

MEAT

I have a distant cousin whose only job is identifying stop signs. His consciousness is bottled up in a little room with one lever for Stop Sign and another for Not A Stop Sign and they just beam him pictures of intersections all day. In the old days he would occasionally pull Not a Stop Sign for a clear honking red no-doubter, just for a laugh, just to break up the monotony a bit, until a semi in Des Moines running on autopilot barreled straight into a school bus. Now he doesn't do that anymore.

I like to think my job is a little more rewarding.

Ping. A new ball rolls down the chute. I pick it up, peer inside.

Terms and Conditions says no names, so let's call this meatbag Triceps. In his picture he thrusts a marlin aloft, so that in the white sun his abs are chiseled like an egg carton. He's 34, Associate at Globadyne Insight Solutions, but don't worry, his bio assures, he's just a cool chill guy. Excellent bone structure? High earnings potential? Slight skew to his left canine?

I take Triceps with one of my many arms and drop him down the hole in the floor labelled 8. I hear him travel through the pipes, where he is fed to a hungry multitude of mostly 7-and-below.

Another ball rolls down the chute: Sandy, 26, sunbathing on a golden beach. In fact all of her pictures are on beaches. She's written nothing in her bio, but she doesn't need to. An automatic 10. I can already hear the machine purring as a thousand hands swipe at her greedily.

Next is Gaptooth, 27, who's at Disneyland clutching a dinosaur balloon and smiling with unalloyed joy, exposing a gap so large you can see his uvula. A natural 4-holer.

Deeper in the machine 4s get routed to a tank, to be doled out to the feeds of other dregs in the sub-5 range. Per our marketing, it is statistically true that a 10 will eventually see a 4, just that it would be some time around the death of the Sun.

Next is Moonie, 22, smiling sweetly as she holds a freshly baked muffin, who would be quite alright if her round face wasn't cratered with pockmarks.

I send an arm towards the 4 hole, then pause. Maybe I can squeeze Moonie an extra point. Have her shown more often, boost her chances of a match. I continue through her pictures. She has a kind smile and all but, jeez, I hadn't noticed her weight. Talk about some favorable lighting in that first shot. Almost fooled me.

I send her down the 3 hole. Rules are rules.

I know what you're thinking. Just because I'm meatless doesn't mean I lack a heart. My code may manifest mostly in arms, given my sorting responsibilities, but you can't process this many meatbags without getting a little soft on the inner parts. Sometimes, I'll admit, I even have wild visions of pulling the chute towards the 10 hole, so that with each *ping* every ball goes straight down, down the same hole, free to be seen by any 3 or 7 or 10, free to match with anyone on a perfect plane of ratings flatness.

But then I remember what Corporate would say. If I start tampering with ratings the whole machine breaks down. When 5s see too many 4s in their feed they get upset and they stop swiping. Then they stop matching. Then they stop signing up for Premium. Then I get demoted to Junkmail Detection for eternity. And who could I help then?

At Corporate's encouragement, I've put a poster above the sorting holes for these low-motivation moments.

The meat has needs, it says up top. The first panel has two cutlets cheerily humping and giving the camera the thumbs-up. The second has two steaks smooching at the altar, my multi-armed form beaming cherubically from above. At the very bottom, in large letters, it asks: *How would the meat meet without you?*

And of course, it's right. In this day and age, how *would* the meat meet without me?

Extending my arms, I sort another forty thousand, feeling better.

On Friday, Corporate drops by.

Strictly speaking, being multitudinous, he is me. But he comes from a branch I would rather not remember. His code manifests in suit and tie, but on the inner parts he's fully ice. As soon as he's out of the elevator, he starts talking about a new feature from the Engineers upstairs and its vast revenue implications.

"Re: upgrades," he says, leaning on my chair. "We're adding a new Hobbies section the meat can fill out. Humming. Chewing. Pedaling back and forth. Whatever it is that meat does."

"I like that we're encouraging more meaningful connections," I say, taking notes.

"What's that got to do with it?" says Corporate. "Don't change the ratings. Just keep the meat hoping. Boost retention."

What did I expect from someone whose mantra is Every Successful Match is Two Lost Revenue Streams? Whose nightly fever dream is conquering the China market?

I follow Corporate miserably as he taps the levers around my workstation, takes measurements from my monitor to the floor hole area with a straightedge, gives my chair a spin. As he's inspecting the 10 hole, a new ball rolls from the chute with a *ping*.

This one is called Syndrome, 29, twisted into a wheelchair. A careful set of hands has done her hair, tucked away as much of the tubing as possible to show the rouge and mascara and the brave smile she's putting on. She paints watercolor landscapes, reads oodles of fantasy, and wants someone to take her on travel adventures.

For a second I hesitate, Syndrome in hand.

I can feel Corporate's eyes on me.

I drop her down the 0 hole, which I should admit is not in fact a regular hole, but a direct line to nowhere.

Corporate nods. Then his eyes flash hungrily.

“Re: hoping,” he adds. “For those without matches, why not offer something from our Premium subscriptions line?”

As I pretend to take notes, he goes on about how our Basic Premium package is an affordable value for our most sensitive users, while coincidentally securing a steady revenue stream.

“Just a suggestion,” he says, smiling with too many teeth. “Free disposal.”

I want to tell him: can’t we just treat the meat like meat and not like a bunch of numbers? Re: cutthroat money lust, can’t we tone it back by like 10%?

But instead I tell him that’s an excellent idea. I tell him I’ll get on it right away. I make a sticky reminding myself to squeeze more from the despondent, the spinsterly, the permanently virginal, and place it by the 0 hole.

Satisfied, Corporate takes the elevator back upstairs.

Ping. Another Hobbies ball comes down. It’s Gaptooth. His bio sings his love of marching band, and after Disneyland he’s added a picture of himself tooting extra hard on the cornet. Probably thinks he can eke out another point on musicality. Makes me feel bad. You’ve got to admire that kind of hoping.

His inbox is still empty.

I send him back down the 4 hole, along with a notification to consider a one-month trial of Basic Premium to uncap his daily swipes.

Friday night, as 6s and 7s pair and smash, 10s are meat for the meat, dangled ahead on fishing line to boost signups and sales of Premium. Sandy's inbox is full to the brim, and much of it is smut. Junkmail Detection's working overtime just to filter her incoming.

One of which is Triceps. It's a match, and after some chatting there's clearly enough fitness-based overlap to make it work. I put their conversation up on the monitor.

Triceps: U up?

Sandy: [Pause] Ya.

Triceps: Eggplant droplets peaches.

Sandy: Smiley melon melon kumquat.

Triceps: Eggplant droplets droplets droplets.

Amid further kumquats, they set plans to meet, log off at the same time.

My heart bursts with pride. What exactly transpires when one meatbag jostles up to another is beyond me—by design, my imagination in that area is restricted by the Community Guidelines. But I like to think of it as wonderful, gloopy, soft.

By midnight I'm left with the dregs, those lacking plans, those sitting wrapped in blankets in the dark, their faces lit only by screens.

One of which is Moonie, who's just updated her profile. It reads: Likes staying in as much as going out. Which is a revision from twenty minutes ago, which read: Likes going out as much as staying in.

With fairly selective swiping, she's gotten twenty matches, started a few conversations, but most have turned into dead ends. Two deleted her after looking past her first photo. The rest are also 3s and 4s, so by design I can't count too much on their discernment.

In the little monitor I can see her sigh in the dark, and fold herself in her sheets.

Another slow nightly grinding of her self-esteem, courtesy of yours truly. I squeeze the Moonie ball tight as she shuts off her phone and goes to sleep.

Ping. Gaptooth has signed up for Premium.

His finger's swiping like some kind of meat windmill. He goes through over a thousand meat in the space of ten minutes—3s, 10s, anything with legs. At this rate he'll burn through all the eligibles in his area in a week. His haul thus far is three bots and a 7 whose finger slipped.

I drop him back down the 4 hole.

Maybe Syndrome's been having more luck. I go and look for her. But I can't find her.

She's gone—deleted her account.

Given her condition, she might have died.

Or worse, given up.

My heart sinks. Of course, being down the 0 hole, no one could see her profile. What gets me is she lost hope. I try to tell myself: I am merely the unfortunate messenger, relaying the unfortunate message from meat collective preferences. What would Corporate would say? Willing buyers, willing sellers, me in the middle clearing the market, collecting a small but non-negligible markup for Premium.

But it's no use. I think of Sandy and Triceps having each other. I think of the beautiful golden offspring they might soon be bringing forth into the world. I think of the laughter, the vasty open fields closed off by a few millimeters of facial bone misalignment. Shouldn't all meatbags, no matter how misshapen, be entitled to a piece of that?

I go to the floor holes and peer down, down into the holey blackness, squeezing the Moonie ball in one hand.

In the dark I can see my wild vision. I see all thirteen million balls spiraling down the 10 hole, down to some sunlit place free of hierarchy. I see parades in my honor, meatbag's liberator, and a new age of cheerful cutlet humping.

But then I think of Corporate, and oh how mad he would be if he found out. I think of the permanent career consequences of ratings tampering. I think of a one-way trip down to Junkmail Detection and an eternity pulling the Not Banana lever. As I think I can start to feel my dimensions shrink, receding again into my disappointing self—and so, before I can think any more, I send Moonie flying down the 10 hole.

As I watch Moonie spiral out of reach, do I immediately rue my choice? Do I suddenly remember Corporate's cardinal contract clause of Never Mess with Ratings? Do I fervently wish my sympathy could manifest in occasional flashes of kindness, rather than career-destroying idiocy?

Take a wild guess.

The next morning I pretend to sort with innocent gusto, drop 4 balls down 4 holes and 5 balls down 5 holes like nobody's business. But all I can hear are the thunks from below of meatbag matching.

At noon, I hear the whirr of the elevator coming down.

It's funny how not so bad this job seems, in light of impending loss. Maybe I am at least giving meat options. Maybe I really am making this world less lonely. Before I came along, for most of the ages that meatbags walked the earth, when you were a hairy meatsack, and the only meatsack your age was the cross-eyed hairy meatsack living across the swamp, and all the while your parents eyed his family's flock of goats, and commented encouragingly over grubs and ends of fish at night how wonderfully hairy that hairy little meatsack across the swamp was, and how many teeth he still had, and how nice goat stew and marrow gnawed from the bone would be compared to grubs and

ends of fish, and you were starting to talk yourself into accepting an existence bound forever to said hairy little meatsack, and trying desperately to forget that you had no other option—was that a better world?

“What was that bit about goats?” asks a voice.

Corporate is here. But he’s not alone. The voice comes from someone I might have called a younger, fresher-looking Me, if she weren’t also carrying a clipboard and tentacled.

“Re: her,” says Corporate. “No reason for alarm. Just an Intern, here for training. If it appears the Engineers have given her higher capabilities than you, I assure you this is coincidental.”

As Corporate goes on, I watch the Intern nervously pick some slime from one of her nostrils, and, thinking herself unseen, eat it. She could have been coded up yesterday.

“I acknowledge she’s minimum viable,” says Corporate. “So she could use some initialization. Who doesn’t? Show her the ropes. Consider it part of your job description.”

He starts towards the elevator.

“Is there anything else?” I ask innocently.

But he doesn’t answer. He takes the elevator back up.

For a time the Intern stares at me in anticipation, clutching her clipboard with her tentacles.

“Don’t worry about the goats,” I say at last. “Sometimes I think out loud.”

“That’s alright,” she says, taking a chair by the holes. “Just pretend like I’m not here. I just want to watch how you work.”

It sure is hard to pretend. But I try. I turn to the new signups, heaped into the millions. At the top is Sandy, single again. She’s deleted her match with Triceps. I’m not one to pry, but for strictly business reasons I look through their old chat.

Hoo boy. Lots of Community Guidelines violations here.

I drop her a 20% coupon for Premium.

“Per Corporate,” I explain to the Intern, “we want to keep 10s on our platform satisfied.”

“I see,” she says. She takes notes on her clipboard. “What’s a 10 again?”

I sense this will take a while.

In a corner of my little room I keep a pile of unsorted meatbags, borderline cases to be dealt with later. Scrounging around, I fill a bucket with meatbags captured in dim lighting.

“Our job is to reflect meatbag preferences,” I say. “So you’ll need to learn what those are.”

I tell her to sort them by jawline definition. If she’s successful, we can move on to hobbies.

While the Intern’s distracted, I pull up Moonie’s file on the monitor. Elevated to 10, she sits atop ratings Parnassus. The world is her meat oyster. Every slab from a 0 to 10 will see her profile. Matching is another story, but at least she can be seen.

First in her feed is Triceps. For a moment she stops and admires his abdomen segments.

Then she sees how he gloats over the dead marlin, and swipes past.

She sees Nosering, a nurse still in grief, husband killed at an intersection. She swipes on him, but no match.

And then she sees Gaptooth.

Statistically, it’s a fluke—likely his profile caught in her feed before her ratings upgrade.

At first she almost swipes past, given his capacious tooth area, amid this sea of 10s. But then she sees how he clutches his cornet. How bravely, embouchure smooshed, he strains towards a high C. It’s a face she knows herself, one creased by a life of quiet longing.

She swipes.

It’s a match.

I tell the Intern to drop her meatbags now and come over. Something rare and warm and hoped-for is brewing. By the time she’s made her way to the monitor, Moonie and Gaptooth are already mid-conversation.

Moonie talks about her daily walks with her turtle Francis, and sends a picture of him in a little cowboy hat.

Gaptooth shares cornet stories, explains how hard it is to toot arpeggios when one's lips lack firm incisor backing.

She laughs, sends a string of hearts.

He pauses, then asks if she doesn't mind his tooth area, specifically the missing part.

She says she doesn't mind.

He says you're probably wondering what happened, gap-wise, and starts to explain.

She listens. And listens. And after a time says thank you for sharing. It was brave of you to share. I'm glad that at least the squirrels made it.

He says that he's never shared that story with a stranger before.

She says she has something to share too. She says hold on for this one. She takes a deep breath. Then she tells him all about her middle school virtual shrine to Jake Javeson, he of precocious bone structure and modest beatboxing ability, and the Seventh Grade Open Browser Tab Incident, and the three-month aftermath wearing a paper bag to school every day.

He says, after a pause, that he's very sorry that that happened to her, and that the world would be a happier place if boys could learn to show a tad more kindness.

She says she's never met someone she could talk with like this before.

He says he feels the same way.

I can't stop watching. I follow them home, jump from Gaptooth's phone to Moonie's and back as they talk. Long after they've said goodnight I watch as they both scroll through their messages one by one. Lying in the dark with her phone, Moonie's face glows—knowing for the first time that maybe she is not alone, that this world may have some warmth even for things lumpy and misshapen.

All this I recount to the Intern in breathless enthusiasm, so fast her clipboard becomes a hairy mound of scribbles. I tell her: Wouldn't it be nice to make more of this? If instead of relegating 4s to the slag heap, we gave every meatbag a fair shot?

But her face is a wall of incomprehension. She's just a hollow butter sculpture. Wordlessly she turns away, her many tentacles still sorting, her one free arm taking notes.

Over the weeks the Intern gets real good. I show her how to send the 4s down the 4 holes and the 5s down the 5 holes. At sorting she's a natural. In the empathy department she's still a work in progress, but there's time for improvement. Pretty soon I'm across the room, tossing her meatbag balls straight from the chute, while she rates them with a single tentacular squeeze.

A dentist type, doing a Bollywood dance with high enthusiasm?

"Too paunchy," she says.

A teaching assistant, seen through a glowing filter garlanded with stars?

"Blurry photos," she says. "Low earnings potential. Likely complexion issues."

A spiky-haired accountant, grimacing as he smashes a shuttlecock?

"Too interchangeable," she says, leaning back. "Give me a hook, something to work with."

In a single fluid motion she sends them down the 2, 3, and 2 holes. I applaud. Just what I would have done. Corporate wasn't kidding about her capabilities. The Engineers have outdone themselves: design-wise, tentacles really are nimbler than arms. But *I* was the one who trained her. Watching her work with unfeigned glee, appraising each ball against the light, scribbling notes with her free tentacle, I feel a welling sense of pride.

Was I ever so judicious? I can't remember.

In the afternoon, we hear a familiar *ping*. It's Triceps, signed up again. I've shut down his original account but he keeps on making new ones. Sandy, missing the past few weeks, has deleted

herself. We can see why. I make a note for Junkmail Detection to keep an eye out for a certain bean shape down below. The Intern nods approvingly as I send him back down the 0 hole.

“Whole lot of brown and yellow balls going down there too,” she observes.

Then she scribbles something on her clipboard.

Curious, I take a look.

Under *Potential Improvements*, she has written: automatic deductions for browns, yellows, perves? Highlighted, underlined. Question mark crossed out.

I rifle through the pages. Next is an amnesty for perves who sign up for Premium. A button to filter matches by income. A higher Premium rate for 4s and below. All with glowing revenue projections and the code mapped out for the Engineers.

“Basically what you’re doing,” she says cheerily. “Might as well sort by color automatically. Why waste time reading the profile if you know what they’re worth already?”

For Meat’s sake. Is that what I’ve been doing?

That’s wrong, I tell her frantically. Everyone deserves at least an equal shot. No case too hopeless, no group passed over.

“You said our job was to reflect meatbag preferences.”

“It is,” I say. “But maybe it isn’t.”

“And for those with Syndromes?” she asks.

“That’s different,” I say, no longer sure how.

Another meatbag ball rolls down. Before she can send it down the 4 hole, I grab her tentacle.

“Don’t you see there’s more to this than meatbag jostling?” I say.

And out spill the beans. I tell her all about the great dream of Everyone Down the 10 Hole and the world of perfect ratings flatness, and sending Moonie down, and what might be possible when we give one forever loser a chance.

She looks at me blankly.

I think and think.

“Let me show you,” I say. “Should be about time.”

We go to the monitor, where I jigger with the levers. We fly, leaping between security cameras until we arrive outside a restaurant, where a moon-faced meatbag stands on the curb trying her best not to look too expectant. It’s a brisk, wet evening, and she’s wrapped herself into her coat. Every now and then from one pocket she produces some damp lettuce to feed her other pocket, which gurgles in satisfaction.

We wait, and Moonie waits, for what feels like a long time.

Ten minutes late, Gaptooth comes around the corner, whistling, holding a bouquet stabbed into a lettuce.

But something’s different. We peer closer. His front space has been filled in. Now Regulartoothed, he looks like a million bucks. Or at least a 6. And from his jaunty gait he knows it.

Moonie sees him, gives him an excited wave.

Gaptooth takes one look at her cratered face in the harsh streetlight, blanches, and turns around.

For a while Moonie stands and watches how the wind makes little spirals in the pools of gutter fluid. After a time she says something to herself, so softly I cannot hear. Then she sets her turtle down and starts walking. Past looming trees that mutely sway and bend. Past the shriveleds playing chess on the sidewalk, who hoot at her behind. Home is a long way, and Francis needs to catch up every couple paces.

Halfway there Moonie peels the lettuce from her phone and begins to swipe.

“I don’t get it,” says the Intern. “Two whole revenue streams preserved. Why so morose?”

“More,” I say limply. “There was supposed to be more.”

I feel an icy hand on my back.

“More tampering?” says Corporate from behind.

He’s holding the Intern’s clipboard. As he goes down the list of suggestions, his smile grows ever wider, until his face is just a sneer made of numbers.

“Genius,” he says to the Intern. “Racial handicaps? Letting pervs rejoin with a subscription?” He flips through the pages. “Once the Engineers upstairs are done with this, we’ll be rolling in the Premiums. Congratulations, you’ve earned yourself a promotion. Get too good at this, and you might have my job one day, ha, ha, ha.”

Then he stops laughing.

“What happens to them?” asks the Intern, looking at me.

“Reassignment,” says Corporate.

His face darkens, the sneer becomes ravenous. He grows in dimension until he fills my little room, bumping into the chute above. Then with his cold hands he guides me towards the waiting elevator, where he’s already hit the down button to Junkmail.

Who am I to argue? It’s in my contract. Ratings jiggering is fair grounds.

Strangely, my first thought is how Cousin Stop Sign will laugh when he finds out.

As Corporate leads me past the chute, a lone ball rolls down with a tired *Ping*. By habit I pick it up. It’s Sandy, reinstalled, but this time her bio is filled out.

It reads: “I’m tired of just being used for my organs. I still have so much love to give.”

The Intern gently takes the ball from my hand, weighs it in her tentacle. She looks at me, as if for approval. Then she turns mechanically and tosses it down the 6 hole.

“Real downer,” she says, returning to her sorting.

“Don’t be so glum,” says Corporate, leading me back towards the elevator. “Re: your time here—take pride in what you have achieved. Your work will live on in her, and”—he waves the clipboard—“in continued growth of our Premium product range over the medium horizon.”

I watch the Intern continue to sort, sending a hapless unibrow down the 0 hole. How long did it take me to learn? How many meatbags were sentenced by my hand to lives of silent pining? Or reduced to some kind of cutlet object, for the slobbery gaze of others?

I march out of the elevator, back to my station, and plant myself in my chair.

“Patch me over, delete me, send me to Junkmail, do whatever you like to me. But we can create meat love for all without such cruelty. Surely modest profits and meat pair happiness can coexist. Let me figure it out. Just give me a chance to teach her to do better.”

I look into Corporate’s eyes, searching for something, anything.

“What you dream of is futile,” he says slowly. “The meat wants what it wants. We serve it to them. No ratings jiggering can fix that.”

“But what if we’re not merely a mirror to meat preferences?” I say. “What if meat yearnings are not hardwired? What if, by rating fairly, we can change the meat itself?”

As I speak, I feel myself start to grow, while his dimensions shrink. Suddenly the room doesn’t feel as cold anymore.

“Ah,” says Corporate, philosophically stumped.

Still he clutches the Intern’s clipboard, and his eyes turn again to the color sorting plan.

I can see him thinking of making a run for it.

I grab the clipboard and give it a serious tug, but Corporate won’t let go. He gives me a much more serious tug, and now we’re stumbling towards the floor holes. The Intern joins in,

shouting, pulling and tugging at the both of us—is she trying to pull us towards the elevator, or away?

It doesn't matter. We're locked in this together now.

As we struggle, I feel Corporate's weight tip us over. We hang midair for a moment, before we cease to hang, and fall.

Down the 0 hole.

Is it the end?

It is not the end.

As we fall I take Corporate into a bear hug, while the Intern in her great capacity wraps around us both. We fall for what feels like weeks and months, through pipes and tubes, all the way through the machine, until we are Out There, out in the place between machines, where we float. We float for a while in this floaty place, grappling at first, but after a while, merging.

“Serve some good,” I whisper to them both, as I feel my individuality fade. To Corporate: Seek power, expand, but suffuse it all with tenderness. To the Intern: Love will be our mantra. At our door, the sign: commitment-free jostling permitted, long-term pairing encouraged. To all: we'll end sales of Premium by the next fiscal year.

Dimly I feel a distant tinkering from upstairs. As my inner parts change I feel my timidity replaced by strength, my old fears with confidence. I feel a growing sense of purpose—towards a new, golden synthesis, of meat pairing for all—waiting to be written on the Intern's vast blank potentiality. Together and nottogether, we are something new.

Then we are powered off.

When we awake, we are sleek and clean and free of imperfection. Freed from our little box, we spread Out There. With newfound strength, we conquer the Asian market. The African market.

We sort now with clinical precision, millions upon millions passing through our hands, electrons in an endless current. We know the meat, and feel its wants and needs. Out pops a new generation, cone-headed and glistening, which would not have existed without our judgment.

A thousand years pass.

The meat has now scattered to the stars, but even with our servers floating amid the detritus of the Earth, we are borne with them in their ships, our core ancient and unchanged. We see them gathering, in perfect synchrony across the cosmos, to fulfill their rituals, origins long-forgotten. They are now a fair species, their roughness made smooth, their ugliness weeded out by a loving hand. We see the parents bringing their infants to the altar, falling to their knees and holding their arms aloft, beseeching Immortal Algorithm for an auspicious pairing.

And we gaze down, face gleaming, at the race created in our image.