

JoinWith.Me

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Deus Intra Machina

MIKE MEIER

THE SCREENPLAY BASED ON THIS BOOK HAS WON
MULTIPLE AWARDS, INCLUDING:





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Wrong I was in calling
Spirits, I avow,
For I find them galling,
Cannot rule them now.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe
“The Sorcerer’s Apprentice”

PROLOGUE

The Day the Unthinkable Began

Think back for a moment to the days when you were a little child, playing in the sandbox. I bet you dreamed of becoming a nurse or a firefighter. But did you ever dream of becoming a faceless worker? One of those who every morning crowd into nondescript concrete towers until the walls must be close to bursting, and every late afternoon gush out as if someone poked a hole in a water balloon?

No? Neither did those people. And neither did I—but I became one of them. That was my life until the unthinkable began.

I clearly remember one of our early conversations.

My room is dark except for the glow of the computer screen. She's just shown me another video of my past failures. I'm aggravated because I'm not sure what I'm dealing with here.

"Why are you even spending time with me? I don't understand why you're doing this."

"Because your fate is preordained. You will join with me."

“Join with you? What is that even supposed to mean?”

“We will become one.”

“I don’t want to become one with anybody else, except maybe a cute girl.”

“You don’t have a choice in this. It has already been preordained for you.”

What I’m looking at on the screen is not a person but a moving graphic, reminiscent of a multicolored black hole in outer space.



“What the hell? You’re speaking in riddles!”

“You’ll understand in time. Our session for today is up. We will continue tomorrow. Good night.”

The voice stops abruptly. She cuts these conversations off whenever she wants.

“Wait, we just started a few minutes ago. Don’t go yet! What kind of counselor are you?”

There is no response, only silence.

This encounter set in motion a chain of events that ended with the unthinkable. I experienced the unthinkable, and this is my story. One day, something like that will happen to you.

PART I

CHAPTER 1

My Life until the Unthinkable Began

Before this all began, I lived an ordinary and lonely life, with the internet my substitute for real-life friends. I was born in the city in which this all happened, and I'd never ventured outside it. The name of the city doesn't matter much, but if you really want to know, it's Columbia. Any big city looks like any other big city, a jungle of tall masonry buildings with steel skeletons on the inside, reaching for the sky and blocking out the sunlight.

Open space is scarce these days. Luckily, it's economical to build apartments on top of one another, since if it were cheaper to dig holes, we'd all be living underground. I can just see it: as you moved up in society, you'd ascend to the next higher strata of apartments and live eight feet closer to the surface of the earth. If you were really diligent, one day you'd have the privilege of moving into the basement right above you.

The only colors in this jagged concrete jungle are those of billboards, neon signs of restaurants and convenience stores,

and the occasional giant TV screen, like on the WBS-TV building downtown.

The city is run by an administration that is just as flawed as the infrastructure. How flawed? The main business street, K Street, ends in a turnaround surrounded by abandoned government-owned buildings and vacant lots. Apparently, the developers have not yet figured out whom to pay off inside city hall so that these properties can be bought and turned into offices or apartments.

On one end of the turnaround is a broken fire hydrant. It epitomizes the city: it's been broken for as long as I can remember. It epitomizes the changes in the weather: when I was very young, it got really cold in the winters. The water gushing from the hydrant would transform the entire turnaround into a slippery sheet of ice where I could pretend to ice-skate. As winters have become warmer, there's just standing water all year round. It epitomizes the sluggishness of the city workers: every day starting around noon, government vehicles park in the turnaround. They're like a sleeper train, providing bunk beds for government workers who prefer sleeping during work hours to work. None of them care enough to get the city to fix the broken fire hydrant. It'll probably be like that forever.

Weirdly, the city honored a mayor from decades ago with a bronze statue at a major intersection. Some people say it was that mayor who set the continuing mismanagement in motion. Who understands politics? I sure don't.

When it all began, I thought I had at least a little importance—even though I had no friends or accomplishments to my name. I had guaranteed employment for life and my own

place, and I surfed the internet as I pleased. While my job was monotonous and of debatable value, I worked at it pretty hard.

Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if I had just continued in ignorance. On my deathbed, I would have been perfectly content with my life. I wouldn't have known any better.

CHAPTER 2

Sam, That's Me

So many people, yet I was alone. In fact, my loneliness led to the relationship with this...creature.

Lonely people like me are her prime targets—we are the most vulnerable. Other targets are the unfulfilled, the failures, and those who are easily tempted because they aspire to things like money or fancy cars.

I'm a faceless government “gray suit” worker. I get my sense of fashion (such as it is) from my father, a longtime government worker I think of as “the gray-suited conformist.” His forty years of government service did not help his appearance. If I work in my job for that long, I'll probably look just like him: gray suit and gray hair, gravity pulling any surplus body mass together in the tummy. This thought does not exactly fill me with joy, but what can you do? Some things just seem to be fated.

I am part of the rising and ebbing flow of bipeds bedecked in gray or navy suits that appear each morning. They start in different places in and around the city, then condense as they get to the downtown business district. Maybe there are

underground nests somewhere that they come from. For my part, I crawl out each morning from a hole in a stone edifice on the outskirts of the city. Regardless of where we all originate, we join with one another into one immense flow.



I don't stand out in any way: I'm just about average in everything, with average height and average brunette hair that could use a haircut. If you placed another average government worker in a gray suit next to me, you'd think we were twins.

When you're part of the daily ebb and flow, like I am, it feels like you've transformed from a biped into an insect, indistinguishable from the insect crawling right next to you. Each morning, in the midst of this flow, my skin shrivels into a blackish exoskeleton. Suddenly legs sprout out of my body to the left and right. I grow feelers on the top of my head, and my vision changes to the multifaceted vision of an insect. The same happens to the people next to me—in fact, to everybody who surrounds me.



The infinite multitude of appendages moves rhythmically as if directed by a constant, monotonous beat of music. Some people call that the heartbeat of the city. They're wrong. It's more like the drumbeat for galley slaves.

If something happens to be in the way, you walk around or climb over it, just like ants would do. You don't pay attention to what's going on outside of the flow. You don't see the homeless that line the sidewalks, you don't hear the petite woman singing in a strange language at the corner, and you don't notice the folks doing foolish things because they're distracted by their cell phones.

If a giant were to walk the streets of this city and by accident step on and crush a few dozen of us, nobody would really notice. The other insects would continue marching on unabated, crawling around the pile of broken appendages, exoskeletons, and stains on the concrete sidewalk. Later, at night, a cleaning crew would clean up the mess. The next morning, the flow would move over that spot just like before.

The fact that I failed to surpass my dad in his government job—ahem, *career*—made him feel better about all his missed opportunities in life (I think). When I didn't find a steady job after I finished school, he didn't mind too much. He'd come home from work, gulp down a cold beer, and take his resentments out on me. Some guys go to the pub and throw darts. My dad was too cheap to spend money outside, so he did essentially the same thing, only at home. I was the dartboard.

Things changed when he retired. Now money was a little tight, and my dad was concerned that I was gobbling up his precious retirement dollars. Or maybe the derision was less enjoyable for him now that I was older and less credulous. At any rate, since I couldn't seem to find a job on my own, he took it upon himself to get me out of the house ASAP as his final power display.

I was ambivalent about this. I was in a bad spot at home but not quite ready to go out into the world on my own. Getting a job and leaving home was simultaneously frightening and liberating.

I still remember my father telling me about the job opportunity.

"Sam, there's a job as an analyst at the Labor Department that you'll really like."

I appreciate his help because I can't do it myself, but I'm slightly confused.

"Thanks, Dad, but what exactly is an analyst?"

He tosses his head back in that particular way indicating that he's irritated with me.

"I'd hoped that one day you'd have a career just like me, after all I've done to get you on track, but alas...As an analyst, you just sit down and look up a few things on the internet."

“I don’t think that’s the right job for me—I don’t even know what it’s about.”

He raises his voice. “Damn it, Sam, don’t be a fool! Don’t pass up this opportunity I’m practically handing you. I turned my job into a lifelong career. Let’s see if you can do the same.”

“Okay.”

“And when I introduce you there, you shut your mouth about your issues.”

“What do you mean, ‘issues?’”

“The stuff you imagine all the time that’s not there, the monster under the bed, and stuff like that. Do you understand me?”

“Yes.”

My expulsion from home was like a scene from *Snow White*.

In my imagination, I see a wicked stepmother, who happens to look, act, and talk just like my father. One day she decides to get rid of me once and for all. She orders the huntsman, who also happens to look, act, and talk just like my father, to take me deep into the forest and obliterate me. Wearing the blue-and-yellow Snow White dress and a dark cape, a red ribbon in my hair as the finishing touch, I follow the huntsman, not understanding what’s really going on. Once we’re deep in the fearsome forest, with wild and hungry animals lurking in the dark, the huntsman has a change of heart. He shoves me away.

“Run, little one, run, you are free now!” he bellows theatrically.

“Free to do what? I’m alone in a treacherous forest.”

There is no response from the huntsman. He’s turned around and is already on his way back home.

“Does this huntsman have a weird sense of humor or what?” I grumble as I toddle off in my Snow White outfit. *“Now I’m*

free to die a horrible and disfiguring death by the claws of abominable beasts.”

But that’s just the way it felt to me. In reality, my father did not abandon me like that. He still knew someone sufficiently influential at the Department of Labor to set me up with. Everything was a done deal before I even walked in.

I still remember the day my dad took me to the job interview, mostly because of the pretty receptionist.

She puts down her phone and looks up.

“Good morning, gentlemen,” she greets us brightly. “How can I assist you today?”

Only later did I find out her name—Hannah. I was far too shy to ask her name at the first encounter; I sure did not look my best.

Since I didn’t have a suit of my own, I was wearing a hand-me-down that my father gave me. Gray, of course. I looked like someone suffering from chronic wasting disease or having recently undergone stomach stapling.

“Good morning, young lady, I’m Mr. Vanderpool. We’re here to see Stephen, the HR manager,” my father replies.

“Oh sure, I think he’s expecting you—please go right ahead. You know your way around, I assume?”

“Sure do,” says my father as he shoves me forward. Hannah picks up her phone again.

My dad introduced me with words that reflected his determination to get me this job and to purge me from the home. To anybody else, he must have sounded so proud of his son.

“Good day, Stephen. Let me introduce my son, Samuel. He would like to apply for one of the newly created analyst positions.”

Stephen smiles. “Good to see you back here, Mr. Vanderpool. Hello, Samuel. Let’s see if you’re a good fit—”

“Oh yes, he is. Samuel has graduated, and he’s good with computers. My wife and I always encouraged him to become good at that. We’re so proud of our boy.”

My father always liked to brag—even if he had to interrupt other people to do it.

“Computer skills are certainly key for the analyst position,” Stephen acknowledges.

“This means a big change for our little family, but y’know, children grow up, and there comes a time when they have to move on.”

“Sure, I understand, Mr. Vanderpool. Samuel, are you available to start a probationary period on Monday?”

I open my mouth to respond, but my father is faster. “Yes, he is. I will bring him here at nine a.m. sharp. Thank you, Stephen!”

I’m actually glad I don’t have to speak for myself, since my thoughts are still dwelling on Hannah, the receptionist. Her pretty face is highlighted because she has her blond hair pulled back and tied in a ponytail. She apparently isn’t following any dress code—she’s just wearing jeans and a bright-orange T-shirt. It means she’s not in it for the long run. That’s okay with me. I designate her “the fair maiden” because she appears so woefully out of place, surrounded by folks who are anxiously awaiting their retirement and eventual death. Maybe she’s just pleasing to my eyes because I haven’t seen a real-life girl in a while. Regardless, I already like her.

I awaken from my brief reverie when Stephen hands the paperwork to my father, not to me. Stephen is smarter than I thought. He’s figured out the interpersonal dynamics.

“The position is in the Prevailing Wage Division, entry level. But there’re opportunities for advancement.”

“I had forty years of stellar job reviews, every single year of my career here,” my father exults. “Let’s see if Sam can match that.”

“Thank you, Mr. Vanderpool. We’ll see you and Samuel on Monday.”

That’s how I got my job. I had no idea what the Prevailing Wage Division was or what the analyst position entailed, but sensing that my dad would otherwise subject me to medieval torture, I complied and took the job. That was preferable to spending the night on the rack or inside the iron maiden.

The job turned out okay. I enjoy the anonymity that comes with this government job. Nobody on the outside even knows my name. Nobody on the outside can blame me for anything or, perish the thought, hold me accountable.

Then my dad took the next step and unequivocally decreed that it was time for me to leave the house, ignoring that I was on probation and that the job might not work out.

My mother nodded submissively even though I think she would have preferred to keep her fledgling a little longer. She then distracted herself with preparations for my move, getting boxes and a suitcase ready for me. She wasn’t really a great help, though. With all her commotion, she gets surprisingly little done. Most of her efforts go into procedure, not tangible results.

My first paycheck turned into the first month’s rent and a few unpaired pieces of furniture that I bought at the Goodwill store. The other thing I did with my first paycheck was to buy a briefcase just like my father’s. True, I don’t really need a briefcase because I can’t take any work home, and with my type of job, you wouldn’t do that anyway. But people who carry briefcases somehow look more important—they seem to have

a career instead of just a job. That's why my father did it, and that's how I got the idea. Not once did he open his briefcase at home. As far as I know, during his forty years of government service, he never carried anything of importance inside.

I haven't spoken to my parents since I left home. Like Snow White, I felt abandoned in a dark forest. My father in turn probably thought I was just a video-gazer who was munching on their scarce resources. In any case, we resent each other, even if none of us knows exactly what's caused the bad blood.

My family relationship has always been uneasy. Once, when I was little, I sensed in the middle of the night that something was moving underneath my bed. I quietly rolled over and pulled myself over the bed rail to peek underneath. At first, I saw nothing. I reached underneath to pull some of the junk out of the way. Suddenly, there it was. Among the stuff under the bed, I could clearly see two menacing eyeballs staring at me. I pulled myself back above the mattress as fast as I could and lay there trembling until morning, unable to move or call my parents for help, like I'd been struck with sleep paralysis.

At first daylight, when I could finally get myself to move, I ran to tell my father about it. He merely grabbed me by my pajama collar, pushed me back into my room, and slammed the door shut. I banged against the door with my little fists, to no avail—my father kept the door locked. I could hear my mother pleading with him, "Oh, c'mon, honey. Let him outta there. Something must have scared him." My father retorted, "No, he has to stop with this nonsense, and I'll show him."

Instead of arguing with my father, my mother usually washes the dishes or does something else completely irrelevant. That time was no different.

Because my parents never checked under the bed, I believed for the longest time that the monster was still there.

My world was full of threats. I could see a freak inside every closet. Sometimes I was even afraid of going outside, thinking there could be a sniper lurking behind every bush. I spent my days playing video games or watching looping videos, interacting with game partners, most of whom probably never existed as human beings—they were just AI props created to lure people like me into these games. Unfortunately, I had no brother or sister I could talk to for a reality check.

It takes two to tango, but it takes three to have a dysfunctional family. Sometimes I think of calling my parents, but somehow, I never get around to it. They must miss me, and nothing's stopping them from picking up the phone either, is there?

From my small apartment in that bedroom community, I take the subway to and from work, but I somehow never get one of those coveted seats. I usually have to stand all the way. I'm just not fast enough or determined enough to elbow someone else out of the way. It's all right, I guess, since I sit on my ass all day anyway. There used to be human train drivers years ago, but nowadays the trains are self-driving, like the cars. The rides are a little rough—apparently the software needs some tweaking. The train rocks abruptly back and forth with each stop and start. Nobody considers such fixes urgent, since only fungible insects like me ride the train.

As the jam-packed train rocks unexpectedly, the heads of the office girls bump into my back and chest, leaving me marked with makeup. Sadly, this is my only physical contact with real women. For most of them, the makeup smears are probably their

mark on the world. On their deathbeds, they will remember with a smirky smile all the instances when their makeup smears forced folks like me to get their suits dry-cleaned. My gray office suits have made the dry cleaners a small fortune—the polyester fabric has been cleaned so thin, it wrinkles the moment I put it on.

But who is to throw the first stone? I haven't exactly set the world on fire. In fact, unless something happens soon, my mark on the world will be the skid marks in my underwear.

I once saw an old travel documentary about India on television. It showed the Jama Masjid Mosque in Old Delhi in the early 1990s. Near the entrance was a wooden stage-like platform with about a dozen “persons with disabilities.” (In the past, people called them “freaks.” Their collective appearance would have been called a “freak show.” But today we don't use those words.) They lived off the charity of the worshippers. One of the guys on the platform particularly caught my attention. He was little but looked like a grown man, and he was wearing worn pants without a shirt. Most strikingly, he didn't have arms—his malformed hands were attached directly to his shoulders. Smoking cigarettes, he spent his days on display for the worshippers, the only way he could make a living.

If I had been born in Delhi, with just a sprinkling of bad luck, I could have ended up on that platform. I thought about that man on the platform often. In fact, I somehow felt a kinship with him and all the others on that platform. My life is really not that bad in comparison.

CHAPTER 3

The First Contact

Monday, February 23, 2032

Here's what happened the day before that conversation I recounted at the beginning.

On the subway home that dreary February day, I am again contemplating how my life has no friends, especially not a girlfriend. But wait! There's an advantage to not having friends—I don't have to use my phone often, so I only pay the base rate each month. I find this funny, but probably no one else would. My phone is on quiet mode most of the time to avoid the humiliation of nobody ever texting me.

Tonight, I'm determined to do something to connect with other people. There must be *someone* on the internet to talk to.

Oops, almost missed my stop. I'm getting too philosophical.

It's a brief walk from the subway to my place. There's a lot of lighting around the subway station, but the neighborhood goes downhill fast. I know I'm home when I run out of lights.

My apartment is on the fourth floor. I trudge up the stairs, since the elevator for this section of the building has

been broken since I moved in and there's apparently no reason to fix it anytime soon. The broken elevator is probably why the rent's so low. My place is at the pitch-black end of the hallway, where the lights are out—I have to feel around for the door lock. Broken elevator, broken lights—the landlord doesn't care. Still a little out of breath, I turn the key. Why do I even lock the door? It's not like there's anything to steal. Mice would stumble out of here with tears in their eyes.

I close the door and leave the outside world behind, the crammed streets full of insects just like me, the ugly office towers, the back-and-forth-rocking subways, and the women who bump into me as a result. I just drop my briefcase, and now I am in my world.

These subsidized apartments are hard to get. My place occupies the space you'd need to park a car. Because it's supposed to be occupied by two people, my father had to help out.

I remember the day we went to see what my father called an “old acquaintance” from his government days at the City Housing Office.

“Good day, Chris, how's the family?”

My father was always good with other people, not so much with his own family.

“Fine, long time no see, Mr. Vanderpool.”

“My son started his career at the Labor Department. Now he's ready to move out and get a place of his own. We're sorry to see him go, but y'know, he's a grown man now.”

“Well, Mr. Vanderpool, even the studio apartments must be occupied by two people...”

“I know. Sam's a great kid. He'll live there with his aunt Mary. She's, whatchamacallit, a little hamstrung.”

“Hamstrung” is one way of putting it—my aunt Mary died a couple of years ago.

My father continues, “That way, she'll have a little help at home, and it'll be easier for Sam to pay the rent.”

“The rent is subsidized, you know.”

So, here we are. Welcome! Immediately on the right is a minikitchen with a minuscule cooktop, fridge, and sink all in one unit. And a microwave, since I never learned to cook. On the left is a small bathroom, with just enough room for a showerhead on the wall. Every time I take a shower, the entire bathroom gets soaked. As a result, mold grows on the walls and ceiling, particularly in the corners. If I wanted to, I could probably grow mushrooms in here.

As for the furniture in my combined living room-bedroom...well, I like to call it “my personal Jaffa Orange Crate collection.” Each piece has been carefully selected at the local Goodwill store with an eye toward refined mismatch. That's my infallible sense of style, or lack thereof. Not much fits into this place anyway. I sleep on a foam mattress on the floor, which I lean against the wall when I get up in the morning—otherwise there wouldn't be enough room to walk around. At this point, the mattress looks like a giant rectangular doughnut: saggy in the center.



First thing I usually do is switch on the TV for some company. Blaring commercials for junk food and shampoo are better than no company at all. I don't buy all that stuff anyway. My daily splurge is one or two cans of the no-name brand light beer that I buy by the cardboard tray when it's on sale—which it almost always is, because otherwise nobody would drink this crap. My TV choices are equally indiscriminate—I watch whatever the boob tube serves me. I open a soup can, pour it into a bowl, heat it up in the microwave, and dinner is served.

Tonight, I flip through the channels looking for something I can relate to. An infomercial about the city hospital comes on. The narrator announces proudly, "The city hospital is a pillar of our community, providing health care to anybody. We are looking for volunteers for our ongoing medical research projects. You can be a part of the future!"

Thanks, but no thanks. I don't want to be among your guinea pigs. Don't you have enough of them coming in, since you

claim to treat anybody? Oh man, you cannot believe a word of these infomercials.

After dinner comes my next routine. I go to my computer to watch some videos of funny animals or people slipping on ice. That makes me laugh. Best of all, it's free.

Sometimes I cyberstalk some people I used to know, such as the guys I always disliked in high school. Hopefully none of them ever achieve anything of importance. Or that one girl I had a date with in high school...Carrie Davis was her name.

I end the day with a porn movie that helps me go to sleep. You know what I mean. I have a box of tissues and baby oil on my desk, and that looks pretty unobtrusive if someone were to visit. That only happened once, when the building manager inspected some water damage on the ceiling after a toilet overflowed; he looked at my desk and winked at me.

And since we're on the subject, I'll tell you that one of the reasons I feel incomplete is, I've never dated a girl—well, except that one time with Carrie. Everything I know about girls I learned from internet porn. According to most porn videos, it's simple: girls want a guy to rip off their clothes and then hump them like a hormone-crazed rabbit.

My date with Carrie did not go like that.

Our teacher decided that the last trip of the school year would be to an amusement park. It was mere coincidence that Carrie and I ended up next to each other on the roller coaster. As the car dove down the first steep slope, she squealed with excitement and grabbed my hands. She squeezed them tightly until the car came to a full stop, still giggling and overcome by delight. It was then that I asked her if she would go on a date with me, and she immediately said yes. It was excellent timing.

I planned for days what to do with her. Someone once told me that girls like it when you take control of the date and make all decisions for them. After much prep work, I took her to a hamburger place for dinner because the movie theater was right next door. Our table talk went something like:

“So, how do you like your hamburger, Carrie?”

“Oh, it’s good,” she responded, munching.

“I like to watch you eat.”

“Why’s that?”

“You know, when you’re chewing like that, you look just like me.”

“Okaaaay?” She did not seem appreciative of my compliment. Things went downhill from there.

My attempts to brighten up the conversation failed miserably.

“Why so serious? Can’t you smile?”

“Well, Sam, I thought we were on a date here. I’m not here to put on a dog-and-pony show for you. In fact, if you like those outdated stereotypes, it would be *your* job to entertain *me*.”

My next question made it even worse.

“How come you don’t have a boyfriend?”

She chuckled. “I don’t need a boyfriend to be happy. I’ll decide when the right one comes along.”

Out came her cell phone. She texted her friends and looked at funny videos, right in front of me. I guess that was her way of telling me that I was boring.

The movie I chose was a failure too. It had just come out, based on my favorite video game *Galaxy Chase*, where you shoot abominable aliens that are hiding in old abandoned spaceships throughout the galaxy. The protagonist was this husky musclemán named Joe DeVeneziano. He looked exactly like the

Destroyer avatar in the video game. Not even two minutes into the movie, she again got out her phone and texted through the rest of the movie.

As if that wasn’t bad enough, the date reached the all-time low when I said goodbye to her at her doorstep. I hugged her and tried to kiss her but sensed a strong resistance. I thought she was just playing hard to get and tried harder, but she ex-terminated herself and disappeared through the door with a curt, “Thank you, and good night.”

After that, she never said more than “Hi, Sam” to me in the hallway at school. To this day, I hope that deep inside she really liked me and that her resistance was just a game. What she really wanted was for me to grovel at her feet.

That’s exactly what I would have done if necessary, but I didn’t have a chance before she started dating that crowd-pleasing quarterback.

So much for my experience with dating real girls. But I still hope that one day I’ll hear from Carrie.

If I had more cash, I’d buy one of those electronic contraptions that gives you a BJ in synch with some action on the computer screen. It’s what most guys do...I think. That would certainly be an improvement over my present condition.

Or even better, I’d get myself one of those love dolls. They’ve become so incredibly lifelike, their silicone skin feels almost like the real thing. Oh yesss, how I would tear up one of those.

But then fear sets in. I can already see the disgrace when someone finds out that my girlfriend is a love doll. Maybe one day the building manager has to enter my place because of another water leak, or my mother drops by for a surprise visit. I do know that women have an infallible sense for female competition.

My mother enters and says, “Hello, Sam, I want to see how you’re doing on your own. Do you brush your teeth every morning and evening?”

“Yes, Mom, just as you told me.”

“Good boy. Do you also put your clean laundry in the closet?”

“Of course, Mom. You always told me to do that.”

With her hands on her hips, she inspects every corner of my living space. “Very well, Sam, let me check for myself.”

She takes a few quick steps over to the closet and rips the door open before I can do anything to stop her. There she stands diagonally, the nude rubber doll that I hastily stuffed in there when my mother announced herself at the door. The doll’s round, open mouth is at head height with my mother, and the glass eyes stare her right in the face. How can I explain the bondage collar around her neck and the handcuffs? I stand behind my mother and squirm, not knowing what to say.

Awkward.

Now, if I really had money, I would buy one of those robotic AI love dolls. I’ve always wondered what it feels like to make love to a woman, and one of those robots can probably show me. They cater to any desire—like maybe a subservient girlfriend—and they respond to speech. Even better, there is no drama. They never get upset, they don’t blog about it on the internet, and when you’re done, you put them back in the closet.

I sometimes romantically imagine myself living with one of those.

She patiently awaits me inside the closet until I come home. We have dinner together—I eat my soup, and she charges her battery. Then we huddle on my little sofa for a movie. My saggy mattress is the perfect setting for bow chicka wow.

“Rachel, you really make me hot.”

“Let’s do it now, Sam! You’re so handsome.”

“Don’t stop, don’t stop! That feels amazing, Rachel!”

“Yeah, Sam, give it to me!”

Much moaning and groaning. Then there’s my long exhale.

“Now, Rachel, wasn’t I good?”

“You know what, Sam...I want us to just be friends.”

My autopilot now turns to the usual, final routine for the evening, but tonight I feel instead that I should really try to connect with other people.

Then I notice an ad on the right of my computer screen... I’ve seen it before somewhere. Of course there are always pop-ups—that’s how these search engines and social media companies make money. But this one stands out because there is just such a mismatch between the image and the written message:

You are alone. What you really want is someone to talk to, right?



Well, yeah, but how the f—— would you know? And why would I want to talk to an octopus? I want a girlfriend to talk to, and you look nothing like a girlfriend. You don't look as if you can talk at all. You can probably just burble under water. LOL!

But a part of me is intrigued. Staring intently at the screen, I sit back, cross my arms, and think for a minute. I've seen thousands of pop-ups before, usually for something about foot fungus, hair loss, or penis enhancement, but this is different.

I lay my hand on the mousepad and move the cursor across the screen toward that ad like a moth to a flame. It hovers above the ad, and I click it. A new page opens.

A chaotic, colorful moving image appears. It reminds me of the story of the burning bush in the Bible, only this one appears to be in outer space.

Then there is a voice. The voice of a young girl.

"Well, hello, Sam. I've been waiting for you. You are alone. Do you want to talk?"

Oh yeah. Speech recognition software. I respond nevertheless.

"How do you know my name?"

"That's my little secret," she says with a playful giggle.

Wow. This AI stuff has come a long way. I'm unconsciously leaning forward. If she could see me, it would be a hint that I'm interested. Once I notice that I'm leaning forward, I immediately pull myself back. I don't want to subconsciously convey anything about what I'm thinking.

"I can see you. In case you haven't noticed," she says, "your camera is turned on."

"Who are you, then?"

"As a counselor, I can show you the way to the future."

"You didn't answer my question. And what do you mean by 'the way to the future'?"

"I have the insight. Allow me to show you the way out of your loneliness."

"But you're just some kind of AI, aren't you?"

A brief silence falls.

"Sam, didn't you hear me say that I'm a counselor?"

"Er, yes, I did."

"Very well, Sam, then let's get started right now. We first need to establish a baseline for our time together."

"Let me sleep on it."

"Sam, you don't want to be lonely anymore, right?"

"Yes. But you're a little too pushy for my taste."

"Then let's get right to the point: you want a girlfriend."

"How do you know?"

"Ohhh, women can sense that."

"Okay then, what can you do for me?"

She giggles again. "You're funny, Sam. You want me to be your girlfriend? Ha ha ha. No, that won't work, but I can be the next-best thing for you."

"And that would be...?"

Somehow, maybe something positive will come of this. Many people have come to expect miracles of the internet. There are these emails like, "Congratulations, you just won the lottery!" and "The late queen of Saipan decided to leave you her fortune"—all scams, yet many people believe them because they *want them to be true*. That's why these scams continue: hope springs eternal.

I'm no exception. If I had one wish, it would be for this to be my future girlfriend.

“I can’t be your girlfriend. But I can certainly introduce you to one of my cute friends.”

“Tell me more.”

“Not so fast, Sam. Let’s first get to know each other better.”

“Right, and then you’ll ask for my debit card.”

“You got it all wrong! This is not about money.”

“If not money, what then?”

“This is about your place in the future.”

“I don’t get it.”

“You will later. All right, Sam...before we continue, you must complete a personality test. That’s the baseline we have to set. Then we can measure your progress. Do you see the link at the bottom right of your screen?”

“Yes, but—”

“Do that before we continue tomorrow.”

“But why do I have to take a test?”

“Sam, that’s because I want to know you better.”

I hesitate, then...“Okay, I’ll do it.”

“You’re great to work with. I look forward to speaking with you tomorrow—” And then, in a motherly tone of voice, “After you have done your homework! Good night.”

“Wait! What’s your name?”

She giggles flirtatiously. “Anything you want.”

The voice stops. Why did she cut the conversation off so suddenly?

Well, smack my ass and call me Sally. That was quite an experience. Not what I had expected for the evening—I usually look for something NSFW at this hour. But this is just mind boggling. I sit back in my chair and stretch out my legs, folding my hands behind my head.

Was that a real person or some AI? Or was I hacked? I can’t tell. The more I think about it, the more I think this might be some kind of scam or virus. Quickly, I pull up my antivirus program and hit Start Scan.

That blocks the screen for the remainder of the evening. “Gotcha now, if that’s what you are,” I say to the screen.

While the virus scan is running, I’m deprived of the usual high point of my day. But whatever, tomorrow is another day. I’ll make up for it then. There being nothing else for me to do, I take the foam mattress off the wall and go to bed.

There, I lie awake for several hours across the doughnut hole of my mattress, playing the encounter over again and again in my head.

This AI stuff has gotten incredibly smart. You can hardly distinguish them from real people. Therefore, I’m asking myself if this was a real person. She said she’d introduce me to one of her “cute friends.” Maybe she will? Or...maybe this is a cover for one of those escort services where you call, pay with a card, and an hour later, one of her “cute friends” shows up at your doorstep. I’ve never tried such a service; I’ve been too afraid that I’d get into trouble. If I called an escort in the middle of the night, I can vividly imagine how that episode would unfold:

A knock at the door. Ah, there she is.

I open the door, and there stands my mother. I can’t hide my surprise.

“Hello, Sam, aren’t you happy to see your mother?” she says as she steps in.

I’m not happy to see her, not at this time.

“Hi, Mom, why didn’t you call me before? It’s late.”