An English Entomologist at the F. D. M.

Last year, running late through the nation’s capital to give a talk at the Smithsonian entitled “IF MOTHS ARE ATTRACTED TO LIGHT WHY DON’T THEY COME OUT IN THE DAYTIME?” I tried to take a short cut between two anonymous granite facades, only to find myself in a blind alley. More haste, less speed, I reminded myself, and was about to retrace my steps when I noticed that the door in the wall barring my progress was a half-inch ajar, held thus by what turned out, on closer inspection, to be a carelessly-discarded pickle. FDM Authorized Personnel Only, said a plaque above the door, and under normal circumstances this would have stopped me in my tracks. But my usually reliable sense of direction told me that this might well be the back of the building where I was due to speak. What’s the worst that could happen? I reasoned, displacing the shriveled gourd with the toe of one brogue and easing my fingers ’twixt door and jamb. A reprimand from some overzealous official? In an uncharacteristic access of impulse I pulled the door open and stepped across the threshold. The door clicked emphatically shut behind me and I found myself walking down a long corridor. “Hello, there!” I called out over the squeaking of my shoes. But response came there none, so like the man on the whisky bottle, I kept walking, until I came to a stairwell and an elevator. I now had the option of going up or down, but not, alas, forward. “Is anybody here?” I shouted but, again, heard nothing but the echo of my own quavering baritone. So I took out my cell-phone, intending to call ahead to explain my predicament. I had only got as far as punching in the area code, however, when a voice behind me murmured, “You’re wasting your battery,” and I turned to find myself confronted by a dark-suited man in his mid-twenties.

“No signal,” he explained, gesturing towards the ceiling, “Security.” And then there was a pause which I suspect only good manners prevented him from curtailing with that untranslatable American monosyllable ‘Duh!’

“Ah. I see,” I said. “Thanks for telling me.”
And now his eyes widened in surprise.
“My God—you’re British!”
“Last time I looked,” I quipped.
“But what are you…? Why are you…” He pointed to a plastic square on his lapel imprinted with his photograph and those same three letters ‘FDM’. “You don’t have one of these?”
“No,”
“But how did you get in?”
“Somebody left the back door open. Not my usual M.O. I assure you, but I’m rather late for a lecture. Moths; diurnal absence, enigma of, theory pertaining to.”
“Dude, you are so in the wrong place.”
“Oh. Perhaps you could direct me towards the front door then?”
He probably would have looked more enthusiastic if I’d suggested we both jog naked to the Lincoln Memorial.
“Are you crazy? You can’t go anywhere near the lobby! It’s full of security. They’ll shoot you!”
“Why would they do that?”
“It’s their job!”
As sweeping statements go this struck me as being right up there with ‘Chim-chiminy, chim-chiminy, chim, chim, che-ree’, but before I could say so a soft ‘ping’ announced the approach of the elevator.

“Quick!” said my young companion, grasping the sleeve of my jacket, “in my office!” Again I was torn; on the one hand not much of what this fellow had said made sense, on the other hand he was wearing the tie of a very reputable university. I cannot think why else I would have followed him—as I did—down the staircase. Once inside his office he wasted no time locking the door and we then stood facing each other in breathless silence as three or four people marched briskly past. Then he perched on the front of his desk and frowned at me in a solicitous manner.

“You really have no idea where you are, do you?”

“Well I assume it’s not entirely unconnected with those letters on your badge. What exactly does ‘FDM’ stand for? No, let me guess; Firearms Discharged Murderously? Foreigners Dispatched with Machineguns?”

“Very funny,” he said, “But if they found out I’d helped you they might shoot me, too.”

So my first impression had been correct; the fellow really was an oboe short of an orchestra.

“Well, this really has been fun,” I said, marching across the parquet, “but I am running very late, so if you wouldn’t mind just—”

“Forget it. It’s almost lunchtime. Place’ll soon be crawling with people. Without one of these suckers on your coat you wouldn’t get ten feet—on your own, anyway. Then you’d never see England again.”

Barking, obviously. I moved towards the desk.

“Well in that case may I just use your—”

But his hand beat mine to the handset.

“They’re all bugged. My name’s Davis, by the way—Jackson Davis. Spelling.”

“Delighted to meet you, Mr. Spelling, but—”

“No—spelling’s not my name—it’s what I do.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Good. If we keep it that way you may get out of here. But you must do exactly as I say.”

He raised a hand to forestall further questioning and pressed an ear against the door. The movement caused his jacket to bow briefly open, and as it did I saw a strap running up from his waistband and glimpsed, in the shadow of his armpit, the gleam of dark metal. Satisfied that the coast was clear he beckoned me forward. But I stood my ground.

“What does a proof-reader need a gun for?” I asked. “Putting the dots on i’s?”

“I’ve never used it.”

“But how do I know that, Mr. Davis? How do I know you’re not just some homicidal maniac who runs around potting foreign nationals like owls?”

He appeared to give my hypothesis serious consideration for a few moments, but when he spoke again there was something in his eye which I hope the scientific community will forgive me for identifying as a twinkle.

“You overestimate my importance around here. You seem to be confusing me with one or two very senior members of the present administration.”
And that settled the matter.
“Alec Robinson, Cambridge, Entomology,” I said, extending a hand. “Lead the way,”

“Okay, this is your story,” intoned my young companion as we walked. “You work for Webster’s—the Dictionary people? They do a lot with us. And you’ve lost your voice.”

We had stopped at a set of double doors.
“Remember,” he went on, punching an access code into a keypad, “Say nothing.”

The doors swung back to reveal a brightly lit, open-plan space where twenty or thirty people sat frowning into computer screens. There were no windows, but along one side of the room was a series of large, gilt-framed portraits of varying antiquity. One of the subjects—a bespectacled, snowy-haired fellow in an old-fashioned, southern-style white suit—I recognized immediately as the founder of the world’s most successful deep-fried chicken franchise. I was wondering which branch of government would wish to honor the memory of a man who had caused so much misery when a smartly-dressed young woman rose from her desk to intercept us.

“Jackson!” she said in a voice like Waterford crystal. “How nice of you to drop by. To what—or should I say, to whom—do we owe the pleasure?”

“Hello, Clara. This is Mr. Parker. Mr. Parker just joined the team at Webster’s. This is Clara Armstrong, Mr. Parker—one of our most brilliant minds.”

“I’m afraid Mr. Parker has laryngitis, Clara.”

“What a small world—that’s what I’m struggling with today, too!”

I looked at her with an expression that said you’re doing a remarkably good job of hiding it.

“Working through lunch again, Clara?” said Jackson.

“Yes—thanks to that presidential colonoscopy leak.”

“I thought something might come of that. What happened?”

“Some Brit reporter said it sounded like he was, quote, ‘looking up a former colleague’—as in ‘colon’ Powell? Powell didn’t give a rat’s ass, of course, but the veep went ballistic; started ranting about unacceptable provocation and a pre-emptive strike on the BBC’s Washington bureau. Next thing you know some staffer came over and made medical a priority. We have G through O in here, and I’m stuck on laryngitis. Can’t decide whether or not to make it an S.E.S.”

“That’s a Syllabic Emphasis Shift, Mr. Parker,” explained my chaperon. “Well, I’m sure you’ll make the right decision, Clara,” he went on, “But we’re on a tight schedule, so if you’ll excuse us . . . .”

She looked at me thoughtfully.

“Good bye, Mr. Parker—I do hope you feel better soon.”

I gave her valedictory nod before turning to follow Jackson. Just before we left the room I looked back at the portrait of the avuncular fellow in the white suit and realized—with some relief—that it was, in fact, Mark Twain.

“I think she bought the act,” muttered Jackson as we hurried along another anonymous corridor, “But I suggest we lay low until everyone else is back at their desks.”
He led me to a meeting room, and once inside it we dragged the table against the door.

“The portraits back there,” I said, panting slightly from my exertions, “who were they?”

“Distinguished FDM alumni, mostly. Also some writers who’ve supported the cause; Faulkner, Kerouac, Vonnegut. There’s another one right there,” he said, pointing to a sweet old lady smiling at us in sepia from the opposite wall. “Familiar with Eudora Welty, Alec?”

“Never heard of her.”

“One of the greatest enemies your country’s ever had.”

“Really? She reminds me of an aunt of mine. But what exactly is the cause she’s served so well?”

“You’d better sit down. I don’t think any Englishman has ever heard what I’m about to tell you.”

And on reflection, I think that sitting down was an excellent suggestion.

“This building,” my young friend began, “Is the headquarters of the Federal Department of Mispronunciation.” He paused in anticipation of the smile I duly failed to suppress. “I was skeptical, too, at first. That was almost three years ago, just after I left Princeton. A few weeks earlier, I’d been invited to drinks at the home of my English professor. When I got there I was surprised to discover there was only one other guest; a middle-aged woman who my host introduced as simply “a friend from Washington.” He then left us alone, and it became clear that the evening had no other purpose than to facilitate our meeting. It was a very short one. She told me she worked for an organization which offered people with my talents a unique opportunity to serve their country. Six weeks and several interviews later I walked into this building and signed, well—I guess it’s the equivalent of your Official Secrets Act. I broke that promise for the first time when I told you what I do here. Everyone else outside gets the official cover, which is that I’m a librarian. I can’t even tell my family the truth.”

“But what is the truth?” I said. “How on earth can something like pronunciation matter to the world’s greatest power?”

“You talk about power, Alec, but how do you measure it? I ask you as a citizen of a country which, not long ago, wielded more than its fair share of the stuff. A fourth of the world’s population once walked beneath a British flag, right?”

I shrugged modestly.

“But you guys got out of the empire business when the cost of policing it started to exceed the returns. America’s only a super-power because we spend so much more on defense than anyone else. But since we have to borrow every cent of that money from China, who’s calling the shots? And why do we need all those guns anyway? What are we fighting about?”

“Oil?”

“Don’t be a sap, Alec. Pretty soon everyone’s energy will be green—and market forces will make sure of that, not people with beards. No, America’s military superiority really is about fighting the bad guys. But our more important long-term agenda is to establish a monopoly of a far more valuable commodity than oil. Knowledge has been power for a long time, but now the medium is the message, too. And ‘the medium’ is still
overwhelmingly language-dependant—especially if it’s that most potent synthesis of information and misinformation known as ‘spin’. Politicians don’t get elected by standing on a box and telling people what they believe in any more. They do it by hiring ad agencies and paying people to stand in front of TV cameras spinning like a...like a...”

“Silk-worm?” I offered. “Rotisserie chicken?”
“You get the picture.”
“But where does Britain stand in all this?”
“In our way.”
“How so?”
“I use the tennis analogy. At some point about midway through the last century the phrase ‘English tennis’ became an oxymoron. But if no one in England can play the game any more, how come you still host the world’s most prestigious tournament? If rankings count, then Switzerland and Croatia are way better qualified to host a grand slam than England—hell, right now so is Scotland. England is so not a tennis nation you have to wonder why Wimbledon is even on the tour. But you invented the game. Ergo, you own it. Freehold. The rest of us just lease.”

He leant backward to swat a small black insect – most likely a mycetophiloidea or fungus-fly—away from his face.
“And your point is? . . .” I said.
“My point is that even though British military strength is now no less risible than modern British tennis (come on, Alec—the Falklands War?), you guys are still punching way above your weight in another important area.”
“You’re talking about London’s importance as a financial hub?”
“Well I’m not talking about money, but I am talking about currency. The sun may have set on the Empire, and the Queen’s face may not be on anyone else’s banknotes any more, but the fact is, the Queen’s English is still very much in circulation—is still in fact the only truly global currency. People buy gold in times of uncertainty, but they watch the news and read the papers and write blogs every day. And when they want to listen to or communicate with people in other parts of the world, there’s only one lingua franca—and, much as we’d like it to be American, it’s not. For a long time, we thought that by carpet bombing the world with our movies and TV our version of English would eclipse and then displace yours. But it’s been a painfully slow and unpredictable process. Twenty years after the launch of CNN, people in India and China and Australia still prefer to listen to the BBC; the voice of the country that that exploited and repressed them. Talk about Stockholm Syndrome! Bottom line is, today Britannia rules something much more important than the waves—she rules the airwaves. Our job to change that—to undermine Britain’s standing in the world and make the sound of an English voice synonymous with immorality, weakness and untrustworthiness. Where do you think Disney got the idea of giving all their cartoon bad guys English accents?”

He paused. The fly had returned, and I noticed that it didn’t have the distinctively broad thorax of a fungus fly and was much more likely to belong to the dipteral suborder of nematocera.

“I’m sorry—you were saying?”

“One of the best-kept secrets of the last century is that when Roosevelt came back from carving up Europe with Stalin and Churchill in Yalta it was Winston, not Uncle Joe, he was mad at. Churchill’s brief had been to basically keep his mouth shut. But that’s not
What happened was that every time Roosevelt started talking, Churchill blew cigar smoke him across the conference table, and every time Roosevelt stopped talking Churchill demanded a translation! He said he could understand Stalin’s Russian better than Roosevelt’s English! There was a strong suspicion the old soak had been up in Stalin’s hotel room drinking vodka all morning. Stalin loved it—laughed so hard he totally forgot to ask for Czechoslovakia before the meeting broke up. But Roosevelt was still hopping mad when he got back to Washington. What we didn’t realize here was how much the war had changed the ‘special relationship’. Turns out Churchill’s behavior at Yalta wasn’t about the fact that we’d dragged our heels for so long before joining the war so much as what happened once we did get involved. Because the billeting of hundreds of thousands of US servicemen on British soil proved more devastating than any invasion The Third Reich might have pulled off. Apparently British women had never seen men with more than five or six teeth before. And our guys were also handing out nylon stockings and chewing gum—and, critically, cigarettes that didn’t fall apart when you lit them. You didn’t stand a chance. Anyway, as the name suggests—”

A noise from the corridor made Jackson pause. To my professional eye he looked, in that instance, as vulnerable as a freshly-fledged mayfly skimming a Hampshire chalk stream on a summer’s evening. I began to get a sense of the danger he’d placed himself in.

“As the name suggests,” he went on, in a lower voice, “The Federal Department of Mispronunciation started out as a one-trick pony; the plan being to build on existing divergences of British and American pronunciation; ‘melting-pot’ compromises; locutions which had fallen from use in Britain long ago but we had somehow preserved; simple errors repeated until they became standard. But it was passive and arbitrary. Roosevelt wanted to make it much more pro-active. The people he put in charge here began recruiting top language graduates from the Ivy-League schools. In here they were given a desk, a copy of The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary and an allocation of pages. Their job, very simply, was to devise alternative pronunciations for the words on those pages. Pronunciations which would challenge the British precedent of what you guys call Received Pronunciation. Their proposals were evaluated by a panel of academics seasoned with disaffected British expats. P.G. Wodehouse, wrongly accused by the British media of colluding with the Nazis, was an early recruit. Once a new pronunciation was approved it would be briefed to all the major radio and TV stations. There were some immediate successes. Simply elongating or shortening vowel sounds, for example, met with little resistance; people didn’t mind trading ‘vase’ for ‘vaise’ and ‘fertile’ for ‘fertle’. But tracking studies showed that across the pond such subtleties were considered quaint rather than rebellious. More radical departures were needed, and that’s when the idea of modifying syllabic emphasis was introduced. On a trip to London, somebody from the department had noticed how angrily audiences there reacted to the scene in Gone with the Wind where Rhett says “Frankly my dear, I don’t give a damn.” A natural delivery of this line would put the major emphasis on the word ‘damn’. But to avoid offending the Bible belt, the director had persuaded Clark Gable to stress the word ‘give’ instead. Americans had never had a problem with this, but British movie-goers wrote to the newspapers about it. So we applied the same thinking to individual words. The beauty of it was that once you’d shifted the emphasis, the spelling would often have to be changed, too, to accommodate the resulting new pronunciation. For instance,
moving the stress in ‘aluminium’, from the third to the second syllable created an
awkward string of three unstressed beats in back of it. So we simply lost the second “i.”
Boy, did that get up British noses! Then, in the sixties, some of our people started
experimenting with LSD and started giving words totally new—and sometimes
conflicting—meaning. Your word for the part of the road reserved for pedestrians—
pavement—became our word for the part of the road used by cars! The trick was not to
simply discard redundant words but if possible give them new jobs. One of my personal
favors is the word ‘hostile’. It means aggressive or unfriendly in both countries, but as
you would have just noticed, we changed the pronunciation to make it sound identical to
‘hostel’—a word with totally the opposite kind of connotations. A kind of domino effect
would often kick in and whole new word groupings emerge. Do you have a cat, Alec?”

“As a matter of fact, I do.”

“Okay, give me another word for cat.”

“Felix domestica?”

“Something a little more user-friendly?”

“Well then, pussy, I suppose.”

“Thank you. In Britain the word ‘pussy’ is so inoffensive it crops up in children’s
nursery rhymes. So what did we do with it? We made it one of the most offensive words.
But we also took your anatomically equivalent expletive—‘fanny’—and applied it to a
wholly innocuous part of the body. To muddy the water further we made your equivalent
word for our fanny—‘bum’—an alternative to our ‘hobo’ or homeless person, and just for
good measure applied your word for ‘mule’ to our buttocks—or, as they have since been
known, asses. Confused? You should be—that was the whole idea. Still is—and it’s not
like the job’s anywhere near finished. There are around 615,000 entries in the latest
dition of the OED, and they add around 2,500 more each quarter. So there’s no shortage
of material. In fact the only real problem we’ve ever had has been motivation. Once the
war generation started dying off it got harder to sustain the necessary needle and during
the Thatcher-Reagan era relations got so warm there was talk of closing the department
down altogether. But every now and then something happens to fire us up again. Have a
look at this. We have to carry it around to remind us what this is all about.”

He took a piece of laminated paper from his pocket and slid it across the table.
This is what was printed on it:

America, you’ll never be a major literary nation
While you lead the Western World in mispronunciation.
No doubt you know your onions rigging federal ballots,
But why did you elect to change spring onions to shállots?
And why teach college students stuff like pathos and catharsis
Before they’ve learnt the basics of syllabic emphásis?
Don’t ask us for indulgence, and don’t expect our praise;
Don’t ‘fedex’ olive branches—we won’t ‘stick ’em in a vaise’.
We will not hear our tongue befouled in accents harsh and nasal,
We won’t leave tips if we are served orégano and baysil.
It’s the grossest disrespect (and by the way, that’s not a verb)
To subtract the s from maths, and ignore the h on herb.
And when you’re here, don’t acclimate—the word’s ‘acclimatise’.

Podium Fall 08-Winter 09
Use lifts, smoke fags, kick arse, eat chips—not french or freedom fries.
And remember, in your politics, by all means look to Plato,
But with words The Bard’s is final; it’s tomato, not tomatyto

“It was pinned to the door of the US Embassy in London on July 4th two years ago.”

“My God,” I said, “It’s like a—”

“Like a what, Alec? A declaration of war? It might as well have been. Because that’s pretty much how certain people in this town chose to interpret it.”

I started to push it back across the table but he stopped me.

“Take it with you, Alec. Tell the world what’s happening in here—before it’s too late.”

“I don’t understand. You work here. Why are you helping me?”

“Because there are people in the present administration—hawks, neo-cons, call them what you like—who want to take this thing to a new and frightening place. Who want to do something that can’t be undone.”

“What? What are they going to do?!”

He looked at his watch.

“We should think about making a move.”

“Jackson, you have to tell me.”

“You’re right,” he said at last, and took a deep breath

“We had an important visitor here recently. Rank-and-filers like me weren’t officially briefed about it until a few days later, but I happened to walk through the lobby when the limo pulled up out front.”

“So who was it?”

“Steve Jobs.”

“The IT johnny? What was he doing here?”

“Delivering the virus.”

“What virus?”

“The virus he’d been asked to develop for us. The virus his people have been working on for the past 2 years. The virus that will sabotage every attempt to visit any online British dictionary and delete every document and file containing every single English spelling and English definition from every laptop, desktop and server. The virus that will wipe British English off the face of the earth.”

“Crikey,” I breathed.

The silence which followed this was suddenly shattered by a high-pitched continuous electronic wail.

“Fire drill?” I shouted.

“Security alert!” said Jackson, leaping off his chair. “Clara—I should have known! We’ll have to make a run for it!”

By the time we’d shunted the table far enough away from the door to open it, the corridor outside was already full of people. There was a great deal of shouting and arm-waving going on but fortunately for us the prevailing impression was one of confusion rather than vigilance. Instead of trying to melt inconspicuously into this chaos, Jackson immediately became the focus of it by jabbing a forefinger towards the far end of the corridor and shouting “THAT WAY! THAT WAY! THAT WAY!” He did this,
moreover, in a voice of such authority that within a short space of time a small stampede had broken out. I was about to join this mad exodus myself when I felt myself being yanked sideways through another doorway.

“Follow me!” said my young friend, sprinting off down some kind of service passageway.

“Where are we going!?” I gasped, struggling to keep up with him.

“Just keep running!” he shouted back, “I have an idea!”

We ran for at least thirty seconds, adrenalin helping me sustain a pace I hadn’t managed since running for buses as an undergraduate. To make matters worse, the ceiling of the passageway was low and traversed at intervals by pipes, so I had to duck repeatedly. But just when I began to think my lungs would burst, Jackson slowed to a cautious trot and a moment later we rounded a bend and came out onto a gantry overlooking an open warehouse space. At the far end of it daylight streamed in through a entrance framing a ramp leading up to the street. Across the bottom of this ramp stood four men holding what looked like machine-guns. There was nobody else on the ground, but just inside the entrance two fork-lifts were loading crates noisily into the back of a large truck.

“The dispatch centre,” whispered Jackson excitedly.

“What’s . . . being . . . dispatched?” I panted.

“Hundreds of thousands of infected CD’s, DVD’s and hard drives,” he replied.

“And hopefully one perfectly healthy lepidopterist. Let’s go!”

We climbed swiftly down a ladder and made our way around the perimeter of the room until we stood in the shadow of one of the crates. Jackson swung around to face me and I saw, with a sudden loosening sensation in my lower digestive tract, that he had taken out his gun.

“Ah,” I said. “So you are going to shoot me after all. Pity.”

“Don’t be an idiot, Alec,” he muttered, as he began using the gun to pry off the lid of the crate. It popped up easily enough, the sound masked by the revving of the fork-lifts.

“Good,” he whispered, peering into the crate, “there should be just about enough room.”

“But it says ‘Budapest’ on the side. I don’t want to go to Budapest.”

“For God’s sake, Alec, you won’t go to Budapest. Once you’re out of this building you’re safe. Now move it!”

I shimmied up the side of the crate and lay down as flat as I could on top of a gigantic shrink-wrapped slab of laptops. Just before the lid came down over me, a hand snaked under it and I shook it vigorously.

“Good luck, Alec.”

“Thank you, Jackson,” I said, “Thank you for everything.”

I heard him re-sealing the lid, and then he was gone, and I was in darkness.

It seemed an eternity before I felt the crate being lifted. It seemed even longer before I heard the truck doors being closed and felt the vibrations of the engine. But I suppose it could only have been five or ten minutes later when we made our first stop. In anticipation of this moment I had already forced the lid open again with my knees and climbed down out of the crate. I braced myself in the darkness, and as soon as I heard the hissing exhalation of the airbrakes flung the doors wide open and jumped out into the
daylight. Instead of dropping several meters to unforgiving pavement, however, my fall was broken by the hood of a taxi that had pulled up behind.

“Jesus H Christ!” yelled the driver from his window as I slid off onto the road.

“No,” I said in a 007-ish way, flicking a fragment of bubble-wrap from my sleeve as I walked around to the rear door. “Robinson. Alec Robinson. Now take me to the British Embassy, would you—there’s a good chap.”

Simon Collins is an Englishman with an American wife. He moved to New York two years ago, lost his job shortly afterwards and is still having problems adapting to many aspects of life here. He has never had any fiction published, but he has written a TV series about an Englishman who marries an American, moves to New York, loses his job shortly afterwards and has problems adapting to many aspects of life here. This show is currently being produced for British TV, so it’s unlikely that anyone in America will ever see it. He enrolled on the 92nd Street Y Poetry Center’s fiction workshop with Sandra Newman because he is also trying to write a novel. The novel is set in Australia (where he lived for a long time), and one of the most valuable things he learnt in the class is that writing about Australia is probably a mistake if you want to get published in America.