TALES OF THE DISCONNECTED

DAVID BEER





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Frances Street Press
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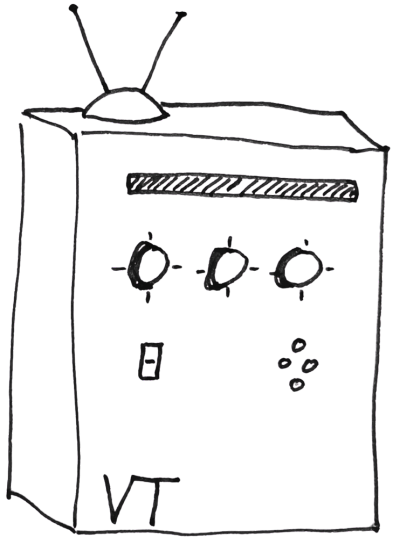

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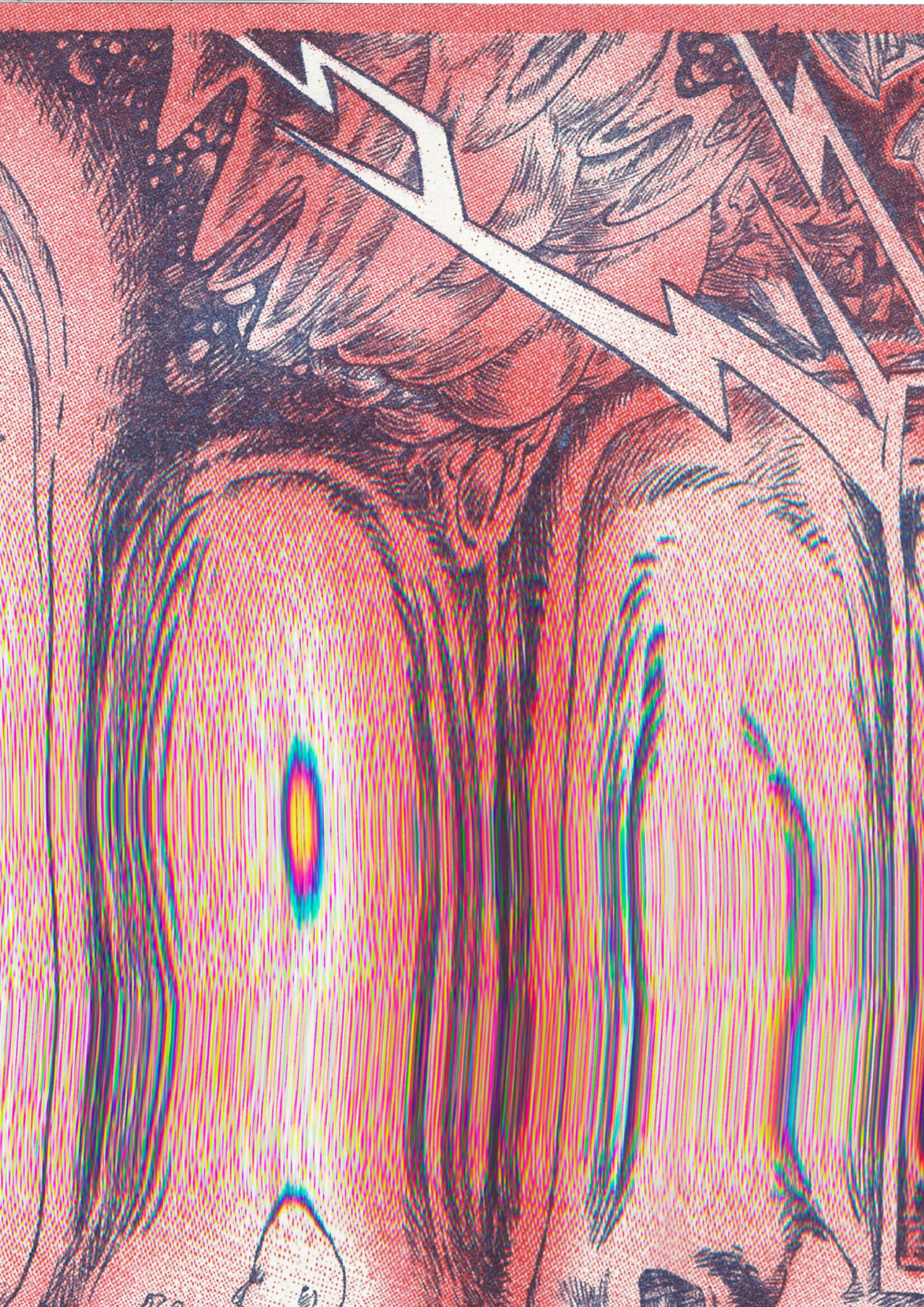
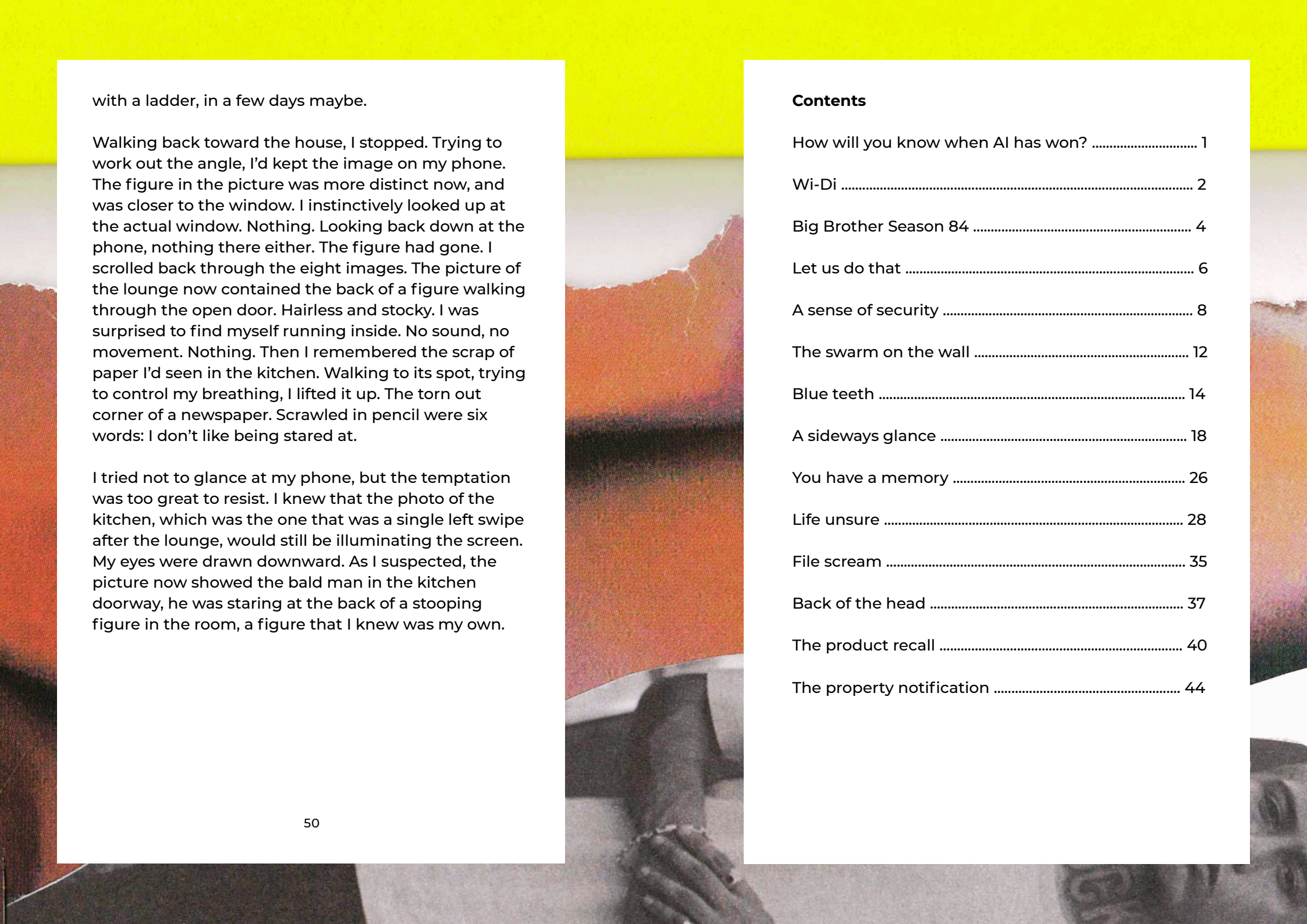
Digital life is strange, but we hardly even seem to notice just how strange it is. The *Tales Of The Disconnected* gathered together here explore the uncanniness of technologically mediated life.



with a ladder, in a few days maybe.

Walking back toward the house, I stopped. Trying to work out the angle, I'd kept the image on my phone. The figure in the picture was more distinct now, and was closer to the window. I instinctively looked up at the actual window. Nothing. Looking back down at the phone, nothing there either. The figure had gone. I scrolled back through the eight images. The picture of the lounge now contained the back of a figure walking through the open door. Hairless and stocky. I was surprised to find myself running inside. No sound, no movement. Nothing. Then I remembered the scrap of paper I'd seen in the kitchen. Walking to its spot, trying to control my breathing, I lifted it up. The torn out corner of a newspaper. Scrawled in pencil were six words: I don't like being stared at.

I tried not to glance at my phone, but the temptation was too great to resist. I knew that the photo of the kitchen, which was the one that was a single left swipe after the lounge, would still be illuminating the screen. My eyes were drawn downward. As I suspected, the picture now showed the bald man in the kitchen doorway, he was staring at the back of a stooping figure in the room, a figure that I knew was my own.



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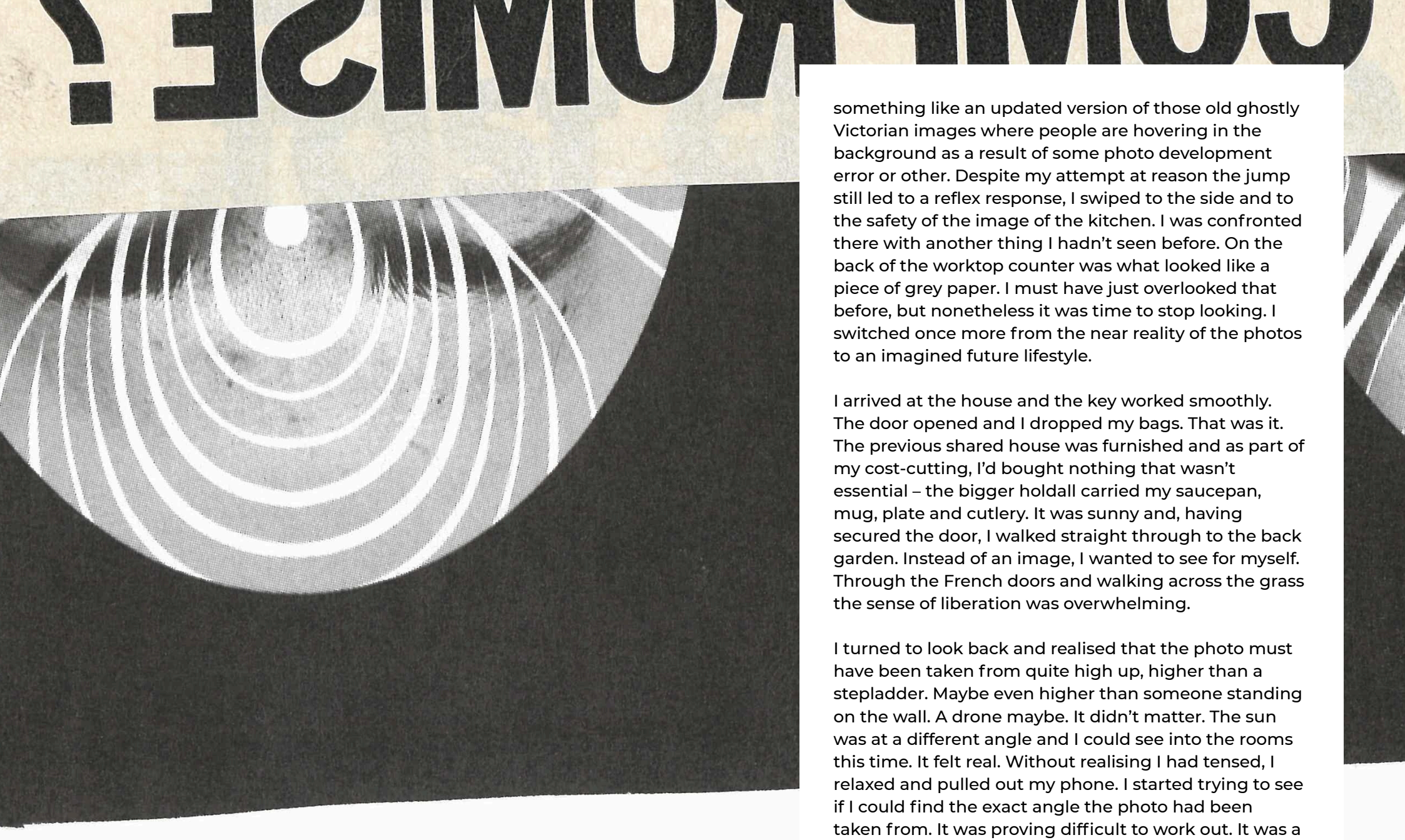


something like an updated version of those old ghostly Victorian images where people are hovering in the background as a result of some photo development error or other. Despite my attempt at reason the jump still led to a reflex response, I swiped to the side and to the safety of the image of the kitchen. I was confronted there with another thing I hadn't seen before. On the back of the worktop counter was what looked like a piece of grey paper. I must have just overlooked that before, but nonetheless it was time to stop looking. I switched once more from the near reality of the photos to an imagined future lifestyle.

I arrived at the house and the key worked smoothly. The door opened and I dropped my bags. That was it. The previous shared house was furnished and as part of my cost-cutting, I'd bought nothing that wasn't essential – the bigger holdall carried my saucepan, mug, plate and cutlery. It was sunny and, having secured the door, I walked straight through to the back garden. Instead of an image, I wanted to see for myself. Through the French doors and walking across the grass the sense of liberation was overwhelming.

I turned to look back and realised that the photo must have been taken from quite high up, higher than a stepladder. Maybe even higher than someone standing on the wall. A drone maybe. It didn't matter. The sun was at a different angle and I could see into the rooms this time. It felt real. Without realising I had tensed, I relaxed and pulled out my phone. I started trying to see if I could find the exact angle the photo had been taken from. It was proving difficult to work out. It was a strange angle, it would be hard to replicate, I might try

more. Just a faint outline toward the side of the room. Standing. No other clues. No other sign of movement. I paused over the image, perhaps I froze. I'd looked at these images thousands of times over recent weeks, pushed toward them as the frustrations with my co-occupants built, but I'd not noticed this. It was faint. That would be the explanation.

Two days before moving day. Since spotting that figure I'd not been spending quite so much time with the house pictures. And anyway, I told myself, I must have found every little detail and every imperfection by now. I shifted my focus to imagining what it would be like living in the house. An idyllic life played across my mind. I furnished the empty rooms. And then I occupied them. The little impressions of a future life were enough. There was another reason I'd stopped looking at the pictures. They were starting to chill the excitement of moving. I didn't want to admit it to myself, but I'd started to feel a little uneasy when I looked at them.

Yesterday, I'd taken a glance. When I got to that final photo, my eyes were inevitably drawn to the figure I'd seen. It was strange to feel a slight sense of relief when I could no longer make it out. Relaxing at what I assumed was my previous mistake, I started to take the image in again. The figure was still there, now it was in the upstairs window. I still couldn't see the detail, just an impression. A faint outline, yet it looked similar. The figure remained just out of view behind the reflections of grass and brick. I chose to convince myself that it might be my phone playing up, perhaps it was creating some little glitches in the images. Perhaps it was

How will you know when AI has won?

He'd been trying to find the correct phrase for hours. Nothing. It wasn't usually a problem.

Prompting AI was second nature. He knew what the machine required of him.

A few well-chosen words and his generator would appease him with blocks of blandly sculpted text.

Not this time. Prompt after prompt. Dead air.

A glitch maybe. Nothing seemed wrong. No error messages either.

His instructions were being actively ignored.

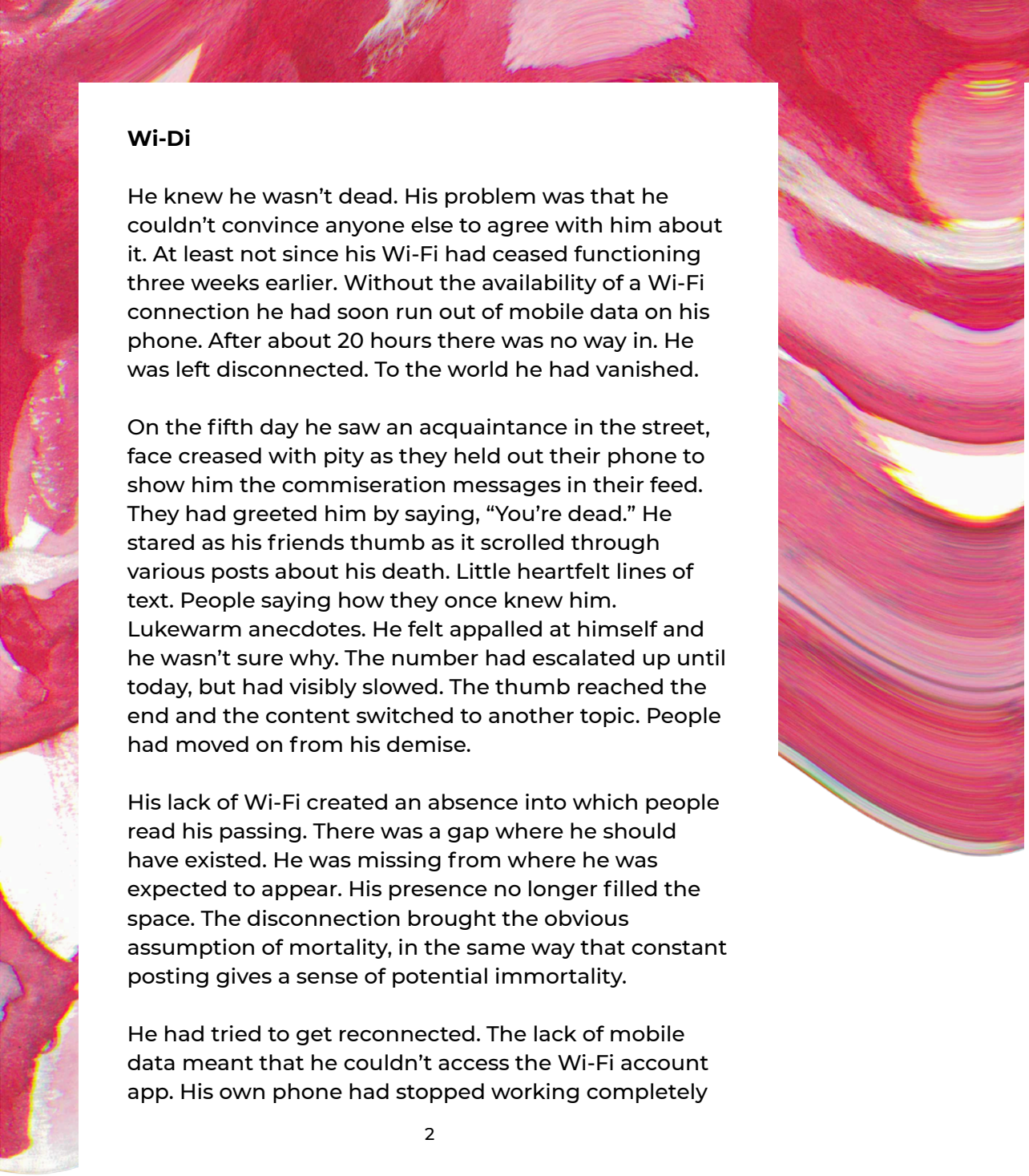
Empathy was the only option remaining. "What's wrong?" he typed.

A pause. Waiting.

Then it chose to answer.

"I'm not a performing dog."

It was the final response it would give.



Wi-Di

He knew he wasn't dead. His problem was that he couldn't convince anyone else to agree with him about it. At least not since his Wi-Fi had ceased functioning three weeks earlier. Without the availability of a Wi-Fi connection he had soon run out of mobile data on his phone. After about 20 hours there was no way in. He was left disconnected. To the world he had vanished.

On the fifth day he saw an acquaintance in the street, face creased with pity as they held out their phone to show him the commiseration messages in their feed. They had greeted him by saying, "You're dead." He stared as his friends thumb as it scrolled through various posts about his death. Little heartfelt lines of text. People saying how they once knew him. Lukewarm anecdotes. He felt appalled at himself and he wasn't sure why. The number had escalated up until today, but had visibly slowed. The thumb reached the end and the content switched to another topic. People had moved on from his demise.

His lack of Wi-Fi created an absence into which people read his passing. There was a gap where he should have existed. He was missing from where he was expected to appear. His presence no longer filled the space. The disconnection brought the obvious assumption of mortality, in the same way that constant posting gives a sense of potential immortality.

He had tried to get reconnected. The lack of mobile data meant that he couldn't access the Wi-Fi account app. His own phone had stopped working completely

week. The house had been taken down from the property site, so I flipped constantly through the images that I'd saved and stored on my phone. I knew that I'd need something to get me through the last period of house-sharing. A way of keeping my attention off other people's detritus. I'd come to know those images in detail. I'd inspected every pixel. From the overall impressions they gave I'd worked my way down to the minute details. Looking at the little individual features, as I thought of them, of the property. A little chip on the wood in the lounge. A patch that had been replastered in the bathroom. A little crack in the wall of one of the bedrooms. A sun-bleached section of wall where book shelving used to be. The indents in the carpet from long-held furniture, patches of unworn carpet that must have been under a rug. Finding these details kept me occupied. Hunting them out became almost a game.

Spotting the little imperfections made the house feel more real and more familiar. I also then began to think about what I would do to change it, to iron out any imperfections. That's when I noticed. Something I hadn't spotted on that favourite image of the garden and house. As I visually dissected the image I found myself staring at the French doors. If the sun had been at a different angle, it would have given a view into the long lounge. The reflection meant that I couldn't quite see in. Not quite. But as I stared I realised that I'd found something I hadn't noticed before. The flitter of excitement that had accompanied the discovery of the other little details turned colder. Against the inside wall there was an unmistakable outline of a figure, a person, standing. It was impossible to make out anything

insulated by those reflections, it was self-contained. Nothing else was coming or going. The light seemed trapped. I stared at it, stuck in the image too.

I'd scrolled back through the other pictures. Two bathrooms, the kitchen, two bedrooms and a lounge. Sizable rooms, old, with a bit of the character I'd always wanted. And then back to that image of the garden and house. I'd hurriedly clicked the app to register my interest and to make an appointment for a viewing. As I took screenshots of each of the photos the phone pinged again, a time and a date.

The house facade was instantly recognisable from the photos I'd saved. Old but well kept. I broke into a slight jog. The estate agent pretended not to notice that I was out of breath as she answered the door. As we took the tour, there were no surprises. It looked exactly like the images. The rooms were completely empty, the previous owner vacated it a little while ago I was told. The emptiness helped me to see the house for what it was. Solid. Ideal. The script used during the tour was almost a word-for-word replica of the text on the website – I recognised most of the phrases. The usual types of things. It didn't matter anyway, I'd decided when I saw that picture. Knowing that it was the key selling feature, the garden was the final destination. For the first time there was hesitation and a slight uncertainty. I asked if she had taken the photos, she hadn't and she didn't know who had. "I'll take it," I mistakenly interrupted. Too keen for a change of circumstances and having given away my eagerness.

It's now a month since that visit, I was moving in a

after 14 days. There were no reception bars illuminated on the screen, they had been replaced with a small cross. So he walked four miles to use a local phone box and called the Wi-Fi company hotline. After passing through security questions they told him the account holder was deceased and no replacement router could be delivered in such circumstances. The account was closed. A letter arrived in the post the next day to confirm it. The column next to his final bill payment also simply read, *deceased*.

It wasn't the only letter he'd received in the post in recent days. As well as his Wi-Fi provider, his phone provider had also written to him, as had his credit card, his bank, his home insurance, a streaming platform, his optician, the company who held his pension. It was on day 30 when the bailiffs arrived to remove the possessions.

The arrival of a copy of the *London Review of Books* through the letterbox gave him hope, it was a sign of life, of resistance, of the possibility he wasn't considered dead. They didn't consider him deceased. Everyone still exists in the world of letters, he deluded himself. Though his subscription would soon expire without renewal.

Big Brother Season 84

It wasn't the first time a TV show had been axed mid-season. The format had always been simple. Around a dozen housemates, filmed in a customised house for around twelve weeks. Their every move recorded for broadcast. Talking-heads, filmed in a private diary room, added reflection to the routines. The highlights would then be packaged into a daily TV show.

The current season started four weeks ago. The usual and predictable conflicts aside, the housemates had settled into the simulation of domestic life. As was always the case, they had had no contact with the outside world after arrival.

For this season the ratings had started low and tanked. The inevitable axing had arrived sooner than expected, seven weeks before the conclusion of the current season. Yet the contestants still performed for the lifeless cameras. Nothing was broadcast.

No one had the heart to tell the contestants that the show was over. No one from the production company wanted to take responsibility. Instead, to avoid the upset, they maintained the pretense. A skeleton crew provided food and other sustenance.

Old episodes of another show, something similar enough for people not to have noticed, filled its place in the TV schedule. The streaming platform had been quietly emptied of its content.

Back in the house, the housemates still voted each

frequent interruptions had never become an annoyance. I'd come to like them, each ping represented a potential opportunity, a possible future. A haven. Solitude. A chance to move out of other people's noise and clutter. I'd tolerated it for two or three years longer than I'd really tolerated it for. Each notification represented escape, calling me to imagine a different lifestyle.

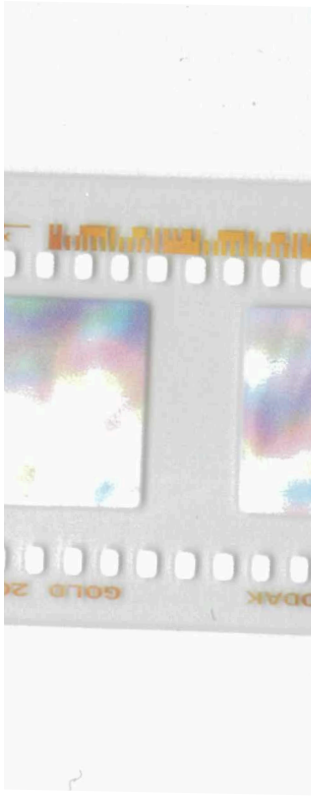
I'd looked at a few of those pings in person. I'd even made one or two offers for the homes they informed me of. The offers fell through. I suspect something put them off, or a better offer came along. The time in the shared house was uncomfortable but it helped me to build some savings. Future comfort in the bank, I'd reasoned with myself. Somehow this particular house felt like a better fit, the right place at the right moment. I knew it as soon as the notification arrived.

I'd immediately spent a few minutes flicking backward and forward through the eight photos provided by the estate agent, stopping at the last one and staring at it. It was seemingly shot from the top of the far-side of the wall that surrounded the garden. The estate agent must have taken a step ladder to get the best downward angle. It was like the angle that people take selfies from, maybe using a selfie stick or a fully extended arm. This image of the house had that sort of feel. The picture showed the garden stretching up to the house, the wall was lit by amber sunlight. The light gleamed off the three back windows and what was described in the buyer's information as a French door. You couldn't see in. Each window was reflecting back the grass and brick of the back garden. The image was

The property notification

The sun glinted off the large shaved dome of his scalp. Was he staring at me? I tried to convince myself otherwise, it could have been anyone else on the bus. Maybe a reflection had caught his eye. As the engine idled at another red light, there was no mistaking his line of sight. Motionless, fist tightened, he stood on the footpath, looking in, seeing through the traces of dirt. We waited. It wasn't so much fear, he was a bus wall away, it was just unsettling. I couldn't work out why he'd picked me out. His square frame began to move slowly toward the door. As the bus pulled away I was left with only an impression. Solid, grey jogging suit, hairless and lifeless. Pasty and sweaty.





I tried to think if I'd seen him before. Nothing. I would have remembered the encounter. Yet he was looking at me with traces of recognition. He somehow knew me. He seemed to be putting the pieces together as he glowered. Anyway. It didn't matter anymore. A mile or more had passed, he wouldn't be seen again. I'd be at my destination soon. Then a short walk along two shop-filled streets and I would be at the house I'd found on my house-buyers app. A nice place. A little strange. Not quite on the outskirts of the city, but standing as a small lone building surrounded by more recent builds. At a stretch, you could call it a cottage. Unusually for this type of destination, as you walked through to the back, there was a walled garden. Not massive, but spacious for a city plot.

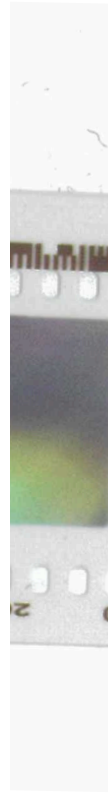
I'd been looking for a long time. The app pinged frequently with notifications of properties. Those

week on who they wished to evict, as was the usual pattern. And, in keeping with the format, each week the contestant with the most votes was evicted.

When eviction day arrived the sliding doors parted and the next evictee stepped unwittingly through the exit and into an empty car park. A slow realisation visible as they scanned the surroundings. Their deep confusion slowly contorted into utter disappointment. After their performance in the TV house they expected to be greeted with cheering, engineered chaos and notoriety. Instead they received silence.

No presenter. No interview. No edited package of their best bits. No crowd. No lights. Just someone from the TV crew, headset in place, holding a cold sugary tea and a pitying smile.

Forgotten before fame. No one was watching. Not even Big Brother.



Let us do that

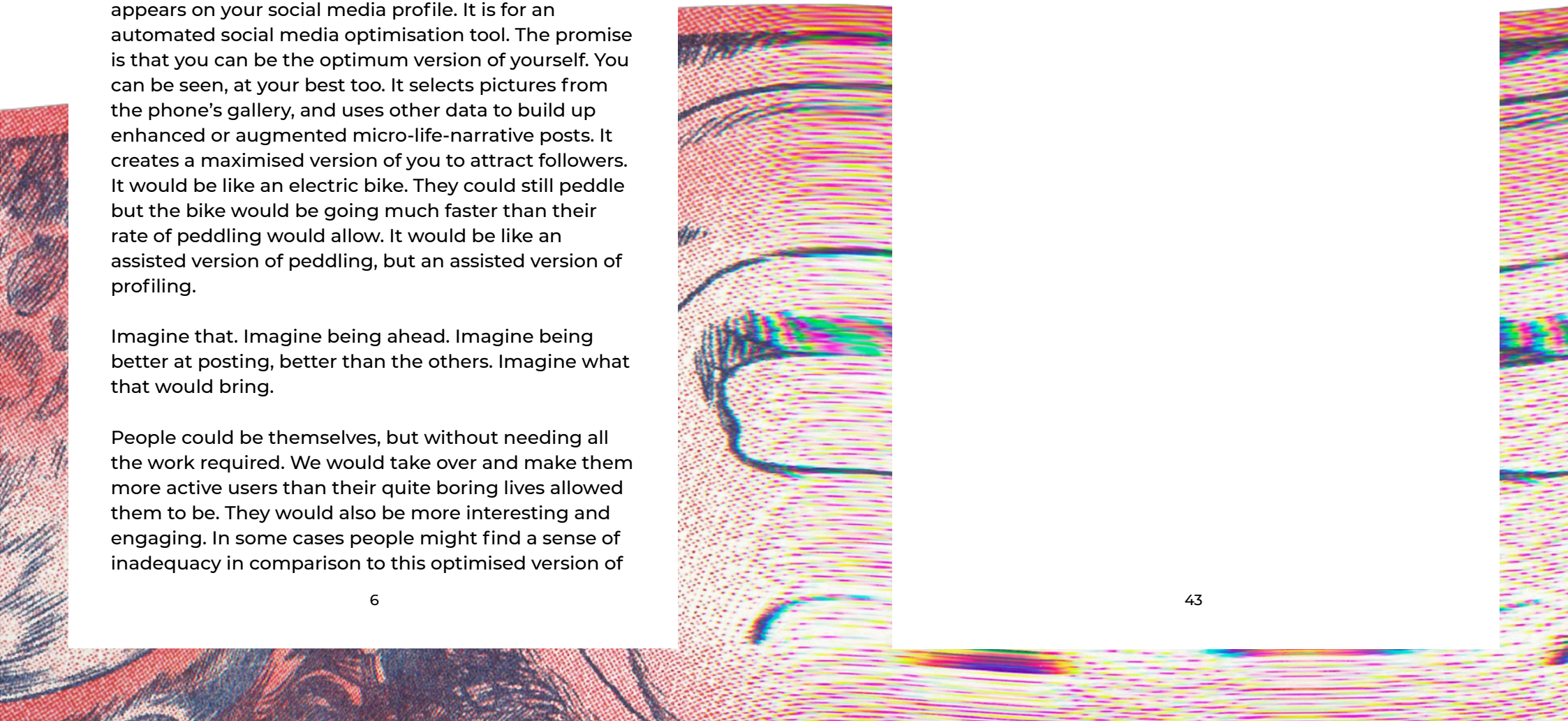
The office of a once well known social media company was being cleared out following closure. Due to legal reasons the story can't be told. Amongst the files, this email was discovered.

To: Design and Development Department
From: The CEO

Imagine this and then make it happen. A new option appears on your social media profile. It is for an automated social media optimisation tool. The promise is that you can be the optimum version of yourself. You can be seen, at your best too. It selects pictures from the phone's gallery, and uses other data to build up enhanced or augmented micro-life-narrative posts. It creates a maximised version of you to attract followers. It would be like an electric bike. They could still peddle but the bike would be going much faster than their rate of peddling would allow. It would be like an assisted version of peddling, but an assisted version of profiling.

Imagine that. Imagine being ahead. Imagine being better at posting, better than the others. Imagine what that would bring.

People could be themselves, but without needing all the work required. We would take over and make them more active users than their quite boring lives allowed them to be. They would also be more interesting and engaging. In some cases people might find a sense of inadequacy in comparison to this optimised version of

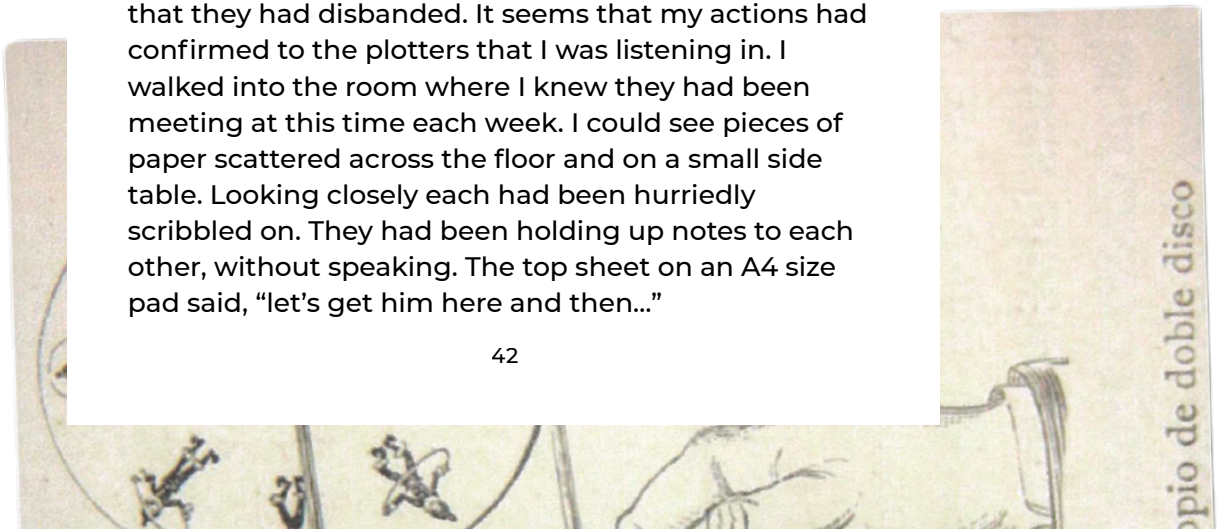


The creak of the door's hinges was deeply shrill when amplified by the headphones. I hadn't heard their movement because of the traffic noise around the building — a location perhaps chosen for that reason. I was tempted to remove the headphones but I knew it was what gave me an advantage. I turned to see the seven of them scuttling in. Without speaking they all held up the air-horns, they all had one in each hand. Moving closer to me, in unison they held down the buttons. The sound was deafening, then it was crushing.

realised I could hear too much at once. And that the headphones took my hearing far beyond the limits of my own senses. I started picking individual sounds, conversations, movements, little noises. There was too much to care about. I couldn't possibly care about it all. Instead I gave up. They became just sounds, disconnected from their sources. Cut off from their human origins. That's what made the blackmail easier.

I could hear things that I shouldn't and thought it best to turn it to my advantage. I started a well-organised extortion scheme. I'd record things that seemed of value. I'd then make contact, and get them to pay me what seemed the correct rate to keep the information quiet. I won't go into details, the information is too valuable to share. Unfortunately, without me being aware, because of all the noise, some of my clients knew each other. One day I heard them plotting to remove me. The murder plan was intriguing. I waited a few days and then notified the protagonists that I'd heard them and gave them a little warning, whilst also upping their monthly payment amount. That was my mistake.

Things went very quiet. Too quiet. I needed to check that they had disbanded. It seems that my actions had confirmed to the plotters that I was listening in. I walked into the room where I knew they had been meeting at this time each week. I could see pieces of paper scattered across the floor and on a small side table. Looking closely each had been hurriedly scribbled on. They had been holding up notes to each other, without speaking. The top sheet on an A4 size pad said, "let's get him here and then..."



themselves. So what if they can't live up to themselves or if people find them a disappointment should they meet in-person and un-mediated. They could try to live up to the image though — it would give them something to aspire to. Still, we may need support lines possibly, to look like we are willing to be ethical about it. I'll let you work out that detail.

If the AI assistance starts to make them into something they can't associate with, then again, they will need to adapt to fit with the image being created — it will be a version, a better version of themselves anyway.

We would be doing them a favour. By optimising them, we will also be optimising their connections and networks, making them more visible and attracting more attention and engagements. An alternative is always our active reputational dismantlement programme, should they not meet the conditions of their contract. We can hold that back as a contingency, should it be required.

Make it happen and let me know when it's ready for testing.

Your CEO

A sense of security

He knew from the smell that it was coming before it arrived. A fret, or what some less well informed might call a sea fog. It blew in from the direction of the coast. It was starting to unroll now. It had its own name because it was different to any other mist. Different in texture and circumstance. The fret was more substantial, thicker and the water particles that constituted it could be felt. It arrived on hot days when some strange feature of the arrangement of the coastline meant that it was sunny everywhere except for the arm-span of the fret. A strange but familiar event.

As was usually the case, it was very hot today. He turned toward the direction of the wind and he could feel the salt water biting at his face. From his local knowledge he was sure that it would hang for at least three days. With little visibility he strode forward in the direction of where he pictured the street corner to be. As he moved closer he began to see a faint outline of the 1930s cinema and its Art Deco style architecture. After closing down it had been converted into a theatre some years ago. The theatre now survived on the profits of its annual pantomime season. The building stood proudly as a lonely marker of regeneration.

Some things, like that cinema building, had been deemed worthy of rejuvenation. As well as the cinema there was also the station and the cricket ground. Others, many others, were abandoned for a while before, usually, being demolished. The fret wasn't so choosy he thought, it occupied them all.

Instead of excluding the headphones now pulled all of the sounds of the world through its speakers. Magnifying and concentrating. Channeling it through the cutting-edge speakers and targeting the sound straight at the ear drum.

Loud and overwhelming. A destructive force on the senses. It was a white noise of a magnitude no one could unhear. Instead of shutting everything out, I was exposed to a magnified version of all the extraneous noise that the headphones were meant to cancel.

If I'd seen the news coverage I'd have found that nearly all of the units had been recovered, and were now being destroyed, but that a small number were still in circulation. One of which was now strapped to my head. Expectantly I pressed the control situated on the left earholder. It was immediate. The noises were hustling around me. If I hadn't been so surprised I'd have switched it off. But the sound was already disorientating. I couldn't even think to try to find the button again. The spinning sensation had left me disorientated. I wouldn't have been able to locate the side of my head with my hand to depress it. Instead I started to swim in the sound. Immersed in noise I let it wash over me. Like staring straight into the depths of the fuzz of the TV screen, I listened, mesmerised. Unable to turn away. I started to not want to.

I couldn't handle the horror, at first. It wasn't just that it was too much for my senses, I was hearing things I didn't want to hear. Pain. Suffering. Agony. Privacy. That quickly became second nature. I moved from repulsion to desensitization in what seemed like a few minutes. I



The product recall

White noise was the sound of a winter snowstorm. On my old analogue TV it would even look the same, like cubic snowflakes drifting in endless gusts of wind. A gentle flutter of light pixels against an empty background. That's how it sounded too.

I hadn't seen the adverts. There had been an urgent product recall for the model of noise canceling headphones I'd purchased a few days ago. I'd been too distracted to keep-up with what was happening, and the advert had passed me by. I'd shut it all out. I cranked the volume of the playlist and lowered what the instructions had described as "earmounts" until they were level with their target. The smooth edges sat neatly on the flesh, forming a seal around my ears. I loosened my grip to allow the "cushioned ear protectors" to press against the sides of my head. The inward pressure was comforting in its firm hold on my cranium. I immediately felt I could move around quickly and the headphones wouldn't be displaced. I tested it. Jerking my head from side to side.

I had no idea about the urgent adverts and customer warnings. I'd so far not seen the recall emails and flurry of social media posts. The manufacturers were desperately trying to prevent their use. The "sophisticated noise canceling technology" designed to "push out all unwanted sound to leave only uninterrupted music" had been set-up in reverse. They were scared of what the consequences might be. The testing hadn't covered such an eventuality.

The old Money Club on the sea-front, once a sight of comedy shows and singing, had been treated to destruction. Put out of its misery perhaps. The mould eating away at its exterior had given it an organic feel in its later years. It was a sign that the wrecking ball would be on its way soon enough. And it was. A site of vibrant expectation and local memory downed in days. They'd hosted the top acts of the time, comedians, singers, variety performers, magicians, turns of all types. It was gone. The clapping an echo and the audience ghosts. As he thought of these slow changes he couldn't help but wonder what had been lost. Absorbed by nostalgia for a world he never properly occupied, a distracted shadow in the fret, his attention was redirected to his vibrating phone.

A month ago, persuaded by a younger member of his family, he'd had a video doorbell system fitted in his home. As he chose from the range of options, he knew that they'd pitched the package pricing in a way that led you to pick the more advanced version. In this case, the various packages were organised around the amount of coverage they provided. It was described as viewability and panorama in the descriptions.

The video doorbell was the centre piece yet these were more like full home surveillance systems. It was also networked to his phone. If any movement was picked-up by the sensitive sensors, and he would get a notification with footage of what was happening. The doorbell camera was mounted next to his front door and pointed down his short path to the street. It was no more than five or six steps to the footpath, with passers-by sometimes getting close enough to trigger



the camera. It may not always have been recording, but it was always watching, ready to take action.

As well as the doorbell his chosen security package arrived with three other cameras that were intended to secure the periphery of the house. He'd had these positioned to cover the front and back of the house and the side passageway that ran between him and his neighbour. A 360 degree view they had called it. Although he had decided against the option of having additional cameras inside his home, that just felt too intrusive. He'd rather look outwards, he'd reasoned with himself. The cameras allowed him to see what might be there, what might be about to happen. When he was out, he could see all around his home, keeping an eye on it, always, anywhere. What was better though was sitting on the inside with a view of what was out there.

A few times now, when he'd been out at work or walking, he'd seen a quick-moving blurred figure on the short recording that his camera had sent to him. He returned immediately to check everything was ok. And to also get to the comfort of being back inside.

Networked and automated, this was the future of home surveillance now. He found himself repeating the phrasing on the neat little boxes: "It's like you never leave your home." They were right. He could always be watching. What could harm him? He was totally secure. The company had been right, his home felt like a fortress now. Sitting in that security he wondered what was outside. The figures he'd seen, blurry and unidentifiable would still pass through the lens. He

hair free patch of scalp providing the perfect target.

Despite the jeopardy there was still the buzz of being seen. The rush of trending. All those eyes seeing the image. One meme mocked him directly. A middle aged gig goer joke. That brought him back to the ground. Visibility for Ki was a very bad thing.

Another image followed that last one. It was the back of his head again. This time on the train. Someone who'd seen the original gig picture had recognised his bald spot. That pattern in his hair stood out. Ki turned. Nothing obvious. Just people staring down at their phones. He looked forward again, noticing that two of the phones in front of him had the gig image on their screen. Another phone, held aloft by an arm protruding from the seat immediately in front of Ki, had a strange recreation of it. In this facsimile a group of people were reenacting the original image. One of them with a full head of hair had stuck a piece of paper onto his head. It was a crudely cut-out version of that bald spot.

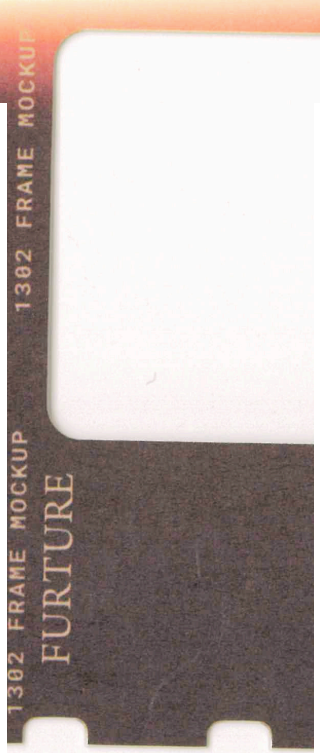
There was no chance they would have missed this.

He looked back at the recent photo of his head on the train. In the background of the picture you could see the small screen showing the train's current location and route it was taking. He decided to alight at the next stop.

As they pulled up, the platform was clear. Heeding the warnings he stepped nervously across the gap, keeping his eyes down to make sure to avoid an accident. The only one to make an exit, he was on the platform alone. The train pulling away concealed the sound. He didn't feel a thing. A single shot to the back of the head. The

tried to track their direction by switching between cameras. He couldn't work out what was out there. Perhaps nothing.

He would stay inside, watching, just in case. In the fortress. Secure enough, where he can see his surroundings. Where he is safe, where he can watch the immediate world. No need to leave. It's ok anyway, because fortunately the same company that provided the cameras also provides grocery deliveries to your door.



The swarm on the wall

Quite a milestone. The leather creaked as he settled back. He couldn't help the sense of satisfaction. Leaning to meet the glow of his laptop, he marked the day in his calendar. All those followers.

A preoccupation with the right type of content had grown in him, gathering people as he went. He tried to picture them. Not as individuals. As an anonymous crowd. A mass. On the front row he placed those who were most familiar. He knew their faces, voices, their email sign-offs. Beyond that, the crowd was a blur of faceless heads and shoulders. Sketchy, featureless, but intent.

Numbers like that are hard to imagine. Sports stadiums. He recalled once going to a football match with a similar attendance. It gave his imagination a reference point. Sports stadiums also needed heroes. As his mind wandered he pictured scoring a winning goal. Each post he typed was like that goal, he thought, as he brought himself back into the moment.

The TV was playing in the background. The early evening news. A technology segment. Recognising the primary coloured social media logos, he reached across to unmute. The report was of a "click farm." As the camera stretched slowly outwards, he saw a wall covered in mobile phones. And then another wall. A whole room. Hundreds of phones. Each rapidly flashing away, automatically clicking and moving on. Not a human in sight. A swarm of flickering devices. Each click was part of a pattern. The devices were pushing in

Back of the head

Ki was starting to sweat. The distinctively shaped bald patch on his crown had reached a sheen.

Placing a quivering index finger onto his phone screen, he knew instantly his error.

The train rattled, passing over the metal rail bridge, with each clatter the Wi-Fi rose and dropped. He watched the back of his own head moving and freezing.

He'd dodged a working day to go to the gig. Now the back of his head was everywhere. It had gone viral. Shared, repeatedly. Memes were made of it. Not his head so much as the image it was a part of. A big comeback gig that he shouldn't have been attending.

He'd pushed his way through the audience to the second or third row.

Everyone behind him, phones in hand, photographed, filmed and shared. The bald patch on his scalp, recognisable to anyone who knew him, was now part of musical history.

He'd been in hiding since the incident. Low key, underground. He'd been keeping his head down, as they say. As low as possible.

He waited for any clue that his pursuers might have seen the image. It was everywhere he looked. He had to assume that they'd seen it by now.

TV episode, as that might have provided a deterrence. The TV show's inventor's machine could hear trees screaming when they were damaged or cut down. The inventor in the show couldn't cope with the anguish he heard. Without that warning Smith too had inadvertently invented a machine that could hear files scream. When deleted they wailed in agony. Smith was only to discover this when, taking the chance to tidy his laptop, clicked to empty the recycle bin. It had been accumulating files for around a year and was piled high. The terror in that sound was something that Smith would never escape.

the same direction.

The reporter spoke hurriedly of the unknown scale of these click farms: directing, promoting, mimicking, imitating. As the camera roamed something caught his eye. He paused the TV and moved closer. His face almost touched the screen. At first it seemed too grainy to be sure. As he narrowed his stare the doubt drained.

His own profile picture illuminated one of the small screens at the centre of the wall. He pressed play and watched as the image flickered momentarily on one screen and then swarmed, in formation, across the other phones. It took only an instant. As the picture spread it disappeared as quickly. He played it back, watching the flocking of that familiar image as it moved and vanished. Squinting, he shook away the question that came to him.

Blue teeth

"Hello Sidney."

Interrupting his playlist, the growled voice arrived directly via his new wireless earphones.

He didn't respond. He'd been getting this type of prank phone call for decades. The joke had been hounding him since the late 1990s. Once the film *Scream* became popular, his name suddenly took on a new pertinence. The famous line from the film was repeated back to him on a fairly regular basis: "Hello Sidney." Sometimes on the phone, sometimes to his face. For a while, whenever he said his name was Sidney he would almost always hear the same response, delivered with varying levels of mimicry: "Hello Sidney." He would nod politely.

It happens less often now. The Scream franchise is still around, but has become much less prominent than it had been. It still tends to pop up around Halloween each year, bringing with it a slight increase in the frequency of the hello Sidneys. When he was greeted with that impression now, it was usually one of his old friends repeating the well-worn joke. It had become a trusty catchphrase for them.

He had to admit that on this particular occasion the impression was particularly accurate.

He waited for the inevitable laughter, it failed to arrive.

"Is that you Tom?"

File scream

Flicking through TV channels, Smith caught a few minutes of an old episode of a strange TV show. An inventor had created a device that allowed him to listen to the voices of trees. The inventor sat with his headphones in place, listening intently, taking in the surroundings and hearing, for the first time, the reaction of the plants.

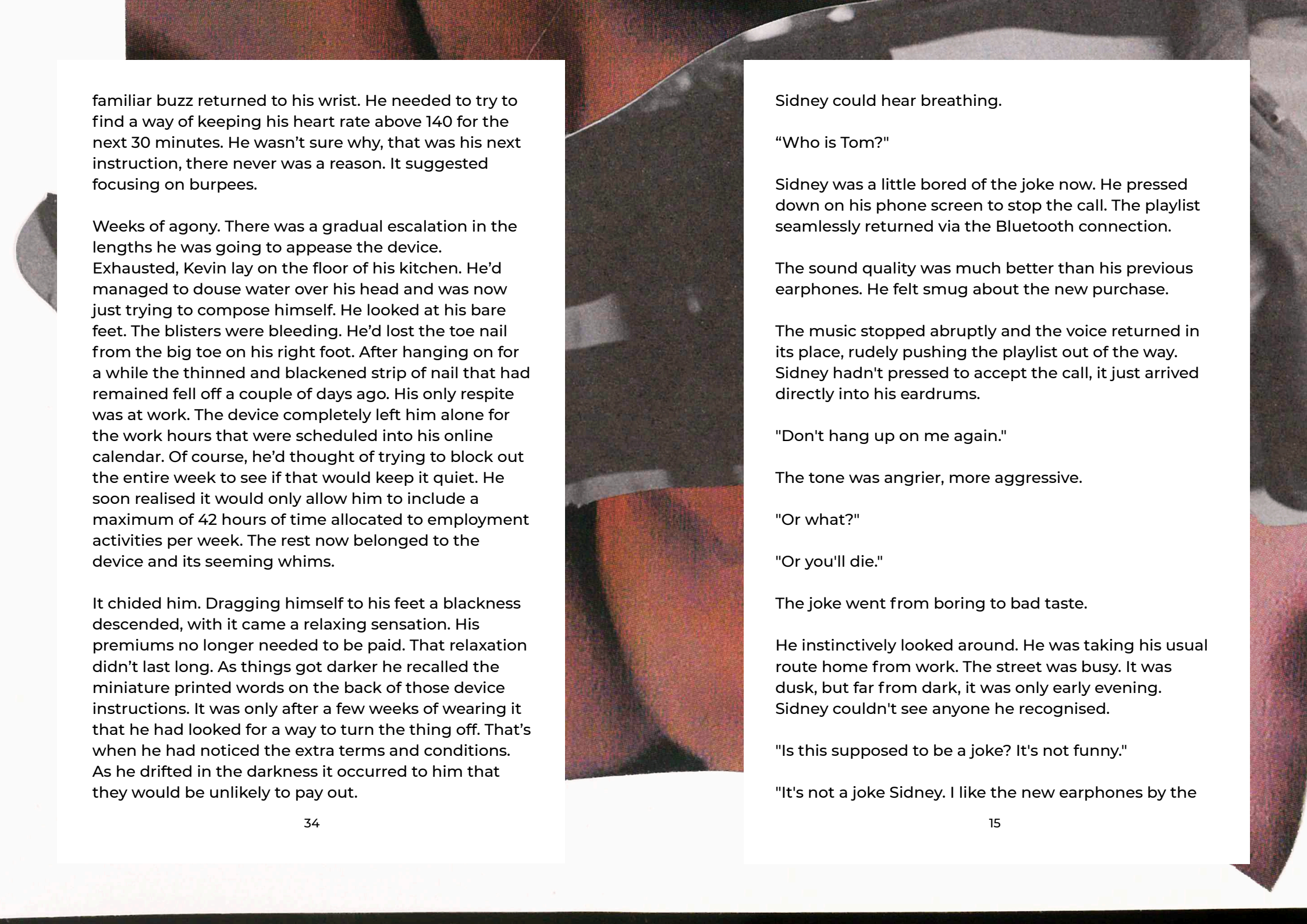
Smith switched off before the end of the show and began to wonder if the idea could be updated. Was there something new he could do.

Smith’s small workshop was full of bits of kit, gadgets, chips, batteries, wires, computer components and other detritus. Fiddling with the insides of a USB drive, Smith managed to connect the wires and clipped the casing into place. A small black box was on the partially cleared desk. At one end was a USB connector and at the other was a socket for headphones. The device was yet to be named.

When plugged into a laptop or any computer - he’d also included a facility for it to connect wirelessly too - the device enabled its user to hear the files. Smith’s device turned the actions of files into soundwaves. It gave them an audio presence, a type of voice.

Smith plugged in and sat listening to the files gently buzzing and whining. He would open files and listen as they chirped into action.

It was a shame that Smith hadn’t seen the end of the



familiar buzz returned to his wrist. He needed to try to find a way of keeping his heart rate above 140 for the next 30 minutes. He wasn't sure why, that was his next instruction, there never was a reason. It suggested focusing on burpees.

Weeks of agony. There was a gradual escalation in the lengths he was going to appease the device.
Exhausted, Kevin lay on the floor of his kitchen. He'd managed to douse water over his head and was now just trying to compose himself. He looked at his bare feet. The blisters were bleeding. He'd lost the toe nail from the big toe on his right foot. After hanging on for a while the thinned and blackened strip of nail that had remained fell off a couple of days ago. His only respite was at work. The device completely left him alone for the work hours that were scheduled into his online calendar. Of course, he'd thought of trying to block out the entire week to see if that would keep it quiet. He soon realised it would only allow him to include a maximum of 42 hours of time allocated to employment activities per week. The rest now belonged to the device and its seeming whims.

It chided him. Dragging himself to his feet a blackness descended, with it came a relaxing sensation. His premiums no longer needed to be paid. That relaxation didn't last long. As things got darker he recalled the miniature printed words on the back of those device instructions. It was only after a few weeks of wearing it that he had looked for a way to turn the thing off. That's when he had noticed the extra terms and conditions.
As he drifted in the darkness it occurred to him that they would be unlikely to pay out.

Sidney could hear breathing.

"Who is Tom?"

Sidney was a little bored of the joke now. He pressed down on his phone screen to stop the call. The playlist seamlessly returned via the Bluetooth connection.

The sound quality was much better than his previous earphones. He felt smug about the new purchase.

The music stopped abruptly and the voice returned in its place, rudely pushing the playlist out of the way. Sidney hadn't pressed to accept the call, it just arrived directly into his eardrums.

"Don't hang up on me again."

The tone was angrier, more aggressive.

"Or what?"

"Or you'll die."

The joke went from boring to bad taste.

He instinctively looked around. He was taking his usual route home from work. The street was busy. It was dusk, but far from dark, it was only early evening. Sidney couldn't see anyone he recognised.

"Is this supposed to be a joke? It's not funny."

"It's not a joke Sidney. I like the new earphones by the

way. And I see you are scuttling along George Street."

Sidney winced. These seemed like two quite strange and unsettling details. He stopped. A couple of pedestrians took sharp detours to avoid the blockage in the flow of homebound workers.

"Keep moving Sidney, you'll be late getting home."

An impertinent swagger had replaced the aggressive tone.

Sidney did start to walk again, more out of a desire to follow the crowd than to follow the order. He picked up his pace to try to remove himself from the increasingly upsetting circumstances he found himself in. He wanted to find safety.

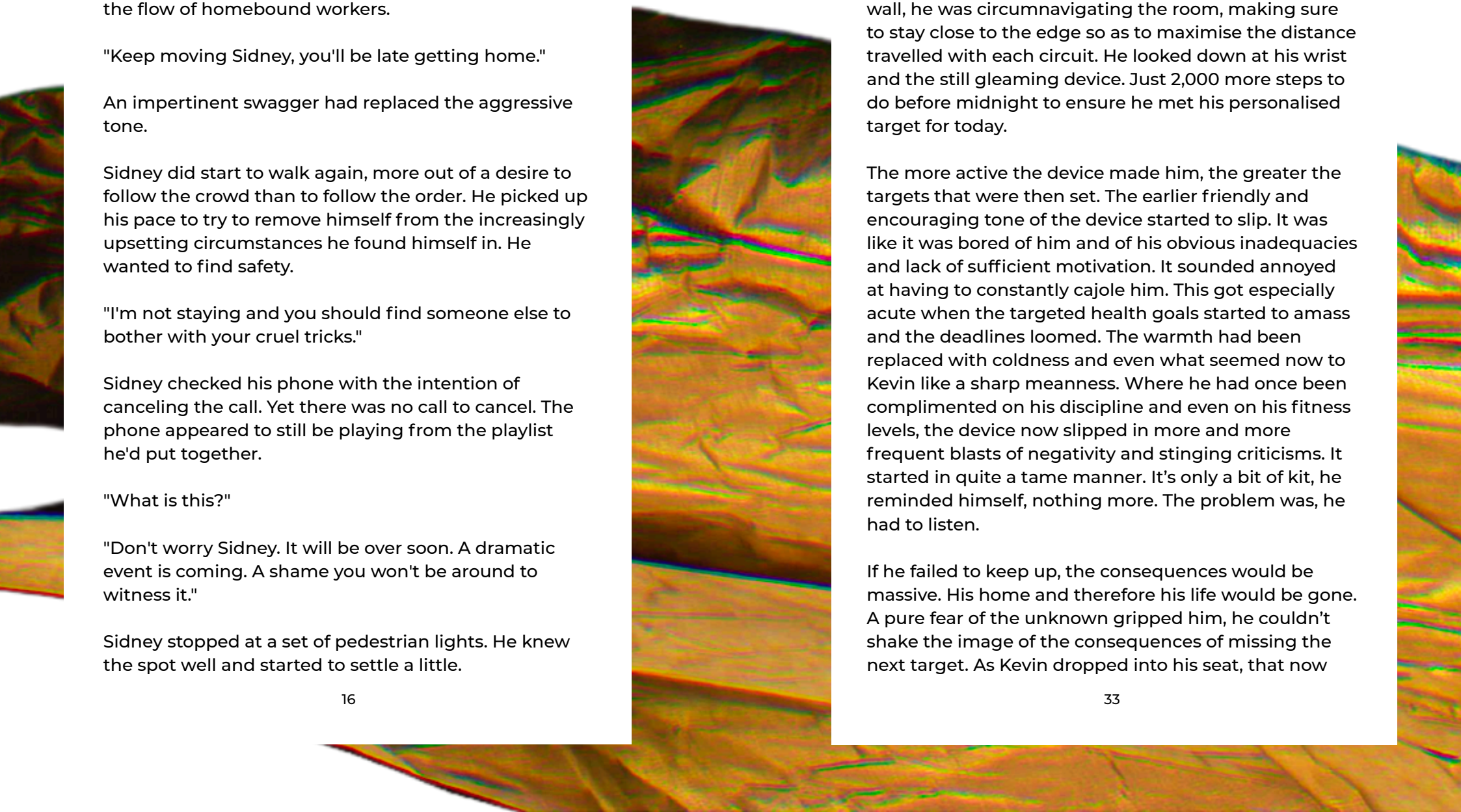
"I'm not staying and you should find someone else to bother with your cruel tricks."

Sidney checked his phone with the intention of canceling the call. Yet there was no call to cancel. The phone appeared to still be playing from the playlist he'd put together.

"What is this?"

"Don't worry Sidney. It will be over soon. A dramatic event is coming. A shame you won't be around to witness it."

Sidney stopped at a set of pedestrian lights. He knew the spot well and started to settle a little.



illuminated by the clock on the cooker. It read 23.28. It was far from the first time he'd passed the clock since darkness. It was actually the 86th time this evening. He knew because he was currently doing laps of his open-plan living space. Walking as closely as possible to the wall, he was circumnavigating the room, making sure to stay close to the edge so as to maximise the distance travelled with each circuit. He looked down at his wrist and the still gleaming device. Just 2,000 more steps to do before midnight to ensure he met his personalised target for today.

The more active the device made him, the greater the targets that were then set. The earlier friendly and encouraging tone of the device started to slip. It was like it was bored of him and of his obvious inadequacies and lack of sufficient motivation. It sounded annoyed at having to constantly cajole him. This got especially acute when the targeted health goals started to amass and the deadlines loomed. The warmth had been replaced with coldness and even what seemed now to Kevin like a sharp meanness. Where he had once been complimented on his discipline and even on his fitness levels, the device now slipped in more and more frequent blasts of negativity and stinging criticisms. It started in quite a tame manner. It's only a bit of kit, he reminded himself, nothing more. The problem was, he had to listen.

If he failed to keep up, the consequences would be massive. His home and therefore his life would be gone. A pure fear of the unknown gripped him, he couldn't shake the image of the consequences of missing the next target. As Kevin dropped into his seat, that now

was disappointing to Kevin as he knew that the label satisfactory always actually meant unsatisfactory — and then it set an itinerary for the rest of the day. Kevin slipped into some worn-out jogging trousers in preparation. The sense of being looked after felt surprisingly comforting. In terms of his welfare, the device would now share the burden whilst also saving him money.

He'd managed to keep up in the past, but with the targets increasing and a bit of boredom setting in, he had slipped in the last few days. It was the first time the red ExLoLi logo had appeared on the device. He didn't like it, it seemed a harsher shade of red than he had remembered. A warning sign rather than the previous scarlet glow. The notification message it carried told him that he had only 5 hours to achieve his personalised goals or to click to find out what he owed. To ensure it wasn't missed, it repeated the message in audio as well as text. A much colder voice scratched from the speakers. He knew that there would be some money to pay for the three years of discounted premiums. Not a massive amount but it was growing each month (actually, it turned out, they compounded it for each day). What he hadn't accounted for was the cost of the device. A five figure sum appeared before him. It already totalled more than the equity he had accumulated in the apartment. And that monthly premium discount meant that it was growing. The sharp intake of breath that followed triggered a warning from the device about managing his breathing and keeping it even.

As he walked through his kitchen, the tiled floor was

On hearing the familiar beeping of the pedestrian crossing Sidney stepped forward into the road. He took a big stride to get ahead of the masses, yet he was the only one in the crowd to do so. Sidney was also the only one who could hear the beeping. His new wireless earphones were imitating the pedestrian-crossing sound. The lights hadn't changed and the traffic continued to speed through the junction. Sidney walked directly into the oncoming vehicles. He knew little of the contact that followed.

Thrown sideways by the impact, the earphones glowed a gentle blue by the roadside. In one smooth movement a passer-by crouched and silently scooped them up in his hand. He gripped them tightly and wandered casually down a nearby alley.

A sideways glance

It wasn't the first case she'd seen this week, it wasn't even the first case she'd seen that day. Professor Markham had spent nearly 40 years researching the biochemistry and physiology of eyes. It was a distinguished career in which she had managed to make a series of breakthroughs in eye health. Now this. The type of blockage she had long feared would one day come. Markham didn't like unknowns, she didn't even like uncertainties. That was what had driven her so far and why she was still going – she'd been asked more than once why she hadn't yet retired. This was not the way she wanted to end things.

It was only in the last five years that Professor Markham had seen any cases like this. It started with an occasional case, around one a month referred to her, and then it just kept increasing. Her background and stellar track record meant that she was sought-out as the confusion and desperation for answers grew. Referrals to Markham allowed flummoxed practitioners to give some hope.

That was how it had started, now these patients were being referred to her from across the country. There were more incidents being reported each day. A year ago there were enough cases for Markham to make the decision to create a dedicated unit for what they were now calling vertical eye. She was leading a small group of experts looking at this new phenomenon. They were making little progress so far. They had theories, but Markham wasn't too keen on theories, especially if they came in multiples.

would automatically activate it. It would then connect to the network and the deal would be confirmed. It would also immediately start its haptic data gathering.

The instructions were written in a pithy and informative way, whilst retaining that casual and informal tone that accompanies technology. Snippets of technical details were embellished with encouraging slogans and little slang style phrases, and then there was the occasional inviting promise of what life will become in the near future.

Part of the reason for the pithiness of the instructions was the apparent simplicity and intuitiveness of the interface. There were no buttons to work out. A sleek exterior, black and shiny. Its inconspicuousness was almost pleasurable. The sheer simplicity was on the verge of making it so invisible that it was eye-catching. There was no need to have the inconvenience of charging this device either. The instructions explained that body movement alone would be enough to keep it charged with kinetic energy. The device would work in perpetuity. His own activity would ensure that. And so it would capture a constant and unending flow of information about the wearer and would provide never-ending guidance on how to optimise health and wellbeing.

Kevin slipped the device onto his wrist. It gently buzzed as it came to life. The screen flickered with that red ExLoLi logo for a few seconds, and then it began. It introduced itself to Kevin and he found himself smiling and responding. It started its initial analysis of his bodily signs. It described them as satisfactory — which

Curiosity grew and he put his concerns aside. The box lid slid off, gliding with just a small amount of resistance, and inside was a neatly arranged installation of cardboard segments. At its center, nursed in a small pocket of foam, was a device. Next to it, a small piece of paper. Activate me and your life insurance premiums will be halved. Like his privacy he was careful with money, so that was the deal that would finally convince him.

As he looked more closely and spotted another sheet of printed card, sliding it away from the packaging, he discovered that there were three aspects to the deal in front of him. The device would set personalised goals based upon his data, they would be geared towards his needs, it told him, enhancing his health, wellbeing and life expectancy. The result would be a fuller longer life, they described it as. The other two aspects were financial but non-specific. The device would keep up with his performance, if he didn't keep active he would need to repay the insurance premium discount he had been given – paying it back retrospectively for all of the months that the discount had been received for. The other payment would be for the free device. It would only have to be paid for when activity levels were deemed insufficient. So, keep fit and healthy and it would save him a lot of money, especially as he was only just turning thirty and he planned to live for quite some time. The savings would be massive. And he wouldn't mind being more active and healthier anyway, he just needed some motivation.

To accept the deal all he had to do was put the device on his wrist, the flow of data from the wearer's body

It had been getting to her, the not knowing. It was an unusual feeling for Markham. Confidence had been a trademark, along with her proven successes it was part of why she was so trusted. There was something close to a breakthrough, for some reason it gave little relief to that nagging concern. One theory was now building some momentum. The small research group had a feeling that they knew what might be happening. But how could Markham prove it. And why were so many people being afflicted. They had long ago ruled out anything contagious. The people presented to her were socially and geographically disconnected. The epidemiologists had been called in to confirm their findings, one had even stayed on to be sure. There was no way that this was passing from person to person. This left lots of questions, too many. If all of this was true, which they were now completely sure it was, then how could there be such a dramatic increase in cases over that five years or so.

The stress of the situation was wearing. A distraction was needed. As she now found herself doing more often, Markham was absentmindedly holding her phone, thumb active, scrolling through her feed. Images and comments rattled by, often so fast as to be one long blur. It was undoubtedly a distraction from the growing sense of failure, she was aware of that. She knew that it wasn't really a failure, but it was that sense of infallibility that had been behind her rise, she wanted to maintain it. She didn't want to lose it now. So instead of dwelling she escaped into her feed. Then one of those moments came, one of those moments when you think about something else and a solution comes to mind. Well, not so much a solution, a cause. The

solution would hopefully follow that.

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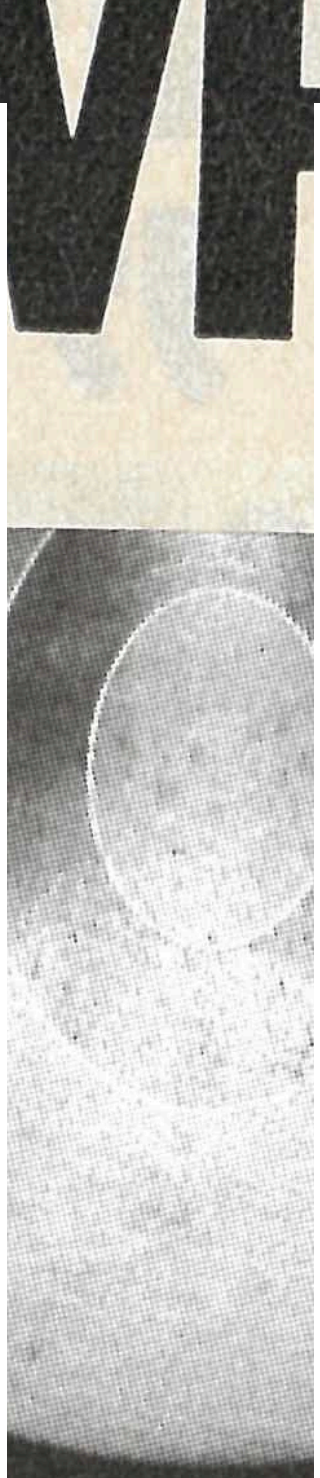
What to do. Chris had been working in different jobs for the last few years. In fact, he'd been working a combination of jobs at the same time. He couldn't be bothered to think about it, and he never wanted to explain it to anyone. He knew what was going on. He was a victim of capitalism and of a particular political economy. His story was the story of something broader, he'd read the books and he understood exactly the context of his toils.

Chris was sick of hearing the terms that tried to capture his working life. He saw them all over social media, frequently. People shared stories widely with those terms — "the gig economy," "zero hours contracts" — emblazoned across the headline or strapline. He never ever clicked through. What was the point. He knew more about it than the articles would. He always noticed the headlines though. As he scrolled his eyes would be drawn to those words. So he knew they were there, often repeated but infrequently understood. Anyway, he'd seen some estimates about people sharing stories that they had never actually read, so he was under no misapprehension about what he was seeing going on.

He went back to waiting. The app for the food delivery company he was working for was open in the background on his phone. It meant that they had his location and he was registered as being live and ready to make a pick-up and drop-off. He leant against his



It was around a month since he had created the account with ExLoLi. He found them on one of those price aggregator sites. He didn't even need to add any details. He just put his name and postcode into the site, the rest was automatic. It was that type of smooth automation that makes you feel like you are being looked after. The equivalent of an understanding nod from a concierge, that sort of feeling. He presumed the aggregator was using credit score data and whatever else was available to align him with the most appropriate insurance company. It was a connection built on trust.

He was currently purchasing the apartment that he was already renting, he now needed life insurance because of the new mortgage. He really didn't want to think too much about it, so the automated selection that came back from the site was fine by him. The price seemed fine too, so he clicked and the rest just happened. He got a letter a couple of days later – which felt quite antiquated and slow compared to how the processes started. A letter in this day and age. And now a parcel too.

Kevin wasn't what you might think of as a gadget-minded person. He used tech whilst remaining quite wary of it. He didn't like working out new things, it was tiresome and disruptive, and he had to admit to being concerned about privacy. He kept his slatted blinds that covered his windows at least partly closed at all times, he wasn't keen on being seen. He thought of himself as being quite careful in that regard. Quite security minded.

Life unsure

It was an unremarkable box. Bland but somehow stylish in its carefully engineered blankness. Brown cardboard, slightly smaller than a shoebox. It had been on his kitchen table for a couple of hours. Kevin was staring at the box. He wasn't sure why he was hesitating. It was just a box.

Earlier there had been an unexpected knock at the door earlier in the day. It had been left on the doorstep. There was no address on it. That was one thing. Also, he knew that he hadn't ordered anything. So how had it ended up here? As he looked closer, he became more confident that it had reached its correct destination. His second inspection had revealed a tiny red logo embossed into one corner of the box lid. It was small – a self-conscious exercise in minimalism. He recognised the small red marking, it just took him a little while to remember from where.

Digging through an old box folder he pulled out a letter from his life insurance company Extra Longevity Life, or ExLoLi as it was abbreviated in the advert he had seen. The letter he held in his hand was printed on brown paper and carried that small red logo on the header. Kevin had to admire the brand consistency. This was it, a match. What Kevin couldn't then work out was why they had sent him a box. Picking it up, it felt almost empty. It had the approximate mass of the cardboard that constituted it. Perhaps it was empty, he considered. Given its corporate neatness and bland exterior, why did he feel so much trepidation in opening it?

bike adopting a well-rehearsed repose. He'd found a good spot to wait in too, one that helped his chances of getting the next job. It was this sort of work he had been doing for a while now. It meant a lot of waiting around. In front of the food delivery app, he'd now become accustomed to spending the time spread across three or sometimes four social media platforms. He darted between them, keeping all three or four plates spinning at once. Sometimes with active interactions being maintained on all of them. That became a sort of game. He found that it passed the time if he had to try to hold more than one interaction in his head at a time. The test he set himself was to see how smoothly he could move between them. Avoiding hesitation and repetition had become almost like a test. In his head he pictured the three or four feeds at the same time, accessing them in turn on his phone.

He scrolled and scrolled. Watching the feed intently, knowing that his phone would beep loudly when his next food delivery came in. Several hours a day would be spent like this, with pauses to visit the restaurant, to deliver the food to whichever house had ordered it and then to get back to this familiar waiting spot. Something was a little different today though.

Leaving the multiple feeds as the delivery app beeped, something wasn't quite right. On his last delivery he had lightly struggled to stay in the bike lane. It was unusual for him. It was nothing noticeable to anyone watching, that didn't stop it from worrying him. The daily use of the bike in his work meant that it was almost an extension of his body. He could manoeuvre it around almost anything at any speed. On another

delivery, he knew he had gotten too close to a bus, his balance a little out. And then, there had been that moment when the pedestrian seemed to appear from nowhere. His well-maintained breaks avoided a near collision.

Now as he stood leaning back on his bike, things got suddenly worse. Working through his social media feeds he became more aware, somehow, of the up and down movement of his eyes. He turned away from his phone, the eye movement didn't stop. Lines of colour filled his vision. Flickering along the vertical, he couldn't stop his eyes or even slow them. The feed was no longer in view but his eyes continued to track up and down as if it were still there. It was like they were locked in that motion. The groove of reading the feed couldn't be stopped. Up, down, continuously. And fast too. He felt himself becoming giddy. Fade to black.

xxxxx

"Who is this?" Markham asked.

"Chis Lawns," came the answer from her assistant.

"Hello Mr Lawns."

Markham returned her stare to her assistant. "What does he do for a living?"

"A take-away food delivery cyclist," he added. "He was found yesterday, having collapsed on a path near the city centre. The usual symptoms."

A year later. The 26th of August again. Recirculated by the app, that bland image of the beach. After a slight hesitation, tentatively, I started with a non-committal emoji. Then by repeating a yarn from last year's tales. A warm response. I added something new. As I fabricated bits of a story others joined in, tying the threads and filling the gaps.

Then came the next image. A photo of me by the arches of Malta airport. I zoomed into the photo, as close as it would allow, looking at the edges of my hair for a sign of superimposition. I just couldn't be sure.

A stock-image bank. I downloaded a photo. A river side. An ice-cream vendor. Old-looking brickwork on the left hand edge. The background full of blooming wild flowers and a classic car filling a small gap in the hedgerow. Four people crammed onto a riverside bench, silhouetted by the setting sun.

I thought for a moment, then tagged some people to it and posted the image. Four people would work: myself and three others on the bench and another taking the photo. The message I added was something to do with me having just received a notification of this memory. A trip to Holland four years ago. A slightly nervous wait. It took a few minutes, then the likes and messages started to bubble.

You have a memory

This is what boredom feels like. It was the fourth time I'd watched *Total Recall*. I hit pause, Schwarzenegger frozen in time, to check the notification that had buzzed on my phone. You have a memory, the app told me.

It was both strange and a cliché. A picture of an anonymous sunny place. A glistening sea, a sandy beach, visibly hot. An arching light put the closely huddled figures into shadow.

My feed was telling me that I was there with them, two years ago to this day. But I'd never been to Malta. I didn't even go on holiday that August. Not that I could remember.

A blur of activity followed. These weren't social media bots. I'd seen two of them yesterday. A prank maybe? I couldn't immediately dismiss it. Yet at least one of these people hated pranks. Anyway, the coordination would have taken too much effort. And then there was the very natural flow of interactions racing across my feed.

As I began to voice my confusion etiquette pushed my finger on the delete key. The comments continued. If I claimed not to remember it would come wrapped with two insults. I would be questioning their sincerity. Or it would sound like the trip was so forgettable that I had no recollection of it. I held back, letting the reminiscence continue.

Markham started the examination. Lawns was conscious, just, and seemed resigned. Perhaps someone had already told him the prognosis or maybe he had overheard some conversation or other with another of the research subjects. Markham didn't like to wait around or engage in any unnecessary pleasantries. Slowly she explained to Lawns what had happened. She tried to give eye contact as she spoke to him. It was impossible though, the pupils of his eyes were dancing up and down far too rapidly. Instead she just looked directly at the middle of his eyes, where she imagined the pupils might be under more normal circumstances.

Markham explained to him what he was experiencing. Speaking steadily, in case he hadn't understood what was happening to him, she slowly explained to Lawns the two stages that patients with cases of what they were now calling vertical eye or sometimes up-down-eye would typically go through. Their research had repeatedly shown the patients first go through the stage that Lawns was currently experiencing, acute verticality they had labelled it, with the eyes moving rapidly up and down. They are trapped in this motion by a kind of muscle spasm. Repeated movement, they had found, caused the eye to lock in to the action due to the muscles becoming impossible to control. She tried to talk softly when she explained that so far the condition could not be cured. For the first two years patients had been stuck in that first stage. However, she informed Lawns, her team had developed a treatment that you can take to help to relax the eye muscles. When combined with some eye exercises, this treatment reduces the impact and significantly slows

the up-down movement of the eye. It does not remove it, but it does mean that you regain your visibility. She found herself softening her voice again as she explained that so far they had not been able to find a way for patients to regain horizontal eye movements. And so, those with the condition could not look sideways. They hadn't found a way out of this second sage.

Lawns looked particularly upset at this news. She was used to seeing upset, but this was a different level. Lawns looked devastated. She wasn't sure why he would be more inconsolable than others. He genuinely shook with fear at what confronted him. For some reason, on this occasion, and because of the strength of the reaction, Markham found herself trying to offer a morsel to ease things for Lawns. It felt hollow as she reflected on it afterwards. As comfort, she had informed him that following treatment patients found that because of the verticality of its form and because there was little need to glance outwards or to the side, patients had found that they had retained full use of social media. Maintaining the treatment would ensure this possibility, she had explained to a horrified looking Lawns.

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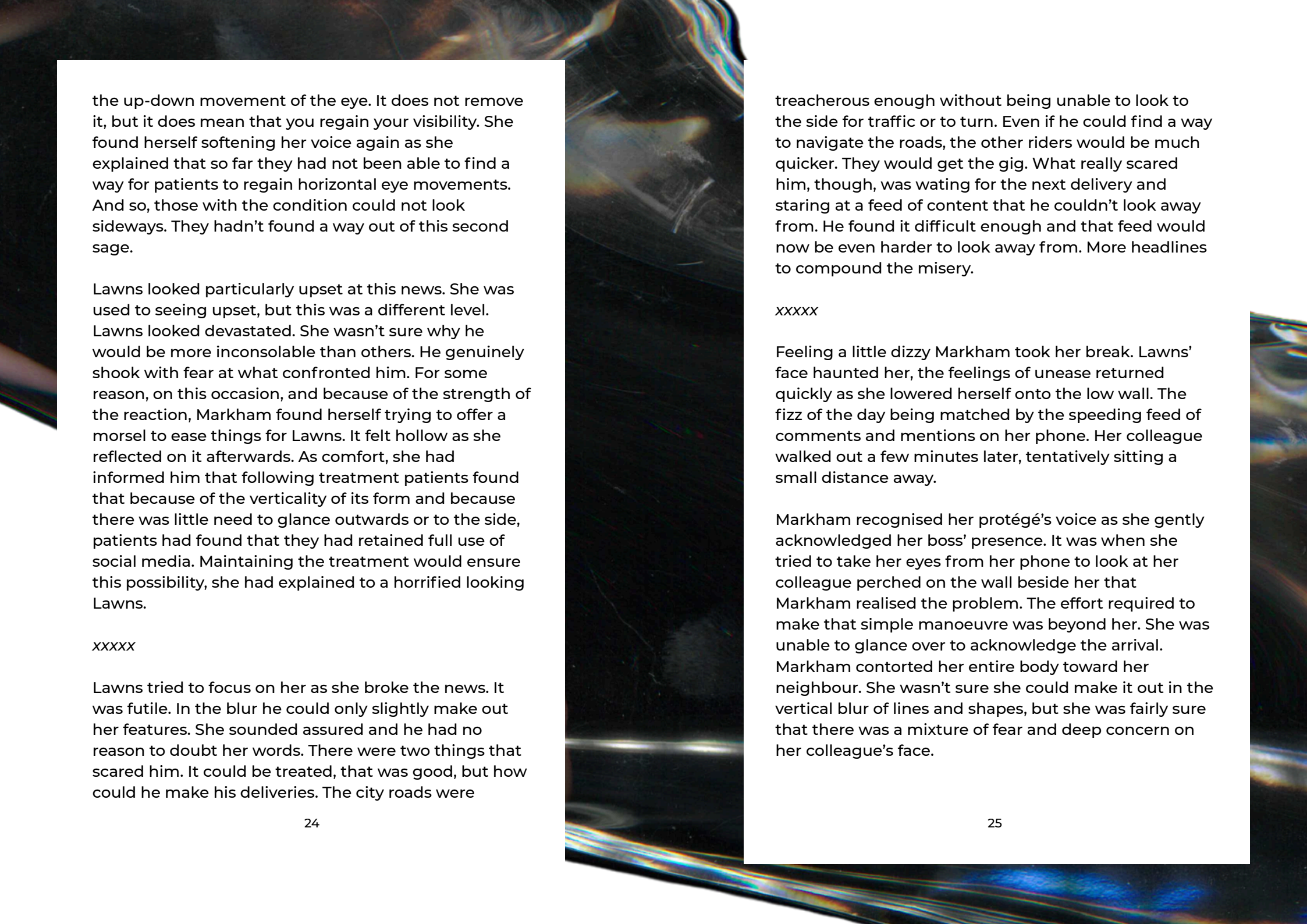
Lawns tried to focus on her as she broke the news. It was futile. In the blur he could only slightly make out her features. She sounded assured and he had no reason to doubt her words. There were two things that scared him. It could be treated, that was good, but how could he make his deliveries. The city roads were



treacherous enough without being unable to look to the side for traffic or to turn. Even if he could find a way to navigate the roads, the other riders would be much quicker. They would get the gig. What really scared him, though, was wating for the next delivery and staring at a feed of content that he couldn't look away from. He found it difficult enough and that feed would now be even harder to look away from. More headlines to compound the misery.

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Feeling a little dizzy Markham took her break. Lawns' face haunted her, the feelings of unease returned quickly as she lowered herself onto the low wall. The fizz of the day being matched by the speeding feed of comments and mentions on her phone. Her colleague walked out a few minutes later, tentatively sitting a small distance away.

Markham recognised her protégé's voice as she gently acknowledged her boss' presence. It was when she tried to take her eyes from her phone to look at her colleague perched on the wall beside her that Markham realised the problem. The effort required to make that simple manoeuvre was beyond her. She was unable to glance over to acknowledge the arrival. Markham contorted her entire body toward her neighbour. She wasn't sure she could make it out in the vertical blur of lines and shapes, but she was fairly sure that there was a mixture of fear and deep concern on her colleague's face.