

Helen Trappelides

What role can fiction serve when the nature of 'fact' is continually called into question?

It was December but the temperature was unusually high for a Winter's day in England. Otto Reed, a 34-year-old philanthropist and tech giant, sat at the head of his mahogany garden table. He was alone. He always was. Otto did not have a family, or many friends either, but one may say that he was hopeful this wouldn't always be the case since he lived in a ten-bedroom neoclassical mansion in Surrey. There was plenty of room for hyperactive children to play tag in the eerily vacant hallways. Otto was familiar with being in solitude now and each day he repeated the same morning routine of waking up at 8am, sipping black coffee in his sizable garden whilst scrolling through the abundance of emails on his phone. He raised his eyebrows slightly after receiving a link from one of his colleagues to the 'Forbes Billionaires 2030: The Richest People in the World' article. Rapidly, his eyes dotted around the phone screen, the white light flashing in his pupils, as he hunched over, putting all his weight on the table, scrolling and scrolling until he at last saw his name. His pupils dilated. Number one... He was the wealthiest man in the world! There were 400 people on that list, and he was at the very top of it. Otto raised his hands above his head and to the sky as if he were thanking someone and melted into his wooden chair. He had done it. He was number one. After taking a few moments to process this, he went back to the article to bathe in his glory once more. He read over his name again, biting down on his bottom lip while smiling. However, his face soon turned expressionless. There was another name under his.

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'Joint number one spot! Is this a joke?', howled Victor Clark, the 60-year-old media tycoon from LA. Victor owned 'The Global Inquirer' and 'Express Press', which were the most read newspapers in the world. Additionally, he was a major benefactor of the broadcaster 'Ark News' in the USA and various other news programs in every single continent. Impatiently, Victor snapped his fingers twice, gesturing towards one of his household staff from his bedroom. 'I want to know everything about this Otto character. How he made his money, his schooling, his parents, the name of his first pet. Just get me everything!' exclaimed Victor. He had been on top of the Forbes Rich List for three years running and would not accept the fact that this esteemed position was being shared. Victor slid on his initial-embroidered slippers and stormed towards his study, slamming every door in his way whilst the recoil echoed around his gothic mansion. Despite having a family, he too lived in solace. His children all went to boarding school and Victor had been a widower for 3 years after his wife, Lisa, had tragically died when a forest fire engulfed their neighbourhood and home. Forest fires were common now. As were floods, hurricanes, earthquakes, droughts, tsunamis. They all happened frequently around the world. Global warming was a huge problem. No one had listened when all those scientists years ago warned that something needed to change. The planet was overpopulated. More people needed to find work and travel. More fossil fuels were being burned.

An hour had passed. Victor had been sitting at his desk the entire time, staring absently at his wall. 'Mr Clark I gathered the information you requested', stated Victor's butler. He ushered his

butler away after snatching the thick pile of documents from his hand. As he skimmed through them, Victor's face went pale as if it had been drained of blood. He and Otto were worth the

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exact amount of money to the final penny. Victor was not satisfied. He called for his butler, firmly stating 'Send him an email. I want to meet with him at the Monte Carlo Grand Prix'.

Across the Atlantic Ocean, Otto was still scrolling through his phone when he heard the pinging noise of a new email. The subject read 'Fellow Number One' and two days later Otto was on a private jet to Monte Carlo.

'Look at him. All smug', Victor thought to himself. He eyed up Otto from head to toe. To Victor's dismay, he was quite well dressed, wearing a black Armani suit, black shirt and silver cufflinks for a splash of colour. Otto confidently walked up to him. He was not hard to miss as he was wearing a velvet red suit and carrying a gold cane.

'So you're into tech', said Victor in an indifferent tone of voice. Otto was slightly taken aback as he had not even had the chance to introduce himself, awkwardly putting the hand he stuck out to shake Victor's behind his back.

'Indeed I am. Although my work is a bit more complicated than-', replied Otto.

'Cigar?' asked Victor. However, he never intended to wait for a response and shoved it into Otto's hand whilst blowing a plume of smoke into his face and chuckling. Otto didn't react. He'd dealt with arrogant, egotistical men like Victor many times in his life, especially when trying to

find investors for 'Vitalz'. Vitalz was a special watch which monitored one's health 24/7 and automatically sent their location to a drone to drop off medicine if illness was detected.

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'I have a proposition for you', announced Victor, 'You and I, we're worth the exact same amount of money, to the final penny. So, I bet you £1 that I can control the world for a year. I'll stop international travel, population growth, the amount of fossil fuels released. If I do this, you owe me £1, and I'll be £1 richer than you. I'll be number one.'

Otto stared at him with dazed eyes. 'I guess this is what rich old men do when they're bored', he thought to himself. He shook Victor's sweaty palm.

One month had passed. Otto was in his living room watching TV until his program was interrupted by an emergency broadcast.

A monotone voice declared, 'Do not leave your home. An influx of solar flares will fill the atmosphere tomorrow morning. If you are in the sun for more than 10 minutes you will be dead within 2 hours. Scientists have concluded that a rise in carbon dioxide levels has disturbed the fabric of the photosynthesis equation. The atmosphere is poisonous. The plants are dying. Protect yourself, your loved ones. Stay at home. Each household will receive a dry food package by their doorstep very soon. We're all in this together. Stay safe.'

At a loss for words, Otto's first thought was that he needed supplies, how could he trust that a package would be delivered to him? And by who? Suddenly, he heard the jingles of keys and

screeching of tyres throughout his neighbourhood as everybody hurried out of their homes in a frenzy in an effort to get to the nearest supermarket. Otto unlocked his range rover and swiftly

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turned out of his driveway. Traffic was already forming, horns blaring. Luckily, he knew a shortcut to the nearest supermarket.

Chaos. Absolute chaos. Windows had already been smashed, people were stepping on top of each other trying to squeeze themselves through the entrance and the looting had already begun. Otto tried climbing through one of the shattered windows, before being pushed by someone, which caused him to slash his leg on a piece of glass. Whilst blood streamed down his leg, Otto grabbed a trolley and made his way to the tinned food and water aisles. He exited through the back door of the supermarket as hundreds of people were outside the store front and he didn't want to get into a brawl over his supplies. Otto was lucky to have gotten there in time. A package was delivered to him, containing a hazmat suit, but it barely had enough food to last 2 weeks. Surely there would be a solution to this problem soon?

Day 364. It had almost been a year since the ill-fated broadcast. The global death toll was 100million, mostly due to starvation. Otto couldn't believe he was still alive, despite journeying out in his hazmat suit multiple times to find food. It was the anti-radiation medicine that kept him going.

PING.

An email. He hadn't received one of those in a while.

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It read, 'Dear Number Two,

I've won! I have singlehandedly slowed down global warming. Not one plane took flight this last year, hardly any fossil fuels were burnt, overpopulation is resolving itself. I must admit, I didn't expect everyone to believe my broadcasts in every continent, but they did! It was easier than I thought. How gullible mankind is. In my attempt to win our silly little bet it seems I have given our world a future. When you really think about it, was staying inside really all that bad? Now the future generation will have a healthy, not dying, planet to thrive on. Me, the accidental humanist, who would have thought.

Regards,

Number One'