# Cheesy Chips

### Ali Giles

Systems are designed to make life simpler; so Katie from head office reminded us.

She was down all the way from Milton Keynes this morning, to give us training on the new till software. Young and hectic, she looked as if she'd dressed in a rush that morning; her skirt twisted and crumpled and her jacket covered in dog hair.

I couldn't really hear her behind her mask, and she talked too fast anyway.

"......operator generated," she said, tippy-tapping baby-pink nails on the screen, "and that means.......
password to use it. For added protection......
changed every month. So, your operator number is the last four digits of your ......
and your password has to be......
but it can't be.....
You don't want......
using your operator number, ok? Any mistakes will be......
ok? So everyone......
on it......
find cheesy chips."

I assumed she said cheesy chips, but to be on the safe side I stayed at the back, watching everyone else.  Shuffling around like polite zombies in their efforts to help each other, while still maintaining social distance. It was like a game of autistic Twister.

Nobody could find cheesy chips. They looked in 'sides', 'kid's menu', 'light snacks' and 'extras'.
"Can't we just *tell* Ray they're cheesy chips?" asked Mary, fretfully.
"No," said Katie, pulling down her mask, "because from now on Ray doesn't come out of the kitchen, and you girls shouldn't go in."
"It's what we've always done," I said.
"Health and Safety guidelines say otherwise."

"There's a message option on the order page," said Ray.

"You mustn't use the message option," Katie snapped her mask back up, "It's too……fusing."

I thought suddenly how meekly we have to follow and do what we're told in life now. How disillusioned we are of it all, but how accepting. Downtrodden, dumbed down, initiative's a thing of the past. And the very rules and systems pushed on us to make life better or simpler paradoxically make it harder, because in real life there are just too many variables. There is no over-ride button on the system.

Over on the till 'beverages' froze, then 'payment options', and finally the whole system.

Ray suggested turning it off and on again, but still it didn't work and the screen turned a pale flickering blue.

Katie called Milton Keynes. "I know that," she kept saying, "I know that. But it's always on the start-up."

Her face was blotchy-red and her mask billowed in and out like the diaphragm on a pump, and it made me so anxious that I pulled my own down and turned to stare out the window, trying to orientate myself, trying to ignore Mary flattening herself against the counter in case I spewed a torrent of covid over her.

"Sorry, sorry, my husband's vulnerable." It's all she's said since the start of this.

I wanted to say we're all fucking vulnerable, Mary. Vulnerable and alone and struggling to cope.

Half past ten in the morning, but the town centre was deserted. Outside the window in the bus shelter, an old man fumbled on his facemask. He took forever. 'Get jabbed now!' said the poster on the side. The girl on it stared angrily.

Fear, I thought. Fear is both the symptom and the disease. Fear is the true virus. Anyone would think it was airborne. Ha ha.

Am I right or am I crazy? There's nobody left to ask; friends aren't friends any more. I can't talk to them like I used to, and half the time I can't be bothered to anyway.

I'm not the same as I was, and when I really think about it, that frightens me. It's all so messy in there when I try and find the old me. Exploding in rage over a spilled drink, but then crying over a missed delivery from Amazon. I'm not sure that I exist, actually. Not in any real sense.

Above the door the heater rattled to life and dropped its heat like a bomb, fanning the dog hairs on Katie's jacket. "Well," she said, ending the call, "I.T are just checking the…"

But I didn't hear what I.T were checking because she pulled her mask back up.

Anyway. To cut a long story short, cheesy chips are found under 'miscellaneous'.