

## **The Rightness Machine**

*by Kristen Gallagher*

Long ago, everyone wanted to be right. That's what I heard from my grandmother in her final days. She said the world once ran primarily on things called "opinion" and "fact," that there was a phenomenon called "rightness." She said there was a strong emphasis put on a certain quality of relation called "agreement," the idea that two or more people would have the same thoughts, or data, I'm not sure, but then they would extrapolate from there that they were "right" and would then act, either physically or verbally, against others. Apparently, though, "agreement," over time, became more and more impossible to come by, so relationships came to manifest more and more in a thing called "disagreement." It sounds like everyone was occupied with it. Whatever else was going on, it was mostly the people who one disagreed with that one spent the most time on, feeling very little outside their own desire, for, I don't know what...agreement? ...desire to be right? It's hard to say from the vantage of today, but from what I sensed from what grandmother said, it seems humans were once mostly obsessed with producing language acts and bodily movements. That, and consuming a wide variety of painkillers.

It was only towards the end that grandmother spoke occasionally of these times, the times she heard about from her grandmother. She never did this before, and I am not certain why she turned to it in the end, but I admit I did find it interesting.

Oddly enough, she said, in spite of all the behavioral significations that everyone seemed to think of themselves as "right"--the constant talking, writing, agreeing, disagreeing, evaluating, labeling--deep down people were having a lot of anxiety. She says when she was growing up there were stories of humans who stayed up at night, staging mock arguments in their heads, or sometimes with lovers while imbibing painkillers together, or sometimes even all alone in bathroom mirrors, imagining the people they disagreed with, speaking as if those people were physically present, practicing at labeling things, diagnosing, searching electronic archives for small signs of proof, And people did this over and over again, as if caught in a loop. It seems to have defined life. Unless grandmother was wrong and made the whole thing up. People do strange things.

Supposedly, according to grandmother's grandmother, that's why Doctor Tuzhi invented The Rightness Machine, a machine somewhat like what people used to call "the internet," the electronic archive, a nearly infinite collection of thoughts, facts, counter-facts and opinions. But Doctor Tuzhi's machine had a few important differences. The Rightness Machine had the ability to understand language and produce passable responses, just as effectively as a human. It could assess truth value in a flash through high speed comparisons of data, including scanning for context clues like has the source of said data produced other provably right or wrong data, or what degree of separation is any source from another source of rightness or wrongness, provably suspect or pure, based on the contexts in which they produce and share their "knowledge," "opinions," "facts."

Doctor Tuzhi tested The Rightness Machine for a decade before sharing her findings with anyone. But after a decade, she was convinced of its reliability. So she released it into the world, and cheap! She said she made it inexpensive as an offering for the public good around the world, so everyone could have access to their own rightness. Instead of expressing rightness in messages, poems, late night imaginary arguments in the mirror, anyone could just ask The Rightness Machine first, just to be extra-certain. The Rightness Machine could tell you if you were right, or maybe just how likely you were to be right. Something like that. I don't really know. It no longer exists, or at least not that I know of.

At first, it sounds like people were excited about The Rightness Machine. Or, let's say, sales suggested an overwhelming international desire for such an instrument. No one was talking about it, though, just buying them. All the purchases suggested people were probably using their Rightness Machines, but all the lack of talk about it suggested people might not enjoy sharing that they had a desire for such a thing, a desire to be right, or to know if they are or are not definitely right.

Truly, it's hard to say for sure why everyone was buying rightness machines and never talking about it. Maybe it was the other way round, maybe the machine was a mind eraser, set to inhibit people from discussing their purchases. Maybe Doctor Tuzhi's goal was to crash the consumer economy, not all at once, but weirdly, slowly, barely detectably, over time. Because, from what I can gather, that has also occurred. The economy is apparently not what it used to be back then. It's hard to be sure about to what extent, because now no one even cares. Who knows why. It doesn't really matter why. But several changes followed the appearance of the Rightness Machine. I sense my desire to draw a conclusion, but who really knows.

All I can gather are the following things.

1. People were buying the machine. Statistically speaking, there was one machine sold for nearly every known employed human on earth.
2. No one was talking about it.
3. Perhaps most interestingly, very shortly after the release of The Rightness Machine, humans across the globe were becoming increasingly more and more...silent.
4. Then the economy slowed considerably.

From the vantage point of today, it is hard to imagine what the old world was like. What grandmother says people used to call "quiet," well it just sounds like ordinary life to me. I already feel weird writing this report. It's really a lot of language. And I'm no expert on any of this!

There is very little archival evidence left of those times. Grandmother says it was all destroyed by a group of early technology gurus, in an action they called "Static Ann."

Having listened to grandmother's stories, I now think I can catch small glimpses of those times in some of today's popular wisdom. Things we still say like "You're always home and home is

nowhere,” and referring to teachers not as individuals, but as a general quality of living, “the subtle superfine.” Or that plaque in the circus that reads, “silence is better than knowledge, stillness better than action.” Based on grandmother’s stories, I picture the old world as a world that looks like ours, but with these super-active humans, in a trance-like state of constant physical motion, tight skulls, mouths moving, fingers typing, something like that. I don’t know, I can barely imagine what it may have been like before humans discovered we could feel the whole universe in our skin. My grandmother told me that her grandmother said there was a time when people were so busy talking and making bodily motions that they didn’t realize the power in the skin. Imagine! What a strange world!

She said, that transition, what we call “The Awakening of the Skin,” happened within one generation of “The Great Silence,” which came, according to her, right on the heels of the release of the release of The Rightness Machine. Again, I can sense myself desiring to draw conclusions, but really, who knows. No one, certainly not I. That’s the only certainty. I do not know.

I will share this: Though no one seems to have any idea what it actually did, I do sense in my skin, as I write this, that I wouldn’t exist if The Rightness Machine had not come to exist.