



Vintage Emulator

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The sprawling dock's wind turbines project fanning shadows over neighbouring terrace roofs. In their height they would dominate the landscape if it wasn't for the cranes towering over them and the endless streets at their feet. They lift containers from the 380-metre long ships arriving into the docks on a perpetual rota. Once in a while a crane operator misjudges the release timings and a dropped steel box breaks the night with the blast of a wave dumping a ship in a slate sea. These containers move the contents of the world; Japanese superbikes, polyurethane sextoys, dismembered 18th-century farm buildings and devices that wirelessly sync with their manufacturer's servers for no apparent reason.

It was such objects and their passage through time that interested Julie more than anything, antiques and collectables specifically. Anything over 100 years is classed as antique but as history moves and the pile increases this definition may eventually need to be changed. The umbrella term 'collectables' bridged the gap for objects after this date up until almost the present day, provided there was a sufficient fanbase. It felt odd for her to contemplate some of the objects in her own life would one day be regarded with the same wonder as a tudor flask or Edison wax cylinder.

The docks had not only given rise to hundreds of terrace streets built to house its workforce but also an isolated community of shipping magnates and warehouse owners. A small town in its own right, it had ascended in line with the ill gotten gains of empire and industrial revolution, the splendour of its houses and civic buildings equivalent to the human suffering required to bring them into existence. Despite the town's grandeur it had enjoyed a relatively short heyday, disfigured by the 20th century's misfortunes and general path of decline. The interwar period was characterised by domestic collapse in bereaved households, merchant dynasties folded through mismanagement and family names died out as successors turned away from their futures to look after ailing relatives. The town now mostly consisted of 2-3 member households living in inherited properties built over 4 floors with 6-10 bedrooms plus servants' quarters.

Due to family money being long exhausted from repair costs and care bills, these households were often forced to sell their contents. Many residents inherited great creaking piles but little in the way of liquid assets. They were

the times Julie lived for, providing both business and pleasure. Following up on a telephone enquiry from a once affluent address and rapping at the front door to have it answered by geriatric siblings in obvious need of a new central heating system. Basically old people who lived with old things. Things that in their combinations told an account of world history with as much pathos as the town's domestic tragedies. Hallways stuffed with safari taxidermy, an attic filled with hardwood artificial limbs, labyrinth basements of nautical memorabilia. She once found a lifesize statue of the virgin Mary cut into parts, rolled up in carpets and crammed up the height of a dumb waiter. People were often left with no choice but to sell family heirlooms and seldom had access to the information that would tell them how much these things were really worth. When this business model played on her conscience Julie reminded herself that these people needed to free up dormant capital in order to spend the money on things they really needed, she was merely a facilitator. If it wasn't for her, half the town's population wouldn't have a full set of windows or a dry roof over their heads. It was true, the whole place was falling apart.

Houses so massive they must have felt redundant on the first day they were occupied. Engineering brick mausoleums between oak and horse chestnut trees, all sharing a common age and stature. Sandstone gate posts with hewn gothic scrollwork, standing as obelisks in ancient woodland. Floral ironwork, eroded into layers of burnt paper by the salt air, falling to cinders if touched. Piles of roof slate the size of cars stacked against lopsided garages, silver wet blocks like family vaults. Back gardens with no discernable end, nature long since overpowering its owners and made walled plots of forest. Each one with its own localised flora, descendants of the original 19th century planting. Back walls engulfed in ivy tapestry or fallen altogether, the only evidence of the manmade being the occasional 1960s concrete folly.

For Julie this crumbling district had borne commercially lucrative fruit for some time. She was able to rent a neat little terrace in a neighbouring suburb and furnish it with some of her favourite pieces unearthed at work. Between house clearances and the odd police auction she managed to keep her industrial unit well stocked and make some notable sales, a few attracting the attention of antiques trade newsletters and local press. This of course meant others were catching wind of the potential to make money, not by the

intermittent trickle of a small antiques dealership but through residential property - the asset that trumped all. Due to remaining inhabitants steadily dying out and the grand scale of their houses, a wave of conversions was sweeping the town. Developers would tempt recent will beneficiaries with a lump sum and hastily convert buildings into flats for young professionals complete with off-street parking. The town was still one of the few places in the region that actually had a housing surplus and the local planning office was eager to be seen facilitating regeneration. Julie soon found herself in a race against the tide of modernization, sometimes resorting to cold calling in an effort to keep ahead of development.

As the once seemingly endless overgrown avenues of forgotten treasure troves began to dry up she was forced to scavenge in less obvious places. The town's highstreet had died a death long ago while the locals still clinged on. It had been classed as a wasteland in Julie's mental map of the town, it had little to offer in comparison to the surrounding residential opulence. She did manage to get a mahogany staircase from the last pub after it closed but that was more in the realm of architectural salvage and not really her gig. This was one resource the old shops held in abundance, the original architects must have had a blank cheque to build a highstreet befitting the area's wealth. Every doorway, lintel and chimney stack was adorned with ornate brickwork, cut flowers and bas reliefs. In an effort to spend their limitless budgets they had added surreptitious details that ranged from humorous to the obscene. The columns of the street's arcade were terracotta caryatids with engorged nipples, protruding at eye level of passers by. A satyr's carved head leched over the tobacconist's doorway with rolled back absinthe eyes, grinning down at a phallic cast iron bollard. A previous shopkeeper in an act of puritanical censorship or mere unawareness had attempted to make the bollard look like a rose, by painting the head white and its veins a gloss green.

There was an architectural detail on the highstreet most people overlooked but was now seared into her mind as if staring directly into the sun. Over the entrance to what had been the town's butcher was a red brick keystone. It had been designed to superficially look like a classical festoon or garland and people had walked past it their whole lives assuming so. It was in fact a highly detailed bunch of entrails clenched by a chainmail fist. The shop's threshold directly below was composed of white mosaic with reflective crimson shards

making out the initials 'J.S' in writhing swirls. When Julie first went under this doorway and crossed the step she had been oblivious to the shop's ornament referring to its contents. She had been given the keys by the nephew of the last butcher. He thought there might be some old chopping blocks in storage upstairs and if they were any good she could buy them as a job lot, they had become sought after recently for the new flats as they were thought to lend kitchens a certain rustic patina. Having a cursory rummage in the old shop she found nothing of value and moved back towards the staircase that met her on the way in. 30 seconds later Julie was running back down sobbing out into the street. Not long after the police arrived they came down to her on the kerb and offered some statutory words of consolation, whilst barely hiding they'd just been upstairs taking the piss out of her. On paper it did sound ridiculous to call the police because you'd found bones above a butchers, but it hadn't really been what they were, more how they were encountered. Somebody must have spent hours, days, arranging them into those intricate configurations. A structure redolent of fan vaulting, an architecture of cartilage. A table had been laid with viscera in symmetrical patterns that gave the effect of lace draped over an altar. The police offered the reassurance that it was probably just someone messing about and gave her a leaflet with a number to call if she felt like she needed to.

It may have just compounded with the increasingly present fear her business was going down the pan but Julie did not deal with the incident well. She was now intermittently terrified of unfamiliar rooms to the extent it became necessary to employ an assistant to help her do house clearances. Julie also became obsessed with researching symbolism within local architecture and started seeing things she'd been looking straight through her whole life. Although this preoccupation tended to affirm her recent psychotic world view, it did provide a sense of security through preparation - there would now be no surprises. Due to a prolonged deterioration and the general state of her industry, Julie's life went into a marked period of regression. In little over 4 months she was forced to sell her remaining stock at auction, give notice on the house and move back in with her dad.

Their relationship had always been a fairly amicable one, not marred by feuds or trauma. Since his wife had died she'd felt a sudden gear shift of responsibility, making an effort to increase the frequency of visits and phone

calls. Dad was the one who'd originally got her into antiques and they always had this common interest to fall back on when the small talk inevitably ran dry, she wondered why they wasted time talking about anything else. He looked his most engaged whenever she described a recent find, always determined to fish out an old trade magazine to show her a relevant article. She wasn't especially worried about them falling out when she moved home, more concerning was the spectre of an infantilising stagnation. Several friends had moved back there just as a stop gap, then fell into predictable cycles of ennui. It wasn't as though there was anything wrong with the place in theory, it just tended to suck the life out of people. Watching others decline had taught her you couldn't let this happen to yourself, if you were going to do solitary then you must do press ups. Julie made a pledge, she was going to get a job. A 'proper' job in the eyes of others, one with enough status to deflect the malicious sympathy of the people she couldn't avoid bumping into. A proper job would have the added advantages of being unenjoyable to an extent that would force her to devise an escape plan and also prevent her body clock and grasp on reality from straying further from that of the general population.

Julie handed her CV in at the estate agent whose signs seemed to be most prevalent in the local area. She undertook a formal yet rushed phone interview the following Monday and was offered a job half an hour later. This success did something to repair her frail ego until the group induction on her first day when it turned out 2 of her new colleagues had been employed that morning via a temping agency. Upon starting the job her dad who was by no means a coarse man, had told her the one thing to remember was that all estate agents were cunts. Julie assumed it was implied he still considered her outside of this category but wondered for how long. This new career seemed jarringly simple, it basically entailed selling people something they already knew they needed whether they liked it or not. To begin with she took issue with the intentionally misleading language they were encouraged to use with clients, although soon realised it didn't make any difference. Former box rooms and storage spaces were described as 'flexi receptions' or 'intimate multi-purpose'. Despite the exaggerated descriptions online and her own incredulous attempts at maintaining the charade during viewings, no one really seemed to mind or notice. The situation was that people were pitted against each other in a race for somewhere to live and they seldom had the

luxury to take exception with reality or lies.

The aspect of her role she found least objectionable was going round taking photos for the agent's website. It was a solitary task and didn't involve crushing people's hopes of reasonable living conditions. The standard approach was to use the office camera with an extremely wide-angle lens. This lens produced photos with a fisheye effect that practically captured every inch of a room apart from the wall directly behind the camera. The photos were then uploaded into editing software which straightened out all the bent lines and angles distorted by the lens. The resulting images posted online presented cavernous living rooms dominated by 2 seater sofas, bathrooms with Holbein-skull toilets smeared across the foreground vanishing off somewhere into the horizon. Despite her aversion to unknown spaces since the event at the butchers Julie felt relatively relaxed while doing this part of the job. It was never undertaken in the dark due to the necessary light conditions and every laminate surface smelt so new that the properties she documented felt reassuringly devoid of history. Each time felt like walking through those little sets they have in B&Q or MFI, intended to make you think how you would feel if the place where you live was furnished with the particular range on display.

Julie ratcheted a handbrake above new smelling tarmac over the former front garden of some late Victorian behemoth. The office's company car was as predictably shit as the frumpy skirt suits she had to wear, both had the tragicomic look of the aspiring entrepreneur on a polyester shoestring. She didn't care, it didn't define who she was at the end of the day. Padding up 4 flights of lilac grey noise reducing carpet Julie was thinking how she could get in and out of there as quickly as possible. It was an attic flat built into the original sloping rafters so she would need to be creative with camera angles - a few weeks ago she'd managed to make a similar property look roughly the size of the Sydney Opera House. It took her about ten minutes in total to photograph every room in the flat. The ceiling angles weren't too awkward and she could manipulate them back at the office either way.

As she went to pick up the camera bag, there was a 5-foot cream door behind a tan vinyl sofa. The door was almost definitely access for utilities in the roof space but it was best to be sure, in her first week she had failed to locate a

guest bedroom mistaking it for an airing cupboard. She skidded the sofa across beech coloured flooring and pulled a small handle hard enough to release the door from the field of a poorly aligned magnetic latch. Relievingly it was pretty much what she had expected - the minute breeze and change in temperature that you find in a roof space. Then something that initially startled her, drew her in. To the left of the hatch was a cluster of medium size objects. She immediately made out two vases, one of those stained-glass table lamps held up by a metal female figure and what looked like a decent copy of The Green Lady leant against an exposed chimney breast. The flat was newly converted and had no previous tenants, the builders must have found the stuff while they were insulating the roof. One of the vases stood on a medium sized cardboard box, Julie leaned in and lifted it towards the door. Its solid centre of gravity suggested it wasn't packed with smaller pieces as she'd assumed. Slitting the crumbling brown tape with the front door key, she pulled the box onto its side by the top flap. A small clump of hair tumbled out, it was matted with light flecks which turned out to be nails. The object filling the box fitted exactly, she shook it upside down to release the vacuum holding it, eventually it gave way with a smooth hiss.

Whatever it was she hadn't seen one before, but it evoked memories of at least a dozen other things. At first glance it kind of looked Art Nouveau but some of its contours would place it within a space age aesthetic from the late 20s to early 60s. It had a small, off-centre dome of glass or perspex, filled with what could have been iridescent dyes suspended in oil. These were gradually settling and particles occasionally refracted light as they cascaded. The surrounding casing had the purple-black lustre of biro ink, with hints of Mallard green or Peacock feather. Even by stroking the temperature of its surface and tapping it with her nail, she couldn't make up her mind whether it was plastic, porcelain, bakelite or some form of lacquer. From its side sprouted a mothy brown woven flex, twisting around on itself like some gristly umbilical cord. At the end of this a more recent 3-pin plug had been fitted, probably within the last 40 years. The wiring looked dubious but Julie was curious to see what happened if it had power. She plugged it into a socket just above the skirting and warily, at arm's length, flicked the switch.

Its dome became illuminated from inside with gradual intensity, molecules of pigment swooped around in it softly, like a gentle movement of iron filings

or an aquatic terrarium. The swelling light was accompanied by a loudening hum of electrical feedback from within the casing, after what felt like a minute it levelled off to about the volume of a broken intercom system. Julie waited a bit longer to see if the object would further increase in volume or intensity, it didn't. In disbelief that its sole purpose was to light up and buzz, she picked it up to inspect it for buttons or other signs of function. On what was assumedly the back based on its flatness and relative lack of ornament, was a small hatch, somewhere you might insert batteries. She unclipped this to find a switch. Alongside the switch's travel was a tiny list, inlaid in plastic or ivory. From top to bottom it read; 'Bathroom, Kitchen, Living room, Hall, Bedroom 1, Bedroom 2'. Julie tried the switch but it was initially stiff, increased force brought it down with momentum to 'Bedroom 1'. A small wire spring smoothly unfurled from the object like a pig's tail just in front of the lit dome which was transitioning its hues in sync with the movement. The generated hum also lowered in pitch, then rose a step when she turned the thing back over and carefully moved the switch to 'Hall', the spring also retracted slightly. The switch seemed to vary these two elements a little but nothing else happened, Julie toggled it for a minute before she got bored and repackaged the thing.

While driving, Julie was preoccupied by a sensation akin to a dream's logic, a familiarity with the unencountered. It was a feeling of having seen similar objects at markets and auctions but without being able to settle on a single example. The more she tried to fix one thing in her mind, the more associations bombarded her. She half-heartedly slapped the steering wheel in the realisation she had forgotten to take a photo of the thing to help with identifying it. Back at the office she tried various search terms to no avail;

"Lacquered Bakelite sound module"

"Crystal display Art Nouveau CB radio"

"Early electric magic lantern projector"

"Prototype games console"+"malleable lustreware casing"

Did you mean: *Prototype games console mailable casing*

At her dad's house over dinner she desperately tried to describe what she had seen. Her frustration with his inability to decipher what she described gave way and she stormed out of the kitchen and spent the rest of the night

trawling the internet in her room.

Julie's sleeping patterns had become increasingly erratic and she was ever more distracted at work, spending most of her time searching for a mention of the object. She had got nowhere. There was nothing that came close to the right combination of scale, form, materials or apparent function on anything beyond a superficial level. It was as if she had brushed against a cultural ghost, no longer even sure whether it had been old or new. A week passed and she could feel herself slipping into the same obsessive behaviours as after that thing at the butchers. In an attempt to exorcise its power she decided the only logical explanation was the object must be a homemade one-off with no recorded history, although she instinctively knew this not to be true.

The following day Julie was called into a meeting with her manager. She started asking questions about the property she had photographed the week before - had everything seemed above board? Julie concurred at appropriate prompts. The new tenants - a couple in their early 30s, had been making bizarre complaints and demanded to be moved to an equivalent property immediately. According to their phone calls and emails they were finding it impossible to live in the flat without suffering from a continuous nausea. Sick building syndrome was a possibility but unheard of in Victorian loft conversions, the flat was now being repeatedly checked for carbon monoxide leaks. Apparently the tenants had stumbled on a temporary fix. The morning after moving in they'd had breakfast in bed to celebrate. Tracing back their steps, it had been the only time they hadn't felt sick in the flat, so had proceeded to eat all meals from the small bedroom. Experimenting with this logic further they discovered sleeping on the kitchen floor and washing in an inflatable paddling pool in the living room was the only way of avoiding what they described as "like travel sickness, but standing still". The tenants said they were prepared to stay if the agents made changes to the flat's layout and plumbing, although this was obviously out of the question. It would have been easy to dismiss the couple as cranks but they came with impeccable references from a string of reputable landlords.

The couple moved out of the flat before they were found an alternative, willing to forego their deposit as per the terms of the break clause. Their move would have put the situation to bed if it wasn't for the next tenants' request

for the tiles to be removed from the bathroom because they could no longer put up with the acoustics. The senior agents at the firm were particularly surprised by this strange behaviour, they weren't used to lower middle-income tenants rocking the boat or making demands. Julie tried to join in with the subsequent office jokes but worried she came across stilted, she knew in her stomach that it all had something to do with that thing. Of course she couldn't know this because the proposition in itself was ridiculous, so to acknowledge it's gut sense of truth was to acknowledge she was once again becoming unhinged.

Julie couldn't go through all that again. The incident at the butcher's shop had made the high street a no go and she couldn't allow her manias to steadily make certain places off limits until she became reduced to a virtual shutaway. The only way to stop obsessing was to strictly adhere to the dogma of rational thought. After the second couple moved out she drove back to the flat under the pretence of taking new photos of the property, suggesting perhaps the old ones were showing it in a negative light. Pushing open the communal front door her mind suddenly made a connection to the last time she had been petrified of a staircase. Was it worse to craze with the sudden horror of a sickening entrance or to feel an accumulating panic of anticipation with each step? She mouthed reassurances in vain, incapable of negotiating herself from the atmosphere. Finally at the top of the soft carpet landing she fumbled at the bunch of keys and turned the lock.

She was greeted by a familiar smell of central heating and shampooed upholstery, everything was perfectly normal. Julie walked straight over to the small wooden door and slid the sofa out of the way, everything inside was just as she had left it. She coaxed the object from its box once again and plugged it in, the glow intensified from the central eye while a rasp gradually rose from its heart. It seemed louder this time, abrasive to a point of directed anger, a disturbed wasps nest. Julie felt panicked, her insomniac obsessing since she first encountered this thing had devised a logic wherein the object was responsible for the mess her life had become, she just wanted things to go back. She wiggled its switch back and forth in various sequences, desperately trying to find an order that would soothe the static cry. With a last ditch yank her finger slipped and slid across the nondescript back casing, over a slight ripple, a vibration like braille. Squinting down it was actually recessed

lettering that read 'Reset' next to a minute hole. Julie grabbed at one of her earrings, the pulling at her lobe opening the ear canal slightly wider, making the noise physically painful. She held the stud like a tiny sword and stabbed at the hole. Julie sat slouched on the floor, she was inside total silence. All seemed fine. She put everything back how it was, washed her face in the kitchen sink and pulled the flat door shut with a hollow click.

Talk in the office had gradually moved on, there hadn't been any strange reports or requests from tenants for a while. Julie's manager asked her to draw up extended contracts for the attic flat, the new tenants were keen to stay long term and wanted to minimise future rent increases and renewal fees. Julie drove home from work, it was a late Thursday afternoon towards the end of an Indian summer. The low lying sun turned her dashboard from grey to yolk gold while she arced over the speed bumps and the reverberations of kids' flat footed running bounced about the terrace walls. Walking into the hall she called to her dad from routine but could sense he wasn't in. Coming into the kitchen she walked over to the table, it was covered with reference books and old antiques catalogues. Directly in front of a pulled out chair was a hardback volume no thinner than a phone book. Julie recognised it as an Army & Navy Stores catalogue; they had once sold everything it was possible to buy, almost like a 19th century precursor to the internet. At the page where she'd found it left open was the heading; *Funeral Directors - bereavement supplies*. Halfway down the page were some wood engravings of decorated boxes with stylised rays encircling them. The description beside read;

Device through means of an electric current, generates a presence in a room so as to mitigate the sense of loss felt in mourners of the recently deceased.