



THE FEED

Nick Clark Windo





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Kate

What Would You Sacrifice?

Is this what you realise when you turn off the Feed? The restaurant's other diners hustle around me, yet I am absolutely alone. I should be nestling in amid the raucous chatter of this busy place, but instead I'm embalmed in real silence, and it's as that weird ringing thing happens in my ears that it hits me: Tom is right. I really must remember this. Even though this unconnected stillness feels deeply unnatural, it is good to be slow – if I can just ignore the itch in my brain.

I was spraying non-stop between classes earlier and I'm still buzzed from it now, even though I took Rafa for a big walk in the park after school. Marooning myself on a bench with my Feed off and my do-not-disturb on, I threw his ball and watched the children play. That was it. That was all I did. No chats, no news streams. I had homework to mark (Class 9K filleting *The Tempest* with trowels in a filtered-thinking test I'd set them) and I should have messaged JasonStark27 to release him from detention, but I didn't. I didn't even check my pool. I simply sat and winced at the repetitive torture of the rusty swings and





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forced my thoughts to slow. And gradually the buzz subsided. My heart calmed and I felt the baby inside me relax: her agitations eased as my mind unknotted. Action: reaction – nice and clear. Tom would have been proud; I slip my Feed on now, here in the restaurant, just our PrivateStream, and nudge him to tell him he’s right. The connection makes my heart race, and without thinking I dip into the chatter of the restaurant’s hectic PublicStream, I plunge with ease into the—

‘No!’ Tom’s thick eyebrows go up and his eyes widen, whether in surprise or irritation I can’t tell, as his Feed stays off and his emotis are therefore unknown to me.

I turn my Feed off again, like one of my troublesome pupils, and we sit in silence some more. He smiles at me but I don’t return it. I can’t, for a while, while I concentrate. *I can do this, I can go slow.* Why does Tom have to make it look so damn easy, though? My eyes rove, hungry for information. The cutlery of the thirty-three other diners scrapes, the occasional, unintended real laugh rasps around the room. Someone coughs. No words, though, no talking in the real, and I hear birdsong over the super-road’s growl. I realise I haven’t heard a bird consciously for so long, and it’s a really lovely thing. But the problem with being off is – it’s – so – slow!

‘How long will this take?’

‘Could take forever,’ Tom agrees, nodding his broad forehead patiently before swivelling towards the kitchens. ‘How long have we been waiting?’

‘I’ll check.’

‘*Kate,*’ Tom warns gently. ‘We are being *slow* tonight.’

And there it is: the psychotherapist’s tone. It implies far more authority than the length of Tom’s experience deserves; in fact, I think I first noticed it right when he





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started practising last year, but I can't check my mundles to see without going on. If it riles *me*, though, why wouldn't it rile his clients? And that wouldn't be good; he has to make this work. It's taken him a while to find himself, and he loves the work. He's really good at it. It's *his*.

So I disengage my eyes again and look around the real, past the diners and outside. It's not yet dark, though the super-road brings an early murk to these older parts of the city. We moved in round the corner two years ago, just before we got married. A beautiful old house (new-builds lack soul – I like a home to have a past) and way more expensive than we could dream of affording, but Tom's parents helped us out. I'm still mixed about that. So's Tom. But we're on the hilltop up here. The super-road arches close above us and the city is an urban growth, laid out below. So many people down there before me, the millions of lights sparking like so many vibrant lives, and I could be chatting with any of them, my thoughts prised out from the lit-up tower over towards the river, the main Hub of the Feed. Tom's father's place. Watching over us all: the eye of a needle through which everyone threads.

Just seeing it, I'm tempted to dive into my pool; I'm itching to check the new poll I set. Two hundred million followers I have now! (If I accepted endorsements, and I wanted to, I'd be able to give up teaching – but *no*.) I'm tempted to do a GPS trawl to see how near I am to any of my followers, but I smother it back and try to ignore the itching in my brain. I gulped in some pool the other day that it's not actually the implant itself that itches. The Feed doesn't create any physical sensation at all. It's just an *urge* that, to make sense of it, we attribute to something physical, and so our brain tells us that it's itching. I re-sprayed that fact. One hundred and thirty-seven million





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people 'liked' it, though I doubt they actually did.

I close my eyes and my memories of the Feed's phantom images score the darkness like neon and starlight, an internal global cityscape where everyone lives close by. So beautiful. So inevitable. So comfortable.

I can't believe I've become hooked.

Tom's right about that, too, damn it and love him at once. Eyes back open and, off as I am, the billboards across the street display nothing but giant square quickcodes on their pristine expanses. The world is quiet. The social hubbub of the restaurant's PublicStream is silenced. I have no idea what the menu is and we can't get the waiter's attention. It's like we don't exist. We're here, cocooned in slow-moving silence as everyone around us communicates, eats and laughs, and it's like—

The waiter's boots echo off the wooden floor as he leaves the kitchen, tattoos strangling his arms. He dumps plates before two young women whose lips twitch, swollen into semi-smiles, while their eyes roll and judder. He grinds pepper on the blonde girl's food but not on her friend's; the communication was silent but clear. Though the waiter stares up into a cobwebbed corner, I know that's not what he's seeing. *This is a strange repose, to be asleep with eyes wide open!* as Class 9K would effortlessly reference, fresh from their filtered-thinking test (they wouldn't). Rather, he's accessing an infinite multitude, streaming with his friends, internalising a soundtrack, messaging his girlfriend . . . or not, I guess, as the trio's mouths twitch into synchronised smiles, because it looks like he's flirting with them, and I'm left itching to go on even more than I had been before, a dry urge, the interface of the Feed teasing my brain like a catch in the back of my throat.

Tom strides over and grabs the waiter, who jerks at the





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contact and gapes when he realises Tom is talking to him – actually speaking words. He disengages his eyes as Tom forces him to really *look* at the world and see the real. Tom drags him back to our table and the young waiter rocks nervously. He has a tiny quickcode tattooed above his eyebrow, shaped like an eagle, instantly scannable and ready to enhance my world, and I wonder: what would I see if I turned on my Feed? What skin does he have set? He's pale, so maybe those girls just saw him with a tan. His teeth aren't even, but maybe to them he has a perfect smile. Or maybe he's set himself to look like someone famous. Turning off the Feed is like drawing back a veil. It might not be as pretty, but it's real, and Tom is right, I know he is, of course I do, it's not just because he hates his father: it is a healthy thing to do.

'No, no, *no*.' Tom clicks his fingers and the startled waiter's gaze jerks back to him. 'We aren't on,' he articulates exaggeratedly, and mimes a mouth with his hands. 'It's just *talk-ing*.'

'You're . . . *off*?' the waiter asks, his voice croaky through disuse. His eyes glaze for a moment. Who did he just message? His manager, for help? Those girls? Probably not; they don't turn to look. Has he sprayed a grab of us? Doubtful – Tom's security settings are so high he's virtually impossible to grab; his father has seen to that.

'Do – you – have – a – menu?' Tom asks, glancing at me. He's having fun with this.

'Not real.' The waiter points at his temple like we're the idiots. 'Just Feed.'

Tom smiles up at him in a way I know means trouble, and it's been a long day, so . . . 'Pasta?' I interrupt, and the waiter nods. Real words feel strange in my mouth, but I speak quickly. 'Bolognese for me, then, and carbonara





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for him. And a side salad, please. Just green.'

Once the waiter flees, Tom's expression makes me laugh despite my mood. This in turn makes him smile, which is nice, his grin still soft, still young around his cheeks, beneath his drooping hair. It's a touch longer than it was when we got married. I lean back and clasp my hands over my baby-filling tummy. Mummy and Daddy happy again, little girl, just like we used to be. Enjoying being off together. We can still do it, you know. We're good together, it's just the other things that get in the way. The distractions. This life.

Tom leans towards me and marks each word on the tabletop: 'Kate, it's so fucked up!'

He means it, very genuinely, but as it's our routine to come to public places and bemoan the state of the world, his angst is rounded and warm. I take his finger before he breaks it, though.

'It is. We're the only ones who're sane.'

'Seriously, *look* at these people. No one's living in the real world any more!'

Something turns fierce despite his speaking in a whisper. And of course, as we're off, I have no idea what he's thinking as his face folds into a scowl and something dies in his eyes. He pulls his hand away and there he goes, his thoughts most likely rolling down that rut to do with his father, his family, the Feed, but I have no way of knowing for sure. Him isolating his thoughts like this is almost rude. What is he thinking about? His alternative life, maybe, the one he chose never to live, where he stayed involved with the Feed rather than running away. We discussed that one loads while he was training to be a psychotherapist. Chasing *that* career – the talking cure – when his father had set up the Feed. Well, you don't have





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to be Freud, do you? I remember Tom's glee before he told him, and I remember his father's reported silent rage. We talk, Tom and I. We talk a lot. It's one of our strengths. When we find the time. Like tonight, when we're going slow. But I wish he'd give himself some peace. He chews his lower lip and stares out of the window, his eyes darting around for all the world as if he was on and spraying away, but I check and he isn't; his Feed is still off.

As is mine.

The blonde and the brunette work through their food silently, mechanically, lost in conversation with each other, or others, or many people at once. From the outside, who knows? Their eyes are moving even quicker than Tom's but what they're seeing is not the tables and old prints on the walls but the pulsing, strobing colours of their Feeds. My brain-itch, I'm suddenly aware, is now unbearable. It's making my fingers flex and clench. My mouth is super-dry. I could be checking my poll. I could be surfing newspools for developments about Energen. Everyone was surprised by the company's announcement, but no one seems to be asking *why* it's made the Arctic drilling stop, *why* it's made this decision *now*, Anthony Levin, its CEO, smiling sincerely at the world. I don't trust him. Something is building. The world is disturbed and people are doing strange things: businesses are unpredictable, politicians perverse.

It's all very odd, and my brain (my actual brain, working really hard here without my Feed) is starting to hurt now. I could, if I was on, be relaxing it, catching up on some ents. Mum and Martha wanted to message tonight because Martha has mundles of her new house to share; I could leave my own world and experience her memory bundles of a place so many miles away in a time now past as if I





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was actually *there*. I could be checking my pool: ‘What Would You Sacrifice?’ has been getting tens of millions of resprays a day. Everyone loves a poll. But I need to keep it fresh. People’s attention needs constant feeding, and if I want to influence them to *think* about the world, I need to be smart. I need to be heard above the chatter. That’s what Tom doesn’t get: I’m using the Feed as a tool for good. I’m not *addicted!*

One of the first polls on ‘What Would You Sacrifice?’ had been ‘. . . for the Arctic?’. Fitting, given Energen’s news today, but barely anyone had taken part back then and I learned from that that it’s not stupidity or carelessness, it’s just distraction. It’s the enticing noise that surrounds us. So now I slip the political ones between things like ‘. . . to look good?’ and ‘. . . to get the man of your dreams?’. I got over sixty million sprays with that particular poll and then hit them with ‘. . . to be kinder to the planet?’. Eighty million sprays for that one. Smashed it. Newspools scraped my stats. (Politicians ‘won’, naturally – who wouldn’t sacrifice them?) What matters is making people focus for a moment on what we’re doing to our world. If we can get a toehold, just crack open people’s brains a bit, then greater changes might follow. I don’t know yet what the next poll will be, but from where I’m sitting I’m thinking something like ‘What Would You Sacrifice . . . for the good of your brain?’ because – and there is no way I could tell Tom this, though I’d like to scream it in his face – I don’t think I’d sacrifice the Feed! I don’t think I could! I can’t! I want to go on, right now, I’m screaming for it inside! But . . . I breathe . . . *come on now, Kate, come on* . . . I breathe and soften my voice, because this was supposed to be a nice evening and I’m just being distracted. Like everyone else. I need to focus here.





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‘Why don’t we do some anagrams, hey, Tom? Get the old brains working . . .’

He grimaces and shifts in his chair. ‘So what have you done today, Kate?’

And then – I can’t help it; it’s because I was thinking about it and I’ve been spraying about it all day, so all those links are fresh, and I’m so desperate to check my pool, it’s like a slip of the tongue, a habit that lives by itself – I go on, and—

—where the hell have you been? Martha messages, & Mum’s rightbehind her, her emotis making it veryclear that she’s about to unleash at me, but I blockher & interrupt. We’re being off tonight, I chat, Tom reckons it’s good for the brain to be slow, to keep it workingproperly. Don’t be ridiculous, Mum chat-snaps, have a look at yoursister’s mundle, & before I can blockher again she sends me one that bursts like a newlyformedbraincell in mymind, the senses & emotis of Martha’s bundledmemory expanding into existence like a polyp in mybrain, so I’m her not me for a while:

—I’m on the lawn looking up at the new house, white frontage (the new [*cloudbreath*] shade from [*PerfectPaint*], an ident links me), peakedwindows, cloudysky above. I step onto the path (that lawn looks weedy, use new [*Weedaway*], an ident links me) & myheartrate increases as I reach out towards the door; myheart is thumping 42% faster & a 2.3% endorphin rush flows in. It’s soexciting! The BioLock – *mine* – recognises me, because it’s mylock in *myhouse!* & the door opens automatically & I hear the kids 6.72m behind me running up the path, but I’m in the hallway now, the coolshadows & the freshsmell of polish & it’s—





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—I freeze the mundle & explain I'll message them later because I've been on for 4millisecs already & Tom'll notice if I'm on much longer & I still haven't surfed any pools for Energen news or looked at the [*WhatWouldYouSacrifice?*] pool & I can see my boards are flashing with 57,603 messages, so the poll must be doing well. A message from someone called ChloeKarlson437 comes in as I watch — *Keep up the good work, Kate!* — but there's no time to reply because— Oh come on, Kate, Martha messages me & I flash her an adrenalspike & at the same time quickly search for [*Energen*] & news streams out of all the pools, but there's nothing new so I spray at my friendgroup to see if they know anything new & send a quickapology to Martha & a wobblyface to Mum & tell them I'll message later & I go off & it's only been 11millisecs—

—but Tom noticed.

'You're *addicted*, Kate,' he hisses.

'Come on,' I scoff, and gesture at everyone around us, though I know he's right.

'You're just like the rest of them!'

'You're such a snob! No, I know,' I say, clicking my fingers, thinking as fast as I can without the Feed. 'You have a transgendered intrasexual abandonment-induced Oedipus complex.' We played this game just before he completed his psychotherapy training: how overly complicated can you make simple psychological syndromes sound? This one actually makes him laugh. 'It's a daddy complex,' I explain, pleased with myself, proud of my brain, riding his good humour, 'but more deeply complex.'

But his laughter stops. He glances at me. Shakes his head. No emotis needed.

'You Feed too much, Kate. Come on. You're . . . you





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didn't do this before. I'm sorry I annoy you, but it's because I care. You'll be freaking out the baby . . .'

We fall into silence again, but the silence isn't like it was. There's more to it now. We both agree the Feed is out of control. It's what we bonded over when we first met at his brother's wedding. We're both worried about the state of the world, too, and Tom agrees it's got so much worse in the five years since then. My parents don't believe that Tom is a good person, because of his family – he's a Hatfield – but he is; I know he is with all my heart. He's not like his brother or his father. But it feels like he has their absolutist streak, like he's making me choose here. Between him and the Feed. Like I can't have both. I turn away from him and pat my bump again, one of the many kids that I regularly tell my two hundred million followers we're consigning to death because of the way we live. She's a Hatfield, too.

'Do you want to go on again then, Kate? We can be slow tomorrow night instead.'

But before I can reply, it happens like a wave. Clatters of cutlery and chairs thrown back. Gasps and a gabble of confused words actually vocalised out in the real, and then silence again, like everyone has taken a breath, but what has happened is everyone's eyes have started to flicker even more rapidly. Someone sobs; the blonde girl's hands are clasped over her mouth. The waiter runs for the door.

'Tom?'

'Get back on!' he says, and he's on a snap second before I am and—

—I'm deluged with mysister. Martha is hystericallyshouting so I blockher & gland testosterone to counter the adrenalspike I feel, her panic contagious, & Mum is





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desperately messaging, Where are you, where are you? I've been messaging you for *seconds*, Kate, what's the *matter* with you? I block her too & notice my boards have thousands of new messages & I've never felt anything like it: the Feed warps with a coalescing weight that nearly makes me fall off my chair in the real. I try to slow my endocrine system down because Mum's now chat-screaming at me that Martha's shouting at *her* & *why did I block my sister?* Then a silence falls on the Feed as billions of FeedIDs pause, like a wave drawing out, before breaking news gushes like a tsunami. Memes flood & rumours ripple like a swelling contagion. News pools burst into form in a swollen tide. Clusters grow around them as people swarm to look, & Mum's panic-bursting me, *What's happening?* My adrenal medulla pumps my system with epinephrine as I rush to look at one of the pools, but something slams down in front of it. *But nothing's dammed*: the Feed is free & people swarm flow to other pools, which are dammed & dammed again, blocked by . . . the company? The government? Within 3 nanosecs 127734 pools are created & dammed & I tell Mum I don't know what's happening & I panic-nudge Tom but he flash-messages me he's trying to message his brother Ben & then something filters out from the seething Feed chatter & there is a vid, a vid is going viral, it's spreading faster than anything before & they're trying to stop it & [*darian charles*] the news is that President Taylor1 has been killed. Everything goes quiet. All FeedIDs are stilled. *President Taylor1 has been killed*. It fractals across the Feed, then mutates to say *assassinated*. Already there's chaos in the US, contagious panic, the economy has flatlined & weapons have been mobilised towards the east. My cortisol levels are up 18.2%, my heartrate beating 2.93 times too fast, & there are now 100000s of this vid & as fast as 1 pool is





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dammed, 2000others appear, & I'm looking up what's the difference between *murder* & *assassination* & Mum is still shouting but she's drowned out by the roar & it's something to do with the word *hash* which is an archaic term for $C_{21}H_{30}O_2$ & I access one of the newspools & what's there, the thing that everyone's absorbing, that's at the centre of all of these newspools coming repeatedly & unstopably into existence is a vid tagged [*RichardDrake62SeniorSecurityAnalystWH.USA.StaffFID#22886284912*] & time-stamped 7.23secs ago. I go into his memory bundle. I have no idea where this room is because the GPS-loc is blocked, but it looks like every special-ops room from any ent I've ever gulped. A lacquered table reflects cold-buzzing neons. Thinscreens & decks adorn the soundproofed walls. Then PresidentTaylor1 walks in with a creamjumper (the new range from [*Muitton*], an ident links me) slung across his shoulders, a big mug of dark & fragrant coffee (the [*arabeanica*] blend from [*Nesspro*], an ident links me) in one hand, & this is the WhiteHouseUSA, this was the WhiteHouseUSA 7.34secs ago, & this mundle getting out is an insane security breach, no wonder pools are being dammed &—

—Good morning all, PresidentTaylor1 says in thereal with that warm-gruff tone, & sits. I understand, he says, given Energen's surprising news, that the race is now on for the ArcticSouth. We will not let it fall into the wrong hands. Folks, we have war in a cold climate. But before the President's smile can fully form, RichardDrake62's view is obscured as a silhouetted figure — PatrickVaughn59, it's tagged — stands & raises a gun. The President's head becomes a cloud of red. The room upturns as Richard Drake62 dives for cover & RichardDrake62's mundle crashes to black & there're the sounds of upheaval &





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someone screams something that sounds like 'DarlanCharles!' & right away [*dariancharles*] is spurting off into thousands of pools saying [*whoisdariancharles?*] & then the vid repeats – repeats – repeats. Whoever's sprayed it zooms in each time on the President's face as his head bursts apart & the mundle slows to split-frame grabs – the President's head splits open in slow-mo & this vid is streaming into 47196255FeedIDs *from this pool alone* & in a stomachdropping cascade all pools are suddenly dammed. Everything stops—

It's like going over the edge of the world. There is nothing; just the samemessage appearing everywhere on theFeed, wherever I look. It's from the government, telling me to *go home quietly*, to *go home now*. All other content is dammed, & in thereal, in the restaurant, we all stand like a herd & flood into the street. Everywhere people stumble, stunned in the hilltop dusk by the absence of anything on theFeed. All communications are culled. The tower, the Hub of theFeed, is still lit in the distance, but it's broadcasting nothing now but the government. On as I am, the quickcodes now make the billboards alive with the samemessage endlessly reproducing itself in spooling neonbrights, expanding off the boards, filling the air, choking the eveningsky with gaudycolours telling us to gohome, there is a curfew, gohome, there is a curfew, gohome, there is a curfew, gohome.

