

Something in the Water

Liz Mulligan, Managing Director of Mercia Water, was suffering in the heat. The traffic was crawling; the nearby railway's tracks had warped, leading to all-round cancellations, and melting asphalt on the ring road had diverted all commuters to the motorway on which she had spent the last hour sweltering. To make matters worse, her car's touchscreen user interface had inexplicably died, taking with it her only means of turning on the air con.

And now, some junior engineer from Habney Edge was calling to advise her to come immediately to the plant.

"Look, I'm needed at the office to beg our competitors to keep water in our pipes, and I'm already running late," she said. "Is it really more urgent than that?"

"I think so." The engineer's voice crackled; maybe a transformer had overheated somewhere. She caught some troubling words like 'poison' and 'toxic' before the line cut out.

There would at least be something cool to drink in the staff room fridge at Habney Edge, she thought to herself. She'd forgotten to bring any liquids with her, and was parched.

Twenty minutes later, the great spiked gate of Mercia Water's fourth-largest water treatment site slid open to admit Liz and her baking car. She parked and paused only to grab her jacket which, though it only added to the heat, would at least hide her blouse's rather unprofessional sweat stains.

The engineer, one of the latest tranche of clueless graduates, was waiting nervously in a patch of shade.

"We've already switched off the supply," she said. She led Liz away from the soaring metal cylinders of the plant and towards a nondescript field, where the presence of the vast tank beneath it was only betrayed by an array of rust-speckled hatches. "We don't know what the contaminant is yet, but – well, smell for yourself."

The engineer opened up the nearest hatch and Liz peered within. Far below, the surface of the dark water faintly reflected the scorching sun above. There was a vague odour: something chemical, something sinister.

As Liz stood upright, she saw the broad-shouldered figure of the site's Chief Security Officer, Blake Weston, approaching them. She steeled herself; more senior staff undoubtedly meant a more serious problem.

"We've reviewed the CCTV reels," he said. "There's a loop of recorded footage replacing an hour-long section from last Monday. It looks like foul play."

"You're saying someone's deliberately contaminated the tank?" said Liz. She felt her rate of sweat production tick up another notch.

"Something funny's going on, that's for certain" said Blake. "I've got the team reviewing our IT systems now, looking for any signs of malicious activity. Such a shame we never got sign-off on those secondary surveillance systems we talked about."

"What about that thing?" The engineer pointed to a small camo-coloured contraption strapped to a tree at the field margin. It was a motion-sensitive camera trap, optimistically installed to record the site's possibly-imaginary badger population – a low-cost nod to the company's half-hearted environmental ambitions.

"Worth a try," shrugged Liz. Blake opened up the camera trap and skipped back through numerous videos of pigeons and rats until they reached the previous Monday. One video aligned exactly with when the security cameras had been deactivated. He pressed play; the video began with an electric van soundlessly backing through the site's open gates. Three masked figures disembarked, attacked a hatch with a pair of pneumatic bolt-cutters, and poured sack after sack of white pellets into the waiting water.

Liz exhaled. "Okay," she said. "I think we'd better assume that the substance is designed to harm human health. It's time to dust off the protocol. My job is to alert the Ministry for Water and Sewage and coordinate a sectoral response with them. Blake, your job is to collaborate with our Head of Comms to alert our staff, as well as shareholders and Godchester residents once we have a clear idea of what's happened."

"And mine?" chirped the young engineer.

Liz wiped her forehead. "Just... don't drink the water."

Only a few hours later – the traffic had miraculously dissipated after rush hour – Liz emerged from Westminster Station and walked the short-but-sizzling distance down Whitehall to the Cabinet Office. An aide took her up a flight of stairs, through an open-plan office full of harried civil servants, and into a large oak-panelled room where the Minister for Water and Sewage sat behind a hardwood desk.

“Well Liz, what a situation,” said the Minister.

“Hi Morgan,” Liz replied. “Good to see you in person, despite the circumstances. Sorry the video call didn’t work out – too many people working from home and too many overheating data centres, they told me.”

“I was expecting your CEO too. Where is he?”

“Stuck in Malta. He’s trying to get back but the planes can’t take off. Hot air means insufficient lift, or something.”

“Huh, that’s a new one. Look, let’s get to it. What’s the latest from your side?”

“Well, they’ve found the source of the system breach. Some security guard fell for a phishing scam. One of these new ones that uses AI to mimic voices on the phone – in this case, his boss, our Chief Security Officer. They asked nicely for the security login details, and the guard handed them over just like that.”

Morgan sighed. “And what are you doing about it?”

“We’ve fired him, of course.”

“And?”

“And the breach has been sealed, our IT team says. In terms of protecting consumers, the water was cut off immediately from the source, and our trucks are already at all the major mains access points to extract anything in the system. But it’s probable that a fair quantity is already downstream, soon to be in pipes within households. The water’s been moving pretty fast through the system given the demand. We’ve done what we can to get the message out to consumers – emails, texts, phone calls, all of that – but we don’t have the manpower to go door-to-door.”

“The water is contaminated with what, exactly?”

“Our chemists have identified it as a pesticide called Epsilox. It’s never been used in the UK so our standard water quality tests didn’t pick it up. But it’s possible that there were sufficient concentrations in the storage tank to present a serious health risk. It’s been linked to intestinal damage in other countries – hence why it’s not licensed here.”

“And your back-up water supplies?”

“That tank was the back-up. We’ve gone through all our extra extraction permits and the reservoirs are basically empty. I was negotiating with our northern competitors to reroute some of their supply before this issue came up. But our chemists think we can make it safe pretty quickly simply by rerouting it through our UV and activated carbon filters; the issue is how to guarantee its safety, given we’ll be developing the tests on the fly. But if we can fast-track test approval through the regulators, we can likely be back in service within five to seven days.”

“A week is a long time without water. And this is the supply that feeds the entirety of Godchester. Several hundred thousand people.” Morgan ran his hands through his threadbare hair. “Alright, well I suppose we’d better get going. My team will prepare a statement for the press, and I’ll contact the Ministry of Defence to mobilise the army to go knocking on doors. They’re already doing water deliveries down in the southeast – hopefully they have enough resources to send a bunch up here too. And we’ll strong-arm the other companies into sending water to your region as soon as possible. Blimey, what a mess you’ve got us in.”

Liz bridled. “Me? I wasn’t going to bring it up now, but it has to be said, if you’d only signed off last year’s request for funding –”

“Don’t start that again, Liz. Bailouts are just not going to be happening any more. If you want to survive, you need to just manage your company better. You’re providing an essential public service which needs to be watertight – pardon the phrasing.”

“That’s not fair. Our profits were at a record low last year, and it’s your government’s stance that’s been making our shareholders nervous. How can we reassure them when you’re obviously gutting our sector? Your decisions affect our bottom line, so don’t tell me it’s

all my fault. We've had to cut all sorts of things – maintenance, training, team-building exercises...”

“Spare me the excuses. You have a monopoly on something that consumers have to buy to live. How hard can it be?”

“It's more complicated than that. You know that.”

“Sorry, Liz. But this is bad. This is career-ending stuff, for both of us, if we don't handle this well.”

“We'll handle it. And if we don't – there's always Plan B.” She reached out and tentatively took his hand.

Liz's husband, a tall, stooped man called Ed, was eating a slapdash dinner when she got home. He was dressed in his old army uniform; even after a decade without use, it still fitted him well.

“They've called in the Reservists already?” Liz said.

“Yep,” Ed replied. He looked tired. “My next shift starts in half an hour.”

“You're doing house calls in the evening?”

“We've got an entire town to cover, and not many of us to do it,” said Ed. “Everyone's either down in Kent doing water deliveries there, or in Dover to manage the climate refugee influx. Plus, it's a lot cooler in the evenings. Fewer fainters, with any luck.”

“Sounds like it's already been a trying day.”

“Maybe not as bad as yours, facing the Minister himself. But it wasn't easy. Lots of people in Godchester hardly speak any English, it turns out. Big migrant communities. Trying to communicate with them was a challenge. Some even thought we were there to evict them.”

“Didn't you have interpreters?”

“Not enough of them, and there are dozens of different languages and dialects in any case. And we don't even have water to give these people yet – the hospital, schools and all the other big buildings got the first delivery, so there's nothing for everyday residents till

tomorrow. So telling them 'don't use the water' but not giving them any other option, especially when so many of them have come here to escape droughts in their own countries... well, I'm not sure our message got through."

"How awful," Liz said, half-listening. She had just received an odd text from Blake. "Can we put the news on?"

Ed looked at her strangely. "I thought we were talking about our days. The counsellor said we should try to do it every evening."

Liz grabbed the remote and turned on the TV.

"... responsibility for the poisoning has been claimed by Advance Guard, a far-right organisation who describe themselves as 'England's best hope'," the newsreader was saying. "The following video was posted online twenty minutes ago."

The camera cut to a grainy recording of a hooded figure, wearing a white mask painted with the red cross of the English flag. "England is suffering," said the figure, a voice modifier granting them an ominous gravelly tone. "Our government is opening the gates to hordes of so-called refugees to plunder our wealth and destroy our values. We were forced to take action. If the government does not change its ways and close our borders, we will be forced to do so again."

The TV cut out. Ed had pulled the cord.

"Just more far-right nutjobs," he said. "Why bother giving them airtime?"

"Because they could do it again," said Liz. "They're evidently capable."

"Capable of exploiting weaknesses, at least."

"What are you trying to say?"

Ed's face was expressionless. "I'd better get going," he said. "There's food and water in the fridge. Bottled water. Just in case."

The next morning, Liz elbowed her way through the crowd of jostling journalists and townspeople that filled Godchester's modest town square.

“Of course, there will be a full enquiry,” the Minister was saying in the centre of the crowd, security personnel enforcing a fragile distance between him and the reporters.

“Mercia Water’s failures will certainly be thoroughly investigated, and appropriate action taken. But for now, we are focusing on rectifying the problem. All residents of Godchester should not drink any water they may have in their pipes, nor use it for any other purpose, including bathing, housework, or watering plants. Water will be available for collection at your nearest hub, or the army will be making door-to-door deliveries for the less physically able.”

“When will the water be safe to drink again?” called a journalist.

“As you all know, the unprecedented drought is leading to unprecedented circumstances,” said the Minister. Sweat shone on his scalp. “For now, the recommendation is to flush all the water in your system, and normal service should resume within a few days. Rest assured, we are mobilising all available resources to solve the issue as soon as possible.”

“Is it true that some people have already been hospitalised due to drinking poisoned water?”

“Doctors are not able to diagnose exact causes of hospitalisation at this time.”

“And how will you protect the nation’s water supplies from future attacks? Will you meet Advance Guard’s demands?”

“We will certainly not be entertaining the demands of a terrorist organisation,” answered the Minister. “But we will be investing significant sums in our water infrastructure to ensure such an attack can never happen again.”

“More taxpayers’ money to support private businesses? How is this fair for citizens?”

The Minister paused. “We are considering introducing a joint public-private model for water infrastructure. Several think tanks are currently investigating possible solutions.”

There was a murmur from the journalists and a smattering of camera flashes. Liz raised an eyebrow; this had been just the disaster the government needed, never mind the collateral damage. Not that it mattered any more.

“And your own position, Minister? Will you resign?”

“I believe that I am best placed to rectify these vulnerabilities and to usher in a new model that will guarantee consumers’ safety into perpetuity,” said the Minister. “With that in mind, I will not be resigning. No further questions.”

The Minister and his staff retreated to his car. The journalists dispersed. Liz walked round the corner to a shaded alley and sent off a quick text. Within five minutes, Minister Morgan Crawley appeared, unaccompanied.

“I have the tickets,” said Liz breathlessly. “The next flight to the Azores – where we first met. And I’ve got rid of those documents and hard drives, just like you asked.”

“Fantastic. I can’t wait to be rid of this accursed country. And your husband?”

“He doesn’t know anything. He’ll be fine. Your family too?”

“I’ve barely had time to see them for years anyway. They won’t even notice the difference.”

The pair exchanged a brief kiss.

“The Azores still have drinking water, I presume?” asked Morgan with a wry grin.

“Don’t.”

The orange sun hung above them in the cloudless sky.