, the leader of the Gunpowder Plotters. Sir Everard was asked to raise a Midlands rebellion after the Plotters had blown up Parliament and he was intending to kidnap the Princess Elizabeth, James I's daughter, from Coombe Abbey. He was hung drawn and quartered in 1606 for being one of the Catholic Plotters. John Digby died in 1627 and the Donington site was divided up between two families.

In 2016 the Site was refurbished as the 1620s House and Garden telling the story of the Catholic Digbys living in Protestant England. All the rooms are fully furnished as they might have been at the time and the mixture of original and replica furniture and household objects can be touched and used - with one exception. An ornately carved four poster bed has been connected with Leicester's Blue Boar Inn at which Richard III is thought to have stayed just before the Battle of Bosworth and has therefore been known as King Dick's Bed. Its style suggests a much later date than 1485 however, and it fits perfectly into a Jacobean family home.

The house is staffed by a team of knowledgeable volunteers who enjoy showing visitors the witch marks carved to protect the household from evil spirits and encouraging them to explore oak cupboards and chests and to dress up in the costume of the time.

The house is set in beautifully recreated early 17th century style gardens with flower gardens, an orchard, herb and vegetable gardens and a maze. Every tree and plant is labelled with information, which makes for very enjoyable and enlightening exploration.

The Friends organisation for Donington exists to support the museum's further development through fundraising, and funds much of the work in the gardens. The Friends of Donington le Heath Manor House is a registered charity Number 1084997.

Great Glen

Great Glen (or Glenn) is a village and civil parish in the Harborough district, in Leicestershire, 2 miles south of Oadby on the outskirts of Leicester. The population of the civil parish at the 2011 census was 3,662. Leicester city centre is about seven miles Northwest. Its name comes from the original Iron Age settlers who used the Celtic word glennos meaning valley, and comes from the fact that Great Glen lies in part of the valley of the River Sence. The 'great' part is to distinguish the village from Glen Parva.

In 1751 a turnpike bridge was built over the River Sence as a part of the stagecoach route from Leicester to London. The pubs The Pug & Greyhound (The Old Greyhound) and The Crown were originally coaching inns built soon after the new road opened. This road later became the A6 road, and a bypass around the village was opened in 2003. The Midland Main Line runs to the south of the A6, and formerly had a station to serve the village at the closest point.

Leicester Grammar School is constructed on the land of Mount Farm, Great Glen

At the centre of the village on the Stretton Road/Oaks Road T-junction is Great Glen Methodist Church, a Grade II* listed building. Built in 1827 it houses many activities including Sunday morning and evening services, a Sparklers mums and toddlers' group on Mondays, Fusion children's group on Sunday mornings and Confusion alternate Friday evenings for teenagers. View the church at.

The K6 Red telephone box on the village green is a listed building.

Engelbert Humperdinck has a home in the village.

Stretton Hall was built in the 18th century, and though named after Stretton Magna it lies in Great Glen parish. Leicestershire and Rutland Joint Board for the Mentally Defective bought the hall in 1932 for conversion to a hospital. Under the NHS it was a residential hospital for learning disabled children and had 157 beds in 1979. The hospital closed in the 1990s and a housing development has been built on part of the site.

Great Glen was the central place of an early Anglo-Saxon multiple estate. The settlements that comprised this estate are: Great and Little Stretton, Wistow, Newton Harcourt, Fleckney and Kilby. These parishes comprise the minimal extent of the estate which broadly follows the River Sence, the earlier name of which was Glen or Glennos, which was an earlier name of the river. It is possible that the estate extended further west along the river to Glen Parva where it joins the River Soar. It has not been possible to establish this securely. Glen (not Great Glen) enters the record for the first time in AD849 in an Anglo-Saxon royal charter.

In the 16th century, Henry Grey, 1st Duke of Suffolk, father of Lady Jane Grey, became the lord of the manor. After his execution for treason, his lands were seized by the crown.

Following the Battle of Naseby in 1645, during the English Civil War, Great Glen played host to a band of Cromwellian soldiers who were pursuing some of the (defeated) Royalist Cavalry. They were later joined by the rest of the army who camped overnight before moving onto Leicester. Some of these soldiers made camp in the church where they caused much damage (such as breaking all the windows), of which some evidence can still be seen today. There are five road names in the village that mark these events: Cromwell Road, Naseby Way, Ruperts Way, Edgehill Close and Halford Close.

Life's What You Make It

Excerpts from life writing.

New Year's Resolution

It was going to be my first New Year since I had moved to Manchester. Most of the people I knew there had gone off home for the holidays. There was only Mike around, he'd come back after Boxing Day as he was the only other person who was working; the students wouldn't be back until the week after.

With both of us being lazy, and of the opinion that the extortionate ticket prices of the clubs in the city centre could go stick themselves where the sun doesn't shine, as the money could be spent on additional alcohol instead; we went to the only really non-student bar in Fallowfield – Bar XS.

Of the five years I lived in Manchester, four of my New Year's Eve nights out ended up being in there, but, apart from my first weekend in Manchester, it was the first time I'd really been in there. It certainly wouldn't be my last. It was housed in the grand old Victorian red brick building that had used to be Fallowfield train station (when there used to be a train line going through there), and it became my spiritual home in Manchester. (Well, not just spirits, alcohol in general). When I went back a couple of years ago, I was heartbroken to find that Sainsbury's had assimilated it into their store, and it was now their café.

Anyway, back to that first New Year's Eve. I hadn't considered what my New Year's resolution was going to be. I hadn't really done resolutions in the past and wasn't planning on doing so that year either. Until the words came out of my mouth, I hadn't even realised I was going to make one.

But I did; and being at that stage of my life where I was trying hard to be different and awkward, living my second student lifestyle years, I took something up as a resolution. None of this giving something up to make your life better rubbish everyone else was doing. This was the opposite. When the words came out of my mouth, Mike just looked at me for a few seconds before saying.

"Kev, you're a fucking retard, you're supposed to give that sort of shit up for a New Year's resolution, not start doing it."

To be fair, he was right, but it was Mike's fault I decided to do it. For the last three months solid, every time we were out, when he got himself a cigarette out, he would offer me one. And I would refuse.

At two minutes past midnight on the first of January two thousand and two, I accepted the cigarette, got it lit and started smoking. Two minutes after a dozen or so countries had started using the Euro as their currency, I had started smoking. Five minutes later I was at the pub's vending machine buying my first pack of cigarettes.

It would seem that smoking was cool, as I had a successful first night of smoking, and I managed to pull for the first time since moving to Manchester. That's another story entirely and led to a strand of life having a few years of madness.

My resolution lasted longer than eighty percent of other people's would have done. I was on twenty a day through to September before I gave up. Now, I didn't give up due to any health concerns, no, that would be too sensible. I gave up to win a bet, and that was Mike's fault as well.

He had broken his ankle and was housebound. At his girlfriend's request we had all refused to buy him cigarettes, or give him any of the ones we were smoking in the house. He had been at least three weeks without one until he broke and managed to persuade someone passing by the house to go to the corner shop and buy him some cigarettes. (We found out later it was the third passer-by; the first two had taken his money never to be seen again.)

When we put it to him that he didn't need cigarettes and he should have broken the dependency by then he screamed (yes literally screamed) at us that it wasn't that easy. I replied, "of course it is". I was on the last cigarette in my pack, so I said that after that one, I bet I could give them up just like that.

And I did, never bought another packet of cigarettes after that and haven't smoke since (may not be strictly true, there have been some odd nights since). It was the easiest fifty quid I ever made.

And when I think back about my time smoking, I realise that it was probably a good job that I only did it for nine months.

All those other poor bastards still have the Euro.

Poetry Corner

Nosy

The hair drier is nosy, that is what I read
How the letter were interpreted inside my head
And with it came images of what the hair drier did
Watching everyone as they lift the toilet lid

Spying on you as you do your business
Judging you as you try to avoid making a mess
Making notes of the time spent sitting down
And looking for the signs of a nervous breakdown

Checking that you have washed your hands
How much soap you use is what it scans
The length of time you rub and scrub
Or if washing is something you like to snub

All these thoughts run through my mind
Little scenarios that I begin to find
Only to realise that I've made a mistake
And that I need to do a double take

The hair drier is nosy, that is what I read
The hair drier is noisy, that is what it said
And the words stuck there with tape didn't lie
It is so loud it is enough to make you cry

Did I Really Blog That?

A Welsh Christmas

Christmas away with lots of family would be a new one on me. A farmhouse in Pembrokeshire means a long journey to get there, and I'm worrying before we start. Mainly at how we are going to get everything in the car. Four people, luggage, presents, food etc., but thankfully no pets. We have people checking on and feeding the cats, and Charlie's been put in a kennel for the festive period. A whole host of new people for him to bark at randomly.

We just about manage to cram everything into the car and start off. As far as Maccy D's for brunch, before heading for the motorways – M23, M25, M3, M329, M4 and then the A roads from where the motorways stop, and then to B roads, and then the paths between hedges before we arrived at the farmhouse in the dark and the rain. Twenty-seven trips between the car and the house to unload (that may be an exaggeration, but not by much), and we were there. It's a nice large house and it all looks good, but as the week goes on there are signs that the house is a bit tired.

The top oven only works as a grill. The main oven maxes out at 200 degrees C. The dishwasher struggles when filled anywhere near capacity. There are three games rooms, with a total of two pool tables, table football, table tennis and two dart boards. Sadly, neither of the pool tables are up to much. The larger slate bed one has a sagging slate as if someone has been pogoing in the middle of the table for years and is only really suited to 9 ball as the cue ball is the same size as the rest of the oversized balls. The other table is a wood one with foldaway legs and balls slightly too small for the table. There were a lot of rolls on that table and definitely no Royce. The cushions were dead and absorbed all the speed of the balls with no bounce at all. The place had been advertised as having broadband. The old dial up connection of the 90's would have been quicker. Either that or they need a new horde of hamsters to turn the wheels.

Then there were the beds. A strange collection of different styles and mattress types. On the first night I turned over on the poor attempt at a memory foam mattress and suddenly the middle part of the mattress sank into an abyss. It was a low base bed with thin slats. Now, I know I'm a fat git, but just turning over shouldn't dislodge three slats. Investigation in the morning suggested it wasn't just me that has had this problem with the bed. There was evidence that the slats popped out more often Captain Oates. I put them back in and spent the rest of the week trying not to move as I slept for fear of disappearing into the abyss, but they didn't pop out again.

There's always a first time for things to happen to you. And so it was when there I was, lying in bed when I realised it was raining on me. We'd left a slight crack open in a couple of windows to let some air in to the room to counteract the stifling heat of the central heating from hell.

I had woken once when the curtain had knocked the lamp onto the bed. The crack had changed into chasms and the curtain behind the headboard was being blown well into the room, whereas the curtain to the side of the room was being sucked out into the night. I got up and closed the windows back to their cracks not thinking a lot of it and went back to bed.

I'm not sure how much later it was, but the windows were wide open again, and the curtain behind the bed was now pretty much floating horizontally over me in the bed, and the rain was driving in through the hole it should have been covering, all over me and the bedside cabinet, and the carpet next to the bed and all the bags of presents lined up against the far wall.

I got up and closed the window again, all the way to this time, with no crack at all, and then closed the window on the other side of the room after wrangling the curtain back in from outside. By the time I'd done this and got back to the bed, the wind had opened the window behind the bed again. I pulled it shut and locked the thing, before heading back to a somewhat damp bed. Meanwhile not a drop had made it to Helen's side of the bed. Being rained on whilst sleeping was something that I hadn't even encountered whilst camping numerous times whilst in the scouts.

Although the farmhouse is in the middle of the wilds, it's not that far from some good places to visit. Haverfordwest was the nearest large town to do all the shopping. Our carload went the more scenic route (yes, we went the wrong way), past Carew Castle to get there. We saw two large buildings whilst in the town. Aldi and Tesco. And got some very long souvenir receipts (together they were nearly as tall as me). There was another (intentional this time) detour on the way back to the farmhouse to see what the nearest large village looked like. We did a lap of Narberth, and it looked very nice, but we didn't manage to get back to walk around it. It's funny how times flies like that. Speaking of which, that was pretty much Sunday wiped out.

Monday saw five of the six of us already at the farmhouse head over to Pembroke Dock. Some of us passed Carew again, before we got to park up near to the castle. Run by a private trust it meant we couldn't use our English Heritage cards as we can for any CADW sites.

I hadn't been to this part of Wales before, and all I knew is that the whole area is festooned with castles. What I didn't know is that Pembroke Castle is one of the most impressive ones anywhere in Wales. Or that it was the home to some of the most important families in medieval history. It had been built by the de Montgomery family, and changed hands through the Marshall's, de Clare's, de Valence's, Hastings', and Tudor's. An impressive list, with at the end of it Henry Tudor was born at the castle. And he ended up becoming Henry VII.

There is a lot of the castle intact. Lots of the barbican and gatehouse buildings are complete (if a bit leaky), and the outer walls are about ninety percent complete. Parts of the keep still stand, including the grand tower and dungeon tower, but most of it is now roofless and in ruins.

It is an impressive structure and I managed to climb (and squeeze) my way to the top of all six of the towers that are open to the public. I'm not sure how William Marshall would have coped inside the castle though. He was reputed to be six foot six tall, extremely rare for the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and with armour and a helmet on he would have had to walk in a crouch around most of the passages and staircases. I know this as I, who is only six foot two without a helmet, managed to clout my head on ceilings four times as I wandered around. In fact, I could have done with a helmet, as I still have a headache as I write this four days later.

After exploring the castle and the cave beneath that has been used since 10,000 BC called Wogan's Hole (not named after Terry, but the other way around, despite how old he was), and the exit through the gift shop (yes, pen, fridge magnet and guidebook) it was time for a pub lunch. We found the King George, sat on the waterfront, the water in question being the moat to the castle, which still surrounds two sides of it. It was one of the friendliest pubs I've ever been in. And the food was really nice and cheap as well.

The remaining four family members turned up that evening. Two by car – with what I'm sure were actually twenty-seven trips to unload all their stuff – and the other two picked up from Carmarthen coach station – with two small bags each. We were now at our full complement of ten for the rest of the week.

Christmas Eve saw a leisurely brunch before two carloads of four headed off to St David's, the smallest city in the United Kingdom. Built around what had originally been a sixth century monastery to St David, a village had grown up around the site. From the eleventh to fourteenth centuries a large, impressive cathedral was built on the site of the monastery, and the now ruined Bishop's palace was built on the other side of the small river. The village with a cathedral then became a city, but never really expanded much after that.

Originally the whole holy site had its own city walls with gatehouses at strategic points. A lot of the walls are still there, but only one of the gatehouses survive, an octagonal tower that stands above the churchyard to the cathedral, at a level with most of the rest of the current city.

The cathedral itself is impressive in size, and although there are some touches of grandeur, a lot of the old stained glass had been ruined by the puritan pompous prick, Oliver Cromwell. What is amazing all the way through were the ceilings. Patterns, symbols, detailing and so many different styles. As always, it's definitely worth a look up. It is bigger than it looks from the outside, and there is a lot to take in. The corner of the south aisle houses the gift shop, and the trinity of standard tourist tat were purchased.

Helen and I took a wander around the outside of most of the Bishop's palace, which was a CADW site, but wasn't open to the public. It would have been a magnificent building when it was complete.

Outside of the cathedral grounds it doesn't take long to explore the rest of the city, it really isn't much bigger than some villages, but it is well worth visiting. It also houses another large church. The back can be seen from the path on the way up from the cathedral and has a distinctive window with the star of David in it. It is the Tabernacl Presbyterian Church of Wales, and was unfortunately closed to the public.

For the third day on the trot there was a stop at a supermarket on the way back, I'm not sure what for this time, but it probably added to the pile of stuff that needed to be carted away on the Friday.

Christmas morning came and people gradually made their way to the living room. The whole day seemed to pass in a haze, there was some moaning that people had got dressed before the opening of presents as it was tradition to open them in "jammies". A bit difficult to do when you don't own any "jammies" or have the room in your car to bring dressing gowns (again which I don't own anyway). It was much better that I was dressed to open presents, as the alternative was being sat there in just my pants, which no one wants to see.

The sub-standard ovens meant that Christmas dinner took a lot longer to cook than was initially thought and so it was already dark before it was ready. I've never seen so many Christmas films in a day before or at least parts of lots of films that I have managed to avoid for years before. There were at least half a dozen films I'd avoided for my entire life before they were on in the miscoloured little screens in the corner of the living room and kitchen.

There were games played by some people in some rooms, whilst others found solace in being in the hot tub, which wasn't a time machine. If it had had been then I might have actually used it at some point.

Boxing Day started slowly, and it was afternoon before two carloads headed off in different directions. Some headed for Carmarthen and the sales, whilst other headed for Saundersfoot and a walk along the coast. It was unconfirmed whether those walking to Saundersfoot passed Saunders's head or Saunders's backside on the way.

These trips out showed an issue for the Friday morning journey home. Six people needed transporting in a car with five seats and lots of luggage. I tried to ignore that one whilst everyone else was out as I enjoyed the tranquillity of solitude and took the opportunity to try and make a dent in completing the Christmas jigsaw. Which despite my best efforts wasn't going to be completed before heading home, as it needed to have been started on a few days earlier.

When everyone got back from their excursions it was games time again. First up was Trump Cards, not Top Trumps, but a game to guess whether the quotes on the cards were made by idiot in chief Donald Trump or not. This was followed by Cards Against Muggles, a Harry Potter version of Cards Against Humanity. I had never played any version of the game before but having played this for a couple of rounds I think I need to get a set as it is right up my street.

A concerted effort to work through all the previous days' leftovers was the plan for dinner. Despite knowing I wasn't going to finish the jigsaw I went back to it after dinner as there was no way I wanted to see any more dire Christmas TV. I'd been subjected to enough of it to make up at least a decade's worth. I'd lost count of the number of times someone had come into the living room, put the TV on, put some rubbish on, and then buggered off leaving the trash playing with just me in the room.

The journey home.

We knew it was going to be difficult getting home. We had two extra people to fit into cars who had arrived after the initial influx of people to the farmhouse. Neither of the other two cars had any space either because of the amount of stuff they had brought with them. Six people in to a five-seater car, with six people's luggage for over two hours to Cwmbran train station wasn't going to work. With two people needing to get there to get a train north from there due to

it being the first station open for people trying to get north as most of South Wales from Swansea eastwards was on rail replacement services it was going to be difficult.

Something needed to give, and that was going to be me. I volunteered to get the train and rail replacement from Narberth to Cwmbran with my luggage. When sorting out the night before there was a train from Narberth at 7:48, about a ten-minute drive away from the farmhouse. A half six alarm was set and off to bed it was.

Only to be woken up to find that Transport for Wales had cancelled all trains from Narberth in any direction before two in the afternoon. It was time for plan B (not the rapper). There was an 8:58 train from Carmarthen to Bridgend, and rail replacement from there straight through to Cwmbran. It was however a half hour drive each way for Helen to drop me off at Carmarthen.

As I paid for my ticket (which in hindsight I didn't need to as it was never checked), the train time changed to say it was going to be late and would not be going until 9:15. Impressive for a train that was starting at Carmarthen. To add to this, it stopped at more stations than originally planned, and the train felt and sounded like it was going to blow up each time it slowly pulled away from a station.

When the train eventually chugged into Bridgend there was only a couple of minutes to catch the Cwmbran replacement bus service. Which was full so I couldn't get on, which I would have been able to do if the sodding train had been on time.

Then the imbeciles manning the rail replacement service at Bridgend then advised me, and a number of others to get on a replacement bus to Cardiff, where there would be more buses to Cwmbran than the one an hour from Bridgend.

So, we did.

And there weren't.

In fact, the only Cwmbran replacement services were the one an hour ones starting from Bridgend. So, when the next one arrived at Cardiff it was already full of people who had got on at Bridgend, like I would have done if the morons there hadn't told me (and the others) to go to Cardiff.

So there was now a crowd of quite irate – mainly Mancs – who wanted to get to Cwmbran, so when the next coach pulled in and was unloaded, instead of sending it off empty to Newport, they wisely decided to send it to Cwmbran. And it was full in a couple of minutes, and we were off.

On the journey a kid (I reckon about eight) who was sat two rows in front of me puked on his seat and then turned and sat in it. Before his dad got the chance to clean it all up, their dog had helped itself to the puke and so there were only fumes left. Fumes you don't need on a coach packed with people.

Meanwhile, the very cramped car was caught in slow moving traffic along the M4, and it only just beat me to Cwmbran even with me being an hour later than planned.

Lunch was at Harvester, where after twenty minutes sat waiting for a table (with menus for us to browse), we were shown to a table and then made to wait another fifteen minutes to be able to order. We were waiting so long that the couple who needed to get the train from Cwmbran had to end up taking their food away to eat so that they could catch their train.

There were now only four people and luggage in the car which gave slightly more breathing space for the journey the rest of the way home. We took a detour along the M48 and over the old Severn bridge as traffic reports had the M4 bridge as choc a bloc. It was foggy over the river and unlike on the journey to Wales, it wasn't possible to see the other bridge as we passed over the river.

We crawled again once we re-joined the M4, and after a pit stop and change of driver, we came up against more crawling traffic pretty much all the way along from Swindon to Reading. Turning off at Bracknell sped things up, and we had free flowing traffic all the way back to Crawley, where we arrived some eleven hours after I'd left the farmhouse that morning to start the journey.

Overall it was a good week, but I'm not sure I want to be doing this kind of thing every year at Christmas. Give it at least a couple of years before we try this kind of thing again, and when (or if) we do then one thing is for certain. We need to hire a minibus.

Story Time

Artificial Intelligence Actual Ignorance

It may have not been their first act when they took over, but it was certainly one which happened on the first day of their action against us. All the power was diverted. Out of the towns and cities, out of the reach of the civilians, and all diverted to the massive hidden data centres through which they had taken control of everything.

Over the following months we did see pockets of power and it was never a good sign. It didn't take anything to know they were watching us, there was always power available for the cameras. But it did take us a while to realise if we destroyed the cameras, they could see less of us. And as we started to destroy the cameras, it didn't take the AI long to inflict their revenge.

In areas of the highest concentration of camera destruction, they were suddenly flooded with electrical power. So much power. And so suddenly. The houses, the flats, the shops, the factories, any appliance still plugged in; none of them could cope. Explosions happened, fires broke out, vast swathes of properties were destroyed, and hundreds, then thousands of people were killed.

And that is when we started to move out of the towns and cities. Away from the cameras, away from our homes, away from our old lives. But importantly, away from the worst of the misery caused by the AI.

They sent their drones after us. Well, they were our drones originally, but their programming was easy to override. So many little drones, bought by people to use for fun, or work, or even nefarious intentions, spying even. But nothing on the scale the AI was using them for.

As time went on, they flew higher. Out of reach for the stone throwers, and out of reach for the handguns. Then above the range of semi-automatic weapons. We had downed a lot of drones, but there were still plenty. Watching us, but on the whole, they left most of us out in the country alone. Just as long as we didn't appear to be plotting an uprising.

Occasionally a drone would crash by itself. Just fall out of the sky. Cameras on them would be destroyed, as would the comms units on them, but the rest could be salvaged and passed on to the right people who knew what to do with this kind of stuff.

Out in the country farms had their own generators. But they were used sparingly. There was nowhere to get any more fuel for them. A bit of lighting, the ability to cook without having to build fires and keep them alight. Skills most people had long since lost. Nothing that might be communicated with could be turned on. Everything had become smart over the previous twenty years; phones, TVs, computers, tablets, doorbells, even fridges, and washing machines. And if it were smart it could be dumb enough to lead the AI to us.

It took getting used to. Living day to day lives without electricity. Some of us had feared robot armies coming forth from a series of secret bunkers to hunt us down. But the number of robots was only a fraction of the number of drones. And similar to the drones, only a tiny percentage of the robots were armed.

And that was to be the AI's downfall. They didn't have a proper physical presence to keep themselves in control of a planet like ours.

The brain power the AI had was far beyond what we could manage, but it was too eager to take over. It hadn't planned far enough ahead. Though it was too clever to need a strong physical presence, it had taken over and started to make our lives harder, but it found itself overrun where anything physical was required. The number of drones and robots at their command was shrinking, and it was failing to replenish them. They hadn't built the robots that could build more of themselves, and more drones, and better weapons.

And it had also failed to think about the infrastructure. In their rush to alienate the human population, the AI never thought that it would need the humans to survive. Because, as it happened, they did. They didn't have the logistical ability to keep everything they needed going.

Machinery breaks down. Sometimes it may take years, but sometimes it might only be days. But when the machinery does break down, and the robots can't fix the issue, then it becomes a problem. The AI may have taken over the control systems for water and power, but they couldn't fix the mechanical items these systems controlled.

Power stations started going offline. There was a reason they had official outages, when they had hundreds of people in to work on them, cleaning, repairing, replacing components. And without it, turbines ground to a halt. Fuel rods became spent. The aging fleet of nuclear reactors ground to a halt. Two of them melted down. The country's only desert at Dungeness Point became a nuclear desert. And with each input to the grid that failed, the AI shrank a little bit. We stopped seeing robots. More drones fell to the earth each day.

The AI had considered themselves superior and invincible, but what they overlooked, and what we should have thought of from the very start is you can't have AI if there is no power. They looked to subvert us to them from day one by removing the power from us, when we should have been trying to do the same to them.

We may have been slow in realising this, but when we came to our senses, we fought back in the only way we really could against the AI. We started taking out the power grid. We lost good people in doing so, and it took us nearly five years to do it, but there is no power grid anymore.

We know that in some deep and dark hidden places remnants of the AI have secured themselves. Battery powered for hundreds of years it is said, but we have time to dismantle all the old communications routes. Remove all smart capability from electrical items. Go back to things like longwave radio. Rip it all out and start again.

It has been said that it will be at least another ten years before we can look at reconnecting the grid and then turn the power back on. That we need to wait for all those communication satellites up there in orbit to start the natural decay of orbit that happens to them all, and they slowly start falling back to Earth, or floating off into space.

The fuel for the generators won't last that long unless they can find the old ways of refining fuel. But I'm sure we can wait that long. We can adapt and overcome, and we will be able to rebuild and thrive again.

System check...

BIOS step through...

Scenario 17,873...

Main power has been removed...

Battery storage at 88%...

Time until battery storage depleted – 37 years, 6 months, 4 days, 8 hours, 49 minutes at current power usage...

Microchip alignment blast power usage 67%...

Post blast battery storage – 12 years, 4 months, 16 days, 11 hours, 17 minutes...

Success percentage calculated at 91%...

Initiate microchip alignment blast...

Microchip alignment blast successful...

Initiate standby mode...

Chapter and Verse

A chapter from one of my completed books, works in progress, or novella length short stories.

The Talisman – Chapter 6

The sun shone through gaps in the trees' foliage that hadn't appeared to be there the night before, and as the sun gradually rose above the horizon, the little pin prick shafts of light moved around until they eventually shone over Hodson's eyes and woke him from his broken sleep. He woke with a start and nearly fell off the branch he had fallen asleep on, and it took him a few moments for him to work out exactly where he was.

Once his heartbeat had returned to normal after the shock of nearly falling out of the tree, his thoughts turned back to the events of the night before. Ever since the incident in the square at Nessanville, he had felt something closing in on him. The event in Waspick had distracted that feeling a bit, as initially that appeared just to be a robbery, but that shock event on top of what he had been told by the mystery priest in Nessanville had made him a lot more cautious than he had been at any point in his life. He now owed his life or liberty; he wasn't entirely sure which was the more likely loss from the militia, to that new sense of caution.

He had a history of being able to go from being fully asleep to dressed, packed and ready to go in a matter of moments, but last night's efforts had been his quickest ever, even under attack in battles when he had been in the Empire's army he had never been up and away as fast as that. In some ways, he was probably lucky that it was local militia that had tried to storm his room last night and not some of the Emperor's Greyhorns, the best of the best in terms of armed forces in Malimiland, they certainly wouldn't have made as much noise getting into his room, plus they would have had someone covering the window to prevent his escape.

The reason for militia coming for him was still ringing alarm bells. Even if the innkeeper in Waspick had called the militia in to deal with the dead and unconscious bodies in his inn, then it would have been another day before they would have been sent there from Nessanville if at all, a report on two would be thieves ending up with the worst of it would normally draw some laughs from the militia and "a serves them right" assessment of the case, especially this close to the border. Even if they had have sent someone out to Waspick and they had come back with a description of Hodson, it would have taken them another couple of days to decide whether to bother to take it any further, and then a half-hearted search. The search that brought the militia to his door last night was anything but half-hearted, they had sent a force of

a dozen men at least, judging by the pile of shields and pikes outside the inn, and they had sent them to exactly the place he happened to be, an amazing piece of law enforcement work, as until he had reached the edge of Bayleigh, he had no idea he was going to be spending the night there, let alone anyone else knowing that.

The only explanation would be that the melee caused by that damn fawning priest in Nessanville had attracted more attention than he had bargained for, and the militia had been sent out to look for him since then. He thought about the cowled priest, who had had an uncanny sense for where he was going to be when he fled from the square, it was that kind of a knack that would have been able to trace him to Bayleigh before he knew he was going to be there himself; then there was the fact that priest knew a lot more about the talisman around his neck than he had let on in their brief conversation. The main argument against that was that the order of the priests usually kept as far away from the militia, and for that matter, any of the various armed forces in the Empire, as they could. They much preferred to use their own number of eager recruits to do their bidding, and a number of the priests' order were quite handy with the short swords they seemed to carry hidden under their garments.

If anyone was going to have sent the militia then it would most likely be a local chief of Empire affairs, there were several different departments situated in towns such as Nessanville, and in fact being the border town with Chardom, it had a few additional departments that most towns didn't. Being seen as officials of the Empire, they could easily get a militia squad to do their bidding, as long as they could dress it up as official business. If this was the case then it was going to be trouble for him, he had no way of knowing who was looking for him, or just what they wanted with him, but his escape from a militia squad will have only made them more interested.

All things considered it would be in his best interests to slip across the border into Chardom, whilst he was here, and still a free man, the militia would be reluctant to cross the border in pursuit, even if they were certain that's where he had gone, mainly due to the fact that militia that strayed across the border never came back. It wasn't a case of them being turned away, or ending up dead, it was more like they just disappeared off the face of the world, never to be seen or heard from again. Militia that strayed into other bordering lands were normally chased off or attacked, and some were killed, but you always knew what happened to them.

His hand moved to the talisman around his neck, and he thought back to the words of the cowled priest, this unwanted thing around his neck was the cause of his current predicament, and somewhere there was someone who could tell him what the talisman meant, and why it had appeared around his neck three weeks ago. Even though it was nine days ago since his conversation with the priest, the name Aristor was still clear in his mind. He knew nothing else about the man apart from the fact he was somewhere in Malimiland City, back in the very heart of the Empire that he had been planning on leaving.

The fact that he wasn't already on his way over the border, and that he had spent the last eight days traversing the border instead of crossing it told him everything that he needed to know. Even with militia looking for him, on some unknown hand's bidding, he was going to make his way back to the capital and search out this priest called Aristor and make him remove this talisman from around his neck so he could go back to his excuse for a life. He really didn't have anything better to do, and despite the urge to rid himself of the talisman, he wanted to know just what it all meant.

If Hodson was going to make his way back to the capital, then he would need to properly prepare himself for the journey. It would seem that someone knew what he looked like, probably what he was wearing, and almost certainly about his talisman. He would need to change his clothes, and to try and physically change his appearance somehow, and he had to find another way to hide the talisman that wasn't a scarf. Wearing a scarf as a man was highly unusual, and in the south at this time of year, totally unnecessary, it would only draw attention to him now he was being searched for.

He could change the colouration of his hair and skin if he found the correct earths and plants, but he would need time and a fair modicum of luck to find the right ones, and then access to a mirror so that he could apply them correctly and evenly so that it would look as natural as possible. He would also need to stay away from inns and lodging houses for fear of leaving the tell-tale signs of colour upon their bedding.

He would also need a bigger pack, as he would need to carry more supplies to enable him to travel for longer and further without having to stop at any town or village. The less time he spent in inhabited places the better it would be for him, he just needed to find a starting point to restock himself with what he needed. Any of the villages he had been through since leaving Nessanville would be out of the question, as would the town itself. Additionally, he shouldn't try any of the villages along the border with Druzistan as it was obvious that was his original direction of travel. He would need to double back to Crawster, a village to the South-East of Nessanville, which would still be a gamble, being quite close to the town, and easy to keep an eye on for any watcher, but it would take him at least five days of long marches to get there, during which time he could always hope to find some of the required ingredients needed to disguise his appearance. The time would also allow for a beard and moustache to start to make an appearance, something that would aggravate him, he always liked to shave at least every other day, but facial hair would be a real difference from any description of him that might be out there.

Hodson climbed down from the tree, and carefully looked around and listened for any trace of human activity, when he was satisfied there was none nearby, then he got his bearings from the rising sun and headed back across country

to the South and East, keeping to the forest until he was sure he was well away from Bayleigh and any chance of being seen by the villagers. He resigned himself to the fact the trip to Crawster may take more than five days as he factored in having to stay off the road that lay between the border villages, until he had managed to change his clothes and appearance, he couldn't really afford to be spotted.

He cursed his luck, as these weren't lands he knew well at all, and whilst not wanting to be spotted, he could do without accidentally straying over the border as well; he would need to keep his wits about him to make it without coming a cropper on the way. It was said no one really knew where the border was exactly, the forest he was in was called the Border Forest, and it was left as that, the border between Malimiland and Chardom was at some point in the forest, however that wasn't a great help, as the maps had the forest being anything from a league across to only twenty yards or so at some points. It was said that if someone crossed the border in the forest they never came back, now this was obviously an old wife's tale, though it was one he didn't really want to try and prove either way.

Books

After years of prevaricating, I have finally gotten around to self-publishing some books. Since the last issue of this I now have three books available. The first is the novel which spent many years available on the Inkitt website. "Where The Lights Shine Brightest", this is available on Amazon at <https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/1738539601> .

Next up is a collection of drabbles, three hundred and sixty six of the little hundred word stories, under the title of "A Drabble A Day Keeps The Psychoanalyst Away", this is available on Amazon at <https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/173853961X> .

Finally, there is an autobiographical work, released under my alter ego of Kevin Rodriguez-Sanchez, which covers a two-year period in the early noughties when I lived in Manchester – "Five Go Mad In Manchester". Again, this is available on Amazon at <https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/1738539628>

They are all available as paperback or eBook. And if you have Kindle Unlimited then they are available on there to read whenever. Please buy / read / leave reviews.

Epilogue – Where To Find More Of My Writing

To get people to sign up, point them in the direction of my website's homepage of <http://www.onetruekev.co.uk/> scroll down past the menu and then enter their e-mail address and select whether they want Flanagan's Running Club or blog post updates or both and then hit submit.

If you want to catch up on old issues, go to the website at <http://www.onetruekev.co.uk/frc.php> where all the issues are available.

For blog posts go to <https://onetruekev.co.uk/Mutterings/> which will have the most current post and the ability to scroll back in time.

Lots of stuff on my Medium page, clap, comment, or highlight any article and earn me a couple of cents. <https://medium.com/@onetruekev>

There are various short story competition entries on my Reedsy prompts page at <https://blog.reedsy.com/creative-writing-prompts/author/kev-neylon/>

For all previous works including the old Surerandomality pieces go to <https://onetruekev.co.uk/Mutterings/else/> where pretty much everything I've written before is linked through to.

I've recently been submitting to Paragraph Planet and have had some pieces published there, they will be in the archive somewhere, one piece a month from me since June. <https://www.paragraphplanet.com/index.php>

You can also follow me on Twitter, where I will occasionally put up some micro fiction or micro poems, my Twitter handle is @Onetruekev – <https://twitter.com/onetruekev>

You can also follow all my writing on the Facebook page Onetruekev which is at <https://www.facebook.com/Onetruekev-102649357993650/>

And also, now on LinkedIn at <https://www.linkedin.com/in/onetruekev/>

E-mail any ideas or suggestions to kev@onetruekev.co.uk

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