**Is This a Life?**

I look across at the blackness of the wallscreen. It shimmers; it folds; it ripples. It has energy. A sweep of the hand opens it up. There are galaxies of pinpricks of light showing everyone currently online, anywhere in the world. I log on but there is no way of seeing my own miniscule dot appear in the myriad of others.

Another sweep of the hand and it zooms in to Metropolis: which is still a pattern of twinklings. I sweep again and again – and I am down to Block level. There are at least a hundred people up and about and checking what’s what. I go down to Floor level but there is only me on this floor. I see my own dot blinking away. At least I am alive. I go back up through Block to Sector level – our hermetically-sealed, twenty-Block unit connected by walkways; a honeycomb of opportunities.These people are the ones I can meet in reality. There are just four of us online. Lazy lot: It’s 9.00 and most are still in bed.

Dad has gone off to one of his Block Coordination meetings. It’s how he spends his time. It’s how he shapes his life. It keeps him out of my way. We get along alright but we live in different worlds. He prefers the face-to-face meetings that sort out the mechanisms of Block life. For me, life is out there, with cyberbuddies.

Tuesday again: It always seems to be Tuesday. Mind you, one day is very much like the next. It could all blur into one after a while but, for some reason, with me, Tuesdays seem to stand out somehow. I don’t know why that should be but, anyway, it is Tuesday again. The screen has the day and the date in the top left-hand corner: Tuesday, clear as anything. Mind you, if it told me it was Thursday I would have to believe it since there is no reliable other way of knowing. So Tuesday it has to be, and I settle to do my updates.

I don’t bother reading the details of what comes up on-screen. I can tell from the shape of the messages that it is the usual *Hi Any plans?* stuff. I don’t post a message yet. Instead I type *Dear Diary.* A new folder opens.

I don’t know why I do this. Each day I put some random thoughts up there – ideas and questions zooming off through the shimmering screen. I am not sure how many people read them. Occasionally there is a comment back but it feels more like a passing stranger, someone wanting to connect briefly and move on. I simply enjoy putting it out there. Not under my own name, obviously; no-one writes under her own name. There are about a hundred kids in our Block and I still can’t totally work out who is who. Some lie so much anyway. It’s hard to sort fact from fiction. And then again, why bother? The made-up fictions make as good a read as any facts would.

Mom told me that she used to do this diary-thing in a book, with a pen that used real ink – a book with a metal clasp to hold it sort of shut; a book that had to be hid under the bed so that no-one read it. Why write stuff that no-one is going to read? She wrote every day, she told me. She isn’t around to ask now that I am more interested. I ask Dad but he knows about as much as any dad when it comes to putting yourself out there. He says that it was all frowned upon when he was my age – all to do with internet sex or something.

I don’t have any problem updating my life, whether people read it or not – and sex definitely does not come into it!

Back to my Diary:

*I don’t know if today is going to be the day when I should try to go Outside. I am not sure if that is what I want, or even if it is possible. There are lots of things I am not sure of.*

*I had a really weird dream last night. I was sitting Outside, under a tree, watching the windows of our block shatter one by one. There seemed no pattern to it: One window, a pause, another window, another pause, another window. All around me RedSuits were radioing reports to BlackSuits inside the Block, directing them from floor to floor, stairway to stairway as each window broke. The really strange thing was that the windows were being shattered from inside. Someone, or something, was knocking at the door of a flat, killing whoever answered, and blasting away at the window once inside the flat. A hammer would have no effect; a bullet would ricochet off the toughened glass. It would take something like a rocket or mortar shell to get through the four layers. A RedSuit was running a programme on his handheld, using video of the shattering windows to predict where the next attack might cone, and sending BlackSuits to that set of coordinates to try to head the attacker off. I looked over at his screen: Our flat was next in line. That is when I woke up.*

*I have never been Outside. Not like Mom or Dad. They used to go wherever they wanted when they were young. They used to live in a house and wander around the city streets doing one thing or another. There was always something that needed doing. All of that stopped of course. Not suddenly stopped: Stopped slowly over a few years, I guess. I ask Dad about how and why but he gets a bit hazy about things now. He has told me bits. There was a time we would sit and talk. That was just after Mom died. We don’t talk so much now. There doesn’t seem much to say. If I talk to people it is ones online; people my own age. There is a worldful of them; there is just one Dad and he has his own things to do.*

*I was born in this Block but Dad remembers the shift from Outside to Safe Inside. At the beginning there was just a growing fear of being outdoors – and finally there was no secure outdoors for anyone to go to.*

*When he gets like that is when Dad starts to troop out his catch-phrases: ‘People had a life back then’; ‘Life has to be worth living’; ‘Get a life ….’. It was a big thing for him, I suppose. It was the end of life as they knew it. It happened in cycles of crop failures, and cold wet winters with hot baking summers. They might have found a way through except for the viruses: Wave after wave; each more virulent and more resistant than the last. People were forced indoors; buildings were sealed off. Everything became self-sufficient. No-one went out except for the maintenance Redsuits and the occasional order-enforcing police Blacksuits. They are the only things you will ever see outdoors, if you can be bothered to look. A year ago one of the maintenance women near here had a mask tear open a bit. She died immediately.*

*It is a forbidden wilderness out there, in more ways than one, but people still like to be surrounded by nature . I don’t know what it is like in other places but nearly all the Blocks here have indoor trees and gardens. One Block, a couple of walkways from here, has a small zoo with rabbits and squirrels. Our Block has a stream with fish.*

*The nearest I have got to Outside is the lower levels of our Block. We were allowed down to see them once. They were full of machines to do this, and that, and something else – I didn’t follow it all. I just picked up that the lowest floors of all Blocks had been given over to services. Heating systems; food production; air-flow systems; recycling systems; sanitisation systems; emergency backups: that sort of thing. It was hot and noisy. I was pleased to get back up to my Level. The only people that stayed close to Ground Level were the Watchers, the Vigilantes, the ones we all rely on. They are our line of defence against what lies in wait Outside.*

*It must have been frightening for Mom and Dad, being forced inside when it all started to get dangerous. If any people were left behind, Outside, they must surely have all died. No mention is ever made of there being people other than those in the Blocks. Surely no living person could have survived the viruses. There are rumours, though: hints of sightings, of shapes in the night. The only way they may just have survived is if they mutated in some way – and that is just stuff told to frighten young children.*

So, it is Tuesday once more, and I am doing what I do every day. I stare into the huge wallscreen. It is never off. It never sleeps. It shuts its surface down from time to time but it is always working away, processing stuff, gathering stuff, keeping me in touch: Giving me my life.

It’s not much of a life; but it is the only life I have. Dad, when he gets in one of his rambly moods, talks about having had two lives: The life he used to have; a real life in a real world (not reduced to this closed-in set of Blocks) and this Second Life, lived out in this shut-down mostly virtual world. For me, this is all I have known. This is my Virtual Comfort Zone. This is my one and only life. This is it: take it or leave it – unless I decide to take my chances outside.

This is my world and the screen is my portal into it. I can step out of this life and into others at the click of my fingers. I can call up that twinkling galaxy and enter into it as it floats all around me. If you stare at the clusters of pinpricks it all seems solid at first until you realise the fragility of it all, with it being nothing more than messages ebbing and flowing and shimmering and zigzagging along networks. It holds itself together; there is no real substance other than what people give to it. If we stop messaging, if we stop linking, then the whole thing would cease to exist. It is an illusion, a hologram, but it is real to us at the same time. All I know is that I must keep logging on; must keep the connections going; must keep stepping into its spaces. I must keep on remaking the map over and over, with all the others who go online, day after day. This is our task. This is our future.

I like the brighter yellow parts where there is more going on but these easily shade into the browns, blues and greys. There are dark patches but it is best not to stray too far into those. They are the zones of emptiness and oblivion; the realms of lone wanderers in a blackness of depression that can suck you up into their strange worlds. There should be signs: Do Not Go Here.

A pass of my hand and *Dear Diary* closes back into the tiny lost speck of light that is me.

I go over to the window. I check the seals between the four layers of reinforced glass. No signs of any wear. No stressmarks in the polarised layer. Everything looks fine. I will tell Dad and he will check that in later when he does our Block Monitoring update. The whole sector of Blocks is wired with sensors. Any slight movement, any sign of weakness, and the building will try to self-correct. The slightest hint of a crack around any window and the outer coating of the building will grow to fill it in again. I have only known one window actually break. That was down on level #3. There were lots of *OMGs* flying around our Block that day, I can tell you, even though it was an inner pane that gave way, simply through age, so there was no danger of outside air getting in. Redsuits had it dealt with in minutes.

I stare into the far distance. In the haze I think I can see shapes. On the horizon I can make out a tall tower, some clouds; but everything is whispy, indeterminate, uncertain. Nearer, between the Blocks is a cracked and scrubby wasteland. There are redundant poles and pylons here and there. There are signs of rubble heaps – the spoils of a past industrial age; discards from a previous era.

Between Blocks #4 and #5 there are tiny figures in red. They are checking outside valves on the hydrants that still bring water into the purification plants. Any heavy lifting is done by robot drones but there are some jobs that need people to risk their lives by being out there. There is strong sun today – they must be sweating in their heavy-duty suits. Rather them than me. I have already decided that I am not cut out to volunteer as Red or Black.

I’ll stick with a future safely tucked away inside unless I choose, for some totally personal reason, to simply wander Outside. Not that it will be a matter of ‘simply wandering’. There will be the Blacksuit guards to get past; the Vigilantes to outflank; the airlock doors to get through; the cameras and alarm systems to get round. Going Outside is not going to be easy – but one day I might just do it: Who knows, maybe even today.

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Is this a life? was written in relation to the following works in the Metropolis exhibition:

* Aleksandra Mir ‘World Map of Social Networks’ (2009)
* Naiza Khan ‘The City Soaks Up like a Sponge’ (2011)
* Naiza Khan ‘The Structures do not hold’ (2011)
* Cao Fei ‘Live in RMB City’ (2009)
* Jochem Hendricks ‘Front Windows’ (2009)