

The Agony of Unsubscribing

James Veitch

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Right. Thanks for sticking around. There we go. OK, guys, I got a text message awhile ago from – that wasn't meant for me, and I know that because it began, "Hi, Phil."

Can I get my slides up there, guys? There we go.

"Hi, Phil."

I'm probably gonna need it to be on my slides for the whole thing. Not me.

He said, "My name's Andrew. I'm one of the new tenants, 11 Dover Place, and I've been told you're the person to contact regarding upkeep, problems, etc."

And I thought, "No, obviously I'm not." And I was – I just said – I said, "Ah, I'm not actually." And I was just composing another message, explaining the fact that basically he got the number wrong, probably by a digit or something like that.

But before I'd had a chance to send that message, I got this back saying, "Actually you are."

[Laughter]

And I thought, "No, you dick."

"According to the leasing agreement, you're responsible for looking after 11 Dover Place from a maintenance perspective."

And from my perspective – which it has to be said, guys, is not one of maintenance – there was only one thing I can do, really. And my hands were tied. I said, "My mistake. How can I help? Phil."

[Laughter]

And we were off. He said, "I'm in the room with en-suite. Can a thermostatic valve be fitted to the towel rail in the bathroom as it's making the room unbearably hot?"

I don't know if you know what a towel rail is. Well, it's in the – it's a rail for towels. And I said, "No can do." *[Laughter]* "But I'm having my builder come 'round on Wednesday to remove one of the windows." *[Laughter]* "This should stop the bedroom overheating."

[Laughter]

He said, "Hi, Phil, I'm at work on Wednesday. Can you clarify what you meant when you said you were removing a window?"

I said, "I'm not removing a window; that would be ridiculous. I'm getting a professional to do it." *[Laughter]* "We should achieve a nice summer breeze to combat the towel rail heat."

[Laughter]

He said, "Can you please explain what you mean about removing windows?"

Now, at this point, if you were Andrew, I think you would be wondering whether I was indeed Phil or whether you got the number wrong. And I – but I didn't want him to wonder that. I didn't want him to think about it. Because by this point, guys, I had plans.

[Laughter]

So, what I did is I just googled the – Google's amazing – I googled the address, and the first thing that came up was an archive Zoopla page for 11 Dover Place, and that included a floor plan. And I thought, "Wow, that is genuinely useful, because that enabled me to send him this. I said, "The plan for Wednesday" – now watch very carefully, guys; I made it like a little animation for him – I sent *[sound of tile breaking]* *[video on overhead]*.

[Laughter]

I turned that into an animated gif, and I sent it to him via iMessage. What I didn't realize at the time is if you send animated gifs via iMessages, they just repeat. So, basically, this is what I sent him. It was like *[sound of tile breaking repeatedly]* *[video on overhead]*.

[Laughter]

He's, "I fail to see how that would help."

And I realized he was right, actually, because I don't remember much from physics at school, but I do remember you need an in and you also need an out. So, I also sent him that. *[Sound of tile breaking]* *[video on overhead]*

[Laughter]

And I said – again, it's the same thing, same thing happening, you know? *[Sound of tile breaking repeatedly]* *[video on overhead]* I said, "Look, FYI, to take full advantage, you'll need to keep your bathroom door open at all times."

[Laughter]

He said, "This is unacceptable. If you do this on Wednesday, my lawyer will be in touch."

[Laughter]

I thought, "Ooooooh." *[Laughter]* I said, "Andrew, from Wednesday, expect the flat to be out of action for six weeks as we initiate the following four-step plan." I was having a pretty great time; I'll be honest. "Step one, remove all four walls." *[Sound of explosion] [video on overhead]* And that's just step one.

[Laughter]

"Step two, expand bathroom." *[Multiple sounds] [video on overhead] [Laughter]* "Step three, isolate towel rail within refrigeration dome." *[Thumping sound] [video on overhead] [laughter]* "Step four, counteract remaining tower rail heat with tower of ice."

[Laughter]

He said, "I've just spoken to the real landlord, so you can knock it off."

[Laughter]

I said, "No problem." *[Laughter]* "Out of interest, did he agree to sort the towel rail?"

He said, "Stop texting me."

I said, "Go on. Did he?"

"Yes."

I have a great time messing around. I first started doing this – like doing comedy – and then I started – just – basically, one day I just started replying to scam e-mails, and that's what really kind of took off for me. I still do it, and I just thought I'd show you a few that I've been doing recently.

So, the first scam e-mail that I got was from a friend of mine – pretending to be my friend Catherine. One of these ones. And the great – it was great because if the scammer is pretending to be a friend of yours, they have no idea what your relationship with that person is. You can say anything you want. So, you can set traps.

This is one I got from my friend Catherine saying, "Dear James, our journey has turned sour." Classic Catherine. "We misplaced our wallet, passport and cell phone. I will indeed be grateful if I can get a loan of 1,800 euros from you." Catherine's obviously had

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her e-mail kind of hacked. They've reset her passport; she can't get back in. And then they just blitzed everyone with this e-mail – everyone in her address book.

And I said, "Catherine, of course I can help. Is everything OK? How's Keith doing?"

[Laughter]

Said, "James, I'm so glad you replied back. Are you headed to" *[video on overhead]* – it's always Western Union, FYI.

And I said, "Of course. Don't worry. How's Keith though?"

Said, "James, Keith is fine. He's have a meeting with the British Embassy now to get replacement passports. Please go to Western Union."

And I said, "Of course. I'll pop along first thing tomorrow. I must say, though, Keith seems remarkably capable" – *[slide on overhead]* *[laughter]* – "I remember he could roll over; he could woof for a treat. Now he's taking meetings at the British Embassy?"
[Slide on overhead]

[Laughter]

I get lots of even tighter scams. I learned to spot all different types. So, there's the classic kind of Nigerian prince that we've all heard of, but you might not have heard of the altruistic widow, but that's an equally ubiquitous scam. The hardest ones for me to deal with, being single, are the honey traps. 'Cause beautiful girls would e-mail me from abroad, and they'd be like, "I love you, James."

And I'd be like, "I really wish this were the case."

But they were really lovely and really well-drawn characters. This is one I got from a girl called Elena. She was wonderful. She said, "I'm a girl who loves to give people happiness always." Which is amazing, but that's exactly the sort of girl I'm looking for.

[Laughter]

She said, "My hobbies are reading novels, jogging, listening to music, cooking, listening to music, TV, and movies."

I said, "My hobbies are playing piano and guitar, pining for girls, worrying about climate change, pining for girls, and the poetry of John Keats."

Then she sent me a picture of her. This is the picture of her. Now, she is genuinely beautiful. Genuinely – she was really lovely. And this is the hard thing. Now, I was like,

"Well, what do you do with that?" So, I reply, I said, "That's amazing." You know, obviously – *[slide on overhead]* *[laughter]*.

Then she sent me another e-mail, and she said, "This is me and my passport."

I was like *[slide on overhead]*, "Well, OK, what are we doing?" Do you know what I mean?

[Laughter]

Then she said this – she said – oh, so, something's happening here, basically. What's happening here is that she is trying to – she's trying to scam me. But I'm also kind of trying to scam her in a way, 'cause I was getting lots of comedy from this. So, I'm trying to pretend to be the person who she wants me to be. There's a little dance going on.

So, I said, "I've made a lot of money but haven't anyone to spend it on. It just sits in a Swiss account, earning interest. How boring." *[Laughter]* "Don't go thinking I'm some sort of business mogul; I'm not. I've just made a few shrewd investments along the way. I bought hummus back in '93, when everyone was like, 'What's hummus?'" *[Laughter]* Some of you were in on that. "I wish I had someone to share my life and wealth with, something to keep me from those biweekly money bonfires I have in the garden for tax purposes."

[Laughter]

She said, "I believe you are very attractive man." *[Laughter]* "I'm excited, and my head is like any big station with a lot of voice."

I said, "How – how – how long" – *[slide on overhead]*.

[Laughter]

Then she sent me this. Now, she sent me something to verify it is actually her. So, what she sent me was basically her holding up – a picture of her holding up a piece of paper. And on that piece of paper is written my e-mail address.

And this – that kind of means it must be her, right? But no, it doesn't. What it means is that someone, probably a guy, has taken a series of pictures of a beautiful girl, like one of her holding up a passport, one of her, you know, in a shop, and then taken one of her holding up a blank piece of paper. And every time he wants to scam someone, he just puts their e-mail onto that piece of paper.

And that's when I realized something. That's when I realized that I have a copy of Photoshop as well. So, this – I sent her this. I just wrote, "Hi, Elena." You know? *[Slide]*

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on overhead] *[laughter]*. But I didn't hear back. I didn't hear back from her. And I was like, "Well, that's rubbish, isn't it?"

So, I thought I'd try again 'cause I still had it open in Photoshop. So, I thought I'd – there was something in her eyes that made – I just thought – so, I made that. *[Slide on overhead]* *[laughter]*. Well done, I think. And then I didn't hear back. So, I went thermonuclear, and I sent her that. *[Video on overhead]* *[scream like ahhhhhh]* – you know what I mean? It makes sense 'cause she is Russian. You know?

[Laughter]

Hey, that was a clever joke.

[Laughter]

Let's do this bit. I got an e-mail from a company called – from Sainsbury's. They're a supermarket in the U.K. And I got an e-mail from them saying, "Just three weeks until Sainsbury's at King's Cross opens."

And I was like, "Wahey. You know, why – how have they got my e-mail address? Why would I need this information?" Anyway, so I – obviously I did what we all do; I just clicked Unsubscribe.

A bit of audio on that, if, then, we could pump the audio a little bit. Hang on. "Just three weeks" and then *[click sound]* *[slide on overhead]*. Wasn't worth it, was it?

[Laughter]

Oh, well. A week passed and despite clicking on subscribe, I got another one, "Just two weeks until Sainsbury's at King's Cross opens." If anything, I was less enthused.

I said, "Why are they e-mailing me? How did they get my e-mail? And why aren't they unsubscribing me." So, I just tried again. *[Clicking sound]* *[slide on overhead]* I thought maybe I didn't click hard enough.

And one – a week passed, and – you guessed it – "Just one week until Sainsbury's at King's Cross opens."

I thought, "Well, screw it." I replied, and I said, "I literally cannot wait." *[Laughter]* "What do you need from me?"

[Laughter]

And they said, "Hi, James, I've asked a colleague to help me with your query." Like it needs help. This guy called Dan.

And I said, "What's the plan, Dan? I'm thinking fireworks, bouncy castle..."

He said, "I'm not sure what you mean."

I said, "I'm just tremendously excited about the opening! Do you want to book the bouncy castle or shall I?"

[Laughter]

He said, "I think you have misunderstood. A new store is opening, but there is no celebration planned. Your feedback is really important to us."

[Laughter]

I said, "What was with the 'Two weeks until,' 'Three weeks until' e-mails? I was getting excited!"

He said, "I'm sorry you're disappointed."

And I thought I'd go full crazy for him, and I said, "Not to worry. Let's do something anyway." *[Laughter]* "Besides, the deposit on the bouncy castle was nonrefundable. If we don't use it, we're out a few hundred quid, Dan."

Dan, legitimately, began to panic. And he said, "Mr. Veitch, I'm not responsible for anything you have ordered. Your feedback is really important to us."

[Laughter]

I said, "Let's not point fingers. Bottom line, you and I are in this together." *[Laughter]* Question, will you be there to make sure people take their shoes off?" *[Laughter]*

And then my relationship with Dan I think significantly deteriorated, because the next e-mail I got was this: "Thanks for your e-mail. Your case number –" *[slide on overhead]*.

And I was like, "That's outrageous." You know? Did he stop when I was – while I – did I want him to stop? No. So, I said, "Dan?"

And I got another one. It was a different case number *[slide on overhead]*. And I said, *[shouts]* "Daaaaan!" Another case number *[slide on overhead]*. I said, "D-Dog?"

[Laughter]

He said, "The store is now open."

I said, "But now we have a bouncy castle for no reason. Fancy coming over?"

[Laughter]

And then we were back to this *[slide on overhead]*. And that's the thing, isn't it? The Internet gave us access to everything, but it also gave everything access to us. And, you know, it kinda bothers me. I think the only thing to do with this sort of thing is to fight fire with fire.

So, I considered my response, and this is what I sent. I replied back, and I said, "Thanks for your e-mail. Your case number –" *[slide on overhead] [laughter]*. I don't know what I expected, but genuinely I did not anticipate this. It was like, "Holy shit. Is this –" *[slide on overhead] [laughter]*. But you have to be – you can't just – you have to keep – you can't just...

I was like, "OK, well, let's just keep doing it." You know? But it was over with Dan. So, is this what I'm doing for the rest of my life? *[Laughter]* It was quite labor intensive. I had other stuff to do. So, what I thought I would do is I have a little e-mail auto reply program. Right?

So, what I did was I wrote a little formula that says, "Thanks for your e-mail." Whenever it receives an e-mail from Sainsbury's, it would just reply with, "Thanks for your e-mail. Your case number is –" and then the formula just ups the case number by one every single time. I put this on my server, I set it running, and then I forgot about it.

[Laughter]

And a couple of years ago, I checked on it, and it transpired there have been a number of e-mails going back and forth between me and Sainsbury's. *[Laughter]* We were currently on 21,439. *[Laughter]* It gives me an enormous sense of satisfaction to know that these two computer programs are just gonna be pinging each other essentially for eternity. *[Laughter]* Best thing is, as well, I've put in a wild card. So, every once in a while, randomly, it pops in like *[ding] [slide on overhead] [laughter]*.

M-kay. So, I don't like tedium. I think tedium is what bothers me. And also the way that companies try and – I think it's hard enough to discriminate the things that generally are important in the world from things that are not important, without getting companies trying to pretend that they're more important than they are. And I feel this a lot more and more.

I get my hair cut in London at a place called Headmasters *[slide on overhead]*. Obviously. *[Laughter]* All right, anyway I get it cut there. But whenever I call them up to get a haircut, they say, "James, who do you want to cut your hair?"

And I say, "Well, preferably someone who can."

And they say, "No, no, no, no, no, James. We have all these different types of people. We have a Stylist, a Senior Stylist, a Master Hair Designer, a Team Designer, and they all have their arbitrary price points."

And I just – this bothers me 'cause, you know, there's enough stuff in my head without having to work out whether a Master Hair Designer is as good as a Senior Consultant. Also, where did they get the Stylist from? Did he just drag them off the street?

[Laughter]

So, I thought they deserved to be called out on this. So, I did what I normally do. I sent them an e-mail. And I said, "Dear Headmasters, I was pleased with my recent haircut until I saw my friend Nige sporting his haircut. I was devastated to discover that despite paying significantly less than me, Nige had come away with a comparable haircut. How do you account for this?"

[Laughter]

They got in touch. They said, "James, I'm really sorry your appointment left you less than satisfied. What were you disappointed by? Jennifer on the Customer Relations Team."

And I said, "Jennifer, Basically, Nige always books a Senior Stylist. So, I figured by booking my appointment with a Master Hair Consultant, I was ensuring a vastly better haircut. But this was not the case. Also, I didn't get a biscuit with my filtered coffee, and he did."

[Laughter]

I wanted to include some stats *[slide on overhead]* to back up my – so, what I did was I took 65 as 100 percent. You've probably seen quite a few graphs, haven't you? And this is... *[Laughter]* So, that's the promise. There's a 30.77 percent difference. But then, actually, the reality is very different between me and Nige's hair. It was a much smaller difference.

And she said, "James, The class of Stylist is based on their experience. I'm very sorry that you feel Nige's haircut is better than yours."

And I said, "Oh, I don't, Jennifer. His haircut is definitely worse than mine. It's just that it's worse –" *[slide on overhead] [laughter]*.

[Slide on overhead] [laughter]

I said, "Basically, I was seen by a Master Hair Consultant. By my calculations, I walked out of the salon just 16.92% shy of the elusive 100% perfect haircut. Yet despite being cut by a Senior Stylist, Nige's hair looks like it could have been done by a Team Designer. If I didn't know better, Jennifer, I'd suspect Headmasters of fabricating arbitrary job titles to make haircuts seem more important than they are. Also, Nige got a biscuit, and I didn't."

[Laughter]

We all know that we can't – we need to have some stats. So, I sent them a graph explaining exactly what happened. So, that's me on the left. That's where Nige should be, Nige actual, that's me, far right – what we all aspire to, the 100% perfect haircut.

She said, "James, my manager is asking what you mean when you say a hundred percent perfect haircut."

[Slide on overhead] [laughter]

She said, "Dear James, I'm delighted to say we can offer you a free cut and style (30 minutes)! Jennifer"

I said, "That's amazing." But to be honest, guys, obviously a question had been left unresolved. So, I sent her a pie chart explaining. I don't know if you – *[slide on overhead] [laughter]*.

"I will make sure there is a biscuit."

[Clapping]

I bet – OK, I've got this bit for you before. I've got two bits for you before I finish, and that should be fine. I got a parking ticket – I got a parking ticket from London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham. It was for entering and stopping at a box juncture when prohibited. You don't have box junctions here, but basically it's a little box that you – you can't stop in it; you always have to move through it. So, you make sure that you can always go through it.

Anyway, I said to them, "This is ridiculous. You have no evidence for this. It is preposterous. The idea of me being in box junction is ridiculous. Where is your evidence?" And just surprised, they did have some fairly damning evidence, because they

had this video of – *[video on overhead]* – and you can see, genuinely, that – you can see the panic in my eyes as I realized I'm stuck in this box junction. *[Thumping sound on video]* Right?

[Laughter]

Now, I went to that box junction, though, and basically – look at this – *[slide on overhead]* all the lines are completely worn away. How am I supposed to know that the box junction's there if the lines aren't clear. That was my argument. Anyway, I sent that to them. I said, "You shouldn't be fining me for this."

And they sent me the plans of the box junction. *[Slide on overhead]* They said, "That's the box junction. That's how it is. That's how it always will be. That's perfectly legal."

So, I sent it back to them. I said, "Look." *[Slide on overhead]* I corrected it.

And then they sent me an e-mail saying, "Dear Mr. Veitch, I have determined the box junction is of acceptable visibility."

So, I sent them a letter, and it was a very strongly-worded letter that I sent. This is the letter that I sent them. *[Slide on overhead]* *[laughter]* *[applause]*

They said, "Mr. Veitch, we received the letter, but the writing was, unfortunately, too faint to read."

I said, "I have determined the letter" – *[slide on overhead]* *[laughter]*.

Guys, can I say the F-word here?

Response: Yes.

Well, I know you can, but just... The people who are paying me, can I say the F-word here?

Response: Yes.

Twice. Thank you. Well, actually, I'm gonna say it twice. So, here we go. I want to do this bit because I've got some time.

We have a thing called Gumtree. Gum tree which is like Craigslist. And I was bored once. So, I put up a flux capacitor for sale on Gumtree. *[Laughter]* If you don't know what a flux capacitor is, it's from the *Back to the Future* films. If you have one, you can travel back and forth in time. I put one up for sale. *[Slide on overhead]* I said, "I

discovered an extra one after a fuck-up in the space/time continuum. That now means that I have two of everything."

[Laughter]

I put one up for sale. Often I do these things, and I just forget that I've done them. And then someone – so, someone – it took ages, but a guy replied. A guy called Joe Lawson sent me an e-mail saying, "So, I can use this to go back to the future, right – question mark, question mark, smiley face."

And I said, "You certainly can, Joe." But crucially, I now had Joe's e-mail address – *[laughter]* – which, as we've established, is not a strong position for him to be in.
[Laughter]

So, because it was a flux capacitor and a time machine, what I then did is I went to Gmail.com, and I set up another e-mail address, this time for futurejoelawson@gmail.com. I then sent Joe an e-mail from himself – *[laughter]* – from the future.

"Dear Joe Lawson, This is Future Joe Lawson. I've come to warn you. Do not buy the flux capacitor. A bad idea. Yours sincerely, Future Joe." That's not great – is it? – good news. So, I wanted to give him like a stock tip. So, I said, obviously, "P.S., invest in hummus."

[Laughter]

"Who is this?"

I said, "It's you, Joe. Thirty years from now. It's mostly the same. Except now you're big into hummus."

[Laughter]

He said, "WTF?"

I said, "Oh, I remember when I used to say 'WTF.' Enjoy those heady days of abbrevs."

He said, "Ha-ha OK. You're the guy from Gumtree. Good one, but you've gone too far."

I didn't think I had gone too far.

[Laughter]

So, because it was a time machine, this flux capacitor, I then went to Gmail.com again, and I made another e-mail address, this time for Future Future Joe Lawson. I then sent

Joe an e-mail from the future of the future – *[slide on overhead] [laugh]* – copying in Future Joe Lawson.

[Laughter]

Stay with me. "I am Future Future Joe Lawson. I am from a future far beyond Future Joe's. I just wanted to chime in and say you can safely purchase the flux capacitor. It all works out in the end. Hummus still good."

[Laughter]

Future Joe was not happy about this at all. He replied to all. He said, "Why should Joe Lawson and I, Future Joe Lawson, trust you?"

[Laughter]

But Future Future Joe was even less happy. He said, "You are not Future Joe Lawson. You are both Past Joe Lawson."

"OK, stop e-mailing me."

[Laughter]

I'd forgotten about him. I was having such a great time. I was like, "Oh, he's still here."

"Please fuck off."

[Laughter]

And they said – but Future Joe said, "Joseph, This probably isn't super helpful to point out, but you did just tell yourself to fuck off."

[Laughter]

If you think about it, "Twice."

[Laughter]

Future Joe said, "Joe, I've had an idea. I'm going to use the flux capacitor to go forward in time and work out whether Future Future Joe can be trusted."

He said, "I'm at work!"

[Laughter]

"I did it, Joe. I've gone further in the future, but I can't see Future Future Joe Lawson anywhere. *[Gasp]* Holy shit. I just realized something."

He said, "Look, I actually can't deal with this right now."

[Laughter]

"I am Future Future Joe Lawson. It's a bit of head-fuck, but there you go."

He said, "I'm blocking you."

So, I had to get in quick. I said, "Your feedback is really important to me."

[Laughter] [applause]

Thanks, guys. Alrighty, this is the last thing I'm gonna do; I'm gonna leave you with this. This has been really fun.

OK, I get a lot of e-mails that are not meant for me. I get a lot of e-mail because I have Veitch@me.com. All right? My last name @me.com, which means that if someone misses off the initial, AVeitch, BVeitch, CVeitch, I just get the e-mail. And I reply to a lot of these. Some are more fun than others. This is one I got that was not for me; it was for Alan and Deb Veitch, and I have no idea who these people are, but it was for Alan and Deb Veitch. And it said, "Please review the attached estimate."

Now, the company is called Relex – a guy called Lex Fischer runs a company called Relex Pools. I love him already. *[Laughter]* And the pool was 102LF. And I thought, "OK, I'll reply." So, I replied, and I said, "Look, what does LF stand for?"

And they said, "LF stands for linear feet."

Janice did not seem to mind or notice that I was neither Alan nor Deb, and I thought, "That's interesting."

And she said, "See attached plans." Now, these are the plans that she attached – *[slide on overhead]* – of the swimming pool they're about to build. So, those are the neighboring houses, obviously. And then on the top left, that's obviously Alan and Deb's house, and that next to it is the proposed swimming pool they were going to have built.

And I want to make very clear, guys, you should never reply to an e-mail that's not meant for you. *[Laughter]* You shouldn't do it. You should just delete it. You should let them know they made a mistake, et cetera. Right? But I don't know about you, but looking at that – to me, I don't know about you, but I just didn't think Alan and Deb were going to be happy with that.

[Laughter]

I said, "Janice, I'm going to be frank. I'm unhappy with the size of the pool."

She said, "Mr. Veitch, It is not legal to build on private property. The pool is as large as it can be without encroaching on your neighbor's property."

I said, "Old Man McPherson? He won't mind. We're still skimping on the size of the pool. I don't want people to come round and be like, 'Where's the pool?' Balls on the line, Janice; it needs to be larger."

[Laughter]

"How much larger?"

I said – boom – *[slide on overhead] [laughter]* Hopefully that has not happened.

[Laughter]

She said, "We – that is not possible."

No shit, Janice.

"We cannot build that close to the property."

Well, I'm a problem-solver. I took away the property. *[Slide on overhead] [laughter]* I thought that she would know that I was joking.

She said, "Where will you live?"

[Laughter]

I said, "Boom." *[Slide on overhead] [laughter]*

Thank you for having me everyone. Take care, have a great conference. Bye-bye.

[Applause]

[End of Audio]