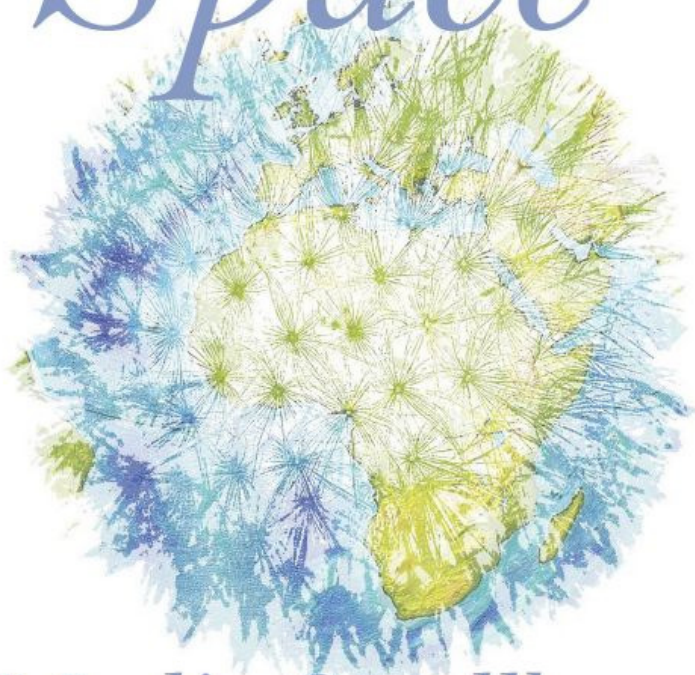


Earth *in* *Space*



Merlin Smallbone

Earth *in* Space

What's the logic behind a 'lifeboat Earth' space colony where the modules appear to have very little genuine purpose and the module captains are all pretty useless as leaders? Budget five thousand years to find a new Earth but in the meantime you've got to preserve culture as well as DNA. Follow two youngsters on an intense journey as they discover the answers and what's special about themselves. Watch the beginnings of a society built on the positive aspects of inner-conviction and self-image. See what matters about role models and group activities. Enjoy keen people realising their limitations and doing better.

Merlin Smallbone is a prolific multi-genre writer from Essex in England. Find out more at merlinsmallbone.shop



Preview

The full version of [Earth in Space](#) by Merlin Smallbone is available in the following formats.

- Paperback A5 316 pages
- PDF A5
- PDF A5 2-column (for limited width readers)

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As the book progresses you'll see the problems of creating a stable society and the rather wonderful way of solving them.

Earth in Space

Merlin Smallbone

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This edition

Again a book which started in my mind with a fairly simple theme then developed into a much more interesting work. Enjoy the story (does it have enough pace and confusion?) but then realise the 'of course they matter' ideas as they evolve.

I don't want you to think there's a message about men being better leaders than women.

This would probably be an ideal book for a book club to read because there are so lots of ideas to think about and debate as they emerge.

Adam prefaces his wisdom

I'm going back a while now. With Eve so close to death I may join her, and it's time to pass on the heart of our wisdom. So much has changed in sixty five years, it's difficult to explain how empty and crude the ship was back then. I hope to give you an idea of what made the two of us different from the others and what it was that expanded into the world you know today.

We were the second 'ship of a million' to be sent from Earth. It's a pretty certain bet that we'd left with less than a decade to spare.

With the message that 'experience arrives just after you need it', this document is only for those who have made their own mistakes, found their own cleverness and float on air while the others walk in tribes on the ground. This is reassurance from the only people who can give it to you – not your peers obviously – but your successful predecessors.

My life on Earth before the launch

Earth is as strange to me as it is to you, except I spent my first nineteen years in real gravity, real atmosphere with actual random weather and tides of fashion. I remember how it was important to follow 'fashion' and how it could erupt into violence. One month we had to stretch our allowances to singing lessons for Gregorian chants, the next jackets with stupid shoulder pads and the next being 'spiritual' in some religious way. I remember

trying to yodel the arabic of the Koran then getting detention at school for making-up yodels and riffs. We were young and didn't know what we were doing. We'd no idea how it happened. People told you what to do I suppose. Except it was more subtle and yet stronger. There was no alternative. An unhatched chick only knows the egg.

I blame grandma Polly. I don't really mean blame but she was the one who showed me to look behind everything. She made me practice the keyboard with what I now realise was the method of a genius. If I did well in showing-off my exercises she'd sit beside me and we'd fly away together to previously unimagined musical planets while I played my bit over and over and she added extras. Then I tried those bits. She must have told me technicalities but I only remember her smile as I concentrated a little harder. At that time I didn't know anybody else with grey hair and stretched face. At bed time she'd send me upstairs, then when I was in bed come and 'tell me a story'. Except she never read from a book. Instead every story would start with "When I was younger" and she'd make me decide what happened next. Then she'd ask why I'd made that choice. I think we went on sea cruises, airship flights, fought Victorian employers and mad scientists in white laboratories full of glass tubes of lustrous colours that made stained glass windows look dull. That took us to the time she renovated the stained glass windows of Winchester Cathedral. I remember after renovating it she carved the stone for the window... The first and only time. Then I realised that not everything she said was completely true. Except it was in a way. There was this memory of carving stone to make a cathedral that she was channelling to me. With her help I could feel exactly how the chisel in my hand chipped the stone. Chalk is relatively soft and a bit of kitchen cutlery that nobody wants can be used to hack at it. I cycled twenty miles to the Kentish North Downs to get some chalk to carve. So I had to make more cycle trips because to begin with I brought home some chalk blocks in my pannier bags

without any idea of what I might carve. I knew I should try but had no idea what I was aiming at. Youth with a nutty granny was a wonderful time of irresponsible, unplanned dedication.

After I left school, State-time for me was three years of chicken-in-the-egg. Not chick in the egg but chicken. I'd already been identified at school as very bright but wayward. A loner but keen to interact. Interact in my way if that makes sense. I didn't know this at the time but it's obvious now. I was the only person who could have missed it! I remember my first erotic kiss at the institute. At the first emergency evacuation rehearsal, Wendy with the green dress and dowdy spectacles held my hand. She was neutral and I was neutral... Except she smiled and I smiled and I wanted to be more than her escape-buddy. Less than 12 hours later, in the middle of the night, I couldn't sleep, Polly replied to my text with the two word message 'KISS HER'. I didn't sleep for the rest of the night either. Words are whopping great pebbles in the cement of love. Polishing a pebble doesn't make it smaller. That's what poets do I suppose. The next day we kissed and hugged and urges urged. Words were a red-eyed tangle of embarrassment to be forgotten.

Love is not what you expect. It can't be written into a catalogue. Wendy started crying a lot and then vanished with a letter to say she had ovarian cancer and I wasn't to try to find her as it would only cause more pain. It was only later – do you see the theme yet – that I wondered if Wendy was a puppet. It was only a lot later – it must be obvious now – that I realised only exceptional people were treated to puppets like Wendy. By then it was half a solar system too far to go back. Though I love Eve dearly, I'd throw her to the crocodiles for another ten minutes with Wendy.

Anyway, at the time I was being force-fed history, technology and social cohesion at the institute so there were more things in my life I had to deal with than a vanished Wendy. I realise now – spot the theme – that Wendy might have been a stooge. How I hate manipulators. Perhaps that was all they knew and they were doing their best in the only way they knew how. Polly pestered me to find musicians who enjoyed the insides of music. It was only then – spot the theme – I understood what she'd been teaching me... About more than music. I cycled to the North Downs on Midsummer's Night, all alone, with a blanket, sandwiches and an engagement ring for Wendy I'd made out of a paperclip. Being alone as the world below you is sleeping and the layers of valley mist turn from Damson to Peach makes you cower at the universe. There's no measure of smallness to express grass beneath the stars. There's no measure of wonder to express the flow of colour into the valley as the stars vanish from the sky. There's no conversation but chilly fingers and face. How shitty not to be able to share it with Wendy. I was small in the eyes of time and fate as well as the universe above me. Would anybody else understand? Shouldn't this be an exam or something? If you're not moved by this then stay on Earth as it crumples up into creased layers of dried mud. Marking would be a problem but you don't need a clock to decide who comes in the first three of a race. Clouds turning from silver, to pink to yellow to grey. This theatre didn't *mean* anything. It was just a natural phenomenon. Who else had seen this. How many thousands of years ago while digging for flints up here on the slopes? They didn't have monthly, or any, fashions then. The invisible birds would have twittered to them in the dawn, first experimentally and then in full chorus. Tens of thousands of years of downland plants prickling their feet. (I know my readers on the ship will probably never experience that magic of being a human on Earth, but then most were happy to stay in bed and ignore the spell-binding cloak of wonder illuminating tiny beings living for a tiny time on a tiny planet. They were happy with what they had – spot the pattern – but never had a Polly.)

At the beginning of each of my three years of State-time I went through the usual selection procedure to narrow down what I'd be when I became an independent and responsible adult. Polly suggested I should invent a job that had never been done before. This made sense to her and then me. For a start there's nobody to tell you exactly what to do. The recruiting for the second 'ship of a million' had closed but when I told the System that I wanted to be a 'Creative Librarian' I was suddenly required to visit a secret location for face to face personality assessment. I asked how I was supposed to find a secret location and was told that was an initiative test. Not too difficult after ten minutes thought... The System or the Ship wanted me so all I had to do was give a good reason for them just to tell me. I called the System back and explained that as the problem was artificial and I had a dozen things I needed to do, an unnecessary bit of some cock-eyed idea of puzzle-solving was a ridiculous waste of time. I kept a cool and persuasive voice. Apparently that was exactly the response they'd been hoping for. As I'd solved their little test within fifteen minutes I was invited to join the second ship straight away. "Woah! I need to know who my boss will be and have a chat first. I may be creative but I was brought up to be ruthlessly efficient. Ask whoever to call me. If you don't know then go up one level and find a mentor."

I spent the next two months collecting. I freeze-dried wine and beer yeasts, then hid them in a hollowed-out memory block. Packets of seeds were 'cooked' into flapjacks. Nuts went into 'fruit-cake'. With permission I asked to take three hermitically sealed 10kg canisters of sterilised peat, garden compost and soil from Uncle John's vegetable patch. Actually by switching around the canisters the sterilisation never happened although the paperwork was complete. Then I took presents for the girls. I was bound to meet girls wasn't I, so it would be a bit late to think of that when it was too late. I had a dozen silver rings made with semi-precious stones, I could invent the 'history' and symbolism

of each one later. Finally, with the last of my savings, I brought a diamond ring and the most exotic plant I could find for Aunt Polly as a thank-you. I made the effort to find out what the poshest vegetables were and presented Uncle Norman with a surprise box of seeds, bulbs and roots. I'd only be going-away once so best do the job well. I'd arranged for four others in the same cohort as me to meet at our home, have a party, then make the best get-away we could with a midnight departure. I gave us a group name 'Polly's pioneers'. There was music, drink, and tides of tears flooding the breakwaters of bravery we'd built.

Using the convoy system of waiting for another group and then all descending on the security screening station at once, I smuggled my contraband through. I never saw any of Polly's pioneers again. The next two months were spent acclimatising and training for the strange environment and society of the ship. Once I'd understood my boss's role I volunteered to deputise for him when it suited me. We didn't really share deep confidences but I made a point of being friendly and helpful. I started causing bizarre problems that only I could solve quickly. Obviously since problem solving was the object of the exercise. Undermine your boss by being helpful!

In my lowly role of intelligent-helper-with-potential I came up with a clever scheme. Suggest a 'plan-B' or at least prepare for the collateral damage if 'plan-A' failed. Being rebuffed in writing as 'negative' and when my plan was needed I wasn't only be in an 'I told you so' position but also having done my best to do the preventive procedures I was well on the way to promotion, or at least dumping on somebody else. Not that I wanted promotion at this early stage. Of course this was the mistake-making phase and I didn't want the certain blots on my account. I cherry-picked issues. Since I'd written my own job specification with a wide scope, but subject to lots of vague provisos to give me a way to

excuse myself, I was able to contribute without committing to the labours of others. I took on aspects of the roles of others that I fancied. If you make it difficult for them to perhaps 'deal with the HR paperwork' then your assistance is very welcome, soon indispensable and then all yours. We were evacuated from our module when it was 'our turn' to be tugged into space. It was strange watching the rusty metal of my new home being sent ahead into orbit on the monitors. As the tractor tugs were hooked up then energised there was anxious silence amongst the 'Ganymedes' as we'd become known. We had the module designation GMY. I'd invented and promoted the name. I suppose if the launch spun-out we'd miss our vocation, but for me now the module was my nest. The only place after my childhood home I'd ever be at home. The orange cubes took an hour to reach the orbital assembly site. Nervous chatter at the start, cheering as the module moved and then fidgeting as numerical displays on the screen raced up or counted down to the 'golden rivet'. Then the crew drifted-off for a shower and make the most of their last two weeks on Earth. I was determined to be the last to leave the launch view lounge as it was the best use of my time I could think of. When my work team got up to leave I declined despite their crude attempts to drag me with them. "I belong up there now. Every hour down here is a dirty delay for me." As soon as I was the last man left I moved to the centre of the front row of seats and stretched-out with hands clasped behind my head. I wasn't going to give anything away by fidgety body language. The screens in front of me showing the module being inched into the assembly grippers were suddenly turned-off. "Hey! Switch them on again." I stood up and faced where you'd expect a projectionist in a cinema. "I was watching that."

A loudspeaker voice said "Can you leave now Adam? We've got other jobs to do."

"How much of a job is leaving the monitors on? How much of a job is looking after me. I know where the fluids dispenser is."

I heard a microphone being muffled then vague conversation. Then after more microphone manipulation noises a different voice said "Would you like to watch from the master mixing suite Adam?"

"Is it quiet?"

"Mostly."

"You sound sensible. Look up the meanings of the word sensible. Come and sit here next to me. We've got things to talk about for ten minutes."

"Why? It's cosy up here."

"What part of the men who sat here fifteen minutes ago did you send into orbit. Do they know? Do you know? Let's experience it for real."

"Alright. You win."

"Im' not fighting you! Or are you a blind boxer who doesn't see what his punches do? Come down and see."

The screens were switched on and a rugged military man came in from the lower entrance. I stood up. I was ready to shake his hand but he only had a left arm. "Thank you for turning on the screens again sir. Let's sit and watch the last hope of human civilisation as it vomits after over-indulging on progress and profit."

"I'm Lieutenant Dennis Gunson."

"How can I help you sir?"

"Explain yourself. It will help you too."

I ignored the implied threat. "I have to understand everything before it's too late for that understanding to be useful. I'll meet women on the ship so I've brought some presents for them. Those

presents are up there now. Those presents are a bridge between an intelligent past and an unknown future. I have to understand what it means to see your future hoisted aloft without you, to have the next fortnight adrift. I'm sure the counselling will be orchestrated by HR for their own ends and harmony. That's fine for them. They say a captain is last to leave his ship. Who is first to board? How do I get up there now and be part of physically joining our module to the main structure?"

"You've explained yourself. I understand. I've never heard of such a request before. I'm not sure where to start."

"Are you married sir?"

"Yes."

"There was a best man at your wedding? And why?"

"Because Garry was my best mate."

"But what did he actually do? Get drunk with you at a stag party. Any mate could have done that. Keep a ring safe for a few minutes. Any mate could have done that. But it would have been bad luck and splinters if you didn't have a best man. I'm a Creative Librarian. It's my job to be on the spot when GMY is married to the ship. It's my job to carry the torch of understanding. I have to be present and be seen to be present and bless the union in an earthly way. That module is a home for 400 men but the ambition of a mission. Just like a marriage is about hope of ambition so that module carries the good wishes of billions of people who will watch it drift then vanish into space forever. I'll be there as best man to the marriage of GMY with the rest of the ship. How do I get up there today. Now."

I'd forged the permission of my boss, made sure I had no ties or outstanding appointments with dentists that could be used against me. With Gunson on my side and my own determination to get to the next blockage regardless of what my current

blockage thought, I became a temporary member of the previous module we were being bolted to. I introduced myself to the senior members of NYM (who immediately became 'Nymphs') as a liaison officer. Grateful for their temporary hospitality and keen to make friends. Apparently the ships architects considered the cellular system was sufficient for mechanical structure and social structure. It was obvious to those who wondered about strangers that the designers were hoping to use localised groups as their unit of social cohesion. I was the outsider who made friends with strangers against this. The Nymphs were all male like us Ganymedes, but I had my sights set on wider horizons.

I was the first man to recolonise GMY. It would be days before the rest of the Ganymedes arrived. As I stepped over the threshold of the airlock I immediately invited the seniors from NYM to join me on a tour of the empty module. Their curiosity swept them and I'm sure they never gave a thought to the implications for men from GMY nipping across to share with the Nymphs. I coaxed a Nymph to print a plaque on the airlock saying that Module Commander Robert Bates(NYM) had officially opened the airlock on 1st September 2251 accompanied by Temporary Acting Module Commander Adam Black(GMY). It had been a close-run thing before I took the shuttle from ground-camp, but I had box of ribbons, balloons and sparkly stickers delivered just in time labelled 'Fripperies – Perishable.' which did the trick. After the gala welcome I recovered and carefully repacked all the decorations. A week later it was my pleasure to welcome the real Module Commander(GMY) to his home for the rest of his life. Of course it wasn't just me, but the senior Nymphs who shook hands and wished the Ganymedes welcome. That way I could admit that I'd had quite a hand in organising things which perhaps I shouldn't have organised, but only as an assistant. I hoped my mob didn't know whether to trust me on that or not. Whatever they wondered I wanted them to know I was comfortable with a network of contacts well outside their comfort zone.

As we would be in assembly orbit for five more months I felt I should scout ahead to the next phase. Being a librarian it was relatively easy for me to hack into the ship's cultural strata. How weird that most of the outward-looking and question-answering work was done by bots.

2 Eve's wisdom

My wisdom is either for everyone or none. There's a paradox to my wisdom. My wisdom should be plain to everyone as it's just an illusion, and yet if it the secret was widely known the power of wisdom would fade faster than memories of Earth.

I hope I've made lives of many generations worth living until the time comes to blossom on a new earth surface. There's a sneaky plan I will reveal at the end which is stinkingly bad and beautifully good at the same time. Even the purest gold coin has two sides. Many sides. Some dark such as the slaves that die in the mines. Some bizarre such as why is a bit of metal so valued. Some fascinating such as why those particular designs. Some socio-scientific such as why that particular value at that particular time, issued by what authority? And many other sides.

My role on the Ship turned out to be the opposite. Take a million uncertain people and a million unknowns and reduce them to something valuable to be proud to hold and even more difficult – to pass on to the next generation without being corroded.

My life on Earth before the launch

I was born into an already large family who had one mission. To 'colonise space'. I was sixth out of seven children and I had more cousins than fingers. Our family was practically a space-freak sect on its own! Grandad Jake and granny Jilly (really Gunhild as I found out later) started it all. My generation were the sons and daughters of politicians, scientists and financiers who worked together at one thing. Getting human colonies into space so that if the Earth was hit by some catastrophe the human race wouldn't be extinguished in a fireball, fighting or flooded.

I remember Grandpa Jake and Granny Jilly. His voice was like the rustle of angry cornflakes. His face was a mask of whiskers and crinkles behind which his eyes betrayed a tiger's mind watching you from behind jungle camouflage. He was so pleased to see anybody that you, or more particularly I, couldn't help but be attracted just because he was who he was. I remember his last words to me. "You look after them while Jilly and me will be on our own round spaceship. You've got a lot to learn and we've got a lot of people to teach." Jilly was never still. She was always doing something except when Grandpa told her to stop and think. Otherwise there was this or that to do. She was often the last to sit down to meals and first to get up and press-on with doing something even if only carrying plates or checking the progress of what was in the oven. One day granny asked me to lay the table but I didn't know how. Once she showed me where the cutlery was kept and supervised me at the first place then from that moment it was my job to be ready to lay the table. I waited ready for the nod. Granny would give me a nod or a hand gesture and I was unleashed and running to do the best job I could of laying the table. When I'd got the basics, confident and proud of my achievement, extras were added such as napkins, soup spoons, side plates, collecting and checking the cruets. I was happy to serve when asked and made sure I was within close asking distance when the time came. People said how nicely I'd laid out the table. Other sisters had to pay attention to the cooking which was different each time but I had a simple role where people can conform to the same mechanical pattern.

We were mostly home-schooled, but we all had a year at school at 12 to show us how much more advanced we were than others of our age. The lessons were really about mixing with others and encouraging them or ignoring them. We didn't know anything except being competitive, so this co-operative year was strange. Naturally we had to learn strange subjects for unspecified reasons. Asking why and why again gave me a reputation as a

trouble-maker. It became a war of 'you give me a good reason and I'll take some notice'. I spent my time in detention reading what I wanted and refusing to do the chores set by the teacher. When they threatened to expel me I shrugged and said it would be a triumph of my intelligence over their rigidity. Father lectured me on how I must learn to conform for the rest of the year. I needed to understand how rigidity of thought was developed first hand so that I would be able to teach later perhaps. So I did my class work and especially homework with additional comments and observations. By the end of the year I laid traps to show-off my extra knowledge. Why did we have to salute The Stars And Stripes? led to a series of quotes and then debate. Of course I'd practised the debate at home so had all my arguments and materials ready. We'd have various levels of debating competition at least once a week. Sometimes it would be the extended family, or something special such as having to write our speeches out and give them to somebody to read and then do all the follow-up arguments the same way. Or be given just two minutes to prepare, or given just ninety seconds, or being cut-off after a repetition or hesitation. Although these were supposed to be games we couldn't help getting involved in striving to do better. I began to enjoy debating any subject given to me in class with only a few minutes notice and no way to research. Of course I could make-up facts because the others assumed when I spoke authoritatively I knew what I was talking about. Little did they know! Uncle Richard told me a trick, and that was to develop some repetition. My best catch-phrases was "Ten percent is better than five percent " or some similar figures being 'better'. Then I came across "I'll leave you to work that out for yourselves." as if there was no possible doubt about the conclusion as the question was so simple! They lapped it up, satisfied somebody else was cooking their ideas into ready meals.

Two things happened after our year of school. We could watch television as much as we liked and we were sent to live with other

families for three-month spells. It was understood that we would help the family however they asked. The comfortable routine of laying the table was replaced with all sorts of chores and unusual activities. Baby-sitting, shopping without debate, taking messages on the phone, helping with bookkeeping, mending clothes, preparing complete meals, washing windows, clearing snow, picking and bottling fruit and so on. It was my place to learn a hundred and one different skills and not to argue. This was strange with the television showing me lifestyles, films and adverts. Were people really supposed to take adverts seriously? Presumably so or the advertisers wouldn't do it. Weird! I tried advertising toenail clippings and cat hair for fun. It was strange how if you had the right voice people would pay attention as if hypnotised. I'm sure I really could have sold toenail scissors and a box to put the clippings in as well. In general I took everything on the TV as a self-parody. Especially the news. News for dumb people I called it. A man and woman at a desk telling you in a formulaic way what they'd managed to get pictures of. A 'feature' was the same but prefaced with a question to introduce it and a promise to follow up if anything interesting happened. When someone asked me what I'd done today I'd play the parts of the puppets at the studio desk, the reporter, myself being interviewed making stupid answers and some worthy commentator. It got out of hand when I made a socmed post and the local TV station picked-up on it and wanted to interview me.

I refused but turned-up at their studios very early one morning asking to see the owner with an alternative format for news that he might like to try for a day. After a quick 'don't patronise me' he listened. My winning argument was that the novelty would last for a few days and that would be long enough for the others in the industry to at least recognise the innovation. Good publicity amongst peers and the advertisers. Being talked about rather than just another clone. I was 15, wore glasses and my mother's clothes. They couldn't understand that once I knew the story I could speak without having to read anything except key names

from a card I'd prepared. How simple was that! I had to spend a day learning about sport and the geographical details of downtown Recargo but so what? The station wanted me to get 'dolled-up' but I refused. Yes a nice dress and a hairdo would be good but fancy stuff was a distraction. When the owner said I must wear high heels I pointed out that very few of his viewers would be wearing high heels. Many would be in mules or barefoot in the bedroom. I was here to murder the stereotype not be tainted by it. We tried a few dry runs then the Monday morning launch came. What the station didn't know was I was determined to do all the way from breakfast through to six pm news.

My prepared catch-phrases were visual. I'd rattle-off the key points using my fingers to tick them off. The cue for the weather was a piece of plastic seaweed in a plastic food box. Of course "Let's have a look at the seaweed" is far more interesting than "And now over to big-titted, short-skirted Maria squirming in front of graphics for morons." My weather was presented by amateur weather watchers or people for whom the weather was important. Farmers, sailors, or storm-chasers. The 6:30 weather became a feature that people watched because they'd no idea who or how it was going to be presented. In the age of air-conditioning and four-wheeled umbrellas the weather is a curiosity more like a religious ritual than a necessity. That part worked. The 'one-o'clock' was always outside at what we thought was the most interesting and practical location for the main news story. Even if a man had landed on the moon we'd be at a high school getting original opinions. (It soon became known through socmed that myself or my assistant, cousin Kylie, would ask witnesses describing something to be a bit more original than 'it was carnage'. The first one to say 'it was like a bomb going off' was asked if they'd been close to a real bomb going off and if not how did they know what it was like? Bit by bit we coaxed slightly more original vox-pop reactions and then took the discussion into human contexts that viewers could understand. "Instead of it was

shocking." we'd retry for "I'd seen him in the neighbourhood a few times. He seemed like a nice guy." to be followed-up with "So an ordinary man in an ordinary neighbourhood." We knew we weren't a screen with news but trying to tickle bored and zoned-out people with human emotions beyond screaming-shock-horror that had lost it's edge decades ago. If people can watch and watch and watch again planes murdering thousands of people in the Twin Towers of the Trade Centre then they're desensitised. It was a challenge and hard work. The breakfast news was deliberately a real office desk with any reporter reading from a handful of paper. There was coffee and changeovers as supposedly new news came in. But we'd always have follow-ups from the previous days or weeks. Farmers or sailors who could spend a minute explaining what actually happened were some real human interest. I insisted the captions scrolling across the bottom of the screen and captions splurged across the back-screens were deleted. The back screens were always stills and not video. When everyone objected to the scrolling captions being killed I explained we weren't seriously in the news for people who needed news business but rather entertainment and space-filling. It was like 'streamlines' on cars which were for show. Also we should remember that most of the audience were at the Fisher-Price stage of intellectual development. One thing at a time was enough for them and if they found it boring then they could find alternative kindergarten-news while we crept up-market and so pulled-in the higher-class of advertising. After the breakfast 'you've caught us in our dressing gown' and lunch time 'we're on the spot – which is a spot like your spot really', the evening news was whatever we made it. We took it to rehearsal stages where the first night of some show was about to begin. We took it to the waterworks, a fishing lake, a factory that had just got an important order for electronic components, an architects that had just won an award and so on. Once the pattern became clear then we had no shortage of invitations. This was the synthetic news elements stripped of the 'essentials' that we'd proved weren't essential and channelled through a real world environment. We

didn't do hospitals and funeral parlours but we soon started to push the places we could scheme a unique experience from. A car crusher was a good start but the one I was proudest of (but was very scary at the time) was up a thousand foot television mast. It took some planning and experimentation but then not many news programs are syndicated and repeated. The real electricity was the last hundred foot hand over hand with just spigots to hold onto and stand on to the top. I was too scared to be scared. Of course there was a camera a few yards below and one on my helmet, but being on the TV doesn't make you immortal. I'd prepared most of my 'and here is the news' perched on the top, but in the event I said "I'm far too scared to read the headlines." and they dealt with it in the studio. The next day, back in the studio, I admitted to utter terror and how it was only the mechanical instructions of the expert mast-maintenance climber that kept me moving. 'Don't do it kids' was a private, but soon well-known phrase. A month later, now our news was covering a much wider area, I was comfortably prone on my back in a rather muddy natural cave speaking to the camera.

You couldn't make up the pressure to join the consumer society. Have a bucket of our make-up. Wear our shoes for sponsorship with three zeroes on! I didn't have time for all that. I knew that boyfriends were available in droves if I wanted but I didn't have time for that. Have some invitations to our party, club, restaurant or show. I chose a quiet day to point out those who offered me sponsorship without advertising on the station. That sent shards of ice through the 'eco-system'. The obvious question to ask a cosmetics promoter is 'do I look ugly?'... Then follow with "Then why do I need your ludicrously overpriced cosmetics. Let's look at the ingredients of this pouch... Total cost say 50 cents if that. Retail price \$7.50. The only people who need your overpriced spells are those with such low esteem they should get some girlfriends and then hit the town. Do you really think men care about the brand of your coloured fats?"

As I said to Andrew, the now rather more chic station owner "Of course we can criticise the advertisers. Not all of them but a few to show the rest we have a dragon ready to burn them to cinders and that's exactly what our viewers want. I haven't started on the big politicians yet but when I do I expect respect and if they can't face it then they'll get rumbled. Not because of their politics but their personality. I might challenge them to a debate up a television mast."

He said "We get hundreds of thousands of advertising from political parties."

"So? You're getting hundreds of thousands more advertising now than you were. You're a take-over target. Don't pretend I'm not worth a double salary. Now I've proved my point I could walk out at any moment and then where would you be?"

"Er You've done well Eve. Spectacularly well, but big networks are not flexible like us. They have to have months of viewer opinion panels before they break broadcasting rules cast in stone."

"I'll be the judge. However let's not be enemies. I'm beginning to get bored so can you find a replacement in say four weeks. I'll give them a week's coaching which takes it to five weeks. Is that a fair offer Andrew?"

Then he was horrible. He reached out with both hands and drew me towards him. "You're like a daughter to me Eve. So precious...." I didn't wait for the rest of his spurious fatherly groping. An experimental slap on his cheek seemed about right. It didn't hurt me much but shocked him. I left the station premises within ten minutes and never returned.

By now I knew all the local journalists and how gossipy news like this was unlikely to be secret for long. So I wrote a simple four sentence statement and sent it to the usual channels and also some of our sources. "I've resigned due to groping by Andrew.

Not sure what next but no interview. Thanks for your six months of camaraderie. The world might be a better place as a result."

I was a valuable personality. My phone never stopped ringing asking me to appear or advertise. I didn't know what I wanted to do... Except appear on a sofa or advertise nipple-rub wasn't on my list. (I secretly took some of Aunt Mary's goose-fat and rubbed it on my nipples, but it made me feel cheap rather than empowered. Cousin Hester persuaded me to have a facial make-over but the photos and images in the mirror were a parody of the real me.) As a joke I said to one hopeful advertiser that I wanted arm-tights for when a girl wanted bare arms but it was cold outside. Even though when they came back a month later I told them it was a joke they pressed-on and went bankrupt shortly after. I kept my free samples in their packets for archeological purposes.

Mother, father and myself went to see Uncle Jake. Just him. This was business. He was nice in his scary way. Now I'd interviewed a few hundred people I instantly recognised the danger from his power to turn mother and father into statues. This was a meeting of nearly equals!

He said. "You were given opportunities and you abused them... wonderfully! Come here granddaughter and give me a kiss. You've made an old man very happy." I had to obey. I had to obey to find out why. "You showed people how to communicate without compromises. I doubt if one in a hundred thousand could do that. Probably one in a million."

"No I didn't grandpa. I entertained them differently. It was a perverse challenge not a philosophy."

"I think you knew all your viewers had dormant brain-cells you might awake."

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Merlin lives in Witham, Essex and writes when he's not programming computers. He is what they call a character, but whether it's a ! or ? remains a mystery. Most of his leading characters are strong and positive, although of course the interesting bits are their weaknesses and doubts. A glance at the catalogue shows a wide range of settings. Typically he writes interesting characters in interesting situations so that 'stuff happens' but there will be ideas and issues that hover in full view yet in the background until spotlighted, when for many readers that's the moment they realise they've been reading a proper book not just a story.