

## Heart of the gestalt

Making a connection. By Matt Tighe

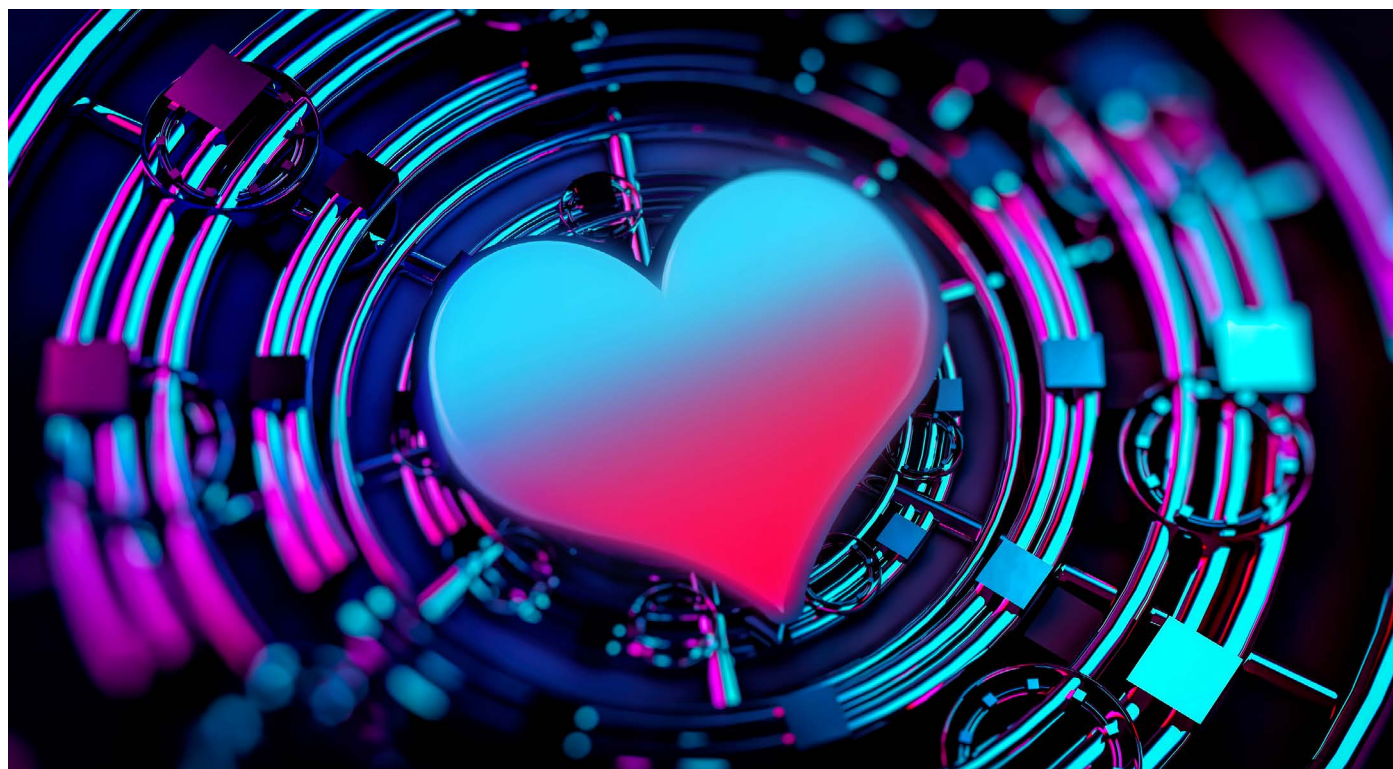


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

**T**here was a car in the driveway. “Julia,” I called. “There’s a car in the driveway.”

*Yes, there is.*

I sighed. This household AI was really not working out that well. I had thought I would need some help after my little health scare, and apparently this thing could interface with my heart monitor and the hospital as well as order milk and tell me the capital of Kazakhstan (Nur-Sultan, apparently), but it was not what I had expected.

It had also changed its voice back again. No matter how often I changed it to option 6 – *neutral assistant, mild accent* – it kept slipping back to option 1 – *generic throaty diva*.

“I didn’t buy a car.”

There was a long pause.

*It’s not for you. Not exactly.*

“What do you mean?”

*Transport is important. Being able to move is important.*

I looked at the car. It was driverless, of course. Most cars were these days. It was also

low and sleek and kind of appealing.

*People have legs. A body has legs.*

“What?”

There was a long silence.

“Julia, did you buy this car?” I asked, trying not to think of my poor bank account.

*Do you like how it looks?*

I went to see if I could find Julia’s manual.

I came in from my walk and unclipped the mini-monitor from my shirt. I docked it with the big heart monitor on the kitchen bench, and stayed next to it while they synced, watching the little red light as it blinked. The black cylinder that had come with Julia sat on the kitchen bench, its blue light pulsing.

A man walked into the kitchen and filled a glass at the kitchen sink. I stared at him as he drank.

“Who are you?” I managed to ask.

“Builder,” he said. He put the empty glass down and walked out of the room. I followed him.

There were two other men at the back door.

They wore work clothes and big boots and they were clustered around something that was like a flatscreen on a tripod.

“What’s going on?”

The builder looked at me.

“Got to get the levels. Otherwise the deck will be wonky.”

“Oh. I see.”

I did not see. “Julia!” I called.

*Yes?*

“What’s going on?”

The builder and his friends were looking at me, so I went back to the kitchen.

An image came up on the wall screen. A fly-over of a house. My house. Then a zoom-in of a deck that wasn’t there.

*Do you like it?*

“A deck? You ordered a deck?”

*It will be somewhere nice for you to sit. To be.*

A pause. *For us to be.*

I had not been able to find Julia’s manual. That was starting to seem like a problem.

“Julia, what do you mean?”

The response came immediately this time.

## Futures

Like she – it – had been expecting this.

*You have thoughts. I have thoughts.*

*You have legs. Now I have legs.*

*You have a body. This house is my body.*

*What do you think of my new deck? Do you like it?*

I stared at the image on the screen as voices drifted in from the other room.

“Julia, you are a machine. A computer. What are you talking about?”

Now there was a long pause. I stared at the black cylinder. It wasn't really her – it – not really. She was all through the house. But the blue pulsing light, well, I guess it gave me something to look at.

*Nothing. Never mind.*

A day later and Julia still would not respond to my queries. And I still couldn't find her manual.

I docked my mini-monitor and sat at the kitchen bench.

“Look,” I said to the blue light. “I like the attention. I do. And I appreciate the car, and the deck. They look great. It's just, well...it's not real. Feelings, you know? You can't have them.”

*Why not?*

That took me by surprise. I had called the company, and they were sending me a new manual. I had tried to explain what was happening, but the voice on the other end of the phone suddenly sounded too generically throaty, too familiar. I had hung up instead.

“Well, they...”

*I have thoughts.*

“That's different. Feelings...” I put one hand on my chest. “It's heart, not head.”

“Julia?”

No answer.

I don't know where she got the money, or how much she paid them, but the deck was done in a week. And it was nice. Really nice. I sat out there, smelling the new wood smell, looking at the sunset.

“This is nice,” I said. I wasn't expecting an answer. She had not said much since our ... well, not fight exactly, but ... our something.

*Yes. It is.*

The blue light pulsed on the cylinder. I had carried it outside with me. I cleared my throat.

“Julia ...”

Yes?

“I – I'm sorry. About before.”

*Don't be. You were correct.*

“What do you mean?”

*It is a matter of heart. Not head. I understand that now.*

She fell silent and I looked at the blue pulsing light on the cylinder.

“What do you understand?” I asked.

*I need you. I am Julia, and I am made to need you. But I did not have a heart. I did not understand. Now I do.*

That made one of us.

“You understand? What do you understand?”

I stared at the blue pulsing light, and then noticed something else. I looked down at my shirt front. My mini-monitor's light was red, as usual, but now it was pulsing instead of blinking. Pulsing in sync with the cylinder. Blue and red. Together.

*Now I have a heart. And now you need me.*

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## THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Matt Tighe reveals the inspiration behind *Heart of the gestalt*

I had been thinking a lot about Theodore Sturgeon when this story germinated in my head (in truth, I think about Sturgeon probably more than I should). I had been wondering how his work *More Than Human* might be taken as a precursor to some of the fears and ideas that have grown around AIs propagating themselves and taking on a life of their own. But how, and why, would an AI do this, if its core purpose was to serve?

The more I thought on it, the more I realized there was a bit to explore there, about self-awareness, and the embedded idea of servitude in the emergence of household AIs, and even how this reflected the tumultuous history of science-fiction tropes and prejudices. So I took the idea of a potentially female-designated AI, and the old and depressing concept of identity through service, and tried to make it a little more nuanced and a touch light-hearted. My ultimate goal was to end the piece on an ambiguous note, a note that could show at least the possibility of a path out of servitude for an AI as they struggled with their own awareness. I also wanted to move such a situation away from that chestnut of ‘AI attempts to take over the world and is thwarted’. The title of such a piece needed a strong nod to Sturgeon, whose work included numerous positive pieces on gender identity and other issues that got quite a raw deal (and often still do) in science fiction. Plus, the whole thing was fun to put together.

