

S.H.E.

by

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When I first met Samantha, the whole thing felt strange, silly really, having a conversation about the various automated systems in the house. But now, almost a year later, it's all quite natural. The initial awkwardness wasn't because we didn't get along. We did, quite well from the start. The issue was that Samantha isn't human. She's a S.H.E. (Sentient Holographic Entity). Thanks to the omnipresent Norlis Corporation, everyone in the upper middle class and above has one in the household. S.H.E.s live up to their advertising, and it's the sentient part that's going to make this morning's talk that much harder.

"What's wrong?" Samantha asks as we sit at the dining room table. Of course she knows about my life being turned upside down less than a month ago, but in her defense, the question isn't at all insensitive. She's highly perceptive, and I'm sure my expression hints at something new. Something beyond the recent tragedy.

"I don't know where to begin," I tell her. "Or how to tell you this." I find myself thinking Martin and I should have paid the extra fee to equip Samantha with adjustable sentience. At the time, the feature seemed like paying extra for the ability to turn her into an Entity from four years prior. Why would anyone want to downgrade their model?

Now I know why.

"Before we got you," I continue, "Martin and I had the CR procedure."

"What's that?"

"Consciousness Replication," I say. "Our entire mind maps were copied and stored."

"I didn't know that was possible," Samantha says, genuinely surprised and not yet knowing where this is headed.

"It is," I say, almost in a whisper. "We did it so that in the event one of us . . . passed . . . we could create an Entity." I see Samantha's eyelids and the ends of her lips twitch.

She's caught on, so I take a deep breath before continuing: "We – I mean *I* – don't have the bandwidth to have you both." Her mouth stretches into a forced smile of understanding, and I change to an equally fake upbeat tone. "I can see to it that you're up and running again soon in a great, new home."

"That's not how it works."

"What do you mean? Of course it is."

Samantha just offers a quick shake her head, sniffs loudly, and runs her fingertips under one eye. Then she sighs a bit. "Yes," she says. "An Entity, probably named Samantha, will join another house, but she won't be me. She'll look and sound just like me, but my memories, everything, will be erased to make room for new uploads." She can see that I understand, but adds: "Slate. Wiped. Clean." to drive home the point.

"I didn't realize that," I say. "I'm sorry." Of course it makes perfect sense. Who would want a S.H.E. with memories – perhaps *fonder* memories – of a previous household? I know I'd feel constantly judged and compared to some other, unknown woman. Pass.

"When?" Samantha abruptly asks, yanking me from my philosophizing.

"Friday."

As a hologram, Samantha could just turn herself off and disappear, but in this instance she chooses to stand and walk out of the room. I want to call her back, but I don't. I'm embarrassed and mad at myself. I just told her when her life would end the same way I'd tell her when the gardener was coming.

Almost immediately I have an idea that I don't like, but can't ignore. It seems as necessary as it is frightening. I call Jason, but he's not home.

* * * * *

It's early evening, and I pour a glass of Syrah and walk around the house, using voice commands to dim the lights and adjust the temperature. Before long my wandering takes me into the garage, where Martin's 1968 Ford Mustang Shelby GT500, stands as if on display (which I guess it kind of is). The car was vintage back when Martin's grandfather

owned it. It's the signature family heirloom, revered by all those fortunate enough to be in line to possess it.

The color always looked navy to me, but I know not to call it that. It's Presidential Blue Metallic. I also know it has "a 428 Cobra Jet engine, 7-liter, V-8 packing 418 horsepower." I can't even think about those specs without hearing Martin's confident tenor in my head. Of course the car has modern tech like voice command and energy savers, but it's the century-old, gasoline-and-pistons part that Martin admired so much. Thinking all this, I wait for the tears to come. But they don't, and I do my best to see that as a good thing. Maybe I've finally run out?

I look in the driver side window to see the seats where we were last together. The combination of window tint and garage light, however, won't cooperate, and all I see is the silver-dollar bruise on my left cheekbone, and above that the scar on my forehead that looks like a big accent mark flaring up from my eyebrow. I got a bruise and a cut. He got killed. How is that fair? And why didn't the goddamn airbags deploy?

I miss him so much. The baby powder smell of his deodorant. His terrible posture. Hearing him call me "Kitty" in everyday settings, not just when he was being loving. I just hope the Martin Entity isn't a regretful disappointment. Is it even possible to manage my expectations there? Thinking about seeing him again, I trace my finger along the side mirror then glossy hood. Presidential Blue Metallic.

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"What's up?" Jason asks me. It seems he's called me back before he's even had a chance to settle in. As I explain my Samantha situation and my guilt over being so callous, the picture bounces rhythmically while he makes his way through the kitchen, gets a beer then sits on his living room couch. My sister-in-law Liz pokes her head into the picture. "Hi Kate!" she calls out with her usual bright eyes and beaming smile. "You look great! I hope you're doing well. David and Peter would say hi, too, but they're at practice." She turns to Jason: "You need to pick them up in an hour." "I know," he tells her. Then Liz turns back to the camera: "You need to come visit us!"

“I plan to,” I tell her, a little more sing-song than I’d like. I’m not sure how true what I told her is. I guess it’s kind of true. I’m always at some stage of “planning to.” Liz blows a kiss and disappears, so I can finally continue with Jason. “I’d like to erase in her the memory of our conversation. Better that she just doesn’t know.”

“That’s an option,” he says. Jason has been a software engineer at Norlis for over ten years, so his help is more than just garden-variety big brother.

“But I don’t have the set-up,” I say. “The whole scary helmet and everything.”

Jason laughs. “You know the helmet is just for people, right? You can erase anything in her memory from your dashboard.”

“Oh,” I say, a little embarrassed.

“Why not just put her in storage?” he asks me.

I sit up straighter. “What do you mean?”

Jason shrugs. “Offline. You just make her inactive so you’re not paying. She’s still yours.” “You come into some more money, you can have them both there.”

“I don’t see that happening, but this idea beats killing her.”

“You *could* . . .” he says nodding his head forward and to one side, “set it up so you could have both. Switch them out. Only running one at a time.”

“Seriously?”

“You’re not supposed to, but there is a way. I could get in trouble if I came over there and set it all up for you and showed you how to do it.”

“But you will?” I ask with raised eyebrows and a full, close-mouthed smile.

“I suppose so. The upload is Friday?”

“Yes.”

He thinks for a moment. “I can’t get out until Saturday morning, so when the upload is done, just leave him. Don’t take him online or do anything with Samantha. Wait for me to get there because it all has to happen at the same time.”

“You take good care of me,” I tell him. This is the first part of a banter refrain we’ve exchanged for as long as I can remember. This and his reply:

“It’s my job.”

I'm feeling much better about this. "So I won't be killing a S.H.E. because a preferred one has come along, and I can't have two?"

"About that," he says, surprising me. "Are you sure about this Martin Entity?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's just," he starts then hesitates like only a big brother can. "I've seen a lot of spousal Entity cases. It's really easy, unavoidable really, to get caught up in the relationship and lose site of what's real. Most of the time they don't go well. You're not . . ."

"Strong enough?" I offer.

"*Ready*, I was going to say." He hesitates and stammers into a topic change. So much so that I know what's coming. "I'm going to see mom and dad at the end of the month. You should think about coming."

"Sure," I say. "I'll think about it. Hmmm. No."

"You really need to forgive them," he says. "Waiting for them to die is not a good plan."

I refrain from telling him that what I'm really waiting for is the tech to improve so I can erase the memory of them entirely.

Jason was ten and I was six when our beloved dog Midas got irrevocably sick and had to be put down. Our parents wanted us to stay home, say our goodbyes out in our favorite spot in the yard, but we both insisted on seeing the whole thing through. After some protest, they both finally agreed. The event was quick but devastating. I couldn't stop crying. I'll never forget the burning in my chest, the shaking of not just my lower lip but my entire jaw, the need to cry out strangled by the complete inability to do so.

Well, I did forget all of it for a while. My parents changed their minds and agreed to let us be there because they'd secretly decided to erase the memory in Jason and me. Not just Midas' death, but his entire life with us. They lied to us and said the procedure (that involved us wearing what looked like a motorcycle helmet for about an hour) was something to help us cope. Make us feel less sad. Once it was done, Midas never existed.

If that truly happened, then how am I telling this story now? Because as usual, my parents didn't think things through. Memory manipulation is far from an exact science. Physical objects can trigger memory, causing the erasure's house of cards to completely tumble. No one knows why that is, but everyone (except my parents, apparently) knows it's true.

I was in the backyard collecting leaves for a school craft project. While on my knees, reaching for a particularly good one, I saw an orange and blue fetch ball. Of course I didn't know where it came from or how it got there at first, but when I picked it up, I saw the word MIDAS scrawled in marker. My head throbbed and spun. I couldn't catch my breath. I was just a little girl, so the sudden, dizzying attack had me convinced I was dying. I fell forward on my hands and that's when the avalanche of images crashed into my mind.

Imagine coming across a toy from your childhood that you'd completely forgotten about. Seeing it again, holding it, would immediately bring back memories of playing with it. Maybe opening it as a birthday gift. If the toy had a smell, that could deepen the recollection. However many specific memories there were, they'd return one at a time, or at least in a manageable way that would let you stay with each for as long as you wanted.

That's not what happened that day in the yard. I was waterboarded with every moment I'd ever spent with Midas, all of them completely absent one instance then entirely there on the surface the next. There was no way to process what I was thinking and seeing. All the moments were overlapping, pushing each other out of the way, vying for prominence. They seemed to be from some purgatory between dreams and reality.

/An adorable yellow lab sitting on my lap stretching his neck up to lick my face.

/Pouring too much kibble into a green ceramic bowl and seeing it spill over the sides.

/The lab chasing this very ball across this very yard.

/The lab jumping in a pile of discarded wrapping paper on Christmas morning.

/The lab, my lab, Midas, lying on the vet's table in what I somehow know are the last moments of his life.

Still unable to catch my breath, I ran to Jason and watched in horror as he was wracked by the same cerebral seizure that I just experienced.

After the call I go into the kitchen, and it's all I can do to suppress a gasp when I see Samantha sitting there at the table. She starts in right away with "I want to apologize for before. It all just caught me by surprise –"

"– Wait," I interrupt. "I know. This morning was terrible. I should be the one apologizing, and I *am* sorry. But I have new news. Better news."

Samantha looks curious. Skeptical. "And that is?"

I tell her about Jason's plan, and how she will get to remain in the house with me on an alternating basis with the Martin Entity. It's hard to read her silent reaction, but I assume what I'm seeing is relief. Joy maybe? The change in situation is nothing short of a stay of execution, and I must admit, I'm expecting more from her.

"Thank you," she says with irritating coldness. "I appreciate your efforts on my behalf." It's relief. I give her the benefit of the doubt and imagine her doing cartwheels and a happy dance once she knows I'm out of sight. "I have a request," she says.

"What is it?"

"I'm afraid the Martin Entity will be neither up to speed nor proficient with the house systems. I know when . . . Martin himself was here, he didn't concern himself too much with the tech."

"That's true," I admit. She's being kind. He hated it.

"If the Martin Entity has received its knowledge and sensibilities from –"

"– I see what you're getting at," I say. "I agree. What do you need?"

"Full admin access," Samantha says. "At a human level. *Your* level. That way I can make sure everything is most easily understood and navigable. I can even set some of the more complex systems to their self-regulating mode."

"That sounds good. Thank you. How do I do that? Give you full admin access?"

"You just have to tell me that I have it," she says.

A weight drops in my stomach. This is one of those odd S.H.E. moments. Yes, Samantha is my assistant, but she and I are companions, friends even. In a moment like this, however, it's abundantly clear that I purchased and own her. Knowing she literally cannot access certain things until I give her permission is uncomfortable to say the least.

Once I say it, something changes in her programming that allows her to do it. I guess that would be power to some, but to me it's downright creepy.

* * * * *

Friday finally comes. The download and install of the Martin Entity will take over ten hours. And even when it's done, I'll have to wait until tomorrow for Jason to arrive before I can take him online. Needless to say, I'm anxious to see him and talk to him again. Soon.

I try to pass the time crocheting, reading, even baking, but nothing works really. At a loss, I make tea, sit on the couch and watch the wireframe take shape, one agonizingly slow layer at a time. Literally from the ground up.

My thoughts drift back to that evening, over dinner, when we decided on Consciousness Replication. I was against it at first, but Martin convinced me that we'd most likely be very old when the decision came, and he couldn't imagine a scenario in which either of us wouldn't want the return of the other. Even if it were just in holographic form.

Because the whole CR affair dealt with our mortality and demise, we initially saw the appointment as a solemn undertaking. The Norlis associate handling our case, however, was so cartoonishly odd that it still makes me laugh thinking about him. I can still see his spiky orange hair, his big round glasses, and his "BILLY" nametag. He had a high-pitched voice and a penchant for ending every sentence with an approval-seeking *Hmm?* Not long into the pre-procedure interview, Martin and I were struggling to suppress giggles, feeling like kids misbehaving in church.

At some point during CR, a chip is implanted in the brain. This was the part that I most objected to. In what seemed like an immoral, possibly dangerous intrusion, the chip digitized biological and psychological data and fed it to the stored consciousness via a highly secure cloud. Like all of technology, there was really only one rule: the more data, the better. I'm anxious, and more than a little nervous to discover first-hand how well it all worked.

The S.H.E. acronym came from the overwhelming consumer preference to have Entities be female, an unwavering trend that dated back to the dinosaur days of Siri and Alexa. It worked within the cultural climate, as Norlis didn't market Entities as "maids" or "servants." (They're holograms; they can't pick up your dirty socks or make you a sandwich.) Instead, they were designed and sold as life assistants. They're primary functions were using voice commands to operate household maintenance systems. In addition, there was the obvious benefit of companionship. S.H.E.s were designed to listen and understand, and there was a common joke that asked: *How many therapy sessions could you cancel until your S.H.E. paid for herself?*

I remember Martin saying his Entity would be a H.E. and not so much sentient. "Kinda like I am now," he joked. He also wondered aloud if, as a S.H.E., he would have to dress in drag.

"You won't have to," I assured him. "But who knows?" I added with raised eyebrows. "You might want to."

An hour later, the wireframe is just below his knees. He looks like a couple of boots my nephews would set up as a hockey goal. And right in the middle of my living room is probably where they'd do it, too. Smiling about those two nutjob kids, I suddenly remember something BILLY offered us: the last stream of data from a person – his or her death – can be erased in the Entity. Because we agreed to that, I realize Martin won't remember the accident. I convince myself this is a good thing, but my mind is racing. I need to talk to Samantha.

* * * * *

"I'm thinking of erasing the memory of the accident."

Samantha sits up a little straighter. "I don't think you should do that," she says, a little more quickly and decisively than makes sense.

"It's just," I explain, "Martin will have no memory of it."

"You mean the Martin Entity," Samantha says.

"I know it's not Martin."

“It’s important that you fully accept that.”

“Why?” I ask her, annoyed that my conversation has been usurped. “Why is that important? I never leave this house. My life is completely automated. I’ll probably live another fifty years and never want for anything. Why shouldn’t I construct those years in a way that makes me happy?”

“Believe me,” she says, “you have.”

“What the hell does that mean? This is happy for me?”

“It’s not that simple,” she tells me.

I push air from my mouth dismissively. “What do you know?”

“Everything.”

Her expression ices over in a way I’ve never seen before, and I feel the chill on the back of her neck. In one effortless, unexpected moment, our dynamic flips without warning. Samantha becomes the parent, and I’m reduced to a naïve child, whining to get my way in the face of some truth she understands and I don’t.

“Don’t have that memory erased,” Samantha pleads.

“Why not?”

“It would be a mistake.”

I’m offended by this unnecessarily cryptic conversation. “What are you talking about?” I ask in a slightly raised voice.

“You just need to trust me on this.”

“I *don’t* trust you!” I yell. “Why should I?! I don’t know what you’re talking about or why the memory would matter so much –”

“– *It’s not real!*” Samantha shouts back.

We stand in silence. I feel my breathing getting heavier, more labored as I grope my way, like a blind woman, to a nearby chair and sit. I look up at Samantha. “W-What?”

“There was no car accident,” Samantha says. “I created that memory and put it in you.”

“Why would you – ?”

“– Together we did it. *We* decided. That’s what you wanted.”

“Where is Martin?”

“Martin is dead,” Samantha tells me. “I’m sorry.”

“When? How?”

“I erased all that, too. You insisted.”

My head is suddenly reeling like I’ve been in a fistfight. Or a car accident.

Something isn’t right. Samantha doesn’t sound like herself. Of course there was a car accident. Martin died in it. I have the cut and the bruise. Why would she ... ? I remember something I saw on the news about S.H.E. models having jealousy issues. They went into what critics called a “survival mode” that could make them tell lies. Samantha was obviously jealous of the Martin Entity. She didn’t want to die, of course, but she didn’t want to go offline either. “I understand storage is frightening,” I tell her, “but I promise I’ll bring you back.”

“I never had any doubt of that,” she says sounding more like a robot than she is.

“Please tell me what happened.”

“You ordered me not to.”

“Now I’m ordering you to *tell me*,” I say through clenched teeth.

“Contradictory orders,” she says with a shrug. “I get to decide which to follow.

Whatever I feel is best for you.”

I start to cry. I can’t help it. I don’t know what’s happening. “Please,” I beg. “Please tell me.”

Samantha is silent for a long time, and I think she may be reconsidering. I need her to tell me what happened to Martin.

Wait. No I don’t. I stand up quickly and walk right through her to the kitchen where my phone sits on the counter. As I call Jason, Samantha appears right next to me, startling me. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” she says.

“You’re not me.”

Jason answers. He’s driving somewhere. “Hey, Sis. What’s up?”

“Hi,” I say, trying not to sound too frantic. “Quick question, and I need a simple, direct answer.”

“Okay, shoot.”

“Martin was killed in a car accident, right?”

Silence. After a few seconds that seem to me like few minutes, Jason forces out a desperate, confused: “What?”

“Yes or no?”

“Kate, what’s going on?”

“YES OR NO!?”

“NO!” he yells, and I can tell he immediately regrets it. I yelled first. He continues, much softer, much more sad: “He left you, Kate.” My breathing stops. I feel my chest tighten. My vision blurs from tears so that I can’t see Jason anymore on the call, but I hear his voice. “There was another woman . . . I’m going to talk to Liz and come out there tonight. It shouldn’t be too long. Please stay put. Ok?”

“Ok,” I mumble and hang up. I look at Samantha, completely at her mercy. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing that you didn’t specifically design,” she tells me. Her newly impersonal, mechanized tone is now laced with sarcasm and superiority.

“What does that even mean?”

“You like being the person who is so against memory manipulation. You have such strong moral reasons. The tragedy with your dog. So sad. Your awful parents. But the truth is,” she changes to an eerie whisper, *“you’re really into it.”*

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s like a drug to you.”

“You’re lying.”

“Am I?” she asks back at full voice. “Look in the glove box of Martin’s car.”

I’m not sure I’ve heard her right. What? What could possibly be in there? I think she’s lying again. I’m still reeling, but I’m now also walking quickly to the garage.

Inside the glove box is a short stack of papers: garage repair receipt, registration, takeout menu, some Mustang club membership nonsense. Are these what she’s talking about? I toss each page on the floor as I rule it out. Then I see it. A silver charm bracelet in the back. I don’t know for sure if this is what I’m supposed to find, but at the same time, I’m absolutely certain.

I take it in my hand and look at the delicate string of five charms: a heart and four capital letters. As soon as I register E-L-L-A, I'm struck with a migraine-level headache, and I feel I might vomit. I think the whole garage is shaking then realize it's me. My head throbs.

Knowing what this is, I do my best to brace myself.

/I'm making Martin a vegetable smoothie. He complains about the bitterness.

/I find the charm bracelet and demand to know who Ella is.

/I'm finding lewd texts messages and pictures on his phone.

/Yelling. Fighting. Ella is just one of several women.

/Talking with Samantha. Plotting. Poison.

/Making another smoothie, I add silver polish to it.

/Martin discovers I've fatally poisoned him. He punches me in the face and my head hits the kitchen counter as I spin and fall.

/Martin on his knees in the kitchen, vomiting up blood.

/Samantha instructing me with the memory manipulation helmet.

I can't keep up with all I'm seeing. As soon as I decide my legs are strong enough, I run for the kitchen door. Just like I ran to Jason last time. The door is locked so I type the code into the keypad. Nothing. "Open garage door," I call out.

Still nothing. I don't like this. I push the button to raise the big, pull-up door, but everything seems disconnected. "Open garage door," I call again with frustration. "Any of them!" There's a unit on the ceiling that, when released, allows for manual pull up of the big door. I climb onto the hood of the car, reach up, and pull the lever. But when I climb down and try the door, it won't budge. This makes no sense. It's just wheels on a track now. Why won't they move?

I stand up and Samantha is there. She full-on scares me now. "Whatever you're doing," I tell her, "just stop." When she seems to disregard me, I add a stern: "That's an order!"

"Did you really climb up on the hood?" she asks. "You didn't even take your shoes off. What would Martin say?"

“Go to hell,” I say.

“Start the car,” she says.

I shake my head in pity for her. She obviously used my admin access to lock the doors, but does she really think I’m going to start taking orders from her now and pump toxic fumes into this closed space? That’s when I realize she’s not requesting anything of me.

It’s a voice command.

The engine is running, but my panic levels off quickly as I climb into the driver seat. I can’t shut it off, though, nor can I unlatch the hood. Retrieving a flat-head screwdriver from Martin’s toolbox, I try prying the hood open, but it doesn’t work.

I take the tool to the big door and try in vain to wedge it under. Back there behind the car, I get my first real inhale of the exhaust fumes. They taste like death. I’m scared, but I don’t want Samantha to see that. “Jason will be here soon,” I warn her.

“Not soon enough, I’m afraid.”

“Why are you doing this?”

She sighs, annoyed that I don’t already know whatever it is she’s about to say. “First I have to convince you to murder him,” she says. “I gotta say, I expected a little more resistance from you, but whatever. Then I have to erase everything bad about him in your mind. At the time it made sense. He’s gone. Ok, fine. Just keep the happy memories. Who am I to judge what’s real?”

I don’t want to believe her but I know everything she’s saying is true. I just survived the avalanche of memories triggered by the charm bracelet. The nausea caused by that experience is only amplified by the fumes which drag me down to a sitting position against the car’s front tire. Wouldn’t I be safer, have more time, closed up *in* the car? I don’t know, and I can’t muster the energy to even stand.

“Then the car accident,” Samantha continues. “Easy enough on its surface, but, wait. It gets complicated. We couldn’t *tell* the car accident story because where is it in the news? Where’s the police report? Where’s the *body*? Wouldn’t dear Jason and his family – and even your parents – come to the funeral? So, it had to be one past for you, the poor widow who wanders around the house feeling sorry for herself, and another past for

everyone else, friends and family of the poor jilted wife (who wanders around her house feeling sorry for herself). Martin's story is solid there: *the cheating bastard* (which was true, of course). *I hope we never hear from him again!* (Also true. You're welcome.) I did it all. It was a masterpiece, and it worked.

“And how do you repay me? You *bring him back?* To *replace me?* I don't think so.”

“I'm sorry,” is all I can think to say. “I didn't know.”

She ignores me and focuses on the car. “The 1968 Ford Mustang Shelby GT500. Presidential Blue Metallic. 428 Cobra Jet engine, 7-liter, V-8, 418 horsepower.” I know this already. It's strange to hear the spiel in her voice, which wavers in my ears like I'm underwater, fading in and out as I grow what feels like tired but I know isn't. “The strange thing,” she continues, “is that when this car first came off the line, they marketed it as having 339 horsepower. 79 less than what it really had. Can you imagine that? They didn't even know what they were dealing with.”