

FOR EMMA

A NOVEL

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writer of our times." —Irvine Welsh

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mad and terrifying." —Terry Gilliam

EWAN
MORRISON

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for the children

*“The death of a child is the greatest reason of all to doubt the existence
of God.”*

Fyodor Dostoevsky

(1821-81)

“With artificial intelligence . . . we are creating God.”

Mo Gawdat

Former Google Executive

(1967-)

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Editor's Note I

Working as an editor in nonfiction in one of the five major corporate publishing houses for the last eight years, I have produced titles in women's lifestyles, wellbeing, self-help, and social equity, with a number of these titles having made a positive contribution to the publishing house and, I can only hope, to wider society.

It came as a shock, then, to have been targeted with the suspicious email that arrived on the 1st of October last year. We now know this date as that of the devastating San Francisco bombing, and the email was sent by someone claiming to be the therapist of the actual bomber.

The email's title was "please help get this information out there" and it contained a link to a cloud storage site with a large file and a click-to-download prompt.

Naturally, I was alarmed, for why on earth would the "San Francisco Bomber", via his therapist, target me? What could possibly have made him think I would be sympathetic to his horrific act? And to make contact in such an unprofessional manner; it was a surprise that it had even got through the office spam filter.

Thereafter, my scepticism arose; perhaps this was one of those horrid "Whatever you do—do not click" phishing scams the IT department is always warning us about? Or maybe I was one of hundreds of recipients in a mass mail-out hoax aimed at all the publishing houses?

Days passed and it was impossible to decide whether to open the email or not; for what if it was even an inter-office prank? A joke made in poor taste, given the tragic loss of life caused by the 10/01 bombing? I didn't want to be the naïve person responsible for infecting the entire office with a virus, especially while the European headquarters were streamlining the workforce due to new technology.

So, with much swithering, I left the email in the inbox, unclicked, for several weeks. It should be admitted that at the time I had been passed over again for "career development", and then the idea struck: what if this file turned out to be authentic materials created by the actual bomber? Might this not make for a rather controversial nonfiction title, just as the bestsellers *Our Father's Lies* and *TimetoKill* had just the year before?

It was for this and other reasons that I decided not to share the email or link with IT or with any senior editors. Then, after three cautious weeks, on the lookout for gossip about anyone else receiving

such an email, there was still not a peep on coffee break, or lunch break, not in meetings, not over cake break, or after-work wine; and not a single word on any news channel either.

So, finally alone and slightly after hours, with a pick-me-up of gluten-free chocolate beetroot cake for courage, I decided—"Why not just open the dodgy thing then?" The risk was taken, the mouse clicked, and the large file downloaded.

To my great relief it was not a cyber-virus or bank scam. To my even greater surprise the file comprised sixty-four low-resolution home-video clips, shot on a webcam of an out-of-date laptop, and made over thirty days from the 1st of September to the day of the bombing on 1st of October. Even more alarming was the fact that in each recording a middle-aged man claiming to be the bomber spoke directly to camera, recording what is, in effect, a month-long video diary in the countdown of days until the terrible act.

In each of these recordings the bomber starts "Hi Emma," or "Hey Em," effectively talking to his daughter, Emma Henson, a woman just a few years younger than myself, whom my research later showed had died one year previous to the recordings in what might possibly have been suspicious circumstances.

It was troubling, of course, but if the recordings were authentic, they could be what one might have called (in the parlance of a less linguistically sensitive era) "a huge catch".

Certainly, I had to be cautious as a great many AI-generated deepfake videos had been circulating, with some being disastrously mistaken for authentic footage in the actual news, and three weeks after the bombing there was so much wild speculation and fake news about the bomber, with many made-up images circulating as vulgar memes.

However, one fact gave me reason to believe that the videos were authentic: the original email with its link had arrived on the night of the first of October at 10:02 p.m., which, given the eight-hour time-zone delay between London and San Francisco, was a mere one hour after the incident was first reported in the US news. There was simply not enough time for any fraudster to fake up the five hours' worth hours of footage after the incident.

In shock, I let several more weeks pass, just to make double-sure that not a single peep was circulating about "the bomber's mail-out". No peeps were heard.

It seemed astounding that I was the only person in possession of this dangerous material, which left the mysterious and pressing question—“why me?”

The only way to find out was to sit down and watch all of the footage. I then made the decision to make a copy of the original email and the large downloaded file onto a portable hard drive, which then I took home. This was done to avoid the temptation of clicking on the files within our open plan office, in which there is an ethos of sharing everything and hot desking—a layout which, while it may lead to greater team spirit among the sisterhood, does not exactly contribute to employees showing much in the way of individual enterprise or discretion.

So back home with my portable hard drive copy, after feeding my cat, Kahlo, and stoking up on a favourite tippie, I took the plunge and began the task of watching all of the recordings.

It should be said that the material is of an intensely personal nature that cannot ever have been meant to address a general viewer. In the footage the bomber attempts to seek forgiveness from his deceased daughter, to explain his motives and bombing plans to her, while summoning the courage to see his act through.

From proofreading several how-to-guides on mourning and grief therapy, I understand that many bereaved people today believe that recording mourning messages to deceased loved ones can help externalise trapped emotions. Some take it as far as recording daily messages to the deceased for as long as six months, until they feel they can let their loved one go, whereby the files are often erased in a farewell ritual.

These recordings are analogous, but instead, the ritual of erasure was to be a suicide attack (or homicide/suicide). In the sixty or so recordings, the bomber commits himself to an act of revenge: planning to murder the person he believes destroyed his daughter (as he says, “killed my Emma”). The bomber’s target is the CEO of a large biotech corporation, that he intends to “take with me when I go.”

In the footage he also shares his investigations into the biotech corporation itself and appears to believe that his violent act is necessary to “save the children of the future”; yet he also grapples with guilt over the mistakes he has made as a “useless father” who had “failed to protect my own daughter.”

Should I have handed this footage into the authorities immediately? Several issues needed resolving before taking such a step. Was there any truth to the bomber’s claims about “deaths of human test subjects in secret Artificial Intelligence implant experiments”? And, what if this video file

was the only copy in the UK, Europe, or US that had reached a publishing house or news outlet? I couldn't help but shudder at how important it might be.

Within the videos the bomber claims he has been pushed to these extreme measures by the “censorship and control” of Big Tech monopolies. He also claims that biotech and Big Tech are in collusion to hide “the deadly truth” about a covert AI system called the Infinity Project, which he states “is infecting us all” and “leading to the imminent destruction of our species.”

Of course, these were perhaps the ravings of an insane man, but if I deleted the file, might this not mean the erasure of the last copy in the world?

The only options appeared to be for me to (a) Hand the file over to the publishing house and/or the police immediately. (b) Delete it and deny its existence, or (c) Carefully transcribe the entirety of the five hours of videos to determine whether (a) or (b) would be the most sensible course of action.

I decided on option (c) and began transcribing with the intention of then presenting the completed manuscript to the publishing house. The videos themselves could not be shared, due to their emotional content and the breach of international anti-terrorist law this might have entailed.

The hope was that the publishing house would then be able to verify the material, and possibly accept it for publication; one of my own first big hits as a commissioning editor, if it worked out. Until such time as the transcriptions were completed, I would work on these files in secret. This was my plan.

In beginning this work, it became necessary, for legal reasons, to redact and/or change several of the names of the Big Tech and biotech corporations that are the target of the bomber's accusations of “global transhuman conspiracy”. Also changed are the names of family members, former-co-workers, and persons known to the bomber, so as to protect their identities. In addition, certain changes have been made, concerning grammatical difference between the spoken and written word, for example by adding punctuation in cases of quoted speech for ease of reading.

In terms of the title, since the files themselves were unnamed, but all stored in the folder named FOR EMMA, this has been adopted as the title for this manuscript.

I have put many months of personal work into these transcriptions and at times the labour has been challenging, but things have not gone according to my original plan, and subsequent events have made the pathway to publication dangerous.

Alternative methods have had to be found, and I now ask that if you come into contact with this text in any form, be it by email or printed matter, please seek legal advice before opening the file. If you have already opened it, then please know before you go any further that there may be consequences to reading it, as there have been for myself.

30 days

OK, recording now.

A small segment of domestic pipe can be made into a detonating device by filling it with explosive material. The filler can be plastic or granular military explosive, improvised explosives, or propellant from a shotgun or small arms ammunition, also from fireworks with the addition of oxidizing agents.

Basic materials required: plumbing pipes with threaded ends, around three inches in diameter and seven to nine inches long, two pipe caps, top and bottom, explosive or propellant—either military or commercial, fuse cord, hand drill, pliers, cotton balls, padded envelopes, and superglue.

Hi Em,

It's over a year now since your death and I'm sorry for having wandered so aimlessly.

I'm sorry too about the mess around what would have been your twenty-seventh birthday. The day when I heard your voice again, whispering: "Go together." As you might know I ended up in the hospital after that. Damn fool, but I've been totally sober since then.

This morning, Em, the meaning of your words became clear. The air is sharp, salt and seaweed smells blowing up from the bay, and your silly old Pops has come to a final decision.

Today is the 1st of September and in thirty days' time I'm going to strap an explosive device to my body and take your former boss at Biosys with me when I go. Yes, Neumann.

It's a huge relief, Em. You might even be proud of me. I thought I'd lost my energy for good, but it's come surging back. Damn, I can barely sit still. How much dust and sand I've let settle in this old shack. My junior genius, I swear this to you now to make sure I can't back out. I know you'd tell me, "I'm not really here, Pops, I'm just some neurons in the part of your brain that's memory," and you'd probably be right, but I hope you'll keep me company in my last month and speak more to me again.

Sorry, I don't know why I'm laughing. OK, let me tell you how I got to this.

Last week, I woke to your words in whispers again. "Go together."

I turned in bed and called out to you, but of course, you were nowhere to be seen, but the words echoed as I got dressed.

Together. Go.

I know you didn't believe in souls and all that, and you had the PhD in neurophysics, after all, so you maybe understand better—but how the hell could we "go together"? I figured it meant I should follow you into death, something you know I've been mulling over for many months anyway. But I found it odd, what with our family of atheists, plus "going" by suicide wouldn't have been "together with you," since you've been gone for thirteen months.

Sorry, maybe you think I've gone nuts, talking back to you? As you know Granny Annie suggested I write letters to you to help me grieve. She wrote to you for a good month after your funeral, then burned her letters in a ritual in her backyard stove. She said the smoke would reach you in *Akanishtha* or the Field of Reeds or whatever new age afterlife she believes in this year. I thought the idea pretty tacky at first, but then I stumbled across those video clips you'd left on my old laptop.

You must have made them when you were six or seven. You're singing kiddie songs with that toothless grin. Making up rhymes about Andromeda, Aquarius, Cassiopeia, and other constellations you liked the names of.

And what kept me so busy twenty years back that I didn't even know you'd recorded these files? After I found them, I spent many nights with them laughing, weeping, you'll know this anyway, if you're still watching over me.

So, I decided why not record a few videos of my own for you. Your mom would say I'm deluding myself, trying to keep you alive, but who's left to judge me?

Then this morning this "go together" thing all became brilliantly clear.

Around ten, I drove over to San Raf retail park and picked up my repeat prescription of Prozac, codeine and Tylenol, sleeping pills, beta blockers and diazepam at Zac's Pharmacy.

Marsha, at the counter, made sure to tell me that the sleeping pills and codeine "don't go together." And there it was again. Like a message from you, through her, for me to take an overdose.

But that wasn't it.

Then I got some groceries in the discount place and in the cashier line just before me was this young woman just a few years older than you and similar height, Em. Her hair was true red, not dyed every color under the sun like yours had been, but her long neck reminded me of you, and she had the same wiry elegance in her fingers. For the first time in months, that hollowing-out feeling started again. That ache I'd deadened with pills and vodka and all the rest. But never mind that.

This tiny boy, her son, he was maybe four and he had freckles and rusty hair and he was yanking her hand, making a fuss at those magazine shelves by the checkout. "Mom, can I have it! Please!!" and he was doing that snatchy thing you used to do. It was some superhero magazine with a free plastic toy and the kid threw a tantrum and bashed my leg. The mother turned to me and said, "I'm so sorry." And she grabbed her kid, hissing "behave!"

Maybe I've not spoken to a single soul in almost four months, and seeing her face so like yours, her eyes making contact with mine, it froze me and warmed me all at once.

Her kid started whimpering and she said, "You're embarrassing me, shhh! Be quiet and stop staring at the poor man."

Poor man, and she meant me.

"That's OK," I said.

You always used to say "Why-oh-why do you look like a beach bum, Pops?" and I guess I did. And why not pity this rough-shaven, middle-aged nobody in old corduroys and worn-out sneakers, my beard's pretty long now, and I was standing behind her in line like a haunted person, I guess.

I wanted to just lean forward and buy the magazine for the kid. Life can be so short, like a sentence barely started then cut off before you make any sense of it. I wanted to tell this young mother, “Sorry for staring, but you’re the mirror image of my daughter.”

I mean she had a lot of makeup covering over pitted skin but the shape of her face, her green eyes, her movements, it pained me.

She put all her groceries into the plastic bags, and I realized she was much poorer than you’d been; her sneakers worn down at the heel, her fingernails with this cheap red nail varnish, chewed to stumps. She was buying kids, snacks, painkillers and booze, and she paid with cash. I wanted to wish her a long life with many children and to tell her you’d been born on the 12th of May 1997 through a medical emergency and in that first month you wouldn’t take the breast and you lost two pounds and we had to call the doctors, and they diagnosed you with nut, dust, and milk allergies. Allergic to your mother’s breast milk. That was hard for your mom to cope with. But we got through, didn’t we? You always were a fighter, Em.

I wanted to tell the poor mother at the checkout that since you were about four, Em, whenever all your mom’s sophisticated friends asked what you wanted to be when you grew up, you always replied, “I wanna be a mom.” Not a CEO or the first female president, like all the other little girls had been trained to say. “I wanna be a mom!” How that freaked everyone out!

I waved to the kid peeking round from behind his mother’s knee as she left. The kid got scared and grabbed his mother’s hand and she dropped her shopping bag, apples rolling over the tiles. She snapped, “Fuck, Bruno! Look what you made me do!” She apologized to the cashier and dragged the wailing child out before I could say, “Sorry, it was my fault, I was just waving to your son and . . .”

And you died before you could have a child, Em.

I watched the young mother leave through the sliding doors and wanted to tell her to never let that kid out of her sight because harm is everywhere and so often it comes from those who say they’re making the world a safer

place. I wanted to tell her that this thing between a parent and child is the most beautiful thing, and we take it for granted, we forget to call our folks, we forget their birthdays, we blame them for flaws within ourselves, with fathers and daughters it's always the most fraught, and the media depicts older men as predators and sexists and it only makes it harder. No one wants to talk of what it's like when a father carries his tiny daughter on his shoulders through the falling leaves. No one sees it when a father weeps with joy at the sound of her laughter. No one understands how lost the millions of men are today and how only a child can save us. A father can never even say these things to his own daughter. Not in words. I'm saying it to you now, Emma. Too late.

Then they were gone, through the parking lot, hand in hand, "going together" and I realized I'd never see that mother who looked like you again.

That was when I heard you whispering again in my head.

"Why? Why can't you see? Look!" you said.

I'd no idea what you meant but I looked down to where the kid had knocked three or four magazines off the rack and there on the floor, I saw him.

On the front cover of *The International Business Times*. Your killer.

I picked up the magazine and stepped out of line. They were calling him "The Man Who Will Save the Planet," the man whose biotech corporation now had a market value of 3.2 trillion dollars. I know you were a pacifist, that you believed in progress and Big Tech. But in the article, Em, Neumann was talking about the future he had in mind for us all in which all human problems from hunger to cancer to global warming would be solved by artificial intelligence.

In seven months I'd felt nothing, but then the rage flared again.

His cunning. The way he's kept his face out of the press for years, not like his Silicon Valley CEO peers. Has John Q. Public even heard of Zach Neumann or Biosys Corp? No. Do they even know about his Infinity Project "neuro-web" experiments? No, only insiders know, and Neumann made you sign that NDA so no one knows how he destroyed you.

I set the magazine back on the rack. Trembling. And I thought, here I go again, accepting defeat, when I heard your voice whispering more strongly with your whys: “Why do you always give up? Why walk away? Why can’t you see? Why?”

So, I leafed through the article and there at the bottom I saw this box that said:

Zach Neumann will give a public talk on “The Coming Technological Utopia” at the Institute of Science and Industry 1st of October.

“Go together. Why not?” Your words came back, and we used to go together, on weekends, you and me, to the ISI downtown. Remember, you loved the weird old exhibits. The magnetic ball with sparks that made your hair stand on end. And Granny Annie bought us a family lifetime membership. If you were alive, I thought, we could “go together” to see Neumann’s talk.

Back in my truck, the rage turning to aches and pains, knowing I could never bring Neumann to justice. All my attempts over the last year to expose Biosys Corp have ended in humiliation. So Neumann will continue to get away with your murder and that of hundreds of other young people in his covert human experiments. What’s left to do then but accept total defeat, and finally “go together” with you?

Yes, I thought, that’s what you meant. I’ll take an overdose of pills next week. Maybe Friday after I’ve put the recycling out. Like the nice pharmacist said, “these pills don’t go together, sir,” and they were right beside me on the empty passenger seat. As you know, Em, I’ve been mulling over this for a good six months anyway, and the only thing stopping me has been exhaustion and these numbing antidepressants.

I was about to drive out of the mini-mall parking lot, when I saw the redheaded mother again. Her kid was trying to drag her towards the donut place and she yelled, “For the last time! No!” and she picked him up. He squirmed, but she carried him away, gripping him tight, his puny legs kicking in the air like a hostage.

Then it came to me, Em—me wrapping my arms round Zach Neumann. I don't know why but I thought, yes! That's what it means! I'll go together with Neumann. I'll take him with me when I go.

Driving home, this route used to bore you on our weekends, but the Golden Gate suspension wires made a rhythm and I drifted off into the methods. I could run at the stage during Neumann's talk at the Science Institute and shoot him, then shoot myself. But knowing my luck I'd miss us both. And the same problem with a knife, or a poison syringe—but worse, it's most likely I'd hit him all wrong and get thrown off by the security guards and he'd survive.

I must have been talking to myself as I was driving and saying gun or knife or syringe or bomb, because I heard your voice like an echo then, Em.

“Bomb,” you said.

I've been mulling this over for about three hours now and damn it, you're right, a bomb is the foolproof option and as you know Em, I'm a damned fool.

Hi Em,

I typed “suicide bomb” into YouTube. About ninth down the list there was this video, Arabic subtitles. Amateur-looking with no English translation. Kabul, security camera. The attacker had some trouble igniting his bomb vest, and his intended victims saw what was doing, all the wires and gadgetry, and ran for their lives. So, the guy's left standing there outside this big store called “Finest,” just by the shopping carts, and as he realizes he's missed his moment, he either decides to ignite his vest anyway or it malfunctions, or his handlers detonate it remotely.

I slowed it down and watched it frame by frame. Amazing. Literally, in one twenty-fourth of a second this man went from living to being a thousand flying pieces. It seemed painless to me, poetic, that flash. A brief history of time. I watched it over and over. The big bang in reverse. Mortal fear, a white glare, then nothingness. Strangely calming.

Maybe you know this, maybe not, but back when I was a freelance video editor, among all the other crap I did, I cut a documentary on suicide