Sleepless in bed, a lightly snoring Marjorie beside him, Roger stared at the ceiling. Determined that the promised second visit would not happen, he kept his attention focussed, trying to stay alert, not drift into sleep. He did not want to see — to know, to feel — anymore.

“Get a grip, man,” he whispered to himself.

The strange events of earlier worried him deeply. As hard as he tried, he could not rationalise his experience. It couldn’t happen, but it had. His mind jangled with confusions and queries about nuclear policy that had wormed unbidden into his brain over a restless and anxious afternoon and evening.
Mentally, he laughed nervously at himself and his newfound doubts. Irrational? Bored with the featureless ceiling, he rolled on to his side and focussed instead on the antique alarm clock on the bedside table: tick, tock, tick…

A loud chime from the grandfather clock in the hall downstairs caused Roger to sit bolt upright. It wasn’t just the sudden noise — that clock hadn’t worked for years! Not since his father died. Now it chimed again and again. Roger checked on Marjorie. Although she was a notoriously light sleeper, his wife remained sound asleep. On the twelfth chime of the grandfather clock, the bedroom door flung itself open. Intense light flooded in, backlighting a figure framed in the doorway.

“Oh my Lord!” cried Roger.

“Afraid not, old chap. It’s just me, your second visitor. Group Captain Lionel Mandrake,¹ at your service.” The figure that

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¹ A hapless character (played by Peter Sellers) in Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying
approached the bedside was a stocky man wearing a moth-eaten and faded military uniform. His top lip was blighted rather than adorned by a bushy moustache, greying to match the hair that showed beneath his RAF officer’s cap.

“I was just like you once,” Mandrake confided, almost cheerily, “until life took an unexpected turn. Since then, my days have been spent digging, uncovering, and demanding the democratic right to know the truth about our beloved old nuclear deterrent. We love that old thing, because we’re trained to love it. But we aren’t locked in, old chap. There is another perspective, another world. Come now, it’s time, we must be going.”

“Time for what?” Roger pleaded, finding himself out of bed and on his feet as Mandrake took his arm and led him towards the

—and Love the Bomb, Stanley Kubrick’s 1964 satire. Mandrake makes a valiant but ultimately vain attempt to avert the nuclear apocalypse that is the film’s tragi-comic climax.
door from which stark white light continued to stream.

“A fine time for questions,” Mandrake chuckled, “especially when you’ve asked so few about our beloved old deterrent, eh?”

“I demand,” Roger blustered, shielding his eyes from the light with his arm…

“You’ll see,” Mandrake reassured him. “Time to interrogate some knowledge that could shift the nature of your ‘Maingate’ decision going on in Parliament. You’ve not wanted to acknowledge it. These issues and arguments have been crowded out, unheard, made invisible over the years. It’s time to listen to them now, though. For the sake of dear old Blighty! There is a choice, we don’t have to be locked in. Now, please hurry along, it’s definitely time!”

“For what?!” Roger demanded as Mandrake half dragged him through the door. Then, the crescendo of a very familiar signature tune and the hubbub of a large crowd hit him in the chest like a physical blow. A sonorous male voice:
“Ladies and gentleman, it’s time for... *Just Answer Me That!*”

Thunderous applause.

Roger found himself sitting on a swivel chair on the compact stage of a TV studio. An audience of a hundred or so people continued clapping. A sense of relief washed over him, as Roger realised he wasn’t in his pyjamas. He wore his best navy pinstripe suit, old school tie, and his favourite Union Jack socks. He immediately reached for his breast pocket and pulled out his monogrammed RCB handkerchief, dabbing away the cold sweat that had gathered on his brow. His heart beat slowed and his breathing calmed. However odd the entrance, this was Roger’s terrain, his home ground. He was in his element. As the applause began to peter out, he chuckled to himself at the sight of the man who faced him across an oak veneer desk: Jeremy Dimble.

“Welcome to this one-off special of *Just Answer Me That!*” Dimble intoned smoothly. “As the up-and-coming Maingate vote on
Trident replacement looms, we are joined by the Right Honourable Roger C. Bezeeneos, a long-standing member of the Parliamentary Committee on Defence and Security, with special expertise on the UK’s nuclear deterrent. We’re going to discuss Trident replacement, of course, and perhaps the UK’s policy of Mutually Assured Destruction, which generally get less of an airing. We have many questions from the floor, but let me start the ball rolling. Roger, this is a 20th-century military technology. Why on earth does 21st century Britain need nuclear weapons?”

Roger settled comfortably into his chair, laced his fingers together over his chest. He’d dealt with this one oh-so-many times.

“Well, first of all thanks for having me, Jeremy, and good evening to all your viewers at home and, of course, the audience here.”

Roger slipped easily into his stride, almost forgetting the bizarre circumstances that had transported him to the studio. He always felt at ease around Jeremy, anyway. He recalled their riotous student days in the restaurants.
and bars of Oxford with “the club” when they were up at University.

“Let me be completely clear,” he began, “the United Kingdom is fully committed to the principle of multilateral disarmament. The world would be a better place without nuclear weapons. However — and it’s a big however — we have to face up to the reality of the global situation. We have a number of genuine threats coming from hostile countries around the world, which means that maintaining a credible nuclear deterrent is essential to ensure the safety of our nation in the 21st century. There is great uncertainty and it would not be in our security interests to unilaterally disarm.”

“Right, so it’s still essential for the safety of the UK?”

“Increasingly so, I believe.”

“We have a question from the audience on this point.”

A studio technician wearing a headset and porting a microphone on a boom hurriedly moved to a woman sitting in the midst of the audience. Roger recognised her im-
mediately as that irritating MP from that little party that refused to completely disappear. Her constituency was that ridiculous South-coast bubble. This was the woman whom, very recently, the PM had shot down for a lack of patriotism. Though he remembered it all too well, Roger never deigned to acknowledge the MP by name.

“How is it essential for the UK’s survival,” she demanded now, “when there are over one hundred and eighty countries without nuclear weapons? Does that mean those

2 Roger’s nemesis is modelled on Caroline Lucas, Green Party MP for Brighton Pavilion, who has consistently opposed Trident renewal. Caroline Lucas lent her support to one aspect of our project, when we staged a Mutually Assured Distraction cabaret in Brighton. She commented: “My daily experience is of Parliament, where I have a totally different reality as my starting point compared with most MPs for whom Trident as a deterrent is a fundamental given. So I really like the way the MAD cabaret turns things on its head and reveals what nonsense nuclear weapons are as a security strategy. It’s a wonderfully creative, entertaining and unique way to talk about weapons of mass destruction — and also desperately needed!”
countries are not safe? By the logic of nuclear weapons ensuring security, should every country obtain nuclear weapons in order to be safe?”

“Oh come on, no.” Roger smiled, feeling superior but very conscious of not wanting to come across as patronising. These days that simply wouldn’t do. “I mean, we’re not starting from a blank slate here, we are where we are. Britain is in a position of global power, and it is up to the global powers to work together to fulfil pledges to the non-proliferation treaty, while being realistic about the serious national security threats that we face. The fine people of the British military are quite certain about that.”

“Well,” Jeremy Dimble said with a smile on his face, “it’s interesting you should mention that, Roger, because we are joined in the front row by Major General Patrick Cordingley, who led British forces in the first Gulf War, and Field Marshal Lord Bramall, former head of the armed forces.”

As the technician moved to bring the microphone to them, Roger gave the uni-
formed, stately looking men the once-over. They were very plainly of good stock, he decided, made of the right stuff. He smiled at them, waiting to lap up the authoritative support for Trident and its replacement that they would surely lend.

“So, Trident is necessary for keeping us safe, Field Marshall?” Dimble asked.

“Nuclear weapons have shown themselves to be completely useless as a deterrent to the threats and scale of violence we currently face, or are likely to face, particularly international terrorism.”

Roger gasped. The Field Marshall looked extremely serious and sober, yet he must surely have had one too many single malts in the Victoria Services Club?

“And Major General,” Dimble prompted, “your thoughts?”

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“Strategic nuclear weapons have no military use. It would seem the government wishes to replace Trident simply to remain a nuclear power alongside the other four permanent members of the UN Security Council.”

Roger was stunned. This wasn’t how this debate was supposed to go. These two looked like thoroughly decent, reliable chaps, former top brass, pillars indeed of the establishment. How was it that he hadn’t heard their views before?

“So,” Dimble directed his hawk-like attention back to Roger, “the security risks of the 21st century are not necessarily solved by nuclear weapons, which have done nothing to protect us from the various attacks occurring on British soil in recent years?”

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“No, well, it is vital that Britain has a say at the top table regarding global security issues, but….”

For an instant that felt like an age, Roger peered into the audience in search of inspiration. Seated in the back row, he caught a grey glimpse of Mandrake. An enigmatic smile seemed to be twitching beneath his RAF moustache. And next to the Captain, Roger was almost sure, sat Sadako! Instantly, his thoughts returned to that family home in Japan. Compelled to continue his answer, Roger nevertheless felt his certitude turning to ash on his tongue.

“The problem is,” he resumed, “that people have no awareness of the jobs and economic benefits created by Trident. They speak as if that isn’t a concern.”

Roger had learned a great deal in politics, not least from Foreign Secretary Horris Gladson, another former member of “the club” in Oxford, about how to deal with awkward questions. Simply answer a different question!
“Opponents would like to see all that economic benefit, all of those highly skilled jobs gone,” he continued with recovering confidence. “But I care, and this government cares passionately about British jobs and skills.”

Roger’s staunch efforts were rewarded by a muted ripple of applause from a section of the audience.

“Right, so it’s about jobs?” Dimble inquired.

“Well, yes, that’s part of it because….”

“Another apposite point,” Dimble interrupted, raising a hand to forestall any further response from Roger, “because in our audience we have Economist Michael Burke, author of a recent report on employment and Trident. So Michael, Trident creates thousands of jobs and this is important for the UK?”

As the microphone technician located Michael Burke, Dimble gave out the phone number for viewers to phone their follow-up programme and awkwardly recited the Twitter address and hashtag: @JAMTomorrow #TridentMAD. Roger sighed to himself and
looked up to see Mandrake, his odd smile still flickering. He remembered what the Group Captain had said: These issues and arguments have been crowded out, unheard, made invisible over the years. Dragging his attention back to the debate, Roger tuned in to Michael Burke’s words.

“The extent of this job creation is tiny relative to the sums involved. In effect, they are among the most costly jobs in history. The money used could be spent on creating many more, better jobs. Two hundred and five billion pounds can be used far more effectively to create well-paid jobs than wasting it on replacing Trident.”

Roger reacted on autopilot, blurting out the Party-line:

“We don’t recognise those costs!”

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“Well then, Roger, could you tell us what the costs actually are?” Dimble demanded.
“The cost of Trident is between twenty-one and forty-nine billion pounds.”
“Yes, but those are the upfront costs, are they not?”
Roger was painfully reminded of Jeremy’s dogged debating society style back in their university days.
“Look, the cost of Trident replacement is between twenty-one and forty-nine billion pounds.”
“That’s already quite a range,” Dimble observed, “but what are the lifetime costs? Michael’s report puts the total cost at nearer two hundred billion pounds. Among the most expensive ventures in history, Roger?”
“The cost of Trident replacement is between twenty-one and forty-nine billion pounds.”
Another trick Roger had learned from Horris: repeat the same thing over and over until the nuisance goes away.
“But what are the lifetime costs?”
Damn, Dimble knew the same strategy! Roger again caught a glimpse of Mandrake, whose expression had taken a quizzical turn. Sadako, meanwhile, fixed her attention squarely on him, piercing him with her sad eyes. He felt his honed political reflexes withering. She could see that personal part of him, the father worried for his daughter….
Momentarily, he wondered what Amanda thought about Trident replacement. Why had they never discussed it? It was her future, after all.

“The MoD does not recognise those figures,” Roger recited wanly.

“Yes, you in the audience?” Dimble pointed towards a raised hand, directing the technician to the would-be speaker.

“I’d like to say, as a trade union member and a former member of the Barrow Alternative Employment Committee6 back in the

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6 BAEC was founded in 1983 by local trade unionists concerned about how dependent on nuclear weapons infrastructures the Borrow Shipyards had become. Assisted by the CND and the Bradford Peace Institute, they explored civil alternatives to
day, that there could be more useful, highly skilled jobs created by unlocking the money for Trident. What Trident did in Barrow was not create a booming economy, but an isolated one. Half the children in Barrow grow up in poverty, it’s one of the poorest wards in the country. There have always been alternative proposals for research and development science funding, for socially useful production, but they get ignored. Sustainable energy and the potential for renewables; developing an NHS that can deliver more of military work. In 1987 they published Oceans of Work, a report exploring diversification strategies for Barrow, towards new jobs oriented around civil engineering and marine-based renewable energy (wave power, offshore wind power, and tidal barriers). These alternatives were not taken seriously by management. Plans were revised in a report by the British American Security Information Council (BASIC) in a report that also details the activities of BAEC. See Steven Schofield, Ocean of Work: Arms Conversion Revisited (London: British American Security Information Council, 2007), https://www.basicint.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/oceans_o.pdf.
what people need; addressing the housing crisis.”

Another hand shot up and the microphone boom shifted to a woman who prefaced her contribution by declaring that she was a member of Scientists for Global Responsibility:

“AWE dominates the research and development landscape....”

“That’s the defence company contracted to the Ministry of Defence,” Dimble clarified, “formerly known as the Atomic Weapons Establishment.”

“British,” Roger interjected proudly, “based right in the heart of Berkshire, world leader in the field. They assemble the Trident warheads.”

“Spending on nuclear weapons far outstrips spending on renewable energies or other technologies in the UK,” the SGR member continued. “We have the best wind, wave, and tidal resources in Europe, so why is the UK lagging behind? Why isn’t UK manufacturing investing in the opportunity of renewables? Because AWE is heavily involved
in universities and dominates the direction of UK scientific research, that’s why not.”

Another audience member pitched in as the microphone technician struggled to keep up, reaching the speaker mid-sentence.

“What about funding thousands of new nurses? And hundreds of new hospitals?”

“Or three million new homes: housing the homeless?” Another voice raised, this time from the midst of the audience.

As the clamour grew, the sweating technician all but gave up trying to reach each new speaker with his microphone.

“Insulate all the old houses in Britain?”

“A hundred-percent renewable energy?”

Oh no, Roger groaned to himself, the tree-huggers, peaceniks, and lefties are out in numbers tonight. There ought to be a law.

The momentum of the dissent was building, as other visions of an alternative future Britain came raining in from the audience. As in the Nagasaki kitchen, inwardly Roger wavered in his certainty around nuclear deterrence. All these issues, concerns and alternatives had always been there. They were
just not parlance in debate among Westminster’s powerful. MPs from across the political spectrum had, Roger reluctantly conceded now, created a bubble of their own. They were insulated from democratic deliberation or any suggestion that the overall worldview that they shared, give or a take a public service or two, was not best for everyone.

“So…” Insistently, Dimble broke into the torrent of views being vociferously expressed by his audience, quieting them. “So, it would seem that Trident is not useful for defence and many more jobs could be supported through alternative spending on public goods. What exactly is your case now then, Roger?”

“Look, let me be clear one again,” even as his heart was less in his words than it had ever been, Roger became animated. “It’s about Britain! It’s about us as a nation; a nation that, as Lady Thatcher said, ‘is not just any other country.’”7 It’s about our place in

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7 The full quote by former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher runs: “Britain is not just another country.
the world! It’s about Britain having achieved a feat of engineering that only a very few countries have. I love Britain, a Britain we have built on industry, on hard work…. On the foundations of empire! We need nuclear deterrence to remain a key, independent power in the world!”

“It’s funny you should say that,” Dimble purred, “about independence.”

As Dimble turned to another scripted contribution from the audience, Roger recognised the speaker and knew what was coming.

“Britain’s ability to continue with nuclear weapons without us support becomes very

It has never been just another country. We would not have grown into an empire if we were just another European country […]. It was Britain that stood when everyone else surrendered and if Britain pulls out of that [nuclear] commitment, it is as if one of the pillars of the temple has collapsed.” Quoted in Ian Jack, “Trident: The British Question,” The Guardian, February 11, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/feb/11/trident-the-british-question.
slim to the point of invisibility,” pronounced Julian Lewis MP, a fellow Conservative, but one opposed to the government line.

“All these blasted facts and figures are rubbish!” an angry male voice abruptly shouted over Lewis’ words. “It’s just nonsense to distract us from the main event. Britain has this weapon so that, if our country is attacked, we can retaliate!”

This was the kind of guy Roger had always been grateful for in an audience, the Great British Patriot. And he was in full, voluminous red, white, and blue flow, his cheeks aflame:

“Would you be like those terrorist sympathisers who say they won’t push the button? That is just weakness! We are a great nation,

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a proud nation. We once led the world, and we will always punch above our weight!”

Some cheering from the audience was countered by a chorus of boos. Roger looked to Sadako, who had tears streaming down her cheeks, just as she had in that kitchen in Nagasaki in 1945. That kitchen that didn’t exist. What was Roger thinking? Meanwhile, Group Lionel Captain Mandrake was worrying his moustache and scowling at the latest speaker who had interrupted to express his conviction of the threat posed to Britain by Iran. Mandrake? Not only a ghost but a ghost of a fictional character! Roger felt distinctly giddy, discomfited on every front.

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9 When he was British prime minister, Harold Macmillan admitted: “It is partly a question of keeping up with the Joneses. Countries which have played a great role in history must retain their dignity. The UK does not want to be just a clown, or a satellite.” See BBC, “A Very British Deterrent,” 2019, https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/4hDvjPQfbDXh52JGKtmYHMr/five-surprising-ways-that-serious-men-talked-about-nuclear-weapons-in-the-1950s-and-60s.
“The real threat to our security,” the original bombastic patriot resumed, “is people who want to throw all that away! We need strong British politicians willing to defend our interests: politicians who are strong enough to push the button!”

“Yeah, we need a leader with that sort of courage!”

“People who would do what is takes for Britain!”

A cluster of angry men were yelling at the stage, at the rest of audience, even at the harassed technician.

“Get that out of my face!”

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Roger felt as if the room was closing in. He’d never hesitated on these questions before, but he couldn’t shake the spectre of the family in Japan, their lives touched by unimaginable horror and anguish. Befuddled, Roger pondered what he heard from Trident’s opponents in this debate. Was the deterrent really the extent of the ambition of Britain in the 21st century: holding on to a relic, trying to rekindle past glories, the nostalgia for empire. Must his nation’s future depend on retaining the power to incinerate millions at the flick of a switch?

“So,” Dimble said, turning to Roger, “would you push the button?”

Roger froze, like a rabbit caught in a car’s headlights. Scrolling in his mind’s eye was a covert nuclear history: Clement Attlee, the Mutual Defence Agreement, the secret memorandum of 1979, the cover-ups, the crashes, the radioactive leaks, the near misses, the half-truths, and the downright lies. He recognised no democracy in this litany. Did it really boil down to Britain’s place in the world being defined by the potential for
instantaneous mass murder? Now that this had crystallised for him as the key question, he sat transfixed as he heard Dimble repeat the question, his voice seeming to come from a long way off.

“Would you push the button?”

Roger’s vision blurred, the studio lights of *Just Answer Me That!* dimmed, and the audience melted away. Through a thickening fog, he heard the question once again:

“*Would you push the button, Roger?*”

“Let me be clear.…” Roger mumbled into the darkness. Feeling sweat roll down his temple, he reached for the monogrammed handkerchief in his breast pocket but all he plucked was duvet! He was back in bed, in his pyjamas with Marjorie sleeping soundly next to him!

“Bad dream?” Group Lionel Captain Mandrake enquired archly, standing at the foot of the bed. “Look, there is a choice, old chap. We’re not locked in. A different Britain, another future, is possible.”
And as Mandrake receded, merging into the darkness of the room, Roger just caught his parting words:

“You’ll see…. Little Boy will show you before this night is over.”

“Little Boy? Little Boy Blue…,” Roger mused even as he fell headlong into an exhausted sleep.

“Who?”