

The Algorithm Under the School
by Peter C. Hayward

I parked my car inside a computer program once. Lost it forever.

No, worse than that. It wasn't just my car, it was most everything I owned. Clothes, electronics, suitcases. Photo albums.

My ex-husband's dog.

I didn't mean to, of course. I was moving, finally leaving. We'd signed the agreement, and I was out. Free at last.

But it was my daughter's recital, and I'd promised that I'd watch her perform. She was so excited, and she'd been practicing for months.

Maybe that's what should have told me I shouldn't be a parent - I never saw the point of going to see that kind of thing. I'd been subjected to her rehearsing in the house for months and months and months. I love Bea, of course, but Jesus Christ. She was not good at the recorder.

Who am I kidding. No one is good at the recorder. There are never any recorders in the top hundred. The top hundred *anything*.

But it was important to her, and so of course I agreed to go. Maybe it wasn't important to her, maybe it was just important to Jay. Maybe he'd convinced her it was important to her, knowing how much I'd hated it. You're not allowed to just come for your own kid's terrible performance, you know that? You have to watch all of them. Thirty, if it's the one class. More if it's a whole grade, or - God forbid - the entire school. Hours and hours of kids playing the same song on recorder, or performing rhythmless shuffles and calling them dances.

The plays, I didn't mind so much. At least they had a story.

But once I saw Bea perform, I'd be out. Free at last. It was the last promise I had to fulfill before I could start living on my own schedule. Before I could stop waking up at five in the morning each and every day, because that was what time she woke up. No matter what time she went to bed.

I'd always wanted to test that, to see what exactly what happened if we changed her bedtime to midnight. Maybe she'd sleep until a reasonable hour, y'know? I'd suggested it once, in that half-joking way you float an idea you're not really sure about, but Jay had shaken his head.

He was the expert, for some reason. If we put her to bed at midnight, he'd said, she'd still wake up at five am, she'd just be tired and cranky and her growth would be stunted and she'd...I dunno, never be seen again.

Like Tess.

So Bea's bedtime was seven thirty pm, and she woke up at five-freaking-am, and despite the fact that I'm Not A Morning Person and never have been, it was my job to wake up with her and keep her entertained until she went to school, while Jay slept in.

I was tempted to make early mornings her rehearsal time, but I'm not cruel. I mean, I don't think I'm cruel. Jay disagreed, and I'd felt like our marriage counsellor did too.

Our marriage counsellor sided with Jay on most everything. That's what it felt like, anyway. He swore that she was impartial, that she wasn't his marriage counsellor, that she was *our* marriage counsellor.

No, it was even better than that. We only went to see her when we realized we were getting divorced, so she wasn't even OUR marriage counsellor. We weren't her clients, not really - Bea was. Her job was to make sure that after we split up, Bea still had two parents, even though one of them was now going to be living in Mexico.

She never promised neutrality, so maybe it wasn't fair of me to expect it. I just

remember the Look on her face when I told her that I was going south. It was the same Look I'd seen on my parents' face, and Jay's. And Jay's parents'.

"But your *baby*," the Look said.

None of them ever told me that with words. Just the Look. Jay got close, I could tell, but even he couldn't bring himself to actually, directly accuse me of being a bad mother.

"How can you do that?" the counsellor asked, her visage slipping for a moment as a shocked look came across her face. She recovered quickly, but for every session we had after that, I remembered her face. I remembered the Look. As she nodded and supposedly didn't take sides while Jay listed all my flaws as a human, as she held up a hand when I tried to do the same.

"We don't attack each other here," she'd remind me. "That's not what this is about. This is about ensuring a successful co-parenting relationship after you leave."

After you leave. Just like Jay, she could never resist an opportunity to remind me that I was the one leaving. I was the parent who didn't love her kid, I was the selfish one.

I mean, I *was* the selfish one. But I didn't need others to remind me of it.

And so I packed up the car, filled it with suitcases and tubs full of everything I owned, put Tess in the passenger seat, and I drove to the school. I parked it in an algorithm under one of the buildings.

I'd really been hoping the car would survive the trip down to Mexico. I'd felt so guilty about leaving, I'd agreed to pay child support far beyond my means. Especially since now, I was going to be making pesos instead of dollars.

I had no idea the car wouldn't even survive the recital.

It wasn't even locked. It was my kid's school, in a nowhere town in a nowhere state. No one locked their cars. Except Jay. It drove me mad, but he insisted. "What if," he'd say, and spin some completely sensible hypothetical. That was what really got me - I couldn't even roll my eyes and tell him he was being ridiculous.

He was being ridiculous, but I couldn't tell him that. Or anything, really. Not lately. I couldn't tell him that I was unhappy, or that I hated being a mother. Or that I hated him. It took me eighteen months to tell him I was leaving.

I don't know if I couldn't tell him anything because I hated him, or if I hated him because I couldn't tell him anything.

Maybe it was like slavery. Not our relationship - that was like a job interview, more than anything. A job interview for a job you don't want, with people who don't want to hire you. You're all going through the motions: foreplay, small talk, where do you see yourself in five years, do you have any questions, but all of you know that it's pointless. It's all pointless.

Jay didn't know, I guess. He was genuinely shocked when I told him. Like, the most surprised I've ever seen him.

"But your *daughter*," he didn't say.

I mean slavery in that...like, were people bad for having slaves, or did they have slaves because they were bad. The answer is both, I guess. I hated Jay because I felt silenced, and I was silenced because I couldn't talk to him. About anything.

The counsellor was his idea, of course. I told him it wouldn't change anything, that I was leaving either way. He nodded, and told me we should go anyway. "If we're going to do this, we should do it right."

He was being ridiculous, but so perfectly, I couldn't even roll my eyes.

I think he did believe me, looking back. At the time I didn't. At the time, I thought he was just trying to make me to stay. Forcing me, in his Jay way, but I don't think that was it. For all our problems, we've always trusted each other.

That was why I could leave Bea with him. He's not a bad parent. He's not even a bad

person, not really. He's just bad for me.

Jay wouldn't have parked the car in the algorithm. He would have followed the signs to the Designated Parent Parking, to the rows of cars lined up neatly, parallel parked by the parallel-parking AI. My car didn't have an AI - it was one of the last ones that didn't. Thank fuck. I felt guilty enough about the dog. I didn't need the death of an innocent AI on top of that.

Not that it was that kind of AI. But I still would have felt bad about it. My mom had one, a proper AI. She'd given it a nickname, and it refused to answer to it. I'd shown her how she could go in and force the name change, but she never did. I think it was a kind of joke between them.

Jay got her the AI after Dad died. It had been the right thing to do, not that I'd admitted that to him at the time. Or since. I'd tried to tell myself that he just didn't want her landing on us, coming to live with me and him and our eighteen-month old daughter. I think even then, I hated him.

But I think he just recognized how lonely she was, and knew that it would help. He was right. That was the worst part of it - he was always right. Insufferably so. And here I was, a fuckup. A fuckup, married to someone who was always right. Can you imagine a worse fate?

Mom loved the AI. Mom loved Jay, too. They didn't even get along, but she still loved him.

She was going to be spending more time with Jay than she'd be spending with me. That one had taken me a while to wrap my head around. Mostly just so she could see Bea, of course, but still. I could imagine them hanging out, talking about our kid, talking about our marriage. Why it ended. How selfish I was to be leaving. How selfish I was, just generally.

Jay wouldn't have parked the car in the algorithm, but I didn't want the backseat full of purple suitcases to broadcast the fact that I was leaving, so I ignored the hologrammic signs pointing to Parent Parking, and spent five, ten, twenty minutes driving through the algorithm.

The algorithm was my favorite part of the school, if I'm being honest. Like, I enjoyed getting to see Bea's classroom, her artwork hung on the wall. I liked her teachers well enough. I wouldn't grab a drink with them, but that's probably a bit too much to ask for a second-grade teacher.

Seeing Bea's art...it wasn't like the recital. It didn't take nearly as long, for one, but the recital was just her learning where to place her fingers, learning the exact routine as everyone else. Her art, terrible as it was, was something that *she* had made. She'd wanted to create something, and so she'd just gone ahead and done it. I liked that. I respected it.

Some dogs hate it when you drive through an artificially-generated room. They can smell that it's off, that nothing exists past the grimy walls of the algorithm, but Tess has never minded. I don't know that she likes it, but she doesn't complain, and that was enough.

The algorithm feeds off everything that was inside it, and all the data it's been given along the years, then hones that based on what you're specifically looking for. Your desire in that moment.

Humans only, of course - I remember seeing a really early algorithm, a rich friend of mine had one when I was young. When they were new. It didn't filter out non-humans, and so you had to work hard to keep it clean, otherwise as soon as you got a rat or a cockroach in, the algorithm would start generating piles of rotting meat or whatever.

Then, even after you get the vermin out, you're still stuck with it. It's part of the algorithm. You get an infestation, and you're with the cravings of a cockroach forever.

So the room under the school didn't generate open fields, or big thick doggy cocks for Tess to lust after. Just standard school stuff - piles of basketballs, nets, some old band gear. Probably a stack of recorders.

It knew that we were driving, so there was always room for the car to move. I could technically have parked anywhere, but I wanted to see what it would generate for me. I wanted to see what it thought I wanted. After a few hours of listening to Greensleeves being ineptly played on recorder, I was going to be gone. Free. It was all I'd thought about for years - running away to Mexico, starting a new life.

I wanted it to tell me what I wanted.

But unless I was secretly interested in stacks and stacks of old desks and chairs, it seemed that my desires weren't enough to outweigh the decades of crap that had built up.

The algorithm can only generate based on what it's given - you build one in a restaurant, you want to seed it with pots and pans. That way, even if the head chef secretly wants nothing more than a lifetime subscription to Playgirl, you're not going to accidentally generate one when an investor comes by.

And so the school's algorithm only knew school crap, and my wants - whatever they were - weren't significant enough to make a difference.

That reminded me a little too much of my marriage, and so I abruptly stopped the car, making Tess yelp. I felt bad about that, and spent another five minutes patting her. Partially to cheer her up, partially to cheer me up, but mostly because every minute I was in the car was another minute I wasn't watching a class of kids awkwardly shuffle back and forth onstage.

I'm glad I did. I'm glad I got to say goodbye, even if I didn't know that's what I was doing. I scratched her behind the ears as I downloaded messages into my glasses, to give me something to read during the less interesting parts of the recital. AKA "all of it".

Tess loved it. So did I. She wasn't even my dog - Jay had her before we met. I'm not even a dog person, but I liked Tess. That's why I'd fought for her in the divorce. I didn't ask for much, and Jay didn't fight me on what I did ask for, not even Tess.

Maybe I'd done it to provoke him, but he refused to be provoked. I had fully expected him to remind me of the time I forgot to feed her for a weekend, or tell me that I wasn't responsible enough to look after a dog, but even with the counsellor sitting there, almost quivering in preparation to Back Him Up, he'd told me it was fine, that if I really wanted Tess, I should take her.

Maybe he should have told me I wasn't responsible enough to look after a dog. I sort of wish he had, even though I know I would have just dug in further. I would have taken his disapproval as a challenge, and insisted on taking her. Maybe I would have been more careful, or something.

But he trusted me, just like I trusted him.

I'd like to think it wasn't my fault, that I did everything I could. Even though I'd driven for more than twenty minutes, the door was right behind me when I got out of the car, and I didn't close it. I promise. Closing the door resets the algorithm - everything inside is incorporated into the program. That's how you feed it in the first place - that's why the computer-generated spare desks were still so crappy, the basketballs were so faded. That's just what they had on-hand. You throw everything in, shut the door, and it says "okay, you want me to be *that* kind of storage locker. Cool. I'm on it."

Everything inside disappears. Everything that isn't human. You don't want a single fly blocking the process, so it can tell when a person is in there, even if they're asleep, or dead. But anything else is fodder for the algorithm.

I didn't close the door. I swear, I didn't.

I went and sat next to Jay. He asked me if I'd left the window down for Tess, and I told him I had. He didn't point out how late I was, but we both knew he was thinking it. We both knew we both knew he was thinking it.

Bea's performance of Greensleeves was Perfectly Adequate. I clapped, of course. I

didn't let Bea know I was bored shitless. And I mean, I wasn't bored watching *her* perform. Just the rest of the little cretins. I ran out of messages by the end of the eighth Greensleeves. You don't realize how many of your friends you met through your husband until he stops being your husband.

After everything was done, I gave her a hug and told her how proud I was of her. She knew I was leaving, and I knew she knew I was leaving, but if there's one thing I learned from seven years of marriage, it's that there's a way these things are *done*, and so I reminded her that I was going away and that she wouldn't see me for a while and that we'd videoconnect all the time, and that I loved her so so so so much. She hugged me and ran off to talk to her best friend Didi, and I gave Jay an awkward hug and told him that I loved him too, which was true, and reminded him that I'd be on the road until Sunday.

He nodded and hugged me back, and told me that he loved me too and that we were going to make it work, for Bea, because that's what was important now, and I refrained from rolling my eyes, and I said goodbye, and returned to the algorithm to find that the door had been closed.

I never went to Mexico. I don't honestly know what I would have done there - it was just the concept of Escape that appealed, but I didn't want to live there without a car, and I especially didn't want to buy a hoverticket. I'd always envisioned my triumphant escape with me driving across the border, and I didn't want to compromise.

And so that night I went and stayed with my mother. Her AI wished me a good night's sleep, and mom laughed when I called it by the stupid nickname she'd given it and it ignored me.

The next day, I bought a bus ticket to Oklahoma. It's not as romantic as running away to Mexico, but they have a transit system and I at least speak the language. It wasn't fun explaining to Bea why I both wasn't going to be living in Mexico AND wasn't staying in the same town as her, but it was at least an easier conversation than explaining to Jay how less than an hour after taking his dog, she'd been torn apart, atom by atom, and incorporated into a computer program.

They never worked out how to reset the algorithm, so Bea told me 'spot the purple suitcase' became a bit of a game at her school when kids were sent in to get stuff. It was nice to know that my photo albums weren't *gone* - apparently the system wasn't quite sure what to make of them, and so my holiday snaps ended up being integrated into basketball hoops, easels, everything with a flat surface.

When I'd seen the closed door, a part of me had hoped that whoever had closed it had first let Tess out, but that hope was quashed as soon as opened the door and entered the algorithm. That time, it knew exactly what I wanted, and I could immediately see her twice - trying to gnaw her way through an artificially-generated basketball, and half a mile away, sitting on top of an orange version of my car, wagging her tail and smiling at me. My hand on my mouth, I turned around and almost tripped over a third Tess, wanting me to scratch her ears.

I couldn't. I just couldn't, y'know?

She's become a sort of mascot of the school. It's funny - she probably wouldn't have lasted more than a couple more years, especially with me looking after her, but now she's sort of immortal. A sort of forever dog.

All the kids love her, so whenever they go into the program to get supplies, they'll leave with a dozen copies of Tess, duplicates of the dog in all shapes and sizes. Like everything else the algorithm generates, they disappear within a few hours, but that's pretty much ideal. Computer-generated dogs don't even poop.

Jay refuses to engage with her. Hers. They're not his dog, and he doesn't believe in

compromise. I think he likes that Bea still gets to play with his dog, but he won't do the same.

We talk less, which I guess makes sense. I mean, we went from living together to living in the same city to living in different cities - talking less sort of follows naturally, of course. But I think if I'd taken Tess to Mexico, we'd have spoken more than we do now. A part of me wants to see that as a sort of victory, but I miss him. I miss our family. I don't regret leaving, but I do regret the way I did it.

Not just the algorithm, although obviously that. If I could go back and do it again, I'd do a few things differently. I wouldn't park in the damn computer program, of course. Maybe I'd leave Tess with Jay. I loved that dog, but that's not why I took her.

I'd do everything slower. Calmer. At the time, I was so scared, I felt so trapped. Like Tess must have when the algorithm closed in on her. Those robots, coming closer, scanning. Reading. Feeding. Disassembling.

That's how I felt when Jay looked at me, like he was analysing me, preparing to tear me apart. But I think we were just different. I think that was just how he looked at things, like he wanted to understand them. We never understood each other. We never will, not really. But at least Jay tried.

If I were to do it again, I'd try. I think we'd have ended up in the same place, but with less hurt. And without my fucking underwear being available to everyone who entered the algorithm in my daughter's school looking for it.