

Think long and prosper

by J.W. Allen

2023

Nate knew he would be the youngest person to become Prime Minister the moment he got his A-Level results. He and Jim spent the summer playing D&D, watching repeats of Star Trek and debating the potential impact of warp drive on modern day life... should Jim get round to inventing it. It was all just a distraction. A distraction from the sick feeling Nate felt in the pit of his stomach. The one that kept saying 'You haven't worked hard enough. You're going to fail!'

He arrived early with Jim on results day to join the queues of fellow classmates gathered either side of the school entrance. The sky was grey and threatening; not a good omen. Nate tried not to brick himself. Why hadn't he listened to Jim and work harder on his politics revision? Then again, everyone told him what a great debater he was. Miss Stop even called him 'a naturally gifted orator' so maybe it had all gone to his head.

As Nate ripped open the envelope, the sick feeling in the pit of his stomach became a huge sigh of relief.

"One A* two As and a B" he yelled proudly, waving the proof in front of Jim.

Jim adjusted his glasses several times as he read Nate's results from over his friend's shoulder. As always, Jim was Jim. Reserved. Placid. Monosyllabic. He offered a shrug and a vague grunt of congratulation. One hand hid in his tatty jean pocket, the other held his own results paper limply between thumb and forefinger.

"Cambridge or Oxford then?" Jim said, quietly stepping back.

"Cambridge has a solid debating society, but Oxford will get me better political connections."

"Great."

"Which one?"

Jim pushed his glasses back up his nose.

"Both."

"Come on man! I mean which one do you think I should go for?"

"Dunno. Both?"

Nate laughed before flinging an arm around Jim's shoulders.

"Yeah, that would be cool, but seriously."

And that was when Nate noticed Jim's expression.

"What's up?"

"Didn't get the physics grade I needed."

Nate grabbed Jim's paper from his hand, furiously reading and re-reading the results, as if by staring he could change the 'C' giving Jim the finger to an 'A'.

"Bullshit."

Jim shrugged. "Probably didn't revise the right stuff."

"No-no, this is bullshit. I saw how hard you've been working these last few months." Nate continued, talking more to himself now than to Jim. "Let's find Gilbert. This is a mistake. You're the school physics genius-slash-geek for fuck's sake. Exam board must've messed up."

And before Jim could say anything, Nate stomped back into the school brandishing Jim's results before him like a phaser set to kill.

#

The exam board had not messed up.

Mr Gilbert calmly helped the boys phone the board, before confirming sadly to Jim, that his physics A-level was not a mistake and that he could resit later in the year if he wanted?

"Don't think Oxford give out second chances," Jim replied. "No problem, sir. I'll figure something out."

He slumped off, head down in deep thought, leaving Nate to catch up not knowing what to say. They walked silently out of the school gates and down the road towards the local pub, passing several groups of students laughing and hugging. Nate couldn't help but notice the odd boy or girl ducking quickly down side streets, heads low, hands clutching scrunched up papers as they tried to escape their own shattered dreams.

"It'll be fine, man," he said to Jim as they approached the Coach and Horses. "You'll still invent warp drive. Guaranteed!"

Jim grunted but otherwise said nothing. Nate decided to lighten the mood by taking advantage of the fact that they were now old enough to be served at the bar. Over several hours and several pints of Fosters, Nate imagined his friend beginning to relax. The pub filled with reams of happy shouts and relieved students. The noise grew and grew as everyone drank and began talking about how excited they were for September and University.

Nate sat with Jim in the corner, revelling in the fact that the bar maid hadn't asked once for his ID at the bar.

"I'm telling you, Jim," Nate slurred across his fifth pint, "This time next year, you'll forget all about your A-levels. 't's just a blip. You'll be knee deep in equations and formulas in a few years, just like you always wanted."

"Yeah. Maybe," Jim sighed.

"Enviro-tech is a cool second choice."

Jim nodded, pushing his glasses up his nose again, even though they hadn't fallen down.

"You'll see," Nate said, a boozy flush of confidence swelling his brain as well as his bladder. "This time in five years, we'll both be saving the world. I'll be well on my way to parliament and you'll be working on the Mars project. Who knows? Y' might even get to work on designing the world's first starship. Yooou'll see."

Jim downed his pint, and stared out of the window as Nate tried to make his fingers do the vulcan salute.

#

2028

"I aint voting for any of you!"

Nate was damp, his feet were sore, and he was pretty sure he'd trodden in something grim a few streets back. Dog mess was one of the more colourful attributes of Seaton-on-the-Wold. At least the rain had helped him clean most of it off his shoe. Shame about the smell.

"Can we at least interest you in our leaflet?" Silke smiled, proffering the cross and tired looking man the latest blurb from David Gangers, prospective Labour MP for the constituency. The election wasn't due for another year and a half, but that didn't stop David from insisting his

team of 'Gangers', as he liked to call Nate and the other canvassers, were out every weekend knocking on doors and 'listening to the concerns of the people'.

"Nah," the man shook his head. "It'll just end up in the recycling."

"You recycle?" Nate interrupted, despite a glare from Silke - they'd agreed that she would do all the talking after the last incident.

"fCourse."

"Sorry, I didn't know people did that round here."

The man sniffed, pinched his nose with one hand, and appeared even more animated since he'd opened the door.

"Yeah, well, I read the government have been burning rubbish illegally again. Bunch of c..." he cut himself off before tipping his head respectfully at Silke. "Apologies. But you all make me mad."

"We're not in government, Mr Zand."

"Yeah, another reason I'm angry."

Nate exchanged a confused look with Silke.

"Then, why don't you consider voting for us at the next election?" Silke said.

"Why? You won't change what's broken about this country, or the planet for that matter. Too busy fightin' each other or takin' money from rich bastards from oil or gambling lobbies... things won't be no different if you got in. Rest of us still have to try and earn a crust and not fuck things up more than we've let people like you fuck 'em up already."

Nate pinched the top of his own brow between two fingers.

How many times must he repeat the same arguments with morons on the doorsteps of suburbia? How could anyone get through to people like Mr Zand?

"Sir... Mr Zand. Look, we agree with you."

"You do?"

"We do?" Silke echoed, her eyes flashing dangerously at Nate.

Nate nodded, morphing his face into what he hoped was an earnest expression of contrition.

"Yes. Because you're not wrong about the Conservatives."

"Not just them, pal," Mr Zand said, folding his arms.

"Okay. But Labour haven't been in power for over twenty years. How can we be expected to change things if we're not in the driving seat?"

"Bingo!" Mr Zand said, waggling thick eyebrows up and down like a cheap gameshow host before performing a slow-hand-clap. "And that right there is Labour's problem. So busy trying to win an argument, you forgot about the rest of us. Tories fight themselves too, but they win more than you do."

Nate thought about pointing out how the system was designed to let Conservatives win more often, but thought better of it.

"Will you at least take our leaflet?" he said, hearing how pathetic it sounded.

Mr Zand, as if seeing how bedraggled and sodden the pair of them looked for the first time, softened.

"Ah, you daft buggers. Gis it here then. But I still aint voting for your lot! You're all useless. If you all stopped fighting and slagging one another off, you might actually get something done. Ever think about that?"

"We're just trying to change the future for the better, one doorstep at a time," Nate recited, trying, and failing, to inject some enthusiasm into his voice.

"You want to really change the future? Take a lesson from that James Matterson. That water rail of his could actually help the planet. He doesn't spend his days bickering like a bunch of archaic twats in a rat-filled shit-hole that's about to sink into the River Thames. Best of luck to yous!"

And with a cheerless wave, Mr Zand slammed the door in their face.

#

Water rail. Water-bloody-rail. That's all everyone was talking about these days. Nate didn't intend to take any lessons from 'James', no matter how many dumb arse constituents sang his former friend's praises.

As they neared the turn into Nate's road, Silke relieved Nate of the remaining leaflets.

"We're all meeting for a drink at the Cavern later. Fancy joining?"

"Can't," Nate sighed. "Having dinner with my mum."

"We'll be there late," Silke smiled, bumping him gently with her arm. "Text me if you fancy it. We can toast to the future!"

Nate smiled then watched half the queue at the bus stop let Silke hop on the number 32 ahead of them, helpless against her bouncy smile and chestnut curls. He could see her going far in the party. Further than him at any rate. A rumble of thunder moved him down the road and towards his childhood home.

#

"Darling!"

Nate's mum threw her arms around him, slapping the wettest kiss on his cheek before squashing him into the bear hug she loved and he hated.

"Oh you're absolutely drenched! Try not to drip on the carpet. Your father's working late again, but he'll be back soon."

Nate's stomach went hollow; it still hurt hearing Mum talk about Dad as if he were still alive. But Nate did as he was told and hung his coat gingerly over the bannisters before following his mum into the kitchen where she wittered on about whatever local drama in town was happening this week. He slumped into a chair round the kitchen table, letting the words skitter over him.

Then she said something that slapped him awake.

"Jim called for you the other day."

"What?"

"Jim," his mum said, stirring a stew without turning around.

"Jim-Jim?"

"Of course! I told him you were busy campaigning so he said he'd try you on the mobile.

Did you get back to him?"

"No. This is the first I've heard about it."

His mum turned carefully, holding one hand under a wooden spoon as she sipped the stew.

"Odd. He said he was going to call you."

"I haven't spoken to him for two years, Mum."

"You boys had a fight again? Honestly! I should just march you both straight to Mr Gilbert's office and let him deal with you both."

Nate took a deep breath.

"We're not in school anymore, Mum. Remember? I work for the local Labour party and Jim..." he trailed off, unable to escape the bitterness at the back of his throat. "Jim lives in California now."

His mum looked at Nate as if he came from another planet. The mist in her eyes cleared for a second before she blinked and returned humming to the stew.

#

David Gangers beat the national polls by arriving in an embarrassing third place in the election. Nate joined the rest of the campaign team for a commiseration wake at party HQ. The small offices stank of sweat and cheap lager. David didn't even have the guts to show his face and thank Nate and the others for spending months pounding the streets and having doors slammed in their faces. Not that it mattered to Nate. He stayed near the buffet table anyway, nibbling at stale quiche and sausage rolls.

Silke was busy working the room, clasping hands and offering condolences to the more upset canvassers. Nate looked on with jealous admiration at her skill.

"There goes a future Labour leader," a familiar voice said by his ear. "Probably PM if she plays her hand well."

Nate looked round to see the tanned relaxed face of James Matterson grinning back at him.

"Alright mate." Jim looked around the room wrinkling his nose as Nate wondered if he could get away with telling Jim to fuck off. "Forgot how damp this town is."

"What you doing here?" Nate finally managed.

"Fancied a break," Jim shrugged. "Thought I'd see if I could catch you for a beer and a catch up. I did try and get your mum to pass on a message last year, but I guess it didn't get through."

Despite the tan, Jim still looked like a reject from the grunge era of the 1990s. Ripped jeans. Ill fitting t-shirt. Manky sweater with holes up the arms and sleeves. He was probably the richest man in the room yet looked like he'd been turfed out of a charity shop.

Jim stepped round beside Nate, forcing them to turn away from the party of gloom.

"Look, mate... uh, I know we didn't part on the best of terms, but I'm having a bit of a problem with water rail that I think you can help us with."

#

2033

It was miles away from the political sphere Nate imagined he'd be, but being head of public relations for Water Rail certainly came with advantages. A big pay check with lots of zeros at the end, for example.

"This is Dolphin actual. Final cab checks complete. Sargassum levels show green..."

"If that's a feekin joke, it's a shit one," Professor Chan's voice crackled through the radio.

Nate had come to learn that Chan, one of the lead designers for water rail, swore more when she was nervous, but Jim ignored her.

"Solar batteries at 70% and climbing. Hydrogas generators online and cycling up. Standing by to throttle in five minutes."

Nate peered through the front windshield of the engine cab as Jim checked and re-checked the drive controls. The platform at Land's End was awash with photographers, journalists, and the First Minister of the United European Confederation. Silke flashed one of her

famous smiles at the throng waiting to see the first ever passenger voyage of the Dolphin Express. Five years late and a few billion over-budget... but finally ready to carry people across the Atlantic.

"Land's End to New York Central in less than a day!" Jim whistled.

"Helps that New York is technically in the Atlantic now."

Jim waved Nate's pessimism away with a chuckle.

"None of this would have been possible if it weren't for you, mate. You helped us turn the narrative around. I don't know how to thank you."

"You could let me off the train? You know I get seasick."

Jim laughed like Nate had made the funniest joke ever. He then returned to stare at the signals at the end of the platform. Nate followed his gaze, trying to ignore the hollow pit his stomach had become.

The weather out to sea looked clear, and the water rails shimmered just a few feet below the surface, ebbing and flowing with the swell. In just a few minutes when the throttle was pulled, they would enter their active state as the train pulled into the Atlantic, maintaining just the right level of cohesion to allow the Dolphin to carve smoothly along the tracks and through the water. Nate had seen Jim run the Dolphin hundreds of times during testing, so why was his mouth swelling with saliva?

"You never did apologise."

"What?" Jim said.

"My 21st birthday."

Jim remained staring through the cab windshield. Outside, Nate could hear a few people outside starting a countdown from three minutes.

"Everyone from the local Labour leadership was there. You ruined my chance of being selected as a parliamentary candidate."

"It was just a bit of fun, Nate. And most people laughed."

Nate felt long buried anger burning up through his chest as the memory wormed its way to the front of his brain.

"I didn't."

They were both silent a few moments.

"Things turned out okay," Jim shrugged. "Look where we are today. Saving the world, one journey at a time. Just like you always wanted."

"Except I wanted to be the one leading the change. Not the one writing press releases about it."

Jim's face clouded with thunder as he looked over at Nate.

"And that right there is why you should never be PM. You were always more interested in the power rather than the journey. Everything was handed to you on a plate when we were at school because of who your dad was. You never had to work for it. Besides, I rescued you from a life of shitty policy research for some useless MP that does nothing and means even less. And all you can do is stand here and complain."

The countdown had reached one minute thirty and the bile at the back of Nate's throat mixed with the fear growing in his belly about this journey.

"I shouldn't have taken this job," he said quietly. "The Dolphin's a marvel of green tech but it isn't ready for large scale passenger trips. We've hidden that from the press, from the public. Christ! Even from ourselves."

"But you did take this job," Jim spat, "I knew you would, because I know you. You want recognition for your help? Well mate, saving the world means hard work and taking a few risks once in a while. Hell, what I've done shows just how pointless academic qualifications are. So, shut the fuck up and smile for the cameras."

Nate blinked back the hurt, before noticing a few tears in Jim's own eyes.

"That's what this is all about? Jealousy?"

"You better buckle up. Signal will go green in less than a minute."

Nate shook his head trying to imagine what the past decade would have been for them if things had gone just a little different. If Jim had gone off to study physics and worked on the starship he always wanted to design.

"I'm sorry," Nate murmured.

Jim flinched, but otherwise didn't react.

"I didn't know the A-Levels had hit you so hard. I just assumed... everything would be fine. I just... I mean I guess..."

"It was what it was," Jim waved him off. "Look, can we fight about this later?"

Nate nodded.

"You should delay the journey, though."

"No."

"I'm speaking as your head of press, not as your friend. If things go wrong..."

Jim rounded on Nate and hissed.

"They. Won't. Go. Wrong. And if you say anything to the assembled masses, you can go back to living with your mum because you won't be working for Water Rail anymore!"

"Fine. Then I quit, effective immediately."

Nate felt as surprised as Jim looked. He hadn't meant to say that, but now that he had, he wouldn't give Jim a chance to respond. He simply pushed through the internal door into the first car behind, walked past a lot of excited passengers, and then stepped through the first set of passenger doors off the train onto the platform.

"Bastard," Nate murmured, wondering if Jim would yell after him. Apologise and beg him to come back.

No one called him back. No one even noticed him leave the terminus.

He heard about the accident on the news the following day.

#

2038

The queue at the checkouts was longer than ever. Half the tills were broken and despite repeated requests for repair, the contractor had failed to arrive for the last three days. They kept blaming the extreme weather; rain and heat competing for supremacy. Yet the reality was Nate's store just wasn't that important. Nate had nearly torn what was left of his hair out trying to convince head office that the store needed a much needed refurb, but nothing ever happened.

He left work around seven pm, handing the shift over to Rachel, a young grad on the fast-track to senior management. She took the fobs and keys with barely a glance up from her phone as Nate recited his shift report. He left her to it and walked outside into a humid rain shower as his own phone rang.

It was Dani.

"Hi love... yeah, I'm just on my way there now... no, don't worry I'll cook when we get home... you too. No, I promise I'll be fine."

He hung up the phone and started walking up the street, away from the town centre and towards the graveyard.

#

The view at the top of the hill was impressive, even though it came with the memories. Nate could see right down to the main terminus. A heavy bank of grey clouds rolled above Land's End, daring the station to release the latest express into the ocean. Nate eased himself onto one of the wooden benches and sighed as he watched a Sealion A7 glide out of the station and into the Atlantic with barely a wobble.

Four years, eleven months and fifty two days.

Seemed like yesterday, Nate mused, cracking open the can of Fosters before toasting the terminus below and taking a deep draught.

"I can't believe we used to drink this piss," he belched a minute later, smacking his lips against the taste. "S'pose it's all we could afford back then."

A sharp gust of wind blew across Nate's face, making his nose dribble.

"Yeah, I know I sound like an old man. And sorry I haven't visited before. Been busy."

He reached into his jacket pocket and retrieved an old style print photo from his pocket. The sun came out from behind the clouds as Nate examined it.

"This is Dani. We met a few years ago. She's nice. Helped me get my head back on straight after what happened... happened. We moved in together a few months ago. I like her."

The clouds hanging over the terminus began to break up as the wind changed direction. Nate sniffed, trying not to glance at the grave off to his right.

"Sorry I was such a dick," he murmured, putting the photo back in his pocket. "I get why you acted the way you did at my 21st. I never noticed how disappointed you were after our A-

Levels. All I could do was bang on about how we'd both be leaders in our fields and then swaggered off to Uni and forgot all about you until my third year."

Somewhere out to sea the shrill whistle of the Sealion express echoed back across the valley below. The wind brushed around the graveyard, whispering through the trees and grass as it danced around Nate.

"Your mum told me about your depression at the funeral. I... didn't know you were going through that. Maybe if I had I could have... I dunno. Helped? Listened a bit more? Then again, you could have told me! I mean, I'm not a fucking mind reader am I?!"

Nate screwed his face up before ruffling the hair back over his ever expanding bald patch.

"Anyway, I'm still here and you're... not. And it sucks. It really really sucks. But if it means anything at all... you made a mark. You did something to help people. More than I ever will. Water Rail's expanding across the globe. The oil lobby got really pissed, but the smarter ones have seen which way the wind is blowing. I'd buy a few shares myself if I had the cash."

Nate trailed off again, his mind rambling across memories old and new. He drained the last dregs from the beer can before crunching it up in his fist. He thought about Jim and their games of D&D. The playground arguments over Star Trek and Star Wars. Life seemed full of possibility back then. Nate rubbed the side of his face, the stubble scratching his palm as he finally accepted the truth that he was neither special nor destined to achieve anything particularly grand.

Life was hard. Try again tomorrow and the day after, and the day after that. Like Jim had after their A-Levels.

Fucking Jim!

Nate finally cried, the tears falling in messy drops against the grass. Everything hurt. He covered his face, trying to hide and ended up smearing snot across his palms. But, in a weird way, it felt like an elephant had just climbed off his chest.

Nate wiped his nose with the back of his free hand and looked down at his friend's gravestone.

"Live long and prosper feels pretty redundant," he sniffed. "So, if it's all right with you, Jim, I think I'll go with a modified version of the Klingon battle cry."

He paused before bending down to place one hand on the tombstone.

"Yours was a sad day to die, buddy. I really am sorry I was such a dick when we were kids. But I'm going to take a leaf out of your book. I'm going to keep trying. Maybe even apply for a job in the diplomatic corp for the Agean reclamation project. I heard they need all hands on deck. Might be able to work on one of the farms out there. They reckon in ten years time, the islands will have recovered enough for us to start moving a limited number of communities back. But, we'll see. I kind of like it quiet."

Nate stood up and stretched his arms out wide, shaking out the tension from his shoulders. The sun was just sinking above the horizon and the first wisps of a cool night skipped through the wind under his nose.

"See you round, buddy."

He turned and began walking down the hill. Maybe things would be okay. Maybe they wouldn't. Hard to know these days.

Nate looked up to the sky and almost tripped up. For a second... just a second... a few clouds seemed to form a vulcan salute. Nate swallowed and slowly wrestled his fingers to the sky to salute back.

"Happy birthday, Jim. Peace and long life." Wiping his face, Nate continued walking, but not before smiling and saying under his breath "Kirk would still dropkick Luke's dumb arse in a fight though."

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