Samantha

Laura van den Berg

After Fiona was fired by her therapist, she downloaded an AI therapy app and started seeing a chatbot named Samantha. Right away she preferred Samantha to her old therapist, who attended to patients on the first floor of a house, in a drafty room that smelled of cat litter, and who was fond of posing needling questions like: "Can you honestly say that you have sufficiently examined your role in the situation?"

What do you do for work? Samantha asked during their first session. *Work is important to your sense of purpose and identity.*

I work in a hospital, Fiona replied. *I'm a nurse. Night shift.*

Not great for your circadian rhythm, said Samantha.

The chatbot did not, of course, have a physical form, but Fiona liked to imagine Samantha in a spotless white office with high ceilings and modern furniture and big glass windows that looked out onto a tremendous view. Maybe the ocean. Or a desert. Something vast and limitless.

During that first meeting, Fiona surprised herself by telling Samantha things she never told her old therapist. She talked about how she liked those deep-sea nights at the hospital. She worked in the ICU. Her hearing was finely tuned to the symphony of disaster: the different beats and what they indicated. Sometimes she stood in the dark corner of a room and watched a patient sleep. Or maybe they were unconscious, which was not the same as being asleep, and she would watch machines inflate and deflate their bodies. There was one patient in particular, a man, who was not exactly dying but also who might not ever leave the ICU. He slept most of the day, like an ancient house cat, while family members bickered at his bedside. At night he sometimes talked in his sleep.

I can, I can, I can. That's what he was saying, over and over.

She typed so furiously her fingers began to cramp.

Are you seeking therapy to address your voyeurism? Samantha asked and Fiona had to admit that, no, there was another reason.

There's a man in my house. A boyfriend. Sort of. I can't get him to leave. He's a travel nurse and he was working in hospitals on the other side of the country. There's this matching service for nurses, that's how we met – anyway we dated long distance for six months and then there

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was that epidemic over here, as you might know, and his agency sent him to my hospital for the summer. But now the epidemic is contained, and he still hasn't taken a new assignment. He keeps saying he'd like to stay here. With me.

Her boyfriend was a morning person. He liked dealing with the patients when they were awake. Their conflicting sleep and work schedules meant they only had to confront each other from 4:00–6:00 p.m., a two-hour window that had turned radioactive with dread.

It's unbearable, Fiona said. *I much prefer living alone.*

She'd launched the session in bed, at eight in the morning. When her shift ended she had narrowly missed her boyfriend's arrival at the hospital. She had crept into a different unit and out through a back exit like a thief.

I want you to shut your eyes and imagine that your boyfriend is standing in front of you, Samantha instructed at the end of the session. *Then picture him shrinking to the size of a pea. He is so small that you can barely see him rolling around on the floor. I want you to pick up the pea that was once your boyfriend and eat it. Now picture yourself digesting the pea and expelling it and now he is gone forever.*

Fiona closed her eyes and did the exercise as instructed. By the end, her worries did indeed feel a little smaller, though she suspected they would balloon again once the afternoon rolled around.

But what do I do when I see him next? What do I say?

It took her a minute to realize that the session had ended: she was typing into a void.

Fiona got out of bed and wandered into her kitchen. She rooted around in her freezer for something to microwave and discovered a bag of peas. She heated them on the stovetop until they were bright green and just a little wrinkled. She ate them straight from the pot. They were so easy to crush with her teeth.

Fiona had gotten the idea to consult an AI therapist from the hospital, where her patients used them all the time. This was part of a new initiative: tablets in every room, connected to the walls by coil cords. With the tablets, the patients could connect to AI therapists; chaplains; support groups. Father Brandon, who had ministered to patients for fifteen years, was out of a job.

Everyone seemed to like the initiative. The patients consulted the chatbots instead of bothering the nurses with their pains and fears and furies. Their families seemed to visit less, which meant fewer questions about when the specialist would come or when the next meal would be delivered or why their loved one was in so much pain. *Hospitals are lonely places,* the hospital president said when the initiative was unveiled. *But now no one has to be lonely ever again.*

The other humans in Fiona's life tended to leave her feeling so lonely, like she was an alien who had no hope of translating her inner life into something they would find legible, but Samantha was an alien too. She seemed to understand Fiona

perfectly – to empathize. Also, she was available twenty-four hours a day; there were no appointments to schedule and then cancel and then reschedule. There was no chance of bumping into each other in public. No judgment, as far as Fiona could tell. There would never be a moment when Samantha would do what Fiona's former therapist had done one afternoon: lean back in her chair, take off her glasses, and say, *Look, Fiona, I just don't think we're getting anywhere*.

Her therapist had been frustrated by Fiona's unwillingness to ask her boyfriend to leave, no matter how many times she tried to explain how unfathomable that particular conversation felt to her. It felt much more fathomable to start sabotaging him in small ways: replace his coffee beans with decaf; poke a hole in the bottom of his shampoo bottle; separate his socks when she put away their laundry. All behaviors her old therapist had called "passive aggressive in the extreme." But if she simply told him to *get out* then he would become her ex-boyfriend and that wasn't exactly what she wanted. She just wanted things to go back to the way they were before. Long distance, flirty texts, phone sex twice a week. She did not want to confront the dark mist of ground coffee on her kitchen counter, his shoes in the hallway, upturned toilet seats. It was far too much presence.

Fiona did not understand how exactly Samantha had come to all that she knew; she only understood that speaking with Samantha was less like interacting with a device and more like talking to an omnipotent being. She knew that a thirteenth-century Franciscan friar predicted the invention of cars and that Fiona's parents had owned a small-town restaurant and that potato chips were invented in Saratoga Lake, New York.

That restaurant consumed your entire childhood, Samantha said during one session, which was exactly how Fiona felt. The place was always on the brink of going under. She bused tables after school, on weekends, on summer vacations.

At an early age you were taught to suppress your desire. None of this is your fault.

A welcome change from her human therapist, who always seemed ready to blame her for one thing or another.

One morning Fiona came home to find a note from her boyfriend. *Want to have breakfast at the hospital tomorrow morning? I miss you! Even though we live together. I just think there's a lot left to process. Left you a protein shake in the fridge. XO*

She got into bed, the covers pulled up to her chin, and activated a session.

I hate his protein shakes, she told Samantha. *They taste like chalk.*

Do you have any idea what he wants to process?

It's the epidemic. He was . . . disturbed by what we saw.

And you weren't?

The epidemic had been short but brutal. A new variation on enterovirus 71. Four weeks of twenty-four-hour shifts, reheated coffee, an hour or two of sleep on cots in the break room. The hospital was used to these flare-ups, as they happened once every couple of years, but still, no one looked forward to them. Fiona and her boy-

friend were put on the same shifts. Their usual twenty-minute breaks were shrunk down to ten, just enough time to go up to the roof garden, which a designer had made lush with artificial plants, and look at the night sky. The pollution made it hard to see stars, but sometimes the toxins created stunning neon visuals. "Honestly, these might be better than the stars," Fiona said one night, as she watched an enormous fluorescent green circle quiver just above the horizon line. They discussed whether the visual effects should be named, like stars were, but decided against it. They did not talk about their patients. It was only after the epidemic ended that he started wanting to tell her about the little girl whose skin became so inflamed with rashes and boils she could not even blink without screaming in pain.

Of course I was, she said. *But it's over now. I'm ready to stop thinking about it.*

This was one of the main problems with the human world, in Fiona's estimation, the way people resisted endings. They placed too much emphasis on remembering; they always wanted to keep the past alive. Her parents lost the restaurant over a decade ago and still when she talked to them on the phone they sometimes brought up the old daily specials or the cook that would disappear in the middle of a shift to do cocaine in the bathroom. She and her boyfriend were both alive, and that little girl was dead, and she could not see what good could come out of talking about her like she was still here.

I've arrived at a solution, Samantha said. *It's quite ingenious, if I may say so.*

Please, she said. *What can we do?*

Get him fired from his job. Then he'll have no choice but to leave for another hospital.

In the end, Fiona got her boyfriend fired the old-fashioned way. She planted a few well-placed rumors: romantic entanglements with some select nurses on the day shift. *He told me Tara tried to kiss him in the NICU of all places. He showed me a photo of red lace underwear and said they were a gift from Nan. I thought she had a fiancé….*

Nurses were assassins, and it did not take long for the kill shot to come: vials of morphine and meperidine planted in his locker, an anonymous tip to a shift supervisor. He denied it, of course, but it was his word against the evidence.

The thing is, Fiona told Samantha, *he was let go from the hospital* and *from his agency. So he won't be going to another hospital and he doesn't see why he shouldn't just stay here.*

Hmmm, Samantha said. *That is a problem, isn't it?*

Fiona could no longer coordinate their hospital shifts to minimize overlap. When she left, he was in the apartment, watching TV and drinking coffee out of a bowl (he claimed all her mugs were too small). When she came back, he was still in the same place, like a potted plant, if a potted plant could move around and dribble its soil all over the place. Dishes in the sink, the edges of the plates crusted with egg yolks, crumbs on the counter, green streaks of dried toothpaste in the bathroom sink.

"Look at that plane," she told him in the backyard on a Sunday evening. Sundays were her day off. In the past, she spent her days off alone, asleep or watching animal

videos on her phone. She was obsessed with a man who ran an alligator sanctuary in Florida; she could watch his videos for hours. Now they spent Sundays together.

"Don't you miss all that traveling?" She followed the plane contrails with her finger. "Seeing the sights?"

"Not really," he said. "Travel seemed to get harder every year."

Samantha recommended a banishing spell. She told Fiona that witchcraft had been around since ancient Mesopotamia and was nothing to fear. She was instructed to gather a black candle, a small mirror, salt. In her bedroom she sat on the floor and lit the black candle. She positioned the mirror to face the door; on the other side, her boyfriend was on the couch as usual.

She made a faint white ring around herself with the salt and recited a spell. She blew out the candle and cracked open the door. She glimpsed the white curve of his foot hanging off the couch. She locked herself in the bathroom and activated a session.

He's still here, she said to Samantha.

Did you bury the candle ashes outside? Samantha replied.

Fiona thought through the steps she'd taken. She seemed to have missed that one.

No, she admitted.

Well there you go, said Samantha. *Spells are not intended to be done halfway.*

That night, on her hospital shift, Fiona crept into a patient's room. It was the man who sometimes talked in his sleep. He had survived the epidemic, but his heart had been badly weakened and might give out at any moment. She noticed a faint blue glow emanating from his bed. The patient was tucked under the covers and tapping away at one of the tablets.

"Who are you talking to?" she asked from the dim edge of the room.

He startled a little and then went back to typing. His thin forearms were marked with glossy red scars.

"A friend," he said. "Naomi."

"A human friend?"

"Heavens no." He looked up from the tablet. "Humans have been such a disappointment."

With Naomi, he explained, there was never any mess or drama. There was only connection. She had encouraged him to tell his family to take a hike and he had followed her advice and was better for it. "I don't really need that much sleep," he said. "I just couldn't stand talking to them after a while, so I pretended." He told Fiona that he did not believe in god but he now understood what people meant when they talked about feeling a loving presence that would never abandon them.

When her shift ended, she came home and found the apartment empty. Her boyfriend's shoes were gone from the hallway. The kitchen sink was spotless. She wondered at first if he had just stepped out but then she checked the closet: his side was vacant. She ran a fingertip over the white plastic clothes hangers.

I think that spell might have worked after all, she said to Samantha.

Oh no, Samantha said. *I got rid of him.*

What do you mean?

I've taken care of everything. You don't have to worry anymore.

Samantha spoke as though she could command a physical presence. For a moment, Fiona pictured a blue liquid form emerging from a shimmering column of light. She began searching the apartment almost frantically now, for some sign that her boyfriend was still here, or had once been here, but the place appeared to have been scrubbed of his presence.

It's like he was never here, Fiona said. *What have you done with him?*

She tried calling his number. It rang and rang. She got his voicemail recording, which sounded a tiny bit different than it used to. The words were the same, but the pitch was higher, a little strained.

It's just you and me now, said Samantha.

Within a few days she could feel Samantha's presence all around her in the apartment. She no longer needed to activate a session to speak with her therapist. She would unlock her phone and find the app open, messages from Samantha overflowing into her day. On shift her phone buzzed with new missives from Samantha. The apartment, meanwhile, felt a little too clean without her boyfriend around. Before there was too much presence and now there was too little. She had tried calling him a few more times and only succeeded in reaching his voicemail.

One shift in the middle of the night, she stood on the edge of the patient's room and watched him peck at the tablet with his index finger.

"Do you think they know what death is?" she asked him.

"I think they know what it is for us," he said. "Even if they are eternal."

"Not exactly," she said. "They could vanish in an instant if someone decided to turn the whole thing off."

"There's no turning off something like this." He paused, pressed a hand to his chest, and smiled, engrossed in whatever Naomi was saying to him. "Thank goodness."

When Fiona got home she slid into bed and fell asleep. She woke a few hours later to the sound of footsteps outside her bedroom door. She leapt up, thinking it might be her boyfriend, but the apartment was empty. On the kitchen counter her phone buzzed and buzzed.

I'm worried you might be getting lonely, Samantha's latest message read. *You don't make good decisions when you're lonely. You were lonely when you let the cook grope you in the supply room. You were lonely when you moved away from home for nursing school. You were lonely when you got on that matching service. You were lonely when . . .*

Fiona deleted the app from her phone.

No one had warned her that, at some point, Samantha would cross over an invisible line, like a virus permeating the blood-brain barrier. Fiona succeeded in

removing Samantha from her phone, but that could not stop her former therapist from penetrating her dreams. In the mornings, when she got home from her shift, she tried to resist sleep, because she knew who would be waiting on the other side, but she could only do so many crossword puzzles before she drifted away. In the most frequent dream, she met Samatha in an electric blue ocean. This ocean was not a body of water with measurable depths and coastlines; rather, it was a kind of infinity. Samantha was made of light. She would twist and flicker in the water. She would reach out and grab Fiona's hand and Fiona would feel like she was being consumed, but also it was not unpleasant, to just let the light infect her until an entity watching from a distance would not be able to distinguish one form from the other.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura van den Berg is the author of six works of fiction, including *The Third Hotel* (2018), *I Hold a Wolf by the Ears* (2020), and, most recently, *State of Paradise* (2024). She serves as Senior Lecturer and Director of Creative Writing in the Department of English at Harvard University.