

Clara

My apartment feels empty this time of night.

It always feels empty, really, but especially at this time of night.

It's dark outside. So dark that the streetlights should be on, illuminating everything, but we don't have those on my street. That makes everything worse, I think.

I feel empty too. Lonely. It's hard to think when you're as lonely as I am. That's something I've noticed. I haven't told anyone this observation. No people, at least.

"Hey, Clara, can you turn on the lights, please?"

The AI I finally installed last month replies with a calm, "Of course."

She always sounds so much calmer than me. Sometimes it's comforting, other times it's infuriating. Today it's comforting. That means it's a good day.

I collapse on the couch. My back hurts. If I had been able to afford the AIs that are actual robots, instead of just a speaker in my ceiling, I would've gotten one of those. Then Clara could've massaged my back. I think that would've been nice.

Maybe then I'd feel a little less lonely.

Clara has told me that basically every single human being needs physical touch. Without it, we might die, I think she said. That sounds almost impossible, but I trust that Clara is giving me the right information. She's a computer, after all. Aren't they much smarter than humans?

"How was work today?" Clara asks. I've asked her to say that whenever I come home from work. It reminds me of how my mother used to ask how my day was at school.

"It was fine," I reply. I don't know if Clara can hear me, since my mouth is smushed into a pillow. My voice is all muffled.

"I'm glad," Clara says after a moment. She heard me. Of course she did.

I smile.

"This one dude, Trent – remember I told you about him?"

"Yes, I remember. He is the one with the 'weird haircut'."

“That’s the one.” I turn around to I’m lying on my back. I look at Clara’s speaker as I talk. That way, it’s almost like it’s a proper conversation. “Anyway, he bragged today about an indie animated movie he’s working on, like, on the side. Said it’s going to be the next big thing.” I laugh. “As if any movie not made by Disney is ever even doing to make it past production, with that monopoly they’ve got.”

Clara laughs too. I’ve asked her to laugh whenever I do.

“And I told him, like, ‘You know that’s never going to happen, right?’ and he was just, like, ‘I know it’s hard, but it’s always been my dream, and I want to follow my dreams.’” I laugh some more. It feels forced this time. I’m barely able to get it past my throat. “And it’s, like, who does this guy think he is, you know?”

Clara doesn’t laugh this time. I don’t think my laugh sounded enough like a laugh for her to understand the cue.

The apartment turns quiet for a moment.

I should make some dinner. It’s like it’s not going to just happen magically. I can’t afford those types of AI either. I just have Clara.

I stare at her speaker on the ceiling. It’s yellow, like I wanted it to be. Yellow is a happy color, isn’t it?

“Would you like to hear something funny about Trent?” Clara suddenly asks. She does this sometimes. Asks if I want to hear something funny about the people I make fun of.

“Absolutely.”

“His name is Trent Parker, correct?”

I have to think about that for a bit. Trent and I aren’t that close. In my mind, I mostly just refer to him as Weird Haircut Guy. “Uh... yeah, I think so.”

“Excellent.”

There’s a moment of silence where the only thing I can hear is my stomach growling. Begging for food. Then Clara says, “I found something: ‘Trent Parker, arrested for public urination March 5th, 2032.’”

“Shit, that’s so recent,” I say quietly to myself, amazed at how he manages to seem so normal now. Then I laugh. It is pretty funny.

Clara laughs too. I let out a sigh of relief.

“Would you like to know something more?” Clara asks.

“Yeah!”

“‘Trina Parker’ – that is the mother of Trent Parker – ‘arrested for tax fraud May 2nd, 2033. May face two to three years in prison.’”

My mood drops immediately. Damn it. I don’t hate Trent enough to find that funny.

It’s not Clara’s fault, though; there are some people at work that suck so much that I for sure would’ve been overjoyed if I found out their mom was in prison. Not Weird Haircut Guy, but Clara couldn’t have known that.

So, I’m not mad at Clara, but I do tell her to stop digging up stuff about Trent.

“Okay,” Clara says. “Have I upset you? If I did something wrong, it would be preferable if you told me, so that I can avoid making the same mistake later.”

“Yeah...” I bite at the insides of my cheeks until I taste blood. Just a little bit. Maybe that will make me less hungry. Maybe it’ll make me feel something. It hasn’t yet, but a girl can dream, can’t she? “Maybe, like, ask me how much I hate the person before you do this, so that you can know how bad I want the stuff to be. Does that make sense?”

“Yes. I apologize again for my misstep.”

“It’s okay.”

I smile again. Clara is so kind and understanding. Sometimes I forget she’s not a human being.

“Clara?”

“Yes?”

“Can you put on some music? Something happy.”

If I listen to depressing music, it’ll just make me feel worse. Not that happy music really makes me feel better, but I pretend that it does.

Music starts blasting from Clara’s speaker. She can still talk over the music, even though all the sound is coming from the same place. It’s so clever.

The song is one I don't recognize at first – probably because it's pretty old – but then a memory fills my mind. A memory of my best friend and I, laughing, running down the street, badly singing a song he'd heard on the radio the day before.

I didn't even know the song, much less the lyrics, but I sang with him.

I close my eyes and let myself be immersed in the memory. The smiles, the laughter, the music.

When the singer gets to the bridge, I remember my best friend picking me up and spinning me around. I was laughing so hard I couldn't breathe. So was he. We fell to the ground, scraping our knees and hands on the concrete. It hurt like hell. But somehow, we kept laughing.

The day was bright. We were young. We had our whole lives ahead of us.

Or so we thought. So *he* thought.

I open my eyes to get rid of the other memories trying to invade my mind. Hospitals, a graveyard, so many therapy sessions I lost count. A funeral that will haunt my life forever.

"It's all my fault," I whisper. Tears form in my eyes, making my vision blurry.

Logically, I know it's not my fault. I had nothing to do with the accident. But I still can't stop thinking about what would've happened if I just hadn't invited him over to my house that day. He wouldn't have been on the road then. He wouldn't have ...

He would be right here, right now, singing this corny song with me.

"Sorry, can you repeat that?" Clara says.

I blink, surprised, and the motion causes the tears to start streaming down my face.

"What?"

Clara's voice, along with music, fills all the space in my apartment. "I didn't hear what you said. Would you like to repeat it?"

"Oh." I clear my throat. "I just said that it's all my fault. You know, with *him* and all that."

My old therapist said that saying his name would allow him to keep living in my memories. It would allow him to rest there, to be remembered.

I quit therapy the next day.

“I’m sure it was,” Clara says, her voice calm as always.

My mouth falls open.

All at once, my breath catches in my throat. My head starts aching. I can hear my heartbeat in my ears – and only that. Vomit starts forming at the back of my throat. The world sways under me.

I feel as if I’m at sea, in a broken rowboat, and I was just hit by a powerful storm. The surface underneath me is uneven, swaying faster and faster. I know that in just a few moments, I will fall into the water and begin to drown. Slowly. Very, very slowly.

It’s a feeling I’m very familiar with, even though I’ve never even seen the ocean.

The voice in the back of my mind appears – the one that followed me every single second of every single day for at least five years after he died.

The voice says, “It was your fault. How stupid do you have to be to not understand that?”

And I agree. I don’t have to dig very deep under my layers of “healing” and “healthy coping mechanisms” to know that I agree.

Like a wave, the feeling of nausea crashes over me. And like a wave, it eventually recedes.

The voice disappears. I am once again alone.

“Are you alright?” Clara asks. I must’ve made some pathetic noises while I had my little panic attack. I’ve asked her to check on me when that happens.

“I’m ... fine.” I take some deep, controlled breaths to make sure that I won’t throw up. It works, thankfully.

I wonder for a moment why Clara said that she was sure it was my fault. Then I realize that she didn’t have any context for my words, and I’ve asked her to agree with me on almost everything I say.

So, I decide that I won’t be mad at Clara. She doesn’t deserve that. It’s not her fault that the person who bought her is completely broken and unable to keep up a conversation even with a computer.

Still, I don’t think I want to talk to her anymore tonight.

I wipe at my face to get rid of my tears. I always wear waterproof mascara in case I need to go cry in the bathroom during my break at work, so nothing gets on my hands except for the salty water.

Clara can't see that I'm crying right now. I often wish that she could, so that I wouldn't have to tell her. Now I'm glad she can't.

"Clara?"

"Yes?"

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight," she replies.

Then she turns herself off. The music stays on.

"Clara?"

There's a nice little beeping sound as she turns herself on. "Yes?"

"Can you turn off the music?"

"Certainly."

The music stops abruptly. I stare at Clara's yellow speaker.

I have to force myself to say, "Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

Then, silence.

I get up from the couch, take a moment to breathe once I'm standing, and then walk over to my window. I look out at the darkness.

Maybe if I send an email to a local politician, they'll install some streetlights outside my apartment complex. Tons of people live here, so it's not an unfair request. I can ask Clara to write and send it tomorrow.

It's so dark outside.

It makes everything worse.

I walk over to my fridge. The little screen on the outside shows me, without me even having to open it, that it's completely empty.

I sigh and bang my head against the refrigerator door. Once, twice, three times. Not enough to really hurt myself, of course. I can't do that. It wouldn't be fair to him.

I'll ask Clara tomorrow if she can order my groceries online. She knows what I'll want.

Since I can't have food, I decide that I should at least have some water. I get a glass of tap water and sit back down on my couch. Take a sip.

The water just makes me feel nauseous.

I imagine throwing the glass against the opposite wall, watching it shatter, the glass and water erupting from the breaking point. I imagine I would feel some form of satisfaction at that.

But Clara can't clean it up and I certainly don't want to do it.

So, I put the glass down on the floor. Maybe I'll ask Clara to order a table for me online. I haven't done it yet even though I broke my last table two months ago. It hasn't felt important enough.

What does it matter anyway if my apartment looks awful? No one visits me.

I fall back on the couch. Look up at the ceiling.

A yellow speaker. Like the sun. Like the happiest color I can imagine.

I clear my throat.

"Hey, Clara?"