



Oswald stood at the front of the room and clapped his hands to get everyone's attention.

"Hello everyone and welcome to this evening's meeting of Technophobes Anonymous. Can I .... yes, sorry, what?"

A sweet little old lady in the third row was waving to attract his attention.

"Isn't this Conversational Klingon?"

"No, they have the hall on Thursdays. Today's Friday."

"So I missed it?"

"For this week, yes, sorry."

"Well *majQa*." She climbed to her feet and edged out of the row.

"As I was saying," Oswald continued, "it's marvellous to see so many new faces joining us here tonight. And just to state for the first timers, there's no judgement here, no criticism. This is a safe, supportive place". *Except lately*, he thought. Rumpelstiltskin had kicked him squarely in a supportive place last week, after a discussion about the legality of using a password-breaking program to guess his name had flared into a full-scale row. To be fair, Rumpelstiltskin was capable of picking a fight in an empty room. But anyway, as a result, he was sitting this week out.

*Ah, sitting ...* sighed Oswald inwardly, shifting his stance to try and ease his discomfort. *I remember sitting....* "Now, who would like to introduce themselves and share their story first?"

Nobody seemed terribly keen to break the ice, but finally one old gentleman slowly raised a hand.

"Yes sir," said Oswald. "Welcome, and tell us about yourself."

"My name, it is Gepetto, and me? I hate technology."

"Hello Gepetto," said Oswald, and waved his hands to encourage the others.

"Hello Gepetto!" they chorused. Gepetto twisted his hat round and round in his hands as he spoke.

"I am never lucky enough to find me a wife, you know? But so very much, I am wanting a son. I am so desperate that, well, I am a wood carver, you see? So I whittle and I carve and I sand and I paint, and I make a *bellissimo* little boy

out of wood. And he is wonderful, he is my *bel ragazzo* ... but it isn't enough. So then I wish and I wish that he might become a *real boy*. He can discover girls, settle down, maybe have some *bambinos, si?* And one night, I wish on a special star and it happens! My boy is real!"

His eyes misted over as the audience gasped. Several of them wiped a tear away.

"Yes, he is a real boy now." Gepetto sighed. "But does he discover girls? No, he discovers *video games!* Whassa matter with him? This latest one? Fortnite! And ha! Big laugh, is fortnight since I am set eyes on him! Why can't he find one called Coupla Hours? And he sleeps all day! I only know he is still in the house because fridge is outta food in the morning. I knock on his door to ask how he is, he just grunts." Gepetto threw his hands up in despair. "*Dios mio*, I got more words out of him when he was made of wood!"

"Thank you Gepetto. That was very moving," said Oswald. He turned his attention to a gum-chewing young woman in the front row.

"Would you like to introduce yourself?" he asked.

"Yeah, my name is Sheherazade, and I, like, hate technology, y'know?"

"Welcome Sheherazade! You .. er .. you *like hate* technology? Is that sort of a love-hate relationship with it?"

"No, I just really, like, hate it."

*Of course you do.* "O-kaaaay, why don't you go ahead and tell us your issues with technology," suggested Oswald.

"Well I tell stories, y'know, to this sultan? Like, I make them up and I leave him with, like, a cliff-hanger every night." She shrugged and snapped her bubble-gum. "I kind of have to, or he'll, like, kill me in the morning, y'know?" She pulled a dramatic face as she dragged a hand across her throat.

The woman next to her squeaked in

alarm, but Sheherazade just shrugged again.

"Meh, it's no big deal. You just have to, like, keep him wanting to know what happens next. Except now, oh yeah, *now* he's got himself a Kindle, y'know? And he can take his pick of, like, thousands of stories. Any time! He was so excited he didn't even remember to threaten to kill me this morning!"

The woman frowned at her. "Did you *want* to be killed this morning?"

"Well *duhhh*, like, of course not, but he didn't even *remember!* And he didn't ask about the cliff-hanger either, y'know? I'm all, like, 'what about my story?' and he's all, like, 'who cares?' And I mean I left that puppy, like, clinging to a branch over a volcano, y'know? And he's got the nerve to say 'who *cares?*' It's a *puppy* for crying out loud!!"

Oswald scanned the rows, and spotted a redhead he hadn't seen at previous meetings. He caught her eye.

"Hello there. Why don't you introduce yourself next?"

The redhead straightened up and cleared her throat. "Hello, my name is Anna, and I hate technology!!" she announced loudly. "Hello Anna!"

"This is about my sister. See, she used to be this really cool person. As in *really* cool. Like, everything-she-touches-freezes kind of cool. And we'd have adventures with snowmen and reindeer, and every day was just so much *fun*. But these days she just lolls about on the sofa with Deliveroo on speed dial and binge watches Netflix. It's all because she's got this Hive app thing on her phone now. She never goes anywhere anymore! Frozen river in the next county starting to melt? She just dials the temperature down a few notches from her phone. Fountain in the square showing signs of working again? Tap, tap, tap, and it's seized solid. Where's the fun in that?! I say to her,

"Who's next?"

A wing was raised in the second row. "I'm Daphne, I'm an ugly duckling, and I hate social media."

"Oooo," said Oswald, "now I don't know. This is really for techno..."

Daphne fixed him with a beady eye and he folded like a cheap suit.

"... on the *other* hand, social media, technophobia, I can see the connection. Say hello to Daphne everyone!"

"Hello Daphne!"

Daphne settled her feathers and began. "My mother was an ugly duckling. So was her mother, and *her* mother, and *her* mother before that. You get the idea. I'm

supposed to be an ugly duckling. Then I grow up and become a swan. But *no-o-ooooo*, social media says I'm not allowed to be ugly. I put my photos on Instagram and all I get is comments saying 'Eeek! Aaaargh! You should use filters!' What's wrong with my photos?" she asked, holding her phone up.

Sheherazade twisted around and looked at Daphne's phone.

"Oooh, like, nice duck lips," she said admiringly.

"Gosh, thanks, that means a lot, *considering I'm a duck.*" She rolled her eyes. "Anyway, this is what I look like and I don't see what's wrong with it."

"Let's call on another new guest. Yes, maybe you over on the right?"

A shifty-looking individual leaned forward.

"You may call me .... Ali B," he said carefully.

*Strange way to put it*, thought Oswald.

"Well, welcome ... Ali B. Please tell us why you're here tonight."

"I see you have a whiteboard there. I think I can illustrate my problem with technology if you'd allow me to use it?"

"Oh. Oh well, certainly. Go ahead."

The man named (possibly) Ali B strode to the front and picked up a marker pen. He proceeded to write &^!(\$%\$!!@! on the board.

"Now, can anyone tell me what that says?" he enquired.

"*Death to the Romulans!!!*"

Ah. Conversational Klingon lady was back. Oswald stifled a smile.

Ali B was less amused. "No. Anyone else?"

"Subtitles for Gordon Ramsay?" came a voice from the back.

"Good one. But no. This, ladies and gentlemen, is what masquerades as a password these days. And *that* is why I hate technology." He replaced the lid on the marker pen with a sharp *click!* and started to pace.

"When I began my ... career ..."

"Just what *is* your career?"

interrupted Oswald suspiciously, throwing half the requirements for anonymity to the winds.

"Oh, let's say that I ... test security systems, shall we? And I used to be able to get through a door with a simple 'Open Sesame'. But now, if you will, I'm faced with this kind of abomination," he gestured at the whiteboard. "And worse than that, we now have biometrics! I mean I do have a certain reputation for dexterity..." he wagged his fingers, "but lately, these fingers can't unlock anything but my own phone."

"Hang on a minute," said Oswald.

After they'd all shuffled out at the end of the meeting, Oswald tidied up as usual. He stacked the chairs against the wall and cleaned the whiteboard. As he turned to leave, a thought struck him and he looked back at the whiteboard.

That &^!(\$%\$!!@! had stolen the marker pen.

© A Griffiths, Aspect Business Communications Ltd 2021