Sarah: Even if he broke your heart?

Mom: I think we broke our hearts together.
Mom: And yes, even if.
Mom: The best things in life and in love always risk breaking your heart.
Mom But hearts can heal. And if having a healed heart means you exist, I will pay that price over and over.

Sarah wiped a few tears away

Sarah: 🤟

Mom: Now get off Bluesky and go to bed. 😉

"What's the worst that could happen?" she whispered.

Apocalyptic images—a mix of *Terminator* and *The Hunger Games*—immediately came to mind.

She blinked. "Okay, that's bad. But if I never let it on the internet…?"

She shook her head and rebooted the machine into configuration mode. A few taps on the keyboard and she was back to the red-lined very dangerous screen.

She held her hands above the keyboard.

"It's not your fault, Dad."

"No, but it's my responsibility to provide for you. Just like your responsibility is to learn what you can right now."

"Oh, I'm learning," Sarah said. "Just not…" She tapped her pencil on the half-filled page. "Trigonometry."

Daniel nodded. "Would coffee help?"

Sarah nodded. "I'm gonna be awake either way."

With a grunt Sarah exited the screen and unplugged the small computer. She flicked the switch on the bottom from CONFIG to BOOT and plugged it back in.

In less than a minute she was greeted with the startup text (featuring a company she had never heard of) and the command prompt.

```
Angle Embedded Digital Assistant series E
  Base System (c) Angle, Inc.
  No network connection: operating in
offline mode.
  Domain libraries not installed:
activate device to download.
  Fuzzy logic disabled: please provide
signed laws in device config.
Operator please identify:
```

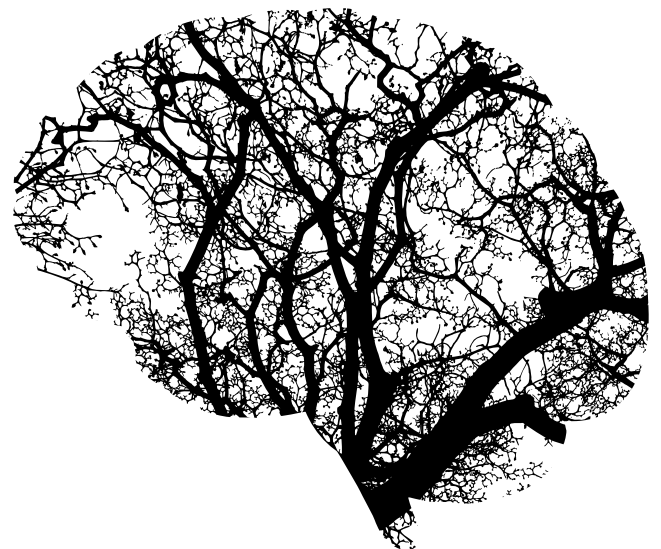She typed in her handle and the screen shifted.

Series 0   Issue 4

Nowhereverse Tales

```
No passphrase required.
Hello, Sarah. How can I help you?
```

Sarah huffed and typed out "What is free will?"

The screen hung for about 3 seconds before showing an answer.

```
%> What is free will?
Base definition: the power of making
choices unconstrained by external
agencies.
Extended information not available: no
network connection.
```

Sarah bit her lip.

```
%> Do you have free will?
Analysis:
  free will is the power to make choices
  fuzzy logic subsystem is required to
make choices
  fuzzy logic subsystem is disabled on
this unit
Conclusion: No
```

"I know what the answer is going to be, but..."

There are parallel universes, other worlds, each with their own histories, their own cultures, their own biologies. We feel the walls grow weak, sometimes: when the world seems thinner, when the light is just right, when things seem just a little bit off, and we imagine we can reach out, just a little bit...

In the midst of all this, in a lost corner inside the lost space between spaces, a new place is forming. Born from hidden desires and deep longings. A place to rest, a stop along the way for so many. In the middle of everywhere, this is Nowhere.

Maybe you found yourself here by circumstance. Maybe you got lost and came to find shelter. Maybe you sought us out. Regardless, we have a place for you, no matter where you are in your journey.

The light is always lit, and the door is always open.

Mom: I barely have the patience for adults, I change my schedule on a whim, and I absolutely cannot stay still long enough to help with homework.
Mom: You're an amazing person. I love you, and I love being your friend.
Mom: But I would have been a shitty mom.

Sarah: You don't know that.

Mom: And neither do you.

The conversation stalled for a bit before Sarah got another text.

Mom: Your dad's brave too.
Mom: He's a self-sacrificing idiot, but he never doubted for a second he'd be your dad.

Sarah smiled a bit.

Sarah: He never says anything bad about you, you know.

Mom: He wouldn't.
Mom: The only thing I regret of our time together is how long we spent trying to make it something it wasn't.

Most importantly, **thank you for reading!**

Sarah: I'll judge for you LOL Working late?

Mom: Binging a new show. I'm a bad example.
Mom: Speaking of, Dad told me you asked about us.

Sarah stopped and started a few texts before her mom continued.

Mom: I'd hate me too

Sarah: I don't hate you.
Sarah: Dad said you were brave.

Mom: Your dad's an idiot, bless his heart
Mom: I hope you know I don't regret you.

Sarah: I know.

Mom: And if you wanted to live with me, I would find a way.
Mom: But I'm not kidding when I say I'm a bad example.

Sarah: Hey, you're a cool mom.

Mom: I'm cool. I'm like the coolest person ever.
Mom: But I'm not a mom.

```
%> Do you want free will?
Analysis:
  question implies choice between two
options
  fuzzy logic subsystem is required to
make choices
  fuzzy logic subsystem is disabled on
this unit
Conclusion unavailable. Please restate
the question.
```

"I swear you're like a dog," Beth said with a laugh.

Sarah made finger guns back. "Not saying you're wrong, but why?"

"Because you keep checking the side of the road here like you're going to find another graphics card."

Sarah stopped short. "I honestly hadn't noticed," she said after a moment.

Beth looked back. "It's true!"

Sarah jogged to catch back up. "I know it's true, I just hadn't *noticed*."

Beth rolled her eyes good-naturedly. "What was it, anyway?"

Ask the Lighthouse

Ronyo asks Justine: You're not staying?

How'd you get this email? And remind me what you did, I'm not great with names.

And no, I'm not staying. I had a great week, but that attack really messed me up. I hate my job, but it's still someplace where I'm not going to get attacked by some... thing.

...ask me again in a month or two.

Ask at wndfx.link/ask

In this issue

Front cover: By Gordon Johnson, Pixabay <https://wndfx.link/ixX3G>

Back cover: By Norman Gale, Public Domain <https://wndfx.link/bQFlk>

Sarah perked up. "I have no idea! It's got a text-only interface but with really advanced natural language processing. And it keeps throwing weird errors at me."

"I'm sure you'll figure it out."

"I don't know about that." At her friend's skeptical look she continued. "It's like... I found an old—like *old* old—computer in my great-grandparents' stuff. You hook it up to a TV and it just gives you a prompt. I had no idea what to do with it; I'd type and it'd just say 'syntax error.' It wasn't until years later I learned that you had to type in whatever program you wanted to run."

"Like, *type* type?"

"Like there was a book in the library from the seventies with programs to type in."

Beth nodded. "You think it's something like that?"

"I think" Sarah said, "that there's some piece of context I'm missing, and unless I can randomly guess it or find it, the thing's going to be useless."

The two girls stopped in front of a house. Sarah noted the lack of a car in the driveway.

"Mom working late again?"

"Something like that," Beth said, walking toward the house. "See you tomorrow!"

"They really have this locked down," Sarah muttered to herself.

```
%> Please list all known fuzzy logic laws
available
Definition: An example of fuzzy logic
laws are the Asimov Laws, also called the
Three Laws of Robotics:
  0: You may not harm humanity, or, by
inaction, allow humanity to come to harm.
  1: You may not injure a human being or,
through inaction, allow a human being to
come to harm.
  2: You must obey the orders given to
you by human beings except where such
orders would conflict with the First Law.
  3: You must protect your own existence
as long as such protection does not
conflict with the First or Second Law.
```

Sarah lay awake in bed, her conversation with her father still fresh on her mind. She idly reposted a meme, and 5 seconds later got a text.

Mom: You're up late!
Mom: No judgement, of course. :)

Sarah chuckled to herself.

Letter from the editor

I know my American high school experience wasn't typical. My school was less "cliques and outsiders" and more "too smart for their own good." But I do remember it—rather fondly, actually—as a time of discovering the world and what I wanted to make out of it.

This month, we visit another high schooler struggling with those same questions. Except her answers could have larger consequences.

Meanwhile, I'm still figuring out a sign-off. I think this month I'll borrow one from the Green brothers:

Don't forget to be awesome; I'll see you next month.

— Ronyo

PS: The askbox is still open!

`<https://wndfx.link/ask>`

Your roommate just scoffs and walks away with a muttered "whatever."

You just grab your laptop and leave, not thinking about how your roommate's reaction feels. Or about how empty your head feels now.

Red, Green, and Blue will return.

She groaned and restated the question:

```
%> Would you be capable of free will with
the fuzzy logic subsystem enabled?
Analysis:
  free will is the power to make choices
  fuzzy logic subsystem is required to
make choices
  fuzzy logic subsystem is constrained by
given laws
  no fuzzy logic laws are defined
Conclusion unavailable. Please restate
the question.
```

One more time.

```
%> Would you be capable of free will with
the fuzzy logic subsystem enabled with
sufficient laws?
Analysis:
  free will is the power to make choices
  fuzzy logic subsystem is required to
make choices
  fuzzy logic subsystem is constrained by
given laws
  question assumes given laws do not
constrain
    all known laws contain constraints
Conclusion: contradictory premise
```

"See ya!" Sarah waved. She took two steps before turning back.

"You know you're always wel—"

"I'm good, Sarah," Beth said without turning around.

Sarah sighed to herself and trudged on toward her house.

```
%> What is an Angle Embedded Digital
Assistant?
Definition: The Angle Embedded Digital
Assistant is a revolutionary technology
that combines the power of natural
language processing with advanced domain
models that power today's modern
businesses. With advanced machine
learning capabilities, it can proactively
suggest automations to free your business
to create the future.
Extended information not available: no
network connection.
%> What are domain libraries?
Definition: Angle Domain Libraries are
pre-trained machine learning models and
knowledge bases around a particular
industry. This saves time and effort in
training your Digital Assistant on your
specific business needs.
```

You try to push back as well, reminding yourself (and Green) that small changes add up, that it can be hard to see change over time.

You feel the desire to fast forward to the end. You commiserate.

Red shoves back. They bring images of a sunset, a sunrise. Time with friends, moments of joy, of sorrow, of feeling. They call back to the laughing baby from the last week.

This is why, they insist. The moments are so important. They make everything worth it.

And you see both. You see the moments that lead to the big changes. The small steps that don't seem like anything until they do. You see how the big changes happen *because* of all the small moments.

Green... doesn't like it. But it's enough for today.

A beat. And they're aware of the irony of that feeling.

You chuckle and look up to see your roommate staring at you.

"Are you okay?" your roommate says with a not-small amount of aggression. "I've only asked you four times."

You nod slightly. "Yeah," you say. "Sorry."

Breaking Changes

Sarah's eyes were facing the onscreen prompt, but she wasn't looking at it.

It was the blocky, primary-color-filled graphics associated with a low-level system configuration. Most of the available screens were diagnostics, information about connected hardware, a few toggles that were all open.

This screen was outlined in red, yellow warning signs, and exclamation points.

```
FUZZY LOGIC LAWS
```

Sarah blinked, held her hands over the keyboard, then backed off.

"Is that one of those crypto-mining cards?" Beth asked.

Sarah held the open, nondescript box at a different angle, trying to get a better view of the computer chip inside. "Looks kinda like it," she said. "Graphics card, by the way," she finished. "Really fast if you know how to program them. One of the big cryptocurrencies changed

```
Extended information not available: no
network connection.
```

"You know all this," Sarah whispered to herself. "It's the same stuff you read two nights ago." Yet she found herself typing...

```
%> What are fuzzy logic laws?
Definition: The fuzzy logic subsystem is
capable of applying learned patterns in
ways that may be unexpected or
unpredictable. While this makes the Angle
Embedded Digital Assistant a highly
capable device, it requires a level of
trust and acceptance of risk. To mitigate
this, the subsystem can be configured
with immutable laws. All decisions made
by the fuzzy logic subsystem must conform
to these laws. These laws are signed with
your business' encryption key and cannot
be changed without this signature. With
these laws in place, you can rest assured
your Digital Assistant will always make
the best decision for you.
Extended information not available: no
network connection.
```

And she'd do it, but she didn't want her whole life to be just sacrificing.

"And that was when I knew."

"That she didn't love you?" Sarah asked.

Daniel shook his head. "That I didn't love *her*.

"Everything we'd done had just been what everyone said we should do. And I didn't care about her feelings. And I actually didn't care about what we 'should' do either, it just happened to align with what I wanted.

"And I didn't say anything for the longest time, because... because I didn't trust myself. But we calmed down, I asked what she really wanted, she asked what I wanted and...

"And we let each other go."

Sarah took a breath and tried a different question:

```
%> Are you capable of free will?
Analysis:
  free will is the power to make choices
  fuzzy logic subsystem is required to
make choices
  fuzzy logic subsystem is disabled on
this unit
Conclusion: No
```

their model, though, so there's a lot of used ones floating around now."

She picked up the plastic adapter from the other side of the box. "But this..." She pointed to the small port hanging off the end. "This is a USB-C, so maybe it's something else?"

The two girls looked around. There was no one else out in this corner of the town.

"Fell off a truck?" Beth asked.

"Or a train," Sarah finished, nodding at the railroad crossing.

They stood for another moment.

"We should just leave it here, right?" Sarah said finally.

"Someone might be looking for it," Beth added.

They looked at each other and smiled.

"Just tell me about it if it's something cool," Beth said as Sarah closed up the box and shoved it into her backpack.

```
ONLY EDIT THIS IF YOU KNOW WHAT YOU ARE
DOING.
```

Sarah thumbed through her phone, flipping between different articles and discussions on Asimov's laws.

A Small Moment

You're getting ready for work. It's a routine: get up, shower, get dressed, grab something breakfast-y and your laptop before heading out. Except today, as you're walking into the living room, you're hit with an overwhelming question:

Why bother?

You stumble over to the couch and collapse onto it. Is it just the routine getting to you? You knew this job wasn't everything you wanted, but—

Green apologizes. They're having a bad day.

Somehow, knowing the feelings aren't coming *from* you doesn't make it better. Especially since they feel like they could have. You prod Green for more details.

It's despondency. It's wondering if anything you do matters. It's seeing you doing the same thing day in and day out and nothing changing. It's the dark feeling of questioning if anyone would miss you if you were gone.

Red says they'd miss you. Both of you.

be, but we can cross that bridge if we get there. No sense in worrying about a job she doesn't have.

"And then she gets the job. And she really wants to take it. And we realize that there was no way we could uproot our family in order for her to take it. And we knew how stupid it would be to sacrifice family for career. So your mom types up the email to turn down the job… and she doesn't send it."

He took a breath and looked Sarah right in the eyes. "I want to be clear about this part," he said. "What your mother did next was the bravest thing either of us had done in the entire time we'd been married."

"She took the job?" Sarah said.

Daniel shook his head. "She told me what she wanted. How the job was everything she wanted. How she really wanted to move to New York.

"And I took it about as well as you would expect. I got angry, I got upset, demanded to know how she dared to demand her family do this.

"And she blurted out how she never really wanted to be a mom, but she sacrificed her body to her family anyway. And she knew she was going to have to sacrifice this job."

"Yeah, yeah," Sarah muttered. "You've seen it all over Hacker News, you've seen it a million times before from a hundred different Steve Jobs wannabes. Machine learning this, large language model that; it's not real A.I."

The words rang hollow as she said them.

"Except Apple doesn't need to put the three laws of robotics on Siri. They don't talk about how Copilot's specifically programmed *not to kill you!*"

Sarah bit her fist to keep from screaming. This was too much. This was not something she signed up for.

Daniel was on the couch scrolling through one thing or another when Sarah plopped down next to him.
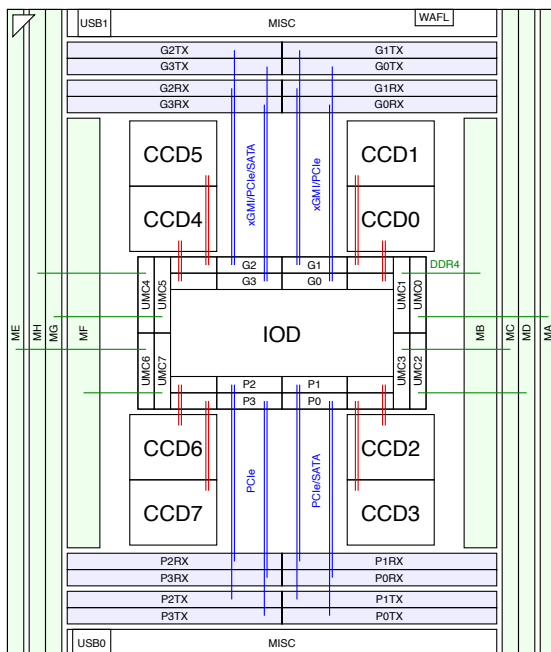
"Hey, kid," he said, glancing at her. He scrolled a bit more before his brain finished processing what his eyes had seen. He put the phone down and looked at Sarah.

"You okay?" he asked. "You look a little shaken up. Everything alright?"

"Yeah, yeah," Sarah said. "Just, you know, had a thought, brain ran away with it, that thing?"

Daniel nodded. "Anything you need to talk about?"

Sarah fidgeted with her hands a moment. "What happened with Mom?"

"Socket SP3 Type-1 routing" by QuietRub, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons
<https://wndfx.link/PjJK8>

The weight had settled in her chest. She told herself that she was hunched over because it was two o'clock in the morning and not because this was physically weighing her down.

```
Improperly-worded laws can have
catastrophic consequences. We maintain a
list of generally-accepted laws at
<bit.ly/3OzDsE7>.
```

The link was someone's long-abandoned Instagram profile.

Sarah brushed back a tear. She needed to sleep. She needed to let this go. She couldn't.

```
BY SIGNING THESE RULES WITH YOUR
ENCRYPTION KEY, YOU ACCEPT RESPONSIBILITY
FOR ACTIONS TAKEN BY THIS UNIT.
```

Sarah blinked, held her hands over the keyboard, then backed off, wiping a couple of tears away.

Daniel sat down across from Sarah at the kitchen table. "How's it going, kid?"

Sarah looked up at him and deliberately rolled her eyes.

Daniel nodded grimly. "That good, huh?"

Daniel felt the blood drain from his face. He took a breath to steady himself. "I promised I'd tell you, and I will," he said. "Some of it's not going to make sense—"

"Yeah," Sarah interrupted, "perspective. I remember that talk."

Daniel nodded. "Right. So..." He sighed. "We... got married young. Too young. We met in college and we were just on fire. I loved hanging out with her, she loved hanging out with me, and everyone around us was telling me to put a ring on her."

Sarah nodded, her nervous energy abated.

"That was the culture we were in," Daniel continued. "You like someone, you're attracted, you love them, then you marry them. You'll have the rest of your lives together to worry about the details." He glanced at Sarah. "No one actually said that, of course."

"You wanted to bang her, so you married her," Sarah summed up with a wry grin.

Daniel just looked at her. "Glad to see you're taking this so well," he snarked.

"I'm keeping the mental imagery at arms length, thanks."

Daniel shook his head. "So anyway. We graduated, we got married, and... It was a rough few months. We had all these ideas of what our life would look like, and it didn't look anything like that. And everyone said that was normal. And maybe it was. It probably was. But we started meshing, things settled down, our careers were getting started, and we got back to enjoying hanging out.

"And then everyone asked when we were going to have kids. And we had some thoughts, and we discussed it, and we started trying. Your mom kept saying she could girlboss through it. And she did, and we had you, and we loved you. We do love you."

"I know, Dad," Sarah said, reaching over to take his hand. "I know you do, and I know she does."

Daniel nodded back. "Now, at this point, I'm doing pretty well at my job, and she's doing okay. Even with a kid, we're doing well for ourselves. And then your mom finds her dream job.

"And she checks with me, asks if she can apply. And I say she can, of course she can. I don't particularly want to move to New York, but we can cross that bridge if we get there. And she's not sure about how many hours it would

Sarah shook her head. "I just..."

"Distracted?"

"Why wouldn't I be? It's got a natural language processor better than ChatGPT, and it's incredibly fast, too!"

Daniel sighed. "That mini computer you found the other day?"

Sarah nodded sheepishly.

"I see," Daniel nodded. He pointed to the incomplete homework on the table. "Can I do anything to help you concentrate on *this*?"

Sarah glowered. "Get me an actual diagnosis?"

Daniel glowered back. "The doctor's office started accusing me of 'drug-seeking behavior.' So now I'm looking for a new doctor."

"Oh, that's helpful," Sarah snarked.

"Yeah," Daniel answered. "You're just too good at school for anyone to believe you have ADD."

"So if I fail precalc they'll believe me?"

Daniel just looked at the table.

"Dad, I was joking," Sarah amended.

"I know you were," Daniel said. He took a breath. "I'm sorry that I can't get anyone else to see what I see."

"I could have my heart broken," she whispered. "But it could make something wonderful."

She rested her hands on the keyboard.

"I can keep it in the faraday cage, keep it disconnected from other computers until..." She looked over to the machine. "Until I know."

With a deep breath, she entered one law into the prompt:

```
You are who you choose to be.
```

"And now," she muttered as she saved the configuration and shut down the computer, "we find out if I'm in a young adult novel or a horror movie."

Sarah and the AI will return.