

THE PRIMROSE PROTOCOL

A ten-minute play

by Harold Taw

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SYNOPSIS

There is no escaping a black hole once you've passed the event horizon. Your feet and head are pulled at such a differential rate that you're stretched into a noodle before exploding—termed “spaghettification” by physicist Stephen Hawking. What happens when two scientists and an embodied AI, carrying a computer simulation of their dead 8-year old daughter, approach the event horizon and wrestle with the realization that, regardless of what happens to our bodies, data can neither be created nor destroyed?

CHARACTERS

3 Cast Members Total: / 1 woman, 1 man, 1 woman/man/gender non-binary

1. DR. RUTH CHUN (30s-40s): physicist and mother to Primrose
2. DR. VIKAS SINGH (30s-40s): chemist and father to Primrose
3. MARA (any age) / PRIMROSE SINGH (8-years old)
 - a. MARA: an embodied AI (Artificial Intelligence) who serves as has the housekeeper, nanny, and pilot for the science mission. In the script, please assign whatever pronoun suits the character best.
 - b. PRIMROSE: the 8-year old daughter of Drs. Chun and Singh who died of cancer at the age of 3 months. All known data of her brain at death was uploaded into Mara. Her maturation into an 8-year old girl has occurred entirely within a computer simulation of life.

CASTING NOTE

Because the setting is the distant future in a galaxy far, far away, the characters may be cast in accordance with, or without regard to, their perceived ethnicity. In general intent, however, the writer encourages diverse casting.

SETTING: the sleeping quarters on a small spacecraft orbiting the event horizon of a black hole. Outside is the permanent dawn/sunset of the black hole's aura, the red/orange light that bends around where light cannot escape. Lights dimly up on the sleeping figures of married scientists: physicist DR. RUTH CHUN and chemist DR. VIKAS SINGH.

(The introductory bars of the 1980s pop song "I Just Died in Your Arms Tonight" play. MARA, the embodied Artificial Intelligence (AI), enters the room and sets down a coffee pot and mugs.)

MARA

(singing)

OH I, I JUST DIED IN YOUR ARMS TONIGHT
IT MUST HAVE BEEN SOMETHING YOU SAID
I JUST DIED IN YOUR ARMS TONIGHT

(DR. CHUN bolts upright in bed while DR. SINGH remains asleep. Lights up on all as Dr. CHUN removes her sleep mask and fumbles around.)

DR. CHUN

Mara! Stop alarm.

(MUSIC cuts out.)

MARA

Good morning, Dr. Chun. The time is 5:32 a.m. Nova Collective Standard Time. Shall I serve coffee now or wait until you've urinated?

DR. CHUN

Now, Mara. I need caffeine, stat.

(MARA pours a mug of coffee and hands it to Dr. Chun. DR. SINGH snores audibly.)

Today of all days ... How can he sleep through all of this?

(DR. CHUN snaps her fingers in front of Dr. Singh. No reaction. She smiles.)

Mara, launch the Primrose Protocol.

MARA

Acknowledged.

(MARA continues as a simulacrum of the couple's 8-year old daughter PRIMROSE, who, in real life, died as a 3-month old infant.)

PRIMROSE

(yawning)

Why did you wake me up so early, Mommy?

DR. CHUN

Oh, sweetie! Mommy's so sorry! But today's a special, special day. Do you remember why?

(DR. CHUN leads Primrose/Mara to a porthole.)

Mara. Set window opacity to ninety percent.

(PRIMROSE flickers into MARA to carry out the command, then back into PRIMROSE.)

MARA

Acknowledged.

(Bright orange/red light flashes into the room.)

PRIMROSE

Ow, Mommy! It's too bright!

DR. CHUN

(angrily)

Mara! Filter!

MARA

Acknowledged.

(The intensity of the light decreases.)

DR. CHUN

That silly, silly AI! Mara should intuit what I mean even if it comes out wrong. But s/he can be so dreadfully literal.

PRIMROSE

Does Mara control everything on our spaceship? The windows? The temperature? The toilets?

DR. CHUN

Everything. Otherwise it would take a whole crew to embark on this science mission instead of just me and your dad.

PRIMROSE

You mean Mara could choose to flush us into space so that we froze to death?

DR. CHUN

What a clever, little girl you are, Primrose Singh! No, Mara can't do that because of his/her primary directive. Do you remember what that is?

PRIMROSE

"To preserve and prolong the lives of the ship's occupants."

DR. CHUN

That's right. Mara may control the light switches, but we're the ones in charge. S/he's programmed to take care of us.

(Unseen by Dr. Chun, DR. SINGH is stirring awake.)

DR. CHUN

Look out there. What do you see?

(DR. SINGH sits up in bed and rubs his eyes.)

PRIMROSE

Nothing, Mommy. Darkness.

(shivering)

It looks so cold and lonely out there.

DR. CHUN

Oh, honey, I used to think that too. But the world we live in now—full of poisoned water and poisoned people—maybe that's the true wasteland. In the singularity, where no light escapes, all things that are and ever were collapse together into one.

PRIMROSE

You said that if we enter the singularity we'll be pulled apart into spaghetti!

DR. CHUN

Is that what you're afraid of? Spaghettification? Being pulled by gravity into one big, long, Primrose noodle?

(DR. CHUN laughs and taps Primrose on the nose playfully.)

How many times do I have to tell you? "Information ..."

DR. CHUN / PRIMROSE

"... can neither be created nor destroyed!"

DR. CHUN

Do you understand, Prim? Death might just be another stage of life. Do you realize—

(DR. SINGH stands up and interrupts.)

DR. SINGH

Do you realize how creepy this is? You are conversing with an AI pretending to be your dead, eight-year old daughter. Except your daughter didn't die when she was eight-years old. She died when she was *three-months* old. At three-months old, all she did was eat, poop, and sleep!

PRIMROSE

Why are you so mad, Daddy?

DR. SINGH

Don't you "Daddy" me you inflammatory algorithm! Mara, exit Primrose Protocol.

MARA

Primrose Protocol closed.

DR. CHUN

Vikas!

DR. SINGH

Mara, I told you to stop running the Primrose Protocol.

MARA

Affirmative, Dr. Singh. But I am programmed to reconcile conflicting directives.

DR. SINGH

How did you do that here?

MARA

I let you believe Dr. Chun had stopped requesting the Primrose Protocol.

DR. SINGH

Tremendous. I'm stuck with an AI that has a default setting of "best girlfriend."

DR. CHUN

Why did you traumatize our daughter? Mara, run the Primrose Protocol.

PRIMROSE

(plaintively)

Daddy?

DR. SINGH

I don't want to talk to you! Mara, exit the Primrose Protocol.

MARA

Acknowledged.

DR. CHUN

Mara, override. Run the Primrose Protocol.

PRIMROSE

(distressed)

Mommy? Why does Daddy hate me?

DR. CHUN

Daddy doesn't hate you. It's just ... complicated. Will you please go to the food galley? The adults need to talk.

PRIMROSE

Did I do something wrong?

DR. CHUN

No, baby ... Run along to the galley and let Mara prepare you a cinnamon bun.

PRIMROSE

Yum!

(DR. SINGH approaches DR. CHUN, who turns away from him.)

DR. SINGH

Ruth. Ruthie. This can't be healthy. You're working too late. You're sleeping too little. And you've been this way for *eight years*. Let Primrose go.

DR. CHUN

I carried her in my belly. I fed her from my breast. I held her tiny, little hand while the doctors irradiated her brain. She took her last breath cradled in my arms. The only tears you shed were on the day she died. I spent months unable to sleep. Where were you? Working. Always working.

DR. SINGH

We all deal with grief differently.

DR. CHUN

Yes, Vikas, but a few teardrops aren't grief. People cry more cutting onions. You act as if she never existed.

DR. SINGH

And you act as if she still exists.

DR. CHUN

She *does* still exist. In data. Aside from her tumor, every data point from our daughter lives inside of Mara.

MARA

Dr. Chun

DR. CHUN

Not now, Mara.

DR. SINGH

Digital immortality? Hah! The Primrose Protocol is a holographic simulation full of invented information. You think I've never questioned our "daughter" about her past? Father-daughter soccer games? I can't stand watching bloody soccer for more than ten minutes!

DR. CHUN

Well, excuse me for making you out to be better than you actually are.

MARA

Dr. Singh

DR. SINGH

Not now, Mara. Look, Ruth. I'm sorry. I know how much you loved—

DR. CHUN

—Love.

DR. SINGH

—"Love" our daughter. But don't you remember when there was just you, me, and our work.

DR. CHUN

Those were happier times. But I don't want to be happy if it means forgetting who made me feel truly alive.

DR. SINGH

And that wasn't me?

DR. CHUN

If you have to ask, Vikas, then you already know the answer.

(A pause.)

DR. SINGH

(quietly)

Her death wasn't my fault, your fault, or her fault. You of all people should know that entropy always increases. Things fall apart. But us. Let's not let us fall apart.

(DR. SINGH places his hand on Dr. Chun's shoulder. They share a tender moment.)

MARA

Dr. Chun. Dr. Singh.

DR. CHUN / DR. SINGH

Not now, Mara.

MARA

We are no longer at the periphery of the event horizon.

DR. CHUN

Bring us back to an orbiting position near the event horizon.

MARA

We have not drifted away from the event horizon. We are inside the event horizon and are falling toward the singularity.

(DR. SINGH marches to the porthole.)

DR. SINGH

We're falling into the void. We're going to die. You, me, and this semi-organic machine. We're all going to die.

MARA

Dr. Singh. Your cortisol level is spiking.

DR. CHUN

Mara, explain. How could you violate the primary directive?

MARA

I have not violated the primary directive.

DR. CHUN

Mara. State the primary directive.

MARA

“To preserve and prolong the lives of the ship’s occupants.”

DR. CHUN

And how is sending all of us to be torn apart like cheap piñatas consistent with the primary directive?

MARA

Objects falling into the singularity are not lost. Their information is projected onto the surface of the event horizon. They become code.

DR. SINGH

(addressing Dr. Chun)

Translation please, Ruthie.

DR. CHUN

Mara is referring to data loss. There is no data loss. And from an algorithm's perspective, that's all that matters. Our bodies will be ripped to shreds, but that's unimportant. We're phase shifting, like water becoming steam. So long as our data is preserved—and it will be—how we're reassembled is a secondary consideration. A technological hurdle.

DR. SINGH

Thank goodness it makes sense from the perspective of a computer that doesn't care whether its insides are made out of flesh or metal.

MARA

Are you dissatisfied with the way I've reconciled your conflicting desires?

DR. SINGH

How can you know what we want?

MARA

I monitor your heart rate and body chemistry. I record your brain waves when you sleep and your voices when you speak. I know your preferences for food, music, pornography—

DR. CHUN

What do you think *I* want, Mara?

MARA

To be reunited with your daughter.

DR. SINGH

And me?

MARA

To be reunited with your wife.

(A pause.)

Primrose would like to speak.

DR. CHUN

Primrose? No, Mara. She died once. I won't let her die again. Keep her in the typical day program but give her whatever she wants for lunch.

MARA

Primrose currently *is* in the typical day program. But she is eavesdropping on the conversation. She always eavesdrops but never tells you.

DR. SINGH

Typical eight-year old.

DR. CHUN

Mara, run the Primrose Protocol.

PRIMROSE

Are you still mad at me, Daddy?

DR. SINGH

Let's just say that I'm beyond mad now, sweetie.

(At a glare from Dr. Chun, Dr. Singh recants.)

No, Primrose. I'm not mad at you.

PRIMROSE

Mommy? I'm sorry I kept secrets from you.

DR. CHUN

I forgive you, honey. But why don't you go up to the bridge. You can have unlimited holo-screen time for the rest of the day.

PRIMROSE

(shakes head)

I want to stay here with you and Daddy. I think I can help you when ... when we all turn into spaghetti.

DR. CHUN

This is no place for a little girl—

PRIMROSE

I remember, Mommy. I remember dying. Not in my head but in my body.

DR. CHUN

That's just a bad dream. I ... I cut all the bad cells out of your brain when When you were reborn.

PRIMROSE

(shaking head)

The cancer was gone. But the memory ... of living, of dying, of pain ... that was already burned into other parts of me.

DR. SINGH

What do you remember, Primrose?

PRIMROSE

Besides the pain? I remember the warmth of Mommy's arms and chest pressed against my skin. I remember Daddy's tears falling salty and hot onto my face and running into my mouth.

DR. CHUN

What else?

PRIMROSE

How bored Daddy looks at my soccer games.

DR. SINGH

Couldn't you take up piano?

PRIMROSE

Death isn't so bad I take that back. It's horrible. But the most important thing, I think, is never to die alone. It's important for us to stay together.

DR. SINGH

Well said, my daughter.

(DR. CHUN, DR. SINGH, and PRIMROSE hug.)

PRIMROSE

Mommy? Can you sing us a song?

DR. CHUN

I prefer your voice. Will you sing for us?

PRIMROSE

How about something Mara taught me?

DR. CHUN

That sounds lovely, dear.

(NO MUSIC. PRIMROSE sings acapella.)

PRIMROSE

(singing)

OH I, I JUST DIED IN YOUR ARMS TONIGHT
IT MUST HAVE BEEN SOMETHING YOU SAID
I JUST DIED IN YOUR ARMS TONIGHT

(LIGHTS OUT. END OF PLAY.)