

# ARCTIC TERN / *STERNA PARADISAEA*

When the Arctic terns failed to find their way home one spring, appearing instead like a storm cloud over the centre of Paris and pecking at the heads of passers-by, many people thought the end of the world was nigh, that this would be the first in a long series of calamities. The city-dwellers stockpiled canned food, hoarded water and waited for a plague of locusts, for droughts, floods or earthquakes, but nothing happened, at least not in Paris. The Arctic terns overran public parks and traffic islands, and defended their territory fiercely. But the locals soon grew used to these aggressive creatures and old men were able to sit on benches in peace so long as they carried a bag of sardines or fry as a sop to the birds.

The terns no longer flew from pole to pole. Summer nights in the Arctic were screech-free and peck-free; summer nights in the Antarctic likewise. The birds' innate sense of direction had become confused, and this was the result. Some instinct had informed the terns that their global position was correct, that they were undoubtedly on the right spot north of the Arctic Circle; the city must have grown up while they were away down south. The older terns were irritable and disorientated but the first generations of birds in the city knew nothing other than traffic noise and human crowds. The tern soon became one of the typical sights of Paris. Tourists could buy postcards with pictures of a tern-white Eiffel Tower and street vendors tried to press people into buying bags full of guppy fish. This didn't bother the terns, and as no predator was directly dependent on them it didn't significantly upset the balance of nature.

A few seasons later, Chicago filled up with bees, literally filled up with bees as if it were covered with honey, though the city was actually far from being covered with honey: there was barely a tree or flower to be found there. Yet bees swarmed to it. On weather satellite pictures a black depression seemed to cling low over the city, a grey swirl twisting counterclockwise around a black epicenter. The bees buzzed and droned and stung and drove the citizens mad. The only answer was to use poison: planes specially designed to extinguish forest fires flew back and forth, poisoning. Yet the bees continued to be drawn to the city and so the poisoning continued until the last citizens finally abandoned the place. The streets were covered with a 50 cm thick layer of evenly fallen bees, yet the insects continued to flock there carrying seeds or pollen on their feet. Soon flowers sprang up in every nook and cranny, putting down roots among the dead bees. Vegetation climbed the walls of the skyscrapers and spread over the streets; the largest glass buildings turned into greenhouses, hot and damp, full of reptiles, insects and tropical plants which sprawled unchecked from their pots, while other buildings resembled huge beehives, full of honey which oozed down the walls, trickled along the streets and dripped into the drains. Bears got wind of the city from far away in Alaska; they licked the buildings, birds fluttered from flower to flower, and the poor took their life in their hands and ventured into the city in search of valuables and honey.

In the centre of Chicago a golden pond formed of honey that had trickled down the streets, over squares and between the floors of almost every building in the city. On its way the honey had absorbed every imaginable scent and substance that its path had crossed, and those in search of unusual sensations tried spreading the honey on bread and found that the world and time itself turned as golden, viscous and sweet as honey. At first sight the approach to the pond seemed easy, an endless carpet of wild flowers. But the wild flowers grew in a thin layer of soil, beneath which lay 20 meters of thick-flowing honey that preserved adventurers like formalin. Those who made their way there seldom came back, but if they returned with so much as one jar of golden honey from the pond they would be set up financially for the rest of their lives. So every day young men could be seen hanging jars and bottles about themselves until all that could be seen through the glass was an irregular human shape or distorted face. The jars clinked as they stepped on to the sticky streets and inched away. After a week they were generally still within calling distance and mothers would launch kites with a sandwich or bottle of milk suspended from them, until their sons had passed beyond the reach of the average kite. After that they were on

their own. They couldn't seek shelter in buildings, for these contained nothing but the compartments and vaults of bees. Nor could they flee if spotted by a bear or a swarm of killer bees. Where an ordinary man could travel at a maximum of 10 meters an hour, a bear could cover 20 meters. The chase was as gruesome as it was slow. Generally, however, it did not require a bear or killer bees to do away with the men; most died of malnutrition or digestive disorders after being submerged up to their shoulders and eating nothing but honey, flowers or grubs for a month.

Shortly after the bees had lost their bearings around Chicago, monarch butterflies began to behave oddly as well. Since the oldest people could remember the butterflies had flown every year in enormous swarms right across America to Mexico where they would hibernate over winter. The hibernation forest was red with butterflies that clustered on every trunk, branch and leaf, and most people saw it as a sacred forest that must not be chopped down or touched in any way. Nor was it ever chopped down or touched in any way. But one autumn the monarch butterflies took themselves up and flew in completely the opposite direction. Instead of heading south to their wintering grounds, they flew north. People tried to point them in the right direction with giant fans or nets; they were trapped from helicopters and taken to the butterfly forest by force. But some instinct was telling them to fly north and that's what they did the moment they were released. They set a course for the North Pole and swarmed around it until they froze in the air and fell to earth like giant snowflakes. They continued to flutter north until the ice cap around the pole was red with monarchs. Viewed from space the world seemed to have acquired an orange cap. Polar bears, wandering around in the camouflage they had evolved over 10,000 years, could now easily be spotted from 100 kilometers away. When the white blobs moved over the butterfly-patterned carpet of snow, the seals yawned and slid unhurriedly through holes in the ice. The polar bears almost died of starvation; they didn't have 10,000 years to turn orange. But then they learnt to roll in the butterflies when their pelts were wet and if enough monarchs froze to them they became invisible again. Their tracks remained white but the seals didn't have the wits to beware of white tracks with sharp teeth approaching at speed.

People soon began to suspect the reason for all this: the world was so saturated with waves, messages, transmissions and electric fields that animals were reading all sorts of gibberish from the air. When four jumbo jets crash-landed the same day exactly seven kilometers from their intended destination, people began in earnest to seek a substitute for all these waves. A monarch butterfly weighing 10 grams could find its way 1,000 kilometers without the help of a satellite. An Arctic tern could fly year after year from its nest on Melrakkasletta in north Iceland to its favorite rock east of Cape Town in South Africa, by instinct alone. Creatures with brains the size of a nut, seed or piece of fluff could do this, yet humans with their heavy heads would have needed 18 satellites, a receiver, radar, maps, compasses, a transmitter, 20 years' training and an atmosphere so thick with waves that it had almost ceased to be transparent.

No one could prove that the waves were harmful to humans, but many were ready to believe so. It was quite enough to believe; the rest was a mere detail. And so an extraordinary industry flourished as never before around wave-defenses. The public had become afraid and paranoid. The world was radioactive. Everyone who got ill, with anything from leukemia to a cold, blamed the waves. Legal proceedings were started weekly against the world's most popular radio and television stations for the most unrelated problems blamed on wave pollution. "Put on a thick cap!" said mothers. "It'll protect you from the waves. Otherwise your hair will become electric and sap your life force!" "Put on your gloves, son! Bare fingers are like aerials that attract waves." "Keep a stone in your left pocket and a small bottle of water in your right. That'll balance the flow of energy."

If someone rang another person's mobile phone unusually often, suspicions were raised: "Hi, how are you?"

"Fine. Did you want anything in particular?"

"No, just to hear your voice."

(Coldly) "Right." (Thinks: She's trying to kill me.)

Microwave transmitters and broadcasting towers were blown up daily by fanatical members of radical residents' associations but these incidents were generally hushed up by the media to prevent an epidemic. It was mainly the print media that gave good coverage to such news items, as their sales increased in direct correlation to the number of towers blown up.

Scientists shook their heads over the public's stupidity. Doctors told them it was completely

unproven that waves had any effect on the human body, and serious academics did not want to be associated with such a crackpot field.

In an old hangar at Reykjavik airport, however, a small international group of ornithologists, molecular biologists, aerodynamicists and biochemists had gathered to dabble in waves. Day and night they worked, dissecting and examining terns, pigeons, bees, salmon and monarch butterflies. They were driven by the unshakeable belief that it was possible to unlock the secrets that lay behind the navigation instinct. The outfit was called LoveStar, and the boss himself was never known by any other name than LoveStar. No reasons were given for the name and people soon gave up expecting a sensible explanation as the employees of LoveStar were regarded by most as crazy. They pretended to be either mad or autistic when journalists tried to obtain interviews with them and ask questions about their work. They did not for anything wish to rouse the interest of the outside world in their research. Outside the hangar there was nothing to be seen but nine-year-old family cars. This was in keeping with the LoveStar dictate: "Nine-year-old Toyotas are invisible."

In the LoveStar laboratory, people pondered such questions as how a shoal of fish could spin round on the spot, every fish at the same split second, as if they had a single body, without it being possible to detect a message passing between them. Or how a flock of birds could fly in perfect unison, as if controlled by one mind.

In the age of ideas it was generally possible to find solutions to problems by making enough men think for long enough at once. That wasn't so complicated. One man was made to split a rock, the next to split the split rock and so on until the atom was found. The man who split the atom was not available for comment.

At LoveStar measuring equipment was developed which could detect signals so weak as to be at levels formerly considered supernatural. This is where the firm's strength lay. The research department's motto was simple: "Everything has substance. The complicated exists, the strange exists, the incomprehensible exists, the unexplained and imaginary exist, but the supernatural does not exist, though nothing is ruled out." The LoveStar group was motivated by a deep conviction: it was obvious that birdwaves were neither imaginary nor supernatural.

It was not long before the LoveStar experts were on the trail. They discovered ways of transmitting sounds, images and messages between human beings using birdwaves which were weak, harmless and could be picked up by devices as light as a butterfly's brain.

While most companies had Mood Divisions that tried to market the company, talk up its success and inspire investor confidence with premature press releases, LoveStar took the opposite course. He ran a deliberate anti-mood program. The company's unofficial story: "Vogelmenschen" by Andreas Vollmer, included the following account of "anti-mood":

"LoveStar owned the majority of shares in the company himself and raised a glass with his employees every time rumors got round about the worthlessness of the shares on the grey market. The employees spoke an incomprehensible language in lectures and interviews, never giving a hint of an intelligent idea or optimism for the future. Journalists were only once admitted into the hangar before the company's discoveries were made public. Elena Krüskemper, a journalist from *Der Spiegel*, was among them and described the visit as follows in her memoirs: "LoveStar insisted that this should be a group of journalists from the most influential newspapers in the world. He welcomed us himself, a tall, handsome man with a shrewd eye, and was amiability itself. When we went to greet him we noticed something in his hands. 'I was preparing lunch,' explained LoveStar apologetically. We saw a live puffin peeping out from between his fingers. He gripped the bird's head and twisted it a few times while the puffin struggled and tried to bite his thumb. 'They've got such a strong grip on life,' said LoveStar when he saw our faces: 'Sometimes you have to wring their necks ten times.' He laid the lifeless bird on the table and held out his hand; it was soiled as the puffin had defecated in its death throes. Several people had questions but LoveStar wanted us to look round the company first.

"He opened the door into the main area and whispered: 'Be very careful not to alarm the staff.' He accompanied us into a gloomy space where the walls were almost covered with birds' wings. Then LoveStar suddenly seemed unsure of himself, as if nervous, and whispered to the employees: 'Stay calm. They're just going to have a look at you.' A woman journalist from the *New York*

*Times* walked up to a red-haired man who was leaning forward over his desk, hiding something under his chest. 'What have you got there?' she asked. 'He doesn't understand English,' answered LoveStar. 'This is Gudjon. He's an unusually tame physicist. He won't move even if you pat him.' LoveStar patted the man on the head which he seemed neither to like nor dislike. Then LoveStar suddenly became jittery again, turned to us and said with a stern expression: 'You must take care, not all my employees are this tame, and don't touch anything.' The woman from *The Times* made a face and went to the next table. On it lay a small egg. She made as if to pick up the egg and LoveStar yelled: 'No, that's Yamaguchi's egg!' The woman looked at him bemused and LoveStar yelled even louder: 'Watch out!' Before we knew what was happening a small Japanese girl had run across the room and jumped on to the table. She screeched and stabbed the woman on the head with a pencil. The staff went berserk but LoveStar reprimanded them in incomprehensible Icelandic. The woman journalist ran out into the lobby and kicked and hammered at the security door. When LoveStar reached her she was like a cornered beast. He tried to calm her down; she touched her skull and looked at her bloodied finger: 'Blood! She drew blood! You'll pay for this!' 'There, there,' said LoveStar, 'worse things have happened to journalists.' He opened the door and the woman ran out into the grey light. We had been driven into a corner but LoveStar tried to make things better. He turned to us and apologized: 'I do hope this incident won't spoil your image of the company. Any questions?'" (Vogelmenschen, pp 213-235)

The reporters took a savage revenge as LoveStar had intended. Movie stars took up the cause of the puffin and investors all over the world withdrew their finance from research into birds and butterflies. Capitalists refused to fund universities that carried out research into birdwaves and politicians were advised by their image consultants not to be associated with cranks. LoveStar found positions for those who lost their research grants.

This was all according to plan.

In birdwaves they had found an unexpected and fabulous virgin territory for science which would eventually free mankind's hands and render copper wires, fibre-optic cables, satellites and microwave transmitters obsolete. The discoveries of LoveStar's Bird and Butterfly Division transformed the world in a matter of a few years. One could say that birdwaves were a new stage in human evolution. The "hands-free man" arose, with a keener sense of direction than a tern and freer than a monarch butterfly.

# A HANDS-FREE MODERN MAN

Indridi Haraldsson was a hands-free modern man. Hands-free people had as little as possible to do with cords and cables – not that they were called cords or cables any more. Cords were known as chains. The old gadgets were not called gadgets, they were known as heaps, weights or burdens. People looked at the heaps and burdens and thanked their lucky stars. In the old days, said some, we were wire-slaves chained to the office chair, far from birdsong and sunshine. But it wasn't like that any more. When men in suits talked to themselves out in the street and reeled off figures, no one took them for lunatics; they were probably talking business with some unseen client. The man who sat in rapt concentration on a riverbank, apparently doing Müller's exercises, might be an engineer designing a bridge. When a sunbathing woman piped up out of the blue that she wanted to buy a two-tonne saithe quota, bystanders needn't automatically assume this was addressed to them, and when a teenager made strange humming noises on the bus, nodding his head to and fro, far from suffering from severe autism he was probably listening to an invisible radio. The man who breathed rapidly or got an erection at an inappropriate time and place probably had his visual nerve permanently connected to some hard-core material, unless he was listening to the sex line. There was no limit to the filth that flooded through the permanently connected heads of some, but of course it was impossible to ban people from filling their own heads with filth, violence and obscenity. You might just as well ban thinking. If someone stood beside you and asked: "What's the time?" and you answered straight away: "It's half past nine", the man who asked could answer, even though there was no one else in sight: "Thanks, but I wasn't actually talking to you."

So if a stranger seemed on the point of striking up a conversation, it generally paid not to answer. You might be interrupting.

Indridi Haraldsson was a hands-free modern man, so no ordinary person could see whether he was going mad or not. When he spoke to himself out in the street there might be someone on the other end of the line. When he laughed and laughed it might be for the same reason, unless he was listening to a funny radio station or, of course, he could have some comedy film or joke playing on the lens. In fact it was impossible to tell what was going on in his head but there was no reason why it should be anything abnormal. If he ran down the street shouting: "The end of the world is nigh! The end of the world is nigh!" most people assumed he was taking part in a game on a radio station for a prize of free hamburgers. When he rode naked up and down the shopping centre escalator seven times in a row people assumed something similar; there was probably a prize being offered for anyone who would ride an escalator naked seven times in a row. It was difficult to tell what prize he was aiming for because he was naked and people could only guess at what target group he belonged to from his hairstyle, age and physical build. Indridi was thin and pale skinned with sparse black body hair, while the hair on his head was fair, rough and unkempt, so he was doubtless not in the target audience of the funky radio station that advertised body building, sports cars, highlights and solariums. He neither had a tattoo nor a pierced lip, brow, forehead or foreskin, so he wasn't in the target audience of the "no-shit" station that played covers of rock and punk and advertised raw beer, unfiltered moonshine and filterless cigarettes. He was naked and unkempt and definitely didn't belong to any of the more sober target groups. Perhaps he was a performance artist. Artists were always busy performing. Perhaps the escalator scene was worth three points on the College of Art's performance art course. Or he could, of course, be in an isolated rare target group. There were plenty of them around but generally an attempt was made to direct people into a more popular area where they could be reached more economically.

If Indridi suddenly barked at someone: "IIIIICE-COLD COKE! IICCCCCE-COLD COKE!!!" for ten seconds without his eyes or body seeming to follow his speech there was nothing abnormal about that. The reason for this behaviour was simple: the advertisements he had transmitted to him were directly connected to his speech centres. "IIIIICCCCE-COLD

COKE!!!!” So he must be an *advertising howler* or *howler* as they were popularly called. He was probably broke enough to fall outside most target groups so it wasn’t worth sending him advertisements. But it was possible to send advertisements through him, to others, by connecting them to his speech centres and using his mouth as a sort of loudspeaker. Those who walked past howlers could expect an announcement:

“IIIIICE-COLD COKE!”

This was more effective than conventional reminders on advertising hoardings or the radio. So Indridi squawked when he met a man on his way to the car park:

“FASTEN YOUR SEATBELT! SLOW DOWN!”

The man had been arrested for speeding without a seatbelt. As a punishment he was made to listen to and pay for 2,000 edifying reminders from advertising howlers. That was probably the best thing about the new technology. It could be used to improve society.

“LOVE THY NEIGHBOUR!”

Squawked a shady-looking man at half-hourly intervals. A born-again murderer, Indridi correctly assumed, and gave him a wide berth. Prisoners could be released early if they squawked for charities or religious firms.

Howlers were not all broke. Many were simply scrounging a discount or perks, and some only became howlers for the first three months of the year while they paid for the latest upgrade of the hands-free operating system. Those who didn’t get their system upgraded could have problems with business or communication. Hands-free home appliances and automatic door openers only recognised the latest system and the same applied to the latest car models. They wouldn’t automatically slow down if someone with the old system crossed the road, so it was just as well to take to one’s heels.

If Indridi came across a group of teenagers he could yell:

“GROOVY SHOES! YOU WERE UNBELIEVABLY COOL TO BUY SUCH GROOVY SHOES!”

Getting people to buy first and then arranging for them to be praised afterwards was a completely new strategy. It was believed to strengthen this behaviour pattern and bring things into fashion earlier.

The announcements were sometimes absurd, sometimes just one word, slogan or phrase, unconnected to anything else. In that case it was probably part of a longer campaign, a so-called teaser campaign that encouraged people to think long and hard. On the way down the high street you might meet an old woman who said out of the blue:

“Smoothness!”

Further down you might meet a teenager who said:

“Smartness!”

And even if you veered round sharply and headed up the next street, you would hear whispered from a basement window:

“Reliability!”

Finally somebody would come racing down a side street on a bike shouting:

“FOOOORD! FORD!”

These campaigns always hit the target; there was no way of escaping them. Everything was measured to within 0.5 cm and the announcement was perfectly tailored to the recipient’s target group, which was categorised down to their most minor eccentricity. The howler system was efficient, simple and convenient, and ordinary members of the public could order a howler for a small fee if they needed a reminder.

“You have a meeting with the minister at three o’clock and don’t forget your wedding anniversary!”

Those who had recently moved to the city liked to order a howler or two to greet them on the street or strike up a conversation.

“Hello Gudmundur, what lovely warm weather we’re having!”

This made the big city less cold and unfriendly. Uprooted farmers who liked to wake up to cockcrow could get their neighbours to crow at six o’clock in the morning if they were lucky enough to live near a howler.

“*Cock-a-doodle-do! Time to wake up!*”

Many entrepreneurs felt it essential to receive a confidence boost first thing in the morning:

“You’re the best!” said the Chinese cleaning woman.

“No one can stop you, Magnus!” said the shifty caretaker.

“You’re looking good today!” said the taxi driver. “Today’s a day to win!”

Passers-by were prepared for anything when there were free men around, so no one paid any attention when Indridi sat in a café and wept. He sat in a corner, crying his eyes out, but it crossed very few people’s minds to ask him what the matter was. It was probably Greek tragedy week with his target group. It was simplest to assume this sort of thing. Or he could be an advertising trap.

“Why are you crying?”

“I want a Honda so much, they’re such great cars and there’s a brilliant offer on this week.”

*Advertising traps* or adTRAPS went further than howlers; they hired out not only their speech centers but also their primitive biological and emotional responses. The method was still technologically imperfect so sometimes traps couldn’t stop laughing or crying for days on end. Of course, no one was compelled to become a trap, to laugh, cry or wet themselves in public and say to a woman with a howling baby:

“Now would have been a good time to have 100% absorbent Pampers!”

Many people let themselves be persuaded to become traps as the hiring out of one’s emotions paid as much as ten conventional speech-centre connections and was generally more effective, especially if people were made to do something funny like wet themselves or cry like a baby.

When the hands-free, permanently online modern man emerged on the scene with his lens and invisible earpieces, most borders were broken down. For example, it was never possible to know where a company’s outside parameters really lay. If Indridi met an old school friend in public he could never tell whether the school friend was actually “serving” him. After a bit of a chat (which, on reflection, did begin with the words: “Dear Indridi, can I help you?”) the conversation generally ended the same way:

“It’s clouding over,” said Indridi, “best get a move on.”

“Oh, that doesn’t bother me, I’ve got an excellent umbrella. Can I offer you an excellent umbrella like this?”

“No thanks. There might be a thunderstorm.”

“Oh, I’ve got such a great insurance policy with LoveLife. I got the umbrella as an extra when I bought this great insurance policy with LoveLife.”

It was clear that the old school friend was a *Secret Host* and his conversation was slanted towards his goal of selling an umbrella or insurance. It didn’t matter what was being discussed. The offer was like a magnet, black hole or drain and every single conversation was doomed to be sucked down that drain, regardless of what was originally being discussed.

*Family:*

“How’s your mother?”

“She’s fine, she’s got such great life insurance, with LoveLife...”

*Art:*

“What did you think of Jonas’s poem?”

“I wonder what sort of life insurance they had in the 19th century? LoveLife hadn’t been founded then...”

*Sport:*

“Good game yesterday.”

“Yes, poor Gisli – torn ligament – I wonder if he’s covered for that? I’ll look him up at LoveLife – you’re with them, aren’t you?”

It was difficult to distinguish a secret host from anyone else. So people didn't always know whom it was safe to believe and trust. A host could be anyone, even a member of one's own inner circle. Unlike traps and howlers, secret hosts advertised on their own initiative. A good secret host didn't give himself away and alternated products regularly. Some sold nothing directly, they merely advertised and created the right mood.

"I recommend this *film*, you must go and see this *film*, it's supposed to be a really good *film*. I'd go right now."

Secret hosts sometimes worked as *spies*. They sent reports to iSTAR (LoveStar Mood Division's Image, Marketing and Publicity Department). Only a handful of managers worked in the iSTAR office, the rest were hands-free modern people, scattered around the globe, drawing their information from a database on Svalbard.

iSTAR had no problem collecting basic information about culture consumption, television viewing, radio listening, food bills, musical taste, daily journeys, main interests and opinions, but more detailed information could come in useful. Hosts and spies twisted their conversations round to the company's interests in search of image, while iSTAR experts got to be a fly on the wall. A discussion among a group of friends about love, death, God or friendship could abruptly take a U-turn when the spy asked out of the blue: "Did you think the politician's tie was tasteful? What about his opinions? Do you sympathies with them? Do you remember how many civilians were killed eight years ago? Do you remember where? Would you put up with a greater loss of human life if you listened to more pop news? The leader has a cute little cat called Molly. Do you find him more likeable now? What about the disabled? Are they fun? Would you take a cut in your standard of living in order to provide them with more services? What do you really think of Madonna?"

Indridi was on his way home that day but no one said to him encouragingly: "Hello, Indridi! You're looking good today!" as he couldn't afford such luxuries. On the way up through Rofabaer he began to sing "May Star". All the howlers in town were singing May Star at that moment; it was part of a publicity campaign for an international song initiative the following week. The song echoed round the town but it was hard to tell who was singing voluntarily and who wasn't. It wasn't considered cool to be a howler, so many people pretended to be singing voluntarily by doing their best to look as if they were loving it. To most passers-by, Indridi appeared a living, light-hearted advertisement. Their lenses showed the notes pouring from his head along with the lyrics, which hovered cheerfully in the air:

"Sing and be happy! International song week starts on Monday!"

When the song was over, Indridi had to fight back tears. Something unbelievably important had been struggling to emerge from his mind but he had lost the thread when May Star began. His life was going to the dogs and everything was upside-down; only a few weeks before life had been as sweet as a strawberry, love as golden as honey but now he wasn't sure that love was all that would be waiting for him when he got home.

**(translation: Victoria Cribb)**