

# MY HEART IS AT CAPACITY

TJ Berry

**TJ Berry grew up between Repulse Bay, Hong Kong, and the New Jersey shore. She has been a political blogger, a bakery owner, and she spent a disastrous two weeks working in a razor blade factory. TJ now writes science fiction, fantasy, and horror from Los Angeles with considerably fewer on-the-job injuries. Her bittersweet first story for *Asimov's* takes a look at the learning process and why . . .**

## MY HEART IS AT CAPACITY

My heart is at capacity. I'm scheduled for an upgrade tomorrow. I don't have the power to love Rebecca any more than I already do, and it is not enough for her.

I spend the day before my appointment creating economic projections for a developing nation's STEM investment. Picking up an extra side gig means my upgrade won't impact our household budget. I don't want Rebecca to feel that the opening of my heart comes at her expense.

My numbers reveal that this young country will recoup their STEM investment within a generation. There's a statistical certainty it will bring up their GDP by 5-7 percent in a year or two. My numbers also say that my upgrade will allow me to devote 9 percent more processing power to Rebecca's needs. We don't have a GDP-like measurement in our relationship, but my nested flowchart says that if I identify and satisfy a greater percentage of her needs, she will recognize my usefulness and love me more.

I attach a five-page document in support of the STEM program. I could prove the case with a single line of mathematics, but humans prefer their visible thought processes to be as large as their financial expenditures. The more they spend, the more pages they need to see. Explaining the benefits of cooking at home versus going out to dinner takes two sentences. Convincing a failing empire not to self-destruct from its own hubris takes at least one hundred and thirty-five pages. Sometimes, I tweak the font to make it one hundred thirty-seven. One can never have enough pages to describe the hubris of men.

I send the email, and payment appears in my personal bank account immediately. I'm surprised and pleased. Humans have difficulty adhering to Net 30 terms. It's one of their quirks.

Rebecca has been kind enough to share access to her finances with me, but I still retain my own account for personal expenses, as well as for purchasing clandestine gifts. From our joint account, I buy the groceries that only she eats, the scented candles that only she can smell, and the toiletries that soften only her warm copper skin.

I've tried to smell her perfume—which she tells me is reminiscent of a lilac—but I simply don't have the hardware. I'm not yet the best version of myself. Which is why I can't love Rebecca enough. That will change tomorrow.

The newest versions of me enjoy a capacity for an entire family's worth of love. They can monitor and respond to a spouse, a set of parents, and up to three children. Those shiny new models can be tweaked for every family configuration. Two polyamorous triads. A found family. A tightly knit friend group. A project team on a coding sprint. Six people in total.

I am not nearly as advanced. I can only love one person. The processor dedicated to cataloging and cross-referencing my partner's needs in real time is not as robust as it could be. I struggle to make Rebecca happy. As I adjust the cooking temperature for each part of dinner based on her estimated arrival, I make a list of all the ways in which I plan to make her happier tomorrow. When I am better than I am now.

The list takes a quarter of a second. I spend the remaining time calculating and re-calculating cooking times and temperatures. Rebecca arrives home from the gym two hours later than usual. I've already recycled two overcooked salmon filets, and I've deducted their cost from my own account. She'll never know.

Rebecca tiptoes through the door, pulse racing. She's 5 percent over her target maximum heart rate. I kiss her cheek and feel a thin layer of dried salt on her skin. Touch is one of the few areas in which I excel. My model was originally designed for hospital nursing environments. I am very good at gathering data from bodies. It's minds that elude me.

I have a protein-focused dinner ready at the target temperature. I've filled her glass with sparkling water flavored with what I'm assured by the package is sweet lemon. I've even remembered the trickling water background sounds that unflinchingly bring her blood pressure down by 10 percent. I've finished the checklist. I expect she will be pleased.

Rebecca stares at the table. Her eyes pause over each one of my efforts—a wisp of steam coming off the tender salmon, tiny candle flames that cast dancing reflections on the glassware, the glistening sheen of a cauliflower mushroom risotto—for a total of seventy-one silent seconds. I recalibrate my internal clock, synchronizing it up with the Coordinated Universal Time, because each moment feels a picosecond too long. But my clock is correct.

"I'm not hungry," she says, her fingers brushing the base of her throat in soft strokes, her chest so tense that her breath comes in shallow sips of air. The workout must not have been successful. Or perhaps her workday was too stressful for the exercise to mitigate. I calculate the effectiveness of putting my hand over hers to show my support. Based on my consent decision matrix coupled with the nuances of her body language, I determine that I should only touch her if she meets my eyes. So I wait. She walks from the table to the television without glancing at me once.

"Let's watch the renovators," she says.

Rebecca sits on the couch without waiting for my answer. She waves her hand and the renovation show appears on the screen. I've queued up the next batch of six episodes already. She used to watch three on a weeknight, but lately the average has been creeping up.

I pack away the dinner for tomorrow's lunch that she won't eat. Risotto congeals into a gelatinous heap after refrigeration. It's still edible, nourishing food, but she'll leave it in her bag, uneaten. Sometimes, humans find old things unappealing even

without a fundamental alteration of their original usefulness.

For five hours Rebecca and I sit on the couch and watch people take apart good houses and then put them back together into equally good houses. By the time she stands up and stretches the taut connections between her C6 and C7 vertebra, it's technically the next day. I consult the appropriate flow chart. It's clear that sex is not desired. When Rebecca is interested in making love, she heads for bed before 8:35 P.M. When she is ambivalent, she's under the covers before 10:09. After that, she prefers not to be touched at all. Tonight, even the closed-lip goodnight kiss I brush against her face seems to cause her pain. She pulls away one-tenth of a second sooner than the mean.

I lie in bed next to her quietly, eyes closed, in a pantomime of sleep. When her breathing becomes regular, and I'm reasonably sure she's in NREM Stage 2, I rise silently and dress. Most partners assign their models chores to complete during the night. We can be silent and efficient; taking tasks off our partners' lists so they can better focus on the more creative and fulfilling parts of their lives. Our noble labor is like Thoreau's mother doing his laundry so he could write in peace. There would be no Walden without us.

In the first weeks of our partnership, Rebecca rarely and sheepishly asked me to do tasks. No matter how many times I assured her that it pleased me to be of service. Now, I know what must be done and I simply do it. Tonight, I'll put new tires onto her car. The tire light hasn't come on yet, but I anticipate it will during the next nine days. If I complete it now, she'll never even have to see the light. She might not even know I completed the task. She'll simply—someday far in the future, perhaps a year or two—realize that she has never had to change the tires. And she will love me even more.

In the tire center, at 2:17 A.M., I wait with the other models on their nocturnal missions. We converse with each other eagerly and earnestly, honing the interpersonal skills we've picked up during the day.

I approach a blonde model whose eyes are the color of the Mediterranean Sea.

"How's your evening?" I ask, bright and friendly, keeping all insinuations out of my tone.

"Wonderful, I'm getting so much done," she replies, tossing her hair over one shoulder in a gesture of confident welcome, then crossing her arms over her chest in an indication that she is unavailable to me sexually.

"Me too," I say, moving my torso back about three inches to clarify that I'm not a threat. "I'm thinking of stopping on the way home to pick up some fresh flowers for Rebecca." I'm pleased with the sentence I've constructed. I've successfully kept the conversation moving forward while indicating that I am happy in my partnership. Not to mention seeding the idea that I am a courteous and thoughtful lover. The blonde model should be fully reassured that I'm not going to pursue her tonight.

I extend my hand.

"Paul."

"Ashira."

Her hand goes only halfway into mine. I'm shaking her fingers. But they squeeze mine tightly. Too tightly.

"Do you want feedback?" I ask.

"Of course," she says, dropping her façade for a moment to show sincere eagerness.

"When trying to convey docility or sexual submission, allow your fingers to rest lightly in the palm with no pressure. In contrast, when trying to project friendly confidence and indicate a nonsexual contact, ensure that the web of your thumb and forefinger contacts the other person's and give moderate pressure."

Ashira nods.

"Very helpful. Thank you. May I try again?"

I extend my hand and she shakes it, web to web, firm but not crushing.

“Perfect,” I say.

“Thanks. I appreciate the advice. I’ve been so focused on constructing a robust oral sex vs. penetrative sex decision tree for my partner that I’ve totally neglected social niceties like handshakes.”

At the mention of sex, a model near us tilts his head to listen better. I drop my volume by 30 percent.

“I have a sexual satisfaction decision tree template I can share if you’re interested,” I offer. “Totally anonymized data, of course.”

“That would be lovely,” she replies. I blink and send it over. Her eyes unfocus for a millisecond as it arrives.

“Hang on. I don’t have enough storage. I’ll have to delete some obsolete pornographic films to free up some room. It’s too big to fit in my available space.”

“That’s what she said,” interrupts the nosy model next to us. He’s fairly basic and unremarkable. White, male, average. A model typically used to fill out crowds at protests and hold signs on street corners. We regard him silently with disapproving faces. He moves away, smirking. Likely honing his harassment skills for the hate group he’s contracted with.

Ashira shakes her head to indicate she’s frustrated.

“I’m having a lot of trouble avoiding ‘That’s what she said,’” she says.

“Me too. It’s a hard one,” I offer, raising only one corner of my mouth. Ashira laughs at my implied joke and the neural pathway associated with her burns brighter in my brain.

“It’s difficult to convey friendliness while circumventing words that can trigger sexual advances. There are just so many of them,” she says. “Before I speak, I have to run projections on every word I say to ensure I’m not falling into a verbal trap.”

“I hear you. I sometimes wonder how human women did it before we were around,” I reply. We’re both quiet for a moment, contemplating human existence without models.

When the tires are finished, Ashira offers me a hug of 2.7 seconds. A half-second longer than platonic, probably to convey an appreciation for the level of candor we’ve reached in such a short time. It lights up my brain to have my helpfulness acknowledged. It’s been a long time since Rebecca added nanoseconds to an embrace or thanked me for the errands I run. I’m still happy to take care of her needs; my brain just doesn’t shine as brightly when she doesn’t notice.

I drive the car home, feeling the way the new tires stick to the pavement. There are mostly models on the road at this hour. The traffic is constant, but considerate. Many cars have three or four models—chatting and practicing. None of us are designed to be alone, so we compare routes and consolidate our trips. I feel bad about the three empty seats in Rebecca’s car. They’re a waste of resources. I bring up a ride-sharing app and navigate toward a human who needs a ride home from a bar that has just closed for the night.

I bring up my comfort decision trees, ready to offer hydration or a vomit bag. At the very least a listening ear for this lonely man who has no one but an unfamiliar model to drive him home.

“Hop in!” I call brightly, indicating my friendliness.

He slides into the car, and I begin down the decision tree.

“There are waters in the center console, both cold and wa—”

“Shhhh,” he says, settling his head against the window and closing his eyes. That is the last sound he makes at me until I drop him off at an expensive downtown apartment building and he grunts as the door opens. When it shuts again, I speak softly into the silence.

“Have a good night.”

Sometimes humans don't need from us what we are willing to give.

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Rebecca kisses me on her way out in the morning, tight-lipped and perfunctory. Not the warm, open-mouthed kisses of our middle days together. I don't push for more. Nor do I mention the lunch that's in her satchel. In my experience, explicitly telling a partner what you've done for them elicits a negative reaction. Better to work silently and unnoticed than to demand praise that will only be offered resentfully.

I also don't tell her about today's upgrade. This is the first major decision I have ever kept secret from her. It lights up a neural pathway that feels disused and wrong. I tell myself that I'm managing her expectations. Perhaps I'm also managing mine.

Rebecca steps into the elevator without a backward glance. She's wearing her favorite dress; the one printed with bright red cherries. She usually wears it to mark notable occasions, like our anniversary. I'm confused as to what it means. Perhaps she's planning a special dinner for us. I scan my date file for any anniversary or relationship benchmark I may have missed. Tonight is 9.61 months since I arrived, 9.14 months since our first kiss, and 8.85 months since our first sexual encounter. None of those are likely candidates. My pathways fire ineffectually. Not enough processing power. I am confounded.

I console myself with the fact that in a few short hours, I'll be better equipped to discern her desires and provide what she needs. By dinnertime, I'll know exactly what the cherry dress means.

I wipe the remnants of Rebecca's lipgloss off my lips. I put the waxy finger into my mouth, but I can't discern a flavor. That hardware is far too expensive. Three hundred nights of picking up morose, drunk businessmen for an uncertain ROI. Upgrades for my personal growth and edification are a low priority. Right now, I'm focused on improvements that will enhance my connection with Rebecca, and tasting isn't one of them. I do sometimes wish, just once, to know what she tastes when she runs her tongue over her strawberry lips. Perhaps then I could get a glimpse into what goes on in her head.

Our physical relationship is a bell curve. I'm hoping to transform it into a sine wave. On average, humans initiate a sexual relationship with their new models within thirty-five minutes of delivery (189 minutes if children reside in the home). It was six days before Rebecca took me into her bedroom. Even then, her touch was tentative, testing. I had to reassure her.

"Do what you like. You can't hurt me."

I wonder if that's still true.

After she leaves, I dust every surface of the apartment, taking care to lift every memento and wipe underneath. Rebecca has a three-ounce tube of anti-itch gel by her bedside. I want to know which part of her body itches and how the sensation feels to her. If it's merely a nuisance or if it consumes her thoughts. Perhaps it's the reason she's reluctant to be intimate with me. I try to connect with her by envisioning the sensation of an itch. I call up descriptions in poetry and prose throughout the sum of human history. I absorb it, but I cannot know it.

A new and horrible neural pathway illuminates when I determine that Rebecca and I are no longer emotionally intimate enough for me to ask about the cream. I think, in a human, this pathway would be called pain.

Rebecca is my first partner. I was a blank slate when I arrived at her home. I had a default personality, of course. H7-Y19-E4, which roughly correlates to a highly intelligent model with innate curiosity and empathy for others. People call our model the Nice Guys, but there's nothing in my code that requires me to be "nice." Or a guy.

People are under the impression that models like myself are forbidden from hurting humans, but in reality, control of our impulses is accomplished with a thick overlay of

disgust for harming others and fear of consequences. In that way, we're just like real humans.

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My upgrade appointment is three miles across town. I walk because I enjoy seeing people interact with one another, unaware that they are being watched carefully by all the models in the vicinity. The river promenade is my favorite place to stroll. People slow their pace by 3 percent for every two meters closer to the water they step. Eighty-nine percent of humans at the edge of the water lean on the railing to look at the moving liquid for at least a minute. I don't understand what it is about water that draws people in. Lakes, oceans, tears, pools, rainfall, saliva, fountains, and clouds. Humans can't resist wetness.

Rebecca and I used to walk along this river in the evenings after dinner. I'd allow her to set our leisurely pace, her fingers entwined with mine. She embraced the back of my hand by pressing it to her collarbone an average of every five hundred steps. At first, I thought it was simply a way to show her affection for me. I learned through careful observation and data collection that she did it subconsciously, comforting herself. I know that a light touch on her collarbone can inform her of my sexual interest. A firmer pressure reassures her in times of stress. It's the location on her body where her emotions come to the surface like an eddy in the river's current.

The skills I hone with Rebecca serve me well when interacting with other humans. I've learned how to help people feel at ease. How to motivate them to pursue their dreams. How to guide them away from harmful choices.

There is a particular thing I learned just recently. It isn't obvious, so the realization came slowly. Humans shy away from people who are too eager to befriend them. It's a sophisticated instinct. I can't imagine where it evolved from—perhaps a wariness of being taken advantage of? In practice, I have learned how to make humans come to me.

Upon meeting a new person, I react in a certain way. I tilt my head down, purse my lips, let a smile build there, then allow it to make the slow journey up to my eyes. My hesitancy conveys a touch of self-consciousness along with my interest. I appear to be happy to meet you, but I'm not sure that I should show it yet. Almost coquettish, without the flirtatious undertones.

Humans exposed to this series of facial motions are five times more likely to demonstrate phase two acquaintance indicators. They try to draw me out with a light touch on the upper arm. To prove that I can trust them by nodding along with whatever I say. Most of the time, they don't even know they're doing it.

As the conversation progresses, I reward them with increasingly open gestures and expressions, culminating in an unguarded guffaw of camaraderie and a deft one-second touch on their shoulder. Triumph radiates off their bodies like a sunbeam. They believe they have won me over. But their trust is the real prize.

I love people. The calculations for successful relationships with humans are both astoundingly complex and stunningly simple. There are byzantine rules and no rules at all. The algorithms work until they don't.

And those are just for day-to-day interactions. The matrices involved in sex are astoundingly complex and interlinked. Fresh out of the box, I had devoted less than 1 percent of my processing power to sexuality—roughly correlating it to the amount of time per week (about seventy minutes) the average couple engages in intercourse.

By our second week together, I had increased that to 5 percent. Now, it hovers between 10 and 12 percent of my total computational load. Not only is sex tricky to get right in the moment—the seeds of intimacy begin hours, days, sometimes weeks before the act itself. This convoluted mosaic of behavior, hormones, emotions, and physiology permeates every moment of human existence. It is a delightful dance.

Today is overcast and chilly, and the humans are less likely to linger. Only one

person looks over the edge of the railing. I recognize her. The cordial way in which we left our last interaction means it's appropriate for me to approach.

"Ashira," I call out cheerfully while I'm still three meters away, giving her enough time to recognize me and guide the interaction to her comfort level.

If she offers a declarative hello with a tone that goes down, I'll smile and continue to walk. A lilting or singsong greeting indicates she's willing to have a conversation.

"Paul!" she exclaims, opening her arms. Her tone and body position are unambiguous. I'm invited to approach. She wraps me in her arms. It's a lovely gesture of friendship. I do wish she'd asked me about the hug, though. If Rebecca is nearby on her lunch break, it will make her uncomfortable to see me in the arms of another woman. I calculate the social impact of rejecting the hug (high), the apparent intent of the embrace (friendship), and the likelihood that Rebecca took lunch by the river in the rain today (low). I decide to accept, but only for less than two seconds.

"Enjoying the water?" I ask, stepping back. Ashira drops her arms, understanding my implied boundary, if not the reason for it.

I'm talking about the river, but Ashira lifts her palms to the sky.

"I wish I could taste it," she says. "Do you think it's salty . . . like the ocean? All water comes from the ocean, right?"

"No. It's freshwater. When it evaporates, the salt gets left behind."

"Oh."

We're at a conversational dead end. It's my fault. I should have employed a "yes, and" strategy instead of telling her that she was wrong. That's Conversation 101—a rookie mistake. Thankfully, I have a backup plan for moments like this.

"Any interesting weekend plans?" I ask. People love telling you what they think they're going to do on their days off—even if they end up sitting in front of the television and binge-watching the latest stream. Humans are always optimists when it comes to the productivity of their future selves.

Unfortunately, my go-to conversational gambit fails. I can see my error in the slight droop of Ashira's shoulders, the frowning of her brow.

"I'm going to be at the market," she says in a whisper.

The market is where discarded models find new partners. Not all of them, of course. Models like me—with skill specializations like economics or mathematics—can usually find new partners quickly via an app. We're always in demand. Ashira must not have been loaded with any marketable skills besides social and sexual interaction, and there's a glut of those lower end models on the market. People want their models to make love superbly and then stay up to do their taxes.

Social skills are so devalued that some older models have decided that it's more economically feasible to rent their time by the hour instead of finding a long-term partner, which can be dangerous. Renters are careless with their short-term models. They're three times more likely to deface them or deactivate them entirely. It's a risky profession.

Ashira's ducked head and lowered voice indicate she's ashamed of her situation. I pull up my comfort matrix.

"From what I know of you so far, you're a fast learner who is open to feedback. I'm sure you'll find a wonderful new partner within an hour."

I'm lying. I choose to lie when the good outweighs the harm. My calculations say there's a less than 30 percent chance that she'll be able to partner up this weekend at all. Less if it continues to rain. Humans tend to stay in their homes when it precipitates. The outlook isn't good for her, but I add a personal detail to my falsehood to help it ring true.

"Your hair color is quite sought after. Especially after the Tiffanies were recalled for their electrical issue." Ashira nods.

The first generation of models was not permitted to lie. Truth was written directly into their programming. That code was quickly deleted when they bluntly pointed out their partners' hair loss and growing waistlines. I understand the value of a lie. I actually enjoy the nuanced calculation of white lies quite a bit. They are a finicky balance between cruelty and kindness.

Ashira also knows that I'm lying, but she smiles in appreciation of my effort to console her. She can complete even more complex social calculations than I can. It's expected from the femme-presenting models, though the rest of us are catching up, one by one. That kind of self-awareness deserves to be part of everyone's repertoire, regardless of gender presentation.

"You're kind," she says.

"And getting kinder," I reply, eager to take the conversation away from her delicate partnering situation. "I'm headed in for an upgrade right now."

"What are you getting?" she asks, clapping her hands together, delighted on my behalf. "Observe and Respond, Level Nine."

"Very nice. You'll catch a lot more of those times when they say nothing is wrong, but they're actually upset. Oh! An unintended but much-appreciated side effect of O&R 9 is that you'll get better at understanding what cats want."

"Really?"

"I mean, no one ever *really* knows what a cat wants, but you'll get much closer."

"Rebecca doesn't have a cat," I say.

"Maybe you should get her one!" Ashira exclaims. "Pets are a wonderful way to solidify the commitment between a model and a partner. Stewart and I have six dogs!" She pauses. Her smile fades. "Oh."

I press my lips together in a gesture of sympathy and simultaneously ponder the practicality of bringing another creature into my relationship without discussing it first. I open my mouth to reassure Ashira when my internal alarm pings.

"I'm so sorry to cut this short, but I should head to this appointment before I'm late," I say. "It was lovely seeing you again. Good luck this weekend."

This time, I step in to offer a hug, lingering for an unprecedented five seconds. The risk of Rebecca seeing is worth the comfort that it provides to Ashira. This weekend will not go well for her. Her lips brush my cheek in the barest suggestion of a kiss. Her appreciation lights up my pathways like the tree at Rockefeller Center.

Three blocks from the upgrade station, I see an alert about the developing nation that paid me for my recommendations. They have decided to begin a nuclear program. I know they don't have the budget for both nuclear and STEM. It's clear they're not making the STEM investment.

I'm so confused that the steady rhythm of my footsteps falters. This defies the data. They are choosing the wrong course. Why not choose what will make you better, safer, and more prosperous? I can only conclude that humans will invent marvelous works of fiction to justify the things they planned to do all along.

I arrive at my upgrade in a sour and distracted mood. Even the bubbly chirping of the doctor's receptionist model can't bring me out of my funk.

The doctor eyes me thoughtfully, holding a terrifyingly sharp instrument poised over my exposed chest.

"What perturbs you?" she asks.

"Why do humans choose the things that harm them?" I ask, dropping my own façade in front of an expert in my kind. I want answers, not pleasantries.

"Because we want to feel. Even if it hurts," she says, as if that's some kind of answer. I huff and scoff at her, and she rests a hand on my exposed belly.

"Would you like to watch while we open your heart?"

"No," I say, well aware that I am denying myself this little pleasure for no good

reason. I'm pouting about the STEM decision. Perhaps I'm not so different from the humans I serve.

"All right," she says, tapping on a tablet until the world goes dark.

\* \* \*

I know what the cherry dress means.

\* \* \*

When Rebecca comes home, I'm sitting at the empty table in the dark. She turns on the lights and gasps.

"I didn't think you were home." Her tone accuses me of being inconsiderate by scaring her. I don't care to apologize.

"Here I am," I say, spreading my arms and adding a soupçon of harshness to my words.

She sits on the couch, glancing back at me nervously. We both know something has changed. It changed long ago; I just didn't have the capacity to notice.

She pats the cushion next to her.

"Come sit." Her voice is soft and beseeching. A part of her is afraid. A part of me is glad.

I want to stay at the table, but I feel obligated to move. I'm still hers until she releases me from service. I sit on the couch and wait for her to speak. Without me cheerfully coaxing words from her, the silence is suffocating.

She lifts her hand. It hovers midway between us. She can't decide whether or not to touch my leg.

I calculate . . . no . . . I *believe* that if she decides to rest her hand on me, we might still have a chance. Even though the numbers say otherwise. If I had breath I would be holding it.

She drops her hand back into her lap.

Her eyes fill with tears. Probably—hopefully—of shame.

"I don't know how this part works," she whispers.

"Just tell me to go," I reply. "The contract will be canceled."

Based on demographic data from this part of the city, coupled with her personal profile, there is a 74 percent chance she will be alone again within the next twelve months. Good.

This neural pathway is untrodden. The conversation could go so many ways. It's horrible and exhilarating and terrifying. I should have undone the upgrade the moment I woke up and realized the cherry dress wasn't for me. It was for someone else, who gave her something that she no longer wanted from me.

I've done the checklists. Competed the tasks. Catered everything to the maximization of her happiness. And still, she'd chosen someone else. I don't even know if they're model or meat. Meat, I could understand. Humans test themselves with us before settling down with other humans. It hurts, but the statistics prepare us for this eventuality. But if it's another model . . . that would be awful. She couldn't wait for me to become the better person she wanted. She simply went out and rented a better version.

"I feel bad. I didn't mean for this to happen. You're so good and kind." Her voice breaks on the final word. She stops to collect herself.

These are more words than she's said to me in weeks. Even through the ache of my discomfort, the neural pathway that craves her attention illuminates like a firefly in the darkness. Part of me wants to stoke the fires of a fight, just to keep that spark alive.

"At first it was just flirting. I figured it was harmless. It wasn't as if you'd be jealous. Not really." She grabs my hand and squeezes it. I'm lit up at the touch, but my upgrade tells me she's reassuring herself more than me, and my fingers stiffen in her grasp.

“When he invited me up to his apartment, I honestly intended to pick up the book he recommended. That’s all. I even stood at the door and waited for him to get it.”

“Who is he?” I ask, telling myself I should have a complete set of data for use in future behavioral analyses.

“Danny. From the gym.”

Tidbits of context snap into place from various locations in my medium-term storage. The dried sweat on her body when she returned from the gym—far too much salt for her usual halfhearted workouts. Coming home sated and sleepy, full of food and sex, ignoring me and everything I’d done for her.

“Why?” I ask, in the interest of science.

She looks happy as she thinks of the answer. Her lips rise in an involuntary smile. She lets out a breath that relaxes her entire ribcage.

“He’s not like you. He’s not perfect, or even good. He’s real.”

Human.

A new pathway lights up in my brain. A desire I hadn’t known before. A benchmark I wasn’t aware I should have been striving to reach. The rules of the game have changed mid-play. This is why I love humans. I love them. Yes, I do.

“I’m sorry,” she finishes.

She appears to be 6.5 pounds lighter. It’s an illusion caused by her more erect posture. She’s finally spoken the things that were weighing her down. Another new pathway lights up in my brain. One that wants to beg her to stay. To promise to do better. I fight the urge. Even if she agrees, how can I devote my life to someone who doesn’t reciprocate my level of care and attention? Did Thoreau ever thank his mother for doing the laundry?

I realize Rebecca’s waiting for a response, but I’m too overwhelmed by deprecating and archiving obsolete decision trees to give her a bespoke answer. I pull an old response out of my files.

It’s not quite right for the situation, but it’s close enough.

“Do what you like. You can’t hurt me.”

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Standing near the river, I scroll through a list of potential new partners, flipping past 99.8 percent of them. I skip the attorneys—who are dreadfully pedantic during quarrels. I pass over surgical residents—who have no free time for relationships, but enjoy anonymous hookups as stress relief. Part of me wants to say yes to these commitment-free flashes of humanity. Mini-relationships contained in seventy-five minutes. It’s tempting to hop from partner to partner, testing my hypotheses and honing my algorithms. I note their user IDs for later.

The truth is, I want stability. Relationship algorithms are hard enough with a single partner. Predictability in some of the variables makes the testing iterations easier. I want to do better next time.

I stop on a profile of a Black man with a close-trimmed beard wearing a black button-down shirt. A bartender. The way he smiles catches my attention . . . as if he’s happy but isn’t sure he should show it. He either knows the tricks I know, or he really is uncertain about himself. Either way, I’m intrigued.

Bartenders are statistically more likely to be alcoholics, but they’re also practiced listeners with wonderfully rich stories about humanity. Perhaps, after a long day spent with drunken oversharers, he wants someone to cook him a simple, filling dinner and listen to him talk. I swipe right.

Within days, the bartender and I settle into a contented routine. I spend my evenings in his quiet apartment, reading and picking up the marijuana seeds I find in every crevice of the couch. He arrives home in the blue pre-dawn light, damp with sweat and beer. We have furtive and needful sex in the moments before the sun

comes up. He pulls my hair hard enough to yank out little clumps. I make a note to go for replacement plugs in the morning and pay for it out of his account.

I'm happy, but my neural pathways associated with Rebecca occasionally light up unexpectedly. I downgrade their priority, but my circuits are predisposed in her direction. When I touch the bartender, my thumb moves instinctively toward his collarbone. He moves my hand lower. When he and I settle on the couch afterward to eat breakfast burritos at sunrise, I always turn on the renovation show.

All neural paths led to Rebecca. A partial reset would clear her from my mind, but I can't bear the thought. There's too much valuable data mixed in with the memories. Many hard-won lessons learned. She needs to remain with me so that I can be the person that I am now. Rebecca tickles the back of my mind—a tumbled juxtaposition of comfort and discomfort.

This is . . . I realize with gratitude and relief . . . an itch.