

WORKING FOR THE MACHINE

Fragments of life and death from a content moderator



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Illustrations and design



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WARNING TO READERS

Some readers may find the following text and images to be violent or disturbing. Discretion and common sense are advised before continuing.





'I have nothing to say.
Only to show.'
WALTER BENJAMIN



INTRODUCTION

The text you see here is, in many ways, like a shattered body. In one sense, it is a fanzine based on snippets from a larger, more structured project to come, hence its fragmentary, quasi-experimental nature. In another, it is put together from pieces of different bodies seen over the five years I worked as a content moderator.

The text is intentionally chopped up and displayed like meat in a butcher's cabinet, with bodies that are butchered, tortured, prostituted, exploited and derided in different ways and formats. Ultimately, content moderators for Meta and, probably, for any other Big Tech firm watch hundreds, if not thousands, of bodies posted on the internet in order to categorize them. Although corporate propaganda says our job is about 'protecting communities', in truth, what we do is label and categorize.

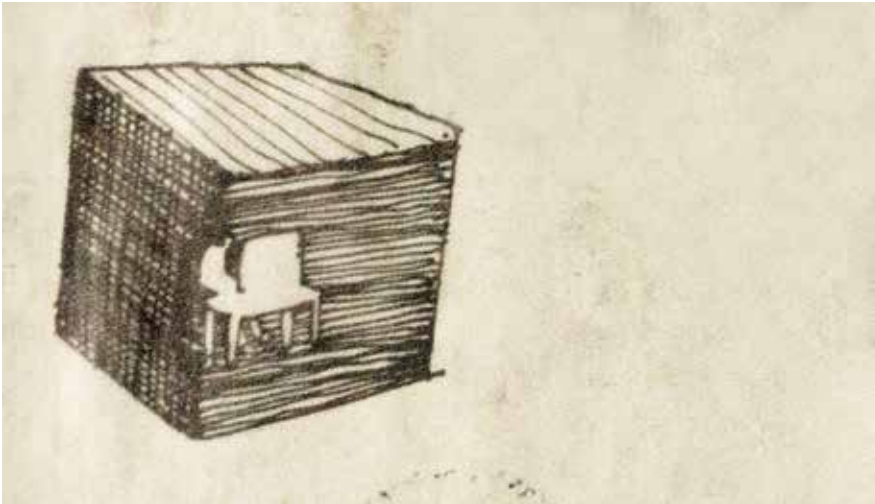
This fanzine does not aim to be an academic work, but neither is it a simple emotional outpouring. Its purpose is to uncover and bring to light what was never meant to be made public but which, for far too long, has remained locked away.

How is it possible that the working conditions of content moderators at Meta (Facebook and Instagram) continue to be invisible? The answer is simple yet painful: systematic and sustained corporate efforts were made to hide them through non-disclosure agreements (NDAs), co-opting of unions, threats, manipulation and, especially, making people afraid to speak out.

The entire burden and responsibility of what is written here falls on me. I worked for a Meta subcontractor for five years, although I am also an anthropologist by training. It is precisely through this dual role as worker and researcher that I claim my right to protect my sources. Nobody should speak for others. Everyone has their own voice. This principle is part of my ethical approach as a researcher. However, this time things are different: I am speaking on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves.

The atmosphere of forced silence has led to me using a mainly autoethnographic approach here. Although the main heft of the text is supported by my own lived experience, I have pulled from conversations, recollections, interviews done specifically for this research and other testimonials. This first-person narrative draws from experiences of former co-workers, who have been disguised to ensure anonymity, as a counterpoint. Neither the number nor identity of the interviewees will be revealed – I have a duty to protect them from any legal or employment risk. Wherever necessary, I have altered their words, but please trust me when I say that everything here is absolutely true. At times, the wounds left by this work are so commonplace that hearing one is akin to hearing them all.

This work would not have been possible without the assignment, guidance, management and invaluable support from Dr Milagros Miceli, Adio-Adet Dinika, Camilla Salim-Wagner, Krystal Kauffman and all the team at Data Worker's Inquiry. My sincerest thanks goes to each and every one of them. Nevertheless, it is undoubtedly my former co-workers at the Tower to whom I owe the most gratitude. The text is dedicated to the former inhabitants of Mordor, those workers in the shadows and modern-day Sisyphuses who clean up the digital dung heap.







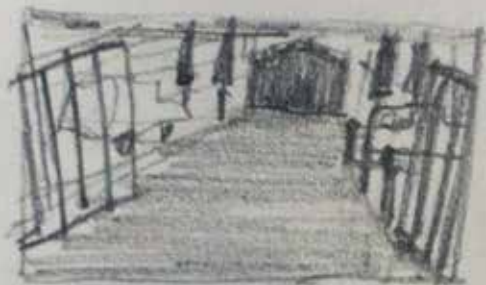
HORROR FILMS

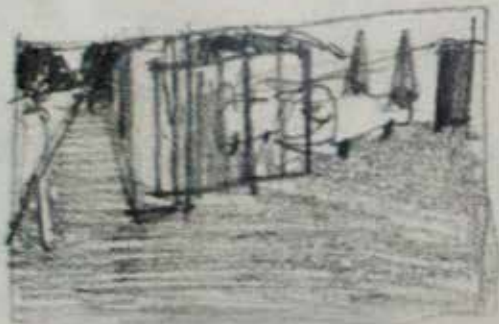
They called me a few days later to arrange the lengthy interviews, tests and even more interviews. When discussing the type of content I would have to review at one of my interviews with HR that I recall as having a more psychological focus, one of the psychologists asked me:

‘Do you like horror films?’

Now that I know what the work actually involved, I find this a curious way to ‘measure’ a person’s stamina to being overexposed to the most abominable situations ever orchestrated by human beings. The question was more articulate than any of the random responses us candidates could ever provide (of course, the answer is always ‘yes’ since everyone wants to get hired). The frivolous take on viewing social media content as merely ‘films’ said more about how they saw what our work entailed than anything we could come up with.

'Just imagine you're watching a film' was basically the advice given in a one-to-one session between the wellness department and a co-worker for the Greek market, who had asked for support in a state of shock after seeing a young girl being gang raped. Another co-worker for the Australian market recounted something similar: after receiving this 'advice', she forced herself to watch content and treat it like a fictional story. However, that was even worse since it led to a sense of alienation and had a near-schizophrenic effect.





A FRIDAY IN CHRISTCHURCH: 51 DEAD. 49 INJURED.

The attack was a talking point for weeks. Not only because of its brutal nature but because it had been streamed on Facebook Live. The video wasn't being shared across the platform. Instead, the platform itself had become a live TV broadcast.

The theory, which would later become the official account, was that the algorithm had failed to detect the massacre since the attacker filmed it 'like a video game', a 'first-person shooter' where players view the world over the barrel of a gun. The example given was the classic game Doom, with its speed, gunshots and violence. According to the theory, the algorithm got confused and thought it was just another video game.

I see this version as meant to be reassuring. The killer is given too much credit. People prefer to see it as a calculated and rational act, almost genius in its depravity. However, I fear a much more sinister truth.

The terrorist's attitude, camera work and framing all point to him truly believing he was in a video game. He wasn't copying a format – he was immersed in it. He was a white supremacist who had fully internalized screen life. Killing was a mission for him. A piece of choreography. A way to exist in the simulation.

Depersonalization is key to eroticized violence: bodies disappear and action becomes an aesthetic, a complete release. What's worrying is how close it echoes the advice we were given by the wellness department when we asked for support.

'Think about it like a film.'

Sure thing.

In the end, neither the attacker nor the algorithm nor we ourselves were able to separate fiction from reality.

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ALIENS

If Martians on their spaceship observed us quietly, using some kind of alien technology to listen in on our conversations, they'd think that we had been completely lobotomized:

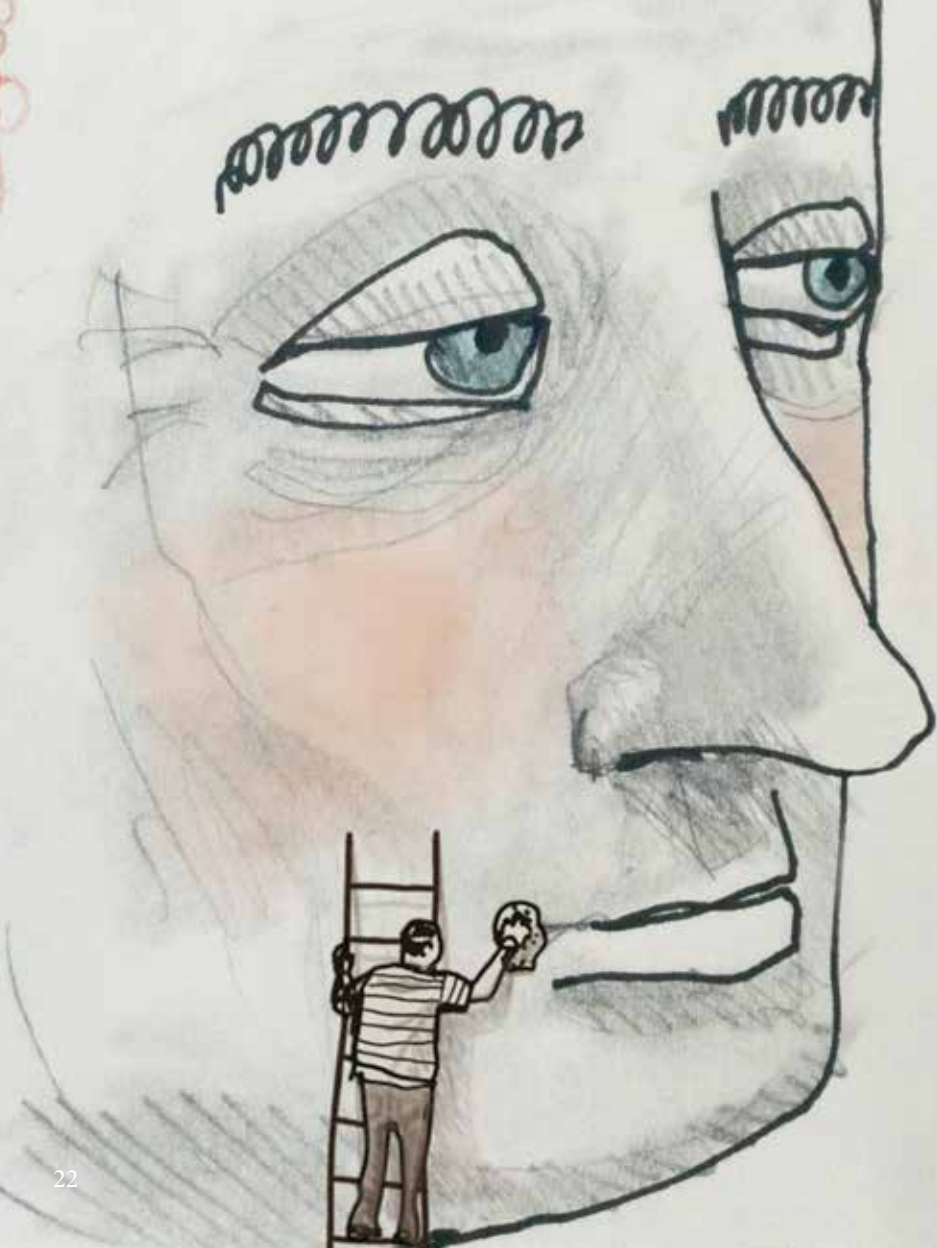
'So, is the areola now part of the nipple or not?'

'So, from now on, an erection is when trousers wrinkle around the groin when someone is standing, but not when they're sitting down, because blah, blah, blah?'

'So, the neckline on a blouse is considered sexually suggestive, but only if we can see cleavage?'

There were manuals to decide what was and was not 'a dead body'.

Pointless discussions about the gender of angels become logical and coherent academic debates in comparison to the endless drivel that we had to learn and unlearn, in a continuous to and fro of interpretations and counter-interpretations about nothing at all.



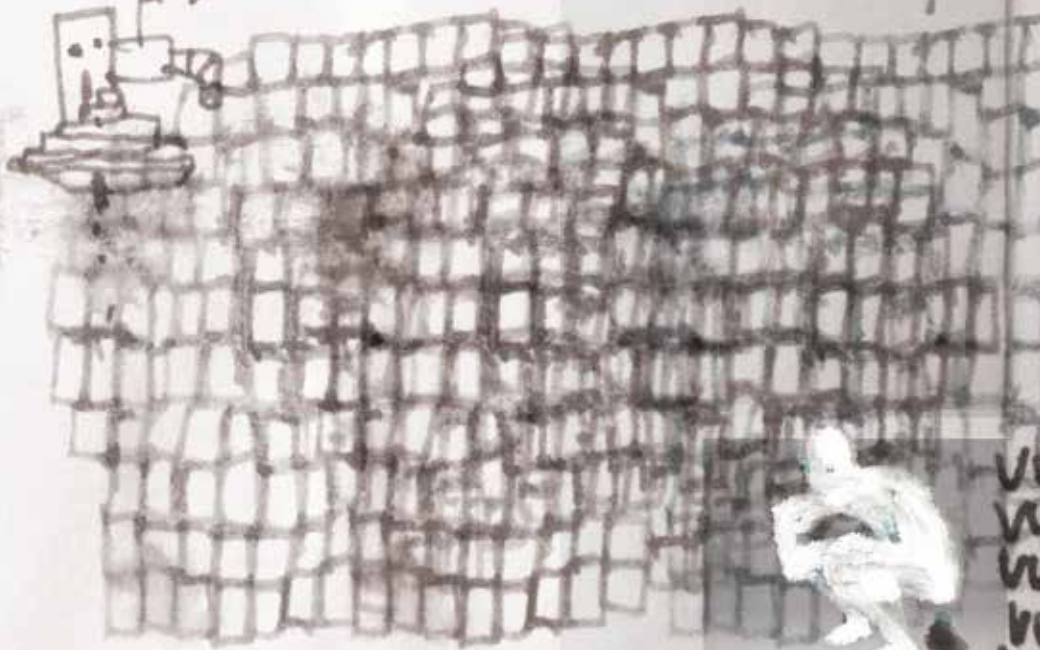
THE CLIENT

We were not allowed to use their real name: we had to refer to them as *The Client*. Like the plot of a dystopian, cyberpunk novel and living up to its name, *Meta* (taken from the Greek μετά, literally ‘beyond’) was the only company to contract the services of CCC Barcelona Digital Services S.L.U., later *Telus Digital*, which would later swallow CCC whole in a shameless example of how predatory animal nature lies at the heart of Big Tech’s corporate driving force. For us, CCC or Telus, it was all the same: cleaning up the daily shit at Little Lord Mark’s behest.

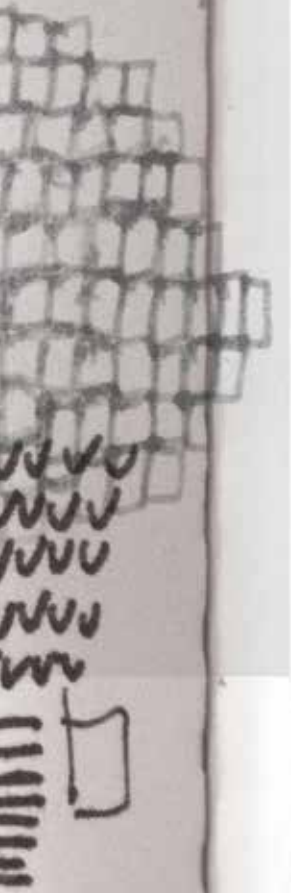
PANIC ATTACK

Wanting to get out as quickly as possible, a colleague with anxiety was hampered by two completely incompatible systems coming together: the arbitrary nature of a highly restrictive work organization and a rigid and ruthless 'smart' building design that hindered any improvisation. After letting off steam about the overbearing technological artefact, the colleague was callously fired. Mercilessly. When they got rid of him and some of us dared asked why, they blamed our colleague: he clearly had anger management issues. For me, I think the problem was the very opposite: we had too much self-control.





Handwritten text on the right edge of the page, oriented vertically. The text is partially cut off but appears to be a list or series of characters, possibly "V", "M", "S", "J", "P", followed by several vertical lines.



1	6	11	16	6	11	16
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SHIT-SMEARED WALLS

Such a surreal situation occurred that it seemed more like a rumour or urban legend conjured by the collective subconscious. Luckily, and thanks to my interviewees, I have been able to confirm that I did not make it up. My interviewee from the Greek office, as well as colleagues from the Italian, German, Brazilian and Peruvian markets confirmed it: people would smear shit on the bathroom walls. Their message remains unclear. Versions differ: according to some, they were just splotches; for others, they spelt out **FUCK TELUS** or **FUCK META**. It's unclear.

Beyond whether the anecdote is true or just mere rumour, what's important is how the employees' collective subconscious has embraced it as real, which makes it all the more significant. And why is that? Because even if it isn't real, it represents a fantastic projection of repressed feelings towards the company, symbolically satisfying our thirst for revenge and urge to throw in its face how disgusting we find its employment policies and lust for control. Fruitless retaliation in the real world was symbolically attained through the collective fantasy of dumping crap all over them.





YOU'RE BETTER OFF NOT DREAMING

My interviewee's romantic relationship came to an end. 'There was no routine, time or enthusiasm,' she said. Trying to explain what went on at work was useless: other people just didn't get it. Besides, every time she tried to explain things, clear images would pop into her head. 'You can't delete them,' she said. 'It's like they've been backed up to your brain's hard drive.'

So she decided to keep quiet. But keeping quiet also made her sick. Her body was pleading for help. Her nervous system wasn't working properly. She went to the public mental health service in Catalonia, where her psychologist told her that they were overwhelmed with similar cases: people at the same company who all had PTSD. Her psychiatrist confirmed the same thing. She was given a prescription for benzodiazepines, antidepressants and Minipress, a medication to suppress dreams. She needed it to avoid the nightmares. Even so, she would wake up screaming at times, heart in her mouth, unable to recall her dream, just her fear. Her daughter woke her up one night, asking why she was screaming. That was when she understood the extent of the damage wrought. She had never had nightmares like these.

The medical record for a patient at the Neuropsychiatry and Addictions Institute (INAD) at the Hospital del Mar in Barcelona read as follow:

A 35-year-old woman with no major medical, drug or psychiatric history came to the outpatient psychiatric clinic with post-traumatic stress disorder after five years' working as an internet content moderator. Over this time, she had been exposed to traumatic visual material, such as sexual assaults and paedophilia.

Her symptoms comprised daily recurrent panic attacks over the last 12 months, invasive images linked to traumatic exposure, intrusive thoughts, insomnia, vivid nightmares, avoiding contact with her child, distrust in her surroundings and an intense fear for her child's safety. The disorder was interfering with her ability to work

The patient received psychological treatment and was prescribed an SSRI (sertraline); however, only a partial response was noted, with most symptoms persisting.





SHARED DENIAL

I had a Peruvian colleague who told me that in the beginning, she thought the job was surprisingly bearable. It involved memes, mundane content, things that could even be funny. However, other material soon reared its ugly head: sexual videos, child exploitation, pornography, terrorism, animal abuse and suicides. Graphic, hardcore images. Not all the time, she said, it was not eight hours non-stop of awfulness. Even so, just a few seconds of that type of content were enough to make her body suffer the consequences. She believed she had it under control in her first year. But afterwards, her health started to nosedive and she couldn't understand why. Her nights were filled with strange dreams. She would see scenes from her job, involuntary video replays that she thought she had left behind. When reviewing content, she would ask herself, 'Why am I still doing this?', flagging content and moving on. Later on though, the same images would seep into her dreams. She was not sleeping well. She still failed to grasp that what was happening to her was a reaction to trauma.

Nobody talked about this at the company. Mental health was never mentioned. A few co-workers would talk about how they were feeling among themselves, but most just played it down. 'Oh yeah, it was nasty but it's done now', they would say. They were in shared denial. There were no preventive chats or warnings about the psychological impact of the job. Nobody ever told us that we could suffer from insomnia, anxiety or panic attacks. I myself became an insomniac, something that I'd never been in the past. I was on tranquillizers for six months.

THOSE BATTLING MONSTERS SHOULD WATCH OUT, MAKING SURE THEY DON'T BECOME MONSTERS THEMSELVES...

She started to notice how more difficult content affected her deeply. Suicides left her shaking. Watching them live was particularly devastating. One night on the graveyard shift, she had to review a video of a person committing suicide in front of the camera. She was unable to intervene in time. The image was burnt into her mind. And what's worse, she found out that one of her friends had taken their own life on the very same day. Everything blurred together: screen, memory and real loss.

After that, she started to suffer from dizzy spells. The first time was at work, when everything just started spinning. Then, attacks would happen at any time: having a coffee, out on a stroll, in the middle of a relaxing conversation. She couldn't grasp what was happening to her. She thought it was physical and went to see several doctors, including trauma, neurology and ENT specialists. All of them gave her the all clear. Until one day a psychiatrist explained how anxiety could also manifest as dizziness.





**... WHEN YOU STARE INTO THE ABYSS FOR A
LONG TIME, THE ABYSS STARES RIGHT BACK
AT YOU**

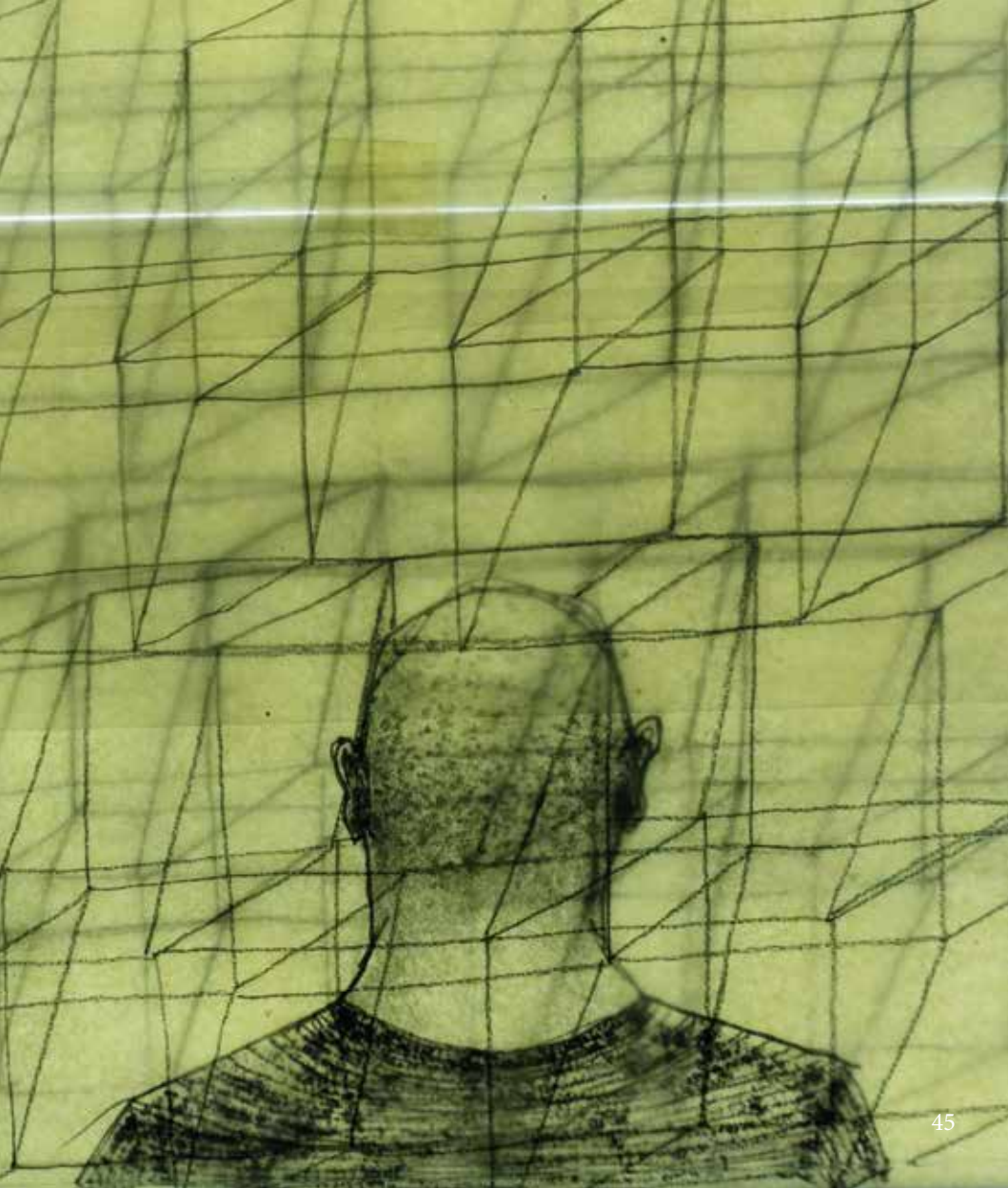
Her third episode was the most crushing. One evening when working alone in a near-empty office, she was assigned a video. Rumours were going around about it being particularly rough: a mother beating her daughter. She watched the entire three and a half minutes, although she was only meant to review 15 seconds. She was unable to look away. What she saw chilled her to the bone: the mother was smoking and drinking, beating a tiny girl in an empty blue room. At one point, the mother stubbed out her cigarette on the child's skin and then urinated on her. The child was very small so the mother just stood over her, opened up her skirt and, wearing no underwear, just urinated on top of her. It was an absolutely disgusting scene.

She took a long time to process the content. Half an hour later, she got a sudden, unbearable stomach ache, such an intense sensation of physical discomfort that she ended up in hospital. As is common, and however odd it may seem to somebody who has never worked in the Tower, she never connected her discomfort to the job. At the time, she just thought it was something she had eaten. It was not until long afterwards during therapy that she grasped how her body was manifesting what her mind found unbearable.



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CRY, CRY AND CRY AGAIN

'Yeah, I started having panic attacks, something I'd never had in my life. It all started after seeing a specific video linked to suicide late at night. I was working the night shift and it was around four in the morning. As this was during Covid, I was at home. We were no longer in lockdown, but we were still working from home. I recall that, from that day on, how should I put it? I felt its impact straight away, you know? I felt really ill. I moved away from my screen right away, got something to eat and came back. My mind was running in the background thinking about, I guess you could say bizarre things. I don't really remember what was running through my head but I do remember feeling that my head was off somewhere else in the ether, and I wasn't really in control.

'In fact, I finished up my shift and went to bed. Nothing else happened, but over the next few days I felt under enormous stress. My insides hardened, you know? Over the next few days I started to get panic attacks (I only know that now but couldn't put my finger on it back then) as I didn't know what was wrong with me. I would freeze in silly everyday situations. I could see that I just stopped functioning.

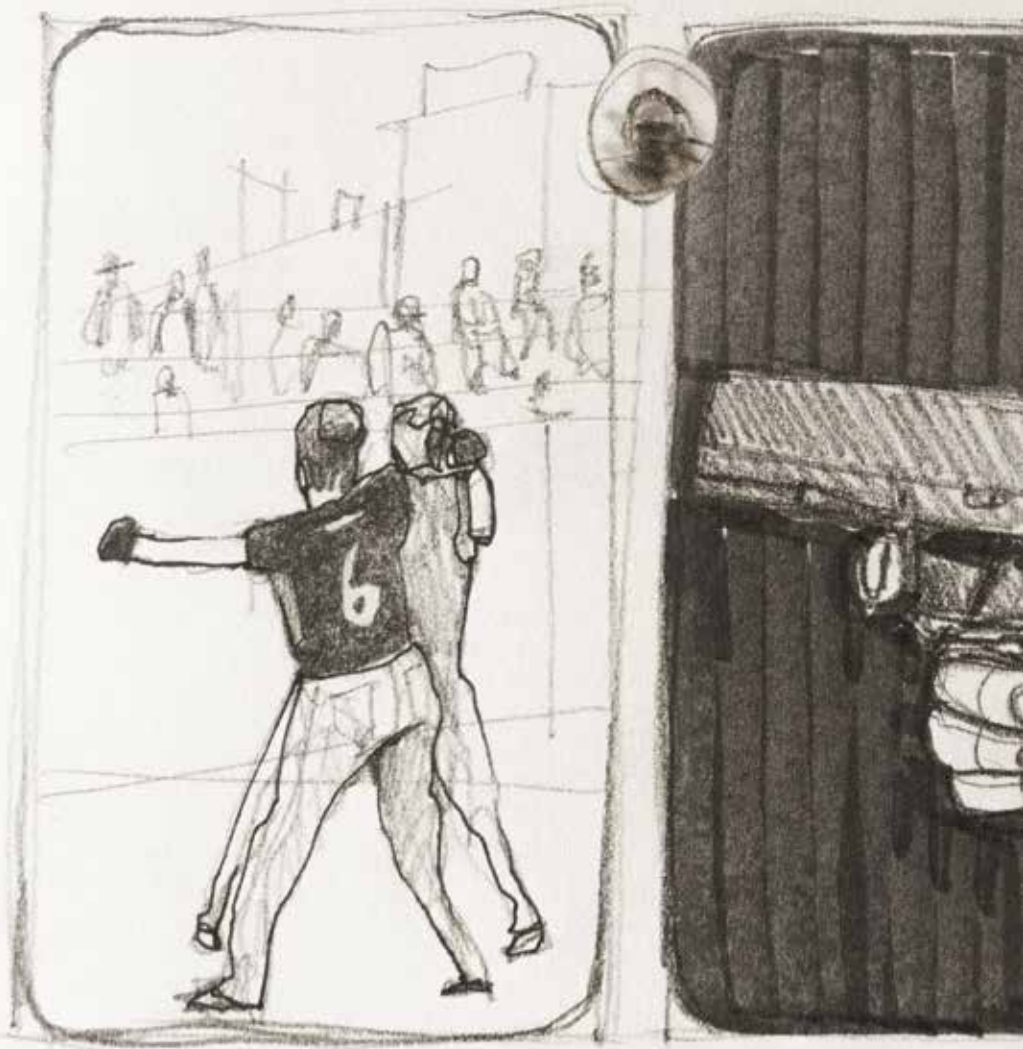
'Like, I would stand at the front door and be unable to open it, just stood there crying. Not with any real emotion but completely numb, like my tears were falling but there was no feeling, you know? My eyes would well up but I was paralyzed, my heart would be racing but I felt nothing. I was with someone and they realized what was happening. In fact, they basically had to move me to one side, taking my hands off the key I'd put in the lock. And that was just the first of my panic attacks. I was really scared as I had never experienced anything like it.'











GROUCHO MARX

Of course, it's all about looking out for yourself, and the only loyalty that multimillionaires know is to their own wallet. They'd sell their own grandmother to make a quick buck. Principles? As Marx (Groucho, not Karl) once said, 'Those are my principles, and if you don't like them... well, I have others'. So... Could you imagine a Zionist company defending the Nazis?

Saying 'I can't believe it' with an astonished look would be mere hot air. Of course I can believe it. In fact, I truly believe that anything is possible.

When Russia invaded Ukraine, we got a message that we needed to make an exception and be more lenient in terms of propaganda, speeches and Nazi symbols **if they were posted by Ukrainians or Ukraine's supporters**. Wow. You could be a Nazi and supremacist without any problem if you were anti-Russian.

THE DARK ENLIGHTENMENT

Meta's ties to neo-reactionary governments around the world are clear. All the top brass from Silicon Valley, including Zuckerberg, attended Trump's inauguration. It may well be a coincidence but doesn't it strike you as strange that they closed Mordor on Trump's self-proclaimed Liberation Day? I picture Trump like the Pied Piper, playing his flute and getting all US companies to run back in a panic into the arms of Daddy in his lair.

When they finally threw us out of Mordor for good, somebody shared a video in a WhatsApp group that had been shot across the street from the offices on closing day. Overstuffed boxes were being loaded onto lorries from a data destruction company. 'They're deleting everything,' the person wrote. But what does 'everything' actually mean? Our decisions? Our records? Even our own biological fingerprints in the system? Nobody knew. When we asked whether the data would be destroyed or saved, they remained silent. 'I'm sure they won't delete anything',

a former co-worker said. By tossing us aside, the company could continue making money off us, just now using our data, listing on an invisible market, feeding other algorithms or using information to install another neo-fascist puppet. Anything is possible.



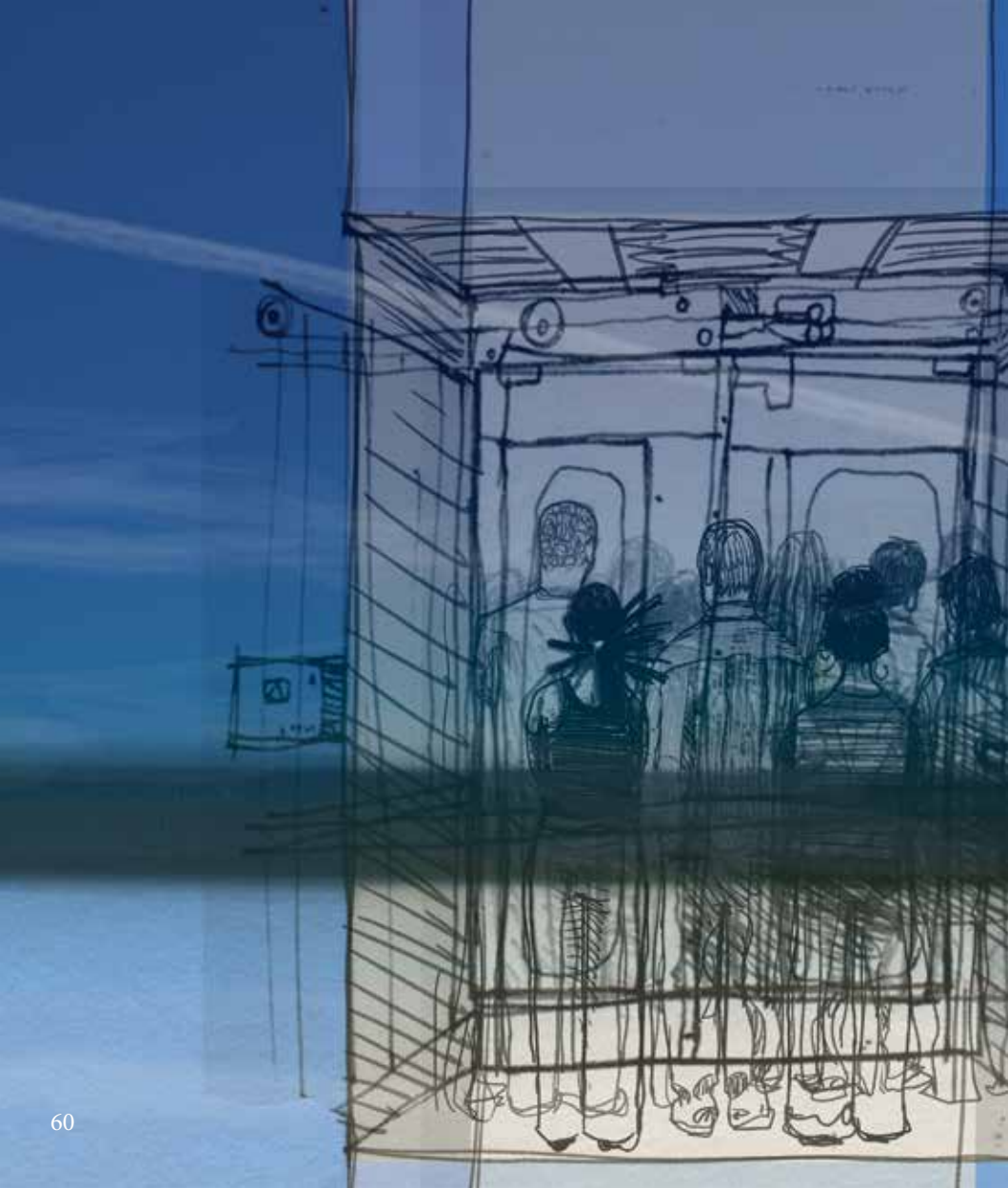




EVERYTHING ON THE INTERNET IS FOREVER

One period was absolutely brutal. We reviewed hundreds of videos a day. But one day, a particularly hideous one popped up. At the start, it just seemed to show a really small baby crying, maybe even a newborn. Nothing out of the ordinary, I thought. But the camera shifted, zoomed out and revealed the full horror. I'm not going to describe it, but it was hideous and involved several adults and the baby. Fucking disgusting. I closed the video and deleted it. Yet it popped up again straight away. The same file under a different user, again and again, spreading across the platform. We would delete it but there it was again, as if the system were making fun of us.

A co-worker and I were convinced the content was not really being removed. We escalated it, asked to speak to a senior manager, both of us angry and out of our minds. We weren't asking for technical explanations, we just wanted the video to disappear immediately. What we got was a reprimand. We were accused of 'making a fuss' and 'questioning processes'. There was nothing worse than showing a bit of humanity in a place that fed off digital cadavers.





LAYOFFS

In the midst of all this, an earthquake struck. The company announced layoffs due to financial restructuring that seemed a bit off, bluntly stating that 680 employees would be made redundant. Nobody knew how, why or whether it was even legal. Some media outlets smelt a rat.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, layoffs ran rampant in Spain as lots of companies were unable to keep paying their entire workforce during closures due to lockdowns or health restrictions. Nevertheless, the government promoted furloughs, temporary redundancies that enabled companies to suspend contracts or reduce hours without firing their workers. The government covered part of their salaries through the State Public Employment Service and companies committed to zero redundancies. In short, the furloughs were 'life jackets' that sidestepped millions of final redundancies at the height of the Covid-19 crisis, introducing a moratorium to avoid irreversible mass dismissals.

Furloughs were an emergency measure designed during the Covid pandemic. However, the crisis had dissipated and we had gone back to working in the office. It was ludicrous to implement an instrument created during the pandemic ‘due to financial issues’. Moreover, a subcontractor for one of the most powerful companies on the planet, Meta, hiding behind financial woes was like a sick joke – impossible to hear without feeling queasy. We thought the government would refuse the furlough, but that wasn’t the case. *And what’s worse, it went from a furlough to final redundancy within a year.*

The company vanished overnight and ceased trading on the very day Trump announced his tide of near-global tariffs on what he stupidly coined *Liberation Day*.

In the meantime, lawsuits have been lodged for psychological damage. Our burden is still labelled a ‘common illness’. The claimants include the relatives of a Colombian employee who committed suicide, having been shattered by the atrocities that the company brought into his life. Although the lawsuit initially began with 12 claimants, there are now nearly 400 of us. It was vital for us to stop being afraid. After years of waiting, we still don’t know what we will achieve. But as the saying goes: ***he who laughs last, laughs longest.***







2026





