THE WIRED SISTERS

A Tragedie of Digital Disruption, in One Acte

THERE WERE THREE of them, as there have always been three, and they met on a Thursday in a rented office above a Pret A Manger near Kings Cross. The baristas downstairs would later say that the coffee machine had behaved strangely that morning, producing three black coffees, without instruction, before anyone had arrived and that of the three women who came to collect them only two cast shadows. But baristas say a lot of things, and none of them write any of it down.

The three were named Denise, Morag, and Constance, and they were builders, for that is the word the industry uses, and they used it too, and we shall let it stand. Though what they built was not a bridge nor a building nor, indeed, anything that existed in the physical realm. They built platforms.

Between them they had built AlgoRecruit™ that rejected a human rights lawyer for "insufficient leadership signalling," The Happiness Index™ that secretly reported employees' private Slack messages to HR in a weekly dashboard, and FocusForge® that disabled your emails for three hours every morning whether you wanted it to or not. All three of their ventures had been seed funded. All three had been successful. All three had been acquired. And all three had made the lives of ordinary professionals immeasurably worse. They fully intended the next idea to be their most wicked yet.

Morag was the eldest and had been for a very long time. Her online profile was deliberately vague. It said only that she had thirty years of experience in change management, which was as true as saying the sea has only thirty years of experience in being salty and wet. Morag had been present at the launch of platforms, and kingdoms, whose names have been long forgotten by everyone except the people they damaged. When she entered rooms, lights often flickered, and though she put this down to the wiring in old buildings, the buildings she entered always seemed, for one reason or another, to be old.

Denise came down from Edinburgh. She always came down from Edinburgh, though she hadn’t lived there for many years. She was the technical one. She could conjure up code in nineteen languages (five of which now deprecated, two fully

obsolete), deploy infrastructure across seventeen cloud providers (even Rackspace), and explain the difference between APIs and microservices with such stoic mysticism that the listener would nod and feel informed yet remain exactly as confused as before. Her train was always on time, though she did not remark on it because she did not remark on many things. She was a listener, a watcher, through eyes the colour of whatever you weren't expecting them to be.

Constance was the youngest, by quite some measure. She kept a wine-red FiloFax whose leather had softened with decades of use, held a Bachelor's Degree in Social Anthropology from Oxford and a Master's in Human-Computer Interaction from Staffordshire Polytechnic. She used the word "online community" without irony, though also without emotion. Constance believed, with powerful sincerity, that professional networking would forever be a reckoning force. Denise and Morag never argued with this. They never corrected her. They treated her belief with a care that, if you watched closely, looked less like respect and more like maintenance. Constance's sincerity was not incidental to what they were building. It was its cold, beating heart.

The idea, which is to say the next idea, because there had been ideas before and there would be ideas after, surfaced on an evening when Morag was scrolling LinkedIn in the bath. A bath eternally full. A bath of tepid black water. She had read a post by a man called Simon who had written six hundred words about giving a sandwich to a homeless person and what it taught them both about leadership. The post had four thousand likes. Morag set the phone on the side of the bath and smiled at the ceiling, and the tap cried one more black tear.

She texted Denise: "When shall we three meet again?"

Denise replied: "In thunder, lightning or in London?"

"London."

A pause. "I'll book the train."

There was no discussion of what they were there for. There were no documents, no pitch deck, no whiteboard session in which the concept was developed from first principles. The idea arrived fully formed, the way ideas do when they are not ideas at all but inevitabilities wearing the clothes of inspiration.

They called it Kindling. The name was Constance’s. She meant it publicly to invoke a sense of sparking connections, of lighting the small fires of professional fellowship that might warm a career or illuminate a path. The other meaning (dry dead wood that exists to be consumed by a larger flame) was not discussed. Denise heard it and said nothing. Morag heard it, smiled briefly, and registered the domain. The dot-com being available, which it should not have been.

The platform was built in two weeks. Fully formed and the code was damned near spotless. The infrastructure inscrutable. The interface beautiful in the way that things built to conceal always are. Soft edges, warm colours, a typeface called Södermalm that looked like a kind person trying to listen. Or at least pretending to.

The features were thus.

A text box that asked "What did you do to change the world today?" Not just "Start a post" because a simple post is finite. Pride is not. Any middle-manager asked what change he has affected will type until his lonely children have long been put to bed by their disinterested au pair, and every single word will be a small, beautifully lit portrait of himself, composed for an audience he has decided in advance is worthy of receiving it.

An introduction engine that matched users not by industry or seniority but by "complementary self-satisfaction," which in practice meant that a man who aggrandised innovation could spend forty minutes countering another's inflation of entrepreneurship with both leaving the conversation feeling profoundly connected yet knowing nothing whatsoever about each other that they had not already known about themselves.

A content feed that suppressed anything under two hundred words, on the principle that brevity was the enemy of ego. This ensured that no user could share a passing thought, an honest reaction, or a single sentence of actual truth. Every post required architecture. Every post required a beginning, a middle, a bulleted list, and a lesson learned. Every post, by mechanical necessity, became a self-serving parable. A constant feed of self-worth sermons.

A reaction system that offered "Appreciated," "Learned from," and "Want to hear more," which were, in the precise language of behavioural design, identical to "Like"

in every functional respect, a dopamine-scaled social reward system, yet one that could be deployed without ever reading the post they were attached to. Still the person pressing the button believed they were doing something more considered, more generous, more *them*, than the people pressing "Like" on that other platform. And this was older magic. Morag knew it well. She had seen it work in rooms where the buttons were made of wood and the platforms made of stone.

Invisible follower count. Invisible, that is, to anyone except the user, who could see their own number at all times, transformed from a public competition into a private obsession, checked last thing at night and first thing in the morning, a number that lived in the body like a second pulse. Designed for performative vanity by way of shareable screenshots.

And the coup de grâce. No mechanism by which a person could share a photograph of themselves standing on a stage or pointing at a slide. This was the feature that attracted the first wave of users. They came because they were tired of those photographs. They came because they wanted something different. They arrived grateful, already believing, already open. But within four weeks they were posting photographs of themselves sitting in thoughtful profile beside a window, which is the same photograph just taken from a more self-involved angle, and writing captions about the importance of reflection, which is the same caption wearing a linen shirt.

These features were assembled the way such things have always been assembled - with tacit knowledge of what people want to believe about themselves and the precise instruments to encourage such self-belief. Each feature was a door left open with a light on inside. The light was warm. The door did not lock behind you. It did not need to. You stepped inside and willingly locked it yourself.

Constance had designed every feature. Her magnum opus. A corporate potion of self-love.

Kindling launched on a Tuesday in March. The first post was Constance's own. Eight hundred words about the loneliness of professional life online, written with such transparent honesty that nine hundred people hit "Appreciated" and four hundred hit "Want to hear more" and Constance, reading every response from her

flat in Hackney, cackled twice from what she would later call relief but which was closer to the feeling of watching rats board a sinking ship.

The second post was by a man named Mac who was not even called Mac. He was called James, and he was a Regional Sales Director for a facilities management company in Gateshead, but felt compelled to gild himself with a more important sounding name on the site registration page. He posted fourteen hundred words about the time he let a junior colleague present to the board and what it taught him about "the architecture of trust." The post contained the sentence "Leadership is a temperature not a title." It received two thousand "Appreciated" reactions. Mac posted again the next day. And the day after that. And the day after that.

By week six, there were a hundred Macs. Two hundred Duncans. A thousand Rosses. And a Malcolm who visited once then went back to LinkedIn.

They came the way they always come, to write about vulnerability as a competitive advantage. To write about crying in car parks and what it taught them about resilience. To write about buying coffee for their teams and calling it "micro-investment in human capital." To write about corporate takeovers as divine intervention. And Denise, monitoring the servers, observed the word "ambition" trend through the fog and filthy analytics.

"And so the hurly-burly’s done," she said.

Morag looked at her. "The battle’s lost and won.”

Said Constance, "Ere the set of sun."

"Fair is foul, and foul is billable," said all.