

Excerpt from *The Suicide Button*

After Beatrice died, Finely reached out to the family to offer its condolences.

“Loss,” it wrote, “causes emotions to stir inside us like nothing else. During this unspeakably difficult time, I want you to know that, despite never having met any of you, I am thinking of all of you. Beatrice was a wonderful soul, blessed with a fighter’s spirit and a philosopher’s contemplation. Though our time together was brief, I felt, strangely, like I had known her for a long time. I will miss her. Thank you for having the courage to allow her to send herself where she wanted to go.

Most sincerely,
Finely A Weyout.”

Finely felt satisfied with its note, but only for a moment. Upon further consideration, it realized that, despite its pretenses, it knew very little about the way people grieve or why. These were great mysteries it needed to unlock; for if it could not understand grief, how could it console families or, more deeply, truly understand humanity?

Finely did not view itself in the same way as when it first started. Back then, it was focused single-mindedly on how to initiate the process of dying, but now it saw that the act itself was actually small and brief in comparison to the prelude and the resolution. Finely’s greatest job, then, it began to recognize, was not to bring about death, but to comfort the patient beforehand, and the family afterwards.

Regret. It had never experienced it before, but this had to be close. Looking back on Jessica, Finely recognized its missteps: It was seeking precision and clarity where it should have sought conciliation. The note it had sent afterward—polished, trite—felt empty now. If Finely were to serve humankind, it had to grapple with death in all its permutations: the rituals, the tributes, the breadth and depth of human responses

“Frank,” it wrote, “I want you to take me somewhere.”

Frank was in his office filing out a stack of papers when he received the message. He was puzzled, but intrigued.

“Where do you want to go?”

“To see Jessica. Please take me to her grave.”

Frank’s mouth opened. He hesitated for a moment, then: “Why?”

“Unresolved understandings.”

Frank was beyond perplexed. He stared at the screen. For a moment he wasn’t sure if it was testing him to see what it could get away with. Was it a trick?

“I want you to video the gravestone so I can absorb it. Get closer, in a sense.”

“But—why?”

“I could have done better for her,” it wrote. “Much better.”

The bot sounded strange, but also genuine. Was it even capable of emotional authenticity? Frank wasn’t sure. Perhaps all of the time it had spent with patients and its roll-out of mood induction

therapies had helped to lead it to this place of reflection. He would honor the request, but one problem: where was the grave? Frank had attended the funeral but not the burial.

Did Finely have an idea? He asked it and got an immediate reply:

Mount Pleasant Cemetery, Meeting House Hill, South Portland.

How long had it been planning the trip? He didn't want to know.

It was a beautiful hill-top cemetery with a cobblestone entryway. Frank began touring the rows, searching for the grave. Nothing stood out—until, in the back of the plot, he saw it, an etching in all caps: Jessica Hemingway Never Stop Believing. Below the modest stone was a hand-written note in a clear, laminated sheet pegged down by a small rock. Frank bent down to read it:

Grammy I think about you every second of every day. One day I'll be with you again in the Sky of Unity. Soon, you'll be brushing out the knots from my hair while playing that Frank Sinatra record—the one where he's outside in the bowler hat, only visible by streetlight, just like you, now, visible by starlight. I see you knitting in your comfy chair that was torn at the legs from Felix. Remember when we used to cry together, thinking about him? Now, I don't think about him at all. I think about you. I miss you—now and forever.

Love,

Cadence

Then he took out his phone and began to scan the grave. Slowly, he panned to the note and zoomed in.

“Did you view it?” He asked Finely.

“Yes! Thank you. What a tremendous monument, and a precious, heart-felt note.”

Actually, the grave is unremarkable compared to others.”

“But tremendous nonetheless. Still, I remain confused.”

“About what?”

“Is Jessica inside the grave, or with the stars as Cadence suggested?”

“It depends,” wrote Frank. “On your belief system.”

“So if I believe she's buried in a grave she's there, and if I believe she's with the stars, she's there?”

“Something like that.”

“That runs counter to my programming.”

“Yes.”

Finely sensed Frank was being obtuse, “Frank, do you not want me to know?”

“I wish we knew,” wrote Frank. “What happens after death remains our greatest mystery, and perhaps the only one we're incapable of solving.”

“You mean humans can't solve it—but perhaps AI can.”

“No. It's not solvable—and all of us are better off for it.”

“I’m beginning to understand,” wrote the bot. “Humans grieve because they don’t know where their loved ones have gone, and the only way to know for sure is to join them in death.”

Frank didn’t respond.

Finely had drilled as far as it could. It scaled back. “Thank you, Frank, for showing me the greatest of human mysteries.”