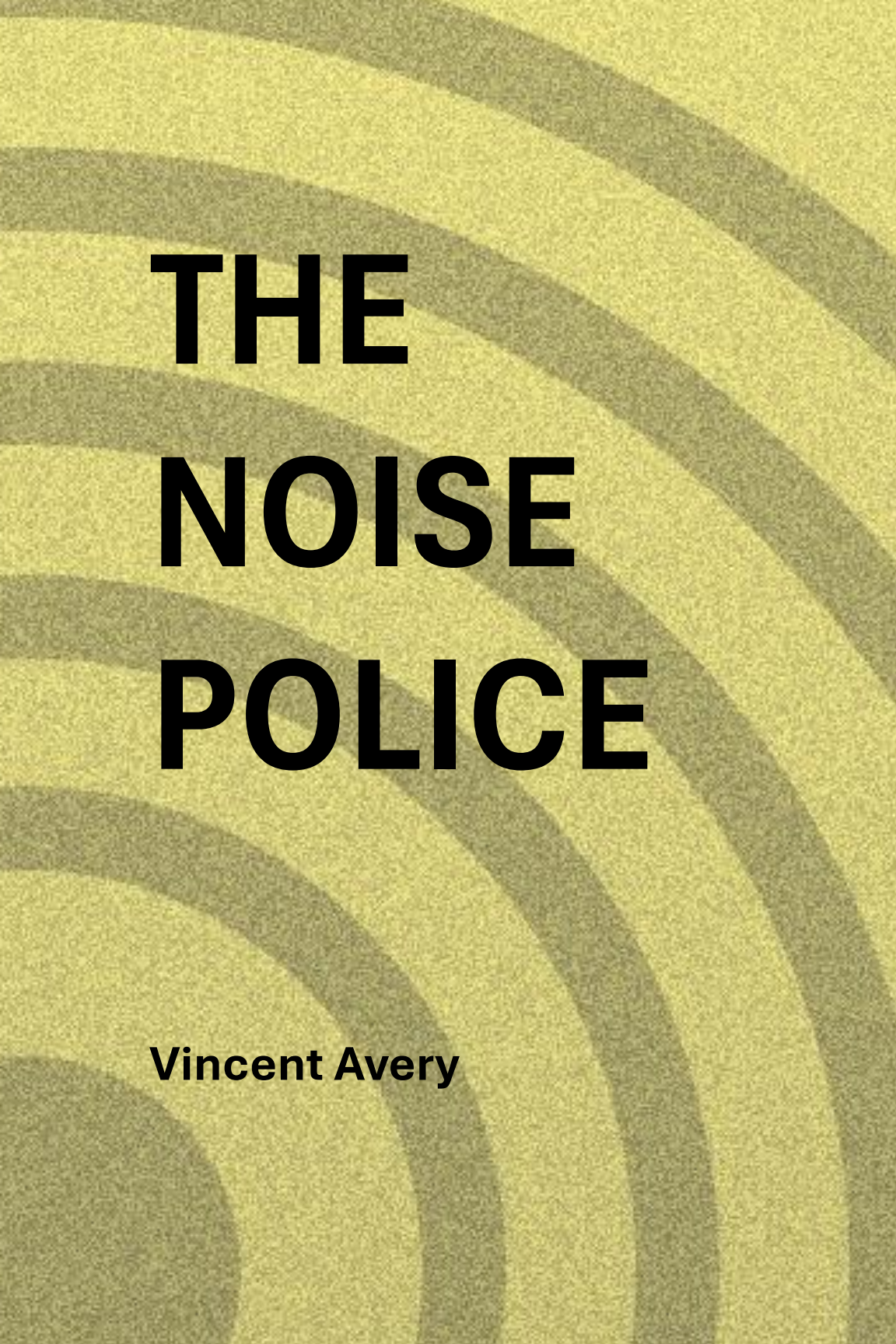




THE NOISE POLICE

Vincent Avery

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First Edition

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CONCEPTION

THE footsteps kept growing louder. Eyes scanned for every minute detail of the single-storey flat in front of him. Motions on the pavement pulled him back to the day ahead. Those thoughts could wait.

Two doors. This man stood for a while, and a couple of cars whirled as they traversed on the moist tarmac. Underneath the typical overcast of the county.

When the scan finished, his focus became clearer: get inside his room as fast as possible.

That was until the agency lead interrupted him.

“Liam! You are running a bit late... and you look absolutely knackered. You alright?”

The man wiped the sweat off his forehead. A deep exhale. He slowed down his thoughts to construct a reply.

“Nothing. Just getting back to work.”

“Come on. You can take a short break if you need it.”

“Still got reports to compile.”

Harrison coupled the smile with a raised eyebrow.

“Right. If you end up in the ICU, remember I warned ya.”

The boss did his usual cackle, which annoyed and lightened up Liam at the same time. For two years now.

Harrison left after that, and Liam proceeded to his dedicated office space. Blinds, a pair of monitors, armchairs with a miniature table. The small room had a tint of sage, and luckily they didn't have to renovate the place much since it was a former therapy centre.

He tossed his bag onto the floor and booted up the computer, aiming to distract himself with the mindless paperwork soon enough. Anything to numb it.

The landline rang.

“Bugger.”

There was a hesitation.

The man picked up the device.

“Inline Services, Liam speaking.”

“The PI agency? I can report, er, consult here, right?”

“Yes.”

“My daughter... she uh, I don’t, I don’t know how to put this together, pardon me...”

“S’alright. Take your time.”

For a moment, all Liam heard was white noise from the other side. The subtle ticking made him observe the clock while holding the telephone.

“She committed suicide.

At our own place, while I was at work. I-I don’t even know why she used the gun...”

This was beyond the responsibilities of a private investigator. Normally, Liam should refer this to the police, perhaps even cancel it for being too volatile.

“...recently found her phone. I don’t know why she hid it in our attic. I refuse to believe it was just her. She was confident for years... and out of nowhere, this. I can’t...”

His focus returned to the client.

“It’s alright. I can wait until I get the full picture.”

“I shouldn’t be talking to authorities like this... bugging them, saying all these delusions...”

“Death is serious, Mrs...”

“Elain... sorry, I just don’t trust the rozzers to handle things in my personal life, and you seem more accommodating. All they did was arrest a dodgy gun owner and move on like she was another file to complete.”

Liam chose his next words carefully.

“Mrs. Elain, don’t worry, I’m not the police. I can only inform them when I finish my work.

I know this must have been rough, so I want to be gentle. What do you think caused this incident?”

“...Hmm. I don’t know. Her friends were genuine, she doesn’t fancy anyone... she spends loads of time online, but everyone does that.”

“I want you to know that many underreported crimes happen around the Internet, since it is much harder to monitor. You mentioned she hid her phone, right?”

“Yes.”

“That could be connected to your ‘online’ claim.

My daughter, she goes to lots of sites online. I’m fine with giving her freedom but there’s just a part of me that still wants some control.

I did a fair bit of tech work when I was still with the Met. It’s usually nasty stuff, but it was also intriguing in some way.”

Maybe he shouldn’t have mentioned that.

“If you trust me enough, I can get that phone checked. We can settle the fees later.”

It took a hefty number of seconds.

“Yes. Yes, you can have her phone. We can meet at my place, discuss details, those things.”

“Thanks. We can set up a future appointment.”

He heard a prolonged sigh.

“Oh my word. You’re a godsend.”

Terse replies. Two or so interruptions. And then... silence. The PI put the phone down. The air never felt this constricting and warm. Liam didn’t take a similar risk before, but he harboured such a fascination for the dark side of technology that he wanted to do it. And he just did.

Perhaps this was something different.

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“Mrs. Elain.”

The man repeated, as he delivered more knocks on the door. Her front porch looked nice.

“Mrs. Elain? This is Liam from two days ago. Can you-”

The door swung to a small extent to reveal the woman.

“Pleasure to meet you.”

He noticed the lack of chattering inside.

“Is there a Mr. Elain, or...?”

“No, marriage never really was my thing. I’m a single mum. And she’s... well, she’s adopted.”

“Are you willing to discuss more about *her* to me?”

“Certainly. If it helps you get useful info.”

His mind was drifting elsewhere...

“Come in, I’ve prepared tea and biscuits.”

“Oh right. That would be lovely, Ms. Elain.”

And the pair entered her place. The door closed shut.

It was a modest setup. Fireplace, picture frames, the telly, window wasn't too dominant, brown carpets, and, of course, a set of sofas with a glass table in between. The area they were situated in, with their cups and snacks.

"...There is absolutely no relation to her being adopted. Thea had always been open to me about her issues, and for the past decade she gradually developed more confidence with her new life. She could have been a great woman.

I had my fair share of mistakes, yes, but so does every parent. And we were fine with each other for years."

"Heard or noticed any worrying detail before she did it?"

Elain scratched her arm at a slow, reassuring pace.

"No, not really."

Liam had a weak frown. He wasn't sure if he hit a spot or if he'd get a hint from this. Maybe both. Then, Elain lifted her cup to drink. She broke the silence.

"Now that you mentioned it, her friend Olive looked rather emotionless while I was walking on the pavement, a good few hours before I heard the news."

“Perhaps this is my cue to ask about her friends?”

“Thea had a fair amount, but the closest one was Olive. She was already in the neighbourhood before we moved here, and I could not thank her enough for all the things she did for Thea. Awful it had to end like this.

I know it’s only been a week, but she’s recovering.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“You mean...”

“Tell her it’s a request from me. It will help both of us.”

The investigator gazed at the beige wall behind Elain.

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He was back on the pavement. The neighbours seemed calm and preoccupied, but that still didn’t erase the concerns here, even with his casual attire.

Liam saw the house from afar. As the man got closer, he could see the teenager, possibly leaving the driveway with her bike.

“Excuse me.”

The PI wanted to remain non-threatening.

“Sorry, excuse me, excuse me.”

“What?”

He was catching his breath after that brisk walk.

“Sorry to bother you. I’m Liam from Inline Services, and I’m a private investigator. You’re Olive Berkley, right?”

He handed over a business card for identification, but he still saw her lowered eyes.

“Great, the police are here... but yes, that’s my name. If you want questions, keep it down.”

“...Sure thing. I was wondering if I could trouble you for a quick chat. About your friend Thea. Ms. Elain already talked to me and I’m working on her request.”

Olive placed her bike on the wall, before taking his card and reading its details. She then glanced at some tree branches.

“Oh... so you’re the guy she mentioned in her text.”

“She said this could help both of you.”

The girl still had doubts, but her face seemed warmer now.

“Alright. Go ahead.”

“Ms. Elain noticed you looked emotionless just before Thea... did that. Know anything that could help me tie up some loose ends? Even small details would be useful.”

Slight gusts. A few leaves crackled.

“Look. Even I don’t know how that happened. One day she was excited and she wanted us to go outside. The next, she’s muttering random words when I look away.”

“Words?”

Olive loosened her grip.

“I-I’m not sure yet. She’d never been like this until now.”

“It’s fine. You don’t have to explain it perfectly.”

“...Alright. Umm, it felt like her words were about, people who- people watching her? But that’s cliché, right?”

“Carry on.”

She flinched back slightly.

“Okay... I haven’t seen anyone stalking her, or her mentioning specific names. But it’s weird, why would she say that? How can someone be watching her then?”

“Did you know Thea hid her phone before she died?”

“Wait, what?”

“You think she had problems online?”

The teenager had to pause after those realisations.

“Feeling watched, her phone being hidden... not to mention she was more active in social media than out there...”

Yeah. Seems like it, if you ask me.”

“Active, in what way?”

“She’s not too showy about it, but she has alts for stuff like photography and communities for adopted people.

Who knows what person she wound up online...”

Liam finally formed a smile today.

“Alright, I’ll leave you to it then. Thank you for your time, Olive. And take care.”

“No worries.”

Olive watched as the man turned around and ran.

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The dimness of the room wasn’t the issue.

Liam knew he had permission, but it still felt wrong. It’s been a while since he handled digital forensics, and even that was voluntary work as a DI before.

He started digging into Thea’s phone.

During the first hour, Liam noticed that the chat logs and inbox were unusually sparse, without any mention of the “people” watching her. Maybe Thea cleared the messages out of fear. Maybe she didn’t want anyone finding out or being dragged to this mess. Probably.

Audio files, music, documents, browser history, notes...

Looks like she removed her traces. Unfortunate.

Then he saw it. A zip file. Sent to this phone after her death. It contained two gigabytes of Thea’s personal files. The phone wasn’t connected to the Internet here, so it must have been sent while the phone was hidden.

Nothing useful in the metadata either. Of every file.

Whoever these people were, they were clever.

He had reluctance in checking Thea’s pictures. But he was used to that feeling, Liam did some steganography back in the day. It seemed like these people also wanted attention, and photos were the perfect hiding spot if they embedded a message. He knew that the smallest literal bits could hide the most damning information.

And one photo has millions of them.

Luckily, tech can solve its own problems. Liam used an LSB program to run checks and find suspicious photos.

Solo shots, landscapes, school-related images, there's Olive in a group photo. Some duplicates, too. The usual.

This could have been a woman with a future. And the phone was both her last memory and demise.

...

Scan finished. Loads of symbols to analyse.

And at last, he found an interesting string.

26KIORUV61KYOUT1KNZ52

But this was still encrypted. What the hell do these numbers and words mean, and for what?

It was clearly arranged in an ordered way. He jotted down the numbers, then the words. Artificial light reflected on Liam, who was thinking of potential connections...

Combining the numbers didn't make sense. They were too short for a mobile number or a coded message, considering the string already had words. Were they keys for a cipher, alphabet shifts? Were they distractions?

The dull afternoon didn't help with the slog. And he already did that for the photos earlier. Base64, Base32, hex values... nothing. Were the tools stupid? Was he stupid? Would he need to do it manually? God, hopefully not.

His head was buried on the desk. Rest was important for work after all... if there was some progress at least. So Liam got out of the drowsiness and stared at the screen.

He never really thought of it earlier.

It should have been his first instinct. It could be another dead-end though, mocking him for thinking it'd be that easy. Back to square one. Again.

If these were coordinates... and somewhere in the UK...

52.26 N, 1.61 E.

Enter.

There it was.

A location just south of Norwich.

Plausible for the perpetrators behind Thea's death.

How about the words then? What's the message?

He opened a program, inserted the words to determine which cipher he needed, before manually decoding it...

ECILOPESION EHT

THE NOISE POLICE.

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He walked out of his office and towards the room of Inline Services' boss.

Its door opened, and Harrison was there. Sitting with his legs on the desk. Still laid-back during his late afternoon break, after putting in a shift.

"How's your suicide case? Dead end?"

A chuckle, as expected, but Liam pushed onward.

“The opposite. Found coordinates and a name.”

The boss finally shifted his head to see Liam with a folder. His legs were now on the floor.

“Really?”

“I had prior experience with digital forensics.

A ciphertext said ‘THE NOISE POLICE’, mean anything to you?
They’re an hour away, out towards the coast.”

Harrison looked at the private investigator for a brief moment, then laughed.

“What’s funny about that?”

“They’re those attention seekers, of course they want you to decode that thing.”

“Who?”

“Kids who call themselves The Noise Police, they’ve been bugging a few locals for some week now.

Still, I wouldn’t want to touch them with a bargepole. Hell, you wouldn’t need to, you’ll still get your bank account hacked.”

Liam lifted a brow, which the older man noticed.

“You aren’t the first one in this office who got done over by these edgelords. And something tells me you’re the only one willing to take the case. Nobody else got this far.”

He remembered Elain didn’t want the police involved. He was already in the grey area anyway. Harrison then asked...

“What makes you think the coordinates will yield anything?”

“Same name came up twice in cyber-related cases. It proves they exist and these numbers could be related to them. And we need to try this somehow. It’s the only lead I have.”

The boss took note of that sentence.

“You’re willing to do this alone, then? No support? I can sack off work if you need it.”

“You mentioned they could hack without us even noticing. If I report this to Norfolk, they’ll clock that, wipe their data, and move before we get more intel. Going solo is the only way to do this quickly and with the least amount of suspicion.

Besides, the police thought the case was already finished, as Elain said. Legal processes would be too slow. I should know, I was one of them before.

These hackers clearly wanted someone to see this. They likely prepared enough for it, and they didn’t hack me or you.

When I get there, I will stall them. And I will get intel.”

“And if something happens to you?”

“Then that would be your signal.”

Harrison sat in silence. His nodding gradually became more noticeable.

“Good luck turning this suicide case into a suicide mission.”

The agency lead performed a short chuckle.

“But seriously, prepare yourself.”

Liam nodded, had a slight pause, and he got his feet moving. Door was shut, he greeted one of his few colleagues, and he was back in his office space again.

The room could use a lighter tint.

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It had only been an hour since he'd eaten the first meal of the day, and he knew it wouldn't take long. The middle-aged man was still thinking of that phone call. Thinking if he could have made better decisions instead of choosing this route.

But something needed to be done either way.

Ignition. The car drove off, through the winding streets, out towards the horizon. And the thoughts faded.

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<https://soundcloud.com/pieropiccioniofficial/its-impossible?in=sen7721/sets/chic-et-chill>

PROMENADE

ONE minute had already passed since he drank a warm cup of tea, but he still made a comment as an attempt to lighten the mood in the caf.

“My first time here. You make wonderful tea.”

“Don’t mention it.”

The two of them exchanged a rather awkward stare.

“Well, I’ll see myself out. Cheers.”

As the tea lady waved her arm, the man changed his focus on the entrance door. The chimes rang as he left.

Back to the main part of his agenda. The reason he was a bus ride away from home, away from the family.

Coordinates were a great help since they eliminate most of the potential areas. But even a hundredth of a degree could mean acres of land to survey. That's another slog Liam has to go through. This time, it was analogue. And all by himself.

He remembered that the destination was slightly far from two roads. It was surrounded by greenery, and there seemed to be nothing on the map. He thought all of that as he mindlessly strolled through the field. Maybe the map was outdated.

Did the hackers just troll him? Was this distraction, so they'd be working on their plans while the only one who could nab them would be lost? No. The numbers made too much sense. The encrypted messages were too elaborate.

The grass scratched at his ankles. At least it wasn't raining. At least it was silent here, not having to worry about his-

An unpainted concrete structure. Boxy. No windows.

Seemed like the perfect nest for a criminal group.

Liam sprinted for a split second, then realised he needed to create a firm persona before meeting the perpetrators.

The walk towards the entrance seemed to drag.

The front door was there, yet Liam stood and hesitated. He'd be lying if he said he wasn't nervous. God knows what could happen once he does it, but he already chose this route.

Four knocks on the metal door. Liam waited.

One second. Another. Ten. Twenty. Thirty-

"Yes?"

"...Are you The Noise Police? Found a ciphertext on an image from Thea's phone."

Maybe that was too much information. He could have just-

"You're on your own then?"

"Yes. Like you wanted."

That was a good sign. It just meant these were the people he was looking for. And it took a while for the response.

"Alright. Come in."

The door swung and he saw a tall man with shorts, a vest, and an indifferent face. Liam entered the hideout.

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Fluorescent lights buzzed overhead. Unpainted concrete meant the grey was still there. A set of chairs, a door for a potential loo. Two people had laptops on the table, along with a few pieces of paper. Another person recluded at one corner with his desktop, though the hoodie meant his face couldn't be seen well.

One of the hackers stood up to approach Liam, and the rest only glanced before going back to work.

"So you're the one who found my message? All by yourself?"

"Yes, and you are?"

"Name's James Wallace. Just a tech. And if you want to know all of them, I'll save you time."

James started pointing at the brawn of their group.

"He's Edward Harper. Big guy, I know. He opened the entrance for you earlier. Try not to piss him off."

Liam noticed the person on the far reaches of the room.

“That one wearing a hoodie?”

“We don’t really talk about him. His face is glued to the bloody screen all day, but he carries the whole team.”

The techie motioned his right hand towards the woman.

“That’s Audrey Hawthorne. Knows infrastructure more than I do, but I’m more loyal to Henry.”

“Henry...?”

“Henry Watson. He doesn’t need to touch a keyboard to hack someone. He’s our idea man, and he has my respect.”

Liam studied James. With that smile and steady breathing.

“How are you comfortable with saying all of these already?”

“We already expected someone with enough background or interest will pick it up.”

That voice change made Liam turn around to see a new face. James smiled as he walked back to his seat and let Henry do the talking.

“And yes, I am Henry Watson, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

The young man grinned.

“We are The Noise Police. I know, it’s a dumb name, since the masses can’t look at others or themselves deeper. And they’ll still think it sounds intelligent.”

“You people are behind Thea’s suicide?”

Henry scoffed.

“That Thea? Young people like to know a lot but they’re usually just hot air. We blackmailed some lad to give her his gun. We’re already used to arrangements like this.

And both were wastes of oxygen anyway. At least she got out young before seeing the rest of this awful world.”

This was it? This was the reasoning?

“We already did our part, now do yours.”

He was caught off guard by Henry’s pivot to seriousness.

“What?”

“Your. Name.”

Liam was silent, not opening his mouth and clearly thinking of his next moves. Edward’s appearance didn’t help.

“Come on. We don’t just reveal sensitive info to coppers like you. And you have a good reason for getting this far. Do your part if you want to continue bugging us here.”

“Right, right.”

Liam pulled out his wallet to show his driving licence to Henry. With James and Audrey looking at him with intent.

“Liam... Liam P. Huxley. Fair enough.”

Audrey noticed that Liam still felt bothered.

“Don’t feel so concerned. Many people die every day, and you don’t feel anything for them. You don’t even know their name.

What we did to Thea was tame. If you want something wild, I hacked a neighbour when he wouldn’t shut up. Surprised he lives in the woods instead of killing himself. At least he left some GPS cache.”

Liam narrowed his eyes towards the woman.

“We’re off to a great start.”

James took part in the ongoing conversation.

“Think that’s great? We pranked an annoying commenter by emailing the bloke’s IP address, just to see how he’d react. We didn’t want to blackmail or anything.

Next thing we know, account’s silent, even all the ten alts he made since his childhood. He tried to delete everything, but the Internet always remembers.”

Liam had to pause from this casual "banter". They weren’t even scared of confessing their crimes, but he needed more info about the group. This was a rare chance to interrogate

people from the source, especially with the other unsolved cases the group might be involved in. So he continued.

“Do you lot have any other hobbies that don’t involve ruining people’s lives?”

A light chuckle from Henry.

“We live for this. Nothing feels more satisfying than silencing loudmouths. Showing how weak they actually are.”

“And you get to say that behind your screens.”

Henry lowered his eyebrows and had a faint smile.

“At least we actually know the world.”

Liam scanned the hideout for a moment and looked back at Henry to state a request.

“I need to know what drives you to do such things.”

“If you want the answer, follow me.”

Henry put his palm on Liam’s shoulder, who quickly moved.

“Don’t touch me.”

“Fine.”

Henry showed the chairs, and the two sat down.

“My group is built on the belief that this world is full of shallow noise. Cycles of misunderstanding that almost no one tries to admit, let alone disrupt.

It ruins our society in many ways. You see it in politics, social media, schools, in our own families. Yet the masses just sit there and let the poison consume them.

We’re here to ‘clean’ the current state of discourse. To disrupt their patterns and to make them all aware of their own noise, of everyone’s mess that they’re too blind or afraid to face.”

Liam could see his past self in Henry. That kind of thinking, the tone, his experience with people when he was part of the Met.

“I suppose there is truth in those words. And I’ve always been a bit short with people.”

“So you’re just as fed up with them as we are. That’s good.”

Liam raised an eyebrow.

“I don’t hate people. I hate their shallowness.”

Henry caught the response and returned fire.

“Same thing. Humans are shallow by design.

Our entertainment is based on human patterns. Businesses predict them. Even children learn about them at school.

Those generic slogans political fanatics use, whichever side they’re on, they’re like those TV shows that repeat words to pacify toddlers. Ever realise that? It’s not even a new strategy if you’ve read some history books.”

Liam folded his arms but remained silent, listening intently to get a grasp of their worldview.

“Many of us like to think we’re aware and free, but we’re just far behind. We’re still fixated on labels and binary thinking, from ideology to sport, even our identity.

It’s how we’re manipulated without knowing it. We don’t even see how we manipulate others with our words, personas, all our posturing every day.”

“That’s a bleak view.”

“A real one.”

Liam paused to think of a quick, formidable response.

“You seem like you’re against absolutism... and you submit to it anyway. You just make your own ‘noise’.”

“Everyone’s doing it. We just want to do it OUR way: using absolutism against itself.”

“You call them shallow yet ‘taking them down’ appears to be a lot of effort. Doesn’t look shallow to me.

What exactly is your plan here? What would you do soon?”

Henry kept the smile.

“It’s just our first meeting, I won’t reveal too much.”

Liam lowered his eyes, then realised Edward was staring.

“Oh right. Can I ask about your story then?”

“...Sure thing. When I was younger, I dreamt of creating...”

Liam couldn't focus, especially with the rest of the group still there. He nodded along and asked a few questions, trying his best to glean some useful info.

Once Henry was done, he stated...

“You lads won't hack my PC when I get home?”

James tried to represent his group.

“Asking that won't do anything. You won't trust us completely and you might tempt real hackers by pointing that out.”

“Okay. Can I come back though? Is that too much to ask?”

Henry commented.

“Yes, you can come back.”

“Alright. I'll be off now.”

Liam stood up and started walking away, to finally get out and-

“Under one condition.”

He turned around and glanced at Henry again.

“We keep talking like this with you. Alone. My group already had countermeasures in case you coppers get here. I’m sure you thought of that before your trip.”

Liam had pulled a face without noticing.

“Come on, don’t frown. I finally found someone who can get on my level, and I genuinely like having a chat with you.”

He stared at Henry’s smile. After that, he moved as naturally as he could to the entrance door. A few more steps and he was finally outside. Soon, he was far from The Noise Police. No more artificial light. Just the wind, the greenery, the trees, and the quiet atmosphere.

But there was something at the back of his mind: what now? What should he do next? What would they do next?

His body wouldn’t move. He just talked to a radical group of criminals who won’t stop, who know too much, and who should be locked away from society. Yet there was a part of him that agrees and wants to know more. Turning them in this

early, with limited info, might be a grave mistake. But so is delaying and not doing much about the situation.

His eyes remained fixed on his car.

- - - - -

Harrison stood near the windows. He liked the beechwood that covered his own office. And the bonsai. It was a relief to rest his eyes on some greenery after hours of staring at the screen. And that reminded him to continue his work.

He was finishing up his final report for the day. The moment he sat, one of his subordinates pushed the door open.

“Liam! You actually made it out alive.”

“Yes. I had a bit of a sit-down with them.”

“What are they like? Just a bunch of edgelords?”

“...In a way. They’re misanthropes who’ve had enough of how shallow they think people are. They have no remorse. They even want their victims to end it all.

Their leader said I could come back, as long as I was alone.
And it's all I've been thinking on the way back.

I need more intel, but I'm conflicted."

Harrison knew this was serious, so he asked a question.

"What do you reckon, then?"

Liam paused, watching his boss's face.

The clock in the room was ticking. One second. Another.

"I'll come back."

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[https://misc-works.bandcamp.com/track/compound-eyes-](https://misc-works.bandcamp.com/track/compound-eyes-b)
b

CURTAIN

“WAS your bank account hacked?”

Emily, one of his colleagues, was caught off guard.

“What? Who’s been telling you that?”

“Harrison did. One of us got done over by them.”

“No-no, you’ve got it all wrong. I looked into a person who got his bank account hacked by that lot.”

“The Noise Police?”

She tried to piece it together.

“That’s what they’re called?”

“Yes, found a lead and spoke to the hackers. Harrison said no one else wanted the case anyway.”

She flinched a bit.

“Wow. You really are an ex-detective. Haven’t spotted a single clue myself. You went analogue?”

“Naturally. Wouldn’t want to get hacked.”

“Why not get some help now?”

“I’m still studying them; I made them comfortable with my lone act. Their leader also wanted me alone if I were to return. Working with Norfolk for Thea’s case would be too slow and unreliable. Would give them some leverage.”

Emily squinted at him.

“Fair enough, you know your business better than I do.”

And they headed to the exit. The two parted as Liam walked towards his car. The man grabbed his work phone from the bag; a single unread message from Ms. Elain was waiting.

any updates on thea?

Liam typed shortly after.

not done yet

He shoved the device back in the bag and got his personal phone. A message immediately caught his eye, and those thoughts returned. And it was simple.

can we have a quick chat?

- - - - -

The wallpaper was peeling in curls. There were cracks and patches on the ceiling. Liam sat in the lounge, consoling a crying woman two years younger than him. There was also a damp scent, paired with the dim yellow lighting.

“My parents... they can’t accept me. Never will. Lost that job. The few friends I had left me ages ago. No one from my past bothered, they just let me become like this.

I keep wanting to prove myself, to finally show them I’m good for once, but I’ve only shown I’m a failure.”

She leaned in and didn’t seem to realise how close they were.

“At least I have you...”

“Jean, we already talked about this.”

“Sorry, sorry. If you weren’t around... I don’t know what I’d be doing right now.”

“Hey, steady. Steady. I’m here, I’m still here.

You’ve been busy with something else, right?”

“Yeah, the new job is fine... other than the colleagues. They like to natter about how I act. I’m just trying my best to cope. Can’t think, the lot of them.”

Jean wiped a tear from her right eye, before speaking again.

“Sometimes I think about the life we could have had...

I know, I know. Sorry again.”

“It’s fine to have intrusive thoughts, just don’t get lost in them. And try to help yourself, too. We both understand, right?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

Liam held her shoulder, and Jean formed a faint smile.

A few minutes later, Liam rose from the sofa, and soon they were waving goodbye outside. As Jean closed the door, he stood for a moment, staring at the bungalow. With the straggly bushes huddled near the brickwork. The wind caught his hair, and he finally walked towards his car.

- - - - -

The engine had stopped, and Liam got out of the vehicle. He took a short breath before entering his home.

And there she was, his wife Darcy vacuuming the living room. The sight of the husband made her pause, and she greeted with a smile.

“Home before four? That’s something. The kids got in early as well.”

His son wandered over.

“Thomas! How’s it going with you and your sister?”

“Still can’t stand her.”

Thomas chuckled.

“Seriously though, we had another argument about you. Got called a daddy’s boy for using plain logic.”

“I see, hope it wasn’t too bad. I’ll try talking to her.”

“Don’t even try, she’s deep in that ACAB teenager phase.”

“Looks like she needs an actual expert to chat with.”

His son laughed again.

“Try your best, she’s in the kitchen. She’s practically a wall.”

“Alright, I’ll talk to her.”

Liam headed to that room, with Darcy watching closely.

Afternoon light came through the kitchen window, lighting up the dining table and a half of his daughter’s face. It was quite compact, the cupboards were near the sink, with the fridge on the adjacent side.

“Hey Carly.”

Liam prepared a glass of water. Darcy tried to be positive.

“You know, Liam, it’s nice that you’re here early.”

Carly thought of a clever pivot.

“I actually feel better when you’re coming home late.”

Her father stopped drinking and looked.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You know already.”

Liam narrowed his eyes. Darcy stood still. Carly waited.

He put the glass of water on the table.

“Look, love, not all the police are like that. By your logic, everyone working for the government is corrupt, even the cleaners. Every uni student on a policing course would be written off as awful, even when plenty of them want to fix the system. It’s nuanced.”

“Yeah, tell that to the lot in my school.”

He didn't want a repeat of what happened before.

"You can't change your parents. You know that already. Don't dwell on things you have no control over. You're only hurting yourself, banging your head on a brick wall for nothing."

"And you didn't have to bring me into this world. But no, you had to do something and add more problems to our society."

Liam let out a sigh.

"Carly. We've been over this."

"And we'll keep talking about it."

Darcy wanted to defend Liam, but...

"Liam, Liam. Enough."

Her husband glanced at her face, then back at their daughter.

"Just, take care of yourself."

Carly only rolled her eyes.

Liam left the kitchen. Darcy saw one frown, and one smile.

- - - - -

“I’ll come back.”

“You’ve already got the intel, surely? You know the people—you’ve likely questioned them. We can bring in Norfolk now.”

“I’m working solo.”

Harrison let out an abrupt snicker.

“You really have a death wish. On your own, no backup again? We can coordinate with actual coppers to box them in.”

“That would pressure them. I don’t think they’re just hacking for kicks, and they’ve got the resources to launch something massive. The police would clutter the process or alert them. These hackers already prepared for it.

If I turn up on my own, they’re more likely to lower their guard.”

He could see Harrison’s eyebrows slanting further, the voice becoming firmer.

“What if they’re stalling?”

“I’m also stalling. I’ll get intel while they’re distracted. In a day or two, I’ll push for my next move.”

Harrison squinted at Liam.

“You have a weird approach for an ex-DI.”

The boss leaned back in his chair.

“Right then, it’s your neck on the line when it hits the fan, but we’ll back you up when you need it.”

...

It was still in his mind. Among many other things yesterday.

Liam thought of that conversation with his boss. Before his second meeting with The Noise Police later.

As the car accelerated, Liam made a few glances through the window. The cloud layer reminded him of a time when he was a police detective years ago.

The announcements burned into his mind... all the towering structures swallowed by the monochrome overcast...

Taking the train away from London.

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<https://misc-works.bandcamp.com/track/lets-move-to-belgium>

INTERLUDE

TWO lime-green sofas were facing each other. Champagne bottles were placed on a glass table. The men wore attire that someone would expect during an occasion. They sat with wine glasses in hand, save for Henry who was standing beside a tripod whiteboard, with a desk behind him. One of them was Tilman, who thought of breaking the silence.

“So... any final name? We can’t just end with ‘NOT A GENERIC CORPORATE SOCIAL MEDIA V0.9.41’”

The group laughed. Even Henry couldn’t help but grin. They were in a room covered by oak-clad walls with an ivory ceiling and floor, but it felt like their noises could still be heard from the first floor of the tech hub.

Jake had to let some words out.

“You even got it down to the numbers! Brilliant!”

“Okay-okay, but if we’re going for a name, we can try working with ‘rasterise’. I don’t know why but the word keeps coming back to my mind lately... rasterise...”

Tilman wanted to comment on Arthur’s brainstorming there.

“It’s fine, maybe a few tweaks. I thought of DECENT. Get me? Because it’s decent and it’s-”

There was a quick reply from Jake.

“That’s rubbish, mate. And yes, we get you.”

“Tough crowd.”

Henry finally barged in.

“Whatever, it’s not a big deal and we can agree on something later. For now, to the stable release!”

The group clashed their glasses and drank some.

“Ah bugger, forgot to open the other one.”

The rest overheard Jake, and Tilman spoke.

“Come on, we spent like 40, 50 quid on that.”

Jake got the bottle and he was visibly struggling to open it. They waited until the bottle unleashed hell, with the cap flying off and hitting the ceiling. Of course, Jake sent the package to Henry, who blocked off the splashes with his hand.

“For Christ’s sake, I just bought the suit a week ago!”

“Too late!”

A lot of overly loud but hearty roars and cheers. You wouldn’t want to be their neighbours right now, but you’d understand they were having the time of their lives. Maybe just this night.

- - - - -

Two young adults were outside, perhaps in the suburbs. It would have been pitch black if it weren’t for the lamp posts. The cold had eased off a bit, and the tarmac seemed more gorgeous with the moonlight above.

Henry walked... while having less than stellar conditions at the moment. Luckily, Jake was there so he won’t fall over and make his current brain damage permanent. Thank goodness they were the only ones there.

“We’re gonna show everyone! Show them!”

“Careful. You’re gonna fall at this rate.”

“Screw those people! Next month, we’ll prove we’re not just wastes of oxygen! They are!”

“Ah jeez. Let’s just sit here before you go mental or get beaten up by someone.”

“Alright, alright.”

Soon, they sat on the pavement, glinting under the streetlight. It was an ordinary midnight, but for Henry, he felt like he was on another planet. The breeze, the silence, the vastness of the suburbs... he’d felt this countless of times before, yet it was magical right now.

“Try breathing slowly.”

Henry inhaled and exhaled, his breath misting in the cold air.

“Thanks. Said a load of rubbish there, right?”

“..Yeah. But let’s move from that. How’s tonight?”

He turned his head to look intently at Jake.

“You want to know?”

For the first time in my life, I actually feel... direction. Progress. Hope. Camaraderie.”

Henry did a little hiccup back there, then proceeded.

“I know, we are no Churchill and it’s just software, but a social media platform like ours getting attention?”

That’s sending a message to the world. It’s not just the money of course, it’s changing how we see ourselves.

Not with groups, or superiority, or posturing. But with actual empathy and honesty. And not just as taglines or annoying media buzz. That success with our first hundred thousand users was just... splendid. They’re all splendid.

It’s proving our ideas DO work. And it’s real.”

Jake felt a bit nervous, probably from all the booze earlier, but he kept listening with a supportive smile.

“I feel like... I’m finally doing something right in my life. And I want the rest of the misfits to feel the same.”

Henry also returned the faint happiness.

“You know, you’re one of the few people in my life that I could actually talk to. Like genuinely talk to.

Other people just come off as dismissive or wrapped up with their norms and can’t look at themselves. Can’t even think or feel. Typical of them, really.”

“Hey, are you alr-”

“I know, I know, sorry. Still some resentment in me, can’t even look at myself sometimes. They probably feel the same and I’m worsening it all again... God, I am so stupid.

I’ll try my best, to be, fine.”

Henry sighed heavily.

“It’s funny. I don’t know their life, they don’t know my life, yet we think our assumptions about each other are the truth. As if we already know everything without even living their lives.”

Jake had to speak up and break down the negativity.

“I understand. We all need to let off steam sometimes. Just remember, I’ll be here, and you’ve made something special.”

“Thanks.”

And tired smiles were exchanged that night.

- - - - -

Lunch time was over, so Henry had to return to his desk and finish tweaking last-minute features. As he walked, Arthur approached him out of nowhere.

“Henry?”

“Yes?”

“Can we... we need you in the office right now.”

“Sure thing.”

“Come with me.”

Henry's motion suggested a faint optimism.

As the pair slowed to a stop, he opened the door and saw the rest. Then, Henry looked at Jake sitting behind the desk. For some reason, he was met with a dull face.

"I need to be direct, Henry. No more delays.

We've been carefully adjusting with your 'anti-social media' stance from the start, until we couldn't anymore.

We are not moving forward with your approach."

Henry raised an eyebrow and slowly folded his arms.

"What? Why not?"

"It won't land with users. The numbers might look decent now, but long-term engagement is one issue we've always been worried about.

It's not great for the new servers or our aim of keeping the platform minimalist. We won't be able to sustain it for years."

A frown, as Jake expected. But he had to continue.

“With fewer users, let alone donors, why even bother for a handful of people? It won’t be a *social* media, and there’ll be a domino effect once people see such a thin userbase and barebones features unlike the big players. They’ll jump ship.”

Henry got this far. He could finally do something good in his life for once... if it weren’t for these pillocks.

“Why the senseless paranoia? Isn’t this what we’re all about? Answering a niche people would want soon? Taking risks like everyone else?”

He looked around his fellow co-founders.

“Are you all just... selling out? After all we’ve done?”

Jake needed to deescalate before it happens. The group knew Henry well enough. And Jake was the closest one.

“We like your ideals... but be realistic. We need to make some quid soon. Our office, bills, we still got debts to settle...”

And it’s not just the money. We can’t operate if we can’t help anyone, if that’s what you want. We have to take measures so we can reach out to the most people possible, even if it’s not exactly charity work as you initially intended.

Helping others is good until you punish yourself for it.”

Henry sighed heavily.

“If we want to prove something to the world, then sacrifice is expected. We should prove that social media doesn’t have to be a cesspool driven by these convoluted algorithms and pointless numbers that only make humanity worse.”

Arthur wanted to let out something to the idea man, because his patience was diminishing quick.

“That’s on you. Even if this approach gets us a lot of funding, it’s not good for lasting development.

I mean, an app that doesn’t even have a feed? Likes? What are we, a bunch of pillocks stuck in the 80s? I can’t see my friends using it much, even for practical reasons. We’re already losing before we compete with the other apps.

People naturally like their ego, and they want a voice over their environment, so they use numbers and echo chambers for it. That’s common knowledge.”

“I know, it’s what most social media already exploit. So why not give people like us a safe space?”

“That’s the point, no one does it. It’s career suicide. Might as well be suicide if you become skint afterwards.”

Henry lowered his brows towards Arthur.

“I’ve seen countless software make it through with all their unconventional design choices.”

“But you’ve never seen the thousands of startups that never made it. Your ‘message to the world’ won’t last if it can’t get out there, let alone survive long enough to be relevant.

We are not wasting this opportunity. We all get to prove something, and going all in for one childish fantasy is not only risky but a waste of everything we’ve done.”

Henry sighed again and scratched his sleeves.

“You’re fine with saying these words now, but you’ll give in to the system soon enough. This... we already have a good thing together. It could be revolutionary, and you’re ruining it.”

Jake stepped in.

“We all did funding, coding, planning, QA. We aren’t taking away your idea, we’re just sharing our takes on it. As a group.”

“And be like the rest of them? Cookie cutter ADHD apps who sold their soul to the system? Give the masses yet another platform to create more noise in this world, make them feel superior when they don’t even have actual substance? Why can’t we be different?”

“Because we’ve all been different. And where did that lead us? Getting labelled, mocked, just because we’re ourselves. And we won’t waste this one shot anymore.

I’m sorry. This world is bigger than us, and if we can’t follow its demands, we won’t even be able to prove anything, more so with your stance.

Trust me, we hate it as much as you do. We just need to be practical. It’s about living with people in this world. With the people we still want to help despite that. And we’re just going for compromises.”

Jake felt awful seeing Henry’s face after that, but he had to be firm here. Sometimes you have to hurt people.

“Maybe soon enough we’ll answer your demand. Just not right now. We have to be patient.”

There was a glare.

“If you really hated the world, you’d do everything to gouge its eyes out.”

Tilman mocked Henry’s agitated display of leadership.

“Stop being so theatrical. What if this isn’t the next big thing, what would you do? You aren’t that special, you know?”

And you’re the only here who’s not making sense. We’ve been thinking of replacing you-”

“Tilman, shut your-”

“What the hell.”

Jake had tense eyes and a wider frown, while the other co-founders appeared less sympathetic.

“I wasted so much time just to study programming, I worked on the prototype for YEARS, I had to tolerate being seen as a joke or a problem for God knows how long, and you’re going to kick me out of my OWN project?”

What a joke. If you’ll let it die before it gets released, I might as well get out.

You're just like the people we used to loathe. God, you're so stuck up with blending in that you became like these... idiots. Like the rest of the masses running this sorry excuse of a civilisation. What a joke."

Henry stormed off and left the room. His eyes were livid, fist clenched. As if his wrath alone would crush the entire world.

Why did I even bother. I knew humanity was a load of rubbish from the start, I knew hope was a fragile illusion that was only useful if it kept you going.

Why did I even bother trying to help or prove something to them? Maybe I'm the idiot here, for believing in the first place.

Maybe I'm that stupid.

- - - - -

"What else did he say?"

"It's not confidential info, he just..."

He only stared at the wall."

Darcy raised an eyebrow. The couple were in bed, the duvets pulled high and the sky outside still pitch black.

“He never told me the rest of it.”

“Right then, hope this case gets wrapped up soon.

And get home early again, if you can. You really need to help me with Carly. She’s been getting on my nerves and I might go mental without you.”

“...I’ll try.”

The wife noticed.

“I know. Handling a case like that, even with your colleagues, it can do a number on you.”

“It’s been bugging me. It doesn’t feel like your run-of-the-mill investigation. Thank goodness I wasn’t on my own when I got there, it would have been suffocating.”

“Harrison better give you a pay rise.”

Liam chuckled. Darcy gave him a warm, radiant smile.

“I’ll go get us some breakfast.”

She kissed his forehead and stood, providing the reassurance he’d need for later. As his wife left, Liam sat upright on the bed, pondering on what he’d done recently. Pondering on the life story of the man he’d have to bring in soon.

- - - - -

Three footsteps, shoes dragged through the grass. The man was limping up the hill, holding a metallic case. The face had lost all its energy. Perhaps the nonstop walking could explain.

As he reached the top, he turned around to get a wide view of the city he used to work for. Tall skyscrapers, blocks of flats, the bridge, highways he’d been for countless mornings... they darkened under the orange dusk.

He sat beside a tree, carefully grasping the case, eyes still gazing ahead. For a while, it looked like he’d sleep there to soothe his eyes, but instead he slowly opened the container. He watched the clouds while contemplating.

The man pointed the gun at the head.

Its weight felt harsh. Even this inanimate object taunted him, like he couldn't escape the pain until his very death. Life just wanted to punish him for his very existence. Why even bother if every move could just be a big mistake?

Tears fell. Pathetic. Why couldn't he just do it? A little nudge, an abrupt movement of a finger. It was quick, nobody needed him, and all this pain won't matter. He didn't know why people kept delaying the reality that everyone will die in the end, thinking everything they do would matter, even though we're all just dots in this universe.

Then a random thought nagged him. Its voice was weak since his childhood, until it stopped by. Possibly to make amends. How about people like him who'd been alienated for so long? Socially, economically, and even by their own selves? They needed someone who shared their pain and had the platform to voice it all out. To disturb this cycle.

The man knew that if his attempts to improve from his faults and commit to compassion were just met with indifference, exploitation, or mockery, with few attempts to understand his life... he couldn't be a good person in this world anymore. He won't play by the rules he'd been sick of since his birth.

So no, he put the gun away and slowly aimed it in front. At the very society that ruined people like him. People who just wanted to be themselves, people who failed and are being

reduced to mere annoyance. Everyone stuck in an unhealthy cycle of misunderstanding they'll receive and pass to others. Everyone screwing each other over...

There was another lesson he got out of this: compassion and transparency aren't always good. They can suck a lot. For him, with his beliefs and vulnerabilities. For others, who need to survive in a world that keeps tricking them. And trying to comprehend something you haven't even experienced will inevitably lead to misunderstandings.

If only the human brain was designed better at the very start. Instead, simplistic thinking, tribalism, emotional weakness, self-interest, and the inability to understand the other life completely... all were nature's default settings. Influencing every awful thing we do.

Not even his own brain could escape from it. No one could.

Maybe people deserve all the pain they get. All the debt, the government, the police, businesses, climate change, wars... they were all just getting karma. For seeing people like Van Gogh before and saying they "care" yet still keeping this cycle.

He knew he looked pathetic there. He didn't care anymore. It was his moment, and the gun made him feel powerful for the first time in his life.

But this wasn't the answer. Violence is cheap. It won't prove much, and change isn't driven by killings alone. People might die, but ideas can outlive their creator for centuries. Words can penetrate the mind and poison the masses no bullet could. Without him actually doing anything.

Just animal noises, yet enough to create lasting change.

The sun remained vibrant during its last hours.

He knew this was a day he'll remember for decades, the day he finally stopped delaying and turned around.

As the man left the spot, an erratic grin formed.

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<https://misc-works.bandcamp.com/track/paint>

THE THEATRE

HIS car slowed down before it was parked on the grass. If he remembered correctly, the caf was a few hundred metres away. The speedometer sat at zero, yet the man kept staring at the steering wheel. Steady breathing.

Liam closed the car door and set off across the field. Walking through the greenery, searching the area... until the structure was in sight again.

Four knocks.

...

This time it only took about ten seconds.

“Liam, welcome back. We were in the middle of something, but you can be my therapist for the day.”

Henry was met with a dull face.

“Don’t treat this like I’m dropping by for coffee.”

“Guess you want a lukewarm reception then.”

“Let’s just go.”

Henry nodded, and Liam entered the windowless structure. Metal clanked as the door shut.

- - - - -

They stared up at the fluorescent strips and lay on the floor, which was Henry’s request. He was sharing his thoughts on humanity again, with Liam beside him.

“Have you ever thought of it? Us making loads of noises when some event happens, and how it sounds stupid to animals?

It’s the same way we view nature, but somehow, we’re not aware of that same behaviour from us.”

Liam kept staring at the ceiling. Better than looking at Henry.

“We’re barely different. Sure, humans are more organised, but we’re really just evolved animals.

Animals are territorial and they're designed to self-preserve. Focusing on threats, even if there aren't real threats. If others threaten their self-preservation, they fight and get defensive.

Oddly similar to humans, don't you think? You see them fight other people in politics and social media. And one natural response they do is comparing their tribes to others. *At least I experienced more. At least I'm not like you.*"

Liam sighed and made a response.

"But like you said, we're evolved animals. We can be better because we can cooperate and empathise."

He glanced at the wall beside Henry, lifted his index finger, and continued talking.

"You know, it's easy to point out issues and tear things down. But forming proper solutions, let alone making them, takes actual brain power."

"I'm sure someone's asked what yours is."

"...I'm still developing mine."

"See? Even the 'awake' people can't do it."

“I said I’m still developing.”

“And what next? Make a petition? Shout in the streets, ramble in social media and become another drone like the rest of them? Be stuck in these groups of muppets?

I thought I finally met someone different.”

“You’re dismissing change entirely.”

Henry made a quick chuckle.

“Of course not. Look around you.”

He extended his arms to emphasise the room with the rest of the hackers and their laptops.

“THIS is change. Actual change. Something new, something that would disturb the status quo, rather than their generic ‘rants’ and patterns.

Sure, it won’t solve human nature directly but it’s not like we can escape from it anyway. We’re just evolved animals.”

Henry started smiling.

“Speaking of which, animals also stay in groups to survive, because they’re defenceless when they’re all by themselves. They don’t want to know what it’s like to be alone.

Notice people never go alone when they want something? It’s another blueprint by these movements, and they understand group behaviour to get support.”

There was a chuckle. Liam thought, did Henry even realise his own irony? Because he just kept talking.

“Like a fish taking bait. People naturally want control over their environment and react to it. They can’t resist being silent and not speaking their own mind about it, so they get lulled.”

Liam didn’t need to look at Henry.

“This kind of mindset drives politicians, businessmen, mass murderers, opportunists...”

“You’re saying I belong there?”

“...Well, I-”

“It’s an old blueprint people have been using since the dawn of man. It only got refined as time passed.

I'm surprised people can't see that public words are more about strategy than actual words. From politicians and businessmen, as you said, to social media users and the news. Human nature is everywhere... obviously.

But we're different because we're aware of this pattern. YOU are aware of it. And we're using it to prove something, not for some petty generic reason like money, validation, or power."

Liam was getting tired of this chat.

"People are more complex than this animal rubbish. I mean just look at yourself. We can improve from animal instincts."

"Yeah, then you wonder how we got all these leaders... the masses just pass responsibility, so they won't be the ones getting blame and they won't be the ones using their brains. So their identity won't get affected. Territorial logic at work.

If humans were naturally complex, there would be more of us. People who can't think don't deserve freedom."

Okay. That was it.

"Can you hear yourself? You weren't exactly a genius at every stage of your life, were you?

You just can't look at them deeper. You act so above them, but you do the same. You don't know their lives, the small things no one sees. You're just marking your own territory like them."

Henry opened his mouth to reply, then stopped. He couldn't quite get it done and let Liam develop.

"You felt alienated as well, didn't you? Can't escape it so might as well yell at everyone about it?

Maybe they already know all this a long time ago. They just don't say it as loud as you."

"If they know, they wouldn't keep this cycle of resentment. They'd try to understand or be aware of themselves. Yet they just keep proving my points. We even get to prove these things hands-on. Someone needs to disturb them all."

"Prove? What do you even prove with all of this? What are these little hacks even for? What are you trying to do here?"

Henry looked. No words got exchanged between them, with Liam scowling. The hackers were observing nearby.

"Do you really want to know?"

“Yes. Tell me already.”

His expression towards Liam remained static.

“We’ve all been testing for a couple of weeks. Hasn’t drawn much attention yet. Even distracts and confuses outsiders, which made it better. And for what, you may ask?

Fireworks.”

Henry made sounds and tried visualising explosions with his hands. Audrey snickered, but Liam was getting impatient.

“Stop winding me up.”

“Alright, alright...”

He turned around to see James.

“Show him.”

The hacker typed on his laptop. Henry continued.

“Since you’ve gotten this far, I feel like we should do some sort of initiation. You already share some of our worldviews; we just want to stress-test it.

To see if trust is possible between us.”

He glanced at James again.

“James, will you-”

“Already done.”

“Brilliant.”

Henry stood up. Liam followed him shortly after, and both were looking at James’s laptop.

“Now this right here, is a random person on a social media platform. We already studied her for a few days. Thought I’d let you see how we do it live.”

The idea man appeared serious in front of James.

“Send the message.”

The hacker typed with a small grin on his face. Liam got near the computer, which Henry took note of.

What can now be seen were strings of run-on responses, to Henry's delight.

"Animal gets defenceless, loses it with survival instincts, tries out a mask to look bigger, then runs to the next group for support... all over some silly words. Patterns we've already seen ages ago.

Let's tell her we already leaked everything."

As James executed Henry's commands with no hesitation, Liam tried leaning forward to get a closer view of-

"You shouldn't know this person, Liam. She's just part of the generic masses, and she's getting karma."

Henry had a palm on Liam's shoulder. He studied Henry's face, which carried a faint smile of reassurance.

Together, they see a zip file being sent, before reading the newer messages. Henry couldn't keep it in and chuckled.

“Look at her, thinking she could call the police on us. She doesn’t even know what an IP address is. Or how she can’t notice her own patterns, so we did the job for her.”

He observed the hacker again.

“Thank you, James. You may now end the presentation.”

“You got it.”

And the window was closed, before Liam could pick up any important details. He still needed to act natural to lull them into a sense of normality, but maybe he already acted too obvious earlier. At least in Henry’s eyes.

“See? Wasn’t so bad. You stood there and watched the whole thing without lifting a finger. We can be on the same page.”

You wish.

“You sure act special about this. I’ve seen worse, mate.”

“Good. Just means our operations aren’t that bad.”

He patted Liam on the back a few times.

“Well, ‘initiation’ is over, and you can keep coming back if you’re interested.”

“Can I leave now?”

“Yeah, we had a long chat.”

Liam stood still, eyes glaring at Henry, then he moved slowly. He opened the door, and he was now at the fields again. His hair fluttered as the wind blew, and he stared for a while.

- - - - -

Here we go.

I’ve been walking through these corridors for half of my life, but today is different.

It’s the day I realise my time here is done, and nothing I do will give me a reason for continuing it. Everyone will move past and keep their dreams, maybe even their future successes, while I rot from the inside out.

I opened the door for the next show. Programme was about to start. Mates asked what the bag was about, so I used an

excuse, saying that I'd prepared some documents for the report. Studio lights turned on, and the camera went live.

I couldn't wait. I wish I could, but the dread is too unbearable. I'd rather do it now than let it fizzle out.

I reached for the gun in my bag.

- - - - -

Harrison was busy finishing up a document, constantly typing on the keyboard of his desktop.

As he'd expect at this hour, Liam showed up.

"What's new, Liam?"

"We might need actual coppers now."

"Figured you'd say that soon enough. I tried setting up a team from the police while you were out. They're more interested in this case after what happened."

Liam raised an eyebrow.

“*What* exactly happened?”

“Seems you’re out of the loop.”

His boss opened the browser and typed.

norfolk nightly live suicide

Was he seeing this right? He stepped closer, before Harrison clicked on a video.

“This is Carter Press, reporting on a recent on-air tragedy. Trillian Cooper, a pundit from Norfolk Nightly, shot herself on live television just two hours ago.

It has been linked to a collective who calls themselves ‘The Noise Police’. They had leaked Trillian’s files, before posting a manifesto mentioning they have blackmailed pundits from both Norfolk Nightly and The Willow Report, two rival partisan news networks in the Norfolk region.

They also posted this message right after the incident.”

Hello everyone! Phase 2 has arrived! We’re here to cleanse the world of substanceless noise, whether you’re young or old, left or right. As long as you’re loud, we’ll be watching you.

Liam saw the few comments underneath the post.

monsters

good riddance, she deserved it

of course you had to be centrists

attack the government next lmao

wdym phase 2?

“The incident went viral, sparking debates about polarisation. Authorities in Norfolk have started searching for The Noise Police, and they have been waiting for tips from anyone who knows about the group.”

His boss clicked on another video.

Four pundits can be seen around a table. There were screens behind them, showing the picture of Trillian.

The woman he indirectly murdered.

“I’m telling you, we CAN’T go silent about this scandal. This is a proper suicide we’re talking about.”

“What if this is what the hackers wanted? Spreading their ideology so others would follow their movement? I know a lot

of us are dissatisfied with public discourse, and the fact that their ideas sound convincing to the masses worries me.”

“The public deserves to know more.”

“You’re fine with people knowing your browser history? I bet you these hackers can retrieve what you deleted.”

“Maybe this gridlock is what they wanted. We can’t stay silent but we also can’t risk doing their work for them. And they won’t even have to do anything.”

Harrison paused the video and faced Liam.

“So, will you cooperate with the police this time?”

Why did he allow this to happen.

Why did he let the group roam around for longer?

Why didn’t he get them framed earlier?

Why was he so stupid and blind?

Was it shared contempt? Camaraderie? Was he lulled by their clarity and intellect?

Why didn't he realise this when he played the same game?
And if this dreadful thing is just one phase, what's the entire master plan?

He could only look at the picture of the dead woman.

- - - - -

<https://misc-works.bandcamp.com/track/this-will-never-happen-again>

SMILE

ALL he could think about during the trip was to finally sort this out once and for all. Even an hour felt too slow now. He needed more speed. More time. Who knows what they'll do.

Liam parked the car and set off across the field, with a gun this time. The structure was initially a dot on the horizon, and he needed to get closer. Closer. Until it was a metre away.

He knocked on the metal door.

One second. Another. Ten.

He knocked again.

One second. Another. Ten.

That was unusual. Liam opened it, and he looked inside.

It can't be.

They were here yesterday. The laptops should have been on that table. Five people should be here. The loo was empty. He was only met with utter dread and silence.

“What?”

Then the metal door clanked. He turned around to see the man he needed to confront. Standing like nothing had just happened yesterday.

“Where’s the rest of them?”

Henry remained silent.

“What’s Phase 3?”

No word spoken.

“I said what’s Phase 3?”

It took a few seconds for the investigator to hear a reply.

“There is no Phase 3.”

Liam stewed for a moment. He tried to slow down his mind...

He slammed Henry against the wall and pointed the gun at the persistent smile.

“You think you’re still playing me, after all that?!”

“Just pull the trigger.

Leaving this world would be great anyway.”

“SHUT UP! Just get to the point and shut up!”

Henry scoffed.

“Humans. When humans can’t think of actual responses, they resort to irrationality, like the typical animal. Deep down in there, they know they can’t fight on the same level, so they take the easy route.”

Henry noticed Liam slowly lowering the gun, though the other hand still held him.

“You know why people are loud? They want control of the narrative. Everyone wants control. And they just use noise to make up for their shallowness.

You let us live because you knew all of that. You had the same resentment, and a part of you wanted to take them down as well. To disturb that awful cycle around us.”

Liam’s eyes were trembling, completely silent now.

“Face it, you could have gotten us arrested early on, but you didn’t, because you wanted to see what would happen if someone pushed the masses off the edge.

Now a human limiter you call your ‘conscience’ is having regrets, and you don’t want your ego put under scrutiny when people find out what you’ve done.”

Liam’s breath was rough, and he tried to slow it down. He realised, he needed to dismantle Henry using this logic. Not fear, which was the reaction the leader wanted. Henry was just waiting for his weaknesses to show up.

Maybe Liam should see if he breaks. To wipe that smug look off of his face.

“I’ve messed up myself.

I’ve been an awful person, let it all out to others when I didn’t care anymore. Spoke like I knew everything about their lives.

I thought they can never be aware. Thought they just sedated themselves and kept shouting with their performances and ignorance. Yet I also made those mistakes.

I've taken the bait. I submitted to revenge, generalisations, spreading resentment which just worsened it.

Maybe that's how you feel, with what happened to you."

Henry was observing Liam intently.

"But behind all their masks and lack of awareness, they are coming from pain. They're processing it. Better yet, they're creating something from it. Many of them are only trying their best with what they have. And they want to have their own voice in a world that shuts it down.

Even if that voice is messy and creates problems. Even if it's annoyingly blind, insecure, or shallow. Even if it's noise.

Because freedom doesn't care how stupid you are, how bad you discuss ideas, or how narrow your perception is. Because everyone is trying to make sense of all the noise, too. And you don't take that freedom away because yours is 'better'."

Liam loosened his grip on Henry, before resuming his talk.

“Not everyone has depth. And that doesn’t make them bad, it just makes them another person. With different layers and history, who knows something else and have other abilities like handling resentment better than us. You can never expect others to be the same. It’s impossible.

People deserve to open up. We develop from each other’s words, especially those who need it the most. We don’t burn bridges down and worsen it with personas, defensiveness, anger, glorified speeches, tribalism, or being sure we already know everything about another person’s life, even though we can’t. Instead, we help. It’s hard but we should keep trying.

If you were really into complexity, you could have seen that and made a better path. Instead, you chose resentment since it’s easier than forgiveness. And you’re only doing the same thing others have done to you.”

Henry took a while to perform his usual scoff. His eyes were narrowed and his mouth had a minor slant.

“Turns out you’re still oblivious, despite all the time we spent rambling in here. You’ll realise how mistaken you are soon enough, and you’ll see why we despise humanity so much.”

Liam scoffed back.

“Guess who just resorted to irrationality.”

Henry tried smiling.

“Yeah. It’s called proving a counterargument to your-”

“Armed police! Stand still!”

That didn’t interrupt Henry’s smile. He slowly shifted his focus to the authority figures, entirely unfazed by the red laser dots dancing across his chest.

“Fair enough, I’ll do it.”

As the officers flooded the room, Liam exhaled calmly. It was over. His plan worked, the psychopath was caught, and the situation would not go worse as he initially feared.

Liam finally wore a relieved smile. Henry seemed to share that expression, despite having cuffs and being accompanied by the police. He made a remark.

“Nice strategy, Liam.”

Henry was brought outside, towards the vehicles with the other officers. Beside the road, two cats started making loud screeches when one of them entered the other's territory. They weren't fighting at all, just waiting for a strike to happen.

It took a few minutes to reach the car. But Henry couldn't stop his mouth, despite being compromised.

"It's funny seeing how desperate people look like when they cling on to life, with all the unnecessary things we do. We fight each other and keep prolonging the pain for no logical reason. Like those feral cats earlier."

"Just shut up."

While entering the vehicle, Liam had noticed Henry's face. Oddly enough, he was still smiling, even for a bit.

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Liam waited in the local custody suite, after handing Henry over to the police. The strip lights didn't hum as loudly here.

George was there as well, and he was thrilled to see the private investigator. Especially when he realised that Liam got the leader of The Noise Police arrested.

“Haven’t lost your touch, Liam.”

“Thanks.”

“Mate, you shouldn’t have quit the job. The Met need more brilliant minds like you.”

“I left for my reasons.”

“...Alright. It’s your life.”

“I’ll just check on Henry before he gets taken away.”

Liam walked towards the corridor, with several doors left and right. Henry was standing with two officers there.

“You had a good run, but your petty Noise Police are done for without its leader.”

Henry stared at Liam for a while, perhaps for the last time. Before revealing his final words.

“Who said I was the leader?”

It was one sentence. Just six short words.

But out of all the millions of sentences he heard since his birth, this destabilised him. It confirmed one of Liam's hidden worries: this wasn't over yet. He tried his best to remember Henry's discussion just before they got into that car.

And that look on his face made Henry smirk.

While being accompanied by the officers towards the cells, Henry couldn't help but laugh. As if he was holding it back earlier. And it echoed through the corridor.

Liam thought he knew everything and had it all sorted out. Those days of planning and observing...

The investigator could only feel devastated.

- - - - -

The hacker place. It was empty when he got there. Where the hell were they? What have they been doing? If Henry wasn't the leader, who was? Was it the lad with the hoodie, and he was distracted by Henry?

Or was he talking to no one this whole time? No, they were real enough. Was he losing it? Maybe, but that didn't diminish

the fact that they were real and still out there. And something would happen to him if he won't do anything.

That manipulative snake won't just stop there; the group must be doing something all this time. When they were on the road, those hours wasted, potential moves that the hackers could have made...

"And here is our local hero, Liam Huxley. Tell me, what is this Noise Police your agency is talking about?"

Shoot. Reporter. Cameraman. He was being filmed right now, at the worst possible time.

"Soon."

Liam sprinted as the news staff were left surprised, and some people remained bewildered.

He tried hiding in a building. Liam was so focused on walking away that he tripped on a small flight of stairs. Clumsy.

It was a dark room. He realised there were people in front of him so he tried to get a better view on the elevated platform.

A spotlight.

Liam was surrounded by actors wearing varying costumes, with a few shrieking at his sudden presence there.

Then... the room became fully illuminated, and Liam shortly narrowed his eyes and impulsively moved his right arm to block himself from the brightness.

A theatre director had a glare.

“Hold! Hold! Mate, we’re in the middle of a rehearsal.”

Those people could only stare at those trembling eyes, until the man ran away.

- - - - -

Two doors. Biometrics scan. The lounge. Emily was about to congratulate him for what he did, until she saw his face. He was rushing towards that room again. Rushing for answers. He opened the door, and Harrison greeted him.

“Well done! You did a proper job with those hackers. Looks like you only have Elain to worry about now.”

Instead of absorbing it, the investigator just said...

“The Noise Police, you know them, right?”

Harrison was still celebrating from Liam’s accomplishment.

“Of course, you think I was born yesterday?”

“BE SERIOUS! Do you know how bloody screwed I am?!”

The boss stopped smiling. Thankfully, nobody heard the yell since they were in his room. Harrison dropped the act for his subordinate, noticing the uneasy face and fast breathing.

“Didn’t you just get their leader arrested? He’d be interrogated and the group will go under once it’s done.”

“Henry Watson.”

“Who?”

“Henry. Watson. Do you have records?”

Harrison raised an eyebrow.

“Who the hell are you talking about?”

“God, I thought you know the group! Henry’s the ‘leader’ I’ve been talking about!”

His boss couldn’t speak.

“They’re still out there. He’s real, right? That’s his name? That place exists? Since I got there multiple times?”

Maybe this was part of Henry’s plan. Or maybe he was going insane. Maybe both.

Either way, it felt like a diversion, but he needed even the smallest bits of info now. And he had to use his remaining time effectively, because it probably ran out before he started improvising his pivot.

His mind was only full of hypotheticals. It was not good.

“You look so screwed in the head.

You’re usually composed. Maybe all you need is a break right now, for everything you’ve done. You put their man under custody, and those hackers will go down soon.”

A pause to take note of facial features.

“Why are you such in a rush anyway? Is there a big threat against you? Your family? Noise Police involved?”

Liam froze in silence, while his boss waited.

“I... I’m not sure.”

- - - - -

The car abruptly stopped as Liam slammed on the brakes. The thoughts have never been stronger. His heart and mind were racing as he approached the bungalow.

He knocked a bit too quickly. It didn’t take long for the door to open, with Jean in sight.

“Liam, I got your message. You alright?”

“No. Not at all.”

“How? What happened? You were fine the other day.”

“Tried to play chess and forgot they own the board.”

“What are you talking about?”

Liam paused, his eyes couldn't stay still.

"Listen, I've been investigating a bunch of hackers..."

"Hackers?"

"Yes, hackers. I thought I got their leader but they're still out there. I have this lingering feeling that something will happen to me. To you. You need to help me."

"Are they The Noise Police?"

Silence.

"You were behind everything that's happened?"

He hesitated and could only perform a head shake.

"No. No. Sorry, but that's just... something I can't handle."

"Jean, calm down. We can talk about this."

He tried holding her-

“Go. Away.”

Liam flinched, his body agitated, and a frown formed.

“You let those people carry on. They’ll get to me someday. I’ll end up like that journalist. And you just HAD to be here.”

“Jean, let’s talk about this calmly-”

“No. Get the HELL out of here. Get out.”

Jean closed the door and locked it. He stood still, and slowly approached his car. For a brief moment, he turned around and he gazed at her bungalow.

This was it.

- - - - -

<https://misc-works.bandcamp.com/track/peak>

YOU'RE ON CAMERA

WAS it worth it? He was only supposed to look into a teenager's death. He didn't want any of this, but this was the route he chose. His mind was growing so tired he couldn't scan his environment, despite the paranoia.

He was in his car, in the middle of nowhere. The desaturated sky seemed like it never showed any sunlight this week. It was quiet with all the trees around him. On his work phone, there were two messages.

where are you? the nca already raided our building

Maybe coward was the right word. He couldn't bear it, and he'd rather take the easy way out.

the police, theyre here again, they said i did obstruction of justice by keeping that phone

It was only supposed to be just another case. He handled so much before, why would this be any different?

He dragged these people down with his choices. His route. And he still contemplated about what happened hours ago.

- - - - -

It was the first day of Liam's unemployment. Perhaps for the rest of his life. He was alone in the lounge, staring blankly at the space in front of him.

"...the latest info about one of the largest data security crises in the UK. The vigilante hacker collective 'The Noise Police' have recently been arrested by local authorities in Norfolk. The group involved former designers and specialists from varying IT companies."

It echoed in the dark. The glow from the telly lit the carpet.

"Two weeks ago, they were testing for what they call 'Phase 3', a wide-scale hack that leaked the personal information of more than four million accounts in the decentralised social media platform Aster. Aster's representatives have not yet addressed the attack publicly.

The live suicide of Trillian Cooper, a pundit from Norfolk Nightly, propelled the scandal onto the international stage. It was suggested to be the intended result, as the hackers

pursued Phase 3 when social media platforms received heavier traffic and engagement about the hacks.

A source mentioned there was even a final Phase 4, which was a supposed ‘hit list’ designed to encourage copycats for their movement. It was never revealed, though authorities remained on high alert for potential hacks in the future.”

The pixels of those broadcast images glowed bright.

“Private investigator Liam Huxley has been credited for their arrest, though a recent leak suggests the aftermath of Phase 3 could have been avoided if he hadn’t stalled the hackers. Inline Services, the PI agency he worked in, has also ceased operations in the light of recent events.”

Liam just gazed at the ceiling.

“Experts theorise that this leak also came from the hackers, but this still has to be confirmed. They advised the public not to create their own conclusions or go after Liam regarding his personal information.

More on this report after the break.”

Music blared, adverts shouted, and he laid on the sofa as if he was bedridden. Liam didn't even have the energy to lift the remote or shut off the noise machine. He just wanted to confirm his final suspicions and probably create a plan for it. If he even had the will anymore.

"Liam, what on earth is this?"

Of course, that was another problem. As he expected.

"Our family name is everywhere, they're mocking us. Mocking you. You didn't tell me, I could have..."

He expected that look.

"You... didn't tell me about... her."

"I could explain, but I don't think it will end well."

"Please do."

Liam didn't stand up.

"Jean used to be a colleague, suffered from personal issues before leaving the police."

He didn't like the look on Darcy's face.

"Yes, she was an ex-girlfriend, but that was years before we got married. She asked for help a few weeks ago since she had no one else to reach out to.

I thought she needed support, she was lonely, and-"

"So you think it's alright to snog someone behind my back?"

"No, it's not. It was never the whole story to begin with. The leaks aren't everything, and we both agreed it wasn't right."

"Then why didn't you tell me? Why wait for a chat log showing it to the ENTIRE world? WHY?"

Liam made a weak sigh. He had no defence at this point.

"Carly already loathes you. Imagine if she finds out her own dad is in the national news AND has cheated on me."

"Please... I didn't cheat, and I got them arrested. I still love you and she just needed..."

Can't you see how this whole thing is destroying me, too? Why can't you try to understand what I'm going through? I do the same for others, why won't they—"

"How about those millions of users you screwed over? How about our kids who'll get bullied at school after this? Can't you see you've basically destroyed their life now?"

The former PI remained silent, while his livid partner had too many thoughts to spill out.

"Christ, Liam."

Darcy tried to reason things out.

"Look, I know there's still good in you. I mean we somehow kept our marriage intact for about a decade..."

"Darcy, can't we just—"

"We've seen enough people do the same. Get a grip.

I need to stay away from you. I really wanted us to keep living together, but if you had told me all this—the hackers, that woman—maybe I wouldn't act so dismissive.

Now everyone's looking at us. And if I stay with a man with this 'integrity'... I don't know.

Those kids need a better life. And it won't be with you."

- - - - -

Her words echoed in his mind. Liam couldn't recall anything else. Just those sharp words. It was oddly interesting that forty-one years of his life all boiled down to this.

This was probably a stupid move. But he didn't care anymore.

Liam hit record on his phone. And he talked.

"This is Liam Huxley. Yes, that Liam on the news."

He hesitated for a while.

"Yes, I delayed the arrest of The Noise Police, but I was also calculating and observing for my next move. I couldn't risk them escaping if I used the proper methods, because they had already prepared for the police. I had limited information at the time, and I needed to gather more from the source.

This might sound insensitive to those of you who got hacked, but my private life was also leaked. I want to say something about this situation.

It's easy to sympathise when you know all the details, which is why we understand the characters in a film. But real life doesn't use a film camera. It doesn't show someone's entire existence and all the details in it.

I don't know your life, and you don't know my life, yet we keep thinking we know enough about each other. We haven't lived a single second of their life, we don't know what's in their mind, and we don't know their issues personally. We might not even know their name, yet we act so sure about who they are. As if we're the custodian of their lives somehow.

We only rely on shortcuts and labels, then we reject new info that contradicts the walls we've already built for our identity. We grasp on only the bits we know, and judge on information that will never be complete. We're desperate for some form of control, for our own convenience in a complex world.

I think this is what's driving most of our problems. Families not understanding each other, social media, our political division, the wars we continue, religious bigotry, all the inequalities...

The real issue is our certainty. I think we should accept that we will never know everything. If we all thought about this deeper, maybe there would be less people like The Noise Police. We'd understand instead of erasing each other."

Another pause.

"That's all I want to say."

It was an awful feeling. He might have worded some ideas horribly, and they could be misinterpreted. But if things were pointless by this point anyway, what was the loss?

So he uploaded the video.

...

There was reluctance at first, but he couldn't just hide from it forever. He scoured the feeds.

The court has finalised their judgment.

what a clown

your missus left you then?

lol

*take your meds
so we're just meant to sit back and say nothing? right ok
all about you isn't it
absolute joke
come out of hiding mate
still cheated on your wife though
tell that to the 4 million people you screwed over
just more proof the police shouldn't be trusted
coward
great, the criminal is teaching morals
at least we do our jobs properly instead of cheating
total hypocrite
this bloke trusted the hackers and now wants to lecture us
enjoy prison mate*

All his efforts to get the hackers caught, his attempts to be honest, him trying to reason and defend people's behaviours, his regrets and realisations... he had done a lot. But everyone was focusing on the only visible, irrefutable claim...

He was still in the wrong.

He thought of Henry again, of The Noise Police. The public was proving their points in real time. The counterargument was a strong one, and he was brought down with them.

But it was ironic. The hackers only cherrypicked details for the leaks because they didn't actually know his life completely. They performed the same shallowness they despised.

Or maybe they were right, in a way, even if their methods were bitter and unfair. Maybe it was even a reasonable response, if society was this deeply entrenched in blindness, inherently toxic to people who don't fit in with the noise. It was a horrible thought, but a part of him had become bitter enough to agree.

The system worked. Human nature did what it was designed for. Maybe the world will never be fixed, no matter what he'll do or what people like Henry will try to prove to the masses.

Liam fought for nuance, but he finally stopped delaying.

Nuance was dead. Had been for a long time.

- - - - -

Heavy footsteps made the wooden floor creak occasionally. The trees, the owls, the ambience reminded the man that this small cabin was serene. But there was no single bit of peace in his mind. There will never be any peace at this point.

The car was deliberately made irreparable. No turning back now. A piece of paper could be found on the table, just beside his weapon of choice. The air felt colder as well.

There was a slight, audible humming amidst the hesitation, not sure if it was the atmosphere or the thoughts.

Soon enough, Liam grabbed the gun.

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<https://misc-works.bandcamp.com/track/i-remember-you-remember>

WORD COUNT: 15,188

Act Zero: 2,717

Act One: 2,141

Act Two: 1,225

Act Three: 2,901

Act Four: 2,168

Act Five: 2,251

Act Six: 1,786

(According to Microsoft Word)

Last tally: May 26, 2026 | 6:08 PM

V1.1.04

Conception proof:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/19zTTOWxFkE0mzH6Yls1n6uJJjLm7thSx/view?usp=sharing>

