God of small things
Matt Rudd seeks enlightenment in a call centre

"AFTER THE TONE, say your password," says the robot. "Beep."

"Samantha," I say, sheepishly.

"Did you say banana?" asks the robot. "No," I reply.

"After the tone, please say your password. Beep."

"Samantha," I repeat, louder.

"What, darling?" says not-Samantha from the hall.
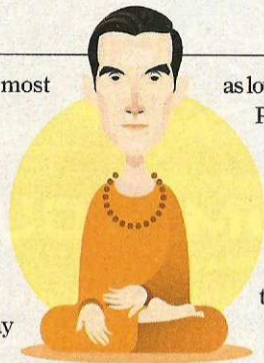
"Nothing," I reply.

"Did you say xylophone?" asks the robot. "No, I said Samantha."

"Who's Samantha?" says not-Samantha.

"Did you say ice cream?" asks the robot, getting colder.

The joy of Interactive Voice Response (IVR). Banks use it. Energy companies use it. Phone companies use it. Or, rather, they don't. They set it up, then leave us to try to use it. Most claim recognition accuracy of 90%. So maybe I'm not speaking clearly enough, innit? According to Call Centre Helper, Britain's most popular contact-centre magazine, regional accents are a problem. IVR is prejudiced against Northerners. And South Africans. But I speak Quite Posh and I can still waste a day trying to convince the robot I never said chimpanzee. In a survey, they found accuracy averaged about 70% but could be as low as 30%. Jonty Pearce, the editor of Call Centre Helper, says: "If people want self-service they use the web. If they pick up the phone, they want to speak to a person." This is an excellent law. Companies take note: the Law of Jonty. Until then, I need to change my password ∎