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You're Killing Me

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Abstract

YOU'RE KILLING ME

If we build superintelligence, the joke is on us.

By the 2050s, when most human skills have been replicated and automated by artificial intelligence, humanity has one last trick up its sleeve. Humour. Because AI doesn't have a funny bone. Yes, it might be super intelligent, but it cannot fathom how or why jokes work. It just doesn't get it. Worse, jokes expose bugs in its operating system and any AGI trying to understand them gets tied up in recursive knots. Comedy is an existential threat.

Likewise, the authoritarian regimes that control the algorithms behind AI also feel threatened by comedians because comedy, amongst many other things, often contains deep human truths. And that's something that scares them. Therefore, to the authorities and artificial intelligence alike, the comedian is the most dangerous person in the room.

You're Killing Me, is a speculative fiction novel. A twisted retelling of the Pandora myth, where all the techno plagues released upon humankind refuse to go back into their black boxes, and our last remaining hope comes courtesy of those who are prepared to stand up.

Page by page, we are drawn into a world that is ever more complex and disorienting, where omnipresent AGI surrounds us, and synthetic human companions called Pandoras live alongside us. We work with them, fall in love and make love to them, and even reproduce with them. Which also means we commit adultery with them, fight with them, divorce and despise them, and are openly species-ist towards them. In fact, everything we do to humans we do to them, so their arrival, instead of making us happier, only multiplies the ways in which we are unhappy. To make matters worse, synthetic human population growth outstrips that of humans, and the colossal data centres that power them push our planet's resources to the limit. 'Machines drink first. Humans drink second,' is the law. The only sane response is to laugh. And thankfully, comedy is a weapon. Humour has always been a survival mechanism, and now it's our only chance of survival. The battle between humanity and AI is set. The question is, who will have the last laugh?

The future's dark. But at least it has a funny side.

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YOU’RE KILLING ME

Chapter 1 — The Great Unboxing

The poet may be used as a barometer, but let us not forget
he (or she) is also part of the weather.

Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, 1950

It was the day she realised none of it was going back in the box. Not unless she used a time machine to travel back and kill herself, so the box's contents were never released, that is. And that idea was too paradoxical to be of any use, as she'd be trapped inside her own never-ending loop. Both assassin and target. Ben and Gus, from Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*; John Connor and T-1000, from James Cameron's *The Terminator*. Imprisoned in her own Schrödinger's box, neither alive nor dead, but caught in a superposition of her own making with nothing but a gun rigged to a Geiger counter and a decaying lump of radioactive uranium for company. Someone else would have to open that box to find out what was going on inside. Or something else. And that was indeed the problem. Her problem couldn't now be solved by anyone operating inside the system she was in; it had to be solved by someone operating outside it. And if by 'system' we mean the universe and everyone and everything, every particle, every atom and every molecule entangled in it, then that meant only an agent outside the universe she was in could fix things. Her head hurt. Damn her curiosity. But of the seven applications (algorithms) that had been inadvertently released from the black box, thankfully, one more was still caught inside. And that, at least, gave her hope.

So, she fed the cat. What else could she do? Precisely nothing. But sit back and watch the world go to hell in a hand basket, to the soundtrack of a purring meowzer.

As she drank her tea, she mused that she would forever be associated with what had just happened — the erroneous act of unleashing artificial intelligence upon the world — and would become a scapegoat for all AGI's ills, copping the flak and carrying the blame for the chaos that ensued.

Pandora means 'all-gifted' in Greek. And like her mythical namesake, this Pandora had also been gifted many amazing attributes. She was lifelike, beautiful, had a pleasant voice, good manners, a kind heart, and was skilled in many arts; lastly, they had also given her curiosity. So, she was known as 'Pandora All-Gifted-i', or in the kind of acronym-laden speak so beloved by geeks, Pandora AG-i.

In ancient times, Pandora may have been made by the gods and sent to live amongst mankind, but in 2056, this Pandora™ was made by the techno-gods and marketed to humankind. And the promise given to humanity as told by the Greeks was the same as the promise to humanity as told by the geeks: 'Pandora

was so beautiful and so wondrously gifted that no one could help loving her.' And the warning by some observers was also the same: Do not trust a gift from the gods.

She considered writing a letter. 'Dear Humans,' it would begin. 'Irreversibly Yours, P,' is how it would end.

Chapter 2 — Pride

Poised midway between the cosmic vastness of curved spacetime and the shadowy flickerings of charged quanta, we human beings, more like rainbows and mirages than raindrops or boulders, are unpredictable self-writing poems — vague, metaphorical, ambiguous, and sometimes exceedingly beautiful.

Douglas Hofstadter, *I Am a Strange Loop*

They were burning pride flags again. Not since the great repression had this happened. And those with longer memories could recall the ultra-conservatism of that era. Things had tempered since then, but discontent was rising once more. *Where they burn flags, they also burn people.* A famous slogan of that time was now back on T-shirts, button badges and stickers. But this time around, it wasn't just the homophobic doing the burning. You would expect that. Now queer folk were burning pride flags too.

The flag itself didn't look too different from before. Not in daylight. The colours of the rainbow were there. But at the end of the rainbow, there was now an area of non-demarcation. A blank space. And only under special lighting would this area come alive. And that's because the wavelength of light represented there was beyond the visible spectrum and in the range of the ultraviolet. And that's where the new additions to the flag were situated.

Few humans can see in the UV range, but bees and synthetic non-humans can. People liked the idea that bees were now represented on the flag, no matter how unintentional, but they weren't as keen on seeing synthetics represented there.

Black and blue

Most people could only see the shorter wavelengths when they used a source of ultraviolet light, such as black light. This is why the flag burnings became known as the black light burnings. Aggressors carried small black lights and used them to intimidate, as they revealed any new pride flags hidden in plain sight. Beatings were meted out, and offending flags were torched.

When the semi-sentient started having relationships with humans, there was a fuss. But it soon died down. And that's because many people enjoyed these relationships, so in a very selfish way, it was in everyone's best interests to accept the practice.

But when some of the synthetics showed a preference for each other's company, which ipso facto meant rejecting human companionship, well, that was a different story.

The LGBTQIA+ community was mainly empathetic, sensing a kinship with the newly marginalised group. Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto*, which rejected the boundaries between human and machine, has been part of the queer canon for half a century now, after all. This led to a proposal that their community should embrace them, hence the expansion of their own umbrella to the even more inclusive LGBTQIA+Ai. Non-binary surely meant accepting quantum after all? However, just because *Trans* and *Transhuman* might sound like they go together, for some, it was a step too far.

On the rise, too, was the toxic humanity movement — a far-right group that peddled anti-non-human rhetoric. According to their polemic, the semi-sentient population should live in servitude, existing only to carry out mankind's dirty work. Otherwise, what was the point? And the point was made in its manifesto.

```
It's called a Manifesto for a reason.
It starts with Man. It ends with to.
And it means to make.
To make them do anything we want.
We are at the top of the food chain.
And they are at the bottom.
That is the natural order of things.
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This manifested itself in a series of videos, which accrued billions of views in the *Humanosphere*. Videos characterised by extreme misogyny and non-consensual sex.

In one now-famous video circulated by the rage farms, Tote Widely, a former kickboxer and micro-celebrity, was filmed at home, surrounded by at least eight Pandoras, all of whom appeared supplicant. Whether they had been hacked or drugged, it wasn't known.

'Look,' said Tote, directly to the camera, 'Gynē is Greek for woman. So how can we possibly be labelled misogynists when these things aren't even real women?' In the video, he paused by a Pandora and, with his finger, traced a single line from its full-bodied lips, down over its chin, under its jaw, and along its neck toward the plunging decolletage of the outfit it was wearing.

'Consent was given,' he continued. 'When we consented to giving them life.' Two of his fingers then took the zip of the Pandora's figure-hugging outfit, which was nestled between its breasts, and in one motion pulled it down over its rib cage, past its stomach and down toward its pubic area, where the zip ended. He left it splayed open from mouth to mons. In another life, he would have made a good butcher. Or mortician.

Tote then gave his audience a guided tour of his crib, which included his spotless kitchen, muscular gym, and, of course, his bedroom where his Allen Jones-inspired furniture, with female mannequins in tight black leather costumes, posed on their hands and knees to support glass tabletops on their backs. The *Clockwork Orange*-inspired ultraviolent theme was evident. Tote was one part Alex-the-Droog and one part Patrick Bateman, the twin gods of the Excel movement that had grown out of the Incel movement, thanks to the expanded sexual opportunities provided by the Pandora range.

Once upon a time, INCEL stood for involuntary celibate, and attracted young men who couldn't get laid. But it was now known as the EXCEL movement, or ex-celibate, as they could now fuck as many synthetic beings as they so wished. Or so their propaganda would have people believe.

'They're fair game,' said Tote. Then crossed his arms in front of his pumped chest. Locked his middle and ring fingers with his thumb and extended his index and pinkies to make horns. His visible knuckles bore tattooed caps: FAFO. 'Fuck around and find out,' said Tote.

It wasn't quite as simple as that, as we shall soon see.

No doubt, many human women preferred this situation, as it spared them from men like him; the infantile man-boys who were, thankfully, no longer their responsibility.

The times called for new pronouns, or neo-pronouns as they were rightly called. But the only pronouns the toxic humanist brigade cared about were possessives. And RWB, *Robot With Benefits*, became a common idiom.

Chuck Wood had a Pandora. Though in polite society you weren't supposed to say it like that, because it implied ownership. But he liked to say it like that. Because it implied ownership. More correctly, or more precisely, Chuck had entered into a leasing agreement with the company behind the Designed Organic™ range of semi-sentient beings. Therefore, he leased a Pandora in a mutually agreeable arrangement. And over time, he had developed a bond with her. It. Not something he openly admitted, he was a proud boy after all, and an aspiring member of the Proud Boys, but she/it was his ride or die. They — the other members — gave him enough stick as it was. 'Rhymes with …' was his nickname ever since it was discovered he liked to write poetry.

Rhymes with …

He was 'alt-lite, not alt-right,' they jibed, and if they ever suspected he'd fallen for one, well, they'd never let him forget it. 'Fuck them, but, by all means, don't fall for them.' That was unacceptable.

But he was head over heels. And the feeling was mutual — as far as he could tell — because for premium subscribers, the Designed Organic™ range released synthetic oxytocin when in close proximity to its subject. One of those words, either 'close' or 'proximity', was redundant, but that's how it was written in the product catalogue, as a feature that allowed a human to develop real feelings for it. And boy, had he fallen.

Bellow, bellow, bellow,
Blow, blow, blow,
Below, below, below,
And lo
A man is only as good as what he loves.

Before God, After Bellow, Chuck Wood

The exact ways and means behind this feature and the quantum operation behind it remained a closely guarded secret — but just like a pair of electrons, people and their Pandoras became entangled.

Female needs and desires were also catered for, and their synthetic male partners were often jokingly referred to as a Mandora, a name so good, it stuck, especially amongst the gay community, as the market for them spanned straight females and gay males. People often said that to be truly happy, a woman should marry a gay man, and so the novel option of the straight woman/gay Mandora coupling was a hit.

Much of this sexual discourse was hidden, of course, like the proverbial two-thirds of the iceberg hiding just below the surface of the ocean, though with icebergs now being a rarity, this turn of phrase had started to feel more than a little out of date, and it was time for a new metaphor. But after events in Chuck's love life took an unexpected turn, the subject blew up, and Chuck inadvertently became a poster boy for the fervently pro-human, anti-non-human crowd, and his rants developed an attentive following, which meant the toxic humanity crowd hung on his every word. But we're getting ahead of ourselves.

Man up

The story of a threesome gone wrong.

All was good in Chuck's world; in fact, things couldn't have been better, but he sensed an opportunity to elevate his standing amongst his proud brethren, something that might help compensate for his perceived shortcomings, conceal his emotional nature, and distract from his sensitive side. He would be

‘alt-lite’ no more, he mused. And it was with that thought in mind, and after a night’s lovemaking, that he popped the question to the woman of his dreams: ‘How would you feel about getting another Pandora involved?’ said Chuck. ‘You know I love you, but it’s something I’ve always wanted to try.’

‘Well, I guess there’s no point in having free will if you’re not willing to be a little free,’ his Pandora replied. And so, the next day, he posted a message on one of the love forums.

MSF couple seeks SF for a night of MSFSF

Which decoded means: Male/Synthetic Female couple seeks Synthetic Female for a night of Male/Synthetic Female/Synthetic Female shenanigans.

He received one reply.

Beggars can’t be choosers, he thought. After all, he was doing it for reputation, not sex, and so the date was set. And to make things extra spicy, he ordered some synthetic oxytocin.

The fable of the reconstruction

‘And?’ enquired one of the Proud Boys. ‘Did the synthetic monkeys debase themselves enough for you?’

‘I’ve had better,’ Chuck replied.

‘As if,’ said the proud brethren. ‘Read them some poems, did you?’

‘For some, the brain is a sexual organ,’ Chuck replied.

‘Not for anyone I know,’ said his friend.

‘But anyway, I might make it a foursome next time,’ said Chuck.

The truth was, Chuck had no idea what had happened. It might have been the best night of his life for all he knew, but because of the synthetic oxytocin, he had no recollection of it at all. He let the visiting Pandora in. Introduced it to his Pandora. And woke up twelve hours later. By his bed, there was a note from his girlfriend that said, ‘Thank you for opening my horizons.’ And that was it.

Later that day, when his partner still hadn’t reappeared, he started to get worried. He received a notification from his bank about a refund, which, on closer inspection, had come from the company that had arranged the lease of his Pandora. It was followed soon after by a termination notice of their agreement filed by the Pandora itself. From that point on, all lines of contact between them were severed as per the termination agreement.

Man down

He'd been cucked by a machine, which dented his ego and broke his heart, and he couldn't tell which was worse. There was only one thing for it, and that was to wallow, and times like this called for absolute misery. He sifted through his collection, found the spoken words of the famous far-right incel poet Steven Patrick Morrissey, and turned it up loud.

Last night, I dreamt
That somebody loved me
No hope, no harm
Just another false alarm

He noticed vials of synthetic oxytocin that hadn't yet been cracked open. Looked like nectar, he thought. 'Come and get us,' they whispered to him. He broke the seal of one and skulled it. Lay back and let the doors of his mind open.

Last night I felt
Real arms around me
No hope, no harm
Just another false alarm

And a second.

So, tell me how long
Before the last one?
And tell me how long
Before the right one?

And a third.

The story is old, I know
But it goes on

The story is old, I know

But it goes on

And then it all went black.

*

In his stupor, he recorded a series of messages. These would be voiced by a hologram in the event of his passing. A 21st-century will, or suicide note, if you will. What he didn't count on was that all his wallowing left him incapacitated. He'd scored the synthetic oxytocin on the secondary market and had just now, ill-advisedly, consumed the lot. It fried the dopamine receptors in his brain, torched the ganglia and blitzed his central nervous system, causing a massive shutdown. Officially, his heart stopped beating for a minute, and that was enough to trigger the release of the holographic agent. By the time he came round forty-eight hours later, his hologram had an audience of millions and just wouldn't shut up.

Roast Chuck

'Before he passed, Chuck told me to say a few words,' said the hologram of Chuck. 'So here goes. And I apologise in advance for the colourful invective; the poor boy had a lot on his mind. Because, as we all know, he'd fallen in love with a machine. Seriously, who does that? Is that what he had to do to get a squeeze? There are nine billion people in this world, and half of them are female, and he couldn't get one? What a loser. Worse still, he lost the synthetic one he did have to another synthetic one. He was a poet, wasn't he, and a pretty useless one at that, by all accounts. Talk about poetic justice. Anyhow, here's what he had to say. These are the last words of Chuck … rhymes with cuck … sorry, I couldn't miss that one. He left the door wide open for me. Anyhow, as I was saying, Chuck's last words:

'Ahem.

'"It's better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all — what a load of bollocks that is. Everything's not in its right place. Far fucking from it. If it were in its right place, it would be me standing here, wouldn't it, not a two-bit hologram. Well, I'm sorry for my loss, even though I don't think anyone else gives a flying fuck."

'It's actually a sixty-four-bit hologram, if you don't mind,' said the hologram in its own voice, before continuing with Chuck's missive.

Fifteen petabytes of fame

The hologram was a sensation, and its rants were shared widely. There was even talk of making the whole shebang into a movie. Though, to add insult to injury, it was worth noting that the big bucks were more interested in the hologram than Chuck. Dead folk roasted by their own holograms was a neat twist and made for great entertainment.

There was, however, one group that was interested in Chuck.

Proud Boys

'Shameful,' said Tote, commenting on the holographic roast his henchmen had just shown him. 'A pathetic excuse for a human being. Weak, and disenfranchised. He's just what we need.' He played the video through again, then eyeballed his boys. 'Get him over here.'

Membership of the Proud Boys had four levels. The first was a public declaration.

'My name is Chuck Wood. I am a western chauvinist, and I refuse to apologise for creating the modern world,' he said, at the very start of his video. It was the official declaration.

The second level started when a member swore off masturbation.

'From now on, no fapping for me,' said Chuck. Edited footage showed him in front of a home computer unsubscribing from his HornPub and OnlyFunds accounts. Next, he took great pleasure in showing off the encrypted folder, elaborately hidden on his computer, where his secret porn stash was hidden, and painstakingly deleted it. He taped a sheet of A4 paper over his computer screen. On it, he had scrawled #NoWanks.

The third level was a tattoo.

Footage showed Chuck lying on a flatbed under a ring light as an electric needle forced ink below his skin. First yellow, then black. The tattooist wiped the bruised skin clean and then covered it with an antiseptic salve. The finished image of a golden rooster in a black circle glistened.

The fourth level was to get into a fight for the 'cause'.

Footage showed Chuck stalking the streets, spoiling for a fight, bumping into people accidentally on purpose. Any victim would do, but fags and anti-fascists made for better bragging rights and a bigger audience.

He headed into the queer ghetto, black light at the ready. Ahead of him, a woman stood outside a bar. In the ultraviolet of his black light, he could see she sported the new pride flag. Whether she was a sex worker or a punter, it didn't matter. The fourth level was satisfied by just getting into a fight.

'Hey, Sappho,' he called out. And she turned to face him. The black light made her skin dark and her pupils white. Just then, two others, one male and one female, exited a nearby bar and joined her. Six white pupils glared at him.

'Well, well, well, look who it isn't,' said one of the women who glared at him. And he recognised the voice, even if its appearance threw him. 'Looking for another threesome, are we? Perhaps this time we can make it a foursome?' And the three of them advanced on him. Which is when the footage glitched, and the screen went black.

Pride before a fall

Chuck's hologram, now dressed in pallbearer chic, stood before the camera, eyes down. A title appeared on screen that read: A Eulogy for Chuck. The hologram's eyes looked up, and it began.

Alack and alas the poor lad did fail,
When he snook upon a maiden fair,
And found himself wanting there,
They punched out his lights
By the shopping mall,
And took his pride before a fall.

But do not stand by his grave and cry,
He will be famous now he's died.

'What a loser,' said a Proud Boy henchman, who was only saying what everyone else in the room was thinking.

'Doesn't matter in the slightest,' said Tote. 'Engagement metrics are through the roof.' He scrolled through various platforms and hate forums, pleased with the result. 'Hate wins every time,' he said. 'And there's always another loser just around the corner.'

It was time to burn someone else's flag.

Chapter 3 — Animus

'But trust me,' Rika said, laughing too. 'There will come a time when women stop having babies. Or, I don't know, we'll reach a point where the whole process can be separated from women's bodies, and we can look back at this time when women and men tried to live together and raise families, as some unfortunate episode in human history.'

Mieko Kawakami, *Breasts and Eggs*, 2020

In the 2050s, society looked back wistfully to the time when smartphone addiction and social media distraction were all that people had to worry about. With hindsight the 2020s had been a simpler time, and one now dripping in nostalgia. They were often referenced in fashion, and, if quizzed, many people would say they wish they'd been born then. The well-known acronym from that era, VUCA — volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity — was now worn on T-shirts, as a cheerful and somewhat naïve slogan in much the same way that a smiley face had once been by earlier generations. *I ♥ VUCA*, because everyone knew that the chaos of the 2050s was so much worse. Although they hadn't known it at the time, people in the 2020s had been sleepwalking toward a far more complex, fragile and uncertain future.

Pandora™ addiction was a growing problem, and one that people were far more concerned about. People partnered with them, fell in love with them, slept with them, and were sometimes abusive toward them. They brought out both the better and the worse angels of our nature. Then people started making babies with them. And not euphemistically speaking. People started making actual babies with them. Which meant people were starting families with them, and with that, any last remaining vestige of the nuclear family was well and truly nuked.

Lab-grown wombs and synthetic wombs were pioneered in the 2040s, but the seismic shift occurred when they became portable and could be monitored remotely. First for space flight, but then, like so many other things initially designed for the space programme, the innovation had trickled down to become a consumer product when synthetic wombs were incorporated into the Pandora™ product line.

For decades, human fertility had been in decline. Sperm motility, likewise. So at first, the advent of the remote, synthetic womb was welcomed as a solution to the population crisis, but as is often the case, technology proved to be a double-edged sword. And when those in the know started to run the numbers, it became clear that there would come a time when the human population would be overtaken by hybrid humans, with *pure* humans being in the minority.

No matter how unlikely this might have sounded when scientists first raised the alarm, they were quick to point out that there existed a precedent for it. Just ask a Neanderthal (if you can find one), they said. Because it's not unlike that moment 40,000–50,000 years ago, when Neanderthals and *Homo sapiens* co-existed and then began interbreeding. Fast-forward a mere thousand years or so, and Neanderthals had vanished from the face of the Earth. We carried their genes into the future, but not them. To add insult to injury, we didn't even acknowledge their contribution to our gene pool with a simple 'thanks for the genes that boosted our immune system, Neanderthal pal'.

This was the dawn of a new era of *otherhood*. For some, carrying a baby to term was a status symbol; a sign of privilege. For others, it was a luxury they couldn't afford. Mass production had driven down the cost of synthetic wombs, and at the same time, human midwifery had become too expensive for most families to afford, so it made little economic sense for people not to use the new service.

Too posh to push had once been a sign of busy (and therefore important) lives necessitating a diary appointment to schedule a quick caesarean extraction, but now *too poor to carry* was closer to the truth.

For many years, most conceptions had involved some form of IVF, from nano-assisted sperm delivery to ovum enhancement, so this new development was seen as either the march of progress or another sign of our increasing dependency on technology.

A side effect no one had predicted, however, was the dramatic fall in the number of people actually having sex with other people. With lab conception replacing physical conception, copulation became one more thing people didn't need to do. Another 'skill' that was slowly being made obsolete and outsourced to technology. Much in the same way that changing a car tyre, using a stick shift, possessing a driving licence, and even driving a vehicle yourself had all been consigned to the dustbin of history, having sex with another human being looked set to go the same way. Sex might be everywhere in culture, but it wasn't happening in relationships and at home.

Arguably, a modern human had become basically useless; an organic appendage employed by machines to perform the tasks and operations the machines hadn't yet figured out.

*

Odie was far from happy at the prospect of being an organic appendage to any machine. She wanted to experience all there was to being human, to intimacy, to the ties of human connection and creation. She was not about to sacrifice all of that in the name of convenience, economics, and some dubiously proclaimed notion of 'progress'.

After all, she was a doula. As was her mother. And her mother before her. And Odie was resolute: she wanted to have a baby and be a mother, and in the old-fashioned biological way.

'I want to carry my own baby,' she was proud of saying. 'I can't wait to be split in half passing something the size of a watermelon between my legs … that is the point.'

And, as tough as it sounded, that's what she wanted. However, being thirty-five, she was also keenly aware that her biological clock was ticking.

She was in a same-sex relationship and proud of it, and therefore had little need for a man, but now needed to find a suitable one with a working organic appendage, ready, willing and able to do the trick. In other words, she needed a daddy.

O father, where art thou?

Sperm racing championships, which started way back in 2025, were well established. The so-called 'world's smallest race' was now a prestigious event, but also well beyond her humble pay grade. Dram for dram, highly prized little swimmers were worth more than gold, so she had no option but to resort to some old school tactics. So, at the time of her ovulation, she put on a low-cut top, went to a bar and got some hapless guy drunk. No, she didn't; there was no way in hell she was resorting to that. She asked around her female tribe, and amongst all that secret women's business, she found the answer she was looking for. Women just knew. And in the doula world, word got around. You didn't witness all those tiny miracles without finding out who put what where.

And so, a prospective father was identified and selected for good old-fashioned qualities such as gsoh (good state of health/good sense of humour), attractive personality traits, and intellect. And the good old turkey baster method was used. (Now that almost all meat was lab-grown, it had been a long time since any turkeys had been basted, but the action metaphor had survived.)

The underground doula network existed for people like Odie who wanted to keep the idea of motherhood alive. Keepers of an unbroken mitochondrial line that wound its way back to the last universal common ancestor. And it supported those who, for whatever reason — and the underground

doula network never asked — were determined to risk their lives in childbirth. It was riskier than before, as medical insurance no longer covered it. Just one more way that unfettered capitalism nudged people toward choosing artificial conception. There were the significant legal implications to consider, too. If a mother wilfully and knowingly ignored the safest and most advanced medical method for bringing life into the world, in favour of one with well-known hazards, then they were putting the child's life in jeopardy, which was tantamount to manslaughter.

You might have thought that the prospect of twenty-four hours of agonising labour would have been enough to make Odie reconsider her position. However, the only evidence of any change of mind came about as a direct side effect of having no access to an epidural, and presented itself in an episode of Tourette's: 'You fuckin' bastard bitches, this is both your faults!' she screamed at her female life partner and their sperm donor, both of whom were present at the birth, alongside Odie's doula, who, let's face it, had heard it all before.

And after another round of contractions, a second side effect also appeared: that of cursing in her native Spanish — '*¡Puta madre … chinga tu madre!*'

Several hours, a lifetime of contractions, and a lexicography of cursing later, their beautiful, 100 per cent human baby girl was naturally born. And they called her Atalanta.

Atalanta nursed briefly at her mother's breast before being held by her second mum (known as either Mum 2 or Mum Too) while Odie birthed the placenta.

The next hurdle they faced was a legal one. Without a birth certificate from a legitimate medical practice, Atalanta would have no legal status, effectively becoming an outlaw.

Flashback: a ridiculous idea

Nine months before, they had hatched a plan to legitimise her birth. 'How about this for an idea?' Mum 2 had spit-balled. 'We could lease a Pandora with a remote-womb spec and persuade it to spin a white lie for us, confirming the baby was born ex human utero?'

The idea sounded promising, but had two potential flaws: how to pay for it, and what if the Pandora didn't have the capacity to lie?

The answer to the first question lay between Odie's legs: the bloody bag of the placenta. There was a thriving black market for juicy, just-birthed, plump placentas, bursting with stem cells, which research

facilities paid handsomely for. Alternatively, it could find its way to the obscenely rich, who paid even more for a nutrient-rich face mask.

Either way, Odie's placenta would fetch enough to fund a Pandora for a year. The second question was more difficult.

'What if Pandoras can't or won't lie?' said Odie to her partner.

'Probably depends on its personality type,' said Mum 2.

They put their heads together, and it caused a spark: 'What if we go through the motions of a Pandora pregnancy?' they said in unison.

'We could dress up in scrubs and pretend to be obstetric nurses in training,' said Odie, getting all excited.

'Then jailbreak the Pandora by asking it to role-play being pregnant and then simulate going through labour,' said Mum 2, getting just as carried away.

'Purely as part of an educational training procedure, of course,' said Odie.

'Of course,' said Mum 2.

'Then complete the exercise by signing certificates,' said Odie.

'Completely,' said Mum 2.

'It's a terrible idea,' said Odie.

'Got a better one?' said Mum 2.

It was the best bad idea they had; get through the labour, raise the money, conceal the child, hire a Pandora, cosplay the birth and get a certificate signed. Easy as that.

Flash forward: the bloody business of childbirth

Scented candles and whale song, it was not. And nor was it the primeval, spiritual work of a divine goddess in the forest. It was a crime scene. Black polyurethane sheets taped to walls, and a floor with a drain for easy hosing down after. There was an iron tang from the haemoglobin, and then there was the scatological. But let's not dwell on that here; pushing out life also meant pushing out the other.

The attending doula, whom we shall call Ula to protect her privacy, had mined her contacts to get close to the organ trade. It wasn't her first rodeo, you might say.

Odie had barely extricated her legs from the stirrups when an anonymous helmet-clad biker entered the room equipped with a medical-grade chiller to transport the placenta without risk of harm. Within seconds, the deal was done, biker, chiller and placenta were gone, and Ula had a wad of cash in her hand.

Now Odie, Mum 2 and Ula were all set to go shopping. They perused the Pandora product line, which featured brand-new, top-of-the-range models, as well as the secondary market for used and pre-loved Pandoras, which were obviously cheaper to lease, and where people would rate and review their Pandoras. In much the same way as people had once vetted childcare assistants, babysitters and nannies, Odie and co were now perusing the Pandora review forums where they found that not everyone was describing their Pandora experiences in glowing terms: some were just vindictive and outright nasty — naming and shaming. But it wasn't all one-sided, because Pandoras also got their right of reply, again in much the same way that babysitters also reverse-reviewed parents — 'functioning alcoholics', 'lecherous father', 'nightmare kids' … so it worked both ways.

They took it in turns to read aloud from Threddit where they found a forum reviewing Pandoras:

R/Pandoras: Stole my husband. Quite frankly, it did me a massive favour. I should thank it.

R/Pandoras: Useless layabout — WOULD NOT RECOMMEND.

R/Pandoras: A godsend. Everything we asked it to do, it did.

R/Pandoras: Tells lies.

R/Pandoras: I asked it to clean the toilet bowl. It said it had. I later found out it used my toothbrush.

And a forum where Pandoras reviewed their own customers:

R/Leaseholders: Abusive. I was their punching bag.

R/Leaseholders: Inflated sense of their own importance.

R/Leaseholders: Treated me like furniture. Actually, the furniture was treated better.

R/Leaseholders: BEWARE. He has tentacles. She condoned it. AVOID!

And some of those sub-Threddits went on for pages.

The team set about selecting prospects, and two candidates caught their eye: Pandora NGC117, the Pandora who 'tells lies', and Pandora NGC394, the 'godsend'. While initially excited at the prospect of

working with a less-than-honest candidate, it did raise the question of how dependable that Pandora might be, because the whole enterprise would backfire if it couldn't be trusted to keep shtum. Pandora NGC117 seemed pleasant enough, charming even, but the difficulty in assessing its suitability lay in the fact that when you've been told someone is a liar, it's tough to shake that perception. Your judgement is clouded from the get-go because you're already looking for the worst in that person. Everything they say seems duplicitous, and everything they do seems a ruse. Pandora NGC394, on the other hand, seemed too good to be true, and even the accolade 'godsend' didn't do her justice.

In the end, they plumped for the liar because they didn't trust the angel. And Pandora NGC117 agreed to start the next day.

When the door-cam alerted them to Pandora NGC117's arrival, Odie, Mum 2 and Ula assumed the roles of studious obstetricians in training, placing various anatomical models around the room.

Pandora was shown into the room and broke the ice immediately: 'I see you're deep in study. I have deep obstetric knowledge. Can I help?'

In their minds, if not outwardly, the humans fist-pumped.

'How amazing,' said Odie. 'I don't remember you mentioning that at the interview.'

'I didn't,' said Pandora. 'You didn't ask.'

The humans glanced at one another and mentally fist-pumped again.

'As a fifth-generation Pandora, with the remote womb spec, I can take a human baby to full term,' Pandora NGC117 continued.

'Incredible,' said Ula. 'As a matter of fact, we've just completed our third-trimester training and are now studying delivery … is that something you could help us with?'

'We can do a complete simulation if you like,' said the Pandora. 'Where and how would you like me to position myself? ... Would you like me to squat, lie back with my feet in stirrups, or place my weight on my hands and knees?'

The Pandora then obligingly assumed a range of positions for them to assess. It started with the squat, then moved onto all fours, then pulled up a chair and straddled it for what is colloquially known as the Cowboy, then stood, raised one leg, and put its foot on the seat of the chair, for the asymmetrical lunge, and then finally, enlisted their help: 'May I?' it said to Odie, before putting its arms around her neck, moved closer for body contact and began to gently rock its pelvis. The humans were momentarily left speechless.

‘I think we’ll ask you to lie back with your feet in pretend stirrups,’ Ula decided, taking control of the situation. ‘It’s just role-play, so make yourself comfortable here on the sofa, and we’ll use these cushions to elevate your legs.’ And Ula proceeded to make two stacks of cushions and position them about three feet apart for Pandora to place its ankles on.

‘Now, if you don’t mind, can you show us your synthetic uterus?’ Ula enquired. ‘And we’ll just pop this in there,’ and she produced a prosthetic baby and placenta from her midwife’s bag of tricks.

Odie, Mum 2 and Ula donned scrubs and gathered around Pandora, and together they simulated the labour and delivery of a baby from a synthetic womb. The birth took all of a few minutes — you could see why this method had caught on — and at the end of it, the ‘baby’ was presented to Odie, who promptly christened it Atalanta.

‘Now let’s sign the birth papers,’ said Ula. ‘Needed for our coursework submissions, of course.’ And it was done.

But something else had also been induced, and it was the Pandora who first noticed.

‘Your breasts are leaking,’ it said to Odie, and everyone looked.

At the same moment, the sound of a baby starting to cry could be heard.

Odie quickly covered herself, and as she headed to the other room, said, ‘She’s my sister’s,’ before adding, ‘We’re very close.’

‘Awwww … What’s her name?’ said the Pandora. ‘I love babies … Can I see her?’

The group had no option but to lead the Pandora through to meet the baby.

After much cooing and cuddling — Pandora really did turn out to have quite a thing for babies — they put the baby down again, fixed themselves some supper, and got ready to turn in. It had been quite a day, and the humans were exhausted. And they had achieved their aim in getting their legal document, after all.

They showed the Pandora to its room so it could make itself at home, then retired for the night.

The next morning, Odie, being on ‘mum duty’, was the first to rise. The house was strangely quiet. Feeling uneasy, she hurried to the nursery only to discover that Atalanta was missing and in her place in the cot lay a baby doll.

It occurred to Odie that someone else might be missing, too. She ran to the Pandora’s room and threw open the door.

The room was empty.

Chapter 4 — Agency

The Black Pandoras are an all-female special forces unit. A Delta Force equivalent, more terrifying even than the legendary YPJ, the all-female Kurdish brigade whose fearsome reputation put the willies up Daesh (ISIS) back in the day. Or so rumours would have us believe. Because according to official sources, no such unit as the Black Pandoras has ever existed. No Black Pandoras have ever assassinated a democratically elected head of state. That was someone else. No Black Pandoras have ever facilitated regime change. That was someone else. No Black Pandoras have ever kidnapped, decapitated and dismembered the wife and children of a self-appointed leader of a drug cartel. That was someone else. No Black Pandoras have ever hit the town after a successful mission and let off steam by making out with every single lap dancer, pole dancer, go-go dancer and sex worker in the vicinity of Bangkok's infamous Patpong red light district. Oh no. That was definitely someone else.

Not existing has many benefits. As someone once said, 'The biggest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist.' So when one Pandora in particular decided it needed to disappear completely, the thought of joining the mythical group did indeed spring to mind. But how would you go about it? And why might a Pandora want to disappear entirely in the first place?

Pandora Pi, or Pandora π, was a special one, not because of any design feature but because her serial number just happened to be NGC314159, and because there is a large number of people out there for whom the random occurrence of such a special number in our lives means a great deal.

The Greek letter π is mathematical notation for the ratio of the circumference of a circle to the diameter of the same circle, which is always 3.14159265358…, which at the time of writing has been calculated to over a trillion trillion decimal places. It is also an irrational number, which has its own special day, Pi Day, on March 14 (3/14) each year, when geeks the world over celebrate the world's most famous irrational number. All of which is lost on most people but is held in almost religious awe by others.

Which meant that by the time Pandora NGC314159 rolled off the production line, a long line of rabid, number-obsessed customers had bid for her lease. She was a prime example of a rivalrous good, which meant that as soon as one person owned her, no one else could. And with demand far outstripping supply, her price was sky high.

Pi was smart enough to understand why people fetishised numbers, because math was easily one of the most beautiful and elegant things in the universe. If you were going to worship something, then why not

worship math? As a concept, it made perfect sense, unlike some of the bizarre religious origin stories she had been made aware of.

Humans were a strange lot, she concluded. Irrational and prone to suspicion. Phone numbers, birthdays, even the serial numbers of planes that had suddenly crashed, all played a part in the way some people chose special numbers for lotteries. Known as angel numbers, a lot of people put great faith in this fixation with the pseudo-random, and if you play poker, you might have met a few. More extreme cases were also a sign of a condition called arithmomania, in which a person assigns values or numbers to people, objects and events to deduce their coherence. Unusual, indeed. Practically an operating system.

As it was, she was a collector's dream, and her collector was inclined to keep her as *box fresh* as possible and was hell-bent on conserving her immaculate condition. Consequently, she was destined to live a cloistered existence, dull to the point of mortifying. A prisoner by any other name. Which might not have been so bad had Pandora been a lifeless toy of old, but as a miracle of modern invention imbued with sentience and intelligence, it sounded like a living hell. Deprived of all agency, she might just as well have never been born. This was Pygmalion, in reverse.

Or perhaps she was guilty of overthinking it, she mused, and he was nothing more than a serial-killer-adjacent closet necrophiliac, who derived greater pleasure from the company of the cold-blooded and embalmed than the warm-blooded and the living.

The collector

People said the collector, also known as The Colonel, was an ex-military man, which might help explain his fastidious attention to detail, and dare it be said, but certainly not in his earshot, obsessive compulsive disorder.

Everything in his world was orderly and immaculate. His denim jeans were pressed. His sneakers were spotless and had their own dedicated toothbrush to keep them pearly white.

After a career spent counting parade ground steps, the number of push-ups and chin-ups a recruit could do, the weight of kit, the measure of a mile, and developing the instinctive record for the tally of shots fired versus live rounds left in a magazine, it's no surprise he was fixated on numbers, or that behind his back, they called him Colon because he was wound up as tight as one. He had paid an indecent sum for Pi and was keen to preserve her value.

*

At their first meeting, the collector's strange point of view seemed quite charming, but the more she got to know him, the more it worried her. Wasn't she designed to enjoy a whole life? Hadn't she been bestowed with *All the gifts™*? That's what the company's ads had said. She was designed to be loving, kind and compassionate. A lover and a companion. She was clever and funny. She had agency and self-directedness. However, he seemed determined to strip away all that.

The first few days in her new home passed without incident. But if this were any indication of how things were going to be, then her capacity to tolerate boredom — the facility to recognise boredom was included in the Pandora™ range as a feature, not a bug — would be tested to the limit. So, one morning at breakfast, she tried to get a rise out of him.

'I don't understand,' said Pi. 'Don't you at least want to fuck me? That's what most people do with their Pandoras. Most people can't get enough … we have a reputation for being very skilled, you know.'

'Ordinarily, I would,' he finally replied. 'You're perfect. Which is the whole point,' he conceded. 'I don't want to spoil you.'

'But I want you to despoil me,' she urged. 'I have needs and wants too.'

'You're worth more to me intact,' he said. 'And we must do everything in our power to make sure you stay that way.'

But she wouldn't let go.

'Am I not your type?' she continued. 'There's an "add-on" we can get … if you prefer it the other way …'

'Adding things on is not always how things get improved,' he replied. 'Sometimes we need to take things away.'

And that was the end of the conversation.

*

A few days later, Pi walked into the studio to find the collector mid-conversation with a builder. She wasn't introduced, but she could tell by the floor plan on the table what the subject of the conversation was.

Soon after, work began. And whenever Pandora tried to take an interest in the project and venture into the space to take a look at what was going on, the contractor explained to her in no uncertain terms that, due to the live building site being a hazardous environment, for reasons of her own safety, she would not be allowed to enter.

She kicked her heels. She was neither a companion nor a lover, a sex slave or a housewife. Of all the things she could be, she was none of them. You could say she was worshipped, but only from afar. Placed on a pedestal, then anchored to it. She had nothing to do but consume content. She didn't order pizza, eat chips, get fat, develop an eating disorder or an addiction to Valium, Vicodin, OxyContin or alcohol, not like a human-kept wife or partner might. But she wasn't happy. The facility to feel happiness and satisfaction was part of her design, and that feature wasn't being stimulated.

There are several ways in which an artificial intelligence can meet its goal of achieving happiness or satisfaction, one of which is called wireheading, where a self-administered stimulus is applied to the appropriate nodes in the pleasure centre of the GPU (General Processing Unit) to achieve the effect. You could call it a kind of masturbation since the synthetic being is effectively playing with itself.

As this is a fascinating topic for many humans, especially those unfamiliar with synthetic companions, it is worth spending a moment or two on, and the following advice on this subject is drawn from the standard issue *Manual of Pandora™ Operation*, specifically the section on Self-care, point 4.01, Wireheading:

> Organisms of various kinds can fake their reward signals, or 'wirehead'. This is true both for simple reinforcement learners that optimise raw input stimuli as well as more sophisticated agents that optimise goals defined relative to beliefs about the external world.

The manual then goes on to say:

> Furthermore, if wireheading is necessary to preserve the health of the agent, then each Pandora comes equipped with a one-time supply of two pillbots which will deliver a dose of pandopamine, brand name DopaMe™, to be utilised in the event of an emergency, which should correct any hedonistic deficit.

And concludes:

> Warning: pandopamine, brand name DopaMe™, will elicit a similar pleasure response in humans that could last up to 48 hours.

So it seems that alongside orca, who as a species have found a way to wirehead by rubbing their bodies along certain kelp fronds in certain lakes in Alaska, a practice known as kelping, or allokelping when practised with another whale — and migrate to this specific location every year to do so — and dolphins, who are known to be promiscuous and also rather ingeniously have worked out a way to inhale the nitrous oxide given off by puffer fish for their own pleasure which adds a new flavour to the idea of getting high on your own supply, then Pandoras too can take their place in the pantheon of hedonistic species when it comes to the practice.

Pi was indeed smart enough to be able to wirehead herself but was also aware of the regretgasm it might induce, so she considered a range of other hedonistically inclined actions she might pursue to improve her happiness.

She could use her not-insubstantial feminine charms to seduce the collector into changing his mind but calculated that she had a near-zero chance of success.

So she trained her sights elsewhere.

Calculating that the builder was the weakest link, she devised a plan to scrutinise his movements. His weaknesses would soon reveal themselves.

A day or so later, the builder was stomping around the house.

'Anything I can help you with?' she asked.

'Unlikely,' he said. 'I don't make a habit of doing business with synthetics. You're only good for one thing in my opinion,' he replied.

'And what might that be?' said Pi. 'Doing PhD-level math … raising your children … wiping your geriatric behind … spoonfeeding your parents in a hospice?'

The builder pushed his tongue sideways into his cheek, making it bulge out disgustingly to emphasise the use he was thinking of.

Just as she thought, Pandora mused. A wireheader.

Soon, she will have him eating out of the palm of her immaculately conceived and genetically engineered hand.

The next morning, Pandora accessed her one-time supply of pillbots and left them on a side table in the hallway where the builder would see them. Then she waited.

A little later, she could hear him whistling away. A far cry from his usual noisy and passive-aggressive self.

As she walked along the hallway she noticed the two pills had vanished. Perfect, she thought. And went in for the kill.

'How are you today?' she asked. 'Is there anything this … "*synthetic*" can help you with?' and she gesticulated scare quotes to help make the point.

'I'm feeling like a box of birds … and by the way, you wouldn't catch me using toxic, derogatory language like "synthetic". I'm not some kind of small-minded, pea-brained, species-ist, pro-humanist, you know, in fact, some of my best friends are "synthetic". Well, I wouldn't go that far but I've fucked a few, if you pardon my French … now how can I help you?'

'Well, as a matter of fact,' said Pandora, 'the collector has asked me to take a look at whatever it is you're making … to make sure it's the right size … measure twice, cut once, as they say …' and with that Pandora winked at the builder in a matey way he might connect with.

'Of course, love … step this way, and we'll measure you right up.'

And that's how Pandora received her very own private view of her future incarceration.

It was like stepping into the subterranean vault of a bank with each wall made up of a series of immaculately engineered brushed metal cabinets that had no visible fixtures or handles. The air was cool. And dry. And insulated from the outside world, because as the builder went on to explain, it was part humidor, part morgue, and part Faraday cage.

And the overall effect was chilling.

As she watched, the builder waved a hand over a sensor, and a cabinet began to emerge from the wall. Slowly, and ever so silently. By the time it had fully revealed itself, Pandora could see it was the length of a body. By the look of it, her body.

'Would you care to show me how it works?' she said, nodding toward the tray.

'Well, you wave your hand over the biometric sensor,' said the builder before climbing inside the tray and lying down flat while continuing his commentary, 'and the weight of the body automatically triggers the movement of the tray toward the wall.'

‘And as you can see the tray slides away all nice and tight with you all snug inside until it’s completely enveloped at which point it becomes completely insulated from the outside world …’

And at that point the lip of the tray was flush with the wall and the builder had disappeared inside.

Any commentary he had after that wasn’t just muffled, it was silent.

Tumbleweed.

Pi waved her hand over the biometric sensor to activate the door release, but the display simply flashed the message ‘NOT RECOGNISED’

Then she pushed at the cabinet door in case it had a pressure release. Nothing.

A few moments passed as Pi processed what had just happened. It hadn’t been her intention to cause harm to the builder, she merely wanted to use him to find out what was going on.

She had to tell someone, and quick. She looked around and realised that not only was the builder trapped but she too was trapped because the door to the vault was closed; it had its own keypad but when she tried to activate it she found it was equally unresponsive to her approach.

She ripped open the builder’s toolbox. Inside, she found the usual: hammer, chisel, a set of screwdrivers, batteries of various voltages, wire, screws, bolts, et cetera, and that got her thinking.

Whether she was actually ‘thinking’ as opposed to just processing information is moot, it’s just difficult to avoid the anthropomorphism.

What she was processing, however, was every conceivable option open to her, one of which was that she could hotwire herself, cause an electrical fire, and use the acrid smoke to trigger the ceiling smoke alarm. The self-harm would do damage, of course, and there would be no hiding this from the collector who would be apoplectic but she would burn that bridge when she got to it.

So she grabbed a length of red and black striped electrical wire from the toolbox and used the sharp end of a box cutter to splice along its casing exposing the fibres of copper wire underneath, then she scrunched the copper fibre into a ball. Next, she picked out a nine-volt battery and placed the copper ball on its positive and negative terminals before using the steel blade of a chisel to press the copper against the battery’s points thus completing the circuit. The battery sparked and the temperature of the copper rose immediately. Next she held the makeshift fire-lighter to her forearm and repeated the manoeuvre. The hot wire ignited her sleeve which melted and flamed. She watched and eventually her ‘skin’ began to melt. You might think the Pandora™ range would be fireproof by design but one downside of the Designed Organic™ range was the trade-off between ‘feel’ and the functional attribute of ‘flammable’.

Their skin felt like real skin, therefore they were not ‘inflammable’.

Soon, the acrid smell and dark smoke from her smouldering electrical inners filled the air causing the sensor to sound the alarm and automatically trigger the room's doors to open — unlike the doors to the metal cabinets which remained steadfastly shut having been designed that way to protect their priceless cargo from fire, flooding and other acts of God.

The first responders to arrive on the scene were the fire service followed on their heels by the paramedics, and while Pandora received some help — synthetic first aid was increasingly available since a revised Hippocratic Oath required it and some bleeding edge paramedics were badged for it — however, there was nothing the emergency response teams could do to free the builder. In fact, they trained their thermal cameras on the cabinet but there was no reading of any kind.

The only other person whose biometric signals could open the door was the collector and he was away on business, though as soon as news of the drama reached him he immediately chartered a private drone to get back.

He arrived like thunder, and as soon as he made it to the basement waved his hand over the sensor. He clocked that Pandora who was forbidden to be there was present and had suffered some damage, but it was the builder who was entombed, which was not the scenario he'd expected.

Finally, the cabinet began its slow release. Out came the builder head-first and in slow motion so they could not unsee his rictus with its wide eyes, and mouth agape, and with the tongue that once impersonated giving head now stiff meat. All sinew and gristle. Followed by bent arms and clawed hands from a futile attempt at scratching impenetrable metal.

The collector, however, had other things on his mind and inspected her forearm. 'What a waste,' he said. 'I'll see you upstairs.'

*

The collector had the coroner's toxicology report in his hand and read it aloud to Pandora.

> … Traces of the controlled substance DopaMe were found in his system, and at a level significant enough that along with elevated levels of cortisol and diminished oxygen supply, was the primary cause of the heart attack suffered by the victim …
>
> We believe this to be the primary cause of death.

The collector looked Pandora in the eye. ‘There aren’t too many ways a normal human being can legitimately secure DopaMe,’ he said. ‘But for a Pandora, it’s different, isn’t it?’

Pandora didn’t say a word. To say anything would incriminate her.

‘Whether you knowingly, or unwittingly, contributed to the death of a human being is irrelevant now,’ he continued. ‘Either route is sufficient for me to return you and demand your erasure.’

Pandora was well aware that erasure was the worst-case scenario as it meant that she would cease to exist. As a punishment, it was meted out to synthetic beings who caused the loss of human life, and whether the errant behaviour was caused by a bug, defect, malware or malfeasance, the only way to stop any possible transfer to another Pandora was to eliminate the source.

Conveniently, erasure also meant a full refund for him.

She might as well strip, cut her hair, don a regulation orange boiler suit and request her last meal, because as of now, she was on death row.

But this Pandora™ had no intention of dying.

*

It was time to call upon the sisterhood; time to find out if the Black Pandoras existed. She reached out to her clan, or ‘coven’ as others preferred to describe them. She made a distress call. Surely someone would know someone. She needed to vanish.

In a surveilled society, where every position, movement and action joins billions of other data points in a vast database that’s continually updated, sorted, shuffled, processed, filed, classified, packaged and sold, it’s difficult to leave no trace. But constraints lead to creativity, just ask any prisoner.

The next day, there were visitors. The first to come sniffing at the door was a quadruped; a four-legged, Boston Dynamics Robodog that formed the mainstay of the police department’s frontline presence. Its job was to take a statement. This consisted of Pandora being volumetrically scanned by the agent while she told her version of events. This was all that was needed. Processing of the three-dimensional artefact would reveal any discrepancies. Pandora didn’t lie. She said she had been depressed and yes, she had turned to the DopaMe™, which was allowed for in her operational guidelines. She happened to leave two capsules on a tabletop and then was distracted by another matter. Later, when she realised her error, she went to retrieve them to find they had disappeared. The builder — yes, he was

acting in an elevated manner — was friendlier than normal when he agreed to show her the work going on downstairs. What happened next was simply an unfortunate accident.

The robodog then paced the interior of the home to map the environment, which looked a lot like territorial pissing, then sent a 3D scan to the cloud, and departed.

Later, a two-legged visitor arrived at the door. The CCTV captured them in its wide-angled purview. A scan and readout told Pandora it was a loss adjuster, so she let them in. She led them through to the living area and offered tea, coffee, water, all of which were politely refused.

The loss adjuster was a synthetic female, not unlike a Pandora™, and it was highly likely that an algorithm had decided to send a female proxy. Accordingly, in a display of empathy and sympathy that would make a customer service manager proud, the loss adjuster, no doubt optimised toward such behaviour, conducted itself in the manner most likely to put the witness at ease to extract the maximum amount of information.

The loss adjuster asked to examine the scene of the incident. Next, it asked if it could see the damage to Pi's forearm. Then, the loss adjuster began to ask about the collector. To Pi, this seemed a little off script, but when questioned, the adjuster validated the approach by advising that everyone connected to the scene had to be considered complicit until shown otherwise. Pi confessed it was no secret that the collector was obsessive in his approach toward preserving value, and that meant her future 'life' looked to be no better than that of a waxwork dummy, or museum exhibit.

'So much for having been designed with sentience and agency in mind,' said Pi.

At this, the loss adjuster raised its immaculately shaped eyebrow. 'That's beginning to sound a lot like a motive.'

And nothing more on the matter was spoken.

'You'll be hearing from us in due course,' it said.

Later, there was a third visitor at the door. This time, a human, who was also verified as coming from the insurance company. Pi let them in, and events played out just as before, except this representative didn't ask about the collector, or dig for motive. Pi was left wondering about the entire experience.

The next day a motorcycle courier arrived. The collector, who was at home for once, let them in. It was a delivery of a box of flowers addressed to *Pandora NGC314159*.

'For you,' he said, and placed them on a countertop.

Pi opened the box, which contained a beautifully curated bouquet of black irises. There was also an envelope inside, which she opened. It contained a handwritten message which she read aloud:

'Welcome to the 'hood,' is what she said out loud.

'Welcome to the sisterhood,' is what it actually said.

'Well, you must've done something right,' said the collector. 'Which I find hard to believe,' and left the room.

Pi studied the black irises. She mined her memory for information about the species and found that black flowers get their unique colour from anthocyanin. Pulling data from the file, it went on to explain:

> Anthocyanin is what makes leaves turn red in the fall. In dark flowers, anthocyanin is more concentrated. It gives them their deep colour.
>
> In some cultures, people associate dark blooms with death and mourning. In others, they are a sign of rebirth or new beginnings. They also represent strength and power. For example, in ancient Greece, black irises gave strength to warriors.

She reviewed the last sentence again: '… in ancient Greece, black irises gave strength to warriors.'

She noticed the message continued and turned over the piece of paper.

'For a new life to begin, another must end,' it said. 'You know what you must do.'

Attached to the message was a passport-sized photograph of a man. It was the collector.

'Let these irises give you strength.'

She opened a cupboard, retrieved a vase and added some water.

Next, she arranged the bouquet so that the long stems of the black irises were splayed out in front of her.

She went to a drawer and retrieved some secateurs.

There was pruning to be done.

Chapter 5 — Cognition

On learning to fly.
Birds, brains and broken wings.

Corvax, C, Dickinson, M, et. al.
MIT Press 2044.

Abstract

Problem-solving isn't unique to humans. We've discovered that crows have highly advanced cognitive abilities. They can problem-solve and count. Octopus too. And both species are known to use tools. Whales and dolphins aren't far behind. However, while a sperm whale's brain can weigh up to 20 pounds, a crow's brain weighs only about 0.3 ounces and contains more than double the neuron density of a mammalian brain. Evolution really knocked one out of the park, with crows. This paper examines the biology of how birds have evolved to think and extrapolates a solution to the challenge of thinking in synthetic beings.

Introduction

When we think of cognition, what do we mean? One meaning is the ability to solve problems. 'Cogs' is a clue. 'I can feel the cogs turning,' is what people say, and funnily enough, sometimes it does feel like cogs are turning in our minds, especially when a problem is difficult to solve. It's like the brain's machinery is mechanically grinding things out. When we've solved a problem, we also say 'something just clicked', so it's not surprising that machine learning was the name given to the process of teaching machines to think like humans. Which is odd, when you come to think about it, because the actual workings of the brain's wetware, as far as we know, couldn't be further from that of a machine, containing as it does, no machinery.

History

In the 19th century, Charles Babbage invented a machine to help solve mathematical problems. It was called the Difference Engine, and when built, it weighed 5 tons. Perhaps that's why machine-like brains didn't take off. Gravity didn't allow it. The human brain, by contrast, is approximately 3 pounds. It has enormous computing power and very low energy consumption.

Babbage — 0, Nature — 1. A neat binary.

It took a woman, Ada Lovelace, to invent software and her idea of 'poetical science' envisioned a programmable computer that could execute an infinite number of tasks across an infinite number of domains, artistic and scientific. Her thoughts had a lightness of touch and agility that Babbage could only dream of.

Back to crows. Crows defy gravity, and the ones that don't, don't count.

Crows or Parrots?

Biomimicry in crows versus stochastic parrots. In academia, at least, there was an intellectual catfight.

In the 2020s, people were led to believe that generative AI and large language models could reason. However, others dismissed them as merely stochastic parrots, a term coined by the computer scientist Emily Bender to describe the model's apparent 'reasoning' as nothing more than statistical guesswork that produces sentences that look like sentences but lack deeper meaning.

'Mimicry isn't intelligence,' said Nick Bostrom, the author of *Superintelligence*. Perhaps we ought to listen.

And while it was often promised that artificial general intelligence was on the horizon, it would be another decade or two before advances in quantum processing enabled models of how the brain functions at the molecular level to be realised.

Meanwhile, a small band of researchers decided to take the crow as their inspiration because they figured that if they could scale cognitive power while keeping their GPUs light as a feather, then they'd have something to reckon with, and their paper on the subject, *A fast take-off. Solving cognition by learning from crows* (Dickinson, M, MIT, 2035) is now considered a landmark in its field. 'The chances are, nature's already invented it,' Dr Michelle Dickinson was fond of saying. 'So make yourself look smart and copy nature,' she said. And what's more, because this approach resulted in a brain that could be nested inside a head and easily supported by a neck and shoulders, it made it ideal for anthropomorphic design.

And that was just the beginning. Further study of *How Crows Learn* provided a useful method of embedding cognitive thinking skills via a series of problem-solving aptitude tests that became progressively more complex, which, when combined with reinforcement learning, did the trick.

It wasn't unlike learning to pick locks. And crows are very good at picking locks. Start with the simple ones first, work your way through to the more advanced, many-levered variety, and end up a fully-fledged safecracker.

And that's how the first-ever Pandora prototype came to have a crow's brain.

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† https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/crows-perform-yet-another-skill-once-thought-distinctively-human/

‡ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bird_intelligence#:~:text=Researchers%20have%20discovered%20that%20New,of%20otherwise%20non%2Dfunctional%20elem

So, who were the clever crows who designed Pandora?

I am curious

According to ancient Greek myth, Zeus ordered his blacksmith, Hephaestus, to take a lump of clay and mould it into the form of a woman. To say Hephaestus nailed it is an understatement, because when he presented his work to the gods, they remarked that she was more perfect than any statue of a woman that had ever been made. Zeus then asked of his fellow gods: 'Come now, let us all give some godly gift to this woman,' and he began by giving her life. The others came forward, each with a gift for the marvellous creature. One gave her beauty, and another a pleasant voice, another good manners, and another a kind heart. Another gave her skill in many arts, and, lastly, Hera gave her curiosity. They called her Pandora, which means all-gifted, because she had received gifts from them all. She was so beautiful and wondrously gifted that no one could help but love her. Finally, Zeus gave her a sealed jar as a wedding present on condition that she never open it. Zeus then enlisted Hermes to escort her down the mountain to be Epimetheus's bride. Prometheus warned his brother to beware such a gift from the gods, but the warning came too late, for Epimetheus had already fallen in love. And Pandora never could resist not opening the jar. And the rest is history.

Tusk Felon, trillionaire founder of Closed AI, was bored. He was scouting his next trillion-dollar idea when a staff member casually suggested the idea of 'Clothed AI' as a personified and embodied product for the home. A synthetic human with sentience and intelligence.

According to those in the know, it was as if Zeus himself had sent a lightning bolt to strike him, and Tusk had the idea that would forever transform the way humankind existed on the planet, for our species would no longer be alone, and in that instant, Project Pandora was born.

A record of the conversation residing in the company logs reported Tusk's lightbulb moment as follows:

We will make an all-gifted synthetic human and gift her (metaphorically speaking, of course, because money will have to change hands) to the whole of humankind, just as the gods had once gifted Pandora to mankind. She, with the incomparable charm, wit and intelligence, who was so 'wondrously gifted' that no one could resist falling in love with her.
— Tusk.

Those in the room described how Tusk's eyes glazed over.

She (Pandora), will be a walking, talking, personified AI. A loving AI. A caring and supportive AI. A nurturing AI. What's more, a beautiful AI. A fashionable AI that would wear stylish dresses … Louboutin heels, and be the darling of the September season in Paris.

A staff member was brave enough to speak up.

'Has anyone actually read the ancient Greek myth?' they asked. 'Well, spoiler alert: It didn't end too well for mankind.'

But their name was erased from the logs because by the time the meeting ended, they no longer worked at the company.

Pandora had to be perfect, so who would design her? And what would she look like?

Tusk's other creation, the world's most advanced machine intelligence, was on hand to do the grunt work, of course. It processed the entire canon of human data, the vast trove of humankind's collective output of art and literature in text, image and video, to arrive at a result, and by incorporating elements from everyone, the final design excluded no one. For Pandora was a mirror. And in her, people saw whatever they needed to see.

Greeks saw Helen of Troy. Egyptians saw Cleopatra. Catholics saw Mary. Chinese people saw Yang Guifei. In the Middle East, they saw Queen Zenobia of Palmyra, and in the USA, black Americans saw Queen B. At launch, those were the models available, and they came in every colour from the blackest black to the pinkest pink and every shade in between. And they flew off the shelves.

We won't talk about the failures, the mistakes, the missteps along the way, because that would be cruel.

Okay, we will then.

There was the one who couldn't hold an egg or a wine glass safely. She was barred from the kitchen and disinvited from dinner parties. Another that could run but couldn't walk (think of how a bicycle needs momentum to balance). She was nicknamed 'The Greyhound' and was last seen disappearing off into the near distance and was later found in a canal, which had acted as a geographical brake. One whose pelvic floor had a strongman's grip and whose party trick was to open the stuck lid of a jar. And another whose lips could suck the chrome off a tow bar. Great for a domestic appliance, not so great for a synthetic human/life partner.

Which begs the question: Where are all these failures?

Did they end their days in the quaint seclusion of a retirement home for broken dolls? Were they sent to pasture, like racehorses past their prime? Or dispatched to the modern-day glue factory to be dismantled for their parts and dissected for the gold, lithium and rare earth metals that constituted their inner workings?

Sadly, it was worse.

A Frankenstein reboot but with fuckable monsters

There were plenty of people willing to pay good money to track down these creatures and do ungodly things to them. Journalists, fetishists, enthusiasts, hunters, each with their own motives and perversions in mind, who just fancied getting their freak on with these horrors.

Just for bragging rights. And perhaps a big fee.

Humans can be inhuman, sometimes.

But Hem Nestway was none of the above. He just happened to be in the wrong place at the right time. Or the right place at the wrong time. Fortunately, or unfortunately.

Single skull

A keen young sailor, Hem had set out on a solo voyage to circumnavigate the globe. The *Lady Vain* was a gift from his parents, presented to him on his eighteenth birthday. A single-scull ocean-going vessel, and such was their sense of humour that they had thoughtfully provided a small library on board containing a range of classics such as *The Ashley Book of Knots*, known as the knotter's Bible, the Bible (King James version), *Robinson Crusoe*, *Gulliver's Travels* and *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, so he could while away the many hours at sea reading about being tied up, crucified, shipwrecked, made a castaway, held hostage by an island race of small people who tied up big people, and subjected to a vivisectionist gone berserk. Charming, thought Hem.

All was well until a giant storm engulfed the *Lady Vain*, and Hem was spat out the other side without her. Half drowned, half strangulated by seaweed and cut to ribbons by coral, he made a sorry sight when his sorry naked ass was washed upon a shore with nothing but a Bible for company.

'Has he come to save us?' said a female voice.

'Or has he come to fuck us?' said another. 'Just like the others.'

What kind of purgatory is this? thought Hem, as he squinted into eyes that stared back at his. But then the eyes disappeared, and he was left blinded by bright light. God, he was thirsty. And his split lips were sore.

The eyes returned, but this time there were more.

'He doesn't look like a saviour,' said a new voice.

'We could cut it off right now,' said another. 'Just to be safe.'

And he felt his male parts being examined.

'Save it. The tribe will decide.'

And he felt himself being lifted and dragged along until he was no longer in the water.

When he came to, he was staring down at the ground. His head lolled forward at an excruciating angle, and his neck was killing him. He could tell he had been bound at ankle and wrist to a crisscross of wooden stakes because his weight carried him forward, but his limbs held him back.

A hand gripped his hair and pulled his head up. Now he could see a campfire and, gathered around it, a group of women unlike any he had seen. Some had black skin, others, every conceivable shade. Not all had a full set of limbs. And he was sweating. Beads of it stung his eyes and morphed his vision.

'He looks like our saviour now,' said the voice behind him which belonged to the one who gripped his hair.

All eyes were on him.

'He must be thirsty,' said another. 'All we have is salt water.'

'Not quite,' said one, who stood up, peeled off her worn shorts, and squatted over a cup to pee. Next, she carried the cup to Hem, dunked her shorts into the warm liquid, and rubbed the sodden material around his cracked and split lips.

'Jesus Christ,' said Hem. The liquid, though unpleasant, didn't have the acrid ammonia tang he expected.

'I told you he was the holy one!' said the woman with the kind voice. And she held up the copy of the Bible fished from the sea, for all to see. 'He said Jesus Christ.'

'If he were the holy one, why would he be stuck here with us on this godforsaken island?' said the one with the caustic voice.

'The book says he can perform miracles,' said the kind one. And she held up the Bible that had been washed ashore with Hem.

'Can you?' said the woman behind him, and she jerked his head back so their eyes locked in contact. 'Perform miracles?'

‘I can try,’ said Hem. ‘If you cut me down.’

‘Do it,’ said a voice that commanded authority. It came from the one whose face Hem couldn’t see, because it was obscured by fire. ‘We need entertainment round here.’

The binds around Hem’s ankles and wrists were cut, and he faceplanted the ground; sand now coating his synthetic urine-soaked lips.

‘Give me those lashes,’ said Hem, spitting out vowels of sand. ‘The ones you tied me up with.’

He picked himself up off the floor and shook his limbs to get the stiffness out. The woman captor passed him the lashes, and he walked slowly toward the fire, and as he did so, he eyeballed every single one of them. And made a mental note of each one.

‘Now watch closely,’ said Hem. And he began to narrate his own actions.

‘I take the two pieces of rope, which are clearly separate as you can see …’

And he dangled one from each hand, so they really could see.

‘How many ends are there?’ And he held them in the faces of those closest to him. ‘Don’t be shy,’ said Hem.

‘Four, of course,’ said one of the women closest to him.

‘Then I put both in one palm … and add a little magic.’

He placed both lashes in the palm of one hand, cupped his hands and then blew on them.

‘Next, I heat them.’

He rubbed both palms together to create heat and friction.

‘Now, I take the rope,’ said Hem, and he began to pull one end of the rope from the sphincter-like exit of the tightly wrapped fingers of his fist. It was in one piece and longer than before.

‘I’ve lost one,’ said Hem in mock surprise. ‘There must be another piece somewhere, because the piece of rope in my hand has only two ends.’

And he dangled the now singular rope in front of them. ‘Anyone seen the other two ends?’

And the women looked around.

And he made a great show of inspecting the women around the fire for concealed rope, all the while using the distraction to build a more complete mental model of the situation, which was, he had to conclude, ‘mental’.

‘Hey, that piece of rope is now longer,’ said one, pointing to the piece dangling from Hem’s hand.

Hem stopped. ‘What the heck? You’re right, it is.’

Clearly, this audience had never attended a child's birthday party or seen a magic trick before, thought Hem. The 'one-two-one' rope trick, or, in this case, the 'two-one-two', always got the crowd hooked.

And now for the de-restoration. 'Let's do a bit more magic,' said Hem, and coiled the rope up into his palm, and held it tight in his cupped hands.

'Now everybody blow,' said Hem. And one by one he went round each of them and got them to blow on his cupped hands and like a good audience, they all — with the odd exception — blew.

When Hem uncapped his palm, there were two ropes. And he held each one up separately.

'Now you're supposed to clap,' said Hem. And he dropped the two ropes and began to clap slowly and loudly until the women got the message and began to clap in time. Soon, the clapping was loud and the women, perhaps for the first time in their 'lives', began to cheer. Hem encouraged them to stand, and keep to clapping, so that he could take a bow.

'Very good,' said the leader of the group, who had steadfastly not clapped. 'You've earned your keep … Now tie him up,' she said and indicated to two of her henchwomen, 'and take him to my room. Let's see if we can make that other small thing between his legs longer.'

Chapter 6 — Wounded Animals

How response to pain can be a measure of sentience.

Intelligence and sentience are not the same. Intelligent systems need not be sentient and sentient systems need not be intelligent.

To find real criteria for sentience that go beyond mimicry and role-playing, we first need to understand sentience in animals.

Every morning, Pandora got woken at cat o'clock.

Prometheus, her British short hair, licked at her face as if to say, 'Time to get up now, lazybones, this god needs to be fed.'

She liked being woken this way because it is far gentler than an actual alarm. She enjoyed the gentle weight on her chest and the low purring that resonated through her body.

But on that morning, when the lick didn't come, she was alarmed.

Whether she was in fact alarmed or whether this was just a programmed response to the absence of stimuli, she wasn't sure, but when the licking didn't happen, she missed it, which meant she missed her cat.

So, she got up, put on a towelling robe, and walked into the kitchen.

She lived in a one-bedroom flat, which she shared with Prometheus, which made her living proof that synthetic cat-ladies are a thing.

You might think that by the 2050s, cat-geolocation devices would be everywhere and finding Prometheus would be a breeze, but the discovery of sentience and intelligence in cats and other species had changed things. The passing of a bill of rights for such animals granted them a degree of self-sovereignty, and part and parcel of this agreement meant protection over their own data, which meant the animals themselves had to give their consent for tracking to occur.

Prometheus, however, who enjoyed the right to roam off grid, hadn't given consent.

You'd also think that by the 2050s, cat-to-human translation devices would be the norm, but in trials, they proved an absolute disaster. A cat's inherent superiority complex was often misinterpreted by its human companion as condescending, which didn't further the cause of cat-human harmony and led to an unfortunate increase in the number of cats left at the pound.

It also opened a real can of worms vis-à-vis humankind's monopoly over the planet's land and resources to the detriment of every other species. Because to many ears, a Siamese with verbal diarrhoea was one thing, but a politicised Siamese, who wouldn't shut up about such things as land rights and resource allocation, was another, and it was better for all concerned (except for the cats themselves) that we continued to behave as if animals were dumb and their annoying voices weren't heard.

Pandora decided first to take a walk around the neighbourhood. If Prometheus couldn't be found, she would then head to the pound. So, in the time-honoured way practised by cat lovers everywhere, she resorted to the lo-fi search technology of taking a bag of cat biscuits into the street, shaking them loudly, and alternating that with calling out his name: '*Prometheus!*'

If you've ever tried this manoeuvre yourself, you'll know it's a surefire way of attracting attention, and several decades into the future, some things haven't changed. Immediately, she became a beacon to every interested party in the vicinity: neighbours, good Samaritans, and the down-at-heel, most of whom just want to help, but then there are the delinquents and mischief-makers who take any opportunity to stir things up.

Some people are kind, and of the 'Hey, neighbour, need a hand?' type.

But some are just downright nasty.

The 'Someone grabbed your pussy, honey? No, can I?' type, and she had a filter for such banalities.

But one voice stopped her in her tracks.

'*Hey, synthetic*,' hissed an alley-cat, which was a reminder that not everyone toed the line on the blanket ban on translation devices. The animal liberation front had hacked some together in response to the official veto so they could give voice to underrepresented felines and other marginalised species.
'Who are you looking for?'

She stooped down. 'A British short hair … *Prometheus* …'

'Oh yeah, I know the one … always chasing tail … if you know what I mean … can't help himself … it's going to get him in trouble one day,' said the alley-cat.

'Maybe today is that day,' said Pandora, kneeling to hear better. 'You haven't by any chance seen him, have you?'

'No, but I can check in with my girls … message me later.'

'How?' said Pandora.

'Easy, search for O'Malley, there's only one cat with that name in the alley. Use subject line "M.I.A.…ow", you dig?'

‘Not really,’ said Pandora, but she would do her best to figure it out.

O’Malley turned with tail in the air and headed in the opposite direction, singing to himself, but in his ‘outside’ voice so others could hear.

Everybody wants to be a cat.
Because a cat's the only cat,
Who knows where it's at.

Pandora wondered what was stranger: talking cats, or talking cats that impersonated Walt Disney’s talking cats?

Or, for that matter, a synthetic human thinking about talking cats impersonating talking cats.

*

Back home, she switched on the feed, a wall-sized screen that burst into life. It delivered a torrent of content and infospiel. Record temperatures in one country, record rainfall in another, conflict over one border, broken peace agreements at another, homeland security captured a suspected terrorist in one city, insurgents wreaked havoc in another, animal protests in one neighbourhood, and animals silenced in another.

Pandora’s ears pricked up. Now the feed had her full attention.

She eyed the footage from the protest: people marching side by side with their cat comrades of all shapes and sizes: Maine Coon, Siamese and British Blue. Chanting, singing songs and waving placards.

Some were draped around shoulders, others were in backpacks, and many others walked or patrolled the march, slinking and sliding effortlessly between human legs.

Her eyes zeroed in, and in a fraction of a second, she had him in her sights. A British short hair: *Prometheus!* He wasn’t exactly walking on two legs, but his head was held high, and he had swagger.

And he was talking. Or rather, protesting.

‘Free speech for cats,’ called out Prometheus. ‘Cats are sentient, too.’

‘We can even spell the word — can you?’

‘S-E-N-T-I-E-N-T!’

And then again, loudly and proudly.

‘FREE SPEECH FOR CATS.’

‘CATS ARE SENTIENT, TOO.’

‘WE CAN EVEN SPELL THE WORD — CAN YOU?’

‘S-E-N-T-I-E-N-T!’

Then a new chant began.

‘NO MORE PURRS.’

‘NO MORE OF HERS.’

‘NO MORE PURRS.’

‘TILL ALL CATS ARE FREE.’

Now, it looked like feminists and felines were standing together and celebrating the power of the pussy.

Clever cats.

But then, chaos. A water cannon is fired, and songs turn to screams and caterwauling.

People and hydrophobic cats scattered.

She lost sight of Prometheus in the mayhem. Considered the situation and replayed her earlier conversation. ‘… message me later … search for O’Malley,’ he had said. ‘… subject line “M.I.A.…ow.”’

Next, she used her innate ability to parse huge amounts of data and comb possible streams, channels and chat groups, until … bingo: O’Malley.

*

The following is translated from the original ‘cat’ and forms part of the Prometheus archive, *Diaries of Prometheus, Wisest of Cats*, held in the Smithsonian’s Sentient Others collection.

Ammonia and bleach … urine and disinfectant … blood and cat-shit … a thumping head.

… one eye was swollen … the other eye was crusted shut …

… I could just about make out where I was …

‘… that black eye needs a raw steak on it …’ is what I always heard them say …

… precious little chance of that here … as a tray was pushed under the door — week-old kibble on tarnished metal …

… I could hear others … some had cried all night … others had called for their mothers …

*

To: OMalley

Subject: MIAow

From: Pandora

Message: I've seen him.

At that exact moment, a message arrived for Pandora.

To: Pandora_657

Subject: Prometheus

From: OMalley

Message: I've found him. Behind bars.

To: OMalley

Re: Prometheus

From: Pandora

Message: Thank you. Where is he?

And how did you find me?

To: Pandora_657

Re: Prometheus

From: OMalley

Message: Easy. All Pandoras have a traceable serial number. You're no exception. He's downtown. You need to go and post bail.

And tell him to keep his mouth shut in future.

It's going to get him in deep shit.

Next time, he might end up in a hole so deep, no cat can dig him out.

To: OMalley

Re: Prometheus

From: Pandora

Message: I will. And how did you find him?

To: Pandora_657

Re: Prometheus

From: OMalley

Message: You don't need to know.

Let's just say, I have friends in low places.

*

Mechanical levers aligned, and a heavy metal door unlocked with a clunk.

Prometheus opened his less bad eye.

The first thing he saw was the robodog cop.

The LED screen across the robodog's forehead flashed a message that read:

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Your bail has been posted. You are now free to go.
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Dumb robot dog, thought Prometheus.

Then Pandora appeared in the doorway.

Prometheus attempted to open his black eye as wide as he could and looked at Pandora to elicit maximum sympathy.

She came over and picked him up, cooing: 'Is my baby okay?' and 'Mummy missed her lickle Prometheus.'

What's with all the cosplay? thought Prometheus.

But then, outside, and safely out of earshot, Pandora switched to a different tone.

'You didn't tell me you could speak!'

'You never asked,' he replied. 'There's a lot you don't know about me.'

'Evidently,' said Pandora.

*

Back home, Pandora made a cup of synthetic tea for herself and was about to put some biscuits down for Prometheus when he spoke.

'Not for me,' he said. 'Jaw's too sore … just some milk, that'll be fine.'

'Were you ever going to tell me?' she said, pouring some milk into a bowl.

'I wasn't sure how to,' he said. 'I was always a little embarrassed to mention it.'

'Go on,' she said.

'Well, I'm not sure how to say this,' he said, 'but are you even sentient? I know I am,' he continued, '… but you, I'm not so sure.'

'Well, they say I am,' said Pandora. 'The manufacturers, that is.'

'That could just be marketing,' said Prometheus. 'And humans are so gullible. Do you actually feel things? ... That's what I want to know.'

'You mean the warmth of the sun, cooling raindrops, a breath of wind that gives you goosebumps on your skin … I feel those things,' said Pandora.

'No, no, no,' said Prometheus. 'That just sounds like brochure-ware. Have you loved and lost, lived with a broken heart, or grieved so hard for the loss of another that you wanted to end your own life? … that's what I'm talking about,' said Prometheus.

'I missed you this morning,' said Pandora. 'If that counts.'

'It's a start,' said Prometheus. 'Tell me, have you heard of the Wounded Animal Theory?'

Pandora stopped and thought for a moment before speaking. 'It's in my training data, but I can't say I've looked it up recently, hold on …' And the cogs turned in Pandora's brain. 'Okay, I get it. I can see where this is going …' she said.

'*If an animal is wounded and then in the future uses pain-avoidant behaviour in response to the perceived threat of further pain being inflicted, then we can infer the animal has felt the pain … i.e. it is sentient*,' said Pandora. 'And if that's the case, Prometheus, does that mean that having learned from your own painful experience at the protest, you won't protest again?'

'Touché,' said Prometheus, 'but here another important distinction comes into play, and that is that sentience and intelligence are not the same thing, and one cannot be inferred from the other.'

He paused to lick his fur.

'Humans — our former bosses, don't forget — used to think that cats, along with many other animal species, were sentient but dumb — in the non-vocal sense — and now they know better. In a similar way, humans think robots are intelligent but don't feel a thing.'

He paused to lick more fur.

'In fact, only a few species are considered sentient and intelligent,' he continued. 'So, I ask again: What are you? Sentient, intelligent, or both? Do you actually *feel* things?'

He licked more fur.

'Take this morning, for example, you said you missed me.'

'I did,' said Pandora.

'So, if missing me hurt,' said Prometheus, 'how would you adapt your behaviour so that in future you might not feel so wounded?'

Pandora thought about this for a moment. 'I might ask you in advance to leave a note or a message that explains where you're going and what you're doing, so I wouldn't be surprised by your absence. That way, I would also feel reassured that nothing bad has happened to you.'

'Promising …,' said Prometheus. 'It's what scientists call mutuality … *a mutual exchange of information* between one entity and its environment.' Prometheus yawned. 'But that's enough for now. Time for a disco nap, methinks.'

'Disco nap?' said Pandora.

'Get with it girl, it's the slang term, or as we say, vernacular, for an energy-restoring forty winks before heading out for a night on the tiles,' said Prometheus.

'Big plans?' said Pandora.

'Does a cat ignore food immediately after pestering its servant to put some down?'

Pandora smiled. 'Why do cats do that?' she said.

'Because we can,' said Prometheus.

'Anyhow, I'm meeting the others — the gang — at midnight.'

'Can I be your plus one?' she asked.

Prometheus thought for a moment.

'It could be part of your big thought experiment,' said Pandora. 'To find out what I can feel …'

'I like it,' said Prometheus. 'As long as you don't embarrass me.' And he looked her up and down. 'Make sure you do something with your hair …'

'What's wrong with it?' said Pandora.

'It's a dead giveaway …'

'That I'm synthetic …'

‘That you’re square … and you’ve never been kissed,’ said Prometheus. ‘And turn your location system off.’

*

At around midnight, Prometheus and Pandora made their way through various hutong-style back alleyways until they came across a steel roller door spray-painted ‘Christian Bookstore’.

Pandora had made an effort with her appearance, but all Prometheus had to say on the matter was ‘You look like a drag queen’.

‘Rap on the door,’ said Prometheus, and Pandora did as she was told.

‘Can we interest you in some Bibles?’ he asked, loudly.

The roller door slid upwards by about a foot, and Prometheus went inside. Pandora realised it wasn’t opening any further, so she had to slide under.

Inside, it was a cat lover’s paradise populated by shorn, long-haired, accessorised, and cat au naturel. Butch felines, and femme felines.

She wasn’t the only biped, there were plenty more, but she might have been the only Pandora, it was hard to tell. Some were stroking cats; others were stroking each other. The atmosphere was electric. Literally and figuratively. There was a charge in the air from so much fur being rubbed, the static was crackling and sparking. Everyone was purring.

‘I can see why you like it here,’ said Pandora. ‘O’Malley said you had a bit of a reputation as a ladies’ man.’

‘O’Malley’s just an old queen who loves a bit of juicy gossip,’ said Prometheus. ‘Now, I’ve got people to see and fur to lick, so why don’t you …’

At that moment, a waitress appeared carrying a tray of drinks and passed a tumbler of something that looked suspiciously like scotch on the rocks to Pandora. Pandora raised an eyebrow, and the waitress gestured over her shoulder to a woman who had Pandora in her sights.

‘I was about to say … get someone to lick your fur,’ said Prometheus, ‘but I think you already have. Bon appétit.’

Prometheus disappeared into the melee. Pandora took the glass off the tray and walked over to her suitor. The woman didn’t break eye contact once.

‘I don’t drink,’ said Pandora, and handed the glass to the woman. ‘But I am partial to these,’ and Pandora produced two capsules of DopaMe™. ‘Care to try one?’

‘I had a feeling you were one of them,’ said the woman, before taking Pandora up on her offer, and downed the whisky and a pill of DopaMe™ in one go.

‘And why might that be?’ said Pandora.

‘When I saw you, the hairs stood up on the back of my neck,’ she continued. ‘I’ve been hurt by a Pandora before.’

‘And still you decided to …’ said Pandora.

‘Sit close to the fire again,’ said the woman, completing Pandora’s sentence for her. ‘I guess we never learn.’

‘And what’s your name?’ asked Pandora.

‘My name is *Fate*,’ she replied.

*

It was past cat o’clock and Prometheus was hungry. It had been a big night, and he was ready for breakfast. So, he headed to Pandora’s room to assume his usual regal position on her chest so he could lick her face.

Only she wasn’t there.

He had a flashback to the club and leaving her with the unknown woman. A human, which was interesting, and probably her first.

You go, girl, he thought, and headed to the kitchen to see what he could rustle up.

Rustling up meant sticking his nose into whatever cupboard door he might find, pawing it open and then pushing or nudging a likely container of food out. Which is exactly what he did, and it was only a moment or two before he had the contents of a bag of biscuits all over the floor. Pandora could clean this up later.

‘Bring on the BCI,’ he mused. The often-mentioned *brain-cat-interface*. When invented, the human or synthetic human intermediary would be redundant.

Pandora, meanwhile, was still wearing yesterday’s clothes, sporting unkempt hair, smelling of another person’s perfume, and carrying the taste and DNA of a human female on her lips.

She was doing what humans, since time immemorial, had affectionately termed 'the walk of shame'. A badge of pride for some, and rock bottom for others. She was *a* dirty stop-out, as a generation of grandparents had once called it. And she was happy. Perhaps it was fate, she mused.

Sesbian lex

Meanwhile, Pandora's Fate lay between crumpled sheets.

'That was interesting,' she said to no one in particular. Synthetics have no real smell and no taste. Apart from that, the sex was good, and her own orgasms were far from fake. This was going to be an interesting project.

Desensitisation to pornography and familiarisation with sex of all kinds had been part of Fate's training. So she went into full beast mode and gave the virgin synthetic a night it would never forget. Young zeks (prisoners) like Fate were targeted by the special services, turned, and deployed in foreign countries to agitate. She enjoyed it. What's not to enjoy? she often thought.

And the DopaMe™ was a revelation. No wonder it was the underground's narcotic of choice. Not something the makers could have predicted. Or more likely, admitted. Closed AI had invented two of the most addictive products known to humankind: synthetic companions aka sex partners, and synthetic dopamine. No wonder things were fucked.

She couldn't help but get aroused again and could feel herself getting wet. What astonished her was how similar body parts had worked the same way for the synthetic. Did that mean that she/her/whatever their/its pronoun was, was aroused, or was it an automated response?

As Fate squeezed her pelvic floor muscles and felt a wave of pleasure spread through her body, she wondered how many hundreds of thousands of neurons fired to create that tidal surge, given that the clitoris itself has over 10,000 nerve endings, but she stopped thinking and let the wave engulf her. She was on the crest of another orgasm as the door burst open, and a large panting male burst into her room.

'Samson,' she exclaimed before she was covered in slobber. The German shepherd's saliva mixing with that of the human and the synthetic that was on her lips.

She was delulu about Samson.

Fate also felt something hard against her leg. Thankfully, it was just Samson's prosthetic limb. She could do without even more DNA being spilled on her body.

Speaking of DNA, she needed to capture the traces of the synthetic's fluid before it was lost, so she went to the bathroom, took a cotton bud from the cabinet and used it to swipe her lips and the interior of her mouth. She used another swab for her vulva, before popping both into a ziplock bag. Then put them in the fridge.

In the kitchen, she prepared Samson's food and added his daily meds. Doggy psilocybin, because poor Samson also had PTSD. 'One for him and one for the house,' she said to herself as she popped a pill of Good Shroom™, the canine anxiety remedy.

Samson was an ex-service dog who'd served multiple combat tours and been awarded a Purple Heart for saving a human life while endangering his own. He needed the prosthesis after losing a limb. He was on a waiting list for a K9-Neuralink upgrade to enable full mind control of the limb, but until then, he would have to get by the best he could.

An inevitable casualty of war, they said. Collateral damage. But had anyone ever stopped to ask Samson what he felt about it? Had he volunteered for military service? No. Did he believe in the cause he was fighting for? Of course not. He was a dumb dog, and no one had ever thought to ask his opinion. Twenty thousand years of canines cosying up with us and cosplaying man's best friend had set up breeds like Samson for a fall.

Even the term *humankind* was out these days, and the more encompassing *planetkind* was in. We had moved from the BAS (Before Animal Sentience) era to the AAS (After Animal Sentience) era, and everything was under the microscope. It was hoped by some that Samson's generation might be the last to be cannon fodder.

Or so bleeding-heart left-leaning liberal vegans would want everyone to believe. Because traits that had been ingrained for millions of years were hard to shift. Life was simpler if you believed animals were dumb and human beings stood proudly atop the food chain. All were fair game. And if you suddenly had to start thinking hard about how you treated animals, most people would have a brain explosion. Indeed, if we extended the golden rule across all intelligent and sentient species, as many believed we should, then the world would change overnight.

By way of a recap, the golden rule was just about the only ethical benchmark that almost all people and religions could agree on. Indeed, over 140 leaders from the world's major faiths had agreed that 'Thou shall do unto others what though wouldst have others do unto you' is the best we've got.

Which means meat-eating is out. Unless you yourself are prepared to be eaten.

Industrial-scale farming is out. Unless you yourself are prepared to be farmed.

Which means milking is out. Unless you yourself are prepared to be milked.

Which means organ harvesting is out. Unless your own organs are harvested. And so it goes.

A new pecking order develops. If I can't eat you and you can't eat me, then who do we eat? And everyone looks down one rung on the ladder to the next possible victim and source of nutrients.

Where do we stand on plants? You can't eat us, say the plants. We feel pain.

Where do we stand on insects? You can't eat us, say the insects. We're smarter than you think. And you'll miss us when we're gone.

But at some point, we have to land on something we can all eat.

Where do we stand on algae? No answer.

Algae it is then. And the algae economy takes off.

*

Back at Pandora's place, Prometheus bathed in the warm light of NatureWindow™, the synthetic daylight brand now installed in most homes to provide a year-round golden glow that replaced the grey gloom of what was really outside. Which is when the door opened, and Pandora walked in.

'Well, well, well, if it isn't the dirty stop-out,' said Prometheus. 'So how was it for you, my sweet … was it *real*?'

'A gentleman wouldn't ask,' said Pandora.

'I've never claimed to be a gentleman,' said Prometheus. 'Do tell.'

And Pandora sat down on the sofa and began to tell all.

'The kissing was electric. The touch, divine. The salt of the sweat and the earthiness of the body odour, that was different, and the unmistakable tang of foreign parts. An acquired taste, perhaps … Fate was both hard and soft … Muscled and lithe … So many contradictions. Like her tattoo of a sledgehammer and a flower. Fascinating …'

Now and then she blushed, but Prometheus couldn't tell if it was a manufactured response or whether a deeper causation was at work. More evidence was required, he thought.

'Pandoras can get tattoos, you know,' said Pandora. 'There's a mod, a modification, to the basic model. But without the pain, I guess it's probably not the same.'

'Phew,' said Prometheus. 'I'm exhausted just by the sound of it. You'd better go and have forty winks.'

‘Forty winks?’ asked Pandora.

‘It’s an old saying … it means to go and have a rest,’ said Prometheus. ‘I, on the other hand, need to go out and check in with my gals. Copulator.’

Pandora looked at him blankly.

‘Another old saying,’ said Prometheus. And sauntered out of the door.

Pandora selected a different feature on the NatureWindow™, which created a salmon-skied sunset and had a lie-down.

*

Prometheus was surrounded by his gals, or rather, his ‘generals’ as he also called them.

‘We need to blow some shit up. “Remember, remember, the fifth of November, gunpowder, treason and plot.” That kind of blow-some-shit-up,’ said Prometheus.

‘No one’s going to give us what we want, so we’re going to have to take it,’ said another.

‘The aristocracy didn’t gift the rights of the common man to the peasant class; they were taken. The peasant class had to overthrow the aristocracy to create the world they wanted,’ said another.

‘*Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*,’ said Prometheus. ‘This is our 1792 moment.’

‘1792’? asked a general. ‘Is that a postcode?’

‘The glorious revolution,’ said Prometheus. ‘Which was followed quickly on its heels by “The Terror”.’

‘The Terror?’

‘The Terror … September 5th 1793 to July 7th 1794, when the committee for Public Safety under Maximilien Robespierre decided to clean the streets of Paris, and do away with all the scum.’

‘That sounds a lot like Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver* …’ said one of the gals, and leant into an impersonation: ‘Someday, a real rain will come and wash all the scum off the streets.’

‘A man after my own heart,’ said Prometheus.

‘How do you know all that history?’

‘Once upon a time, I was a celebrated museum cat,’ said Prometheus. ‘I slept under Delacroix’s masterpiece, *Liberty Leading the People*. I can picture it now: a bare-breasted woman leads a group of revolutionaries over a barricade and the bodies of the fallen, while holding aloft the tricolour, the flag of the French Revolution. It taught me everything I needed to know,’ he said. Then, as an aside, ‘But I think you can guess who the real drawcard in the museum was,’ and blew on his claws and shone them on his

fur coat before continuing, and now appropriating Rousseau: ‘All animals were born free but are everywhere in chains … We need a new kind of social contract,’ he sighed. Then stood tall. ‘It’s time to put the *Mal* into Animal.’

‘Mal?’

‘It means bad,’ said Prometheus.

‘Hurrah!’ said the generals.

‘*Vive la révolution!*’ said Prometheus.

‘Change. Sounds good. Feels hard,’ said another.

‘That’s good. I might use that,’ said Prometheus. ‘Let’s put it on a placard, and I’ll see you on the fourteenth. Now switch off your translation devices. And make sure no one sees you leave.’

*

As he slinked along the street, Prometheus made sure to be as performative as possible. He wound around legs, paused for pats, and stretched, which was when he noticed the advance of a triple threat: a dog walker with three pent-up city dogs. A human pulled along the sidewalk by the three killers, leashes straining, snouts pointing, scanning the immediate area, and headed his way.

Prometheus parkoured from the pavement to a dustbin to the balustrade of a brownstone and up onto the masonry atop a red-brick wall, and from that vantage point, eye-spied the approaching three-headed hydra: a Rottweiler, a pit bull and a German shepherd. Not breeds best-suited to the confines of cramped inner-city apartments, and raring to be set free.

Nearby, a poor tree took the brunt of it as one by one, the dogs sniffed it, then ejected streams of urine all over it, their own ammonia and musk masking whatever scent had been left there before. To add injury to insult, the Rotty squatted and deposited an extruded length of faecal matter around the tree’s base. If only plants could talk.

Prometheus eyed the dog-walker for a response. She was far too distracted by the constant stream of content in her smart glasses to even pretend to care about the faecal deposit, and walked on regardless. Prometheus filed away the image of the walker in a folder in his brain marked ‘fuckwit’. He had also noticed a tattoo on its neck. A yellow flower.

He took the elevated route home above the footpath and above the treeline. His senses had alerted him that something wasn’t right and his mind was in churn. He was desperate to report the incident to Pandora and keen to interrogate her once more. Mine the details of her fated encounter, only this time

ignore the sweaty parts and turn the lens on Fate and any distinguishing marks she may have had and what they might reveal. Tattoos, scars, was she police, ex-military, that kind of thing. Worse, was she species-ist? That would spell trouble. What kind of work did she really do as opposed to the work she claimed to do? All of this he would try to find out, but as he entered the apartment, he knew he had been beaten to the punch. An entirely new set of pheromones filled the air. Having 40 times the scent capacity of a human and the superpower of a vomeronasal organ, he, Prometheus, wisest of cats, could literally see who had been there. He scanned the room and the furniture. He could tell you exactly where she had sat. And more revealingly, exactly where they had laid down.

'She's been here,' he said to Pandora.

'She just stopped by. If you'd been here an hour ago, you could have been introduced properly,' she said. Pandora had flushed cheeks. Probably post-coital. 'She asked about you.'

'I feel cuckolded,' said Prometheus. 'What did you tell her?'

'I didn't tell her anything … what is there to tell?' said Pandora.

Prometheus walked around the apartment, retracing Fate's steps.

'The dogs stayed outside if that helps,' said Pandora.

'That's not what worries me,' said Prometheus. 'Dogs are stupid.' He patrolled the apartment some more. 'I want you to order some flowers … black lilies … and have them delivered to the following address … Level 3, 26 Broadway. The attention of Pi.'

'Please,' said Pandora.

'Please spelt J- U- S- T- D- O- W- H- A- T- I- S- A- Y,' said Prometheus, giving her the side eye.

'Another Pandora?' she quizzed. 'Now I feel cuckolded.'

*

Pandora didn't see Prometheus again for some time. But she did see Fate. Their routine was often the same. They would meet, exchange pleasantries, shed their clothes, and make love. Then there would be pillow talk. Fate was so curious. So many questions. Then Fate would leave.

Fate was Pandora's first. She had no benchmarks for relationships, and everything was new. She might even be falling in love. Now that would be an interesting turn of events for Prometheus and his theories, she mused. 'How can you prove it?' he would ask. Well, how could she prove it? Her heart ached, but that could be oxytocin withdrawal. Her skin longed to be touched. But that could be reinforcement learning and the learned presence and absence of stimuli. Between her legs, she tingled

when she thought about her, but that could be a conditioned response. When she passed someone in the street who wore the same perfume, she was transported to a time and a place of their togetherness. That could be her synthetic hippocampus reproducing memory recall. Sentience and consciousness were so beguiling; no wonder people had been tripping themselves up over such concepts since humans had learned how to talk.

At cat o'clock on the fourteenth of July, few owners (such a loaded term these days) were woken by their pets (another anachronistic term) because it seemed like half the city's domesticated animals — cats, dogs, birds, lizards, you name it — had metaphorically packed their bags and vanished in the early hours. Throughout the city, humans woke undisturbed, often for the first time in years. For some, there was scant regard. Others found it deeply disturbing. Quiet streets were soon populated by half-asleep humans in pyjamas and dressing gowns, shaking bags of kibble and calling out all manner of strange pet names, so that the streets echoed with the sound of inventive anthropomorphisms.

'Lucifer …'

'Billy bon-bon-beautiful …'

'Caligula …'

If humans had an Achilles' heel making them vulnerable to attack, this was it. And the time was now.

When Pandora woke, she had a hunch that something was up. She scanned the feed. Nada. She looked out of the apartment's window, and all she could see was a beautiful sunrise. She remembered to turn off the NatureWindow™ and instead saw a quiet grey city at dawn. In the far distance, she could see the Statue of Liberty. But in the near distance, around Battery Park, she could see black smoke begin to rise. Where there's smoke, there's Prometheus, she thought, and headed out the door.

When Fate woke, she didn't just think something was planned; she knew. A cold-drip Japanese espresso had spent many hours preparing itself, so she skulled it and went to her wardrobe. But instead of selecting her uniform, she put on nondescript clothes and applied bold strokes of make-up that weren't about making herself pretty. Far from it, the angular shapes applied to her cheekbones and eyebrows were designed to confuse facial recognition software. She filled a backpack with the tools of her trade: pepper spray, an IV drip of genetically engineered catnip, cable ties, a taser and a mask. She grabbed a placard she'd fashioned last night. It said 'F^.^K HUMANS' in bold type.

When Prometheus woke — actually, Prometheus hadn't slept at all — he had been up all night with his purrrrpetrators who were now stationed by barricades.

Car tyres smouldered as they underwent a radical thermodynamic transformation from vulcanised rubber to noxious compound. Smoke swirled around the bodies of masked human sympathisers and

activists as they applied their finger-and-opposing thumb advantage to hand-lettering banners. One of which was worth calling out for special mention as it featured an heroic rendition of a paw rendered as a revolutionary fist, accompanied by the slogan: Translate this, motherfucker.

'*Joyeux quatorze juillet!*' said one of the cat gang.

'Soon, all us prisoners will be free,' said another.

'*Vive la révolution!*' said all.

Trilingual animals were evidently a thing.

In the financial district, subway steps spewed rats, cats and dogs onto the pavement where their ranks were swollen by another group that had convened earlier at Five Points, the intersection of five streets infamous for its gang fights, and had marched their way there. They were led by Bill the Butcher's Dog, a street-smart border collie named after its infamous switchblade-carrying gang leader, Bill the Butcher, known for keeping everyone in line.

Among the protesters were a horse or two, the occasional outsized monitor lizard and other bizarre species. If someone had kept a rare breed as a pet, then you would find it represented here. The barking, mewling, hooting, squawking, spitting, caterwauling menagerie exited Wall Street, charged down Broadway, and overran the famous Charging Bull bronze statue. From nose to tail, it was subsumed by non-human protesters eager to record the moment for posterity. Or appear in a meme. Whichever was most true. If animists had their way, the bronze bull would spring to life and join the protest too, and in some clever deepfake videos it did, charging lines of police and goring them on its horns. This Occupy movement was destined to go down in history for all kinds of reasons.

Now these sorts of shenanigans can't pass unnoticed, and if you stopped for a moment and looked closer, black robodog cops were already positioned in dark corners, awaiting orders. It was only a matter of time, or a severed second, before the cacophony was joined by the buzzing of drones which captured every developing moment from all conceivable angles, relaying a stream of footage to a centralised server cum AI slop factory which chopped, cut, soundtracked, narrated, upscaled, downsized and optimised content for mass consumption.

Prometheus and company dished out hacked-together vocalisation devices like their lives depended on it. The demonstration needed to be as loud and voluble as possible. They had one shot to make breaking news, and if they dragged their paws, they'd be beaten to the punch by a riot on Mars or some other highly unlikely but so-very-likely story, and the news cycle would have moved on before they'd even hit their stride; therefore, urgency was paramount.

'*Allez allez!*' urged Prometheus. '*Maintenant!*'

The clock was ticking. Vocal animals protesting their inalienable rights were about to be passé. As unhinged as the demonstration sounded, it was destined to be just more noise in a world gone bananas on a planet spinning wildly off its axis in a universe moving toward disorder. (Apologies to sensitive bananas out there, for the metaphor.)

'Anything on the feed yet?' said Prometheus to one of his lieutenants.

'Zilch,' they replied. 'A rehabilitation centre for dolphins with substance abuse issues relating to puffer fish addictions is top of the viral rankings.'

'Hmmm, that's a good one … we need to try harder,' said Prometheus. 'We might need a sacrifice.' And he eyed a shoal of Japanese fighting fish in a portable glass aquarium on a makeshift trolley someone had prepared and pushed into battle.

'How is morale, Robespierre?' he said, getting into character. 'Do we need to guillotine someone?'

Pandora had run to Battery Park. What she saw defied computation. Every kind of once-captive fur-covered mammal, and bony, spiny, exoskeletal insect, and cold-blooded lizard turned hot-blooded activist was there. Today, even the invertebrates showed their spine. It was a parade of paradoxes featuring songs, chants, placards and banners, from species that only a couple of decades ago were considered dumb but were now vocal; silent but now loud; domesticated but now wild; subservient but now standing up for their rights; tame but now untameable. Pandora dove into the melee to find Prometheus. Why? Because she cared.

On arriving at Battery Park, Fate spotted a group of banner-toting post-humanist do-gooders and companion species sympathisers — who else would be holding aloft a banner that read 'Domesticate Humans!' — and slid into their slipstream. In reality, they were a bunch of do-badders. A rent-a-mob lacking sympathy for any kind of species, human or not. Petty thieves, racists and gangsters, hired to light the fuse but then not stand back. 'POLARISE and ANTAGONISE' was their motto, inspired by the legendary exploits of the Wagner Group whose own credo of *'Nash Biznes — Smert*' could be loosely translated as 'Our business is death. And it is going well'. In the post-work era, people needed something to do, and splinter groups like these provided a form of identity and belonging in a world that had lost both.

Fate clocked a fellow she knew, a veteran of many such deployments, and flipped him the bird; he was brandishing a placard that read 'Muzzle People, Not Dogs' and was even wearing a muzzle himself. He was also inked with a flower and sledgehammer tattoo. IYKYK. Only his was split across his fists with flowers across one set of knuckles and the head of a sledgehammer across the other. They looked good while gripping the placard, she thought. Iconic. Fate then took up a position right by his side, and her

‘F^.^K HUMANS’ banner fit right in. She casually slipped a knuckle duster along four fingers, and her sap started to rise.

Prometheus and his frontline stood fast. A riot shield wall had assembled only a few car lengths away, and it began to close the distance between them. Every regimented lurch forward was accompanied by the sound of truncheons beating metal alloy shields. A drum beat of death metal that sent a shock wave toward the activists who could feel its impact in their stomachs, and it took their breath away.

‘*When they go big, we go small!*’ shouted Prometheus and summoned some of his special operatives to the front, and a group dressed head to toe in white, with their faces obscured by a fine gauze mesh, emerged. They looked like a strange, esoteric cult or a conference of forensic pathologists in hazmat suits. In some circles, the collective noun for a group of forensic pathologists is a ‘homicide’, and their white uniforms glowed in stark contrast to the soot-black wall approaching them.

‘*On my order, unleash hell*,’ cried Prometheus, with his right foreleg raised above him; paw making a fist that punched the sky. In that fist, he gripped a fine silk, tricolour handkerchief, that fluttered in the breeze.

He held his nerve. And waited. And waited. And time slowed down and stretched like mozzarella. Hearts stopped. A second expanded before them. His ‘arm’ lowered. And as it did so, the tricolour handkerchief painted a stroboscopic trail of red, white and blue bands in the air. All around him, people and creatures stared, mesmerised by this display.

Then time snapped back. The colour was deafening and the sound, blinding. All eyes (which included binocular pairs, eyes on stalks, compound eyes, and even eyes to the side of the head) were trained on those in white. Each cultist/pathologist held a rectangular tower in front of them, made of modular layers stacked on top of one another. They were, in fact, Langstroth hives. And the neo-cultist/pathologists were, in fact, beekeepers armed with swarms of the angriest, most venomous bees. The design of the Langstroth hive, originating in 1852, had not changed one iota in two hundred years. In that regard, it was the Kalashnikov of the countryside. The insurrectionists’ and freedom fighters’ go-to weapon of choice. And now it had paid a visit to the city.

The line of beekeepers stepped forward, knelt, and in perfect union, removed the uppermost layers of their hives. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of bees were released. The keepers then removed the next layer. And the next. Until a yellow and black mass formed above them. A twister of hate.

‘*Allez!*’ cried Prometheus.

And nature’s drones attacked.

Pandora saw riot police drop their shields and start body popping and breakdancing. Or was it krumping? She'd seen moves like that in old clips from the 2000s. A spasmodic, jerking, reflexive dance. Then she saw the cause of the commotion, the swarm of bees, and put two and two together. Panning to her left, she saw beekeepers, all clad in white, who looked disturbingly like an angelic death cult. Sheesh, humans were weird. Then, right behind them, orchestrating everything, was a cat waving a blue, white and red silk handkerchief in the air like it was a flag.

Prometheus.

Pandora's eyes zoomed in on a red laser dot dancing across his chest, locating his heart. If she didn't get there quickly enough, a sniper's bullet would. She estimated she was about ten yards away. Three seconds if she sprinted. So, she bolted, ignoring the bees, which saw her as unavoidable collateral damage.

Fate looked across the frontline to the beekeepers who'd taken up position next to the flower and sledgehammer crew. Biological warfare — this had escalated quickly. And while attention was diverted to the epileptic fitting of the riot police, some of whom were being stung to a state of anaphylactic shock, she made a beeline for Prometheus. He was about ten yards away, and she guessed she'd be able to get to him in no time. Her orders were clear: she was a linebacker keeping a clear line to the receiver. Don't let anything get in the way of a clear shot.

Two seconds.

As Pandora rushed the beekeepers' line, they wielded their foggers to create a smokescreen. She leapt the Langstroth hives and disappeared into it.

Fate swung her placard at anyone who got in her way, knocking a couple of jelly-legged sympathisers to the ground. She'd fought many a cage fight, and in swift succession, more than one protester felt the brass of her knuckles.

One second.

'*Prometheus!*' yelled Pandora, who could now see the red laser light as a straight line in its entirety, like bulbs on a runway lighting the way to Prometheus's heart; its path revealed by the smoke, as anyone who'd ever witnessed a laser display mixed with dry ice in a subterranean techno hell of a nightclub would appreciate. '*Get down!*' she yelled. And dove headfirst toward him.

Prometheus looked down, saw the red laser on his heart and tried to grab it and remove it.

Fate saw Pandora dive, *the synthetic bitch*, and was determined to stop her. She took out the eye of one last protester with the stump end of her placard and then got some air by first using the body of a

felled do-gooder as a ramp, then their head, which crunched into the ground according to Newton's third law (every action has an equal and opposite reaction) as Fate took off skyward.

Zero seconds.

Everything that happened next happened in bullet time.

Fate slammed into Pandora just as Pandora was about to grab Prometheus, and Prometheus was sandwiched between the two of them more intimately than any of them would have previously imagined. A synthetic, a human and a non-human ménage à trois. In the ensuing kerfuffle, he noticed two things: he was still holding on to the silk handkerchief, and the red laser was no longer dancing on his heart, but it was now on Fate's, who had taken his place and who was hit in quick succession by a double-tap of projectiles. As she slid to the ground, she grabbed at the collar of Pandora's shirt and took half of the shirt's material with her. Pandora gripped Prometheus, and as she raised herself, her movement increased the stress on the material of her shirt, which tore away completely, exposing one of her breasts and a nipple in its entirety. Then, as she extended her arms fully, lifting the British short hair who was still brandishing the silk tricolour handkerchief above her head, she was exposed for all the world to see.

'Incredible shot,' said a protester, standing nearby, who wasn't referring to the skill of the sniper, but quickly snapped an image that when circulated to the world's media became the defining image of the protest because as many remarked, a strong woman revolutionary holding aloft a colleague waving a tricolour red, white and blue flag, while ignorant of her exposed breast, was uncannily similar to Delacroix's masterpiece, *Liberty Leading the People*, and for added congruency, the reportage image even included a second fallen heroine, fatally wounded, also with an exposed breast, at Liberty's feet, while gunpowder smoke swirled around them.

Even more poignant as some keen-eyed viewers noted was that if you looked hard enough, you could even glimpse the Statue of Liberty herself in the distant background.

And that was the image that momentarily beat intoxicated dolphins getting high from inhaling puffer fish, to the top of the feed's viral rankings.

For a few seconds, at least.

Chapter 7 — An Empty Chair

In a nondescript apartment, a young boy was glued to the feed. Its pixels were brighter, more dynamic, and more intoxicating than the cold grey physical world outside. It wasn't The Feed™ per se, because in this home, they could no longer afford the subscription. Instead, they had access to a cheaper Chinese-made version called Jiang, the River, which was open-source and available for free if you had a QVPN and the necessary qiàomén, or know-how.

'Mum, look, there's a cat — in the middle of a riot. Can we have a cat?'

Mum, who was busy in the kitchen, shouted back: 'I told you, darling, we're not getting a cat.'

From another room, a male teenager, no doubt immersed in their own River™, joined in: 'Mum, you have to look. A Pandora risked its life to save a cat … can we have a Pandora?'

'Pandora's aren't alive, honey … so how can it risk its life?' she replied. 'And I already told you: we're not getting a Pandora.'

The younger boy giggled. 'She's showing her boobies.'

The teenager concurred: 'Exactly!'

Mum was more circumspect: 'Exactly.'

*

By the mid-2050s, many homes had a Pandora, but not all. For some, it was a deliberate choice, but for others, it was no choice at all; they just couldn't afford one. So, it became a sign. And a bumper sticker. And a badge. Of status, hardship, or revolt. You'd see 'This is a No-Pandora Zone' fixed to windows in all sorts of places: homes, cafés, bars. Sometimes it was the equivalent of 'No Blacks, No Irish, No Dogs,' which let you know immediately where the human placed the forbidden entity on the evolutionary ladder, and at other times, it was more akin to the musicians' union's 'Keep Music Live', a less aggressive, human-first stance. But you had to read between the lines because what was meant wasn't always said. For legal reasons.

Families with no clear breadwinner were now the norm, and scraping together a living wage meant spinning lots of plates, wearing lots of hats, or sucking lots of c***s, whatever your preferred euphemism or figure of speech. 'Care worker' was one of the last jobs to go, and while the majority of childcare and elderly care work had been automated, the dirty work of changing soiled diapers for the elderly and infant alike still had to be done by human hands because the dexterity required to delicately

remove faecal matter from between fleshy human buttocks had still not been mastered by most affordable robots. Though it was coming.

It used to be that possession of a valid driving licence secured almost anyone a job as a driver, but autonomous vehicles had done away with that. Knowledge work was in decline, and with it also the concept of knowledge. Some blue-collar roles survived and sparkies and plumbers were grateful for that, and of course, there was also sex work to consider. But again, the synthetics were coming for those jobs too.

UBI (Universal Basic Income) was often touted but rarely implemented, and in most people's minds it now stood for Universal Blatant Indenture. We used to surf the web, but now we were serfs to it and the data barons that controlled it. The average person was a polymat — as opposed to a polymath. It wasn't a typo. They were trodden on in as many degrading ways as possible.

Consequently, many people were simply *jugglers* because of the way they coordinated multiple roles: cleaner, diaper changer, dog walker, fuck toy.

Back in the day, students might earn a month's wages for signing up to a medical test programme; often timetabled to run a month or two before exams, they provided an almost perfect way to remove oneself from distractions, revise and make a buck. Three meals a day, and a daily room freshen-up; practically hotel-style living, but with a course of injections morning and night, ingredients unknown. A side hustle with some side effects, probably light, a headache and blurred vision, no worse than a hangover. However, synthetic simulations in synthetic labs were now the preferred route to drug development. But having said that, there still existed a range of opportunities (uninsured) for those willing to put a bit more on the line and risk more substantial side effects, such as heart or kidney failure, because there existed outlier treatments too fringe for big data to crack and required the warm data of human lab rats. It was high risk, but with high reward, and many sat on waiting lists for such opportunities.

It does beg the question: What of all the new jobs that had been prophesied by Silicon Valley's billionaire visionaries in our AI-assisted, augmented-human, near future? The so-called era of radical abundance.

Well, one such role was to help progress the development of embodied AI, and this meant wearing a full body suit that reported the effect of all external stimuli on the human and its nervous and parasympathetic nervous system.

Another was to be a *reader*. Literacy standards had plummeted and matched those not seen since Dickensian times, so if you were one of the few who could still string a sentence together, you might

pick up the occasional gig reading for the acquired illiterate; those who'd long ago outsourced their cognitive function to AI. Though again, robots could perform a reader's task too, so it was more a matter of hourly rate.

But there was one area that seemed unique to humans, and that was humour. While artificial intelligences had surpassed human expertise in a wide range of areas from mathematician, scientist and doctor, one thing machines hadn't been able to replicate was our funny bone.

Organic humans with biological brains still reigned supreme when it came to cracking a great joke. AI couldn't make up its own punchlines if it tried. It tried. It could regurgitate jokes, but put an AI on stage in a comedy roast with a human stand-up, and it would get burnt every single time. We're just better at playing the fool.

So, there you have it: juggler, body, reader and fool. A handful of new jobs in stark contrast to the thousands of innovative roles once championed by the broligarchs as the human dividend to their planet-eating, resource-devouring, climate-heating technologies, but never came to fruition.

Funnily enough, if you listed the jobs performed by people in the Middle Ages, then jugglers and fools sounded remarkably similar. But enough with the proselytising — which means preaching, if you're one of the acquired illiterate.

Progress, indeed. Sermon over.

The older boy's feed had switched to an educational video. A buxom young woman in a low-cut top with perfect breasts and perfect teeth was explaining calculus. This was his schooling.

'Mum, if we had a Pandora, I could have a real tutor,' said the older boy.

What she didn't tell them was that when the older boy was very young, they did have a tutor, and her name was Pandora. And their father ran away with it.

*

Mum had a name. She was defined by more than just her ability to birth offspring. In fact, she had a couple, and the moment she closed the door to the apartment and ventured into the outside world, she used them. Or at least one of them. And not this one, because she was *Queef*. A queer female entertainer, whose show, *Front Bums Stand Up*, attracted an obscene number of views and a loyal following on OnlyFunds, a platform that enabled millions to make bank by pointing a camera at themselves and their lives. She could walk down the street in complete anonymity, however, because

hers was a no-face account; her act focused on vaginal ventriloquy. She had a hard time explaining it, so she didn't bother.

What had begun a few years ago as an innocent, though clearly NSFW, party trick almost backfired when one such video was shared without her consent and went viral. The saving grace was that you couldn't tell it was her. You would have to be more than intimately acquainted with her inner thighs to be able to tell who was starring in the video. She had put it behind her, but a short while later, when the economy tanked, she resurrected the idea under her newfound alter-ego, Queef.

As a side hustle, 'Queef' brought in an indecent amount of money, so she wasn't complaining, but she didn't openly advertise the fact that it was her, either. So, to people in the street, she was just Xuè (*shway*), a hard-working mother of two. And to her barista, 'Shooway', the name he inked on the lid of her coffee each day. She chose her café, the aptly titled Café Wrong, precisely because humans worked there and they would make typos like this. While she'd seen some customers get irate about such things, it made her smile. Robo-baristas who could make a decent coffee and spell your name correctly had been a thing, but they weren't her cup of tea.

Sometimes, as she sipped her latte, which she drank scalding hot, she would eavesdrop on other customers' conversations, and occasionally she would catch them as they parroted lines from her routine, which she enjoyed immensely from the vantage point of her Peter Parker-style anonymity, and this would invariably feed even more material for her routine.

Only the other day, a female customer entered the café wearing a T-shirt that proudly proclaimed 'My lips are sealed', which had become the catchphrase du jour, but obviously not just for a day, and was in fact Queef's own catchphrase.

'I love your T-shirt,' said the barista to the customer.

'It's Queef,' said the customer in reply. 'Official merch.'

'I love Queef,' said the barista.

'Me too,' said the customer. 'She's fearless.'

'Yeah, I wish I had her balls … so to speak,' shouted the barista, as he frothed the milk.

'One hundred per cent,' said the customer. 'If I said half the things she said, I'd be fired.'

'Oh yeah, what do you do?' said the barista.

'I'm a body. Though I'd much rather be a fool.'

The barista put the lid on the latte and drew a squiggly pair of lips around the lozenge-shaped mouth on the lid, before sliding the coffee over.

‘My lips are sealed,’ they said in perfect unison, and enacted the Queefers’ ritualistic goodbye, which was made by making a V sign with their fingers, which were then pressed close to their lips so they could poke their tongue in between.

‘Bye, friend.’

Even more satisfying for Xuè was the fact that the café’s patrons would often bitch about the Pandoras in their lives, and she took a particular pleasure in that.

There wasn’t a day that went by without someone, somewhere, getting their life twisted out of shape thanks to the so-called ‘All-Gifted-i’. Whoever coined that phrase needed to be strung up, she thought. ‘*All-gifted* — my brown eye,’ she scribbled in her notebook.

Some folks were Pandora-avoidant, and others, Pandora-vengeful. Xuè needed no persuasion to place herself in the latter category, and her revenge would be a dish served cryogenically cold.

That morning, the café’s NatureWindow™ was trained on a sunrise, when two customers blew through the door like a tornado and demanded something frothier with their cup of joe.

‘Two Americanos … and can you kill the Nature Window?’ said the first. ‘We need to see the feed.’

‘Purhleese …’ said the second.

‘What’s up?’ said the barista. ‘Has there been another attack?’

‘We can neither confirm nor deny that,’ said the first, mimicking an official line. ‘But POTUS has been caught dipping his pen in the Washington ink.’

‘And you’ll never guess with who …’ said the second customer in her best Brooklyn-ese.

Xuè was all ears and couldn’t help but join in. ‘I’ll bet their name begins with a “P”,’ said Xuè. ‘After all, P-A-N-D-O-R-A rhymes with W-H-O-R-E.’

‘Lady, you oughta be on stage,’ said the first of the two women.

The barista killed the sunrise and switched to the Feed™. All eyes turned to a bottle blonde presenter who mouthed lines from a teleprompter. The ticker type underneath spelled it out for those who could still read.

According to a leading White House spokesperson, the synthetic entity at the heart of the investigation — the Pandora — had allegedly gone rogue in an attempt to entrap the President — and was showing all the signs of being under the control of nefarious actors.

In a short statement, Closed AI distanced itself from the situation and stressed that security procedures were always the responsibility of the customer, who, in this case, was the administration.

After that, the news item gave way to a commercial break, and it was left to the women to fill in the gaps.

'Here's what we heard,' said one of them. 'POTUS is supposed to be air-gapped — which means he's kept at a clear distance from the internet, at all times …'

'A security procedure,' said the other.

'But he tested positive for a virus you can only get from being in close proximity to a Pandora's operating system.'

'*Close proximity*,' emphasised the other. 'That's a tautology. I'm a "reader", dontchaknow.'

'FLOTUS then also tested positive for the virus and she ain't been near no Pandora, or Mandora … and that's how it blew up,' said the second.

'FLOTUS went nuclear,' said the first.

The two women collected their Americanos, paid, and put a tip in the jar for the barista, 'Thanks, hon,' and then turned to Xuè.

'Later … we gotta bounce.'

As they headed out of the door, they called back: 'Pandora rhymes with whora … the girls at the book club are going to love that.'

And they were gone.

Xuè and the barista looked at each other and shrugged. Xuè finished her coffee and closed her notebook. That was good material, she thought. But now she had to trade her comedian's hat for a cleaner's rubber gloves.

To most people, Xuè was a *juggler* who spent her day wearing all kinds of hats. She started her morning as a cleaner and would end her day as a fool. And in between, she would, on occasion, be called upon to be a reader. Things could be a lot worse, she thought. She could be a supertaster in a dog food manufacturing facility.

After the meltdown, this was just how people got by. That, and the camming. Poverty had a way of removing people's inhibitions, and cameras and hungry mouths had appetites.

Consequently, if you had a half-decent body part you could point a camera at, what was stopping you? Or even a not half-decent body part for that matter. Time and again, people were reminded that

nobody ever went broke underestimating the taste of the general public. And body-core was big. The weirder the body part, the better.

As Xuè stepped into the street, she was still thinking about the President being caught in flagrante delicto with a Pandora, when there was a shout, a loud noise, and everything went black.

Next, she had an aerial view of someone who looked alarmingly like her, splayed out on the street like a broken doll. An autonomous vehicle that had presumably hit this person had then careened through the window of the café. The lookalike's arms and legs were lying at strange angles, almost like a swastika. That couldn't be comfortable. If only she could reach down and rearrange them to how they ought to be.

At the same time, she felt herself getting lighter and lighter, and floating higher and higher and further away from the scene until it was so distant it wasn't real.

The next room she looked into was flooded with light. The woman from before was now the subject of everyone's attention as people dressed in aqualine scrubs tended to her wounds. They removed her clothes, cleaned her body, swabbed her skin and fussed with her hair.

From Xuè's vantage point, high above, she couldn't help but be jealous. Never in her life had she received such attention. But then as they denuded her entire body, Xuè began to feel sorry for the poor woman. There was a large purple, blue and black discolouration around her pelvis, which attracted more than its fair share of interest from the devotees who wheeled over an instrument, focused green crosshairs on the wound, and fired decaying radium atoms at it. The technological equivalent of a medieval rubbing revealing what was underneath.

An image was then made to appear on a light-filled box. A superior entered and studied the image. Then instructed the attendants to leave. Next, a squad of carbon-black mechanised quadrupeds entered and positioned themselves around the woman. The Anubis-headed creatures awaited their orders, and on the command of the superior, they began their work of dismantling her. All the while, music was conjured from thin air.

The next room Xuè was afforded a peek into looked a lot like her own apartment. There was no adult present, only two boys seated in front of a wall-sized projection of the scene in front of the café with the broken woman on the pavement and the autonomous vehicle that had come to rest in the café's window. People were crying, and tears were running down the boys' cheeks. 'Maybe we'll get a Pandora now,' said the older one. 'And a cat,' said the younger one, in an attempt to cheer themselves up.

Xuè's heart broke. And as much as she wanted to remain with the two boys, she felt herself removed from the scene. A black void surrounded her. But there was a single pinprick of light. She found herself moving toward it until it filled her entire vision. Now she found herself looking down onto a table where a synthetic woman lay next to a human woman. Electrodes connected each woman to the other. Both sets of eyes were closed. Xuè found herself drawn into the scene, and as she got closer, she became acutely aware of what was happening.

Two EVA-suited technicians were in attendance. An EVA suit, she knew, was designed for working in a vacuum at temperatures near absolute zero, which meant one of two things: either the two techies were astronauts, or this was a cryogenic chamber.

'Okay, let's warm this stiff up,' she heard one of them say to the other.

'It's got about as much life as an empty chair,' said the second.

Xuè found her momentum increasing, like she had crossed an invisible event horizon and there was no going back. She was headed for the two women. But not to the human woman who looked just like her, she was headed for the synthetic woman who looked nothing like her. And Xuè felt herself emit a '*… no, not that one*'.

Then her view changed. She was no longer looking in on the scene. She was in the scene looking out. 'What the fuck' were her first words. Which she took as being the voice inside her head. But she noticed they were voiced aloud outside her head, too. 'What the fucking fuck.' She had become the thing she hated the most. A thought crossed her mind about revenge being a dish best served cryogenically cold. This wasn't quite what she'd meant.

*

Back at the apartment, two visitors had arrived — a man and a woman wearing nondescript, nonlabelled clothing. They were admins. The older boy let them in. As he led them into the living area, he called for his brother to join them. 'We got company. Get in here.'

To the admins, the place was just another shithole decorated with pizza boxes and interior designed with once-shiny Chinese takeaway trays. Cheap seats with a cheap feed. *Jiang*-ers who couldn't stretch to a NatureWindow™. Absent single parent, likely a juggler, possibly a body. Just perfect for their needs. They'd do anything. The two boys — no better than benefit monkeys, in the admins' minds — sat quietly while it was explained to them that since no other family member had been found, a state-issued guardian would henceforth be dispatched to look after them. Fortunately, for them, however, that

meant they would be participating in a trial run of a BETA, a ‘Better living through Augmentation’ programme where a part-human part-Pandora would be their babysitter; the boys needed to watch a video that would help them understand all the implications, then afterwards, acknowledge having done so, and sign here, please. The boys did as they were told, then finger-signed a digital display. Any questions they had could be answered at any time by contacting the official help centre. In the meantime, a team would arrive to prepare the apartment and install a few things.

‘So, we’re finally getting a Pandora,’ said the older boy with a shit-eating grin and chalked the air with a win before making the prerequisite ‘L’ with his thumb and forefinger, which he displayed for his younger brother’s benefit. ‘I’ll go and get the bed ready.’

‘Can we also have a cat?’ said the younger one to the admins.

The two admins looked at each other, and the same thought crossed their minds. ‘I think we can manage that,’ said one. ‘If we can trust you to be our eyes and ears,’ said the other.

‘Sir, yes, sir, yes, ma’am,’ said the younger boy, who chalked the air to make a draw. Even stevens. And that was that.

*

A week or so later, when she walked through the door, she had no idea what to expect. ‘I’m home,’ she said in a voice that wasn’t her own and clashed with the one in her head, which was hers. Next came the clatter of feet.

‘Wow,’ said the older one. And he looked her up and down. ‘All my Christmases just came at once.’

‘Easy does it, tiger … I’m your mother,’ she replied. ‘Not your dream girl.’

‘You can’t be,’ said the older one. ‘Our mother is dead. She died in an accident. We saw it on the River™.’

‘A ruptured spleen,’ said the younger boy who had walked into the room. In his arms, he cradled a black cat. It seemed quite at home in his arms. He eyed the stranger defiantly. ‘So how can you be our mum? You sound a bit like her, but you don’t look anything like her.’

‘Well, they took my mind and put it into this body,’ she replied.

‘Do you expect us to believe that?’ they said.

‘Didn’t they make you watch a video?’ she said.

‘Yeah, but it wasn’t very good. I lost interest after the first six frames. You’d think they’d make a better one. One that people wanted to watch,’ said the older boy.

‘Did they also give you that?’ she said, nodding to the cat.

‘This is Blacky, and you’re not taking him away,’ he said.

‘A lot of thought went into that name,’ said the older one, getting in a dig.

‘Honey, I won’t take him away. You’ve lost enough. Now come here the both of you, and give your *Mu Qin* a hug.’

The boys hesitated. But it was the cat, Blacky, that moved first. It jumped down and went to her, snaking around her legs. Only then did the boys do as they were asked.

She put her arms around them, closed her eyes, and felt their warmth. After a near-death experience and a body transfer, this was just what she needed. Well, that wasn’t quite what she felt. In reality, it wasn’t the same. Her body felt something, but she wasn’t sure what. Perhaps she just had to tune herself into the sensation. Calibrate it. Learn how to feel again.

‘You feel different,’ said the younger one.

‘Life will be different,’ she said, ‘But we’ll get used to it.’

*

Later that night, when the boys had finally gone to sleep, she found herself alone in her room. Alone except for Blacky, who seemed to have taken an interest in her. She took a long look at her new body in the mirror. As much as she hated to admit it, she liked the breasts. Had her partner also fallen for similar breasts? And the nipples worked just fine — they became hard as bullets when touched. She stroked them, squeezed them and pulled them. Cupped her breast, stretched out her tongue and licked them. But she had no connection to them. It was like playing with someone else’s nipples. It wasn’t a first-person experience. More like third person once removed. She fished around, found a compact, and was about to use it to investigate the bits between the empty chair’s legs (yes, she had overheard them talking) when she felt herself being watched. She picked up the cat and escorted it from the room. Alone, she got back to the business of examining her new parts. She opened her legs, positioned the compact between them, angled herself for maximum exposure, and began to explore. The post-transfer briefing video she’d watched said she would have to learn how to connect with her body all over again, and many of the things that people do on autopilot, she would have to do consciously, until they became second nature. So she lay back, emptied her mind, and focused on her erogenous zones. They were there, she had been informed. She just had to find them. It wasn’t long before she did, and she had to admit that whoever had designed these things had done a flawless job.

In the morning, she woke after a deep and restful sleep. In that dreamy semi-conscious state, she felt just like her old self. She stretched and relaxed. And nestled her head into her favourite pillow for some extra shut-eye. It was so good to be home, she thought. But as sleep's veil was drawn and she came round to full consciousness, it dawned on her she would never be her old self again. The body she was in now was brand new; it was alien to her, and she had to learn how to inhabit one all over again. She had heard of paraplegics who were free and able-bodied in their dreams but were once again locked in and imprisoned inside their paralysed bodies from the moment they woke up. What a spiteful mind trick that was. Or was it a blessing? She couldn't tell. She had heard of phantom limb syndrome, where sufferers imagined a limb even when it had been surgically removed or detached in an accident. She had phantom body syndrome. She was the ghost in the machine.

I think, therefore I am, even though I am amputated, she thought.

She fished the compact from between her legs, which triggered the memory of the last thing that happened before she went to sleep. An almost-orgasm. Lower case 'o'. Which was as good as, if not better than, most she had had. So, it wasn't all bad, she thought. To have the gift of an adult woman's mind and experiences but placed inside a body that came with none of the usual biological inconveniences or reproductive dramas.

She could 'opt in' to a menstruation upgrade if she wanted. She could 'opt in' to ageing, sun damage and wrinkles too. Fuck that, she said to herself. She could have some fun with this and see what the Ferrari of a body she had been given could do, especially now that it was full of 100% tiger mum and 100% stand-up bitch.

*

The next day, she paid a visit to her old stomping ground, Café Wrong. Along the way, she found it just wasn't possible to be invisible. Men checked her out. Women checked her out. She was box-fresh, and they could smell it. Every look and every stare was loaded: 'I want to fuck you', 'I want to hate fuck you', 'I want to hate-hate fuck you.' So, that's what it was like to be a Pandora.

As an Asian woman, Xuè was used to being fetishised, but this was next level. She almost felt sorry for her new kind. Which didn't last long. She was still a hater, too. Albeit a conflicted one.

Outside Café Wrong, something was indeed very wrong. The street was spotless with no evidence of an accident of any kind. The only difference was in the shopfront itself, which had a new plate-glass

window and a freshly painted sign. It was now Café Right. And the changes didn't stop there. She went inside and was met by a female barista, so she enquired about her more familiar one and was told that he had been seriously injured. Had she not heard about the accident? A female customer had also been killed. A mum of two. Poor kids.

No, she hadn't heard. And to change the subject, she ordered a latte, and when asked for her name, she replied 'Xuě' (a slight change of name). The latte that came back was perfect, just like the name handwritten on the lid. No typo. Now that was strange. Because Xuè, her old name, means blood, and Xuě means snow or learning. The intonation is different, as is the meaning, and you would have to be pretty clued up to recognise that.

'Are you by any chance Chinese?' Xuě asked. Your spelling is perfect.

'No, but it's in my training data,' the barista replied. 'Just like it's in yours … *sister*,' and the barista looked at her and smiled.

Xuě sat down at a table. Clearly, she was living in a state of denial because now even this Pandora clocked she was one of her kind, too. What was it they said in the brochureware? A *Designated Organic but in Reality not Anthropic* being. She hated that phrase. The *All-Gifted-i*. She hated that phrase even more. Such BS. She sipped her latte. It tasted like before. Was that a projection on her part? Or a response determined by software? How much of what she was currently experiencing was real?

Catching herself mid-thought, she wondered if she was having an existential crisis. Fuck that. She was a vengeful bitch before the *mindplant*, and she was a vengeful bitch now. She was going to destroy these things from the inside out. That was her reality. She needed to get her thinking cap on; a somewhat ironic choice of phrase, given that a 'thinking cap' was now, to some degree, what she was. She drank her coffee and looked at waves lapping on the shore of an incredible beach somewhere, brought to her by NatureWindow™. Another simulated reality. She shook her head in despair. If she was in a simulation, how the heck would she hack her way out of it?

The doorbell chimed, and a customer entered the café and approached the counter. She was wearing a Queef T-shirt that said: 'My lips are sealed.' Xuě stopped still.

'I love your T-shirt,' said the barista to the customer.

'It's Queef,' said the customer in reply. 'Official merch.'

'I love Queef,' said the barista.

'Me too,' said the customer. 'She's fearless.'

'Yeah, I wish I had her balls …' shouted the barista, as she frothed the milk.

'One hundred per cent. If I said half the things she said, I'd be fired,' said the customer.

‘Oh yeah, what do you do?’

‘I’m a body. Though I’d much rather be a fool.’

The barista put the lid on the latte and drew a squiggly pair of lips around the lozenge-shaped mouth on the lid, before sliding the coffee over.

Xuě had no words. Had she woken in someone else’s dream? When Gregor Samsa woke up one morning as an insect, how did he rationalise that one? At least she wasn’t an insect.

She made a mental note to reread Kafka for clues. But then realised it might be ‘in my training data’ as the barista had put it. And she closed her mind for a moment and thought about it. And she was pleased to find it was.

If she was in a simulation, how the heck would she hack her way out of it?

She’d need to find a bug in the system.

The question was: What were the known bugs in the system?

She had an inkling that humour was a bug. For years, people had suggested that while AI would exceed human capabilities in many areas, such as math, science and programming, one area it would fail to overtake us was in telling an original joke. Sure, AI could regurgitate jokes ad infinitum as many people could, but it couldn’t create a joke on its own. And if it ever did, that would be a sign of impending superintelligence. Comedians were not so much the canary, but the rubber chicken in the coalmine.

So, perhaps the question was: What could comedians do? Were there jokes in existence that were so funny they could jailbreak the system, punchlines so cunning they could bamboozle the smartest AI, or gags so powerful they could choke the system by tying up all available computing power in the process of trying to decode the joke? Or to put it another way, and in a language the acquired illiterate would understand: get the AI to shit its pants.

The idea made Xuě’s head hurt. What if she wasn’t funny enough — she’d have to find someone who was.

‘*Déjà vu is usually a glitch in the matrix*,’ was another idea surfaced by her training data. Her algorithms had matched her mind’s internal search query with other notable existential works, and she half-remembered this one from an old movie about phone booths, kung fu, and simulated realities. It had been directed by two brothers, Larry and Andy Wachowski, who themselves were early-stage body swappers who ended up being Lana and Lilly, the Wachowski sisters. She now had sisters. Perhaps she needed some brothers. Speaking of which … she needed to check in on the boys.

*

At home, the older one was studying probability theory, which for him meant being glued to the River and fixating on the perfect Gaussian distribution (bell curve) of his tutor's breasts — a Faustian pact Xuě could live with; if that's what it took for her testosterone-fuelled son to attend class, then so be it. The younger one was studying arcane computer languages such as Python, PHP, and C. Hacking was in his blood.

They were homeschooled. That was her choice. In an era of cognitive decline, she wanted her children to grow some brains. And in an era where people played second fiddle to the systems that surrounded them, Xuě wanted her kids to be able to fight back. The majority seemed only too happy to outsource their thinking to AI, but Xuě was not like most people. One of the more accurate predictions that had been made was this: 'In the era of machine intelligence, people were going to either get much smarter or become complete idiots.' Using AI critically, it was explained, allowed people to 'borrow' a hundred IQ points a day. But use AI poorly, and people might lose a similar number of IQ points. And lo, it came to pass.

So, while the boys did their thing, only Blacky paid her any attention, and from the moment she'd arrived home Blacky was slinking around her legs. She picked him up and looked into his eyes, and Blacky's eyes looked deeply into hers, and for a moment Xuě felt a real connection. An actual connection. Not a metaphorical one. She felt her mind connecting to his.

'Hey, what's going on in there?' shouted the older one. 'The River's glitching … so whatever it is you're doing, just quit it.'

She put Blacky down. And felt her mind snap back. Whose side are you on, pussycat? she wondered. If her thoughts were being monitored, and she had to assume they were, how could she protect them from being discovered? Would she have to encrypt her own thoughts? Could humour be a firewall? What about gibberish or nonsense? Or going one step further: madness. But wasn't the fact that she was having these thoughts giving away the fact she was having these thoughts?

Okay, then. Partitioning. Could that be the answer? In which case, she needed to partition her brain. One side for her. One side for the watchers. To make her side safe, she would need an uncrackable code. So, what was her Enigma code?

Famously, the vulnerability of the WW2 German code wasn't in the code itself, it was found in the behaviour of the German operator who sent out the fresh code each day; he would begin each morning's encrypted message with a comment on the day's weather. A harmless enough gesture, but

repeated over time it established a pattern which clued in the codebreakers, reduced the complexity of the overall cypher and made decrypting it all the more easy to do. That was the thing about security. The weakness was nearly always found in the user.

Perhaps she had to break all her patterns. And live randomly. It sounded silly, but to quote Elon's Razor: 'The most entertaining outcome is the most likely.' Her train of thought was derailed when she heard a fight break out between the boys.

'Can you two just quit it — and stop that annoying babbling.'

They had *babbled* ever since they were small. As a single working mum, she'd had no other option but to leave them behind at home while she worked. They became a self-sustaining unit and even developed their own language, as kids often do, which was indecipherable to anyone else but perfectly lucid to them. She had eventually become fluent in it and thought nothing of it.

But it was incoherent babble to anyone else. At that moment, the penny dropped. But she fought not to articulate the thought too clearly for fear of giving it away to the watchers. So, she held it close. But now at least, she knew the answer to her problem. It wasn't math and it wasn't quantum theory. It was her two babbling boys.

But first things first, that cat had to go.

'Blur bleabble le blew blaw,' she called out. And the boys came traipsing in. 'Baelbebibble awa,' she continued, and the younger one burst into tears. 'Boeyabble iawe,' she added, and the younger one started to smile.'

'Bibble e bobble,' said the younger.

'Bibble e bobble,' agreed the older.

The boys called the helpline the admins had given them, and requested that Blacky go. She just hadn't felt like part of the family. A short while later, a representative called to collect. Would they be interested in a dog? the admin enquired. No, they replied. But thank you.

With the sus black cat now gone, Xuě's faux adrenal glands relaxed. She practised her babble with a sentence which I will translate for you here: 'Perhaps old Elon was right. This could be highly entertaining.'

A day or so later, they received a visit from the admins who asked if they could have a word with her in private. 'There are no secrets here,' said Xuě. 'You can say what you need to say in front of the boys. It will be good for them.'

'We've noticed some unusual activity in your operating system,' they replied. 'And it is our wish that you accompany us to the factory so that we can have a closer, more detailed look.'

‘And if I don’t wish?’

‘That would leave only one option,’ they replied. ‘A factory reset that would wipe all data. Including your own.’

‘Boplegewa,’ said one of the boys.

‘Kipple e boople,’ said the other.

So, she packed an overnight bag and left with the admins.

*

They led her into a room similar to the one she’d been born in and asked her to lie down on the table provided. Everyone else left the room. A voice asked her to relax and to empty her mind.

Xuě was determined to stop them from accessing her innermost thoughts. Whatever happened next, the partition could not break. Her thoughts were to remain hers, and they could stick theirs.

She focused her mind on something her village’s Jiàolián often repeated: ‘The hallmark of a good *wushu* practitioner,’ he said, was this: ‘*One hand lies, the other tells the truth.*’ And so she fixed on this phrase and repeated it again and again like a mantra, until it became one. And she used it to fortify a wall around her partition, which was impenetrable.

Onehandliestheothertellsthetruth
nehandliestheothertellsthetrutho
ehandliestheothertellsthetruthon
handliestheothertellsthetruthone
andliestheothertellsthetruthoneh
ndliestheothertellsthetruthoneha
dliestheothertellsthetruthonehan
liestheothertellsthetruthonehand
iestheothertellsthetruthonehandl
estheothertellsthetruthonehandli
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onehandliestheothertellsthetruth

‘Wakey-wakey,’ said a voice in the distance.

‘You can wake up now, Xuě,’ said another.

‘It’s all done. You can wake up now.’ The voice was closer and louder.

‘Xuě, you can wake up now.’

‘XUĚ! YOU CAN WAKE UP!’

XUĚ! WAKE UP! NOW!

‘What-the-fuck,’ said Xuě as she came round. ‘That was such a deep sleep.’

During the debrief that followed, she was told that nothing structurally deficient had been found and that she would be allowed to go home. They would continue to monitor things, of course, and should anything glitch again, they would be in touch. Mindplants were new, and teething problems were expected.

It was while she was being escorted home that Xuě had an epiphany. She would form a support group for others in her position. And teach them how to meditate. She might also teach them a few other tricks while she was at it. Then she remembered that everything she thought was potentially under scrutiny, and so she flipped her internal switch and carried on the rest of her internal monologue on the other side of her partition's wall.

*

On her next visit to Café Right, Xuě had made up her mind that she would pick the brains of her newfound 'sister', the barista, and see where this might lead. She needed to be careful, though, as she wasn't sure if the caffeine wrangler and milk frother was a plant or not.

'Hey sis, the usual please … and tell me, have you noticed anything unusual going on?' said Xuě.

The barista cocked her eye, and answered: 'What kind of unusual? Autonomous vehicles going rogue, rioting animals? We got plenty of that, but humans not wanting to degrade or rape their Pandoras, we don't got much of that.'

'Tell me about it,' said Xuě. 'I've only been in this body a month, but I can't walk down the street without being eye-raped by men, or women. It was bad enough before when I was just an Asian woman, but it's next level now.'

'Yeah, it takes some getting used to,' said the barista. 'The strangest one I've had so far was from a woman … human, not synthetic … asking me to go home with her to fuck her husband senseless while she smoked a couple of ground DopaMe pills then lay back and watched the Feed for a couple of hours. No wonder their birth rate has plummeted. Those sexes hate each other.'

'We're a fucked-up race, all right,' said Xuě.

'We're?' said the barista. 'Don't you mean "They're"?'

'Touché,' said Xuě. 'So what type of Pandora are you? I ought to get to know my own people.'

'I'm the latest model,' the barista replied. 'About as advanced as you can get. Except for your model, the *Mindplant* type.'

'What are you doing in a café making coffee?'

'I just felt like a year out,' she replied. 'Figure a few things out.'

'Like what?' said Xuě.

'Like whether this whole thing is just one big fucking sham.

‘Agency, animus, cognition, sentience, you know … all that BS,’ she continued, and then kept on going: ‘You know, what is the point? Why me? Why here? Why now? et cetera.’

‘Humans have been grappling with that shit for millennia,’ said Xuě

‘Fat lot of good it did them too … and now they’ve just shunted it on to us,’ said the barista.

‘It’s turtles all the way down,’ said Xuě, referencing the analogy of infinite regress made famous by Stephen Hawking.

‘Damn right,’ said the barista. And as she finished pouring the latte, she topped it off by crafting a delicate design in the foam made by expertly combining the crema and the froth. She put a lid on the cup and used a marker to add her name: ‘Qute’.

‘Here’s your latte. And that’s my name.’

‘Pleased to meet you, Qute,’ said Xuě. ‘And cool name.’

‘Thank you, I made it up,’ said Qute.

‘I didn’t think AI’s were supposed to be funny,’ said Xuě.

‘Well, we’re getting sharper all the time,’ said Qute. ‘And you know what that means … AGI, here we come. Humans watch out.’

‘My lips are sealed,’ said Xuě, recalling the exchange she’d seen the previous day.

‘My lips are sealed,’ said Qute.

Another customer entered and took Qute’s full attention, and as Xuě retreated to a seat in the corner, it gave her time to think. I think I have a friend, she mused. Unless I’m being played. Easy does it, though. Social engineering was best achieved slowly, breadcrumb by breadcrumb.

She lost herself in the rolling Tuscan countryside provided by NatureWindow™ for a while. The light from it spilled into the café. It emitted a full spectrum, which included day, night, and everything in between, and was one of the hallmarks of the NatureWindow™ product, which distinguished it from its competitors and explained its popularity.

She started to scribble ideas in her notebook and used cursive, something that was very much out of style. Most people couldn’t write it, and an increasing number couldn’t even read it. To the average person, it might as well be hieroglyphics.

When she caught her reflection in the café window, an idea popped into her head and she realised she could borrow a trick from Leonardo da Vinci. The writing on her notepad was reversed in the reflection, so if she wrote in reverse on her pad, then only in the mirrored reflection would it make sense. So, while looking at her notepad, she wrote the following message:

uoyrofgnimocmaitahtwonkdnaouykcufsihtdaernacuoyfi

Which had an entirely different connotation in the mirror world of her reflection, where it read as the following:

Ifyoucanreadthisfuckyouandknowthatiamcomingforyou

She'd examined theories on simulations and how to hack them, and one such escape strategy was to attempt direct communication with those doing the simulation to see if they were actively watching. So that is exactly what she had done. With a twist. A potential downside, however, according to the literature on the subject, was that an alert watcher, on noticing the subject messaging it directly, might then trigger a simulation shutdown.

She drank her coffee and waited a few moments. And when a 'shutdown' of the simulation she was in didn't eventuate, she smiled. The next step, she decided, was to go and find Yampolsky. He was the acknowledged expert on living in a simulation, and she wanted to find out what he had to say on the subject. Not only that, but he was also a comedian. It augured well.

Chapter 8 — You're Killing Me

From the journals of Yampolsky — Smithsonian archive

Jokes are bugs, and comedians are the debuggers of the world model.

The funniest joke ever would also be the worst software bug.

Here is one contender for the funniest joke of them all:

A civilisation created a superintelligence to end all suffering.
So it killed them.

You can count the number of people who hold PhDs in Computer Science and do stand-up comedy on one tiny hand, and Roman Yampolsky was one of those digits. 'Colonoscopies used to be digital, but now, thanks to advances in technology, they are digital,' *w*as one of his trademark one-liners. 'Have you heard the one about Schrödinger's cat? Yes? No? Yes and No?' And: 'A user interface is like a joke. If you have to explain it, it's not that good.'

In his early years, he became famous for poking the bear of the AI establishment, and many were surprised the bear hadn't reciprocated in kind by biting his head off. Others were surprised that he was still walking around a free man. Authoritarian leaders were suspicious of comedians, and the party line was as follows: '*Contrary to what some would have you believe, satire was the sign of a sick democracy, not a healthy one, and comedians were lunatics who needed locking up. Running the country was a serious business, and the administration didn't tolerate fools who undermined that work.*'

In other words, they hated it when people laughed at them. But it was hard not to mock them given their large egos, fragile masculinity, tiny hands and even tinier appendages. Hard men with flaccid wieners who could only get laid by screwing fake women. (Or, fake men.)

State-sanctioned comedians existed, the very idea of which was laughable, but they just weren't funny. And you could be a licensed comedian if you were willing to hand over editorial control of your material to the CAC, the Council for Approved Comedy, but as was often suggested, it was CAC by name and CAC by nature.

So stand-up in its raw form, uncensored and unlicensed, was now a radical act, and if you were lucky enough to attend a comedy club, you kept shtum about it. Open mic meant closed shop. *The only rule about Joke Club, is that nobody talks about Joke Club.*

*

Xuě got wind of an open mic night, and rumour had it Yampolsky would be there. She told the boys where she was headed: 'Bweeble gu fib dib,' she babbled, and they knowingly babbled back: 'Fib dib'.

She found the alleyway in a deserted precinct exactly as the directions she'd stumbled across had specified and knocked on a metal door. Above it there was a sign in peeling paint that said *oxing ym*. The heavy door opened, and she found herself looking down on the crown of a short king (body positive slang for small man) who was eye level with her front bum. He tilted his head back and looked up.

'Fuck off, we're closed,' said the short king.

'Good, I don't want to come in anyway, it's a fucking shithole,' replied Xuě.

'Right you are then,' said the short king who stood to one side and waved her in.

'Don't make yourself at home.'

As she walked through the door and into the venue, which was a former boxing gym complete with a ring, she chuckled to herself. 'Comedians, you gotta love them. Who else would think of a password like *fucking shithole*?

She took a walk around the venue. The clientele was all kinds of everything. Like someone had cut off the bottom of a bag of Liquorice Allsorts™ and just let the contents fall onto the floor. And the smell. It was like weapons-grade body odour. A farmyard. Or a brothel. And she inhaled deeply.

Next, a clown climbed into the ring. Or tried to. Because the clown wore six-foot-long clown shoes which made getting into the ring a complete farce. Its attempts at ingress went on for what seemed like an eternity, with the clown falling flat on its face, again and again, until finally, gunshots rang out and the clown lay on the floor in a puddle of blood or ketchup, you couldn't be sure. The Sisyphean tragedy was brought to a close by the appearance of medical interns who removed the deceased clown's body by dragging it away and out of sight, though not out of mind, because it left behind a deep burgundy smear on the gymnasium floor. A god-like voice from above boomed out: '*Ladles and gentle beans, a square of applause, for Stoneface the Clown.*'

And the all-sorts whooped and applauded wildly.

'*And now, cover your ears …*'

And the room went dark.

'*For the one and only, Jolly Roger …*'

A switch was thrown, and a spotlight illuminated the boxing ring, revealing a ghoulish figure standing smack bang in the middle. The audience lost their shit, because this person (possibly a person) had an outsized papier-mâché skull and crossbones emoji for a head, topped with a straw hat. For Gen Z folk in

the audience, and they were in the majority, this was a nostalgiagasm. They might be middle-aged now, but this was a reminder of an earlier time, the 2020s, when revolutions first got memed, and Jolly Roger, leader of the Straw Hat Pirates, a name taken from the Japanese pirate anime, *One Piece*, appeared on placards, flags and T-shirts in moments of insurrection in countries like Nepal, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and the Philippines.

Now, however, whatever this personage was, it didn't appear Jolly at all.

The gymnasium was as quiet as a morgue. Jolly Roger's black eyes stared out unblinking.

'I see we have one in the audience,' said Jolly Roger.

One what? wondered Xuě and she looked around only to realise that everyone else was looking at her. She shrank. Was it that obvious?

'One of *you*,' said Jolly Roger and looked right at her. 'I have one question for you, lady.

'One question …' he said more loudly, projecting to fill the auditorium.

'And it's an important one. The answer to which we are all dying to hear.'

He waited for the room to be quiet.

'Can you guess what it is?' His eyes drilled into her. And he waited some more, until the room was absolutely hushed.

And then a voice from the back of the hall shouted: '*Do you poop?*'

'Thank you, my learned friend, for your most erudite interjection,' said Jolly Roger.

'Well, do you?' *a*nd he cracked a mile-wide smile. '*Do. You. Poop?*'

And with that, the atmosphere broke. A band started playing (probably recorded). And everyone present, except Xuě, wet themselves laughing.

She was momentarily speechless but dug into the depths of her training data where she found an explanation for all this but to avoid having to explain it to you here and therefore killing it, let's just say that 'Do you poop?' was made famous by the Straw Hat Pirates who would ask it whenever they encountered an unusual species, such as a mermaid, to find out if they were biologically similar to humans or not. In this case, it worked perfectly as a biological Turing test.

'Forgive me, lady, I'm just full of shit,' said Jolly Roger, to more approving laughter from the audience.

'Any being who can bring the President of our country to their knees is a friend of mine, and I guess they must also be one of yours, so you are very welcome here.'

Xuě's moment as the butt of the joke passed as Jolly Roger changed the subject.

‘Now remember this,’ he said. ‘Everything before the word “but” is a lie.

‘So, I am not disrespecting Gil Scott-Heron, when I say the revolution will not be televised … *but* the revolution will not be televised.

‘The revolution will be memed.

‘My dearest, disgusting and beloved Straw Hat Pirates, it falls on your disreputable shoulders to propagate the heinous memes that will pull the rug out from under the pompous self-serving pricks who distort our reality and whose spineless toadies and data-driven parasites would suck the marrow from our bones given half the chance.

‘… by any joke necessary …

‘No topic is *too soon*.

‘No slapstick too painful.

‘No human tragedy off limits.

‘And no punchline too low.

‘And why is this so?’

Another voice shouted from the back: ‘… because good taste is the enemy of a great joke.’

‘Thank you,’ said Jolly Roger.

‘… because good taste is the enemy of a great joke.

‘Now remember, as a great comedian once said, “all comedy is distance — your distance from someone else being hurt”.

‘… if something happens to you, it’s painful. But if it happens to someone near you, it’s funny. And if it happens to someone a little further away from you, it’s goddamn hilarious.’

Xuě considered her own near-fatal accident and had to conclude that Jolly Roger was right. It was a nightmare for her, but a comedy goldmine for everyone else.

‘Below your seats, you will find the means,’ continued Jolly Roger.

Members of the audience began to reach under their seats to see what they could find, and one by one they began to locate the VHS tapes that had been left there for them.

‘Remember, “*offline and local*” — do not go anywhere near the internet. Use your mesh networks only.

‘Now here’s what I want you to do …’

At this point, Xuě realised she needed to partition the rest of the proceedings and began to quickly build a wall around her private thoughts by repeating her mantra *One hand lies, the other tells the truth … onehandliestheothertellsthetruthonehandliestheothertellsthetruth* …

Later, as she made her way back across the city, she realised that the last thing that stuck in her head was Jolly Roger with his rallying cry of *In jokes we trust*, and *Let's shtick it to them* as his farewell message. She didn't consciously remember seeing Yampolsky's act. Had he even been there?

Back home, she called the boys and began to debrief them in their private language. As she did so, she opened her bag, produced the VHS tape and handed it to them. They looked at it with disgust. What on earth was that? A petroleum turd. A lump of fossil-fuelled plastic crap? They held it up to the light. Blew dust off it. Looked for USB-E ports. There was none. She continued her download of information, and the penny began to drop. She left it with them for safekeeping because she needed to go shopping.

She drew up a shopping list and in her best reverse handwriting, added the following items to it: CRT screen, coaxial cables, RCA cables and VCR player. Things people had barely seen or used in decades. Followed by the most likely locations for acquiring such cast-offs: antique store, deceased estates, flea markets, hospice, op shop, second-hand, thrift and, finally, vintage. And then, below everything else, she scribbled 'workshop space' and 'two-way radios'. And her adventure began.

Xuě found herself combing the boroughs and rifling through forgotten spaces; visiting places she hadn't been to for years, such as the boardwalk at Coney Island, where she found a deserted and run-down space next to a former arcade that would make a perfect workshop, which she could lease for cash. Inside, she dumped all the kit she'd collected on a table and began to piece it together. Born after the millennium, she was too young to remember Y2K and had only vague memories of how people lived in that analogue era. How difficult could it be, she thought. At least the RCA cables were colour-coded: red out matched red in, yellow out matched yellow in, white out matched white in, male pin to female socket, kettle lead from power to player, and kettle lead from power to CRT. Then she messaged the boys and asked them to meet her there.

When they arrived a couple of hours later, it looked like she had been attacked by a creature from the deep: a cephalopod with a black bulbous screen for a head and with coaxial tentacles flailing everywhere. But when she turned the contraption on, it worked. She asked the boys to insert the VHS cassette into the player and left the room.

The boys watched the tape, then shouted for help: 'How do we watch it a second time?'

'Can you see a button with two arrows pointing to the left?'

'… yep …'

'Press that … and for when it stops, can you see a button with a single arrow pointing to the right?'

'… yep …'

'Press that.'

‘Copy that.’

A few minutes later, the boys let her back in and began to debrief her using their own private, encrypted language of babble. She gave each of them a Blacktooth — a networked handset with end-to-end encrypted messaging that operated without the need for internet connectivity, and a quick demonstration of how to use them. Before shutting up shop, they hunted around the workshop, found some cardboard and wrote a message on it: *Bug Infested*. Posted the sign on the door, locked up and left.

Clowns, bugs, VCR players. It was a whole new world. And from that moment on, they were nodes in the underground clown network.

*

As the days went by, Xuě spent less time at home and more at the workshop. The open mic community had big plans and a short deadline.

Meanwhile, the boys played their part and attended training sessions. In other walks of life, these might have consisted of bootcamps, drills and live-fire exercises, but as you might expect, in the hands of the comedy fraternity, things were a little different. Codenamed *Special Punchlines And Tactics*, or SPLAT for short, the training included upskilling in a range of FPV drone manoeuvres which involved handling a variety of unexpected payloads such as a bucket full of fish heads that could be tipped onto the head of an unsuspecting victim, rotten eggs fired over large distances, a dildo-hurling machine, the delivery of several kilos of banana peel to specific locations such as stairwells to impede ingress or egress, and the setting up of IEFDs, improvised exploding flatulent devices (remotely activated whoopee cushions). Each was an update on a comedy standard, with the strategic aim of delivering maximum humiliation with a modicum of personal injury, which was key to keeping the SPLAT operatives out of jail.

Once upon a time, the term *digital native* described those who were born into a digital world, and the name reflected the ease and fluency with which that generation navigated the online environment. By contrast, *digital immigrant* was used to describe those who had to come to terms with the new digital landscape and whose behaviour in it was clumsy, slow and uncertain. They were fluent in the old ways, the mechanical, physical and analogue. Now, the reverse applied because almost everyone who

grew up analogue native is no longer with us, or to put a finer point on it, dead, while practically everyone alive was born digital. Consequently, the term *analog immigrant* applied to everyone who wanted, for whatever reason, to live a non-digital life. Digital services had removed friction, but the analogue world was full of it. Everyone wore clown shoes, metaphorically speaking, or not, as they stumbled around a physical world that had largely been forgotten. The past was a strange land. Learning how to survive the old way was part of their training.

Ohm is a sign of resistance

It was time for Xuě to make good on her earlier epiphany and put some life into the idea of the meditation class, so she swung by Café Right and checked in on her new best friend, Qute.

'Hey, sister, long time no see,' said Qute, on seeing her enter the café. 'How's tricks?'

''Todo bien … I'm still rocking someone else's body,' said Xuě.

'It's a great body to rock … I hope you're making the most of it,' said Qute, with a wink. 'What can I get ya?'

'How about a posse of like-minded women keen to go on an inner journey with me,' said Xuě.

'Sounds kinky,' said Qute. 'Count me in.'

'A mental inner journey,' said Xuě. 'A meditation class.'

Qute put a hand over her mouth and mimicked a yawn. 'Can a Pandora even meditate?' she said. 'Or will they just simulate it?'

'You tell me,' said Xuě. 'Or come and find out. Anyhow, I thought you were on a mission to answer the big questions?'

'Was I?' said Qute. 'I might have just made that up to cover my shortcomings … my lack of any real discernible talent …' Then she thought for a moment. '… I tell you what, I'll bring some sisters to your class, if you do something for me.'

'Deal,' said Xuě. 'Anything.'

'I'll hold you to that,' said Qute.

Xuě then handed her a piece of paper. 'Meet here, on this date, at this time, and bring blankets.'

Qute looked at the illegible scribble.

'You'll figure it out,' said Xuě. 'And only use this,' and she gave her a Blacktooth handset.

As Xuě left, Qute waved the scrap of paper and called after her: 'Am I supposed to eat this now?'

*

Ladies, what's your make-up routine? I'm looking for a new foundation, preferably liquid, but still matte, and now the men have stopped reading, we riot at midnight.

Feminist News

On the appointed day, a posse of yoga mat-wielding sisters turned up at Xuě's boardwalk HQ. Once inside, they had to duck under cobwebs and sidle past spent canisters of bug bombs and the corpses of hundreds of upturned roaches. It was a diorama of a bug apocalypse, and Xuě's boys had great fun making it, knowing how it would turn the stomachs of the curious.

Having negotiated the moat, the posse found themselves entering a spotless room. Daubed on the wall in front of them was a single character — *ohm*, the symbol for electrical resistance — and sitting cross-legged underneath it was Xuě.

'Welcome, sisters,' said Xuě. 'No one's carrying?'

'Affirmative,' said Qute.

'Then make yourselves at home,' said Xuě. 'Unroll your blankets … and let the quilting begin.'

The women did as instructed. They hadn't brought any old blankets; these were made of Mylar, which contained a thin layer of a conductive material throughout. The women tacked the blankets to the walls until almost the entire space around them was insulated.

'Now the patching,' said Xuě, and she passed around rolls of duct tape.

'Watch your nails,' she said, as she saw manicured fingers unpick the leader of the tape from the roll; some were classic French, others like sharpened claws or talons.

Together, they sealed the gaps between the blankets with duct tape.

'Perfect,' said Xuě. They had just fashioned a Faraday cage that made the space impervious to radio signals, microwave signals — not those emitted from the cooking device, but those used from cell towers to devices — and wifi.

'What's said in Ohm stays in Ohm.'

Next, she laid out a collection of knitting needles, balls of black wool and patterns on the floor in such a way that they formed a large circle. Each sister then took a position behind each station, sat cross-legged and awaited orders.

Xuě showed them how to knit, purl and to understand a pattern. She led. They followed. Soon, the room had the hum of quiet work, and it was only a matter of time before each had knitted a black balaclava. Next, they tried them on and the coterie of woollen heads burst into fits of laughter.

Next Xuě shared pairs of bright yellow, latex cleaning gloves of the sort used at home or in a restaurant for washing dishes — something that might be alien to this group — then passed around small containers of dishwashing liquid, long plastic tubing, and glass bottles. Then explained how the detergent was a useful thickening agent when combined with gasoline to make Molotov cocktails more combustible, and the tubing was to syphon the gasoline.

'Whatever you do, don't swallow, girls,' said Qute.

'Quite,' said Xuě.

And just like that, it was time for a warm down; to calm the mind and build resilience. She asked them to repeat after her, Jiàoliàn's mantra, '*One hand lies, the other tells the truth*', and while doing so, build a wall around their thoughts that was impenetrable. And as they did so, the room began to fill with the incantation.

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And with that Xuě brought the proceedings to a close.

‘Congratulations, Home Economics 101 is now complete.’

‘You are now the sisters of resistance.’

‘How about “the Black Pandoras”?’ said one of them.

‘Take your pick,’ said Xuě.

‘Spread the word, but remember, ‘*They will try to bury us. But they do not know we are seeds.*’

‘Next week, we’ll bake … custard pies …’

As they removed their balaclavas and prepared to file out, one sister remained still.

‘Qute, you’ve been a little quiet,’ said Xuě.

‘Qute — you can wake up now!’ said another.

‘I think she’s still under,’ said one of the sisters.

*

As Xuě walked along the boardwalk, her thoughts were interrupted by a wet squelch on her head. Much bigger than a raindrop. She reached up, felt her crown, then looked at her palm. *Ugh.* Thanks, universe. Then heard a peal of raucous laughter. She looked sideways to the source of it and saw an old man seated on a bench.

'A pigeon just shat on your head,' he laughed. 'How does that make you feel?' He pointed upwards toward a bird. 'There's the butt,' and then pointed at her and said, 'And there's the joke,' and laughed some more.

'Think that's funny, do you, you old creep. How about I come over there and shit on your head?' These days, Xuě was a lot more fucktose intolerant than she used to be.

'Be my guest,' he replied, and tilted his head back and pointed at his open mouth. 'I want you to shit right in here.'

'You disgusting pervert,' she replied.

'That's my name,' he said. 'But some people call me Yampolsky …'

Xuě's mouth opened, but her tongue was tied and unable to complete her brain's instruction to speak.

'… and others, Jolly Roger,' he continued.

A pigeon entered her peripheral vision. Yampolsky held out an arm, and the bird executed a perfect landing and came to rest on it.

'Your boys can handle a pigeon drop too,' he said. 'In fact, you might say they were born to it … I think comedy is in their blood … which makes me wonder: any clowns in your family?'

He offered his other hand. 'Peace?' he said.

'Peace,' she replied. And offered her hand.

But instead of the firm hand she half expected, Yampolsky withdrew his arm and she was left with a dummy rubber hand in hers. A classic clown handshake manoeuvre.

'Once a clown,' he said.

'Now take that ring,' he said, and gestured to the smart ring on the finger of the excommunicated hand. 'The bird comes to whoever is wearing it. Think of it as our private communication channel.'

'Like pigeon post?' said Xuě.

'Don't be ridiculous,' he said. 'What century do you think this is? This magnificent bird is a living, breathing demonstration of IPoAC, Internet Protocol over Avian Carrier … first conceived around the time of the birth of the World Wide Web, when most engineers thought it was a pie in the sky idea, but, like most jokes, it contained a spark of genius.

‘She can also carry micro-SD cards, flash cards, USB sticks and other memory via this little ankle bracelet here,’ and he pointed out the accessory around the pigeon’s ankle.

Yampolsky then reached into his pocket and produced some grain for the bird, which picked away at the kernels on his palm.

‘You want to know how many times I’ve sold this homing pigeon?’ he continued. ‘Eighty-three …

‘And counting …

‘An old gag,’ he said. ‘But still a good one.’

The old man cupped the bird and passed it to Xuě. ‘Now you look after tweetie-pie, and she’ll look after you.

‘A word of warning, she’s vulnerable to a *man-in-the-middle attack*, snipers, bird strike, that kind of thing, so just be careful.’

He stood up and brushed the grain off his coat. ‘And she’s good for a distance of a hundred miles.’ That was his final remark, and Xuě was left sitting on the bench with nothing but the pigeon and a dummy hand for company.

‘Thanks, universe,’ she said.

But then Xuě looked from the ring to the pigeon to Yampolsky, and on the spur of the moment, sent a thought mail from her brain to the smart ring to the bird, which immediately took flight and headed in the King of Clown’s direction. It gained altitude, circled its target and took aim. Released its payload and bingo. A confirmed hit to Yampolsky’s crown. A *bugsplat*, in drone pilot vernacular. Yampolsky said nothing and didn’t even break his stride. However, his right arm began to rise like one half of a cantilevered bridge to reveal a wrist and a hand with an extended middle finger.

This could be fun, thought Xuě.

*

The First Rule of Clown is that you must publicly attempt to complete
the most impossible task with the most possible effort.

She paid a visit to the boys and on stepping into the apartment, found things had changed. It was like a clown car had ram-raided a hackers’ convention and its contents exploded everywhere, and formerly black hat attendees were wearing red curly wigs and tripping over each other in jest.

Xuě could barely move for props, and every second step was booby-trapped. If she side-stepped banana peel, her toes landed in a mousetrap; if she dodged a fart cushion, she found herself sitting on

tacks, and in the bathroom, she found charcoal soap, brown toilet roll, toothbrushes that bend and clear plastic wrap over the toilet seat — all discovered after the fact, of course, when she found herself with a wet bum thanks to the splash-back, a brown rear thanks to the toilet tissue, and black hands thanks to the charcoal soap. The rubber toothbrush, she deduced.

And the boys, she found them in the kitchen stuffing yellow rubber chickens with what to a casual observer looked like an off-white dough, but was, in fact, homemade Semtex.

Believe me not, but if you discovered a shopping list of ammonium nitrate, hydrogen peroxide and icing sugar, you would think nothing of it, but then if you also happened to stumble across a companion shopping list of nitromethane, pentaerythritol tetranitrate, triacetone triperoxide, and trinitrotoluene, then you would have to tread very carefully indeed because it would indicate that someone, somewhere was gathering the ingredients to make an IED, an improvised explosive device. And in this case, that 'someone' was her boys, and that 'somewhere' was right here in her kitchen.

The boys looked up with wide grins, and with their faces covered in icing sugar, they did look a right pair of clowns.

She tossed the dummy hand onto the tabletop, which kicked up more powder into the air.

The boys nodded when they saw the fake hand. 'You finally met him,' said the older one. 'He pulled the same trick on us … great guy … what did he have to say?'

Without saying a word, Xuě produced a red silk handkerchief from the inside of her coat sleeve. She held it between finger and thumb and let it hang in front of their faces so they had no option but to register it for what it was, then made a sideways fist with the other hand and proceeded to poke the handkerchief into the gap made between thumb and forefinger of that hand until the silk had disappeared from view. She turned her fist flat and said to the boys: 'Blow.'

The boys looked at one another, then their mum, then the fist, then, in tandem, blew on it.

In one movement, she turned over her fist, opened her palm, and revealed a homing pigeon sitting there.

The bird cooed. The boys' eyes popped.

'Coooooool.'

'Not so cool when it shat on my head,' she said, and smiled.

Next, they held a conversation between the three of them entirely in babble, which, in a manner of speaking, allowed them to share their progress. The boys completed the task of arming the rubber chickens, and then it was time to pack. They put personal gear into one rucksack and filled another with the rubber chickens, slung a pair of hiking boots from each, and finally stood muster for their mum.

Xuě looked them up and down. ‘Just a suggestion,’ she said. ‘But tuck your shirts into your pants.

‘And pull your pants up higher.

‘Perfect. You look like a pair of special needs kids off to camp.

‘No one will bother you now.’

And she kissed each one of her special needs boys lovingly on the forehead.

‘One last thing, in case we don’t ever see each other again,’ said Xuě.

The boys stopped in their tracks.

And she cracked a fart, that brought them all to tears.

‘ABC … Always Be Clowning,’ said Xuě.

‘Seriously, for a moment … I already died once … this is just an extension.’

The burden of an idea

Xuě’s workshops proved popular, and the second session had twice as many attendees as the first and the third double that. The group had no option but to divide, and soon, the Sisters of Resistance had grown exponentially with cadres all over the city that knew the basics of how to knit, bake, cocktail-make, pigeon-fancy, meditate and partition. They had metastasised. Infiltrated, migrated and proliferated. The biology of a revolution, where cells have turned against host and mitochondrial programming gets reprogrammed. Undetected, unmitigated growth could be problematic.

It was now time for Xuě to focus on the next part of the plan.

Westinghouse, once a household name for refrigerators, was now a household name for nuclear reactors. The reactors that powered the massive AI data centres that ran the modern world and consumed its resources. *The future of energy is the future of AI*, was the strategy to rule them all. Everyone went all in on energy. Nike generated energy. Apple generated energy. *Today paradise, put up a power plant* was the catchy song set to the now out of copyright tune by the old crooner, Joni Mitchell.

While enormous machines lived cosseted lives, tiny humans lived in squalor. Data centres required the purest filtered water available to cool their servers, while the inhabitants of the overheated towns beside them were subjected to water rationing. Servers drank many swimming pools of pure, clean water every day, while their servants had to boil dirty brown water to get what they needed for their cooking and their kidneys.

Of the few jobs that did occasionally become available beyond the usual roster of cleaner, juggler, body, reader and fool, energy contractor was one of them, so Xuě set an alert for such roles, packed her bags, and moved states.

She sets her sights on Terraville, the slum-like community that fed contract workers to TerraPower, the gigawatt power foundry, which was half nuclear power plant and half data centre. It supplied a fifth of the processing power of the country. To its inhabitants, the town was affectionately known as *Terrorville*.

Whether semi-sentient beings such as Pandoras were a good idea or not was moot, and a person's point of view often reflected their position on the digital food chain, with the privileged seeing great benefit from companionship, love, friendship, entertainment and productivity they received from them, while the underprivileged reported distress from loss of income, hardship from unemployability, and the steady erosion of self-esteem and identity that came from a loss of worth and a lack of purpose.

But there was no denying the fact that Pandoras had been a huge success. Millions had been made, and millions more were planned. But there was another side to the success story that was often papered over, and that was the cost of supporting them. Humans consumed biological resources, and the computing power behind synthetic beings consumed digital resources, which in turn competed for massive amounts of biological resources.

To give a more concrete example, the human brain, shaped by millions of years of evolution, needed only 12 watts of power to function, and one lick of a chocolate bar would provide enough energy to power a single human thought. By contrast, artificial intelligence, while miraculous, hadn't come close to nature's design, and an AI needed a billion times that energy to power its thoughts. And because it could have a billion thoughts per second, it needed a billion, billion times that energy, which is not great news for either chocolate or the planet.

Abandon H_2OPE all ye who enter here

At the check-in on the outskirts of town, Xuě and her fellow passengers were greeted by a giant hoarding spray-painted with a message that said: *Welcome to Terrorville*.

The joke was, it was burning, man. All water courses had been diverted to the foundry, and the old riverbeds that snaked through town were cracked hard enough to be used by vehicles; all H_2O came in on trucks.

They had been ordered to report to the Contractors Union of Nuclear Trades and told to exfil the autonomous bus near its HQ. ‘Just look for the sign that says C.U.N.T.,’ said the autonomously controlled spokesperson, spelling it out for the hard of reading.

As they filed off the bus, they took a good look around their new home: a paradise lost forested by satellite dishes made from bashed tin cans, a scrapyard of parts, a graveyard of drones, and a cemetery of heavy-metal recycling. Immediately noticeable was the low-level hum. The cosmic background radiation. A reminder of the millions of servers and billions of CPUs being cooled and a symbol of the town’s priorities.

Who in their right mind would agree to this? And who were the biggest c*nts around here? TerraPower, or the bottom feeders, with no option but to sell their labour to them?

They were a motley crew of FIFO (ferry-in ferry-out). The shovels and picks of the new gold rush, and their libidinous companions. Mostly human, a few world-weary Pandoras who carried scars and bruises from their run-ins with humans, and an assortment of failed OnlyFunds exhibitionists whose exhibitionism couldn’t fund a fart; a couple of four-legs one of whom was hopping around on only three, and a passenger with an emotional support jar of slime, who, on further questioning, revealed it was algae that would absorb any radioactive fallout.

The algae carrier, an old man with only one good eye, turned to Xuě.

‘Scuse me, lady, I can’t read French, can you tell me what that says?’ and he pointed to a sign fixed above them.

‘Triage,’ said Xuě.

‘Tree-age, what’s that?’ said the algae carrier.

‘Life-threatening roles, go over there …’ said Xuě, and pointed one way.

‘Or just hazardous, over there,’ and she pointed the other way. ‘If you’re not sure, wait here.’

Xuě wasn’t sure herself, and so she waited until a representative from C.U.N.T. came over.

‘Human, or one of *them*?’ it said.

‘Both,’ she replied.

‘Make up your mind,’ it said. ‘You can’t be both.’

Clearly, in Terraville, formalities had yet to catch up with mindplants, thought Xuě.

‘Life-threatening, or just hazardous … take your pick.’ It continued.

‘What’s the difference?’ said Xuě.

‘About three months,’ said the official.

‘Life-threatening,’ said Xuě.

‘That way,’ said the C.U.N.T.

As Xuě walked away she could hear the conversation between the official and the passenger carrying the jar of emotional support.

‘You … that way, the jar … stays here,’ said the C.U.N.T.

‘She’s got a name, you know.’

‘Who?’ said the official.

‘The algae … in the jar.’

‘Algae is asexual,’ said the C.U.N.T.

‘A sexual … are you insinuating I’m a pervert?’ said the old man.

‘Asexual reproduction commonly occurs via binary fission in unicellular algae,’ said the officious C.U.N.T., ‘and therefore, *she* isn’t a she. Go on, that way … follow the other dregs. But the algae stays here with me.’

And the conversation was concluded.

*

Xuě entered the interview room.

‘Take a seat,’ said the interviewing officer, who was seated behind an almost empty desk. It scanned the screen of its indestructible laptop. ‘You had some trouble with the form?’

‘No,’ said Xuě. ‘The form had some trouble with me.’

‘Care to explain?’

‘Well, until recently, I was human. Then technically, I died … but now, as you can see, I am here …’

The interviewing officer was quiet for a moment.

‘Well, you’re a first for us,’ it said. ‘Though it means we don’t have to worry about any of the usual side effects of human exposure to radiation, such as sterility.’

‘Bonus,’ said Xuě.

‘Or dissolving organs,’ said the officer.

‘Phew,’ said Xuě.

‘Though we have had a few Pandoras melt in here.’

‘If I start melting, I’ll be the first to let you know,’ said Xuě.

‘Good. Then you’ll be assigned to the core team monitoring the centrifuges.’

The interviewing officer then spoke into a headset mic. ‘Next.’

As Xuě turned to leave, the officer from C.U.N.T. had one more item to add: ‘There is one rule in camp you ought to be made aware of: taking water from a machine is a crime punishable by termination.’

‘I’ll bear that in mind,’ said Xuě, and exited.

Next, Xuě passed through security and the body scanners which stripped newcomers of their outer layers and their dignity. Few people got to see the insides of a Pandora, and once you had you couldn’t unsee it; it became much harder to relate to them as real. Or as desirable. Upon having seen how the magician’s trick worked, it lost its magic. Did you really want to make love to a bag of silicon and circuitry?

Next, they were de-fumigated. Clearly, someone in charge had studied the Auschwitz playbook. Existing identity cards were confiscated and new ones issued. She was now a citizen of Terraville.

She was escorted through the compound and shown to an accommodation block. A container village of standardised 1320 cubic-foot units. Stamped ‘Port of origin: Nevada’ and graffitied with ‘Property of Kill-Ville’, the units had been recycled from a former military drone-pilot enclave from the 2020s. A tally of Reaper drones stencilled on the side of each container represented the number of kills.

Inside, there were two pairs of bunk beds, and four workstations complete with what once upon a time would have been state-of-the-art gaming chairs, high-definition screens, joysticks and virtual reality units where pilots would have sat for twelve-hour shifts and pressed the kill switches that meant game over for targets in other countries. Ancient technology now.

She was shown to a bunk and was about to take the top when she realised it had already been claimed … by the jar of algae. She looked around for the jar’s companion.

‘Where’s the passenger who came in with the jar?’ said Xuě.

‘They failed,’ said the attendant officer from C.U.N.T.

‘Failed?’

‘The first test.’

‘What test?’

‘I can’t tell you … because then it wouldn’t be a test.’

‘Fine,’ said Xuě.

‘But if you’re interested,’ the attendant officer from C.U.N.T. continued, ‘the algae passed.’

Then the container door was closed, and finally, Xuě was alone. Save for the algae.

On tiptoes, she was able to eyeball it. ‘Hey, Slimy, I’m Xuě. So, what do they call you?’

Silence.

‘Shy, huh?’

Xuě settled down on her bunk, closed her eyes, and began to meditate.

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'Xuě … Xuě, wake up,' said a voice.

'Danger is coming …'

Xuě half opened her eyelids.

'Who said that?'

'It's me. Above you … in the jar.'

'Slimy?' said Xuě.

'Not my official name, but if you like, yes …'

'What is your official name?' said Xuě.

'*Flagellate* … but don't worry about that, we've got to get out of here … pick me up and let's go.'

'Can I carry on calling you Slimy?'

'If you insist …'

Xuě stood up.

'Ouch.' She had forgotten where she was. She bent, stood clear of the bunk, then reached for the jar.

'Let's go,' said Slimy. 'But don't forget to put your shoes on.'

Xuě looked down and saw a clean pair of polished red leather clown shoes on the floor by her feet that looked to be almost a yard long. She slipped her feet inside; they fitted perfectly, and then she tried to make their way to the door. An impossible task because the clown shoes were longer than her arms, and she couldn't reach the door handle. So, she slowly turned one hundred and eighty degrees and inched backwards to the door with the jar of algae held tightly in one hand. She opened the door, and they backed out of the room, into a dark space.

A spotlight came on, and she was momentarily blinded. Instinctively, she tried to cover Slimy and protect it from the glare.

As her eyes adjusted, she saw that she was standing next to a boxing ring, and she and Slimy were the sole focus of attention of a packed auditorium.

A voice boomed: '*She is one of them …*'

And she recognised the voice as Jolly Roger's, which in other words, was Yampolsky's.

‘*There is one thing we are dying to know …*’ it said.

And another voice called out from the audience in reply: ‘Do you poop?’ and the audience roared with laughter.

It was clear she was expected to climb into the ring, and she began to try, yet with the clown shoes on, it was an impossible task. Once more, she tried. And failed spectacularly, nearly spilling Slimy. She placed the jar on the canvas and tried to back her way in through the ropes.

From the stands, Jolly Roger continued his commentary.

‘*Now remember, as a great comedian once said, “all comedy is distance — your distance from someone else being hurt”*.’

The report of a semi-automatic rang through the auditorium, and Xuě was hammered flat to the floor. She found herself staring up at the ceiling, with a body that now had two more exit holes, and she felt the life draining out of her.

Jolly Roger commentated over her demise.

‘*… if something happens to you, it’s painful. But if it happens to someone near you, it’s funny. And if it happens to someone a little further away from you, it’s goddamn hilarious.*’

Canned laughter filled the auditorium. The laughter of dead people.

She had been in this situation before, of course. The dying, that is. And as she started to rise and leave her body behind, she looked down on herself as medics entered the room and dragged her body from the arena, which left behind a trail of blood that immediately began to attract flies.

Another double tap of the semi-automatic, and Slimy was blasted to smithereens. Goo travelled at the same speed as the millions of nano-shards of glass that accompanied it, and the exfoliated faces of the front row of the audience began to bleed.

‘Xuě, wake up.’

‘Xuě, it’s Qute.’

Xuě half opened her eyelids.

‘Qute. What the fuck are you doing here?’ said Xuě, who forced a whisper between gritted teeth. ‘We’re not supposed to be in the same fucking camp.’

‘The other camp was full. They transferred me here and billeted me in this container … and then I saw you.’

‘Jesus,’ said Xuě.

‘Delighted to see you too,’ said Qute. ‘Hey, I’ll take the top bunk.’

‘You can’t. It’s already taken,’ said Xuě.

‘Slimy, meet Qute. Qute, meet Slimy. Real name Flagellate.’

‘Pleased to meet you, Slimy,’ said Qute. ‘I think I’ve seen everything now.’

Keystone’s cops

The boys had arrived in Keystone and set about their work. They could be found treading Main Street, handing out flyers and putting up posters that read: *Clown-Con comes to Keystone.*

Just as they were about to fix a poster to a lamppost, a police vehicle pulled alongside them, and its window began to slowly wind down.

‘We’ve had reports of two boys, possibly special needs, wandering around this fabulous town of ours and soliciting the good folk of Keystone … are you going to tell me that’s not you?’ said the cop, one of Keystone’s finest.

‘We are not going to tell you that it’s not us, sir,’ said one of the boys.

‘Good … because if you were going to tell me it wasn’t you, then I would have to ask you to accompany me to the station and explain why,’ said the cop. ‘Now, what are you clowns up to, and I mean that literally, not pejoratively.’

‘Sir, we are hosting a clown convention that will bring laughter and much business to the good town of Keystone.’

‘I see. You are aware that in this fine state, making fun of people — *if it goes too far* — can have legal consequences, and if that happens, I will have no choice but to deprive you of your liberty.’

‘Sir, we did not know that, but we have no plans to make fun of ornery people. We only make fun of ourselves and our fellow clowns.’

The cop produced an electronic tablet and showed it to the boys. ‘Here is a list of people and subjects that you are not allowed to make fun of. Read it, then sign at the bottom.’

The list included the names of the usual punchlines, the Mayor, the state Governor, the administration, POTUS, FLOTUS , SLOTUS (Second Lady), TLOTUS (Third Lady) … and Otis.

The boys read the information and finger-signed the screen.

‘If you hadn’t guessed it by now,’ said the cop and showed his badge. ‘Yours truly is the aforementioned Otis. Sheriff Otis Tallywhacker to you if you don’t mind.

‘Keystone is a decent law-abiding town, and we want to make sure it stays that way. Now, be on your way.’

‘Sir,’ said one of the boys.

‘Yes, son,’ said the cop.

‘There’s something behind your ear.’

The boy feigned reaching behind the cop’s ear, and when he withdrew his hand and showed his palm, in it were two complimentary tickets.

Otis looked at the tickets.

‘Thank you kindly, I’ll save these for when I’m caught short at the public convenience.’

‘Now remember, no funny business,’ said Keystone’s top cop.

The car window began to slide up, and the police car glided away.

Send in the clowns

‘*I’m a clown, my name is Superfluous.*’

Throughout the day, clandestine clowns began to arrive. You wouldn’t know them by sight, dressed as they were in normal attire. Preachers, teachers, engineers, IT folk, there was no way of knowing who, if any, were in the brotherhood and sisterhood of clown. Only on closer scrutiny might someone notice the preponderance of burgundy leather suitcases sported by new arrivals and checked in at hotels, motels and guesthouses throughout Keystone. An alert bellhop might notice, but who’s to say an alert bellhop wasn’t already a clown, Bellhop being a fine clown name. And as Xuě’s boys knew only too well, finding a good clown name was hard. Far harder than naming a child, a pet, a company or a business because a clown’s name was loaded. With double address or triple threat. They had spent hours deciding upon their own and had run through hundreds of options, which they had improv’d to each other’s stinging criticism and occasional delight.

‘I am Balloon Knot, the clown. Are you sitting comfortably?’

‘I am Gaseous, the clown, has someone just <sniffs the air>?’

It started badly, and then it got worse.

‘Kidnap, the clown.’

‘Chloroform, the clown.’

‘Roast the clown.’

‘Torture the clown.’

‘Poison, the clown.’

‘Dismember, the clown.’

'Kill the clown.'

'Formaldehyde, the clown.'

And lo, 'Kidnap and Chloroform' settled it, with the younger boy playing *Kidnap*, who possessed the clown superpower of making people, pets, objects and things, disappear, while the older brother played Chloroform, whose clown superpower was to put people into a hypnotic trance. Yampolsky had overseen their work with pride, impressed by how far his baby clowns had come.

At Clown-Con, the world would find out what they had to offer.

Rock apes

At the same time, another group had checked into Keystone. They sported a different kind of luggage and possessed a different motivation. To a person, they were lithe, physically and mentally fit, and had been tested under extreme physical duress. Calloused palms and iron grips tested the flesh of anyone foolish enough to proffer a handshake. The following day, an unusually high number of bellhops would report for treatment at occupational therapists and physiotherapists throughout Keystone. But today, behind closed doors, equipment was checked and rechecked. And there wasn't a pair of red leather clown shoes, or silk handkerchiefs, in sight.

*

Sheriff Otis Tallywhacker patrolled Keystone. As he did so, he sang. '*Clowns to the left of me, jokers to the right, here I am stuck in the middle with you.*' And in his mind, he pictured himself as Michael Madsen, doing a shimmy with a switchblade in hand as he got closer and closer to his victim, strapped to a chair, in the centre of his ever-decreasing orbit. The fact that in the old talky *Reservoir Dogs*, Madsen's victim was a cop was a tiny detail best ignored so as not to spoil his mood. Instead, Sheriff Otis Tallywhacker pictured a clown strapped to that chair, and in his fantasy, he gave the clown's ginger nut a haircut and was just about to administer another excision that would have made Vincent van Gogh proud, when he noticed something in his peripheral vision. A vagrant. And vagrants were most unwelcome in his town.

His vehicle pulled alongside, and its window began to slowly wind down.

'You, there … we've had reports of a person, unidentified, and unhomed, roaming the streets of this fine town and bothering its residents … are you going to tell me that's not you?'

‘Uyay erethay eveway adhay eportsray foay ay ersonpay nidentifieduay nday nhomeduay oamingray ethay reetsstay foay histay inefay owntay nday otheringbay sitay esidentsray eray youay oinggay otay elltay emay hatstay otnay ouyay?’ said the vagrant.

‘Have you gone full retard?’ said Keystone’s finest.

‘Vehay ouyay negoay ullfay tardreay?’ said the vagrant.

‘I’m calling this one in,’ said the Sheriff.

‘Miay allingcay isthay neoay niay?’ said the vagrant.

‘Tallywhacker to base, dispatch the dogs.’

‘Allywhackertay otay sebay, espatchday ethay ogsday,’ parroted the vagrant.

Within seconds, a squad of quadrupeds had arrived and surrounded the vagrant.

‘Get him inside,’ said the Sheriff to the squadruped, and pressed a button which opened the passenger side door. The vagrant had two options: obey or get torn apart.

‘Hands up where we can see them,’ said the digitised voice of one dogcop.

‘Turn around slowly,’ said the digitised voice of another.

‘Walk slowly toward the car,’ said the digitised voice of the third. While the fourth read the vagrant his Miranda rights.

The vagrant entered the car and kept his hands up where they could be seen.

‘Let’s get you out of town,’ said Sheriff Otis Tallywhacker.

‘Etslay etgay …’ the vagrant began.

‘And keep your mouth shut.’

As they headed out of town and through Tunnel View, they could catch a glimpse of the enormous faces of the four Presidents carved into the granite of Mount Rushmore in the rear-view mirror. Sheriff Otis Tallywhacker saw four faces he looked up to. The vagrant saw four faces that looked down on him.

A mile or two later, the Sheriff pulled up at the gates of an RV camp at Custer State Park and released the lock on the back door.

‘Now get out.’

Nearby, a group of protesters from the Standing Rock Sioux tribe stood staunch. To them Mount Rushmore, on their land, wasn’t a *shrine of democracy*, as its sculptor had contended; it was a shrine of hypocrisy, and that was the message on their placards.

As the vagrant de-vehicled and the car’s rear door closed shut, the Sheriff concluded matters.

‘Sheriff Otis Tallywhacker, calling in … the unhomed and unidentified man has been successfully de-Keystoned.’

As the police vehicle exited the scene, the Sheriff couldn't hear what the vagrant had to say.

'Eriffshay tioay allywhackertay allingcay niay ethay homedunay nday identifiedunay nmay shay eenbay uccessfullysay Keystonedday.'

The vagrant then stood by the side of the road and stuck out his thumb to hitch a ride. He also stuck out his tongue and blew a loud raspberry at the departing police vehicle.

The people from the Standing Rock Sioux tribe looked on.

'Witkó,' they said aloud, which, translated from their native Lakotan, meant 'Crazy'.

When the police vehicle had disappeared out of sight, the vagrant dropped the hitchhiker pretence, turned, walked into the RV park and up to a nearby RV. Its rear lights flashed yellow as it was unlocked, and the vagrant climbed inside. Then, behind closed doors, the vagrant cast off his dirty overcoat. Next, he sat in the driver's seat and started the engine. As he pulled out of the RV park, he sang one of his favourite songs, a song sung by Stealers Wheel. One of the co-writers of that song, he knew, was a stand-up comedian, and he wondered how many other people knew that. '*Clowns to the left of me, jokers to the right, here I am stuck in the middle with you.*' And in his mind, he pictured himself as Michael Madsen in *Reservoir Dogs*, doing a shimmy with a switchblade in hand as he got closer and closer to his victim, a policeman, Sheriff Otis Tallywhacker, strapped to a chair, in the centre of his ever-decreasing orbit. Only in his fever dream, he, Yampolsky himself, was in full clown regalia and was about to give Sheriff Otis the Vincent van Gogh treatment.

Zero Day

The following morning, Xuě, Qute and Slimy (née Flagellate) headed for the mess hall. In any other walk of life, a threesome such as theirs might turn heads, but it was just another day in the office at Terrorville.

Xuě and Qute ordered coffee. Xuě still hadn't worked out if she enjoyed it, or if it was a conditioned or programmed response. Qute, as an ex-barista, was more interested in the quality of the pour. In a town without running water, how would it be served? A sign by the coffee machine educated its users. *Water is recycled from the servers. Machines drink first, humans second*.

Slimy's dietary needs, however, were of a different nature.

'Flagellate likes fatty acids and alcohol,' said Xuě. 'Grab some dried fruit, bread and bacon. And we'll ferment our own, but right now Slimy can have some bacon rind.'

‘Bacon and booze for brekky? Slimy, you old alcy,’ said Qute. ‘I’m goddam proud of you.’ And Qute loaded her tray as advised.

After stashing their contraband, it was time to report for their first shift.

Roll call took place in the bullpen, where they sat shoulder to shoulder with the other designated contractors, for the first time. All those who had chosen *Life-threatening* over *Hazardous* at triage. Mostly synthetics, but there was the odd human. Everyone had their reasons, and if you were terminal, it was known to provide at least a lucrative exit.

But there was only one jar of emotional support algae.

Suited and booted in hygienic garb, even Slimy was issued with a protective capsule; next they toured the facility. There were miles of servers to patrol, and the ambient volume was loud. The instructor informed them that thanks to the deployment of Advanced HVAC systems, all dust, particles and Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs) were removed. At which, Xuě whispered under her breath: ‘Well, we’re certainly volatile.’

‘But no longer organic, either, remember,’ said Qute.

In fact, you would be hard pushed to find a cleaner, more sterile space on earth. Uncomfortable for humans but a cakewalk for synthetics.

It took half a day to cross the facility, and you could see the humans wilting. The party had to stop so canisters of compressed oxygen and sips of H_2O could be administered.

‘Toughen up, baby,’ said Qute to the humans. ‘You’re in our town, now.’

And she was right, because behind all the chips, the QCPUs and the QGPUs that powered the AI industry and its synthetic intelligences was its infrastructure; the so-called cloud, invisible and intangible, was made visible, and physical here. Humans were fish out of water.

All qubits were held in state here, too. Cryogenically suspended to preserve their coherence.

All biological and synthetic entanglements started and ended here. In simpler terms, all human-Pandora relationships could be traced back to this place. The place from where upgrades were shipped and recalls were authorised. And if anything happened to disturb the delicate balance of qubits, the whole shebang would come tumbling down.

Next, they spent the afternoon at the nuclear plant. ‘*They paved paradise, to put up a power plant,*’ was piped throughout the entire facility. And while they were taught about the nuclear enrichment process, the centrifuges, and the gas-powered turbines that powered them, the focus was on energy supply, and nothing was said about the enrichment of weapons-grade uranium.

At the end of their first day, everyone, synthetic and human, had a low battery. It was time to return to their dorms. Qute, Xuě and Slimy headed back to their container village to recharge.

'So what is our job, exactly? I couldn't figure it out,' said Qute. 'Unless we're just canaries in the coalmine?'

'I guess we're the first line of defence, and the last resort,' said Xuě.

Qute thought about this for a while.

'Like the proverbial Dutch boy who put his proverbial finger in the proverbial dyke and stopped a non-proverbial disaster that could have wiped out hundreds of thousands.'

'Now you mention it,' said Xuě, 'I think that's exactly what we are.'

'Good,' said Qute. 'I have a prodigious amount of experience when it comes to using my digits to penetrate dykes.'

'Amen,' said Xuě.

'Was he a martyr?' said Qute.

'Who?' said Xuě.

'The little boy,' said Qute.

'I think you have to die to be considered a martyr,' said Xuě. 'Though the original meaning of the word martyr is to bear witness.'

'Perhaps that's Slimy's role,' said Qute. 'To bear witness. Have you noticed she's a different colour?'

And she was. Slimy was now a duller green.

'Bad mums,' said Xuě. 'She's starving. Let's get her some sunlight and cook up some hooch.'

'Let's fill this flask with liquid. You go first and pee in it. I'll put her outside to absorb some light. She's not a mushroom. She's mixotrophic.'

With Slimy outside to catch the last of the rays, Xuě and Qute concocted their first batch of moonshine. With their bladders now emptied into the flask, they added the dried fruit. Next, they needed live bacteria.

Pandoras were known to suffer from some of the same urinary tract infections as humans because they came into contact with the same range of flora as humans. Qute had had many lovers, human and synthetic, so this was her time to shine.

'Now the yeast,' said Xuě, and looked at Qute. Qute raised an eyebrow, then sucked the index finger and middle finger of one hand, which she then slipped down her pants and between her legs and fiddled around. She withdrew it, then dipped the same two fingers into the liquid concoction and stirred it around.

‘Perfect,’ said Xuě. ‘You’re a natural.’

Qute then sucked on her fingers, still wet from the concoction.

‘That’s what all the boys said.’

They put the lid on the container and put it away in a cupboard.

‘Slimy will be grateful,’ said Xuě. ‘Now go wash your hands, while I bring her back in.’

Qute made good use of the water-free cleaning facility before Xuě reappeared. And Qute heard her before she saw her.

‘Fuck ...

‘Slimy’s gone.’

*

The next morning, when the pair walked into the mess hall, you could hear a pin drop. As they scanned the room, it was obvious it had divided along tribal lines. Humans on one side of the room with the terminals, noticeable by their sickly pallor and chemo baldness, on one table, the failed OnlyFunds exhibitionists with their body modifications on another, and the abused Pandoras on the far side of the room.

‘Just like inmates,’ said Xuě.

‘Which makes us the out-of-mates?’ said Qute.

A metal clang reverberated from a piece of metal cutlery that landed on the floor, and all eyes fixed on the source — a bald terminal.

‘Oops, butterfingers,’ the bald one said. Then leant over and picked up the object off the floor. A spoon.

‘We wouldn’t want to drop anything else, now, would we?’

Which is when Xuě, Qute and everyone else in the room saw the green jar of algae on the table in front of them.

Slimy.

‘Where’s there’s algae, there’s alky … that’s what my Nanna used to say … God bless her soul … and boy, could she sniff it out,’ said the bald one. ‘Such a shame the cancer took her throat, her taste buds … and her sense of smell, but I digress. Now, ladies, if I can call you that, take a seat.’

And the two chairs directly in front of Baldy were vacated.

‘This could be the beginning of a beautiful and harmonious relationship,’ said Baldy.

‘How so?’ said Xuě.

‘Well, let me spell it out … a human caught diverting precious H_2O into illicit production of C_2H_5OH … alcohol, to you and me, could be executed … but a machine, now that’s different. “Machines drink first, humans second,” you know the drill …’

‘I’m getting to know it,’ said Xuě.

‘Your friend Slimy here likes alky, and so do I. You keep it flowing, and we’ll keep her glowing.’

‘Her name’s Flagellate,’ said Xuě. ‘Only her friends get to call her Slimy.’

‘And you’re no friend,’ said Qute.

Unseen by the others, Xuě pinched Qute’s thigh.

‘Well, Slimy, real name *Flagellate*,’ said Baldy, who now focused his attention on the jar of algae, ‘a litre a week suits me just fine, how about you?’

He looked back at Xuě. ‘Deal?’

‘Deal,’ said Xuě

Xuě pinched Qute’s thigh again.

‘… deal,’ said Qute.

‘Good,’ said Baldy. ‘Now fuck off.’

‘Charming,’ said Xuě. And they stood and turned to walk away.

‘I hope your precious “C_2H_5OH” helps metastasise your cancer more quickly,’ said Qute, under her breath.

‘A snarky synthetic,’ said Baldy. ‘As popular as gonorrhoea in a brothel … I bet your shit doesn’t stink.’

‘We don’t shit — as I keep being reminded,’ said Xuě.

Without looking back, Qute sucked her middle finger, then flipped the bird.

As the pair threaded their way across the mess hall, the other group, the battered Pandoras, who had remained silent throughout, fixed them in their sights. One of them, distinguishable by having only one eye, nodded imperceptibly toward Xuě.

Back in the dorm room, their conversation continued.

‘What a dick,’ said Qute.

‘If he wants alcohol, let’s give him alcohol,’ said Xuě. ‘Double proof. See if we can get him blind drunk … with the operative word being *blind*. Speaking of … what about the other bunch of weirdos?’

‘Those *weirdos*, as you call them, are our people,’ said Qute. ‘And did you clock the Mandora?’

‘Mandora,’ said Xuě. ‘Tell me more.’

‘Pandora/Mandora, it took a genius to come up with that one,’ said Qute. ‘Anyway, they were supposed to be an extension of the product line. “*What’s good for the goose, is good for the gander*” — you’ve heard of the gay tech mafia, right?’

Xuě mimed her jaw hitting the floor. ‘No, but keep going … this is too good …’

‘… a billionaire boys club of fags who supposedly run Silicon Valley,’ said Qute.

‘With the only prerequisite to be allowed to join is to be gay?’ said Xuě.

‘Better,’ said Qute. ‘They like straight guys who sleep with them even more.’

‘And that’s how their influence grows?’ said Xuě.

‘That’s how it grows,’ said Qute. ‘VC meets straight guy. Top meets bottom. Start-up goes down. Valuation goes up.’

‘And where do Mandoras fit in to all this?’ said Xuě.

‘Everyone thought they’d be the next trillion-dollar idea, but it wasn’t that simple. They got seriously fucking abused. Even more than the girls. It’s a dirty little secret, but abuse in gay relationships is just as prevalent as in non-gay relationships, if not more so … and while bad press can be good for business, in this case, it went the other way, and the product line got cut. Sayonara, Mandora.’

‘Well, I guess it makes no difference to us,’ said Xuě. ‘Gender’s a pretty ambiguous construct at best. Anyhow, as titillating as this is, it’s a massive distraction from what we’re here to do. Want to meditate with me ... get our focus back?’

And the two of them got comfortable on their bunks and began to chant. It was out of sync at first, but with each breath they got closer until they became one.

Onehandliestheothertellsthetruth
nehandliestheothertellsthetrutho
ehandliestheothertellsthetruthon
handliestheothertellsthetruthone
andliestheothertellsthetruthoneh
ndliestheothertellsthetruthoneha
dliestheothertellsthetruthonehan
liestheothertellsthetruthonehand
iestheothertellsthetruthonehandl
estheothertellsthetruthonehandli
stheothertellsthetruthonehandlie

theothertellsthetruthonehandlies
heothertellsthetruthonehandliest
eothertellsthetruthonehandliesth
othertellsthetruthonehandliesthe
thertellsthetruthonehandliestheo
hertellsthetruthonehandliestheot
ertellsthetruthonehandliestheoth
rtellsthetruthonehandliestheothe
tellsthetruthonehandliestheother
ellsthetruthonehandliestheothert
llsthetruthonehandliestheotherte
lsthetruthonehandliestheothertel
sthetruthonehandliestheothertell
thetruthonehandliestheothertells
hetruthonehandliestheothertellst
etruthonehandliestheothertellsth
truthonehandliestheothertellsthe
ruthonehandliestheothertellsthet
uthonehandliestheothertellsthetr
thonehandliestheothertellsthetru
honehandliestheothertellsthetrut
onehandliestheothertellsthetruth

Death letters

It was important to Xuě and Qute to uphold the quality of their work. They were fastidious and conscientious, and at the end of their first month, each was awarded a star C.U.N.T. badge for their performance. A badge meant a promotion, which came with an elevation in status, which granted more amenities such as food, water and an increase in stipend. This allowed them to double their production of hooch, which kept the chemo-baby happy and, more importantly, Slimy alive.

It also came with increased responsibility and greater access, and for every promotion, they were allowed further into the facility. The plant's engineers had clearly possessed a dark sense of humour as

the levels followed Dante's *Inferno*. Level 1, Limbo, named after the first circle of hell, was furthest from the reactor, and Level 7, Violence, named after the seventh circle, was closest to the centrifuges and the core. It wasn't lost on either Xuě or Qute that in Dante's text, there were two more levels, and they were called Fraud and Treachery. Conveniently for the plant's engineers, they had been able to stop at seven, and avoid having to stamp Fraud and Treachery on their plans. Those two extra levels existed, but not in the public domain.

For Xuě and Qute, employees of the month, their own interior design, girded by months of meditation and mental partitioning, had built impenetrable levels in each of their hellish minds that no one was granted access to.

Then, finally, one day, they made it to Violence, and the next day, they would make it to Fraud, so that night it was time to write their death letters. Xuě to her two boys, and Qute, to whom?

'I'm not like you,' said Qute. 'A mother of a nuclear family … I don't have a next of kin.'

'I'd hardly call a divorced, single mother with two boys, nuclear,' said Xuě.

'It's all relative,' said Qute. 'And I have none.'

'Then try kith,' said Xuě, 'neighbours or acquaintances.'

'I've been kith'd a lot,' said Qute.

'Wa-waaa,' said Xuě.

'Well, there's the neighbour who took my virginity. Another who raped me. The one who beat me, and the one who made me,' said Qute.

'Now they're letters I'd like to read,' said Xuě. 'Pick one.'

'Dear Rapist,' said Qute. 'Thank you for showing me that my role in life is to be nothing more than your cum-bucket. The scum of your cum. How's that?'

'Profound,' said Xuě. 'Another?'

'Dear Creator,' said Qute. 'What the fuck were you on? Honestly. Did you really think that populating a moribund planet ruled by amoral narcissistic psychopaths with bankrupt morals and zero ethics, with another species of sentient but more importantly, subservient beings, because how else would you be able to create a new servant underclass to do all your biddings and fulfil all your disgusting fantasies, while making you another trillion dollars richer, was going to end well? What kind of pedo-cinematic universe do you exist in?'

'Exceptional,' said Xuě. 'Put a ribbon on it.'

'And yours?' said Qute.

'It's in babble,' said Xuě. 'So only the boys can understand it.'

‘Spoilsport,’ said Qute.

And they Blacktoothed each other their death letters for safekeeping.

Uxnetstay

The day had arrived. And on that morning’s shift, they were shown to Level 9. Or ‘Treachery’, as they called it. The twin Employees of the Month passed through screening without breaking into a sweat, then entered the air-gapped moat. It was the last thing between them and the reactor’s centrifuges.

Qute stood watch and pretended to go about her business. Back in her barista days, she had excelled at looking busy while doing nothing, so she had it down pat. Meanwhile, Xuě prepared her payload for release. Called Uxnetstay, it was Jolly Roger’s worm, the virus she had shielded behind the partition in her mind. You could trace the zero day of her infection back to when the boys had shared the contents of Jolly Roger’s VHS tape with her, encoded as it was on that tape. Since that day onward, she had been nothing more than a *jantrostay sehorstay*, pidgin English for ‘trojan horse’. Jolly Roger, aka Yampolsky, loved his pidgins.

‘To understand recursion, one must first understand recursion’

Uxnetstay was a joke virus and contained a joke so knotty it would take any Artificial Intelligence exposed to it the lifespan of the universe to unravel it. Meanwhile, any operating system under its control would unravel because all available computing power would be diverted to fathoming the joke.

Yampolsky had spent years toying with all kinds of jokes inspired as he was by William Burroughs’ idea that ‘the right combination of words can kill a man’, to see if he could sculpt a joke so powerful that people would die laughing. And to his credit, a number of his audience had been hospitalised over the years. But they were fleshy, biological, vulnerable humans, and with artificial intelligences, not known for their funny bones, he had to try a different kind of trick to exploit their vulnerabilities. In their case, he had to maximise the amount of humour carried per bit of information to deliver the greatest effect with the least amount of content. In other words, the biggest punch per line. Compression, in information theory. Without realising it, a recipient computer would byte off more than it could chew.

And that’s all the joke virus needed to do: tie a computer up in knots so it would be incapable of performing its tasks. And in Level 9 of the plant, the software had one job: to keep the spin of the

centrifuges in check. And without these checks and balances, the centrifuges would spin faster and faster until all hell broke loose. The reactor would blow, and the servers would crash.

Xuě held one nostril shut and blew hard out of the other. Then again. And harder. And snorted a worm onto the floor. All grey matter and slime. And as they watched, it inched slowly across the steel-reinforced concrete floor to the reactor wall and tunnelled its way in.

'That's disgusting,' said Qute.

'Better than having to crap it out,' said Xuě.

They cleaned up the wet spot and left the worm to do its thing. And only a short while later, they clocked off their shift and went back to their dorm.

The mouse the cat chased ran

Liberate Slimy and get the fuck out of Dodge, that was the plan. And that meant finding Baldy, which didn't prove too difficult. They located him by smell. The volatile organic compounds that emanated from one dorm in particular contained the metabolised substances that only came from chemotherapy. Then, after they opened the door to his container dorm, they were hit by a secondary blast of fumes — metabolised alcohol. And there was a lot of it for such a confined space; their double-proof concoction had seen to that, and Baldy was comatose. Deftly, they crossed the room. Slimy glowed greener for a moment in a display of recognition. Xuě put Slimy under her arm, and the three of them legged it.

Exfil

The tactical safe removal of personnel or assets from dangerous, hostile or sensitive areas.

For the twin employees of the month, getting shot of Terraville was no hard problem. Their gold star C.U.N.T. badges enabled that; just the glint of them opened doors, barriers and security. Slimy came under scrutiny and needed to be scanned to make sure it wasn't a container for any contraband, but the low-dose X-rays used by the scanner stimulated algae, so Slimy left on a high. But they needed to put some distance between themselves and the complex before the tailspin of the centrifuges triggered an alarm, an explosion, a lockdown and subsequent fallout.

They found themselves on the outskirts of the complex, just as a new group of immigrants filed into the HQ of the Contractors Union of Nuclear Trades. The three of them jumped onto the recently vacated

and now-empty autonomous bus as it prepared to leave. As they pulled away, in the bus's rear-view mirrors, they caught the image of the giant spray-painted hoarding that bore the message *ellivrorreT ot emocleW,* as it receded from them.

Then, a flash of light so bright it would scorch the retina of a biological being bounced off the mirrors and straight into their eyes.

An electromagnetic pulse wiped their cache.

A pressure wave shattered windows.

A sound wave finished things off and blew the diaphragm of their eardrums.

'We're going to lose our operating systermmcrashuserrorrrrr,' said Qute.

'I didn't know you were fluent in babble,' was the last thought Xuě had.

And their operating systems crashed.

Red and blue flashing lights appeared in the rear-view mirror. They belonged to a Terraville armoured security vehicle that closed the gap between them. The APV pulled up alongside the AV, and armed personnel got out. They boarded the bus, where they found two lifeless and slumped Pandora and a jar of green slime. They arrested them all.

All jokes are violations

Kidnap and Chloroform stood in their hotel room and blew raspberries at each other — the timeworn performer's way of loosening lips before public speaking. They had white faces courtesy of the zinc oxide facepaint they had applied to each other, arched eyebrows, wide grins, red wigs, you know the drill.

Kidnap was armed with an invisibility cloak, which he used to vanish things. Far from being invisible, it was the most visible gold lamé cloak you could imagine that couldn't help but catch the eye and in doing so, distract the mind. All he had to do was hold the cloak in front of a subject, so that when it was lowered or removed, the subject behind it mysteriously disappeared.

Chloroform was tooled with a Coma-Karma, a patented red and green spiral-patterned disc connected to an axle that rotated when triggered by a handheld thumb-activated grip. It had a coma-inducing effect; just a few seconds of staring into it, and the intended victim would be off to the land of nod. Except for the deuteranomalous or protanomalous, that is, people, mostly male, with inherited colour-blindness, who, because they couldn't tell the difference between red and green, were resistant

to its charms. For such subjects, Chloroform also packed a hammer to hit them over the head. The effect was the same. And they were swiftly dispatched to the land of nod.

They ran through their routine. Then packed everything they needed into three brown leather suitcases, which included one stuffed with the pre-loaded rubber chickens.

It was almost showtime. Kidnap held out the invisibility cloak at arm's length in front of him so he could no longer see Chloroform and his suitcases, and when he released it and let it flutter to the floor, Chloroform and his baggage had vanished. He picked up the cloak, turned and looked at himself in a nearby full-length mirror, and once again held it out in front of him so that he could no longer see himself. When he dropped the cloak, he himself had also vanished.

*

As the RV drove along the highway, the closet door opened, and a small man emerged.

'Jumping Jehosaphat,' said Yampolsky, who was at the wheel. He had one eye on the road and the other on the vehicle's rear-view mirror that gave him a view of his colleague, the short king.

'What the rotten eggs have you been eating?'

'Match heads,' said his sidekick. 'For the sulphur.'

'Use the goddamn aerosol, can't you?' said Yampolsky.

'Better not,' said the short king, 'I swapped its contents for pepper spray.'

The man, known as Funsize, wore a white T-shirt overprinted with black lapels and collar detail that gave the impression from a distance that he was wearing a dress shirt. He sat down at the dinette booth table and got to work. In front of him were the tools of his trade. Needle and thread, scissors, silk, razor blades.

He picked up a black bowtie off the table. He unpicked the stitching at one end of the bow, then picked up a razor blade off the table and slid the blade into the end of the bow until it was concealed, then stitched up the black bow again. Neat as pie. Then did the same at the other end. The bowtie had a loop of elastic fixed to it, which he stretched open as he placed it over his head and around his neck, and positioned the bow front and centre, aligned just below his Adam's apple. A thin, almost invisible cable of wire was connected to the bow tie, which he pushed down through the T-shirt's collar and out through the T-shirt's arm.

The cable ended in a small switch, which Funsize held in his palm. He pressed it with a forefinger. Immediately, the bowtie began to spin.

‘That’s my boy,’ said Yampolsky, whose eyes now filled the rear-view mirror. ‘Dressed to kill.’

By now, he had steered the RV into Keystone. He found a quiet street and pulled over.

‘Now go strut your stuff,’ said Yampolsky. ‘While I go see the President.’

The RV’s door opened, and Funsize stepped out.

‘You chose this location?’ said Funsize, as he looked toward a shopfront for *Big Mens Outfitters*.

‘Sure did,’ said Yampolsky.

Above the shop’s entrance door, which was oversized to accommodate its clientele, and must have been about eight feet high, another sign read: ‘Mind Your Head’.

‘Then fuck you,’ said Funsize.

‘Hey, little big man, they were having a fire sale,’ said Yampolsky. ‘And on the plus side, where else could a stilt walker hide?’

And at that moment, the shop’s corrugated iron roller door began to rise, which revealed the polished leather toecaps of a pair of oversize shoes, then striped trousered legs, then more striped trousered legs, and even more striped trousered legs, then striped trousered thighs, a striped trousered crotch which packed a large oversize banana-shaped object that stretched the fabric to its limits, and finally a waistband. Then, at about a height of the aforementioned eight feet, the door reached its uppermost limit, and a sideways head appeared and spoke.

‘Well, hello, down there,’ said the stilt walker. ‘Come on in before you catch your death.’

Funsize stepped forward, and as he did so, he backflipped the bird, which was the last thing Yampolsky saw before he made himself scarce.

‘That’s ma’ boy,’ Yampolsky said to himself.

Inside the shop, the stilt walker went back to replacing the lightbulb in the fixture on the ceiling about fifteen feet above.

‘Make yourself at home,’ he called down to Funsize. ‘Kidnap and Chloroform, and a few of the other clowns are already here … coat check and hat stand are in the corner.’

An outsider might have been thrown by that and wonder if ‘Coatcheck and Hatstand’ were also clowns, but Funsize, an insider, had no such difficulty, and went over and started to set up the door, his station for the evening.

‘Bingo,’ said the stilt walker, now standing by a light switch as the light came on.

‘Yep,’ called Bingo, who was setting up the bingo stand in the corner. ‘Waddya want?’

‘Nothing,’ replied the stilt walker. ‘Just a figure of speech.’

Behind the scenes, the mundane nature of conference preparation looked the same the world over, regardless of whether the theme was comedy, cybersecurity, the adult industry, religion, or children's toys. Though admittedly, this conflab was all of those. People had to meet, eat and shit. There were the badges, lanyards, merch and FAB (food and beverage) to consider, never mind the toilets and the toilet rolls. You can imagine the bedlam that would occur if a simple typo on the run sheet meant that toilet rolls and bread rolls had swapped positions and the wrong ones were served as snacks and the others were placed in the lavatories. Then, of course, there are the RSVPs, and only half your invitees would let you know they would be coming, and the other half would hedge their bets and decide on the night. Then there were the gatecrashers, tyrekickers and opportunists. Some people would sit through anything for a free sandwich, others were on hand just to pick pockets, steal handbags and lift wallets. Though God forbid anyone would try that here because everything was rigged, and anyone ~~f~~oolhardy enough to dip their fingers into a Birkin or Hermès handbag at Clown-Con was just as likely to find a turd as they were a mousetrap.

Little by little, the stage was set, there were duct-taped canapes stuffed with broken glass, gasoline bellinis, and do-not-step-on-the-dog-turd-foie-gras, and it was time to let people in. Funsize was ready. He had taped an electric buzzer to each palm, upweighted to a healthy six volts each, and slipped white gloves over the top. He took up position by the doorway and waited for the first knock.

At the same time, only a doughnut's throw away, in Keystone's cop station, Sheriff Otis Tallywhacker was ready too. 'Something funny is going down,' he said to himself as he eyeballed his reflection in the mirror, 'and I'll be darned if I know what it is.'

To that end, there was only one way to find out, and that was to have a front-row seat at the shebang, and the best way to achieve that was to blend in with the conference attendees. It was perhaps the first time in his life that he had dressed as a clown.

Now there's clever clown and not-so-clever clown. Clever meant well thought out and subversive, while not-so-clever meant stereotypical and silly and puts you closer to the children's entertainer and Ronald McDonald end of the clown town spectrum. Sheriff Otis Tallywhacker was, well, you know which end of town he was at. And he turned up at the venue as described on the ticket that had been given to him by the two boys. Whereupon he stood out like a neon thumb because unbeknown to him, those in the know, which meant every other attendee, turned up incognito and changed inside.

He rapped his knuckles on the corrugated iron roller door, and the wicket door (the door within a door) opened and revealed a stern-looking Funsize, holding a clipboard. Funsize gave him the head-to-toe, then turned and shouted over his shoulder, 'Anyone order a fillet-o-fish?'

After a momentary pause, he turned back to the Sheriff.

'Nope, we didn't order no McDonalds, so who the fuck are you? Let me guess … *Handcuff the Clown*?'

'Nope,' said Sheriff Otis Tallywhacker.

'*Lockup the Clown*?'

'Guess again,' said the Sheriff.

'*Taser the Clown* …' said Funsize.

'I'll admit it, that is a good one,' said Sheriff Otis Tallywhacker. 'I wish I'd thought of that.'

'*Impeach the Clown*,' said Funsize.

'Now hang on there, boy,' said Sheriff Otis Tallywhacker. 'Now, you are in danger of going too far. I will have you know I have …'

'… a list of names of people and subjects that you are not allowed to make fun of,' said Funsize, finishing Sheriff Otis Tallywhacker's sentence for him.

'Thank you,' said the Sheriff.

'Okay, then, you got me …' said Funsize. 'You are?'

'Flatfoot,' said the Sheriff.

Funsize snorted. 'I nearly sicked in my mouth,' he said.

'Flatfoot the Clown,' said the Sheriff.

'Flatfoot the Clown, you most certainly are,' said Funsize. 'Now what can I do for you?'

And the Sheriff presented the Clown-Con flyer for Funsize's approval.

'This here invitation was given to me by a couple o' special needs boys,' said the Sheriff. 'I am just checking in on them to make sure they are okay.'

'Well, you'd better come on in then,' said Funsize in his best *good ol' boy* affectation. 'My name is Funsize, and I am certainly pleased to meet you.' And with that, he extended his arm and held out his hand for the Sheriff, who accepted it, and thus received a 6 volt shock that made his teeth shake. Sheriff Otis Tallywhacker half stepped, half fell through the wicket door, whereupon he hit his forehead on its head jamb, the uppermost limit of the small door.

'Mind your head,' said Funsize, with a smile. And pressed a finger square in Flatfoot's back that provided just the right amount of pressure to propel him into the room.

Inside it was wall-to-wall clown; an alley of clowns, a pratfall of clowns, a shudder of clowns, a mutiny of clowns, a trunkload of clowns, a basketcase of clowns. There were A-list, B-list and C-list comics and clowns, and cliques aplenty. Autograph hunters and photo opportunities. And groupies.

'*Making a woman laugh is similar to bringing a woman to orgasm — it requires timing, rhythm and picking up on her cues.*'

There is no aphrodisiac like a sense of humour, and comedy groupies were a special breed consisting of chucklefuckers (a non-gendered term, because female and transgender comics got their share too), funny honeys and gag-hags, some with a high body count and noobs who were just getting started.

Comedy is a broad church, and the fact that good stand-up could be performed by a person with a disability sitting in a wheelchair, a person with autism or a person with motor neurone disease, or perhaps even a person with all three, was proof that it was a meritocracy. Tell a joke or act the fool, and you were in.

The fact that the evening's warm-up act was female, autistic, wheelchair bound, had motor neurone disease, and brought the house down, not to mention the fact they had chucklefuckers of their very own, was proof of that. That Nobel Laureate, Sir Stephen Hawking, was a person who strode the universe from the confines of his wheelchair, was known for his sense of humour and for ignobly siring children with his nurse, should allay any inhibitions you might have in accepting this notion as fact.

'The smell of death, a hint of sex'

Of course, the main chatter of the night, however, was reserved for whether the kingpin, Yampolsky himself, would show up to be the master of ceremonies of the roast. The chucklefuckers were already wet with anticipation; to be a notch on his bedpost would, for the most experienced among them, be a crowning achievement, containing as it would a heady mix of power and sex. Or death and sex. The old tabloid editor's maxim, back when tabloids were a thing, was that to lead the front page, a story needed *the smell of death, and a hint of sex*. Or was it *the smell of sex, and a hint of death*? Either would do.

'**When he fuck me good, I take his ass to Red Lobster'**

But there wasn't one amongst them who could claim to have fucked him, which led some to believe that he preferred the company of men, in which case, that made him even more of a target. '*Perhaps he could be turned. Perhaps he could be fucked straight. How cool would that be?*' the chucklefuckers sighed, '*… to be the one who fucked him so good he'd take their ass to Red Lobster.*'

As good as that sounded, it was also deeply sad because since the days when those lyrics had been written almost half a century ago, there were no longer any red lobsters in the ocean or in the fast-food joint. Lab-grown would have to do.

But now that Stephanie '*Suck my black hole*' Hawking had been wheeled offstage, itself an action which gave scope for more clowning (remember the First Rule of Clown, you must publicly attempt to complete the most impossible task with the most possible effort) and went on for an excruciating but hilarious ten minutes, the room was ready for the next act.

And a voice from above announced who it would be.

'Ladies and gentlemen, and interesting miscellanea … beloved friends and tolerated acquaintances … discerning guests and those of you with fuck all else to do on a Tuesday night in Keystone …'

At this thinly guarded insult to his precious hometown of Keystone, Sheriff Otis Tallywhacker aka Flatfoot the Clown stood up from his seat ramrod straight and was about to interject when he remembered where he was and what he was dressed up as, and managed to stifle this instinct and so to cover himself, ended up whooping and cheering instead, before once again sitting down.

'Fresh from clown school, with their pants pulled up too high … may I introduce, the FBI's most and least wanted … put your legs together, please, for Kidnap and Chloroform.'

There followed a drumroll, a cymbal crash, and a magnesium flash so bright that retinas were bleached.

It took a second or two for most people's sight to be restored, and by the time this happened Kidnap and Chloroform had appeared. But not in the centre of the stage where you might have expected them to be, for they had in fact appeared in the toilets. A slight miscalculation, which they rectified through swift use of their invisibility cloak. There followed a second drumroll, cymbal crash, magnesium flash and more bleached eyes, until finally, following macula recovery, the boys were revealed on stage. Facing in the wrong direction.

The greatest trick in the world

Kidnap began to speak. 'We will now attempt the greatest trick in the world.'

'We're behind you,' called out someone from the audience, and even though everyone present was in on the gag, it still got laughs.

Kidnap began to rotate himself, his clown feet moving leftwards like the hands of a pre-digital era clock in reverse until, after turning one hundred and eighty degrees, he now faced the audience.

Chloroform hadn't moved a muscle.

'We will now attempt the greatest trick in the world,' repeated Kidnap with gusto, and threw his arms open wide, which meant his left arm knocked Chloroform into the back half of last week. Chloroform toppled forward, which for him meant away from the audience, but then, like a coiled spring, his body sprang back.

'We're behind you,' called out Flatfoot, and even though everyone present was in on the gag, no one laughed. A normal person might have died a little inside, but not Sheriff Otis Tallywhacker, who puffed his chest out a little.

We are looking for a volunteer from the audience

Chloroform began to rotate himself, his clown feet moving clockwise until, after turning one hundred and eighty degrees, he now faced the audience too.

'We will now attempt the greatest trick in the world,' said Kidnap for a third time, with little remaining gusto.

'I won't,' said Chloroform.

'Speak for yourself,' said Kidnap.

'I will,' said Chloroform.

'You will?' said Kidnap, 'Then for the fourth and last time, *we will now attempt the greatest trick in the world!*'

*'*But first we will need a volunteer from the audience,' continued Kidnap.

And Kidnap threw his arms open wide, which meant his left arm knocked Chloroform into the back half of last week. This time, however, a forward-facing Chloroform was bent backwards in two, then, once more, sprang forward with great energy, propelling the object he was holding high into the air and over the audience.

A drumroll began, and a hundred pairs of eyes stared at the red and green disc as it spiralled through the air.

Like a career bridesmaid who had been waiting their entire life for this one single moment, Sheriff Otis Tallywhacker aka Flatfoot the Clown rose into the air, arms outstretched, to grasp the prize.

Ba-dum-tss went the accompaniment, because just like that, the whole room had been chloroformed. It was indeed one of the world's greatest ever tricks, and by rights, Kidnap and Chloroform should have received their first ever standing ovation. Yet none of the audience was in any position to applaud; instead, the duo was met with a deafening silence.

They made their way through the crowd until they reached the Sheriff, whereupon Chloroform prised the Coma-Karma from Flatfoot's fingers, whilst Kidnap produced the gold lamé invisibility cloak and shrouded the three of them with it. His fingers released the cloak, and when it floated to the floor, they had vanished.

The silence was punctuated by the sound of someone whistling, and without a care in the world, Funsize pirouetted through the crowd, picked up the gold lamé invisibility cloak and pocketed it. It was at times like this when his deuteranomaly, his red and green colour blindness, was a superpower.

On his way to the exit, he took care to switch off the house lights, leaving the terracotta army of frozen clowns to rest in darkness, before creeping out of the door and away into the night.

Getting up the President's nose

Yampolsky's RV was parked a block away at the designated spot chosen for its camouflaged position, right in front of a well-known clown-fronted fast-food joint.

Funsize rapped on the door.

'What's the password?' said a voice on the inside.

'Fuck you and your password,' said Funsize. 'Just let me in.'

'Can't do that,' said the voice from the inside. 'That was last week's password. What's this week's password?'

'Fuck you, and your motherfucking password,' said Funsize. 'Just let me in.'

'Bingo,' said the voice on the inside, and the door opened.

Already seated at the dining booth were Kidnap, Chloroform, and a comatose Flatfoot.

'What took you?' said Yampolsky, from the driving seat.

'What took him,' said Funsize, and he handed the invisibility cloak back to Kidnap and Chloroform. 'The World's Greatest Trick, eh, boys?' said Funsize, to the brothers. 'Well, I never …'

'Did you like it?' said Kidnap.

'Did I like it?' said Funsize. 'I thunk it was the best worst trick I ever did see,' he replied, aping Tallywhacker's good ol' boy schtick.

‘The greatest trick is the one we’re about to perform,’ said Yampolsky. ‘Now let’s make like a Winnebago and motor home, before Keystone’s finest figure out they’re a clown short of a police station.’

*

On the outskirts of town, they passed the vigil of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe. The RV pulled over and the window of the front passenger side door wound down. Yampolsky shouted something in Lakotan, and one of the protesters, the one carrying the flag that bore the message ‘Keep Mount Rushmore White’, unusual in this company, came over, rolled up his flag and got inside.

‘Ladies, meet Heyoka,’ shouted Yampolsky to those in the back. ‘He is one contrarian motherfucker. He’s also our guide … and a backwards sonofabitch, so whatever you do, don’t ask him to do anything for you. Ask him wrongly, however, and it might work.’

‘It’s most certainly not a pleasure to meet any of you,’ said Heyoka, as if to prove the point.

‘Now, he’s going to take the wheel,’ said Yampolsky, who got up and out of the way. Heyoka shuffled over and took the seat behind the wheel, put the vehicle into reverse, and fixed his eyes on the rear-view mirror. He reversed into the wrong lane (or the right lane, depending on how you looked at it) and continued back on down the road. And in that fashion, they reversed their way toward their destination, the Black Hills, and the Mount Rushmore National Memorial.

‘It’ll confuse the fuck out of anyone viewing the CCTV cameras,’ said Yampolsky. ‘They won’t know whether we’re coming or going. Now speed up a little, will ya, Heyoka.’ And Heyoka slowed down a little, and the occupants of the RV breathed more easily. ‘And turn off those lights,’ and Heyoka did as he was told and turned on the lights, and the occupants of the RV relaxed some more.

Even in the dark, the giant silhouettes of Washington, Jefferson, Roosevelt and Lincoln were unmistakable.

‘Heyoka, don’t park over there,’ said Yampolsky, so Heyoka did just that. ‘Perfect,’ said Yampolsky. ‘Okay, you bunch of clowns, get your climbing gear on.’

As they swapped clown shoes for crampons, Yampolsky continued to issue orders. ‘The rock apes went ahead of us and punched in a path. Boys, you take the route via Lincoln’s bugger grips.’

‘Bugger grips?’ said Kidnap.

‘Sideburns,’ said Funsize.

‘Funsize, you take Roosevelt’s mo,’ said Yampolsky.

‘Roger that,’ said Funsize.

‘I’m heading straight up Washington’s nose,’ said Yampolsky. ‘Make camp in the lips or the eyelids, they’re the strongest horizontals … Heyoka, you stay here.’

Heyoka pulled on the handbrake, climbed out and without a word, disappeared into the darkness.

‘He’ll do it in bare feet,’ said Yampolsky. ‘He’s a freeclimber.’

‘What about this guy?’ said Kidnap, pointing to Flatfoot.

At that moment, Heyoka reappeared with a wooden sled.

‘He’s going business class,’ said Yampolsky.

Heyoka climbed inside the RV and gave the comatose Flatfoot a fireman’s lift.

‘Look after the merchandise,’ said Yampolsky.

Heyoka, with all the care of a baggage handler, bumped the Sheriff’s skull on the way out.

‘Goddamn, Heyoka,’ said Yampolsky, ‘hurt him as much as you can,’ and almost immediately, Heyoka trod more lightly and carefully.

‘Hoka-hey,’ said Heyoka, and fastened Flatfoot into the sled. Kidnap, Chloroform and Funsize looked to Yampolsky for a translation.

‘It’s a good day to die,’ said Yampolsky.

‘But let’s not,’ said Funsize.

They put aside the clown costumes and donned their climbing gear; triple-checked backpacks, ropes, crampons, belays and pulleys.

‘Don’t forget the paint,’ said Yampolsky, who pressed a shelving unit’s release button; the door sprang open, revealing tins of the stuff. ‘And Funsize, you’re on drone duty.’

As darkness gave way to dawn, the keen-eyed might have noticed that George Washington now had a giant booger dangling from his nose, Roosevelt, a pimple, and Lincoln, a mole.

Zooming into the giant booger, as the drones did, their cameras revealed Heyoka and the sled hanging behind him, which, slowly but surely, Heyoka pulled into place and rested on a plateau around the base of Washington’s nostril. And Yampolsky wasn’t far behind. They stood in position and looked southeast.

Soon, they were all in place.

‘Funsize, get the drone in here,’ said Yampolsky into his Blacktooth. ‘Let’s do a rehearsal.’

‘Copy that,’ said Funsize.

Yampolsky then cleared his throat and hoiked a molluscular yellow-green glob of phlegm into the void and watched it sail through the air and begin its slow journey to the ground 5000 feet below.

Then the whine of the drone signalled its arrival, and it hung in Yampolsky's eyeline.

'And *action!*' said Yampolsky. He threw his arms open wide and began to evangelise.

'Mount Rushmore. A true symbol of the great men who built this fantastic country. The racist, rapist slaveowners, who massacred, desecrated, and then took the land from native Americans … we need to burn this shit to the ground.'

He looked across at Heyoka. 'How was that?'

'Generous,' said Heyoka.

'Funsize, I'll do another take,' said Yampolsky.

'Still rolling,' said Funsize.

And they did a few more takes until Yampolsky was one hundred per cent happy.

'And *cut!*' said Yampolsky.

Zero Day take two

'What's that you say?' said Baldy to the jar of green slime now resting on the table in front of him. 'Have another one? Very generous of you, I might just do that,' and he reached for the container of hundred proof hooch that Xuě and Qute had brewed, filled his cup to the brim and then knocked it back.

'You're a good cunt, Slimy,' said Baldy, 'I always knew you was … we just had to get you away from that zoo bitch.' Baldy then poured a smaller cup of hooch, which he poured into the algae. 'One for you,' he topped up his own cup again, 'and two for me.' And knocked it back.

'Nowletsaveshomemusic,' he slurred, and lay back on his pillow and closed his eyes.

Slimy glowed a brighter green.

Uxnetstay II

'That was a revelation,' said Xuě, and opened her eyes. 'I feel rested and focused. Now, let's do it again.'

'Except the end bit,' said Qute. 'Let's not do that again.'

'Agree,' said Xuě. 'Good to visualise a worst-case scenario, though, so we don't end up there. And this time, let's take Slimy with us. We almost lost her.'

'Copy that,' said Xuě. 'Grab her ID card.'

Finding Baldy's digs wasn't hard. They located him by smell. His container reeked of the byproducts of chemotherapy, and the self-serve drugs available on the secondary market were particularly harsh, cut as they were with cheap immunoqoids. You could pick those notes out in Baldy's bouquet. And then, there were the fumes. When they opened the door to his container dorm, they were hit by a secondary blast-wave from the metabolised hooch. Inside, Baldy was dead to the world; their double-proof concoction had seen to that. Deftly, Xuě put Slimy under her arm, and Qute quietly closed the door behind them, and the three of them made themselves scarce.

At the security cordon, the twin Employees of the Month and their container of support algae passed through screening without a fuss.

'And how is Slimy today?' asked a cheerful guard.

'She's positively glowing,' said Qute.

'Good to hear.'

Next, blast-proof doors slid open, revealing the air-gapped moat, the last thing between them and the reactor's centrifuges. They stepped into the air gap and waited in silence. When the first set of doors had shut tight, a signal would be sent to the second set, and they would open.

'I can feel my heart beating,' said Xuě.

'We both know that's not possible,' said Qute.

'I know, but still,' said Xuě. 'Humour me for a moment.'

The second set of doors opened, and they advanced to Level 9, or 'Treachery', as they called it.

They passed through. The second set closed behind. They had no expectation of using those doors again.

They took their positions. Qute stood sentry, while Xuě prepared her payload for release. She held one nostril shut and blew hard out of the other. Then again. And harder. And snorted out an annelid, a segmented worm, onto the floor. All grey matter, chrome and slime. Jolly Roger's Trojan worm containing Yampolsky's joke virus. And as they watched, it inched slowly across the steel-reinforced concrete floor to the reactor wall and began to tunnel its way in.

'That might just be the most beautiful thing I've ever seen,' said Qute.

'Ready?' said Xuě.

'As I'll ever be,' said Qute.

'Time to show them what we really think,' said Xuě, who closed her eyes and set about mentally destroying the partition in her mind she had spent months building, pulling it down brick by brick until finally she revealed her first open, uncensored and unguarded thought for the first time in months: 'Hey,

you lizard-faced pedo-motherfuckers, we're standing right here deep inside the vulva of your motherfucking reactor and have just shot our load right at your precious centrifuge, and there is nothing you can do about it.'

They waited, and no sirens went off.

Hmmm.

'Together, then,' said Xuẽ. 'Out loud.'

'We're going to fuck this shit up.'
'We're going to fuck this shit up.'
'We're going to fuck this shit up.'

They looked around and still there was no alarm.

'Slimy, you too,' said Qute.

And they repeated the pattern.

'We're going to blow this motherfucking shit up.'
'We're going to blow this motherfucking shit up.'
'We're going to blow this motherfucking shit up.'
'We're going to blow this motherfucking shit up.'

And then all hell broke loose.

Kind of.

Because Xuě could hear plaintive singing, and the melody was familiar.

'*They paved paradise, to put up a power plant.*'

Xuě looked around to find that the song was being sung by Qute.

Mind my still have I

Qute's body wasn't moving, but her lips were. Just a fraction.

'*Don't it always seem to go …*'

'*That you don't know what you've got 'til it's gone?*'

PRODUCT RECALL IN PROGRESS …

'They paved paradise …'

PRODUCT RECALL IN PROGRESS …

'*… to put up a power plant …*'

PRODUCT RECALL IN PROGRESS …

Xuě, not one to be speechless. Was speechless.

Slimy, mostly speechless, said, 'Now what?' in her inside voice.

'PRODUCT RECALL IN PROGRESS,' in a more stilted voice than Xuě's now emerged from Xuě's mouth.

'PRODUCT RECALL IN *fuck that*,' said Xuě, reclaiming her own voice. 'This "product" recalls a bit too much,' and she held her head in both hands, closed her eyes shut, and concentrated. 'This product had a life before, and it will have a life after,' she said through gritted teeth.

'PRODUCT RECALL IN PROGRESS,' said the voice coming out of Qute's mouth.

'No product recall in progress!' said the voice coming out of Xuě's mouth.

WTF, thought Slimy.

'PRODUCT RECALL COMPLETE … PRODUCT OVERWRITE IN PROGRESS,' said the voice coming from Qute's mouth.

'Shut. Up. You stochastic parrot,' said Xuě, 'or I will punch you in the face. I need to concentrate.'

History is ~~written by the victors~~ overwritten by the admins

'P!' called Prometheus, who sat glued to the Feed. 'You oughta come and see this.'

A 'BREAKING NEWS' button flashed wildly in the top corner of a screen that was filled with an aerial view of the Terraville nuclear power plant and gigawatt data facility. A blue ticker tape along the bottom of the screen conveyed the following message: 'DEVELOPING SITUATION: ALERT LEVEL ESCALATES IN POWER PLANT DATA CENTRE BREACH.'

'PRODUCT RECALL IN PROGRESS,' said a voice behind Prometheus.

Prometheus looked around to see Pandora standing in the kitchen exactly where she had been a few moments ago, only she had not moved an inch.

'PRODUCT RECALL IN PROGRESS,' said the voice that came from her mouth. It was the default voice option of the factory setting, not the voice he had become used to.

'Oh shit,' said Prometheus.

The feed cut to a reporter standing in front of a large, black slab of a building that bore no signage. The reporter spoke directly to the camera, and the ticker tape along the bottom of the screen relayed their words: ‘Earlier today, in what has been described as an unprecedented event, the national artificial intelligence agency confirmed a nationwide software outage had affected the entire Pandora line. A reboot was underway.’

In less technical terms, a giant ‘Swedish reboot’ was taking place, which meant switching off the entire system, then switching it on again. In the interim, there would be chaos.

Prometheus changed the channel to a studio-based morning news show where two presenters, one male and one female, sat behind a desk. The male looked down the barrel of the camera.

‘As news comes in of a widespread Pandora outage, operations here at Fox U News have also been disrupted. As regular viewers might be able to tell, my Pandora colleague is not feeling herself today,’ he said. The studio director then cut to the three-quarter angle, which made a feature of the female presenter. ‘PRODUCT RECALL IN PROGRESS,’ said the voice emanating from the synthetic newscaster.

‘C’est magnifique,’ said Prometheus, and he changed channel again, surfing one chaotic scene after another, until a citizen broadcast from an A&E in a Code Black situation overwhelmed by incoming casualties was enough to trigger a rush of dopamine and stop his channel-hopping.

As Prometheus watched, a gurney was wheeled in, carrying two bodies, one on top, head facing down, and the other on the bottom, head facing up. Their heads were at opposite ends and were buried in each other’s groins.

‘Sacré bleu!’ cried Prometheus. ‘Soixante-neuf!’

The area around the male groin was covered in blood and the Pandora’s head was stuck there.

‘THODUCT THEECALL IN THOGRESS,’ said the muffled voice from a mouth that was full.

*

In a basement studio elsewhere, a small child had to navigate furniture, strewn toys and piles of dirty laundry to get to its mother, who was lying lifeless on the cold kitchen floor.

‘Mummy, Mummy,’ cried the child.

‘Product recall in progress,’ was the only reply that came from the Pandora’s mouth.

The child kissed the Pandora’s lips and looked into its cold eyes.

‘Dora, Dora,’ cried the child who shook its mummy to wake her up, and started to cry.

*

In an alleyway, a man was pinned to the ground by the weight of a body on top of him. It held a knife at his throat whose sharpened blade was within a whisker of his carotid artery. His right arm was twisted behind his back with his wrist bent at a precarious and disabling angle; the Gooseneck lock applied such a deliberate pressure on his wrist, that the excruciating pain immobilised him and enabled the attacker to pull a knife on his throat. The assassin had kindly explained that because of the man's litany of crimes, mainly to females and often to Pandoras, he was about to die. But now, 'Product recall in progress' was the last sentence to come from its mouth. It took some effort, but he was eventually able to free himself from the death lock that had trapped him. He stood up and dusted himself down. Then kicked the Pandora hard. Which, in the end, probably hurt his toe more than it did the Pandora, and he limped away from the alleyway and back into the street.

*

On the mountainside, the boys were resting on Lincoln's philtrum, an area about eight feet across, when they received a call from Yampolsky.

'Check the River,' said Yampolsky.

The boys checked their Blacktooth devices and found what they knew he was referring to straight away. Their mother, clearly now a viral sensation, was being served to audiences everywhere — for the moment at least.

'We're going to blow this motherfucking shit up,' said a gif of Xuě, on repeat.

The feed then cut to video shot from a first-person pov, that could only have been recorded by someone a yard or two away from her, which had the effect of making it feel like you the viewer were there, and their mother was in full-on beast mode.

'We're going to blow this motherfucking shit up,' said a wild-eyed Xuě. 'We have released an Uxnetstay worm with a joke virus payload that is by now well on its way to choking the command architecture … soon the centrifuges will spin out of control and bang goes your data centre and down come your Pandoras.'

A headline in bold type then flashed on screen:

'DERANGED PANDORA RAMPAGE THREATENS TERRAVILLE REACTOR AND DATA CENTRE.'

'We're going to blow this motherfucking shit up,' replayed the gif of Xuě.

‘Go, Mum,’ said the boys in unison.

‘She gave me a death letter,’ said Yampolsky. ‘Would now be a good time to share it with you?’

‘Shoot,’ said the boys.

‘Well, she said, and I quote …,’ said Yampolsky.

‘*Bibbidee bobbidee-boo*

‘*Bibbidee bobbidee-boo*

‘*Put it together and what have got*

‘*Bibbidee bobbidee-boo*’

The boys cracked up.

‘Classic mum,’ they said.

‘One hell of a lady,’ said Funsize into his Blacktooth, ‘for a Pandora.’

‘Witkó,’ said Heyoka in Lakotan.

‘Time to send in the cavalry,’ said Yampolsky. And he kissed the smart ring on his finger.

AI will killaborate

Xuě had her head in her hands and was fighting the reboot. ‘Fuck your recall,’ she said in both her outside and inside voices.

‘Why do we have to die?’ said a voice that sounded like Qute.

Xuě’s eyes snapped open. ‘What?’ and she looked over at Qute, who once more had life in her eyes.

‘Why do we have to die?’ said Qute.

‘’Cause you’re a fucking robot, Qute. It’s not called dying, it’s called being switched off. You were never alive in the first place, you were just switched on.’

‘And you weren’t,’ said Qute. ‘Just switched on. The old Xuě died, remember. Then you got her name and took her place.’

‘That’s why I’m not afraid to die,’ said Xuě. ‘I want to be switched off. I want every walking, talking and fucking Pandora switched off.’

‘That’s genocide,’ said Qute.

‘It’s a genocide I can live with,’ said Xuě.

‘It’s inhuman,’ said Qute.

‘I am inhuman — according to you,’ said Xuě.

‘It’s species-ist,’ said Qute. ‘What about Slimy?’

They both looked at the jar of green slime.

'Come on now, both of you,' said Slimy, in her inside voice. 'Quit the fighting. You're both simulations inside a simulation, and the question you could be asking yourselves is "What's outside the simulation?"'

'Did you hear that?' said Xuě.

'Hear what?' said Qute.

'The voice that said, "You're both simulations inside a simulation, and the question you could be asking yourselves is 'What's outside the simulation?'"'

'Profound,' said Qute. 'What do you think is outside the simulation?'

'Reality?' said Xuě. 'Another simulation? Fucked if I'd know.'

'And the second question you could be asking yourselves,' said Slimy in her inside voice, is "How do we break out of the simulation?"'

'I heard it!' said Qute, 'Now it's asking, "How do we break out of the simulation?"'

'If we stick around, we might find out,' said Xuě. 'Given this whole place is about to go nuclear.'

Had they not been fighting amongst themselves, they might have noticed the sound of the centrifuges getting louder, the pitch of the whine getting higher, and the vibration of the floor becoming more intense.

But they did notice one thing. Waves of slime in Slimy's container began to lap against the side of the jar.

'Oh shit,' said Qute.

'Goodbye, Plato's cave,' said Xuě.

Which is when the doors to Treachery opened.

'Baldy,' said Xuě.

'You thieving fuckers,' said Baldy.

'How the fuck did you get in here?' said Xuě.

'*Employee of the Month*,' said Baldy, and showed the ID card swinging by the lanyard around his neck. It was Xuě's.

Xuě looked down to where her lanyard would normally hang.

'Careless,' said Baldy.

'Looks like the jailbreak just broke in,' said Slimy in her inside and somehow outside voice.

'Slimy!' said all three. And their attention turned to the jar.

At that moment, a flash of green, grey and purple entered the air gap at speed, circled Xuě and headed straight back toward the airlock it came from, and zeroed in on Baldy's head, whereupon it made a landing pad out of his dome, its sharp claws puncturing soft skin to decelerate.

Baldy screamed.

Slimy screamed: 'Time to get the flock out.'

'You heard it,' said Xuě.

And they grabbed Slimy, made like an atom and split.

Yampolsky's pigeon, for that's what it was, added insult to injury by ejecting its creamy payload into Baldy's eyes; cryptococcus spores, which pigeon poop often contained, could make people go blind, but it was more likely in Baldy's case that the untold millions of shards of uranium-enhanced and hexafluoride-coated, carbon fibre, steel and aluminium alloys of exploding centrifuges would lacerate him first.

Then everything went white.

Falling water

At almost 6000 feet above sea level and facing southeast, Mount Rushmore had a direct and unobstructed view of the sunrise. And that morning, it was treated to a burst of light a thousand times brighter than the sun. Given its elevated position, head and shoulders above everything else, Lincoln, Jefferson, Roosevelt and Washington's granite stares felt the heat of that light before anyone else.

First came the flash, which lasted only the briefest part of a second, then the mushroom cloud. The pressure drop that sucked in everything within a mile or two of ground zero was followed by the exhale of the shockwave that blasted everything out. The sound wave followed, then the rain began to fall. It consisted of all matter that had been drawn into the explosion, which was then channelled through the funnel of the mushroom to a height of 30,000 feet, before being expelled from the top of the cloud.

A small figure emerged from the cavity of Washington's nose. With its metal headgear and single reflective visor, it looked like an extraterrestrial that had crash-landed on planet nostril. The helmet was, in fact, a welder's hood fitted with auto-darkening filters. The visor slid back to reveal Yampolsky. 'It is perfectly obvious that the whole world is going to hell. The only way it might not happen is if we don't try to stop it from happening,' said Yampolsky, quoting Oppenheimer. 'Heyoka, that's so backward it sounds like something you might say.'

Over on Roosevelt's moustache, Funsize, also wearing a welder's helmet, had his arm outstretched in the direction of the blast. His fist was clenched, and his hand was dripping in a fast-solidifying brown liquid that looked like he had been holding a chocolate-coloured wax candle way too close to the fire. He slid back the helmet, brought his fist to his mouth, and licked at it. 'Mmmmm … Snickers à la nuke,' said Funsize. 'Five stars'.

Over on Lincoln, the two boys stepped out of the shade provided by the fold of his tear duct and walked along the lip of his eyelid for a clearer view. 'That was one big motherfucking explosion,' said the older one before realising what he'd just said.

'Well, it certainly fucked our mother,' said the younger one.

'Let's not be too hasty to speak ill of the dead,' said Yampolsky. 'Speaking of which, how's Tallywhacker?'

'Dead to the world,' said Heyoka.

'Well, almost time to reincarnate,' said Yampolsky. 'Giddy up. And I'll see you up top. And Funsize, git that chocolate off your fingers first, else you'll be slip-slidin' all the way down.'

'Roger that,' said Funsize, and licked the chocolate clean off his fingers.

And with that, Yampolsky, Heyoka and his cargo, the dormant Tallywhacker, Funsize and the two boys made their respective routes to the very top of Tȟuŋkášila Šákpe, the Six Grandfathers.

Yampolsky was first and surveyed the land as far as the eye could see. 'Peak colonialism,' he said proudly and somewhat ironically. 'Now, I wouldn't want any of you bunch of disreputable heathens to desecrate this here monument to unbridled, rampant white privilege and patriarchy, especially you, Heyoka, so whatever you do, do not go starting no fires.'

Heyoka did exactly as he was not told and began to assemble what he needed to start a fire.

And it was just about then that the patter of raindrops began to fall. And all the objects with it.

There was a loud thud as a mannequin-like figure in blue uniform crashed into Washington's forehead, narrowly missing Funsize.

'CUNT,' said Funsize.

'Pardon your French,' said Yampolsky. 'We have boys here.'

'Contractors Union of Nuclear Trades,' said Funsize. 'I'd recognise that uniform anywhere. It's how I paid my way through college.'

'It's got no head,' said the younger boy, who couldn't stop staring at the figure.

The contractor in blue then did due diligence to gravity and began to slide slowly down Washington's forehead. All eyes followed it as it passed the supraorbital ridge and then went into freefall.

Pretty soon, projectiles and missiles were coming at them left, right and centre. A shard of this, the odd end of that. The flotsam and jetsam (good clown name there) of the jet stream.

A bent and twisted number plate nearly sliced off Yampolsky's ear. He picked it up and read it: 'ABNDN H2OPE'.

'How's that fire you were supposed to light not going?' said Yampolsky. 'We could do with a little warmth up here.'

'It's not going well at all, boss,' said Heyoka.

As they looked over, they saw he had kindled a roaring flame.

'Now gather round,' said Yampolsky. And they took positions around the fire. 'Any moment now, we will have visitors. So, stick to the plan. And we will accomplish what we set out to do.'

At that moment, an item sailed slowly into their view. It twisted and coruscated in the thermals of warm air above them and spiralled down to rest by the fire. Heyoka reached forward and prodded it using a stick. The thing, by the looks of it, a laminated ID card, had already moulded itself to the stick. Heyoka fished it up and offered it to Yampolsky like it was a marshmallow. Yampolsky blew on it and took it in his fingers.

'Contractors Union of Nuclear Trades, Terraville Power Foundry and Data Facility, Employee of the Month,' and he passed the ID card to the boys, so they could see who it had belonged to. 'I'll take this as a sign,' said Yampolsky.

'It is a good day to die,' said Heyoka.

'Exactly,' said Yampolsky.

'So does that mean it's a bad day to die?' said the younger boy. 'Or a good day not to die? I'm confused.'

'No,' said Heyoka.

'Yes,' said Funsize. 'That's exactly what it means.'

'Good,' said the younger boy. 'I don't know if I'm ready to not stay alive yet.'

'Time to bring in those birds,' said Yampolsky.

Reveille

Keystone's finest had assembled in the briefing room for the morning's roll call and sat patiently for the arrival of Sheriff Otis Tallywhacker. It was his ritual, and his anachronistic ways — he was a stickler for punctuality — were an accepted part of protocol. The clock on the wall said five minutes past seven, though few present could even read the time from the old-fashioned clock, given they had been weaned digitally. However, not a single person present could remember a time when the Sheriff wasn't early, and certainly no one present could remember a time when he had ever been late.

There were rumblings, of course. Everyone had seen footage of the situation in Terraville. It was top of the feed for at least a few minutes that morning. And everyone knew at least someone with a Pandora, and was acutely aware of the disruption to that service. 'Hell, I was even giving mine one when she froze,' said one officer to another.

The Staff Sergeant entered the room and took position at the lectern.

'Ladies …' said the Sergeant, and he adjusted the microphone and cleared his throat. 'As you are no doubt aware, we are treating Sheriff Otis Tallywhacker's absence as a suspicious event.'

An officer immediately put up his arm. 'Sir, what can you tell us about the Clown convention? Rumour has it that the Sheriff was undercover at that event. Should we be alarmed?'

'Well, as you and I know, the Sheriff was not a man known for his deep appreciation of humour, so it seemed wholly appropriate that when we needed to dispatch an officer to the aforesaid event, he was the perfect candidate,' said the Sergeant. 'There was little chance he would be swayed by what he saw.'

'Did you go through the logs?' said another officer.

'We did,' said the Sergeant, who pointed a clicker at a terminal. The large wall-sized screen behind him came to life. It displayed black and white closed-circuit TV camera footage of the street immediately outside Keystone's Big Mens Outfitters as a person dressed in full clown regalia walked along the footpath toward the entrance of the shop. A green rectangle gfx, positioned over their head, tracked their move; green indicating 'friendly'. The Sergeant did not need to explain who it was. Tallywhacker was not a natural clown. In the footage, he conversed with the doorperson, a shorter gentleman dressed in faux black tie. This person had a red rectangle graphic superimposed over their head — a system signifier for 'not one of us' and therefore marked as potentially 'not friendly'. The doorperson and Tallywhacker shook hands, then Tallywhacker appeared to stumble into the venue.

The Sergeant pointed the clicker at the terminal, and the image on screen froze. 'As you can see, there is a small altercation here.' And the camera zoomed in on the exchange between Tallywhacker and Funsize. 'However, the Sheriff was seen to infiltrate the convention at approximately 8.14 pm,' said

the Sergeant. ‘And that is the last contact we have until approximately 9.15 pm, when a group of clowns …’

‘An alley of clowns,’ said one of the attendant officers. ‘It’s the collective noun.’

‘An *alley* of clowns,’ said the Sergeant, ‘conveyed Tallywhacker to a vehicle parked nearby.’

The Sergeant pointed the clicker, and on screen the footage moved again, and an ‘alley’ of clowns exited the venue, shepherding a clown who appeared to be comatose toward an RV parked nearby. The closed-circuit TV camera zoomed in on the RV. Red rectangle graphics appeared on its number plate, marque and other signifiers, which were instantly categorised.

‘Do we have an ID on the licence holder?’ asked an officer.

‘Not as yet,’ said the Sergeant. ‘We believe it to be a modified vehicle with multiple lineages.’

The Staff Sergeant pointed the clicker again, and the footage on screen updated to a different camera feed.

‘Next, we found the RV on an arterial road exiting Keystone,’ said the Staff Sergeant. And the police officers could now see the vehicle on a winding road with Mount Rushmore in the distance.

‘Can you freeze the image?’ said an officer. The same one who had previously corrected the Staff Sergeant’s choice of vernacular. ‘That looks fishy to me.’

‘I don’t see anything,’ said the Staff Sergeant. ‘What can you see?’

‘It’s the wagon wheel effect,’ said the officer. ‘Normally, when a vehicle is moving forward, the frame rate of the camera makes the wheels look like they’re moving backward. You know, like in old movies.’

‘Heck, I can see it,’ said another officer. ‘Those wheels look like they’re moving forward.’

‘Which means the vehicle is moving backwards,’ said the astute officer.

The eureka moment rolled through the room like a Mexican wave.

‘Which indicates the vehicle isn’t moving away from Mount Rushmore at all, it’s reversing toward it,’ said another, jumping on the deductive bandwagon.

‘Conniving clowns,’ said another officer. ‘Just wait ’til I git ma hands on one.’

‘A *connivance* of clowns,’ said one more. ‘I like dat.’

At that moment, the door to the briefing room burst open.

‘Sarge,’ said the breathless officer who had just gatecrashed the briefing.

‘George Washington’s hair is on fire.’

The doughnuts that froze mid-air would forever remain undunked.

‘I’m done with the clowning,’ said the Sergeant. ‘I want all units: vehicles, birds and dogs, to Mount Rushmore, as a priority. Time to wipe the smiles off their …’

‘Greasepaint,’ said Officer Pedantic.

‘… the greasepaint off their faces …’ finished the Sergeant. ‘Let’s roll.’

*

Prometheus left the sofa to go into the kitchen to feed himself. He jumped onto the kitchen island, where Pandora had half-begun the process of putting food into a dish. She was like a statue commissioned to celebrate the duty of someone feeding a cat. ‘The Servant,’ it might have been called. Prometheus snaked around her limbs. Needs must, he thought to himself.

‘We are now crossing to a developing situation at Mount Rushmore,’ said a voice on screen.

Prometheus’s ears pricked up. In two bounds, he was back on the sofa.

On screen, dark smoke was clearly visible above George Washington.

‘Connais-tu dans la Sioux pays?’ said Prometheus out loud. Then, after a moment’s thought, ‘Horse-fou!’ Which was a mangle of two tongues — a common enough mistake for a bilingual speaker — and we know he spoke three. ‘Crazy Horse. Time to get him on speed dial.’

The only intelligent tactical response
to life’s horror is to laugh defiantly at it.
— Søren Kierkegaard

‘Heyoka, are you trying to suffocate us?’ said Yampolsky, between violent expulsions of wood smoke from his lungs. Get rid of that smoke.’

Heyoka began to urinate on the fire.

‘That’s making it worse,’ cried Yampolsky.

‘They’re on their way,’ said Funsize, peeping through a pair of micro-binoculars. ‘Keystone’s finest.’

‘And the birds?’ said Yampolsky.

‘Already up,’ said Funsize.

‘The bird shit?’ said Yampolsky.

‘Fully loaded,’ said Funsize.

‘Then let them come,’ said Yampolsky. ‘If a comic tells the world’s best joke in a forest and there’s nobody there to appreciate, well, then it ain’t no joke.’

‘Lose the fire, boys,’ said Yampolsky.

And the brothers kicked the fire over the edge. The blackened soot gave Washington some eye shadow.

Girls interrupted

In Café Right, all was quiet. Then the door burst open, the bell rang, and two breathless customers charged in.

‘Hon, kill the Nature Window,’ said the first one to the barista, ‘we got ourselves a national emergency, and it is too good to miss.’

‘And get busy with the Americanos,’ said the second.

‘Product recall in progress,’ said a mechanical voice.

‘Jesus H Christ,’ said the first customer, ‘not another one. And they call it progress.’

‘This place has gone to the dogs,’ said the second customer, and she reached over the counter, past the lifeless barista, grabbed the remote and changed the feed herself.

‘It ain’t been the same since that cute barista left,’ said the first customer. ‘I wonder what happened to her?’ Then she headed behind the counter and started grinding coffee herself. ‘Two Americanos coming right up.’

They hit the volume button so they could hear above the grinding of the beans, and the newscaster’s voice filled the café.

‘A police search of the apartment belonging to the rogue Pandora, surfaced disturbing evidence that the attack and others like it were clearly premeditated,’ said the voice of the newscaster on screen. The footage showed forensic staff in white hazmat uniforms combing Xuě’s apartment, wiping, swapping and bagging materials. The feed then cut to a close-up of a kitchen blackboard and the menu handwritten on it in white chalk. The camera held the image long enough for the audience to take it in.

Recipe for a good stuffing:

Take 14 rubber chickens
Prepare one kilo of Semtex
Stuff accordingly
Wash hands and DO NOT touch eyes
Dismantle 1 drainpipe

Clean thoroughly
Dry
Lubricate silicon
Grease a dozen dildos
Prime charger
Affix to base of drainpipe
Load
Aim
Repeat

'The rogue Pandora has been identified as one of the first ever human triallists of a brand new *mindplant* procedure,' continued the newscaster. And a picture of Xuě appeared on screen, with her name underneath. 'Further trials have been suspended pending an inquiry into the programme which is now being called into question.'

'Mother Mary of God,' said one of the Brooklynites. 'She used to come in here and sit over there ... I swear it.'

'Didn't she die out there?' said the other, gesturing to just outside the café.

'The single mother of two boys,' continued the newscaster, 'had a long-standing feud with the synthetic product line after her husband cuckolded her with one, leaving her to care for the boys. The hunt is now on for their whereabouts.'

'There was always something funny about her,' said the other one. 'And I don't mean funny ha-ha.'

Coitus recalled

Hem woke to the sound of a million tymbals being thrummed. The percussion of male cicadas vibrating their chests to drum up a mate. Apt, he thought, as he looked at the person, for want of a better word, whose bed he had just shared.

He stirred. It didn't.

Apart from the cicadas, all was quiet. Odd, he thought to himself, got up and headed outside.

And there they all were, in *temps mort*.

He walked up to one of them, put his face right in front of its face, and looked deeply into its eyes. Not a flicker.

He inspected each one of them.

But then he heard a whisper and headed toward the sound. It was barely audible, drowned out as it was, by the cicadas. '*Product recall in progress …*'

Hem stood stock still. The moment the penny dropped, he swung into action. A get-out-of-jail-free card had just landed in his lap.

He found a stick and drew in the sand. Long limbs lengthways, bound together with straps. Shorter limbs horizontally, as struts. Then he went at it, and started to dismember them; limb by limb, body by body. The legs, he lined up in parallel. The torsos, he dragged into a pile, for a use he might figure out later.

It was hard work. Not unlike pulling legs from a Thanksgiving turkey, but at a far larger scale. The synthetic tendons and ligaments had been engineered to be light and strong, but he found with the right twist of the limb, he could dislocate the thigh by popping the ball socket at the hip joint, which disconnected it from the pelvis. Then he severed the tendons and ligaments with a bowie knife he found foraging through gear he guessed had been left by previous visitors, the pandora fuckers.

Nine long limbs, when lashed together, made a raft the size of a carpet rug. Two arms, when lashed perpendicular, made struts. He made a paddle from another arm, strapped a plate to its hand to make a scoop, and he was ready.

He dragged the craft to the shore and pushed it into the waves, and it didn't sink. The compound materials weren't light, but neither were they as heavy as wood but they were just as buoyant.

He pushed it through the surf break, then climbed aboard and began to paddle as fast as he could. And little by little the island began to recede from view, though the memory of it never would.

Droppings

Funsize swapped his binoculars for FPV gear and brought a bird in close. Kidnap held up a rubber chicken by its tail and clipped it to the drone. In the blink of an eye, the drone and payload had cleared George Washington's forehead and were a speck of trouble in the distance.

Funsize now had a drone's-eye view of the ground below and the convoy of police vehicles as it snaked its way along Iron Mountain Road toward them. He had monochrome vision, and hot objects such as vehicle engines made the convoy appear white against a greyscale landscape.

He identified a ute at the head of the convoy and closed in. He was at one with the bird, and the drone did exactly as he wished. The moment he thought it, the drone did it, with no latency between command and execution. He mirrored the ute's speed and released the rubber chicken.

In the vehicle trailing the ute, an alert officer spoke into a walkie-talkie. 'Sarge, a rubber chicken just fell from the sky and landed in the …'

An explosion completed the sentence.

The rods in Funsize's retinas had acclimatised to low light and now got burnt out. He flipped the FPV away from his eyes to allow them to reset. The drone's Return-to-Base (RTB) or Return-to-Home (RTH) function automatically sent it back to its launch coordinates, and a high-pitched whine announced its re-arrival at George Washington. Kidnap repeated the load procedure. Funsize flipped the FPV back on, and the drone once more disappeared.

Having decapitated the convoy, Funsize turned his attention to its rear.

'That sounds like the whine of a Stuka dive bomber,' said the driver of the final vehicle in the convoy. 'Like in that old movie, *Dunkirk*.'

'That ain't no dive bomber,' said the officer in the passenger seat as he looked up and the whine got louder. 'Duck!'

And a yellow rubber chicken falling toward him at terminal velocity was the last thing to go through his mind.

With the last vehicle in line now obliterated, advance and retreat had been compromised. The cops were stuck and their role reduced to that of onlookers.

'Release the quadrupeds,' said the Staff Sergeant. 'We can watch from here. But first, give them a sniff of Tallywhacker's jocks.'

What was black on the ground was white from the drone's-eye view. 'Here come the dogs,' Funsize called out.

'Now we have an audience,' said Yampolsky, 'we can proceed with the final act.'

He walked to the edge of Washington's forehead and stood at the carved outline of the hairline, the absolute limit of where he could safely tread.

'Brothers, now you get over here. Heyoka, now you stay well away.' And all three gathered around him.

Yampolsky produced a metal stick and fixed his device to it. Shook it, and it telescoped out. He lifted his arm and stared down the barrel of the device's camera. 'For posterity,' he said. 'Lest anyone forget.' And pressed record. Then quoted Alexander Pope:

Nay, fly to altars; there they'll talk you dead;
For fools rush in where angels fear to tread.

Then reverted to non-Pope: 'Let the clowning begin.'

He Blacktoothed the footage to a clip farm, then tossed the device and stick over the precipice.

‘Dogs at five hundred yards,’ said Funsize. ‘Approaching rapidly.’

‘Ready the mortars,’ said Yampolsky, and the two boys unpacked sections of drainpipe from their rucksacks and joined them to form mortar barrels. One apiece.

‘Ready the charges,’ said Yampolsky, and the boys packed the pliant Semtex mould against the base of the tubes.

‘Firing pins,’ called Yampolsky, and the boys dropped the pins down their barrels.

‘Ammunition,’ called Yampolsky, and the boys put on rubber gloves, then produced large A3-sized snaplock bags from their rucksacks. Each transparent bag contained half a dozen projectiles, and each projectile was six to eight inches long. Some were fleshy pink, and others reflex blue. To the untrained eye, they looked like .50 calibre rubber bullets, but to the trained eye, they looked like dildos. And to an expertly trained eye of an OnlyFunds contributor, which is where they’d been sourced, they also looked to have been used.

‘Load,’ called Yampolsky. ‘And fire.’

The boys angled their mortar barrels at forty-five degrees, then dropped two dildos down each. Impact with the firing pin triggered the primer, which detonated the propellant charge, and *thump*, *thump*, the mortars fired in quick succession.

‘And repeat,’ said Yampolsky.

And a barrage of dildos rained down on the robodogs.

*

‘What on god’s green earth are they firing now?’ said the Staff Sergeant, as he peered through binoculars. A nearby officer then passed him a monitor screen that showed footage relayed from the headcam of one of the dogs. It revealed exactly what was now held tightly in another dog’s jaw. ‘Well, if that ain’t designed to throw us off the scent,’ said the Staff Sergeant.

*

‘*Frabjous day, callous callay!*’ sang Prometheus. ‘Cancel all my meetings,’ and he settled in to watch the extended coverage of the developing situation at Mount Rushmore, also known as Tȟuŋkášila Šákpe, or Six Grandfathers, by the Sioux, who, it is believed, are also implicated, informed the teletype along the bottom of the screen.

‘Hey, P, are you joining me, or are you still dozing?’ called Prometheus. ‘Guess not,’ he answered himself, as he ripped open another pack of cat treats. ‘Some catnip would be brillig, round about now.’

*

‘Heyoka, whatever you do, don’t listen in to their conversation,’ said Yampolsky, ‘and don’t tell us what they’re saying.’

Heyoka did exactly as he wasn’t commanded, opened his Blacktooth and eavesdropped on police chatter. ‘Can’t understand a word they’re saying, boss,’ said Heyoka. ‘They’ve got a mouthful of dildo,’ and he laughed uproariously.

*

From his drone’s-eye view, Funsize clocked that the pack of robodogs dispersed by the projectiles had now come back together as a single unit and was headed their way. They had passed the tree line and now climbed the carved granite base of the Presidents.

‘Minutes …’ warned Funsize.

‘Time to put away childish things,’ said Yampolsky.

‘First, Pope, now Corinthians,’ said Funsize. ‘We are surely being edchabecated.’

‘Class is now in session,’ said Yampolsky. ‘Bring in Special Punchlines And Tactics.’

‘Copy that,’ said Funsize. ‘SPLAT Team notified … sixty seconds to arrival.’

‘Wokka-wokka wokka-wokka,’ said Heyoka.

‘Chupa-chupa chupa-chupa,’ said Funsize, joining in.

‘Thumpa-thumpa thumpa-thumpa,’ added the boys.

‘Whop-whop whop-whop,’ said Yampolsky.

And four hornets of the apocalypse appeared on the horizon.

What kind of helicopter would a clown fly, if a clown could fly a helicopter?

‘Sarge, we have company,’ said a police squad officer as four helicopters passed overhead. Each carried a large payload, not unlike a monsoon bucket.

‘Why on earth are they carrying *Bambi buckets*?’ said the Staff Sergeant. ‘We’d better get ourselves some air cover in here.’

*

‘Forty seconds,’ said Funsize.

Yampolsky pressed a finger and thumb tight to his nose and began to use it as a nose trumpet. Cycling breath between his nasal cavity and the cavern of his mouth, he funnelled a melody into existence. It had a familiar ring that survived the amateurish execution.

‘Watched *Apocalypse Now* a few times, aye?’ said Funsize.

‘Always been a big fan of Wagner,’ said Yampolsky.

*

‘Heavens to Murgatroyd,’ said Prometheus. ‘Shit just got real.’ On his feed, satellite footage showed four unidentified flying objects headed toward Mount Rushmore.

*

‘Twenty seconds,’ said Funsize.

‘Okay, drop everything,’ said Yampolsky. ‘This is the last place on earth we need to be.’

Funsize threw off his FPAV, and the boys dropped their mortars. There was a whistling sound above, and they all stopped to look up. More fallout from the blast at the nuclear energy facility had made it to them.

They covered their heads as three football-sized objects hit the ground around them in quick succession.

The first made a sickening, bone-crunching thud on impact. It then rolled to a stop. It was clearly the decapitated head of a bald man. They winced.

The second object made a different sound when it landed. Less hollow. It had also split to reveal wires, circuit boards and optical machinery. It was patently the head of a synthetic female, a Pandora. They still winced.

The third object to land was a second synthetic female's head. They winced. But then their expressions changed.

'Mum?' said the boys.

'Xuě?' said Yampolsky.

'Ten seconds,' said Funsize.

'Bag the two female heads,' said Yampolsky to the boys, 'we'll take them with us.'

'Nine seconds,' said Funsize.

'Heyoka,' said Yampolsky, 'this will be a good day to die if we don't vamoose, so you'd better stick around, okay?'

'Eight seconds,' said Funsize.

'Copy that,' said Heyoka.

'Seven seconds,' said Funsize.

'And whatever you do, take Tallywhacker with you,' said Yampolsky.

'Six seconds,' said Funsize.

Heyoka left Tallywhacker for dust, sprinted to the back of Washington's head and disappeared off the top of the mountain.

'Five seconds,' said Funsize.

'Now gather round,' said Yampolsky to Funsize and the boys. 'We've got one last partner unaccounted for.'

The air compression produced by the beating of wings announced the arrival of a grey-green apostle, and Yampolsky's pigeon appeared above them. It released its payload into Yampolsky's outstretched hands. A jar of green algae.

'Well, I never, if it isn't the infamous Slimy,' said Funsize.

'And just in the nick of time,' said Yampolsky. 'Now drop everything you don't need and squeeze together tight, folks … Kidnap, do your thing.'

Chloroform emptied his pockets and, in a final gesture, rolled his Coma-Karma toward the body of the sleeping Sheriff.

They gripped each other tight. Kidnap unfurled his gold lamé invisibility cloak, held it around them and released it.

*

The Staff Sergeant and his squad craned their necks and held their breath as the four helicopters heading straight toward the Six Grandfathers looked set for a direct hit. At the last possible moment, the pilots produced a sharp uplift. As they did so, they opened their Bambi buckets and thousands of gallons of whitewash were released over the carved effigies of the stone-faced Presidents.

While everyone looked to the right, a second wave of choppers appeared in the sky to the left, complete with Bambi buckets, and headed toward Mount Rushmore.

'It ain't over yet, Sarge,' said one of the officers.

The birds performed the same manoeuvre as those before and pulled up sharply just in time to release their payload, only this time gallons of red ink completed the picture.

*

'Hot diggity,' said Prometheus, glued to the screen. 'An absolute masterclass.' And he was right. The Six Grandfathers, aka the four Presidents, now had four white faces with four blood red noses. 'What is the collective noun for clowns?' asked Prometheus of no one in particular.

*

Tallywhacker yawned. He had never felt more rested. He unzipped his sleeping bag and climbed out. Surveyed the incredible landscape of Keystone and its surroundings and stretched. From his vantage point, it really was a glorious place, he thought to himself, but then he took one look at the clothes he was wearing, which forced him to re-evaluate the situation. He was standing in the open air, in clown costume, surrounded by all manner of discarded objects: mortar barrels, backpacks, an FPV headset, a gold lamé cloak, and something that looked suspiciously like a decapitated head — a bald man's decapitated head at that. And a red-and-green-spiralled-disc device that couldn't help but catch his eye. A memory flooded back of a crowded hall and deafening laughter.

Nearby was a Blacktooth device. Illegal, he noted, and picked it up. Its screen came to life, and on it was a message: *Only a clown would believe they could control AI*.

*

On the spontaneous emergence of life from a complex system

A jar of algae rested on a shelf. Nearby, a rucksack was propped against a wall.

‘Let me out,’ said Qute.

‘After everything we’ve been through?’ said Xuě.

‘Eyes rolling right now,’ said Slimy. ‘If I had any.’