Gleams of Half-Extinguished Thought

by NothingEnough

Summary

In which Data's programming mimics human behavior better than expected.

Geordi half-limped into his quarters. He dumped his padd on his desk. His comm joined it, flipping and rocking halfway across the desk blotter. He kicked off his shoes and neither went where he was aiming--one sailed through the air and landed on the sofa, the other thudded against the nearby wall. His fingers caught the edge of his VISOR; he shut his eyes, then removed it.

"Computer," he said, placing the VISOR on the desk. The computer chirped. "Lights off."

Despite the startling number of dramatic stories Geordi could (and did!) relate after Captain Picard chose him for the Enterprise, he knew the truth: he had a routine and he adhered to it. Having a standardized schedule helped with that immensely, and it helped him stay somewhat level when he ran into overtime. Often, the reason for him working overtime related to some disaster, and the adrenaline helped him to manage the pain the VISOR inflicted… but days like today left him a shuddering wreck.

He had worked an extra three hours. Trying to understand the cause of a minute fluctuation in the arming speed of the phasor banks.

Maybe he and Lieutenant Khan prevented some future catastrophic failure of the phasor banks. Or maybe it was a huge waste of their time. He suspected the latter, as they'd found nothing wrong. He'd have ignored the problem entirely if his brain hadn't threatened to eat itself out of boredom. And he only ground at it so long out of a dim hope that there was something more than maintenance performed by Engineering today. In addition, Khan was stubborn as a mule.

But by the end when she finally admitted defeat, he had a screaming headache, and barely remembered how to tell Khan he'd see her tomorrow.

Removing the VISOR helped. A little.

Keeping the same routine whether he wore it or not helped. A little.

Geordi walked unerring to his washroom, where he stripped out of his uniform, folded it, set it in the laundry basket, and stepped into the booth. He showered until he could feel wrinkles curling and forming on his fingertips and toes. Mostly, he stood under the showerhead and let the water pressure pound out some of the pain. Once out, he dried off, finally remembered to pee for the first time since lunch, washed up, and dressed for bed. No way could he sleep with these searing spikes drilling into his temples, but he wasn't planning on leaving his quarters unless summoned.

He soon stretched out on the sofa, the padd in his hands, staring upwards into nothing. He didn't need the padd. But it felt right, part of the routine.

Had to think past the pain, outrun it until he was tired enough to sleep.

"Computer."

That familiar chirp.

"Access all results of Engineering status checks of Commander Data."

Another chirp. "Access restricted. Please provide clearance."

He gave it. A vague, unsettled sense struck him. He was in the habit of describing himself as Data's doctor, but that didn't gel very smoothly with their current situation.

"Granted."

"Computer, compare the results of... oh, let's say a year's worth of physicals, beginning with the one I did yesterday." Some people thought he was odd for how conversational he was with the computer, as though she would put on airs unless she was brusquely addressed.

"Specify."

"Fair. Uh, all right, we'll start with something simple. How many times has Data's defragmentation program been activated by me?"

A chirp, then: "Nine instances found."

"How many of those instances are dated within the past two months?"

"Eight."

Okay. So he wasn't slipping a cog. That *was* unusually high. Data's defrag was supposed to automatically execute as needed. If it failed to do so, that usually meant that Data had repeatedly accessed the same file or file group. He'd overdo it and the files fragmented faster than his automated processes could handle. Eventually Data would end up doing his own equivalent of staring off into space listlessly, and Geordi would insist he took a break and run the damn defrag.

Always meant one of two groups of memories. It had gotten so that Geordi would look at some of the folder names--strings of fifty characters or more apiece--and be able to read them as "Lal's First Word". Or "The First Time Lieutenant Tasha Yar Smiled In My Presence".

"Okay, all right," he said. "Computer, how many files were defragged during the last status check?"

"Three hundred and seventy-five folders, containing a total of seven thousand, one hundred and thirty-six files."

"Well." He didn't need to ask if that comported with the first defrag conducted that year. "Give me the name of the first folder."

The computer went off on a long string of numbers, as he expected. Data's system was too complex for one numeric system; the folder name started out in Terran, then grew lousy with Vulcan, Andorian, and Ferengi numerals. No Klingon, though. Maybe Soong had a problem with Klingons he never talked about.

He creased his brow as the recitation continued. This particular combination he hadn't heard before. How was he supposed to help Data work through his androidy version of transient depression if he didn't know what caused it? What was in there?

He swallowed back that creeping sensation of possible violations of engineering ethics. "Stop. Computer, what kind of files are in that thing, and how many are there?"

"There are two hundred and eight files. File type is not recognized."

He sat up. He dropped the padd. He heard it hit the floor. He didn't care. "What do you mean, you can't recognize it?"

"File type is--"

"All right, I get it. You don't know. Maybe... it's a file type only a positronic computer would be able to execute."

"Please clarify request."

He had to smile, but only for a moment. He'd only really looked at the folders' names before, not their contents. How had he gone this long without knowing what, precisely, was the stuff of Data's memory? (Except that he knew, of course; it was prying, or it felt like prying, and part of reaffirming Data's personhood was not treating his brain like a thesis in waiting. Now, Data could be ruminating too frequently on a single memory, but he could also be malfunctioning or damaged.)

He set his bare feet on the floor and his heels twisted against the carpet, like he was in Engineering, like he could compulsively whirl around a bank of screens in his preferred chair. "Computer, tap into Daystrom's databases if you've got to. Add in Soong's public research for giggles."

A longer sequence of chirps. Fortunately, the poor AI ignored his closing idiom.

Riddle me this, Computer, he thought, but daren't say out loud. That would baffle her further. Also, he normally didn't let on that he spent too many hours as a teenager listening to ancient TV shows. "Given what we know about positronic neural networks, are there documented examples of files which are only executable using Data's processors?"

Many more chirps, a veritable springtime-in-the-park's worth. Poor old girl was struggling through three separate mounds of information while also, incidentally, running 90% of ship operations. He tilted his head downwards, listening, enjoying how the headache seemed to melt by degrees the longer he focused on anything else.

"Commander Maddox of the Daystrom Research Institute has hypothesized that Soong-type androids might possess any number of files fitting the parameters of your search."

He never got a chance to move past the hypothetical stage. Geordi was still grateful that Maddox never got his mitts on Data. And all the same, here he was, about to ask: "Can you give me the short version of his hypothesis?"

"Soong-type androids employ unique executables to record memories, to--"

"Hold up." Okay, maybe his habit of interrupting once he heard what he wanted to hear was why he hadn't known this about Data already. "So, basically, each of those files collected together is a single memory?"

"Correct."

"What do they represent?"

"Maddox suggested that each of the five senses would be represented by sets of unique executables."

"Computer, I want you to consider, for the next five minutes, that Maddox's hypothesis is correct. Give me the file type most likely to correspond to the sense of touch."

Chug-a-chug. He let her think it over. At last: "Assuming the hypothesis is correct, the sense of touch is most likely represented by .fi, .to, .fa, .le, .pe, .ne--"

"Let's focus on that last one. Select three files from Data's last exam that are .ne, and tell me their names."

She read them off immediately; this was her game, not airy speculation. Geordi didn't recognize any numerical patterns that matched what he'd seen before. But they all did begin with the same string of 1494573.

He sneered a little. Didn't mean anything yet. But he'd--

Oh!

He clapped his hands. "Computer, access Data's exam from the start of the year." Data had been thinking about Tasha's death, back then. He did that periodically. "What are the first seven digits of the folder I defragged?"

"9305846."

"Is that also the first seven digits of any files inside the folder?"

"One hundred and ten files located."

That number had shown up on every folder involving a memory of Tasha Yar. So here was a new one, a new designation, or a designation he'd not encountered before, representing someone, but it could be…

… no. He'd nearly thought *it could be anyone*, but that wasn't true. Was it? "Is there any indication of when the 1494573 files began heavily fragmenting?"

"Unable to comply."

"Fine. When, exactly, did I first defrag Data in the last two months?"

"Stardate 44201.73."

"What the hell was I doing--"

And, all at once, Geordi sank back into the sofa.

Two months ago. Of course. He hadn't noticed Data slowing down because they, because they had just started having sex. He had been somewhat preoccupied processing his own memories, and hadn't noticed Data doing the same. And he'd been too busy thinking about how it felt *to touch him like that* and hadn't really given much thought to running the defrag manually.

Geordi stood up. He walked to his desk, and retrieved his VISOR. "Cancel previous request," he said, since she probably awaited the end of his last unfinished question. "Computer, link up to my padd and send me the list of files. I'm going to take a look."

He slid on the VISOR, grimaced, kept the lights off.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

"Listen," Geordi said.

"I am all ears."

"No, you're not," he said. He let his hand cup the top of Data's thigh. "Otherwise you'd have nothing but .ly files in your memory core."

Data stared. Geordi almost smiled, but bit it back. This date had gone well--well enough that they were on the sofa, lights low and teas drunk, pressing close in that way which suggested that they'd retire to bed soon, and Geordi… Geordi picked that moment to talk about what he'd learned and guessed about Data's recent train of thoughts.

No wonder nobody dated him more than once.

"I do not recall discussing .ly files with you before."

"We didn't." He had the presence of mind to pull his hand away. "Look, I'm sorry. I peeked at those files you were fragging to death."

"I assumed you would. It is a part of your job, and of your naturally curious personality."

"Yeah, but you don't want to show your memory core's contents to just anybody."

"I have not shown it to 'just anybody', Geordi."

Huh. He didn't expect Data to get angry, of course, but he had expected that suppressed snippiness, like an English butler who quietly insults his master with praise. This strange acceptance drove him onward. "So, you're thinking about the last time we had sex, right? That's what those files are?"

"Yes."

"A lot. Enough to wear the memories thin."

"That is an interesting metaphor for the phenomenon."

Well, if nothing else got a reaction out of him, this probably would. "Data, you're sexually frustrated."

A slight pause. "I beg your pardon?"

"You heard me."

"I lack the emotional faculties for frustration of any kind."

"You know what humans do when we're sexually frustrated?"

"I am aware of certain pop-culture stereotypes regarding that subject."

"We think about it. A lot. Not all of us get, uh, get turned on, and not all of us go about it the same way. But a lot of us, most of us even, when we don't have sex often enough, we think about it. How to get it, or other times we've done it."

"Are you speaking from experience?"

"Observation."

"You have observed organic life-forms, Geordi."

"I've observed *you*, Data, and you've had part of your processing power dedicated to thinking about the last time we slept together since we d-did it."

Data paused. "And you have not?"

"Well…" Geordi blinked. His friend examined him with the same flat expression as ever, but Geordi thought there must be something else behind it. Not feelings, not that, but the way Data's gaze shifted over Geordi's burning face felt… intensive. Searching. Nerve-racking. "I thought about it, sure." His hands knotted into one atop his knees. "I just. I guess I didn't think about it as much as you."

There must be something wrong with him. An android, a being with no desire or libido, wanted to have sex more frequently than Geordi. He thought about it, planned for it, and when he didn't get it, he engaged in this amazing kind of mental masturbation to satisfy himself. He'd reach within his memory core and pluck out a thought of Geordi--Geordi kissing along the side of his neck, Geordi's voice rough and laughing as he breathlessly spoke against Data's ear, the sensation of Data's fingertips drifting across his lips--and played it until it crumbled into pieces scattered across the core.

Geordi, meanwhile, only thought about sex in the abstract, at a distance, as one part of a potential issue with Data's software.

He opened his mouth.

Then closed it again as thoughtfully-warm fingers touched his cheek.

"Your embarrassment is unwarranted." Data spoke with the same measure he used in almost all things. "You accept me. I would be a poor friend if I did not accept you. Perhaps we should endeavor to more clearly communicate."

"Yeah." He was right. Damn it. Fine. His friend had willingly shown Geordi his most private thoughts, naturally, easily trusting Geordi with his memories (and given how many of those thoughts focused on Geordi's mouth, he'd trusted Geordi with a nascent fetish). What could he possibly offer in return?

Only one thing.

He reached up, laid his hand on top of Data's, holding it against his cheek as his humiliation slowly suffocated under the weight of his determination. "I can do that. You're right. I don't really think about sex. Not like you, but. I've thought about trying certain things. With you. They're not."

Spit it out, already.

"This whole thing gave me an idea. If you access a file in your memory core, do you experience it directly as a physical sensation?"

"No. I am programmed with what Father called a nostalgia subroutine. It allows me to review memory files while generating new ones."

"Of course he did. So if I were to activate one of those files, could you turn off the nostalgia subroutine?"

Data paused. He wasn't processing slowly--he was doing it for effect, a fact Geordi realized when Data allowed the silence to draw out to a cringeworthy length, until Geordi had to bite the inside of his own cheek to keep in a nervous vocalization. The temptation to say something *gnawed* at his patience and almost brought his thoughts to a standstill, but then, his friend said: "Yes. And yes. Also, yes."

"Are you feeling okay?"

"I am well, thank you. I think, if you take a moment, you will find that you wish to ask me two more questions. I was answering you. A little presumptive of me, but you are generally appreciative of my attempts at anticipating your needs."

Geordi wasn't as poorly off as some of his fellow engineers, but there was a reason he hadn't majored in linguistics or psychiatry. It took him north of a minute to figure out what Data meant. By then, his friend had silently risen from the sofa and cleared away their teacups.

Yes, I can deactivate the nostalgia subroutine. That one was self-evident.

Almost immediately, he recognized the second: *Yes, if I do so, it should have the effect you desire. I will be unable to distinguish between physical sensation, and the memory of same.*

And then--and after careful review of what they had spoken of, there was only one more question *to* ask--Geordi watched as Data took a seat beside him, and suddenly, an act he'd seen dozens of times before in more clinical contexts took on an entirely different tone, as

Yes, we can test that hypothesis tonight.

as Data's fingertips found the edges of one of his cranial panels and opened it up.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!