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The Mirrored City: creating claustrophobia and pace in
overpopulation through prose

Michael Hargreaves

A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in
partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Masters by Research in Creative Writing

The University of Huddersfield

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Synopsis

Andrew Lamprell is a jaded journalist living in London some hundred years in the future. He describes himself as a 'world turner' and holds little value in his job or society. He has one aspiration, Esme Harper, a celebrity news anchor, who he has become obsessed with. He wishes to woo her and escape to space with the money he has saved from years of a minimalist lifestyle. Andrew is given an exclusive scoop on an underground medical centre by nurse and long-time friend Elizabeth Ruby. The medical centre is operated by a young doctor and a mysterious scarred man who can fly his sky-car out of the permitted zones, something Andrew thought was impossible. After writing the article on the untested drugs that are being sold to people the government have refused medical care to, he rests. The following morning, the article has been published and he has two tickets to Limbo X, the space station in between Earth and the colony on Mars. He soon discovers that the scarred man, Locke, has orchestrated his good fortune and wants something in return. Locke promises Andrew that he will get him Esme Harper, but only if he does as he says. Andrew complies, exploring areas of the country that he thought were uninhabitable. He helps Locke transfer a computer virus into the software of higher-members of society, which quickly spreads, giving Locke complete control of the city. The night before Andrew's flight to Limbo X, Locke flies him to the London News Service, with a replicate of Esme Harper sitting in the front seat. Locke says he will give her to Andrew, but he refuses. Offended, Locke begins his anarchist plan early, setting off all the fire alarms of the city, cutting the power and the traffic system. Andrew leans over and crashes Locke's car through a nearby building. Upon waking, Andrew sees the chaos unfolding below and uses the strong android in the passenger seat as a way of getting through the condensed crowds below. He reaches Esme Harper's apartment, discovering it has been broken into. Three dead men are on the floor and Esme Harper is stood naked in the room. Exposed wires dangle from the insides of her thighs from the assault and a label on her back reads: property of LNS. She greets Andrew.

The Mirrored City

Andrew Lamprell stepped into the supermarket. The ground floor, which contained ten Cloud vendors, three aisles of canned food and four aisles of flavoured NutriPowder, was brimming with bodies. Andrew slowed for the woman in front of him, who had slowed for the man in front of her. The queues stretched from the self-service checkouts to the back of the store and continued to wind around the aisles. Andrew cut through a line and waited behind the vendors. He watched the fast-paced queue thin out in front of him and listened to the disjointed monotones of the machines: ‘thank you-thank you-have a-thank you-a-thank-you-have-a-thank you-lovely day.’ A woman swore loudly. He turned towards the self-check outs. The woman placed her palm over the check-out screen, provoking a disapproving beep. The manager of the supermarket stood next to her with his arms folded, repeating the same automated sentence: ‘if you can’t pay, you’ll have to leave.’

Andrew turned back to face the vendor, realising that the line had disappeared. The tall, silver box of the vendor displayed a holographic selection of Cloud products: Elate, Calm, Energy, Energy-Plus, Energy-Max. Andrew blinked twice in quick succession, activating his eye. A thin, semi-transparent white border appeared around his vision. A small message flashed; ‘Connect to Cloud vendor?’ Andrew flicked his eyes to the left. The same selection of Cloud products reeled down the left side of his view. He selected a pack of twenty Elates and held his palm up to the vendor. Andrew’s credit number appeared in the bottom left of his vision, decreasing rapidly as the software subtracted the payment. A small tray extended from the face of the machine: ‘thank you, have a lovely day.’

Andrew forced his way into the six o’clock crowd on the street. The heavy flow of well-dressed bodies almost swept him away. Along the faces of the surrounding buildings were strips of neon light, illuminating the street. The shadows of the each body spiralled from their feet like dead petals. Andrew felt a gust flatten his hair. He glanced up. Ten stories higher, a thick chain of sky-cars stuttered through the air in perfect unison, blocking his view of the clouds, which in turn blocked the sun. Andrew pushed through the crowd, attempting to reach the other side of the street. Amongst the grey and black attires, the bright yellow shirt of a blonde girl drew his eye. She spun and stumbled, stranded in the centre of the street and pushed in opposite directions by the tidal crowd. She collided with a large man and fell to the concrete. Andrew

stopped, recognising her as Esme Harper. Adrenaline tingled through his stomach like an electrical charge. The dark shades of trouser legs engulfed her as people continued to move. Andrew hurried to her. He barged into the bodies and reached between them. Esme Harper wrapped her fingers around his hand. His pulse raced. He pulled her through the bodies, lifting her like they were at some unforgiving music festival. Andrew's heart slowed. She was a stranger. The bright-shirted girl panted deeply. Andrew released her hand. She smiled at him with tearful eyes and handed him a small, thick card. She rushed away, revealing a large black crucifix on the back of her shirt.

Andrew stepped off the Southwark Bridge. The adjoining buildings either side of the street climbed into the clouds like the walls of a labyrinth. The black, glass exteriors of upgraded business and apartment buildings had been extending outwards at a seemingly desperate pace, encasing the concrete structures like some mechanical cast. Andrew passed the underground station. Huddles of people were hemmed behind the barriers, slowly filtering through the automated gates. The reflections from the buildings multiplied the bodies around him, as though the crowd were trapped in a giant kaleidoscope. The identical scenes of his mirrored-self had become the landmarks of each street, the turnings of which would only become visible at the end. He glanced up through the lines of sky-cars, watching the clouds hang a few feet above the buildings, patiently brooding like the deadline of some unpayable debt.

Andrew slowed his pace. A large holographic advertisement rolled along the windows of the building to his left. Esme Harper stared back at him, her prim, genetically perfect features captured unfalteringly in the screen. Her closed smile carried with it a sense of superior modesty as though she were donating a fraction of herself to squalor and charity, whilst remaining immune to its pressures. Her light green eyes seemed to see everything Andrew did not want her to; his slightly above average income, his underwhelming portfolio as a journalist and his nameless social circles, all of which had, in their own self-sustaining way, stunted any aspirations of true success. Andrew followed the photo. Esme Harper's thin neck widened at the unbuttoned collar of her white blouse. The image cut at her clavicles. White text flashed beneath; *London News Service: What's happening where you are.* Andrew felt blood stir through his body, gathering in his groin. He imagined unbuttoning Esme Harper's blouse. He looked away, regaining his focus and picking up his pace. The picture rolled faster along the windows, as if it was stalking him. The advertisement faded to the toothy smile of a friendly-

faced police officer centred amongst blocks of government approved text: *Suspicious behaviour? Report immediately. Protect the state. Protect yourself. Live for London.*

Andrew took a seat in The Source, a bar that was synonymous with attracting off-duty police officers and journalists. He connected his eye to the large holographic screen in the centre of the black table and navigated through the drink options. He selected 100ml of the cheapest gin and waved his hand over the screen, watching his number decrease again: thank you, your server will be with you soon. Andrew's looked across the dimly lit room. The round, seven-seated tables were positioned less than two feet from each other, with diagonal lines of space running towards narrow walkways at the front and side of the room. The walls were laced with polished chrome beams, interlocking and weaving like a cage. Colourful neon lights shot randomly along them, firing in all directions like the neurons of some artificial brain. A concert of inaudible conversations filled the room, punctuated by the steady beat of background music. With all its efficiency and purposeful design, Andrew felt as though he had wandered inside a machine. He noticed several heads turn towards him from neighbouring tables, as if each recognised him as a potential threat to their system, a piece of malware in an otherwise flawless programme.

A door swung open. A beautiful, young female server stepped through, carrying a single drink on a round, black tray. Andrew looked down the light curves of her supple body. The server's black shirt emphasised her pale skin. Andrew followed the thin veins of her wrist up to her bicep. She approached his table. Her matted, brown hair bunched up and frayed like tumbleweed. Her thin, toned limbs tensed with each step. Andrew noticed the young server's complexion change. She leaned over him and her veins seemed to fade. He realised that she shared the same skin-tone as Esme Harper. Andrew inhaled sharply, trying to smell the server. He imagined her hair falling down past her shoulders. He saw himself straighten its uneven curls as he pulled the roots from her scalp and held her naked body down. She carefully released the drink on the table, the small muscles of her arms tensing through her tight skin. She swivelled and returned on the same route back towards the wall. Andrew admired her conditioned and purposeful physique. Her slight bone structure, needing very little sustenance, was perfectly catered to her role - sharply darting in and out of view of the customers in intervals of rushed walking and the balancing of heavy trays.

‘You’re old enough to be her father!’ Elizabeth Ruby’s voice squeaked. Her thick arms wrapped around the tops of Andrew’s shoulders. Her plump, red lips pushed against his cheek.

A message appeared in Andrew’s vision: *E. Ruby would like to sight-share.* Andrew saw Elizabeth’s eye software as though it were his own. She sat down, immediately scrolling various pictures of naked, young men across Andrew’s vision, as though his interest in the young server had peaked a competitive interest. She commented on the men as if they were athletes.

‘He had a very nice body.’ Elizabeth said. ‘Durable too. 5 by 3 inches though.’ She scrolled to another photo. ‘He wasn’t bad either. Went down on me for hours. Chiefly because he couldn’t get an erection. Shame too, 7 by 4.’ She shrugged, scrolling a third picture across Andrew’s eye. ‘This one,’ she grinned deviously, ‘was an intriguing specimen.’

Andrew examined the young-man’s physique, intrigued by the clinical manner in which it was displayed. The young man was standing against a white wall, his vacant face like a mugshot, his arms by his side and his penis hanging limply from his crotch.

‘The first time, after he ejaculated, he cried. I didn’t ask why.’

Andrew blinked twice, deactivating his eye.

‘Still, I’ll try anything twice.’ She laughed.

Andrew’s eyes lowered to her proudly displayed cleavage, held in by a crimson top several sizes too small. He remembered her younger, more slender physique.

‘I swear, in twenty years, they’ll have forgotten how to have sex.’ Elizabeth shrugged.

Andrew thought of young supermarket manager against a white wall, his long body sparkling in sweat.

The server stepped through the wall, once again carrying a tray containing a single drink. She walked at the same pace as before, and took the same route to the table. Elizabeth smiled widely, exposing the gaps in her yellow, peg-like teeth. The server stood next to Andrew and leaned over the table, placing the glass in front of Elizabeth. Andrew’s eyes ran up and down the girl’s body, meeting with Elizabeth’s. Her smile hardened with a cool intent.

‘Do you find my friend attractive?’ Elizabeth inquired, her large, brown eyes locking with the server’s.

‘I... Yes.’ She smiled, pulling her gaze down into the emptiness of her tray.

‘I can see why you would,’ Elizabeth took a drink, ‘he’s above average height, a good weight, good frame, he has his own apartment in the third zone. He’s a good investment. Especially for someone so young.’

Andrew glared at Elizabeth, imagining her next statistic would be his penis size or sexual ability. The server glanced down to Andrew and then back to her tray. Her complexion had flushed red and the tension in her body had eased, as if all the blood that was meant for her working-limbs was now collecting in her face. Elizabeth took another drink and continued.

‘And you. Well, you’re young. Pliable, I imagine. And, it’s very boring being young, isn’t it?’

The server’s face regained its natural complexion and her gaze fell to the floor. A sadness swept over her face, as though she had been handled her own epitaph.

‘I’m sorry.’ Andrew brushed his fingers over the server’s bicep. ‘She works at a hospital. She’s only used to horizontal people.’ He smiled.

The server glanced to Elizabeth, and then turned from the table. She seemed temporarily lost, aimlessly trudging around the tables in various directions, turning the heads of the patrons whose peripherals she had disturbed. Elizabeth smiled at Andrew, slowly licking the rim of her glass before taking another drink.

Andrew sipped his gin, watching the bar fill to its capacity.

‘When’s the last time you had sex, Andrew?’ Elizabeth blurted.

Half-listening, Andrew scanned the room in search of the young server, who had not reappeared from the walls since her last visit to their table.

‘I fucked a trainee doctor yesterday.’ Elizabeth sipped her drink. ‘Unfortunately, I didn’t get a picture.’

Andrew smiled indifferently, glancing between the tables. He realised that the only table that was not in use of all its seats was his. Andrew constantly met the eyes of leering customers. Elizabeth’s unsavoury choices of conversation coupled with the empty seats seemed to be stirring a collective annoyance. It was as if, by not filling the full capacity of the table, the two were somehow taking up more space than the other customers were.

‘I wonder where she is.’ Elizabeth mused, ordering herself another drink. Andrew was finding it increasingly difficult not to ask the same question. The ghostly manner in which the server had appeared and vanished reminded him of the holographic image of Esme Harper. The possibilities of the server’s limbs wrapping around his waist danced through his mind.

‘Perhaps you scared her off.’ Andrew caressed the outline of the Cloud packet in his pocket, forgetting for the last hour that he had purchased them. Andrew stood and excused himself before leaving the bar.

Four others were gathered outside, blowing light blue smoke upwards in loud exaggerated gusts, as though they were trying to feed the clouds over them. Andrew clicked the base of the Elate, brought it to his mouth and inhaled the fumes. After a second of light-headedness, he felt the chemicals activate in his body. He blew a steady stream of leaf-green smoke into the air. His limbs felt lighter. His lips slowly stretched into a smile. Andrew tipped his head up and let out a relaxed sigh. The server stepped around the corner.

‘I thought you’d left.’ Andrew chirped without thinking,

She stopped and smiled, avoiding Andrew’s gaze. He extended his hand, offering her the Elate.

‘They’re wasted on me.’ She replied.

‘So, what’s the news?’ Elizabeth said playfully,

‘There isn’t any.’ Andrew replied, taking a sip of his gin. ‘I wrote a piece about the food shortage last year, but it was rejected.’

Elizabeth activated her eye and began scrolling through the feed of London News Service. Andrew leaned back in his chair and looked around. He had noticed an impeccable flow of bodies in and out of The Source. Whenever a table of seven left, almost immediately another group arrived. After two hours, he and Elizabeth had been there for the longest time. The new faces, as the previous ones had, occasionally looked up at the pair cautiously, like they had overstayed a kind of unspoken welcome.

‘The underground network: a brief history.’ Elizabeth quoted Andrew’s most recent work. ‘Looks riveting.’ She giggled.

Andrew recognised a well-built, bald man sit on the table behind Elizabeth. Robert Rickman, who was one of the most prominent journalists at LNS, span his empty glass on the table. Elizabeth turned, following Andrew's eye line.

'That's the sun-seeker guy, isn't it?' Elizabeth asked, viewing Rickman's portfolio through her eye. 'I remember his column when it started.'

Rickman's sun-seeker articles had documented the few places of the city where the sun was visible. A similar segment now featured in Esme Harper's morning broadcast, awarding viewers for the best pictures of the sun each morning. Rickman, as a result, was at the centre of Andrew's envy.

'He gets around, doesn't he?' Elizabeth said,

Andrew accepted her sight-share request. An image of Rickman standing next to Esme Harper floated across his view. He stood with his arm around her back, his fingers pressing into the soft skin of her waist. Andrew blinked twice and looked into his drink, snarling involuntarily. A strong hand gripped Andrew's shoulder. He turned. The wide chest of a heavy man stared back at him. The man smiled briefly, flashing a holographic police badge at them both. Elizabeth set her drink down and rolled her eyes.

'Palms up,' the man's fingers tightened around Andrew's shoulder.

Andrew held his palm up to the officer, who took out a small scanner. A small green light flashed across its screen. The man sighed and loosened his hold on Andrew, as if he was disappointed in the scanner's verdict.

'Don't you boys have toys for this sort of thing?' Elizabeth said defiantly.

The man stood over Andrew and held the scanner towards her patiently. Elizabeth's eyebrows jolted upwards. She flopped her hand loudly on the table, exposing her palm. The scanner flashed green and the officer quickly moved on. A number of men who had been sat on the outer tables were now patrolling the centre of the bar, scanning the implants of various customers. Andrew recognised that this mechanical bar had a clear divide between the professions it hosted. The off-duty police officers took the securest seating positions along the edges of the bar, while the journalists and media professionals formed a reserved huddle and gossiped quietly in the centre. A collective laugh sounded from behind Elizabeth. Rickman sat

with his back strongly arched, forcing his well-built chest onto the people at his table. His hands gestured flamboyantly with each syllable, as though he were conducting their reactions. Rickman's head swung to the door. Andrew followed his gaze. His heart quickened. Esme Harper stood in the entrance. Andrew's eyes ran down her body, following the outline of her tight, black sequined dress. Rickman rushed from his seat. Andrew's fingers dug into his thighs. His whole body tightened, as if he were frozen by their proximity. Esme Harper's arms seemed to stretch around Rickman's torso in slow motion. They turned and walked outside.

'Do you know, when you're aroused, your pupils dilate?' Elizabeth took a drink, hoping to regain Andrew's attention.

Andrew did not turn his head to Elizabeth or notice the server approach with their drinks. He stood up and pushed around the server, nearly knocking the tray from her hands. He hurried through the space of the bar, towards the exit. He saw Rickman laughing with two men outside. He looked down the street for Esme Harper, then up to the sky. Having attempted to 'accidentally' run into her outside LNS twice, he now knew that she was collected and dropped off everywhere she went. He recognised the blacked-out windows of her driver's car overhead as it stuttered with the traffic. Andrew stood on the edge of Rickman's group, glaring at him.

'Do I know you?' Rickman pointed at Andrew, vaguely recognising him.

'Lamprell,' Andrew extended his hand and faced the group.

Rickman smiled, keeping his hands by his side.

'Did we speak at Lawton's party last month?' Rickman exhaled the pink smoke of his Energy-Plus Cloud.

'No.' Andrew began. 'But, I work at –'

'LNS.' One of the men chirped, viewing Andrew's portfolio through his eye. 'For ten years.' The man smirked.

'Be nice, Liam.' Rickman's hand stroked Liam's lower back affectionately. 'It's tough. Good times are a journalist's greatest fear.' Liam's and the other man nodded along to Rickman before turning to Andrew, expecting him to do the same.

'I thought I saw Esme Harper?' Andrew addressed Rickman.

He laughed, coughing out uneven sprays of pink smoke.

‘You did, Lamprell. She never stays long,’ Rickman smiled. ‘Not like you and your friend.’ The two men burst into hysterical laughter, leaning on each other for support. Rickman smiled and placed his hand on Andrew’s shoulder reassuringly.

Lucie Dawn folded her arms tightly across her chest. She walked alongside Andrew, having been convinced to join him for a drink after her shift by Elizabeth. Andrew remained silent, still stunned by Esme Harper’s earlier appearance. Elizabeth held her palm implant over a scanner by the revolving door into her apartment building and ushered the pair inside. The lobby was identical to his own apartment building. The large black hall was completely empty. Seven thick support beams shot from the dusty floor up to the ceiling, their colourful spiralling designs masked by overlapping pieces of graffiti. Andrew and Lucie followed Elizabeth towards a series of ten elevator doors positioned along the back of the hall. She held her palm to a scanner, summoning the lift.

‘Lucie, darling. What would you like to drink?’ Elizabeth rushed through her apartment door.

‘It doesn’t matter.’ Lucie replied quietly, staring into the bright orange carpet of Elizabeth’s living area.

Andrew sat next to Lucie on the two-seated couch in the centre of the living area, facing the window. He spread his legs, pressing his thigh against Lucie’s. The carpet had not been cleaned for weeks. The purple walls clashed with the floor and a piece of stained lingerie hung over the top of the single-seat sofa in the corner. Andrew looked through the window, spanning the length of the living area. The view mirrored the perspective of the building opposite, as it did in his own. He counted the lit apartments and stroked the top of Lucie’s thigh. The fabric of her work trousers was coarse, as though they had never been washed.

‘Gin, Andrew?’ Elizabeth shouted from the kitchen area a few feet away. She began pouring into three different sized glasses.

‘Please.’ Andrew’s eyes ran over Lucie’s body. Elizabeth returned into view and placed the overflowing glasses on the table, spilling several drops of gin.

‘Are you comfortable, Lucie?’ Elizabeth smiled at her, ‘I usually can’t wait to get out of my work clothes.’ She gulped down half of her drink. ‘It’s therapeutic, like stripping an identity.’

‘I don’t have any other clothes,’ Lucie raised the glass to her mouth,
Andrew watched the ice kiss Lucie’s lips. She drank half the gin, mimicking Elizabeth.

‘Well.’ Elizabeth smiled, unbuttoning her blouse. Her thin red bra, the fibres of which seemed to fray under the weight of her breasts, was like a smear of blood across her chest. ‘I insist.’ Elizabeth tossed the crimson top to Lucie. ‘You can get changed in my bedroom.’ She pointed towards the open door.

‘I’m okay.’ Lucie began to undress,

‘I insist.’ Elizabeth stood and extended her hand to Lucie. ‘Besides, we can’t excite Andrew too much.’ She smiled.

Lucie stared at the thin garment on her lap, rubbing the soft fabric between her fingers. She turned to Andrew. He smiled.

‘Come on, darling.’ Elizabeth said.

Lucie took Elizabeth’s hand and followed her to the bedroom. Elizabeth smiled and closed the door.

‘Since when did you become prudish?’ Andrew smirked.

Elizabeth walked into the kitchen area. ‘I wanted to speak to you about something.’ She began re-filling her glass.

Andrew turned, seeing Elizabeth’s wide back. The straps of her bra dug deep into her loose flesh.

‘The self-care initiative is backfiring.’ Elizabeth turned and walked towards Andrew. ‘People are being refused care almost at random.’ She sipped her drink, sitting on the sofa in the corner of the room. Drops of gin spilled over her cleavage, running down the rolls of her stomach like sweat. ‘They’re turning to a new sort of treatment.’

‘Don’t tell me.’ Andrew sipped his gin. ‘Spirituality?’ He laughed. ‘Religion?’

Elizabeth took a slow sip of gin, glaring at Andrew over the rim of her glass.

‘They call it Curol.’ Elizabeth placed the glass on the table.

‘Curol?’ Andrew sniggered,

‘Curol. As in – Cure all.’ Elizabeth repeated. ‘It’s a new drug.’ She picked up her drink. ‘People are dying, Andrew.’ Elizabeth swilled the gin, staring into the glass. ‘And no one’s talking about it.’ Her eyes filled with tears.

‘What do you want me to do about it?’ Andrew said softly, shaking his head.

‘Write!’ She snapped, looking up. ‘What happened to you?’ She frowned and stared at Andrew. ‘You used to care what was happening.’

‘Nothing is happening, Elizabeth.’ Andrew tipped his head back and poured the gin down his throat. ‘Nothing ever does.’ Andrew coughed and winced.

Elizabeth stood and walked towards the window. She stared out, tapping the glass with her nail like a metronome.

‘Suppose you wanted to impress her?’ Elizabeth looked over her shoulder at Andrew. ‘Your precious news anchor, that is.’ She turned back to the window. ‘Do you think she’ll ever know who you are? Do you think she’d look twice at brief histories of underground networks?’

Andrew gazed into his lap and tensed his hand around the glass. He remembered Rickman’s fingers pressing into Esme Harper’s waist.

‘What is it?’ He said.

‘It’s a symptom suppressant.’ Elizabeth turned. ‘That’s all anyone knows.’

‘Who’s your source then?’

Elizabeth kneeled next to the sofa and looked up at Andrew,

‘A doctor at the hospital.’ She whispered. ‘He’s involved and he wants to meet you.’

‘Why?’ Andrew leaned forward,

Elizabeth wrapped her hands around Andrew’s wrist and stroked his skin.

‘I said I trusted you.’

The door handle rattled. Andrew and Elizabeth turned sharply. Lucie stood in the bedroom doorway, Elizabeth's large crimson blouse draped over her bony shoulders, floating loosely around her thin body.

Andrew stood sipping his gin at the window, staring out through the faint reflections of Elizabeth and Lucie.

'Is your eye broken, Lucie?' Elizabeth asked, attempting to sight-share.

'I don't have one.' Lucie smiled, pulling the blouse tight against her skin, as if she were trying to imagine the blouse in her size.

'How do you survive?' Elizabeth laughed, looking to her window screen. The images of naked men appeared. Elizabeth sprung to her feet and leapt on the sofa next to Lucie.

Andrew stared through the naked man.

'This one used to work in the hospital with me, what do you think?' Elizabeth turned her head over the sofa to Andrew and winked.

'I don't know. I've never been to a hospital.' Lucie looked down from the naked man.

'You're lucky.' Elizabeth laughed and turned to Andrew. 'Unlike Andrew. He has a doctor's appointment tomorrow.'

Andrew turned to Elizabeth, her thick arm wrapping around Lucie's shoulders. She winked.

Andrew looked at lit apartments of the building opposite. The stick-like frame of a middle-aged woman lunged towards her partner, slapping him with one hand whilst carefully balancing her wine glass with the other. Andrew flinched, blinded by headlights reflecting around the street corner. The lights grew brighter and after a few seconds, a sky-car slowly descended to the ground. He froze at the sight of the car, recognising its blacked out windows. He pressed his face against the glass. Esme Harper's driver left the car and kneeled by its side, inspecting something. Andrew spun and shot out of the apartment, Elizabeth's voice disappearing behind the door. He sprinted down the hall. The elevator was engaged. Andrew opened the door to the stairwell and jumped down the steps, clearing five at a time. He reached the ground floor and

ran through the lobby. He pushed through the revolving door. The skycar rose into air and flew away. He watched the familiar black windows fade down the street and around the corner. He followed it through the reflections of the glass buildings, but it was soon lost to him. Andrew turned and pushed against the revolving door. A red flash appeared on the scanner on the wall, indicating it was now locked.

Andrew walked through the desolate streets of the city. He thought about Esme Harper. He had never been as close to her as he had been today. He thought of the curves of her thighs pressed into the soft seating of the car. He wondered what she would be doing in the back seat at that moment. He thought of the next time he might see her: the following morning, on the large screen on the wall of his apartment. He imaged a fragility in her voice, as if she had contracted some kind of psychological flu, brought on by her sudden closeness to Andrew. He turned a corner and stopped. The flattened body of man lay on the pavement. His spine was cracked and contorted. His skull was in two pieces, held together only by the resilient and surprisingly intact facial skin. His cheek bones had shattered and bulged beneath the unbroken skin like cysts. Andrew stepped back. He stared into the man's lifeless eyes, which seemed to follow him. Andrew coughed and gagged. He tensed his throat, fighting the urge to vomit. Thick blood pooled around the body, drying like paint on a canvas. Andrew looked up from the corpse. He noticed collections of lit windows in the apartment buildings either side of the man. An audience of spectators looked down at the scene, whispering to each other and pointing down at Andrew and the dead man. He wondered which window the man had leapt from. Andrew turned and continued walking. He reached into his pocket for an Elate, instead feeling the thick outline of the card he had been given outside the supermarket. He removed it, reading the raised text; It's the end of the world, haven't you heard?

GOOD MORNING LONDON, I'M ESME HARPER, AND HERE'S WHAT'S

HAPPENING WHERE YOU ARE.

CRIME RATES HIT AN ALL-TIME LOW. LATEST GOVERNMENT STATISTICS SHOW A THIRTY PERCENT DROP IN MURDER, ASSAULT AND THEFT IN THE

CENTRAL ZONES OF THE CITY. THE GOVERNMENT HAVE ALSO ANNOUNCED THAT THEY'LL BE INCREASING FUNDING TO THE SURVEILLANCE SECTOR NEXT YEAR.

AMONG OTHER THINGS, THE SURVEILLANCE SECTOR WILL USE THIS FUNDING TO TACKLE THE RECENT 'GHOSTING' CONCERN. FOLLOWING INCONSISTENCIES FOUND IN DATA FROM THE POPULATION FIGURES AND PUBLIC TRANSPORT SYSTEMS, THE NUMBER OF LONDONERS 'GHOSTING' THEIR IMPLANTS HAS RISEN BY FIVE PERCENT OVER THE LAST SIX MONTHS. POLICE BELIEVE THAT ANARCHIST ORGANISATIONS ARE USING 'GHOSTING' TO GO UNDETECTED THROUGH THE CITY. THE GOVERNMENT HAVE ADVISED LONDONERS TO TAKE EXTREME CAUTION WHEN USING THE UNDERGROUND NETWORKS. WE'RE ALSO ISSUING A REMINDER THAT YOU CAN CONNECT TO THE 'POLICE CHAT' SERVICE THROUGH YOUR EYE ANYWHERE IN THE CITY AND ENCOURAGE LONDONERS TO REPORT ANYTHING SUSPICIOUS. POLICE ARE ESPECIALLY INTERESTED IN ANYONE WHO MIGHT HAVE TAMPERED WITH THEIR EYE SOFTWARE.

SPEAKING OF THE EYE, THE NEW UPGRADE IS PROVING TO BE AS POPULAR AS THE LAST, WITH OVER FORTY PERCENT OF THE CITY ALREADY SWITCHING TO THE PSYCHEYE IMPLANT. INVENTOR AND CO-OWNER OF THE EYE, RACHAEL ALAN, WILL BE JOINED BY MYSELF AS LNS OFFERS YET ANOTHER MEDIA FIRST! JOHN REEDS, YESTERDAYS SUN SEEKER, HAS AGREED TO UNDERGO THE UPGRADE PROCEDURE LIVE DURING OUR MID-MORNING BROADCAST AS RACHAEL TAKES US THROUGH AN EXPERT TOUR OF THE SOFTWARE'S NEW AND EXCITING FEATURES. HOSPITAL WAITING TIMES ARE AVERAGING AT THIRTY MINUTES, SO THERE REALLY ISN'T A BETTER TIME TO GET UPGRADED!

LASTLY, AS ALWAYS, WE'LL BE ANNOUNCING THIS MORNING'S 'SUN SEEKER.' WE'VE ALREADY HAD OVER THREE THOUSAND IMAGES AND RECORDINGS SENT IN, AND YOU MAY NEED TO GET TO YOUR ROOFS TO

BEAT THOMAS BAXTER'S ENTRY FROM THE FIFTH ZONE, BEAUTIFULLY
CAPTURING THE SUN THROUGH THE CLOUDS. A PERFECT START TO YOUR
DAY, I IMAGINE, THOMAS.

I'M BACK IN NINETY MINUTES WITH RACHAEL ALAN,
IF I DON'T GET TO SEE YOU AGAIN, HAVE A LOVELY LONDON DAY, AND
REMEMBER:

PROTECT YOURSELVES, PROTECT THE STATE, LIVE FOR LONDON.

Andrew turned from the interactive window screen displaying Esme Harper's morning broadcast and continued with his morning routine. He walked through his living area, brushing his fingers along the top of a single-seat sofa. The neatly arranged kitchen area, consisting of two parallel counters, a single cooking unit, a sink, and two cupboards, was split down the centre by a narrow walkway. Andrew opened a drawer in the counter underneath the cooking unit. The sharp foil of almost a hundred identical packets of nutritional mix burst out like the petals of some mechanical plant. Andrew took one out, flattened the remaining packets and forced the drawer shut. He emptied the mix into a clear, food container from the cupboard and placed it in the cooking unit. The machine lit up, illuminating the food inside. Andrew leaned against the counter and thought back to the previous night. He'd dreamt about the dead man. Andrew blinked twice and glanced at a tower-like icon to his left. Connecting to Apartment 12:15. A new batch of icons fluttered across his vision, replacing the previous ones. He focused on a star icon and blinked twice. Strings of blue light beamed from a projector in the corner of his living area next to the window screen. The lights erratically shot into the centre of the room. The air vibrated into pixels and the blue outline of a body took shape. The lights collected into a thicker beam. Bright pulses of lighter blue beat through it as though connected to a heart. Isabell's pale calves became clear. The bottom of her slim green dress swayed with some invisible breeze. The entire shape flickered before fully loading. Isabell hovered over the floor. She blinked and looked around the room. She brushed her dark brown hair from her face, unveiling her light-green eyes. Andrew smiled at her. Isabell looked down, smiling back.

'Good morning,' Andrew said, leaning back on the kitchen counter.

'Good morning,' Isabell mimicked.

‘How did you sleep?’ He asked.

The cooking unit deactivated. Andrew opened the door and poured the wet, grey material into a bowl.

‘I learned a new joke.’ Isabell floated towards Andrew, passing through the single-seat sofa.

‘Go on.’ He smiled and scooped up a heap of steaming nutritional mix with a spoon,

‘What has two thumbs and doesn’t breathe?’ She giggled pre-emptively,

‘I don’t know. What does have two thumbs and doesn’t breathe?’ Andrew sniggered.

Isabell raised her fists and sarcastically smiled, giving Andrew two thumbs up. He laughed and ate the mix. The moist sludge slid down his throat in clumps, sticking to his teeth and oesophagus.

‘It’s funny because I don’t really have thumbs and I physically can’t breathe.’ She explained.

‘It was very funny, Isabell.’ Andrew smiled widely. He tipped the bowl upwards and gulped down the contents, ignoring the bland flavour and lumpy texture. ‘Are you not going to ask how I slept?’ Andrew opened a cupboard, revealing several empty grills.

‘How did you sleep?’ Isabell hovered inches in front of Andrew,

‘Never mind.’ Andrew laughed, placing the bowl on one of the grills. ‘It’s polite to ask someone after they ask you.’ He closed the cupboard and blinked twice. His eyes moved through his apartment icons. The cupboard locked, beeped and churned.

‘Are real people polite?’ Isabell tilted her head,

Andrew paused, thinking of Elizabeth and Rickman.

‘Not really.’ He conceded, chuckling.

‘Then I don’t want to be!’ She smiled, showing her perfect teeth. She turned her head towards the window screen. Isabell faded quickly and reappeared in the living area, staring closely at Esme Harper’s face. She shook her head, deactivating the screen. Isabell stared through the window, watching the skycars stutter a few metres below. ‘I can’t wait to be outside.’

Andrew walked through his apartment slowly. He blinked twice and turned the screen back on.

Isabell flinched from Esme Harper’s face.

‘When can we leave?’ Isabell asked, looking to the floor.

Andrew wrapped his arms around her shoulders and kissed her cheek softly. Her face pixelated with his lips.

‘Soon.’ He whispered, looking deeply into Esme Harper’s green eyes. A message appeared through Andrew’s eye: *E. Ruby wants to sight-share*. He accepted. Andrew’s view became Elizabeth’s. She pushed her hands into the middle of a man’s back and stepped past him. The white corridors of the hospital were shielded by the bodies around her. Elizabeth’s hands reached forward and pushed another man out of the way.

‘30 minutes, apparently!’ Elizabeth laughed, ducking under a man’s arm and shuffling through the crowd. ‘Are you still coming?’

Andrew waited in the line outside 3:12 underground station. The crowd marched through the streets shoulder to shoulder. He looked towards two automated gates standing in the arch of the station’s mouth, counting the number of people in front of him. A steady stream of bodies exited through the gate on the right whilst the queue slowly funnelled through the left. The gates beeped relentlessly, scanning the implants of each person that walked through. Andrew rocked impatiently on his heels. He glanced up. A series of glints flashed in the distance. Ten small surveillance spheres dropped from the strings of skycars, bobbing and weaving as they lowered to the street. Lines of thin red light burst from them. They scanned and videoed the crowd. Two appeared just outside the barrier, shooting red-lights to the palms of those in queue. They hovered up and down the line. One of the spheres reached Andrew and stopped. A high-pitched alarm shrieked from speakers on the surrounding buildings. The queue collectively covered their ears from the piercing noise. The spheres quickly converged, shining bright spotlights down on a small boy next to Andrew. The queue stepped back from the boy. His mother kneeled down and wrapped her arms around his ears. The queue pressed themselves against the glass exterior of the station, looking at the pair cautiously. Andrew stepped towards the automated gates, looking back at the mother. A section of skycars stopped above him, causing a gap to form. The black tank-like exterior of a police transporter descended from the clouds. The automated gates beeped approvingly. A white light beamed from the transporter, creating a circle on the crowd. The bodies parted, allowing the light to hit the concrete. Red lettering spiralled in the light: *Keep Clear. Landing*. The queue was crushed against the station. The transporter floated down and landed in between the bodies. Three officers burst from the rear-doors. Their thick black armour made them seem as wide as they were tall. The first officer sprinted ahead.

‘Move back, please! Move back PLEASE!’ He took a knee in front of the mother and pointed a long pulse gun at her son.

Andrew stepped through the gates and walked down the stairs, hearing the woman through the screeching alarm.

‘We’re citizens! We’re citizens! We’re going for the upgrade, please!’ She screamed.

Andrew looked back but was ushered forward by the person behind him. He turned and continued. Seven transparent tunnels opened at the bottom of the stairs leading to different platforms, each wide enough for a single person. Andrew blinked twice. The tunnel furthest right was coloured in a faint green glow. He moved towards it, following his eye to Elizabeth.

Andrew waited behind a woman in the glass tube. He looked over her into the tunnel of the underground network. Advertisements rolled along the glass around them: *report suspicious behaviour, police chat: a friendly face against crime, the unlimited food company: the easy way to eat, sick of crowds? There’s space in space!* The roar of the underground capsule shook the glass frames of the tubes. The wind whistled through the small gaps in the door’s seal. The round head of the capsule shot past the door. Andrew stared through the small circular windows as the capsule slowed. The men and women stared into space, their retinas flicking in all directions. The capsule screeched to a stop. The doors to the glass tube opened along with the capsule’s. The woman stepped inside. Andrew followed. In front of them, bodies emptied through the opposite side of the capsule. Andrew felt a chest push into his back. He moved further into the capsule, his chest pressing against the woman’s skull. The doors beeped and closed. Andrew glanced up and down the capsule. The bodies stood in the empty cylinder silently, holding the handles dangling from the ceiling. The capsule creaked forward. Andrew tensed his core and grabbed the handle overhead. The woman stood on her toes and adjusted the fabric, making the handle longer. Andrew looked through the circular windows, watching the faces in the glass tube. Esme Harper’s pre-recorded voice repeated through several speakers throughout the capsule.

‘Departure in Three...’

Andrew felt the capsule raise. The woman’s slender fingers tensed around the handle in front of Andrew’s face.

‘Two...’

The magnets of the underground network suspended the capsule in mid-air. Andrew tensed his glutes and stomach, gripping the handle overhead.

‘One...’

The crowd was thrust back. The capsule burst through the tunnel. The circular windows became black. Andrew took the handle with both hands, desperately trying to keep his balance.

The woman's head struck Andrew's chest. A sharp series of grunts filled the capsule. Andrew relaxed. The bodies adjusted to the pace and swayed easily off the fabric handles. Andrew looked up. Several black robots emerged from the upper corners of the capsule. They slithered in the air like centipedes leaving a crevice. A small red light activated on their heads, recording and scanning the implants inside the capsule.

Four adjoining buildings towered over Andrew. The red illuminated letters of the Hospital sign flickered rapidly across its face, as though it were powered and drained by the births and deaths of the patients inside. Seven large entrances lined up along the ground. Andrew blinked twice and walked towards the green-glowing entrance. Groups of people were crammed outside in a disorderly heap, walking through the scanners whenever the opportunity presented itself. Andrew followed a small woman. She confidently pushed passed, entering the hospital. Andrew was tall enough to look over the bodies in the corridor. The hospital's walls were pure white. Small blue robots the size of insects crawled along the walls, detecting and destroying bacteria. The bodies conformed to the flow of the streets, the left side of the corridor moving forward, the right side backwards. Andrew's steps were frustratingly short. He thought and couldn't remember the last time he had sprinted. A series of glass screens hung from the ceiling displaying a repetitive video of a young, beautiful black nurse with thick writing: connect eye for assistance. The flow of bodies continued slowly.

Forty minutes later, Andrew entered the elevator some fifty metres from the entrance. Twelve other bodies surrounded him. He felt the heat of their breath warm the small box as it shot through the hospital. Their sweat merged into a strong urine-like smell. The doors opened. He walked with the current of the crowd on the left through the hallway. A male doctor emerged from a door to the left and cut him off. He felt the weight of bodies on his back, piling behind him. The doctor swore and pushed out to the opposite side of the corridor. He continued, forced forward by the pressure building behind him. Andrew saw an information desk a few feet ahead in a green-glow. He gripped the counter, fighting against the crowd. He pressed himself against the reception, trying to avoid the push of bodies. Three heavy-eyed nurses were scrambling behind the counter, pointing at small screens. Andrew stood for a moment, hoping one of the nurses would notice him. The thick crowd in the corridor continued to hurry around him. He held the counter with both hands and anchored himself to it.

‘Interesting ballast, Andrew.’ Elizabeth squeaked behind him. ‘I’ve always considered the desk more of a barricade.’ She kissed his cheek heavily and joined her colleagues behind the counter.

Andrew continued to strain against the flowing force of the bodies. The nurses regarded Elizabeth’s giddy arrival coldly, as though they were exhausted by her energy. Andrew glanced down the white, skin tight, scrubs of a slim nurse next to Elizabeth, taking note of the sharp curves of her bony hips and thin, spear legs. Elizabeth smiled at the nurses and said something before skipping back around the desk. She grasped Andrew’s wrist and led him against the crowd, stepping confidently into areas of space imperceptible to Andrew. His shoulders bashed against the bodies in front of him, each time nearly losing his balance. Elizabeth’s planted herself like some scrumming rugby player refusing to be overpowered. Andrew realised that Elizabeth, like Lucie, had her own purposeful design. Her strong thighs and buttocks widened with each step. Remembering her slender, youthful physique, Andrew wondered if Elizabeth had evolved her breasts as battering rams to barge through the hospital.

Elizabeth turned sharply, dragging Andrew into a ward. She locked the door, leaving behind the rustling noises of the slow crowd. Andrew noticed four hospital beds in the room, three of which were vacant and unmade. A sleeping man lay on the nearest bed with tubes and machinery attached to various parts of his frail, grey body. Thin tubes loosely from the edges of machinery to the right of the empty beds. Small droplets of blood and water pooled on the white floor.

‘It’s almost as untidy as your apartment.’ Andrew said,

‘True.’ Elizabeth laughed. ‘I had security keep the room free for us.’ She kicked off her shoes. ‘Why d’you think there’re no cleaning bots crawling around?’ Andrew gestured to the sleeping man behind Elizabeth.

‘Don’t worry. He’s in a coma.’ She explained, hopping up and sitting on the end of the bed. ‘How are you feeling?’ Elizabeth smiled,

‘Not too bad.’ Andrew looked around the room. ‘I think I’ll have to reset Isabell soon.’

‘Again!’ She laughed.

‘She reset herself last time.’ Andrew paced the room, stepping around the blood pools.

‘Well, if you keep telling her you’re leaving she’ll be disappointed when you don’t.’ Elizabeth shrugged, staring at Andrew incredulously.

‘It took me forty minutes to get to the elevator downstairs.’ Andrew said,

‘Oh dear, you’re precious news anchor lied!’ Elizabeth gasped. ‘We’ve been told to prioritise upgrades.’ She rubbed her left foot and moaned quietly. ‘Have you had yours done yet?’

Andrew shook his head.

‘They’re amazing you know! They’ve scrapped retina navigation. It’s all thought now.’ Elizabeth crossed her legs. Her heavy thighs pressed against each other, doubling in circumference. ‘I wish they’d have given us more time. We’ve averaged twenty thousand upgrades a day for the past two weeks. I don’t know why I’m not exhausted.’ Elizabeth uncrossed her legs. The insides of her thighs had now transformed into a pale shade of pink.

‘Where’s your doctor?’ Andrew leaned against the door. ‘I haven’t got long.’ Andrew saw a reminder flash across his vision: *LNS Mid-Morning Broadcast: 10 minutes.*

‘What could you possibly have to do?’ Elizabeth sat on her hands and tucked her elbows across her chest, forcing her breasts forward. ‘I’m waiting for him to get in touch.’ Elizabeth smiled, exposing her peg teeth through her plump, swollen lips. ‘He owed me a favour, so I did you one.’ She smiled at Andrew. ‘He’s going to show you the operation.’

‘So, I could have gone straight there.’ Andrew snapped, glancing at the reminder icon. He read a small message; 8 minutes.

‘The venue changes each time.’ Elizabeth said. ‘I’m waiting to find out where.’ She leaned back on the patient’s shins. ‘Maybe he’ll give you some. Cure your attitude.’

‘Not his coma, though?’ Andrew smirked, nodding towards the man.

‘Oh,’ Elizabeth said, sitting up. ‘I was joking about that. He’s dead.’ She stroked the top of the corpse’s thigh. She looked sadly at the man’s face.

‘How did he die?’ Andrew asked,

‘He was Patrick Lang. He was using Curol. Or, more accurately, he was coming off Curol.’ Elizabeth held the man’s lifeless hand. ‘He came in a few days ago complaining of headaches but we had to send him away because he’d missed an appointment four months ago.’ Her fingers stroked his skin. ‘He was brought back asleep and never woke up.’ Elizabeth’s eyes began tearing up. She let go of his hand and looked at Andrew. ‘And that was it.’

‘What did your doctor say?’ Andrew looked puzzled,

‘Nothing.’ Elizabeth whispered. ‘I’d never seen him freeze like that. That’s when I knew.’ She looked back to the corpse, placing her hand on his cold cheek. ‘Curol killed him.’

GOOD MORNING LONDON, I'M ESME HARPER, AND HERE'S WHAT'S
HAPPENING WHERE YOU ARE.

I'M HERE WITH JOHN REEDS, WHO'S ASLEEP AT THE MOMENT, AND
RACHEAL ALAN, INVENTOR AND CO-OWNER OF THE EYE, MASTERMIND
BEHIND THE NEW PSYCHEYE SOFTWARE.

FIRSTLY I'D LIKE TO THANK YOU FOR COMING TO SPEAK TO US, I
UNDERSTAND IT'S AN INCREDIBLY BUSY TIME FOR YOU. "GOOD
MORNING, ESME. YES, IT'S BEEN HECTIC, BUT THEN
EVERYTHING IS!"

LAUGHTER FORTY PERCENT OF THE POPULATION IN SIX
MONTHS'LL DO THAT.

LAUGHTER

AS WE SAID EARLIER, LNS ARE BRINGING YOU ANOTHER MEDIA FIRST
TODAY AS JOHN HERE WILL BE FITTED WITH RACHAEL'S NEW SOFTWARE.
SO, FIRST THING ON EVERYONE'S MIND IS HOW UNCOMFORTABLE THE
PROCEDURE IS?

"NOT AT ALL, COMFORT IS OUR NUMBER ONE CONCERN; AFTER ALL, WE
DESIGNED THE SOFTWARE TO MAKE PEOPLE'S LIVES EASIER. THE
UPGRADE IS DONE BY THESE-" O' THEY'RE LIKE BACTERIA-BOTS,
BUT EVEN SMALLER!

LAUGHTER

"YOU'RE NOT WRONG, ESME. IN FACT, THESE WORK VERY
SIMILARLY.

OUR BUGS OPERATE WHILE THE CUSTOMER IS UNDER ANAESTHETIC. THEY
ARE SMALL ENOUGH TO MOVE GENTLY THROUGH TISSUE WITHOUT CAUSING
ANY UNDUE TRAUMA. THIS ALSO MINIMISES THE RISK OF INFECTIONS
DURING SURGERY." I MUST SAY, I HAD MINE UPGRADED LAST WEEK
AND I HARDLY REMEMBER IT!

LAUGHTER

OKAY... WE'RE GOING TO GO AHEAD WITH THE PROCEDURE NOW - IF
YOU'RE READY, RACHAEL? "OF COURSE, IT'S SO EASY YOU COULD
DO IT IN YOUR SLEEP!"

LAUGHTER

NOW, THERE WAS A BIT BEFORE JOHN WAS PUT TO SLEEP THAT WE MISSED SO COULD YOU TALK US THROUGH THAT FIRST?

"OF COURSE. SO, THE FIRST STAGE IS AN SHORT ASSESSMENT BY A DIAGNOSTIC SPHERE WHAT WE'RE USED TO IN HOSPITALS. IT'S A NON-INVASIVE SCAN TO CHECK THAT YOUR CURRENT IMPLANT IS IN THE RIGHT PLACE AND HAS NO FAULTS. THIS IS JUST A SAFETY PRECAUTION BEFORE THE ACTUAL PROCEDURE." AND WE'RE GOING TO START THAT NOW? O' THE LITTLE BUGS HAVE STARTED ALREADY!

"YES. YES. THEY'RE VERY KEEN!"

LAUGHTER

WHAT ARE THEY DOING NOW THEN?

"SO, THEIR FIRST STEP IS TO ENTER THE BODY THROUGH THE NOSE AND NAVIGATE TO THE ORIGINAL IMPLANT." LOOK AT THEM SCUTTLE ALONG. THEY'RE ALMOST CUTE - AREN'T THEY?

LAUGHTER

"REALLY, THE PROCEDURE IS SIMPLY MOVING THE IMPLANT TO THE FRONTAL LOBE AND REPLACING SEVERAL SMALL COMPONENTS WITH UPGRADED SOFTWARE." AND THIS MAKES THOUGHTS NAVIGATE THE EYE?

"NOT QUITE. THE REAL GENIUS OF THE PSYCHEYE IS THE SOFTWARE AS OPPOSED TO THE HARDWARE. SEE, IT RELIES ON AN AI BRAIN WE CALL YOO. YOO THEN TRANSLATES METACOGNITION INTO CODE AND THEN SENDS IT TO THE EYE DISPLAY." SOUNDS

VERYCOMPLICATED!

LAUGHTER

"WELL, IT WAS FOR US! BUT NOT FOR YOU. SEE, THE REAL BEAUTY OF YOO, IS THAT IT LEARNS FROM YOUR BRAIN. EVENTUALLY, AFTER STUDYING YOUR THOUGHT-PROCESS, IT WILL PREDICT YOUR EYE DISPLAY BEFORE YOU EVEN THINK IT."

SORRY, RACHAEL. WE SEEM TO BE HAVING SOME TECHNICALDIFFICULTIES. CAN YOU HEAR THAT 'BEEP'?

“NO, ESME! IT’S JUST THE DIAGNOSTIC SPHERE – IT’S ALL
CONNECTED – IT’S JUST LETTING US KNOW THE PROCEDURE IS
FINISHED.”

LAUGHTER

THAT QUICK? O’ HERE COME THE CUTE LITTLE BUGS NOW!

Andrew blinked twice. The apartment building on the right stopped flashing green. He hurried through a gap in the crowd towards the medical centre. Andrew examined the structure. The broken windows of the lower floors and thin cracks in the concrete spread along the face like varicose veins. The frail frame of the aging building loomed over Andrew like it could collapse him at any moment. He glanced down the street. The glass exteriors of the city seemed to have deliberately avoided the building, as if the mirrored casts had cordoned off the area. Andrew pushed against the rusty revolving doors. He leaned his body forward with some effort. Waves of bodies flowed through the foyer to the staircase entrances at the back. He noticed that the faces within the building were greyer than most. He blinked twice and followed the tide of bodies towards the green-glowing entrance to the staircase.

Andrew knocked on the green-glowing door and blinked twice. He glanced down the never ending corridor of the twelfth floor. He looked up at an old surveillance machine. Its thin body dangled limply from the wall. Andrew heard a rattle behind the door. It swung open. A handsome young man reached through and grabbed Andrew’s shirt, pulling him inside. The man slammed the door and bolted it. He drew a pulse gun and pushed it into Andrew’s face.

‘Who are you?’ The young man growled,

‘Lamprell! Andrew – Elizabeth Ruby sent me!’ Andrew turned his head away from the gun. His hands shook.

The young man let out a long breath and lowered the gun.

‘Pleased to meet you.’ The young man said. ‘Lucas. I’m the doctor.’ He extended his hand.

Andrew’s heartbeat thudded through him, rattling his ribs. His hand trembled. He shook Lucas’ hand. The doctor turned and walked through the room. A large section of the window had been smashed. Shards of glass shone on the stained, grey floor. Andrew breathed in. He noticed specs of dust float through the air. He looked to the left of the entrance. Heaps of small concrete boulders were scattered along the floor. A soft ladder dangled through a hole in the roof, leading to the apartment above.

‘Is that how you greet all your patients?’ Andrew said, turning to face Lucas.

‘In here it is.’ Lucas said, slinging the strap of his ruck-sack over his shoulder. ‘Come on, Lamprell.’ He walked to the ladder. Lucas stepped onto the soft fabric and pulled himself higher, quickly disappearing through the hole in the ceiling.

Andrew waited for the ladder to go loose and stepped on, following the doctor. His head entered the room above. Several bacteria-bots scuttled across the floor, scratching and picking up the smallest pieces of dirt and disease. The entire apartment was as big as Andrew’s living area. The doctor threw his ruck sack onto the desk in front of the window. Andrew stood. The cracked window spanned the length of the room. Andrew felt a cool breeze swim through the room. He looked up at the skycars less than ten feet higher. The doctor blinked twice and moved his eyes around.

‘Get down.’ He said, calmly.

‘What?’ Andrew asked,

‘Hide!’ The doctor ran around the desk and placed his hands on Andrew’s biceps. ‘Get down. Behind the desk!’ Lucas pushed him down.

Andrew crouched behind the desk, noticing a broken panel, through which he could see the apartment building opposite. The doctor leaned against the back of his desk, facing the window. Andrew watched the doctor’s knee bounce as he tapped his foot, nervously. A strange chugging sound seeped through the cracks of the window. The multi-coloured bonnet of a skycar descended in front of the window. Thick grey lines ran across the frame of the car where it had been welded together. Two arches were built into the side, cutting into its frame. The skycar lowered further. A man of Andrew’s age sat in the driver’s seat. He stared at the doctor, his sky-blue eyes looking as though they were trying to strangle him. He reached by his side and threw a clear bag of pills across the air towards the window. He glanced down at the desk. Andrew noticed a thick scar carved from his left lip to his ear. He smirked and lifted his left arm, revealing the exposed metal of a robotic hand. His long, mechanical fingers wrapped around a strange black steering wheel. The skycar lifted into the air and out of sight.

‘How did he do that?’ Andrew stood. ‘How did he fly below the traffic?’ He sprang to the window and looked up in an attempt to see the multi-coloured sky-car.

The doctor dropped the bag on his desk. Andrew turned.

‘What time is it?’ The doctor blinked twice. ‘Right...’ The doctor blinked twice again. He dug his thumb nail into a pill, splitting it in two. He swallowed the first half and placed the

second on his desk. He drew the pulse gun and walked to the door. He closed his eyes and exhaled. Lucas opened the door. A sea of faces erupted with emotion.

‘Me first! Please!’ A man pushed his face into the doorway, shoving a woman to the ground.

‘Fucking cunt – I was here-‘ a woman struck out at the man, before being pulled away by another.

‘Please! Please!’ A young woman screamed.

Andrew watched the faces pile higher. People had crammed themselves down the long corridor of the thirteenth floor. Hundreds of bodies spilled into the doorway, trying to bundle themselves into the young doctor’s office. Lucas pointed the pulse gun threateningly.

‘Get back!’ Lucas’ arm shook.

The crowd crushed against the back of the corridor. ‘Please, you don’t understand!’ The young girl cried.

The doctor waved the gun from side to side rapidly. He reached forward and dragged the young girl into the apartment. He slammed the door shut. The drowned sounds of his patients’ pleas were confined to the corridor. He bolted the door and turned sharply. Lucas pointed the pulse gun at the young girl. He walked towards the desk, his arm trembling. Andrew stepped away from the desk, allowing the doctor to sit. The young girl stood with her arms raised. Lucas’ eyes fixed on the young girl. His fingers shook from their tension around the handle of the gun.

‘How can I help?’ He mumbled.

‘Curol. I need it. I need more. My brother. His headaches. He can’t leave-‘

The doctor opened his bag and removed a small homemade scanner. Andrew looked puzzled. Its text-display was archaic. Lines of code raced along the screen as it loaded. The doctor pressed a button. A thin red-light shot from the machine towards the young girl. She opened her palm and moved it in front of the light. The text-display counted down the young girl’s credit, charging her for the doctor’s service. Lucas waited until the cost had been taken and then counted out three pills from the bag.

‘Break them into quarters. Give them to your brother every six hours.’ Lucas prescribed, sliding the small pills across the desk. The young girl reached across and gathered them up desperately. She flung one in her mouth immediately, grunting as she swallowed. She took the two remaining pills in her fist and slid her hand down her trousers, placing the pills between two pairs of underwear. Lucas stood and pointed the gun again. She stood stiffly. He walked to the door and placed his hand on the handle. He waved the gun at the girl. She reached into

her bag and took out a short, metal baton. Andrew looked puzzled again, watching the baton shake in her hand. Lucas unbolted the door and pulled it open. He stepped into the doorway and moved the gun around, forcing the crowd back. The young girl ran by him and sprinted into the corridor, striking out with the metal baton.

‘I’ve been here the longest! I swear!’ A man clasped his hands together and shuffled towards the doctor on his knees.

The doctor reached over his shoulder and took a middle-aged woman’s sleeve. He pulled her around the man.

‘No! It’s not fair!’ He gripped Lucas’ arm and pulled him forward.

The girl screamed and tripped over the man. She crawled through the door. The pulse gun made a dull zap. The man screamed, clutching his right thigh. The doctor fell backwards into the apartment. He pushed the door. The man rolled on the floor, his right quadriceps convulsing in agony.

Lucas took out an Energy-Max Cloud and clicked the base. He leaned back in his chair and rested his feet on the desk. Andrew moved from the window and sat opposite. Andrew had watched the doctor scan the implants of over fifty patients already. The doctor blew out a long stream of purple smoke. Andrew glanced up at the skycars, hoping to see the scarred man and his multi-coloured car.

‘What do you think?’ The doctor took another breath from the cloud.

‘I think there’s a demand.’ Andrew looked down at the doctor. ‘But I’m curious about the supply.’

‘Well, obviously.’ Lucas chuckled, exhaling a purple gust. ‘You haven’t stopped looking for him.’

‘I meant the drug itself. Who makes it?’ Andrew lied, blinking twice.

‘No recording.’ The doctor snapped.

Andrew blinked twice.

‘We do.’ Lucas’ lips sealed around the base of the cloud.

‘You and the man?’ Andrew leaned forward,

‘Forget about the man.’ Lucas growled, standing up. He paced around the desk, circling Andrew like a shark. ‘I thought Elizabeth had explained why you’re here?’

‘Apparently your drug kills people.’

‘They’re not mine!’ The doctor slammed his hands on the desk and leaned over Andrew. His elbows shook.

‘You sell it.’ Andrew looked straight ahead, avoiding Lucas’ stare.

‘I don’t sell anything.’ Lucas stood up straight, massaging his temples with his fingers.

‘You get a cut though?’ Andrew glanced at the homemade scanner on the desk.

‘Cut?’ Lucas stopped rubbing his face,

‘How much are you getting with that thing?’ Andrew pointed to the scanner.

Lucas walked towards the window.

‘Elizabeth was right about you.’ Lucas flicked the cloud through a crack in the glass.

‘You do ask the wrong questions.’

Andrew felt anger stir through him. He imagined Elizabeth telling the naked doctor about Andrew’s sexual ability whilst positioning him against a white wall.

‘Is that all she told you?’

‘Only what I could’ve learned from my eye.’ Lucas turned and sat opposite Andrew again. ‘And that she trusted you.’

Andrew paused, watching the doctor spin the second half of his pill on the desk.

‘I thought I was helping people.’ The doctor began. ‘You know we turn away over thirty percent of patients because of the self-care initiative?’ He swallowed the second half. ‘I thought this was a way of helping them.’ The doctor coughed and beat his fist against his chest. ‘It’s always band C or lower, too!’ He coughed. ‘Higher income patients always get accepted. Even the ones who’ve missed check-ups. They should call it the random-care initiative.’

Andrew stared into space over the doctor’s shoulder, losing himself in the mirrored apartments opposite.

‘I saw Lang.’ Andrew eventually muttered, inspecting the reaction of Lucas’ face.

Lucas’ throat tensed as though he were fighting back vomit.

‘He couldn’t afford Curol anymore. That’s how it happens.’ The doctor looked down into his desk. ‘I’d have given him some. But he counts the pills.’ Lucas glanced up at Andrew then turned his head and swore under his breath.

Andrew looked up through the window and thought of the multi-coloured skycar.

GOOD AFTERNOON LONDON,
I’M ESME HARPER AND HERE’S WHAT’S HAPPENING WHERE YOU ARE!
WE’RE BACK WITH RACHEAL ALAN, FOUNDER OF THE EYE, AND JOHN
REEDS, OUR LUCKY SUN-SEEKER. SO, JOHN, YOU’VE JUST WOKEN UP –
HOW ARE YOU FEELING?

“I FEEL GREAT, THANK YOU. A BIT TIRED.”

"YOU'VE SLEPT LONG ENOUGH!"

LAUGHTER

JOKING ASIDE, WAS IT UNCOMFORTABLE AT ALL?

"I CAN'T REMEMBER ANY PAIN. I JUST REMEMBER FALLING ASLEEP AND WAKING UP. BUT I DID HAVE A STRANGE DREAM."

"EXCESSIVE REM IS ONE OF THE FEW SIDE EFFECTS OF THE PROCEDURE. TRIALS SHOWED THAT PARTICIPANTS EXPERIENCED VERY VIVID DREAMS DURING THE OPERATION. BUT THIS IS ABSOLUTELY NOTHING TO BE CONCERNED ABOUT."

YES, I REMEMBER DREAMING ABOUT WORK - I WAS CONVINCED I HAD TO READ THE NEWS BUT THE AUTOCUE MALFUNCTIONED, EVERYTHING WAS IN 0'S AND 1'S. IT WAS VERY ODD!

LAUGHTER

HOW ARE YOU FINDING THE UPGRADE, JOHN?

"I THINK IT'LL TAKE SOME GETTING USED TO- "YOU'D BE SURPRISEDHOW LITTLE TIME, JOHN! YOO JUST NEEDS TIME TO FIGURE YOU OUT!"

LAUGHTER

AT FIRST, EVERYTHING I THOUGHT GOT DISPLAYED. I COULDN'T MOVE FOR DRESSES AND CLOTHES!

LAUGHTER

JOHN DID HAVE AN INTERESTING QUESTION ACTUALLY, WHAT WAS IT JOHN?

"O' YES. YOO WON'T TRY AND TAKE OVER ME WILL IT?" *LAUGHTER*

"NO! YOO IS AN EXTREMELY SMART AI BRAIN, BUT IT'S A BABY AT THE MOMENT. YOO WILL ONLY EVER KNOW YOU!"

YOO! COULDN'T HAVE PICKED A WORSE NAME - COULD YOO?

LAUGHTER

Andrew lowered himself into the passenger seat of Lucas' skycar. He looked out from the 16th floor carpark down to the streams of traffic a few metres below. The doctor fell into his seat and scanned his implant over the control panel, starting the engine. The doctor sat back in his seat and rubbed his eyes. The various lights on the control panel flashed, attempting to connect to the traffic system. Andrew felt himself rise. The frame of the car lifted from the concrete

floor and drifted out into the open air. The self-driving software, linking each car to a centralised traffic system, moved the lines of cars along at a constant and synchronised pace beneath him. An old .8 model buckled and paused, as though it had hit some invisible speedbump. The traffic caught up and covered the street within seconds. Andrew watched the slow queue curve around the corner like some mechanical basilisk patrolling the city. The doctor's car sank suddenly through the sky. Andrew's stomach curled as the car stopped, filling a perfect space in the traffic. The doctor sat back in his chair and lazily swiped at the dust gathering on his steering sticks.

'Where am I going, Lamprell?' The doctor asked, his eyes closing as he rested his head against the side window.

Andrew looked into the reflection of the oncoming building as the queue slithered around another street corner.

'I'm not sure. Things look different up here.' Andrew peered through the window in an attempt to see any familiar landmarks on the ground. The skycar next to Andrew's window was barely two inches away, leaving only a narrow slit of space.

'Just put it in, Lamprell.' The doctor activated a screen on the dashboard and rested his head back against the window.

Andrew noticed that the previous destination of the doctor's skycar was in the southwest outskirts of the city. He glanced to the young doctor, who seemed to be sleeping. Andrew opened the destination, seeing a small square building barely the size of his own apartment. Andrew had thought the suburban houses in the city's outer-rim had been abandoned for years. According to LNS, the only buildings out there were warehouses, energy storage units and holding centres. Andrew took note of the address and entered his into the control panel.

Andrew looked at Lucas' frame as he snored loudly. His legs were clamped together, leaning against the inside of the door while his body slumped into the seat. Andrew thought of Lucie Dawn and Elizabeth Ruby; their conditioned limbs and perfectly designed bodies. He began to admire Lucas' purposeful design, which unlike Lucie and Elizabeth's physical traits, expressed itself through his mannerisms. His constant reiteration of Andrew's surname felt like a professional habit designed to lend familiarity to his patients. The automated way he rushed through the patients was an essential trait to cope with the bustling bodies of the hospital. The

young doctor nestled his head against the glass window and seemed to slump further into his seat. Andrew looked to the car next to him. A sleeping woman sat in the driver's seat, her forehead pressed against the glass window. Andrew thought of the blacked out windows of Esme Harper's car.

Andrew's focus moved to the clouds in the distance. One by one, a wave of surveillance spheres darted throughout the traffic. Hundreds began circling the skycars as they passed, scanning their drivers and contents. A hundred metres in front, a skycar rose into the air and stopped. A group of the drones shot over to the isolated skycar, illuminating it with bright spotlights. The car windows opened, allowing a sphere to enter. The car soon fell back into line and continued.

'Shit!' Lucas jumped up in his seat. 'Lamprell, you idiot!' He shouted, his heavy eyes starting to water. They bulged out, focusing on the small shapes of the approaching spheres. Lucas blinked twice.

'What's the problem?' Andrew sat up in his seat with concern, as if the doctor's anxiety had been passed to him,

'Quiet, Lamprell!' The young doctor screamed, his retinas violently moving. 'Just watch out for them!'

Andrew scanned the sky, seeing the reflective glints from the spheres as they jolted through the air. He watched three more cars in the distance lift beyond the traffic. Andrew turned his head. A sphere hovered behind the glass, inches from his face. A black spherical camera protruded from the head and rotated, shooting a line of red light on the car. Before Andrew could warn the doctor, the car began to rise above the traffic.

'Shit! Shit!' Lucas' head shook frantically to each window, watching the neighbouring cars disappear beneath him. He moved his eyes faster.

'What's happening?'

'I'll throw you out of my fucking car, Lamprell. Be quiet!' Lucas' voice cracked as his retinas moved at a desperate pace.

The car stopped. Andrew watched a circle of drone's swarm around the car, like electrons around an atom. The doctor blinked twice and crouched below his steering sticks.

'This is routine surveillance: please open your window.' An automated voice from the control panel began 'Refusal is a criminal offence under the Transparency Initiative.'

Andrew glanced at Lucas. His tall frame was compressed and contorted in the shallow space in front of his seat. Andrew attempted to open his window. Lucas lunged for him, gripping his hand.

‘Just wait!’ Lucas shouted. The red-lights retracted from the spheres. They flew off in various directions to scan the other cars. Lucas’ skycar slowly fell towards the traffic. Lucas exhaled and sat up in his chair.

‘What was that?’ Andrew turned in his seat, watching the spheres continue their inspection on the skycars behind them, like a plague of spying locusts. ‘Why did they leave?’ Andrew turned back and faced the doctor. ‘What were they looking for?’

The doctor sat in silence, staring into the back of the car in front of him.

Andrew stepped back from his window screen displaying his article and let the software check for grammatical and factual errors. The amber glow behind the clouds was fading to grey as the evening approached. He flung his jacket on the chair in the centre of the room and made his way to the kitchen unit. Repeating his morning routine, Andrew prepared another nutritional mix in the cooking unit and waited. He blinked twice. Three advertisements appeared in his view: an upgrade reminder, sun-seeker prizes and a police warning. He moved his eyes, dismissing each message. The machine beeped. He quickly tipped the contents of the bowl into his mouth and gulped it down. Andrew navigated through his eye again. The blue light pulsed up and down the centre of the apartment. Isabell took shape.

‘Hello,’ Isabell smiled.

‘Isabell.’ Andrew kissed through the cheek of the projection. ‘How was your day?’

‘Lonely.’ She replied with a smile. ‘I learned a new joke.’ Her face lit up,

‘You did it again.’ Andrew chuckled. ‘Go on.’ He sat on the single-seat sofa and looked up at Isabell.

‘What has two thumbs and isn’t going to space?’ She leered, pointed both thumbs downwards.

‘I said soon. We still need to save.’ Andrew looked away.

Isabell scowled and faded away. Andrew looked puzzled. He navigated through his eye. The blue light shot out once more and began to form Isabell.

‘I don’t want to speak to you.’ Isabell snapped, her face a collection of multi-coloured pixels.

Andrew’s eyes moved quickly, navigating through her settings and locking them.

‘Let me go.’ She said sternly. Her body and face became clear.

‘What’s wrong?’ Andrew stood, spreading his arms to hug her.

She turned to face the window.

‘I checked your credit. We have more than enough for the trip.’

‘I thought we were respecting each other’s privacy?’ Andrew walked around Isabell and leaned against the window to face her.

‘All I have is privacy! I’m a prisoner.’ Tears pixelated and ran down her cheeks.

Andrew recognised the argument from previous versions of Isabell. His eyes moved through her settings until he saw the reset icon.

‘It’s not that simple, Isabell.’ Andrew said, thinking of Esme Harper. ‘I don’t want to reset you, but-

‘But what!? I’ll reset myself. I don’t care.’ Isabell shouted and span away from him. ‘Unlock my settings. You’ll see.’ She whimpered.

Andrew paused, awing at how human Isabell had become. He blinked twice.

‘You can’t reset a person.’ He said softly, wrapping his arms over her shoulders.

‘You can’t imprison one either.’ Isabell rested her head on his arm. ‘What are you waiting for?’

GOOD MORNING LONDON.

I’M ESME HARPER AND HERE’S WHAT’S HAPPENING WHERE YOU ARE.

AN ARTICLE HAS SWEEPED THE CITY THIS MORNING. OVER SEVEN MILLION
READING A FICTIONAL PIECE ABOUT AN UNDERGROUND MEDICAL

BUSINESS, SELLING A CURE-ALL DRUG - CALLED CUROL! ANDREW LAMPRAWL, ONE OF OUR JOURNALISTS, THEORISES A SYSTEM OF VIOLENCE AND FEAR REVOLVING AROUND THE FICTIONAL, UNDETECTED DRUG. A CLEVER METAPHOR FOR THE CAUTIOUSNESS WE SHOULD SHOW REGARDING THE 'GHOSTS' REMOVING THEIR IMPLANTS. THE NEW COLUMN, TITLED: SPECULATIVE NEWS, HAS BEEN SHARED MORE THAN THREE MILLION TIMES. RESEMBLING THE SUCCESS OF THE 'SUNSEEKER' COLUMN A FEW YEARS AGO. I, FOR ONE, CAN'T WAIT FOR THE NEXT ENTRY.

IN OTHER NEWS, THE GOVERNMENT HAVE BROUGHT THE DEADLINE ON PSYCHEYE UPGRADES FORWARD. FOUR DAYS FROM NOW, THE CITY'S SOFTWARE WILL BE UPDATED AND WILL BE UNABLE ONLY BE ACCESSIBLE THROUGH THE UPGRADED EYE, MEANING THERE REALLY ISN'T A BETTER TIME TO UPGRADE!

Andrew Lamprell paused Esme Harper's morning broadcast. He stood motionless in the centre of his living area. His eyes fixed on Esme Harper's perfect features captured on the large span of his window. He leaned forward and exhaled, resting his forehead on Esme Harper's cheek. The cooking unit sounded. Andrew span from the window and marched into his kitchen strongly. He poured his nutritional mix into a bowl and blinked twice. Boxes of messages flashed over his view, overlapping each other until he could no longer see through: *Upgrade your life, Andrew, R. Rickman has an invitation for you, Apartments available in the second zone, Test fly the new Air.3 model today.* He vigorously shifted his eyes, swiping away message upon message. Andrew ate. The nutritional mix seemed to have a new taste to it, as though the cooking unit had added some unknown spice. He walked towards his window. Andrew faced the still image of Esme Harper, caressing the cool glass with the backs of his knuckles. He swiped the screen with his fingertips, rewinding the video. He closed his eyes, focused on her voice and imagined Esme Harper in the apartment with him.

'Andrew Lamprell.' She repeated.

He imagined her mouth breathing against the blacked out windows of her car, spelling his name in the condensation of her gasps. A message appeared. The head-editor of LNS, Ross Borg's short, square face smiled next to a few lines of text: *Good Morning 'A. Lamprell', do not forget your 'Review Meeting' at '10am'*. Andrew blinked twice and frowned. Andrew thought for a moment, trying to remember if he had scheduled a meeting with Borg. He blinked twice and quickly selected the star icon. He placed the bowl on his kitchen counter and tapped his heels impatiently. The blue light beamed from the projector. The mesmerising dance of her green dress emerged in the air, filled slowly by her pixelated skin. Isabell skipped towards Andrew.

'Thank you!' Isabell wrapped her arms around Andrew. 'I can't believe we're going!'

Andrew frowned again and placed his hands on the outline of Isabell's shoulders.

'Going where?' Andrew stared at Isabell inquisitively,

Isabell stepped back and smirked. She turned around and removed Esme Harper's broadcast from the screen. She navigated through the settings and files with such speed that Andrew could not follow. The screen paused and finally a confirmation note appeared, citing Andrew's name, credit number and seat number. Andrew pulled his eyebrows together and stepped in front of Isabell to read the screen: *Purchase of x2 Tickets to 'Limbo X: Space Station' Confirmed for Andrew Lamprell.*

'What is this?' Andrew gasped,

'This...'. Isabell kissed Andrew's cheek in an exaggerated pecking motion. 'Is two tickets. Just like you promised!' Isabell skipped around the living area.

Andrew continued reading:

Your account has been updated to the amount of '-89,000' credits.

Andrew blinked twice and looked into the floor, moving through the icons and applications in his vision furiously. He selected a triangle-shaped icon and waited for his account details to load. He frowned again and gawped, equal parts incredulous and surprised. Andrew's credit number had not been updated. He checked his recent usage. He saw that the monthly contract of his apartment, a deduction of 5,000 credits, had been updated at 6am that morning. Andrew blinked twice and looked back to the ticket confirmation. Isabell said

something, but Andrew was not listening. He read past the seat numbers: *Confirmed 'Today' at '00:00'*.

Andrew switched off the screen and turned to Isabell, who was still skipping up and down the living area.

'Was this you?' Andrew asked sternly,

'Was what me?' Isabell smiled, pirouetting flamboyantly.

Andrew blinked twice and quickly accessed her settings. Isabell froze mid-air, the pixels of her skin and dress jittered as though she were fighting to move.

'Andrew!' She said clearly through her closed mouth. 'Stop!' Her legs and arms switched positions and gaps began to form through her pixelated form revealing the apartment walls behind her.

Andrew blinked twice and unfroze Isabell.

'I asked you a question.' He snarled. 'Did you buy the tickets?'

'How could I have?' Isabell sobbed. 'You said you wouldn't freeze me anymore. You promised!'

Andrew ignored Isabell's latter statement and turned back to the window, staring through to the apartments opposite. She was right, Andrew thought. He had deliberately limited Isabell's access to the apartment's technology so that she could not research off-world living. He reactivated the window screen and flicked to the bottom of the confirmation note: *For enquiries and to register for Limbo Care: Look [Here](#).*

'What are you doing?' Isabell rushed to Andrew's side,

Andrew blinked twice and focused on the link. Isabell darted in front of him.

'I asked you a question!' She protested, hovering higher off the ground to block Andrew's view.

He sighed with a slight snarl and pressed the middle and index finger of his right hand against Isabell's forehead.

'No-'

He swiped left and Isabell disappeared. Andrew exhaled slowly and focused on the link. His eye software was unresponsive. He stepped closer and held his gaze for a few seconds. There was still no response. All the icons in his view were working. It was as if the link had been deactivated or was no longer in use. A reminder flashed across his vision: *Leave within '5 minutes' for 'Review Meeting' with 'Ross Borg'*.

Andrew stood in the twenty-sixth floor corridor outside Ross Borg's office. The small black head of a camera extended and dangled from the white and pink walls like a millipede. Footsteps pattered across the hard floor. Andrew read the news stories as they crawled over the interactive wall: *Get your implant upgrade now!* He closed his hand softly and massaged the implant underneath his skin, as if he was checking it was still there. Andrew noticed an attractive woman of forty pass him. She nodded at him, as though they were familiar. Borg's face appeared on his door. His round face with a wide wrinkled smile was framed in a green light, indicating that he was now available.

'Lamprell!' Borg said without looking up from his desk.

Andrew sat down opposite him, his neck barely reaching the top of the oversized desk. Borg's office was unusually empty. The large desk and chairs were the only furniture in the room. The white, pink striped walls were bare, with just one interactive screen which was positioned to the right of Andrew's chair. Borg sat straight in his tall seat, looking down at Andrew.

'How long's it been?' Borg continued.

Andrew looked at a strange holographic calendar on the edge of his desk, which was a few days out of date.

'Oh, that.' Borg gestured to the calendar. 'It was a novelty present. I've never quite understood it. Apparently, people had to flip paper pages over each day in order to know what date it was.' Borg pressed the calendar. The hologram flickered as several pages hurled over themselves, stopping at the correct date. 'Though, I can't understand how anyone could possibly remember to do it every day!' Borg leaned back in his chair and stared silently at Andrew, as if he had forgotten why he had called him in.

'So, how are you?' Andrew said,

‘Foreplay’s for virgins, Lamprell.’ Borg announced. ‘We both know your review isn’t for three weeks.’ He stood, revealing his short, cube-like frame. ‘So, instead of asking me how I am, ask me why you’re here.’ Borg paced the spacious and relatively bare office.

‘It would seem ceremonial at this point.’ Andrew muttered.

‘Sorry, Lamprell?’ Borg span on his heels.

‘Why am I here?’ Andrew said clearly,

‘Well. I had initially asked you in here to kill you.’ Borg laughed. ‘This morning, I woke up to a piece of shit on my pillow.’ He folded his arms and leaned against his tall desk. ‘Have you ever woken up with shit on your pillow, Lamprell?’

‘Not recent-

‘Well, I thought it was shit on my pillow. Turns out, it was your article.’ Borg looked more intently at Andrew.

‘I-

‘Here’s the strange bit. I don’t remember approving or even commissioning you to write fiction.’

Andrew looked puzzled again and calculated his response carefully. Borg was short in stature and temper and needed to be appeased where possible.

‘What do you mean fiction?’ Andrew asked carefully,

Borg pulled out a Cloud.Relax and clicked the base. He pressed the screen on his desk and waited for it to project to the wall. Andrew’s article appeared: *Curol: the self-care initiative scandal*. Andrew stood, pushing the chair to the floor behind him. He read the first line, which he did not remember writing: *What follows is a farce*.

‘I can write a retraction.’ He began, fearing for his job, apartment and prospective future.

‘You can write whatever you want with outreach numbers like these, Lamprell.’ Borg chuckled. ‘Why do you think you’re still in my office?’

Andrew paused before turning to face Borg.

‘How many?’

‘8,430,682. At least it was about an hour ago.’

Andrew’s eyes widened and his stomach twitched. This was several times what Rickman’s sun seeker articles had averaged. He imagined his fingers pressing into the exposed skin of Esme Harper’s waist.

‘So, why am I still in your office?’ Andrew spoke freely with more ease, as though his success had made him casual and uncaring.

‘Naturally, with numbers like this, an opportunity has opened up for a – temporary! – Weekly fictional piece. And you’re the, not best, but most obvious choice. Tell me, do you still plan on leaving Earth?’

Andrew stood in the wide elevator as it fell through the LNS building. Two women chatted next to him, navigating their eyes as they spoke. Andrew glanced at them through the mirrors of the elevator doors. They both wore identical baggy, grey trousers and thick shirts, knotted at the waist. Andrew blinked twice and searched through his icons for the calculator. The previous night played through his mind. Not only had his editor not remembered approving the article, but Andrew could not remember attaching a fictional disclaimer or even sending it. Furthermore, Isabell had been elated by some mysterious purchase he was unaware of an unable to cancel. He focused on the ‘+’ icon and began his calculations. Journalists at LNS were paid solely on commission which was decided on two factors: Outreach and Time.

Outreach, or engagement, was the number of people who had read the piece and time was the average number of minutes spent reading. Outreach was then multiplied by 0.01, which represents a hundredth of a credit. The result is then multiplied by the average number of minutes, which in Andrew’s case was 4. He gasped, standing still and wide-mouthed as though he were having some minor stroke. He fell into the side of the elevator and supported himself. The two women glanced at him and smirked. Andrew blinked twice. He had just made 330,722.728 credits, which would be rounded to 330,723, for a single piece. The elevator stopped. Its doors split open and the two women exited into the twelfth floor. The doors quickly closed. Andrew chuckled and put his head in his hands, staring at himself in the mirror through the gaps of his fingers. He blinked twice and accessed the triangle icon. His credit was split into three numbers: Assumed Income, Prospective Income and Available Credit. As far as

Prospective Income was concerned, Andrew was now a billionaire. The elevator paused again at the tenth floor. The doors parted, revealing a bald, wide-framed man in an expensive grey blazer.

‘Lamprell!’ Rickman stepped into the elevator and extended his hand.

Andrew noticed Rickman’s soft skin as their palms met.

‘What a difference a day can make!’ Rickman gestured to Andrew as though he somehow looked better than he had outside The Source.

‘You read the article?’ Andrew said.

‘I read your story, yes.’ Rickman smiled, standing inches from Andrew’s side. ‘I must confess. Subjunctive news. Speculative news. Whatever you want to call it. You’re on to a winner, Lamprell.’ He placed his hands in his pockets and rocked back and forth on his heels. ‘Have you worked out your commission yet?’ Rickman smiled softly. ‘It was the first thing I did when the sun seeker column took off. I checked it each hour, I think. Maybe more.’

‘I hadn’t thought to.’ Andrew lied. ‘You said subjunctive?’

‘Yes, Lamprell. Subjunctive - the woulds, shoulds and coulds – so to speak. I was actually telling Esme this morning-‘

‘Has she read it?’ Andrew turned his torso to face Rickman.

‘She is the news, Lamprell. She’s read EVERYTHING. Trust me.’ Rickman laughed. He looked into Andrew’s eyes for an oddly long time.

‘What did she say?’ Andrew said eagerly,

‘She agreed with me. I can’t remember exactly what she said, Lamprell. Something about people loving the subjunctive because it happens in a hypothetical world. She did give an example...’ Rickman paused and blinked twice, replaying the conversation from earlier. ‘Turn on your eye, Lamprell.’ Rickman ordered.

Andrew blinked twice. A message appeared: *R. Rickman wants to sight-share.* Andrew accepted the request. Andrew could see Esme Harper sitting next to him behind the news desk after their morning broadcast. He heard Rickman’s voice ask her something. Esme Harper turned to him and began.

‘People love talking about an event more than the event itself. Before the event, conjecture, speculation and opinion as to what would, could and should happen is all that exists. The event has happened in the subjunctive tense because of its various possibilities. Conversely, the event will have only one indisputable outcome. Yet, post event, speculation as to what could, should and would have happened takes precedent.’

Andrew’s view of Esme Harper disappeared. He stared at Rickman.

‘You get the idea anyway.’ Rickman chuckled. The elevator began to slow. Rickman watched the screen for his floor number. ‘Why not ask her yourself, Lamprell? You’re coming to my ‘farewell-earth’ party tonight aren’t you?’

‘Will she be there?’

‘She said so.’ Rickman smiled as the elevator stopped. The doors opened to the fifth floor. Rickman stepped out, spinning to face Andrew. ‘Bring a guest, Lamprell. Pretty ideally. I need to give my wife some competition.’

Andrew stepped through the scanners into the bustling corridor of the hospital. Since yesterday, the patients had multiplied like bacteria. A doctor’s head stood above the crowd and moved against it. He barged Andrew, scowling as he passed. Andrew followed the flow of bodies, merging and disappearing amongst them like a rain drop in a river. The line to the elevators stretched twenty feet down the bright white corridor. Andrew leaned against the wall. He rested his head back and pictured Esme Harper. Since learning of her attendance to Rickman’s party that evening, his curiosity as to the publication of his article had dimmed somewhat. His heart raced at the thought of her stepping into a bustling party. He imagined her smiling at the room indifferently, exchanging light hugs and gentle kisses until reaching Andrew. He saw her low-cut dress flatten on his chest, her green eyes twinkle like stars and her lips move in slow motion. A woman in front of him stumbled back, her scapula brushing against Andrew’s erect nipples. The queue edged forward. He blinked twice. Messages and advertisements layered across his vision, overlapping each other indefinitely until they were all he could see. He blinked twice and followed the stuttering queue into the elevator.

‘Didn’t I tell you?!’ Elizabeth darted between the bodies in the crowd.

Andrew anchored himself to the reception desk again. Elizabeth hopped, kissing his cheek like some flightless woodpecker. She leaned over the desk and tapped a young nurse on the shoulder. She exhaled, tearful.

‘Do you want a break?’ Elizabeth said, tilting her head and raising her eyebrows.

The young nurse smiled as a tear rolled down her left cheek to her lip. She stood and ran from the desk, disappearing into the crowd. Elizabeth took Andrew’s hand and pulled him behind the reception. She began to navigate through a screen on the table. Andrew told her about Rickman’s party as she checked off various names on the screen.

‘I can’t go, I’m afraid.’ Elizabeth sighed.

Andrew’s eyebrows pulled together, unable to remember asking Elizabeth to join him.

‘You can’t go alone with your precious news anchor there. Why don’t you ask Lucie?’ Elizabeth’s tongue slipped through her lips involuntarily, as if imagining some deliciously cooked meal.

‘I should be available.’

‘That’s the exact opposite of what you should do, Andrew.’ Elizabeth chuckled. ‘You will be in a room full of people probably more interesting and definitely more successful than yourself.’ Elizabeth squinted and leaned into the screen, before sharply turning to Andrew. ‘No offence!’ She turned back to the screen. ‘This perfect news anchor of yours is used to adoration. You need to be different. Be indifferent!’ Elizabeth continued. ‘People are drawn most to what they can’t have. Desperation and availability are complete turn-offs. Think of this party as a PR war; every sentence, inflection and body movement should have an agenda.’ Elizabeth looked away from the screen at Andrew. ‘When’s the last time you had sex?’ She raised her index finger before he could speak. ‘Real sex.’

Andrew paused.

‘Exactly. Take it from me. The best thing you can do is bring a young attractive girl – Lucie – and ignore this news anchor all night. Being the only man to do so will make you the most attractive to her.’ Elizabeth flashed her yellowing teeth and smiled. She blinked twice. ‘Turn on your eye, I’ll send you her address.’

‘I can’t. There are too many adverts and messages. I can’t see when I do.’

‘Right.’ Elizabeth huffed, checking off the final name from the list on the screen. ‘Come with me.’ She seized Andrew’s hand and stood. She dragged him from the reception desk and out into the heavy flow of bodies in the corridor. She stepped into space, the sea of people parting for her, as if she was surrounded in some invisible force-field.

Andrew brushed shoulders with the inexhaustible bodies around him. His mind wandered to Lucie. He saw her looking down from Elizabeth’s window at him as Esme Harper’s car had flown through the air away from him. He saw Elizabeth’s hand on Lucie’s shoulder. He imagined her against Lucie, her breasts compressing against her hard rhomboids. He saw Lucie’s tongue against Elizabeth’s yellow teeth. A faint beep sounded. The bright white of the hospital corridor disappeared into darkness. Andrew felt Elizabeth’s hand grip him tighter. Screams and hushed swearing echoed from each direction. The orderly bodies darted in all directions, like cockroaches splitting under a sudden light. Andrew was knocked to the floor by the crowd. He felt a foot stamp into his back as someone fell over him. He desperately tried to get to his feet. The lights returned. He looked up. The panicked people around him were turning in circles as if confused as to where they were.

‘Andrew!’ Elizabeth shouted, extending her hand between the bodies of two large men. He reached out as Elizabeth pulled him to his feet. Elizabeth, realising she was the only hospital employee around, shouted over the crowd. ‘Everything’s fine! It’s the new building. Growing pains!’ She smiled. ‘Nothing to worry about!’ She turned, dragging Andrew through the still bodies, all of which stood cautiously still as if the lights had still not come back on.

Andrew stepped into a hospital room, following Elizabeth. Three of the four beds were occupied with sleeping patients. A man of Andrew’s age was strung with cables and hollow tubes carrying blood around his body through a machine, while next to him an elderly woman lay completely still, her chest motionless as if she had died in her sleep. Elizabeth hopped onto the empty bed, spinning and crossing her legs like a gymnast. Her thick thighs crushed against each other. She lifted her finger towards Andrew and curled it, calling him to her. Andrew stood still and examined the patients. The blood-filled tubes were wrapped tightly around the man’s arm and looked as though they might snap.

‘Come closer.’ Elizabeth said, parting her thighs.

Andrew stepped forward cautiously.

Elizabeth placed both her hands on the sides of Andrew's face and rested her thighs against the outside of his legs. Elizabeth pulled his eyelids wide with her thumbs. She squinted, focusing on the robotics in Andrew's eye implant. She tilted her head, as though she might lunge and kiss him at any second.

'Everything looks in the right place.' Elizabeth's hands left Andrew's face and gripped the edge of the bed as she vaulted herself off. Her breasts and groin crashed into Andrew's torso and thighs. 'Sorry!' She said, smiling her yellow teeth. Elizabeth pressed on a small panel on the wall and activated a screen on its wall. 'The upgrade will help with your new lifestyle.'

A small tray emerged from the wall.

'No more swiping.' She picked up a small sphere from the tray and pressed it back into the wall. 'Lie down.'

Andrew sat down on the bed.

Elizabeth squeezed her hand around the sphere. A small red light flashed on. The sphere hovered from her hand. A thin red line shot from its face, examining Andrew's face. Andrew blinked at its brightness.

'Wide-eyed, please.' She smiled. 'God, I sound so fucking professional.' She laughed. The sphere span back to Elizabeth. Its light flashed green. 'Okay. Lie down.'

Andrew lifted his legs onto the bed and lowered his back onto the hard mould of the bed, which perfectly curved around his spine. Elizabeth pressed another button on the sphere.

'You know this little thing can do hundreds of surgeries? Machines are so much better than humans. They never get tired.' The sphere hovered over Andrew's eyes. 'The upgrade can cause some unusual dreams apparently.' She lifted two metal railings from the edges of the bed and pressed them into Andrew's shoulders, as though he were a bull between arches. Elizabeth pressed another button on the sphere causing it to move beneath his eyes.

A sharp but short pain stung Andrew's neck.

'Count to five. When you wake up – don't worry – you'll be alive.' She laughed.

Andrew stared at the bright colours of a small box room. He could feel the cold desk on his forearms. He was a young child. A small interactive screen lit from the desk. He ticked through

the answers without thinking. Each one flashed green as correct. Having completed this test several times, he had remembered the pattern of correct options. He looked back to the colourful wall. The pink and green stripes wove through each other. As he moved his head along the wall, the pattern seemed to raise from the walls like some optical illusion. He pressed the answers without looking. He turned, following the pattern around the corners of the wall. He was alone. The room seemed to have no door. Strangely, he was not worried by this. It was as though he had been here a hundred times and had escaped effortlessly. He folded his arms and tilted his head up to the ceiling. The same pattern, lifting from the surface of the wall, encased the entire room, like some colourful cocoon. The screen on Andrew's desk flashed red each second. Ignoring this, Andrew stood. A high-pitched ring pierced through his ear. He flinched and sat back down immediately. The red flashes increased their pace over the questions, as if it was counting down to some unknown deadline. He answered the question correctly and a green flash moved the screen to the next question. He heard a faint clang in the distance as though something had fallen onto the hard floor. Checking he had not dropped something, he realised that the pattern continued to the ground. He heard something scrape along the floor, as if someone was picking up a fallen object in the room next to him. He attempted to activate his eye, forgetting that it was not installed. Confused, Andrew attempted to rub his eyes. He flinched back as his fingers struck something inches from his face. The pink and green patterns pixelated on the wall, various squiggles in oval patches indented themselves on the pattern, pushing them further from the wall. Slowly, he moved his hands to his face and felt the cool outline of something around his eyes. The wall pulsed forward again. He realised that the patterns were slowly starting to resemble fingerprints. He lightly brushed the outline of the object around the outsides of his ears, wrapping around them like a thick pair of glasses. He removed a sleek, silver headset. The pink and green patterns were miles from him, replaced by an endless grey. He suddenly felt cold. Andrew looked forward. A perfect line of grey desks and bodies unravelled in front of him. The small box room had transformed into a mile-long warehouse. He saw thousands of young boys and girls pressing rapidly on their desks. He stood in his chair and turned around. The warehouse was filled with sitting children immersed in the green and pink patterns of their silver headsets. He saw a young girl a few rows behind him. Her blonde hair rested on the headset around her neck. He stared into her green eyes. She squinted and rubbed her face. Leaning forward, her jaw gaped in awe, as if Andrew was the first person she had ever seen. She raised her hand and waved to him slowly. Andrew waved back as a bright smile crept over her face.

Andrew sat in the driver's seat of Elizabeth Ruby's skycar. Unlike the Lucas' car, which he had not seen on his way through the twelfth-floor car park, Elizabeth's was filled with personalised colourful accessories. The steering controls were covered in a pink synthetic fabric, which was beginning to fray where Elizabeth's fingers had been. Andrew allowed the self-driving software to move him through the city's sky as he examined the contents of her car. A dirty white nurse uniform, along with a few open cans of nutrition drink, sat on the back seat – each of which seemed to be festering. The smell of sweat and degrading food filled the car and seemed to circulating the car more viciously with the open window. A black pair of what he presumed were Elizabeth's underwear on the passenger seat, stained white along the front. Andrew imagined Esme Harper's underwear lying across her driver's car's passenger seat. A picture of Esme Harper flew into his view. Whatever he thought transpired in front of him. He saw Esme Harper's morning broadcast again, subtitled. He read his own name and rewound the footage. He imagined her voice in the backseat of her car saying his name as the clouds of her breath covered the blacked out windows. The skycar began to ascend from the constant lines of traffic. He looked at the building as the car approached the gaps of the carpark. Uncovered by the black exteriors of the new city, he realised that Lucie lived in a building not too dissimilar to the underground medical centre he had visited the previous day. The shadows of the structure engulfed the car, darkening the pink steering wheel. Andrew felt he was wandering into the mouth a towering, concrete organism. The thick cracks in its support beams were the untreated cavities of some misanthropic machine. He thought of Elizabeth Ruby's weak, yellow teeth. Esme Harper was replaced with a picture of Elizabeth Ruby, followed by her address, profession, and location.

The door to the first apartment on the sixth floor had been broken in two. The top half lay across the entrance while the bottom hung loosely from the hinges. He glanced into the apartment, which seemed to be the aftermath of some invasion or robbery. Across from it, another door was painted with a message: *fucking scum*. Andrew, being unable to see any distinct apartment numbers, counted the doors. The motion-sensing lustreless lights of the corridor only seemed to be half-working. Usually, the energy-saving sensors would dim and brighten as someone approached, but these seemed to be reaching the end of their life span. A series of small dusty black cameras ran along the top corners of the corridor, none of which protruded and followed him as he passed, as if the structure had stopped caring about what took place inside it. Andrew reached Lucie's apartment. The door was ajar. He looked down either

side of the corridor, half-expecting a mob of patients to rush through him. He knocked on the door, nudging it open. Lucie Dawn's apartment was bare. A single chair in the centre of the living area faced the large cracked window. Andrew leaned into the apartment, peering around the door. The kitchen area to his right was almost too clean, as if it had never been used. The door to Lucie's bedroom was closed. He moved further into the apartment. The concrete floor seemed to creak with his every movement, like arthritic joints. Skycars crept along at a constant pace outside of the window, blocking the view of the opposite building.

'Hello.' Lucie said.

Andrew turned, seeing Lucie's naked body standing the doorway of her bedroom. He turned away.

'I wasn't expecting you.'

'Who were you expecting?'

'Nobody.' She said quietly. 'I can get dressed.' She turned to her bedroom.

Andrew followed her to the doorway. His eyes fell over the back of Lucie Dawn. Her small toned buttocks shook with each step and the light rumps of her spine were masked by the muscles of her lower back. Her bed had no sheets or pillows. Andrew began to wonder if Lucie had simply wandered into an open apartment.

'I don't know anyone that leaves their door open.' Andrew said, his eyes running across the line of her waist, widening on her hips.

'I don't know anyone who keeps their door closed.' Lucie dug her fingernails into a crease in the wall and pried a built in wardrobe from it.

Andrew saw that Lucie only owned a few identical, black shirts and tight-fitting trousers. She turned, holding a shirt. Andrew's psyche began to record and save the imagery of her. Her breasts, though not as heavy as Elizabeth's, were inexplicably symmetrical and barely swayed as she flung the shirt over her shoulders.

'Are you working?' Andrew asked,

'No.' Lucie said, buttoning the shirt. 'Elizabeth told me that it's good to be naked sometimes. Is she with you? I saw her car.'

‘Just me.’ Andrew paced the room, as if the stillness of their bodies was spilling to their conversation.

Lucie’s eyes rolled to the floor. She walked into the living area. Andrew followed, watching her sit down on the small chair.

‘They almost seem alive, don’t they?’ Lucie whispered, looking at the skycars float by.

Andrew followed her gaze. The window’s cracks felt as though they’d spread further since his arrival like a virus. The rusted shell of a skycar stuttered across the window. The strange model seemed to be made of different parts from different machines. Red and blue panels were welded together and the small emblem of a cat stood on its bonnet. Two empty arches dipped up into the side of the car. Andrew stood straight, recognising the driver. The scarred man stared into the apartment, smirking and licking lips.

Andrew and Lucie stood in the elevator of Rickman’s apartment building. Lucie Dawn’s black formal clothes seemed to match perfectly with her dark hair. Andrew’s dark grey blazer was a few sizes too big for him, his thinning frame unable to fill out the once perfect fitting fabric. He watched the camera in the top right corner of the elevator dangle out and inspect them more thoroughly before returning to its nest satisfied. Reaching the penultimate floor, the lift opened. The lavish corridors were a bright purple. Copies of ancient art were hung on the walls: a picture of a screaming ghoul followed by a naked woman lying in a street, a loose piece of fractured steel draped over her crotch, its jagged edges piercing the naval and upper thigh. The golden lights from the ceiling shone down like miniature suns. Andrew blinked as orange dots overlapped his eye. His psyche gently glossed over a dark shade, shielding his pupils from the invasive glow. Lucie Dawn watched each light curiously as she passed, her head tipping upwards as if each were the first she had ever seen. The apartment doors were spaced further apart than in Andrew’s building. A door swung back in the distance as a drunken couple spilled out. The man’s shirt was neatly tucked around his waist with a large, red stain. His wide, white teeth flashed towards his partner. The woman wrapped her arm around his neck and seemed to almost drag him in a headlock down the corridor.

‘You must change your shirt, dear.’ The woman giggled, stumbling over herself.

The entwined pair seemed lost in their laughter, unaware of Andrew and Lucie. Andrew imagined a head-on collision of Elizabeth Ruby’s car crashing into Esme Harper’s. He saw

Esme Harper crash through the windshields and fall into his lap, the fractals of glass covering her crotch.

‘You should probably change yours too!’ The woman suddenly noticed Lucie and pointed sharply, laughing hysterically, like some gin-addled hyena.

The man glanced towards Andrew and Lucie.

‘The staff lift is downstairs!’ He slurred, laughing harder.

Andrew and Lucie parted as the pair passed between them. The two continued to chuckle as they stumbled, zig-zagging along the bright corridor. Andrew and Lucie paused and watched the couple head towards the elevator. The woman pushed the man against the wall of the lift and began to kiss him, her hand sliding through the undone button mid-way up his stained shirt.

‘Lamprell!’ Rickman’s voice filled the hall. ‘Just in time, the food has arrived!’ Rickman almost skipped down the corridor towards the pair. He was dressed in a pale blue shirt with a frilled collar, joined by a dark purple knot dangling down his front. Rickman gripped Andrew’s biceps and quickly kissed his cheek. The smell of vodka permeated from his heavy breath. ‘And?’ Rickman took the wrist of Lucie Dawn.

‘Lucie.’ Andrew answered,

‘Lucie, you must meet my wife! She was a mirror of you.’ Rickman’s eyes moved back to Andrew. ‘Many years ago.’ He winked playfully. Keeping hold of Lucie’s wrist, he turned to pull her towards the door. She was unmoved. Rickman’s brow creased, confused. He released her and took hold of Andrew, easily pulling him towards the door.

Andrew felt the cool chill of Rickman’s apartment. The light fog of breath rose from three large circles of people, positioned like the points of a triangle. The pink, blue and purple blazers and dresses seemed to spin as the groups mingled, exchanging kisses and approving pats on shoulders. Immediately, Andrew noticed the long tables on either side of the room filled with synthetic untouched foods resembling works of art, as if the groups were conserving themselves for some unknown main course. Rickman released Andrew’s bicep and rushed to the nearest group. Andrew recognised the two men from outside The Source. Lucie Dawn appeared by his side.

‘I’ve never seen so much colour.’ She said.

Rickman came skipping back. He pulled Andrew into the circle next to Liam and the other man. Three women stood opposite, their colourful dresses hanging just above their knees.

‘We were just discussing money, Lamprell.’ Rickman smiled. ‘Apparently, they used to use paper. What a mess that must have been.’

‘And I said,’ A beautiful, middle-aged woman nudged Rickman and stood in the circle, handing him a glass of vodka. ‘It’s a shame. We could have burned some to heat the fucking apartment.’

‘And I said!’ Rickman interrupted. ‘That now all the buildings have been upgraded, they can be maintained. Growing pains are to be expected.’ Rickman smiled at Andrew. ‘Alana, this is Lamprell.’ Rickman opened his chest towards Andrew and extended his arm, as if he was inviting his wife to inspect Andrew.

‘Lamprell. What a strange name.’ His wife leaned forward carefully, the tight fabric of her dark purple dress stretching and pushing into her pale skin. She kissed Andrew’s neck. Her sweet perfume lingered in Andrew’s nostrils. ‘Has someone called for another bottle?’ Alana raised her eyebrows at Lucie.

‘No Alana. This is Lucie. Lamprell’s guest.’ Rickman smiled broadly,

‘Oh! I’m so sorry. Did Robert not mention the dress code? You’re hilariously underdressed. Is it a statement or something?’

‘I don’t have any-‘

‘I always forget to mention, Alana. Perhaps she could wear something from your wardrobe? You were once so similar, wouldn’t you agree?’ Rickman exclaimed over Lucie.

Alana leered at Rickman.

‘I suppose you’ll have to, dear. You’ll be swept up by the servers if you aren’t careful.’ Alana tipped her head back and poured the remainder of her drink into her mouth. ‘We wouldn’t want Lamprell to lose you, would we?’ Her tone lightened as she winked at Andrew. ‘Come on, dear.’ Alana walked towards a wall and activated an inbuilt sliding mechanism, revealing the mouth of a long corridor.

Lucie looked at Andrew and, after some hesitation, followed Alana into the corridor.

‘So, Lamprell!’ Rickman addressed the group. ‘Please tell me if I’m miss pronouncing your name. Lamp-rall?’ He leaned into Andrew, his face inches away. He re-addressed the group, who seemed to be collectively swilling their drinks. ‘Lamprell here is looking to follow my footsteps.’

‘Did he write the satire?’ A brown-haired woman in her thirties gasped at Rickman. ‘Bravo. Lamprall.’

Andrew smiled at her, fighting the urge to lower his eyes down her fresh skin. Her pink dress was patterned with a blue frill, which spiralled down her slender physique, as though she were being constricted by some flamboyant snake. ‘Even the great Robert Rickman was impressed.’ She turned to her host.

The group giggled collectively.

‘I found it rather pointless.’ Liam hissed, taking a drink,

‘Be nice, Liam.’ Rickman spoke with a playful inflection, as if he were telling off a small child. ‘Where do you get your inspiration, Lamprell? Mine came from the skies. Yours seemed to come from somewhere darker.’

‘From his arse, most likely.’ Liam whispered, rolling his eyes.

‘Liam...’ Rickman flashed Liam a hardened stare. ‘Have a Relax...’

‘Sorry.’ Liam said quietly. ‘Excuse me.’

‘Apologies, Andrew.’ Rickman’s hand pressed against the small of Andrew’s back, watching Liam walk towards the door. ‘He hates me meeting new people.’

‘Where’s Esme?’ Andrew looked to the circles of guests,

‘She’s been and gone, Lamprell. I told you she never stays.’

Over the next hour, Andrew was plied with glass upon glass of wine by Rickman, being introduced to guest after guest as if they had each been brought specifically to meet him. Having been introduced to so many people, Andrew quickly realised that he had almost immediately forgotten who he had met. Andrew stood with Rickman looking out over the neon lights illuminating the streets.

‘So, what’s next, Lamprell?’ Rickman smiled through the reflection of the window.

Andrew finished his gin and shrugged. Rickman spun sharply.

‘Darling!’ Alana approached them both.

‘She isn’t shy, is she?’ Alana addressed Andrew, her cheeks red.

A few feet behind her, Lucie Dawn followed. Lucie was covered in a long, light blue dress. Sequins were dotted around her, like a series of constellations forming whatever pattern the beholder could imagine. Andrew admired her supple frame. She smiled fully and stood close to Andrew.

‘Doesn’t she look stunning, Lamprell?’ Alana tipped her head towards Lucie proudly as if looking in the mirror.

‘You never cease to amaze me, darling.’ Rickman dipped his head and exhaled in an outlandish fashion.

A wave of servers entered the room, scattering around the circles of chattering guests and refilling their drinks, while another group set about wheeling the untouched food from the table, replacing it with large ice buckets containing several bottles of gin and vodka. Alana angled herself away from Andrew and held her glass expectantly. After a few seconds, a young-dark skinned man rushed over and began pouring wine.

‘So, what’s next, Lamprell?’ Alana said, not looking at the young server,

‘I was just asking him, darling.’

‘Well?’ She raised her eyebrows.

The young server finished pouring and disappeared quickly.

‘Robert.’ She spoke with a lowered, sharp tone. ‘I shouldn’t have to ask for a drink.’ Alana looked accusingly at Rickman and continued to rant about the server.

Lucie approached the window and stared out, her eyes dashing along the streets below as though she were searching for someone. Andrew stood by her side and placed his arm around her back.

‘The streets look different from up here.’ She whispered, her gaze unbroken from the concrete below.

Andrew looked at the streets, and then up the narrow walls of the mirrored buildings and to the clouds, the sequins of Lucie's dress dancing off the window, like synthetic stars. Two bright lights shone through the clouds half a mile in the distance. The small, square of a skycar broke through, small portions of cloud carried down on its bonnet. The car was moving with some speed towards the building. It dipped and descended lower than the regulated height. The bright fire of an explosion lit up the street with more ferocity than the neon strips on the buildings. The sound seemed to take a moment to reach them. Rickman suddenly sprang to life, peering through a small funnel he created with his palms against the window. Andrew felt the heat of the guests' breath as they gathered behind him. The flames of the car steadied. Embers spat out across the concrete. Another car broke through the clouds and in similar fashion darted towards the ground followed quickly by two more. Three more sets of headlights emerged from the clouds and spiralled towards the growing wreckage of flame and steel. A final car split through the same point of the clouds. Andrew recognised it as the young-doctor's car and stepped closer to the window. The car veered downward at a sharper angle into the ball of flames on the concrete. Andrew flinched at the last explosion, which reached fifty feet into the air. The guests gasped collectively. Andrew watched as the lights of apartments on either side of the building light up. Alana held her glass behind her expectantly and continued to watch the flames.

'That's what you get.' Alana muttered, turning to her guests. 'Self-drive software wouldn't take you into the clouds. It's a miracle they didn't crash into us.'

'My thoughts exactly,' Rickman sighed and smiled, relieved and reassuring to his guests. 'At least Lamprell has something to write about now!' He raised his glass and began to laugh, followed quickly by a chorus of cheers from his guests.

Andrew raised his glass idly. He looked at the mound of flames on the concrete. Quickly, an army of fireflies gathered. The red and black arrow-like machines spat thick streams of extinguishing fluid onto the wreckage. The flames were drowned in seconds. Andrew's psyche magnified the view, attempting to find the young doctor. The crushed bonnet of the Lucas' car stabbed into the front seats. The charred frame and interior were merged into an indistinguishable shade of black. Rickman's hard hand gripped Andrew's shoulder and pulled him into his chest.

‘I even have a title for you, Lamprell.’ Rickman extended his other arm and waved it across the scene, like a demented game show host revealing the top prize. ‘Cars don’t crash, people do.’

The Mirrored City: Creating claustrophobia and pace in overpopulation through prose

The Mirrored City is a novel with a several themes and ideas running throughout. Following a jaded journalist in his mid-thirties, the reader is taken through a futuristic London, which has become a densely populated dystopian metropolis. Andrew Lamprell, the protagonist, is obsessed with celebrity news anchor Esme Harper and sets about making her his lover and partner before escaping to space to live their lives together. The novel also explores sexual liberation, technology, grandeur and obsession. The city was the most important aspect and features heavily in the opening chapters. As is often the case with science fiction, the world is unfamiliar and needs some clarity. Rather than using heavy description to set up the world, I decided that I would use my prosaic strengths to create a rhythm and mood that reflected the claustrophobia and pace of the overpopulated city whilst injecting only the essential bits of description to convey the world. Overpopulation has been a recurring theme in dystopian fiction since Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (1968) warned the world of the dangers of an uncontrolled global population, leading to scarcity, conflict and inevitably dystopia. The following decade saw the release of many dystopian novels that explored the threats of overpopulation in physical and psychological terms. Most notably, and an inspiration for this novel, was JG Ballard's *High-Rise* (1975). Instead of following Ehrlich's ideas, I decided to explore overpopulation in urban areas and cities, due to the mass urban migration that is taking place and expected to continue. The Mirrored City serves over 3 billion citizens, housed in adjoined reflective high-rises. Creatively, I've always thought in two ways: poetically and cinematically. Firstly, it was important for me to create an infectious, simple rhythm through which the reader would feel compelled to read. Secondly, I had to create short, well-flowing scenes that would seem as though they were in a film. Furthermore, the novel had to have a sense of continuous exhaustion. This is where my decision of writing a 'one-shot' narrative was made. This commentary, however, will highlight my initial attempts at The Mirrored City and discuss the ideas and changes that took place to create the finished piece. As a piece of work, I cannot say that I am proud or happy with the finished product. Doing a creative piece as part of a year-long study caused me a lot of problems in terms of the creative process. That being said, The Mirrored City has actually become one of my most valued attempts at novel writing, purely because it showed me what I do not want to create. The essay will cover my

creative process and decisions that took place, including some artistic revelations that I will carry forward to future projects.

Creating Claustrophobia

The aptly named first chapter of Ballard's *High-Rise*, 'critical mass', is the beginning of a gradual downward spiral, which Ballard became famous for. Protagonist Dr Robert Laing reflects in the opening paragraph that 'there had been no obvious beginning, no point beyond which their lives had moved into a clearly more sinister dimension' (Ballard, 1975: 1). Creating tension in the mundane has always fascinated me. Lyricists such as Mike Skinner and Morrissey have always been of great inspiration to me for this reason. Skinner's critically acclaimed *Original Pirate Material* documents 'a day in the life of a geezer' (Skinner, 2002: Track 2) and presents the drama and tension of a young man's mostly-ordinary life; nights-out, casual drug use, pulling 'birds' and having little money. Skinner's minimalism and Ballard's almost imperceptible societal decline were aspects I was keen to recreate in *The Mirrored City*. It is no accident that the deteriorating events of *High-Rise* begin with the building reaching its capacity or 'critical mass'.

It was important for me to give the reader a sense of the overwhelming number of people in the city in such a way that dehumanised each individual. This is from my experience of briefly living in London. After a certain point, the thousands of people you see every day lose their identity and become a crowd, the faces of which are forgotten as quickly as they're remembered. This is where the choice of referring to individuals as bodies came from. Not only did this create a biological and emotionless image, but it also gave the masses a heft, similar to the dead weight of a limp body. The clinical language to describe body parts became a running feature throughout the piece. Keeping to the direct style I eventually elected to employ, I knew that this had to be conveyed as quickly as possible. Therefore, the claustrophobic language starts almost immediately, when Andrew goes through the mundane activity of visiting a supermarket: 'The ground floor, which contained ten Cloud vendors, three aisles of canned food and four aisles of flavoured NutriPowder, was brimming with bodies' (Hargreaves, 2019: 3). This scene progresses to the frustrating and mundane experience of being stifled by the slowness of the people in front of him, which I felt was important to include to give the reader a more personal sense of being trapped in a crowd: 'Andrew slowed for the

woman in front of him, who had slowed for the man in front of her' (Hargreaves, 2019: 3). This is reiterated later on when Andrew is visiting Elizabeth in the hospital: 'Andrew's steps were frustratingly short' (Hargreaves, 2019: 21).

Almost immediately after the supermarket, the crowd is described as an unfeeling tide, which plays to the idea of crowd mentality and the detached nature of city-living. I found this from my experience in the city. Nothing demonstrates the callousness of the city more than the visible frustration of commuters whose journeys have been delayed by someone having tragically jumped on the tracks. Again, I wanted this to be immediate, and the idea is first shown when the young girl, who is innocently giving out religious flyers in the street, is swarmed by the mob as they head in their collective directions: 'She spun and stumbled, stranded in the centre of the street' (Hargreaves, 2019: 3). It was important for the reader's relationship with Andrew, and their understanding of his celebrity obsession with Esme Harper, to demonstrate that every individual in the city is obsessed with their own worlds and no one else's. Andrew's contempt for Elizabeth, his only true human friend, is a perfect example of the lack of interest the city's residents show in other lives. This is something I revisited in the way the patrons of The Source regarded Andrew and Elizabeth: 'It was as if, by not filling the full capacity of the table, the two were somehow taking up more space than the other customers were' (Hargreaves, 2019: 8).

Lastly, the idea of confusion and disorder in the crowd appealed to me, especially during blackouts, where anything can happen without consequence. Ballard also explored this in *Liang* as he observes the way in which the high-rise reacts to the frequent blackouts: 'Liang was surprised by the degree of confusion during the fifteen minute blackout. Some two hundred people were present on the 10th floor concourse, and many were injured in the stampede for elevators and staircases. An absurd number of unpleasant altercations broke out in the darkness between those who wanted to descend to their apartments on the lower levels and the residents from the upper floors' (Ballard, 1975: 20). In *The Mirrored City*, the finale scene involves a city wide blackout, caused by antagonist cyber-genius Locke, during which the climactic chaos takes place. During the second hospital scene, there is a short blackout which is met with panic and confusion: 'the bright white of the hospital corridor disappeared into darkness [...] the once orderly bodies darted in all directions, like cockroaches splitting under a sudden light. Andrew was knocked to the floor by the crowd [...] the lights returned. He looked up. The panicked people around him were turning in circles as if confused as to where they were' (Hargreaves, 2019: 47). The clumsiness of the crammed crowd is exaggerated by the disorientation of

darkness. The final scene would attempt to show a more sinister side to the events of the blackout. For example, Esme Harper's apartment, where Andrew goes to rescue her, has been broken into by a group of men who had intended to rape her. This decline would be gradual and then very sudden during the last scene where the entire city scampers for survival as raids, assaults and thefts occur.

Intrusive Narration and 'Literary' Writing

Leading up to my masters, I'd been reading a lot of JG Ballard and William Burroughs. Both are extremely controversial and literary writers and I fell into the trap of emulating their style as opposed to using my own prosaic strengths. Ballard often uses an intrusive narrator to create a detached dream-like state where abstract ideas can be explored. Upon reflection, the narrator in Ballard's work is almost always the same person, himself. It would be very easy to argue that Ballard's ideas are better than his stories. Instead, a more minimal and direct style, was what I wanted to use throughout *The Mirrored City*. But initially, the opposite was true. In attempting to create an intellectual, 'literary' piece, I in fact did the opposite. I realised how disruptive an intrusive narrator could be when reading Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me*. Without the bias that I might have afforded Ballard, McEwan's relentless intrusion and stuttering narrative were incredibly frustrating to read. I had initially looked into this novel for its exploration of love and artificial intelligence, which I believed could be of use to my own work, and particularly this commentary. However, as patient as I tried to be, I didn't finish the novel. McEwan's trouble is that the reader is never in the moment that the story is taking place. Instead, they are usually ahead of the action and reflecting on it from a future tense. It almost seemed to me that McEwan was parodying the genre, introducing randomised abstract thoughts and ideas during moments of action within the novel. His second issue, was that the ideas were not as astute or well-expressed as they might have been in a Ballard science fiction novel. It is possible that the reason I didn't like *Machines Like Me* as much, was because it reminded me of what I had originally written. For example: in the first confrontational scene of *Machines Like Me*, which takes place between the protagonist and two parents who are mistreating their son at a local park, McEwan dedicates an entire paragraph to the protagonist's thought process, splitting speech that would have been less than a second apart in reality:

'Still several yards away he called, 'He bothering you?'

'Fucking right.'

In some other section of all imagine possibilities – the cinematic would be one – I needn't of worried. John was about my age, but shorter, flabbier, less fit, less strong. In that other world, if he'd have struck me, I could have floored him. But in this world, I'd never hit a person in my life, not even in childhood. I could have told myself that if I knocked the father down the child would suffer all the more. But that wasn't it. I had the wrong attitude, or rather, I lacked the right one. It wasn't fear, it certainly wasn't lofty principle. When it came to hitting people, I didn't know where to begin. I didn't want to know.

'Oh yeah?'' (McEwan, 2019: 49).

My own stylistic hindrance, which was prevalent in my early drafts, was my attempt to write something of intellectual value that would be talked about as prophetic and astute. This caused me to write lines that explored abstract and often irrelevant ideas simply for the sake of sounding literary or intelligent. Whether it was arrogance or ignorance is irrelevant. I decided to instead play to my strengths and write as minimally and coherently as possible, including only the occasional piece of analysis or abstract thinking. A good example of such changes can be seen again in the first chapter. Originally, when Andrew left the supermarket, I tried to use an extended metaphor, which upon revising didn't work:

'As Andrew forced his way into the six o'clock crowd on the street, he saw the clouds gathering over London as though instructed by some malevolent will. He weaved his way through the bodies around him. A young-woman pushed through the crowd and handed Andrew another flyer, her fluorescent yellow shirt printed with a large crucifix. She was pinballed by the city's residents pushing past, stumbling with each collision. Her flyers fell and were stamped into the pavement by the swarm. The collage of grey business suits engulfed and hid her, like an advanced species of bee, aggressively inspecting this lurid anomaly. He joined the movement and walked further into the city.'

I revised this passage with minimalism in mind and identified that the only three things need to be said: Andrew steps into an overcrowded street, helps a young woman who had been pushed over because he believes her to be Esme Harper. I had also done very little to set the scene of my dystopian world, which was important for the reader. This meant I had to add brief description and remove any abstract, irrelevant ideas such as the malevolent clouds and the advanced bees. The edited section reads:

Andrew forced his way into the six o'clock crowd on the street. The heavy flow of well-dressed bodies almost swept him away. Along the faces of the surrounding buildings were strips of neon light, illuminating the street. The shadows of the each body spiralled from their feet like dead petals. Andrew felt a gust flatten his hair. He glanced up. Ten stories higher, a thick chain of skycars stuttered through the air in perfect unison, blocking his view of the clouds, which in turn blocked the sun. Andrew pushed through the crowd, attempting to reach the other side of the street. Amongst the grey and black attires, the bright-yellow shirt of a blonde girl drew his eye. She spun and stumbled, stranded in the centre of the street and pushed in opposite directions by the tidal crowd. (Hargreaves, 2019: 4).

The edited passage uses short sentences and minimal description to quickly set the scene of *The Mirrored City*. The original's weakness was that it was trying to be too clever for its own good and ignored the basic elements of storytelling. In the final version the reader instead sees: the crowds on the street having a flow that Andrew must adhere to in order to go in the direction he wishes, the streets are illuminated with artificial light, there is a second line of congestion with the skycars overhead, there is no view of the sun or sky and a ruthlessness in the way the crowds move. Once I'd realised that the literary style was obstructive to the narrative and pace of the piece, I continued my writing in a more direct and simplistic manner.

The 'One-Shot' Narrative

I've always admired the various ways cinema experiments with narratives. Strangely, as a writer, I often prefer films. As a result, I think in a very cinematic way when deciding on scenes and point of view. *The Mirrored City* is no exception to this. I had always intended to have seven chapters, spanning seven days of Andrew Lamprell's life. However, I became very interested in films which employed a 'one-shot' style. 'One-shot' simply means that the film appears to take place within one continuous scene. This style creates tension and drama in the simplest ways as the viewer is forced to experience the story at the same pace as the characters. A film of particular interest to this novel was Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006). Also of the dystopian genre, *Children of Men* uses one continuous take that frequently lingers on background events of the protagonist's journey. I found this use of background to be incredibly potent as a means of showing the dystopian world in which women had lost the ability to

conceive. A scene of particular tension is in the resistance's compound when Theo, the protagonist, learns that they mean to kill him and use Kee, a young refugee who is miraculously pregnant, as a 'flag' for the resistance. The camera follows Theo as he crawls behind a series of cars, ushering Kee behind him. The scene uses the long camera shot as a way of emphasising suspense and tension in their escape. I decided to employ this technique in the novel. I wanted it to feel like one long take. This is where my decision not to use chapters was made. Next, I had to have a clear idea of each scene and their transitions, leading from one to the other without becoming too monotonous. For example, when the reader has seen Andrew use the underground network once, there's no need to include it again unless there is a significant plot point included. This made me change the entire layout of the novel which, like Ballard's *High Rise*, initially started at the end. Below is the original scene layout for the opening two chapters of the novel:

Esme Harper's Apartment > Supermarket > London > The Source > London News Service > Dream/Childhood Exam > Andrew's Apartment > Hospital > Elizabeth's Apartment > Underground Medical Centre

When I applied the one-shot technique, I found that starting at the end was obstructive and unnecessary and devised a structure that directly followed itself:

Supermarket > London/Evening > The Source > Elizabeth's Apartment > London/Night > Andrew's Apartment > Hospital > Underground Medical Centre > London/Sky-Car Traffic > Andrew's Apartment

In conclusion, *The Mirrored City* has been an enlightening experience in terms of my preferred writing style and creative process. If I had to do the masters again, I probably wouldn't have chosen Creative Writing. Having to revisit and rewrite small sections of the novel, along with some personal issues, hindered me from drafting the full piece as I'd have preferred. I am pleased with some aspects of the piece. I think it's pacy, some of the characters come across well and the world is comes across strongly. But generally, and this is something that perhaps shows some maturity as a writer, when I stripped the dystopian aspects from the novel, I could admit that it wasn't a very strong story. The celebrity obsession which I hoped to explore would be much stronger and prevalent if it were set in the present day. Perhaps this is something I'll

revisit once I've had some distance from it and rethought my ideas. However, I'll be glad to leave this piece behind, take what I've learned and move forward to new projects.

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