

THE ANTHROPOCENE CHRONICLES

Saranne Bensusan
Emma Pullar
Carmen Radtke
Rachael Howard
Nick Jackson
Fiona Leitch



DO
your bit!

 A Civil Compliance Message

From the 3rd Story Productions Ltd
20-22 Wenlock Road
London
N1 7GU

www.fromthe3rdstoryproductions.co.uk

First published in the United Kingdom by
From the 3rd Story Productions Ltd 2017

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Fiona Leitch, Rachael Howard, Nick Jackson and
Emma Pullar 2017

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Publisher's Foreword by Lawrence Mallinson

What is "The Anthropocene Chronicles"? For me as a publisher it has not just been a collection of Sci-Fi stories set in a dystopian future, but a project allowing me to work with and some wonderfully talented authors that have each worked hard to enrich and develop the world and characters that you will read about throughout this book.

Each writer has something unique to bring to the collection and if you aren't familiar with their work then you are in for a treat and having read these stories I am flattered to be able to get to be a part of them in some way, by bringing them to you.

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CHRONICLES
FREE SAMPLE - NOT FOR RESALE

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Introduction

Hominids of the Genus Homo evolved during the Pleistocene epoch (between 2,588,000 to 11,700 years ago). There were several species of hominids during this time, and we, Homo sapiens, briefly shared time with Homo erectus (1.9 million – 143,000 years ago), and Homo neanderthalensis (100,000 – 25,000 years ago). Only one species of the genus Homo survived into the Holocene epoch 11,700 years ago. Us. Homo sapiens (190,000 years ago – present).

The Anthropocene is the geological epoch that follows on from the Holocene. It is thought that the Anthropocene started in the industrial revolution, with the onset on burning fossil fuels on an industrial scale, causing which is thought to be the start of man-made climate change. This is evidenced by atmospheric concentrations of CO₂ (Carbon Dioxide) and CH₄ (Methane) accumulating faster than normal. This was followed in the mid-20th Century with testing and use of nuclear weapons, and the introduction of the wide use of plastics. These plastics are already in the oceans, and will form part of the geological record in millions of years time. It will be one of the geological markers for the Anthropocene. Other geological markers will be nuclear isotopes from the decay of nuclear weapons and energy use, and concrete from the construction industry. Humans have also had a major impact on the species we share our planet with, and species are now becoming extinct at a rate of 20-100 times faster than normal because of human activity. It is now thought that we have entered Earth's 6th mass extinction.

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The Anthropocene Chronicles

In the year 2160 there are 12 billion people on Earth. Humans have made a devastating impact on the planet, and following The Change, resources have become rationed and strict regimes have been implemented to keep the population healthy and minimise waste.

The Subcommittee on Quaternary Stratigraphy confirmed that the earth had entered into a new geological epoch, moving from the Holocene to the Anthropocene, following major scientific debate and evidence that human activity has impacted upon the climate and environment of the planet in a significant and lasting way, making a permanent mark in the geological record.

All human life is now managed by the 'state', a computerised A.I. system which controls the lives of everyone to maximise productivity and safety, and minimise further human devastation on the planet, and provides one-to-one supervision and assistance to humans in the form of A.I. Units, varying from Cube devices to various robots for the better off. There is no crime as we know it today.

Animal farms have been eliminated as a measure of protecting the environment from further damage, and the entire human population is now vegan. To ensure global productivity, citizens from poorer backgrounds must work continuously underground without seeing the light of day, whilst the far fewer

elite enjoy freedom and liberty above ground, with fresh air, sunlight, and time to pursue hobbies and dreams and have pets.

The below ground citizens are unaware that there is another possible life, and those above ground are unaware that all they have is at the expense of others underground.

These are a few of their stories.

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SCHEDULED

Written by Saranne Bensusan

Emilie lives on her own in a small one-roomed apartment with no windows. It is little more than a 1980's style box room if you are old enough to remember those, and hundreds of apartments like these are crammed into a 194 floor underground building to maximise the number of residents who can live there. And there are hundreds of buildings like this. As a result, everything feels cramped. There are no communal eating or socialising areas, and therefore no real opportunities for people to make friends. It is a lonely existence. The building is designed for workers, and to keep the workers as efficient as possible. Many millions of people live like this below ground because this is all they have known. Emilie has grown up being told that everybody lives underground because the earth's surface has become uninhabitable due to nuclear fallout. She has never questioned the monotonous existence as a worker of the lowest class and accepts her lot without question, believing that this is just the way the world works. She has no idea that there are other levels of existence and assumes that everyone is just like her. She has never thought about other possibilities or ambitions outside of her own life.

Everything in Emilie's apartment is clean and white, and simplistic in design. There is a tall daylight lamp in the corner that pops on in the morning to give the illusion of sunlight. Everything she needs for living is in the one room. She has a small cubicle for the shower and toilet. Her bed is small and in the corner of her room and there is a small area in another corner where she can prepare hot drinks and warm up food; and she has a small closet with seven days worth

of work clothes, some gym clothes and sleeping jumpsuits, all of which are white. There are two pairs of shoes. One for the gym and the other for work. There are no other clothes or shoes.

Her apartment is minimalistic and technology based with no room to 'collect' belongings or nik naks. There are no books or ornaments, but there is a photo frame with pictures of family members, a docking station for mobile devices and a square digital device in the room, which is Emilie's personal assistant Gina. Gina is part of an intricate structure of interconnecting AI devices connected to a central hive mind; a singular AI that is connected to every human being through the technology they have in their own homes. The entire human population is controlled by AI. The personal assistants are there to ensure that people are supervised and that they stick to their schedules and don't break the rules.

Emilie is woken up by Gina at precisely 6am in a calm, slow, gentle voice. "GOOD MORNING EMILIE. IT IS 6AM. IT IS TIME FOR YOU TO GET UP". The tall lamp pops on, bathing Emilie's small apartment in warm sunlight.

Gina shows Emilie's digital seven-day schedule in the form of a holographic display.

Emilie sits up slowly.

It can't be morning already. I feel like I only just shut my eyes.

Emilie feels burnt out and is in need of a holiday, but holidays are a thing of the distant past. This is a time for work and industry, and she needs to play her

part. So she forces herself out of bed despite how tired she is feeling.

She is wearing a white jumpsuit, which is part of the uniform clothing that people are allowed to wear. Her kettle pops on automatically and she wanders over to make herself a coffee and to grab a pre-prepped bagel from the small fridge. All of the food in the fridge is pre-prepped. There are no random snacks or drinks, or little edible luxuries to make her feel better. Food in this part of the world is rationed, and employees like Emilie are on a strict ration diet. She takes her cup and bagel, and looks at her schedule.

It shows that there are no days off and that she is to work seven days a week, and every day is the same.

Gina expands today's schedule, but Emilie is still able to see the rest of her week. It is Monday March 17.

Gina continues her reminders. "YOU MUST GET READY FOR YOUR MANDATORY GYM SESSION AT 6.30AM, OR THERE WILL BE A PENALTY"

"Thank you Gina" Emilie says, as she looks at her schedule and thinks that what she really needs is a day off. She isn't going to get that though. It looks like the following:

- 06:00 - wake up call, breakfast
- 06:30 - mandatory gym session
- 07:00 - shower and dress for work
- 07:30 - leave for work
- 08:00 - work until 18:00
- 13:00 - lunch
- 19:00 - dinner time

20:00 - virtual reality time

Every day of the week is exactly the same, with no breaks or changes except Tuesday night, where she has a 'date' scheduled in for 8pm, and 'virtual reality time' has been rescheduled for 10pm.

"DID YOU KNOW THAT TODAY USED TO BE CELEBRATED AT ST PATRICK'S DAY?" says Gina.

"No, I didn't!" Emilie replies as she heads to her closet for her gym clothes. "What is that?"

Emilie opens the small closet and grabs her gym kit, and then goes into the small bathroom to get changed whilst Gina continues.

"IT WAS A CHRISTIAN FEAST TO CELEBRATE ST PATRICK AND THE ARRIVAL OF CHRISTIANITY IN IRELAND." Gina says. She displays images of Ireland, Christian symbols, and images of people celebrating St Patrick's Day in the 21st Century, dressed in funky green hats and drinking lots of black liquid in glasses with 'Guinness' written on them. Emilie comes out of the bathroom and has a look at the images.

"Wow. I wonder what it would have been like to live back then. All that fresh air and sunshine. And Guinness too! I wonder what that's like" she says wistfully as she brushes her hair. She ties it up into a scruffy knot. Gina closes down the images quickly as if to end the topic of conversation.

Emilie heads to the door. She puts her palm onto a plate and the door opens onto a corridor that looks like a hotel corridor, except that it is cleaner and more clinical. She exits her small apartment and the door closes behind her.

She walks towards the elevator and goes down 15 floors further underground. She arrives at the gym level and is greeted by a sign when the elevator doors open.

“GYM LEVEL. PLEASE CHECK IN BEFORE USING THE EQUIPMENT”

She heads towards another tablet on a wall outside another door. She puts her hand on it as before and checks in. It is Gina again.

“HELLO EMILIE! YOUR TARGET FOR THIS SESSION IS 500 CALORIES. YOUR SESSION WILL BE MONITORED.”

“Thanks Gina” Emilie replies. The door opens and Emilie enters and she walks over to the treadmill for a run.

There are holographic propaganda slogans being displayed at the gym saying ‘DO YOUR BIT FOR THE HEALTH SERVICE! KEEP IN SHAPE’. There are holographic projections of videos showing very obese people needing nurses to wipe their bums and needing oxygen tanks to breathe from; along with articles about how overweight people are a drain on the health services as all health conditions are obesity related.

She gets on the treadmill, pushes a few buttons and sets off at a comfortable jog. Moments later though, she hears a commotion at the door and looks over and sees a man shouting at the door plate.

“YOU HAVEN’T ACHIEVED YOUR TARGET TODAY. YOU NEED TO GO BACK AND CARRY ON EXERCISING” said a man’s cool computerised voice.

“But I’ve been exercising for 30 minutes like I’m supposed to. I need to get ready for work now!” the

man shouts. He is irate, red in the face and sweaty from exercise.

“I’M SORRY. IF YOU LEAVE NOW YOU WILL FACE A PENALTY FINE” says the cool voice.

“Look, I need to get ready for work. If I miss work the penalty will be a lot bigger than missing the gym won’t it?” He replies, annoyed.

“YOUR PENALTY FOR NOT ACHIEVING YOUR TARGET IS A SECOND GYM SESSION THIS EVENING AT 8PM. I WILL RE-ARRANGE YOUR SCHEDULE TO FIT THAT IN”

“Well fuck you very much” says the man. He puts his sweaty palm to the door and it opens. He leaves. Emilie pushes a few more buttons on the treadmill and picks up the pace of her run. She doesn’t want to be the person who hasn’t worked hard enough on her gym session.

Emilie comes back from the gym 30 minutes later and has a shower. The water is always cold, but Emilie takes it in her stride as this is all she has known. She has never experienced the pleasure of a hot shower, and showers quickly. With a towel wrapped around her, she puts her dirty gym clothes into a chute and heads to her wardrobe to get out her work clothes. There are seven sets of hangers with identical outfits on them. All of her work clothes in her wardrobe are identical, so she wears the same boring trouser and shirt outfit each day. She grabs the first hanger in the wardrobe. It would be nice to be able to wear a dress she thinks. I’ve worked hard at the gym and my body is in great shape. But Emilie knows that she hasn’t earned enough merits for luxury items such as

summer dresses and gets dressed as normal. She grabs her work shoes and puts them on.

Emilie is dressed as neat as a pin and has her hair up in a bun. She checks herself in the mirror one last time before leaving for work, and picks up the photo of her family and puts it into her bag. She puts her palm onto the plate at the door and the door opens as before. She heads to the elevator again at a brisk pace and the doors ping open as she arrives. This time she goes upwards to the 5th underground level and comes out at a travelator station. She steps out into a busy area and moves with the fast-moving crowds towards the travelators. These look like airport travelators where people can get on and off. These carry a much larger volume of people than traditional train carriages, and the travelators are packed. Everybody is wearing the same outfit, both men and women. Everyone is in a hurry.

During Emilie's journey, she sees more public service announcements saying

'DO YOUR BIT FOR THE ECONOMY! GET A JOB!' It shows lots of businesses looking for employees in bright airy offices. There are also videos being played on holographic screens with people saying that those that don't work are a drain on society and cost other people their earned food rations and other privileges.

I've already got a fucking job Emilie thinks to herself. Along with everyone else here travelling to work. Who are they aiming the advertising at?

Emilie gets off the travelator and walks at a fast pace towards the elevators, and pushes the button frantically as if pushing it several times in quick

succession will hurry it up. The elevator arrives after a few moments, and Emilie gets in. It takes her down 14 floors to her office.

Emilie arrives at the offices where she works precisely on time. She works at a busy call centre handling complaints for a conglomerate of delivery companies. She gets out of the elevator and exchanges pleasantries with the receptionist as she passes and goes straight to her desk. She sits at a desk with a screen and a mobile phone slot. Everything is clean and white. There is no clutter at her desk, except the photo of family members that she gets out of her bag and puts onto her table. She puts her mobile phone in and a holographic keyboard is projected down on to the multipurpose work surface. Her desk phone rings at precisely 8am. She answers immediately and efficiently.

“Good morning, MST Holdings. Emilie speaking how may I help you today?” She logs onto her computer using the holographic keyboard. Whilst she is typing, a supervisor comes around to inspect her work and her work area.

“No personalisation is allowed” he says whilst she is talking to a customer on the phone. He points to her photo. She quickly grabs it and puts it back in her bag.

“Sorry. Thank you for reminding me” she says.

“I will have to log this one as this is the second time you have needed verbal correction on personalisation. You may get a fine. Your personal assistant will inform you of any penalty” he says. He touches his pad a couple of times as if to log something and then walks off to the next desk. Emilie watches him leave and then looks at the photo in her

bag and re-adjusts it so that she can still see it, without it causing another infraction.

She notices that the desk next to her is empty. Looks at the girl opposite her.

“Where is Anne?” Emilie asks, pointing toward the empty seat.

“Not sure. No-one has said anything about where she is” replies the girl opposite. Just then Emilie’s phone started ringing again and she gets into the pace of working and forgets about the empty chair next to her.

At lunch time Emilie takes her phone out of the docking station and puts it in her bag, and heads to the cafeteria for lunch. Everyone else heads there at the same time and food is dispensed by machines that are similar to snack dispensers seen in school cafeterias of the 21st century. Emilie uses her thumb print on a machine and then selects a sandwich.

She gets a text message from Gina.

“500 CALORIES WILL BE DEDUCTED FROM YOUR DAILY ALLOWANCE EMILIE. YOU ONLY HAVE ANOTHER 500 CALORIES LEFT FOR THE DAY.”

Emilie finds somewhere to sit and eat her sandwich, and muses through her social media account to find out what her friends are up to this week. She sees that one friend has been promoted and can now move to a bigger apartment and gives it a ‘like’. Another friend was successful in her application to have a baby. She gives that a like too. Another friend has been awarded enough merits to buy herself leisure wear. She considers putting a statement up of her own, but pauses over the text buttons without

writing anything. Nothing different has happened to her lately. Everything is the same old same. Day in day out. The same shit, on and on. It never ends. Oh I need a break! She closes down her social media app and gets up. She wanders over to the water fountain and drinks some water before heading back to her desk.

Emilie gets back home to her apartment at bang on 6.30pm, and is greeted by her personal assistant Gina.

“WELCOME HOME EMILIE!”

“Thank you, Gina. Please can you find me a suitable meal for this evening?” Emilie puts her bag down and takes a pin out of her bun to let her hair down. Gina displays the internet holographically, and rapidly searches pages and pages to find a vegan recipe that fits with what Emilie’s nutritional needs are.

“EMILIE, I HAVE ORDERED A TOFU SALAD AND STIR FRY VEGETABLES. IT WILL BE HERE AT 7PM. I ALSO RECEIVED A MESSAGE FROM YOUR EMPLOYER TODAY. I UNDERSTAND THAT YOU HAVE BEEN DISPLAYING PERSONAL ITEMS AT WORK EVEN THOUGH YOU HAVE BEEN ASKED NOT TO.”

“Yes Gina. I’m really sorry about that” says Emilie. “What is the penalty?”

“THERE ISN’T ONE THIS TIME EMILIE. AS YOU KNOW THIS IS THE FIRST TIME AN OFFENCE HAS BEEN REPORTED, SO I WILL RECORD THAT I HAVE GIVEN YOU A WARNING”

“Thanks Gina”

“DON’T THANK ME. THESE ARE THE RULES. IF YOU HAVE ANOTHER REPORTED OFFENCE THEN YOU WILL HAVE TO PAY A PENALTY.”

Emilie looks deflated. She takes the picture out of her bag and stares at it longingly. "It's just that I miss them" she says.

"I UNDERSTAND" says Gina. "BUT THERE ARE RULES THAT WE MUST OBEY IN ORDER TO MAINTAIN A PEACEFUL EXISTENCE."

The food arrives through a delivery chute near the kettle area. It is hot.

"Gina. Display today's news articles and current affairs". Gina opens up several windows of news articles for Emilie whilst she opens a takeaway carton and eats her food.

The government has announced that the retirement age has now been increased to 85 years old for all people currently under the age of 40. Emile drifts off into a reverie about having to work another 50 years at her current pace, knowing that it is probably impossible to do without going mad. She will probably be as fit as a fiddle in 50 years' time, but with no marbles, or worse, not physically able to do her job due to frailty and being forced to continue anyway. She imagines herself failing the gym session and missing work because of arthritis, and wonders what the penalty is for someone who physically can't do their job anymore. She starts to think about why she doesn't see any old people and where they go once they get to retirement age. There are no old people living in her apartment block and she doesn't see any at the gym. Come to think of it, she has never seen anyone over the age of 50. She is roused from her musings by a news report that no-one will be able to live above ground within the next 500 years due to ongoing nuclear contamination, and she comes to the

conclusion that old people don't retire to the surface for sun, sea and sand. She decides to ask Gina.

"Gina, where do all the old people go?"

"THEY GO TO RETIREMENT VILLAGES WHERE THEY CAN BE LOOKED AFTER" comes Gina's cool reply.

"Do they get to see their relatives?"

"OF COURSE. IF THEIR RELATIVES ARE YOUNG THOUGH, IT WILL NEED TO BE SCHEDULED IN SO THAT IT DOESN'T INTERFERE WITH THEIR PRODUCTIVITY" Gina continues.

"Oh". Says Emilie. Emilie thinks about how she would ever fit in such a visit to see an elderly relative, given how cram packed her life is and realises that it must be like this for others too. "What if you become too frail for work before you get to retirement age?"

"IF YOU FOLLOW THE STATE HEALTH RULES ON DIET AND EXERCISE THERE IS NO REASON WHY YOU SHOULD BECOME FRAIL BEFORE THE AGE OF 85" says Gina in a cool voice.

Emilie sees that the time is showing 7.59pm. As it clicks to 8pm, the holographic news articles disappear and Emilie puts on her virtual reality headset.

This transports her to a world above ground, and she finds herself in a park with wide open spaces, children throwing balls for their dogs, music, barbeques and families having fun together.

She sees a tall man, and as he sees her he gives her a broad smile. He comes over to hug her and greet her as an old friend.

"Lars! Lovely to see you" she says

“Likewise! I bought us a picnic this time” he raises up a basket with his right hand to show her. It has a blanket folded over the top of it.

“Wonderful” she says, “let’s go find a spot”. She looks down at herself and realises that she is wearing a light yellow summery dress with roses printed on it and a pair of flip flops. The sun is shining and it appears to be a lovely sunny summer’s day. She feels warm and happy.

They walk off together in the sunshine and find a nice shady spot under a tree. Emilie gets the blanket off the top of the basket and spreads it down on the ground, whilst Lars gets out two wine glasses and a bottle of red wine. He pours them a drink.

“Let’s toast to getting through another day” he says and he raises a glass and hands her the other one. They chink the glasses together and drink.

They then sit down. Emilie looks inside the basket and sees that there are lots of ‘naughty’ foods that she would not be allowed in the real world, in addition to the wine of course. She sees chocolate, cherry Bakewell’s, neat little triangular sandwiches with the crusts cut off, and best of all, pork pies.

“Is there real meat in these?” she asks eagerly.

“Well, your brain will think it is real meat” he says with a smile. “Pork to be exact”.

She tucks into a pork pie and is amazed at how it tastes. She speaks with her mouth full.

“Well, I hab no idea wha’ pork tastes like” she swallows her mouthful. “But if it tastes like this, then I like it very much!” she says.

Emilie and Lars enjoy their picnic together and laugh at a dog chasing its own tail in the park. Emile

indulges in all the things that she would not normally be allowed in the real world, such as laughter and friendship, and inwardly thinks that if it wasn't for this little rest haven then her life would not be worth living at all.

The park turned into the office, and Lars is telling her to put her photo back up onto her desk. She looks at the desk and sees that there is a glass of wine and a message on her screen saying, 'DO YOUR BIT FOR THE PEOPLE IN THE PARK!' The girl who works opposite her spoke in Gina's voice and told her that Anne had eaten a real pork pie and that was why she wasn't coming back into work.

Emilie wakes up with a start and instantly realises that she has overslept. She is still wearing her Virtual Reality headset and her work clothes from yesterday. She pulls off the headset.

Her attention is drawn to her phone, which is buzzing with several reminders saying that she has missed the gym and that she has to pay a fine. She opens up one of the messages and it reads 'DO YOUR BIT! PAY YOUR FINE!' The time is showing as 7.16am.

"Oh shit!" she said. She has realised that that she has missed breakfast and the mandatory gym session.

She jumps out of bed quickly and immediately checks Gina, who is unusually quiet. All of the device's lights are off.

"Gina, can you hear me?" she says. There is no answer. Emilie checks the device and pushes the reboot button. It whirrs into action.

"GOOD MORNING EMILIE. I HAVE RUN AN INTERNAL SCAN AND SEE THAT THERE WAS A POWER DISRUPTION IN THE NIGHT. I MUST

APOLOGISE FOR NOT WAKING YOU. I SEE THAT YOU HAVE A FINE FOR MISSING YOUR MANDATORY GYM SESSION THIS MORNING. THE FINE IS THAT YOU HAVE TO RE-ARRANGE THE MISSED GYM SESSION TO WHENEVER SUITS YOUR SCHEDULE. YOU WILL NEED TO RE-ARRANGE THIS QUICKLY. I CAN DO THIS FOR YOU.”

“Do I still need to pay a fine even though it was your fault I wasn’t woken up in time?” Emilie says,

“YES. I’M SORRY ABOUT THAT. PLEASE MAKE SURE THAT YOU RE-ARRANGE YOUR SESSION TODAY.”

Emilie looks at her schedule. It is the same as the day before, except where it should have said ‘MANDATORY GYM’ it now says, ‘PAY YOUR FINE’ in large red letters. She lets out an exasperated sigh and hurries off to get showered and dressed for work.

As she puts her hand to the plate to leave, Gina gives her another warning before opening the door.

“DON’T FORGET YOU MUST RE-SCHEDULE YOUR GYM SESSION BY THE END OF TODAY OTHERWISE THERE WILL BE A FURTHER PENALTY. I CAN DO THIS FOR YOU IF YOU LIKE.”

“Thank you, Gina, I will do it when I get to work” and with that, the door opens and Emilie heads out to the elevators.

Emilie’s work journey is exactly the same as the day before, down to the same people standing in the same positions on their journey to work, wearing the same outfits and the same shoes as everybody else. Emilie ponders on how people always gravitate to the

same places in their morning routine, and get on and off the travelators at exactly the same time and the same place every single day. At least today was different for her!

The usual public service announcements at stations are saying DO YOUR BIT FOR THE ECONOMY! GET A JOB!', and if it wasn't for the knot of anxiety building in Emilie's tummy this could be just another day, like every other day in her monotonous life. She looks at a woman in front of her, who is dressed in exactly the same way she is. Emilie wishes she could trade places with her and have a worry-free day.

Emilie arrives at work. She exchanges pleasantries with colleagues as usual and finds her desk. She puts her mobile phone in and a holographic keyboard pops up for her to type on.

A message pops up on her work screen straight away that says "DO YOUR BIT! PAY YOUR FINE!" and underneath it in smaller letters it says that she has missed the gym and needs to re-arrange her session today without fail. She dismisses it off the screen with a finger swipe and the desk phone rings. She answers it in the same way she did yesterday, and all other thoughts are driven out of her head.

"Good morning, MST Holdings. Emilie speaking how may I help you today?" She logs onto her computer using the holographic keyboard. Whilst she is typing, the supervisor comes around to inspect her work and her work area again.

"Good to see you are following procedures today." He says, turning his attention to his pad screen. "Oh, it looks as though you have an outstanding gym

penalty. Make sure that you re-arrange this as soon as possible as I don't want to lose another employee" he says, and walks off to inspect the next desk without looking at Emilie.

Emilie is stuck on the words 'lose another employee?', and casts a glance over to Anne's empty seat. What happened to Anne? Did she miss the gym? When will she be back? Just then a man comes and plonks his bag on Anne's chair and smiles at Emilie.

"Hi! My name is Mark. I guess we are neighbours!" he smiles at her. She smiles back and doesn't say anything. He docks his mobile phone, and just as with Emilie a keyboard pops up and his phone starts ringing. He immediately gets to work.

I guess Anne is not coming back then, she thinks. Perhaps she has another job and has been reassigned to another section? Emilie doesn't think on this any further as her phone starts ringing again.

It's lunchtime again, and along with everyone else, Emilie heads for the cafeteria as usual. As she missed breakfast, Emilie is looking at the food with hungry eyes, and in addition to her usual sandwich she also orders a large slice of cake. She uses her thumb print to order the food and the information is transmitted to Gina, who instantly sends her a text message saying, "YOU HAVE EXCEEDED YOUR CALORIE COUNT FOR THE DAY." A second message pops up in quick succession "YOU HAVE ALREADY MISSED A GYM SESSION". Emilie is angry at Gina and starts shouting at her phone in the busy cafeteria.

"But that was your fault Gina!" Emilie shouts. People start to look at her.

Gina doesn't respond. Instead, Gina accesses her diary and deletes her date for the evening, and puts in another mandatory gym session, this time for one hour.

"That's not fair! It's your fault that I missed breakfast and the gym."

More people are looking at her in the cafeteria, but she doesn't notice as she gets another message from Gina saying, "I HAVE BOOKED YOU INTO THE GYM FOR YOUR OWN GOOD." Deflated, Emilie sits down to eat, making the most of the cake. I want to make this gym session worth it, she thinks to herself. No. Actually, sod it. I'm still going on my date this evening. Gina can stick that in her torpedo tube and smoke it. Emilie gets her phone out and begins to write a text to her date.

Peter's wrist-pad flashes and he sees his date for the evening being deleted from his schedule. He isn't given an explanation.

"What?" He looks confused. He gets a text directly from Emilie a few minutes later.

"Peter, the date is still on. Many apologies but I am having a few technical glitches with my AI unit. I'll see you at 8pm as planned".

"Mary please can you reschedule my date with Emilie at 8pm tonight?" he says, looking at his wrist-pad.

"OF COURSE. WOULD YOU LIKE ANYTHING ELSE?"

"No thank you"

At 7.48pm Emilie is sitting in a restaurant waiting for her date to arrive, and not owning anything other than bed clothes and work clothes, she is still dressed for work. Her date arrives promptly at 8pm and she notices that he is also in his work wear. This makes her feel a little more relaxed. She stands up as he approaches her table and smiles at him.

“Hello, I’m Peter” he says, smiling and extending his arm to shake her hand. She shakes it.

“I’m Emilie” she says with a smile back. She straightens her shirt as they both sit down. The waiter comes over.

“Would you like anything to drink?” he asks. Peter quickly looks at the menu.

“We will both have the sugar free cola” he replies before Emilie can open her mouth. She smiles sweetly at the waiter, but inside she is mutinous. Sugar free cola is the last thing she wants. He leaves and comes back with two small glasses of sugar free cola and waits impatiently for their food order. Emilie’s phone is buzzing and she tries to ignore it.

“Let’s order the salad” she says before Peter could get in another order on her behalf. He nods his head in agreement. At least she eats sensibly.

“Sounds good, I like the look of the one with the beansprouts in it” he says still looking at the menu. The waiter makes a note on his pad and heads off to the kitchens.

“So what do you do for work?” Peter asks as he puts the menu down. Emilie is distracted by her phone, which is buzzing, and picks it up. She sees a message on the screen from Gina.

“YOU MISSED YOUR SECOND MANDATORY GYM SESSION OF THE DAY.” She looks up at her date.

“Huh?”

Peter looks frustrated. He repeats himself, but slower “What do you do for work?”

“Oh, I work at a call centre. What do you do?” she says, smiling.

“I work in a call centre too. I wonder if we work in the same place! Who is your employer?” he says with enthusiasm.

Just then the waiter comes back with two wilted beansprout salads that look like they have been sitting in the sun for three days. Emilie looks crestfallen at her food. More boring shit to eat she thinks. I’m starving. I want some real food for a change.

Emilie smiles at her date, but the smile doesn’t reach her eyes as her phone buzzes again. She looks down. It is another text message from Gina.

“YOU WILL NOW HAVE TO PAY A PENALTY”. Gina isn’t specific about what the penalty will be, and Emilie assumes that Gina will tell her when she gets back home.

“Are you OK?” Peter asks, “you look distracted”

“Oh, I’m OK”. She smiles again at Peter and starts eating. She is done within minutes, despite the salad being so awful.

Peter is just watching her. He hasn’t even started on his salad yet. Emilie waves the waiter back over.

“Please can I have some real food?” she asks. The waiter is looking gobsmacked.

“This is real food. What are you talking about?”

“Oh, you know. Cake, pork pies, roast beef, boiled potatoes, chicken.”

“We don’t have any animal products I’m afraid. Far too damaging to the environment. We have cake though”

“I’ll have that then. Whatever you’ve got will be good. And make it a big slice” she says confidently.

Gobsmacked at her behaviour, Peter interjects. “What are you doing?”

“I’m having an off-day” she says with a hint of satisfaction in her voice. The waiter just stares at her. She gives him a look that says “well, what are you waiting for?” and he stalks off to the kitchens. Emilie watches him as he has a quick conversation with a colleague, and gets the sense that they are talking about her as his colleague’s eyes flick over to her direction.

Peter is just staring at her in disbelief. He still hasn’t touched his salad. Emilie turns to Peter.

“You might not want to eat that” she says, pointing at his salad. “It tastes like three-day old flip flop”.

“What’s a flip flop?” Peter asks.

Just then, the waiter returns with her slice of cake and gives her a judgemental look. He puts it down in front of her.

“You’ll pay for that later you know” he says. She responds with sass.

“Well, if I wasn’t allowed it, then it shouldn’t be on the menu, should it?”

The waiter quickly walks off, shaking his head. Ignoring Peter completely she tucks in and scoffs it as quick as she scoffed her wilted salad. That was a lot better than salad. But I could murder some roast pork.

Her phone buzzes with yet another text message from Gina. "YOU HAVE EXCEEDED YOUR CALORIE INTAKE FOR THE DAY BY 1000 CALORIES."

Peter has had enough. He throws his napkin onto his untouched salad and gets up.

"I'm leaving. I hope you enjoy your 'off-day'" he says. Emilie doesn't notice that he spoke and is still looking at her phone. He walks off and leaves Emilie behind in the restaurant.

Emilie's phone buzzes with more messages from Gina but she doesn't want to have any more of Gina's meddling. It was Gina's fault that she was in this mess in the first place. Why the hell would Gina be offline anyway? There is definitely something fishy going on here. Emilie tries to switch her phone off, but finds out that she can't. Another message pops up from Gina.

"YOU CANNOT SWITCH YOUR PHONE OFF WHILST YOU HAVE AN OUTSTANDING PENALTY AND REMINDERS IN FORCE."

Emilie lets out a frustrated sigh. She too throws her napkin down but onto an empty plate and gets up to leave.

Emilie lets herself into her apartment, looking dejected. Instead of talking to Emilie, Gina flashes up several large screens around her tiny apartment with text in red letters "YOU HAVE A PENALTY."

Emilie ignores this and throws her bag down on the bed. She picks up the Virtual Reality headset. Lars is in the park again and it is another lovely sunny day.

"Hi" he says in his usual warm, friendly greeting as he gives her a hug. "You're late today!"

“Hey you! I’ve had such a crap day.”

“Why don’t you tell me about it?” he says. They walk towards the shady tree they sat under yesterday. The sun feels pleasantly warm on her skin.

“Oh where do I start? I woke up late, missed breakfast, missed the gym and then over ate at lunch and again at dinner. My phone has been buzzing like crazy and I just had the worst date ever” she flops onto the grass. Lars however, is still standing.

His face has fallen from being happy to being alarmed.

“What happened?” he asked in a serious tone that she has never experienced from him before.

“I just had a couple of messages from Gina. She booked me in for a gym session tonight to replace the one from this morning but I went on my date instead. Dates in the real world are really hard to come by! I’ve been waiting months for approval.” She says, unconcerned. “Gina says that I have to pay a penalty. I don’t know what this is yet though.” She says, looking at Lars, and shielding the sun from her eyes with her hand. Just then a dog barks in the distance, which is followed by a small child’s laughter.

Lars looks frightened for her. She picks up on his mood.

“What? It’s just gym and a couple of fines.” She says.

“You need to get off here immediately. Go and sort this out now with Gina! If you don’t, then the penalty is severe.”

She looks at him. Now she is frightened. Her stomach is doing somersaults.

Emilie rips off the headgear and decides to do some research on the internet to find out where Lars is in the real world. He has never frightened her before like this.

“Gina, please display any information about Lars for me” she says urgently.

Gina completely ignores her. Emilie logs onto the database herself by docking her phone and starts typing on a projected keyboard like she has at work. She starts a search on information about Lars, and lots of articles pop up. In chat rooms people discuss him being a cautionary tale made up to make sure that you stay on the straight and narrow, whilst others discuss the possibility that he is there to be an outlet of pleasure so that people can enjoy the freedoms of the old days and still be productive in today’s world. It would seem that many women and men fell in love with him and compared notes on what he was like in bed. She sees a newspaper article, written with the sensational headline:

MAN HAS ORGANS HARVESTED FOR
HAVING AN OFF-DAY

Emilie reads and re-reads the headline. Her heart is pumping somewhere in her throat and her stomach turns over. She reads the next line.

A Sector G telephone operator was
terminated for organ harvesting yesterday
after he broke several productivity laws during
a three-day binge

It shows a headshot of Lars smiling at the camera. It is definitely him, even though there is no mention of his name. Why didn't he ever say anything?

Emilie is shaking now. She sees another article relating to the 'Upper Levels' and that the people who live there were making complaints about having to wait on hold to talk to someone about their internet service provider. Her eye is drawn to a mental health publication with his photo attached to it. She starts reading.

Was this young man unlawfully punished?

A Sector G telephone operator was put to death because he broke a series of laws relating to productivity, but there is sufficient evidence to show that he had a mental health breakdown due to the gruelling schedule he was forced to keep.

Emilie re-reads the opening headline. She can relate to this. Her schedule is relentless and her quality of life is poor. She merely exists and is kept functional on a basic level so that she can work. She carries on reading the next few lines.

Every year over five million people are put to death in this way for breaking minor laws, yet the government does nothing to investigate why people are having breakdowns.

"The laws are there to be followed. He broke the law and he was punished accordingly" said a government spokesperson.

The journalist continues:

But what if there is a more sinister reason behind this? Say an organ donor shortage on the Upper Levels?

Emilie is mortified. She has no idea what the 'Upper Levels' are, but understands what organ donation would mean for her. Terrified for her own safety she clicks on the 'accept' button for "you have a penalty", hoping that it is not too late to sort something out with Gina. She inwardly pleads that she isn't beset by a similar fate to Lars. She hears nothing in response from Gina.

"Gina?" she says. Nothing. Gina is still giving her the silent treatment, and Emilie is feeling more and more anxious by the minute.

She carries on looking at the articles and comes across another government paper. This time it is a law document signed off by all 800 members of parliament.

Due to the serious infractions that occurred on 24th January 2142, it has now become necessary to reduce the time taken between an individual committing a crime and their punishment.

Punishment will now occur within 24 hours of the crime. There will be sufficient warnings to give law breakers time to rectify mistakes within this time frame, meaning that it will only be persistent law breakers, deviants, and those who wilfully subvert the law who will be terminated.

Emilie has another wave of adrenaline. This time it is followed by a jolt in her stomach as she hears a loud banging on her door.

“Open up!” shouts a man’s voice, followed by more loud banging.

“This is Civil Compliance! Open up or we will break the door in!”

At that moment, all of the holographic articles disappear. She can hear Civil Compliance Officers ramming her door with something and hears a splintering noise as the door breaks.

“Gina?” Emilie says with a quivering voice “please help me!”

Emilie panics as she waits for the Civil Compliance Officer to arrest her. Tears are rolling down her face. I hope it doesn’t hurt.

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