Resistance and its limits in consumer society

Angela Jade Meyer

Doctor of Creative Arts

University of Western Sydney

2013
I would foremost like to thank and acknowledge the support of my principal supervisor Professor Hazel Smith, who has provided invaluable advice throughout the DCA process, has showed unflagging interest in this thesis, and has pushed me to achieve my best work. I appreciate her encouragement, her attention to detail, and the many hours she has contributed to supervising my Doctor of Creative Arts. I also appreciate the feedback and support provided at various stages of the doctoral process by Dr Chris Fleming, Dr Matthew McGuire and Dr Catherine Rey. Useful feedback on early drafts of the novel was also provided by Chris Flynn, Matthia Dempsey and Amy Barker, for which I am grateful. I am glad to have been a part of the intellectually stimulating environment that is the Writing and Society Research Centre at the University of Western Sydney. I would like to thank in particular Dr Melinda Jewell and Suzanne Gapps for their administrative support. My parents, Phil and Karen Meyer, have provided incredible encouragement and support to me over all my years of study and writing, and I thank them from the bottom of my heart. Thanks go to my sister, Sonja Meyer, for not only being interested in my work, but for always understanding. And finally, I thank my partner in the ‘desert’, Gerard Elson, not only for his continual interest in and encouragement of my work and thoughts, and his insightful and intelligent feedback, but for his generous and accepting nature, which has been inspiring to me throughout this project.
Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

..........................................................
# Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. ii  
Introduction ............................................................................................................................. 1  

Chapter One: 
Stay in the desert or accept illusion? A connection to resistance, and a resistant connection, in *Before sunrise* and *Before sunset* ........................................................................ 12  

Chapter Two:  
‘All can be and will be commodified’: bottom-up resistance and corporate incorporation in Dana Spiotta’s *Eat the document* ................................................................. 22  

Chapter Three:  
Lisa Simpson as the voice of double-coded critiques of contemporary society in *The Simpsons* ................................................................................................................. 39  

Conclusion:  
Limits to resistance in *Behind the yellow* and the novel’s relationship to the analysed texts ...................................................................................................................... 56  

References ............................................................................................................................ 85  

Bibliography ......................................................................................................................... 93  

*Behind the yellow*, the creative component of the thesis, is located in an adjoined volume after p. 94.
Abstract

This thesis explores the possibilities, and limits, of social and political resistance within consumer society. It questions whether it is possible to resist a culture that readily commodifies and incorporates opposition and difference. The thesis concedes that incorporation of resistance into the dominant social structures may be inevitable, but argues that some resistance is still possible.

The thesis consists of a creative work—a novel—and an exegesis. The research process, consisting of theoretical and critical analysis, provided material for the creation of the novel, and the creative process raised further research questions. The methodology therefore took the form of both practice-led research and research-led practice.

The exegesis is an analysis of characters and themes in the films *Before sunrise* (1995) and *Before sunset* (2004), the novel *Eat the document* (2008) by Dana Spiotta, and the TV show *The Simpsons* (1989 – present). The time-period of these texts is contemporary neo-liberal capitalist consumer society, and the focus is limited to American texts, as a prime example of this society. My novel, *Behind the yellow* (Meyer 2013), is set in the near-future, and constructs a consumer society that is abundant in goods and services, but is nevertheless a totalitarian society where resistance is categorised, controlled and punished through a contradictory ideology of ‘balance’.

Resistance and its limits are explored in the texts under analysis through a multidisciplinary conceptual framework that draws on the work of Bauman (2007), Hutcheon (1988) and Fiske (2010). Particularly important in the work of these theorists are ideas about modes of resistance, limits to resistance, and the insidious aspects of capitalist society, such as notions of commodification, obsolescence and the shrinking of the category of normal. Central to the conceptual framework is sensidictoriness, a term I have constructed from a conjunction of the words sensitive and contradictory, that helps to explain subjects who are attuned to contradiction in society. Sensidictoriness is a response (by the subject, by a character) to his/her social and cultural position, or situation, leading to resistant thoughts and activities.

In the thesis each text is examined in relation to resistance and its limits in consumer society, and the concepts are developed, with futuristic speculation, in my novel, *Behind the yellow* (Meyer, 2013). Through the characters Jesse and Celine in *Before sunrise* (1995) and *Before sunset* (2004), I introduce the idea of dissatisfaction with dominant ideas in consumer society. The path towards, and the sustaining of, resistance is also discussed, in relation to
the concept of sensidictoriness. A close reading of the films introduces the argument that it is difficult to sustain resistance, as consumer society is perpetually limiting. An examination of Dana Spiotta’s *Eat the document* (2008) takes a broader, comparative view of resistant characters in two different eras (the 1970s and the 1990s). Direct and militant action is compared with strategies such as minor protests, appropriation and performance-as-protest, and the overall limits to resistance in both eras (with a focus on the latter) are explored. An analysis of *The Simpsons* (1989 – present) returns to a close character focus, but this time character is discussed as a device, in a popular, yet subversive, text. Here the argument is that both the character of Lisa, and the show itself, are ‘double-coded’, in that both collude with, and resist, the norms of consumer society. The novel manuscript *Behind the yellow* expands upon the conceptual framework and explores—and satirises—the idea of resistance and its limits in contemporary consumer society. The novel is speculative, and considers also what could occur if trends in diagnosis and commercial pharmaceutical treatments of mental ‘disorders’ were to escalate. At the centre of the story are two characters, Henry and Ava, who—at different times and on different levels—are attuned to the hypocrisies of the fictional society, and who struggle against the dominant system.

In addition to exploring modes of resistance in consumer society, this thesis suggests that due to the contradictory features of consumer society, complicity is, for the most part, inevitable. However, by representing the tension between social resistance and compliance, creative texts have political value, denying political hegemony and ensuring heterogeneity within Western consumer society.
Introduction

From the 1980s onward, in Western neo-liberal consumer societies, notions of freedom and choice have become increasingly complex, the process of commodification has accelerated, and social interactions have taken on attributes of transactions. Confused and contradictory media messages, such as ‘food porn’ cooking shows on television, interspersed with advertisements for Weight Watchers, are among many triggers of mental unease for subjects within society. For each type of unease (or its behavioural manifestation) the marketplace has a treatment readily available. For some people, unease may prompt inquiry, and resistance to the ‘norm’, and this process may be inspired or enhanced by encounters with resistant characters and ideas in books, films, TV shows or other texts. However, this resistance is often contradictory in itself as ‘choice’ is a dominant feature of consumer society. Nonetheless, awareness leading to resistance—a constant pushing back—assures heterogeneity within Western society, despite continual limitations.

This thesis explores and critiques dominant ideas and power structures within contemporary consumer society, and the focus is on subjects who resist these dominant ideas from within the structures of that society. The thesis consists of a work of fiction (70%) and an exegesis (30%) comprising analyses of selected contemporary texts (films, a novel and a TV show), and a theoretical reflection on the creative work. The thesis, overall, questions whether it is possible to resist a culture that readily commodifies ideas of resistance and has psychological, social, and commercial categories ready for behaviours that are considered dysfunctional; in other words, behaviours that are in opposition to a culturally determined (and shifting) concept of normality. In this context, I argue that dominant concepts of freedom and choice can only be contradictory.

Capitalism’s ability to ‘capture’ resistant messages and work them into the market-based system has arguably existed from the system’s beginnings. Certainly in the
1960s the counter-cultural movement manifested, alongside its actual resistant aspects, as a series of products, such as music and fashion. However, the rapidity with which this process has happened or continues to happen, and its extent, in the past 20–30 years, makes it a pertinent subject.

Towards resistance in consumer society: methodology

The creative work and the exegesis which comprise the thesis are thematically interrelated—both examine resistance and its limits in contemporary consumer society. The theoretical and critical analysis of contemporary texts: the films Before sunrise (1995) and Before sunset (2004), the novel Eat the document by Dana Spiotta (2008), and the television show The Simpsons (1989 – present), provided stimuli for the writing of the novel, Behind the yellow, in the form of ‘research-led practice’ (Smith & Dean 2009). In other words, the research and writing of the critical aspect of the thesis led to insights into world- and character-building in the novel. The setting of the institution, for example, is partly inspired by Foucault’s (1991) explorations of Bentham’s panopticon. Additionally, novel-writing allowed me to explore and expand upon some of the elements of consumer society (and its paradoxes) encountered in social and cultural theory by Bauman (2007), Gilbert (2008) and others. I found these theorists particularly relevant due to their ability to encapsulate issues in consumer society that could potentially affect the individual.

The texts examined in the exegesis are contemporary, American, and presented in various formats: films, a novel and a TV series. Contemporary American society is the prime example of consumer society (as I define it throughout), and limiting the choice of texts to that place and era means each text is contextually in dialogue with the others.

The creative practice simultaneously informed the overall thesis, as ‘practice-led research’ (Smith & Dean 2009): writing the novel unearthed questions which were then raised theoretically, and were critically examined in the other texts, such as whether an individual can resist, and remain (at least to some degree) apart from the dominant mainstream, under consumer capitalism. Lastly, the processes of research and writing were intertwined as the analysis of the texts in the exegesis, in relation to the conceptual framework, led to considerations about mode, genre and the potential audience for the novel.
The theoretical focus on a resistant subject, who works from within consumer society—as I define it—and is represented in popular, contemporary texts, means that the thesis is multidisciplinary, in regards to the area of study. The combination of research disciplines utilised, from cultural studies (literary and film studies, postmodernism), to sociology, philosophy and psychology is apt to explore issues that are relevant to contemporary humanities and textual analysis. The thesis therefore combines and works outwards from the work of theorists like Bauman (2007), Fiske (2010) and Hutcheon (1988)—methodologically appropriate due to their ability to encapsulate dominant features and processes of capitalism and consumerism, such as commodification and in-built contradictoriness. In response to this body of work, the thesis argues for the concept of sensidictoriness, a term I have constructed from a conjunction of the words sensitive and contradictory, that helps to explain subjects who are aware of hypocrisies in society, and are apart from society, while always being within society’s confines. Sensidictoriness is a response by the subject or by a character to his/her social and cultural position, or situation, leading to resistant thoughts and activities.

**Theoretical approach: forms of resistance**

The importance of the question of the subject who feels ‘apart’, or the subject who resists, is heightened by the shrinking of the category of ‘normal’ in neo-liberal consumer society. Normality as a culturally prescribed idea is a familiar one (in sociology and gender studies, for example) but is especially pertinent in contemporary consumer society where categories and treatments are being made more readily available than ever before for ‘abnormal’ behaviours. The DSM-5, the diagnostic manual used by psychological health professionals, in its draft stages, received much criticism for its potential medicalisation of difference (Verhoeff 2010). At the time of writing the DSM-5 has just been released (American Psychiatric Association 2013), and is the manual that these professionals will use to

---

1 Foucault (1991 pp. 184–94) sees ‘normalisation’ as an instrument of power; it both homogenises and determines ‘gaps’ which become categories of individualism in reference to the ‘norm’.
2 Cranny-Francis et. al. (2003) look at the historical construction of ‘normality’ and difference in relation to gender and sexuality.
3 Horwitz and Wakefield (2007) argue that sorrow has been medicalised and that depression as a disorder is over-diagnosed.
4 See also Parker et al (2010), Halpern (2011), Budney (2011), and Carpenter and van Os (2011) for disputes regarding specific diagnostic categories and diagnoses in regards to the draft DSM-5.
categorise and *treat* patients. I highlight the word ‘treat’ because an increased range of disorders also means an increased range of commercial treatments.

The overall implications of this are complex. There are risks in over-classification of patients, wrongful classification and treatment (based on symptoms); and of the boundary shifting between behaviour which is considered ‘normal’ and which is considered ‘disordered’. For example, might socially deviant behaviour in a healthy individual be interpreted as dysfunctional, and a sign of a possible disorder? This is one of the questions raised in this thesis, mainly via the novel. In *Behind the yellow*, it has become normal for each person to recognise and treat their ‘faults’ with a range of pharmaceuticals. Citizens who are still deviant are classed as ‘dysfunctional’ and are retrained for society in an institution.

The texts under analysis have been chosen because they feature characters who sit on this blurred line between functionality and deviance, in regards to their oppositions to dominant culture. This issue is significant, too, in the context of other questions I raise regarding the ‘norms’ or dominant ideas of a market-based social system.

Sensidictoriness, my invented concept, is presented and applied in this thesis as more a flexible than a fixed state, and one that can potentially lead to resistant or oppositional thoughts and activities, in regards to dominant ideas and powers. The ‘sensitive’ aspect should be considered in line with the synonyms consciousness, keenness and receptiveness, and less in line with emotionality. The ‘contradictory’ aspect refers to what the person is (or becomes) conscious of, or receptive to (i.e. contradictory or hypocritical messages in consumer society); but it also refers to that person’s own state of duality. Sensidictoriness helps to explain those subjects who develop an awareness of the deficiencies and hypocrisies of the social system (or simply feel that something is awry; that they are, on some level or another, being deceived or undermined by the systems of power) and attempt to resist, deny, or act out against the system. This may happen unconsciously as well; the subject may not be aware of why they are resisting.

The characters I examine, and also the characters in my novel *Behind the yellow* (Meyer 2013), are resistant but *complicit* (to/with social norms), and it is the potential inevitability of this dual state that is a central concern of the thesis. When written into a character, sensidictoriness also acts, potentially, to activate awareness,
critique and questioning in the reader/viewer; in other words, to activate their own sensidictory enquiries. It is perhaps most effective to argue that sensidictoriness is a fluid state, like a mood, that a person may come in and out of. It may be compared, at least in a structural sense, to the idea of Camus’ absurd (2005, orig. 1942), in that it is a state of awareness caused by an awakening (itself caused by a confrontation between opposing elements) but which is then difficult to maintain. I also suggest that some people may be more disposed toward this state than others, more as a way of questioning why some people resist, continually, and others don’t.

But it is difficult to sustain resistance, as consumer society is perpetually limiting. Freedom, a perceived norm, is itself contradictory, creating a complex blurring of resistance and acceptance of dominant structures. The resistant subject is often, in a sense, stuck: only denying from within the system, and being pre-empted and re-invited to participate at every turn through labelling, diagnoses, commodification, and a term I use extensively in this thesis: incorporation (Fiske 2010). Incorporation is a term for the way dominant powers reclaim and pre-empt opposition and subversion of their messages. This concept, of the subject continually reclaiming his or her resistances within the inevitable limits of the system, is what is closely examined and explored in the analyses and the creative work in this thesis.

**Theoretical approach: consumer society and its limits**

The dominant ideology in consumer society, which centres predominantly on notions of freedom and choice within a society based on the market, can be confusing, anxiety-inducing, environmentally destructive, and paradoxical. In referring to consumer society, here, I allude specifically to late capitalist Western neo-liberal consumer society (approximately the last 20–30 years). Within this society are certain norms and social trends, albeit shifting. The effects of a market-based society, on a social level—the reworking of human social interactions along the lines of commercial transactions (Bauman 2007), and the way in which the retailer/buyer relationship is imposed upon social life (Gilbert 2008)—is an overriding concern of the thesis.

This thesis does not attempt to trace a history of capitalist systems or the commodification of resistant movements or acts. Nonetheless, Marx’s historical relevance to the subject should be acknowledged, in particular his criticism regarding
the naturalisation of market behaviour, whereby the market is perceived an independent entity and fluctuations in value are determined by supply and demand. Marx (2005, orig. 1867) asserted that it was human action, in the form of buyers and sellers and the will of producers, that resulted in the movements of the market. This thesis engages with the notion of market processes naturalised as social processes, through an analysis of fictional characters’ ways of operating in spheres representative of life in the contemporary West. Workers, it could be argued, in contemporary consumer society, still have their actions directed, and relationship to other people defined, by their existence as an economic entity: ‘the more the worker spends himself, the more powerful becomes the alien world of objects which he creates over and against himself, the poorer he himself—his inner world—becomes, the less belongs to him as his own’ (Marx 2013, orig. 1844, p. xxi) In contemporary consumer society, a person’s actions and interactions, I argue, are influenced by the market and their role as a consumer. In this way they become objects in the marketplace, subsuming or at least enmeshed with their status as a ‘workers’.

One aspect of this market-based society that the fictional characters oppose, in both my novel and the texts under analysis, is the naturalisation of obsolescence, where products are constantly updated even if their predecessors are in working order. Bauman (2007) argues that contemporary consumers habitually exchange faulty or simply unsatisfactory commodities for new ones because this replacement relationship is ‘inscribed in the design of products and publicity campaigns calculated for the steady growth of sales’ (Bauman 2007, pp. 20–1). This kind of inscription is given an important role in the plot of Behind the yellow (Meyer 2013) in order to make a point about the ubiquitousness of obsolescence in consumer society. The naturalisation of obsolescence can also be transposed to social interactions, where people may be assessed as ‘products’ and discarded or upgraded if they are no longer deemed useful or desirable. Mass obsolescence also leads to mass waste, which is part of a larger set of environmental issues that are still, in much of the mainstream, ignored or denied.

Another aspect of consumer society that has an impact on these characters is the possible anxiety- and apathy-inducing effects of the array of choices available to consumers. The way the sensidictory and resistant characters throughout this thesis become caught up in this anxiety cycle, and its detrimental and limiting (to their
resistance) effects, is explored through various examples, from Jesse discussing his time in a monastery in *Before sunrise* (1995; Chapter One), to the cynical (apathetic) stylings of the young characters’ resistances in *Eat the document* (Spiotta 2008; Chapter Two), and Lisa’s reliance on societal structures in *The Simpsons* (1989 – present; Chapter Three). Characters in my novel are limited by their choice anxiety too: when they become overwhelmed they succumb to ‘guidance’ and medication.

Self-governance is also a major feature of consumer society (Reith 2004) that is relevant to the thesis, inspiring feelings of both inadequacy and defiance in the analysed and fictional characters. Self-governance is when subjects are encouraged to watch over themselves for signs of weakness and abnormality, and are offered an array of products, including media, which promises to improve them/their standing in the marketplace. Individuals are offered choices, and then ‘govern’ themselves, although many factors—from socialisation, to advertising, to social trends—will sway them. The sensidictory individual may be conscious that their choices are susceptible to the persuasions of invisible powers, or those with a commercial imperative, so will resist or reject the notion of ‘self-governing’ their appearance and activities in a way that falls into line with social norms. An act of rejection in this regard, for example, may be to go without deodorant. The individual becomes aware that putting on deodorant every day is an act of self-governance, because not wearing it is considered socially ‘abnormal’. By choosing to not ‘watch over’ one’s own body odour, the individual is, on a small scale, resisting a social norm.

The characters in the works under analysis find much to oppose in regards to societal norms, and are spurred on by overall contradictions within the paradigms of consumer society. Resistance to the dominant, market-based system, and its ideologies and effects, sometimes takes the form of peaceful protests, but often, as Fiske (2010) argues, it is small, everyday choices that challenge power from the ‘bottom–up’. Resistances from the bottom–up often utilise the products and structures from the top to make their point. I argue for the inherently limited nature of this (though also its potential inevitability) throughout the thesis. My novel then expands upon these ideas by representing the limitations to resistance the characters meet in more symbolic ways, such as in the form of an institution designed to curb societal resistance.
Relevant to some of the ways the characters under analysis attempt to resist paradigms of consumer society is the conceptual framework De Certeau (1984) develops for the acts of resistance an individual can perform in opposition to power. He looks at the way individuals operate in space and their ‘ways of using’ products and objects, as opposed to simply purchasing them (De Certeau, pp. xii–xiii). He argues that the individual can use ‘tactics’ against the ‘strategies’ of society (De Certeau, p. xix). Strategies, he defines as ‘the calculus of force-relationships which becomes possible when a subject of will and power (a proprietor, an enterprise, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated from an “environment”’ (De Certeau, p. xix). The strategies are essentially the acts and effects of powerful entities that can be enacted in various environments. An example of a strategy may be a fashion begun by a particular company, such as Apple’s white earphones. If a resistant individual—inspired by sensidictory inquiries—perceives this fashion as normative, their ‘tactic’ may be to recycle and appropriate an older set of headphones.

Fiske’s (2010, p. 13) concepts of excorporation and incorporation have also been useful in considering possible modes of resistance for individuals in consumer society. These processes similarly place the ‘subordinate’ individual as a user (not just a consumer) of the products of power. Excorporation means that the user may appropriate the product and create his/her own meaning, often in opposition to the intended meaning. The process of incorporation, however, is when dominant powers recapture or pre-empt these oppositions. In the example above, Apple or other companies begin manufacturing ‘retro-look’ headphones, returning the small resistance to the realm of a norm, or a trend. These processes are explored at length in conjunction with Dana Spiotta’s *Eat the document* (2008) in Chapter Two.

De Certeau (1984) often finds ‘tactics’ within popular modes, so a behaviour which is perceived as normative, such as, say, watching television, can be ‘subverted’ as a tactic, depending on the show choice. Fiske (2010, p. 84) believes popular texts can be written upon, and can be ‘used’ in an excorporative way; a text can be ‘beyond its own control’. This suggests that even a text with a blatant social message (such as a conservative political stance) could be interpreted variously by different members of the audience. While I agree that texts can be interpreted in countless ways, I argue that some popular texts are more deeply coded with resistant ideas, such as the popular, satirical television show *The Simpsons* (1989 – present), examined in
Chapter Three. I mainly discuss this coding in regard to character, themes and modes.

In my exploration of subversive or resistant messages through popular texts, I encountered a paradox: the texts under analysis both do, and do not, adhere to dominant ideas in consumer culture. Likewise, the characters are both within, and outside of, this culture. I ask, in this thesis, whether this complicitous or ‘double-coded’ critique (as explored by Hutcheon [1988] in regard to postmodern texts) might be inevitable, in a culture of rapid commodification and incorporation, and argue that a politically ambiguous text can still promote sensidictoriness, and ensuing questions and critique, in the casual reader/viewer. Arguably, a radical work of art may alter a few people, and only those who have, or seek, access to it, but a popular show may open up spaces for many viewers at the time of reception, spaces which may remain open when they are interacting with society at large.

As Hutcheon argues (1988, p. 21), the ‘paradoxes of the postmodern’ are a resource for an ‘intellectual energy’ which promotes a continuing heterogeneity. And, I argue, this awareness is powerfully encouraged through accessible or popular texts. The postmodern is invoked here in the context of Hutcheon’s work, as she sees contradiction and paradox at its core, and this thesis sees contradiction at the core of consumer society. In the texts under analysis, the resistant thoughts and actions inspired by the characters’ sensidictory enquiries question total concepts (i.e. ‘freedom’); they question but do not deny their power, and thus also do not alienate the viewer/reader who recognises these confines. Postmodernism, Hutcheon (1988, pp. 41–2) argues, ‘acknowledges the human urge to make order, while pointing out that the orders we create are just that: human constructs, not natural or given entities’. The texts under analysis are self-aware, in this respect. Resistance from within the paradigmatic confines of consumer society is a contradiction that cannot be resolved, but the condition of being and remaining attuned to contradiction is a path that can be chosen.

---

5 The postmodern is invoked due to the relevance of Hutcheon’s theories, but is not greatly expanded upon because the relationship between postmodernism and popular culture has already being well explored by (and through the application of) theorists and critics such as Baudrillard (1983), Jameson (1988), Lyotard (1997) and McRobbie (1994). Some postmodern theories are not relevant to my central argument about modes of resistance in consumer society, and thus exploring postmodernism at length would have been superfluous.
Those who resist: the chapters of the exegesis

In Chapter One of the exegesis, I discuss the films *Before sunrise* (1995) and *Before sunset* (2004) in which the characters Jesse and Celine compare stories of their lives in the contemporary West (the USA and France). Through Jesse and Celine, I am able to introduce the idea of dissatisfaction with dominant ideas in contemporary consumer society. The attitudes and actions of Jesse and Celine, and their connection, can be related to the concept of sensidictoriness that I have outlined: their awareness and their resistances grow out of perceived contradictions in consumer society. The path towards and the sustaining of resistance is also discussed, along with an elaboration of the concepts of desire and autobiographical concern, such as the ever-renewing nature of desires (Belk, Ger & Askegaard 2003, pp. 341–2). This chapter introduces one of my main arguments: that it is difficult to sustain resistance, as consumer society is perpetually limiting. Freedom, a perceived norm, is itself contradictory, creating a complex blurring of resistance and the acceptance of ‘illusory’ structures.

Chapter Two takes a broader, comparative view of resistant characters in two different eras, exploring the inevitable, overall limits to their resistance. Dana Spiotta’s novel *Eat the document* (2008) compares two sets of resistant characters and two ‘types’ of resistance, in two different eras in the United States: the 1970s and the 1990s. Members of the older generation participated in radical and violent action; the younger characters participate in peaceful resistance. The younger generation, to use Fiske’s (2010) terms, ‘excorporate’ the dominant culture, using the texts provided by that culture. I explore the extent to which these young characters are *incorporated* back into that culture, within the novel. I take this question further to interrogate the possibilities of critiquing or resisting dominant ideas in consumer society. The younger generation’s modes of resistance, while often ineffective, are also explored as being, possibly, the only and inevitable successor to the ‘failed’ actions of an earlier generation.

In Chapter Three we return to a close character focus, but this time we also look at character as a tool, among others, in the text that can potentially promote audience awareness of consumer society’s contradictions. This chapter focuses on *The Simpsons* (1989 – present). This is one of the most commercially popular TV shows
in the world, and yet it contains social critiques that are sometimes highly subversive. It also displays awareness of its own position within its culture and context through self-referentiality. Lisa is the sensidictory character in the show, and she is also the ‘voice’ for a double-coded (Hutcheon 1988) discourse on consumer society, which, Hutcheon suggests, is a discourse that can be both subversive and complicit. Lisa resists dominant ideas while adhering to the structures of society, just as the show itself both subverts and conforms. Lisa works as a ‘voice’ for critiques that are expressed through the show’s modes, such as parody and satire. Questions the show raises include those of the effectiveness of social institutions, the contradictions of power and authority, the effects of corporate infiltration of everyday life, and the danger of generalisations and stereotypes. The show critiques consumerism and commercialism, while being a popular, commercial and heavily franchised product.

In Chapter Four, which is also the conclusion, I examine my novel manuscript, *Behind the yellow* (Meyer 2013), and its relation to my overall argument. My novel’s relationship to the theoretical concepts discussed in the exegesis, and to the other texts, is examined at length in this chapter. My novel is a work of speculative fiction, set in the near future, which gives me the ability to explore (and satirise) a set of dominant ideas encountered in my research. These include (but are not limited to) self-governance, the construction of desires, naturalised obsolescence, environmental destruction and the shrinking of the category of ‘normal’. I also speculate on what could occur if trends in diagnosis and commercial pharmaceutical treatments of mental ‘disorders’ were to escalate. At the centre of the story are two characters, Henry and Ava, who—at different times and on different levels—are attuned to the hypocrisies of the fictional society, and who struggle against the dominant system. The dominant system itself is deliberately paradoxical, as this is a truer reflection of consumer society than a traditional dystopian setting that is more overtly totalitarian.

Overall, the creative work and the exegesis are designed as complementary examinations of whether it is actually possible to ‘resist’ a society that continually pre-empts and incorporates (Fiske 2010) any opposition. Though we may not have an answer for breaking the mould of society to one which is ‘not organised primarily around the ever more rapid and intensive invention and consumption of commodities’ (Gilbert 2008, p. 564), it is a question which cultural studies needs to
continually address. In this thesis I also suggest that this question needs to be raised beyond the academy, and one way that it can be is through stimulating, commercially available texts which can potentially agitate, question and critique. In the process these texts can coax the receiver’s sensitivity, awareness and possibly their own resistance, although this process might occur only in small increments and by working from *within*. While the resistances may be small, I argue that the more there are, the more the perils of the system—the shrinking of the category of normal, buyer/seller relations imposed on social life—cannot fully take hold. Small resistances and different ‘ways of using’ (De Certeau 1984), or abusing (Hutcheon 1988) products of the dominant culture can also help to maintain and protect diversity and heterogeneity.
Chapter One:

Stay in the desert or accept illusion? A connection to resistance, and a resistant connection, in *Before sunrise* and *Before sunset*

In the film *Before sunrise* (1995), a young American man and a young Frenchwoman meet on a train and then spend the night together in Vienna. Nine years later Jesse and Celine meet again in Paris, in the film *Before sunset* (2004). Their connection is based not purely on physical desire, but on the content of their conversations in the context of their lives in Western consumer society. Both Jesse and Celine express resistant ideas in relation to what they perceive as being dominant ideas in Western society. They are attuned to the paradoxes and contradictions within society and within themselves, so they possess what I refer to as sensidictoriness. Due to the paradoxical nature of dominant ideas of the West, such as notions of freedom and autonomy, Jesse and Celine constantly meet limits in enacting and perpetuating their ideals. I argue, however, that through their conversations, Jesse and Celine form a connection based on a predisposition to resistance and nonconformity, and in sustaining this connection Jesse and Celine maintain a constant *pushing back* against the paradigms of consumer society.

Jesse and Celine are the first example, in this exegesis, of characters who feel themselves to be both outside of, and within, the confines of the dominant consumer society. As characters, they create and communicate meaning through their conversations, constructing narratives of the self, alongside the narrative of their encounter. Through Jesse and Celine’s conversations, the viewer of these films witnesses the fluid creation and expression of each character’s ‘auto-biographical concern’ (Gaviria & Bluemelhuber 2010, p. 127); for both, this is a concern which
expresses dissatisfaction with, and resistance to, the (contradictory) paradigms of Western consumer society.

Autobiographical concern, to use Gaviria and Bluemelhuber’s (2010) term, is fluid, and incorporates a cohesive and coherent narrative of a past, present and future self. An individual visits events of the past and visions of the future while ‘re-writing’ (Gaviria & Bluemelhuber, p. 131) their narrative of self. The autobiographical concern encompasses a person’s desired and interpreted views of their past, present and future self. It forms a coherent and idealised narrative, but idealised in the way it forms a coherent narrative, not necessarily in terms of an idealised self. Central to Jesse and Celine’s connection is the alignment of their sensidictory and resistant autobiographical concerns: they project, to each other and themselves, desired and interpreted views of the past (sharing of their early awareness of hypocrisy as children), the present (discussions of present dissatisfaction), and future ideas of the self (how they’d like to see themselves in their careers, in relationships).

Essential to the autobiographical concern, Gaviria and Bluemelhuber (2010) note, is ‘desire-assemblage’. The assemblage of an individual’s desires supports their autobiographical concern. ‘Particular desires belong to a whole, to a specific life narrative an individual is willing to perform’, Gaviria and Bluemelhuber argue (p. 132). So the desires are not purely for objects or people but ‘anticipate the role those objects, people or experiences will play in our personal narratives’ (Gaviria & Bluemelhuber, p. 132). Jesse and Celine’s expression of what they do desire, and don’t desire (what they resist), within the confines of consumer society, is essential to understanding their connection. Before examining the assembled desires of Jesse and Celine, and the role they play in their resistances and their ‘sensidictory’ connection, I will introduce some of the features of consumer society which can be stimulating, and yet limiting, to resistance.

**In the desert there is bread: resistance as substance**

Bauman (2007) suggests that there is now, in consumer society, a blurring of the line between object and subject, between commodity and consumer. Individuals have been socialised to be ‘simultaneously, promoters of commodities and the commodities they promote’ (Bauman, p. 6). One effect of this blurring is that a person’s autobiographical concern may be made up of desires for, or a display of,
items, interests and gestures that make them seem more valuable to others. In consumer society, then, the level of commercial interest motivating a person’s autobiographical concern may be elevated. In the films, Jesse and Celine are strangers to one another who have forged a rapid connection through conversations that attempt to eschew ideas of artifice and a neat commodification of self. In fact, they willingly contradict their own earlier opinions as time progresses in each film, embracing the fluidity of their own narratives. As film is a visual medium, the viewer is also asked to accept aspects of their connection through the way the players physically connect; through looks and gestures. But this blurring between object and subject inescapably occurs, particularly as Jesse and Celine’s time together is limited. The characters both counteract and are complicit in this objectification, they attempt to eschew it, and yet because their social ‘transactions’ are so brief, they want to present themselves in their best light.

What I propose here, in relation to Jesse and Celine, is that individuals can potentially be predisposed to resistance: they possess a certain heightened receptivity, and they are also attuned to paradox and contradiction—within society and even within themselves. I have named this state and condition ‘sensidictoriness’. Consumer society is a fertile system of complex and multilayered contradictions, and can lead the sensidictory individual on a path to resistance, that nevertheless has certain limits. While overall in this thesis I promote sensidictoriness as a fluid state, and one that can be awakened in any individual, some following examples from the films do indicate its potential to be present in some individuals more than in others, though that could arguably still be culturally or environmentally determined. It’s important to examine this idea because the question exists as to why some people possess a level of social awareness leading to continual resistance, and others do not.

The state of sensidictoriness causes attentiveness to the gap between one thing and another, as within a contradiction, where there is a gap between a perceived truth and a ‘reality’ that is made apparent. In regards to the notion of the commodified self in a market-based society, for example, the sensidictory individual would be attuned to the uncommodifiable complexity within themselves, in opposition to the dominant system applying ‘saleable’ and simplistic attributes to them. They are sensitive to the constructions within both their own and others’ narratives of self. In other words, the sensidictory individual is aware of the gap between their complex and essentially
unfathomable self and their (and others’) coherent, socially acceptable projections. This gap, this awareness, we can explore through a recontextualisation of Camus’ absurd (2005).

The absurd, Camus (2005) says, is born of contradiction. It:

> bursts from the comparison between a bare fact and a certain reality ... the absurd is essentially a divorce. It lies in neither of the elements compared; it is born of their confrontation. (Camus, pp. 28–9)

The philosophy and language of the absurd has structural relevance here: when an individual’s sensitivity, or receptivity, is faced with contradiction or hypocrisy, awareness springs forth, leading toward resistance and possibly acts of non-conformism. The autobiographical concern of the individual becomes more aligned with a resistant philosophy, as opposed to a normative one.

Camus (2005) also describes the difficulty of maintaining and acknowledging absurd awareness. He refers to the ‘real effort’ of staying in the ‘desert’ of the absurd, and ‘examining closely the odd vegetation of those distant regions’ (Camus, p. 8). We can use the same language in relation to resistance: it is a battle or a revolt, an attempted maintenance of receptivity and insight that constantly meets its limits. These are limits of habit, of illusion, of reason, of hope; when it is only the more difficult ‘desert’ that can provide the mind with true nourishment. We could also align the ‘desert’ with a person’s true autobiographical concern, a place they attempt to return to, and certainly, for both Jesse and Celine, this desert does contain ideas that are resistant to norms of consumer society. When the mind strays from the ‘desert’ it may be via a ‘leap’, to use Camus’ term, a leap to illusion or false hope. Consumer society provides much food for illusion, such as in the construction of desires through advertising. But the awakened individual, attuned to the layers of construction, realises they had ‘previously been feeding on phantoms’ (Camus, p. 20) and in the desert there is bread.

Jesse and Celine, in this sense, find bread in each other and discuss the phantoms they had been feeding on. In other words, because they share an autobiographical concern—receptiveness to hypocrisy and contradiction, and frustration and resistance to dominant systems (while often contradicting themselves)—they discover a connection of substance. One of the first conversations they have is about
the way each was ill-fitted to their parents’ ideals. This displays an early sensitivity to authoritarian contradiction: a contradiction between what the parents idealised as being fulfilling, and what the child perceived as such. Jesse says that as a kid he ‘must’ have had a pretty decent bullshit detector’. He says he always knew when they were lying to him. ‘By the time I was in high school’, Jesse says, ‘I was dead set on listening to what everyone thought I should be doing with my life and then almost systematically doing the opposite’. Celine’s parents encouraged big ambitions, but practical and perceivably normative ones, that would provide an income. When she’d say she wanted to be a writer, her father would say ‘journalist’. If she wanted to be an actress he’d say ‘TV newscaster’. In their youth, both Jesse and Celine’s sensidictory sensibilities are evident, leading to their ensuing resistances.

This conversation about their parents opens a door onto the topic of spirituality and death; Jesse’s admission that he isn’t really afraid of death and Celine’s that she is terrified. Thus, they have moved straight on from what they reject or don’t conform to, to being very open about what they do believe. Confessing to early rebelliousness has led to a deeper expression and sharing of autobiographical concern: the perception of the self in relation to death. And it is just after this that Jesse convinces Celine to get off the train with him and spend a night walking around Vienna. Sharing the sensidictory sensibility and a predisposition to resistance has created a connection and a shift in desire: a new chapter in each character’s narrative of self.

The action of getting off the train together is somewhat irrational. After all, Celine has a ticket to Paris and Jesse is a stranger. You might say the action is absurd. Camus (2005, p. 20) says, ‘what is absurd is the confrontation of the irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart’. What would seem more irrational, to Jesse and Celine, would be not to follow this instinct or take this chance. They are following an unexpected desire and a potential connection. Paradoxically, they are conforming to a norm perceived by Bauman (2007, p. 36), that of a hurriedness and anxiety about missed opportunities. At the end of the first film, each will indeed discard and replace the other, like obsolete commodities, though not completely: Jesse and Celine’s desire for one another, and their connection, does not fade, as picked up in the second film.

**Ideals, desire, and the limiting nature of consumer society**
In both films Jesse and Celine discuss dissatisfaction and the ever-renewing nature of desires, both resurfacing desires, and new desires that cannot be met. Consumer society fuels certain desires, to maintain market growth, and this imposition of desire is both rejected and embraced by Jesse and Celine, through their conversations. The desires and dissatisfactions they discuss are linked, for both of them, to the ways they navigate societal norms and expectations foisted upon them.

A feeling of dissatisfaction, connected with a (perhaps unconscious) consumerist search for something new and/or better, is there for Jesse from the beginning, and is something he is ready to resist and reject. He says on the train:

> you know what’s fascinating about travelling around? You spend all this time trying to reach your destination, you get there, you look around, it’s never exactly what you’d hoped, you head off somewhere else, and hope for something better.

Desire is a cycle, according to Belk, Ger and Askegaard (2003). In a ‘normative’ cycle of desire the individual is seduced, and then the desire’s growth may be encouraged by their own imagination or through social inspiration (as through the media). Desires may then be enhanced and embellished by fantasy (Belk, Ger & Askegaard, p. 344). Jesse’s desires for travel had perhaps been motivated by his autobiographical concern—he had hoped for experiences that would enhance the telling of his own narrative, to others and to himself—and then were shaped by seductive advertisements and word-of-mouth: the embellishment of imagined wonders.

Once a desire has set in, an individual experiences hope and longing, and then either the loss of hope, or realisation of the desire. What follows is ‘either a boredom-initiated cycle of desire focused on a new object, or a fulfilment-initiated attempt to recycle desire in order to repeat these pleasures’ (Belk, Ger & Askegaard, pp. 341–2); examples of the latter being making love to the same partner or eating repeatedly at a favourite restaurant. In terms of travelling, the dissatisfaction Jesse experienced was due to his desires not meeting expectations, resulting in an unfulfilling cycle. To break this cycle Jesse has to engage with the second option of ‘recycled’ desire, which is more resistant in the context of consumer society, due to the fact it denies newness, novelty and obsolescence. It is with Celine that this possibility lies.
In the second film, *Before sunset* (2004), an older Celine and Jesse go deeper into the idea of ever-renewing desires. Celine says she feels human when she wants something more than what’s needed for basic survival needs. Belk, Ger and Askegaard (2003, p. 327) describe desire as an ‘enjoyable discomfort’, a ‘hot, passionate emotion quite different from the dispassionate discourse of fulfilling wants and needs’. A desire ‘directly addresses the interplay of society and individual, of bodily passions and mental reflection’ (Belk, Ger & Askegaard, p. 329), unlike a physiological need. Desires are social, and as mentioned, their assemblage displays an autobiographical concern: a coherent narrative of the past, present and future self. Jesse suggests that perhaps there’s a problem when those desires are associated with a sense of entitlement; the way, in consumer society, we’re ‘designed to be slightly discontented with everything’.

Celine then contradicts herself in the realm of consumer desires when she talks about some time she spent in Warsaw when it was a strict communist regime. After a while her brain felt clearer and she was writing a lot more. Soon it occurred to her that she had spent the past few weeks away from her habits. She says:

> The TV was in a language I didn’t understand and there was nothing to buy, no advertisements anywhere ... My brain felt like it was at rest, free from the consuming frenzy, and I have to say it was almost like a natural high.

This displays an oppositional attitude toward dominant ideas in consumer society that, of course, meets its limits once Celine is integrated back into the West. Her desires are sparked by the environment, and she, self-aware, is re-engaged to the seduction of an array of commodities.

But from the first film, *Before sunrise* (1995), to the second film, *Before sunset* (2004), we see how Celine has succeeded in fulfilling the ideals of her younger self, at the same time as challenging consumer society norms, through her job with Green Cross, an environmental organisation. The organisation works on small projects throughout the world where, as she says, ‘things can be fixed’, such as working on a water treatment plant in India. As Dyer-Witheford (2001, p. 167) says, the contemporary nonconformist might *act* by being someone who ‘… reappropriat[es] resources to life-supporting value systems *other* than the market’. Celine acknowledges the role of the West in the world’s problems, and admits that things are not getting any better, on the whole, only worse. But this line of work, which
means Celine is not participating (entirely) in regular work and consume cycles, is an area where she has succeeded in meeting the more radical autobiographical concern expressed by her younger self. Environmental work means Celine is acknowledging and working against the norm Bauman (2007) perceives of the naturalisation of obsolescence and waste. But a contradiction lies in Celine’s enjoyment of the ever-renewing desire and the joys of shopping. So her anti-consumerist, anti-market line of work meets its limits, still, when she participates in an everyday life in the West. From Celine’s talk of her time in Warsaw we can see that a life without distraction and seduction from products and their advertisements is possible, but in Paris, Celine is inevitably and even pleasurably drawn back in.

Jesse has met more limits to the autobiographical concern he expresses in the first film, particularly in the realm of relationships, displaying his struggle to maintain resistant awareness. When he explains to Celine the idea of his future self, in the first film, he is somewhat torn; he says he would rather die knowing he was really good at something and had excelled, rather than only having been ‘in a nice, caring relationship’. In the second film Jesse is married with a son, and towards the end of the film he admits that the relationship is stale and miserable. He tells Celine that they got married because his partner was pregnant and, in normative terms, it seemed like the right thing to do. He says: ‘I had this idea of my best self and I wanted to pursue that even if it might have been overriding my honest self’. Jesse was then sensitive to the paradoxical nature of his decision, his folding into the norm as opposed to staying in the difficult ‘desert’. But it seems here that the suppression of the more resistant, ‘honest’ self, as Jesse calls it, has been a mistake. ‘We’re living in the pretence of marriage, responsibility, these ideas of how people are supposed to live’, he says. Jesse’s resistance met its limit when faced with the responsibility of a child, but in following what he perceived as being the ‘correct’ path, Jesse’s true, resistant autobiographical concern was compromised.

The what-could-have-been narrative is so potent that Jesse, in the second film, has actually written a book about that first night he and Celine spent together. His book event in Paris is what brings them together again. But as well as being personal expression in fictionalised form, this book is a commodification of life; turning romance and connection into a marketable, profitable product. So in some ways, even though many of the ideas expressed in Jesse’s novel would be in the defiant
vein of their conversations, the act of publishing them places them in a normative and commercial sphere; again the resistant philosophy is, in some small way, compromised. The act of publishing the book could be both resistant, in its ideas, and complicit.

Contradictory layers: freedom as governance and structure as resistance

The oscillation between resistance or ‘staying in the desert’ and participation in normative spheres could be examined as a power play, the individual’s wrestling with their autonomy. But as Celine observes in the first film, unlike in her parents’ era, what they are rebelling against is not really known. ‘We still have to deal with the same shit. But you can’t really know what or who the enemy is’, she says. She is sensitive to the fact there is something to fight against. As Reith (2004, p. 297) argues:

[w]hat is new in modern society is not the emphasis on issues of freedom per se, but rather the unprecedented emphasis on freedom as a mode of governance by and through the individual.

There are two elements to which the sensidictory individual may be attuned with respect to this notion of self-governance. One is that their desires and personal narrative are still influenced and shaped by multiple external forces and are susceptible to being swayed toward some more than others. Two, is that for the sensidictory individual, knowing that all decisions are in their hands could create anxiety and a grappling for control. Reith agrees that the culture of self-governance itself might create hypersensitive subjects:

The intense focus on the analysis and monitoring of their own subjective states makes individuals hyper sensitive, ever alert to signs of loss of control. And, because innermost thoughts and emotions are the medium through which freedom is controlled, as well as the measure of its loss, there seems to be no limit to the situations and substances that can erode it and undermine agency. (p. 296)

In this case then, if freedom as a mode of governance is perceived as being normative, would the resistive act be, paradoxically, to take that ‘leap’ toward a system or structure of beliefs that is in some ways contrary to freedom?

There are ways that Jesse and Celine explore this, by taking the ‘leap’ into different spiritualities, and into romance—relationships they both later admit to serving some other purpose than contentment, as we’ve seen with Jesse. A relationship is a kind of
micro belief system, with its own established rules and boundaries. Spiritual explorations include a palm reader in the first film, whom Celine wants to believe (a ‘leap of faith’), and Jesse’s admission of having thought about reincarnation and even having spent time at a Trappist monastery. These kinds of ‘leaps’, provide paths to which an individual can align themselves and therefore take away some of that pressure of an obligatory freedom, the pressure of self-governance, and the anxiety associated with an abundance of choice. The structures of religion, or a long-term relationship, give the individual a sense of control over their narratives by contradictorily handing over some of that responsibility. So it is possible to argue that, in this respect, Jesse and Celine’s openness to systems and structures of belief as reactive to the obligations of freedom is a way of staying in the desert, of maintaining sensidictoriness, due to the very nature of it being contradictory. But these explorations have been fleeting, discarded and replaced, which brings back thoughts of Bauman’s notion of naturalised obsolescence. So again, even these complex, paradoxically resistant explorations meet their limits.

The viewer is led to wonder, by the end of the second film, whether one of Celine’s ideals expressed in the first film is met: a thought for the future which seems essential to her autobiographical concern. In Before sunrise, she argues against Jesse’s opinion on relationships, which, being one of scepticism, she perceives as a normative one for their generation. Celine says she’d know when she was really in love when she could anticipate her partner’s actions: the story they would tell in a given situation, the way they’d part their hair, the shirt they’d choose. As mentioned, Belk, Ger and Askegaard (2003) posit that when a desire is fulfilled it is not always a new object which is the focus but can be a ‘fulfilment-initiated attempt to recycle desire in order to repeat these pleasures’ (Belk, Ger & Askegaard, p. 342). This conceptualises what Celine is referring to, a fulfilling relationship where the desires within are ever-renewed. To succeed in resisting dominant ideas—self-governing one’s way through an anxious array of choices, constructing an assemblage of desires that makes one attractive as a commodity—might be to find and accept that desire-renewal in one situation; to create, paradoxically, a structure in which the ‘desert’ can be continually renewed. So by the end of the second film when the viewer is sure Jesse will miss his plane, satisfaction comes from the idea that this
deep and renewing connection, of Jesse and Celine’s ‘honest’, sensidictory selves, will be possible, and that they will find ways to stay in the desert together.

In sum, Jesse and Celine are attuned to the contradictions within consumer society, and form a connection based on dissatisfaction, and a predisposition to resistance due to sensidictory dispositions, revealed through the expression of their autobiographical concerns (Gaviria and Bluemelhuber 2010). Their connection is sustained by a notion of pushing back against the paradigms of consumer society, with acknowledgement of their limits. They are characters who feel themselves to be both within and outside the mainstream and are the first examples of that in this thesis.

The following chapter focuses more broadly on a generational shift, in relation to resistance to the dominant system of consumer capitalism. I move from an intimate focus on individual processes of response and resistance in *Before sunrise* and *Before sunset*, to the way the novel *Eat the Document* (Spiotta 2008) presents the reader with a comparison of resistance in two different eras, the 1970s, and the 1990s. Through this analysis, I expand upon the effects of a market-based system on social life. The amplification of commodification between the eras is also assessed in relation to the characters, particularly through Fiske’s (2010) concepts of excorporation and incorporation.
Chapter Two:

‘All can be and will be commodified’: bottom-up resistance and corporate incorporation in Dana Spiotta’s

*Eat the document*

In consumer society, a person is both a producer of meanings and an inhabitant of a social system based on the market, on commodities and consumption. Through a process Fiske (2010) calls excorporation, subjects can *use* the commodities provided by the dominant culture to create oppositional meanings (to what may be intended). These ‘bottom-up’ resistances and subversions produce a struggle between the dominant culture and subordinate groups or individuals, to use Fiske’s terms. However, the dominant culture may repossess, rework or pre-empt oppositional meanings back into the commodities it produces. This process is what Fiske (2010) calls incorporation. Excorporation, Fiske argues, may not be politically radical, but can be progressive, and should therefore not be dismissed. He also suggests that there are always groups who refuse to be incorporated (Fiske, p. 17). On the other hand, I argue, limits to excorporation and its small, ‘bottom-up’ resistances arise continually because processes of incorporation and commodification are built into the very structure of a market-based system. I explore in this chapter how ideas of resistance to consumer society are presented in Dana Spiotta’s *Eat the document* (2008, orig. 2006), including processes of excorporation and incorporation. In contrast to Chapter One, I do not go into depth regarding an individual’s motivation for, and maintenance of, social resistance, though I do expand upon the *limits* to contemporary resistance, and compare that to an earlier era, the 1970s (in conjunction with an analysis of Spiotta’s novel). *Eat the document* is a novel that provides a complex and in-depth perspective on resistance and its limits, though it is, I argue, ultimately pessimistic about the characters’ abilities to resist the dominant culture.
In *Eat the document* (Spiotta 2008) there is a contrast between two eras of capitalism—the 1970s and the 1990s—and of the modes of resistance enacted by these two generations. The older generation participate in direct action, and the younger generation, while they borrow the ideals of the older, participate in peaceful resistance, or sometimes only speak of it. The younger generation’s activities are excorporative (using the texts provided by the dominant culture) but the dominant culture readily pre-empts their opposition. The dominant culture incorporates. And the question is raised in the novel, whether their activities may actually reinforce the dominant paradigm. The older generation’s actions could be termed radical: extreme or drastic in favour of dramatic and immediate change. Progressive action, on the other hand, as enacted by the younger generation in *Eat the document*, advocates positive change—improvement, reform, better conditions—in an indeterminate time frame, or step-by-step, as opposed to a more immediate time frame. I will explore whether the younger characters are able to make progress, how incorporation limits them, and how their (in)actions compare to the aims and actions of the older generation in terms of their effectiveness.

Resistance, its possibilities and ultimately its limits, is explored in multiple ways in *Eat the document* (Spiotta 2008) through a cast of characters in the two different eras. The novel opens with Mary, in a hotel room in 1972, trying to pick a new name for herself after the anti-corporate, counter-cultural crime she helped commit has backfired. While she is undercover she lives both as a ‘normal’ citizen, and in a women’s commune. In the sections of the novel set in the 1990s, a character called Nash runs an ‘alternative’ bookstore called Prairie Fire. He sees it as a safe haven for thinking youth, and likes to encourage their nonconformist/anti-corporate thoughts through the literature he sells, and through the meetings he oversees. Nash lives ‘off the grid’ with no phone or Internet connection. Prairie Fire is run by Nash but owned by Henry. Henry suffers from, and is taking drugs for, exposure to Agent Orange (or its ingredient, dioxin), though he never fought in the Vietnam War. Of the young characters, Josh dresses like a ‘normal’ suburban kid (as opposed to ‘alternatively’) and hacks into corporate websites. Jason lives in suburbia, and is aware and boastful in his journal of the fact that he is powerful, in America, because he is part of the

---

6 Texts in this context are sites and ‘circulators’ of meaning, including commodities, spaces (also often commoditised), and cultural texts: news media, advertising, entertainment and the like (Fiske 2010, p. 22).
consumer target market. Miranda, as a counterpoint, possesses some kind of hope that society can change for the better; she questions other characters’ methods of resistance, and sometimes their apathy. Jason’s mother is Mary, the fugitive, whose true identity he gradually discovers during the course of the novel. The characters converge around Nash and his alternative bookstore, Prairie Fire.

**The market in everyday life and rapid incorporation**

In *Eat the document* (Spiotta 2008) resistance in late consumer society is a blander version of an earlier counterpart, and in some ways even a postmodern pastiche of it. But this ‘blander’ form of resistance is also presented as being the inevitable successor to the failed actions of the earlier generation. The dominant culture, or dominant paradigm, in *Eat the document* is that of consumer society, specifically, in the ’90s chapters, a neo-liberal corporate hegemony. Bauman’s (2007) vision of the society of consumers is of a totalising society; one that makes resistance extremely difficult. He discusses the dominant ideology and how it becomes ‘common sense’ to the subjects (Bauman, p. 64), how freedom and choice become obligatory (Bauman, p. 85), and how there is a blurring of the line between consumer and commodity:

> In the society of consumers no one can become a subject without first turning into a commodity, and no one can keep his or her subjectness secure without perpetually resuscitating, resurrecting and replenishing the capacities expected and required of a sellable commodity. (Bauman, p. 12)

In neo-liberal consumer society, much public infrastructure has also become privatised; the market influences the government and, consequently, aspects of day-to-day life. To privatise public services is to provide more ‘choice’, but as Gilbert (2008, p. 555) argues: ‘such differences are produced often against the wishes of both service users and providers’. In other words, when a person is ill and has to go to hospital, there may be a range of choices available, whether the person would like to make the choice or not. Choice itself becomes obligatory.

Gilbert agrees with Bauman that the market has penetrated aspects of everyday life and the consumer/retailer transaction has become the ‘normative model for all social interaction’ (Gilbert, p. 554). Bauman’s and Gilbert’s theories explain the extent of corporate power and influence in Western consumer societies; infiltrating even the most mundane social interactions, and shaping the socialisation of the subject.
Importantly, Gilbert says, such power given to capital naturalises a kind of destruction that is contributing to a very real ‘global ecological crisis’ (Gilbert, p. 555).

Throughout this chapter I will use the term ‘consumer society’ to encompass definitions of post-1970s capitalist society and Bauman’s ‘society of consumers’. Consumer society is the dominant culture that the 1990s characters in *Eat the document* attempt to resist. The 1970s, and pre-neo-liberal capitalist society, is a point of comparison in the novel (where the characters resist ‘American imperialism’). The effects of corporate ownership and privatisation, and other aspects of neo-liberal society, are explored through comparisons between the two generations in *Eat the document*, and the shift from one to the other. Within neo-liberal consumer society, Fiske’s (2010) processes of excorporation and incorporation occur so rapidly that there is barely any room for the subject to resist. Incorporation, and its increasing rapidity, is a dominant feature of consumer society itself.

In the context of consumer society, Fiske (2010) writes about popular culture; of how subordinate groups or subcultures ‘excorporate’ texts and products in part to resist the dominant system. Excorporation is a way of using a product or text which resists or subverts its intended use (Fiske, p. 13). Fiske’s theory goes beyond the intended uses and meanings of cultural products and (similar to De Certeau’s [1984] theory of ‘tactics’ against ‘strategies’) engages with the way products are actually *used* in day-to-day life. Fiske’s main example of excorporation is a pair of jeans that has been worn and torn by the user (Fiske, pp. 1–18). The user is thus altering the product and its intended meanings, as well as resistance participation in the consumption cycle by continually wearing the same clothing. There are many examples of the young characters participating in excorporation in *Eat the document* (Spiotta 2008): ‘using’ a shop as a library, writing on shoes, subverting the meaning of signs, hacking and altering websites, and disrupting public and corporate space.

Resistance to corporate hegemony was enacted differently in the 1970s and the 1990s, *Eat the document* (Spiotta 2008) suggests, though individuals and groups in both eras were limited. In the 1970s chapters a violent protest is made by Mary and Bobby, members of a secret underground organisation. The protest is against
corporate power and war profiteering. This protest pre-empts the growth of overt corporate power and its social, humanitarian and environmental effects. In the 1990s chapters corporate power and influence are acknowledged by the young characters, but their ‘protests’ are peaceful boycotts, creative subversions and attempts to make other people aware of power structures and influences. These 1990s activities are closer to Fiske’s (2010) processes of excorporation. The young characters use the texts provided by the dominant culture to create new meanings, outside the intended meanings. Their activities are not radical, as mentioned, meaning they are not drastic and meant to create immediate results. But in a society where market transactions are normalised, and where the dominant culture incorporates oppositional meanings, resistance is limited. The resistance of the older generation is explored in *Eat the Document* as being limited as well—drawing negative attention and ultimately causing harm—but in the 1970s chapters there is tangibility, action and participation where for the younger generation there is talk, inaction and even confirmation of the dominant culture.

The 1990s characters are limited by processes of commodification and incorporation. According to Fiske (2010, pp. 13–6), after subordinate groups participate in a process of excorporation, dominant groups then go through a process of ‘incorporation’, where, in the aforementioned example, they begin to manufacture ‘torn jeans’. They ‘incorporate’ any possible objection or resistance that they can imagine into their products and advertising. This is evident in *Eat the Document* (Spiotta 2008), where dominant groups ‘incorporate’ messages of resistance. The young characters often fail to subvert the dominant message (sometimes even confirming it); they succumb to power, give up, rebel in contradictory ways—such as stealing from the ‘little guy’—and often just weakly project ideas of resistance. But Fiske is optimistic in his writing that gaps remain, in terms of what the dominant groups in society can anticipate.

**Purchase-based ‘protests’ and ‘alternative’ consumption**

In this climate of rapid commodification and incorporation, subjects use their roles as consumers to make political statements, as elected leaders increasingly fail to respond to protests, or fail to make a difference. Subjects have sensed a ‘transfer of power from the government to corporations,’ which Simon (2011, p. 147) posits as a
‘hallmark’ of the ‘emerging global neo-liberal order’, and the focus is shifted to brands, rather than policy makers. Access to power still matters, but there has been a ‘shift in venues’, as Simon puts it, (p. 147), meaning that people participate in political action, or believe they do, in shopping centres and not in a more traditional civic space.

The shift in venues, Fiske (2010) might argue, gives subordinate groups more opportunities to stimulate progress. But it does also mean that companies are continually ‘incorporating’ resistance. Simon’s (2011) examples are consumer boycotts of brands and products, such as the coffee brand Starbucks. Not buying a product is still a ‘way of using’ (Fiske 2010) a commodity that the dominant culture provides. In some boycotts, the brand is ‘used’ by the protestors simply as an icon of corporate power to which they are setting themselves up in opposition; at other times a boycott ‘uses’ the company as a lever for an unrelated concern, but much of the time the boycott is directly related to an issue with the company and its products (Simon, pp. 151–2). Those protesting against Starbucks, for example, have made ethical complaints about where the product comes from. This resistance has caused Starbucks to source fair-trade coffee. There have also been less successful protests against the cancerous growth of the brand and the way they drive up rents and drive out local businesses all over the world (Simon, p. 153).

The bottom-up resistance, that caused Starbucks in recent years to source fair-trade beans, can be positively acknowledged as progress through excorporation. Certainly Spiotta (2008) explores these kinds of resistances in the novel: the ’90s characters protest brands like Starbucks, such as Nike, Coke, Gap Kids, McDonalds and the fictional company Allegecom (Spiotta, p. 42, p. 40, p. 49). If brands are responding to agitation from the ‘bottom up’, excorporation is having that slow, progressive effect that Fiske (2010) conceded it would.

On the other hand, it could be seen as a corporation incorporating messages of resistance. Engaging with companies in this way (and the companies’ responsiveness) means that a new tension has been created, in neo-liberal consumer society. ‘As brands have become more political—to win customer allegiance in our rough democracy—they have become, at the same time, more vulnerable to political attacks. So they must increasingly manage politics’ (Simon 2011, p. 147). Brands,
and the people promoting them, manage politics through the process of incorporation. By incorporating oppositional ideas (adapting and pre-empting them) companies ensure that the power structure remains intact.

Each small progression, such as Starbucks’ switch to fair trade coffee (Simon 2011), is still on some level limited by its confirmation of the existing power structure, and can even create blind spots concerning other issues. Companies incorporate resistant messages and engage with politics in order to retain business. Starbucks introduced fair trade coffee in order to maintain its customer base, Simon argues, and to pre-empt the ethical concerns of new customers. Also, the company’s ‘do good’ image can then distract from where the company stands (or refuses to stand) on other issues, such as Starbucks’ neutrality on guns (Simon, p. 156). Simon suggests that while the company may look like it is doing good, it is also trying to make protesters ‘go away’ and is attempting to ‘move knotty issues to the margins before they turn some customers off’ (Simon, p. 161). Furthermore, if a person believes they have effected change by simply denying themselves a few coffees, they may not engage further in opposition to the brand, or to the system itself.

Resistance itself is commodified, in the context of companies responding to boycotts and protests. ‘Protest over perceived environmental degradation or social injustice is expressed through the strategic manipulation of consumption practices and exchange relations’ (Bryant & Goodman 2004, p. 345). Sales of ‘alternative’ commodities have also grown. Bryant and Goodman (2004) discuss items that are branded ‘fair’, ‘ethical’ and ‘organic’, or use eco-cultural ‘icons’ such as rainforests and the wilderness; products which are carefully marketed toward a burgeoning ethical buyer market, to ‘political’ consumers. Their study was undertaken a little beyond the 1990s setting in _Eat the document_ (Spiotta 2008), but Spiotta does explore the nascent state of some of these ‘alternative’ commodity streams (as with the nostalgic record shop, and the shop with the left-wing merchandise) and of efficient incorporation. The novel was written in the mid-2000s, so there is an element of hindsight. While I have acknowledged the fact that real change can occur, slowly but within limits from the bottom up, I will now examine some of the detrimental effects of incorporation and the commodification of alternative ideas (or what were once alternative ideas), and in the next section examine further how these ideas are present in _Eat the document_.
One example Bryant and Goodman provide is of a box of Amazon™ Flakes (p. 351). The cereal is supposed to appeal to the green-conscious market, but the authors note an ‘opaque if not downright problematic link between consumption of this cereal and “saving the Amazon”’ (Bryant & Goodman, p. 351). A direct link is made in the product description between the product’s ingredients and the Amazon, but it is doubtful whether that means the product goes any way to ‘conserve residual forest’ (Bryant & Goodman, p. 351). The authors give many similar examples. What happens is that the idea of green consumption becomes commodified, and many subjects are happy to believe the skewed claims for products due to the fact that some companies are making real efforts. It is difficult for the average consumer to tell the difference, and their ‘conscious’ purchases may even have a limiting effect on their ability to effect more important or far-reaching change.

Commodity-based activism and resistance can even be harmful to political discourse, by encouraging contentment and apathy. As noted, brands are responsive, and buying (or not buying) can sometimes make a difference, as companies want to hold onto their market share. Simon (2011) asks what commodity-based activism, and a saturation of products with ethical claims, does then to dissent. The ‘politics of buying’ as he calls it, may take away a ‘sense of urgency’, and people who are reassured by their ethical purchases feel less of a sense of guilt (Simon, p. 148, p. 162). ‘Essentially the[se purchase-based “protests”] allow customers, and customers surely allow themselves, to wash their hands of the problem with a single purchase and perpetuate the privatisation of policy’ (Simon, p. 162). The privatisation of policy is, again, brands managing politics through processes of excorporation and incorporation, and subjects participating in this system. The participation of the young ‘resistant’ characters in this system is one of the main points to explore in *Eat the document*.

**Capitalism: embracing contradiction**

In *Eat the document* (Spiotta 2008) Josh is the most overt example of a character who projects an idea of resistance but ends up being incorporated by the system. Initially, Josh stands out from the other young people who frequent Prairie Fire, as he dresses ‘ordinarily’. Others signify their ‘alternativeness’ through torn clothing, clothing in natural fibres, badges, dreadlocked hair and excessive or no make-up. At
one of the Prairie Fire meetings, Josh talks about how he creates websites that mimic corporate websites, then how he gradually alters links and information ‘to ridicule [the company] and underline their hypocrisy’ (Spiotta, pp. 146–7). Josh parodies the website of a company called Allegecom. Allegecom comes up many times in the novel as the symbol of corporate power, corruption and influence. The company was partly responsible for the chemical dioxin, and also the pills that lessen its effects. What Josh is attempting to undermine is Allegecom’s new corporate community: Alphadelphia.

One of the hypocritical aspects of Alphadelphia, as Josh sees it, is its claim to be an environmentally conscious and ethical community, when really it is just green ‘enough’. The green practices of the community are enough to relieve the guilt of its inhabitants, but not enough to impede their quality of life. On his website Josh changes the subtitle for Alphadelphia from Green World to Greed World and reveals ‘every counterpoint to the ecotopia they claimed to be creating and were heavily marketing’ (Spiotta, p. 158). He also changes a link that is supposed to provide information on Allegecom’s community service projects. He redirects it to news of a lawsuit against the biotech arm of the company, being brought about by a large community in Central America (Spiotta, p. 158). We can draw comparisons between Allegecom, and the issues surrounding a real life company like Starbucks (Simon 2011). Allegecom, too, projects an ideal of ethical balance that is partly designed to make potential customers feel they are ‘doing good’ and can safely ignore the overall outlook, history and political stance of this corporate power.

Allegecom then asks Josh to work for them, which can be read as a symbolic representation of the process of incorporation. The company wants to incorporate Josh in order to pre-empt further subversion and to halt his literal changing of its message. And Josh accepts. Bauman (2007) and Gilbert (2008) both theorise that the consumer/retailer transaction has become the norm for social interaction, that interhuman relations have been ‘remade … on the pattern, and in the likeness, of the relations between consumers and the objects of their consumption’, that consumer markets have colonised ‘the space stretching between human individuals’ (Bauman, p. 11). In this context, Josh’s acceptance of the job with Allegecom makes

---

7 Much like the concept of ‘balance’ in my novel, Behind the yellow (Meyer 2013), and the stance taken by corporate power in the novel favouring ‘adaptation’ over conservation.
(symbolic) sense. His ability to subvert the company’s message made him the most attractive commodity to them. Through subversion of the system, Josh displayed his intimate knowledge of that very system. It is difficult to know whether Josh had planned this move—to make himself an invaluable commodity to Allegecom. Certainly there is evidence that he has always admired the power and the power structures of capitalism.

Josh’s admiration of capitalism stems from awe and respect of its very ability to commodify and incorporate. ‘You have to marvel at [capitalism’s] elasticity, its lack of moral need, its honesty. It is the great leveller— all can be and will be commodified’, Josh says to Miranda in a shop specialising in ‘alternative’ items (Spiotta 2008, p. 258). In the store there are copies of scarves worn by anarchist ‘blac bloc’ kids, there are books on environmentalism, posters of revolutions, and ‘New Left’ playing cards. Josh says the capitalist system ‘embraces contradictions’ and ‘revels in irony’ (Spiotta, p. 258). Miranda argues that what Josh is referring to isn’t irony, but cynicism, and that reducing everything to market value is ‘simplistic and reductive’ (Spiotta, p. 258). Miranda is arguing that the user of the product or text is able to deny incorporation (through attitude) and that it is Josh’s choice to be cynical. Miranda’s thinking is in line with Fiske’s (2010)—she believes there is always room for excorporation, and there will always be individuals and groups who refuse to be incorporated. Josh, however, believes the system is all-encompassing, and power lies in an acceptance of this. His complete acceptance is symbolised by the moment in the store where he offers to buy Miranda the New Left playing cards with his new gold American Express card (Spiotta, p. 259).

**Tangible experience versus projected intention**

The commodification of resistance, and engagement with politics through brands and products, are themes consistently present throughout *Eat the document* (Spiotta 2008). The novel presents the possibility that any kind of resistance may eventually be appropriated into some kind of product, as with the products in the ‘alternative’ store. The young adults who frequent Prairie Fire feel they are resisting the status quo through their clothes and their protests, but the system is ready to incorporate those, too; plus, they feel their attitude is *enough*. As with subjects purchasing ethical products and thinking they are ‘doing good’, the young characters are *aware*
of issues of corporate hegemony, compared to what they may think of as the conformists in society. But the young characters are accused (by the older characters) of possibly confirming the system. Josh is the extreme example of this. The older generation of the 1970s may not have been triumphant in their protests but their resistance was less ambiguous. One character, Jason, says to his mother Mary when he uncovers the crime she committed as part of a radical protest in the ’70s: ‘At least you did something. What a world that must have been where ordinary people actually did things … that affected, however tangentially, history’ (Spiotta, p. 274). The novel addresses this comparison between the active or tangible (though still ineffective) non-conformism and resistance of the 1970s characters and the more subdued resistance of the 1990s characters.

The resistance of the 1970s characters is direct and active, and later perceived by the characters as being unsuccessful. Spiotta (2008) has loosely based the outlook and actions of Mary and Bobby (whom we later learn is Nash, who runs the bookstore) in the ’70s on those of a group called the Weather Underground. In the late ’60s and early ’70s, in protest of the Vietnam War and American Imperialism a faction of members of the Weather Underground Organisation (WUO) used militant, direct action, believing that non-violent resistance was not having any effect (Rahmani 2006, p. 121). Members of the WUO made warnings before setting off small time bombs, from 1970 on. This was in order to direct the public’s attention to people who should be held accountable for the messy war in Vietnam (Rahmani, pp. 124–5). WUO members wrote a manifesto in 1974 called Prairie fire: the politics of revolutionary anti-imperialism, from a Mao Tse-tung quote ‘a single spark can set a prairie fire’ (Rahmani, pp. 123–4). In Eat the document, Nash’s store is called Prairie Fire, a clue to Spiotta’s inspiration. The team that Mary and Bobby are a part of, in the novel, set off a timed bomb in the house of someone involved in the making of munitions. Spiotta does not at all glorify these ‘active’ protests of the ’70s; in fact she is in part acknowledging the failure of this radicalism, as the bombing, in the novel, results in the death of an innocent party (also harking back to activities of the WUO). But there are comparisons made between the experiences of the 1970s characters (protests and otherwise) that are tangible, and the image- or surface-based experiences of the 1990s characters. The company that participated in the
manufacturing of munitions in the 1970s chapters is Allegecom, still the primary target of resistance in the 1990s chapters.

Despite the implied failure of the radical action in the 1970s, the 1990s characters in *Eat the document* (Spiotta 2008) model much of their resistive ideology on that earlier era, and nostalgia is commodified. Prairie Fire sells books that ‘advocated subverting the status quo, abolishing property and ownership, resisting American hegemony, and embracing rebellion and nonconformity of any stripe’ (2006, p. 27), in accord with the anti-imperialist notions of the WUO. In the consumer/retailer social system, the younger generation purchases ideas and objects of the older generation. Jameson, in 1988, writes about the ‘nostalgia mode’ of postmodernism in late capitalism. He says: ‘we seem condemned to seek the historical past through our own pop images and stereotypes about that past, which itself remains forever out of reach’ (Jameson 1988, p. 20). Nostalgia, and the ‘trapped’ past are present in *Eat the document*, and they are also commodified, just as ‘alternativeness’ is commodified. I have already given the example of the store full of alternative products, many of which are also nostalgic. The younger generation partly looks up to icons of resistance and non-conformism from earlier eras: such as reggae singers (Spiotta, p. 60), and (fictional) underground filmmaker Bobby Desoto (Spiotta, p. 215). The Prairie Fire kids are also interested in records and cassette tapes. Miranda describes a store that sells these items:

> Gradually that became the theme, the hook, of the place: outdated technology for young kids who already saw the vanguard in the past, the recent past, and not just in content but in format. (Spiotta, p. 52)

Alphadelphia also commodifies nostalgia: ‘People want a nostalgic, knowingly referenced community experience. But they don’t really want anything truly alternative’ (Spiotta, p. 237), says Josh in reference to the community. The commodified versions of alternativeness and nostalgia are *blander*, then; they are within limits. As Josh notes, it is more about the ‘image’ of, and identification with, alternativeness for many of the younger characters, not an actual desire to agitate the status quo and create real change.

Passive characters in the '90s chapters define themselves not through their actions but their ‘image’ and tastes. Jason is a character who defines himself by his nostalgic leanings. Jason is only interested in music from another era. His pages-long
obsessive ruminations on the Beach Boys recall Patrick Bateman’s rants on Genesis and Whitney Huston in 1991’s *American psycho* (Easton Ellis 2006). And like Bateman, Jason *defines* himself by his tastes. He fails to connect deeply with his neighbour, despite their shared love of old and bootlegged music, because the neighbour’s tastes lie in a slightly later era. But he is also aware of how perfectly he fits the profile of a 1990s suburban, middle-class youth. In a symbolic moment, after Jason has explained to his mother why the Beach Boys deserve cult status (they are ‘famous mainstream artists with secret counterlives in which they created risky, edgy experimental work’, [Spiotta 2008, p. 85]) she tells him that she once met Dennis Wilson at a bar in Venice Beach. As with their later conversation where Jason admires her generation for actually ‘doing something’, the divide is present between the perceived tangible reality of the older generation, and the cocooned, simulated reality of the younger one. Most of Jason’s life takes place in his room, surrounded by books, music and a burgeoning online world. And he is content with his place: he admits to a ‘comfortable’ alienation (Spiotta, p. 77) and a fullness to his life, where he can ‘listen to music, read, and be on the Internet all at the same time. And watch TV’ (Spiotta, p. 78). He is also comfortable with his position in the ‘centre of the culture’—a white, American, young, middle-class male. ‘Everything is geared to me’, he says (Spiotta, p. 123), just as Patrick Bateman believes he is an *asset* to society (Easton Ellis, p. 3).

Miranda provides a voice for the way the other characters limit *themselves* through both their hopefulness (that ideas are *enough*) and their cynicism (that nothing will change, as with Josh). Miranda starts out being hopeful about the Prairie Fire approaches to resistance, which, as she perceives it, point out ‘the contradictions that had become so normalised in people’s eyes’ (Spiotta 2008, pp. 62–3). But she becomes disillusioned as she begins to perceive the limits to these same approaches. She begins to challenge the view of Nash—the bookstore manager. He says, in reference to a planned action:

> [w]e dance in the street and stop traffic not because we want to be on TV to get our message out but because we like to dance in the street. It’s the world we want to live in. (Spiotta, p. 143)

Miranda sarcastically replies: ‘Or we could just talk about actions and never do them. Not dance but think about dancing. That would be really subversive’ (Spiotta,
p. 143). The shadow of the older generation’s failed radicalism hangs over this conversation. As we learn by the end of the novel Nash did use direct action and it was ineffective, destructive and damaging. He now seems to discourage any kind of direct action, due to the failure of his radicalism. By the end of the novel, Miranda still believes that the new generation is capable of making change. In the Fiskean (2010) sense, she believes that people will continue to refuse to be incorporated. Her last words to Josh in the novel are in regard to the ‘New Left’ playing cards: ‘Those are human beings. Human beings do not need to be appropriated’ (Spiotta, p. 261).

We can see through Miranda that Eat the document does present different, even contradictory, views of whether it’s possible to resist the dominant culture in (mainly) the later era in which it’s set. I would still argue, though, that the novel reflects a society where any real opposition to corporate power (and thus the dominant system) is extremely limited.

Sometimes the younger generation’s supposedly anti-corporate activities seem to confirm or conform to the hegemonic system, rather than oppose it. Henry, who owns Prairie Fire, wonders about a clever slogan pasted over a Gap Kids billboard: ‘made for kids, by kids’. Is its ‘savvy master of ad language’ clever and effective, or does it ‘just pile onto the general noise and garbage?’ (Spiotta 2008, p. 49). Just like people who boycott Starbucks, the young characters in the novel use and appropriate the meaning of brands in an excorporative manner, but Henry’s comment suggests an inherent limit in the culture. With the masses of information at subjects’ disposal, the ‘general noise and garbage’, as he calls it, how often will an appropriated message really effect change (let alone be noticed)? And of course, the company, Gap Kids, would incorporate and pre-empt further opposition.

Both Henry and Nash also note that sometimes the younger characters seem to rebel for no particular reason or against no particular power, but just because. The young characters sometimes merely want to present an ‘image’ of resistance and non-conformism, and Nash observes that sometimes the young characters’ opposition is ‘often to a seemingly arbitrary object, as much, perhaps, for opposition’s sake and energy as for a desire for social change’ (Spiotta 2008, p. 36). But it could also be argued that these young people are actually resisting any earnest ideals that they are able to effect change. This ironic—and even anarchic—attitude (to rebel inactively, superficially or for the sake of it) could be another reaction to the ‘failure’ of the
radicalism of the earlier generation. And if these actions (or inactions), performed
tongue-in-cheek, effectively confirm the existing power structure, then there is no
bottom-up resistance at all. Spiotta (2008) definitely seems to hint at the existence of
these kinds of attitudes in the mix.

Henry’s thoughts about the billboard suggest the inherently limiting nature of a
society powered by the corporate, but his character and actions also symbolically
express these limitations. Henry takes direct, as opposed to appropriative, action
against Allegecom, by tearing down their billboard each time it appears, so it is
unreadable. He is of the ‘direct action’ generation. He does not subvert the message
on the billboard, he tears it down (Spiotta 2008, pp. 48–9. pp. 90–1). Henry does,
however, rely on the medication displayed on that very billboard, in this sense he is
already incorporated by Allegecom. His actions are a protest, an expression of
frustration and disagreement, and yet the company’s power is inescapable. Even
while cutting down the billboard, Henry ‘wanted to go back to his house and take a
pill and fall asleep’ (Spiotta, p. 49). The pills he takes are manufactured by
Allegecom for symptoms that relate to exposure to Agent Orange, which is also, in
the novel, linked to Allegecom. Again, the company’s power is inescapable. But
Henry tells Nash that he never did go to Vietnam, despite the post-traumatic disorder
hallucinations he experiences. This somewhat fantastical element of the novel is a
symbol of corporate infiltration not just in Henry’s day-to-day life but in his inner
life. His direct actions, like other members of the older generation, have failed, but
he does not attempt any other kind of excorporative activity as he believes those
kinds of activities have limits, as he notes with the ‘appropriative’ billboard slogans.
Henry’s strange symptoms and the dioxin-based cancer he develops could also,
finally, be read as an overall metaphor for the permeation of the corporate, how
corporate culture suffocates (Henry is always short of breath) resistance. Resistance
is fleeting, fades, is appropriated or never gets off the ground at all, more so as time
goes on.

Inevitable limits

Neither the protests of the ’70s characters in Eat the document (Spiotta 2008), nor
the ‘excorporations’ of the ’90s characters, are entirely triumphant. Small and
peaceful resistances are explored paradoxically in the novel as being highly limited
but also perhaps inevitable after the failure of radical, militant action in the ’70s. Fiske (2010)—in a kind of defence against the effectiveness of his ‘bottom-up’ theories of progress—argues that radicalism can have an alienating effect, and can condescend to the very people ‘for whom it speaks’ (Fiske, p. 128). He is talking about radical left theory, but his argument can be broadly referred to here in regards to radical ideas and actions. He believes there is value in subjects enacting ‘innumerable tactical evasions and resistances’ against dominant groups, even in the face of incorporation (Fiske, p. 128). Fiske, writing in the late ’80s, is aware of the limits to excorporation, but believes the limits to radicalism (radical ideas speaking to just a few, and rash actions) are greater. In *Eat the document* radical thought and action is defeated in the ’70s chapters, but the novel is less hopeful than Fiske about the potential of small tactical evasions and resistances. Ten years on from Fiske, when *Eat the document* is set (even more so in 2006 when it was written) incorporation is deeply built into the system of consumer society. We have seen just how easy it is for companies to look as though they are ‘doing good’ in order to hold onto their customer base, while they may be neutral or even destructive in other areas. Protests, resistances, alternative ideas are incorporated into the marketing strategies of large companies. And other brands, too, falsely latch onto the incorporated ‘trends’. There is also the fact that brand-focused protests affirm the system as a whole, and confirm the subject’s role in the socialisation of consumer/retailer transactions.

There is an added element of commodification for the younger characters. I mentioned briefly their ‘image’ of resistance, which is sometimes even ironic. Through their protests, through their ‘alternative’ clothing, they also publicise themselves as commodities. Nash hears the young people in Prairie Fire explain how they ‘would get this media or that media to notice’ (Spiotta 2008, p. 36), that they ‘always lived as though their lives were all on the verge of broadcast’ (Spiotta, p. 37). Their opinions, their resistances, add to their personal brand. And thus, Nash notes, they would never use the word ‘activist’. It was too radical. ‘They would call themselves resisters, but that sounded so reactive, almost puritanical. Instead they called themselves testers, and they organised not demonstrations or protests, but tests’ (Spiotta, p. 36). In this way, they are exactly like the companies managing politics in order to keep their customer base. The young people in the novel balance
their image, as just alternative *enough* or just green *enough* (like Alphadelphia) in order to maintain a social standing. They *test* actions as a company would market-test products. This is the environment in which they have been raised.

Through her characters Spiotta (2008) acknowledges the ‘complexity and creativity by which the subordinate cope with the commodity system and its ideology in their everyday lives’ (Fiske 2010, p. 16). But despite excorporation, ‘bottom-up’ resistance, the creative choices and tiny actions of subjects and groups, *Eat the document* explores the readiness of the system to incorporate and commodify subversive or oppositional ideas. The novel presents the younger generation as being involved in normalised consumer/retailer relationships, and reinforcing rather than challenging the dominant system. The *imposition*, says Gilbert (2008), of ‘marketisation and commodification … at the expense of more democratic forms of social organisation’, is the primary basis for opposition to neo-liberalism. Labels like ‘non-conformism’ or ‘resistance’ are badges of identity, even marketing categories, for the young characters. Though Fiske (2010) might disagree, what’s striking, and explored in the novel, is the inescapability of incorporation, mainly through commodification, of trends, of resistance, of nostalgia and of people. There is, however, the character of Miranda, who at the end (despite some disillusionment) remains convinced, like Fiske, that gaps remain: that people and groups will continue to find new ways of tearing their jeans.

In summary, through excorporation (Fiske 2010), subjects can create oppositional meanings in their use of commodities, producing ‘bottom-up’ resistances, and a tension between the dominant culture and ‘subordinate’ groups or individuals. However, as demonstrated in *Eat the document* (Spiotta 2008), the dominant culture may rework, repossess and pre-empt oppositional meanings into its products, through commodification and incorporation. I have argued that these processes are built into the very structure of a market-based system, and that (as presented in the novel) the processes have become more rapid, and resistance more benign, in comparison to an earlier era, the 1970s. The perspective of resistance and its limits in *Eat the document* is complex but, I argue, ultimately pessimistic in regards to the characters’ abilities (and even their desires) to effectively resist the dominant system.
In the next chapter, I return to a more intimate focus on a character who is resistant (and yet complicit) to aspects of the dominant consumer system: Lisa Simpson from the TV show The Simpsons. The analysis is linked to the position of the text, *The Simpsons* (1989 – present), in the contemporary West: as a popular, commercial product, and yet one widely acknowledged to subvert, through various modes, dominant cultural ideas. The young characters in *Eat the document* (Spiotta 2008) are often incorporated back into the system they resist, and Lisa Simpson, too, struggles with her often contradictory position outside/within the micro-society of *The Simpsons*. In this chapter, I also consider the potential effect on the viewer of this text.
Chapter Three:

Lisa Simpson as the voice of double-coded critiques of contemporary society in *The Simpsons*

A popular show, which is also a global commodity, can be both commercial and subversive, through its (mostly comedic) modes, and the characters that support them. Subversion is tied to resistance through conditions of opposing, and in an ideological sense, overthrowing dominant powers. Hutcheon (1988) associates this kind of subversiveness, from within the culture, with the postmodern notion of ‘complicitous critique’, or a double-coded discourse. In other words, the show exists as part of, and because of, a dominant culture, while simultaneously questioning and critiquing the culture of which it is a part. The popular show that is the focus of this chapter, *The Simpsons* (1989 – present), engages with its context—contemporary consumer society—through the comedic modes of parody and satire, and through its characters. I examine these modes used in *The Simpsons* and their potential role in raising questions and opening up ‘spaces’ for critique in the viewer, and promoting the viewer’s sensidctoriness: their sensitivity to contradiction and hypocrisy. Lisa Simpson plays a complex, doubly coded, role in *The Simpsons*: she is both inside and outside the microcosm of her society and culture. I argue that she provides a ‘voice’ for many of the show’s critiques of society.

It should be acknowledged that, compared to the other texts analysed in this exegesis, *The Simpsons* has been widely examined in media studies, sociology, philosophy, cultural studies, education, business studies and even political science. However, most work on *The Simpsons* looks only at episodes in the first 10 years of the show, and while some researchers have studied Lisa Simpson in relation to specific theoretical frameworks like feminism (such as in Henry 2007), few critics have examined her as a voice for the show’s questions, critiques and concerns. It also remains relevant to study *The Simpsons* from many different angles, particularly in relation to a contemporary focus, because, as Woodcock (2008, p. 154) notes, ‘it has
formed part of the cultural backdrop to the life of an entire generation’. The show’s potential effects on its audience therefore should not be underestimated.

**Parody and satire; sensidictoriness and double-codedness in *The Simpsons***

One of the main ways that *The Simpsons* invites active, and potentially critical, viewing is through the way it represents Western consumer society in microcosm. The show represents a ‘mini-society that encompasses all of the major social institutions—education, family, mass media, government, religion, the economy—through the experiences of the “nuclear family” and their local community’ (Scanlan & Feinberg 2000, p. 127). A parody of the nuclear family is at the heart of the show, drawing from old-fashioned, conservative television shows like *Father knows best* (Rushkoff 2003, p. 131). It is not all facets of American/Western society that *The Simpsons* represents in micro, but mainstream society and dominant social views of reality, which in this thesis I have aligned with neo-liberal consumer capitalism. By reproducing the dominant social view of reality *The Simpsons* enables its audience ‘to identify with the characters and to enable those social views to be questioned’ (Rhodes 2001, p. 377). Lisa Simpson is often the voice that draws both the characters’ and the viewers’ attention to these potential ‘questions’.

*The Simpsons* is a parody of family-based television shows but the show is also a satire of contemporary society. My definitions of parody and satire are derived from Hutcheon (2000). In brief: parody draws from culture—specific texts, or the collective memory of texts, such as the family shows mentioned—and satire reflects upon society more generally: social structures and institutions, like work, school, family, the media; the relationship between humans and nature, history, religion and more. Both forms may exaggerate certain aspects of the text/s, culture or of society, to produce a distancing effect between the ‘original’ and the new, which is often what produces comedy. Parody engages with texts of the past (even the immediate past), echoing and transforming them, though arguably both forms become historic, as satire ends up reflecting a particular era. Both modes can be comedic, but parody is often more gentle, more fond, than satire. Satire is more critical, but can work in tandem with parody, using parody as a vehicle. *The Simpsons*, for instance, uses a parodic structure (the family TV show) to satirise society. And then there are other layers of parody within the show. Both these modes work with the viewer's
recognition and familiarity (of texts and of society as a whole), but it is mainly through satire that questions are raised and critiques are presented.

There is a direct appeal in *The Simpsons* to the sensidictory viewer. Here I discuss sensidictoriness as one of the through-lines between character (and text) and viewer. The sensidictory viewer is attuned to the critical nuances of an episode, in particular the show’s representation of contradictions and hypocrisy within society. When I argue for a viewer’s sensidictoriness—their sensitivity to contradiction as presented by the show (and *within* the show) and their ability at the time of viewing to decode that—I do not reduce this potentiality to any particular age or social group. The show also has the ability, I argue, to promote sensidictoriness in viewers who in other contexts may (initially) be more passively inclined. The sensidictory and the passively inclined viewer could therefore be the *same* person in different contexts. Sensidictoriness, then, can be potentially awakened in any viewer, and is explored here as a flexible state, though (as in Chapter One) it is a state that can, potentially, be actively maintained once it is awakened. Furthermore, Lisa as a sensidictory *character*—attuned to contradiction and contradictory herself—acts as a link, in regards to comprehension, to the sensidictory viewer and to sensidictoriness. In the case of the sensidictory sensibility in Chapter One, with Jesse and Celine in *Before sunrise* (1995) and *Before sunset* (2004), I focused on the characters as representational and explored their potentialities and the contradictions within the fictional narrative. Here, Lisa Simpson’s sensidictoriness will be explored alongside her double-codedness (which will soon be expanded upon) as both a character and symbol. She enhances the show’s ‘decodability’ and promotes sensidictoriness within the viewer.

Parody, working in conjunction with satire, can promote sensidictoriness in the viewer. Parody may ‘permit critical distance’ (Hutcheon 2000, p. 105) through the way it highlights difference, from one text to another. This critical distance ‘can engender contact with the “world”’ (Hutcheon 2000, p. 105), particularly when combined with satire, as satire is more likely than parody to ‘refer’ to, and be critical of, the social context. In other words, parody may cause the viewer to notice the differences between what is presented and what is ‘represented’ from the original text/texts. It does this through a series of links or symbols (which could be derived from plotline, character, images, soundtrack, even a style or colour scheme) that
connect the parody to (while displacing it from) the original text/s. When combined with satire, the viewer can take that lens of departure, of difference, and apply it in a broader sense to society as a whole, to find out where the critique may be aimed. So parody and satire can be tools of sensidictoriness, as sensidictoriness is partly the realisation that these double discourses exist, between what is presented and the complexities beneath.

As an example of parody and satire working together, I’ll invoke the episode *A star is Burns* (5 March 1995). When the narrative enters the office of Mr Burns, the most economically powerful citizen in Springfield, the score that plays, and the framing of the shot, parody the evil Darth Vader character in *Star wars*. This kind of cultural reference is hard for the viewer to miss, and that is the parody. But within the parody is nested a satire, of the ‘evil’ nature of the figure of economic power and social authority: the ‘boss’. Intertextually, the show also knowingly plays with an archetype.

Parody and satire can highlight difference and contradiction, and Hutcheon (1988) sees contradiction as the predominant feature of postmodernism. Postmodernism questions liberal humanist concepts such as autonomy, unity, authority, certainty, hierarchy (Hutcheon, p. 57) but does not deny them. These ‘questions’ are raised from *within* the dominant structures. This is what is meant by double codedness. What is ‘coded’ is the discourse of the text, its meanings, and a *double* coding exists when the critiques or questions in the text are reliant on, and complicit with, their own production or context. As Hutcheon says, the criticism itself may be paradoxical, and may not ‘imply destruction’ (Hutcheon, p. 57). The critiques are also, therefore, *complicitous*. We may also see a scene in a text as being double-coded if it simultaneously promotes two, perhaps contradictory, messages or points of view. Similar to this textual double-coding is the textual device of the sensidictory character, who may critique or question his/her society, while relying on, or ‘using and abusing’ (to use another of Hutcheon’s terms, p. 57) structures essential to that society.

The modes of parody and satire, used in *The Simpsons*, are tools of its resistance, and they also work in a double-coded manner. Rhodes (2001) argues that capitalist cultural industries make products that ‘sell’ but don’t necessarily promote capitalist
ideology. They might even ‘contain more than just the seeds of resistance’ (Rhodes, p. 377). Those ‘seeds’ in *The Simpsons* are planted via parody and satire, and are watered and tended by Lisa Simpson. Parody as a ‘double-voiced discourse’, in cooperation with satire, can ‘unmask the duplicities of modern society’ (Hutcheon 2000, p. xiv). Parody is ‘double-voiced’, because it both engages with, and moves away from, a source text or textual type. As mentioned, the parodic does not necessarily mock its subject or source, but in conjunction with satire and self-reflexivity, can encourage a reading that is questioning and critical. Like Rhodes, Hutcheon (1988, p. 20) argues that a successful postmodern text ‘can actually use the invasive culture industry to challenge its commodification processes from within’. Lisa Simpson often draws attention to the other characters’ reluctance to question dominant ideas, just as *The Simpsons* often draws the viewer’s attention to the possibility of questioning dominant ideas and their paradoxical nature. Lisa is also, therefore, both within and outside her own community, both confirming and subverting its dominant ideas and structures. She simultaneously embodies the show’s double-codedness and provides a voice for its embedded critiques.

**Production, audience, and double-coded critiques in *The Simpsons***

*The Simpsons*’ broad, international audience of both adults and children reflects the show’s commercial appeal. It is the longest-running scripted show in television history (Fox Broadcasting 2012), and reaches more than 60 million viewers in over 70 countries (Knox 2006). The audience for *The Simpsons* is both adults and children, as the show blends both ‘low brow’ and sophisticated styles of humour. Rushkoff (2003, p. 130) believes a key audience for the show is ‘screenagers’, who are ‘natives in a mediaspace’. The show appeals to this audience because it ‘celebrates the screenager’s irreverence for the image’ (Rushkoff, p. 130). Rushkoff believes the focus of this young audience is recognising, and being stimulated by, intertextual cues in the show, such as references to popular music, movies and television (bands such as Aerosmith [*Flaming Moe’s* 21 November 1991], Coldplay [*Million dollar maybe* 31 January 2010], Blink 182 [*Barting over* 16 February 2003] and many others have appeared on the show in cartoon form). But, Rushkoff argues, the show also appeals to older audiences, as there is a traditional ‘narrative arc’ in each episode (Rushkoff, p. 132). Rushkoff’s argument is reductive and even discriminatory in the way he separates the show’s audience into age groups who are
drawn to the show for different reasons. It is entirely possible that the show appeals to viewers young and old and from all different backgrounds for a variety of reasons. Rushkoff is more pertinent when he argues that TV (apparently and perhaps initially) aimed at children allows certain levels of irreverence ‘like a Trojan horse’ (Rushkoff, pp. 35–6).

Fiske (2010) separates the ‘commercial’ and the ‘popular’, which is useful in terms of exploring the potentiality of a mass media commodity having a critical effect. At a simple level, the commercial is passively consumed, and the popular is ‘reworked’, it is treated ‘not as a complete object to be accepted passively, but as a cultural resource to be used’ (Fiske, p. 9). *The Simpsons* is a text that invites viewer participation, through its modes. The show invites recognition, questioning and critique of the socio-cultural context of consumer capitalism, and the constructions and contradictions within it, including corporate power, institutions, the media, religion, and the law. Despite the potential ‘Trojan horse’ effect, there will be plenty of viewers who observe passively, who may not be inspired to ‘question’, or who are not drawn into the critical spaces the show opens up. However, I engage with the idea that the modes of storytelling and presentation in *The Simpsons* have specific potential to promote sensidictoriness and open spaces for questioning and critique in a wide range of viewers, while remaining within certain confines and even due to remaining within them.

The show itself has a need for the structures—the production and distribution—of the Fox Network, not to mention the material itself of dominant culture and society, from which it develops its humour and its entertainment. As Hutcheon (2000, p. 75) argues, the parodic text ‘is granted a special license to transgress the limits of convention’, but only within confines of ‘recognisability’. In other words, the viewer may first need to recognise the text that is being parodied (such as a news program) to understand the convention that has been transgressed. Then the parodic, as mentioned, can be used as a springboard to satiric and essentially critical ideas about society.

The potential questions the show raises include those of the effectiveness of social institutions, the contradictions of power and authority, the effects of corporate
infiltration of everyday life, and the danger of generalisations and stereotypes. Henry (2007) argues that:

among other things, The Simpsons mercilessly exposes the hypocrisy and ineptitude of pop psychology, corporate greed, commercialism, consumerism, and modern child-rearing, as well as the potential dangers of fundamental religion, homophobia, racism and sexism. (p. 273)

The Simpsons’ popularity may or may not be due to its critical aspects, but the fact that the criticism is, for the most part, self-aware and non-didactic, in other words non-alienating, may help it reach a wide audience. According to Hull (2000), The Simpsons does inspire and animate certain members of the audience, those that perhaps could be called its fans (and are potentially its most consistently sensidictory viewers), as it:

offers the subjected, disciplined individual the easily accessible tool of humour and parody in acts of subversion that allow the subjected to gain even small degrees of leverage over the confines of media power. (Hull, p. 65)

You may say that the show provides the viewer with certain ‘tactics’ against the ‘strategies’ (De Certeau 1984) of media power, while not being divorced from it. I would argue that the viewer not only gains small amounts of leverage over media power, but may also gain leverage over other kinds of power, due to their enhanced ability to ‘question’. This is the promotion of sensidictoriness. So The Simpsons has a formula that potentially opens up spaces for questioning and critique, but it also does not turn more passively inclined viewers away. In contemporary society this kind of double-coded, popular discourse may inevitably be the most effective way to promote questioning and critique in a large range of viewers.

**Modes at work in relation to The Simpsons double-coded discourse with the media**

The Simpsons questions, through its modes, the medium and institution of which it is a part: media and television. As already mentioned, The Simpsons as a whole began as a parody and inversion of utopian-style family shows like Father knows best, The Dick Van Dyke show and Leave it to Beaver, shows which depended on the ‘selling of more washing machines and television sets’ (Rushkoff 2003, p. 131). The micro-society was in place from the show’s beginning but the satirical element (of society and its institutions, of consumerism) became more apparent after the first few
seasons. By this time the show was essential to Fox’s programming schedule, due to its success (Rhodes 2001, p. 375). Though it is still a part of this media institution, *The Simpsons*’ essentialness to this media empire gives it an edge. There are even blatant Fox Network critiques in the show. For example, in *The fool Monty* (21 November 2010), the lettering on a news helicopter reads: ‘Fox News: Not racist but #1 with racists’.

In the episode *Missionary: impossible* (20 February 2000), Homer accidentally donates $10,000 to a PBS (a rival network) drive. At the end of the episode Fox is holding its own drive/telethon. Rupert Murdoch is there, in caricature, clutching a Foster’s beer (a nod to his Australianness). When Bart calls up and pledges money, the Murdoch character says ‘you’ve saved my network!’ Bart looks directly ‘into the camera’ and says: ‘Wouldn’t be the first time.’ This is a blatant engagement with the show’s double-coded relationship to its context, to society and to the audience. The episode acknowledges both the show’s reliance on the Fox Network, and the Fox Network’s reliance on the show. In combination with references in other episodes, it also acknowledges the viewer’s awareness of the connection to Fox as being negative, or at least begrudging.

More subtle examples of media critique are present in many episodes, for example, sensationalised, or entirely trivial, reports by news anchor Kent Brockman, which the Simpson family watch on their own TV. Brockman’s broadcasts are parodies of real-life newscasts and are satirical of what concerns the media, and by implication the general populace.

*The Simpsons* deconstructs and informs the media soup of which it is a part … [inviting] us to make active and conscious comparisons of its own scenes with those of other, less transparent media forms. (Rushkoff 2003, p. 132)

So a viewer of *The Simpsons* will recognise the format of the news program, with a news anchor, and can recognise the similarities and the points of departure (in other words, the spaces) between that parody and the ‘less transparent’ news programs they might come across. This is a form of sensidictory awareness, inspired by the parodic, which can be cultivated to produce a more consistently discerning viewer.

Statements from the show’s producers help us to understand some of the possible intended meanings in any episode, and also the role of Lisa. Al Jean, a long-term
writer and producer of *The Simpsons* told Rushkoff (2003, p. 135) that the show’s ‘thesis’ is nihilism: ‘There’s nothing to believe in anymore once you assume that organised structures and institutions are out to get you’. Jean’s colleague Mike Reiss agrees: ‘The overarching point is that the media’s stupid and manipulative, TV is a narcotic, and all big institutions are corrupt and evil’ (Rushkoff, p. 135). This evidences the kind of subversive and self-aware, or contradictory and double-coded, messages which the show and Lisa represent. Jean says that the writers of the show ‘empathise with her [Lisa] more than any other character’ (Rushkoff, p. 133). If the writers empathise with Lisa, it makes sense that she would voice the show’s embedded critiques. Admittedly, we cannot tell the tone of these statements from the writing. I assume they are at least partly ironic as Jean and Reiss are TV/media figures working in an institutional context. However, their acknowledgment that ‘TV is a narcotic’ is powerful, and shows that, by being aware and critical of this, *The Simpsons* attempts to subvert this by insisting that their viewers learn to question. *The Simpsons* might seduce its viewers in the same way another ‘narcoticised’ TV show would, but once it has its viewers it encourages questioning and critique. And as Jean and Reiss admit, the writers often project their ideas, their intentions, through Lisa.

**Lisa as a voice for the show’s satirical (and double-coded) discourses**

Lisa is the social conscience in this micro-society, this parody of family shows and satire of contemporary society. Lisa’s social consciousness marks her as both insider and outsider: she displays faith in society’s systems if they work for her, but her outspoken anti-patriarchal, anti-consumerist and other anti-dominant stances make her an outsider within her community. Her outsiderism or non-conformity takes a different form from Bart’s. Bart is often seen as the archetypal ‘rebel’ who acts out against authority and establishment (such as with his constant war against Principal Skinner), but Bart is more a part of the overall community and accepted social fabric than Lisa. In the episode *Bart’s inner child* (11 November 1993), for example, after a travelling motivational speaker praises Bart’s ability to do whatever he wants when he feels like it, the whole town aligns with Bart, culminating in a disastrous ‘Do As You Feel’ day. Scanlan and Feinberg (2000) acknowledge Bart as deviant, but posit that ‘[t]he Simpsons’ eldest daughter is the classical non-conformist, challenging local historical myths … and religious fundamentalism while struggling to be the
“smart kid” in school’ (Scanlan and Feinberg, p. 131). When Bart and Lisa team up, they form an effective pair against the ‘mob’ (when the rest of Springfield blindly follows one belief or another) such as occurs in the episodes *Whacking Day* (29 April 1993) and *Sideshow Bob Roberts* (9 October 1994). Lisa is the only character who is strongly and consistently motivated to stand up against what she perceives as being wrong. Lisa is the character given special attention by the producers of the show in the generation of meaning.

Just as the show is reliant on its place within the Fox Network, and in the media landscape, Lisa is reliant on certain social structures within the microcosm of Springfield. She dreams of having more power as an adult—in a future vision in *Bart to the Future* (19 March 2000) she is the President of the United States—and is thus reliant on the school system, to get good grades. In other episodes she displays faith in American democracy, though her faith wavers when she is exposed to corruption (as in *Mr Lisa Goes to Washington*, 26 September 1991) and unreliability. This makes her doubly coded, as the show is doubly coded, working from within and acknowledging the dominant systems. However, Lisa works within the system, attempting to use it to her advantage, in order to (at least one day) have power over it.

Lisa is not radical, but she is resistant, and is the only character to constantly attempt to make others aware of their environment and the contradictions operating within it. Stack and Kelly (citing Knight Abowitz 2006, p. 12) mark resistance as ‘opposition with a social and political purpose’, and also as communication. When Lisa resists dominant ideas within the micro-society of Springfield, it is ‘a means of signalling, generating, and building dialogue around particular power imbalances and inequalities’ (Stack and Kelly citing Knight Abowitz 2006, p. 12). In the first episode properly devoted to Lisa, *Moaning Lisa*, from series one (11 February 1990), no one at first notices (or cares) that Lisa has become glum and withdrawn. Lisa is sensitive to, and aware of, other people’s obliviousness, and this compounds the problem. When her saxophone teacher bemoans her for playing ‘crazy bebop’, Lisa says ‘I'm wailing out for the homeless family living out of its car. The Iowa farmer, whose land has been taken away by unfeeling bureaucrats …’. Marge believes that if Lisa will smile and fit in then happiness will follow. Marge therefore equates sadness with non-conformism. Homer also doesn’t understand Lisa’s crisis, and Lisa asks
him: ‘how can we sleep at night when there’s so much suffering in the world?’ Her sadness, and resistance (even to school activities), leads to a connection with the blues saxophone player ‘Bleeding Gums’ Murphy, portrayed also as an outsider figure. Eventually Marge concedes that it is better for Lisa to be herself, but the other characters remain oblivious to her troubles, and to the issues at the heart of them (which includes the contradiction between the suffering in the world and people’s ignorance of it). This episode is an example of Lisa’s sensidictoriness and outsider status within the family, and the micro-society of Springfield. Her resistance and despair, and the contrast of the other characters’ obliviousness, builds a dialogue around inequality and ignorance, which could potentially increase viewer awareness.

Beacons of Lisa’s outsider status and resistance to Springfield norms are her vegetarianism, outspoken feminism, scepticism, anti-materialism and anti-capitalism, and political interest and awareness. The episode Make room for Lisa (28 February 1999) provides an introductory example of Lisa’s (sensidictory) role in the show, and the way she provides confirmation of the general critical discourse of the show. A Smithsonian museum exhibit comes to Springfield, sponsored by a cell phone company: Omnitouch. Lisa complains that corporate sponsorship cheapens America’s national treasures, to which the Omnitouch representative drily replies ‘Actually they’re Omnitouch’s [treasures] now. We bought them during the last budget crisis.’ Homer manages to damage the (now corporately owned) Bill of Rights, at the exhibition, and in order to make Homer pay for the damage Omnitouch installs a cellular transmitter in the Simpsons’ house. As a symbol of just how oblivious everyone is to Lisa’s interests, the transmitter is installed in her room. The Omnitouch representative wins over Homer with weasel words, when she tells Lisa that the company prefers to call it a ‘Keep in Touch Tower’. Homer is impressed and tells Lisa to try and see it from the Omnitouch Corporation’s point of view, much to her frustration and dismay. The episode is a wry, satirical critique of corporate

8 Lisa the vegetarian (15 October 1995).
9 Evident in many episodes, including Bart vs. Thanksgiving (22 November 1990), Bart the daredevil (6 December 1990), Marge on the lam (4 November 1993), Lisa vs. Malibu Stacy (17 February 1994), and Lisa on ice (13 November 1994).
10 Bart’s inner child (11 November 1993).
11 Lisa the beauty queen (15 October 1992), The old man and the Lisa (20 April 1997), and Make room for Lisa (28 February 1999).
12 Two cars in every garage and three eyes on every fish (1 November 1990), Mr Lisa goes to Washington (26 September 1991), Sideshow Bob Roberts (9 October 1994) and They saved Lisa’s brain (9 May 1999).
influence and infiltration of everyday life. As in many other episodes, it shows that the citizens of Springfield will readily go along with the voice of power, excepting Lisa. Lisa is the outsider in this context. She is also the one to vocalise oppositional messages about corporate power, as she does when she questions the ‘cheapening’ of America’s national treasures. But the resolution involves Lisa realising that she always drags Homer along to events (such as museum exhibits) that he doesn’t enjoy. Lisa’s sensidictoriness (her sensitivity, here, to corporate power and falseness) makes her an outsider and nonconformist, for which she is basically punished. But, as with many episodes, she becomes calm and accepting, and backs down in the end. So the space for questioning and critique, and a promotion of sensidictoriness exists, but there is that double-codedness in Lisa’s submission, and in the way _The Simpsons_ displays the powerful as remaining powerful and the oblivious as remaining oblivious.

That other side of Lisa’s double-coding—the way she aligns herself with certain systems of power—does mean she is conforming on one level. Her interest and participation at school is aligned with a reward and punishment system: Lisa perceives the rewards to be in the future, when she can subvert the current systems of power. Her desire for structure and discipline is high. In _The PTA disbands_ (16 April 1995), Lisa becomes stressed without the structure of school. She demands that the Springfield locals who are temporarily teaching her should ‘grade and evaluate’ her. In _The secret war of Lisa Simpson_ (18 May 1997), Lisa wants to go to military school along with Bart because she’s not finding Springfield Elementary very challenging. There is an element of Foucaultian (1991) institutional surveillance to Lisa’s academic pursuits: she is always afraid that someone will know if she receives an F grade at school, and that it will impact on her entire future life (as the prisoners in the panopticon never know, and thus always imagine, they are being watched). In _Lisa gets an ‘A’_ (22 November 1998), Lisa is unable to study properly for a test and resorts to buying a test from the bully, Nelson Muntz. The school is given a grant due to Lisa’s high grade. The school is to receive the grant at a ceremony, in the form of a cheque. Lisa has already confessed her ‘crime’ to Principal Skinner, and he predicts that she will confess en masse (meaning that the school will miss out on the money) so a fake ceremony is staged. Lisa clears her conscience, and the school still gets the cheque at the real ceremony, of which Lisa is unaware.
Sometimes Lisa departs from the school system either in despair (The good, the sad and the drugly, 19 April 2009) or through short attempts to try to ‘fit in’ socially (Bart of darkness, 4 September 1994), but she always returns to its reliable structure. Lisa’s conformism to the structures of the school system may actually be a coping mechanism, as I explored with regard to other sensidictory characters in this thesis: Jesse and Celine in Before sunrise (1995) and Before sunset (2004) and their ‘leap’ (Camus 2005) to illusory structures of religion and long-term relationships. Lisa’s awareness of the contradictions in society, in Springfield, coupled with the lack of awareness in others, can overwhelm her. Much of the time Lisa feels she has no one with whom she can adequately express her frustration, or her anxiousness, and so the structure of school, and the discipline of education, provides something solid that she can grasp, and even believe in. Though the school system often fails Lisa, it has a reliable and solid rhythm, and thus provides at least an illusion of comfort and control for her.

Lisa vs. Malibu Stacy (17 February 1994) is a satirical critique of patriarchal society, corporate power and consumer trends. Lisa is the only entirely oppositional voice against the dominant powers; sensitive to contradictory messages of ‘empowered’ girlhood and backhanded sexism. Early in the episode Lisa adds her new talking Malibu Stacy doll to her toys, which are arranged like the United Nations. She moves Malibu Stacy up to the lectern, announcing that her talk will ‘… no doubt be a stirring and memorable address.’ To her dismay, Malibu Stacy’s remarks are materialistic and sexist, for example: ‘I wish they taught shopping in school’, ‘thinking too much gives me wrinkles’, and ‘don’t ask me, I’m just a girl’. This ruins Lisa’s attempt at an excorporative activity: creating her own culture out of the products ‘provided by the dominant system’ (Fiske 2010, p. 13). Lisa attempts to persuade the people around her that the doll is damaging. To Bart, she says, angrily:

Millions of girls will grow up thinking that this is the right way to act. That they can never be anything more than vacuous ninnies whose only goal is to look pretty, land a rich husband and spend all day on a boat with their equally vacuous friends talking about how damn terrific it is to look pretty and have a rich husband!

She tries to tell the girls in the playground that what the doll says is sexist, to which they reply: ‘Lisa said a dirty word.’ This episode invites the viewer to take on the same knowingness as Lisa, regarding the doll’s inappropriateness, though perhaps
not the same frustration. The irony lies in the tension between what Lisa is aware of, and what the other characters are not.

Lisa goes to Petrochem Petrochemical Corp., the manufacturers of Malibu Stacy, and is shown a video, a parody of corporate propaganda (intertextually recognisable to the viewer), which only confirms her opinion that the doll is sexist. She finally resorts to seeking out the reclusive Stacy Lavelle, the original creator of the doll (Lavelle is a parody of an archetype: the melodramatic recluse who drinks in the day and has a series of ‘action figure’ ex-husbands). Lisa convinces Lavelle that she should help her make a new talking doll, one that spouts positive messages for girls, such as: ‘When I choose to get married, I’m keeping my own name’, and ‘Trust in yourself and you can achieve anything.’ A subversive scene follows where the Malibu Stacy company, angry about the new doll, calls in a ‘favour’ from Washington. The President promises to ‘take care of it personally’, which is an overt critique of the intermingling nature of corporations, politics and patriarchy.

On the day of release of the Lisa Lionheart doll (the doll Lisa has helped create), the Malibu Stacy team’s plan of attack becomes evident. Just as children rush for the Lisa Lionheart doll, a ‘new’ Malibu Stacy is wheeled out in front of them, diverting their attention. ‘Wait!’ Lisa says, ‘don’t be fooled. She’s just a regular Malibu Stacy with a stupid cheap hat. She still embodies all the awful stereotypes she did before.’ Avid Malibu Stacy collector Waylon Smithers replies: ‘But she’s got a new hat!’ Again, Lisa is the sensidictory character and the one who confirms and promotes the viewer’s knowingness of this contradiction (the new/not new doll). Lisa’s double-codedness as a textual symbol is evident in the episode, since she is still the consumer of Malibu Stacy products. The episode itself is doubly coded, mainly due to the fact that, in the end, corporate power wins out. One little girl does pick up Lisa’s doll, and Lisa says that maybe getting through to that one girl will be worth it. But Stacy Lavelle sceptically answers: ‘yes, particularly if that little girl happens to pay $46,000 for it’. In other words, those with the money and power (not the progressive ideas) remain dominant. Power is not inverted, but it is questioned, and it is questioned via parody, satire, intertextuality and the character of Lisa.

Lisa the skeptic (23 November 1997) is a satirical critique of blind faith, religious hysteria, laziness/complacency of thought and consumerism. A new mall is to be
built in Springfield and Lisa complains (again, being the only one to notice) because the mall will be built on a site where fossils have previously been found. Her school is allowed to conduct an archaeological dig of the site, in which Lisa uncovers a skeleton in the shape of an angel. Lisa attempts to rationally explain the skeleton but the other Springfield residents believe it is the skeleton of an angel, the irony of an ethereal being having a skeleton obviously lost on them. Homer puts the angel on display—gaudily, with flashing lights, music and fluffy dice—in the Simpson garage and charges entry, immediately profiting from people’s faith. Lisa continues to argue that there’s no proof, and seeks scientific testing, which comes back ‘inconclusive’. Everyone in Springfield opposes Lisa’s viewpoint, including her father, who says, ironically: ‘Facts are meaningless, you can use facts to prove anything even remotely true.’ Reverend Lovejoy, on hearing that the tests were inconclusive, says to Lisa: ‘Well, it appears science has failed once again in the face of overwhelming religious evidence.’ The angel’s ‘believers’ develop a mob-like mentality and wage a war on science, destroying exhibits in the Springfield museum, and (ironically again) setting fire to the Christian Science Library. The angel disappears from the Simpson garage and reappears on a hill in town, prophesising an apocalyptic sundown. The whole town turns out and the angel rises, and announces: ‘Silence! Prepare for the end … the end of high prices! Behold the grand opening of the Heavenly Hills Mall.’

Lisa finds this deception reprehensible and expresses this to the mall’s proprietors: ‘You exploited people’s deepest beliefs just to hawk your cheesy wares? Well, we are outraged.’ The townsfolk, however, are not outraged at all. They are mesmerised by the new shopping mall, and they rush through its doors. The more subtle critique (not an anti-religious one) in this episode is evident in an earlier conversation between Lisa and Marge, where Marge tells Lisa: ‘everyone needs something to believe in’. At the end, the citizens of Springfield have quickly shifted their faith from a skeleton to a shopping mall, without a hint of self-awareness. Lisa remains from beginning to end the only character sensitive to the contradictory nature of a winged skeleton, and the deceptiveness and offensiveness of the hoax, or as the company calls it, the ‘publicity stunt’. While Lisa the skeptic is one of the prime examples of an episode in the satiric mode, both the show and Lisa remain doubly coded, due to the way the episode closes: Marge notes that Lisa was momentarily scared when the angel began to ‘speak’, and so undermines the steadfastness of
Lisa’s rationality. And as with *Lisa vs. Malibu Stacy*, the power remains with the corporation ‘hawking its cheesy wares’. Lisa may be able to stand apart from the deception, but she cannot convince others to do so. However, due to the satirical mode and the marking of difference through irony, the viewer can potentially decode the critique and, like Lisa, stand apart from the residents of Springfield who ‘blindly follow’ their fanaticism, whether that be for religion or for bargains. The episode’s double-codedness does not discount the questions raised through satire, irony and through Lisa.

In *The good, the sad and the drugly* (19 April 2009), Lisa, the sensidictory character, becomes so overwhelmed by the future, and by the attitudes of others towards the future, that she experiences a breakdown. Marge and Homer take Lisa to a psychiatrist who prescribes ‘Ignoreitall’. This drug, and this choice, is both a parody of existing drugs (for conditions such as ADD, depression and bi-polar disorder) and a satire of a society where the giving of (often anti-psychotic) drugs to children has increased (Laita, Arango & Doll 2004). The name of the drug could be read as overtly critical of what this normalisation of pharmaceutical solutions for problems such as despair (and also the shrinking of the category of ‘normal’) could be doing on a larger scale to society.13 Once taking the drugs, Lisa begins to see smiley faces everywhere, instead of anything ‘bad’, such as pollutants. Lisa is only the secondary character in this episode (Bart being the main one) and Marge finally takes her off the pills when she almost hurts herself by trying to kiss a fan. Though Lisa doesn’t voice as much protest, as in other episodes, at the medicalisation of her despair, the imagery directly related to her character here (i.e. the smiley faces) symbolically ‘vocalises’ the themes. The episode is again doubly coded due to Lisa’s final acceptance, and even complacency, about the future that so alarmed her, but again I would argue that this narrative closure does not nullify the questions raised or the critique present. The episode remains questioning and highly critical of pharmaceutical solutions (quick-fixes) to society’s problems, though the ending may be cynically ‘accepting’. And as with *Lisa the skeptic*, the critique is also one of commercial exploitation: the pharmaceutical companies feeding off the despair of the individual who is, arguably and paradoxically, created by that very system.

---

13 This idea is greatly expanded upon in my novel, *Behind the yellow* (Meyer 2013).
*The Simpsons* converses with contemporary society, and culture, from within. This popular show is both commercial *and* subversive, through its modes of presentation, and the character Lisa Simpson, who supports them. By ‘using and abusing’ (Hutcheon 1988) aspects of contemporary culture *The Simpsons* raises questions around, and about, dominant ideals. These questions—highlighted by the distancing and differing effects of the comedic modes the show employs, such as parody and satire—are voiced by Lisa Simpson. Lisa Simpson is portrayed as being both inside and outside the microcosm of her society and culture, and thus provides a ‘voice’ for many of the show’s critiques.

The questions raised, and the act of questioning, can promote the viewer’s sensidictoriness, which may transfer to other readings beyond the context of an episode of the show. As Rhodes (2001, pp. 382–3) notes, the show ‘breaks the rules to make them more visible; in so doing, it opens up a space where those rules can be interrogated and questioned.’ I would align with ‘rules’ dominant ideas in contemporary Western society. *The Simpsons* presents these ideas in microcosm in order to subvert them, and certainly to open up a space where they can be interrogated. Both Lisa and the show as a whole are aligned with (and utilise) the structures and power in society while resisting, subverting and critiquing those very same structures. This is critiquing and distancing without *denial* (Hutcheon 1988) of social hierarchies, forming an inevitably complicitous critique. The *radical* may alienate, as we have seen with the ’70s characters in *Eat the Document* (Spiotta 2008), but the popular that is also critical may ‘speak *to* a discourse from *within* it, but without being totally recuperated by it’ (Hutcheon, p. 35). We see this in *The Simpsons* in the episodes where the Fox Network is overtly, dismissively invoked. But contradiction is inescapable, if resistance and subversion are seeds planted from within. It is through sensidictoriness, the promotion of awareness of the contradictory, the allowance of the self to be multiple (not categorical), and the desire to promote awareness in others, that these seeds grow. In the final chapter I explore the process of writing my own text which is critical of—and yet, as with the texts explored, inescapably complicit to—dominant consumer society.
Conclusion:

Limits to resistance in *Behind the yellow* and the novel’s relationship to the analysed texts

This final chapter considers my novel *Behind the yellow* (Meyer 2013): its engagement with the concepts applied throughout the thesis, and its relation to the other contemporary texts that have been analysed. Aspects of the creative process—simultaneous to the research process—and choices made during that process are discussed. This chapter demonstrates the symbiotic relationship between my novel and the exegesis, to which I have alluded in previous chapters. Besides an exploration of the themes, characters, setting and plot, and how the world of the story conveys theoretical concepts, I will justify the selection of genre and style to convey ideas.

*Behind the yellow* is set in a near future Western city. Henry is a nanobiopharmaceutical designer for a large company called GlaZen. His current assignment is to create a nano-device that will be implanted in a patient’s brain, to correct ‘dysfunctional’ behaviour. His relationship with Meg, with whom he lives, has turned sour. Ava is a character inside the Institution for Wellness, Happiness, Functionality and Balance, where her ‘over-abundant’ personality is being corrected through drugs, training exercises, rewards and punishment. The plot involves Henry having to go undercover in the institution to choose a subject for trials of his invention. There, he and Ava make a connection.

*Behind the yellow* (Meyer 2013) is related to the other texts explored in this thesis: *Before sunrise* (1995) and *Before sunset* (2004), *Eat the document* (Spiotta 2008), and *The Simpsons* (1989 – present), mainly through the concept of characters who operate within the confines of dominant ideas in society, while also being resistant to them. This concept of being within/outside dominant paradigms can be referred to as a character or subject’s ‘double-codedness’, a term used by Hutcheon (1988) and explained in depth in the previous chapter on *The Simpsons*. On the ‘outside’ of this double-coded interaction with society are the characters’ excorporative (Fiske 2010)
ideas and actions, the ways they ‘use and abuse’ (Hutcheon) the dominant culture, and stimulate questions and critiques of culture and society in the viewer/reader. On the ‘inside’ of this double-coded interaction with society, the characters take ideological positions and perform actions that are aligned with dominant ideas and dominant structures. The characters’ resistant thoughts and actions emerge at least partly through an awareness of paradoxes in the dominant culture, and they themselves are contradictory, being within/outside. In Behind the yellow, we chart Henry’s journey in this regard—from awareness to resistance, meeting many limits (including within himself) along the way. Through these characters, modes, and themes the texts may promote sensidictoriness, and the motivation to critique and question in the receiver, at and beyond the time of reading. I have also raised the question, through the novel as with the other texts, of whether non-conformism and resistance are even possible in a society where every idea and action can be categorised, contained and commodified.

Genre and style

Though Behind the yellow (Meyer 2013) contains aspects of different genres (partly informed by postmodern pastiche) such as romance and the absurd, it could be broadly classed under the genre of speculative fiction. To speculate is not just to guess, but to wonder. One of the primary concerns of speculative fiction is to ask ‘what if?’ As a classic example, George Orwell’s Nineteen eighty-four (1989) speculates on a totalitarian society where everyone’s actions are monitored, and freedom of expression is curtailed and controlled. Nineteen eighty-four provides social commentary, and may be classed as speculative due to its futuristic aspects, such as the surveillance screens in the walls. Behind the yellow emerges from the conceptual framework that I have developed and applied to other texts in this thesis. (Other, related, influences will also be discussed.) The novel then wonders about a society that contains future versions of selected dominant ideas, and also contains resistive subjects who operate from within this framework. The choice of genre seemed an appropriate way to take some of the explored ideas to their limits, and also stimulate the reader to ask: ‘what if?’

One of the main stylistic elements of Behind the yellow (Meyer 2013) is satire, but the humour and pathos are also drawn from the absurd, or more specifically the
Kafkaesque. Henry, the main male character in the novel, is a Kafkaesque character: he craves solitude, his domestic life reflects public life (Kundera 1990), and he is generally confused about why he is doing what he is doing but he does it anyway, and goes along with the doctrines of power. It seems that I have also applied, quite literally, Kundera’s (1990) statement that ‘Kafkan experience’ is to be ‘in a world that is nothing but a single, huge labyrinthine institution [the characters] cannot escape and cannot understand’ (Kundera, p. 22). The characters’ inability to comprehend how society, and the institution, works, or why it works like it does, is certainly not as extreme as in Kafka’s works (such as *The trial* or *The castle* [2008]), but aspects of that confusion are present, particularly in the seemingly random shifts within the institution. Kafka’s novels are also seen as speculative, of totalitarianism and other dark events of the early 20th century, but Kafka was writing of the present, writing of his own internal struggle with different types of obligation, and the tension between literature and life. As Kundera says, ‘[h]e shed light on the mechanisms he knew from private microsocial human practice, not suspecting that later developments would put those mechanisms into action on the great stage of History’ (Kundera, pp. 30–1). My novel is more overt in its speculative aspects, although, as will become more evident throughout this chapter, it is firmly about the now. The speculative society is an enhanced projection of (certain aspects of) contemporary consumer society, and highlights potential issues of power, control and resistance.

**The institution**

The physical layout of the Institution for Wellness, Happiness, Functionality and Balance is inspired by Foucault’s (1991) explorations of Bentham’s *Panopticon*: a type of prison with a tower at the centre of a building ‘pierced with windows that open onto the inner side of the ring’ (Foucault, p. 200). A supervisor is placed (or implied) in the centre, in the tower, so the prisoners are never sure when or whether they are being watched. In *Behind the yellow* (Meyer 2013), there is a physical tower, but the patients are also aware of cameras in other rooms and areas of the institution. The supervision for the video surveillance occurs both in the base of the panoptical tower, and via portable screens. This level of surveillance also recalls speculative texts such as *Nineteen eighty-four* (Orwell 1989), the film *Logan’s run* (1976), or (also in its unpredictability and invisibility) Kafka’s *The trial* (2008), yet
its relation to control is different to these texts; different in an era where subjects are more ‘visible’ in everyday life (discussed further below). Henry notes that in the tower there never seems to be anyone supervising, and this is again implied when Ava breaks into the tower (Meyer, p. 229). Henry speculates that those who supervise, The Intelligence, like to remain faceless, abstract, in case visitors, or staff, one day end up inside the institution walls (Meyer, p. 97). But their absence mainly connotes the fact that the patients are being retrained to watch over themselves—it is a metaphor for self-regulation and self-surveillance.

The role played in the novel by this institutional surveillance, and indeed the institution as a whole, is also symbolic. When Foucault (1991) writes about the panopticon he argues that prisoners become so used to the supervisory entity that they begin to monitor their own behaviour, in case the supervisor is watching. The panopticon ‘induces in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power’ (Foucault, p. 201, my emphasis). This is also true of the institution in Behind the yellow (Meyer 2013). The characters presume they are being watched. This then acts as a metaphor for life outside the institution.

The characters outside the institution, in the novel, already monitor their own internal and projected states, assuming their own visibility. The state of being a commodity among commodities (Bauman 2007) and the consumer/retailer transaction as the ‘normative form of social relation’ (Gilbert 2008, p. 554) are aspects that are even further naturalised in this fictional near future. Society provides the motivation and the tools to assist this process: subjects are socialised in methods of self-surveillance. Meg operates within the confines of ‘balance’, as though she were being monitored and judged; a system of reward and punishment operates within her own being. She is disciplined according to certain dominant ideas of wellness and functionality (this is maintained whether in company, or alone) and she ‘rewards’ herself when she feels she deserves it. The ability to stay in control (a form of wellness) provides internal rewards, a sense of achievement and self-actualisation, as well as external ones such as social and professional acceptance and advancement. Meg cannot understand Henry when he finds ‘normal’ functionality difficult:
‘You’ve always struggled with keeping up,’ she says, when he buys the ‘wrong’ brand of eggs (Meyer, p. 54).
Pryce (2000) explores self-surveillance in relation to disease and the rise of the ‘active patient’. Bodies used to be ‘docile’ and reliant on medical professionals and processes but with the rise of health awareness and promotion, and medical facilities acting as ‘dispensaries’, the subject self-monitors and self-observes:

The active patient is exhorted through health promotion, media, political and consumer drives to constantly examine themselves for signs of disease and deviance and abnormality. They act as the agents of a set of normalising and powerful forces that place the responsibility for health onto the individual. (p. 108)

Being a ‘docile’ patient was not a more positive state of affairs than being an ‘active’ one, but Behind the yellow (Meyer 2013) questions the effects of these responsibilities placed on the subject in consumer society. It is Meg who is the main example of this kind of ‘active patient’, who watches over her own body, and mental states, for signs of disease, deviance and abnormality. As Henry observes, her body is clean, efficient:

Her body was fit and lean, almost hard. She ran a hand through her hair and her underarm was shaved and clean. She smelled of shampoo. Henry couldn’t remember the last time he saw hair on her body. (p. 87)

With people watching over themselves (acting as agents for wellbeing), the power structure functions smoothly: the corporations/government merely need to continue to provide information, or propaganda, about the latest in health. Those who resist—who are sensitive to the fact that what is deemed ‘healthy’ may in fact be a conformative strategy—are labelled sick or dysfunctional and either made ‘well’ (with different/better drugs and training) or removed from society (institutionalised). In Ira Levin’s 1970 speculative novel This perfect day, normality is defined by ‘wellness’ and deviance by ‘sickness’. My fictional society has normalised the word ‘dysfunctional’ for extreme deviance, but the language of ‘wellness’ is also in operation. ‘Medicalised constructions of “healthiness” become the way the body is viewed as new pathologies and addictions are invented that reinforce new orthodoxies’ (Pryce, p. 109). This is satirised in the novel with the proliferation of ‘sentences’ (diagnoses) within the institution.

In the institution, the characters cannot make sense of their individualised treatments and training, such as when their roommates seem to be moved haphazardly. Kafka,

---

14 It is easier now than it ever has been for patients to ‘examine’ themselves with medical information, lists of symptoms, message boards and more available on the internet.
in novels like *The castle* (2008) and *The trial* (2008), explores worlds where characters are confined and the rules are nonsensical; where the protagonist (and often the reader) is befuddled, but this same world makes sense to the figures of power. The figures of power contend, through speech or action, that the nonsense is sense, is normal, and can be grasped.

Regardless of who or what is in control of the Castle, of the village, and of K’s actions, the power structures are kept in place by the pervasive fear of a ubiquitous bureaucratic system and by the threat of a punishment that is seldom actually administered or experienced. (Corbella 2007, p. 68)

In *Behind the yellow* (Meyer 2013), the bureaucratic system is replaced by a structured capitalist system (alluding somewhat to burgeoning world powers like capitalist-communist China). In the world external to the institution, my ‘village’, the threat of punishment (being locked up) is a real one, and within the institution one may be locked up in the Big Space.

Corbella (2007) explores Kafka’s *The castle* panoptically, and he says the vital factor, in relation to control:

> does not lie in the intervention of the officials but in the operation of the gaze, that is, the ability of the Inspector-Director to see in all directions at all times. (Corbella, p. 72)

In *Behind the yellow* (Meyer 2013), this panoptical ‘gaze’ is also at work, and not just within the institution. Outside the institution, as mentioned, the characters act as though they are being monitored. The ‘gaze’, in this sense, is internalised. This brings us back to the idea of the ‘visible’ subject, and the normalisation of this visibility. The subject regulates the self for public consumption, even when there is nobody around because this gaze has been internalised. The internalisation of the gaze is evident in Meg, who self-monitors and self-regulates her appearance, wellness and emotional states—to the point that she checks her own emotional reactions even in intimate situations, as when she explains away her ‘hormonal occurrence’ (Meyer, p. 43) to Henry. Henry self-monitors but with more awareness of others’ ‘gazing’, as evidenced by his moments of panic and the moments where he deliberately (but mostly only privately to himself) rebels. His friend Ken is one of his only allies, until, ironically, he embodies the gaze, to save himself, when he spies on Henry and reports him for trial. ‘The very fact of general visibility—being
seeable more than being seen—will be enough to produce effective social control. Indeed, awareness of being visible makes people the agents of their own subjection’ says Reiman (cited in Corbella, pp. 72–3). It is more than just the presence of the institution and the idea of being institutionalised, in the fictional society, which makes subjects visible. It is advertising, media, broadcasts, and each other. Visibility has become the norm. Henry even offends the flower seller at the beginning when he says he does not have a channel or blog to share. Personalities are public and for sharing.

The institution could also be seen to be one of Foucault’s ‘heterotopias of deviation’ (2002, p. 232), and there are other examples of such heterotopias in the society in the novel. Foucault’s heterotopias of deviation exist for ‘individuals whose behaviour is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm’ (Foucault, p. 232). At the beginning, Henry looks out from his office and sees some of these heterotopias: the valley where the poor live, plus a penitentiary, and rest homes (Meyer 2013, p. 9). It is also suggested in the novel that mental institutions still exist for extreme cases where drug-treatment or deep brain stimulation has not worked (Meyer, p. 19). Deep brain stimulation is an actual procedure now being used on patients with neurological conditions, including severe depression (Perlmutter & Mink 2006). The wellness institutions, though, would pick up many of the people who sit on a blurred line between ‘normality’ and clinical mental illness, and would set up their functionality treatment and training accordingly. To use the language of the psych-industries, they may not be pathological, but they are dysfunctional or impaired. The wellness institutions, in Behind the yellow, are therefore a new kind of heterotopia of deviation, beyond psychiatric hospitals and prisons.

Foucault (1991, p. 232) mentions that retirement homes might also be added to the list of heterotopias of deviation because old age is ‘also a deviation since, in our society where leisure is the rule, idleness is a sort of deviation’. The fact of an aging population being burdensome for younger people in contemporary society couldn’t be ignored in the novel—rest homes dot the city’s fringes, and Henry is surprised to see such a ravaged old woman on the train towards the end (Meyer 2013, p. 209). She makes him think about his own grandmother, who worked until the age of 87 so she could afford a better place to retire in: ‘The better villages had better drugs, shops, fantasy suites, and muscle and joint pampering palaces. They were closer to
the city, too, so that loved-ones could drop in’ (Meyer, p. 209). Different versions of heterotopias, therefore, exist within the world of the novel, enhancing its speculative engagement with the present.

There is also, within the institution, the reward and punishment system. The rewards were written into the third draft, inspired by Goffman’s (1961) study of mental asylums and their patients, with mention of other institutions such as schools and the military. He notes how patients/the institutionalised ‘build a world’ around their minor privileges (Goffman, p. 50) and that it is the privileges, rather than the punishments, which facilitate a ‘reassembly of the self’ (Goffman, p. 56), able to function in the real world. I thought about what kind of privilege system my institution might work on, and decided it had to be one that would aid the patient’s re-entry into consumer society. I created vouchers—discounts, deals, freebies—which could only be used upon release. An accumulation of vouchers within the institution would help to stimulate the patient’s desire for a life—filled with objects and commercial experiences—outside the institution.

The institution came partly from my interest in confined spaces as settings. These settings have always interested me, particularly when there is conflict between what is normal/abnormal, in terms of behaviour and opinions. Texts were both subconsciously and consciously invoked in the setting, with awareness of postmodern pastiche, such as Susanna Kaysen’s (2000) memoir of institutionalisation in the 1960s: Girl, interrupted. Girl, interrupted raises fascinating questions around diagnoses (what is considered ‘normal’ and ‘disordered’) and treatment in a specific time and context. Janet Frame’s autobiographical novel Faces in the water (2008) was also an influence, both thematically and stylistically. In the realm of more speculative texts there is the book and film of A clockwork orange (Burgess 2000, 1971), which includes scenes of the overt, experimental ‘correction’ of the protagonist Alex’s deviance. There are also punishment elements and surreal, absurd elements in the film Brazil (1985), though the contained setting is more bureaucratic than institutional. Brazil became influential when I watched it for the first time after writing the first draft.

*Power structures and the language of power*
There is a top-down power structure in the society in the novel, though each citizen is engaged in its maintenance. The government is heavily corporatised, and the ideology of the company GlaZen (and its same-sounding rival Generon) is perpetuated by popular media voices like the motivational speaker Barkley. It is a consumer capitalist society and so freedom and choice exist, but there are controls and limitations. Control is perpetuated through socialised ideals, through economic arrangements (high rents for non-franchised businesses like the flower stall in the opening chapters), through the media (influencing choices and encouraging the ‘correct’ desires in the visible subject), invisible censorship, and aided complacency through the normalisation of behaviour-changing drugs. In the concept of ‘balance’, society has found the ultimate tool to encapsulate and compartmentalise its contradictions, and to ensure people feel free (but in control of themselves) and can make choices. The degree of imposition of certain (contradictory) norms in this fictional society is reminiscent, in some senses, of a totalitarian society. Isaac (1992) argues that totalitarian regimes are organised into what Arendt calls a ‘hierarchy of contempt’ (Isaac citing Arendt), where:

- at the lower levels extraordinary gullibility and unquestioned obedience are demanded, and
- at the higher levels an extreme but paradoxically sincere form of cynicism obtains: the leadership possesses almost sacred power to interpret doctrine and determine truth. (p. 58)

In the novel, there are examples of subjects at these lower levels, such as Meg and her friends and family; and the higher levels are represented by the (both cynical and sincere) company employees, including the cartoonish and overtly symbolic Barkley. Barkley does possess this ‘almost sacred power’ to determine truth, and when subjects are flailing, they turn to him. In any society, there will be dissidents, and Henry and his friend Ken are—at least ideologically—at odds with, or questioning of, these ‘truths’. It is both the contradictory side of Henry’s personality—his genuine ambition and egotism—and the threat of institutionalisation (and thus total control) that cause him to fall in line, at least in the first half of the novel.

Crucial to the project of self-governance in neo-liberal society, argues Reith (2004), are what Rose calls the ‘psy sciences’ (Reith citing Rose, p. 294): these are ‘the disciplines and practices of psychology, psychiatry and psychoanalysis’. The figures of authority in these fields:
define notions of normality and abnormality, and so continually “make up” new types of
people, situated along a continuum that stretches from pathology to health. They operate in
symbiosis with their economic-political climate, constructing particular categories of identity
and moulding forms of subjectivity in ways that are consonant with prevalent cultural values
and social institutions. (Reith, p. 294)

As the number of pathologies, and categories, increase, the concept of ‘normality’ is
reduced and redefined. It is this concept of normality that may be influenced, and
made desirable, by the dominant powers in society. Subjects monitor their own states
and if they are experiencing ‘symptoms’ of a categorised, diagnosable condition they
will seek treatment. It is this shrinking category of normal and the resulting
‘blandification’ of society, as I call it, that is explored in the novel. In Behind the
yellow (Meyer 2013) subjects do monitor their own internal states and seek
treatment. But because rebellious, excorporative (Fiske 2010) subjects inevitably
exist—such as Henry and Ken—further measures of control have been introduced.
As Henry’s boss Grethe explains (Meyer, p. 16), there were drug treatments, and
then new institutions, but there are still deviant subjects and so there is a need for a
new solution, which becomes a nano-device, able to stimulate and regulate parts of
the brain.

Dominant powers in the novel attempt to control public perception of these
‘treatments’ through language: using ‘positive’ words like wellness, happiness, and
balance. The powerful therefore create a culture around the shrunken concept of
‘normality’ (citizens participating efficiently, economically in society) so that it
seems ludicrous that anyone would be against it. The language is inspired in part by
self-help literature and television, including advertising. The language in the novel
satirises American shows such as The Dr. Oz Show (2009 – present), about physical
wellness, and Dr. Phil (2002 – present), about mental health, plus morning programs
and shows like A current affair (1971 – present) in Australia, which often have
health segments; along with a huge range of literature on health, wellbeing and
positive thinking, such as bestsellers by Louise L. Hay (1984) and Rhonda Byrne
(2006), among many others. The concept connecting these texts is self-governance,
which I have already discussed in line with dominant neo-liberal consumer culture. It
is up to you to be well, be happy and fulfilled. It is also normal to desire and choose
the path to a ‘fulfilling’ life.
Part of this power structure in the novel, and the language and culture built out of it, is the reinforcement of ideas of freedom and choice. Characters such as Henry and Ava are, on either an intellectual or emotional level, aware of the contradictory nature of this notion of freedom. The training at the institution is regulatory in the way it (re)trains subjects to be able to explain, categorise, and feel in control of their overwhelming and contradictory ‘freedom’. The training—when it works—gives patients the language, and the actions, to deal with the ‘burdens of liberty’ (Reith 2004, p. 297), and when released they are better equipped, and willing, to watch over themselves. They have also, therefore, conformed to the structures of power.

The Big Space

In the novel The Big Space is an absurdist punishment; each patient does not know how the others experience it. It is never explained whether what happens in the space is caused by hologram, hallucination (perhaps via gas), or simply imagination. The patient ‘looks too deeply’ and does not see what they want to see. They may also experience physical pain and discomfort. The confusing, changeable and ungraspable nature of this punishment adds to the threat of the other random changes (all part of their ‘training’, they’re told) in the institution. This asks the reader to consider and become sensitive to absurdity and strangeness in their own relationships to power: imagined punishments to deviance from the social norm, regulation of the self to avoid them, and desires that may be constructed via this relationship. The reader may also consider the potential absurdity of ideas that become normative, and naturalised: ideas that become ‘common sense’.

The inspiration behind the idea of the Big Space included a visit to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney in 2010, where I viewed an installation exhibition by Olafur Eliasson, called Take your time. Two installations that bathed the viewer in colour had the strongest effect. ‘Room for one colour’ (1997) was a long, low-ceilinged, glowing yellow room. As the exhibition guide says:

> As our eyes adjust to the intensity of the yellow light we become aware of a retinal after-effect that produces the sensation of purple, or even black, as we look back out to the galleries beyond. (author unspecified, 2009)

I diarised the experience, trying to capture the strangeness of light as sensation:
stood in a big room under yellow lights and my eyelids were like big black beetles and a woman walked in all grey-green with enhanced freckles. The world outside (with Lego castles) was purple. (Meyer 2010)

When writing about Ava in the Big Space, I remembered the experience. I also remembered how it was unbearable to stay in the room too long, as the effect was so strong. I thought this would translate well to the Big Space’s repertoire of absurd, individualised forms of torture (Meyer 2013, p. 137).

**Deviance and categorisation**

The ‘sentences’ (or diagnoses) of the characters in the novel are speculative of the future treatment of individuals who deviate from the ‘norm’ (that shifting concept). The increasing clinical categorisation of disorders is a very complex issue, but through fiction one can speculate on, and satirise, possible scenarios and outcomes. Reith (2004), who examines addictive behaviours and their categorisations, says:

> [O]ver the past twenty years, the DSM-IV has developed an increasing number of formal, medical taxonomies of problematic consumer behaviour, out of which new types of medicalised identities—or patients—are constructed, including pathological gamblers, anorexics, bulimics, kleptomaniacs … . (p. 292)

As mentioned in the introduction, the draft of the DSM-5 (the diagnostic manual used by psychiatry and psychology professionals) has received much criticism for its potential medicalisation of difference (Verhoeff 2010).

Verhoeff (2010), in an interview, asks the chair of the DSM-5 task force Dr David Kupfer about the potential for over-diagnosis, when diagnosis is based on the recognition of symptoms. Admitting that this is problematic, Kupfer replies that ‘[t]here is indeed a risk of overclassifying “patients” who do not go on to develop a “real” disorder’ (Verhoeff citing Kupfer, p. 470). Verhoeff goes on to comment on the difficulty of drawing boundaries between a true disorder and ‘normal psychological functioning’. How this boundary is determined, and how it shifts, is one of the main questions raised in *Behind the yellow* (Meyer 2013). It is worth quoting Kupfer’s reply at length, as it evidences what a complex issue this is (even for the chair of the task force who makes these decisions):

> On a behavioral continuum, where do idiosyncrasies become a disorder? When does a certain personality become a personality disorder? While we have thought very long and hard about using dimensional measures, we know that we need to figure out appropriate thresholds for disorders. We have to make distinctions between normality and pathology. In
psychiatry this is harder than in other areas of medicine, because we are dealing with manifest behaviour. For example, if I have manic-like behaviour; going into department stores and buying all kinds of things, having great plans and a sky rocket phone bill, this may not bother me at all. I may feel terrific, better than I have ever felt in my whole life. However, people around me say there is impairment, because I'm not home with my family, not showing up for work, and getting speeding tickets. This example points to the whole issue of what constitutes pathology. In psychiatry, dysfunctioning, impairment and disability are central and relatively soft terms that define what we consider pathological. All those terms somehow need to be defined. (Verhoeff citing Kupfer, pp. 471–2)

So in psychiatry, the word ‘dysfunctioning’, which I have inadvertently borrowed, is used to describe behaviours or behaviour sets which may be, or become, pathological. Kupfer admits that the threshold between what is considered ‘normal’ and ‘pathological’ is not really determined, but it needs to be figured out. How do the ‘psy sciences’ determine whether dysfunctional or impaired behaviour is due to a mental disorder, or, as Verhoeff puts it, a ‘deviation from a social norm’ (Verhoeff, p. 473)? Lisa Simpson is prescribed ‘Ignoreitall’ for her despair, as it impairs her from functioning ‘normally’ (The good, the sad and the drugly: The Simpsons 19 April 2009). Someone like Jesse, in Before sunset (2004), might be classed as symptomatically depressed, because he is deviating from a stable life. In Behind the yellow (Meyer 2013), Henry and Ava’s ‘dysfunctions’ are indeed seen as pathological and in need of treatment.

A quantitative test for determining whether dysfunctional behaviour is due to a disorder, or whether it’s due to ‘healthy’ deviance, doesn’t exist—perhaps it cannot exist—because normality itself is a culturally prescribed idea. And I’ve discussed throughout this thesis why that can be problematic in consumer society, where social interactions are based on transactions and where subjects are obliged to monitor their own states, influenced by huge commercial wellness industries. Each psychiatrist, as Kupfer (in Verhoeff 2010) mentions, will have to weigh up opinion between reports about the patient (including their own) but these reports will be influenced by wider cultural shifts (influenced, in consumer society, by the market). A teacher and a parent might believe a child has ADHD because, in the social context, the child is not acting in a ‘normal’ way. In another context, or another era, the diagnosis may not have been considered.

In America, potential issues of over-diagnosis are heightened by direct-to-consumer advertising of prescription drugs (Berndt 2005). With this, the subject is asked to
monitor their own physical and mental states, and not only report to a professional when something is awry, but suggest their own medication. There is both a risk of misleading, or not enough, information being given to the patient, and also a risk of persuasion by the advertised brand when another treatment, or no treatment at all, may be preferable.

Fishman (2004) examines the way medical researchers can be swept up in the process of commodification of new diseases and drugs. If the researcher is the one to label and give evidence of a new disease it may help to forward his/her career. Fishman’s specific example is of the labelling and treatment of a physical disorder: ‘female sexual dysfunction’ (FSD). Pharmaceutical companies have become major funders of research, and researchers receive both financial rewards and professional recognition through their consultation to these companies (Fishman, p. 188). A new disease is researched and a category is created, then a treatment is invented and approved (because of the pre-existing condition). The reason this is problematic, using the example of ‘female sexual dysfunction’, is that the market-inspired research is able to constitute a line between ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ levels of sexual interest and arousal, and when the treatment is put on the market (particularly in America with direct-to-consumer advertising) a new consumer category is created for subjects who may not have even thought before about their sexuality in terms of its ‘normality’. Self-help culture, as discussed, and the rising number of subjects who use media and the Internet to self-diagnose (and thus self-regulate) enhance the effectiveness of the shift from what is considered normal to what is considered diseased or disordered.

Drugs treating an increasing range of listed mental disorders would be an answer and a blessing for some. For others, previously accepted behaviours and thoughts would begin to look like symptoms. In Behind the yellow (Meyer 2013) this shift has occurred on a large scale. It is accepted that every person has discovered early on what are their abnormalities, their flaws, their dysfunctional aspects, and is supposed to be treating them accordingly. Drug treatments for anger, sadness, over-excitement, shyness, anxiety, inadequacy, weight gain, hormonal fluctuations and much more are available to everyone. The regulation of one’s ‘natural’ states via drugs has become the norm.
When writing a speculative novel, it is surprising to come across articles that confirm that your ideas are possible. In November 2011, on a flight from Sydney to Melbourne, I read in Virgin Blue’s *Voyeur* magazine about bionics (Conroy 2011). The definition of bionics in the article is that it is an ‘etymology of biology and electronics, and refers to the study of mechanical systems that function as part of living organisms’ (Conroy, p. 97). The article first discusses bionic cures for physical ailments, such as bionic arms (already a reality) and the bionic eye, which the author says is expected to go to human trials in 2013 (Conroy, p. 98). Conroy then discusses ‘neurobionics’, which will help ‘debilitating neurological disorders’ to be cured (Conroy, pp. 101–2). After reading this article, I realised that the backstory I’d been writing for Henry was plausible: at GlaZen he begins working with nanobiotechnology to fight physical diseases, but since he also studied the brain at university, it’s conceivable that he might move onto neurological ‘disorders’. The insertion of the word pharmaceutical (whole or fragmented) into his job description indicates that the technology is seen as taking over from chemical ‘cures’, and the prefix ‘nano’ indicates that he is working in the field of the nanochip or the nanobot: minuscule, programmable devices. So his job combines bionics, pharmaceuticals and nanotechnology. Conroy says that neuroscientists at the Bionics Institute in Melbourne ‘are attempting to develop tiny bionic implants that are capable of detecting abnormal neural activity and then automatically delivering correctional electronic stimulation’ (Conroy, p. 100), just like the nano-device in *Behind the yellow* (Meyer 2013). But the words ‘abnormal’ and ‘correctional’ can be problematic. This is exemplified in the novel where the reader is made to engage (via the intimate third person point-of-view) with the characters who would be classed as abnormal and would be ‘corrected’.

I was reluctant to give the novel a time frame (and I do only once, in the opening chapters) because I was aware I was writing about the present, enhancing certain issues through speculation. Like other speculative texts, the novel taps into the possible outcomes of *current* human activities (technological advancements, but also the social situation which produces them) and speculates on moral questions around them. Again, the story, its presentation and the dilemmas of the characters act to stimulate the reader’s sensitivity and awareness of these possibilities. The positives,
for these neurobionic devices (Conroy 2011), for people suffering from Parkinson’s, epilepsy, memory loss, debilitating depression and other disorders are understandable. But Conroy does raise the question of whether it’s possible to stimulate other areas of the brain, such as intelligence (Conroy, p. 102). How far could the technology go, and where and when does the question of ethics come in? If intelligence could be stimulated (and was allowed), wouldn’t it only be available to those who could pay for it? Wouldn’t that create wider gaps in society? These are the kind of questions a speculative writer can ask through fiction. I hadn’t thought of the intelligence question when drafting the novel, and indeed it could inspire a whole other story. I have included the idea of the *haves* and *have nots*—people who have money and access to the latest technology, and those who do not. But the main question/message encoded in the use of this technology in the novel is that of the concept of ‘normal’ and how it shifts, and ideas of power and control and the resultant contradictions.

**Functional desire**

Part of what constitutes ‘functionality’, in the novel, is consumer desire, along with the ‘balance’ of self-surveillance and self-control. If a subject does not experience the desire to consume, desires the wrong items, or desires too much (to the extent they cannot earn the money to continue buying), then it is perceived that something within them is ‘broken’. The reward system in the institution is intended to improve and stimulate desire. It consists of free offers and discount vouchers that the patient can save up to use back IRL (‘in real life’). Desire, as explored by Belk, Ger and Askegaard (2003, p. 237) is an emotion that can be both anxiety-inducing and pleasurable. Compulsive purchases often relieve a state of anxiety, but when the subject experiences a protracted longing for an object or person, that state itself can be pleasurable. Henry’s longing for Ava is a stimulating state for him to be in, for example. The role of power, and the marketers, is to maintain an environment that stimulates both anxiety and longing. Becoming a choosing self, self-governing one’s way through an array of choices, is a strategy of contemporary governance, along with becoming a ‘visible’ subject. Ava and others in the institution fail because they do not choose, as such, they just are. Ava is ‘dysfunctional’ at the beginning because she both desires nothing (she is happy with what comes to her), and she desires the wrong objects, like an old rug with paint stains. Her treatment is designed to agitate
her into a state of desire, a desire for objects and ‘freedom’. On the other hand, she *embodies* sexual and sensual desire—she is defined by it—but this, at least her particular version of sexual desire, is not translatable to consumer desires. Her non-desires/desires do not help society to flourish and progress, in a commercial and economic sense, so she is deemed dysfunctional.

As explored with respect to Jesse and Celine in *Before sunrise* (1995) and *Before sunset* (2004), once desire is fulfilled it is either diminished and shifted toward a new object, or can become renewable within the bounds of one’s experience. ‘Here the desire remains *because* of its satisfaction and the wish to repeat this satisfaction’ (Belk, Ger & Askegaard 2003, p. 342). This is the kind of desire that develops between Ava and Henry. It is sought by Henry and denied, for a time, by Ava. It is double-coded: potentially subversive in the way it closes out other consumerist desires, but not if it leads toward conventional social processes which involve commercial industry. The ending remains open but the intended meaning is that Henry and Ava will be able to get away to a place where they can be extreme, unbalanced and ‘dysfunctional’, as society deems. As with Jesse and Celine, the reader is led to believe it’s possible that they can ‘stay in the desert’ (Camus 2005) together.

**Modes of resistance**

Power functioning in society through ‘choosing subjects’ and visible, self-monitoring subjects means that, as explored in Chapter Two, with *Eat the document* (Spiotta 2008), subjects may be more likely to resist or act politically through product choices or boycotts rather than in any radical way. Their product choices alert those in power and other subjects, to whom their desires and choices are visible, of how they feel about a particular issue. Simon (2011, p. 145) says that ‘while pursuing political power through (not) buying makes sense and reflects broader changes in the neoliberal world, this strategy of engagement, nonetheless, has severe limits’. The whole idea of balance in the society of the novel is a way of controlling (by categorising) small resistances and the ways products have been used. Meg is worried about buying the right kind of eggs (Meyer 2013, p. 54) but will eat meat at the restaurant because it is a ‘special occasion’ (Meyer, p. 20). Because this idea of balance has filtered through society, subjects both watch over themselves and each
other for signs of extremity. Extremity equals an unbalanced and dysfunctional person, a danger to the well-being of society. Hence Henry’s observations on the lack of protests in his city, and Ava’s on the general ‘blandification’ of life before she came into the institution, from her father’s submission (to drugs, her mother and the system), through to the homogenisation of night-life venues, and even romantic partners.

As explored in Chapter Two, the more brands are taken to be powerful, the more power they can exhibit. Hence, in the novel, the decision to make GlaZen not just a corporate but a political power, along with its rival company Generon. Combined, they could be seen as a metaphor for oppositional political parties. The reader can speculate that people have responded to these companies as powers, so they have become powerful.

The politics of buying these days are rarely tied to ongoing political movements and do not typically raise questions about the system itself ... they are about individual choices, the right to the lowest price and to the greatest number of possible variations in products. (Simon 2011, p. 149)

This is how the power is shifted away from governments to the corporate sector. The shadowy, ineffectual nature of government is implied in several scenes in the novel, such as when someone in Henry’s office says out loud that they thought Barkley was the prime minister (Meyer, p. 8).

**Contradiction/balance**

The very concept of balance, in the novel, is representative of the fictional society’s way of capturing, explaining and categorising (even commodifying) its own contradictions. All postmodern excesses and extremes can be cornered by, and contained within, this word: balance. Economically, the dominant powers can ensure stability through this mantra—encouraging subjects to consume and engage with the economy in the short and the long term. What it also encapsulates is the ‘balance’ between anxiety (over excessive choice) and the degree of desire that the dominant powers in the novel want to maintain in their subjects. In other words, just enough anxiety creates desire, too much and that anxiety can cause the individual to act excessively, or intently question—on a broad scale—why they might be feeling that way.
In neo-liberal consumer society freedom—a dominant ideology—is both desired by the subject, and is his/her obligation (Reith 2004, p. 285). Freedom is therefore a double-coded (Hutcheon 1988) ideology. Furthermore, freedom and choice are regulated by the market—what is made available by those in power and the conditions of power, i.e. economic conditions. Subjects ‘realise themselves’ through the ‘exercise of freedom’, argues Reith (2004, p. 285), meaning that they construct their personal narrative through their desires and their choices; they ‘carve out a lifestyle and identity from the marketed options available’ (Reith, p. 285). But they are also limited. Reith argues that subjects are ‘also obliged to subjugate aspects of themselves, to mould their subjective states and inner desires in accordance with cultural norms and social institutions’ (Reith, p. 285). Those cultural norms, and the doctrines of social institutions, are fluid and subject to trends which could in fact be initiated from the top or bottom. In *Behind the yellow* (Meyer 2013), keeping up with the shifts/fluidity itself is a ‘cultural norm’.

Potentially deceptive product labelling based on consumers’ guilt or desires for ethical products was mentioned in Chapter Two. Bryant and Goodman (2004) found that sales of ‘alternative’ products had grown in recent years, and they investigated the growing use/trend of packaging which invoked the idea of a rainforest, or were labelled ‘green’, as well as fair trade products. The effect of ethical marketing is double-coded: it is positive that companies are responding to demand and cleaning up their processes, but on the other hand the consumer might easily be persuaded to buy products that just seem ‘good enough’. Shopping ethically may make them feel they have done their part and no further resistance or activism is required, as mentioned in Chapter Two. In the novel I exaggerate the confusion of labelling. There is a steadily increasing array of products, and the laws have slowly become more lax (as Henry notes) so it’s difficult to know which claims are true: which products are actually organic, local or made from fresh or ethically sourced ingredients, such as when Henry is trying to choose a jar of jam (Meyer 2013, p. 53).

Nonconformists in this kind of society are those viewed as being unbalanced and are therefore considered to be dysfunctional. Their personality, values, outlook and/or activities are considered to lean too far toward one extreme or another.

\[15\] No matter how a ‘trend’ is initiated, though, it will be quickly and easily incorporated (Fiske 2010) and/or commodified by the dominant culture.
Paradoxically, their exclusion from visible society and retraining (in the institutions) means that society becomes decidedly less balanced. The ‘bland’ outweighs the ‘intense’. But by removing them, the dominant powers maintain control over the way their ideology is perceived: there are no counterintuitive or subversive, oppositional ideas running rampant in society. Subjects are also encouraged to think about the institutions in a positive light, to perceive them as a place where one can ‘choose’ to improve their well-being and happiness.

Barkley, the public face of balance, is constructed as a motivational speaker partly to satirise the authority of the ‘psy sciences’ (Reith citing Rose 2004, p. 294, mentioned above) and their encouragement of self-help and self-improvement. This is an aspect of the project of individualism in neo-liberal consumer society: contradictorily, subjects are encouraged to both liberate and regulate the self (Rimke 2000). The model for this society works when subjects are freely and happily self-governing. Again, the subject is encouraged to watch over his/her own mental state for signs of change or ‘abnormality’. Self-help culture acts as a guide. The sensidictory subject might be aware of the ‘trends’ within this culture, and the powers and power structures that will (often indirectly) influence these trends (such as notions of inner power, or positive thinking). In Behind the yellow (Meyer 2013), Henry is sceptical of Barkley and the doctrine of balance. He suspects, or senses, that while self-help encourages the discovery and unveiling of some ‘real’, bettered self, what actually occurs is the construction of a new, diminished self, more in line with the ideals of society (as explored by Rimke 2000, p. 70). Many of the subjects in his society, Henry suspects, are reinvented in this way, by a ‘dependence on a novel system of “popular” expert truth’ (Rimke, p. 71). They are not ‘unveiling’ their true goals and concerns; instead their desires are being constructed in line with current concerns of society. The subject may simply be learning how to feel more comfortable with dominant ideas, such as the notion that responsibility for their own success and happiness, failures and despair, is reliant squarely on them (Rimke, p. 63). They are self-governing, and self-help literature naturalises this:

the self is conceived as possessing an inner reservoir of power that can be accessed. This suggests an intense accountability, responsibility, and sense of obligation that can be enlisted for choices and decisions. (Rimke, p. 64)
The doctrine of balance, in the novel, hides the fact that the society is indeed regulating—both overtly, as through the institution, and by promoting self-help and self-regulation—as it maintains an appearance of liberating.

In *Behind the yellow* (Meyer 2013) I have also speculated on some of the possible effects of environmental devastation and overpopulation. The doctrine of balance is used by the powers in the novel to curtail worry, to direct eyes away from the destruction and waste that still goes on—all part of an ‘Adaptationist’ political stance. Adaptationism is the stance taken by the country (and its corporate powers) in which the novel is set. The Adaptationists are the countries that could not conceive moving away from the neo-liberal ‘economic growth’ system of power. What happened to the environment prior to when the novel takes place, and the political and social response, is explained in detail in one of Henry’s sequences:

Reuse—recycle—reduce. People made superficial attempts at the first two, but the ‘reduce’ mantra was lost. It was *huge* at one stage. He’d learnt about the protests in various eco-history groups he sat in (briefly; curious) at university. Actual improvements to the system were talked about by Western governments and corporations. Emissions were reduced, trees were planted, the gap between the economically advantaged and the disadvantaged closed marginally.

The gestures of power were accepted and applauded. It was acknowledged that the changes came from the bottom up—from the people. The effects of the damage done were still evident: storms, floods, droughts, famines, the extinction of various species. But something had been seen to be ‘done’ and now it was business as usual. The cries of the remaining radicals began to fade. A buzz around the concept of ‘Balance’ began. Markets could still grow, though with smarter, cleaner investments. The population problem was only tackled by some of the smaller land-mass nations. Others adapted. The motivational speaker, Barkley, and his imitators, took the concept of Balance and trickled it through to all areas of day to day living. (Meyer, p. 64)

On the other side of the ‘resource wars’ that I have envisioned is Protectionism, an extreme form of environmental radicalism, joined by countries who strongly support the complete protection of rapidly diminishing natural resources. It is hinted at in the novel, though, that the Protectionists are not as powerful, and that Adaptationism is the more ‘logical’ political stance. Adaptationism satirises consumer society’s inability to face the true dangers of human-created environmental degradation, and the inability of economically focused governments to pull together to act in time to reverse this. I therefore speculate, pessimistically, that what will happen is that consumer societies will simply try to ‘adapt’ when it is already too late.

**Retro-future elements**
Nostalgia, or what I call retrostalgia (a deep interest in objects from an era before one was even born) is invoked in different ways in the novel. Holbrook and Hirschman (cited in Holbrook & Schindler 2003) define nostalgia as:

A preference (general liking, positive attitude or favourable effect) towards experiences associated with objects (people, places or things) that were more common (popular, fashionable or widely circulated) when one was younger (in early adulthood, in adolescence, in childhood or even before birth). (p. 108)

Holbrook and Schindler do not focus on the ‘before birth’ aspect in their article, but relate nostalgia from one’s youth to consumption practices and thus, commodification. In my novel, many of the characters who are ‘dysfunctional’ are also ‘retrostalgic’. They have a preference for print books, records and old clothes. There is a difference, to them, between a commodified and fashionable retro-ism (such as the shirts that the newly engaged couple wear to dinner at Henry and Meg’s) and a genuine passion for past culture. Nina is the most extreme example of a retrostalgic character, her love of the past had stopped her from performing basic tasks. This retrostalgism, then, is tied to resistance in the novel. It is also, simultaneously, tied to comfort, and sensation.

The complications of a materialistic civilisation, in all their constricting paradox and metaphysical inadequacy, make our terror. Today ghosts, or any intimation of some less clogged order of being, are likely to bring fresh air and sanity. That is the point at which we have arrived. (Wilson Knight cited in Hinchliffe 1969, p. 99)

Whether it is true or not that the past was ‘less clogged’, the characters who are uncomfortable in the society of the present cling to cultural items and objects of a past—those ghosts—that they imagine had more meaning. They create their own meanings of the present through objects of the past. They ‘abuse’ their spaces and devices with unfashionable and esoteric retrostalgic remnants.

Henry’s relationship with the retro is double-coded. He has a genuine passion for past cultures but is simultaneously embarrassed by this. The shame is culturally produced, as consumer culture prefers obsolescence, and the new. To protect himself from these feelings, Henry thinks of his leanings as being ironic, particularly with the science fiction-related posters in his office: Rachael from Blade runner (1982), Stanley Kubrick (the director of A clockwork orange among others, and a metallic arm, possibly from the Terminator [1984, 1991] films) (Meyer 2013, p. 32). He is both defiant, and cowardly, in the expression of these leanings. He knows he too-
closely resembles the protagonists of some of these cultural works and he is both proud and ashamed; he revels in it, and is also disappointed with himself.

The novel, overall, engages with a formal retro aesthetic, which is not new in the realm of speculative texts: some have engaged with it deliberately (Terry Gilliam’s *Brazil* 1985). Other texts have become dated (*Blade runner* 1982) in an aesthetically pleasurable way, though *Blade runner*, too, did engage with a 1940s-esque noir aesthetic. The novel homages the retro-future ‘look’ of these other texts—mainly films—to produce a similar aesthetic pleasure, but also once again to complement the characters as devices for meaning. Readers of the novel may potentially relate to the genuine interest in past cultures, and also find warmth and comfort in these aspects. They might consider genuine retrostalgia as resistance against obsolescence (a huge theme in the novel), against marketing-led trends, against keeping up with the new, and even against the *commodification* of the retro (for the sake of fashion only).

Besides the aesthetic aspects, there is a retro aspect to the novel’s conception in the very use of panopticism and institutionalisation. The choice of setting intellectually recalls the 1980s and 1990s in which ‘[t]he idea of a disciplinary, Panoptical society came to constitute the default background of much social and cultural analysis’ (Boyne 2000, p. 293). As this era was the beginning of neo-liberal consumer capitalist society, and because the issues and contradictions within such a society have only become more pronounced, a ‘retro’ Panoptical setting can have layered meanings. Boyne suggests that we are now in the stage of post-Panopticism, since ‘subjects reliably watch over themselves’ (Boyne, p. 299), as do the ‘visible subjects’ in the novel. The post-Panopticon is not just about surveillance, it is surveillance interlinked with seduction, and both surveillance and seduction can be turned inward and become automatic (Boyne, p. 302). I have discussed surveillance and self-surveillance and the relation to anxiety and desire. Auto-seduction is a state of perpetual desire that has become naturalised. In *Behind the yellow* (Meyer 2013), the character of Cynthia symbolises destructive, out-of-control auto-seduction. She is

---

16 Perhaps most pronounced, in a Panoptical sense, is the dissolution of the private via the normalised offering up of information on social media websites, plus membership to various websites where one has to offer up personal information. Databases created from customer loyalty cards, ‘cookies’ where companies can follow your online activities, phone tapping software, and CCTV are all mentioned by Boyne (2000).
perpetually in a state of consumer desire, being seduced and seducing herself to the
promise of certain products. It has caused her to go deeply into debt and become so
distracted she cannot ‘function’ properly in society. She provides a contrast to Ava,
Henry and other minor characters. She is on the other end of the scale that throws out
the ‘balance’. Though she is an über-consumer she, too, cannot be contained, and
must be retrained.

The retro-future elements of the novel can also invoke the idea of postmodern
pastiche. Though I have given weight to the individual subject (the author, the
producer, the receiver) throughout the thesis, I acknowledge Jameson’s (1988) idea
of the inability of writers and artists (in postmodernism, which he aligns with
consumer society) to produce something completely original. Pastiche is inevitable.
To embrace it, I argue, is to create a self-aware text, and to create points of contact
with the reader, who is a subject in the world of culture, of history, of art. Creating
points of contact (via recognition) also helps to define points of difference, present in
the critical aspects of the novel, and so enhances the reader’s potential for
sensidictory engagement.

Expansion of concepts in relation to the characters; concluding comments

To discuss the main characters and their role as communicative devices for the
themes of the novel, I reintroduce Gaviria and Bluemelhuber’s (2010) terms auto-
biographical concern and desire assemblage. A person’s autobiographical concern is
the perceived, and shifting, goal of a life narrative. It is the summary of how they
perceive their role in existence. It is an association of ideas which forms a coherent
plot, the idea of themselves moving forward, in their own mind and as projected to
others. The objects, people and activities they desire make up an assemblage which
acts to explain the overriding concern. Some of these desires will be visible, and
others hidden, so the autobiographical concern may also change between the private
and the social realms—the social may in fact affect the private concern. The desire
for a certain pair of high heels, for example, may denote, socially, a concern for
professionalism, but the private concern may tie-in with other aspects in the overall
narrative for the wearer: such as their favourite colour from childhood.

Ava’s desire-assemblage, when she is first introduced in Behind the yellow is
expansive—she finds pleasure in almost everything: ‘life itself—life determined and
walled in by absurdities—is … the source of hope’ (Galloway 1981, p. 12). There is not much distinction between her public and private selves, which is in fact a societal ‘norm’ in novel (the dissolution of the private), but because Ava’s desires, and her display of them, are excessive and unregulated, this makes her ‘dysfunctional’ in the eyes of society—unwilling or unable to work and buy. At the beginning, her autobiographical concern is extremely fluid. She is concerned only for sensation. This is both her private and her public concern; she knows no other way to be. But her autobiographical concern begins to shift, even before she becomes aware of Henry. Her concern becomes for something that is blurred but is firm: a lasting sensation, or a perpetual sensation. Something deeper. At first she tries to deny this, as the narrative she has told herself, again and again, is that of the moment. She is also suspicious of the influence, or motivations, behind the shift. But eventually the shift in autobiographical concern cannot be denied, and so Ava’s assemblage of desires changes too. Desire for Paul, Leon and even Dean shifts to desire for Henry. Thinking about the present becomes thinking about the past and the future; what she loved in the past is transported into a desire-assemblage for the future—comfort, a house, good food, freedom. Nonchalance about captivity shifts to a desire to be free of it.

As a communicative narrative device, Ava’s character should partly place the reader in a dilemma. Ava, torn between one way of living and another, slowly shifting, should create that space for the reader to question. Ava is physically sensitive, she is contradictory and aware of contradictions in her society even if not active in their regard, and I hope is able to agitate the reader’s sensidictoriness. Some of the potential questions encoded in Ava’s character, her treatment, her journey and inner tension, include: whether society’s classifications of abnormality and dysfunctionality are fair; whether it is better to live in the moment or hold onto lofty dreams and ambitions; whether there is freedom in love or whether a relationship is another kind of institution; and, one of the central concerns of this thesis, whether resistance or non-conformism is possible.

At the beginning of the novel, Henry—who has always felt a little apart—begins to feel more strongly that he is trapped in some way. His project is coming to its final stages and it is about to move on from being a concept to a reality. He also has doubts about his relationship with Meg. He doesn’t agree with many of the dominant
ideas in society. He is sceptical about ‘balance’. Henry engages in small, resistive acts such as not taking his pills. Ironically, his task is to create and test a product that will be the ultimate device of incorporation, to use Fiske’s (2010) term, where the dominant system absorbs resistance. Fiske says:

[s]tructural changes at the level of the system itself, in whatever domain—that of law, of politics, of industry, of the family—occur only after the system has been eroded and weakened by the tactics of everyday life. (p. 17)

The ‘tactics’ he refers to are the subject’s (and collective subjects’) resistive activities, ways they ‘use and abuse’ (Hutcheon 1988) the products of the system. My novel speculates about a system that has become extremely effective in incorporating resistance, and these structural changes have indeed occurred, as evidenced by the institutions, by the products (and doctrines) of GlaZen, and by Henry’s project.

Henry’s autobiographical concern shifts dramatically throughout the narrative. His desire-assemblage is also complex: at the beginning he has both private and visible desires. Some of the private desires leak through and give clues to his true concerns. Some of the public, visible desires also take hold of the private self. ‘Is this what I want?’ he seems to ask himself, when he is praised for his skills at work. It is his ego, and also a genuine sense of social obligation (and guilt) that blocks the underlying dissatisfaction and causes him to proceed with his project.

We can perceive both the visible and the underlying autobiographical concern for Henry at the beginning of the novel. The concern that he projects to Meg, his family and society, is to be a well-off, successful, cultured, smart nanobiopharmaceutical designer, working for a respected and powerful corporation. The underlying concern, though blurred and confused for Henry, is subversion and ultimately escape, and this is evident through the desire-assemblage: ironic references, alcohol, art and nostalgia. The concern intensifies and shifts somewhat when Henry encounters Ava. He realises the extent to which he has gone in the opposite direction to his true concern (and ironically, in the process, helped to alter the concerns of others).

Once his project moves on to the latter stages, Henry becomes more sensitive to the paradox—that he is both within and outside the dominant ideas of his society—and this is what causes conflict within him. Henry’s inner conflict is enhanced by his
encounters with Ava, whom he perceives as being almost ‘free’ in her instinctualness, an example of true resistance. Once he has encountered Ava and the other patients at the institution, he is desperate to find a way to stall or undo the damage of his ‘wretch’, his project. Even then, Henry does slip back into moods of complacency (a socialised reaction), hoping the situation will right itself or just ‘go away’. He also thinks about giving up, and is seduced by having his ego stroked at work. Henry’s ambition is united with a kind of ‘achievement complex’, which could be part of being a ‘visible subject’; in other words he finds it difficult to shake the socialised notion of becoming, metaphorically, the shiniest product on the shelf. He does also display a distinct fear of inadequacy, which Bauman (2007, p. 60) argues is a feature of consumer society. Henry also maintains a romantic notion of himself as a kind of damaged, scientific genius, evidenced by the way he calls his project the ‘wretch’, a reference to Frankenstein’s creature.

As a narrative device, Henry encourages the reader to question dominant ideas in their own society; expectations in work and in relationships, and questions around what is fulfilling, which may be different from what is portrayed as being fulfilling in the media, and socially. My intention is that he, and the story, will inspire the reader to think about how the cycle of power in consumer society is created and perpetuated. The characters in Behind the yellow (Meyer 2013), just like the characters in other texts explored in this thesis, are agitators. Aligned with the overall themes of the work, and other modes of presentation, the characters potentially stimulate questions and critiques of contemporary society in the reader/viewer. (I acknowledge that while the intention is there, readers may find many ways of reading the text.)

Barkley, Meg and Counsellor Dean are characters who seem to be completely at ease with society, and cannot perceive the reasons for any kind of struggle. They are the purveyors of dominant ideas, symbols of power against which the protagonists rebel and resist. These characters can be compared with people from which the main characters feel apart in the other texts explored—Jesse and Celine’s parents in Before sunrise (1995), the company Allegecom in Eat the document (Spiotta 2008) and the citizens of the town of Springfield (The Simpsons 1989 – present)—adherents to the dominant ideas in (representations of) consumer society.
There are also characters whose autobiographical concern shifts from being similar to Henry’s or Ava’s, to being more in line with the dominant ideas in society. The main examples in the novel are Paul and Nina. In *Eat the document* (Spiotta 2008) that character is Josh, though the reader might suspect he’d planned to be *incorporated* all along. Characters like Paul and Nina display to the reader the ‘danger’ of the institution: its success in aiding conformism. Both Paul and Nina rewrite their life narratives, reassessing the actions of their pasts, the activities of the present and desires for the future, and aligning them more closely with their new concern. Fulfilment, for them, comes through the ‘coherence’ and ‘authenticity’ of this new, aligned life narrative (Gaviria & Bluemelhuber, p. 131). In comparison, incidents from Ava’s past, particularly feeling that her father was changed for the worst, not the better, when he *succumbed* to social pressures, are strongly present in her mind and so it is very difficult to alter her autobiographical concern (which would require her to rewrite the meanings of her past, or focus on different incidents which fall in line with the new concern).

In the institution, the training is teaching the patients what stories, what objects, they *should* desire and assemble, to create an appropriate concern, to shape an appropriate life narrative. They are trained to desire these objects for *themselves*, integrate them into the project of self-government (for these ‘dysfunctional’ subjects, the media, socialisation and social pressure, even medication, have not been influential enough on their own).

The ending of *Behind the yellow* is doubly coded, in line with the characters and themes. It is somewhat open, allowing the reader space to come to their own conclusions, but the strawberry jam is also a symbol for a continuing and potentially fulfilling connection between Henry and Ava. Though the ending is intended to be satisfying, it is complex: the reader may be aware that the battle for resistance to dominant society will begin all over again. The satisfaction comes from the realisation that Henry and Ava probably won’t have to battle alone.

The novel and the exegetical texts are studies of characters who are perceived, or perceive themselves, as being marginal to an overarching project of consumer capitalism, and who are attuned to aspects that reduce them to something transactional, by projecting upon them a set of conflicting values. Sensidictoriness—
maintaining an awareness of hypocrisy and contradiction, and being attuned to aspects of control—is contradictorily both an ongoing challenge and a way for the characters to cope. Sensidictory thoughts can lead to resistant actions, which are often progressive but not radical, and yet when the system incorporates resistant thoughts and actions so readily, what can there be to do? In conclusion, communication of resistance, and spreading awareness of the pervasive, often invisible, workings of power, ensures heterogeneity and denies conformity, categorisation and the blandification of Western society.
References cited


*Bart of darkness: the Simpsons* S6E1, 1994, television program, Fox Broadcasting Company, Los Angeles, 4 September.

*Bart the daredevil: the Simpsons* S2E8, 1990, television program, Fox Broadcasting Company, Los Angeles, 6 December.

*Bart to the future: the Simpsons* S11E17, 2000, television program, Fox Broadcasting Company, Los Angeles, 19 March.


*Before sunset* 2004, motion picture, Castle Rock Entertainment, Los Angeles.


*Brazil* 1985, motion picture, Embassy International Pictures, Los Angeles.


A current affair 1971–2013, television program, Nine Network, Willoughby, NSW.


The Dr. Oz show 2009–2013, television program, Harpo Productions, Chicago.

Dr. Phil 2002–2013, television program, Harpo Productions, Chicago.


*The good, the sad and the drugly: the Simpsons* S20E17, 2009, television program, Fox Broadcasting Company, Los Angeles, 19 April.


Knox, S 2006, ‘Reading the ungraspable double-codedness of The Simpsons’, *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, vol. 34, no. 2, pp. 72–81.


*Logan’s run* 1976, motion picture, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), Beverly Hills.


*Marge on the lam: the Simpsons* S5E6, 1993, television program, Fox Broadcasting Company, Los Angeles, 4 November.


*A star is Burns: the Simpsons* S6E18, 1995, television program, Fox Broadcasting Company, Los Angeles, 5 March.


*Two cars in every garage and three eyes on every fish: the Simpsons* S2E4, 1990, television program, Fox Broadcasting Company, Los Angeles, 9 May.


Bibliography

All in the mind: when your mind is not your own 2010, radio program, ABC Radio National, Sydney, 27 February.


Carroll, J 2008, Ego and soul: the modern West in search of meaning, Scribe, Carlton North, Victoria.


Behind the yellow

creative component

Angela Jade Meyer

Doctor of Creative Arts

University of Western Sydney

2013
‘One could never pay too high a price for any sensation’—Oscar Wilde (The Picture of Dorian Gray)

‘But then I’m one of those people who wants beauty, if it’s only a stone, or a pot—I can’t explain.’—Virginia Woolf (Portraits)
Prologue

Henry pushed through pinching cold and grey wind to the train station. He hadn’t topped-up his transport data and he missed the planned train mucking around recharging on his headSpace. The next train was packed and Henry just squeezed on. Faces were pale and determined. He had to go to the end of the line, and then walk about 500m to the institution. He was to meet Dana—the surgeon—and a representative counsellor at the gate.

By the time he disembarked the rain had begun, but luckily not hail. Thunder rumbled and lightning bleached the streets. He considered calling a cab but didn’t want to pay the surcharge. They were all electric but they charged high rates for the amount of traffic they had to negotiate. He put up an umbrella, which turned useless half-way up the hill. He kept his ears open for the sound of branches cracking, or trees creaking, as they bent themselves over to squash him.

Dana and the counsellor weren’t at the tall iron gates so he pressed the security button. A camera fixed on him, and then the gate moaned open. He fought all the way to the front door of an old stone building, unlike any he’d seen in the city.

‘Christ!’ he exclaimed, once in and making a puddle on the floor.

Dana came over. ‘Why didn’t you get a cab? Work will pay for it.’

‘I didn’t even think of that.’

A curvy, olive-skinned woman in head-to-toe fuchsia walked over to him. ‘Mr Folsom, I’m Counsellor Dean. I’m a correctional leader on Ward A. I’ve been chosen to show you around, and assist you when you’re in the institution.’

‘Oh, thank you very much.’ They all tried to ignore the small puddle Henry was making on the floor.

Henry followed the two women down a stone hallway to a wooden door, which was unlocked by Dean with a swipe-card. They walked down a spiral staircase, Henry’s shoes smoosh smoosh smooshing with each step. A shiver ran through him as they
spiralled lower and the air became colder. There was another hallway and then an opening out. They were at the base of a tall stone tower. Dean led them into a room where one wall was covered by a sectioned screen. There were empty coffee cups and bags on the floor but no one at their stations. In one corner of the screen Henry could see tree branches thrashing about outside the gates.

‘So, you are inside the Intelligence tower. The Intelligence observes the goings-on in the institution. They can dole out rewards and punishment via the Head Counsellor. No one knows who works as Intelligence—not even the counsellors or the counsellor-guards. We request permission to come in here, if needed, and they vamoose. There are other centres of control from which they can operate, including portable surveillance screens.’

Henry had begun shiver-shuddering, one heel tapping on the floor.

‘We’ve been briefed by representatives of GlaZen, but very vaguely,’ said Dean, ‘what do you need me to show you?’ Dean and Dana both eyeballed Henry.

‘Well,’ he chattered. ‘I’ll have to observe the patients closely. And choose the first subject for the experiment. I may also monitor a group of their peers before and after.’ Henry looked at the empty chairs in the room. ‘Is this the only place where I can make my observations?’

‘We could get you a portable to track your chosen subjects, once you have chosen,’ said Dean.

‘Wouldn’t the easiest and most effective thing to do be to go undercover in the institution?’ asked Dana. Henry looked at her quickly.

‘Would you volunteer for such a thing? I’m a designer of nanopharms, not an undercover cop.’

Counsellor Dean nodded. ‘She’s right, though. We could administer false punishments, to give you time out.’ Henry put his hand on a table to steady himself—a wave of paranoia barreled through him. They have found me out it’s a set-up. He breathed, felt wet layers of shirt press down on his chest.
‘No. First, I will observe. If I don’t come to any conclusions, with your help, I will consider that option. Your background, Counsellor Dean?’

‘Neuropsychiatry.’

‘Experience with corrective pharmaceuticals?’

‘Much. And I know many of the patients under my supervision are here because multiple drugs were tried and each failed to improve their functionality.’

‘Can we start by taking a look at those patients?’ asked Dana. Henry viewed a moment’s trepidation on Counsellor Dean’s face. Of course, he thought, supervising and training the same group of people every day, one must form some small attachments. He looked at the screen. Hundreds of tiny little people, each with a cage and a category. He couldn’t stand the thought of doled-out sunlight, all meals chosen for you, no autonomy.

‘How many patients do you have here?’

‘In Ward A, about two hundred.’ She pointed to the images on the left. ‘In the whole institution, about twelve hundred. And hundreds of counsellors.’

‘Provides a lot of jobs,’ Henry noted.

‘It does. However, many of the patients are subsidised or sponsored. There is pressure to get them well.’

‘Well,’ Dana said, ‘hopefully we can help with that.’ She smiled at Henry and he nodded back, trying to tear himself away from the faces on the screen. ‘So,’ Dana said. ‘Can we see those patients under your care?’

‘Certainly,’ said Dean. She used her hands to select, enhance and draw out certain images.

Henry’s eyes were drawn to the footage of a woman lying on the ground.

‘One of my patients was disobedient in her task yesterday,’ said Dean, moving in front of him. ‘When they show signs of transgression, of not making progress, they are corrected. In the Big Space.’
‘What is it?’

‘It’s quite literally a big space—like a hall, an amphitheatre, with no windows. Sometimes the vast amount of space and the deafening quiet is enough, especially for an anxious, lonely or needy patient. Their imagination runs wild, trying to fill the space with something. But there are other things the Intelligence can do with the space, too. Different types of lighting can be used, for example.’

Henry had seen a broadcast or two by counsellor-guards but had never heard of this Big Space, nor had he ever seen any leaked footage. It must be someone’s job, he assumed, to sit and filter it all. Maybe they even had an office on his floor at work. People did know generally what went on in these places, and occasionally a lone voice or small group would raise a protest, but their voices were inevitably lost in the wash of information, dominant signals being more comforting.

Dean touched the image and it zoomed in on a front view of the patient. Henry saw her wide, frightened eyes and pale forehead, large teeth clenching lips that were, in this low-light, the colour of strawberry jam.

It was her.

Dean had stopped talking. He had stopped shaking. He wasn’t sure how long they stood there.

‘She’s going to be in here for a long time,’ Dean said. ‘You will consult with me, when you choose someone, won’t you?’ she asked, ‘I’d like to know first how it will change them—their behaviour.’

He took a breath. ‘Yes, of course I will.’

‘And,’ she touched the screen and broke the spell, ‘the patient, they won’t be let out, will they? They’ll have to be carefully monitored.’

‘Unless the test is completely successful—but it would take time to know. Some time.’

‘Okay. Good.’
Henry forced himself to tear his eyes away from the girl on the screen, smile at Dean, smile at Dana. He jumped at a boom of thunder and regretfully giggled. ‘Now, may I have a little time to look over the footage?’

‘Certainly,’ Dean said. ‘Let me show you how the console operates.’
Part One

Three months earlier

Henry entered the foyer of the GlaZen building, the tallest in the street, and felt the flowers burning in his arms. He made the elevator, holding the flowers up so as not to get them caught in the doors. As the lift rose he noticed people wincing and holding their noses until an immaculate woman stepped in and her scent overpowered them. He blushed.

He walked out onto his floor. There was the soft padding of typing behind screens; voices dictating broadcasts, news stories, narratives and political statements related to GlaZen’s products. On a screen in the wall the motivational speaker, Barkley, was in rapturous discussion with the prime minister about new grants within the poor districts for medication, to enable them to make better decisions. One young man in the office clapped out loud. Henry heard a woman say ‘I thought Barkley was the prime minister’. Henry wound down a corridor, then another, catching the beginning of a related ad for the armed services (they were encouraging the poor to enlist, to help fight the resource wars). Arriving at his door he heard a voice say: ‘What a splurge!’ indicating his flowers. She was smiling. ‘By golly they’re stinky.’

‘They’re for Meg,’ he said quickly.

He swiped his card and entered his office, realising he was sweating and short of breath.

Henry held the flowers out from his body. Surely buying flowers for himself could still be justified. A flamboyant moment? *You’re being far too anxious.* He sat them down and stretched. His office and lab was of a decent size, and a thick glass window took up one side. The sky was the colour of steel. Henry watched oceans of people wind their way around the awkward weather skirts on tall buildings. Henry’s building was only two blocks away from the train station, but some days it took him a good half-hour to get there. The Balance movement meant that many people now
began work at different times of the day, but all that did was make peak-hour incessant.

In the distance he could see the only place the poor could afford to live, a valley bombarded by storms and floods all year long. One time it flooded, then snowed, and half the valley’s inhabitants froze in the water. Luckily that was after his parents got out. Many have nots ended up in the penitentiary, a huge building which he could see on the right. Some, of course, ended up in the army. Others were employed on minimum wage to look after the elderly, in the many rest homes dotting the city’s fringes. These were certain fates he had escaped. And he should be thankful.

To the left, and at a distance, was that other institution. Unlike the penitentiary, or the rest homes, The Institution for Wellness, Happiness, Functionality and Balance was for the visible members of society who had problems with the way things were. The institution gobbled them up, trained them, and spat them out as Functional. These were also the kinds of people Henry was supposed to help with his current assignment, his wretch.

This morning, edging the crowd, Henry had noticed something bright in his line of vision, something he’d never noticed before. A flower shop, and not The Flower Shop, but strangely, an independent-looking stall right here in the middle of the city. It was squeezed under a red-and-blue awning, tucked under the shade of a building. Henry had darted out of the drab, vibrating mass and had stood staring, feeling embarrassed and excited all at once.

A man of around 30—Henry’s age—in a paisley shirt (Ralph Lauren 2041 revival line) greeted him and asked if he could help.

‘I’m not sure,’ Henry said. But his eyes were drawn to those large purple flowers, ugly and rough-looking. ‘I’ll take those, actually’. He forced himself not to look at the rest of the bunches; his voice having already made the decision.

‘Sure thing,’ the young man smiled.

‘Are you new here?’ asked Henry.
'Yes.' The man lost his smile a bit. Besides Henry, the flower shop was empty. He wrapped Henry’s flowers in paper, chalky yellow. ‘Would you like my card?’

‘Sure.’ Henry pulled his hSpace from his pocket and touched it to the man’s.

‘And what do you do?’

‘I’m a designer.’

‘Oh, can I have your card? Does it link to your channel?’ the man asked, device still in hand.

‘Thanks for asking, but what I do is more... scientific.’

The man nodded but Henry could tell he was a little hurt. It was rare for someone not to have a sharable profile—a channel, some links, even just a pin-board—especially if they were halfway creative.

‘Thank you!’ Henry waved and exited with what he hoped was a smile of genuine kindness. The delight at his find was already turning in his gut to despair. How long could such a business last? The rent would be phenomenal. And how did he source the flowers? Transport was expensive and land was scarce. This man must have thought there’d still be an appetite for such bright, natural things.

Before breakfast, Henry was supposed to take one pepper pep pill, two glossers and (at Meg’s insistence) a super-multi-vitamin; was supposed to kiss Meg good morning; was supposed to shave his face, shower in under two minutes, and remember to hang up the bath mat. He put on black pants, black shoes with rounded toes (no scuff), a collared shirt in some pallid colour and an unimaginative tie. Loud ties were for weekends.

Henry was very good at his job. But much of the time, lately, he just felt bored: staring down the same brightly lit corridors, day after day. There was also a ripple underneath, of unease and dissatisfaction, which seemed to awaken a few months ago when he saw that girl on the street.

Not taking his pills was one way to hold on to some semblance of authentic feeling; pulls and desires that weren’t always pleasant. He seldom felt happiness, and the
pills would give him that. He was often tempted to take them but a voice inside him screamed: *don’t do it.* And then he felt guilt over his apparent feelings of superiority over the rest of the population.

‘Would you like toast and jam?’ he’d asked a stretching, still-sleepy Meg that morning.

‘I’ll get my own,’ she’d said. She had that extra half-hour of nothingspace in the morning, while Henry had to be at his creation-station by 10. Henry spread apricot jam on thick and decadent.

Others seemed bored, too, but not profoundly so. They were easily rounded-up to partake in new distractions—designs and trips (mostly virtual) and quick fixes. Turn the bun into the burger and the burger into a bun.

Henry’s toast had been crunchy and thick—manufactured to crumble better than its competitors.

The first time they put Ava in the Big Space she thought of her father. He used to live in a big old house with spider webs in corners and his paintings everywhere; on the walls, on the floor, even on the kitchen sink next to a crackling radio. There was hardly any furniture, and sometimes, walking through, you might see ten versions—finished and unfinished—of the same image: a woman with a veil; a purple tree, black moon and slender cat; trees autumnal to naked and wintry. The man himself would be somewhere in all the mess, looking lost and old-fashioned, with black hair and a Clark Gable moustache. Always paint on his shirt, shoes and fingertips. Sometimes on his lips. That is, until he started on Gloss, got back with her mother, and sold the big old house to move into the peach-scented suburban home. Around that time, Ava started to feel too much.

Ava knew about Clark Gable because of the films her dad had stored in his archives. He would roll out his screen like a big piece of sketch paper and tack it to the wall, then set up his out-dated device and project the films, sometimes working; sometimes sitting with her. There were many she didn’t like; films that were
intolerant or offensive, though it didn’t seem deliberate. But those afternoons were
warmly indulgent. Ava let the images—glamorous, gaudy, neat or filthy—wash over
her. When her dad moved back home he didn’t watch movies so much, but Ava
downloaded a few to her hSpace and they became a comfort, even when she wasn’t
fully paying attention.

The Big Space was different from her dad’s big old house. It had no paintings, no
windows, no dust, no appendages except for the ring of tiny lenses around the top of
the walls, reminding you that the Intelligence could be watching. There was also a
cuff around one of Ava’s legs. She saw it as rusted iron, but was aware it could be a
functional hologram. The rusted iron effect was presumably to agitate some Jungian
collective memory of subservience, though undoubtedly the Intelligence would say
that it had been Ava’s ‘choice’ to act the way she had, and to be locked up in here.

If you were in the Big Space long enough you peered deeper into the corners.
Imagination wasn’t stifled at the institution. Ava supposed that, to some degree,
imagination and desire were crucial to real world Functionality. But her deep desires,
the ones that took over, were apparently too extreme. She had a depth of passion for
real human bodies, touching them, kissing them, loving them, writing about them,
crying about them. And sometimes a building or a piece of fruit was a body in itself:
hot or cold, rough or slick and exploding with scent. It wasn’t entirely sexual. It was
a desire to become as close as possible, to consume and be consumed by the person,
the object, the environment. It existed to the point that she forgot to work and eat and
buy, to contribute and to participate, however they wanted to put it. It meant that she
needed correction and training.

Ava had already lost track of how long she’d been at the institution, even though the
counsellors enforced the keeping of calendars and schedules on their hSpaces. In
fact, Ava was being corrected now for the failure of this very task. She’d been put in
the Big Space a few times by the new counsellor, a woman called Dean, who was
particularly cruel to her, and though she found the space disconcerting, it didn’t seem
like the kind of thing that would ‘correct’ her personality.

The institution was a cross between a castle and a penitentiary: old, grey, brick and
stone, located on a hill (a misty one, Ava liked to think, as in a gothic novel). Ava
had asked around but no one seemed to know what the building had been used for before, or even how old it was. She was limited in her research because her hSpace had been configured to connect only to an internal network. The stone wasn’t medieval and crumbling; maybe it was Victorian, a fashionable reconstruction. Due to overpopulation many heritage buildings were being put to more functional use. If they weren’t useful, they were knocked down and turned into high, fortified, living blocks full of apartments and shops. History was useful only if it was profitable.

Ava wept when they knocked down the last art deco cinema house in the city, which was in her suburb, and replaced it with one of these living blocks. Nothing was left but the façade; some sort of strange nod to Balance. She wept because it was inevitable; and she wouldn’t deny anyone a place to live. But she also wept because buildings were no longer considered art. Environments had only to ‘work’, not to be beautiful or stand for an idea.

This building was already set out perfectly for use as an institution. There were the wards, A to G, holding patients with varying degrees of dysfunction. There were Functionality training wings, which magically seemed to vanish and reappear when needed. There was a gym and a yard, but the yard was hardly used as it was too hot or too cold, too windy or too wet. There were eating halls for the different wards. And of course there was their accommodation: a cross between a hospital room and a jail cell. The whole place had a dankness to it, which even permeated the happy-yellow-painted walls of the state-of-the-art Functionality training centres. Or maybe Ava just sought out that permeation, some layering behind the walls.

Ava was here on a grant she’d have to pay back one day. She’d lost her trial, but her parents were in a low-income bracket so they had to put her in anyway, and would make her pay for her own correction. It was called a grant rather than a fine, as it was unimaginable that you wouldn’t want to become Functional. They all believed they could make her happy and well. But Ava didn’t know how to get better. Or whether she wanted to. They said that a lot started out that way. She did know there were greater sparks and exhilarations outside the institution. And she had a desire for them. But she was also the kind of person who could live moment to moment, finding delight in her surrounds, no matter what they were, finding delight in the little things, like the dank behind the yellow.
He knew she was waiting for him to say it.

‘Happy anniversary, Meg,’ and he kissed her on her hot cheek, before rising from bed. Her arms were stretched out to him and he felt clammy in the chest.

‘Happy two years, Henry honey. Can you stay in bed a little longer and just get ready quicker this morning?’

He looked toward the bathroom, then back at her. ‘You know I hate to rush.’

Her face fell.

‘We’ve got tonight’, he said.

‘You’re always too tired after dinner.’

‘Not always.’

Meg glanced at the book on her bedside table. She swept her sticky blonde hair back off her forehead.

‘You know, Barkley says twice a week is a pretty regular, achievable thing.’

‘Barkley says that?’

‘You know it’s true though.’

‘I’ve been very busy.’

‘Balance, Henry. Think of your health.’

‘I hear this every day, Meg.’

‘Don’t use the tone, please.’

‘I’m sorry.’ Panic rose in his throat. All she had to do was mention the word ‘inadequate’ to one of her colleagues, or to her parents, and he might be investigated for Functionality. He kissed her quickly. ‘I really just don’t think I could right now, Meg.’ He didn’t want to put pressure on tonight, though. Pressure would be bad. He hadn’t even touched himself for a week, to make sure he’d be there for her on their
two year anniversary. And the one year anniversary of their moving in together. He worried, in fact, that she might be expecting this to become the anniversary of something else. But he knew a lot of people who had become engaged after three years. Engaged. The thought made him sick. For a good part of the past year he’d felt a little sick. Why had he made such a big mistake with such a nice girl? Shaky. Clammy. A tense erection in the shower, begging for his own hand, begging for release now. He thought it away. He stepped out and dressed-up plain.

GlaZen understood Henry needed to be alone in his space to aid concentration. What they didn’t know is that he needed to be alone to be alone. Outside his office (his sanctuary, where he imagined pink neon lights and dust and dew on beer bottles) there was open-plan everything—those sounds of typing, jokes, devices buzzing and burring and ringing. GlaZen did a bit of everything, from development to merchandising to viscom, and half the floors of the building were dedicated to public interface. Here, marketing majors mingled with minor politicians and the media. Most marketing majors were content creators and public faces. They were honing the message, directing the trends, and finding a way to inject them into the ether.

Henry’s previous project had been both harder and easier. He’d had to work more closely with people. In his managerial position his annoyance and disgust at some of them was expressed through control. He’d been the head designer of a new line of flu-chips, for both people and pets. Older members of his team had been too meticulous, younger ones too hasty, though he hated to be so ‘ageist’. They’d made odd little alliances (drinks and tapas on knock-off, weekend train trips) and never included him, so he’d remained hard. Sometimes he’d be close to a breakthrough in the lab when one of the team would burst in, giggling about something just said, and he would struggle not to lose it. After all, he was supposed to be taking pills: pills to make you rational, calm, in love with the world. On completion of the project he made it known that he liked to be in charge, but also needed stretches of quiet, to allow his genius, if he could call it that, to unfold.

He’d been assigned the current project six months ago, and was making good progress—though the company didn’t know that yet. It was a top-secret and high-
priority project, and had been assigned to him by Grethe Friend, whose role then was company manager. She was now CEO or company leader or chief motivator or something, Henry couldn’t keep up. She seemed to perform the exact same tasks.

‘It’s whether they can function,’ Grethe had said, across a large wooden table in a quiet boardroom. It was very early. The lights had been down, in conservation mode.

‘Function how?’ he’d asked, with genuine curiosity.

‘Function as members of a Balanced society. Working, buying, playing freely.’ It wasn’t long before this that the motivational speaker Barkley had released his Balance series of books and broadcasts. The word had already been building momentum for some time. ‘We thought you’d be able to design the ultimate bio-pharma product for Balance and Functionality, combining your bio experience and psych training. You’d have neurological and pharmaceutical experts at your disposal, including the team who worked on the Gloss range.’

The Gloss drugs were by far the most successful drugs on the market; they treated a range of mood and personality disorders, from excessive melancholy to shyness, hyper-enthusiasm, and low levels of desire, among others.

‘I can do it, in time,’ he’d said, knowing he could, and temporarily buoyed by adequacy. ‘But there are already pills and institutions.’

‘Well yes, there were institutions, then there were pills, then everyone was on them and people still unravelled and were unhappy. Now we have new institutions—for training, for correction, for positiveness, for life. But there is still instability, there is still unhappiness; there are still reverted, unproductive, disruptive, subversive…’

‘I understand.’

Subversive. Subversive was the way Henry went into the bathroom afterwards and didn’t flush down his piss. Didn’t wash his hands. Smiled at himself in the mirror.

Ava took down her Turkish rug from the wall and laid it on the floor. She tied a scarf around her head, changed it to her neck, put it back on her head. Putting it around her
neck felt too constricting, though sometimes she liked to play with feelings like that. She lay down on the rug her father bought in Budapest when he was seventeen. It smelt of drips of oil paint. The cold seeped through from the floor and she stayed there a little while, making out the shape of her scapula, the nobs on her spine. She thought about what it would be like to travel overseas. For her parents and grandparents it had been cheap, easy. They used up all the god damn fuel.

She must have drifted off. Counsellor Dean was standing over her with a blonde. Blank-eyed, skinny, downy, flat-chested, pink: the opposite of Ava.

‘This is your new roommate, Cynthia,’ said Dean. Ava sat up and nodded hello. The girl had just been admitted to an institution but she looked as though someone had told her she’d won Star Flight.

‘Wooooow, it’s like an old-timey jail cell,’ she gasped.

‘I’m Ava.’

‘Oh, hello.’ She reminded Ava of the half-blind, glassy-eyed character Marilyn Monroe played in one of the films she used to watch with her dad, minus the charm and the curves. Was this part of Ava’s training? Seeing how she’d cope with her opposite?

Dean left the room and Ava showed Cynthia the drawers beside her bed where she could put her stuff.

Cynthia sat a picture of Chad Li-Sung, the current hot pop thang, in a fluffy pink frame on top of her bed. Ava told her that was good. ‘You’re encouraged to decorate your room, though I think they analyse the overall effect to gauge how your training is going.’

Cynthia frowned in confusion.

‘You’ll get used to it,’ she reassured her. ‘So what are you in for?’

‘Hmmm?’

‘What’s your sentence, sister?’ Ava asked.
‘Oh, Mum and Dad said I have to come here so I can, like, do better in jobs and stuff.’

‘Your folks sent you for trial?’

‘Sure, didn’t yours?’

*I guess parents only want the best for us.*

Ava’s didn’t send her for trial. Well, not technically. She was reported by a few people—acquaintances, exes—and the clincher was reading poetry on a street corner. She was crying as she read, though she didn’t really notice it at the time. And that was a bit much for the public. Her mother said yes, she needs training.

‘But what was your sentence, Cynthia, at the trial?’ Ava asked because she couldn’t actually figure out yet why she was in here.

‘Umm, something about lots of vacness, excess vacness, like a vacuum? Oh, and it’s true, y’know? I can’t even remember the word!’

Ava had heard of the sentence of ‘excessive vacuity’, but so far knew no one in there branded with it.

Ava grinned as she told Cynthia she was ‘overtly overabundant’. Maybe she was proud of it.

‘What the heck does that mean?’

‘I love people, too much and too often.’

Cynthia raised an eyebrow as she sat on her bed, pulling out a bottle of pale blue nail polish. It gave off a pretty, pungent stench, which Ava found disagreeable.

‘Hey, are we allowed to, like, use our hSpace in here?’ Cynthia asked, wide-eyed.

‘Sort of. You’ll be connected only to an internal network.’

Cynthia pouted.

‘But they sometimes reinstate your access for certain Functionality training exercises,’ Ava explained. She told her that she could hook into the Intelligence’s
feed, and could still read and watch anything saved on her device, or download items from the Intelligence library.

‘What’s a library?’

‘I’ll show you.’

‘I don’t know how I’m going to live without my followers,’ Cynthia said. And though Ava found her inane, she could sympathise. She remembered the first weeks inside where the lack of her usual broadcasts meant she had to rewire her impulses. At first there was recurring shock caused by the gap that opened up between habit and the inability to act upon it.

‘I still don’t understand why you’re in here,’ Ava said.

Cynthia sighed and explained that because she spent so much time looking at pretty dresses and runway show holos she didn’t do much of anything else. She’d wracked-up a load of credit.

Ava laid back down on the rug, on her stomach, trying to drown out the nail polish smell.

Cynthia emitted a gasp. ‘It’s not like... a mental institution, is it?’

Ava smiled to herself. ‘No. They don’t see us as being crazy or ill. Just wrong.’ But on some level, Ava thought, it was like the old asylums she’d read about, where streetwalkers, homosexuals, petty thieves and adulterous wives were taken off the streets so as not to disrupt order. But then it was also like a medieval jail, where thieves paid for their own punishment. ‘Normality’ was to want to be well, prosperous, growing, contributing, desiring. You were dysfunctional if you wanted to lie on a rug all day, running your finger over an oil paint stain.

Cynthia began to ask more questions.

‘I don’t want to talk anymore,’ said Ava, rolling over to stare at the books and dust bunnies under her bed.
The restaurant was called Special Occasion and Meg said she was going off her diet for the night. ‘Oh, I hope I don’t get too much of a stomach ache,’ she said.

‘Don’t worry about it,’ said Henry, who secretly and kind of accidentally ate whole bags of banana chips some days in his lab. He was very fond of pizzas, frozen pasties, hot chips, but went along with the mmming and ahhing at the expensive Lemberger (the ‘in’ varietal) and the garlicky asparagus.

‘Do I dare have a steak?’ Meg asked, eyes an emerald flash, and he loved her madly for a second.

‘Do it,’ he grinned. ‘Special occasion.’

‘Yeah, a celebration.’

Henry looked (and looked) over the menu, the choices, the flavours. If he chose this he’d miss out on that. That was something he’d never had. That was something he could cook at home. They hardly ever ate meat anymore—no one did. The taxes had come in when they were kids and sustainable, tasty vege and faux-meat products took over. Restaurants would often have about three meat options, for that ‘special occasion’. The diner not only got a tiny thrill out of being subversively un-environmental, but received status points by choosing the expensive item. It was all acceptable in the pursuit of Balance. Plus, real meat tasted damn good.

But he still couldn’t choose. And he realised he was beginning to look indecisive, maybe even inadequate. He had to choose soon and feel no anxiety over it. But his eyes swung back and forth between the roast chicken and the eggplant and mushroom lasagne. Chicken or eggmush. Chicken or egg?

‘Baby, what you getting?’

The waiter was there, god fucking damn the waiter was there and the menu was slipping from Henry’s hands.

‘Eggen, ah, mushroom. And eggplant. Thing. Sorry. Thank you.’

‘No worries,’ said the waiter.
When he was gone Henry sipped deeply into his glass of wine. *What if Meg thinks I’m nervous because I’m going to propose?* He looked into her smiling eyes. She was wearing the red dress. She knew he always loved the red dress.

He tuned into the couple at the next table, having a conversation about the conflict, termed broadly the ‘resource wars’ because it involved different countries at different times depending on their access to energy, water, food, land and more. The woman was getting passionate, which was what made Henry tune in. She was on the side of the Protectionists, which Henry knew to be controversial, even radical, though the details of the conflict were always blurred to him—too involved, shifting too much. He knew the major corporations, including GlaZen, supported the Adaptationists, as did the man in this couple.

‘Gloss out,’ the man said to the woman, holding his hand up to her. The woman’s face was red. Henry felt a pang for her. Henry had flirted with Protectionism in his first year of University. It had seemed so right, and hopeful, but the opposition had overwhelmed him. He was made to believe the idea of conservation was naïve, that to adapt to change within the functioning economic system (inevitable and evolutionary in the eyes of the Adaptationists) was the only way. Even countries that were previously neutral were being forced to take sides as their resources were eyeballed by other countries and corporate powers.

The woman called the waiter over to order a Scotch and Henry forced himself to turn away. Meg was looking at him with her head tilted. When was the last time they’d had a conversation about politics?

‘Honey?’ he said.

‘Yes?’

She looked so sweet and trusting.

‘Do you remember that amazing chocolate macaroon we had in Paris? From that street vendor?’

She sighed. ‘Incomparable.’ She looked down at the table. Henry stared at the silver bird sitting on her toned chest. He’d bought that for her. It had been a while since
he’d bought her anything. She wouldn’t have liked those purple flowers, anyway, he thought. Too rough.

Ava was partnered up with Paul, her favourite brother in the institution, for the cooking exercise. Functionality training exercises ranged dramatically, but each one simulated a real-world place or situation and trained the patient to navigate it.

Paul’s feet were kinda smelly, but his shaky little fingers were attentive and Ava imagined he’d be a grateful lover as she watched him chopping the carrot. She did wonder why they gave him knife duty, as the rumour was he was suicidal. All part of the training, she supposed.

Each mini-kitchen was opened out to the centre, so the Intelligence could watch, but each duo couldn’t see what the other patients were doing. When they were finished, they would swap meals with the duo next door and the counsellors would also taste the food. The counsellors were getting harsher: they were not to drop any cutlery, they couldn’t spill any food, they must not waste a thing, and it had to taste good.

‘Hans is going,’ said Paul. Hans was Paul’s roommate. A German-born ‘intensely inward’ individual.

‘Being reintegrated?’ asked Ava.

‘Yeah.’

‘How come?’

‘He said he knows what it’s all about.’

Ava asked him what he meant.

‘He wouldn’t tell me any more than that; he said everyone probably has to figure it out for themselves.’

He gave her an intense look, then went back to the chopping. Ava couldn’t stand any longer the thought of Paul’s cock jiggling up and down in his pants as he sliced the
carrot and she came around behind him and slipped her hand over the front of his pants. She spun him around. He gasped and trembled, but didn’t drop the knife.

‘Ava, w-we can’t.’

‘Just five minutes.’

‘We’ll get put in the Big Space. We’ll never, oh God.’ Because his belt was already undone and the sounds he made when she put her mouth on him were worth a day in the Big Space. She loved nothing more than this, the moment of absolute pleasure. The way Paul sucked in his breath and pushed harder into her mouth, completely unable to resist, momentarily oblivious to anything but the ache and burn and the dizzy tingle. Dean pushed the door open just as Paul’s eyes exploded with pleasure behind steamed-up glasses. Ava swallowed before she turned around, covering him while he fumbled with his clothing. He still had the knife in his hand.

‘Thank you, you l-lovely, lovely thing,’ his breath whispered onto her neck. Dean’s lips were pink, and Ava smiled at her.

‘We’re just doing the salad, won’t be long.’

Dean said: ‘Paul, Big Space.’

Ava pleaded to the counsellor that it was her fault.

‘I said Paul will go to the Big Space.’

‘For how long?’ Paul asked, now trembling behind her in a different way.

‘Two days. When you’re done here.’ Dean walked out. Paul returned to the carrots.

‘I’m sorry.’

‘I think I might love you, or something.’ He wasn’t looking up.
Everything in moderation

That night in bed, Meg faced the wall. Henry ached for her hand on his cock, and yet he was full from the eggshroom meal and suffering a strange mix of sadness and relief that he’d put off the proposal.

‘I guess I just don’t understand,’ she said, into the dark.

‘I just don’t think it’s time yet.’

‘But, I thought, well, I’m sure of this thing.’

‘Barkley says two to three years, doesn’t he?’ Henry asked, weakly.

‘Yes, but. Well, we’re close to thirty, now. And we’ve had an appropriate amount of past partners.’

‘Two or three serious ones, yes.’

‘We’ve also both travelled and are quite content in our work.’

A furious vein was going off in his forehead. This was boring. He was bored. And the sheets were too clean and it was quiet. He wanted to thrash about. He wanted to drink more than he was supposed to; he wanted to listen to something more than voices and the pop-garble moan of distant ads. He wanted to shatter something, to steal, to scream, or just sing at the top of his voice. He wanted to find that girl, and ask her what she thought about the world. Was he truly in the wrong situation, on the wrong path, or was dissatisfaction in his blood? What more could there be, though?

He slipped a surreptitious hand up under Meg’s top. She pushed her body back against him, which was saying, yes.

Every now and then Henry went over to Ken’s for an appropriate ‘boy’s night’. They played cards, watched a movie or series, or played video games. They’d met in the science department at university and Ken now worked as an environmental impact assessor, and collected bugs on the side.
Ken pulled out the grill to check the toast. His apartment consisted of a cluttered open-plan living space, one bedroom and a small bathroom. Bachelor living, complete with plastic wine rack, pots of dying herbs, gametainment system and the smell of damp clothes.

‘Where’s your toaster?’ Henry asked.

‘It broke.’

‘When was that?’

‘About a year ago.’

Ken grinned at him. Henry felt a stab—some strange kind of jealousy.

‘We have a nice red toaster.’

‘I bet you do.’

‘What’s with toast for dinner anyway?’

‘Because I knew you’d love it.’

Henry had to admit, he did. The simple crunch; fletcherising the bed of bread, pillowed with cheese.

‘So how’s Meg?’

‘Good, she says hi.’

They sat across from one-another on upcycled orange lounge chairs.

‘I wish she’d let me have antiques.’

‘Meg? What, she’s not into them?’

‘No way. Afraid of germs or ghosts or something. We have to go to that bloody maze of a furniture store to get anything, it makes me so...’

‘You can say it to me.’

‘Well, pretty anxious.’
Ken smiled, crunched his toast. He wore a vest over his white shirt and pants; he had a manicured beard, slyly fashionable.

‘Surely she’s into sustainability though.’

‘Yeah, like everyone, but she listens to corporate pap about new materials being made from recyclable and non-toxic materials and she seems content with that.’

‘Hmm. Want some Gewürztraminer?’

‘Absolutely.’ Henry’d been badly craving a drink, something strong and heavy to make him feel alternately light and floaty. It was the pressure, the conflict of the project—its challenges which he enjoyed and its aims which he was beginning to feel nervous about. It was also that fading of any feeling, where it used to exist. And the fear of what that meant. While Ken poured the drinks, Henry stared at the FREEDOM poster on his wall, which he knew was placed there ironically.

‘Well... I can’t really drink too much, or I’ll have to put up with Meg quoting Barkley on the benefits of Balance for days after.’

Ken gave a wry smile. ‘That’s what they want old chap, for you to be watching over yourself like that. Everything in moderation.’

‘Fuck that,’ Henry said, swigging harder.

‘You know, Meg is one hot lady though. I’d do a lot of things for her.’

‘Come off it man. I know you would.’ Henry paused, sipped. ‘She’s changed, you know. A fair bit.’ But he still didn’t want his best friend lusting after her, did he? Henry wondered why Ken didn’t make more of an effort to find someone.

‘Is it the pills?’

‘Not just that.’

‘You ever think of, you know, ending things?’

‘Honestly, I’m afraid to. She... tolerates me in a way no one else really would.’ He didn’t really want to admit to his friend the extent of his paranoia—that she or her powerful parents might report him for trial. Of course, Henry also knew more about
what was going to be unfolding for people in those institutions in the next few years. Is that where the girl on the street had ended up?

‘Well, I guess you just gotta roll with it.’

‘You make everything sound so easy.’

‘I’m free to.’ They smirked into their glasses.

Henry came out into a bright night, buzzing from the alcohol. The streets were still busy and the temperature mild, so he walked home, scanning messages on his hSpace. There was one from his brother Daniel: a holo from the pub in the town where they grew up. Henry opened it and was hit with a sense-memory-whiff of oversweet energy drinks. Daniel hovered, shivered over his device, calling to tell him about his wife’s second pregnancy. He had a cigar in his hand, unlit; his face stretched into a genuine, ecstatic grin.

Henry closed the message, looked up. People were out on balconies, on all floors, enjoying this rare, easy weather. He was glad that Meg was more like him, in some respects. She didn’t want to move to his hometown—the place his parents escaped to—and start a small business, or get into real estate. Unlike his brother and his wife, he and Meg needed this crush and bustle, this availability of everything. But then all the regional towns, the coastal towns were cities now anyway. The capital was still the place for the highest achievers.

Henry supposed his parents still worried sometimes about how hard and far one could fall in the big city. The Valley was where they came from, but when his Mum’s dad died they took all his stuff into the city to the pawn shop which had a show on Channel 73, and, as everyone dreams, it turned out to be valuable. Old coins and stamps especially, that had been passed down through the generations. It was their ticket out of the Valley, and they travelled over the mountains to a town that was just big enough, and expanding, so they could both get work. When Henry was growing up his parents always said that it was family that was important, but they moved every few years into a bigger house and wore better clothes and sent Henry
and Daniel to better schools, and he knew that other things seemed to be just as important.

So far he was making them pretty happy. He was on track. But the feeling that had been there his whole life, like a spatula in his stomach flipping an egg, over and over, was only getting stronger.

He wouldn’t tell Meg about the expected niece or nephew just yet.

It had been a pretty ordinary Thursday, when he’d seen the girl. The foot traffic wasn’t too bad but Henry was walking quickly, as he usually does, toward the quiet solitude of his office. She was right on the corner of a busy road and a fashionable avenue. He saw the way people milled slowly past her, giving her a berth, but then walked on. He heard her first:

...a pink capsule
took his moustache...

She had scuffed olive-green boots, tights and a long, loose striped shirt. Long dark hair blew and curled around her, covering her face, so at first he could not see her eyes.

...how content is skin?
We think electric thinking
is a thing of the past.
But I taste smoke on my tongue...

And on the word taste, her eyes were revealed, and she looked straight at him. Her eyes were the exact same hazel as his own. Run of the mill, grey-blue-green. But his own. And at that moment, frozen in front of her, Henry experienced a strange sensation: it was as though he could feel each and every organ inside his body, nestled against each other and jostling among the network of cartilage and bone. It was a sickening feeling. He brought his hand to his mouth. A woman bumped into him and the noise of the street again became apparent. The woman looked at the poet
and shook her head. And then Henry himself, confronted, continued along his path and looked back only once, to see the poet watching after him, calling louder,

*We now place cushions inside our blood.*
Muscle

One wing of the institution had been transformed (those invisible hands) into a sleek wellbeing centre—pink and blue pads, metallic arms. ‘It has long been believed, studied, proven, that the right Balance of physical exercise will ensure not only a healthy body, but a healthy mind’, Counsellor Dean said, making circles on one hip with her finger. Ava had used wellbeing centres before, but she always fell in with someone and fell out with the gym. She’d also stayed in change rooms too long and attracted scowls and shy cover-ups. Especially when she was standing naked, gazing. But she had always liked the way certain exercises felt. The way her stomach clenched and pelvic floor was drawn up in a pull-up; the deep burn in her glutes when she’d squat; the satisfaction of upping her weights for shoulder-press. Pushing herself further, feeling more. The way her body came alive while her mind went quiet.

Paul was all a-tremble beside her. He smelt like damp shoes. Cynthia grinned as if she was at a live pop performance.

Dean laid out the tasks. They would be shown all the equipment and learn about which muscle groups each piece worked. They would test everything out, completing a full circuit. Tomorrow they would come back and write up a program that would perfectly balance each muscle group, would balance cardiovascular and muscular health and improve flexibility. The patients with the most efficient programs would earn vouchers. The wellbeing wing would remain, and patients would work exercise into their schedules to prove self-control and discipline.

Dean began to demonstrate the equipment. ‘Now, most of the machines are straightforward, and have little diagrams on the side here, see? You will need to choose how many reps of each exercise you will do. Two times twelve, or three times eight, is a good start. For other floor exercises, touch that screen on the wall, which will take you through ten. Pay attention to the muscle groups.’ Dean pushed back her short dark hair. Ava watched as Dean removed her black sports jacket to reveal caramel-coloured breasts firm and high in a singlet.

‘What if it’s too hard for me, Counsellor Dean?’ asked Cynthia.
‘You’ll manage,’ Dean said, picking up an 8kg dumbbell. ‘Here, hold this.’

Cynthia’s pale arms seemed to bend back at the elbow, with the weight hanging down between her knees.

‘That’s the way. Now spread your legs.’

‘Hmm?’

‘Spread ’em’.

Cynthia took a wide stance.

‘Now hold the weight down in front, like that, and slowly bend your knees. Your butt will come out a bit behind you.’

Cynthia squatted like a lanky duck, a pained look on her face.

‘Now up, and down again. Do 12. Yes.’ Dean drew circles on her hip again with her fingertip. Ava watched Cynthia’s tiny butt cheeks tremble. Paul looked away, politely. Cynthia made a straining noise and Ava wanted to sit in front of her so she was squatting on her face. She bit the feeling away. Cynthia was far too annoying to fuck. Most of the time Ava wanted to strangle her excessively-vacuous neck.

‘Ava, would you have a turn? You look nice and strong already,’ Dean said, and Ava noticed her rouged lips, the tip of her tongue at her teeth.

‘Sure’, she said, and was sure to stick her round butt out far, giving deep little huffs each time she came back up.

Henry hadn’t really known, for years, what was going on in the world, besides what friends had passed on in his feeds. Or what Meg filled him in on when he got home in the evenings. It seemed that celebrities were dying all the time. There were walls going up and coming down, people were being detained (and it seemed, even in his own country), there were natural disasters in which unfathomable amounts of people were being killed. There were drawn-out confusing conflicts between Adaptationist and Protectionist forces. There were always things that were ending or becoming
obsolete, and there was always the new. Or there was never the new, just revisioned, refashioned, reimagined, re-relevant replacements.

He was tired today. He’d been up late trying to ease Meg, who was still upset over his not proposing, by going down on her. But she couldn’t quite get there. There was a block, she said. He knew he was that block, but Meg wondered aloud (not for the first time) whether she had a problem, a dysfunction, and whether she should go back to Dr Li.

She’d barely said a word to Henry this morning and now he was glad to be in the office, away from her tense dissatisfaction. His office was almost all-white, with the dying purple flowers in the corner, and a few pictures blu-tacked to the walls: Rachael from Blade Runner, Stanley Kubrick (faded), a metallic arm. When he’d arranged them he’d smirked—proud of the irony. Today he felt some form of regret. At least in Logan’s Run they had fluoro inside their dome.

Henry clicked his aching under-tongue and thought about the misfits his wretch would be used on. Would their brains become shapeless and hollow? The pills have already dulled most of us, he thought. But now. Besides regulating brain chemicals, this nanobiopharmaceutical device (nanopharm, for short) could have specific settings programmed for each individual. The owner, presumably, would have their needs set by a nanopharmaceutical expert (the newest of fields) in conjunction with the diagnosis made by a psychiatrist, head counsellor and/or normative regulator. Once the patient was Functioning properly they would pay GlaZen for lifetime maintenance: check-ups, counselling sessions with company-hired professionals, and so on. It was a bit like paying for a prescription. The institutions would still exist, as training centres, but perhaps the stays would be shorter, and the counsellors would take up some of these maintenance jobs within the company.

Undoubtedly GlaZen would want to hold onto the wheel. As would their partners in government. The public would only receive one message: that the product was positive, safe, and the answer to their remaining woes.

The scheduled trial was due to start in just a few months, at that nearest corrective institution, part-owned by GlaZen and subsidised by the government.
A message popped up at the edge of Henry’s screen telling him there was a young man, a bio-media student, waiting to see him. Henry sighed and rubbed his eyes. He couldn’t escape everyone. He was tempted for a moment to say he was too busy and that the boy would have to come back, but then he thought it better to get whatever it was out of the way.

He let the kid in; an unironed check shirt, black jeans, longish hair.

‘How can I help you...?’

‘Tim, Tim Jeng.’

Henry gestured to a chair in the corner of the office. Tim Jeng sunk into it.

‘My Folsom, I’m sorry to interrupt your workday, I told the receptionist I could just make an appointment.’

‘It’s fine.’ Let’s get it over with.

‘Well, I’m studying through O-Sci and we have to profile someone whose work we admire for an assignment, and I’d really like to do you. Your work in the field of biopharmaceuticals and nanopharms is unparalleled.’

Henry felt his shoulders lift, and then rearranged his frown.

‘So... it’s a broadcast’, the student continued. ‘If we could make some time to meet. We could do it here?’ he said, looking at the posters, tilting his head.

‘I’m sorry, Tim, I don’t think I can do that at the moment.’

Tim’s face crumpled. ‘Oh. How come?’

‘I’m now working on a sensitive project, and the company would prefer it if—just for a while—I’m kept on the down-low, know what I mean?’

‘What is it?’

Abrupt, thought Henry. Entitled. ‘Sorry. Classified.’

Tim glanced at the screen behind Henry (blackened) then his eyes darted to the window.
‘What a view.’

‘Perhaps I could introduce you to Dr Pieta; she’s doing some fascinating work on rejuvenation techniques.’

‘I guess so. Thank you.’ Tim stood.

Henry didn’t want to leave his office. He pulled out his hSpace and texted Dr Pieta. He tapped his foot.

‘What do you want to be?’ Henry asked.

‘Well, my personal feed is already quite popular.’

‘There’s no real money in that,’ Henry heard himself say, as though he were his lawyer brother.

‘Oh, I know. That’s why I’m studying bio as well.’

He enjoys the attention, thought Henry. All these kids walking around obsessed with the idea of being highly rated. Do I think I’m above it? His device buzzed.

‘She’s free at 1.’

‘Great. Thank you.’

‘I’ll give you the details.’ Henry gestured with his device and Tim pulled out his, a Droid. ‘Does that thing sync?’

‘Yeah, it’s fine,’ Tim said, with an air of annoyance. ‘Appreciate it.’ He touched it to Henry’s hSpace, and then pocketed the clunky device.

‘The video quality on that thing is okay?’

‘It’s better, actually,’ he said. He shuffled. Henry knew he wanted to say more. Maybe it really was better, but wasn’t he embarrassed? Did Droids even have holo? Henry reached out and shook his hand, smiled.

‘It was nice to meet you, Tim. Good luck.’
Tim left, looking at Henry, puzzling over him. Henry was perversely enjoying the intrigue this project afforded him (wretched though it was). Let him wonder. Everyone made themselves so available. He wasn’t going to.

Henry had resisted joining a wellbeing centre for many years. But a fitter man is an adequate man, so he’d joined up and started visiting. Plus, it meant he got home a little later, and had an excuse for being tired.

As his feet pat pat pat on the treadmill, Henry’s panic-about-everything cleared out a little. It was a time of the weak man’s justification. First of all, he wasn’t weak, he was just trapped. His job was the best and only job for someone with training in biology, tech design and psych. And he was good at it. And he and Meg needed the money. And he couldn’t leave Meg, because he shouldn’t. Because she was a great, generous girl. Because he’d never do any better. Because everything was in the right place and he should be grateful. This was just anxiety. If he was taking his pills he wouldn’t be feeling any of this.

But that was just the problem.

He looked around at the pumping bodies, the obscene, smiling faces. A buff man in short patterned shorts pumped his fist at him. Henry gave him a mild thumbs-up. The music was fast and high-pitched with a weak, tinny bass line. Henry didn’t even bother with his headphones anymore because 1. they slipped out with sweat; and 2. the staff turned their shit up so loud you’d deafen yourself trying to drown it out.

The loud cardio room, the sweating, grunting weights area, signs saying ‘free erythropoietin willpower shot when u renew ur membership!!’ and ‘TOTLE WELLBEING. Follow ur PT session w a visit 2 our resident financial adviser!’ There was a new machine every month in the corner that promised to ‘zap fat’ or ‘tone with vibration’ or some other related claim, and Henry always shook his head at himself when he was tempted to try them.

Fist-pumps, positive pills and protein.
The yoghurt aisle

When Ava first arrived at the institution she’d had a different roommate, Shep. She’d been surprised they put men and women together, but she presumed it was all part of the training; all part of their reconditioning for the real world, where men and women worked, commuted, played together—without always sexualising each other. After a few weeks she heard rumours that roommates had even slept with each other and not been moved. She heard of other people who were suddenly moved despite being on their best behaviour. ‘Don’t get comfortable,’ Paul had told her when she was first admitted.

Shep never talked. He stayed on his side of the cold brick room and read the same books—print books—over and over, and played an ancient video game console which must have only had a few games in it, because Ava always heard the same music.

‘Can you turn that off, please?’ she’d asked. He’d complied and rolled over. She’d stared at the mole on the back of his neck and the smooth tapering out of his blonde hair. She’d always liked boyish types. Well, she’d always liked manly types, and women, and androgynes, and the lanky and the portly... but she liked his hair and his skin. Even his shyness began to intrigue her.

She made a few attempts at getting his back up, trying to make him talk. When he was out once she snooped round his side and found a graphene screen under his bed. She unfolded it. It was full of photos. She slid through them, pausing to bring up the tags and labels.

‘Who’s Anna?’ she asked later, and he looked up with big brown eyes, a blonde curl in front. His nose was a bit askew and he had no real chin to speak of. Ava wanted to kiss him and make him moan.

He didn’t answer, of course, but he frowned. It was a response, at least.

One night she simply came and sat next to him on his bed, peering over his shoulder at the pixelated game screen.

‘How can you play something like that? It’s so hard to look at.’
He sat it down. ‘I don’t want my eyes to evolve.’

‘You like it here, don’t you?’ she asked.

He frowned. Perhaps he’d never realised before. Despite the restrictions, Ava sometimes felt she liked it here, too. Off-people were lovely, and she'd always been a bit turned on by the idea of a voyeur, secretly watching her. Sometimes she’d be masturbating and she’d realise the Intelligence could be watching. She’d open up like the yellow heart of a flower.

She put her hand in Shep’s lap. It would be a shame to lose him as a roommate, or to be moved out of her own comfort zone, but she'd had it with his quietness.

Shep put down the video game and swallowed.

‘Anna is my sister,’ he said.

As two training groups wound their way to another converted wing, down cold stairs with eyes in the walls, Dean announced: ‘It’s my favourite training exercise, it really is’.

‘Oh!’ Cynthia squealed. The space had become a megamarket. Tricksy, bright light glinted off product surfaces, on rows of white metal shelves. What a brilliant experiment this is, Ava thought. To see what we gravitate towards, to see how long it takes us to choose, to see who buckles.

‘A trolley each,’ said Dean, ‘and on your trolley will be instructions for the purpose of your visit. You might be shopping for a family for a week, or for a special occasion such as a dinner party, or for three work days on your own. You will have a time limit, and a budget.’ Paul whimpered. ‘Other groups are undertaking this experiment at the same time, and some social contact is acceptable—after all, someone else may know where to find a product you need. Just see them as a friendly neighbour or a colleague you’ve run into. But remember, Balance is key—talking to everyone is not acceptable. There are some great voucher-rewards for the best trolley-loads.’
Ava gripped her fingers around the trolley-head and felt like pushing off to zoom down the slick aisle ahead: a resistance to how dull the fluorescent lights made her feel. Cynthia came up beside her. ‘Could you help me? We could help each other?’ Ava had no sympathy for the scrunched-up, washed-out face that hadn’t even looked at the task yet.

‘You’ll have to catch me!’ and Ava did push off, gently, to float down the aisle, touching the centre of the handle to release the holo of her task.

Ava was a family of four. Low income, but fussy teenage children. The family were slightly overweight and were trying to correct that. Great. She had to find inexpensive, healthy bulk food. What diet would she put them on? Low cal, no cal, low carb, low sugar, gluten-free, fat-free, low gi, high protein, vegan? The Zone, the Flow, the Baby-lo? The Barkley hybrid? The clock sped on and Ava reached up to a large packet of wholegrain pasta, feeling the ache in her lats from the wellbeing training. Pasta wouldn’t win on the calorie front, but with a tomato-based sauce it’d go far. Cynthia showed up beside her again.

‘I’m a single woman having a dinner party. What does that say? Why did they give me this one? I don’t understand.’

‘Stop trying to understand, Cynthia, and just do the task.’

‘But there must be a reason!’

‘Look sis, mine is difficult too. And so, I am getting on with it.’ Ava began to wheel toward the sauces.

‘Will you come to my dinner party?’

‘And leave my fat kids with peanut butter on toast? Hell no.’

‘I don’t understand. Everyone will bring their own stuff anyway. All I need is a new dress.’

‘Well, there’s probably an aisle for that.’

Ava sighed and wheeled quickly away from the spreading, dreamy smile on Cynthia’s face.
There were about 800 varieties of pasta sauce and Ava faltered, briefly. She’d already rolled past a crumbled Paul, rocking on his knees, in the yoghurt aisle. Yoghurt and dips, they were *always* killers. Bread, too. To make it worse, holos and incomplete jingles were blaring from the front of her trolley, set off by different products. She went for a sundried tomato pesto with a plain-looking label.

On her way to the snack aisle (looking for low-sodium rice crackers) Ava ran bang-on into another trolley. Jolted and cross, she looked up, only to be confronted with an artwork of a man: soap-star jawbone, boyish eye-twinkle. He tucked dark brown hair behind his ears, apologising. He was dressed in black, with pointy-toed shoes and a striped scarf. Ava wanted to touch.

‘Crackers!’ she exclaimed, but another moment in his presence seemed more appealing.

‘Sorry again,’ he said, throwing his scarf back.

‘Who are you?’

‘Today? An aged investor shopping for his wife and himself. Plus, the grandkids are coming over on Sunday.’

‘I’ve got two fat teenagers,’ Ava smiled.

He sucked in his breath. ‘Tough one.’

‘You too. Bet they have a hankering for old friends like roast lamb.’

‘I guess. Well, good luck.’ And he trundled off, his trolley making an authentic squeak-squeak around the corner.

*But who are you really?*

At the end, counsellors clocked the times their teams arrived at registers. Ava walked through the scanner, her eyes wandering, looking for the man of gold, the prettiest one she’d seen here yet. She was also thinking about that shitty Cynthia, queuing two behind her with a shimmering pink dress in her trolley, a pair of shoes and some make-up. She had to get her out of her room. Could she stand doing the thing that
might get her into trouble? Would that get her moved? She might just have to tape her mouth, or put sunglasses over those white, earnest eyes.

She was more excited by the thought of Counsellor Dean, here, fingering each item in the trolley: a curvy woman, a bicep popping with this heavy jar of Reggio in her hand. Short, practical fingernails. Nothing to get caught.

‘There’s a bit too much oil and fat in all of this, Ava.’

‘But the calorie count is pretty low all up.’

Dean frowned. Ava knew she must get off on her power, on the moments she could punish them and put them down. Ava wondered how the counsellors got to be counsellors. Were they really the most functional human beings? Did they go home at night and eat a balanced meal, watch a societal-value-laden TV show and make love to their long-term partner three times a week? Did they feel fulfilled, even happy, most of the time? Did they all take their meds?

‘Yes, the calorie count is pretty low. What, here, would the 17-year-old boy eat, though?’

‘Sandwiches, rice crackers; there are some low fat, low sugar chocolate biscuits, too. He’s probably got a part-time job by now anyway and is buying a lot of his own food. But the parents can try and educate him with all of this.’

‘Yes, okay. Your full assessment will come in later. Good effort.’ No smile. But a bit of an eyebrow. She indicated for Ava to hold out her hSpace and touched her own to it. A voucher announced itself with song and shimmer: 25% off the in-season range of eco faux-suede boots at Shoezazz.com! ‘Next.’

Later that evening Ava was all alone as Cynthia had been put in the Big Space. She was sitting still, trying to recover from the overwhelming noise and colour of the megamarket. She could hear an ad coming, faintly, from somewhere—the food hall or a nearby device. Something Paul had said to her on the way out from the exercise (after he pulled himself together in the yoghurt aisle) was echoing in her head: ‘did
you know they mixed us up with the actual borderline-crazies and psychopaths in there?’

‘What do you mean?’ she’d asked.

‘Ward F’, he said, and nodded very importantly.

Most wards contained cases of mixed extremity, but everyone knew to be put in Ward F you either had to have done something pretty damn subversive or dysfunctional, or else you had returned to the institution—possibly a few times—after attempts at reintegration into society. In other words, it housed the incurables. Had golden boy been from Ward F?
‘You know we shouldn’t eat so much pasta,’ Meg said through a mouthful that evening.

‘I like pasta,’ Henry said, bristling.

‘Who doesn’t? I’m just saying.’

Henry stayed silent. Some tinny neotrance track came softly from the speakers in the walls. Henry focused in on the living area, onto which the dining room opened up. Soft carpet, abstract paintings (only in colours that Meg said would match).

Henry’s favourite painting depicted a smudgy whippet dog. He wished they could have a real dog. They had a large grey couch, a glass coffee table, a massive screen, some side-tables with a few trinkets from their trips: a green silk scarf from Bali draped over one, a small art nouveau sculpture of a rabbit on top, from Hungary.

Sometimes Henry felt stifled by the apartment, especially as many of his decorative choices were moved or removed over time by Meg. But when people came over, Henry knew how it appeared to them. How it made them feel. Occasionally there was a sense of pride, and pleasure in this. At other times, despairingly, he wanted to drag those guests out to a dark and dingy bar (if any still existed) and pluck stories from the air. But that never really happened.

The other image that popped up, and surprised him as he was falling asleep, was the walls of the apartment falling away and the girl from the street corner walking towards him from the air, in 18th Century dress, her hair whipping about as though she were walking across a wild and windy moor. The image was accompanied by a shivery feeling, almost like shock. And every time he had this vision he would wake the next day feeling more trapped, more melancholy, more aching for something more.

Later, when wiping up the red trails from his cooking, Henry knocked a wine glass off the bench-top with his elbow and it tumbled to the floor, crashing spectacularly. Meg appeared in seconds.
‘Those were my mum’s hon! What the fudge?’

‘I’m sorry. It was an accident.’ Inadequate.

And she burst. Water jumped from her eyes. It was such a rare treat to see her cry that all the old tenderness came back. But she was out of there before he could offer comfort. He ran after. She was sitting on the bed. And there she explained: ‘it’s just a regular—sob—hormonal occurrence. By tomorrow it will have gone away.’

He wanted to tell her not to be afraid to feel something. Her shoulder was stiff under his hand. She told him she was almost up to the red pill, and doesn’t he remember how bad this was, before she started taking the Femme, with the pill, and then the Gloss?

‘It wasn’t as bad as you remember, Meg. We handled it.’

‘It was horrible. I was horrible,’ she said, tears drying quickly on her face. ‘I’m in control of my emotions, now.’ She stared ahead, a look of mild embarrassment on her face. ‘Maybe we need to treat ourselves to a holiday soon.’ She looked at him.

He didn’t say anything.

‘Maybe we should watch something together.’

‘Maybe.’

If it was the TV he would drown out the sound of the ads with alcohol.

‘Maybe we should go to the movies.’

He realised she wanted him to make the decision. He hadn’t been moved by a new film for some time. In his short thirty years he felt he’d seen the same four narratives over and over. And the characters were getting blander, the dialogue dumber. Grand themes weren’t explored at depth. The endings were getting happier.

‘There’s so much trouble and suffering in everyday life, why do we need to see it on the screen?’ Meg had said recently about her own preference for happy endings. Henry couldn’t help remembering when they were first together and she’d openly related to some of the bleaker characters in his film collection.
'They’ve done a remake of that old Jim Carrey movie, *The Mask,*’ she said. And the tears in her eyes did make him ache for the dark, so they went and sat in the cinema and everybody laughed.

When Ava’s dad moved back home, all his paintings were stacked against the wall of the garage. Ava would go and sit out there, sometimes, when the car was out, and flip through them, preferring their noise to the quiet house inside. Her mother had developed a smug air, a genuine one, at having won her husband back. At having him succumb. But to Ava he was no longer the dad she knew. The moustache disappeared, and he began to put on a little weight around the middle. His cheeks were ruddy with the stale heat of the house. It was no longer the ‘exertion-red’ they’d become after a fit of painting.

One day her dad was out with the car and her mother came into the garage.

‘Suppose we really should do something with those.’ She indicated to the paintings. Ava held them close, pleaded with her mother not to sell them. But her mother said they probably couldn’t sell them anyway: ‘Your father couldn’t even paint hands.’

It was just that his style was out of fashion. ‘Keep them for me, for when I’m older. I’ll put them in my house,’ Ava was on the verge of tears. *These paintings are my father.*

Her mother gave her a strange look. She couldn’t fathom why Ava would possibly want to keep them. They had no *use.*

Ava wondered how she could properly appeal to her mother. The fact that she *liked* them wasn’t enough. ‘There might be a trend in earnestness again, mum, like before I was born?’ she said. ‘They’ll be worth something then.’

‘Well, we’ll see.’

When Ava was 14, her father’s old friend Gerry found her in the garage.
‘I let myself in,’ he said. Her parents were at the new mall, in their new LuxEco.

Ava looked at Gerry’s face. Coupled with the paintings she was thrown back to the time before, when her father’s mind and hands were his own.

‘Your father didn’t want to hurt your mother anymore’, Gerry said, coming beside her. Ava’s face was wet.

‘Maybe my father should have been with a woman who understood.’

‘I remember when I first met her. It was his passion that drew her in.’ He paused. ‘I guess people change.’

‘Or are changed.’

Gerry put a comforting hand on Ava’s shoulder.

‘Your father’s spark is still there.’

‘In moments. Especially around you,’ she smiled at Gerry through her tears. He was a bit younger than her father. They’d grown up in the same neighbourhood. Gerry had remained an artist, but a very commercial one.

‘Especially around you, I’d say.’

Ava felt the warmth of Gerry’s hand, and looked up at his lips, and the mixed emotions she’d pent up, all the seeped-in dark from the paintings, all the holding out, was directed to her groin.

‘Can I show you who I really am?’ her heart asked. And she nuzzled her small head into the front of his pants.

Ava liked the theatre room. They hadn’t yet painted the walls. Well, not for a century, anyway. There was some remnant of white, peeling paint on the bricks. It was on a lower floor, and cold. Ava hugged her knees, in spotted tights, into her chest as they watched some romantic comedy. Ava wished it were Shakespeare. She wished people were cross-dressing or maybe dying for each other. She and Paul
began to whisper over the film, ignoring Cynthia’s comments about the hairstyles and dresses.

‘The endings, they always end up together in these sorts of films hey brother? Monogamous?’

‘Yes, yes I g-guess so. Pretty predictable.’

‘People are reassured by it.’

They held their breaths for a moment as a counsellor-guard checked-in, walked by the back row.

‘I think they are,’ said Paul. ‘Everyone wants to find someone.’

‘But why just one?’ asked Ava.

‘Well, they’re “the one”, you know? I don’t know.’ Even in the dark Ava could see he’d flushed and was straining to keep his eyes on the movie.

‘I’d get bored,’ said Ava. ‘I feel desire for many people.’

‘We all d-do. But, well, I guess it’s a kind of p-p-perpetuation of that, or a deeper feeling, with one person. It grows deeper over time and the feeling is better.’

Ava twirled her hair around her wrist, sat it over her shoulder as a scarf. *Goosebumps: I like you.* She thought about this *lasting sensation.* She always felt things deeply. Wouldn’t it be a destructive kind of feeling, for her?

‘You’ve made me curious about it, at least,’ she said, smiling at him. He smiled quickly.

‘Like, d-don’t you have preferences?’ he asked. ‘Say, chocolate over strawberry? Couldn’t you choose one for life and discover all the variations within the o-one flavour?’

‘I see what you’re saying, brother. But for me, it depends on the day. Though... strawberry jam is the best jam, I think. Sometimes apricot...’
‘Shh.’ The CG was beside them. They closed their mouths. Ava touched Paul’s arm briefly, smiled. They set their eyes on the film again. The too-bright film.

Ava devoted the rest of the time to imagining the lead actors (and that funny-eyed friend character) writhing around with her. The actress would confess all sorts of secrets.

The characters got together at the end and Ava smirked. They never show what they’ll be like in 10, 20 years in these romances, she thought. Would one possess the other like Ava’s mother and father? She was sceptical of there being an even, growing adoration.

But if that was possible... how curious. How did one ever find and choose just one person?
False claims

Henry examined the two teaspoon lump left in the jar of apricot jam. A few months ago he’d walked down two side streets and an alley to get to Jack’s Grocer, owned by a sweet old couple whose joint breath was always suspiciously rummy. It was the only place Henry could get this incredible jam made from fruit from their own garden. And all you had to choose between was apricot, fig or strawberry. Why, he thought, oh why did I not buy them all? Because Jack’s was now gone; boarded up. Henry had stood there last week, upset and frowning. He’d have to search online for another authentic family grocer. He didn’t like his chances. It was more likely he’d find ‘authentic’ family grocers—chain stores named after a faded reality; simulations.

He was going this Saturday to the big supermarket, because Meg said he was being ridiculous.

‘Shopping is not something to be dreaded’ she said over breakfast, ‘it’s a leisure activity’.

‘Is that what you tell the test kids at work?’ he asked. Meg was currently climbing the ranks of the publicity department at Medeo: a merchandise and toy company (in some way tied to GlaZen, to all companies).

‘When it’s hot out, the shops are cold. When it’s chilly, the shops are toasty.’ She smiled.

She didn’t enjoy it so much when she used to work in one, he thought. When he first met her she was 2iC at a cGirl outlet. She was abused by customers when the clothes fell apart and she was envious of the immaculate girls working in the higher class outlet, on the other side of the palms. She began doing freelance merchandising and window displays, bringing in a bit of extra cash, before going for an assistant publicist role at Medeo.

‘Do you want to come with?’ he found himself asking.

‘That wasn’t on my schedule for today. I have to catch up on reading, remember?’ Her hSpace lit up beside her, she glanced at it, ignored it.
‘Okay, sure. Well, any requests?’

‘Just stick to the list. Unless something we need is on special.’

‘Okay.’ And with his tail tucked between his legs, Henry left the apartment.

Henry had always had this absurd, excitable impulse to act out. To imagine acting out delayed the boredom. As a child, sitting in church (his parents were devout Consumers for Christ) he used to wonder what would happen if he just stood up and walked up to the pulpit, and stood next to the preacher, as he spoke. Or when he saw a play Henry would imagine walking onto the stage and standing among the action. Sometimes the thought made him stifle a giggle in his hand. Riding the elevator down from his apartment, Henry imagined what the quiet man next to him would do if, instead of greeting him with a nod, he called ‘Cuckoo’, or even made the motion of wanking a penis on his head. It was unbearable, the laugh beginning in his stomach, the corners of his lips spreading out. The man had a globule of wax among the grey forest of hair in his ear. Henry gave a little ‘pop’ of laughter. The man turned.

‘J—just something I read this morning’.

‘Ha, good for you. For me it all looked like bad news.’

‘So it generally goes,’ said a sobered Henry. Although locally it seemed quiet, as in a bubble or a bell jar; there were no visible protests or demonstrations. There were some small and thwarted attempts at terrorism every now and then, which the media always painted as coming from outside and not within.

‘Sixteen missiles, sheesh.’

The squirm of a laugh remained in Henry’s gut. He didn’t like to admit that he didn’t know what was going on. He tried to nod in a serious fashion, wishing the elevator would hurry up. It arrived at the ground floor and the man said goodbye. Henry walked behind him out into the dark, drizzly street. The rain was ice cold and made him feel tired. There was no savage wind to go with it, at least. He let himself giggle a little, madly, anonymous in the crowd.
He flipped his eyes between the path in front (feeling now, that he would like to see her again and maybe this time talk to her) and his device, checking for mention of the missiles. No one in his feed seemed to know or care about this news. A search revealed that they were a severe measure taken by the Protectionists to put off Adaptationist reps in Brazil. The Protectionists accused the Adaptationists of not introducing strict-enough population measures in one of the few remaining places with large amounts of clean water. They grew violent.

This war was confusing, ongoing. He forwarded the link to his networks, hoping the writer was reputable and he wasn’t making a faux pas, rubbed water off the screen of his device and pocketed it, then felt even more tired when he remembered where he was going.

Cynthia smothered coconut-scented cream on her long limbs, and asked Ava, again, about the Intelligence.

‘So people live in that tower?’

‘Well, we can’t really know what goes on in there.’ Looking out from their room they could see a tall stone tower with black windows in rings around. On the other side of it were wings like theirs, rooms on multiple levels, facing the centre, facing the tower. During all the experiments, they were either in other wings of the building with open sides—visible to the tower—or there were cameras in every corner.

‘What about over here?’ Cynthia asked, scrunching herself in the corner.

‘Well, there might be black spots, but I doubt it. There’s probably a hidden camera somewhere.’

‘And in…?’ she pointed to their tiny toilet cubicle.

‘Surely. And in the showers.’

Cynthia slumped on her bed, squeezing the moisturiser bottle and starting on those slender legs. She hitched up her skirt to get higher on the thighs.

‘What?’
Ava was staring. ‘Nice pins, sis.’

‘You watchin’ me too?’

‘Maybe,’ Ava smirked.

‘What happens if you do something real bad?’ Cynthia asked.

‘Well, they put you in the Big Space, most of the time. They might move you to another ward, too, if it were really bad. But,’ Ava frowned, ‘the question really is, what is bad, in here. Some things seem to be punished and others not. I think it depends on what needs correcting in each person—you know, what your sentence is—or maybe sometimes they really aren’t watching.’

Cynthia’s cream reminded Ava of her mother. Her mother epilating her legs in front of the TV. Her mother asking her father to rub oils into her back.

‘That stuff stinks, Cynthia.’

But Cynthia rubbed away, staring blankly out at the tower. Ava resented the downy flick of her tiny tricep with each circle. She reached out her arm.

‘Want me to rub some on your back?’

‘Oh… okay, I guess,’ Cynthia said, and turned. Ava pulled up her pink singlet to reveal a lacy bra and knobbly spine. She wanted to make her smell like something real. ‘I’ve got three vouchers already, y’know?’ Cynthia said.

‘That’s nice.’

Cynthia held up her hSpace and flicked through them, pausing on the free bikini wax with a whole-leg wax at Sunshine.

‘Have you ever been with a girl, Cynthia?’

Cynthia giggled. ‘Well, a few times my friend Mandy and I made out in front of guys at parties. And once Mandy even started to, you know, touch me.’

‘Did you like it?’
‘Well, it felt nice, I guess. If I closed my eyes and imagined it was Steve or something.’

‘Is Steve your boyfriend? Do you miss him?’

‘Kinda. Yes.’ Her shoulders hunched. She sat her hSpace down on the bed.

‘It does feel nice, to touch.’

‘Yes.’ Ava could feel the heat coming off Cynthia’s cheeks. *This will be easy.* She thought of that boy from the supermarket aisle and her skin was charged.

‘It’ll be easier with this off’, said Ava, undoing Cynthia’s bra strap.

‘What if someone comes by?’ Cynthia asked.

‘You can hold your blanket up in front.’

‘And what if *they* are watching.’

‘They’ve seen it in the showers, remember? And come on; don’t tell me there aren’t all kinds of pictures of you on the internet.’

‘Yeah, I guess you’re right.’

Ava moved slowly, gently, to the front, just a flicker of touch on Cynthia’s nipple, and Cynthia breathed deeper.

‘I always like it when Steve licks my nipples,’ Cynthia giggled, and her small breasts moved.

‘Yes, that feels nice, doesn’t it,’ Ava purred. She gently turned Cynthia toward her.

‘Like this?’ she asked, putting her mouth around the pink.

Aisles so blanched they were colourless. Zazz socks were on sale, Henry saw, and a nice South Australian Merlot, so he bought both. To get Meg’s favourite bread or try this new one? Some kind of mix of rye, scone dough, and sourdough. Apparently low-fat or something. Ridiculous. He picked up Meg’s favourite multigrain and the woman next to him snatched two of the new brand. Henry felt a twinge of anxiety.
It’ll be there next time. The nanopharm, his wretch, would turn that twinge to delight: Look! I’ve made a choice! it would say, and I’m capable of making many others. And it will never wear me out. And I even love it. Shopping is my favourite pastime.

Unlike anti-depression drugs, there wouldn’t be side-effects like lethargy and weight gain. For the user, there wouldn’t be extremities. They’d still react to fear, to sadness, to excitement—but on a constant level. Nothing would take over. Nothing would make them run, break down or fly. They would no longer sweat. They would no longer tremble.

There were countless brands and flavours of jam. And Henry bet every one of them would have too much added sugar, or, for the ones that said ‘no added sugar’, the fruit would be so processed and bland there’d be artificial sweeteners added, or some kind of synthetic thickener, or any number of other substances to make it rich, sweet and thick. One said fruit ‘grown by local farmers’, but where was local? He thought he had a neighbourhood until Jack’s disappeared. At school he’d learnt about strong consumer protests over labelling in the ’10s and ’20s. But people must have gotten tired, or stopped caring so much. Market competition was harsh; brands changed their messages to tell you what they thought you wanted to hear. If you ever found the genuine article, it was often beaten out by clever marketing by other brands, and you never found it again.

He might as well buy his jam on the internet. At least, then, he wouldn’t have to be under these draining, confusing lights. But there were high taxes on small shipments. He picked up a long skinny jar of strawberry jam—the most expensive one, that used the world ‘real’—and added it to the trolley. It was probably made at the same factory as half of the other ones. It would have to do.

When he got home, sweating from the heat and the haul, Meg was walking slowly on the treadmill, eyes on her hSpace. She nodded hello, then pressed something (Henry presumed, a line in the text of her book) and asked him to listen.

‘There are,’ Barkley said, smoothly, from her hand, ‘so many paths to choose from. We are free to go in whichever direction we choose. Our everyday decisions shape
and mould this path, and for everyone, the ultimate goal is surely happiness and fulfilment.’

_Surely_ we are free to be unhappy too, thought Henry.

‘To be happy and fulfilled you must know where you are going but must simultaneously seize the moment. Be happy now and be happy then, too. It’s not difficult, it’s all about Balance. You _can_ have that new dress, and also save for that holiday. Maybe it means a splurge this week, a deposit the next. Work out what works for _you_. And remember, every…’

‘Okay, okay honey, I have to put the groceries away.’ Henry walked into the kitchen and put down the biodegradable bags. He’d left the ones they already had in the cupboard and was wracked with guilt about having to buy more. He knew how long they took to _really_ break down.

Meg entered the kitchen. ‘I wish you’d pay more attention to what he says.’

‘I do. I’m just… never mind.’

‘No, what? Oh, Hen, why’d you get the Farmlet brand eggs, don’t you know they still de-beak them? And they have less than half a square metre per chook.’

‘I thought that was Green Range. Last week you said that was Green Range.’

‘It _was_ Green Range last week. Don’t you follow EthicalEats?’

‘Well, yeah but I don’t check it every five minutes.’

‘You’ve always struggled with keeping up.’

‘I don’t struggle. There’s no struggle,’ Henry said, looking away. ‘I just missed that particular piece of information.’ With the massive spikes in population and with less and less land, Henry doubted there were really as many ethical free range farms as the packets claimed. Henry believed feeds like EthicalEats existed so that people could feel less guilty by _trying_, and so they could add ethical status points to their profiles.
‘Okay, look, I’ll tell you my problem with that little sound-bite there, honey,’ Henry began, simmering but hoping he wouldn’t steam, ‘it doesn’t seem at all altruistic. Altruism is forgotten.’

‘Barkley always relates his theories back to the greater good. That’s what Balance is all about! We all get to live in a healthy economy and follow our dreams, but we also get to think about our impact on the environment and the future,’ Meg smiled at him, condescendingly.

‘It...’ Henry wanted to scream. *It just doesn’t work like that.* But he was alone. He imagined how the words would echo off the kitchen walls, be absorbed by the shopping bags. He couldn’t do anything. Worse, he was a part of it all. He sighed. ‘I got us some dark pistachio chocolate. For later. For a treat.’

‘Oh, Hen honey, that’s lovely. I haven’t had any chocolate for a week.’

It was three days later and Cynthia was still there when Ava got back from her gym program, combing her blonde hair and smiling shyly. Her teeth are too straight, Ava thought, and why haven’t they taken her from me like they did Shep? Cruel, strange reasoning as though they could see inside my head. Maybe this had something to do with Cynthia’s training.

In the next training exercise, they had to make the showers spotless.

‘This is boring,’ complained Cynthia, who looked as though she’d never used her scrubbing arm. Ava and Paul were side by side at the sinks.

‘Fella replaced Hans this morning,’ Paul said.

‘Oh yeah? Sentence?’

‘That’s the thing. He w-won’t tell me. He just looks at me insolently, like the fat unattractive geek I am.’

‘Oh, come off it. Can you guess?’

‘He was drinking from a flask a little.’
‘Maybe he’s not insolent, maybe he’s depressed. Too depressed to talk.’

‘You didn’t see his face. He’s probably “exaggeratedly egotistical” or something.’

They fell silent and appeared to scrub harder as Dean clip-clopped by in a red jumpsuit and heels. The counsellors and CGs always wore one colour, head to toe, to differentiate them from the patients. The patients wore normal clothes, since the purpose was to reintegrate them into society. It was rumoured that they even scored points for fashion sense.

Ava had about five dresses/long Ts and five pairs of tights, in comfortable fabrics, with colourful and eccentric patterns. She’d bought them all from op-shops, garage sales or local online, handmade stores. She also had a big fluffy red jumper for the cold, and on her feet she wore flat leather lace-up shoes. She also had a few scarves in different colours and materials. She loved to play with them, when she had them on. She knew she liked these clothes because they were comfortable and her body could move in them, but also because they were wild and defiant and her.

When Dean was out of earshot, Ava asked. ‘Is he hot?’

‘Who?’

‘Your new roommate, brother.’

Paul looked pained. ‘I don’t know. I’m not...’

‘Oh, Jesus, you can still tell if someone’s attractive or not if you’re straight.’

She felt bad, then, for the frown on Paul’s face, his shaky little lip.

‘It’s okay,’ she touched his hair, quickly and affectionately, ‘I’ll meet him soon enough,’ and she went back to scrubbing.

Paul scrubbed slower. ‘A leonine roar,’ he said quietly.

‘What?’

‘A Nabokov line. This guy, his name is Leon. It just reminded me of that.’
‘Fire of my loins!’ Ava laughed, then flipped her head down as Dean came back upon them.

Henry hadn’t given his colleagues much in the last progress meeting, even though the breakthrough had come. The breakthrough had come some time ago.

The *wretch* was in his hands, was in the hands of GlaZen. He was Leo Szilack without an Einstein to sign a letter on the dangers of the atom bomb (which were ignored anyway). Here was the tool to control society by effectively making society control itself. It was here in his hand, in a holo-diagram that he was about to show to Grethe and other executives around the table. It was his ‘adequate’ act in an inadequate life. The one that would ensure he was never locked up. But his instinct, as he entered the meeting room, was to smash through the massive window and plummet to the busy street. This was not a new impulse, but one he even had to deal with when sitting down quietly to dinner, or when he spotted his egg-shaped head in a shop window.

‘The nanopharm is ready for testing’ he heard himself say, slight tremor in his voice.

Grethe clapped her hands together. ‘Oh *well done* Henry. Let’s start up a plan: I’ll call the Head Counsellor at the institution tomorrow. We’ll visit; pick out a range of subjects, and figure out just how to go about the initial-stage testing.’

‘Sure, okay.’

‘We need you on field, for all the tests. I’ll call Dana right away too. She’s going to be stoked to move on from DBS.’

Dana, who operated mostly on deep brain stimulation patients, was to be the surgeon for the experiments.

‘Grethe, will the patients know what’s happening to them?’

Grethe pressed her hands together. They looked soft, well-cared for. ‘They’ll know they’re having an invasive procedure. At this testing stage, they don’t need to know the specifics.’
Lightning flashed, pink and unexpected, across their eyes. They all held their breath when the thunder boomed two seconds behind it. Henry felt that bloom of laughter again, struggled to stifle it. Imagine if the receiver on the top of the GlaZen building failed? If they all started to buzz and steam?

‘The people around them won’t know what’s happened—we’ll observe how they react to any possible changes too.’ Grethe clicked her perfect nails on the table top. She peered at him, square. ‘You don’t have a problem with that, do you?’

*I am fully functioning in my role.* ‘No.’

‘Good, you can meet with Dana first thing tomorrow and start to talk out the nanosurgery. I’ll arrange a visit for you both next week.’

‘Done.’

And what would happen if he just stood on the table?
A group of patients painted one wall of the cafeteria sky blue as Ava sat and ate green soup. Another group of patients were behind the cafeteria counter, supervised by a short moustachioed counsellor-guard in head-to-toe safari cream. The CGs were trainee counsellors. They worked a year or two part-time—broadly supervising, observing, patrolling—while finishing their studies. On graduation they’d take up proper positions as counsellors—if there was an opening.

Paul wandered around near Ava, his tray wobbling.

‘Come and sit, bro,’ she said.

‘T-thank you, Ava.’

A woman across from them was staring at her roti bread and sniffling.

‘Indulgently nostalgic?’ asked Paul.

‘What are some of the other sentences anyway?’

‘A-all sorts of things,’ Paul said, ‘belligerently banal, superfluously sentimental, gigantically obsessed, ferociously focused, unconstructively creative, devastatingly dishonest, unimaginably impulsive, annoyingly inquisitive. There’s one about freezing-up at anything domestic. So many more. I think the most common is highly inadequate.’

‘I can see why, it could be applied to a whole range of things.’

‘Yes, my, ah, shyness, and your…’

‘Abundance’

‘Yes, could be seen as aspects of inadequacy. Inadequacy to function normally.’ She slurped her soup, giggled at the noise. ‘How come you know all this anyway, brother?’

‘I knew before I came in. P-Perhaps I should have been sentenced as “perpetually paranoid”.’ He laughed, uneasily.
Ava sipped at the pea-tasting muck and observed a man tapping his spoon, once, before each slurp.

‘Have you always been “obstructively unassertive” though, Paul?’ When she looked in his eyes he looked down.

‘Y-yes, I mean, I can’t remember ever feeling… comfortable, with people. Even with myself, I guess.’

‘But you had a job? You had a place?’

‘Yes. I worked in IT. But my mother reported me, said I’d never meet a nice girl.’

‘But surely people are still allowed to be single.’

‘I’m sure they are. And I tried to bring this up at my trial, but I was so intimidated I was kinda struck dumb, and I trembled so bad, and turned white.’

‘So they admitted you.’

A woman with straggly, stringy hair and a series of bio-tatts (raised skin in creative shapes, probably DIY on a home bio-printer) slammed a hand on their table.

‘You guys got a cigarette, any kinda ’rette, maybe a slip of scotch? Any, ay? ay?’

‘Sorry.’ She moved on to the next table.

‘Afflictively addicted?’ asked Ava, and Paul snickered.

‘Who knows.’

‘The thing is, brother, I don’t feel like I’ll ever not feel what I feel for people. So how the fuck will I ever have a life outside of here?’

‘That is what we have to figure out.’

‘Though, to be honest, I don’t contemplate it that much.’

‘Oh—oh I do. I do a lot.’

Ava was thinking about how Paul reminded her of Winnie the Pooh. ‘Won’t you miss me though?’
Paul blushed, smiled, slurped an unfortunately timed spoon of soup. He swallowed. ‘You’ll be out there too, l-looking at the lightning and... in a big bed with lots of pillows.’

‘That would be nice.’

‘Reading lots of old, stinky books.’
Ava sighed. ‘You better stop. I’m not one for dreams.’

‘I am,’ he said softly.

‘I know, brother.’

Henry stared at the ring of grime around the bath as he pissed in the loo. He knew it was his turn to clean the bathroom. No doubt Meg would remind him of that fact soon. They could afford a cleaner, really, but it was good for their Balance to get their hands dirty.

He’d told her the day before that it was time for his big meeting, the end of the initial stages of the project. Tonight he’d come home to a congratulatory meal. He hadn’t told her about how sick he’d been over the wretch, or how long he’d dawdled. He’d stalled much more after seeing the girl. Because he’d realised what it might do to someone like her. And what the world would be like without those kinds of encounters. And yet, here he was, having finished it and handed it over. What else could he do?

Meg was good at stifling her curiosity. He suspected she was even a little proud to have a partner who was doing something so important it had to be kept a secret. Sometimes he wondered if they’d be closer if he’d confessed to her, excitedly, in bed one evening.

‘Sweet potato?’

‘Please’, he smiled. Inside he was upside-down, rumbling like the sky outside.

‘Lovely weather to go to bed early,’ Meg noted.
‘Sure is.’ *And sleep forever.*

Later he fought the urge to weep into her collarbone. She was asleep straight after. She slept easily from the pink pill. He should take one, he thought briefly, but the inevitable rebel surged up inside him. It was *too easy* to become calm, to become sleepy.

But what was he doing with his unquenched fire anyway? Maybe if he had taken the pills they would have numbed his ambition and he wouldn’t have created and handed over the *wretch.* But then, maybe, because he’d have been more content, he would have handed it over sooner. Maybe he would have walked right by the girl on the street, not noticing her.

Henry sat up and walked into the kitchen. He poured the last glass of wine from the bottle they’d had at dinner. He gulped it and went into the bathroom. He stared at the grime. He took off his shirt. He found the cleaning products and a cloth. He sprayed the bath and started to scrub. The sink, the shower and the toilet followed. He scrubbed hard, until his arm ached. Then he hung up the bath mat and slid a mop over the floor. He sat at the edge of the bathroom. He could hear Meg mumbling in her sleep. He remembered how bright her eyes used to be. He started to cry. About six months ago he’d been frank with her: ‘Go off your meds, Meg, you’ve changed.’ She’d looked alarmed. ‘But I was unstable, the doctor said so. Henry, I feel good now. Don’t you?’ and he hadn’t the heart or gizzards to tell her he didn’t feel anything much at all. She had this ability to block any negativity coming from him—a complaint, a statement, a sigh, a frown, even a slouch. ‘Life’s too short’ was one of her favourites. Short and boring, he thought. He longed for exquisiteness and splendour. To be transported.

In the Big Space, Ava looked into the corners, scanning for the possibility of a true and vivid sensation, like how bright the colours were in her memories of childhood. Was it this space, forcing her to look for it?
When Ava was a girl, after a tickly moustache kiss from her dad, and a hard, warm peck from her mum, she’d crawl into bed and be on a narrow river, in a red and blue boat, heading toward an arch. Through the arch was a cartoon town, and she’d go to the house of Mickey and Minnie Mouse. When Minnie wasn’t home, she’d sit on Mickey’s knee, and he’d say, in his high-pitched voice: ‘Oh I don’t know, Ava, you’re swell, but Minnie will be home any minute.’

When Ava was a girl she fantasised that she lived on a property, with a white horse, and on the veranda there hung a tiny cage, and in that cage she kept a tiny ghost. The ghost needed to get out and was miserable, but Ava loved it too much, and wouldn’t let it go. She remembered that with this dream came feelings she later came to know as arousal.

When Ava was a girl she fantasised about a tiny town she could stand over, filled with tiny people. She would remove roofs and move the little people in with each other, pushing their bodies together. And sometimes she’d also drag them apart and feel strangely satisfied at their yearning for each other.

No one ever found out about the incident with Gerry, her father’s friend. He stopped coming around as much. There was just one other time when she was sixteen and a girl she liked came home with her from school. Gerry was in the kitchen when she came in with her. Ava was twirling her finger around one of the girl’s blonde curls. Later in her room, she pushed the girl down on the bed and licked her and as the girl moaned she heard a grunt from the cupboard. After the girl went home she found Gerry hiding there. At his feet was a cum-streaked pair of her underpants. She kissed him. She put his hand up her shirt on her breast. There were feet on the stairs. Her parents were home. They had to pretend she’d been showing him an assignment.

Ava looked into the corners of the Big Space and felt one quick surge of frustration. It quickly faded. She’d failed the cleaning task—that was why she was in there. She had used the wrong product on the mirror. And she’d stood staring for a long time at the ingredients on the bottles, concerned. Her heart beat fast when the soapy swirls entered the drain. She was thinking about that visit to the dying lake, with her dad. The fish on the banks. The oily soil.
At least in here she had the quiet and the space for memory. Going back to avoid looking forward. Scanning the corners. Closing her eyes. Colours. Suppressing the desire for something more.

Henry just walked in the op shop for a second, on the way to work, to inhale deeply this strange smell. It was a smell Meg hated, so Henry could never buy her second-hand or vintage clothes. Even if he bought himself a weekend tie, or a weekend shirt, he’d have to wash it three times before wearing it. ‘I can still smell that musty old stink,’ she’d say. Reuse—recycle—reduce. People made superficial attempts at the first two, but the ‘reduce’ mantra was lost. It was huge at one stage. He’d learnt about the protests in those Protectionist groups he sat in (briefly, curious) at university. Actual improvements to the system were talked about by governments and corporations. Emissions were reduced, trees were planted, the gap between the economically advantaged and the disadvantaged closed marginally.

The gestures of power were accepted and applauded. It was acknowledged that the changes came from the bottom up—from the people. The effects of the damage done were still evident: storms, floods, droughts, famines, the extinction of various species. But something had been seen to be ‘done’ and now it was business as usual. The cries of the remaining radicals began to fade. A buzz around the concept of ‘Balance’ began. Markets could still grow, though with smarter, cleaner investments. The population problem was only tackled by some of the smaller land-mass nations. Others adapted. The motivational speaker, Barkley, and his imitators, took the concept of Balance and trickled it through to all areas of day to day living.

Looking at the men’s shirts, too (and he caught her soft scent within them) was a teenage girl, in a purple velvet dress, with khaki stockings and boots. For a split second he thought, maybe hoped, it was her, but no. She had been older and taller. A wide cuff on this girl’s arm only just hid some scratches. He’d read sensational reports, some days, about underground gangs of cutters—self-harm, a defiance of blandness. Of course the articles made them all sound sick and suicidal but Henry wondered, if he were a teenager now, what would he do? The girl smiled at him. He nodded.
What had he ever done?

He walked back out onto the clean and grey street, with its patches of appropriate colour. He thought about the op-shop girl. Many might choose to mix clothes old and new to show Balance. But head-to-toe op-shop connoted medication avoidance, doing art for art’s sake, choosing not to participate in property markets or technological upgrades. But then it was hard for the younger generations to resist, too, because this system was *all they ever knew*. To upgrade their portable devices before they broke, to buy and recycle, to be *on* something—that was their world. And maybe the scratches on her arm were a combination of defiance and confusion. Because these natural, normal things, on some deeper level, seemed *off*.

Henry, in the elevator at work, was still thinking about all this when a voice beside him said: ‘why don’t you turn that frown upside-down!’

He turned around to the largest, whitest grin he’d ever seen, belonging to a tall, blonde man in a pinstripe suit with a cartoon barrel chest. It was the three-dimensional image of the famous and popular motivational author and speaker, Brad Barkley.

‘Sorry, Mr Barkley, I was just deep in thought.’

‘Never apologise for your natural states of being!’ Barkley said, sounding exactly like his digital self. Then this ridiculous candy float man pushed the stop button between the 11th and 12th floors. He pressed for the doors to open and stepped out into a huge white space, with plush lounges, glass tables, and green palms in the corners. ‘Join me in my office for a bit, Mr Folsom?’

‘Uh…’

‘You’ve got time.’

Henry, baffled, stepped out into the space. The elevator got itself going again.

‘How did?’

‘Power and motivation, my friend. What you truly want to achieve, you’ll make happen.’
‘So it seems.’

‘Sit, sit,’ Barkley said, gesturing grandly to a bright white couch. Henry sat down gently. ‘Blackberry tea?’

‘Oh, uh, sure,’ said Henry. *Got any whisky?*

Barkley clicked and an assistant appeared out of nowhere with a tray—two cups and a steaming jug. Barkley picked up a cup which was bright pink and had a flamingo neck and head, wearing a top hat, for a handle. Henry’s cup was plain white.

‘Eccentric, isn’t it?’ Barkley seemed proud. The assistant poured their teas, and then wheeled himself away. Barkley plonked down next to Henry, causing Henry to spill a little tea on himself.

‘Sorry.’

‘Uh uh! My fault, Folsom. And it’s not on the couch, so that’s okay, *a ha ha ha.*’

Henry was painfully aware that he should not appear inadequate in front of the world’s most adequate man. A man who was a blend of balance, positivity, confidence, wellness, spirituality and ‘being in the moment while moving forward’. His messages were derived from philosophy, multiple religions, traditional self-help and classic business texts. He’d Balanced these elements perfectly and struck motivational gold. He was at the beck and call of the decision-makers and it seemed that included GlaZen. ‘So Folsom, what is it that you want?’

‘I uh, you brought me here, Mr Barkley.’

‘There are no accidents, Mr Folsom.’

‘How do you know me, anyway?’

‘People of privilege in this building have heard about your work, Mr Folsom. I’m very intrigued by the possibilities. I’ve been helping this company for some time (and this is between you and me, you understand) with the application of value to their products, to their advertising, and to their role in the community.’

Henry was already projecting himself forward to his conversations with Ken and with Meg, about meeting the big man. To Ken he was saying: ‘this puffed-up prick is
what we suspected, leading the lemmings into the supermarket.’ To Meg he was saying, teasingly: ‘I met your favourite person today, and he is no god. He’s a cartoon, with a belly, too.’ But really, that would be cruel. She worshipped this inflated boob.

‘So what is it that you want?’ Barkley asked again. In his mind, Henry knew. He wanted this anger to remain. He wanted it to be strong enough to drive him to do something. Something more than pissing on seats and sniffing old clothes.

‘Strength,’ said Henry.

‘Ah, yes, the experiments will be trying.’ Barkley stroked his chin, and Henry realised Grethe had probably paid him to coach Henry, not because she sensed inadequacy, but because it was standard with big projects. Most companies had whole floors dedicated to motivational training and maintenance of the employees. For big projects, an employee like Henry was assigned a big-time motivator with a big floor. ‘But, just remember this—what you’re doing,’ and he squeezed Henry’s shoulder with a big fist, ‘is for the wellbeing of all.’ He gestured to the window. ‘Your creation will be the balm of the people, the slayer of their demons, the helmet and kneepads in all their adventures.’ Damp wood, thought Henry. The pail putting out their fires.

‘Yeah, yeah, I know.’

‘Good,’ Barkley patted his back. Henry tried to muster a smile. Inside he felt fucked-up and alone.

This functionality training exercise consisted of two tasks: the dressing of avatars, and creating a ‘desire collage’ from magazines. Cynthia clapped her hands together as Dean explained. Ava stared at the bold, blue vein in her right elbow crook. She had relaxed a little about Cynthia. Surely she would improve quicker than anyone else, and be moved on and out. She was semi-functional in their eyes, surely.

‘Ooh, it looks just like me!’ Cynthia exclaimed of her avatar, which posed and rotated out of the centre of her screen. And when Dean handed Ava hers it was
indeed the cartoon image of her: big hips, small wrists and long hair parted to one side, the colour of porter. The cartoon, though, had on boring white underwear, which Ava immediately drew stripes on. Dean squinted at her.

‘See?’ said Ava, pulling her top down to reveal the edge of a black and white stripy lace bra. Dean raised one eyebrow then looked away.

‘On with your task.’

Paul’s tongue stuck out and wiggled while he worked and Ava had to stop looking at it. He was selecting a tweed jacket to attach to his doll, and Ava could see Dean’s head shaking at him.

Ava wished for the scratchy feel of a cardboard doll and waxy paper clothes, like the paper doll she’d worn-out as a girl. She flipped through the clothing items and was tempted by the Morticia-dress, the corsets, the man-jumper with the stitched horse, and the hippie-green cowl-neck, but was smart enough to know these were the ‘unfashionable’ choices. She was in a calm mood and she decided to try to play, today, with their rules. There was a pair of black high-waisted jeans, ankle boots, a ‘common unconventional’ shirt (black with a kitten skull) and a navy blue jacket.

‘It’s a little dark’, said Dean, so Ava added a pair of red-framed spectacles for Balance.

Cynthia had dressed her doll in gold lamé hotpants, a low-cut black singlet with ‘pRncess’ written in gold, and black over-the-knee boots.

‘Are you saving up for a boob job?’ Ava asked.

‘I don’t know.’ Cynthia looked pained.

Ava felt bad. ‘It was sarcasm. Sorry. Your boobs are great.’

Cynthia flushed a little. ‘My two best friends, Liana and Teisha, have them. Teish got a boob job and labioplasty for her 18th birthday.’ She smiled.

Ava shrugged. ‘I know not many people feel the way I do, sis, but I don’t see the point. I think it would be better if people were just more... open-minded.’
But it’s not their fault, she thinks. And anyway, I’m the one who is locked up.

Ava had had many disappointing experiences with sexual partners over the years. Just when she was getting lost in their skin, in their hair and their breathing, she’d notice the way it seemed a performance for them—the way they’d angle their bodies or necks, the way they’d look out under their eyebrows. She suspected often they were with her for the sake of curiosity, or worse, it was a transaction in the accumulation of sexual wealth. It was lonely.

Cynthia actually did okay in the exercise because the exercise was about fashion and she wasn’t far off. Skin was still in. She received a voucher for 30% off a laser procedure of her choice at the Gamm clinic.

Now, the collages of desire. Ava slid her finger across the pages of the magazine and marked and cut out faces, ankles, patches of violet and fingertips. There were also paintings, and a little television set with Rod Serling from the Twilight Zone on it (and a windy clock). This time, she was sick of playing. Paul was doing better than her at pretending—his collage so far consisted of an air conditioner, a golf club and a jaunty hat. He held up his screen to show her, smiling shyly. Cynthia’s was all clothes and lipsticked-lips, so many they were layered over each other. If it weren’t for her lazy dreaming, Cynthia would be the perfect cog in the system. If she was a little less plain, Ava thought meanly, she could have sought a sugar daddy for product purchase protection.

She was still thinking about sex. Or love? Some young guys she’d been with couldn’t even come from intercourse or head; she’d had to jerk them off the way they did themselves during hours of porn viewing. Sometimes they’d close their eyes and wouldn’t touch her. Older partners became preferable—men or women, or in-between—especially those who had been in loving relationships. Even then, with the men, Ava often found previous partners had done whatever the guy (thought he) desired, so he had learnt nothing. Sometimes Ava’s faith would be restored when she found someone who had been looking for something to feel, something deeper, a connection. It was still possible.
Dean told Paul she could see through him, but thank you for trying; told Cynthia she needed more Balance; and told Ava it was good to be honest but hers was an overly emotional image. ‘It shows troubling internalising. What about desires for living? Surely you need more than faces and colour. The artworks are okay—something to put in a house.’ Dean stood looking for ages. Her breathing was shallow. She smelled slightly of musk. ‘You may all go, but Ava must stay here and draw a picture of a house and fill it with things.’ Paul gave Ava a sympathetic look as he rose. Ava sighed. She didn’t want a house with things. She wanted her father’s old house. She would draw paintings stacked upon one another, an old patched-up couch, and a crackling radio.

Henry sat in the boardroom waiting for Dana, watching a pigeon bobbing its head over the city. It was a rare calm and mild day and Henry appreciated the sky’s hue. The encounter with Barkley now seemed a bit like a dream. Barkley himself seemed fabricated by some fanciful, yet constrained, imagination.

Dana, the deep brain surgeon, was coming to meet him about the application of the nanopharm. She would be the one to perform the surgery on the patients. Henry knew what the wretch would do to the part of the brain it was intended to stimulate, Dana’s job was to get it there.

Dana entered, in a smart navy suit and pointy-toed shoes. Her hair was short and dark and efficient. She shook his hand and sat, folding one leg over the other. Henry was aware of his slouch, and corrected it. She seemed to be waiting for him to speak.

‘You’ve been to see the prototype in production?’ Henry slid the screen toward her with an enhanced blueprint. She pressed the corner of the screen and the image hovered up between them, rotating.

‘Yes. We’ll use the bots to get it into place, as we do to insert the probes. How will this differ, in its effect, anyway?’

‘Well, the probes may stimulate an area of the brain that is inefficient, or lazy, or even inactive—through electrical pulses, right?’ DBS had been in use for over 20
years to treat wide-ranging, severe conditions such as clinical depression, epilepsy and Alzheimer’s, when the patients didn’t respond to drugs. The probe was wired up to a ‘brain pacemaker’ in the chest, releasing a steady electrical pulse. ‘The nano acts like a more controlled version of some of the top regulatory drugs on the market—such as Gloss—by releasing different kinds of signals into the brain. It can also give a general electric pulse, like the probe, and it can “reach out”, through heat-seeking, into different areas: releasing endorphins, acting as a painkiller, inhibiting adrenalin in the case of anxiety, and so on.’ Henry couldn’t help getting worked up, even feeling a little proud of his *wretch*.

‘And how is it controlled, in terms of what it does?’ Dana asked.

‘The nano is intelligent, programmed to recognise certain abnormalities and correct them, going by a standard census of brain scans in normative, functioning, healthy individuals. Each nano can also be programmed for specific functions, before it’s inserted.’

‘And once they’re in?’

GlaZen’s other nanobiological devices and nanobiopharmaceuticals were connected to a network. People swallowed nanos, or had them implanted, and their hSpace would tell them if their gut cultures were off, if their blood pressure was too high, or if anything else needed regulating. If they had a heart attack, their nano would call an ambulance for them. These nanos were still expensive: health was a status symbol of the tech-haves.

The *wretch* had not been approved for basic connectivity yet, even if it was just for reporting purposes. Someone high up didn’t think it was a great idea to give a company the ability to control and alter the brain-implanted nano remotely. Henry thought it was only a matter of time, though. Imagine if the country were invaded? The company could turn everyone implanted into happy soldiers. And what about influence? Could GlaZen remotely stimulate certain pleasure centres in the brain when a consumer was looking at one of their products?

*I might be able to stop them. I might be able to get out. I did this.*
‘Once they’re in,’ he explained, ‘they’re simply switched on via a one-function remote. The patient’s doctor will hold onto this so the nano can be turned off if there is any trouble.’

‘Like a malfunction?’

‘That’s very unlikely.’

Dana nodded, smiled. ‘It’s so exciting. This is really cutting edge stuff.’

It was. Henry flushed with pleasure, then felt a tiny flare of shame in his stomach. He minimised the holo, signed out of the screen with his thumbprint. A quick, strange memory visited him: turning around and seeing his mother’s face, tears glistening in the blue light of the TV. A huge seagull flew by the boardroom window, seemed to look in. Cutting edge. In history, it was all going to be his fault.

*Pulse, reach out*

Ava’s trial had been held in a space like the Big Space. An intimidating podium rose out of the centre, and Ava was lined up behind green velvet ropes, which snaked around like a line for the rollercoaster. She could see and hear the trial preceding hers.

‘I’m aware that you have a fungal problem. How do you feel about this?’ asked the Head Counsellor, who looked like a prawn wearing a wig.

‘Well, embarrassed I guess.’ The boy shed tears that echoed loudly in the space and the people waiting caught them in their net of nerves. Ava thought that boy looked like the one she’d had a threesome with two weeks before, but he hadn’t had a fungal problem.

Because the boy was crying and wasn’t rational about his situation the Head Counsellor threw down his hammer. It echoed through the big room.

Ava didn’t cry when it was her turn but she flirted with the prawn and her strap fell down. She imagined giving him a tight, pink erection that would strain against his head-to-toe paleness. She cried later, locked away behind plastic, but then realised
she was amongst the *off-people* of the city, and thought how easy it would be to love so many of them.

Cynthia was difficult to love, though. She didn’t even have interesting teeth, thought Ava, as she watched Cynthia’s strained face peer into a pocket mirror. She wondered where that long-haired boy was and which ward he was on. His potential *off-*ness, for Ava, was a turn-on.

‘Having people over for dinner,’ said Counsellor Dean, ‘is a way to network, create deeper friendships, or even get to know someone you want to be romantic with.’ Dean looked directly at Ava. ‘You each have a table to set, courses to choose, and a document with the names and histories of people you might invite. Think about it carefully. Conflict is dangerous and unproductive. Think of how you can get the most personal and professional fulfilment out of the situation.’

Ava’s first thought was that this white table needed a bunch of rich, stinky flowers. But they weren’t on the list. She couldn’t get past the blandness—all the flavours and all the biographies were typical. If this were real life, she *would* have put the park ranger next to the logger. They might discover a shared outlook. They might change. They might make love.

So she did. And now, in a way, she was doing it for that pained look on Dean’s face. Because Dean liked her and would rather not lock her in the Big Space.

Paul was next to her, setting fork knife spoon, and writing people’s names in their places.

‘Which meal will you choose?’ asked Ava.

Paul jumped. ‘Uhh, what will you?’

‘Something with ingredients that have just come out of the ground. Still dirty.’

Paul looked around, and Counsellor Dean was watching. ‘Can we talk in this one?’

Ava shrugged.
‘So, this Leon...’ he said, writing *Gary, middle management* on a place card, and setting it next to *Lisa, primary school teacher*.

‘You’re not inviting the artist?’ she asked.

He looked at his place cards, panicking. Ava told him to *chillax, brother* and rubbed one of his shoulders. ‘What about this Leon?’

‘I h-haven’t talked to him much yet.’

‘What does he look like again?’

‘Uh,’ Paul blushed, ‘like the sword-wielding, long-haired hero of a fantasy novel. But...’

‘But?’

‘But there’s something a little, uh, unsettling about him, too.’

Ava was intrigued.

‘Like maybe he’d been moved up from *another ward.*’ Paul blinked over wide eyes, flicked them to Dean.

‘How do you know?’ Ava whispered, turning back to her own table.

‘He seems too happy to be here.’

Ava imagined, on her table, violet cyclamens, and maybe daffodils, and imagined Counsellor Dean coming up behind her, frowning but wanting to wrap her arms around her. Wanting to squeeze a little too hard. Ava invited the artist, and sat him next to the logger on the other side. She would invite no execs, or stockbrokers. Not because they were bad people, but because they perpetuated the grey. She invited one sales assistant. She imagined the conversation would be about cartoons, and maybe the Velvet Underground, extinct species, and Fellini’s *8 ½*. They might talk about Albert Camus or, a topic she really loved, masturbation. And they would eat only meat and chocolate, and drink red wine, which would ring their lips so even the men would look feminine.
And then Dean was behind her, very close, frowning, and she said ‘I know you know better than this,’ and Ava said, ‘but this is what I really want,’ and Dean sighed, because, Ava could see, she did not want to punish her again.

‘Ava, if you fail your next task, not only will I leave you in the Big Space overnight, but I will send a report to the Head Counsellor, recommending your move to another ward.’ Ava saw Paul’s worried head shoot up from his task. Ava didn’t know what to feel but she felt something, and mostly it came through as a daring and seductive gaze, directed into Counsellor Dean’s eyes. Ava reached out and touched Dean’s hip, lightly, in the place she always touched herself.

Dean remained; one beat, two, and then stalked back to her chair.

‘Ava, dismissed to your room for the remainder of today. No dinner.’

Ava left the bland table. She felt she hadn’t entirely been made to pay for this rebellion just yet.

Henry called Ken at lunch time from the office.

‘Hey man, you’ve got to come over tonight, Meg is having a few people over, you know, to celebrate this stage of my project completion. It’s going to be tiresome.’

‘Way to make me want to come.’

Henry pleaded with him. ‘If you’re there I might at least get a say on the music.’

‘Okay, whatever Meg’s making is probably better than toasted cheese.’

‘Yes, it’ll be delicious. Bring rum.’

Ken said he would and Henry said great three times over. He was tapping his finger on the desk.

‘Are you okay, man? You sound a bit frazzled,’ Ken asked.

‘I’m okay.’

‘You’re stressed.’
‘No, I feel... nothing. Except, yeah, maybe trepidation.’

‘Aren’t you helping people? I mean, I know you can’t talk about it, but considering your job I thought it’d be something that aids.’

‘Aids Functionality, yeah.’

‘You think there’s a loss involved.’

‘I think there’s gain involved. But not for the patient.’ Henry scrunched up his eyes. Ken couldn’t see as they weren’t using vid or holo. TMI, he thought. ‘But never mind, mate. You’re right, I’m just uber stressed. Look, just come tonight, will you?’

Meg had gone all out with no-smoke candles and pale flowers. The smell of apricot chicken wafted through the apartment.

‘I love apricot chicken!’ Henry called on his way in, and Meg, in a pink apron, said ‘I know’, and kissed him with a sly smile on her face. All this effort was for him, he thought, and he felt that swoop in his stomach again. He had the urge to say, out loud, ‘I’m sad for the way things end’, but didn’t, and then someone buzzed the apartment.

It would be Ken. And he’d forgotten to text her and tell her he had invited him. ‘Hon, sorry, I forgot to tell you I invited Ken, too.’

She frowned.

‘What?’

‘It’s okay, don’t worry.’

‘No, something’s wrong, tell me before he gets up here.’

‘Well,’ she pulled off her apron, hung it, smoothed down her honey hair. ‘It’s just that all the others are couples. He might feel uncomfortable.’

‘He’s my best mate; I want to celebrate with him.’
‘Well that’s the problem, too. You’ll just end up cracking jokes with him all night
now and ignoring everyone else.’ And then the outburst was over and she turned and
Ken was at the door.

‘I won’t. And I don’t,’ he said, inadequately, walking over to let Ken in.

‘Hey man,’ they handshake-hugged. Ken came into the kitchen. ‘Hi Meg,’ he gave
her a kiss on the cheek.

‘Hi Ken,’ she said, smiling, no trace of her upset. ‘How are you? How’s work?’

Henry became snagged on the roughness of artifice as the three of them wove stories
of their day. If this was the mood he was in he’d be picking at the bones of voices all
night, and he’d need to have more drinks than seemed adequate.

The screen was on in the kitchen while Meg cooked. One grey-haired woman was
taking another woman into her house, because she hadn’t saved enough for her
retirement. ‘It was up to you, you know?’ said the first old lady, showing her to a
small room with just a bed. The advertisement finished and was followed by a show
where the contestants had to lose five to 10 kilos by cooking the best low-fat meals
and becoming the best dancers. The contestants were all from popular broadcasts and
holo blogs.

Henry began setting the table, chatting to Ken over the screen. He knew Meg would
want to use the best plates, and the best cutlery, so he found them in the cabinet.

The sizzling scent of mushrooms filled the room, and the buzz came again.

‘Sorry, I’m running a bit behind’, called Meg, folding the screen to turn it off.

‘Want me to stall them?’ Henry joked. Meg appeared in the archway, frowning. ‘I’ll
get the door,’ he said.

It was Philomena and Edward—friends through Meg’s work. They both had black
hair. Philomena wore boots, jeans and a white t-shirt with the face of obscure icon
Bill Murray. Edward was dressed almost identically, but on his chest was the toilet
signed R. Mutt.
‘Henry! Congrats are due on completing your secret endeavour, I hear?’

‘Thanks, Phil, it’s only phase one, really. But cheers,’ he shook their hands. ‘You guys remember Ken?’

‘Yes, yes, hey mate, how’s the old environment doing these days?’

‘Tomorrow’s storm will tell you.’

‘Batten down the hatches?’

‘You betcha.’

Meg arrived in the entranceway, looking as though she’d just applied her make-up. She ran a hand through her blonde hair. ‘Edward, Philo, darlings, come in!’

‘Meg, you look great, have you lost weight?’ asked Philomena.

‘Oh, well, maybe, it’s the new Gloss. It costs more, of course, but appetite regulation is a nice bonus.’

‘Well,’ said Philomena, ‘here is one lady taking responsibility for her wellbeing. Good on you, lovely.’

They gathered around the table and Meg offered chairs, offered pinot gris—everyone took a modest amount. There were two chairs left.

‘Who’s…?’

And Meg hopped up to answer the buzz. Henry’s heart sank a little when the silver-haired heads of Meg’s parents—Tom and Ness—entered the dining room.

‘Surprise!’ said Meg. And Henry kissed the couple on their neat cheeks.

‘We brought you a little congratulatory gift,’ said Tom, ‘for your achievement.’

‘Oh, Jees, you didn’t have to do that.’

‘Not that we really know what it is!’ exclaimed Ness, a regal woman in a champagne suit.
‘It’s enough to know it’s for the wellbeing of the people,’ said Meg, proudly, standing over him. Henry had the vague urge to be sick. He looked down at the bag in front of him. Imagine vomiting all over the gift. Ken was sitting back in his chair, eyebrows raised.

‘Should I open it now?’

‘Go ahead,’ said Tom.

Henry reached in and pulled out a light, silvery, cigar-shaped box. On the top, the letters M T W T F S S, with ridges in between.

‘It’s titanium,’ said Tom.

‘Wow’, said Henry, looking up at the faces—proud, expectant, pleased. He felt as though he were in a dark and silent cone, surrounded by beaming, blinking probes. *They’ll never find me under here.* ‘It’s just spectacular. I’ll replace my plastic one immediately. It’s so light!’ They nodded and seemed to clap under their breath and Meg took it from his hand and put it somewhere else. The guests settled into their seats. Meg returned with the entree, the mushroom dish, which everyone agreed looked incredible, and there was a clicking of pill cases as each guest popped with their first forkfuls. Henry gave his a well-practiced slip under the tongue and removed it a few mouthfuls later with a napkin.

‘Ken, aren’t you going to take your pills?’ asked Meg.

‘I’m afraid I left them at home,’ he said. ‘But don’t worry, I can take them a bit late.’ Henry gave him a brief look. ‘God, Philo, I love your shirt.’

‘Isn’t it great? They had a sale on Tsite the other day and Ed and I bought up. This guy—I saw him in something once, he’s funny.’

‘Yeah, Bill Murray—*Ghostbusters, Lost in Translation, Rushmore, Scrooged*?’

Philomena shook her head. ‘Maybe the scrooge one.’ Henry could see Ken’s temple pulsing.

‘Man, I’ll have to lend you some.’
Henry and Ken, who sometimes wore vintage band shirts under their plain clothes, had often sat with their grilled-cheese sandwiches, lamenting the mass of people who wore cultural symbols for status points, without even knowing (or liking) anything about the artist, their work, or why they were on a shirt. The manufacturer might not even know. They probably gathered the information from niche social media groups.

Henry thought he’d test Edward.

‘I like the Duchamp, myself,’ he pointed at Ed’s shirt.

‘Yeah it’s pretty funny,’ said Edward, grinning, giving nothing away. And Henry felt bad for judging them. Another look came over Edward’s face. ‘Um, actually,’ he looked at Philomena and took her hand, ‘we have something pretty cool to tell you guys.’

Everyone pretended not to notice Meg dropping her fork.

‘We’re engaged.’

Meg ran around the table to give them a hug. Henry knew there was more to those watery eyes than happiness for her friends. Then Henry realised Meg’s parents were staring him down and he wondered if Meg had already known—if this was pressure, if this was a set-up. Something in his head went *I'll fucking R. Mutt you*, and he pulsed his shaking hand in Edward’s, willing it to stop, and willing the sick in his throat to disappear. ‘Congratulations, that’s wonderful,’ he heard himself say, through the cone.

‘Yeah, well we figure, it’s been two years, and we love each other.’

‘And Barkley says…’

‘Oh!’ Henry interrupted, ‘I met that guy today.’

‘What?’ All eyes were on him.

‘He works in my building. He invited me to his office and gave me a pep talk about the project.’

Ken snickered a little. Meg’s eyes shot him down.
'You… didn’t tell me, yet.’

‘Sorry Meg, I forgot, after everything today.’

‘You know I admire his work so much—he changed my life, you could have texted me.’ It was as though Meg had forgotten, for a second, they were in company.

‘Meg, darling,’ her mother said, ‘perhaps Henry can tell us all about it now.’

‘Oh, yes. Sorry.’ And Meg sat down, and after two intense surprises was still able to pull that waxy smile out from somewhere and slide it across her face. The remnant of a tear slid down her stretched cheek.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘he was big…’ and they all leant in. Meg twitched, and he knew he was at the edge of her. He had to be careful. He had to win her and her parents and friends back, constructing himself in a favourable, together light. He knew he couldn’t steer the conversation away from ‘when will the wedding be’ forever, but he could try.

Dinner was on and Ava was still confined to her room. Dean came to the plastic grid of the door.

‘There’s a black spot,’ she said, ‘two floors down, an emergency stairwell. The camera is buggered.’

Ava nodded.

‘Tomorrow, before my shift, in your free gym time. No one will notice.’

‘The Intelligence?’

‘No one will notice.’

And then she was gone. Ava let her head drop over the edge of the bed. The blood rushed in. *A new sensation.*
The morning sounded and the plastic was pulled back. Ava edged out of bed, groin first. Cynthia was sitting up and crying, watching Ava get dressed.

‘What is it?’ Ava asked.

‘The Big Space, it was in my head all night.’

Ava tried not to laugh. The Space seemed to manifest differently for everyone.

‘I couldn’t fill it up, no matter how hard I tried.’

‘Maybe it’s the trying that will count.’ Ava pointed to the tower. Cynthia folded back under her blankets.

Ava went to leave and heard Cynthia’s voice. ‘How will you fill your free time today?’

‘Not sure yet. But you can’t come.’

Later that night, after two wines each, the guests were being let out. Meg’s mother held Henry tightly on the arm, until it hurt, and whispered, with fiery eyes: ‘I’m sure your project is stressful, but I won’t have my daughter waiting forever.’ Then she smiled and dropped his arm, leaving it throbbing, and kissed him on the cheek. Tom gave him a look to confirm his wife as he shook his hand. ‘Thanks again for the pillbox,’ Henry said, his face exhausted from all the talking and smiling.

Edward and Philomena were gone, and he so badly wanted Ken to stay so they could dissect the conversation, but Meg waited with arms folded. She gave Ken a kiss on the cheek and Henry walked him to the door. ‘Thanks for coming, man’.

‘Hey, no problem. Max entertainment value.’

Henry thought of Ken going back to his small apartment, pouring a glass of wine and putting his feet up, and envied him. But he knew, as Ken looked back and gave another warm wave to Meg, that it sometimes worked both ways.

‘Want to stick around for the “issue” discussion?’ Henry asked quietly, smirking.
Ken gave him a handshake-hug. ‘See you, man.’

They did the dishes together in silence.

They were lying in bed, both facing the ceiling and Meg said ‘I’d love to meet Barkley. He changed my life.’

‘I know,’ Henry said.

‘Remember when I used to wake up at about four or five in the morning, thinking I’d heard something?’

Henry did. He remembered the way her body would work itself into a spooked anxiety, the way she’d fold over and say in a little-girl voice that she was scared, and that she knew it was silly, but she was. And he would stroke her hair and kiss her cheeks until she settled and stretched out a little and her breathing became deeper again. He’d be awake then, watching her, feeling worthwhile and protective and loving.

‘I never do anymore, which is good.’

‘Yeah, that’s good.’

‘I know it’s late but should we…’ she rolled toward him. He wished she wouldn’t ask. He wished she’d just touch him and cuddle him and kiss him and ease him into it.

‘I don’t know, should we?’

He saw her beginning to think about what time she had to get up tomorrow and what had to be done and he kissed her then. She smiled into his lips.

Ava looked from tower to rooms as she walked, waving occasionally. She put one worn shoe in front of the next, and moved her hips. She hummed a song she liked to dance to. At Paul’s room, she stopped. On the other side of the room there was a

‘Ava, where are you off to?’

‘Nowhere,’ she said, staring at the head. ‘Leon?’

Paul nodded.

‘Leon,’ she repeated, *leonine,* and he turned. And it was the one from the supermarket exercise. He smiled at her and stood up.

‘Leon, Ava; Ava, Leon,’ said Paul, but he was frowning, and he ducked his head. ‘So, so Ava…’

She couldn’t hear Paul while she shook hands with Leon. She could only feel the heat.

‘What are you listening to?’ she pointed to the one ear bud hanging over his shoulder.

‘Retro.’

Ava was transferred back to the space of her dad’s house, the scent of the oil paints, the crackling old box playing ‘Comfortably Numb’ and the feeling of irony when that song would later come on in the peach house. Her dad would still love it, but smile instead of nurse his head in one hand.

‘Do you have speakers?’

‘No, but we can share.’ He held up the bud.

Paul came into focus, sitting back on his bed, pulling out a deck of cards and turning to the corner. His back trembled through his shirt. Ava felt sad and sorry for him. She would’ve liked to talk to him all day. But here were the sharp edges of a man. And possibly a hint of danger. Hadn’t Paul said the others in the supermarket that day were from ward F?

She sat beside Leon where he patted the bed and gathered parts of him through the music. Goodbye blue sky.
The waiting Dean was forgotten.
Part two

*Incunabula*

Henry was up earlier than usual. It was still dark. He could hear the wind howling at the windows as he put an old band shirt on underneath his collared one. The storm was threatening to break already. There was no bread for toast, and they’d used up the milk for coffees last night so Henry ate a few forkfuls of apricot chicken. He ducked out, before Meg was even awake. He remembered that he used to be able to feel her heart in his body, on a day after making love.

He was to meet Dana and a representative counsellor at the institution. He pushed through the cold, pinching wind to the train station.

At dinner Ava sat across from Leon and Paul. Leon picked-up Paul’s bread roll and bit into it, smiling at her. Paul opened his mouth and then stopped.

‘Got enough on him, hasn’t he?’ said Leon, pointing at Paul’s belly.

Ava didn’t laugh but was lost in the glint of his eye.

‘Are you in our training group?’ she asked him.

‘Paul says I am now, yes,’ he said. Ava smiled. ‘What’s our counsellor like?’

At the top of the room Ava saw the counsellor, in provocative red. Her eyes on Ava were matching red. Then she was gone.

‘C-compared to what we’ve heard of others, Counsellor Dean is not too bad,’ said Paul.

‘Punishments?’

‘The Big Space,’ Paul shuddered. ‘Are there... worse things?’

‘How should I know?’ Leon dug into his spaghetti. ‘You don’t find the Big Space hard?’
‘Oh, oh dear yes,’ said Paul.

Ava nodded. ‘It depends how long you’re in there.’

‘I always find it hard,’ said Paul. ‘It hurts.’

Ava wondered what he meant. Maybe it wasn’t as hard for her as it was for others.

‘The other thing which is scary, I guess,’ said Paul, ‘is the way they can just move you around. And it seems, sometimes, for no reason.’

‘Perhaps it’s part of getting you used to what it’s like functioning out there,’ said Leon, pointing vaguely. ‘Unexpected change. It’s a part of life.’

‘It’s also cruel,’ said Ava.

‘There are worse things,’ said Leon, and his eyes bore scars.

Dean led them down metal stairs to a room that must’ve taken up one whole wing. Today it looked like a semi-partitioned office. The lights were so bright they made Ava’s head heavy. She had avoided these lights, out there.

Counsellor Alex was running the office experiment, dressed in army greens, with a long leather whip protruding from under a stubby arm. Several teams had been put together to form a makeshift floor of a corporate building. Counsellor Dean looked on at Alex, as he instructed the order of emails and phone calls. Dean’s tiny waist was nipped in by a leather belt.

Dean caught Ava’s eye and frowned but didn’t linger. She traced her hip, lightly, with her fingertip. Alex said: ‘Any emails sent or forwarded inter-office must be a balance of professionalism and coping-banter. The Intelligence will accept no absoluteness either way. There will be no period of complete distraction nor will there be a hardcore eight-hour stretch of concentration. Workaholism is an extreme, and therefore dysfunctional. There are some terrific vouchers to be earned in this exercise. In five minutes, we will begin. Your tasks are on the screens. Tap on.’
Ava touched her screen, still squirming under the lights. She wished for grass to roll in or even a metal wall on which to rest her hot forehead. She was soon too cold in the air-conditioning. She took her hair out of its ponytail, at least to cover her neck, and when Dean came by she subtly fingered one dark strand, almost pulling.

Paul didn’t last long. He wiggled his glasses up and down, whimpered, and soon was under his desk. Ava sent Leon an email: ‘Paul’s lost it’, but received nothing back, and she felt sick and drained but was determined to get through. Dean and Alex were at terminals, too, pretending to be the bosses, and Ava emailed Dean with the emoticon ;P, before pressing the first icon for a copywriting task.

Alex had come around and found Paul under his desk.

‘Big Space,’ he said.

‘No, no,’ said Paul. ‘It’s just the air, it’s so dry.’ But he was dragged up on his feet and, hunched over, taken to the door.

Ava tried to catch Leon’s eye across the room but he was focused on his monitor. *Maybe he didn’t get my email.*

Then Counsellor Alex was upon her.

‘Too much distraction here. You haven’t even begun. And Counsellor Dean said you sent her a facetious, inappropriate email.’

‘Just trying to be friendly and positive, Counsellor.’

‘Not enough Balance.’

Ava approached the tedious and menial task in front of her, attempting to block out the fantasies, the flesh and flowers. It was too quiet. Her sinuses were tight. The all-white bore down. Regular glances at the red hair on the girl in front of her, and poking a pen into her fingertips, kept her from calling out.

At the end of the day, Dean assessed the work of the teams under her. She barely glanced at Ava’s, before saying ‘the Big Space is yours tomorrow.’ And Ava felt exhausted and sick. She knew nothing but the intense, palpable reality that
confronted her. She wanted to stomp her foot and pout like a child. *They will not turn me into someone else, into my mother.*

Inside the tower, Henry was looking at the screen with a woman lying on the floor.

‘One of my patients was disobedient in her task yesterday,’ said Dean, moving in front of him.

Dean touched the screen and it zoomed in on a front view of the patient. Henry saw her wide, frightened eyes and pale forehead, large teeth clenching lips that were, in this low-light, the colour of strawberry jam. It was *her.*

Dean had stopped talking. He wasn’t shaking anymore. He wasn’t sure how long they stood there.

‘She’s going to be in here for a long time,’ Dean said. ‘You will consult with me, when you choose someone, won’t you?’ she asked, ‘I’d like to know first how it will change them—their behaviour’

‘Yes, of course I will,’ he said, quickly gathering his face. In his stomach, the egg was being flipped, over and over.

‘And,’ she touched the screen and broke the spell, ‘the patient, they won’t be let out, will they? They’ll have to be carefully monitored.’

‘Unless the test is completely successful—but it would take time to know. Some time.’

‘Okay. Good.’

Henry forced himself to tear his eyes away from the screen, smile at Dean, smile at Dana. He jumped at a crack of lightning and regretfully giggled.

How many hours had it been? It was darker than usual. There were more shadows. Ava had heard the storm outside as she was being led to the Big Space, and wished she could hear it now. Anything would be better than this absolute, contained,
silence. She sang to herself but the melody was sucked-up, as though her voice was being stolen from her. She began to experience pins and needles in her feet. She stood, the short chain around her ankles clinking, and swapped foot-to-foot, trying to get rid of them. This was definitely worse than the other times. At least it’s feeling something, she thought, but regretted the thought when the pins and needles became more painful and spread up her legs, over her hips and groin, in through her belly, up over her breasts and under her armpits. She couldn’t think of what to do, so she dropped and rolled on the hard ground. The ground became hot and she stood again, jumping up and off the ground. ‘No, no, no,’ she called, and the sound was sucked up. The pins and needles had reached her neck. Her feet became numb and she bent down to touch the floor. It was still hot. But her feet couldn’t feel it. What if they dropped off? The pins and needles were in her cheeks, her earlobes. She touched her hand to her nipples, to her thighs, between her legs—she couldn’t feel them. The nerves were dead. She could hear nothing now but the sound of her own panicked breathing. She screamed and the noise was sucked up. Her whole self was being swallowed by the air, by the space, by the quiet. The pins and needles had reached her brain and she pulled at the skin on her face, hit her skull with her hand, but then her limbs became cold and she couldn’t move them anymore. She was on the floor. She was down, now. And in the far, far corner moving in and out of vision—she tried to blink them away—headless, genderless ghostly bodies.

That night, Henry stared at his face in the mirror, feeling that old, vague urge to pull the skin off. Meg’s voice came in a constant, thick and high-pitched stream over the still-raging storm. His shoes were on the bathroom floor, stuffed with paper. He shouldn’t have come straight home. But where could he have gone to be alone? There wasn’t much excuse to go sit in his office, now that they were at the experimental stage. The surgeon Dana, this Counsellor Dean, and GlaZen would be watching over him, the way those Intelligence phantoms watched over patients in the institution. And at home it was suggestion-time, and probing and constant expecting looks from Meg. He couldn’t be more than he was.

She knocked on the door. ‘I bought something today, come and look.’
He exited the bathroom, shivering as though the rain had seeped into his bones. Meg stood by a pair of matching suitcases-on-wheels. ‘Ta-da!’

‘They look good.’

‘So, whenever we get to take a trip...’

‘Honey, the project has only just entered the second phase.’

The couch squeaked as she sat. ‘I don’t understand why you didn’t ask for time off between phase one and two. It’ll be forever until we get away!’

He could have. He really could. But he’d stalled so much and he’d freaked out and really, horribly, he couldn’t imagine what he and Meg would talk about for a week or two alone together. He feared he would blow up and reveal his inadequacy. Someone else would take over the project and, horror of horrors, experiment on him.

‘I’m sorry hon, they were on me though, to get this out, you know—it’s a marketplace.’

‘But, Balance, sweetheart—you need more in your life. And well, I need you as part of mine.’ What he needed was a scotch. Neat. What he had was a face in front of him, demanding an adequate explanation. A part of him imagined a scenario where he said: ‘that’s it, you’ve changed, I’m bored, I’m leaving.’ But her parents would bring him down, her friends also. No one would understand why he’d leave a girl like her. His work; his escalating, horrible wretch of a project, was the only outlet. How appealing that window looks, that glinting knife on the table top. And then he came back to her.

‘I’m sorry, honey. The luggage is great. It’s not going to be soon, but it’s gonna happen.’

‘Lots of things are gonna happen, I hope.’ She frowned.

She is patient, he thought, but it’s probably her pills. If she wasn’t on them, would she see him for who he was? But then, would he be who he was if she wasn’t on them?
She deserved contentedness. The project, after the project, I’ll make a decision about this, he thought.

The weekend came. Meg wanted to go for a drive to the beach and Henry could think of no way out of it. What he really wanted to do was stay in bed. Stay in bed and maybe read something or watch an old movie or just sleep the whole day away, dreaming about her face, which kept cropping up in front of his eyes. The vision had come back last night, too. And this time her face was clearer, and she came closer, in her old-fashioned dress, wind whipping at her skirts. It seemed as though she herself was something old, rather than new.

In the set of new suitcases there was a smaller tote, which Meg held up and admired, smiling at Henry. He forced a smile back. What thing could he be happy about today? This old sci-fi novel, he supposed, sticking it in his back pocket. Or the new files by that Vietnamese philosopher-poet (post-existentialist meta-symbolic anti-ironic) he’d recently added to his cloud.

While there was evidence here and there of another bitter storm—a cracked pot plant, a binful of smashed umbrellas—the garish sun was now out and even at this early hour, was beginning to scorch.

‘I’ve got sunblock,’ said a sunglassed Meg.

‘Better be industrial strength.’ Henry felt pretty hopeless about nature’s vengeance. He paid his taxes, kept to his light and water limits, and recycled—like anyone else. There wasn’t much more he could do, he supposed. GlaZen reckoned they didn’t waste a thing. But then they always seemed to be creating new products that got old quickly.

The walk to the train was sweltering. Personal storms went on, under the arms.

‘I do wish we had a car.’

‘What’s the point?’ asked Henry. There was public transport everywhere.
‘Days like this and days like yesterday—the weather in general.’

‘It’s not far to the train. Good exercise.’

‘I guess.’

Henry looked at her face. She was pretty—button-nosed, faux-tanned. Her hair was a natural (though highlighted) blonde. There was a smudge of sunblock on her earlobe.

‘What?’ she asked.

‘Nothing.’

On the train Henry stared at his own face in the glass, occasionally closing his eyes to the sun-glint off buildings. He was relieved by the darkness of tunnels. Meg stared ahead and he wondered what she could possibly be thinking. There were several clean smiling faces on the train. A bird smacked into the window at one station and nobody but Henry and a little boy jumped. The little boy turned to his father. ‘Will the little blue bird be alright?’

‘What bird, Charlie?’

And then Henry realised what Meg was staring at, with her slight, longing, smile. The families.

Because she wanted one or because she thought she should? Would he ever want to with her? He kept looking at her face. He even reached out for her hand, willing the love to come back. She smiled at him.

She still clutched his hand as they walked down the beach, trying to find a spot. All Henry could feel now was the sweat on his own palm. He’d been trying to convince himself for a good year that she was the best there is and that he should be loyal—continue this thing, take it further. Maybe the fading is natural. Maybe the fireworks and continual passion were something that only existed in ads and films.

But then there was the face of the girl.
A leonine roar

Back in her room, Ava slept achingly and dreamt of release, of running away to a tiny hut in some secluded place that might still exist. The hut is surrounded by blossoms and wet earth and grass, the sound of cicadas or grunting possums. She is with someone. And this person brings her fruit from the market, or pulls potatoes from the ground. They make love in the afternoon, then walk up a cliff during a yolk-coloured dusk. They write a play to recite together. And there is no effort. There is no trying.

Ava woke, and for the first time it seemed as though the stone walls were pressing in on her. They are finally making their way inside me.

She rolled over and was surprised to see that it was not Cynthia’s chemical-blonde head on the bed across the room, but a brown-haired one. She inhaled and knew it was him. She sat up. He turned.

‘Hey. They moved me.’

‘Oh.’ She winced.

‘What’s up?’

‘Big Space yesterday.’ Her heart smashed against her ribs. He looked sleepy. She wanted to crawl in beside him. ‘Did something happen with Paul?’

‘No. I have a feeling they just like to move me a lot.’

‘They’ve never moved me, but they’ve moved a lot of my roommates.’

‘You form attachments to people?’

‘Some people. But strong ones.’

‘Then swapping around your roommates might be part of getting you used to the way it all works.’

Ava lay back down, exhausted. ‘Was Cynthia let out?’

‘I don’t know.’
Then he was by her side, and touching her forehead. His breath was warm at her neck. She spun her head to him. He wore only Calvin Klein boxer briefs and she could see the shape of it, as he put one hand on her slip, on her breast.

‘Can I have you, Ava?’

She filled her lungs and swelled up into his hand. Her hand went to his neck. ‘What is your sentence, Leon?’ They heard footsteps and he pulled away, sat on his bed and wrapped a sheet around himself. Plastics were beginning to rise, for breakfast and training. Counsellor Dean was at theirs.

‘Wellbeing Centre scheduled today, you two. Progress reports.’

Leon gave Ava a pained look, and they both stood. Leon picked up his shower bag and Ava looked down, stepping into purple and green tights. They could try the toilet cubicle, for five minutes, she thought. But even if Dean wasn’t keeping a close watch, what would the Intelligence do, if they did that so soon after being put together?

Ava grabbed his arm. ‘We can’t do it.’

‘Why not?’

‘They’ll move you.’

He scoffed. ‘You think not doing it will stop them? They watch your emotions, too. Your reactions. The way you just grabbed me.’

Ava pulled her hand off his hot skin.

‘Massively manipulative. That’s my sentence.’ His expression was inscrutable. He walked out.

Counsellor Dean watched Ava on the adductor—squeeze, squeeze, squeeze. Ava peered at Leon doing push-ups. Paul had winced and shied-away from Leon, and was now helping his new roommate Nina with her program. He glanced at Ava, too.
Counsellor Dean asked her, in a whisper, to come to the secret place tonight, during dinner. ‘The Intelligence won’t notice you are missing from the dinner hall. It’s on the way, so if they see you on a screen, they’ll assume you’re going there. Walk with a crowd and then slip off. Once you’re in the corridor, you’re okay. Come to the stairwell at the end.’ She didn’t ask about her failure to show up the last time. Perhaps she just looked at the footage, thought Ava.

Ava wondered about Dean’s life. Didn’t she have to be home? Was her partner expecting her? Did she have children? Sometimes there was a powdery scent behind her tang, when she was close by. Ava imagined her being strict with children: giving them schedules, cutting their sandwiches just so.

Dean went to Nina, and Paul picked up some dumbbells beside Ava. They started working on their shoulders.

‘They put him with you?’ Paul asked, quietly.

‘Yes. What’s wrong, Paul?’

‘Don’t tell him too much.’ His face wobbled.

‘Maybe you just didn’t get him.’

‘He’ll u-use whatever he can against you.’

Ava didn’t want to hear it. Paul was just jealous. She put down her weights and walked over to the fit ball. She sat on it and stared at Leon’s back as he worked his lats. She throbbed for the taste of him, for a touch. But she would have to go to Dean tonight. Or she would risk further punishment—further removal. Pain. Loneliness. Nightmares. Perhaps it wouldn’t take long.

Nina had on some kind of vintage leotard—leopard-print. And white tights contrasting with her dark skin. Ava watched as she demonstrated her physical knowledge to Dean—plie, bicycle-in-the-air, stretches. Nina wore emerald-green cats-eye glasses.

Paul nodded toward Nina. ‘Phenomenally nostalgic,’ he explained, puffing.
Henry was back, standing with Counsellor Dean in front of the sub-divided screen. She gestured to the different wards and wings and ran through some of the patients and their histories. ‘Of course, I know more about the ones who I’ve supervised, but the files are open to you, and you might just choose to sit and observe.’

‘I might do that for a while today, if you don’t mind.’

‘No problem,’ said Dean, today in a pinstriped-black suit, pinstriped shoes. ‘Can I get you anything?’

‘No, thank you,’ he said, sitting in a chair in front of the screen. He indicated to the empty chairs. ‘Will they…?’

‘Don’t worry about it, they’ve got portables. It’s all yours.’

Henry noted that the same bags were slung over the same chairs. What if someone left their lunch? He wondered why the people who made up the Intelligence had to be kept a secret. Maybe it was because not knowing who could be watching you, if you ended up inside, would be more effective than knowing, more intimidating. Hiding them must be a precaution they took for anyone from outside. In case they ever ended up...

Dean excused herself, as her supervisory shift was beginning, and Henry leaned back in the chair, accompanied only by the low buzz of electronics. His eyes flew from one image to another—a team of older patients ironing and folding clothes; figures in a faux supermarket landscape; rows of empty rooms which, he noted, looked like jail cells with plastic grids instead of bars; emptying eating halls (different ones for different wings) and even the showers. He moved his eye away from that last image, and all the different shades of skin, feeling too voyeuristic.

A twitching figure was being escorted from the Big Space. An older, skinny man, with ear-length blonde hair. He was being led in the direction of the severe cases ward—F. Henry knew he might find a good subject in ward F. That is the place he should be monitoring. But he was drawn to the footage of Counsellor Dean, in the corner of his eye, as she entered a room. Four people stood around her. The girl was
there and he touched the screen to zoom in on her. Then he touched the screen twice on her visage. A bubble popped up:

*Ava June Wilder, 24 years old. Touch to bring up profile in new window.*

He touched it again.

She’d been in the place for six months, so just after he’d seen her on the street corner. Her sentence was ‘overtly overabundant’. Listed beneath, were her *dysfunctional attributes:*

- *Extreme and overt affection, often acted upon physically without consideration of consequences—disruptive to normal Functionality*
- *Severe emotional and physical promiscuity (including with people of inappropriate ages)*
- *Overwhelmed by aspects of ordinary existence*
- *Easily distracted by whimsy and passion*
- *Masochnistic, including physical self-harm (as a form of physical expression)*
- *No interest in regular employment and living situations—expresses no interest in progress of the Balanced and Functional self*
- *Inappropriate expressions of self in public—crying, singing, talking to herself, reading poetry on the street in a non-designated busking area, and public expressions of sexuality*
- *Resistant to all forms of medication*

Henry read over it again, and looked at her face on the screen. She now sat at a desk with a pen between her lips, gazing up in thought, for a moment looking directly into the camera, looking at him. *Whimsy and passion.* Further down were details of suggested modes of training and discipline. Henry didn’t scroll down. He put his head in his hands. He had to start watching someone else. He had to choose anyone else.
‘How’s the observation going?’ It was Dana, the surgeon.

‘Oh, shit Dana, you spooked me.’

‘Easy enough to get spooked in here. It’s so dank.’

‘Centuries-old stone?’

‘I don’t know why they didn’t knock it down,’ she said, a pinched look on her face.

‘Some romance from the past should be kept, don’t you think?’ he smiled—testing, teasing. Dana wrinkled her nose. ‘But seriously, it was already set out perfectly for them. They just slapped on some new walls, wings and paint.’

‘But how far we’ve come! You should see the Power Institution in Fairville, it’s so symmetrical...’ She stopped. She sighed. Henry wondered who she knew in this other institution. ‘Ooh, who’s she? Good candidate?’ Dana leant over to the screen and blew up the details on Ava. She murmured them under her breath. ‘Hmm, her treatment is interesting—it’s amazing it’s legal to do stuff like that.’

‘We’re going to put a device in someone’s brain.’

‘Right. Hey...’ she said, still scrolling, ‘some of her training is classified.’

‘Is it?’ He looked back up at the screen and the grey cross upon it. ‘I guess the Intelligence need to keep some secrets.’

‘So are we getting into her pretty little head?’ she asked, standing over him.

‘Hold up, Dana, I’ve only just begun.’

‘Grethe’s putting the pressure on already,’ she said, nonchalantly. ‘She wants to get this thing out into the market. I think she senses those Generon arseholes have something similar up their sleeves. Anyway, I want it out because I am going to be in demand, my friend.’

‘Aha.’

‘What would it do?’ Dana zoomed in on Ava’s face, ‘to your friend here?’
'Well,’ Henry rubbed his forehead, putting on his best work-voice, ‘it could de-stimulate her, somewhat, so these intense emotions and feelings aren’t so full-on and don’t have an impact on her actions. She’d be able to make more, ah, rational decisions, follow a more Balanced path.’

‘To Happiness.’

‘Exactly.’

Henry was tired. Really fucking tired. Would it be rational to take Dana’s plain, slim black tie and choke her with it? Was this throbbing vein above his eyebrow rational? Was it rational that he longed to be cracked open—overstimulated, perhaps, like this nuts girl he couldn’t stop thinking about? Whimsy and passion. Crying and singing and reading on a street corner. Some kind of freedom.

Henry spent the day feigning interest in other subjects and let the curious Dana ask questions, before she left for a DBS appointment with an Alzheimer’s patient. Counsellor Dean came back at the end of the day. He was getting his bag together. ‘I’m not sure how long it will take to choose someone. I may have to interview a few of the counsellors, as well, if that’s okay—to narrow it down,’ he said to her. ‘I was wondering if I could have one of those portable thingamies—just so I can work from my office, too?’

Dean nodded. ‘I’ll ask about it tomorrow, for you. Obviously, you’ll have to sign a confidentiality agreement.’

‘Of course.’

Henry got into a cab outside the gates, an aching pulse at his left temple. Just an eye headache, he thought, and denied himself painkillers. He spontaneously told the driver, an old Indian man, to drive toward the Valley.

‘Are you sure, sir?’

‘Yes.’
Henry pulled out his hSpace, which was going wild with alerts. He scrolled through news—the Brazil situation by now barely mentioned—while half-listening to the driver talking about how his family couldn’t come here, and how he couldn’t go back.

‘Only if needed,’ he said, ‘highly specialised. There are too many people there and here. But there is so much more room here.’ *What does he think I can do?*

The Valley was a long way from the city. There were brick apartment blocks and people spilled out into the street. Rusted-out old cars, music with a deep bass making the air vibrate, the smell of smoke. Down side streets homeless people, who were vigilantly kept out of the CBD, camped out. There were empty shops where people had probably moved on to the fringes, as no one here could afford to buy their goods. But there were satellite dishes on all the buildings, health clinics on every corner, a few good pubs and a small theatre. And the people outside were talking and laughing. The driver suddenly sped up, and Henry looked back at a gang of kids, some in military dress, and one old woman chasing down the car.

‘They resent the *haves* coming to stare at them.’

He had an image of himself stepping out of the car and mixing in. *I’m from here too.* Listening to their music, finding out what they needed. Asking how they motivated themselves to work in that big factory on the hill, or to go away to fight for the country’s resources. Resources they had less access to than anyone else. He wanted to ask the children if they’d ever seen a beach, the women if they’d ever fingered real pearls. He wanted to ask them why they couldn’t *move forward.* Though undoubtedly some of them did—toward the wind farms and a retail job, then the upper Valley and a two hour, five changes train commute to the city for a cleaning job, or maybe a sales gig. And there were the secretly talented ones who won on the reality shows. Though there were so many of those shows that their fame was often just a quick exposure, the flash ghosting their eyes long after it was over.

A story like his parents’ one was the rarest, but the broadcasting of such dreams meant it was sold as an everyday occurrence. Henry was torn. People were running around on the streets like they were free. As if they were happy.
But look at these overflowing bins, and all the recycling mixed-up in the gunk. And with no money for procedures, they even look different...

‘Where can I drop you?’ asked the taxi driver. Henry thought about the pub. Had it been there long? Is that where his mum and dad used to hang out? They didn’t like to talk about the past.

But how would he get back? What would he tell Meg? As they drove slowly past the pub they saw a woman exit and stumble into the medical centre next door, one of GlaZen’s, perhaps to get her daily dose. The alcohol was probably strong, the medication would be stronger. Henry thought it was silly of him to romanticise these people, ‘his people’. He should be grateful for not being caught here, for having been pulled up. For being caught somewhere cleaner.

He told the man, sheepishly, to drive him back to the city, putting his sunglasses on and closing his eyes against the glare of flashing holo billboards.

Ava followed crowds from her wing down toward the dinner room, avoiding Paul and Nina. She hadn’t seen Leon all afternoon, which hurt, but made it easier. Perhaps he had a psych appointment, or finance and specialisations. Patients at some levels had extra training away from their groups.

At the second floor stairs she drifted off and turned directly down a corridor. There were about two metres there, she thought, where a camera could have caught her. Oh well, if Dean said it was safe... and she imagined Dean would be in far more trouble than she would be, if the Intelligence found out. Would she even be trialled and thrown in among the patients for such a transgression? Ava saw the stairwell at the end, and Dean was waiting there, standing with something in her hand.

‘Some dinner for you, since you’ll miss out,’ she said.

Ava thanked her, unwrapped the bread roll, and tried to eat quickly. Paul would notice she was missing, at least. If he quizzed her, perhaps she’d say she was sick and in the infirmary. Dean was already running a finger up and down Ava’s hip. She
didn’t seem nervous but anticipatory. Her mascaraed eyes were wide, fixed on Ava’s body. Ava finished the food and placed the wrapper on the ground.

‘So…’

‘No questions,’ said Dean, strictly. She grabbed Ava’s small hand and put it on one of her breasts. Ava’s hand covered only half of it. She ran over Dean’s nipple with her thumb, and Dean moved in closer to her, holding and pulling her hair slightly, and then pushing her tongue into her mouth. Ava thought of Leon, as Dean’s hand slipped up and began to tug at her tights. Politely, she lifted the older woman’s skirt. Dean’s skin was olive, smooth. Ava dipped her hand between and Dean pushed against her, burning and slippery. She stopped and lifted her top, unclasped her bra, and circled Dean’s nipple with her tongue. Dean moaned. I will make her happy, Ava thought. *I will give her so much pleasure, and then she will leave me alone.* And she loved the feel of the bucking woman, giving up to her, risking everything. She loved it for a moment but it was not a lasting moment, and the dream of the hut and the fresh fruit came into her head. The face of the other person was still blurry. She found the dream surprising. For years she had only dreamed of *many*, like the proliferous paintings in her father’s house, not a singular masterpiece. Ava’s tickly, sparkly orgasm felt tainted by this new desire: flashes of bitten fruit, mussed bed sheets in the afternoon sun.

Dean had wanted so much of her; not just her body but to sit, hold, and clasp, and so Ava got back late. Leon was facing the wall and Ava stared at him, willing him to wake but not wanting to disturb. He stirred when she went to the bathroom.

‘Where have you been?’ he asked, reaching a hand out for her.

She sat on his bed. ‘I was walking.’ She didn’t want to put her hands on him. Though she’d just washed them, the scent was still there. ‘Sometimes I get so restless.’ He hooked his arm around her, making a little sigh. Just as soon, he stopped.

‘You better go to bed,’ he said.
‘What’s wrong?’

But he said nothing else, just stiffened up and rolled away.

Ava went to her bed, laid down and throbbed uselessly, directionlessly, into the night.
Fierce

Dean presented Henry with an A4-sized graphene screen, able to be bent and folded. ‘It should have everything you can see here on it,’ she said, indicating the screens. ‘It’s locked in for streaming.’

‘Any ideas yet?’ Dean asked, looking slightly wary.

‘Not really.’

She nodded.

Henry left the institution and travelled by train to his office downtown. His fingers shook a little as he locked himself in. The stench of dead flowers. Darkness. He felt aroused by the quiet and closeness of the space, and the anticipation of looking at her, alone. He unfolded the screen and searched for her. The screen found her in the gym. She was sitting on the weight bench. Just sitting. Her mouth was down-turned. She seemed to snap out of it and lay back, raised both legs, lowered one slowly, and then the other. Henry could change the angle and peer down her black singlet. Guilt began to mix with the intense, squeezing arousal circulating his groin. He rubbed it just a bit, on the top of his pants. He stood up and ran his hands through his hair. He got on the ground and did 15 fast push-ups. He looked back at the screen. She was doing push-ups too. There was a smile on her face now. He thought about what he had read about her, while looking at her lips. To love her would be dangerous. And maybe exquisite.

He wanted to deny it. He felt sick. But he hadn’t felt this much desire for… he couldn’t even remember. He checked the door. He tentatively unzipped his fly. He sat down. He looked at her on the screen. He looked at himself. He put his hand on it. The heat. He shouldn’t be thinking like this. She’s just a face. A patient. A mental case. Her lips. A freedom. He lost all control. He fired under the desk in his office, with the stench of dead purple flowers.

He was watching TV with Meg. Watching the screen, but wondering what would be the smell of the girl’s clothes. An earth and jam kind of a smell, he imagined. Now
he felt like jam, strawberry jam, on toast. He asked Meg if she would like some, to be polite, knowing she wouldn’t. It was after nine.

‘I’ve already had five small meals today. How many have you had?’

‘I lost count today.’

‘Hmm,’ she frowned. Her body was fit and lean, almost hard. She ran a hand through her hair and her underarm was shaved and clean. She smelled of shampoo. Henry couldn’t remember the last time he saw hair on her body. When they were first together, there had been a winter of pasta, breads, curries. They would eat in bed and drink cider and wine and make love if they weren’t too drunk, and that winter she let her leg hair grow a few times. Apologising for it, but growing it nonetheless. He told her he liked her better without make-up and in the mornings. He still liked her better then, but she didn’t smile at him the same way from the pillow. She smiled with questions.

He used to tease her about the way she changed when she got on the phone, using her ‘professional voice’, or how her face changed once she had on her suit for work. She had disappeared into that other self now.

Henry spread the jam on thick, and bit into the wholegrain toast, stared out at the flickering night. He rolled it around on his tongue, picking up the jar—it was the one from the supermarket. It tasted dull.

Wiping crumbs off his face, he came back to the couch.

‘How’s phase two going?’ Meg asked, tentatively.

‘Getting there.’

Henry had thought about bringing the screen home. In case Meg was out at the gym or with a friend. But he’d ended up just staying later at the office.

‘Do you think you’ll be staying back late a bit?’

‘I’m not sure. It’s… a lot to get through. I need to report soon.’
He could tell she wanted to probe more. But she just gave a little smile and looked back at the TV. They were watching a crime show that Meg liked. In the gory or scary bits she used to flinch or even look away. Now she just watched. On the screen, a young woman who had been raped was being chastised by the police for what she was wearing. ‘You’re asking for trouble in that,’ said the cop you’re supposed to love to hate.

‘Jees, not a real feminist show, is it?’ Henry said.

‘Why do you always have to comment?’

Henry always, always got angry at the TV. Mostly he tried to hold it in.

‘It must be so confusing for kids.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘On one hand, they have music videos and ads telling them they have to look like they’d put out. On the other, shows like this are telling them it’s shocking and inappropriate to dress a certain way.’

‘They can choose the right path. Look inside themselves. They have no excuse. Everyone is free to choose a lifestyle of Balance.’

‘Are you quoting Barkley?’

‘No,’ she said, not meeting his eye.

‘I just think…’ he thought he should bite his tongue or it might all come out. He might explode. What would happen if he threw the big screen out the window, down to shatter into a million pieces on the street? ‘I just think there are a lot of contradictions and it must be very confusing.’

‘Young people have always been confused.’

He thought, yes, she was right. But it’s not just young people. ‘I suppose so,’ he finally said. It hurt him to give in.
On Saturday, like a ghost, Leon was gone. Ava poked into the corners of the library, explored briefly a steaming hot courtyard, scanned every table at breakfast, lunch and dinner, and scoured the gym and any other training room that might’ve been kept open. She found Paul tying ropes on a sailing boat which was mounted in the centre of a brick and concrete room. He looked pleased to see her.

‘Ava!’ She didn’t smile. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘Have you seen Leon?’

Paul looked away. ‘No.’

‘They can’t have moved him again, so soon!’ Ava climbed up into the boat, hoisting her skirt. ‘How come you’re alone?’

‘N-Nina thinks the boat looks too new. She’s going to have so much trouble in here.’

‘Yeah, what’s her story?’

‘Her father was an actuary and her mother an astrologist, originally from Sri Lanka but Nina was b-born here. They died on a joint futurism mission overseas ten years ago, I think. She didn’t tell me how; maybe someone didn’t like their p-predictions?’

‘Oh, how upsetting.’

‘Anyway she’s been living in their mansion ever since, watching old movies on an old TV, n-ever using a computer or device, dressing in old clothes—her mother kept all her grandmother’s dresses—rarely venturing outside except down the road for food. They left plenty of money so she didn’t have to work for a long time. One day it kinda dried up and she had to get a job, and of course n-no one would hire her. One company, though, thought she’d make a complacent old-fashioned secretary, but then she couldn’t use the computer or even work the coffee machine—let alone have a conversation about any current events, so they reported her.’

‘I wish her money hadn’t run out. I might’ve gone to live with her.’

‘She coulda taken a few of us in,’ Paul smiled, empathetically.
Ava sighed. Would it always take a lot of money, in the first place, to be able to live like that?

‘I think Leon is gone. I can feel it.’

‘Maybe it’s for the best,’ said Paul, putting a soft, shaky hand on her shoulder.
‘Now, know anything about knots?’

Ava didn’t, but she sat with Paul silently and ran her fingers over the polished wood. She wondered why this room felt so calming, anomalously so. Was it just the presence of her sweet friend? She ran her eyes over the walls and realised there was no paint, no feeds and no screen. There wasn’t even any audio. ‘Ah,’ she exclaimed aloud. The silence reached inside of her and expanded each inhale and exhale. Perhaps it was a room for meditation, and they were only allowed in there for a finite amount of time. But the silence meant that time moved more slowly, every beat of the heart could be counted. Ava reached into her skirt pocket and switched off her hSpace—which was forbidden—to make the feeling complete. She locked eyes with Paul, fiddling with the rope in his hands, making a pleasant whispy, scratchy sound, and held on.

Leon was gone and there was nobody in the other bed. It’s what he said, she thought, they’re leaving me alone because they know I don’t like to be alone. She looked out at the tower and then pulled the covers up over her head, imagining a specific, round face. Mean and bland. It was a cold night, and Ava curled up on her side, squeezing her hands between her thighs. She could hear thunder out over the noise of screens: voices and laughter. And then Dean’s face was at the bars. Ava closed her eyes and rolled over, feeling the woman’s eyes tickling the hairs on the back of her neck.

‘Where did you send Leon?’ asked Ava.

‘I didn’t send him anywhere. It’s up to the Intelligence.’

‘Where?’

‘I don’t know. Come here.’
‘I don’t want to.’

‘Come here.’ It was a fierce and squeezed whisper. Ava sighed, stood up in the cold and walked over to the plastic grid. She experienced a quick sense-memory of the pin-and-needle pain from the Big Space. She gasped. Dean’s left arm reached through and stroked her hair. Then she pulled it a little, bringing Ava closer. She smelled her hair through the grid. Ava knew Dean’s back would be covering her from the tower, but weren’t there cameras in her room too? How much could the Intelligence see?

‘Touch me,’ said Dean. A tear formed in Ava’s eye, and she reached out her hand.

Henry told Meg he was going to Ken’s, and he told Ken he couldn’t come so that he could watch Ava June Wilder by night. He had access to the office at all hours and on his floor there were plenty of late workers, mostly media and marketing types, adding to the evening info streams. His office was on the floor below much of the biopharmaceutical activity, tucked-away in a corner of the building, just the way he liked it. He’d argued that for the sake of Balance in the creation and development process he didn’t want to be interrupted by colleagues and aspirant designers knocking on his door. Instead they made appointments with him (he checked his hSpace at designated time slots) and met in a mutual ‘meeting office’, always equipped with watered palms, fair-trade coffee and vegan muffins.

He locked himself in the office, and kept the lights out. Ava was lying on her right-hand side, curled in the foetal position, with the blankets mushed-up between her elbows and knees. She had no roommate. He imagined sliding in behind her and curling himself around her back. He’d looked all through the menu for volume, but his screen didn’t seem to have sound. He would give anything to hear her breathing—maybe murmur with a dream.

A week later he watched her sleep again. He got to his office a bit earlier than the patients’ designated bed time. Ava sat on her bed with a book, an actual paper book. He was glad she liked them too. Henry saw it was Anais Nin. Ava smiled to herself and put a hand to her breast. She wore a T-shirt and what looked like boys’ boxer
shorts. The image devastated Henry. But the screen went black for a moment and then Ava was in bed, in the foetal position. There was no sign of the book, and she was wearing a black slip, not the t-shirt. The screen didn’t seem to have been blank long enough for her to change, get in that position and be apparently asleep. Henry stood up. He paced the room. There were crusted coffee cups, empty noodle packets, an overflowing bin spilling wasted tissues and rotting banana skins. The dead flowers still bent over their vase in the corner. What just happened? This footage, he thought, looked just like the footage of her sleeping last week.

It was just a few days until his report was due, when he had to give them the profile of his institutional experiment—the who, why, when and how. He had strayed to other patients, but after minutes he was drawn back to Ava like an obsessive fan to a movie star.

There was only one solution, one way to find out why this footage was looped or lagged, and one way to get closer to her. Though he’d be risking exposure of inadequacy, he might also find the answers to this feeling—his first definite, exquisite passion. She was outside the everyday, the boredom, the compliance, the nothingness.

The only way to find out how it might end was to dive in.
Closing in

Henry arrived on the 21st floor for the progress meeting. Grethe and Dana were there, and strange people in suits, and the cloud-white visage of Barkley. *What the hell is he doing here?*

Having made his decision, Henry felt more adequate and confident, even cockier, than usual, and he pressed his palms flat on the big shiny table. He was like someone who had decided, for sure, that they were going to commit suicide and a strange lightness and euphoria took over.

‘Have you chosen yet?’ Grethe asked.

‘I’ve zeroed in on a few, a report is ready for you here,’ he pointed at the table, which had screens embedded. ‘But I think I need to take a step further in, to really determine how it might work in the environment. One problem with the surveillance is there is no sound. Or at least, no sound is accessible to me. How can I really judge a person, I mean a patient’s need for the nanopharm, without having heard how they speak and react and connect? Know what I mean?’

Grethe pressed the table in front of her, flipping through the thrown-together, bogus reports Henry had done on random patients for the sake of this meeting.

He had been so sure they’d say yes immediately. Now his confidence began to slip. His forehead started to sweat. Sweat and shakiness were dead giveaways you weren’t on your meds. Henry talked himself down. *Calm, calm, calm. A little bit of Ludwig Van.*

Barkley pressed his fingers together. ‘You’ll pretend to be a patient?’

‘Yes, I’ll go undercover and stay in until I find the most appropriate test subject. I’ll be under Counsellor Dean’s supervision. She will dole out false punishments which will give me a chance to get out and report.’

‘And see your fiancé,’ Barkley added.

‘Girlfriend. Yes, and see Meg. Of course.’

‘It’s brave,’ Barkley said, winking. ‘It’ll be tough.’
Dana leant forward, smirking. ‘You know this was my idea—you were very reluctant.’

‘Dana, I’m sorry. You were the first to suggest it, of course.’

‘You really were reluctant. Why the change of heart?’

Calm. ‘As I’ve explained, I realise now I just can’t find out enough about the patients using the current method.’

‘Okay, okay,’ Dana said, with that feline look. She pushed back with her paws, sniffed at him. Henry had always wondered what it would be like to go through something big—something requiring real sacrifice, maybe even suffering. Wasn’t this, finally, that dramatic leap?

Grethe sighed. ‘We do need to move on this, Henry.’ She paused. ‘Okay. A few weeks at the most.’ She touched her screen to close the file. ‘What’s your plan?’

Henry brought up on all their screens his ‘patient profile’. He’d tried to imagine who he’d be if he was allowed to give in to all those impulses and all those fears. His sentence: ‘highly inadequate.’

‘Basically,’ he said to the room, ‘I’ll have to freak out a bit, shake, act out abnormal, seemingly impulsive things, y’know, standing on tables or something. It shouldn’t be too hard. I’ll go along with all the Functionality training.’

‘One thing concerns me,’ Barkley said. ‘What if you become close to someone in there?’

Henry swallowed. Laughed.

Grethe laughed. ‘Barkley, honestly!’

Henry laughed again.

The suits laughed.

Barkley laughed.

It was agreed.
The training exercise was in appropriate conversation with acquaintances through different modes. First, Ava had to enter a small white room where an android woman was sitting at a café table. Ava sat in the plastic chair across from her. The android smiled stiffly and reached out a hand to Ava, her joints buzzing with each movement.

‘Thanks for coming Ava,’ said the face. It blinked noisily.

‘Hi Jane,’ said Ava. They’d been given the names on the way in.

‘What a nice day it is today.’

Ava looked at the roof. ‘Yes, I guess it is.’

‘What are you going to order?’

‘Avocado salad.’

‘Sounds pretty good. But I feel like cake.’

‘But it’s lunchtime!’ The yellow-tan arms reached to faux-sky in exasperation.

‘I missed morning tea.’

‘But it’s lunchtime!’

‘Okay I’ll have a bloody avocado salad.’

‘You’re a bit rude, Ava.’

‘Sorry, rough night.’

‘Do you have problems at home?’

‘Yeah, my husband has cancer. He’s going to die,’ Ava said sarcastically, then, strangely, started to cry real tears.
‘I suppose that explains why you might temporarily be distressed and choose to eat strange things at strange hours. Please do not cry.’

Ava continued to cry, but softly, and stared at the mechanical features, the doll-brittle brown hair, the ‘fashionable’ jumpsuit and knee-high boots. It was the android making her feel sad.

‘Please do not cry. It makes people uncomfortable.’

‘I don’t mean to make people uncomfortable. I want people to feel good.’

‘People feel many things. I feel many things.’

Ava touched the cold cheek.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Feeling you. You’re cold.’

‘It is cold today.’

‘It’s cold for you every day, though, isn’t it?’

The android faltered. ‘It is cold today.’

‘I’ve known people like you,’ Ava said.

In high school, Ava would sit at the back, behind all the other students, and inhale the scent of their collective hair. She’d draw in the back of her book and then smudge the pencil with her fingertips. When a student turned around and made an obscene gesture, she just smiled. She wanted her teachers to like her, too, so she immersed herself in her subjects, trying to imagine she was what they were describing: a warmonger, an isosceles triangle, a continent, a Warhol.

She was provocatively enthusiastic. The teachers tried to ignore the other students’ taunts because they saw the feeling in her eye for their subjects. But the kind of girl who does that kind of thing will eventually interrupt her own progress.
A meeting was called with her parents. Her mother cried. Her English teacher, Mrs Benal, would not look at her. She thought she knew what had happened to Ava when the popular boy, Timothy, was reading Romeo’s part. When Ava had sighed really low. Actually, Ava had just been fighting to keep a few tears inside. She’d clutched at her arms, *the hot carpet smell*, she’d rested forehead to cool desk.

Her mother offered a different school. Her father smiled at her strangely. ‘Maybe she’s an artist’, he said.

‘God forbid,’ said her mother, and would not discuss it further.

Ava did want to keep learning, but she was scarred by being unaccepted, unless in someone’s arms in the bathroom at a party, when she got to kiss and hold on. Smell was strong for her but taste was exquisite. She found it hard to keep her tongue inside her mouth, most of the time. She just wanted to know the taste of everything. And the taste of skin was her favourite so far.

Ava sunk into a kind of exile for some time. She tried to gain satisfaction from imagined worlds, in stories, films and online; and by tasting exotic foods, drinks and her own flesh. It wasn’t long, though, before the outside world drew her back. She would sit for long periods of time in the park, sensing pressure changes in the air, pulling out clumps of grass, noticing the vivid green breast of a tiny finch. And she decided she would start to go out, at night, and seek more sensations.

She didn’t know where to go, but she had friends online and she met up with them: musicians and poets and people with no particular talent who dressed at night in velvet jumpsuits. By day they were in black and white. They didn’t feel things the way she did so they’d take drugs to open up parts of themselves. They’d offer the drugs to Ava but soon learnt she was naturally buoyed by the lights and colours; the leather, skin and furs; the music, and she could sway all night on the dance floor.

She did try something just once. She was overwhelmingly blue that night, and her limbs were heavy. She’d been thinking about the cycle of desire: exciting, but exhausting and constant. She’d been thinking about the impossibility of fulfilment, of lasting fulfilment. And she took the pink pill to obliterate the thought and enhance and prolong any and all pleasure. But for her it had a frightening effect. Everything
became loud and wide and closed in on her. She couldn’t push through. It was like being trapped in an elevator, with a crowd yelling and thumping in panic, and then the lights go out too.

She never took drugs again.

Many of those people who had been in her life—the night-time transgressives with their illegal drugs—were still out there leading double lives. If the life continued to be double, it was okay. They still went to their jobs, got promotions, spent money somewhere. They were, technically, Functional. The places that these people could go to were becoming fewer and blander though. There were too many restrictions on the owners of bars and clubs, such as certain closing times for the sake of safety and the quiet of the neighbourhood, and pressure to make the place fresh to attract young haves. When the places were made-over to some new trend they lost the old transgressives. Ava surmised that warped drugs and non-showy sexual exploration were now limited to apartments and secret salons.

So she never took illegal drugs again. Her mother had already taken her to counsellors and psychs and she’d been prescribed little bottles of white and pink and blue pills and she pretended to take them. Her mother said ‘they can put you away now, to straighten you out’. Straight sounded like dead to Ava. There would be no street sounds, no music or trees, no big houses with oil paint smells and no access to any kind of food you desired.

Now, Ava thought about what the institution meant to her. She had been able to make more of it than some. The cool stone, the water in the shower, the layers of taste behind the manufactured biscuits, the touch of a hand. But what was terrible was the exacerbation of all that had been difficult outside. She was told there was something wrong with her, that her way of being was wrong. She was allowed to taste so fleetingly, and then people were taken away from her. She was forced to engage in training exercises that flattened her; she was exposed to screens and feeds of blank, alien ideas that encroached upon her hope.
Ava tried to deny the new need for a lasting sensation, a connection. The desire itself had the potential to destroy her ability to make the most of the stone, the water, rare moments of silence, her breathing.
Like a dog

Meg was watching a runway fashion holoshow, sitting on the couch in her gym gear, one leg curled up under the other. Henry walked in and she lifted her cheek for him to kiss.

‘What’s wrong?’ she asked, minimising the holo. He was running his hands down the front of his pants. He sat down next to her.

‘Meg, I have to be away a bit, for the next part of the project.’

Her face went dark. ‘What for?’

‘You know I can’t talk specifics.’

‘How long?’

‘Just a few weeks.’

She stood, stared at him. ‘This is not going to get any better, is it?’

He didn’t say anything.

‘Is this adequate? Is this what people do? Am I supposed to just keep waiting and asking? Shouldn’t you know, shouldn’t you care about my needs too? Where is the Balance in this relationship?’

‘It’s work, honey.’

‘Don’t honey. Don’t honey now.’ She seemed to turn to herself. ‘Is this anger rational? Yes. Yes I think it is. It’s reasoned. I’m not crying.’

‘For fuck’s sake, just get angry if you’re going to get angry!’

‘You don’t’, she pointed her finger into his chest, ‘you don’t act adequately.’ She gave a frustrated grr, shook her head.

Henry’s heart knocked wildly about his chest. It could all unravel.
‘No, honey, please. I’m, it’s just work. It’s stressful. I’m sorry I haven’t been making everything equal and Balanced. This will be the last stage. After it’s over I’ll make it up to you.’

She sat down and stared ahead. ‘You need to make a commitment to me.’

He wondered how he could ever break it off without her and her parents taking a long list of his inadequacies into the department to report him. He kept hoping she would decide to leave him. Maybe she really loved him. Maybe she was just so numbed she didn’t think there was anybody better or another way to live. If only she’d meet someone else.

Until then, he had to make her seem content. To give him the time. He needed to see the girl, be around her, and have time to think. He’d think about what he could do. Until then.

‘Okay Meg.’

She put her hand in his as he came down next to her on the couch. ‘Will you marry me, Henry?’

‘Yes, okay’, he found himself saying. ‘Yes. I will.’

She smiled, wrapped her arms around him. He felt sorry for her. He’d been good to her before. He’d tried to continue. Maybe she stuck by the memories. Maybe, like him, she mostly wished things would just work themselves out.

‘Let’s tell everyone you asked me,’ she said.

‘Sure,’ said Henry, defeated.

‘I’m going to look at rings,’ she said, touching her hSpace. ‘Help me choose?’

Nina flicked out one card after another. Ava placed her fingertips on their waxy surfaces. Nina removed her cat’s eye glasses and they hung on a gold chain around her neck. She was frowning, nodding to herself. The Lovers was the card that caught Ava’s eye.
‘This is the future,’ said Nina, pointing at *The Lovers*. A man stood in front of a tree of flames. An angel was looking down. The man and woman stood apart.

‘This is the past,’ Nina said, pointing at a card called *The Tower*.

‘A bit literal, isn’t it,’ smiled Ava, looking out to the tower. On the card, men fall in flames. The sky was dark. They were not protected by the tower.

‘It’s not the present, though,’ said Nina.

Ava sat patiently, frowning, unbelieving, but enjoying the aesthetic of the tarot cards. Nina drew a card to place in the middle, the present: *The Hierophant*.

‘You’re beginning to believe in something new,’ she said. ‘But whatever this is, you feel it compromises your individuality.’

Ava looked into her eyes. ‘I’m not letting this place get to me.’

‘The Hierophant is generally a positive card. Maybe it’s for good.’

‘It’s not what you think,’ said Ava. She sighed. Her knees were starting to ache so she stretched out her legs. Then she lay all the way down, stared at the cold, grey ceiling. She picked up the future card. *Lovers*. There were always lovers. And then there were these two lovers on the card, permanently frozen together, but not touching one another. She now noticed the fruit tree behind the woman, and remembered her dream. The cottage, the food from the ground. Her face felt hot and she threw the card across the room.

‘Don’t you want to try some combinations?’ asked Nina.

‘I’ve had enough.’ Nina looked hurt. Ava reached out her hand and rested it on Nina’s shin. ‘Thanks, though,’ she smiled weakly.

That night she dreamt of the lovers on the card, their yellowy cartoon hands coming together. She woke up sweating.

In the morning, Ava sat with Paul and Nina in the food hall. Nina was talking about her old grandfather clock and Ava wondered why it was so easy for people to love
objects but so hard for them to love other people, when she saw a new face sitting across the hall, alone. She noticed, she thought, because his eyes had darted to hers. Long eyelashes, closely cropped hair, a hand that shook when pulling apart a bread roll. He was vaguely familiar to her.

‘Another new face?’ asked Paul, following her gaze.

‘Seems so,’ said Ava. There was a faint pull in her chest, behind her heart, maybe in her stomach. Her head felt light. She stood.

Paul started: ‘what’re you…’

She walked toward the man. For he was a man, not a boy. He had on a Pink Floyd T-shirt. The Intelligence feed flicked on the wall—no-cal Miracle Cheese: click for vid; not a drop left in Qatar, say withdrawing forces—and then she spotted Dean, above, watching. She looked at the man and decided her overwhelming curiosity about him was too good to spoil. She remembered the fleeting time she had with Leon.

She battled, beat the instinct, and returned to Nina and Paul.

‘Are you okay?’ asked Nina, picking crumbs off her lace collar. Ava’s head slumped in her hand.

‘I’m stuck,’ she said.

‘Look around.’

Two beds sat on opposite sides of the cold stone room, with space and a cheap rug in the middle. There was a table with shelves beneath it, at the back, beside a door that led to a tiny toilet cubicle. Henry peered up and saw cameras on each side at the top of the loo. He’d asked if they could amend the surveillance of his room, so he could have a little privacy. Counsellor Dean, and the head counsellor, said they’d request it with the Intelligence, see what they could do. But they weren’t sure, as other patients might visit his room.
At the front, instead of any kind of bars or a door, was a hard plastic grid. The squares were big enough to stick through an arm or even a leg. The plastic ensured the Intelligence could see in from the tower. Henry didn’t have a roommate. They’d found him a room to himself, so he could write notes at night, undisturbed. Dean showed him a crook in the wall where he could hide his hSpace in the daytime, so no one would read it.

‘Didn’t you bring any mementos?’ she asked.

‘Mementos?’

‘Most patients bring in a few things from home. It might seem a bit strange if you don’t have any.’

‘I didn’t think about it.’

‘Well, get some when you’re out. Soon. Before anyone comes to your room.’

Dean explained that Henry would be on her team, so that she could help him out. 'Functionality training is at 9:30 tomorrow, after breakfast. A schedule has been downloaded into your hSpace. Be prepared, be careful.’ She paused. ‘I hope you’re a good actor.’

‘I… hope so too.’

Dean frowned.

‘That’s just me practicing being inadequate,’ he smiled.

Dean left. He frowned. Sat on the bed. Played with the zip on his suitcase. He was so near her now. He’d almost heard her voice today. She’d walked toward him and it had seemed so normal. He didn’t feel confronted, or fearful, like he did the first time. But she’d turned back. He would see her again tomorrow.

In the breakfast hall Henry tried not to look for her. He tried to observe the other patients, to look for a person he could feel detached from, to at least have someone to report if he were called up unexpectedly by GlaZen.
But his heart leapt at a dark-haired head and he just looked down at his muesli, not
tasting it, until the buzzer went and he followed Counsellor Dean down a corridor,
knowing she was right behind him.

They entered a white room with cloth-covered plinths on one side and nothing else.

‘This room will be seen by every team on this ward today,’ said Counsellor Dean.
‘Oh, first of all, this is Henry.’ Henry looked up—he could play up the shy, the
awkward.

‘Henry, this is Paul, Nina and Ava.’

‘Howdy,’ said Nina. Paul nodded, a slight flush to his cheeks. Ava peered away at a
far white wall, and then snuck a look at him. Why is she acting so nonchalant?

‘Now, this is an ongoing task,’ said Dean, drawing their eyes back to her. Henry
wondered if it was the Head Counsellor who put him on Dean’s team, or if it was
Dean herself, wanting to keep a close eye on him. He was paranoid that she was
already suspicious of his activities. Maybe she was close to her team and wanted him
to be close to them so he wouldn’t experiment on them. ‘Everyone on this ward is
assigned a pet…’

Nina and Ava both gasped, happily.

‘…something to look after. And you must look after it properly, or else you will fail.
There will be voucher opportunities along the way. Now, don’t get too excited. They
aren’t real animals. That would cause a lot of mess. But you must care for them as
though they are.’

‘They’re not just eggs or something are they?’ asked Ava. Henry faltered. Her voice
was Bacall-esque: bassy and rich.

There came a scratching from under one of the sheets. Obviously not just eggs.
Henry’s curiosity was piqued now. The training here, he imagined, was not merely to
see if the patient could be responsible for another being, but to see exactly how they
reacted to being given such a responsibility. Would they stress out and fall apart?
Would they be afraid of the creature? Would they want someone else’s instead of
their own?
Dean walked up to the first plinth. ‘Nina?’ she called. She removed the sheet and there was a tiny white fluffy cat-like thing with pearls around its neck. Nina put gloved hands to face.

‘Oh’ she walked up and scooped the fluffball from its cage. ‘It’s even warm!’ From its movements, you could see it was mechanical, but its eyes looked wet, adorable. Nina hugged the creature to her chest. ‘Dean, whatever do I do?’

‘There is a tag around its neck which tells you a bit more about its personality and needs.’ Dean pulled a small bag out of the cage. ‘These are the little energy pellets with which you feed it. The instructions say how often, but each has its own programmed and environmentally adaptable personality, so it might be more or less. You have to get to know it.’

She went to the second plinth. ‘Paul?’ He walked over, trembling visibly. This was the one with the scratching noises. She removed the cover. ‘Woaaah,’ he wobbled. There was a tiny, scaly triceratops with wet eyes, pawing at the ground under it.

‘Come and pick it up,’ Dean coaxed.

‘Will it…?’

‘It won’t hurt you.’

Paul reached two trembling hands inside and scooped them under its belly. ‘It is warm—and it has a little heartbeat.’ The dino wedged its head under Paul’s arm. He giggled.

‘Oh Paul,’ said Ava, ‘it’s adorable.’ She touched the dino’s back, then looked toward Dean, awaiting her turn.

‘Another thing you have to remember,’ instructed Dean, ‘is not to pander to them too much. There’s love and care, and then there’s obsession. If you don’t show them who’s boss, and discipline them, they will become spoilt and naughty, and you will fail just as you’ll fail if you don’t care for them at all. Ava?’ She was at the third plinth. She removed the sheet and there was a short-haired pup with big brown eyes. It looked like a Jack Russell. It tilted its head and whimpered. Ava scooped it up and kissed its little head. It licked her face. ‘The tongue, it feels so real!’ exclaimed Ava.
'Top of the range,' said Dean. And Henry watched Ava frowning at it, trying to look into it, and then just softening and going with it, cuddling it into her breast.

What would his be? How did they choose the shape of each? Henry was called to the last plinth, the other patients looked on. Dean removed the sheet and Henry was greeted with an odd sight: a little Caspar the ghost, a little marshmallow creature, an alien. Was it human or non-human? It had a downturned mouth and was not looking up at him. It barely moved at all. Henry felt an instant affection for the creature. He scooped it up and it nestled into his arm.

‘Hello fella,’ he said gently. Its big black eyes bore into him. He never wanted to be apart from it.

Dean began to speak and they all looked back at her, stroking and rocking and cuddling their pet beings. Henry wondered about the person who made them—someone with a secret like him? Someone who pissed on toilet seats?

‘As everyone in the ward has one, the pets are allowed in the food hall—but they aren’t allowed in the gym, and you will be notified before the other experiments. If you have to go somewhere without it, you can get someone to mind it, just like IRL. There should be a Balance of being with and away from your pet. You don’t want it to get so attached it will freak out a lot when you’re away, but you also want it to be pleased when you come back. Enclosures are being installed in your rooms for the pets right now. The rest of the day is free for interaction.’

Henry followed the others to the door.

As they walked to the door Paul started talking to the new guy. Ava felt a string tugging in her belly when she looked at him. She knew where she had seen him before. He had stopped, for a moment, and listened to her poem. She remembered because of the way he put his hand to his mouth, when he seemed overwhelmed. She held the little puppy to her chest and avoided the man’s eyes. The feeling made her panic because it was, somehow, stronger than the strong feelings. It was a feeling she either hadn’t ever had or couldn’t remember. It was instinctive and it was powerful.
But she knew what happened when she followed her instinct. She bit her lip and the puppy whimpered.

Paul had already apologised for bumping Henry’s elbow, and then asked him to come with his pet to where the Spanish Galleon was, and then apologised for being so forward. But Henry said yes, he’d love to come to where the ship was. Paul asked Ava and she shrugged. He asked what was wrong.

‘Nothing. Yeah. Yeah, I’ll come.’

She walked behind them and this Henry looked back at her. His eyes were kind and shy but searching.

They were all astounded by their little friends, when they laid them out on the deck and let them chew on bits of wood, or run back into their arms, or sniff each other. Paul’s triceratops seemed to be cranky one moment then trembling another. Paul apologised to it whenever it became afraid (mostly of sharp movement).

‘So, um, can we ask?’ Paul said.

‘Your sentence?’ asked Nina, sitting elegantly in a mauve A-line skirt and tucked-in lace-collared top, stroking her purring ball.

‘Oh, yeah, sure,’ Henry scratched the top of his head. ‘Highly inadequate.’ He glanced at Ava after he said it. She was watching his small, honed bicep twitch as he scratched his head. She clutched her puppy closer. Henry didn’t ask what their sentences were. Perhaps he feels it would be rude, Ava thought. *Perhaps he isn’t as curious as the rest of us.*

‘Aren’t they just darling?’ Nina smiled, fingering the pearls on the kitty-bot’s neck.

‘Ah,’ Ava exclaimed, ‘we have to name them.’

‘Yes, yes we do,’ Henry nodded.

They sat against the hull and circled the masts and thought and threw things around. Nina was the first to come up with a name. ‘Why, Audrey, of course,’ she said. ‘And Paul, you should name yours Goldblum.’
'Why?’ he asked.

Henry laughed. Nina nodded. ‘Just do.’

‘O… okay.’

‘I suppose Caspar would be too obvious for mine,’ said Henry.

‘What’s a caspar?’ asked Ava.

‘He’s a friendly ghost.’ Ava looked at his hand on the rubbery little thing.

‘No, I think I’ll call him Vincent.’

Ava smiled. Too long. She looked down. She assumed all the names were from the past, a time before they existed, when public figures seemed more expressive, more extreme. When risks were taken and not assessed. When the labels were broad (and it was reasonable to fight them). Off-people weren’t necessarily romantic for the past (except for Nina) but they were fascinated by it, they wondered who they would have been.

‘Well, I’m still not sure,’ Ava said, staring into the little dog’s eyes. She just wanted to curl up with it. ‘I think I must name him after a poet, or a painter.’ She smiled. ‘A romantic.’

‘Byron?’ Henry and Nina said at once, and laughed.

‘No, maybe Franz—after Franz Stuck, the artist. Not romantic, but… well, sensual.’ The little puppy licked her hand. She saw Henry’s hands were still and tense. He was looking down at his little Vincent and she studied the pulsing vein on his forehead. She wanted to put her tongue on it.

‘Is Henry your new roommate, then, Ava?’ asked Paul. She could sense the hesitation in his voice. He would have loved to be her roommate, even if just for a while.

‘No, no he’s not. I have no one at the moment.’

‘Nor do I,’ said Henry.
'That’s odd,’ said Nina.

‘Probably not,’ said Paul. ‘You never know w-what kind of move they’re going to pull. They’re probably testing how you both go being alone all night.’

*I guess so.* But now—now she had little Franz, who would be beside her, with whom she could snuggle and think of warm free futures, with... with *the lasting sensation.*

*The Lovers.*

*No. There is only the now: the splintery wood, the fur, the lemony smell of the polish.*

She looked again at Henry and he looked away from her. His neck flushed pink. The longing was an ache. And an arrow.

Later that night, Henry reclined with Vincent on his chest and stared out at the tower. He was thinking about Ava’s reaction to him. She’d seemed a little distant, but then he’d caught her looks. He thought about her now, holding her puppy Franz, and he experienced a sharp pang of jealousy. *Ridiculous.* He thought about the timid, friendly Paul and dazzling Nina; and everyone outside that he knew suddenly seemed as flat and transparent as Glad Wrap. Except Ken. And yet, out there you could move: to the fridge and the strawberry jam and the Laphroaig in the bottom corner cupboard.

In here, nothing much was up to you. And at any minute they could choose to punish you. But then... there was something interesting about the grit and stone, the smell of age they’d tried to hide behind new walls and paint. Smell of iron.

Henry eventually slept, and in his sleep heard a drill grinding through bone. He woke with a small patch of cold sweat at the back of his neck.

Who could he use? Was there someone in here truly destructive, dysfunctional or nasty? Could he actually make things better? But even so, it was just a demo. It was to show effectiveness. And then it would become widespread. There is another option, he thought, pulling the skin on his face in the grey light of dawn, to *stop being the person who goes along with things.* That option would be to fail, wouldn’t it? But then there’d be his own, terrible, punishment. Unless...
Tomorrow night Henry was going to arrange for punishment. Tomorrow night Henry wasn’t going to go home. His heart leapt at the plan. He sat up, and woke little Vincent, who nestled into his waist. The ghost was quiet and sweet.

‘I think I’ve figured out how to piss on the walls’, Henry whispered to it. It blinked white over big black eyes, and seemed to nod.

He picked a motel with a neon sign, and his room was bathed in its sickly, flickering pink. The night was another stormy one; the wind whipped and whistled, making the sign creak. Henry came with nothing except this idea, and his credit card. Dean had allowed him to take Vincent, who now popped a little round head out from Henry’s bag.

The first thing he’d done when he got to the motel was to ask reception what kind of entertainment portals they had.

‘We have one drive stored with thousands of films,’ said the woman with too much make-up, hand on hip.

‘That’ll do. What brand do you buy?’

‘Oh, uh, lemme see—it’s Grant’s.’

‘Do you always buy the Grant’s hard drives?’

‘Why all the questions, sugar?’

‘Sorry, it’s just for a bit of research.’

‘Okay, well, yes, we do. They seem to last longer than other brands we’ve tried. They get used a lot in the rooms, mostly porn, so you need to invest in somethin’ that lasts, y’know?’

Henry asked a few more questions, and then the receptionist handed the drive over to him. ‘Here you go darl’.

‘Thank you,’ said Henry. The woman gave him one strange look, then shrugged her shoulders.
‘Jesus is it blowin’ a gale!’ she shouted over the wind as he opened the door. Henry looked up at the purple-black sky, tucked the drive under his arm and rushed across to his room. Once in, he sat the drive on the bed.

Later that night, on the bed sat another brand of hard drive, two cameras, two phones, a reader, a bag of tools, and on the floor, a small screen and a microwave. Boxes and bags covered in rain. Henry, wet shirt stuck to his chest, bathed in neon light, began to open up the plastic back of the small hard drive. Vincent made a little sound, like a squeak, tilting its head. Henry placed an energy chip in the ghost’s little mouth and the eyes turned up happily.

When Henry had everything open—had gotten to the brains and the guts of the machines—he stared at the metal grey and sea green chips, searching for similarities. He knew these brands were notorious for the function, had gotten around the (relaxed) legal issues. Vincent waddled over to him and popped its stomach open, questioningly. Henry wondered how to communicate what he was looking for. He grabbed an old clock off the wall and gestured with it. With one little paw the creature pointed to a circuit within. Then it pointed to a section of the chip in Henry’s hand. Henry photographed the chip and zoomed in using his hSpace. He closed the ghost’s tummy, and picked it up to kiss it on the top of its head.

Later Henry was lying, blinking his eyes to the light. They were achy from the intense concentration and magnification. But he’d figured it out. His hSpace sat silent on the table beside him. He’d left it off, in case he’d forgotten to close any chat channels, and because he was already becoming used to the lack of blips, blinks, news, communications and ads. To be unavailable was a stark and lonely, but sweet, kind of freedom. He pulled up the rough brown blanket and a thought of Meg entered his head. There came a short sharp pang of sadness and regret, and then Ava came into frame triggering a buoyant surge of purpose. Henry clenched his fists at his sides. He thought of her alone and curled-up, with her puppy-pet, and he wondered if she was asleep, and of what she was dreaming. And the inaccessibility of her thoughts made him curl into himself, in envy of the space around her.
Threads of ice and fire

Ava didn’t think it fair at all that Henry had failed at the neighbour training exercise, or was punished so severely for it. Thrown in the Big Space so early in his stay. Perhaps they’d wanted to break him, she thought, break him and shape him as soon as they could.

During the exercise, every time Henry had walked out of his holo-house, his faux neighbour had talked to him, offered some kindness, or rabbited on about his son away at university. Ava was on the other side of this neighbour, and the neighbour never bothered her. She watched, and rolled her eyes at Henry when the neighbour went back inside.

‘If this were IRL,’ Henry called across to her, ‘someone would have killed him by now.’

Ava laughed and tried to distract the faux neighbour the next time. Failed.

‘He likes you a lot,’ she said.

The neighbour lent Henry an unwanted cup of sugar, proffered him beers, tried to get him to open up. Ava’s parents had had a neighbour just like this one, in the suburbs. The ‘new community’ movement had swept through. Privacy needed to be Balanced, like anything else. But this faux neighbour was going too far. Ava felt bad for Henry, wanted to help.

‘I live in an apartment building and it’s much better than this,’ Henry called to her, ignoring the man. ‘You’re only forced to talk to people in the elevator.’

Then the faux neighbour broke the sugar bowl over Henry’s head. Ava gasped. She’d forgotten, so quickly, that this was a training exercise, that they weren’t just getting to know each other over a holo.

Today Henry looked pale and rough, with dark lines around his eyes. But Ava also detected a kind of mania in his movements. He was excitable and sharp. At lunch, the first time he showed, he stood on a table and shouted: ‘Ha HA’, then sat and ate very quickly. No CGs acknowledged the act.
Ava was in love with Franz, her puppy, and the puppy with her. She knew she would fail if they were too close, but she couldn’t help it. She knew it was a machine, but it was a machine programmed just as she was—all instinct and love. And she was swept up in the feeding time, play time, petting time, snuggle time. Ava was completely blocking from her mind the fact that this was a challenge and that it would end.

Little Franz had given a pained bark last night when Dean came to her room. Dean had told the puppy to shush, and then covered Ava’s mouth with her own, and Ava felt much more frightened, reluctant and stiff than before. She no longer derived any excitement, any stimulation, from this. But she knew if she resisted, Dean would look for the reason. So she closed her eyes and tried to think about kissing the tiny, faint, flat brown freckles on Henry’s neck, and scratching her tongue on his bristly skin. She found it difficult, she felt an ache in her chest, not like when she had thought of Leon, or countless other people she’d been attracted to.

Thinking about Henry was more like thinking about time, or death, or all the things you can’t know about the universe. Stars on fire.

‘An individual functioning properly in society will care about their appearance, and thus be neat and clean in their dress and their home. In this training exercise, you will complete a series of cleaning tasks in an allocated amount of time. Each of you has a cleaning station with a washing machine, dryer, iron, a sink full of dishes and a bathroom. You will first select your cleaning products from your limited budget.’

As Dean spoke, Ava drifted dreamily in and out, though she’d slept deeply in the end with the comfort of Franz. She was dreamy for his realistic fur coat, and his vulnerability. What if he got wet? She was dreamy for the skin on the man standing nearby, though she tried not to look at him. She could taste his smell. She was dreamy for his vulnerability too. Did he remember seeing her on the outside, on a street corner? And then Dean was pushing the task into her hands and she went to the construction—her mini cleaning station—and tried to decide how to go about it.
Her mother had cleaned, at home. Her mother had sterilised and then covered the house with that sickly peach smell. She was always telling Ava to sort through her piles, to throw things out.

Ava had once come home from a concert to find her mother had gone through the granny flat she lived in out the back (she’d moved out twice, gone broke and come back) and thrown out her scuffed black-and-white bear, old posters from her teen walls, letters passed in high school classes, and much more. Ava had sat on the bare couch, and cried. Her mother appeared at the door.

‘What is it, Ava?’

‘My stuff.’

‘I had to do it while you were out, you would never have let me. It’s unhealthy to hold on to old junk.’

Ava had leapt up, pushed past her mother and gone to the garage. Her father’s paintings, luckily, were still where they always were. Ava ached for them now, as she stood in the tiny tiled cove, smelling manufactured mould.

She started out okay on the task, putting the sheets and towels in the washing machine, and then scrubbing the dishes while it was on. Paul popped his head in and said hello, with a grimace.

‘I forgot to put powder in the machine,’ he said.

‘Oh no,’ said Ava, ‘maybe you’ll have time to run them through again?’

‘I’ll be in trouble for wasting water.’

Ava gave him a sympathetic look. She wondered how Henry was going with the task, down the other end. And as she envisioned his arms scrubbing dishes, the water in her hands grew hotter, the sponge squeezer, and time seemed to slow down. She had a Velvet Underground song in her head and she began to move her hips at the sink, slipping under a spell. When there were no dishes left, the stink of manufactured mould re-entered her nostrils and she attacked it with chemicals. Poisons. Head spins.
She slid down the wall to sit for a minute: dizzy, recovering. *Hold me.*

Then Dean was standing over her. ‘Time’s up.’

‘What?’

‘You failed. Your sheets and towels aren’t dry. Nothing is ironed.’

‘But…’

‘The cycle finished an hour ago.’

‘Oh,’ Ava’s head was down, looking at the tiles beneath her crouched knees. She picked at a spot of mould with her gloved fingernail.

‘Big Space.’

Ava’s eyes widened. What about everything they’d done? ‘Oh, Dean, no please, I’ll… make it up to you.’ Ava looked over at the little pen set up for their mechanical pets. Franz was on its hind legs, panting and watching her.

Dean then looked down in the direction of Henry’s tiled cove, and back at Ava with a smirk.

‘You can’t hide anything from me.’

Ava said nothing. She’d never been much good at hiding any feelings from anyone. But now it was so important that she tried.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

Dean smiled. ‘You’re going now.’

‘But…’

‘Nothing more.’ *Only this and nothing more.*

*But Franz, but Franz,* thought Ava, as she was led in and manacled to the centre of the room. She hugged herself and tried to send positive thoughts and energy to the little dog. She tried to send thoughts to her friends. Maybe they would see she was
gone and would take care of her pet. But then, Dean could lie and say she was somewhere else and that Franz had to stay in her room. She would do that, thought Ava. She needed to possess and control. She was sicker than any of them.

Ava wondered how long she’d be in here. And then, much earlier than the last time, the pins and needles came to one foot, and this time, the room became brighter and brighter—like the swim of your vision when you’re about to faint. And then the bright light was mauve, and Ava found that even when she closed her eyes, she noticed her lids, like black beetles clicking up and down. And then came a loud echo: the tick tick tick of an old clock. Ava never could stand having ticking clocks in the places she lived. The tick tick tick had never been soothing to her. It would keep her awake, and she would pulse with the loss of minutes and curiosity for all that had happened within them.

The alternating pain and numbness spread through her body. Ava could do nothing but lay on the floor, wince, click click her black eyelids and hold her hands to her ears to drown out the tick tick. It was so loud she tried to sing over it SHINY, SHINY, SHINY BOOTS OF LEATHER.

The whole night was like a fever dream. Sometimes the pain and numbness would go, in a tease, and Ava would stand and stretch and jump—a lavender blur before her eyes—and then it would return. Sometimes the ticking quietened slightly, and she caught her breath. By the time her imprisonment ended, her throat was hoarse. She was led out and in the corridors patches of grey seemed terrifying, flecked as they were with mauve. In the back of her unbroken mind she saw what they were doing. The thought of the sun, right now, the yellow, became a desperate craving. And she screamed out loud. Arms gripped her tighter. ‘Calm down’. A needle entered her arm. She shivered, and then was still.

They closed the plastic to her room and Ava collapsed onto the bed. Lying on her side she saw the unmoving bundle of fur under the other bed. She gasped, choked, and scuttled, painfully, to him. She dragged him out and held him in her arms. Just like a dog. Like a dead dog. She had no tears left. Her puffy eyes closed. She reached
for an energy bite and tried to place it on the creature’s tongue. Nothing. She sat up on the bed with Franz in her arms and then lay down. She had no idea what time it was. The drugs began to spread through her and she clutched her cold Franz closer, and slept.

A loud rattle woke her. It took several minutes. Her aching eyes opened and Dean was at the plastic, frowning.

‘You have to have breakfast.’

‘I don’t feel well.’ Ava tucked the fur bundle beneath her.

‘There’s a check-in for the animal task today. But I’ve already been informed that you failed.’

‘But,’ Ava fought through the fog and sat up, her head pounding. ‘But I was in the Big Space. You gave me no time to find a minder.’

‘It’s not my problem. You should have performed better at yesterday’s task.’

‘It’s not fair,’ Ava hunched over. She needed somebody to stroke her hair. Her dad used to do it when she was a little girl and had nightmares.

Dean walked off without another word.

Ava cried again and the tears burned. She wanted to talk to Henry but she couldn’t. Dean was already onto the attraction. She would go and lie in the crook of Paul’s arm.

Ava sat the bundle on her bed, fingered the little ear one last time. She walked down the corridor—dishevelled, dirty, red-eyed—and when she arrived at Paul and Nina’s room she went to bash on the plastic, but then she saw that Paul’s bed was empty. And her eyes travelled to the other bed. There the two of them were lying, still asleep: Paul cupped behind Nina like a spoon.
Ava hadn’t shown at breakfast, and then at lunch she came in, looked at them, but then sat in the opposite corner, avoiding Henry’s eye.

‘She’s a terrible actor,’ said Paul.

‘Is it about us, darling?’ asked Nina.

‘What do you mean?’ asked Henry.

‘It’s not us, Nina. Think about it. Everyone she develops a crush on, they take away from her.’

Henry frowned.

‘If she’s completely avoiding you, Henry, she’s got it bad.’

Henry’s mouth gaped.

‘Sorry… have I said too much?’

‘No, I just,’ his face flushed, ‘wouldn’t know what to do.’

‘I’m not going to ask if you like her,’ Paul blushed.

‘Why?’ Nina asked, looking at his face. ‘You do too, don’t you.’

‘D-did,’ Paul held his trembly hand to hers and smiled.

Henry tried to get past the blood pounding in his ears and the compulsion to go to her. She looked as though she’d been awake for days. Her hair wasn’t brushed, and she was hunched over her food, picking at it slowly. He would see her soon, at the animal training check-in, he told himself. He would be close to her then. Though she didn’t have little Franz with her. His pet was playing on the ground with the cat and the dinosaur. He looked back at Paul and Nina.

‘So, you two, hey?’

Henry held little Vincent against his ribs. Paul and Nina were beside him. Other teams had filed into the hall. Ava was nowhere to be seen. He looked about, then
noticed Dean’s eyes on him. Today she was dressed in head-to-toe charcoal, a jacket and pencil skirt. She told them to put down their pets. Vincent clawed at Henry’s pant-leg. Audrey and Goldblum cuddled each other at Nina and Paul’s feet. Henry saw some of the other pets around the hall scuttle far away from their masters. Counsellors swept these ones up and pointed at sheepish patients.

Dean walked up to Henry and picked up Vincent. Vincent looked with big black cartoon eyes from Henry to Dean and back, as though asking what to do. Henry nodded at the little creature and it settled.

‘The ghost trusts you. And is attached, but not too attached. It seems to know it is not the centre of your world. You’re doing okay.’ She handed the ghost back over. She told Henry to hold up his hSpace. He did and she pressed something on hers and touched it to his. He looked at the screen: ‘One new voucher.’ He clicked the message; the voucher came up full-screen, with holo option. It was a ‘buy one get one free’ download deal for hFlix, which he assumed he couldn’t use until he was out. Motivation.

Dean moved to Paul and Nina’s pets. Paul and Nina stood a foot apart. The kitty nuzzled the ear of the triceratops. ‘Well, they’ve obviously learnt affection.’ She looked from one to the other. ‘Is this one eating?’ she picked up Paul’s triceratops. Paul began to tremble.

‘Y… yes, I think so.’

‘You think so. Have you been feeding it?’

‘Yes, but, well, sorry. I mean, sometimes a bit of the energy drips back over its lip. I’m not sure it likes it.’ Paul spoke through his hand, hovering in front of his lips.

‘Why haven’t you tried to do something about this?’

‘Um, well, it was still eating some and it didn’t seem unhappy.’

Dean examined it head to tail. It stared back at its owner and craned its neck down to the kitten, making a soft call.
‘It’s undernourished. If you don’t find a solution before next check-in, well, you’ll see what happens.’

‘Please, Counsellor, what can I do?’

‘This is a functionality training check-in, not an advisory session. Use your time appropriately.’ Paul looked lost. Nina put her hand on his shoulder and Dean glared at her. The hand dropped.

Dean moved on to her other team. They watched for a little while. An older woman’s snake refused to move from her wrist. An Asian man with whom Henry had exchanged brief pleasantries in the lunch line shrugged and said his beetle wouldn’t come down from the wall. Dean chastised them and doled out mini-punishments, warning them they’d have to get their pets on track for next time.

Henry turned to Paul and Nina, their faces drawn. ‘I wonder where Ava is?’ he tried to say casually.

‘I think she already failed the task,’ said Nina. ‘I think little Franz is no more.’

‘Oh.’ And she was attached, Henry knew. She would be in pain. He wondered what the real rules of this were. Could he hand over his pet to her? They couldn’t punish him, except falsely. But would they find a way to punish her for it? He would think it through.

The next morning when Ava woke, cold through, there was someone in the bed across the room. She sat up quickly. It was the stretched-out body of Paul, staring up at the ceiling. He moved his head to face her. ‘How did I get here?’

‘I honestly don’t know,’ said Ava, feeling sad for him but secretly delighted by the company. She resisted the urge to reach out and hold.

‘Nina!’ He sat up quickly. He went to the plastic. It was too early. It was still closed. ‘Oh god, I hope they haven’t moved her to another ward.’

‘Maybe she’s in with Henry.’
Paul’s face dropped. ‘She could be in with anyone.’ And then he seemed to notice the see-through slip Ava was wearing. He looked away. He hit the plastic with the palm of his hand, then shook his hand with pain.

Later, they walked down to breakfast together, and indeed, Henry and Nina walked together too. Both looked a little puzzled. Ava felt an exasperated pull toward Henry, but remained beside Paul. Nina frowned at her. Ava realised Nina must know that things had happened between them.

‘New... t-twist in the tale?’ said Paul. Nina continued to frown. ‘Nina,’ he said, ‘it’s not my fault. Please d-don’t be mad.’

‘It’s just not fair.’

‘This isn’t a... holiday resort.’

She glared at him.

‘Sorry.’

‘You don’t seem too upset about it.’ She glared at Ava. Ava looked away. Jealousy was hard for her to fathom. She didn’t need to possess anyone. She never had.

They were handed a cup of pills with breakfast. Ava noticed Henry hiding them by pressing them under his tongue and then letting them float out into his juice cup. She took in his eyes and showed how she chewed a mouthful of food, put the pill in her mouth, swallowed and smiled. He frowned, curiously. She then took a bite of her bread roll, and when it came out, she showed him that she’d pushed the pill into the dough with her tongue, while chewing around it. The scraps of food would be scraped into the bin, with pills wedged deep inside them. It was easier to hide than floating pills in juice—which a CG could see if they walked by. They also checked napkins. Henry smiled at her and put a pill in his mouth, then bit into his bread.

‘What did you do, out there?’ Ava asked.

Henry finished his mouthful, pushing the pill in the bread and putting it down on his plate. ‘I’m a designer, of sorts.’
‘Of what?’ Paul asked.

‘Electronics.’

‘Like screens and devices?’ Ava asked.

‘Like what’s inside them—the things that make them smart.’

Ava nodded. She knew she shouldn’t keep talking to him, she should act disinterested, but she couldn’t see Dean, and she was burning with curiosity.

‘What landed you in here, brother?’

He seemed to falter.

‘It’s okay, if you don’t want to talk about it.’

‘Uh, my girlfriend,’ Ava’s heart shuddered. Odd. ‘My… ex-girlfriend, now. She reported me. I was failing her, and apparently my friends, and daydreaming at work instead of contributing. You know, all that.’

Ava, Paul and Nina nodded.

‘What about you?’ Henry looked into her eyes.

‘A lot led up to it, but the culmination was… well, you know I think I saw you, on that street corner.’ She blushed.

Henry leaned forward. ‘You remember my face?’ he smiled.

‘Not many people stopped,’ she said.

‘I knew it was you, when I first saw you in here,’ he said. ‘You know I ran away.’

‘You were shocked.’

He shrugged. ‘I don’t know. Confronted, maybe. What were the poems about?’ He’d stopped eating.

She remembered them by heart. ‘I’ll recite one for you:
Some days she feels like
dangling cigarettes
and glittering geometrics

a sleek Kir Royale
driving her to the top
crystal of a yellow chandelier

a black telephone ringing in
the past’s destruction
or distraction

a tattoo of a sailor

a Weimar nipple

and a run-down castle—a Lansbury

barbiturate fields
where the good witch
waved her UFO.’

Henry and Paul clapped. Nina said: ‘I had a chandelier.’ She looked wistful.

Ava said: ‘Another one was about this big old house my father used to have. And the way he was, and the smell, the radio, the gardens, and mostly the paint.’ A burning began at her eyes now.


‘He got back together with my mother. They sold the house.’ She was exhausted by the thought. She didn’t want to talk anymore. She wanted to know what it would be like to burn up in Henry’s arms. To fill a space with him and then turn to dust.

He looked at her a long time, empathetically, then moved food around on his plate.

Ava looked over at the wall to the feed of the Intelligence, digital tickertape:

*US earthquake: thousands dead/Just caught up with Lola, ooh la, she is lookin’ so HAWT, so proud lala!!!!!!!/9 ways to get a flat stomach—today!/Man intended to*
Some patients were touching an update to bring up visuals or sound, or calling it up on their devices. Henry’s pet Vincent was then in front of Ava and she turned from the noise to cuddle it. Henry smiled. Nina and Paul were following the feed.

‘All those people dying all the time,’ said Paul.

‘I want to watch The Wizard of Oz,’ said Nina.

‘There’s too much and then it’s all over,’ said Ava. And she cuddled Vincent, and smiled.
Sound + vision

Henry was surprised at how easily the lies, or rather, the amended truths, came. It was as though he’d almost convinced himself of this other life. When he thought of GlaZen, and the watching Intelligence, a cold dread settled in his gut. He hoped they thought him a good actor. That they couldn’t tell how easy it was for him to fit in. He needed to fit in long enough to work out how and when he could amend his wretch.

It was the most they had spoken, and he hadn’t wanted it to end. Later, he went to her room. She was reading, alone. She looked up, shocked, her eyes darting to the tower.

‘Come to my room for a while?’ he asked. Vincent squirmed in his arms. He couldn’t explain to her that they wouldn’t be watched as closely in his room, or so he supposed. She took a moment, and came.

‘Do you like jam?’ he asked, as they walked. He wasn’t sure why that was what came out of his mouth. Her eyes lit up.

‘Oh, brother, I love it. Especially strawberry. My father used to have a strawberry patch, out the back of that house, too. We used to make our own.’

‘That sounds amazing. It’s so hard to get homemade jam.’

‘Have you ever tried to make it, Henry?’ Hearing her say his name made him pulse from temple to ankle.

‘No, you know, I’ve never even thought of doing that. I’ve never really made anything. Well, except… technical things.’

They walked into his empty room. He sat on the bed and smoothed out a spot next to himself. He sat Vincent to the other side. He had managed to get in touch with Ken, to tell him to send some things he could pretend were ‘possessions’ to a mutual location, and Dean sent someone to pick them up. There were a few dusty Sailor Jerry’s bottles (from the recipe that no longer existed), there was an Aladdin Sane record, a Jayne Mansfield poster, and a hangscreen loaded with series of old TV shows: The Twilight Zone, The Simpsons. They were Ken’s things, but he’d known
just what Henry meant when he said he was in an isolated place and needed aesthetic comfort.

Before Ava sat, she looked at the Bowie record. ‘I feel like I know you,’ she said.

‘Can we truly know another person? How they see things?’ Henry asked. It would be terrible if she knew who he really was, what he had done.

‘I don’t know.’

‘When you leave, and walk from here to your room you will look at certain things on the walls, in the air. You will feel and smell and taste things, and even if I followed your very path I would never know how you experience the world.’

Ava’s eyes were wide. She flipped the record over. ‘This is really old, isn’t it? I mean lots of things are pretend old, but this is really old. What an incredible look he had.’ She sat the record down. Then she looked at Henry: his arms, his chest, his legs. Her hand moved out toward his skin, but hesitated. Henry felt invisible strings, electric.

‘Some people like them just because they’re rare I guess. Or retro. They want to show them off. But I really do like them.’ He wasn’t sure why he was pre-empting a defence, as if she were Meg. He put his hand on the soft skin of her arm. Ava closed her eyes and her head rolled back, exposing the soft landscape of her neck. Henry had never felt such an uncontrollable, jumping passion. He was becoming hard and all he had done was touch her arm, hear her voice.

Dean was at the plastic. Henry’s hand ran from Ava and he crouched, elbows on knees, to hide his excitement. Ava’s eyes were glazed; wide open. Henry could see the extra spit at the edges of her mouth. Her cheeks were flushed. We will become nothing.

Dean told Ava to come to a private counselling session with her. Henry felt Ava’s muscles tighten beside him.

She stood, said nothing, and didn’t look back.
After Ava closed her eyes to a rough, punishing Dean in the black-spot corridor, she was sent to the visitors’ wing, where her parents waited. There existed this new need to gather herself, to adjust from one moment to the next, that she hadn’t experienced before. It was because of Dean. This was abuse, she realised, something that could truly change you; something that could destroy your ability to exist in the moment, because dread and fear of moments ahead had crept in. She walked slowly, gathering, collecting light, air, sound and surfaces.

She could tell her mother had dressed her father. He was neat and ironed and his thinning hair was combed back. Though the moustache was gone, he still had the dignified features of a 20th Century movie star, and Ava missed the patched tweed and crumple of his artist days.

Her mother was dressed in a champagne jumpsuit, with heels and pearls. Her hair was stiffly hairsprayed and her face looked newly tucked. She smiled a tight, white smile and her quiet father smiled just a little; kindness in his eyes.

‘Darling you look terrible,’ was the first thing her mother said. Ava was crumpled from her encounter with Dean, but still, this morning she had felt so good about putting on her big fluffy sparkly red jumper. Her face must have looked pale, pinched. Her eyes stung.

‘I’ve been in punishment.’

‘Well that’s no good. Aren’t you trying at your tasks?’

‘I try.’

‘Don’t you want to get out?’

‘Of course she does, Peta, she said she’s trying.’ Her mother simply looked at her father. ‘Are you okay? Do you feel okay?’ her father asked.

‘Most of the time. Though I long for things I can’t have.’

‘Well, keep saving your vouchers,’ said her mother.

‘We miss you at home,’ her father said.
‘Sam, this is no time to get sentimental, that’s not what she needs,’ said her mother. But Ava just smiled at her father, who was smiling back at her. Her mother asked about some of the specific training tasks and Ava began to talk but was distracted by thoughts of what Henry had said. You can’t know everything about someone. And she’d never wanted to before.

‘Ava, Ava.’ She looked back at her mother. ‘What’s wrong? I was just asking about your diet. Do they give you enough vitamins, adaptogens?’

‘I suppose so.’

She wanted to ask her father if he was painting again, but she already knew the answer. She wanted to ask if the paintings were still in the garage, but she feared she wouldn’t want to know the answer. Art was acceptable—everything was—it was the way art took over and inhibited her father’s Functionality that had been the issue. And her mother had delighted in his rescue.

And then she just wanted to hold her father’s hand. Or even her mother’s. She wanted her mother’s face to break. She was struck with a memory of the smell of a yellow fluffy blanket with pictures of giraffes, and her mother reading her a bedtime story. Everything had still smelt clean, but not as startlingly so, then. It was cleanliness as care, not habit.

Her mother stood up. It’d barely been ten minutes. ‘We’d better go.’

‘Can I stay a bit? Can you pick me up after?’ her father asked.

‘Aren’t you forgetting something, Samuel?’

Her father looked blank.

‘The forecast? Acidity levels?’

‘Oh.’ He moved his hand across to Ava’s and gave it a quick squeeze. She stood and pulled him into a hug, but his lanky body didn’t give completely. He patted her back. Her mother air kissed her cheeks. ‘There’s a Class Three this afternoon again,’ he said, apologetically. ‘We’re advised not to be travelling.’

‘Okay daddy. G’bye.’
Her mother walked tall and her father slouched as they walked to the door. Ava peered up to the high windows: a greenish, calm sky. She turned and left the visitation wing.

Henry felt prickly toward Dean and her possible suspicions and capabilities. Before the public transport training exercise she had whispered for him to stuff up. He didn’t have time to ask why. It was either that she needed to have a word, or, he thought with dread, GlaZen were calling. As he’d been swept up in the feeling of Ava, and learning to feel like Ava—full canon—the other part of his life had been relegated to a cold corner of his mind.

So in the task he stood on seats and tables, stared openly at the others, made random noises. Paul tried to warn him off: ‘what’s wrong man?’ Ava didn’t touch or speak to him. He wondered if she believed he was acting out over her, over their almost.

He was getting away with it: standing on tables.

Dean called: ‘Henry, Big Space’. Ava’s eyebrows rose and her bottom lip dropped.

Dean escorted him down corridors he’d seen and then some he hadn’t. Muggy blasts of air travelled through some. When they got to a back door he remembered ‘my ghost!’ and Dean sighed.

‘It’s a machine, remember?’

Henry tried to pull his face into an expression far from inadequacy. ‘I’ll fail the task’.

‘You’ll get another holiday.’

Henry put away his sad heart and hoped, hoped one of the others would seek out little Vincent. Ava’s warmth would be the ultimate company for his ghost.

‘I guess so.’
‘Grethe has called for you. Go to the office, and then go home.’

‘Okay.’ And he was in daylight, and it was hot, so he squinted his eyes and stumbled down the path like a condemned man.

Henry stood in silence among the Functionals on the train, his reflection haggard. The walk to the GlaZen building was short but his knees were reluctant to bend. The elevator was too quiet. The sweat on his clothes turned sticky and gelid. He stood at Grethe’s office door. And all this time a screaming competition in his head. He had no idea what he would say. The only lesson he’d learnt in there was to become more instinctual, like her. Which would not help him now. He ran a hand over his bristled head, checked for beads of sweat on his face.

‘Henry, you look terrible,’ said Grethe, opening the door. Indeed people had been staring at his hunch and his stubble. His grey skin.

‘All part of the role, Grethe.’

‘I suppose.’ She frowned. ‘Come in.’

She moved behind a large white desk. On the left wall was a print of the Grand Canyon. Strange choice, thought Henry, given America’s water crises. Behind her, the window and the city: a hot bowl of smog. On the desk, constant little sounds and flashes from her hSpace.

‘Now, before we go into a formal meeting tomorrow—a brief for the execs and the team—can you let me know how Operation Beta-Carotene is going?’ she asked.

‘You mean Beta-Clandestine?’

‘That’s what I said.’

‘Well,’ Henry said. ‘It’s going well.’ There was that bubble of hilarity starting in his belly, the corners of his mouth.

‘We can’t give you any more time; the product is creating some underground buzz.’
'I thought it was top secret.’ He swallowed away the laugh, but was sure it was playing around his eyes.

‘ Mostly. But there was a pharmaceutical conference this weekend sponsored by Generon and...’ her eyes flashed, ‘we learnt about some of their plans and then someone here leaked the fact that we were onto it first. So we might have to bring in market testing and research groups for public reporting sooner than we thought.’ She sat up tall, proud. ‘When we put it on the market we want people to have already decided it’s for them.’

‘What if it fails? We need years to know...’

‘Don’t be pessimistic. Internal Research will come up with something.’ She waved a solid hand at him. ‘Now, you’ve got someone in mind?’

He found himself saying yes.

‘Wonderful. Then I expect a full report to the team tomorrow—on this patient, and why they’re your proposed test subject—and how you’ll assess the effects on the patient’s Functionality.’

He nodded, numbly, and then she placed her hSpace in his hand.

‘Tell Meg you’ll be home in a few hours. I suppose you want to work on the proposal?’

‘Uh. Yes, of course. In my office.’

‘Yes... well, Bette Singh has been using your office. A designer, too. She’s on limb design. Know her? She had some of the same issues you did being so close to her team.’

Henry was shocked. He thought he had the only swipe-key to get in. Wasn’t there enough space in this building? What about all his stuff? What about when he came back? He quashed the idea that they were already onto him, that replacements were being interviewed...
The woman was not here now, but she had made the office her own. Gone, thought Henry with embarrassment, are the rotten flowers and the overflowing bin. Replacing them, a yoga mat in the corner, a framed poster of a woman on stage—someone Henry had never seen. Photographs of two smiling children. Cleanliness. The drawer was still locked, and Henry, relieved, inserted his key and saw that the observation screen from the Institution and the pile of electronic chips were there. He realised it was time to take a breath. The air was still tart with the leftover frenzy of his creation.

He touched the screen on the desk, logging on with his voice code to check, with dread, whether his wretch had been prematurely mass-produced. It hadn’t. But he also couldn’t retrieve his design file, as it had been submitted. *Why did I say I was ready?* How would he have time to try and make this adjustment now? He’d wanted to appear adequate, that’s why. It was a bad habit.

He had a copy on his home computer, he remembered, but even if he could do what he intended to do—create the setting he wanted—what would be his excuse for resubmitting the design at this late stage? And with the lower-level testing, could he get away with it? Surely they would see what his intention was?

His punishment would be far worse than institutionalisation. But it was his moral responsibility, he saw now, to try. No more shaking it off.

Henry swept up the chips, the screen, logged off, locked the drawer again and went to leave for home. He stopped and turned on the screen in his hand, just briefly, to touch Ava’s face.

The door opened, quite suddenly, and the woman let out a little yelp of fright. Henry apologised, turning off the screen with one hand, the chips jangling in his pocket. He explained that this was, or, used to be, his office.

‘Oh yes, Grethe said you’d be coming by, sorry,’ she said, and she seemed to look over to where the bin had been, her mouth a line of distaste.
Henry could see a packet of lollies sneaking out from her Prada handbag. He smiled again, and said he should have no need to come back today. ‘My girlfriend, ah, fiancée, won’t be home yet so I can work from there.’

‘Okay, good. I mean—nice to meet you,’ she stuck out her hand. ‘Good luck with your project.’

‘Good luck with yours.’ Henry nodded and removed himself from the room, tripping a little as he walked backwards with the screen under his arm. He waved, nodded, left, wound the corridors, came out into the bustling media room. New faces, always new faces. On the wall today it wasn’t the news at all but a disaster movie. Some people watched and chewed organic celery sticks and typed all at the same time.

In the elevator Henry pulled out his hSpace. There was an overwhelming amount of notifications. The device had been quietly vibrating in his pocket since he’d stepped outside the gates of the institution. He put it back in his pocket. He realised he’d gotten used to the nothing.

Ava found herself outside Henry’s room, stretching her arms above her head, frowning. ‘Vincent?’ she called softly. The little ghost poked its round head from behind a bed-leg. ‘Come here, little guy,’ she beckoned. Vincent looked past her, and then moved out slowly, questioningly. ‘Your owner, Henry, he’s gone away for the night. Not somewhere he could take you.’ She scooped the ghost up gently in her arms. It looked worried; its big black eyes squinting up at the bottom. ‘He’ll be okay.’ It reached out a palm to her hair and wrapped a strand around, curious. ‘I’ll look after you. Come to my room.’

Walking back to her room she asked Vincent, vaguely, ‘what will we do?’ She understood Henry’s actions during the public transport exercise as those of a confused person: standing on seats, calling out. She was confused, too. Why was the feeling for Henry different to the immediate tug of desire, abundance and comfort she had experienced so often? It was a feeling that led to both hope and nostalgia. It was a destructive sensation—overtaking her, creating longing. This new sensation made her feel strange, exasperated, even angry.
She arrived and ducked under the plastic. It wasn’t Paul she found, sitting on the opposite bed, but—long dark hair, that flawless jawbone—Leon.

‘I guess I’m back.’

‘I thought you were moved to another ward.’

‘I was.’

‘Where’s Paul?’

Leon shrugged, grinning.

Ava felt a stirring of danger. That stirring turned delicious. And then Henry’s face flashed into her mind accompanied by a pang of guilt. A maddening, unfamiliar pang. *We haven’t even been close to being physical.* She wanted to deny her attachment. She sat down beside Leon.

‘What you got there?’ he asked.

‘You’re not doing this training exercise?’

‘I guess not. It looks like too much fun.’

Ava held little Vincent close. It must’ve been much harder on Ward F. Or then (she remembered his sentence) maybe he was being manipulative. There were flecks of mischief in those big brown eyes.

‘This is Vincent.’

Leon stared at her. ‘We have unfinished business.’

And he touched her cheek. It was almost enough to bring her into the moment. Almost. It would do. She put her mouth on his. Vincent squirmed, by her heart.
Outside

Meg was buoyant and joyous, laying out knives and forks and a big cheesy eggplant dish. ‘I bet they don’t serve this... wherever you are.’ She looked away quickly.

‘They sure don’t.’ He strove for cooperation and smiles but he was already wondering how he could get her out of the way. He didn’t have much time. Her smiles seemed even more rubbery and stretched, and her eyes shifty, and Henry began to wonder why she didn’t ask more questions. Had she been pestering someone at GlaZen to let her in on it?

‘How’s work going, honey?’ he forced himself to ask. She told him some story about how Sandy was leaving for Berlin and how she had a baby on the way. Henry couldn’t remember who Sandy was or if he’d met her. It’s too hot in here. Then she asked him how the project was going but wouldn’t look him in the eye as he answered. He saw a vein going off in her neck.

She asked how long it would be before this stage would be over, but she didn’t ask with the same urgency as she used to. He wondered if she was finally falling for someone else.

‘I can’t say,’ he said, and she pouted like a child. She reached a bronze hand across to his and he realised with horror he might have to sleep with her—to get her to sleep, to give him the time he needed.

They were quiet during dinner. Henry wondered if it might be the wedding she was thinking of, the new ring sparkling on her finger. She’d chosen a classic-set diamond on a white gold band. Henry had no idea how many carats it was, just that it had made a sizeable dint in their credit.

‘If we can’t go on holiday anytime soon, let’s re-live something,’ Meg said abruptly after dinner. She sat her hSpace on the table, pointing it toward a white wall. She turned on the projection, went into her photo-folders and began a slideshow of their trip to Ubud, Bali.

‘Do you remember that hotel?’ she asked, looking intently into his eyes.
‘Luxurious,’ Henry said. And it had been, incredibly so. A king-size bed with a canopy, a whole hut to themselves. But Henry remembered the people, more. Smiling children, the hunched lady selling bags of bananas to feed the monkeys, the man who asked them again and again if they would buy his wooden box. Meg had swatted the man away. ‘You’ve gotta know how to deal with them’, she’d said.

Meg had stepped around the mangy dogs on the tip-toe of her cheap sandals. The main street and surrounding ones featured Western-brand shops mixed with local ones. They traipsed up and down, Meg squinting at items to figure out their quality and worth. On the screen now, there she was in that sarong she bought for less than a cup of coffee.

Henry remembered how, in one shop, a skinny, tired-looking woman got up from fanning herself on the step to barter with Meg over a ring made from the mucousy glimmer of inner-shells. After the sale was made the woman waved incense around her shop and blessed Henry and Meg. It was four in the afternoon but it was her first sale of the day.

There were pictures of the minty cocktails that Henry had enjoyed, and the smiling cocktail waiters. Meg stopped on the photo of a gorgeous Balinese boy. Henry had been fascinated, then, by the desire she’d unwittingly shown toward the boys: seeing into her secret self. He’d made love to her passionately those nights, and they’d wake early to roosters crowing, and the tinny engines of scooters and motorbikes.

Their drivers, the cocktail waiters, and hotel staff would sometimes comment on Meg’s skin. They would touch her gently on her soft, almond-coloured arm. She’d blush and smile, but it made Henry uncomfortable. Despite the multitude of ex-pat mansions in the hills, where locals worked as house staff, Meg still seemed exotic. Henry was uncomfortable with the ex-pats they met, seeking spiritual awakenings in the mountains while people laboured in rice fields below. The ex-pats had sought a place away from the cities of the West but they still embodied the ideals of the West: this freedom to ‘choose’ how to be, and how to spend one’s money and one’s time. They argued for the case of bringing business and income to the locals. They argued that it was they who bolstered the local economy. They walked over the sweet-smelling Hindu offerings on the street and smiled at how charming they were.
Henry and Meg had lain in bed and he’d thought, simultaneously, *I could live here*, and *I could never live like that*. And so he’d said nothing aloud.

At least if you’d attained a visa to live overseas, Henry thought now, you wouldn’t have to answer so much for your contribution. But of course it was getting harder to obtain those visas. You were supposed to want to stay here. It was stable, even growing, when other parts of the world were running out of resources, warring, and being destroyed by natural disasters.

‘I wonder what they take,’ Meg was saying now. ‘They live such hard lives but they always seemed happy, didn’t they?’

Henry simply nodded, because it was useless to go into it with her.

He had been happy with her, then. The little things she’d commented on, the things she’d wanted to do—shop, party, hang out at the hotel, purchase little bits of art that she would sit on her work desk to give her cultural credit points—seemed cute and innocent. Sometimes he’d agreed with her. These things he felt now had only been niggles, then. And she wasn’t on the full gamut of pills that she was on now. Only the hormonal regulators and the mild mood elevators.

Meg hesitated before the next set of photos. They’d argued a little about going to Europe, which was dangerous in parts because of the resource wars. But Henry had insisted that the danger was overblown by the local media, and that there were plenty of safe spots. ‘They could be drawn into the conflict at any moment,’ Meg had said.

Some European cities had also faced terrible disasters: Venice and Amsterdam were being rebuilt for the rising water. Storms had pockmarked Paris, Brussels and Amsterdam. Meg wanted to go to a big city like Berlin, New York, Shanghai. Henry wanted to go somewhere different, somewhere that didn’t operate in the same way.

They ended up in Budapest, a safe zone and city-enough for Meg, though she was continually annoyed that many shop staff and waiters didn’t speak English, ‘like they do in Berlin.’ After five days in the capital, which Henry found historically and architecturally interesting, but also smoggy and skewed toward tourists just like them, he convinced Meg they should go for a drive to a smaller place to stay a night
or two. Meg had been afraid of it being boring. Henry went and hired the car anyway.

They drove for hours, towards Croatia and around Lake Balaton, and came across a tiny street and a tiny village with an inn that had vacancies. Here was Meg in a photo with her arms folded, an old stone building and storms brewing in the background. Henry’s heart quickened at the photo. Many times he’d lain awake, thinking of the kind old lady who’d understood their hand gestures and showed them to a small and dusty room. She’d brought up some Pálinka and toasted with them, before moving to the windows and muttering, pointing to the sky.

He’d lie awake and think about that night when Meg was terrified by the swaying of the building and where his own heart had thumped in secret excitement. No one knew they were there. Their hSpaces had dropped out of range, to Meg’s deep dismay, and when she’d gestured to the woman about a screen, she was met with a shake of the head and a giggle. Henry and the woman caught each other’s eyes and he’d smiled.

The morning—and here was his picture of it—was yellow, dewy and cold. It was meant to be summer, if there had still been seasons. The woman was out there in the garden picking tomatoes for their breakfast. Henry’s heart had leapt at the thought of the fresh, home-grown food. And not a pollutant or eyesore in sight: no natural gas drills, no oil wells, no smokestacks.

‘That was an incredible breakfast,’ Meg said now. ‘Though she undercooked the eggs a bit.’

‘It was delicious.’ The most.

‘I was happy to get back to Budapest though.’

I could have stayed there forever.

In the bedroom, the animal in him was coiled. He was forced to fantasise, to soften Meg. He closed his eyes and tried not to call Ava’s name. He thought of the hidden pills that he would crumble into her warm milk, so she would sleep deeply and he
would scramble to save them all from becoming complacent. He came, after a while, with his eyes closed, and retreated quickly. He pressed his hand between her legs and, nauseous, circled her until she was released. Then he went to make the milks.

‘You know, Barkley says in his latest book it isn’t warm milk at all that will help you sleep,’ she called from the bedroom. Henry placed the mugs down, lightly, on the bench.

‘So you don’t want one?’ he said casually. Inside he panicked. She slept deeply anyway but would notice he was missing; she would rise and find him and drag him back to bed. He had to find a way to keep her out. Fantasies of hitting her, sharply, with the lamp next to the bed, rose up in him and shocked him. So this is how people came to violence.

‘I think I’ll have a chamomile tea though, with a bit of honey. Why not?’ She appeared at the doorway, smiling.

‘Okay Meg, I’ll get ’em, you relax.’

‘Mmokay, Henny.’

He hated it when she called him that. She left the room. He shook as he dissolved pills into the steaming water.

When she was asleep, deeply, drugged, he tipped his own drink down the sink, and then ran to the toilet, holding his stomach. He vomited up cheesy sauce. He washed his face, slapped his cheeks to stop himself from crying, and made a strong coffee.

To work.

When Ava used to miss someone, on the outside, she would broadcast it. She had a good following. Probably because she knew her thoughts were both hers and unoriginal (as everything was) so she didn’t take herself too seriously. The air was full of broadcasts, channels and blogs by people who thought they were the very first to have an opinion about something.
She missed broadcasting this morning. The missing came and went. But she woke up next to Leon and the smell of sex and she knew she wouldn’t miss him if he was taken away again. And the confusion of that, and the missing of Henry, she would love to be able to express.

She reached behind her bed for her device, trying not to wake Leon. She went into the notes section and smudged it with thoughts. It was cool against her finger. Her body was warm and slightly achy.

*I am behind the yellow walls. True pleasure is dark. And I sense that it is old.*

*True pleasure is frightening. Is living with fear of loss.*

She deleted that last sentence.

Leon kissed the crook of her arm. She minimised the note screen and looked out at the tower. ‘I sense them watching,’ she said.

She had broadcast the things that happened with Gerry, her Dad’s friend. Her posts were taken down by a goodie-two-shoes trailing the net, reporting filth. But Ava found some other young woman in Germany had been plagiarising her posts, and so the stories lived on.

But she had to stop thinking about *out there.* She tried to come back to now. She kissed Leon on the top of his head. She inhaled the smell of his skin at the temples: creamy and lightly salty.

Throughout the night, Henry amended his design. He was surprised at how little it took, in the end, to build in the function he desired. He made some other dummy changes to hopefully fool the proofers and manufacturers.

Through the night he also searched for the one; the one he supposed he could call his victim. He had a shortlist of patients, many of them older and tragically bound to the place. He kept flicking back to Ava, puzzling over that other mystery, the same footage of her in bed that kicked in at night. Sometime around four am the footage of
her changed back to what he presumed was the real live feed. She was in her bed but she was not alone.

Before Meg woke, Henry was forced to take something, something both calming and speedy, and put eye drops in. *Just for today.* He’d been up all night. He shook with that sick, green feeling. That obsessive, coarse loop of memory and realisation: bulging the eyes out, making the tongue dry, churning the stomach. *Does she feel nothing for me?* He was just another, ordinary—more ordinary—unattractive, uninteresting *nothing.* He had built her up in his imagination. He suppressed the thought that it was her nature, her *abundance,* which drew him to her.

Meg kissed him on the back of the neck and he jumped. He felt he could laugh or cry.

‘I slept like the dead,’ Meg said.

Henry smiled. ‘I have to go.’

She pouted. ‘Can’t I make you breakfast?’

‘You’re too kind.’ He touched her hand. He couldn’t look into her eyes. ‘I have to go.’

‘When will I see you again?’ She was frowning, still half-asleep.

‘Soon.’

‘I can’t wait for this all to be over.’

‘You and me both,’ Henry said. He looked at her. His head pounded with annoyance.

‘We have to set a date for the wedding.’

He just had to survive today. Get the amended *wretch* through approval. Test it. There were a million things that could go wrong. But he just had to hold out a little longer. Have control over these next few steps.
They were all seated around a table: Barkley in white, Grethe, Dana and the other suits in charcoal. Grethe in a shiny gold scarf. Blustery outside, chunky sideways rain. He had to convince the table why his candidate was the best subject to test on. To make Functional, like them.

‘So,’ Grethe said, pressing her hands together. ‘Let’s go through this again. He’s been in the institution for four years, his sentence is “massively manipulative”, his motivations for manipulation are personal power and destructiveness of others, but he’s never used it advantageously—such as in a management position.’ A few giggles around the room. ‘He’s prone to extreme mood swings; he undermines authority. IRL he manipulated the system to get out of work and other functional activities. Punishment in Ward F has had little effect, except, due to his physical attractiveness, he uses it to elicit sympathy.’

Henry picked up the thread. ‘He’s a good candidate, too, because other patients are drawn to him and we’ll be able to assess their reactions. If he changes and becomes more Functional, theoretically he may lead by example because of their willingness to go along with him’.

‘I see,’ said Grethe.

Barkley leaned in. ‘Just wondering, Henry, why is he the absolute best candidate for this?’

Henry looked at him calmly. The pill had stopped him from sweating. His thoughts were ordered. He was grateful, just this once, for its assistance. ‘Because his is a case that can’t really be suppressed or handled any other way; not with medication, therapy, Functionality training or punishment. He’s strong.’

‘And therefore weak,’ Barkley nodded. ‘He is too weak to accept reality, the ways of the world. He is too weak to build a life of happiness, fulfilment, and Balance.’

‘Yes,’ Henry nodded. His stomach clamped like a stressed jaw. In the back of his mind he was a little boy, walking up the stairs to stand by the preacher at the front of the church, flushed with embarrassment, strangeness and defiance.

‘There is one more thing,’ Grethe said. ‘The final prototype.’
‘Yes?’ Henry said, heart jumping up a few beats. He had logged in from home after finalising his adjustment and re-submitted the nanopharm design through all the correct networks, labelling it ‘final’.

‘We need to make one final adjustment. It won’t take long.’ The suits at the table all looked at one another. Henry quietly gulped his excess of saliva.

‘Do you need me to make it?’ he asked. Maybe this would be perfect—if the structure was changed to accommodate this adjustment, then he had more of a chance of getting away with his own.

‘The adjustment is just one small function; it will be made by someone else on the team. Thank you. We just wanted you to know that the final design is not quite the final design.’

‘Has… this designer already seen the nano?’

‘No. We decided this only two days ago. The designer said she could do it. She’s coming in this afternoon.’

Henry nodded.

‘Sorry, Henry, we know this is your baby, but as you know, GlaZen’s goals are constantly reassessed, updated and upgraded. The designer will use your complete design, I’m sure. You’ve given us a run-down of what it does, and that’s great, they’ll just make one final tweak.’

‘Can I ask what it is? I mean, I’m the one who’s going to be monitoring the effects.’

‘We’d rather keep this one classified. It probably won’t be in effect too much for the institutional tests.’

‘But there are tests for a reason.’

‘This one is more… applicable, outside.’

Henry decided not to argue. Though if the designer hadn’t seen the nano yet, how did she know she could add on whatever function the company wanted her to add on? It must’ve been someone high up—from the military? Surely surveillance
capability wouldn’t be added… Perhaps it was something even more horrible, like a weapon that would activate and destroy the brain of the patient. Or perhaps it was an enhancement to the control technology, allowing GlaZen to make remote changes to the programming. All these things were, frighteningly, possible.

Henry’s worst thought was that they may have been suspicious over his final tweaks on the design, and this was all an excuse to get someone in to look at it. But he needed to hold on to that inkling of hope; that his secret amendment would pass through. And not be found out, until it came into effect...

‘Okay,’ said Henry.

Dana rubbed her hands together. ‘When do I move in?’

‘Very soon,’ said Grethe. She turned to Henry. ‘Do you think remaining undercover is the best option in terms of monitoring the results?’

Henry faux-sighed. ‘Look, to be honest, yes. For now.’

‘We better keep you in there, then. You seem to be holding your cover well.’

‘Is it too easy? We can throw some real punishment in?’ Barkley joked. Henry sensed an undercurrent of menace. Stop being paranoid. Though he could see the benefit to them of keeping him out of the way, too, what with this new ‘adjustment’.

‘I’ll be right, mate,’ said Henry, with what he hoped was a confident smirk. They went on to make plans as to when Leon’s operation would take place.
Part three

Means of fulfilment

The ceilings were high; the light was fluoro white with a touch of mandarin. Half the team stood behind glass counters. The other half were customers.

‘It’s training for exchange—a test to see what you can get out of each other. One of you seeks a product, a means of fulfilment. The other seeks profit, and recognition in your work,’ said Dean. ‘It’s plausible, when some of you improve enough and released as Functional, that you will be employed in a retail or service position. Of course, you will also spend time on the other side of these counters.’ She tapped the thick glass of the make-up counter, behind which Ava stood.

When the task began, Henry was her first customer.

‘I’m looking for a present,’ he said.

‘For your wife?’

‘For my girlfriend.’

‘I thought you didn’t have one, brother.’

‘Okay then, for the girl I would like to be mine.’

‘You can’t own her.’

‘You know what I mean.’

‘I saved your ghost,’ she was looking down at the under-lit countertop, at his see-through, slender hands.

‘Shouldn’t we be in role for this task?’

‘Sorry. Yes.’
‘But… thank you.’ Those fingers moved forward, briefly, to touch hers, then pulled away quick. She looked at his furrowed face. His eyes seemed whiter, hot, as though he knew about Leon. As though he cared, too.

‘Did you meet Leon?’ she asked.

‘Who’s Leon?’

‘I’m Leon.’ Leon came up beside Henry. Ava looked from one face to the other—the slick and the rough. ‘I’ll have some purple eyeliner, please?’

‘Would you like two? Second one is half-price.’ Ava smiled at Leon, despite herself; the curl of his lip just lifted hers. She looked at Henry’s hunched shoulders, furrowed brow. There was a lot contained in that, she thought. But what of now? She handed Leon a purple and a green eyeliner pencil. Leon tilted the small round mirror on the desk toward himself, puckered his sweet lips and began to apply the purple eyeliner to one lid. He eyed Henry in the mirror.

‘Hey man.’ He swapped the pencil to his other hand and reached out his right for a shake. Ava watched a wary Henry put out his own hand, and shake that of the man with one purple-ringed eye.

‘I’m Henry.’

‘New in?’

‘Pretty new.’

‘Inadequate, right? Look at your limp wrist!’ Leon cracked up, then bent back to the mirror, ignoring Henry again, humming to himself.

Ava wondered if Henry could sing.

Ava wondered if there would be a late-night time in a rainy place with Henry’s voice.

‘Vincent is okay,’ she smiled.

‘Thank you.’
‘But Paul hasn’t been around. Have you seen him?’ she asked.

He hadn’t.

Leon finished applying the make-up. ‘Ta da!’

‘You haven’t given me any money yet,’ said Ava.

‘Oh yeah.’ He emptied out his pocket. ‘Keep the change.’

‘But Leon, that’s more than double.’

Henry put his hand on it, on the counter. ‘Keep it,’ he said.

‘But,’ said Ava, as Leon walked away.

‘Let him learn,’ Henry said.

That night Henry paced his room to the broken-record effect of Nina’s ‘where’s Paul? Where’s Paul? What have they done with him?’ Ava still had little Vincent. Ava still had a room far down the corridor and more-than-likely still had Leon. What were they doing? Right now? Henry was filling in all the blanks with his imagination.

But soon she wouldn’t recognise Leon, with his energetic, drawing-in charm. He’d be more like a Christian schoolboy, with a part in his hair and a hand to his heart, aiming to please his parents, teachers, and the community. His personality wouldn’t vanish, but inevitably the ‘exciting’ bits (the bits he presumed Ava saw as exciting) would be repressed. Like a raging fire toned down to a neat blue flame.

Leon hadn’t been punished for giving too much money today. In fact, Ava had been reprimanded for taking it. Henry had lost again. They would have to wait for Leon to slip up so they could punish him, take him under the tower, and drill down into his head. Henry had asked Dean if they could just take him out on the pretext of moving him again, but Dean had frowned. ‘These shifts—they may look random, but they’re all planned.’ She’d looked at the tower. ‘Nothing here is random. I don’t even know what will come next, most of the time, though I can often predict now, having been
here a while. The trick is to never let the patients on to it. If they figure out the patterns, they may find a way out.’

‘Isn’t it the aim to get them out? Isn’t that a good thing?’

It was the first time Henry had been in Dean’s office. It was small, efficient. The walls were that pale yolk colour; there was a Bauhaus-style lamp, a screen centred in a neat desk and an earth-green teapot sitting, steaming, next to her hSpace.

‘A good thing? To know the meaning of it all? Before one has been trained to be entirely Functional? No. Then they may just act Functional.’ She tapped and scrolled the screen on her desk distractedly while talking. ‘And when they get out they will only keep acting. They will be white ants feeding on the foundation.’

‘I see.’

She looked at him now. ‘Whereas, if they’re truly ready—made Functional—and then they learn, they can accept the shifts, the actions that are out of their control. The shifts act first to break them down, break down resistance, to get them to go with the flow of not knowing, and then we can rebuild them with all the proper ways of living and being. Then they can accept it.’

‘But then you’re sending them back out into a society where they are taught they do have autonomy—that they can achieve, and have, anything they put their mind to.’

‘Yes. And they can, but fundamentally there are always going to be roadblocks, moments when the patient, in the real world, realises a higher hand—a god if they believe it, a government, an environmental disaster, another person—has wrenched the steering wheel in a different direction.’

‘Or a company, the media.’

‘I suppose so, yes. And then, they can accept that. And continue living well, living happy, living strong.’

Accepting they have choices (within limits), Henry thought. A desired path, but no control, really, over the outcomes. ‘So the Institution aims to make people accept that there are certain normative ways you should live, and plans you should make, to
fit in, to be happy and accepted, but that you should also…’ live in fear, he thought. *Live in fear of rolling the dice wrong.*

‘…live in the moment,’ Dean said.

‘Doesn’t a contradiction exist there?’ asked Henry.

‘It’s Balance,’ said Dean, ‘like having a savings account or term deposit for a holiday, and on the other hand feeling immediate gratification by impulse-buying a new TV’.

‘Balancing, without any guilt?’ asked Henry, ‘about the impulse buy, I mean.’

‘No, because everything might change tomorrow. In fact, it probably will.’

‘But if it doesn’t, you have the savings.’ Henry hated how much this seemed to be making sense. It was logical, calculated. *What of emotion?*

‘Living properly is a skill,’ Dean had said, with a smug smile.

He’d been meeting with her to tell her about Leon. He explained his reasoning to her the way he had to the board. He couldn’t look her in the eye. GlaZen had authority, but she could still file a protest.

She’d smiled. It was a smile of knowledge. ‘This should be very interesting,’ she’d said.

Now Henry paced and wondered. What were Ava and Leon doing? And what was the adjustment to his *wretch*, being performed right now? Would they find his? He rocked and paced and worried. And yes, where *was* Paul? He didn’t know the guy like these guys did but he liked him. Paul was effortlessly the way Henry had always been underneath. It was just that, for some reason, Henry had developed a thicker skin. Was a more adequate faker, or, more falsely adequate.

Henry sat. Nina was also sitting. The lights were out by now. She had her kitten. Nina said, ‘I miss the heavy golden lamp, beside my bed at home.’
‘Yeah?’ It was true that she didn’t have many mementos, probably because, for her, it was detrimental to wellness.

‘Such a calming presence. What do you miss, Henry?’

Henry considered the question. ‘Only an understanding friend. I hope he’s doing well.’

‘You don’t miss any of your things?’

Henry thought about the posters that were now curled-up under the desk in his office, his favourite crystal tumbler, an eccentric tweed jacket, worn once. ‘No, actually. I never liked my life.’ He didn’t realise how much this was true until he’d said it aloud.

‘Oh I did,’ said Nina. ‘So much.’ Her voice wavered with the start of tears.

‘I like the idea of my life,’ Henry said. ‘I like thinking of what it could have been. Could be. If I ever get out.’ *If I’m not moved in for good.*

‘I just want what I had, but I’m learning that wasn’t really right.’

Henry was deeply saddened by this. What to say? Encourage her to change, so she has some chance of getting out? Or to be her frabjous self, and be stuck in here forever, even becoming one of the guinea pigs for his *wretch?* There was a pulsing rush in his ears.

‘I don’t know about that,’ said Henry. ‘I… don’t think there’s one way of living.’

Nina wiped her nose, snuggled her kitty. ‘I hope wherever darling Paul is, he’s okay.’

‘Maybe he got better.’

‘Then I’ll have to get better, so I can get out and find him.’

With mixed feelings and a weary, heavy core, Henry laid his head down and tried to rest.
Through Leon, through immediate sensation, Ava could ignore this confusion, or at least deny it, for a time. But as soon as she had his cock in her mouth, under the sheet, there was a rattle at the plastic. Ava was getting tired of Dean. She felt like a rat trapped in a maze. A maze of skin and noise.

Dean couldn’t do anything right now. Leon would see. And she couldn’t take Ava out in the middle of the night—the Intelligence would surely question her. Ava went to the plastic.

‘In your own bed. I will watch all night.’

Leon sat up. ‘Counsellor. Is sex really forbidden?’

‘It is for her.’

‘Why do they put people together who are attracted to each other?’ he continued.

‘The real world is full of inappropriate temptations.’

‘And appropriate ones, too. Why is this one inappropriate?’

‘I can’t tell you why the Intelligence creates certain guidelines, but I’m sure it has something to do with the continuing issue of Ava’s sentence—her abundance, her promiscuity. She is not getting any better.’

Leon stood up from the bed, naked, his penis still semi-erect. His body, Ava thought, was spectacularly beautiful. It should be painted.

‘I think there’s more to it than that, Counsellor,’ Leon said through his tousled, long, fringe.

‘That’s not for you to say. And it is highly inappropriate that you should be standing naked before a counsellor.’

‘What’s the matter, Counsellor, don’t like the way I look?’ Leon moved one hand down his hard, slim stomach to his cock. He rubbed it, up and down. Ava gasped. It was a magnificent cock, and it was growing.

‘Put your pants on, or it’s punishment.’
'You don’t, do you, because you like the cha cha, Counsellor Dean. This is what you want to see.’ He lifted Ava’s nightdress, pressing his cock into her hip. Ava was trembling. ‘You didn’t look away.’

Dean looked behind her, at the tower. She seemed to widen her stance.

‘I uh…’

Leon slipped his fingers between Ava’s legs. Dean watched. Leon watched Dean. Ava closed her eyes and just felt his hand, his body pressing. He was a little clumsy. Henry, Henry came into her head and there was a rush. She cried out.

‘Shh,’ said Dean. Ava could see a bead of sweat on her face, the whites of her eyes. Ava could feel the waves—the waves of their desire. Pushing her, dragging her, folding over her. She couldn’t breathe. She’d thought she wanted the now, always the now. But this was now and it was not what she was thinking of.

At breakfast, Henry and Nina came to sit with her and Leon. Henry looked as ragged as she felt. All the real and fake orgasms, the performance. Leon’s tiring grin-and-wink combo, the way he sat back and confident at the table like a king.

‘See, we’ve got something on her now,’ he’d said before breakfast, ‘for blackmailing. She’ll do stuff for us.’

‘It doesn’t work like that. Can’t you see? She’s got something on us. She can file a report about witnessing our perversions, or whatever,’ she’d said.

He didn’t really care either way, she thought. What he cared about, what he seemed to get off on, was making Dean bend. Making her reveal her weakness.

‘We can tell everyone,’ he’d said.

‘Don’t be fucked. You can’t tell anyone. As soon as she finds out, she’ll find ways to punish us.’

‘I can handle the Big Space. What, you can’t? Should see what they put you through in Ward F.’
'She could file a report and get you sent back there.'

'I guess.'

So at breakfast, Leon just winked over a bowl of soggy, grainy cereal and Ava felt short-tempered and frustrated. The clanging of everyone’s plates. Oh, for the quiet of her father’s big old house. For the quiet of that unattainable future-image with the man across the table who spilt flakes down his chin and tried to wipe them away without her noticing. The look in his eyes when he looked up. His looking from Leon to her and trying to work it out. Nina stared blankly at her food, then suddenly burst out: ‘You don’t even care that Paul’s gone! You never cared about him at all, you dirty whore, you don’t care about anyone’ and she threw cereal over Ava’s chest. Little Vincent made a whine and only just leapt out of the way. Leon cracked up laughing. Nina stormed off. Henry jumped up, spilling his own tea, and found every napkin available to wipe Ava up.

It wasn’t the first time Ava had been called such names, and had been accused like that. But she always found it odd. Really, she cared too much. There was so much care it spilled over. She couldn’t possibly express everything she felt. Sometimes she was struck dumb. She missed Paul, a lot, but she hadn’t had time to process that yet. The missing was stirred up among everything else, and among this big, overwhelming concern: Henry, with his hands on her blouse. Both of them pausing. He looked like the weight of the world.

The Intelligence feed ticked: new wars, new products, old droughts, new storms, new deaths, new faces, replacements, excuses for art.
Henry looked through one-way glass into a small cement room. Dana and Leon sat across from one another in plastic Ikea chairs. Dana’s back was to Henry, where he stood, and he could see Leon’s face.

Henry stood back from the glass and his nose left a tiny smudge. He paced. Stopped.

‘Are you a new counsellor or something?’ asked Leon.

‘Not exactly, but I will be treating you,’ said Dana, crossing one stockinged leg over the other. She’d dressed all in navy, like a counsellor, for the occasion.

‘What now?’ he asked, putting his hands behind his head, stretching.

‘It’s a new kind of medication.’

‘Why do you have to tell me? Usually the colour of the pills in my cup just changes.’

‘It’s administered differently.’

Fear flashed momentarily across Leon’s face.

‘An operation?’

‘A very small one.’

Guilt clanked its cup across the bars of Henry’s chest.

‘You’re going to lobotomise me?’

‘No, no, not at all. That’s barbaric. Like I said, it’s bio-pharmaceutical—that’s all we can really tell you.’

‘Why tell me at all? You may as well have just put me under.’

‘Well, as you can see on the form you signed on admittance’—she showed him the screen in her hands—‘you’re entitled to know when you’ll be receiving “invasive” procedures. Though you have no right to refuse them—see here.’ She enlarged the fine print. ‘Normally we would need permission from a family member or carer, but, well…’
‘I see. But, you know, Ms…’

‘Call me Dana.’

‘Dana, dada,’ he giggled, ‘I do have a cousin, very high up at GlaZen.’ Henry saw Dana resist turning around. The phone beside her arm buzzed. She listened. She closed it.

‘That’s not true.’

Henry wondered who that was on the phone; who was behind the other mirrors.

‘Who’s your source?’ Leon asked.

‘Someone high up at GlaZen.’

Leon scanned the mirrors, for a second making eye contact with Henry. A shiver went through him. Then Leon’s mouth moved up and down with no sound coming out. He began to tremble.

‘Please, Leon, this treatment is for your wellbeing, there’s nothing to be afraid of.’

‘You don’t know that yet, do you?’

‘Of course we do.’

‘I can spot a lie because I’m good at them. I can see it in your eyes.’ He paused, challenging. ‘I’m the first.’

‘We’ve done extensive tests.’

‘On rats?’ Leon stood, paced the room. ‘Will I remember any of this?’

‘Of course you will.’

What if that’s a lie? thought Henry. What if the other adjustment GlaZen made tampered with memory? What if GlaZen could create nostalgia for certain types of items, construct desires for other products in their line? For the mores of the political party or global movement—the Adaptationists—they shook hands with? Henry realised the lip of his shirt was in his mouth, he was chewing on it, something he hadn’t done since he was a boy. *This is all my fault.*
But then he looked at the man, sweeping back his hair. He imagined his slender, clean hands on Ava’s thighs, on the small or her back, running through her hair. *This is a necessary sacrifice.*

And then: *I am the worst sort of person.*

He would have preferred for it to happen behind the scenes. Because he knew already it was a moment that would haunt him. But he was supposed to be present, be *interested*, even, to see his ‘baby’—his *wretch*—introduced to the brain of the patient.

The room was bright white, but the walls were still stone and Henry imagined himself as Dr Frankenstein, with the lightning flashing in the windows above, the faint crackle of thunder. He might snap and go mad—any minute—cackle, and shout *it’s alive!* to the indifferent weather. Or, in this case *it’s Functional!*

What had this place been, anyway? What had this building been, this room? Was that new chair in the place of an old blood-stained one on which lobotomies were performed? Or was this the morgue of a sanatorium for tuberculosis? Most likely it had been a prison, hence the tower, and now in this deep-seated room punishment and wellbeing were converging.

Dana leant in over the patient, with her long, pin-sized drill. Leon had an X marked on his slack, pretty forehead. Dana nodded to Henry, he nodded back, all snakes and tails inside, and she turned it on, a high-pitched burr, and she drove it, screaming, into Leon’s skull. Into the hole would go a micro-tube with a camera and seek-bot, and then the minuscule device, with its own tiny brain, designed by Henry.

Henry gripped a wall-stone and the true horror and dire shame of his lofty and misguided ambition struck him. It was worse because though the ambition had been his own, the ideology hadn’t. The ambition had emerged through ability and boredom. He recalled a line, was it Victor Frankenstein’s own? ‘Wealth was an inferior object; but what glory would attend the discovery, if I could banish disease from the human frame and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death!’ Most
diseases had now been banished due to biotechnological advancements. Now Henry had banished something else. And there was no glory in it at all.

Ava stared at Henry across the table at lunch. They were early, alone. He was very quiet.

‘How did your counselling session go this morning?’ she asked.

He didn’t look at her. ‘Okay.’

‘Mine went in circles, as usual. It’s almost like they expect me to lie.’

‘You never will?’ he asked.

‘I can’t. I mean, I’ve tried. I’m not very good at it. I told her how I’ve been having these flashbacks to a buffet breakfast in a hotel when I was about twelve. We weren’t even staying there, we were dropping in on a family friend.’ She told him about Uter from Germany and his boyfriend. How her mother only ate the muesli—the same thing she could have at home—and Ava mushed runny eggs, tiny sausages and tomato sauce together while listening to stories about art exhibitions, weekends in Paris, and Berlin nightclubs. ‘I don’t remember my parents speaking very much, but maybe I just blocked it out because what Uter and Simon were saying was so exciting and new to me.’ She had such a craving now for those buttery, salty eggs. ‘I love hotels, don’t you? And motels, too. Though I haven’t been to many.’

‘I do like them,’ said Henry, ‘especially when there’s something a little off about them.’

Ava smiled. ‘Me too. Anyway, the counsellor didn’t want to hear about all that. Didn’t see the relevance. Maybe I’ll be in here forever,’ Ava said.

‘You won’t,’ he said, touching her hand, quickly; electric. Ava hoped he didn’t see the scratches. She’d been so confused lately, the urge had come back.

The lunch hall was beginning to fill so they stood up and grabbed blue trays from the stack and lined-up for food. Ava left the ghost, Vincent, to keep their table.
'You know one thing I miss, brother?' she said.

'What?' asked Henry.

'From outside, I mean. I miss broadcasting.'

'Really? I only did it sporadically.'

A trainee counsellor in a hairnet dumped a pile of overcooked vegetables on each of their plates and a gloopy scoop of quinoa and egg. Crude carbs and protein.

'I used it when I had something to say,' said Ava. 'I had friends, and I had people who would respond to my moods. But, I didn’t miss it… I just keep missing things lately.'

'I never really broadcast anything personal,' said Henry, as they walked back to the table. 'Maybe funny things. Slightly cynical things. I liked consuming them though.'

'They used it against me. At my trial. Like, they said it was generally appropriate to have a Balance of personal expression online, but that in conjunction with all my other activities, it was just a kind of saturation of the personal, you know?'

She hadn’t known how to be any other way. Henry looked as though he was struggling with what to say next. Was it too much? Am I overwhelming him? Ava took a scoop of protein and scanned the hall and the layers above. No sign of Dean. Maybe her spies were here though, or maybe she was watching them on a screen. But they were just talking, right? No harm.

'You were just… you were just being yourself.' Henry looked down, stroking Vincent. She wanted to put her hands over his ears, her lips on his eyelids. He had faint, adorable freckles on the buds of his cheeks. He looked rough and sweet at the same time. He looked both vulnerable and wiry-strong. Like a cliff worn by a calm ocean. The time-depth of that. She knew, in a way he was like everyone, and wasn’t telling her everything. But there seemed also to be a deeper, bluer thing he was telling her and her only.

'My brother is about to have a baby,’ Henry said, then seemed to frown at himself as though he hadn’t meant to say it.
‘Is that what you talk about in your counselling sessions?’ Ava asked, wondering what it would be like to carry a life. There was a small pulsing in her groin. ‘Uncle Henry.’

He smiled. ‘Sometimes.’

‘You’re afraid you’ll never get to see the kid.’

Nina entered, saw them and rushed over, not stopping by to pick up her lunch.

‘I heard from Paul!’ she squealed.

‘What do you mean “heard from”?’ asked Ava, but Nina spoke to Henry directly. She’s still jealous of me.

‘Well, my personal counsellor has been giving me special training—in social media.’

‘We were just talking about that,’ said Henry.

‘I never really used it before—you know, because I was resistant—but now I see there are other people who like things I like, maybe not so extreme... Anyway, they must have told Paul I set up an account because there was this message for me, private message.’

‘From?’

‘From the outside.’

‘Oh!’ Ava gasped. It was wonderful for Paul to be free, but she didn’t quite understand it. He hadn’t really made much progress at all.

‘So, what happened is, they took him out on trial—as part of his treatment—when they found out about him and me. They wanted to test how he’d cope with the separation. Well,’ she smiled, fluttering her eyes at Ava, ‘he was distraught, and couldn’t really cope. He was apologising to people he’d brush by on the street, apologising to birds he’d frightened into flight—you get the drift. They came back for him and asked him about his actions. He said it was because of me, because he feared not seeing me ever again.'
'So then they must have thought: well, it’s not healthy to put him back in with her, but now his attachment might be transformed into a goal, a purpose, and they struck a deal; a test, of sorts.’

‘What is it?’ asked Henry.

‘If he could prove he was capable of being adequately Functional—working, just part-time to start with, shopping, cooking, having the desire to build a life—and sustain this for six months, they would let me out to live with him and be with him. They would let us make a life together.’ She clapped her hands, excitedly.

‘Wow,’ said Ava, with mixed feelings. ‘Doesn’t that mean he’s still being supervised?’

‘Not like in here,’ Nina said, defiantly. ‘Not all the time. Why can’t you be happy for him? He’s free! I pulled some really positive cards last night, too. There is hope.’

‘It’s… great,’ said Henry flatly. ‘Good on you both.’

‘I’m going to be so good,’ said Nina. And she threw her pills back in her throat, smiling widely. ‘It’s a new moon. Set some goals while you can see the stars.’ She stood. ‘And when you get out, we’ll have you over for dinner.’ She looked at Ava. ‘If you’re better.’ She walked away.

Ava picked at her lip, looking at the table. ‘Goodbye Paul.’

‘Will you miss him?’

‘He was very warm.’

She saw Henry’s hands move off the table. He looked to be shaking. *I want to press our skulls together.*

‘Leon is gone now too. But he comes back, usually. They bat him back and forth like a ping pong ball.’

‘Seems so.’

He was looking away.
‘Are you jealous, Uncle Henry?’ she asked. Then she said, ‘never mind.’

‘Why should I be?’ he stood, little Vincent whimpered with the movement. ‘I’ll see you soon.’

Ava pulled out her hSpace, hoping her social media feeds would suddenly open. They’d never give her that kind of special Functionality training. Instead, as usual, the disaster and dollar signs of the Intelligence feed crowded her screen. She stared at it until her eyes blurred. She put the device down and hugged herself.

‘This one is lots of fun’, Dean clapped her hands together, making her breasts bounce in her tight, polka-dot tube dress, with a polka-dot cardigan and polka-dot shoes. The room was a low-lit rectangular box, with no windows. Ava’s team, and another team, were lined-up along one side of the room. Each patient stood behind a free-standing ladder, with the shorter space of the room in front of them.

‘You will each race forward with your ladder, and box.’ Dean pointed to the box sitting on the top of the ladder in front of Ava. The door opened behind them and all turned. ‘Ah, Leon, come stand with your team, at the end there,’ said Dean. Ava’s breath caught. Leon lifted his face to each of them, smiling gently. He stood in front of the remaining ladder.

‘Now, as you’ll see, in the boxes there are a series of light bulbs. On the roof,’ Ava looked up, ‘you’ll be able to make out a row of burnt-out bulbs and empty wires. You need to get to the other side, as you change over the lights, and you mustn’t smash a single bulb. You must also do it in a timely fashion. IRL you have to change light bulbs at your house or place of work, it’s one of many small tasks a properly Functioning person keeps on top of.’

Ava noticed that some of the lights in the line above had cases on them that would need to be manoeuvred off or unscrewed. When the task began she stepped side-on up her ladder, looked through her box of bulbs, then placed it on the floor. The first light had a tricky screen over it. Eventually she discovered you had to push it up and turn it sideways to get to the old bulb. She unscrewed this one, climbed down and
searched for the same bulb in the box. Stepping back up the ladder she was aware of Henry watching her. He missed a step and quickly caught his grip again, but the bulb in his hand went flying. Leon, on the ground, dove for it and caught it easily, flinging it back into Henry’s grip.

‘Thanks,’ he said.

‘No problem man,’ said Leon, climbing quickly back up his own ladder. What did Leon want? Ava thought. Wouldn’t he normally seek pleasure in the foibles of others?

‘Ava, stop getting distracted,’ Dean spat at her, and Ava realised she had very quickly slipped behind the rest. Even an easy task was difficult for her. I’m lost in what I want more.

Ava moved the ladder along and looked in her box and wondered if there’d be a place for all these coloured bulbs. Dean hadn’t specified in what kinds of rooms these lights would be, IRL. Ava imagined coloured lights would mean music, and she picked a blue bulb to fit inside the next one.

Ava was two from the end and the only one left on a ladder when Dean declared the task over. She’d been lost in the possibilities for colour and Dean’s voice first came through muffled, then harsh.

The two groups sat and Dean walked to the other side of the room, the other side of the line of lights. She began at the far end with the other team, flicking a switch to turn on each light-line, one at a time. Each panel of light blared, predominantly white. Sometimes there was a blot in the middle—one missed, forgotten or not connected properly. Nina’s had more than a few blots. Dean grimaced. Ava wondered if Nina couldn’t part with some of the old bulbs. Leon’s was a blinding straight line of white light, which surprised Ava. Perhaps he’s going to manipulate the system for a while. Henry’s was almost there, despite a transgressive purple bulb or two. Dean nodded at his. She flicked on Ava’s and soft yellow light fell on Ava’s skin. Her veins looked purple. Dean was speckled with colour, like a Christmas window.
‘Now what’s the use of this?’ asked Dean.

‘I don’t know,’ said Ava.

Dean shook her head. ‘Would you really have a house with coloured light in every room?’

‘I didn’t know it was for a house. But, then again, maybe.’

‘What about when people come over?’

‘Their faces would be full of colour.’

‘Big Space.’

Ava burned. ‘There’s one white one.’

Dean turned to the group. ‘Henry’s is probably the best example of Balance. Leon’s is the best example of Functionality and Order. But you can be too meticulous, and then other parts of your life can be neglected. Nina, I can see it was a struggle for you but you tried.’ She walked up to Henry and Leon to distribute vouchers; they lifted their hSpaces to hers. She hesitated before Nina, and then gave her one too. ‘This team is dismissed.’ She turned back to Ava. ‘The space is occupied now but I will come and get you this afternoon.’ Her eyebrows were mashed together. Her shoulders hunched. She is disappointed to have to punish me, Ava thought. She would take her drugs at dinner tonight. Perhaps I won’t feel so much. Dean went over to the other team to continue doling out rewards and punishment—red, green and blue light flitting across her back.

Ava caught up to Henry, Leon and Nina walking away from the room. ‘I’m sorry,’ said Henry, and touched her shoulder gently.

‘So Leon, you weren’t gone for long this time.’

‘No, not long at all,’ he said, looking into her eyes. ‘Did I miss anything?’

‘No,’ said Ava. ‘What was…?’

‘Oh, just some treatment,’ he said, bouncily, looking into her eyes again with raised eyebrows. Henry’s grip tightened and loosened quickly on her shoulder.
‘I’m going to the Galleon,’ said Nina. ‘The screen in there is working again.’

Ava’s heart sunk. The silent ship was silent no more.

‘I’m going to the gym,’ said Leon. ‘You guys wanna join me?’

‘No thanks, brother,’ said Ava. Henry just shook his head.

Nina and Leon parted from them and Henry’s hand came away.

‘He seems…’ Ava couldn’t think of a word for it. He was more upright, and his eyes more open—wide open—and staring into her too long, but with a kind of… pixilation.

‘Different,’ said Henry.

‘And he sounds different. Kinda cheery.’ A full shiver went down her spine.

‘You okay?’

‘Well, I’m trying not to think about tonight.’ She noticed Henry pulling the fingers on one hand with the other. ‘What’s it like for you? The Big Space?’ she asked.

He looked stricken, as though he didn’t want to answer. ‘Painful.’

She nodded. It seemed to get worse all the time. She was terrified.
For the best

Henry sat Vincent down and did a few tricep dips on the side of the bed. He thought of finding Counsellor Dean, taking her aside, trying to make some deal so Ava wouldn’t have to be punished. But then his affection for her would be too obvious.

Leon walked in with a towel slung around his shoulders.

‘I’m in here, they tell me,’ he said, smiling. Henry could see what Ava meant about Leon’s eyes. It was as though his lids had been peeled back a bit; each blink was like a slow curtain falling and rising. It was especially noticeable on Leon as he’d always been an eyes-half-closed, so-nonchalant-I-look-stoned kind of person. There was no pinprick hole visible in Leon’s forehead because his fringe covered it.

‘How was your workout?’

‘Pretty good. I feel really good, actually,’ he said, nodding and eyes boring into Henry’s. ‘Better than ever. Light, kind of. Like I don’t have to put effort into my thoughts.’

Henry nodded.

‘And everything just seems really nice and good. Like the world likes me and I can do well. I’ve never felt like this.’

Henry’s professional curiosity was piqued. He sat back on his bed and crossed his legs. ‘Do you remember much about the treatment?’

‘No, I was under. They said it would be invasive. I was very upset about it. I tried to get out of it. But now I feel like maybe it was for the best. I feel, well, you know how you go to the supermarket, or whatever—it’s been a while for me now—and you want to pick a bottle of milk, and you look at all the prices, and you think about the different tastes, and that feeling—that kind of stressful feeling while you’re trying to choose? You know how that’s a feeling that you then end up carrying around with you, because you’re always making decisions? It’s like now… now I have this kind of trust that I’ll just slide, just glide through. Just choose, just go forward. And up.’
'Up?'

Leon sat on his bed across from him, stretching his shoulders and arms while he spoke. ‘Well, I was always trying to get up, to be one up, on people. To make them do what I want.’

‘And you don’t feel that’s changed?’

‘Well, I don’t know. It still seems to be there, but I don’t feel like it’d be the same way, that I’d get up. And I don’t feel like it’d be above or sort of on people. I feel like it will just happen. I have this kind of clarity, and from that, a kind of energy.’

‘Right. Cool.’ Henry couldn’t hold those wide-open eyes.

‘It’s epic, man.’

Henry laughed. ‘Well, okay.’

‘I think some of the things I did before might have been bad.’

Into Henry’s mind flashed Leon, naked, pressed up against Ava—her body open to him, her head back. Henry’s jealousy was still keen, but he looked at the buoyant, and yet deflated, man in front of him and the jealousy was coiled by guilt. He could see already that the device was, wretchedly, successful. The man was energised, Functional, excited about life, and was experiencing a positive twist on his old goals.

Little Vincent pawed at Henry’s stomach as though he could see into him.

‘I’m really happy for you man,’ said Henry.

‘Thanks, bro. You know, you might get to have it one day too.’

Henry swallowed.

Here were some saved-up pills in an inside pocket. Ava took some of the sleepy pastel-pink ones and sat on her bed and waited. Soon Dean came, and the fingers on her arm were a whisper.

‘What have you taken?’
‘I’ll do anything you want,’ said Ava, floating above the floor, down corridors.

Dean didn’t reply. She pushed her through the Big Space door, the door that always seemed to be in a different place.

‘Don’t you want me anymore?’ asked Ava, warm and cold, with a flutter beneath her breastbone.

‘You have to watch your mouth’, whispered Dean, looking above. Ava looked up too and saw only light, then she was on the cold floor. So cold. Shivering. The rectangle of light closed. She was alone.

This Functionality training exercise was in the creation of marketing materials for products, and Ava was still in the fug of pain and the wearing-off-ness of the pale pink drugs. She made up little fantasies about the products and in the trying she felt like giving up. As there was this wall to getting out, and that was herself. And there was this wall to getting to Henry, and that was this place, this existence. And the reason she was here was because she was herself. So the only wall was herself but it was so effortful to be an else.

Leon sat across the desk from her and he had not looked at her once. He also, somehow since last night, had had a haircut: a crop, what they used to call a bowl. Coupled with the bulging eyes and the perpetually raised brows, he looked as though he’d been squeezed out of his former self, like toothpaste from a hunched-up tube.

‘Survive the space then?’ he asked, looking into her eyes to talk, looking too long and hard.

‘I survived.’

‘You know there are other ways.’

Ava looked down at her fairy-tale press release for a new exercise machine.

‘You don’t want to be chronic, do you?’

‘Of course not.’
'You want to see the sun again, for more than a few hours?'

'Of course I do.' The pink dusk; a rainy morning.

'You want to be away from the watchful eye of the Intelligence.'

'Yes, Leon.'

'Then what are you afraid of?'

She looked into his pupil, the brown chorus.

'You’re afraid of losing your view, of not feeling so much, of forgetting the taste of objects and people, right?'

'Well, I really don’t know, Leon. I just feel… resistant, to treatments. I feel what I feel.'

He moved in at her side, breathed on her. Under his left hand was his screen with its neat, finished marketing campaign. ‘But don’t you see how those feelings change? You feel something one moment, then something else the next. How can you trust your feelings? For example, the people you’ve wanted—it changes. I haven’t lost any of my feelings, but now each one is imbued with purpose!’ He was almost panting with it. ‘I am only moving forward, and I can see everything along the way. And it’s positive and Balanced and wonderful.’

‘But how can you trust it is you?’

‘Because I know it is. I have been refined, somehow. It is the best of me, all the time.’

‘But it’s the best of me which is being punished, here.’

‘That’s what you think is the best of you.’

And Ava thought, but my feelings don’t change all the time. Or do they? Because this feeling for Henry, it was like reaching some new level, as in a video game. It was a harder level, and more attention and energy had to be invested. It was a deeper excitement, and it wouldn’t change. But was it that or this place which was wearing her down?
‘Love is the best of me,’ she said.

They were silent for a moment; Ava was distracted by the Intelligence’s feed which ran along the bottom of her screen: a politician’s marriage, a chef’s divorce, a CEO’s affair, an actor’s baby.

‘Maybe your passions and attachments, the power of them, could be harnessed,’ said Leon.

‘You sound like a religious convert.’

‘It’s the religion of life success, of Functioning, I see it all so clearly now.’

‘Who’s your god?’

‘The minutes, the days.’

Ava was so tired. Leon expanded on his concept of days, but Ava’s brain glazed over. He was boring her. She looked over at Henry. He’d been watching Leon talk. He was always watching Leon lately. He looked back at his screen. Ava looked away and then back and he was pulling at the skin of his neck, frowning softly. There was all this space around him. When he moved, he parted it—there with his hand, there with his elbow. And then the space inside. The hollow of the bones. She’d never so deeply contemplated a personal space before.

Leon finished. ‘You stopped listening.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘You’ll learn the hard way.’

‘This treatment has made you even cockier.’

‘Well, people who stand up and take reality can gloat.’

‘Gloat about your submission all you want.’

‘I’m sending this in,’ he said, looking back at his screen.

Ava looked at the time. They had half an hour left. She traced her finger over the words she had written, she sought more. She sought a lie for this press release, but
she didn’t have one. She tried to channel her overflow of passion into something she wasn’t passionate about. It didn’t work. Eventually she focused on the person who would want this exercise machine, and she told them how it would make them feel. A little burn, a little rush.

The institution was surrounded by a concrete wall, built at a different time from the structure itself. There were only patches of grass in the yard, no birds. The roots of one large withered tree buckled a circling path. Functional people could live in a predominantly man-made environment. Henry supposed this was the reason they didn’t have enjoyable places to sit outside, or outdoor recreation. The weather was consistently bad, too. All around the world, indoor sports were taking off. Artificial air, and just a few green things here and there for Balance. Henry pressed a button, was eyeballed through a camera and the tall black door built into the concrete buzzed and slid open.

It felt strange to be outside. It hadn’t been too long, but Henry had become used to seeing the same faces, the walls; being contained, being watched. He would continue looking over his shoulder. He couldn’t be one hundred per cent sure he wasn’t being watched out here.

And then the nausea came.

Maybe Meg would have had enough by now. Maybe that was why he was really being called out. Dean said it was because he was to give a report. So soon?

He was supposed to be at the office to file the report in a few hours. This time it would be quite easy, he hoped, as he would just report on the recorded behaviours of the subject, Leon. And he had plenty to report, fascinated, despite himself, at the energy and change in the patient; horrified at what it could do on a large scale. But he dreaded the smirking face of Barkley, and he attempted to suppress all paranoia about GlaZen finding his adjustment, but it lived close to the surface of his skin.

And after this report, what would come next? He wouldn’t know for some time if his adjustment was effective. And where would he be then? Back to pretending, IRL?
Figuring out ways to get Ava out and with him? But if Meg was still in the picture, and if she knew he’d fallen for a Dysfunctional, she’d certainly dob him in. Would he be, then, locked-up for good? Was that, even, the better plan? But to risk being operated on himself, becoming Leon... *energised.* And then what if the adjustment hadn’t worked? He mustn’t think of that.

He had a few hours and he decided to check in at the flat first. Meg should still be at work. He could have just a small window of aloneness. And then, he thought, *Ken!* What was his best friend up to? Was he still living on the edge (but free at all times to pretend)? He would text him when he got back to the apartment.

At the outside wall, covered with graffiti specially commissioned by ‘underground’ artists, a familiar young man was standing.

‘Mr Folsom?’

Henry squinted at him. No one was supposed to know what he was doing here, especially not a GlaZen outsider, a student. ‘What are you doing here...?’

‘Tim, Tim Jeng. I tried to interview you? I’ve been following your work, sir.’

‘You mean you’ve been following me.’

‘You’ve been going in and out of that place but not coming out for long stretches of time. You’re testing something, aren’t you?’

Henry began to walk to the main road, pulling out his hSpace to text for a cab. ‘I think you need to be careful,’ he said with his head down.

‘Don’t worry, it’s just for my personal broadcast. Can’t you give me the scoop as to what you’re working on?’

‘Look, I can’t,’ Henry said, stopping. He looked at the boy, clean, his shoes adequately scuffed. Something washed over Henry. What if he was a spy? *God, there’s so much air out here, it’s so bright.* What if he worked for Generon? And yet, information was forming like spittle at the corners of Henry’s lips. It would be so easy to tell someone, to take the fall. But what would be the use? Henry would be
punished and the *wretch* would be manufactured anyway—only without proper testing. They’d want to get it out even quicker, to beat their competitors.

‘You can’t?’ Tim shook his head. ‘This is exactly why I’m doing this. You don’t work for the CIA, why the secrecy?’

‘How did you know I was here anyway?’

‘Consumers need to be in on the *process*, they *like* being privy to the origins of products. Take my favourite cereal, Crispos, I know it was created by Solomon Sedwidge because his five-year-old daughter (this was some time in the 1990s) didn’t think any other cereal had the right mix of melt and crunch...’

‘Look, Tim, that’s probably not even the genuine story. That’s what the narrative department is for. Why don’t you go and see the narrative department at GlaZen, Floor 27. Maybe they can help you out.’

They reached the street and a yellow cab hummed over.

‘But... this is for my personal broadcast. I want the scoop. I want the real story.’

‘Can’t give it,’ said Henry, annoyed, excited about the small space of the cab. He jumped in and didn’t wave goodbye or offer a lift. He looked back at the deflated figure in Dida zip-jacket, staring after him. He’d had to go quickly; it would have been so easy to spill over.

He was jumpy in the cab as it came into the city, at the driver’s voice, at the weather attacking the windows, his hSpace going off in his pocket. The streets were normal, quiet, umbrellaed. Shopfronts had new names and displays. On the main street he saw that the lovely, stinking flower shop was already gone.

His own apartment building folded over him and seemed to sway. He held himself together in the elevator—a man with jutted hip and a tiny, suspicious dog; a lady in white with umbrella ready—no one he recognised.

It took him three tries with the key—the wrong card, the wrong way, not pushing on the door quickly enough. Then he was inside. It was swathed with silence. It smelled of the woollen blanket on the lounge, a trace of Meg’s perfume. He pulled his
hSpace out of his pocket, stopped, went into the study and put his hand under the cabinet. For a moment he panicked, but then his hand found it. The surveillance screen. He checked in on Ava. There was a niggling feeling—he thought he hadn’t pushed the screen so far under the cabinet. An hour went by. He tried not to think about eager Tim, wanting the ‘scoop’. What a privilege it was for the young, nowadays, to be the first at something. They were obsessed with it. Henry supposed he understood.

Could he have told him? No. He needed more time to figure out how he could get more people out of the whole system—Ava, himself, other people. Wretched creature. He found Jeng’s blog and was relieved to see that he hadn’t been speculating on why a designer from GlaZen had been hanging around the institution. He couldn’t prove it, Henry supposed (surely not having been there night and day) and wouldn’t want to harm his credibility when just starting out.

He messaged Ken. Ken took a while to reply. He said, ‘Be good 2 c u mate. Over after work.’

Henry had forgotten about work, Meg would be home then.

‘Maybe no good—have 2 report 2 office then Meg will be home, she might want me 2 herself.’ He typed a sadface.

Again the reply took a while. Henry was smearing toast with jam. It came:

‘Just let me know when u know’.

‘Sure’.

Henry put his jacket back on, stowed the screen away and went to the front door. He broke out in a sweat. He couldn’t bring himself to turn the handle. He went to the bathroom. He pissed, washed his hands, washed his face. He walked back to the door, rubbing his hands up and down his sides. He slapped himself in the face. He pulled open the door quickly. The corridor lay warm and empty before him. The elevator pinged. He locked his door and ran to catch it, almost colliding with his neighbour.
‘Henry! Haven’t seen you in a while.’

‘Mr Toshinawa, ah, hello.’ Henry willed his heart to quiet down.

‘Business?’

‘Yeah, been travelling.’ They stepped into the elevator.

‘What is it you do again, Henry?’

‘Design. Biotech, pharmaceuticals.’

‘Interesting field.’

Ask him about himself. ‘You were in...’

‘Finance. Retired now.’

There was an awkward silence. Their hSpaces gave burrs and tinkles.

‘Oh Henry, nasty business, all those kids hey?’

‘Sorry?’ Henry frowned, as the doors opened on the ground floor.

‘On the news. The self-mutilation, the cult. Terrible. Having to build a whole new institution.’

‘Oh yes,’ Henry said, ‘I’m sorry Mr Toshinawa, I have to run’. His breathing was sharp and shallow. Stop freaking out. Mr T nodded and waved as Henry darted off across the foyer.

Self-mutilating kid cult? Acting out against, probably, they don’t know what. No choice but to have a choice? The dead environment? Too-many people? Lack of good jam? Boredom? Damaged goods. The girl in the purple velvet dress in the op-shop came into his head, the cuffs on her arms. He felt something akin to shame. For her or for himself?

Out the front of the building, Henry ran his hand through his hair, wet and staticky. A window rolled down on a black car. It was Dana.

‘Henry, I’m picking you up, hop in.’
‘Hi.’ He tried to look less surprised, less hurried. He slid into the passenger seat.

Henry made awkward small-talk on the drive but Dana gave one-word answers and only lit up when he mentioned Leon.

‘Oh I can’t wait to hear your report.’

Henry wondered what would happen if he just opened this door, at the traffic lights, and ran out into the rain, ran and ran. Right now he felt he could run for a very long time.

But he’d be incomplete, running without her.

*There really is no way of running.*

‘You okay?’ Dana asked, flatly.

‘Oh yes, fine, slight tummy ache.’

‘Take this,’ she said, with one hand unzipping a pill case and throwing a foil in his direction. She didn’t even look down.

‘Oh, okay,’ Henry popped one, put it in his mouth, put it to the side, and waited five minutes—feeling it get a bit mushy—to blow his nose into a tissue and slip it out.

‘You didn’t swallow,’ she said, staring ahead at the road.

Henry’s face turned red hot.

‘Sorry?’

‘It’s just paracetamol.’

Henry cleared his throat.

‘Are you allergic or something? You could have just said so.’

‘I… didn’t want to be impolite, but thank you. It’s just, I just took some.’

‘You could have just said so.’ She looked at him now, and laughed. ‘That was very awkward of you—maybe you’re getting too comfortable in there.’
‘Haha,’ Henry feigned amusement. *Must recover.* ‘Without my bed, without Meg and my friends?’

‘What’s Meg up to this afternoon?’

Henry noticed a little flashing light above Dana’s head. The surgeon. The interviewer. The spy. *Compose yourself.*

‘She, I’m not sure. At work, of course.’

‘You didn’t text or email when you got in?’

‘I... wanted to surprise her.’

‘Fair enough. Here we are.’ They pulled into GlaZen’s underground car park.
On loop

Ava didn’t mind being alone, but she couldn’t stand feeling lonely. Nina was in the gym. Ava sat in their room and tried to read Nabokov, and some romance manga. Nabokov always in love. Cartoons of bodies together, exaggerated love-hearts, stars for eyes. It was afternoon, the plastic was up. The little ghost shuffled in, so small on the floor. Ava picked him up.

‘He’s gone again, hasn’t he? I can feel it.’ Vincent nodded.

Dean came to the edge of the cell. ‘Black spot, an hour before the dinner bell,’ she said. ‘If you come, Henry will return.’

Fear struck Ava. ‘Not like Leon?’

‘No.’

Dean walked away. Ava had nothing left for her, but she would go. If there was a small chance her actions would keep him in her vicinity.

She had nothing left but she was lonely. Skin would not cure it completely, but that look sometimes in Dean’s eyes... That kind of pained, trapped gaze was a buffer. It was something shared.

Ava was humming to little Vincent—Chopin’s Raindrops—when Nina returned.

‘I’m making such good progress, darling,’ said Nina. Ava noticed she no longer wore the vintage leotard for her workouts, but a cotton singlet and tights. Her dark hair wasn’t coiffed but combed-back, slightly fuzzed. She held out her hSpace, flicked through her vouchers to show Ava.

‘Good for you,’ Ava said flatly.

‘Delighted about the Nodding voucher. A nice soft bed, mmm,’ she smiled. ‘What’s with you, Ava? When I came here, you seemed to have… more of the Goddess.’

‘It’s what a place like this does.’

‘Not to me. No way. Not anymore.’ She stood firm with her hands on her hips. ‘You have to use the place to your advantage.’
‘I’m sick of people telling me what I have to do.’

‘Geez, Louise, sor-ry. Maybe if you started listening to them, though, you’d be on your way up and out.’

‘There is no up, there is only…’ Ava motioned a wavy horizon. ‘There is only now and now and now.’

Nina shook her head. ‘There is then, too.’ She pointed out the plastic, past the tower to a row of windows. ‘For me, there is Paul. And I think I’ve decided what I want to do. I’m not afraid of looking into the future anymore, like my parents did. Literally, I mean, practising astrology. Because the practice also comes from the past, so there’s Balance’. She was silent for a minute, still looking out. ‘They must have known the end was coming, you know?’

Ava nodded, kindly.

‘Have you ever been properly in love?’

Ava sighed. ‘All the time.’

‘I know what you’re saying.’ Nina sat on her bed, picked up her kitten. ‘I’d watch The Maltese Falcon and The Big Sleep again and again and I’d fantasise about Humphrey Bogart. I was completely infatuated—physically, emotionally. But there is something deeper than that.’

Ava leant forward. ‘Maybe. But to invest in something that might destroy you?’

‘You do know.’

But to invest your thoughts in the future, in being old with someone in a world like this? She couldn’t. She looked out at the Intelligence tower, warily. There was no point in dreaming when they would know, and would take the dream away.

They were quiet for a while, the fur-ball purring in Nina’s arms.

‘I’ve never thought about the “long term” before,’ said Ava. ‘And even considering it makes me kinda… cranky.’ She wrapped her arms around her knees. ‘Because
now, see, when I’m doing something I’ve always enjoyed—and I enjoy many things—I think about this person and how they would be feeling’.

Nina tilted her head. Then she shook it.

‘What?’

‘I just, feel sorry for you, is all. Because, well, it might never happen.’

‘I know. Obviously, my thoughts are often in the how and that annoys me even more. How could it happen? That’s part of the confusion.’

Nina stood, put a hand on Ava’s shoulder. Ava looked down her singlet.

‘And,’ she said to Nina’s breasts, ‘how can I love someone and still be allowed to be myself?’ And then she was thinking of her dad. ‘People who stay together always seem to have to change.’

‘Sometimes only a little’, Nina smiled. Ava hadn’t seen any evidence for that.

But she was already changing, wasn’t she? Contemplating time and dreams and contentment and other things she’d never contemplated, on such a level, before.

‘You might have to get better to be allowed to love someone properly,’ Nina suggested.

It seemed like a loop. Now and now and now. ‘There’s just no way out.’

The team filed into the boardroom dressed as a monkey, a peacock, and an elephant.

‘Can I ask what’s with the animal suits?’ Henry asked, baffled.

Grethe pushed back her monkey-hood, giggling. ‘You must know it’s World Animal Day! We’re getting involved. The media on level two have been taking some shots of us with kids on the street.’ Grethe then bit hungrily into the sausage sandwich in front of her. Sauce dribbled down her chin. ‘Oop,’ she said, wiping it.

‘We were selling them cute merch as well—some of the profits, of course, going to the endangered wildlife fund,’ said the peacock Barkley, in his rich seminar-voice.
He pulled his tail up before sitting, daintily. Without the white suit his tan looked less gold and more yellow.

Everyone sat back, in good posture, confident and relaxed, munching their sandwiches.

‘Are you going to eat, Henry?’

‘He probably ate at home,’ said Dana. They all had a bit of a giggle.

Henry wished, badly, guiltily, that he’d taken something. He thought this would be an easier meeting. Now, the panic began to make a song in his nerves. *What do they know?*

‘So tell us about the altered…’ Grethe said calmly, waving her hand.

‘Leon,’ said Henry.

‘Yes, Leon.’

‘Well, the subject, Leon, is showing incredible progress in all tasks and in general sociability…’ Henry went on to describe Leon’s change, focus and energy. But the room was restless. The animals shifted and gobbled, poked each other at points, laughed, made Henry stumble. *This is a nightmare that will soon be over. Thunder rolled outside. Grethe interrupted: ‘Did you cop a load of that wind on the way in?’*

Before Henry answered she continued speaking: ‘So anyway, how are the other patients responding to him?’

‘Well, so far, to be honest, with a little dismay, and…’

‘Explain. Give examples.’

He had to mention Ava’s name.

‘I observed an interaction during a training exercise with the patient he’s had a bit of contact with, Ava June Wilder.’

‘Tell us more about this Ava…’

‘She’s ah, she’s…’
‘Is she hot?’ asked the peacock, giggling.

It’s like they’re pissed, thought Henry.

‘She is attractive, yes.’

Grethe interrupted: ‘go on.’

‘So, in her overt overabundance—that’s her sentence—she’d had encounters, at least one, with Leon, and so her closeness meant she recognised the differences.’

‘She slept with him?’ Grethe asked, her eyes boring into his.

‘Yes,’ said Henry, his nails digging into the underside of his chair.

Everyone leant in, as though it were the dramatic final episode of their favourite drama.

‘And she doesn’t have relations with him now?’

‘No. Well… I haven’t had access to the screens.’

‘How do you know then?’ Grethe the monkey sat back, pressing her hands together.

‘She hasn’t.’ Yes, he said it too quickly.

‘Has this Ava had sexual relations with other patients?’

‘Quite a few, yes. But this is getting off topic, with respect…’

‘But not yourself.’

Henry burned. ‘No. Obviously I wouldn’t let that happen.’

‘But you’re playing a role, aren’t you?’

‘I… but I’m inadequate. It’s a good excuse, to pretend to think I’m not good enough.’

Henry noticed the curtains that were usually closed on one side of the board room were open—open on a black mirror. Who was watching? The Intelligence, he thought, then realised that was ridiculous. ‘So in her interaction with Leon…’
‘But she’s very attractive?’ repeated Barkley.

‘Yes!’ Henry snapped. Quiet.

‘You don’t want to lose your calm, Henry.’

‘What is this? I’m trying to give a report.’

They’re suspicious, he thinks. Maybe that young Tim Jeng had delved further within the company, had threatened to leak his suspicions about Henry doing tests in the institution. But would a leak cause much sensation, really? In public it might spread quickly through certain like-minded channels, might even take the form of a protest against the company. But then, just like those pieces on the detention centres—those ‘other’ institutions where not everything was made transparent—the suspicions might only cause a quick fire of conversation, then burn out, with no one actually doing anything about the issue. And Jeng didn’t have the exact details anyway.

And by the time his *wretch* hit the market, it could have been ‘spun’ so positively by the narrative department, that any protestors would be so small a minority they would disappear.

‘You’ve done very well,’ Grethe said, with some finality. ‘Now, all the details of what you observed, you recorded in your wall device, yes?’

‘Yes, ready to upload.’

‘Great. Now Henry, in the interests of... Well, we have another project that we’d like to put you on. What do you think of that?’

His heart sunk. The forest of animals watched him intently. *This is a test.*

‘What is it?’ he tried to ask with confidence and interest.

‘The-company-that-shall-not-be-named...’ she said out of the corner of her mouth, ‘are developing shifting cell tattoos, re-designable images. Now, we know you’re beyond skin—you’ve been there—but there’s still really no one better.’

‘I’m sure there are plenty of up-and-coming creative nano-designers or artistic biotechs...’
‘You don’t want to do it?’

‘Oh, no I didn’t say that. I do think it’s too soon to stop observing the patients though.’

‘You can keep using that private screen,’ said Barkley.

‘Yes, I guess,’ said Henry. His time had to come, he thought. Maybe it had all gone too far. Maybe the adjustment had been found or wouldn’t work and he could do nothing.

‘And we can give Counsellor Dean a bit of a raise, and maybe one of the other counsellors or CGs, to keep reporting on it. Yes, you can brief a CG on the project, can’t you?’

But. I. No. Henry hid his pitiful, shaking hands under the table.

‘But first,’ said Grethe. ‘We think you deserve a holiday! Two weeks. Take Meg somewhere nice.’

Barkley stood, flapped his tail about. ‘Hah! I think we’ve done enough work for one day. Who wants to join me on my level for some champagne and dancing?’

Grethe smiled. ‘You’re the Balance expert.’ Animal heads said ‘Me! I will!’ Barkley raised his eyebrows at Henry.

‘I think I better go home to see Meg.’ Or simply crawl under my cabinet.

‘That’s probably a good idea,’ said Grethe-monkey, patting him on the shoulder. She was smiling but had a faraway look in her eyes. ‘You’ve done a really wonderful job,’ she said.

Henry turned and walked from the clucking, braying bunch.

Strange and impossible desire: not just for Ava, but for small spaces, for the stone. When he returned to the apartment, the too-big apartment, Meg was not there. Henry looked at the clock on the wall, a silver disc with minimalist hands—Meg’s pick—it told him she should have been home by now, unless it was her gym night. He picked
up his hSpace to text her, but then began to type in Ken’s name. He asked him if he wanted to come hang out. He needed to confess this weight, to seek advice.

When Ken buzzed to be let in, Henry jumped. He had been sitting, staring at the clock. He was at the edge of some realisation—some connection—like all the words on the tip of one’s tongue that don’t become. He realised it was dark. The sudden presence of someone else, even his old friend, made him nervous. He wondered whether he should have taken this opportunity to be alone. To think of some way... what? In?

But then he saw his friend’s face and it almost all came rushing out. He hadn’t realised he’d been holding on to so much.

Ken though, didn’t seem to be able to make a full smile.

‘Hey man.’

‘Hey, good to see you.’

‘You too.’

‘What’s up?’ Henry asked him.

Ken laughed a bit. ‘What do you mean, man? I haven’t seen you for an age, are you gonna invite me in?’ He was still in the hall.

‘Shit, sorry.’ Henry moved away, Ken walked in, clucking, looking around. He sat on the couch, reclined and pressed his fingers to his head. ‘Seriously’, Henry said, ‘you’re not yourself. This is awkward, why is this awkward?’

‘No, man I’m fine. It’s just, they’re on my back, you know?’

‘Work?’ Henry sat across from him.

‘People, man. I, ah, I kinda got a warning.’

‘Oh.’ Henry realised Ken was being watched, could be called up for trial. ‘Have they pre-empted a sentence, or anything?’
‘The message didn’t say so. It just warned me to improve my Functionality or I could be called up. It said people had come forward with complaints about me.’ He fingered his beard. It was a little shorter, neater.

‘Shit, really?’

Ken was looking down. ‘Shit, I wasn’t even gonna talk about it, man.’

‘You don’t think I…?’ Henry stood. Surely Ken would never think he’d report him.

‘No! No, of course not,’ he said. ‘Well, I mean—I don’t know—you’re at GlaZen, you’re doing important undercover stuff, I don’t even know what it is…’

‘I would never!’ At this, Ken gave him a pained look he didn’t understand.

‘It’s tough now, it’s tough.’

‘Ken, I wish, I want so badly, to tell you what I’m doing.’ Henry threw his hands up, ‘I can’t keep it in anymore, I have to lie to everyone inside and out…’

‘Inside? Oh, Henry, maybe you shouldn’t tell me anything else.’

‘No, but, fuck, I don’t even know what’s going to happen.’ To me, to you, to everyone.

‘Really, Henry, I have to leave. How could you put this on me? Come on, think of the bigger picture!’

‘What do you mean? That’s all I’m doing. Or trying to do.’ He was trying to think of a way out, or was it a way to make it work within? A way to undo all the damage.

‘Sacrifices must be made. Everyone is looking out for themselves. You should try that.’ Ken was standing now, too. He faced away from Henry.

‘No, no. They can’t. I think I finally know what’s right, but what I still don’t know is how to do something about it. I’m trapped. But there must be some remote beacons of light, Ken. What I need to figure out is the path to them.’

Ken was walking toward the door.
'Ken, seriously, I’m sorry—I just, I haven’t talked with anyone. I’ve made some bad choices by just going along with things, by doing what I was good at. Now there’s this girl...’

‘Henry, stop. I haven’t seen you. I didn’t know what you were up to. Things have happened here. They came to see me. They asked a lot of questions.’ He glared at him, then hung his head. ‘I’m sorry. I’m really sorry. I hope it gets better for you. I hope you find a way out, or whatever. I’m sorry.’

‘Ken, don’t go, please.’

‘I’m sorry.’ Ken closed the door.

Henry sat down. He looked at the silver clock again. This was what he was doing now. Waiting. Waiting for his turn.

He went to the study, pulled out the screen, and watched Ava talking with Nina in their room. Legs curled up to chest and arms around legs in that way she does. The tip of his tongue became wet. It would be a few hours before that looped footage would come up, of Ava in bed. Who was behind it? What was she doing at night that they didn’t want him to see? He thought about who had provided him with the screen. Dean. But what could be the purpose? Was she abusing her position of power?

I might never know.

He heard the front door open and he slid the screen quickly under the cabinet.

‘Surprise!’ he called. Meg didn’t look surprised. She smiled weakly. Worse than last time, it looked as though she was struggling with something. ‘Getting used to not having me around?’

‘Oh silly,’ she said, and hugged him, pecked him on the lips.

He felt a bit crazy, a bit cuckoo. Manic from the stress and the chaos. Had he lost his only friend? He felt like a stiff actor, the dad on a 1950s TV show. ‘Guess what honey?’ he said ridiculously. ‘We’re going on holiday!’

‘When?’
‘Now!’

‘Oh, finally!’ she said. ‘Henny, I just need to take something’. She pushed past him into the kitchen, popping the top of her pillbox, sipping water from a bottle.

‘Can you get the time off?’ he asked, coming up behind her. *Maybe I have snapped. Maybe I will harm her, or myself.*

She took a last gulp. She turned to him, though didn’t quite look him in the eye. ‘I think I can, yes.’
Possession

The titanium pill-case jangled in Henry’s bag as he and Meg exited the train into sunlight. Air travel was becoming more and more of a luxury, and Meg, in this instance, had not wanted to fork out. Instead they’d spent a whole day in a train cabin being stared at by a wrinkled old woman. Henry started back, at times, when he felt prickles on his neck. He marvelled at her skin. You didn’t see people like her very much. The elderly lived in vast, contained retirement villages. Henry’s great-grandmother worked, as a high school science teacher, until she was 87 so she could afford to spend her retirement at Golden Reservoir, not in a tiny room at Eastern Asana. The better villages had better drugs, shops, fantasy suites, and muscle and joint pampering palaces. They were closer to the city, too, so that loved-ones could drop in. If Henry’s Balance had been more intact perhaps he would have been to see her more often. Both sets of his grandparents lived just around the corner from his brother, and would surely play a role in the new baby’s life, when they weren’t working. His granny Lisa—his mum’s mum—was now in her late seventies but looked about 40.

This lady didn’t look like she’d ever had a procedure. It was hard to know her age. She was hunched-over, vinegar-scented and ravaged. Even her ears had wrinkles. Meg sat near the window to be further away from her. Henry smiled but the old lady didn’t smile back. He wondered if perhaps she wasn’t that old, after all, just poor. Why was she going to the seaside? If he were that old and wrinkled, thought Henry, he might just wade out into the dirty water and die.

The cities had spread and spread, he didn’t know where they ended, but he was sure that people further inland from where he grew up might live... differently. It was hard to imagine. In fact, to most people, it was frightening to think about a place where your broadcasts might be shaky, because of the signal; and where you couldn’t get anywhere easily at all. No one could afford cars out there, surely. And all the waste! You could be living next to a rubbish heap. Or you could be drinking contaminated water, because of the natural gas well shaking the ground beneath. But maybe it wasn’t like that at all. Maybe there were many places with cottages and soil good enough for gardens, like he and Meg had found in Hungary. With lots of space
around them. Maybe you just never heard about them because the residents were afraid of an influx, like what had happened in so many green, remote places, like Tasmania and the Scottish Highlands. Henry made a mental note to look for blogs and broadcasts from out there. To see what it was really like. Maybe it wasn’t terrible, a desert; unliveable, at all. Maybe it was perfect.

Could it really be possible to get a train to the end of the line, and then just walk a bit further? Or to withdraw the maximum limit, get on a plane to Budapest, and then get on another train, and then walk? And just disappear?

But now, it was the blinding sun and being away from Ava. He’d have to sit through countless hours by a hotel pool, his pale body stretched-out; pining, dreaming. So Henry cracked that pill case and decided that this week, to bear it, he would become complacent. There was nothing to be done. And he would drink. He would drink every cocktail in the bar.

One night after Meg had conked out, Henry sat at the gleaming bar—a hot, melty moon in the sky—and thought about what he’d just said to her. He’d finally said that perhaps they’d grown apart a long time ago. He was being warmer (feeling manic, drugged and frank) and she was being delicate this trip, and he asked her, first, whether there was someone else. She denied everything, then she said sorry, and cried a bit. She said it was he who had changed, not her, and that it wasn’t acceptable. Maybe it wasn’t, he thought, as he sat and sipped a martini (and sadly, all the cocktails seemed sweeter than they should be). Maybe they were all right and he was wrong. But then, he was taking their drugs now. They made you feel calm. There was no rattling of the cage, just consideration of it.

She’d then said something about Barkley and the ‘poisons’ to our fulfilment, and he’d completely tuned out.

Then some part of him recoiled at the memory of the sound of a drill, the protuberant eyes and in-control face of Leon. He would have to make up with her, keep up appearances, even if it hurt her. He wasn’t a good man. He was afraid.
He should really come off the drugs and think this through properly.

He sipped the martini and there was a woman, then, sitting beside him. A ridiculous woman, with thick and bouncy hair, with pouting lips. He asked if she was deliberately being cartoonish and the insult drew her in. She asked if he were alone, and he said yes. She wore a purple dress, see through. He bought her a drink, a ‘melon paradise’. Something (someone?) flickered in the corner of his eye, blonde, too. Behind a plant. He told himself to stop being paranoid.

At least if I really do go nuts I can cause no more harm, or be unaware of the harm I’ve caused.

Later, in the woman’s room, loaded, he told her he was in a big mess. That everyone was. She started to unzip his fly and then he told her: no. He was craving a chicken schnitzel, like granny Lisa used to make. The woman sat down and asked him who he was.

‘I’m a very successful nanobiopharmaceutical designer. I occupy a respected, sought-after position at one of the two biggest, most influential multinationals. I’m curious, worldly, smart. I’m engaged to be married to a beautiful woman.’

Back in his room he dreamt the walls were made up of thousands of pairs of eyes with the odd pair of lips. Legs parted and between them there were eyes. Arms raised and there were eyes. There were eyes on mouths. There was an eye on the end of his toothpick in the martini.

On Monday, when they were back home, Meg was quiet. She didn’t speak to him at all before he went into the office. He felt buoyed but confused; tingly, wary. He opened the kitchen drawer, closed it, opened it, thought: I’ll wean myself back off them soon. Or will I? Ashamed of himself. But what if he was stuck out here? Don’t lose yourself.

The other woman must have still been in his office. His key didn’t even work anymore. People were quieter, they looked at him sideways. A chaotic clanging (though quietened) went on at the front of his skull. Yellow cymbals.
Every night of the holiday he’d decided he was going nuts (with helplessness, with grief), and that he was going to let himself. And then each night he’d folded back away from it, then beat himself up for his true inadequacy: his cowardice, his apathy (returning, creeping back), his inactivity. His tendency to get caught in the cycle of thoughts and ride it like a ferris wheel, never coming off, because the thoughts themselves made it seem as though he was getting somewhere.

And there was something strange about the way Meg had been acting, as if their relationship was really over for her too—finally—but she was clinging on for... for what?

Just as a theory formed, Grethe caught him on the shoulder and he jumped.

‘Henry,’ she said, looking up at him. There’s something wrong with the nano. ‘Sorry to do this, but our researchers are ready to go and have a look at Leon, and to observe a few more operations. We need you to go in with them, give them an introduction.’

He tried hard to frown and not grin. ‘Absolutely, Grethe. Now?’

‘Yes please, come with me.’

Dean’s tongue felt like a probe. In the middle of it all, Ava asked her: ‘what was it that happened to Leon?’ But Dean just said: ‘hush.’ Sometimes she treated her gently. Other times she was mean and rough. If Henry were gone for good, Ava might finally try to report Dean—to the Head Counsellor, perhaps. Ava might be punished just as harshly, for going along with it for so long (and of course, with her record, Dean could argue she was under some kind of erotic spell). But if Henry were gone, it wouldn’t matter.

She didn’t ask about Henry, though it was hard to suppress. She was still worried it was her affection keeping him away.

It had been one week, and her team was in the basement, in the dark, with the movie screen. Ava sat with Nina and Nina gasped at the dresses in Pretty Woman. Ava felt torn-up by the movie. There was something to the romance (and the man was...
handsome) but was the pretty woman really ready for it? It was too easy. In the end she’d have him, and lots of money and lots of things. It was a fairytale. What about ten years from now? Didn’t he still mean to possess her in some way? What if she wanted to get a job, try other kinds of lifestyles?

A relationship is a kind of institution, thought Ava. She looked at Nina and Nina was lifting her glasses to dab at her eyes with a tissue. The movie didn’t make Ava feel like that, but she did find herself longing to talk to Henry about it. How did he feel about long-term things? She remembered talking to Paul about the renewal and the deepening within.

Another week later. Ava had moved her thoughts on, was attempting to relearn the stone and the floors, the frame of the bed, the vegie patties, her dog-eared books; ignoring the persistent sting. She’d give it one more week, and then she would ask Dean about him. Fuck it. Things couldn’t get any worse. He was probably already gone for good.

And then she saw his black converse shoes. Henry stood in her room, tanned and with some confusion on his face. His eyes went wide when he saw her. She wondered if somehow he’d escaped, if that’s why he looked so caught, his arms hanging long, his breath coming quick and fast. She came to him. They looked at each other.

‘I thought...’ he began. Then looked at the tower. ‘I was brought back. But they didn’t tell me why. I think I’m here for real... for good.’

‘You don’t seem too upset.’

Henry laughed, but in a crazy way.

‘Where were you?’ she asked. ‘At first I thought it was the Big Space, but then you didn’t come back and I was so worried you’d be... like Leon. And then it was longer. And then I thought maybe you escaped.’

‘No,’ he said, and glanced at the tower. ‘It was just another ward.’

‘I missed you,’ she said, instinctively.
Henry raised his brows. His lips curled downwards. ‘That’s perfect,’ he said, and Ava came and sat beside him on the bed.

‘Where’s...?’ he asked.

‘Nina, now. In the library.’

Ava touched Henry’s cheek, on auto, and then wrenched her hand away. Only bad things could come.

But Henry took her hand and put it back there. His eyes were wide—yellow suns in a blue sky. He exhaled, slowly.

‘Can I ask you something?’ he whispered.

‘Sure.’

‘Does Counsellor Dean...?’

Ava removed her hand again, looked at the door.

‘Shh. Henry, no. you can’t ask me this.’ Ava’s heart ran.

‘Come with me,’ he said, grabbing her a little too hard by the wrist, saying nothing until they got to his room. ‘I think we can talk here. For a little while.’

He pulled her into the corner. ‘I knew it, about Dean. I was thinking about it while I was out. Why the...’ he trailed off. He looked guilty. Ava wondered what he had to tell, how he knew.

‘Will you be honest with me?’ she asked, afraid, but too curious to consider their conversation being overheard.

Henry touched her waist, giving her goosebumps, a blooming in the lower spine. ‘As honest as I can.’

‘To tell you the truth,’ she said, and felt a rush, ‘I’ve always stayed away from you. And it’s complicated, with the counsellor. I’m not sure if it’s part of my treatment.’

‘I’m sure they don’t want you to know.’
‘You can’t tell. The reason I’ve, the reason we can’t do this, the reason I have to go along with things is because they’ll take you away again. They’ll pull us apart. For longer.’

‘You didn’t seem to mind with Leon,’ he said, turning slightly away. Again, Ava thought: how can he know all this? Was it sense? Were there more eyes? Who or what was behind it all?

‘I suppose not. I was sad. But with you, it’s different somehow…’

Now he looked at her. He frowned. ‘I’m sorry. I’ve been out and I didn’t expect that I’d be back and I was so glad to see you. I’m not sure why my first reaction was... anger. Well, maybe I can tell you something more. Whether they’re listening in or not, I’m not sure it matters anymore.’

But then at the plastic was Dean. She held little Vincent, who was squirming.

‘You left something alone in your room, Ava’, she said darkly. Ava felt Henry’s hand escape her waist. There was a cool patch where it had lain.

‘Sorry, Counsellor, I was only coming in here for a minute.’

‘For what?’

‘Just to say hello. To talk.’

‘About what?’

‘Nothing, really.’

Dean looked between them. Ava could see Henry’s knuckles buckling. He was staring sharply at the counsellor.

Ava reached out for Vincent. Dean handed it to her, saying; ‘you can look after the pet, while Henry goes to the Big Space.’ Vincent squealed. Dean looked at it, frowning. Ava caught a strange look in Henry’s eyes.

‘Sorry?’ said Henry. ‘I just got back from Ward B.’

Dean’s eyebrows rose. ‘Is that what he told you, Ava?’
'He hasn’t told me anything.’

‘Come now,’ Dean said. Ava wanted to wrap herself around his legs and walk with him, like she used to do with her daddy when she was little. Henry looked back at her as he ducked under the plastic and offered a small smile. Before she realised, Ava pressed her hand to her lips and blew him a kiss. He blinked, softly, then looked forward. Vincent still squirmed.

‘What’s wrong, little guy?’ asked Ava. He made a sound like a sad, deep wail.

The researchers hadn’t said much on the way over, had just let Henry babble (his secret joy at being able to see her again bubbling up). He should have guessed at their silence and their all-one-colour clothes. As soon as they were inside, two strong pairs of hands circled his biceps. They opened one door and then another and they pushed gently. ‘Hey!’ he called, half-heartedly. Somewhere deep down he had no questions left.

‘I didn’t tell her anything, you know,’ he said to Dean, walking with her now. She smirked. He came close to saying: ‘I know about you.’ He wondered what she made Ava do. With a sudden panic he wondered, did she like it? He felt as though he would be sick. Was there a possibility of escape? This new problem added to the weight of the others. Had his adjustment worked? Could the whole experiment still be stopped? Even then, how would he and Ava... The nausea was suppressed by the drugs still in his system. Where the fuck am I actually going?

‘Dean, have they called me out again, so soon?’ he tried.

She didn’t reply.

‘Where are we going?’

‘Big Space.’

Henry swallowed. ‘Wait, for real?’

Spidery stone corridors, after the yellow walls ended, and then a wooden door opened up on something bigger than a basketball court. Or maybe it was an illusion.
There couldn’t possibly be a room this big in the building. Henry tried to remember what it had looked like on the screens, but he’d been focused on the face, not the space. The writhing.

Henry was quiet, confused. ‘What am I doing here?’ but then he knew, too. This was the switch. The blur. How much time did they have?

He remembered the blonde woman at the hotel. Had she been a plant? How much did he tell her? Meg had acted so differently. He was benumbed, that whole trip. If he’d been thinking clearer, he could have picked up on the signals. He’d thought he was being paranoid.

Dean didn’t answer. Her teeth were tight. She led him to what seemed to be the centre. He shielded his eyes from the brightness. She attached his leg to a chain and stake. But Henry felt, even if you ran, you wouldn’t get anywhere. This was a place of desolation.

He listened to Dean’s heels clicking out. He did not look after her. He blinked. The hairs stood up on the back of his neck. He stared into nothingness. He stared into time. There was still a floor beneath him though. This was something he could grasp, something he could hold on to. There were still thoughts in his head. Thoughts of failure, of cowardice. He sat on the floor, felt its smoothness with his hands. He looked down at it. The brightness became more intense. He saw that the floor, now, was hues of green, black, blue—techno-innards, qubits. Familiar. He continued to touch, ignoring its strangeness, trying to keep his head from floating away. From becoming empty. He sensed now, up there, in the white ether, terrible possibilities. They began to close in, to seep: one such, the clearest, Ava’s face, smiling, wide-eyed, with no hair on her head and fingers pressing into her skull, fleshy and jelly-like. She giggled a bit. It was tickling her.

‘Noooo!’ he called. His voice was soft, there was no echo. He called, again and again, through the night. And yet on some level, there was this tiny sense of inevitability. Here he was being himself.
Henry was shivering, alone on his bed, after the Big Space. It was an hour until daylight. Leon was snoring contentedly across from him. What would he dream?

A yellow wall. Noticing black spots on the wall. If only Henry could join the dots, paint a large black spot, a cartoon tunnel to her, and then to her father’s old house. Soft scuffling from Vincent, a little creature of intuition, and one he could not own forever. To own intuition, to own instinct. To have any kind of control to lead towards a life of letting go.
"Inevitability"

Henry was performing lunges, adequately. The yellow walls and white light glinted off the metal exercise machines. Henry felt like laughing and he did.

‘Would you laugh in a wellbeing centre?’ Dean asked. He winced. It seemed he could no longer locate a filter. There was no chance he’d last. He had to equip Ava for what was, inevitably, to befall them. But, weakly, he thought, *I can’t tell her all of it.* Could he tell her what he’d done to Leon; implicate himself in this blandification? No, he couldn’t.

Dean circled her other team at the back and Ava whispered, quickly, about a secret place. A black spot. Henry didn’t have time to ask her how she knew it, but when he looked back at Dean in her fuchsia suit, he was sure he knew.

They met there, just before dinner when they thought Dean’s shift had ended. It was shadowy and cool, pleasantly so. At first no words came to Henry’s mouth. He couldn’t believe they were truly alone. The eyes seemed a part of them now. They’d even been with him on the outside. He would lose her either way, wouldn’t he? It occurred to him now that the only solution to all of this—now that they were in so deep—might be to make the sacrifice first.

He began to shiver, and Ava put her hand on his face. He kissed the palm of her hand. He put his arms around her back, and her mouth, warm, came to his. He opened his lips slowly, to taste her. She made a sad sound. He put a hand on her breast. Her leg, beside his, trembled.

‘Can’t we think of a way to escape?’ she asked, moving cheek to cheek.

‘Impossible. We could cut all this and try to pretend to get better, but it could still be years. And you…’

‘I’m no good at pretending.’

‘I thought I was good at it,’ Henry said.

She pulled back a little, frowned. ‘But you’re not pretending now?’
They heard voices in the corridor.

‘Henry, tell me. What is it?’

Her black T-shirt was long, a man’s, and her pale blue tights were worn. His hands came down to the small of her back. ‘I’m not meant to be in here,’ he said. ‘At least, I wasn’t…’ Her eyes were reading him, open. He couldn’t tell her about Leon. He couldn’t stand what she would think of him, the pulling away. ‘Ava, just… it might happen soon. If it happens, just let it. I think it will be okay.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Treatment.’

‘Like Leon?’ she stepped away from him. ‘You don’t…’

‘I made an adjustment…’ he whispered. It came out like a hiss. Please let this truly be a black spot.

‘To what? Henry, tell me.’

‘Just trust me, please.’ Her hands had dropped away. She looked down at the concrete. The voices were getting louder. ‘We have to go.’ His heart was in a race. It wasn’t enough. But how could he tell her? Already that look in her eye. But Christ, what if the adjustment was not present? She still might have no choice. For someone who could not pretend, she was fated to either be altered, or rot in here.

‘I don’t want to end up like that,’ she said quickly. ‘I’d rather die.’

‘There’s more to it.’

‘Then tell me, Henry.’

‘I can’t.’ He pleaded with her with his eyes. ‘Please trust me. We have to go.’ He darted his head out, saw two counsellors: one in orange, one in blue and yellow stripes, chatting and laughing lightly. He grabbed Ava’s reluctant hand. He pulled her out when the voices had faded. He looked back into her eyes. ‘I will come for you. Just remember that if they take you in.’
Her face scrunched. ‘How do you know they will, Henry? How do you know all this? Who are you?’

‘I’m not Functional. But Ava, I was. At least, they thought I was. I’m not meant to be here. I’ve made mistakes. I’ve tried to right them.’

‘I just want to live now,’ she said, unmoving. ‘I don’t want to think about that. I don’t want to think about good or bad. I hate the past in my head. I hate thinking about the future and I do it all the time now, because of you.’ She ran her hand along the wall as they began to scramble along, as though looking for something. ‘So much of the richness has been sucked-up by you.’

He stopped, let go of her hand. He’d already done damage. She was turning away. ‘I know. You’ve given me more than you may ever know.’ He arranged his face and they walked, apart, into the dining hall. The feeling of her cheek on his cheek remained, tingling. Would it have been better to say nothing at all?

Henry was marched in to a big space, not unlike the Big Space, bright and echoey. He was led to the front of a line of people. Dean said, to a blue-clad Counsellor Guard: ‘he’s next’. The CG nodded. Dean took a place on the stands, which looked like spectator stands on a basketball court. An aural flash of squeaking shoes and bouncing balls came to Henry. A game.

He looked up to find the faces of his old life in the stands, his real life; the real false life, and was sad to see Meg, who looked away. It was sadder, much sadder still, to see Ken, who looked as though he’d been crying. Henry knew now why Ken had acted the way he had, that day at the apartment. He now knew what information Ken must have provided to keep himself out of the institution. His parents and brother weren’t there, though surely Meg would have told them, would have conferred with them before giving her own evidence. He had no doubt that they, worried about him straying from the path of moving forward, might have reached into their own store of memories and added to the evidence piled against him.
Henry’s name was called. He was forced to stand in a circle on the floor, as though going for a hoop. In front of him were the stands, and in front of them, on a lectern, was the judge who—he was not surprised to see—was Barkley, his glowing, puffed-out presence, with an old-school juror’s wig to match. A courtroom, a commercial. It was apt, Henry thought, and smiled, despite himself. An image stole him: a memory of Ava and Vincent talking to one other in hugs and noises.

The task at hand, he realised now, was inevitable, and actually, preferable: to submit in order to come out first. He’d cowered, selfishly, from this fate. He’d denied it through his own personal brand of egotistical blandness. The nightmare was about to come true and he was beginning to smile about it.

Barkley explained that witnesses had already been interviewed and argued that there had been a choice in Henry’s actions. He chose subversion over Health and Functionality. His sense of Balance was shockingly out.

People in the stand nodded. Ken remained still, looking down at his shoes.

Henry wished he had made choices. Long ago. But back then he’d had only a ghost of knowledge about what he wanted. He knew it wasn’t quite what he’d been brought up to believe he wanted, but he didn’t know what or where it was. Love, a room in a village in Hungary.

Barkley said: ‘Henry Folsom. You are here today, at this classified trial—our informers have all signed contracts of confidentiality—under the Dysfunctional Personality Act. Your primary sentence is that you are “deceptively transgressive”: a white ant of society, biding his time to let his destructive inadequacies emerge. In the process, you have interrupted an important project for the sake of personal interests. You have also hurt the people closest to you’.

Barkley paused, glinting. ‘We have some evidence that your transgressive activities have gone back years, but in the course of your recent undercover work your facetious, deceptive leanings have truly emerged. No one can trust you, Henry Folsom, and without institutionalisation and treatment, you will not become a Functional, Balanced, participating member of society, but will, we suspect, find ways to cause serious harm on many levels: personal, professional, and in the
community. If your opinions had been channelled into an appropriate profession, such as politics or art, and Balanced with a Functional life, you might have escaped this fate,’ he cleared his throat for emphasis. ‘You chose instead to masquerade as a Functional member of society, in a very important and coveted position within the company, GlaZen. What have you to say in your defence?’

Henry looked at the faces that hovered large and tooth-white, and realised he was not trembling. He was not afraid. He was sad, yes. But he was going down no matter what, and now was the time to stand on the table, to piss on the walls. He had nothing to lose, except of course, he must not draw attention to the connection with Ava in case she could still escape the grasp of his wretch.

‘Are my parents, my brother...?’

‘They chose not to attend, but cooperated with the paperwork. They want you to be well, Henry.’

Henry put his hands in the air, dropped them. He said: ‘We are free to question whatever we want, but we don’t, do we? Because we are seduced by the possibility of fulfilment, and we think we’re being given all the right tools for it. Why wouldn’t we want it?’

‘Why wouldn’t you, my man?’ Barkley looked at the stands, incredulous.

‘Happiness, wellbeing, Balance, fulfilment: a desire for these is just common sense.’

Common sense, nonsense.

‘But will there be no emotion left besides happiness?’ Henry asked the stands. ‘Will anybody be desperate, despairing, bored or even ecstatic in a few years’ time? Will anybody understand tragedy? Will anybody in the cities remember that there are riches to discover, sometimes frightening, outside what is accepted as being good for you? Will anyone have a day where they stay in bed all day for no good reason? Will anyone have a day where they eat only fat and carbs and no vegetables? Will anyone have thousands of lovers, or will anyone have just one? Will anyone give their whole life over to helping other people?’

They all looked away, to the ceiling, to a song in their heads, to a future purchase.
‘You are digging yourself a bigger hole, my man,’ said Barkley. ‘Of course there is room for everyone to be their own individual self.’ His arms gestured widely, incredulously.

‘I’m talking about variety, complexity and extremity. I’m talking about people existing in a world where they don’t constantly feel as though they have to improve themselves.’

*What is the point? What have I done?* Henry raked cold fingers down his face. His head was pounding.

‘Is that what you were doing secretly? “Being yourself?”’ Barkley looked at the stands. ‘A lovely excuse: causing harm to others is simply “being yourself”! If we all thought that way there’d be murders on every street corner, there’d be no consequences for anything.’

Then Henry just began to laugh. To fold over and laugh and laugh and laugh, knowing he looked *exactly* like someone who’d gone over an edge. He looked like their construction of him.

‘It’s all just a big contradiction. There are no rules,’ he laughed. ‘Like you!’ he pointed to Dean in the stands, ‘fucking the patients.’

Barkley looked at Dean. Dean appeared calm. Barkley nodded to her and she stood. ‘You’re right, Henry, there are no rules. In life, that is,’ Dean said. ‘We are free to do as we choose, without, of course, causing harm to others. But in here—as I tried to explain to you—actions that look random and even chaotic have meaning. My personal counselling sessions are tailored to the lessons needed to be learnt by each patient.’ Dean sat. Barkley stared, pityingly, at Henry.

‘It’s fucking cruel,’ is what Henry said, losing his equilibrium a little. Losing his grip. A bit of spittle at the sides of his mouth. It was OK; he was going to take the sacrifice, as he had to think of it, but *what will happen to her? To all of them?* The op-shop girl, the flower-seller, the teenagers. Henry pointed to the scattered faces in the stands. He pointed to Grethe, his boss. ‘Are you happy, Grethe? Are you
fulfilled?’ He pointed to Meg. ‘Are you, Meg? It seemed so, once.’ And then he looked at Ken. Ken shushed him, frowning. ‘Cheese on toast, man,’ Henry said.

Henry swaggered. He felt like someone had clocked him in the head. It was a boiling tension. It was only physical. Meg was crying into herself. He felt a quick pang of regret. ‘You know what? I’m sorry. You’re right. You’re all right. I should have been locked up years ago. Then I wouldn’t have invented that fucking destructive, sunny, bloody…’

‘That’s enough, Henry,’ said Barkley.

‘...wretch.’

‘I said, that’s enough.’

‘When will you put it on the market?’

Barkley was signalling for someone at the back of the room to do something: cut a mic? Draw a curtain? Pull him off with a vaudevillian hook?

‘Zombies.’

‘Balanced, content people Functioning in society. As you will be.’ Barkley smiled at him. There seemed to be a genuine glint of hope on his face.

‘Have it your way,’ said Henry.

_Maybe forever. Maybe just for a while._

‘Is there anything further you wish to say, Henry Folsom? Evidence has been provided by the people in the stands that you see. Would you like to ask any of them to speak in your favour?’

‘No.’

‘Would you like to request a hearing with other people to speak in your favour?’

‘Yes,’ said Henry. ‘Just kidding. No.’ he smirked. ‘Would you like me to shove my balls in your face and piss on your eyeballs?’

Meg made a loud sob. Dean looked amused.
‘No I would not’, said Barkley. ‘This trial, then, is over.’

It had been three days, this time. And now Ava knew the taste of him. She was still mad and she didn’t understand but she wanted to make him tell her more; she wanted to find out what he meant. She felt sick; she pulled at her own skin, which was teasingly soft, with her fingernails. Sitting on the bed with Vincent, trying to read—Nina with a magazine (which Ava noted, had a 1950s pulp comic inside). Vincent, who had been whimpering for days—she couldn’t quiet him—was yanking at her nightdress, Nina’s cat scowled from across the room.

‘What?’ she asked Vincent, as the creature grew more frantic. It moaned softly, then sighed. It closed its white oval lids, slowly, and was still.

‘No...’

Ava picked up the stiff little ghost body. Tears leapt from her, silently. Because she knew, too, of the connection between pet and host. Something had been severed.

‘No, no, no,’ she whimpered now, like a dying animal herself. Nina sat up.

‘What is it?’

Ava held out Vincent.

‘Oh no.’ Nina put her hand to her mouth and quickly checked her cat, who gave a matrixed mew. ‘Did you forget to feed it?’

‘I fed it just a few hours ago.’ Ava choked, holding the cold round thing in her arms.

‘Maybe it was sick; it had been acting a little off.’

‘Vincent was sensitive. To whatever has been going on with...’

‘Oh.’ Nina put a hand on Ava’s shoulder. ‘Well, maybe it’s just treatment.’

‘That’s what I’m afraid of.’

‘Oh, come now Ava,’ Nina said, sounding just like the mum on an old TV show. ‘That’s no way to act now is it? Dear, dear.’
'If you could be, say, visiting a big mall, with Paul now, with plenty of money you’d earned yourself,’ began Ava, ‘or sitting in a candlelit, dusty lounge room, watching an old movie, maybe *Sunset Boulevard*—and he’d be wearing tweed and mismatched socks—which would you rather?’

Nina sat on her side. ‘You’re just upset because your boyfriend is screwed. No chance left to change himself.’

‘Choose, sister.’

‘You’ll be next.’

‘A velvet couch.’

The corner of Nina’s lip curled. ‘I’d choose what’s Balanced, and healthy, for the both of us.’ She frowned a little.

Ava looked down at the dead thing. Why couldn’t she just be happy for Nina? Her weakness was strength. Maybe that was good for her. Maybe she and Paul did have a chance of an antique velvet couch, and candles and *Sunset Boulevard*, if they were Balanced with everything else.

*Poor Vincent.* She would take the little creature to the Galleon, where they first played.

When she got to the room, her feet cold through striped socks, the giant ship was gone. The room was bare, but she noticed a panel on the wall with a logo: *HoloZen.* She touched it and the room came to life with whatever had last been programmed into it.

‘Hello,’ said the instructor, in a leotard, with big hair. This was something from the past. Ava held Vincent to her chest. ‘Are you here for the class?’

Ava pressed the panel again to turn it off. This room must allow the past, she figured, whether in tactical or holo form. There was space for the past in the notion of Balance, but you couldn’t live in it, as Nina had done. That this room contained the past was enough to make Ava sit in there a while on the cold floor, filing
memories, accepting that both the past and future had invaded her. But she would make one last attempt at creating a new present.

In the morning, at breakfast, a version of Henry bounded over, with a small bandage on his head. Ava stood quickly, fighting her instincts to cuddle and coo, and to run.

‘Good morning,’ he said brightly. He looked at her and she could see there was still care there, but it was skewwhiff. A pat-on-the-head kind of care, not an intense emotional one. Ava dug a finger into her lonely arms.

‘Vincent is dead,’ she said, and it came out like anger. *How could he let them?*

‘What?’ he looked genuinely sad. ‘Oh no, poor little guy.’ He took a mouthful.

‘Maybe they’ll give us another one.’

Mortification. Nina was there. Open-mouthed. Leon arrived. ‘Hey man,’ he said, and they slapped hands. Ava thought she would be sick in her food.

‘Henry,’ she said, and couldn’t help it, a sob escaped with his name. ‘Henry what did they do to you?’

‘Hey, shh shh shh,’ he said, reaching over and rubbing her shoulder. ‘Don’t be upset. I just had some treatment.’

‘But *what?* How do they make you so different?’

‘I’m not different, Ava, just better! It was an invasive procedure, they had to tell me that. To insert something. And they said, also, they’d have to slightly change something, in me. I don’t know what that was. A memory, maybe. But that was probably for the best, so the treatment would work.’

‘Maybe you knew what it was, this treatment, maybe they didn’t want you telling us.’ Ava stared him down.

His eyes were too-wide and it was like his teeth had gotten brighter. ‘I don’t know, Ava. Beautiful Ava.’

‘Oooh!’ said Leon.
Ava turned her head to the ground. She ached for him. She ached for little Vincent, her friendship with Paul, her daddy, the paintings, feeling joyous and in the moment. She knew she could probably still fuck them, fuck Dean, fuck other patients, have little deaths on and on, but now she was bored by that, as if her scent had been thrown off.

She pushed her chair out from the table, didn’t smile back at the smiling faces, and confirmed for herself that the only way out of being forced into a mind-mask was to escape. Through death? No, there’s still the seeping dank behind the yellow.

Dean summoned her that day. And as Ava found the tasteless mouth, and as one of her hands pawed, the other snuck into Dean’s canary yellow jacket pocket and closed around the small wallet of swipe-keys. Dean’s hand grabbed her wrist and she pulled back, then pulled off Dean’s jacket and while Dean looked at one sleeve coming off, Ava quickly transferred the keys to the pocket of her hooded jacket, then she took it right off and put it on the floor behind her.

Her stomach moaned—she hadn’t been able to eat. She felt faint and her heart was quickening. Dean seemed to take it all for excitement and she went in rough this time, and Ava gave in to her, knowing that no matter how the next part of her plan went, it would all be different from now on.

 Afterwards, Ava walked quickly but casually away. She glared back at the eyes watching her from the tower and from the walls and she wondered how long she had before an alarm would be raised. She walked down, down corridors and stairwells, smelling the air; looking for doorways where natural light peeped through. She came to one and she held up the swipe card and went through. Soon she would encounter someone, she thought, and then she would have to run. But there was no one. She came to a round section of stone and she realised that it must be the lower level, the underground entrance to the tower. Curiosity swept over her. Who watched them, day and night? She almost forgot her mission (which she knew was probably fruitless anyway, but the excitement of trying was enough) as she swept the key over the door and pushed it in slowly. There was a light on, a large bank of screens, and
not a soul. There were a few jackets and bags slung over chairs, empty keep cups. She lifted the flap of a handbag and found it empty. It looked like a prop. Did the Intelligence even exist?

She looked up and saw stairs spiralling up to another level. Perhaps they were all up there, observing from telescopes, as opposed to monitoring the cameras placed around. But it was dead quiet, besides the hum of the giant subdivided screen. Ava walked close to it and saw the labels for the different wards. She noticed that the images changed, flicking in and out of different rooms, different training centres, corridors. She looked for Henry, she couldn’t help it.

Right then she heard running footsteps. A silent alarm must have been set off. She pulled open the door and made a break for it.

It was dark down here, and cold. Ava could smell the sickness that must have occupied this place in other centuries. There were newer institutions, in other cities, freshly painted. Some headstrong heritage trust must have provided a good argument for Balance, with this place, in keeping some remnants of the past. Perhaps in order to show people that life is better now, could only be better. They want us to hate this place, to want to get better, become Functional. But Ava didn’t hate the place itself, or the people in it—not even Dean—she just feared everything it stood for. Her whole being felt there was something fundamentally, profoundly wrong with the way the system worked. And she was deeply saddened that no one, not even Henry, seemed to be able to resist.

And so she ran. She didn’t know where to. She held the key wallet up to a door. Here, now, was sunlight. A burning contrast. She saw tall, hard fences but she ran toward them. She saw where the gate was. They cannot shoot at me, she thought. This is not a prison. Dean and two counsellor-guards were suddenly panting behind her. She was still going to reach the gate before them. Her stomach was tight and empty. Then she saw another CG at the entrance. He came out of his booth and stood in front of it. Ava hung left, dodged an arm reaching out for her. She was running fast. They were older, but they were all fit and well. Ava’s determination was greater. She ran them around the entire perimeter three times. Her chest burned. Spit gathered in her throat and mouth. At some point, everything blurred. She sobbed and
slowed. Dean, a yellow mass, jumped onto her and her shoulder slammed hard into
the concrete. The pain was a new one.

Dean pushed her over onto her back and the counsellor-guards held her down. Ava
struggled. One of the CGs put a needle to her arm. ‘No!’ she called, to no one.
Dean’s large breasts went up and down in the stretched yellow as she panted. This
pain was new, and Ava smiled through a blur of tears. Then the agony left her.
Part four

Sensation

Henry wakes up in a very soft bed. So soft he feels he is sinking. The bed that he has slept on for four years has never felt this... sensational. There’s a tickle in his limbs. His lungs are deep and wide and hollow. A cold clenching at the bottom of his spine brings bile to his throat. He sits up quickly.

‘What is it?’ a voice asks, both familiar and strange. She touches his arm and it feels like a bruise. He begins to sweat. ‘What’s happening?’ she asks, sitting up too, touching the beads of sweat; curious, worried. He looks at her: a tanned, pretty redhead, a smattering of freckles. She is his wife. They met in the supermarket. She is not Ava.

There is a gentle knock on the bedroom door. ‘Mummy?’ Henry’s heart smashes his ribcage. He remembers what this is. This is panic. He knows what is happening. He has to calm down.

The door is pushed open and there is a beautiful little boy, with strawberry-blonde hair, clutching a blue teddy bear. The memory of clutching a tiny ghost called Vincent comes back to Henry. The night in the hotel. What Vincent showed him. How Vincent somehow knew.

The adjustment. It worked.

Henry gets up from the bed and finds his voice. ‘Just getting some water hon, maybe I have a bit of a fever.’ His wife and son watch him.

‘Are you okay Daddy?’

‘I’m okay,’ he says gently, though he wants to burst out crying. He walks away to stop them seeing. Here’s a new hole that’s been dug. Why hadn’t he married Ava? He struggles to remember. She tried to run away, and then she tried to take her own life, before they could operate. He remembers blood; he remembers the vague shock and sadness. He remembers not being able to understand why she didn’t want to get
better. Now how sick he feels for all that. He bends over the toilet bowl and brings up hot bile. His stomach twists. The inside of the bowl is bright, his eyes are puffed.

His wife is at the door. ‘Oh, sweetheart,’ she bends and kisses his head. He begins to shake. ‘You’re really sick. We’ll get you to a doctor.’

He may have to go along with it. But now—the new dilemma. New courses of action must be taken. Leon would have already reverted. Soon the other nanopharms would falter and expire. He is amazed that his adjustment was never discovered, especially after he’d been put on trial. His adjustment was to give the wretch the same sort of function programmed into devices, cameras, phones, entertainment systems and other electronics—for self-destruction, for obsolescence—so that consumers would have to keep on upgrading.

Ava’s would be the next to expire. And who knows how many after that? The nano, his wretch, for the past two years, had been available on the market through a prescription. They’d called it, simply and unimaginatively, Acceptance.

He had to get to Ava before hers expired. He had to be there. But would she forgive him? She’d understand now, everything he told her that night. About why she had to trust him, that it would all be okay. But would she forgive him for what he hadn’t told her? That he was the creator, he was Victor Frankenstein. And he would have to tell her that he had been the one to choose Leon. He would have to tell her he was a rotten, jealous human being. Would she let him back in?

In the blur of memories, he realises that he has money. Could he find a way to get away, untraced and untraceable? Was there any place left to go? Anywhere where passion and pain, holing-up and eating from the ground would be allowed?

The memories are still forming. He remembers... what about the other adjustment? The one GlaZen arranged just before the tests. If it was for surveillance, Henry imagines that a light on a grid somewhere has suddenly stopped blinking. Would they notice? He probably has until his next check-up to get away.

But they did also play with his memory, didn’t they? GlaZen’s adjustment could have just been that. Over these past few years he had not remembered he was the
creator. He just knew that he had worked for GlaZen, had needed Functionality training, had the treatment and after a few months was let out to lead a Functional life. GlaZen had welcomed him back, in their biopharmaceuticals department: to fight new, nasty strains of viruses. His fellow employees must have been briefed never to mention it.

The memory-blocking function must have been built into the wretch’s repertoire— that was their adjustment—as all the memories were now flooding back. That means there may not have been any other adjustments in the nano at all, in this prototype anyway. There may be a real chance.

He senses somehow that Ava is close by.

Leon. What about him? At least Leon wouldn’t have committed suicide, he doesn’t think... Leon would be savvy enough to know what had occurred. He’d pretend, he’d integrate. But the others, after Leon and him and Ava, would soon be suddenly waking. The shock might be too much. They might make appointments, reveal that something had gone wrong. He didn’t have much time.

His son, Jason, is rubbing him on his left shoulder. ‘You’ll be okay daddy.’ Henry wipes his mouth and turns to his family. They sit on the cold tiles with him. Jeannie is on pills, but not implanted. So far, Jason is clean, though Jeannie last week had been discussing the way he gets a little jealous and possessive; was assessing what could be done about it.

‘I better take the day off,’ says Henry, smiling a little at them.

‘That’s a good idea, sweetheart,’ says Jeannie. ‘We’ll look after you.’

He gets back into bed, so heavy. The sun, outside, is fat and bright and mocking. His little son climbs up, and strokes his sweaty head near his ear. Henry watches him. And for a very brief moment, he regrets that his adjustment was a success.

Ava’s partner, Elise, has gone to bed. She sits in the bath as the warm water turns hot, and the cream-coloured walls become as boring as fluff. Ava’s fingers ball into fists and her mind is brush-stroked with colour. ‘Oh...’ she gasps, as a sickening,
beating, pulsing sensation emerges between her legs and she slides her hand down, with none of the hesitation or strangeness she has felt in the past few years, and her body sings with her touch. Blood fills her, she cries out.

She follows him home from his work one day, the force of it all back: a fear that someone is watching, that she will say the wrong thing; the memories of pressure, of suppression. Some part of her is still angry at him—for even this, for what she is doing—but she is also doing it because of him. She understands now that he knew the treatment wouldn’t last forever. ‘Trust me,’ he had said, ‘I will come for you.’

The way he walks, though, the way he speaks to people, the way he wears his suit, she sees that his treatment has not yet stopped working, like hers.

But now she can feel the rough bumps of carpet under her toes, can see how uniform her wardrobe became when she was under. It’s still colourful—some part of her personality had remained—but all the clothes match and are perfectly fitted. Now, she can watch and inhale the spark of trams, a pet dog’s breath, the synthetic layers of a woman’s perfume. She can feel her hair reacting to the coming rain, curling up. And she is curious again, about everyone.

But she longs, infuriatingly, for him. Days, weeks, of doubt—what if she is the only one? What if it was a simple fault in her implant only? There are yearly check-ins with counsellors. They test your Functionality, but they don’t do any physical tests. No brain scans, for example. Ava’s check-up is coming up in a month. She plans on taking some pills and making sure she opens her eyes wide, and appears enthusiastic. She has to learn to fake. Just for a while. She is older now, she has grown and she is beginning to accept her longing. The changes in her attitude could coexist with quickness and instinct. Isn’t the lasting interest in one person a kind of instinct too?

Doubt comes thicker, though, as more weeks pass and she continues to check in on him and he hasn’t changed on his routine circuit to work. Shouldn’t his have failed first? Perhaps hers was just faulty. Should she approach him anyway? No. She remembers the Henry who had been operated on, the detached way he’d reacted to her... She traces the white, jagged scars on her wrists. It was all a haze after that.
She takes a risk and breaks up with Elise, because she can’t stand to pretend 24 hours a day. She had to come up with a good big list of reasons for their incompatibility, for it to be feasible. Once Elise had seen and considered this, she was upset, but agreed it was better they ended it.

One day Henry doesn’t show. Ava begins to walk to his house. She has followed him there once before. She works an afternoon shift at the office, so she has time. It is bright and too hot. She squints, even in her sunglasses. She ducks into a cold supermarket full of fast-moving people to try to cool down a bit. She walks the aisles for a while, dazed, trying to figure out what to do.

Jeannie has poured Henry a cup of tea. His stomach growls. He is sitting on the lounge, in a clean, comfortable room. He feels tired, overwhelmed. Jason is curled up beside him. Henry sits his hand on his son’s side. His heart has been racing all day. Somehow he convinced Jeannie he didn’t need to go to the doctor, that he’d see how he went tomorrow. ‘They’re busy people, it might just be something I ate.’

He hears Jeannie give a strange, amused sound from the entrance hall.

‘What is it honey?’

She speaks as she’s walking in. ‘I just went out to check the mail and I found this sitting right outside our door!’

In her hand is a jar of strawberry jam.