

FLARE AND FALTER

Michael Conley

"Conley walks the difficult tightrope between darkness and humour; he is an exciting up-and-coming talent whose work deserves serious praise."

Claire Askew
author of *This Changes Things*



This story is an excerpt from
Flare and Falter
by Michael Conley,
published by Splice.

For further information,
and to purchase the book,
please visit

[www.ThisIsSplice.co.uk
/showcase/michael-conley](http://www.ThisIsSplice.co.uk/showcase/michael-conley)

When It Starts

IT STARTS IN a mid-sized former mining town in Yorkshire.

No explanation for it. No marks on the bodies. No history of such things.

Outside its walls, nobody is affected.

Some consider sending aid but it's unclear what they can do.

The town's MPs decide to stay and fight for change in Westminster.

The news describes it as affecting *a population the size of roughly three Wembleys in an area roughly half the size of Surrey* in case we cannot comprehend what a quarter of a million people in a mid-sized former mining town in Yorkshire would look like, which we never can.

In what ensues, there are no heroes. We want to help, but we are afraid. Everyone seems to disapprove of the vote to quarantine the town, but that doesn't stop the proposal passing with a comfortable majority. Perhaps the ones who voted against it are the closest people we have to heroes, or maybe they're actually the biggest hypocrites because they all knew they never stood a chance of winning.

There's a special episode of *Newsround* to explain it all to the children.

You can tell how panicked the government is because the construction vehicles are used to make a *de facto* perimeter fence almost immediately, and the real fence goes up overnight. There are rumours about the migrant workers who built the fence having

been tricked or forced into building themselves inside it, so as to avoid further risk. Either way, they're in there now.

There are half-hearted protests against the government, but they only last a few days, and the slogans on the placards seem more imploring than angry: "Don't hurt them," "Surely there must be another way," "Please, not this," and so on and so forth.

The residents of the town, of course, upload everything live onto social media. It is unwatchable, in both senses of the word: they are so ordinary and none of them really have anything interesting to say about any of it. There are lots of messages about how important love is, how important it is to live for the moment because you don't know when everything might be taken away. The same stuff as always.

In light of what we all know is about to happen, you might think that some of the nastier corners of the internet would give them a break, but if you actually think this then you know nothing about the nastier corners of the internet. Now there are many memes of young people quietly weeping to camera, their heads superimposed onto bodies involved in a bewildering variety of pornographic exploits.

In the night, someone damages whatever brings the signal to the town—the power lines, the fibreoptics, the satellite signals, we don't know—and with that we hear no more from them.