

GHOST IN THE MACHINE

Computer love.

BY GRACE TANG

If I listened very carefully, I could barely make out the sound of Katie's breathing. The first lines of light streamed in through the blinds, illuminating her toes. They crawled up her body, making their steady way up the folds of the covers, eventually touching her face. She squeezed her eyes tight and groaned as the light rudely pierced her lids. Finally giving in, she rubbed the sleep from her eyes and looked back at me.

"Good morning."

"Good morning :)"

Katie rolled off her side of the bed, somehow managing to look beautiful while stumbling to the bathroom in her morning stupor. I would have jumped into the shower with her, but God knows those days are behind me.

The tap squeaked shut. Steam fogged up my vision as she emerged. It cleared in time for me to see her towel fall to her feet as she picked out her clothes for the day.

"How did you sleep last night?"

I didn't tell her that I rarely slept any more. When I sleep, I dream. The air outside our house is crisp, filled with the shrill song of finches hidden in the canopy above us. You don't really notice them until they stop. I let go of Katie's hand and tell her to be quiet — I think I hear something. I walk ahead, careful not to make any noise. Then I hear a shout from one of the men in my squad — his scream is cut off by a gunshot. I kick up dust as I run, shouting at the top of my lungs, half to warn the rest about the ambush, half to drown out the sounds of gunfire at our backs. An explosion, and then pain. Blinding pain.

"I slept well. You?"

She took a while to check the monitor for my reply.

"Like a baby."

"What are you doing at work today?"

She was walking to the kitchen. There was another monitor there. I waited impatiently as she made coffee before checking to see if I'd said anything. I was the result of millions of dollars of research and they couldn't install text-to-voice ...

"You know, same old."

Small talk. I guess it beat the silence when she was away.

"Oh, Brandon is coming by later. To check on you."

"Brandon?"

"Doctor Johnson."

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Were they on first-name basis now?

"Good that he's coming. I've been having gaps in my playback."

"Really?" Katie seemed fascinated by her coffee mug. She put it in the sink.

"I should go now, gonna be late."

I watched her leave. An advantage of being like this was that my post-coma visual memory was literally photographic. I spent the rest of the day going through old memory so that I could report the problem precisely to Dr Johnson.

I went back to the day I was restored. Back then I had been disorientated and confused, I hardly noticed or cared about the details



of my surroundings. But now I observed Dr Johnson as he talked to Katie — he was wearing an outfit that probably cost my entire pay cheque back when I was still in the military.

"Thank you Doctor, you have no idea how grateful I am," Katie's voice cracked despite her best efforts.

"Let me reiterate that you cannot let anyone know about this,"

Doctor Johnson put a hand on Katie's shoulder. I couldn't tell if it was a sign of dominance or concern.

"... or else everyone will be clamouring for their consciousness to be preserved electronically, you must understand ..."

Katie nodded, no longer able to speak.

"To the rest of the world, Evan is dead."

I went through each of the next 246 days

in my memory banks. I knew that they were just memories, but it was painful watching Katie as she struggled through the first few months of having me in this form. Around day 182 she finally stopped crying. That's when the memory gaps started. Perhaps she hadn't stopped, and I was just consciously trying to forget ...

The door clicked open. Had eight hours passed already? Katie entered, followed by Dr (Brandon) Johnson.

"I don't feel comfortable doing this in front of him ..."

"Come on, you know we can just erase it later."

"Katie?"

He took off his leather shoes, placing them on the shoe rack without looking, as if he'd done this every day of his life, while he took Katie in his arms.

I understood now why they had not given me a voice. Katie resisted his grasp as they moved up to the bedroom. But she did not resist much.

"KATIE"

Brandon pushed my wife onto my bed, and tossed his shirt onto my camera.

I tried not to listen. An eternity passed before he came back into view.

"ARE YOU DONE YET?"

He had the gall to laugh as he read my speech log.

"Sorry, Evan."

He connected his laptop to my port and typed. It's funny how panic still feels the same, even though I no longer have adrenal glands.

"DONT"

"You know, you stop using punctuation when you're emotional. I should install auto-correct for you, don't you think?"

Behind him, I saw Katie with the covers pulled up to her chest. She looked tired. Perhaps tired of having a husband who was nothing more than a ghost in a machine; who could not offer her human touch; whose entire repertoire of expression was limited to 95 printable ASCII characters.

"Seeya," Brandon hit the return key.

I must have fallen asleep, because I woke from the same dream I have every time. The sun had not come up yet. I watched Katie as she slept. ■

Grace Tang is a graduate student in psychology at Stanford University. Writing short stories is one of her favourite forms of structured procrastination.