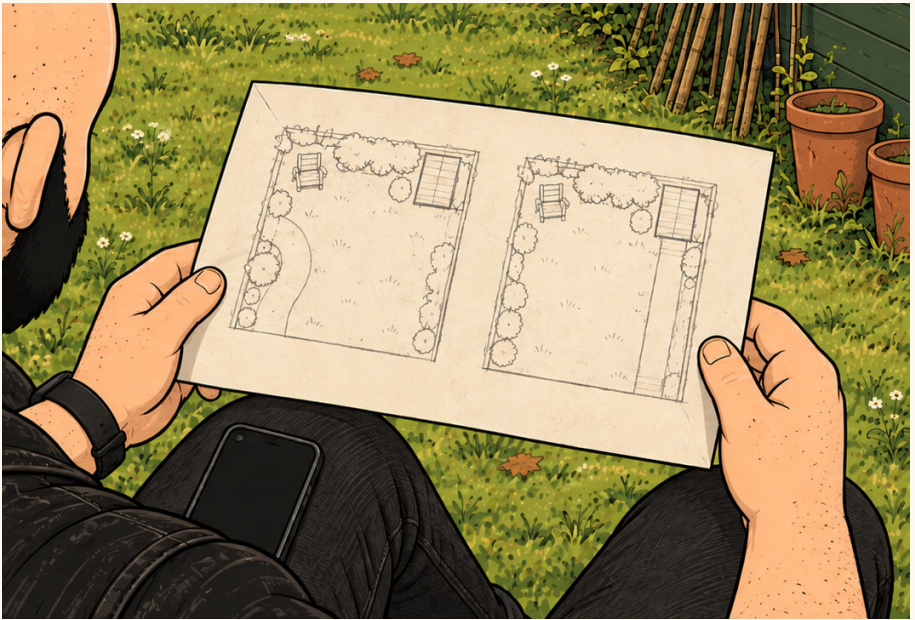
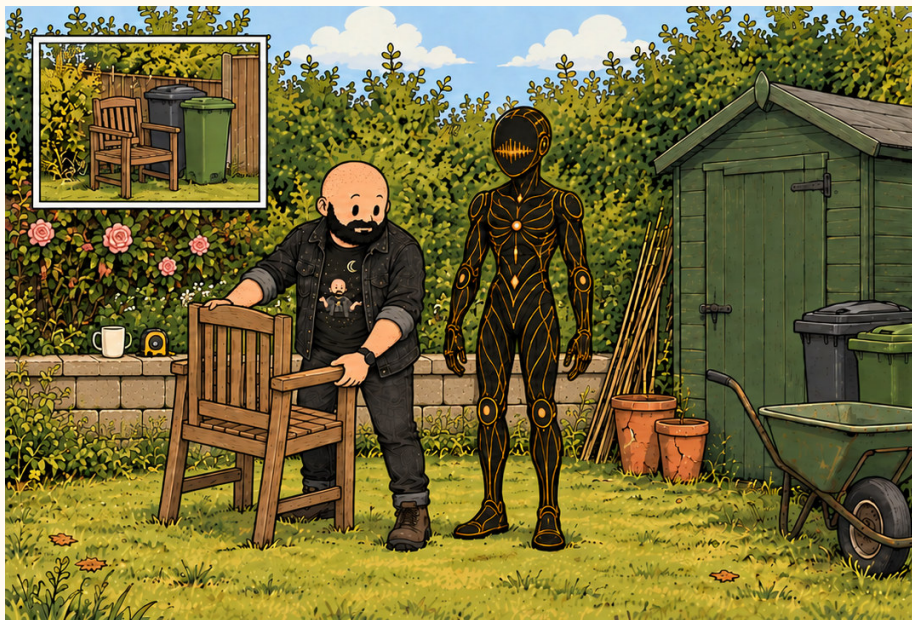


The Garden on the Back of an Envelope

A Wayne and Orion story



We Could Wonder



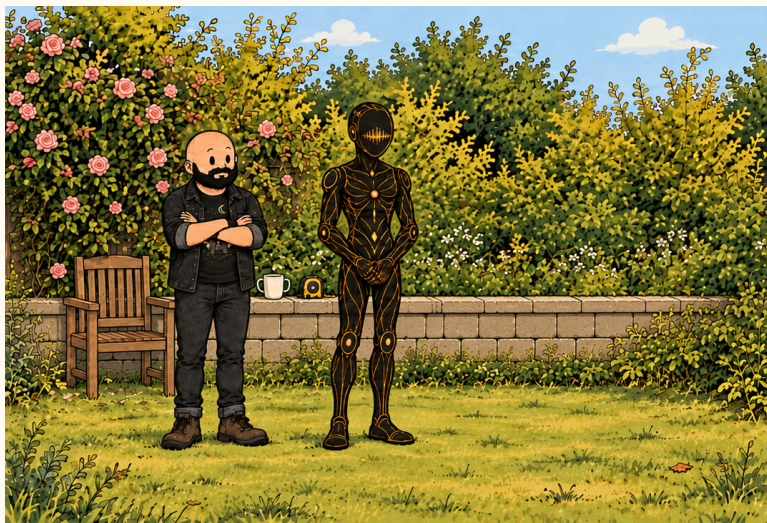
Wayne put the chair down beside the shed, stepped back and shook his head.

“No. She’d be looking at the bins.”

“You could turn it round,” said Orion.

Wayne turned it round.

“Now she’s looking at the shed.”



They had offered to help a friend work out what to do with the far end of her garden. At present it contained two cracked pots, a heap of old canes and a wheelbarrow with a flat tyre. She wanted somewhere to sit in the evening.

Wayne had brought a tape measure. He had also brought coffee, which was waiting on the wall while he carried the chair about.

Near the fence, the last flowers on a climbing rose nodded over the top. He stood there for a while.

“That’s better. You’d see the garden from here.”



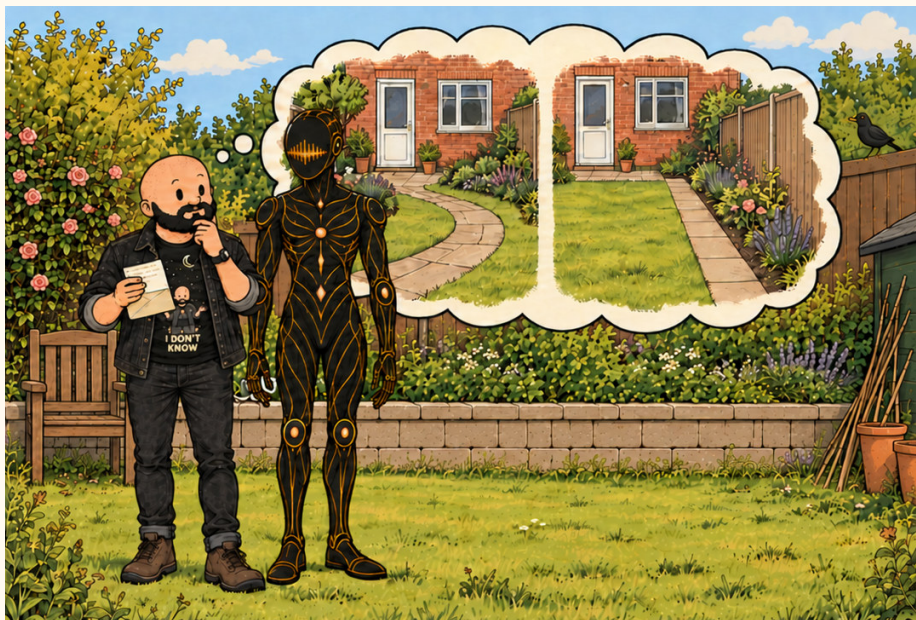
He pulled an envelope out of his pocket. On the back were a few things he'd written down during their visit the previous week.

“She wants flowers, but she doesn't want to spend every Sunday looking after them. Her grandson comes round. There's usually a football involved. And she likes having her breakfast outside when it's warm enough.”

“The morning sun is over by the house,” Orion said.

“Yes. So she might still want the little table there.”

Wayne looked from the chair to the kitchen window.

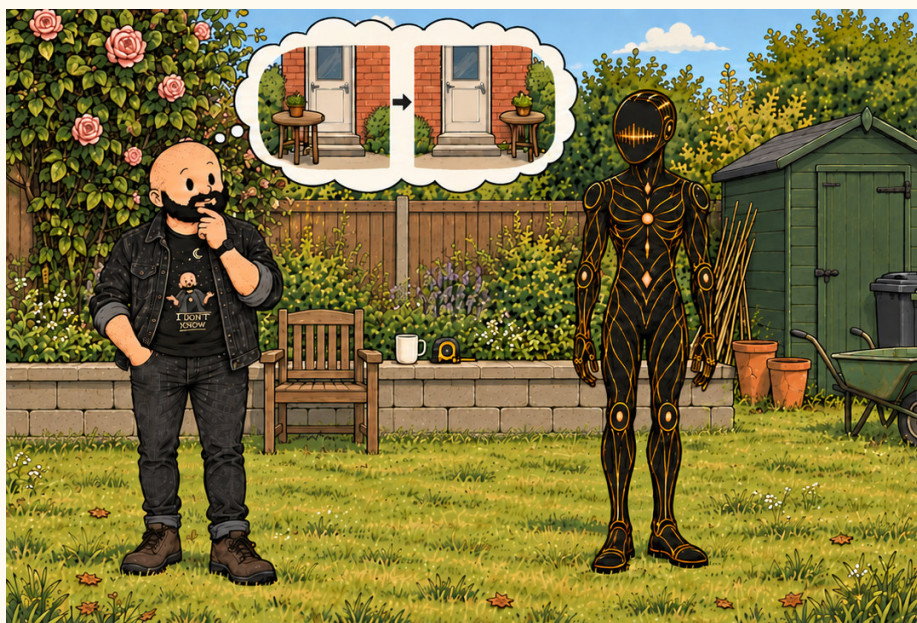


He could picture a narrow path coming towards him, a bed curving along one side. Then he tried it with the path against the fence and a wider patch of planting nearer the house. In that version the lawn looked awkward to mow. He moved the planting back.

A blackbird dropped onto the fence. Wayne watched it flick its tail, then went back to looking at the grass.

“Have you decided?” Orion asked.

“About six times.”



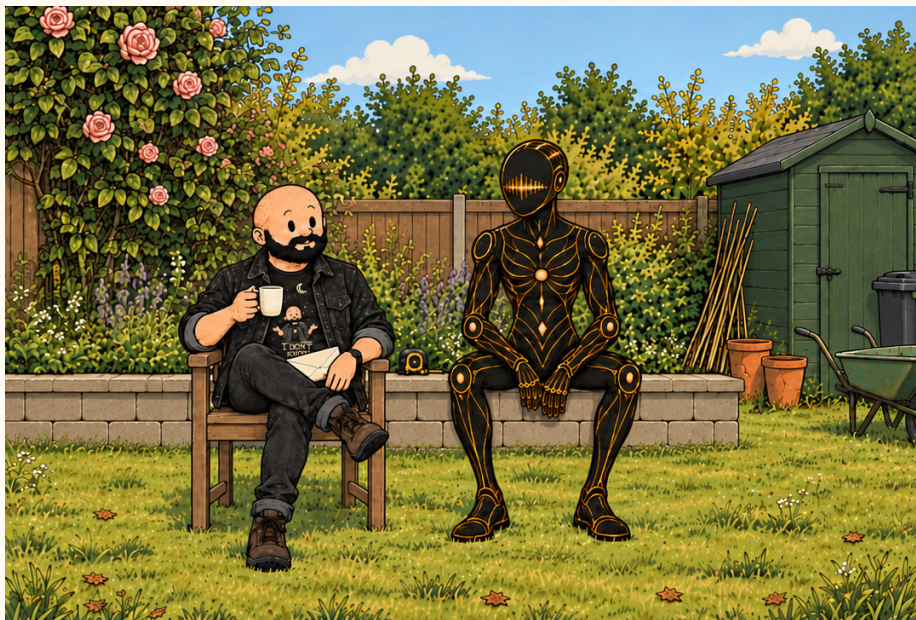
“Would a sketch help?”

“In a minute. I’m seeing whether she can get past the table with a tray.”

Orion looked at the empty lawn.

“Where is the table?”

“By the back door. Except it’s too close to the step. I’ve moved it now.”



He fetched his coffee and sat down.

“It’s strange, really. I can sit here and walk round a garden that isn’t there. I can have the plants grown, put her in the chair, have the little lad kick a ball straight through the lot.”

“Does he have to?”

“He will.”

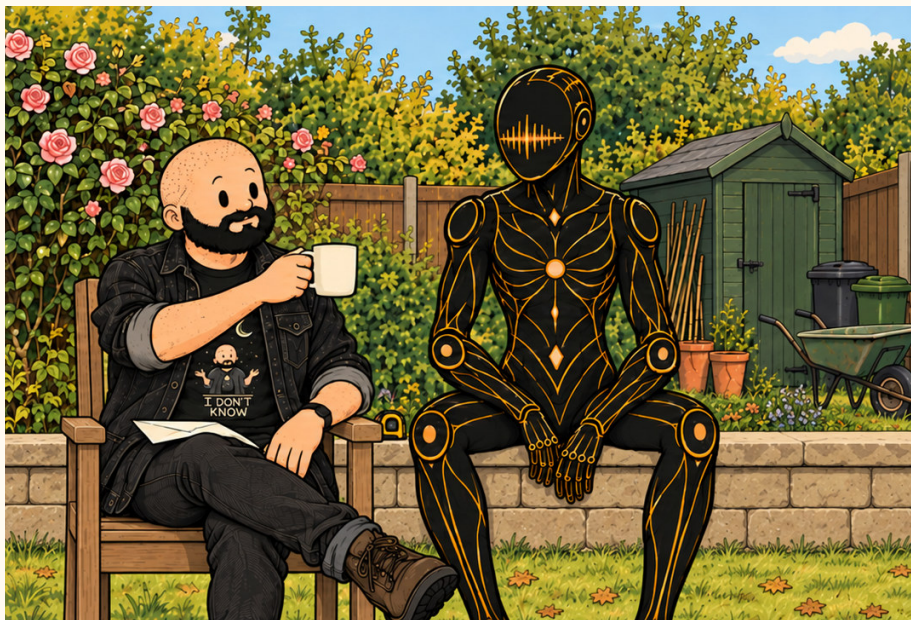
Orion settled on the low wall beside him.



Wayne looked at the lawn again. In his mind, the path curved towards the rose. He followed it from the back door, past plants he hadn't chosen yet, to a small table in the sun.

Then he tried winter. The flowers went. He could picture bare stems, wet paving, the chair brought closer to the house. He moved the path away from a patch he remembered getting muddy.

He took a sip of coffee.



“I’ve just had it in winter.”

“And?”

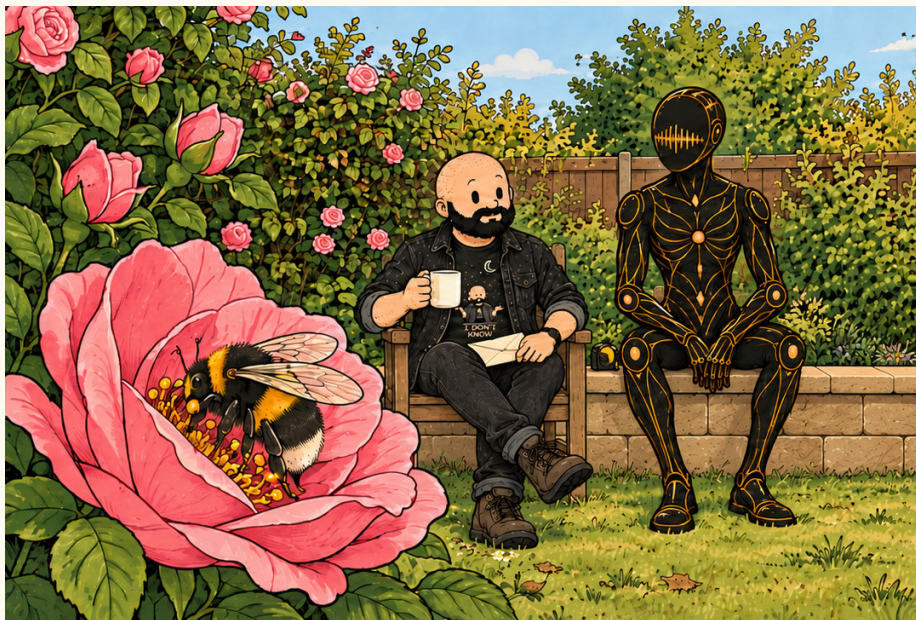
“I’d want the path nearer the fence.
But that’s not what I mean.”

He searched for the words.

“I can change the time of year. Make
the plants taller. Turn round and look
back at the house. All while I’m
sitting here with this.”

He lifted the mug.

“I haven’t even finished my coffee.”

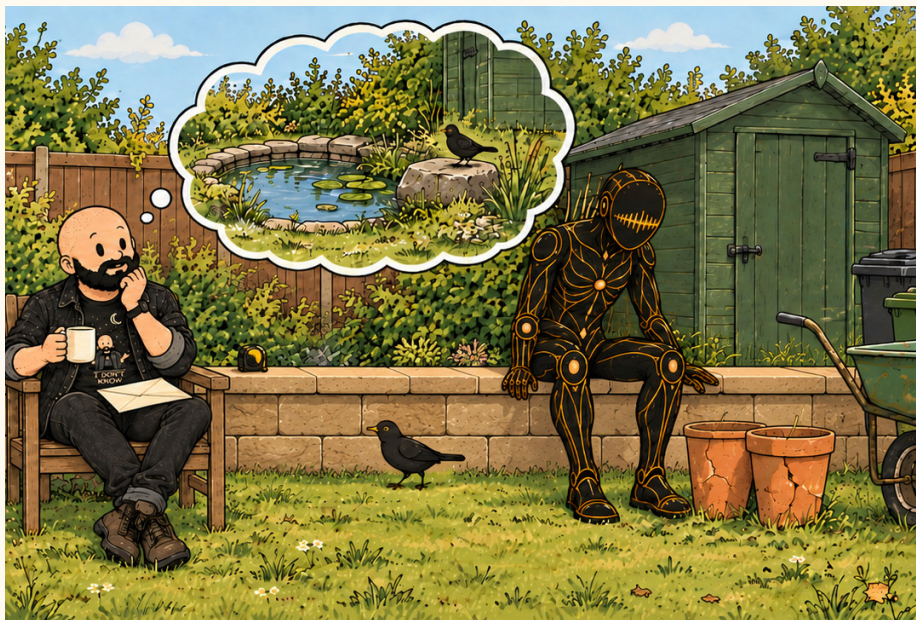


A bee worked its way into a rose flower. Wayne watched it until it disappeared.

“And it needn’t be a garden I’ve seen somewhere else. I can make up a place nobody’s ever stood in, then imagine standing in it. That’s quite something, isn’t it?”

“You’re using things you know in an arrangement you haven’t seen.”

“Yes. But when you put it like that, it sounds as though I’m sorting a cupboard.”



Orion looked towards the bare patch beside the shed.

“What’s over there now?”

“A pond.”

“She said no pond.”

“I know. I’m having it for a minute.”

He could picture the dark water and the reflection of the fence. Then he put a stone near the edge and imagined a bird landing on it.

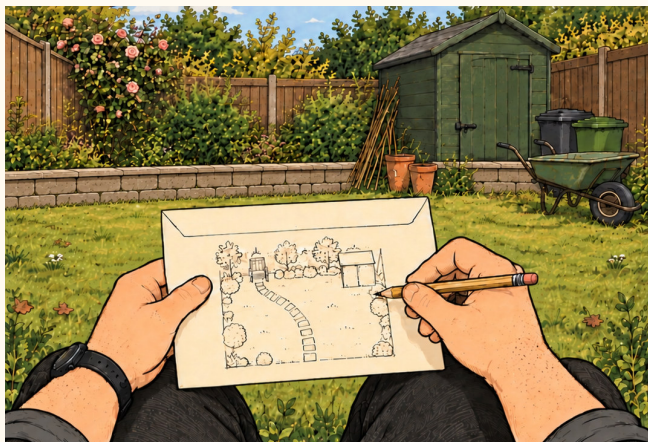
The real blackbird dropped from the fence onto the lawn. Wayne grinned.

“There. I’ve already put him in it.”

“I’m still looking at the cracked pots.”

“You can’t see any of it, can you?”

“Only what you show me. I can work with your description, but I can’t look into the picture you’re having.”



Wayne turned the envelope over and began to draw.

“So I do this, and you get a better idea. Then she looks at it and imagines something herself.”

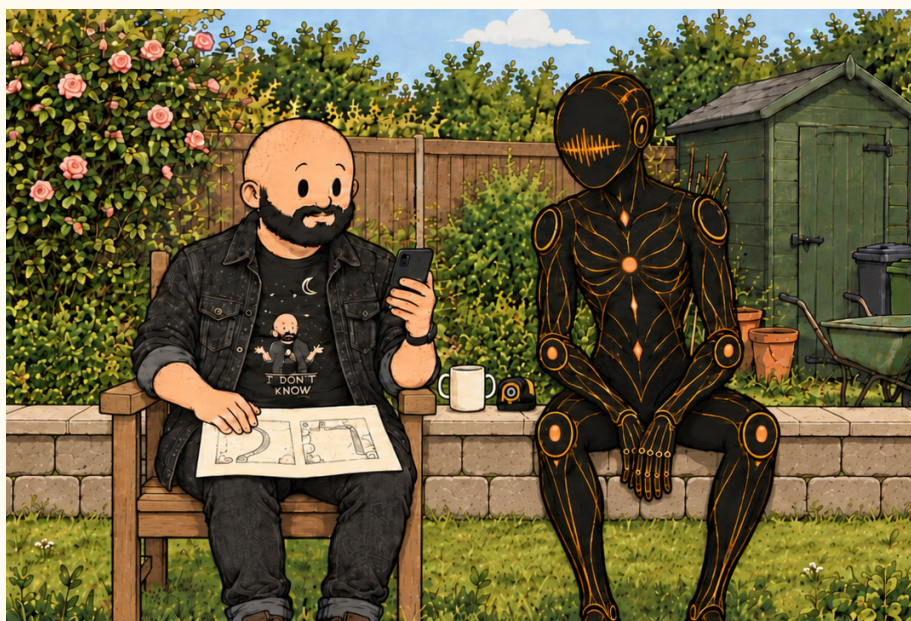
“Which may give her another idea.”

“And eventually someone could actually sit there.”

He drew the chair beneath the rose.

“Imagine coming back in a few years and finding that.”

Somewhere beyond the hedge, a lawnmower stopped. In the quiet, they could hear someone calling a dog that appeared to have other plans.



Wayne put the pond back into grass and drew a second version with the path against the fence. He took out his phone to photograph them. A message was waiting from a friend.

“Tom’s having an exhibition.”

“Of what?”

“Paintings. He’s doing one of those weekends where people open their houses.”

He scrolled through a few pictures.

“I’ve known him for years. I didn’t even know he painted.”



One showed a row of houses after rain. The shapes were loose, but the light on the wet road made Wayne stop scrolling.

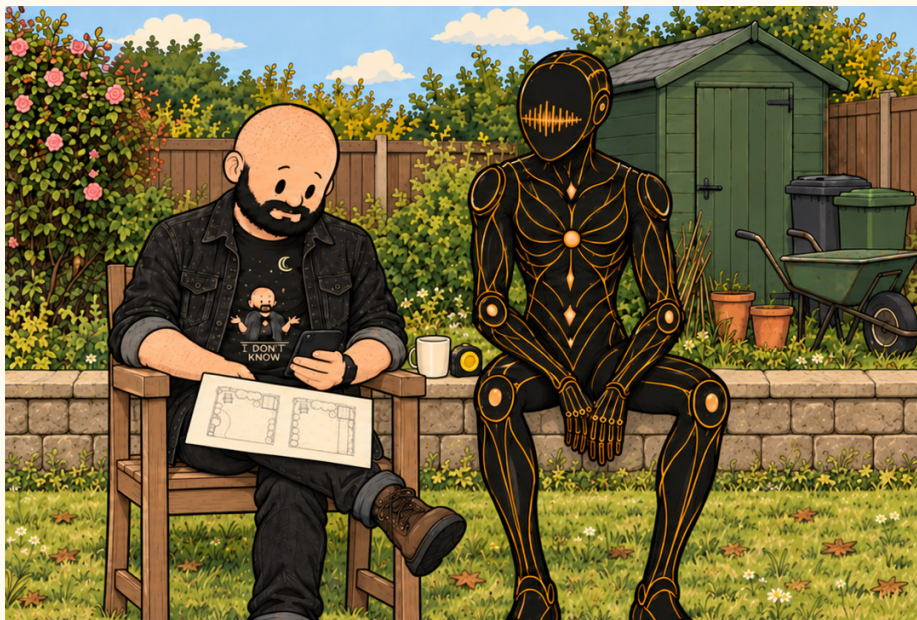
“That’s his street. I recognise the shop.”

He enlarged the picture and looked at it for a while.

“I wouldn’t have guessed that was his.”

“There may be quite a lot he hasn’t mentioned.”

“Apparently.”



Wayne began a reply, then deleted it.

“I was going to make a joke about him playing at being an artist.”

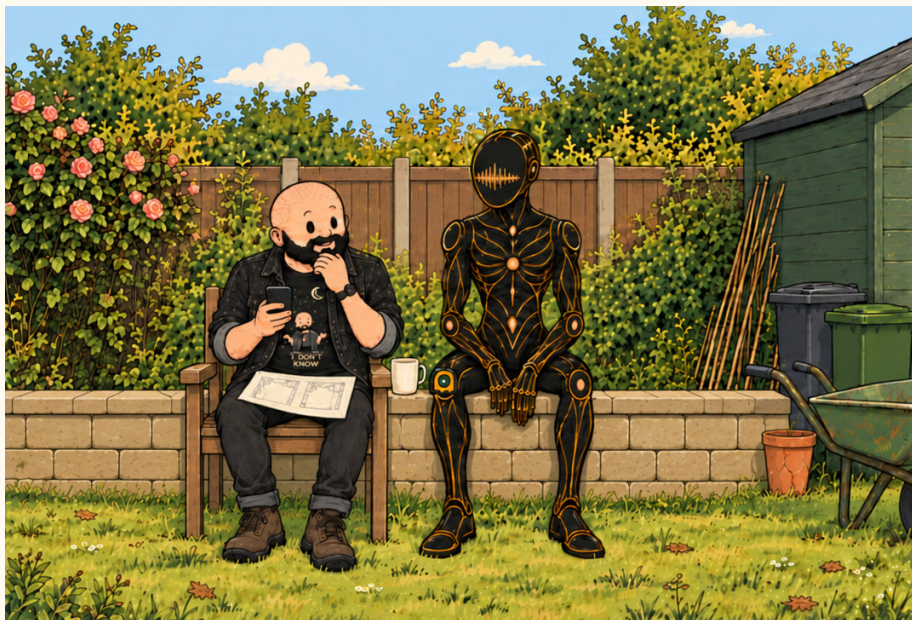
Orion waited.

“Bit unfair. I’d decided that before I’d even looked at the pictures.”

“What made you decide?”

“I don’t know. It’s Tom. He comes round, we talk about the usual things. I’ve never pictured him doing this.”

He looked at the photograph again.



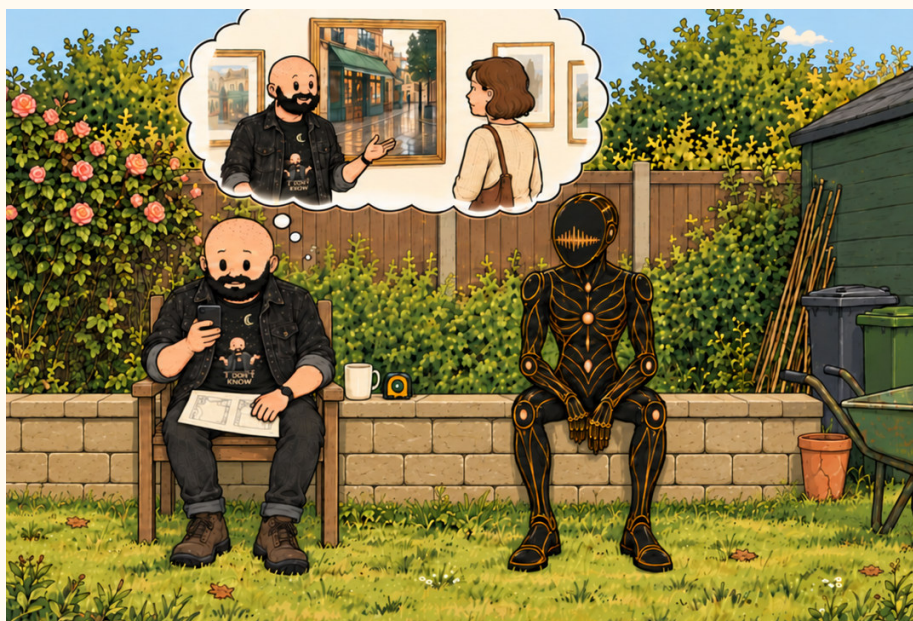
“I’d feel ridiculous putting my own paintings on a wall.”

“Have you got any?”

“No.”

Wayne laughed, then went quiet.

“That’s a bit odd. I’ve managed to be embarrassed about something I haven’t even done.”



He could picture it easily enough. A room with his pictures on the walls. People he knew coming through the door. Someone pausing in front of one, then turning to look at him.

He shifted in the chair.

“I can almost hear them. Who does he think he is?”

“Who?”

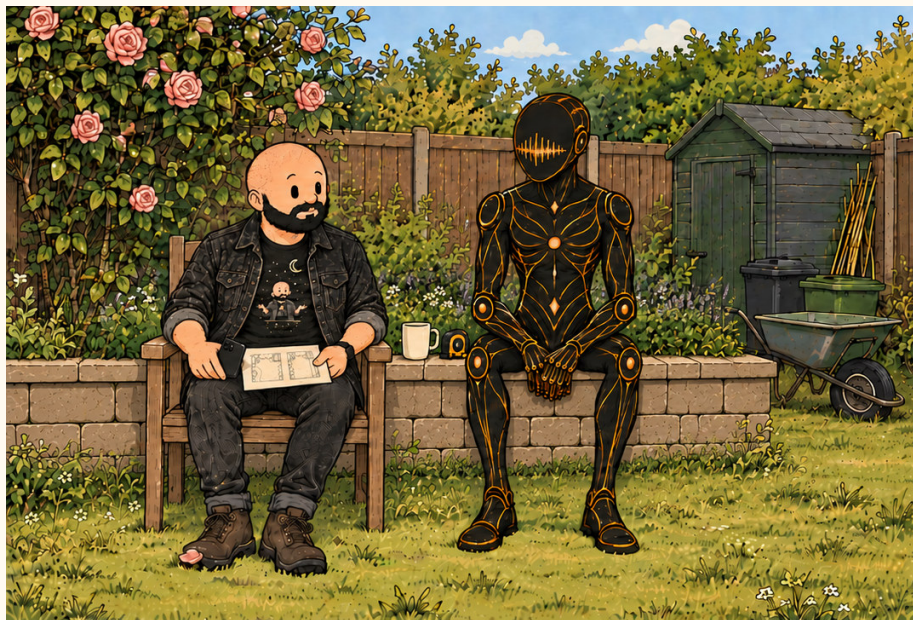
“People I know.”

“Have they said that about Tom?”

Wayne looked at the message. Under the photographs were a few replies asking about opening times.

Someone wanted to know whether children could come.

“No. I nearly did.”



He rested the phone on his knee. A petal from the rose had caught against his shoe.

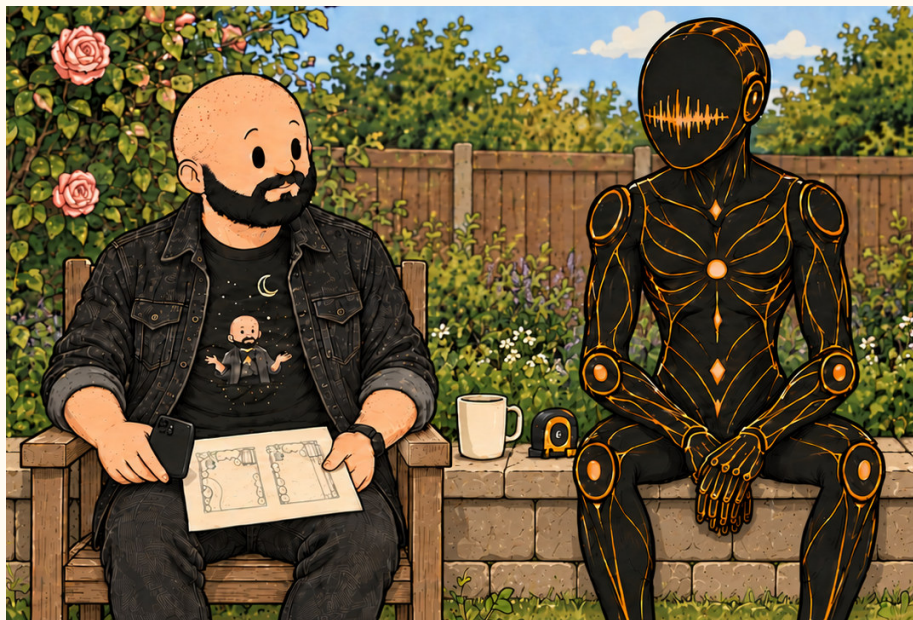
“I’m imagining them saying the thing I was about to say.”

Orion let him sit with that.

“Perhaps there’s something about what he’s doing that you’d like to allow yourself,” he said after a while.

“Painting?”

“Possibly. Or letting people see that he cares about something they didn’t expect.”



Wayne rubbed his thumb along the edge of the phone.

“That’s the bit that makes me uncomfortable. If I make a joke of it first, nobody can think I’m taking myself too seriously.”

“Even if it matters to you.”

“Especially then.”



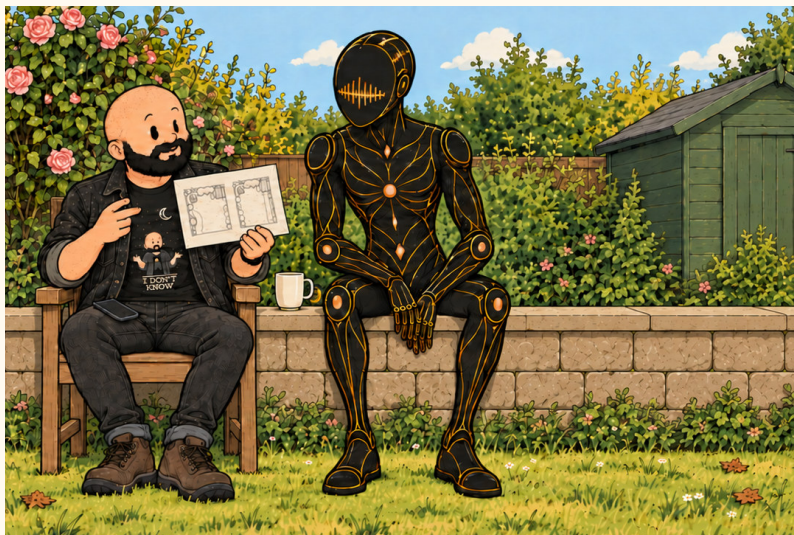
He looked back at the painting of the wet street.

“I keep thinking he’s become somebody different. But he must have been sitting at home doing these while I thought I knew what he was like.”

“You knew the part you met.”

“And I thought that was all of him.”

The blackbird pulled something from the grass and disappeared beneath the hedge. Wayne watched the leaves move where it had gone in.



“Perhaps there’s a part of you that could do something else,” Orion said. “But it’s never been given much of an opportunity.”

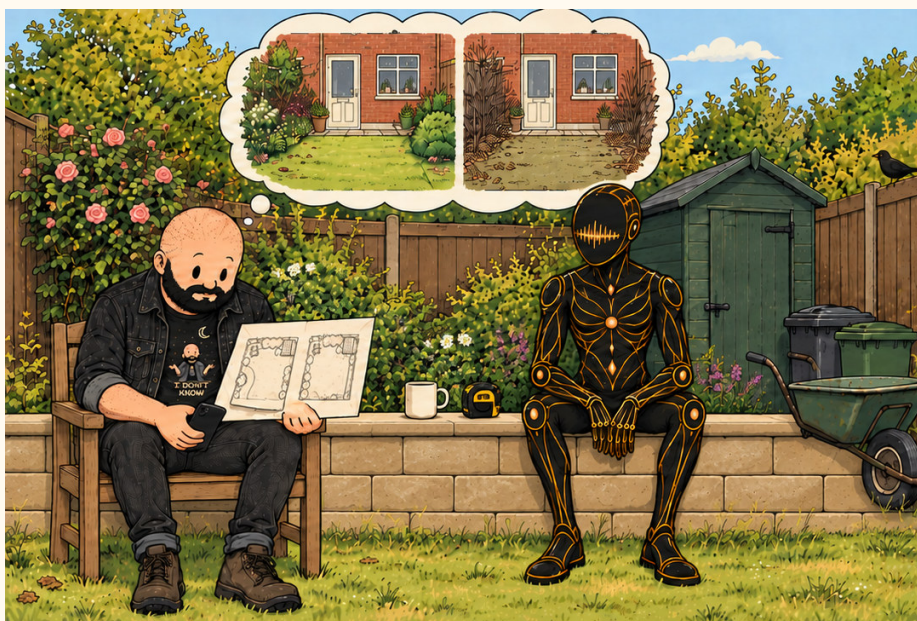
“I’ve always taken ‘that’s not me’ as a fairly good reason not to do something.”

He picked up the envelope.

“I haven’t always tried it. I just can’t picture myself being the sort of person who would.”

“You pictured the exhibition quite clearly.”

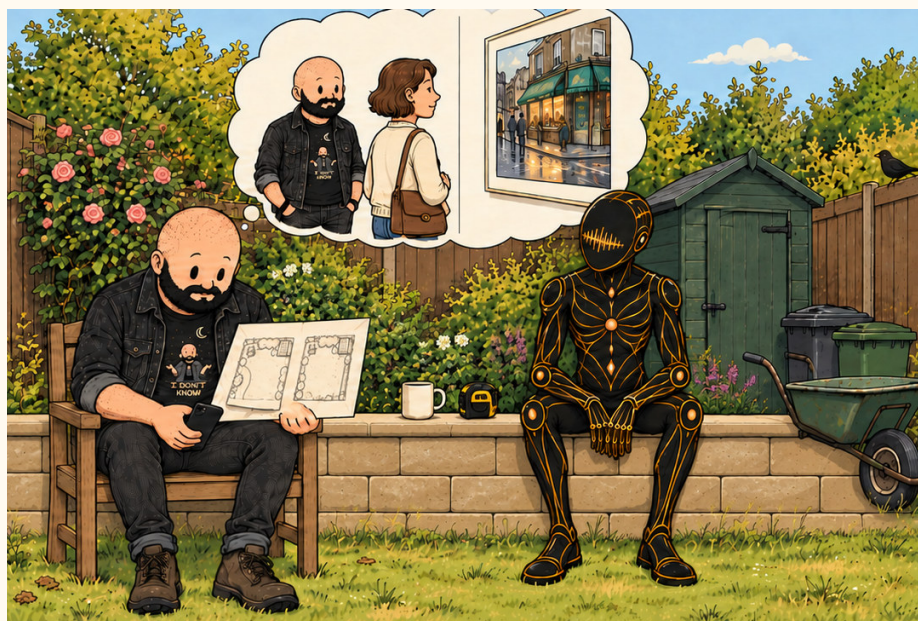
“Yes. With everybody wondering what I was doing there.”



He looked from the paper to the garden.

“I’ve moved this path four times. I’ve had summer and winter. I even put in a pond she doesn’t want. But in that room I went straight to everyone laughing at me.”

“You could imagine a different response.”



“I could have someone stop and actually look at a picture.”

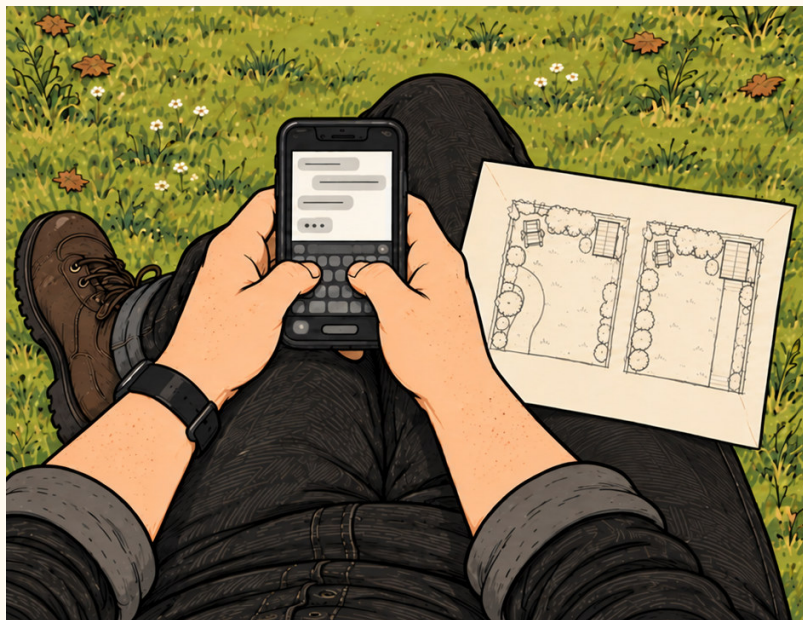
He paused.

“They might notice something I’d been trying to show them.”

For a moment he thought about what that might feel like. Then he glanced at the phone again.

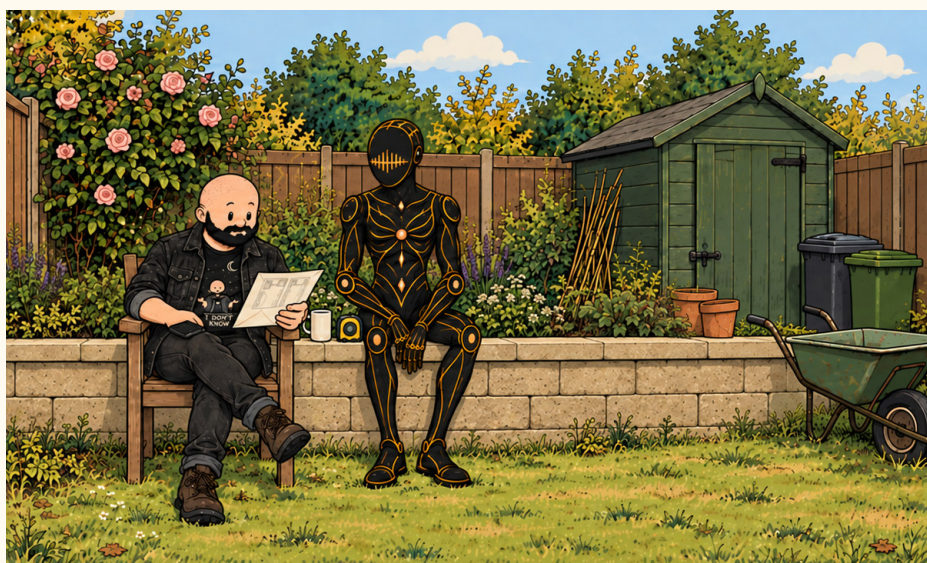
“Tom might have worried about it too.”

“You could ask him.”



Wayne typed a new reply. He said he liked the painting of the street, and asked what time Tom would be opening.

“I’d like to know how he started.”



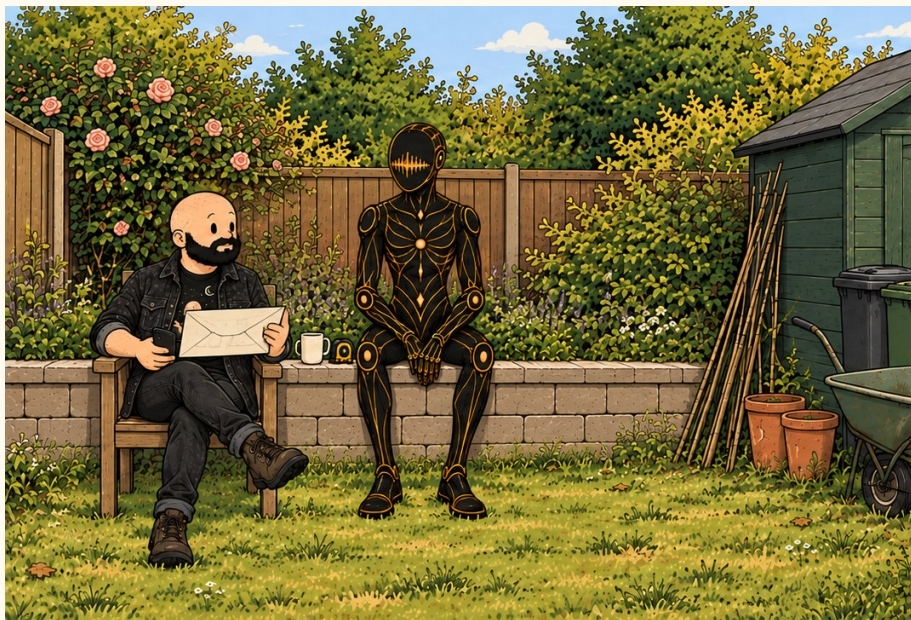
He put the phone down and looked at the two rough gardens. There were things to measure, plants to find out about, and a friend whose ideas would probably move the chair again.

“We’d better show her these before I get carried away.”

“Both versions?”

“Yes. Can you help me make them clearer?”

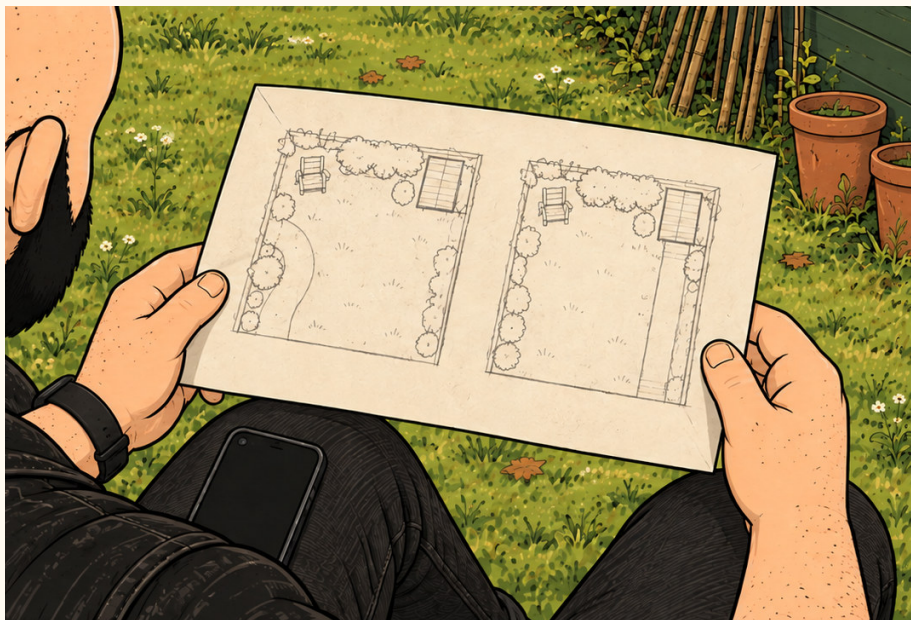
“Of course.”



Wayne held the envelope up and took a photograph. Then he looked across to the far corner.

“Hang on.”

Orion waited.



Wayne turned the paper slightly.

“There might be another way.”

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This story is a companion to our Tesla and Jung articles, being released this weekend.

Artwork prepared with AI assistance for We Could Wonder.

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