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Written by James Smythe

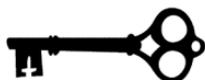
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JAMES SMYTHE

The Testimony



blue door

This novel is entirely a work of fiction.
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the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to
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Absence of Evidence is not Evidence of Absence.

Dr Carl Sagan

*(on the potential existence of a deity,
or extraterrestrial life)*

Absence of Evidence is not Evidence of Absence.

Donald Rumsfeld

*(on the potential existence of weapons
of mass destruction in Iraq)*

STATIC

Phil Gossard, sales executive, London

At first, we thought that the noise was just a radio. We didn't even think about how long it had been since we'd had a *real* radio anywhere near the office; it just struck us that it was the same noise, tuning it. We were sitting in the office eating our lunches; the sandwich man had done his daily delivery, and I had picked a ham roll. I *never* had ham. We didn't eat together, not usually, but we were trying it as something new, get the team together for a daily meal, something more social than just work. It promoted a sense of team-building that the management thought we were missing. At the talks, the meetings, they told us that we should learn to lean on each other more. This is a way to bring you all together, they told us. Three or four bites into the sandwich, I noticed it, niggling; like a radio, as I say, sitting at the back of the room. I asked the rest of them if they could hear it, and they couldn't at first, and then one of them did – Marcus, I think, from sales – so we followed the noise, tried to find where it was coming from. Is it speakers, from the computers? somebody asked, but it wasn't that. We thought it was louder as we went towards

the window, so we opened them. Where's it coming from? Marcus asked, but neither of us could tell because it sounded like it was coming from all around us. It seemed stupid to say it at the time, but it seemed like it was coming from inside my head; I didn't say that, and then the others started to hear it, one by one. The whole thing seemed to take a few minutes, I reckon – but it could have been less, could have been more – and when the static reached its loudest, Bill, our boss, decided to go downstairs, see if it was louder there. We watched him out of the windows, in the street with people from all the other offices, and they all just sort of stood there and listened. Within a couple more minutes everyone from the other offices was either out there as well or crowded round at their own windows, and we were all listening to it. And then it was gone.

**Simon Dabnall, Member of Parliament,
London**

It's a rare day that you have silence in the House of Commons. There was some head of state in from one of the Eastern European nations, and that tended to make some of the back-benchers rowdy, make them show off. That's attention-grabbers for you. Some of the rabble liked to think that it might make their names stand out for future PM-related references. Sad, really. The visiting chap just sat and stared at the paneling. But it was a loud day anyway: something about the NHS (again), immigrants (again), terrorism controls in the heart of Staines (again), and most of the front-benchers were going at it cats and dogs. That pillock from Chester was waving his hands around as he shouted, like he was being pestered by a

wasp, that way that he did, and nobody was listening to him. Then we heard the static – that’s what we all agreed it sounded like, at first, like the sound of televisions in the middle of the night – and Chester stopped his flapping, and we listened. There’s never any sound in the room that we don’t know about – there were no crowds outside, no tours, and it’s about as soundproofed as a room without real soundproofing can get – so we all looked around for the source, heads peeking up like we were meerkats.

When it was over – quick as it began, as if somebody just flicked a switch and turned the power off – we just sat there, and nobody said anything for the longest time, until the speaker told us to reconvene the following day. We all shuffled out onto the riverbank, seemingly along with everybody else on both sides of the river, and we just milled around. It’s like a fire drill, somebody joked, but it wasn’t *really* a joke. The tubes, the buses, nothing was running – everybody froze because this was an *event* – so we were all just stranded there.

Jacques Pasceau, linguistics expert, Marseilles

It was like you were trying to tune into the right frequency but you were wearing ear-muffs, that’s how clear the noise was. We were working on a translation of something – me, Audrey, Patrice, David, Jolie – working on verbs, some dull shit like that for an undergrad class I was tutoring, and suddenly there it was, *Chhhhhhhhhhh*. I’ve never heard anything like it. I mean, people called it static, but I thought it was more like a growl, even. I said that out loud when it was finished and we were just talking about it over and over, and Audrey said that I was being stupid, but you know, I *wasn’t*, not really.

Meredith Lieberstein, retiree, New York City

12th of April, life is normal. 13th of April, still normal. 14th of April, everything gets torn apart, or put back together, whichever way you want to think of it. We had only just woken up – Leonard’s bladder, same as every night, tick tock – when it happened. I had the TV on, quietly, because I wasn’t completely awake, and I thought it was coming from that at first, then they went to one of those *We Have A Fault* screens, and the noise didn’t stop. When Leonard came back he flicked around through the channels, trying to find CNN – because that had never gone down, not that we could remember, or BBC World – but that was the same. *We Have A Fault*. How often do you need the news to tell you what’s actually going on these days, anyway? The one time we needed it, and it was no help at all. Eventually one of them came back – Fox was first, I think, because I remember Leonard joking about there being a first time for everything – and they started telling us what we already knew, with no explanations. There has been an event, they said. Within minutes they were referring to the noise as static, though we thought it sounded more like paper being crumpled. Leonard was watching, flicking the channels, when we heard the beeping from outside, so I went out onto the fire stairs. Cars were logged up around the park, people out of them and walking around. You could see that they were scared, even from four floors up. Look at this, Leonard said, and I went back in to see the helicopter footage of the Brooklyn Bridge – those were the days when they constantly had the helicopters out, circling the city at night just *waiting* for something to happen, convinced that, sooner or later, they would be in the right place at the right time – and the bridge was

chock-full of cars, some of them empty, some of them crashed (because the drivers had been fiddling with their radios or headsets, looking for the source of the static, I'd guess). This was – Fox News called it – a Community Event, capital C, capital E, like a ceasefire or an election or garden barbecues on the 4th of July.

**Andrew Brubaker, White House Chief of Staff,
Washington, DC**

We were talking through POTUS' schedule, because something had to be added, visiting some library because he had said something about funding them – I don't know, small-time stuff. It was ten minutes to wheels up, cabin doors were sealed, press were all seated, and then we heard the static. When you're with the President of the United States sitting on Air Force One and you hear a noise like that? You assume it's an attack.

**Piers Anderson, private military contractor,
the Middle East**

As a soldier, no matter what you're doing – sleeping, on a recce, whatever – you hear a noise you haven't heard before, you damn well listen. We were packing, and there was a hand-over at the camp happening. We'd been on recon, which was all we ever did in those days. It had been a couple of decades since we'd actually needed to be out there in any great number, but people – the people with the money and the power – were still scared. The Yanks were taking it over from us, which was a hell of a relief, let me tell you. We weren't having a party, exactly, but we were happy to be leaving, and then we heard

the static. Somebody asked if it wasn't just the sand. We'd had storms a few days previous, and it was a bit easier to assume that it might be that than . . . well, whatever it was. I've seen the footage on the news now of people going crazy because of it, panicking, all that, but we just tried to get on with our jobs. We loaded the trucks, took them to the airfield. A random noise might have made us prick up our ears, but there was no way it was stopping us getting home, I'll tell you that for nothing. What did stop us coming home? Orders. We were barely on the plane when we were told that we weren't going anywhere, that we were to stay put until the government knew what the hell it was that made the noise. That meant that somebody somewhere was worried that it was terror-related, so we knew we'd be there for the long haul.

Tom Gibson, news anchor, New York City

I was putting my tie on again. We were at commercials, and I'd been watching it on the monitors the whole broadcast, mocking me, crooked across my shirt. I called for the floor manager to do it, but she was fumbling through so I snapped it away and used the picture coming off camera 2 to set it straight. When the static started we thought it was coming from the equipment, so my producer shouted up to the booth to check, but they said everything was functioning normally, but they could hear it as well, and they were soundproofed. It got louder and louder and then we realized that we were meant to have gone back on the air, so they played the filler screen while I got myself together. Somebody looked out of the windows, down at Times Square, and everybody was looking up. They all heard it, they said, so I made the decision

to talk about it on air. We were the first to, first on with a report about what we would come to know as *The Broadcast*.

Isabella Dulli, nun, Vatican City

Part of our day was being a presence; being around with the people, walking around the City and spreading the word of God to them. Because that was why they were there, visiting us; to see the Holy Father and get his blessing, and to be so close to God, as those of us in service to Him were. The queues were always so long, at the ticket office, and we took it in turns to visit with the people as they waited, to talk with them of God's majesty. The day of the static, that was my day, my only one of the month, where I was attending the queues. The people started queuing in the very early hours, before the sun was even up, because the Tomb of St Peter was only open so very rarely. They wanted to see it so much, because it was so old. In the guest-book, they write that it smells holy, and that they can really feel Christ's presence there, the gaze of God Himself. I always laughed at that, because I said, You can feel His gaze everywhere, and they said, I know, but here *especially*. I enjoyed my days working around the Basilica, because everybody was always in awe. The morning of the static, I was so happy, ready for the day; I was down by the crowds, and they were asking me questions about my piety, about what it was like to be so close to God's love – It is a miracle, I would say, it is like no love that I have ever known before, and it is incomparable, original and beautiful and wonderful – and I was answering them as I always did. I was in a photograph with some gentlemen, come over from Germany, posing for them when I – we all – heard it. The tour guide that they had asked to take the photograph told us to say, Thanks be

to God, and then we heard it. The Germans said the phrase – I know, because I heard them, but they were so far away as to be blocked out, like they were in another room, shut away behind doors – but I didn't, because the static came, and everybody started panicking. All I could think was, Please, God, let this sound in our ears be a good thing.

Mark Kirkman, unemployed, Boston

I didn't hear it. I was in a bar, should have been in bed already, and everybody else stopped, listened, switched the music off. I tried really hard, once I worked out what was going on, but I just couldn't hear it.

Theodor Fyodorov, unemployed, Moscow

I was in bed, because Anastasia didn't have class. She had a bag of pot with her, so we did what we always did – put cartoons on, smoked pot in bed (I didn't have the heating on most of the time, not until it was so cold that the pipes would freeze if I didn't turn it on), and then I cooked breakfast, and we read books – she loved reading, loved reading all the English-language books, not even translated, showing off to me, because she knew I didn't read anything in Russian, let alone English. We were in bed when we heard the static, and it freaked her out at first, like a cat hearing a noise it doesn't expect; then she settled down, and we swapped cartoons for the news.

María Marcos Callas, housewife, Barcelona

We were staying in the city, for our anniversary. We always went back every five years or so, because it was where he

proposed to me, in the Basilica, which was my favourite church. I had spent the morning praying by myself, as I did most mornings, and I was getting ready to finish before the service began. I prayed by myself because it was a way to truly get God to hear you through all of the other voices, you see – you pray so hard amongst a sea of ambivalence, and your prayer rises above the darkness – and then, all of a sudden, He started to speak to me, to us, to the world. We couldn't hear Him, of course, because He spoke in tongues, but it was His divine power. Romans chapter ten, verse seventeen: So Faith comes by hearing, and hearing comes as the Word of God. I sat there and wept, because I couldn't believe that He had chosen me, and then I saw that others had heard it, and I wept because it meant that we were all hearing Him, all of us, and we were all saved.

Dafni Haza, political speechwriter, Tel Aviv

I had just started my job that day, and one of the first tasks as part of my position was to issue a statement reassuring the people, letting them know that their government was looking into the situation. It was the same in every single country around the world; but I was new, and the people of Israel expected statements, so I wrote them. It wasn't an order. Part of the role involved thinking for myself, thinking on my feet, being pre-emptive. I had always been good with words. It was a particular skill of mine, to be able to phrase them the right way. My father used to say that I could sell *anything*, and that I should go into sales, into marketing; I agreed, but wanted to do something with those skills, something more than just *selling*. I wanted to go into politics, so that's what I worked

for. Speech-writing was the way in: I was good at spinning things, making them sound good, or true. The static was there, everybody heard it, and everybody wanted to know what it was. It was my responsibility to give them an answer that came from the government itself, and reassurance was the government's watchword. That's the way that it works.

I had a team, and we had a press release being planned as soon as the television reports started asking what it was, and we realized that everybody heard it, it was a big deal – or it was going to be a big deal – and that we would have to deal with it. We didn't have time to even think about what it actually was. We had to just get on with our jobs.

Dhruv Rawat, doctor, Bankipore

I forget now why they were filming in the region before the static, but they had video cameras, full crews. All the children had run over to see what they were doing, standing by the catering tables – tables of food! In that heat! – and peering through, desperate to be on the camera. That was always the way, when the cameras were in town: all the children wanted to be in on it. They knew that they would probably never even see what they were being filmed for, but that didn't stop them. (Somebody, I forget who, said that the glare of the spotlight hits the people even on the streets of India, when they're already blinded by the sun. It must have been somebody intelligent, but I cannot for the life of me remember who.) I remember when I was a child, and the first time the television cameras came and filmed us all for the British news, and we didn't know what they were. That sounds like a lie, I know, but I was very young – only four or five, young enough to not know any

better, and we did not have a television in my house, of course – and my friends and I did not believe that they could film us, put us on their screens as they did, show us what we looked like there. It was fascinating! People say, what moments made you decide to change your life? That was one for me, because they were so glamorous. There was one lady with them, wearing a long white skirt and a shirt that clung to her body like I had never seen, and a hat that was thick and white and nearly covered her entire face in shade. I went over to her, and she was the one who told us what they were doing there, and I thought, Some day I'll persuade them to film me. After that, my plan, of course, was to leave Bankipore and go somewhere else – of course, dreaming of Mumbai – and to be on camera. I never went, because nobody ever does. Instead, I worked hard at school, and then went to Bangalore and I became a doctor, and then I moved back to Bankipore, because I thought that I could do some good here. That is what all my doctor friends said, if they weren't going overseas; they were going home to do some good. Then, when the static happened and the cameras were there, I was the person standing closest to them, trying to see what they were there for. The woman talking to the camera, I recognized her from the international news television channel they showed in the hotel restaurant-bar – I lived out of hotels for a while. I was outside when the static happened, and the woman came over to me, saw that I was smartly dressed – I wore a shirt and tie to work every day, because it established a rule from the second I saw a patient, that I was a doctor, an authority – and she asked me if I heard the static as well; she wanted to check that it wasn't coming from their equipment. I told her, Yes, of course I did.

Is it a noise that's common here? she asked. A nearby factory or something? I said, No, I have never heard it before. I asked some of the children – who were over by my offices, by the wall, lined up as if they were waiting for their turn to be spoken to by the woman – and they said that they had not heard it before either. I am sorry, I told the woman. Will you say something about it on camera, just in case? she asked, and I said, Of course I will. She went back to her crew, who were all Indian as well, but they weren't local, because nobody from Bankipore had that sort of equipment (that I knew of), and they all came over, set up in front of me. What do you think it was? she asked me, and I said, seeing myself reflected in the camera lens, that I thought it was probably nothing, because we couldn't explain what it was. I am a man of science; there has to be an explanation for me to believe it, I said. Thank you, she said, and she moved on.

Elijah Said, prisoner on Death Row, Chicago

I was asleep when I first heard the static, in my cot. They called them cots, like we were babies. Lots of people in there didn't sleep, defiantly staying awake, rattling anything they could against the bars, or howling their way through the nights. They would try to make sure that nobody could forget who they were, or *where* they were. I am a murderer, their actions called out, you would do well to remember who it is that I am, what I am capable of. It is within me to commit horrors upon you, and for that reason, I do not sleep when you tell me to; I sleep on my own timescale. On the corridor, we didn't get exercise like the rest, didn't get library time. Our meals were visited upon us, delivered on trays, always hot, always

neatly plated, our cutlery thin shards of blunt plastic that was counted back when we were finished with our meals. If we tried anything – and I did not, but I watched as others did, unrepentant in their drive for freedom, or revenge – the cutlery was removed completely, and the prisoner ate with their hands, like a primate, free yet ignorant. The guards would laugh as they spooned potato into their mouths, with the gravy dripping through their fingers; that's your punishment, they would say. No, I say: their punishment was both being there in the first place, behind those bars; and also would be delivered by Allah upon their death, a death that they entirely deserved for the crimes that they had committed toward their fellow man. They howled in the nights, dogs, desperate for their creator to put them out of their misery.

I could sleep through the catcalling, the constant abuse; but when a noise was unknown it would rouse me from even the deepest sleep. The static had us all on our feet, demanding to know what was happening. The guards ignored us, and left us alone. That was the first time I could remember the corridor being left unguarded; no matter how loud the shouts came for the next few minutes, the guards didn't return, and we were briefly free from their watch to do as we pleased within those confines; for my part, I was on my musalla, praying.

The guards returned after a few minutes, when I was still praying, and they put the lights on along the corridor, demanded that we turn out. They were on edge, frantic as mice. As always, I stood back, allowed them into my cell. As always, they invaded my privacy, their trust of my people so low that they felt no shame in their intrusions. They searched under my cot, in the metal basin they called a toilet, around

my person. They searched my mat, which they were forbidden to do, and they provoked me, prodded me like I was cattle, all to get a reaction. You don't say much, do you? they asked, and I did not reply: No, I do not.

When they were gone, and the corridor was quiet again – a comparative quiet, a quiet that is still loud with shouting, but constant, our own personal take on the tranquil – my neighbour, a murderer by the name of Finkler, spoke to me. Hey, brother, he said, because he called everybody of colour that name – as if he were saying, I am one of you, the oppressed, the downtrodden, *we are in this together* – you know what that was? No, I replied. He carried on, even though the lights were now out, and the guards demanded silence from us: What d'you reckon it was, then? Allah will deliver answers, I said. He went quiet. Even in here he knew I could still kill him, if he didn't go at the hands of the state first.