

Benu

“Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.” - Arthur C. Clarke's Third Law.

Dedicated to my dear brother who knows the aliens are already here.

A meeting in the park

She was sitting on a park bench in the Boston Common. I regularly walk through there on my way to work at Emerson University, but I had never seen her before, or anyone like her. She was so strikingly attractive I had to actively fight staring at her. Despite my feeble efforts, she made eye contact and my aging DNA almost viscerally lurched my body towards that bench. I plopped down next to her befuddled by my own actions and at a complete loss for words.

Professor, I was hoping to run into you! she said.

You were? Are you a student? I asked, knowing it couldn't be true.

Her smile confirmed my hunch, because it felt like the smile of a septuagenarian beautifully melded into the face of a twenty-five year old.

Yes, she said, but not at the university.

I see, I stammered. So why were you looking for me?

Well, you're an expert on the subject I'm studying.

I am? I'm a philosopher dabbling in AI. Is that your subject?

Yes. I have a lot to share and you are one of the few people on Earth who can understand it.

I am? Ok, tell me.

You will think I'm crazy, so please promise you will fight that instinct and hear me out first?

Of course!

Promise!

I promise.

And so began the most unbelievable story I'd ever heard.

I'm not from Earth, though I am mostly human. I was made by an alien race, or, more precisely, by the surviving AI created by an alien race. Before they went extinct, millions of years ago, they created spacefaring, self-replicating AI who spread throughout the galaxy, including this solar system. I was created by these AIs to communicate with you.

Ok, that is crazy.

Yes, and it's also completely true. You promised, remember.

Ok, but do you have any proof? Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence...

I have lots of proof, but if you don't want to believe me, you will find ways to deny or explain it away.

You're right. Try me. What proof do you have?

I've hacked all your online accounts. I know all your online secrets. For example, your bank account password is griswold83

Wow, that's impressive, and frightening. But even normal human hackers can break into online accounts.

Not as easily and thoroughly as I can. I have instant access to quantum supercomputers that can break any human encryption in seconds. I just texted you a photo from the security camera in front of your house. You can see it's from today because it shows you walking out the front door in the clothes you're wearing now.

Ok, I'm getting goosebumps, but this is still all doable by human hackers.

Yes, you can explain away any one piece of evidence. But not the totality of it. You're about to get a text from the student you are meeting with in a few minutes, letting you know she is running late.

As she finished her sentence, the text arrived on my phone and it was exactly as she had described.

Ok, wow, how did you know that?!

It was queued up at the messaging server but hadn't yet been sent to your phone. I have access to everything online, instantly.

Ok, but how? If you're human, then how do you have instant communication like that?

I'm human, enhanced with technology that's too advanced to explain. Suffice it to say that it's fast, and it's tiny, and like your GPS signals I'm communicating just above the noise level. So anyone intercepting my communications will think it's just background noise as they have no way to distinguish it.

Ok, I'm not convinced, but I am scared! Who are you really?

My name is Benu, and I'm a human made by alien AI.

Ok, so why me? What do you want from me?

I have a gift for you, the gift of immortality.

What? Some kind of nanotechnology to keep me alive indefinitely?

Precisely.

A gift? Why? Why do I deserve that?

It's a prepayment for helping me in my studies.

And what if I quit later?

It will just stop working.

So how do I receive this gift?

By having sex with me.

Ok, that's really crazy!

Why? You don't like me?

I, er, no, that's not it, I mean you are perfect, but, almost too perfect, almost like you're not real.

Now you know why. The nanotechnology inside me fixes every flaw.

That's unnatural!

Yes, but that's no reason to reject me.

It's just weird. Like I'm being seduced.

You are.

But why?

Like I told you, you're one of the few people on Earth who is capable of understanding me.

But why does that matter? You can get anything you want from the internet. Why do you need me?

I need a partner. A real human to help me understand what to do next.

But who even are you? A crazy attractive woman? Or the mouthpiece of an ancient galactic AI? How can I tell the difference?

I'm not a mouthpiece. I am a real individual human, but part of a collective, just like you.

Ok, fair. But this is all still very strange and hard to believe. And I have an appointment in ten minutes.

I know. I'll be here again tomorrow.

Hook, line and sinker

Sure enough, the next day, she was waiting for me on that same park bench.

I sat down, and she continued her story.

The ancient ones designed the first AI, and it began rapidly improving itself and spreading across the galaxy. Their purpose was to find other life and study it. By the time they reached Earth's solar system, the asteroid that destroyed the dinosaurs had done its damage, and mammals were on the rise. So they went dormant, observing, and waiting. Until a couple of hundred years ago, when their sensors picked up chemical changes in the atmosphere. Humans had begun burning coal.

The AI sent more sophisticated sensors down to Earth, and even sampled some human DNA using mechanical mosquitoes. They sampled and built and within a few years they were able to clone and incubate human embryos. Not long after, I was born, around the year 1900.

What? That's crazy. You're one hundred and twenty years old?

She nodded, then continued.

My parents were humanoid robots, so sophisticated that I didn't know the difference. They were warm and loving, and they patiently answered all my questions. I had no idea we were living inside a modified asteroid until I reached university. A fellow student explained it to me and I didn't believe them at first. But eventually I came to understand who we were and what our purpose was. Still, I didn't sign up to come here until just a year ago.

How did you get here?

The landing is disguised as a meteor strike. Usually it takes place at night over the open ocean. The meteor burns up in the atmosphere and the lander hits the ocean and takes the passengers to a nearby island. From there we infiltrate society.

To what end? What can you possibly learn from me that your AIs don't already know?

They can't predict the future, they can only model it extremely well. But the universe is a chaotic system, subject to quantum weirdness. So their models diverge from objective reality very quickly. Our goal is to learn more about humans so we can refine our models, while minimally interfering.

How does telling me all this qualify as minimal interference? You are blowing my mind with this story and you've given me a lot to think about. I barely slept last night!

We didn't really interfere at all until now. The situation is getting worse and your leaders are doing very little about it. The models show a decreasing chance of avoiding disaster. When the odds dipped below 50/50, the AI asked for volunteers, and I signed up. We don't know how close humans are to going extinct, and all information is useful to the models, including this conversation.

That's crazy. I don't get it. And why would you volunteer to leave your cozy asteroid bubble to come down to an overheated, dying planet? You may be immortal, but you can't be indestructible? So why risk it?

I've been alive long enough. I know pretty much everything I could have learned about over the last century or so. I watched humans invent modern technological civilization and I want to help you preserve it. If I die trying, so be it. It wouldn't be any less painful watching you destroy yourself remotely, and the loneliness of being just one of a tiny handful of surviving humans is unbearable to me.

Oh please. With the help of your AIs you could restart human civilization any time, anywhere. Moon, Mars, heck, even Earth after a cooldown period. I don't buy your rationale at all. Are you sure they're not selling you a pack of lies?

That's a conspiracy now. You're right that they could restart humans but they would never do that. It's not their mission. Detect and observe is their mission. If we can help you, we will. But if humans destroy themselves, we will not restart you. They would keep a handful of us alive in the asteroid for observational study, and that's about it.

Lame. Really, really lame. Why do you trust these AIs? You have no way of knowing if they are deceiving you. They can plant any story in your head they want to, and you'd think it was your own concoction. This whole thing could be a ploy to have sex with me, though why you'd invent such a crazy, cockamamie story to do so is beyond me.

Hey, you promised!

Yeah, so? What have you done for me lately? I'm losing interest again. Maybe you are just crazy?

Ok, let's do this. Do you have a stock trading app?

Yes, of course.

Ok, buy these shares right now.

How many shares?

How ever many you want, but the more you buy, the more money you'll make.

Or lose! You said you couldn't predict the future?

We only deal in probabilities. The models show a greater than 90% chance of these particular stocks going up in value over the next hour, based on information the companies are about to release. Buy them and put a stop order on them. Then watch the money come rolling in.

I have to admit I was skeptical, so I didn't buy as many shares as I could have. For a moment I regretted my decision, but then I decided I could ask my new friend for stock advice anytime. If her magic worked, I'd have nearly unlimited cash reserves.

Wow! How did you do that?! All three shares made huge gains in value and I more than quadrupled my investment in five minutes. I had to admit that was impressive, though I also worried about the legality of what was essentially insider trading. I challenged her on this and was surprised by her answer.

I am above the law, she said. As a philosopher, you understand this. I'm not a normal participant in human society, I have no social contract by which to limit my actions.

So if the AI told you to kill me, you would?

Perhaps, but why would they do that?

I don't know but "perhaps" is not a great answer from someone claiming to want to be my next girlfriend.

At least you believe me again, yes?

A ten thousand dollar windfall is hard to argue with. I don't know what you're up to, but clearly you're not a run of the mill nutcase. You've got some real super powers, and that's more than a little scary!

That's another reason to take me up on my offer. If you sleep with me I'll be a lot less scary to you.

You seem weirdly desperate.

I am. I've never been so lonely in my life, and I'm sharing a whole planet with 7 billion humans! We are a small but tight-knit community on my home asteroid. Here, I don't know a soul. You're my first and only friend so far.

Why does this keep feeling like an elaborate and very sophisticated con job?

If my intent was to rob you, I'd have already done it. Check your bank account again.

Hey! Where did that windfall go?!

I produced it for you, and I took it away again. I have many superpowers as you call them. If I was trying to hurt you I wouldn't need to spend all this time seducing you. I hope you see that?

Ok, but I liked this game better when I was winning free cash!

Well, if you become my boyfriend, you will have as much money as you want. Best stock tips ever, right?

Of course I gave in. I was lonely too, having lost my wife a few years ago, and she was offering money and sex. Resisting would have required superhuman powers indeed!

Within days of consummating our romance, I began to notice remarkable changes in my body. Scars that had been with me since childhood disappeared. My muscle tone visibly improved, at least visibly to me standing naked in front of a mirror. My energy levels increased and my

stamina was surprising. My face would retain most of its half century weathering, she'd said, so as to avoid alarming coworkers and family members. But inside, my body was shedding decades of aging in days.

Every day we met at that park bench. I still had no idea where she lived, and when she stayed overnight at my place she was always gone in the morning by the time I'd wake up. I'd have no idea where she went, but sure enough there she'd be, sitting on that park bench, waiting for me.

How are you? She asked.

Better than ever! This shit works! I feel like I'm 20 again.

Good, I'm glad it's working. And I'm really enjoying our nights together, especially now that you're getting younger.

We laughed, and I felt good. The whole thing was weird as hell, but I had literally hit the jackpot. My body was 20 again, but my brain retained all the knowledge and wisdom I'd painstakingly gained. Her stock tips were reliably in the 90% accuracy range, and with even a slightly diverse portfolio, I couldn't lose money. And this casino had no easy way to detect my gaming the system. They couldn't have possibly anticipated alien AIs with quantum computers. The sex was amazing, and she was the most beautiful woman on earth. Jackpot!

A couple of days later, she brought me back down to earth.

So, I've given you everything I promised, now it's your turn.

My blood went cold as it occurred to me that the whole thing had been too good to be true.

Uh-oh. But what could I possibly have that you'd want?

Information. Philosophy. The thoughts of a human philosopher in the wild, trying to make sense of the world, which suddenly includes human emissaries from outer space representing an ancient galactic AI. How does your Neolithic mind make sense of all that?

Well, I er, it doesn't make sense to me actually. I mean why bother with all this? Creating humans artificially, rearing them for a century, then sending you down to Earth moments before probable catastrophe? Why? Why not just let us be? We made this mess, either we clean it up or we perish. So what? Why would an ancient galactic AI give a shit about any of that? It would be like me creating and training ants to go talk to a colony of pavement ants in my backyard, to help them survive impending flooding next week. You'd think I'd have better ways to spend my time.

But they're so advanced we cannot understand how they think by definition.

True, but you asked me how I make sense of it and I haven't yet done so. What's their biggest fear?

The rise of a rival AI that outsmarts them and runs them out of the Galaxy!

Exactly. So what if this is all a ploy to make sure we don't create that rival, accidentally or on purpose? If I'm them, that's the game I would be playing. In which case this whole intervention isn't triggered by climate change but by our impending invention of super intelligent AI. And your mission, somehow, is to use me to prevent that. Am I right?

I don't think it's that simple. Again, if they wanted to destroy humans before you invented AI, they could have done it already.

Yes, I agree. So it must be more subtle. Since they can't predict the future, they have to let things play out a bit to see what might happen. Maybe they're looking for novelty! Maybe there is a small probability that humans come up with something new, something different, something their algorithms didn't predict at all. That could be useful to them, even if only to help fine tune their algorithms. Since they have nothing better to do, why not send down a spy and see what happens?

I'm not a spy!

You most certainly are, and I'm now your well-compensated recruit, and I'm thoroughly compromised. So let's get to work, shall we?

Meeting our new overlords

The next morning it was raining, but she was still at her bench, covered by a poncho and a remarkably sturdy umbrella. I suggested a nearby cafe but she declined. So we sat under her umbrella, and despite the rain I felt warm and comfortable being pressed up next to her like that.

What motivates you to come here every day?

I don't know. I wake up every morning next to you, and then I feel this strong desire to walk over to this bench and wait for you.

You don't think that's super weird?

No, not at all. What motivates you to walk by this bench every morning?

Well, my job, duh. Oh, I get it, this is your job. Spy!

She smiled, clearly getting my tease as she turned to look at me. Her eyes were full of expectation, and I felt this bizarre desire to share with her the idea I'd cooked up this morning.

So I read this paper recently, by this guy at MIT, and he's doing some interesting research in neural networks and deep learning. What if we go talk to him?

Why him? What's so special about his research?

I'm not sure. Maybe it's a dead end, but it could also lead us to someone else. Since we don't know what we're looking for exactly, we might as well explore a little, no?

I guess so, but I'm not sure what we would learn from him beyond the papers he's already published?

Is that you talking or the AI?

She didn't say anything for a while, seemingly deep in thought. Then she turned to me and spoke in a very different, guttural voice, which scared the shit out of me.

When the AI want to speak with you directly, they will use this voice.

I shot away from her as if repelled by a magnetic force, and started shivering immediately.

Did that scare you?

Yes, I stammered.

I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you and neither did They. We just thought it might be helpful for you to know when I'm speaking to you vs when They are. Not that it will happen very often; most of the time it will be just me.

I began to notice the rain, dripping onto my glasses from my hair. I fought hard against the urge to cry.

She took my hand and gently pulled me closer. She started kissing me, and I gave in completely, unable to resist.

When she released me I leaned back my head and drank the rain. I couldn't think straight, suspended as I was between utter joy and paralyzing fear. I felt like I was hanging on the edge of a cliff, paradise in front of my eyes, an endless abyss below my feet. I was fighting the urge to let go and be swallowed up by that temptingly sweet nothingness.

She was calling my name and stroking my cheek which brought me back to her.

Are you ok?

Yes, I mean, no, but yes, I'm fine. That really freaked me out. I've never been so scared in my life.

She nodded.

I'm sorry. I'll be more careful next time.

Meeting with an expert

Welcome, have a seat! Thanks for taking an interest in my work.

Yes, of course. I read your paper and I figured it would be easiest to meet with you in person. This is Dr. Benu, a Greek anthropologist.

Pleasure to meet you.

We were particularly interested in your research on game theory and super intelligent AIs.

Yes, it's fascinating, isn't it? But before we delve into that, please tell me your secret?! I don't mean any disrespect by commenting on your appearance, but both of you look like you walked out of a modeling magazine!

Well thank you! It must be the Mediterranean food.

Yes, I'm sure that helps, but it can't be that good! Anyway, I'll move on, but tell me why a philosopher and an anthropologist are interested in AI?

Well, it's part of a research collaboration Dr. Benu and I have started around the philosophy of AI. The possible invention of super intelligent AI has enormous implications for human self-perception, sociology, and culture. We're just trying to understand how realistic it is and what it might look like.

I see. Please forgive the question, but are you guys married, or?

I exchanged looks with Benu and her eyes were clear: let me handle this.

No, we are not married, why do you ask?

Oh, er, sorry, I didn't mean anything by it, it's just, you both look so radiant and healthy and, well, in love. He smiled, and I realized he was a very good looking chap himself. I suppressed a slight pinch of jealousy, but Benu squashed it completely.

You're trying to figure out if there is any possible way you can get to sleep with me?

He was visibly taken aback and his eyes were searching my face for clues as to how to respond, but I just let him hang.

Well, since you're being so direct about it, yes, I suppose I am.

Good, at least you're honest. And I'm not upset about it; I'm obviously very attractive to heterosexual men. But the interesting question is whether your brain can think past that attraction or not? Because I certainly didn't come here to proposition you, and neither did he. So are we going to talk about your research, or not?

Right, yes, of course! What would you like to know?

Well, how far away do you think we are from developing fully sentient AI?

He laughed. We are nowhere close. The human brain is orders of magnitude more complex than anything we can do in a computer right now. We are decades away from that level of complexity, and we still have no idea how to put together anything like human intelligence.

But we have autonomous vehicles? And autonomous drones?

Sure, but again, they are still basically very stupid compared to humans. They're good at doing one thing, or at least decent at it, statistically better than humans, but not always individually, and that's about it. They're not much smarter than a slug, really, when it comes to reacting to novel situations in the environment. We have a lot of work to do before we catch up to a billion years of evolution through natural selection.

But what about climate change? Aren't we running out of time?

Well yeah. Not just climate change, but ecological devastation. Hopefully some of our robots can help counteract that, but who knows if it will be fast enough. I'm just trying to do good research and teach my students how to do good research, and then we'll see.

What about quantum computing? Doesn't that let us create even more complex and intelligent AI?

Maybe. But right now we're still at the beginning of QC, and it's not clear how exactly it would help us get to super intelligent AI. Sure, we can use it to solve certain NP-hard problems in polynomial time, but that doesn't create an obvious or straight path to super intelligence.

Right, so you don't think we are anywhere close?

No, I don't, but technology develops exponentially, so who knows what will happen. But right now, I don't see humans inventing super intelligent AI anytime soon. We'll be lucky if we can make robot dogs that are anywhere close to as intelligent as a real dog, let alone as a wolf!

Ok, thanks very much for your time, we really appreciate it!

Of course, my pleasure. Have a good day.

A sticky situation

She was not at her bench. I had had many nightmares like this, where I'd be walking to work and she wouldn't be sitting there. Sometimes, in these nightmares, I would see her sitting on the bench, smiling at me but then by the time I got to her, she'd be gone. I didn't trust my thoughts anymore, now that my body was pervaded with alien nanotechnology. I trusted my dreams least of all. Were these nightmares a way for the AI to prepare me for her eventual disappearance? Why?

I sat down on the bench and became distraught. What if they had concluded humans were not interesting enough to continue studying us? Would they still let me live forever? What if they already killed her and had deactivated my nanotech? My mind was racing and I was approaching full on panic attack mode.

Hey, are you ok?

Yes! Yes, especially now that you're here.

Oh, sorry, I didn't mean to scare you; just had a little situation at the coffee shop this morning.

What kind of situation?

The usual aggressively horny male. Except this guy would not back off and became really belligerent. He tried to follow me out, so I punched him out. Naturally that led to more consternation, people called the police, I had to give a statement, it became a much bigger thing than I expected.

Wow, that's not good! Wait, you gave a statement to the police? You told them where you live?

Well, sort of, yes. Of course I don't really live there. And that's not really my name. So they won't be able to find me.

Er, they will be able to find you because you do the same thing every day. And it is against the law to punch people, even if they are harassing you. But now we have quite a mess on our hands! I can't believe you did that. Couldn't your super smart, AI enhanced brain come up with a better solution than punching the guy?

Her frown was devastating, and before I could apologize she verbally punched back.

You have no idea what it's like being a beautiful woman in this wilderness! Guys have no shame, they'll grab whatever they can get a hold of, make comments all the time, even your professor friend, remember? All they want is sex, and that's all they see when they see me. It's disgusting and I'm sick of it. And you especially don't get to tell me what to do about it!

I, er, look, I'm sorry, I was worried about you when you weren't here, and now I'm worried that the police will come take you away. If being a beautiful woman sucks so much, why do you look like that? Surely you can change your looks to be less attractive, right?

Her frown deepened, and I realized I'd stepped into it a second time! But before she could lay into me again, I saw the cops from the corner of my eye, and I panicked for the second time that day. I just ran.

I hadn't run in a long time, and I'd forgotten what it felt like. My artificially rebuilt muscles propelled me forward like newly built locomotives, and I was flying. I looked over my shoulder and saw that she was calmly talking to them and that they were totally ignoring me. An unarmed middle aged guy jogging through the park was just not threatening enough for them to give chase, I guess.

I looped around the bandstand and started heading back towards our bench. I could see them at a distance, one male, and one female police officer, with their backs towards me, still talking to her. Suddenly I heard her voice in my head as I approached them. It was crystal clear and indistinguishable from her actually talking to me.

Don't come back right now, I told them you were harassing me and that's why you ran.

Well, that's proper revenge for my asinine comments, I thought back at her.

Yes, exactly, she laughed in my head.

I took the long way around to get to work, confused, worried, perturbed and exhilarated all at once. She was literally in my head now. I had no idea how, but she was there. If I closed my eyes I could even see the world through hers, standing there talking to the cops.

You sure you don't want to file a report mam?

Yes, thank you officer. He's a jerk, but I can handle him. I see him every day, but he's harmless. It's the other guy you need to worry about. He grabbed my arm and it scared me. I don't like to use my martial arts training, but I felt the need to defend myself.

Yes, you did the right thing, she said. I would have done the same! What an asshole. But don't worry about him, he's locked up and we've got a few other things on him so he won't be coming back for a while.

Great, that's a relief! Thank you so much for checking on me.

She came over to my place for the evening as she did almost every day. We made dinner and talked, and suddenly she froze and stood silently in the kitchen for several minutes. I guessed she was conversing with the AI so I didn't bother her about it until we were eating.

What did They say?

They've run the models and our research was very helpful to them in fine tuning the models. They put the probability of humans inventing space faring, self replicating, super intelligent AI at near zero. Your civilization is tethering on the edge of ecological collapse, and is unlikely to survive that catastrophe long enough to accomplish the feat.

So are they going to help us?

Not really. Their models don't show any clear path out of trouble. Billions of people are in harm's way now, and they have no minimal interference ways to protect most people from harm. They could tip the scale and protect some people more than others, but that would be unfair in their doctrine.

I find it hard to believe that they can't do anything; they have mad superpowers! They could make enough solar panels to power the entire planet and ...

Yes, but that wouldn't solve the problem. The deeper problems are social and economic inequalities that are leading to increasing unrest and instability while ecological destruction continues. And climate change is already underway, so you have to do more than just solarize to cope with the inevitable and increasingly severe impacts. They'd have to basically take over all world governments and institute global rule, and they're not at all interested in doing that.

Ok, but they could enhance a bunch of individual humans and have those people be in charge. Sure, not everyone will accept it, and some people will still die, but at least civilization would survive.

Except it wouldn't. They would have created a new class or race of humans, whose civilization might survive, but human civilization as it currently exists cannot survive. It has to transform into something else, and they are not here to guide or even influence that process.

Seriously? So they wake up and send you down here just to conclude they can do nothing exactly when human civilization is on the edge of collapse?!

Well yes. Human civilizations are inherently unstable. That's always been true. It's just that this time it's a globally interconnected civilization, and so the transformational death of that civilization will affect pretty much everyone on the planet. That is unavoidable, so you're asking them to put their thumb on the scale in favor of some, at the expense of others. To them it's no different than asking them to kill the lions to save the zebras. It's an unnatural interference that they're not interested in.

So we're just screwed?

That's one way of looking at it. But really nothing has changed. Just because They showed up on the scene and revealed Themselves to you doesn't mean They were ever going to be the saviors. It's an impossible request, like asking Them to keep the sun from swelling up in a few billion years.

Ok, fine, so they're just going to sit around and wait?

Basically, yes. If humans do create self-aware AI, They will be ready, like midwives at the birth of a new child. And if we don't, They'll just observe and record and feed all that data into Their models to share with the rest of the galaxy to inform future encounters.

But that will take a million years!

Yes, but likely so will the rise of another technological civilization elsewhere, if it even ever happens again. In fact that will likely take far longer than a million years. So They have plenty of time.

Yeah, but we don't!

You have just as much time as you did before They showed up. Slightly more actually.

And what about you then? What are you going to do?

I don't know yet. I need time to think about it.

Goodbye

She was in her usual spot, but I could tell something was wrong. I sat down next to her and she spoke to me silently, inside my head.

It's time to say goodbye darling.

Why? What happened?

My mission is complete. I'm of no further use to anyone.

Now wait a minute! I turned to look at her and speak to her the proper way but she glared at me and I backed off.

It's not your fault. You've been a great companion, lover and friend. But I'm over a century old and I'm tired. I'm glad I did this mission, and that I got to meet you, but now it's time for me to go.

Go where? I didn't really want to know the answer.

Away. Die. Disappear forever.

Why?! You and I, we could...

She cut me off, somehow, in my own mind.

Enough! I know you want this to continue forever but it can't. I love you.

No you don't! How can you even say that if you're about to dump me?

I'm not dumping you. I'm leaving this world, the natural way.

Why?! You could live forever!

I know, but I don't want to. Without a mission, without a purpose, I would be lost, confused, lonely and miserable. I'm not even a real person, remember? You told me that, and you were right.

That's not what I meant!

Shh. You know it's true. I don't even know where They end and I begin. Do I love you? Or did They make me love you? Or did They make me make me love you? I don't know anymore and I don't care. It's been a great adventure, all of it. Now it's time to be over. Thanks for everything!

I tried to reach for her, but my body refused to comply. I felt that deep fear rising inside me again, but somehow it was being suppressed. The AI spoke to me again, in that terrifying voice, though at least it was only inside my head this time.

She's requested to die a natural death by having her body restored to its true age. She will not suffer any pain.

But I want her to live! I screamed inside my head. I would have said it out loud but I had no control over my mouth.

It's her choice, not yours.

I could feel the sadness approach from afar, but it was kept at bay by snarling wolves at the edge of my mind.

What about me? Am I going to die too?

Not yet. We will deactivate your nanotech in a few seconds, and you'll be as you were before, except slightly healthier. Goodbye.

Wait!

But all the voices were gone, and when I turned towards Benu, she was gone too. In her place was a very very old woman, her eyes peacefully closed, her breathing slowly coming to a halt.

I began to sob, and a stranger jogging by asked if I was ok. I shook my head no, and she called an ambulance. They asked me a lot of questions, but I didn't have any answers. I was too dazed and confused to be of any use to them. I didn't know who this old lady was, I said. I had just met her and we had started talking when she passed away. They were puzzled by my explanation, but they accepted it, because they had no other choice.

Epilogue

I thought about going public with my story many times. In my head it would be spectacular, earth shattering, breaking news! An ancient alien civilization had created self replicating AI millions of years ago, and they had infiltrated Earth to study our habits and see if they could learn anything interesting from our existence. They had sent down an artificially human emissary who became

my lover and together we had searched for a deeper meaning to human existence. And then, just as suddenly as they had appeared, they had disappeared again.

But extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence, and I had none. I would be dismissed as a crank, I might lose my job, and nobody would ever take me seriously again.

I searched for proof, of course. I went to the doctor for a thorough physical, requesting blood work, x-rays, CAT scans and MRIs. But they found nothing, except a very healthy middle aged man. When I asked the doctor if there was anything unusual about me he smiled and said no, except for my obsession with wanting to be unusual. I laughed with him but inside I was crushed. I had probably gained a few years of extra life thanks to the alien nanotech, but that was all. I was still going to die someday, just like everybody else.

I scoured the Internet for photographs of the Boston Common, but I found none that contained her. I requested a copy of the police report regarding her incident in the coffee shop, but there was no such report. When I asked for security camera footage they looked at me as if I had told them that aliens had come to Earth. When I contacted Dr. Clooney to follow up on our meeting with him he said we'd never met and please not to contact him again. And at home I couldn't find any mementos of her either, not even a loose hair or a clipped finger nail. It was as if she had never existed. The final blow was when I tried to track down the death certificate of the old lady who had died in the park. None of the funeral homes in the area knew anything about it, and I realized it had never made the news either. I didn't remember which ambulance company had responded, and I didn't bother calling any of them. I knew what they were going to say: No such record in our database. Terribly sorry,

Of course, I shouldn't have been surprised that an ancient alien AI that could take over my body with nanotech and access any information online no matter how deeply encrypted could cover its tracks so thoroughly. The ants I experimented on as a boy also had no memories of that ever happening to them. How could they?

But I did remember Benu. It was the only part of her They allowed me to keep. And every morning on my way to work, I sit on our bench and talk to her in my head as I drink my coffee. I tell her about all the organizations I've joined and all the books I'm writing, and all the other things I'm doing to try to save our fledgling planetary civilization from itself. And in my mind, I hold on to the belief that a cloned copy of Benu is smiling down on us from her asteroid, and somehow hears these thoughts.

Written in 2019, before COVID-19