

# INSTACRIME

A shortish story

by

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My name is Rene Martini (phonetically Reeny just so you know I'm a girl, lets get that quite clear). Okay it sounds made up and that's, well, for you to judge, but my parents were a little flamboyant. I digress. I'm a new student at Manchester University. Reading maths (or math if American) and at the moment I'm sitting in a large lecture theatre, one that is still of yesteryear, gowns and blackboards and that, just arrived through the busy entrance, not helped by some police checking all of us coming in, oh and the lecture (my first at uni) is just... about... to begin.

In walks a professor, well he looks like one any way. Stands at the middle. No words. Smiles through his well creased face, turns to an enormous blackboard that seems as wide as the horizon, and starts scribbling out in chalk....(what happened to electronic boards?) ...and gradually builds a story in numbers, starting with .... "If  $2+2=4$  (i got that) and" ...well he was off then. People started laughing, 'ooing', looking puzzled, clapping and all that. It was a good old story and the board began to fill. Forty minutes later he was still silently going and had 230 freshers absolutely wrapped around his chalk-finger. Clever man. I knew i'd enjoy it here, though I hadn't really met anyone properly as I missed freshers week through illness. I could tell where where he was going with the next bit and my eyeline got distracted by someone in front who either was super intelligent and knew all the professor's next moves or had other things on her mind. The girl right in front was on Instagram - that's a picture social media platform thing for those few remaining people in the Milky Way that haven't fallen like nearly everyone on this planet into its web. She was on her phone and had just posted an

image of the lecture - professor in action - with the hashtag #profplum tagged. Yes, I know monopoly and all that, well it clearly suited his style and was one of the reasons a lot of people came here to do maths, he was quite a performer. I looked back at the girl in front. It seemed as though lots of others were doing the same so I looked at my own, rather cracked faced phone for #profplum and there were loads of people posting, mainly impressed, with lots of 'wows' and that, with of course the odd person who'd got completely lost but was still enjoying the show. I clicked on another option in Instagram to see quite how many people were posting. There must have been at least thirty. I could see names and pictures - someone I recognised, hey, I'd check them later.

A few pictures popped up on my Instagram trail from people back home and others I followed. I looked back at some of my own pictures from the summer... that holiday with mum in Herghada, then the time in Pembrokeshire and those lovely cliffs, Hadrian's wall walking with Dad, a windmill in Amsterdam and of course Cosmeston country park and walking my beloved dogs Meg and Summer... yes a good summer...

"Your course tutors will examine the challenge posed here on Friday!" I broke out of my golden summer reverie as Prof Plum had actually spoken. He bowed and left. I took a picture of the board to get to grips with later on whatever challenge had been posed.

In the melee to leave, as it seemed everyone had a gap until the next lecture, all my compatriots were heading for the uni Costa. There was a group of girls I'd said hello to just

before the lecture who mostly had that slightly-scared-who-shall-I-talk-to look, that no doubt I'd shown myself. I've often wondered about social interaction and whether you can put it down to some scientific explanation. You know the social extrovert types, then the introverts, the processors and the creatives and all that profiling stuff. But then our own sensors seem to always work at something else, anyway after two minutes I'd worked out what really helped people connect was humour. If you didn't get the other person's own version or complete lack of it, then you were never going to click, as other hurried introductions I'd had the previous day had not got past the 'from where/grades / school' stuff, in order to progress to any sort of 'yes lets try to be friends and see where it....'

"Coffee?" Asked a long black headed girl, tall and slim, hair in weird braided patterns. I nodded, "I'm Rachel, hi!" She held out her hand and I shook it, seemed a bit business like and wondered if I was in a meeting. Then she nodded across the room to the rest of the group and I slid over. Quickly I was introduced to Abi and Izzy. Abi was smiley, and gentle and wore lots of nice, tasteful pastelly stuff, her hair was straightened and smart, while Izzy was so different, it was like she didn't care, but did in a really last minute sort of way. Izzy was different for two reasons, she had much shorter hair and was very, very Scottish!

"So we all saw you on your phone, how did you keep up with the Plum?" Asked Izzy in what I was quickly beginning to realise was her very direct style. I replied...

"Oh well I knew where he was going on that bit and something took my attention it was a girl in front, I hadn't quite realised how big the 'Plum' was as you call him on social media." Rachel's eyes widened slightly and I

responded to her unasked question. “I noticed how many people were following him on #ProfPlum”.

“I know he’s so cool isn't he” dreamed in Abi, smiling.

“Hey, did you hear about that girl last night?” Asked Izzy.

“Oh yeah, she was a student on our course wasn't she, I even met her in freshers week” replied Abi.

“What student?” I asked, noticing Rachel drinking her coffee quickly. Izzy seemed well into the gossip.

“So she somehow got involved in drug running, met a guy in a van in that car park by the leisure centre you know near our hall, and then I guess on the way back got hit on the head.”

“That’s terrible! Oh that’s why the police were outside!” I added.

Izzy nodded. “Seems strange that someone gets involved in that stuff so soon and then is taken out so quickly.”

“Oh there’s someone there I just need to say hello to”

Rachel stood up “let’s meet up later at Cloud 23 I've got passes, ten o'clock?” and with that she left.

“She seemed on edge a bit, don’t you think.” We nodded at Abi’s observation.

“Unless ...” I said

“What?” Asked Izzy

“Oh nothing I was thinking about the poor girl who died.”

“What you mean, how they all communicate and avoid the police?” I nodded back at Izzy’s question.

It went quiet for a while until Abi’s latte slurping became so comic that we all laughed.

“Hey I’m trialling for football” said Izzy

“Oh yeah I need to go too, I'm in for cricket” I replied.

“Slightly weird”, replied Abi, “I'm going to medieval reenactment” she giggled. “Lets meet later at Cloud 23”... and then Izzy added...

“I should coco!”

We all laughed at Izzy’s phrase, it was so old yet coolly retro. I wondered about the challenges of getting to such a desirable fleshpot as I waited for a bus to my trial.

I looked at my watch, checked my phone, looked at Instagram. More than other social media, it hooked me in. I noticed that a few more likes had accumulated on my Hadrian’s wall images. Suddenly Rachel’s face popped up on the header of the screen, I clicked to follow. She was called #Rachcocktail01

I tracked her pictures. She certainly had an expensive lifestyle or rich parents. There was a picture of her cars, plural! I hadn't even got one and had only just passed my theory test. She had a penchant for Porsche. Then there were pictures of an amazing lawn and manicured flower beds and a basket of bottles of Barolo, so out of my bracket.

I got onto the tram, thought it was a bus I was waiting for and realised I was in Manchester! Found a seat and tracked Instagram again. There was Max, an old school friend, funny and witty in all he did. He was a bit weird but nice weird, you could tell. He’d posted about caterpillars today, as well as his cat. He always posted about his cat. I looked up and saw a cat sitting on a wall. The same black style fur. Coincidence or pattern? Hey! that was the message of the Prof, ‘always seek patterns in what might seem random scatterings of events and things....’

Max always had a cat photo, so I tried to filter all his images of cats, one eating, one preening, one sleeping, one playing, one eating, one preen... oh! I kept going and there

was a perfect pattern of four. I laughed. The woman across from me looked up. I ignored her and continued to smile.

Then I saw on Rachel's posts a like from someone's identity which intrigued my curiosity. She was called FloGirl. I liked the pictures, they were all summery, with golden happy images. I couldn't believe they were all actually ones she had taken as they were so perfect. I know it was the end of summer, early Autumn, but had she really seen all these amazing rural scenes?. Certainly Rachel liked a lot of them, not all though...

"University sports centre..." the tram's automatic voice stop announcer woke me out of my mental wonderings.

The afternoon was fun, meeting new and likeminded people. On the tram back I pondered quite what the night would be like. Rachel had seemingly organised everything.

A shower and inevitably quick search of what I call my 'wardrobe' meant i was sort of ready.

"Quick, come on Rene!" I rushed up to the hotel's main entrance and a ticket was pressed into my hand by Abi. We had all glammed up not really knowing what we'd let ourselves in for.

"Thanks, you look good!"

"Oh, nice bit of slap I borrowed from Izzy" Abi nodded to Izzy.

"Let's go" Rachel appeared, she seemed, serene, quite beautiful. Her dress and figure were impressive. She was a bit like her Insta posts I thought.

Cloud23 was amazing, and so were its inhabitants. “Look, its Becks” Abi was star struck and I had to move her on. We quickly found a place and Rachel immediately called a waiter and just shouted ‘Champagne’.

That was so cool. We, that is me and the other two giggled as the little girls we really were. Rachel wasn't giggling though, just smiling serenely, again.

My phone buzzed and instinctively I picked it out of my bag, I'm addicted, I thought thinking I should leave it alone.

The new person I was following, FloGirl, had posted something about a vitamin cocktail with beetroot using a starburst of light refracting through a crystal glass of blood reds. Pretty, again. This image followed another one of a shelf of health food books all at different angles.

Then Rachel posted, I looked up at her as she expertly slipped her phone back into her bag.

“Right ladies, zumwohl, bottoms up”

And with that, the Champagne flowed. I knew I was pretty unworldly about all this but when the bubbles hit me like an unblocked mountain stream, I almost toppled over from the first gulp, the room focused in like an out of control camera lens. Everyone was laughing, I was sliding down a huge snow slope and laughing out loud until I collapsed into the bank of soft cushions.

I woke in Abi's room. Thank goodness. Abi was standing at the window and coffee had brewed.

“Oh my gosh what was that all about?” I asked.

“Well my dearie, methinks we was hoodwinked” replied Abi unsuccessfully using pirate speak.



My worries were happily confirmed.

“We were taken for a ride by flashy Rachel or whatever her name is.”

“So you think she's not a student then?”

“Yes I think she's a student, but up to something extra curricular. I don't know what it is, other than spiking what was our already heady champagne. Good job you collapsed so early it gave me a reason to leave”

“Yeah, I was never very sure about how such an expensive night was going to pan out. Especially as I only had a twenty pound note on me.”

I slurped coffee and walked over to the window, watched a boy focus so much on his phone that he walked into a lamp-post.

“Here look at this” I said.

“Hey you love Instagram don't you!” Mocked Abi.

“It's not well, it's more than that, look at this.” I showed Abi my phone screen. “Look, here's someone who follows Rachel, see its all dreamy perfect countryside and food and rural images and health stuff.”

“So what does that mean, maybe she or FloGirl likes all that stuff.”

“Look at this one...” I waited. It took a while. But slowly the mist rose for Abi. “Look at the patterns.”

“Oh yeah, that's good, the initials of the health books which are not straight make the word ‘leisure’, clever and quite cool, whats it for anyway?”

“Look at this other follower.” I showed Abi another screen from someone called...

“WeeklyBoy's a cool name, so what's the pattern here? H'mnn he doesn't post much, only at night and maybe

twice a week..." I could hear Abi's brain working, just as well as I hadn't got this far.

"Ah, yes see all these? What would prof Plum ask?"

"Where's the pattern?"

I looked as Abi swiped across from image to image and then it dawned on me. "Time"

"Correct, look, all have a time device or notice of some sort, yet not the central part of the picture, this one has 9.40pm and all are in the evening."

"How about checking the hashtags as well..." my suggestion took three coffees to crack the code. Good job we had no lectures today. Finally Abi shouted

"Yes"

"I looked across from my phone.

"Look, I reckon WeeklyBoy is a ring leader of sorts, I've written out all these hashtags in chronological order. They all match the image he has...see...?"

"So he finds images to match the hashtag and somehow allocates someone within the picture directing them to fulfil a mission, no wonder he doesn't post much." I looked at the list, this is how it looked, first the image then hashtags:

Old Trafford Cricket ground #summersport #whiteboots

Courgettes. #greenspringlife #morrisonsgreenoffer

Croquet. #summerfun #bathtime

Penarth Pier #fall #lookout. #piertime

Warhol #Munroe #springinparis #leicestersqodeondays

Olympic stadium #summersport #greatcoaching

Cardiff's Millenium stadium #hywl #haf #armsparking

Newport transporter bridge #gaeaf #bridgetoofarcafe

An old cricket pavilion #teaandcake #haf #penarthcc

A slide at a playground #fastslider #summerplaytime  
#victoriapark

An homage to Johan Cruyff #footielegend #earrach  
#noucamp

The river Taff in summer #pontcanna #wales

“But where do they go?” Abi asked.

“Got it” it suddenly clicked for me. “Look at the final hashtags, they are all places, I guess car parks probably.

“OK, so WeeklyBoy sets the place and someone I guess with money, then that someone sets the time, look lets track FloGirl from her last post of courgettes”

“But hang on who gets the pickup or meeting?”

“You mean the one who sets the time?”

I nodded.

“Easy,…” Abi laughed. The picture and its hashtag are the other party.”

“But the pictures are all different?” I was confused.

“Look, the images and hashtags have a pattern, or at least four types of groups, green growing things like courgettes, sport, art, and places of interest. They must all relate to at least four people so green is person one, sport another and so on.

“Hang on, we’ve missed someone, there's the person with the goods probably drugs I know, but who is that then?” I asked.

We both looked at our screens knowing this was one missing piece.

The door knocked and in came Rachel.

“Oh!” She was surprised to see us both. “Just checking you were ok!”

“Feeling a bit better thanks”

She nodded and left.

“No she wasn't.” Murred Abi. “Nice feigning of feeling ill!” We laughed and looked back at our screens.

After another ten minutes Abi jumped up.

“Got it!”

“Go on.”

“So, look at the middle hashtags...!”

I scanned each one and then it clicked.

“Oh yes, seasons, with a bit of welsh and Gaelic added for good measure. I suppose a welsh summer, haf, is one person and and the English summer another.”

“Right, let’s test it.” I could see Abi was on a roll. She looked up FloGirl’s post for the same day. It was a group of girls doing yoga and when Abi zoomed in there was a poster on a notice board, advertising a car boot sale near the students union building and a start time of nine o'clock.

“So I bet this guy has got people all over using this system,”

“And all so loosely connected it would be difficult to pin anything on anyone.”

“Unless someone proved their theorem.”

“What you mean check it out, for real?” Abi’s eyes would have fallen out on springs if this actually was an animation. “Come on” I was on it now... “Lets see what’s happening today...”

We looked at WeeklyBoy’s latest post.

“Oh look” said Abi “Its two hours old.” We looked at each other. The picture was a cricket ground.

“Old Trafford cricket ground I recognise that. And he’s put a hashtag of #whiteboots, so boots, maybe a nearby chemist”

“Yes your sport of course” said Abi “So it is sport person, whoever that is, lets see who is picking that up.”

“Hymnn,” I checked FloGirl’s latest post “no her last one was last night so she cant be sport.”

“Let’s see if ...oh my gosh look.” Abi was even more amazed.

“Rachel’s posted a picture of a blond girl and a hashtag of #neatgrassstripes. They connect there but what's the time clue?” We looked at the picture of some more health books for a good five minutes and then I solved it.

“Look one book has a price tag. £21.00”

“Oh yes! Nine o’clock so Rachel is meeting someone with the code of summer in a car park near boots near the cricket ground here in Manchester. That’s in...”

“One hour...”

We both jumped.

Izzy had walked in.

“Don’t worry, I’ve had my suspicions too. It’s ok I rather hoped you two boffins would help me. So... I need to tell you while I am a student I also work sort of for the police. Anyway there’s an Uber cab coming in two minutes, we need to get there before the rendezvous. Let’s go.”

And with that, Izzy left in a whirl leaving behind an eddy pool of confusion, surprise and worry all mixed up between Abi and I.

We found a nearby cafe, got some coffees in and waited. “What do we do?” Abi asked.

“Just watch and then if your theory is right, I can present it to my boss.”

“Oh to get Rachel?”

“Och no” Izzy’s scots accent came out strongly. “She’s smallfry, we need to get WeeklyBoy and his network, if we shut Rachel down, then we miss the big fish and then they set different systems and patterns.

At 20:55 Rachel appeared to loiter around the back of Boots the chemist and right on nine o'clock a white, plain van swooped around the corner, with the drivers window down and within twenty seconds, was gone. In a minute, Rachel had also vanished and all that was left was my unfinished caramel macchiato. Abi and I looked at each other.

“Sad to say it happens all the time, but thanks to you, we are onto a new unknown network. Come on let’s celebrate at the Albion with a proper drink.”

Izzy had ordered another taxi and before long we were ensconced in the chic old pub that was one of the places to be seen in, in Manchester, talking logarithms, mathematical patterns and predictive theories.

A week later, Abi and I cracked the WeeklyBoy, thanks to the latest lecture from #ProfPlum. We sat down with Izzy again at the Albion.

“Congratulations, what’s your bank details?” She scribbled down a figure with the pound sign in front and we gawped. “Do I take it you’re in?” All Abi and I could respond with was... “I should coco!”

So, my course is going pretty well, enjoying the subject, of course Prof. Plum’s performances and Abi and I have made quite a bit of money working for our extra curricular line of interest when the mad scots student sends a message to meet in the Albion. Oh and more importantly I’ve made two good friends and I could see we would be going places together.

Oh, in case you need to know or were wondering I’m called.... renemartini007

The end