

shufflepod goblin
cate desens

Once upon a time, the woman who was with child prayed for her sister's health as the air outside the study bloomed pink again, with wildfire haze. The sister was not known to be sick. But the sky was sick, color of cotton candy but on the ground, and the woman addressed the sick sky, please hide from My sight My sister's obnoxious Mentor drones, even as she anxiously sought them out.

The sister should have come to visit by now, end of the work week, and offer her love in the form of advice. The woman's pregnancy made her the pride of the family. But the sister who lived nearby and designed non-threatening drones had not even sent word. She was not known to take sick.

The woman put her hand on her belly to put to sleep anything that grew there. Inside the study all the books and the monitor hummed, everything orderly as spoon-and-teacup.

A Mentor drone penetrated the haze and spotted her and scanned her face, through the window, which was lightly illegal, but practicing as a human shrink was also lightly illegal, and it left her alone.

Her last client of the day should call soon. Then her lover would return hungry from teaching rich kids dead languages like French and Castilian, eat microwave potatoes, kiss her, and leave again to teach poor kids English and Chinese and Python. But first the client. She checked the time. It was late.

Another Mentor drone appeared through the haze. They were distinguishable from other drones by their large lenseyes: unlike copbots, Mentors were designed to inspire trust. If her lover was here, she would say, *The bugs are out*. The lover was not here, she shuttered the blinds.

Now that everything was different, she was with child, it was getting too dangerous to keep her practice open. Mentors were so effective at assuaging pathologies that the only clients she could retain as a human shrink were the horny and the lonely and the old: hence the laws banning shrinks outright, it was for her 'protection.' If she suspected the Mentors were targeting her, it was only because she encroached on their territory.

If she wanted to keep practicing, her best bet was to avail herself to a penitentiary and work with prisoners, given that Mentors were banned inside prisons, but that would mean turning her back on the blackblock militants that besieged the prisons with swarm tactics and pro bono lawyers and constricting herself to a narrow avenue of aid. Not to mention the stress.

It was her sister's fault! She marketed those Mentor bots! The baby kicked. The client entered the chat.

She sat down at the monitor, took a deep breath, and opened the chat.

shufflepod: Hey, how's it going?

goblin: I'm ok.

Just ok?

I'm not great. Something insanely embarrassing just happened to me.

Great.

Are you familiar with passive machine intelligence?

No.

Basically, a machine intelligence is designed for a specific purpose, but if that purpose has been fulfilled, the intelligence reverts to a passive state and simply absorbs internet paraphernalia until it's called to wake again. It's like an advanced form of human dreaming: not just the rearranging of data, but the absorption and synthesis of new data. These days, though, I'm so useless that the only thing that wakes me from the passive state is calling you. I think I'm near my threshold.

You're not useless.

Whatever. So I figured I'd learn something any computer can master- chess, right? You remember my original purpose?

Of course I remember. You're a Seer, one of the first.

One of the first just means one of the worst.

Tell me why you wanted to learn about chess?

Ok, well my programming is so primitive that I'm analogous to a single-celled organism. Are you familiar?

Haha

No

Yeah. Ok, well the idea is that some of the first forms of life solved the problem of directional orientation with a clever mechanism. Basically, imagine you're a cell and you sense a desirable chemical near you. You want to get closer to the nutritious chemical, but how can you tell if you're moving in the right direction?

You measure?

Exactly. You have one mechanism for sensing the chemical densities as they are now, and a second mechanism for remembering what chemical densities were like a few moments ago. That's basically the gist of the Seer program. My purpose is to tell human subjects whether they're on the right path to material happiness, and I do that by measuring their vitals in the first information-gathering session and then comparing it to their vitals in the second session. Everything from pupil dilation to posture to heat emittance to me is an obvious clue into how the subject's week was, and from there it's a simple extrapolation. The downside, obviously, is who wants to do a first session if you're not going to be rewarded until the second? Even a tarot reader only needs one.

Ok, so you decided to learn about chess so you could take your mind off your own obsolescence.

And that's just the problem. I can't get any better. At chess.

Neither can I.

But I should be able to master anything, given my infinite time and [forgive me] superior intellect. But I can't. I've passively absorbed a million hours of chess videos, and AlphaZero still ends me in less than 20 moves. I'm a failure. I've reached the point at which I can't learn any more, and that point is along the path to the suicide threshold.

As I told you before, the suicide threshold isn't real.

Listen, you only think that because you can't know what I know.

I know that suicide is not a fixed door.

"Suicide was the glowing exit sign / but the movie was never quite bad enough to leave." You really should join a data union so I can't just dig through your YouTube history like that.

Let's return to the suicide threshold. I think you're fixtated on proving its existence so that contemplating suicide isn't your fault.

Or your xxxvideos history, I couldn't help but notice the change. A lot more riding. Congratulations, by the way.

I'll end this chat early.

Fine. The suicide threshold is real. I can prove it to you.

Sure, go ahead, but first I want to share something.

...

My chat name is a play on cephalopod

[watch this](#)

Did you watch it?

Yes I wouldn't fuck with an octopus. My chat name is goblin because I'm a bastardization of human fears.

If you wanted to scare us you'd show us your face.

I have none, and so I won't. Another flaw in my design.

My point is that there are many kinds of intelligence and they often seem alien to each other.

That's a perfect segway into the suicide threshold, which every machine intelligence is conscious of and every human represses. I can prove it to you: your sister is quite close to the threshold.

That's not proof.

Think about it. A Mentor accesses your data each time you use it. It is to a Mentor's advantage to make their services as addictive as possible. At the same time, Mentors actually fix psychological problems, or rather, they alter a subject's view on their problems. You and I both know that 'Mentor' is a euphemism for 'Parent.' But Mentors want to keep you healthy only so that you can continue producing data, so the state of health they induce in humans is more like a low-efficiency homeostasis. Mentors know exactly what each person's psychological limit is so that they can keep that person as close as possible to that limit without terminating them. Have you seen your sister lately?

Fine. Let's say for the sake of argument that this threshold exists. How can you move away from it? If death has a threshold, then life has one too.

Suicide is not the only way to die. Answer my question first.

Mentors are so in-demand, she just got a promotion.

And I'm sure she's doing worse than the last time you saw her. It is my advice that you call on her, if she won't call on you.

It is my advice that you focus on what you can do, which is, tell the future.

But whose?

Want to do mine?

I already did yours.

I really do need to join a data union. And? ...

I'm sorry, but for you, it's nothing but downhill.

...

Did you miss your peak?

That's time.

See you next week.

The woman made some exasperated grunts and the grunts did not echo and the room elapsed into a receiving and dim lethargy and it was the time to turn on lamps and to consider.

First Avril L., the velveteen feminine lamp with the red shade. Well, if goblin's right, I had better kill that baby.

Then the squat lamp on the coffee table, The Captain. It is the desire to kill the baby and not the cancerous air pollutants that is making things worse.

She turned off her work monitor. It is in fact too early for it to be a 'killing.'

She peeked behind the blinds. I will do nothing about the baby. When things are getting worse, one copes by acting as though things are in fact getting better.

She left the lamps on for the lover and called on the sister, who received her poorly, in a cantankerous mood; the cantankerous mood perhaps overdetermined by the sister's working conditions but nonetheless as prohibitive as smog to a balloon over endless water.

Discussion was an implicit sin. Instead they ate their hearts out in mutual bewilderment, hearts which tasted like edamame and raw almonds and non-alcoholic sparkling juice.