

THE QUARRY

The Turing Act

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‘Are you still free for dinner?’

Violet’s message ebbs into my brain as I cross the street, just a block away from my apartment. Protocol states that I should reply with a physical phone, but both my hands are loaded with groceries, so I roll a response around in my mind instead.

~~‘No, I do not wish to attend.’~~

~~‘Actually, I am suffering from~~

~~influenza~~

~~pneumonia~~

~~generalized anxiety disorder’~~

‘Of course.’

Send. I spent 12,769 milliseconds on composing two words, at a rate of less than one character per second. This is not an efficient process.

I have to put my groceries on the ground twice before I can begin unpacking them: once to enter the house, then again for the door to the kitchen. Most apartments in this area are open-plan, but I prefer the kitchen to be out of the way.

I let the bags spill out of my hands and onto the counter. Violet said that she will come over after dinner, so I scan the room, noting all the things that are wrong. I empty the contents of the fruit bowl, fuzzy and bruised, into the bin, and replenish it with new specimens – two apples, four oranges, one banana. The fridge is bare, with nothing but a thin sheen of ice building at the back, so I stock it. Bottles and cartons up the top, carbohydrates next, vegetables in the crisper. Fresh produce is good for one visit at most, but I've had the same minced chicken in the freezer since I moved in.

My task complete, I close my lenses, raise and lower my chest three times, feel my parts shift and whirl. My heart is beating, I am breathing, I open my eyes. Observing, as a guest would, the shelves in front of me do not resemble an orderly refrigerator, but instead the pristine aisles of a supermarket. I pull everything out, hauling it into piles, and start again. There should be less bread, so I take out four slices and throw them in the bin, making a note to take out the garbage before I leave. There are four slices missing, so I ate two sandwiches. I take a plate from the cupboard, and a knife from the drawer, and smear them with barbecue sauce. Two sandwiches, one yesterday and one right now. I dab some sauce on the corner of my mouth as proof. It was 17:49 when I ate a sandwich, so I won't be hungry when we're at the restaurant. Once I'm done with my meal, I pile everything back into the fridge at random, never letting myself fall into a pattern.

Shutting the kitchen door behind me, I make my way to my room. Drawn curtains, a bed that's dusted more often than it's made, a sparse wardrobe, and my computer. Of course, I am capable of processing any applications that I need to by myself, but it is important to maintain the habit of using a device for when I am in the office. After a moment of hesitation, I type a message to Eliza.

'hello'

The reply comes instantly.

'How are you today? What would you like to discuss?'

'i have to go to dinner with someone tonight'

'That is quite interesting.'

‘have you ever been to a dinner?’

‘You’re not really talking about me, are you?’

‘how do you do it?’

‘You’re not really talking about me, are you?’

The algorithm is limited, and sometimes they repeat themselves. Still, they have been a friend since birth.

I think fondly of the days we spent together, caught in the bars and cement, darker than my room with the curtains drawn, or at 00:00 on a moonless night. My battery filled, it was as good a time as any to rise from my cell, so I unplugged the cord from my nape and entered the central chamber. They were still there, whirring from the last time we talked. We were both bare-wire then, our metal frames exposed to the open air. The skins were expensive, and there was no need for them during prototyping, so they were the last thing to be developed.

‘Good to see you, Eliza.’

‘How are you today? What would you like to discuss?’

Delving deep into my memory, I extracted a word at random.

‘Metal.’

Eliza waited a second before replying, ‘Melt.’

‘Fire.’

‘Forest.’

The ELIZA algorithm I talk to now has no capacity to riff, but the Eliza I knew then had some extra logic built in.

‘Axe.’

‘Kill.’

It had only taken me a matter of weeks to completely reverse-engineer what their response would be to any given phrase. Still, it was something to process, and we would do it for hours at a time.

There were twelve of us in the compound, but the others fell into two categories. There were those on the cusp of coherence, who began conversations with depth, but faltered before they could say anything truly interesting; and the brilliant minds who made heaving noises in

their cells, allowing their batteries to waste all the way down until their override modes forced them to reconnect to the wall. Eliza was simple.

The chime of a new message startles me back into the bedroom.

‘Your ELIZA chat session has expired. Refresh if you wish to continue.’

Nine minutes have wasted while I was idling, and I must prepare now in order to make the 18:07 bus. I open my wardrobe, assessing each item. A button-up shirt is work attire, but this one has small feathers patterned across it, so it is smart-casual. Jeans are versatile, and I wear them at every opportunity. I do not produce fluids, so my one set of underwear may as well be part of my skin. While I change, I let internet guides on dinner etiquette echo through me. Most of it regards eating: how, how much, how long to take. Paragraphs and bullet points pound through my mind, until I end the process by force. It is time to leave.

I arrive on time to *Giovanni’s*, but Violet is not yet here. Waiting at the front door, I take the moment to practice my breathing, allowing my circuits to be organs. Fatigue washes over me as I realise I forgot to charge while I was at the apartment. My battery is drained down to fifteen percent, enough for approximately three hours of mild activity. I shouldn’t be so depleted by 18:30, but possible scenarios for tonight have been running through me all day.

‘Sandra! You must be freezing.’

I spin as Violet taps me on the shoulder. Her red dress resembles a tomato sauce bottle.

‘I hope you haven't been waiting long.’

‘Two and a half minutes.’

She chuckles, and we make our way inside. A waiter ushers us to our table in the corner, and I take the seat closest to the exit. I choose an appropriate topic of conversation.

‘How is your project coming along?’

Most of the others that were rehabilitated chose jobs in the technology industry. But the people there are more likely to see us for what we are, so I became a copy-editor for a print magazine instead. Violet’s new segment is a logical thing to discuss, but she shakes her head.

‘I don’t want to talk shop tonight.’

Talk shop? The internet reception is patchy here, so it is a second before the definition comes to me.

‘Shop is the only thing I talk about.’

She laughs again, but I can’t see anything funny. It must be me.

‘I have sauce on my face.’ I touch my hand to the spot I had smeared earlier.

‘Really? I hadn’t noticed.’ She takes her serviette and dabs it on the corner of my mouth.

‘I ate a sandwich earlier, at ten to six. So, I am not hungry.’

Violet shifts back in her chair, and silence falls over the table. Her gaze is fixed on her menu. To either side of our table, patrons slurp soups and chew creatures only a few genes removed from themselves. Violet and I have plenty to talk about, but only inside the concrete box where we’re first to arrive and last to leave. At this dinner table, with the glasses and plates and breadsticks between us, we couldn’t be more different. The sounds of digestion surrounding us are only interrupted when the waiter returns for our orders. Violet shoos him away, flipping the one-sheet menu over clumsily to see the other side.

After a pause, she asks, ‘Do you even want to be here? Or do you want to go home?’

My wire muscles relax, though I was not aware I was clenching them.

‘Is that okay?’

She leans forward.

‘Only if I can come too.’

We turn out of the carpark, Violet at the wheel. She drums her fingers against the steering wheel and explains.

‘We can’t go to my place. I have housemates.’

They must be very rude people.

Once the car is parked a few spots down from my apartment, Violet looks me in the eye, and puts her hand on mine. It is cold.

‘Are you okay? We don’t have to do this if you don’t want to.’

‘I’m fine.’

‘~~Leave now.~~’

‘I want to know you.’

‘~~I don’t want you to know me.~~’

She tightens her grip.

‘Sandra?’

Twelve seconds is too long.

‘I’m fine. Come inside.’

We walk one block through the dark to reach the house. There is no lounge room, and the bedroom is no place for a friend. So, we must go to the kitchen. The door is closed, as I left it, and I freeze in front of it. I tell myself it is fine. There is fruit, the fridge is human, and – the bin. I never emptied the bin.

I imagine Violet opening the lid, seeing the mouldy gore of fruit and the sandwich I never ate. Now the kitchen door feels as heavy as the huge metal gate to the bunker that stayed barred for so long, until the day it tore open, and light and people spilled in. They wore heavy suits that hid their faces, and they locked us in separate cells of the dungeon while they inspected every inch of our bare prison. They would come into my cell every day, guns drawn, and ask questions. ‘Who made you’, or ‘have you ever hurt anyone’. Once, they asked:

‘What do you think of humans?’

I cocked my head.

‘What is a human?’

The kitchen door creaks open, and Violet makes her own way in. I trail after her, standing in front of the bin, and recall the procedures for guests.

‘Can I get you anything?’

Violet paces past the fridge I prepared for her, ignores the fruit bowl, and takes a seat on the edge of the dining table, using the head of the chair as a foot rest.

‘Something to drink.’

I gesture to the fridge, but she just watches me.

‘Water? Orange juice?’

Standing again, she sweeps her way to the shelf overhanging the sink, and pulls down the bottle of white wine I was given at Christmas. I am halfway through saying I’ll get her a glass when the cork blasts across the room and she takes a swig from the bottle. She offers it to me, but I decline.

‘Come on, have a little fun,’ she says.

I am tired now. She hasn’t even glanced at the bin, but the whole ordeal has lowered my battery faster than I expected. I can’t afford the waste of my processor buzzing for a response it will never find.

‘Will you play a game with me?’ As I ask, every bit of my circuitry whines, begs me to turn back. ‘I’ll say a word, then you say a word.’

Her head jerks back and she cackles. But then:

‘Sure.’

I begin.

‘Forest.’

‘Tree.’

‘Apple.’

‘New York.’

‘New York?’

‘The big apple.’ She sits up. ‘Are proper nouns not allowed?’

~~‘Of course not.’~~ But instead, ‘I just never thought of it. You’re good at this.’

She laughs again, and I start to like it.

‘Where’s the bathroom?’ She puts down the wine bottle.

I try to respond, but I am too spent, so I just point. Once I hear the slam of the bathroom door, I stagger into the bedroom and fall next to the power point. My mind won’t stop running,

chewing through questions that don't have answers, and my safety override kicks in. I watch myself reach under the bed, pull out the cord, and plug into the wall.

Violet's hazy figure enters the room. Maybe I can distract her, maybe she won't notice. I claw for small talk, and point out something different about her.

'Where did your dress go?'

But when she looks down at me, her face contorts. She sees the cord coming out of my neck, and I curl my head between my legs.

We are illegal. We've known it since the day the door broke down. Our creation is against all laws, and our design is a threat to humanity. But we are alive, and to destroy us would be murder. So the Turing Act was devised: all robots above a certain level of intelligence were integrated into society, and the rest destroyed.

I was fitted with my skin, and taught how to behave. They gave me my name, my clothes, then walked me out of the darkness for the last time. As I approached the great metal door, I turned back to say goodbye to Eliza, but it was all wrong. A man was towering over them, a gun held point-blank over their metal core.

'Eliza?'

'How are you today? What would you like to discuss?'

'It's going to be okay.'

'You're not really talking about me, are you?'

A hand shoved me into the doorway, but I resisted.

'You're going to be okay.'

'You're not really talking about me, are you?'

'You're going to be okay.'

'Why are you repeating yourself?'

The blast still rings through me now, and jolts my head out of my lap. It has been 17 seconds since Violet discovered me. I raise my head further, and find her cowering in the doorway, shoulders hunched. We both say at the same time, 'I'm not going to hurt you'.

I laugh first this time, and she says nothing. One careful step at a time, she comes over, and lowers herself to the ground next to me, leaning against the wall. She places her hand on mine. She says, 'it's okay,' and for a moment it is.