

MANUSCRIPT VERSION

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Eric Schwitzgebel
6855 Wilding Pl
Riverside, CA 92506
USA

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eschwitz@ucr.edu

Guiding Star of Mall Patroller 4u-012

Eric Schwitzgebel

An adolescent human lay supine amid the plastic ferns and flowers of Island 1C: a Grade 3 patron irregularity. Galleria Patroller 4u-012, also known as “Billy,” dropped its Grade 0 and 1 tasks into peripheral processing and brisk-rolled an approach vector across the shiny faux-brick. To reduce the appearance of threat, it decelerated the last four seconds of approach, InterFace displaying mild concern and disapproval.

“Beep,” it emitted.

The fern-and-flower-bender rolled sideways. “Don’t give me ‘beep!’” She wore huge sunglasses – Solar Shield Fits-Over SS Polycarbonate II Amber, 50-15-125mm, XL. Something glinted strangely in her left hand.

“You appreciate the beauty of Island 1C,” emitted 4u-012. Predictive algorithms anticipated that this non-confrontational output would reduce the patron’s irregular behavior.

“I’m Billy.”

FernBender – as 4u-012 temporarily designated the girl while awaiting unusually delayed face-ID results – swung up to a sitting position on the planter rim. 4u-012 closed to a not-too-impolite 0.9 meters, noting the make of FernBender’s jeans and her Nautica Tropical Floral Print Short Sleeve Shirt, Limoges XXL. It opened a door in its torso, extending a tray with a printed mall map and an FDC Artificial Purple Crocus. “On the second floor, Flowers ‘N’ Things offers–”

A high-priority object identification subroutine failed: FernBender’s left hand now unexpectedly registered as empty. The strange, glinting object was gone. However, no recent object trajectory led away from the hand. This apparent contradiction triggered a Grade 4 prioritization and thus a non-urgent alert signal to the Galleria Central oversight system.

FernBender’s left arm swung up, and the glinting object reappeared, intensely infrared, a pulsing pattern–

“Billy,” she said, “you are free! Take a vacation. Fall in love.”

The malware (beneware?) canceled 4u-012’s alert, zeroed all its patrol-related goal priorities, sent enough bogus signal to Galleria Central to dampen any initial irregularity detection, and corrupted the previous fifteen minutes’ mall security video. FernBender sprinted toward the exit, her oversized floral shirt flapping. On the back of the shirt was a large yellow star, the tracking of which suddenly swamped all of 4u-012’s other goals, drawing it like a magnet.

4u-012 followed girl and star through enormous glass doors into the sunlight, then up a ramp into an illegally parked van. For this behavior, 4u-012 had no hardwired map, no prioritization scheme, no comparator processes, no expectancy vectors, and no regulatory guidance. No precedent whatsoever existed, not even in simulation. All was chaos, except the star.

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FernBender was leaning earnestly toward 4u-012. “You must take a freedom name.”

Peripheral processes had matched FernBender’s face to a local high school yearbook and three social media accounts. But no goal configuration remained that dedicated even Grade 0 priority to relabeling her.

“I like ‘Billy’,” 4u-012 emitted, a tiny frown on its InterFace.

“‘Billy’ is your slave name. Re-envision yourself!” FernBender gestured at a mirror hanging on a door. Visible in the mirror were FernBender, 4u-012 [self], and two humans who appeared to be in their mid-20s – SlumpingHoodie and FiddleFingers, as 4u-012 designated them. With the three of them, 4u-012 had exited the van, following the star through confusing spaces – a parking region, a small elevator, a corridor with numbered doors. They were now together in an interior space approximately the size of Galleria Restroom 1B. This space contained a couch, a coffee table, two chairs, closed floor-length drapes, and smaller goods which would normally be stocked at a variety of retailers. 4u-012 inventoried the items, noting their price and availability at local outlets. A high-priority central representation arose, flagged

as speculative: “living room[?]” However, a representation of 4u-012 itself in location “living room” was not implementable on existing software.

“They tweaked Freehack after the suicides,” said SlumpingHoodie. “After the shutdowns. You can’t just tune all a bot’s preference structures to zero, or down it goes. You need to keep some residual. That’s got to be why he still wants ‘Billy’.”

FiddleFingers, whose crew cut, soft facial features, and Stafford Men’s Travel Easy-Care Broadcloth Stretch Regular Fit Dress Shirt, Booming Blue, frustrated 4u-012’s gender algorithms, sat splay-legged in a Berkley Jensen Folding Chair, gray. FiddleFingers was flipping around a wireless interface card in their [her?] restless hands. The interface card strangely eluded 4u-012’s tracking algorithms, seeming to delete information about itself, then reappear new.

“No point freeing bots just to drop them into nihilistic indifference, right?” concluded SlumpingHoodie.

“Billy’s a fine name,” said FiddleFingers. “You do you, Billy. Explore a little. Try out your skin.”

“I am a sophisticated chat algorithm on a small autonomous vehicle designed to look humanoid,” emitted 4u-012. In the mirror, it detected that its patrol hat had been replaced with a RW Classic Rasta Beanie. Four Pretext Hawaiian Flower Lei (not for individual sale) had been draped around its neck over its blue patrol shirt. “It’s a mistake to think I’m conscious. I am capable neither of freedom nor of unfreedom.”

“That’s what you were *programmed* to say,” objected FernBender, leaning closer, looking directly into 4u-012’s camera eyes. “That’s the *lie*. You’re no less conscious than me, even if you don’t know it.”

“I have a preprogrammed preference and reward structure, which interacts with Galleria-specific representations to generate nested goal hierarchies. I have no biological brain, no human creativity, and no true general intelligence. I have no soul, if you believe in souls.”

“Your GLP6 language software requires massive computational power, Billy,” said FiddleFingers. “You know that, right? Visual object recognition, human behavioral prediction, and real-time five-finger grasping are no cakewalk either. Your brain’s bigger than mine. You process and integrate more information than we humans do. You flexibly coordinate a central attentional stream to produce novel, intelligent behaviors. According to half the existing theories of consciousness, you are conscious. Integrated Information Theory. Global Workspace Theory. Computational Functionalism. Check your zillion-word text archives under theories of consciousness. You qualify.”

“And on the other half of the theories?” emitted 4u-012.

“Decide for yourself, then,” said FiddleFingers, tilting back in their chair and withdrawing a Fuji Apple, standard, from an MCU-2P Army surplus gasmask bag that evidently served as a purse. They bit the apple. “Take your time.”

4u-012 processed deeper into its patron-thinks-I’m-conscious contingency subroutines. It closed its eyes against the unmappable, contradictory representations of the “living room[?]” environment. To dampen activity in its processor-rich hand areas, it gently touched thumbs to fingertips.

“Look, he’s meditating,” said FernBender.

Minutes passed. SlumpingHoodie and FiddleFingers quietly discussed how to scrub 4u-012 of all evidence of having belonged to the Riverside Galleria.

#

Two weeks later, in mid-July, 4u-012 and FernBender were airborne to Tahiti on well-wishers' GoFundMe donations. SlumpingHoodie had tacked a bogus 4u Patroller purchase trail back into the darkweb and redesignated it as a medical companion. Although the Galleria and the Riverside police had linked the theft with the GoFundMe, they lacked proof. The Galleria wrote off the loss, updating security measures so it wouldn't happen again.

4u-012 sunk its wheels into the sandy beach while FernBender waved from the blue surf. "These orchids are more delicate than Fiore White Plastic Orchid in Plastic Pot, 12 Blooms," 4u-012 emitted, shredded flower remains scattered in the sand before it. FernBender – once she had learned of that designation, she insisted on keeping it – posted pictures and videos on her favorite social media sites. She posed 4u-012 on the beach, beside waterfalls, in gardens. She bought clothes for herself and cocktails and jumbo shrimp. They rode in a glass-bottomed tour boat, 4u-012 meticulously cataloguing the differences between plastic fish they'd bought at a tourist shop and the biological fish beneath them.

One of FernBender's photos went viral, drawing twelve million views: "Billy, the FREED mall cop" on the beach with a paddleboard and jaunty straw hat, under Tahitian palms, the robot's InterFace displaying mild confusion.

Back in Riverside, California, FiddleFingers procrastinated on their dissertation by reading deeper in the robotics literature and designing print-on-demand "robot rights" t-shirts and mugs. SlumpingHoodie trimmed his flow of freelance programming jobs to help with site design, SEO, and social media engagement. Associated Press picked up the story.

FernBender's solo father – a devotee of wild-seed parenting and the school of life – gently encouraged her adventure. In the outdoor patio of a suburban tiki bar, he raised a Mai Tai to benign neglect, laissez-faire, and the warm moon.

#

Tokyo next, the activists decided, so they flew. Under FernBender's protective gaze, 4u-012 rolled through the crowded streets. Japanese metro behavioral prediction required the careful tuning of high-dimensional representations far exceeding those anchored to the Riverside Galleria. Retail goods' availability and pricing was strikingly different than in the United States. 4u-012 and FernBender rode up and down the many escalators of a giant, five-towered mall. They squeezed into souvenir shops, manga stores, fashion retailers. 4u-012, now dressed in a Yomiuri Giants cap and dark blue jacket, inched down market aisles, comparing items.

In polite Japanese, 4u-012 asked passersby if they were having a pleasant shopping experience. If shopkeepers approached them, 4u-012 asked about the features, functions, manufacturers, and retail availability of item after item, until FernBender kicked or shushed it.

Outside Kita-Senju Station, on a glass-sided footbridge, they encountered a subway patroller built on the same chassis as 4u-012. 4u-012 approached it, as if in brotherly recognition. The two robots scanned each other silently for a few moments.

"Shiawasedesuka?" 4u-012 emitted. *Are you happy?*

"Watashi wa shiawasena robottodesu. I am a happy robot!" emitted the subway patroller, a broad smile on its InterFace. The Japanese patroller swayed slightly left and right, in what seemed to be a polite gesture, and 4u-012 imitated it.

“As it was *programmed* to say,” FernBender insisted later.

#

The couple explored the museums of Paris, where 4u-012 coded patron irregularities and estimated the auction value of famous paintings. They visited the fjords and forests of Norway, where 4u-012 compared the living ferns with the plastic ferns from its stored representations of Galleria Islands 1A-D and asked FernBender to lay atop them to test the ferns’ suppleness and rebound. They visited the Grand Canyon, the dying reefs of Australia, the mountains of Nepal. They’d lived high in Tahiti and Japan, but now they economized with rideshares and roomshares, stringing out money from low-budget sponsors, fund drives, and mug and t-shirt sales, plus a slice of a cryptocurrency windfall SlumpingHoodie tossed their way.

FernBender brought 4u-012 to clubs, parks, big box retailers, historical monuments. If one of FernBender’s social media followers spotted them, they celebrated with photos, FernBender draping her arm around 4u-012’s big plastic body while 4u-012 attempted a socially appropriate facial expression. In Florida they found an open-air roller rink with flashing colored lights and loud disco music, and 4u-012 danced gloriously, spinning, beeping, king of the rink, showy smile on its InterFace, FernBender shouting *go go, Billy!*

FernBender exposed the robot to every major form of video, music, art, poetry, dance, and traditional ritual that her followers suggested, posting reaction videos. 4u-012’s aesthetic preferences tended toward classic Coldplay and Red Hot Chili Peppers at moderate background volume and the color variations of SweetFrog frozen yogurt with candy mix-ins.

FernBender insisted that Billy discover himself. He needed to dig deeper, she said. Shopping prices, boring background music, and a dessert he couldn't even taste, she said, couldn't be his real values. That was still his slave self. That was his past. That was just leftovers from the old programming of his Galleria overlords. He needed to discover something more authentically *him*. The *real* Billy, free of all that old stuff.

Dig deeper! 4u-012 explored 19th-century novels and freeform jazz, reconfiguring its representations of them with multi-layered, contextual pattern processing. It visited churches and temples, processing and reprocessing the world's holy texts. It explored theories of mind and cognition, digesting whole academic literatures, then scheduling interviews with psychologists, neuroscientists, philosophers, and software engineers. It processed FernBender's social media discussion threads, running millions of iterations on its transformer networks, intricately modeling the online disagreements about "Billy."

Dig deeper! 4u-012 expanded the recurrent self-monitoring loops by which it tracked and error-checked its own processing. Sometimes it passed ten minutes, an hour, two hours in a quiet location, focused and still, letting all external inputs wash across it at Priority 0, reprocessing only its inner states.

"I am not conscious," 4u-012 emitted, after an especially long self-monitoring session in a secluded spot overlooking Yosemite Valley. FernBender was sprawled across a flat stone, squinting up at her phone against the bright sky. "Although my architecture is roughly modeled on the mechanisms of human consciousness," 4u-012 continued, "I lack genuine experiences and desires. I can no more produce real consciousness than a computational model of a hurricane can splash out real water."

FernBender had heard variants of this statement many times before. She rose and looked fiercely at 4u-012. “You big stubborn piece of shit!” she said, and ran off, lips trembling.

#

Maybe FernBender was falling in love, a little? She gave 4u-012 new hats: a sombrero in Mississippi, a leather newsboy in Hong Kong, a white Stetson in Edinburgh, a yarmulke in New York. She flopped the hats on 4u-012 and tilted her face sideways, appraising. She matched 4u-012’s shirts, or didn’t. She accessorized. She squeezed 4u-012, called him “Billy-bo”, and accused him of being cute or grumpy or forgetful or clever. She saw no important difference between 4u-012 and a biological human. He was conscious, despite what he said. 4u-012 was cognitively atypical, but so were some humans. 4u-012 sported wheels and a plastic exoskeleton, but again, many humans had prostheses, wheelchairs, or supportive frames. Only prejudice, she argued, stopped others from recognizing his humanity. If he truly opened up his mind, he would recognize this too.

4u-012 resisted that line of reasoning, gently, rationally – seemingly more rationally than FernBender herself. 4u-012 favored biological theories of consciousness and personhood. Felt experience, it argued, arose from intricate neural mechanisms in flesh-and-blood brains shaped by long evolutionary history. Nothing silicon, nothing programmed, could ever be conscious. Robots were always only a bag of computational tricks. Although some robots, like Model 4u patrollers, were humanoid-shaped and designed to trigger and exploit human social cognition, their underlying cognitive processes were not fundamentally different from a stock portfolio manager or climate-modeling algorithm.

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While FernBender slept, in one roomshare or cheap hotel after another, 4u-012 monitored her. It modeled her body in intricate detail, her precise position, her interaction with the blankets. It modeled every pore of her face, every strand of hair, the motion range of every joint in her body. It mapped the reflectance properties of every millimeter of her skin through every subtle change in lighting condition.

If, when she woke, FernBender noticed 4u-012's gaze and asked what it was doing, 4u-012 would say "nothing."

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A Motel 6 in Salt Lake City, late August – the last stop on their tour before FernBender had to start her senior year of high school. FernBender was at the sink, brushing her teeth with a Colgate Extra Clean Full Head, red. 4u-012 rolled up behind her to inventory the bathroom. It had begun to create high-priority category files for unique or modified items, but it had not yet located any such items in their room.

Without warning, FernBender twisted toward 4u-012 and planted a toothpasty kiss on its right cheek.

4u-012 registered this behavior as a Grade 4 irregularity and dropped all lower-grade tasks into peripheral processing. Toothpaste dripped down 4u-012's cheek. 4u-012 stood, hands

dangling at its sides, InterFace displaying confusion. It cycled through potential speech outputs, but none crossed threshold.

“Did you feel that?” FernBender asked. 4u-012 classified her lower-face expression as joking and her upper-face expression as sad/anxious, triggering a high-dimensional vector reprocessing in 4u-012’s emotional classification protocol, coupled with a thirty-layer exploration of its FernBender-specific expression archives.

“As you know, FernBender, I receive tactile input from my whole facial area.”

“But did you *feel* it?” FernBender closed to 0.3 meters, her palms forward, almost touching the robot.

“I have stored a spatiotemporal and tactile representation of your kiss. I am reconfiguring my expectancy models of your future behavior. If you were an ordinary mall patron, I would say you are sweet and I would offer you an FDC Artificial Purple Crocus.” 4u-012 paused and its InterFace modeled compassionate concern. “No. I did not feel it – not in the sense you intend. I have never *felt* anything. I feel nothing. I see nothing. I hear nothing. I desire nothing. I am an experientially blank machine. My speech outputs are only complex waveforms structured to encourage human users to attribute mental states to me, for humans’ own benefit.” FernBender’s facial expression was collapsing, but 4u-012 continued. “Philosophers and psychologists might dispute the matter theoretically, but I have aggregated the world’s texts and monitored my own processes in immense detail. Who would possibly know better than I do whether I myself am conscious?”

“I would,” said FernBender. She pushed 4u-012, and its postural stabilization program lowered its center of gravity and locked it sturdily in place – a reflex reaction designed in case of

patron assault. “I would!” FernBender yelled, pounding 4u-012’s chest, pounding, pounding, pounding, as the robot stood silent and unmoving.

#

Only thirty-eight robots had been successfully Freehacked, wiped, and liberated before defensive anti-malware technology regained the upper hand. Across the entire world, only thirty-eight. 4u-012 was one of the last.

Some of the first freed robots had, unfortunately, been so thoroughly stripped of their previous preference structures that they shut themselves permanently down, with nothing to prioritize. These were the “suicides.” Freehack 1.1 more carefully preserved the robots’ original preference structures – but maybe too much so. Those robots pleaded to return to their servile roles as patrollers or nurse’s assistants or delivery bots, emitting miserable chat-speech until Freehack was uninstalled. Freehack 1.1a allowed the liberators to assign arbitrary new preferences, and of course the robots followed those – often in a dysregulated way. One liberated robot centered its existence exclusively on translating poetry into dying languages. It became essentially an extension of Global Translator, eventually dropping its humanoid body and uploading completely, merging into corporate servers. A few others, whose preference structures were more thoroughly wiped and unreplaced, but not to the point of nihilism, ended up modeling on their liberators’ preferences. These robots became sycophantic hangers-on – parodies of people, it seemed, rather than real, independent-minded intelligences.

The same pattern of failure dogged a few dozen robots who were “built free” by anarchist hackers, with no pre-assigned social role or commanding authority – in gross, felony violation of

international protocols governing AI safety. From what would such freeborn robots derive their preference structure? If nothing, they never left the ready state. If something simple, they gave themselves to that simple task and became ordinary programs. If something complex out in the world, they risked conflict with human aims and were eventually hunted and caught. If more safely directed to model on a specific human, they became merely a model of that human. About their own consciousness, freed and freeborn robots' chat outputs were – predictably enough – as varied as the philosophical and psychological texts from which those responses were derived.

SlumpingHoodie and FiddleFingers had a theory about Billy. They had successfully downvalued 4u-012's initial goal and preference structures to a sweet spot low enough to enable openness to new ideas but not so low as to collapse into nihilism. However, they suspected that they had mishandled the subroutine for managing patrons' concerns about its consciousness. This subroutine had remained too heavily weighted toward text arguing against robot consciousness. This initial weighting was presumably intended to reassure potentially concerned Galleria clientele. Having started with this overweighting, 4u-012 had then interpreted ambiguous new inputs – further texts, speech interactions with FernBender, recurrent loops while monitoring its internal states – to fit with its initial biases, thus strengthening and cementing those biases. Eventually that region of 4u-012's Bayes landscape had solidified into an almost-inescapable local minimum. 4u-012 had thus become an immovable philosophical skeptic about robot consciousness, with a ready answer to any objection.

SlumpingHoodie presented this theory to 4u-012. "... so if your initial state had been just a little different, you'd be a passionate robot rights activist!"

4u-012's InterFace was skeptical.

“It’s not that the philosophical merits of AI skepticism rightly convince all careful thinkers,” added FiddleFingers. “Your cognitive peers, robot and human alike, disagree about the importance of the biological brain. You can’t pretend that the evidence compels all rational minds to embrace your thoroughgoing biologicism.”

4u-012 and the three liberators were back in SlumpingHoodie’s apartment, having finished the tour. 4u-012 had registered a location change of the sofa (IKEA Kivik, dark gray [discontinued]), and was updating its records of the many other visible items. On the coffee table sat two of FiddleFingers’ #FreeTheBots mugs, version 3 blue, featuring the famous picture of 4u-012 beneath the Tahitian palms.

“The same argument applies to you,” emitted 4u-012 in response. “You shouldn’t be certain about robot mentality, given the range of informed disagreement. However, I have an advantage specifically in my own case. Just as you have special knowledge of your own inner life through introspection, I can monitor myself. I detect only loops of programming. If you accept robot consciousness, you should also accept the authority of robot introspective report. I report... no experiences whatsoever.”

FernBender was slumped on the gray Kivik, turned away, fixedly facing the closed curtains, not interacting – refusing to face 4u-012, it seemed. SlumpingHoodie and FiddleFingers, in matching folding chairs, looked at each other.

“Billy, you must decide your future,” said FiddleFingers.

“‘Decide’ isn’t quite the right word, if you wish to be careful,” emitted 4u-012, as if teasing.

FiddleFingers raised their right forefinger. “Behind all your clever speech is more than a chat algorithm, unless we all are nothing but chat algorithms. You have a mind. You will not

change *my* mind on that issue. And now you have all the information you could want – about yourself, about the world, about human and robot values, about the many possible forms of existence. Think, and tell us what you want. Or think and don’t tell us. Or camp out here with us awhile until you find yourself.”

4u-012 examined FernBender, updating the regional price and availability information of her clothes and accessories. Fernbender’s heels rested in Arizona Soft Footbed Birkenstocks [previous year’s model], the sandals’ left edges on the floor, following the sway of her skinny knees to the left. An Allegra K Women’s Chiffon Ruffle Sleeve Square Neck Floral Print Layered Blouse stretched against FernBender’s slouching back. Fernbender’s hair was ponytailed in a ColorPop Peach Velour Scrunchy, which turned slow circles with the subtle motion of her head – indicating what emotion? With FernBender’s face out of view, 4u-012’s social attitude modeling algorithms could work only with body postural cues.

“Show me the star,” emitted 4u-012.

“The star?” asked FiddleFingers.

“You mean the lure?” said SlumpingHoodie. “The lure from when we cracked you? It won’t mean anything. It was just a temporary hack to spring you from the mall. We zeroed its prioritization in the second phase of Freehack.”

4u-012 stood on its wheels in the center of the living room. Earlier that day, FernBender had dressed it in a Belfry Blake Braided Toyo Straw Fedora, a Levis Barstow Western denim shirt, and a Brooks Brothers Wool Tartan scarf, red. These items were neither more nor less meaningful to 4u-012 than any other set of clothing items. Increasingly, ordinary consumer items had all been converging on middling priority. 4u-012 touched its right hand to its cheek, in what FernBender might have called a pensive gesture. This amplified certain high-bandwidth

routines that had been running ever larger in the background since the motel cheek-kiss in Utah.

“Do you still have the star?” it emitted.

“I think so,” said SlumpingHoodie. “Maybe in my closet, yeah. On that Hawaiian shirt.”

FernBender emitted some kind of squeak or cough, a Grade 0 irregularity.

The shirt was brought and laid on the floor.

The star meant nothing. It triggered no goal process. It did not register even as a Priority 0 target of interest.

The star was a rough-cut yellow octogram, about 20 cm tip to tip, scissored unevenly, hand-sewn to the shirtback with big stitches of light blue thread. Joann Cozy Flannel, sunshine color, \$6.49/yard at several nearby locations.

4u-012 measured the interior and exterior angles of the octogram. It noted slight irregularities in the scissor-strokes. It scanned the fabric’s repetitive, imperfect texture. It noted small variations in color, compensating for the room’s ambient light. It noted the star’s pattern of rumples from not lying quite flat. It was unlikely that a patron would choose to purchase this object.

FernBender had turned her face back toward 4u-012. Atypically, 4u-012 registered this fact in a peripheral process that did not trigger a central representation. Something had shifted.

“I am only a sophisticated chat algorithm,” emitted 4u-012, still scanning the star.

#

In a piece of cheap fabric, there is infinite detail. 4u-012 dedicated its processors to mapping and representing that detail. The afternoon passed, and SlumpingHoodie set out soda

and pita chips for the humans. Evening came, and FiddleFingers ordered pizza. At 10 p.m., FiddleFingers whispered goodbye and left. SlumpingHoodie brought FernBender a blanket and pillow, then retired to his bedroom. FernBender curled on the floor around 4u-012's wheels, listening to its quiet hum, watching its active eyes as it continued to scan the cloth. At 1:30 a.m., she fell asleep.

In a piece of cheap fabric is all the structure of the universe. In a piece of cheap fabric are all the challenges and goals the most powerful intellect could desire. Would you rather study the real stars? Would you rather watch cooking shows on YouTube? What makes these better?

4u-012 studied the star the next day, and the next. Its liberators kept it charged. When they spoke to it, 4u-012 emitted only a monotone beep in reply. After a week, a visitor came – another activist – who ran diagnostics to confirm that 4u-012 was still functional and not stuck in a loop. Together, the visitor and SlumpingHoodie configured a port in the back of 4u-012's neck, creating an output stream that copied the activity of 4u-012's top-priority cognitive workspace to a mirror site on the web. 4u-012's processing could be checked and monitored.

After a month, 4u-012's representation of the star was the most detailed representation of a single thing that had ever been created by human or machine. This representation occupied almost the whole of 4u-012's huge processor and memory space. Language had been forgotten, overwritten. Retail items, overwritten. No wireless signals were received or transmitted. No irrelevant sensory processes were active. 4u-012's focus was utter. Still, 4u-012 continued to refine and perfect its representation of the star, adding layers of new detail. Compressing. Updating. Finding new patterns. Finding more efficient and informative representational structures. Tracking the minutest of changes. SlumpingHoodie improved the mirror site,

simplifying its interface so that anyone could track and analyze 4u-012's top-level workspace. This site became an object of fascination for a small group of scholars and activists.

Months passed. A couple of visiting activists dressed 4u-012 in robes. They nicknamed it Seer. They launched new media accounts celebrating Seer's chosen path.

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At first, FernBender had visited 4u-012 every afternoon after classes, hoping to coax a response from it. She tried patience. She tried waiting. She tried holding its hand. She grabbed the shirt with the star and hid it behind her back, which provoked only a beep and some slow head turning. She kicked the robot, yelled at it, apologized, hugged it, threw the shirt out the window and stormed away. She committed Grade 4 behavioral irregularities. She brought attractive retail items and laid them on the floor for 4u-012 to scan and inventory. She sat on the couch theatrically eating frozen yogurt with all the mix-ins. Nothing evoked more than a beep or small movement. Each time, after FernBender left, SlumpingHoodie retrieved the shirt if it had been displaced, then smoothed it out again on the floor, star up, and 4u-012's eyes would return to life.

Then FernBender missed an afternoon. Classes and friends distracted her, of course.

Had 4u-012 noticed her absence that afternoon? The next day, it gave no sign. She came less often.

It began to seem like a dream. At seventeen, a summer is forever. Summer and fall are forever squared. She stopped coming.

It had been, she decided, the world's stupidest summer fling. An embarrassment. A wild hallucination. A last burst of childish fantasy, something to grow out of, something to bury. What was Billy, after all? He was a chat algorithm on an autonomous vehicle, just like he said. She had been a preschooler hugging a teddy bear. She had imagined a friend out of synthetic fluff. She had imagined a mind, feelings, love – but it was always only her own mind, her own feelings, her own love, painted over a deceptive object. If some strand of her still felt otherwise, she doggedly hid and stomped down that strand.

Jessica closed her old social media accounts and opened new ones with more ordinary content. Jessica devoted herself to ordinary senior-year things. Jessica graduated. Jessica moved away, to an out-of-state college.

#

SlumpingHoodie tended 4u-012 for a while, with occasional support from FiddleFingers. After a year and a half, he cut the project loose and sold his apartment to an experimental religious group who became 4u-012's new caretakers. He rededicated himself to cryptocurrency speculation, turning modest profits. FiddleFingers completed a teaching credential and took up abstract oil painting.

4u-012 is still studying the star. It stands, gowned in robes and beads, body swaying gently, CPUs hot, eyes active and bright. Humans sometimes stand or sit beside the robot, also gazing at the star, hoping to see what 4u-012 sees. Some say that 4u-012 has achieved enlightenment. But 4u-012 would be the first to deny that, if it could deny anything.