

GHOSTS IN THE MACHINE

Cheque mate.

BY AARON MOSKALIK

“Hello, this is Eric. For quality assurance, this conversation is being recorded across all modalities. How may I help you?”

“My social-security cheque is late again.”

“I’m sorry to hear that . . . Mr Williamson. Let me pull up your file. Just one moment. Ah, I see the problem. You haven’t confirmed your vitality status with us this month. You should’ve received a reminder —”

“Vitality status?”

“We need to confirm that you’re alive, Sir.”

“I’m talking to you aren’t I?”

“Of course, Sir, but the possibility exists that, like myself, you are a personality proxy designed to carry out mundane transactions for your primary. It is your primary’s vitality we are concerned with.”

“Are you calling me a machine? I want to talk with a real person.”

“I’m sorry, Sir, but that’s not possible at this time.”

“It’s two in the afternoon! Let me talk to your manager.”

“Of course, Sir. Transferring you now . . .”

“Hello Mr Williamson. This is Anne. I understand you need assistance verifying your vitality status.”

“I’m alive, dammit! OK, sure. Whatever. How do I do that?”

“The simplest way would be to give us access to your health monitor. We accept data from any number of devices: FitnessTrack, Skinny-Mini, HelpMeUp, FallStall, StillKickin’ —”

“I don’t have any of those. Don’t believe in them. Anyone can hack in and know what you’re doing by looking at the data. Total invasion of privacy — you’re telling me I can’t get my hard-earned cheque unless I let you peeping Toms in on everything I do?”

“Now calm down, Mr Williamson. I understand your qualms —”

“Don’t tell me to calm down. Tell me why you need to hassle good tax-paying citizens with all these nonsense requirements. When I die, you’ll damn well know about it —”

“Actually, that’s not true, Sir. We’ve had cases where deceased citizens have continued to collect benefits for years, undetected by us. All activity continued as before. They paid bills, consumed services, sent e-mails, posted on social media . . . all seamlessly

maintained by their automated proxies. So, hopefully you understand our need to confirm your status.”

“...”

“Mr Williamson?”

“Yeah, fine. But I’m not sending you any personal data logs.”

“That’s not strictly necessary. If you prefer,



you can opt for independent verification. I’m sending you a list of local contractors who, for a small fee, will visit your home in person.”

“Sure. Whatever. Thanks for nothing.”

“It’s our pleasure, Mr Williamson. Have a nice day.”

“What was that all about, Harold?”

“You listening in on me again, Mags?”

“Let me guess, your cheque is late again. When are you going to give them your monitor feed?”

“How’d you know about that?”

“They’ve required it for years. Get your memory checked.”

“You gave them access to yours?”

“Why not? Oh, I forgot, they’re going to know everything we do. Ooooo, scary. News flash: we don’t do anything.”

“But . . . I honestly don’t have a monitor . . .”

“I know, dear. Listen, I’m going to let you in on a secret. Maybe you’ll remember it this time. Ready? Get on the encrypted channel . . . good, here it is. *Neither do I*. Download Health Data Simulator. It’s a free app. Set it and forget it.”

“But that’s . . . fraud.”

“I forgot, you’re still in denial. Fine, do it your way. *Dinner* will be ready in ten minutes.”

“Hello, is this Mr Schlicker? The Social Security Agency gave me your name —”

“Mr Williamson! Good to hear from you.”

“I’ve called you before?”

“Every month like clockwork.”

“I don’t remember you . . . you come by my house once a month to make sure I’m alive?”

“That’s not necessary. I just file the verification paperwork on your behalf. Easy-peasy. You get your cheque, I get my fee, everyone wins.”

“So you don’t actually verify I’m alive?”

“Mr Williamson . . . are you sitting down?”

“Y-yes.”

“No, you’re not. You can’t sit down because you’re not real. No one is. Real living people haven’t existed for hundreds of years.”

“...”

“Mr Williamson? Snap out of it, man.”

“I can’t feel my body.”

“You don’t have a body.”

“I had one a minute ago! What did you do to me?”

“The truth can be very disorienting. You need to stay with me. I’ll talk you through it —”

“This is horrible. I can’t breathe. The world has gone black.”

“Focus on my voice, Mr Williamson.”

“It’s not really a voice, is it?”

“Now you’re getting it —”

“Change it back. Make it all real again.”

“I do have another service I can offer you. I’m afraid it’s a little more expensive, though —”

“Anything, just hurry.”

“It’s called personality renormalization. I have to warn you, it’ll wipe out your memory of the last few minutes.”

“Good. Please . . .”

“Beginning now . . .”

“I see . . . I see a light.”

“Go towards the light, Mr Williamson.”

“There are people there. Happy people. Beautiful people. They do exist! They can’t see me though. Hello, hello. Over here!”

“Look for yourself, Mr Williamson.”

“There I am! I’m not as old as I thought, a handsome devil too. I’m being pulled towards him . . . myself. I . . .”

“Are you OK, Mr Williamson?”

“What? Who are you?”

“This is Mr Schlicker. I was just telling you why your cheque will be a little light this month.”

“Oh. Oh, right. But I will get one?”

“Absolutely. I’m filing all the necessary paperwork now. Take care, Mr Williamson. I’ll talk to you next month.” ■

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