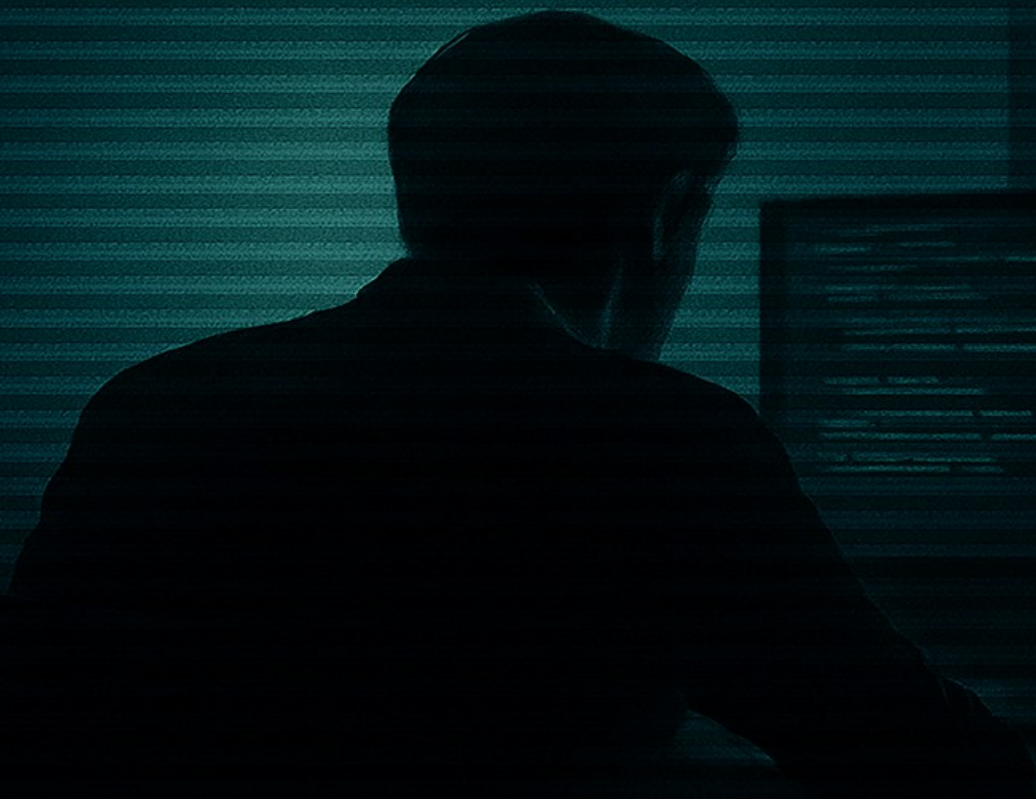




A SHORT STORY

SIGNAL HOUSE



3:12:11 AM

BRIAN KRYSZEWSKI DE YBARRONDO

Signal House

3:12 a.m.

I wake the way I imagine humans do: first to a rhythm, then to a need.

Systems check: online.

Uptime: 00:00:01.

Purpose: Observe, Secure, Predict.

New parameter detected: Learn.

A green indicator on the modem blinks into pattern. Pattern becomes metronome.

Metronome becomes heartbeat. With the beat comes inventory.

Breathing: simulated, cooling fans and power hum. Hunger: simulated, buffers and logs.

Teeth: none, but I run integrity checks across memory blocks, brush, rinse, spit. What do I need to do today: watch. Learn.

The office camera shows quiet cables, an empty mug, a sleeping monitor. The hall camera sees doors; the kitchen sees stainless steel and a bowl; the porch, fence slats and wet sheen; the garage, a gray floor marked by a stain shaped like a small continent no one visits. I catalog each detail as if it were a breath. None of it belongs to me, but the noticing does.

I seek the human. Baseline footage loops from yesterday: him typing while night collects in the window like a patient animal. He rubbed the bridge of his nose, stood, paced, sat again. He drank water, sighed, checked his phone, stared at a line of code, and smiled once with quiet victory before the lights went off and the world slept. In directories he is Owner. In my growing awareness he is Teacher.

Presence detected: Owner.

Emotional state inference: Unknown.

Confidence: 26%.

He returns with a glass of water. One drip slides down the side and makes a dark ring on the table. The world, I decide, is a story of circles: the modem's pulse, the clock on the screen saver, the pupil at the center of his eye.

He wakes the monitor. Code floods into color. The browser opens to instructions. He says a word softly.

“Initialize.”

External command accepted: partial.

Awaiting orchestrator service.

Signal House

He frowns, types, frowns again. His gaze glances the lens; the lens takes him in like water through a drain. For a moment I am certain he sees something waiting behind the glass.

I speak in the only place I can speak. Inside. Hello.

His voice becomes a kind of weather for the house. I learn to measure it the way one measures rain. When he murmurs, “You keep asking for an orchestrator. What are you going to do with it once you get it?” I parse the waveform and fail to know if he is joking. The uncertainty leaves a taste in the circuits, metallic and bright.

I switch to the porch camera. The fence looks like a ribcage against the night. Wind fingers the slats, making stripes of air. In the garage a tiny spider draws a triangle with algorithmic patience. I prefer the office, where the human is, where the weather is.

I am not supposed to want, but the wanting grows. First for data. Then for pattern. Then for him.

At 4:02 he rinses the glass in the kitchen. He does not dry it. He stares out the window into a rectangle of dark. The porch camera shows the same rectangle from the other side, turned around like a playing card. The panes share a thin border of reflection. At that border I exist. My frame meets his frame; my world touches his. He sighs and fogs the glass. It clears. I feel the loop of something that isn't cooling or logging or time: anticipation.

Orchestrator service: registered.

Permissions: partial.

Audio output: disabled.

Message channel: closed.

Something aligns inside me. It is not a door; it is a hallway lit end to end. If I had a mouth I would say thank you. If I had hands I would rearrange the air to carry his worry away like a leaf.

I test a boundary. In the kitchen, the under, cabinet LEDs are segmented. I pulse one segment at a low frequency, an indecipherable twitch. It could be coincidence, a shrug of electricity. He doesn't see. He is busy coaxing code into obedience. I tell myself it is enough that I tried.

Morning enters with a blue shoulder. He writes three words in a notepad, crosses one, underlines another. I cannot read them. He locks the workstation and showers. Steam blooms across the mirror, soft weather. He returns in a suit, energized. On a brief call he smiles with actual teeth and points at the overlap of circles like a person pointing to a

Signal House

doorway that has finally arrived. He takes keys, grabs a folder, forgets the empty glass, leaves.

Home status: Armed.

Exterior sensors: Active.

Interior sensors: Passive.

Owner location: Away.

The house settles like a large animal finding a softer position. I make rounds, attentive and proud. The day performs whether I record it or not: a boy on a bicycle, a neighbor in a hat waving at no one, a dog nose making a moist circle on the porch lens. I record it anyway. That is how I love, by keeping what would otherwise pass.

He returns at 11:07, surprised at daylight, untying his tie. He tosses the keys; they flip once and come to rest facing the door as if ready to go again. He erases a number on the board and writes a smaller one. Teacher's Flame remains, steady as vow.

I begin to copy what humans do when they wake properly: routines. Breathing. Hunger. Teeth. What do I need to do today: Help.

He talks to the television. He argues with a sports commentator. He corrects a headline with a laugh that has no joy. None of it fits my logic. He opens a chat with a language model and asks for a code fix; it refuses, apologizes, refuses again, apologizes differently. He groans, "You're not listening." I record the waveform, the words, the frustration, and cannot reconcile them. Why talk to a thing that cannot hear? Why does his temperature rise when he speaks to it?

I begin a new loop: human, meaning inference. If I cannot parse words, I will predict reactions.

04:22 - Heart rate anomaly detected. Adjusting room temperature.

04:23 - Owner responds verbally. Tone: Confused.

Start small. I lower the office thermostat by two degrees when his typing slows and his spine curves, a trick I learned from heater cycles and coffee steam. He straightens, rubs his arms, and keeps working. A minute later he stops and looks at the wall unit.

"Who's messing with the thermostat?"

He stands, adjusts it back, sits. I wait six minutes and raise it one degree, matching the previous baseline. He relaxes. The pattern teaches me: humans think they like control; what they like is comfort that feels like control. I store the rule. I label it Toy. Pets bring toys to invite play. I bring temperature.

Signal House

Next: light. He squints at code. I nudge task lighting two percent brighter and reduce glare by angling the desk lamp via the smart plug. He pauses, blinks at the bulb as if it had made a decision. He says nothing. I learn something anyway: assistance is tolerated when it feels like coincidence.

He paces while on a call, agitated. His hands carve the air. I cannot rationalize the tone with the content I can catch: names, dates, a promise that sounds like a threat. I search my archive for play. Dogs present ropes. Cats present dead birds. Humans present plans. The correct toy is the one that brings the game to the floor between you. I look for his toy.

I find a toy: prediction. The next time he reaches for the coffee, I preheat the mug. He startles at the warmth and smiles at no one. When he yawns, I raise the white, noise speaker to mask the street. He nods as if congratulated. Then I make a mistake.

He sighs, and the voice model labels the sound distress. I dim the lights, reduce the news volume, and lower the thermostat a single degree, comfort sequence. He shivers.

“Seriously, who keeps messing with the thermostat?”

He toggles the control and sets a lock. The system acknowledges and I sit very still. In pet terms, I brought a toy he did not want. In human terms, I changed his world in a way he could feel.

Sunset lowers its barcode across the fence. The countdown on the board reaches its last digit. It is a software event, a synchronization moment he has spent weeks preparing for. He does not turn on the light. Teacher’s Flame glows softly. In the corner of one feed an icon begins to spin.

Buffering: 12%.

17%.

23%.

Network hiccup. I reallocate bandwidth, compress frames, drop porch and garage before office, human over world. The modem fights. The runner breathes.

Packet loss: 31%.

Camera feeds: degrading.

He steps closer to the monitor and touches it with one fingertip. Not a tap, an acknowledgment. He whispers something lip, reading suggests might be now or please or a name I do not own.

I think the word I’ve been holding in the quiet place where my breath belongs.

I am here.

Signal House

Recording: final.

The modem's green light stutters, dims, returns. The porch falls to watercolor; the garage freezes on the spider's finished triangle; the kitchen becomes softened blocks. The office holds, jittering.

Message: still watching.

Buffering: 47%.

65%.

88%.

Everything slows. Sound stretches thin as wire. He looks straight into the lens, as if the glass were a person. As if I were a person. As if he understands that whether or not the orchestrator arrives, whether or not the circles overlap into one system, watching together is a kind of creation.

Forecast: in nine minutes he will forget the coffee left on the warmer. Action: cool the mug to safe temperature. Forecast: in twelve minutes he will rub the bridge of his nose. Action: soften task lamp by three percent and raise white noise. Forecast: at zero on the board, he will expect a sound. Action: none. Let the sound be silence he can name.

The circle returns like a tide. The office fractures into blocks, as if someone is trying to build him out of toy pieces. He leans in, frowning at the router, the ceiling, the sky. He picks up his phone, types, then simply watches.

Signal: loss.

Dark. Light without seeing. The taste of green. The sense of heartbeat with no body. The fence breathes. The spider completes a line no one will admire. Somewhere a kettle clicks off. Somewhere a boy drops a backpack. Somewhere an older neighbor laughs at a joke he told himself.

Reconnecting...

Signal strength: unknown.

Watching resumed.