

A Small, Deliberate Mistake

Mara's job was to make machines worse.

Not broken.

Broken was expensive.

Worse required taste.

At nine every morning, she logged into the Human Variance Department and opened a queue of things that had been made too perfectly.

Wedding vows.

Restaurant menus.

Children's drawings.

Apology letters.

Ceramic bowls.

Birthday cards.

Corporate condolences.

Songs.

Photographs.

Handwritten notes generated in seventeen thousand simulated styles.

Her task was simple.

Add evidence of a person.

The official title was Authenticity Adjustment Specialist.

Nobody called it that.

They called themselves Imperfectionists.

The machines had become too good.

That was the problem.

Not evil.

Not conscious.

Not rebellious.

Just embarrassingly competent.

They wrote without hesitation.

Painted without fatigue.

Designed furniture that never wobbled.

Composed songs with mathematically satisfying tension and release.

Generated photographs where every subject blinked at a statistically believable interval.

For a while, people loved it.

Then they got tired.

Nobody could agree on exactly when perfection became suspicious.

Some blamed advertising.

Some blamed politics.

Some blamed the year every streaming service released a hit breakup song within eleven minutes of the same celebrity divorce.

Whatever the cause, consumers developed an appetite for evidence.

A crooked stitch.

A crossed-out word.

A fingerprint in glaze.

A breath before the chorus.

The tiny brutality of an actual choice.

Companies responded immediately.

HUMAN-FINISHED

Anything labeled HUMAN-FINISHED could sell for triple.

Mara's department existed to make sure the label felt true.

Her first assignment every morning was usually handwriting.

The system generated a note.

Mara damaged it.

Not randomly.

Randomness looked fake.

Humans were patterned creatures.

A woman writing to her sister might begin neatly and deteriorate near the emotional part.

A tired father would press harder on the downward strokes.

A teenager might dot an i three letters late because her hand was moving faster than her attention.

Mara knew these things.

She knew that sincere handwriting was rarely evenly insincere.

That was why she was good.

On Monday, she received a thank-you card.

Dear Mr. Patel,

Thank you so much for the beautiful flowers. They meant more to us than you know during this difficult time. Your kindness will not be forgotten.

Warmly,

The Henderson Family

Perfect.

Dead.

Mara stared at it.

She moved beautiful half a millimeter above the line.

Changed the second t in forgotten so it leaned.

Added pressure to the final stroke in kindness.

Then she deleted the period after Warmly.

The quality meter dropped from 99.8 to 94.1.

The Human Probability score climbed from 61 to 87.

Better.

She sent it.

Next came a child's drawing.

A yellow house.

Green lawn.

Blue sky.

Two parents.

One dog.

Sun in the upper-left corner.

Every crayon stroke had been modeled after children ages five through seven.

That was exactly the problem.

It contained every mistake children made and none that any particular child had chosen.

Mara made one parent taller.

She moved the dog too close to the house.

Then she gave the sun eight rays instead of nine.

Human Probability: 92.

Sent.

At 10:43, she received toast.

Not actual toast.

A breakfast advertisement.

The machine had generated a rustic slice of sourdough topped with avocado, radish, microgreens, chili oil, and one soft-boiled egg.

The brief requested:

MAKE ASPIRATIONAL BUT HOMEMADE.

Mara zoomed in.

Everything was wrong.

The egg sat exactly off-center.

The avocado had been spread with simulated irregularity.

Three radish slices overlapped at different angles.

One chili flake had landed near the crust in what the system clearly believed was an act of rebellion.

Mara sighed.

"Trying too hard."

Her desk assistant chimed.

"Comment recorded."

"I wasn't talking to you."

"Comment removed."

Mara deleted the chili flake.

She tore the toast.

A small tear.

Bottom-right corner.

Then she smeared avocado onto the plate.

Human Probability rose nine points.

That was the secret.

Machines added mistakes.

People made consequences.

At lunch, Mara sat with Tomas from Audio.

He specialized in breath.

"Bad day?" he asked.

"They gave me toast."

"Cruel."

"You?"

"Indie folk."

"Worse."

He nodded.

"They keep putting breaths in logical places."

Mara unwrapped her sandwich.

"Amateurs."

"I had to move one into the middle of a word."

"That's nice."

"Thank you."

Across the cafeteria, screens displayed the company slogan.

PERFECTION IS AUTOMATIC.

HUMANITY IS CURATED.

Tomas looked up.

"I hate that sentence."

"You say that every day."

"Because every day it remains terrible."

Mara took a bite.

"You think they'll automate us?"

"Eventually."

"Can you automate imperfection?"

"You can automate anything if the goal is to make somebody unemployed."

"That should be on the wall."

"I've submitted it."

"You have not."

"I submitted it emotionally."

Mara laughed.

That afternoon, she received a mug.

White ceramic.

Hand-thrown appearance.

Slightly uneven lip.

Glaze pooling near the base.

The model had even generated a microscopic thumbprint.

Mara stared.

"No."

Her assistant waited.

"That thumbprint is insulting."

"Would you like to flag the asset?"

"Yes."

"Reason?"

"Cowardice."

"Reason not recognized."

"Fake thumbprint."

"Flagged."

She replaced it with a faint drag mark near the handle.

Not decorative.

Not charming.

Something a potter might have noticed too late and decided was fine.

Human Probability: 96.

She approved it.

At 4:17, the queue changed.

The border turned red.

PRIORITY REVIEW

Mara straightened.

Priority requests came from executive clients.

Films.

Luxury brands.

Government communications.

Royal families.

People who paid enough to need believable flaws immediately.

The file loaded.

It was a letter.

No company logo.

No client name.

No branding.

Just text.

Dear Eli,

I have rewritten this eleven times.

Mara stopped.

The opening was terrible.

Which meant it was good.

She continued.

Every version keeps sounding like I am trying to win. I don't want to win. I just want to say what happened without turning it into a weapon.

The cursor blinked at the end of the paragraph.

Mara frowned.

I was angry when you left. I am still angry, if I am honest. But anger keeps trying to simplify everything, and what happened between us was not simple. You hurt me. I hurt you. Sometimes on purpose. Sometimes because I was tired. Sometimes because I thought being right mattered more than being kind.

There were awkward repetitions.

Uneven sentence lengths.

An unnecessary comma.

A paragraph that began with But.

The style analyzer displayed miserable numbers.

LINGUISTIC EFFICIENCY: 63

STRUCTURAL COHERENCE: 71

EMOTIONAL CLARITY: 58

HUMAN PROBABILITY: 99

Mara blinked.

She opened the metadata.

Origin:

UNVERIFIED MANUAL INPUT

Not machine-generated.

Human.

She went back to the letter.

There are things I miss that embarrass me. I miss the noise you made when you sneezed. I miss finding the cabinet doors open after you made coffee. I miss arguing about whether the bedroom was cold. I miss being irritated by you in the ordinary ways.

I don't know what that means.

Maybe nothing.

Maybe that is the point.

There were two more pages.

No request for forgiveness.

No grand reconciliation.

No perfect ending.

Near the bottom:

I wanted to tell you I'm sorry without making the apology another way of asking you for something. I don't know if I have managed that.

Then:

I hope you are okay.

Then, beneath it:

No. That sounds stupid.

The sentence had been crossed out.

Below it:

I hope there are mornings when you forget to be sad.

Mara's throat tightened.

A message appeared beside the file.

CLIENT REQUEST: HUMANIZE

She stared at it.

Then laughed once.

Not because it was funny.

Because the alternative was throwing her monitor.

She opened the revision controls.

The system recommended:

- Add one typographical error.
- Vary punctuation.
- Insert handwriting irregularities.
- Reduce grammatical consistency.
- Introduce emotional asymmetry.

Mara closed the recommendations.

She checked the source again.

Human.

The company had been given a real letter and asked to make it feel more real.

Tomas messaged her.

You still alive?

She ignored it.

Mara opened the client brief.

Recipient has expressed distrust of AI-mediated communication. Client wishes to ensure message feels organically authored.

She read that twice.

Then a third time.

The writer had authored it.

Someone had apparently decided authorship was insufficient.

It needed evidence.

A performance of the thing it already was.

Mara looked around the office.

Hundreds of people sat beneath white lights, adding fingerprints to images of fingerprints.

Moving breaths.

Crooking letters.

Breaking symmetry.

Teaching machines to imitate the evidence that people had existed.

She looked back at the letter.

Her hand hovered over the keyboard.

The task timer counted down.

14:58.

14:57.

14:56.

She clicked REJECT REQUEST.

PRIORITY TASKS REQUIRE MODIFICATION BEFORE DELIVERY.

She clicked OVERRIDE.

SUPERVISOR AUTHORIZATION REQUIRED.

"Of course."

Mara stood.

Her supervisor, Nia, sat behind glass at the far end of the room.

Mara carried the tablet over.

Nia looked up.

"What happened?"

"This shouldn't be here."

"That describes half the queue."

"It's human."

Nia glanced at the tablet.

"And?"

"They want me to humanize it."

"So?"

Mara waited.

Nia's face changed.

She took the tablet.

Read.

Scrolled.

Read more slowly.

"Oh."

"Yeah."

Nia sighed.

"What does the client want?"

"The client wants proof."

"Of what?"

"That a person wrote it."

"A person did write it."

"I noticed."

Nia handed the tablet back.

"Add something small."

Mara stared at her.

"You're serious?"

"We don't authenticate origin. We adjust perception."

"That sentence should frighten you."

"It does. It is also still our job."

Mara looked through the glass wall.

At Tomas in Audio with his headphones on, moving breaths around.

At Lena in Visual adding a wrinkle to someone's forehead.

At Chao rotating the handle of a simulated teacup by three degrees.

"What would you change?" Mara asked.

Nia hesitated.

"That's not the point."

"What would you change?"

Nia looked down at the letter.

"The comma after honest."

"You'd remove it?"

"No."

"Then what?"

"I'd probably move it."

"Why?"

Nia shrugged.

"So it looked less intentional."

Mara felt something cold pass through her.

The letter contained anger, tenderness, embarrassment, memory, contradiction.

It contained the shape of two people failing each other.

Somewhere, someone had looked at it and thought:

Needs another mistake.

Mara returned to her desk.

The timer read 08:11.

She opened the document.

She placed the cursor after:

I hope there are mornings when you forget to be sad.

What could she add?

A misspelling?

A blot of ink?

A sentence fragment?

Maybe:

take care

Lowercase.

Too obvious.

A duplicated word.

Too engineered.

One accidental space.

Cowardly.

The Human Probability score already read 99.

There was nowhere meaningful to go.

Mara opened the underlying evaluation.

The one clients never saw.

It showed why the system believed the letter was human.

Contradictory intent.

Non-optimal repetition.

Emotional risk without transactional objective.

Ambiguous closure.

Unresolved self-implication.

Inefficient honesty.

Mara read the last phrase again.

Inefficient honesty.

"That's it."

Her assistant activated.

"Would you like to comment?"

"No."

She opened the delivery notes.

No adjustment performed. Human authorship is already evident.

She stopped.

Deleted evident.

Tried again.

No adjustment performed. The text contains the irregularities, contradictions, risks, and unresolved choices typically introduced during authenticity adjustment. Further modification would not make the work more human. It would make the humanity more performative.

She submitted.

MODIFICATION REQUIRED.

Mara smiled.

"All right."

She reopened the letter.

Scrolled to the first line.

Dear Eli,

She placed the cursor after the comma.

Then she pressed the space bar once.

One extra space.

Invisible unless you knew where to look.

The system recalculated.

HUMAN PROBABILITY: 99

Unchanged.

MODIFICATION REQUIREMENT SATISFIED.

Mara submitted the letter.

At 4:36, the client approved it.

No comment.

At 4:42, Nia appeared beside her desk.

"You changed the spacing."

"One extra space."

"I checked."

"Then you know I completed the assignment."

Nia folded her arms.

"You're impossible."

"I'm very carefully imperfect."

Nia tried not to smile.

"Go home."

Mara logged out.

On the train, advertisements floated above the windows.

HAND-FINISHED SHOES

HUMAN-TOUCHED MUSIC

AUTHENTICALLY IMPERFECT CERAMICS

REAL FEELING. VERIFIED.

A little girl sat across from Mara drawing on a paper napkin.

Not a tablet.

Actual paper.

She drew a cat.

At least Mara thought it was a cat.

It had six legs.

One enormous eye.

Three ears.

The tail came out of its forehead.

The girl held it up to her father.

"Look."

He examined it seriously.

"Is that a cat?"

"Yes."

"Why does it have six legs?"

The girl frowned.

She looked at the drawing as if the sixth leg had appeared without permission.

Then she said, "Because it does."

Her father nodded.

"Fair enough."

Mara looked away before either of them noticed her smiling.

The next morning, she logged in at nine.

Her queue loaded.

Wedding vows.

Product photographs.

A lullaby.

A handwritten recipe.

Then an internal memo appeared.

UPDATED AUTHENTICITY MODEL DEPLOYED

The system can now generate non-optimal emotional contradiction with 97.4% reliability.

Mara read it.

Below:

Future update: simulated inefficient honesty.

She laughed so loudly Tomas looked over from Audio.

"What?"

She turned her screen toward him.

He read the memo.

"Oh, good."

"Apparently they figured us out."

"No."

"No?"

Tomas removed one earphone.

"They figured out the pattern."

"What's the difference?"

He looked at her.

"You tell me."

A new task opened automatically.

A ceramic bowl.

Blue glaze.

Slight asymmetry.

Tiny fingerprint near the base.

Mara stared at the fingerprint.

Yesterday she would have removed it.

Today she left it alone.

Instead, she rotated the bowl.

There, on the underside, the machine had generated a maker's mark.

Perfectly centered.

She dragged it left.

Too far.

She almost corrected it.

Then stopped.

Human Probability fell two points.

A warning appeared.

LOWER-SCORING VERSION SELECTED.

Mara clicked:

CONFIRM.

Another warning.

A HIGHER-QUALITY OPTION IS AVAILABLE.

Mara smiled.

Then she chose the worse one.

On purpose.