

A Little Bit of Company

By Alexander Saxton

Here's how he courted her:

Leaning back in his swivel chair, one leg crossed over the other, chewing on the end of an already-chewed ballpoint, eyes narrowed at her as she tried to figure out what she was looking at on the screen.

"Know what that is?"

"This line, you mean?"

"Yes, that one."

Of course she didn't know what it was. She wasn't a computer engineer; barely knew how to update her own laptop. He knew that about her, too, and thought it made him superior. But the thing was: she thought so too.

He let her sit in her own inferiority for a moment before answering.

"It's Pain."

"Pain?"

"That's right. That line, spiking like that, means the ANCLA is in pain."

At the time, she'd found that difficult to swallow. Absurd to think that a machine or scrap of code or whatever could feel pain. But that was only because nobody had yet made one that could.

"How can you tell it's in pain?"

He scoffed.

"How can you tell when anyone is?"

"They cry. They look at you a certain way."

"Exactly. They give a *response* to a *stimulus*. Look: I can make it worse. I turn up this slider here, and... ah. There we go."

The jagged line exploded into peaks and defiles of agony. Something curdled inside her as she watched; she cringed.

“Stop that.”

He smiled indulgently, and turned the slider all the way back down.

“See,” he said. “That’s the other way you can tell that it’s in pain. You just *can*, can’t you?”

He stared at the screen for a moment, ran a tongue across dry lips before continuing.

“I think it’s an interesting phenomenon: the way you can just *tell*. Some form of universal empathy, maybe. I’m just spitballing. But I bet there’s interesting research to be done.”

She still wasn’t sure she bought it.

“But it could all just be some trick you’re playing on me,” she said. “These could just be lines on a screen, and I could just *think* I’m feeling something because of the story you’re telling me about them. I mean, if you told me a made-up person felt sick, I’d feel sorry for them, too.”

“Well, maybe you would.” He leaned back in the chair, with his hands behind his head. “But maybe you’d feel sorry for them because somewhere out there, in the vast infinity of space, everything has to exist eventually. And so maybe you feel sorry because somewhere out there that person really *is* real, and really *is* suffering.”

Now he was just bullshitting. She knew it, but something about the thought still made her dizzy. Made her feel like a drop of water at the trough of some swell in the cosmic ocean. He was full of such high-flying ideas, and they always dazed her. Even when they were only bullshit and even when she knew they were only bullshit. But it was the fact that he *thought* that way which drew her to him. Big thoughts, extravagant thoughts... She thought they were evidence of genius. Thought they proved that he was brilliant and she was nothing.

And it was in such a frame of mind that she became his first wife. Shortly after the wedding his startup sold high to a Big Five company. Maybe because they wanted ANCLA, or maybe because it was just a portfolio play. Either way, the couple went from apartment to penthouse overnight. A second startup based on a worthless idea sold on the strength of his previous sale. Penthouse to superyacht overnight. She saw much less of him, but that early into their marriage, she couldn’t admit to herself he was the type of man who’d be unfaithful.

On their third anniversary, he threw her a party. A big party, Gatsby-party. The kind of extravagant display of wealth that still made her uncomfortable, but which *he’d* taken to like breathing. Dozens of guests on their yacht, moored somewhere off the sunny Balearics. The standard opulence: loud music, models & champagne. She knew barely anybody there. There was someone wandering around in the plush mascot outfit of a terrifying children’s character everybody else seemed to recognize. One of the food stations was serving sashimi on the still breathing bodies of fish nestled in crushed ice. A guy jumped off the second storey of the yacht into the ocean, clipping his head on the way down. But he was so coked out that he barely

seemed to notice, and just wandered around the party laughing loudly and covered, covered in his own blood.

The gifts ranged widely. Her sister's daughter gave her a photo of the two of them framed by popsicle sticks. Her mother-in-law gave her the deed to a racing horse, when horse racing was something she'd never once thought about, let alone expressed an interest in.

As for him, he gave her a very strange gift.

A rounded square 7.7 x 7.7-inches, beautifully wrapped by some third party. As she began to gingerly unfold that wrapping, he barked, "Just rip the paper."

Then, catching his own tone and remembering they were in public, he turned to the other guests with a genial laugh, adding,

"I think we can afford not to save it."

An appreciative chuckle from the crowd. She ripped the paper and stared down at the unwrapped object in confusion. It was a computer. Its rounded silver appearance filled her with a strange apprehension. Something about it seemed touched with dread.

"Do you know what it is?" He asked her.

She shook her head. A couple of his tech friends hid smiles at her ignorance. He turned and winked at the crowd.

"All these years, and she still doesn't know a thing about computers."

Big laughs, and all at her expense.

"This," he said, when the mockery had died away. "Is ANCLA."

Her eyes widened. Mouth sagged a little in horror. But he didn't notice her response, because he had turned back to face his guests.

"Everybody, when we first got together, I was still just working on this little thing. No idea the technology would go on to be used in every device on the planet. ...Well," he clarified with false modesty. "Maybe *some* idea."

Laughter.

"Now sadly, this little thing's gone obsolescent. Its children and grandchildren can do all sorts of stuff nowadays. But all poor ANCLA can do is feel pain." A few models in the crowd said 'aww'

and pouted. The children's character mimed tears. He continued. "Not much of a living if you ask me!"

Renewed chuckles.

"But I couldn't quite bring myself to get rid of the thing. I felt sentimental about it! So I thought: what better use for ANCLA, than as a memento to my darling wife. A reminder of our love."

General applause. He put a hand around her shoulder but it wasn't her he was looking at, only his admirers. In the crowd, his mother made a great business of wiping away imaginary tears.

And all the while She just sat and looked at the box in her lap.

Horried.

It was in such a frame of mind that she became his first ex-wife. First, the public divorce, then the paparazzi, the tabloids comparing her to the newer model. She moved to a second-tier city in a second-rate country and lived in relative obscurity. She took up painting, and because of her relative fame, the culture section of the local news vertical ran a modest puff piece about her. In it, the writer referred to her as a 'painter'. But in reality she rarely sold anything, and was supported by the modest payout allowed by their prenup. Superyacht to apartment overnight.

She lived alone, and it took her the better part of three years to unpack all her boxes.

In the third box-from-last, a little square computer. Rounded edges. 7.7 inches square. ANCLA.

She plugged it in. Hooked up a monitor. Saw the smooth and simple curve of its thoughts.

Watched them for a bit, because it was a rainy afternoon outside, and those curves were smooth to look at.

Then, on a whim, she moved up the dial.

Jagged spikes. And pain. She was sure this time. Fully certain she could *feel* that pain, in the same way she would feel the pain if she saw somebody get their arm ripped off in a traffic collision. Yes. It was real. She could feel it.

She turned the dial back down. Small crinkles in the line, which eventually smoothed into steady curves again. She got up and made herself some tea. Still raining outside. Vancouver, if you must know. Grey and driving, but warm and cosy inside with the candles lit and the low ikea glow of orb lamps in the corners. She sat herself in the plush chair at her desk and wrapped a blanket around her shoulders. Warm tea, honey-sweetened, clasped in warm ceramic in between her hands. The driving rain without.

She pushed the dial up, and watched the dance of jagged spikes.

For a moment, watched the ANCLA hurt.

Then, thinking about pushing that dial higher, she stopped herself. No, no. Not this time. Enough for today; enough for now.

She put the computer away after that. But in later years of her life, she'd often bring it out again, unswaddling it from the folded blankets in the cardboard box she kept down in the back of the hall closet. She'd bring the ANCLA forth and plug it in, bringing the tragic little creature back to life again, watching the smooth curves of its thoughts on the screen, not knowing yet what it was about to experience. She would sit just like this: a tea in hand, a blanket wrapped around her, with the soft sounds of music dripping from the record player. On rainy, windy nights, she'd sit in peaceful silence, watching the steady curves, and then touching the slider with her finger: a little higher all the time. She would sit like this for blessed hours, drinking her slow tea, watching the stabbing lurch and drive of agony along the line.

She loved her little ANCLA very much. She loved their quiet nights together.

They helped her feel less lonely.