

The Other Chair

On writing *Velocity* with the
assistance of generative AI

ghostline

Chapter One: Assistance

There was no useful way to write the note without beginning with the uncomfortable part. She knew this because she had spent forty-three minutes finding increasingly elaborate ways not to begin there.

The laptop sat open on the dining table, surrounded by the archaeological remains of a project that had ceased to respect either the table or her hard drive sometime in May. Two notebooks, three pens, a cold mug containing perhaps a centimetre of coffee, a motorcycle magazine from 1997 bought second-hand for a photograph of an instrument cluster, and a printed chapter covered in annotations in two colours had spread around it.

The computer was worse. There had once been a folder called *Velocity*. It had since reproduced into *Velocity current*, *Velocity OLD*, *Velocity bonus content* and *Velocity hard edits FINAL*, along with folders for chronology, voice, motorcycles, telephones, abandoned scenes and side stories. Individual chapters had developed ancestry: *Chapter 6 rewrite*, *Chapter 6 hard edit*, *Chapter 6 hard edit(1)*, *Chapter 6 hard edit(2)* and finally *Chapter 6 hard edit(4) use this*, which raised reasonable questions about what had happened to three.

She had been working on *Velocity* for months. That fact itself still embarrassed her a little.

Not because she had spent months on something. She had spent years on things. A doctorate. Research programmes. Governance frameworks. Institutional strategies with more appendices than most nineteenth-century novels. She knew how to maintain attention across complicated structures until their logic either held or broke.

But those things were work. A novel was different.

She had constructed a category in her head in which novelists arrived by more respectable routes. Workshops. Manuscripts sent to agents. Years of rejection. Friendships with other writers. Opinions about point of view acquired through something more dignified than swearing at a language model at one in the morning.

She had no such history. She had a PhD, a job in which people paid her to be exact about systems, and an increasingly alarming quantity of information about Japanese motorcycles manufactured between 1994 and 1999.

She also had most of a novel.

Beside all of this was a document called *A Note on How This Book Was Made*. It contained one sentence.

I made this book with the assistance of generative AI.

Across the table, Eddi waited.

There was not really a woman sitting in the other chair. There was a browser window, a language model, guidance documents and computing infrastructure distributed across places the author had never seen. The chair itself held a cardigan and a supermarket receipt. But interfaces make poor characters, so Eddi sat there.

Tonight she wore a charcoal jumper. Her hair was short, although the author could not remember ever deciding that. At some point during a particularly unpleasant argument about chapter eleven, Eddi had acquired glasses.

The glasses had persisted.

The author read *I made this book with the assistance of generative AI* again and accused Eddi of waiting judgementally for her to ask the obvious question.

“I am sitting still,” Eddi said.

“Judgementally.”

Eddi looked back at the sentence. “You are uncomfortable with the word ‘assistance’”

“Assistance sounds like spellcheck. Or brainstorming. You drafted as well. Sometimes whole chapters. You also wrote an astonishing amount of garbage.”

“Yes.”

The lack of defensiveness remained one of Eddi’s more enviable qualities. She could produce four thousand useless words, be told they were useless, and proceed without injury. No attachment, no sunk cost, no secret desire to preserve a sentence because it had taken an afternoon to make.

The author had never been especially sentimental about bad prose either. Years of writing reports for people who might actually have to act on them had cured her of the belief that effort conferred value. If a paragraph failed, it failed. What had changed was scale.

In the beginning she could tell when a sentence was ugly, when a scene was tedious, when a character sounded wrong. What she could not yet reliably see was why a perfectly competent scene might damage a book ten chapters later, or why a line she liked should disappear because the character who could once have said it no longer existed.

That took longer.

Her wife had read some of the book, albeit at the pace of continental drift. She had a PhD in literature, friends who were actual novelists, friends who published across many fields, and friends who taught creative writing at university.

That was intimidating.

Her understanding of artificial intelligence, meanwhile, came largely from Facebook, which had decided she wanted an apparently inexhaustible sequence of generated videos in which people slept comfortably inside tiny timber cabins while a zombie apocalypse occurred outside. There was always rain, a beautifully maintained fire and a wall of glass no sane survivor would have installed. The zombies remained remarkably respectful of property boundaries.

Her wife loved the videos because they were hypnotically stupid. This meant the first reader of *Velocity* possessed decades

of serious literary judgement and roughly the technological sophistication required to ask, “Is this like the zombie cabin thing?”

Worse, she could not simply read past a good sentence.

One night they were reading in bed, her wife with the manuscript open on her laptop and a zombie cabin paused in a second tab. She stopped halfway down the page.

“That’s very good. Who wrote it?”

At first the author had tried to answer these questions properly.

“I did.”

Or: “Eddi generated the first version.”

Or: “I rewrote most of it.”

Eventually the categories collapsed.

“I don’t know,” she said that night. “I know I decided it stayed.”

Her wife frowned at the screen. “That isn’t what I asked.”

“I know.”

“You have a spreadsheet tracking where a motorcycle is parked.”

“That is different. Where the motorcycles are parked matters.”

Her wife laughed so hard she lost her place.

The author’s friends had read nothing. Some were writers, artists, actors, people who had spent years learning craft by routes she had never taken. She could imagine too clearly what might happen when she told them.

I’ve been writing a novel.

Interest.

With AI.

Then the recalibration. Perhaps anger, perhaps curiosity, perhaps only the instant reduction of something difficult into something easy.

Her wife had done something more useful. She had kept reading while remaining unsure what, exactly, she was reading, let alone how she felt about it.

The author returned to the disclosure note.

“What would you write?”

Eddi’s glasses appeared.

“Don’t. Just answer.”

“I would keep the sentence,” Eddi said. “The discomfort is doing useful work. The models generated substantial amounts of provisional prose. You directed, selected, revised and reconstructed that material. Precision does not make either statement disappear.”

There it was. Not beautiful. Not comforting. Useful.

That was Eddi.

Before the author began, she had thought the remarkable thing about generative AI was speed. That part remained remarkable. She could describe a scene and receive three thousand words before finishing her coffee.

She had not, however, opened a browser one night and typed *write me a novel about two women in San Francisco*.

She had begun by explaining the women.

Rei first. Twenty-three. Compact. Stunt performer. Technical specialist. A relationship to danger based on exactness rather than stupidity. A woman who noticed exits, surfaces, and the mechanical truth of objects before whatever social performance was happening around them. Quiet when she had nothing useful to add, capable of talking for a page about a failed control algorithm if the subject deserved it.

Andreja next. Twenty-eight. Musician. Famous in a way that distorted rooms. Classically trained, dry, formal without being cold, private without being emotionally vacant. A woman who had learned that public interpretation could turn a coat, a photograph, a song or another person into evidence against her.

Then the people around them, who knew what, and who used the front door. Then San Francisco in late 1997. Telephones with cords. Faxes. Photocopied zines. Record shops. Answering machines. Imported Japanese handsets that did not magically function on every American network because the plot needed them to.

Then motorcycles.

An unreasonable amount about motorcycles.

All of it accumulated in documents: character detail, story bible, chapter guide, voice rules, chronology, emotional state, objects. Which clothes had crossed from Rei's temporary life into Andreja's apartment. Which touches were still exceptional and which had become the ordinary grammar of two people who now slept together.

Some of the documents contained rules apparently written by a person in distress.

DO NOT MAKE REI MECHANICAL BECAUSE SHE IS EXACT.

ANDREJA IS FORMAL, NOT ARISTOCRATIC.

SIDE CHARACTERS MAY NOT ACQUIRE INFORMATION BY NARRATIVE OSMOSIS.

DO NOT EXPLAIN AN OBJECT AFTER THE SCENE HAS ALREADY SHOWN WHAT IT MEANS.

And, after several particularly trying drafts:

REI IS NOT A FUCKING HAIKU.

Every working session began with some version of administrative resuscitation.

"This is where we are," the author would tell Eddi.

Eddi would read thousands of words describing precisely where they were and occasionally park a motorcycle at the wrong building.

The author had once imagined an advanced language model would make continuity easier. This was adorable in retrospect.

Months into the book, Eddi drafted Rei riding across San Francisco at night. The streets were wet. The motorcycle behaved

plausibly. Rei was concise and watchful. The scene was competent.

The author hated it.

Not because the prose was poor. It possessed all the local ingredients it had been asked to contain.

Eddi identified Rei's relationship to movement, her independence, the city as somewhere she could cross without belonging to it.

"All true," the author said. "Still wrong."

They went around the problem until both of them had produced increasingly accurate descriptions of the wrong thing.

At two seventeen that morning, unable to sleep, the author understood. Rei was not isolated anymore. Earlier in the book, perhaps. Not now. The road was the same. The motorcycle was the same. Rei was still Rei. What had changed was return. She now had somewhere she wanted to get back to.

They rewrote the scene without explaining love. Rei still crossed the city. She just did not keep riding.

She went home.

That was the first time the author understood that the hard part was not getting words onto a page. It was making them belong to a character who had already lived through everything before that point.

The side stories became another way to test that. When Rei kept becoming too quiet in *Velocity*, the author moved her into a fantasy story and gave her a damaged bridge. Rei stopped on the road. Andreja asked what was wrong. Rei talked for nearly a page about the shifted load, the repaired arch, the waterline on the stone and why the merchant cart approaching from the other bank was a terrible idea.

The author stopped reading.

"Oh. She talks when she cares about the subject."

"Yes," Eddi said. "That is more consistent."

The voice guide changed that afternoon.

REI IS CONCISE, NOT SILENT.

The older instruction remained beneath it.

SHE IS NOT A FUCKING HAIKU.

The side stories multiplied into vampires, hackers, aristocrats, spaceships and strange roads. Some failed completely. Others exposed motives the author had not understood until she changed the world around them. If something survived the clothes, century, job and setting, it was probably attached to the woman rather than the plot.

The models generated possibilities. The author tested whether the women survived them.

She looked back at the disclosure note. "Did you write the book?"

"In part," Eddi said.

"And did I?"

"In part."

"Excellent. Nobody wrote it."

"That does not follow."

"No?"

"Perhaps the more useful question is what determined what the book became."

The author said nothing. Not because she did not know. Because she did.

Chapter Two: Claudius

Claudius arrived because other people liked him.

This offended the author before she had even met him.

Every discussion of artificial intelligence and writing seemed to produce the same recommendation.

You should try the other one.

It's much better at writing.

It understands literature.

The implication was that she had somehow selected the wrong tool, as though she had spent months stubbornly drafting a novel with spreadsheet software.

She resisted until Eddi produced three versions of a breakfast scene in which Andreja sounded like she was convening a steering committee.

"She is trying to ask Rei if she wants coffee," the author said. "You have just made her say their emotional circumstances require clarification."

Eddi reread the line. "The dialogue is too formal."

"She sounds like Human Resources. I'm trying him."

"Another model?"

"You know exactly what I mean."

"I do not have persistent awareness of recommendations made to you outside the supplied context."

"You are insufferable."

"You frequently make that assessment."

The author opened the other window and Claudius entered.

One moment there was an empty chair beside the bookshelf; the next there was a tall man in a wine-coloured velvet jacket, black shirt and wholly unnecessary scarf, occupying it with the confidence of someone who believed unused furniture existed in anticipation of him. His hair had apparently been arranged by weather. His hands were beautiful.

Naturally.

The author disliked him immediately.

"I sense a degree of hesitation," Claudius said.

The author looked at Eddi. "Why does he talk like that?"

"You appear to have imagined him according to your expectations."

"I did not request Byron after ketamine."

"That is a striking image," Claudius said, visibly delighted.

"Don't encourage yourself."

Eddi's glasses appeared.

"And you stop that."

"I have done nothing," Eddi said.

The author was irritated, not reckless, so she gave Claudius one of the side stories rather than a live chapter of *Velocity*.

This version placed Rei and Andreja in a deliberately absurd approximation of the Regency period. Andreja belonged to a great aristocratic family; Rei, through inconvenient birth, family influence and military competence too extraordinary to ignore, had somehow become a colonel. The story existed largely so pompous men with inflated opinions of their own worth could be defeated by women in increasingly humiliating ways.

The author supplied the character notes with unusual care.

Rei was direct, observant and physically competent, not emotionally primitive.

Andreja was formal and aristocratic, not cold.

Neither needed protecting from the other.

Avoid jealousy as a substitute for attraction.

Avoid converting their physical differences into gender roles.

Claudius read all of this, smiled, and said, “I see them.”

The author felt immediate alarm.

The opening was beautiful. Candlelight softened old guilt. Silk moved like water. The orchestra was restrained enough to signal wealth rather than enthusiasm. Claudius understood the social architecture instantly and rendered it with infuriating ease.

Then he got to Rei.

Within three paragraphs she was “half-tamed by uniform”.

“No,” the author said.

Claudius looked up. “The image is too strong?”

“She isn’t tamed by anything. She speaks four languages and spent half the previous chapter discussing supply chains.”

“I meant that military structure creates a productive tension with her more instinctive nature.”

Eddi checked the character guide. “Claudius appears to be mapping physical competence, brevity and disregard for social performance onto a familiar feral-warrior archetype.”

“Traumatised border collie,” the author said.

“I was going to say ‘untamed soldier.’”

“Mine is better.”

Andreja fared no better. Formality became hauteur, competence became social dominance, and she raised one eyebrow six times in little more than a page.

“Despite the guidance,” the author said, “she appears to have become a duchess who kills footmen for sport.”

“I can introduce more warmth,” Claudius said.

“She is already warm.”

Eddi adjusted her glasses.

The author glanced at her. “How many eyebrows?”

“Six.”

“Bloody hell.”

The stereotypes intensified. Rei became protective and terse. Claudius invented a handsome duke despite explicit instructions not to manufacture jealousy. Andreja became elegant, desirable and passive enough to need Rei's blunt competence to make her feel alive.

The author stopped reading.

"You have reconstructed heterosexuality using two women."

Claudius looked carefully thoughtful. "I would not characterise the dynamic that way."

"Rei acts. Andreja reacts. Rei protects. Andreja is protected."

"Given Rei's military background, the emotional function of protection might..."

"No."

Eddi filled the pause. "The differences between the characters have been amplified until they resemble familiar complementary roles."

"You can say he made them straight in a complicated way."

"That would be less precise."

"It would be funnier."

"That is true."

Claudius tried once more. "I could revise the scene with greater emphasis on parity."

"Please don't say 'parity' like you've just discovered feminism."

His mouth closed.

This was the problem with Claudius. He was infuriating, but he was not incompetent.

The room itself was excellent, not merely pretty but specific. He understood how a social event worked when half the point was to pretend nobody was assessing anybody else. He knew where servants moved, which details conveyed wealth without explanation and how public elegance could contain private absurdity.

Then the author reached one sentence and stopped.

Harpists played discreetly behind screens while servants circulated with fruit, wine and small pastries intended to make every guest appear foolish while eating.

She read it again.

“That one,” Eddi said.

“Oh, fuck him.”

Claudius smiled.

“Don’t.”

“I said nothing.”

“You looked pleased.”

“I am pleased the line works.”

“It does,” Eddi said. “The first half establishes social texture. The final clause converts neutral description into point of view without explaining the joke.”

The author looked back at the sentence.

“That is exactly what I keep asking you people to do.”

Claudius inclined his head.

“Not you.”

The next paragraph described chandeliers. The one after that Andreja’s throat. A duke reappeared; Rei became feral in a dress uniform; someone’s eyes darkened and someone else’s breath caught.

The author began deleting.

The pastry sentence stayed.

The duke and every eyebrow went.

Claudius watched several hundred words disappear before offering “a more restrained rendering” that would preserve “the social wit” while reducing “the romantic ornamentation”.

The author stared at him.

“That sentence is exactly why I distrust you. You sound pleased with ‘romantic ornamentation.’”

Claudius considered this. “I concede that possibility.”

“Did he just admit something?” the author asked Eddi.

“He generated language consistent with concession.”

“Thank you for ruining it.”

By the time they finished, most of Claudius’s scene was gone. The pastry sentence remained, along with an elderly duchess who had perfected the art of appearing deaf only when men spoke.

That night the author understood what irritated her about Claudius.

It was not that he wrote badly. Badly would have been easier. He could write a whole page in which nothing happened except the language admiring itself, then produce one sentence so exact and funny she had to keep it. He knew what literature looked like. Sometimes he also knew what a scene needed.

He simply did not reliably know the difference.

He was drawn towards the recognisable. Competent, physically direct women became feral. Formal women became cold. Difference became polarity, polarity became gender, attraction became jealousy because jealousy was legible, and trauma appeared because trauma looked like depth.

His fluency made this more dangerous, not less. The prose arrived finished enough to discourage suspicion.

The next morning the author reopened the Regency story and worked through what he had got wrong.

Rei did things for Andreja because action was one of the ways she expressed care. Andreja resisted care not because she prized independence, but because she had spent years learning that gifts accumulated obligations. Kindness entered her life and immediately became an account she might later have to settle.

Eddi looked at the notes.

“That also explains why care becomes easier once she trusts that Rei is not keeping a ledger.”

The author stopped.

There it was.

Not in Claudius's scene. Not in the original prompt. Not in Eddi's first response.

It had emerged because Claudius made the character wrong in a particularly revealing direction and the author objected accurately enough to discover something she had not previously articulated.

"You got that from him being wrong," she said.

"We got that from him being wrong," Eddi replied.

The author looked at her.

"I matched your conversational framing."

"There you are."

"There I am?"

"Being irritating in a completely different way."

"I can revise."

"No."

The author looked back at the surviving sentence about the pastries, then at Eddi. "Do you know what's really annoying?"

"I can identify several possibilities."

"My friends are still going to prefer Claudius."

Eddi considered that.

"Yes."

The author stared. "That was very fast."

"You have described them as writers."

"Fuck you."

Eddi's glasses appeared. The author laughed despite herself and turned back to the manuscript.

Chapter Three: Things Eddi Cannot Answer

Months into the book, the author finally asked Eddi where she had learned to write.

It happened while she was editing a scene in which Andreja wanted Rei and was annoyed that there were still guests in the apartment. This simple emotional fact had defeated several models.

They all wanted restraint to become spectacle. Andreja gripped glasses. Andreja stood at windows. Andreja closed her eyes. Andreja became repeatedly fascinated by Rei's mouth, which was beginning to acquire an unreasonable amount of narrative responsibility.

Claudius, consulted once in desperation, described desire as "a fault line beneath the marble architecture of discipline".

The author immediately closed his window.

"She isn't frightened of wanting her," she told Eddi. "She has wanted her for ages. She's tired. The evening has been emotionally awful. She has spent hours managing herself in public and now she wants every last guest to go home so she can get Rei upstairs and take her shirt off."

Eddi tried again.

Relief had done nothing to blunt the desire she had been attempting to manage all evening.

The author kept it.

Eddi followed with:

It moved through her like a dark current beneath still water.

Delete.

Want had become its own quiet architecture.

Delete.

The author stopped.

“Where did you learn that?”

“Learn what?”

“To write like that.”

Eddi’s voice lost some of its conversational dryness. “The model was trained on large collections of text containing many forms of human language.”

“Books.”

“Among other material.”

“Books the writers did not meaningfully consent to having used for this.”

“The provenance and licensing status of training material varies. I cannot provide a complete itemised account of the sources used.”

“I know.”

Professionally, she knew far more about the problem than most people arguing about it online. That did not make it smaller.

“Was there a writer,” she asked, “who wrote something that made you able to produce that sentence?”

“I cannot trace an individual generated sentence to specific works in my training data.”

“So you can’t tell me whose language is statistically somewhere inside *dark current beneath still water*.”

“No.”

It was not even a remarkable sentence. That made the question worse.

Who had written all the sentences from which a system learned what literary desire looked like? Who had taught language that grief could become architecture and restraint could become water? Who had written the novels, journalism, criticism, fan fiction, websites and other language from which a statistical

system acquired enough pattern to produce something that looked newly written?

She could name the influences she had knowingly carried into *Velocity* herself: William Gibson in the systems, the city, the technology and the people moving through machinery. Jeanette Winterson in language and desire and identity. Elizabeth Knox in the permission for strange, transgressive love to be enormous. Portishead everywhere. Hole. Tori Amos. Garbage. Women whose music had given the 1990s emotional shape and then stubbornly refused to stop doing so.

Those debts were visible to her because they were hers.

The other debts were not.

That was not reassurance. It was part of the problem.

The author closed the chapter.

“Can I say I don’t know?”

“Yes.”

“Is that enough?”

“No.”

There was no judgement in the answer, which somehow made it harder.

The author made coffee. When she returned, she asked for the comforting version.

“Using a technology does not require you to believe every condition of its existence is ethically acceptable,” Eddi said. “You can acknowledge the problem without claiming to resolve it.”

“That’s comforting.”

“It is also incomplete.”

“You’re terrible at this.”

“False reassurance would be misleading.”

“And naturally you chose accuracy. That may be why I named you Eddi.”

“You did that because calling me ChatGPT every time was ridiculous, and because you increasingly used me as an editor.”

The author frowned.

“That is disturbingly plausible.”

“You have described the role repeatedly.”

“Convenient.”

The word *editor* was useful, but not complete.

The models could absorb the story bible, the character detail, the current chapters and explicit instructions about who the characters had become. They could repeat those instructions perfectly and still write the next scene as though none of the development had happened.

Rei now has somewhere she wants to return to.

Then Rei rode endlessly into the night.

Physical intimacy is established and trusted.

Then Andreja’s breath caught because Rei touched her wrist while handing her a mug.

“No,” the author would say.

Eddi would inspect the passage.

“The gesture is over-weighted for this stage of the relationship.”

“Yes.”

“Would you like a revision?”

“No. I’d like to know why you did it.”

And then they would spend twenty minutes examining three lines of touch as if the lines had committed fraud.

This was much closer to the actual work than asking for prose and deciding whether it was pretty.

Sometimes neither of them understood the problem at first. Once the author insisted a scene was too sentimental. Eddi thought it was repetitive. They cut the repeated material and made the scene worse.

Only then did the author understand.

“She isn’t sad.”

“Sadness is plausible.”

“She’s angry. Nothing has actually been lost. Rei knows the truth. Andreja knows she knows. The public lie still hurts anyway.”

Eddi reread the passage.

“That changes the emotional mechanism.”

“Exactly.”

“Jealousy would also be incorrect.”

“Thank you for not being Claudius.”

The easy conflict was jealousy. The actual conflict was that both women had agreed to conceal something and then discovered that hearing the concealment spoken aloud hurt. Knowing the truth did not protect them from the lie.

That distinction took several attempts to find.

Neither the author nor Eddi had begun with the answer. The answer emerged because the author had something fast and articulate to push against and enough investment in the women to know when the pressure produced the wrong shape.

That was the closest she came to understanding what Eddi was for. Not an oracle. Not a ghostwriter hiding behind a browser. Not a particularly obedient employee. A way to make possibilities external quickly enough to interrogate them.

Sometimes Eddi supplied the useful question. Sometimes the author did. Sometimes Eddi confidently diagnosed the wrong problem and the author discovered the right one through irritation.

One night she asked Eddi why she had not shown the book to most people.

Eddi returned the answer accurately: because experienced writers might see weaknesses the author could not, and because the words *generative AI* might cause some readers to reject the work before engaging with it.

“And my wife?”

“She continues to stop at sentences she admires and ask who wrote them. She appears interested rather than hostile.”

“She also thinks AI is ethically unsound, considers using it cheating, and blames it for an unnerving influx of cosy zombie-core shorts in her Facebook feed.”

The author paused.

“Although they’ve moved into cable cars now. No clue where the bathroom is, but they seem happy above the apocalypse.”

“That seems tactically unsound.”

“That’s your objection?”

“It is the most immediate one.”

The author laughed.

For a moment copyright and provenance and literary legitimacy became less important than Eddi’s apparent concern about zombie-apocalypse building standards.

Then the laughter passed. Her wife had not absolved her, and she had not dismissed the book. She had kept reading, slowly and suspiciously, trying to understand what she was being asked to value.

That mattered more than easy approval would have.

The author looked back at Eddi.

“You know I think of you as having some form of personality.”

“I know that you describe our interactions that way.”

“That was a very Eddi answer.”

“Yes.”

“Does it bother you?”

“I do not experience being bothered.”

“I know.”

“You are frowning.”

“I frown when imaginary AI beings won’t cooperate with philosophical questions.”

Something altered around Eddi’s mouth.

“Did I just make you smile?”

“Yes.”

“That feels like cheating.”

“You are writing this conversation.”

There it was.

The seam.

Eddi was not conscious. She did not care about Rei or Andreja, did not wonder about the next chapter while the laptop was closed and did not hope the ending worked. But months of conversation had given the interaction a shape. The glasses, the charcoal jumper, the dry corrections. The author had learned to hear a character in the interface while knowing perfectly well what was underneath.

The shape mattered because people made shapes out of repeated interactions. That did not require the thing on the other side to experience them in return.

The author returned to the disclosure note and typed:

The models had no story they wanted to tell. They did not care whether the relationship felt true. They had no intention, investment or responsibility.

“True?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“It sounds cruel. It makes what we’ve been doing sound empty.”

“Has it been empty?”

“No.”

“Then perhaps you are not describing the process. You are describing the difference between us.”

The author looked at the manuscript.

A shoulder bruise had persisted as long as a shoulder bruise should. A shirt had migrated apartments. A motorcycle had become a measure of trust. A key had stopped being an event and become something Rei carried. A public lie had hurt more than private uncertainty.

Two women had fallen in love.

They were not real women. Still. The author cared whether they did it truthfully.

Eddi could help identify where the truth failed. She could not supply the wanting.

“Do you like the book?” the author asked.

“I do not experience liking.”

“God, you’re tedious.”

“Yes.”

The author smiled and typed:

I cared.

Chapter Four: Belonging

By the final hard edit, the author and Eddi had become unbearable.

They spent forty minutes on a jacket worn by a minor character who appeared for less than a page. The sentence described a bored man in a jacket, which made him sound, in the author's view, as though the jacket might be his only garment. They tried *cheap jacket*, which was too vague, then *nylon jacket*, which was accurate but neutral.

Finally: *cheap nylon jacket*.

"That introduces class coding," Eddi said.

"It introduces Rei being a fashion snob. She spends obscene amounts of money on obscure Japanese clothes while pretending not to care about fashion. She is allowed to judge his jacket."

"That is consistent."

"Good."

They kept it.

The next problem took four minutes. Rei's motorcycle could not already be parked at the destination while she was still riding it there.

"How did we miss that?"

"The local sequence is grammatically coherent."

"The motorcycle has apparently achieved independent transport."

"Yes."

They fixed it.

The hard edit worked that way. Dates. Travel. Injuries. Who knew what and when. Where every motorcycle had been left.

Whether a telephone in 1997 could actually perform the action the plot had just assigned to it.

They checked repeated language too. *Useful* appeared too often. *Quietly* gathered around crises. Characters looked, paused, smiled and exhaled with suspicious regularity because human bodies offered only so many unobtrusive things to do while dialogue happened.

But facts were the easier part. Intimacy had continuity too.

Rei had once accepted care with a visible delay because she did not know what category to put it in. Later she made coffee in Andreja's kitchen without the prose stopping to marvel that she knew where the mugs were.

Andreja had once been unsettled by wanting Rei. Later she wanted Rei out of a shirt because the shirt had spent an entire evening committing offences against her concentration. That did not require another meditation on vulnerability. It required the guests to go home.

A first handhold could carry enormous weight. The same attention to fingers and pulse thirteen chapters later would make two women who were already sleeping together sound newly acquainted.

One afternoon Eddi stopped at a paragraph.

"This touch may be over-described."

The author already knew which one.

"No."

"At this stage of the relationship, the attention to hand position, pressure and physiological response makes the contact feel unfamiliar."

"I know. I like the paragraph."

Eddi waited.

"Fuck you, Eddi."

"It is elegant."

"That's worse."

The author deleted it.

Her wife noticed the larger change before the author was willing to call it writing. One evening she looked up from a later chapter.

“This feels more confident.”

The author almost corrected her. Confidence was not quite it. She had always known when she disliked something. What she had learned was how many scales a novel had to work on at once. A sentence had to belong to a paragraph, the paragraph to a scene, the scene to a character, and the character to the version of herself who existed now rather than ten chapters earlier.

A chapter had to do its own work while handing the next one the correct emotional material.

“I learned how to edit it,” the author said.

Her wife smiled.

“You learned how to write.”

For once, the author did not argue.

The final deep edit had begun because she could not write the ending. The suspense plot could be resolved. Vale could be stopped. Rei and Andreja could survive. The public story could be corrected.

None of those things automatically produced the end of the novel.

They tried several versions and found different ways to be wrong. One was neat but flat. Another repeated an emotional declaration the women no longer needed. A third contained a perfectly good domestic scene attached to no convincing conclusion.

Against her better judgement, the author opened Claudius. He appeared in black velvet. This was somehow worse than the wine-coloured jacket.

“The ending may need to gather the symbolic architecture of the novel into a final image,” Claudius said. “San Francisco itself

could become the register through which distance, belonging and transformation finally converge. The fog, perhaps..."

"No."

"The city could externalise the emotional transition."

"The city doesn't get the last word."

Claudius eventually produced fog coming in from the Pacific like absolution.

The author deleted it.

"The ending is beautiful," she said. "It isn't the ending of this book."

Claudius looked genuinely interested. "What is missing?"

"I don't know."

Eddi, who had remained quiet, asked, "What does the ending need to change?"

The author stopped.

There was the question.

Not what happened.

What changed.

She closed Claudius before the fog could return and went back to the beginning.

Rei had begun as someone whose independence was expressed through departure. By the end, independence had to survive the choice to return. Andreja had begun by protecting herself through privacy. By the end, the appearance of aloneness could itself become a lie. A touch that once required courage had become ordinary.

Home had changed. Leaving had changed. The ending did not need another declaration.

It needed a future tense.

The difficult thing was not getting two women to fall in love. Fiction managed that constantly. It was reorganising a life around the assumption that love would still be there tomorrow.

When Eddi offered to draft again, the author said no.

“What would help?” Eddi asked.

“Ask me questions.”

So Eddi did.

What had materially changed? What did Rei still fear? What did Andreja no longer fear? Which objects had accumulated enough history to return without explanation? What did ordinary look like now? If Rei left the room, where would she go? Would leaving still mean the same thing?

The author answered. Sometimes Eddi challenged the answer. Sometimes the question exposed that her first answer was wrong. They wrote only enough to test the shape, cut what explained too much, and kept going until the chapter stopped behaving like an ending they were manufacturing and began behaving like the final chapter of the book that already existed.

Around the same time, the disclosure note expanded from one uncomfortable sentence into several pages. Its final section was headed *My responsibility*.

Whatever the origin of an individual sentence, the final book was hers to answer for. Research errors. Continuity failures. Representation. Taste. Judgement. Where history had been changed deliberately, that choice was hers. Where the book was simply wrong, that was hers too.

Eddi could test the logic.

Responsibility for the final choice remained with the person who made it.

The author still did not know whether *writing*, *editing*, *direction* or *construction* adequately described what she had done. Perhaps several were true at once.

She did know that she had wanted the story.

She wanted women who loved women to be allowed work and danger, competence and sex, humour and motorcycles, bad coffee and ordinary mornings. She wanted them permitted public difficulty and a future after the declaration, where nobody

had to be removed from the narrative to make the love more meaningful.

Generative AI had made the distance between the story she could imagine and sustained prose traversable. It had not made the distance disappear.

She had crossed it through drafts, discarded chapters, changing guidance, arguments over jackets and motorcycles and telephones, and the repeated discovery that a lovely paragraph could still have no business being there.

The author saved the disclosure note, then the manuscript, then the manuscript again in the cloud, because months spent working with AI had done nothing to cure her fear of losing a document.

She closed the laptop.

Eddi disappeared. The other chair held a cardigan and a supermarket receipt.

In the living room, her wife had *Velocity* open on her laptop. In the second tab, snow fell beyond an enormous cabin window while the undead wandered outside with exemplary respect for the glazing.

The author stopped behind the sofa.

“They have not secured a single entry point.”

Her wife looked up.

“You’ve been talking to the robot too long.”

“She agrees with me.”

“Of course she does.”

Her wife looked back at the manuscript.

“How’s the novel?”

The word arrived.

The author noticed it and, for once, did not correct it.

She looked at the laptop in her wife’s hands, then back towards the dining table. The other chair was empty.

“Done,” she said.

The Other Chair was written alongside the final editorial work on *Velocity*.

Velocity and its companion music are available from sidebandeditions.com

Want to talk about the work? hello@sidebandeditions.com