

likeMe

A friend in need.

KEITH BROOKE

I stand in the queue that might save my life, almost at the door of the community hall now. Friday's bingo here has been cancelled. I blink away the alert. I don't care. Most large gatherings have been called off in the current circumstances. The line shifts and I edge forward.

The man in front is tall and thin, his manner nervous. His profile is locked down. I turn away. Behind me is Emily; she turned 24 last month. She's an eight on likeMe, with twelve friends in common, a complementary star sign, a shared fondness for Chinese food and skiing; looking for friendship and more. I've seen her in town but never spoken to her before. She sends a nudge: she wants to play a word game while we wait. All this overlaid on what I see: eyes that sparkle above her medmask, petite body wrapped in a padded parka. I accept; she scores 36 on the first round.

I shuffle forward, take my turn, finding a diplomatic 32 words in the grid.

Standing in the doorway now, sheltered from the drizzle. Just inside I see a guard: face mask, gloves, semi-automatic cradled across her chest. Yesterday when I'd been here, a woman at the desk had started to scream, flailing at the guard who tried to intervene. "It's me!" she had cried. "How could it be a fake ID? How could I have done that? You have to let me through. You have to let me have the jab." Then, sobbing, slumped in the guard's arms: "How could I fake it?" Her overlay as she passed: three friends in common — she was a starred friend of Mickey's, or so her meSphere profile said — atheist, likeMe four. She had a fever too, according to fluApp. I edged away from her, as did those around me in the queue.

My turn: I score 47 to Emily's 43. Close.

Yesterday, as the guard had escorted the woman from the hall, she twisted, somehow rammed the crown of her head into the guard's face, forcing his mask askew. The guard reeled away, trying to straighten the mask, and the woman darted back into the hall. Another guard brought her to the ground. She writhed, but couldn't break free. The first guard, mask righted, walked over and kicked the woman in the head and

she stopped moving. I turned away from the bloody mess, making for the exit already. There would be no more inoculations today.

Now, safely inside, only 30 or so people ahead of us in the queue. Us. I glance at Emily, smile, see the response in her eyes and like it.

I look away, aware of the space between us — between us all. Final round: she scores 29. I delay, flicking through holiday pics Jakey has posted, old ones from when you could travel. He's tagged me in some of them. I loc him: he's in town today, having a pint in the Anchor.

I check where the rest of the old crew are. Mickey is over at his sister's; Pru is drinking in the Cosmo, two doors down from the Anchor — I wonder why she hasn't hooked up with Jakey? Bad vibes between them? I search, but nothing is flagged. Arno is —

Emily sends a nudge, so I stop buddy-surfing and score 31 in my minute. I shrug, smile, she emotes a raspberry-blow and grins.

Back to the crew: where's Jakey gone? I nudge Pru with a *Jakey*?

Don't know, babe, she messages. Cut out half a min ago.

I stare at the polished wood-tile floor, try not to think of my dad. Last month. There, and then gone.

I'm being stupid. Jumping to conclusions. Then Pru is back with: *Not good, babe. They're taking someone out. Bagged up. I think it's Jakey, babe.*

I breathe deep, feel the lightest of touches on my arm. Emily. I can't remember the last time someone touched me. "One of my mates," I tell her, and she knows what I'm saying immediately. Me and Jakey... we go back years.

We move forward in the queue. Only ten or so to go now.

She sends me a hug, sends me off-profile contact info. *Any time you want to talk.*

Checking locs of all the crew, I eventually reach the front. A woman with a locked-down profile and big glasses over her mask asks for my ID. I open a channel on my 'Sphere, allow the digital handshake, and she nods me through to the office for my jab.

Outside, Emily is still being sympathetic to my loss, but her moodrating is up at nine — inoculated, safe from the latest variant of the pandemic.

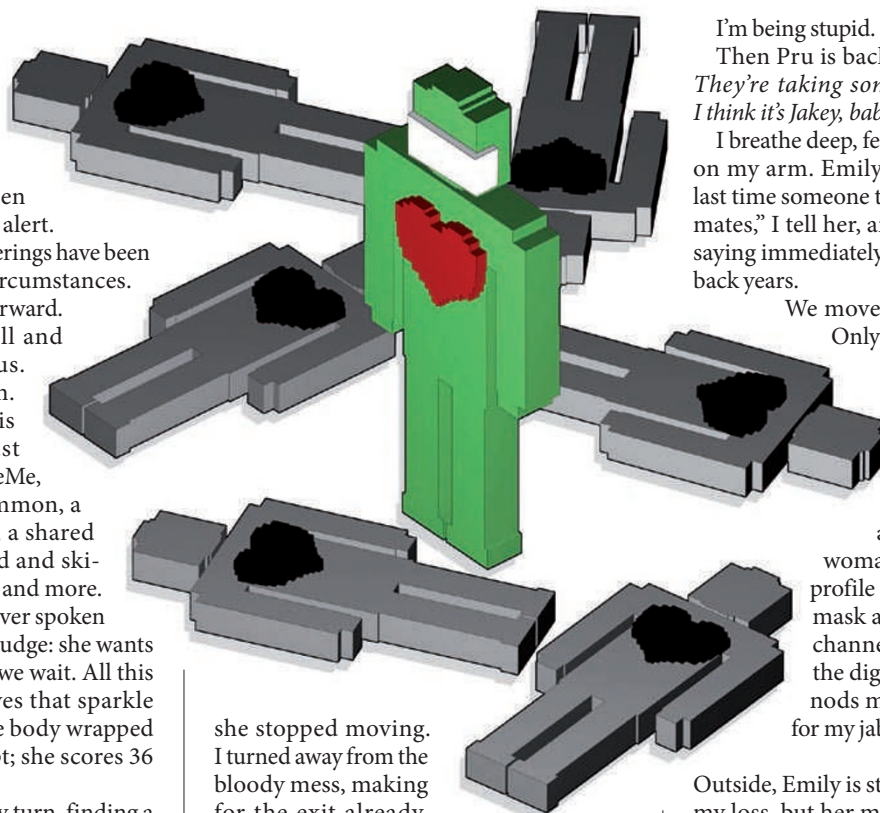
We walk, silent, bouncing fragments between each other: favourite films and books, cook in or eat out, jokes, pics, hates, secrets. Restaurants we each like flag themselves as we pass, then apologize for being temporarily closed. After five minutes our routes diverge, but I feel as if I have known her half my life.

Almost home, I realize that I've forgotten my earlier paranoia about the crew. I search for Jakey, but nothing. Then Pru: she's at her home now, safe. I message her hugs. Mickey... nothing. Damn.

At the door I glance at the array of blank name tags by the buzzers. Most of this building is empty now.

I head up, let myself in, pour a JD on ice. Message Emily. Two people with high likeMes, immune for now. *Let's get together. I need more than this. So much more.* ■

Keith Brooke has published approximately 70 short stories, and his 11th novel was published in April 2010. He reviews science fiction for *The Guardian* and is currently editing a book on the sub-genres of science fiction for Palgrave Macmillan.



JACEY