

Future Hobbies

The sun's still somewhere east of here and already the streets are packed. The hobby hardcore are out in force, covering Centre Park Square like kids at a fair as they run, cycle and crab-walk their ways around the Designated Areas of Fun. Through the transparent walls of my apartment block's foyer, I watch my neighbours bustle about, desperate to up their social standing by getting up early and braving the rain.

I know I'm gonna be late for the meet if I stand here judging people, but I need a few seconds to ready myself before entering this figurative field of sheep. As I massage my temples and breathe through my nose an out of breath fella stumbles in through the doors. He spots me trying to hide behind a giant plant pot and the discomfort on his face at being wet and wheezy lasts less than a second before his instincts kicks in. He looks down at the floor to ready himself before levelling his head with his best ever smile.

“Lovely morning to be out and about eh?” he asks, his face now looking like the male lead in the last few seconds of a porno. I tilt my head up at the still-dark sky and struggle to hold back a scowl. A lovely morning? Compared to what? It's dark and rainy, like every morning, each day sticking to the schedule. The nights and days still grow and shrink in synch with the passing seasons, but the rain? That's run by the government. It kicks in at three, drops a measured amount before bugging off till tomorrow.

It's been a while since I've been up this early so I carry on staring up at the darkness above, scanning the skies for some man-made device, some pump or balloon or floating robot that waters the world like a green-fingered giant. I'm sure it's a simple enough process, something I can get my head around but nobody round here really knows how it works. Only the smartest 1% are told stuff like that and it's not like they hang around to share. They're plucked from school in their final year and given a government post, one of the last few meaningful jobs that comes with prestige, perks and a future that severs their pasts.

It bothers me to be out of the loop, to not know such simple things as how the weather works, but what bothers me more is that nobody else cares. At what point did specialist knowledge become a taboo? When did curiosity get confused with dissatisfaction? People are too busy trying to seem happy to bother asking questions anymore, too scared of turning their white wool black with a show of discontent. A lovely morning to be out and about? Yeah, maybe if you're a bloody mushroom.

I take a few deep breaths and tell myself the guy was just being polite. His was a throwaway line, a rhetorical question, no more than a line in a script. But that's the problem as far as I'm concerned – the script. The one the fakers read with glee, so happy to have lines to learn instead of thoughts to struggle with. After years of living like an outsider, a wolf in a fluffy white coat, today's the day I take a solid step towards leaving this island behind; hopping the fence and rejoining the world, getting far away from these bleating sheep, self-herding their way through hopes and hoops round a maze of their own creation.

I step out into the morning drizzle and make my way through the park. The four apartment blocks that house the town's single people loom large from each point of the compass, blocking out light from the moon and stars, turning the rain invisible till it reaches ground-level where the street-lights pump out their gloom. A random group of solo joggers move into a single line, a conga-

column of conformity, their footfall syncing for a couple of steps before going their separate ways. Surely the world can't have always been full of such pathetic, keen-to-please people? If it had then how have we made it this far? Maybe this is what our species needed - worker bees buzzing about, desperate to please their fat, greedy queens.

A nearby woman catches my eye as she struggles with a yoga pose. She sees me seeing her and strengthens her stance like I'm judging her in a contest, her supple muscles straining till she slips and topples arse over tit, off of her mat and into the mud. Honestly, why aren't these wankers still asleep? How desperate do you have to be to display your well-being that you're willing to do yoga in the rain?

I try and tune them all out, ignoring the jugglers and the middle-aged man that's sliding about on skates. Eventually, I leave the freak-show behind and walk up a family street, the well-trimmed gardens and fresh-painted facades hiding buried dreams and relationship doubts. The road loops around so I cut through the golf course, hoping to make up some of the time I've lost but when I reach the clubhouse the contact is already there waiting.

"You're late," says the woman from her spot on the bench. I take a seat and sneak a sideways peek to ensure I've not stumbled into the wrong shady encounter. She looks too old for this town. Must have herself a tourist pass. She definitely looks like a criminal though. You can always spot them nowadays - it's the lack of a constant smile. I recognise her resting bitch-face from my own miserable reflection.

"Sorry," I say without offering an excuse.

"Do you know why we're here today?" she asks, skipping the small talk. Good for her.

"No. Mr. Rees messaged me last night, said he had a job. He didn't say what, only that it'd be worth my while".

"And what are you hoping to receive in return?"

"Um, no offence, but what's that got to do with you?"

She shakes her head and lets out a sigh that flavours the air with coffee. "Gil, you're not making this any easier".

"Well lady whose name I don't know, you're not making me want to. Is this the job? To give answers to a survey? 'Cause we could've done this at a more reasonable hour". A robot glides by on its tracks, a non-hover model that's practically antique. It scans the ground for rubbish and leaves and other unwanted, out of place things, pauses for a second at my real leather boots then rolls along on its way. The woman holds her silence and the seconds spin out till the moment starts making me feel queasy.

"Okay," I say with a sigh of my own and over-the-top tut and eye-roll. "He said he'd pay me in drugs. Recreational ones, without the mandatory doctor face-time.

"I'm afraid that's not the answer I have on the card".

“What? What card? You should be afraid, talking bullshit riddles before the sun's even up. Look, you clearly know who I am so what's with the security checks?”

She offers no answer and I try and wait her out but I know she's got me beat just from looking at her, sitting there all serene like a lump of stone or some master of quiet time chicken.

“Okay, I want out alright? Over the barriers and back to the mainland”.

She finally turns and raises a brow. “*Back*, to the mainland?”

“Alright, *to* the mainland”.

“Why? You know it's all gone, right?”

“I don't know shit. How would I? Nobody ever talks about it. They just pretend like there's nothing outside this perfect little bubble we call Britain. Oh what, you wanna talk about it? You got something real to say?”

“It's a wasteland young man. A diseased, radioactive wasteland that lost its ability to sustain life half a century ago. Britain is all that remains now”.

“How do you know that? Are you sharing the standard rumours or do you actually know some truth?”

“Hmm. I wonder where this unhealthy obsession with the past comes from?”

“Oh my word. What are you, my psychologist? Now is not the time for a deep and meaningful. You're not my psychologist okay? How's about we skip the motherly concern and you tell me what we're here to do.”

Her thoughts hit me like a brick dipped in vinegar. Words force their way into my mind, making me forget who and where I am for a second that feels like years.

(Ignorant little shit. Welcome to the monitoring list)

Her brainwaves send mine a tumbling, forcing entry and evicting my own. The pain's both mental and physical, like bad news and a belly ache all rolled into one. It's always been this way for me, ever since I can remember. You'd think it'd be a blessing being able to read minds, and maybe it would be if I only heard thoughts that were positive, or even painfully mundane, but it's never been like that for me. Only people's angriest thoughts are strong enough to invade my own. That's why I'm still here in a starter town; single and wished a good morning by every passer-by but fundamentally without friends. It's too hard hearing all the horrible thoughts that hide behind smiling lips.

The woman's words on their own don't seem all that bad but as I pay them more mind I realise it was the 'you're not my mother' comment that earned me her ire. Did she lose a child at some point? Maybe she was one of those that couldn't conceive and didn't qualify for adoption. I feel like I could push further and find out more. That rare feeling of untapped capacity is there and begging to be sated, but it's dangerous. I never know what state it'll leave me in. It's been a long

time since I've had an insight that's more than just the surface words. She must be proper fuming, though you wouldn't know it to look at her. And what's this monitoring shit about? Who's list would that be now?

"Let's go," she says, standing up and walking to the green.

"Go where?" I ask, still sitting and struggling to act normal as my brain and muscles spasm in tandem. This is starting to worry me now. I mean, what's with all the secrecy? Why couldn't the old man clue me in last night? And why is this nosey old bird so interested in my future intentions? I run to catch her up and just as I'm about to grab her shoulder, spin her around and demand some answers she says something that sends ice down my back and my balls shrivel up into hiding.

"We received an anonymous tip about the location of an elder".

The word elder hits me like a brick, the second one in a minute only this one's got a sugar-coating. My heart starts pounding, not faster or slower but harder, so's I can feel it in my toes. An elder? After all these years? If I can make contact then maybe I can get answers to my questions: like what was life like before the fall when the world was full of people; what caused the fall to come about and where did the elders fit in? The chance to get some answers from those in the know, some info from people with first-hand knowledge instead of gossip shared behind tiny cupped hands, the talk of parks and school playgrounds, whispered stories of mind-reading grannies told between tales of gods and ghosts; my excitement at the prospect makes the grey clouds glow like shiny things in the sun. The good feeling lasts for a second or two before I realise the danger I'm in. The burst of fear makes my feet throb.

"The contact has arranged to meet us on the 15th green. From there they will escort us to the location. Once we have confirmed the elder's whereabouts, we call in Central and collect the bounty."

So many questions come to mind and I grope through them one at a time, trying to put them in order, sort them into ones to ask and ones to wonder. "Why doesn't this contact just inform Central themselves?" I ask this in a voice that's way too loud, the added volume meant to power through suspicious wobbles sounding forced and false to my ears.

"I'm not sure" says the woman without turning round. "I have an item to pass on. I assume it has something to do with it."

"Well, what about defences? They must have protection? Someone looking after it?"

"I don't know".

"And why are we meeting at sunrise? Is that important? Not midday when people are around and not early morning when they'd all be asleep. I mean, that's weird, right? It's not just me? That's gotta be significant somehow".

The woman stops at the edge of a fairway and spins round to face me, anger now plain on her face. Her drawn down brow almost touches the cheeks forced upwards by snarling teeth. "At this point I know no more than you, and as you pointed out, I am neither your mother nor your psychologist. So how about we cut out the chit chat, yes?"

She turns on her heels and cuts through the woods, flicking branches into my face as she follows her phone towards the green on hole fifteen. Her thoughts were there if I wanted them, like some treasure in a safe for which I have the code. It's strange having so much control. Must be the drama hyping me up. Maybe that's the key to greater perception. Hang around the townies in a constant state of panic, one brought on by dodgy meds and a desperate need to pee. What am I saying? I want to bury the beast, not awaken it. I'd take ignorant bliss over enlightened anxiety any day of the week.

I follow the woman through the woody patch and think about what lies ahead. A real live, surviving elder - someone like me. It might be one of my grandparents, even one of my parents for all I know. I think back to what I know about them, what my foster-father told me before I was removed from his care. The official story, if you can find one, is that the elders were the victims of a final assault from the rest of the world's bad guys and gals, a final fuck you before we developed the tech to cut ourselves off completely. Some kind of virus that would spread across the country and doom us all to extinction. For whatever reason, it only killed those aged forty and over. 1% survived the virus and took on powers no science could explain - telepathy. The government said they were infected with a plague that could mutate and end mankind. Others said they were botched experiments, an attempt to create long-range spies to keep eyes on those across the seas. There were lots of different theories from what I can gather, each one different enough to scare each section of society into turning them in on mass. Hundreds of thousands were offered up by frightened families, foolish patriots or people greedy for money, back when money meant something. The last one was found over ten years ago which pretty much disproved the infectious theory but by then, nobody cared. The threat was gone and any elders that managed to slip the net were too old to procreate, their threat rendered inert. Of course, I'm living proof that that was never the case.

As we pace up another fairway I mull over the scary questions, the ones that make my feet throb and my palms go slick and sticky. First and foremost, top of the tree, won't someone with the power to read minds know I've got those powers too? You've gotta go with yes there. I mean, from what little I've learnt about the elders, their powers dwarf mine. I'm guessing only one of my parents had the virus and the other diluted it before it was passed down but it's a pretty safe assumption that he or she is gonna know what I know the second we arrive, if we even make contact that is. I can think something normal or hum a tune but surely that'd just attract unwanted attention. No, they'll know soon enough and they'll expose me for sure, me being the bad guy looking to kill his own kind. I should make my excuses, say I'm too scared or bail out on moral grounds, say my teacher was an elder or something like that. But then, the chance to find out the truth... screw it, it's too great an opportunity. I tell myself I wanna hop the wall and run away to Europe, get away from the phonies, go exploring, adventuring and fun shit like that. But really, I suppose I just want some answers.

I walk into the back of the woman whose name I never asked and mumble my apologies. "This is the place" she says, standing next to a wall so covered in green that it looks like a hedge. She pockets her phone and pulls out a gun, an illegally home printed one by the looks of it.

"Don't I get one of those?" I ask.

"No".

“Then how am I supposed to back you up?”

“You don't. I back you up”.

“Oh,” I say, a little insulted to learn I've been recruited as a human shield. We stand there in silence and the odd combination of fear and excitement sends me scanning the shrubbery for loo roll-sized leaves. The green wall shudders and a door swings out. A man's head appears at the crack. I recognise him straight away. No surprise there – it's a small town and we all get around but he's something of a celebrity, him and his sister. I heard they were born here in Frimley and their dad had contacts at Central, managed to get permission to let his kids grow up in a 5/20/50 town, the only residents between ages five and twenty. What I know of them probably comes from the same playground gossipers as the elder stories but apparently their dad home-schooled them both whilst he looked after his wife. They say her parents were Central somebodies and that's why they were allowed to remain after she fell sick from some mystery illness, something they couldn't cure or chop out of her genes, but I'm guessing now that's all total bollocks. They've been hiding an elder all along. The story goes the daughter turned up in the square one day and signed up for clubs and classes like any other new arrival. She never talked about her childhood and everyone was too polite to ask. This guy, her brother, arrived a few years later. He loves his football. Can't play for shit. Not so much two left feet as he is running on uneven stumps.

He stands there eyeing us both, his gaze switching between me and my partner-in-crime in such quick succession that I worry he's having a seizure. Then, after giving us both several once overs he steps through the gap in the wall.

“Who do you work for?” he asks, eyes locked on mine, the assumption that I'm in charge giving me an odd burst of pride.

“An intermediary with contacts at Central” responds the lady, stealing both my moment and his attention.

“The amnesty is still in place yeah? Me, my dad and sister won't be punished?”

“Correct,” says the lady, sliding an AR ring off her finger and handing it to him. He puts it on his finger, waits a few seconds and then stuffs it in his pocket. Must be a new model. I always wondered if it was possible to reach an end point with tech, a time where we know everything there is to know and it seemed that that time had come, at least as far as Augmented Reality goes 'cause there's not been a new model in years. Some people still use the old palm tablets but most of us prefer our data projected directly onto our vision, routed through the chip inside a ring, all the news and entertainment one could need overlapping your vision or in the peripheries. Apparently the AR chips used to be embedded in your body, but people got paranoid that their movements were tracked, started second guessing their interactions. It fostered mistrust so it was agreed that our chips should stay external, removable, and that's why they were built into jewellery that you could leave at home if you wanted. This guy - Hogan his name is – is ready to give up his adopted grandparent for a bit of the latest kit, some new shiny new tech with modest upgrades. What a greedy, selfish prick.

“Once Central has secured the elder and the bounty has been claimed, your share of the credits will be deposited,” says the woman.

"I don't care about the credits" says Hogan, spitting out the word 'credit' like it's a bone in a lump of dog food. "I just want it to be over. I want them gone".

"Them?" asks the woman with another eyebrow lift.

"Yeah. There's three of them. Been down there longer than I've been alive. My dad says they're special, that me and my sister are lucky to have them around but he's wrong. He's always wrong, and he never sees it. How is that possible when he's spent his life looking after three telepaths? Why did they let him make so many mistakes?"

His cheeks flush and his eyes widen as the long-rotten secrets spill out. An emotional stew made from guilt and resentment bubbles over his brain pot till his thoughts merge with mine. Again my insight dips deeper than the simple surface stuff and it catches me by surprise. I pretend to rub dust from my eyes as a knowledge fills me in an instant, like a smell that breaks an internal dam and brings on a flood of memories.

It's not about revenge. He wants what's left of his immediate family to live a normal life. He wants his dad to move to another town, to leave behind the stigma of home-ownership and rejoin the dating pool. He wants his sister to open up to others, to live free of the worry of keeping fugitives safe. He wants this more than anything and he knows the price is his family's love. After a life of doing his daily duty he's making one final sacrifice for his immediate family at the cost of all future contact, or at least that's what he thinks. The AR ring contains a residency permit for another, less sought after town. Farnborough. It's not far away, and I wanna tell him it'll be okay, reassure him that his dad and sister will forgive him but I can't so I don't.

The thumb and forefinger I've got jammed in my eyes grow wet with tears as all the negative emotions that've lead him to this point storm through my mind. I pull back in case I burst into an uncontrollable sob from being pummelled by his concentrated sadness. There was more there, so much more if I wanted it, all of his interactions with the elders, all their wisdom and knowledge but I had to get out. He's a good man - I know that now - and to peek at the good stuff means suffering the bad, the intimate, the embarrassing thoughts and feelings we all have when we're sure we're alone in our heads. The little that I saw made me feel creepy and wrong, like I've spied on a relative whilst they're getting undressed. Also, I don't want a home-made bullet in the head whilst I'm fitting on the floor as I reel through his entire life.

"Follow this wall till you get to a shed. In there, there's a flight of stairs hidden under a rug. They're down there". He looks up from his feet. "How long till they get picked up?"

"A couple of hours I would guess. You'll be notified once they're removed so that you can return and remain in residence".

"I don't ever wanna go back to that place. Who even wants wealth? Wanting more than your fair share is the seed that sows pure evil". It's an old saying and the way he recites it makes him sound like a member of those Jesus cults from the olden days before the god-talkers were deemed to be mentally ill. But the conviction with which he says it, the anger. Again I have to stifle the urge to reach out and tell him it'll be okay. You see this, this is why I don't read minds. You take on everyone's problems and I've enough of my own already.

"Are there any security devices we need to be aware of?" asks the woman. "Any guards?"

“No, nothing like that. I think there used to be surveillance equipment back when I was a kid but they've been down there so long you know? Never been so much as sniffed at.” He stands there for a second, staring at me with a strange look on his face that's either curiosity or contempt, then he walks off without another word. It's a pity I never checked him out sooner. We could've been friends him and I. Two unhappy chappies being moody together in a land of grinning twats.

The woman and I watch him walk off and with him goes my chances of answers. It sickens me, to be so close to all I've ever wanted. Instead, I get to watch agents arrive from Central and take the elders away, leaving me credit or calorie or Channel-crossing rich but depressingly answer poor. I suppose I could always track him down or speak to his sister. I'm sure they both know plenty. They must've asked the questions that drove me to here. But then maybe they weren't as inquisitive as I. Most people don't care about the past. Could I kill this woman now and keep the elders safe? Grab her gun and end her life in pursuit of my own desires? What would I regret more: ending her life for my own benefit or letting this chance slip away? I don't know, and in my experience gambles aren't worth the risk unless you know the odds in play. Best to push this as far as it goes and see if any certainty overtakes my doubt.

“So, what now?” I ask. She chews it over for a moment.

“We're done here. You'll get your cut of the bounty, or whatever form you've arranged that to take”. She turns back the way we came. “Watch out for the golf balls.”

“Hang on,” I say, scrambling for a lie, knowing it has to be a gooden, aware of her suspicious gaze and my out-of-place emotions. “I know that guy, not personally but I've seen him around. Heard about him. He's got beef with his dad, embarrassed he held onto a mansion when everyone else gave theirs up. Maybe the elder story's bullshit and he's after revenge. I mean, does any of that sound remotely possible to you? That three elders have been holed up in a Frimley Town basement for the past fifty years?”

“Likely? No. Possible? Of course. A basement is an obvious place to someone. And you should never underestimate people's will to survive”.

“We could always take a look though. Check out this shed, confirm the blanket through a window or go in and check for steps. I mean, we're already here. Weeding out a false claim would save old man Rees some negative cred when he feeds it up the chain.” Her eyes squint for a sec and I fear I've overplayed my hand. This sudden willingness to take extra steps must clash with all that I've said so far. “And we might find things worth removing before the government come in and claim it all”. That's the way Gil, scum-bag it up. “Better we take the treasure before Central does. And I don't know about you but I've got fuck all else to do”.

She looks at the sky as if checking the time then looks at her phone to confirm it. “Okay. Follow me. Do as I do. Anything more than that and I'll put a bullet in your leg”.

Charming. She walks back to the wall and slips through the crack and I sidle in after her, past foliage grown shaggy and wild with neglect. We push through onto an overgrown lawn that runs up to a mansion, a three-story jobby with turrets and towers, a storybook palace from a time long gone that reminds me of another foster-father tale, my only reliable source on the past.

“Happiness is the new wealth of the world was the slogan back then. But the rest of the world was dead by that point so it was a pretty shitty slogan if you ask me. Bloody literative types and their love of alliteration. It was such a different world, Gilly. Everyone had jobs that paid different amounts. Your earnings were printed on pieces of paper that you swapped for whatever you wanted. We'd all dedicate forty hours a week and more to these jobs, and whilst most people struggled, others had massive mansions and lived totally different lives. When the robots started doing all the jobs and things like food and travel became free, everyone gave up their oversized houses to be developed for the benefit of all. You see, when the jobs dried up, people still wanted ways to distinguish themselves. They wanted ways to feel superior so happiness became the new marker. It really did become the new wealth because the truly happy don't need more than most, they didn't need mansions or material goods”.

Looking at this ancient relic of a house makes me pity the dad for what he sacrificed to help out the old underground-dwellers. He must've been shunned for holding onto this building when really, he just needed some privacy for his stowaways.

As we make our way along the treeline towards the small building in the corner I notice movement to my right, from the patio that juts out from the face of the house like an old, grey, mossy tongue. An ambush now would be perfect; I could prove my talents, swap sides and all of the answers would be mine.

We arrive at the shed and both peer inside through a window covered in mould. The brightening sky gives off enough light to illuminate the bare, bumpy floor and a rectangle in the middle a few shades darker than the pale concrete that surrounds it.

“It seems the kid was telling” she stops mid-sentence, her tongue poking out for a second before retreating back into her mouth.

“What are you doing here?” asks a female voice from somewhere over my shoulder. I turn to confront a face with a crossbow for a nose. “I asked you a question?”

“We jumped the fence to find our ball,” says the woman.

“Bullshit. There's a sound fence on the wall. Chipped balls can't cross it. What are you doing here?”

“We're using old fashioned balls, dear. Like the Romans used to”.

“Romans?” asks the girl and for a second I detect her confusion.

(Romans?)

and I know she recognises the word from some teaching about the times before the fall. Must've learnt it off the elders. She drops her crossbow and before it hits the floor a stun-gun takes its place. A blue light flashes in front of me and my nostrils fill up with an assortment of smells: burnt air and hair and something sinister I hope isn't coming from anybody's pants. The older woman drops to the floor and lies twitching on the grass like a lazy break-dancer. The young woman, Hogan's sister Reagan I presume, points the zapper at me.

"Tell me what you're doing here or you'll join her on the ground. And then in it".

"Nice line," I say, fumbling for time as I focus my thoughts away from the smell. "Damn it Hogan, what have you done?" I say a split second after she thinks it.

"What, what the fuck?" She lowers the gun in her confusion before raising it back up to groin level.

"How did you... What's going on?"

"I read your mind. I'm like them down there, or at least my parents were. One of them. I took a job from a guy who said he could help me get answers and a possible path to Europe. I didn't know what the job was till I met her", I nod down at the woman as her spasms die down. "I just wanna know the truth, what's out there and why we're safe in here. Please, take me to them. I'm not a threat. You have to believe me". What a stupid closing line.

"Okay, so what number am I thinking right now?"

"You're thinking about kicking me in the balls for fun, zapping me unconscious then burying us both alive near where your dad buried the two when you were young, when you watched him out the window near the wardrobe full of suits".

"Oh". She pauses, gathers herself and asks "how do I know you're not working for them? That they recruited you because of your skills?"

"You don't, but they will. Within seconds I reckon. Take me to them and they'll confirm it and then we can help each other. Or, you can kill us both and hope nobody else comes a-knocking".

"Okay," she says with a sarcastic smile then the world goes blue then black.

*

When I come to I'm in another world, one I can't make sense of. Fields of what must be lavender bushes roll into the distant horizon where they meet a range of mountains. As I roll over onto my side my right eye opens and I regain my depth perception and the fields and mountains slowly morph into a carpet and skirting board.

(don't be scared/he's dribbled on the carpet/Lieutenant Burns, how the devil are ya?)

This brain invasion is new to me and it's somehow both scary and pleasant, like the soothing voice of a head doctor narrating a horror movie. I roll onto my back, tilt my head up a bit and take in the room around me. I'm in what I assume is the bunker beneath the shed; a living area with three beds, three doors on the walls, a table in the centre and windows to the outside with the over-bright glow of digital screens. A withered head pokes out from each bed, the faces older than I've ever seen, a mixed bag of expressions covering interest, contempt, and confusion.

"What are you doing here?" asks Reagan from the corner, crouched down over the prone figure of my prone, female accomplice. She's red-faced and sweaty, I assume from dragging two bodies down a flight of stairs.

“Oh Reagan,” says one of the bed heads, a woman with white hair and the long, thin face of a gob-smacked horse. “We know that already. We've seen. His story checks out”.

“Yes I know you know. You always know Emma, but do you share with me? How is it possible to upset someone so much when you know what will piss them off?”

“Nanny Emma”.

“Oh Central preserve us, is that really the most important thing right now?”

“How about a round of teas?” asks the old man, the one who said something about a tenant on fire.

“Fuck off Michael!”. She does the standard eye-rub of someone stressed out. “I'm sorry, but there's more important things going on right now than your morning cup of tea”.

“Why not? We fought a war for you”.

“No, you didn't. You were a butcher that watched too many war films”.

“Still helped with the war effort”.

Reagan closes her eyes and takes a deep breath that reminds me of my own efforts to stay calm back in my apartment block foyer, a time that already feels like last week. “And you wonder why Hogan reported you all. What we've done for you and all you can ask is that I leave to go make some tea”.

“Hey, what's with the 'you'?” asks the other old woman, peeking out over a blanket that muffles her voice. “It's him, and he's senile. Anyway, we've always known that that was Hogan's path. He...”

“Kate, will you please stop saying path like it's all pre-ordained. You can't see the future, only people's thoughts and pasts.

“But we knew he would eventually. It was in his heart. He always worried about you and your dad.”

Reagan leaps up, her fingers tense and splayed like the gnarly roots of an upturned tree. “So you knew? And you never said anything? You didn't care what it would do to us all?”

“We saw the possibility,” says Emma in that calm, patient tone that's nothing but annoying when you're angry and there's no chance of being calmed down. “But Reagan, you can't act on an idea. If we were to act on people's thoughts, if we started imprisoning people for what they were thinking then there'd be no one left to guard them. You'll be okay. The amnesty will keep you safe, and we're happy being taken aren't we gang? We've been down here long enough”.

“That's bollocks and you know it. You could've given me a heads up so I could talk to Hogan. We could've worked something out. But instead I spend my life looking after you three and now you're

off to who knows where for them to do who knows what. I lose you three and my brother. If I never see him again it'll be all your fault”.

“Sorry to butt in,” I say from my spot on the floor, “but your brother's only gone to Farnborough. We can walk there in an hour or take a ten minute pod ride. I'll go with you once this is over, but please, I need to get some answers before Central storms through that door”. I point at a random door that for all I know leads to the toilet.

“Answers to what?”

“He wants a history lesson,” says Emma and suddenly I'm no longer in the bunker. I'm in a room watching a TV screen that's fixed to a giant box on stilts. A humanoid shape with oversized arms, legs and head slowly moves along chalky ground. I lean forward in my chair and rest my elbows on hairless knees attached to slender, child-like legs. The feed switches to a studio then someone shouts 'stop' and just like that I'm back in the bunker.

“Stop,” says Reagan. “Our problem first, then you get your answers”. She turns to Emma. “What can we do? Are they on their way?”

“I don't know dear”.

“Well, can't you read her thoughts like you did his? See her memories while she sleeps?”

“Oh Reagan, I thought you knew already. She's dead”.

Reagan turns to me, her mouth a red O of horrified surprise on a face that's turned white with shock. “I didn't, I mean I...”

“Probably a heart attack, from your little zap gun. So we only have this young man's version of events”.

They all look at me, as if I'm the one in the know and not the most lost here. “I don't think she worked for Central. She said she worked for a man called Mr. Rees. He's like a local gangster of sorts. They were gonna report the location and get a share of the bounty”.

“So nobody knows we're here?” asks Reagan.

“Well, Mr. Rees probably knows the meeting point which was near your back wall. Other than that...”

“Can they track her to here?”

“She's got a phone on her. They might track that”.

Reagan goes through the dead lady's pockets and pulls out her old palm phone. Then she checks the woman's fingers, wrists, ankles and neck for an AR device. None found she stands thinking for a bit then says “I'm gonna go back to the course and throw this over a neighbours wall. Yours too. You better get your answers whilst I'm gone because when I get back, you're gone too”. I slip off the ring on my right index finger and hand it out to her without a word. She snatches it from my

palm and then stomps towards the door on my right.

“Throw it somewhere easy to find if it turns out I can have it back” I ask.

“And don't forget to wipe off your fingerprints” Emma shouts to the closing door. “Now,” she says facing me. “Where were we?” and before I can answer I'm gone again.

*

I'm back in the room, the one with the giant TV with a screen the size of my head. The floor and walls are covered in brown and orange fuzz. On the TV is the same humanoid shape, all oversized bits that're white and bulgy. The figure bounces around and the voice that drifts out the box to me talks about astronauts visiting the moon, that floating white circle that lives in the sky, a lump of rock that circles our planet and stops our seas growing stagnant. The feed switches to a man in a studio who declares it all a scam. He gives his reasons why the whole thing was faked and I hear a snort to my right.

“Bloody conspiracy theorists,” says a man from his armchair then he takes a sip from a can.

“What's a conspiracy thesist daddy?” I ask in the high falsetto of a pre-pubescent girl.

“Crazy is what they are,” says the man and lets off a delightful fart/burp combo.

“But what does it mean?”

“A conspiracy theorist believes things that really happened were made up and that made up things really happened”. He looks pleased by that summary but he shouldn't because she doesn't understand it at all. It's an odd feeling, to comprehend something with my 33-year-old brain and to be simultaneously confused like my host currently is. Currently? Is that right? Or would that have been right? Best not to focus on it now. I want to ask my own question but I can only wait for my host to ask her own. Because, I realise, this has already happened.

“But why?” I ask with my child's never-ending need for answers. The man sighs, finishes his can and calls me onto his knee. I jump up, sit down and let him envelop me in his doughy arms, breathe in his strangely pleasing aroma of beer, sweat and if I'm not mistaken a curry consumed in the last 24 hours. This must've been before soap was invented.

“A lot of the time it's 'cause people believe what they want to be true. That's why you've got so many god-botherers thinking there's someone up there listening to them, making them more special than they are, offering promises of a better life when they kick the bucket”. I tilt my head up at that funny angle that kids do when they're trying to think.

“But why do people not want us to go to space?”

“It's all butts with you innit sweetheart. But this, but that, I've got a skinny butt” and he tickles my belly and hips and I look at him with a love I've never known and the love and loss of something I've never had overwhelms me. I cry at the beauty of it but my eyes stay dry.

“That's the other side of the conspiracy nuts. It's not a case of believing what they want, it's the

believing itself. It feeds their insecurities. It lets them feel like they're in the know, that they're on the inside looking out, an insider with special knowledge that the mainstream don't have. I guess there'll always be those that believe the unbelievable. Hell, your mumma says she believes in ghosts. Never seen one or nothing, but her mum did before her and her mum before that, and it gives her something to gossip about with her gaggle of housewives, gives them common ground. And no amount of facts will ever convince her otherwise”.

She's still confused 'cause she's six and he used words like 'insecurities' and 'mainstream' but I think back to those rumours back home of secret robot overlords that control us behind the scenes and it turns out this guy's right. People will always believe the unbelievable. I want this little girl to ask more questions, to walk around her neighbourhood and show me what's what, or maybe just watch TV and let me see the world as it was. But most of all I want another hug, to feel real love. And it happens. He draws me in and I throw my skinny arms around his neck and feel his stubble, feel him blow my long blonde hair off his face as he reaches for another beer from a trio of tables that live inside each other and I never want this moment to end. I never want to go back because this is all I need and if I think it hard enough then she'll know, Emma will know and she'll let me live her life forever, right up until the point where I'm dragged through her door in about ninety or so years time.

But in an instant, the blink of an eye or the beat of a heart, I'm somewhere else, dressed in loose-fitting pyjamas in a bright white room standing over a bed full of stuffed toy bears and a sickly-looking kid. The child's sleeping, the machines are beeping and the tubes that run from her nose and wrists tell me she's very sick indeed. Her skin is as white as the walls around her, making the random red splotches stand out and scream with alarm, like a spaghetti sauce stain on a newly laid carpet that's the colour of clouds on a bright, sunny day. Her parents sit at her bedside and I know it's 2005 and Emma's close to losing her control.

“Why was she not vaccinated?” Asks Emma in a voice she can't stop from shaking. She's seen worse, seen neglect and abuse far more shocking than this but for some reason, this is worse and she's on the verge of losing her professional facade.

“The MMR vaccine gives you autism, everyone knows that,” says the lady as she strokes her baby's hair.

“That was one study,” Emma says through gritted teeth, the words getting louder, her hands forming fists and her mind growing hazy and red. “And the author made it up for profit. It was disproved”.

“Too much magnesium. That's what Katy McGregor says”.

“Katy McGregor is an actress! She only knows what she was told and what she was told was a lie!”

The mother looks surprised at the outburst but she keeps her composure because this isn't the first time she's had this conversation. “We live a clean life. No chemicals, no GMOs, only what is natural”.

“Every thing's natural you stupid woman. It all comes from nature. And GMOs mean fewer pesticides so less of the chemicals that do actual harm. Oh what, you'd rather go back to bananas full of pips? If this little girl dies it'll be all your fault, all because you believed some website run by

a sad somebody that values advertising cash over medical facts”.

She walks away, away from the girl and her gullible parents and away from the medical profession because she knows she can't do it anymore, can't be on the front lines of the war against fucking idiots, people that would risk their own child's health so they can do as the celebs do and tell themselves that they're the same, that they're special too, that they're on the inside looking out. I wanna cry and this time the tears do fall, tears not just for the innocent child in bed number twelve but tears over a lost career. She walks up a corridor, looking for the exit sign so she can run away as far as she can but before she gets ten steps...

She's walking down a city street. It's London, 2007. The air stinks of hydrocarbons and pods are everywhere, lining up end to end but instead of being powered by electrics and driven by computers they're pumping out poison and driven by people that are beeping in impatient frustration. Still, it's nice to be outside and see the streets and I'm enjoying the walk. Restaurants line the road and people sit out front in the cool night air, eating their food, oblivious to the stinking air that surrounds them.

She looks to the sky and squints at the moon and thinks about her date tonight. It's their third date and he's a good man, a considerate man that ticks all her boxes. He's kind to people – immigrants, service staff, the rich, the poor - and he makes her laugh. When he asks questions he's interested in the answer and isn't just waiting to talk. He works out, she knows that because he told her so on their first date and he has an amazing body but he didn't dwell on it or mention it again and she knows tonight will be the night she invites him back. She's plucked and shaved and tidied her flat and tonight they'll make love on fresh, clean sheets. She stifles a smile but then lets it happen and walks along grinning like a fool. She catches eyes with a lady stood smoking outside a wine bar and it's almost like she knows and they trade a passing nod. Then a sickening thud comes from the end of the street and the darkening night fills with the sounds of screams and the clatter of dropped cutlery. She picks up her speed as people run past her with fearful, tearful faces. By the time she reaches where the car hit the crowd the blood's running into the gutters. The smell of pollution is partially masked by the harsh, metallic stink of spilt blood. She takes off her jacket and uses it to staunch fast-bleeding wounds. She doesn't have enough clothes and she doesn't have enough time and everyone's running away. Sirens get close as she tells dying people that it's all gonna be okay, the men and women in green and yellow surround her and start to take over. She walks to the side and sits down in tears and tries not to look at the carnage. Then a man with a beard and a backpack in hand screams a few foreign words before the entire world burns.

Time skips forward but not by much and she's in a white room of her own, having metal removed from her body as the pyjama people tell her it was a terrorist attack. The conspiracy theorists that think there's a man in the clouds say he wants them to kill those that are different, not just those that have lighter skin but those that don't believe what they do. They're called Muslims and their numbers are many and a tiny minority want everyone dead. I want to go back to that safe little bunker beneath the mouldy shed. I'm sorry I asked for this. Ignorance is bliss and I never thought the world could be so full of hate. We look at the past like it's better than now but it's not, it's not, it's always much worse. Her body aches and burns and stings but her mind hurts even more as the names of the deceased scroll across a screen on the wall. Jason's gone and so is his humour, his sweet muscled butt and his genuine concern, concern that caused him to be there too, right in the thick of it when the bomb went off and all that remains now is a world full of fighting and hatred and anger and pain.

It's 2012 and she's on a date in a restaurant that sells Indian food, or Persian food as the man she's with informs her with an irritating smugness. She met him through a dating website and he came across pleasant but she now knows no amount of text talking can really give you a complete picture. He's not a bad guy, but she knows within seconds that it's not going to go anywhere. He's picked a good place to eat though 'cause this dhanksak dish is amazing. They get onto the subject of climate change which is a growing concern for most people – all the poison they pump into the air isn't going anywhere and it's slowly killing the planet, paying them back with floods and muds that slide and kill, droughts and other weather extremes caused by rapidly increasing temperatures.

“You don't believe all that nonsense do ya?” he asks as he dips his naan bread in Emma's dish.

“Climate change?”

“Yeah. You know it's a hoax spread by the tree-huggers right?”

“It's an indisputable fact. The ten hottest years on record have come in the last twelve years”.

“Doesn't feel like it to me”.

“Well, that's not how facts work”.

“Oh god, here we go”.

“What?”

“Nothing, nothing. How's your food?”

“You should know, you keep eating it”.

“Well I'm paying for it aren't I?”

“No. We'll be splitting the bill”.

“I don't mind or nothing. It's a promising investment”. He winks at her and we both feel a sudden bout of nausea that has nothing to do with the food.

“So you think climate change is what, a conspiracy theory?”

“Well, yeah”.

“So all the world's governments and all the world's climate experts - apart from maybe 1% that work for oil companies - do you think they're wrong or do you think they're lying?”

“Take your pick”.

“No, come on. You're the one with iron-clad convictions”.

“Does it matter?”

“Not really. Either way you're talking nonsense. If you think they're wrong, then you think you know more than trained scientists, or at the very least you think the owners of websites do. People with no education or experience in any scientific field. Which is ridiculous. Or maybe you think they're all lying, that they've all been paid off by who exactly? The tree-huggers? You think they're richer than all those invested in oil? You think all the world's governments - who aren't exactly known for getting along - have colluded in this lie, and at no point has a low ranked worker who thinks they're undervalued gone home and vented to his wife and the story's got out. You don't think out of all these millions of people that've sold out their planet for a bit of cash haven't had a burst of conscience and blown the whistle? That nobody's recorded proof of this massive cover-up and sold it on for fame and fortune?”

“Well I think..”

“People can't keep secrets Robert, even on a small scale. Everyone has to tell someone, and that someone has to tell someone else. It's unlikely when you're dealing with something small and inconsequential, confined to a small group of people. It definitely wouldn't happen when it's something that dooms the planet, when you're asking them to conspire in something that'll keep them up at night. Do you really think millions of people can keep the same secret? That they're screwing over their own children and ruining the planet?”

“Alright darling, calm your jets. What are you, some militant feminist?”

“And what the fuck has feminism got to do with anything?” Her voice is getting louder, attracting attention from the other eaters and I don't care because she doesn't care and I'm enjoying this one, enjoying the surface stuff telling this dickbag what's what. The refusal to believe basic scientific findings is disturbing but it's plenty better than a terrorist attack.

“What, because I'm a woman what I say isn't valid? It's all part of a hidden agenda to oppress the patriarchy?” I'm willing him to keep his cool and calm the situation because I'm guessing the next memory won't be as good as this one, and I really wanna taste more of that dhansak curry but my deluded, probably dead brother-in groin lets me down.

“I didn't come here for a lecture on feminism”.

I feel her anger bubbling over and even though this guy's a total tool I hope she doesn't throw food in his face because it's still pretty hot and he doesn't deserve a second or third-degree burn. He's just misguided, not strong enough to resist the propaganda and my hope gets realised in a funny as fuck way as she forgoes the hot liquids and slaps him round the face with his own greasy garlic naan bread. A few people laugh and cheer from afar as Emma throws a cup of green sauce in his face. She walks over to the bar, fishes a twenty from her purse, then takes out another ten for the mess, takes the time to tell them how good their food was. Damn it I'm in love with this wrinkly old grinner 'cause this girl is the shit and a half. I'm high on the moment because this is amazing; a time and a place where people speak their minds and don't constantly worry about being judged, a time where it's okay to be unhappy, where they don't all walk around with fake smiles on their faces, ignoring the bad shit instead of embracing it all in a healthy and constructive way.

She walks to the door with her head held high, facing front and centre, serenaded by a chorus of

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

