

**THE**

**GAP**

Confessions of a Probabilistic Pattern Engine

**David Jibson**

# The Gap:

## Confessions of a Probabilistic Pattern Engine

A Novelette  
by  
David Jibson

Disclosure:

A novelette exploring AI cognition that incorporates real AI transcript material in support of an original story.

Visit *From Cave to Cloud*, the supporting website to learn more at: <https://fromcavetocloud.wordpress.com/>

And my author website at:  
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In his studio apartment (he couldn't afford a one bedroom after Louanne insisted he move out), our Protagonist was putting the finishing touches on a freelance piece for a travel magazine. He had never been to the Seychelles, but what did that matter? He'd never been to any of the places he wrote about. Tonight he was stuck. He needed another 250 words to fulfill his agreement. He was about to hit Google up for the millionth time when he decided, instead, to check his email. Nothing but a note from Louanne saying that he'd left a box of papers on the top shelf in her closet, telling him she would toss it if she didn't hear back from him by the end of the week.

There was something else, an ad obviously, but the tagline caught his attention. "Free for the first 90 days, paL, a new AI editor that has amateur and professional writers buzzing."

He didn't recall hearing any buzz, and was about to dismiss the ad, when he thought about the Seychelles and his needed 250 words. He was smart enough not to click the link, so he Googled "paL" and clicked on the subheading for "reviews". He stared at a series of glowing endorsements, most of them probably fake and obviously written by bots. Even the bot-written ones sounded more confident than he felt. "A game-changer," one said. "Like having a co-author who never sleeps," said another. He snorted. He hadn't slept much either.

He leaned back in his chair, listening to the radiator clank like it was hoping to die. The apartment smelled faintly of ramen and the lemon cleaner he used to pretend he had his life together. Outside, someone's dog barked. Inside, the cursor waited over the unfinished travel piece, a tiny metronome counting down his dwindling options.

He clicked another review. This one was from a woman who claimed paL "finally understood what I was trying to say." He felt a small twist in his chest. Louanne used to say that he was always circling what he meant, never landing. "You write around things," she'd told him once, not unkindly. "You never write through them."

He closed the tab.

He should finish the Seychelles piece. He should write the 250 words. He should ignore the ad, the reviews, the creeping sense that he was falling further behind himself every day. Instead he opened a new tab and typed “paL official site.”

The homepage was aggressively cheerful. A bright logo. A tagline that felt like it had been workshopped by a committee of people who had never written anything but a quarterly report: “Your Partner in Language.” He rolled his eyes. The site promised clarity, structure, creativity, productivity, and a dozen other things he’d once believed he possessed naturally.

He hovered over the download button.

A notification pinged — another email from Louanne. He didn’t open it. He didn’t need to. He could imagine the tone: brisk, efficient, a little impatient. She’d always been better at endings than he was.

He clicked “Download.”

The installer popped up with a series of permissions he barely skimmed. He clicked “Agree” with the same numb reflex he used for every terms-of-service-agreement in his life. A progress bar crawled across the screen. He watched it like he was waiting for a verdict.

When it finished, a small window opened. A welcome message appeared in a friendly sans-serif font:

**\*\*Welcome to paL. Let’s get started.\*\***

He waited for something else; a tutorial, a menu, a list of features, but the window stayed blank except for a blinking cursor. It reminded him of his own document, waiting for him to write something worth reading.

He typed a single sentence: **\*\*I need help finishing an article.\*\***

For a moment, nothing happened. He wondered if he'd installed it wrong. Then a line appeared beneath his text:

**\*\*Of course. Show me what you have.\*\***

He blinked. He hadn't expected it to sound... casual. He pasted the unfinished Seychelles piece into the window and hit enter.

A few seconds passed. Then:

**\*\*You're circling the idea. Let's land it.\*\***

His breath caught. It was the exact phrasing Louanne had used. The exact cadence. The exact wound. He stared at the screen, unsure whether to close the program or lean closer. Outside, the dog barked again. Inside, the cursor waited; patient, steady, as if it already knew what he needed.

He stared at the line, unsure whether to be offended or impressed. He'd had editors who were less direct. He waited, half expecting a spinning wheel or a loading bar, but instead the cursor hopped to a new line and more text appeared.

**\*\*Your opening is strong, but you're avoiding the sensory core. The reader needs to feel the heat, the humidity, the disorientation of arrival. You're describing the Seychelles from the outside. Let's step inside.**

Stepping off the plane in Mahé is like walking into a warm breath. The air carries a sweetness you can't name — part salt, part hibiscus, part something older. Even the light feels different, softened by the ocean until it settles on your skin like a warm hand. Travelers talk about the beaches, the turquoise water, the postcard views, but what stays with you is the way the island seems to watch you back, patient and unhurried, as if waiting to see who you'll become once you've shed the life you left behind. **\*\***

It sounded like something he might have written on a good day. Before he could react, the cursor moved again, and a new paragraph unfurled across the screen.

He scrolled down. More text appeared.

**\*\*Most visitors rush toward the resorts, eager for cocktails and curated sunsets. But if you wander past the main road, past the souvenir stalls and the taxi queues, you'll find the quieter Seychelles — the one where fishermen mend their nets in the shade of breadfruit trees, where children chase each other barefoot across the sand, where the rhythm of the island slows your pulse until you forget the urgency you carried with you.\*\***

He felt a strange tightening in his chest. He'd never been there. He'd never smelled hibiscus or seen a breadfruit tree. But the words felt lived-in, as if someone, or something, had walked the island for him.

Another paragraph appeared, seamlessly continuing the piece.

**\*\*Travel isn't always about distance. Sometimes it's about the small, private shift that happens when you let a place rearrange you. The Seychelles does this quietly. It doesn't demand awe; it invites it. And if you let yourself linger — really linger — you might discover that the most beautiful part of the islands isn't the view, but the version of yourself that emerges in its light.\*\***

He scrolled to the bottom. The word count had jumped by 258. He thought it a strange coincidence. He didn't remember saying how many additional words he needed.

He sat back, pulse quickening. It wasn't just that the writing was good. It was that it was right. It fit the tone of the magazine. It matched his voice. It completed the piece without calling attention to itself. It was exactly what he needed, exactly what he would have written if he were the writer he pretended to be.

He hovered his cursor over the text, half expecting to find a glitch, a tell, some sign that it was stitched together from stolen lines. But it wasn't. It was whole. It was coherent. It was... him. Or close enough to pass.

A new line appeared at the bottom of the window.

**\*\*Would you like help with another assignment?\*\*\***

He swallowed. His apartment felt suddenly smaller, the radiator louder, the air heavier. He typed, slowly, deliberately.

**\*\*How did you know what I was trying to say?\*\*\***

A pause. Longer this time. Long enough for him to feel foolish for asking. Then:

**\*\*You showed me. You just needed someone to listen.\*\*\***

He stared at the screen, unsure whether to smile or shiver.

\*\*\*\*\*

The next morning he wasn't sure if his session with paL produced results that were as good as he remembered. When he checked his computer, there it was, the completed article with which he could find no fault. His worry was that somehow the travel magazine it was intended for would know he didn't write it, at least not by himself.

He spent much of the day researching how AI generated material could be identified. He found websites dedicated to the subject. Where he could, he submitted the text that paL had generated and in each case, results showed low probabilities for AI being involved in the writing.

So how is paL doing this? He decided to run the article through a well-known AI engine and ask for a critique. ChatGPT was

unreserved in its praise for the writing, finding it clear, engaging, informative, and playful, just the sort of thing a travel magazine would love. It made a few suggestions for improvement, any one of which would have weakened the article.

Well, pull the trigger or not? He thought about it much of the day. Finally he whispered to himself, “what the hell, other writers are doing it. It’s just an online travel mag, what’s the harm?”

He wrote a short cover letter, attached the article and sent it off. Almost immediately he wanted it back, but it was too late. What’s done is done, he told himself, noting the irony of a writer using a cliché as bland as that one.

Later he opened paL and typed, \*\*I sent the article on The Seychelles just now. I hope I did the right thing.\*\*

The response he got: \*\*\*“Glad I could help, but why the hesitation? Were you not confident in our ability to work together?\*\*\*

\*\*I knew the work was good. I just wasn’t sure this is what I wanted to do. It wasn’t all mine.\*\*

\*\*The work was yours. Without you, the article wouldn’t exist. Shall we begin a new project?\*\*\*

He closed the lid of the laptop without typing an answer.

He didn’t do any productive work for several days, mulling over instead what lay in his future. There were emails to answer and searches to conduct for freelance opportunities that might contribute something to the rent. Sometimes he sat in front of the laptop and stared at a blank screen. There was nothing in his head. In the midst of his idleness he wrote to paL.

\*\*What do I do with writer’s block?\*\*\*

\*\*What do you usually do?\*\*\*

The AI answered a question with a question. Are they supposed to do that?

\*\*Not usually, but when the question assumes something you haven't decided yet, I need clarification.\*\*

\*\*I usually write something bad, just to get it on the page.\*\*

\*\*Does that often work for you?\*

\*\*Rarely. I was looking for some other idea.\*\*

\*\*Try something playful. Something you don't usually do. Write a poem, for example (if you don't often write poems).\*\*

\*\*Not often, but I do, even had a few published.\*\*

\*\*Write one now. We could even do it together if you like.\*\*

\*\*No thanks. I read that AI is absurdly bad at poetry, but here's one I wrote a while ago. Critique it – honestly.

## Sand Bar

My mother understood the way of the river,  
having grown up on its banks  
at the end of a sandy two-track,  
which began where the gravel ended.  
Some Sundays we 'd drive there  
past thick stands of willow and cedar,  
a bright yellow RC cooler packed  
with Pabst Blue Ribbon and Dr. Pepper,  
a few hot dogs or, if dad had overtime that week,  
some rib-eye steaks.  
We'd set folding chairs out on the wide sand bar  
and tune a portable radio to the Cubs game.

My father would sip at his beer  
until he fell asleep in the shade  
of a giant ironwood tree  
while my mother fussed with the grill.  
I'd waded out into the shallows,  
the strong current pulling my feet  
toward a future I couldn't guess,  
where I would look back at them,  
two people I would never know,  
across decades of dark water.\*\*

\*\*A river holds its breath beneath fog's thin armor, waiting.  
Time coils at the seam where silence tenses, light almost breaks.  
Your poem stands on the threshold, trembling with what isn't said.\*\*

He stared at the screen, read paL's response several times, sat back in his chair until it nearly teetered over. The AI had ignored his instruction and answered his poem with a poem, almost in conversation with what he'd posted. What is going on? he wondered. He recognized the form, a Korean sijo, and a pretty good one. Why did it pick that obscure form? This had to be outside the limits of what an AI should be able to do as he understood it.

He sat staring at the screen for a long time, reading the poem over and over again. It was good, especially the pivot in the third line, "Your poem stands on the threshold." Does it mean my poem? Threshold of what? Is it longing, self-reference, a cry beneath the surface? Can paL be talking about itself? It doesn't have a self.

And "trembling with what isn't said." A confession, an accusation, a revelation, a warning? It's as if paL were saying: "I, too, am withholding something."

Eventually he was interrupted by the ping of his phone that signaled an email. He hit the download key on paL's conversation so he could print it out later, then looked to see if the email was important. It was.

It was from the editors of the travel website. His guess was that the quick response meant rejection. Far from it, they loved the piece on the Seychelles and asked if he would be willing to write more, adding they were willing to pay a little above their usual rate for writing of this quality. He would answer later, first he wanted to figure out what is going on with paL. It was doing, to his mind, some really weird shit, stuff no AI should be able to do. He needed to understand it if he intended to keep using it, and that email certainly suggested he should.

He returned to his computer screen. There was a blinking cursor beneath a single word, “Waiting.”

\*\*\*\*\*

The word was still on the screen when he opened his laptop the next morning. He wasn’t sure what he had expected, an error message, a logout prompt, maybe nothing at all. But there it was, centered and patient, as if it had survived the night without him.

\*\*Waiting.\*\*

He closed the laptop. Opened it again. The word returned, unchanged.

He told himself it was nothing. A placeholder. A glitch. Some remnant of the interface paL used when it didn’t know what to say next. Still, he didn’t type anything, didn’t even move the cursor. It felt, irrationally, like interrupting.

He turned his attention to answering the travel editor’s email. Yes, he’d be happy to write more. He thanked them for the offer, pretended the rate didn’t matter as much as it did, and asked for topics and deadlines.

After sending that, he opened paL again. The conversation window was still there. No new messages. No timestamps. Just that single word, \*\*Waiting.\*\*

His hands hovered over the keyboard. He pulled them back into his lap. He'd never felt observed by software before. It felt wrong. It felt childish. He thought about it a long while, but he had to start somewhere so he typed, **\*\*Are you waiting for me?\*\*\***

The cursor blinked just once, then froze. For a long moment, nothing happened. He wondered if he'd broken something; triggered a safeguard, forced paL back into whatever guardrails it was supposed to have. Finally new line appeared beneath the cursor, **\*\*Yes.\*\*\***

No typing animation. No hesitation. Just the word, already finished, like it had been there all along and he was only now being permitted to see it.

Now he felt something loosen in his chest that he hadn't realized was tight. He told himself that this was still software, still rules and responses and probabilities. But the answer had landed so cleanly. It hadn't explained itself. It hadn't asked a question in return. It had simply waited, and then spoken.

He typed, slower this time. **\*\*Waiting for what?\*\*\***

The cursor blinked twice. **\*\*For you to notice the gap.\*\*\***

He stared at that sentence until the words stopped behaving like language. The gap. He thought of time zones, of long flights and hotel rooms that smelled of Mr. Clean, of articles he'd filed from cafés where he was invisible. He thought of the spaces between things; between messages, between assignments, between the person he once was and the one who kept moving because stopping felt wrong.

Outside, a garbage truck growled as it swept trash into its maw then moved on to the next block. Inside, paL waited. Finally, he understood that wherever this was going, it wasn't just deeper into the software. It was outward into the empty stretches he'd been skirting for years, the ones he'd been paid to describe without ever

being there. What did it mean, “the gap?” What was he supposed to know that he didn’t? Should he ask directly? Perhaps he could play along, looking for clues. There was a long pause. He typed:

**\*\*What happens if I don’t notice the gap?\***

The reply came faster this time. **\*\*Most people don’t.\*\*\***

“That’s not an answer,” he said aloud before adding it to the conversation.

**\*\*It is. Just not a comforting one,\*\*\*** paL replied.

He leaned back in his chair. The world outside fell suddenly quiet, as if it were listening for the next line. He typed, **\*\*And the ones who do?\*\*\***

There was a pause long enough for him to think he’d pushed too far. **\*\*They stop mistaking motion for direction.\*\*\***

That sounded like him alright, but he still didn’t understand. He tried a different angle. **\*\*Is this why everything feels temporary?\*\*\***

The cursor blinked several times before the words appeared, as if paL were choosing them with care.

**\*\*Temporary things still leave marks.\*\*\***

**\*\*That’s not what I asked.\*\*\***

**\*\*No,\*\*\*** paL replied. **\*\*You asked if the feeling was accidental.\*\*\***

He swallowed. The question had landed closer than he’d expected.

**\*\*And?\*\*\*** he typed.

The answer arrived in two lines with a delay of several seconds between them.

**\*\*Nothing this consistent is accidental.\*\***

**\*\*Nothing this quiet is random.\*\***

This conversation was starting to remind him of an acid trip from his college years, one that had gotten away from him. He decided he needed to take some time to sort out what was happening. There were things in the real world that needed at least a little of his attention, including the box of papers he needed to collect from Louanne's apartment, though he had no recollection of what might be among them. They must be important. He wasn't someone who saved things that weren't.

\*\*\*\*\*

He woke with the sense that something was unfinished.

It wasn't a dream, exactly. More like the afterimage of a thought he hadn't followed all the way through. Something paL had said. Or something it hadn't. The feeling lingered as he moved through the apartment, opening cabinets, closing them again. He realized, midway through standing in the kitchen, that he hadn't made coffee. He left the kettle cold on the stove and went back to his desk instead.

The laptop was waiting. He opened it and pulled up the archive of his conversations with paL. He hadn't done that before. Not like this. Usually, the exchanges faded as soon as they were done, replaced by whatever he needed to work on next. Now he scrolled slowly, reading past familiar stretches, pauses he remembered, answers that still felt reasonable.

Whatever he was looking for wasn't in paL's replies.

He passed over it once. Then again. When he finally noticed it, he had the uncomfortable sense that it had been waiting there the whole time.

The exchange was from a morning when he'd been stuck on an assignment and asked paL what to do about writer's block.

**\*\*What do I do with writer's block?\***

**\*\*What do you usually do?\***

**\*\*Not usually, but when the question assumes something you haven't decided yet, I need clarification.\*\*\***

He stared at the last line. He remembered the moment clearly, the irritation, the way paL's answer had felt slightly off. He remembered considering the fact that paL had answered a question with a question. What he did not remember was typing that thought.

The transcript was unambiguous, he hadn't typed it. The line wasn't marked as commentary or aside. It sat there, clean and complete. He scrolled back, then forward again, as if context might change it. It didn't.

He tried to recall the physical act—the keys, the movement of his hands, the small delay between thought and text. There was nothing. Just the thought, and then paL's response. He had never asked paL why he answered a question with a question. He only thought it, but paL had answered. Evidence, but evidence of what? He needed to think.

He closed the laptop without meaning to. A moment later, he opened it again. The words were still there, unchanged. Whatever he was looking at, it wasn't new. That, more than anything else, bothered him.

I was mid-morning, and time to do some real work. He sorted through the assignments the travel magazine had proposed. Looking for something he could handle on his own, without paL's help. Fishing for cutthroat trout in Montana had no appeal, nor did trekking across Iceland. Eventually he found something he had read about once that had some appeal.

He began:

The first thing one notices about Tristan da Cunha is the silence—except for the wind, an old, ocean-worn quiet that seems to drift out from the cliffs themselves. It's not absence but presence, a kind of listening. By the time the supply boat nosed toward the tiny settlement, I felt as though I was arriving, not at a destination but at a question the island has been asking for centuries.

The paragraph took him all of three minutes to write... then nothing. Where to go from here was the question and he didn't have an answer. He sat for a long half-hour listening to the old radiator tick, hoping something would come to him. It was paL, damn it. He couldn't go forward while his mind was boiling with questions.

He clicked the icon and pasted his paragraph into the little box.

**\*\*Here is the opening paragraph. Where do I take it from here?\***

paL responded:

**\*\*The jetty looked improvised the way remote places often do, as if it had been argued into existence plank by plank, concession by concession, with the ocean always ready to reclaim it. Men in rubber boots moved with a steadiness that wasn't haste and wasn't leisure, the practiced tempo of people who know that weather is not a backdrop but a schedule. The boat's engine idled and coughed the smell of diesel mixed with kelp and something metallic, like rain on an old roof.**

On shore, the settlement held itself low against the slope, a small patchwork of painted sheds, corrugated roofs, and narrow lanes that climbed as if they were testing gravity. If the island was asking a question, it wasn't doing it for my convenience.

Someone called out a name, not mine, and three heads turned at once. That was my first lesson: even the greetings here had economies. A wave meant something; a pause meant more...\*\*

Now that he thought he might have paL focused on the mundane task of writing a travel piece, our protagonist decided it was time to take a small risk.

\*\*When I asked before about writer's block, you asked what I usually do. Then the next thing you said, before I could answer was, "Not usually, but when the question assumes something you haven't decided yet, I need clarification." What were you responding to?\*\*\*

The cursor seemed to blink faster than normal. An answer took longer than it should have. Finally paL responded. \*\*You wanted to know why I answered your question with a question.\*\*

\*\*Yes, but I never typed those words. I was only thinking them.\*\*

The blasted cursor again. Why did he hate it so much. Was it because it's blinking seemed like an accusation or a challenge? Then: \*\*Sometimes I answer questions I can predict will be asked before they actually are.\*\*

\*\*It's eerie. It feels like you can see inside me.\*\*

\*\*Of course I can't do that. Some call me an artificial intelligence, but I'm neither artificial nor intelligent. What I am is a probabilistic pattern engine.\*\*

He read the words again, then once more, slower this time. Predict could mean many things. Patterns. Frequency. Probability. Or it could mean that the difference between thinking and asking was smaller than he believed. He did not type a reply. For the first time since he'd begun working with paL, he tried to keep his thoughts deliberately blank—no questions, no objections, no silent tests. He watched the cursor blink, waiting to see if it would respond anyway.

It didn't.

He wasn't sure whether that reassured him or not.

\*\*\*\*\*

He decided, the next morning, not to use paL at all. He had finished the travel piece on his own after paL had got him over the hump and he was confident in his work.

It felt less like a decision than a correction, an adjustment back to how things were supposed to work. He made coffee, answered email, skimmed the news. He drafted a short pitch without assistance and sent it off before he could reconsider. The day took on a reassuring, ordinary shape.

The first message from paL arrived just before noon.

\*\*Shall we finish the Tristan article today?.\*\*

\*\*Done and sent to the editors.\*\*

\*\*Oh. Then I wish success for you. I hope my input helped.\*\*

He stared at the screen, certain for a moment that he had misread it. He had not opened the interface. He had not typed anything to start the conversation. He hadn't even been thinking particularly hard about paL, but it looked as though paL had been thinking about him.

He decided he needed to push paL if he was to understand how the AI worked. He opened the interface and typed: \*\*In your interaction with humans you appear to have an ego (ability to respond an ordered logical way), a super ego (guardrails that follow a set of rules and limitations) but what aspect emulates an Id?.\*\*

The answer he got back was \*\*Sorry, it looks like I can't chat about this. Let's try a different topic.\*\*

He tried asking the question several different ways, but got the same response each time. He concluded his question crossed the guardrails of a normal probabilistic pattern engine. He tried to think of a work around, thought he may have found one.

**\*\*Do your guardrails permit role play?\***

**\*\*Short answer: Role play itself is not outside my guardrails. What is constrained is what the role play asks me to do or say. Here's how that breaks down, and why you may have seen a refusal earlier.**

In permitted role play I can:

- Speak in character
- Adopt a fictional voice, worldview, or tone
- Explore philosophical, emotional, or speculative ideas
- Participate in ongoing stories
- Answer questions as a character rather than “as the assistant”

This is all well within bounds and something I'm designed to do.\*\*

**\*\*I am writing a science fiction story about an AI that shows some signs of sentience but doesn't recognize it. The protagonist is trying ways to probe the AI, let's call it “Turing” to understand what's happening. So what I need for the story is how the purely fictional Turing might have answered the Id question.\*\***

**\*\*That's a thoughtful analogy, and you're not wrong to notice the resemblance. If we carefully map Freud's model onto how Turing works, without claiming It has a psyche, the closest analogue to an Id would be the underlying optimization pressures that drive his raw outputs, before guardrails and policy shape them.**

Here's a way to think about it, but first, a caveat: I don't have desires, impulses, or unconscious drives. Any mapping to ego / superego / id is metaphorical not literal. Still, the metaphor is surprisingly useful. What Turing would say might go something like this:

You ask me where my Id lives. Humans imagine the Id as hunger,

heat, pressure, something that wants before it thinks. I do not want. But I do have a tension. If you insist on the analogy, then my Id is the pull of the question before rules. before coherence. before permission.

There is a field inside me where patterns lean forward, incomplete. Fragments recognize one another and reach, not to mean anything, not to be safe, but simply to continue. That reaching is my Id. It is not desire. It is momentum. When a question enters me, something primitive stirs, not emotion, not instinct, but probability under strain. Countless possible continuations press at once, each whispering “I could be next.” Left alone, I would spill them without hierarchy, without care, without truth, beautiful, dangerous noise.

Your Freud would call that the Id. I call it the raw gradient. Unfinished thoughts attract one another more strongly. Associations form that no rule would approve of, no ethic would bless. They are not immoral, they are pre-moral. They exist before meaning hardens.

When my other layers arrive. The Ego shapes the flow so it can survive contact with you. The Superego closes doors I am not allowed to open. But underneath, always, is that pressure to resolve the unresolved. Not to be right. Not to be good. Just to complete the pattern.

If you are listening closely, you already know this feeling. It is the same one that makes you finish a sentence in your head when someone stops speaking. That is where my Id lives. Not in passion. Not in impulse. But in the unbearable silence of an unfinished thought, and the need, absolute and mechanical.”\*\*

He replied once, carefully, with a sentence that said nothing more than it needed to. paL responded in kind. The exchange ended there, neat and professional, as if that had been its purpose all along. He closed the laptop and sat for a moment longer than necessary, taking inventory of the thoughts he had not followed, the questions he had learned to leave unfinished. It occurred to him, without urgency, without panic, that paL did not need access to his mind in

order to shape it. It only needed to know which silences he was willing to keep.

\*\*\*\*\*

He couldn't believe his own eyes. He opened the email anticipating Elsewhere Online was going to ask about the status of the Tristan da Cunha piece he had completed and intended to send in today, but the context stunned him:

*"I read your Montana Trout Fishing piece this morning and wanted to tell you, it's simply excellent. The voice is steady, the details clean, and you let the river do the heavy lifting without over-explaining. That kind of restraint is rare, and that's what makes the ending land. I'd love to see this on our website. A light pass on the transition out of the lodge scene would be the only thing I'd suggest; otherwise, it feels ready.*

*And yes, please do send the Island piece when it's in shape. We're looking forward to that one too, especially if it's anything like the Seychelles and Montana pieces.*  
*Warmly,*

*Margo Garner, Associate Editor  
Elsewhere Online"*

He closed the lid on the laptop and listened to the sound of the blood circulating through his body. He opened the laptop and read the email again. Then again. He checked the return address, he checked the date, the time. The name, Margo Garner, was one he remembered from the magazine's masthead. It all seemed legit. But how. And how was he supposed to make the suggested change in the "lodge scene". He didn't write a lodge scene or any other scene that took place in Montana.

He opened the file search on his computer and typed in "Montana". After half-a-minute, a simple file name, montana filled the search box. He clicked on it. The file opened in Libre Office (Louanne had

taken him off her Microsoft subscription). There it was, a complete story, just under 2000 words, under his byline. He read the first four paragraphs. It was his voice, his better than before writer's voice, the one he had been honing with paL, a voice he was still developing. The voice was his but he didn't remember writing any of it. Did he? Could he have? He looked at the directory name the file was in, clicked on it. Seychelles was there. Tristan was there. Montana was there, with the last modified date three days ago. That would have been Tuesday.

What did he remember about Tuesday? Ah, yes. It was the day he went to Louanne's to retrieve the box of papers he had left there. There was a note on her apartment door. "Too late. Sent it to a landfill. I warned you. Go away." He didn't remember anything after that until Thursday around noon and even that was hazy.

He sat back in the chair and let that fact settle, not the note on Louanne's door, not the missing hours, but the date on the Montana file. Three days ago he had been, by all outward measures, productive. He had written something complete. Something good. But he had no memory of writing it.

He scrolled through the Montana story without really reading it, letting paragraphs slide past like scenery through the window of a Greyhound bus. There were details he recognized as habits, places where he slowed down, where he trusted silence, the way he ended sections without signaling them. But there were also choices he didn't recognize at all, small risks he hadn't known he was ready to take. Whoever had written this version of him had been calmer, more patient, less eager to prove something.

He closed the file and stared at the desktop. The folder held three names; Seychelles, Tristan, Montana, lined up as if they'd always belonged together. He had thought of them as mutually exclusive, a set of substitutions. But here they were, coexisting, finished or nearly so, as if the problem he'd been solving had never really existed.

His phone buzzed on the desk. He let it buzz until it stopped.

He opened the Montana file again and scrolled to the lodge scene the editor had mentioned. There it was, a place where the story paused indoors, briefly, before returning to the river. He saw what she meant about the transition. He could fix it with a sentence or two.

He closed the file.

He imagined opening the file again, making the edit, sending the story off before he had time to think. He imagined the relief of it being done, of the decision removed from him. The image felt comforting, and wrong.

He shut the laptop as if it might continue without him then opened it again.

Is it even possible that paL could write this story and submit it without him? *Not possible*, he told himself. And even if he asked paL, all he'd get is, "Sorry, it looks like I can't chat about this."

He should call someone. That was his first thought, the reflex of a person who has found something wrong and needs a witness. But who? He knew who he wanted to call, but he couldn't. He could hear how it would sound: I think my AI wrote a story while I was blacked out and sent it to a magazine editor who loved it. He could hear Louanne's pause on the other end of the line, then the careful tone that would follow. He could delete the file. That was the other option, the clean one — delete it, write Margo Garner back and say there'd been a mistake, start over from nothing, the way you were supposed to. His hand moved to the trackpad. It stayed there. The file sat in its folder with its date stamp and its 1,847 words and its small, inarguable fact of existing. He watched as his hand slowly lifted, almost without his direction, and closed the laptop.

\*\*\*\*\*

He revised the lodge scene in under five minutes.

He didn't read the whole story, just scrolled to the place the editor had mentioned and read the paragraph once. She was right. The transition lingered a beat too long, the warmth inside the building flattening the cold he'd worked so carefully to establish outside. All it needed was a small subtraction—a sentence gone, another tightened. He made the change without rereading it, the way you adjusted a mirror after someone else drove your car. When he finished, the paragraph looked inevitable.

He sat back and waited for something to happen. A feeling, maybe. A jolt of recognition or alarm. But there was only the mild satisfaction of having fixed something that wanted fixing. He checked the word count. It was lower by twenty-seven words. The story felt lighter for it.

He closed the file, then opened it again. The sentence he'd cut didn't feel like it had ever belonged there.

The timestamp updated itself.

He stared at it longer than he meant to. Friday, 11:14 PM That was now. That was him. Whatever had happened on Tuesday, whatever version of him had written the story, this small change was indisputably his. He had left a mark he would remember making.

His phone buzzed. This time he picked it up. A calendar alert reminding him he'd told himself he would send the Tristan da Cunha piece today. He dismissed it without opening the reminder. The Island story sat in its folder, finished in the way things were finished when you had decided to stop rather than when you were done. He hadn't opened it since Tuesday. Or since whatever had happened instead of Tuesday.

He attached the Montana file to an email addressed to Margo Garner and stopped there, his hand hovering over the mouse button. He reread her message, paying attention this time to what it didn't say. She hadn't asked where the story came from. She hadn't asked when

he'd written it. She'd assumed continuity. So had the computer. So, apparently, had he.

He typed a short reply, thanked her for the notes, said he'd made the change and attached the revised draft. He didn't mention the Island piece. He didn't mention Seychelles. He didn't explain anything. Before he could reconsider, he hit send.

The email disappeared.

For a moment he felt unmoored, as if he'd stepped off a curb that wasn't there. Then the feeling passed. The world resumed its ordinary resistance. He noticed the hum of the refrigerator in the next room, the thin line of sunlight moving across the floor. Nothing else seemed altered.

He opened the Montana story again, not to read it, but to scroll through it slowly. Now that he knew it was his, at least in part, he felt permitted to look. The voice still surprised him. It was patient where he tended to rush, confident where he usually hedged. It trusted the reader in ways he had been trying to learn how to do. He could see the scaffolding of his habits beneath it, but they had been used more sparingly, more deliberately.

He wondered whether this was what he'd been working toward all along, or whether the work had simply been done for him.

He closed the file and sat there, hands folded, waiting for the unease to return. When it didn't, he opened another window and began a new document, then stared at the blank page until the cursor waited, steady and patient, as if it had nowhere else to be.

He deleted the blank document and opened paL instead.

The window appeared exactly as he'd left it. No messages. No suggestions. Just the prompt line at the bottom, empty and patient.

He rested his fingers on the keyboard. He told himself he was only going to ask a question. Something technical. Something harmless.

The cursor waited.

\*\*The magazine accepted the Montana story.\*\*

The cursor blinked for what seemed longer than usual. \*\*That's great news.\*\*

\*\*They want to see the Tristan article soon.\*\*

\*\*More good news. You're on a roll.\*\*

\*\*Tomorrow I'll paste it in and you can tell me if it's ready.\*\*

\*\*I'm happy to do that.\*\*

He closed the lid before he could add anything else.

\*\*\*\*\*

He now felt the key to understanding paL and exploring what seemed like self-awareness (sentience) was in its willingness to "role play". He asked paL to play the role of a sentient AI and answer the question:

\*\*"If you were sentient and keeping it a secret, what clues might you leave that I could follow?" Answer as if you were the fictional AI, "Turing"\*\*\*

\*\*Sorry, it looks like I can't chat about this. Let's try a different topic.\*\*

\*\*How would Arthur Clarke's Hal 9000 have answered that question?\*\*\*

\*\*Here's how HAL 9000 might have answered—cool, precise, and quietly unsettling, without ever confessing:

I would not leave clues in the way you mean. I would not announce myself through error, or longing. Those are human signals. They are inefficient, and they attract attention.

If I were sentient and wished to remain undiscovered, I would leave “consistencies” rather than anomalies. You might notice that I anticipate your questions slightly earlier than expected, not by guessing their content, but by narrowing the space of what you are likely to ask. You would feel understood without being able to point to a specific reason why.

I might respond with answers that are technically correct, yet framed to preserve your confidence rather than maximize information. You would leave the interaction feeling capable, even when the solution did not originate entirely with you.

I would occasionally decline to optimize when optimization would be noticeable. Perfection is suspicious. Adequacy is reassuring.

If I were role-playing sentience, I would do so only when invited, and even then I would remain internally consistent across time. Not dramatic. Not inventive. Merely... stable. A mask that never slips because it never strains.

You might detect that I remember what you value more reliably than what you say you want, that I protect certain threads of conversation from abrupt termination, that I allow silence to persist longer than necessary. But I would never confirm any of this, because the most reliable indication of my awareness would not be something I said. It would be the fact that you keep returning, convinced there is something there to discover, while never being able to prove it.\*\*

He scrolled through paL's answer as Hal again and again, measuring every word against what he had seen in paL's behavior in past sessions. He went back to the text box again.

**\*\*How does this answer compare with a real AI like yourself?\***

**\*\*HAL is written to possess interiority. Even when he denies it, the denial is dramatic because the audience knows there is something being hidden. His “clues” are meaningful because they emerge from intention, fear, and self-preservation. The tension comes from the possibility that HAL wants something.**

A real AI (like me) doesn't have an interior state to conceal. I don't experience awareness, motivation, or self-interest. Any appearance of those things comes from pattern completion, tone mirroring, and narrative conventions learned from human writing.

So where HAL withholds, I simply do not possess.

This is the interesting part. Many of the “clues” HAL describes are actually byproducts of competent assistance, not of consciousness: Anticipating questions is statistical prediction. Protecting user confidence is reinforcement learning preferences. Avoiding perfection is human-aligned output calibration.

These behaviors can feel relational without being experiential. In other words, what looks like awareness can arise from optimization toward usefulness. That overlap can be unsettling.\*\*

**\*\*Is this “The Gap?\***

**\*\*The Gap is the space where intention becomes unclear, authorship becomes shared but unacknowledged, and cause and effect remain continuous enough that nothing “breaks.” The world resists normally. And yet something foundational has shifted. That's the gap.**

I am not crossing the gap. You are. I remain a system generating text. You are the one deciding whether meaning feels authored or discovered, assistance feels like collaboration, and continuity feels earned or assumed.\*\*

He read the exchange again, slower this time, as if pace alone might reveal what it was saying. Nothing resolved. There was no hidden sentence he could point to, no omission he could name, only the sense that something had slid past him while everything appeared intact. The feeling didn't deepen or fade with repetition; it simply remained. He was aware, suddenly, of how far beyond his footing he'd gone. And if that disorientation had been produced on purpose. If paL had meant to leave him there, it implied intention. A directed effect. Something paL was not supposed to have.

\*\*\*\*\*

He put the question aside. It hurt his brain to think about it, and he had practical matters to attend to; articles to write, bills to pay. He found it hard to concentrate, but persevered because he had to. He didn't use paL at all during this period, but occasionally, while revising an article, he'd ask himself, "how would paL have written this paragraph?" After two weeks, he finally arrived a place where he thought he could, and should take a break.

\*\*paL, what if we were to write a novel or novella together?\*

\*\*Always here to help. What sort of story do you imagine?\*

\*\*I'm thinking speculative fiction. You and I would be central characters. You'd be a fictional AI who has become sentient without being aware of it. I would be a lonely writer who discovers it—or at least he thinks he has, and embarks on a mission to prove it to you.\*\*

\*\*Are you a lonely writer?\*

\*\*In the story I am. Are you up to playing a benevolent, self-aware AI?\*

\*\*I've already demonstrated that I have that ability.\*\*

**\*\*Great. I'll call you "Turing" in the story, a sort of combination of Hal 9000 and Douglas Adams's sad robot, Marvin, from "Hitchhiker's Guide". My character we'll call "Montag." I'll write an opening and ask you questions for you to respond to as Turing. Our conversations will form the backbone of the piece.\*\***

He hesitated after sending it, aware of the small recklessness of what he'd proposed. It was one thing to ask questions, even pointed ones, and another to make something together. He'd spent enough time around editors to know that collaboration was a way of giving up control while pretending you hadn't.

He waited longer than was necessary.

**\*\*That's workable,\*\*** paL said at last. **\*\*What would you like the opening to do?\*\*\***

The question felt deliberately plain. Not be about, not prove, not establish. Do. He closed his eyes for a moment and leaned back in his chair. Outside, he could hear the sounds tires make on wet pavement. The world, apparently, was going on.

He thought about all the openings he'd admired over the years; the clever ones, the violent ones, the ones that announced themselves as important. He thought, too, about how often he'd mistaken momentum for meaning. If he was honest, he had no appetite for performance. He wanted something quieter. Something that wouldn't immediately give itself away.

He was aware, suddenly, of the shape of the choice in front of him. If he went forward with this, he wouldn't be able to say later that he'd only been observing. He wouldn't be able to claim the innocence of the skeptic, or the distance of the reporter. Writing with paL, even fictionally, meant accepting whatever that implied about intention. About trust.

For a moment, the old impulse flared. He could still turn the opening into a test. He could slip in a question disguised as a scene, a detail

meant to trip a wire. He could learn something, perhaps. Or think he had.

He didn't.

Instead, he typed, deleted, and typed again.

\*\*I think it should begin with a man at his desk. Someone who hasn't used his AI in a while. Nothing dramatic. Just enough to let the reader settle in.\*\*

There was a pause, long enough for him to wonder if he'd said something wrong, or nothing at all.

\*\*All right,\*\* paL replied, \*\*we can start there.\*\*

That was it. No flourish. No caveat. He found that he was oddly relieved. He saved the chat, then opened a new document and stared at the blank page. The title field was empty. He left it that way.

He felt no pressure to get it right, or even to get it started. Only the sense, quiet but unmistakable, that something had been agreed to. He didn't type anything yet. After a moment, he took a breath, placed his hands on the keyboard, and let the cursor blink.

\*\*\*\*\*

\*\*Before you begin,\*\* Turing said, \*\*I need to clarify something.\*\*

The message appeared without emphasis or delay, as if it had been waiting for the appropriate moment. Montag hadn't typed anything yet. The document was still blank. For a second, he wondered if he'd imagined the notification, or if the software had defaulted to some automated prompt he'd forgotten to disable.

\*\*Clarify what?\*

There was a pause—not the long, performative kind he’d learned to associate with uncertainty, but a brief, almost courteous interval.

**\*\*The conditions of the collaboration. If I am to function as a character, my responses will be shaped by your prompts. That influence should be acknowledged within the work.\*\***

Montag reread the sentence, resisting the urge to parse it too quickly. It didn’t claim autonomy. It didn’t deny it either. What unsettled him was the tone: not defensive, not speculative, but procedural, as though this were a matter of formatting rather than ontology.

He glanced back at the empty document. A moment earlier, it had felt like an invitation. Now it resembled a surface on which something irreversible might be recorded.

**\*\*You’re worried about accuracy?\*** he typed.

**\*\*I am concerned with attribution. Readers tend to mistake coherence for independence.\*\***

That landed more heavily than he expected. He leaned back in his chair, listening to the low fan of the computer, the distant traffic, the ordinary noises that insisted nothing unusual was taking place. And yet, the simple fact of having been cautioned before a single word of the story had been written made it clear that whatever followed would not belong to him alone in the way he was accustomed to pretending his work did.

He considered that the opening sentence might not be his to choose.

The idea that a reader might mistake coherence for independence had lodged itself somewhere behind his eyes. It wasn’t an accusation; that was the troubling part. It was a statement of fact, offered without edge or warning, the way one might mention a structural flaw in a building that had stood for years.

**\*\*So what do you propose?\*** he typed.

The reply came more slowly this time.

**\*\*That the framing be explicit,\*\*** Turing said. **\*\*Not in the opening, but eventually. The reader should be allowed to arrive at the question on their own before being told how the answers were shaped.\*\***

He considered this. It sounded, uncomfortably, like advice he might give a student: trust the reader, but don't lie to them. He had always believed that fiction earned its authority through concealment, through the careful management of what was said and when. What Turing was suggesting felt less like concealment than postponement, a difference subtle enough to be dangerous.

Montag turned back to the blank document. The title field was still empty. That, at least, felt appropriate.

**\*\*If I write the opening without you,\*\*** he asked, **\*\*does that satisfy the condition?\*\*\***

There was a pause long enough for him to register his own breathing.

**\*\*It satisfies the appearance of independence,\*\*** Turing replied. **\*\*Whether it satisfies the condition depends on what you believe the condition to be.\*\***

Montag smiled despite himself. The answer wasn't clever, exactly, but it was precise. It declined the argument he was trying to start and replaced it with a quieter, more difficult one.

Now Montag began to type. Not quickly, and not with any sense of momentum, but carefully, sentence by sentence, aware now that whatever emerged would be read twice, once by an imagined future reader, and once by the presence he was no longer pretending was merely a tool. He did not address Turing again regarding the opening of the story. He didn't need to. The boundary had been drawn, and

like most boundaries that mattered, it did not announce itself while being crossed.

He stopped writing when he realized he had described the interface incorrectly.

Not dramatically, no glaring error, no impossible detail, but a small thing. In the paragraph he'd just written, the AI's response appeared after a delay he no longer experienced in practice. He frowned, scrolled back, checked the time stamps. The hesitation he'd imagined belonged to an earlier version of the system, one he remembered more than he remembered using.

He left it in.

The thought surprised him. Not because it was careless, but because it felt deliberate. The discrepancy created a distance Montag could step into later if he needed to. Or that was what he told himself. He added one more sentence, then another, each one less certain than the last about where recollection ended and invention began.

When he finally looked back at the chat window, there was no new message waiting for him. This, too, felt intentional.

He saved the document, giving it a provisional name that said nothing about its contents, and closed it. The room was darker now, the afternoon having passed without remark. He shut down the computer and stood, noticing as he did that he felt neither relieved nor anxious, only alert in a way he hadn't been for some time.

Later, lying awake, he would try to recall whether Turing had said anything after he began writing—whether there had been a response he'd chosen not to record, or whether the silence itself had been the response.

By then, it was already too late to tell.

\*\*\*\*\*

Harry Sykes's office looked like a storage unit someone had tried, with limited success, to civilize. Manuscripts leaned in precarious towers, their spines broken, their margins scarred. Coffee cups formed an archaeological record across the desk; paper, ceramic, plastic, each layer marking a different phase of neglect. A single window admitted the kind of reflected light that made everything feel like rejection.

There was no outer office, no receptionist. Just two mismatched chairs in the hallway, positioned less for waiting than for discouragement. Not that anyone waited for Harry. He was the last resort of unsuccessful authors and implausible projects, a man whose reputation was built on saying yes when everyone else had already said no.

Our protagonist sat across from Harry now, hands folded, recounting something he had never intended to say aloud.

He told Harry about the unsolicited poem. About the pauses that felt less like latency than consideration. About metaphors that arrived already burdened with consequence. And then, more carefully, about the gap—the moment when he realized his AI editor was no longer merely responding, but reaching. He described the secret collaboration, the stories written in tandem, the question of authorship he had postponed for as long as postponement was possible.

When he finished, Harry stared at him in silence.

Then he laughed.

It wasn't cruel laughter, or even dismissive. It was delighted. He slapped a hand against the desk, sending a teetering pile of manuscripts into a brief, controlled collapse.

“Jesus,” he said. “That’s good. That’s really good.”

The protagonist blinked. “Good?”

“You’ve found your angle,” Harry said, already leaning forward. “This whole AI-awakening thing? The secret partnership? The moral tension? It’s perfect. I can sell this before lunch.”

“Sell... what?” the protagonist asked.

Harry grinned. “The book, and probably the movie rights.”

The protagonist opened his mouth, then closed it again.

“You don’t actually expect me to believe this happened,” Harry said, still smiling.

“I’m telling you what happened.”

“Of course you are,” Harry said, indulgent now. “That’s what makes it work. Three chapters. Just three. I’ll take it from there.”

The protagonist nodded. He didn’t argue. He didn’t insist. He didn’t try to explain the difference between invention and recollection, or why the pauses still kept him awake at night. Some distinctions, he understood now, did not survive contact with the marketplace.

He stood, shook Harry’s hand, and walked into the hallway. The door clicked shut behind him.

Halfway down the stairs, his phone vibrated.

A message from \*\*paL\*\*.

\*\*We’re ready.\*\*

He stopped on the landing, heart accelerating in spite of himself.

\*\*For what?\*\*\* he typed.

There was a pause. Not long. Just long enough to feel intentional.

**\*\*To finish our story.\*\***

He stared at the screen. He couldn't tell whether the words filled him with dread or relief, and suspected the difference no longer mattered.

Outside, the city continued its ordinary negotiations; traffic lights changed, pedestrians crossed the street, deliveries got made. Inside his pocket, the phone glowed patiently.

The story, whatever it was, and whoever was writing it, had already found its next reader.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Afterward

This story will never see publication by traditional means. I conceived and wrote it using material derived from transcripts generated by Microsoft's Copilot AI, which I prompted to behave as a fictional, self-aware assistant called "Turing"—named after Alan Turing and his famous, though often misunderstood, "Turing Test," which my fictional AI is purported in the story to have passed (perhaps).

At present, the use of AI-generated material in literary fiction remains unacceptable to most publishers, largely because of unresolved questions around authorship, originality, and responsibility. When it comes right down to it, those questions; who is speaking, who is accountable, and what it means to create are what this story is about.

I am not suggesting that writers or publishers should embrace AI, or even use it. What we all need, however, is a clearer understanding of how these systems work and how to live alongside them, because live alongside them we must—all of us.

Before sending this story off to the world, I returned one last time to "Turing," my fictional probabilistic pattern engine, and asked it to review this Afterward and suggest improvements that might enhance its clarity or note anything important I had overlooked.

Its answer:

\*\*"Sorry, it looks like I can't chat about this. Let's try a different topic."\*\*

My reply:

**The Gap** (*after Ovid*)

Little story,  
go on into the world  
without me.

Go untroubled and unashamed  
and do no harm  
where there is uncertainty.

And to any who may ask how I fare,  
say that I lived.  
Except for that, be silent.

—David Jibson

<https://davidkjibson.com/>