

The Honey Pot Man

A Short Story

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Jim's tics have been with him for as long as he can remember. It's not the spasms that bother him; it's the implications of their manifestation.

Trouble ahead. Life-changing trouble.

Always.

Episodes, he calls them.

At least he has fair warning.

The tics have saved him hundreds of times, evidenced by the Episode Log in which he faithfully tracks a life of near misses.

He's learned from the data too. The zone of interference lasts no more than a day. Tic minus twenty-four hours and counting.

Avoidance is usually the best defence, though preventative measures are possible now and then. A heating engineer located the fault in his gas boiler, and a call to a sweep ensured the chimney fire in the soot-heavy flue never caught.

As a teenager he even faked a seizure after holding the boarding passes for a trip to New York. His parents cancelled the holiday. The frustration twitching underneath their sympathy evaporated when news came in that Pan Am Flight 103 en route to JFK had exploded, killing the crew, 243 passengers, and eleven residents of nearby Lockerbie.

It's the roads that pose the greatest threat. SatNav is Jim's friend. A blink and a bark, and he reroutes.

Like that time in 2010 on the A47 when he passed the turnoff for the Broads. The junction's a bastard – little better than a gash in the central reservation. Seventeen hours after Jim's eyelids had gone into overdrive and an *arp* ripped from his throat, a car stalled as its driver attempted to cross the dual carriageway. The HGV braked, but time had run out for both of them.

Jim was nowhere near – he'd been sure to take the backroads that day.

He mostly drives the country lanes anyway; his customers live in the sticks. Jim is the honey pot man, though no bee lover. Norfolk's oldest septic tanks are brick-lined wells shaped like traditional clay honey pots. The tankers into which they're emptied are known by locals as honey wagons.

Those with a strong constitution have a job for life; superfast broadband is no guarantee that a twenty-first-century village-dweller's shit won't float in a hole twenty feet from their front door.

Not the sort of career most would shout about, but an unfazed Jim has found money in honey and mirth in muck. His wagon boasts the strapline 'Yesterday's meals on wheels', which gives his grateful customers a chuckle as, quite literally, he does their dirty work.

Mondays are always busy, and fitting in the weekend emergencies is tricky – it's just him and his lovely wife, Anna. She manages the bookings.

Jim listens as she reassures a regular. Mrs Lovey *always* calls ahead to ensure he's on track.

The Episode Log has lain untouched for months so the blinking catches him off guard.

Mrs Lovey is eighty-six and, though a real stickler for time-keeping, largely lives up to her name. He's been piping away her honey for going on two decades and she always offers him a cuppa, doesn't fuss over the smell, and never shies away from shaking his hand.

He massages his twitching eyes and tries to swallow the threatening bark.

The old lady's safety demands action but Anna is adamant. 'Let the police handle it. We'll say it's toxic gases and they need to get her off the premises for twenty-four hours. As for Mrs L, well, she'll be put out but at least she'll live to get the hump.'



Two days later, Jim backs the wagon up Mrs Lovey's drive and drags the pipe over to the honey pot.

Arp.

Something isn't right. He's well beyond the zone of interference.

He shimmies the concrete cover to the side.

A conical police helmet bobs in the septic sludge. Jim's knees buckle.

'No tea for you today, young man. You know how I feel about tardiness.'

The pressure on his spine is almost tender, and just enough.

His lids spasm for the last time as he tips forward, honey-bound.