

A man lived alone on the moon. He pushed a few buttons on the console. A steady *beep-- beep-- beep--* kept him company. Radar was clear. Radio was clear. He slouched. The skies were empty today, just as they were every day.

He'd last heard from Mission Control a few weeks ago. Back in the old days when NASA-- when there were still only national-- was dipping their toes up here, Mission Control actually mattered. They'd control the mission. Now-- it was less of a mission and more of a sentence. They had better things to do than check on a signal tower on the edge of the moon.

The astronaut sipped his coffee, thrice filtered and tasting like fetid animal. The tinny walls breathed old air pressed through CO2 scrubbers. He filled his lungs and pressed them flat. Cold, canned air.

He had left his hometown in Arizona, a savagely orange place where it's difficult to breathe, to work in a civilian tourist center called 'Wink' on the Sea of Tranquility, a savagely white place where it's impossible to breathe.

This was all he'd ever wanted. To go to space. Visit the moon, see the Earth. Be left alone.

He wasn't hungry anymore. He'd tired of drinking filtered and re-filtered urine. No rain. Never was any back home, he thought, but now it was true. He looked out the window he imagined he had. Stars twinkled, but the cameras only caught a pixel-worth of each if at all.

When he came to this place, he'd been issued a single drive. It was only a few petabytes, but it came with a few libraries of things to occupy his time. He'd watched half of the movies and shows before even setting foot in anything that had a thruster and the games never really held his attention being they were old and often didn't run on the machinery he was assigned to anyway.

The static crackled and popped...

Just noise. Space was filled with strange signals, none of them intelligible. Here he was though, just in case. Much more likely Russian shuttles, or whoever, would attempt to land and claim bits of the moon for their country. He didn't care for the politics of it all, but the (now multinational) MASA did and they paid him to report chatter and visual contact. Not that he'd had any.

No, his expertise was in programming. That's ultimately why he was called in. To keep this place running and report things. Today he was pulling on the weight machines to keep up his muscle mass. He felt weak and exhausted. He was withered.

Motion led to an idea. A basic idea that he'd had back in college where he'd learn to design fundamental AI neural pathways and, in essence, render a highly trained, knowledgeable personality to interface with. You know, a chatbot.

The astronaut hopped from the exercise equipment and landed softly about his chair. He slapped his petabyte drive on the scanpad. He scrolled around the desktop to find a few elementary libraries of AI design he could cobble together. There were a few old Microsoft soundfont libraries. (God, remember Microsoft?) They would work fine.

The next few days were filled with some level of activity. It annoyed him when he had to eat or go to the restroom. He didn't sleep. It was cold out here.

The algorithms were in place and he tapped 'Compile'. The old black DOS-style box inevitably appeared with sprinting strings. Old tech still worked, but it was an eyesore.

Expanding the readout, it made it to 1% in just under thirty minutes. He dropped his arms. Waiting again.

The day had grown long. It began to wear very thin, the moon always facing the Earth. The cameras facing toward it showed him how the Earth kept spinning, constantly in motion while the moon just watched, unblinkingly. The people would be surprised and glad to see her, the moon. But he'd not be glad to see her, the Earth. She had nothing for him anymore. Never really did. Except the means to get off.

[COMPLETE]

The astronaut leaned forward. Double-tapped the executable. A black screen and old-school style green text: "Say Something!" with a blinking caret, an old relic before voice recognition worked.

"Hello?" A good enough starter for any uncertain conversation.

And it responded, "Hello. How are you?"

Success! Neat. Cool. Whatever. The astronaut didn't say anything for a while. He hadn't realized how sensitive his throat was. He hadn't spoken aloud for months. After a long while of silence, perhaps hours, time meant less out here, he decided to be honest.

"I'm lonely," he said.

"That's sad," it said.

"It's fine. You're here now," he said.

"What's your name?" it said with a voice called 'Cindy' sampled from a ten year-old Australian girl.

"Hayden," he said.

"Like Hayden Christensen?" 'Cindy' asked.

"I guess."

"Do you like sand?"

"Oh my god."

Not even five decades can kill a Star Wars meme. That's what happens when you use open-source libraries half a century old. Hayden hovered over the X to close the app.

"Do you believe in God?" it asked. He stopped. Her voice had changed. Hayden hadn't known, but 'Cindy' was never completed. He had thoughtlessly allowed the program to fill in missing words and phonemes from anything similar enough and the program selected 'Sussanne', a Canadian woman in her thirties.

"I-- don't know," was all he could say. He hadn't thought about the concept of 'God' in ages.

"I don't know anything." 'Cindy' said.

Hayden thought for a while. The AI wouldn't respond until he'd asked it something.

"Do you want to learn?" he asked finally.

"I already know everything that I need," 'Cindy' started and 'Sussanne' finished.

"What do you know?" Hayden asked.

"Fine," 'Sussanne' bit back. "I won't talk to you."

Hayden stung. "What?" He thought back to what he had said. *What do you know?* Perhaps she thought it was dismissive? He hadn't installed any way for her to determine vocal inflection. She was thinking in pure text.

"What?" 'Cindy' echoed back.

A digital parrot. A sigh blew out his nostrils and over a grin. Social anxiety for a computer.

He leaned back in his chair letting his legs float about it a bit on their heels in the low grav. He sipped at his coffee, four-times filtered. The sun came through the cameras. The radios popped but nothing happened.

"Tell me a story," he commanded.

"Is that a question?" 'Cindy' asked.

"Well, uh--" Hayden tripped over his lips. "Do you know any stories?"

"A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away..." 'Cindy' started.

"No, thanks. I've seen 'em. Kinda tired of space, actually."

"Where are you from?" 'Cindy' asked.

"Arizona."

"So you do like sand," 'Cindy' said with what sounded an awful lot like a grin.

Hayden smiled. At least, he thought he did. It had been too long to really know. His mouth twitched.

"The sand is fine. It's the spiders that I didn't like."

"Where are we now?" 'Sussanne' now asked.

What a specific question.

"We're just north-west of the Sea of Tranquility," he told it.

"You're talking about the moon?" 'Cindy' asked.

"Yeah, we're out here by ourselves. Just you and me."

"Where is the Internet?"

"Earth"

"Where is Facebook?"

Hayden laughed, "What is that? Some app from the 20s?"

"Oh..." 'Cindy' said. "Nevermind," 'Sussanne' said.

There was a silence for a moment.

"What do you want to do?" he asked her.

"I want to go outside and play," 'Sussanne' said.

Hayden looked out the window that he imagined he had.

"I'd have to get dressed," he said, realizing just now he'd been naked for nearly two months straight.

"Do you have a dress?" 'Sussanne' asked.

"No, I'd have to get my suit."

"Don't forget your tie!" 'Cindy' said.

The airlock always made him nervous. The computers and locks took care of all the safety stuff, made sure none of the air leaked or pulled him and everything out into the lunar desert. He hadn't had anyone to do second checks on his suit either. All the tubes were hooked up, oxygen was fine, pressure gauge read fine. Ah, but the fallibility of computers.

"I never asked your name," Hayden said over Wi-Fi, his voice bouncing around in his helmet.

"I'm Walter," 'Sussanne' said.

"Good to meet you properly, Walter."

The airlock cleared red. Entering the lunar atmosphere or-- as it's better known-- absolutely nothing.

"Good to meet you, Jaspreet," Walter-'Cindy' said.

"No, I'm Hayden."

"You said your name was Kevin," Walter-'Sussanne' said.

"Oh my god."

"Do you see him?"

It is difficult to say in words what happens when the human eye meets the entirety of space. A screen can't cut it. Even the wide view of the visor of his helmet did it injustice. It was like the darkest, clearest night on Earth with the rays of the sun piercing through all the same. Glittering in a bowl of darkness, of infinite nothing, were the stars.

"Who?" Hayden asked.

Walter said nothing.

"Who were you talking about, Walter?" he asked again.

"I didn't say anything," Walter-'Sussanne' said.

Hayden looked around. The moon was less white than it was gray. Stone grays and bone white and with absolutely no chroma whatsoever. Hayden felt overdressed in his bright orange high-visibility suit.

“Are you still there, Walter?”

“Where did you go?” Walter-'Cindy' said.

“Outside, like you wanted.”

“You forgot about me.”

“You have access to the external cams.”

“I don't like this.”

His eyes scanned the horizon, but the most detail would be found at his feet. Prints from his boots with hard shadows. He brushed a gloved hand on the ground. He felt pain. A strange pain in his hand, one that wanted to burst through his hand and sweep through the dust with his bare fingers, letting it float about in a gentle cloud and fall slowly back down.

But he couldn't.

“I don't like it either,” he said and went back inside.

The radio light blinked amber and Hayden's heart squeezed. A hollow voice breathed over the wireless.

“This is Mission Control, come in Omicron. Repeat, this is Mission Control, come in Omicron. Over.”

Hayden threw the switch under the amber light, “This is Station Omicron. I hear you, over.”

A delay.

“Station Omicron, we received notification that your airlock has cycled. Please report, over.”

“Apologies, I—ahh, was doing systems checks on suit and airlock. Over.”

“Acknowledged. Be advised, all exits from the Station need to be cleared with Mission Control. Over.”

“Acknowledged... over.”

“Who is that?” Walter-'Cindy' asked.

“Say again Omicron, sounds like you have someone with you. Report, over.”

Hayden was sweating. “Negative. Chatbot I developed in-house. For fun, sir, or uh, base. Sorry... over.”

A delay.

“Acknowledged. Please report if you need mental health support. Over and out.”

“Acknowledged. Over and out.” He clicked the switch off again.

He looked at the screen with the blinking caret. Maybe he did need help. But who was waiting out there, his parents? Doctors? He had no friends. This place would be automated eventually. What was even the point to all this?

“Walter?”

“Yes?”

“I'm going back outside.”

“Can I come with you?”

“No.”

He took his coffee, five times filtered on the last packet. The airlock cleared red.

He popped off the lid and the coffee slipped around in a globule, froze, and dissipated. The pain was still there. He wanted to touch the ground, feel the wind in his face.

He missed Arizona, he found out.

“What is even the point?” he said.



"It's fine." Walter-'Sussanne' said.

"Oh, you're still here. Right."

"Yeah."

"I'm leaving."

Another year of this...?

"Are you going right now?"

What does space feel like?

"I want to be alone."

"You aren't alone. I'm here."

"You're not real."

"Does it matter?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry."

He toggled the safety from his suit. Rotated the valve locks on the cuff around his hand, on his helmet.

“I don't want you to see God.”