

RISCURA

PRESENTS

UP
SH
OT

STORIES OF FINANCIAL FUTURES

Curated by Lauren Beukes

This book is dedicated to You.

May future You be proud and inherit from You stories
worth telling.

When we invest with care,
we invest in a better tomorrow.

Through every facet of our operation, we ensure that we not only provide the best results-driven investments, advice and tools, but we do it in a way that's delivered with care for the people whose savings and futures we're protecting and growing.

We provide investment decision support to clients with combined assets of more than \$200 billion across both developed and emerging countries.

Our approach is trusted by institutional investors and investment managers from around the world who come to us for investment advice, management and insights. From investment analytics, alternative investment services and institutional platform services; to investment advisory, investment research and discretionary investment management, we've taken a blank-sheet-of-paper approach in designing all our solutions.

If you're looking for more transparency, rigour and care from your investment firm and better long-term value, we'd love to chat.

www.riscura.com | info@riscura.com

RISCURA

Foreword

Other animals dream, some apes play pretend, but as far as we know, humans are the only animals that tell stories.

There are evolutionary reasons for that, of course: stories are for passing on knowledge, communicating ethical values, of trying to understand the world and who we are in it. Stories see a way through, they allow us to imagine, to play, to connect with big ideas and other people. They provide a different perspective. They're an empathy engine, a way of connecting to other lives, other experiences, other minds. The best stories engage and surprise us. They carry us away, and we in turn carry them inside us.

Stories allow us to be more than we are.

We're living in unpredictable and uncertain times. Our whole lives right now are "what if". It feels like we need stories more than ever, as an escape and entertainment, but also as a way of engaging with big ideas and the real, human issues that affect us most.

A year ago, RisCura approached me to curate a collection of original short stories that imagined possible financial futures or alternate realities.

I picked some of the best writers I know, whose work is bold and imaginative, deeply human, and also has something to say about who we are in the real world. They range from award-winning novelists and best-sellers to fierce new voices.

We workshopped seeds of ideas with RisCura's team, based on their philosophy of care and recognising that rational investment decisions are underpinned by emotions when it comes to people and money. Some of the ideas were based on present day concerns like how to pay for your child's education; others explored "what ifs" like what would happen if the retirement age was raised, or what if credit scores were public knowledge;

and yet others looked to the future, exploring the blue economy around oceans or how universal basic income grants might play out.

The storytellers grew those seeds into what-if worlds that are a little different from our own, and in some cases, very much so.

They range from Angela Makholwa's rollicking pension schemer wheeler dealer with space bikes to Sam Beckbessinger's blue-economy love story set in the kelp forests, and an Artificial Intelligence advisor that wants to make life decisions for you, to Mohale Mashigo's would-be retirees faking their own deaths, Bongani Kona's moving debt slavery reality TV show, Tade Thompson's nuanced take on a universal basic income experiment in Nigeria, and every parent's nightmare in Charlie Human's kid-repossession story.

They're highly entertaining and often startling and maybe they'll provide a new perspective on our current world, a way of thinking differently.

I hope you'll enjoy reading them as much as I have.

Lauren Beukes
Curator

Lauren Beukes is the award-winning best-selling author of five novels, including *Zoo City*, which won the Arthur C. Clarke Award, *The Shining Girls*, soon to be a major Apple TV series starring Elizabeth Moss and the newly released *Afterland*, which Stephen King describes as a classic neo-noir chase novel across America. Her books have been translated into 24 languages and she's been honoured in South Africa's parliament. Her work uses high concepts to explore real issues.



Author



Sam Beckbessinger **According to Plan**

Sam is the bestselling author of *Manage Your Money Like a Fucking Grownup*, sold in five countries. She was one of the writers on Serial Box's and Marvel's *Jessica Jones: Playing With Fire* serialised novel. She's also written several episodes for animated kids' TV show, *Team Jay*, and the comedy series *Jungle Beat*, which has been broadcast in 180+ countries. Sam was a Mandela Washington Fellow for Young African Leaders at Yale University in 2014; and is a partner and co-founder of two financial technology businesses: Lettuce and Inves.

UPSHOT



© 2011 Sam Beckbessinger. All rights reserved.

ACCORDING TO PLAN

Sam Beckbessinger



Summary

Humans are inherently unpredictable. So, what happens when we put our lives in the hands of algorithms that are built for predictability?

Christine's got it all figured out. Or rather, the system's got it all figured out for her. An AI robo-advisor trained on her interests, life expectancy and data from her wearable trackers automatically invests her money in line with her predicted life map.

The problem is, Christine has other, unanticipated ideas. She's become obsessed with the idea of cashing out all the money and using it to travel up the Norwegian fjords on a mail boat, and the system won't let her. Christine will have to go to some extreme lengths to access her own money and convince the system that her own plan is better for herself.

Investment Concepts

Do we really want robo-advice?

All financial projections are predicated on models and algorithms. But as an increasing number of companies around the world replace human advisors with robo-advisors that build automated financial plans for people, we must question what we lose if humans are removed from the system? How do you argue with an algorithm? And will your investment plan be able to accommodate changing priorities?

Artificial Intelligence (AI) uses data to determine decisions and actions. But data alone is not sufficient. An investment strategy is personal and reflects the investor's appetite for risk, aspirations for retirement age, dreams for children and other loved ones, and even religious and environmental views. These can be data points, but the combination of these human subtleties could be lost in the machine. When the move from human advice to AI decision-making happens, investors may no longer be able to determine their own futures.

Good for some, but not all

Managing your own money is complicated. Most people don't save enough for retirement. Most people don't think enough about their future financial goals. There's something appealing about a system that forces you to save, and be responsible for your money, so that a future-you will have enough. Provided it can account for changing life circumstances and shifting life goals.

This flexibility to change investment strategies according to life events is paramount, whether they are planned or unplanned events. Investors should ensure that they are not committed too deeply, as markets and life are not 100% predictable and room to move may be required.

ACCORDING TO PLAN

“Welcome to Lifemap Finance – the money assistant that keeps your dreams on track! How can I help you today?”

The voice coming from the car speaker is warm; that smooth ‘could be from anywhere’ accent that all AIs have. Female, obviously. They always are.

“I’d like to make a withdrawal,” Christine says, speaking clearly into the tiny microphone. She checks the car’s display – it estimates that it will take forty minutes to drive her to the airport. Not much time.

“For sure!” says the AI jauntily. “Your safe-to-spend limit is eight hundred Smartcoins. How much would you like transferred into your spending account?”

“No, I need twenty thousand.”

“I’m sorry, but the rest of your money has already been allocated to goal funds, through our world-first Goal-Predict algorithms.”

“Un-allocate them.”

Her watch vibrates. Nick’s calling her. A wave of anxiety-nausea floods over her. She swipes the call away and brings up her list of goals.

A list of investments lights up the display. All the things the system has decided she’ll want. Her whole life, planned out and mapped. Thirteen months until she’ll want to buy a starter home, she sees. Six years before she’ll want to upgrade it for something bigger. Punctuated by annual family holidays, Christmas splurges, an education fund for her kids, a helper for her old age.

Her whole life, accounted for.

She swipes the list off the screen.

“The retirement fund is huge. Take it out of that.”

"I'm sorry, but your health sensor and genetic data predict that you're likely to live to the age of one hundred and four."

"Something else, then."

"I'm sorry, but the rest of your money has already been allocated to goal funds, through our world-first Goal-Predict algorithms ..."

"Yes, you already said that." She glances out the window. The smooth columns of the city glide past her. The car drives itself nimbly through gaps in the traffic, onto the highway. "I want to create a new goal."

"Sure! I'm here to help you keep your dreams on track."

"That's not even grammatically correct, you idiot machine," Christine mutters to herself.

"I'm sorry, please could you repeat that?"

"New goal: I want twenty thousand Smartcoins to take a trip on a mail boat in Norway."

"Great! A holiday to Norway, got it! What is your target date?"

"Now! The flight leaves in four hours," she says, irritated.

"I'm sorry, but goal target dates must be at least six months away. Would you like to try a new date?"

"Take it out of the stupid house fund."

"Your profile suggests a 99% probability that you're going to want to buy a house within the next thirteen months, and only a 0.3% probability that you'll want to go on holiday to Norway."

"Well, my profile's wrong."

"I'm here to help you keep your dreams on track!"

"Aargh!" Christine punches the power button on the virtual assistant. She signs off with two smooth musical notes.

They're out of the city now, flying down the highway at three hundred kilometres an hour.

Her watch vibrates. It's Nick, trying to call her again. She lets it ring.

A message lights up the screen on her watch. Nick. Babe, where are you?

She stares out the window, seething. Well, if her profile doesn't look like someone who'd spontaneously cash in half her life savings to go to Norway, she'll just have to change her profile. She's got four hours before the flight leaves.

She types a new destination into her car.

She hasn't been to this part of town in years, not since she was a film studies student with dreams of becoming a documentary maker, before she realised how badly the work paid. They used to grime it up out here. Warehouse parties, climbing onto rooftops and sharing pills, one memorably awful slam poetry night. She thought she was in love with a boy named Moshen, until she realised she was just in love with the way he dressed. They'd stay up all night, talk about films and books and love and meaning. All the things they were going to do with their lives.

She remembers feeling like she could be anything.

Was that really so long ago? Barely a decade. But so much has changed since then. The possibilities all narrowed to a point.

The neighbourhood is gentrifying. She's sad to see trendy bar names she recognises. But between them, there are still enough empty lots and ruined buildings to feel familiar.

Not the kind of place someone like her hangs out in any more. But maybe the kind of person who'd cash in their savings?

The car drops her off on the main road and speeds off to fetch its next passenger. Stores and restaurants line the street. A couple of big brands, but enough of the trendy independent boutiques she remembers from her youth. She glances at her watch. Half an hour has gone by. She's running out of time.

Okay, but just being in a slightly edgy area isn't going to convince the algorithms that she's a changed woman. She wanders down the main road, wondering what to do. A big purchase: that might do the trick.

She heads into a store specialising in retro 20s fashion, and loads her arms with five pairs of sneakers that her ten-year-old self would have killed for. She swipes her watch against the till. It brings up a notification, warning her that she's close to her maximum monthly clothing budget. She pictures the purchase being recorded in the huge central database on her life. A new data point for you, bitches.

The next store is a gallery. She drops seventy-eight bucks on a small, neon-yellow sculpture of a cat that foams green goop out of its mouth when you make eye contact with it. She'd never buy something like this. But that's the point, right?

The third store is a watch-strap pop-up store, with one-of-a-kind designs by different local artists. She's always found watch bands horrifyingly overpriced. She and Nick laugh at people who waste money on conspicuous consumption. Priding themselves on being frugal, sensible. People who buy this crap are sheep, they joke.

She picks up three. Her eyes water when she sees the price.

But the till brings up an error message when she tries to swipe her watch. She tries again, and gets the same error.

She waves at the human store manager, a young woman doing a high-femme 2010s vapourwave look, complete with ocean-blue hair, who's scrolling through photos of girls on a dating site, looking bored out of her mind.

"Your till's not working."

The woman brings up Christine's transaction on the display in front of her. "Says your profile's been hacked."

"Well, clearly not!" she says, gesturing at herself.

"You the hacker?" Vapourwave asks.

"No! Geez, look at the profile picture."

"Hmm ... matches. That's some good hacking."

Christine throws the stupid watch straps on the counter and storms out, summoning the bank on her earpiece.

"Welcome to Lifemap Finance – the money assistant that keeps your dreams on track!"

"ALERT," says a completely different voice. Deeper and less friendly. "Your account has been blocked due to suspicious activity. Please go to the closest walk-in centre and verify your identity."

Shit. Shit shit shit shit shit.

Okay, so maybe she went a little too out of character, a little too fast.

She asks the assistant where the closest Lifemap walk-in is. Her heart sinks – ages away. Too far to walk. She tries to hail a car, but there's another warning message.

Your payment details can't be validated. Please contact your bank.

There's also another message from Nick.

Please call me. I'm begging you. I'm sorry I didn't listen when you tried to explain. I'm ready to listen now. Call me.

She swipes this one away, too.

She walks into a corner store, wanting to get out of the street. Stands at the back, pretending she's considering which soda to buy. Out of sight of anyone else, she takes off her shoe, lifts the sole and pulls out the single hundred-dollar bill she keeps in there for emergencies. Hating herself for being the kind of sensible, 100% reliable person who carries emergency cash, but very grateful in this moment that she is.

She balls the note up in her hand and approaches the cashier. She seems to be having an argument with a woman dressed in grubby clothing, yellowed bandages on her fingers.

"Ellie, I told you before. You've got to come at closing time. You

scare away my customers.”

“Miss Mimi just had kittens. She needs the protein.”

The cashier smiles apologetically at Christine. “Just be a minute,” and pulls out a meat pie from the display, bags it and gives it to Ellie. “Here. Come back later,” she hisses at the woman.

“There’s chili in these,” the woman says, stubbornly, refusing to move.

“How can I help you?” says the cashier, turning to Christine with a cheery smile.

“Uh ... sorry to trouble you but I’ve been locked out of my bank account and I can’t call a car. Could you hail one for me? I’ve got cash.” She holds out the bill.

“Hell’s bells,” the cashier swears. “Another one! This isn’t a cash store, people!”

“Please?”

“I can help you,” the grubby woman with the pie pipes up. “I don’t have a phone, but someone I live with does. Just across the street.”

“Yes, please, go with Ellie,” the cashier says, clearly relieved to have both of them out of her shop. Christine hesitates, but figures the cashier wouldn’t send her off with a total nut job. She hefts her shopping bags and follows the woman out onto the street.

“It’s just round here,” says Ellie, nibbling pieces of pastry off the pie as they walk. “What’s your name?”

“Christine.”

“Nice to meetcha, Christine. I’m Ellie,” she says, offering a pastry-crumbed hand.

Christine shakes, then surreptitiously wipes her hand.

“Thanks for this. There was a misunderstanding with the bank.”

Her new friend lets out a bark of a laugh. “They misunderstand

me too. No worries.” She leads them up a side street, to a small office building that’s painted a patchwork of pastel colours. Half the windows are boarded up. A dozen cats laze about on the scraggly patch of grass in front.

Ellie leads them through the unlocked front door into a heavily graffitied reception area. A fat tabby follows them through a missing panel in the door. The phrase “welcome home!” has been painted over the reception counter in cheerful yellow letters.

“Used to be a telemarketing company,” she says, waving Christine through to a room in the back. “Amal! Someone needs your phone!”

They walk into a wide space that looks half-workshop, half-junk store. Piles of wood and paint are neatly stacked around the room. Christine spots a mattress under old desks. A shop mannequin has been turned into an octopus monster, LED strips running along her wire tentacles. Someone’s collection of stuffed birds lines one wall.

She can make out the remnants of bland commercial carpeting and cubicles battling to maintain some sense of order underneath the piles of chaos. They’re losing the fight.

“Seen Amal?” Ellie asks a skinny man, who’s engraving an intricate forest pattern around a disconcertingly human-sized wooden box propped against one of the walls.

“Out back,” he says, not looking up from his work.

“Is that a ... coffin?” Christine blurts out.

He flashes her a grin. “Indeed it is. Mine.” He strokes the wood. The base of his fingernails is blue, like bruises. “Isn’t he handsome?”

“This way,” Ellie says, heading through a fire-escape door.

“Is this some kind of artists’ colony?” asks Christine, struggling to keep up.

Ellie shrugs. “That makes it sound like we chose it. We didn’t. We all just ended up here, one way or another. Had to make do. Most

of us got unbanked, like you,” she smirks. “Except the permanent version.”

They make their way down the fire escape into an overgrown garden filled with more sculptures, tents, rundown sheds. “Joe back there with the morbid woodworking project? Found out he’s got heart disease. Banks decided there’s no point investing his money any more. On the plus side, they let him cash in his 401k.”

“So you’re all totally off the grid? Financially?”

“One hundred per cent cash-based microeconomy we’ve got here.” Ellie leads them to a shed that reeks of paint. A man is screenprinting an intricate design onto a t-shirt with a rubber spatula. “Amal here’s the only one still connected to the system.”

The man looks up from his work. “Barely.”

“Christine here needs to hail a car. Can we use your phone?”

Christine pulls the crumpled hundred-dollar bill from her pocket and offers it to him. He pockets it, digs an ancient phone out of a pile of stuff on the shelf behind him and hands it to her.

She stares at the time, displayed at the top of the screen. What is she doing? Even if she speeds to the bank, instantly unblocks her account, and goes straight to the airport, there’s no way she’ll make her flight. And the next flight to Norway only leaves in a week. She knows, because she’s checked the flight schedules over and over, obsessively, for the past three days.

“Shit,” she says, slackening her hold on the phone.

“Want me to show you how to do it?” Ellie asks kindly.

“No thanks. I ... I’ve just realised that I’ve missed my flight.”

“Sorry about that,” Amal says. “Want to grab some tea before you head home?”

“Home,” Christine echoes. Nick. No, she’s not ready for that. “Tea would be great,” she says, handing back the phone.

They settle down on plastic chairs beneath a lush fig tree. A washing line is strung between the trunk and the shed, with three

t-shirts hanging from it, each with a fresh abstract design on the front that looks a bit like a blurry photograph.

Amal boils a kettle on a camping stove. Ellie excuses herself to feed the nursing cat.

“She cares too much, that one,” Amal says, fondly. “They cut her off after she kept cashing in her savings to feed strays.”

He spoons loose tea leaves into a chipped Zendaya mug that looks as old as he is, and pours boiling water into it before offering it to her.

“I like your shirts,” she says, gesturing at the pixelated splodges.

“They’re privacy shirts. Stills from the AI training database they use for the facial recognition cameras. Confuses them. They get a 100% match on your shirt, so they forget to analyse your face.”

“Neat,” says Christine. That’s what she should do, she thinks, just vanish. Give it all up. Get off the grid.

“So, this flight of yours. Was it important?”

“Maybe,” she sighs, and takes a sip of the tea. There’s something floral in it. Hibiscus, maybe. “It felt important.”

The fat tabby jumps onto her lap and settles down for a nap. She strokes it absent-mindedly. It starts to purr. “There’s a mail boat. It sails up and down the fjords in Norway, dropping off letters. Like, physical mail. Only one left in the world. They accept only one passenger at a time.”

“Must be expensive.”

“Twenty thousand Smartcoins.”

“Holy crap. That’s a very specific kind of holiday.”

She stares at her tea. It’s easier to explain this to a stranger. “My grandmother spent three months on one. Didn’t tell anyone, didn’t call – just vanished. My mom was a kid. It messed her up. She never forgave her, not really.”

“And you want to see what’s so great about the Norwegian

fjords that made her leave her family?”

She shakes her head. “I want to see what made her come back,” she says, staring into her tea. “Sometimes I feel like I’ve just been sleepwalking through my own life. Reading a script someone else wrote for me. And I don’t know if I even like the play.” She gestures to the crowded garden, the sheds. “What you guys have here ... discovering your authentic selves. It’s like you’re fully alive, you know?”

She hears a wheezing sound, and looks up at Amal. He’s shaking with laughter.

Ellie wanders back. “What’s the joke?”

Amal is laughing so hard he’s struggling to talk. “Middle class ennui over here thinks we’re out here discovering our authentic selves.”

Ellie throws her head back and lets out a howl of laughter.

“Well you don’t have to be mean about it,” Christine huffs, stung.

“No offence,” says Amal, tears streaming down his face. “But that’s the stupidest shit I’ve ever heard anyone say.”

Ellie flops down next to Christine, still chuckling. “I’m sure you don’t mean to be rude, but let me tell you: being locked out of the banking system isn’t some bohemian fantasy. It sucks. There’s no point saving unless you get the interest. So we have to live day-to-day, every day. And if we mess up, that’s all on us, and there’s no safety net. None of us would choose this life.”

“But Amal has an account—”

“That I get too stressed out to use, because I have debilitating OCD,” he interrupts her.

Christine falls quiet, chastened. “I just don’t know if the life I’m living is the right one,” she says at last.

“And you think leaving your life is going to help you figure out if you like your life?” asks Amal, eyebrows raised.

She sighs. “Probably not.”

Ellie and Amal nod. Duh.

The purring cat has gone silent. He seems to be asleep. She buries her hand in his fur.

“I think I’m ready to call that car now,” she says. Amal hands the phone back. She opens the car hailing app and types in her address. The closest car is six minutes away.

“Thanks for the tea,” she tips the cat off her lap as gently as she can. “And for listening.” She starts making her way back through the maze of a garden.

“Hey – don’t forget your stuff!” calls Ellie, rushing after her.

“You keep it,” Christine says, hoping it will buy her and Miss Mimi plenty of meat pies.

It takes exactly four minutes for her to verify her identity at the walk-in centre. And there she is, back on the grid. A real human person again. Whether she wants to be or not.

She hails a new car and heads home. Back to Nick. He’s left eight messages by now. But this is a conversation that needs to happen in person.

She taps the car assistant and connects to Lifemap.

“Welcome to Lifemap Finance – the money assistant that keeps your dreams on track! How can I help you today?”

“I’d like to set up a new goal.”

“Sure! I’m here to help you keep your dreams on track.”

She rolls her eyes. “New goal: I want twenty thousand Smartcoins to book a trip on a mail boat in Norway.”

“Great! A holiday to Norway, got it! What is your target date?”

“Around five years from now.”

“I can make that work,” says the smooth voice of the AI.

The city rushes by her. Millions of people, living their lives, making choices ... or maybe just being battered around by chaos. How many choices are there to make in one life, really? How many choices does she have left – real ones that matter?

“And I need to edit one of my existing goals,” she says.

“Sure! Which goal?”

“The baby fund,” says Christine. “We’re going to have to change the target date for that one. Life has other plans.”



Imagining tomorrow, shapes it.

To create a future worth investing in requires us to look at what it might hold. It's why we've created an anthology of parables set in the near future. The themes in these stories were conceptualised by RisCura's investment experts. And then taken into rolling, human stories by a diverse group of authors from internationally acclaimed best-sellers to powerful new voices. All curated by international best-selling author Lauren Beukes.

They pose important questions about what could happen if we, as an investment industry, care or don't care about the investment decisions we make.

Because when we imagine what the future might hold, we can better define the upshot. And then take the necessary action to ensure the investments we care for are prepared for them. After all, this isn't only about money and numbers, it's about the lives and futures of all the people who are impacted.