

R E F U N D S F O R
MACHINES
A /S_ERIES _OF SHORT >STORIES

// // LINES // //

re.occurrence

(leo mara)

The white ring around the isolated profile icon thickened in time with speech to indicate who on the video-less call was speaking. “Okay... Are we all agreeing then?” The female voice, obscured by the limitations of a thin spread internet connection, came through aged inbuilt speakers. “...and we’re prepared to do this, knowing something big, and probably awful... is about to be said publicly about them. We’re agreeing not to know what that’s going to be for the duration of the two days that we produce work for them?”

08:08

08:08

08:08

The time changed. 08:27, from expected 08:09, which was 08:05 four minutes earlier at 08:04.

“Signal failure,” Roger read out loud, looking down through his white framed lenses at the allrail app open on his phone. “Says 08:41 on here.”

“Good start.” Betty chewed on a cold almond croissant poking out from a paper bag. She wore the same short, heavy, and overwide coat she wore for most jobs.

Sam checked about the platform. At commuters in parkas, the only other Black person in sight, and mangled-footed pigeons pecking at tiny scraps of flaked pastry and shredded betting slips. And the oblong sign with the name of the station across it and next to it, in its bold, copyrighted font – Ayling Network. The same Ayling Network printed repeatedly on their lanyards.

Cone tore open a pack of dry brioche rolls. He offered them first to his colleagues.

08:52

08:52

08:52

Sam poured still water from a disposable, ad-overloaded bottle into one that was more permanent and mixed in a sachet of powdered protein. He locked the cap, shook the contents and stared across the table, ready to react to Betty’s and Cone’s reactions. With one wireless earbud each, the pair watched a recent upload on Betty’s phone.

“You think this has something to do with what it is?” Betty asked, expecting Sam already thought it was.

The footage was square, and low res. Captured by the body cam of a security office, whose blue-ish wedding ring was distracting in the foreground. He stood back, the security office, questioned a young man with a shaved head, who was squashed, folded, balled, and pressed against carriage seats by two other officers.

“Don’t know,” Sam held his shake on the table between the paired seats. He resisted temptation to form a further, fast assumption. “Not even sure if that was on one of Ayling’s lines.”

"It's definitely one of theirs," Betty felt certain. "You can tell by the seats. You can just about see the screen above the doors for a second as well. I'm pretty sure it's only an Ayling line that runs direct through Ilford and Tower, to Hammersmith."

"If you can tell it's definitely Ayling, we shouldn't be looking," Roger suggested, focusing more on his own phone and the sudden three varied-in-length messages sent from his partner.

"Fuck it." Betty kept watching. "Seen it now."

"No, I don't give a shit," Roger put his phone face down on the table. "I wasn't saying don't look. If we can find out before we're being gatekept, great."

"It wasn't part of the agreement that we didn't look yet anyway," Sam tried to justify. Conscious that he appeared the first to test the conditions of said agreement. "I don't think this's got anything to do with what's coming today anyway. That was released only two days ago, and they didn't mention it to you, Betty, when you discussed the contract."

"If this was anything to do with whatever's coming, what would that be?"

"Are you asking what would the big thing about to be said about Ayling be?" Betty checked the question, "if it was anything to do with this video?"

"Yeah."

"I mean. This is a small drug bust on one of their lines. Could be there're more?"

"Where's Siobhan getting on?" Roger asked.

"Fuck knows. No idea now," Betty said, "I told her the train's delayed, she hasn't replied to me yet. I expect she's still getting on at Caledonian if they don't skip the stop."

Cranes went by. Crossing booms and hoists. Relentless construction. Black, grey, or white square high-rises. Indent balconies. Cramped, dark throughout the day studio and one-bedroom apartments. Almost all eyes were on phones down the entire train. Absorbed in grabby, thirty-second physical exertions or emotional ventilations or affirmations. Choreographed dances in front of propped lenses. Coincidences, two-hundred-attempted trick shots, caught by accident freakouts. Or backlit pages. Scrolling posts written by self-acclaimed writers who know equal or less to the reader about the subject of their matter.

09:21 09:21

Siobhan boarded at Caledonian.

She made her way down the agitated carriages, slipping past uncoordinatedly parked suitcases. Stepping over subtly modified and drooling dachshunds and bulldogs sloppily outstretched in the aisle. She saw Betty. She only just about recognised Betty.

"Hi," she said, and fell in the single space across from the group, next to a man with his eyes shut, tie too long, headphones denting scruff.

"How you doing?" Betty asked her.

"I'm good. I'm good," Siobhan felt.

"This is all of us. Our team." Betty pointed, "Sam, Roger. Cone."

"Hi," Siobhan repeated. "Wh- What do you all do? I imagine you do different things."

"Yeah," Betty started...

...Before Sam took over, “The things we do separately. Betty’s comms. She does the contracts and manages our relationships with clients. Does most of to all our messaging and commercialising. Cone’s the most active with the content we make. Setting, filming, lighting. Editing. Roger thinks up most the ideas and decides on most of the content. He does the research. And he writes any scripts we need for actors as well. I’m optimisation. I work out where we did a good job and where we fuck up. Whether or not they bought the ginger-flavoured salad dressing.”

“Amazing,” Siobhan replied, half emphatically. “You all do a lot.”

“You’re big on socials,” Cone didn’t ask.

Siobhan yawned and covered her open mouth. “I’m doing alright,” she supposed, scratching her ribs through her wax raincoat. “I’m not international.”

“You can’t be far off,” Betty knew, “You’re good. You have a very positive image.” She doubted the sincerity of her own compliment. “Siobhan, do you know why Ayling Network hired us?”

09:40

09:40

09:40 09:40

Betty, Sam, Siobhan, Roger, Cone, and now Scott, who joined the troupe a few stops back at Vauxhall, juggled positions. They pivoted as they took uncoordinated turns trying for a little green light at the magnetic, ground floor entrance of the twenty-four floors of Ayling offices. Eight attempts with three different ‘to expire shortly’ lanyards later, they were in.

Sam eyed all sides of the open foyer with one slight head turn. There was a scattering of low tables and chairs and standing charge points in odd places. On the walls, were sets of parallel lines, straight lines. A line fixation in all the artwork mounted in inlit frames.

On the far wall, were two more sets of locked automatic glass doors guarding elevators. Elevators which crossed in front of an atrium it looked like. But before the elevators and the glass doors, was a reception vendor.

Betty stopped at the tit-height computer boxed in a matte, metro tiles case with an eighteen-inch screen for a face. She waited for the machine to process the image transmitted from the inbuilt camera on its ‘chin’.

“Hello,” it greeted with a relaxed voice. The brightness of its screen increased, painting their faces with illuminated Ayling brand yellow.

“Hi,” Betty answered. “We’re here to collect some equipment.”

“Would you please enter your name?” it asked.

The screen went white. A colourless loading icon appeared, then froze twice... before a bar for text and an onscreen keyboard appeared.

Betty held out a finger. She didn’t start right away. “M- My name, or our name?”

“I can search both.”

Betty typed. B-e-t-h-a-n-y C-o-r-n-i-c-k S-a-m J-o-h-n-s-t-o-n-e S-P-D. Hit enter.

The vendor was doing something. Searching for the entered names under submitted orders, Betty assumed.

“Did you receive receipt confirmation of your order?” it asked a moment later.

“Where?”

“When an order is available for collection, you will be notified by message sent to a provided phone number.”

“We didn’t put in an order,” Sam stepped forward, “We don’t work here.”

“Do you need further assistance?”

“Yeah.”

“What can I help you with?”

“With what I said,” Betty pressed. “We were sent to pick up some equipment. We got our own, but apparently yours is what we have to use.”

Stood at the back, Siobhan checked the view count on her most recent hair tutorial.

“This is the address we were given. By Ayling. Which would make sense... because these offices are Ayling. We’re here to collect our equipment. *Your* equipment, for us.”

“Collect.” The vendor paused. “Do you need assistance with an order?”

“I need to speak to an actual person.”

“Would you like to speak to a customer advisor?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

Another loading icon appeared. “Hello?” The icon circled, continuously. It didn’t go. It continued to spin even though the call was connected.

“Hello. I’m Bethany Cornick. SPD. We were told to come to your offices in Battersea to pick up some equipment for filming. It should’ve been put aside for us.”

Shuffling. “Do you know what equipment was set aside for you?”

“Cameras. A rig.”

“SPD?”

That’s us.”

“Why?”

“Why?” Betty stared at Sam. “Why are we here? Why are we filming?” She turned her head back to the vendor. “My understanding’s we’re here to get a head start in repairing the damage about to be done to Ayling’s public relations in...” back to Sam again, “...?”

And Sam to Scott, “What time does the shit drop, Scott?”

“I don’t think I should tell you what time,” Scott answered, feeling a blister form.

“Very soon,” Betty said back to the assistant speaking through the vendor.

10:03 10:03

Apart from Siobhan who stood, the group sat at two small iron tables on the street outside Cartoo Coffee. They slumped in slow-rotting, foldable chairs, tucking their feet, rucksacks and other bags in, aware of the constant two-way pedestrian traffic near enough on top of them. The high probability of a plastic-bagged or balaclava wearing individual grabbing and dashing.

“...find below a list of initial suggestions.” Betty read off a creased piece of white A4.

“Do they want us for the work, or do they want do it themselves?”

Betty continued, “‘drome shots’- I expect that’s meant to say *drone*. Drone shots of ‘new lines’. ‘Suggest stretches with no materials or graffiti in proximity’.”

“Did we get a drone?” Roger asked, looking about their bags.

“No, they didn’t give us a drone,” Cone knew, having scanned through these few cases and bags eventually handed over at Ayling’s offices.

“What do they mean materials?” Sam asked, sipping black tea in a card cup. Not his protein.

“Do they mean building materials, maybe? Probably want any shots we get clear of ongoing construction or repairs,” Betty surmised. “Scott, that the sort of thing you can help with?”

Hands in his jacket pockets, he shrugged. “I wouldn’t be authorised to move along any construction.”

Betty sat herself up. “I didn’t mean move it, I meant help us with knowing where it is and where it isn’t. Where can we find clear tracks? And are we going to actually have access to any of it?”

Scott withdrew his phone. “Let me find out.”

Sam urged on, “What else?”

“‘new station entrances’.”

“Got it. Yeah. Fine. No materials?”

“Not specified on that one...” Betty returned to the list, “‘Members of public (varied) purchasing tickets, boarding trains, arriving at destinations’.”

“Are they suggesting we follow random people from where they get on to where they get off?” Roger asked, more rhetorically as he folded an emptied sugar packet.

“Cover generations. Retired. Teenagers. Children... if- with consent and accompanying parents... if evidenced’. ‘Approach smiling customers in areas where new stations are open’. ‘Interview’. ‘Ask about favourite journeys made possible because of Ayling Network’.”

“Pay actors, guys,” Sam stressed.

“Either they’re idiots- ignorant, or they’re too preoccupied right now to realise the unreliability of relying on unbiased and *unpaid* passers as contributors to say something about you.”

“We should try,” Roger considered, his arms now crossed, feeling the cold.

“‘Shoot attractions difficult to get to without using Ayling Network lines’... Oh my god... And then the last thing on this list... ‘trains’.”

“Fuck off-” Sam reacted.

Roger chuckled. “You’re fucking joking.”

“I’m not fucking joking. Seriously, the last thing they’ve put on this printout is ‘trains’.”

Siobhan kept still. She felt something knot inside of her. “Where am I?”

SPD almost forgot Siobhan was there. She waited for an answer.

Betty skimmed the list over. “I have no idea.” She scrunched her own face awkwardly. “Did they send you something separate?”

“No.”

Silence sat.

“Alright.” Betty had to think. “I mean, this is nothing, fuck this,” she gestured to the list. “This is what we do so... We’ll make the most of you being here, Siobhan. You tell us what you’re good with doing.”

“Not nudity,” Siobhan asserted.

“No... Wasn’t planning on getting you to take off your clothes for this, Siobhan. It’s promos... for a rail network.”

“Well, hold on,” Roger tickled.

“Roger, shut the fuck up.”

“I mean this politely...” Siobhan didn’t want any more of the coffee in her possession. Six sips were too much of a seasonal latte. “Ayling has to have its own marketing department?”

Cone put the two last brioche survivors in his rucksack. “Maybe the big reveal is that the whole marketing department massively fucked up. Did something like promote Off-Machine and got fired and maybe accused.” He bit his nail. “Maybe they were responsible for that shit in Ella Square?”

“We don’t know what their department is or was,” Sam turned the conversation back to Siobhan. “But I know that I don’t see much of any marketing for Ayling. Haven’t really, ever. It’s most likely, Siobhan, that yeah, they had a department, and it was ‘discontinued’ start of the decade as part of that first replacement wave, and while regulations around production with AI are still debated, they haven’t likely bothered with any reemployment if they haven’t needed to.”

“Cheaper to outsource anyway,” Betty commented. “To pay for us to make something.”

Roger added, “And of course, we’re struggling enough to agree to an offer to make the content for an organisation that may be child traffickers or riddled with fraud which’ll be public knowledge in how long, Scott?”

Scott was scrolling through emails on his phone. He didn’t entertain the joke.

“We’ve considered the risks. And you’re taking the same one, right?” Sam said to Siobhan, looking up to her, “We could be voluntarily offering ourselves as collateral... or main media moves on to the next cancellation or exposure. We could’ve used that porn-screen thing. If only that’d happened in the next few days, after it’d come out that Ayling, Scott, remind us what’s about to come out.”

Roger and Betty smiled.

10:48 (expected 10:51)

10:48 (expected 10:51)

10:48 (expected

10:51)

“First station on our list is the next stop, are we getting off?” Sam shuffled his feet on the minutely speckled, gum-stained floor. “Roger, you come up with anything good yet?”

“Getting there,” he answered, and thought. Head down, he focused on a refurbished, mid-grade tablet, housed in a case plastered with a couple of pop culture stickers. “Ah, h- it’s not good- not good, but it’s strategic. I might think of something better.” He flipped the cover over on his tablet. “Yeah, let’s disembark. Start shooting something.”

The group rushed, grabbing again at the hoard of cased and bagged belongings. Hands free, Scott watched from close to the soon parting carriages doors.

11:06 11:06 11:06

11:06

Cone held the final brioche in his mouth while adjusting the belts, strapping the body rig over his sweatshirt as he walked a fraction behind the rest of the group.

"It's the 'Omus Hesitation'. You know the Omus Hesitation?" Roger asked, fast walking with hands in chino pockets, shoulders strained with a fully packed rucksack.

"Yes," Betty answered, keeping up at his side, one hand holding fringe off her forehead, and the other lugging a heavy-duty case.

"No," Sam answered, also in line, on the other side of Betty and equally encumbered.

"No? Sam, you don't remember Daniel Omus? Famous artist. Singer, synthesist. Was pop, but... romantic. 'Tonight is the Last Time' -"

"Yeah, no- I know who Daniel Omus is."

"You remember what happened to him?"

"What, recently?"

"N- Er, no. About seven years ago."

"The multiple accusations of sexual misconduct?"

"Yeah."

"Then yes, I remember."

"Alright. So, Omus Hesitation, the idea is there're 'mainstayers'. Mainstay services, cultures, retailers, movies, artists. They are exactly what they sound like. They *stay*. Even if they're not 'relevant' by the twenty-thirty redefinition of that word, they survive trends. Live on past them because of the scale and generalness of their audiences is massive. They stay so popular that they got a good level of invulnerability against major allegations, publicised indictments and other shit." Roger wet his lips. "Daniel Omus was accused by six men of assault and harassment. Five evidenced the claims with records of card transactions and calls and messages. Not all were held up and Daniel was sentenced with public service and a fine. Omus is hitting millions of streams on To My Ears every month. He's still invited onto talk shows. It's fame bias. If it was publicised that a person with as much as probably half of his fame was up against the same accusations, they'd have corrupted batteries dispatched to their address. People like Omus too much. They don't want to give up his music."

"What's a few assault charges," Betty commented, tired of regulatory ignorance.

Cone offered his own opinion, "His music's fucking shit."

"I can think of much bigger examples than Dan Omus it should be named after." Specifically more male examples came to Betty's mind.

"What's this theory have to do with your idea, Roger?" Sam asked.

"A lot of the *organisations* that land under the Omus Hesitation, are part of it because there's not an alternative brand or a competitive offering of quality to what they provide that's good enough to replace the one under heavy fire."

"Happens all the time, we pay for services that we fucking hate because if there even is an alternative it's not as cheap or easy," Cone called ahead.

"My idea is we produce content that's no bullshit," Roger explained, "No pretending people are using the Network, enjoying the ride, so grateful for the service. Instead, I think we focus on why people are actually getting on Ayling lines instead of using e-bikes or the city's busses, or other lines."

“The idea’s simple then?” Sam said, “Opinions about Ayling, we know, are going to drop in an instant very soon. There’ll probably be a shower of hate, therefore you want to instead put focus on facts. We say, it’s true, Ayling is the fastest transport to where you want to go. They run five to two-am. Prices are... reasonable.”

“Exactly. We’re publicising the less debatable positives.”

“Good idea,” Sam approved. “We got off, then I guess you got an idea what to shoot here?”

11:31

11:31 11:31

Roger took more than one step back. While he waited on slow data for the Ayling app to route a journey, he read and reread ‘Covent Palmer’ over in his head. The name hung, neon green and illuminated, outlined and bold above him and above the plain-designed front entrance of the newly founded retail complex.

Scott watched Cone fixate on the OVF of Ayling’s loaned camera. Tracing the parades of on trend colours for gilets, overshirts and coats, and haste walks of early lunch-timers and day-offers on unimportant phone calls. Kids chasing each other. The people in frame step, loiter, rest about right-angle triangles of white slabbed and artificially turfed courtyard.

Sam noticed first, Betty and Siobhan appear from the entrance of Covent Palmer, clutching onto enormous paper bags all marked with the name of the same one brand.

“You got all that fast,” Sam noted.

“That’s all her.” Betty indicated to Siobhan, who was dressed in entirely different attire then when she entered the complex. “She knows how to shop.”

Sam reached out, accepted the thinning company credit card back from Betty. “You’re needed,” he said to Siobhan, keeping his arm out, “Let me take those.”

“If we’re ready, Siobhan... we’re just going to get you over and over leaving through the front. And move you about in front here as well where Palmer’s above you so it’s obvious where you’ve come from.”

12:51

“And you’re going to take the stairs, Siobhan,” Roger directed, “...out of the station. We’ll go again and again. Maybe five times to start.”

Passers weren’t subtle about their curiosity. Heads turned. Eyes stared. Through AR frames, blue light lens, sunglasses, and nothing, they watched. Watched the attractive young woman, dressed in woolly hat, jeans, and plain sweatshirt descend the set of jet washed stone stairs.

13:47

13:47

In baggy shirt, baggy trousers, boots, Siobhan marched parallel to and backdropped by a commercial stretch of the Thames. She passed the white piped, white cabled Oanon

footbridge. Patched coloured containers on a cargo hauler anchored on the far side of the river. Cabiboats speeded by, veered to the near side to pull up at the next bottom-flated stop. Stepping near perfectly in time, Cone tracked Siobhan with the rig on his chest.

Roger, Sam, Betty incidentally stood in a neat line to spectate. Betty dipped her hands into her deep jacket pockets, felt another lanyard. In her head, she tried to guess if it was black with a pink card for Hey Marie ‘crew’, or yellow with Dream in Homes ‘distribution site access’ on white.

Siobhan continued her strut.

14:39

14:39

14:39

Siobhan continued her strut.

Cone tracked with the shot as they rode on side-by-side escalators up to the ticket gates entering the Ayling Network station not far from London Bridge. More of the Thames and high rises as backdrop. Seen through the watermarked and thick and thin pigeon shit decorated, easily removed with editing software, glorious panels of glass sheltering the escalators.

14:47

Bridges, cabiboats, haulers, glass daggers, bank towers. Siobhan stood still, earphones on, head forward, riding the escalator down, with Cone tracking, out of the station.

15:03 15:03

15:03 15:03

A sweet potato fry fell out of the ramen bowl, onto the tray. The fast order of food moved around dining customers and wet wiped tables. It moved until the self-operated short tower of shelves stopped next to the table marked with the same number displayed on its playing card sized screen.

“Thank you.” Sam took the loaded tray, pushed it to the centre of their table and lifted off the transparent plastic cover.

The tower held where it was, processing the location of the table for the next order. “You’re welcome,” it replied with an articulate voice, before moving off.

Betty snuck a fry from the tray, ate it.

Cone replayed footage on a tablet.

Roger looked over his shoulder, “If we spend decent time stitching it together, in my head, it looks like a live action 2D platformer. Siobhan is always centre in the shots, and the locations come side scrolling to her. The point it implies,” he took a chicken wing, “is Ayling makes for a straight transition. We want to edit it so Siobhan’s walking into one station one side of London, and she’s straight back out at another. The trains are direct, fast... it’s like you never got on one. We’re selling public transport, riding on the Network, without focusing at all on the trains themselves. Because if this shit is about something taking place on the lines, you know we’d just be feeding into the internet frenzy. Providing

better footage to be captioned, memed, and completely fucked with. Which fine by us, we did our part, but you know Ayling could- I don't know, maybe would try to put the blame back on us for that. Or they dare name us and fuck up any reputation we just about have."

"Why have you been working out the times for the rides on your phone for the places we shot?" Sam asked, thinking of the three examples he witnessed.

"For a graphic to lay over the bit. Drive that point. That you are not getting a more direct journey on another train line."

"You've been writing them like you would think you could fit them all into one day."

"We have so far."

"Yeah," Sam still didn't understand, "But you've done them in a different order to what we've actually done, and you've added more stops."

"I got another idea. And it goes on top of the idea we're already doing. We use what we're doing a bit like a trojan horse. And past me doing this, seeing if I can make all the journeys work in one day on the app, we haven't got to really do anything more for it."

The protein shake returned. Sam withdrew the bottle from his rucksack. Beige sludge curtained the interior of the plastic, sticking to the sides. "You want to share the idea?"

"Do you know SiM?"

"Yes," said Sam.

"No," Betty answered. "Do they know Omus?"

"Yes," Siobhan, "Ye- I know SiM. Not- I don't know whether he knows Omus, though."

"He started off as a streamer," Roger explained. "Made MAKO content full time."

"But he wasn't SiM- wasn't known as SiM," Cone said, "He changed his name when he moved to making videos to prove, or mainly disprove, information or ideas put out by commercial businesses."

Betty asked, "How do you go from MAKO content to trolling consumerism?"

"I don't remember."

Cone knew. "He was making MAKO content and ordered a lot of shit from a takeaway place. The food was hilariously portioned, and he was quick enough to react live and to think to capture it on his camera. He played to the comments and called out the place over the phone then documented and went on this whole mission to get the portions changed."

"He's not the first. To go live with demystifying ads."

"No. But he's young, white and he's attractive," Sam said.

"And a bit of a shithead. The kind people seem to like."

"Oh, yeah, completely. I don't like him, but I still watch his content. And so do hundreds-of-thousands of others. More than would pay any attention to what we're making here. So, the idea is we brag. We really emphasise that all these trips on Ayling's Express lines can be made in a single day, and we put it together, a hint obnoxiously, to bait SiM like a little fishee. If he goes for the bait, he makes content out of attempting to do all the journeys the same way in a day and when he proves its possible, which it is because I'm making sure that it is, then its massive PR for Ayling as well as views for SiM. They beat SiM. Not many organisations beat his trials. Then we can advise Ayling share SiM's content, maybe 'at' him, too, and it gets even more attention."

Betty wiped her teeth with her tongue. "We have to hope SiM took the bait. We can flood his comments on other videos with suggestions that he takes it on."

"Roger, I am again genuinely impressed," Sam offered.

"Siobhan said they're not the first," Betty said, "Just want to make sure, if we don't have to rely on SiM, then... let's not. If she would want to," she looked at Siobhan, "...couldn't Siobhan instead do the trial?"

"If she wanted, yeah," Roger considered, "yeah, we could say for sure Siobhan could do it. Might be weird that she's in the ad itself then challenges it as well and we got ninety-whatever ninety-six percent chance the trial's going to happen but much less chance that it'll go as viral. Not to say Siobhan isn't... but that's not- this isn't really her sort of content. She keeps an audience that probably aren't going to engage with this. So, for Siobhan to do... ninety-six, sixty-three. There's definitely some crossover with Siobhan's, but SiM's audience, they watch SiM doing this exact kind of thing. But yeah, we can't say for certain that SiM is going to do it. So, like... he's seventy, and ninety percent."

"You're making these figures up off the top of your head," Cone wanted to point out.

"Completely."

Sam finished off his shake. "Siobhan can't do it," he decided.

Betty asked, "Why?"

"Roger just said. If she did the ad and then the test. She can't do that. That's *brazen* affiliation. She's hired by Ayling for the advert, it's just going to look like she was paid again for the test. It's biased. We couldn't make it not look setup."

"I didn't even think about that," Roger realised, holding another tear of fried chicken.

"Yeah." Betty leaned back. She sighed and rested her arm up on the wobbly table. "No, I didn't either."

Roger put the chicken down on a napkin. "Then original plan. We hope SiM comes through for us, unknowingly. Unaware that that's what he's doing. And hope the big bad news today doesn't instead make him want to avoid any mention of Ayling in his content. Betty, we do what you said as well. We blast his comments."

"End of the day," Sam said, "worst case, we did our work, made this ad and got paid."

"Right."

Roger sloped forward, chest over the quarter-absorbed, grease-dosed buffet, and reached his hand to the middle, "Team on three."

No one in the team moved to add their hand.

15:33

"What if... she fell asleep on the train, woke up at the end of the line, and there're er-cleaners working around her. Or she sneezes, it- and she's suddenly instantly five stations along. It's comical. You make up a tagline like 'they're really that fast'."

The pitch came from Scott. It came from nowhere.

The group digested the idea, along with the tail end of various chicken and fries they gnawed on and rushed into their systems. They lounged, most on one side of the seats-against-sides carriage. Sam scratched his stubble. Roger held a horizontal rail and sniffed to try clear his nose.

Betty reviewed. "That's not awful."

"No, I like it," Roger realised.

Sam, who was sat alone across the aisle, watched about his feet. He looked at the paper bags stuffed with the arrangements of clothes Betty and Siobhan chose.

Roger caught him. "It's alright, Sam. We kept the tags on all of it. I've requested the refund already. There's a drop-off locker at our last location for the day."

Sam nodded, suddenly looked side on as the train slowed down approaching a regularly overpopulated platform.

As the doors opened, a crowd waited impatiently to disembark while a mother and her older child dragged a buggy off the train. When they were clear, the rest rushed, and an equal number of people getting off, got on. Concluding the crowd, were three Public Security officers, attired in their black vest uniforms.

They glanced about the carriage. Crossed eyes with Siobhan, Betty, Roger, and one purposefully turned the other way to watch the platform quickly fall behind as the train accelerated along the tracks.

Scott's phone sounded. Then it sounded again. And once more a few seconds later as he was already reading what was likely a message on it, while shielding the screen with his palm.

Betty caught on. She grabbed a handrail, lifted herself from the sunken seat.

Scott's eyes shot. He looked to her movement.

"I'm going to find a toilet," she said to Siobhan and Roger, "I'll be right back," before making her way through people and down the carriage.

The two Public Security officers who were not looking out the window watched her go. Like an older brother, Sam watched, too. Beyond a couple lads pumping chests, sipping on cans and chatting football managers, he noticed two more outfitted officers. These two officers moved down the train. They moved with intent in Betty's direction, then, relief, adjusted slightly, each to one side, to let Betty through. Once she was, they came closer together again and continued once more in the same direction, towards them. Afraid to look like he was doing something wrong, Sam looked down again. He tried to relax his shoulders and fixate on the collar of a formal shirt folded in one of the bags.

When the straight-faced officers were all together right beside them, they made no transaction. They traded no conversation. One moved quietly. He took the empty seat beside Sam.

Scott moved his attention off his phone and went to say something to Sam when he suddenly reconsidered, silently surprised by the officers' presence.

Minutes later, Betty returned to the scene. Like Scott, she seemed to maybe know something more, and too, was unsettled by the convening officers. Incidentally she crossed eyes with the officer sat down next to Sam, catching him peaking into the bags loaded with clothes.

"At the next stop, we're all getting off," an officer by the carriage doors said.

Roger, Cone, Siobhan looked up. They looked at the officer who spoke. At the seriousness in his expression, underneath the dark stubble, and the scattered red complexion of his otherwise white cheeks.

Sam turned his head to look, too.

“We’ll take you to the closest portable unit where you’ll be questioned.”

Siobhan panicked. “What’s happening?” she asked.

Cone and Roger instead felt everything in their throats.

“What have we done-? Have we done something?” Betty asked, unsure where to put her hands.

“Better you stay calm. You see us, don’t you? We are not arresting you here. And if you’re not resisting, then we don’t need to. We won’t cause a scene. Do you understand? As I say... we will all calmly get off in a few minutes, at the next stop.”

Sam held his breath. “Are we under arrest?”

The officer shuffled his posture as he leaned on the door, looked back to Sam, “No. You’re not. Not at the moment. But we do have the authority to arrest you if you do not come with us to be questioned.”

“Why the fuck would we be arrested?” Roger verbally burped. He wasn’t sure who he was asking. Whether he questioned the officers, or Sam, or Betty.

“You might be confused, but I suggest you hold yourselves together. If we’ve learnt anything from recent exposure, it’s that we don’t start to react until we’re clear of spectators and their thirty-five-thousand ways to record. Alright?”

It felt wrong. It produced nausea and previously never experienced panic inside of all of them, and it felt wrong. Still, they all felt forced to do what they were told.

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“If you all want to take a seat, the officer who’ll explain what’s going on will be through in a couple minutes.”

Sam, Scott, and Betty fit into the room with no detail.

There were three seats. Two on one side of a plain table, one of the other. Betty and Sam took the two seats together. Scott stood. The officer, the only one to speak on the train, shut the door behind him as he left them to wait.

Sam looked to Scott, “Scott, is there a chance this has anything to do with what’s being released today about Ayling?”

“I’m not sure,” he answered, seeming honest.

“Is it released now? Is it public knowledge?”

“It’s out,” Betty inserted.

Scott and Sam looked at Betty.

“He didn’t hide it well,” she said, nodding to Scott. “He made it obvious. When we were on the last train. It’s dropped. That’s why I got up, went to the toilet-”

“You saw it.” Scott breathed out. “Then you’re done. You broke the terms of agr-”

“What’s the news, Betty?” Sam asked.

The door opened. An average-sized officer, with flat hair and patchy eyebrows, crept in, one hand moving in his pocket, and the other checking his phone. “Hello,” he introduced, before making any eye contact. “Hi.”

“Hi,” Betty replied.

"You left me a seat. Very kind. Thank you." He sat down. "Okay." He put his phone, the screen face down, on the table aged with a few old, very short lengths of duct tape. "I need to ask some questions. Before I start, would anyone like some water?"

No one indicated that they would.

"No," Betty replied.

"No worries." The officer pulled a second, larger phone, from his pocket and laid it on the table's surface. He opened an application for note taking and readied his index and the onscreen keys to type with. "First, in fact... you're carrying a case with a five-digit lock. Could you please tell me the code?"

"Wh-" Sam looked to Betty, "What case was that?"

"It was for the rig. I've got no idea. I don't remember what it was."

"Oh, fuck. No, I don't- It was four-one- I think, I can't-" Sam said to the interrogating officer, "Cone or Roger, the two- the friends of ours that you took through to the other room, they'll be able to tell you. They can tell you the code. And if not, they've got the tag with the code written down on it."

"Okay." The phone vibrated with every letter tapped. "I'd like you to please explain to me what you were doing on the train."

"What were we doing on the train? We were- using it- I don't..." Sam looked at the officer, "What else would we be doing?"

"We weren't doing anything," Betty answered.

The officer asked, "Where were you going?"

"The University."

"To go to the University, or just to its station?"

"The station," Betty continued.

"Then where were you going from the station?"

"To the library. Not inside. Just to go outside of it."

The officer noted. "To do what?"

"Film. We're filming for Ayling," Sam answered. "We'd been signed on by Ayling Network on Monday, to create some promotional content for them."

"And that's what's in the cases, and the bags?"

"Yes."

"And what are the clothes?"

"Costumes."

"They were bought for Siobhan Ellen, the woman with Roger and Cone. They were for her to wear for the different scenes we had to film. If we're being honest, alright, our plan was to return all the clothes when we were done with them. Is that what this is about?"

"The clothes? No." The officer cleared his throat. "No, that's not illegal."

"Why are we here?"

"Because your behaviour's very suspicious, guys. You've made a lot of back-and-forth trips in just over half a day. I'm not a videographer, do correct me if this isn't right, but I would have thought filming would take up a lot more time of the day. Even if it's for the lines' organisation. Why is it you're moving so constantly?"

Sam put his arms on the table. "Because the content for Ayling that we were filming was to make a point of all the places you could get to in one day."

Betty took over, "You can look at the footage that we have up to this point. Siobhan was our one actor. She's got the clothes on that we bought, and the idea's that we stitch the footage together, so it runs in one constantly moving sequence where she is smashing out a lot of trips in one day and the point is, that's possible for anyone, because of the speed of Ayling's trains, and the stations they connect." She put her hands up, "We know Ayling's fucked now. We didn't know that this morning. Well- we knew, but we didn't know why. They- as in Ayling, told us that themselves at the start. When I first spoke to them, they said there would be a big scandal about them coming out in the news today. The agreement was we couldn't look at what it was while we were making the content for them. That's what Scott's here for. He was supposed to make sure we didn't try to find out. Although, he didn't really do a great job, I snuck off and looked it up as soon as I thought it was out. So, now, I get it... I get looking at us today, we look like drug runners, but I promise you we're not."

"Drug runners. Woah, no, we're not." Sam reacted. "We're not drug runners."

The officer nodded.

"Is that- that's it? It *is* to do with that? What is it, is there more?" Sam asked Betty.

"A lot mor-"

"You wouldn't be the first to pretend to be 'film crew' to transport drugs."

"No." Betty thought it important to emphasise, "...but the fact that we don't have any drugs on us."

"A film crew' is a cover that'd only be worth it for trying to cross international borders though, would it not? *Sorry*. I don't mean actually 'worth' it. You know what I mean? The whole point is it being a cover to explain why you're in another country."

"I understand what you're saying." The officer left his notes. "And you would be the only runners they've bothered to dress up on the lines. And, like you say, the only runners without drugs in your possession."

Sam recognised he had still not yet been given a full answer. "What was the scandal specifically?"

"We'll check the footage you have, like you say. If it is what you say it is, we apologise and you're obviously free to go. My advice, consider leaving this project unfinished."

Sam felt rumblings of a headache. "What was the news?"

The officer reclined in his permanently upright seat. "Information was sold in ANTNs."

"ANTNs'?"

"Auction Net-to-News. Interceptors listen for or buy rumours with Webcoin, find routes into organisations' data and copy the compromising information, sell it to the highest bidder in ANTNs. Big news streamers employ staff to be first to grab these data spillages and wind them into a narrative fit for engagement. The information sold about Ayling were lists. The lists were names of individuals and when they're run through the systems that control the gates and the security machines on the trains, they were programmed to be invisible."

"Should you be sharing all this information?" Betty asked.

"It's public knowledge. Its all in the release today. Anyone bothers to read past the first ten percent of the articles." The officer stretched his spine. "What I was saying. We've started to track these individuals, find them in person, and of course, so far, they've all

been runners transporting illegal stimulants, painkillers, marijuana, cocaine from one side of the Thames to the other. North to South, East to West. They'd come out the station, drop the carry to another individual who nine-times-out-of-ten rode an electric scooter, and then they'd get back on the line again."

"Holy shit," Sam responded.

"Ayling Network don't come off even as fools who were none-the-wiser." The officer put his phone away in his pocket. "The lists were internal. They come from inside Ayling. Though they could try to claim they were planted, it's already proven that's not to be the case. There're names of employees. And a confession from high-up staff. Ayling have between seventy and a hundred employees who're either aware or involved in the operation."

Betty looked sideways at Sam, "That was the news."

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When Scott, Sam, and Betty were led out of the room for questioning, Siobhan, Cone, Roger were already free as well. They sat together in a row, on a hideously blue bench. As soon as they saw Betty and Sam, Scott didn't really matter, they got up and met them. Roger grabbed Sam, hugged him and didn't expect the relief until it was gripping and expressed in the embrace.

"Did they tell you what's going on with Ayling?" Sam asked, Roger's shoulder pressing into his chin which pressed into his teeth.

"Yeah. Cat's well and truly fucked off out of the bag," Cone answered. "Sorry, Scott."

"Getting well away from Ayling," Roger added to the mocking.

"Far as it can," now Betty. "I think we probably should've stayed away."

Sam reminded them, "In your defence, and ours, maybe we didn't know it'd be this bad."

"I'm going for a vape," Scott uttered, vacating the portable station.

"How were we warned?" Sam wondered. "How'd Ayling know ahead of time that this was being dropped today?"

"From what the officer said," Cone replied, "...there's been an investigation going on for at least a week to find out more about the list before knowledge of it was allowed to be released. Ayling would've been aware that was happening and then probably to protect their staff, they were warned about when the news was being released."

"Cool," Roger said, nonchalantly. "What do we do now? Do you think we finish the content?"

"No. No, well Scott's probably ratting on us right now," Betty pictured, "agreements fucked, and I hope it is anyway. Ayling will null the contract if we don't, so..."

"Hang on," Roger said. "Siobhan, when you said earlier when we asked if you knew why Ayling hired you, you said *they* didn't tell you. I just realised, did you know the whole time what it was?"

"Yeah, I knew," she admitted, tying her hair up.

"Oh... Okay. Fair enough. How?"

"Doesn't matter."

“Should we get out of here?” Sam asked.

Cone gestured to the thirty or so kg of cases and bags, “What about all this?”

“We need to return it,” Sam said.

“Who to?” asked the officer, not even pretending to have not listened to the entirety of their conversation.

“Ayling.”

“Oh, alright. Well, I suppose you need to return it...” The officer stood, signature straight-face. “Not really. Fuck ‘em. Leave it here. We’re going to be going to those offices a lot.” Slowly, he lifted his arm, pointed into the portable station, “If you want to avoid their man you’ve been stuck with, take the exit down there, and to your left.”

“Oh. Thank you,” Sam said, smiling.

“Alright. Are we going home?” Betty asked the group, “What are we doing now?”

“I got another idea,” Roger spoke up. “We fucking pivot.”

Lines
re.occurrence
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