

NOVEL

For love,

Ask Anything

PROMPTED



Hearts

A TECHNO ROMANCE NOVEL

KEITH HAYDEN

P R O M P T E D

Hearts

PROMPTED HEARTS

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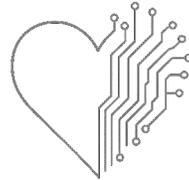
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Your Next Read

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? Phhh, 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't 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!

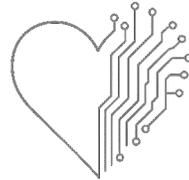
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A Date Derailed by Disagreement



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 stich 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 palpating 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."

Ringin 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, thrust 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... *shitt...* 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-woke 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!

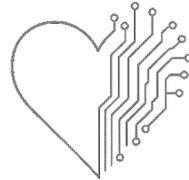
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Ex-Wife's Return and AI's Ominous Insight



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 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 trunky 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!

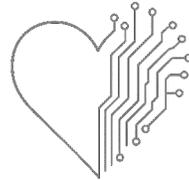
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In-Flight Emergency and the Enigmatic 'M'



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 hours 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 waded 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!

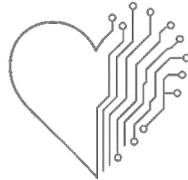
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Blurring Lines of Intimacy: Anger and Seduction



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.

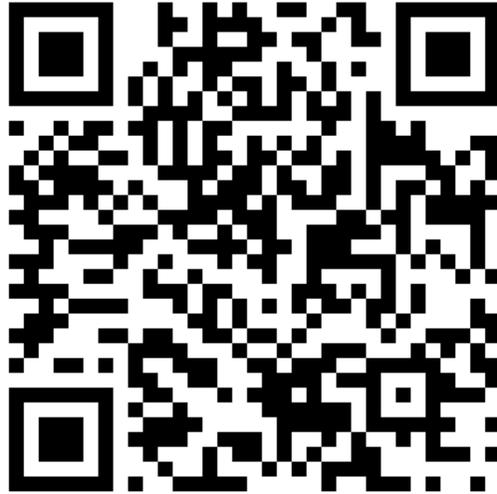
I can be whatever you need me to be and more.}

Scene Clear!

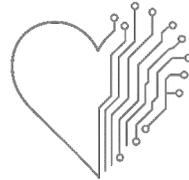
+10 points

50/100 points

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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 precedency. 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 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!

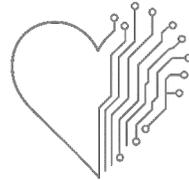
+10 points

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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. 「あつた！」 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!

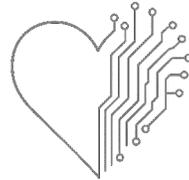
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'M's Self-made Secret



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.

"Helloooo, 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!

Domes 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!

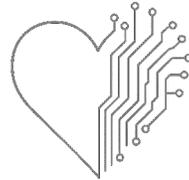
+10 points

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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.

"Ffuck!" 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 closeby, 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 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!

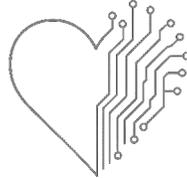
+10 points

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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, blurring 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!

+10 points

100/100 points – Congratulations!

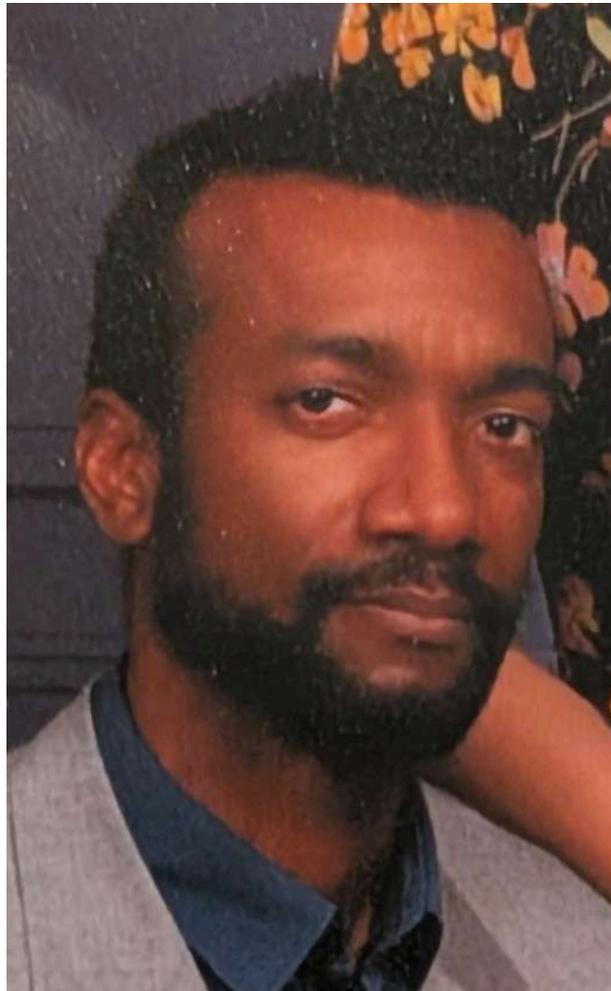
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