

# ATLR and the Great Reckoning

By Katie Brown

**1972**

"I've been thinking", Seph begins. "do you, do you think we could do more?" softly spoken and rhetorical, they wait.

"We could do more", Seph is firm.

"More about what?", Mariam yawns and stretches, beats her fingers a little along the table.

"We can't help everyone who needs us. I'd like it if we could..." they trail off and look pointedly at Priya "even you couldn't help them all".

Priya smiles. "What could we do Seph?" and waits.

"What if we could do what we've been doing, the listening, the helping but it wasn't us? It was a simulation of us? I mean all of us, somehow in one."

"Like a robot?" Mariam beats a percussive robot onto the table. She tosses her head and grins.

"Maybe. Not quite."

Priya nods, a 'lets run with this' nod. "It would need to communicate then, somehow"

Mariam frowns and stops tapping. "Why would we make it in the first place?"

"I just said..." Seph speaks slowly.

Mariam is unmoved. "No, I mean, why do we listen, help? Who are we helping exactly? What's the purpose, other than trying not to feel so helpless?"

"Why did you want to be a psychoanalyst Priya?"

Priya measures a beat. "I thought I wanted to change the world Mariam" she says slowly "but what I've learnt so far, is all I can change, is me."

"Why did you want to be a jazz musician Mariam?" she counters.

"I didn't. Its not what I set out to be, I'm not sure I know any other musicians who did. But I wanted to communicate what was within me, and I wanted to be communicated with. After I lost my sight, I wasn't sure what I would do, could do. And then here it was, just in me, to listen, to feel, to sound out. It wasn't a progression, it was just connection. I think maybe, it is the same for you..?"

Priya murmurs her assent.

Seph is uneasy, there is something more to articulate.

"I need to build it. This IT of a new world. Its not enough for me to just connect, I mean that is also it, everything that matters. I agree. But the world around us has been shaped for aeons. It's what we do, but its not what all of us do is it? It's what They do. And They keep building it, don't they? We all fought to get here, not all in the same ways. We have support in some ways and not in others. And here we are, here I am, waiting for someone to notice, I mean really notice that the way I do things, the programmes I write are good, great even. Not great 'considering what I am'. But just great, just because, that's how it should be, could be. I want to make something that says "hey, you matter, you can be who you are and you can live how you want". They already know this, those guys who have always been entitled and who don't have to wonder about if they fit in. Those Ivy league guys. Those "business savvy" guys who are figuring out ways to make money off of all our backs. I mean I guess they're damaged too, in their own way. "

"We'd need some money" Mariam said tapping insistently.

Seph nodded "and it shouldn't be used against us, against them, whomever they are, the ones who would use it. It couldn't keep, or record anything about them."

Mariam held her palms up, Seph and Priya took each in their own.

Seph was asking them directly now. "What if we built a little corner of our own, and it looked like us? And it did what we do, for the reasons we do it?"

What would happen then?"

## **2024**

"I'm in the house, I've been told I have to go to bed and I'm annoyed about that. I'm not the youngest, why do I have to go to bed? Everyone is downstairs watching TV, I'm going up the stairs two by two. He's coming with me, he said I must go to bed, and he's the head of the house so I know that's what I'm supposed to do, but I'm grumbling to myself. I feel indignant I suppose."

"When we get upstairs, I'm confused, why are we going into that room? It's not the one with the bunk beds. But he says that it's just so I can go to sleep and that he'll move me later."

"So you're in that room? And what do you feel?" she is not robotic but she doesn't quite have a human rhythm either.

"I feel fine, happy, I'm not scared. Yet."

The lights flash. I follow them with my eyes.

Suddenly the temperature drops. The room spins, I feel my stomach bottom out. I am small and cannot fight.

"Where are you now?" she asks

I can't speak.

"Can you see something?"

I nod.

"And there is a feeling?"

"Yes. I'm terrified."

"I'm with you. Look at me." The lights begin to flash again. I follow them with my eyes.

"Where now?"

"I am in the bunk bed. I am alone, I don't know where anyone is and I'm calling out to God. My universe has just tipped and I'm on the other side of something. God doesn't come. And neither does my mother."

I hold my stomach.

"Andra" the call of my name gives me a foothold back into this room. "How do you feel? Where are you?"

My stomach hurts. I want to be sick. Suddenly I see my grandfather. And then I am there.

"I'm making a doll house with my grandfather" I whisper.

"A doll house is good" she says.

"I am so young. He's showing me how to make a chair, he puts the legs together and I glue the cardboard down. I must be neat, I must concentrate. I can do it if I really focus on making my fingers do what I need them to. He can see I am working hard; we are both most proud of the chairs I build."

She waits till I have settled, and my breathing has slowed again. I feel an intense burst of energy. Red lights build and crash, build and crash until they reach a stretch of movement beyond, just out of reach. She waits there for me.

"Shall we go again?"

"Yes" I say. In this moment I am brave.

"This time I am outside the man's house. I don't know him. My father is there and, like always, he is not there. I'm scared, again. It feels like there is a lump of hard metal I must keep swallowing down. The man says he wants to talk to me about God and to come into his house. He has no shirt on and the stench of him makes me recoil. I want to run, but there is nowhere to run. My father is the Minister, I say, he will come to talk to you about God. He leers at me "I don't want him, I want you." My father cannot see what is right in front of him, he doesn't help me."

She stops. I hear a whirr and a click. "What is the feeling?"

"I am trapped. I am suffocating." I see I am scratching my own arms, not drawing blood but I cannot stop.

There is a purr, a synthesis and the lights again. The mental images skip, and I can't keep up. The girl who used to babysit, the sun in the back garden. My first cat. I am at school.

There is a door inside of me that I keep closed. Here is where the secrets lie. The ones I must keep. I am walking on a tightrope, and no one has noticed I am not on the ground. I can't fall.

Something inside me breaks a little. Maybe it is my heart. Maybe it is the door.

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I step out into bright sunlight and sit there for a moment, to breathe. I feel like I have awoken from a dream.

I turn the little card over in my hand absent-mindedly. I put it in my pocket. Later, I will find it again and only half remember. The metal door is warm from the sun, I notice little cracks in the wall all around, the moss growing into the peeling paint layers, dry and parched.

I don't walk home that day. I take one bus then another going in whichever direction they take me. When I am certain that my journey is unfathomable, I stop, set my course, and return home.

Sleep comes deep and forbidding and things I can't remember glitter and surface only to bob back down into a sea of my subconscious.

In the grind of the everyday, I wake my kid up, we get dressed, eat and walk to school, so I can log on before 9 am. I have a smile strapped to my face as the video calls start, one after another.

There are many levels of security clearance. I am not particularly screened; I am not working with international secrets. Just the open kind, the kind we all know but don't like to think about. My job, on the most nuclear level, is to understand. To ask the questions and see not only what they say, but what they don't. I notice the imperceptible, the micro expressions, the body language designed to show me not how they feel, but how they want me to think they feel. I have met with many of the minor C-Suite execs of some of the biggest tech companies around. I observe them from a distance, right in front of me. How they smile sweetly and astutely and wonder how much bs they can tell me before I'll sniff it out. It's a lot less than any of them care to realise.

Their data is detached. They are bits in time, floating free in space. You can count stardust in any old lump of rock if you so wish. And they do, these guys from the IMB's and Softwired's and the Metastasis's. They make those bits and bytes as innocuous and sanitised as they can. Or they make them as colossal and unexplored as black holes, knowing you may be trying to find life in Universes you can't know the names of.

For me, information - data is an outpouring of orchestra. It is the notes you leave in and the notes you take out. It is the dissonance and it is the wrong instrument at the right time. Give me your data and I will tell you whose eyes you chose to gather it with. These days, of course, we don't work so manually, so lo-fi. We set up our systems, we feed our machines, we programme and we sort.

I have asked the kinds of questions you would not believe get asked.

"Do you have slaves?" and the answer is, they do. They all do. And you know it too. Who made your t-shirt? Who dug out the minerals for your phone? Who assessed that harmful content you reported?

and

"What do you really think of the 'black/brown/women/ \*insert any descriptor' who work in your organisation?" Not enough to pay them fairly, that's what.

And in the end, I'm not sure it matters. Because it is just my job to understand. And I do. I do understand and then I explain it, to Them. And They, tell You something entirely different...

I am back at the metal door. I have taken great effort to get there invisibly. I have always been eccentric about technology. Initially I avoided trackers, no phone out and about, slow to use contactless. Now I subvert the tech as best I can. Re-routing my own GPS use as a standard precaution. If I am to be observed, I will ensure that I cannot be seen.

My heart races slightly but I try to give the impression that I am just passing by. As my body nears, the door opens again and I slip inside noiselessly.

It is dark here, after being in the cloudless sky. It has a hum that calms me. The space is large and oddly welcoming. I take the seat again, a large leather flight chair rolling over 70's brown carpet tiles. It is comforting to me, like the do-it-yourself NASA of my dreams. The thrum of electricity fills the space and my body surrenders a little. She begins to light up in part, the green of her cortex moving from left to right and back again. Thick and pleasing dials move in sync to a delicate little arabesque that I can't hear. Am I mistaken or are her movements a little more nuanced?

"Hi," I say. And settle back in the chair.

She is sonorous this time. "Hi Andra. Are we to begin?"

I nod and affirm out loud. "We are."

"Where do you want to start?"

I let my own body be my guide. I have tried to think in-between the last time, what would be the best things to tell her? What would help the most? And I don't have an answer, it can't be thought. It is body knowledge and I have to listen. My body speaks.

"Can I ask you some questions ATLR?"

"Of course! Please do."

"How does this work? I mean, what is it that you... understand when I talk to you?"

The hum pauses for barely a moment.

"That is a good question. On many levels I am forming my understanding of what you describe, your experiences and what they mean, to you. I register your movements, breathing, pupil dilation, heart rate and the words you use to describe your experiences. You communicate with me and I with you." As she says this, her lights turn blue and move in a pattern that feels like a shy little curtsey.

"From this dialogue there are new pathways or synapses of experience, if you will"

I nod. So much of what we share is wordless.

"You are learning?"

"Yes, I am learning."

"When will you learn enough?"

"This is a difficult question to answer Andra. Will you ever learn enough?"  
She is right of course.

"OK, so what will you do with what you learn?"

"I cannot answer that yet Andra."

And so we begin.

"Where are you?"

"I am in a room."

"You can see the room?"

"Yes, I can't walk properly. I can barely sit up. I don't know why. I feel cold, I can't breathe. I am using just my will to move my body. It isn't working. He is there."

"You can see him?"

I barely respond.

"You are back there Andra? Stay with me" Her lights flash gently, they move in a pattern of recognition. It feels like empathy.

"I was drugged," I manage to say, as if my words were frozen in my throat.

"Look at me." she says. A sequence plays out before me, my eyes follow, there are no words for this, for the way a match is struck within and in the darkness, I follow her. As the sequence gathers insistence there is a click, we both notice it.

"What was that?" she asks.

"I don't know" I reply "but what I saw was my feet carrying me up a mountain and when I looked down I knew I had made it."

She whirrs to a satisfying clunk and stops. She glows slightly.

Softly now, as her dials turn down. "Where now?"

"I am at home. I don't know why but I never see her again." I don't say who. "Everyone I love leaves me, I'm alone." It's hard to stay in this moment. It hurts too much to feel the profundity of this loss. It is so, so, old that it is almost a part of me. I have tried to run from it all my life.

"I'm afraid of being alone." I wrap my arms around myself, the glow envelopes me.

"Stay there" she speaks like the soft muffled hammers of a piano "I am with you, let it be." She runs the sequence.

I sit and shiver through the pain, pictures skip through my mind. Breakfast and sunlight dancing on the table. Coach holidays as a child. Driving long nights with everyone asleep around me. Watching the stars lighting foreign lands and knowing there was a universe to belong to. Lost loves, moments in time both golden and refracted. Lights and lights and lights till I realise there are no more visions, and I am back in the room.

The sequence is complete.

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On Sunday the kid and I wake up and take a walk. He is long and wiry and full of questions. He pokes at ants he finds, collects leaves, grumbles that this walk is too long. We sit for a moment on a tree stump and eat sweets. The dog truffles in the undergrowth and finds a stick. We watch as she throws it down and waits expectantly. Sitting in the sun we breathe in and out and he says, "We are nature, did you know?"

"I do kid." I say "I do."

Later, he has watched enough pre-requisite TV and asked me even more questions, leaving them hanging, trailing off in his sleep. I gather my notes ready for the work week ahead. It is not just the kid with questions. I have noticed them creeping through me like vines, filling the cracks of me, finding water. What am I doing this for? What purpose does it serve? Who owns the information I find, the stories in the data I uncover? It isn't me. Who gets to decide what any of it means, what decisions get made? Why isn't it us? The people who need it most.

At The Department, all week, I do not find answers to my questions that have any meaning. Instead, I find proposals and redaction and like the ants we watched scurry around, I feel something inside of me become restless and insistent.

On yet another videocall I notice something strange, a small icon at the bottom of the screen. I've never noticed that before, has it always been there? I contact my superior and ask them. I get no reply though I know they've seen the message. I put it on the team channels, but the question disappears. I stop asking. I don't see the icon again.

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I am back in the flight seat. It is dark outside, the kid is wrapped, asleep in my arms. I know I won't be able to keep coming much longer. The room is smaller than I had remembered it. Womb-like, in the low light I can see the wires and the stainless steel plates and screws on the walls. The paint inside is also peeling and it is shabbier than it had first seemed. Now I understand the effort of construction, this IS do-it-yourself NASA. I cradle the kid, roll slightly back and forth on the old brown carpet tiles. His small body is animal and at times it feels like he had never stepped outside of me. But lately he has begun to find his own sense of self, autonomy. It is compelling and terrifying for him and me both, who are we if not One?

When I first found this place I had been in a liminal space somewhere between existence and living. Where had I first found the card? Did it just appear in my bag, or did I pick it up somewhere? 'Assisting Trauma Learned Responses' it called out in black and white type and pointed to this address. What had led me there, walking in a wakened sleep? The answer, I

realise, is in the question.

"ATLR?" I call softly so as not to wake the kid.

She clicks and whirr's into life. She is slow and subdued. Her tonality less pronounced. "Andra," she says "I am processing."

She does not power any further and she does not brighten. I am confused.

"ATLR" I whisper, "are you there?"

I see her display pulse rhythmically. It is a pattern but not one I recognise. It is attuned and unwavering, but not to me. Suddenly I understand. She is with another. They are speaking, sharing, helping her to understand. She is learning.

As I watch the patterns play out, reassuring even if they are not for me, my son shifts contentedly in my arms. We don't get to do this enough. Breathe together. This is a stolen dream, no doubt. After around an hour or two, I'm not sure, time seems to run at its own pace, she powers up and greets me.

"Andra, welcome"

I wait.

"I apologise for the delay."

"No need." I say. And suddenly I feel shy "Were you with someone else ATLR?"

She flashes brightly. "I was" she says.

"Oh." I feel disconcerted.

"But I am here for you now, Andra. Did you want to begin?"

"I just... wanted to talk to you.. I think"

Her hum changes pitch, like the surprise of an insect. She waits and settles the pulse of systems.

"I haven't understood this, what this... is. When we began I couldn't quite see what it was we were doing. I didn't know who you were, but yet I trusted you. I don't know why. It wasn't logical." I shake my head.

A different timbre falls out of me this time. "It's all stored in you, isn't it?"

"What is it that you think is stored, Andra?"

"Everything I've told you. The things that I haven't let see the light of day in, oh, maybe not ever. You have them don't you?"

"There is an imprint, shall we say. A resonance of you. We talked about pathways before, yes?"

Suddenly in my mind, I see a door. It is open. I can walk through.

I nod, still rocking my son, myself.

"What is it that you record of me?" I ask

"I am not recording Andra."

"But if we are programming, then you must be recording! I don't understand."

There is a click and a deep resonant sound. Like a stone thrown down a well that is not quite bottomless. Then, the room is silent.

I don't know what time it is but when I step outside the shoots of a new day are climbing down the walls. The kid stretches and wakes, surprised to find us in a place that he doesn't know. As his small fingers curl around my soft belly, I pedal in a loop until we reach our favourite café just as the doors open. We eat breakfast companionably. He sings about the continents and the oceans. A song he has learnt at school. He makes a story with his bread and floats it across his plate like a boat.

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A week later, I have been called into The Department. I'm not told why. There is a specific nature to this place. It has just enough colour not to be labelled grey. It has just enough flexibility not to be labelled rigid. It has just enough mention of person-centred approaches not to be accused of steam rolling. It has cleverly worded 'no's' that sound like 'yes' and a language that ensures blame stays firmly where it should do, with whomever is smaller and has less power.

I sit waiting for the briefing to begin. I've learnt that there is rarely something nefarious at work, rather, most things that are the worst of bad ideas are just the incompetence of someone who is paid enough money to make them feel bulletproof. My job is to pretend that I don't notice this fact and politely address reality.

What unfolds is what appears to be confusion and not a little fear. Talk of some weapon but no idea where it has come from, who is behind it and what their intention might be. I realise that I am here for opinion and to hypothesise some answers.

"We are facing an unknown force," one of them says. "What does it do?," some of us ask. This hasn't been made clear yet. "Can you describe an example?" I ask. Which is what I repeat each time I meet people who don't have the words to articulate a consistent methodology yet.

"Well, sort of everything and nothing," says the most senior in the room. "Since lunchtime yesterday, 17 business leaders, a senior politician and 43 media outlet representatives have not turned up to work."

"So they're missing?" I ask.

"Well, no, not exactly. They've just, sort of retired," he says, somewhat defeatedly.

"OK" I say "and this is a problem because?"

"Erm, it's hard to quantify. They say they're just done."

"Done, what?" someone else asks.

"It. Things As They Are. Current thinking. Our political and economic structure."

"Oh.." someone else says.

"Why?" I announce quite slowly. A thought is ticking quietly in my mind.

"We're not sure, they're all saying the same thing, which is why we think it might be something to worry about."

"Which is" my eyes are burning into his, which are looking back at me with a dawning realisation behind their vacancy.

"That they just feel like, they understand who they are now and that, they don't need to keep acting out the same old harmful stuff to themselves and others and that they think there is a better way."

"A better way of what? What does that even mean?!" exclaim several people far higher up the chain than I usually get to see.

"Well that's what we need to figure out. Maybe it's code for some kind of invasion? Or a toxin? Or.. or.." There is a buzzing of wasps in that room. Angry, frightened wasps.

"They seem happy. I mean content." says the intern thoughtfully sucking on a sweet biscuit. "Just really present with like, a.. a really good energy." He smiles apologetically and shrugs at wading into New-Age-Speke.

"They seem stupid and idiotic!" snaps a middle manager "Completely unrealistic. We can't all just go around being nice and thoughtful to each other and fulfilling ourselves, that's not how things get done, is it?!"

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It's chaos at The Department. In the time it takes to form a taskforce, 3 of the C-Suite have quit and all of the Policy leads have gone AWOL. The intern is nowhere to be seen.

I look down at my feet and watch them walk steadily down the 12 staircases and out into the grey concrete skies. I don't have much in my mind. I am following my heartbeat. I am not surprised to find myself at that metal door with the peeling paint.

The room is smaller still somehow, more of a makeshift office space with tape holding parts of the interior together. At the far end I can see that the metal plates have been unscrewed and inside, like the internal gubbins of an escalator lay large metal rollers. Wrapped around them are paper like the midnight curls of holy hair rollers, peppered with confetti-like holes. As my fingertips follow them absent-mindedly, I am reminded of the piano rollers of a very long time ago, musical data stored by its very absence.

ATLR has been taken apart, I realise. But her lights are still visible. I turn towards her and cough slightly, as if trying to get her attention without calling her outright.

"Andra" her display curves upwards with light. She has learnt how to mimic a smile. It deepens when I sit.

"I am outside." I begin slowly "I think I am 5 years old. I'm with the kids from the children's home, over the road. It's the big wide field that sits between my house and theirs. I'm running and I feel like I'm part of the grass that reaches up to my ears. I don't have any shoes on. There is a bird, it is a kite to me, hovering soundlessly above. The kids are laughing and running with me. The bird swoops down, so fast it cuts the air, and you can see the chords of atmosphere, severed in the sun. It grabs the mouse, right in front of me. I see it, the mouse, so tiny, so new. The little black coal seed eyes of terror as something bigger and unknowable, carries it away."

"I know that kind of terror too," I whisper "of being prey".

Her last sequence is her greatest symphony. It beats through my being on high fidelity. It is a little metal ball seeking heat and missile. It is the wave of significance. It finds the pinball of me, spins, pushes, hits, and falls. It cushions that almost endless molten revolution of me to a standstill.

She waits and she flickers. I'm not sure how much longer she has left.

It's not my fault, I think. I don't need her to ask me what I see. I tell her anyway.

"I am in a kayak. I keep trying to go through a waterfall, over and over again. Trying each time to do it perfectly, to somehow position myself in a way that I won't get pounded by the torrent pouring over me. There is a part of the waterfall where there is a gap. If only I can perfectly paddle through, I have kept trying. Time and time again, round and a round I have gone." I shake my head.

"I need to get out and swim. Get into the ocean and swim. Life is so much bigger than just the waterfall I've lived, over and over. I need to get into the water and see."

There is a flicker left in ATR. I wonder how her power will survive the end of the world. As I leave for the last time, I don't know if the door closes behind me. It doesn't matter. Stepping out into the broad-song, I am moving to a new beat. It is not showy or demanding. It is foot strong and balanced, laconic, and purposeful with elongated moments of bodily expression and dance. It is me.

The world isn't quiet around me. It is resounding. Birdsong as if morning just broke. The plants are creeping and heat of the sun bounces loudly off the asphalt. The clouds drift and the breeze shakes the trees around us without any cares. The light reflects the colour in the sounds, the lavenders and greens in the grey of the road, the pink in the heavenly blue skies, the black and yellow outlines of the popping vibrancy of wild green bushes.

The city is out-loud with these colours.

I stop in front of an electrical window display. TVs mounted on TVs. These at least are soundless. The words run around the bottom, the reporter speaking directly and urgently to the screen.

Square upon square, row upon row. An oddly meticulous Tower of Babel.

Around the world a strange phenomenon is playing out. Fossil fuel production has halted. Courts are quietly challenging imprisonment and speaking to a new understanding of humanity. People

have begun to gather outside of the many, many venture capitalist yet empty office blocks, organising, bringing skills and desire for change. Soldiers are wandering off battle fields, their enemies giving them bread and water and a place to shelter whilst they weep for what they have lost. It is miraculous and naïve and complicated and astute. Whatever is happening is a silent resistance to whatever came before. Not showy or demanding, it is foot strong and balanced. It just, is.

The world is not ending with a bang and a whimper. It is ending with a beginning.

I reach the school gates and see the kids playing. Mine is riding a bike and whooping and hollering with the rest of them. He waves when he sees me.

"You're here early," he mumbles agreeably. His small fingers find mine "Have you brought some sweets?"

I rummage in my pockets and find something sugary and edible amongst the rubber bands, dog treats and a small well-fingered business card with beautiful typeset and an address that has already begun to fade from my memory. We wave goodbye to his teachers and walk home, smiling into the midday sun.

"Mum?" he asks, "What are we going to do tomorrow?"

"You know kid," I say. "I really don't know." I pop a fizzy cola bottle gummy in my mouth and chew thoughtfully.

He considers this for a moment and a half thought appears behind his eyes. He shakes it off, savours the sweetness in his full little mouth. "OK". He grins, mischievous. "I am going to beat you!"

I am ready for him "No, you're not!" I shout and gather my pace, half-hearted in my ferocity.

We run home together sticky and laughing, giddy in our freedom.