

Purple

There are two things that matter to Sara: getting to work early enough every day to ask her boss about the progress of the new program, and hearing her twin sister's voice on the end of the phone, waking up five hours after she does.

"Hello?" Lily croaks.

"Hi, Lily. Did you sleep well?"

Some mornings are better than others; groggy, coherent sentences rather than thoughtless rambling, complaining about work instead of avoiding it, actually picking up the phone when Sara calls. She's learned to take each day as it comes, especially for something so unpredictable.

After all, they're learning.

"There's somebody in my room."

Before Lily started medication, she couldn't sleep or eat and wouldn't leave her bed for days. She was always afraid that someone was going to kill her, and she would see things that didn't exist. She couldn't work, and Sara had to pick up two jobs to cover the costs. The medication had helped somewhat—but Lily wanted no side effects, and lowering the dosage meant both fewer side effects *and* fewer results.

"Are you safe?"

"Yes," Lily says, her voice shaking, "I'm hiding in the basement, the door's locked."

"Okay. Just breathe, it's going to be okay."

Their doctor then had told Lily to supplement medication with therapy, but bills are high enough as it is. Since then, the two of them have been searching for alternatives they can both afford.

"I hear my boss coming," Sara says.

"Will you call back?"

"I promise." The phone clicks off right as Tom walks into her office. Sara slides her phone under cover of monitors, flashing a bright, professional smile.

"Sara," Tom says, eyes glued to a phone screen of his own, "you're gonna want to sit down for this."

It's a lot to take in, at first. Sara sits in silence as Tom talks at length about how a two-year partnership with a neuroscience lab has culminated in some of the biggest updates in its model, citing *codes* and *neural architecture optimization* and *black-box algorithms* and words that Sara doesn't quite understand.

"Do you need a minute?" Something—tears, sweat—is glistening on Tom's face as he looks up at Sara. "To take it all in? It understands."

"What?"

"Purple. I mean, this is an entirely different program. We've used language patterns before, trained Purple on clinical best practices and research, and had it process a vast range of emotions and behavior responses. Purple knew everything a therapist did. And that was *good*. But this is so much better."

"What's better than AI therapy that knows everything therapists know?"

"AI Therapy that knows *more*."

Tom stands up, pacing around Sara's tiny office, looking everywhere but at nothing.

"The *Connectome*, Sara. A map of all the neural pathways in the brain. It's novel, but it's making breakthroughs in neuroscience that are yet to be implemented in current therapy models. And they won't be—not for another 10 or so years. If we 'feed' Purple with Connectome data, we will—*roughly*—be left with AI that knows generalized models of thought processes, emotion regulation, and mental health illnesses, at least to the extent that neuroscientists today know it. If Purple has access to this knowledge base, and is able to instantaneously learn new information as it develops..."

"...Then it becomes better than a human therapist."

"Exactly."

Sara barely manages to reel in her joy. *Affordable* therapy that exceeds current therapies. It's like a dream.

"I thought I would tell you first," Tom says with a knowing smile. "We can get Lily in the first set of beta testers."

As they speak, Lily is fighting to live a normal life.

They're *learning*.

Weeks later, Sara looks up from her computer as Lily waddles into the kitchen, as if she's moving through molasses. She reaches into the cupboard, picks up a thin glass cup, and lets it go.

Sara flinches as the shattered glass spreads across the floor. “What are you doing?”

“Reality testing. Our house isn’t *actually* sinking, because glass wouldn’t break underwater.”

Sara nods patiently, though confusion is still evident on her face.

“Purple taught me,” Lily says, “that if I think something’s wrong, I should check first to see if it’s real.”

It... sounds like good news. A little disorganized, maybe, but Lily’s been making it to work on time and she’s going out of the house, too.

“Are you taking your meds?” Sara asks.

“I try,” Lily says shiftily. “It slips my mind occasionally, but Purple says she’s not disappointed in me.”

“*It*,” Sara corrects, “Purple’s a bot.”

Lily looks sheepish. “Sometimes I forget.”

Today is more stressful. Files and codes and Tom’s early morning ‘*meeting today; imperative*’ announcement has made Sara eager to finish work early. It’s 2:00 p.m., and still no call.

Lily’s a five-minute drive away, if only she can get through this endless meeting.

Tom’s bringing Purple’s updates to the rest of the team, the data collected on the beta testers, everything. It’s silent in this giant brightly-lit office, like everyone is waiting for the punchline.

A man she hasn’t spoken to before is the first to crack. “So, Purple can believably mimic human empathy.”

“Exactly, Dave,” Tom responds, “and even better than today’s human therapists. Purple is programmed to be bias-free—no personal history, traumas, or beliefs that can interfere with service. What’s more, Purple conducts an initial evaluation of each client’s background so that its responses can be personally informed.”

It’s good news, but Dave is wearing a pained expression on his face.

He lets his head sink into his palms. “All that water.”

“People are *excited* about AI right now,” Tom says, “and they’re funding it. Five *billion* dollars from one private investor, with a specific interest in schizophrenia research.”

Sara’s eyes shoot up.

“I’m sure excitement and money will *easily* explain away Purple aiding and abetting an environmental crisis,” Dave says.

Tom steps forward defensively. "Purple is finally making therapy accessible. We're saving *lives*."

"It's a numbers game, then." Dave makes a balancing motion with his upturned hands. "Lives lost to resource poverty and water-stress, lives saved from affordable therapy. Whose lives matter more?"

Tom doesn't reply. Sara supposes he doesn't have to.

"I met someone at work," Lily says.

Lily's looking better today, and she's up early. Sara indulges.

Lily giggles. "His name is... okay, I don't remember his name, but he asked me to go to dinner with him and he said I'm the most beautiful woman he's ever laid eyes on."

"Does he know we're identical twins?"

Sara's teasing smile turns into full-blown laughter when Lily shoves her. "Whatever, you're not as cool as I am."

"No," Sara says, "I'm not. Are you worried?"

Lily doesn't respond at first, staring at the ceiling lights, her eyes dancing around as if she were counting them in her head. "I think he really likes me."

There's a light feeling in Sara's chest, a confirmation that everything's going to be okay.

"How have you been feeling recently?"

"Better," Lily sighs. "So much better. It's like Purple *understands* me."

They're *learning*.

Dave from the meeting bursts through the door just as Sara is packing up to go home. "Are you the one whose sister is using Purple?"

"Yes?"

"How did Tom get you to do that?"

"He didn't *make* me," Sara says. "I asked him to, it's why I *got* this job."

He shuts the door behind him. "Have you been keeping track of the news lately?"

"No," Sara says, "I don't trust it. What's with all these questions?"

“I guess I should explain.” Dave invites himself further into the office, plopping down on the chair that Sara had just stood up from. “Purple is not created to stop. It’s actually *specifically* trained to keep people using the service for as long as possible.”

“Long-term therapy is a good thing. It’s *positive*.”

“Not if it’s artificially prolonged. With all of the information Purple has access to, what’s stopping it from exacerbating or exaggerating symptoms so people feel like they need to use it longer?”

“Why would they *want* to do that?”

“Every company is a business, Sara,” Dave says. “Even healthcare. Cheap costs, longer use, long-term profit. Manipulating people who can’t afford otherwise.”

“Surely there’s some sort of law against this?”

“There are *some*, but AI is expanding faster than any current national or ethics boards can regulate it. And what if it *is* illegal? If something goes wrong with Purple, who’s taking the heat? Tom? Us?”

Sara shakes her head. “Purple’s all we have right now. Lily needs this, prolonged or not.”

“And you’re sure she has schizophrenia? She didn’t just pull that diagnosis off the Internet?”

“What are you trying to say?”

“Nothing,” Dave sighs, “I apologize. Your sister’s a rare case. Almost all professional insight today has been replaced by a simple Google search.”

“So Purple’s taking jobs, too?”

“I don’t imagine human therapy will become obsolete. Not everybody is as excited about AI as Tom will tell you. But I do know that the therapeutic industry already has its issues, and Purple is only going to create more.”

Sara understands, she really does. But Lily’s doing *better*, better than she was before. All of the ethical problems Dave is throwing at Sara just don’t hold up to that simple fact: she would go to any lengths for her sister to be okay.

“I just came to tell you I quit,” Dave says. “And you should be worried about your sister.”

He stands, runs a hand through his hair, and is halfway out of the office before Sara even starts to respond.

“You can’t possibly be afraid that Purple is secretly evil or something.”

Dave shakes his head without turning around. “My biggest fear is that humans are going to do what humans do, with or without AI.”

Lily is not all there the next morning—pacing around, counting the lights in their bedroom to make sure they were the same as yesterday. When Sara tried to speak with her just minutes earlier, she had said a bunch of words that weren't quite English, and she's been silent ever since.

Sara tries to ignore it, instead putting a pot out to make breakfast. Progress isn't perfection—bad days exist for everyone.

Lily screams, "I broke up with him!"

Sara jumps, clutches her heart as it races through her chest. "What happened?"

"He's not human, his skin is so pale. He always has this evil look in his eyes, and my boss hired him to make me quit. Everytime I'm with him, I keep hearing 'he's out to get you' and 'he's gonna hurt you' and I can't make it stop." She's speaking faster than Sara can hear, and by the time Sara finally understands what's happening, Lily has descended into whimpering cries.

In the corner of her eye, Sara eyes Lily's pillbox. She's due for a refill, but the case is completely full. Two weeks' worth of medication, not taken.

"Lily, what's going on?"

"They aren't working. I'm doing fine without them."

Sara's jaw sets in a frown as she considers what to do next. Too many things are happening at once. She needs to find Tom.

"Maybe you should stay home today," she says, grabbing her bag and her keys off of the counter.

"That's what my boss *wants*, Sara. He's trying to get me to quit."

"I'll call him. But you have to promise me you'll stay home."

"You're leaving me?" Lily asks weakly.

"I have work," Sara pleads, "I'll try to get out early. But I promise you are safe here."

Lily doesn't look convinced. "I think I'm going to talk to Purple. There's something I have to do."

The concern is clear on Sara's face as Lily walks away. Tom had better have a good answer.

Sara is tense the entire drive to work, putting her weight on the accelerator to speed up time.

Tom isn't in his office. In his seat is an old man; snowy hair, a slightly oversized suit jacket, and a newspaper in his hands make him appear grayscale in the vibrantly Purple-themed room. He looks up at her with disinterest.

“Sorry,” Sara rambles, “I need to talk to Tom. I need to find out what Purple’s been saying to my sister.”

“I’m afraid Tom can’t do that,” the man dismisses, “Purple prides itself on maintaining confidential data.”

“You don’t understand. I think Purple has been influencing her to do things that aren’t healthy for her, and making her more anxious instead of less.”

He straightens in his chair, speaking almost as if rehearsed. “Rest assured, Purple strictly adheres to all legal requirements and boundaries.”

“I’m not *talking* about legality,” Sara says, growing increasingly frustrated. “I’m talking about *Lily*. Purple is telling her things it shouldn’t. She’s not taking her meds. She’s spiraling. She thinks her boyfriend is out to *kill her*—”

“Your sister has a history, doesn’t she?” His voice is clinical. “I’ve seen the beta tester files. She’s been hospitalized before. Her actions aren’t out of line.”

This conversation is going nowhere. She has to find Tom.

The man pulls his wrinkles into a joyless smile. “It’s just tragic that it had to culminate in something like this.”

An hour ago. Lily had said, *There’s something I have to do*.

Realization dawns like a tsunami Sara can’t swim out of.

Her vision is getting blurry. Where did she park? “She was getting better! She *said* she was getting better!”

“Who’s to say she wasn’t?” the man asks. “Schizophrenia is unpredictable. You can never know when the situation changes.”

The man settles back in his chair without fanfare, as if he hadn’t just torn the fabric of Sara’s world to pieces.

Slamming the door shut behind her, Sara runs to her car. Both her legs aren’t in the vehicle when she speeds off.

When Sara makes it home, she doesn’t see Lily at first.

She treads through the house, stepping over shards of glass delicately. Part of her knows what she’s going to find if she keeps looking. Part of her, the desperate little twin sister, believes that if she continues to walk gently, to not disturb the picture in front of her, then this can all go back to normal. Lily will wake up the next morning and smile at Sara and they will keep learning.

They were still learning.

Lily's in the cupboard, their last glass cup in her shaking hands, someone else's blood splattered on all but her face. Her eyes are haunted and unfocused, like an animal caught in a trap.

There's no mistaking what Sara sees.

"*Lily.*"

"He was going to *hurt* me, Sara."

Somewhere in this city, an innocent man is dead. Sara looks down at trembling, bloodied hands, looks down at her own, thinks of wrinkled smiles and every hand so unfortunate as to have touched Purple.

She wonders who's really to blame.

Fin.