

“Booth nineteen. Where the fuck is Booth nineteen?” Michelle whispered to herself as she slipped across the polished concrete floor. She looked drunk, but she wasn’t. She was lost and frightened and hadn’t slept for days.

Michelle was in her early 40s, a burnt-out lawyer who now fancied herself as a writer. She normally dressed tactically to conceal her plumpish core and skinny limbs, but this morning had arrived at her appointment wearing nothing but a stained nightgown. Her ruddy complexion, which she’d always been so self-conscious of, was magnified by the extreme fluorescence of the warehouse light.

The warehouse, which was on the outskirts of Melbourne, had been converted on a budget to a high-volume medical clinic. Fifty defunct photoboos were arranged in sequence around the interior border, painted white and revamped to function as small consulting suites. Lockable doors replaced the black curtains and walls were sound-proofed to ensure confidentiality. Glass screens divided the booths into separate spaces for doctor and patient. The seats were uncushioned and uncomfortable, but for twenty minute appointments, that was seldom an issue. Booths were identifiable by a description of their resident clinician and an adjacent photo, which was plastered to the door.

‘Ahha. Booth nineteen!’ Michelle read the description aloud to confirm she’d found Joseph C. ‘Dr Joseph C. is 65% practical and 35% understanding. He’s available on short notice, has no history of professional misconduct and is always on time. His Freud-ish face and Attenborough-esque voice make him the near perfect psychiatrist’.

Opening the door Michelle was greeted by a flood of warm light. Relieved to climb inside she sat down opposite the most gentle face and reassuring smile she’d ever seen. It was after 3am but Joseph looked a carbon copy of his photo - the same red tie, brown knitted vest and neatly arranged white beard. He spoke almost immediately as she sat, “Michelle, I see you’ve made an urgent appointment. What is the nature of your emergency?”

Michelle had heard that the booth psychiatrists were famous for their no-nonsense approach, and she was late, so she too got straight to the point. 'I need to turn it off Dr. C. *Him* off, I mean. I just need to turn him off.'

There was an awkward pause before Joseph broadened his smile and spoke again. 'Please Michelle, call me Joseph. This sounds like something that must be very difficult for you. Would you mind sharing the relevant background?'

"Sure. I mean, whatever you like Doc, but what can one really say about fifteen years of marriage in twenty minutes? For the sake of time I'll fast forward to when this whole mess started about two years ago with that fucking limp. 'Foot drop' they called it, said it was a pretty typical 'presenting complaint'. I mean I just thought a limp was a limp was a limp, you know? But apparently not. Everything nowadays must be classified and subclassified and sub-subclassified. A 'foot drop', by the way, is what happens when you can't flex your foot up towards your head. It's hard to explain, because it's an action you'd think wouldn't even matter..." She stood up to demonstrate the movement but there wasn't enough room in the booth to lift her leg.

"I am aware that a foot drop describes a failure of ankle dorsiflexion. Please, sit down and refocus."

Michelle didn't like being interrupted but did as she was told. "You're not quite as chatty as you look, are you Doc? I don't mean to offend..."

"Oh, you won't offend me Michelle, don't worry."

"Ok. But you're quite clinical, aren't you? I mean this is probably just what I need right now if I'm honest – frank advice from a kind face. Whenever I've seen a shrink in the past I've had this tendency to tell half-truths, you know? It's not that I'm a liar, don't get me wrong. I'd just always put a positive spin on myself or my behavior so they'd tell me I was right, or hard done by or a victim of circumstance..."

“Please Michelle. Let’s focus on the issue at hand. You were telling me about an issue that arose from a failure of ankle dorsiflexion.”

“Yes. Of course. Well, I heard it before I saw it I think. I mean, how often do you really take a good hard look at your spouse, hey? Leo would always just sort of, float around in the background you know? Boy, I remember the sound so clearly... Thud, thud, thud!” Michelle smacked the screen hard three times, but Joseph didn’t flinch. “On our new wooden floorboards as well. I remember screaming at him, ‘Jesus, Leo! Take some care’”. But really, he never gave two shits about anything nice I tried to do to our house, so I didn’t take too much notice. Boy, the guilt burns. Because still, before I took the time to take a good look at him I remember thinking he’d suddenly become a real pain in the ass, you know? Holding me up more often than usual, I mean. But again, I barely thought twice about that, because Leo was always the daydreaming, slow walking type”.

Michelle was shaking her head.

“That’s interesting Michelle, but I will remind you there are only fifteen minutes left in this consultation.”

‘Yeh, ok. Anyway, one Sunday, a good month after Leo had ruined the floorboards, we were walking down Collins St, and I remember looking to my right to tell him to ‘hurry the fuck up’ – it had become a reflex – but I got no response. I turned around and saw him, a good hundred yards back in the distance. And I was forced to wait and watch him painstakingly slug his way towards me. He looked like some sort of cripple – leaning to one side, lifting one foot higher than the other and then flopping it to the ground. And Joseph – I’m sorry. I am just all over the place here – if you want a mental image of Leo, he resembled a somewhat even less attractive version of Neil Young. So, this whole thing is just not a pretty scene – a homeless looking dude, who’s meant to be my goddam husband, laboring towards me like some sort of extra-terrestrial blob, and I’m freaking out, screaming at him to hurry up. And suddenly, in the middle of the busiest intersection in Melbourne, he decides to fall flat on his face. The traffic screeches to a halt and I run over, pick him up and – Jesus, I feel

horrible – I’m frightened and embarrassed so I take him by the collar and just scream right in his face, “What the fuck is wrong with you, Leo?!”

I tried, but I just couldn’t lift him to his feet and the traffic was backing up, so I ended up calling an ambulance. Things moved pretty quickly from there. Leo was admitted to hospital, had one of everything on the menu- –blood work, biopsies, nerve conduction studies, MRIs you name it – and was wheeled out by yours truly two days later. Within a week we were sitting in oversized leather chairs facing an empty desk like two petrified kids in a very wealthy principal’s office. Finally, and as if he was doing us some sort of favor, ‘Monsieur neurologist extraordinaire’, wandered in wearing this offensive looking pin stripe suit.

Michelle broke off again to give a one fingered salute into the distance. “Thanks for making it. Asshole!”

“Boy, he was a funny looking guy, let me tell you. Kevin Schwartz! That was his name. Anyway, quite like you, he was not big on the niceties. There was barely a greeting before he sat down, mumbled something about ‘Motor Neurone Disease’ and, get this – started eating a fucking ham sandwich. And I’m panicking because despite his ‘I couldn’t give a shit’ delivery, ‘Motor Neurone disease’ is just one of those conditions, like ‘Human Immunodeficiency Virus’ or ‘Crimean-Congo Haemorrhagic Fever’, that just *has* to be serious. simply by the very nature of how it sounds.”

“Motor Neurone Disease,” Michelle mouthed robotically at the screen.

“My memory of the rest of that consultation is vague. I remember feeling hypnotised by the fluorescent yellow mustard shmears at the corners of his mouth and falling into a sort of trance, imagining what this ‘Motor Neurone Disease’ might involve. Could it be some sort of terrible, genetic condition that would result in my having to look after an entire family of homeless-looking limpers? I tuned back in to ask him this and he responded with a correction, which is another thing I hate. He said that the limp is not a limp: it’s actually foot drop. Well la di da, you fucking dickhead, I felt like saying. He then reassured me that I would not be caring for a family of limpers, because Motor Neuron Disease was not genetic.

Either way, he wrapped up, having children at this stage wouldn't be the 'morally responsible thing to do', because things were about to get much worse than just a foot drop. Then he smiled and said we should make another appointment to see him in a month."

"This is interesting Michelle, but I am still having a difficult time understanding the nature of your presenting complaint. I will remind you that there are only 12 minutes left in your consultation."

"Hold on, Dr Perfect. I'm getting there. As it turns out your asshole colleague was right. Things did get a whole lot worse. Twelve months on I was wiping Leo's ass and trying to convince people that it was my pleasure because of love and all that. Then one day this pretty little rep comes over – the type that used to make Leo's head turn 180 degrees just by walking past. She squatted down next to him in his chair, put her hand on his back and explained that the device she had would be able to speak for him once he was no longer able to. He looked her in the eye, told her no thank you and that it was about time for him to get on with dying.

And you know, as much as I hated nursing Leo, I'd never consciously considered that death was what we were working towards. A half-lifetime of loneliness just petrified me, Joseph. I know what you're thinking – poor little Michelle, history's first widow. Boo Hoo. But that's not fair, because when it comes to comparing loneliness, no one seems to have bothered with the sub classifications and let me tell you, there are plenty! There's the over-the-hill, middle-aged woman who suddenly and unexpectedly finds herself lonely against her will. How would you subclassify that, hey? The lack of hope. The sheer length of the pain that lies ahead. Come on!"

Joseph looked blankly. He knew of no loneliness sub classification. And time was running out, so he tried again to refocus Michelle. 'Michelle, can you tell me a little bit more about why you are here today?'

“Just as I thought – nothing! And that’s why we made the deal. I would help him die and he would help me keep him forever. I’d read about Humbot, who were the leaders in personalized humanoid creation. They were happy to help me immortalize Leo but you wouldn’t believe the amount of detail and effort those shysters demanded. The first step was to install cameras in every room of our house to record as many of Leo’s movements, postures and mannerisms as possible – whatever was left of them anyway. I then had to record interviews with him to collect as much data as I could: the food he liked, his political views, his taste in music, movies and art, how he felt about his friends. Most painstaking was having to listen to him recall as many memories from his childhood as possible. That was a labor of love, let me tell you!

“I must confess, quite a bit of data had to be collected without Leo knowing. I mean, that was Humbot’s recommendation, mostly to get a more genuine picture of how Leo interacted with me but also to collect unbiased data on how he displayed different emotions – how his eyes, body language and tone of voice changed. It wasn’t always pleasant. One day I turned off his wheelchair and put the TV remote on the other side of the room just to get a good picture of how he behaved when he was angry. I was so determined to squeeze every little bit of data out that by the time I wheeled him onto the plane – rigid, dribbling and unable to talk – he was all pulp and no juice.

“We arrived at Humbot HQ in California and Leo 2.0 was waiting to greet us. He looked, felt and even smelt like a fresh Leo, but was still lifeless. Before Humbot would upload the data and activate him, they were adamant that I turn Leo 1.0 over to them in order to help fulfil my side of the bargain. I gave him a hug, they wheeled him away and three hours later I was on a return flight to Melbourne with an upright, continent, verbal version of the original article. And in case you’re wondering, friends were easier to fool than I thought. People will believe anything you tell them with the words ‘stem cell’ and ‘miracle’.”

Joseph twitched. He was keen to say something but didn’t quite know what.

“The first couple of weeks with Leo 2.0 were like falling in love all over again. Humbot called it robotic limerence and said I would enjoy it. Boy, I wish I could show you a picture of him.

Physically speaking, he was really quite something. I know I've been talking Leo 1.0's physical appearance down, and this is not to say that version 2.0 was perfect but he was definitely the best possible physical version of the original. And my god, sexually he was flawless. I should tell you by the way, that the thing that separates Humbot from their competition is that they collect partner data too. So 2.0 was upsized, without foreskin, and had a thrust time-to-ejaculation – TTE they call it – optimised to just over nine minutes.

“They also had me submit detailed data on the things I like to hear! Without fail, 2.0 says the ‘right’ thing. Seven seconds after finishing, he was programmed to roll over and say, “Wow. That was intense, Michelle. You were amazing.” He reassures me with just the right amount of conviction but without overdoing it so as to make me seem irrational. I found the whole thing pretty impressive for the first few weeks.

“Ha! But here is the funny thing, Joseph – and now we're getting warmer – this was just the thing that started pissing me off. The scriptedness of it all. The perfectly punctuated, infuriatingly innocent SMSs. ‘No thank you Michelle. Love, Leo.’ ‘That would be very nice Michelle. Love, Leo’. Who would've guessed that his ability to indicate - ‘When you do ‘X’ it makes me feel ‘Y’ - would end up sounding so formulaic? And boy, worst of all was the active listening function. I paid a premium for that, too. Every time I speak he looks straight at me, eyes wide, head ever so slightly tilted and he nods, adding ‘Mmmm’ every ten to fifteen seconds.

Joseph nodded.

“We'd been home for less than a month before I wanted to punch his lights out. But who doesn't get frustrated with their partner every now and then? I thought that perhaps a little engagement with normal people was all we needed. So last week I suggested that we join our friends for Saturday night karaoke. We used to go quite often, and I've always been a pretty good singer – would win talent shows and everything. Well, I gave my ‘stem cell’ spiel and Leo 2.0 received nothing short of a hero's welcome. Funny if you ask me, because everyone used to dread 1.0's rendition of ‘We are the Champions’. And get this, last song of the night, 2.0 gets asked up on stage and then proceeds to belt out a fucking faultless

version of 'Oh Darling'. He's looking at me square in eye the entire time, with that stupid longing head tilt asking me to 'please believe him'. And Joseph, I don't know what happened - the crowd was cheering like he was fucking Paul McCartney – but I just lost it. I hurled my beer right at his face and ran out in tears.

Joseph thought he could finally have some input so interjected, "Was there anything in particular about the performance that troubled you Michelle? This is information I could feed back to Humbot."

"He's an imposter, Joseph! He's pleading with me to 'believe'. But what am I to believe? There are no dreams, no fantasies, no imagination. There's no possibility, no uncertainty. I don't even believe myself anymore! My thoughts are all so muddled that my memory of the real Leo is confused and fading."

Joseph just looked at her blankly.

"I started doing these funny little things as reminders that he wasn't real. Or maybe I was trying to catch him out, but I don't think so. And spare me the lecture, I know that accusing a machine of deception is idiotic, but I can't help it. Don't tell me you've never lost it at a machine. That you've never thought to just pick a keyboard up high with two hands and fucking smash the thing".

Michelle stood up again and smacked the screen with two hands.

"I put on our wedding video and quizzed him about long dead guests who were there. He gives these kind of politely duplicitous replies, 'Gee, I just can't quite remember the Steinbergs, Michelle'. But I'm a sucker for punishment so I just kept digging. "How about our wedding cake Leo? Wasn't that delicious?" And because he's programmed for agreeableness, particularly in the presence of uncertainty he'll say , "Oh yes! Delicious!" and then smile and touch my hand. And you know what, we didn't even have a fucking wedding cake!"

Michelle was switching quite rapidly between crying and laughing now.

“So I got to thinking, Joseph. If that asshole imposter wants to lie to my face, I’ll have to just catch him out while he’s sleeping. How do you like that one! So when he’s asleep, I test him. I stick all my sewing pins in quite deeply. He seems to bleed something quite like blood, but he doesn’t even rouse, that fraud. I bend his fingers all the way back on themselves. That’s right, all the fucking way back and he doesn’t even flinch!

“These small victories aside, the only other pleasure I could cling to was sleep. For just a few hours a night I could forget that the thing lying next to me was an imposter. But then two nights ago, in a moment of half-asleep weakness I rolled over and put my hand over its chest. And I was just awake enough to feel a purr where his heart should have been beating. Like the hum of an engine. And now no matter how hard I try I can’t unhear it and I can’t unfeel it”.

She leant forward and dragged her fingertips over the screen.

“So I ring up Humbot. I tell them I need to switch it off. For just a while maybe. For just a little respite. But they tell me there’s no switch. Would you believe it? No. Fucking. Switch. I am sleeping next to a turbine with a face and it has no switch! And want to hear something really funny? Don’t be fooled by these tears Joseph, it’s actually, fucking hilarious.”

She was standing and laughing hysterically now, which Joseph couldn’t quite make sense of.

“Remember my delicate Leo at the end, how there was nothing we could do to stop each little neuron melting away? The robot that lies next to me now is almost completely death resistant! There are no enzymatic pathways to disrupt – he politely thanks me for his cyanide-laced Wheaties. There is no cellular metabolism to break – a lethal dose of insulin and he still wakes up with that fucking smile.

I begged Humbot, Joseph, begged them! But still, they said it would just be too difficult to deactivate it. They said that they understood that adjusting to a new partner can be difficult but that talking to you would be helpful.

Michelle was sobbing but still laughing hysterically. Joseph spoke, "Michelle, we only have one minute left. At the end of this I will have to deliver my diagnosis and management plan. If you would like to continue you will have to insert additional funds." Michelle had no money, but wasn't listening anyway.

"If it cannot be turned off, I want to obliterate it. And don't you worry, I told them how!" Michelle's eyes widened and she smiled.

"I will cover him with a towel while he's asleep and I will very calmly and very quickly chop him into pieces, starting with his legs so that he cannot run away. I'll then put him in a bag and return him to the manufacturer. I've already bought the chainsaw. I'm almost certain his insides are just red, homogenous glob with bits of computer chip. The whole thing would be just like smashing a keyboard."

And with that, the light turned off and Joseph disappeared. Michelle sat for a short while, sobbing in the dark. It was only when she got up to leave that she realised she'd been locked inside the booth.

Postscript

The analysis, though based on an incredibly complex algorithm took less than a second. A combination of key words, tone of voice and pattern of movement were all considered before the final diagnosis flashed on the screen: Delusional disorder (Capgras). High risk robocidal ideation.

Michelle screamed and yanked aggressively at the door but it wouldn't open. She was to remain locked inside until she could be dealt with in the morning.

Had Joseph C. 3.0 been on just a minute longer, his analysis would have been quite different. Because even though Michelle's hysteria settled quite quickly, her tears continued to flow. Through fairly rudimentary computer vision technology Joseph could quite easily identify the shape of an undisturbed tear – modelled using a closed form of the the elastica equation, the *syntractrix of Poleni* – as it emerged from the medial canthus.

Indeed for Joseph C. 2.0, a tear was a tear was a tear. But this new 3.0 model came equipped with advanced tear technology. Through motion analysis it could recognise the unique path of an uninterrupted tear. The rapid acceleration of the tear exiting the canthus, running over the anterior check, tracking ever so slightly medially at an angle of between 7-10 degrees to the vertical. It could identify the rapid deceleration of the tear as it settled just lateral to the chin. And finally, it could even predict the precise moment at which tear surface tension would give way to gravity, and how long it would take the tear to fall to the floor.

There it could measure the sheer tear volume, which at 4000 microliters and at a rate 600 microliter a minute in this case, was breaching acceptable norms of crying. Measurement of Prolactin and ACTH levels would confirm that these were indeed emotional tears and not irritant or basal tears.

So, had Joseph C. 3.0 been on for just a minute longer, analysis of the uninterrupted tear would have computed an entirely different diagnosis- quite a specific sub classification of sadness: grief (delayed), loneliness (duration indefinite), guilt (mild).