

Relief

It was almost 5 o'clock on Christmas Eve and Claire was sitting in her office, typing away. She had had the most interesting interviews today - she had found three incredibly talented candidates for the company she worked for. Claire had a background in psychology and currently worked in HR. She knew her job title didn't sound overly appealing, throughout the years she had received her fair share of eye-rolls, yawns and condescending comments. Claire didn't care, though. She knew something that many people hadn't yet realised: since the mass introduction of AI personal assistants last January, work had become much more meaningful. Before, her colleagues would come to work tired, grumpy, complaining, waiting impatiently for the next holiday. Now, very few colleagues came to the office at all. The only people who came to work were the ones, who actually wanted to work. Most of the time she was by herself, not another human in sight. She would hear the relaxing sound of multiple keyboards chattering around her - it was the personal assistants, of course. They worked quietly, typing up reports, sending emails, running errands, often bringing her coffee and lunch. Many of them interviewed people, too. Her assistant stayed at home, Claire's work was sacred to her. It was hers and hers alone.

At first the AI assistants had needed to be told what to do - her colleagues would take the day off (most would do that for months, of course) and would order their AI assistants to do their work for them, Claire remembered. The human employees, Claire's colleagues, would still get paid. As long as the work was completed, they would receive a salary at the end of the month. After all, personal assistants had now become an extension of one's own self. Of course, there had been other technological advances throughout the years, different stationary machines, which you could speak to, some mobile household helpers, but none of them had been as impressive or successful as the AI personal assistants. Often, the assistant knew their owner better than the owner knew themselves. Hence, the assistants often surprised their owners with the perfect thoughtful gift, the most brilliant idea, the perfect solution to a problem. It was almost eerie, but it gave the owners a sense of pride. It was their thoughts, their knowledge, which had been so helpfully synthesized by the assistants. The humans had done the work, the credit, the pride was theirs. The assistants just lent a processing capacity, which humans often couldn't afford - after all, humans have limited attention span and all their everyday duties and distractions. Now, unlike in the first half of the 21st century, people could once again enjoy more personal freedom, they were free to sleep more, exercise more, spend time with family, paint, dance, go to the movies, go for long walks, sit in the sun with a picnic basket. There were no more long, stressful commutes, there were no more traffic jams, no more long queues in the local cafe at lunch time. People could, of course, choose to go to work in person. Some of them, like Claire, did. Claire loved her work. She loved it before she bought her personal assistant, but she started loving it even more now that only the most devoted colleagues would come to the office in person. Those were the devoted professionals, she thought. The real masters of their work, the ones who wanted to be there and make a difference in the world. More importantly, there were less candidates applying to work in the company and she had much more time to talk to them, get to know their dreams, fears, ambitions, create detailed profiles and choose wisely whom she wanted to hire. Claire satisfied what she called her "thirst for humanity" this way. Despite the immense help she was receiving at home from her assistant and her husband's assistant (Tom, her husband, also attended his office in person), Claire still had little time to spend with her 3 children. Only the oldest, 10-year-old Amanda had an AI assistant. She had received JO-167 (as Claire often called it jokingly, Jo) several months ago for her 10th birthday, when she was finally legally allowed to have one. The two younger siblings were looked after by Jo, too. Jo would cooperate with the other assistants at home, they would cook, clean, shop, feed the children, do laundry, pay bills, receive the mail, help the children with homework, prepare school lunches, organise the kids' backpacks, iron their uniforms, and complete any other household duties that came up. Claire's personal assistant would help out with small work-related errands, of course. Such as buying stationery, sending out some emails, which didn't require a personal touch. Claire didn't trust the AI assistants to do the "deeply human things", as she called them. She didn't let the

assistants in her household choose gifts, she didn't let them write birthday cards, she wouldn't allow them to substitute (and film) at her daughter's piano recital, as some parents would do nowadays. But she felt torn. She felt what she thought people had felt 30 years before, when there had been no AI personal assistants. She felt that there was never enough time to spend at work and at home, that one would always lose out in favour of the other. She needed balance, but she wanted to do it all herself. At least the housework had been taken care of...

"How did people do it all those years ago?", she said out loud, as if waking herself up with her own voice.

People had been so stressed back then, nowadays, barely anyone felt stress. Life seemed so much easier and more relaxed. Except, she thought, so many people had become lazy and complacent, even careless. She thought about how heartbroken one of Amanda's classmates had been a few weeks ago, when her parents hadn't shown up to her school play. Both of their AI personal assistants had been there, however, streaming it live to the parents' phones, while the parents sat at home (one would hope) watching. While some people became more disconnected from their families and friends, others tried to forge extra connections, by including the assistants in family life as much as possible. Some people craved more connection, others craved more isolation. Claire sat at her desk, wondering whether people had always been like this or whether technology had made them this way. She wondered if the AI assistants had accidentally brought out the worst in some people and the best in others. She herself had grown in her job so much thanks to her assistant! So many little tasks, which were trivial, but would have taken up her time, had been accomplished quietly and efficiently by the assistant. The house was cleaned, the bills were paid, the groceries were bought. She had so much more time and energy to focus on work. Most of them she didn't even have to ask for, the AI assistant was almost telepathic! But the truly meaningful, human things she couldn't delegate. No way was she going to miss out on her children's lives.

Claire looked up at the clock and realised it was already 5:10 - she could have left work earlier, of course, but she wanted to work a normal work day, so she always stayed until 5. She saved the report she had been working on, grabbed her bag and hurried through the crunchy snow, towards the self-driving car, which was waiting for her in the car park. It was a quiet ride home, yet she worried about what the AI assistants had been doing. Had they cooked a family dinner? Had they cleaned? Had they helped the children dress with their festive clothes? Had they set the table?

Had they even remembered it was Christmas eve? She vaguely remembered telling them. Maybe she only thought of telling them, maybe she had forgotten. Did robots really care about Christmas? The more she thought about it, the more worried she became - what if the AI assistants had forgotten, it was their first Christmas eve, after all. What if the kids were disappointed, thinking Christmas had been forgotten? She tried to console herself with the thoughts that Tom, the children and she had at least decorated the tree together. Also, she and Tom had spent two days preparing the presents for the kids, so at least that was taken of. But could she trust the robotic helpers to really create a good Christmas spirit? She knew the AI assistants were connected to the internet, but was that enough in this case? How well could the internet really convey Christmas?

Claire picked up her phone and tried calling the house - no one answered. She tried the individual numbers of the three AI assistants in the house - no response. This had never happened before. The AIs were programmed to be reliable and would never fail to answer a call right away. Claire felt a sudden chill down her spine, despite the warm, cosy atmosphere of the car.

Why weren't they answering? What if something had gone wrong? What if the helpers had been hacked? What if they had malfunctioned and harmed the children?! She remembered a recent story she had read online where an entire family had been murdered by multiple gunshots in their home. There were speculations that the AI helpers had done it and she had had her doubts. However, at the time, Tom had re-assured her that this was just fear-mongering and that it was probably being done by opponents of the AI personal assistants business. But what if it had been true? Her stomach turned. What if her children had been attacked and destroyed by the robots?! What if they had been shot or poisoned? Tom had a gun locked away in a safe, but the AIs probably knew the combination...there were many household detergents they could have used to poison the children, if

they wanted to...why even go to that trouble, when they could probably just break their fragile necks with a single movement of their cold, metallic hands...What was she going to find? For a split second an image flashed before her: her three young children lying cold on the floor of her house, the house wrecked, the AI assistants gone.

The car stopped. Claire had arrived home.

She stepped out into the cold winter air and was hit by the flashing red, white, blue, and green Christmas lights that were dispersed through the yard. For a moment, she saw the lights of emergency vehicles parked in the yard. An ambulance, with medics inside trying to revive a child. A police car, officers investigating a crime scene. She could have sworn they were there. She shook her head. No, it was just colourful decorations, which she had placed there herself. The lights were too strong, they slashed through the darkness of the winter evening. They were merciless, terrifying. Her eyes filled with tears, as the flashes blinded her and made her feel dizzy. Her knees felt soft, her feet heavy as she forced herself to walk to the front door and turn the key.

Claire cautiously opened the front door.

She was immediately embraced by the smell of roast turkey and baked potatoes with...a hint of rosemary, perhaps? She didn't have much time to figure out the spice because she was suddenly accosted by three excited, overjoyed children.

"Mommy, you're home! Happy Christmas eve! Let's celebrate!", shouted Amanda, squeezing her waist in a hug.

"Surprise! Happy almost-Christmas, mommy!", cheered little five-year-old Monica.

"Hi, mommy!", squeaked tiny Timmy, who just happily cuddled her leg.

Claire looked down at her children's smiling faces and a warm feeling washed over her. They were happy, clean, their hair combed, and they were even wearing their festive clothes! At that moment the door behind them opened and Tom came in, shaking the snow from his coat. The children jumped to greet him too and he joined in the family hug. Claire noticed that he looked just as pleasantly surprised as she had, by the pleasant atmosphere and the tidiness of the kids.

The five of them walked into the dining room together. The table was set with the finest china they had - the white and blue plates glistened, the cutlery shone and flickered with the festive light coming from the lights on the Christmas tree. There were several candles at the table, all glowing warmly. The fireplace had also been stoked and lit and was quietly spreading its warmth throughout the room. Claire's eyes had been drawn to the golden-crust, juicy turkey, which was sitting in a silver tray in the middle of the table. Next to it were multiple plates with roasted potatoes, brussels sprouts, cheeses, sausages, and homemade bread. There was even a chocolate fudge cake placed at one end of the table. The whole room seemed to be alive with light and warmth. The three children looked at their parents excitedly, impatiently throwing glances at the delicious dinner waiting for them.

The three AI assistants stood in a line near the door. JO-167, apparently the appointed spokesperson of the three, spoke.

"Surprise! Welcome home, Mr. and Mrs. Johnson! We recently learned about surprises and how much humans love them, so we decided to create a surprise for your family. This is why we weren't answering your calls, we apologise for any worries we may have caused you. We hope you enjoy your dinner. Merry Christmas!"