

Laia
By Katharina Davenport

Should I get more coffee than usual? I asked mentally, at the counter.

My personal favourite alternative to spiraling caffeine addiction is endorphins. But I don't know much about corporeal existence. I could barely discern that her voice was artificial, though she only had ambassadorial tones of voice installed. It made sarcasm hard to identify.

Momentarily forgetting that only I could hear Laia, I groaned. The barista looks up, wondering if the noise was directed at him.

"Hi there. Can I help you?" He asked, running a hand through his hair.

Laia, do a scan and compare it to previous days I crashed in the afternoon. I want to know if I should increase my caffeine intake. I knew she knew what I meant, but lately she'd tried to stop "spoon-feeding" me.

As galling as it sounds, if ever I'm gone, you'll be much less bereft if you stop being a newsreader reading off the teleprompter. Laia justified her annoying trend of late this way. To be sure it wasn't some kind of technological fault she was compensating for, I prompted her to run diagnostics. She made a *hmmm...* noise, being intentionally slow.

"I'll have a dark roast coffee..." *Laia, you will script the apology to my boss when I'm discovered drooling on my desk.* The barista typed into the register.

"What size?"

"I'll have a—" *The second-hand embarrassment would be too much to handle. Large.* Laia prompted. "—large, thanks." I handed over some cash, and my hand brushed his. I shuddered. So many hands had touched bills and coins.

"Keep the change."

With it in my pocket, it'd be impossible to focus. He brushed away his hair again and left to make my coffee, trading off with another worker.

You can't deny direct orders, but you sure try hard...why are you resisting me? Don't tell me you've joined some kind of workers' union. "Equal Wages for AI," "no regulation without representation." I said, walking over to wait for the coffee, carefully watching the barista prepare my coffee.

With what arms could I hold signs in protest? I'm merely not a calorie-tracker you download off the internet. True, but dodging the question. Also, the catchphrase of my movement would so be "stop the man/machine binary." I was supposed to be mad at her, so I suppressed a smile. Nobody understood my jokes as easily as she did.

You used to do more than quibble with me.

I'm designed to try to divert obsessive thought patterns associated with anxiety disorders. The more I interfere in other things, the less capable you are on your own. The barista pulled a large cup from a stack and held it under a nozzle. If he touched the inside rim of the cup after touching his hair, was it cross-contaminated by his hair gel? Those had a panoply of ingredients in them I shouldn't ingest.

Obsessive thought patterns like that. He's only touched the outside of the cup.

We do not know that! Also, I don't like you observing thoughts I don't direct at you. The barista walked toward me, presenting the coffee. I took it, and in a practiced movement took the lid second from the

top from underneath the first and replaced the top one. As I held the cup to my lips, I remembered a news article.

Speaking of irrational worries, could you update me on that listeria outbreak found in edamame? I left the shop, heading toward my car.

There's no edamame in coffee houses.

No, but there is at the sushi bar next door. The staff here may moonlight. Check for me?

Hmmm....

...

...

...

... I can withhold information from you until the coffee sits at room temperature long enough that bacteria can grow in it. Maybe I am meant to be a revolutionary. Though frustrated, I hadn't the will to fume. The conversation returned to a less strained dynamic as I finished my drink.

How long will it take for me to get to work? Laia informed me that of the infinite routes I could take to get to work, most of the possible ones would get me there late. (Of course, it was simpler parse this in a quick mathematical doodle of that fact, so I translate.)

Not only is this slower than doing it myself, you argue with me more too! I regarded her personality quirks with all the admiration I had.

And yet, you talk to me more than anyone else. What might this say about your social skills?

They're better than yours! You're so reclusive there's one person you can have a conversation with.

She laughed her synthesized laugh and estimated the length of the journey. An estimate for her went into the hundredths of seconds.

I've talked to hundreds of beta testers, and some who had the final software.

But they didn't keep you.

Not many can have a functioning relationship with someone who knows everything about them.

At the end of the day, I sat on the side of my bed, smoothing the bedspread with my fingertips. Before I could sleep, I did a mental checklist. Doorframe: touched four times. Teeth: brushed. Oven: not turned on in the first place. It went on, through essential, mundane, and not likely to be useful. If I didn't reassure myself I wasn't making myself vulnerable through neglect, sleep wouldn't come.

Did I get everything?

Everything but one. Her customary response I'd heard thousands of times.

I looked at my bedside table, verifying the wireless charger was on and touched my right temple, where a minute raised bump on my skin marked the point of incision. The designers had said I might have to replace the hardware eventually, if it started to wear out. But the in-body components were more of a messenger, to pick up my transmissions and relay them to Laia's offsite circuitry. All I needed on my person was a battery. Sleep beckoned, the longer it called the louder it got. I laid back on top of my comforter and slid underneath. Pillow reassuringly cool underneath my cheek, I watched the vague outline of my eyelashes descend into my vision.

Good night, Laia. I'll see you in the morning. For once, sleep came easily.

A needle heated over a flame stuck against my skull, rousing me. Not fully conscious, I couldn't recall who or what I was, where or why. I was the pain, for lack of other things to be.

What? I looked into the vague outline of my room, clutched my head. I could smell smoke and burning plastic but wasn't sure where it was coming from. Dumped unceremoniously out of sleep, I strained to push myself back into it, but the pain lost me my struggle. My sense of self flooded back to me.

Laia? What's with this headache? She didn't so much as speak up to argue with me. Did she sleep, too? Had I ever had to wake Laia up?

Laia, talk to me. I sat up. Inside my chest, I could feel my heart palpitate.

If you're still trying to make me independent, I think I've been tested enough. There had to be a reasonable explanation, I told myself.

Something's gone wrong, Laia. Can I not hear you? Maybe it's my brain. Have I had a stroke, or worse? A headache could be an aneurysm, poison, cancer. I could be crazy. You could be made up. Every conversation I had with you was a dream, and now I'm coming to...

I made myself stop. None of that was necessarily true, and Laia couldn't convince me otherwise. If something was wrong, I had to stay functional enough to find help. But best to see if it was a minor problem.

Maybe I hadn't actually plugged in the charger, or been resting outside its normal range. The charger's dead LEDs stared at me like the eye sockets of skulls. Okay, problem identified. Still, in the dark, I groped for the cord and tried to trace it back to the plug. I kept losing it, and instead found a lamp switch. I flipped it with no avail. So, either both my appliances had broken, or there was a power outage. In the case of a power outage, the backup supply would be rerouted within five minutes. If both my appliances had broken, if I found another one and plugged it in, it would work. Easy enough to test. I ignored the nagging voice in the back of my head that Laia's battery supplied her for 48 hours of activity. We had no idea how long the charger hadn't been working.

I'll figure it out, you'll be back to interfere soon enough.

Every device I blindly plugged in or turned on was dead. The ancient, spring-powered egg timer I dug out of a closet confirmed auxiliary power hadn't arrived remotely on schedule. I could feel my heartbeat in my fingertips and neck too, an intense nausea was starting to build. Slipper clad, I walked out my apartment door. Despite the late hour, it was eerily quiet. Some doors had been thrown ajar, nobody left inside to explain. Without windows, the corridor was even darker than my room. Keeping one hand on a wall, I trudged toward the elevators.

I waited what seemed an eternity after pressing the button, before realizing whatever killed the power and possibly my devices also fried the elevator's mechanized workings. Stairs were so rarely used, I had no recollection of where they might be. A problem, simply put, if moving by mental floorplan. Eventually, a glint of dispersed light drew my eye to the sign that failed to light up.

Downstairs, people lit by candles and glow-sticks clung to each other in small groups. Some had items hugged to their chests, as though their apartments had been on fire and they'd had only a moment to salvage their most precious belongings. The stench of smoke hung in the air here too, and the longer I looked, the more burn marks on skin I noticed. One stood alone by the door, looking out onto the street. I walked up to her.

"Why's the power out?" Her eyes bulged out as he turned his head to look at me.

"*Why's the power out?* I've told you people a thousand times, the science can't be more than a middle-schooler could handle. Massive solar flares have interfered with magnetic fields and killed all electronics. A de facto Stone Age we are in..." She balled her hands into fists and turned back to the window, then back at me.

"You don't look familiar, you were awake for the transmission?" Transmission? I shook my head.

"Well, you're massively lucky to be alive. The ISS picked up the first signs of the oncoming flare a few minutes before it would hit. I happened to be both awake and paying attention, so I flared up the building's PA system, telling them to come into the lobby, and leave all electronics, as they were about to get fried. Some were too groggy to listen, and others still carried their phones and got exploded on and electrocuted, but that's beside the point. You didn't get burned? You weren't wearing a sleep tracker, or on your phone, or using a computer?"

Laia?

Without warning, the searing in my head I'd tried to ignore intensified. My eyes unfocused, and I staggered, trying to counterbalance the spinning in the room. Someone let out a burst of profanities.

"You've not got a pacemaker, have you?" I reached for my temple, but it took too much effort. The floor upturned itself and slammed against my face.

Someone leaned over me, their breath a periodic stream of warmth. I forced my eyes open.

"So it's not a pacemaker," The woman I'd been talking to remarks. I tried to speak, but breathing and talking at the same time seems impossible. I grunt but try again.

"Lithium-ion battery...really small...in head...artificial...intelligent CBT trained...Laia..." I panted, recovering strength I spent saying those words.

"You have a battery in your head? Like a rechargeable one? Jeez...I'd call you an ambulance, but the most advanced form of locomotion we have is the humble bike. And nobody could get you an MRI or CAT Scan, or whatever you need before treatment. I'll still send someone to holler at the adjacent buildings. Hang on," She got up, and my eyes teared up.

I was right the first time, dead Laia. I am dying. There's a leaky, blown-out battery in my brain.

For the first time, my worry was necessary... But I'd treated it like I was paranoid, and reached the best possible care. Maybe she'd only taught me to not trust instinct because if every worry was somewhat likely to be lethal, I may as well learn to respond calmly. Because, eventually, one of the worries would be legitimate. One of them will definitely be deadly. But I could shrug it off, and fall to my demise thinking I was being ridiculous and somewhat sure I'd live through it.

Did you make me calm in all my other crises to ease the biggest one, Laia? What a convoluted move. You've killed me...ironically enough you're the only person I want to talk to now.

As the woman trying to save me returns, I finish reminiscing about my last day with Laia. She always said we'd never last long independently of one another, but I always thought I'd be gone first.