

The SuDoku Inheritance

A mystery adventure novel
by
Jeff Pratt

**Absolutely no SuDoku knowledge
is necessary to enjoy this novel!**

All characters are fictional etc etc.

Any resemblance to anyone that I know may well be intentional!

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The word "*Sudoku*" is the Japanese abbreviation of a longer phrase, "*suuji wa dokushin ni kagiru*", meaning "the digits must occur only once", which is the essence of the SuDoku puzzle. It is a trademark of puzzle publisher Nikoli Co. Ltd. in Japan.

Fact: there are 6,670,903,752,021,072,936,960 possible solutions to a Sudoku grid.

A Warning from Nathan

The girls thought that soo-do-koo was a number thirty-nine on the Chinese take-away menu, to be enjoyed with sweet-and-sour sauce and special fried rice. Neither of them had attempted the number puzzle before but that didn't stop them tackling this particular infernal SuDoku. Whether driven by paternal love or simple greed, they would both soon be experiencing its sweet-and-sour aftertaste.

Me? I'm a bit of an expert if I say so myself. Anything that requires a half-decent brain and a shed-load of logic and I'm your man. Somehow that hasn't really helped me this time. In fact, it's damn near killed me.

One minute I was Jack-the-Lad: stacks of dosh, a girl a day to keep the doctor away, primed for some new Italian home-cooking - if you take my meaning; the world smelt fresh and promising; no worries, mate. Next minute I was Jack-the-had: sued for zillions of pounds, sniffing around the foul arse-end of Southwark SE1, hounded by the fuzz, and with enough problems to wear out even titanium worry beads.

My career has careered right off its tracks. My so-called colleagues have screwed me, good and proper, with size-twelve cross-head self-tappers. Unemployed. Unemployable. Nobody would allow me to empty their dustbins let alone fix their mission-critical software systems.

Then there's plod, trying to feel my size sixteen Hermes collar. Old Bill have fingered me for kidnap but they can't prove it. I've a cast-iron alibi that says I didn't do it. Trouble is, it's beginning to go rusty, 'cause I did. Seems very unfair, especially as they haven't yet found Mitzi, my one true love. Also forcefully kidnapped. I fear for her safety. Alone. Scared.

And then there's the bodies. They keep piling up. Stiffs everywhere. Three so far. Four if you include the rat. Only one was down to me but I sense another in the offing. And one more if you count my imminent suicide, which I'm now putting the finishing touches to.

*How did life get so dark?
One day at a time, that's how.
Starting with that siren Thursday.
I should have walked away.
But no. My groin said stay.
And it always wins.*

*One look at the SuDoku told me that it belonged in the "extremely fiendish" category. What it didn't tell me was precisely how fiendish the other players would turn out to be. Male or female. Black or white. Beatles' fan or Mozart. Who could you trust?
It should have been a doddle. They always are. Hard, difficult, fiendish – bring 'em on, I say.
It should've been a steal. In fact, I stole it from Jasmine. Goddess Jasmine, from the New Church of Sainsbury's. I hadn't yet managed to steal her heart so I started with something easier.
Easier?
Yeah right!*

*Oh, and I haven't even begun to mention the family baggage. More skeletons in more cupboards than the average city mortuary. And that's before we get to mine.
As for clues? Well, the fish counter at my local Tesco has fewer red herrings.*

*The SuDoku wasn't hard. Not even difficult. Just frigging impossible.
But I did it.
Well, we did it. Me and the girls.*

Apparently, SuDoku literally means each digit occurs just once. I know now which digit I'd use just once on the next puzzle – the forefinger on my right hand. Up yours, Mr SuDoku!

If I had my way, every SuDoku puzzle would carry a sticker:

GOVERNMENT WARNING
SuDoku can seriously damage your health

Prologue

When I was a boy, I loved the sea.

It allowed me to float free.

Free of all childhood worries: teachers, history and Latin, bullies, acne, pubic hair, and girls.

Free of uncertainty.

Life was simply a big carefree game.

Then one day - it was a summer solstice, they said – a storm blew and savagely washed away my boyhood.

Within seconds, freedom had turned to imprisonment and a yoke of guilt burdened my young slender shoulders. Whispers, innuendos, accusations and admonishments became my companions.

The sea had betrayed me.

And I loved the sea no more.

Now, some twenty years later, having built a reef of protective isolation around my island, that same capricious sea was playing another cruel game.

Having stole my childhood, it was now taking my manhood too. My very life.

Davy Jones had set aside a locker with my name on it.

There was no point in fighting fate.

There was a full moon, which meant high tide was in the early hours of the morning in these waters. I had been tumbled viciously over the reef of razor-sharp rocks like a pair of stone-washed denims. The rocks formed a natural groyne – a groyne in my groin, I mused, my puerile sense of humour not quite battered into submission. Those rocks got covered two or three hours before high water so I figured it must be around midnight, but logical thought was not my strong suit at the moment, so I could have been hopelessly wrong. I knew that if I didn't get inside the reef then I'd be swept clear past the headland, on across Bournemouth Bay, and down to the Channel Isles. Next stop Ireland or even America.

As well as my humour, my playlist facility seemed to be intact too, as I seemed to be humming Blondie's "Tide is high" as if my life depended on it:

It's not the things you do that tease and wound me bad

But it's the way you do the things you do to me

The tide is high but I'm holding on

I'm gonna be your number one.

But who was doing the teasing and wounding? I couldn't recall, nor could I remember whose number one I wanted to be.

Another wave crashed onto the flotsam of my limp body, tumbling me violently up the beach, rasping my bare skin like a Black and Decker sander using number sixty grit.

I coughed and gasped and vomited all at the same time. Snot and flocs of Japanese seaweed covered my face. My eyes stung from the salt. My lungs were burning so hot that no water could quench them. I could taste blood - luckily there were no sharks here in the Solent.

My body stopped moving momentarily as the wave paused to consider its options. Teasing me. Face down, with arms above my head, I dug my fingers into the sand with all the force I could muster, trying to gain some purchase and inch my way out of the cloying water. But the eddy was too fierce and I was dragged inexorably by the undertow back down the beach, my fingers ploughing furrows in the soft wet sand for Neptune himself to sow his mischief.

My legs were useless, numb, unresponsive. Maybe they weren't there anymore.

Again and again I was tossed back up the beach, each time my fingers grasping salvation, only to be denied and sucked back to purgatory. It was like that ubiquitous dream – running through treacle towards some distant target that never gets any closer, as your legs crumble and your will-power drains into the ground.

I don't know how long I'd been in the sea.

I remembered being on the boat.

We'd had supper at the beach cafe with a celebratory bottle of champagne – cheap plonk but we felt like millionaires. We were celebrating something... we'd solved a riddle or something... we'd found something... money? Afterwards we'd laid on the beach as the sun set, and I had commented on the growing cumulo-nimbus clouds coming down the English Channel, sent by those pesky French. I'd bought tickets for us to go somewhere... somewhere nice... Venice?

After the tourists had vacated the sand spit, we'd fulfilled each other in the sand dunes. She'd joked something about one for the road, whatever that meant. But it was good, it always was. Though she'd seemed distant, preoccupied, even puzzled.

But then, she often puzzled me.

Jasmine!

Yes, Jasmine, she was the one.

She had wanted to go out in a boat but I hated the sea. She knew that. She countered my protestations about the weather with the promise of cocktails - sex on the beach followed by sex at sea. We had stolen - no, borrowed - a dinghy. Then we had set to sea with a bottle of Bacardi, or two - useful, I giggled, if we had to send an SOS message. She seemed unaffected by the sweet white rum as she sat in the bows of the dinghy toying with the anchor rope. I stood bare-chested on the transom, carefully balanced like a Venetian gondolier singing *Just One Cornetto*, much to her amusement. She was throwing breadsticks at me and I was driving them off for a six down deep cover using an oar as a remarkably effective bat. It was a good game.

She had emptied my pockets in case I fell in and soaked my phone and wallet. She was always thoughtful like that.

Then the moon had sneakily hidden behind one of those ominous anvil clouds.

And everything had all gone black.

Now, the blackness had engulfed me. There was no light on in my brain. Time to give in to the black. Time to give up hope.

But wait!

A flash of light from down the beach.

It must be Jasmine.

She'd seen me. Any minute now she'd pull me from the mire, break its claws and haul me to safety.

But it was only a tormenting flash of lightning whose thunderous roar rumbled all around me like a goading pack of hyenas.

Please, sweet Jesus, I will go to church if you save me now. I will give my money to the poor... most of it... I will try to be less wrathful, less greedy, less slothful, less proud, less lusty – that could be hard - less envious, and less gluttonous, and less of any other sin you can think of.

Oh, God, I will take life seriously and treasure it forever. I will... Please... Please... Please...

But the other gods, Zeus and his brother Poseidon, simply laughed and continued their hectoring. Wave after wave tossed me around like a salad spinner. Again and again they rolled the dice and played their game.

It was a game that only they could win.

Part I - Foreplay

Chapter 1.

A few months earlier.

You'd expect to find a goddess in a temple or on Mount Olympus or somewhere esoteric, but not here in the supermarket. The first time I saw Jasmine was Thursday evening, my regular re-stocking day, looking suitably goddess-like and serene contemplating the dairy aisles. As shops have now usurped churches as places of worship then maybe the *Temple of Sainsbury's* made a perfectly reasonable venue for a deity trying to move with the times.

Her long, sleek, black hair hung down the back of her short white summer raincoat like an unmined seam of anthracite. Black heeled shoes accentuated her shapely legs, legs that disappeared up into the raincoat to an unimaginable rainforest of pleasure. She reminded me of Ellen Barkin in that classic film with Al Pacino, what was it called?... *The Sea of Love*, where she meets him in an all night grocery store, dressed in nothing but a raincoat and high-heeled shoes. And I mean *nothing*.

I could see from her basket that she had already selected skimmed milk and salads and was deliberating over the yoghurts. I quickly dreamt up a casual gambit, "Excuse me, but what's the difference between this Greek yoghurt and the other ones? Is it healthier?" How could that fail to engage her – a man who is careful about his food.

"What?" She turned to face me. Beautiful green eyes... that looked blankly at the toad that had slithered up beside her.

"Greek. Is it healthier?" I repeated, pointing to the display. Not that I cared really but I could imagine licking it off her sweet body with honey and...

"No idea," she replied curtly, and she was gone before I could even begin to debate the merits of probiotics and prebiotics.

Rejection and defeat are two words that really have no place in my vocabulary, they are simply synonyms for *must try harder*.

Why had she spurned me so quickly? She couldn't possibly have a boyfriend already. How did I know? Well, you can always spot the single girls in the supermarket by the contents of their baskets. At least, that is the theory behind my latest blockbuster Kindle e-book *How to Pick Up Girls in Sainsbury's*. That is, if I ever get around to writing it. Their shopping basket would be full of yoghurts, skimmed milk, fruit juice, quorn, salads, brown rice and bread. All in small packets. And of course, a shed load of toiletries. Definitely no Shredded Wheat, baked beans or Gillette Mach 3 razors. On second thoughts, three-bladed razors would be OK but no way would a girl be seduced by the techno-babbling adverts for five blades - only a vain man would fall for that. Oh, and tampons: boxes of them - regular, lite, super-lite, mega-heavy - how can it all be so complicated?

In fact, I think I could refine the whole shopping basket premise and spin out a series of e-books to cater for all tastes, including: *How to Pick Up Tarts in Tescos* - where value brands in the basket would be a dead giveaway; *How to Pick Up Lushes in Lidl's* - in the wines and beer aisles obviously; *How to Pick Up Minxes in Morrisons*, or should it be *Muffs in Morrisons?* - assuming Sean Bean's television commercial voiceovers haven't seduced them already with their promise of a good Northern rough rogering; and finally *How to Pick Up Posh Totty in Fortnum and Mason* - assuming you can afford Beluga caviar and foie gras for breakfast, though I guess they don't carry their own shopping baskets there.

I scoured the supermarket for her but she had vanished. Had I imagined her? Were yoghurts hallucinatory? But no, there she was at the checkout, three aisles to my left, handing over her plastic. The checkout girl on my aisle was from the tortoise family. She even had an impervious shell on her back that easily resisted my scowl of frustration at her tardiness. I considered dumping my basket and leaping over the three intervening checkouts but I was blocked in from behind by an

old guard who had barricaded me with his abandoned trolley, while he went back to look for Steradent or Horlicks or something. By the time I had paid, she was long gone. I stared into my bag of groceries: a lousy omelette for dinner, and definitely no hope of afters.

But fate was being unusually kind to me tonight. I espied her in the supermarket car park. She had the bonnet of her car propped open. It was clearly going nowhere. What did she expect from a Fiat Panda?

God was tipping buckets of water over us deliberately trying to drown my ardour but I was never one to miss an opportunity. I felt lucky. Luck is simply when preparation meets opportunity. And I was always prepared for a pretty girl.

“Hi, got a problem?”

She scowled at me. “No, I’m sheltering under the bonnet from the rain.”

How I love sarcasm from a girl, it shows intelligence, and I do value intelligent pillow-talk afterwards, but it’s not a prerequisite by any means. “Here, let me look.” I reached through the her car window and turned the ignition key. The engine groaned and said leave me alone, I want to sleep. “Flat battery,” I announced knowingly. “Want a lift.”

Her shoulders sagged. She looked at her watch. Hesitated. And nodded resignedly.

All right! Game on!

She grabbed the shopping from her car, her briefcase and a clutch of files and folders and dumped them in the boot of my car, then climbed reluctantly into the front passenger seat.

“Your driver, Nathan, at your command my lady,” I said jauntily.

“Jasmine,” she said coldly, and told me the area to head for. She glanced at her watch again.

“Late?” I ventured.

She nodded and grimaced in a way that said, “Duh? Bleeding obvious, or what?” and then stared out of the side window.

Undeterred, I kept a lively tone in my voice. “Boyfriend waiting?”

A small shake of her head and her refection in the window said “no.” Excellent. I ignored the part of the message that said “please, shut up.”

“Girlfriend?” I joked. It never fails to get them talking, either to establish their straightness or to show off their diversity.

“Just drive, can’t you?”

Enough for now, I considered.

It was less than ten minutes to her place so I didn’t have much time to save the situation. I adjusted the mirror so that I could watch her surreptitiously. She sat straight-backed with her hands on her lap, looking ahead now. Her face was perfect, carved from ivory with not a single blemish. Her eyes, with a hint of make-up, seemed like an emerald mine leading down to her very soul. Her lips, pressed tight together, were crying out to be released from their spell and allowed to laugh again. Her long black wet hair, stuck to her cheeks, and was asking to be brushed gently aside. Her V-neck sweater guided my eyes downwards and my imagination filled in the missing detail. Long long long naked legs, disappeared into the foot well, with her short white raincoat struggling to cover her tanned thighs.

“I’ve seen you somewhere, haven’t I?”

“Oh, please,” she said in exasperation, “that’s so corny.”

But I had. “The Game Fair, Earls Court, last month.”

She seemed momentarily startled but quickly regained her disdain. “I can assure you I have no interest in partridge, pheasant, quail or any other sort of game. It’s barbaric. A rich man’s obscene sport.” A pause. “It’s left here.”

Ha! A reaction. Now we were making progress. I slowed to take the turn, deliberately taking my time.

The Game Fair wasn’t about meat and wasn’t actually held in the big exhibition hall at Earls Court. Rather, it was a competition between a bunch of gaming geeks and computer nerds in a small meeting hall about two streets away; and it wasn’t a big glam and glitzy affair sponsored by the

heavyweights like Microsoft and Sony, it was more in the crisps and lager league. In reality, it was a bunch of ballsy guys and gals trying to outwit each other in front of thousands – well, maybe a few hundred – enthusiastic, noisy onlookers. There were no material prizes only the satisfaction of winning and the adulation of the crowd when us victors suddenly gained a following of groupie girls. Unfortunately a Chinese girl of about sixteen with a body like a weightlifter wearing thick tortoiseshell glasses had pursued me ruthlessly until I beat a hasty retreat for home.

I explained the setup to Jasmine.

“Playing games all day seems like a total waste of time to me,” she said.

I considered a robust defence but decided to keep my ammo dry for now. My winner’s boast at the fair, *Games and girls are the same – keep trying and eventually you’ll beat them into submission* probably wouldn’t be my best line right now. We drove a little further in silence whilst I constructed a new gambit. But too late.

“Here is fine, by the stone pillars,” she said, and opened the car door even before I’d pulled tardily to a halt.

She collected her stuff from the boot and refused all help. “I can manage,” she said, adding a reluctant, “Thank you.”

“Not at all, I was just...” Hoping?

And she melted into the black night, back to Mount Olympus, or wherever else goddesses go on a miserable wet evening.

Chapter 2.

Back at my place, I slewed into the underground car park with a delicious squeal of tyres on the wet painted floor. I gathered my bags and noticed she had left a document folder in the boot. I dismissed the idea of driving straight back to her place as I didn't know exactly where she lived, but the real reason was that the folder may have contained some useful insights into this enigmatic woman – like an address.

I walked through the marble-lined concierge and nodded to George at the desk, “Evening, Mr Spitz,” he said, and I took the lift to the top floor and entered my apartment.

I could see from the living room window that the rain clouds were dispersing and the sun had long since turned in for the night, leaving its dusky red dressing gown hanging outside its door. The last of the day's yachtsmen were fighting the strong ebb and making for a safe haven in Poole harbour. The full moon was beginning to assert its supremacy of the evening sky and shone like a searchlight across the bay, silhouetting the occasional night fisherman on Bournemouth beach, eight floors below me. It was this view that had sold the penthouse flat to me: from the Needles staunchly defending the approach to the Isle of Wight in the east, to Old Harry rocks in the west, where the Purbecks kissed the sea. Brand new – no detritus from previous tenants engrained in the woodwork. Of course, the thirty percent discount that I had negotiated from the struggling builders had helped to swing it – amazing what a wad of ready cash can do when waved at people facing bankruptcy, that and the compelling logic of my argument that if the penthouse was sold then punters would have faith in the rest of the project.

Yes the view was utterly seductive. And it worked on everyone who came here. It broke down all resistance and after that... I relished the thought of its effect on Jasmine but first I had to locate her and find the right bait.

I zapped the remote control and the window blinds closed obediently and quietly behind me as I made for the music system. I ejected my recent selection of “Beautiful Liar”, from the sexy duo of Beyonce and Shakira, because I feared I'd already lasered a hole right through it. It wasn't exactly *Top of the Pops* any more but I tend to prefer the old stuff, especially by hot babes like them. Besides, its lyrics were way too ominous for present circumstances:

*Let's not kill the karma
Let's not start a fight
It's not worth the drama
For a beautiful liar.*

I couldn't be bothered to search through my entire forty gigabytes of MP3s so I turned to my precious vinyl collection – the only true media for music. I settled on a Phil Collins and Genesis anthology, the perfect mix of mellow brain-chill and thought-provoking power drumming.

I dusted the record carefully and placed it on my Clearaudio Bluemotion Turntable – over a grand's worth of superlative German engineering; cued the Ortofon stylus – as faithful as an English sheepdog, even though it's Danish; and set the volume on the Bang and Olufsen BeoSound system – also Danish - to loud. And I mean *loud*.

Music deserves respect even if it means I have to shop abroad.

Taking a bottle of toffee vodka from my well-stocked cabinet - fresh from my last ski trip to Meribel - I poured a generous slug into a brandy balloon that was almost big enough to hold a floor mop. In Meribel, they drank it as shots but I liked to sip the muddy brown nectar. Some say that dissolving Werthers Originals in vodka is a waste of good Smirnoff but it fired your belly on an arctic ski-lift and would postpone the need for dinner tonight.

I needed time to contemplate, time to plot, time to imagine.

I kicked off my shoes and shuffled barefoot across the exquisite silk rug, revelling in the luxurious ecstasy between my toes. It had cost me a few zillion Turkish lira even after haggling with the toothless little geezer in Istanbul's labyrinthine Grand Bazaar but it was worth it.

Unbeknown to the vendor, his daughter later demonstrated how sumptuous it felt on all naked skin - not only toes. You don't get after-sales service like that in Carpet Right on my High Street.

I settled down in my leather lazy-boy, adjusted the footrest, swirled the vodka for luck and focussed on the document folder on my lap.

It was bright pink with a few dark patches where the rain had kissed it. There was a hint of perfume and I inhaled its promised intimacy - Jean-Paul Gaultier, if I wasn't mistaken. I pulled tentatively at the red ribbon that secured the folder, teasing it gently like a hesitant bow on a nightdress, until it yielded to reveal all. My feeble conscience meekly hoped the bow would defy me and prevent this violation but it yielded without a struggle. I rifled through the contents quickly but found nothing very interesting: a few glossy leaflets about charity donations, some bound business reports, and miscellaneous loose pages. I carefully maintained their order and arrangement, including the dog-eared and scrunched-up pages, for I didn't want her to know I had plundered her secrets. I sipped some more vodka and set about examining the contents more thoroughly. There had to be clues to her identity - and more - within, surely?

I soon found an email printout addressed to *jasmine.turner@C-C-C.org.uk*. Progress. I considered sending her an email right now but I wasn't one for waiting - the evening was still young and I wasn't ready for bed yet - not alone anyway. Besides, I suspected she would simply ask me to drop her stuff off somewhere and rebuff any follow up attempt. A few pages deeper into her folder - bingo! - a business letterhead giving a local Poole address and landline and declaring that C-C-C stood for Corporate Charity Conscience. Progress indeed. But the remaining folder contents revealed no home address, no mobile number, no Facebook or Twitter details - no way to contact her right now. So much for twenty-four by seven instant communications.

I went through the whole folder again but found nothing else that helped me discover her. Damn it.

And then I noticed an envelope tucked into a sleeve of the document folder. It was handwritten and addressed to her at the office. It had obviously been opened but then re-sealed. I carefully teased the flap open and withdrew the single hand-written page and unfolded it, noting the way it had been enveloped so I could replace it exactly. I scanned the page but it gave no information as to how I might contact her now.

There were no clues at all about Jasmine.

But the whole page was absolutely jammed-packed with clues of an entirely different nature.

Chapter 3.

The Final Puzzle- the hardest ever ???

This was written challengingly at the top of the page.

There followed about twenty short lines which apart from the first and last were grouped as rhyming couplets, though the poet was certainly not a Wordsworth, nor even a Pam Ayres. There was no conventional punctuation and no capitalisation except for the first word of each line, rather like clues to a cryptic crossword puzzle. Perhaps that's what they were and I was missing the empty crossword grid. But then, which clues were up and which were down?

I flicked the remote to increase the volume of the Genesis soundtrack - I find it helps me to think – and read the page slowly. Each line made less sense than the previous. It was like stumbling into Lewis Carroll's *Jabberwocky* or some other nonsense from Edward Lear.

To start with how many gods were there truly

*The gifted kings of east have all gone
Enid made them famous now she's done*

*Rent a house on old kent road
Date of juno gold sword*

*Olive trees by heaven's gate
Love letters written in hate*

*Purple halogen with outershell spinners
Skumi's debut tallied no winners*

*Ford garages behind spooks' safe place
Lying cyclops stares at infinite space*

*Pretty hard lead actors in secret resistance
Benign tumour signals walking assistants*

*Ate a white virgin at venus' door overseeing her charges
Palace balls in three dimensions seen from the largest*

*Before dinner sciacchetri from the heritage lands
Aye aye aye captain stripes commands*

*Foresee which charley should transform inferior isola di sotto
Fix keys on st pierre's coat - it's armed aux naturale - en avant motto*

And at the end a pin-up in a red cell

There followed a short poem:

*Poetry never was my season
No sense, no rhyme, no reason
Time for me – gone all too soon
For you it's about a bike on the moon*

And the statement:

Where there's a will there's a way

Alongside some of the lines were pencilled terse comments, presumably indicating possible answers to the riddles – for what else could they be? - but nothing that made any sense to me. At the foot of the page there was a date - several weeks ago - and the signature *Daddy*, which struck me as rather quaint. Shouldn't it be *Dad* or *Father* for someone of Jasmine's age? But what would I know? And as if to reinforce my filial inadequacies, Phil Collins started wailing from the turntable:

You walked out

You left us behind

And you're no son

No son of mine.

I snatched up the remote and angrily stabbed the skip-track button several times before realising that vinyl doesn't respond to whimsical selection so I had to endure the lecture. Yeah, thanks, Phil, I know I'm no son - it'd been drummed into me many times over. Perhaps I should be playing "I am a rock" by Simon and Garfunkel:

I am a rock

I am an island

And a rock feels no pain

And an island never cries.

And that portrayed fairly accurately how I had cocooned my feelings in order to survive my teenage years.

Now, as I had proved at the recent games fair, I'm a pretty cool dude when it comes to puzzles.

But this one?

I had no idea where to start.

Chapter 4.

So how many gods were there in the old days?

That's the question.

That's her question.

In fact, it's only the first of a stack of equally unfathomable, frustrating, baffling, head-scratching, crotch-itching, riddles of hers.

Goddess Jasmine. She was the biggest riddle.

"You're so smug, Jeremy, do you know how many gods there were?"

He seemed oblivious to me.

"Well, do you?" I shouted.

No, I thought not.

Paxman continued to ignore my question and progressively barbecued the undergraduates who had foolishly believed they could outwit him on *University Challenge*. I skipped to another programme on the BBC iPlayer hoping for something to occupy my mind on this lousy rainy Thursday. I thought it would take my mind of her riddles but after fifteen minutes of fruitless channel surfing I picked up Jasmine's challenge again and re-cued the vinyl. Phil Collins started all over again but this time a few decibels louder. As I said, I'm not a quitter.

As I recall, in the old days the pagans had a god for anything and everything: the sun, the moon, the sea, the underworld, the earth; war, love, beauty, youth, fertility. Even one for the pre-historic cow. And one for every day of the week and probably two for lousy Thursdays.

They definitely had quite a few.

But what *exactly* did Jasmine's question mean?

To start with how many gods were there truly

And who cares how many gods there were in the beginning, anyway?

The Greeks had a few gods, didn't they?

Zeus, lord of the sky, in charge of all the other guys who hung out on Mount Olympus: Poseidon - ruler of the sea, Eros - god of love, Helios - god of the sun, and of course, Aphrodite - goddess of love and beauty. If she had looked anything like Mira Sorvino, in the movie *Mighty Aphrodite*, then I would definitely convert to the Greek Church.

I was running out of fingers to count up all these gods.

And this was the first of Jasmine's twenty riddles. Twenty small steps for man - one giant leap into paradise. With a bit of luck.

Soldier on.

Talking of soldiers, what about the Romans? Mars - god of war, I bet he was always in demand as they ruthlessly carved their motorways through Europe. Jupiter - bringer of peace - or did Holst invent that bit? Diana - the huntress, and Venus - Aphrodite's equivalent. Like the Greeks, the Romans certainly weren't short of a bit of divine totty.

And Jasmine was divinity itself. True, she didn't openly invite me into her heaven on our first encounter; true, she totally ignored my witty conversation; true, she simply spirited herself away into the night; but she was only playing hard to get. I could tell. That cold-shoulder was definitely a come-on for warmer times ahead.

So what of the Egyptians? Did they come before the Greeks and the Romans, with their pyramids and sacred cats? Ra, Osiris, Isis, Set and the other sphinx riddlers.

Jasmine was like the Sphinx itself. Enigmatic. Unreadable. You could also add: cold, frigid and unemotional, but I knew that was all an act. She was waiting for Howard Carter - my alter ego - the great pyramid discoverer, to plunder her treasures. I had already plundered her personal files and stolen this list of twenty bizarre riddles. Well, not stolen exactly - more like... borrowed.

But the first of those borrowed questions did ask specifically about gods, so maybe the ladies should be excluded. So cross off Venus and Aphrodite for starters. And you too, Mira Sorvino, sorry.

But don't cross off Jasmine. No way.

Neither Roman nor Greek, as far as I knew, but with her long black shiny hair, green eyes and tall lithe body, she could easily be descended from Cleopatra herself. And her slightly aquiline nose could well be the product of the Egyptian queen's liaison with Mark Anthony himself. Definitely, worthy of an obelisk on the Thames embankment.

Goddess Jasmine.

I'm erecting my own obelisk just thinking about her.

The Norse gods?

Thor, Odin and the other plundering Viking mobsters: did they come before the Greeks or afterwards? I began to wish I had paid more attention in history instead of watching aircraft out of the window on their flight path over our school, en route to Heathrow. Or watching Miss Jacobs surreptitiously adjusting her stocking tops under the desk. The thought of pillaging Vikings conquering the white flesh of Miss Jacobs suddenly seemed a potent erotic mixture and my mind wandered excitedly over her battlefield.

I downed another slug of the sweet sticky ski-nectar to try and bring me back to the gods, or more particularly numen Jasmine. I had first seen her only a few hours ago but already she was fully ensconced on my shrine reserved for women to idolise. Jasmine and her impossible riddles or clues. Clues to what, I had no idea. Not that she had asked me to solve them for her. Far from it. They sort of fell out of the scented pink folder that she had left in my car by mistake, and that I just accidentally happened to cursorily read.

Now, I pride myself on my puzzle-solving abilities. Crosswords, anagrams, tangrams, SuDoku, Killer, Samurai, Tatami, Futoshiki and Goduko are all devoured with equal relish and success. Maybe it's a natural consequence of being a shit-hot IT consultant, or maybe it's vice versa. Modesty apart, I am pretty darn good. I'll give you the solution before most people have even sharpened their pencil.

But Jasmine's clues were cryptic in the extreme. They weren't simply general knowledge or logic, they were... downright bizarre.

And I was still stuck on number one:

To start with how many gods were there truly

A question mark had been pencilled in a few inches to the right of the question. Quite right too. A comma after *with* might not come amiss too. And shouldn't *gods* start with a capital? Perhaps not. Even with correct punctuation I was still stumped and I hadn't even considered Buddha and Allah yet? Where did they fit in the great scheme of past and present deity? What about the Chinese, they must have had gods that were aeons old? And the Mayans? The Aztecs? And Africa - where man started off - why haven't the Africans got a big bunch of gods of their own?

So how many gods in total?

Lots.

Maybe the pencilled question mark alongside the first riddle simply meant *haven't got a bloody clue, mate*.

Chapter 5.

Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries* is a stirring piece of music, evocative of great battles and pregnant with anticipation, so it was a fitting ringtone for my mobile. Ironic in the circumstances, I thought, that the Valkyries were beautiful young Norse women, mounted upon winged horses, armed with helmets and spears; minor deities serving the big chief god Odin.

My head was beginning to ache, partly from Phil's earlier lecture about father and son relationships, and partly from the intractable riddles, and just possibly from too much vodka. The stirring call of the Valkyries was a welcome distraction. I only gave this mobile number to my friends and important contacts. A glance at the display showed me the caller was Jim from one of the big banks and one of my big customers. Jim only called when he had a problem. A big problem.

"So what have you broken now?" I greeted. Jim and I went back a long way.

"Good evening to you too, Nathan. Got a minute?"

"If you're paying."

Jim explained succinctly that the IT system that controlled the bank's credit cards was giving problems. "It's running like a three-legged dog, with two tied together, and getting slower as we speak."

In real terms this meant that customers in shops, garages, restaurants, hotels and other retail outlets, would be queuing to pay with their cards and no doubt getting stropky with the wait.

"I've got the new Ops Director breathing down my neck."

"I'm sure he thinks that'll help you concentrate."

Jim went on to explain that they had just installed a new version of the database software that underpinned a major part of the credit card computer system. It was software that I had helped write in a previous life. Banks test everything to destruction, they have to, so it was likely that something in the new installation had either been done incorrectly, or more likely, the installation instructions were plain wrong. Unfortunately, software doesn't always do what it says on the tin.

"Presumably that's version four-point-three, Jim? And you've compiled the queries and optimised the buffers...?" I was referring to detailed parts of the software process, which to a layman would be nonsense, but Jim was no layman.

"Of course I have."

Ouch! Jim wasn't usually that tetchy. Guess the new Ops Director must have dragon's breath.

I walked hurriedly into my study, stabbed the enter-key on the computer keyboard and instantly the huge wall-hung monitor obediently leapt into life with a stunningly crisp picture of the Bosses piste in Meribel, a spiteful black run with arse-high moguls, that I still hadn't mastered.

I logged into the website of the manufacturer of the bank's database software. Using my privileged access codes, I soon found the release notes for version four-point-three. Release notes tell technicians like me about glitches that have been found, which are not documented in the official instruction manuals. The notes looked fine until they mentioned a few optional features that the clients may or may not want to install. This is often the cause of many problems as it is genuinely impossible to test all the various combinations of options that clients may or may not use.

"That can't be right," I murmured to myself. A quick chat-room session with their technical support guys confirmed it. The label on the tin was wrong.

"Jim?" I realised I hadn't spoken to him for several minutes but he was still there. "Re-apply patches two-four-seven-point-one and two-nine-three-point-six, in that order, not the other way around like the manual says." A patch was a small, hastily-written program written to fix a bug, rather like sticking a plaster on a wound. "Then recompile all the queries again, to be on the safe side. And up the buffers to five meg for the hell of it." Anyone listening in to our conversation would imagine it was a foreign language.

This operation would take Jim's team about fifteen minutes to organise and execute. For just a few of those minutes, the credit card system would be unavailable to paying customers. Punters would not be amused.

“Management aren’t going to like this one little bit, Nathan. There must be another way.”

“There isn’t. Trust me.”

“OK, we’re on it.”

If only all problems were that easy to solve.

Chapter 6.

While Jim obtained the necessary permission from his management hierarchy, I returned to my quest for permission to Jasmine's heart. If not her heart then at least the rest of her body.

*The gifted kings of east have all gone
Enid made them famous now she's done*

First it was gods, now it's kings. The riddles had obviously been compiled by a historian or bible-basher.

Of course! *We three kings of Orient are, bearing gifts we travel afar*, I sang as best as my monotonic broken voice allowed. OK, now we're getting somewhere. But who's Enid? She sounded old - probably small and granny-like, with grey hair held in a tight bun, wearing round-rimmed spectacles and busy with knitting.

*Rent a house on old kent road
Date of juno gold sword*

Old Kent Road - is that the A2? Blackheath, Dartford way? I don't know London all that well, in fact, I try to avoid it, especially at night. Too many weirdos. You never know who you might pull in a club. As for gold swords?

*Olive trees by heaven's gate
Love letters written in hate*

Nice rhyming, I thought. A small smiley figure had been drawn alongside this one. I guessed Jasmine knew the answer, which was one up on me at this stage. A quick scan of the page showed that this was the only smiley. I'd never written a love letter, the sort you write on scented paper with SWALK across the envelope. It's all emails and texts now. Besides, with one-night stands you don't need them. I did receive one once from the fat girl in form three with the National Health specs - I ripped it up.

I had thought the first question about gods was hard, these others were... impossible. I recalled the footnote saying *where there's a will there's a way* which presumably meant that the clues were hard but possible. Well, I love a challenge and I'm a pretty tenacious guy but this was a whole new definition of *possible* in my book.

If I could get just one clue and put it in context then I'd have a good excuse to see Jasmine again. Get the clue - get the girl. Some chance. Perhaps I should simply return the folder to Jasmine and rely on my usual charm offensive to break through her defences. My track record should certainly stack the odds in my favour. A handsome thirty-ish hunk like me. Well fit. Well, fit-ish. OK, I should go to the gym more. And possibly my nose is still a bit crooked from a schoolboy scrap but you should have seen the other kid afterwards.

How could I fail?

OK, it didn't quite work this evening but that was different. She was a damsel in distress. Admittedly, she had barely acknowledged me, barely said thanks for the lift, but as I said, she was distressed.

I turned my attention back to the clues. It was hard to concentrate when I was making so little progress. Correction - no progress.

*Purple halogen with outershell spinners
Skumi's debut tallied no winners*

Cars have halogen headlights. Spinners are used by fishermen, I think.

A frowning smiley figure - a frownie? - had been pencilled alongside this one.

Ford garages behind spooks' safe place

Lying cyclops stares at infinite space

Why would anyone buy a Ford? I've never understood.

Phil ceased his drumming for a short while before deciding what song to play next and in that quiet space I realised someone had been knocking on my door – it hadn't been Phil drumming out of time.

I leapt from my chair scattering the contents of the pink folder all over the floor.

Jasmine!

Guilt ran over me like a steamroller.

She had come to collect her belongings only to find me rifling through her life. She had sensed the intrusion with her divine powers and was now here to deal out thunderbolts of retribution.

I panicked. I stuffed the spilt papers, documents and leaflets clumsily back into the folder. The page of clues was definitely the fourth page, I remembered, but the rest? I re-tied the pink ribbon. Would the scent come off on my hands? Would she smell the guilt on me?

I opened the door with an innocent smile hastily pasted onto my face. "Hi, Jasmine. Nice to see you," I was ready to say.

But it was only George.

George was the head porter and concierge at Branksome Mansions where I, a top IT executive, lived in the exclusive penthouse suite. At least that was what George said to anyone who would listen. In reality, he was the janitor and odd job man of a modest block of flats in Bournemouth – imaginatively named Chine Block A - where I, a freelance IT consultant, had arguably the best of the four top floor apartments.

"Sorry to bother you, sir. Only... Mrs Green from the flat below asked me to ask you if you could possibly turn the music down. Just a bit, sir. If you don't mind."

I'd tried fruitlessly to stop George calling me *sir*. Mr Spitz would have been fine. Nathan would have been better. But I think it made *him* feel important.

He looked nervously up and down the corridor and then back to me. "Only, her Bertie can't sleep and they're off to see their daughter in Newcastle tomorrow." He glanced nervously at me as if I was Medusa. "They've an early start." George stood meekly awaiting my wrath for daring to ask, staring at his shoes. He seemed oblivious to the fact that the music had already finished.

"Her precious Bertie is as deaf as a door-post," I would have liked to have said, "and sleeps twenty-three hours a day, only getting up to empty his uncontrollable bladder." I sighed in deep relief. I never thought that I would be glad not to have Jasmine knocking on my door but I was thoroughly delighted. "Yes, of course, George. I hadn't realised it was so loud. I am so sorry."

George beamed. "Oh thank you, sir. Thank you indeed. Mrs Green will be so pleased." And he strode off down the corridor, his head held high.

I closed the door and crossed to the turntable, flipped the LP and cued Phil Collins again. No more lectures, Phil. OK? I turned the volume down half a dozen decibels. Not enough to spoil my enjoyment and definitely not enough to make one iota of difference to the slumbering Bertie but enough to keep Mrs Green happy.

The neighbourhood was full of old people and getting worse by the day. Every time you stepped outside you risked death at the hands of myopic septuagenarians in a Zimmer-frame derby. They had moved down from London to retire and die, but had then found that Bournemouth really had a lot to offer. So they forgot to die. Which was a great shame in most cases.

Thank heavens it hadn't been Jasmine.

I realised that I was shaking. Frightened at the thought of being unmasked as a dirty little snooper. I took the whole toffee-vodka bottle back to my chair and removed a history of fluff from the sides of the leather cushioning as I settled back down again. I made a mental note to speak to George about Mrs T and her poor standards. Mrs T was the head receptionist and household manager of Branksome Mansions, according to George. In reality, his wife was the cleaner.

I poured another hefty slug and tried to apply some fresh logic to these damnable clues. Maybe the cloudy liquid was clouding my thinking. Logic? Huh! Of course, it couldn't have been Jasmine at the door, Mr Logical, could it? She doesn't even know where I live, does she?

No response from Jim yet, what was keeping him? I mused.

So, where was I?

Pretty hard lead actors in secret resistance

Benign tumour signals walking assistants

Hard actors? Stallone. Schwarznegger. I certainly wouldn't call them pretty. Their faces seem covered in tumours.

More frownies pencilled alongside.

Ate a white virgin at venus' door overseeing her charges

Palace balls in three dimensions seen from the largest

Now that's more my cup of tea. If Jasmine's the white virgin then let's eat and go to the ball.

Before dinner sciacchetri from the heritage lands

Aye aye aye captain stripes commands

Heritage lands – is that the same as the Holy lands? And who is Captain Stripes?

Three frownies and six questions marks. She obviously had about as much clue as I had.

Foresee which charley should transform inferior isola di sotto

Fix keys on st pierre's coat - it's armed aux naturale - en avant motto

At last. This was clearly an anagram of *isola di sotto*. Any crossword fan could tell you *transform* points to that. However, after a few minutes deliberation, the best I could come up with was *I laid Sisto too*. Maybe Sisto was a classical heroine. Maybe I needed to include *inferior* in the anagram.

Who knows? I was also beginning to think – who cares?

I tried to shake off my defeatist air. Get the clues – get the girl. That appeared to be my new mantra. The two had become inextricably linked in my head. It was clear she needed help and fate had dealt her me. But in truth, rather than unravelling clues, I'd rather be unravelling the buttons on Jasmine's white coat. Would it be like Ellen Barkin's?

And at the end a pin-up in a red cell

The last one. Thank Christ for that. The only pin-up that I was interested in right now was Jasmine. And I'd like her pinned to the wall while I...

Pencilled doodlings at the bottom of the page signalled frustration and *Help!!!* had been etched into the paper in desperation. Other words had been chiselled deeply into the page, possibly in anger, and then erased perhaps in regret: *mean bastard* and *just desserts!!* were clearly discernible, whilst I could guess at a few other erased un-ladylike blasphemies.

The page had been smudged with water. Tears?

I felt like crying too at the apparent hopelessness that it portrayed.

I returned all the contents to the pink folder and carefully re-tied the ribbon, just in case there was another knock on the door. I studied it carefully until satisfied that it was as originally found. While I awaited the return call from Jim at the bank, I checked my emails in my study. A job offer from a bank in Athens sounded vaguely interesting but the money was a joke. What's a Grecian urn? Not enough, to paraphrase Frankie Howerd. A big-paying insurance company in London had some tedious routine database maintenance to be done. OK if I got desperate. A few spam emails. That was it.

I wiped the static dust carefully off the computer screen and picked fluff from between the keys of the keyboard with a toothpick. Mrs T was forbidden in here.

I thought I might as well check the ansaphone on the landline while Jim was busy. It showed four messages. I tended to give that number to people who I'm not too fussed about and so messages often sit on it for days. I stabbed the play button.

Two messages were from BT. It's amazing that you can screen all junk calls except those from BT. Which part of "*no, I'm not interested*" do they not understand? Perhaps I needed to learn Punjabi so I could liaise direct with their call centre management.

The next message was from a financial newsletter that I subscribed to advising me to go short on oil and long on the dollar. One day I'll summon up the courage to take their advice, meanwhile I'll stick with my ISAs. Having been born with a plastic knife in my mouth – hence my sharp wit – I am very reluctant to risk the small booty that I have amassed so far.

I waited through the buzzes and clicks and a long pause for the last tedious message.

"Hi. It's me. Vicky. The vixen. Remember?"

Did I remember Vicky the vixen? One very foxy lady. A final-year arts student, nearly ten years my junior, but I've always believed in learning from the young. And what she taught me with a paintbrush and a couple of spliffs would probably have shocked even Picasso. It would make Kama Sutra readers blush too. Anyone who thought I looked like a younger George Clooney had to be worthy of attention. Perhaps I should call back now? But I couldn't until the business with Jim was sorted. And with Jasmine being uppermost in my mind, Vicky would have to wait. I'm strictly a serial guy. Although, as Jasmine and me weren't yet *an item*, there was a gap in the queue...

Dream on, stud.

I wandered back over to my keyboard and fired up Google. "How many gods were there?" I asked, but I knew the ninety-five billion hits would lead me nowhere. The question was too vague. There was a useful looking article on polytheism from Wikipedia but could I trust that much-abused source of dubious information?

On the brink of giving up my search, an article from the 12th August 2006 edition of *New Scientist* caught my eye. "There are only 33 gods," it proclaimed authoritatively. Apparently, the others are but manifestations, pseudonyms, aliases, a.k.a.s etc of those thirty-three.

Yes!

There was the answer.

I'd cracked it!

Knew it couldn't be that hard. Just knew it.

But as I read on, such phrases as "...since no gods can be irrational, none of them can be transcendental..." and "...assuming our universe is typical, the expected number will be one-half infinity, which is, er, infinite..." made me realise that this erudite treatise was no more than an academic mind game.

The true answer was anything between zero and infinity.

Didn't exactly narrow it down much, did it?

On a whim, I Googled "Jasmine" and learnt that it was a shrub or vine – vine sounded better - of the Oleaceae family, usually with white flowers, worn in the hair by women in southern Asia. Some claimed that jasmine tea was effective in preventing certain cancers. Also, the oil was used for perfumes and incense. That all sounded very positive indeed.

On a further whim, I Googled "goddess Jasmine" and was surprised to get over half-a-million hits. "Erotic tantra massage and sacred sexual healing tantric" from www.goddesstemple.com seemed worth a visit, especially as there were several pictures of the goddess bedecked in chains and contorted in impossible positions. www.goddessjasmine.co.uk sounded even more promising but turned up pictures of a guy named Sid dressed only in gold trunks and boots. And www.livejasmin.com, as expected, had a webcam of a definite non-goddess doing ungodly things to her body. What they all had in common was the nagging request for credit card details. I was hoping that if I played my own cards right I wouldn't have to pay a penny to see a lot more of Jasmine.

My reveries were interrupted by Jim riding the Valkyries again.

“You’re a bloody genius, Nathan. We’re up and steaming.”

I just love the bank. They’re one of my best friends. Always having problems. Always paying me money to fix them. It’s much easier than robbing it with a mask and gun.

“No worries, mate. That’s why I get the big bucks. A hundred quid for kicking the little bugger...”

“...but a thousand quid for knowing where to kick it,” chimed Jim. “Yeah, yeah, I know. At least, Harris is off my back now.”

“Hatchet Harris? From JP Morgan? He’s the new man?”

“Twelve-month contract. You know him?”

“Not really.” There was no point in telling Jim that he was in for a hellish year, assuming he survived that long. I had worked with Harris once. Never again.

“Anyway, I owe you one, Nathan.”

“Don’t worry, you’ll pay one day. In fact as a starter for ten, how many gods were there in the old days?”

“God knows. Is it a riddle?”

Good answer in the circumstances. “Sort of. I gave a girl a lift this evening and it was one of her questions.”

“Odd question for a first date. Hang on, I’ll ask the team.” I heard Jim parody my question and receive several lewd responses from his co-workers. “Sorry, they’re all atheists here.”

“There are nineteen more riddles, just like that one. All impossible.”

“So there’s no cocoa for you tonight, I take it?”

Jim was right, I was wasting my time. Jasmine wasn’t interested. Full stop. End of sentence. End of story.

Chapter 7.

Clues, riddles, questions – whatever they were – were worrying at me like a persistent yapping terrier. They were doing my head in. To hell with them, I'll call Vicky right now. Her phone message sounded way more fun than I was having here. Maybe the night wouldn't be wasted after all.

But I didn't. Instead, I picked up last Sunday's *Observer* and located the Killer SuDoku puzzle that I hadn't yet finished. It was a tough one, obviously compiled by a cunning human and not churned out by a computer program. I was stuck in the bottom right hand corner. I posited some numbers in the troublesome squares but nothing seemed to hang together. Then I spotted it. The last square on the penultimate row had to be a nine. Couldn't be anything else. And the rest followed. Done!

Having proved to myself that my brain was fully functional, in a last ditch effort I decided to look afresh at Jasmine's list of twenty clues. If I could solve the bank's problems that easy then these clues should be a doddle.

But I was interrupted by a text on my mobile. I fumbled for the phone, not noticing who the text was from. It was probably Jim from the bank saying another big thank you, he was good like that.

The text read: *Leave her alone. OR ELSE.*

Chapter 8.

I grinned. Who the hell was that? The text could be from countless boyfriends or husbands, I wasn't always picky about going for singletons. Fortunately, I was fit enough to defend myself if it came to it. I scrolled down the text to see if the sender had suppressed their number.

What the...? The text had been sent by Jim.

I called him back immediately but received no reply. I called twice more then sent five texts at one minute intervals asking him to call me back, each one more imperative than the previous.

I couldn't imagine who Jim was referring to in his text. I did have a little fling with Sandy, the ginger-haired girl, at the bank party a few weeks ago, but I wasn't aware that she and Jim were an item. We had no one else in common as far as I knew.

I stood pondering for a while then shrugged; no point in worrying over one unknown female. The pink folder stared at me from the table, inviting me. Daring me. My fingers hesitated on the ribbon.

No, you don't violate a deity twice and get away with it.

I put the folder down and tried hard to remember the exact wording of the first clue. I wrote it down on the only paper to hand, a yellow Post-it note:

To start with how many gods were there truly.

I read it aloud three times hoping HE would hear me and help me out a bit.

Nothing. I guessed he had gone to bed early.

OK, God, if that's the way you want to play it. Guess you think you're the only one, huh?

Sod the question. Sod the gods. Sod Jasmine.

I screwed up the Post-it and tossed it into the bin.

What's Vicky's number? I decided I needed an art lesson.

Before I could call her, my mobile announced the Valkyries again. It was Jim. "What's the panic?"

"What did you send that text for?"

"What text?"

"Telling me to lay off her."

"Who?"

It was clear that Jim knew nothing about the text. He'd been in a meeting and had left his mobile on his desk – company policy: no phones in meetings, I liked that. And there was no trace of the message in his call register. "What've you been drinking, Nathan?"

His casual attitude was beginning to grate on me. "Someone in your team must have used your phone and deleted the message afterwards."

"Nathan, get real. I haven't got time for this bullshit. Get yourself a decent phone."

"I'm serious, Jim." I was now a lot more than serious. "I want the names of everyone on your team who had access..."

Jim's reply was uncharacteristically colourful as he hung up.

Phil had finished his concert performance and my precious stylus was click-clicking in the lead-out groove. I carefully slid the vinyl back into its protective cover then into the album sleeve. The delicate operation helped to calm me down. I don't know why the text had rattled me so much – I would apologise to Jim tomorrow. I turned the album cover over in my hands looking at the exquisite artwork. Oh, the lost art of album covers. I idly read the sleeve notes:

...in the beginning, Phil Collins was just a drummer hiding behind showmen Peter Gabriel, Steve Hackett... ..but he has since emerged as the one true rock god of Genesis.

Ha!

Revelations!

Hardest puzzle ever?

I think not.

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