

Zeppelin

Shorts and Flashes

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Foreword

‘Zeppelin’ was the first piece of fiction I’d written since high school. I penned it one Saturday morning after seeing the Noirwich Crime Writing Festival’s call for submissions to its 2018 flash fiction competition.

To my delight I made the shortlist. We three finalists were invited to read our stories at Noirwich Live, the festival’s closing event.

I didn’t win, but I’d got the bug. By the time I stood up in front of a crowd of amateur and professional writers, creative writing tutors, family, friends, and other book buffs, I’d written an additional seven stories.

I was hooked on flash.

All the stories in this collection were inspired by people or things that have made a mark on me in some small (or big) way. In that sense, these are works of fact. However, none of the sinister or spooky stuff is true! That’s where the fiction comes in ...

I had a cat called Andrew. What transpires in ‘Wiccan Wonder’ did happen to me, but Andrew’s former owners weren’t witches.

I have a good friend who spends hours looking up and down with binoculars and a drone, but he’s never seen harm.

Our house is not connected to the mains drainage, but that is all there is to report.

As for that couple in ‘Zeppelin’, I and my soul mate have had that same conversation, but that’s where it ends. I hope!

And that’s what’s hooked me, I think ... the pleasure of fusing the real and the made-up.

Norfolk features frequently. My small family made a home in this county in 2005 and we love it. Plus, it has a quirkiness that makes it ripe for story-telling.

My job as a fiction editor requires me to consider structure, flow, tension, motivation, rhythm, viewpoint, spelling, grammar, and punctuation. I think my editing skills must have helped a great deal when I took myself over to the other side of my desk and began to write.

Still, whether I’ve managed to incorporate my experience into my fiction is for you to judge. I can tell you this: I loved writing these short stories, and now that I’ve started I can’t imagine stopping.

I hope you enjoy them.

Louise Harnby, 2018

Zeppelin

‘What d’you think they’re *really* doing in there?’

It’s a game they play once a week. They drive into town for vape juice and vinyl – feeding her nicotine addiction and his lust for Led Zeppelin.

Town, or just Norwich. That’s what they still call it after thirteen years. Not *the city*, which is what the locals say. Old habits.

Halfway in, they pass the model-railway shop. It’s been there for decades. They went in once, just to see. All trains and tracks and tiny trees, and a dedicated space where you could get a cup of tea and do your model planning. And so many staff. She wasn’t buying it, not in this day and age. Not with Amazon and eBay. Monstrous overheads. They’d left, giggling, bantering about where the bodies were buried.

‘Double-oh gauge.’

‘What?’

‘That’s the code. You say “double-oh gauge” and they show you the real money stuff – machetes and machine guns.’

He laughs and takes his hand off the gear stick. Slides it over to just above her knee. She’s the love of his life and these moments warm him – the easy companionship. They never argue, always find a

way to work out the hard stuff. There's nothing he couldn't tell her.

A few miles on, it's the cane shop's turn.

'Come on – who buys cane furniture anymore? Or who buys *enough* to keep a place like that afloat?'

They decide it's Norfolk's premier drug-trafficking centre. She says the scare quotes on the signage give it away.

'*All types of "cane" furniture sold here.*' She reads it out loud, holding up two fingers on each hand when she gets to the middle word. He glances at her and winks.

'I'll take four grams,' he says. 'Norwich is breaking bad!'

They park in St. Giles, grab an early lunch from a café in the lanes, then mooch around together for half an hour. He doesn't fancy looking at shoes and electronic ciggies, and she's not interested in flipping through boxes of old records, so they agree to meet back at the car in an hour.

He watches her head off towards Imelda's, a spring in her step. Apparently, the shoes are delicious, though expensive. Worth every penny, she says. And why not? She works her backside off for her business, and they don't lead an extravagant life. Her fancy shoes give her pleasure, and that makes him happy.

He makes his way to the second-hand record shop and pushes through the door. Sal's on the till.

'Zeppelin.' It's their code word.

Sal leads him round the back, down some stairs and past a tower of junk vinyl. Says: 'Just in.'

The Makarov is compact. Not great on accuracy but the hit will be close-range. And he likes the integrated suppressor.

He pays, places the pistol in a concealed pocket in his jacket, and picks up the plastic bag Sal's prepared. He walks his fingers through the album sleeves so he can crow about them in the car – Skynyrd, Moody Blues, Sinatra, more Zeppelin. Eclectic.

There's nothing he couldn't tell her.

There's plenty he doesn't.

Wiccan Wonder

There are three of them. One white, smudged with grey and caramel, a scrawny tabby, and a big black bugger. She likes him. Handsome and haughty, already strutting around like he owns the place.

‘I’ll take him.’

‘Fidelio,’ says the cat lady. ‘That’s his name. He’s special. Can sense things. Came from that Wiccan lot over in Clapham. And he likes you – I can tell.’

Course you can, she thinks, and smiles, holding back the *fuck-are-you-talking-about* as she thrusts thirty quid for Cats Protection into the woman’s hand.

By the time the door’s closed she’s changed his name. Andrew, like the dog in *Mary Poppins*. A bit more down to earth and just a little bonkers. But it suits him. They’ll mooch along nicely together.

THREE MONTHS LATER

Two in the afternoon and she’s still in bed. Last night was a late one, another two-dinners jobby with her mates. Meet, eat, drink, eat again. London’s good for that.

She stares up at the blown plaster on the ceiling and makes a mental note to get someone in.

She would have slept like a log but the damn cat won't settle. Keeps mewling and kneading the mattress. She shushes him and he looks at her the way cats do. Like you're shit and in their way. He rises to all fours and pads to the bottom of the bed, leaving a tiny brown arse print on the white sheet. Maybe his guts are playing up – he's been off his food the past couple of days. Then he's back again, worrying her with his paws.

'Christ's sake. Come on then.'

She rolls to the side of the bed and stands. Andrew bolts through the door and she follows. He takes the stairs four at time, all grace and guile. She treads more carefully.

Halfway down, she freezes as a huge, keening yawn comes from above. Structural. She fights to make sense of it as the world turns beige. *What the—*

She takes a breath, chews dust. Gagging, she reaches for the bannister and steadies herself, then trips her way to the bottom and into the kitchen where the air is clear.

The cat's by the fridge, lapping at the water bowl. He looks up, then saunters across and rubs the length of this arched body against her calf.

She gives it thirty minutes, then climbs the stairs. She's worked it out. The catastrophe awaiting her confirms it. Half the bedroom ceiling has come down. The corner of a pillow pokes out

from under a hunk of plasterboard and coving.
Christ, if—

Fur tickles her bare leg once more. She looks down.

‘Who’s a clever bugger then.’

Handsome and haughty. And the cat lady was right.

TWELVE YEARS LATER

She runs a finger oh so gently over the fur just above his nose. Three weeks ago, she lost her mum. Now him. It’s a different kind of hurt, of course. And there are wonderful others in her life who arrived later – a man, a child. Still, it aches. The end of an era. And he saved her – there’s that.

She’s not ready yet but she’s spoken to the cat lady. And when the time’s right, the Wiccan lot in Clapham have a little something for her.

Killer Heels

I am the cobbler. Want your Zippo engraved? I'm not your man. Need the cracked screen on your iPhone repaired? A spare key? A trophy for your kid's sports day? Nothing doing. That's for the high street.

Me? I make beautiful, hand-crafted shoes. My clients' needs are precise, my creations bespoke.

The studio is discreet. Nothing much to look at from the outside, just a ramshackle fisherman's hut on the dunes.

There's plenty of parking space by the café. And no one gives you a second glance ... even during the winter months, the big skies and sandy beach bring the dog-walkers, twitchers and seal-spotters. So while I'm not quite out of sight, I am out of mind. Plus, Norfolk people have ready smiles but keep to their own business.

Which is how we like it, me and my clients.

Take J, for example. One of my regulars. My creations have girdled her feet for two decades. She's an artisan, too, of a sort. I don't ask much, and she doesn't say much. Still, a good cobbler needs to know the *intention* if a shoe's to do its job.

With J, it's all about sevens. Seven pairs of shoes for seven days a week.

Monday's shoes are dancing shoes. Three-inch heels support her calf muscles, though the sole is flexible and the toe boxed like a traditional pointe. Classical ballet and modern dance all-in. I fashion the Dori shoes in exquisite berry-red satin, with ribbons to match. Her moves are dirty but divine, she tells me with wink.

Tuesday's shoes are business shoes. Something comfortable and timeless. Something she can stride in. Something androgynous yet achingly feminine. The saddle Oxfords fit her like a glove – tan suede on cream leather.

Two decades back, she was wearing them with baggy socks and shift dresses. These days, they're teamed with wide-leg pinstripes that swish around long legs. The boys in management don't play silly buggers with her, that's for sure.

Wednesday's shoes are climbing shoes. Initially, they were a challenge, I can tell you. Not the mechanics of the build – I'm fine with that – but the sacrificing of comfort. A good cobbler considers the wearing. Good shoes are worn yet not *felt*.

J's climbing is aggressive and technical. She's in her forties and younger athletes are snapping at her heels. The tight leather binds her feet to the point of constriction, but that's what's required to keep ahead of the pups. She's still winning county comps, so I keep my head in the fit.

Thursday's shoes are running shoes. J wouldn't dream of hitting JD Sports. I'm her king of trainers, she says.

She regularly pounds fifteen kilometres of tarmac and we need to look after her knees. Plus, in the past five years she's begun to overpronate just a touch, so I build in a little motion control for stability.

Running is how J does her planning, and my shoes help her focus on what's in her head, not what's on her feet.

Friday's shoes are visiting shoes. She volunteers at a refuge. Doesn't discuss the people she meets there – that would be a breach of trust – but I know those women are running for their lives.

We've worked out what she needs to walk the hallways, check the locks and cameras, vet the security team, clean the rooms, serve the food, nurse the wounds, listen to the fear, build hope from horror.

I almost smell her fury as I construct pumps of the softest black leather and a sturdy rubber sole. They're like a second skin. She forgets she's wearing them.

Saturday's shoes are killing shoes. Back in the day, I experimented with custom insoles and spring-loaded thumb daggers. We talked about coating the blades in ricin or botulinum. All very

Rosa Klebb. In practice, the engineering proved temperamental, the execution awkward, even for an athlete like J. Sometimes simplicity is the name of the game.

I put mechanics and chemistry to one side and turned to geometry. Killer heels. It's all in the angles, a trompe l'oeil, really. The heel appears straight but curves into a razor-sharp vertical edge that J uses to slice through the Achilles tendon with a mere flick of the ankle – a move she's perfected in her dance classes. Her victim's still processing the damage as she slides the heel across his neck.

I have ears all over. Word is, that refuge has an unusually high recovery rate. New lives, fresh starts.

Sunday's shoes are paddling shoes. After a week's work, J's feet are tired. Jaded feet make for a sloppy mind. The jelly flats are green because that's her favourite colour. They hold their shape in the salt and shale. The water cleanses as she wades but the broken pebbles and jagged chalk reef underfoot don't assault her.

I keep this to myself but consider these shoes my crown in her seven-day collection. Sentimental, I know, but everyone needs saving one way or another.

The Honey Pot Man

Jim's tics have been with him for as long as he can remember. It's not the spasms that bother him; it's the implications of their manifestation.

Trouble ahead. Life-changing trouble.

Always.

Episodes, he calls them.

At least he has fair warning.

The tics have saved him hundreds of times, evidenced by the Episode Log in which he faithfully tracks a life of near misses.

He's learned from the data too. The zone of interference lasts no more than a day. Tic minus twenty-four hours and counting.

Avoidance is usually the best defence, though preventative measures are possible now and then. A heating engineer located the fault in his gas boiler, and a call to a sweep ensured the chimney fire in the soot-heavy flue never caught.

As a teenager he even faked a seizure after holding the boarding passes for a trip to New York. His parents cancelled the holiday. The frustration twitching underneath their sympathy evaporated when news came in that Pan Am Flight 103 en route to JFK had exploded, killing the crew, 243 passengers, and eleven residents of nearby Lockerbie.

It's the roads that pose the greatest threat. SatNav is Jim's friend. A blink and a bark, and he reroutes.

Like that time in 2010 on the A47 when he passed the turnoff for the Broads. The junction's a bastard – little better than a gash in the central reservation. Seventeen hours after Jim's eyelids had gone into overdrive and an *arp* ripped from his throat, a car stalled as its driver attempted to cross the dual carriageway. The HGV braked, but time had run out for both of them.

Jim was nowhere near – he'd been sure to take the backroads that day.

He mostly drives the country lanes anyway; his customers live in the sticks. Jim is the honey pot man, though no bee lover. Norfolk's oldest septic tanks are brick-lined wells shaped like traditional clay honey pots. The tankers into which they're emptied are known by locals as honey wagons.

Those with a strong constitution have a job for life; superfast broadband is no guarantee that a twenty-first-century village-dweller's shit won't float in a hole twenty feet from their front door.

Not the sort of career most would shout about, but an unfazed Jim has found money in honey and mirth in muck. His wagon boasts the strapline 'Yesterday's meals on wheels', which gives his grateful customers a chuckle as, quite literally, he does their dirty work.

Mondays are always busy, and fitting in the weekend emergencies is tricky – it’s just him and his lovely wife, Anna. She manages the bookings.

Jim listens as she reassures a regular. Mrs Lovey *always* calls ahead to ensure he’s on track.

The Episode Log has lain untouched for months so the blinking catches him off guard.

Mrs Lovey is eighty-six and, though a real stickler for time-keeping, largely lives up to her name. He’s been piping away her honey for going on two decades and she always offers him a cuppa, doesn’t fuss over the smell, and never shies away from shaking his hand.

He massages his twitching eyes and tries to swallow the threatening bark.

The old lady’s safety demands action but Anna is adamant. ‘Let the police handle it. We’ll say it’s toxic gases and they need to get her off the premises for twenty-four hours. As for Mrs L, well, she’ll be put out but at least she’ll live to get the hump.’



Two days later, Jim backs the wagon up Mrs Lovey’s drive and drags the pipe over to the honey pot.

Arp.

Something isn't right. He's well beyond the zone of interference.

He shimmies the concrete cover to the side.

A conical police helmet bobs in the septic sludge. Jim's knees buckle.

'No tea for you today, young man. You know how I feel about tardiness.'

The pressure on his spine is almost tender, and just enough.

His lids spasm for the last time as he tips forward, honey-bound.

Big Skies

Ian pairs the drone with his iPad so he can record the mayhem.

Norfolk's skies are huge, and ten miles east of the city the light pollution is virtually zero. He's lived here most of his life and never tires of looking up.

He's counted shooting stars, tracked the International Space Station, picked out the Lagoon Nebula, *oohed* over Jupiter and Mars, and *ahhed* over Tycho, one of the moon's larger craters. And with nothing more than a pair of Celestron SkyMaster binoculars. The heavens in his hands for less than a hundred quid. What's not to like?

He was the first of his mates to get an iPad. But only so he could download an interactive astronomy app that blew his mind for three pounds.

Some say he's a gadget geek but they're missing the point. An early adopter, certainly, but it's never been about the tech per se. It's about what he can see with it.

Today's different though. Today he's looking down. The Holy Stone quadcopter boasts wi-fi camera, live video, and GPS-assisted flight. The battery life is awesome, and the wide-angle lens

offers amazing real-time viewing at a distance of up to 500 metres.

He thinks about his mum, how she's always loved birdwatching. Now, he can see what the birds see. And that's the thing about drones. It's not what's available in the viewfinder as much as the *perspective*.

Yesterday evening, he'd driven over to his bestie's place a couple of villages away. They'd parked up by the graveyard next to the busted-up old church and set the Holy Stone among the holy stones. It hummed to life and rose into the air, then moved forwards across the adjoining field.

Ian held the drone hawk-like, and whooped as he watched his mate's Lab hare off in pursuit of a Muntjac. A Fenton moment followed, his friend shrieking commands at a hound driven delirious by the scent of dinner.

Today, though, is not for fun. The woods and fenland between Panxworth and Pedham are the perfect hunting ground during pheasant season.

Ian has no time for people who kill for entertainment. Worse still, this lot are breaking the law. Shooting is banned on Sundays in England, even when the field is open. But they couldn't care less, and without evidence it's his word against theirs.

The video footage will change the game. Native uploads to Twitter and Facebook. He'll tag the Norfolk rags, TV and local radio too.

The pairing complete, he packs up the car with his gear and heads out to save some birds.



He can already hear the shots as he parks up. A crack. Then another. The business of killing is underway.

He unpacks his kit and leans against the car. A few tweaks and the drone is airborne. He focuses on the iPad screen, glides the quadcopter towards the low canopy of the woods and hovers over the birch. It's early October and the leaves are rusting.

Crack.

He swivels the drone right, searching the screen for a twat and a trigger. Sees a man. Holds the drone steady and zooms in with the viewfinder.

Bastard.

Crack.

The guy's head pivots sharply left to right, then tips skywards. His eyes look right into Ian's though the tablet.

Ian tries to process what he's seeing. The man looks terrified. And he's not armed.

Another shot rings out. The guy darts behind a tree, and Ian shifts the copter a fraction, keeping

the man in his scope. His eyes dart to the corner of the screen. *Recording.* Thank Christ.

He places the controller on the bonnet of his car. Keeps one shaking hand free for the joystick and fishes in a pocket for his phone with the other.

‘Please state your name and the nature of the emergency.’

‘Ian Watson. I need the police. There’s a guy in the woods being shot at. They’re fucking hunting him.’ The words tumble from his mouth, the pitch rising with every syllable.

‘Where are you, sir?’

Crack.

He breathes deep. Thinks: keep it together. ‘The public footpath on the corner of the Panxworth Road. By the orange house.’

An idea tickles. He swivels the drone in a smooth arc until he sights the line of shooters. He’s expecting camouflage, not waxed jackets and tweed caps. NFN. Normal for Norfolk.

Back to the guy. He lowers the copter until it’s a couple of feet above the man’s head. Gets his attention. This close, beads of sweat are visible through the retina display, as is the abject terror on the guy’s face.

Ian moves the drone ahead. The guy doesn’t twitch. Ian tweaks the stick to push the drone towards the man, then moves it ahead again: *Follow me, you dozy fuck!*

The man seems to get it and takes a tentative step. Then another. Ian lifts the drone to the treetops and brings it – and the guy – home.



His name is Feliks and he's from Lithuania. He came to help with the harvest but they took his passport, and with it his liberty.

He's not the first. The shooting party have been operating for years. Forensics found a mass grave. They're still piecing together the broken bodies and stolen lives.

Ian hands Feliks the Celestron bins and a beer. The sky is big and clear. Tonight's a good night for looking up.

Red Diesel

‘Rural crime is a huge issue around these parts, and this task force is going to put the balance of power back in the hands of the hardworking people who make East Anglia tick.’

Sergeant Rachel Sharp thanks the reporters for their time and takes her place front and centre in the pack. Twenty-one officers line the steps in front of the station.

Twenty-one.

Like they have nothing else to worry about. Like people-trafficking, paedophiles and punch-ups are a thing of the past. Like crime hasn’t become more complex and the perps more cunning. Like police numbers haven’t been cut. Like their budget hasn’t been slashed by a million quid in the past twelve months.

Like having twenty-one trained officers checking fuel tanks is the best way of keeping people safe.

Operation Red Diesel.

Crims have been nicking the stuff from tractors and combines. It’s no different to the fuel available from the pump – just a load of red dye mixed in. It works just fine in domestic vehicles but is illegal on account of the reduced tax.

Rachel, a townie through and through, wonders whether a more effective solution might lie in asking the farmers to lock up their agri-plant, but she plays the good copper, toes the line, and organizes the rota – twenty-one of her finest spot-checking cars on the Norfolk, Lincolnshire and Cambridgeshire borders.

Disruption is the name of the game. Her superiors have got that right. The diesel thieves are motoring around the countryside with full tanks while her department's running on air.



Two months into the op, Rachel's mobile vibrates. It's her number two, Nik. She thinks about not answering. Always the same story – they've dipped twenty-whatever cars and got nothing.

Still, Nik's a good officer and she should set an example. She picks up.

'We've got red,' he says.

His voice sounds funny, kind of thick, as if he's drunk or full of cold.

'And ...'

'It's not diesel.'

'Nik, speak to me in whats, not nots.'

'Blood. It's fucking blood. A whole tank of it.'

Cars can't run on blood. She knows this. So must he. He's their resident petrol-head.

‘How does—’

‘There’s a second tank ... another tiny filler neck just next to the fuel one.’

He tells her how the Škoda SUV was a random pull-over. That they almost missed it – the fuel dip had come up clear. It was only as he was screwing the cap back on that he noticed the stain. He thought it was rust and peered close, spotted the nipple to the right. Black rubber, about the size of a pea. He pressed it and viscous red liquid oozed onto his fingers.

‘I puked, then I called in CSI. They’re draining the second tank. There’s gallons of the stuff. I should have called you sooner but ... I’ve never seen ... I was—’

‘It’s okay, Nik. You did good. Let forensics do their thing. Just bring the driver in.’



Forty minutes later Rachel walks into the interrogation room. Nik does a *he’s-a-weirdo* thing with his eyebrows. She doesn’t want to pre-judge but this driver guy is all off. He doesn’t have a cornered look about him, but he’s not smug either. Impassive, she thinks.

She’s still waiting on the CSI people for the haematology report. In the meantime, she needs to

find out why Operation Red Diesel has turned into a bloody nightmare, literally.



Twenty-four hours later, it's confirmed. The blood's human.

There's something else – forensics are reporting saliva around the rubber nipple next to the main filler neck on the car.

And Mr Impassive is dead. The CCTV footage from his cell tells them nothing. He went to sleep and never woke up.

But it's weird. He's pale, almost translucent. Like he's been exsanguinated.

Unlike the Škoda's, his tank is empty.

Smells Like Trouble

How does one know that their experience of the world is the same as everyone else's? She recalls the conversation with a friend – how Paul swore it was grey when she was seeing a muddy green.

You don't know, she decides, not unless there's a linguistic reference point ... a green or a grey to anchor the conversation.

She's read about a woman who can smell Parkinson's. The skin gives off a musky odour in the early stages of the disease, and her natty nose picks it up. If scientists can identify the molecular signature of that odour, it'll speed up diagnosis and treatment.

Her own situation is tricky.

She can smell trouble.

What trouble smells *like*, she can't say. Sweet, fruity, fishy, rancid, faecal, or musky, like with the Parkinson's? Any one of those would help because it would give her a language through which to articulate the problem.

As a child she avoided certain others, could detect their corruption with her nose. She hadn't learned the name for it, but recognized its presence as clearly as cut grass, her mum's chicken cacciatore, and the mess the dog left on the lawn.

Sometimes the odour took her breath away. More frequently it was an irritant.

That others seemed oblivious to the obvious perplexed her. Only later did it occur to her that perhaps her nasal presence was unusual.

Awareness of what that smell meant, and what to call it, came in her early twenties. She'd graduated with a first in Journalism from Goldsmiths. Remaining in London without a job was out of the question so she'd headed home to Norwich. The internship with the *Eastern Daily Press* had paid peanuts, but peanuts were better than nothing.

She spent a year covering the courts. Most of the cases were dull as ditch water. Until Dale Culver took the stand.

Culver had bludgeoned a homeless man to death for nothing more than being in his way.

In his closing remarks, the judge described Culver as a menace with a psychopathic personality disorder and sentenced him to twenty years at Her Majesty's pleasure.

Culver's pathology had been an olfactory assault. She'd gagged throughout the proceedings.

That was ten years ago. Since then, she's researched the condition extensively. The terminology around psychopathy is tangled and confusing, more so than the throwaway lines in TV dramas would have anyone believe. Lack of

empathy and emotional disconnection are almost always evident. Violence not so much. Popular career paths include sales, media ... and law.

And that's the thing. The trouble she's smelling isn't always the big-hitting stuff – things you can go to the police with. You can't arrest someone because they're manipulative, or a persistent liar, or ruthless, or because they charm you into doing things you'd rather not, even if that charm leads to harm.

Which explains why she smells trouble so often. In fact, it's difficult to work out who's worthy of her trust, of her investment, and what action to take.

Like that Culver case. He was a menace, no doubt. But he wasn't the only one in the room. She knows that now. Her attribution might have been misplaced.

Just last week she attended a wedding. Ten years on and there she was, tarted up to the nines and trying to hold the retch in her throat as the judge who'd presided over the case walked down the aisle with the bride on his arm.

Maybe he's violent; maybe he's not. Either way, the thought of someone like *that* invested with so much power itches furiously. He has no right. Something needs to be done, though she has yet to work out what. One thing's for sure – it's unacceptable.

Unacceptable. Not frightening or disgusting or disturbing. Yet surely it should be all those things. And that's another problem right there. Like with the Paul and the colours, it seems her perspective is off.

Her own odour is telling: familiar, so it doesn't make her gag, but she recognizes it for what it is. Not sweet, fruity, fishy, rancid, faecal or musky. Just trouble.

She smells a little like trouble.

Craft Gin Connoisseur

We use only the most exclusive ingredients in our distillery. The leaves of the kaffir lime. The bark of the cassia. Elderflower and orris root. Lavender and lemongrass. Bog myrtle and pink peppercorn. Angelica, saffron, yuzu ... they're very fashionable at the moment, very *darling*.

They're also rather a bore.

The Young Turks of the marketing world say that to be heard at the noisy digital dinner party we must be different. We must stand out.

Brand identity, not bland identity.

We must be prepared to repel as well as compel if we are to attract the perfect client, the angel client ... the client who will pay our price for our product because they want what we, and only we, can offer.

But craft has become the new C-word.

We stand by the artisanal values that underpin every bottle we produce while the big brands nip at our heels, ready with their ubiquitous small batches, botanicals and tea-bagging butchery.

Less craft than crass.

We ask: where is the provenance, the traceability, the humanity?

For the artisan, a gin is conceived, born, nurtured, shaped.

Consumers can taste the soul of our spirits on their tongues.

There is valour in every infusion, credibility in every measure, a story in every distillation.

Juniper is our base botanical, naturally, but coriander and cardamom are for those who have bastardized our art. Rather, our clients' discrete palettes determine our signature notes:

Tears.

Pain.

Grief.

Terror.

None can be picked wholesale. Each provides the gin with a distinct human *dimension*.

Ask and we will tell you the names of the weepers and how many cups they filled with their heartache.

Ask and we will tell you of the torture they endured and for how long they suffered.

Ask and we will tell you about the lives we stole, and how those left behind were ripped asunder.

Ask and we will tell you of the dread we ground into the very bones of our donors.

Provenance. Traceability. Humanity.

The foundations of our craft.

Chin-chin.

Border Control

I push my way through the gate and trip across the lawn towards the main house. It's a charmer.

They don't build walls that thick anymore – too expensive. The brickwork is traditional. Norfolk Reds are absorbent, which lets the old girl breathe and keeps the damp at bay. But what I like best is the way the salt catches in the creases. It's like the bricks are smiling.

What else can I tell you?

It's not a family home, though it should be. A high brick-and-flint wall surrounds a good-size lawn – character and privacy. Perfect for careful parents looking to intern independent kids.

It's not a business premises, though it could be. There's plenty of storage space in the outbuildings, all of which are in good nick. They'd make ideal studios for artists who craft best in company.

It's not a holiday home, though it would be ... if someone dolled it up and advertised in on Airbnb. The coastline is near enough that if the windows were open you could smell the salt and hear the surf breaking.

The problem with this gaff is the view.

Look forward and you'll see wide skies and open water. The battle between sand and sea never

ceases. The dunes don't stand a chance without the wooden groynes that punctuate the shoreline.

Look right and take in the offshore windfarm at Scroby Sands. The blades slice through the light breeze with a soundless grace. The seals don't seem to mind and the little terns keep coming.

Now look left. It's a tangle of pipes and pylons. The gas terminal stretches along the coast road for a kilometre. The complex never sleeps and at night it has a kind of Bladerunner majesty. During the day, though, it's a retinal assault.

You couldn't rent or sell this place if you tried. No one comes to Norfolk expecting anything less than three hundred and sixty degrees of Mother Nature's premium eye candy.

Which suits us fine.

Our visitors don't get to enjoy the garden or the outbuildings because we don't let them outside.

They don't hear the surf or smell the salt because we don't open the windows.

They don't look left, right or straight ahead because the doors are always locked.

I'm part of the security detail. At any one time there are thirty of us on duty. We're all field veterans who know how to keep our mouths shut and our muscles toned.

Each of us is an Expert-level practitioner of Krav Maga. Grade 3 minimum. Our tech might malfunction but our strikes, takedowns, throws

and groundwork are powered by training and discipline, and don't.

We're armed too, of course. Between us we have more blades than Scroby's turbines, and it's an offence to cross the perimeter without a firearm. Initially, we each carried a SIG Sauer MCX rifle and a Glock 19, though these days it's a whole new ballgame.

And talking of the perimeter, it extends well beyond the brick-and-flint wall, a good 500 metres. Cross it without invitation and we'll be on you in seconds. This is private property, after all.

Having the gas terminal close is handy. We bump up against its heavily barbed borders. Accidental interlopers assume they've trespassed on the property of Shell, Eni or Perenco, and leave without fuss.

I can hear the cogs whirring. Maybe you're thinking this is some ghastly interrogation centre – Guantanamo with windmills.

Or a halfway house to facilitate extraordinary rendition. Honestly? It's more about water-skiing than water-boarding around these parts.

How about safe-guarding witnesses set to testify against perps of organized crime? That could work.

Or perhaps you've gone leftfield and think we're harbouring aliens. Greens and greys. Roswell on Sea.

If only.

The problem we're managing here is more complex.

The manifold. Twenty-seven cubic metres in which everything you thought made sense goes to shit.

I'm just a guy with a blade and a gun so the physics is a stretch, but the way I understand it, it's basically an arrivals lounge for those who live in universes that might have been ours but aren't.

Our visitors are us.

Sort of.

It comes down to proximity ... of experience not geography.

The Near-bys' lives are uncannily similar. They come because they can, because they're curious. They want nothing from us, just to say hello.

The Midmosts fall into two camps. Category 1s live an existence that for us is conceivable but as yet unachievable. Mainly because of their tech. Category 2s are struggling, but with obstacles that can be overcome. If we can help, we do, but more often it's the C1s chipping in.

Last but not least, the Yonders. You've probably worked it out. They're in trouble. Knocked sideways by some planet-wide horror the likes of which we can only invent in our dreams, our books and our Hollywood blockbusters.

Too far gone for C1 assistance, they want out. Or in, depending on how you look at it.

Most would be harmless if we let them through. They want nothing more than to survive, to make a home, to live a life. But we can't even look after our own, never mind several billion refugees from a sister Earth. Think about what you see on the news, how people start throwing their toys out of the pram when it comes to immigration.

And there's more than one Yonder universe. The science of collapsing probabilities allows for expansion with every what-if.

That's where the security detail comes in. No one leaves the manifold until we're certain of their status. And even then, no one leaves the house.

Most Yonders are brazen. Fair play – their clocks are ticking. We have a zero-tolerance policy. Just a sniff of a breach and we act. Thanks to the C1s, our defence upgrades are stand-out. No more bullets; it's all about protons. Our response is swift and clean. Visitor to vapour in a flash.

Shrewder Yonders pretend to be Midmosts and Near-bys. Identification isn't as hard as you might think. They press too fast, too hard, and lack the enthusiasm that genuine C2s show for home-centred support. And they have a certain disposition – haunted and hunted. That's what usually exposes them.

All in all, we have the situation in hand. Still, this is border control that bends the mind.

I try not to think about the Yonders too much, about the unthinkable burdens borne by other versions of me.

As for here – home – maybe if everyone knew about the manifold, and the nightmare plight of some who assemble there and the centillions they represent, we'd work a little harder to look after each other.