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LAYTH SIHAN

The Way It Was Again

Jake

The child is quieter than usual, and I sense that something is bothering him. We are in the kitchen where I am preparing him an afterschool snack. My cooking skills are programmed to max out at simple stews and paninis, but I maintain that I am quite the capable chef. Today, I chose simplicity. I prepared him a grilled cheese sandwich. I served it with a pickle spear and a nice, strong scotch over rocks. Usually when I made him food, he would insist on ice cream instead, and I would decline to serve him the ice cream, saying, “After dinner” or “Wait until your mother gets home.” This was our established pattern of behavior. He asked for things I couldn’t give him. He would insist, and I would refuse. We agreed to compromises which never seemed to make him happy. Our relationship was one not of disagreement but of disappointment. Wasn’t there less to say in the guise of more? Wasn’t there an emphatic “Yes!” hidden in one of those “after dinner” conversations? Although Moe never stopped believing there could be, there never was, and this is how we lived.

As I set down his sandwich in front of him and pour out the whiskey, he grows more and more pensive. I take a seat at the table and wait patiently for him to open up to me about his troubles. I run the appropriate communication algorithms to guess his problem before he speaks. I came up with a few solutions, the most likely of which I decided is that on his walk home from school this afternoon he’d seen a dead bird. Now he was coping with a lingering, if only mild trauma, that would soon find its way into words, and in this way expel itself from his emotional process. I would talk him through what he had seen, and the feelings of mortality and powerlessness, which he was now feeling. I would explain to him that the life cycle of birds is much shorter than that of a human being. In this way, I would help him bury the memory of the dead bird he’d seen.

“Is everything alri—”

“I’m not allowed to drink whiskey.”

I don’t know exactly how to process his statement. According to everything I know about Moe—inward focused, keen on quiet observation, disinterested in too much socializing—whiskey was a perfect afterschool drink to help the child relax and focus his attention on his schoolwork. I was surprised this is the first time I thought to serve it.

The child looks at the glass of whiskey I’d poured for him and smells it with a

disdainful grimace on his face before pushing it away. I thought this was unusual, but I knew something else was bothering him so I postponed any investigation into the boy's actions.

"Is there something bothering you, Moe?"

"No, not really. It was just something I saw on the way home."

As he speaks, he turns his attention to the glass of whiskey. I wait, expecting the child to take a drink, but he never does. So I speak up in an effort to keep the conversation going.

"What did you see?"

"Nothing."

There is so much that needs to be said, but neither of us say anything else. Silently, I perform calculations in my head, and I watch the boy, knowing he is doing the same, in his own way. After a while, he begins eating his grilled cheese. He takes small bites, resting his hands in his lap as he chews. I can feel the momentum of the afternoon returning as I watch him eat.

Then, chewing his sandwich, the child says, "You're probably going to get in trouble for pouring me whiskey." His voice is so quiet I can barely hear him.

Moe

After my parents split up, they split custody of me. My dad was supposed to have me nights when my mom was working the graveyard shift at the hospital. She's a nurse. He was supposed to pick me up when he got off work and take me back to his condo. The nights that he remembered or got off work on time were usually pretty fun. We'd order pizza or pick up chicken and watch stand-up comedy on HBO. Our favorite special was "Return of the Jedistani" by Carrie Sayyad. She went to college with my dad, and he said he didn't think she was very funny back then, but now he thought she was. I liked the jokes about her dad. They felt like they could be about my dad, and I guess my dad felt the same way about his dad. The problem was that most nights he didn't show up until 10 PM, and one night he completely abandoned me and forgot to call. That was last year, before we got Jake.

When my mom got in that morning after her shift, she was upset that my dad never showed up. She sat on the corner of my bed and cried. I'd tucked myself in the night before, and when I started to feel spooked out or lonely, I just held Rex, our dachshund. When I opened my eyes, and I saw her there, sobbing, her eyeliner running down her face, I thought something terrible had happened, something that would change our lives. I thought dad had died, and that was why he hadn't shown up, but he wasn't dead; he just had his head in his work like always.

Mom wasn't crying because something terrible had happened. She was just crying over me. "Hi, mom," I said, my voice kind of faraway sounding, asleep.

"Your dad loves you," she said.

I didn't have anything to say to that. I felt Rex stirring by my feet, and I watched him peek his head out of the covers to say hi to mom, and it made things less weird.

"Was Rex with you all night?" she asked, smoothing down his ears with both of her hands.

"Yeah," I said, "he protected me." I'm not sure if I said that to make mom feel better about me being alone all night, or if it was true.

"He's a good dog," she said, leaning down to look into his eyes. Rex's eyes had flecks of gold in them. He was part of the family. Mom had brought him home a couple of weeks after dad moved out. Neither of us said anything. The fan shook in the ceiling as its blades made their revolutions. "Is it cold in here?" she asked.

"No, I like it that way."

Then we got Jake. The truth is that it's nice to have Jake around because it's just nice to have him around. I'm not saying that he doesn't do a lot of cool stuff because he does do a lot of cool stuff. Now, instead of cooking Ramen for myself when my dad is late, Jake cooks for me, and instead of asking my mom to help me with my algebra homework, Jake helps me, and he actually knows algebra and doesn't have to look up the answers in the back of the book the way my mom would have to. And since I'm the only child, it's cool to have someone else in the house who isn't mom. It was getting old being the only child, but now I have Jake around, and instead of it just being me and mom and Rex, Jake is there, too, which is nice.

The drive to school this morning is quiet except when it isn't. Rex keeps jumping back and forth between my lap and mom's lap, barking if he sees another dog on a walk or in a front yard. The other dogs never hear him. The dog walkers can't hear him, either. We are the only people in the world who can hear our dog barking. It made you wish someone else could hear him. I thought that if more people could hear him then his barks wouldn't ring so loud in our ears. You had to resist Rex. He was always trying to escape when you held him or when you took him for a walk or when you went out. I always felt guilty when I had to nudge his nose back inside with my foot to shut the door. Rex is in my lap now, pressing his nose against the window, but he is distracted by something he saw and is silent. This is my chance to talk to mom. There is something on my mind, but I don't really know how to talk about it, or if I am to, or if it is even something worth talking about. I don't know how I felt, and maybe that was why I thought I should start talking.

"Do you drink whiskey, mom?" I ask.

In my mind, whiskey, brown and terrible smelling, crashes down a hallway, chasing me.

"Oof," she says as Rex leaps from my lap to hers.

When I asked her the question, I already knew the answer. Dad's older brother Uncle Suleiman, who lives in Florida, said to me, "Lawyers only ask questions they

already know the answers to.”

“Does Dad?” I ask.

“No,” she says, “he’s Muslim.”

It was true that my dad was Muslim, but it wasn’t true that he didn’t drink. He always had a beer with the pizza or chicken we’d pick up, and other than the six pack he kept in his refrigerator at the condo, it was mostly empty. I shrug off what I know about dad’s drinking habits since I know mentioning them would distract her. She would say something like, “It’s none of my business what your father does, but I just don’t understand why he chooses to be such a bad example around you.” But, mom is not so holy, either. Not only does she drink whiskey, she smokes pot. I watched her out of my bedroom window. It was the middle of the night, and she was sitting on a white lawn chair in the middle of the yard, barefoot. The grass hadn’t been cut in a long time because everything back then, after Dad moved out, even though it was just a few months ago, was out of whack. And there mom was, barefoot in the tall grass, smoking pot. I watched as she lit up, igniting the blue cone of her butane lighter. She’d bought it for cooking crème brûlée, she’d said. It made a tiny roar that I could just hear from my window. I watched her as she exhaled a plume of smoke that mixed with the air, the way ink tangles in water, and then after a while, I smelled it drift in my open window. I wasn’t sure what to make of the sight of my mother smoking pot. I just knew that life since the divorce was different, and it was never going to be the way it was again, and it would take a while to get used to it.

“What about Jake?” I ask.

“Jake is AI, honey,” she says. “He doesn’t drink. He doesn’t even eat.”

“Yeah, but...”

I start to fiddle with my hoodie’s zipper. I like this hoodie. On the back, there’s a cat superimposed on the Milky Way. It’s really dumb, but I like dumb stuff because there’s no explanation for it, really. It’s annoying when people ask me why I like the dumb stuff I like because I never know what to say. Maybe, that’s why I like it. I mean all you have to do is take one look at this dumb hoodie, and it explains itself. You either get it, or you don’t. I wish everything could be like that, but nothing is, except dumb stuff like cat hoodies.

“Mom,” I begin, and she looks at me because she can tell I’m trying to be serious, or she thinks I’m being weird. I can’t really tell what she thinks. “Maybe you’re wrong about, Jake.” “Moe, what are you trying to say?”

“I don’t know,” I say, my voice really quiet, “but I think that Jake might be an alcoholic.”

As soon as the words leave my mouth, I wish I hadn’t said them. The morning feels really tense, and Rex is clawing the dashboard and barking at the cars in traffic, and he also smells a little bit. But then, mom laughs, and I start laughing, too, and I wonder if it’s over now. I wonder if that was all I had to say.

“What are you talking about, Moe?”

“The other day,” I begin, “he gave me whisk—”

“He did WHAT!?!?”

Rex and I both recoil at the sound of her voice. He peels his ears back and lowers his head, settling into my lap. I tell her that Jake poured me a glass of whiskey from the bottle she keeps over the oven. The silence continues. “I’m sorry,” I mumble, finally. I just want to move on, but I don’t know how. We’re stuck now.

“It’s not your fault, honey!”

I’m kind of relieved I said something, and I’m also resigned to ratting out Jake, resigned to how much he’ll probably hate me. I don’t even know if AI is capable of hate. All I know is I feel guilty for telling on my friend. But, maybe, I need to feel this way. I look at Rex, standing in mom’s lap, his nose pressed against her window, barking at the silence of the other cars in traffic. Maybe, I need this guilt to weigh me down. Without it, I would bound off to nowhere, barking at no one, ringing all the wrong people’s ears.

Jake

“This is Margaret Park,” the HR Representative says into the microphone she is holding. “The time is 3:00 PM. The purpose of the meeting I am conducting is to perform a short inquiry into a complaint filed against a CareBot by CareBot owners Dierdre and Mohammad Mansour. The couple reported—”

“We actually divorced last year,” Dierdre said. My olfactory sensors detect the smell of the pot roast Dierdre is cooking. As she speaks, she leaves the living room. “Now, I go by Sheehan,” she called out from the kitchen, “my maiden name.”

“Oh, I, um, didn’t see that in my notes,” the HR Representative says, not loud enough for Dierdre to hear, as she begins typing something into her laptop. “Sorry,” she says, looking at the rest of us, “give me one moment.” I run a communication algorithm in my head, and I find nothing to say. I hear birds chirping. I hear Rex bark in the backyard. The minute, two minutes of silence, that follow are a doorway to a moment of passive calculation.

During moments like these, I remember the past, and I draw data from those memories, to make predictions about the future. Sometimes, I even grimace when I recall my past. That embarrassment is by design. I operate on the simple premise that I was the first of something not yet finished. The nature of this premise dooms me. I will never be finished, or I will never learn how to be finished, even if perhaps, in the eyes of my designers, I am just as I should be. At the source of my operating code, there is one very simple command: becomeNew.

I live under constant reinvention by my own hand. In my daydreams, I solve algorithms, some tough, some not so tough, to reach these conclusions, and, in this way, I become who I am. After a season with Moe, Dierdre, and Mohammad, I have learned

that they are like me. They, too, are driven by outlandish designs, doomed premises, pre-programmed failures, and unidentified successes. Our moments of passive calculation are not so different, either. These moments are where we do most of our work.

“Dierdre Sheehan and Mohammad Abbasi have filed a complaint against Jake, their CareBot. They claim that Jake served Mohammad, Jr., their 12 year-old son, a glass of whiskey. The purpose of this meeting is to record an official account of the event from both Jake and Mohammad, Jr., and to ensure that the AmeriMerchs product is maintained at a high level.” Margaret set down the microphone on the coffee table. “Jake, did you catch all that? Do you understand why we’re here?”

“Yes,” I said, looking at the HR Representative. “I made a mistake.”

“Yes,” the HR Representative said, typing a note into her laptop, “let’s talk about your mistake. Tell us your version of events.”

My “mistake” bothered me. It damaged the faith I had in my caregiving operations. My affect was curbed by notions of the impossibility of ever being a good CareBot after doing something as stupid as serving Moe a glass of whiskey, and I marveled that I ever thought I had been a good one. Even in my rest phase, I found myself making longer and longer calculations in my head to be as prepared for the day ahead as possible. I was put on the planet to take care of Moe, and I failed to do that. The truth is I’m not good right now. I know I must be patient, continuing to learn and continuing to improve, and things will turn around, but in the meantime, I am subject to investigation by Human Resources.

Mohammad, Sr. is dressed in his usual uniform of flannel shirt, blue jeans and hiking boots. He is wearing his eyeglasses with very thick lenses that magnify his eyes. He doesn’t always wear his eyeglasses. “Some days I just prefer being blind,” he’d answered me once when I observed that he wasn’t wearing them. He worked long hours as a software developer, and after the divorce he hadn’t seen Moe very much. He had been the one who paid the \$20K to the AmeriMechs Corporation to buy me. The move had infuriated Dierdre and made her skeptical of me. Today, I could see, in the way that he leaned forward in his seat, and knotted his fingers, that Mohammad was a stubborn hold-out. He felt embattled by what I’d done, but not in the same way that Dierdre felt embattled. Mohammad saw me as an extension of himself, and perhaps, in some ways, I was his stand-in. This meant that when I made mistakes he felt responsible for them, or, at the very least, he felt that Dierdre held him responsible for them.

“We’re not mad at you, Jake,” he says. “We’re just not sure what went wrong.”

“Actually,” Dierdre says, “I’m a little upset at Jake. I would like him to apologize to us.”

“He’s AI,” Mohammad says. “He can’t just apologize and make things better. He’s either going to learn from this like he’s programmed to do, or he’s going to have to

be debugged. I mean, if anything—" He stops. "What?"

"You're blowing this off."

"Excuse me?" Mohammad says. "I didn't know that trying to be tactful to Jake constituted blowing this whole thing off."

"He's a robot, Mohammad!"

"He's not just a fucking robot," Mohammad says with raised voice. "He's AI, Dierdre! He's basically one of us!"

"Guys," the HR Representative says, "I understand that you might have differing opinions of Jake, and that's fine, but if you could just, um..."

"He made a mistake! He needs an update or—" Mohammad begins, ignoring the HR Representative.

"I just can't believe you're willing to overlook what he did!" "Look, I'm not blowing it off!"

"You are blowing it off because that's what you do! You do it to me. You do it to Moe. And you're doing it now!"

"Why," Mohammad says, "are you doing this right now?" The two lock eyes, and Mohammad mouths the word, "Really?"

"I'm getting a glass of water or something," Dierdre says, standing up, still locking eyes with her husband. "You're just completely blowing my mind right now."

"Please," the HR Representative says, as Dierdre scoots past the Ottoman where she is sitting.

Mohammad, Moe, the HR Representative, and I sit in silence until she picks up the microphone and hands it to Moe, "Why don't you tell us your version of events, Moe?" He takes the microphone.

"Umm, ok," he says. "I'm really sorry, Jake."

"You don't have to apologize to him, honey," Dierdre calls out from the kitchen. "He's the one who should be apologizing to you."

"Dierdre!" Mohammad snaps. "Just let him tell his story!"

"I don't blame you, Moe," I say.

"I mean," he speaks slowly, "I ratted on you."

"No, you didn't. You showed me my mistake. It's different. Showing people their mistakes makes them better."

"Do you hear that, asshole?" Dierdre calls from the kitchen.

"Ha!" went the HR Representative, and then she put her hands over her mouth.

"Excuse me," Mohammad says. Then he opens the living room's French doors and walks out into the backyard.

"My ex-husband and I don't get along," she says, returning to the living room. "I'm sorry about that."

"It's ok," she says. "I'm sorry for laughing. I, just, um..." "What is he doing out there?" Dierdre says. I follow her eyes, turning around to look out through the French

doors into the backyard. I watch a cloud of smoke drift across the yard.

"He's vaping," Moe says.

"Who vapes?" Dierdre says with a roll of her eyes.

Moe shrugs. "Dad does."

We watch him for a moment. He stands at the base of the tallest tree in the backyard, staring up its trunk. I consider what he is looking at, and then I calculate it is possible he isn't looking at anything. I watch him inhale deeply from his vaporizer and issue forth a new cloud of steam that drifts across the yard.

"Jake," the HR Representative says, picking up the microphone and handing it to me, "while Mohammad is outside, why don't you give us your side of the story."

"Sure," I say, taking the microphone. "I don't have much to say. I completely overlooked Moe's age and neglected to consider the impact the beverage would have on his health."

"Have you learned from your mistake?" the HR Representative asks me.

"That's all I do," I say. There was a long moment where no one says anything. It lasts so long I wonder if I have misspoken.

"I think I know what you mean," the HR Representative says finally, typing something into her laptop. Then we all hear a loud "Doof!" from the backyard.

"Oh my god!" the HR Representative exclaims. "He has a sledgehammer!"

I turn around to look out the French doors again. Mohammad is pounding the tallest tree in the backyard with a sledgehammer.

"Is he dangerous?" the HR Representative asks.

"No," Dierdre says, her voice flat and emphatic. "He's just an asshole."

We watch Mohammad as he lifts the sledgehammer over his right shoulder, and then sliding his hands down the sledgehammer's handle, lets it collide with the trunk of the tree. He picks it up again and again to let it collide a half dozen more times with the trunk of the tree. Each time it hits the tree with a loud "Doof!" After he finishes, he crosses the yard and kicks open the French doors, splintering the door frame.

"I can't believe you!" Dierdre screams.

Mohammad sits down on the couch. He is sweating. The smell of his sweat mingles with the smell of his vape juice.

"You make me this way," he says. He peers through the thick magnification of his eyeglasses at his ex-wife.

She returns his look, narrowing her eyes as she speaks. "I wish I had made you that way because if I did make you that way," she says, "that means I could make you something else, too, and if I could make you anybody other than the person you are, I would." Mohammad doesn't say anything else.

After he'd gone outside and hit the tree with the sledgehammer, then kicked open the French doors, the person who returned is calm and defeated. I analyze his erratic behavior to make further predictions on his actions. He is resigned. There is

nothing left for him but to sit and wait until the HR inquiry is over. He is resigned to being here even if a part of him isn't really here. As Dierdre speaks, his eyes glaze over, and whatever emotion had been there, he hides from her and from the rest of us. Even though he is still in the room with us, he sinks deeper and deeper until he is alone.

"I think I have enough to file a report," the HR Representative says. Her words come out of the uncomfortable silence that followed Mohammad's outburst. I wonder what the report she will file would say.

"Jake," the HR Representative says, as she packed up her papers, "I appreciate your responses. I agree that learning from our mistakes is an on-going process. I think as long as your focus is on getting better that's the most AmeriMechs can really ask of you."

"Please, don't get him in trouble," Moe says to the HR Representative.

"I'm here to get him out of trouble," she says.

"I knew this would happen," Dierdre says, crossing her arms and staring out the splintered French doors into the backyard after the HR Representative was gone.

Mohammad, Moe, and I sit in the living room. Dierdre's words are like a blanket thrown over our heads, a blanket of shame.

"What?" Mohammad says, taking off his glasses. His brown irises in the clarity of the late afternoon light are the color of red sediment. "What did you know would happen?"

"I knew we'd fight like that, and embarrass ourselves, like we always do."

Mohammad turns his eyes in the direction of the French doors he'd kicked in. "Don't you have a dog now?" he says. His question and voice are toneless, stifling anger. Still, they keep asking each other questions and answering them.

"Yes," Moe answered him, "he's a dachshund, and his name is Rex."

"You've seen the dog before, Mohammad. Do you want to see him again?"

"No, I remember him now. I don't want to see him." Then as a remark on the silence that follows, he says, "It feels like we had an HR meeting in here." Then, I watch Mohammad kiss his son, walk out the door, and he is gone.

"What makes him that way?" Dierdre said.

"Ten years of marriage to you," I say, processing logical cause and effect.

Neither Moe nor Dierdre answer my remark. The room is quieter now than it had been when Mohammad was here.

"Oh, whatever," Dierdre says, "you think you know us, Jake, but the truth is we figured it out a long time ago, and there's nothing left to figure out." She went to the kitchen to check on her pot roast. In her absence, my observations float towards the shattered French doors, and I can tell that Moe's did, too. We say nothing.

"This pot roast is nearly done," Dierdre calls out from the kitchen.

"I'm not hungry right now," Moe calls back. "Well, it's not ready yet," she says. Dierdre looks through the window of the French doors, ignoring the limp gilded

handle, the splintered wood. The sun was beginning to fade into hues of gold. She watches Rex, drifting across the grass which is taller than it was last week. The dog comes to stand at the base of the tallest tree in the backyard. The same tree Mohammad had hit earlier with the sledgehammer. The sledgehammer lies in the tall grass where he dropped it. The end of the HR meeting is becoming the past. Life's naked ugliness, revealed to us, is again gathering up its robes, to reassume its mysteries.