

The Program

There's going to be a day when the Program will work. That's what I kept telling Martin, but on days like this it was hard to be the convincing one. Everything that was getting handed to us was either completely uninteresting or just plain old harmless. But we differed on that, too.

"Look at this one", Martin said, pointing at the screen and the wall of text.

Kittens, how do you make lemon meringue pie, strangulation, kittens, best whodunnit movies, strangulation, kittens...

"Looks pretty basic", I said.

"Pretty basic", Martin echoed. "*Strangulation*", he emphasized. "This dude is obviously quite messed up. We might have a potential killer here."

"Potential weirdo for sure", I said. "People google all kinds of things."

"Well you get back to me when we have a dead body at our hands with the cause of death being strangulation and I'll be glad to say 'I told you so'." Martin unbuckled his seatbelt. "What's the point of all of this if we don't act? I'm sick of just waiting around and letting these psychos be psychos. Let's go."

He was already out, slamming the car door behind him.

I stayed behind a few moments, thinking this through. Ever since the Program had started we hadn't had any massive breakthroughs. We'd caught one guy selling drugs on a minor scale and then mostly people planning to kill themselves and thanks to our intervention they didn't. This was a good thing of course, but not at all on the level of what the boss had in mind. We were still waiting for something big. The gist of the Program was to do a little evil to do a lot of good. I valued my privacy highly myself, but I'd also never been under any illusion that all of my data went away by deleting my internet history. Our challenge was to invade people's privacy, act if we saw anything juicy or even remotely juicy, go to their homes and pretend like we didn't have their entire internet history in our hands. It was a bit like reading someone's mind against their will, not that we'd gotten that far. *Yet.*

I opened the car door and got out. Martin was looking at the house, big frown on his face, he seemed annoyed, but that was pretty standard for him. He was far too impatient for this kind of job. He should try living in a van for months and months just listening to tapped phone lines. It is as boring as you think it is.

"Took you long enough", he said. "I can't wait to have this done."

Martin tended to end up with cases like this one that didn't actually lead anywhere. Mostly because he shied away from the real stuff, all those planned suicides - you had to talk to those people, level with them, show some empathy. This was really hard for Martin who thought we should take them straight to the mental ward. I didn't like those cases myself, mind you. If I'd wanted to work with people in that way I would have become a shrink, but the reason I put up with it is because I believed in the Program. I believed we would get something big someday. Short cuts didn't truly exist and nothing was easy.

Now this dude. Strangulation and kittens, had possibly tried to bake or at least wanted to know how to make a lemon meringue pie. Potential killer Martin said, *yeah right*.

He looked younger than he really was, and was newly awake, squinting at us.

"Hi there Colin", Martin greeted. "We just want to have a chat", Martin held up his badge, grinning in a way that wasn't altogether nice. I had told him before he needed to work on not letting his real emotion shine through. He said it was easy for me because I didn't have emotion. It was true that Martin was more emotional, but then again he hadn't been in the army - they made it a habit to kick it out of you.

The young man made us coffee. I wasn't planning on drinking it. I looked around his apartment and nothing stood out. He had a fancy surround system I noticed, probably liked watching those whodunnit movies with the volume up high. I wondered if he'd found any good lists online like he'd searched for. I didn't mind a good mystery myself.

"You have anything to go with it?" Martin asked, raising his coffee cup. "Myself I like lemon meringue pie, anything with lemon really."

I shot Martin a pointed look. He really needed to stop doing this.

"Yeah, I don't mind it", Colin said.

"No yolk in the egg whites, that's the secret", Martin said and I kicked him under the table.

"Huh?" Colin said.

"That's how you make a good lemon meringue pie."

Martin was the son of our boss, that's the only reason he was working here and it showed in moments like this. He wasn't a people-person which in itself is alright, because I'm not either. The secret is adapting and being open to the idea that people aren't born only to irritate you. Martin thought everyone around him was stupid and wrong which by default somehow made Martin himself intelligent and always right. Yes, he needed to join the army. It would kill his ego, had certainly killed mine a million times over. It also would make him realize why we're doing this. The world is a messed up place and we need to do everything we can

to correct the balance. It might not always be the ethical way, but sometimes the means justify the end.

“You’ve got a nice view here”, I said to Colin, nodding towards the balcony overlooking the river. “I always liked this neighbourhood. How long have you lived here?”

“Ah, I don’t know. Three years?” Colin was scratching his head.

Uncomfortable, I noted. But not because he was a potential killer. Probably because he had two investigators in his home and he had no idea why.

Martin opened his mouth, I made sure he closed it by dominating the conversation.

“I don’t know if you’ve heard”, I continued, noting Martin shooting me a dirty look out of the corner of my eye. “But we have a man in the area who broke into a few houses and tried to strangle a woman. Naturally we’re talking to residents. To see if they’ve heard or seen anything.”

“I haven’t”, Colin said. “I mean, I haven’t heard or seen anything. That’s scary.”

“You wouldn’t know anything about that? About why someone would do that?”

“No.”

“Are you familiar with strangulation as such? Have any interest in it?”

Colin flushed.

“Not really, no.”

“Not at all or...?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“You’re not being very precise. I guess, I suppose. So which one is it? Are you into strangulation or not?”

“No.”

“Right”, I said, looking at the balcony again. “It really is a nice neighborhood. I hope you understand we’re just looking out for you. Please let us know if anything comes up.” I got up and reached out my hand for a shake. “Thank you Colin.”

We walked out.

“What the hell was that?” Martin said once the door was closed and we were out of earshot. “You going all psycho-mode on him? If he did have anything to tell us, you scared him off.”

“He didn’t have anything to tell us”, I said. “I was just saving you from yourself Martin”, I sighed and watched him walk to the driver’s side. He fumbled around looking for the keys, patting his pants pockets and jacket pockets. I walked around and gestured for him to get to the other side of the car.

“I’m driving”, I said holding up the car keys.

“How did you...”

“You really need to pay more attention to your valuables. Now come on, passenger seat for you.”

I started driving and Martin looked at our next visit.

“I can’t believe you let that guy go”, He said again.

“He hasn’t done anything wrong”, I said, turning right onto the main road.

“Come on, strangulation? Who googles that?”

“Lots of people do. There’s all kinds of weird stuff out there and way worse than that. You’re looking at it the wrong way. You want to catch bad guys so badly you’re turning it all into black and white and it’s not that simple.”

“There are bad guys and good guys”, Martin said. “There are, and that’s just the truth.”

“You should join the army.”

“This again?” He scoffed.

“Just for a year or two. Go see some war. It will do you good.”

“I’m too old.”

“You’re never too old to see the real world.”

He needed to have all of his black and white thinking muddled into one big grey area. See how right and wrong, good and bad, all got muddled up together and to realize that when you killed the enemy or whatever they wanted you to believe was the enemy, you just really killed a part of yourself. How liberating it could be.

“Bad guys aren’t that obvious”, I continued. “That’s why they’re so hard to catch.”

“That Colin was a weirdo.”

“Yeah, but not a bad guy. He also wants to know how to make lemon meringue pie.”

I knew Martin was rolling his eyes or at least thinking about it. He was quite dramatic that way.

“How do you know?” He asked.

“I just do. So, what’s next?”

“Oh great”, he said looking down at the pad.

It was an emergency visit to a house nearby. Someone had been googling quite intensely about overdoses and visited a few suicide forums. Martin asked to stay in the car.

“Why don’t we just call an ambulance?” He said, not for the first time.

“I’ll check it out, see how serious it is”, I said, letting the car door slam shut behind me.

It had started to rain and the run down house looked more tragic than it was. Once colored bright white the color had started to fade into something more yellow-looking. I knocked on the door and was met by an elderly lady, possibly in her late sixties.

“Good afternoon, m’am. I’m sorry to disturb you, but could I borrow some of your time?” I showed my badge.

She looked closer at my badge, squinted behind her glasses.

“Frances”, she read out loud. “I always liked that name.”

I forced myself to smile.

“Come in Frances, my name’s Gale. I’ll make you a cup of tea.”

“Thank you.”

There were boxes everywhere and it made me think of my uncle. One day he’d cleaned out the entire house, put everything of sentimental value into boxes and even emptied out the fridge. My father who’d met him on the day had said he’d seemed calm and clear-headed, much calmer and much more clear headed than he’d seemed in a long time. Then he killed himself. It was all quite textbook and yet you never truly see it coming until after, when it’s too late.

“Are you moving?” I asked Gale who did a vague gesture with her hand.

“Just organizing. The house is too big for me and it’s time I have a clean-up.”

An old grandfather’s clock was ticking away, and the kitchen looked homely, though cluttered. A yellow budgie was in a cage by the window, chirping away. I noticed the cage was in fact open, and that’s when I saw the bird poop all over the curtains.

“That’s just Elvis”, Gale said. “He makes quite a mess, but he’s good company.”

“I’m sure.”

“Black or green?” Gale was holding up to different boxes of tea.

“Whatever you’re having is fine”, I said.

“So what can I do for you?” She asked when we sat down.

She didn’t strike me as someone who was planning on killing herself. She seemed to be of sound mind. Stable. My gut feeling had always been solid so I trusted this. But then why would she have all that internet history? There were pages and pages of it. Morbid curiosity? Something wrong with our system?

“We’ve been getting reports about break-ins in the area”, I said. “We’re just checking with residents to see if they have heard or seen anything.”

“Like someone moving outdoor pieces or leaving a hammer on your porch or something?”

“Yes, exactly like that. Have you noticed anything?”

“Be careful, it’s hot.” Gale said once I lifted the cup “I can’t say I have noticed anything. It’s a calm neighborhood.” She dipped her tea bag, looking at me. The budgie made a shrill chirping sound. “I can’t believe you actually showed up”, she said next, as if in awe.

“I’m sorry what was that?” The tea smelled strong of something herbal.

“Oh, I should give you some context. You’ve met my little girl.”

“Oh?” I put my cup down.

“Her name’s Patricia.”

I didn’t say anything. I couldn’t remember a Patricia.

“She had psychiatric problems. Could get a bit paranoid at times and desperately depressed at others. You went to her house once not that long ago.”

“Okay”, I said, though I had no idea who she was. We’d had a few of those cases. “How’s she doing?”

“She died.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“You see, after your visit, she got really paranoid. Apparently you knew things she hadn’t told anyone. Almost like you could read her mind. She was talking about being under surveillance and I didn’t believe her. I told you she had those issues, right? But then she got specific. Mentioned her internet history, so I did some googling on my own.”

“I see.”

“And now you’re here.” Gale looked at me with a neutral expression on her face. “What was your story, you said? Someone in the neighborhood causing trouble?”

“Break-ins”, I said.

“Right. Do you think you’ll catch them?”

“With the residents' help I’m sure we will.”

“I’m a bit sad it’s not real, honestly.” Gale gave a shrewd smile. “It would serve as a distraction. My little girl is not here anymore. What do I have to live for? And to think I didn’t believe her. I told her she was imagining things. The worst thing you can tell a person who is already convinced she is crazy, but I wanted to calm her down, you see. To realize it wasn’t real, but it *was* real. And here you are. Are you going to ask me about my internet history, is that what you do?”

“Are you planning to kill yourself or someone else?” I asked her.

“Someone needs to pay.”

Her tone was calm, but something was definitely off. I glanced around me, but saw from the corner of my eye Gale bring out a gun from underneath the table.

“I thought it was you”, she said, aiming the gun towards her chin. “But it’s me.”

“Please put that gun down”, I said.

“Or is it you?” She turned the gun away from her and aimed it at me.

In an instant Martin was there, in the doorway.

“Martin, don’t”, I called out, but he fired his gun and Gale slumped in the chair, her gun falling to the floor.

There was a moment when Martin and I looked at each other.

“Call 911”, I said, but Martin wasn’t moving. I brought out my cell, dialed it myself, told Martin to take off his jacket, which he didn’t do. I shrugged out of my own and threw it at him.

“Press it to the wound”, I said. “I’m not asking you Martin, I’m telling you. This is an order.” Poor kid had never shot anyone before and had managed to shoot her straight in the chest.

“Is she dead?”

For Christ’s sake. But at least now he was doing what he’d been told, his hands shaking, but pressing firmly on her chest. We had almost no time if Gale was going to stand a chance.

The ambulance arrived within minutes and took her away. She was still breathing. Me and Martin were questioned on the spot and then we got orders to head back to the station for documentation. I was driving again, but with no protests this time.

“She just got her gun out”, Martin said. “From nowhere? What happened?”

“That’s what happened”, I said and had told the officers that very same thing. I couldn’t very well go into her talking about her daughter. By doing so I would compromise the Program. I still couldn’t remember the daughter or her name even, but I must have not handled it very well, had obviously said something that had driven the poor girl a bit crazy. Don’t get me wrong, I didn’t like it. I would have preferred if that wasn’t the story, but I also knew things like these happened. Humans weren’t robots. We couldn’t program them or predict how they were going to act on information given to them.

We’d only gone five minutes when Martin told me to pull over. He threw up on the side of the road. While he was out there I was notified that Gale had passed away. I told Martin the news when he got back to the car, wiping the sides of his mouth. No point in waiting.

“We’ll have to shut down the Program”, he said, pale and clammy looking.

“No, we won’t”, I said and started driving again.

“But someone died. I shot someone.”

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“She was suicidal”, I said. Paused to think this through. I wanted to be careful with Martin.
“We have her internet history to prove it. These things happen.”

Casualties. They always happened. It wasn't right, but very little could be done about them.
Martin would see that in time.

“Did anyone take the budgie?” he asked.

“What budgie?”

“The old lady, she had a budgie.”

“I'm sure someone will take care of it”, I said.

Martin was quiet for a long time.

“You're right I suppose”, he said finally. “The Program won't shut down and it shouldn't,
either. That lady had a gun after all. She could have hurt anyone.”

“Exactly.”

“We're doing the right thing”, he said.

Yes, I agreed. *We're doing the right thing.*