**The Retirement Algorithm**

Mark’s computer desk was his fortress. He sat at its heart, in his swivel chair, his face bathed in the bluish glow of his 27-inch monitor. Eight hours a day, sometimes ten, he navigated the infinite labyrinth of the internet, doing a bit of everything: programming little projects that no one would ever use, writing short stories that stayed (mostly) unpublished in the depths of his hard drive, watching fmusic videos of young people in their twenties believing their bands would last forever.

He had been a programmer once, a damn good one. But now, retired, it was different. The computer wasn’t a tool anymore; it was his entire world. And he didn’t know how to leave it.

“Mark,” his wife said, standing in the doorway, arms crossed. “It’s gorgeous out. Let’s walk by the ocean.”

He hesitated, fingers still hovering over the keys. She waited. He sighed and stood up.

The ocean was always there, vast and indifferent, waves hissing as they pushed and pulled against the shore. They walked in silence, Mark stuffing his hands into his jacket pockets as his wife pointed out seabirds and ships way out to sea. He nodded, enjoying his time with her, wishing his brain would stop reminding him of what to do on his computer when they got back. The salty air was bracing, the sun warm on his face, but he wasn’t really present.

When they got home, he kissed her on the cheek, muttered something about an idea he didn’t want to lose, and retreated to his study. She shook her head but didn’t follow him.

Mark knew he had a problem. He’d known it for years, ever since his wife had started suggesting long walks and anything that would get him outside, with or without her. But there was so much to learn and do on his computer. And really, what was there outside? He loved nature, but he needed the mental situation of solving problems. He knew this was a symptom of being retired – most guys he n-knew who had retired felt the same things. Retirement had felt like a finish line he was aiming for – he had yearned for it for decades. He’d dreamed of unstructured days and endless free time. And no one who had to work every day would sympathize with someone who didn’t. Getting up for his first coffee of the day and deciding how to spend his hours was no small thing – he loved it. But sometimes there were so many hours to fill – sometimes he just didn’t know how to fill the void. So he would surf the internet – him and everyone else, he thought.

Fishing rods learning corner of in the basement unused. His bass guitar leaned against the wall gathering dust. He thought about picking it up and playing with the old songs and sometimes he did. More often, he didn’t touch it. What was the point? No band, no gigs, no audience. Just him, playing to an empty room.

The computer was easier. It asked nothing of him except his attention, and it gave him everything in return even though those things were fleeting and virtual. Somehow it worked for him. He could immerse himself with the unending content begging him for attention, distracting him from the nagging sense of loss that had crept into his life over the years.

One afternoon, Mark watched the film The Social Dilemma for the third time. It didn’t tell him anything he didn’t already know—he had built some of the very algorithms discussed in the film – methods to keep people engaged, back when he still worked. The irony wasn’t lost on him. He, too, had been captured by the same psychological tricks to keep him engaged – knowing they were tricks didn’t stop them from working.

The next day, he sat on the train, heading downtown for some computer peripherals. What else? Around him, everyone riding the train stared at their phones. Teens swiped through TikToks, professionals tapped out emails, a grandmother squinted at her screen with her thumb poised to zoom in. Mark pulled his phone out of his pocket to join them, but the screen felt too small, the touch keyboard too cramped. He needed his monitor, his full-sized keyboard, his chair.

The train rumbled on, carrying him past rows of houses where people probably stared at screens just like him. It wasn’t just him. It was everyone.

One evening, his wife found him in the study, hunched over as usual. She didn’t scold him or ask him to come for a walk. Instead, she placed a photo on his desk. It was an old snapshot of Mark holding up a huge striped bass with a proud grin the ocean waves lapping at his feet.

“You used to love fishing,” she said softly.

Mark looked at the photo and then back at his screen. The cursor blinked, waiting for his next command. He didn’t answer her, just nodded. She kissed him on the head and he stopped her and kissed her. He knew she just wanted the best for him.

The next day, he dusted off his fishing rod and walked to the beach. His fingers fumbled a bit as he tied on a lure. But once the line hit the water, something shifted. He had spent hundreds of hours of his life fishing, maybe thousands. The tension of waiting, the rhythm of the waves, the anticipation of a tug—he’d forgotten how satisfying it was. It was like doing nothing in a way – every fisherman knows that – it’s a waiting game. But while you waited you felt the sand under your feet, watched the waves, the gulls, and there was always the chance of a strike. He didn’t catch anything that morning, but he didn’t care. For the first time in years, he hadn’t been thinking about his computer. The ocean engaged his attention – the ocean could do that.

When he got home, his wife smiled at him as he stored the rod in its usual corner. He told her he’d had fun and would do it again and he meant it. After dinner, he went back to his desk. The computer greeted him like an old friend, its screen glowing with possibilities.

Mark knew he wasn’t going to quit spending hours on his computer every day. Nothing had changed. The computer was too deeply embedded in his life and the way he worked. But he also knew he had to make an effor to make room for other things. He started setting a timer—four hours at the desk, then a break. He played his bass again and enjoyed it. He fished twice a week, often catching nothing – it was a big ocean. But he found peace in the waiting.

The algorithms had won, in a way, but they hadn’t taken everything. Mark smiled as he clicked open a blank document and began typing. Retirement was still a work in progress, but at least now, he thought that maybe he was beginning to write a better script for himself.

**Ben Santora**