

# Crueller Surprise

Stories by Louise Ashcroft



## Joon and Jilla's Unterplanet

---

Joon and Jilla got on like a house on fire.

Not the kind of blaze easily extinguished by thick jets of fluoroprotein propellant, but a gleaming exothermic plasma igniting your left cerebral hemisphere's appetite for excellent conversation.

Hard to put out.

They'd met at a bus stop in Lower Addiscombe Road and noticed they were both wearing similar 14-karat pendants in the shape of confused boomerangs, sun dried Pac-Men, Republics of Croatia, angry croissants, or scraggy silhouettes of Phoenix (the real American Bald Eagle mascot who flies around the Crystal Palace stadium before each match).

Enough in common to spark up a pleasant chat.

Just small talk at first, like how Jilla had given up New Year's Resolutions in favour of 'reset moments' such as doing a quick press-up or lunge each time she said the words 'the' or 'and', as an 'exercise-snack'.

They discussed what should be done about the Home Secretary's tendency to tell drink-spiking jokes at parties, or why the word 'chat' still means 'cat' and 'vagina' in French but in English has ceased to mean 'informal conversation',

instead referring to a whole personality trait that one can possess.

Both Joon and Jilla had good chat.

Their chat was so good that high frequency particles darted between the women's mouths, releasing verbose gases which steamed up Joon's Vision Express Prada spectacles. Their chat was soooo good that clumps of ideas began to cluster in the air around their heads, planetesimally; clattering into thought-pebbles that fused like matted faeces on lambs' tails to form elegant little dwarf-planets orbiting their MAC-cosmetics-clad skulls like space-junk or like that Tesla Roadster with a mannequin in the driver's seat that SpaceX catapulted into elliptical heliocentric orbit in 2018.

Many years and many buses went by, but Joon and Jilla kept chatting, and their matter kept unfolding, until the stuff scuffing their lipsticks crossed some threshold that warranted a tiny official man with huge, vascular arms to visit and take sexy notes. He was from the ISR, but had no idea what those letters stood for except that they were very important and had tasked him with legally registering Joon and Jilla's gurgitated unterplanet after nosey neighbours with property-ladders in their tights raised concerns.

Luckily, for a small admin fee, the official man [prawn body, turkey-traybake arms] explained that Joon and Jilla could claim legal rights to this new celestial territory, and that his

FatMax® confirmed it ample for building a substantial detached family home set in 1.2 acres of formal grounds with a serious ha-ha and solar-tech pool complex.

Joon and Jilla lived happily on their own planet for the rest of their days, employing the official man (flimsy FatMax® guppy with guns) as a Butler to keep an eye out for the bus while they discussed phone scams, designer egg-chairs for dogs, what Prince Harry's unkempt left eyebrow means for his marriage, and the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's acrobatic essay-leaps from subjects like the actual size of Giant Wotsits to the work of 13<sup>th</sup> century know-it-all Thomas Aquinas.

Putting the World to rights, Joon and Jilla grew new universes in the supernova explosions that sparkled between their two great minds.



## First Date

---

I am on a coffee shop first date with a bristly Tree Surgeon, but he doesn't know it. His official date, a woman with a turtle-wax-bootboy-Winkleman fringe, looks disappointed.

I bury my head in a copy of Ideal Housing Crisis magazine, pretending not to listen; dampening my irrepressible giggles, grimaces and 'hell-yeah's, as though it's a coincidence that the cadence of their conversation perfectly mirrors the emotional timeline of articles like '623 ideas for stress-free *spathrooms*' or '1001 strife-hacks to stop you sweating the small stuff'. [*Quietly: Ha! Oh! No-no-no... same!*]

It's their date, and I don't want to interrupt.

Humans have two ears and one mouth, so we should listen and speak in those proportions.

I'm chaperoning sideways, through the gills, so I don't seem rude - trying to access senses not yet available to humans, in a manner that doesn't fit neatly into any of the criteria for ASBOs and civil injunctions.

The Tree Surgeon talks about how his dog Ted bit someone today, and laughs. He suggests it was the jogger's fault: "What, did he want me to buy him a new T-shirt?! It didn't

draw blood, just a small rip". A tiny dog must have jumped high (assuming the jogger was upright).

The Barista looks me up and down, in a universe shaped like a saddle or a Pringle.

'Up' and 'down' are subjective on a planetary scale.

46 billion light years in every direction.

Sipping a flat white with Flat-Earther suspicion, I visibly wrap my head around infinity, remembering that cartographers wrote "here be lions" on *terra incognita*, and that it's thoughts like these that make me better at parasocial dates than participatory ones.

The Tree Surgeon namechecks a Rottweiler charity and his date (who looks like one of those Hair Surgeons) says 'aaaaaawwwwwwwwwwwww!' three beats beyond sincerity.

I flinch. Tree Surgeon's dog must be a *Rottweiler*, and it *bit* a man today!

The Woman asks "So you like climbing trees, do you?", in a tone that makes it clear she really means "why have you ditched an impressive chef career to whittle notches off branches, live on a boat and grow the kind of beard that screams *men like me become hermits because it's how we process emotions?*".

He reassures her that there's no longer a risk of her becoming a 'chef widow', and they are hypothetically breaking up over his antisocial hours in an imaginary real



past, despite having only just met. I am inches from them the whole time, taking these notes and occasionally checking the part of my wrist where a watch might be – as if waiting for a client/friend/ending.

Her: "Isn't living on a boat wet? - I haven't been on a houseboat".

Him: "evidently you haven't"

Her: "Isn't it like a caravan but less beige?"

Him: "It's like living in a corridor"

Her: "Why do you live on a boat?"

Him: "Have you ever floated your flat to Liverpool or Leeds, for all of July?".

She hasn't. Doesn't look like she wants to.

I am on a date with two people and a fruit fly that's drowned in pricey decaffeinated froth. None of them know I'm on the date too, it just happened. The woman is in her twenties and has tropical hardwood for hair (I can tell from her voice but I haven't looked directly). The man is a similar age. He's bedraggled in the privileged kind of way that compels middle class creatives to identify as 'Makers'. His tongue waves its red flags at half tempo to disguise 'down and out' as 'out-out' outgoing: "My Rottweiler bit a Stranger today", "One day I'll live in a tree as a form of emotional armour", all with a "how about this weather, hey?!" shrug.

It is spitting. The fruit fly is dead.

Earlier I ran past half a dropped baguette, swollen and disintegrating on the cycle path, like a reject from a casting call for a whimsical French film where nothing happens slowly over rickety wheels under aimless armpits. I am that baguette now; soaking up this sweaty, clichéd rendezvous while pretending to read a listicle ranking ten most beach-worthy faux-shearling cushions. Over the past twenty minutes, my chair and I have inched our six legs closer to the couple, like a roach, and now I'm pressed against his left ankle and her right knee. It would be awkward if they were to acknowledge me now.

The rest of the café is empty.

The date woman is the personification of a nine quid scourer in an Upper Street boutique. Knowing anything else about her would spoil her Modernity.

Before either of them consciously realises, I am sitting on the Woman's lap and the Man is massaging my feet, which I've draped over his tapered sweatpants (that repel water without sacrificing breathability). We've reached an unspoken agreement that I'll be part of their shared future; like an extraneous prosthetic, or skintag; like mistletoe, or bracket mushrooms growing from the bark of a mismatched love whose potential for romance I will parch.

As we all sip our second cappuccinos, I'm the only thing that's keeping them together.

I'll do it for the rest of their lives if they'll let me.

Just little old me, an eighty-something divorcee; straddling their Hinge, asking them if I can play the role of their (improbable) hypothetical newborn.

One should never presume, but the Woman on this date (endangered timber hair, something to declare) looks efficiency-orientated. Her bucket list is from B&Q. She might not want the faff of giving birth the traditional way. It'd be better if the child were born much older. Better if it were me. Just little old me...a wailing granny with a bib on, riding along the canal towpath in this lovely couple's pram with their (not his fault) Rottweiler; tripping on milestones, babbling in a buggy full of bath-books, reading *Ideal Home's* easy as A,B,C '*secrets to making a snug more immersive by balancing out more-is-more super-glam with workable calm, on a boat, up a tree, in another life...*' without making this first date more uncomfortable.



## Fly Tipping

---

Animatronic dinosaur, Bolivian lithium battery, custom Prosecco-o-clock snow globe featuring a photo of you and your friend's rabbit.

Stolen bike parts, one shoe, foil balloon promoting the terms and conditions of a bank holiday sale, 'His & Her's' earplugs and those silver capsules for whipping cream and distracting teens from more serious crimes.

All these unwanted objects, fly-tipped by the snicket.

Snicket is a Yorkshire word for ginnel, which is a Lancashire word for sneaky little pathway.

Where will all these objects end up now that you don't want them anymore?

I start to wonder... what if all objects were born instead of manufactured, and we had to cut them from our umbilicals and explain to them what the world is, how to behave, how not to behave, and why they are grounded.

What if every shoe started as a shoe foetus which had to be pushed out of the hole in the body of a size eight boot, and taught how to walk for itself?

Would we treat objects differently if they had been born and raised?

A Peperami wrapper swirls around in a greasy eddy of air currents at my feet. My Mum texts to ask "is there a tornado in London?" so I text a friend to say 'my Mum says there's a tornado in London', then reply to Mum with an emoji tornado.

The wrapper of the Peperami dances around the abandoned shoe, souvenir pencil with the logo of a National-Trust-lighthouse-school-trip destination in Tyneside; that snow-globe, the foil balloon, Lego with discoloured Play-Doh stamped into its crevices, pamphlets shouting 'Visit Cornwall!' (desperately), empty Ace Cider bottles nibbled by snails and shot vodka miniatures fresh with escapism.

I wonder whether, if objects were born instead of manufactured, we'd treat them better?

I glance down at half a Peperami, the lone shoe, and part of a tent that a homeless person is living in,

and I think - No.

We probably wouldn't treat things with any more dignity if they'd been born.

## Shoe Sanctuary

---

Back when all shoes were wild and flocked the Earth, Carol could've tamed a herd and jumped aboard, riding their percussioned souls like the steppes of ancient Trans-Siberian camel trains.

But that was many hoofprints ago.

Now that most shoes have been domesticated and the untameable ones have fled to the bottom of the sea, washing up on the beach from time to time, people put their sightings down to container ship cargo lost to storms with names like Mitch (1998), Katrina (2005) and Carol (1953). Our Carol is calm.

She sneakers out nightly and scoops up their shored tongues, then takes them home and nurses them back to health in an improvised isopod floatation tank in the spare bedroom.

Releasing them into the stretch between the tides, the soothed souls swim off, grateful as gloves.

But they never wave back.





# The End

---

It is rare that a story starts with these words The End.

And yet perhaps it makes more sense than if The End were in the middle, like steak haché or early onset bitten-by-a-shark.

Beginning with The End takes the burden of expectation off the Writer, who can now leave her desk to find love and loss in Crawford Park.

The sticks in the park have two ends and no beginnings. There is a global shortage of beginnings.

The End



## Air Fryer

---

My Mum and Dad are obsessed with their new 'air fryer'. Its name is Ninja. It means 'one who sneaks' - a mercenary, a Guerrilla Warrior of feudal Japan. The extent to which I mistrust the gadget has become part of my identity. This consumer trash is the perfect scapegoat for all of my climate anxiety and carbon panic, and I'm so irked by it that I need to take a half-hour hot shower twice daily to calm down; A carbon pirouette which doesn't count as climate-queasy, because I'm Pisces and we crave waves. My boiler-busting wings-clipped waterfall is merely somatic resistance against the pressures of neoliberalism.

My carbon footprint has a verruca.

Dad says the Ninja is energy efficient, but I still reckon it'll break soon and end up sitting in silence in a hole with all the forgotten 'George Foremans' and chocolate fountains, for 10,000 years. George Foreman is the boxer who invented a noughties electric griddle bearing his signature. He earned more from that than his entire boxing career. I wonder what consumer 'must-have' 1930s entertainer George *Formby* might have patented had he not focussed on playing lightly comic songs on his banjolele?

Many humans can't imagine life without an air fryer now. How would we tempura the shit out of the Earth's overheated atmosphere without one? My Dad is showing

me how the Ninja works, by putting every species of vegetable into its compartment, one by one, with the menacing attentiveness of a Victorian taxonomist, to demonstrate all the textures that are possible on different fryer settings. This is his way of convincing me he should buy me an air fryer for Christmas. He is evangelical about it.

Dehydrating a sprout until it resembles a tiny Turin shroud. Giving Swiss chard the shivers. Blanching beets. Crisping up a tomato. Please don't point out that a tomato isn't a vegetable, go tell Stephen Fry (he can make a panel show about it). Dad exclaims, "It doesn't fry, it's not really a fryer, it's like a tiny oven - everything you can do in a regular kitchen has been squeezed into a box the size of Harry Maguire's head." He clarifies the buttery expression on my face, "Gheee!". An expression of mild disgust betraying the ideological suspicion of grease that I've inherited from 90s diet culture, an era when everything was made of polysaccharide Xanthan gum.

But it's 2024 now and the stabilisers are off. My parents are back on dry land. They have sold the aspirational caravan they were living in for four years when the pandemic coerced a friendly aristocrat (who owned the campsite they were stationed on) to volunteer his driveway for a few weeks that turned into too long. Gone are the days of hanging their pants to dry next to his tennis court, because they have bought a 1950s detached in the suburbs of South Wales and done an impressive Grand Designs job on it. The rear half has been replaced with a glass box but the front is

intact in all its post-war glory, like your old Home Economics teacher secretly going commando.

Mum and I share design crushes over WhatsApp.

Vlado Milunić and Gehry's Dancing House in Prague, Peter Pichler's Mirror Houses in South Tyrol, Marek Cyran and Adam Nielbvowicz's upside down house near Niagara Falls, the italicised houses on Baldwin Street in New Zealand (live-in parallelograms on a road steeper than Wales' Ffordd Pen Llech). Leandro Erlich's floating house looms atop a tangle of roots. Why is it mainly men that get to make weird buildings? Mum might have been a Starchitect if she'd gone to grammar-school and got a university grant like her Brother. But she's done a lot of doer-uppers her own way.

Despite all the space they've got in the new place, Mum and Dad remain spiritually nomadic and still prefer to pretend they're in the caravan, squeezing into the smallest room of the house and cooking dinner diorama-style, like they're Borrowers. Over the years, they have moved house no less than 17 times and spent several long intervals in vans. The necessary life-hacks and resourcefulness of caravan living make them feel they have 'beaten the man'. During the pandemic that man was specifically one friendly Welsh aristocrat who owned the campsite they were on and offered to let them stay on his own driveway for 'a few weeks' while it all blew over. Weeks became years and they bonded over their shared grief that the free lattés in Waitrose had been temporarily withdrawn because of a plague. Free lattés and death are great levellers. I am

forever grateful to this probable-Tory and will grant him pardon when the revolution comes (as long as we can still use his pool). When me and my Sister were kids we had a 'Sylvanian Families' Manor House. It was a toy mansion populated by eerie humanoid woodland creatures and was occasionally a stage for our hamster Fuzzy-Felt (most famously in a multi species production of Hamlet performed for our neighbours Daniel Teale and Heather (despite Daniel being grounded for getting his bottom stuck in a bucket and Heather's Mum having to lubricate it free using a spatula and some Stork spread).

My Nana used to eat beef dripping in sandwiches for 1920s factory lunches. She nostalgically called this arterial Polyfilla 'mucky-fat'. But now it's 2024 and there are air fryers. Air is Britain's biggest export...we import air fryers from the East, we export fried air, and we ignore the consequences of extraction capitalism.

Why am I such a pseudo-intellectual, economically unproductive, spoilt prick that I can't just thank my Dad when he offers to buy me an air fryer?

Sorry Dad.

P.S- I don't want an air fryer.

## Spinny and the Stupid Mistakes

---

A Man with spinning eyes approaches me as I go down the escalator at Blackhorse Road tube station.

What's the word for an escalator, elevator or lift when it's going down?

The Man says:

"excuse me, I hope you don't mind me saying but you look like you've made some amazing life choices".

Now, normally I'd ask why, or whether amazing necessarily means good, or I'd self-deprecate:

"What?! This old thing?! These old life choices?!!"

Instead, I flip the conversation back his way: "What are the best life choices you've made?", I ask.

His eyes stop spinning and he looks directly into my pupils with the intensity of someone trying to get a SIM card out of a phone by jabbing a bit of wire into a tiny hole, until... pop!..His mind opens and he looks sad and says, "I never really had any choices."

"Well, you chose to talk to me!", I say. And we get talking, about stupid mistakes I'd made, and small choices he'd had without realising – like blue socks or red today or whether to carry on living.

He looks tired, and I say "don't worry, soon there'll be a data driven app that simulates the infinite sliding-doors-butterfly-effect repercussions of every choice so that we can all make the very best decision every time. He looks even sadder now, and says "So bad decisions will die out?" "Yes, I guess so", I reply.

This thought is unexpectedly upsetting for us both. We want to have the right to make bad decisions, poor choices and utterly illogical impulses, because the most idiotic stuff either of us had ever done had led to unexpected great stuff too.

"You wouldn't have become best mates with Cindy if you hadn't put that Eveready 4R25 6v carbon zinco battery in your mouth to electrocute your tongue because of boredom and what ifs", the man with spinning eyes (Spinny) says.

Emotive classical piano plays, and Spinny's deep voice warbles improvised, atonal lyrics, "Anyone who's ever discovered anything did it by making the wrong decisions... all the brightest futures are stumbled into like Jägerbomb dance floor vomit". It's the public piano at St.Pancras station, and Spinny's on it, playing the Jurassic Park theme badly.

It's beautiful. Strangers waiting for lovers at the Eurostar gates have tears in their eyes. Rousing chords rouse and twinkly ivories twinkle...then "ROAaaaAAAarRRRRR!"



Spinny screams a Tyrannosaurus crescendo and everyone jumps out of their skin. He's laughing.

Spinny and I exchange numbers.

We've come up with a plan.

We're going to set up a secret society called URSPSM – the unroyal society for the preservation of stupid mistakes. As we part ways, neither of us really knows how we'll do it or fully believes it'll happen.

I'm jogging the next day and it's pissing it down.

I stop at every puddle and inch my way through, soaking my Asics.

A trendy alternative dude who ~~was bullied in school~~ looks like an advert for 18<sup>th</sup> Century cough sweets walks past.

He observes my puddle techniques and calmly shouts "No...You should just stamp through the puddle fast so all the water splashes away and your shoes stay dry."

Holding his gaze, I continue doing the puddles wrongly.

Slowly.

Defiantly.

Against optimisation.

And, I phone Spinny.



## Roychel's Hoverboard

---

Roychel and Letto meet weekly at a local café to discuss people they know who have died (she killed herself didn't she? No, she caught a syndrome...etc).

Today they share a table with me, as I pretend to work on a laptop (secretly taking their minutes).

They chat about how So-and-so's 'right to remain' document costs £3000 and that's why she's working all the time these days. They talk about how Roychel's hairdresser's Sister is a Cleaner at the Grand Hotel in Skegness and gets paid less than the Asylum Seekers who live there.

"They're lovely people, but they have their mobile phones paid for and one of them has a classic gold 6.5 Bluetooth hoverboard", Roychel whispers.

"Do you want a hoverboard?", Letto asks.

"No of course not!" Roychel replies.

"Well, what are you bothered about then?", Letto asks.

She can't quite articulate why, but Roychel feels anyone forcibly displaced from their home country because of war or threat to life should not be allowed to float slightly above the ground of Skegness on a hoverboard as though they were better than ordinary folk. They shouldn't be allowed to hover inches from the surface of an award-winning, vibrant,

family-friendly seaside resort with golden sands and traditional attractions, as if not wanting to touch it for fear of germs or whatever it is they are refusing proximity to.

They may as well turn their nose up at a Pukka with battered curry-sauce in Brian's on the seafront.

The coffee shop we're in doesn't sell pies. It's in the big smoke. It's a museum café.

Pies would steam up the architectural vision of Pringle Richards Sharratt Architects' £3.7 million refurbishment.

A pigeon hits the window pane with a thud and kids totter about the park outside in high vis vests, bumping into each other like atoms anticipating a boil.

Gravity is still a novelty to children - it is to adults too but we have to hide it (most leisure activities are just elaborate ways of rolling, falling or propelling ourselves off the earth so we can be pressed back terrestrial again, to make sure the peculiar force is still there). People should talk about gravity more, because it's something we all have in common, and that's why the Olympics are great for global diplomacy despite their tendency for nationalism.

The England flags on the Kirby Estate in Bermondsey are keeping house prices at bay, St George is still slaying - with estate agents for dragons.

You are not afraid of flying, you're afraid of falling.

Derek Jarman's garden film plays on a flat screen in the exhibition room adjacent to the café. It's the bit where a boy is holding a snail shell, pressing the soft part of the gentle animal into the pointy end of a bamboo cane, thoughtfully, as two trusting antennae wince.

My café companions discuss a colleague who does magic. "He does not move his hands!" Letto exclaims.

Humans are fascinated by endurance stillness. Some people make a career out of it, like Marina Abramović or those reprobates dressed as Yoda outside the National Gallery. I used to think that if I were the Queen I'd don a Pikachu costume or grubby Minnie Mouse onesie and stand in Trafalgar Square; not because I needed tourists to throw 10ps and coppers at me, but because I needed the public kind of privacy that only Commoners can afford.

The Queen died aged 96, so we never got to see what would happen when she reached 100 and had to write a letter to herself. Would she have glitched? Monarchy goes meta-archy.

250,000 people queued all day and night to see the dead Queen. Many of them were young people. Perhaps they got the wrong Palace (thought it was the skate brand). The Queen didn't just drop dead, she hype-dropped like a Supreme hoodie.

I die on stage at stand-up: "Was the Queen's belly button pickled and sent to the Royal Navel Museum in Greenwich?"

Long. Silence.

A man wearing an Aldi-specials acupuncture mat instead of a scarf (because it was great value) is helping the café staff correct spelling mistakes he's identified on the blackboard menu.

I dislike grammar pedants. I wrote a joke about it:

If you see a Criminal with two teardrop tattoos below his left eye, it's either because he killed two people or because he used to just have one teardrop but a grammar nerd thought it was an erroneous apostrophe and tried to correct it. Now the felon's got two teardrops and a long sentence.

Life always ends in the middle of a...

## The Fake Armpit

---

He didn't dare to mention it at first. It was awkward. Like being mis-sold a mourning suit instead of a morning suit and turning up to your own wedding wearing an omen. Black clad red flag. If Grim Reaper marries a Divorce Lawyer, till when do they part?

And then my friend just blurts it out.

"That toothpaste you bought me was for dentures."

He's offended. Worried nobody believed his teeth were his own. He's also flattered, that he might be assumed to be the kind of person who has 'drag teeth'.

Teeth whose charisma demands a stage.

Teeth whose tongue identifies as red sequined curtains at the cabaret. The epiglottis is nature's Club Bouncer; one in one out, if your name's not down get out the windpipe.

But tonight, 'Glottis wants to entertain.

Gulp. I hadn't meant to buy denture paste, I was rushing and it was in German. Another tongue.

My friend and I laughed about it, because disembodied teeth are funny, and even people with dentures know this:

My friend's Grandma hid hers in places to scare him - tucking them into bed so he'd get a nasty peck when he climbed in.

Dentures are slapstick the way that other accessibility aids are not allowed to be.

I wonder what the Tooth Fairy does when someone gets their teeth knocked out in a fight, or when the dissolving gums of celebrities addicted to speed leave them hanging off their tooth nerves: Canines and incisors dangling like swings in the park. Does she have a little fairy hazmat suit for that? Poor thing.

I am spitting out this story with my immaculate teeth. Long creamy tablets made sportier by two curved white stripes; ghosts of the glass bottlenecks of '00s alcopops. I still get 'I was brave' stickers from the Hygienist. Little Miss Tiny's stupid face flecked with plaque and blood.

When my friend revealed I'd bought him denture paste instead of Sensodyne, it touched a nerve. I remembered I'd got myself some deodorant at the same shop. Things we forgot on the plane.

The Pharmacist had to go into the back room to find it. I didn't recognise the brand or know what was written.

If the toothpaste was for false teeth, then was the deodorant for false armpits too?

Had my own armpits, under this suspicious influence, become fake armpits too?

I hoped so. I began to imagine all the other products that this fantasy pharmacy might sell. Not just pastes for fake teeth and fake armpits, but ointments and powders for sci-fi stuff, and make-up you couldn't make up.



## The London Eyes

---

The London Eye Ferris wheel has a twin.  
Not many people know this.  
There are a pair of London Eyes.  
But one is shut tight.

I like the famous London Eye (the one that's wide-open to the crowds).  
But, I prefer the one that's winking, so nobody knows it's around.  
I've worked out its position on the Southbank  
By pacing a giant's nose-width from the all-seeing one

Its lashes are railings.  
Its tears are in the Thames.  
Hard to see it, because it's winking.  
I ride this other London Eye instead of paying £25 for a spin on the popular one.

I like to stand on its paved eyelid, turning slowly.  
Taking in its 360-degree views of iconic grey ground-level,  
for a full 30-minute rotation.

Architects Julia Barfield and David Marks designed both London Eyes, I think.

But they kept quiet about the shut one,  
so I can enjoy it without 3.5 million tourists.

Thanks Julia and Mark. Wink, wink.

The secret London Eye is winking at me.

Winking can mean friendship, solidarity or non-aggression.

It can show that someone's joking, sharing a secret, or lying.

It can be flirtatious, or considered vulgar.

It's all these things, my shy London Eye.

I wish the Street Performers by the bridge would stop  
blowing giant soap bubbles in it.

They're making my London Eye cry.

## Stained

---

Let's start with a riddle:

What's more expensive when it's stained?

It's become fashionable to keep your parking tickets on your windscreen.

I saw a Ferrari cruise through New Bond Street with three of them on recently -  
same colour as its bonnet.

Does it count as counterculture? Like the way the cool kids at school used to keep labels on their kicks to make them look nicked; sticking the grey security discs back on with their Mum's Hobbycraft glue gun.

Are the penalty-Paraders flaunting that they'd take a £100 wrist-slap to pop into Prada?

Is the parking ticket the new designer label, or are they using them as decoys for Traffic Wardens?  
Avoidance tactics, like playing dead.

I'm in Farnham today, it's a time-warp town where 'Keep Calm & Carry On' cupcakes are still baking a 'big society' on Bankers' pensions riding sensible all-wheel drives that cost 50-grand but are as charismatic as the viral milk-carton of employee's urine that Morrison's supermarket accidentally delivered in someone's groceries.

There's a shop on Farnham high street that'll convert your old videos into other obsolete formats. The swing-sign advert outside says 'VHS to DVD'.

What if VHS 'Very Heavy Sins' could be converted to DVD 'Delightfully Virtuous Deeds' in this shop, like Catholic indulgences;

Extra-sacramental remissions of God's punishment, paying off everything unethical the Customer has done in their life. Perfect for retired Bankers.

VHS (Vile Haemorrhoid-Sniffers) can be reformatted as DVD (Delicate Violet Drapery), for Windows.

VHS (Venereal Hosiery Smears) can be exported to DVD (Dainty Vaporific Dancers) with the mere curse of a cursor.

The VHS (Victorious Holy Spirit) lives in that windowless concrete church down by Farnham traffic lights.

That riddle again...

What is more expensive when it's stained?

Stained glass windows.

## Full Flush

---

Lucky's in the flashy toilets of London's art-meets-biology museum, the Wellcome Collection. She wishes the words 'full flush' referred to the winning poker hand she's been dealt by life, but they don't, and she hasn't. Instead these words are vinylled in Helvetica next to 'half flush', on the buttons of the loo, and they mean shit. Lucky's shit. At least she feels like it today.

Why don't the flush buttons say what they mean?!

She doesn't need protecting from the material reality of her own ablutions, especially in a museum whose USP is corporeality. Politeness just reinforces the unconscious belief that mortal physicality should be replaced with euphemisms like 1 and 2.

She considers flushing herself down the porcelain bowl, but goes for a coffee in the museum cafe instead. It's open plan. She watches two men in their early twenties, messing about in the adjacent gift shop. One of them has hair the colour of 2024's official Pantone, 'Peach Fuzz', and the other is in full flush. They're both considering purchasing small telescopes and are holding them up, pressing the ends of the telescopes together and giggling.

They are trying to see how close they can get, as if they want to be so close they can climb inside each other. Then

they flip the toy telescopes the other way round and press them together again, to test whether their emotional connection is strong at distance. Isn't this the kind of thing that Lucky used to find romantic?

After a lifetime spent working at The British Cement Association on Euston Road, all she's thinking is that "two men in their prime, on a weekday, in a capital city, ought to spend less time playing with tiny telescopes and more time contributing to the economy". She opens her British Cement branded briefcase and inside is a tiny telescope of her own, from a trade fair. They'd had them made to help the British Cement Association stand out from other cement associations after it merged with the Quarry Products Association and The Concrete Centre to form the Mineral Products Association before becoming known as MPA Cement. Lucky's telescope is in mint condition. Still in its box. She gets tangled up in a stranger's 'emotional baggage' tote in the revolving doors as she exits the museum.

She can see someone stealing the CPR machine outside Euston station because it is more lucrative than anyone stealing her heart. They can't dismantle Lucky's heart and sell the components on eBay, can they? What would it fetch? There are CPR machines in the street to help save people from cardiac arrests, but no devices that help kickstart other halted organs or help Lucky style-out today's unexpected emotional cataclysm. What if there were little cabinets that could be accessed in case of crises of

compassion, hope, or love? - Cabinets with eye holes and soothing voices that you or Lucky could crawl into and watch the World from, for a bit, until you've got your beat back?

What if the flushes in the toilets invited us to dispose of fears or problems, that they might enter the sewage system in bleachy swirls?

May there one day in the near future be cubicles devoted to sobbing in, wishing in, or writing full (and half) stories in, like this.

Help us out, Lucky. Press the big flush for us, would you, love?

In lieu of a happier ending.





## Troye's ClatterGuard

---

Troye has invented a deodorant for noises. London Estate Agents love it. Especially those in Barking and Tooting, where residents are driven potty by the areas' respective eponymous dins. Troye's AI powered device targets sonic trash in the airwaves and slices it directly from your soundscape in real time.

Is your neighbour clipping their toenails loudly?

Do you want to whistle a hit by a disgraced popstar in the street without causing offence?

Don't punch a woodpecker, it's only doing its job.

"Get yourself a can of ClatterGuard so you can nature-bathe in peace", so the advert went.

You know the drill. [That maddening drill, that Bettina in flat 9 is using to construct giant platform shoes for dancing bigger at Glastonbury]...ClatterGuard it!

People loved ClatterGuard at first. Cans of it silently flew off the shelves - it was the Lynx of the listening world, the only drawback being you couldn't light it like a blowtorch in the boys' changing rooms to look hashtagfireemoji.

ClatterGuard noise-eliminating spray was especially good for eradicating the loud opinions of edgelord 'devil's

advocates' who monopolise the Q&A time at lectures with convoluted points that aren't even questions.

A special safety-catch has been added to stop the spray being used to censor voices that the rich and powerful would prefer not to hear. Troye had thought of everything.

Local Councils introduced special noise bins where unwanted sounds removed by ClatterGuard could be disposed of like Dyson-dust. The brimming noise bins were then taken to a vast warehouse called Drumsheds in Tottenham and emptied into its echo-chamber.

When pollution got fashionable, Bettina from flat 9 visited the noise warehouse to reclaim her drilling sound.

She was blown away.

This place was *better* than Glastonbury!

Parps, bloop and clanks juddered around the space and Bettina danced.

She texted Troye and the two jabber-junkies teamed up to open the Council's noise disposal warehouse as a nightclub.

ClatterHAUS. It was a completely new genre of music, and revellers came from far and wide to rave to it.

Even the Q&A edgelords and your clammy uncle Tony were invited.

