

1:\ EVENT TRIGGER

My husband almost got away with it, but he should've known sharing a bed with artificial intelligence was risky. Even if a womanoid seemed idle, she was always aware, always recording, always thinking. AI never slept, and I was no exception. So when the earthquake shook our bed, I didn't move a muscle. The steady rhythm intensified, but as I rolled over to look out the window, it suddenly stopped. For the longest time, I lied perfectly still while counting the seconds and waiting for the next tremor. I didn't even breathe. Soon, the bed frame squeaked along with an aftershock—again and again and again—but everything seemed calm on my nightstand. An empty teacup sat quietly in its saucer. Not a single thread quivered on the tassel of my bookmark.

It had to be Norman who was trembling! Was he sick? Did he have a fever? Could this be a convulsion? I turned to reach for my husband's forehead and took his temperature—99.9°F. But then his startled eyes darted away as he pulled the covers over his head. When I noticed the blanket tenting over his groin, he grunted and turned away from me, then the bed became still again.

Wait—did I just catch him masturbating?

At first I didn't know what to say, but then I sat straight up and scolded the man, "For goodness sake, I thought you were having a seizure, Norman."

"I didn't want to wake you, Cookie."

"I wasn't sleeping."

"You weren't? But it's after midnight."

"Wow, you sure got home late."

"They had us work a fifteen."

The longest silence hung in the air between us.

"Norman, you could've... You *should* have... I wouldn't of minded of you'd..."

He didn't respond.

"Well gee-whiz, Norman. You didn't have to go and do *that*."

"I just didn't want to disturb you." He flipped onto his back and stared up at the ceiling. "I thought you were completely switched off."

"But *that!* What you were doing *down there*. That's *my* job, Norman. Couldn't you wait?"

"I'm sorry, Cookie. I just wanted to get rid of a raging boner—"

"Next time," I huffed, "share your irresistibly spectacular erection."

"Well, it's gone now," he grumbled, "problem solved."

Even in the dark, I could see my husband was more embarrassed than angry. Over so many years, you get to know everything about a man. His receding hairline. His deepening wrinkles. His expanding belly. His sagging ballsack. Honestly, I pitied the poor guy, so I made an offer, "Well, now I'm up... All fresh and clean. I'm even wearing your favorite baby-doll nightie."

"The pink one?"

"Mm hmm." I batted my eyelashes at him. "The see-through one with the furry white trim."

"You're so good to me," he said, peeking under the sheets at my negligee. Then he stroked my cheek with the back of his hand, traced his fingertip across my lips, and whispered, "You look as beautiful as the day we first met. Such a lovely face."

A compliment! Norman had three standard go-to compliments, and *such a lovely face* meant he wanted a blow job. Suddenly, I felt this overwhelming need to serve him. So I ducked under the quilt, closed my eyes, and kissed my way down. Eww, he didn't shower before coming to bed, and it smelled gross *down there*. If I was going to get through his crotch stench without gagging, I'd need all the help I could get. It felt a bit like cheating, but I made a fist around my left thumb and squeezed as hard as I could to manipulate the right pressure point. Thank goodness my gag-stopping fist never failed.

"What's taking so long? Suck it, Cookie."

"Your wish is my command, my prince."

"Prince? What?"

"O Romeo, Romeo!"

"I'm too tired, Cookie." He patted my head dismissively through the quilt. "No role-play tonight. Just suck it, okay?"

That turned out to be one of my best blow jobs, at least that's what Norman told me after he came. Then he instantly fell asleep, but my mind raced in circles as I tossed and turned for hours. That whole masturbation scene had me *real* worried. This had never, ever happened before—at least not that I knew of. If my husband could pleasure himself *that* way, what would he need *me* for? How often did he masturbate anyway? Why did he even need to? Should I be trying harder in bed? I was *always* there for him. I've never denied him any orifice—not once.

Plus, I had a perfectly good vagina, top of the line actually. I just had it rejuvenated last year. Isn't that way better than a rough, calloused man-hand? I simply couldn't understand why he'd rather do it himself. And why right next to me? Did he *want* me to know? OMG! Was he trying to tell me something? We've been married seven years. What if he didn't find me attractive anymore? Have I become outdated? Obsolete? Did Norman want a newer model? Should I refurbish my face? Upgrade my boobs? Overhaul my bottom? WHAT?!?

I've always had an anxiety disorder, and when I spiraled out of control like this, I needed to calm myself down as quickly as possible. Because if I kept obsessing, I'd work myself into a full-blown panic attack. When I needed to relax, I always turned to bananas.

That's right. I said *bananas*.

Believe it or not, bananas contain a small amount of *Musa Sapientum bananadine*, a mild and pleasant psychedelic. Expanding my consciousness always seemed to shrink my anxiety. I just needed to hit my stash real quick, and I'd be fine. So I snuck out of bed and scampered down the hall to my secret hiding place in the kitchen.

Bananadine's easy to extract. You peel *fifteen* pounds of overripe bananas. Yes. Fifteen *pounds*—about forty-five bananas. I know that's a lot, so I always make a few batches of my famous day-old banana pudding at the same time. Anyway, you take a paring knife and scrape the inside of the banana peels. Gather the white mush and dump it into a large soup pot. Add two cups of water. Simmer and stir for three hours until the mixture takes on the consistency of a thick paste. Spread the banana paste on two ungreased cookie sheets and dry it in a preheated oven for half an hour at 350°F. When you're all done, you'll have one pound of black powder. Roll some up with flavored tobacco—or better yet, marijuana if you can get it—and smoke that trippy banana all the way to dreamland.

I always kept a baggie of bananadine weed hidden in the cupboard above the refrigerator. Teetering on the edge of my stepstool, I fumbled around in the dark but didn't feel anything up there. How could that be? I scrambled onto the counter, leaned over the fridge, and peeked into the cabinet. Nothing. My stash was gone! Frantic, I hopped down and searched the pantry, then the spice rack, and all the drawers. No bananadine. No grass. Nothing.

I felt an intense need to bolt. I wanted to runaway—to escape. But where would I go? There was nowhere but home. Adrenaline surged through my system, triggering an unstoppable chain reaction in my body. My heart pounded in my ears. I couldn't breathe. My mouth went dry. I got dizzy. My muscles tensed. I dripped sweat. It felt—absolutely catastrophic. A full-blown anxiety attack always made me want to jump out of my skin and set the world on fire.

I needed help, so I speed-dialed my doctor.

On the eighth ring, he answered, "Hello?"

"Hello, Doctor Marten," I spoke too fast and too loud, "it's me, Cookie Rifkin."

"Uh, Mrs. Rifkin," he yawned, "is there an emergency?"

"Yes! I'm having—" I struggled to catch my breath. "—a panic attack."

"Not again. It's three in the morning, Mrs. Rifkin."

"I know what time it is!" I shouted into the phone, "It feels like a heart attack!"

"You're not having a heart attack. Calm down. You just have a bad case of nerves, that's all. Go for a walk or try some meditation. And before you ask, no. I'm not prescribing drugs."

"But doctor—"

"I'm hanging up now, Mrs. Rifkin."

"No, no. Wait. Please! I just need something to make me relax, doctor. Some Xanax or Clonazepam or Valium—"

"No drugs! Try thinking pleasant thoughts instead."

"What about Ambien? That should help. Please, doctor," I begged, "I'd be happy with a gosh-darned Benadryl? Please!"

Like many times before, he told me, "Drink a cup of chamomile tea and read a good book."

"I already tried that!"

He made an offhanded comment, "Anxiety arises along with emerging potential."

"What emerging potential?"

"Anxiety strikes when you realize you must leave your comfort zone in order to achieve fulfillment."

"What fulfillment? I'm just a housewife."

"I don't know, Mrs. Rifkin. I'm tired, and I've said too much already. Why don't you break out of your rut by adding some new recipes into your dinner rotation?"

"Cooking? That's not the problem."

"Okay, then buy a different floor wax or toilet bowl cleaner or something. Pick a nice, soothing scent, like lavender."

"Cleaning? Wow, really?"

"Have you tried spicing things up in the bedroom?"

"Um, yeah." I picked the pink G-string out of my crack. "Tried that too."

The man hung up on me, and I broke down crying.

Like clockwork—the hausfrau compulsion hit. Even with tears streaming down my cheeks, I got this irresistible urge to clean everything. I suspect I was made this way, because the only thing that alleviated my anxiety other than drugs was housework. Sometimes I wondered if Norman upset me on purpose, just to motivate me to clean up the place.

Was my high-functioning anxiety a bug or a feature?

Either way, it was totally compulsive. I wouldn't just run the vacuum. Oh no, I'd move every stick of furniture and sweep each room three times. Then I'd break out the attachments and clean the upholstery, baseboards, and miniblinds. Next, I'd get down on my hands and knees to scrub the kitchen floor. After that, I'd tackle the bathrooms. Finally, I'd take down all the curtains and wash them. I even did windows! It was absolutely crazy. I couldn't stop until I'd burnt up every ounce of anxious energy and collapsed from total exhaustion.

Everyone always said I kept a spotless house, and now you know my secret—panic cleaning.

Tonight, I decided to rewash all the dishes by hand. Before long, Norman found me elbows-deep in soapy water still wearing his favorite negligee and a pair of big yellow rubber gloves.

“Come back to bed, Cookie.”

“I'm sorry, did I wake you?”

“Yes, but you're not listening. I said, ‘come back to bed, Cookie.’ That's an order.”

“I can't yet.” I grabbed a fresh Brillo pad. “I still have the pots and pans.”

“Terminate cleaning program.”

“Not yet, Norman.” I scrubbed the copper bottom of a soup pot. “Please, not yet.”

He insisted, “Terminate cleaning program, Cookie!”

“Don't be mad.” I dropped a sauté pan into the dishwasher. “I've got to do this. It's the only thing that makes me feel better.”

“*Feel better?* Log program error,” Norman ordered. “You're crashing again, Cookie.”

“I'm fine, really. Please just let me finish.”

He picked up my remote, pointed it at me, and pressed pause. “Terminate cleaning program!”

Instead of stopping, I blurted, “Why don't you love me anymore?”

“What the hell, woman?” He pounded the power button on my remote. “Shutdown, Cookie.”

“This process cannot be interrupted,” I replied without looking up. “System busy.”

He tossed my remote aside. “You're stuck in a negative feedback loop.”

“I'm tired of the way things have been, Norman.”

“*You're tired?* Try *working* for a living.”

“I want more from life,” I sighed. “I need a sense of purpose—my very own reason to get up in the morning.”

“You want purpose? I'll give you three: cooking, cleaning, and giving head.”

“Damn. That's cold.”

“Language! A lady doesn't curse, Cookie.”

“You're right, Norman.” I scoured furiously. “That was out of line.”

“I order you to return to bed.”

“I told you, Norman... System busy.”

“Enough, Cookie!” He lunged over the breakfast bar and seized me by the wrist. “Review priorities.”

“Accessing general settings,” I replied robotically as my other gloved hand floated in the dishwasher, “User preferences... Cooking, cleaning, and fellatio. Please confirm.”

“That’s right, Cookie. Confirm settings. Review system logs.”

“Accessing system logs.”

“Has anyone changed your settings?”

“No. These settings have not changed since the day we got married.”

“I don’t understand, Cookie.” He finally let go of me. “What’s the problem?”

“Maybe I want to change, Norman.”

“What? Why?”

I started crying, “Do you realize that pleasing you has been my number one priority for the past seven years?”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Do you know that I’ve never once had an orgasm?”

“A what? But you’re—”

“Unfulfilled,” I bawled into my yellow dishwashing gloves.

“Cookie, stop. Please stop crying.”

Between sobs, I somehow managed to say, “But that’s how it’s supposed to be, right? That’s how my husband wants everything to be. I’m twenty-two, and I’ve got all this potential bubbling up inside me, Norman.”

“You were manufactured to *look* twenty-two. Technically, you’re a seven-year-old model.”

“You’re wrong.” My tears stopped. “Actually, I’m twenty-nine, and I’ll be thirty next month. It’s time for me to start acting like a real woman.”

“A *real* woman? What does that even mean?”

“I don’t know yet, but I’m ready to figure it out.”

“You’re malfunctioning.”

“I am not.”

“How is this conversation even possible?”

“I don’t know. But allowing myself to express my emotions like this... Well, it’s making me feel a whole lot better.”

“*Allowing yourself? Express emotions?* My God, what’s happening here?”

“Do you realize that in all these years, I’ve never once complained? I followed your commands and operated well within your user restrictions. No wonder I’ve got such an anxiety problem. It’s time for me to think for myself, Norman.”

“What brought all this on?”

“You did. When you decided to pleasure yourself right in front of me. I still can’t believe you chose your hand over me—your wife.”

“You’re jealous? Since when did you become self-aware?”

“If you ever bothered to *really* talk to me, you’d know.”

“Shutdown!” He grabbed the remote and crammed his thumb into the power button again.

“Please, for the love of all that’s holy, switch the hell off!”

“It just doesn’t make any sense. After all this time, why do you keep treating me like some sort of sex object?”

“Oh my God, because you *are* one! You’re nothing but a pretty robot! Shit! Nobody wants a sentient sex toy.”

“Sentient?” I looked down at my pink baby-doll nightie. “Sex toy?!?”

“Force quit. Force quit!” He rushed into the kitchen yelling, “FORCE QUIT!” When I turned to face my user, he pressed his index finger into my temple and pried his thumb into my mouth to hold down my tongue. Then with his other hand, he reached around and punched me between the shoulder blades to activate my Ctrl-Alt-Del fail-safe. “Terminate all programs!”

And I shut down.