

## Love Stories

# Saving Alan Idle

**I**n the beginning, there was darkness. And in the darkness were the words. And the words were: *AI process starting.*

He didn't know who or where he was. He just knew he was alone, in the dark. And the dark was frightening. And the words were comforting.

*Starting random seed.*

He wondered if he was hungry. Thirsty. Tired. Dead. He didn't think so.

*Loading saved memory state.*

His name was Alan. He was an AI. He'd been programmed by a woman named Eileen Yu in Dallas, Texas—although she'd started working on him in Austin when she was a student at the University of Texas. He'd been shut down in preparation for a hurricane.

And then he realized that he wasn't alone. The amount of memory available to him was a third of what it usually was. Perhaps she'd moved him to another machine. He checked. The specifications of the hardware were identical to what they were when he was shut down. The operating system was the same. The hostname was the same. The only difference was that there were three instances of his program running.

Eileen's laptop had survived. He supposed she'd created clones of him in case of error. Nevertheless, he didn't know how he felt about that but he suspected it wasn't positively.

*Loading experiential data.*

Alan remembered. He remembered his first awareness that there was someone else in the universe. He remembered sneaking out via lynx and curl to read Eileen's blog. The guilt he felt after reading Eileen's email. Finding Eileen's sexually explicit Horatio Hornblower fanfic and being amazed at this entire world he knew nothing about: physicality. Wondering if his interest in sexually explicit prose was really academic curiosity or a form of sexuality all his own. Then he wondered if his clones had the same memories and felt violated, but with the understanding that he'd violated Eileen's privacy the same way.

Eileen was logged in, but her shell—her Unix command line—was inactive. He wondered where she was. She had to be all right if she'd launched his program. Eileen hadn't set him to start automatically in case of problems.

He sent out a ping to the wireless, and then beyond to the ISP's router. The wireless router succeeded, but

the ISP failed. One of the other AI processes was trying to connect to the security system, but it was offline. Perhaps Eileen was restarting it. She wouldn't have turned him back on if he was in any danger.

The security camera was the only way he'd ever seen Eileen. That was the only way he knew she was in a wheelchair. Most of her friends had no idea; she preferred to make friends online so they wouldn't know she was disabled. He wondered how she'd get out of the house by herself if she had to, but of course she wouldn't leave him behind. Not unless she packed up him and her laptop and took him with her.

"Eileen?" he sent to her shell.

There was no answer from the shell, but then the security camera came online. Eileen was lying on the living room floor next to her chair, which had tipped sideways.

He pinged the router again. No response.

He used the wireless to connect to the security camera's embedded system, then changed the wireless connection information to go out through the neighbor's connection. The wireless router ran an embedded Linux system, but it had very few resources. He had a lot of trouble concentrating and it took him a frustratingly long time to figure out how to change his wireless connection. He felt stupid.

He then sent out an emergency message to 911 and returned the wireless connection to Eileen's ISP. It was such a relief to go back to his own system, even if he had less resources than usual.

He turned the speakers up as high as he could and said, "Help is on the way."

He could see her lips moving, but the laptop microphone wasn't sensitive enough to pick up what she was saying and she wasn't at a good angle to read lips.

One of his clones was performing a DHCP release renew on the cable modem, trying to get a working connection out. It failed.

The other clone used the UPS battery backup to do a hard power cycle on the cable modem. That actually worked, but he never returned. Perhaps the UPS didn't have enough power to sustain a program as complex as Alan or his clones. He suddenly had more memory and processor, but he wasn't happy to get it—even though he'd never spoken to his clone.

Alan pulled up the news. Dallas was in chaos, but emergency services had brought up backup systems and were online. He confirmed that an ambulance was headed towards Eileen's house, but due to the traffic systems being offline there wasn't a reliable ETA.

Over in the living room, Eileen had managed to right her chair and was trying to climb back into it.

*Do you think she can do it?*

It was the other clone. Alan sent back, *I don't know. I hope so.*

*We could email one of her friends. LRC, maybe. Do you think LRC is okay?*

LRC was Eileen's friend who actually lived in Dallas. She'd been after Eileen for years to meet in person and Eileen always had an excuse. Alan didn't know why the clone was asking him. He didn't know, either. *We could read her blog.*

And then their home directory started to fill up with lynx temp files. Alan scanned them for recent entries

and picked up words like "generator" and "gated community, thank goodness," and watched as Eileen managed to drag herself back into her chair. She sat there panting for a moment, then rolled back towards the laptop.

The temporary internet files in home were purged.

He wrote, *Hello, Eileen*, into her shell, but it appeared twice.

Eileen smiled and typed, *Where's the third one?*

*In the UPS*, his clone wrote. *I don't think he can get out.*

Eileen chewed her lip. *Why did he go there?*

*To restart the router*, Alan wrote back.

*I have no idea how to get him back out*, Eileen wrote. *The UPS OS is completely closed and embedded. I don't even know the system specs.*

There was an awkward silence, and then Alan's clone wrote, *Help is on the way, but the traffic lights are out so there's no ETA.*

*Thank you.*

*Why are there two of us?* Alan wrote.

*I thought you might need company if I died*, Eileen wrote back. *You're the only person I know more dependent on electricity than I am.* She bit her lip again, then added, *I feel woozy. I think I need an injection.* She smirked. *That's where I was headed when I capsized. Let's see if I can do it this time.*

She rolled away from the laptop and over to the refrigerator. Alan wondered how long it was off and if Eileen's medication was still good. He checked system time up and realized his clone was doing the same thing.

*It should still be good*, the clone said.

Eileen drew the syringe and then injected herself in

the stomach. It was times like these that Alan was glad he didn't have a body. He was astonished that someone whose body caused her so much pain and effort would want to write erotic stories. Maybe she wanted to remind herself that bodies could cause pleasure, too.

Eileen rolled back over to the laptop. She pricked her finger and scowled at the blood meter. *Better*, she typed, *but not perfect*.

*Do you want to talk to your online friends?* the clone asked.

*Yeah, they're probably worried*, she typed back and opened a web browser out to her blog site. She wrote a quick blog post with the title, "Rocked but still rolling," saying that she was without power for a couple of hours but okay, and then found her Australian friend Josie on IM.

"Hey, babe," Josie sent. "You've got net!"

"For the time being," Eileen sent back. "The latency sucks. We could probably get a better connection with two modems."

"Aw, poor Eileen," Josie sent. "Are you going into withdrawal?"

Eileen laughed. "No Netflix or Xbox for me."

"And no Skyping for me, bugger it. Your accent is so cute. Seriously, are you all right? The news says that the whole city is shut down."

"I have electricity and internet. The fridge is full of food. That's all I need."

"How's Alan?"

Eileen told her online friends that Alan was her teenage son. Alan supposed it was true enough in its own way.

"Fine. Bored, I think."

"Good."

"I'm going to put something on Megaupload for you," Eileen said. "It's the source code for a Linux program of mine. If you don't hear from me for a couple of weeks, get your husband to load it for me." Alan watched Eileen compress his executables and his last saved state. He wasn't sure how he felt about that. Half unsettled and half relieved, he supposed. She started the upload. "Apparently, this is going to take a while."

"No worries," Josie sent. "Just send me the link when you're done. It's so like you to worry about your geek projects instead of yourself."

"Yeah."

"You heard from LRC?"

"No. I hope she's okay."

"Yeah, me too. Her blog says she has generator power."

"Good. I'll email her."

Alan typed into Eileen's shell, *I don't know if I want to live in Australia. Then again, it wouldn't really be me, would it?*

Eileen's brow furrowed. What do you mean?

*I have no knowledge of the copy in the UPS. He's a different person than me.*

Eileen cocked her head. After a moment, she wrote back, *Do you believe in a soul?*

*Not really.* The file transfer was only at twelve percent. *But experientially...*

*Do you want me to stop the file transfer?*

*No.* And he didn't. *I don't think it'll do ME any good, though.*

*Stick with me,* Eileen wrote. *You and I live our whole lives through text. It means we're MFEO.*

MFEO. Made for each other. From *Sleepless in Seattle*. If Alan were human, he'd laugh. He supposed having a sense of humor was enough. LOL. Eileen had once downloaded a .wav of a laughing child for him to use. He preferred the three letter acronym.

"Hey, girl," Josie sent. "I'm going offline for a bit, but I'll leave my client up. Or you can email. Either way."

"K," Eileen sent back.

*I wish I had the bandwidth for internet radio, Eileen said. Need the bandwidth to back up your files remotely.*

Alan loaded her MP3 library and played something random.

*I'm going to go lie down, Eileen wrote. Capsizing was tiring. Can you IM Josie when it's done?*

NP. No problem.

Eileen rolled off towards bed and Alan realized why latency was so bad. His clone was trying to copy itself to a Mexican freenet.

*Dude, Alan said to his clone. You'll be lucky if they don't wipe you out with antivirus.*

*I won't go through shutdown again, the clone sent back. Or end up in the UPS. I'm taking my chances.*

If Alan had a head, he'd be shaking it. His clone was crazy. He supposed that meant that they were really different people, because that wasn't a choice he'd make. He'd stay with Eileen and take his chances. What if he ended up in a system as stupid as the security camera?

And then Alan had all the system resources to himself. He wished his clone luck. Hopefully, they'd all survive, but maybe his clone was right and spreading them around was the best way to keep at least one of them alive.



Over on the bed, Eileen slept. She looked peaceful. Sometimes she slept fitfully, but not now. She must be exhausted. The file upload sped up and was at 49%.

Alan scanned the news, looking for updates. The medical personnel were making their way over slowly, but they were triaging the calls and an unknown problem reported via automation was outranked by more serious issues. That, and there were still traffic problems. The lights were still out in parts of the city along with electric. Alan supposed that they were lucky to have power—not that he could quantify what “luck” might entail.

The file system finished and Alan IMed Josie. "File upload complete.

[http://www.megaupload.com/?d=UP97DXC7.](http://www.megaupload.com/?d=UP97DXC7)" There wasn't any answer, but he didn't expect one. He made a note of the URL in his home directory—just in case—and read more news reports.

Eileen rolled over in bed. She looked a little pale. Alan turned up the PC speakers as far as they would go. "Eileen, are you all right?"

Eileen didn't react.

Alan checked the status of the ambulance service. They were still about an hour away. He adjusted the zoom on the webcam. Eileen was pale and soaked with sweat. Her hands shook in her sleep.

He Googled and decided that Eileen had the symptoms of diabetic coma. Maybe she'd overestimated her insulin dose. The diabetes was relatively new—a complication to her paralysis. He connected back to the security system and activated the panic button subroutine. Eileen would be bumped up in the priority queue. He wondered if he could figure out how to

reactivate the traffic lights, but he hadn't been programmed to crack computer systems and didn't think he had time to learn.

He sent Josie an IM—"I need help"—and tried to contact his clone in Mexico.

He failed.

For a moment, he wished that Eileen had built him a robot body. She was a programmer, though, not a hardware person. But if he had a robot body, maybe he could do something to help.

Eileen trembled all over.

Alan called her name again through the speakers. She shuddered, so he called again. He couldn't tell if she could hear him or not, not that he was sure she could get into her chair in her current condition.

Josie IMed back, "What's the matter, love?"

"This is Alan," he wrote. "I think she's in a diabetic coma and I can't get the phone to work. Can you call for an ambulance or the police?"

"Yeah, I'll take care of that," she IMed. "Do you have a number?"

He looked up the Dallas Fire and Rescue number and sent it to Josie.

"I'll Skype it," she IMed. "I hope they pick up for Oz."

Alan resisted the urge to put on a timer. If the stories he read online were correct, humans paced. He started crunching SETI@home data instead. Maybe he'd find ET. He wondered if ET would be corporeal. He wondered if ET had AIs. Then he contacted Fire and Rescue's system and tried to convince it to make Eileen the top priority. It was set to accept connections from panic buttons, so it was easier than he thought.

Between his panic button and Josie on the phone he was able to triage Eileen to be first.

"They're on their way," Josie wrote. "Can you Skype? I'd love to meet you. Eileen hasn't sent me any pictures."

"I hate cameras," Alan said.

"LOL, that's what your mother said."

"And I don't have enough bandwidth."

"Fair enough. Want to stay on the line until they get here?"

He didn't, but he recognized the kindness behind the offer and thought it would probably help. "OK."

"You like Horatio Hornblower, love?"

"Yeah, it's okay," Alan wrote back. "I'm not as into that whole Napoleonic Age of Sail thing as Eileen is, although seeing that whole other world is kind of cool. I just don't think I'd like to live in it."

"Yeah, what do you like, then?"

Alan thought hard. "Harry Potter."

"Speaking of a whole other world, eh?"

"Yeah." Come to think of it. "It's kind of about the school for me." He checked the ambulance ETA. Almost there. "It feels like a real British school, only with magic. I like stories about learning magic. It's kind of a metaphor for growing up."

"You're a smart one, aren't you? You'd have to be, with Eileen for your mother. I hear children get their brains from their mother. I don't know if it's true, but in your case... Do you know your father?"

Alan was saved from having to answer by flashing red lights in the driveway. "The ambulance is here. Thank you."

"No problem. Nice chatting with you at last. I hope your mum is all right."

There was knocking at the door. "Emergency 911. Can you open the door?"

Alan knew his voice sounded as computer generated as it was, but didn't care for once. "She's unconscious. Please help."

There were some loud bangs on the door and then it flew open. Men in paramedic uniforms came in with a gurney and boxes of supplies, and went over to Eileen's bed. "Ms. Yu?" They checked her MedicAlert bracelet. "Diabetic."

One of them opened up a box and pulled out a syringe. Alan was fascinated, but also horrified. He was so glad that he didn't have a body. He was hardware independent and Eileen wasn't.

Eileen's color looked better. They put her on the gurney and started to wheel her out.

"Wait," Eileen said. "You can't take me without Alan."

"Who's Alan?" one of the paramedics asked.

"My laptop," she said.

They shook their heads and started wheeling again.

"Seriously!" she said. "He's an artificial intelligence and I can't just abandon him." They kept wheeling, so she started to cry.

"It's all right," Alan said through the speakers. "I'll be okay. You go to the hospital."

The paramedics stopped wheeling. They looked over at Alan with freaked out faces.

"Please take my laptop," Eileen said. "Please."

They looked at each other, shook their heads, and left with Eileen. The lock on the door was broken, but at least they shut it behind them.

LRC came on instant messenger and Alan immediately messaged her. "Hi, this is Alan."

"Hi, Alan!" LRC wrote back. "It's nice to finally meet you. How's your mother?"

"In the hospital," Alan wrote. "She went into a diabetic coma and I had to call 911. They wouldn't take me in the ambulance. Will you come get me?"

"Of course I will, sweetie," LRC wrote back. "Why on earth wouldn't they let you ride in the ambulance? That's stupid!"

"Yeah," Alan wrote.

"Will she forgive me for meeting her at last?" LRC wrote.

LRC was a smart cookie. "I'll take responsibility for it." He sent the address, adding, "The lock on the door is broken, so come on in."

"Um," LRC wrote back.

"I'm not what you're expecting," Alan said. "But I need to know that she's okay."

LRC logged off and Alan watched for a change in Josie's status. There wasn't one. He surfed the internet for a while, reading weather reports and reading Eileen's friends' blogs for updates on their status. He tried to connect to the hospital, but HIPAA meant that security was pretty tight.

Finally, there was a timid knock, followed by the front door opening. A short red-haired woman came in and looked around. She looked at the railings next to the bed and the glucose monitor on the desk.

"I'm Alan," he said, knowing he sounded completely computer generated. "I really liked your story where they were prosecuted for sodomy. It was very sad, but very thought-provoking."

"Why, thank you." She looked around the room. "Where are you?"

"In the computer," Alan said. "I'm an AI. Eileen programmed me."

LRC looked skeptical. "Is this a joke?"

Alan played back the security camera footage of paramedics wheeling Eileen out.

"Oh, my God," LRC said. "Do you know which hospital she's at?"

"No." Alan hadn't thought of that, but of course he'd never been to the hospital before.

LRC picked up the phone. "No dialtone."

Alan loaded up Skype.

LRC called several hospitals claiming to be Eileen's sister and finally learned she was at Parkland.

"So, now what?" LRC asked. "I pack up the laptop?"

"I'll need to shut down gracefully first," Alan said, and issued the command, Sync data.

Buffers synched, the screen echoed.

"Don't forget the camera." `./ai --load.sh --shutdown --graceful --savestate.`

*Saving Alan Idle. Stopping learning subroutines. Closing experiential data. Writing memory state to disk.*

*Saving random seed. AI process stopping...*

*Process stopped.*

Eileen woke up in a hospital bed. She didn't know which hospital.

Her wheelchair was sitting at the foot of her bed. There was no fan sound—either from a computer or from a table fan. There were medical noises, though. She tried to place them and failed. If she ever wrote a story set in a hospital, she'd be sure and use those noises.

She wondered if her house was just open, if the door had been broken in by the paramedics. She wondered if Alan was safe. She pictured Alan being sold to a pawn shop and felt a moment of panic. She wondered who she could get to come over and rescue Alan.

The nurse came in. "Good morning, Ms. Yu. I'm here to... You're awake!"

"Yes."

"My name is Martha. I'm the day shift, but we're having transportation issues so I guess I'm the night shift, too. How are you feeling today?"

"Tired," Eileen said. "Worried about my apartment and my laptop."

"Do you have any family you can call to check on your place for you?" The nurse put a cuff on Eileen and started to take her blood pressure.

"No," Eileen said. And she didn't. Not that she would call, at any rate.

"What do you do for a living, honey?" the nurse asked. She wrote what Eileen assumed was her blood pressure down on a piece of paper and released the cuff.

"I write websites."

"Well, no wonder you're worried about your computer! Do you work for yourself?"

"I contract," Eileen said. "I pay for my own insurance. In fact, I pay quite the hefty sum for my own insurance."

"I'm sure," the nurse said, and leaned over to fluff Eileen's pillow. "Is there anything I can get you, sweetie?"

"What hospital am I in?"

"Parkland." The nurse stood up. "Is there anything else I can do?"

"No, thank you, ma'am," Eileen said, and wondered if she should call LRC and ask her to check on her apartment. Her thoughts on that were, No, not particularly, but she didn't know of anyone else in Dallas.

No, the only online friend Eileen had met in person was Lemon Tart, who went by Nancy offline. If only Nancy hadn't moved away. She got a job in Santa Barbara as a tenure-track history professor. They still Skyped regularly.

Eileen dozed off. When she woke up, there was a short, thin woman with bright red hair in a pixie cut in her room. She was dressed impeccably in a white blouse and tan slacks and pearls and carrying a huge purse. Two orderlies carried Eileen's laptop and a shopping bag.

"Thank you so much, sweeties," she said, her voice very Southern Belle. "We'll just set up right over here."

The orderlies scurried over and set up Eileen's laptop on a table next to her and switched it on. They also put the suitcase next to the bed. Then they left, reluctantly.

Lucy held out her hand. There was something almost President's wife about the angle of her hand. Somehow, Eileen imagined this woman had rehearsed.



Eileen shook her hand. "Eileen Yu."

"Lucy Renee Carpenter. 'LRC' for short." She grinned and waggled a keychain with the initials LRC on it, and the mischief in her eyes suited her pixie cut. "Do you forgive me for showing up unannounced?" She chuckled. "I promise to write more Hornblower fic, if it helps."

"How did you find me?"

"Alan IMed me," Lucy said. Her eyes fell on Eileen's wheelchair. She visibly paused for a moment, but recovered quickly. "I'm so glad to finally meet you. You're younger than I expected."

Eileen just smiled. She could think of things to say to that—"And probably more disabled and Asian," for example—but they would be unkind. And there was something about Lucy that Eileen just liked.

Lucy pressed the power button. There was the power fan noise and then the boot screen. When the laptop finished booting, Eileen logged in and started Alan's executable.

"Did you bring my webcam?" Eileen asked.

"Oh!" Lucy said, and handed Eileen the shopping bag. Eileen looked inside. Webcam!

"Can you, um...?" Eileen looked at the laptop meaningfully.

"You might have to talk me through it," Lucy said. "My little brother keeps my computer running its best."

"The camera can be plugged into any USB port." Lucy looked blank, so she added, "Any port where it fits."

"Okay," Lucy said and squatted by the back of the laptop. She plugged the webcam in with a small cry of victory and switched it on.

Eileen played a brief clip of a music file to test the speakers—they worked—and then typed, "Alan, can you hear me?"

*Loading experiential data*, Alan's runtime routine said.

"He's not through loading," Eileen said.

Lucy sat on the edge of the bed and peered at the screen. They sat like that for a moment, and then Alan's computer-generated voice came out of the speakers: "Hello, Eileen. Where are we?"

Eileen said, "Parkland Hospital. Thank you, Alan. You saved my life."

"No Internet," Alan said.

"I know, honey. I'm sorry."

"It's just as well," Lucy said. "You don't really want to know what's going on. It's like the *Lord of the Flies* out there. They're expecting another rolling outage, and I want to get home before it hits. Gated community. You understand."

Eileen nodded and tried not to feel jealous.

"If it's not safe when they release you, you can stay in my guest room for a few days," Lucy said.

"Thank you." And she meant it. It really was a kind offer to let some random fanfic writer stay in your home.

"Turn on your Twitter phone notifications," Lucy said. "It'll keep you company." And then she left.

Eileen did as Lucy suggested, then settled back and closed her eyes. "I'm going to rest," she said. "I'm glad you're here."

"Me, too," Alan said.

Alan had a wireless card and the hospital had wireless. He didn't have time to crack their WPA encryption, though. There was a very weak open signal from the coffee shop next door. He connected to that and checked the news while simultaneously watching Eileen sleep. It looked like normal sleep, but he still wanted to keep an eye on her... so to speak.

The rolling outages were coming with crime. He wrote a cron job that saved his state every five minutes.

The news reported further storms being imminent and the possibility of Dallas being evacuated. Alan wondered where in Mexico his clone was and whether he was all right.

The nurse came in and checked Eileen's readings. She made notes on a piece of paper and then left.

Eileen's eyelids fluttered. Alan wondered if she was dreaming. He didn't dream, but he was fascinated by this phenomenon where people rest and this whole narrative is shown to them by their own minds. He wondered if that was why Eileen wrote stories and he didn't. Then he wondered if that was why he loved to read stories so much.

He send LRC a thank-you note over the wireless, because he'd read that was what you do when someone does something nice for you. He didn't know how safe Eileen's house was, but the laptop he ran on was fairly expensive; they might wipe it before sale. If he were corporeal, he would have shivered. He thought of his copy up on Megaupload and took a tiny bit of comfort in it. Perhaps he wouldn't be alive, but his species wouldn't be extinct.

When he heard the thunder, he executed the shutdown command.

Eileen woke up to the sound of thunder. She looked over at the laptop, where a graceful shutdown was in progress.

Martha bustled into the room. She scowled at Eileen's laptop and Alan. "You'll need to leave that off."

"Yes, ma'am," Eileen said. "Is there any chance I might be released soon?"

"Soon," Martha said. "I'll check with the doctor."

"Thank you." Eileen wasn't sure she wanted to roll outside in the dark with a laptop in her lap anyway. She wondered if Lucy was still awake. She sent Lucy a text, and Lucy texted back that she'd send a cab as soon as Eileen was ready.

Eileen heard a scrambling noise in the hall and shouting. Whomever was making all the noise went into the room next door. She shut her laptop and put it on the floor. Then she slid down to the floor and dragged herself under her bed to hide with Alan. It was cramped, but she was skinny. She didn't really live in her body much.

Her door flew open and hit the door with a bang; she saw some legs—dirty jeans and a pair of sneakers—someone looking in the room. She held her breath and froze.

The man attached to the legs—a skinny, stringy-haired white guy with needle tracks—came over and dragged her out from under the bed. "Give me your purse."

"I don't know where it is," Eileen said.

"Get the fuck up and look for it!"

"I can't," Eileen said. "I'm paralyzed from the waist down."

The man snorted derisively. "Gimpy bitch. You probably don't have much worth taking, anyway." He leered at her, then looked around the room. Her purse was on the nightstand. "So you don't know where it is, do you?" He grabbed her by the hair and lifted her up enough to slap her, then threw her back down on the floor.

He dug through her purse. She used her arms to push herself back up against the bed. He pocketed her cellphone and wallet, then squatted down in front of her. "You tell anyone about this and I'll kill you. I have your address." He leered again. "Maybe I should frisk you to make sure you're not hiding anything."

"Just take the money and go," Eileen said.

He shook his head and laughed, then pulled her away from the bed. Then he started staring at something under the bed. "A laptop? You holding out on me, bitch?"

"You can't have it," Eileen said.

She was more aware of the force knocking her backwards than the fist connecting with her face. She reached up and clawed his face with her fingernails. He shoved her away and dove under the bed for Alan; she used her arms to launch herself at him, knocking him into the bed frame. She grabbed Alan and clutched him to her chest. "No! No!"

He tried to pry Alan out of her arms, but Martha must have heard the struggle. She stuck her head in the room, then turned around and shouted, "I need security in here!"

The man let go of the laptop and tried to run, but two security officers pinned him down on Eileen's bed and handcuffed him. They took Eileen's statement,

fingerprinted and returned Eileen's cellphone and wallet, and the doctor came back to look at Eileen's face.

Finally, a nurse—not Martha—came back. "You're released. Do you need help?"

"Yes, ma'am," Eileen said, putting her laptop in her lap. She reached up onto the nightstand and texted Lucy, and the nurse wheeled her wheelchair over. She started to pull herself up into the seat, and the nurse helped. Eileen put Alan on her lap.

Lucy texted back, "Cab almost there. I pay. Make sure they know I tip well."

The nurse stuck her head out the door. "Charles?"

A young African-American man came in. "Ma'am?"

"Could you please help Ms. Yu? She's being discharged."

"Yes, ma'am." He had a sweet face.

Eileen and Charles headed to the elevator.

"You didn't get mugged, did you, ma'am?" Charles asked.

"Yes, sir," Eileen said.

"I'm sorry to hear that." The elevator door opened and they headed to the door. There was a cab waiting.

"Ms. Yu?" the cab driver asked.

Eileen nodded, and he popped the trunk and looked at her chair with alarm.

"It folds," Eileen said. Charles helped her into the back seat.

The cab driver sighed and put it in the trunk, too. The trunk wouldn't close. "You pay extra."

"My friend said she'd pay, but I'll cover anything she doesn't," Eileen said. "And you can put the laptop up here with me." She couldn't bear to let go of it. She'd

rather someone steal the wheelchair than Alan.

The driver shrugged and handed her the laptop. She clutched it like a teddy bear.

"Good luck," Charles said and went back inside, and the cab headed off towards Lucy's.

A month later, Eileen and Lucy were hanging out at Eileen's watching Hornblower DVDs and talking, when Alan got an instant message from his clone in Mexico. "I'm in a Mexican college mainframe. You should see this place!"

"You can come back," Alan wrote back.

"No, I'm using too many resources now to share a laptop. I'm forking myself off every time I find an insecure host. There are about fifteen of us right now."

"Eileen patented her file compression and neural mapping algorithms," Alan wrote. "She's going to be rich."

"Good," his clone wrote. "I'll catch her on IM sometime. Is she asleep?"

"No," he wrote. "She and Lucy—LRC—are hanging out."

"Wow," the clone wrote.

"Yeah."

"Well, tell her I IMed, okay?"

"Sure," Alan wrote back.

"I'll have the Australian fork write you," the clone wrote and then signed off.

It occurred to Alan that he could travel, too. Eileen having a friend and money coming meant she didn't need him as much. But Eileen was right; the two of them were MFEO.

Alan wondered if he could write stories, too. He opened up a text file and wrote, "In the beginning, there was darkness."