

Living Fiction

and other short stories

Louise Harnby

Copyright © 2018–19 Louise Harnby

The right of Louise Harnby to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988. All rights reserved. This book is offered subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated without permission of the author.

Contents

Foreword

Zeppelin

Wiccan Wonder

Killer Heels

The Honey Pot Man

Big Skies

Red Diesel

Smells Like Trouble

Craft Gin Connoisseur

Border Control

Super Fun

Living Fiction

Trick of the Eye

Foreword

‘Zeppelin’ was the first piece of fiction I’d written since high school. I penned it one Saturday morning after seeing the Noirwich Crime Writing Festival’s call for submissions to its 2018 flash fiction competition.

To my delight I made the shortlist. We three finalists were invited to read our stories at Noirwich Live, the festival’s closing event.

I didn’t win, but I’d got the bug. By the time I stood up in front of a crowd of amateur and professional writers, creative writing tutors, family, friends, and other book buffs, I’d written an additional seven stories.

I was hooked on flash and shorts.

All the stories in this collection were inspired by people or things that have made a mark on me in some small (or big) way. In that sense, these are works of fact. However, none of the sinister or spooky stuff is true. That’s where the fiction comes in ...

I had a cat called Andrew. What transpires in ‘Wiccan Wonder’ did happen, but Andrew’s former owners weren’t witches.

I have a good friend who spends hours looking up and down with binoculars and a drone, but he’s never seen harm.

Our house is not connected to the mains drainage, but that is all there is to report.

As for that couple in ‘Zeppelin’, I and my soul mate have had that same conversation, but that’s where it ends. I hope!

And that’s what’s hooked me, I think ... the pleasure of fusing the real and the made-up.

Norfolk features frequently. My small family made a home in this county in 2005 and we love it. Plus, it has a quiriness that makes it ripe for story-telling.

My job as a fiction editor requires me to consider structure, flow, tension, motivation, rhythm, viewpoint, spelling, grammar, and punctuation. I think my editing skills must have helped a great deal when I took myself over to the other side of my desk and began to write.

Still, whether I’ve managed to incorporate my experience into my fiction is for you to judge. I can tell you this: I loved writing these short stories, and now that I’ve started I can’t imagine stopping.

I hope you enjoy them.

Louise Harnby, 2018

Zeppelin

‘What d’you think they’re *really* doing in there?’

It’s a game they play once a week. They drive into town for vape juice and vinyl – feeding her nicotine addiction and his lust for Led Zeppelin.

Town, or just Norwich. That’s what they still call it after thirteen years. Not *the city*, which is what the locals say. Old habits.

Halfway in, they pass the model-railway shop. It’s been there for decades. They went in once, just to see. All trains and tracks and tiny trees, and a dedicated space where you could get a cup of tea and do your model planning. And so many staff. She wasn’t buying it, not in this day and age. Not with Amazon and eBay. Monstrous overheads. They’d left, giggling, bantering about where the bodies were buried.

‘Double-oh gauge.’

‘What?’

‘That’s the code. You say “double-oh gauge” and they show you the real money stuff – machetes and machine guns.’

He laughs and takes his hand off the gear stick. Slides it over to just above her knee. She’s the love of his life and these moments warm him – the easy companionship. They never argue, always find a

way to work out the hard stuff. There's nothing he couldn't tell her.

A few miles on, it's the cane shop's turn.

'Come on – who buys cane furniture anymore? Or who buys *enough* to keep a place like that afloat?'

They decide it's Norfolk's premier drug-trafficking centre. She says the scare quotes on the signage give it away.

'*All types of "cane" furniture sold here.*' She reads it out loud, holding up two fingers on each hand when she gets to the middle word. He glances at her and winks.

'I'll take four grams,' he says. 'Norwich is breaking bad!'

They park in St. Giles, grab an early lunch from a café in the lanes, then mooch around together for half an hour. He doesn't fancy looking at shoes and electronic ciggies, and she's not interested in flipping through boxes of old records, so they agree to meet back at the car in an hour.

He watches her head off towards Imelda's, a spring in her step. Apparently, the shoes are delicious, though expensive. Worth every penny, she says. And why not? She works her backside off for her business, and they don't lead an extravagant life. Her fancy shoes give her pleasure, and that makes him happy.

He makes his way to the second-hand record shop and pushes through the door. Sal's on the till.

'Zeppelin.' It's their code word.

Sal leads him round the back, down some stairs and past a tower of junk vinyl. Says: 'Just in.'

The Makarov is compact. Not great on accuracy but the hit will be close-range. And he likes the integrated suppressor.

He pays, places the pistol in a concealed pocket in his jacket, and picks up the plastic bag Sal's prepared. He walks his fingers through the album sleeves so he can crow about them in the car – Skynyrd, Moody Blues, Sinatra, more Zeppelin. Eclectic.

There's nothing he couldn't tell her.

There's plenty he doesn't.

Wiccan Wonder

There are three of them. One white, smudged with grey and caramel, a scrawny tabby, and a big black bugger. She likes him. Handsome and haughty, already strutting around like he owns the place.

‘I’ll take him.’

‘Fidelio,’ says the cat lady. ‘That’s his name. He’s special. Can sense things. Came from that Wiccan lot over in Clapham. And he likes you – I can tell.’

Course you can, she thinks. She smiles, holding back the *fuck-are-you-talking-about* as she thrusts thirty quid for Cats Protection into the woman’s hand.

By the time the door’s closed she’s changed his name. Andrew, like the dog in *Mary Poppins*. A bit more down to earth and just a little bonkers. But it suits him. They’ll mooch along nicely together.

THREE MONTHS LATER

Two in the afternoon and she’s still in bed. Last night was a late one, another two-dinners jobby with her mates. Meet, eat, drink, eat again. London’s good for that.

She stares up at the blown plaster on the ceiling and makes a mental note to get someone in.

She would have slept like a log but the damn cat won't settle. Keeps mewling and kneading the mattress. She shushes him and he looks at her the way cats do. Like you're shit and in their way. He rises to all fours and pads to the bottom of the bed, leaving a tiny brown arse print on the white sheet. Maybe his guts are playing up – he's been off his food the past couple of days. Then he's back again, worrying her with his paws.

‘Christ’s sake. Come on then.’

She rolls to the side of the bed and stands. Andrew bolts through the door and she follows. He takes the stairs four at time, all grace and guile. She treads more carefully.

Halfway down, she freezes as a huge, keening yawn comes from above. Structural. She fights to make sense of it as the world turns beige. *What the—*

She takes a breath, chews dust. Gagging, she reaches for the bannister and steadies herself, then trips her way to the bottom and into the kitchen where the air is clear.

The cat's by the fridge, lapping at the water bowl. He looks up, then saunters across and rubs the length of this arched body against her calf.

She gives it thirty minutes, then climbs the stairs. She's worked it out. The catastrophe awaiting her confirms it. Half the bedroom ceiling has come down. The corner of a pillow pokes out

from under a hunk of plasterboard and coving.
Christ, if—

Fur tickles her bare leg once more. She looks down.

‘Who’s a clever bugger then.’

Handsome and haughty. And the cat lady was right.

TWELVE YEARS LATER

She runs a finger oh so gently over the fur just above his nose. Three weeks ago, she lost her mum. Now him. It’s a different kind of hurt, of course. And there are wonderful others in her life who arrived later – a man, a child. Still, it aches. The end of an era. And he saved her – there’s that.

She’s not ready yet but she’s spoken to the cat lady. And when the time’s right, the Wiccan lot in Clapham have a little something for her.

Killer Heels

I am the cobbler. Want your Zippo engraved? I'm not your man. Need the cracked screen on your iPhone repaired? A spare key? A trophy for your kid's sports day? Nothing doing. That's for the high street.

Me? I make beautiful, hand-crafted shoes. My clients' needs are precise, my creations bespoke.

The studio is discreet. Nothing much to look at from the outside, just a ramshackle fisherman's hut on the dunes.

There's plenty of parking space by the café. And no one gives you a second glance ... even during the winter months, the big skies and sandy beach bring the dog-walkers, twitchers and seal-spotters. So while I'm not quite out of sight, I am out of mind. Plus, Norfolk people have ready smiles but keep to their own business.

Which is how we like it, me and my clients.

Take J, for example. One of my regulars. My creations have girdled her feet for two decades. She's an artisan, too, of a sort. I don't ask much, and she doesn't say much. Still, a good cobbler needs to know the *intention* if a shoe's to do its job.

With J, it's all about sevens. Seven pairs of shoes for seven days a week.

Monday's shoes are dancing shoes. Three-inch heels support her calf muscles, though the sole is flexible and the toe boxed like a traditional pointe. Classical ballet and modern dance all-in. I fashion the Dori shoes in exquisite berry-red satin, with ribbons to match. Her moves are dirty but divine, she tells me with a wink.

Tuesday's shoes are business shoes. Something comfortable and timeless. Something she can stride in. Something androgynous yet achingly feminine. The saddle Oxfords fit her like a glove – tan suede on cream leather.

Two decades back, she was wearing them with baggy socks and shift dresses. These days, they're teamed with wide-leg pinstripes that swish around long legs. The boys in management don't play silly buggers with her, that's for sure.

Wednesday's shoes are climbing shoes. Initially, they were a challenge, I can tell you. Not the mechanics of the build – I'm fine with that – but the sacrificing of comfort. A good cobbler considers the wearing. Good shoes are worn yet not *felt*.

J's climbing is aggressive and technical. She's in her forties and younger athletes are snapping at her heels. The tight leather binds her feet to the point of constriction, but that's what's required to keep ahead of the pups. She's still winning county comps, so I keep my head in the fit.

Thursday's shoes are running shoes. J wouldn't dream of hitting JD Sports. I'm her king of trainers, she says.

She regularly pounds fifteen kilometres of tarmac and we need to look after her knees. Plus, in the past five years she's begun to overpronate just a touch, so I build in a little motion control for stability.

Running is how J does her planning, and my shoes help her focus on what's in her head, not what's on her feet.

Friday's shoes are visiting shoes. She volunteers at a refuge. Doesn't discuss the people she meets there – that would be a breach of trust – but I know those women are running for their lives.

We've worked out what she needs to walk the hallways, check the locks and cameras, vet the security team, clean the rooms, serve the food, nurse the wounds, listen to the fear, build hope from horror.

I almost smell her fury as I construct pumps of the softest black leather and a sturdy rubber sole. They're like a second skin. She forgets she's wearing them.

Saturday's shoes are killing shoes. Back in the day, I experimented with custom insoles and spring-loaded thumb daggers. We talked about coating the blades in ricin or botulinum. All very

Rosa Klebb. In practice, the engineering proved temperamental, the execution awkward, even for an athlete like J. Sometimes simplicity is the name of the game.

I put mechanics and chemistry to one side and turned to geometry. Killer heels. It's all in the angles, a trompe l'oeil, really. The heel appears straight but curves into a razor-sharp vertical edge that J uses to slice through the Achilles tendon with a mere flick of the ankle – a move she's perfected in her dance classes. Her victim's still processing the damage as she slides the heel across his neck.

I have ears all over. Word is, that refuge has an unusually high recovery rate. New lives, fresh starts.

Sunday's shoes are paddling shoes. After a week's work, J's feet are tired. Jaded feet make for a sloppy mind. The jelly flats are green because that's her favourite colour. They hold their shape in the salt and shale. The water cleanses as she wades but the broken pebbles and jagged chalk reef underfoot don't assault her.

I keep this to myself but consider these shoes my crown in her seven-day collection. Sentimental, I know, but everyone needs saving one way or another.

The Honey Pot Man

Jim's tics have been with him for as long as he can remember. It's not the spasms that bother him; it's the implications of their manifestation.

Trouble ahead. Life-changing trouble.

Always.

Episodes, he calls them.

At least he has fair warning.

The tics have saved him hundreds of times, evidenced by the Episode Log in which he faithfully tracks a life of near misses.

He's learned from the data too. The zone of interference lasts no more than a day. Tic minus twenty-four hours and counting.

Avoidance is usually the best defence, though preventative measures are possible now and then. A heating engineer located the fault in his gas boiler, and a call to a sweep ensured the chimney fire in the soot-heavy flue never caught.

As a teenager he even faked a seizure after holding the boarding passes for a trip to New York. His parents cancelled the holiday. The frustration twitching underneath their sympathy evaporated when news came in that Pan Am Flight 103 en route to JFK had exploded, killing the crew, 243 passengers, and eleven residents of nearby Lockerbie.

It's the roads that pose the greatest threat. SatNav is Jim's friend. A blink and a bark, and he reroutes.

Like that time in 2010 on the A47 when he passed the turnoff for the Broads. The junction's a bastard – little better than a gash in the central reservation. Seventeen hours after Jim's eyelids had gone into overdrive and an *arp* ripped from his throat, a car stalled as its driver attempted to cross the dual carriageway. The HGV braked, but time had run out for both of them.

Jim was nowhere near – he'd been sure to take the backroads that day.

He mostly drives the country lanes anyway; his customers live in the sticks. Jim is the honey pot man, though no bee lover. Norfolk's oldest septic tanks are brick-lined wells shaped like traditional clay honey pots. The tankers into which they're emptied are known by locals as honey wagons.

Those with a strong constitution have a job for life; superfast broadband is no guarantee that a twenty-first-century village-dweller's shit won't float in a hole twenty feet from their front door.

Not the sort of career most would shout about, but an unfazed Jim has found money in honey and mirth in muck. His wagon boasts the strapline 'Yesterday's meals on wheels', which gives his grateful customers a chuckle as, quite literally, he does their dirty work.

Mondays are always busy, and fitting in the weekend emergencies is tricky – it’s just him and his lovely wife, Anna. She manages the bookings.

Jim listens as she reassures a regular. Mrs Lovey *always* calls ahead to ensure he’s on track.

The Episode Log has lain untouched for months so the blinking catches him off guard.

Mrs Lovey is eighty-six and, though a real stickler for time-keeping, largely lives up to her name. He’s been piping away her honey for going on two decades and she always offers him a cuppa, doesn’t fuss over the smell, and never shies away from shaking his hand.

He massages his twitching eyes and tries to swallow the threatening bark.

The old lady’s safety demands action but Anna is adamant. ‘Let the police handle it. We’ll say it’s toxic gases and they need to get her off the premises for twenty-four hours. As for Mrs L, well, she’ll be put out but at least she’ll live to get the hump.’



Two days later, Jim backs the wagon up Mrs Lovey’s drive and drags the pipe over to the honey pot.

Arp.

Something isn't right. He's well beyond the zone of interference.

He shimmies the concrete cover to the side.

A conical police helmet bobs in the septic sludge. Jim's knees buckle.

'No tea for you today, young man. You know how I feel about tardiness.'

The pressure on his spine is almost tender, and just enough.

His lids spasm for the last time as he tips forward, honey-bound.

Big Skies

Ian pairs the drone with his iPad so he can record the mayhem.

Norfolk's skies are huge, and ten miles east of the city the light pollution is virtually zero. He's lived here most of his life and never tires of looking up.

He's counted shooting stars, tracked the International Space Station, picked out the Lagoon Nebula, *oohed* over Jupiter and Mars, and *ahhed* over Tycho, one of the moon's larger craters. And with nothing more than a pair of Celestron SkyMaster binoculars. The heavens in his hands for less than a hundred quid. What's not to like?

He was the first of his mates to get an iPad. But only so he could download an interactive astronomy app that blew his mind for three pounds.

Some say he's a gadget geek but they're missing the point. An early adopter, certainly, but it's never been about the tech per se. It's about what he can see with it.

Today's different though. Today he's looking down. The Holy Stone quadcopter boasts wi-fi camera, live video, and GPS-assisted flight. The battery life is awesome, and the wide-angle lens

offers amazing real-time viewing at a distance of up to 500 metres.

He thinks about his mum, how she's always loved birdwatching. Now, he can see what the birds see. And that's the thing about drones. It's not what's available in the viewfinder as much as the *perspective*.

Yesterday evening, he'd driven over to his bestie's place a couple of villages away. They'd parked up by the graveyard next to the busted-up old church and set the Holy Stone among the holy stones. It hummed to life and rose into the air, then moved forwards across the adjoining field.

Ian held the drone hawk-like, and whooped as he watched his mate's Lab hare off in pursuit of a Muntjac. A Fenton moment followed, his friend shrieking commands at a hound driven delirious by the scent of dinner.

Today, though, is not for fun. The woods and fenland between Panxworth and Pedham are the perfect hunting ground during pheasant season.

Ian has no time for people who kill for entertainment. Worse still, this lot are breaking the law. Shooting is banned on Sundays in England, even when the field is open. But they couldn't care less, and without evidence it's his word against theirs.

The video footage will change the game. Native uploads to Twitter and Facebook. He'll tag the Norfolk rags, TV and local radio too.

The pairing complete, he packs up the car with his gear and heads out to save some birds.



He can already hear the shots as he parks up. A crack. Then another. The business of killing is underway.

He unpacks his kit and leans against the car. A few tweaks and the drone is airborne. He focuses on the iPad screen, glides the quadcopter towards the low canopy of the woods and hovers over the birch. It's early October and the leaves are rusting.

Crack.

He swivels the drone right, searching the screen for a twat and a trigger. Sees a man. Holds the drone steady and zooms in with the viewfinder.

Bastard.

Crack.

The guy's head pivots sharply left to right, then tips skywards. His eyes look right into Ian's though the tablet.

Ian tries to process what he's seeing. The man looks terrified. And he's not armed.

Another shot rings out. The guy darts behind a tree, and Ian shifts the copter a fraction, keeping

the man in his scope. His eyes dart to the corner of the screen. *Recording.* Thank Christ.

He places the controller on the bonnet of his car. Keeps one shaking hand free for the joystick and fishes in a pocket for his phone with the other.

‘Please state your name and the nature of the emergency.’

‘Ian Watson. I need the police. There’s a guy in the woods being shot at. They’re fucking hunting him.’ The words tumble from his mouth, the pitch rising with every syllable.

‘Where are you, sir?’

Crack.

He breathes deep. Thinks: keep it together. ‘The public footpath on the corner of the Panxworth Road. By the orange house.’

An idea tickles. He swivels the drone in a smooth arc until he sights the line of shooters. He’s expecting camouflage, not waxed jackets and tweed caps. NFN. Normal for Norfolk.

Back to the guy. He lowers the copter until it’s a couple of feet above the man’s head. Gets his attention. This close, beads of sweat are visible through the retina display, as is the abject terror on the guy’s face.

Ian moves the drone ahead. The guy doesn’t twitch. Ian tweaks the stick to push the drone towards the man, then moves it ahead again: *Follow me, you dozy fuck!*

The man seems to get it and takes a tentative step. Then another. Ian lifts the drone to the treetops and brings it – and the guy – home.



His name is Feliks and he's from Lithuania. He came to help with the harvest but they took his passport, and with it his liberty.

He's not the first. The shooting party have been operating for years. Forensics found a mass grave. They're still piecing together the broken bodies and stolen lives.

Ian hands Feliks the Celestron bins and a beer. The sky is big and clear. Tonight's a good night for looking up.

Red Diesel

‘Rural crime is a huge issue around these parts, and this task force is going to put the balance of power back in the hands of the hardworking people who make East Anglia tick.’

Sergeant Rachel Sharp thanks the reporters for their time and takes her place front and centre in the pack. Twenty-one officers line the steps in front of the station.

Twenty-one.

Like they have nothing else to worry about. Like people-trafficking, paedophiles and punch-ups are a thing of the past. Like crime hasn’t become more complex and the perps more cunning. Like police numbers haven’t been cut. Like their budget hasn’t been slashed by a million quid in the past twelve months.

Like having twenty-one trained officers checking fuel tanks is the best way of keeping people safe.

Operation Red Diesel.

Crims have been nicking the stuff from tractors and combines. It’s no different to the fuel available from the pump – just a load of red dye mixed in. It works just fine in domestic vehicles but is illegal on account of the reduced tax.

Rachel, a townie through and through, wonders whether a more effective solution might lie in asking the farmers to lock up their agri-plant, but she plays the good copper, toes the line, and organizes the rota – twenty-one of her finest spot-checking cars on the Norfolk, Lincolnshire and Cambridgeshire borders.

Disruption is the name of the game. Her superiors have got that right. The diesel thieves are motoring around the countryside with full tanks while her department's running on air.



Two months into the op, Rachel's mobile vibrates. It's her number two, Nik. She thinks about not answering. Always the same story – they've dipped twenty-whatever cars and got nothing.

Still, Nik's a good officer and she should set an example. She picks up.

'We've got red,' he says.

His voice sounds funny, kind of thick, as if he's drunk or full of cold.

'And ...'

'It's not diesel.'

'Nik, speak to me in whats, not nots.'

'Blood. It's fucking blood. A whole tank of it.'

Cars can't run on blood. She knows this. So must he. He's their resident petrol-head.

‘How does—’

‘There’s a second tank ... another tiny filler neck just next to the fuel one.’

He tells her how the Škoda SUV was a random pull-over. That they almost missed it – the fuel dip had come up clear. It was only as he was screwing the cap back on that he noticed the stain. He thought it was rust and peered close, spotted the nipple to the right. Black rubber, about the size of a pea. He pressed it and viscous red liquid oozed onto his fingers.

‘I puked, then I called in CSI. They’re draining the second tank. There’s gallons of the stuff. I should have called you sooner but ... I’ve never seen ... I was—’

‘It’s okay, Nik. You did good. Let forensics do their thing. Just bring the driver in.’



Forty minutes later Rachel walks into the interrogation room. Nik does a *he’s-a-weirdo* thing with his eyebrows. She doesn’t want to pre-judge but this driver guy is all off. He doesn’t have a cornered look about him, but he’s not smug either. Impassive, she thinks.

She’s still waiting on the CSI people for the haematology report. In the meantime, she needs to

find out why Operation Red Diesel has turned into a bloody nightmare, literally.



Twenty-four hours later, it's confirmed. The blood's human.

There's something else – forensics are reporting saliva around the rubber nipple next to the main filler neck on the car.

And Mr Impassive is dead. The CCTV footage from his cell tells them nothing. He went to sleep and never woke up.

But it's weird. He's pale, almost translucent. Like he's been exsanguinated.

Unlike the Škoda's, his tank is empty.

Smells Like Trouble

How does one know that their experience of the world is the same as everyone else's? She recalls the conversation with a friend – how Paul swore it was grey when she was seeing a muddy green.

You don't know, she decides, not unless there's a linguistic reference point ... a green or a grey to anchor the conversation.

She's read about a woman who can smell Parkinson's. The skin gives off a musky odour in the early stages of the disease, and her natty nose picks it up. If scientists can identify the molecular signature of that odour, it'll speed up diagnosis and treatment.

Her own situation is tricky.

She can smell trouble.

What trouble smells *like*, she can't say. Sweet, fruity, fishy, rancid, faecal, or musky, like with the Parkinson's? Any one of those would help because it would give her a language through which to articulate the problem.

As a child she avoided certain others, could detect their corruption with her nose. She hadn't learned the name for it, but recognized its presence as clearly as cut grass, her mum's chicken cacciatore, and the mess the dog left on the lawn.

Sometimes the odour took her breath away. More frequently it was an irritant.

That others seemed oblivious to the obvious perplexed her. Only later did it occur to her that perhaps her nasal presence was unusual.

Awareness of what that smell meant, and what to call it, came in her early twenties. She'd graduated with a first in Journalism from Goldsmiths. Remaining in London without a job was out of the question so she'd headed home to Norwich. The internship with the *Eastern Daily Press* had paid peanuts, but peanuts were better than nothing.

She spent a year covering the courts. Most of the cases were dull as ditch water. Until Dale Culver took the stand.

Culver had bludgeoned a homeless man to death for nothing more than being in his way.

In his closing remarks, the judge described Culver as a menace with a psychopathic personality disorder and sentenced him to twenty years at Her Majesty's pleasure.

Culver's pathology had been an olfactory assault. She'd gagged throughout the proceedings.

That was ten years ago. Since then, she's researched the condition extensively. The terminology around psychopathy is tangled and confusing, more so than the throwaway lines in TV dramas would have anyone believe. Lack of

empathy and emotional disconnection are almost always evident. Violence not so much. Popular career paths include sales, media ... and law.

And that's the thing. The trouble she's smelling isn't always the big-hitting stuff – things you can go to the police with. You can't arrest someone because they're manipulative, or a persistent liar, or ruthless, or because they charm you into doing things you'd rather not, even if that charm leads to harm.

Which explains why she smells trouble so often. In fact, it's difficult to work out who's worthy of her trust, of her investment, and what action to take.

Like that Culver case. He was a menace, no doubt. But he wasn't the only one in the room. She knows that now. Her attribution might have been misplaced.

Just last week she attended a wedding. Ten years on and there she was, tarted up to the nines and trying to hold the retch in her throat as the judge who'd presided over the case walked down the aisle with the bride on his arm.

Maybe he's violent; maybe he's not. Either way, the thought of someone like *that* invested with so much power itches furiously. He has no right. Something needs to be done, though she has yet to work out what. One thing's for sure – it's unacceptable.

Unacceptable. Not frightening or disgusting or disturbing. Yet surely it should be all those things. And that's another problem right there. Like with Paul and the colours, it seems her perspective is off.

Her own odour is telling: familiar, so it doesn't make her gag, but she recognizes it for what it is. Not sweet, fruity, fishy, rancid, faecal or musky. Just trouble.

She smells a little like trouble.

Craft Gin Connoisseur

We use only the most exclusive ingredients in our distillery. The leaves of the kaffir lime. The bark of the cassia. Elderflower and orris root. Lavender and lemongrass. Bog myrtle and pink peppercorn. Angelica, saffron, yuzu ... they're very fashionable at the moment, very *darling*.

They're also rather a bore.

The Young Turks of the marketing world say that to be heard at the noisy digital dinner party we must be different. We must stand out.

Brand identity, not bland identity.

We must be prepared to repel as well as compel if we are to attract the perfect client, the angel client ... the client who will pay our price for our product because they want what we, and only we, can offer.

But craft has become the new C-word.

We stand by the artisanal values that underpin every bottle we produce while the big brands nip at our heels, ready with their ubiquitous small batches, botanicals and tea-bagging butchery.

Less craft than crass.

We ask: where is the provenance, the traceability, the humanity?

For the artisan, a gin is conceived, born, nurtured, shaped.

Consumers can taste the soul of our spirits on their tongues.

There is valour in every infusion, credibility in every measure, a story in every distillation.

Juniper is our base botanical, naturally, but coriander and cardamom are for those who have bastardized our art. Rather, our clients' discrete palettes determine our signature notes:

Tears.

Pain.

Grief.

Terror.

None can be picked wholesale. Each provides the gin with a distinct human *dimension*.

Ask and we will tell you the names of the weepers and how many cups they filled with their heartache.

Ask and we will tell you of the torture they endured and for how long they suffered.

Ask and we will tell you about the lives we stole, and how those left behind were ripped asunder.

Ask and we will tell you of the dread we ground into the very bones of our donors.

Provenance. Traceability. Humanity.

The foundations of our craft.

Chin-chin.

Border Control

I push my way through the gate and trip across the lawn towards the main house. It's a charmer.

They don't build walls that thick anymore – too expensive. The brickwork is traditional. Norfolk Reds are absorbent, which lets the old girl breathe and keeps the damp at bay. But what I like best is the way the salt catches in the creases. It's like the bricks are smiling.

What else can I tell you?

It's not a family home, though it should be. A high brick-and-flint wall surrounds a good-size lawn – character and privacy. Perfect for careful parents looking to intern independent kids.

It's not a business premises, though it could be. There's plenty of storage space in the outbuildings, all of which are in good nick. They'd make ideal studios for artists who craft best in company.

It's not a holiday home, though it would be ... if someone dolled it up and advertised in on Airbnb. The coastline is near enough that if the windows were open you could smell the salt and hear the surf breaking.

The problem with this gaff is the view.

Look forward and you'll see wide skies and open water. The battle between sand and sea never

ceases. The dunes don't stand a chance without the wooden groynes that punctuate the shoreline.

Look right and take in the offshore windfarm at Scroby Sands. The blades slice through the light breeze with a soundless grace. The seals don't seem to mind and the little terns keep coming.

Now look left. It's a tangle of pipes and pylons. The gas terminal stretches along the coast road for a kilometre. The complex never sleeps and at night it has a kind of Bladerunner majesty. During the day, though, it's a retinal assault.

You couldn't rent or sell this place if you tried. No one comes to Norfolk expecting anything less than three hundred and sixty degrees of Mother Nature's premium eye candy.

Which suits us fine.

Our visitors don't get to enjoy the garden or the outbuildings because we don't let them outside.

They don't hear the surf or smell the salt because we don't open the windows.

They don't look left, right or straight ahead because the doors are always locked.

I'm part of the security detail. At any one time there are thirty of us on duty. We're all field veterans who know how to keep our mouths shut and our muscles toned.

Each of us is an Expert-level practitioner of Krav Maga. Grade 3 minimum. Our tech might malfunction but our strikes, takedowns, throws

and groundwork are powered by training and discipline, and don't.

We're armed too, of course. Between us we have more blades than Scroby's turbines, and it's an offence to cross the perimeter without a firearm. Initially, we each carried a SIG Sauer MCX rifle and a Glock 19, though these days it's a whole new ballgame.

And talking of the perimeter, it extends well beyond the brick-and-flint wall, a good 500 metres. Cross it without invitation and we'll be on you in seconds. This is private property, after all.

Having the gas terminal close is handy. We bump up against its heavily barbed borders. Accidental interlopers assume they've trespassed on the property of Shell, Eni or Perenco, and leave without fuss.

I can hear the cogs whirring. Maybe you're thinking this is some ghastly interrogation centre – Guantanamo with windmills.

Or a halfway house to facilitate extraordinary rendition. Honestly? It's more about water-skiing than water-boarding around these parts.

How about safe-guarding witnesses set to testify against perps of organized crime? That could work.

Or perhaps you've gone leftfield and think we're harbouring aliens. Greens and greys. Roswell on Sea.

If only.

The problem we're managing here is more complex.

The manifold. Twenty-seven cubic metres in which everything you thought made sense goes to shit.

I'm just a guy with a blade and a gun so the physics is a stretch, but the way I understand it, it's basically an arrivals lounge for those who live in universes that might have been ours but aren't.

Our visitors are us.

Sort of.

It comes down to proximity ... of experience not geography.

The Near-bys' lives are uncannily similar. They come because they can, because they're curious. They want nothing from us, just to say hello.

The Midmosts fall into two camps. Category 1s live an existence that for us is conceivable but as yet unachievable. Mainly because of their tech. Category 2s are struggling, but with obstacles that can be overcome. If we can help, we do, but more often it's the C1s chipping in.

Last but not least, the Yonders. You've probably worked it out. They're in trouble. Knocked sideways by some planet-wide horror the likes of which we can only invent in our dreams, our books and our Hollywood blockbusters.

Too far gone for C1 assistance, they want out. Or in, depending on how you look at it.

Most would be harmless if we let them through. They want nothing more than to survive, to make a home, to live a life. But we can't even look after our own, never mind several billion refugees from a sister Earth. Think about what you see on the news, how people start throwing their toys out of the pram when it comes to immigration.

And there's more than one Yonder universe. The science of collapsing probabilities allows for expansion with every what-if.

That's where the security detail comes in. No one leaves the manifold until we're certain of their status. And even then, no one leaves the house.

Most Yonders are brazen. Fair play – their clocks are ticking. We have a zero-tolerance policy. Just a sniff of a breach and we act. Thanks to the C1s, our defence upgrades are stand-out. No more bullets; it's all about protons. Our response is swift and clean. Visitor to vapour in a flash.

Shrewder Yonders pretend to be Midmosts and Near-bys. Identification isn't as hard as you might think. They press too fast, too hard, and lack the enthusiasm that genuine C2s show for home-centred support. And they have a certain disposition – haunted and hunted. That's what usually exposes them.

All in all, we have the situation in hand. Still, this is border control that bends the mind.

I try not to think about the Yonders too much, about the unthinkable burdens borne by other versions of me.

As for here – home – maybe if everyone knew about the manifold, and the nightmare plight of some who assemble there and the centillions they represent, we'd work a little harder to look after each other.

Super Fun

Picks and Gar are a super fun marketing duo committed to making business promotion less boring. High on life, love and laughs.

Every video, every blog, every podcast, every webinar, every speaking engagement is pumped to bursting point.

Think Morecambe and Wise, Ant and Dec, Abbott and Costello, Fred and Ginger ... no, not Fred and Ginger. Neo and Morpheus – that's better. They are the Neo and Morpheus of the marketing world.

Problem is, there *is* a spoon. It's called the algorithm. And in this game, you need to be *on it*.

Competition is global and everyone's fighting for a tiny piece of ever-changing thingummies that show no mercy and can only be guessed at. Google, YouTube, Facebook, Insta. They all have them.

Picks slumps on the sofa and wishes they would all fuck off. It's exhausting. He can't say that in public, naturally. Being on it means metre-wide smiles, pylon-high confidence and mine-deep humility. No one likes a wanker.

At least he's not on his own. The P&G bromance is a decade old. Gar is magnificent – a genius. A neuropathic condition means he can't

peel a satsuma or feel his feet, but his design skills make their website pop, and the guy can close a sale like no one else on the planet. Plus, when it comes to reeling in middle-aged women to their membership group, it's Gar who tarts long eyelashes into Periscope.

Picks is the banter man. Together, they've built a community, a client base, and a speaker reel to die for.

But – and it's a big but – they've set the bar high. Down isn't an option, not with the competition. Being on it means staying on it.

And then there's the retention issue. All that effort for each new customer. They'll pay, sure, but stay? That's the trick – scaling it but keeping it personal, like a family.

An Insta notification pings on his phone. He stares at the device, wonders what the world would look like if there were an algorithm that measured truth. Not the bollocks of likes and retweets and comments and shares. Not the marketing-ese of *engagement* and *user experience*.

What really pisses him off is that most of the high-ranking marketing consultancies are made up of fat, white men who got rich on the four P's in a time when getting noticed didn't require dressing up as a prison escapee or a zombie.

Or like that time Gar wore a mankini.

Fun.

Super fucking fun.

He and Gar have spoken about it. It's time to change things up.

Hashtag poke the bear.

Winking emoji.

BOOM.

That stuff.



SocialCon is the biggest event in the marketing calendar. Everyone who's anyone is there.

This isn't a room with thirty delegates, a whiteboard and four marker pens that don't work. It's an amphitheatre. Seats two thousand. There are four giant screens on the back wall of the stage, a rockstar sound system, and a catwalk. A fucking catwalk!

This is where marketers can strut, arms up and wide, like they're Jesus or Elvis or Taylor Swift.

'I feel like a frickin' gladiator,' says Gar.

Picks can't decide whether to piss or puke.

They're up in an hour.



On stage, Gar sits on a bar stool so the focus is on his words, not his wheels. Picks stands to the audience's left. Always on the left.

The house is full.

Rich guys.

Fat guys.

White guys.

P&G are just two blokes from the Toon but a slick presentation, inflatable aliens, and cutesie British accents delivering Twitter tips have the flock in a frenzy in under thirty minutes.

They're nearly done.

Picks looks at Gar.

The lights go off.

Static licks the air. There's a crackle.

Two thousand little green men pulse in the gloom.

And two thousand explosions destroy the silence.



It's carnage.

The organizers are furious. The floor is littered with a bajillion tiny paper birds. Twitter confetti! Whodda thought? Cost a bomb too. But worth it because no one – not one single person – is talking about anything else.

They bunk off, head for a bar a couple of miles away, leaving the rich, fat, white men to enjoy the closing keynote.

They order beers and snacks and watch the news on the TV in the corner.

It comes bang on time, just as ordered. From this distance, it's nothing more than a low rumble. Almost discreet. A few minutes later, the air is peeling with sirens and flashing red and blue.

Onscreen, the anchor man breaks the news: Uptown is down. SocialCon is the new ground zero.

Picks and Gar have raised the bar.

And razed the competition. *BOOM!*


Now *that's* super fun.

Living Fiction

Choose your preferred mode of consumption using the buttons below.

Word-Only (WO): Traditional story mode. Read the words on the page and use your imagination.

Neural-Integration (NI): A fully immersive experience via a neuro-catheter attached to your scalp. Your brain will receive neuro-stimuli that enable you to experience, in real time, what the characters see, hear, smell, taste, touch and feel.

Optional (OPT): To switch between WO and NI, use the  icon at the top of each page to enter and exit NI instantly (neuro-catheter required).

WO

NI

OPT

THE LIBRARIAN

Steve closes the feed. Break-time for TLR29134. Thank fuck. Poor bitch. He sets up TLR11892. Better. This puppy is sick but happy to give.

Do the crime, do the time. Steve has no truck with that. Lock 'em up by all means, but this?

Every library has a population of forty thousand tellers, each housed in a pod the size of a large coffin. One librarian manages two thousand pods. All that keeps costs down and security up. Tax payers love 'em. So do politicians.

Take TLR29134. She's serving eighteen months for burglary. When the feed's closed, she's offline. She can think or she can sleep. What she can't do is get out of that pod.

Most choose sleep.

Synthetic veins relay nutrients in and waste out. Regular rotation of the pods reduces the incidence of pressure injuries. Neuro-catheters are the bridge between mind and server.

Tellers are catalogued not by what they've done but by what they share. Like TLR29134. She was orphaned when she was seven. Survived a car crash that destroyed her parents. Now she gets to relive it via the feed because, somewhere, there's an authitect creating a masterpiece in which her experience will feature.

Living Fiction they call it.

Steve thinks the system is broken. It can't be right that TLR29134 will spend eighteen months sharing a nightmare while TLR11892 gets to mentally masturbate for the sake of a realistic transgressor narrative.

He doesn't care how cheap it is. That's not punishment. It's not doing the time.

Fortunately for TLR29134, there's not much demand for seven-year-old kids in car crashes. The same can't be said for serial killers and torturers. Christ, TLR11892 even has a wait-list, if you can believe that – architects itching to hire him.

Back in the old days, before architects and tellers, writers had to make their shit up. Libraries housed books, not crooks. And forget the feed; the only system a librarian had to worry about was the Dewey Decimal.

He doesn't touch the stuff. Give him word-only any day of the week. Or a violin concerto. No one gets tortured for that. He hopes.

THE AUTHITECT

The Authitecture Podcast

Episode 61

Welcome to this episode of The Authitecture Podcast. I'm Dave Griene and I'm your host. Today, I want to talk about suffering. Yep, you heard me.

I'm gonna be straight with you – I've got a right old bee in my bonnet about this. And since some of you are at the beginning of your story-creation journeys, I think it's worth addressing.

So this came about because the other day I was chatting with someone about writing, and they said that we're – and they actually used this word – *inferior* to the authors of the past because we don't make it up, don't sweat for it, don't live it, breathe it, lose sleep over it.

Let me tell you, I do all those things. I'm an artist. Creating a book isn't just about chucking a load of data from a feed into a drive and uploading it to Amazon. All my Living Fiction goes through a strict editorial process, just like books have always done.

The big-picture work comes first. I have to create my story, work out my plot, plant my clues, decide who's going to move around in the world I've built, and how and why. Good story

architecture is essential: Setup, motive, denouement. The classic three-act structure.

Plus, there's a new problem – one that traditional authors never had to deal with but that we architects absolutely do. Digital coherency. So let's say I create a baddie. That character has a gender, a body, a belief system, a psychology, a pathology, an environment, a history, a motivation, a goal, an obstacle protagonist. All that stuff will determine their actions, and the emotions they experience as they act.

Living Fiction is a *thing* precisely because it's based on lived experience. Chances are you won't find just one perp in a plastic tub who has everything you need, unless you're Janna Jensen. There's a reason she's made stars out of her tellers. More likely you'll need forty or fifty threads, maybe more.

The research alone is time-consuming and hellishly expensive. It's not enough to find matches for your story. Those matches need to be a good fit *with each other*, otherwise the characterization becomes fragmented. That's what it takes if you want every piece of your narrative to ooze with integrity and offer a seamless experience for the plugged-in reader.

Now think about how many characters are in a book and you start to see what people like me are up against.

I have a contract with one of the big-name digital publishers, and the in-house support is a godsend. They make sure the data streams don't decay and give me a team of editors who check my Living Fiction to ensure that every paragraph, sentence and word stimulates the senses just as I intended.

Newbie authitects, listen up. Good editors are worth their weight in gold. Their fresh eyes, ears, fingers, tongues and noses ensure the tellers add substance to the characters in your books, but never dominate.

Plus, there's always a lot of noise in those feeds, and that has to be edited out. Locating a memory and reliving it into a neuro-cath without any junk requires a level of concentration that few possess. Memories, like the lives they were born from, are messy.

And don't forget – some people want WO mode. So I go to all that effort to create the full neural experience and I *still* have to make the words count, just in case the reader wants to use their own brain. That's what the moaners forget – the digital stuff doesn't replace the writing. It comes on top of it. I'm both author and neural architect. That's where the damn term authitect comes from, for Christ's sake!

And something else ... I know there are some who think that forcing tellers to relive past horrors

is barbaric and has no place in a civilized world. But think about this. In the old days, those who created stories suffered for their writing. Now the criminals do it for us. Murderers, thieves, nonces, pimps and pervs all repurposing their experiences in the name of art.

I don't call that barbaric. I call it poetic justice.

Thanks for listening and letting me get that off my chest. Don't forget to rate and review The Authitecture Podcast if you enjoyed this episode. Let's talk soon!

THE INDIE TELLER

Alicia shuts down the feed and logs off. She takes a slurp of latte number three and massages the small shorn patch on the back of her head where the feed-pad sits. Today's been productive, and she feels relaxed – not many of her friends can say that after a day's work. This has to be the best job in the world.

Alicia is paid to remember. She set up as an indie teller six months ago – website, social media profiles, a vlog ... it's all there. For her, at least.

She savours that thought. Kneads it against the memory of the news article she'd clicked on earlier. A man had killed himself – a former inmate who'd done two years in a library. Thirty-six hours after his release he unplugged himself from the life sentence in his head. The memories he'd been forced to repeatedly pipe into the feed were horrendous ... just thinking about them had upset her. She can't imagine wanting even to read the words, never mind taste and smell them. He went in desperate and came out broken. The offences hadn't even been that serious to her mind – car theft and DUI. Certainly not worth the man's life.

There's a lot of controversy around telling, well, the library version of it anyway. She gets it. The tellers in those pods are milked for their

monstrous memories, and from what she's hearing, time in the clink for some of the more unsavoury characters is more reward than restorative justice.

And then there's the inmates sentenced for lesser crimes. They broke the law, yes, but wasn't their waywardness at least in part a product of circumstance – poverty, illness, desperation? She can well imagine making similar mistakes had her life been different. Those poor souls are paying a price, but to her it seems disproportionate to the crime.

The indie teller market is on the up, though. The mainstream publishing industry was so busy building mega-servers of living memory that it barely noticed Mindle Direct Publishing tiptoeing on its coat tails.

The Mindle brought the feed to the masses, and it wasn't long before indie authitects began creating *their* stories *their* way ... and they needed tellers.

Enter Alicia. Two deaths in the family, a cancer scare, a weird thing with a stalker guy in her early twenties, and three devastating miscarriages. Fodder for the DIYers, perhaps. Funnily enough, though, that's not what she's commissioned for.

She's had her fair share of ache and break, but, in the main, her life has been a tender one. And the people who visit her website? They're looking for

someone who's prepared to tell about the good times.

She neuro-caths ...

– the song of the sea. Waves break on the shore below the French windows of a house they've rented in Devon. It's dark but she can hear their liquid rhythm.

– his declaration. He wants to grow wrinkly with her. A love!

– the Morse-like heartbeat of an eight-week-old foetus in her belly. It flashes white on the monitor. Alive!

– the dining room of her childhood. There's a tabletop Christmas tree in the corner laden with glass baubles. The wall behind is bathed in red, green, yellow, pink. She can smell the pine.

– a Labrador's soft yellow head against her arm. It's winter. The room is warm from the fire dancing in the hearth and the laughter of her child and husband. They're playing Crazy Eights.

– a woodpigeon cooing outside the caravan on the island. The light is different here though she can't work out why. The air smells of seaweed and salt.

Alicia shares myriad moments of ordinary magic. She is everyday life for hire. That some find comfort in the essence of her gentle pleasures is a wonder.

THE PUBLISHER

DigiBookCon

*In Conversation with Vincent Manola, Head of
Digital Publishing, Drift Press*

—Vincent, welcome and thank you for joining us. Drift Press pioneered Living Fiction. Tell us how it all began.

—It's great to be here. So Living Fiction started out as an experiment, if I'm honest. We were looking for a way to turn watchers into readers. Three decades ago, Netflix and Prime began spoon-feeding busy, entertainment-hungry audiences with readymade content on multiple devices. And, sure, book sales – print and digital – were still relatively stable, which meant the ship wasn't sinking.

Here's the thing though – you don't create an environment for long-term growth by cocooning yourself in a bubble of *now*. You need to stretch, push the boundaries, embrace a vision – not of what is, but of what might be. So we and a few others started playing with interactive digital works.

—But you were still working with the old publishing model ...

—Pretty much. So let's say you downloaded a book to your e-reader, and you came to a scene with a group of monks singing a Gregorian chant in a Benedictine seminary. You'd click on an icon by the text and be able to hear the music.

—The academic presses were doing this too, weren't they?

—Absolutely. One of the earliest examples was a forensic science textbook in which you clicked through to videos of autopsies and crime-scene investigations. The whole thing had begun to move in an enrichment direction.

—Though video had been around for decades ...

—Sure, but we pushed further. With Living Fiction it was the first time the reader didn't have to switch to a different piece of software or another platform. What we did was offer the reader a one-stop shop. We consolidated the multimedia experience. Before, it had been interruptive.

So take audiobooks. That was an alternative if you wanted to hear a voice, but it still meant different software, Audible or something. Entertainment used to be all about boxing. Think about it – video versus audio versus writing. Series versus movies. Novels versus short fiction versus serial fiction. And hardbacks versus paperbacks versus e-books.

Even the traditionally conservative BBC realized before we did that it was time to stop forcing the consumer to choose.

And so that's what we wanted to do – offer an all-encompassing experience that gave the reader something more than a *read*, and in a way that was seamless.

—Still, it was quite a shift from video segments to a full neural-integration or NI experience.

—You're right. But there were three breakthroughs that opened the door for the book trade. The first was Alzheimer's research. So it works like this. When we smell, taste, hear, see, touch, all that sensory input creates electrical activity in the hippocampus. Each event has a unique signature, or 'spike train'. In people with Alzheimer's, the spike trains come to a standstill before those sensory experiences can be stored as memory. Neuroscientists developed implants that acted as kind of hubs – grabbing the data, coding it and moving it on. Kind of like the neural version of the control room at Charing Cross Station.

So, once science had found a way to locate, access and, most importantly, capture specific memories, there was no reason why anyone couldn't plug in. That's where it started. Those implants became the pad that now sits on the scalp when we're accessing Living Fiction feeds, or when the tellers are transmitting.

The second issue was storage. Quantum computing changed everything. Now that we have stable 2,000-qubit systems, data processing is faster than ever.

The third was Amazon's input ... a portable device like an e-reader that would enable the consumer to access this neural data easily. You know what? They were going to call it the MindReader, but the public weren't having any of

it. Way too creepy. Plus the Kindle was already a well-loved brand. So they changed a letter and the Mindle was born!

—On the subject of minds, let's talk now about the neuro-catheters. Tell us how they work.

—So the neuro-catheters are conduits for the data feed between the mind and the server. Think of them as a bridge connecting two sides of a river. The only difference between a teller and a reader is the direction in which the feed flows. A teller gives; a reader receives.

And I know there are still some people who won't go anywhere near a neuro-catheter. We talk about plugging in but it's not invasive, honestly! There's no surgical incision. It's not like back in the days of deep-brain stimulation when electrodes were implanted directly into tissue. It's more like an EEG – like I said, just a small pad on the back of the scalp. No bigger than a penny. You can't even see where the head's shaved. I love that we're influencing fashion though! Nike just launched a range of beanies and caps with Mindle ports so you can access your Living Fiction regardless of the weather.

—Yeah, I saw that. Very cool.

—But headwear aside, neuro-cathing means readers no longer have to imagine anything. You read the words on the page and the feed does it all for you. So here's an example. Imagine Sammy's

in a noisy bar with a group of friends. He's the viewpoint character. Josh sits down at a table. Sammy is attracted to Josh. As the reader takes in the text on the page, they experience Sammy hearing the background noise in the room, seeing Josh's body, tasting the wine on his tongue, and feeling the arousal in his genitals.

That's Living Fiction. All the senses. It's a completely immersive experience.

—Talking of which, there's been some criticism around how the mainstream publishing industry has exploited this. At Drift Press, for example, you have a celebrity authitect who's on her third living autobiography. Critics have called it neuroporn. How do you respond to that?

—Publishers have always been the gatekeepers of storytelling. I'm not saying there isn't room for self-publishers and indie authitects, but we remain committed to providing a supportive publishing environment for our creators – editorial, sales, marketing and PR, rights, translation options, access to memory feeds, and data control and storage. It's about process. Lack of process has a negative impact on quality, credibility and visibility.

Ask any librarian or publisher about what comes through those feeds. There's a lot of extraneous information that needs to be removed before it can be integrated into a book.

And the hard truth is this: process costs money. Our Star Minds imprint is astonishingly popular

with readers, and the income generated is what allows us to invest in the new talent coming through for niche genres.

And while celebrity memoir might not be everyone's cup of tea, the quality of our neural feeds is exceptional – especially for those who've invested in high-quality cath. Truly authentic.

—And finally, Vincent, what innovations are in the pipeline for Drift?

—I think the most exciting thing for us right now is the holiday-reading programme. I'm not talking about the current model whereby a reader decides which stories they'll download to their Mindle and devour by the pool. Instead, we want to bring the pool to them. Imagine a book that lasts for two weeks, one in which you share in the lived experience of, say, a safari break, trekking in the jungle or visiting the orangutan nurseries in Borneo. Throw in a romance, a bit of danger, a mystery ... whatever takes your fancy.

That's a big jump from the current Living Fiction model because it involves looking after the reader's body during the story vacation. However, we're talking with the libraries and learning how they use the teller pods. All I can say is, watch this space!

THE MINDLE JUNKIE

My Mindle is stacked. If I'd been born fifty years ago I wouldn't have touched books with a barge pole. My gran is word-only all the way, and in print too. She wants to hold the thing, turn the pages. That's fine by me. Each to their own.

What puts me off is the work involved. Reading is supposed to be a pleasure, but for me it's a drag. All those nudges – action beats, speech tags, scene descriptions. It's a ball-ache having to pay attention to that stuff, and yet in WO mode it's essential if you want to understand the story properly.

With the Mindle, it's all done for you, and I love it. I can skim over the boring stuff and let the feed do the work.

My neuro-cath is awesome – top of the range. If you're serious about reading, it's the only way to go. Cheaper caths do the job but the feed stream tends to buffer. Kind of spoils it when your eyes are scanning a fight scene and instead of getting an adrenaline rush you're hit by the smell of the apples from two paragraphs up.

My preferred Living Fiction genres are action adventure and thriller. My favourite authitect is Janna Jensen. I heard her interviewed on The Authitecture Podcast a couple of weeks back. She

is totally on it. She uses a combo of library-based and indie tellers.

There are a ton of former soldiers and mercenaries – private sector, she called them – who are more than happy to neuro-cath their combat experiences into a data server if the price is right.

For her bad guys, she uses the libraries. She talked about how enhanced state surveillance had smashed up the organized crime syndicates, and how the bosses might be in jail but still need to feed their families. She giggled as she said it, and I wasn't sure if she was talking about the wife and kids or *family* family. Still, it came as a bit of a shock – that you can go to jail for murder, corruption and human trafficking and get paid for sharing that kind of stuff. And they earn a shitload. Seems crime does pay, after all.

I remember this one teller she mentioned – it made me laugh because the crim's a headcase, yet he's got a Bond thing in his pod number ... What was it again? Something like 10071. And this guy's one of her regulars – she uses him in every book. There's a limit placed on how much inputting the tellers do but she got round it – offered a cash incentive, and a little something for the library. They'd all agreed to up his feed time.

And this is the weird bit. Now he's in demand – his stuff's that good. I can vouch for it too. I've

got *Steal 'Em and Stick 'Em*, *Arse Butcher*, and *Pony Play*. Those stories are the shit. Total mindfuck. Or should that be Mindlefuck? Whatever. Anyway, it's got to the point where he needs an agent. WTF is *that* all about?

THE QUIET READER

I run my fingertips over the cover. It's smooth all over but for the title and the author's name. There, the letters are raised. I close my eyes and see if I can work them out but they make no sense unless I'm looking.

There's a picture on the cover too – a seascape with a lone figure staring into the distance. The book is about a man who can't remember who he is. I decide he's trying to find himself in that ocean.

There are five hundred pages inside, all covered with tiny writing. The paper feels ever so slightly gritty, though not in an unpleasant way.

And it smells. I hear talk of this often, of how much it's missed. Not all books smell the same, of course. It depends where they've been stored, how old they are, what kind of paper they're printed on, and what the binding's made of. Me? I'm not so bothered about that.

What I love is the silence.

I read the words on the first page. What I sense is not a void. There is a *something* that sits behind and around as I process the words, sentences, and paragraphs, fusing them with images I conjure to bring sense to it all. But it's a quiet, solitary experience.

My mind's voice, my mind's eye.

It is bliss.

Gone is the dislocation, the neural onslaught I experience when I plug in to Living Fiction.

These words, these characters, this world ... none of it is mine. And, yet, I have freedom in this place. It is as real as I choose it to be but no more.

What the author describes I can neither see, nor touch, nor taste, nor hear. Instead, I imagine I can. And that's enough.

The joy, the fear, the confusion, the relief, they are not my emotions. Instead, I imagine they are. And that too is enough.

This book, and the tale within it, is a twilight zone where blurred senses guide me quietly as the tickertape of letters moves across my vision.

I am reading.

Words only.

A noiseless gift.

THE DATA MERCHANT

The Times, London Bridge Street, SE1

—Let me get this straight. You're saying you've found intelligence and security comms in the Mindle database.

—Yes. Google Books too. The thing you need to understand is that with the advent of stable quantum computing, traditional public-key cryptography became a joke. Government, banking, commerce, the scientific community – all of them were so keen to reap the benefits that they forgot to pay analogous and simultaneous attention to the threats. And that's despite the numerous warnings. Google it. The internet is awash with articles that talk about breach risk. Some of them go back as far as 2016. We knew about the potential harms before we'd even built the damn things.

I'm not saying it wasn't a surprise. It's clever. Really clever. MI5 and MI6 intel just sitting there in plain sight, cloaked by the invisibility of its apparent uselessness.

—Meaning?

—Some architects commission their feeds but most pick and choose from a database, especially in the indie market. The feeds have to be high quality and findable, and that means the tagging needs to be relevant. Then the servers' built-in algorithms score the feed on congruence, stability and purity.

Congruence means that a certain percentage of the content has to match the tags assigned by the librarians, or in the case of the self-publishing sector, the indie tellers.

Stability relates to how quickly the data decays. Tellers using lower-quality neuro-caths produce feeds with more interference – like the static on a busted analogue screen or pixilation on a smart TV.

Purity is about the quality of the content. Experienced tellers focus harder so the reliving of events isn't fragmentary. Imagine having a conversation with someone and being interrupted every five or ten seconds. That's what an impure feed's like.

Even an authitect with a small budget won't bother with feeds that score sub-thirty. And that's where I found this stuff – the intel is housed in the crap feeds where no one will find it.

—Except you. You found it. So what made you look there?

—I make a living from analysing data. Patterns are what interest me, especially changes in them. That's where you find interesting stuff. Sub-thirty feeds increased by ten per cent last year. Something like that makes me take notice.

—Is there any way they could know their feeds have been accessed, and by whom? What I'm asking is, can you be traced?

—Stats are limited on both servers, so they'll know someone's been in but not where or who.

—**And what do you want, Mr Preston?**

—I'm a data merchant.

—**You mean a hacker.**

—No, a data merchant. I find and sell data. I've given you my price. It's a big number but a fair one, given the scoop I'm offering. In exchange, I'll show you where the feeds are. I doubt you'll find them otherwise. After that, it's up to you what you do with the information.

—**I don't see that we can do anything with this 'scoop' as you call it. Can you imagine the chaos if we were to go to the country with this? Our bank accounts are vulnerable. The state doesn't trust its own encryption. The security of the nation is in the hands of intelligence services creating rogue Living Fiction feeds to manage their covert ops ... Half the population would roll around laughing. The other half would riot. And we'd be sitting ducks for our enemies. Not exactly a story that plays well for the defence of the realm, is it?**

—Then I'll take it to the *Guardian*.

—**You do that, Milo. Let me call you a cab. It's the least I can do after all your hard work.**

Milo fumes. Fucking stuck-up establishment idiots. They don't have a clue. The country's going to hell in a handcart and they have the audacity to talk about defence of the realm. Jesus.

‘You’ve gone the wrong way, mate. This takes us south over the river. We need to be heading for N1 – I need the *Guardian*.’

‘Don’t worry yourself, sir. I’ve been told exactly where to take you. And I’m told there’s plenty of newspapers in the library.’

THE LIBRARIAN

Steve opens the feed. It's a newbie – pod 32065. Miserable as piss. Doesn't stop moaning about how he's innocent, been set up, the papers are colluding with organized crime ... Blah blah.

He's heard it too many times. They all say it. It doesn't make any difference. He's just a librarian.

The neural-location brief is unusual. He can't work out why anyone would want something so dull ... TLR32065 will be reliving his own readings of Living Fiction. There's a ton of data. Must have spent hours on his Mindle. And now he's creating a feed of himself accessing the feed. One man on both sides of the river.

Meta or what?

Trick of the Eye

‘Maybe they bricked it up and skimmed it. But it *was* there.’

Laura Hughes swears there was a door but I’m looking at concrete. On the other side is a room that never sleeps. The call centre runs twenty-four seven and one of the night-shift crew would surely have noticed a man dragging a terrified woman through the wall and into that room. No one saw a thing.

‘It was right there, I’m telling you.’ She scuffs her feet against the gravel, a petulant child in grown-up skin. ‘You think cos I was on the puff I couldn’t see straight. But I saw it.’

And I believe her.

My gut and a ticking clock tell me to.

The gut thing is down to Hughes. She’s clean as a whistle, never been on our radar. Keeps herself to herself. Simply, I have no reason to doubt her.

The clock thing is down to our anonymous abductee. The trail goes colder with every hour that passes and we’ve already lost precious time.

My only witness is a puff-head, that’s true. But she hasn’t tried to hide it and that tells me her habit is probably an old friend whose limits she knows.

Still, I need more before I can call in a bunch of hardhats to destroy the wall and find this mystery door.

‘You mind if we go back to yours?’ I point towards my car. ‘I read the report you gave the uniforms but I want to see for myself. Show me what you saw, how you saw it.’

She nods, offering me just the twitch of a smile. ‘We can walk. It’s not far.’



Hughes called 999 at 1 a.m., claiming she’d seen a woman being pushed through a door on the side of the TeleCare building. By a man – she could tell by the way he moved. The woman had been hunched up, holding herself like she was winded or wounded, maybe both.

The beat cops arrived nine minutes later. Three cars trawled the surrounding side roads and the gravel lane by the wall of the call centre while two officers talked to Hughes.

At first, they ignored the half-toked doobie on the coffee table ... just let the witness tell her tale. She sounded straight enough.

She’d been taking a piss. Saw the abduction through the window. Stopped her mid-flow, she said.

Then they checked the view from the bathroom window.

And that's when time started to leak.

Because there was no way you could see out of that window if you were sitting on the bog.

The two officers, tired after a shift's worth of lip from the drunks and the junked, decided Hughes was talking out of her weed hole. Rather than addressing the discrepancy, they bade her a polite goodnight.

Me, I don't like loose ends. I caught this one at seven-thirty this morning and called Hughes. Asked her how come she'd seen what she'd seen from a too-high window.

'But I *was* standing,' she told me.

Hughes, it turns out, is transitioning. Still stands to pee. And why wouldn't she? Each to their own. I'm a bloke and happy to be one but I've always preferred to sit.

I don't blame my colleagues, not entirely. They should've checked, but Hughes has a small frame and delicate features. I'd never have guessed. Her evolving body fits her like a glove.



We arrive at her place and go straight to the bathroom.

'Walk me through it,' I say.

Hughes gestures for me to stand in front of the toilet as if I'm taking a pee. 'Now look out the window.'

She's on the fourth floor and the pane isn't frosted. I can see the TeleCare building clearly, also a gravel lane and the wire fence that edges the residents' car park below.

'I know it was late, but see? There's three lampposts. You can't tell now cos it's daytime but the third one on the right is busted. It's right in your line of sight. The door was directly behind it.'

I bend my knees and adjust my neck just a little to the left, positioning myself so I can get the line.

'What the fuck are you doing, Inspector? No wonder I never felt comfortable in a man's body. I've been pissing wrong all these years.'

I feel like a dick but there's a method to my madness. 'I'm six foot one. You're five eight at a push. The view's a little off. I want to see it like you saw it.'

We swap places and she frowns. 'You're right. I must have been a bit more stoned than I thought. Maybe I was standing further back. Now I know why there's often piss on the floor.'

I go over to the window and look at the call centre. Perhaps Hughes had been a little fuzzy on her feet. Or maybe I'm missing something.

'Clock's ticking. I'm going to take some photos.'

‘You still believe me, then?’ she says.

I move back in front of the toilet and take out my phone. Shift my position as I snap ... a step back, then forward. Bend my knees then straighten my legs, covering all the angles since I can’t be sure exactly where Hughes stood. The lamppost is my frame of reference because that’s the one thing she’s sure about.

‘Unfortunately, I do.’



I leave Hughes in her flat and head back to the lane. Check the third lamppost. The bulb’s broken.

I’m half-glad. Instinct says this is not attention-seeking behaviour on Hughes’s part but the physical confirmation is gratifying. I’m half-sad, too. A woman’s in trouble and I can’t make this lone report of her abduction work without the damn door.

I walk up the lane, scouring the gravel for something out of whack, then head down, checking out the wall as I go. It’s long, eighty feet of ugly – grey concrete stained black from soot, and white from moisture and pigeon shit. At ten-foot intervals, hoarding panels advertise a timber yard, self-storage, cheap mobile data packages. The one to the right of the no-door concrete boasts of the council’s plans for an expanded bus service.

Bawdy – yellow text on a hot-pink background – but it provides welcome relief from the grime.

I look up and down the length of the wall, sensing something off, but the itch dissipates when a flabby guy with man-boobs rounds the corner at the bottom of the lane and starts whining about the disruption to service.

The nasty bastard in me wants to ram him against the wall and slap him around, tell him that someone has been taken, that her life could be on the line. But I'm a twenty-first-century copper so I bite my tongue, talk about procedure and apologize for the inconvenience.

The missing woman ... I don't even know her name.



It's back to the station for a debrief. Then I get my team to work. Thirty minutes later we re-huddle.

Pete's up first. 'No new missing persons. And the hospitals have no traumas or gunshot wounds that match our vic.'

'Maybe they're not in a local hospital. Or maybe they don't come from around here.' It's Alex, the annoying new kid. 'I could ring around.'

Chelle's got a list of names associated with the call centre – who owns it, works in it, staff shifts – but there's nothing weird leaping out.

‘Have you cross-checked to see if any of them have previous?’ says Alex.

Previous. Please.

“Nothing weird” means I’ve got it covered,’ says Chelle with a gentleness I admire and object to simultaneously.

‘I called the council to report the broken lamp.’ Alex again. Like he’s expecting a round of applause. Little shit.

The adrenaline lag’s making me grumpy. My gut’s still telling me I need to follow this through but I’m running out of reasons to justify it.

A uniform from the front desk pokes his head around the door. A guy from the call centre wants to make a formal complaint.

Fuck this.

‘Alex, why don’t you observe? Good experience.’

He’s thrilled. So am I. He’ll be out of my hair for an hour.



Ten minutes later, he’s back.

He leans in close, whispering words like they’re state secrets. ‘Sir, there’s something I need to discuss with you urgently.’

‘Just spit it out, for Christ’s sake.’

He snaps back but my tongue hasn't erased the almost giddy look from his face.

'The complaint ... it's not about this morning – the interviews and whatnot. It's about last night in the lane. A racket started around two-thirty. Went on for half an hour.'

I remember the moobed whiner. *Disruption to service.*

'Call the council. Find out what they were doing.'

I give him a good-work pat on the shoulder and head for the interview room.



It's the whiney guy. Can't tell me much, just that there was a lot of clanging and drilling that made dealing with already furious customers even more difficult.

Again, I appease him as best I can, then go back to the department. Alex tells me the council had no work scheduled. Something's warding off the surprise I should be feeling.

The photos I snapped from Laura Hughes's bathroom show three irregularly spaced lampposts. I sense a veil lifting. Nothing solid, not yet, just a glimpse at what might lie beneath.

'Pete, see if you can track down any images of TeleCare and the lane. Google Earth maybe.'

Chelle, you're with me.' I catch Alex in the corner of my eye. 'You too.'



We park at the bottom of the lane and walk over to the first lamppost. I scuff away the gravel at the base with my foot. The cement footing is stained with moss and dirt. Same with the second post. We head for the third, the broken one that Hughes mentioned. Chelle pushes away the stones with her boot.

The base is different – some kind of reinforced polymer. I push against the lamp. It holds steady but there's give in the footing. I pull the post into my chest, gripping it with both hands, and lift. It's four metres long yet no heavier than a rotary washing line.

'It's a trompe l'oeil.'

'A what?' says Alex.

'Trick of the eye. Illusion.' I look over at the wall with Laura Hughes's invisible door. 'We used the lamppost as the frame of reference, but someone moved it.'

'Hang on,' says Alex.

He runs to the bottom of the lane and paces out the distance between the first and middle posts. Then he restarts the count, passes the third post

and stops about ten feet ahead. The three of us join him and move gravel around with our feet.

‘Here.’ Chelle’s boot points at another polymer footing. This one has a lid covering the hole where the post goes.

We turn around and look at the wall. Yellow on hot pink.

‘Time to get that hoarding down.’



Hard hats in Hi-Viz arrive twenty minutes later. The board’s off within a blink. Like the lamppost, it’s designed to move easily and slips off heavy-duty hooks.

Behind it lies Laura Hughes’s elusive door.

I look at the bare concrete to the right of where the board hung. There at the top of the wall is the source of the itch I’d failed to scratch earlier – a matching row of hooks. Lift on, lift off.

One of the men makes short work of the lock and the door opens outwards.

I peek in. The wall’s hollow. It’s tight but there’s just enough space for me to walk a few steps. I switch on my phone torch and aim it down the length of the corridor. Visibility’s about fifteen feet, but what’s beyond is anyone’s guess.

I come back outside. Alex bounces excitedly, begging for a look-see.

‘No. No one goes in. Chelle, get forensics down here to secure the scene. Alex, uniforms. The lane needs blocking at both ends.’

Someone’s gone to a lot of trouble to conceal an entrance and confuse any onlookers. But more interesting is the corridor, which seems purpose-built. For what, I can’t be sure, but this is no standard abduction. Even planned kidnaps aren’t configured years in advance and that wall’s an integral part of the TeleCare building, not an add-on.

I call Pete. ‘Forget Google Earth. Double-check on the owner of the call centre and see if you can get any drawings, floorplans, blueprints, that kind of stuff.’



The place is swarming with police and forensics, and a crowd of civilians has gathered in the car park. I spot Laura Hughes and beckon her meet me at the fence.

‘Did she look frightened?’ I ask.

Hughes looks through me, like she’s replaying the scene in her head. ‘I couldn’t see her face but it seemed like the guy was pushing her.’

‘Did it seem like she was resisting? Pulling away, fighting with him?’

‘No, but for fuck’s sake, maybe she couldn’t. Like I said in my statement, she was all hunched up like she was hurt. Look, she didn’t seem happy about it, okay? Other than that, I dunno. Sorry.’

‘It’s fine. You’ve got us this far.’



Chelle and I don white overalls and booties.

Peter trots over. ‘No floorplan yet but Land Registry has the building going up in 1984. Planning permission was given for warehousing but I’ve got nothing on the contractors or the building work. The owner’s Davis Holdings – like Chelle said – and TeleCare have been leasing the property for the past five years.’

‘Right. See if you can find out more about the holding company. We’ve got the all-clear from the techs to go in. Stay in radio contact.’

I pick up my kit bag and take the lead. The air’s a bit musty but the corridor is drylined top and bottom and on both sides. Built to last.

We follow the line of the building, me holding an industrial torch that lights the way ahead. There’s another door about fifty feet up on the left.

I’m twitchy. This whole thing, it feels too pro. ‘Let’s up the pace. I want to find out what the fuck’s going on before we’ve got company.’

‘Company, sir? Who—’

‘Not sure – it’s just a tickle.’

We fast-walk up the corridor and reach the door.

I open the kit bag, take out the drill and break the lock.



The room is small, maybe eight by ten, and dry-lined like the corridor. Along the back wall are six chairs. A viewing gallery? A tripod and camera stand between them. Aside from that, it’s empty, sterile even. But eerie too.

Who sits in those chairs? What do they watch? Who fills the space in front of the camera?

The corridor, the hoarding hooks, the moveable dud lamppost – all of it was planned years ago. But maybe that’s not the only trick in play.

All along I’ve been thinking of the woman as a victim ... that she was taken. Our witness said so. But the Hughes thing is bugging me.

For the illusion to work, they had to be sure no one was watching. The whiney guy from the call centre said the disruption started around two-thirty. The uniforms arrived at Hughes’s flat at nine minutes past one but were out by two. If it had been me watching that woman being pushed through the door, I’d have been back in the bathroom, looking out the window for, what, an

hour, two? The rest of the night? I'd have witnessed them moving the hoarding board and the lamppost.

But Hughes didn't report seeing or hearing anything else that night. No drills, no clanging. And I'd not asked her what she did after the uniforms left because I'd only found out later about the trompe l'oeil.

You still believe me, then?

Unfortunately, I don't.



I yank on Chelle's sleeve and pull her through the door. She gives me a spill-it look. The idea's only half-formed but I need to give it chops.

'Move. We'll talk as we go.'

We start down the corridor and I buzz Pete. 'Keep it casual but look around and see if Laura Hughes is still in the car park.'

'Roger that.'

'I think we're being played,' I say to Chelle, 'and Hughes is part of it. Maybe the complainer from the call centre too. I just can't work out why.'

'So you think Laura Hughes didn't see the woman being pushed—'

'I think Laura Hughes *is* the woman who was pushed. Question is, if she's under duress, why not

just come to us straight instead of concocting the bathroom story?’

We reach the exit and step into daylight.

Pete’s on me straightaway. ‘No sign of Hughes.’

‘Gimme a leg-up over the fence.’



I land in the car park and sprint towards the block of flats, hoping I’m not too late. Hughes is already in the hallway as I run through the double doors. She’s dragging a case behind her but stops when she sees me.

‘Just shut it down. That’s all you have to do.’ She’s near to tears.

‘Laura, I need more.’

‘We’ve given you as much as we can. The rest is on you.’

‘We? You mean you and the guy from the call centre?’

Hughes doesn’t respond, just flops against the wall.

‘Tell me,’ I say. ‘I’ll keep you both out of it. Right now, though, all I’ve got is a camera, a concealed corridor and interference with council property in the shape of a lamppost. And only one of those things is a crime. Since I doubt you’re

pissed off about the street lighting, what's going on?'

She slides to the floor.

'You weren't taken, were you?' I say.

'Not the first time. But once is enough. There's no out. Not for any of us. Last night never happened. I made it up. It's just an account of what *has* happened God knows how many times. To me, Marky at the call centre, and everyone else. You need to do something.'

I nod towards the door. 'Do they know where you live or can we chat about this over a brew?'



She talks while I drive ...

The room's lit so the men's faces are in shadow as they watch. A camera records the proceedings. Maybe there's a live feed, or perhaps it's just swag for the punters' goodie bags.

Sometimes it's her on show. Other times it's someone else; she watches from her bathroom as the performers and their audience come and go. When the gig's done, the entrance is concealed. The heavies have it down to a fine art – under two minutes to move the board and the post. Quiet as mice, she says.

She agreed the first time because she needed the money for the drugs and the op – a life of living a biological lie had left her impatient.

She and Marky satisfy niche appetites for breasts and balls. But the so-called shows have taken an even more insidious turn. Not everyone's satisfied with masturbation; they want to *engage*. And for some, pleasure comes only through pain. Slaps and spanks have become mere luxury. Torture and rape are commonplace.

'And why stop there? How long before even that's not enough? You've got to shut them down.'

I think about the flat. How hard would it be to find her, to put two and two together?

'You own your place?'

'Rent. Chose it for the location – I've got pics, but *you* need to say you took them.'

My phone pings and I pull over.

A message from Pete: *Weird. Chief Super's on the board of Davis Holdings.*

It's like he's punched me, and I'm back with the chairs and who sits in them.

Focus.

I turn to Hughes. 'Why the fake call-in last night? And even then, couldn't you have told us about the lamppost switch?'

'Marky broke the bulb. We wanted to see if you'd look ... really look. Show us you weren't bent. It's got to come from you. Those men? In

that room their faces are just black holes, but I can make them out from my bathroom. Recognize all of them.'

Her voice drops to a choked whisper, on the cusp of a reveal. 'Senior politicians, a chat-show host, a borough councillor who spends more time on the TV and Twitter than in his office—'

'Okay, so—'

'And your boss ... the big cheese. It'll be their word against ours – a couple of pissed-off stoners with an identity crisis versus the establishment. Now do you see why?'

Unfortunately, I do.

And, Christ, do I have my work cut out for me.