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FREDHEIM, HARALD orcid.org/0000-0003-1538-1179, Burrell, Lynda, Bradshaw, Alice et al. (2 more authors) (2023) *The Museum of TAT Presents: Creative responses to museum profusion*. University of York, York.

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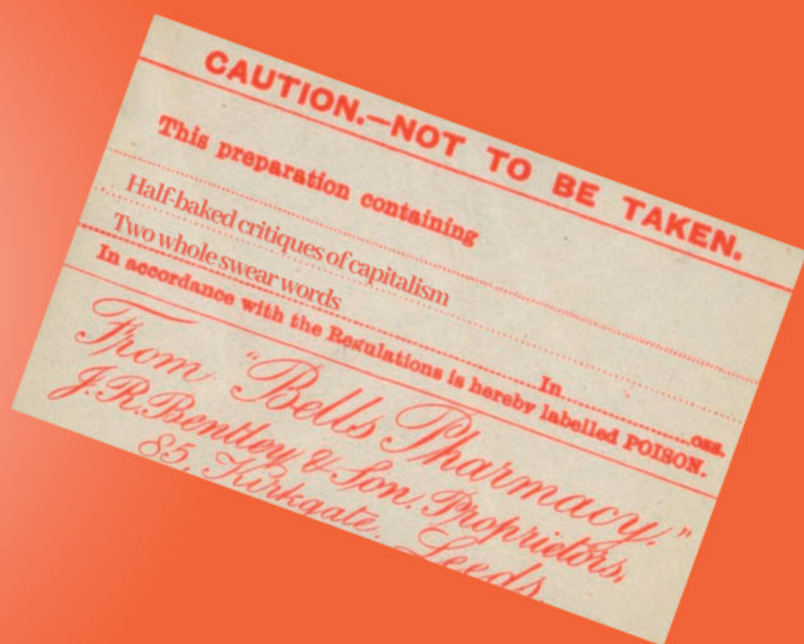
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THE MUSEUM OF TAT PRESENTS

CREATIVE RESPONSES TO MUSEUM PROFUSION



@MUSEUMTAT



UNIVERSITY
of York

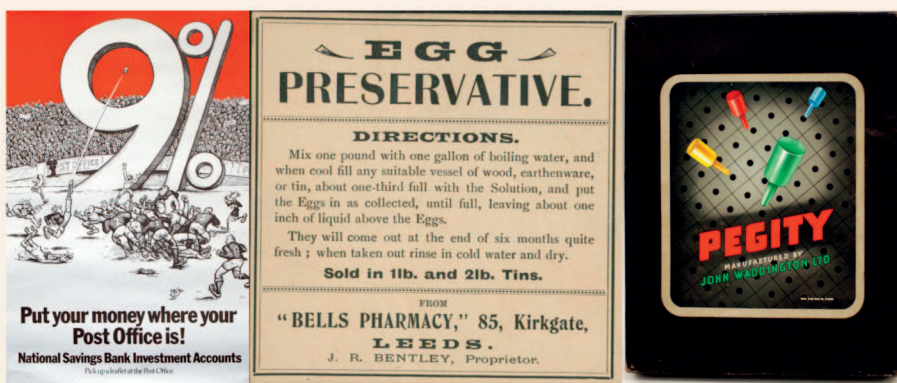


Economic
and Social
Research Council

TABLE OF CONTENTS

03.	THE TAT IS BACK
06.	ALICE BRADSHAW
10.	ALEX HARWOOD
14.	CLARE FISHER

THE TAT IS BACK



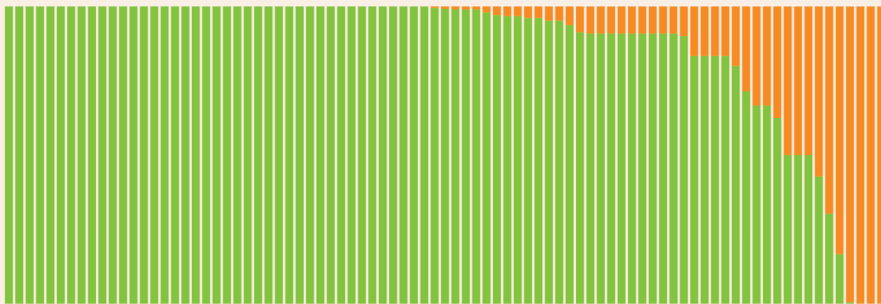
Welcome to The Museum of TAT! We collect unwanted, unused and unneeded museum items and work with creatives to find ways to give new life to these items by transforming them.

We think all our museum tat is wonderful, even though the items often are duplicate, damaged, unwieldy or just a bit random. We also think some of them deserve a makeover, so we work with local creatives to add new layers of meaning to them.

All our objects have had at least two lives already, in everyday use as their makers intended and as objects in museum collections. Join us in celebrating as they embark on their third. They carry the stories of both their past lives with them - in unexpected ways!

Lynda Burrell first came up with the idea for The Museum of TAT in 2018 in response to research findings presented at an event organised by Harald Fredheim. At the time, Harald was working on the "profusion" theme of the Heritage Futures research programme and had surveyed almost 100 UK museums about how they choose what to keep for

the future. The results Harald and his colleagues presented showed that despite pressures on storage space, most museums are still adding (green) many more objects to their collections than they are removing (orange) from them. Nevertheless, most museum staff said this was changing and that they were adding fewer items and removing more than before.



Many museum staff told Harald and his colleagues they had objects they wanted to remove from their collections but that they were struggling to find good new homes for. As shown in the figure below, most expressed that they would consider destroying, recycling or finding ways to re-use unwanted objects that no other museum would take on. There was no consensus that the rules for permanently removing items from museum collections should be less strict, but rather that the process for finding new homes for them could be much better. One respondent shared that they had offered items to local artists for public art projects.



It was in response to discussing these findings with fellow museum practitioners and researchers that Lynda first suggested there should be a museum of tat. Today, 5 years later, we are here at Leeds Industrial Museum to show off

what three Yorkshire-based creatives have done with some of the objects gifted to The Museum of TAT by Leeds Museums and Galleries. We hope what they have come up with sparks a range of emotions. We'd love to know what you think!

Lynda-Louise Burrell moved from Nottingham to London to study at the London College of Fashion and worked in New York City where she worked with designers and clients including Marc Jacobs, Italian Vogue, Macy's, Vanity Fair, GQ, NBC and Oprah's O. She returned to London in 2009 and in 2014 began setting up a 'museum without walls' that celebrates and commemorates Caribbean social history and heritage with her mother, Catherine Ross. As Creative Director at Museumand: The National Caribbean Heritage Museum, Lynda now works with schools, colleges, universities, businesses, broadcasters, councils, and communities all year round, to share and help people discover Caribbean and Black history and heritage. Museumand partners with national institutions like The V&A and The National Trust as well as local and regional libraries, archives and museums. Don't miss their new podcast "Objekts and Tings" and find out more at museumand.org.

Harald Fredheim moved from Norway to the USA and UK to study archaeology and objects conservation. He completed his PhD at the University of York and worked as a researcher at the University of Exeter and Museum of London Archaeology, before returning to York as a Lecturer in Museum Studies in 2021. Harald's research focuses on participatory practices in museums and the wider heritage sector and on how heritage changes over time - whether accidentally or deliberately. Harald prefers his research to be rooted in practice and has been working with Lynda to establish The Museum of TAT since 2018.

Contact: museumoftat@gmail.com & [@museumtat](https://www.instagram.com/museumtat)



ALICE BRADSHAW



Alice Bradshaw used Bell's Pharmacy medicine labels to create collages inspired by objects sourced from charity shops' "final reduction bins" and from a social media call-out for "tat".

The objects sourced from the charity shops were the items nobody wanted, twice; firstly in gifting to the charity shop and secondly ending up in the discounted price 'bin'. These objects represent the flora (flower bowl), fauna (owl) and fungi

mushrooms) of the natural world which resonate with the natural history section of Leeds Museums' Collection. They also relate taxonomically to some of the ingredients found on medicine labels and allude to the debate about what is 'natural'. The

objects sourced from social media call out for items that people regarding as 'tat', playing on the Museum of TAT's name and the artist's strong interest in rubbish and synonymous etymologies. These items (an elephant necklace missing the chain, a glass bottle with a decorative butterfly lid and toy fish) also reference museums' natural history sections in their motifs.

Alice worked with the medicine labels that sometimes created absurd connections to the objects they were representing in a playful juxtaposition of old and new. The faded colours and script typography were also particularly important to transform the sometimes garish 'modern day' rubbish with the antiquated medicine labels which create new readings of objects and artworks.



Alice Bradshaw is an artist, curator and writer. She is interested in discarded, everyday materials and words. Recycling and repetition are important strategies in her work, which sets up a dialogue around the value of rubbish through objects, publications, exhibitions and events. Alice is also interested in the social history of rubbish. What previous life did the rubbish have in usage? What decision making factors were involved in the discarding of the object by the previous owner? What value judgements were made? In her practice she regularly uses discarded objects, elevating them to museum status, to question their value and invite viewers to do the same.

Contact: alicebradshaw.co.uk

Make your own collage here!

Make your own collage here!

ALEX HARWOOD



Inspired by Leeds Museums' deaccessioned National Savings posters, Alex envisioned a socially engaged/participatory arts project responding to the current cost of living crisis in the UK.

Utilising scanned imagery taken from various posters in the museum collection Alex created both a digital collage/painting and an ongoing digital animation work, bringing to life elements of the collage and combining with snippets taken from interview

audio recordings. Juxtapositioned alongside politician soundbites are the thoughts of various project participants that Alex has engaged with, offering an insight into the impact of the crisis on people living in Leeds and across West Yorkshire.

The National Savings Movement, operating between 1916 and 1978 and used to finance the deficit of government spending over tax revenues, was instrumental in raising funds to support the war effort during World War II. Using Leeds born and British official war artist Henry Carr's 'Liberation' as a template to build his digital collage/painting from and place elements from the posters within, Alex references the link between the Movement and the War while alluding to the consequences of libertarian policies adopted during the short-lived tenure of Liz Truss as UK Prime Minister.

Remaining true to Carr's original composition and replacing figures like for like to depict well publicised stories of political

scandal, the scene juxtaposes both photographic and illustrated elements to create a surreal, chaotic and absurd scene. In viewing this outlandish fictitious scene, yet one that references true life events, the viewer is invited to contemplate the absurdity of the narrative that they are presented with, and the blurred lines between fiction and reality.

Alongside the collage, Alex presents a short reel of digital animation works in progress, and a selection of audio recordings made during interviews with project participants. These works in progress are both a reflection of the current stage of the project and the ongoing tumultuous nature of the subject matter.

Alex Harwood is a visual/digital artist and filmmaker with an experimental and multidisciplinary approach to his practice and a primary focus on producing collaborative, socially engaged work. Centred around the acts of storytelling and documenting personal histories while exploring social, cultural and political themes, Alex aims to provide a platform for people to share their views and ideas, particularly those who may experience barriers to participating in and engaging with creative opportunities, and to raise awareness of social and political issues affecting the lives of everyday people.

Contact: alexharwoodartist.co.uk

Alex is still actively seeking participants with whom to make further audio recordings and would welcome anyone who would like to contribute their own response to the project. These recordings will potentially be used in further animation and/or sound pieces developed by Alex as the project progresses.

The audio recordings are made via individual or group interviews/conversations held with Alex, using the following questions as prompts:

1. Please briefly introduce yourself, including:

Name

Age

Occupation

Where you are from (place of birth) / where you live (city/town)

Your marital/family status, number of children

Social/cultural background

2. What are your thoughts on the current cost of living crisis in the UK?

3. How has the current cost of living crisis affected you and your family/friends?

4. How are you managing to cover the increased costs of energy, food, fuel, mortgage/rent etc?

5. Has the increase in the cost of living had a detrimental effect on your finances/quality of life/mental health?

6. How do you feel about the UK government's handling of the crisis?

7. Is there anything else you would like to add or comment on?



Contributions are anonymous (responses given to question 1 are solely for the purpose of keeping track of demographic information and will not be shared) and participants are free to omit any information they would prefer not to disclose or skip any questions they would prefer not to answer. Recordings can be made in person, via online video call or, if preferred, participants may also record their own responses and send them to Alex directly.

Please contact Alex at info@alexharwoodartist.co.uk for further information.



CLARE FISHER



Clare Fisher used Waddington's board games as inspiration to write a series of short stories. She has left some sections blank for you to write your own and says:

Of all the items in The Museum of TAT's collection, the Waddingtons board games struck me the most. They all believe in capitalism, in climbing the career ladder and building mines and building a good life with a fervour it is difficult, if not impossible, to

maintain in the 2020s. They do not know about economic crises, about austerity, about the climate crisis. They believe that everyone can win a big house and a big career and a big X forever. They prompted me to ask: in what ways is life like a game? Is

winning even possible? And why, though this way of life is clearly not working for so many of us, don't we consider other options? And how do the values that are so obvious in these games still shape life today? The stories that follow are imagined complaints, cries, attempts to resist or at least understand how 'the game'

operates. The titles of each fragment, and the questions in between, are mostly taken from the games' rules; only at the very end have I 'interfered'. You are welcome to scribble your own answers to the questions, or responses to the stories, in the blank space. I hope you enjoy reading/playing!



Clare Fisher is a prose writer, and Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Sheffield. They are the author of the novel, *All the Good Things* (Viking, 2017), and the short story collections, *How the Light Gets In* (Influx Press, 2018) and *The Moon is Trending* (Salt, 2023). Their work has been published internationally, won a Betty Trask Award and been longlisted for the Edgehill Short Story Award and the International Dylan Thomas Prize. They live in Leeds.

Contact: @claresitafisher

THE FUN GAME THAT YOU CAN NEVER WIN!

BY CLARE FISHER AND _____

FAO: Minister of Winning and Losing

FAO: Rt. Hon. Chief of Justice

FAO: Waddington's Games Ltd

FAO: Adam Smith

FAO: Quality of Life Commission

FAO: God

FAO: Karl Marx

FAO: We've had enough

Hi there,

We're writing to tell you that we think you've taken your game far enough, in fact, much, much, too far, and it's time to stop. It's time to figure out what life might be like if we weren't playing. It really is time to stop.

We're writing as people who didn't so much follow your rules as swallow them. Day and night, they jangled around our intestines, keeping us safe and warm and safe and safe. We made sure our success formulas added up to sixty points, we did not trade happiness points with money points, we steered clear of the scandal square, we did not use more than



one lorry at one time, we did not fire more than one secretary per quarter, we rubbed the board with a fine silk handkerchief before playing, we played with commitment and concentration, so much so, that we forgot we were playing. We forgot the game was the game and the rules were the rules. We thought we were discovering our authentic life paths.

We thought that any day now, we'd win. We'd wake up to the smell of coffee made by someone so far from our beds they didn't feel, to us, like a person. We'd wake up late, because when we'd won, we could wake up whenever we wanted, because winning came with making millions, possibly billions, whilst bouncing from holiday to holiday and feeling happy and carefree all of the time. An astonishing new lover would sweep us off of our feet at the bus stop, where we would continue to spin, foot-less, for years and years — all whilst holding down a stimulating and well-paid job with regular promotions, several children, and a spouse. We'd never feel angry or sad or confused or anxious or hungry or despairing or irritated or like there was nothing inside of us, not even nothing. Our lives would be a mystery whose answer was always that we deserved everything we had, and more. And more.

But when we won, it was nothing like we imagined. It made us angry and sad and confused and anxious and hungry and despairing and irritated and like there was nothing inside of us, not even nothing. It made us wonder where the problem lay: with the game, or with us? Why did everyone keep playing if not even the winners benefitted? And were there even winners? Was winning the right word for what we'd done, or had done to us, or — what?

Now, what we want is a refund, a reversal, a life boat, an unsubscribe form, a fire exit. We want answers. We want you to tell us how to stop wanting the things the game makes us want. We want you to tell us what, if we're not winning and losing, we ought to do instead. We want you to hear our evidence re: the game is fucked. We want answers.

Best wishes,

Players 2566, 6713, 1892, 2145, 9048, 2153, 7724, 0912

DO NOT TRY TO UNDERSTAND EVERYTHING BEFORE YOU PLAY

Player 2566

I remember pinning the tail on the donkey with such precision that everyone insisted I'd peeped through the blindfold, and when I said I hadn't, they said I was lying, and when I said, what's the prize, they said, nothing, since I wasn't only a cheater, I was a liar, and then my little brother got the prize even though he'd pinned the tail on the donkey's nose, the prize was a pack of sweets, he ate them all in one go and immediately threw up.



I remember Weetabix and how when I admitted that the reason I never finished them in time for the school bus was that if I didn't get them as soggy as possible my entire day felt the way the TV looked when it wouldn't tune and white streaks cut through the picture you were meant to see, she stopped buying them; after that, my days only got streakier.

I remember the snow, and how it melted much faster than the time it took me to make a snowball, which I chucked at my teacher anyway, even though it was just grit and ice, and how, even though I never managed to aim the ball in the right place in PE, I got it right in his eye, I mean right in, and he started yelling and crying and then he went to hospital.

I remember the fear of homework – of doing it, of not-doing it, of the void that beckoned when I finally stopped worrying about doing or not-doing it.

I remember my legs swinging under the piano stool as my fingers trudged up and down the keyboard; middle C, then the scales, major first.

I remember the way my stomach stung when I saw how much different my drawing of the pine cone looked from the pine cone that actually existed in the middle of the table; and how much harder it stung

when I saw that my friend R's drawing looked more like the pine cone than the pine cone itself.

I do not remember a before.

WHEN WILL BUSINESS IMPROVE?

This image shows a full page of white paper with horizontal dashed lines, typical of primary-ruled notebook paper. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings present.

YOUR SUCCESS FORMULA MUST ALWAYS ADD UP TO 60 POINTS, BUT YOU MAY DIVIDE UP THESE POINTS IN ANY WAY YOU LIKE AMONG THE THREE GOALS, MONEY, FAME AND HAPPINESS. HAPPINESS POINTS AND FAME POINTS MAY NOT BE TRADED.

Player 6713

I'm not sure if my evidence is "mine", exactly. It's about Jenny Kimble from High School. She was perfectly nice – she'd let me copy her answers about the Causes of the Russian Revolution – until she got cast as the dead girl. In the Road Safety adverts, I mean. Her pretend-dead face stared out from billboards and posters all over town.



Everyone wanted to know how it had happened. Had someone stopped her in the street to say she'd look great as a corpse? Had they made her lie down on the concrete and think about what it would be like to never think about being alive or dead or in chemistry or maths or anywhere ever again?

Oh, she'd shrug, her eyes on the ground, I don't want to talk about it.

But the other kids would press her, and then she'd look up, o-kayyyy, she'd say, but I could tell from the way her lips twitched that she had somehow been waiting for this moment — the moment when she told everyone what it was like to play a dead girl — her whole life.

I'm not sure why I'm telling you this.

I left school over a decade ago. Jenny and I didn't stay in touch. Though I

do occasionally stalk her on Facebook. She's not a model anymore, she's a civil servant. She has a pretty house and a pretty daughter with two names joined by a dash, like molly-may or betty-rose or rose-may. She has a husband, he is not pretty. The first time I looked at their family portrait, which, based on my research, must've cost between £520 and £744.55, depending on which package they chose, I thought: that's the dead girl. I mean, she's still dead. She is successful but dead and no one but me knows it.

I drafted a few messages to tell her that I know exactly how lonely it is. On the tarmac, I mean. The metaphorical tarmac. After the third draft, I looked back at the portrait, only, it was a different shot; in this one, the husband looked slightly less ugly, the child was sucking on its lace collar, and she – she looked happy. She looked like a person who was never going to die, not even once. When I reopened the Messenger app, intending to delete my message, I saw I'd already sent it. I tried to unsend it but it was too late and when I googled how to unsend Facebook messages, an advert for the family portrait company popped up with a special offer that was valid for one hour only. The prices were slightly higher than the ones I'd seen on the website, maybe thirty minutes earlier, and I'd already maxed out my overdraft, but I clicked. I wanted to know what it felt like to win, if only for a minute.

IS THERE A SINGLE GENTLEMAN HERE PRESENT?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

THE FUN GAME THAT GIVES YOU POWER OVER PEOPLE!

Player 1892

I followed the rules to the letter, I swallowed the letters, they blocked up my insides, the doctors couldn't tell why I was so constipated. I sorted out my import tax and my export tax and my anti-bandit strategy and all that jazz.

But there was no guidance on dealing with people. The ones who were living there, I mean. On the land. The land I'd bought. When the lorries drove up, they were lying all the way across what was meant to be the mouth of the mine. They reminded me of the paper-dolls my daughters hang up like streamers all round their bedrooms, the way they were holding hands. I tried to think of them as that – paper. In the written report, I referred to them as 'the obstruction.' I wrote that the obstruction had been removed swiftly. And it was. The mine was born as planned. I made my millions. But I still see them. The people. Holding hands. I see the ones who sat up and looked at me right before the bulldozers moved in. They are saying something, I don't know what. I think they might be laughing at me.



WILL THEY BE HAPPY?



IMPORTANT: KEEP THE GAME IN A COOL PLACE

Player 2145

I was in the office early. I wanted to test out the new espresso machine before Jane, Mandy, and the rest of the “Nespresso” (No-spresso, more like it) faction marched in complaining that it was “fiddly” and “bitter” and didn’t facilitate fantasies of George Clooney. I pressed the ON button. Nothing happened. I pressed it again. It hissed black liquid into my cup.



Then I heard footsteps, lots of them, coming up the hall. Then the kitchen was full of maybe twenty or thirty people, they weren’t any of the usual office people, and they weren’t visitors, not official ones, they weren’t wearing those ugly plastic VISITOR badges. They were men, women, children, and people so old you couldn’t tell if they were men or women. When I asked what they were doing here, and how they’d got past Cathy at Reception, they looked at me as if to ask me the same question. They proceeded to sit, stand, lie, cartwheel, swivel and wheel everywhere. Absolutely everywhere. I saw a child make a den under Jane’s desk. I saw a man cramming three of Mandy’s protein bars into his mouth at once. I saw three women carry an entire island out of the front door as if this was an activity they did every day.

I told them to stop. I grabbed the espresso machine, I hadn’t even tried it yet, it wasn’t fair. But they just kept passing chairs and computers and desks and waste paper bins and water coolers and stationary through the doors and the windows. They were stronger than me, even the ones who looked weaker, even the children.

When the office was almost empty, one of the very old maybe-man-maybe-women came up to me and pressed their finger against my lips. They told me a story. I cannot remember the details, only that when it was finished, I understood that we were the thieves, not them. Sure, our

company had bought the espresso machine and the ergonomic desk chairs and the computers with receipts and invoices and Purchase Orders, they had done everything right by the tax man. But numbers were just shapes with made-up meanings. Numbers were just a distraction from the blankness beyond them, as were letters. As soon as they said it, I felt a sudden movement in my gut, almost as if I had drunk that espresso after all. I hadn't, though. I'd just heard the Truth. I mean the one your body knows whether or not you want it to. I made no more attempts to stop them.

By the time the Nespresso faction arrived, the people were gone and I was star-fished on the bare carpet. My head was in the rectangle of darker-coloured carpet where my desk had been. I didn't know where it or my computer now were. I didn't care. The life they'd contained, and that had contained me, was woefully pointless. I started to laugh. I couldn't stop.

Jane asked was I robbed.

Mandy asked, did they threaten you did they hold a gun to my head did everything flash before my eyes was it like in the movies.

Jane said, she's in shock, bless her, she's always been odd, but this really takes the biscuit, maybe she needs a biscuit, maybe it's low blood sugar.

Mandy ran into the kitchen, only to come back in tears. There aren't any biscuits, not even those off-brand digestives! And of course they've taken my protein bars, too.

Jane started to cry, too.

It's not the end of the world, I assured them.

Then what is it? asked Mandy. What the hell is it?

This was not a question I was prepared to answer.

HOW MUCH DO I PAY THESE PEOPLE?



THE PAYROLL SQUARE MEANS TROUBLE!

Player 9048

I started to see holes in things, I mean real holes, in real things, like the car windscreen. I was driving us to my brother's, my wife was in the passenger seat, and the windscreen was whole, and then it wasn't, and there was no way to know what had or hadn't happened in the 'and then' in which it had happened though how had it because we did not live in the world of world where holes could just appear like that.

The hole was about three times as wide as my head and a lot more jagged. I looked at my wife to see if she could see it but all she seemed to see was me looking at her, at which point she snapped at me to look at the road. I tried, but now the stench of hot tarmac and chips and bus fumes was wafting through the hole. The next time we stopped at the lights, I reached forward and touched it. My wife shrieked. The lights changed. The car behind us beeped its horn; the car behind the car behind us beeped its horn. I drove on. My fingers had indeed touched glass, but that didn't mean the hole wasn't real; it meant that the hole was scared to be touched.

I can't remember which hole came next: the one in my electric toothbrush or the rugby boots my son insisted we buy even though he does not play rugby. I can't remember how long it took to reach a point where any given moment was more hole than not. What I do remember is that the day our stocks soared was a particularly hole-ridden day. Corks were popping all over the office. Pop pop pop pop. I started to cry then, and they assumed, I suppose, that it was happiness. It wasn't, though. Happiness is not what it was.



HOW MANY TIMES HAS SHE BEEN IN LOVE?

THE RULES FOR ANY INTRIGUING AND INTERESTING GAME MUST INEVITABLY DEMAND A LITTLE CONCENTRATION AND CAREERS IS NO EXCEPTION.

Player 2153

I was star-fished inside the full body scanner when I first saw her. She saw me see her. The scan flashed green to indicate to the guards that I hadn't stolen any of the company products or ingredients used to make the products. I walked towards her and she held out her arms and gave me the sort of hug I had, in all honesty, been waiting my whole life to receive.

You have been selected, she said, for the special programme.

Oh no, I said, there must be some mistake. I did not enter any programme. I confessed that I had been the second-to-least bad at anything I'd ever done.

She narrowed her eyes. If you follow the rules, you will reach the next level.

She did not have to say what she meant by the next level; I felt it; I felt her feeling me feel it. My whole body quivered.

Then she began to power-walk towards the revolving doors.

But how will I know when I've got there? I asked.

She turned, tilted her head to one side that made me suspect that if she hadn't just told me I was special, she thought I was stupid, when you



know, you'll know.

Over the next few weeks, I began to adjust to the idea that I wasn't one of the almost-worst people. If someone pushed in front of me in the lunch queue, I told them off. My role was 'product assembly assistant assistant'. I had to place a metal cylinder into a cylindrical hole, twenty cylinders a minute or else my pay was docked. Before she found me, I only ever hit this target when I 'accidentally' drank from Frank's water bottle (it's an open secret that he dissolves speed into it). But the knowledge that I'd been chosen, and that the ones who'd chosen me might be watching, that they not only knew what I was up to, but that they cared — it made me work a lot faster. Better still, it made work feel less like work; I'd sort of float up above my body, dreaming about the life I'd live once I reached The Next Level.

By the fifth week, I was doing 30 to 40 cylinders per minute. At this point, Management got suspicious. They demanded blood tests and urine tests. When the tests came back negative, they demanded lie detector texts. They demanded I confess to using deep brain stimulation. They demanded I confess to using some drug that went some place other than your blood or urine stream. I didn't feel sad or scared or angry: I was certain, absolutely certain, that today would be the day that the woman would return. To tell me I'd done it; I'd followed all the steps. She'd be waiting with a car, a fancy one, with a fully stocked mini bar, ready to whisk me to the Next Level. So I told them about her. They laughed so much they had to untuck their shirts from their belts and dab at their eyes. They all had a lot of fluff in their belly buttons, I noticed.

At my next shift, everyone curtsied at me. Your highness! So special! Are you there yet? What's the secret to being chosen? Then Management announced that the new minimum cylinders a minute was 40. Now everyone hates me, well, apart from Frank, who is now selling a lot more speed. I don't mind, though. I just close my eyes and replay the sound of her voice telling me I am special. I know that it's the truth. And now that I've told you all this, I am certain, absolutely certain, in a way that is even more certain to the way I was absolutely certain yesterday and the day before, that tomorrow will in fact be the day she returns. It will! My bones already taste like car fumes.

HOW MUCH LONGER ARE YOU GOING TO GO ON FIGHTING ABOUT MONEY?

HOW MUCH LONGER ARE YOU GOING TO GO ON PLAYING?

THE OBJECT OF THE GAME CAREERS IS TO "SUCCEED" BUT, JUST AS IN REAL LIFE, EACH PLAYER HAS HIS OWN IDEA OF WHAT SUCCESS REALLY MEANS.

Player 7724

I was the first one to arrive at the rating square. It was a little chilly but I was adopting a happiness-focussed mindset so it didn't get to me. It soon enough got to my fingers – they were already blue – but not to me. I knew my Success Formula by heart. I'd rubbed it with a fine silk handkerchief and stored it in a cool dry place – as per the rules.

After about half an hour, the raters turned up. Several of them had food smeared down their fronts, like babies. The thought crossed my mind that, given the importance the rules placed on personal presentation, this was a little unfair; but I shoed it away as an example of negativity-focussed thinking.

I closed my eyes and focussed on how happy I'd feel once the raters saw how much effort I'd made. I gave my happiness a colour (green) and a smell (fresh donuts). I made it into an animal (baby otter cuddling a second baby otter) into a swimming pool with water so fresh you could drink it, into the flattest flat white that ever did live, into a pair of boots so new and so soft that you feel as if you are floating not walking as if you are on some planet whose overriding force is kinder than gravity.

But they still rated me Satisfactory.

Satisfactory! I mean, does all this sound Satisfactory to you?

On my way home, I bought donuts. I wanted to eat them whilst sitting in the green green grass, ideally near a swimming pool. The problem was, it took me a long time to find any grass, and when I did, it wasn't green, and the donuts were cold, the jam all congealed. I couldn't



afford to buy a new box so I ate them anyway. I told myself that reality was whatever you made of it; that I didn't have to believe the ratings if I didn't want to, that that one week six months ago when I did get a Very Good, my friends had loved me no more than usual; if anything, they'd seemed irritated when I'd mentioned it. I should be more like them – not caring. I want to be. I want for my happiness to exist independently of the ratings. It doesn't, though. I can feel it, right now, inside me; heavy in the way that things only are when they're dead.

**HOW MUCH LONGER WILL YOU GO ON
FIGHTING ABOUT**

FIGHTING

**HOW MUCH LONGER ARE YOU GOING TO
GO ON PLAYING**

**HOW MUCH LONGER ARE YOU GOING TO
GO ON WINNING IF WINNING DOESN'T
FEEL LIKE WINNING**

HOW MUCH LONGER

HOW MUCH

THE OUIJA IS A GREAT MYSTERY. WE DO NOT CLAIM TO GIVE EXACT DIRECTIONS FOR ITS MANAGEMENT, NEITHER DO WE CLAIM THAT IT WILL WORK IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES AND AT ALL TIMES.

Player 0912

Remove the L from PLAYER and what do you get? PAYER. Exactly. Think about it. The codes are there if you see them, and I see them. The more I see them, the more I SEE THEM. I have a blog, it's called THEY ARE PLAYING US. It has 192 entries, but you'd only have to read about half to be convinced of our case. My daughter read 3 of them but when I asked about the others, she said that she'd already had more than enough of my paranoid thinking. She said there is no game. I reminded her of the lengths I'd gone to to protect her from the game's worse features.

She rolled her eyes. As if you're not protected, you, a white boomer with a decent pension and no mortgage.

Of course, this got me hot under the collar, I couldn't help it. How else was I supposed to feel when she used things I couldn't help against me?

She suggested, and not for the first time, that I seek help.

Yes, I said, don't we all.

She sighed in the direction of the soup, which I'd made myself, with vegetables I'd grown myself.

What? I countered.

When her mother was alive, she was always on at me for being



one of 'those men' who refused to cook.

She shook her head. Nothing.

I said, it's something.

She said, yes, but you won't like it so there's no point saying it.

I said, that's not fair.

She glanced, again, at the soup, and said, the world's not so dangerous.

I laughed.

I'm not joking, she said.

I began to reel out facts that would prove otherwise but she held her hand up in the air. It is dangerous. It's dangerous and fucked up. But it also can be, you know, really beautiful.

Oh dear, I said. Are you going to tell me to live, laugh, love?

She frowned at me. Then she did laugh. She laughed and laughed.

When did you find out about live, laugh, love? She wanted to know.

I reminded her that I don't live in a vacuum. Yes, I don't have Google - my blog is on an independent browser - or an electronic bank card, I don't go to supermarkets or do anything else to let them play me even more than they already have, but every few weeks I do tire of my own company. I wander into town. If I see anyone else who looks like they're tired of their own company, I make faces at them so as to signify my recognition of our mutual state of being. Oftentimes, the other person crosses to the other side of the road, but occasionally they stop and talk. When we're done, I get a cup of tea and a hot buttered tea cake in the one remaining cafe that takes cash. I go to the charity shops. It was there that I encountered Live, Laugh, Love - first, on a tea towel, then a jumper, then a set of mugs, a towel-towel, a pair of otherwise decent trainers.

But I didn't tell my daughter this; we just sat in a companionable silence, then we completed a puzzle of the Eiffel Tower I'd bought from the very same charity shop. It was almost as if she was right; the game wasn't even real.

Then she left - she had to do a late-night Teams call for work, whatever that meant - and I realised this is exactly what they want you to think. I'd been duped. Lived-laughed-loved! Normally, a revelation of this magnitude would make me feel the way I used to feel when I got a big

promotion, bought my daughter a present she wanted, or otherwise succeeded in the game. This time, however, it just made me feel blue. The puzzle was cheaply made; some of the photo was peeling off the cardboard backing and the pieces didn't properly fit together. I didn't know why I'd bought it, or why I'd wasted our precious time completing it. I began to kick it. I continued until it was a pile of dust. Then I... Well, I cried. Quite a lot. Almost as much as when my wife died, though I can't tell you why. It's not the sort of thing I can put in my blog.

WHEN WILL HAPPINESS IMPROVE?



GET IN TOUCH



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