

Sang Dissonance Over 3

“Yeah!” said Vivienne.

“Sure, yeah.” replied Jackie, Jackie wasn’t thinking. Things were just happening and it felt ok, no need to think too hard, just keep walking.

“Alright we’ll meet at a place round here. What do you want to eat Vivienne?” Fergus turned to look at Vivienne, walking backwards as he asked.

“Pizza!”

“Haha alright! We’ll get you some pizza.”

a. Cut between Fergus and Vivienne Turn to Page 67 (Block 141)

b. Let it slide Turn to Page 1 (Block 2)

4 GOOD KID

“Yeah. She’s a good kid.”

“What happened to Daddy?”

Jackie felt a chill as an old ford rolled past. About 1 or 2 people walked by every 30 seconds.

“Well, you know. Shit happened. He was a prick anyway.” She took another drag, walked slightly into the pavement, turned back to Mack, rolled the back of her head against her shoulders. “A real fuckin waste. I don’t like to think about him, you know?” Jackie laughed quickly to herself.

a. Continue Turn to Page 54 (Block 111)

5 TABLE ETCHING

No swastikas, thankfully. Some names in cyrillic script marked out as having occurred 2 years ago. Not nearly long enough to gain any prestige via the novelty of the time it arrived from. But you don’t really care that much either way.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 37 (Block 76)

6 YOU OK?

“You ok?”

He shook his head, sighed out “I don’t know... no.”

“I need a break.” He continued. “But this is something I have to do.” He closed up the book, put it back in his suitcase.

“I think I remember this part of the tunnel anyway.” He looked outside.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 77 (Block 163)

7 INTERFERENCE

Christof is not amused.

“You want a pay rise? You bring in more money for me, then you get it. You have it the wrong way round.”

Back when you were the new kid on the block, when you had the novelty boost and the respective higher ratings because of it, you suspiciously didn’t get this mythical ‘higher rate’. Through your objections, you were told that you were expected to stay at that heightened starting rate and only get higher, it was obviously bullshit, but then sunk cost fallacy kicked in I suppose, and the money was just good enough to stick around.

He swivelled round in his chair, faced towards the monitor in front of him.

“You want more? You bring more.” He said in a lower tone of voice to the equipment.

a. You prick

Turn to Page 100 (Block 207)

8 TRAIN LURCH

The train lurched slightly, then continued its smooth procession

down the dim-lit concrete. "This?" He smiled. "This book's insane y'know?" He ran its contents through his fingers. "Shit's non-sequential. It feels like it falls in and out of itself. You've got like 15 different plotlines that are all disconnected but secretly connected at weird points. Guy seems like a bit of a prick. But he had some good things." He turned a page. "You heard about something called VHS?"

"Suppose I have, old physical, right? I know DVDs at least. Got them in the flat with Vivienne."

"Yeah old physical storage. Hardly much more sophisticated than writing it down on paper. Every time you accessed the fuckin thing it would degrade a bit. Wasn't even in bits. Anyway, it's basically like retrodystopia. This guy imagined a world where everyone was addicted to video. Like, you'd get your videos via a physical thing, like a package." He sniffed once, then once more like he had a cold. "I mean. Just think about the logistics. You'd have to have this massive warehouse somewhere where you churned in tapes and churned them out. And this stuff would have to be delivered by a person. Not even a hoveraid or nothing." He closed the book. "But he was right, you know? The book's shit. But that seemed to be part of what he was trying to say. He was fucking right. I don't know man, every time I talk to people we all just recognise we're ill, really quite ill, but never do anything about it." He looked at Jackie, like he expected her to answer a question.

- a. "Why read a bad book?" Turn to Page 52 (Block 107)
- b. "You ok?" Turn to Page 3 (Block 6)
- c. Don't say anything Turn to Page 10 (Block 24)

9 I DON'T GIVE UP

“I can’t stay long.” Jackie leaned on the bar, untied her hair and let it drape over her shoulders. Head rising up again to meet Orban looking down at her, grasping a thick woven rag in his prosthetic hand.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 51 (Block 105)

10 VIVIENNE, YOUR KID

Your kid, Vivienne. Sweet kid. Smart too. Who you move forward for.

a. Back

Turn to Page 91 (Block 189)

11 BLACK ON WHITE

Many looks come and go, as has always been. Fashion is so quick now that it stopped being definable through styles. It’s primarily a game of connotations now. Impressions, references, meta-references. It has a politics of its own.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 37 (Block 76)

12 SHOT GLASS

The glass sat as a pile of colour against other colours. Brown liquid in translucent solid against wood. It stayed there.

a. Talk to Orban

Turn to Page 53 (Block 109)

13 A WEIRD PLACE

“Weird place.” Jackie said to Fergus.

“Just unfurnished is all. Old shit, feels like it was last inhabited by a granny.” He said at the base of a doorframe. “..I know a guy. Enough for what we’re doing. It’s fine. Even has a kettle.”

He said, brandishing a mug of tea and a smile. “Got a working fridge and everything. Anyway, thought you could do with somewhere to park Vivienne.”

a. “Alright, well it seems alright.” Turn to Page 45 (Block 94)

b. “No, I want her to come with me.” Turn to Page 86 (Block 178)

14 ATE LOTS

“They ate lots when they were little, Vivienne.”

“No!!... That’s silly. They’re waaay too big, mommy.”

Jackie smiled, leaning on the wall next to the doorway, exhausted.

a. Continue Turn to Page 34 (Block 67)

15 INFINITE JEST

No clue. But it looks like it takes itself seriously. Its cover is white, with horizontal streaks of red and blue. It’s a serious book. For serious people.

And unfortunately, serious Fergus has caught you looking at it.

a. Continue Turn to Page 3 (Block 8)

16 WATER

“You had enough water?” Jackie asked.

Hesitantly Livv said, looking Jackie up and down as she did: “Nahh I guess not.” Her London accent was strong. “This aura’s all off anyway.”

a. Continue

Turn to Page 45 (Block 96)

17 WEIRD CHOICE

“Weird choice.” Fergus chimed.

“Well it’s my own. What’s up with that?” Jackie heard the whirr of Mack’s eyes again, though he did not move.

Fergus ran his hands through his hair, leaned back, “Just thought it’d be kind to get a hot meal in y’a. Didn’t imagine you’d’ve said no, but here we are.” He brandished his teeth. “No matter. You can pay for yours yourself.”

a. Continue

Turn to Page 74 (Block 159)

18 WHO?

“Hacker. Coderunner. We’ll need one for the shit we’re trying to pull.”

He scratched at his chin, something approximating a 5’oclock shadow was developing on his face.

“Can’t give you a name, and I ain’t met him yet. Comes through an alias, but when I asked around for that alias. I’ll admit I was impressed. I need to wire him some money and then he’ll provide me with more, it’s just the EU-England geoboundary makes that wiring process expensive.”

The clack of the wheels of his suitcase pick away at your head. Your feet move underneath you. You move on.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 55 (Block 114)

19 AUTOPILOT

Jackie threw her gear onto the sofa to the side of her, walked into the kitchen on the left under the pullup bar.

“What do you want to eat tonight Vivie?”

“Ummm. Can we have... spaghetti?”

“Alright sweetie.”

Jackie grabbed some spaghetti, an onion, and 2 cans of tomatoes from the cupboard above the hob to the side, and started cooking. The kitchen was the length of the main room, but with only enough width for a countertop and space to walk. Vivienne had turned on Nausicaä. In the kitchen Jackie watched the water sit there as the first act played in the midground of her hearing. She closed her eyes.

“Why are the bugs so big Mommy?”

“Hm?” Jackie felt her eyebrows raise to respond to the question, but her eyes didn’t want to open.

“They’re like, the size of elephants! Or bigger.”

- a. “They ate lots when they were little.” Turn to Page 6 (Block 14)
- b. “Radiation, I think.” Turn to Page 29 (Block 59)
- c. “I’m not sure.” Turn to Page 95 (Block 197)

20 CAME WITH THE FLAT

“Came with the flat, same as the TV. Vivi likes them. Thought why not? It’s kinda nice, sitting on a sofa.”

“Mmm.” Fergus replied. Vivienne rushed past with a clattering of small feet.

- a. Continue Turn to Page 77 (Block 163)

21 MOMENTARY LAPSE OF REASON

That moment right there? That lapse. That was the first real break your mind has had in a long long time. Turned your brain

off more than any soak in the bath could.

Sometimes it's good to be confronted with the simple question of "How do I get through these here 5 seconds?"

Now, back to the stress of near-life experience.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 63 (Block 131)

22 GEISHAGIRL

A shitty, racially charged pet name Christof has bestowed on you. But more specifically for your boxing persona. By happenstance, it's also used by some of your audience members too. You are mixed race, half White, half Korean, French by nationality but your accent is pretty neutral. In fights you wear a cloth binder with a cropped bomber jacket on top, it has a flowered kimono-like pattern.

a. Back

Turn to Page 25 (Block 54)

23 BOW ROAD

Another taxi, this time a jolly skeletal polish man in a flat cap. The tannoi said "NEARBY POINTS OF INTEREST: BOW ROAD, COGNIPHASE CENTRE, TESCO'S". There was no conversation in the Taxi once the polish man gave up on it, there was only the low tick of the taxi's motor as it chicaned down the streets and lanes.

Fergus was staring out into the middle distance. He had brought something strange with him. It looked like a cage you'd keep a battery chicken in. As Jackie looked at it, Fergus caught on, and looked at her looking at it. Jackie now looked at her. They engaged in some weird conversation of the eyes.

Jackie got the courage to speak.

a. “Why do you want what we’re stealing from Pandora?”

Turn to Page 98 (Block 203)

b. “What are we getting?”

Turn to Page 37 (Block 77)

24 SAY NOTHING

You look at him, not really saying anything. But eventually you found your face had responded for you through the expression it landed on. He looked away out the window. “Whatever.”

a. Continue

Turn to Page 77 (Block 163)

25 FANTASY

Jackie ended up at The Fantasy, 20 minutes or so from close. Some part of her brain funnelled her down there and she obliged to it. For Orban, for some reason.

The door clicked closed. The ambience outside turned to a domestic silence. Orban was there, standing behind the bar. The sounds of her footsteps tapped underfoot. She walked past the bend in the room.

“I know who you are, Jackie. I know who you were.” a voice came from behind her, from the bend, then the acrid thin smell of cigarette smoke hit her. “I know why you’re here. Or rather, I know why you came here. But I don’t know why you stay here.” He took what sounded like a gulp from a drink, paused, and then put it down on the table he was sitting at. It touched the wood with a klink. He didn’t sound Romanian.

Orban’s hoveraid took up a position to the right and above of Jackie.

a. Turn to meet him

167 to Page 80 (Block Turn)

26 SERBAN SHOULDN'T FALL

"Don't make Serban fall, I'm sure he's a nice boy."

"Yeah... I won't, it was silly. Oh, the power I wield! They really drill it into you in the course that you have a big responsibility for them, that you can't let it to your head at all. But you have to balance it you know? They need some space to get hurt, teaches them how the world really works. Back before, if they bonked their little heads on a table or a wall they would scream and scream and cry and cry. They do that a little here, but I can be reasonable to them, I can turn it off. And it all goes away when they get out. It's better like this, you know?"

a. "How long now?"

Turn to Page 81 (Block 169)

27 PROVE

The dead air wore out its welcome quickly.

"Here, lemme prove it to you." He stood up and got out a small object, it would fit comfortably in your palm. It was a roll of cash, brown plastic notes. UK 10s. "This is just to show I mean it." He put it on the counter.

Neither of them had noticed that it happened, but from behind the bar, Orban had a double barrel trained at the man. Orban had shifted himself so his frame was taller. The man looked up at the shotgun, noted it, the smile nearly fell from his face but not quite.

"Alright, I mean no harm, guy, all I ask is you print out some receipt for me to write on." He slowly rose from his wooden seat.

"I have not used that in a decade." Orban spoke in English, gun trained squarely unmoving from his chest.

He blew air from his lips like a horse. "What's wrong with paper? Whatever, alright, give me a napkin." The last of the patrons scuttled out of the bar to the sounds of chair-legs

scraping on polished wood.

Jackie felt the air around him move as he stepped past, he was looking up to Orban rather than her. He grabbed a ballpoint from his inside jacket pocket and hunched over to write something. Orban sidled back further away from the bar to keep his shot. Jackie hadn't moved.

- a. Say... something Turn to Page 83 (Block 172)
- b. Say nothing Turn to Page 71 (Block 150)

28 NORMAL STREETS

The normal streets do fine. Right now, in this light in the evening they seem to have a rhythm, you move to it as you proceed towards Vivienne. Beyond an alleyway on another street, the wind scatters leaves and packaging in a vortex, but you can barely hear it from here.

- a. Will Orban be missing me right now? Turn to Page 50 (Block 102)
- b. How old is Vivienne? Turn to Page 58 (Block 120)
- c. Where am I going? Turn to Page 17 (Block 36)

29 HANDSOME

He's too scared shitless to be handsome right now. Maybe in a sopping wet kind of way, like he's gotten caught in a thunderstorm underdressed and arrived on your doorstep with an apology. But he's an alright looking dude.

- a. Continue Turn to Page 64 (Block 133)

30 REST

You yawn. “I think I need some rest man. Your talking is making me sleepy.” You give Mack a smile. The noise of the pattering rain at the window lulls you into a deep mellow.

“You wanna sleep here? I can find you a blanket.”

“Yeah... here’s good.” Is all you can manage to say. You recline into the sofa, a cushion against your head, your eyes close, darkness meets you. The world outside them becomes merely theoretical. The slight tick and hum of Mack’s tech punctuates time.

Sometime later, you feel yourself being covered by a sheet, but you do not open your eyes.

“Goodnight.” Mack says, you hear the door lightly click shut.

END

31 NUERALINK

Neuralink was surgeon tech at first. Remote vicarious surgery. You could strap a set onto a young doc with all their motorics intact, connect it to the grid, port it to an old pro in Boston or Manchester or Lisbon. Could send feeling forward or back. Anywhere you like, as long as the ping was below bounds and the connection guaranteed. Possession by satellite. An inadvertent effect of nueralink was that surgeons started getting hooked. Old men loving the feeling of new meat again; skin wrapped tight around muscle and sinew. Little tremors temporarily abated via a conduit of young flesh. People of a certain age tell of when the stories first started coming out. Medic schools having to break up other types of work that started happening under neuralink. A pair of students caught in an embrace on the floor of a surgery room. Naked, skin on skin, coiled in thick black wire, adorned only with headsets, gleaming

with sweat, breathing heavy on the sterile floor under the hum of purple fluorescent light and overlapping shadows.

It went to market soon after, how couldn't it.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 21 (Block
43)

32 BAD LUCK LIKE US

"Why do you come here man? I don't particularly like you, you and your bad luck. Your past work doesn't sit well with me either." They paused for a second, "You're late too."

"Mmm. Well, you seem happy enough to take my money anyhow, Jon."

"That's business."

"Sure is. And I like you for your independence, and your independence. Fences best stand alone, not part of some chain that stretches across the countryside. And I like you for your security." He glanced over at the faraday cage in the centre of the room.

"The Faraday is a gimmick man, there, I said it. It's there for boobs like you who get drawn in by shit like that. That pseudobabble."

"What's all the noise?"

A black woman walked into the space from a door Jackie hadn't noticed until now, she had a dressing gown on, and short braids with resistors weaved in. More than that, it seemed her entire jaw had been replaced with a mechanical one. It was a good job, it matched the rest of her skin tone and was grafted without any too noticeable seams. The only thing that'd catch you onto it from a distance was her bottom teeth. They were a

dull silver against her top set of white.

“Don’t worry ‘bout it. Some customers. You’re sick, Livv, remember?”

“Mmmm I guess. I mean, this noise isn’t helping my headache anyway.” She had a necklace on with a pink quartz pendant, she tugged on it absentmindedly between her fingers.

Fergus affected a cough. One to which Jon looked over again.

“Fine man, what’s the 2-fact code?”

Fergus got out a small black box from his pocket with a yellow LED readout. He clicked a button on the side of it.

He hung there for a second, like a program that’s stopped responding. Stared at it, but didn’t move, clicked it again, then again. He muttered to himself. He looked around, laughed. “84ROG”.

Jon typed it into their terminal, Livv sat down on a chair at the base of one of the pillars. “Alright... that’s a...” you could hear her searching. “Heart machine. Hm. That’s some bespoke stuff. Alright..”

Jon switched the vertical monitor to a different tab full of yellow text readouts, walked up to the faraday. “I preferred doing our business remote, worked out better for me. Less weird shit to deal with. You know, ever since I started dealing with you man, feels like all our dealings are burdened. Broken somehow.”

Fergus’ posture was taught, he put himself upright, static. “I know my... reputation. This is the last thing I want from you, don’t worry.”

“Hah, good.” The laugh did nothing to alleviate their mood.

They opened the metal cage door of the faraday with a small black metal key, the whole thing made a rattling noise as Jon entered, the metal spokes reminded Jackie of the skeleton of the wings of a dead bird she’d seen lying dead on a pavement somewhere. A still image of a memory. Jon went to a shelf and

went to grab a cardboard box roughly the size of a small toaster.

a. Where was this? Turn to Page 50 (Block 100)

b. Continue Turn to Page 90 (Block 186)

33 HANDSHAKE

He retracted his offer of a handshake like a dog with a tail between his legs, started talking instead.

“I want you Jackie. Or rather, you could be very useful to me. You could be a lot more useful to yourself too. This nueralink stuff is beneath you, you were something once... I know what sort of wage you’re on Jackie. It’s pretty shit, even for here. I know about Vivie and I know what you’re capable of.”

At this moment, he brandished a look of unearned, self-supposed superiority “I. know.” It didn’t do his face well.

a. Continue Turn to Page 11 (Block 27)

34 GET A MENU

“Let me read the menu. Shit we don’t even have menus. Could we get a menu?” Jackie smiled at the waitress’s face.

“Alright.” She said with an eyebrow raise. The waitress walked off in the direction of the West Africans. The one on the phone was now hunching into the table, the other was in the same position as before but looking out the window into the overexposed outside. The waitress came back, handed the menu to Jackie. Jackie scanned it, found the mains.

You always get sprite with a meal, it’s almost some kind of ritual. What stands out to you in the menu are these:

- a. Squid ink pasta Turn to Page 68 (Block 142)
- b. Spaghetti and meatballs Turn to Page 47 (Block 98)
- c. Margherita Pizza Turn to Page 83 (Block 170)
- d. A pizza with bell pepper on it Turn to Page 67 (Block 139)
- e. Risotto Turn to Page 61 (Block 127)

35 WHAT NOW?

Jackie looked over to Fergus. Gave a face like ‘what fucking now?!’

Livv continued “..Felt it soon as you got in here. Something’s wrong. Energy’s all wrong.” Her expressions filled with vitriol. “Get the fuck out.” At her cheekbone there was a small cut, it was slowly seeping out strawberry-syrup coloured blood.

- a. Continue Turn to Page 92 (Block 191)

36 DAYCARE

Vivienne’s daycare. In a building a small way from here. Going in reminds you of doctor’s waiting rooms.

- a. Continue Turn to Page 79 (Block 165)

37 I DON'T KNOW

“...Shit I don’t know man. I just use the thing.” You scratched the back of your head.

“Well... alright. You heard of Hegelian dialectics? Or dialectics.”

a. Continue

Turn to Page 20 (Block 41)

38 SMOKE BREAK

Mack was smoking outside the restaurant door, sitting on the right hand side of the frame. They'd all paid up; Jackie separately as-per. Fergus was sitting towards the back of the room, talking to what seemed to be the owner in Italian. Vivienne was walking around the room, currently looking at the ice cream freezer. The colours of the ice creams reminded her of RGB. Jackie walked up to Mack.

a. "Spare a cigarette?"

Turn to Page 69 (Block 145)

39 THE FANTASY

Jackie walked into the Fantasy, the low hum of traffic was at once abated by the click of the door into its frame. It was quiet in the Fantasy, it always seemed like it was quieter than it should be. Underfoot were floorboards as wide as the length of your feet, around were a number of mismatched tables strewn about. A handful of small groups sat around those tables, large Men hunched over like gorillas. They'd run out of conversation at least a decade ago.

Orban was tending bar, his hoveraid moved silently above him, clicking as it scanned for liquid levels in the bottles behind him. His right hand was crude brazilian steel, 6 stainless mechanical fingers protruded from the remains of his wrist. The right side of his jaw was slightly lopsided, a defect he held in great repute from some early water war. When he swallowed, it would lock back into place.

The bar was at the other side of the space, it continued lengthwise round a turn in the room. The hoveraid turned to face her, clicked more rapidly, repositioned itself in the air, then set itself back on its regular course. Jackie walked up to the bar. Bottles illuminated in a yellow fade of backlit neon. Orban

had clocked her soon after she'd entered the doorway.

"Jackie. It is you."

- a. Yes it's me Turn to Page 84 (Block 174)
- b. It's not me Turn to Page 89 (Block 183)
- c. Say nothing Turn to Page 38 (Block 79)

40 CAVALRY HORSE

The English weren't famed for their cavalry, that anecdote would fall on deaf ears here. Horses aren't as useful as ships in crossing the channel during war.

- a. Continue Turn to Page 1 (Block 3)

41 HEGEL

"Heard of Hegel I suppose."

"Alright, well there's this theory of cognition kind of like dialectics. There's this huge capability in your brain for facts, non-emotive functional left-brain shit. But people always wondered how that shit was stored. Turns out, it's dialectic based. Opposites attract. Hypothesis, Antithesis, Synthesis. Those sorts of patterns. You get me?" He scratched his nose lightly. "I.E. The pattern by which thoughts occur to you, the patterns they get mutated by in your head. Are encoded in your brain every time you make a thought. You know what patterns are? That's just binary code by another name."

"...Alright, sure."

"Well you know viruses right? You got your classic immutable stuff. Then you got your polymorphic. Then you've got your AI aided viruses. This is in the last 2 categories. And it kills anything it touches. I mean kills and I mean anything.

Figures out any connections it has then fires itself to those connections before frying it in any capacity it can. Or even creating connections itself then passing it on. Its whole USP is cracking open electric skulls.”

a. “Shit.” Turn to Page 30 (Block 60)

b. “...Do androids dream of cracking electric skulls?” Turn to Page 52 (Block 106)

42 SWIMMING

Swim on, swim on. Through the deep blue. Through time and place. At this time of night, in this environment, here - there is only this. You’ve found somewhere else to be, just for a little while.

a. Continue Turn to Page 10 (Block 25)

43 HAIL

“Jackie. Come here, talk to me.” Christof hailed Jackie over as she was walking up to him “You broke feeling, that is... amateur, more than this you broke the fantasy. I can’t have you doing this, people can tell.” He proclaimed to her in Romanian.

a. Try to get your barings a bit more Turn to Page 36 (Block 74)

b. Try to respond Turn to Page 76 (Block 160)

44 GUERNICA

You like Guernica. Legs and arms flying about the place, morbid stuff. Picasso was a prick though. Old style old-world narcissism wrapped in an annoying amount of talent. Reminds

you of here somehow, of Bucharest.

a. Have I lived anywhere else? Turn to Page 90 (Block 185)

b. Better get going Turn to Page 91 (Block 189)

45 SERBAN SHOULD FALL

“You should make Serban fall. Vivie’s talked a bit about him before.”

“Aww, but that’s so mean! He’s just a little boisterous. I think he likes her.” She yawned, the next words of her sentence transitioning from yawn to full speech. “Anyway, I should not say but his parents are a little harsh on him. That is all I will say.”

a. “How long now?” Turn to Page 81 (Block 169)

46 DONE DEAL

“Alright. Turn around, hands behind your back.

She complied. “You guys are done. Fucking done.”

“Over to that pillar.”

“We know people. You’re dead in this town. Shit’s over for you.”

a. Continue Turn to Page 92 (Block 191)

47 SHOTGLASS

Jackie clasped the shotglass between her right thumb and her forefinger, held it there for a second. A pile of colour against other colours. Brown liquid in translucent solid against wood. He drank the other, raising it up to his mouth with his non-prosthetic hand. Jackie closed her eyes and drank it, left the

a. Find some strength

Turn to Page 74 (Block 158)

51 HOW DID YOU FIND ME?

He replied, quicker than anticipated. “I was shopping. You were the price of a planeride and a trip to Bucharest. Seemed like a good deal to me.”

“I’ve got someone for you to meet anyway.” Fergus continued, turning his head around to look at Jackie as he kept moving forward.

a. “Why me?”

Turn to Page 84 (Block 173)

b. “Who?”

Turn to Page 7 (Block 18)

52 CONSENSUAL HALLUCINATION

You are privy to the frontend of a consensual hallucination. Of a type experienced by a good percentage of the richer couple billion people on the blue ball we live on. You work at a neuralink venue, people get to feel what you feel through their headsets or optic sets if they have them. Full immersion in your qualia. There’s variability on the format, the input/output mix is bespoke, so you can have a degree of control over what happens. But boxing, what you do, is naturally all output. People like the thrill of the pain and the adrenaline, without the damage. Ratings are a mix of things, but it’s a byword for user engagement. How many donations, how many viewers, average levels of chemicals in the brain, etc. You aren’t personally doing so hot on that front.

a. Nueralink?

Turn to Page 13 (Block 31)

b. Continue

Turn to Page 21 (Block 43)

53 MINESTRONE

“Fine, whatever. I’ll just have the minestrone. Annnd a sprite.”

“Alright, that’ll be coming soon.” She turned to Vivienne.

“What would you like?” She said with a smile.

“Pizza!” replied Vivienne, she put her hands in the air. “And I want chicken on it.”

“Alright! That won’t be long.” She said ‘alright’ like ‘awe-right’.

The waitress took off and walked slowly to the back.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 67 (Block 140)

54 HAIL 2

“More than this Geishagirl, you are doing this too often.”

Christof swiveled in his chair to look at the metrics on his monitor, user brain levels mapped out to different points in the match. Through cognitive lenses; fear, lust, schadenfreude. As well as this, direct chemical levels in regions of the brain. He moved his coffee up to his mouth. “You’ve got the die-hards but that is it, what am I going to be doing with you when they get bored and move onto the next Boxerchick huh? If you remember to feel how you actually feel, people get all sad. They don’t want to know about your life, your whatever, your history, your blahh blahh glahh glahh. They come here for the boxing.”

a. What does the coffee smell like?

Turn to Page 95 (Block 196)

b. Geishagirl?

Turn to Page 9 (Block 22)

c. “My diehards are just fine, they pay me well.”

Turn to Page 86 (Block 177)

d. "Too much interference? I think that could be remedied by something on your end."
Rub your fingers together.

Turn to Page 3 (Block 7)

e. "Don't give me that shit right now Christof"

Turn to Page 72 (Block 154)

55 4 LANER

They stood in the middle of a 4 lane road. Cars in the other lane kept passing while traffic was backing up behind the taxi. They managed to get onto the pavement and Fergus kept walking in the direction that they would've been going in the taxi, the cage tucked tightly underneath his arm. He never glanced back at the taxi.

"Fucker's getting bold. Whatever." Fergus half mumbled half shouted to himself.

"What?"

"We're off to a guy I know. Down one of these streets. You remember how I said you can only store it in organic matter? Well, we're gonna get some organic matter."

They walked off the street into an alleyway of high-brow Georgian buildings, and came up to a shabby green door set into a red brick wall. It was by some grey metal boxes that hummed electrically, power converters or junction boxes or something. Fergus knocked three times, waited for what felt like an entire minute. Then a voice from the other side said.

"Get in then."

They walked into a basement, a large flat open space interspersed with light brown wooden pillars that would give you splinters if you ran your fingers down one. In the far ends of the rough brick space lay shelves of different depths containing layers and layers of different objects, some of which

were in boxes but most were not, mainly coming through as black angular silhouettes. The basement was quite deep, roughly 12ft high. In the centre of the room sat a giant metal cage with a table, a set of high shelves that looked like the ones outside the room, and a chair. The room's floor was white patterned tile. It reminded Jackie of a place you'd go to a gig in. It smelled like concrete mix and boiled cauliflower.

Jackie hadn't gotten a good look at who opened the door when she came in. She and Fergus stood by the door, they stood on a slight landing just before the space proper. They had a black hoodie on, and burgundy dyed short hair.

"Hey there Jon."

"Stay.. there." ignoring the pleasantries. They looked androgynous, they bounded down into the main area, a small distance to the left of the cage lay a desk, chair, and double monitor terminal setup. One was set up portrait orientation, it had lines and lines of text on it as far as Jackie could tell. They moved to it and punched some commands on the keyboard.

"Stay still."

A mechanical whirr sounded indistinctly, Jackie couldn't figure out where from.

"Always keeping it secure. Just how I like it Jon."

Jon sighed, "Alright, you're clean, far as my machine goes. Now what do you want?"

"I got a package coming in. Via one of your suppliers."

"Fine." They folded into the seat by the desk.

a. Get a better look at Jon. Turn to Page 91 (Block 188)

b. Continue Turn to Page 14 (Block 32)

56 M6

Henri Coandă International was the terminus of the M6 line. The journey came in small snippets of cognisance for Jackie, passing unmanned stations some stopped at and some sailed through. A pair of teenagers holding hands dressed in black on white stripes and vertically marked cut lips passing the carriage aisle. Vivienne there with Jackie on her lap as they went, Vivienne feeling as Jackie felt too; tired. Not talking. Fergus on the other side of the knife etched plastic table, head supporting his hand like a pillar under an overhang, watching the darkness move outside.

The LED readout slid along its display, it read HENRI COANDĂ ALIGHT HERE FOR INTERNATIONAL AIR-. Then it cut out, continuing THE TRAIN TERMINATES HERE.

- a. Black on white stripes Turn to Page 5 (Block 11)
- b. Table etchings Turn to Page 2 (Block 5)
- c. Watch the darkness move Turn to Page 45 (Block 93)

57 SIGN OFF

Fergus signed something in NSL and sent it off. The place they eventually shuffled into was called “Buon Italiano”, uncanny murals of markedly Italian looking people lay on the walls. It was a bit past midday on a Tuesday, two West African men sat on a table near the doorway, both leaning back into the chairs, talking sporadically in bouncing tones while one was on his phone. There was a small section walled off by aluminium shelving, behind it sat a pizza oven and an old nonna who was tall enough to see through the 1st shelving layer, her face looked into the main space through there, she was scanning the

room, Jackie, and the group like a guard dog.

In the middle of the room sat a thin man, who seemed to be in his late 20s early 30s. He was facing away from the front door, looking in the same direction as the pizza oven. He had a dyed blonde buzzcut and thin black framed glasses with easy lenses. In his right hand was a silver fork that was languishing in a shallow bowl with no sign of food in it, there was a light scar on the back of his hand. He was staring at the wall.

Fergus put his hand on Mack's shoulder, Mack hadn't noticed them walking in. "Mack." Fergus said jovially. Mack looked up, surprised. "Shit I was spacing out."

"Mack. Mack. This is Jackie and Vivienne."

"Hey. Nice to meet you two." He craned his neck the long way round to meet them while he sat below them in his seat. He spoke in the general direction of the wall rather than them.

a. Does he remind me of anyone?

Turn to Page 99 (Block 205)

b. What sort of read am I getting on him?

Turn to Page 43 (Block 87)

58 HAZE

You walk past trees with leaves lit up bright green by white streetlight. Their internal structure in focus, blade, vein, and stem.

Under the spotlight, they teeter back and forth with the breeze.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 10 (Block 25)

59 RADIATION, I THINK

"Radiation, I think. I think at least? Though it may just be toxic

stuff, I forget.”

“What is ray-dee-a-tion?”

“Don’t worry about it sweetie.”

“Okay.”

a. Continue

Turn to Page 34 (Block 67)

60 AI ASPECT

“...Yeah, uhh, exactly. But we gotta store it in something obviously. Can’t work on it if you can’t store it somewhere. But because of the AI aspect, you can’t store it anywhere regular. Gotta store it in something it can’t kill, and something that it can’t push out from to anything else.”

“So, we store it in something odd. Organic matter itself. We’ve cooked some up, it’s sitting up there right now... that answer your question?”

“...I suppose.” Jackie paused for a while, she found she was chewing on one of her nails. “But I don’t know why you want it. What you’re gonna be doing with it once I get it for you using this thing.”

“Personal reasons.”

“Personal reasons?”

“...Personal reasons, financial reasons, whatever.” He paused, waved his hand dismissively. A new tone of voice came to him, “I’ve got a buyer.”

“I’m interested in those personal reasons more.”

“Well, be interested all you like.” His voice was raising. “I just got fucked over is all. Project killed because of ‘moral concerns’, ‘company reasons’, bullshit. Someone do themselves in? That’s up to them. Not my fau-”

At that moment the taxi jolted violently, a terrible noise surrounded the space. Jackie found her internal organs shifted around and a rush of blood to the head. The curtain that hides the fact that we’re all in some overelaborate physics simulation

a. Continue

Turn to Page 95 (Block 199)

63 STICKY

Jackie could feel some kind of static stickiness in the air. As if the moisture in her fingers was acting as a conduit for charge.

Jon was covering their head with their hand.

“It’s all... it’s all.” Their head was bleeding.

Livv picked up, facing Fergus, “Get the fuck off them. What the fuck did you do, what the fuck did you do?!” Livv shouted as they moved over to Jon quick. “You get the fuck away from ‘em right now.” She got a small pistol out of one of the pockets of her dressing gown and waved her hands up and down in petulant arcs. She couldn’t stop it it seemed. She was repeating “What did you do?!”.

In response, Fergus turned round and put up one hand, the other he kept locked around his cage. He pulled his head back as if that’d soften a bullet. Livv continued to scream, the lights kept flickering.

“Jackie, fucking do something.” Shouted Fergus.

a. Do something

Turn to Page 40 (Block 82)

64 UNWIND

There was a pause, Christof breathed in through his nose to a crescendo, threw up a hand in a quarter-wave motion and shook his head slightly. “Your money’s in the normal place. Go get it.” He turned away, looked back at his monitor, he sighed against the hum of the machine.

A short pause. Jackie moved on, unwinding from the situation. Felt the weight of the air in the room above her and heard steps behind her in the wake of the end of the conversation. She moved up the tunnel past the stands,

alongside the thick cabling in the tunnel that led to the Hitachi processor that ported out to the Bucharest grid and beyond. A blast of heat dissipated off of the dust soaked fans. She pushed up the stairs and into the changing rooms.

a. What was on the walls? Turn to Page 73 (Block 157)

b. Continue Turn to Page 43 (Block 89)

65 UNUSUAL

“Mmm. ‘un...ushe...ual’” you repeat back to him.

“Yeah, very much so.” He smiles slightly.

a. Back Turn to Page 95 (Block 199)

66 YOU DONE?

“You done?”

“Hm?”

“You programmers. You think that just because you’ve created the world around us that we owe you the time of day when it comes to all your gobbledygook.” Jackie said with a smile.

Mack just chuckled - along with you, not against you.

You continued. “You do all this shit to the world- literally make magic happen, and then you make it mundane. And then you give it names like ‘grebghoul’.” Jackie chuckled, sat down next to Mack, he- in response- had a lightly stupefied look on his face.

“Well... we need some kind of grounding I guess. Our worlds are mostly separate, yours and mine.” He stretched out, continued. “You know, I never actually deal with the real world in my work. The comparatively normie programs I sometimes make? My code never touches actual data, I simply enable the

processing of that data. But you have to bring your own to it, B.Y.O.D.”

a. Continue

Turn to Page 59 (Block 121)

67 SPAGHETTI

Jackie plated up the spaghetti and brought it into the main room. Each hand holding a bowl, and a thumb gripped around each rim, fingers splayed out underneath, fork handle pointing out like antennae. She placed it down on the little table in front of the sofa, blocking Vivienne’s view as Jackie did so. Jackie sat down next to Vivienne, held her arms around her, kissed her on the forehead, and leaned back. Vivienne nestled her head into the well of her neck, eyes still glued onto the screen. They sat there for a while, letting the film wash over. Nausicaa had woken up underneath the forest in ‘the vaults’, a cavern of pale blue and white. Milo was there too, trying to be useful to Nausicaa.

“You need to eat all that Vivie.”

“Mmm, alright Momma.”

“What do you think of Serban?” Jackie asked in Romanian.

“Mmm. He’s mean...”

“Yeah?”

“I don’t like him.”

a. Continue

Turn to Page 60 (Block 123)

68 WHY AM I DOING THIS?

For Vivienne.

a. Back

Turn to Page 44 (Block 91)

69 HEADWIRE

Fergus then asked, “Your implant, how does that shit wire up to your actual head?”

a. “I don’t know.” Turn to Page 17 (Block 37)

b. “Electrodes linking to neuron activity.” Turn to Page 62 (Block 128)

70 TREES FOR DVDS

“Didn’t have to cut down any nice trees for em. Polycarbon not carbon.”

“Mmm. Maybe they cut down fake plastic ones. Fake plastic trees cut down for fake plastic people. Shit, I mean, not you in particular...”

You found yourself making a face at him. He looked away out the window. “Whatever.”

a. Continue Turn to Page 77 (Block 163)

71 KNOW WHAT NOT

“I don’t know man. I just don’t know. Like, why are we always meant to know? Why can’t we just say ‘I don’t know’.”

Mack chuckled at this.

“We’ve got forces beyond our control trying to stop us from knowing. Isn’t it fair enough to not know sometimes?”

“Come on now. You know that’s not true. Or at least it’s not what’s happening.”

“No! Remember, right now I don’t know. That’s the point I’m making.”

Mack chuckled again, a slightly nervous one. “Well, you’re gonna have to find a way regardless.”

At this point Vivienne looked up to you. Her eyes looking straight into yours while her hands played with her blocks

without the rest of her needing to engage. You didn't know how to respond, you ended up just not.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 56 (Block 115)

72 SICK

Not a good idea. Hold it in, soldier. We've still got a march ahead.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 63 (Block 131)

73 LANGUAGES

London at this time, as it has for countless years, has countless languages and dialects spoken. Soft and hard amalgamations of different languages from completely different locations and even language families. Indo-European with Dravidian, multiple kinds of creoles. Divergences within dialects. Accents associated with these dialects that are regional within London. A tapestry of understanding and misunderstanding. You hear nothing you recognise. You have to be there to get it, man.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 1 (Block 3)

74 BARINGS

Jackie stared vacantly into Chris' face, or rather, stared at the space it occupied, and what it consisted of. She heard the words first, and then saw his facial muscles catch up. It felt good, like watching snow melt in a timelapse.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 25 (Block 54)

75 PICK IT UP

Before you could, Orban picked it up, took it to his eyes, grunted.

“Fergus. He’s called Fergus.” He said in English quite quickly, he continued to study it. The hoveraid passed above, presumably it read it. He passed it back to her.

It read Fergus. I leave here by Sunday, midday. Then an address on the other side of town.

“I would not bother with it.” Orban said in Romanian, moving down the bar slightly. “I would not bother with him. He would know that I would have that behind here, but he did that anyway. If he didn’t know, he is an idiot.” He grabbed the roll of plastic notes.

“Tonight, I don’t break even.” He rocked the roll back and forth in tense motions, he nodded along with the motion. “But even so, this is for you.” He placed it down firmly next to her, grabbed a bottle from behind him, took out its cork with a shoom sound, poured out two shots in front of Jackie.

a. Take the drink. Turn to Page 22 (Block 47)

b. Leave the drink, just let it sit there. Turn to Page 5 (Block 12)

76 SUITCASE CRACKLE

The sound of suitcases crackle at the cold air as they roll over bevelled brick floor.

a. “How did you find me, Fergus?” Turn to Page 24 (Block 51)

b. Continue Turn to Page 55 (Block 114)

77 HEART MACHINE

“A heart machine.” He replied immediately.

“Heart machine?”

“Yeah.”

“What does it do?”

He paused. Regardless of any tension between them, Jackie could feel he would have literally nothing to say to her if it weren't for the job.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 34 (Block 69)

78 DRASTIC

Jackie looked into Mack's eyes.

“Give me a cigarette, Mack.”

“Sure.” He got one out from somewhere on him.

Jackie took it. “Be quiet for a second.”

“..Sure..”

Jackie put it to her mouth, moved in closer and over Mack, supporting herself with her arm planted against the sofa cushion, and made her cigarette touch the end of his. It lit. She flashed him her eyes. He sat stupefied still.

She breathed in, warmth filled her lungs, and blew out to the side of them. Taking the cigarette out and holding it in her hand, in a pose like she was offering someone to take that hand.

Mack breathed in through his nose, darted to the side to put his fag in the ashtray, put himself back, and moved in to kiss Jackie.

It tasted of him, like metal and beer.

END

79 IT'S NOONE

You don't say anything.

Orban says nothing back.

You continue not to say anything.

A sympathetic, silly look came across his face. He got out a glass, and poured a pint. Not saying anything.

a. Take it, admit it's you Turn to Page 98 (Block 202)

b. Take it, don't admit it's you Turn to Page 4 (Block 9)

80 CHRISTOF

Christof has never looked worse than right now. Spilling slightly over his blue plastic chair before a wooden table. Right fist clasped around a lit cigarette. His terminal oriented vertically, slowly listing the readouts of incoming transactions in pale white. Reports generate then replace themselves at top-right of the screen. Small points of light animating themselves in a sea of brownish black.

Christof's glasses were much too slight to match his bloated appearance. He reminded Jackie of an old politician/spin doctor called Alaistar Campbell, if he'd put on weight and was Romanian.

a. Back Turn to Page 100 (Block 207)

81 ME NO SHOOT

"I don't want to shoot you Livv."

"I don't want you here you fucking cunts. Look what you fucking did to Jon. Shit this is all wrong. Just get the fuck out."

a. Figure out what Fergus
wants out of the situation Turn to Page 17 (Block 35)

b. Get Livv somewhere out
the way

Turn to Page 22 (Block 46)

82 SOMETHING

Jackie got out of her stupor. Rushed up to Livv, bashed into her side, grabbed at the gun, couldn't quite get her hands on it. Fergus sidled off toward the front door while this was going on. Jon was on their knees on the floor in the cage, leaning against its frame.

Whiplash of the ears. Two shots rang out into the ceiling. Dust fell down from it. The light that hadn't burst was now pulsing. Jackie wrangled it out of Livv's hands. Pointed it at her. Both stood convulsing, panting.

Now what?

a. "I don't want to shoot you."

Turn to Page 39 (Block 81)

b. "You stay right fucking
there."

Turn to Page 78 (Block 164)

83 METAL CONTRACT

Jackie heard the sound of thin metal contracting from heat through the passage to the back. Leaned backwards to look through. Along the corridor were rectangular cubicles, stacked on each other along the wall. With small ladders leading into each. The floor underfoot had a layer of tough foam mattressing, the school gym kind. Vivienne was in the 2nd from the back on the top level. Past this corridor was another set of rooms of the same cubicles, Vivienne had graduated from one of them to the corridor in the last month or so.

"Mmm." Replied Jackie. "Different system than they used

on me.”

“Yeah, it’s an older system than what they’re coming out with nowadays. But I’ve kept up to date with what they push out to me occasionally.” Jackie turned and ambled into the corridor. Moved to Vivienne’s cubicle, looked in at her, her lightly closed eyes behind the tough plastic screen, fluorescent blue haze. Sofia was standing against the entrance to the passage, one hand on her hip and one above her head against the frame.

a. What system is it? Turn to Page 99 (Block 206)

b. Continue Turn to Page 96 (Block 201)

84 INSPECT STRANGER

He was old, but his demeanour didn’t match that fact. He had an energy and an intensity to him. But the clothes he wore seemed arbitrary, they bore no discernible intentional connotations. It’s as if whether he presented one way or the other wasn’t something he considered anymore.

a. Back Turn to Page 80 (Block 167)

85 THE EYES HAVE IT

Jackie sat beside Vivienne on the bed, looking into her eyes. Filtering her hands through Vivienne’s hair. The suburbs here sounded different at night than Bucharest did. The rain pattered onto the balcony outside the window. The orange of the streetlight was filtered through the off-white fabric of the curtains. She couldn’t tell what those eyes of Vivienne’s were thinking.

“Goodnight.” She kissed Vivienne on the forehead and left, closing the door as she did. Leaving her to her world of things

as they really are. A good night's rest and a ceiling to stare at.

Mack was sitting in largely the same position as he was before. But on the shabby wooden table next to the chair, he had gotten the heart machine out of its box.

He started lighting a cigarette, talking as he did so. "You know, I generally have a rule about my employers." The cigarette lay on his lip. "Try to know as little as possible. Keeps shit simple, less on you and less can be taken from you in any scan." He got out his lighter, warm soft flame against its end. "But given the nature of this. I've made an exception." He took a tired drag, let it steep, and blew out. His demeanour relaxed. "Recon work isn't my forte" he said with a wave of his hand, "so I've got a grebghoul. Lowest... sapience? level viable for this kind of work without getting spotted by anything." Mack had his left forefinger extended loosely in Jackie's general direction, he was shaking his hand up and down as he spoke as if to reassure of something, mostly to himself. "Got it running now, tracking leads. Anything it picks up, it'll tell me. And I'll tell you."

Jackie didn't know what to say. Was there anything to say? She looked into his eyes, his black on black on black, with her own tired pair.

Mack continued, taking another puff, "It's slower than anything heavy duty. But it's quieter. I don't want to have it on Pandora's records that I'm beating around their bush y'know?"

a. "...grebghoul?" Turn to Page 55 (Block 113)

b. "You done?" Turn to Page 33 (Block 66)

86 I DON'T KNOW OLD HOUSE

"Yes we are sweetie."

"Ok."

a. Continue

Turn to Page 41 (Block 85)

87 READ

He looks like he woke up about an hour ago. Programmers aren't known for their good sleep schedules or timekeeping.

He's got a pokerface on right now though. Not too easy from his face, but his posture is pretty closed. Crabby.

a. How come?

Turn to Page 80 (Block 168)

b. Posture bad from sitting down all day programming?

Turn to Page 60 (Block 124)

88 YOUR PUB

The Fantasy is a pub. Your pub, you deem. There isn't much there beyond a slight glint of recognition, but you wish to like the place. You need a drink, just one.

a. Sounds good to me

Turn to Page 19 (Block 39)

b. I'm fine thanks, no drink today

Turn to Page 58 (Block 118)

c. One?

Turn to Page 73 (Block 156)

89 PORCELAIN

Jackie lumbered in, the walls white porcelain tile. Moved over to a mirror in the corner set into the wall with a counter underneath. The shape of the tiles curved where the wall met the counter at a right angle. She crumpled into a chair before the mirror.

There were a set of bottles there, on the left side of the mirror were ones used to apply makeup and on the right to

remove. Jackie wetted cotton pads in a little bowl, and then dabbed her face with makeup remover.

- a. Look into the mirror Turn to Page 61 (Block 126)

90 WHERE ARE WE GOING FERGUS?

“I already told you, I’ve got someone for you to meet.”

“I know that. How about an address?”

“Mmm.” He rubbed his chin. “I’m shit with place names, it’s an old build, don’t worry we’ll be fine. I know by look and feel.”

He’s annoyingly relaxed, doubt you could get anything else useful out of him.

- a. Continue Turn to Page 3 (Block 8)

91 LINK SPLIT

Jackie lunged at it, managed a hook to his side.

Then her link split. The last .5 seconds repeated again and again for what felt like 5. The sounds of her lunge coming in rhythmically, repeating like a beat.

She came to on the floor. Sava was towering above her, her head throbbed but it was a hollow feeling. Like her body didn’t recognise it as hurt but as something else.

- a. Why am I doing this, this
shit hurts Turn to Page 34 (Block 68)
- b. Feel the pain more Turn to Page 59 (Block 122)
- c. Look up to Sava Turn to Page 62 (Block 130)

92 ROMANIAN IN DIFFERENCE

Romanian is looser with its sentence structure. You definitely

think ‘in’ language. Romanian is nice, it helps you come to thoughts quicker. No faffing about with extra preposition before saying what you want to say. You know what you mean anyway, it’s you you’re talking to.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 70 (Block 148)

93 DARKNESS MOVE

You watch the darkness move, it doesn’t watch back, it simply observes. Like looking into the eyes of a whale.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 37 (Block 76)

94 ALRIGHT ALRIGHT

“Alright, well it seems alright. Alright enough to sleep in for a while anyway. Where to?”

“A fence. Hard to explain where it is, kind of by design.” He swung a duffel bag over his shoulder. “We’re collecting.”

a. Continue

Turn to Page 9 (Block 23)

95 LONDON LOVES

You like it more than Paris at least. Paris is designed to be beautiful as long as you conform to it. London’s not been designed at all. Its structure is naturally selected, somewhat at least.

Bucharest is more like a big town than a proper city now.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 70 (Block 148)

96 FARADAY

Jon reached for the cardboard box again, picked it up. Fergus

walked up to the faraday.

“Put it in this.” He placed his own metal cage at the base of the metal door with a rattle.

Jon rolled their eyes. “Come on man. This shit’s just excessive.” Jon sighed. “Alright, sure.” Jon moved further to the door.

Jackie could feel something, a slight pressure in her temples. Livv began grimacing, sucking air through her teeth. Jon placed Fergus’ cage into the room’s one. Livv got out of her chair. Time felt like it was slowing. “Nah nah. This shit ain’t right, these energies ain’t right.” She was squeezing on her pendant as she walked fast up to the centre of the room. “Babes, I want them ou-.”

Jon placed it in Fergus’ hands. And then, Jackie swore she saw a slight flash as it hit his hands, but it was too quick.

One of the lights above them hummed too hard and burst with a ‘snap’. Lights out. Then light violently flickering. A terrible electric distortion rang out across the room. Jackie felt her muscles contort, nearly falling over. Some moisture within had been rendered taught and brittle.

The pressure was gone in Jackie’s head, replaced by a ringing of the ears and confusion. The world caught up quick. Every screen, every light was flickering.

Jon’s head was wedged against the doorframe, they were on their knees on the floor, inert.

- a. Catch your breath Turn to Page 70 (Block 147)
- b. Just watch Turn to Page 46 (Block 97)
- c. Protest Turn to Page 69 (Block 146)

97 JUST WATCH

This is nice, watching.

Not exactly what Fergus had in mind when he brought you here though.

Fergus had fallen onto his knees. There was dust in the air. “Christ. It doesn’t matter. Shit Jon, what does this cost you then I’m outta here. Jon? Jon?” Fergus was shaking them.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 32 (Block 63)

98 SPAGHETTI AND MEATBALLS

“I’ll have the spaghetti and meatballs. Annnd a sprite.”

“Alright, that’ll be coming soon.” She turned to Vivienne.

“What would you like?” She said with a smile.

“Pizza!” replied Vivienne, she put her hands in the air. “And I want chicken on it.”

“Alright! That won’t be long.” She said ‘alright’ like ‘awe-right’.

The waitress took off and walked slowly to the back.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 50 (Block 101)

99 KATIE

Jackie looked in the mirror while her hands did the work. She was in her room, just about to go out. Katie was sitting on her bed, buoyant against the springs in the mattress, looking out the window to their side. At the middle space, between the buildings, elevated hundreds or so meters in the air. Watching traffic.

"It's been so long since I've gone out. I feel out of practice."

"Mmm" replied Katie.

"I hate putting on this concealer. It always ends up oxidising. Do you think it looks ok?" Soft yellow light fell onto her face from the light above the mirror.

"Yeah it looks good, don't worry."

Jackie continued to apply makeup, a pause, she started studying Katie. Katie had large ringlets of jet black hair that went just past her shoulders, 3 stud piercings; 2 spiderbite under the right side of her bottom lip, 1 through her right nostril. Her insert eyes met Jackie's. Low purple with flecks of lilac just brighter than ambient light. They both looked at each other for a second, a smile came across her face. She looked down.

"Sorry I just... You're right, it's been a while. My head's in other places I suppose."

"Fuck him, you know?" Jackie replied "We're gonna have fun tonight. Tempt is on, then we've got an hour or two of whatever they play after."

"Yeah I just... I don't know, I feel tired."

"Tired, how?"

"Tired like... you just remembered to actually feel all the pains and aches that you've accepted as part of waking up and getting out of bed and doing what you do. Y'know?" She was looking out the window again. She had a similar expression to the first one except her mouth was closed now. Lips pursed

together, then “Like you feel it in your back in the same way you started feeling it when you were fifteen. And then you start feeling it in your head as if it was there somehow. Then it’s in what you see, everything around you pushing onto you somehow. People, things, the weather, what time it is, colours.”

Jackie found herself copying Katie’s expression, still applying her concealer but slower now. Feeling more and more aware of her hand, as if the pressures it exerted on her face weren’t her own. Their eyes met again, and Jackie felt the need to look away. Jackie moved the brush away, leaned back into her chair, towards the direction of Katie behind her.

“Girl, I love you.”

“I love you too.” Katie replied back, the corners of her mouth curling upwards.

“I get it, I’m not happy.” She swivelled round to face her, “I’m spending way too much on rent, my work’s nonexistent, I don’t do anything anymore I just occupy myself so I don’t have to think. I woke up and found myself 3 years older than I wanted to be.” Jackie took her hands out and Katie put her hands in hers in turn. “But we have to keep going. You and me.”

Palms squeezed lightly together. “And anyway, you look way too gorgeous right now to be looking that sad before we go out.”

Katie smiled, exhaled a small laugh through her nose. The smile slowly dissipated, she clasped up her mouth again.

“I guess I felt like there’d be a point where I could have experienced a couple of things, I could have got a couple of things done and then I’d have no more things to do. But I’d be happy about it.” She shuffled in place on the bed, springs shifting underneath her weight.

Jackie let go, swivelled round slow again, got back to work. “Cmon. We’ve got a long way left to go. And tonight’s the

furthest point you have between you and the day you die.”

“Mmmm. I don’t know if what you said really meant anything, but alright.”

Katie looked out the window again, occupied. Lit a cigarette, took it to her mouth and took a drag. Smoke billowing out towards the window, catching the deep red light pouring into the room from the flow ads outside. A dozen syncopated light sequences overlapping her face in their own rhythm.

“I wonder if Damien will be there...”

a. Continue

Turn to Page 19 (Block 38)

100 DEADBIRD

Manchester. By a bus stop in the drizzle, you stood above it a giant - its only mourner.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 90 (Block 186)

101 BORING CHOICE

“Boring choice.” Fergus chimed.

“Well it’s my own. What’s up with that?” Jackie heard the whirr of Mack’s eyes again, though he did not move.

Fergus ran his hands through his hair, leaned back, “Just thought it’d be kind to get a hot meal in y’a. Didn’t imagine you’d’ve said no, but here we are.” He brandished his teeth. “No matter. You can pay for yours yourself.”

a. Continue

Turn to Page 74 (Block 159)

102 MISSING ORBAN

I think so, in his own sense. He’s a hard man, but there are wrinkles in that hard shell which show kindness. A small few

are for you.

The money helps too, a bar needs patrons.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 79 (Block 165)

103 YES NEW HOUSE

“For now, it is sweetie.”

“Ok.”

a. Continue

Turn to Page 94 (Block 194)

104 POCKET CHANGE

You search your pockets for change. Your brain tells you the situation ain't right to get out your card and do that whole dance.

You find £4 in coins. You put them on the seat you sat on, the feeling of the soft cushioning bewilders you a little in the current circumstances. Cabbie sees you do it, but he stares ahead looking at the road in front instead. He shakes his head and swears resignedly again.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 26 (Block 55)

105 RUSH

“Why the rush, girl? You are rushing but you go nowhere.”

“I've got to pick up my kid; Vivienne.”

An eyebrow raised on Orban's face, “Ah, I did not know you were a mother, that is funny.” He scratched his salt and pepper beard. Orban's face wasn't the most pleasant to look at, but it was definitely one that was hard to look away from. Like brutalist architecture.

He had been rebuilt more than once, which made sense with how he looked. But he had managed to save his non-prosthetic,

snow blue eyes. They pierced into you like a thousand people watched from behind them.

“Yeah, just sort of happened I suppose. Someone’s gotta be having kids here. Doubt you’d have wanted to have birthed her for me.”

He smiled, then chuckled, a top row of small, perfectly symmetrical, gleaming teeth on red gums. “I suppose not!” he boomed. Jackie finished her drink, placed it back down, Orban took the glass and put it behind the counter.

a. Continue Turn to Page 79 (Block 165)

106 ELECTRIC SKULLS

“What?” Fergus replied.

“Huh?”

The ticking of the engine’s motor came back into auditory frame. The buildings outside transposed as they went round a corner.

a. Continue Turn to Page 30 (Block 60)

107 BAD BOOKS

“That makes no sense, man. If the book’s shit dump it. Anyway, a book? I know they’re nice collectibles and they’ve got that historic feel about them, but it just reminds me of that fad for them a while like 3 years back. Seems wasteful to me. All that paper.”

“Well, you’ve got DVDs. That’s pretty oldhead. You weren’t even about when they were around proper.”

a. “No trees cut down for
DVDs” Turn to Page 35 (Block 70)

b. "They came with the flat"

Turn to Page 8 (Block 20)

108 NOT SURE HOW I'M DOING

"I'm not really sure how I'm doing. Things happen and I happen."

"Hah! I think you've cracked it."

You look at Sofie, a bit confused.

"Well... half of it. Start enjoying it and you've got the other half. You know, I think you could learn a lot from Vivienne. Or maybe just kids, they love their little plans; they live to the fullest. Every day is an adventure. She's doing well! Speaks good Romanian, despite the state you brought her in, good sums. Likes grapes and crisps and sandwiches."

a. Continue

Turn to Page 40 (Block 83)

109 AIN'T WHAT SHE USED TO BE

"I'm not quite who I say I am Orban."

"Mm." Orban grunted.

Jackie rested into the bar and looked up at him, cupping her jaw in her hand.

"I was someone dangerous." She grinned.

"Mmmm."

Jackie still held the napkin in her other hand, she looked at it.

"You do not need to be again." Orban said. He place his hand on the napkin as well. It read 'Fergus, I beneath his grasp and hers. "Vivienne does not need that."

"Yeah. Maybe." Jackie replied, and lightly dropped it onto the bar. Orban took it, and loosened it from his grasp into the bin.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 28 (Block 56)

110 COOL GLASSES

“Your glasses are cool.”

“What?” Sophie’s eyes lit up, then she tempered a smile. “Are you sure? They work for me I suppose but I do not think they are ‘cool’, or at least other people don’t think so.” She said, signing quotes in the air as she said ‘cool’.

She looked away for a second and inputted something into her computer, smiling.

“You and Vivienne are so alike. Vivienne’s doing well! Speaks good Romanian, despite the state you brought her in, good sums. Likes grapes and crisps and sandwiches.”

a. Continue

Turn to Page 40 (Block 83)

111 THINK ABOUT HIM

“I don’t like thinking about him’. I say that, but he’s one of those things I seem to not be able to stop myself from talking about when asked.”

Mack looked at her, at least she thought he was looking at her, eyes notwithstanding. Not speaking, waiting.

a. “What’s up with you?”

Turn to Page 95 (Block 199)

112 GODMOTHER

“I’m your fairy godmother.” He smiled a sickly smile at her. Jackie could hear Orban clattering at something under the bar.

a. “No, as in, what’s your name?”

Turn to Page 58 (Block 119)

b. “Why are you here?”

Turn to Page 90 (Block 187)

113 GREBGHOUL

“Mmmm. Grebghoul.”

“Hm?”

“Silly name. ‘Greb’ ‘Ghoul’.”

“Hehe, yeah that’s true.”

“You programmers are so odd. You do all this shit to the world- literally make magic happen, and then you make it mundane. And then you give it names like ‘grebghoul’.” Jackie chuckled, sat down next to Mack, he- in response- had a lightly stupefied look on his face.

“Well... we need some kind of grounding I guess. Our worlds are mostly separate, yours and mine.” He stretched out, continued. “You know, I never actually deal with the real world in my work. The comparatively normie programs I sometimes make? My code never touches actual data, I simply enable the processing of that data. But you have to bring your own to it, B.Y.O.D.”

a. Continue

Turn to Page 59 (Block 121)

114 STYX

Vivienne had her hands wrapped around the straps of her bag, she wasn’t talking.

You and a handful others amassed in a line at the checkin. The slow amble of a thousand souls in the styx of an airport. The plane was an electroprop, behind the blades at Jackie’s seat it whirred and whistled. Vivienne winced as the pressure built in her ears. The steward’s safety dance came in Romanian and English, sleep came without dreams.

Heathrow arrived in miniature below a blue white haze of cloud. The terminal heaved with the weight of 10 thousand journeys. Of energy and laconic understanding. A consortium

of Japanese businessmen in suits, a lone old woman with a wrinkled red leather bag. It smelled of cooked bacon rolls with red sauce, yellow floor cleaner and sweet mochas. Jackie remembered she had forgotten a shirt she liked.

Another line now, named Elizabeth. She heard once it was the last they built in wheelstock. London was an aggregating mass of infrastructure, luck, and graft. They glided down lit pale concrete tunnels in air conditioned carriages. Vivienne ran up and down the sparsely attended train. There were points she was hidden entirely by the train barrel's articulation as it went round a corner. Fergus was reading a tome of a book called 'Infinite jest', Jackie was supporting her head with her arm against the well of a window.

- a. "Where are we going Fergus?" Turn to Page 44 (Block 90)
- b. Sit, breathe. Turn to Page 72 (Block 153)
- c. Infinite jest? Turn to Page 6 (Block 15)

115 NON SENSE

"You know, it just doesn't make much sense to me really. Normally I'd do some looking myself, but seems this Jon guy has their shit tight. The way you describe it, it doesn't make much sense either. No fault of your own of course." He took a small gulp from his can.

Jackie moved to a chair opposite Mack. "I'm telling you man, that shit felt wrong. And the taxi too? Probabilities don't

work like that for weird shit.”

He held up the nearing empty can up to the sky against his mouth. “Probabilities do work like that actually.”

Jackie responded with a sour look..

“...But yeah it’s odd.”

“Where did you go today mummy?”

“I went out to get something sweetie. Don’t you worry.”

“Hmmm ok.” Vivienne yawned an unaffected yawn.

“Alright missie let’s get you to bed.”

“Mmmm ok.”

Jackie took her hand, walked her through the corridor to the room Fergus had set out for them. It was small, it reminded her of the size of her bedroom growing up as a kid. There were two single beds without sheets on opposite walls from eachother.

“Mummy, is this our new house?”

- a. “Yes.” Turn to Page 51 (Block 103)
- b. “No.” Turn to Page 23 (Block 48)
- c. “I’m not sure.” Turn to Page 95 (Block 198)

116 SURVIVING

“I’m surviving I guess.” Jackie looked around, rocked on her heels. “You know, we weren’t really made to live as long as we do.”

Jackie tapped on a metal radiator, it responded with a dull thnk. Sofia looked concerned.

“Sometimes it seems a bit much to me is all.”

“Mmm. Well, ok. I am doing okay, you know? I am much older than you are and it gets ok, you know? Anyway, you have a little one. Vivienne’s doing well! Speaks good Romanian, despite the state you brought her in, good sums. Likes grapes

and crisps and sandwiches.”

a. Continue

Turn to Page 40 (Block 83)

117 SAVA

Sava was in his mid twenties, and had recently given up on having hair. One day he came in with it shaved off and that was that. Head shining like a river in the hot sun. His eyes sat wide on his head.

a. Back

Turn to Page 1 (Block 1)

118 NO DRINK

Hm, that’s not like you. You’re no alcoholic but you like a drink to calm down. But it’s a good a day as any for a change of pace. And drink doesn’t come for free.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 92 (Block 190)

119 WHAT'S YOUR NAME?

“I’m Fergus. It’s good to meet you.” He held out his hand for a handshake, with his other he rocked his empty glass back and forth. He was reclined lazily in his chair.

a. “Why are you here?”

Turn to Page 16 (Block 33)

120 VIVIENNE AGE

Vivienne is 4 years old. Dark ringlet hair frames her face and goes down to just above her shoulders. She’s smart, a thinker.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 79 (Block 165)

121 THIS BOY

a. Do something drastic to shut this boy up.

Turn to Page 38 (Block 78)

b. Just rest, you need it

Turn to Page 13 (Block 30)

122 FEEL THE PAIN MORE

Sure!

The pain comes in low waves embedded beneath your scalp, it spreads across the top of your skull like coloured dye being dropped in a glass of clear water. It tastes like stepping on tiny shards of glass barefoot.

a. Back

Turn to Page 44 (Block 91)

123 FERGUS

Jackie woke up at 0:33am. She had gone to sleep at 10:50. Just late enough to feel tired enough to fall into slumber, but not late enough for her body to permit her uninterrupted rest. Vivienne was there with her, nestled into the well of her arm. The blue glow of the television screen's landing page for after a film had finished greeted her eyes. Those eyes felt tired, the light had dried them out through her eyelids.

Vivienne continued to lie in the well of her arm, despite Jackie's movements that should've woken her.

She carried Vivienne to her bed in the corner of the room. A single mattress on top of a tough, plastic-wrapped wooden frame, and tucked her in. She needed to go out. She found a marker pen and a4 and wrote a note to Vivienne that she was out for a while, she could read well, it would be a little challenge for her. Down the stairs and into the cool October night.

Jackie walked past rows of cars, old Datsuns, Mitsubishis, Fords. Like rocks on the bank of a river. Past a store named "Convenience for U!" in English with a Romanian subtitle. The night felt good, above her lay no stars but Jackie felt a certain weight as she looked up, like she was swimming through it. Bucharest's haze was a different colour than the streetlights she had as a kid.

a. Swimming Turn to Page 21 (Block 42)

b. Haze Turn to Page 29 (Block 58)

124 CRABBY PROGRAMMING

Hah. Maybe. But it definitely seems more than that, his movements are a little stunted. More info is needed. Sit down, grab a chair.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 64 (Block 133)

125 EXHAUST SOOTED STREETS

There's only bustle here. Any beauty to London is either incidental or was cordoned for, and then built around. Corporately ordained. God through transcendent, enlightened business activity.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 1 (Block 3)

126 PICASSO

You are halfway through taking off your makeup, sheer white facepaint. In the reflection you look like a Picasso painting of a woman he wasn't fond of at the time.

a. Make a silly face

Turn to Page 63 (Block 132)

b. Any Picasso paintings I like?

Turn to Page 21 (Block 44)

c. Better get going

Turn to Page 91 (Block 189)

127 RISOTTO

"I'll have your mushroom risotto. Annd a sprite."

"Alright, that'll be coming soon." She turned to Vivienne.

"What would you like?" She said with a smile.

"Pizza!" replied Vivienne, she put her hands in the air. "And I want chicken on it."

"Alright! That won't be long." She said 'alright' like 'aweright'.

The waitress took off and walked slowly to the back.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 50 (Block 101)

128 ELECTRODE

“...Subdermal electrodes that correspond to neurons and regions of the brain right?” You scratched the back of your head.

“Well yeah, but that’s output... alright. You heard of Hegelian dialectics? Or dialectics.”

a. Continue

Turn to Page 20 (Block 41)

129 WHERE AM I?

The clearing used to be a boxing gym, but now it’s mainly a seedy neuralink output venue for all sorts and some spare rooms with the occasional industrial plastic-metal chair.

a. Back

Turn to Page 1 (Block 1)

130 TRICKY

“You are a tricky bitch, Jackie.” He spat out to the side.

Jackie groaned, she felt sick.

“A tricky tricky bitch.”

The timer on the wall gave her 5 seconds to get up, 4 seconds. Her limbs moved as if possessed. She found herself up again. Drunk of the head. The bell dinged, but Sava waltzed around on the spot as if it hadn’t.

“You are letting this go to your head Jackie. You know that is not what they want.”

Jackie stayed silent, in the trench of her mind she found some strength.

“You keep going like this? You got no metrics left.”

a. Get up and fight

Turn to Page 100 (Block 208)

131 UNIMAGINE

“Fucker. Cabbie! What the fuck was that?”

The cars behind were increasing in number quickly.

He kept swearing, unimaginatively. “Fuck sake. What the fuck was that. Hey I’m talking to you you Polac, what the fuck was that?”

“I do not know. Fuck you! The car, it is, it just fucking stopped. The computer inside, it is making no sense. All the lights are just flashing.” He rocked back and forth in the front of the taxi, hitting at various controls with futility.

“...that fucker. Alright, we get out. We’re gonna walk the rest of the way. Come on Jackie.” He opened the door.

The cabbie tore round to face him as he left. “Fuck you, you pay me now!”

Fergus was outside of the cab now. “Did you get me there pal? No you didn’t, so I’m not paying you. Come on Jackie.” Jackie got out.

“Jebane kurwy. Banda pierdolonych złodziei.”

a. Try and pay him.

Turn to Page 51 (Block 104)

b. Leave it.

Turn to Page 26 (Block 55)

132 FACE

You make a silly face. It feels good to do so, muscles in your face contorting into a gurn that’d amuse any self respecting 5 year old.

a. Back

Turn to Page 61 (Block 126)

b. Better get going

Turn to Page 91 (Block 189)

133 WE'LL SIT

A pause. Then Fergus said “We’ll sit down.” And they did, the table had a thick white tablecloth that felt slightly rougher to touch than it looked. Jackie looked around the table. There was 1 more chair than needed. Vivienne’s arms reached just above the table level. Mack had black on black eyes. In them lay a reflection of the mirror on the opposite wall in front of him and behind Jackie. Jackie could just about make out small differences on the smooth surface, then realised a very low whirr she was occasionally hearing were the eyes as well. They were darting around the room.

“So. Mack, Jackie. Jackie, Mack. Mack does his computers. He’ll be guiding you in the job we’re gonna be doing. I need a piece of software outta Pandora. Then we move onto the next part.” He grinned and rubbed his chin, undid his thin ponytail. Mack stayed silent, he looked stilted in his tight yellow smiley face t-shirt, it didn’t match his eyes, which betrayed nothing by themselves. Jackie recognised them now, they were jockey-tech. ‘Midnight vision’ brand, didn’t need a headset; you could just connect through a headport and have the sensorium disabled through the eyes. A tall waitress came over, she had strawberry blonde hair and freckles. “But first, food. Give me a plate of carbonara and a cloudy lemonade. Mack’ll have the same except give him a coke. Jackie’ll have minestrone and a water.” Jackie felt her stomach contract slightly. If Fergus noticed any change in her, he didn’t show it. The waitress’s hand paced through the order, it would be picked up in the kitchen.

“You getting this?”

The waitress replied in a smooth English accent. “Minestrone and a water.” She said it like ‘wough-ah; as her hand made the same motions in ASL.

a. “Wait, I want something else.” Turn to Page 65 (Block 134)

b. Weird. Real weird, but let it slide Turn to Page 65 (Block 135)

134 SOMETHING ELSE

“Wait. I’ll have something else. I don’t want minestrone.”

The table shuffled into quiet. The waitress’ hand stood dormant.

“Alright, uhhh. What would you like?”

“I’m not sure uhh...”

a. Get something you know will be on the menu Turn to Page 83 (Block 170)

b. Get a menu Turn to Page 16 (Block 34)

c. Just get what he ordered for you Turn to Page 25 (Block 53)

135 COMING SOON

“Alright, that’ll be coming soon.” She turned to Vivienne.

“What would you like?” She said with a smile.

“Pizza!” replied Vivienne, she put her hands in the air. “And I want chicken on it.”

“Alright! That won’t be long.” She said ‘alright’ like ‘aweright’.

The waitress took off and walked slowly to the back.

a. Continue Turn to Page 74 (Block 159)

136 CAR ARC

The arcing sound of a car moving towards you fills your ears as you walk down the slightly dusty pavement. The light sits golden and undisturbed, a haze has crept over the horizon. The trees in the wind give a smell that reminds you of times when you weren't sore from boxing matches.

You should get going though.

- a. Back Turn to Page 91 (Block 189)

137 SHORT STAY

“How long we staying?”

“..uuhhh a week? No more than a week and a bit. We're all good for it. Place goes on the market in a month. I know a guy. Enough for what we're doing. It's fine. Even has a kettle.” He said, brandishing a mug of tea and a smile. “Got a working fridge and everything. Anyway, thought you could do with somewhere to park Vivienne.”

- a. “Alright, well it seems alright.” Turn to Page 45 (Block 94)

- b. “I want her to come with me.” Turn to Page 86 (Block 178)

138 WORK'S GETTING TO ME

“Fine enough Sophie, getting it in the neck from work. But I guess that's it.”

“Ah, always the worst.” Sofia was in her early 40s, frizzy brown-blond hair just above her shoulders in a loose bob. She wore a purple top and a straw coloured cardigan.

- a. Continue Turn to Page 40 (Block 83)

139 BELL PEPPER PIZZA

"I'll have a bell pepper pizza. Annnd a sprite."

"Alright, that'll be coming soon." She turned to Vivienne.

"What would you like?" She said with a smile.

"Pizza!" replied Vivienne, she put her hands in the air. "And I want chicken on it."

"Alright! That won't be long." She said 'alright' like 'awe-right'.

The waitress took off and walked slowly to the back.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 50 (Block 101)

140 GOOD CHOICE

"Good choice." Fergus chimed.

"Well yeah, whatever. I still chose it, it's my own. What's up with that?" Jackie heard the whirr of Mack's eyes again, though he did not move.

Fergus ran his hands through his hair, leaned back, "Just thought it'd be kind to get a hot meal in y'a. Didn't imagine you'd've said no to a free lunch at any point but hey ho."

a. Continue

Turn to Page 74 (Block 159)

141 CUT BETWEEN

Jackie looked at Fergus. "How about broccoli pizza Vivie?"

"Ewwww. That's gross. I don't want that."

"Don't worry we'll get you some cheese pizza ok?"

Fergus had turned forward again now, he was looking to where they were walking.

"There's so many English signs here."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah, there's some back home but there's sooo many here."

They walked past different multi-fonted ads for local

businesses. A launderette, a small store on a corner with a yellow bannered frontage.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 28 (Block 57)

142 SQUID INK

"I'll have the squid ink pasta. Annnd a sprite."

"Alright, that'll be coming soon." She turned to Vivienne.

"What would you like?" She said with a smile.

"Pizza!" replied Vivienne, she put her hands in the air. "And I want chicken on it."

"Alright! That won't be long." She said 'alright' like 'awe-right'.

The waitress took off and walked slowly to the back.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 7 (Block 17)

143 YES OLD HOUSE

"I don't know sweetie."

"Ok."

a. Continue

Turn to Page 41 (Block 85)

144 THINK NO EVIL

"I've decided to not think about it."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. It's lovely. I'm basically just breathing right now."

"Hah. Alright."

"You should join me. This not thinking about my problems thing, I feel like I've really found what I enjoy in life."

"Mm. Well I don't know. You have to harness it sometimes."

Jackie continued from her previous sentence, speaking

under her breath. “What difference does it make anyway?”

a. Continue

Turn to Page 56 (Block 115)

145 JACKIE LOOK

Mack looked at Jackie for a second. Then his arm moved to his jean’s back pockets to get out a plastic coated thin paper-card box. He picked at it until a cigarette emerged in his hands.

Passed it to Jackie. “Here.”

Jackie took it. “Here’s a lighter.” It was neon pink and see-through, the liquid had nearly all coalesced on the left hand side of the segmentation within.

Jackie lit it, cupping it in her hands despite the lack of wind. Took a drag, felt the warmth inside. Blew out. Relaxed herself.

“Better?”

“Yeah. I don’t really smoke anymore because of Vivie. But sometimes I indulge.”

“So you’re a good mother then. I’m glad. Vivie’s nice.”

a. “She’s a good kid.”

Turn to Page 2 (Block 4)

b. “Course I’m a good mother. Who do you take me for?”

Turn to Page 31 (Block 61)

146 PROTEST

Jackie caught herself, “What the fuck was that Fergus?” She asked loudly.

Fergus had fallen onto his knees. There was dust in the air. “Christ. It doesn’t matter. Shit Jon, what does this cost you then I’m outta here. Jon? Jon?” Fergus was shaking them.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 32 (Block 63)

147 BREATH CATCH

Breathing is good. The muscles around your lungs have tensed up either from the situation or maybe some kind of electric shock. The oxygen goes to your head and you feel dizzy, your vision gains more texture than you like. Things look odd.

Fergus had fallen onto his knees. There was dust in the air. “Christ. It doesn’t matter. Shit Jon, what does this cost you then I’m outta here. Jon? Jon?” Fergus was shaking them.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 32 (Block 63)

148 1930 TWOSTORY

They got out roughly 10 minutes away. Jackie felt they could’ve easily walked. “Barnes Street”. They got out and Fergus walked up to a 1930s two storey apartment building. They all followed. Jackie’s ears were occupied with the sounds of moving luggage. It’s always such a loud sound when moving into somewhere new, she thought.

Fergus got out the keys and opened the black painted door. They shuffled in, beige carpeting.

“Home. There’s a room out back for you.” He said looking at Vivienne and Jackie. “You and her can sleep in that room.”

“Alright. Give me a second.” The place was probably a 2 bed. Had what you’d need but the rooms were smallish. Bumpy off-white wallpaper encased every room. It reminded Jackie of the paper in a wasp’s nest. The kitchen was practically the same, in terms of emotional impact.

a. “How long we staying?”

Turn to Page 66 (Block 137)

b. “Weird place.”

Turn to Page 5 (Block 13)

149 ROGER ROGER

Fergus had ordered a black cab. It arrived at 4:43. They clambered into the back of it and moved into the London streets. The driver was called Germain, he shouted into his earpiece as he drove. Jackie felt her brain switching to thinking in English instead of Romanian. They passed by people on the pavement, people looked different here from in Romania. White British of course, but there were all different shades of people. Being from London was like being its own nationality within Britain, she had heard. Jackie agreed, she supposed. The taxi sounded out tannoi advertisements for different nearby stores. “TRY TONY’S CHICKEN FOR CHICKEN THAT’LL FUCK YOU UP.” “BITS AND PIECES WILL HELP YOU WITH ANY CLOTHING NEEDS YOU MAY HAVE.”

a. What are the differences between thinking in English versus Romanian?

Turn to Page 44 (Block 92)

b. Do I like London?

Turn to Page 45 (Block 95)

150 SMILE AFFECT

He affected a smile at Jackie, then his face reset, like he wasn’t convinced of himself. He moved the napkin over to her. “Consider it.”

He picked up a half finished pint from the bar that a large man in a black and white striped shirt had left behind, drank it, rocking back on his heels with the glass angled up into the air, and waltzed off to the doorway. His feet tapping at the boards as he went, Orban’s hoveraid stalking behind. The door clicked as he opened it, then it slammed closed.

Jackie breathed out. Orban lowered the shotgun, then put it back on its hinge behind the bar, it sounded like a piece of

wood. The napkin lay in front of Jackie. A landing pad of white against a sea of light brown scratches.

- a. Pick it up Turn to Page 36 (Block 75)

151 HOLD SECOND

“Just hold on a second babe. I’ll get you in a sec.”

- a. Continue Turn to Page 45 (Block 96)

152 FISH

“Why’d she like the fish?”

“Why does anyone?” Sofia laughed lightly. “She just took a liking to them.” She looked to the right for a second like she was trying to remember something, then pointed at Jackie. “She liked the shape, that’s what that signal must’ve meant. Something about the shape moving through the murky depths. It was very sweet.”

- a. Back Turn to Page 96 (Block 201)

153 BREATHING

Cool, climate controlled, corporate air fills your lungs. Feels thick, subsidised. Like you’re breathing on someone else’s dime. And if you were to ask, with daggers in their eyes they’d say that you’re more than welcome to it.

- a. Continue Turn to Page 3 (Block 8)

154 SHIT RIGHT NOW

Jackie had stopped panting but not by much. “Don’t give me that right now Christof, I just got out.” Jackie yawned, “And

your fucking tech is splitting. Halfway through there I had him but then your fucking tech split on me. And I was good! You fucker. Shit the performance there? That was real shit. If the audience doesn't like it maybe they don't like a good fucking fight."

Christof shook his head dejected. "Maybe that's true, but they don't care. I'm just trying to tell you that you can't do it like this much longer."

a. You prick Turn to Page 100 (Block 207)

155 WHY ALL THE MOVIES?

People in your life, anyone's life, come and go. Characters are eternal. Of mythic quality. That description will ring true for as long as people watch those movies.

a. Continue Turn to Page 64 (Block 133)

156 JUST ONE

Maybe one and a half, but the daycare closes soon, you'll be pushing it. Closes at 7.

a. Sounds good to me Turn to Page 19 (Block 39)

b. I'm fine thanks, no drink today Turn to Page 58 (Block 118)

157 WALLS

On the walls lay posters in cyrillic that she'd read countless times before, their meaning mulled over repeatedly until they conveyed no meaning, in the same way a word feels odd on your tongue if you say it out loud too many times.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 43 (Block 89)

158 FAKEOUT

Jackie pushed off the ropes, veered right, a fakeout, then veered a left. Gave a left hook to his face. Jabs from then on, her leadened arms moved without her, felt pressure as her molars forced against themselves. Pushed him away before he could manage anything. Pulled back, kept light on her feet.

Sava was walking fast trying to shrug off the assault, speeding around facing away from her and down to the floor. He laughed lightly to himself, then looked up to the ceiling as if he was finding god.

The thing about boxing is you're looking to get hurt, it's like you set yourself up for something wonderful and painful and tender and slightly sad. A romance. Every spar partner is a new fling. You learn of them in ways hidden to the everyday, hidden to the 'Hello'-s, to the 'I haven't seen you in ages'-s.

You learn them haptically, through how they feel, through knowing their movements and limitations. Their inner decision-making, their weaknesses and strengths, what each movement means and what tonight's deviations could mean. You learn what they can't hide behind words. And while you learn them, they learn you in turn. And then it's over.

Maybe Sava found god. Before Jackie could react, he took off and was back on her. Jackie took a punch but blocked a couple, she was losing ground. But then, an opening.

a. Take it

Turn to Page 44 (Block 91)

159 BREATHE CONTINUOUS

He breathed in and then out through his nose loudly in one continuous action, the sound didn't pause. He leaned forward. "The minestrone is lovely anyway, simple but delightful. How I

like it. Me and this place go way back, used to come here all the time for breaks from Pandora.”

“Pandora?” Jackie knew them. Or thought she knew them. And she also thought they had a headquarters in London. Vivienne started coughing lightly, Jackie brought her up onto her lap and pushed the chair further back from the table.

“Yeah I worked there. That’s what this is all about. Anyway, first we eat.”

The food was good. The sound of their cutlery; metal on ceramic, bounced tightly against the relative silence of the restaurant. Fergus was lightly hunched over his bowl of carbonara, Mack was laid back. His fork took long drags to get to his mouth. Jackie’s pasta reminded her of a video she’d seen of countless eels writhing around eachother, but it didn’t affect her appetite or the taste of the food. About two thirds into his bowl, Fergus started talking.

“Alright, so, Pandora deal in shaping tech. Like, prop stuff.” He chewed on some more pasta and then spoke again, “Microganda, targeted for each user so they believe whatever it is that’s needed.” Jackie realised she had stopped eating, she started again. “They also deal in a lot of other shit. But some of it’s known some of it’s not. That’s the headline anyway. What they’re best at.”

Mack suddenly animated himself.

“Their thought completion tech is better. I use it myself.” Everyone turned to Mack, Vivienne looked up from the crust of her pizza she was chewing. “Don’t worry I’m not using it right now. I’d be talking at a million miles a minute if I were. It can be tiring sometimes but it’s good stuff.”

“Mmm.” said Fergus, non-profoundly. The sound of the tinkling of his bowl continued. “Scary shit that. New too.”

“Been around. If you knew where to look.”

“Mm.” Fergus said, genuinely considering it. “Anyway.” He got out a small trinket from his inside jacket pocket, a small

matte black box roughly the length of your hand's span. A couple centimetres thick with a bevelled slit down the middle. He tapped it with his three middle fingers twice against its length. Blue light channeled out. The outline of what looked like building plans in light clinical blue which didn't show up well against the tablecloth and the ambience of the room. "Cool huh?" He smiled, then stopped smiling as he saw Mack's lack of expression in his blacker than black eyes. "These are the plans for the building."

a. Continue

Turn to Page 48 (Block 99)

160 RESPOND

You don't manage it. You can taste the lactic acid welling up beneath your teeth. Not exactly a conducive environment for stringing a sentence together. You spit some on the floor, Orban notices, says nothing but conveys obvious disappointment through his eyebrows.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 25 (Block 54)

161 ME NO LIKE

"I don't like this Mack."

"Yeah that's understandable. I don't like this either."

"But I need the money." Jackie said looking at Vivienne, playing with her blocks.

"Yeah I can get that." He looked at Vivienne as well.

Vivienne noticed, looked at them nonplussed. Her view switched from face to adult face, she giggled.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 56 (Block 115)

162 SOMETHING TO DO

"It's something to do. I guess, maybe I needed something to do. Money's nice too." You continue, "But it's weird you know? I don't know, it's weird."

"Seems weird with Vivienne."

"..Yeah. I'll grant you that. I don't know, at the same time, Bucharest's nice but it's dying. Maybe it's better I brought her here even if just for a little bit."

"Fair fair."

Jackie's cigarette had about 1/3rd left.

"...anyway, you didn't answer my question."

"Which one is that?"

"What's up with you?"

a. Continue

Turn to Page 84 (Block 176)

163 WHITECHAPEL

The tannoi played. Whitechapel.

"Whitechapel. That's the name. That's where we get off." Fergus raised up off the purple seating. "Guy's name is Mack by the way. Info came in."

"Mack.." Jackie felt the name on her tongue. "Alright."

The exit from the station greeted them with soft light and pattering rain spitting at the pavement. Dark spots on mottled grey. It'd become overcast since they got on the train. Bucharest was 2 hours forward from London. But the journey was roughly that long itself. So really, discounting shunting around the airport, they were only 1 hour from when they'd left. Pointless arithmetic went through Jackie's head. Vivienne bounced around the street, making play out of the space. A small set of tarp-covered scaffold market stalls sat nearby. Selling clothes, fruit and sunglasses. Vivienne picked up a pair, put them on her face, then put them back as she saw the seller lumbering over, he said something loudly in what sounded like Turkish. Jackie had heard it here and there in Bucharest. They

walked further down from the station to the east. Vivienne's hand was in Jackie's. It was busy here, streets were lightly stained with exhaust soot, there was shouting in the streets from people, conversations in 6 different languages. A compacting kind of loud which kept your point of concentration squarely pushed against your temples. You felt a tamed on-edge that they trained cavalry horse to ignore by shooting muskets and cannon while they ate, Jackie had learned once.

- a. Any languages I know? Turn to Page 36 (Block 73)
- b. Exhaust sooted streets Turn to Page 61 (Block 125)
- c. Cavalry horse Turn to Page 20 (Block 40)

164 STAY THERE

“You stay right there. And shut the. Fuck. Up.”

This seemed to do something. Livv was finally quiet. But her eyes weren't, behind them lay a world of malice. They pierced you in a way which made your muscles feel weak.

- a. Figure out what Fergus wants out of this situation Turn to Page 17 (Block 35)
- b. Get Livv somewhere out of the way Turn to Page 22 (Block 46)

165 BUCHAREST AND VIVIENNE

Vivienne’s daycare was a converted store. The front room was roughly 40ft by 20ft, the wall to the left was occupied by shelving filled with sheafs and binders, built ceiling to floor out of beach ply. The giant store window let in the dusk light from the street, along with the strip fluorescent above that seemed to have been installed at a different point to everything else in the room. In the corner, on a stool, sat Sofia behind a desk built into the shelved wooden ply. Arranged on the desk was a cafetière, a desk lamp, mugs, and an old desktop. An ancient brass cash register sat on the windowsill. There was nowhere to sit.

Sofia looked up at Jackie through square-frame glasses, took her hand away from the mouse. Moved her body to face her, leaned back into the chair then forward, elbows resting on knees.

“How’s it going?”

- | | |
|--|-----------------------------|
| a. Look at the shelves | Turn to Page 83 (Block 171) |
| b. Look at the cash register | Turn to Page 87 (Block 179) |
| c. Relax for a second | Turn to Page 99 (Block 204) |
| d. “Work’s getting to me.” | Turn to Page 66 (Block 138) |
| e. “Surviving. That’s all I need to do.” | Turn to Page 57 (Block 116) |
| f. “I’m not sure how I’m doing.” | Turn to Page 53 (Block 108) |

g. “You have cool glasses.” Turn to Page 54 (Block 110)

166 ROPES

No such luck. Jackie couldn’t get up off the ropes, it wasn’t in her right now.

Sava slowed, stood still. “Come on Geishagirl, you are fine!”. He laughed. “Come on back in, you look fine, you look good! How is the kid?” He grinned sinister. “You know, a kid without a Daddy is such a sad thing.”

a. Give him a piece of your mind Turn to Page 23 (Block 50)

b. Try and find some strength Turn to Page 74 (Block 158)

167 TURN

She turned to meet him, he was the same man from the street with Vivienne. He had deep brown eyes, the same wide creased forehead, the same thin ponytail. Jackie tensed up, felt it knot in her shoulders.

a. Inspect him further Turn to Page 41 (Block 84)

b. “Who are you?” Turn to Page 54 (Block 112)

c. “Why are you here?” Turn to Page 90 (Block 187)

168 HOW COME?

I don’t think he’s comfortable with this entire exchange. It wasn’t enough to not turn up to it. But maybe he’s on edge about something. You’ll have to just wade through it.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 64 (Block 133)

169 HOW LONG NOW?

“How long now?”

“Thirty... two seconds.”

“Alright.”

“I do want to say something to you Jackie. Vivienne is good girl, I like her. But I can't do this for free.”

Jackie stayed silent, felt her back tense up, closed her eyes.

“Alright.”

“I'll let her stay until the end of the month, but if you can't pay, I am sorry but that is it.”

“Alright...” Jackie watched Vivienne. She was curled up on the mat inside the cubicle, face towards her. Condensation from Jackie's nose built and subsided on the glass as she thought of wanting to be able to sleep as peacefully as Vivienne could. Vivienne's eyes opened slowly, she smiled. She moved her weight over to the door mechanism and pressed her hands against the glass.

“Mommy!”

“And we played in the rocks and there was lots of pebbles there. And I threw a pebble and it made a big splashing noise! Like sploshhhh... sploshhh.”

“Oh yes?”

“And then we saw this big cave and we walked into it and it was really dangerous.”

“Is that so?”

Jackie held Vivienne’s hand as they walked along the street to the bus. The sky was about to fall into night, it rang out deep purple blue, buildings sat black against it. The streetlights had come on 5 minutes before.

In front of her stood a man. He was in a long dark jacket, dark hair pulled back in a small ponytail, he was seemingly broad, though it may have just been the jacket. Forehead wide and more wrinkled than the rest of his face. Eyes untrusting. Breathing slowly through his nose, frame slowly bobbing up and down with the sound. His expression blank, but his eyes discerning and exact. Jackie felt she knew him. He stood on the inside of the pavement below an overhanging sign for a store long dead. Jackie squeezed Vivienne’s hand tighter, picked up the pace.

“What else did you see?”

“I saw a fish!” Vivienne triumphantly motioned with her entire body to say that. Beaming up at Vivienne. Dark hair framing her face. One arm in the air, hand splayed. One locked in Jackie’s. Jackie smiled a closed-mouth smile back. Vivienne was still in the same pose, cognisantly thinking about how to keep her pose as she walked forward, looking up to Jackie. They passed the man, for a second she heard the sound of the breathing, felt herself in the shadow of his frame. A low wave of discomfort came over her.

“Oh yeah? What kind?”

“Ummm. I don’t know. But I’ve never seen a fish before.” Vivienne looked forward, her face turned serious. They kept walking. Jackie felt his eyes on the back of her head, felt for her keys.

Her flat consisted of four rooms. A main room, a small kitchen, a bedroom, and a shower room. The front door opened onto the main room. It took 3 seconds to get from the door to the main window. On the carpet sat a holo and in the back

corner on a table sat an old TV. They were going to watch Ghibli tonight.

a. Autopilot

Turn to Page 7 (Block 19)

170 MARGHERITA

“I’ll have a margherita pizza. Annnd a sprite.”

“Alright, that’ll be coming soon.” She turned to Vivienne.

“What would you like?” She said with a smile.

“Pizza!” replied Vivienne, she put her hands in the air. “And I want chicken on it.”

“Alright! That won’t be long.” She said ‘alright’ like ‘awe-right’.

The waitress took off and walked slowly to the back.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 50 (Block 101)

171 SHELVED

The shelves are taller than you, maybe twice as tall. They are dour but they seem caring. You can make out groupings of different types of documents. Records for the building, records for the kids.

a. Back

Turn to Page 79 (Block 165)

172 I DON'T KILL PEOPLE

“This isn’t what I do, man. I don’t do jobs anymore. I don’t kill people for one.”

“No killing people then! Don’t worry, what I want from you? No.. killing.. people.”

a. Continue

Turn to Page 71 (Block 150)

173 WHY ME?

“Why not? Y’know?..”

He giggled slightly.

“But I’ll admit, that’s an unsatisfying answer. Traceability. You made yourself real scarce, and although you’re not... top of the line, untraceability gives me certain benefits. Less legwork for me.”

a. “You know, you didn’t really answer my question the first time.” Turn to Page 94 (Block 193)

b. Continue Turn to Page 55 (Block 114)

174 IT'S ME

“Yes it is me, I can’t stay long though.” Jackie leaned on the bar, untied her hair and let it drape over her shoulders. Head rising up again to meet Orban looking down at her, grasping a thick woven rag in his prosthetic hand. “Give me a half pint of Jericho.”

a. Continue Turn to Page 51 (Block 105)

175 ANGERBALL

A ball of anger built in Jackie’s core. “I’ve said no, Christof.”

a. Continue Turn to Page 32 (Block 64)

176 CODERUNNER COWBOY

Mack took another drag. “Hmmm, well. I’m a console jockey y’know. Big deal. A cowboy. Coderunner. Done jobs about 6 years now. A couple I like talking about, a couple I can’t, a

couple I don't want to. I've got these black inserts and they do me well, though they scare people, but that sits fine with me. Always hated having that headset on, got rid of it as soon as they came on the market and had a stable release build." He looked around himself, as if somewhere on his person was a fact about himself. "I'm thin I guess, not very good at eating or at least being hungry. Not very tall. What else do you want?"

"Fine fine. Guess I've got a picture of you now. It's just I like knowing who'll be on the other end of the line a bit better before I do a run." Jackie gleamed a smile. "Anyway, you'll have to be a little nice to me. It's been a little while, I've been trying to do less work since Vivie came along."

"I understand."

All of a sudden, the world seemed like it was hanging, empty. Jackie felt a pang of loneliness well in her as she smoked the last of her cigarette. She threw it on the pavement and rubbed it out. Saying more seemed to be the appropriate thing to do.

"I don't know man. I love Vivie. But she wasn't what I was expecting. One day I had her and she became the most important thing there was out of necessity." She leaned her back against the wall, looked up. "I had plans I think. Or you know, my mind was occupied by shit. I'd built up prospects in my head of what was probably going to happen. A fractal of plans. Plans to do things then you'd plan to make plans once they were done. Then she came and it all changed. It wasn't like I missed out on what would've happened, because nothing was concrete. And at the end of the day I was just going to be living no matter what I did, even if all my dreams came true or whatever." A couple cars crawled past, one's brakes squealed gratingly.

“But you know. Maybe I did miss out on something.”

“Well, things have gone pretty much as I expected for me. I wouldn’t say it’s been rosey. Like the person I’ve built is perfect for someone else but not that suited for me. Anyway”

Jackie looked into the restaurant at Vivienne. She was sitting on a chair against a round table with plates and cutlery on top. She looked tired. “We’ve been here a while don’t you think?” Jackie said.

“Yeah I suppose. I’ll go in. I wanna get moving.”

Mack moved into the restaurant. Jackie went in shortly after. She was 26.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 71 (Block 149)

177 DIEHARDS

Christof sat and considered for a second, “Your diehards are... how you say in English, a ‘Vanishing commodity’ they pay your rent, but how long?”

He grins a shit eating grin.

“How long you think you can keep this up Geisha?”

a. Prick.

Turn to Page 100 (Block 207)

178 COME WITH ME

“Mm. I’d rather take her with me.”

“Sure? I’m hiring you for a reason, and it isn’t to lug kids around. We’re off somewhere potentially dangerous, stat.”

That was annoyingly salient point. “Fine. I’m just not happy is all, it’s a new place for her.”

“Well, whatever. She’ll be fine here. We’re going soon. Mack’s record’s clean if that’s what you’re worried about.” He swung a duffel bag over his shoulder. “We’re collecting.”

a. Continue

Turn to Page 9 (Block 23)

179 REGISTER

The register could be in a museum if anyone cared to put it in one. Its surface in the light reminds you of how wet coins feel between your fingers.

a. Back

Turn to Page 79 (Block 165)

180 MONEY NEED

“Yeah well I need the money I suppose.”

“Don’t we all?”

“Yeah well I’ve got Vivie to take care of y’know.”

“Fair fair.”

Jackie’s cigarette had about 1/3rd left.

“...anyway, you didn’t answer my question.”

“Which one is that?”

“What’s up with you?”

a. Continue

Turn to Page 84 (Block 176)

181 BACK TO MACK

Mack had gotten beer while they were gone. A 12 pack sat in the fridge alongside a bottle of milk and a packet of ham.

Fergus had ordered Indian food which they had eaten in mostly silence as the rain started coming in, he paid extra for field meat not lab.

Mack sat on the placid couch in the living room, he'd been setting up this room for comms. A colony of tech had started sprawling in a corner of the room. The windows were wet, it was quite a downpour. He sat there with an opened can of lager in his hand. On the carpeted floor, Vivienne played with some faded wooden blocks they'd found in a cupboard. The air outside felt musty and thick.

"I'd managed to get enough set up to feel the chatter as you left that place. Right now it's running as an interesting anecdote through various channels, geeky crowd."

Jackie was by the doorway, crossing her arms, Mack was looking up to her. Fergus had gone out for a walk in the rain. Said he liked to feel it 'all fall down'.

- a. "I don't like this Mack." Turn to Page 76 (Block 161)
- b. "I don't know what to think." Turn to Page 35 (Block 71)
- c. "I don't think I trust Fergus." Turn to Page 88 (Block 182)
- d. "I'm just not going to think about any of this." Turn to Page 68 (Block 144)

182 I DON'T TRUST FERGUS

"I don't think I trust Fergus. I can't figure him out. Why he's

doing all this.”

“Mmm.”

“He doesn’t seem to care about money. He had every chance to get out of there with £10k unspent.”

“Mmmm. Yeah that’s odd to me too.”

“I don’t know man.”

Mack looked at Jackie through his glasses, his expression became more sure, “I think the question for you is this: Do you trust him enough to get out of here with what you need? Do you necessarily need to trust him for that?”

You gave it some thought, but it came to no conclusion; regardless, your mouth said:

“I don’t think I have a choice. This is what I have now.”

a. Continue

Turn to Page 56 (Block 115)

183 IT'S NOT ME

“Who?”

“You! It is you.”

“You sure?”

“I think so.”

Jackie laughed. “I can’t stay long.” Jackie leaned on the bar, untied her hair and let it drape over her shoulders. Head rising up again to meet Orban looking down at her, grasping a thick woven rag in his prosthetic hand. “Give me a half pint of Jericho.”

a. Continue

Turn to Page 51 (Block 105)

184 YOU'RE RIGHT

“Fair enough. Sorry I think I’m stressed. And yeah, not many mothers now. Weird isn’t it?” You look down at your cigarette, slowly burning through. “Not many girls to talk to about it back

home, a lot of the material on it now is pretty outdated.”

There’s a slight hang in the conversation. But it is a real conversation, you can feel it. Seems you can’t really talk to Fergus, only the bit of him he’s cordoned off for that purpose.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 95 (Block 199)

185 TOWNS

France, here and there. You can’t remember specific towns, you moved about a lot growing up and you were young. But you lived in Paris for a bit. Outskirts, never managed to get clearance for a trip into the gated old town. Manchester in England for a year too.

a. Better get going

Turn to Page 91 (Block 189)

186 HALF MUTED

“Fuckin ‘ell.” Livv said in a half muted shout, she leaned forward to hold her forehead with her hand.

“You ok sweetie?” Jon replied.

“It’s this fucking headache.”

a. Chime in.

Turn to Page 6 (Block 16)

b. Leave it.

Turn to Page 72 (Block 151)

187 I WANT YOU

“I want you Jackie. Or rather, you could be very useful to me. You could be a lot more useful to yourself too. This nueralink stuff is beneath you, you were something once... I know what sort of wage you’re on Jackie. It’s pretty shit, even for here. I know about Vivie and I know what you’re capable of.”

At this moment, he brandished a look of unearned, self-

supposed superiority “I. know.” It didn’t do his face well.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 11 (Block 27)

188 THEYLINER

Jackie got a better look at Jon. Jackie thought they were wearing eyeliner before but now she realised that those were just deep bags under their eyes.

They seemed like a they. Best be cognisant of that.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 14 (Block 32)

189 LIBERTÉ

For a moment, time passed all at once, Jackie found herself out in the world.

The streets were wide here, rises low and old. Jackie was in the Paris of the East, or so she was told. She didn’t really think the name fit that well. Jackie had seen the old bits of Paris in photos, in pamphlets, in holos and via neuralink, even if she never got in past the wall. It wasn’t Paris, not even the outskirts where she’d lived.

It lacked Liberté. It lacked a sneer by which it dictated its beauty. It looked like someone had painted Paris onto buildings out of stone impasto, taken the curving streets and paths and layered it over. Paris was skeletal, geometric, it splayed itself out across the landscape, you walked down its arteries.

She was in the Old Town of Bucharest. 6pm, mid October. Once populations crept down, people started moving back into the old towns. She walked past Skodas and Fiats, past closed shutters, shop interiors lit by streetlight, past bars, over crossings and round corners. It was a cool evening, music played lightly from nearby bars against light traffic and

birdsong.

You need to pick up Vivienne, but first you want to get a drink.

- a. Vivienne? Turn to Page 5 (Block 10)
- b. Where am I going? Turn to Page 43 (Block 88)
- c. Stay here for a while, it's nice Turn to Page 65 (Block 136)
- d. I don't want a drink Turn to Page 58 (Block 118)

190 WHERE DO YOU WANT TO GO?

Where do you want to go instead?

- a. Just the normal streets Turn to Page 12 (Block 28)
- b. Scenic route Turn to Page 23 (Block 49)

191 OWE

Fergus didn't seem to care. "What do we owe?"

"What?"

"What do we owe you?"

Livv sighed. "I don't fucking know she dealt with that. I just want you out. Right. Now."

"No. How much is it."

“I don’t know! It’d be in the listing on the monitor.”

“Well alright.” That monitor’s display pulsed with the same timing as the light above.

Fergus walked over to the monitor. Keyed in something. He sighed.

“Roj roj roj”. He repeated, hit the enter key, and waited for a second.

“Alright. Says here it’s £10,000. That the amount?”

Livv was silent. A storm raged within her.

“That the amount, huh?”

“Just give me the money and get the fuck out.”

Fergus smiled, loving this. “Alright then.”

He got out 10 rolls of notes and placed them in a row on the desk with the monitor. So that you could count them from afar. Livv had crawled back to Jon and was holding them by the shoulders.

“Just breathe babes it’ll be alright. We’ll get you outta here.” She looked back at Fergus and Jackie. “You guys are fucking done. Get the fuck out.”

Jackie still had her gun trained on them. Fergus waltzed through the door, slammed it behind him. Jackie sidled back into it, still aiming. It opened with a kick from the surface of her shoe’s sole.

“Sorry.” she said.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 88 (Block 181)

192 NO OLD HOUSE

“No sweetie.”

“Ok.”

a. Continue

Turn to Page 41 (Block 85)

193 FIND ME

He raised his eyebrows.

“Oh well!”

He tapped his nose twice with his forefinger, and turned his head away.

“Let’s just get on the plane. I want to sleep.”

- a. Continue Turn to Page 55 (Block 114)

194 TUCK

Jackie tucked her in with a light blanket Jackie had found alongside the wooden blocks.

“Mummy, are we going back to our old house?”

- a. “Yes.” Turn to Page 68 (Block 143)
- b. “No.” Turn to Page 93 (Block 192)
- c. “I don’t know.” Turn to Page 42 (Block 86)

195 KNOW YOUR STUFF

“You know your stuff then.”

Mack chuckled, “Yeah. One of the things I’m better at. I’ve done work like this before y’know. But you’re right, this is definitely sus somehow. He doesn’t seem like the type to go for this kinda thing.”

Vivienne was jogging around one of the tables. The pugilistic sound of a regular Italian conversation came from inside.

- a. “I need the money.” Turn to Page 87 (Block 180)

b. "It's something to do, even if it's weird."

Turn to Page 76 (Block 162)

196 COFFEE

Sweet sultry earth. Like the dirt you find on your fingers after a walk through the woods in spring. Delicious.

a. Back

Turn to Page 25 (Block 54)

197 I'M NOT SURE

"I'm not sure, I don't know if they explain it. That's the magic of it, sweetie. Why do you think they're big?"

"Ummm. I don't know. They are like, a mile big. That's tooo big." She paused for a second, then Jackie heard the sound of a little yawn.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 34 (Block 67)

198 I DON'T KNOW NEW HOUSE

"We'll have to see, sweetie."

"Ok."

a. Continue

Turn to Page 94 (Block 194)

199 WHAT'S UP

"Well what's up with you?" Jackie continued.

"Me?"

"Yeah man. This whole thing seems sus to me. Weird fucking setup. Including you." She looked into his eyes then, but all she could see in them was her reflection.

Mack laughed. "Yeah I thought so too. I know a bit about Fergus. Met him once or twice when he was up to a different

spec it seems. Seemed he dropped off the face of the planet, but then he picked back up all at once about 8 months back.” His cigarette was languishing in his right hand, low down next to his hips. “He’s real. Or at least he was; worked at Pandora. Seems we’re getting out his old shit or something. That’s why I’m giving him the time of day. But it’s certainly ‘un...ushe...ual’.” He said unusual slowly, picking apart each sound like he was cutting up a piece of meat with a knife and fork.

a. Unusual Turn to Page 33 (Block 65)

b. Continue Turn to Page 94 (Block 195)

200 A FOREST

“A forest...” You say to yourself absentmindedly. “Which one?”

“Based off of one I went to in the countryside. Early spring, before it gets hot. ‘Glavoi’. That was a nice little business trip.”

a. Back Turn to Page 96 (Block 201)

201 MY WORK

“Anyway, you’ve seen my work, it’s good stuff. I know the tooling for it better than anyone.”

“What was it today?”

“They were in a forest today. They went on a little adventure. Played in a shallow stream under tree-cover. Vivienne saw some fish, she liked that a lot.” Sofia moved back to her desk. Jackie heard the clicking of keys again. Sofia continued, a bit above the keystrokes in sound level. “Serban was a bit mean to her again but Iona stood up for her. Maybe I make Serban have a little fall tomorrow. Nothing major, nothing like he would be getting hurt. Hmm, maybe not.”

The cubicle reminded Jackie of a microwave. The rest of them were empty, they’d been picked up earlier. Vivienne lay inside looking like a whole chicken.

“What’s she up to now?”

“Now? She’s... walking along the main path I’ve set out. She’s got a pinecone in her hand, she’s picked at some of it. She’s thinking about Serban, seems she’s generally ok. She thinks he’s mean but she’s also kind of sad about him. I think I know what she’s meaning.” She tutted to herself. “They still haven’t figured out how to program the right lenses when processing young emotions, so that’s all I can say. She likes how it smells there, earthy. It smells like earth and damp pine leaves.”

- | | |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| a. A forest | Turn to Page 96 (Block 200) |
| b. Fish | Turn to Page 72 (Block 152) |
| c. “Serban should have a fall.” | Turn to Page 22 (Block 45) |
| d. “Don’t make Serban fall.” | Turn to Page 11 (Block 26) |
| e. “How long now?” | Turn to Page 81 (Block 169) |

202 I GIVE UP

“Alright, I give up. Yes it’s me. I can’t stay long though.” Jackie leaned on the bar, untied her hair and let it drape over her shoulders. Head rising up again to meet Orban looking down at her, grasping a thick woven rag in his prosthetic hand.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 51 (Block 105)

203 PANDORA STEAL

“Why do you want this thing Fergus?” you rephrased, “By that I mean, what you’ve got me on the job for, not why’ve you got that chicken coop.”

“Hmm.” He scratched his chin. “Why do you need to know?”

“I like to know what I’m in for before I steal it. Useful to know something about it in case there’s some fuckup or I need to improvise.”

He paused. Regardless of any tension between them, Jackie could feel he would have literally nothing to say to her if it weren’t for the job.

“...Fine. It’s some soft called Bespoke Image. I was working on it before I left Pandora. It bricks systems.”

Jackie didn’t speak for a second. “...That all? Sounds... civilian almost.”

“Well, it’s potent shit for one, yours truly wrote it. Along with others.... Fuck that place. Anyway, it’s hot like white hot. And the kicker is it can’t be made anywhere else but Pandora. It required a particular kind of development environment.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

There was a bump in the road, it went ‘babump’.

a. Continue

Turn to Page 34 (Block 69)

204 RELAX

You close your eyes. You feel the dryness leave them. This is the place, you're somewhere nobody else can go. You're choosing not to be aware of Sofia looking at you, she's a mutual party in this, she thinks you could do with the rest. She watches on, not minding.

a. Back

Turn to Page 79 (Block 165)

205 REMIND ME

You watched Fight Club? It's silly, but he's kind of like him in the 2nd half with his shaved head. His demeanour is the opposite, though. He also kind of looks like a young Ewan McGregor when he was in Trainspotting. Matches better how he comes across too.

a. Why all the movies?

Turn to Page 73 (Block 155)

b. ...Is he handsome?

Turn to Page 12 (Block 29)

206 SENSORI

It's a Sensori B5-300-F, a little antiquated; but given the economic realities of this part of the world it's very good tech, still holds up well. Its bands range from abstract stimulation for the very young to full blown worlds for ages up to 6. It really enhances young lives, gives them whole worlds to explore in the safety of a controlled environment. And Sensori is well known for being good with legacy support.

You grew up off of a mid-tier B3 range model, newest models are pushing B7.

a. Back

Turn to Page 40 (Block 83)

207 WHATEVER

“Fine. Fine. Whatever. I just hate that you always give me this after fights, Christof.”

“What?”

“Feels obvious you can’t think after them.” Jackie felt her Geisha bomber jacket unstick from her arms and shoulders as the sweat from the fight cooled.

“What do you mean?”

“After fights. I’ve just been hit in the head a bunch, brain no think good.” Jackie taps her head twice.

A pause.

“You know, if that is true, there’s other types of link here you could try girl”, he looked at her more intently. “With what you’ve got... you could do very well.” Christof went quiet, stayed too still, looking up at Jackie.

a. Inspect Christof

Turn to Page 39 (Block 80)

b. Decline

Turn to Page 84 (Block 175)

208 STRIKE

With a speed she didn’t know, Jackie moved up to Sava. If he’d reacted it would’ve taken him by surprise. A clean blow, straight to the side of the head. Jackie felt it in her knuckles, a dull pain in her bones. He spat, sweat launched off of him. Twisted and fell to the floor. He landed with a loud thump, his hips were angled wrong. His face lay flat on the floor, back open to the world.

If her ratings hadn’t gone up from that nothing would.

a. Ratings? What is all this?

Turn to Page 24 (Block 52)

b. Continue

Turn to Page 21 (Block 43)

Shameless Plug

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