

# *The* MANTELPIECE

Issue 17

Literary Magazine

November 2024





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a surprising history*



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Vera Design's jewellery is sold in 24 stores in Iceland and one in the Faroe Islands and on their website [www.veradesign.is](http://www.veradesign.is) from where it is shipped worldwide.



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*Erik N. Patel* is a writer and digital nomad whose work has appeared in various literary magazines. Constantly on the move, he draws inspiration from his extensive travels, weaving the landscapes, cultures, and people he encounters into his writing. His unique perspective as a global wanderer adds depth and richness to his stories, making his voice a distinctive one in contemporary literature ([web](#)).

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Coverphoto: ulzanna / Adobe Stock

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# Fireside Poetry

There is something elemental, almost sacred, about the act of reading poetry on a cold evening. Whether seated before the flickering flames of a hearth or curled up under a blanket in the glow of a soft lamp, literature has a unique power to warm the soul. The biting chill of winter outside, the muffled silence of snow, and the crackling intimacy of a well-loved book all conspire to create a perfect moment of communion between reader and writer. And what better companions for such evenings than the enduring verses of the Fireside Poets?

The Fireside Poets, a group of 19th-century American writers that included Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, John Greenleaf Whittier, Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr., James Russell Lowell, and William Cullen Bryant, earned their moniker for the very image their work conjures: families gathered around the fireplace, reciting poetry that spoke to shared values, national identity, and the rhythms of everyday life. Their accessible, rhyming verses lent themselves to memorization and oral recitation, making them household names in their time. While critics today may find their moralizing tones and patriotic fervor dated, the Fireside Poets still hold an undeniable charm—their work a time capsule of earnest, unhurried sentimentality.

Consider Longfellow’s “A Psalm of Life,” with its exhortation to “act, that each tomorrow / Find us farther than today.” On a dark winter’s night, such lines seem almost to push back against the oppressive darkness, to remind us that even in the midst of dormancy, growth remains possible. Or Whittier’s “Snow-Bound: A Winter Idyl,” a tender meditation on family and memory set against a snowstorm, which captures the unique stillness and togetherness of winter evenings. These poems, like the fireside itself, radiate a steady warmth—not the searing heat of passion, but the comforting glow of connection and reflection.

Yet the appeal of fireside reading is hardly limited to 19th-century verse. Modern literature, too, offers a wealth of treasures perfectly suited to such evenings. The sparse, crystalline lines of Mary Oliver, for instance, feel like frost traced on a windowpane, their simplicity belying profound depths. “You do not have to be good,” she writes in her much-loved poem “Wild Geese.” On a night when cold winds howl, such words remind us of the kindness we owe ourselves, of the inherent worth in simply being.

Or take the works of Billy Collins, whose conversational tone and wry humor lend themselves beautifully to solitary contemplation. His poems often unfold like quiet

“So, as winter settles in, let us not overlook the quiet joys of fireside poetry.”

anecdotes shared between friends, drawing readers into their gentle revelations. Collins’s “The Lanyard,” with its bittersweet meditation on childhood and gratitude, or “Introduction to Poetry,” which playfully explores the act of reading itself, invite us to linger, to savor the quiet pleasures of language.

Even prose can capture the fireside spirit. Think of Marilynne Robinson’s luminous novel *Gilead*, which reads like a long letter written on a winter’s evening. Or Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*, its quiet melancholy as suited to the season as the long shadows cast by firelight. In the hands of such writers, stories become hearths of their own, inviting us to gather close, to warm ourselves against the chill of the outside world.

It is not just the content of good literature that suits it to winter nights, but its very na-

ture. The act of reading demands slowness, attention, and stillness—qualities that seem to come more naturally in winter, when the world outside contracts and the hours of darkness expand. Unlike the hurried pace of summer days, the long nights of winter encourage a kind of introspection, a turning inward that pairs beautifully with the meditative rhythms of poetry and prose. To read in winter is to join a lineage of countless others who have sought solace, wisdom, and joy in the written word during the year’s most austere season.

Perhaps this is why the image of a reader by the fire persists in our cultural imagination, an enduring archetype that bridges centuries and continents. It speaks to something universal in the human experience—a desire for warmth and light, for stories and ideas that connect us to one another and to ourselves. Whether the fire is real or metaphorical matters little; what counts is the act of gathering close to something that glows.

In our modern world, the idea of fireside poetry takes on new resonance. For many, the hearth has been replaced by the soft hum of central heating, the flames by the glow of a reading lamp or a backlit screen. Yet the essence remains unchanged: the search for a kind of warmth that is not merely physical, but emotional and intellectual as well. In a time when distractions abound and our attention is fractured, the quiet intimacy of reading feels almost radical. To sit with a poem or a story on a cold evening is to reclaim a measure of presence, to allow oneself to be fully absorbed by the beauty of language and the power of ideas.

So, as winter settles in, let us not overlook the quiet joys of fireside poetry. Let us revisit the timeless verses of the Fireside Poets, discover the crystalline clarity of modern voices, and find solace in the pages of well-worn books. Let us gather, if only in spirit, around the hearth of literature, and remember that even in the coldest seasons, there is warmth to be found in words.

□ L.H.

# Alienation in the 21st Century

## The Modern Condition of Isolation and Absurdity

Eleanor Jiménez

Alienation has long been a central theme in literature, capturing the sense of detachment, absurdity, and struggle that many individuals face in society. While the 20th century saw industrialization, war, and bureaucracy as primary sources of alienation, the 21st century has introduced new dimensions: digital surveillance, corporate control, urban loneliness, and the dehumanizing effects of automation. These forces shape contemporary literature and film, where protagonists often find themselves lost in a system that feels both indifferent and inescapable.

This essay will explore how alienation is depicted in modern literature, with references to books such as Ling Ma's *Severance*, Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, Sayaka Murata's *Convenience Store Woman*, George Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo*, and Michel Houellebecq's *The Map and the Territory*. Through these works, we will examine how contemporary storytelling reflects the anxieties and detachment of modern life.

### The Workplace as a Machine of Alienation

One of the most significant sources of alienation in modern society is the workplace. Contemporary corporate culture, characterized by rigid structures, mind-numbing routines, and the expectation of unwavering productivity, has transformed work into an impersonal and often meaningless endeavor. In Sayaka Murata's *Convenience Store Woman*, the protagonist Keiko Furukura finds a sense of stability in the meticulously structured world of a convenience store. However,

this order comes at the cost of individuality. Her existence revolves entirely around the store, and she struggles to engage with the world outside of it. Murata's novel highlights the tension between conformity and personal identity in an economy that demands complete subservience to routine.

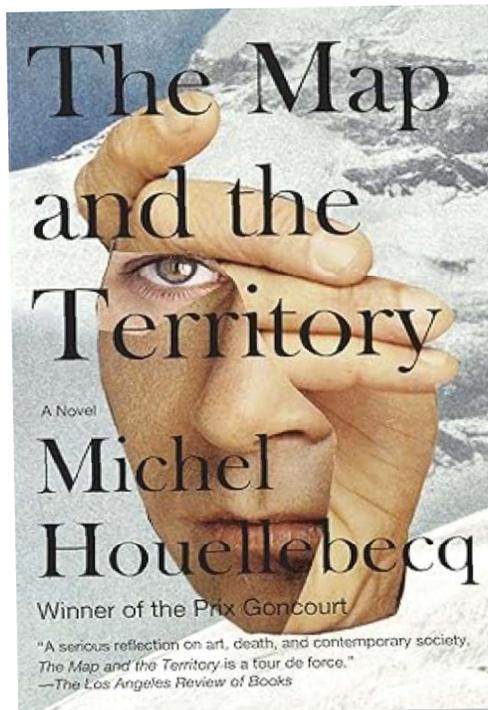
Ling Ma's *Severance* expands on this idea by portraying the absurdity of corporate

without question. Both *Severance* and *Convenience Store Woman* illustrate the ways in which modern work environments alienate individuals from their own desires, replacing purpose with structure and routine.

### Digital Isolation and the Surveillance Society

In the digital age, human interaction is increasingly mediated through screens, algorithms, and social media platforms. While technology has made communication more accessible, it has also contributed to a deep sense of isolation. Social media fosters superficial connections while eroding meaningful relationships, replacing physical presence with digital validation. In Dave Eggers' *The Circle*, the protagonist Mae Holland becomes engulfed in a technology company that promotes total transparency. Under the guise of progress, privacy is eliminated, and individuals are encouraged to broadcast their lives in real-time. This level of surveillance creates a culture where personal identity is shaped by online performance rather than authentic experiences.

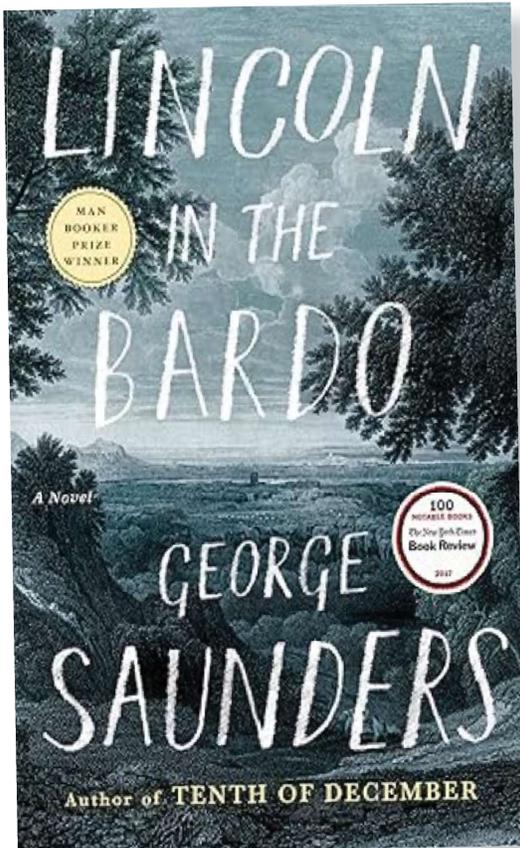
Michel Houellebecq's *The Map and the Territory* also addresses the dehumanizing effects of a digital society. The novel follows an artist who becomes disillusioned with a world increasingly defined by technology and commercialism. As personal relationships become commodified and interactions feel transactional, the protagonist grapples with the alienation of a world where meaning is elusive. These narratives reflect a growing concern that, despite being more connected than ever, individuals today feel profoundly alone.



life against the backdrop of an apocalyptic plague. Even as society collapses, the protagonist continues to perform her job, following office procedures long after they have ceased to matter. The novel critiques the relentless pursuit of productivity and the way capitalism conditions individuals to accept monotonous, repetitive tasks

## Urban Alienation and the City as an Impersonal Space

Cities, once centers of vibrant culture and human connection, have increasingly become spaces of isolation. High-rise apartments, crowded streets, and corporate skyscrapers foster anonymity rather than community. J.G. Ballard's *High-Rise* explores how urban environments can become breeding grounds for alienation



and social fragmentation. The novel follows residents of a luxury high-rise apartment building who become detached from the outside world, eventually devolving into chaos and violence. The physical proximity of individuals does nothing to prevent their descent into tribalism and disconnection.

Teju Cole's *Open City* presents a more introspective form of urban alienation. The protagonist, a Nigerian immigrant living in New York, wanders through the city while reflecting on art, politics, and history. Despite being surrounded by people, he remains emotionally detached, his journey serving as a metaphor for the loneliness experienced in contemporary urban life. The novel highlights the paradox of cities: they are densely populated, yet individuals often feel invisible and disconnected from one another.

## The Algorithmic Bureaucracy: Power Without Accountability

Modern alienation is not only psychological but also structural. The rise of artificial intelligence and algorithm-driven decision-making has created new forms of power that are as impersonal as they are inescapable. In the past, individuals struggled against bureaucracies; today, they struggle against automated systems that make decisions without accountability. Whether it's job applications, loan approvals, or legal judgments, algorithms have replaced human discretion, often replicating systemic biases while remaining inaccessible and unchallengeable.

George Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo* explores this theme through a surreal depiction of the afterlife, where spirits remain trapped in a liminal state, unable to move on due to an arbitrary set of rules they barely comprehend. The novel echoes the modern experience of dealing with digital gatekeepers—systems that dictate one's fate without explanation or recourse. In a world where algorithms determine access to opportunities, individuals are reduced to data points, their identities flattened into impersonal metrics.

## Psychological Alienation and Existential Anxiety

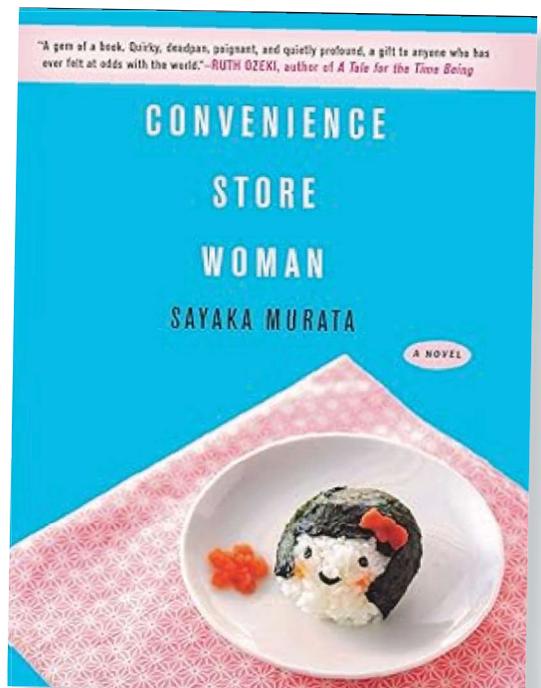
Alienation is not merely external—it is also deeply psychological. Many contemporary novels explore the theme of existential isolation, where characters struggle to find meaning in an increasingly absurd world. Otessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* presents a protagonist who attempts to escape from reality altogether by entering a year-long drug-induced sleep. Her withdrawal from the world is both an act of rebellion against societal expectations and an expression of profound existential despair. The novel reflects a growing sentiment that modern life, with its relentless demands and lack of fulfillment, drives individuals to seek refuge in numbness.

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* remains one of the most powerful literary depictions of psychological alienation. The protagonist, Esther Greenwood, experiences a deep disconnect from the world around her, feeling trapped in a suffocating existence with no clear escape. While the novel was published in the 1960s, its themes remain relevant today, as mental health struggles continue to be exacerbated by societal pressures and the demands of modern life.

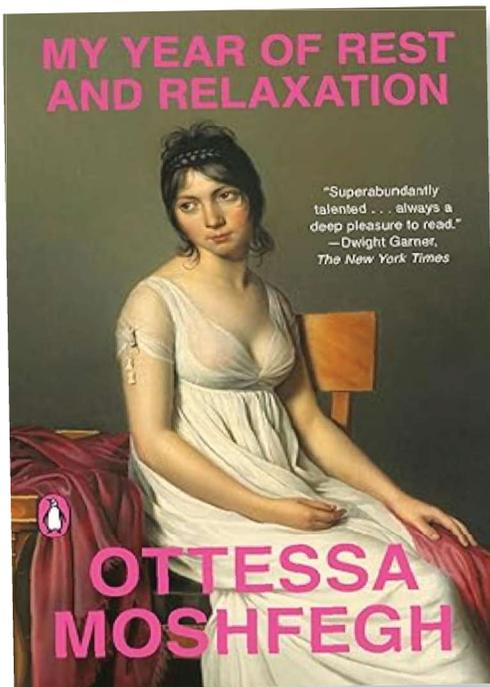
## Alienation in Contemporary Film: The Cinematic Expression of Disconnection

Film has long been a powerful medium for exploring themes of alienation, particularly in an era where technology, globalization, and urbanization intensify feelings of detachment. The visual and auditory elements of cinema allow filmmakers to depict isolation in a way that is often more visceral and immediate than literature, enabling audiences to experience the emotional weight of alienation through cinematography, sound design, and performance. Over the decades, films have portrayed various facets of alienation, from the urban loneliness of large, impersonal cities to the psychological estrangement caused by digital technology and social disconnection.

In many ways, cinema has become a mirror of contemporary society, reflecting the anxieties and disconnections of the modern world. As cities grow larger and



more crowded, paradoxically, people often feel more isolated than ever. The towering skyscrapers, endless traffic, and masses of strangers passing each other on the street without acknowledgment create a backdrop of anonymity. Films such as *Lost in Translation* (2003) and *Taxi Driver* (1976) highlight the urban experience of alienation, where characters struggle to find genuine human connections in environments that seem indifferent to their existence. *Lost in Translation* presents



a quiet, introspective look at two lonely individuals who form a fleeting connection in a foreign land, while *Taxi Driver* portrays the psychological toll of extreme isolation, culminating in violence and moral decay.

Technology, another defining force of the modern era, has also played a significant role in shaping the way films depict alienation. The rise of artificial intelligence, social media, and virtual communication has created a paradoxical reality in which people are more connected than ever but also more detached from meaningful human interaction. Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013) examines this paradox by following a man who falls in love with an artificial intelligence, highlighting the ways in which digital relationships can offer emotional fulfillment while simultaneously deepening real-world isolation. Similarly, films like *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (2018) explore how technology manipulates human agency, creating a world in which individuals feel powerless, controlled by unseen algorithms that dictate their choices.

Beyond urban loneliness and digital isolation, cinema has also explored existential alienation—the profound feeling of being a stranger to oneself and the world. This theme is central to the works of filmmakers like David Lynch, whose surreal narratives in films such as *Mulholland Drive* (2001) and *Eraserhead* (1977) depict characters who exist in fragmented realities, struggling to piece together their identities. The dreamlike and

often nightmarish quality of Lynch's films emphasizes the psychological dislocation that arises when reality itself feels unreliable. Similarly, Charlie Kaufman's *Synecdoche, New York* (2008) presents a protagonist whose perception of time and self becomes increasingly distorted, illustrating how alienation is not only a social condition but also a deeply personal and philosophical one.

Science fiction films have also become a crucial medium for addressing alienation, using futuristic settings to examine the consequences of technological and societal developments. Films like *Blade Runner* (1982) and its sequel *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) depict dystopian worlds where artificial beings and humans alike struggle with questions of identity, purpose, and emotional connection. These films challenge audiences to consider what it truly means to be human and whether the increasing mechanization of life is stripping people of their ability to relate to one another on a fundamental level. Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, in particular, raises questions about memory, autonomy, and the artificiality of constructed identities, reinforcing the notion that alienation is not just a matter of external environment but also an internal conflict.

### Alienation and Solitude

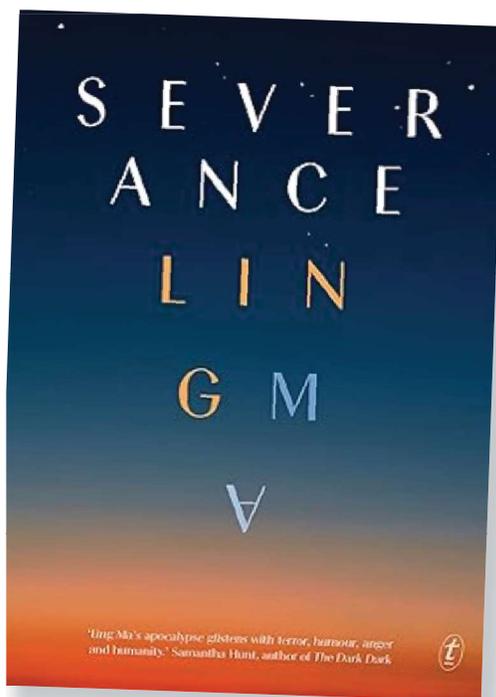
Another genre that powerfully conveys themes of alienation is horror. Many horror films focus on the terror of isolation, whether in a literal sense—being physically trapped in a hostile environment—or in an emotional sense, where characters become estranged from those around them. Ari Aster's *Hereditary* (2018) and Robert Eggers' *The Lighthouse* (2019) both depict protagonists descending into psychological madness as their isolation deepens. *Hereditary* uses familial trauma as a means of exploring emotional alienation, while *The Lighthouse* presents two men trapped together in a confined space, their sanity unraveling as they become more disconnected from reality. These films suggest that isolation is not merely a passive state but an active force that erodes mental and emotional stability.

Ultimately, cinema serves as a powerful medium for expressing and examining alienation in its many forms. Whether through the depiction of urban loneliness, technological estrangement, existential disconnection, or psychological horror, films allow audiences to experience the

depths of isolation while also offering a sense of catharsis. The ability of film to capture the nuances of alienation ensures that it will remain a central theme in storytelling for years to come, as society continues to grapple with the challenges of an increasingly fragmented world.

### The Persistence of Alienation in Modern Society

Despite advancements in technology, communication, and globalization, alienation remains a defining aspect of modern life. Whether in the workplace, digital spaces, urban environments, or personal psychology, individuals continue to grapple with feelings of detachment and absurdity. Literature and film serve as mirrors to this condition, reflecting the anxieties and disconnections of contemporary existence.



As society becomes increasingly mechanized and impersonal, the question remains: How can individuals reclaim a sense of meaning and connection? While modern narratives often depict the struggle of alienation, they also suggest that small acts of resistance—whether through personal introspection, artistic expression, or genuine human connection—offer glimpses of hope. In a world where individuals often feel reduced to data points, rediscovering personal agency and authentic relationships may be the only way to break free from the structures that alienate us. □

# The Appointment

Elliot Hayes



Illustration: Evina / Adobe Stock

**T**he letter arrived on a Tuesday, delivered not by the usual postman but by a uniformed courier who handed it over with an inscrutable expression. It was a single sheet of paper, typewritten, signed by an unnamed official.

“You are required to appear for an appointment at the Office on Wednesday at precisely 9:00 AM. Failure to comply may result in consequences. Bring this letter.”

There was no return address, no indication of what the appointment was for. The man—his name was Victor Lang—examined the envelope for clues, but it was unmarked.

He left early the next morning, navigating through unfamiliar streets. He had lived in the city for years but had never heard of the Office. There was no number to call, no official listing in the directory. He asked a grocer if he knew where it might be, but the man only shook his head.

**T**he previous evening, Victor had mentioned the letter to Clara, a woman whose presence in his life was difficult to define. Sometimes they spent nights together, tangled in bedsheets, but other times she vanished for days without explanation. She had frowned when he showed her the letter.

“You shouldn’t go,” she said. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“It’s probably just a bureaucratic mix-up.”

“There’s no Office,” she insisted. “Not in this city.”

Yet here he was, standing before an imposing government building. The guards at the entrance barely glanced at his letter before waving him inside. The hallway was long and lined with doors, each unmarked. The only sign of life was a receptionist sitting behind a curved desk. She peered at him over half-moon spectacles.

“Name?” she asked, already writing something down.

“Victor Lang. I have an appointment at nine.”

“Appointment?” She frowned. “We don’t schedule appointments here.”

Victor held up the letter. The receptionist took it, skimmed it, and then nodded, as if suddenly remembering something.

“Ah, yes. Take a seat. You’ll be called shortly.”

He turned to find a row of stiff-backed chairs, all occupied by men and women clutching similar letters. No one spoke. He took the last available seat beside an older man who stared blankly ahead.

**T**ime passed. A clock on the wall ticked forward, though he was unsure whether it was accurate. A young woman checked her watch and frowned. “I’ve been here since yesterday morning,” she muttered. “They haven’t called a single name.”

“Have you asked?” Victor whispered.

She gave him a sharp look. “They don’t like questions.”

Hours drifted by. No one was called. No one left. The receptionist continued writing, occasionally glancing at the waiting room as if to confirm they were all still there. Victor tried to speak to the older man beside him, but he merely shook his head and turned away.

His stomach grumbled. There were no refreshments, no indication that anyone was meant to stay for so long. He considered leaving but hesitated. The letter had been explicit about consequences. He decided to wait a little longer.

# The Distance Between Us

Wesley Finch

I.

## Connection Unstable

Your name hums in my pocket,  
a half-typed message blinking.  
We orbit each other in blue-lit rooms,  
pixels smoothing what silence can't.

You send me a song with no words,  
say this reminds me of you.  
Maybe love is just frequency—  
the right sound, or static creeping in.

I scroll back through our history,  
past midnight confessions,  
past the moment I should have answered.

II.

## Reconnecting...

We meet in real air,  
where silence isn't a glitch.  
Your face is softer without pixels,  
your laugh less compressed.

You touch my sleeve—  
not a like, just touch.

Somewhere, a love is buffering,  
waiting to be read.

---

That evening, he dozed off, waking to the sound of footsteps. Clara was standing near the entrance, her dark eyes scanning the room. How had she gotten in? She shouldn't be here. He started to rise, but she gave the smallest shake of her head.

"Come with me," she whispered.

"I can't. They haven't called me yet."

"Victor—"

Before she could finish, the receptionist returned, her sharp gaze landing on Clara. "You don't belong here," she said coldly.

Clara stepped back. "Neither does he."

"He was summoned," the receptionist replied. "You were not. Leave."

Clara hesitated, her eyes locked onto Victor's. Then she turned and walked away, the doors swinging shut behind her.

Victor slumped back into his seat. He had missed his chance to leave. Something told him he wouldn't get another.

Days passed. The waiting room remained full, though some people had been replaced by new arrivals. Victor tried to recall when that had happened, but he couldn't remember anyone actually walking in. Sleep came in restless bursts. Conversations were hushed and fragmented, suggestions that the Office had always existed, that no one had ever seen the inside of the appointment room. Someone whispered of a man who had been waiting for years.

One night, Victor awoke to find the room nearly empty. The receptionist had vanished. The doors lining the hallway stood slightly ajar. The silence felt dangerous.

A movement in the corner caught his eye. The older man was still there, his eyes wide and alert. "It happens like this sometimes," he murmured. "You mustn't go through the doors. They lead nowhere."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Victor asked.

The man said nothing. The receptionist returned at dawn, and the room refilled with new arrivals.

Victor lost track of time. His clothes hung loose on his frame. The others looked just as worn. He could no longer remember where he lived or if he had ever lived anywhere before this room. The letter in his pocket had faded, its ink smudged beyond recognition. He could not remember what it had originally said.

One morning, the receptionist finally stood and called a name. "Victor Lang."

A hush fell over the room. Victor hesitated, feeling the weight of countless eyes upon him. His legs trembled as he stood. The older man caught his sleeve. "Don't go," he whispered. "They never come back."

Victor wrenched his arm free. The receptionist held the door open.

He stepped through.

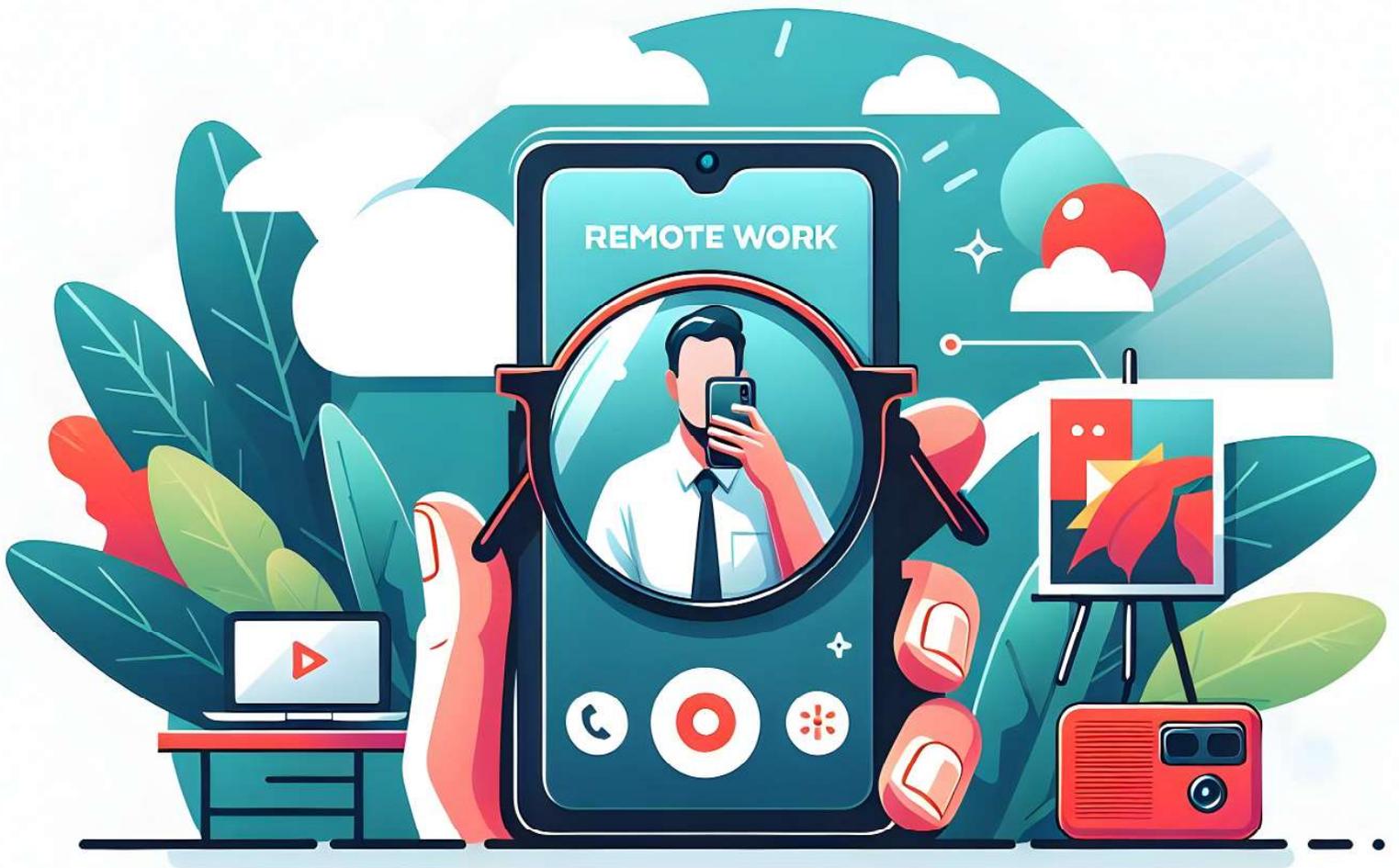
The door shut behind him.

The receptionist adjusted her glasses and looked at the waiting room.

"Next." □

# The Work-from-Home Affair

Noah Sinclair



Richard Hudson sat at his desk, staring at his computer screen, the glow from the monitor casting a pale light on his face. It was a Friday afternoon, and the last few hours of the workweek had dragged on. His office was silent except for the occasional click of keys, the hum of the printer in the corner, and the distant sounds of children playing outside the window. Outside, the world was vibrant and warm, but inside, Richard felt like a ghost in his own life.

The pandemic had changed so many things for so many people. For Richard, it had meant the shift from a bustling office

downtown to the isolation of working from home. At first, he had been enthusiastic. The thought of being free from the rigid structure of the office, of spending more time with Claire and the kids, had seemed like a dream. But now, months later, the novelty had worn off, and the reality of his new normal had settled in like a dull ache.

He missed the office. He missed the interactions with colleagues, the chance to step outside of his home and into a world that felt separate from the demands of family and domestic life. He missed the sense of purpose that came with the hum of activity that filled his office building, the

urgency of deadlines, the clarity of being *at work*.

But here he was—sitting at his desk at home, the noise of his family filling the background as they went about their own business. Claire was in the kitchen, preparing dinner, the clink of dishes and the murmur of their children's voices leaking through the walls. The dissonance between his work and home life had become more pronounced in recent weeks. It wasn't that Claire was difficult; in fact, she was supportive, always patient, always present. It was just that their lives had become too intertwined, their separate identities blurred by the constant proximity of work and home.

Richard had always been the type of person who could compartmentalize. He could separate his work from his personal life, his role as a husband from his role as an employee. But now, with the walls of his house closing in on him, he was finding it more difficult than ever to maintain that boundary. The lines had become so blurred that sometimes he wasn't sure where one life ended, and the other began. As he sat in his office that afternoon, his phone buzzed. It was an email notification from Elle.

*Hey, Richard. How's your week going?*

It was a simple message, but it made Richard's heart skip a beat. Elle was a colleague from his old office, a person he had known casually for years but had never really spoken to outside of work emails and occasional meetings. But over the past few months, their interactions had taken on a new tone. What had started as a simple exchange about work had morphed into something more personal, more intimate. They had started emailing late at night, discussing everything from their frustrations with work to their thoughts on life and relationships. Richard had always been careful to keep the conversations light, but lately, he found himself opening up more than he had intended.

He typed a quick response to Elle, his fingers hesitating over the keyboard. What was he doing? He was married, after all. He had a family. And yet, there was something about these late-night exchanges with Elle that felt different. She understood him in a way that Claire no longer seemed to.

*It's been a long week, to be honest. A lot of the same—just staring at screens all day. I miss the old days when things felt a bit more... meaningful, you know?*

The response came quickly.

*I get it. I feel the same way. It's like we're just going through the motions, day after day. But maybe we're not supposed to figure it all out right now, right? Maybe it's okay to just be for a little while.*

Richard stared at her words, their simplicity hitting him harder than he expected. Maybe it was just the fact that Elle was the first person in weeks who had articulated the feeling he had been suppressing for so long. He wasn't sure what he was supposed to do with that, but it was a start.

Over the next few weeks, Richard found himself emailing Elle more and more. They began to share personal details—things about their pasts, their childhoods, their dreams and fears. He had never meant

for it to go this far, but there was something so easy about confiding in her. She had an uncanny ability to listen, to make him feel heard without judgment. The conversations started to feel like a lifeline.

Meanwhile, at home, things had become more strained. Claire, ever the dutiful wife, had become increasingly frustrated with the fact that Richard was always home, yet still seemed so distant. She would make dinner, take care of the children, and attend to the house, all while Richard remained locked in his office, typing away at his keyboard, distracted by his growing connection with Elle.

Richard couldn't help but feel guilty, but at the same time, he couldn't seem to stop himself. There was something about the connection with Elle that felt *real*, something that had been missing from his marriage for a long time. He tried to push it from his mind, but it was like a nagging itch he couldn't scratch.

One evening, after the kids had gone to bed, Richard sat in the living room with Claire, the two of them sipping wine in silence. There was an uncomfortable tension in the air, an unspoken understanding that something was amiss between them.

"Richard, what's going on?" Claire asked, her voice soft but firm.

Richard looked at her, surprised by the directness of the question. "What do you mean?"

"You've been different lately," Claire continued, her eyes searching his face for any sign of the man she had married. "Distant. Like you're here, but you're not really here."

Richard felt a lump form in his throat. He knew she was right. He had been absent, emotionally, in a way that he couldn't explain. But he didn't know how to fix it. He didn't know how to tell her that he was caught up in something he shouldn't be, something that made him feel alive in ways that he hadn't felt in years.

"I'm just tired," Richard lied, offering her a weak smile. "Work is wearing me down, I guess."

Claire didn't seem convinced, but she nodded and took a sip of her wine. They sat in silence for a few more minutes, but the air between them felt thick, suffocating. Richard couldn't remember the last time they had truly connected—really connected—on any meaningful level.

That night, as he lay in bed beside Claire, Richard's phone buzzed again. It was another email from Elle.

*Can we talk tomorrow?*

Richard's heart raced. He didn't know what he expected from these late-night exchanges anymore. Maybe it was just a fleeting connection, a momentary escape from the monotony of his life. But for some reason, it felt like more than that.

He typed back quickly, without thinking.

*Of course. I'd like that.*

The next day, as Richard sat in his office, the conversation with Claire still weighing heavily on his mind, he opened the email from Elle.

*I've been thinking a lot about what you said the other day, Elle wrote. About feeling stuck. I feel that way too. Like we're just waiting for something to change, but we don't know what that something is. It's frustrating, isn't it?*

Richard stared at the words, feeling a sense of connection that he couldn't deny. He had never felt so understood by anyone in his life.

*It's more than frustrating, Richard replied. It feels like I'm suffocating, like I'm just going through the motions. I don't know how to get out of it.*

*Maybe we don't always need to change things, though. Maybe it's just enough to acknowledge it, you know? To admit that we're stuck for a little while. I think that's something a lot of people are too afraid to do. But maybe... maybe it's the first step toward figuring out what comes next.*

Richard stared at her email for a long time, the weight of her words sinking in. He had never thought of it that way. Maybe acknowledging that things were stuck was the first step. Maybe that was all he needed to do.

But then, just as quickly, the weight of his own situation pressed down on him again. His phone buzzed, this time with a call from Claire. Richard's heart sank. The moment he had been avoiding was here. He couldn't keep pretending, couldn't keep avoiding the truth.

He quickly ended the call with Elle and answered Claire's.

"Richard," Claire's voice was anxious, "I need to talk to you about something. When you're done, can you come downstairs?"

Richard's pulse quickened. "Sure, I'll be right down."

The call with Claire ended, and Richard's heart raced as he sat in his office, staring at the phone in his hand. He wasn't sure what this conversation would lead to, but he knew one thing: things were changing. □

# A Table for One

## The Joy of Eating Alone

Renji Nakamura



Photo: Tennen / Adobe Stock

There was a time when eating alone was seen as a sad, even pitiable act. A person sitting at a restaurant table for one or quietly having dinner at home with only the hum of the television for company could evoke a sense of loneliness. Meals have long been social occasions, opportunities to connect, share stories, and bond over food. Yet, in modern life, the act of eating alone is undergoing a shift in perception. What was once stigmatized is now, in some ways, seen as a form of self-care, independence, and even a necessity of contemporary routines.

This shift reflects broader societal changes. The rise of urban living, the growing

independence of individuals, and the ever-accelerating pace of life have altered how we view food and company. Eating alone today is not always about isolation; sometimes, it is an intentional act, a moment of personal retreat in a world that rarely stops moving.

Throughout history, meals have been central to human interaction. In many cultures, sharing food is a fundamental act of hospitality. In ancient Greece, the symposium was a gathering of men who dined and debated together. Traditional Asian cultures emphasize communal meals, where multiple dishes are placed at the center of the table, encouraging interaction. In European history, grand feasts were held as symbols of power and unity. Even in the home, the dinner table

was once the heart of family life, a place to discuss the events of the day.

Eating alone, by contrast, was often associated with misfortune or social failure. A person who dined alone at a restaurant might be pitied or assumed to be lacking companionship. Popular media reinforced this idea. Films and literature have long used the image of the solitary eater to convey sadness—think of the lone diner in a dimly lit café, stirring a cup of coffee with no one to talk to.

In the 21st century, however, the stigma surrounding eating alone has softened. The rise of fast-paced urban living has made solo meals commonplace. More people live alone than ever before, particularly in major cities where single-person households are on the rise. Work schedules are increasingly unpredictable, making it difficult for families or friends to coordinate mealtimes. With food delivery apps and grab-and-go culture thriving, people are as likely to eat at their desks, in their cars, or at home alone as they are to share a meal with others.

At the same time, many people are embracing eating alone as a choice rather than an unfortunate reality. In Japan, for example, the trend of “ohitorisama” (enjoying activities alone) has gained popularity, with restaurants catering specifically to solo diners. High-end establishments now create experiences tailored to individuals who want to savor a meal in peace, without the pressure of conversation. Across social media, people proudly document their solo dining adventures, reframing it as an act of self-care rather than social failure.

There is a crucial distinction between solitude and loneliness. Solitude is a state of being alone that can be fulfilling, even restorative. Loneliness, on the other hand, is the pain of isolation, the longing for companionship that is absent. Eating alone

# Autocorrection

Anya Vu

The river has stopped arguing. It rewrites itself in dry sand,  
lets the fish learn new ways to breathe or not at all.

A heron stands where the water used to be,  
its reflection swallowed by cracked earth,  
waiting for something that will not return.

The wind is tired of knocking on windows  
that no one opens anymore. It twists around cell towers,  
picks up plastic bags, wraps them in sky—  
a new kind of cloud, weightless,  
drifting toward no rain.

On the highway, a billboard says BUY NOW, PAY LATER,  
but later is already here. The trees that lined this road  
are stumps now, still remembering what it felt like  
to hold birds in their arms.

At night, the ocean sings backup  
to the sound of melting ice.  
Somewhere, in a city that doesn't know the stars,  
a girl watches a screen that tells her  
which forests are on fire. She scrolls past.

The earth corrects our mistakes  
with silence, with salt,  
with time we thought we owned.

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can embody either experience, depending on context and mindset.

For some, dining alone is a moment of mindfulness, a rare break from constant interaction. A person might take pleasure in eating alone at a quiet café, reading a book, or simply savoring the meal without distractions. This kind of solitude can be empowering, offering a chance for reflection and relaxation.

For others, however, eating alone can heighten feelings of isolation. A person who longs for company but finds themselves eating alone night after night may struggle with a sense of disconnection. The absence of conversation, the lack of shared laughter or stories, can make a meal feel mechanical rather than nourishing in an emotional sense.

The pandemic underscored both sides of this experience. As lockdowns kept people apart, many found themselves eating alone more than ever before. Some embraced the solitude, learning to cook for themselves and appreciating the quiet. Others experienced profound loneliness, missing the ritual of shared meals with friends, family, or even casual acquaintances at a favorite restaurant. As attitudes toward eating alone continue to evolve, it may be time to reframe the experience. Rather than seeing solo dining as a sign of loneliness or as something to be avoided, we might consider it a skill—one that allows for both independence and contentment.

There is a certain artistry in learning to enjoy one's own company at the table. Some people take themselves out to a restaurant with the same enthusiasm they would for a date or a gathering with friends. Others find solace in cooking for one, treating it not as a chore but as an act of self-respect. In some ways, enjoying a meal alone can be a form of self-acceptance, a way of saying, "I am enough."

Yet, while eating alone can be fulfilling, it is worth remembering the value of shared meals. Breaking bread with others is a deeply human experience, one that fosters connection and community. Perhaps the ideal is not to choose between solitude and social dining, but to embrace both—the quiet pleasure of a meal alone and the joy of eating together when the opportunity arises.

The changing perception of eating alone mirrors larger shifts in how we view independence, solitude, and social connection in modern life. While dining alone was once stigmatized, it is now increasingly seen as a valid, even rewarding experience. The challenge is to ensure that eating alone remains a choice rather than a necessity imposed by social disconnection.

As we move forward in an era where individualism and fast-paced living often replace traditional communal meals, we might do well to balance both worlds. To appreciate the peace of a quiet meal, yet never lose sight of the warmth that comes from sharing food with others. Because at its core, food is more than sustenance—it is a bridge between solitude and togetherness, a reminder that even when we eat alone, we are part of a larger human story. □

# My Therapist Says I Should Stop Taking Advice from My Algorithm

Eric N. Patel

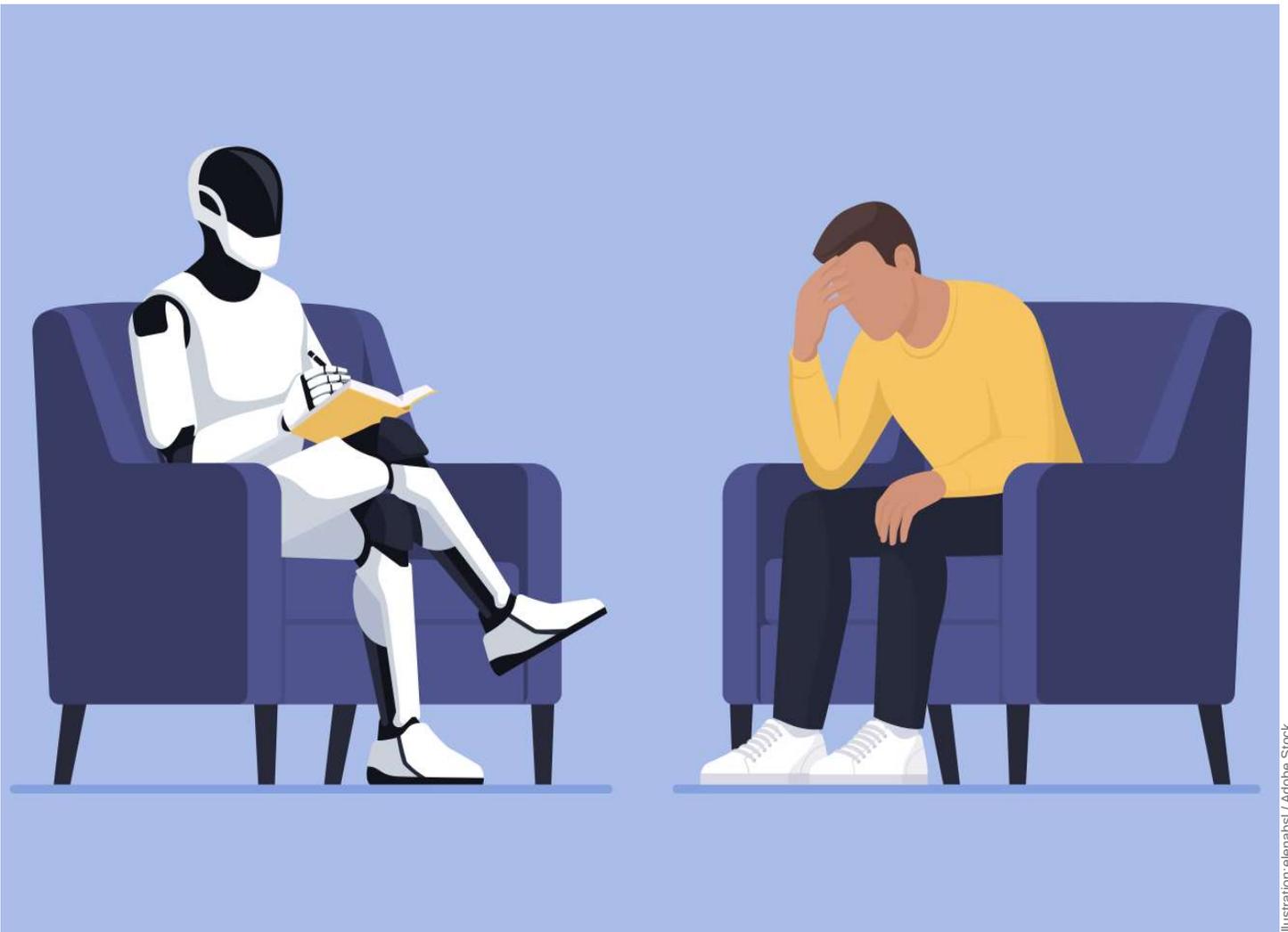


Illustration: eleanabs / Adobe Stock

**I**t began innocently enough. I was scrolling through my social media feed when an ad appeared: “Feeling Lost? Try Journaling!” This was followed by a carousel of aesthetically pleasing notebooks, each promising to unlock my untapped potential. I’d never searched for notebooks or journaling prompts, but the algorithm knew. It always knows.

Within a week, I owned three new notebooks—one for gratitude, one for

manifesting my goals, and one, inexplicably, for tracking my water intake. I told myself I was investing in my mental health, but my therapist disagreed.

“You’re outsourcing your decision-making,” she said, raising an eyebrow. “Algorithms are great at selling you solutions, but they don’t know you.”

That was a few months ago, and while I’d like to say I’ve since taken back control of my life, the truth is more complicated.

My therapist may not understand the allure of the algorithm, but it’s hard to resist a force that knows me better than I know myself—or at least pretends to.

## The Algorithm Is Always Watching

**T**he modern algorithm is a marvel of artificial intelligence and human psychology. It doesn’t just predict what I want; it shapes what I want. When I complained to a friend about feeling

unmotivated, the next day my YouTube recommendations were filled with productivity gurus. They wore crisp white shirts and spoke in calm, authoritative tones about the “science of habit formation.” I clicked on one video, then another. Soon, I was setting a 5 a.m. alarm and preparing to “win the morning.”

Spoiler alert: I did not win the morning. I barely survived it. By 10 a.m., I was a zombie, clutching an overpriced matcha latte because my algorithm had also convinced me that coffee was toxic.

The algorithm doesn't just stop at your phone. It seeps into your lifestyle, your choices, even your personality. It turns suggestions into commandments. Didn't meditate today? You've failed. Skipped leg day? You're a quitter. Ignored the “7 Books Successful People Read” list? Good luck staying mediocre. It's a relentless cycle of aspiration, fueled by data and a subtle but insidious whisper: “You're not enough, but you could be.”

### Therapy vs. The Algorithm

When I brought this up in therapy, my therapist gave me a look that I can only describe as compassionate disbelief.

“Algorithms are designed to keep you engaged,” she explained. “They're not interested in your well-being. They're interested in your attention.”

I nodded, pretending to understand, but deep down, I wasn't convinced. After all, the algorithm had helped me discover weighted blankets, ASMR videos, and a skincare routine that actually works. Wasn't that a form of caring? Sure, it also tricked me into buying a \$300 juicer that I used twice, but isn't that just the price of progress?

My therapist suggested a radical experiment: spend one week ignoring algorithmic advice. No YouTube recommendations, no targeted ads, no Spotify playlists tailored to my mood.

“What if I miss something important?” I asked.

She laughed. “Like what?”

She had a point, but going cold turkey felt impossible. Instead, I compromised by limiting my interactions with the algorithm. I would search for things intentionally rather than letting them come to me. This, as it turns out, is harder than it sounds.

### Living Without The Algorithm

Day one was chaos. Without my “Morning Motivation” playlist, I had no idea how to start my day. Should I listen to classical music? A podcast? The deafening silence? I felt like a ship without a rudder, adrift in an ocean of choice. By lunchtime, I caved and let Spotify's AI DJ take over. It was eerie how quickly it sensed my mood, spinning a mix of upbeat indie tracks and melancholic acoustic ballads

Day two, I tried to cook dinner without algorithmic assistance. Normally, I'd ask Google for a recipe or let Instagram inspire me with a reel of someone effortlessly making a vegan Buddha bowl. Instead, I dug out an old cookbook and flipped through it like a caveman discovering fire. The results were edible, but barely.

By day three, I was questioning the entire premise of my experiment. Algorithms aren't inherently bad, I reasoned. They're tools, and tools are only as harmful as the

“In the end, my therapist was right: algorithms aren't a substitute for self-awareness. They can guide us, entertain us, and even inspire us, but they can't define us.”

way they're used. Still, I couldn't shake the feeling that my reliance on them had eroded my ability to think for myself. When had I last chosen a book to read without consulting Goodreads? Or picked a restaurant without checking Yelp reviews?

### The Dark Side of Personalization

The problem isn't just that algorithms shape our choices; it's that they're designed to prioritize engagement over nuance. They're not tailoring experiences to enrich our lives; they're creating feedback loops that keep us scrolling, clicking, and consuming. And the more they learn about us, the better they get at it.

Consider this: after I watched a single video about minimalist living, my feeds were flooded with content about decluttering, capsule wardrobes, and tiny homes. At first, I was intrigued. Maybe I did need to get rid of 80% of my possessions. But soon, the minimalist lifestyle began to feel like yet another unattainable ideal. Instead of feeling liberated, I felt burdened by the pressure to do more with less.

This is the dark side of personalization. It doesn't just reflect your interests; it amplifies them, often to the point of absurdity. What starts as curiosity becomes obsession. And once the algorithm has you hooked, it's nearly impossible to break free.

### Finding Balance

By the end of my week-long experiment, I wasn't ready to renounce algorithms entirely, but I had gained a new perspective. I realized that the algorithm's greatest strength—its ability to adapt to our preferences—is also its greatest weakness. It gives us what we think we want, but not necessarily what we need.

So, where does that leave me? For starters, I've made a conscious effort to reclaim some agency. I've started making decisions based on intuition rather than algorithmic suggestion. I've unfollowed accounts that make me feel inadequate and subscribed to a few that challenge my worldview. I've even stopped buying every productivity tool that promises to change my life.

But I'm not perfect. Just last week, I clicked on an ad for a meditation app that promised to “reprogram my subconscious.” It sounded ridiculous, but I downloaded it anyway. What can I say? Old habits die hard.

### The Takeaway

In the end, my therapist was right: Algorithms aren't a substitute for self-awareness. They can guide us, entertain us, and even inspire us, but they can't define us. That's a job only we can do—messy, imperfect, and human as we are.

So, while I'll never completely break up with my algorithm, I've learned to take its advice with a grain of salt. After all, life isn't about optimizing every moment; it's about living it. And no algorithm, no matter how sophisticated, can do that for me. □

# The Gift

Jason Kohler



Illustration: Saiolegraphic Paulai/Adobe Stock

**T**here are mornings when you wake up and the day already feels like it's been slipping through your fingers, even though it's still barely begun.

Jack had one of those mornings. He was sitting at the kitchen table, staring at a cup of coffee that had gone cold, though it had only been five minutes since he'd made it. His wife, Grace, was getting ready in the next room, the faint sound of her movements filtering through the walls. He could hear the rustle of her clothes, the quiet click of her heels against the floor. She was never in a hurry, always meticulous.

It was their daughter's birthday today, and Grace had spent the last week preparing. Of course, Jack had known. He knew because she'd told him about it every day, like it was some kind of reminder he couldn't possibly forget. Still, the date had crept up on him, and now he was sitting there, at the kitchen table, wondering how he'd gotten here—how, year after year, he kept making the same mistakes.

He was supposed to get the cake. That was the one thing she had asked him to do. He hadn't forgotten; he just hadn't remembered to do it. He couldn't

remember the last time he'd done anything for her that mattered.

Grace came into the kitchen, her face tight, not from anger but from the exhaustion that always seemed to follow her when she had too many things on her plate. Her eyes flicked over him, not with disappointment exactly, but with something else. She had stopped looking disappointed a long time ago. She didn't even ask if he had gotten the cake. She just looked at him, like she was reading the last chapter of a book she had already finished.

"Are you planning on doing anything today?" she asked, her voice neutral.

“Yeah,” Jack said, but then he didn’t know what to say next. He wasn’t sure if he was trying to convince her or himself. “Yeah, I’ll take care of it. I’ll—”

“Don’t bother,” Grace interrupted. “I’ll get it.”

He sat there, unable to speak, as she turned and walked back to the hallway, slipping into the shoes she’d set out beside the door. Her movements were smooth, efficient. She didn’t look back.

Jack let out a breath, then grabbed his jacket from the back of the chair. He wasn’t going to stay there. He wasn’t going to let her take care of everything again. She was always taking care of everything. It was like he’d stopped mattering in that way, the way you do when you’ve been given so many chances to prove yourself and you don’t.

He didn’t want to go back into the house, though. It felt like one more failure. He felt it every time he walked through that door—this constant, nagging sense that it wasn’t his anymore, that somehow, it was Grace’s house, Grace’s life, and he was just... living in it.

It hadn’t always been like this. When they’d first moved in together, everything had felt new, alive with possibility. Their first place together had been small, a dingy little apartment with peeling wallpaper and windows that didn’t quite close right. But Jack remembered how Grace had looked at him back then—like she thought he could do anything. And he had, or at least, he tried. But it was harder now.

Their daughter, Abby, had come along quickly after the marriage, and that was when things had started to change. Jack couldn’t pinpoint when exactly. It wasn’t any one thing. It was the cumulative effect of a hundred small disappointments, the way he’d stopped being the person he’d thought he was, the person Grace had once thought he was. Every time he promised to do something and didn’t, every time he let her down, it wore him down. And then it wore her down, too.

He stood there for a moment, hand on the doorframe, feeling the weight of something too large to move.

It wasn’t like he didn’t love Grace. He did, in his own way. But love had become so tangled up with regret, so suffocated by his own failures, that it was hard to know what was left.

The party was set up by the time Jack returned. There were balloons in the living room, and Grace was busy arranging them into some kind of pattern, or maybe she wasn’t. Maybe she was just trying to create the illusion of something—of normalcy, of happiness.

Abby was playing with a few of her friends, but her eyes kept flicking to her mother, who was busy with the decorations. The air in the room felt thick, like it always did when there was tension but no one was willing to name it. Jack watched for a while, lingering at the door like he was afraid of stepping into the moment, afraid of breaking something delicate.

When Abby spotted him, her face lit up, and she ran over, throwing her arms around his legs. Jack was surprised by how light she felt, how small. It was strange, how quickly she’d grown—he hadn’t realized how much time had passed until now.

“Daddy, did you bring the cake?” Abby asked, pulling back to look at him. She had her mother’s eyes, wide and searching.

Jack froze. It was like a trap had been set, and now it was too late to back out. He was supposed to be the one to make this right, to be the one she could depend on. He smiled at her, a half-smile that didn’t feel right, but it was all he had.

“I forgot,” he said, and for a moment, he could see the confusion in her eyes, like she couldn’t process the idea that her father had made a mistake. She looked up at him, waiting for him to make it better, but he couldn’t. He couldn’t fix it, not now, not anymore.

Grace stepped into the room then, catching the tail end of the moment. Jack could see the resignation on her face, the way she held herself just a little too still, as if she was afraid of letting any of her anger slip out. He didn’t need to hear the words to know what she was thinking. He’d failed again.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart,” Grace said, her voice quiet, like she was soothing a child. “Daddy’s been busy, that’s all.”

Abby seemed to accept the explanation. But Jack didn’t. It wasn’t enough. It wasn’t ever enough.

The party continued on around him, but Jack felt more and more like an outsider, like he was watching something that didn’t belong to him. The children were laughing and playing, their faces

bright with innocence, but Jack couldn’t shake the feeling that something had been lost. He wondered, not for the first time, if he’d missed the chance to fix it—to fix himself—and if maybe there was nothing left to salvage.

He found himself standing by the window later, watching the children run around the yard, their voices carrying through the air. He was still holding his coat, not wanting to put it down, as though that might somehow make things worse. Grace came to stand beside him after a while, her presence soft but unyielding.

“You don’t have to be here, you know,” she said, her eyes trained on the children. “You don’t have to pretend.”

Jack nodded, though the words didn’t mean anything. He wasn’t pretending. He just didn’t know how to be any more than this—just a man with his coat in his hand, looking out at a life he had once thought he could control.

When the party was over, and the guests had gone home, Abby was tucked into bed, her birthday over, as quickly and quietly as it had begun. Jack found Grace in the kitchen, cleaning up, wiping down counters as if the day had never happened, as if nothing had changed.

“I’m sorry,” Jack said, but the words felt weak. He wasn’t sure what he was sorry for anymore. For the cake, for the lies, for not being enough. Maybe for all of it.

Grace didn’t look up at him. She kept wiping, scrubbing, as if the motion itself could erase everything that had come before.

“It’s fine,” she said, and her voice was flat, no trace of anger, no trace of anything. She wasn’t angry with him, Jack realized. She was just... done.

He stood there for a moment, unsure of what to say next. But when Grace finally turned to face him, there was nothing in her expression that suggested they were going to be okay, that they were going to fix anything.

“I should go to bed,” Jack said finally, and Grace nodded, though she didn’t say anything.

He left the kitchen, leaving the quiet behind him, knowing that he wasn’t leaving her, not really. He was just leaving the day. And maybe that was the same thing. □

# The Economy of Attention

## How the Search for Meaning is Monetized

Tenzin Dorji



Illustration Miha Creative / Adobe Stock

In an age where technology permeates every aspect of our lives, we've come to understand that our attention is perhaps the most valuable commodity. The rise of digital platforms, social media, and 24/7 connectivity has created a landscape in which our focus and time are relentlessly sought after, commodified, and sold. The so-called "economy of attention" is not just about advertising revenue or user data—it is about the subtle, pervasive ways in which companies, platforms, and even individuals

profit from our very need for meaning and connection. From influencer culture to the algorithms that govern our feeds, the search for purpose in a digital age has become a marketplace. As we seek validation, purpose, and identity through online interactions, the digital world doesn't just capture our attention—it manipulates and shapes it, turning it into a currency.

### The Rise of the Attention Economy

The term "attention economy" was first coined by economist Herbert Simon

in the 1970s when he observed that, in an information-rich world, attention was becoming the scarce resource. But it wasn't until the rise of the internet and the explosion of digital platforms that this idea began to crystallize into a reality. In the digital age, companies are no longer just selling products—they're selling our focus, our engagement, and our emotional investment. The world of social media, search engines, and streaming platforms is built upon an intricate web of algorithms designed to capture and maintain our attention for as

long as possible. From Facebook’s endless scroll to YouTube’s “next video” button, everything is optimized to hold us captive in a loop of dopamine-driven engagement.

In this context, attention is no longer simply the act of being aware of something—it is a resource that can be extracted, analyzed, and monetized. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok don’t charge users for access to their services. Instead, they capitalize on the attention we provide, using our clicks, likes, shares, and comments as currency. Every interaction is recorded, analyzed, and used to refine and target advertisements with surgical precision

### The Economics of Engagement

To understand how our search for meaning is monetized, it’s important to first look at the mechanics of engagement. Platforms like Google and Facebook rely heavily on user-generated data, gathering everything from search queries to the time spent viewing a particular video or post. This data doesn’t just inform advertising strategies; it also determines the content we see and the recommendations we are offered. In this way, platforms become curators of our lives, subtly shaping the narrative of our online existence

Take, for example, the infinite scroll feature, popularized by platforms like Facebook and Twitter. It is designed to keep us engaged by offering us an endless stream of content, making it difficult to stop. The more we scroll, the more data we provide, which is used to refine what content will keep us engaged longer. This process is driven by the algorithms that determine which posts, videos, or tweets are more likely to resonate with us—based on what we have previously liked, shared, or commented on. These algorithms are powerful tools that exploit our psychological biases, playing on our curiosity, our desire for social validation, and our need for connection.

The result is a system in which meaning and purpose are increasingly found through the lens of engagement. In a sense, the attention economy has created a new form

of existential currency, where value is determined not by the intrinsic worth of what we consume but by how much time we devote to it. The search for meaning is no longer a solitary, introspective journey but one that is guided by the algorithms of the platforms we engage with. The more we engage, the more meaning is produced, but it is always a meaning that is mediated through the needs of advertisers, content creators, and tech companies.

### The Search for Connection: A New Form of Social Validation

At the heart of the attention economy lies the search for connection and validation. Humans are inherently social creatures, and as our physical interactions have become more limited—especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic—the digital realm has become the primary

“While technology has undoubtedly made it easier for us to connect with others and access information, it has also created a system in which our attention is commodified and sold to the highest bidder.”

space in which we seek approval, love, and recognition. Whether through likes on Instagram, comments on a blog post, or shares on Twitter, these small acts of acknowledgment have come to represent a form of social currency. The more likes or comments we receive, the more we feel validated in our existence. In turn, this validation becomes addictive, driving us to create more content, engage with more posts, and spend more time on the platform.

The monetization of this desire for connection is perhaps most evident in the rise of influencer culture. Influencers, who

are often seen as “ordinary” people who have simply built an online following, make a living by capitalizing on their ability to capture and hold the attention of others. Through sponsorships, product placements, and brand partnerships, influencers turn their personal brand into a profit-making machine. But the key to their success lies in their ability to maintain an intimate, seemingly authentic connection with their followers. The more their followers feel like they “know” them, the more likely they are to engage with the content they produce, share it with others, and contribute to their online success. In essence, influencers have learned how to monetize their followers’ need for connection, turning personal engagement into a lucrative business model.

The psychology of social media platforms is also designed to amplify this need for validation. Every notification, like, or comment is a small dopamine hit, reinforcing the desire to post more frequently and engage more deeply. These platforms tap into our primal desire to be seen and heard, offering instant rewards for our attention. This constant cycle of posting and reacting creates a feedback loop that can feel both gratifying and overwhelming. As a result, the search for meaning—once a complex and introspective journey—is reduced to a series of clicks and likes that ultimately serve to deepen our engagement with the platform, rather than offering a path to deeper, more lasting fulfillment.

### The Price of Meaning: Personal Data and Privacy

One of the most insidious aspects of the attention economy is the way in which our search for meaning is intertwined with our personal data. Every click, every search, and every like is tracked and used to build a profile of who we are, what we care about, and how we behave. This data is valuable, not just to advertisers but also to the platforms themselves, which use it to refine their algorithms and create more targeted, personalized experiences.

However, the commodification of personal data raises serious ethical concerns. In exchange for free access to platforms, we give up control over our digital footprints. Our desires, preferences, and even our moods are no longer private—they are assets that can be sold or traded. The more personal information a platform has about us, the better it can serve us content that will keep us hooked, resulting in an endless cycle of engagement. This creates a paradox: while we may seek meaning and connection, we often end up giving away pieces of ourselves in the process. Our identities are increasingly shaped not by our internal desires, but by the external forces that know us better than we know ourselves.

### Escaping the Attention Economy

The economy of attention has transformed the way we interact with the world and, more profoundly, the way we search for meaning. In a landscape dominated by algorithms and digital platforms, the pursuit of purpose has become a transactional act, one that is constantly measured in terms of engagement. Every click, like, or share has a price—whether in terms of our time, our personal data, or our emotional energy.

As individuals, it is increasingly difficult to navigate this new economy without falling prey to its inherent traps. The desire for validation, connection, and meaning is exploited by those who control the digital platforms we engage with. While technology has undoubtedly made it easier for us to connect with others and access information, it has also created a system in which our attention is commodified and sold to the highest bidder.

To reclaim control over our search for meaning, we must first acknowledge the way in which our attention is being manipulated. This may mean setting boundaries around our digital engagement, curating our online environments to protect our mental health, and finding ways to reconnect with meaning in offline spaces. Ultimately, the challenge is to recognize that while the economy of attention can provide us with instant gratification, it can never offer us the lasting fulfillment that comes from genuine, authentic engagement with the world around us. □

# Silent Screen

Tenzin Dorji

I wake to an inbox full of sorrys,  
but the words feel empty,  
fading in the blue light  
like a text typed and erased before it's sent.  
Your name still lingers in the list,  
but it's just a symbol now,  
a photo frozen in time—  
a reminder that nothing comes back.

I leave your name on read,  
not because I don't care,  
but because I don't know how to make a call  
that doesn't end before it begins.

The memory of you is pixelated,  
flickering in the corners of my phone,  
a photo I can't quite remember,  
a conversation left unfinished.  
I scroll past moments,  
too many to count,  
none of them real anymore.

Your absence is a notification I can't clear,  
a buzz I can't mute.  
I tap delete,  
but the silence still echoes.

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# Lost in Shirasawa

## A Journey into Japan's Hidden Heart

Lars Henriksson



Photo: k / Adobe Stock

I never meant to end up in Shirasawa. In fact, I had never even heard of the village before that chilly November afternoon when I found myself standing at the edge of a quiet road, the last bus long departed, and my phone's signal reduced to a mocking single bar that refused to load a map. I had set out that morning from Takayama, intending to take a scenic train

ride through the Japanese Alps and back. But somewhere between my excitement and my inability to decipher station signs fast enough, I had boarded the wrong train, then compounded my mistake by choosing a random bus at the last station, hoping it would loop back. Instead, it had deposited me here, in a valley wrapped in golden autumn foliage, with the sun sinking low behind the mountains.

For a moment, I simply stood there, inhaling the crisp air laced with the scent of burning wood. Shirasawa was little more than a cluster of wooden houses, their tiled roofs heavy with history. Smoke curled lazily from a few chimneys, and the narrow streets were lined with persimmon trees, their bright orange fruit clinging to nearly bare branches. It was the kind of place that felt untouched by time, a pocket

of old Japan that had somehow slipped through the cracks of modernization. The mountains stood like silent sentinels around the village, their slopes thick with ancient cedar and maple trees, their leaves now ablaze in a fiery spectrum of red, orange, and gold. The air carried the faint scent of damp earth, the richness of fallen leaves decomposing into the fertile ground. A gentle stream wove its way through the valley, its clear waters murmuring softly over smooth stones, reflecting the dusky sky like shards of polished glass.

A voice startled me from my reverie. “Gaijin?” It was an old man, his face weathered but his eyes sharp with curiosity. I hesitated before nodding. “Hai.” It was one of the few Japanese words I was confident in.

He gestured toward the village and, without waiting for a response, turned and began walking. With little choice, I followed, my backpack heavy on my shoulders. We weaved through narrow lanes, past wooden houses with sliding doors slightly ajar, revealing tatami mats and the dim glow of paper lanterns. Every so often, someone would peek out, offering a cautious nod or a curious smile. The scent of freshly cut cedar mixed with the crisp autumn air, and somewhere in the distance, I heard the rhythmic chopping of wood, a sound that blended harmoniously with the rustling of the trees and the gentle babbling of the stream.

The old man led me to a small, rustic house with a noren, a short curtain, hanging over the doorway. He pushed it aside and motioned for me to enter. Inside, the air was thick with the comforting scent of miso and grilled fish. A low table sat in the center of the room, surrounded by zabuton cushions. An elderly woman appeared from the kitchen, wiping her hands on an apron. She looked at me, then at the man, and simply nodded before disappearing again.

“Taberu?” the old man asked, rubbing his stomach. Eat?

I hesitated, not wanting to impose, but my own stomach made the decision for me. “Arigatou gozaimasu,” I said, the phrase feeling clumsy but sincere.

Moments later, the woman returned with a tray of food—steaming bowls of



Photo: mer\_nonta / Adobe Stock

*Shirakawa-go in Gifu Prefecture. Shirakawa-go is renowned for its traditional gassho-zukuri farmhouses, characterized by their steep thatched roofs designed to withstand heavy snowfall. Nestled in a remote mountain valley along the Shogawa River, this UNESCO World Heritage Site offers a glimpse into Japan's rural past.*

*The village is surrounded by dense forests and towering mountains, creating a picturesque setting that changes with the seasons. In autumn, the landscape is adorned with vibrant hues of red, orange, and gold as the maple and beech trees transform. The serene environment, combined with the village's historic architecture, makes Shirakawa-go a captivating destination for those seeking to experience traditional Japanese culture amidst natural beauty.*

rice, miso soup, and grilled fish, alongside small dishes of pickled vegetables. I sat cross-legged and picked up the chopsticks, mimicking their movements. The fish was delicate, the rice subtly sweet, the soup a warm embrace against the evening chill.

Through slow, careful words and exaggerated gestures, I learned that my host's name was Tanaka-san. He had been born in Shirasawa and had lived here his entire life. His wife, Emiko, served us tea in ceramic cups that felt warm against my palms. As the evening stretched on, the language barrier became less of an obstacle. Laughter bridged the gaps where words failed, and there was an unspoken understanding that I was welcome, if only for this moment.

After dinner, Tanaka-san led me outside. The village was cloaked in darkness, save for the moonlight casting long shadows on the ground. He pointed toward the sky. “Hoshi.” Stars.

I nodded. “Beautiful.”

He chuckled. “Hoshizora.” Starry sky.

The mountains, now silhouettes against a navy-blue sky, seemed to breathe alongside us, their presence vast and eternal. The air had taken on a sharper chill, the kind that signals the deepening of autumn and the impending arrival of winter. The sky was impossibly clear, the Milky Way stretching like a river of light across the heavens. I had never seen so many stars in my life. They pulsed gently, as if whispering stories from another time, another world.

# Noonday Nuisance

Heimir Steinarsson

We stood there for a while, two strangers connected by nothing but chance and the quiet magic of the night. Eventually, Emiko appeared with a futon and gestured toward a small tatami room. Grateful beyond words, I bowed deeply and murmured my thanks. That night, I fell asleep to the distant sound of rustling leaves, the occasional hoot of an owl, and the faint trickle of the nearby stream, feeling, for the first time in a long while, completely at peace.

The next morning, the village was already stirring when I stepped outside. A group of elderly women, their heads wrapped in scarves, were sweeping the narrow paths, their brooms scratching against the stone. Children in neatly pressed uniforms hurried past, their laughter bouncing off the wooden walls. The air was filled with the scent of woodsmoke and damp earth. The trees, though past their peak, still shimmered in the morning light, their colors softened by the golden sunrise. The distant sound of a temple bell rang through the valley, a deep, resonant note that seemed to vibrate through my chest.

Tanaka-san found me near the entrance of the house. He pressed a small bundle into my hands—onigiri wrapped in crisp nori. “For train,” he said.

I bowed, struggling to find words that could convey my gratitude. “Arigatou gozaimasu,” I said again, and this time, it felt fuller, more meaningful.

As I walked toward the bus stop, I turned for one last look at Shirasawa. It was still there, as if waiting patiently for the next traveler who might stumble upon it. I had come here by mistake, yet I was leaving with a heart full of warmth and a renewed understanding of why getting lost sometimes leads us exactly where we need to be.

I boarded the bus, watching as the village disappeared from view, the morning mist curling around its rooftops like a whispered farewell. I knew I would never find my way back to Shirasawa on purpose—but perhaps that was the beauty of it. Some places are meant to be stumbled upon, not sought after. And maybe, just maybe, the best journeys are the ones we never plan at all. □

It's early afternoon, and I  
am trying to assemble my  
limited concentration to  
start with the things I have to do.

My smartphone pings seductively,  
but I resist the urge to see  
the inbound message on display.  
It's likely rubbish anyway.

Or is it? Something's telling me  
it might be wise to go and see  
what this dispatch is all about.  
I think I'd better check it out.

No, it was just some email scam  
that should have been sent straight to Spam  
instead of catapulting me  
out of my brief serenity.

So, where was I? And what was I  
about to do just now? And why  
is there no coffee in my cup?  
I guess it's time to fill it up.

Then I will get back to my tasks,  
and when somebody comes and asks  
me what I'm doing, I'll just say  
I have been working here all day.



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