

R E F U N D S F O R
MACHINES
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re.occurrence

(leo mara)

“Jesus shitting Christ. Steven, I can’t actually be seeing that?”

Aileen could not believe what she saw. She covered her open mouth with her peeling-plastered and hard-skinned palm. She confronted the surrounding invasion. Feared the impending consequences.

“Aileen.”

“Happy Bank Holiday,” she uttered, throwing her mouth covering hand to instead press down on tied-back wiry trails of blonde, white and grey hair. “What happened?”

Steve slapped shut and plopped his flip phone into a corner torn top pocket on his white shirt. He pointed across the- “The-”

“You’re pointing at them. Yeah, I see them. I see the behemoth penises, Steven.”

He tilted his head, said with surprise, “Without your glasses?”

“If I couldn’t, do you think you pointing would make any fucking difference?”

“Leen,” Steven put a hand up flat on one side of his face to shield his eyes, “I want to stop looking at them.”

“Look away then, Steven.”

“I can’t.”

“If you don’t want to, you don’t need to look at them.” Aileen picked her chin up. She scanned the visual scenes on the forty plus two-hundred-inch and upward in size ad screens. Screens which covered the building block and panelled glass and concrete walls forming the eminent retail square. The paused game streams, uncertified promotions, and blown-up trim and lube jobs. “Oh, my God. My eyes. No, man, I go for dicks, but that’s really too much. See a therapist, Steven. Talk to your girlfriend.” Aileen rubbed her eyelids. “No, don’t do that.”

Despite the brighter daylight, Aileen spotted fast flashes of blue and red on corner marble stones and the reflective stripes of Steve’s otherwise ultra red vest as it hung tied around his waist. Aileen turned around. She saw the silent sirens, counted two standard police units and one unmarked.

A tight-topped, muscled man popped up out of the unmarked white hatchback, took two sucks on a vape he throttled. His eyes appeared to fall to one cock hung over U-package collection lockers.

Three officers formed from the two marked cars. They approached Aileen together, close enough to be bumping into one another. One glanced around. He gritted his back teeth, and prayed the hundreds of in-person witnesses, and the thousands more streamed live to would scatter with their unsteady arrival. The other two officers, one on a flip phone, scanned the checkerboard of bare humans. He compared the array to his own recollection of the forty-something OLED boards usually plastered with promotional AI-generated, forcibly immersive material. Massive profit retailers, automobile manufacturers, and popstars whose existence was in question. Instead, today, office-place workshops, video calls, amateur modelling and porn. And a little bit of the latest episodes of shows only available on BoxSets+.

The officer on the phone stopped nearest to Aileen and the curb. He eyed her red vest with hi-vis stripes, greeted with a head gesture. Mouthing an unstringed sentence too quiet to make sense of, he assumed she got it and continued with his conversation on the phone, “It’s all fifty screens in Brixton’s Ella Square.”

“Forty-two,” Aileen corrected.

“Not all fifty,” he communicated on the phone, “Forty-two are effected.”

“No, there aren’t fifty screens, there’re forty-two and it isn’t-”

“All forty-two are-”

“Not all forty-two. Thirty- Thirty-one out of the forty-two we have on this Square-”

“Thirty out of the forty-two are effected.”

“Thirty-one.”

“Thirty-one.” The officer wobbled to one side and to the other. He planted his feet and held his breath and response as he ran his proper attention across the screens. Evidently, this was asked of him. “There’re blank faces. The faces have faces, but like as in the expressions are ‘blank’, they look confused. They’re on video calls on Dweams or Zoob, Time Together. Er. Text. Er. Says- It says ‘Pract-’. ‘Practice’, ‘Get into pairs, start by-’. There is a lot of pornography. It’s all different.”

“A lot of people here to cater to,” Aileen commented. One of the other officers might have smiled, she couldn’t quite tell.

“Should I count?” he asked over the phone. “Ah- Two. Four. Five. Eigh... Eight... Fifteen. Sixteen. Nine-, there’re nineteen displays currently up with schlongs on-”

“Schlongs”, Aileen loved. “Nineteen,” she said under her breath, “and hopefully less by the fucking minute. Screen 28GScr, over there,” Aileen gestured to it. “You were here five minutes sooner... you’d seen a widespread arse instead of that synopsis.”

“Who are you?” one officer, not on the phone, asked as he lifted one foot up onto the street curb.

“I’m Aileen.”

He too looked at her vest and broad shoulders. “You’re in hi-vis.”

“Well spotted.”

“What are you, are you security?” His thumbs rested inside uniform pockets.

“That’s it,” she said. “Hi. I’m the Ho. Head of. For Commercial Line. Which is about sixty schlongs of Ella Square. Sixty percent. Excuse me.”

“What’s happening, Aileen?”

Aileen looked between the officers then back over her own shoulder. A woman bent over before rotating and pulling one leg up to above her head. “There’re blank faces. They have faces. Er. Text. Says ‘get into pairs’” Her head reverted around again to the officers, and off of the workout video. “A lot of different pornography. Nineteen screens you counted.”

“Do we think this is a targeted attack?”

“Maybe. Not a single one is flaccid.”

“What?”

“I’m not sure it’s targeted. If it is, then not the content. Could be they’re reversed connecting to people’s devices to cause an unstructured shit show-? Every engineer and his younger supervisor are behind the literal scenes, trying to work out how almost half of

the screens have been connected to and that whatever's happened hasn't only shit with one or two screens on the same one closed network, but is cros—"Aileen coughed, "...sing them."

"Reversed connecting'. What do you mean?"

"Er. You know Screen Casting? You got something on your phone you want to put up on a TV, so you connect your phone to the TV through a network—" she demonstrated somewhat with hand gestures.

"I know Screen Casting."

"Yeah. So, that..." she pointed at the officer, "but in reverse. So... I'm *told*, what's on the screens is likely casting from random devices around the Square. From computers, tablets, phones. But its reversed, those who are Screen Casting don't realise it."

"How could they not know?"

"It's cute of you to pretend, officer, like you haven't once put your porn up on the TV by accident."

"I haven't."

"Whatever you say." Aileen gave a thumbs up. "Anyway. Again I'm told, they might not have realised because the screens on their devices will either still be displaying whatever they're looking at or they'll have gone black. If they'd gone black, you wouldn't know what was happening and couldn't see what you were doing to try to stop it. And if the screens not changed, the only thing that tells you you're Screen Casting is a teeny icon in the corner. How many people that've got smart devices, do you think, thought to learn what the icon is?"

"What is the icon?"

"There you go."

"You think right now nineteen shoppers are looking at penises? Where-?"

"Well, this isn't just shopping. There are new apartments behind most of the stores."

"I don't buy that *that* many people wouldn't realise," the officer doubted, eyeing cheek and a woman in a beige coat, below the screen, eating chocolate ice cream.

"I'm telling you what I was told. You can choose whether to take a computer science grad's word about computers."

"How old was he?"

"You see though... a lot of the screens aren't staying on one arse or another. Wouldn't that seem like they are realising they are screen casting and turning it off? And just another is immediately connected. What is the thing," Aileen pondered, facing penis, "...about cutting the heads off of snakes?"

The short officer on the phone hung up the phone. He flipped it shut, shoved it into a too small pocket in his black tact vest. "Happy Bank Holiday," he said to Aileen.

"Thank you, officer," she replied.

"The screens should be turned off," he divisively advised.

"Why, has something with the screens-?"

"Are we able to turn all of the screens off?"

"I'm HO security," HO Aileen said, "Ask the engineers. I'd bet it's probably the first thing they'd tried to do, but-"

“Okay. Can we clear the Square?” he asked, glancing about the circulating crowds. Slow-to-react parents abruptly hiding the sights of their children and running for cover under permanently installed and art abstract marquees. The teens in shut and cultish circles. Dressed to best each other but all wearing the same thing. Holding phone cameras up to the humping and hand tugging. Those whose phones were probably dead, lost or broken, instead imitating motions. Thrusting at the atmosphere.

“Sure. You can clear the Square. You have the helm, officer, we’ll follow your lead. We’ve moved on as many who’re going to listen to us,” she said, checking on the outside diners fenced in in restaurant patios by woodchip, steel, rope and plant pot. “My team of six cover the whole commercial line. We’re understaffed when there’s two groups of kids being cunts at the same time. Like I say, we’ll follow, we’ll back you. But if you’re going for a full evacuation, *further* removed than muster points and you want a perimeter... you are going to need your own bodies and cars.”

The officer nodded to no soon end. Like a stiff bobblehead. “I understand. But we can rely on the support of the six of you on your security team as well?”

Aileen envisaged the superhero line up of strong red. Loose red vests with hi-vis. “No, five. Five of us today. Thea’s off. Court hearing.”

“Then the five of you.”

“We’ll go through the stores, ask the staff clear any customers including those hiding, close shop, and wait wherever you want to set up passes, in case they can reopen anytime soon. Dick free.”

“Fantastic. And we’ll send a couple officers through the apartments hiding behind, inform residents, advise they stay off any devices until the issue is resolved.”

“Cool,” Aileen now nodded. “I’m glad it’s you and not us doing that.”

“Do you want to do it instead?”

“No, I think you misheard me, officer.”

“Jesus Christ, Steven.”

“Jess.”

“What’s happening outside?” asked the twenty-three-year-old manning the rib-high, gloss counter of Good Ramen. “I can’t get Aileen to stop taking the piss. She said she’s gone out to the Square to take a photo to show me she’s not lying.”

Steven scratched dry snot off his septum. “What did she say is happening?”

“She said there was another protest out there. A public orgy like the one in Lille.”

“Oh, yeah, people are trying to stop them. They’re falling over them and so they’re just joining in instead.” Steven imagined wiping the snot on Jess’s yellow apron. Of course, he wouldn’t actually d-

“Is there actually a fucking orgy out there?”

“No, it’s not that extreme.”

“What is happening?” Jess watched Steven’s fingers.

“They’ve lost control of like thirty of the screens.” The two of them were alone in the shop. It was vacant of customers. And any dark colours, Steven noticed. As he addressed the counter, unsettled to look at Jess for too long, hard light reflected on the ladle dunked in constantly heated katsu and marked his sight. “Most of them are playing porn.”

“Oh... my fucking god. Really?” She covered her nose, mouse and chin with her latex gloved hand. “Porn, like, full on porn? Not-”

“Yup,” he said, unfussed. “There’s no sound, though. I didn’t really take that in before, the screens have no speakers. It’s all just vide-”

“Ah!” Jess screamed, “Fuck!” She through her hands.

Aileen knocked on the floor-to-ceiling glass fronting Good Ramen. Appearing from nowhere. Steven steered back over his shoulder, looked to his HO, Aileen.

Aileen held her wide-screened phone up and pressed it against the glass.

Jess squinted. She saw what looked like an odd-angled, pale dick beside a promo for the upcoming Sword in the Rock live action remake. “Is that dick?”

“A lot of it is penises on the screens, yeah,” Steven offered.

Aileen kept her arm still and the photo evidence up for further review. Her head tipped down. She held the button on the radio clipped to her belt...

“Have you calmly explained to Jess its cock city out there?” blurted from Steven’s radio.

Steven looked to Jess. He asked, soft, considerate, “Was I calm?”

“Yes,” Jess answered.

Looking pleased with his work, Steven hit the button on his radio, “I have.”

“Have you asked Jess to evacuate yet?”

“No.”

“Could you ask Jess to evacuate?”

Steven again moved his face from his radio to Jess, “Jess, if you could please now evacuate.”

“Bollocks.”

“A couple sets. But it’s more the cocks actually,” said Theo, Aileen’s skinniest guard, scratching the patch of hair on his chin. Once upon a time, he was stronger. Wagered on his own rough and brotherly fights with cousins. Cousins who jumped and returned to Nigeria before predicted new terms to immigration pushed.

“When’s it likely to be over?” asked the restaurant manager, chasing waiters with judging glances.

Theo looked about the airport-esque restaurant’s onyx bar and behind wall of wine glasses. The standard tables and chairs crookedly laid out and cobble-stoned with handbags, and failing dates and business lunches and divorces, ordering overpriced filet mignon and pulled pork burgers.

“Don’t know, chef. Law’s orderin-”

“I’m the manager.”

“Alright. Law is ordering full evacuation. We’re moving everyone out of here, and off the Line and the Square.”

“I understand you want to vacate outside where it’s happening, but what’s the problem with us staying in here? We’re not leaving the restaurant.”

“I’m following police officials, sir. You are asked to evacuate.”

“If I have to leave, and ask all of my customers too, I have to refund all of their food. I have to write it all off. And then write off everything that’s being cooked and prepared in

the kitchen as well and ask the chefs to carry out checks to ensure that it is safe to leave and that we won't start a fire before we evacuate." The manager got ever so closer to Theo. "All that, and we might be outside for five minutes."

"Brother, you sell burgers and sandwiches and I've seen you on ToDoor, you can pack this food up. Give them napkins and vouchers and send them out. Get started on those closing checks."

"This is insane, I'm not moving."

"No, I know you're not moving, because you're running your mouth." Theo hit his radio, tipped half his posture down, "Red, king of the shit house next to Happy Filled is telling me he's not leaving."

"Red Two here," vibrated out the radio. "Re- Which Red is this?"

"Red Five," Theo answered.

"Red Five. Red Five, what Red are you spea-"

"Red One."

"Ah... this is Red Two... how funny. Red One hasn't answered... Red One... are you there? Red Five needs backup at... at the- where did you say you were, Red Five?"

Theo kept his eyes off the manager. "The shit house."

"Next to Happy Filled?"

"You know the one."

"What...? Oh, the- the shit house, you mean the restaurant. Red One, are you available to backup Red Five at the terrible restaurant next to Happy Filled?"

"Yeah, Red One," Aileen picked up, "Red Five...?"

"Yah?" Theo responded, within the pattern of holding the button on his radio, releasing the button on his radio, holding the button, releasing the button, holding, releasing, holding, releasing-

"Can he hear me?"

Holding... "Who?"

Releasing... "The manager."

"Hold on." Theo raised the volume on his still belted radio. "Say something quick."

"Er- m- mmb- books," Aileen said as fast as possible.

Theo continued to look at his radio rather than anywhere else. "Did you hear that?"

No answer.

Eyes kept where they were, Theo asked again, "Did you hear that?"

"This is Red Three. Red One," brief laughter, "you by any chance in Winston Novels...?"

The manager dropped his shoulders, his attention went quickly back and forth between Theo and his channel of team communication, "Wh- Who- Who are you asking? Are you asking if I heard her?"

"Yea. Brother, who else do you think I'd be asking-"

"Yes, I hear her."

Holding... "Yeah, he hears you, Red One, go ahead." Release.

"Spectacular work, Red Five. What is your name, sir who can hear me?"

"Brent."

"Brent. Brent, get the fuck out," Aileen kindly asked. "As fast as you could, please. Out of the restaurant, then the complex."

“No, sorry. I don’t see a reason to. It’s not profitable or safe for us to walk out.”

“Yes, thank you for that insight. It is troubling. If I think about it hard though... given that you’re a chain, Trent, though, knowing the business can probably survive the minor disruption to one of its fifty restaurants, I think I’ll be able to sleep okay tonight.” Aileen then muttered, “Even if I am dreaming about massive penises.”

“I’m still not hearing a reason for why we need to *leave*,” the manager resisted, hands planted irritably firm on tucked shirt over curvy hips.

“There are about twenty erections that make up the reason, ready to look you in the teeth. See for yourself on your way out. Goodbye, Brant.”

“Couple more,” an unannounced Red interjected, through the radio, “Twenty-two.”

“Who’s that? Red Three?”

“Ah, shit, we got more cocks appearing?”

“Yeah, it’s Red Three.”

“Yeah, we do.”

“Red Three, is that too many for us to handle?”

“Ask your dad.”

“I kind of see his point, though-”

“*His* point? What, out there? I didn’t see his...” Ann muttered and thought about the dicks on display. Her Red layer was tied about and above her prominent hips. Tied taut like her bleach dyed hair.

“If its only on the screens outside, and not in here, why’re we evacuating?”

“Suppose because if you’re not into it, it’s intense.” Ann fiddled with her radio in one palm. “Safer to evacuate the commercial line than to try to manage eyes spread across the area. And if the screens inside here go, too, that’s another problem.”

“A second dicking?”

Holding... “Ask your dad,” Ann suggested.

“Red Three, I don’t know who my dad is.”

Aileen wandered back onto the quieting Square, leaving the three-story, eighty-plus stores complex through automatic sliding doors.

With her one free limb, she mimed. She pretended to pull a cigarette from her cleavage, and a lighter from the denim pocket sewed onto the jeans clothing her arse. She pursed her lips, lit the air and smoked the invisible thing. A shallow shopping trolley occupied her other grip. Meat-filled.

Men in black cargos, and standard white hi-vis, set ladders, climbed precariously and jabbed their feet into gutters and other sizable indents and corners in the Square’s surrounding structure. The railings, the cleaned glass and white concrete box architecture. They worked with one another, handing up loosely gathered dark fabric covering.

The screens above them had variety. The nearest to their advancing height was porn. One-on-one action. A well-held standing sixty-nine. For the close-to minute Aileen was invested, she was impressed. Neither the supposed kickboxer, nor his over-enthused coach showed signs of submission. Of tiring or letting any grip slip and retreating to

missionary. On a neighbouring screen to their left, there was a looped graphic. Another AI generated graphic, a turning, supernaturally unwinding plastic bottle. A promotion for Right Now Energy ‘sweet endurance sauce’, available in flavours ‘vanilla’, ‘banoffee’, ‘pistachio’ and ‘cookies & cream’. Two metres right of the back of the upside-down coach’s head, was perfume. A greyscale Chalamet cropped from the torso, protected from the flash in a-father-of-two light shaded glasses. The height of a floor above it all, was the biggest screen. An absorbing mist. Fireflies only alight with the steady beat of their insect-sized hearts. A thirty-year-old, cast to play a boy, walked into frame from the foreground. He marched cinematically unnaturally. Stiff, but cool, and toward centre. Revealed, thrusted into boulder, a sword. Cut to black. ‘MAY’. *Fast*. Quick cut back to scene. He grabbed a hold. Jerked. Perfect white teeth clenched, hair messed, glazed with dirt and sweat, aggressively pulled on the sword. Again, it cut to black. Then black to vibrant red, and a little more onscreen text, ‘Come & See’, with C&E Cinemas nationally notorious logo.

Aileen bumped the button on her belted radio, “Update, Reds. Are we evacuated?” Ow. She flinched, her fingers seared and reactively dropped her cigarette.

“Red Two here. Waiting on stragglers. Most shops have locked up.”

“Red Three. I’m leading the logically blind. Taking them to the centre doors on the backside. I’ve got a lot less coming out the rear than there was half an hour ago. Hoping that’s a sign that we’re close.”

More plastic-aesthetic graphics motioned on the screens untampered.

“Good work,” Aileen offered.

To the West, five aligned, four of which were unaffected. A couple of thirty-somethings, over-smiling, applying eyeliner, getting ready, and trying on ZM clothing. Clothing swapped with AI, like most apparel outlets, for season and for demographics wherever the long ad played. Mia AI. A meta commercial. Mia researched in real time, recreated ad tropes in real time in front of a live camera in front of another live camera broadcasted to Screen 11MaSq. CliMB. The number one app for ‘tree-vloggers’, an enthusiastic brand of nature influencers. A skinny young, of age, man getting along extremely well with his supposed stepmother. And the last of the five screens... a morphing human. One computer-graphics well-haired scalp to rigid shoulders, phasing seamlessly between characters. A Twenty-Thirties fashioned white woman to a sepia filtered, moustached gentleman, to a low-fringed teenager with near-identical eyes, a woman with suggestion of existence in a later decade. A near future age. ‘GENE’. The model faded, and the organisation’s name appeared. ‘Discovering your ancestral line one distant uncle at a time’. ‘And now. Predicting your descendants as well.’

Aileen got out her phone, started to record the scene. She captured its vacancy underneath the standard English sunny but clouded day sky. The diving flight and pestering of fat pigeons. The screens continuing along the scaffolding and the wide panels of glass above trademark stores. Limited edition sport socks. Fresh white trainers personalised with description-input, machine illustrated, permanent paint marker designs. Many machines. Variously modelled and imagined. Animated and documented and distributed. Cinema. Sneak peek trailers for further spoiling trailers. Further animation. Specifically, hentai. A curious choose your own visual novel.

And the workshop. ‘Manifest’. ‘Think of five successes you want in the next five years.’ One middle-aged man observed. Appeared entranced. Stood on the spot, hands by his flat sides.

“Sir.”

He turned. “Hello,” he greeted Aileen, “Happy Bank Holiday.”

“Thank you, sir, d- do you think you can leave the Square?”

He glanced at the bottle of red, the avocado, the microwavable shepherd’s pie and the air-tight-plastic separately suffocating the thirty steaks, and the cheaper beef, in Aileen’s trolley. “Yeah!” he replied, moving his eyes, “Sorry! Of course.” He backed up slowly, simultaneously turning back as well to the workshop, the ‘five successes’.

“Faster,” Aileen inspired.

He took another four steps ‘faster’ back, then stopped.

“Yeah... You realise I can still see you, sir.”

“I think this is important,” he answered, gazing at the words incidentally transferred.

“If I have to, I will pick you up-”

Noise fired from the right. Two sets of doors on the front of the Square’s main complex opened outward, customers funnelled out, running.

“What the fuck?” *Hold*, “Reds, I got a crowd coming out of the front of the complex, running out onto the Square. Why are they freaking out?!”

“Red Three,” Ann responded, “You do? Fuck knows. Have no idea where they’ve come from. They haven’t passed us. No one’s said to get out fast. Is there something we don’t know?”

“No. No, I don’t know nothing you don’t know. I got it, though,” Aileen decided.

“Keep running!” a short guy in a shorter t-shirt yelled.

“No!” Aileen jogged at the sort of small scattering group. “Chill!”

Jackets and overshirts became capes. Tied laces flailed and shoes caused flat footed lunges. They fled around her, the men and woman, ignoring her counter to their panic. “Run!”

“What’re you running from?” she needed to understand.

“Why’re they running?” an engineer yelled from where he stood at the bottom of an occupied ladder.

“Do you not hear me asking?!”

The distress coated him. “Should we be running?!” The eight or nine people escaped down a wide, commercial street, away from the Square. “Lads!” the engineer called up the ladder, “Get down. Get down, now. We need to get out of here I think!”

Aileen watched the lads. Two hanging, one on each side of the continuing porn wrestling, gripped the covering fabric they had handed up to each other. Carefully they held the layered sheet taut and with teamworking coordination, hooked it over the top side and let it fall to cover the screen. As it did, the dark fabric settled. Unfortunately, the image shone through. The boxer, in nothing but a sweat-rinsed white headband with ‘HOT’ sewn across it, stretched his grey-hooded, tits-out instructor.

The two men soon abseiled and together with their supervisor, fled too from the scene. Abandoned ropes dangled. More equipment, mostly another five or six sheets, was left piled on the concrete.

Eight or so people crept onto the Square at different times through the hour. They posed in front of selected screens, taking crappy selfies.

One personality, all by herself, adjusted a tripod a metre away from her before she positioned side on, fixed her hair and lined her open mouth up.

Two men rotated. They took turns taking photos of each other in front of an AI-made, sixteen second, cinematic motion picture promoting their brother-run barbers.

Another loner. A just beyond teenager spoke to his baton-mounted camera, about the dehumanisation of 'Plasticising'.

More porn carried on in the background.

The engineers returned to recollect their equipment. Happy to come back once informed at one of the waiting gates, that there was no reason to have run away.

Aileen's Reds hung about the Square, entertained. They snuck their own videos, and photos. They made up accompanying grunts and dialogue for the porn. Shooed off anyone without a badge or fluorescence and rested on steps as the sun crept through the grey.

Within another hour, the screens all cut to white, then to black.

The Reds, and Aileen, fire officers, law enforcement, technicians and the engineers, and hiding civilians all cheered. A relatively slow and untimed clap from Aileen and the engineer who thought to run followed.

"Is it over?" Steven asked out loud, feeling he could be changed.

"Yeah," another engineer called back from some distance, "the fucking screens are off now, aren't they?"

Over another hour... one by one, two by four, ten by five, the few crowds of attending workers dropped out of their conversations, strolled away and belted up in their cars.

'YOU have the confidence,' the text on Screen 3OD assured.

Then a push transition.

'THANK YOU'.

The man engaged for the entire attended-unattended workshop waited on his feet. The last slide cut to white, then to black.

"I have the confidence," he uttered to himself, and from nowhere, cheers sounded about him. He grinned, and felt ready now, for whatever came next.

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