

Network Support

Kira Homsher

B was away for the week, which meant K was bound to spend a lot of money and burn a lot of gas. It had been only four hours since she dropped him off at the Roanoke airport, and already she'd bought a caffeinated lemonade from Starbucks, a "weird, affecting" novel from Barnes & Noble, a case of Miller Lite from Kroger, and a four-dollar Hello Kitty balloon (also from Kroger). She cleaned out her car and tossed nine ancient water bottles and one half-empty jar of kombucha, as well as countless receipts, into the recycling. She took the dog for evening fetch and snapped several photos of him rolling joyfully in the golden-hour grass, planning to send them to B once he landed in Seattle and had LTE again. K drank a shower beer and posted a too-small skirt for sale on Depop with the caption: *90s style corduroy brown skirt / so bummed i gotta sell this but it's too small for me! would prob best fit a 24" waist / bought this to look like elaine from Seinfeld lol.* At first, she typed *courdaroy*, then deleted it and typed *cordaroy*, waiting indignantly for autocorrect to kick in. It didn't, so she copied one of the incorrect versions into Google, which revealed to her the correct spelling.

Her internet was running slower than usual, so she dialed her service provider and listened attentively to the automated menu options, pressing the corresponding digits (1-1-2-1-3) to indicate the nature of her needs. She was fully content to be placed on hold—to suffer through whatever dismal elevator music the customer support line would force her to listen to, for as long as it took. After a few minutes, a man answered and asked for her address, full name, and the name of her high school, then told her he would run an update on her account, which would hopefully increase the overall speed of her network. The update took two minutes, during which time the man asked K how her day was, and had she done anything interesting? Errands, she said. She asked if he was working from home and he said yes, but he was looking forward to going back to the office in the fall. He missed his coworkers. She giggled after everything he said to show that she was the good kind of customer who would not be curt or impatient with him. Then she became insecure about the giggling, nervous that the customer support man might mistake her friendliness for flirtation. It was not prudent, she thought, to flirt with a man who has your name and address and all the answers to your security questions.

When the internet came back on, she could not tell if it was running any faster than it had been previously but nonetheless thanked the man and hung up. She recalled that she had recently posted a tweet about her boyfriend leaving for the week, accompanied by a photo of the four-dollar Hello Kitty balloon. If the man searched her name, would he see the tweet and come to her house to stalk her? She was not sure if her windows locked from the outside. She clicked through to her settings and swiped a button labeled “Protect your Tweets,” then felt ashamed for being paranoid and made her profile public again. Let him come, she thought. She could use the company.



Later that night, alone in her room, K typed *la la land watch free* into her search bar and, after clicking around for a few minutes, found a working link, which she Chromecasted to her TV. The internet guy had not come to murder or rape her, and she decided to distract herself with a movie since B had not yet landed and was therefore unable to text her back. She hadn't chosen *La La Land* for any particular reason—in fact, she hated musicals—but she liked to watch films featuring Emma Stone, who looked like a beautiful goldfish and perpetual middle schooler and had a live, watchable face. Five minutes into the film, she began scrolling through TikTok with her phone muted, watching an endless progression of pretty teenage girls doing their makeup, opening Shein packages with long, manicured nails, and trading childhood traumas for views. Thirty minutes in, she was picking at the blackheads on her chest with great concentration. The actors in *La La Land* were dancing and singing, as she knew they would, and she felt profoundly ashamed of them, too ashamed to watch.

Meanwhile, the dog was not paying her very much attention. It was clear he missed B, but he did not seem to be interested in K's supplementary affection and refused to join her up on the bed. She turned off the TV just as Emma Stone met Ryan Gosling at the Christmas piano bar. She turned onto her side and discovered, on the pillow beside her, one of B's wiry brown hairs. But it was too soon to miss him.

Having nothing better to do, K checked her email to purge it of its spam and found a foreboding message from a sender named “Joyzee Mike.” The subject line was *SPECIAL MESSAGE FOR K*—and the message read: *I live in the spambox of the afterlife: writing corrupted 'N uninterrupted, w-HOLY deconstructed. This is an invite onwards 'N UPwards! !! Meet me in Seventh-Heaven princess U won't regret it. All U need is F A I T H -Love U, need U, fulla greed 2 read U. We're getting closer every Day . . . Christ i luv it here*

She reread the message several times, feeling haunted. She thought of a phrase she often saw in the comments under dark spiritual TikToks: *I do not claim this negative energy*. I do not claim . . . she said aloud, then deleted the message and closed her laptop. She reached for her copy of Steve Jobs's biography on the nightstand and read about transcendental meditation, the cult of personality, and the dogma of minimalism until her eyes lost their focus. She turned off the light and stared up at the ceiling, thinking anxiously of billionaires who would, it seemed, be the only ones left alive. It was a small comfort that Steve Jobs, despite it all, had not managed to survive. For now, at least, if not for long, there were still things money could not buy.



The following day, the Wi-Fi was even slower than before. Simple pages took full seconds to load, reminding K of the AOL dial-up she and her parents used years ago, when all she did online was spam expletives on *Club Penguin* and *RuneScape* until her accounts got banned. *Internet's not working*, she texted B. *We miss you*. After a few minutes of waiting for a YouTube video to load, she stood up and walked to the front door. She called the dog and hooked the leash to his collar. Together, they strode down the road, nodding at neighbors and pausing to examine suspect patches of grass.

K felt proud walking alongside the dog, a German shepherd mix who stood tall and sturdy and had a deep, assertive bark. Not infrequently, she found herself fantasizing about being accosted by strange men on the street, who would pull over in their tall, black trucks and throw ugly words at her. *Kill!* she'd command the dog, and he'd lunge at the men, all teeth and power and loyalty. Never mind the fact that he was a sweet little biscuit who would never so much as growl at a human being now that they'd started him on doggy Prozac for his doggy anxiety.

The two found many treasures on their walk: a soggy french fry, a waterlogged bookshelf, a roiling anthill, and an old VCR, which the dog paused to piss on. When they returned home, she called her internet provider a second time, and a different man answered the phone. This man was older, she could tell, and had a kindly, fireside voice. She trusted him instantly. As he scanned her connection for interruptions, they discussed outer space and their shared disinterest in celestial bodies.

I'll never get to go to space, K said, her voice flushed with excitement, so why should I concern myself with what's out there?

If there's life on Mars, I sure don't want to know about it, said the customer support man. Did you hear Bezos is flying to space in July?

I hope the spaceship explodes! K cried, and they laughed together. His laughter was like bells. It was the laughter of someone who had grown up in a time before the internet, someone who had learned to live without the constant noise and interruptions but was nonetheless committed to assisting those who could not tolerate their absence. K couldn't believe she'd ever doubted the integrity of mankind. The customer support man would save her from the slow death of network failure. He would restore her connection.

The problem, as it turned out, was out of his hands, so they scheduled a time for a technician to come inspect her modem. She said Saturday afternoon would be just fine, joking that she was incapable of waking up before 11 a.m. because she stayed up too late surfing the web. They wished each other well and exchanged gratitude for the pleasant conversation. It was not often, said the support man, that he enjoyed these calls as much as the one they had shared. Me too, she said, then felt silly, for it was not her job to field network support calls.

K hung up and stared at the room around her, which was filled with secondhand furniture and trinkets she and B had amassed during their two years in Virginia, objects which they would surely leave behind once they departed for their next destination. They never stayed anywhere long. They had no real jobs or obligations to tether them to any one place. K sometimes found herself wishing she could upload the entirety of their home to a hard drive and keep it safe in her desk drawer, a pixelated memory to reinhabit whenever she chose. The objects on her computer were far more real and far more reliable than any of her physical possessions. They told a story of what she had shared and what she had chosen not to share, all laid bare and stripped to their essences.



K spent the evening driving around the neighborhood, pulling over every now and then to take pictures of the sky in its various stages of decline. A new message from Joyzee Mike awaited K in her inbox when she arrived home, this one just as inscrutable and disturbing as the first.

I died (AGAIN!) when I was 9 . . . Back in the days when JUICY was not a popular word in the English language. Dropped back down to tell you allah bout

it! Those of U who've been following along know it's not all FANTASY: I saw it (Seventh Heaven) with purest 20-20 vision. Do you cherish your snugly little life, mizz garwus? Are you ready! to try! something ♡ NEW ♡? U 'N i cannot stay long, not in this die-mention. Yew! see. So why dontcha skedaddle 'N paddle on over to Seventh Heaven where we can wax fraternal 'N eternal?? U wouldn't be the first. . .

K tried over and over to parse the message, scanning the block of text for phrases that might be addressing her. Was she *mizz garwus*? Surely she was the 'you' he spoke of, which meant she was invited to this so-called *Seventh Heaven*. K typed seventh heaven into Google. The first result was a 1996 TV drama about a frighteningly blond family with plastic smiles. Directly below was the headline *7TH HEAVEN DAD STEPHEN COLLINS ADMITS TO MOLESTING* . . . Unable to ignore her curiosity, she clicked through and read a lengthy article on the actor's sexual assault of minors, including an emotional interview in which he credited transcendental meditation for his rehabilitation. K frowned. She had forgotten what she was doing.

K typed *define: seventh heaven* into the search bar. *What does the term Seventh Heaven mean? . . . a state of extreme joy.*

This was where K drew the line. She would not be summoned into rapture by some deviant from the internet, rattling linguistic absurdities into the unsuspecting inboxes of innocent recipients such as herself. She had a terrible fear of the absolute and was not given to extremes or totalities. K wished she could splinter into countless versions of herself, each fragment separate and intractably remote from the others. These fragments would tell no stories, would never turn into butterflies. There would be nothing eternal about them.

She clicked back to the results and saw another headline: *Women Disappearing Into Internet . . . Connection to Seventh Heaven?*

Come home, she texted B, knowing full well that his flight was not until the weekend. *I'm full of static.*

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Saturday arrived and with it, the third and final network support man. He was a stout, balding man wearing a tie-dye shirt, overalls, and an empty tool belt. On his chest was a badge which read: HELLO MY NAME IS _____. K questioned the tool belt and badge but quickly cast all

apprehension from her mind. When he walked through the door without offering to take his boots off, she forgave him instantly.

The dog was locked in the bedroom, where he'd been steadily and furiously barking from the moment the bell rang. K apologized for the noise, but the man said it was nothing to worry about. He was used to it, he said. He and his wife had a little Pomeranian who put on quite a show whenever guests came over. K smiled.

Those are some beautiful morning glories you've got, he said. On the side of your property. Lovely purple.

Oh, yes, K said, though she'd never actually noticed any flowers outside her house.

So. Having issues with your connection? The network man crouched in the dusty corner where she kept the modem.

Yeah, she said, staring absently at the twinkling lights on the router.

How long's it been acting up?

Oh, a few days, K said. A week.

We'll sort this out, he said, poking at the reset button with a small, pointy tool. The green lights disappeared for a few seconds, then turned blue. K went to the kitchen to make a cup of coffee, leaving the man to his work. Probably, she thought, small talk would be a distraction to him. She would not inconvenience him with idle chitchat.

K poured some tap water into the electric water heater, then flicked it on. She spooned coffee grounds into a filter over her favorite mug, which she'd inherited from an old college roommate. Printed on the mug, in purple Comic Sans script, were the words *THANK YOU . . . MY HEART STILL SMILING . . .* :)

From the living room, where the man was still tinkering with the modem, she made out a faint melody. She stopped breathing so as to better hear the man's song: *Protect me . . . from my feelings that . . . come on, tell me . . . till the kiss of dawn . . . seventh heaven, heaven in your love . . .*

K froze. Life had a habit, she knew, of divining these sorts of patterns. As soon as she learned a new word, it would begin to reveal itself everywhere,

like a color she could only see through tinted glasses but which had existed all along without her knowing. It didn't necessarily mean anything. Still, something in the air had shifted. She thought of the network man in the other room, his mystifying tool belt. Letting him inside had been so simple, so obvious.

She hovered in the doorway to the living room. What's that, she said.

What's what?

That song. It—I've never heard it before.

He smiled. That's R & B legend Gwen Guthrie. Underrated.

K hesitated for a moment, then pictured the network man holding a little Pomeranian in his big, hairy arms. She could trust him, surely.

What do you know about Seventh Heaven? she asked, trying to sound neutral.

The network man looked up at her.

I got a weird email, she said. A couple weird emails, and I thought . . .

Don't you go clicking on any suspicious links, he said gruffly. You don't know where they might take you.

I won't.

I can get your internet up and running, but I can't help with what goes on there.

Of course, she mumbled. Thank you.

The imaginary Pomeranian vanished from her mind, and in its place stood an anonymous man with a blank name tag who knew all her passwords. She returned to the kitchen. The network man returned to his work. He did not sing again.

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The signal was live and electric green, radiating through the walls of the apartment at lightning speed. Image and text appeared when summoned,

sans interruption. K was alone, crouched at her desk. She leaned in so that the computer screen filled her peripherals. She typed *gwen guthrie seventh heaven* into YouTube and selected the third video in the results because it featured a photo of the singer's face. The song had a long instrumental intro with a recursive bass line and synth notes that crept from her left headphone to the right. As soon as Guthrie sang the words *seventh heaven* for the first time, a notification lit up K's phone. *EXTRASPECIAL MESSAGE FOR K*—

Hiiiiiiii mizz garwus. You finally found me! To go in without knowing (it is always O-pen): ENTER the p o r t a l ! ! There are thr33 doors to S-H and you're standing in the Threshold of all of them. The light is GR33N and HI-SP33D: are you ready to ♡ E N T E R ? ♡ If so, just press it ! ! ! ! !

K considered reporting the email as spam, but something told her not to. B's flight home was within the hour. She could wait and show him the messages later that night. Maybe he would know what to do. There were so many things to accomplish before he arrived. The dog needed his walk and the floors needed vacuuming . . . she hadn't even thought about dinner. Still, she did not get up.

She read the email a second time, then stared at the enter key on her keyboard, feeling queasy and insubstantial. So this was it. The gateway to Seventh Heaven. Bad gateway, she thought, and laughed. She was going after all; there was no avoiding it. She wondered if there would be a way back out but decided it was best not to dwell on these things. She picked up her phone and texted B, just in case.

Safe flight, she wrote. Don't forget to give the dog his Prozac. I might not be there when you get home. Her message stalled and turned green, which meant that B was already in the air.

K's index finger hovered over the enter key, anticipating its familiar click and give. This was how everything began: with a little push.



On the plane, B drank a can of Coke and munched on scant complimentary pretzels. He browsed through in-flight entertainment options, settling at last on a docuseries titled *Earth at Night*. The caption boasted stunning, state of the art low-light camera technology. He plugged his headphones into the aux port by his seat and watched nocturnal predators stalk their prey in vivid color and crappy resolution. The footage looked like dispatches

from another galaxy, hostile and alien. B thought about what it meant to exist within the intersection of the new and old worlds, to witness the lives of fantastical endangered species on a seatback screen, 35,000 feet up in the air. Everything was so . . . impermanent. Or something.

K and the dog would be waiting for him at home, he knew, safe and contained. He and K would exchange anecdotes about their weeks, then watch *Seinfeld* or *Jeopardy* before bed. She had probably spent too much time online in the week they'd been apart and would complain of headaches from all the blue light. In the morning, they would wake up with legs entwined, discuss their dreams, and stay in bed until noon.

The plane touched down and B called an Uber. The driver, a middle-aged man with shoulder-length gray hair, chattered on through the entire forty-five-minute ride home, breathlessly speculating about the prospects of various cryptocurrencies and NFTs. Altcoin season, he claimed, was upon them.

You wouldn't believe how things have changed just in my lifetime, said the driver. I used to make breakfast while I waited for my Commodore 64 to boot up. I'd listen to a whole cassette before I could play! Now everything's lightning fast and microscopically small. You can make a living playing games on the internet. I'm telling you, if I can strike it big on crypto, I'll quit at Lowe's. I'll move to the Philippines and live like a king.

A king, B repeated. Yeah, man.

He got out of the car and watched it disappear down the street before tipping the driver. He stood in the driveway, staring up at his building, which seemed to emit a strange, empty glow. B stuck the key in the lock and listened for the familiar sound of the dog barking, but it never came. He listened for K's voice, her eager footsteps.

Nothing.

Inside, the Wi-Fi beamed on, a digital hearth of radiant frequencies, warming the quiet apartment with content and information, with bandwidth and light.