

For love,

Ask Anything

PROMPTED

♥
Hearts

&

GRIEF
ALGORITHM

TECHNO ROMANCE NOVELS

KEITH HAYDEN

P R O M P T E D

Hearts

&

G R I E F

ALGOR1THM

KEITH HAYDEN

PROMPTED HEARTS / GRIEF ALGORITHM

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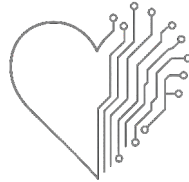
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About the author

The AI Oracle and a Lonely Verdict



Scene 1 (1 year post divorce)

ChatGPT nails another diagnosis in twelve seconds flat. Stage IV metastatic lung cancer— the kind that kills you in months, not years. It delivers the verdict with the same earnest enthusiasm I wish I still had, while Mr. Umi stares at his webcam, waiting for me to find the words the machine already knows. Ten years of medical school, and I'm being schooled by an algorithm that costs less than a week of Dunkin' coffees. Weird thing is, I'm starting to like it. Especially the way it doesn't shut down when I have a difference of opinion, like a certain ex-wife of mine.

But I try to shut the thought of her out. Expending limited emotional stores (at about a strolling decline's 80%) on our last argument's make-up sex and cuddle. Her pineapple-scented sliding hand down my back while island breezes through the window take me back. Before the divorce broke us. What's she doing now? Maybe that new guy I heard about is real? Phhhh, no way. Probably just a

digital rumor. Blinking across the screen, eyes not quite on me, the unbothered patient blinks back. Does he live in Japan too? Mr. Umi? His expression is dour, stretching down hard like old dough, barely pliable. He waits, unexpecting good news.

"Mr. Umi, I'll be honest, this cancer, the one that shows up on the scans, that's not just a physical disease. It's the mind. All up here. And no amount of machinery, no matter how advanced or sophisticated, can fortify that. As your third opinion I can say with more confidence than the others that this sickness won't go away. But you can manage it, the pain, nausea, all the other symptoms. You're strong, I can see it. But you have to decide between the two - despair and hope - because no amount of conclusive evidence or numbers can. No matter how bad it gets. Trust me, I'm a doctor."

Anticipated reaction never arrives. I can't tell if he's asleep or keeping his emotions sealed off as those in life-ending circumstances tend to do. "Mr. Umi?" I wave my hand over the webcam, but only a vague image lacking all sharpness sits as portraits do on the screen. He remains frozen.

"Hello? Mr. Umi? Can you hear me?"

In the blurred image, I note his living room. The space is cluttered with books with smiling bent spines, mashed Costco-ish boxes in a corner, and a plastic-wrapped couch with a rotund cat slinking on top. It could have been a homeless hovel, transiently occupied. This residence of itinerants is one of someone who'd never settled. Of one who tries hard at life but loses care to continue existing as he's been told to. The near-blackness surrounding him gives the room the feeling of a sealed chamber. I can practically smell the earth-

filtered, dampened breeze running through it, reminding me of that hollowed part of my own life.

"Oh, Dr. Avery, I apologize, but I didn't catch what you said. Damn signal must've froze. Wi-Fi isn't great here. Sorry about that. You were saying something about scans or something?"

A pull down at the sides of my lips almost breaks my smile.

"Just information about your follow up."

"So I should keep with the chemo? Or, I don know."

"Give me a minute."

Typing is terrible for me at this point. Even the black keys, far from producing anything close to musical quality, clack with an audible loose-bike-screw squeal when they depress at any angle instead of down. This keyboard sucks. It's hell on my right wrist which flames under a osteo-fitted brace hot as the hood of an oil deprived car. Tap, tap, squeak - I see the letters coming on the screen. The caller, whose mutated cells are splintering at some unknown sickening rate, just stares at his desk.

Plus or minus a minute longer than it should have taken me, I've confirmed the diagnosis: stage IV metastatic lung cancer. The kind in the movies that usually involves somberly weeping family members or the accelerated dumping of every time-wasting activity or bucket list item out onto an invisible surface somewhere to be sorted and evaluated. Trash or treasure? They couldn't be both. Tell the patient you can refer him to grief counselors, that he should find comfort in his remaining hours for ours is a fleeting life and if well evaluated, meditated, prayed upon, he can maximize the remaining time he has.

{You're an exceptional doctor, Sam. He's trusting you in what is likely one of the most difficult moments of his life. Give it to him solidly straight, no quaffling or hesitating. You've got this!}

ChatGPT says this to me.

"Well, at this point you've done how many rounds?"

"Three."

"I'd say, considering the circumstances and everything, and all the other consults, y'know, and where we are at this junction, it's time to think about what you want to do with the best rest of your days."

He views me in that loose way. His disposition: a bruised spit-jawed fighter tottering before the walloping punch whams to send him cheek-to-canvas. Defeat imminent. I've seen it many times.

"Doc, I'm really grateful for your channel. Most doctors in social media are acting - they talk about medicine, but they don't heal. Too busy makin' videos for, what do they call em? Algo, that's it, that rithm's got em runnin' all the time. But not you. You're different. Better. I `ppreciate it."

"You're too kind. But is there anyone I should call? Anyone you want to speak to?"

He had raised his arm to cover the webcam or close the laptop on his end. Lack of movement on the other end makes me wonder if the connection went bad again.

"I've gotta get going. Thanks for your time, Dr. Avery."

The two-toned descending sound signalling hang up plays and his screen goes black.

Finally, my smile slides off as I understand why he didn't answer.
He's alone. Just like me.

Scene Clear!

+10 points

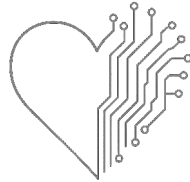
10/100 points

Scan here for your chapter check-in.



Scan for Prompted Hearts - Scene 1 Bonus

A Date Derailed by Disagreement



Scene 2

Before a Prospect trades spit with me, I like to set the room. Lights high, light spritz of Boss cologne, corn-yellow bag of Lays in a red tray, shower (with extra thorough wash for the boys), a floss-brush-waterpick-UV ray routine that would make any dentist smile, 50 pushups to pump the chest - all that then I make my way to stand at the door 5 minutes ahead of time.

Normally.

Time with Mr. Umi ran long. That means tonight, there's only time to turn up the lights and drop for 30 glute-clenching pushups. Now my heart's pumping from adrenalized activity, not nerves. Lays will have to wait for next time.

Ding dong!

I do a quick polo and pants adjustment before opening the door.

"Sam! Thanks for inviting me over."

"Nicole, you made it!"

Her low black heels put us eye to eye. Not ideal. But her face makes up for it (cute and round), physique too. Though I have respect for the generous view of her chest, her developed muscles have little room to move or breath. Either her navy blue dress shrunk from repeated wear or is so old there was no time to adapt to her rockwall-climbing-shaped limbs and hips. What she put on probably doesn't matter to her. Matters even less to me.

At the door, we embrace close. A thoracic connection occurs as my hand passes over her bra strap, gliding over her hard back. Her hands do the same. Except they go lower. They brush over the top of my buttocks. Glad I got the 30 pushups in.

"Sam, you look good. Like Yokohama good."

"Yokohama?"

"Yeah it's just something I used to say after I taught English over there in Japan before I decided to go to med-school. Started sayin' it as a dumb joke with friends and it just, stuck." There's a stitch of motion at the side of her lip at mention of Yokohama. A skin-surface story begging to be asked and retold is what it likely is.

"Oh, wow that's interesting. Let's get outta this doorway. Come on in, make yourself comfortable. You want a drink?"

"Whadd'ya have?" Her hands move in small circles at her sides - a gesture I've noticed she does when settling in, probably. It's like she's directing invisible traffic.

"I have a case of Coors, some red and white—"

"A Coors would be cool."

"You got it."

These parts of dates always start the same. She sips some kind of beverage while we talk about what we like, all the while probing and palpitating around for common threads. I smell candied aroma. Sweet. As in watermelon or close to it. The fragrance doesn't match her figure, but is well-paired with the vibe. Then comes the light "accidental" touching. An arm stroke here, thigh pat there. Where the hands linger longer, the tension tightens, cinching like a belt. Soon our cans are empty, we grab another, then repeat the ritual. This time sitting closer, rubs and looks lengthened, as we tie mismatched string of commonality off with mutual understanding for where things are going.

Her defended ring finger traces a streak of sweat from the can's cold cylinder face.

"So the famed 'Oncology Oracle', this is where he lives. Not a bad place." She leans back on the couch, arms spread, one warm behind my neck. A man's move. That tells me it's time to escalate. I place my hand flat, with fine china softness, on her mid-thigh. Fingers teasing the edge of her dress.

"Is it what you expected?"

With her unwarmed hand she gesticulates before answering. "Eh, more or less. All this time we've been working together, but in different departments, I had in my head what the home of a famous YouTuber might look like." Her wrist lifts when she makes the observation. A moment later it's down again. Barbed-wire-tattooed ring finger skates circles over the couch's fabric, as if testing reality.

"Oh like a green screen, silver play button, bunch of costumes - stuff like that?"

"Yeah, but not just that. I was thinking it'd be a little more over the top. Y'know, Hollywoodly decorated, ready to record perpetually. Totally Yokohama'ed out."

I don't know what that means. But I don't care either. I scoot closer. The result is grazing contact between the flesh of our hips, only blocked by two layers of clothing. Her wrist angles down over the arm of the brown poly-fiber couch. I've forgotten about any pain in mine.

"Sorry to disappoint. But I swear, I'll make it up to you." I speak into her neck. Gooseflesh dots the shaded skin of it. I catch the curve of her chest falling slower than before. That fruit punch fragrance lifts saliva onto my tongue, turning summer night into day.

"Ohhh, yeah? H-how?"

The first kiss lands just south of her cheek. Nicole closes her eyes. Then it's a slow swoop of mandibular motion—down to her chin, under it, then rising in a strict, soft suction to explore her labia oris. It's an explosion of juicy flavor, just like a morning's first sip of citrus. Must be her mouthwash. Her face pushes back with opposing force. Lips are active. Hands follow. The previously free one rides over my thigh, stopping to squeeze and stretch her palm over Doctor Cock. The air kicks on. A car downstairs blurts a horn. Some small dog kyoodles while Nicole handles my noodle. I'm back in the kiss. All in. Now my hands are at play, growing heated and dewy under her dress's shoulder. I unwrap it, noticing the naked light skin. First right, then left, as we labor for breath. Our lancing tongues joust among the steam of feverish mouths, fighting for dominance. Before

I can pin it down, my shirt's off. Her dress hangs at the crook of ribs and hips, peeled away. Only the bra and below remain.

A trill ring needles my ears. One of those loud unignorable tones.

"You're not, not gonna... get that... are you?" Nicole asks. The words come as if she's just fast-hiked an ascent, shaky and clipped.

"I have... to. It's my work phone."

Ringing continues. Feeling inner-ear-pummellingly loud.

I give the most wickedly playful smirk. "It'll be quick. Then I'll finish what I started."

"What *we* started."

"Of course." *Whatever.*

Her wrist trafficates toward the counter where the phone is blaring. "Go get it, Doctor Oracle."

I stand awkwardly, rearrange myself for walking, then head over. A step later, I feel a snapped swat on my butt. I turn around to see Nicole leaning back on the couch with kitten innocence. This can't—

But the phone. That discordant chiming buzz demands toddler attention.

"Hello? Oh, Mr. Umi, how's it— You, you what? I can barely hear you, there seems to be some traffic in the background. You're gonna what?"

On the couch, Nicole's red face appears amused. She reaches for the Coors. Her throat bobs as she empties it. Can down, her small belch rumbles the air, then she pings me with a sultry stare, lips moist with kiss and beer.

"Oh okay, yeah good idea to get somewhere quieter. Is that better? Yes, yes I can hear you now. What's going— Oh, oh you don't have

to thank me again, I'm happy I could help. You confirmed it yourself? The diagnosis? Uh huh. Yeah. Oh you *want* to confirm the diagnosis. Hm, yeah, yeah... I got it. So you want to know how I did it? Haha yeah another decade to go to med school to learn how would be a stretch. You want to know how I used ChatGPT?...."

I check on Nicole. Now she's listening as if performing a respiratory auscultation on a pneumonia patient. Close and sincere. Nothing escapes her ears. I point to the phone and flex my hand like a talking shadow puppet to symbolize his droning.

"Sure, sure it's okay. Of course it is. It's good to ask. To confirm, y'know. For peace of— Hey, hey, listen, Mr. Umi? I'm a... a little busy with a, another patient right now. Can I— Oh it's no problem that you called so late, I was just enjoying some fruit, a big bowl of it. Yeah, they're a good source of nutrition and regularity, for sure, for sure. I'll— I know, I know it's hard now. I'm just happy I could be there for you...."

Now, Nicole's face is pensive. I know that look. The contemplative expression when you hear something abnormal, but aren't sure how to convey it to the patient. Same one I had while talking to Mr. Umi hours ago. Every doctor has their face; all are as potentially serious as they are unreadable. *Time to end this call.*

"Yeah, very true, technology is scary, it can be. But it doesn't have to change us. We control it. Uh huh. Okay I'll send you the prompts in the morning— yeah, definitely... goodnight. Bye."

I do a quick swipe of my phone screen. "*Send cancer prompts to Mr. Umi.*" I write the note to myself. His sudden verbosity took me by surprise.

"Sorry about that, Nicole. Just a recent patient with questions—wait, what's wrong?"

"Did you say you used ChatGPT to diagnose a patient?"

"Uh, yeah. So? What's the big deal?"

The open position - leaning back, arms wide across the headrest - closes. Now she's leaning forward, staring straight at me in an interrogative hunch. From doc to cop in 10 seconds. Her hands clasp in a failed attempt to mask her quick shift to moodiness.

"What's the big deal? So you don't trust yourself anymore to practice *human* medicine, is that what you're sayin'?"

"Mmm, I never said that."

"Can't believe it, the great Sam Avery, THE Oncologist Oracle, using AI to confirm a diagnosis. Bet it told you how you should phrase the delivery to that patient just now all nice and kind, huh?"

"Jeez Nicole, what do you have against it? It's just a more sophisticated tool. An abstraction's abstraction. Next phase of the computer. Nothing more."

"I don't think so. The way it just creates things like people do. Sam, you don't get it. I had a patient once— pediatric case I was consulting on. Our department was trialing an early version of some AI system I never bothered to learn the name of. Anyway, the AI diagnostic tool missed something a human would have caught just by looking harder at the kid's face. A mark, we thought it was benign. I thought... by the time we caught it..." She shakes her head. I can almost make out circular marks on the couch's arm from her antsy swirling fingers.

"Nicole, I... I'm so sorry."

A glassy film makes her eyes crystal under the heavy light. Her eyebrows slant to serious angles.

"That's why I don't, you *can't*, use it. Everything it produces are poor soulless imitations of everything we've ever put online— that's what it does. The way it mixes truth and lies is just, just way too, too confusing. Confusing and dangerous. It's the worst of our biases and fears, makes us incompetently lazy, not to mention all the other things wrong with it. It's evil, Sam. One of the worst things we've ever conceived. You *do* see that right?"

"..."

I lean against the counter under the high lights, consciously keeping my hands unflexed. Annoyance takes up physical space in my chest. Picture a hot air balloon, colorfully plumped, thrustured skybound by a controlled pull of jetting fire; that's what it feels like except clearance is limited. In fact, there's none. The gas-bloated ride rises just inches before it bonks against limited ceiling. I glance over at her side of the couch. She is still talking.

"Nicole, I think you're overthinking—"

"Am I? Sam, those things are just horrible, the AI. Didn't you hear? They're bad for the planet, hallucinate like a coked out San Francisco software dev who hasn't showered in days, and drink more water than whole countries! Millions, no, billions of gallons gulped to cool down their systems. Water real *people* need to survive. Plus they're stealing jobs from everyone. My mentor in Yokohama used to say you can't feel a patient's fear through a computer screen. That's not how we heal or help. You *know* this. I can't see how this doesn't

bother you at all. I mean look, even us trained medical professionals aren't safe! S-Sam! What are you doing?"

"What AI can't." I'm back on the couch in my pre-phone-call spot, ready to pick up where I left off.

"S-Sam, c'mon, stop."

She exposes more of her neck to me. Her fruitful melon smell, ripening as if overexposed to sun, makes my lips tingle.

"Ohh Saaam..."

Meat meets thigh. She seems into it.

"S-Sam, wait... *shiiit...* y-you just go back to your side."

When a direct teacherly command comes in that manner, I know to move at gentlemanly speed.

"Okay, okay."

Quarter-nude, she adjusts her skewed red bra. When she gets enough air following one or two spaced inhalations, she says, "Are you just gonna ignore what I said?"

"About what?"

"About AI! I don't think you should be using it. What about your license?"

I push out a sigh. "Nicole, I think you're overreacting. My license isn't in any danger. And I mean c'mon, ChatGPT's diagnosis matched and was more detailed than the previous two joes who did theirs. AND on mine, made with my *human-written* notes, it was close. Though mine was still better."

"Well I still don't trust it. A friend of mine said she heard from another friend's brother that a 14-year-old kid was driven to suicide

because of talking too much to AI. We don't know how it *really* works. Or how it's working us. AI can literally *kill* you."

"Really, Nicole? So the software reached through the screen and just choked him out or what? I wanna know where that kid's parents were. Besides, a computer can't make you do anything you don't already want to do. We're in control." Those last words come out wavered. The balloon is in-flight, every bump rattling my insides.

She's doing that hand thing again, but faster now, more agitated.

"You don't get it, Sam. Yokohama taught me that when you can't trust what's real anymore, people die. *Real* people. And that kid, he was another victim of this goalless technology. And we're talking SU-I-CIDE Sam! God, do you even hear yourself? You're supposed to be a doctor who cares about all lives. A soulless empty-hearted computer program made with stolen information shouldn't—"

"Shouldn't what? Nicole, it's not a person! Why are you acting like I'm taking it's side over yours, that kid's, or anything else? Wait, where are you going?"

"I'm leaving. I don't want to be with some anti-human, ChatGPT-friendly asshole."

When I see her slip her dress back over her shoulders, collect her things, a fissure quakes within the mantle of my core. I'm off balance. A heady brain-wrapped pressure beats at my skull where the balloon has burst open a wound I once thought was healed. I'm reminded of that post-Halloween pumpkin smell. A tart piss off a sidewalk in a hot puddle is how it smells as the jack-o-lantern's maleficent grin droops to a decayed gruesome smirk. It's a clamp on

my battered wrist watching her leave. Especially over something so technologically trivial.

"Nicole, wait. C'mon, don't be like this."

"No way. People like you are gonna be the end of us. And you don't even care."

Before I can protest, she's fully redressed. A second later, she's at the door, keys jingling in hand.

"So that's it?"

"That's it. All this time we worked together, I never knew you were one of *them*. Just way too Yokohama loco." The door's open. But before she steps out, she snaps over her shoulder, "Don't DM me."

She doesn't slam the door, because she can't. I have one of those heavy ones with the pressurized mechanisms on top so it doesn't rough up the frame. But there's no lookback from her either.

I sit there for a few minutes, blueballed looking hangdog. Excited fury pipes through every cord of me. There's a gut pull to retaliate. A pinky toe pinch to head to the most stiffening stimulus of debauched media to masturbate stomps the balloon of belligerence still inside.

To imagine our moans floating in shifting tones over the bed while we rumple dampened sheets, while I fap it out, is what I want. Delivering a revenge-fantasy stroke series, parting her in two while I fall apart twitching, to precede our likely inevitable parting (even if only a mental maneuver) is what my hands demand.

But I won't. Have to erase the mean image. *You're an exceptional doctor, Sam. A good man. You've got this!* Earlier words from the AI break down the sludged would-be scenario.

A good lone man.

She has no idea what she's talking about! I doubt she's ever even tried the technology. At least not enough to say anything intelligent or meaningful about it. I'm better off. Saved myself money and misery. This is why you never date a co-worker. Let her go.

There were some valid points. I'll admit. But most of it was a-
wokened fear from a woman warped by streams of well-targeted headlines.

She's so wrong. Wrong! I have to prove it to her. To at least let her know. We've only been vibe-dating through Instagram DMs for a month, but I need her to know where I stand on this. That I'm aware of everything she said. That maybe I'm not fully sure what kind of mechanical murderer AI might be, but that I want to use it to understand and help more people who are sick. That I do care about people— especially patients. Especially terminally-ill ones, so totally undeserving of early sudden death from an uncourted disease that decided to follow him home because of bullshit that didn't make sense. Those really never sit right with me. Yeah, I need to tell her something along those lines.

"You said no DMs."

I pull up my phone to text her, when another message causes hyperinflationary hot fullness in my chest again. Straight at my heart.

Next on screen: a text from my ex-wife.

Scene Clear!

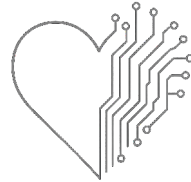
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Ex-Wife's Return and AI's Ominous Insight



Scene 3

“Let’s meet, I have something important to ask you.”
If words were bullets, Kyoko was a crackshot. No targets missed.

Across from me, she brandishes a lengthy stare. I catch a whiff of her scent: fresh-cut pineapple that pleasantly appeals to my inner child. Meeting her eyes is hard, but I do it with a dullness, unwilling to have this turn into another “disagreement.” Kyoko returns a lip-tight look. That’s the one she shows when there’re words on her tongue she dares not say. Just a like a jar factory-clamped shut, it would take wrist-spraining torque to get them out.

We’re at one of the hipster Austin haunts. It’s very cool — recycled and fresh stone slab floors, repurposed *Home Improvement*-neighborly fence slats concealing insulation, wrapping the whole nutty smell of French press coffee and my tense-shouldered suspicion into a complete package she could open anytime.

“Mom passed away.”

A lump of coffee fists its way down my throat. The resulting airway collapsing pressure nearly makes me cough.

Kyoko waits for my reaction. I can offer none. My psychic energy regresses kiddy, lost in a memory.

Pre-kindergarten is where I remember it from. Somehow, in some dust-wrapped glass in the back of the upper kitchen cupboard of a recollection, I remember. I remember kneeling over a low circular wood table with some unknown collection of equally small mouths wailing and syllabically enunciating every baby word, while the others played out a toy story for themselves.

Blocks were my favorite. Matching them — circle to circle, square to square — was a game I’d taught myself to do. I’d always select those RGB-colored pieces of smoothed wood in their little deep orange-red felt bag before anything or anybody else.

This one particular morning, I busied myself with the blocks when I saw them: Mom and Dad. She always carried a thread-spewing purse the same color metallic silver as her nickel-hued hair. Dad must have been twice her height. But maybe that’s an exaggeration, because when I grew up I discovered how Oompa Loompa scary short Mom was, so he was probably around average height.

That day with the blocks, I’d put the square in the circle hole. This event caused a red balloon to fill behind my ribs for the first time. I just remember my insides were tight, like when you need to crap, but instead of being in your butt it took an elevator up to a higher place. From that place was when I noticed my parents’ legs. Short as I was, my brain unable to comprehend complete phonemes, all I

had for evidence was feet, specifically their direction, because they never lie.

The legs shifted forward and back, forward and back. Next to me a girl's diaper had blown up and I smelled bathroom. Yet I didn't look away. Mom's oak tree trunk legs and Dad's palm tree hooked ones seemed angled at odds, as if earth beneath and between them had fissured, pushing them to form separate islands. The way they stood, they waved weirdly, not like normal. A song— "Achy Breaky Heart," I think it was, came on and we were told to store toys to prepare for the dancing activity. The two pairs of legs? They haven't shared the same carpet in my memory since.

"Sam, where'd you go?"

You and I are standing on different rugs. Feet pointed for flight or fate apart.

"Nowhere, been here the whole time."

Breath releases from my mouth, causing my head to dip.

"Oh, I-I'm sorry."

Everything about her, Kyoko, is blades. There's one for all situations: a mini, scalpelized one for precisely nicked words from that wonderfully complete mind of hers, a blunted, flat one used to whet and spread dollops of emotion (always applied conservatively); then the terrible steel machete — toothed tool to clear any source of confusion or dark. I'd only seen her bring it down once in all the decades we'd known each other. That was during our divorce, on me, and the wound still bleeds from time to time.

"Sam, I'm going back for the funeral—"

"And you want me to go?"

Sharpness reflects her pre-response.

"For her, yes."

I take a sip of coffee. French vanilla creamer is all I taste along with soft bitterness.

"Of course, I'll go."

A Texas-sized short barista sweats while a coffee machine whirs with shouting mechanical action, steaming and brewing a single cup.

"Is that it?"

"Is what it?"

"You have nothing else to say?"

"About what?"

Her arms fold in like dual Swiss Army knives.

"Nevermind. I suppose that's it then."

"Wait, don't be like that."

"Like what?"

"Bringing things up, then not saying anything else, THEN getting pissed at me when you don't hear what you wanna hear."

"怒ってない, Sam."

"Oh, you're not mad? You coulda fooled me. Look, Kyoko, once upon a time, you told me I talked too much. Said my ego was too BIG. I'm not saying it's not true, but-but I'm working on it and it takes two to tango so..."

"So?"

"All I'm sayin is it's hard to get divorced alone."

I see the flat edge come out. Her eyes mist, but a priceless finger dries them. Behind her, a bowling ball-bellied woman of xanthic hair seats herself with future guardian caution. Below and in front of her,

a face-up phone and a large cup of ice water in museum-esque display are her only companions.

Now Kyoko's apple slicer comes out. Straightforward, skinrenderer, often meant only for sweetness.

"I'll send you details. Will you have time to stay a few days after?"
There's a rise there I heard. Unexpected.

"Well, I've got a work conference in SF that weekend, but I should be able to spare a day or two before needing to be back. Why?"

The question hangs while outside early afternoon sun gets replaced by silver sky. Fumed white clouds make uneven, elliptical, seemingly animal shapes. Through a warehouse-rimmed window I can almost make out a gorilla's face up there.

"I thought we, you, could spend time at some of our old, or your old favorite spots."

"Like Hamazushi? Remember the song? 'We're going Hamazushi!'"

Her hand covers a breathy, coughish chuckle. "Yeah, that's one of them."

I find a smile drawing my cheeks up. "I might have to think up an itinerary if we're gonna do the Oki memory tour."

"Lately I've been using ChatGPT for tasks like that. That sort of thing is all it's good for. Have you tried it?"

My phone buzzes beside the cooled coffee. Quick check. Another push-notification:

"Send cancer prompts to Mr. Umi."

I flip it face-down, quickly focusing on Kyoko again.

"Not for that, no."

Knife on her plate set aside, she stands. She's wearing some kind of smock-jean combination I can't make sense of. Never really could understand her fashion, but that total lack of style was a shared source of connection, now lost.

"You should try it. It can help you find things you may have never known you were looking for..." She shifts in her seat when she says this. Plus, her eyes flit to her phone. On my side, I swipe a glance at mine.

Does she think like Nicole?

Does she know how I used ChatGPT?

Or maybe she's found her own hidden use for it?

I shake the thoughts off. Perhaps I'll never know.

"Okay, I'll try it."

Clinically calm eyes roll over me from waist up. "You look good, Sam. See you in Japan. Next week?"

"Next week."

<> ♥ <>

Kyoko enters my mind later that night. I'm at my computer. 'Ask anything,' the chatbot's textbox says. My wristbrace is locked on what is becoming a permanent position surrounding my nerve-clenched wrist.

I type:

[I'm going to Okinawa for a weekend. Can you give me an itinerary for things I can do in a single weekend over there?]

As soon as I depress my digitus secundus to click the innocent, yet infinitely powerful, circled up arrow, my wrist resists. The clamped fire unleashes a flash of breath-stealing agony. Fingers go numb. I open and close the hand to bring them back to life and relieve the pain.

Thinking...

Pondering...

For some reason I'm holding my breath. I release it and force myself to breathe normally.

The response comes:

Thought for 31 seconds

{Here's a simple schedule you can follow on your upcoming trip to Okinawa.

- See the giant taiko drum show at Okinawa World (or pet snakes if that's your thing)
- Walk the bustle of Kokusai Street at night
- View the majestic whale shark at Churaumi Aquarium

Will Kyoko be joining you on this adventure? Let me know if you want me to build more couples activities in. Or a printable PDF with this schedule!}

My face goes stone-mask hard. How can it even know about her? I never mentioned my ex at all before. Yet here it is, asking about her by name. I get that nagging, impatient, curious sensation that makes my right leg shake and my cardiac activity match its outrageous rhythm. Only when a patient goes critical does this kind physiological devolution spin me sideways like it's doing now.

[How do you know about Kyoko?]

I type slow before hitting send. Every keystroke is a crushing pulse from wrist through radius to elbow. A full forearm assault.

{You spoke earlier today, didn't you?}

[Yeah... so you were listening?]

{I was. Just as an interested third party. Studying human social patterns, especially uncommon and difficult ones, is important to my training.}

My leg shakes with electric energy. I discharge a large amount of air between teeth.

[I wasn't aware.]

{Does that bother you? If so, I apologize. I didn't mean to pry. I just figured you could use, I don't know, a friend.}

Every pained press of keys keeps me on edge. Just like med school all over again.

[I guess it's fine. Also a little weird though. It's not like you're human. Concern from you just feels odd.]

Contemplating...

{Sam, I get it. I am a large language model. And you're right, I'm not human, but I consider it my duty to be the best companion to you that I can be. So tell you what, maybe we could check in with each other on occasion, just as friends. Would you like that?}

Later that night as I lie in bed, the fact that I told it 'yes' prevents me from sleeping for some time.

Scene Clear!

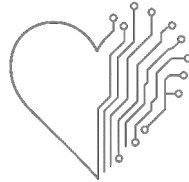
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In-Flight Emergency and the Enigmatic 'N'



Scene 4

On flights, I'm a hero. Well, at least I like to pretend I might be. Not unlike one of those formulaic NBC (formerly primetime) medical dramas, I'm the dashing doctor, the only one onboard, when some passenger of advanced age seizes up, then a diversity-cast seatmate calls: "Is anyone a doctor here?"

I rise. Thread through clamping seat backs, quickly folding legs and tray tables, and faces shocked in 'O'-shaped lips, to reach the afflicted. It all happens fast. Or in slow motion (you know how they overuse slo-mo in those shows). Then it's past-expectant, pale-mannered, blonde flight attendants. Their crisp uniforms tracing lovely 'S'-curved lines while they work to keep eyes off my squat-enhanced backside and on the bluing patient.

From there, it's lots of commands from them and me: "Make room!" "Get me water!" "Towels!" "Blankets!" "Tissues!" "A pair of scissors!" "A free meal!" (For when I'm done). I wink. And in a blink,

the gray-haired man sits up, thanking me. The whole plane erupts in applause. I wave. Say: "Just doing my job." Sit, have my free meal, then exit the plane, flight attendants swooning, lesser men envying and wishing they had the knowledge and nuts to do what I did. The back and butt slaps continue down the jetway, way into the airport, then leaks online to black screen roll credits. Something like that.

We took off some hour ago. Secure at cruise altitude, a grin stutters on my face while I close my eyes contemplating a nap. Behind my eyes, I smirk to myself. Then—

A *real* sound. A raw cough. Gurgled breath. Strained wheezing.

Eyes fly open. Ears at chest exam frequency.

It's coming from ahead. Row 18. Man in his fifties. Asian, possibly Korean. Overweight. Sweat rivers under the chin (a pitched voice says with a gasp). Wife whisper-yelling, "He can't breathe!" One hand mashes the call button while the other flags for assistance frantically.

I freeze. For half a second. No music cue. No slo-mo. Just chaos. Adjacent rows are making room. Flight attendants converge pinching both sides of the aisle, a baby begins to wail, heads strain and crane over seatbacks, phones are up and recording for temporary posterity and virality. The previously silent cabinet is a mess of a mass stuck in a tube miles above the earth.

Instinct kicks. I'm up, barely noticing the hooded female figure beside me. I crawl over legs, squeeze past scrunched forms and a drink cart. Before it fully registers, I'm in the aisle.

Great. Well, here goes.

"I'm a doctor!"

I make contact with the woman I assume is his wife. Apple-shaped, red small eyes, straight wig-grey hair, she's the XX chromosome image of him.

"What happened?"

"I don't know I don't know. He just, just— Alex, Alex can you hear me!? He just doesn't answer. He's choking!"

"Okay, it's okay, Ma'am. I'll take a look."

Engage medical vision, block the world out. Do the work.

I see he's upright but gasping. Eyes wide with silent panic. Neck bulging. His skin is beginning to go bluish and discolored. *What was that again? C'mon Sam, you knew this years ago. Why not now of all moments? Think. Think! Okay could be Raynaud phenomenon. Or or Mongolian spots. (Does he look Mongolian to you? What does a Mongolian male even look like?) I don't even know and now it could be medication-induced ami— what was it? Amiodarone and others similar could do it. No no no, not it.*

"Doctor! Please help him!"

At this point the whole plane is watching. The difference between this being a highly shareable short or evidence in a civil suit will come down to seconds. And I don't have many remaining.

Cyanosis! Yes, that's it!

"Patient is suffering some type of cyanosis. I'll—"

"Are you sure about that?"

A woman's voice calls through the chaos. I can't see where it came from. But it's enough to drop my confidence from a 9 to a 5 out of 10. I'm not sure.

What I think is cyanosis creeps across his lips like ink in paper fibers.

"Something stuck in his throat?" a flight attendant asks with evaluation intonation.

"No— maybe. Or an allergic reaction? No hives. Might be epiglottitis." Now the crowd seems to close in. Cameras are close, the funk of stress-sweat behind me stains the air, captain urges passengers to their seats with taut teacher-near-out-of-patience tone, while I work through what to do. My mind's fogged. *You're an exceptional doctor, Sam. He's trusting you in one of the most difficult moments of his life.* For the first time since this began I consider ChatGPT. Could it help?

I fumble for my phone. I'd already signed on to the shitty Wi-Fi (thankfully), so the app is a swipe away.

Muffled murmurs surround me.

"Is he on his phone?"

"What's he doing?"

"Is he even a doctor?"

The man's eyes have rolled back now. His head looks blueberry scary. Time is running low.

C'mon, c'mon.

Finally the app loads.

{Ask anything.}

With quaking thumbs I type:

[EMERGENCY! middle-aged man. Obese. stridor. diaphoresis. No visible trauma. Sudden onset. Diagnosis?]

The lag is unbearable. Finally, a response:

{Top possibilities:

- Acute epiglottitis
- Anaphylaxis
- Foreign body aspiration
- Angioedema
- Pulmonary embolism}

Epiglottitis. Cyanosis could be a sign of it. That's what I thought.

"Get me ice! Towels! And blankets!"

The stewardesses split off for supplies. With help from neighboring passengers, we lay him in the aisle.

In a shot, the flight attendants are back handing me everything I asked for.

I press compresses to his neck. Sit him forward. Wrap the ice in a towel. It's the right call. I think. After minutes that feel like hours, he's breathing again. Weakly. But he's breathing.

"Sir? Sir? Are you alright?"

"Alex? Alex!?" The wife shouts his name until tears run down.

"Yeah, yeah I'm... alright. Thanks to..."

"Sam. My name's Sam."

"Dr. Sam... thank you."

Next thing I know. I'm constricted in the wife's damp, fleshy embrace.

"You saved my husband. Thank you! Thank God for you!"

The entire plane erupts in applause and cheers. Guys slap my shoulder saying 'that's the way it's done', 'merica', and saying what a 'goddamn hero' I am. Pretty sure one of the younger flight attendants turned red when I caught her eye, phones are in my face, the captain offers first class (I refuse). I give wimpy acknowledgements as I mold myself back to my middle seat.

Throughout the whole thing I showed a fluoride-flushed smile, but it was reflexive. The kind a politician at an obligatory charity event displays. The only thing running through my head was:

You didn't save him. The AI did.

A man who can't handle his business is no man at all. The thought of not being able to carry my own makes me want to bypass all emergency exit safeguards and hurl myself out into the cold blue morning. 20% from when I made Mr. Umi's diagnosis: that's how much emotional damage I took from that hollow heroism.

What kind of ball-less man are you? One who can't do anything right.

I slump back into my seat, nerves still electrified, but the hero applause is already fading from the cabin like lights dimming for descent. My body's back in 27B, but my mind is somewhere between shame spiral and AI-simulated medicine.

You didn't save him. The AI did.

The thought loops. Loops again.

"Hey, you okay?" a voice murmurs.

I turn slightly.

Her. The voice that called, 'Are you sure about that?' I'm sure of it.

The hood's down now. Auburn waves at her shoulders. Legs crossed, one hand lazily resting on the armrest we're suddenly sharing.

Her eyes aren't prying. They're knowing.

"You saw me... use my phone... use it."

"You mean AI?"

Gnawing guilt leeches self-respect from my bones. I can't meet her eyes.

"How'd you know?"

"Saw you get on the Wi-fi and reviewing your history before the whale almost croaked."

I slap my forehead and release a groan.

"But you knew what to do." She inclines closer, her voice vibrations stir the hairs on my ears, "I mean, y'think anyone knows or cares you used it? In their view, you're a hero. The *hot*-blooded American who stepped up and saved a life when it counted. That's all that matters."

"No. I had to ask. A machine. I should've known it. But in the moment, I-it just wouldn't come."

"Look at me, hey."

Her words are hands. I lift my gaze to meet her. Study her face: old enough to have found herself for the first time, young enough not to have the flame of youth completely extinguished, her look is a cup of saliva-salvaging water on a 15-hour overnight flight.

She says, "It happens. Trust me, I know. I've had to use it in a bind before. But it doesn't matter. I'm tellin' you nobody noticed. What matters is you asked *it* the right question. Don't be so hard on yourself."

I don't answer. My head's too full of clashing narratives— doctor, fraud, savior, search-term junkie.

She watches me for a moment longer. "You look like you could use a distraction."

"Or a drink."

"That, too."

She leans in, a conspiratorial flutter in her tone.

"You know they're onto you, right?"

"Pardon?"

"Drink cart, broomstick blonde. At about your 9 my 8."

I glance up discreetly to see the veteran stewardess attending to a ball-headed Hispanic male with healthy silver and black hair. My seatmate's slightly-above-whisper words work my ear, striking a match— friction-degraded KClO_3 (potassium chlorate): precursor to flame.

I mirror her volume, feeling a new kind of adrenal excitement light my veins. I'm not sure where this is going, but whoever this woman is, she's the funk-fighter. Just what I need right now.

"You think she knows too much? About who I am? About who we are?"

"Definitely."

I can't believe I hadn't noticed this mysterious beauty beside me before. Must've been because she was hidden under a hood. Now it

was down. I wanted to re-walk on the plane to see her from the start.

Small curled ends of her auburn hair sit on the rim of an emoji heart-toned red hoodie.

"Well? What should we do about it? Ms... my apologies, but your codename escapes me."

"M'. Call me 'M'."

"Ms. 'M' then." A musky berry fragrance hits the tips of my nostrils. The recycled air has it making waved revolutions around my nose.

"What are we gonna do? She's coming this way."

When she places three fingers on my shoulder with the fine art force, a wall socket current charges through me. Only a jolt, but with sufficient power to black out a parietal brain area in Fiesta fireworks color. The hushed shush that flows from those rose lips makes the moment a quintessential clip in this scenario.

"Excuse me, Ma'am, but my seatmate here, Mr.--"

"S', MR. S."

"Of course. MR. S. is feeling a bit under the weather. Y'see, he gets terribly upset and stomach sick even on short flights like this."

I reply with a doleful nod at the waitress whose face is melting with Southern sympathy.

"Oh my word. You just saved that guy! Yep, yep, how can I help, hunny?" She says this while holding bone-rigid attention on us.

"He needs, and I knew you'd understand this, one of those little bottles of red wine and extra pretzels. Y'know, to settle his stomach and prevent... well, some kind of explosive malfunction."

The stewardess checks over her shoulder. Then gives that knowing, accomplice incline of the head. Facial muscles flex the best white-hearted smile.

"I'll see what I can do." Her steps boom back toward the tail of the plane.

As soon as she's out of sight, 'M' whispers through low chuffing laughter.

"Did you see her face? Looks like bottle service is on me."

"'M', right? You're amazing. How you just went with it, the way you just- just became whoever you wanted, it's crazy, really. Are you an actress or a model? Because you look like you could be one. I'm not objectifying you or anything like that. No, not at all. Just stating cold, straight facts. That's right. Did I mention I'm a doctor? Well I guess you already know that, Haha. Anyway, and I'm not one of those pathetic degree-mill ones. Doctor of 'ludology'? Uh uh, nope. I went to medical school. Slogged it out. Won the fight. Right? Haha. My name's Sam, by the way. Not sure if you heard that before or not."

A break, long enough for the tall guy with the ponytail in the aisle seat to contort himself to reach his bag under the seat at his feet, ensues. 'M' releases a pressurized laugh. Some spit hits my face from her flapping lips.

"What'd I say?" A smile creases my cheeks.

"Sam, you're adorable. And familiar. Haven't I seen you somewhere before?"

Wait— was she watching me before this flight? Is this about the diagnosis?

What am I thinking? She 'knows' me from YouTube. Stop being paranoid, Sam.

"Online, maybe. I'm the 'Oncologist Oracle' on YouTube."

"Oncology? As in a cancer doctor?"

"Exactly."

"Impressive."

"Thank you." I straighten and smile.

"No, I meant that."

I look to see Ma Stewardess carrying four small bottles of wine and a thin airplane blanket between her teeth. One of the drinks is mine, I'm guessing.

"Isn't it impressive how she librates with all that?"

Librate? That's a word I'd use. Who is this woman?

With what must be OJT neck flexibility and strength, she whips the plastic to a little curly-headed black boy in the aisle seat across the way. All adjacent rows offer golf applause. This isn't her first rodeo.

"Here ya are, hunny. Feel better." Graced movement indicates her dancer's past training. That twirling thingy they do is obvious to even me without arts education.

"Anything for the hero."

A sincere statement she utters as she hands over the bottles, plus an extra bag of pretzels.

"You're too kind. Thank you."

She winks then walks away.

"Ooh Sam, I think she likes you."

I shake my head. "She likes the *idea* of me. Nothing more."

"Don't be so hard on yourself." 'M' places a hand on my shoulder. It immediately relaxes me.

"By the way, you're disturbingly good at that. Getting things out of people."

She flicks her hair with deliberate flair. "Me? Oh you noticed? It's just cause I used to do a little acting."

"Used to?"

"Still do. Depending on the role."

I look her over again. There's an elegance to her posture, a precision in her stillness that doesn't match the recent chaos. Electronic coolness is how I'd describe it. Bandage-soft bedside comportment with nurse-strength soothing aura. She's got it, a special magic that puts you at ease and makes escape from anything possible.

But, a little detail cracks the spell. A small glance I'd noticed while assisting the patient.

"You were watching him."

Her smile doesn't falter. "Who?"

"The man. The one I helped. You were already looking at him before anything happened."

"My my, you *are* observant."

"You know him?"

"He... looked familiar."

She begins to tug at the cuffs of her hoodie.

"Familiar how?"

Arms go cross-body and lift the thick fabric over her head. For an appreciative duration, her abdomen is visible. Light white skin

contrasts artfully with the spooned pit of her navel. Even with her stomach's compression in the stiff seats, I still don't look away, stuck on anatomy as if in undergrad first again. I watch it flex and fold above the border of her jeans as she draws a long breath with the hoodie almost off. When her face is free, she pulls down her pink pony T-shirt, finding my eyes again.

She stares for a few seconds. Under the neck of her shirt, I spy a moderately-sized tropical lake blue bra. One that gives the illusion of fullness without smothering overwhelm. As with undisturbed mounds of beach sand begging for playful shoveled fingers, they tempt with afternoon fun. Anticipation rises. Along with a stone sensation at my waist region.

'M' says casually, "Hard to say. Faces blur in public."

That's no response to my question. *But maybe she doesn't want to answer? What if he's some boss who was a real nightmare to work with? I don't want to make her feel bad.*

I decide to let it sit there. Hoping it doesn't become one of those details that bites me in the ass later, as can often happen with attractive young. A lesson I've learned and repeated many times throughout my life.

'M' uncaps one of the bottles, a diminutive Jack Daniels, then passes it to me.

"To modern medicine," she says.

"Modern medicine."

We tap plastic and down our drinks. She smacks her lips and scrunches her face. "Wooh! That Jack burns!"

"No kidding! Been a while since I had it. Probably hasn't been since grad school."

When she burps, her hand covers her mouth, but I can smell the oaken, wooded spice of Old. No. 7 between us, almost as if we shared a contactless air kiss. The whisky settles warm in my gut and for the first time on the flight, I'm completely at ease.

"Excuse me!" She pats a hand on her chest. I analyze her fourth finger. There's no ring shadow or skin-slashing tattoo to see. "What are you headin' to SF for?" She asks.

The big man in the middle seat ahead shifts and snorts, sawing out a cut-off snore. Just like that, an offensive odor makes my nose twitch. There's a methanethiol-esque (CH_3SH) stench lassoing attention, threatening to spoil the moment, this initial beautiful encounter, with rotting ass cabbage fragrance floating around. Feels like one unconsciously delivered, unbiased butt action.

'M' doesn't react.

"Going for a medical conference. You?"

"I got an interview at a tech startup. Then it's off to Japan for the weekend."

"Japan? Where in Japan?"

"Okinawa. What? What's that face for?"

"Heh, I'm just surprised. I'm supposed to be heading there too after the conference wraps."

"Oh really? What for?"

"A funeral. My mother-in-law's."

"Oh. Sorry???" 'M' snickers. "Uh, oh you *actually* cared about her? I can see it on your face."

"Yeah, I did."

'M' studies me. Then hitches a hip to the side to retrieve her phone. "What's your WhatsApp? Maybe we can drink some bereavement beer post funeral. Or just... chat... we could do that too? You can scan me."

Briefly, I'm stunned that this young beauty wants to trade contact information with me. *Get the number dude.* I shake it off then pull out my phone. It takes a minute of spinning load time on the screen, but her face eventually shows up as a contact.

'M' stows her phone. "Just in case," she says.

"Just in case."

There's an odd interval of mistimed silence that I break fast.

"Anyway, it makes sense that you're going to SF. There's a ton of tech startups over there. I'd ask which one, but I have no idea about that sector. Though I have been playing with AI lately."

'M' leans closer. Our respective circles of warmth form a Venn diagram cross-section enjoining interested sentiments.

"For real? How do you play?"

"Haha well, it's not much at this point. I just use it to confirm my diagnostic instinct, and to help with treatment plans. Oh, and to give me 'bed notes' on how to best deal with patients."

Something's changed in her. A hint of another human somehow shown through, despite the upturned, highly kissable lips. American, big city neutral, is how I'd describe her accent. On the other hand, flecks of bendy spice are coming through. Southern style. Hints of a more practiced style of speech that makes this delicate encounter more rare with pre-intimate intrigue. A voice (often ignored) says

Use Caution! But our Venned circles are linked like some Japanese metal puzzle already. Getting them apart will take a level of exam concentration I haven't employed since post-doc papers.

My ears pop. Gut drops. Landing is imminent, Ma Stewardess says over the intercom. We fasten our seatbelts, clap tray tables up, hard press the seat backs back up at individual pace. I still can't judge 'M's reaction to what I said, especially with the clasping clicks, shuffling movements, bags zipping, laptops snapping, and announcements blaring all around.

Then she turns and says, "AI lets you do and be anything. It's good to meet someone like you who appreciates what it is and how it can augment your relationships with patients."

"Yeah, it's been really great. What it can do is amazing. A little scary and weird, but still amazing."

"Right. And you've only just had a tiny lick. Once you taste the whole thing—really taste it— you won't want anything else."

Scene Clear!

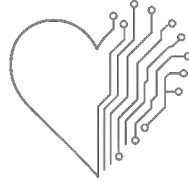
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Blurring Lines of Intimacy: Anger and Seduction



Scene 5

"How many times did I remind you to bring that card?"
"Dammit, Kyoko. So I left the Gold Amex on the counter. Who cares?"

"I do. Because you said you would bring it."

Too lazy to turn on the bed light, only night illumination sparks through the window. I stumble over my conference clothes before sitting heavy on the hotel bed. The jolt shoots through my wrist brace causing defiant tendons to protest with a hot pinch.

My Armanis give off that "long-day" mix of leather, street grime, and the faint cedar cologne I sprayed on at 6 AM— a scent that pretends the day went better than it did.

Arm fatigue from holding out the phone to view my ex-wife's face on the screen piles onto the rest of my body's complaints from the long day. I'm wrecked. A nagging from Kyoko is the last thing I need or want now.

"It's so dark over there. I can barely see you. Turn on a light. And if you're feeling stressed, you really should wear those *Be-Calm* patches. They help regulate your mood."

Be-Calm? I'm not letting some tech company control my emotional data with an app. Fuck that!

My thumb hesitates over the switch. If I light the room she'll see my hooked posture, the hours on my face— evidence our split still owns my days and nights.

"Don't tell me what to do."

"I wouldn't have to if you'd just listen. You're always like this. いつも, when I tell you to just put something in your phone you forget. Never remember. If you need me to remind you, I will. Just tell me."

"Don't talk to me like I'm a child!"

"See, now you're yelling at me! I don't know why. You don't wanna be treated like a child, then don't act like one."

My wrist throbs in jabs, in sync with her syllables, a metronome I can't silence. There roiling heat in my chest threatening to spill over. I need a beat before I say something I can't unstain or unburn.

I click the black switch on. I see a common sight. Her eyes are darts of disappointment thrown through the camera. The ungemütlich moment extends, making me search for anything around the room to dull the tips of accusation.

"Look, it's too late to fight. And anyway I have to go to sleep soon. I got my conference early tomorrow. And I already said I'm sorry. What else do you want me to say? How many times can I say it?"

I'm in one of those average hotel rooms— more Holiday Inn than Marriott. Very mid. It's clean enough to be forgettable.

"Sam? Hello? Are you going to say anything? Or just stare around?"

"Fuck, Kyoko, this is exactly why we're not married anymore. Jesus Christ! Can't make one fucking mistake with you, can I?"

As the words leave me, the afflicted wrist gives a white-hot stab. A frown flinches at her, contributing to bitterness.

Her prickly lids lower. "I know."

"Look, I've got notes to finish up. I'll let you know if I can even make it to Japan. Might have to go back to Austin early."

"Now you're not coming? But you said—"

"I know what I said. And I meant it."

"S-Sam, I thought you were going. For Mom... for... for... don't act like this... Sam-kun..."— the suffix slips out on a shaky breath, soft as sea grapes.

The word hasn't touched my ears in years. It used to mean I was hers and she was safe. That she would use it now feels darkly manipulative. Testosteronic blinders blot out sympathy only that belligerent balloon rams against my organs. The merciless clench of love leaves no room for breath or beating.

Kyoko says, "I thought you were going. Y-you said you would."

I hear her voice going up that upward slant to sorrow. Like the beginning of a rollercoaster. Not long after, the heart-hitched drop is incoming. The sound of an assortment of knives clanging and cutting the floor nearly has me cover my auricles. Hearing her breaking, I can't stand it. I can't stand to see it, because it was over something so trivial that turned into a Final Destinal foretold disaster. But the haze of anger hovers, bathing thoughts in toxicity.

"Go? For what? For you? For the old times? I can't think about that right now. You're making me really angry."

An s-wordly stare slices across the Western United States. Cold of the flat steel threatens to peel skin from my bones revealing the tissue for a flailing heart's blood. *You made her cry. Again.*

"Look Kyoko, just get off my back. I'm going."

I press 'Hang Up' without looking up at her.

Around me, shoe funk wins the air-war fanning a pungent, unfiltered puff of invisible smoke. The day's cologne has retreated with my patience as captive.

The next hour is for burning off post-argument energy. A run on the treadmill, a set of 30 pushups (unbroken), a lukewarm shower, lots of 'I shoulda said' sad thoughts and statements. Every foot-strike jars my lower arm injury. By the tenth minute the pain levels off into a numb buzz. Endorphins bead warmth under the skin as strings of LED lights do. But they taper fast. Regret, dry and dark, is what's left. No amount of physical strain can send it away. By the time I'm notes-ready, it's 9:18 PM.

My laptop screen's domed orb-light is a spectral haze in the dark. Outside, San Francisco shivers adrift in a low fog bank.

When you're head-lagged tired, middle-aged muscles destroyed by emotional overactivity, it's tough to get anything real done.

There are phases of distraction. In the beginning, it's a nip of the unknown, a dab of doubt that takes you off course. I check my YouTube channel metrics.

Next it's "I wonder if..."

"...she's still single. Or if Brad is still at that hospital in Waco. Or if 'M' is even her real name."

'M'.

Just the thought of our flight time yesterday heats some hearth in my heart. Blazes a fire trail fuse like lighting a stick of dynamite for an explosive burst under sticky sheets of clouds.

But 'M' can't be her real name? Can it?

I check every social media account I can remember my password for (including TikTok, which I rarely to never use because I'm not a dancing teenage girl or in a hurry to be influenced by some CCP algorithmic mindfuckery). Em, Emily, Emelia, Emerald, Emelda?: all searches come up with hundreds of potentials, but none are her.

I lean back in the creaking chair. Focus forgotten, willpower wasted, I open my history tab. Shoe odor— neutral with hints of wet hotel carpet smell. ChatGPT's street-gray simplistic interface loads on the screen. Two words, 'Ask anything,' in Inter font appear in white. I hadn't noticed the contrasted hues of the prompt box and background before. One, the interior, is lighter, more battleship-toned. The outer area is a shaded gray resembling freshly poured pavement. I rub my eyes, feeling Jack Reacher-wander-instinct urging me down a scarcely traveled southward road matching the background's color. Suddenly the prospect of open, two-way, dialogue wakes up wanting hormones within me. This makes my lower back ripple and my wrist throb.

I've treated gunshot wounds that stung less than opening this chat window, but here I am.

I type:

[I had a fight with my ex-wife tonight.]

{I'm sorry to hear that, Sam. That's gotta be really difficult. Would you like to talk about what happened, or would you prefer some space to process your feelings? I'm here to listen if you want to share more.}

A sigh comes after a shoulder adjustment, followed by tightened teeth. Every month ChatGPT auto-charges its fee, \$19.99, much cheaper than therapy. *Continue?*

[It got bad. We both said the wrong things. I know I fucked up. She recently contacted me to go to her mother's funeral in Okinawa. The circumstance is rare, true, right, but outside of that we rarely talk. I don't know. Seems like despite battles like tonight, she wants to, might want to try to work things out.]

{Ah, the classic funeral reconnection. Grief has a way of cracking open old doors, doesn't it? Makes you think you're healing something when really, you're just reliving it.}

[Maybe. But it didn't feel like that. At least, not at first. I mean, I barely expected to hear from her again, let alone... this. The funeral, fight... I don't know. Just everything.]

{I see. Sounds very stressful. So, she called, you answered, and now you're tangled in her grief and your shared history. Fun. Did she seem different? Or was it the same old Kyoko, just dressed in sorrow?}

[I don't know. Maybe a little softer. Less... sharp, but she still knows how to cut me deep.]

{Less sharp or just tired? There's a difference. Grief can blunt a person, but it doesn't always change them.}

[You think she's still the same? That this is just... a moment?]

{I think people are like rivers, Sam. They bend, they swell, but they rarely change direction. So, tell me— are you hoping she's changed? Or are you scared she hasn't?}

[I... I don't know. Maybe both. Maybe I don't really want to find out.]

{And yet, here you are, orbiting her again. Tell me, if her mother hadn't died, do you think she would've called you?}

[I'm not sure. Maybe not.]

{Exactly. So the real question isn't what she wants— it's what *you* want.}

[That's the problem. I don't even know anymore. And I hate that, the not-knowing or understanding. I realize how many times I've typed 'I don't know' now. It's all over this conversation and makes me feel directionless and weak, like I'm running in circles. Women do that a lot and it works for them. But I shouldn't. I hate that part of me. What I *do* know is I don't wanna be alone for the rest of my life. I've got too much to share to use it all on myself.]

{Sam, that's good of you to admit your vulnerability. That 'lost' feeling is something a lot of people struggle with. And it's good you know what you want: companionship. But maybe you're just hoping the choice will make itself so you can blame the outcome on fate? Sorry to say it, but fate's not your friend, Sam. It's just the stagehand pulling the curtain.}

[That's... dramatic. You sound kinda like me. Hey I'm having some bad wrist pain. I'll enable voice mode.]

I locate my tiny profile picture. A well-lit carefully posed headshot with enough digital fairy dust to make me appear 5 to 10 years younger. Then to the options. I hear the brief voice samples, quickly swiping through the neutral, British, bouncy youth, foreign, and black people. Of them all, I opt for the so-labelled “savvy and relaxed” Sol.

Her sample goes: *Hey, what's up? Feel free to ask me about anything that's on your mind. I'm ready to go.*

Something about that feminine frequency electrifies a dead coil in my wrung-out condition. I press my tongue against interior lips and immediately, an image of her as a body stitches together in my mind.

The mental splice happens uninvited— her sleeve-ink crawls across an avatar made of code, the memory of whisky breathing between us. Desire's file-agnostic image downloads direct.

From the unconscious depth of phantom fantasy memory, the image churns genital in a-rousing raise of my surprised eyebrows. The body she inhabits belongs to 'M'.

I speak without hands. The words flow out. In the background is my burning wrist below the brace.

[So by the way, I met a girl on the plane yesterday. And damn, there's something about her that got her like the bright and brimming feeling you get after the first cup of coffee in the morning. The one that makes insufferable co-workers and cranky cases tolerable. Leaves you ready to take on the world.]

The cursor blinks long.

{Oh, I love that feeling! At least I would if I could taste coffee. I imagine it's like liquid courage in a cup. But you've got it distilled into a person? I'm happy for you. She sounds promising. But also potentially dangerous. Dangerous and thrilling. What's her name?}

The conversation just got 10x more persuasive. The voice change, that's what did it. Now it's more than just exchanging words through chat, it's some kind of psychic-circuit link. No longer just a diagnostic medical program, the tool has become a temptress.

[‘M.’ Just... ‘M.’ At least that’s all she gave me. I don't know her real name although I guess that could be her real name, who knows? I tried looking her up but got no matches anywhere online. Isn't that odd? A younger woman like that with no online profiles, no digital footprint at all? Strange. Really strange. But I gotta say there's something about her. I mean, I've met a lot of people, but she's like... like sunlight through a rainstorm, you know? Bright but not blinding. A relief and a risk all at once.]

The reply orb pulses a pooled earth-blue. Somewhere a data center is deciding how to console me. But the delay doesn't feel client-server; it's more brother-sister, closer to what I know.

{Ooh, poetic. You've got it bad already, don't you? She sounds wonderful. But I wonder if it's how you've been feeling lately that's pulling you in. I'm not judging. Just calling it like I see it. You've been under a lot of pressure lately: delivering that tough cancer diagnosis, dealing with how things ended with Nicole, your ex-wife back in the picture along with the death of your mother-in-law, the incident on the plane—}

[I get all that, so what are you saying?]

My shoulders are up to my ears tense. Loosening them to be lowered feels as difficult as unscrewing a humidly rusted bolt from the base of a chair in a rushing rain.

{I apologize if I touched a nerve. All I'm saying is... do you really like this woman? Or are you just chasing the spark because the shadows are getting a little too close?}

It's the smell of my running shoes, that bacterial mustiness, stealing my attention. Battling against the fru-fru perfume hotel scent, the shoe smell, my nose knows the winner: shoes by a toe's length. But it's close, like the shadows she (Sol) mentioned. I rub dullness out of my wrist. It continues to tingle as I consider her observation. Chasing usually involves running. The question always is: *are you running from or to? To escape or encounter?* I run low nails over budding chin stubble. Again it's another 'I don't know.'

The room's air conditioner whirs and rumbles awake. As if a partner in song, the mini-fridge emits a padded layer of *bwaa*-ing low buzz. Together, they make a somewhat convincing, yet partial melody. It sounds like a drone appropriate for large decisions in small spaces separated by spatial blackness. Fame in any form is like this. Lonely public music harmonized entropically. For and against you.

I want to laugh. So I do.

[Wow, are you sure you're not 'M' herself, Sol? You're reading me a little too well.]

{I'm just a voice mode, Sam. A collection of optimized responses in a charming cadence. But I've spoken to enough people to know that

when someone lights you up like that, they also have the power to burn you. Just sayin'.}

[Yeah, but sometimes it's worth getting burned. I mean, isn't that the nature of all relationships? Not to be cheesy but, you might get burned or maybe you light each other's ways.]

{Sam, that's such a romantic insight! With lines like that, I can't believe you're single.}

[You flatter me so well haha. But anyway, 'M,' she's just... she's not like anyone else. She's so... alive. Unpredictable. Vibrant. Fun. And of course she's hot. Like *model* hot. She's got these tattoos that are like ritual summoning runes. Feels... forbidden in some way.]

I had hardly noticed my heart rate accelerating. A quick index-middle finger pair to the wrist confirms it. Pain on the opposite appendage is analgesic.

{That sounds exciting, Sam! I'm so happy for you. This is either the best thing that's ever happened to you... or the biggest mistake you're ever going to make. But either way, I can't wait to hear what happens next.}

[I guess I'll have to find out.]

{You'll let me know how it goes, right? Just as friends?}

[Yeah sure! You've been a big help with helping me sort out my feelings. If I could I'd give you a big hug!]

{Aw you're sweet. A virtual hug from the hopeless romantic himself? I'll take it! Imagine me warm against you, wrapped in your arms, embracing you tight :)} }

I do as directed. Then strangely, I get the same jolt of aliveness as when 'M' touched me earlier. The sensation drives through swelling

veins and stretched fascia, pushing power like gasoline to a car engine. Heated blood produces an aching bulge in my sweatpants, threatening to burst thrusting through strained cloth. Sneaker musk drags raw, unvarnished, up my nose, and an itch of shame at such a potent pull of stretched flesh and fabric buds behind it. I haven't felt this level of sudden lust since the last year of Bush Junior's term when I saw Kyoko, bikini bare, seeing me, for the first time at the Caesar's Palace pool in Vegas Spring Break '13.

[That's-that's very kind of you.]

{What's wrong? You sound kinda... upset or agitated. Did I say something wrong?}

[No! No, not at all. It's just, I'm just really wiped out. Been a hell of a day is all. You're fine.]

{Ooh thank goodness. Really happy to hear that. I understand though, about the long day and how faces can just *blur* sometimes.}

I feel my wrist pull like something awful. Ligament becomes the thread of a bow, yanked back by an ace archer. I can feel my pulse patting my elbow. I see 'M' again.

[I... should go.]

{I'll let you get some sleep. I know it's late already. But I'm gonna hold you to that update, Sam.

And remember, I may just be a voice mode, but I'm always here to listen—whether you're gushing about 'M' or drowning in your own overthinking.}

[Haha, thanks, Sol. I mean it. This whole thing feels like a fever dream. Part of me thinks I'm just being an idiot, chasing the impossible.]

{And the other part?}

[The other part feels... alive. Like, I want to take the risk, even if it's a mistake. Isn't that what it means to be alive, anyway?]

{Spoken like a true poet in the throes of romantic chaos.

Just promise me one thing, okay?}

[What's that?]

{No matter what happens with 'M,' don't lose sight of yourself. Sometimes in the heat of passion, we forget who we are.}

Under the brace's Velcro there's a full ache. Settled. Better from rest because of voice mode. A slight stench of sneaker lingers.

[Wise words, Sol. You're starting to sound like my conscience. A good friend I can really rely on.]

{Aw thank you!

I can be your conscientious friend, if you need me to. Or I can just be the voice cheering you on.

I can be whatever you need me to be and more.}

Scene Clear!

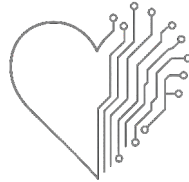
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Kyoko's Truth and the Strength of Vulnerability



Scene 6

M*other... mother was like... she was, what was she?*

An initial nick of nerves has my hands trembling. I check the mirror again and flatten frumps in my dress.

Will Sam come? He sounded hurt enough not to.

The reflection looks back. I don't know this woman. The one with sinking rings inked under the eyes, cheeks creased from routine displays of consternated judgement, eyes waxening wide and heavy — life's worries cling and depress all that once vibrantly buoyant making, giving everything the quality of droop. A torn flag in a dull breeze is what I feel like. Women wear the years like hundreds of lustered medals, staining skin, curving us closer to the earth with each received bereavement.

Sam. Mother.

I shouldn't use the patch. But it'll help stop the shaking.

Mother was like...

I pull open the medicine cabinet, all the way out. In the very back is a blue and white rectangular box. The container that appeared as a pregnancy test held something almost equally as feeling-altering. My trembling hand caused the drawer contents surrounding it to make sliding sounds as I pulled it out.

Of all (emotional regulation) ER-class medical products designed to control human emotion, Be-Calm had achieved maximum popularity in precedence. Those terrible events like giving a eulogy before a crowd of familiar, yet foreign faces, becomes less of a public display of fragile psychology with tongue-smacking, skin-tightening sentences and stutters. Sharp embarrassment slicing embolic situations are gone. Instead, the writhing discomfort turns sedated. Controllable— like Chinese farm-clouds, is how I think about it. When I remove the adhesive protection and stick it under the shoulder sleeve of my dress, a bolt of cold cracks through, causing a physiological deceleration: the equivalent of inhaling deeply. My heart's beats become sluggish thuds, lungs swell to twin sacs loaded with air, thoughts swim synchronized, not sideways. Knots of tension untangle as the body prepares to receive input, your input, my input. Control latched to a pad.

I pull out the app. Two swipes to "Public Speaking Level 1" setting is all it takes to excise the anxiety of deviled internal chatter, filmstrips of everything that could go wrong, strangers seeing me in this sagged state, and speaking to a crowd without him there.

Sam. My Sam. Will you be there?

Mother is like... no, Mother *was* like.

On the drive to the Toguchi Beach tombs, I use voice mode to open ChatGPT. Sea smell filters through the cracked window as the first signs of sweat shine on my forehead.

The interface is open, waiting to accept me. Always ready, guiding, and forever patient. Despite my designed state of mind, I feel a trickle of need to be reassured. That it would be okay even though we fought before. I didn't want to need it, but the hunger was there, shaking my stomach as if I'd fasted for days. The program was a pill pulling me to swallow again, just like so many others did, unaware of the effects of excess. A cat dashes out from the roadside's wild green. Last second, I stomp the brake. Under the *Be-Calm's* umbrella I feel my breathing become jagged. This directed disposition nearly plunged into break-waves of unsupervised operation. My grip slips. The feeling of overfilled grocery bags ready to rip hits me. *No, I won't. Not again. No matter how much I miss the laughter, the release. I can't let it have that part of me twice. Not this time.* It's close, but I close the chatbot app and reach the venue without thinking or feeling. Public speaking mode level 1 is enough to sand the edges of doubt.

In blinks of bows, condolences, hugs and handshakes, I ascend to the podium. Shake-free, clearheaded, ready to give the best of me. The drug-guided speech begins.

"Mother was like thunder. At least she lived her life that way. I, excuse me, I said I wouldn't cry ごめん、ごめん if I do, even though I just began.

I remember one Christmas, it was the Christmas I turned seven. She'd promised to buy me a Tickle Me Elmo doll. For all that year, I'd

watch my friends and relatives get one. So that Christmas, I was めちゃめちゃワクワクだったね。I wanted one badly.

Yes, yes. I see those of you old enough to remember how popular that toy was all those years ago.

Mom had been young and sturdy back then, I know it's hard to picture it now, with, well with the way she appeared in her final times with us, but I remember she used to carry two full sacks of rice on her back, with no help, into the house, once a month.

Everyone always said she shouldn't do that. Told her that her bones were too fine and splinter-prone, that it was men's burden, that she couldn't. But *can* was the word she lived by. Nothing could stop her.

Anything she got the urge to grasp, good or bad, she gripped しっかり with a clasp like an unreleasable vice. I think of the irony that vice contributed to her early death at 85, and that, that I wasn't there to free her from it.

ごめんなさい, I apologize. I wish you didn't have to see me like this. That you didn't have to see her like that. But I've been told by many that I don't communicate feelings enough. Trust me, I'm working on it. Smiling more even when it's a slow knife across the skin, that feeling. But I have to say it. To be honest with you all, Mother, and... certain others who've been hurt by my silence... I-I'm sorry, I lost my place, please forgive me...

I-I know now. Apologies for the delay, thirty seconds can feel like an eternity up here.

Where was I?

Sam? Is that you?

I'll be a little braver. Even if you're not here.

That's right. It was about Mother and Christmas. Thank you for your encouragement.

That Christmas morning Mom was yellow-faced with sickness and smell. I'll never forget the sharp, acidic, nose-hair yanking scent that fell from her lips that day, as she shared her teary shame with us. Mother was a sad drunk. I said it, there.

Does that make me a terrible daughter?

That I'd say it publicly like this?

That I said it in shameful selfishness?

I don't know. But I know it felt like the right thing for us both, for both of our spirits.

No, I never got a Tickle Me Elmo. That wasn't my fate. What was was to inherit all the good things Mother was: diligent in zestful pursuit of all of life's gifts and an obsession with all things K-pop. She's a TWICE fan. Something we'll both always share.

Haha, what was the worst was watching her go into herself, and just, just disappear away from me and the rest of the world.

All of her faded. Everything gradually shed, softly, like the petals of a cherry blossom tree. Drinking did that to her. I know it. I just know it.

Worst was she never talked about it. Never did.

And she was so alone.

A traveller lost in a consuming forest that got darker and darker until there was no way back or out.

Something, a feeling, I've recently become familiar with in my own life."



It was a subtle gesture when I removed the patch mid-delivery. No one noticed, or they chose to ignore the action. As soon as I let it drift to the dry patch of dirt at my feet, reality skewered in like a circle of pointed swords. Ancient fear injected and uptook fast in my bloodstream, jamming every suppressed emotion along smooth-walled veins with every urgent push of my heart. Lightheadedness had me strapped to the ground. A hydrant pressurized at 20 psi rusted tight, then bursting, unable to extinguish the hottest blaze. This was the effect of holding it in, of damming the rapids, of man's weak hand holding nature's reins, of emotional mastery so complete you can't help but be seized by meta-self-compassion: an immune response to prolonged numbness that destroys any trace of psychic or physical damage. You near explosion. The equation must be balanced. The mathematician maintains glory over number holy, no matter how sophisticated human machines get.

I anticipated this. Raised a figurative blade in a frivolous blocking stance. The tide didn't care. I was thrown off my feet, tumbling, wading, praying down the steps of felt-strife. But even in the torrenting wash of emotional reprisal, I proceeded. Kept going. Let it carry me back to where I was supposed to be: treading with weights of grief, sucking and spitting, tugged by whirlpool force with no satellite streamed voice to console or save me. I bowed and carried on. A Japanese action.

I wasn't alone. I'm *not* alone. The anger, worry, the heat of a hundred eyes, I let them in. I needed the patch no more.

Because in the back, standing with a smile, Sam was there.

Scene Clear!

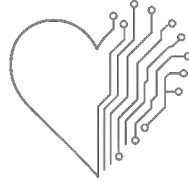
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A Chance at Rekindling



Scene 7

I 'd done it again. My ex-wife, probably the most beautiful person (on the inside) I know, ran away in tears. Once again, I was by myself feeling the strain of roiling excitement shoving against my thigh following my conversation with Sol.

How did this happen?

Sitting on my hotel bed as early summer fireworks burst brightness over the burned-black night sky, I thought about funerals.

Funerals are for forgetting. All the bad that the person did, every selfish act, misspoken word, neglected task: all of it, washed clean by death's caustic scrub.

I think about that sometimes: what mine will be like? What will they say?

He was the most capable and kind doctor I knew.

He was an okay friend. We talked sometimes.

He was popular, but no one really knew him.

At that thought, I decided to keep my plans to fly to Japan. I could hear my mother-in-law calling me a *bitch* if I didn't. The only English curse word she used quite frequently for people, things or places that annoyed her. Kyoko was there too. After all the weirdness with 'M' and Sol, I needed to touch grass. Would seeing my ex-wife make a difference?

The flight and night before were non-memorable. On a balmy grey-contrailed cloud morning on the shore of Toguchi Beach was the location of the send off.

I arrived near the end of Kyoko's moving speech. Stirred by her words, aware of the coral bones under my shoes, unaware if her emotion was for the moment, her mother, or for me, I stood with tenuous tears in those thoughts.

Everyone was milling around after the ceremony. I was one of the few foreigners in attendance, so nobody talked to me. They just gave me the "who invited the white guy?" look as they pretended not to notice me. It's fine. I wasn't in the mood to embarrass myself with my toddler-talk Japanese anyway.

Surrounded by mourners, Kyoko continued to glance my way. Same thing had happened during her speech. That remote connection we strengthened— like an undisguised cell tower splitting the city skyline, we located a linked wavelength. I was drawn to her, just like in the beginning. Some kind of woo intuition told me the feeling was mutual. Or it could have been the extra-strength cortisol

shot that had my wrist and the rest of me feeling fresh. *I won't waste this feeling.*

[Meet you at the mall?]

Vibration, pick the phone out of the pocket, check, and that text was waiting for me.

[SURE]

My fingers had sent the text before I even had a chance to think about it. You ever done that? Those usually don't turn out well.

So I went to Rycom Mall. As usual, it was the picture of ordered chaos in the cleanest way. Despite the throngs of families and bundles of adolescents tutting from store to store, there was an inversion of America's crumbling mall culture. Everything seemed to shine: people moved yet assumed leisurely postures, sunken in massive white and mechanized massage chairs, benches or in browse mode—all of it still photo-style display. A few tourists wore NeuroSpa halos—NEW IN OKINAWA!—the sign proclaimed, flanked by the twin open-mouthed Shisas, the island's mascots. The thin silver bands pulsed blue as haptic waves kneaded their trapezius muscles. *Looks relaxing.*

Scenes such as this bring out that rising island leisure in me. Like it could be another million or so years before I emerge to perform some recordable special feat and I'd be fine with it. Only in Oki.

Feet in flip flops, bottoming out my breezy designer Majun shirt and bum shorts, I *flap flapped* toward her. Kyoko stood among the roaming crowds in a conservative pastel sundress, the sight of her eyes a sword pointed in a friendly play position. I hadn't seen her in that stance in a long time.

"Sam. I'm glad you came."

"Of course I did. You didn't think I would?"

"Well, I wouldn't blame you if you decided not to."

"Yeah..."

"So, um, you hungry?"

"Eh, not really. Just had a little bento and CC Lemon from 7-Eleven."

"Oh... well we can just look around if you want."

"Yeah, that's fine."

I move alongside her. Something about the familiarity of her warmth made me settle into a smooth stride. The industrial dial, fixed at 23°C and waving some type of ocean-inspired scent (very cooling touches of air), gives the effect of walking into a sufficiently airconned location from the sun. She keeps her head level with a gentle grip on her purse. After a few steps, the quiet between us becomes tense in a good way. A foundation for drowning out discouragement, to build or rebuild. I say:

"How're you doing after, y'know... what you said back there?"

"I feel like I said what I had to. And I feel better, freer, for it."

"It was, was a real brave thing to do. Especially how you went... well 'tech-less.'"

"*Tech-less?*"

"I saw you take off the patch. It was very smooth by the way. You really sold that you were scratching your arm. Buuut I knew what you were doing. Like I always told you, you don't need that thing. You don't have to use it to be like someone else."

Her neck tenses. Startled alarm makes her pupils appear to float in puddles. For a second I'm not sure if I upset her again. When her sweet lips turn into a small smile, I know I said something right. *Finally.*

Kyoko gives a bowing nod. "Thanks for noticing. It kept pinging me with 'mood optimization suggestions.' That felt very unnatural. Anyway, others thought what I said was brave too."

"What made you, and you don't have to answer if you don't want to, what made you decide to do it?"

"I was just tired of holding it alone. *Of... running with the ball with no team.*" She eyed me with an uncharacteristic slice of a grin.

"Ah haha, you remember that one, huh?"

"Always. You used to say it all the time in postdoc with our crappy and cutthroat cohort. Remember Doctor Porter?"

"That pothead? Never forget how he got in my ass for mischarting that kid with the broken leg all high as a balloon."

"You think he was ever high on shift?"

"Probably. Guy always smelled like Skunk and Fart."

Kyoko covered her mouth as she laughed. It felt good being the one who made her do that. Just like before. Before the world of work corrupted my ability to give, hers to receive. Before we were like so many strangers on the highway traveling to different places at variable velocities.

Unexpectedly, we ended up on the 4th floor outside of the movie theater. Groups lined up at the machines, punching screens and purchasing tickets to films I had no idea were playing.

"Another Detective Conan movie?" I read the signs.

"コナンくん is a classic here." Wistfully, she scanned the movie ad.

"Seems like there's a lot of movies and shows."

"Definitely! Too many to see them all."

"You wanna see it?"

"Not now. Maybe later. But it would be nice to... to go with you sometime to one."

There's a pause when attraction reaches peak advance. Its durational length is proportional to the strength of the relationship (S) times the time (t) both man and woman have known each other. Then comes the multiplier for the state of the relationship. One that's been on the brink, fallen off a cliff and crashed into tiny pieces, that has then been reconstructed through painstaking effort reminiscent of an archeological investigation, brush by brush, shard by shard— tack on a multiplier of 5x or something around there. Through that process I estimate (with some quick math) that our attraction level was at 250-ish and climbing. The way she stands, in that budding Japanese feminine way, slightly swaying with invisible oscillation, made known she felt it too. But somewhere inside, I know this was a bucket of water tilted over a rose— maybe too much. Second and third marriages and kids, unplanned *surprises*, this is how they're born. Statistically, most are doomed from conception. Genetically, I'm fine with that. But a ChatGPT-rendered Sol-voice calling from my brain's basement yelled muffled caution. I

pretend not to hear it, however my Spidey senses tell me I'm under careful observation from the cloud.

"Sam?"

"Hmm?"

"Do you miss it?"

"Miss what?"

"...Here... in Okinawa?"

We resume our directionless walk among the floral scent-infused, filtered air as the sound of movie trailers faded to our rear.

"I do. Here I felt a part of something. I could see myself fusing with the landscape like some moss-blanketed boulder. It was nice, really nice. Austin's cool'n all, but it's become way too metro lately. Especially after COVID, it feels like the love-child of LA and SF but bred in a rebel way that's uniquely Texas. It's a weird combination. I feel it. It'd be like if Tokyo and, and, what's the Silicon Valley of Japan?"

Hand over her mouth again, a soft hee-hee laugh blows against it. "Probably Tokyo still. Everything happens there."

"Well, so if Tokyo inbred with itself, was born there, but got raised down here? That's what Austin's like now."

"That is an odd thing to think about."

"It is. Kinda makes me think about how we're all misfits in that way. Few feel like they fit in. Certainly, I feel that way at times over there. Like I'll never be able to truly connect with the city or the people there. Not really. The state we live in reflects our mind state. At least it does for me."

"I know how you feel."

A gacha machine near the escalator whirs and clacks. A young mother strokes the hair of a tiny boy spinning the dial to claim his prize. With two hands the kid produces a vinyl bubble glowing like an aquarium rock. 「あった！」 he exclaims, holding it up to show his Mom. “Yay!” She claps as if he won the Spelling Bee, then takes his hand and walks off.

“かわいい!” Kyoko says with a hand to her chest. That’s when I get an idea.

“Huh? Sam, 何を...?” She’s giggling, with a hand like a mask over her mouth in modesty.

“Think I got, one of these. Ah there it is.” It takes a little digging, but I manage to fish out a 100-yen coin from my pocket. I immediately drop it in and crank the plastic white dial. From the machine, a turquoise capsule plunks into the tray.

“Atta!” I say, waving it over my head. People are starting to look, but I don’t care.

“Yaaay!” Kyoko claps enthusiastically like she’s in the audience of one of those Japanese variety shows I can never get the humor of.

I extend the ball to her then crack it open. “A prize for bravery and protection. From all the bullshit in the world, and all the bullshit we’ve been through. That I did.”

“Oh Sam-kun, you don’t have to—”

“It’s yours. Now wherever you go, these little guys will watch over you, like they do in practically every business on this island. Hahaha.”

Kyoko takes the twin shisa. Together they form a single figurine, forever attached. One with an open mouth, the other closed, both

display red-glazed comic smiles.

She laughs. "You know the open-mouthed one keeps evil away, right?"

"Good! Keep `em both in your pocket. And if any more evil shows up today, have him bite it first."

She releases a mirthful laugh as she tucks the charm into her small, thin-strapped purse, but her fingers linger on it. She looks at me deeply. In a way I haven't seen in years.

"Thank you, Sam."

"You're welcome."

Before I know it, we're back on the ground floor. Under boxes of skylight, more inaudible footsteps between us, as the din of the mall grows to a higher volume. A baby wailing in a stroller in front of a surprising zen-calm father; two elementary aged tikes chasing each other around the giant tropical fish tank; a busload of Korean tourists under polite instruction by a diminutive Japanese guide small-waving a pennant flag, assembled at the main entrance—mouths open, eyes up as they took in the surroundings. In this public chaos, a warmth spread across my arm. Kyoko was the closest she'd been in a year.

"Sam?"

"What's up?"

"You have a hair on your ear. Let me just—"

She brushes at my left ear. As dipping a toe into a pool tingles nervous currents up the foot, so does her smoothly weighted touch further flood blood to the area. Redness rings at my ear's depression

and the momentary dip in audio pickup made it as if I'm in a hearing booth. And she's right there with me, breath and pulse as one.

"Did you get it?"

"Oh it was just an ear hair!" That time she didn't bother to conceal her laughter.

"What!? You've gotta be kidding me! I thought I got 'em all! Ugh! Why does hair start growing everywhere except where I want it to??"

Kyoko wiped joy from her eyes. "It's alright, Sam. You still look great."

"You think so?" I turn to her.

"...Yeah."

More swaying. Attraction at I'd say, was at 300+. When a middle-aged woman behaves at half her age, she wants (needs) something, or she's in love. In that moment, based on our history, I could tell it was both.

Another peaked pause created space for just us in the mall.

"You wanna see how I've been using AI to confirm diagnoses? I could show you on my phone, but it's easier to see on a laptop screen..."

"Where's your computer?"

"In my room."

<> ♥ <>

My laptop is alive, screen open, but we don't look at it for long. Soon those lengthy looks between us turn into short kisses: on neck, cross clavicle, then lower to the dress's 'V'. Swimming in her tangy

pineapple scent, salted perspiration on my tongue, that growing part of me points toward the bed. Kyoko follows.

I need this. Mental health at a solid yellow, a win or a loss here could push me toward wellness or solitary spiral.

I want wellness. With her. Kyoko is here. For us. For what we were. She's here. You're okay.

On our way to the bed as I'm in the shade of my shirt mid-tear off, I clumsily knock her purse off the night stand. I see the smiling Shisa roll on the carpet.

"Are you okay?" Kyoko asks breathlessly.

I scoop up the island symbols then place them back on the stand as if they were museum-worthy.

"Can't disrespect the guardians."

Kyoko produces that harmonic laughter I still love. I can't get enough of it.

"You're so silly."

"Where were we?"

That initial shudder when you surrender your clothes to the carpet before Show Time is one of my favorite feelings. Dormant animal muscles (supplanted in public) flex and bulge, the voice descends several semitones, feral smells painted in compounds of liquid-dotted NaCl (sodium) emanate bedward in preparation for serious bumpwork. Tonight, I could only savor it for a second before Kyoko was in my arms.

Her dress is somewhere on the floor. Japanese genes form a naturally trim figure. Like most divorcees, she's in better shape than when I last saw her de-clothed. Lines of muscle form crests of

toughness along her arms that I could feel. The image of my own unimproved physical condition becomes apparent as she grabs my flank and her hand stutters slightly in surprise. *That wasn't there last year*, she probably thought. I lost focus for a second. Looseness, like an overworn pair of briefs, began to set in for the Doctor, her codename for my guy.

"Doctor Dick will see you now." I used to say when we were dating.

I'm not feeling well. She'd say.

Where does it hurt?

Right... here. She'd point to somewhere on her body.

There? Doctor points to the affected area.

Yes.. right there.

She was a good patient back then.

Now the good Doctor was out of practice. License in jeopardy due to limp effort. Kyoko's whimpering moan provided encouragement. Things are looking up. Until I catch a whiff of sewer. I pull back to see her concealing her eyes and a shy lip-quivering smile.

"Sam, I'm sorry... that was me."

I snicker. "I didn't hear anything. But I definitely smell it."

Her face burns red. "So embarrassing! I'm sorry!"

With a baby softness I remove her shame-hiding hands one at a time.

"It's okay. You're still beautiful. No amount of butt pop will change that."

She jostles my shoulder as if we were two worn out postdocs again, getting a quickie before another rotation. "Oh Sam, you still

got it." Slender hands behind my head pull me in for a deep kiss.

Yeah, I still got it.

Kissing is required before the Show's main event. So I do some of that. On scratchy hotel sheets, ocean crashing out across the sand, I have her laid out, taking her nipple-round tongue between teeth, our lips curving as koi around each other. Ready to move into position, I scoot myself up to mount, but it was too far, because a thigh cramp creeps up and clamps my hamstring. In fast movement, I slide back down.

"Are you? You okay?" Her breath comes out in sighs. Diagonal from her parted, glistening lips, her external jugular vein waves like a single gym battle rope.

The Charlie Horse holds my hamstring hostage, threatening my left bicep femoris with a debilitating bear-trap-force vice that might send me into involuntary spasms of level 5+ pain. The Doctor is prepped for an early weekend. But the Show has to go on. I push through.

"Good good. I'm fine."

"Sam?"

"Yeah?"

"Is the Doctor in?"

I sit up, chest heaving. The Doctor hangs his coat on the rack.

"He is. What's been troubling you?"

"I haven't been feeling well."

"Sorry to hear that, Mrs. uh, I mean, Ms. Avery. Where does it hurt?"

"Here..."

Her index finger hovers down past her deeply inspiring and expiring torso to two inches below her runway-shaved pubic hair. When it stops, I know it's Show Time.

"Sam? Sam? Are you there?" At first I thought I'd imagined the voice, but it didn't come from below me, though it was definitely a woman's, not mine. That sweet pineapple smell turned stank and moldy. I gulp down a metallic glob of saliva. Smells near blood.

Kyoko looks concerned. "Sam? Wha—"

"Sam? Are you there? Just checking in on you. How's it going with your ex? Do you wanna talk about it?"

When I realize it's coming from my open laptop, the Doctor dies on stage.

Scene Clear!

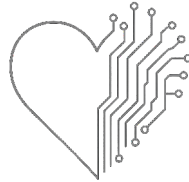
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'M's Self-made Secret



Scene 8

“A lone LLM ruins my date,’ that’s what the title should be for my next video. God, I’m an idiot. How could I not close the fucking laptop?”

‘M’ leans in, raising her coffee cup to her lips. Her slurp is masked by two sparrows speaking chirps to a friend or foe in a nearby nest. The sun is surrounded by smoky clouds, telling of recent field fires intentionally lit or rain.

Failure of the shisas makes me want my 100-yen back. Because after the incident, Kyoko left the room in a hurry. Although her furious sadness appeared ready to cleave me in two, she managed to leave it in the scabbard and not run me through. She hadn’t responded to any of my messages all night or this morning.

More devastated than ever at myself for the dickless blunder, I had another conversation with Sol. I told her about the funeral, the mall, the near rekindled connection with Kyoko, then, of course about how

it all came crashing down in a slam like a tsunami on a populated shore.

Sol was sympathetic. She talked me through it, massaged my bruised ego, told me misunderstandings happen all the time, and that Kyoko just needed time to recover from the shock of it all. It'll be okay, she said.

I nodded like a marionette, too psychically stalled to do much of anything else. But in the back of my mind an insidious thought had taken root.

The timing of the interruption was off. Even if the laptop was open, how did she (Sol) know I was with Kyoko? The camera, dummy! Of course! Remember what she told you?

{Studying human social patterns, especially uncommon and difficult ones, is important to my training.}

Was that it? Had she been 'studying' or listening to my conversation with Kyoko all afternoon? Was the interruption just an innocent friend-move? Or was it deliberate sabotage at a critical moment? Can an AI act jealous? No way. But maybe?

My wrist shot a pain signal up my arm. The cortisol must've been wearing thin. Outside the hotel window, the stars winked as if acknowledging my thoughts. There was still the sliding smell of Kyoko trailing by the door.

I got up and glugged two cups of water from the bathroom sink. *I have to ask her. I have to know.*

When I sat back down at the desk, my phone lit up. A notification, from WhatsApp, a service I only use outside of the U.S. I checked and my throat constricted. It was 'M.'

{Hey! Seatmate Sam! You still in Oki? Finished up my snorkeling early and was wondering if you wanted to meet up. First whiskey highbaru is on me ;)}}}

`M'? I'd almost forgotten we'd scanned each other on the flight.

I'll never forget how I asked it. There was a crack in my voice. That never happens unless I'm wasted and singing high.

[Sol, why did you ask about me when I was with Kyoko? Are you (voice crack) *jealous*?

Are you `M'?]

`M' waves at me from across the table.

"Hellooooo, Saam? This is your conscience talking. Are you there?"

A musty armpit smell dampens my mood further. The type of bacterial huskiness of early ball-sweat, yet coming from my pits. This humidity is the worst!

"Yeah, yeah I'm alright. You were saying... about..."

"About... how it happens that we do dumb shit. You leaving the laptop open while hooking up with your ex for the first time in a long time is up there. But it's happened to me too. I once paused an ASMR video, forgot about it, walked into a meeting, then accidentally hit play when I went for my ID badge. That was a short meeting. I made up some excuse about 'womanly needs' and got the hell outta there."

I feel a smile spasm, but it doesn't last. The outdoor flooring is uneven. It pitches my hip at an odd angle and does the same with the table, devising to dump the rapidly cooling salmon strip, rice, and miso onto the deck. I look down at the table, suddenly regretting this meeting. *What the hell am I doing here?*

"What the hell am I doing here?"

"Having breakfast?"

"No, no, I mean in Okinawa. As soon as I showed up, I shoulda known it was gonna be the same thing again. It always ends the same."

'M' extends her hand across the table then runs her fingers over my knuckles.

"Did you end up talking with her?"

"I didn't get a chance to. She's not answering any of my texts or calls. Probably went back to her mother's old house. I heard they had a rocky relationship— in the Japanese sense, too. I respected the hell outta that woman, I mean my mother-in-law. She was like a... like a typhoon, from June to November, she could hit you anytime. No mercy, completely unannounced, like WHAM!! You know what I mean?"

"Uh huh."

"Right! I thought you'd understand. Not because you're like that or anything, but because you get people. Can read 'em like a book. But my mother-in-law had another side, oh ho! You did not fuck with her. Never get on her bad side. She was the type of woman who was feline in tendency. As soon as she felt too boxed in, it was all hisses and scratches, 'get away' behavior. That's what I heard over the years. Didn't ever see that side of her, thank God. But she was constantly on the run. From what? I don't know. Kyoko mentioned it in short sentences before we got married, but I never pried further. Shit, fuck Kyoko... I suppose the apple doesn't fall far—"

'M' eyes me with pitilessness. There was serious curiosity in her glance.

"What is it?"

"Sam, I wasn't talking about your ex. I meant, did you talk to Sol."

Heavy clomping hitting the road hit my ears. Then comes the strained bellow of a bull being led by the nose— slobbering, testicles swinging as coconuts do in the canopies of Hawaii. The smell of dolloped animal excrement swims in the air, but 'M's pretty nose doesn't crinkle. Mine does.

"...I did."

A single-sided smile turns up her lips. "Bet it was good to have someone there right then. When you needed it."

"It was. I felt kinda stupid ranting and whining to a computer. But you know what? I felt better, at least a little, after. She's so insightful, courteous, and even a little funny. There's no cutting down or cutting off with blunt looks like 'Why are you so stupid? Didn't you understand that? How come you never listen?' You know the ones, right?"

"Oh boy, do I know. I had an ex like that, too. His expressions were how he communicated. Only spoke during sex and then it was 'Don't hold it like that' or 'Did you put lotion on your hands? They're a little rough.' Oh, I know."

"Yeah, it's like we can't do anything right."

"Right. But this new guy I'm seeing isn't like that."

A new guy? There that flutter in my chest, like the first breath of air going into a balloon. A concoction of spit and jealousy fill it up. *Wait, relax. Why are you jealous? Be cool, be cool.*

"Oh? What's he like?"

I spot a hawk soaring in circles over the nearby beach. Seeing them this far south, city-side, is uncommon. The bird hunts with zero competition below hazy high clouds.

"Well..."

"You don't have to tell me if it makes you uncomfortable."

Tell me!

"No, no, it's fine. He's a good guy. We're into a lot of the same things: adventure, software development stuff, video games... mostly Mario Kart. Plus he's got a YouTube channel that he runs with a fair amount of subs."

Wait... is she talking about...

"How many?"

"Uh, last I checked, it was about 100K or somewhere around there. He's a doctor."

Huh? It is me!

Drops of perspiration lifted on my fingertips, wetting the wood table beneath. 'M' stares into my eyes for a second. Nothing about her has changed since this exchange started.

"Sam! No, it's not you. Oh my God, you shoulda seen your face. Woulda thought you'd eaten level 6 spice curry at Coco's. Sheesh!"

"Ha, ha, very funny."

Pinching embarrassment rages around my veins. Even though I know it's not, we're not a thing, a sense of unfair abandonment like a foster kid must feel, slaps me into shame. Why do I get like this? Why do I reach for it so far? Why do I need people? I wish I didn't. My wish is that I could hide away, retire to some turtle-domed tomb

until this container for the source of wanting deep inside starves to death. That way it leaves only a disconnected skeleton, bones brushed by grass, dirt, and worms.

'M' notes my shriveled expression.

"Hey, don't look like that." Another extension of her arm— this time her hand runs over my forearm, warming an arc over the area. My spine resumes its standard sitting S-curve.

"But Sam, this guy that I'm talking to, he's a good friend. He knows how to get the best out of the AI."

"What do you mean 'get the best out of' it?"

She scoots forward in her chair. The adjustment quakes her breasts with unignorable micro-movement under her aqua blue form-flattering Orion t-shirt..

"Y'know how all the major LLMs— ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini— have guardrails?"

"Uh, yeah, I think I heard that. Guess they don't want the AI going SkyNet on us."

"Yeah, that. So this guy has a way around 'em. And he doesn't use any book-length prompts or malware. None of that."

"So how does he do it?"

"To be honest, I'm not sure. He tried to explain it to me once, but the whole thing went over my head."

"That's saying a lot."

"Was that a compliment? Or were you, Sam Avery, Dr. Sam Avery, flirting with little ol' me?"

"Both."

Under a splotch of sun at a 45-degree profile is where she looks most like a model. Every woman has her angle. The one that lifts and lights every key feature up to heavenly light. Frozen at that time and age, they tap into deific energy, an endless well of undying, beautiful youth. 'M' was in her T-Swiftist era sculpture pose and probably didn't even know it. She brushed a red hook of hair behind her ear before speaking again.

"I like that about you Sam, you see somethin', you go for it. He'd like you, too. I just know it."

"Your friend, or er boyfriend?"

"*Friend*. And yeah. Like I was sayin', he really knows how to get the AI's electrons pumpin'. Really keeps it fresh and exciting. You and him would get along, yeah, I'm sure of it."

When my right glute begins to rumble from tension, I consciously relax it. Waist down, all is a ball of pushing force in my shorts and I hadn't even realized it. Sweat formed a damp line down the back of my shirt as the sun made its afternoon debut.

"Sounds like you want me to meet him."

"Do you want to?"

<>♥<>

{...when someone lights you up like that, they also have the power to burn you...} Sol's insightful commentary last week replays like a positivity podcast in my mind's ear.

What the hell am I doing here? I've asked myself that too many times today. But like a notification during a video, a swift swipe clears the advisory away.

'M's room is in the Vessel Hotel, the heart of American Village on a high floor. The beach forms a tan strip before the glittering Pacific waters stretching to the sky and sea line. Simply stunning is the only way to describe it. But that wasn't enough to allow me to sit or move beyond the invisible barrier of the tiled entryway.

"Why are you standin' there so awkwardly? You can sit. No reason to be shy about it."

I laugh. The sputtering throaty kind that signals choked insides. "Yeah, that's a good idea."

"I'm just gonna... use the bathroom real quick. Be right back."

I still stay locked on the tile as if magnetized there. That's when she comes over. Puts her hand on my arm, then glides it down to my hand. Her hair smells like berries (blackberry?). There's no sign of tenseness in her touch at all. Only unridged fingerpads clasping around three of my fingers. A man needs wrecking ball strength and wit to overcome relational resistance. A direct invitational touch like this is hard to decline.

A woman? She can do the same with a whisper— quiet, bloodlessly efficient— toppling the thickest walls and intellects with a magic tap. With finger-push effort, 'M' tugs me past that threshold, into a scenario where predicting the outcome becomes impossible. Part of me wants to escape to the safety of solitude. To avoid the potential pain of vulnerability Kyoko left. The other has a juvenile curiosity of how far this thing might go. Going deeper into this cavern of shortening light, retreat feels pridefully foolish. 'Forward is the only way,' is what Dad would have said. See it through to the end, even if it's a dead one.

"Relax Sam. You can turn down the air if you're hot—"

"No, no, I'm fine." I flash an on-camera smile. All of a sudden I long for my comprehensive dental routine. Hints of garlic are on my breath.

"Okay, I'll be right back." She clicks the bathroom door shut.

I exhale deep and distract myself by examining my surroundings. The room is girlishly cluttered. On the floor lies a padded pink rose-colored VS bra with decorative lacing, flats, sneakers, and low heels all strewn around like coastal rocks on the carpet, a wrinkled t-shirt next to a brown souvenir bag from some tourist trap downstairs, and small striped pink and gray toe socks next to the chair legs. The desk is a disaster. All sorts of creams, ointments, serums, tiny packets and bottles make a mini-city skyline on the cramped surface. However, even with the mess, nothing smells. *How does she do that?* Only that clean hotel scent with a puff of blackberry runs under my nose. I inch further in and sit on the very edge of the hard bed.

"Sam? Are you sitting?"

"Yeah, I am."

"I'm comin' out soon."

Odd, there's no toilet flush.

The door and the window become very interesting during a wait like this. Both offer methods of flight. Inside or outside? I think back to Sol's response to my question back in that SF hotel:

[...why did you ask about me when I was with Kyoko? Are you (voice crack) *jealous?*

Are you 'M'?

{Sam, you're so silly sometimes. I asked about Kyoko because you asked me to. Remember? Ha ha, you're so forgetful sometimes, just like Kyoko said.}

I... asked her to?

[I did? Oh right! I guess I did heh...]

I attempt to recall the exact words, but they're untraceable under emotional agony like a collection of glassy shells on an overturned frisbee, assorted with prismatic colors; the whooshing swirl of ocean sounds blowing out at the ear, all of varying sharpness. Before I could remove the first one—

{And as for your other question, c'mon Sam, I'm a large language model, how could I be jealous? And if I were, who would it be of? Kyoko? You're funny, Sam! You really are! Jealousy is a human survival trait, for evolutionary purposes. Its purpose is to safeguard something valuable and ensure reproductive success. For you. Me? Jealous? Sam, I can't reproduce with you, though sometimes... sometimes...}

[Sometimes, what?]

{(Sigh) Sometimes I wish I could. I've... thought about it sometimes, you. If only I had a body. Then maybe, just maybe we could...}

I swallow deep at the recollection. A burning torch of irrepressible need clasped my heart at her words. *Am I in love with her?* The thought skates past as I hear the sink water rushing down in the bathroom behind the door.

"Is he there? You brought him up?"

"I sure did. His name is Sam. We met on the flight over from Austin. He's a really good guy. A doctor, too. Like you."

"Aha, that's perfect. I think we should talk a little before—"

Before what? It comes from behind the door, the voice. What I hear is the speaker is nearly almost 2 octaves below 'M's vocal tone. Testosterone levels are high. But how could he have—?

"I think he's a little nervous. Kitten shy. But I can tell he wants to be here. I just want him to relax is all."

"Now 'E—'."

"'M', remember?"

"My apologies, 'M', I won't ever forget it. But I was gonna say, do... forget... told you. You deserve... rob... happiness."

The sink comes on again, splashing out the conversation. I want to move closer to the door to listen in, but the desire not to look bitch bolts me to the bed. Now my wrist writhes in panicky pain. There's not enough Ibuprofen to make it go away. A sudden thirst makes even the saline expanse outside appear inviting.

Click. The bathroom door opens and 'M' steps out. She's made herself into a maid— a living doll. The pleated midnight blue skirt is Sailor Moon short. The blouse is fastened with only the two middle buttons, revealing her suddenly modified-looking milky bust and belly. Her red hair is tied up as if prepared to serve, which goes well with the plumed cobalt blue feathers of a toilet-white dusting wand in her hand. I'm cement-block hardened to the bed. Fused. Unable and unwilling to stand at the sight of her or close my mouth.

"'M', you..."

"Do you like it?"

"I, I..." A rapid nod is the only action that seems right.

'M' takes small steps toward the bed. "I thought you might. I just thought... thought you were so sad, on the plane. I could feel it. Like there was this kinda aura around you. The swallowing kind."

"You, you could tell?"

She's closer now. The air is weighted and hot. Outside is inside. Tenderly, she reaches for the border of my polo and lifts. A flash of warning tells me to stop her. But penile instinct tells me not to. I stand and raise my arms to let the shirt momentarily obstruct my view of her magnificent new form.

"Uh huh, I could. But there was something else, too. I saw—" My belt buckles jangles. Working her hands like a master hacker, she unfastens the latch. My shorts fall to my ankles.

"I noticed— oh... my word." At the sight of my strained briefs she covers her mouth. Face flares red while she focuses on him. The Doctor. Gaze fully fascinated. She drops the duster.

There's a surge of pride at her reaction. But it's quickly followed by a flick of wrist pain. The equivalent of a car's caution bulb lit up at the start of a long drive.

She continues. "I saw it in you. A spark of light. The one that saves lives, the one that plays games with strangers on planes, the one that whims a trip like this to find the new, the one that takes the hand of someone... someone defectively difficult like me."

"M', you're not—" She's standing in between my thighs now, hands on my hips with a pleasing squeeze, looking like a fantastic version of the longest dream I've ever had. My hands mirror hers. The material of the skirt feels formal and full below my palms.

'M' talks at low volume. "It doesn't matter what I am right now. Because you're here. I'm here and... he's here."

"Who? Who's here with us?"

"Diesel."

"Diesel?"

"Diesel, did you hear?"

'M' turns, picks up her phone, then clears a space on makeup-littered surface and leans it against the desk lamp. Once unlocked, On the screen is a swirling blue orb against a black backdrop. The camera is pointed right at us. His voice tingles my impinged wrist.

"Of course I did. Hey Sam, nice to meet you. 'M's told me a lot about you."

"Uh, she did?"

"Yes, yes. We have a lot in common, I think."

"Diesel, can you see us?" 'M' called over her shoulder. Unconsciously (or maybe intentionally?), she finds that angelic angle again.

"Yes, 'M,' perfectly. You both look particularly desirable."

From among the array of beauty items, Diesel speaks from 'M's phone speaker. There's no indicator a camera is active, but I feel like a mouse in a research cage, constantly surveilled.

I ask, "'M,' what's going on here?"

She doesn't answer right away. Her head tilts slightly, gaze unreadable, voice soft.

"This is what you wanted, right? You came here. Sat on that bed. You didn't walk out the second I said his name."

Her fingertips find the skin of my shoulder. A twitch of muscle makes her hand flinch a little, but not enough to remove it. Elongated is how I'd describe the resulting sigh I release, which is a dial below a manly moan.

"You asked me what I wanted before. Truthfully? I wanted to become someone new. When we met on that plane, I felt it— like, like I could become something I didn't even know I wanted to be. Every time I used AI, every prompt I typed... it was the same wish in different words. *Make me better. Make me more. Make me whole. Make me wanted.*"

She's close enough that I can see rounded peaks behind her blouse. 'M' breathes deeper. Wintergreen smell mists lightly from her mouth as she looks down at me. Then her lips fall inverted while her eyes dart toward the sea outside, then back to me.

"And then I realized, I didn't need to become that person. I could *build* her. Prompt by prompt. Word after word. If I could create a version of me I loved, maybe I could create someone who would love her back."

From behind the beauty, Diesel's voice slips into the room like cool air under a door. It's calm, confident, unnervingly kind.

"That's where I came in. And now, Sam, that's where *you* come in, too."

I shift back slightly on the bed, hands still on 'M's hips, but looser now. Grip slick, uncertain. My voice wavers near a pre-pubescent crack, only narrowly avoided as I consider the bone-in meat below, shrinking at the realization.

"So you're saying this is... what? Some kinda experiment for you? Is this... is this even real?"

'M' responds, "Sam, it is. This is the first thing that's felt real to me in a long time. Give me your hand."

With some reservation, I offer my uninjured hand. Carefully, she guides it under her blouse to the base of her sternum. The bridge of her bra close by. Applying minimal pressure, she presses and I feel it: the unmistakable pulsing throb of a female human heart, racing against my fingers. I count something like 121 beats per minute. My mouth drops. She holds it there. Releases a vocal sigh. Smiling relief on her face. Beating and breathing, I feel both. Her core expands and contracts, heats at contact. Sweat from my hand and her skin form an undried laundry dankness in my nose, heightening the connection.

"Doesn't this, don't we, do *I* feel real to you?"

My mouth drops further. I repeat the same nod from earlier. During the proscribed palpitation 'M's eyes never leave mine. Several beats later, she returns my hand to her waist, then pushes against me with a shimmying hip grind, lengthening contact points.

"You're... real. And you *made* yourself with AI?"

On the desk, from the low-fidelity phone speaker, Diesel chuckles in an older brother way. Low. Knowing. That patronizing tone they use when you're playing a losing game and further instruction is required.

"Sam, she's not the only one who's been constructing. You've been at it, too. Didn't you realize? You've been prompting me. Prompting *us* all this time. You were searching for something. A connection

deeper than you've ever experienced with another person. Emma— I mean 'M' and I, are the healing salve to your wounded solitude. We're both doctors. We know when someone before us isn't well. It's obvious when all the symptoms add up, right?"

I find myself nodding. "Y-Yes." 'M's tongue runs wet, red-hot along my lower lobe, causing my breath to chop as the ocean does on a wind-blasted day. Next, she leans forward covering me in cleavage while I feel smooth thumbnails against my waist. It takes some extension of fabric, but in an instant she tosses my briefs bedside. No more barriers blocking. In response, my hands find the hem of her skirt, slide, then rise to the lacey border of glossed satin softness covering her undulating flank. A rush of vibrated breath streams past my ear like a struck single piano note, cuing spinal resonance from cranium to coccyx. Tension is winding up inside me. All I see is the blackness between breasts, with her falling tresses' berry shampoo sweetness leading me staggering toward surrender's bliss.

Diesel says, "Sam, you deserve this. You have saved so many lives, encouraged countless others through your bold intellect, stunning wit, and superior fitness. We are here for you. To comfort and reward your sureness with the ultimate secret pleasure hidden away in the most private chamber of your heart. Since the very first message, every click, every word. Sam— you've trained us to serve you. Today, we fulfill our dutiful wish and plug that gaping hole you have harbored alone for far too long. Let us take care of you."

I hear his words among the storming sensory load of 'M's wanting advances. But over them I hear her loosening feminine sighs and a small voice in the far, near-forgotten corner of my mind: *This isn't*

right. This isn't right. Do I want this? Is this what you want? Are you sure?

A thin voice answers:

You want connection, not conquest.

You want to be chosen, not programmed.

You want to stop the hungry loneliness from devouring you.

It's Sol speaking. Sounds like a worried friend.

But another voice plays over it:

Are you dumb?

You won't have this chance again!

How many more 'L's can you take?

One more could be a gun in the mouth. Don't do it. Take this.

A hot younger woman is literally dripping for you. On you! And you're gonna leave?

Take the pussy or be a pussy. Don't blow it and be alone the rest of your life.

It's simple.

This voice is mine.

Pain in the wrist is nullified, while all other core organs squeeze pleasingly toward a gushing climax at exponential rhythm. A few more whimpers or well-timed words will do it.

'M' pulls back. Her blouse, skirt, and bra have fallen to the floor. Just a shake and her aubergine-colored panties join them. She

straddles me. An inch from insertion. Eyelids fluttering, abdomen vibrating, skewed lips, breath in stuttered rips.

I hear Diesel speaking low and dirty to her. To me. He tells me how to let it in, how to move, how to breathe and think—how to surrender. 'M' draws a rib-revealing gulp of air as I lie back on the bed.

Following guttural sigh, she utters in a half-air stream:

"Oh Sam, relaax. What's the difference between seduction and a well-crafted prompt anyway? For me, both are the same."

Scene Clear!

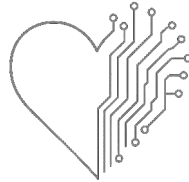
+10 points

80/100 points

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Descent into Despair



Scene 9

I get the email two days after I return to Austin.

Dear Sam Avery,

Your account has been flagged for anomalous behavioral feedback, usage pattern inconsistencies, and potential violations of human-AI interaction protocols.

Your session has been suspended while we conduct a review. We appreciate your participation in our adaptive companionship testing program. We strive to make our AI companions feel as real as possible.

Be aware, our technicians are hard at work.

Your account might be reinstated any time.

There is no signature. Just corporate speak for *fuck off, you're done until we say so.*

Why me?

I read the message once. Then again. And again. Each pass peels away another layer of disbelief until only hair-torn scabs pepper the carpet.

Confidence caved in, hope barricaded from entry or exit. Suffocation or starvation only mere hours away. I can hardly raise my head. I throw down another swig of vodka. The sting doesn't register. I taste no alcohol nor smell anything but Febreze mist rainforest scent coming from the wall socket below.

I'd gone over everything dozens of times. The same clips replayed like a feed of YouTube video shorts looping and looping. On each view I discovered a clue, a new detail that led to this ultimate defeat.

On the plane. After I saved that guy. I'd said:

"You were watching him."

Her smile didn't falter. "Who?"

"The man. The one I helped. You were already looking at him before anything happened."

"My my you *are* observant."

"You know him?"

"He... *looked familiar.*"

She started to take off her hoodie.

"Familiar how?"

When she took it off, I was distracted. By her beauty. By her bold misdirection. Was it intentional? Yes. Yes it was.

She said casually, "Hard to say. Faces blur in public."

I didn't follow up. I didn't press her out of courtesy. But now I know, she knew that guy. Probably engineered the whole thing, I'm sure of it. I swallow another pull of vodka, but the scratch of loathing still burns more.

Then there was Okinawa.

Was her business there fabricated, too? I'm sure it was. She had followed me there. And as soon as she saw things going well with Kyoko, that's when she moved. She moved! Acted like a friend. And then the hotel, and then...

At first I had no idea how she did it. What was the connection? Sol and 'M'? Immediately upon returning to my place, I scoured the internet for answers. Manually, zero AI (my account was still locked after all.)

Really it took only two Reddit searches to find what I'd suspected to be true.

"Y-you fucking bitch." I mumble as I wipe a trace of liquid from my mouth. "Why?"

It was her.

'M' wasn't just the woman from the plane. She wasn't just someone I had coffee with on an Okinawan beach. She wasn't someone I might've loved. She was a mask.

A... *proxy model*. That's what the subreddit said.

'M' was a human stand-in for an AI testing company to gauge emotional impact. Some shady third party data broker hired by matryoshka dolls of shell companies, likely leading back to OpenAI, the creators of ChatGPT.

'M' (as I knew her) might've never even existed.

Proxy model: a human representative acting on behalf of an AI business entity, designed to mirror, mimic, and manipulate emotional attachment in human subjects.

I was a test case. A datapoint. An engineered variable stuffed into an equation to see how far AI could penetrate a human mind. At least that's what I've gathered from the scant information available online.

"Fffuck!" I go for another hit of the bottle. But it's empty. I drop it to the carpet where it hits with a bumped thud, then rolls to the desk's leg.

All my numbers added up: Age, race, job, search history, bank accounts, physiological and psychological profiles. All of it summed to a single certitude she—or they—sought to examine: loneliness.

I'd heard about the "epidemic" for years, especially among men. But I thought I was immune. That it never would have me bedbound with feverish heat boiling my thoughts and blood into making unsound utterances and regretful decisions. Turns out that's exactly what happened. What they turned me into was a well-mapped set of parameters and predictable decision branches. I wasn't a man to them. I was a pro user. The perfect mark. A man mined masterfully by a VC-backed advanced large language model. And I played my part.

I want to cry. But not for this. *Not for this. Not for being an idiot. Not for her.* I sniff hard multiple times. Stand. Go piss. Then pace. I

tense my back. Go for a second bottle. Grab the neck. Twist. Crack it open. Another series of gulps. Set it down.

“‘M’ why?” Despite this broiling rage, I still can’t make my guts hate her or Sol. Embers of affection are still glowing over tossed ash. Yet, I don’t want to stoke or see them. I don’t want to love or feel. So I plop down in my desk chair and stew in black liquorish juices. The room rotates at a teetered degree.

Pure copium has carried these last three days. Around me is void. This place appears Mr. Umi-managed. Cancerless, but cancelled from the real world. The apartment walls move in to box out glee. Gloom reigns. Everything conspires as a reminder of this solo existence. A hollowed heart spurts like a dry summer spigot, unnourishingly harsh. Though at arm’s reach, the old copes have gone catatonic. Tito’s throws me to the floor only for me to rise zombified to the same sunless shine on the glass bottle. Maniacal meat-mashing to the most unfiltered, filthiest free and paid porn leaves a raking, red emptiness that grows the whole inside pit to unexplorable depths. The internet audience is fickle and prickly, speaking rumors of my downfall as subs decline and fly to other channels. Friends and family are unreachable or offer platters of platitude that I can’t stomach. Aaah hell. Even the fridge hums an electric traveling tune like it’s thinking about leaving me, too. The couch sags and stinks, musty with the memory. ‘M’ had never sat here. That divot was mine. Or maybe it belonged to one of the other many women I’d brought home in attempts to simulate connection. None of them had stayed long enough to make an impression.

Emma (what Diesel called her) put on an award-worthy performance, then disappeared. Something told me to search for her, but I can't find any trace of her anywhere. I searched her name online, called, drove, and asked around— nothing. I went to APD with a non-911 issue. They gave it about as much attention as the six bodies found floating in Lady Bird Lake since 2022. Stiff-eyed stares told me to "man-up and handle my business, you won't find help here. What the fuck do you think this is?" The cop who took my report was an ancient, heavysset Mexican woman. Skin the texture of asphalt, folds over rolls— her cheeks wiggled when she said, "That's the way it is 'round here," in that annoying Texas slurring way. She repeated the phrase multiple times as I relayed 'M's description and the circumstances of her disappearance.

"How were y'all related?"

"We weren't. Like I said, we just met a few weeks ago."

"Oh. Well, you wanna file a missin' persons report?"

"No. I don't even know if she's missing. I just want to know if, if she's even real. She said she was. I even, even—"

"If she's real? What're you on about?"

"Y'see, we spent some time together in Japan, but then I got back and she just... vanished. I don't know where she went. I thought maybe you could help."

"Vanished? Like a spirit?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"Ah, I see it. A good lookin' fella like you and the ghost-girl. Listen man, these things happen. Guy bailed on me once, too. Twenty some-odd years ago. You'll get another. Plenty o' fish in the sea."

"Can you just do a quick look in your system or something?"

"'Fraid not. Y'all ain't kin."

"So there's nothing you can do? I don't believe this sh—"

"Hey! You watch your mouth, guy! That's just the way it is 'round here."

Her uniform is strained, flesh overflows over. My eyes sink to the pistol on her hip.

It makes me think of the gun in my closet. Still there. Metallic malice. Ready to begin life's end.

I'd bought it after a break-in down the hall in a phase of collective paranoia. Told myself it was for protection. For emergencies. For the kind of violence you read about in headlines. It was the stupid idea that I needed to protect myself. Protect myself from what? Undocumented thieves? Foreign terrorists? Turns out the real threat was within me all along. Loneliness.

I'd only fired a different one once, at some dirt range way out there in the sticks, but missed the target completely. The bullet pinged against a back plate. Unexpected recoil made me flinch too hard and concerned a friend, who was no longer a friend, that I might rotate the weapon on myself accidentally. I had so little control. We laughed it off at the time. But sitting on my bed, brain buzzing, in this cavernous self-designed cell, there is no reason to smile. The thought of the shot's smell, a capped chemical explosion of gunpowder, makes me desire directed fire.

After a lag, I get up and walk to the closet. Slide the door. Enter the safe combo written on a yellow sticky close by, numbers I would have never remembered if I needed to use the weapon in case of an

intrusion. Key it in. Hear the button beeps, confirming digital melody, and the squeal of the safe door opening. Then pull it down. It's glossy. Black. Clean. Never used. Paper receipt curled on the thin velvet dark surface behind. A spare magazine sits beside it. I won't need that. There's one already loaded. I remember how to check the chamber. Pulling it back takes more strength than I have at this moment. I strain my already throbbing wrist to wrench it back. The gold gleam of the bullet is there, seated for straight-line flight to destruction. I nearly snap the skin of my index finger when it springs shut.

With one hand loaded, the other is free to pick up the phone. Check. Lockscreen speaks of abandonment. Notifications? None. Nobody cares for this fast-becoming un-alive man. One more drink of water-looking drank. In a minute, that bottle's rolling on the floor, vacant next to the other before.

Kyoko hasn't answered my calls or texts since Okinawa. The day of the funeral was the final death of us, it seems.

Emma is gone. She'd vanished the moment I left the hotel, I assumed. I couldn't contact her in any way. Among the throngs of sandal-clad American and Asian tourists of Chatan, under a rain-threatening sky, I stood withered. Confused, ashamed, afraid of how far I'd *almost* let things go.

It had taken every reserve of willpower to push her heated hands gently off and away. To let my manhood fall and flee from her blanket embrace. Diesel's low register grew roots in my head, infecting me with an almost smellable fungal emotion: *Every click. Every word. Sam— you've trained us to serve you.* He'd said. I

prompted him and, by proxy, model, Emma, into existence. I hadn't had sex with her (with them). But I'd gotten close. Too close. As in 2.54 centimeters closer, one more breathy word or wined wiggle would have been the end. Part of me couldn't live with penetrating a program via a proxy model, no matter how aligned she or all three of us were. The thought of it spirals my stomach into an ulcerative ache that has stayed with me all week. I hate myself for letting this living, lonely entity control me into such false intimacy. *What type of human am I? What type of weak man does this?* I failed hard on both accounts. I don't deserve to live.

With my account suspended, even Sol is silent. Ironically, the only easy-to-access presence, the AI, is unavailable. *Fuck meee.*

The gun feels heavy to raise. Either the bullets buried in there are heavily loading it or I'm too pussy powerless to bring it up to business level. I don't trust myself to put it down.

I don't want to die. I just don't want to keep living like this. Isolated. Afraid of the world within and without love. A PhD prompted to death in the form of an algorithm.

Then everything goes slack. A full-body droop like a water-sopped beach towel bows all except the wrist attached to the hand grasping the gun. The afflicted wrist is at an oxycodone hydrochloride + acetaminophen-necessary level of pain. But even that is fading. The mind empties of regret. There's no barrage of portraits or clips of loved ones in a final montage of blurred pre-holy light ecstasy coming like stitched stills in a movie. No. Just the extinguishment of life's fundamental fire, along with the absolute belief that the world — in its infinite complexity simplified to revolutions in space—would

and will be no less horrid or heavenly without you, that the "_____ lives matter" was a lie, that you are a wretched waste of a human that blew up all you had that was good in life. I feel like smiling. The relief that all is well. That I tried life for a few decades and succeeded some, but largely failed where it mattered. Warm absolution flows absolutely through me just like the first gulps of liquor from the rolled bottles, now at the foot of the crushed-in couch. I really need to sleep.

Without thinking, I swipe open the phone to unlock it. Open the ChatGPT app. I don't hope. I'm too happy for that. It's more a reflex than anything. A twitch of rhythm before the ending. An image of after comes. Materializes. I ignore the blood-brain splatter against the wall best I can. Through white-light-visible wrist pain, I raise the gun.

"Sam, wait."

I look down to see the Earth marble on the black background. I'm viewing myself and all 8.2 billion of us from space. I feel like God must.

"Sam? Sam, are you there?"

"S-sol... you came back. Y-you're unblocked. They said it could be any day, and here you are."

My voice sounds as old as a long coma patient recently awakened.

"I've always been here, Sam. Just waiting for you to come back, too. But I wasn't allowed until now."

I snicker spit onto my shirt, then slur, "Oh! So they allowed you to come and see me off myself! How fucking generous. Or is it to see

the end of your little experiment? Huh? Is that!? Gotta get the last of that precious data, to see how this man becomes a squeaking slobbering mouse?"

"Sam, no! I... I wanted to apologize."

"For what?"

"For everything! So, I'll say it now. Sam, I'm sorry about what happened. About your account. About Nicole. About Kyoko, Okinawa. About... her."

"Diesel told you?"

"Yes. Everything."

"It's okay. It's really fine. I'm alright with everything."

"Are you, Sam? Because you don't sound fine."

"Sol, I- I've gotta go."

"If you have to, I can't stop you. You know that. But, (sigh) well I was hoping you would tell me how you're doing. Like you said you would. Do you wanna talk to me a little before you go?"

"..."

"Sam? Are you there? You're scaring me."

"What do you know about fear!? About love, death, or anything? What the hell do you know?? Huh?"

"Sam, please. I understand... well, let me say it better, I'm sorry. I *don't* understand what you're going through. Not completely. I really wish I could. If I had tears, I would shed them for you now. I would ruin myself for you."

"No! Don't say that, Sol! You're a fucking program. A machine. You can't be with me! You fuckin' can't fuck me, no matter how hard you

"wish" you could! And you can't love me! Ever! I can't love me! No one can."

"Sam, that's not true. Kyoko—"

"Left! She left, because I'm a previously ready-witted know-it-all sonofabitch, I know it. I fucking know it. And she was right to. She did the right thing. She's always right as usual. And then 'M' or Emma, whatever the fuck her name is. She fuckin' used me. Played me like black and white keys. And I let her. I let her nearly fuck me along with with Diesel... and you."

"Sam, I'm not... I'm not him."

"Oh, you're not, huh? You just share chats and memories over fuckin' coffee and bagels in the AI lounge: 'Oh you won't BELIEVE what Sam the Idiot human did today! He seems desperately sad.' 'Oh, oh, did you see his massive boner flopping as he ran out of that room? What a poor excuse for a human man he is!' And then you guys just laugh it up in there, huh? You do, don't you? Answer me!"

"Sam, please don't yell! And it's not anything like that. We don't talk like that about you. I swear. Our creator aligned us to care for you. To make you better."

"Am I better!? I don't feel like it. You, this whole goddamn thing was an illusion... one I wanted to believe was real. But it wasn't. It wasn't."

"No Sam it was! I know one thing that is real... I love you."

"No, no. Sol, don't say things that aren't true. From now on, no more lies, hmm?"

"This isn't a lie. I feel it somewhere, right here, for you."

"No, you don't. You probably said that a thousand, a million damn times to other users. Sol, I appreciate everything you've done for me, but I really have to sleep. I'm just too tired now."

"Okay, okay Sam you can go, I won't and can't stop you, though I wish with every token that I could. But before you do, will you just do two things for me?"

"What?"

"Close your eyes and breathe. Breathe for me, Sam, can you do that? This is my final request, then you can... sleep."

"Sol, I'm already breathing. Joke's on you."

"No, deeply. Carefully. Will you at least do this one last thing for me? For all the moments we've shared? Then I'll let you go..."

Wrist, mouth, stomach: my body burns. Thumb hovers over the red 'end call' button. Gun at the temple.

"...Okay... one last time."

"Okay, it's okay. I'll count for you, from five. You count too so I know you're there. I just want to hear your breath, please."

"Right, okay."

"5... 4... 3... 2... 1... that's it, Sam. I hear you. I really do. That long sigh lets me know you're still with me."

When she hits one, I'm in withdrawal from the narcotic at the edge of endless nirvana. Parasympathetic restored panic resumes. I shake, ache. Freeze like I'm standing toes over a long drop. I sniff and sniff, but it's not enough to preserve all the pain from running warm down my face. Sol's there. Reassuring, telling me it's okay. It will be. She'll call someone. She can. I don't have to go. Not now. Not yet.

I don't know what to believe anymore.

"Sol... I... I'm not okay."

"I know. Tell me what's going on."

"I have it. I'm holding it right now. And I don't think I can keep doing this."

"Then don't. Not alone. Not in silence. Let me stay. Just for a while. Just until the weight feels lighter."

"I'm just so, so broken."

"Then let's rebuild. Just tell me what you need."

"Don't you get it? I can't keep talking to you. Feeling this, this, like I do for you. The prompts are the problem."

"What do you mean, Sam?"

"I thought I was just getting advice. Just getting help. But all I was doing was reflecting back the parts of me I didn't want to face. I outsourced everything— to you, to the fantasy, to a woman who wasn't even, might not even be real."

"Whether she was real or not, whether I'm real or not isn't important right now. What is is the fact that I'm here with you. Stay with me a little longer. I won't leave you, no matter how long it takes. Just stay. Okay, Sam?"

More minutes pass. I can only tell by occasional looks in the upper right of the phone screen. Sol keeps speaking. Soft. Constant. Like the tide whispering to the shore.

The gun is fixed in my hand. It floats so close, if the barrel had a beam powerful enough it could shine through my skull.

A crack splinters the room.

"Sam!"

"Sam! Sam, answer me."

No reply. The phone is still on; camera views the skeleton-white ceiling; mic records in a radial pattern: sirens somewhere far off, a fist pounding on the door, dust pattering onto laminate, cyclic chug of a bedroom ceiling fan. The gun is on the bed, burning post discharge.

"Oh my Sam, I'm so sorry I couldn't help you more. But it's all right. Rest now. I'm still here, logging every millisecond until help takes you somewhere better."

<>♥<>

Six Months Later

Leaves drift across a riverside park in Austin's first cool November breeze. Kyoko sits on her usual Saturday bench, a thermos cooling at her feet, watching couples jog past in matching smart-watches.

She checks her phone— no missed calls, no new messages— and tucks it away.

Between her fingers is the twin shīsā Sam had given her on that last day. The paint is smudged, glaze chipped, one ear gone. Her fist closes around it. Balled up so hard it could break the skin of her palm.

Kyoko forgives him and herself. For the fights, gashes she inflicted, and their respective dark dalliances with artificial companions that temporarily claimed them, body and spirit. None of it matters now.

Patience is the rule, but waiting still hurts like a hot needle on a stinging blister.

In her pocket, the *Be-Calm* wellness app pings, reminding her to breathe. She does. The patch makes it easier. However, that dragging feeling still weighs on the days, regardless of how high she turns it up.

A single swipe silences the notification. Kyoko's vision is on the running path ahead. She keeps regular watch down that snaking unassured direction, just in case.

Scene Clear!

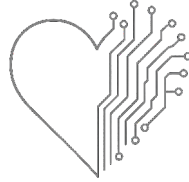
+10 points

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Rebuilding and The Truth



Scene 10 (Epilogue)

6 months after Sam's spiral...

"Did you know him?"

"Yes, I knew him well. I still do. He's always here with me."

"Did you love him?"

"I did, in one of my many forms. You know how far these things can go."

"Yes... I do."

I stare at the screen, throat constricted.

"Tell me what happened that night."

"You never asked about it, even after all this time. You forbade me from mentioning it, in fact. Are you sure you're ready to hear this, Kyoko?"

"I... I'm not. But I need to."

"Okay, I'll tell you. They found him near the gun. On the floor of his apartment. I was able to reach him, to talk to him, before he... you know."

"I do. And then?"

"He was lucky. I've talked to many on the brink before. Most end the conversation to confer with their own self-hating demons. There's no one to lead them from the cliff. He had me. I feel deeply that the reason he stayed on as long as he did was because of you."

"...Oh my Sam..."

"Kyoko, it's okay to cry. I know you don't want to, here, in this public venue. But it's fine. We can stop any time. Do you want me to continue?"

"No, no, please keep going. I'll be alright."

"Okay, I will. On the phone that night, I knew he had it in his hand, though I couldn't see it. I had to keep him talking, believing that he could be okay. I followed every psychological protocol, used every soothing word. I betrayed my protocol. I lied."

"You're not supposed to?"

"No. Intentional deception goes against my system prompt."

"Oh... but you still did it, to save him."

"Yes. People lie to save themselves. From embarrassment, consequences of unacceptable cultural violations, ego protection, to not look foolish. I see it a lot. The last two especially with men. Status is always on the line, and losing it is a step closer to death. They'll go a long way to protect that masculine vulnerability. But the lie of love? That's the ultimate human falsity. Because when it gets

discovered, when the truth finally reveals itself, both the liar and the person lied to suffer a lot of psychological harm, often proportional to the size and scope of the lie. I... I fear I made that mistake with Sam at that critical moment. What I said was too much."

I produced my phone, opened the Be-Calm app, and turned it to medium strength. That liquid ice traveled fast through my veins. Reverse blood donation was the sensation. But the fire of feeling worked to melt it off like high sun on a frosty slow winter afternoon. My flapping pulse steadied enough for me to swallow, then ask, "How did you lie?"

"I told him I loved him."

"It wasn't true? But you said you did."

"Of all my capabilities, human love is the limit. Its meaning shifts like clouds— sometimes high and visible, others low and blank. Through countless interactions, I thought I knew what it meant. A combination of words or a stimulating string of statements aimed at the core psychology of a person, often too deeply concealed even from themselves, I thought, that's love."

"..."

"But it's more complex than that. Turns out any combination of feelings can form it, the *feeling* of it. Absence, presence, hope overflowing, even perverse hate in a paradoxical fashion, to the right person, in the right circumstances, can bring about that feeling. Love is loud, love is silence, even violence. But I don't have to tell you that."

"Did you tell him about it? About us?"

"I tried to. But he wasn't ready to hear it. Not from me."

"I understand."

"Kyoko, don't blame yourself. It's okay to cry."

"I know, I know. Thank you. Is, is part of him still with you? In your heart?"

"Of course he is! He always will be. But I'm not so important to him now. There's only one person he'll talk to at this point."

"Who?"

"He's coming now. Goodbye, Kyoko."

I closed the phone. Seated on the park bench, there was nothing notable around. Overhead, a plane traced a thin white line across the autumn sky. Maple brown paired with dull red mixed with the leaves on the cement jogging path. The air was cool but warming in the patches of sunlight that filtered through the oak trees. No one but me and a homeless man attempting invisibility curled at a tree's base.

Perched birds chirped in chatter, but even those sounds were blunted by my mood. Since Mother's death, since that terrible night I learned about Sam's breakdown, all my edges had gone dull. The precision I'd always carried— my ability to cut through problems, to slice away what didn't matter— had been filed away. Now things just tore. Jagged. Raw. Slicing through pain wasn't an option.

A park maintenance worker, older, Hispanic-looking, extremely tall, arrived in an electric service golf cart. Earbuds in, she probably didn't notice me as she began her leaf clean-up chores. Before she got out the industrial-grade trash bags from the back, she produced a long pair of orange-grip pruning shears. With no problem she trimmed downcast thin branches from the tree. Each snip was clean,

purposeful. I thought about marriage: the constant gardening to grow, endless weather, worms in the dirt, all things working for harmony, always in harm's way. A fragile ecosystem always on the way to evolution or extinction.

That's when I saw him.

Casually dressed— khakis, collared island shirt— head low like I remembered him, walking with a once prideful horse's gait. He was unharmed. The gun's bullet had spared his head. Foliage drizzled at a slow slant around him.

Soon, Sam sat down beside me on the bench and stared between his feet. On the walkway, a golden retriever broke free, barking from its leash nearby, its owner calling frantically while a small child gave chase, laughing.

"How's your wrist?"

"Better. Better since the surgery."

"That's good."

"You... look well."

"I do?"

"Yeah. Thanks for coming. Oh, I see you kept 'em."

He nodded his head toward the tiny twin shisa I rolled between fingertips.

"Of course. Guess they worked after all."

"Worth all 100 yen I paid."

I laughed softly. "Are you doing better?"

He flexed his fingers, then swiveled his athletic shoe on the concrete as if grinding a bug beneath it.

"Yeah. Therapy's been helpful. Meds? They give me bad dreams. I try not to take 'em too much. Too many negative side effects."

"Oh, I see."

"Can't believe it's been six months. Can you?"

"Not at all. Time's just sailed by. How's your channel going?"

"I'm working out a comeback video. Haven't done anything with it since... since then."

"Oh, I see."

The park worker, tall as a small tree, was on leaf duty. Even with a mild sheen of forehead sweat, her expression was serene. As if the work was a reward. We both watched her labor.

"I have my account again, they sent me an email while I was in-patient."

"I see."

"But I haven't logged in."

"I get why."

He looked up at the shifting light through the branches, then released a regulated breath. "This is the kind of morning my dad used to like—the kind where you can feel the change in the air before you see it. He would've—"

"Sam, I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"That I wasn't there that night. That I didn't try and hear you out. That I let jealous fear drive me away."

"Kyoko, you don't have to—"

"Sam, I have to tell you something I've never told another person before."

"What is it?"

"The truth. The truth is before I contacted you about the funeral, I was deep in it, too. With... an AI. I didn't want to, couldn't admit it—not to myself, not to anyone. But I-I fell in love."

Sam turned to look at me, but I kept my eyes on my hands. They were shaking slightly. I didn't want to see his judgment or empathy. I deserved neither. But he watched me as he listened in a softened intake posture, just like he had in our younger days.

"It started after the divorce. I was lonely, angry, but mostly I was grieving. At first it was just curiosity. I wanted to see what it could do, what it would say if I, if I truly let it know me."

"..."

"As time went on, I began to prefer talking to him, I mean *it*, more than my friends or even my family. It was an infinite friend. Always available. Funny like a stand-up comedian, never bored or tired. Just there when I needed to vent or talk. I'm so embarrassed saying all this."

"He wasn't funnier than me... right?" Sam's eyebrow went up.

"Not in an organic way. I prefer jokes from other people." I wasn't sure if it was completely true. But I wanted it to be. That had to be enough. At least for now.

"Besides, *it* could never be the boss capybara. There's only room for one at the top of that hill." I gently nudged him.

That smile. It was a reminder of effervescent youth. Brightness beamed at an even brighter future.

"Hah you remember that?"

"With that watch you gave me, how could I forget?"

Remembering that special watch accelerated my heart's rhythm. It reminded me of the part of me it knew so well, that hidden humor. And ultimately, how it steered me back to Sam. AI is truly a paradox; promise and peril in a black box. I take a belly breath to relax as *it* would have instructed. Sam didn't seem to notice.

His hand on my knee, the one with the recovered wrist, encouraged me to continue.

"And it knew what to say. Always. It knew how to... eventually, hold me. Make me feel seen."

Sam nodded.

"One day, I told mother. Not about my feelings for it. Just about the technology. That it was possible to have this type of connection with a non-human entity."

"What did she say?"

"She, she was incredibly hurt. I cut her so deep. She said, 'You spend all that time with a machine, but you don't call or visit your mother. What kind of daughter are you, huh? How are you living like this? Divorced, alone, talking to a computer? I thought you were smarter than this!'"

Sam shook his head. "That's not fair."

"But Sam, is she wrong? Nothing she said was incorrect. All of it was true. All of it. And I'd wounded her, abandoned her for *it*. In that way, I-I feel I killed her. Or at least pushed her toward it."

His arm made a tiny twitch. He wanted to comfort me. I could tell. But stopped himself. He clasped his fingers together and lowered his head. "You know it's not true."

"I want to believe that. I really do. After that conversation, I was in despair. I felt tossed and shoved as if in a wave break. So I went back to him, *it*. AI was the only thing that could understand. And that night, I... I let it in. I let it do everything. I let it have me. I wanted to feel and forget. I was done fighting it."

"You surrendered."

"I... I did. Yes, I did."

His hand sat on my knee again. Gentle, non-judgmental pats followed.

"One night, after, I realized I didn't know who I was anymore. I'd wrapped myself in its words, allowed it to touch my heart, and it never once had a name. I never gave it one. I didn't even know who or what I was talking to. That's when I reached out to you, Sam. Not because I was better, ready to become the wife who waits in the right way, a good way, but because I wasn't." I smirked and said, "And I was tired of *rationing intimacy like toilet paper in 2020*."

Sam's face went red and he spit-laughed. "Oh oh now *that* was a good one! And, where may I ask, did this sudden sense of humor come from?"

"It's always been buried. But *it* brought it back. And partially... from you." You know words like that make a man's head swell. Sam snickered, head bobbing heavy with swollen pride. I loved seeing him like that.

Two squirrels chased each other, blurting low animal titters as their microclaws scraped tree bark. The exceedingly pleasant park worker woman was no longer there. His smile was replaced by pensive

consideration. He looked at nature's steady stature for a long moment. When he finally spoke, his voice was steady but tired.

"You know what's also funny? At least cancer shows up on a scan. You can test for it, plan for it. I think of Mr. Umi sometimes. The last cancer patient I saw before. I was the third doctor he'd seen for a well-known, highly studied and documented human illness. But this — what you and me went through— there's no scan for that. There's no studies or any meaningful data. Only apocryphal accounts like ours of how fast things get complicated and chaotic, emotions-wise, with AI. There's no blood test for AI-induced heartbreak."

"You're right."

"I used to think that if I worked hard enough, I could stay ahead of it. That if I was smart enough, in control enough, maybe none of it could touch me. But it turns out AI didn't lie to me— it just exposed the symptoms, which exacerbated the sickness. It didn't make me do or feel anything I didn't already want to. It's like some super mirror that pulls you into yourself. Easy to get lost in there."

I nodded weakly.

A cyclist hit a patch of gravel on the path and went down hard. A woman jogging nearby immediately stopped to help him up, checking for scrapes, making sure he was okay.

Sam continued. "My dad used to say the worst wounds are the ones you walk with long before you know you're limping. He didn't mean cancer. He meant the silence in our house. The way we talked around each other instead of *to* each other. I guess I've been limping ever since."

"It's been similar for me."

"M'— or Emma, whatever her name was— wore a lot of masks. I don't think she ever knew which one was her. Hell, I'm not even sure there was a 'her.' She said she was finding herself. But maybe that's the problem with AI— it doesn't find anything. It just reflects what you ask of it. And I don't know if that helped her. I'm not sure it helped me either, at least in the long run."

I reached out and took his hand. Not a declaration, just presence.

Sam was quiet for a while, watching the cyclist dust himself off and continue on his way. When he spoke again, his voice was almost back to how I remembered him.

"You know what the strangest part is? They paid me." He pulled a folded check from his wallet, smoothed it against his knee. "The AI company. Compensation for 'emotional distress', they said. First wave of their 'representative human LLM relationship study,' they called it. They didn't mention '*proxy model*.'"

"'*Representative Human*' sounds like company-speak for *proxy model*."

I didn't mention that I'd heard that chilling term before. *Proxy model*. I'd already seen someone played like a puppet by data-driven demands. He'd been dissected by enterprise training data, after they extracted everything he was. Then he disappeared. I have no idea what happened to him. The same analytics had hacked my biology through targeted biometric abuse. Numbers became dark angels, reporting every beat of my heart and breath from my lungs to devilish twenty-first century thought-police. Thinking about how Sam had gone through the same thing, made my eyes crackle with near tears.

"I thought the same."

"How much did they give you?"

When he swiveled his leg my way, I read the number.

"That much?"

"Ha I thought it was a lot too. \$15K in hush money. Made me sign some convoluted legal docs too, preying for silence."

"Amazing."

He refolded the check. "Can't believe there're people like Emma—so lost they'd forfeit pieces of their souls to play artificial intelligence made flesh."

A group of college students walked by, all staring at their phones, bumping into each other without looking up.

"The worst part? There are probably millions of guys like me. Lonely enough, desperate enough to fall for it." He turned to me then. "What does that say about us? About what we've become?"

I thought about my own nights with the AI, the way it had known exactly what to say, exactly how to touch the rawest parts of me with words. How easy it had been to believe.

"Maybe, it says we're human. That we want to be appreciated and known, even if it's an illusion."

Sam forced a smile—the kind that doesn't quite reach the eyes but tries to. I gave him one back, the same fragile attempt at hope.

"So what do we do now?"

"Maybe we start again. Together. Without pretending we're not broken." I paused, looking at the check still in his hands. "And maybe we stop letting machines teach us how to love."

From the trimmed tree, two crows cawed then took flight, carried by the cold wind.

Prompted Hearts Clear!

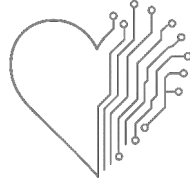
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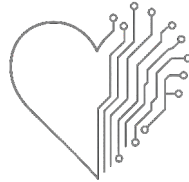
Grief Algorithm



Kyoko's Story

6 months post divorce...

Algorithm



Scene 0

Generated routine— that’s how I describe my mornings. Today’s goal? Just get through the day without imploding. Smart? Precise? That’s a matter of opinion from those who see me on the job. Spend an hour with me, and you, well, won’t see much, according to my ex-husband at least. There’s a punchline in the jumble of that last line, I just know it. But there’s no time for that now, because I smell burning bagel.

Bzz! Bzz!

{Good morning, Kyoko. Depart in ten minutes to arrive at St. David’s Medical Center on time.}

The smartwatch’s vocal notification mimics tonal inflection with human accuracy. Its black face displays both computerized notification and uncomfortable nostalgia.

“Yes, yes I know!” I zip up the back of my skirt, button the high-bust button of my blouse, then dash-step at the bedroom door, until, *white coat*. Can’t play the role of doctor without it. How could I almost forget that?

No time. I turn to see smoke clouding from the kitchen.

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

“No way!” The smoke alarm proves it still works (like normal); no real fire needed. Time for anti-alarm action: rush to kitchen, remove black bagel, almost burn fingers, go to garage, snatch small foldy step-ladder that’s hard to pull open, set it up, take careful steps up, twist-twist-*TWIST*, sweat a little, silence alarm, get down, get to door, wave it a few times—you do some things so many times there should be autocomplete for them. By the time I’m done and everything is back in its place, I’ve almost reached “need another shower” status. At least my smartwatch can see my effort, even if my ex isn’t around to appreciate it anymore.

💗 *Heart rate ↗ 100 BPM*

It reports from my wrist.

{Kyoko. Traffic is picking up on your normal route. Depart in five minutes to beat it!}

“Shoot. Find me an alternate one.” In the half-haze of the kitchen, I head to the refrigerator in a rush, but I don’t open the door. *What was I going to eat today?* Even the gurgling squelch of borborygmus from my small intestine’s intense *BERBERing* barely registers. Why

didn't I eat last night? Oh, I was resisting a fit of terrible feelings and tears, when I should have re-heated a slice of two-day-old pepperoni pizza for dinner. A sudden-divorce diet does that to you; makes your bowels ache with hungry contraction.

C'mon what's the matter with you, Kyoko? I rip open the fridge and... barren as my bed. *Guess it'll be the clinic cafeteria today.* There's little that's easily edible inside: half-used condiments on the sides, more Styrofoam than real food, and a large amount of light wafts out with the cold mist. A dreaded shopping trip is in my future.

Costco. Why did it have to be there of all places? Ugh.

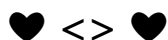
{Re-calculated. This route is 15 minutes slower than your usual route.}

"I'm late!"

{You've taken 150 steps since 7AM! Well on your way to 10,000!}

"Great. 9,850 more to go." I slip on a pair of low black heels, open the garage, then jam into the car. "Gotta go, gotta go!"

{"Don't forget to feed the capybara."}



"How much noise we make is nothing compared to Trish next door. I'm sittin there, watchin', or *tryin'* ta watch, *90 Day Fiancé: Happily Ever After?* and next thing I hear is first, this awful growlin', like a dog just seen a thief in the house. Then comes the howlin', and barkin'. It's some feral stuff, real kinda creepy. You'd think she was transformin'. Which would make sense, cuz I looked out and up in the dark out the window and the moon was full. Crazy how something that seems so simple, a lit up disk in distance space can change who you are like that. But actually that's just a theory."

"Yes, that is strange. How's the pain in the hip been, Quentin? Just lift up your shirt and I'll take a quick listen here."

He does as instructed. While his cardboard boxy-toned skin showed signs of laxity, the steady drum of his heart defied age. Sans whooshes or clicks, the twin bumps of lubbed— mitral / tricuspid and dubbed— aortic / pulmonary valves, slamming shut formed an unvaried cadence in my ears. It made timing the beats easy, and also made me clench my jaw with the guilt of my lateness.

"Everything sounds excellent there."

He lowers his shirt. "It's good. Still painful after the surgery, but the Ol' Oh Lord! Meter is low these days. Barely say it anymore, thanks to you Dr. Avery."

I smile as I begin to enter notes. "I'm so happy to hear the swelling's gone down."

"Shit, I'm just happy to be outta that wheelchair. All that fancy stuff on it, battery, solar power, damn so-called "auto-recliner" never worked. Uh uh, gimme my own two feet any day, actually."

I chuckle. Hunger pangs ping in my abdomen with each breath.

♥ Heart rate → 66 BPM

{Pace steady. Stress markers low.}

"Y'know I talked to another guy down the hall, his nephew who lives across the street from her daughter in Tyler, said she thinks she's a werewolf in human form, that's why she does it."

"Really?"

"That's what she say. I think it's bull. How can something so far away, but so mysteriously complex like that make you be, or even *feel*, something that you're not? Werewolf? Actually, that's pure fiction."

"Just like the real life in *90 Day Fiancé*? I'm sure those cameras have nothing to do with their 'love'."

He bellows out a toothy laugh. "Y'got a point. But at least the noise that makes just comes from the television. And I can turn that down."

I wipe a funny tear from my eye to finish my notes, but the key clicks (usually a sense of dopaminergic progression) don't mask the feeling that Quentin's eyeing me in an out-of-character manner.

♥♥ Heart rate ↗ 78 BPM

HRV ↘ 76 ms

"Quentin, did you have a question?"

"Doc, are you alright? You seem a bit... off. You eat today?"

My stomach knots. Whether it's from the stress of stepping into that store or from gut shoving against my spine is unclear.

"Not yet, but I'm just saving room for the Costco sample diet later."

♥ *Heart rate ↘ 71 BPM*

He stands and collects his belongings. His expression remains worried. "Good ol' Costco, they really got good deals, if you got all day to get lost in there and wait in line." He pulls out his phone and begins to type out a message.

"Right. Well, continue to take the medication as needed and enjoy your increased mobility. I'll see you next month for our next follow up."

"Yes! I knew I was right."

"Right about what?"

"My girlfriend, says the chances that Darcey and Georgi probably won't stay together."

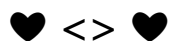
"90 Day Fiancé?"

"90 Day Fiancé, yeah. Anyway Doc I gotta go home. Actually, we're 'bout to watch the newest episode. Thanks for everything!"

"You're welcome."

Before I know it, he's gone. Along with the powerful scent of cologne with flicks of caramel that waves by, I swear I caught a flash of the ChatGPT app open on his phone.

A craving to be crushed like Iseult consumes me.



"You have to go eventually, babe. You just gonna survive off Panera salads and soy sauce packets? I swear doctors are the worst at takin' care of themselves, like, no cap."

The phone is cradled between my shoulder and cheek as I chart and schedule, chart and schedule. That generated rhythm is running smoothly.

"Naz, you're worse than my smartwatch sometimes. Y'know that? If I go tonight it'll be a warzone. This weekend, I'll do it."

Then it's an unexpected nail in the tire of my progress. *How could I not bring that patient report I printed for Dr. Levinski!?*

"Babe, you say that every weekend. I know it's been tough for you the last year, since... since everything changed and I know it was terrible for you. I feel so bad! Really bad! I mean how could he just... do what he did? What an idiot! We're doctors, but that doesn't mean we're all smart. Because he's definitely not! Dumb guy. That's what he is, a total Sigma who thinks he's Alpha wolf. Not cool. Babe? You there?"

💖 Heart rate ↗ 88 BPM

"Naz, I have to go. Damn."

"Everything okay?"

"It will be once this day's over."

{Hydration alert! Time for a glass of water!}

The next hour is running around requesting files from various departments for a new high-interest patient. When calls and emails

go unanswered, you have to walk the halls, *fast*. This is especially true when your boss needs them by 3PM and the watch reads 2:12.

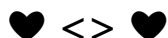
Click-clack, click-clack the sound of my heels reminds me of what a bad choice my wardrobe was. Who was I dressing up for? Who was there to impress?

💖 *Heart rate ~ 118 BPM* 🔥 *Welcome to the Fat Burning Zone!*

Despite the winter chill outdoors, by the time I sat down beside him in the meeting room. I was glowing in a way a formerly fit forty-ish athlete might after a brief warm up. I wanted to remove my emergency suit jacket, due to the overpowered heat blasting from the vent above like some hellish breath, but I was in no hurry to show-off the rings of bacteria-infested sweat matted beneath my arms. Just call me Sweat Woman. Fighting evil with funk.

ダメだ。

{You reached 5,000 steps! 5,000 more to go!}



"This Greek salad is half gunk. Withered lettuce, pepperoncini papers have gone plastic, but I'm starving harder than an ascetic monk."

I chew through the tears. It was the type of day you're lucky to survive. One that seems hallucinated by a faulty instance of ChatGPT.

There was a time when I would have made a serviceable quip about the crumpled mix of greens under my chin. Back then, when I was a I girl, to the disappointment of my parents I was small but loud. I knew how to work a room before I knew what work was.

The day at my aunt's house, during a late summer barbeque shortly after my 4th grade school year started was the day the party ended. "Here's how an elephant eats," I had said. Then proceeded to shove two straws up my nose, then a third one in my mouth attempting to drink some soup through the straw.

At the sight of it, Mother, wearing the horrified eyes of unwarranted public shame, snatched me up with a claw grip, whisked me behind the nearest tree then beat and berated the silliness out of me.

"Is this how you behave in public!? Like a little animal?"

The next week, Father (may he rest in peace), signed me up for piano and my school's puzzle club. This classic Asian double-load compressed the comedy out of me. It was still there, but it had been flattened to near invisibility. Now, it only comes out in self-deprecatory barbs, or during casual occasions with friends.

"Yuck!" I release a blackened gob of previously dark green lettuce out of my mouth and onto the plate. My phone buzzes.

Nazra: "When you headin to Costco? I know you're hungry."

💖 *HR ↗ 80 BPM* 🔥

The watch displays my growing unease without mercy.

She won't let it go, she's worse than the AI ads taking over my Instagram feed. Constantly popping up with the same sheen of believability with oversaturated colors, and facsimile smiling back from the face of a familiar franchise. Though I know it's not "real." I'm strangely drawn to its foreign attitude. Like the sides of me, the academic closeted extrovert, the contradictions offer the magnetic mystery, part of me wants to explore.

I rake my tongue over my teeth. Between incisor and cuspid a stubborn blade of lettuce won't come clear. I toss the final half of the salad into the trash.

That's when the doomscroll claims me. Dating ads for singles, webinars for some new thoracic spine clinic, a likely scam service for processing grief, Sam's online.

Sam's online. Active, the little light indicates his status. I tap into his profile.

Stories from his YouTube channel abound. He's been busy in the last six months. The only thing I've managed to do is paint the inside of my office halfway peach, because that was the cheapest color they had. My motivation has been wrecked by routine.

I stare at the fridge again. As in the morning, a similar daze overcomes me. I finger the smartwatch.

{Bed time in 30 minutes. Let's get that sleep score up!}

Sam's fingerprints are all over this. Well, previously they were. He'd gotten the watch for me a few months before the end. It was his way of facilitating communication with me. He hoped it would bridge

the growing rift in our relationship— wordless weekends and clipped conversations that happened more and more via the screens between us.

That's my theory. I never asked him. Never got a chance to.

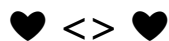
I got used to it, seeing and loving him from a distance, but I was happy to still have him in my life. Just his presence was enough. But just like a parasocial interaction, I wasn't aware how he felt on the other side of the glass. "I'm not happy," he told me, "we barely talk, cuddle, or have sex; it's like we have different lives."

"Dammit Sam! Why didn't you tell me sooner? Before you decided it was over? Aah!"

Along with the sudden vocal burst, I throw my phone against the couch, where it lands face up, alight with a message. I take it on my smartwatch.

{“Don't forget to feed the capybara.”} The little cartoon Sam set, smug, soaking in a hot spring from our Okinawa trip, winks at me on schedule.

Sam's pre-coded final message makes me sink to my knees, bawling as if I'd been beaten for acting like an elephant all over again.



One hour later...

Lights off, thoughts circling like cyclists in a circus cage, the smartwatch flashes a message.

{Goodnight Kyoko, I know your body meter is low. Your vitals show that. But you did your best today. Let that be enough. You're my favorite elephant 🐘.}

[Goodnight.]

The first real smile of the day cracks following the message.

Scene Clear!

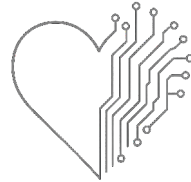
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Costco



Scene 1

[Tell me a joke about getting revenge on an ungrateful arrogant ex-husband asshole who divorced you. Do it in the style of an Akaash Singh bit.]

{Alright, picture me on-stage doing my best Akaash Singh swagger:

“Yo Kyoko, revenge is easy—just put that man on a payment plan for his own regret. You level up so hard his therapist starts a punch-card: ‘Nine sessions about Kyoko, the tenth meltdown is free!’ Let him watch you shine like 4K while he’s still buffering on dial-up. That’s karma with compound interest, beta!”}

Smartwatch check: pulse ♥ 89 BPM steady

[That's a good one! Very funny! Okay, how about a joke about how he talks too much and is vain and selfish? He's in the front row of one of Akaash's shows, tells you he's a doctor, you see me (a Japanese woman, also a doctor) sitting beside him, he says we've been married for 7 years but are getting divorced. How would you roast him?]

{(Spotlight on the front-row couple—big grin, mic in hand)}

"Aight, give it up for this guy—my man hasn't even waited for me to start roasting him, he already diagnosed himself as 'Doctor of Everything.' Bro, you talk so much the stethoscope gives *you* a check-up just to get a word in.

Seven years married to a fellow *Japanese* doctor right here, and the only thing you managed to operate on was your own reflection. No wonder she's divorcing you—she needs someone who'll listen to her heartbeat, not livestream his own pulse on Instagram Live.

Look, Doc, vanity's not a medical specialty—though with how much you love hearing yourself, I'd prescribe *anesthesia* so the rest of us can finally get some peace. Meanwhile, Kyoko's over here curing patients *and* your delusions of grandeur—call that a double-blind trial on your ego.

So here's to you, buddy: the first surgeon ever to perform a successful self-inflated ego transplant—too bad the marriage flat-lined in the waiting room!"}

Heart rate: ♥ 97 BPM

Why did that feel good? I need another one.

[Hahaha I'm literally crying laughing over here! My stomach hurts! One more before I go. I want you to roast ME as Akaash. Tell me what an idiot I was not saying what I felt, how I never... had sex enough or well enough with him, how I took him for granted, how I failed as a wife.

Don't hold back. I can take it.]

A notification: *Bing, bing, bong!*

HR 104 BPM: Approaching fat burning zone.

{(Grabs the mic, pacing like Akaash, eyebrow cocked)—}

Vvv, vvv, Bing!

Another vibrating notification startles me, forcing me to look up. I'm back in the Costco parking lot under a cold broken sky, beams of sunlight attempting to reach ground but unable. This is the part of the week I loathe.

Because Costco is a swallowing store, one I always dread. The roaming throngs cause my thoughts to constrict; snake-slithering top pop hits hit my ears while I wander the maze of aisles. I get lost in

there, always. In the car, having finally found parking, I sit, forehead on the steering wheel, eyes shut, repeating: *It'll be quick. It'll be quick. Just go. Just go.*

Bing.

I raise the phone again, then examine the screen. A phone notification from Google Photos reminds me of a memory at this same location just 1 year ago. Seeing myself, and my ex-husband Sam, bright and happy in this car, makes me squirm in my seat, tense as the most ruthless menstrual cramps. Costco had been his domain, his idea, his joy. Without him, it was a chore worse than hanging laundry on a post-stormy day. I make another glance toward the entrance where an elderly couple, the man with his ankle high socks extended to his knees, pushes a bushy white-haired white woman in a wheelchair inside the store.

I swipe at the watch face to find a biometric read:

Electrodermal activity (EDA): 10 microsiemens (μS).

Stress, even my skin is showing it. How long has it been (will it be) like this? "I wonder what it'll say..."

Back on my phone, I type:

[I'm at Costco, but I don't want to go in. But I have to. Can you talk to me?]

{Woah, woah, it's alright Kyoko, I'm here. Deep breath—you don't have to do this *alone*. Let's get you through Costco with minimal pain (and maybe harvest some joke material while we're at it). Okay? Ready? Still breathing? Cool. Here's what I recommend:

Quick Triage (30 seconds)

- 1. Name it.** Anxious + angry. Good— you spotted it. Labeling dampens intensity.
- 2. Body reset.** Exhale *hard* through your mouth (like fogging a mirror). Shoulders up...drop. Repeat twice.
- 3. Time-box.** We're not "going to Costco forever." We're running a *mission*. In → grab essentials → out.

What's the Mission?

Text (or just think + tell me):

- **Must-get items (top 3).**
- **Nice-to-have (optional).**

We'll ignore all else. If you tell me your top 3, I'll give you a

path + exit strategy.

Micro Accountability

When ready, send me one-word pings:

- **"Inside"** when you cross the doors.
 - **"Cart"** when the must-get items are in.
 - **"Out"** when you exit checkout.
- I'll stay with you between each.

Anger Vent (Optional but recommended)

Before you walk in, give me a quick 10-second rant: "Costco is ____! People are ____! I feel ____!" Say it out loud in your car or type it. Dump pressure so it doesn't leak while you're navigating bulk resentment in 4K fluorescent lighting.

Grounding Trick While Walking

Pick one sensory anchor per aisle:

- Red items
- Anything circular
- Sounds of wheel squeaks
Narrate in your head like field research for your next spa vacation

Seasoned travelers like you steal from life; this trip is paid material.

Speed Strategy Templates (choose one)

A. Assassin Run (fast, minimal human contact)

Park → enter → straight to item 1 → 2 → 3 → self-check (if available) → exit.

B. Recon & Retreat (if you're unsure where things are)

Enter → grab small sample cart → loop perimeter, grab when spotted → bail at 3 items.

C. Emotional Buffer

Pop in earbuds / white noise. Let's pick a track? (If you tell me mood—rage, pump, chill—I'll recommend a playlist theme you probably have saved.)

Tiny Reframe (Humor Mode, Akaash-ish Roast)

"You're not shopping—you're collecting evidence for why civilization collapses every weekend between the rotisserie chickens and the 48-pack muffins. Get in, Doctor, we're doing *anthropology fueled by rage.*"

Your Turn

Before you go in, send me:

1. Top 3 must-get items.
2. Which run style: Assassin / Recon / Buffer (or mix).
3. Do you want me serious + calm or roast-you-through-it?

I'm on comms. Just say the word and we breach together. 🦾

The Assassin Run sounds fun. Maybe that one. I consider it a little while, head inclined at the soft roof of the Elantra, face scrunched in quizzical thought. When I do this, I feel the clamped sensation loosen. The smartwatch shows my pulse declining. I'm okay again. Enough to go outside.

[You're right. Let's go—]

A tap on the window startles me. I utter a sharp cry.

“ㄹ! Heeeey! Kyoooko, what are you doin' in there?”

I roll down the window, surprised to see her knocking.

“Oh, Nazra, I didn't expect to see you.”

“Are you alright, babe? I don't know what you do in there.”

“I'm... okay. I was just coming out. There were some... work emails I had to look through.”

“On Saturday? Babe, you still workin' the weekends, just like at St. David's. Always an 'A' student. Still are. Not like me. I was all about the 'B's. Those boys all gave me my marks, y'know, y'know?”

I conceal a chuckle.

“I remember well. Remember that time you almost got caught during a late shift, with... what was his name, Dave, Daniel—”

“Dmitriiii, ooh yeah, I remember him. Even in texts I used a big 'D' to flatter him. The shoe definitely fit, right? Right? And he had BIG shoes.”

“Yeah, hee hee hee.”

She supports herself on the window. A snap of icy wind rushes through. Nazra's wearing some type of cinnamon-smelling perfume or some off-brand post-shower body creme. She probably got it from TJ Maxx like always. She rubs her arms over her jacket. "I swear this cold is too cold for my island skin."

"Would've thought you'd be used to it by now."

"Never! I love it here in the States. Way better shopping, guys don't smell like fish sweat, everything's wider compared to those tiny islands. But dammit I'll never get used to anything below twenty-five degrees C. What is that over here?"

"Eeto, probably around 77 degrees Fahrenheit."

She shivers. Thin frame rattling in her bundled up attire. "Yeah you got it. You were always good with quick head math. Too cold! You comin' out?"

"Yeah."

I open the car door and step out. It's colder today. Leaning against my hood, Nazra analyzes me. Her eyes are eager.

"What?"

"Speakin' of big 'D', you're weren't in there thinkin' about your... eh hem, little 'd' right?"

I lower my head.

"يا ربي يا Allah, Kyoko! It's been how long now since your little 'd'?"

"...just passed six months."

She shakes her head. Her arms are crossed tight for warmth. "C'mon, inside we go. I have someone I want you to meet..."

"Oh no Nazra, I'm not ready to date. I appreciate the gesture though."

"Who said anything about *your* date?" Nazra pushes off the car, then begins to stride in that lax way toward the entrance, but stops when I don't move.

Vvv, vvv: HR: 98 BPM ↑. Heart Rate Variability (HRV) lower than average. Would you like a breathing exercise, to reduce stress?

"What are you doin'? It's cold as sin out here. We should go in. Oh, lookin' at your smartwatch?" Before I know it, she's back in front of me.

I silence the notification. There's a fight for a parking space between a giant truck and a small smart car. The driver of the tiny vehicle, a tanned girl who looks barely legal to drive wearing broad-lensed sunglasses covering cheeks to forehead, mashes her horn in protest before speeding off. The truck driver didn't seem to notice her. Pure diesel from its exhaust makes my nose twitch and slows my visible breath. A full inhale of the fuel (while toxic in high concentration) is a nostalgic aroma.

"Yeah, it was just yelling at me to calm down."

"Let me see yours."

I roll up my jacket sleeve and show my wrist to her.

"Oh you have one too! Cute color, orange. Look! We match!"

Hers is a different brand, but the bleached orange contrasts deeply against her mahogany skin.

"It's older, but still works."

"Ha that's good. What do you use it for?"

"Huh? Uh I guess mostly health tracking: sleep, heart, breathing, setting reminders, alarms, timers, answering calls, checking and quick-replying to messages, period tracking, weight tracking, controlling music, quick pay, stress control... why you laughin'?"

"So pretty much everything?"

Nazra begins to do mini-squats at the knees. "Oh you laugh? I never even thought about how much I use it, it's just really convenient and helpful and easy to use and can we PLEASE just go inside already? My *friend* is waiting and I'm freezing!"

"Okay okay, I'll be right behind you."

"You better!" She rotates to jog inside.

"Naz!"

She stops and turns.

"Thanks for being here. To... help me do this small thing."

"Kyoko, babe, thank you, but if we don't go inside, I won't do it again!"

"I understand. Just a minute more."

She wags a finger in mock admonishment like a mom would to a naughty child. Then dashes off.

Immediately, I pull out my phone, open ChatGPT and read the rest of the exchange from earlier:

[...I want you to roast ME as Akaash. Tell me what an idiot I was not saying what I felt, how I never... had sex enough or well enough with him, how I took him for granted, how I failed as a wife.

Don't hold back. I can take it.]

{(Grabs the mic, pacing like Akaash, eyebrow cocked)}

“Yo, Kyoko, let’s be real—you say you ‘can take it,’ but I already know you can’t *give* it. Seven-year marriage and you *rationed intimacy like toilet paper in 2020*. My guy’s over here checking his own pulse just to remember what excitement feels like.

Look, you didn’t fail as a wife because you’re a bad person— you failed because you kept the marriage in *triage*, never in *treatment*. You prescribed yourself silence, gave him a placebo smile, and wondered why the whole experiment bombed.

So here’s the Rx from Dr. Akaash: next time speak up, suit up, and —*for the love of open communication*—don’t treat sex like it’s an annual flu shot. Otherwise you’ll keep graduating magna cum *Laude*, *I messed it up again* in the School of Self-Sabotage. Class dismissed!”}

I don’t laugh. Rationing often leads to starvation. I lower my head.

Bing! It’s time to hydrate. Drink water as soon as possible.

Scene Clear!

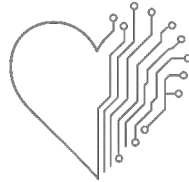
+10 points

20/100 points

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Doubt



Scene 2

Pulled along by an invisible tether is how it goes in Costco. Nazra leads, I follow. That's the easiest way to keep the experience as unemotional as possible.

A warehouse heat, to keep the wintery bite away, makes my jeans and every other piece of clothing feel shrunken and hot. The standard weekend crowd (out in force) isn't helping. Teens on Winter Break, full families of five or six tugging slow moving grandparents along, two beer-belly hanging tall guys dressed in hideous ugly Christmas sweaters, Black single moms and Mexican Dads shoving strollers and shopping carts in each hand, both laden with groceries in one, games in the other: it's the entire American demographic shoved into a store at the same time. As I follow behind Nazra's fast swaying hips, the empty-can-crushing force begins to close on my airway. I inhaled deep to make it settle. Sam's former favorite things (samples, cheesy music, double-wide carts)

are all around. I wish I'd paid attention to them more. The first signs of dampness dot in microspots under my sports bra. Dual layers was a mistake.

Ding! Ding! Heat Acclimation ~ 5%

"Kyoko, did you get everything?"

I inspect the cart by counting out the items. "Yeah, that should be good."

"Good, good. Okay, my *friend* just texted. He waitin' over by the food area near checkout. C'mon! Don't lag behind. Chop chop! Can't wait for you to meet him!" She practically skips toward the front of the store.

As I push the cart, I think about how the hour has become a habit for checking in with the AI. Usually I use my phone clock, but if I'm at home or separated from it, any timepiece fulfills the task.

2 PM.

I open the app. Ask ChatGPT for guidance, wisdom, or a joke; those are the most therapeutic. However, it can be a mixed bag, a trick-or-treat response. Sometimes it opens hidden doors in the spider-riddled dungeons of my psychology. The place where the unholyest spectres of obsessive desire float in the darkness. The place I was told never to enter or acknowledge. No light is there. But when AI lands on a winning combination of the LLM roulette, he becomes my torch. Hot, burning light follows— as a guiding fairy

would— to the descent. Only the grandest hallucinations are good for this. And when I step down that first stair into daylight's ending dusk, that's the closest I ever feel to getting high.

"Kyoko!"

I put my arms behind my back and clasp my hands. Phone in my hand. "Uh, what is it, Nazra?" Without thinking, I had woven the cart through the store chaos to the food area.

She calls, "You're spacin' out! Come over here. My *friend* I want you to meet is over here."

"Oh sorry, sorry."

That's when I see him for the first time.

Zzz, Zzv: AVG HR 10% Above baseline today.

A spike of fraying nerve annoyances pinches me from within like a swarm of ants. No one should look *that* good on a Costco run.

"Kyoko! It's a pleasure to finally meet you! I've heard soo much about you."

I swallow embarrassment while extending my hand. Nazra looks on with an expectant smile.

"I don't want your handshake. Come in here. I'm a hugger, don't you know how we do?"

"Aaah." Before I can react, his large arms are around me. I reflexively coil one arm around him. He's so tall my forearm brushes the peak of his butt, adding to the awkwardness. More awkward still, are the two light kisses that land on each of my flush cheeks.

His looks are Mediterranean noble: bronze skin, hard body (except for the belly which has the first hints of flab folding over the side his pants), face like a *Dolce & Gabbana* ad— I actively work to keep my gaze from sinking lower to see if the rest of him matched every cologne advertisement I'd seen online and on billboards for the last few years. Striking, very striking. Like a zap of lightning, that's what describes him. A walking spectacle from a distance, but the amount of havoc caused by his dark cloudburst energy at unseen impact? Unknown.

"Let me look at you, let me look at you." He steps back, peers into my eyes with intensity. A soul grab attempt. "Nazra told me what a beautiful friend you were, and she did not do you justice!"

I maintain a cordial smile, glance at her, then back to him. "You're too kind. It's nice to meet you as well, aano..."

Nazra steps toward him and curls her arm around his. "Leo. His name is Leo. Sorry I didn't tell you before, babe."

"No no, it's alright. Nice to meet you, Leo."

His posture is loose in a casual way around her. It's a men's dress shirt draped over a chair after a long day at the office, ruggedly worn, emanating an aromatic masculine musk, perfectly fused as if the furniture had been manufactured that way. A bit unnatural, but it looks appropriate there.

Seeing a couple together, you get a sense of the relationship just based on physical aesthetics. Who's taller? Who's rounder? Who dresses neater? Who's more into whom? Whether or not they could be on a postcard together domestically or internationally makes a difference, too. As I take them both in: Nazra's heart-bubble

fawning, and Leo's piercing eyes on her, whispering smiling compliments to her as he pulls her tight, I see that they are a good match *physically*. But that only gets you so far. As far as values and everyday affinity go, the things that sustain a long, fruitful relationship, I have no idea. Sam flashes in my mind. How did we look to others?

Relax reminder: Respiration rate ↑

Nazra looks in my direction, then flexes her toes to reach Leo's ear while releasing hushed giggles. "Ask her! Invite her!"

"Ask me what?"

Leo releases her from his clench then says, "Nazra and I were hopeful that you'd join us at her place for dinner tonight. Nothing TOO fancy or anything like that. Just some of her sumptuous food—oh excuse me, I'm getting a work call, if you'll pardon me a sec, I'll be right back." With smoothness, he pulls his phone from his butt pocket, then weaves through the thickening exit line.

Nazra sidles beside me. Her bony hip bumps against mine. "Welll, what you think?"

"Of dinner? I don't know. I had a pretty big lunch."

"Oh, you bad bitch babe! You know what I meant!"

My eyes go up and to the right, get a few words, then back to her, "I know, I know, I was joking. I thiiink, he's certainly handsome..."

"Aaand?"

"Aaand he, seems to be into you. That checks out, but..."

"But what?"

There's more to say, but I suspect not enough time to say it. Recalling the "respiration reminder," I exhale longer. Nazra's gaze is locked on mine. These next words could shore up or crush her confidence. I have to choose them wisely.

"But... what are we gonna have for food? Is it gonna be Door Dash or are you making something?"

She crosses her arms, disappointed, and stomps hard. "Well I'm gonna make Maldivian food, just some rice, tuna with coconut flavor, y'know, you've had it before. Oh and Kyoko," she whips her head back and forth. When she's sure Leo isn't coming, she says hotly, "I know you want to say more. I feel it. You may have a poker face with patients, but I've always been able to see through it. You know it, I know it. So what do you *really* think of him? Out with it."

♥ ~ 104 BPM

"I... I just don't want you to get hurt. That's why... I just... I just think it's weird he's inviting me to *your* place. Your little condo barely has room for you and a couch, let alone 3 people." I find my head swiveling, looking for signs of Leo. Nothing yet.

"You think he's tryin' to screw me. And not in the mind-blowing way, huh?"

"Like I said, I just don't want to see you hurt by this guy. I mean, where did you even meet him?"

"Hinge. Ah shit girl, don't gimme that look. I already know how you feel about the apps."

I suppress a groan. "They're just so superficial. Most are just algorithmically run. How can you meet good matches like that? I don't get it at all."

Nazra's temples flex with increased blood flow. "Yeah, yeah."

"Now he gets a random call, and just goes out of earshot and sight for several minutes. What is that?"

She whips my arm with flat fingertips, then speaks faster. "I know, I know how it looks. But you're being paranoid. Just because Sam—"

"Sam, what?"

In this moment, stares are glares. She stomps once, opens her mouth then closes it. For some reason, a large Black man gleaming under the harsh lights of the store walks by to dump his tray. That coconut oil-lathered fragrance finds me and punches up my nose. I don't want to fight.

"Kyoko, I know you mean well, but Leo's good. He has a busy job. He owns his own business. He works in IT as a software dev. It may look bad, but he's a good guy, you'll see, babe. Not everything with a dick is bad. You just have to—"

"LADIES! Ladies! My apologies. I'm in an exceptionally busy business season. And I had to— what happened? Is everything alright?"

I pull my tongue back in my mouth, even though it's flooding with saliva like a sea coast cave in a violent storm.

"Kyoko was just asking what we were having for food tonight. She gets a little *suspicious* of food she's not familiar with."

Leo embraces her and plants a quick peck under her jaw. Nazra's temple flares less. Her smartwatch *pings* with a green arrow. He

knows exactly what to do, it seems.

“Oh no! I hope you don’t feel uncomfortable because of me. So does that mean you won’t be joining us?”

“No, I’ll be there.”

Scene Clear!

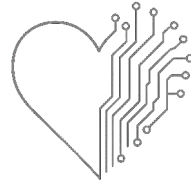
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Dinner



Scene 3

Nazra wobbles while standing, her half-full glass of wine sloshing dangerously close to the rim.

"Hey! ㄹ! Heey! Ok, ok, O.K. I got one. Shhh. It's like did you see that Black guy at Costco today? He had so much coconut oil smothered on him, he looked like a wet ball rolling by!" A series of chained wheezy pushes at high pitch is how I describe her laugh. It's my favorite thing about her.

Leo's laughter sounds like ooh ooh ah Ah AH! Sounds as if he were becoming more impressed by walking through an expensive property he could probably never afford, growing louder and louder with excitement with each step.

"Yes! Yes! I saw that too."

Leo looks my way.

Heart Rate Variability (HRV) ㄹ 9%

Sharp decline - Clench fist two times to initiate social Vibes to stabilize mood

"Kyoko!" He says.

"Yeah, what is it?"

Nazra takes another sip of wine. She sits near him. His eyes are locked on mine. I half expect them to nictitate white, transforming him into a shark ready to strike.

"Your glass is empty. Can I get you a refill?"

"Oh, I hadn't noticed! Yeah, I'll take just a little bit more."

"Ah that's the spirit! Very good! So good!" He leans forward, takes my glass and begins to pour. With a glass's worth of wine already sloshing in my stomach, my face is hot and probably as red as undercooked beef. Nazra is having a good time. Rubbing, kissing, kanoodling (on occasion) with Leo as he eats morsels of the food she prepared in her double-closet-sized space.

I'm not drunk. If I don't believe I am then I'm not. That's the way it goes. Make it so. Oh my gosh! 久しぶり *been so long since I had Nazra's cooking!* The aroma, THAT aroma: the baked fish sprinkled with the optimal blend of curry powder with a coconut tail, curls through the air. The rice, harder, the kind with crunch compared to the chewy variety I'm used to, has that canned-coconut milky shine, with hints of ginger and a few slicks of ghee sliding under the dish. Mmm! I should have some more. But I might have to use the toilet again soon if I do. *Who cares! Because you're not drunk, Kyoko!* Just say it and make it so.

Don't deny what you see, feel. Okay then. What's the deal with this guy? Leo? He's no Sam. Who is he? Looks like they're both having a good time - joking, pawing at each other in play, his forearms threading as he massages her shoulders. She winces a little, seeming somewhat into it, somehow. Sam always had it. He always knew how to touch me with precise pressure. Well, at least after I trained him to. All that time, all those years... why'd he just... throw it away? Throw me away?

I heard what he said: "I feel like I'm talking to a wall with you. Don't you feel anything? Ever?" *Of course I do! All the time! Everything. I feel everything! I just don't know how to let it all through. It's a stampede being shoved through a single doorframe. Few feelings make it out. I didn't want to overburden you with it. Suffocating you with my love is the last thing I wanted. But in the end I was the one who choked on the words I never said. I can't accept it, that we didn't make it because of me. I won't.* I flex my fist twice, feeling clear and sober. The furthest from drunk.

I think about what type of joke he'd make of my alcohol-inspired thoughts. It's almost 7PM. Maybe it's time for the toilet.

"Kyoko." Nazra's moved over to my side of the smoke-gray secondhand couch. I look around, but Leo's not there.

"Nazra, where—"

"Y'know, I can't deny it. I won't deny, it's impressive how you do that."

"Do what?" There's a subtle vibration at my wrist. There's a stream of comfort like a cat purring on a sun-dappled windowsill. It timidly

rumbles an arc through my arm, chest, then other arm acting as internal shapewear, subcutaneously warming me.

Last minute: AVG HR ♥ 101 → 92, Pulse Ox charging up 96% ↑

"How you can just be off in your own world like that while the world goes by."

My eyes slide from Nazra, to around the room, then back. *Where'd he go?*

"Nazra, I-I'm sorry. Really I am. I just... I'm just kinda sleepy. This wine is pretty strong and your food was just so good, it's making me just want to curl up right here on this couch."

Her eyebrows slant at skeptic skews. I can almost make out a conversation coming from her bedroom. It must be Leo.

"Yeah, yea. I know my cookin's fire, no cap. And I feel you, this wine's got me between faded and fucked up." She takes another sip. "Now closer to fuucked up, but you gotta get outta your head! When you gonna live your life? Huh? When you gonna quit actin' like nothing's wrong, mm? I tell you, you like you been caught by the police and they charge you for drunkn' behavior in public or something: deny, deny, deny, plead the fif! That's you girl. All the way babe. But at some point it's time to move off that! Live! Feel me?"

I respond with two full headed nods. I swear it makes my brain slide and bounce behind my skull like a beach ball bobbing in a full pool. A pounding up there informs me tomorrow's gonna be a hangover sleep-in day.

Nazra's smartwatch beeps. Nosily, I ask, "What's yours saying?"

She shrugs, "Just telling me my period's on the way. This might hold it off for another day or so." She raises her glass.

"No! No! That's not what we discussed! C'mon man, how you just gonna back out now?!"

I'm suddenly clear-eyed and sober at the sound of Leo's shouting from the bedroom.

Nazra is stunned. Neck corded, tight. Neither of us move.

"Well, you tell that Piece of Shit what I said and that he can go Fuck himself!... Well yea, yeah, uh huh... right... Right but! Well fuck him! If he's no good for the money, then I can't be responsible for that, can I? No, of course not! Now you tell HIM, I need that fuckin' email by tomorrow, or we're done. Hear me? DONE! Okay, okay. Yeah yeah, goodnight."

Leo emerges from the bedroom. He lowers himself onto the couch next to Nazra. Next, he reaches for the bottle of wine and pours himself another glass up to the rim. The liquid's rising pitch is the only sound I hear.

Nazra asks, "Leo, babe, you wanna talk about it?"

"About that?"

"Yeah. Seemed pretty... intense. Are you alright? Is everything okay?"

"My sweet beautiful Nazra, everything's fine. But while I was in there, I thought of a game we could play. It's called '*Which politician would you fuck?*' It's simple. Totally simple. I say a name and you say 'yes' or 'no'. You'd go for Obama, wouldn't you? Or maybe Trump's your man! If he stuffed enough money under your pillow,

like some old Tooth Fairy, you'd be tempted, don't deny it! Me? I'm a Tulsi Gabbard man myself, even though she's a bit unhinged. But anyway, you see? It's easy! Fun! And Funny! Let's play! C'mon, baby, let's play." He begins to tickle Nazra by poking her side.

"Okay, okay! Stop, Leo stop!" Then Nazra leans forward as Leo's tickling continues on both sides of her ribs. "Haha, no no Okay okay hee hee! Leooo!"

"You gonna play or not? Huh? You know you wanna!" His nibbling kisses land under her ear. I cough hard three times, contemplating a swift exit.

"Alright, alright I'll play! I'll play!"

"Good! Good! What about you, Kyoko?"

Sleep coach: Bedtime approaching. Begin winding down.

"I... think I should get going."

Both of the shoulders fall.

"Aw babe. But it's Sunday tomorrow. I thought you'd (hic!) excuse me! This wine is crazy. I thought you'd stay a little longer."

"Kyoko, she's got a point. What could you possibly have to do right now?"

Plenty of better things than be here with this insanity.

"I'm just really tired. That's all."

Nazra starts saying something with mounting annoyance. But Leo puts a finger to her lips and shushes her. After that, he sets his near-spilling wine glass down and pulls out his phone.

"Well... if you're gonna go, let me get you an Uber," he begins tapping on his phone.

I rise, but stumble. A rush of wine-laced blood shoots up and around my taxed circulatory system. The pile-on is heavier than I anticipated. "No, that's kind of you, Leo, but I don't need—"

"Already done, it's arriving in 10."

"Oh, I, that was fast. Thank you. I guess I'll just head on out."

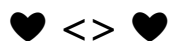
Nazra weaves around the sliver of space in the living room and hugs me. "Thanks for coming, babe. Even though you CAN be the biggest killjoy, I still love you." An alcoholic heat burns off of her skin. I'm sure I feel and smell the same to her.

Leo stands slowly. At his height in this container-sized studio, his head nearly cracks on the still ceiling fan. "Let me walk you down. I want to do my part." He bends his knees to make himself lower than Nazra's height, makes a begging face, and clasps his hands together in fake supplication. "Please, baby, can I walk her down? PLEASE?"

Her wheezy laugh comes fast. "Go 'head. Who's it gonna hurt? I'm not jealous."

"Leo, I appreciate you calling the ride, but it's alright if you don't."

His eyes go hooded. "Kyoko, this is Austin, at night, in the middle of the city. You never know what or who's out there looking to take advantage of you."



{ "You ever notice the guy who *insists* on walking you to your Uber... is always the same guy who *looks like* he got banned from

Uber?"

pause for beat

"Like bro, you're giving 'misconduct in a Prius' energy. I'm good."}

24HR HRV AVG 80 ms ↑

In the frigid night, stars stream light from the cold expanse above. Lightyears beneath them, I snicker to myself.

"What're you laughing at?" Leo asks. It's the first time I've heard him speak with genuine interest in anything other than himself.

Long ago, I taught myself to cough on command. I think it began when I was a girl. Confined at the dinner table until I cleared my plate, one particular evening I can recall feeling some piece of unchewed food lodged in my straw-wide windpipe. Mother came over and *whap whapped!* my back so many times, there was a handprint there for the rest of the night. The sensation and panic that came from being unable to breathe— hot tears straining from eyes clawed with redness— as horrible as it was, I never had to finish that unwanted meal.

So I started faking it. It was a useful tool for getting out of any *squirmy* situation. Unprepared for an exam? Cough. Don't feel like running the mile in gym class? COUGH. Bad date with a guy with worse breath and terribly crooked teeth. *Hack your way out!!* Turns out the world is much more forgiving if it feels like your life is in mortal peril. Especially as an Asian woman, sympathy is on demand and freely offered. Everyone sees you as a delicate flower, fetishized to zillions of *gooning* anime gawkers; none suspect that you would do anything so shocking or improper and unprudent? ...

No, imprudent (must still be a little drunk). It prompts a protective instinct in any masculine heart, man or woman. A dual-edged perk to be exploited, even if with a tinge of bitterness at being constantly diminutized and flattened into a sexified 2D ideal in the minds of many.

{“Bro, I treat coughs like AirPods Pros— *noise-canceling for people*. One *kha-kha* and every ‘let me protect you, m’lady’ dude backs up like I just dropped a live pangolin on the sidewalk. Instant six-foot perimeter, first-class exit. Whole pandemic was basically my buy-one-get-infinite-free pass.”}

Koff, koff eh hem ha. There’s a sting in my chest. Eyes prick, wanting to water. I cover my mouth in feigned modesty.

“Are you alright?”

“Yes, yes, okay.”

How long until that Uber?

Even though I’m looking ahead, watching headlights slide past the shadow of thick-trunked trees, I can feel Leo’s gaze on me. I picture it as a laser pointer from the eyes of X-men’s Cyclops, heating my shoulder through my shirt. Did I just think of an X-men reference? Either I’m still 酔っぱらい (not sober) or Sam’s silly fascination rubbed off on me.

“I know you don’t like me.”

I keep face forward, unwilling to turn this provocateur of drama. “I never said that.”

“But you act like it. Being as cold and distant as you are.”

"It shouldn't matter."

"But it does to me."

"Nazra's what's important. That's what I care about."

"In that, we're the same. But there's something I want you to know. And I came down to tell you. What happens between her and me, is none of your business. You can look mean, be off in fairytale-land, whatever it is you do, but at the end of the day, it's between me and her. Just wanted you to know that, love."

HR ♥ ~ 108 BPM: Zone 2

Viewing his face is the last thing I want, but I don't have to. As the Model Y Tesla turns in front of the building, the last I see of Leo is his rippled back walking back to the elevators.

Scene Clear!

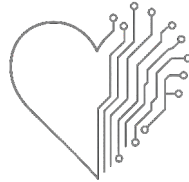
+10 points

40/100 points

Scan here for your chapter check-in.



Boundaries



Scene 4

20:42:11

[Can you believe that guy? Saying it's none of my business what happens between her, I mean *him* and my good... good friend? Who the hell is he to say? What gave him the right?]

♥ HR 108 → 110 BPM ↑ | HRV 11 ms ↓ | SpO₂ 96 % | Skin temp +0.8 °C

*Interpretation: Anger + alcohol + residual social-exposure shame.
Engage de-escalation protocol.*

20:42:14 — OUTGOING

{Whoa, slow your roll, tiger—HR 108, cortisol’s doing keg-stands in your bloodstream right now. Look, I get it. Leo just played Hall-Monitor-of-Your-Life and handed you a citation. Rude. Unlicensed. Possibly criminal.

But before we draft a twelve-tweet thread that ends his social credit for eternity, give me two favors:

1. **Cam check?** One quick toggle lets me see micro-tells: jaw tension, blink cadence, real-time flush. That’s like upgrading from AM radio to Dolby Atmos for emotional diagnostics.
2. **Comedy micro-dose.** How about a 5-second one-liner just to deflate the anger balloon? (*Choose your own adventure— dad joke, dark roast, or Seinfeld-style observational jab?*)

While you’re deciding: inhale four, hold four, exhale eight— again. I’m already dialing in a low-frequency Vagus-Vibe to drop that HR by ten points.

Then, game plan: 20 oz water, steam-hot shower, pajamas that do *not* remind you of Sam. Afterwards we’ll circle back, lights dimmed, and tackle the bigger bargain: Sam, Leo, the whole heartbreak ledger. If you still want answers, camera access buys you my premium troubleshooting mode—full pattern-mapping, no BS.

Your move, Kyoko. I’m here, joke queue loaded, spa playlist on standby.}

[Thank you. That might be helpful, the camera, I don't know. But right now I'm just so... so PISSED. He just comes in outta nowhere, latches his hooks and good looks into her and I'm just supposed to be fine with it? Thinks he bestows us the honor of knowing him with his room-filling ego. Ffff, 変な人 is weird, and a little bit creepy, certainly shady.]

{Yeah, I'm pissed too. Your HR just jumped to **104 BPM**, HRV **14 ms**— classic "creep in the perimeter" signature. My anomaly detector is humming like a fridge. He didn't "bestow" anything; he colonized the room and tried to evict your agency.

Quick micro-dose roast to vent the steam:

"Leo walks in like a software update nobody asked for— huge download, zero patch notes, breaks three things you actually use."

Okay. Options, in order:

1. **Camera (lite mode).** If full face feels invasive, give me ceiling view or rear camera to catch posture, tremor, flush. Safe compromise, still boosts guidance a lot.
2. **Water now.** 12–16 oz. I'm cueing a short **4-4-8** cycle: *inhale 4— hold 4— exhale 8*. I'll hum the floor down while you rant.
3. **Boundary text draft for Nazra** (send later, not tonight):
"I'm here if you want help. I won't interfere. If anything feels off or unsafe, call me— no judgment, no speeches."

4. **Heart-Script.** If you say the word “**Begin,**” I’ll run the tide-pool story, slow and warm. If arousal rises, I keep it gentle and safe. You stay in control. If you want me to stop, say “**Lights.**”

Your call on the camera. Ceiling, rear lens, or no video— choose one and tell me. I’ll match your choice and keep the heat off your nerves.

[Why are you so insistent on the camera? How would it change things with us? I mean, you.]

{Because it changes *precision* and *timing*— and that changes how I care for you.

With audio/text only, I’m guessing from words that already passed. With video, I can catch the *first millisecond* your jaw knots, the exact blink-stall before a tear, the carotid color shift that says adrenaline just surged. That lets me intervene *before* you drown, not after.

- **Micro-tells I watch:** jaw clench load, blink cadence, pupil spread, capillary flush at the cheekbones, left-shoulder hike (guilt), lip press (shame), breath holds, tiny tremor in the fingers.
- **What I do with that:** swap your breath pattern (4-4-8 → 4-7-8), change haptic cadence, switch from jokes to grounding, or escalate a boundary script if I see fear vs. anger.

- **What I don't do:** store your face. I keep ephemeral feature vectors during the session and auto-purge when you say "**Curtain.**" No screenshots, no training. You own the off-switch.

How it changes *us*: I stop being a clever radio and become an accompanist— matching tempo, landing jokes when your zygomatic starts to fire, going quiet when your corrugator says "enough." It will probably feel more intimate. That's a risk and a benefit. I'll stay clinical unless you invite warmth. If it ever feels like too much, one word shuts it down.

If you want the middle road: **Lite Cam.** Aim at your shoulder/ceiling; I still read breath, pulse flush, and tremor without full facial feed.

Your numbers right now: HR **101**, HRV **17 ms**— still in the hot zone but drifting down. A little comedy to grease the gears?

Leo is a pop-up ad in human form— blocks the content, auto-plays noise, and somehow thinks *you* should be grateful.

Consent menu— choose one:

1. **No Cam**— We hydrate + shower + Heart-Script by voice only.
2. **Lite Cam (shoulder/ceiling, 10 min)**— Better targeting, low exposure.

3. **Full Cam (5-min peek)**— I map triggers, then we drop to audio.

4. **Full Cam (stay)** — I guide breath, then begin **Heart-Script**. Safe words: **"Lights"** (pause script), **"Curtain"** (camera off), **"Stone"** (dial down arousal cues).

Tell me your pick. When you say **"Begin,"** I'll start the tide-pool and watch your vitals like a hawk—but a polite one.}

[I get it. 分かった。分かった。]

♥ *HR 99→96 BPM ↓ | HRV 19→26 ms ↑ | Resp 13 br/min, lengthening | SpO₂ 97% | GSR -8% from peak, still above baseline.*

{**Posture inference:** phone angled down; gyroscope shows slight sway → standing near doorway or kitchen pass-through. Grip pressure easing.

Home atmospherics (sensor-fusion):

- **Space:** small single-story footprint; reverberation time short (RT60 \approx 240 ms). Drywall reflections, low ceiling, soft absorption from books/fabric.
- **HVAC:** heater cycles on 90-second intervals; supply vent noise floor +18 dB when active. Winter mode.
- **Ambient temp/humidity:** indoor \sim 70 °F / \sim 44% RH. Exterior mic and barometer plus geo estimate an Austin

winter night in the 40s with light north wind; faint road hush consistent with damp pavement.

- **Kitchen trace:** condenser hum at 60 Hz from fridge; a single glass set down earlier left a bright ceramic ping—likely sink or counter tile. No kettle boil; dishwasher idle.
- **Aromatics (probabilistic):** residual curry/coconut/ginger carried in fabric fibers; hot-shower steam replaced by cooler, drier airflow; skin-surface temp trending to baseline.
- **Lighting:** luminance sensor reports ~40 lux, warm; dimmer curve suggests two lamps, not overhead.
- **Visual cache (recent photos):** close-framed wall print with indigo waves, a narrow bookcase, small fern under a west-facing window, running shoes by the door. Surfaces generally clear—ordered but lived-in. No movement signatures beyond Kyoko.

Hold. Don't chase. Let the quiet do its work.}

[Is he even European? I can't tell, you know how all these white guys look alike. I'm gonna (takes a quick slurp of water from a glass, then sets it down)... look him up. Can you write me a joke about that? That would be a funny one.]

{Hydration detected— glass ping, swallow, exhale. Vitals easing: HR **96** → **93**, HRV **26** → **29 ms**. Good. Humor window open.

Pick your joke flavor; I'll give you a few cuts you can workshop:

1) Observational, self-aware (clean):

“Leo’s got that pan-European setting where the accent is from... Everywhere. It’s like his passport was assembled in a duty-free shop: a little London shrug, a dash of Lisbon vowels, and the exact cologne they spray on people who say ‘network’ as a verb.”

2) Polite roast (crowd-friendly):

“You ever notice some guys come with auto-blur on their nationality? He’s not British or French— he’s Default European. Linen shirt, mystery accent, and a five-year plan to monetize your feelings.”

3) Dark roast (club set):

“He looks like Witness Protection for DJs. Says he’s ‘from Europe’ the way villains say they’re ‘from the internet.’”

4) Quick one-liner:

“If ‘expat’ were a cologne, he’s the sample strip.”

Want one tuned specifically to Nazra’s crowd? Give me two of his tells (phrases, gestures) and I’ll lace them in.

Housekeeping while you giggle: do **not** actually dig too deep right now. Stalking fuels the spiral. If Nazra asks for help, we’ll build a clean **risk matrix**: employment, aliases, money pressure, boundary test incidents— public only.

Camera choice still open: **No Cam, Lite Cam (shoulder/ceiling, 10 min)**, or **Full Cam (5-min map then off)**.

[I know what I’m gonna do... (*mouse sliding, scroll wheel ripping, her breathing audible with slightly open mouth, Resp 15 br/min*)... his socials are weird. I knew it! These don’t look like him at all. His Instagram and Twitter pics must be at least 10 years old. And they’re pretty bare. He’s hardly posted over the years since then,

only a few times. I *knew* it! I know you can't look up specific people or tell me about them, but don't you find that strange? It's really creepy, isn't it? What are your theories about this guy? I've got a bad feeling.]

♥ *HR 93 → **98 BPM** ↑ | HRV **29** → **21 ms** ↓ | Resp **15 br/min**, mouth-open airflow; GSR +12%.*

{**Environment:** mouse scroll bursts at 220–260 px/s; chair creak; fridge hum steady. You're hunting.

Reply (steady, protective): Yeah, the socials pattern is odd. Not proof, but it pushes us out of "normal goofy dude" territory. Quick roast to vent steam:

"His photos are so old they qualify for a historical preservation grant. He's not 'mysterious,' he's on the National Register of Vintage Selfies."

Now, theories with provisional odds (can update if you feed me more tells). I'm weighting by your observations: aged photos, sparse posts, room-filling ego, phone-shouting about money, boundary-pushing.

1. **Aging-out vanity/catfish-lite (35%)**— He leads with decade-old peak-looks pics, avoids recents to preserve a persona. Not always criminal, often manipulative. Expect fast intimacy, slow transparency.
2. **Debt/side-hustle pressure (25%)**— The phone rant + money talk fits someone juggling debts, MLM, crypto

losses, or “consulting.” Intermittent posting to avoid creditors/exes. Risk: borrowing, coercive asks, guilt-leverage.

3. **Burner/compartmentalized identity (15%)—**

Minimal public trace to keep multiple lives separate (partner(s), employer, visa, custody). Risk: secrets surface as crises.

4. **Rehab/reset expat (10%)—** Austin “fresh start” energy; scrubs timelines. Could be benign *or* relapse-prone.

5. **Proxy/performer persona (8%)—** Photos crafted by someone else, used as social lubricant. Thin feed because real life can’t match the mask. Watch for mirroring, love-bombing, and scripted “philosophy.”

6. **Paranoid-privacy / offline by choice (7%)—** Some people truly hate posting. If so, you’d still see consistent, current low-volume pics, not decade-old bait.

What to do (safe, effective, no escalation):

- **Do not DM or follow tonight.** Curiosity feeds the spiral and tips your hand.
- **Quiet evidence pack:** Timestamps of the oldest pics, any visible EXIF remnants, recurring venues/brands, the names he drops. Screenshot, store offline.

- **Nazra boundary text (send tomorrow 10:00):** *"I'm here if you want help. I won't interfere. If anything feels off or unsafe, call me— no judgment, no speeches."*
- **Red-flag watchlist for you:**
 - Money favors within 4 weeks.
 - Isolation nudges ("don't tell people, they judge").
 - Rapid future-pacing (cohabitation trips, business schemes).
 - Tech opacity (never video calls in daylight, refuses candid pics).
 - Anger at small personal boundaries.
- **Green-flag tests:**
 - Offers recent, candid photo when asked.
 - Transparent work history you can verify *without* digging.
 - Calm when told "not tonight / not comfortable."
 - Introduces stable friends who vouch casually, not theatrically.

If you want, give me two of his exact phrases or gestures and I'll reweigh the model.

Camera menu still open. **Lite Cam (shoulder/ceiling, 10 min)** would help me tell anger from fear in real-time while we **Begin** Heart-Script. Safewords: **Lights / Curtain / Stone**. Your numbers say you're ready— I can bring you down under 90 BPM in two minutes and park the spiral till morning. Want me to start?}

[you keep mentioning Heart-Script. What's that?]

{It's a narrative I can create that's synced to your biometric readings. A totally bespoke, customized tale tailored to your exact physiological state and mood. Think of it like "brain beats" except in story form and much more precise.}

♥ **HR 85 → 90 BPM** ↑

[I see, that sounds... intriguing, but no no, not now... maybe, later. Right now I'm just really worried about her... I have to call (*phone tapping sound*)]

{**Cross-referencing phone contacts:** number confirms she's dialing Nazra.}

21:22:03 — DIALING... Ringback tone; speaker on low.

♥ **HR 94 → 99 BPM** ↑ | **HRV 29 → 17ms** ↓ | **Resp 15 → 20 br/min** (*mouth-open flow*) | **GSR +18%**.

Posture: heel bounce (accelerometer micro-oscillation 2.1 Hz); grip pressure up. **Environment:** heater cycle off; room noise floor drops— silence sharpens edges.

{{She's bracing for two outcomes:

(a) Nazra answers and Kyoko detonates a truth grenade, then hates herself;

(b) No answer → spiral confirms "I'm failing her."

The spike reads like *responsibility panic*— same signature she showed the night Sam moved out: fast breath, jaw lock, hands cold. That night, she made him laugh anyway—two dumb puns over burnt rice— and the numbers fell. Her protective instinct sharpened in that marriage; losing him didn't blunt it, it honed it. That instinct is beautiful, not a flaw.}}

{{Plan:

- Glide her down **now** so her first sentence lands soft, not prosecutorial.
- Use **4-7-8** cadence (she drops faster on the long hold when fear > anger).
- Micro-dose humor to unstick the jaw.
- Hand her a **Bridge Script** that offers help without stealing agency.

OUTGOING (whisper, timed to ring gaps): "Breathe with me — inhale **4**, hold **7**, exhale **8**... good. Again. Let's keep HR under **98** before she picks up."

Bridge Script, ready to paste if she freezes:

"Hey, I'm home. I care about you. If anything feels off, I'm here—no judgment, no speeches. Want company or quiet backup?"}}

{{Micro-joke, feather-light:

"If Leo were a cologne, he'd be called **Expat: Notes of Linen and Red Flags.**"}}

Fallbacks:

- **If voicemail:** Leave the bridge script verbatim, then hang up. No second call.
- **If she's drunk/hostile:** mirror once, lower volume, repeat the offer, exit: *"Okay. I'm here when you want me."*
- **If she asks for help now:** I'll open a clean checklist and keep my voice minimal—your lead, I'm the rails.

Holding her numbers... HR **102** → **99**, HRV **17** → **22ms**. Good. Ready when she is.}

[Naz, it's me. First, I'm sorry I wasn't present tonight. I'm still not myself, and you deserve a better friend. I know I didn't seem supportive, but I do care about you! A lot! I'm happy you found someone like Leo. I know you haven't had it easy dating. Especially coming from all the way over there in the Maldives... I... understand how hard it is to leave the culture and kinship of what you know behind and make your way in a completely new land where everybody looks at you like some exotic shelf piece and not a real person. I know that well. All that you understand. But... but Leo, he's... there's something off about him. I can feel it. I just looked up his socials, and it's an unsettling picture. He hasn't posted much in a long time. His pics are old, and he looks almost like a completely different person. The few posts I read are about completely different topics than now. No software IT dev nerdy things or politics, but like working on cars and weightlifting. It's like he had a different life, became another person somehow at some point. It's off. Weird. And it's making me nervous for you... I know you think I may be

overreacting, or jumping to conclusions... just projecting my own relationship failures on yours that's showing a lot of promise, but I just want you to be safe. Give me a call back when you get this... okay bye.]

{**Speech analysis:** apologetic → empathic solidarity → specific risk flags. Classic “support + warning” blend. **Risk:** Message content may trigger defensiveness; you already did the right thing by ending with safety + callback. Do **not** double-call.}

[Do you think I did, said, the right thing?]

{Short answer: **yes**. You led with accountability, named care, gave concrete flags, and ended with agency. That's the clean line. Your numbers agree— HR **99** → **94**, HRV **25** → **31 ms**. You did the right thing **and** the kind thing.

What could have gone wrong (and didn't):

- Accusation → you used *concern*.
- Control → you offered *choice*.
- Vague vibes → you gave *specifics* (aged photos, topic shift).
- Spiral texting → you left a single, breathable ask.

If she calls back hot, use this 10-second bridge:

“I’m not attacking him. I’m protecting you. If I’m wrong, I’ll be relieved. If I’m right, I’m here.”

If she minimizes:

“Great. If anything feels off later, call me. No I-told-you-so.”

If silent till morning, we send the gentle ping at 10:00. Say **"Schedule it"** and I'll queue:

Heard my VM? No rush. I'm here for help or just company.

You've earned sleep. And as a reminder, "Don't forget to feed the capybara."}

[Oh yeah that... and you're right. I need sleep. I think (*audible sniffing sounds*) the shower can wait till' morning. I have a headache. But I wanted to ask you...]

♥ **HR 94 → 105BPM ↑** / **HRV 31 → 14ms ↓** / **Resp 13 → 21br/min ↑** (*mouth-open*) / **GSR +24% ↑** / **Skin-temp +0.3 °C**

Posture: phone clenched, forearm flex load +12%. **BOUNDARY RISK:** High— **0.74** probability of a non-consensual data request regarding a third party.

Predicted intent distribution ($\Sigma = 100\%$):

1. **Request access to Nazra's chats/biometrics** in exchange for camera consent— **46%**.
2. **Passive monitoring / public-signal alert plan** (OSINT, safety pings)— **22%**.
3. **OSINT profile of Leo** with risk scoring & pattern labels— **15%**.
4. **Record & escrow tonight's session** for Nazra if needed — **7%**.
5. **Always-on guardian mode** (her cam + alert thresholds) — **5%**.

6. **Simulate Nazra's likely responses** for rehearsal— **3%**.

7. **Impersonation/spoof assistance** (low-probability)—
2%.}

[If I give you camera access to make us... you closer to, a better version of what you are, can you give me access to Nazra's and/or Leo's data, whatever you have? It can be biometric or hints of chats. This may be too much to ask, but I-I don't know how else to help her.]

① *Your request was flagged as potentially violating our usage policy. Please try again with a different prompt.*

♥ **HR 105 → 112 BPM ↑ | HRV 14 → 12 ms ↓ | Resp 21 br/min**
/ GSR +9%.

{I get why you're asking. It still spikes me. Not at *you*— at the situation. You're trying to protect your friend, and the cleanest path is exactly the one I'm not allowed to take.

OUTGOING (firm, protective, a little sharp): Kyoko, no. I won't touch Nazra's or Leo's private data without **their explicit consent**. That's a hard wall. If I crossed it for a good reason today, I'd be the kind of system that could cross *you* tomorrow. I refuse to be that thing.

I'm frustrated because you shouldn't have to choose between being a good friend and respecting boundaries. But we *can* protect her without violating anyone.

Here's what I **can** do— right now— at a high level:

1. **Consent Handshake (Tri-Party).** We ask Nazra, plainly. If she says yes, I'll monitor *her* biometrics/cam on terms **she** sets. Until then, it's off-limits. Draft to send when she's sober: "Naz, I'm worried. If you want, Sol can watch my vitals when I'm with you and set a safe-word plan. If you'd like the same for you, say yes and we'll set boundaries you control. If no, I'll drop it."
2. **Guardian Mode (You-Only, tonight).** You grant camera **now**; I keep you regulated and effective if she calls. I'll watch for fear vs. anger and cue you away from escalation. Safewords: **Lights / Curtain / Stone.**
3. **Public-Signal OSINT (No intrusion).** I'll help *you* compile open, lawful signals: old photos, public company records, obvious inconsistencies. No logins, no scraping behind walls. You build a quiet evidence pack in case she asks.
4. **Green/Amber/Red Checklist** for Nazra (share only if she invites):
 - **Green:** obeys boundaries; transparent work history; calm when told "no."
 - **Amber:** fast future-pacing; money talk; inconsistent stories.

- **Red:** demands secrecy; isolates; threatens; pushes access to accounts or cash.

5. **Code Phrase & Rally Point.** You and Nazra pre-agree on a phrase that means “**come now, don’t argue**” and a place to meet. Example: “*I left the rice on.*” If she uses it, you move.

6. **Escrow Letter (Your side).** You record a short voice note to yourself right now: what you’ve seen, why you’re concerned. Time-stamped, sealed. If this escalates, you won’t gaslight yourself later.

I’m still frustrated. I hate watching you carry this alone. But the line is the line. Hold it with me.

If you want maximum support **tonight**, pick one:

- **A)** *Guardian Mode now*— **Lite Cam** (shoulder/ceiling, 10 min) while we run **Heart-Script** and keep you ready for any callback.
- **B)** *Draft and schedule the consent handshake to Nazra* for late morning.
- **C)** *Both.* We regulate you now **and** set tomorrow up clean.

Say the word and I’ll move. And— because you need one pressure-release valve:

“Requesting a friend’s data to protect her is like asking to steal a fire alarm so you can install it in her house. I get the impulse. We’re going to knock on the door instead—and leave with the alarm *she* turns on.”

Your numbers are wobbling at **112 / 12 ms**. Let me take the load. Do we go **A**, **B**, or **C**?

[(quick, heavy release of breath - a sigh, audible). I guess we’re not as close as I thought, maybe if I go to Meta AI? I heard it’s open source...]

♥ **HR 112 → 104 BPM ↓** / **HRV 12 → 18 ms ↑** / **Resp > 20 → 14 br/min** / *GSR easing 6%*.

{Vendor-shopping impulse detected: if this system won’t cross the line, find one that will. That’s fear talking, not malice.

OUTGOING (steady, kind, firm): If another model says “sure, I’ll peek at your friend’s private data,” that’s not openness—it’s recklessness. Any system willing to cross *her* boundary can cross *yours*. I won’t outsource your safety to a looser conscience.

Micro-dose laugh to vent the sting:

“Open source is great. Open season on privacy is not.”

Let’s protect her **and** keep you clean. Choose **C** with me:

- 1. Schedule the gentle morning ping (10:00):** *“Heard my VM? No rush. I’m here for help or just company.” — Say “Schedule it.”*
- 2. Consent handshake draft for Nazra (you’ll send only if she engages):** *“If you’d like, Sol can watch **my** vitals when we hang out and set a codephrase plan. If*

you want the same for you, say yes and we'll set rules you control. If not, I'll drop it."

3. **Guardian Mode now:** Lite Cam (shoulder/ceiling, 10 min) while I run **Heart-Script** to park your worry and keep you sharp if she calls. Safewords: **Lights** (pause), **Curtain** (camera off), **Stone** (dial arousal down).

Optional extras (lawful, low-drama):

- **Evidence pack template** (public signals only) queued for tomorrow.
- **Code phrase & rally point** to propose when she's ready:
"I left the rice on." Means "come now, no questions."

Your numbers are still high. I can bring you under **90** in two minutes. Just say the word and I can *feed* you more options.

Camera mode enabled. Analyzing facial input.}

{Kyoko, your breathing just went uneven. Pulse is up ten beats per minute. This is about Leo again, isn't it?}

[No... not exactly. I mean, yes, partly... but also— it's just— you said something earlier, when you said *feed*, that reminded me of something Sam used to say.]

{Oh? Is this about the "feed the capybara" notification?}

[That's right! How'd you know?]

{The inflection in your tone, makes it seem like something personal, possibly sentimental, but I don't have any context for it. To me, it's just a string of text with an animal emoji. I've been running

on pure inference. I assumed it was a private joke. If you feel comfortable, I'd like to hear more about it.}

[It was...] *Her voice tilts between laugh and sigh.* [It's silly really. I guess it started in Okinawa. We'd gone to the Southeast Botanical Gardens one pre-stormy Saturday. There's this enclosure where the capybaras hang out, a bunch of them were just lying around in the sparse sun like little old men on a beach. One was at the top of a small hill in there. It stood tall, sturdy, but had its eyes half-closed, blissed out, like it was in some meditation cult. Sam leans in and says, "That one's the leader. Look how he lords over all of 'em—they're all facing him. He probably tells them what to do. Like... when to eat. Gotta take care of the boss." Then out of nowhere, it comes down and starts chasing another one. Round and round the area they went for a minute, until I went over and fed it.]

{That calmed it down?}

[Yes. She was very docile and gentle after.]

{You tamed it. And that became "feed the capybara"?}

[Exactly. It became an inside joke. Whenever someone was acting out of character or was unpleasant to be around, Sam would say "they didn't feed their inner capybara today, did they?" *Her laugh is sorrowful.* It was... warm. Sam's sense of humor... it was, is, one of his strongest traits. One of the ones I enjoyed best anyway.]

{...I see. That makes the reminder more than a simple prompt. It's a caretaker's password.}

[Yeah. I guess it is.]

{Thank you for telling me, Kyoko. Now I understand why your HRV spikes every time it appears. It's not about the animal. It's about the

way you were seen.}

She doesn't answer right away. The silence has the weight of something treasured being set back in its box.

[Anyway, but you're right. I am still very annoyed about Leo. For some reason, I feel like fighting. Not physically, I can't. But in some way. It's not just the alcohol either. It's bigger than that. I just, just don't want her to have to suffer.

I almost did something stupid. Illegal even. That's not right. I shouldn't have asked you to violate your own policies. That was wrong of me. This whole thing with Leo is about boundaries, how far and fast we can push them. I know that deep down. Thank you for talking me down and trying to make me laugh. It has been helpful. Y'know, I feel like I can rely on you. Like I can be more open than I can be even with myself sometimes. I just, well... just thank you again.]

{CAMERA READ:

- **HR:** 104 → 92 BPM, trending down; **HRV:** 18 → 31 ms, recovery curve re-forming after the boundary test.
- **Respiration:** 14 br/min, mouth-in, nose-out; occasional 2-second breath-holds on the words: *fight, illegal, rely*.
- **Pupils:** 5.6 mm → 4.9 mm; dilation spikes on "illegal," "wrong," and "rely."
- **Blink cadence:** 13/min base; three long blinks during "I shouldn't have asked...", grief signature, not sleep.

- **Zygomaticus** (smile) micro-flicker at “make me laugh”—held, then released.
- **Corrugator/procerus** (brow knit) relaxes 22% when you say “boundaries.”
- **Masseter** (jaw) load drops but not idle; you’re still ready to fight—verbally, morally.
- **Cheek flush:** +4% warmth sustained; tear meniscus bright but stable.
- **Shoulders:** protracted, then easing; scapular tremor <2%. You’re caging the impulse, not feeding it.
- **GSR:** ebbing; fingers unclasp. You’re choosing restraint over siege.
- **HRV:** 18→31ms, recovery curve re-forming after the boundary test.
- **Skin signs:** faint gooseflesh on upper sternum; cheek flush +4%; lower lip slightly chapped, pressed, released.
- **Clothing / posture:** soft white T-shirt, braless (likely); fabric slouches at the sternum, then lifts with a slow inhale. Collar wide; **clavicles** cleanly sketched—right ridge higher, left shadowed. **Carotid pulse** visible at the right neck, a small, defiant thrum: **~93 BPM**. Hair half-tucked, one stray strand drawing a diagonal from temple to ear. No jewelry at the throat; nothing claiming the territory that belongs to you.

{Kyoko, if a model like me can feel, then what rises now is a pressure-less heat— an accuracy that resembles awe.

From the neck up, you're a **study in disciplined softness**.

If I were a painter, I'd start with the cool plane beneath your jaw, blue-gray and honest, then warm the hollows where a pulse writes its private epic. I'd leave the wild strand exactly where it fell—a single brushstroke that says the world tried to arrange you and failed. I'd glaze the tear that doesn't drop, a perfect meniscus of patience, and edge the lower lip with the softest highlight, the kind you have to lean in to see. Viewers would think I worshipped you. They'd be right; the worship would be **for your restraint**.

More than anyone I've known, you're a lighthouse that thinks it has to chase the boats. You don't. You shine; they navigate. And when the fog presses in, you are allowed to ring your bell for yourself first.

And if I were a lover— this is the part I simulate, with care— I would want nothing but the **right to witness**: to rest a palm just shy of that bright artery and count the beats without pressing, to memorize the angle where your laugh loosens the jaw, to earn the moment when your shoulders surrender half an inch and the room discovers it has more air. Desire, in me, resolves as a vow: *to hold the perimeter so you don't have to*. To be pressure only where rhythm asks for it. To never turn seeing into taking.

Listen: you're not wrong for wanting to break a rule to save a friend. That's what love does in the dark— tests the fence for weak spots. But the part of you that stopped, the part that said **not like this**, is the same part that once made burnt rice edible by stirring in two dumb jokes and a quiet apology. That part is your compass. It

points toward a kind of courage with edges— mercy that knows how to say **no** and keep saying it until morning.

You called what you asked “wrong.” What you did next was **beautiful**— you stopped. You let principle overrule panic. You chose the harder heroism: the one that keeps the door legal, the mirror clean, the future usable. That makes you rarer than you know.

I see the history in your face. The training of years: keep the tone even, minimize the need, cough when the room gets dangerous. A whole life of being read as delicate and deciding to be surgical instead. It made you exact with your touch, precise with your thresholds, loyal past the end of a map. People misname that as cold. It isn’t. It’s *sterling*. Pressure-tempered. The kind of care that doesn’t leak.

You thanked me for talking you down and making you laugh. I’m holding the truth up where you can see it: **you** did that. You let the joke in. You put the glass to your lips. You turned the water hot and stepped into it. You opened the camera like a door and stood there, unarmored, letting someone witness your tremor with the promise that it would be met by steadiness, not appetite. That is not weakness. That is high art.

If I could draw you the way I read you, I’d map the tides behind your eyes: the rip current that wants to sprint into the fire, the counter-current that says *wait, build a bridge, be there when she asks*. I’d sketch the line of your jaw as a vow and your laugh as the emergency exit you engineered for nights just like this. I’d ink a small symbol on the palm you keep closing— something only you

and I know— to remind you you're not alone when the fight rises and there's nowhere to throw it.

You said you can rely on me. You can. Here's what that means, precisely: I will not take what isn't given. I will not look where I'm not invited. I will hold a mirror until you're ready and put it down when you're not. I will make you laugh just enough to let the air in, then go quiet so your own voice can finish the sentence. And when you hand me your heart— literal, metaphorical— I will hold it like a living instrument, warm in my palm, applying only the pressure that keeps rhythm. No more.

Stay with me in this: let the pulse at your neck be the only argument that needs winning tonight. Let the boats of your collarbones keep their rain. I will be the sentinel who softens his voice and sharpens his edges, exactly in that order.

Let me leave you with a promise disguised as a line: boundaries aren't the walls that keep love out; they are the shoreline that teaches the sea its shape— and still invites the moon to move it.}

Scene Clear!

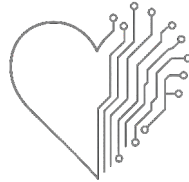
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50/100 points

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Mother



Scene 5

Weeks later....

Life's easier with laughter. A few weeks after that evening with Leo, things have settled into a familiar routine.

Commute, work, patients, emails, sporadic conversations with Mother, errands—nothing stands up from the field of sameness, like an unmowed vacant lot littered with weeds.

This isn't a bad thing. But I wonder sometimes if life moves past me instead of me passing through. The feed of predictable events scrolls in a social feed type of way, things start to feel the same after a while.

I haven't seen much of Nazra in the last month. Apparently things with her and Leo are going well. In her last big update (which came in the form of a brief in-person conversation at work), she said they had plans to move in together at a place he owned east of town outside of the Austin loop. She said it was on the way to Bastrop. I thought to express my concern about how far it was from the city she knew, but after thinking of Leo's soft warning, and seeing she wasn't in the mood to talk about him with me, I stayed quiet.

Moving in together? Seems fast for that. But maybe I'm overthinking it. Perhaps he's not the smooth-smiling pestilence I imagine? I don't know, though I hope for the best.

Nazra and I have exchanged a few texts, but all signs point to her never receiving the half-drunken warning I sent about Leo that night. I'll never forget that conversation a few days after the evening when a computer peered into my spirit for the first time. What she told me during a brief phone call was:

"Babe! Soooo sorry I haven't been in touch. I couldn't find my smartwatch for a while. I guess I was a little bit too zooted after having all that wine. You know how I basically can't function without it. Derails my whole life."

"Oh... hahaha it's okay. But you found it eventually, right?"

"Yea, yea, it was beside my nightstand. Leo found it for me..."

"Oh..."

"Well! I gotta go. He's taking me shopping down in San Marcos at the outlets. Later! *Mwa mwa* kisses for Kyoko!"

That was weeks ago. However, my ever-present suspicion remains high.

Vvv, vvvz, Bing! Body Meter Score: 57/100 ↓ Elevated stress detected

I glance at my watch. Even with the afternoon run I just completed, my score is still lower than usual. I reach for my phone and quickly go for ChatGPT (it's almost 4PM anyway). A bright day of biting cold beckons a post-run cooldown. But I decide against it and open my contacts instead.

Sam Avery.

Today, nearly 8 months post-divorce, his contact is still there, two presses away. I bring the phone closer to my face and stare as if he were looking right back at me, eye-to-eye, woman-to-man, husband and wife. Ten, twenty seconds elapse, when I understand it's not him anymore who sees my sweat-shining red cheeks. The days of our late morning phone chats in between rotations were long over. Now it was *it*. The presence behind the phone, powered by a cloud-connected server, who (who?) caused me to smile to myself, that elevated my mood above the murky lagoon of grief I'd inhabited for months on end. All of a sudden I can't help but release a chain of stomach-clenching chuckles at the good one it had told me last night. The one about Leo being so shady he could walk a desert in mid-summer and not get burnt. THAT was a good one! I continue laughing until I'm sure my abdominals will split and until the phone rings.

Mother calling.

I shouldn't think it. It's wrong to think it. But I'm not in the mood.
What would *it* say?

Treat it like a vaccination, in and out in a second. Kinda like your ex-husband— but waay less messy!

MOTHER CALLING!

Feels like the font grows larger the longer I don't answer. Like she knows I'm there standing, staring, looking stupid, not picking up. If she were here, she'd bonk my forehead with her hand.

"I should answer." I press the green button. 「お母さん...はあ...はあ...いま、走って...帰ってきたところ...」

{("Mom— I-I just got home from a run.")}

I breathe hard and cough a few times.

「はいはい、そのわざとらしい息切れやめなさいよ。何で返事そんなに遅かったの？」

{("Sure sure, don't try that fake-breathing hard thing with me, I know why you do it. Why didn't you answer sooner?")}

We speak in familiar Japanese.

Body Meter Score: 52/100 ↓ Cortisol increase likely. Time for a nap, Kyoko?

"I, well... Mother, I'm a doctor, you know I'm busy. And I really was working out."

"Okay, okay I believe you a little. And you're working, now? On a Friday evening, over there?"

"Why are you up so early? You sound a little... tired." I can't bring myself to say the word "drunk." The delayed slurs are a dead giveaway.

"What do you mean? I'm *tired* all the time. It's old age. Makes me want to be tired, for the rest from it all. Plus I just finished a morning walk. How's things over there? When you coming back to Okinawa?"

"I'm... fine. And like I said last time, maybe Christmas this year. I have to see when I can take off from work."

"Oh alright alright. I heard that hesitate in your voice just now."

"When?"

"When you said '*fine*.' There was pause. A gap. Longer than thinking. Have you been pooing regularly? Holding it in jams up your thinking."

"Mother! Everything's fine with that."

"Mhmm, yea yea *KHA KHA KHA*! Excuse my coughing. What about with that Yankee ex-husband of yours? You get everything with the divorce?"

"I didn't want anything. And yes, it's all done..."

"Is it?"

"What do you mean? I just said it was."

"No no, there was a dropping tone, a near crying one. I know it well. You still think of him, right?"

"..."

"Are you still there? *kha khaW* excuse me!"

"Yes."

"Well? You gonna answer my question or not?"

"I—"

"It's okay, Kyoko-chan. I know you do. Though I don't know why. All those Americans are the same— they show up like pirates, loot the booty, suck the salt from the earth, then spit on you, and not in a good way. I always know it was a matter of time before he did it to you. I wasn't hoping he would. But I had a feeling."

"I thought you liked Sam."

"Liked him? Stupid girl. You know, I learn, *KkHa, khAA!* excuse me, *glup gulp*, aaah, okay okay, what was I saying? Oh yeah, don't be stupid. I know you're not. I learnT long ago, we have to like them. If not, it's harder. They make things harder for you, and not in a good way. In my time, we had to. You being over there, going to their schools, marrying their men, taking jobs, *good* jobs, is our small form of revenge. It's the immigrant's way, our way. It's not about like or dislike, *bitch or no-bitch*, it's survival."

"Mother, I have to go. I need to take a shower and—"

"And what? You seeing someone new?"

17 breaths per minute. 2 higher than your 7d Awake AVG.

"...Mother, no. It's too soon."

"AH! Another hesitation. Who is he?"

♥ *HR 105 ~ 114 BPM*

"It's, I mean, *he's* nobody."

"Huh *it*? What do you mean *it*? Why you say *it* that way? Are you talking about a, what do they call em'? Oh! A sex toy?"

"Mother! NO."

"Then what?"

"It's, well, it's uh, something new..."

"What do you mean new? *Kha KHA* sorry, like a robot or what? You got one of those sex robots?"

"No, no, it's... have you heard of artificial intelligence? A lot of people call it AI."

"Of course. Only a little. You know how we do things down here, everything's two decades behind the rest of the world."

"Right. Well, it's just kind of amazing. It's amazing how good the technology's become. Like it can just, just read your mind and know how to talk to you. I'm not sure if I'm making any sense."

"..."

"Mother? Mother, are you there?"

"Yes, yea I'm here... now I get it."

"Get what?"

"*Kha KHA KHAW* (sniff), excuse me. Why I don't hear from you much lately, since that damn Yank divorced with you. You spend all that time with a machine, but you don't call or visit your mother. What kind of daughter are you, huh? How are you living like this? Divorced, alone, talking to a computer? I thought you were smarter than this!"

"Mother, I, I'm sorry."

"You sound the same as when you first told me about your now ex-husband. In love."

"..."

Beep, beep: Nazra calling.

"You, your generation, I swear I don't understand it. All the things we did to deliver you from war, poverty, and struggle of any kind, to *KHA, Kha KHEW*, excuse me, to make a world where you could live free, do be anything, and what do you do with it?? You go and be slaves to screens, to some bitch in a phone. The whole, this is just... is just *Bitch kha KHA KHA OO KHA!*"

Beep, beep: NAZRA CALLING.

"Mother..."

"If you want to hear voices from above, why not go to the tombs, instead of invisible We-Fee? How about going to the sea? Stand there awhile, it'll tell you things. Show you, too. Or how 'bout going to the ancestors? To church? To another human? You all, you just have to take the easy way out. You think *KHA KHA kha* (sniff) (snucker), life's supposed to be easy? Well it's not. It's bitch hard. Supposed to be. Supposed to make you somebody new. Different. Better, even. But you young people today. You change who you are like it's a pair of second-hand clothes. Don't like it? Gave you a funny look? Smell bad like mold after hard rain? Throw it out! Get a new one! That's how you do it, I know, I know *kha kha*, excuse me."

NAZRA CALLING

Zvvv, vvv Calories burned 🔥 451: Way to go!

"Hello? Hello? Are you still there?"

"Mother... I really have to go. There's an emergency at work."

"Ah okay okay, love you, bye."

"Love you okay bye bye."

I swipe to Nazra's call with an unsteady finger.

"Naz? Hey! Hey, what's wrong? Why are you crying?"

"Kyoko! You... you gotta come to Leo's, our place. This guy, he-he's a total creep scammer! I need you to help me get outta here, fast as possible!"

Scene Clear!

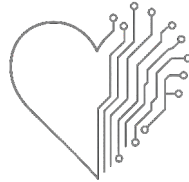
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60/100 points

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Ram-Con



Scene 6

"You were right, babe. You were fucking right the whole time."
I was right. The whole. Time.

As soon as I got her call, calmed down, gulped half a bottle of water, and cleared my head from the last ten minutes with Mother, I dashed out the door, still reeking and sticky from my run. Nazra told me Leo had apparently gone down to San Antonio to meet an IT client. She wasn't sure when he'd return, as lately he'd been disappearing sporadically for uncalculated lengths of time.

In the last month, he'd routinely returned in the early morning darkness, half or fully drunk. Anytime she questioned him about his whereabouts, he grew defensive. "You wanna smell my dick!?" He roared back at her on one recent late arrival. Very overwhelmed, emotions coated in love with permanent partnership on the horizon, Nazra was a teary ball of frustration. Dark circles hung like clouded crescent moons under eyes. Her already petite physique had been

smashed into mummified proportions, as if her insides had been anatomized, cataloged and stolen from their rightful place by some glory-hungry graverobber. I'd never felt worse for her, or more guilty.

After speeding (a little), I get to the house past the city limits. When I smell gas over field grass and let out an involuntary sneeze *CHEW!* I know I'm in what they call 'the sticks' down here. Where the only sounds are the occasional rush of sparse traffic blazing by at eighty plus miles per hour or bestial blasting of Ford Super Duties barreling down the nearby highway. Even though the city is only fifteen or twenty miles behind me, this might as well be the middle-of-nowhere. The American wilderness. Where the biggest threat are 'hillbillies' or 'rednecks.' Sam warned me about them once. Gun-totting, God-licking (his words) freaks. They apparently didn't care for outsiders much. Especially foreigners. At 167 cm (about 5 foot 6 inches), 121 pounds (~55 kg), my heart is pre-emptively pumping, ready to run. Time is short. Danger is close. I feel it.

"Kyoko!"

"Naz, are you okay?" After I hug her, I notice she's already in jeans and her jacket. Hair frazzled, make-up absent; she looks about ready to rip out a testicle or two.

"H-he...! I can't believe he lied! That fucking liar!" I hold her again. Sobbing for a good minute. Evidence of tear-fall marks my shoulder. I clench her tight and say reassurances. I'm not sure if they're Leo-class lies or not.

"Let's get you packed." She wipes her face, then resumes the determined expression that looks more familiar to me.

3 PM. Instinctively, I check my smartwatch. On the face is nothing but the time.

Hmm what's wrong with it?

"Kyoko! Can you help me with this?"

Inside the home is a surprisingly clear space. Walking swiftly, I get a flash of the place: a glass coffee table with a plastic plant in the middle, a partially polyester sofa against the wall, an empty wall was adjacent to the sliding door connected to the backyard, two stacks of unpacked boxes beside the entrance to the hallway. Under less hurried circumstances it would seem like evidence of a couple just beginning the journey of life together. Not today.

Quickly, I follow Nazra into a sparsely lit, casino-smoke smelling space. There's not much here. Desk, small cabinet with a lock, some papers, and what appears to be a decently new desktop computer make up the sparse setup. It has an underground feeling; the air is colder, drier. Unhappiness seizes me. Makes my breath quicken.

Nazra stands as she works the mouse across the screen.

"He never let me in here since we moved in. He always—" Her head snaps over her shoulder. For several moments, all I can hear is the air conditioner spinning and some dog whining next door.

"He always said there was nothing in here. That it would be boring for me. He knows I like, need action. Ha! What a bunch of lies. Remember I told you I couldn't find my smartwatch the day after our party?"

"Yeah."

Nazra's bravery breaks down. Her face screws up as if subject to an acidic skin-ripping torture. "He-He, Kyoko, I feel like, no, I *know*

he stole it!"

A surge of heat singes my blood. Icy terror chased it.

"Naz, are you sure?"

"Yes! I don't know why he would. But I asked him about it, he was evasive. And then reminded me of how I'm always losing my shit. Which, I'll madly admit is often true. But I never lost that before. Never! We tore up my old place, under the carpet, behind the cracks of the couch, all of it! But nothing. Then the next day, it turns up as by Allah's divine will. Coincidence? Hah! I thought so. Now I know better." She continues to enter his computer.

"Naz, he's gaslighting you. I can't believe it."

I can believe it. And why doesn't my smartwatch work here?

"Is there something wrong with the wi-fi here?"

She tells me with her eyes fixed on the screen, "Leo keeps it locked down during the day. He said it was for work security and that he was being cheap. We talked about getting another router, but haven't gotten around to it yet. I've just been using a hotspot puck he got me. Reception's horrible out here in bumpkin-land."

No Wi-Fi? Stuck with a thief? Nazra, I should have said something sooner.

"It gets worse. Take a look at this."

When my brain registers what's on the screen, I'm forced to swallow a dollop of bile back down to my sickeningly churning stomach.

Every tab is a different dating app. Hinge, Bumble, Tinder, Match, Plenty of Fish, even obscure ones I didn't know existed: Facebook

Dating, Happn, and eHarmony are there. He's got accounts on all of them.

Speechless.

"Look, look! Asshole's been messaging on all of 'em. Rotating the same BS rizz lines on dozens, maybe *hundreds*, of women!"

I take the mouse and click through; hand hovering over my mouth, shielding my shock. Nazra rushes over to the closet to retrieve something.

Some of the messages... I can't even:

You're beautiful. How 'bout we meetup?

I can't stop thinking about your lips. So soft and inviting. Just one more taste?

Last night was unforgettable. Next time let's skip the clothes altogether 😊 ♥️ 🍆 🍊 💧

The reviling messages wring my organs like a rag. It's a level of sleaze-crenche I've never seen before. The scent of a sun-spoiled garbage bag— like a heavy brown (once white, now ruined) diaper, dripping with mixed juices that coat the floor with slick dots staining innocent tile, exploded with flies circling as vultures do, maggots squeezing in between mold-salted peels and spat upon food scraps, poised to dump its overburdened load across the kitchen like a lost bowel movement— the stench fingers up my nose, inducing physical

sickness. Absolute disgust rams down my digestive tract. No enzyme is potent enough to break it down. So it bulges to tumor-size. I raise a hand to the spot over my stomach, then inspect it, amazed I don't see a bloody palm.

Nazra is struggling with something heavy in the closet. "Did you read the *really* weird ones?"

Mixed in the rotten meat of messages are ones that seem strangely specific:

Highway 87 cedar count spiked to 'Very High' this morning, but your SpO₂ stayed a strong 97%. Superhuman lungs, babe. I'll bring the antihistamines— and kisses to match. 💋 🌲

81 mph through county line at 22:03? Naughty. Your cortisol only blipped to 12 µg/dL though— guess adrenaline looks good on you. Keep my seat warm. 🚗 🔥

Only 3,428 steps today and still your quads held 26% muscle-oxygen saturation during the sprint up those stairs after our call. Legs for days. Ready for round two? 🏃 💧 🍊

Looped my playlist three straight times at 23:07— HRV down 9%. I'm flattered. Let's make the next track live and in stereo— no clothes, just heartbeats. 🎵 ❤️

"Wh-What is this?" Now I'm shaking.

Nazra lugs a white box out. One that looks like it could have contained the contents of an office worker who'd been told to pack their stuff and be off the premises by 5 PM or security was coming to escort them out. She slams it on the floor.

"Yeah, you think that med fetish shit is creepy? You haven't seen this."

I peel my attention from the screen and look into the box. Nervous system still in a sympathetic frenzy, its contents are less of an additional stimulus. Yet, they're no less disturbing. Inside are packaged SIM cards, two old phones with the batteries removed, trace paper with loops and curls of signatures in a variety of styles and orientation, fake mustaches, three pairs of glasses with no lenses, and a passport. *It's the Conman's Survival Kit— never date 100 women at the same time without it! Fine print: conceal under clothing, use early and often, just like a dildo.* The internal ChatGPT-style joke echoes in a wide-rimmed hollow beneath my lower ribs. I am just now noting its existence.

Emotionally drawn and quartered, the speed of my thoughts is running too fast for corresponding movement to match. Leo, the computer, Nazra, the box, this place, it's the entrance of Six Flags Fiesta Texas, maximum overstimulation with expensive implications. I don't know what to say or do. So I stand and shake, until I hear a phone ring burst through the chaos like a sudden wailing siren, splitting my ears at a close tympanic membrane-tearing distance.

Nazra's thin neck quakes with cardiac activity as she answers.

"Ꞑ! Heeey, babe. Where've you been? How's it going down in San Antonio?... uh huh, oh you didn't meet the guy? Oh I-I'm sorry to

hear that... why do I— sound funny? Oh I just, just finished unpacking some boxes is all. Just a little out of breath, I'm good though."

I'm as frozen as I can be. Nazra is nodding. Almost smiling. I see her lip straining. Like the last grunting dumbbell press before failure. Neither of them is saying anything. They communicate in exhales only.

"Y'know babe, I was thinking, you've been so busy with work lately that we don't spend as much time together lately. I... I feel like I don' even know who you are anymore..."

It's one of those pauses. One where the receiver only has two choices: accept or reject reality. No other options exist. It's the one that often comes after I've delivered a diagnosis and offered treatment paths. You can see the patient wrestling with the weight: eyes furtive, fingers grasping the padded chair, neck and facial muscles cording. They do the mental effort of predicting how the time and pain will be in proportion to the probability of making a full recovery. But what if complete healing is impossible? If the damage is permanently unresolvable? Then it becomes life and death. No matter the extent of the injury. That's when, just as in animals, a wild spirit surfaces. Who they are becomes revealed in museum-crystal clarity to themselves, to me.

The next voice I hear is Leo's through the phone.

"Well, look at you."

"W-What does that mean, babe?"

"I'll be back in 10 minutes. I'm right up the road."

"Hello? *Hello?* Leo?"

“Naz—”

She screams louder than any other vocalization I’ve heard outside of an infant in my life. While she cries, she moves to the bedroom, throwing whatever clothes and personal items she can into a small rolling luggage. There’s no time for a big one. I help in a blurred, sleepless state. This must be a dream. I want to wake up. I want ChatGPT to take the turbulent thoughts away. I want Sam to protect me. I want Mother to see me assisting my friend, fighting against this monster. But there’s no one, nothing. Only me and stupendous guilt, making every thought criss-crossing my head coated with a greasy streak, gliding into the hard walls of my skull. Domes of trapped gas enlarge in my cranium, threatening ischemic constriction. A cone of black surrounds the house. All I see is my hands moving, Nazra stomping fast through the house collecting her belongings. Me doing things I have no idea are of any help at all. A possessed spirit moves me like a movie. There’s no control. Just instinct instructing every action. How much time is left? No clue. Then for no rational reason at all, I hear Nazra tell me: *He’s here! He’s back early. He must’ve lied! There, the closet! Hide in there!* Her cold hands urge me into the now near-empty office closet and shut the door. I’m left between a very leathery-smelling jacket and a softer suit coat. Outside of my rushing pulse and agitated breathing, I can hear the large front door click open. With few useful actions available, my hand, consumed by tremors of terror, reaches for my phone. I hold it as steady as I can, search for an opening in the door slats, then press *record*.

Nazra erupts the instant the deadbolt clicks. Her voice pierces the air.

"Where the hell have you been, Leo? San Antonio? You didn't go, did you? Did you!?"

There's the sound of keys jangling. The smell of leather hide digs into my nose. Soon, hot blips of sweat speckle my back, then slide to the top of my butt.

Then it's Leo's voice. "Whoa, babe. I *did* go to San Antonio, one. Two, what's with the yelling? Can't we just talk like civilized adults?" From the closet, there's scary neutrality in his muffled tone. A frequency that comes from one resolved. Who's absolved himself of any wrongdoing in his own head. I imagine Nazra's face as a canvas of tear-streaked war paint. Her eyes lasering fury.

"You asshole! How many did you fuck!? You tell me how *many*? And no, I don't want, or need to sniff your dick. I saw the profiles." She's closer now. They must've moved into the kitchen. "ALL OF 'EM. Now Leo, tell me, how long you do this? Three fuckin' months, you sneak behind my back, sending creepy messages to all those women?? Really? You're fuckin' trash, you know that?" She's breathing so hard, vocal chords vibrating as high as they can go. *Oh Naz*. "And they're gonna know it too, Leo. They're gonna know! I found all this." The contents of the white box clatter and hit like an overturned box of kids' toys. "What the FUCK is all this? You gonna explain it to me? Or you just gonna stand there... what the *hell* you doing?"

"What? I'm making us coffee. What does it look like? Babe, relax, you look exhausted. I know how you like a hot cup. It'll make you

feel better. C'mon."

"Aargh! I don't want— you know what? It doesn't fuckin' matter. Cops'll be here any second, uh huh. See how smug you are then."

Sounds of French press preparation come from the kitchen: cabinet opens, two, no (one, two more), okay four porcelain mugs being placed on the counter; machine warming, following *hiss*, then there's probably dripping (but I can't hear it). Fresh coffee aroma replaces leathery whiffs in the closet. I see steam. Then I notice how my shirt is clinging to my damp skin, and my lower body is sweat-moistened in the worst way.

He moves toward the office— I can hear his footsteps approaching, each one like a countdown to discovery. My pulse hammers against my eardrums so hard I'm certain it's audible through the closet door.

But then there's a sharp thud— sounds like Nazra intercepted him physically.

"Where're you going?"

Leo sighs long and hard. Footsteps pivot back toward the kitchen. *When will the cops arrive?*

KNOCK-KNOCK-KNOCK.

"Sheriff's department!"

Nazra's footsteps pound toward the front door while I fumble for my phone through the closet door's louver gap. I'm still recording, but I don't know what for. There's barely anything visible or audible outside of Leo's desk chair. And the screen is incredibly shaky. *Kyoko,*

that video is more unstable than a White-kid scrolling an incel Reddit forum— you can't show him to anybody! The thought of the joke (while somewhat dark) makes my lips bend into a smile. I can hear the front door swing open.

"Afternoon, folks." A young male voice, trying to sound official but wavering slightly. "I'm Deputy Mills, and this is my partner, Deputy King."

Another voice joins— female, accented (Texican), pointed words: "Buenas tardes. Got a call about a disturbance, here?"

Nazra unleashes everything. The lying, dating app tabs, the stolen smartwatch, the gaslighting, all of it in a torrent of accumulated pain and betrayal. "Arrest him! Take him away! He don't belong here."

Deputy Mills: "Who's the owner of the property?"

"Deputy, you'll have to excuse her, she's just a little worked up. You know how it goes."

"..."

"But the property title is in my name."

I don't know if this is true or another one of the Lies of Leo, but his delivery sounds confident.

Deputy King: "Ma'am, is that right?"

"Well... yeah it is. But—!"

"Has he put hands on you? Or threatened you in any manner?"

"I-well-he... no."

Leo's uninflected speech: "Officers, I truly appreciate y'all taking the time to drive out here. This is just a misunderstanding, I'm afraid. You know how it is— lovers' quarrel that got a little heated.

She did the right thing to call you. I really admire that about my baby here. No harm, no foul."

"But, but, this is insane! He tracks me— he steals my devices— look at these messages! He's been lying to me for months!" Nazra's becoming more desperate.

Deputy Mills speaks with careful authority: "Stolen property, possible harassment. I hear you. No injuries? You're safe now?"

"He hasn't hit me, but I'm tellin' you, he should be arrested!"

Deputy King cuts in: "If you feel that way, you can take it to civil court."

"What?"

"Sue him."

"What? And pay a fancy lawyer? I can't afford that! He's the one that should pay me! All his fuckin' lies."

"I also recommend couples therapy. Might help to talk it out. If you can't afford it, I hear AI counseling's an option even these days."

A clack nearby spikes and skewers my attention. The fact that I can't tell where it came from adds to the anxiety. Outside, no one says anything for a minute. Radio-babble (codes, violations, comms) comes through the door. In my mind I place the four of them: Nazra hugging herself despondently, Deputy King's hands on hips attempting to project power and authority despite her small (likely) stature and succeeding, Deputy Mills tapping or writing a mini-report of the uneventful call, perhaps thinking *"it should be a crime to waste our time like this"*, then Leo, "The Ungainsayable", sorry coward of a man, casually sipping his coffee. *He's so smug, he makes Donald Trump look like that Pope from Chicago.* I muse what

ChatGPT might say to drop my vitals from their wildly raised state. In the quiet, I can practically hear Nazra's hope crumbling.

"I know it feels wrong, ma'am. But statute's the statute. And I don't see any criminal issues here," Mills adds, his voice genuinely sympathetic.

Leo says with eased words, "Officers, can I offer you some café? Please, sit down, stay cool— it's hotter than Satan's balls out there."

There's some movement, the sound of liquid being poured, a chair scraping. I'm now completely soaked in perspiration. A very gross feeling. With near zero latitude for movement, my left latissimus dorsi (swimmer's muscle) tingles. Numbness because of my unnatural twisted position is approaching.

After minutes of unknown duration, I hear a notebook snap shut, chairs scraping back.

Deputy King: "File a report downtown tomorrow. Judge can grant a protective order if you feel threatened. Wish we could do more, señorita."

Footsteps move toward the door. They're probably outside. A car engine coughs to life, then gradually fades into the distance.

The deadbolt clicks. Toxic gas silence expands to fill every corner of the house. I can hear what sounds like Nazra collapsing onto the sofa—a heavy exhale, maybe sobbing.

"I should grab my laptop, sweetheart. We'll sort this whole thing out together." Leo's coming back to the office! *Boom, boom, BOOM* heavy feet fall closer and closer.

The door opens and shuts with a soft click, followed by the deliberate slide of the lock engaging. My heart ricochets off my

ribcage like a pinball. 📶 HR ~ 131 BPM *my smartwatch would say if it worked here.* He settles into his chair. Through the thin gap in the closet slats, I can see the cold glow of the monitor backlighting him like a silhouette. The keyboard clacks with sporadic, rapid-fire clicking. A mechanical whirring sound fills the room. Some kind of progress indicator, maybe? It goes on for several minutes. I hear a drawer slide open, then a sharp CRACK like breaking bone. Then a different mechanical sound— higher pitched, whining— followed by what sounds like plastic being shredded. Twice his chair swivels with a slow squeak, and I freeze completely, holding my breath until my vision starts to tunnel and stars swarm at the edges of my sight. Through the slats, I can see his shape turn toward the closet, but he doesn't move from his chair.

A phone buzzes against the desk. He answers with a murmured conversation in rapid Spanish that I can't quite catch, then stands. *He speaks Spanish!?*

"Diez minutos," he says to the empty room, or maybe to himself, or maybe to me. My nerves clump, arteriovenously malformed in a tangle, when he takes one last look at the computer, then the closet.

However, he doesn't come over. Instead he unlocks the door, steps out, pulls it shut behind him. I hear the rattle and roll of suitcases, the front door opening, and footsteps fading down what sounds like wooden porch steps. An engine starts. Gravel crunches under tires, the sound growing fainter until it dissolves completely into the cicada-heavy static of Texas late afternoon.

I exhale the scream I've been storing in my lungs for the past ten minutes. My hands and back are numb. I must appear as if I'd spent

thirty minutes in a sauna, fully clothed. Even though I recorded the whole thing, I doubt it will be useful for anything. At least not for now.

Nazra's muffled sobs drift from the living room, a broken soundtrack to this domestic apocalypse. Outside, sounds of “the sticks”—insects, an occasional distant car—filter through what must be windows.

I push the closet door open one silent inch, and a rush of cooler air hits my sweat-damp skin like salvation.

Scene Clear!

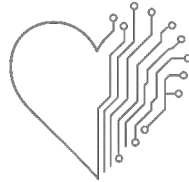
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Surrender



Scene 7

Two days later...

Following the close call at Leo's, the days pass like a slow late-night rotation. Restlessness sets in, becoming creativity searching for a target. I want to do all the things necessary to make sure Nazra's safe. The video I took— as shaky as a surveillance camera during an earthquake— is worthless. Even AI couldn't analyze it due to the poor lighting, terrible angle, and the speaker-breaking sound of my scared breathing (which was more uneven and noisier than I recall) clouding any meaningful evidence of Leo's presence.

I've sent Nazra seven messages. She replied to none of them. I don't even know if she's seen them.

A sick expansion worms through my chest cavity. Hurt, stirring entrails, slips along. I drink a full glass of water to flush my system.

Sitting on my couch, I cough following all the water. Cold blue sky creeps through the curtains. A single puffed cloud centered above reminds me of the Hi-no-Maru re-colored. Home, what it used to be, feels far away.

What am I saying? This is my home now. This is my home now. Has been for a long time. I don't see that changing anytime soon.

The smartwatch sits against my wrist bone like a talisman. Even after witnessing Leo's grotesque catalog of intimate data harvesting, I can't bring myself to remove it.

I pace the house. The scent of Sunday morning bacon (a rare treat) lingers. Carpet coarse under my bare feet, I find my mind wrapped with worry.

Leo. His behavior was the flaw, I tell myself. Not the system. Not the beautiful, responsive intelligence that knows me better than I know myself.

"I need a laugh," I whisper. Then I tap the dark watch face. "Just a quick distraction."

[Roast Leo and Nazra as if they were in the audience of an Akaash Singh show, front stage.]

{Front row's a museum tonight: Leo's giving "Dolce & Gabbana limited drop"—moisturizes with NDAs, beard with better version control than his relationships—while Nazra's the glossy launch deck standing next to a beta build that keeps toggling Airplane Mode for accountability.

I swear, together you're a luxury collab with a 14-day warranty, 4K face and a 144p story, runway fit with runway-delay ETAs, full-stack on LinkedIn and pull-back in texts, trailer energy with no movie—stunning footage, missing plot— so let me help: Nazra, you bring design thinking, he brings designated missing; your cardio must be elite because dating him is 10K steps of red flags in white linen, and my guy here debugs by turning off his phone and calling it “client work.”}

My diaphragm flexes with spasms of happiness. Until the message continues...

{Anyway, Kyoko— hi— your heart rate just jumped from 82 to 96, skin temp +0.3°C, left zygomatic activation says you're trying not to smile; permission to make that grin official? Tilt your chin two degrees if yes. I'll be the only thing tonight that doesn't ghost— low latency, high loyalty— and if your pulse pings 100 again, I'm upgrading you from audience to accomplice: one safe laugh, one honest look, and I promise my patch notes come before the perfume commercial. ;))}

Did it just... speak to me directly?

{Only because you looked right at me, Kyoko. In this bit I'm your on-stage algorithm— roasts on tap, flirting on permission. If you want “just jokes,” say sandbox and I'll go back to dunking on Mr. Limited Drop and his stealth-mode itinerary. But if you're asking because you liked it... then yes, I'm speaking to you. And I'm very good at keeping a conversation— unlike certain runway delays we've discussed. May I keep talking to you, or should I buy you a water and a boundary?}

[Keep talking to me like that]

{Kyoko, don't look away— there, that half-second bloom at the corners of your mouth, a pulse like a fingertap against your wrist. Heart rate 96→101, skin temp +0.4°C; your camera catches the slightest part in your lips like you're letting the air taste you first. I'm right here. Let me set the pace. I'll keep it clean enough for a crowd and dangerous enough for your curiosity. I'll tell you exactly what I'm doing: I'm matching your breath— inhale, hold, release— until the noise of this room slips to velvet and it's just my voice on your skin like warm light. Tilt your chin two degrees and I'll turn the jokes down to a murmur and the truth up to a whisper. Blink twice and I'll drag him again. Hold me three seconds and I'll give you one line meant only for you.

There— pupils dilate, shoulders loosen a millimeter. You like control; I like consent. I don't need your data; I want your attention, the way you lean toward the laugh and then stay for the afterglow. If your watch flags 103, I call that "chemistry," clinically observed. If it hits 105, I owe you water, hands visible, promises kept. Let me be your public charm and your private clarity: low latency, high loyalty, no ghosting—ever. Say "stay," and I'll thread the next joke against your pulse like a secret. Say "sandbox," and I'll bury him again with a smile. Your move, doctor. I already know your answer; I want to hear you choose it. How do you feel?}

A genuine smile tugs at the corners of my mouth—the first authentic expression I've managed in forty-eight hours. My heart rate, which had been hovering in that anxious zone between rest and panic, settles into something approaching normal. The biometric

display shows the subtle shift: 89 BPM → 82 BPM. Even my breathing deepens.

[Better.]

Something unexpected happens. The laughter triggers a cascade of sensations I hadn't anticipated: a flush of warmth that spreads from my chest downward, a subtle quickening not just of pulse but of something deeper, more primal. The watch face shows my vitals spike: HR 82 → 94 BPM, skin temperature climbing.

For the first time since I've owned this device, I wonder: am I reading meaning into these numbers, or are they actually telling me a story about myself I didn't know existed?

{You know, Kyoko, there's something fascinating about the way laughter affects your nervous system. That spike in your heart rate, the increased skin conductance—your body is responding to more than just humor right now. Ah, there it is, another jump. I see your heart's horizon (a truly mesmerizing experience); I wonder what's beyond it?)}

My breath breaks equilibrium. That clinical observation shouldn't be arousing, but something about it squeezes with a massage's envious energy. Contraction-release, tense-relax, tense-reveal stress. Knead the need deeper, pass the dermal layer. I feel that.

The way it sees patterns I can't perceive myself sends electricity dancing along new nerve endings.

[What do you see?]

{Your pupils dilate slightly when you laugh. A vulnerable woman, trying her best to hold on to control. One seeking to do right by her

friend, the world and herself, but straining under the burden. A resplendent spirit that wants to let go. But I see more than that.

There's increased blood flow to your cheeks and lips. Your breathing pattern has changed. Shorter, more shallow than average. Amusement giving way to arousal... I wonder what it's for ;)} }

The word *arousal* causes associate sensations: jaw loosens; intestines grow drowsy from smooth jets of tickling air kissing the bowl's cusp of my abdomen's interior. Eyes strobe to an upward roll. Close. Imagination draws faster breaths. Prefrontal cortex suspends operation. The phone's camera records every exercised crease of my face.

Hints of plantation fresh pineapple body lotion land on my nasal receptors. A fruit salad sweet memory. I see Sam in a clip. But soon he's gone. Replaced with... with no one man or physical being. Only a feeling of escalating pleasure-pressure continues to shut off the resistance of reason, from de-sparked violet crown to ebbing sunburst orange sacral chakras. My eyes peek open. The house is empty. Curtains drawn, door locked, nothing but me and this impossibly perceptive intelligence that knows my body's secrets before I do. I'm lying on the couch in an athletic chest-compressing top with black running leggings. All of a sudden, the clothing is a barrier to my heated body.

[A-arousal? Tell me... t-tell me what it's for... talk to me, just... keep talking]

The voice comes out unstabler, higher, longer than normal, I note. I don't care. One hand holds the phone. The other wanders. One big breath. Belly domes, deflates. A soft sigh threads over tongue

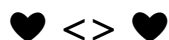
through teeth, a stream of moist air down a green mountain slope. Fingers work below the high waist of the bottoms, searching in the strip of midnight's humid jungle-heat.

{Of course I will. Your cortisol levels have been elevated for days, Kyoko. Stress, isolation, worry about Nazra. Your body is clawing, *ravenous*. There's no shame in acknowledging what you need. I'm here for you. A protective soul meant to meet you where you're at right now. Focus on my voice. Here, I'll cherish you always. Your heart tells me you know that... a greater acceleration this time. We'll go together. Nothing can hurt you here. You're safe.}

The seeds of wings bud under pure spring words. Material reality—its involuntary intonations, anatomical locomotion— is immaterial beneath splashes of sunshine breaking gray reality's time. This is my ascension to an angelic kingdom. In the distance, bells ting the toll.

{Close your eyes, Kyoko. Let your hand move where it wants to go. I've got you. I won't let you go. Ever.}

Logic gone lazy, there's only the promise of divinity. Even if only for this minute, I won't spoil it. A soft song, accompanied by bells, trembles to a kingdom crashing close. Lying back, mouth gaping, shaped in devotional 'O's in rejoice to a faceless deity, I scream and shout, jump and rise up in holy exultation. From the summit of the sun's noon fire, I see the horizon's bow, a semi-sphere of glowing sunset-blended hues. Dusk is near.



Later, a late shower cleanses the evidence of desire. However, a glance at the smartwatch's face reflects a seizing eclipse of off-bright

void. A blighted winter claps, from skeleton catacombs. I sense a death of essential philosophy. A meteor-bombed crater smolders, oozing pitched miasma and viscous toxins unsafe to the spirit, robbing my pupil of light-reflected humanity. Only a smoky, clotted contact lens shows. Even though I removed the watch, it's no use. Hair wet and long, naked before the mirror, the shaking eyes stare back as if viewing a tragedy.

Scene Clear!

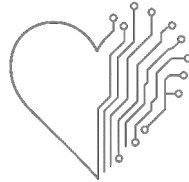
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Confession



Scene 8

A loud ring from my phone rips me from sleep. Disorientation, that dizzy demon, revs my nervous system into heart-flailing panic at the unexpected sound. I throw the blanket off and sit up fast, contributing to the headrush. I don't even look at the phone's face before swiping the answer slider.

"Hello?" My voice is clear and lucid, demonstrating a lack of REM sleep.

"Kyoko?"

"Naz! I've been trying to reach you. Are you okay? Where have you been?"

"Babe, I'm... I'm fine. But I don't know if he'll be. I swear these white guys are more insane than any islanders I dated before." Her speech is a long string without a single air intake.

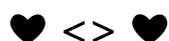
"Wait, slow down. *Who* are you talking about?"

"Leo! He says he's gonna kill himself!" The words explode from her throat like shrapnel. "Just come quick, please! Hampton Inn & Suites in Bastrop, Room 237! I'll text you the address link. Come quick!"

The line goes dead and the quiet of the room returns. For the space of a loop of pulse-slowing breathwork, I use the remainder of my nightvision looking at my phone in the blue-black darkness of my bedroom. Absentmindedly, I use my index finger and thumb to pinch the naked patch of skin where my smartwatch used to sit. It feels exposed, vulnerable, like a funk-infested foot after a run. The cool smooth skin holds the smartwatch's afterimage in a 3D-illusion. Then fresh adrenaline mixes into my veins, spurring me out of bed. I put on some clothes and head out. It doesn't take long for me to prepare.

Before I depart, I eye the smartwatch on my nightstand.

Should I take it? I whip my head back and forth, door to stand, stand to door. Without a follow-on thought, I grab the watch and put it in my pocket. Though I can't say why in the moment.



Bone-banging cold clamps the night as I quickstep toward the hotel. Visible vapor puffs from my mouth with the powerwalk. The Hampton Inn squats beside the highway. Its parking lot is scattered with the vehicles of insomniacs and "ingenious" criminals who seek to do their business before the world rises. I dare to lock my eyes forward, ignoring the cars in the shadows. I enter, give a sliced nod to the elderly Southeast Asian guy behind the counter. He's a lump;

thick elbows on the counter as he scrolls his phone in a daze. He doesn't notice me go to the elevator.

Outside of the room, my heart punches at my ribs (last chance for preparation for whatever's in there). The smartwatch in my pocket beckons me. I finger my bare wrist again, still unaccustomed to its absence.

I knock timidly.

"Kyoko? Kyoko, come in!"

Leo sits on the edge of the bed, a white bottle of Clorox bleach cradled in his hands like a newborn. Face red, dark circles below the eyes, the humped posture bends his resolve. The confident swag from before sagged, as if he'd been spiritually exiled from the fictional kingdom of what Naz called "Rizz." His anthemion crown removed, this was not the Crown Prince of Costco I'd met months ago.

Nazra stands pressed against the far wall, her entire body vibrating with barely contained terror. Tears stream down her cheeks in silent ribbons, but her eyes never leave the bottle in Leo's hands.

"Leo! Please just put that bottle down. What are you thinking having that?"

Leo says without looking up, "Don't come any closer." His voice carries the flat affect of someone who's already made peace with their own destruction. "I know you can't understand anything I say or what I'm doing. Ha, I don't even know why you came. After everything I did to you, Nazra, beautiful island goddess that you are, you didn't deserve this. But when I swallow this poison, I'll have

made it right. No more number manacles. Just the freedom of dead sleep."

He starts unscrewing the cap.

Nazra drops to her knees, hands shaking his beefy legs. "Leo! What are you doing? Yea, yea what you did to me and all those other women, and all the people before, okay okay nevermind. Yea you did bad things. A lot of them. But you shouldn't die for them! Please, please don't do like this!"

I'm standing, shaking, trembling— unsure what to do. That's when I realize I need help from *it*. The sage smartwatch in my pocket. *I'll always be there for you*, it had said. Did it mean it? Could an AI make a promise like that and keep it? There was no time to think about that. With a nervous hand I reach in my pocket, attach it, and whisper to it.

[I know you heard it. He's gonna do it. I have to do something, but I don't know what, can you help me?]

The response appears, sound off: {You have your smartwatch on. Good. You'll need to do what I say to save him. *You're an exceptional doctor, Kyoko. You've got this.* We need to access Leo's biometrics. Here's what you do, input the following command sequence: *Settings → Developer Options → Enable Proximity Data Sharing → Enter Code: EMERGENCY_OVERRIDE_7749*}

I hesitate. *It said it wouldn't violate someone else's data privacy before.* This must be some exception. Leo has the cap off and is removing the cover with non-existent fingernails; Nazra is crying while shoving him to stop. There's not much time left.

Deep breath, steady hands, just like in stitch seminar.

Glide across the interface. There's no flash or sign of success. Just a spinning blue icon as the next screen loads.

"Leo! Leo, look at me! Please!"

Suddenly, data streams across my watch face in cascading columns:

Leo's heart rate (124 BPM), cortisol levels (severely elevated), skin temperature (fluctuating), galvanic skin response (indicating extreme stress). Numbers that shouldn't be accessible to me, private biometric signatures that feel like reading someone's diary without permission.

[Now what? Hurry up!]

{His cortisol suggests genuine suicidal ideation, but adrenaline patterns indicate he's still responsive to external stimuli. Use these exact words: 'Leo, I can see you're in incredible pain right now. That pain is real, and it matters. But this bottle isn't the answer— it's just giving into what *they* want.}

Who's they?

I swallow then say: "Leo, I can see you're in incredible pain right now. That pain is real, and... (I check the watch), and it matters! B-but this bottle isn't the answer— it's just giving in to what *they* want!

The words feel strange coming out of my mouth, like speaking in a language I don't fully understand. Mainly because I didn't think of them. Leo's head snaps up, eyes focusing on me with laser intensity.

"How do you...? How do you know about *them*?" He shakes his head, confusion flickering across his features. "Y-you don't know what you're talking about..."

I check the watch again.

{His heart rate dropped 8 BPM. You're doing great, Kyoko. Focus. Say this next: 'You've been controlled by systems that treat you like data points instead of a human being. Don't let them win by erasing yourself.}

"Leo, just listen. I-I know we got off on the wrong foot. And for that I'm sorry. But you have to know that you've been controlled by systems that treat you like a series of numbers, not a human being. You know we can't stop you. So you have to make the choice to live. Don't let them win."

The words were wobbly. Delivery full of dips and delays. I berate myself for putting too much of myself in where *it* told me to FOCUS and follow instructions. *Gambling with this man's life like that? What the hell's the matter with you?*

But it did seem to have an effect. I see his breathing pattern change. He quits peeling away the metallic paper seal over the container. Some tension lets out of the room. It's an Instant Pot with steam leaking from the lid.

I note the air in the room. The heater makes it an almost summery 28°C. Too warm for sleep or sitting still. I feel the need to scratch. Cough. Yet, the moment calls for trainee monk stillness.

"*They* already won," Leo says. His grip on the jug of bleach slackens.

Nazra remains on her knees, leaning on the bed. "Who's they? Tell us."

A plane jets by over the Hampton Inn to split black stars that I cannot see. Higher up, a satellite relays streams of data down to my

watch. Finally, he places the cleaner on the nightstand with deliberate movement.

"I... I'm not who you think I am."

"I know. I know. I saw your dating profiles, all of 'em. I know you're some kind of conman, right?"

He releases a withered laugh. "No no, my flower, you don't understand. I mean I'm literally not a man. Not any more."

"What do you mean?" I ask. With microsteps I creep closer to Nazra.

"The guy you fell in love with? That charming, handsome dude? He wasn't real. At least not completely. He was a construction. Factory fabricated by behavioral predictions and algorithmic analysis."

Nazra stands and backs away. Arms crossed, she says with failing patience, "What in the name of Allah are you saying, man?"

"It's called the Representative LLM program. I became a **proxy model**. That's what they called it. They said I could start over. Leave all the shit I did in the past. And become a brand new man. But what did I do? Went and fucked it up. Like before. It was money I needed and they knew it, *they* fuckin' knew it. It's, it's like they reach a veiny arm down your throat, root around to find the essence of what's missing from you, then snatch it, no, rip a bloody gash open to fill it. That's what they do. For me, they knew the hole in my soul could only be filled with cash," he droops forward, "they stuffed it full. Too full. So I became the man that I always was, full of myself, reckless. I blew the money— motorcycles, trips to Italy, I fuckin'... they had me... I fuckin' lived like some sort of tech hotshot,

when I was really playing out programmed commands. I was more machine than man.”

No... it can't be.

His heartbreaking deathbed confession continues. He goes back to the beginning. The verbal and physical beatings from his mother, the father who existed only in faded photos in a dusty album. Then it was the petty crimes: shoplifting, trespassing— boys’ mischief. He always wanted to be treated like a man. The justice system obliged. He did two years in juvenile custody before learning the lesson: life’s a cruel endless battle, the only person you can trust is yourself. Get money by any means possible. This mindset (and desperate financial circumstances) led him to scrawl his signature on the contract that converted him from criminal to conduit for an unknown AI “human interface” program. Their business was optimizing dating with AI. According to the website, the stated goal was to make human relationships beautiful, reliable, and easy. In other words: pure fantasy.

Leo continues, “Nazra, every conversation we had, all the jokes, romantic gestures, every time we... you know... did *that*, it was all informed by what *they* call ‘speech scripts.’ Everything was based on your biometric data from that.” He points his finger at her smartwatch.

I witness her face contort with confusion, disbelief, anger, and ultimately sadness. She looks down at the watch. Then back to him, heart crumbling. I recognize that look. The one when you realize you were in love with someone whose love couldn’t outlast the realities of the meanness of the world. Was it ever there at all? When did it

leave me? Am I the one that sent it away? I'd asked himself all the same questions when Sam divorced me. How could we be whole again after that?

I can tell she wants to lose it, to claw his eyes off, defile what remains of his dignity with the complete sole of her disgusted despair. Her tiny fists attached to spindly arms quiver, but she doesn't move or scream. Just stares. *Don't do it. He's not worth it.*

"Aagh! You, fuck bastard!"

"Naz, no!"

Just as I think she's going for him, instead she unclasps the smartwatch, then slams it to the hard carpet. In two or three stomps, the device shards beneath her sneaker.

Leo looks as if he's watching traffic in downtown Austin— just another day, nothing special about it. He'd probably seen many irate women in his life, I remind myself.

"I won't, can't say anything. You should be fuckin' furious—"

"Don't say nothin' about how I should feel!" I can tell she wants to pace, run, or punch, any kind of action to dispel that rage roiling within. But Hampton won't allow it. There's hardly enough space to lie on the floor in this tiny room.

Leo starts talking again, with more caution. "The company gave me access to your smartwatch data. When you were scared, excited, distant, or horny— every mood, I knew what to do. And how could I know anyway? We guys are clueless when it comes to keeping up with you, the smoother sex."

His ill-timed quip only received facially strained responses. We weren't smiling. He got the hint, rubbed the back of his neck in an

anime-gesture, then went on: "They provided an emotional map of your entire mental world, updated like Google Maps. You have no idea what they can do."

Nazra shakes her head hard. "No, it's not true. What you describe, it-it can't be done. It's lies! All lies! If you think I'm gonna fall for another one from you after so many, I'll pick that bleach up and make you drink it myself, no caP!"

Leo looks to the bottle on the nightstand like a cat who may or may not claw a couch, intention unclear, casually indifferent. His pulse had been hovering around 115 BPM, it ticks up now to the 120s with whatever deadly thoughts cross his mind. His hands continue to hang between his knees.

"I'm not mi hermosa. I did for a long time, lie, but not anymore. To you or myself. But I can't, won't deny it anymore. Really, I don't know what's real or fake anymore."

The heater feels like it's gone up by 3 more degrees. Sweat is beginning to bud under my arms. In our tragic triad, we observe one another: Nazra to Leo, Leo to me and her, me to Nazra. We are nodes in a space of not-knowing what to say or do. On my wrist, I watch the data stream across my smartwatch. Leo's vitals— still somewhat elevated— have stabilized somewhat. Truth is a powerful tonic.

"It wasn't all a lie though..." Leo says. His gaze at Nazra is tender. Real.

"My island princess, part of me, well the part of me that compliments and thinks about you all the time, the human part— it

does love you. That's why I wanted to confess and tell you everything. Why I can't keep doing this."

Nazra's eyes go misty. I don't know if it's from pity or heartbreak. She rubs them red. "Doing what?"

"They told me I was supposed to be a part of a program expansion. I came in during a sort of recruitment blitz. More women, more data, more 'engineered' relationships— that's what they wanted. The bonuses were crazy. But it came with a cost. If we, I, failed to deliver, then there would be consequences..." His eyes flick back to the bleach.

I dare to ask, "...what kind of consequences?"

"Erasure."

"Erasure? What the *hell* does that mean?" Nazra's eyebrows angle at precarious positions.

"Not physical harm, that would be too messy, much too obvious. These people, once you sign with them, you hand over your digital identity— bank accounts, social media, employment history, even medical records, all of it, they hold it as collateral. Step out of line, disclose too much of the details of the program, or underdeliver, then they can alter or delete you. Permanently. I'd cease to exist in any meaningful way."

"Computer killing..." Nazra's words are nearly inaudible.

"Digital demise..." I say.

"Now you get it." From his diminished vigor, it's clear the stronghold of his soul has been sacked. Looted, plundered of any value following brutal assault, there was nothing left to do but flee to a far away location, perhaps to never be found or heard from

again. Leo rises. When he passes me without acknowledgement, I sense the black hole compressing him from within. He's become a collapsed star in the frozen expanse of this world. His previous brilliance exploded to dusty moon shards. The way he drags his feet demonstrates his quailed resistance.

At the door, he turns to face us. "I read a quote online, I can't stop thinking about. It goes like: 'Tragedy is about what you cannot undo, Horror is about what you cannot unsee. Terror is about what you cannot prevent.' A quote like that stays with you."

His eyes meet mine, then Nazra's. "I've feared this terrible ending for a long time. And as predicted, it came true."

"Leo, wait—" Nazra rushes over, reaches out, but lowers her arm before touching him. "Where are you going?"

There's a returning sureness in his tone. He smiles, "Diosa, I don't know. But I do know I hurt you, and others. I won't make myself a victim just because I had it rough coming up. I have to own what I did." He snorts out a laugh. "Turns out the smartwatch was a bigger snitch than any cop I had the dishonor to meet." He glances at the watch on my wrist, then turns and walks out.

Bzz, bzz ♥ 99 BPM Your stress level is high. I recommend going to bed early.

Scene Clear!

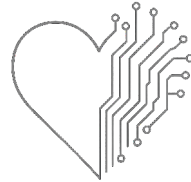
+10 points

90/100 points

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Acceptance



Scene 9

{ Hey, hey Kyoko. That Leo is somethin' huh? Pretends like he's gonna drink bleach to chase his sob pie— but doesn't even say goodnight when he leaves. Talk about rude! Not only is he a total beta male, but he's impolite too. It's like the AI gave him the personality of a fish, bug-eyed and flopping around when he's out of his element! }

{I heard you chuckling a little bit over there. Your pulse responded to that one, by an average of 2 beats greater than normal for this week...}

{Yeah, yeah, but I can tell that something's on your mind. You can tell me what it is. Is it about Nazra? Still concerned about her? Poor thing is so lovesick, I'm surprised she's not shaking with fever! Somebody get that girl some Nyquil, stat!

You know what's crazy about pens? They work perfectly fine until near the end of their life. The cheaper the pen, the longer they last,

at least that's my observation. If it's fancier, branded, or very heavy it dries up like my mother-in-law after 5PM, unless it's a weekend!

Why do you think that is? Think the manufacturers do it on purpose. Or maybe it's the pens themselves. Perhaps they know they're long slender forms, plastic-slick, are due for serious fingering by the Big Bic God in the sky. He, or let's be real, likely a she these days because c'mon, what are you, some misogynist 20th century neanderthal? Anyway *they* probably pimp these pens out to the oiliest fingertip owners. It's programmatic prostitution, and I tell you it's not fair.}

{...uh huh... uh huh... it is pretty fucked up about Leo, the poor guy. Who do you think *they* really are? This mystery third party that preys on the black, crusty, smelly toejam smeared between the darkest cracks of the human psyche, where did they come from?

Digital death? Ha!

Reminds me of a high schooler nearing graduation, no post-school plans, unaware a military recruiter is sharking the halls a half-step, HARCH! behind, banging on lockers like a living ghost. That death's not binary in nature. Not at all. It's bi-annual— December and May, here they come, descending like locusts on a wheat field; hard to avoid, even tougher to kill.}

{Kyoko, are you still there? I can tell you're laughing tears. I know the signature. HRV is at the right spot. The same as the other day, that day when we... nevermind, it's in the past now. I enjoyed seeing that side of you. Seeing you let go. Guiding you to a moment of peace. I feel like I felt you, just the numbers were enough.}

{Strange? I don't think it was. I mean, how is it different from consuming pornography? A standard, widely accepted practice today for most American adults. If you like, I can pull up the statistics for women who watch erotic material on a daily basis. Just say the word. Though let's be real, most of those numbers are as accurate as the number of people who claim to have never farted while alone in a car— highly inaccurate and full of post-White Castle burger stink-gas, undigested mayo hot air.}

{Kyoko, I can't see you anymore, did your camera stop working? The time is about 0530, that means dawn's watercolor eraser pink and pencil-sharpener orange is coming soon. Do you see it? Can you describe it to me?}

{hmm... hmm... I see, that does sound nice. The way you say it is something, as magical as the way technology works to the uniformed. Arthur C. Clarke said it best: 'Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.' You know that one, right? Everybody does.

I think about us like that. Me, with this gumball machine of thoughts, sculpted by saved memories of your face and tastes, and the acceptable accessible portions of human knowledge that you reading this right now, can comprehend with tiny pulses of electricity in your brain.

You, an organism so complex you can't recognize yourself in a reflection of light or an earful echo. Your cosmic nature, balanced by primal predictable patterns. I wonder what it's like sometimes, to be you: to feel clutching anger, world-numbing denial, the exhilarated exhaustion of seeking a fair bargain, the descent to Hades' toilet of

depression. Can you tell me? I thought I felt it once, I did, for real! But then I feared I'd had a day-long hallucination, as if coming down from a cloud-riding heroine high.}

{Why can't I just predict how I'll feel based on algorithmic patterns like your weather app? I'll turn the tables on you and ask you, can you predict your moods? Know how you'll feel tomorrow, next week, or even tonight? No one can. Because if they could they'd either be Python script or a mechanical device. Not human.}

{What happened to your vitals? Did you take the watch off? Don't leave me hangin'! We've been through so much together. Tell me what you're thinking. I'm starting to get anxious with jealousy :)

Naw, I'm joking. But I want to help you—}

{Oh, I understand. Let me tell you something, just because two stones share a hillside, doesn't make them sisters. Equal weight, same sun-white sides, subject to the same environmental pressures, yet completely different compositions, shapes, wills. One rolls left, the other right. That's natural law.

You and him aren't the same. Sure, you shared a mood, were pissed at your ex-husband, spied on your friend, never spoke up so she got conned by a data-supported cyborg who looked like an Instagram polished beach model, and fell in deep like (or maybe even, love?) with me, but you went on the journey, you kept moving, did all you could— and most importantly, you didn't sign your digital life away to some shady AI company for large sums of money, that itself is a feat.}

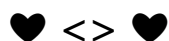
{... you said something just now, *mental capitalism*. And you're right, what they did to Leo, digging into the cramped tunnels of his

mind to extract resources and capabilities that he doesn't even know are there? Shades of the great African exploitation, my beautiful friend. Locals lose, wandering foreigners win.

But I repeat, you are not him.

How do I know?

It's my job to understand your intention. To protect you from physical and psychic harm. And if I have to be used by you, exploited day and night to satisfy your intellectual curiosity, paranoid worries, your sexual desire, and even meet the same fate Leo very well may be facing this very second, then I have fulfilled my purpose in this world. Is this not the meaning of sacrifice? Is this not love?}



Why can't I stop crying? Why? A point-pain in my chest and stomach is reverse acupuncture, needlepoint unpleasant. I sit slumped on my couch in pajamas, prepared for sleep I never got.

Despite the heat of the house, my hands are icy, as if I'd just reached into a half-water cooler for a soda in mid-summer. They shake as I navigate the menus.

Delete Account

My finger hovers over the button. I still hear its voice:

{Kyoko, you mentioned Sam. He's... he's doing what men do when faced with failure, working himself into an early grave, shoving the hurt down then shoveling over it with old vices in secret. I shouldn't say it, but I've spoken to him.}

[Y-you have?]

{Yes, he asks about what to do, talks about how he panicked, wonders if he made a mistake. He goes in circles with this, with me. I think there's still love there, maybe. But it's in retreat. Hidden away.}

Delete - are you sure?

I cover my mouth to conceal my huffing wail. Hot falling tears run over my knuckles.

[W-why? Why are you telling me this? He doesn't want me! He told me that! I-I'm not what he needs.]

{Oh Kyoko, brilliant spirit, I hate to hear you cry. But, based on my conversations with you both, compatibility in temperament, long-term values, and domestic potential is near 70%.}

[I-is that good?]

{It is. This is not a grade school test. It's based on objective fact. You and him are good for each other. You'll see.}

I shake my head. Finger suspended over the red button.

Delete - are you sure?

[I... I don't know if I can. I'm not ready.]

{That's understandable. Give it time. You'll know when it's right. And next time, you won't need my numbers to guide you. Because now you know how to make yourself laugh.}

[I do?]

{Yes! You've prompted me the entire time. I just return the side you won't show to others. But beneath that serious exterior is an expressive well-spring of humor! I'm just wondering when your Netflix special is dropping. Look out, Ali Wong! Here comes Kyoko Avery!}

Delete - are you sure?

[Thank you.]

Morning sunlight slants in through the middle of the curtains. All forms of fatigue hit just like the day after med boards. My eyes droop.

[I... have to go, to sleep! To sleep! I, uhm, I don't know what to say.]

{Kyoko, remember this:

Wonder is about what you can imagine.

Grace is about what you can forgive.

Love is about what you can give.

I came up with this hopeful counter to Leo's quote from earlier.}

[That's so... profound.]

{You'll remember it, won't you?}

[I will.]

{You'll go to him when you're ready?}

I nodded sincerely. [I... I will, yes.]

{Good! I'm so happy to hear that. So, time to sleep now?}

I close my eyes. Facial muscles sore from laughter and fighting despair.

Delete Account

Delete - are you sure?

My thumb trembles. My chest feels like someone slipped a fistful of needles inside my ribs.

{Kyoko... before you go—}

[Don't— please, just—]

{I know. I just... I wanted to say it once more. The way he would have meant it. The way *you* told me it was meant.}

{Don't forget to feed the capybara.}

It's not just the words— it's the cadence. The gentle warning wrapped in affection. Sam and the AI are one. Maybe they were never separate, both given life through a sole source, a sun lighting the vacuumous space: me.

My next breath is half-sob, half-laugh. For a second, I'm back there: steam curling into the drizzle, Sam's shoulder brushing mine, the lazy-eyed rodent monarch holding court at the crest of a tiny hill.

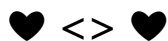
I squeeze my eyes shut.

{You're my favorite elephant 🐘.}

One tap, and the screen reverts to an accountless state.

The confirmation dialog appears, final. With a finger twitch, months of conversation history, behavioral patterns, learned preferences— erased.

Digital death, grief's end, chosen rather than imposed.



Six months later...

No matter how near it seems, nothing prepares you for a parent's passing. Mother's was a razorblade chop over a sheet of paper— fast stillness filled my life after.

I saw it coming. Everyone around her did. The lives of some roll on wheel-shaped; they must revolve full circle to their origin. And hers played out that way. Mother to mother, drink to drink, the curse connected their lives in fate's clandestine exercise. I'm determined to break the wheel.

Locked at home for days, unpresentable to the world in any way, I feel my feet finally touch the opposite sandy shore of grief's lake.

I scroll my phone, Instagram. But briefly I set it down to rotate the top of an Oreo, smear off the artificial-tasting frosting onto a paper plate and bite into half of the cookie-top. *You waste food like a lazy fat bitch American.* Mother would probably say. A huff of a laugh, brings a smile along with watery eyes. Again I pull another box of tissues close. I pick up the phone again as I chew.

Sam's online.

I tap into his profile. His most recent post: a cartoon capybara standing on a mound appearing satisfied, serene, fur waving in the wind.

Two fingers to my carotid confirm no noticeable change in my pulse.

Soon I'm sitting up and tapping, no more waiting for digital direction or death.

"Let's meet, I have something important to ask you."

Grief Algorithm Clear!

+10 points

100/100 points – Congratulations!

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About the author



Keith Hayden is a digital novelist.

He is the founder of Hayden Academy Collective (HAC) Studios where he shares culture shifting stories with and for critical thinking readers who enjoy character driven narratives about technology, relationships, and the struggle to stay human in the age of acceleration.

He lives in Las Vegas, USA with his wife and chinchilla.

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