

# The Mystery of the Blue Screen of Death

## A Benji Neer Investigation

### Cast of Characters:

Benjamin 'Benji' Neer ..... Private Investigator  
Lady Pentium 'PC' Chipps ..... The Intended Victim  
Old Mother Board ..... Housekeeper  
'Chip' Memree ..... Lady Chipps' nephew  
C P Pugh ..... Chip's Tutor  
Win Dawes ..... Chipps' family factotum

Hardy Drive ..... Chipps family Archivist  
Anne Vidia DVI, VGA (Hons) ..... Painting Lady Chipps  
Dee V DeWriter ..... Secretary to Lady Chipps  
Penny Drive ..... Hardy Drive's niece  
Cable ..... Butler  
Mrs Powers ..... Cook

Benji Neer mustered a look of polite interest as he waited for his client, Lady Chipps, to get to the point. Beside them, Cable, the butler, fussed with a tea tray.

"Someone," she finally announced, "is trying to kill me." She leaned in towards Benji and loudly whispered, "I think it's Cable..." *Chink!!* The suspect in question smacked the teapot against a cup.

"I see," said Benji carefully, as the butler caught his eye and rolled his own heavenwards. "May I ask why?"

"Oh. Isn't it usually the butler?"

Anyway, it'd be so easy to replace Cable."

As Benji reached for a mince pie, a menacing growl made him pause, and he saw Lady Chipps' chihuahua eye him up with a manic gleam in its eyes.

"Oh, don't mind Jumper," she said fondly. "He's just a little softie."

The little softie promptly struck like a rattlesnake, just missing Benji's hastily retracted fingers, while Lady Chipps continued, oblivious. "Lately I've been plagued with these odd dizzy spells, you see. I'm told I turn quite blue and spout gibberish." She frowned. "I usually recover within a few minutes, but this morning, I had to rest for quite half an hour before I was able to get up. I do worry that one of these attacks will prove fatal."

Benji ventured towards his teacup, but was driven back by another warning growl. He swore inwardly. He really *wanted* a cup of tea ...

"Umm, I hate to mention it, Lady Chipps, but there's a little bit of a *smell* in here," said Benji, radiating wide-eyed innocence. "Do you think maybe your little dog has rolled in something?"

"Oh no! Do you think so?" Lady Chipps rang the bell for Cable, who promptly reappeared. She passed the protesting pooch across to him, cooing, "Iz my widdle baby needing a bath? Izzy den?"

Jumper knew damned well he wasn't, and as he was borne ignominiously from the room, he glared back at Benji, who raised his teacup in a cheerful salute.

"As I was saying," continued Lady Chipps, "I really think it must be someone here who's responsible."

"Then I'll have to question everyone. I'll start with the most recent addition ....."

### Anne Vidia, Artist

The artist peeked around the edge of her easel as Benji came in.

"Scuse me if I don't shake hands," she said, waving her paint-spattered fingers. "I'm first for the inquisition then, am I?"

"Well the attacks do seem to have begun just after you arrived ...?"

"Ah, right, enter the suspicious stranger. Well, I have only been here a few weeks. Lady C decided she wanted a picture and nobody here was capable of any decent quality, so I ended up installed in the household, God help me. Nuttier than a squirrel's lunchbox, the lot of 'em. But look, without Lady C, I'm just a spare part." She regarded Benji levelly. "Just because the others have been here longer, doesn't mean one of them hasn't been corrupted, you know." She picked up a cloth and wiped her hands, then before Benji could stop her, she'd leaned over and snatched his notebook and pen. .

"What are you doing?" asked Benji peevishly, as he watched her making notes in *his* notebook.

"Helping. Artist's eye for observation, if you like." She treated him to a dazzling smile. "You'll find my input invaluable."

"Oh I will, will I?" he grumbled as he stepped around the easel to reclaim his property. Looking at the canvas, he saw it depicted Lady Chipps seated on a velvet-upholstered chair. She was perfectly captured, from her faded periwinkle eyes to her softly-waved white hair. In her lap, glaring out at the world as if it personally affronted him, sat Jumper. Benji drifted to the right of the picture, then the left, studying the dog as he did.

"It's true," he remarked. "The eyes really do follow you around the room."

"So do the teeth," muttered Anne darkly.

**Mrs Powers, Cook** (to which Anne had added "*blows up without warning*")

As Benji entered the kitchen, the cook glanced up, and then pointedly took the head and tail clean off a haddock with two swift strokes of a butcher's knife. Benji winced, and then recoiled as the knife

suddenly appeared right under his nose. He gingerly moved it away with his fingertip.

"I'm ..." he began.

"Oh, I ken fine who ye are. Pokin' yer snotty wee nose intae everythin'. Well let me tell ye somethin' - this place wouldnae run at a' if it wisnae fer me. So gawn an' look elsewhere. Gawn, get away with ye, ya snotty-nosed wee runt that y'are!!!!"

At six-foot, 16-stone and dry-nosed (he checked), Benji felt this was unfair, but since the knife gave her argument a definite edge (and sharp pointy bit), he opted for a tactical withdrawal. Pausing in the hallway to make a phone call, he failed to notice the shadow of a psychotic chihuahua creeping up the stairs beside him. Jumper was bathed, blow-dried, be-ribboned, and consequently about as jolly as a sack of pit vipers. Reaching throat-level, he aimed, crouched and launched ...

Still talking, Benji glanced down and saw a pin on the carpet. Being a firm believer in "see a pin and pick it up", he did just that, leaving Jumper to sail unnoticed over his head, collide with the wall and slide to the floor on a trail of drool. While Benji finished his call and headed off in search of his next suspect, Jumper shook himself and slunk away, muttering.

**Old Mother Board, Housekeeper** ("*a regular chatterbox*")

The housekeeper had chosen the most uncomfortable chair in the room, and sat rigidly upright on it, staring at a point six inches above Benji's head with her mouth fixed in a grim line.

"You've been here right from the start, I understand?" ventured Benji.

"Sir."

Benji waited... but evidently nothing else was forthcoming. He pressed on.

"And you've witnessed these dizzy spells Lady Chipps has complained of?"

"Sir."

After a few more minutes of this scintillating badinage, the only thing Benji managed to deduce was that Anne Vidia wasn't a stranger to irony. He drew a line through the housekeeper's name and gave up.

**'Chip' Memree, Nephew** ("*just*

*begging for a good slap*")

"... and I didn't do anything! Why is everyone picking on me?! It's not *fa-a-a-ir!!*"

Benji suppressed a sigh. He'd only said 'hello'. Five minutes of whining later.....

"Mr Memree. *Please,*" he pleaded.

"Nobody's accusing you of anything. I'm just trying to gather information."

"But it's nothing to do with me! Aunt Pentium probably just did too much and got overheated. Why does everyone blame me?! It's so *unfa-a-a-ir!!*"

**C P Pugh, Tutor** ("*BO-ring*")

"No, Chip is far from a good pupil," C P Pugh scoffed. "You teach him something one day and it's gone the next. You'd think someone wiped his brain while he was asleep. Why, look at that lesson we did last week on Thermopylae ...."

"Uh-huh, so would you say...?"

"... now everyone just thinks of that film, *300*, but actually there's a lot of really *quite* interesting facts about the Persians that people don't realise. For example, Mr Neer ..." He leaned forward to better engage Benji's attention, but it'd already wandered off in search of something more exciting. Currently, it was counting the leaves on the flock wallpaper....

... *seventy-eight, seventy-nine...*

"...now - and this is interesting - *some* scholars are of the opinion ..."

... *one hundred and four, one hundred and five ...*

"... Fascinating. Quite fascinating. Don't you think so, Mr Neer?"

Benji snapped back to attention.

"Absolutely. Oh my, is that the time? I must get on. But thank you so much."

**Dee V DeWriter, Secretary** ("*bitter old spinster*")

"Dee V DeWriter. *Miss,*" she was at pains to point out. "I'm PC's secretary."

Miss DeWriter was utterly bland.

Straight, greying blonde hair, and an unflattering beige suit with boxy 80's-style shoulder pads, conspired to make her look like Spongebob's rather faded aunt.

"I'm close to retirement, Mr Neer. What would I have to gain? I was just hoping to hang on till I was pensioned off." She sighed. "To be honest, PC hasn't needed me in months. I wouldn't be at all surprised if she eventually forgets I even exist."

"I'd have thought there was always work for a secretary," said Benji, confused by the artist's notes on her. She didn't seem at all bitter, just sad.

"Oh there's plenty of *work*," she spat, (*ahhh, there it was*). "But PC doesn't want anyone but Pen these days. It's always Pen, Pen, Pen."

Benji referred to his notes. "That would be Penny Drive?"

"Pen, yes. Oh Pen is younger, Pen is quicker and she's so *terribly* practical." The words came through gritted teeth.

**Win Dawes, Factotum** ("*control freak*")

"Mr Dawes, I'm not exactly clear what it is you do here." Benji tapped his notebook with his pen.

Win Dawes blinked from behind rimless glasses. "Well ... everything. I'm the person

who makes this place run."

"Ah, and there was Mrs Powers telling me it was her," said Benji jovially.

Win removed his glasses and polished them carefully with a cloth. "Really? How odd. No, Mr Neer," he said, without a trace of humour, "it's me. I'm the one who deals with everything. I handle all the enquiries, give everyone their instructions for the day, arrange and supervise everything. This place is a well-oiled machine now, and I'm the one who operates it." Noticing Benji peering around the room, he asked, "Is anything the matter?"

Benji had been aware for a good few minutes of a low-level '*hrrrrmm*' noise, and frankly it was putting him off a bit. He made a few more notes and, thanking Win for his time, pushed his chair backwards and stood. He failed to hear the startled '*yip!*' from below, as Jumper, who'd *just* made it to within striking distance of Benji's ankle, now found himself pinned between the leg of the chair and the base of an occasional table. He snapped and squirmed impotently as Benji's trouser leg moved out of range.

**Hardy Drive, Archivist** ("*a sweetie*")

"Been here years, of course, building up all that information on the Chippses. Go on, ask me anything. It's all stored up here, y'know." Hardy Drive tapped his forehead, and then gave a heavy sigh. "Can't always retrieve it lately, though. Getting old, I expect."

"So if anything happened to Lady Chipps," asked Benji, "could you move on somewhere new?"

"Oh no. No, I don't think so. Nobody wants an old archivist. We get stuffed full of one family's history, y'see. Hard to wipe it all out and start over. No, got to be realistic - I'd be in the rubbish bin." He nodded towards a bin by the Christmas tree in the corner, and then became very flustered when Benji followed his gaze.

"Ah, and what do we have here then?" asked Benji, pulling some crumpled brown wrapping paper from the bin. A skull and crossbones decorated the address label.

"I keep throwing them away!" Hardy Drive wrung his hands. "But they won't stop coming!" He hung his head. "I answered an advert a few weeks ago. It looked so genuine! And then I started getting these parcels of poison in the mail. I didn't know what to do, so I just kept binning them! I would *never* use them against PC!!"

"All the same," said Benji thoughtfully, "I think someone has."

**Penny Drive** ("*slicker than a wet otter*")

"Penelope Drive?"

"Just Penny is fine."

Benji assessed the young woman in front of him. On the surface, she was immaculately turned out and oozed efficiency, but Benji couldn't shake the impression that she was *all* surface.

"Really, Mr Neer," she marvelled, "I doubt this place has seen an update in years. And they all actually believe in a job for *life*. Can you imagine?"

"And I take it you don't?"

"Well hardly. Can't wait to go somewhere more modern."

"Oh? And just what might you be willing to do to achieve that?"

Suddenly realising she was doing an excellent job of incriminating herself, Penny made a dash for the door. Benji sprang up to intercept, but her attempted escape was foiled by Jumper. *Finally*, he'd got close enough to smell Benji's blood, and then just as he leapt, he got tangled up in Penny's legs. All three of them crashed to the floor. Caught between the two struggling humans, Jumper's tiny psychopathic brain reset to "Bite". He snapped his jaws shut on the nearest available appendage.

Penny Drive shrieked.

Everyone came running, and as Penny tried to shake Jumper off, a small bottle labelled 'Poison' flew from her sleeve and rolled across the floor. All jaws dropped (including Jumper's, who fell off Penny's arm). Pulling a lace handkerchief from her pocket (which sent another poison bottle sailing across the room), she artfully dabbed at her eyes before turning accusingly on her uncle. "It wasn't me! *You* brought them into the house! I just found them and I was .. disposing of them for you?" she concluded lamely. She peeked through downcast lashes to see if there was the slightest chance anyone was buying this performance. There wasn't. She flung the handkerchief aside and snarled at them. "Well you're all so *past* it! And you'd have kept me dangling till I was old and useless too! Well I want a life away from here!!"

Lady Chipps drew herself up regally. "Then go and have one, by all means. In fact, I think it's safe to say you can remove yourself immediately." She watched impassively as Penny Drive was ejected, and then approached Benji.

"The hero of the hour," she said warmly.

Benji ducked his head shyly. "Oh. Well. All in a day's work you know."

"What? No, not *you*," said Lady Chipps derisively. She reached past him to pick up Jumper and hugged him. "Did my widdle baby find the bad lady? Diddy den? Who's Mummy's clever, *clever* boy? *You*," she flicked her hand at Benji, "may see yourself out." She carried Jumper triumphantly from the room.

"Wow. You actually got *fired*." Anne Vidia was shocked. "Nobody *ever* gets booted round here."

"Oh. Lucky me," said Benji glumly.

"What'll you do now?" she asked sympathetically.

He shrugged. "Move onto the next case, I suppose." He checked the messages on his phone. "Huh. Office with mail going missing, apparently."

"Oh... interesting," she said politely.

"No, it'll be in the next drawer down from where it's supposed to be." Benji sighed. "I really thought this was a case I could get my teeth into."

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Lying in his basket, blissfully replete with finest fillet steak, Jumper was thinking the exact same thing.