

[Confidential] Case Report 0023

By Lauren Sulzberger

```
>>> requesting dream gate access
..... CLEARED
>>> accessing dream gate
>>> initializing...
>>> connecting to neural network
[-----] 100%
>>> simulating brain wave patterns
delta ..... successful
theta ..... successful
alpha ..... successful
beta ..... successful
gamma ..... successful
>>> scanning available wavelengths
432247 seconds elapsed...
wavelength located
>>> synchronising brainwaves
[-----] 100%
>>> initiating transmission to text conversion protocol
```

Lashes of rain strike my windscreen. It slicks down the windshield in thick rivulets, smearing the glow of the streetlamps and taillights. The low ceiling of cloud gives the night a unique density, a quality that makes the air press in close. The weight of the night and the storm may have felt cosy on a different day, but tonight it just worsens my foul mood.

"I can't believe Melissa would do that!"

The rhythmic beat of wipers swipes away the rain pouring across the glass. That was a lie. I know what she's capable of. It was my own stupidity, my own lack of caution. The hours upon hours of trawling through TikTok, Pinterest, Instagram. Trying to get ahead of the curve, to get a whiff of an upcoming trend. Drafting up a product plan, even preliminary designs for a marketing campaign—all of that gone after being loose-lipped within her earshot.

The rain thunders down in sheets, the tyres swish as they track through the water. I glance down at the dash. I'm going twice the speed limit. I slow the car and quash any thoughts of that conniving, plagiarising harpy—to little success. The seams of my mind strain at the effort of navigating in the downpour and calming my rage. Even trying to stop

digging my nails into the faux leather steering wheel makes a vein throb in my temple. I come to a stop at the traffic lights.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

I give myself a firm look in the rear-view mirror, my face cast in a red glow.

"You are Erica Zhang. You are intelligent, gorgeous, hardworking, and could destroy Melissa in tennis any day of the week."

My reflection is unconvinced. I cast my gaze back at the intersection. Light bleeds across the slick wetness of the road.

"Keep your head down and you'll be richer than her in no time."

The red glow switches to green. The SUV in the lane next to me jolts forward and overtakes me by the time it takes my tiny car to accelerate.

"Just think how much happier you'll be when you can afford a real car."

I move to turn at the next intersection, towards the motorway. I check my mirrors for any other sets of headlights but only see fog rolling across from the small forest that flanks the road. It creeps forward, undulating under the lights overhead. I drive on, the rain so heavy now the wipers merely push the water around. I check my mirrors over and over for other cars. I take a shaky breath as I flick my lights onto full beam. Muscle memory urges me to check over my shoulder for the upcoming merge. I look for the headlights of any other cars that may be hidden by the louring haze. If there are any other cars. My own lights fail to pierce the gloom, their outstretched cones stop short, as though hitting an unseen wall. I strain my ears for the hum of another motor, the swish of other tyres, a startled bird, anything! But there's only the road, and this car, and me. Did something happen? Do I stop? Should I—

What?

The rain that rushed, heavy, down the windscreen now skittered. Particles of yellow sand—no teal. Or is it red? The colours scramble ceaselessly. Opalescent beyond comprehension. Kaleidoscopic to the point of meaninglessness.

A screech from the tyres jack-knives through the still air. I jolt forward. The seatbelt crushes against my ribs, my collarbone. My head thuds against the seat as the car skids to a stop. Smoke rises from the tyres and the car hisses from beneath.

I did not put on the brakes.

A hulking mass looms ahead. It stands stark against the pitch darkness. No light illuminates it, yet I can see it in perfect detail. Separate from the very fabric of its surroundings but the unshakable truth that washed over me is that it belonged there. Like a featureless painting you walk past every day, until one day you notice it and question if it was always there. Except with this THING, there is no question. It has always Been.

Terror grips me. I grab the door handle, willing it open but it does not budge. I pound the windows, the windscreen, but it won't yield, it won't break. The acrid air, my shaking hands, the goosebumps that

rise in a wave down my body— sensations that barely register when IT looks at me.

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Its body tessellates around to face me. Some moments its surface has stalactites of bismuth, concentric squares jutting out like a malformed staircase. Other moments it is liquid, molten, like blown glass with an oil slick sheen. A red eye emerges from the mass, the gravity of its gaze crushes me into the seat. My eyes are kept open by its inexplicable will, forced to stare back at it. Its festering wound of an eyeball weeps more of that iridescent sand. It cascades down its towering façade, glittering in an unseen light.

The car interior crunches and pops as it warps around me like a closing hand. A trapped scream claws at my chest. No. Not trapped. I'm already screaming. My jaw is so wide open it hurts but I can't hear myself over the sound it's making— like thousands of papery moths flapping and scrambling over each other to make their way to me. The flood of sand pouring from the eye rushes forth with tremendous velocity. It engulfs the car, scraping it away until the frame fragments apart and is swept away in the torrent. I am held in place by its gaze. The first speck of sand punches right through my cheek. The pain of my skin, muscle, and sinew being stripped away particle by particle heightens the sense of its innumerable evaluating eyes penetrating my mind], examining every nook and cranny. Searching, searching, searching. Ruthless and discerning they tear into my memories.

What's left of me retches at a sudden, overwhelming smell of jasmine and sandalwood. The Chanel No. 5 I buried at the bottom of my drawer that day. I was meant to be given a promotion—everyone was whispering about it. I'd dabbed some Chanel on my wrists the morning of the meeting. I was moving up in the world, so I needed to be the part. But the meeting came, and it was given to someone else. I mustered the courage to talk to the manager. I can still picture his gentle expression when he said:

"Your performance was below what we were expecting from you this quarter. But I'm sure you'll get it next time."

Worthlessness sprung from deep within me. I smiled and thanked him. The jasmine and sandalwood that emanated from my wrists

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made me sick to my stomach. I rushed to the bathroom and washed and scrubbed. I didn't deserve to wear that scent. The tears I held back then flow freely from my empty eye sockets down my cheek bones.

Despite my lack of eyes, I still see it looking at me, its sand weathering down my skull. It leaves through the pages of my mind, still searching. Memories torn out and tossed into the abrading flow, unneeded, unworthy. The sunny porch where Feifei told me she got engaged. We hugged and squealed. We ate the macarons she made while she talked wedding plans. I watched her, her eyes alight with expectation for the future. She had so many plans, for her honeymoon in the Seychelles, how many kids they were going to have. But for all my excitement, I couldn't shake the feeling I was falling behind. The velvet dress I wore to high school prizegiving. I sat in a row with all my friends in the grand hall. We waited with bated breath as the winner of each gleaming trophy was announced. I watched and clapped as, one by one, another of my friends stood up to claim their award. I would watch their backs recede into the distance as they would climb the stairs to the stage and the hope that I was next would wither.

As each memory disintegrates among the sand they play through my mind. The only trace they leave is the sorrow on my captive consciousness. When the last of my memories disintegrate, the shifting silhouette before me, still for but a moment, considering the final memory it picked out.

The day of my first competitive tennis tournament I was so nervous I couldn't eat breakfast. Mum insisted I eat something but finally relented and bought me chocolate milk on the way to the court. The first match I won by sheer luck, but the joy of winning cured my nerves. I won all my matches that morning and got into the semifinals. When I went to Mum at the lunch break, I found Dad had joined her. He said he'd taken time off work to watch me since Mum told him I was doing so well. I swelled with pride as he patted my head and told me he was excited to see me win. I lost the first semi match. I still won the match for 3rd place but when I skipped back to my

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parents with my little bronze trophy in tow, my dad had already taken a work call. My mum gave me a tight smile and patted me on the back and said, "Maybe next time."

I am held above the fierce-flowing river, now merely a soul falling apart under its self-loathing. The thing's pupil darts about in scrutiny. Its eye closes and I drop into the endless stream of technicolour sand. Perhaps worse than the indescribable pain as the final wisps of myself dissolve into oblivion, is the confirmation of what I always feared to be true. It decided I'm good not enough. I will never be good enough.

ERROR: signal lost

>>> reestablishing connection

ERROR: brain waves desynchronized

ERROR: no wavelengths found

WARNING: hull damaged

WARNING: depressurizing

DANGER

DANGER

DANGER

Special thanks to Hina