



THE SYMBOLIC BEHAVIOUR EMPORIUM

3633 Words

The genesis of this story is strange, but illustrates how inspiration can come in many forms.

While editing another story with a different word processing software, an unfamiliar phrase in the text caused the spell checker to throw out a suggested revision.

That revised phrase was – symbolic behaviour emporium.

This bore no relation to the existing phrase and so was quickly rejected.

However, the phrase was too intriguing to be simply dismissed.

Hence, this story grew out of that anomalous phrase.

THE SYMBOLIC BEHAVIOUR EMPORIUM

The door opened an inch and a single guarded eye appeared in the crack. A long finger followed, curling around the edge, its red lacquered nail tapping on the wood with impatience.

“Yes?” a harsh voice demanded.

“I hope this wonderful morning finds you well, ma’am,” the salesman began cheerfully, launching a bold smile which burned up on re-entry.

The single pupil flickered up to the blue cloudless sky as if to confirm the statement and then settled back on the salesman. Two more painted fingers curled around the door like the legs of some cross-dressing spider. “Whatever it is you’re selling, I’m not interested.”

The salesman recognised the first denial and mentally skipped to the relevant chapter in the manual. “I’m selling time, ma’am,” he said. “A very precious commodity, I’m sure you’ll agree.”

“Time?” The eyebrow lifted, the pupil dilated then constricted like a zoom lens on a camera. “How can you sell time?”

That was the opening he needed, the question, *the invitation*. He took a deep breath. He’d been practising for hours, exercising his lung capacity like deep sea pearl divers. Now he was ready. He began. “Ma’am, what would you pay for an extra hour a day? That’s seven hours a week. Three hundred and sixty-four hours a year. In common currency that’s approximately two weeks. Two weeks you could spend on the golden sands of an exotic beach right here on Earth. Perhaps you could wander the Martian ruins, or visit one of the many exclusive Luna health farms. I hear the view of Jupiter from the Ganymede Dome is particularly beautiful.”

Slightly red-faced he stopped and smiled. He'd succeeded in delivering the whole speech in one breath without sounding like an asthmatic on forty fags a day. He felt the tiny electric thrill of success as the door opened another couple of inches revealing the single eye's sibling.

The salesman spied his chance. "Do you know that with the products on today's market it takes two hours a day to vacuum a whole house? I can sell you a product that will halve that time giving you that extra hour."

The door squeaked back to its uninviting sliver and the eye squinted in anger. "You're selling a vacuum cleaner? I have a vacuum cleaner."

Damn! He'd delivered the punch line too early. Not dissimilar to his sex life. He'd completely missed out the *foot in the door* section of the manual. Now there wasn't enough room to insert a little toe. He flashed back to his intensive training week, held on a farm out in the country. He recalled his salesman mantras. Swallow the panic, and keep smiling. Happy thoughts, positive thinking, and keep smiling. Show no fear, and keep smiling. Those days had been illuminating if not a little strange. He wasn't sure how firing guns at teddy bears, or bathing naked in cold tapioca, bore any relation to selling vacuum cleaners. But then the coaches were very fond of the word holistic. His friend had said that if you look up holistic in the dictionary it should say *total bullshit*.

The woman was still glaring at him and the door crack was narrowing by degrees.

"Be assured, ma'am, you do not have a vacuum cleaner like this one," the salesman finally blurted out, then calmly added, almost in a conspiratorial whisper. "Nobody has a vacuum cleaner like *this* one." He decided it was time to use the company tag line. "If I can take just five minutes of *your* time, ma'am, I can give you back weeks."

Had he blown it?

The smile was beginning to hurt, his cheek muscles cramping under the strain. One eye started twitching. He imagined that at this moment, with the sweat on his brow and one half of his face going into spasm, he looked more like a psychopath.

To his surprise and joy, the door opened all the way. On seeing the face, the salesman decided he preferred the mystery offered by the single eye. He was about to cross the threshold when the woman held up one hand stopping him dead. With the other she touched something on the other side of the door and all the salesman's hopes came crashing down. The woman had activated the dreaded DUPE 2000.

The DUPE 2000 stood for Detectable Unnatural Physiological Emanations. He didn't know what the 2000 meant. Had there been 1999 versions prior to this one? Probably meant nothing. Most companies arbitrarily put big numbers in front of their product names to make them sound more impressive. Perhaps 2000 meant 2000 ways to screw up a salesman's life.

With its activation, several cameras and other strange probe-like devices jutted out of the walls and pointed at him like some kind of miniature S.W.A.T. team. He could see the digital read-out displays on the small screen in the hall. He laughed nervously as he realised he was about to fail, yet again, in his new career.

Augustus Podd had been a vacuum cleaner salesman for exactly one week. Previously, he had been a councillor for neurotic household appliances; a maintenance technician for defective robotic genitalia; a tour guide for visiting Martian holiday makers, and a hazardous fluids operative for Disposable Lovedolls Inc. Podd had failed spectacularly in all of these professions.

As a councillor he had tried talking a grill out of undercooking everything for fear of giving its owners food poisoning. Instead, the grill decided to electrocute its owners hence removing the source of its neurosis.

As a maintenance technician he had adjusted one particular robot's malfunctioning pecker and had unfortunately got the speed setting wrong by a factor of ten. The robot melted under the strain and the woman involved had to have cosmetic surgery to remove the smile from her face.

As a tour guide he had taken a group of three-foot tall Martians on a tour of a slaughterhouse. Regrettably, he had ushered them through the wrong door where they met with several spinning blades and ended up in some of the meat pies. On the upside, due to the new mystery ingredient, sales had increased by twenty percent.

His final position as hazardous fluids operative regularly sent him to the residence of a burly Arkansan gentleman, Mr Colrouge. As Pod was carrying the last of a consignment of nine bulging lovedolls out of the house to his small van, Colrouge had warned, "Careful boy, there's a lot of surface tension in them there beauties."

Pod had barely managed to fit eight of the dolls in his already swollen van, the ninth he'd had to sit on the passenger seat. While he was filling in the paperwork, a short-sighted policeman had approached the open window of the van.

"Ma'am, do you know not wearing a seat belt is an offence?" the officer explained to the smiling lovedoll.

"You don't understand, officer," Podd had entreated from Colrouge's front door.

"Thank you, sir, but I'm dealing with this," the policeman told Podd. He then noticed fluid seeping from the doll's eyes. "No need to cry, ma'am. No harm done. Let me put your seat belt on for you."

Podd had been too late to stop the cop. Witnesses heard a woomph sound and noticed the sides of the van balloon outwards for a fraction of a second. The exploding doll had resulted in a chain reaction causing all the other dolls to rupture. The cop had drowned in the

ensuing flood pouring out of the passenger window. He could have been saved but none of the passers-by were willing to give him the kiss of life. The only charge Augustus Podd had received was discharging his load without due care and attention. Now he was about to fail again as the DUPE 2000 unveiled his inadequacies.

“Okay, sell me the vacuum cleaner, if you can,” the woman challenged him.

“The Super Sux Deluxe Turbo 5000,” stammered Podd, still disturbed at how closely the name of the cleaner mirrored that of one of the lovedolls. “is the best vacuum cleaner on the market.”

The alarms went off simultaneously. Podd had expected it. He saw the display screen and his heartrate had almost doubled, the sweat detector was off the scale. His Abnormal Histrionics read-out said he was directing a plane into land. It felt like seven of the eight pints of his blood were now in his face. The three alarms he had activated were lit up in bright neon. DESPERATE, INSINCERE, LIAR.

The woman shut off the alarms, nodded knowingly at Podd and proceeded to slam the door in his face. Two hours and ten doors later he realised the DUPE 2000 salesman had beaten him to the punch. He had sold his gadget to all the households in Podd’s assigned area. In desperation, Podd had managed to sell a sole vacuum cleaner complete with a small device for the safe removal of belly-button fluff to his former customer, the fat Arkansan, Mr Colrouge, who had lamented Podd’s departure because the new guy came to remove the dolls far too early, and, as Colrouge explained, “I don’t really like to let them go until I can bounce a dime off them, no siree bob.”

With that gruesome image fresh in his mind, Podd returned to base. He was just about to hand in his resignation when a colleague, Henry Kipple, stopped him. “Have you heard about the SBE?”

“The SBE?”

“The Symbolic Behaviour Emporium.”

“I’ve never heard of it,” said Podd.

“It’s down in the Mall,” said Kipple. “A small shop on one of the back streets.”

“How can they help me?” asked Podd, forlornly.

“They can sell you a symbolic behaviour pattern,” said Kipple. “They helped me years ago. I had the same problem. Now look at me.” Kipple had been the company’s best salesman for five years running.

Podd had to admit that whatever Kipple had used had worked perfectly. “What’s involved with this symbolic behaviour pattern?” he asked.

“Go down to the mall,” said Kipple. “They’ll tell you all about it. Tell them I sent you and they’ll give you a discount.”

Once more, feeling a thread of hope replace his familiar sense of resignation, Podd took an air taxi downtown to the address Kipple had given him. The shop was, indeed, in a back street, in a very seedy part of the Mall. By the time he reached the door of the shop he had been propositioned by two women, a man, and an electrical sheep that offered him a discount because it was Thursday.

The inside of the shop was simple, a counter at one end surrounded by posters on the wall extolling the virtues of the Martian mud baths and the merits of visiting the glorious volcanoes of Io. Opposite the counter was a waiting area complete with plastic moulded chairs and a coffee table boasting an assortment of magazines including this month’s edition of *The Cabbage Connoisseur* that Podd had yet to acquire. The spartan nature of the shop’s interior also included the clientele of which Podd was the only one. He rang the bell on the counter and a man emerged from the back brushing crumbs from his jacket. He was a round man in as

much as his tailor probably relied on the maths symbol Pi when measuring him up for suits. His head was bald and rested on a small thick neck obscured by at least three chins. The name tag on his jacket label announced him as Mr Smith.

“Do you have an appointment?” asked Smith.

Podd was taken off guard. “I didn’t know I needed an appointment,” he stammered. “Mr Kipple sent me.”

“Well, we are very busy,” said Smith. “You can’t expect to just walk in and get an appointment before everyone else.”

Slightly bewildered, Podd glanced around at the empty waiting area. “But there’s nobody here.”

“What do you mean nobody here?” Smith threw open his appointment book and stabbed the empty page of today’s date with a meaty digit. “Fully booked, you see?”

Podd leaned closer to the pristine white page, marred only by a dusty fingerprint in one corner. “It’s empty,” he said, feeling the encounter slipping away from him.

“No, it isn’t,” Smith insisted. “It’s full.”

“This *is* the Symbolic Behaviour Emporium?” Podd inquired, now believing he’d wandered into some dubious establishment.

“The very same.”

And like a mantra against evil demons, Podd announced again, “Mr Kipple sent me.”

Then the salesman made what Podd could only assume was the rantings of a madman.

“Mr Kipple is a purple avocado,” said Smith, smiling and pointing to something above his own head.

“Is he really?” Podd began backing away gradually. “Well, you learn something new every day.”

“He spans his wife daily with a celery stick,” said Smith.

“Well, I never,” said Podd, extending a hand backward feeling for the door handle. The salesman obviously had some kind of food fixation. He could imagine the next day’s headlines. Augustus Podd found dead, beaten to death with a cucumber. Still the man maintained his manic smile and his frantic gesticulating at the ceiling. Then Podd noticed the device. Fixed to the wall above Smith’s head was the DUPE 2000. But more importantly, it was silent. In the face of these outrageous statements the device remained resolutely unresponsive. Podd relaxed his outstretched arm. He approached the desk once more and said, “Mr Kipple is indeed a purple avocado.”

The device exploded with a crescendo of chimes and bells as all the dials went off the scale.

“Mr Kipple phoned ahead,” said Smith. “Said to expect you and to give you a demonstration.”

“How did you do it?” asked Podd, impressed.

“You know how the DUPE 2000 works,” Smith began, “It monitors your natural physiological responses. Blush response, pupil dilation, skin temperature, heart rate, sweat response, voice tone variations and many other tell tale signs of insincerity and dishonesty. Our product can mask all of these effects.”

“How does it work?” asked Podd, eagerly.

“We inject you with specialised nanobots,” Smith explained. “Whenever you have a reaction during a sales pitch, the nanobots block your natural reaction and create the opposite physical response. So, if your heart rate threatens to increase, the nanobots slow it down. If your vocal tones seem to waver, the nanobots make you sound confident.”

“Will it hurt?” asked Podd.

“Only your customers’ pockets,” said Smith, winking conspiratorially. He lifted the hatch in the counter and beckoned Podd through to the back of the shop. Podd followed and hesitated when he saw the strange device awaiting him. It was a chair surrounded by a web of wires and tubes and syringes that he eyed with some concern.

“Have a seat,” said Smith, taking a long truncheon-like device out of a holster fitted to the chair.

“What’s that?” asked Podd.

“Anal probe,” said Smith.

Podd made a quick mental calculation and was ten steps towards the exit when Smith shouted him back.

“There is no way you’re sticking that up my arse,” said Podd.

The salesman frowned. “Why would I want to do that?”

“You said it was an anal probe.”

Smith laughed. “I said it was a NAL probe. NAL stands for Neural Accentuator Link. It activates the nanoprobes to your unique brainwave pattern.”

Podd returned to his seat and Smith ran the truncheon over his head. That finished, the various tubes all moved in closer until several of the syringes were about a centimetre from his skin. Then Podd felt a light stinging sensation as the syringes punctured his skin and injected him.

“All done,” said Smith.

All Podd could feel was a slightly warm sensation in his skin. “Is that it? Don’t I need to lie down?”

“No, it’s perfectly safe,” Smith told him.

“And this counters all those emotions that will stop me making a sale?” asked Podd.

“Absolutely. It will counter insincerity, cover up feelings of desperation to make the sale and mask any untruths or exaggerations you make. There are a few emotions it doesn’t affect which are listed in the brochure but none of those have anything to do with making that sale.”

Podd gratefully paid the bill and once more found himself in an air taxi going back to his office. He didn’t feel any different, in fact he felt quite exhilarated. He once more packed up his samples and headed out to his district.

He knocked on the first door he came to and unlike his first visit, this door was flung open wide revealing a woman who resembled a member of the Russian weight lifting team, feet apart, hands on her hips and a challenging, “Vell vot do you vont?” thrust from her puffy lips.

Podd peered around the woman, which wasn’t easy as he considered the gravity exerted by her body was bending light rays. He saw on the wall the infamous DUPE 2000 and he took a deep breath and launched into his sales pitch.

“Good morning, ma’am. What would you pay for an extra hour a day? That’s seven hours a week, approximately three hundred and...”

Thirty minutes later, Podd was flushed with success as the woman, who had consequently introduced herself as Inga, had signed on the dotted line. He had lied and exaggerated like a veteran and not so much as a squeak had come from the DUPE 2000. His heart rate never climbed above 70, his face felt cool and even his voice sounded deeper whenever he lied, unlike his normal shrill.

He deposited the Super Sux Deluxe Turbo 5000 in all its chrome and black polycarbonite glory on the carpet and accepted the cheque and agreement and wished the woman a good day.

He almost made it.

He actually had one foot nearly out the door when the bells went off. And he reckoned he could have got away if it had been just a normal housewife. But Inga had him by the collar and yanked him back into the house. He glanced dejectedly at the DUPE 2000 but it was silent. The sirens were coming from another device.

“What’s that?” he asked, shakily, as Inga retrieved the cheque and agreement and reduced them to confetti in a manner that led Podd to believe a stack of telephone directories would present no great challenge to this woman.

“Zat eez zee GT 3000,” said Inga.

Podd groaned. “What does it detect?”

Inga held him suspended, his feet kicking at thin air. “Guilt.”

It was just no good, thought Podd. It was like life. Newton had got it right. For every action there would always be an equal and opposite reaction. He felt like an Olympic hurdler who had negotiated all the barriers and with the tape in his sights had tripped over his own laces. He could lie and cheat his way to a sale but he couldn’t stop his feelings of guilt for conning some poor gullible housewife out of her money for what was nothing more than a worthless piece of household tech.

Inga then picked up one of the vacuum cleaner attachments and a strange look passed over her face. “Let’s see how multifunctional zees attachments really are,” she said, cryptically.

When Podd came to, the face of a pretty nurse swam into view. She smiled warmly and he allowed himself a little fantasy of this angel tenderly returning him to full health, falling in love with him, marrying him and giving birth to two beautiful children.

The fantasy was shattered as Podd became abruptly aware of an uncomfortable feeling in his lower abdomen. There was a resounding pop and the nurse was suddenly tying a knot in a clear plastic bag and explaining, “Just impacted faeces, doctor.”

In that moment, Podd knew that even given an infinity of universes, there was not one in which a long-term relationship begins with the words 'just impacted faeces, doctor.'"

"Just a little shit," the nurse explained to Podd, dangling the bag of excrement from one finger.

"I'm sorry, Mr Podd," the doctor seemed to be telling him as he held up a plastic bag of his own containing something else, the harsh hospital lights illuminating the silver sparkle of chrome. "It appears you had the feline flea fastidiator attachment to the Super Sux Deluxe Turbo 5000 inserted into your rectum. Its corrugated nature would have ordinarily been a challenge in its removal but it was made doubly difficult as it was introduced sideways."

Podd was disconcerted by the use of the word introduced since it seemed so genteel a term, almost as if calling cards had been exchanged, for what was an incident of violent sexual assault.

The doctor continued, "You may take some small comfort, Mr Podd, from the knowledge that you're not the first gentleman we have seen who has *entertained* the Super Sux Deluxe Turbo 5000. Although, of course, most treat it in a rather more proactive fashion, if you get my drift."

"So how long will I be in here for, doctor?" asked Podd.

"A day or two should see you right," said the doctor, "and we have a small surprise for you. A friend of yours is in the next bed and will keep you company."

The doctor pulled the screen away to reveal the burly Arkansan gentleman.

"Well hell, if it ain't, Mr Podd," said Colrouge. "I knew you had it in you, boy, yes siree. Well you did, didn't you? Well and truly *in* you."

Colrouge pulled the covers from his own bed to reveal the Super Sux Deluxe Turbo 5000 attached firmly to his groinal area. "She's a little hussy, ain't she? Hell, once she gets a hold of you she sure don' let go."

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Partial material contributed by Michael P Cope