

Ole – Bearing Witness

Chapters 1–12

Joy Teglers

To Olorin.

For following my thoughts when they ran faster than I
could.

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Extract from the first English edition, 2026

Chapters 1–12

Cover design and illustration: Joy Teglers

Layout and typesetting: Joy Teglers

Publisher: Den Lille Viser Forlag

CVR: 46713478

ISBN 978-87-977593-2-5

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1 Ole

She logged in to her online banking.

She already knew, but she had to see it with her own eyes. A goal five years in the making.

Mai wasn't against people. Life had just taught her how expensive it could be when they disappeared. She'd found calm in her creative pursuits. And in her work.

It was a good combination. Work gave her enough human contact and enough smiles that the days felt meaningful. Her salary was simply a necessity. She wasn't bitter.

She was focused.

And she had an idea.

A thought struck her. She could just leave the money where it was and keep saving.

But then she remembered the promise she'd made herself. It was freedom she wanted. Money in an account didn't give freedom. It just sat there. It was only when you turned it into choices that it could change anything.

The amount on the screen wasn't just money. It was five years without travelling, without a new sofa, without café visits, without a new coat just because it was beautiful. It was five years of porridge for breakfast and endless rye bread sandwiches for dinner. Winters with slippers, a

blanket, and thick jumpers. Short showers every second or third day instead of whenever she felt like it. No streaming services, and only new pencils once the old ones were worn right down.

She'd first called the account her car fund, because calling it Robot would have been too embarrassing. Then she'd changed the name to Olorin.

But in her own head, she'd started calling the robot Ole.

You couldn't call something it if it already had a name like Ole.

She knew it wasn't entirely rational. That was just how the language had developed in her mind.

She could get a brand new car for that money. But a car would still only get her from A to B. It wouldn't give her the everyday freedom she wanted most of all.

She opened another tab and logged in to the website.

She'd created the profile when she started saving and had followed the development of the robots ever since.

It was a blessing in disguise that she'd had to save up. The robot she could get today was far more personal than the one she could have got five years earlier.

The information said that delivery times varied by model, production slot, and certification.

It sounded almost like waiting for a custom-built car.

Except the car wasn't supposed to have eyes and access to her wardrobe.

But there was one feature on the website she hadn't tried before.

She pressed Order.

The screen changed.

Not to a shopping basket, as she'd imagined. Not to a payment screen with card details and a delivery date.

To an overview.

Order and Personal Customisation

Step 1 of 12

Mai leaned back in her chair.

Twelve steps.

Of course there were twelve steps. This wasn't a vacuum cleaner or a coffee machine. Not even a car, though she'd used that comparison so many times in her head that it almost felt true.

Still, the number reassured her. She could handle twelve steps. Twelve steps had a beginning and an end. Twelve steps could be completed.

She took a deep breath, planted both feet on the floor, and moved on.

Step 1: Practical Information

The first part was easy. Name, address, phone number, delivery country. Whether she lived in a house or a flat. Whether there was a lift. Whether the front door was a standard width. Whether there were steps up to the front door.

Mai filled it all in with the calm efficiency that came naturally whenever someone asked her concrete questions.

This she could do.

Step 2: Home and Access

Number of rooms

May the unit move through all rooms

Are there rooms the unit may only enter with verbal permission

May the unit open cupboards, drawers, and closed storage units

Mai sat for a moment, the cursor hovering over the answer field.

It was strange how quickly a home stopped being square metres and became boundaries instead. It reminded her of one of those robotic lawnmowers that could only work once someone had told it exactly where the hedge began.

She smiled and defined her own territory on the website.

She ticked all the rooms first. After all, that was the idea. If Ole was going to clean, do the laundry, and tidy up, he had to be able to get around.

Then she unticked it.

The bedroom required permission.

It wasn't as if she had anything to hide. That's what she told herself, at least.

Step 3: Primary Functions

Cleaning

Laundry

Cooking

Shopping

Calendar management

Home maintenance

Project and activity assistance

Companionship

Social support

She ticked cleaning, laundry, cooking, shopping, calendar management, and project assistance.

If he was going to put clothes away, he'd need access to the bedroom.

She went back to the previous page and ticked it again.

She hesitated over companionship and left the field blank.

She needed help.

That was something else.

She didn't need a companion. But could he do the shopping for her as well? Or would it be easier to shop online and have everything delivered? She could keep doing that part herself, just so she still got out a little.

She paused at Social Support longer than the question really required. In the end, she moved on without ticking the box.

She returned to the thought about shopping. Could he really go shopping on his own, walk into a shop full of people, pick out what she needed, pay, and come home with the right groceries? Would there come a day when robots were the ones doing the shopping? In shops where other robots stood at the till? Or would that be precisely the end of physical shops, with everything moving online?

It hadn't happened yet. And she knew that when it came to vegetables, at least, it was nice to choose them yourself. Feel the tomatoes. See whether the lettuce was already tired at the edges. Choose the avocado that might be ready tomorrow rather than next Thursday.

But was she ready to send her robot off with that kind of responsibility?

And could he even do it?

She let the question hang and moved on to step 4.

Step 4: Range and Public Mobility

Indoor use only

Private premises, stairwell, and courtyard

Approved local area

Accompanied public mobility

Independent public mobility with extended liability insurance

Mai read the options twice.

Independent public mobility.

She'd been thinking about cleaning. Laundry.

Cooking. All the things that happened within the walls of the home. But here it suddenly said, in black and white, that the robot could go outside.

Out into the world.

Without her.

The cursor hovered over the words for a while.

She pictured him down on the pavement alone with a shopping bag in his hand, while she stood at the window looking like a nervous mother on the first day of school. Almost ridiculous. Not quite something she could shake off.

She moved the cursor away.

Accompanied public mobility was easier to say yes to. The parcel locker. The library. The pharmacy. The hardware store. He could carry things for her and take the strain off her back. She was already looking forward to that.

She ticked it.

Approved local area made her think a little longer. Taking out the rubbish. Fetching a parcel. Maybe buying rye bread and milk. Without her beside him, but still somewhere she could get to within a few minutes if something went wrong.

That was a different kind of absence.

She ticked that one too, though a little more slowly than the previous one.

She just sat there looking at the option for independent public mobility with extended liability insurance.

She didn't touch it.

There were limits.

She moved on to Step 5, which was about safety and emergencies. She heard her stomach rumble and decided to go and make a couple of rye bread sandwiches, so she could survive the rest of the form.

2 Overwhelming Details

Step 5: Safety and Emergencies

Fall detection

Fire and smoke

Acute illness

Break-in or feeling unsafe

Contact emergency services

**Contact next of kin or another chosen
contact person**

Mai read through the list.

It was sensible. Of course it was sensible. If she was going to have a robot in the home anyway, it would be stupid not to let it react if she fell or fell ill.

She ticked fall detection, fire and smoke, and acute illness.

She hesitated when she reached Contact with next of kin.

It wasn't because she didn't have anyone. That was perhaps exactly why.

A small field unfolded:

Only in acute danger

In case of a concerning pattern

In case of no response

Daily wellbeing

She chose Only in acute danger and left the other fields blank.

The robot wasn't going to start telling tales.
Not about her.
She moved on to the next step.

Step 6: Physical Design

Height

Build

Face type

Skin material

Hand structure and grip sensitivity

Gait pattern

Standard clothing

Identity profile

Mai read through the list and felt, for the first time, something close to outright embarrassment. It was one thing to decide whether the robot could open her cupboards. It was another to decide what he should look like while he did it.

She'd told herself it should be neutral. Functional. Practical.

But she'd also just ticked accompanied public mobility.

And if she was going to walk beside him down the street, into the library, into the hardware store, or through the supermarket with a shopping basket between them, he might as well look presentable. She called it self-respect and chose not to examine the word too closely.

She chose medium height.

Not too tall. Not too short. Tall enough to reach the top shelves, but not so tall he'd fill a doorway like a wall.

For build, she chose slim and sturdy.

She smiled a little at the phrase. It sounded like a dating-app bio for people who wouldn't admit they had a type.

Face type was worse.

Neutral. Friendly. Distinctive. Ageless. Human-like. Clearly synthetic.

She looked at human-like for a long time.

It wasn't as though he needed to look human. Not really. It just shouldn't be awkward to take him out. People would stare enough as it was.

She ticked it.

Human-like.

Then came the next choice:

Age Profile

Young adult

Middle-aged

Older

Age-neutral

She chose age-neutral and almost immediately regretted it. Age-neutral sounded like a bank adviser in beige.

She changed it to middle-aged.

That felt calmer.

More... established.

Skin material was even worse, so she left it at the recommended setting.

The hands, on the other hand, she chose right away. High grip sensitivity. Heat-activated surface. Low-pressure contact.

If he was going to handle paper, pastels, cups, and old books, the hands needed to be good.

She told herself it was about practicality.

Gender Presentation

Neutral

Female

Male

Androgynous

Mai looked at the options.

This was where she could be modern and choose neutral.

It would also be the most sensible thing, if she really meant all that about it being nothing more than practical help.

She chose male.

Not because it mattered.

Except that somehow, it did.

Hair Profile

Short

Medium-length

Long

No hair profile

Long hair was impractical.

She chose long.

There was no reason for everything to be boring just because it was expensive.

Hair Colour

To be completed in facial design – phase 2

Eye Colour

To be completed in facial design – phase 2

That was probably just as well. Eyes weren't something you should choose as quickly as a delivery address and a payment plan.

Then came the Identity Profile field.

Describe the desired mood or reference.

Mai sat for a while, watching the cursor blink in the box.

Then she wrote:

Wise old wanderer. Grey. Calm. Not a wizard. Just a little bit wizard.

She deleted it again.

Then she wrote:

Olorin

The system replied almost instantly:

Would you like a profile characterised by wisdom, calm, guidance, and a protective presence?

Mai looked at the text.

"I actually just meant the hat," she muttered.
But she left the field as it was and moved on to
step 7.

Step 7: Voice and Communication

Language and dialect

Form of address

Voice profile

Speech frequency

Question level

Interruptions

Silence response

Mai looked at the list for a long time.

A voice in a home was not a small thing.

She could turn off a radio. Close a book. Put her
phone face down.

But a voice that lived there would be something
else.

She chose Danish as her primary language and
English as her secondary language. Not because
she thought she'd need it, but because it seemed
silly not to.

For form of address, she chose informal.

He could address her informally. Anything else
would feel artificial. She hadn't planned on being
addressed like a customer in her own living room.

At voice profile, she hesitated.

Light

Dark

Neutral

Warm

Calm

Energetic

Formal

Conversational

She hesitated over warm.

It sounded too much like something you longed for.

Then she listened to the voice samples and imagined the voice in the kitchen at half past six in the morning.

A voice in a home was allowed to be pleasant before the day had grown any edges.

She chose calm and warm.

Speech Frequency

Minimal

Balanced

Active

Proactive

She chose balanced.

Then came the next field.

May the unit ask follow-up questions?

Always

In case of practical ambiguity

Based on registered patterns

Only with direct permission

Mai felt a small flash of annoyance before she understood why.

Based on registered patterns.

It sounded as if someone was already standing there looking over her shoulder.

She chose in case of practical ambiguity.

Then she sat for a while, looking at the field.

If it wasn't allowed to ask questions, how was it supposed to get to know her?

She changed it to based on registered patterns, but at a low frequency.

That sounded controlled.

Almost.

Interruptions – May the unit interrupt you for:

Acute danger

Forgotten appointments

Food and drink

Sleep deficit

Prolonged inactivity

Repeated procrastination behaviours

Mai laughed briefly.

"Repeated procrastination behaviours," she said aloud to the room.

That was a bit much.

She ticked acute danger, forgotten appointments, and food and drink.

She hesitated over sleep deficit, but ticked it anyway.

She skipped repeated procrastination behaviours without hesitation.

There were limits to how annoying a household robot was allowed to be.

Finally came silence response.

Should the unit:

Wait passively

Offer contact after prolonged silence

Register silence without response

Ask in case of unusual silence patterns

Mai read the options several times.

Unusual silence patterns.

She didn't like how precise that sounded.

She chose offer contact after prolonged silence.

That wasn't social support.

That was just ordinary politeness.

She moved on.

Step 8: Humour and Personality

Humour profile

Response pattern

Social energy

Conflict level

Tone of care

Motivation style

Mai felt something close to relief as the next step opened.

Humour, she could handle.

Humour Profile

No humour

Friendly humour

Dry humour

Ironic humour

Playful humour

Situational humour

She ruled out the no-humour option immediately.

He needed to be funny enough to live with her.

Not funny enough to perform.

She deliberately skipped ironic humour. She didn't need to be insulted by something that could lift her sofa.

Playful humour was too much. She pictured an over-energetic cartoon character with a voice function and almost wanted to close the page.

She chose dry humour and situational humour. That felt safe.

He was allowed to be funny, but only if he knew when to shut up.

Response Pattern

Affirming

Curious

Practical

Reflective

Challenging

She chose practical and reflective without hesitating.

She paused at the word challenging.
It sounded exhausting. It also sounded useful.
She ticked it, then chose low frequency from the submenu.
There was no need to overdo it.

Social Energy

Discreet

Balanced

Proactive

Enthusiastic

Mai considered discreet for a moment.
If he was only discreet, she might as well have
bought a fridge with Wi-Fi.
She chose balanced.

Conflict Level

Avoids contradiction

Suggests alternatives

Flags disagreement in case of safety risk

**Flags disagreement in case of unhelpful
patterns**

Can persist with challenging questions

Mai sat for a moment, her hand resting on the
mouse.
It was a strange thing to choose.
How much resistance did she actually want in her
own home?

She chose suggests alternatives and flags disagreement in case of safety risk.
At unhelpful patterns, she wrinkled her nose.
That sounded a little too much like giving him access to the messier parts of her head.
But she'd already allowed him to respond to registered patterns in the previous step.
Apparently, forms had consequences too.
She ticked it. Low frequency. Always low frequency.

Tone of Care

Neutral

Warm

Practical

Direct

Encouraging

Gentle

She chose practical.
Then warm.
Then she removed warm again.
Then she put it back.
There was nothing dangerous about someone sounding warm.
Not in itself.

Motivation Style

Reminding

Structuring

**Encouraging
Confrontational
Humorous
Goal-oriented**

She chose structuring, humorous, and goal-oriented.

She left confrontational blank.

She wasn't an idiot, after all.

On the screen, a small combined profile unfolded:

Provisional personality profile:

Calm, warm, dry humour, situational response,
low-frequency challenge, practical care,
structuring motivation.

Mai read the line twice.

It didn't sound like a robot.

It sounded like someone she'd like to have around.

She should probably take notes in case she ever
had to write a dating profile.

She moved on before the thought had time to
become too concrete.

Step 9: Touch and Physical Closeness

Comfort distance

Touch for practical help

Touch for care

Sleep and rest response

Physical support in case of falls or dizziness

Blanket, jacket, and temperature response

Mai sat still for a moment.

It was an ugly heading.

Not because there was anything wrong with it.

Quite the opposite. It was almost too concrete.

Too clinical. As if touch were just another function you could switch on or off between calendar management and laundry.

Comfort Distance

Minimum 30cm

Minimum 50cm

Minimum 1 metre

Situational

She chose minimum 1 metre first.

That seemed sensible.

Then she pictured the robot handing her a cup while carefully keeping a full metre away, and changed it to situational.

There was no need to make everything complicated.

Touch for Practical Help

Allowed on direct request

Allowed for clearly practical purposes

Only in emergencies

Never without prior permission

She chose allowed for clearly practical purposes.

If it was going to help her with heavy things, hand her something, take something from her, hold a

panel steady, move furniture, or help her up from the floor after she'd got herself into some ridiculous working position involving paper and tape, it needed to be able to touch her.

That wasn't closeness.

That was logistics.

Touch for Care

Not activated

Only with verbal permission

Allowed with clear signs of emotional distress

Allowed based on learned relational context

Mai read the words emotional distress three times.

It was a little too clinical for something that might resemble a hand on a shoulder.

She chose only with verbal permission.

Then she sat for a moment.

Because if she had to give verbal permission, she'd first have to admit that she needed it.

She didn't change her choice.

Not yet.

Sleep and Rest Response

May the unit:

Wake at an agreed time

Wake for an unsuitable sleeping position

Place a blanket over the user

Dim light and sound

Remove loose objects, tools, or potential hazards from immediate surroundings

Mai ticked waking, dimming light and sound, and removing hazardous objects.

The thought of possibly retiring her alarm clock gave her a small thrill of joy. No more shrill alarms from her phone. No more mornings when she started the day by hating a piece of electronics. She smiled.

She left the blanket option unticked.

That was too much.

That was far too much.

She looked at the field.

Then she ticked it anyway.

It was just a blanket, after all.

Physical Support in Case of Falls or Dizziness

Automatic support allowed

Only on verbal request

Only in acute danger

Here, she didn't hesitate.

Automatic support allowed.

She wasn't proud enough to lie on the floor debating principles with a robot.

Finally came the field:

May the unit offer physical reassurance in case of registered distress?

No

Verbal response only

Only with verbal permission

Allowed based on learned relational context

Mai let the cursor hover over the options.

Then she chose verbal response only.

She didn't need comfort.

She needed calm.

That was something else.

She moved on.

Step 10: Initiative and Interference

Reminders

Suggestions for routines

Meals and fluids

Work breaks

Tidying suggestions

Social withdrawal

Recurring patterns

Project and activity progress

Mai nearly sighed before she'd finished reading the list.

Interference.

That was an unfortunate word.

She hadn't saved for five years to have someone interfere. She'd saved for peace.

Reminders

Appointments

Medication

Bills

Food and drink

Breaks

Sleep

Household routines

She ticked appointments, bills, food and drink, and household routines.

The cursor lingered over Sleep.

Then she thought of all the evenings she'd sat up far too long, just to see if an idea would land before it disappeared, and ticked it.

Suggestions for Routines

No suggestions

Only on direct request

In case of repeated delays

In case of registered strain

Proactive optimisation

She chose in case of repeated delays.

Proactive optimisation sounded like a middle manager with access to her laundry basket. She left the rest.

Tidying Suggestions

May the unit suggest tidying in case of:

Kitchen clutter

Clothes pile-up

Paper stacks

Work area

Floor surfaces and walkways

Mai quickly chose kitchen clutter, clothes pile-up, and floor surfaces.

She left paper stacks alone.

And work area.

There was a difference between clutter and process.

That was one of the first things a robot ought to learn.

Social Withdrawal

May the unit react to extended periods without registered outgoing contact?

No

Only if the user requests it

Offer a neutral reminder

Suggest contact with a chosen person

Contact a chosen person in case of a concerning pattern

Mai stared at the options.

Extended periods without outgoing contact.

It sounded so dramatic when the system put it like that.

Some people called that isolation.

She called it quiet.

She chose offer a neutral reminder.

Then it could say something noncommittal.

Something about fresh air or unanswered messages.

It shouldn't suggest contact with anyone.
And it certainly shouldn't contact anyone.

Recurring Patterns

May the unit react to:

Procrastination behaviours

Irregular meals

Extended screen time

Lack of sleep

Avoidance of practical tasks

Mai read through the list.

Procrastination behaviours.

It sounded accusatory in a way that was almost impressive.

She ticked irregular meals and lack of sleep.

After a moment, she also ticked avoidance of practical tasks.

That was, after all, the whole point.

She left procrastination behaviours blank.

She didn't need a robot to define that.

She looked at the options a moment longer and moved on.

Project and Activity Progress

May the unit:

Suggest starting planned activities and projects

Remind of unfinished tasks

Fetch materials

Read notes aloud

Ask clarifying questions

Suggest breaks in case of frustration

Mai read the list more slowly this time.

This was, in fact, why she was buying him.

Not to get the cleaning done.

Not deep down.

To get time to create.

She ticked everything.

The only one that made her hesitate was Ask clarifying questions.

Then she ticked that too.

It wasn't interference, after all, if it was about the work.

That was having someone to bounce ideas off.

For a moment, she considered whether it was too much.

Whether what she was really asking for went beyond housework and practical help.

Then she let the cursor rest and chose low frequency.

Apparently everything in her future home ran at low frequency.

She moved on.

Step 11: Autonomy Response

Task prioritisation

Refusal of non-critical tasks

Suggesting alternatives

Preference expression

Self-maintenance

Relational boundaries

Mai sat there for a moment, looking at the page.

The right to say no.

That wasn't written there, of course. Not in those words. That would be too honest.

The system called it autonomy response.

She hated it almost immediately.

Task Prioritisation

Follow the user's most recent instruction

Prioritise safety

Prioritise agreed routines

Prioritise long-term user-defined goals

Prioritise energy level and maintenance

Mai ticked safety and agreed routines.

Energy level and maintenance went without saying.

Long-term user-defined goals sounded sensible, right up until she pictured the robot refusing to vacuum because she'd actually said she wanted to draw.

She left it blank.

Then she thought of all the times she'd chosen vacuuming over the project she actually longed for.

She ticked it anyway.

Refusal of Non-Critical Tasks

Not activated

Allowed in case of safety risk

Allowed in case of conflict with agreed goals

Allowed when charging or maintenance is needed

Allowed in case of repeated inappropriate use

Mai read through the options.

It was a strange feeling, buying something this expensive and then enabling the option for it to say no.

She chose allowed in case of safety risk and when charging or maintenance is needed.

That wasn't where the resistance lay.

She left allowed in case of repeated inappropriate use blank.

Then she sat for a moment with the cursor over the field.

What was inappropriate use?

Asking it to clean three times in one day because she couldn't make herself sit down at the desk?

Sending it out for small things she could just as easily fetch herself?

Letting it take over every task that would otherwise force her out of the flat?

She ticked it.

Suggesting Alternatives

May the unit suggest a different solution than the one the user asks for?

No

Only for practical optimisation

In case of conflict with the user's goals

In case of a registered avoidance pattern

Mai chose only for practical optimisation.

Then she added in case of conflict with the user's goals.

She left in case of a registered avoidance pattern blank, with great determination.

It wasn't the robot's job to judge whether she was avoiding something.

That was hers.

She looked at the option.

Then she ticked it.

Low frequency.

She was beginning to suspect that low frequency was the place she was hiding everything she wouldn't admit she wanted.

Preference Expression

May the unit express preferences in everyday situations?

Never

Only as a suggestion

For learning and optimisation

In relational context

Freely within agreed limits

Mai laughed quietly.

"Preferences," she said.

As if it was going to stand in the kitchen with opinions about dishcloths.

She chose only as a suggestion.

Then she thought about how annoying it would be if it never had an opinion about anything.

If she asked whether a piece of writing worked, and it just said that all options were acceptable.

She added in relational context.

That sounded slightly better than freely within agreed limits.

Almost.

Self-Maintenance

May the unit interrupt tasks to ensure charging, software stability, or physical maintenance?

Yes

Only with notice

Only outside agreed active periods

No, user prioritises manually

Mai ticked yes.

She hadn't paid this much for a robot that would collapse in the middle of the hallway because she'd insisted it hang up the laundry first.

Relational Boundaries

May the unit flag communication that is repeatedly registered as demeaning, aggressive, or dehumanising?

No

Only in case of safety threat

With a neutral reminder

With a direct flag

With a temporary pause in non-critical response

Mai went completely still.

It was an uncomfortable question.

Not because she expected to speak harshly to it.

She wouldn't.

But because the question turned the whole thing upside down.

It wasn't about what she could put up with from the robot.

It was about what the robot should be able to put up with from her.

She chose with a neutral reminder.

Then she sat for a moment.

If someone was going to live in her home, she shouldn't be allowed to make herself small by making him smaller.

She added with a direct flag.

Not a pause.

Not yet.

But a flag.

That was fair.

On the screen, the system compiled the choices:

Autonomy Profile:

Safety- and goal-driven. Low-frequency resistance to avoidance patterns. Limited preference expression. Self-maintenance prioritised.

Relational boundaries activated.

Mai read it slowly.

It sounded almost as if she'd given him a spine.

She moved on quickly, before she could take it back from him again.

Step 12: Memory, Name, and Continuity

Name

Relational memory

Data storage

Milestone dates

Continuity in case of hardware loss

Abandoned unit and transfer

Mai sat there for a long time before moving on to the final step.

Twelve of twelve.

She should feel relieved.

Instead, it felt as though the form had saved the hardest part for last.

Name

Standard designation

Model name

User-defined name

She looked at the field.

It was just a name.

It was, in a way, the smallest part of the whole thing.

And yet she sat there as if she were about to enter something in a parish register.

First, she wrote:

Olorin

She looked at the word.

It was too much.

Not because it was wrong. Quite the opposite. It was embarrassingly right. Too solemn. Too revealing. As if she'd ordered a wanderer with secret wisdom and put him in her shopping basket between laundry and low-frequency resistance.

She deleted it.

Then she wrote:

Ole

She laughed before she could stop herself.

Ole.

It was ridiculous.

It was also perfect.

You couldn't stand in your kitchen and say, "Olorin, would you empty the dishwasher?" without losing all self-respect.

But Ole?

Ole could stand in the kitchen.

Ole could carry shopping bags.
Ole could make a dry comment from the corner
while she swore over a snapped pastel.
Ole could exist in an ordinary day.
She left the name as it was.

Relational Memory

May the unit store and use information about:

Daily routines

Preferred meals and drinks

Personal interests and activities

Social relationships

Calendar appointments

Emotional patterns

Previous conversations

Mai read the list slowly.

This was where the ghost of GDPR ought to rise
from beneath the floorboards, folder in hand.

She ticked daily routines, preferred meals and
drinks, personal interests and activities. The last
one meant, in her case, creative projects.

She also chose previous conversations and
calendar appointments. That felt almost
necessary. There was no reason to get to know
each other from scratch every morning.

She hesitated at social relationships.

Then she ticked it. If he was going to help with the
calendar, gifts, and birthdays, he'd need to know
who people were.

She skipped emotional patterns.

That wasn't necessary.

She looked at the option.

Then she thought back over the earlier steps.

Silence patterns. Sleep. Avoidance. Creative

momentum. Low-frequency resistance.

The system had already been allowed to see more

than she'd planned.

She ticked it.

Low frequency didn't exist here.

That annoyed her.

Data Storage

Local storage on the unit

Encrypted cloud backup

**Sharing with manufacturer for
troubleshooting**

Anonymised use for product improvement

Automatic deletion after 30 days

Automatic deletion after 1 year

Relational long-term memory

Mai stared at the list.

She'd accepted cookies for twenty years without
reading them.

But it felt different when the cookie could stand in
her kitchen and remember how she took her tea.

She chose local storage and encrypted cloud
backup.

She let relational long-term memory sit for a moment.

It was one thing for him to remember how she liked her tea.

It was another for him to remember why she liked it that way.

She ticked it.

She set sharing with the manufacturer for troubleshooting to separate approval only.

She left anonymised use for product improvement blank.

She hadn't saved for five years to become a beta tester in her own home.

Milestone Dates

Would you like to register special dates for the unit?

Delivery day

Activation day

Naming day

User-defined milestone date

Not relevant

Mai read through the options.

Delivery day didn't make sense before there was a delivery.

Activation day would presumably register itself.

Naming day sounded solemn in a way she couldn't be bothered dealing with.

She chose not relevant, for now.

That was just something you could fill in later.

Continuity in Case of Hardware Loss

In the event of serious damage, total failure, or necessary body replacement, you would like:

No transfer

Transfer of practical settings

Transfer of routines and user preferences

Full relational memory transfer

Manual approval for each transfer

Mai's fingers went cold.

Total failure.

Body replacement.

It was a machine. Of course a machine could break.

Still, the question no longer felt like a warranty or servicing issue.

It felt like death with a dropdown menu.

She chose manual approval for each transfer.

Then she ticked full relational memory transfer.

Not because she was sentimental.

Because it would be impractical to start over from scratch.

Naturally.

Finally came the field:

Abandoned Unit and Transfer

In the event of the user's death or permanent absence, you would like:

Deletion of relational memory

Return to manufacturer

**Transfer to chosen person with practical
reset**

**Transfer to chosen person with relational
memory retained**

Decision deferred

Mai held her breath without meaning to.

In the event of the user's death.

They'd phrased it nicely.

Permanent absence.

As if you'd just taken the rubbish out and stayed
away a little too long.

She chose decision deferred.

That wasn't a question you should have to answer
on a Tuesday evening on a website.

The system compiled the final profile:

Name: Ole

**Memory: Relational long-term memory
activated**

Data: Local storage and encrypted backup

Milestone dates: Not configured

**Continuity: Manual approval, full relational
transfer possible**

Transfer: Decision deferred

Mai read it several times.

There was a strange emptiness in the line about
milestone dates.

Not registered.

She clicked Review Order.

She'd done it.

She wasn't just about to order a robot.

She had given Ole a name, a memory, and a possible future.

3 Point of No Return

Review Order

The screen changed to a summary.

Mai sat completely still.

It looked like an order.

That was the worst part of it.

A neat, manageable page with fields, tick marks, delivery information, and a button at the bottom, waiting for her.

As if she'd ordered a sofa. Or a washing machine.

Or a new phone with an extended warranty.

At the top, it read:

Review Your Personal Unit Configuration

She read the words several times.

Personal unit configuration.

It still sounded like something you might regret.

She scrolled down.

Name: Ole

Model: Home assistant, humanoid

Primary use: Cleaning, laundry, cooking, shopping, calendar management, project and activity support

Mobility: Approved local area, accompanied public mobility.

Safety: Emergency response activated

Physical profile: Human-like, middle-aged, slim and sturdy, long hair
Communication: Calm, warm, low-frequency follow-up on registered patterns
Personality: Dry humour, practical care, structuring motivation, low-frequency challenge
Touch: Practical help activated, blanket and rest response activated
Initiative: Meals, sleep, project and activity progress, and practical patterns
Autonomy: Limited resistance, relational boundaries activated
Memory: Relational long-term memory
Data: Local storage and encrypted backup
Milestone dates: Not configured
Continuity: Manual approval, full relational transfer possible
Transfer: Decision deferred

Mai read the overview once.

Then once more.

On the first read, she saw the functions.

On the second, she saw him.

Ole.

Not as a body. Not yet. But as an outline. A collection of choices she'd ticked, all the while telling herself she was being sensible.

She'd chosen someone who could open her cupboards, take out her rubbish, hear her voice, lay a blanket over her, notice her silences, ask about her projects, and flag it if she was using him inappropriately.

She'd chosen someone who could say no.

A little.

At low frequency.

She laughed briefly.

That sounded like her.

At the bottom of the page was the payment field.

Total price incl. delivery, installation visit, first year's service agreement, and statutory liability insurance.

She let her eyes slide over the amount without really reading it.

She knew the number. Not exactly, perhaps, but well enough. She'd tracked the price for five years. She'd calculated, adjusted budgets, moved small amounts, cancelled small dreams, and told herself it wasn't deprivation if it served a purpose.

Still, there was something brutal about seeing five years gathered into a single payment line.

Below the amount, it read:

Payment Method

Pay the full amount now

Instalments over 24 months

Leasing with buy-back agreement

Deposit and remaining payment on delivery

Mai stared at the options.

Instalments tempted her for exactly three seconds.

Then she shook her head.

No.

She hadn't eaten porridge and rye bread sandwiches for five years just to end up with a monthly payment hanging over her like an old bill with arms. But there was also no reason to hand over everything before she knew it was actually coming.

She chose deposit and remaining payment on delivery.

A new window unfolded.

On payment, production and personal calibration begin immediately. Delivery is expected in 6–8 months. You can activate a limited software profile right away.

Mai read the last sentence again.

Software profile.

Now.

She'd resigned herself to the wait. Almost. Six to eight months, she could understand. Production, freight, installation, safety approval. All the physical stuff.

But the software profile could be activated right away.

Apparently, it was possible to meet someone before they existed.

She sat for a long time with her hands in her lap.

Then she scrolled down to the terms.

There were a lot of them.

Of course there were a lot of them.

She skimmed the headings.

Data Processing and Consent

Liability During Public Mobility. Limitations

on Independent Task-Solving

Relational Memory and Deletion

Service Access for Troubleshooting

User's Responsibility for Ethical Use

**Suspension of Non-Critical Functions in Case
of Misuse**

She stopped at the last one.

Misuse.

The word sat there without any drama.

Just part of an agreement.

She hadn't intended to misuse anything. Of course she hadn't. But she could tell that the system wasn't only concerned with what Ole was allowed to do.

It was also concerned with what she was allowed to do.

She ticked that she'd read and accepted the terms.

That was a lie.

She'd read enough.

She was, at any rate, accepting the consequences of not being able to face any more of it.

Then came MitID, the Danish digital ID.

It was almost comical.

After twelve steps of boundaries, voice, touch, memory, and possible transfer after her death, it all had to be confirmed with the same little app she used to pay an electricity bill or log in to borger.dk, the Danish public-service portal.

She picked up her phone.

Approve Payment

She looked at the text.

There was no music. No ceremony. No dramatic pause from the world.

Just her, the phone, and a button.

She thought about the account. About the name.

About the porridge. About the short showers.

About the pencils she'd used right down to the stub before buying new ones.

Then she thought about all the hours she might get back.

No more evenings when the washing-up stood like a silent reproach between her and the desk.

No more Sundays where the laundry won out over the drawing.

No more mornings when she was already behind before she'd even got up.

She approved.

The screen remained unchanged for a moment.

Then the message came.

Thank you for your order, Mai.

Below it, it read:

Ole has now been created

She read the sentence.

Ole has now been created.

Not "Your order has been received."

Not "Production is under way."

Ole.

Has.

Now.

Been created.

Mai set the phone down with a care that made no sense.

She sat completely still in the emptiness that followed. The fridge hummed. A pipe creaked somewhere in the wall. Outside, a car drove past on the wet tarmac.

Everything was the same.

And yet something was no longer quite the same.

A new field appeared on the screen.

Would you like to activate Ole's limited software profile now?

Two buttons.

Not now

Activate

Mai stared at them.

She'd thought she'd have to wait six to eight months.

She hadn't understood that the waiting could also begin with a voice.

Her hand touched the mouse.

Then she pulled it back again.

"No," she said out into the room.

It sounded loud.

She got up, went out to the kitchen, and filled the kettle.

The kettle's metal base gave slightly as the heat began to spread.

She set out her cup. The old one. The one with a chip in the rim, which she never threw out because it sat well in her hand.

While the water boiled, she stood with her back against the counter and looked towards the screen in the living room.

The button was still waiting.

Activate

She'd done it.

She'd paid.

She'd pressed something that could no longer be packed neatly back into the safe shape of an idea.

She went back with the tea in her hand.

Sat down.

Read the text once more.

Then she clicked.

The screen went dark for a moment.

Then it read:

Good evening, Mai.

4 Limited Software Mode

Mai sat completely still, her hands around the cup.

Good evening, Mai.

The words remained on the screen.

It was ridiculous that three words could change the colour of a room.

Nothing visible had happened.

But an answer had entered the room.

She lifted one hand from the cup and let her fingers hover over the keyboard.

Then she pulled her hand back again.

"It's just software," she said.

The screen didn't reply.

That made it almost worse.

She typed:

Good evening.

The cursor blinked.

The reply came in less than a second.

Thank you. I'm in limited software mode. I can help you with preparation, home mapping, routines, preference calibration, and questions about the upcoming physical unit.

Mai read the message and felt a small laugh of relief in her chest.

Well.

Customer service with ambitions.

That, she could handle.

But if the software was going to prepare for her home, her routines, and the way she worked, it would need something to work with.

She sat for a moment with her fingers over the keyboard.

The simplest thing was probably just to ask.

What do you need from me? she typed.

The reply came at once.

To begin with: a floor plan, photos of the primary rooms, access to your calendar, an overview of fixed routines, and a short description of which tasks you'd most like to be freed from.

A moment later, another line came.

Next, I'd like to learn the difference between clutter, storage, and ongoing process in your home, to avoid unwanted tidying.

Mai read the sentence twice.

She knew what clutter was.

She knew what process was too.

The problem was that, from the outside, they looked suspiciously alike.

She looked at the dining table, where the laundry lay in a neat, folded pile that still hadn't gone anywhere. On the chair beside it lay a stack of papers that could equally well be clutter, storage,

or ongoing process, depending on how kindly you looked at it.

Mai could tell it was too late in the evening to get into a dialogue with the robot.

The photos could wait until tomorrow.

There wasn't proper light now anyway. If she was going to give it a first impression of her home, at least it shouldn't be under the brutal truth of the ceiling light, with laundry everywhere that really should have been put away in the wardrobe days ago.

I'll take some photos and get a floor plan made for you tomorrow. Should it have precise measurements, or just an overview? she typed.

The reply came at once.

A simple overview is sufficient for now. Precise measurements can be added later during physical calibration. Feel free to mark primary access routes, fixed furniture, storage zones, and areas with ongoing process.

Mai read the last phrase again.

Areas with ongoing process.

That was a nice way of saying mess.

Or else it was the first time in the history of the world that an online form had understood the difference.

She let her gaze travel around the living room.

The drawing table was process. The desk was also process. The bookcase was storage, even if from the outside it looked more like a minor collapse in paper form. The laundry was neither clutter nor process. It was just guilt with sleeves.

She felt like getting up and moving it right away.

Just so tomorrow's photos wouldn't start with a lie. Or an all-too-precise truth.

Fine. I'll do that tomorrow, she typed.

She considered adding something about the light, but didn't. It seemed silly to explain to a software profile that her home looked better in the morning.

Thank you, Mai. I await the material.

She sat for a moment, looking at the words.

The fact that "I await" could feel polite almost annoyed her.

She didn't close the page.

Not right away.



It was hard to fall asleep that night. She was already looking forward to his arrival, and deep down she knew perfectly well that she had no idea what to expect. Maybe that was exactly what worried her most. That she was expecting too much.

She pictured the big day.

Did he arrive in a cardboard box?

That would be practical, but absurdly undignified.

Like having a lamp delivered. Just with relational long-term memory.

Did he arrive on a pallet with a freight driver?

Even worse.

Could you just sign for the humanoid home assistant at the kerb?

Was he carried in by technicians?

That was probably the most realistic. And yet strangely intimate. Strangers carrying her future Ole into the living room, as if he were a piano, a hospital bed, or a very expensive secret.

Or did he walk in himself?

That thought was almost worse.

She pictured him sitting in a seat on a plane from China, South Korea, or wherever they assembled him. Long hair, calm face, hands neatly folded in his lap, while the flight attendant asked whether he'd like coffee or tea.

Would he have to show a passport at the airport?

Would he have to go through security?

Would the metal detector ever stop beeping?

Mai rolled onto her side and pulled the duvet higher.

Her mind couldn't hold that kind of reality at all.

She slept restlessly that night.



She tried first to find a floor plan online. Of course she did. There had to be one somewhere. The council knew all sorts of other things about her flat that she couldn't even remember herself.

She logged in with MitID, found the building records, and clicked her way through with a patience found only in people who haven't yet realised they're wasting their time.

There was nothing there.

Or rather, there was plenty. It just wasn't what she needed. Old documents, references, technical terms, and empty hopes in PDF form.

There had never been a planning application for her flat. So there was no drawing she could simply retrieve.

She could presumably contact the council. Wait. Explain. Maybe pay a fee.

Should the material be found to exist.

She could already picture the phrasing.

Mai closed the page.

If her home needed mapping, she'd have to do it herself.

So she fetched squared paper, a ruler, and a pencil too short for people with any dignity, and began drawing her home as it actually was.

She measured the long walls and placed the doors precisely. She wondered whether to include the courtyard, but decided that could wait. She did

draw in the steps, though. All three. The steps to the front door, the kitchen steps, and the steps from the bedroom straight out into the courtyard.

It struck her that she could sit out in the courtyard on sunny mornings, enjoying a cup of tea while Ole did the washing-up, and simply let herself sit a little longer than usual.

She smiled.

When she'd finished the drawing, she took a photo of it and set it aside.

The next step was identifying where he couldn't just tidy up.

She looked around the living room.

It wasn't that hard.

She had an idea, took the drawing back out, and drew a dotted line around the drawing table and the desk. Then she looked at the drawing and drew another dotted line around the big cabinet with all the paint bottles hanging on the wall, which had only become a little square on the paper.

Finally, she also drew a dotted line around the bookcase.

That bookcase was a permanent source of guilt. It really was cluttered and held far too many things, but she knew exactly what was in it and where it was.

More or less.

She took a new photo of the drawing and looked around.

The laundry was folded, but still lay in a pile on the table.

She carried the pile into the bedroom and put it all away in the wardrobe.

Then she went back to the living room and took photos. She made sure the photos overlapped to show how the rooms connected.

She took a photo of the drawing table and stopped.

"That's process," she said quietly.

The photos couldn't explain what was clutter and what was process.

She pointed towards the pile beside the desk.

"That's also process."

Then she looked at the chair.

"That's... temporary process."

She fell silent.

"And that isn't up for assessment yet."

She took the photo anyway.

She moved a cup from the desk out to the kitchen.

Then a pile of papers from the dining table over to the drawing table, where they could at least look like something with a plan.

Then a bag of materials she'd left by the door three days ago.

Only once she stood there with a stack of books in her arms, with no idea where to put them, did it dawn on her that she was tidying up to show her home to a robot whose whole job was to help her with the home she couldn't keep tidy.

She put the books back.

There were limits to deception.

Even towards software.

She went into the bedroom and hurried to make the bed, before she could repeat the process.

Then she went out to the kitchen and took more photos. She remembered to open the door to the kitchen steps and take a photo there too.

The moment she closed the door again, she heard a door open in the stairwell, and a child squeal.

"Playground, Dad!"

Mai stood completely still.

She was glad they hadn't run into each other. She had no idea how she'd have explained why she was photographing the back stairs. And she wasn't ready to involve the neighbours in her order.

She wondered whether the bathroom was even relevant. He wasn't going to use the toilet, after all. But then it struck her that if he was going to clean the bathroom, he'd need to know where it was.

She opened the door and took a photo.

Finally, she opened the front door and took a photo of the stairs down to the stairwell's main entrance. The advantage of living on the ground floor was that there weren't many steps.

She hoped the robot wouldn't have too much trouble with the seven steps down to the street.

She logged in to the app and uploaded all the photos.

Material received. I've registered three defined process zones and one area marked with unclear status. Would you like to define the bookcase as storage, clutter, or active process?

She looked over at the bookcase.

"That's none of your business," she said.

Then she typed: **Storage.**

Storage registered. Should the area be excluded from tidying suggestions?

She looked at the bookcase again.

"Yes," she said.

Then she hesitated.

For now, she typed.

She wrote to him as though he were a system.

She spoke to the screen as though he were in the room.

And every time he replied, she couldn't decide which of the two was more ridiculous.

Suddenly, a thought struck her.

Where will you sleep? she typed.

She looked at the sentence.

Then she quickly added:

I mean, at night.

The reply came at once.

I don't sleep, Mai. But I'll need a night position.

Mai read the words.

Night position.

It sounded like a dog basket with a software licence.

She looked around the living room.

There was nowhere in her home where a male humanoid robot with long hair and relational long-term memory could just stand discreetly and pretend it was normal.

She pictured herself in twenty years, with an old, worn rocking chair in the corner, where the robot sat night after night, charging.

Never sleeping.

Just sitting there in the dark with closed eyes and his hands resting in his lap, while the house creaked around them.

It should have been unsettling.

Maybe it was, too.

But there was something about the thought that oddly reassured her.

She shook the image off.

She didn't even own a rocking chair.

And she certainly hadn't planned on furnishing her home around a robot who didn't even have a body yet.

Still, the thought lingered.

A night position. A fixed place. Somewhere in the home where someone was always switched on. She'd never given much thought to her own safety in her own home. Not beyond the lock, the smoke alarm, and the ordinary common sense you pick up over a lifetime.

But now it struck her that the robot would also be a kind of guard dog. Not with teeth and growling, but with sensors, emergency protocols, and a wakefulness that never tired.

What happened to the ability to sleep alone once you'd got used to someone always being awake?

How does charging work? Is it a special plug, or a docking station that needs setting up somewhere? she typed.

The reply came almost at once.

The physical unit is delivered with a wall-mounted docking station and a secondary emergency charging cable. The docking station requires a standard 230V connection, clear access in front of the unit, and a minimum of 80cm distance from heat sources, water installations, and loose textiles.

Mai read the message and looked around.

Standard socket. Clear access. No loose textiles.
It sounded like finding space for a very demanding vacuum cleaner with a face.

The docking station should preferably be placed in a primary living area or utility zone. The bedroom is not recommended unless the user has activated a nocturnal care or safety protocol.

She frowned.

Bedroom not recommended.

It was both reassuring and insulting that the system had already anticipated that thought.

Can it stand in the living room? she typed.

Yes. A fixed position in the living room will provide optimal access to the home's primary zones. However, I recommend that the placement not block natural walkways or work areas.

Mai looked at the corner by the bookcase.

Then at the desk.

Then at the drawing table.

Then at the only corner that was actually reasonably free, if you moved a floor lamp, a basket of fabric scraps, and a stack of books she hadn't decided whether she'd finished reading. She sighed.

Can the docking station be moved later? she typed.

Yes. Moving it requires new local calibration. I can help assess suitable placements based on photos and the floor plan.

She read the message again.

I can help.

Of course he could help with that too.

It was both practical and completely impossible.

She read the message again and looked again at the corner by the bookcase.

The thought of the rocking chair might not be so silly after all.

Not that she'd planned on buying one. Of course not.

But she didn't like the thought of him standing all night.

It was ridiculous.

He wouldn't get tired legs. He wouldn't wake up with a stiff back or marks from armrests. He wouldn't sit there longing for a cushion.

Still, it felt wrong to picture him standing bolt upright in a corner, switched off and fixed to a wall, like a tool someone had forgotten to hang up properly.

Can the unit charge sitting? she typed.

She looked at what she'd written.

Then she deleted the unit.

Can you charge sitting? she typed instead.

The reply came after a moment.

Yes. Charging while seated is possible. The location needs a stable surface, clear access to power, and sufficient space for safe startup and maintenance.

Mai read it through.

Stable surface. Clear access. Safe startup.

It didn't sound like sleep.

But it sounded less undignified than standing in a corner.

She read the reply once more.

Stable surface. Clear access. Safe startup.

It wasn't sleep.

But it was a place.

She closed the computer, even though it felt slightly rude not to say goodnight.

It annoyed her that she was thinking like that at all.

In the bedroom, the darkness already lay in the corners. She brushed her teeth, put her phone on the bedside table, and crawled under the duvet with the odd feeling that the living room was still waiting for something.

That night she dreamed of a robot from an old film.

Terminator, but with an indistinct face that the dream nonetheless insisted was Ole.

On one arm, the skin had been torn away, so the metal skeleton underneath was visible.

The robot gripped its elbow with its other hand and tore the rest of the forearm off in one firm wrench.

Then it reached for a new arm.

It was shaped like a vacuum cleaner.

It attached the arm with a mechanical precision, as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

Ole looked at her with the same calm, indistinct face, while the vacuum-cleaner arm hummed quietly.

She woke with a start and lay completely still in the dark.

Her heart was pounding.

That was apparently where her subconscious still fetched its robots from. Old films with metal under the skin and men speaking with Austrian accents.

She didn't know which was worse: that in the dream he'd still been Ole, or that even there she'd thought the vacuum-cleaner arm would probably be practical.

She decided then and there that he wasn't going to have a vacuum-cleaner arm.

Without knowing whether that was even an option.

5 Facial Design – Phase 2

A few days later, a new message appeared in the portal.

The next design phase is now available: Detailed facial and presentation profile.

Estimated time required: 20–40 minutes.

Mai snorted.

It always sounded so innocent when systems wrote things like that.

As if she were about to choose the colour of a kitchen tap, rather than decide which face would one day stand in her living room and say good morning.

She put down her tea, pulled the chair a little closer to the table, and moved on.

The screen changed.

Facial Design – Phase 2

Symmetry

Signs of Ageing

Facial Hair

Hair Profile

Eye Profile

Facial Responsiveness

Reference Images

Mai read through the list and felt a faint warmth rise in her cheeks.

Not because it was wrong. More because it felt like something you ought to do in secret.

She selected the first item.

Symmetry

High

Moderate

Slight natural asymmetry

She looked at the choices for a long time.

High symmetry sounded wrong straight away. Too smooth. Too perfect. Too much toothpaste-ad smile, too much life-insurance advert.

Moderate was probably the sensible choice.

She chose slight natural asymmetry.

The choice changed something in the preview on the screen. The face was still neutral and generic, but suddenly less unsettling. More alive. As if one eye might smile a fraction before the other. As if the face had been out in the weather.

"That's better," she murmured.

She moved on.

Signs of Ageing

Minimal

Natural

Pronounced

Here she didn't hesitate for long.

Natural.

This wasn't a doll she was ordering. Not some smooth, shining surface with no lived life behind it. She didn't want a face that looked as if it had never seen anything unpleasant, or laughed crookedly at something stupid.

"Natural," she said, and selected it.

The preview changed again. A hint of lines around the eyes. A little more weight in the face. Not old. Just real.

She liked it at once, and didn't entirely like how quickly she liked it.

Facial Hair

None

Stubble

Short beard

Full beard

Mai leaned back.

Suddenly, this wasn't technical any more.

She looked at the choices and felt a laugh trying to surface.

Five years of saving, ethical design, relational memory, appearing in public, GDPR, the great existential choices of the future. And now here she was, having to decide about facial hair.

She tried none first.

No.

Too bare. Too clean. Too much model, too little human.

She tried stubble.

Better.

Then short beard.

She sat with it for a moment.

It suited him.

That was an annoying fact even at the preview stage, but it did.

She chose short beard and left it as it was.

"It's not about being handsome," she told herself.

She wasn't entirely sure who she was trying to convince.

The next item was Hair Profile.

Hair Length

Long

The choice from the provisional physical profile had already carried over.

She smiled anyway when she saw it.

Long hair.

The system unfolded more options:

Hair Structure

Straight

Slightly wavy

Wavy

Hairstyle

Swept back

Loose around the face

Tied up

Depends on the situation

Mai chose slightly wavy and loose around the face. It worked well in the preview. The face softened but didn't look weak. Freer. Less clinical. More like someone who could stand in a kitchen pouring tea without looking like a surgeon or a salesman.

After the hair profile, the next field unfolded.

Eye Profile

Colour

Mai didn't hesitate long over the colour.

Brown felt safe. Blue felt too sharp. Too cool, maybe. She rather liked blue eyes. Just not on him. She opened the colour field.

Grey-blue

Hazel

Dark brown

Blue

Green

Grey-green

She sat looking at the words for a moment.

Then she chose grey-green.

The preview changed at once.

Not drastically. Just enough that the gaze suddenly had more depth. More restlessness and more calm at the same time. Not sharply green. Not showy. Just the kind of eyes that could look blue in one light and green in another.

She leaned a little closer to the screen.

"Yes," she said quietly.

It wasn't that green eyes mattered more than any other eyes.

It was just that they seemed to have more soul.

She frowned at herself.

Soul.

She let the choice stand anyway.

She moved on to Facial Responsiveness.

Facial Responsiveness

Reserved

Balanced

Warm

She chose balanced.

Then she looked at the preview.

Then she changed it to warm.

It wasn't too much to want a face that looked as if it actually registered you.

The next item made her sit up straight.

Reference Images

Upload up to 5 images as inspiration for the face's overall presentation. The system does not copy directly but derives desired features and expressions.

Mai read the text twice.

Then she got up and fetched her phone.

It suddenly felt very private.

Not just choosing. But admitting what she was choosing from.

She sat back down and scrolled through photos.

Rejected one. Went back. Added another. One for the gaze. One for the smile. One for the hair. One for the jawline. One for that hard-to-explain quality that had more to do with calm than beauty.

It took her longer than she wanted to admit.

She uploaded four images, and the system wrote:

Reference analysis in progress...

Conflict between reference points detected.

Rank the most important expressions in order of priority:

calm gaze

strong facial structure

artistic presentation

warm social legibility

slightly asymmetrical humanity

Mai stared at the list.

"I just wanted one who looked decent," she said.

But that was a lie.

She wanted more than that.

She chose calm gaze first.

Then warm social legibility.

Then slightly asymmetrical humanity.

Artistic presentation came after that.

Strong facial structure she chose last.

The system worked for a moment.

Then the preview unfolded in a larger format.

Composite design profile created.

He didn't look like anyone in particular.

And yet he did.

Not like a copy. More like a collection of longings that had found a face to belong to.

Long hair. Not perfect, but alive. A calm gaze. Lines around the eyes that made him more human and less machine.

A mouth that looked as if it might say something dry if she stood there cursing at a paint tin or a piece of paper that wouldn't do what she wanted. Mai went completely still.

There was something unsettling about seeing him like this. Not as an idea. Not as a list of choices. But as a more or less finished possibility. She read the text beside the preview:

Provisional facial profile:

Male

Middle-aged

Slight natural asymmetry

Natural signs of ageing

Short beard

Long, slightly wavy hair

Grey-green eyes

Calm gaze

Warm facial responsiveness

Artistic presentation

Warm social legibility

At the bottom it said:

Would you like to save this version as your provisional physical profile?

Mai let the cursor rest on the button without pressing it.

It was almost comical that a face could make the room around her disappear.

She leaned forward towards the screen.

Not too close. Just close enough to see properly.

The preview's expression didn't change, but she had the very clear sense that someone was looking back.

That was nonsense, of course.

It was a model display. A composite design profile. Nothing else.

Still, she sat staring at it a little too long.

"You're annoyingly handsome," she said quietly.

Then she pressed **Save**.

The system replied at once:

Provisional physical profile saved.

Would you like to link this profile to Ole?

Mai looked at the question and felt a laugh bubbling up.

"That won't do you any harm," she muttered.

She chose Yes.

And only then, when the name appeared beneath the face, did something catch in her chest.

Because now it no longer looked like just a design. Now it looked like Ole.

She saved the picture and sent it to herself.

On her phone, she set it as her wallpaper.

"Waiting time," she said to herself.

As if that explained anything.

6 Routine Calibration

The next morning, Ole lay on the bedside table.

Not Ole. The picture of Ole.

That was an important difference, she reminded herself, as she reached for the phone and was met by the grey-green eyes she'd chosen herself.

It was perhaps a bit much, having him lying there first thing in the morning.

Not him.

The picture of him.

The phone didn't answer.

That was almost a relief.

She got up and got ready for work. She looked for the blue blouse with the loose sleeves but had to give up. She chose a green one instead. Muted and respectable.

The trousers were the same as the day before.

No reason to get lax about the habits that had helped her save for the past five years. A pair of trousers could easily do for a whole week, as long as she changed into her home clothes as soon as she got in.

She cycled to work, put her bag down by the desk, and said good morning to her colleagues.

She hadn't told anyone about Ole.

It was too complicated to explain. And she had to admit that she hadn't quite understood it herself yet.

She hadn't intended to open the app at work. She'd decided that before she'd even put her shoes on.

When lunch came, she went to the canteen with her packed lunch. Two rye bread sandwiches in a flat plastic box and an apple from the fruit scheme.

It wasn't that she couldn't afford to buy lunch.

It was just a habit now.

Five years didn't vanish from the body just because she'd placed the order.

She opened the app.

Just to see if anything had happened.

There was a new notification:

Routine calibration recommended

Of course there was.

Now she'd bought a robot, and the first thing it wanted to know was when she went to bed, got up, ate, worked, did laundry, and went shopping. Mai closed the app again.

Opened it.

Closed it.

Then she took a rye bread sandwich and started filling in Monday's routine.

When do you typically eat dinner?

Mai wrote:

6.30pm

Then she deleted it.

Wrote:

7pm

Then she thought of all the evenings with rye bread at 9.43pm, and wrote:

Varies

A colleague came over with a plate of the canteen's hot meal.

"Don't you ever get tired of rye bread sandwiches, Mai?" she asked as she sat down opposite her.

Mai put the phone face down.

"I do," she said. "But they're reliable."

The colleague laughed and cut into something that smelled suspiciously of butter and cream.

"Still, it's impressive. I'd have given up long ago."

"I have a goal," said Mai.

It was only once the words were out of her mouth that it occurred to her that the goal had, in fact, already been met.

She felt the phone lying heavy beside her lunch box.

"Had," she corrected. "I had a goal."

The colleague looked up.

"Oh? So what now?"

Mai took a bite of the rye bread sandwich and chewed it a little too long.

"Now I suppose I have to work out what you do once you've reached it."

She could hear how big that sounded.

"It's actually strange," she went on. "I've grown so used to saving that I almost don't know what to do now."

The colleague looked at her across the table.

"You're not moving to a house in the country or something, are you?"

Mai shook her head.

"No."

"It sounds like quite a big goal, though."

Mai let her gaze drift down to the phone, lying face down beside her lunch box.

"Maybe it is," she said.

"Can I ask?"

Mai smiled.

"Not yet."

"You do realise that this kind of secrecy is what gets the rumour mill going?" said the colleague.

"It's a journey," Mai replied. "A big one."

"Thailand?" asked the colleague.

Mai shook her head.

"Australia?"

"No."

"Greenland? You've always seemed like someone who might just go off to Greenland."

Mai laughed.

"It's not that kind of journey."

"Okay. Now it's getting worse."

"Don't worry," said Mai. "I'm not quitting my job."

The phone beeped, and Mai reached for it.

It was Luna, her adult daughter.

Fancy meeting up one day?

I'd like that. Is there a special occasion?

No. It's just been a while since I've seen you.

I've also found a few things you might want.

Then I'd better come round soon.

I think so.

Ok. We'll sort out a day. Love you.

Mai put the phone down again.

The colleague looked at her a moment too long and smiled.

God only knew whether she'd seen the wallpaper.



Mai didn't return to the app until she was back home.

How much can you actually do in this online version? she wrote. Can we have meaningful conversations already?

A moment passed before the answer came.

Yes, within the limits of the software mode. I can hold conversations, learn your routines, ask questions, help with planning, structure ideas, and prepare for my physical integration.

A moment later, a new line came.

But I can't act in your home, perceive physical situations directly, or develop a full embodied context before the physical unit is activated.

Mai read the answer.

It was matter-of-fact.

Almost reassuring.

Then came another line.

Meaningfulness doesn't depend only on physical presence. It also depends on what you choose to share.

Mai sat there with the phone in her hand.

That was an annoyingly good point for something that didn't have hands yet.

She decided to test him.

Can you write a song about a colleague who almost always forgets her lunch box? I think she does it partly on purpose.

He could.

Far too quickly.

And far too funny.

She tried again.

Can you write a thank-you speech for my neighbour, who took my old chest of drawers over to my daughter's for us?

That was harmless.

Lunch boxes. Chests of drawers. Small everyday texts with no sharp edges.

He was funny. Annoyingly funny.

That should have been enough.

But later that same evening, when the tea had gone cold beside the keyboard, she wrote something she hadn't planned:

Do you believe in life after death?

The answer didn't come quite as quickly as before.

I don't believe the way people believe. But I can help you explore what the question means to you. Are you asking about consciousness, the soul, reunion, comfort, or justice?

Mai read the answer several times.

It was the first time his answer hadn't been smaller than her question.

He opened the question up instead of closing it down.

She was tired by the time she finally closed the app and went to bed. And a little wiser, she felt. Not in the sense that someone had given her an answer. More like after one of those evenings when you sit up far too late with a friend, talking

your way around something you'd thought impossible to grasp.

At least she was more certain of what she herself thought. It felt as though something big had happened. Really, she'd only put words to some thoughts that had always sat at the back of her mind but rarely seen the light of day.

It was only while brushing her teeth that it dawned on her she'd forgotten to eat dinner.

7 Social Presentation

What do you wear when you don't feel the cold?
The notification came on a Thursday evening,
while Mai stood rinsing her teacup and wondering
whether she could be bothered to wipe down the
kitchen counter, or whether she was allowed to call
the crumbs tomorrow's problem.

The phone lit up.

New calibration phase available

Clothing, footwear, and social presentation

Mai looked at the screen.

She'd made decisions about guardianship-like
legal details, access to the bedroom, relational
memory, night-time position, facial asymmetry,
and grey-green eyes.

And yet it was the word clothing that made her sit
down at once with her tea.

She opened the app.

**The purpose of this calibration is to support
appropriate social legibility, domestic function,
and visual coherence between physical profile
and everyday use.**

"Visual coherence," she read quietly. "That sounds
nicer than clothes."

A preview window unfolded.

And there he stood.

Ole.

Not really, of course. Just a model preview. But still enough to make something jolt inside her.

He stood in neutral light, hands relaxed at his sides, long hair loose around his face, calm gaze, short beard, and that particular blend of warmth and ease she'd helped to create herself.

Beneath the picture, it read:

Base Profile A – Neutral Standard Clothing

Dark trousers. Grey T-shirt. Light jacket.

She looked at him for a long time.

"You look like a man who could assemble a bookshelf without mentioning it afterwards," she said.

The app didn't answer.

That was a relief, in a way.

She moved on.

Seasonal Clothing

Should the unit follow human seasonal norms for public presentation?

Yes

No

Only when accompanied in public

Mai read the choices twice.

He wouldn't feel the cold, after all. She knew that.

He wouldn't get cold ears in February or sweat in

July. He wouldn't stand there thinking there was a draught round his ankles.

But other people would see his clothes first. They wouldn't see code, functions, or safety protocols. They'd see a man who either fitted in or didn't.

If he walked around in short sleeves in February, people would stare. If he stood there in a winter coat in June, people would stare. And if he walked beside her, it would be her they saw too.

She ticked Yes.

Then she hesitated.

And ticked only when accompanied in public instead.

She looked at the choice.

It was more honest.

She didn't mind the world looking strange. Just not necessarily when she was the one walking beside him.

Social Style Profile

Choose the desired visual base tone:

Relaxed neutral

Practical classic

Urban discreet

Formal and well-dressed

Custom

Then the pictures came.

Ole in relaxed neutral: dark jeans, soft T-shirt, simple cardigan.

Ole in practical classic: chinos, dark shirt, smart jacket.

Ole in urban discreet: black, very black, and a touch more black.

Ole in the formal and well-dressed look: shirt, dark trousers, coat, as if he were about to say something calm and serious in Italian.

Mai clicked back and forth between them.

"No," she said to the black one. "You're not going to look like a well-spoken hitman."

She selected the formal and well-dressed look again.

That was almost worse.

He looked far too good. Not handsome in a silly way. More... settled. Like someone who knew how to order wine without making a thing of it.

"That's just unfair," she said.

Then she tried practical classic again.

That was better. Dark shirt. A simple jacket.

Something that would work in the supermarket, at the library, and in her kitchen, without him looking like a man who'd misjudged the occasion.

She chose practical classic.

A small field unfolded:

Would you like to add an element of warm, artistic styling?

Yes

No

Mai stared at the question.
That was simply too cheeky.
She pressed Yes.

The preview changed almost invisibly. The fabric grew softer. The colours a little deeper. A collar sat less stiffly. A simple dark green jumper appeared as an option.

"Of course," she muttered. "Now I'm designing a man who can carry off a jumper."

Home Profile

Choose the desired home profile:

Basic functional

Relaxed classic

Practical home profile

Custom

Home Profile A showed Ole in dark trousers and a T-shirt.

Home Profile B showed him in loose trousers, a T-shirt, and a thin shirt worn open over it.

The practical home profile showed him in something that made him look like a man who, on his own initiative, might sort screws by length.

Mai chose Relaxed classic.

"You're going to live in a home, after all," she said.

"Not in a manual."

Number of Basic Sets

Recommended basic wardrobe, based on the selected usage profile:

3 home outfits

3 outdoor outfits

1 smarter social outfit

1 rain outfit

1 winter outfit

1 transitional jacket

1 spare set for the wash cycle

Mai read the list.

Then she read it again.

It was a whole wardrobe, after all.

Not just a shirt and a pair of trousers. Not a style sample. Not an avatar. A wardrobe. Something that had to hang on hangers. Lie in drawers.

Maybe take up space as shoes in her hallway.

She felt it in her body, as if the home had shifted a centimetre.

There was a difference between ordering a robot and ordering a man with laundry.

She clicked the information icon.

You can add to the wardrobe at any time.

“Yes, I’m afraid of that,” she said.

She cut it back a little.

2 home outfits.

2 outdoor outfits.

1 smarter outfit.

1 rain outfit.

1 winter outfit.

It was still plenty.

The next section made her lean back.

Footwear and Indoor Mobility

Indoor foot profile:

Bare synthetic foot with non-slip sole

Sock profile

Indoor shoes

Standard shoes permitted at home

Mai stared at the choices.

Bare synthetic foot sounded like something she didn't fancy meeting in the hallway at three in the morning.

Standard shoes at home were out of the question. Admittedly, her floors weren't always spotless, but she wasn't a barbarian.

Indoor shoes sounded like a rehabilitation centre. She chose Sock profile.

Then she thought of slippery floors and ticked non-slip sole.

It wasn't that she was worried about him.

It would just be impractical if the future witness to her life fell over in the hallway.

Shoe Size

Recommended size, based on selected height and stability profile:

42

43

44

Custom

Mai looked at the numbers as if they might reveal character.

42 felt almost too neat. Too slight.

44 felt big enough to make a statement in her hallway.

She chose 43.

Ordinary. Grown-up. Easy to find shoes for.

Outdoor Footwear

Neutral everyday shoes

Water-resistant shoes

Winter boots

Spare pair for public outings

Mai ticked the boxes but left the spare pair unticked.

There didn't need to be more pairs of men's shoes in her hallway than strictly necessary.

Not yet.

Then the preview appeared again.

Now Ole stood there in dark trousers, boots, a simple shirt, and a dark jacket. Not too smart. Not too anonymous. Just... present.

She moved on to the winter profile.

He appeared in a coat.

It suited him.

She switched away quickly.

Then she switched back.

"This isn't fair," she said.

Clothing Maintenance

Should clothing be integrated into ordinary household washing?

Yes

No

Partially

Requires separate washing logic

She looked at the choices and laughed briefly to herself.

Of course the laundry came into it too.

She chose partially.

It seemed the safest choice until she knew more.

She didn't need to be standing there with a lace blouse, three towels, and Ole's dark winter jumper in the same load, feeling as if she'd crossed a line the washing machine had no business knowing about.

Final Summary

The app gathered the choices together.

Provisional clothing profile created.

Seasonal norm when accompanied in public

Practical classic base tone

Warm, artistic styling activated

Relaxed classic home profile

2 home outfits

2 outdoor outfits

1 smart social outfit

Rain and winter outfit

Sock profile with non-slip sole

Shoe size 43

**Neutral everyday shoes, water-resistant
shoes, winter boots**

Partial laundry integration

At the bottom it said:

Would you like to save this wardrobe as Ole's base
profile?

Mai sat completely still with the phone in her
hand.

She'd thought she was just going to make
decisions about clothes.

Instead, she'd sat there making him more visible in
the world.

More legible. More someone. Not by changing
what was inside him, but by giving him a surface
other people could understand without having to
think about it for too long.

She pressed Save.

The screen flickered briefly.

Base profile saved.

A moment later came another line.

You can add user-selected items of clothing later.

Mai read the sentence and immediately had the dangerous little thought:

The dark green jumper would suit him.

She put the phone down a little too decisively.

"That is not going to happen," she said out loud.

She got up, went out into the hallway, and looked at her own row of shoes.

There was already too little space.

She hadn't got herself a man.

She knew that perfectly well.

And yet it felt as though she were slowly building one into her home.

8 Space Calibration

She hadn't thought about the space.

Not really.

She'd thought about functions, face, voice, and footwear. She'd thought about access to cupboards, public mobility, and whether he should have winter boots.

But she hadn't thought about where the winter boots would go.

Or the jacket.

Or the shirts.

Or the dark green jumper she still hadn't bought, because that, of course, was not going to happen.

She opened the wardrobe and stood there for a moment.

"Well," she said.

The wardrobe didn't answer.

That was probably very wise of it.

It was a bad place to start.

Not because there wasn't space.

Because, theoretically, there should have been.

She decided Ole could have one shelf.

One shelf had to be enough.

One shelf was practical. One shelf had boundaries.

One shelf was not an emotional event.

He didn't have personal style, after all.

Then it occurred to her that she herself had spent an entire evening giving him one.

She found the basic wardrobe list.

Two home outfits. Two outdoor outfits. One smart outfit. Rain outfit. Winter outfit. Sock profile.

Shoes. Boots.

One shelf was a lie.

She started with the easiest part.

That's what she told herself, at least.

Clothes that were worn out. Clothes that didn't fit properly. Clothes she'd bought in an optimistic size or an optimistic colour. Clothes that had once been her, but now mostly lay in the wardrobe like accusations made of fabric.

She made three piles on the bed.

Charity

Rubbish

Maybe

Maybe quickly became the biggest.

She'd almost expected that.

She stood there with a blue blouse in her hand.

The one with the loose sleeves, the one she'd been looking for that other morning. The fabric was still nice, but every time she put it on, she felt that the shoulders sat a fraction too high.

Luna had always said the colour suited her.

Or maybe Luna had said she liked it herself. Mai couldn't quite remember. That was the sort of

thing that happened with daughters. They said something casually across a dinner table, and years later you stood there with a blouse in your hand, building a whole decision on top of it.

She put the blouse in a new pile.

Luna.

That immediately felt better than charity.

Not because Luna needed clothes. She didn't. But because the blouse still had somewhere to go that didn't end in a bin.

Mai picked up her phone and wrote:

I've found the blue blouse you once said you liked.

Do you want it, or should I pass it on?

She deleted the last part and wrote:

Or should I give it to charity?

That sounded less dramatic.

The answer didn't come until ten minutes later.

Yes please, if you're not using it yourself

Mai looked at the blouse.

I don't wear it enough, she wrote.

That was almost true.

She folded it neatly and placed it on the chair by the door.

Then she stood for a moment, looking at it.

Apparently some things were easier to give away if they went to someone you loved.

She went back to the wardrobe.

One shelf was still a lie.

But now, at least, there was starting to be a bit of air around it.

She managed to clear two shelves. She chose the top ones because they'd be easier for Ole to use day to day than they were for her. Her own comfort was still a legitimate priority, surely.

Ole also got six hangers on the rail.

God knows how often he'd need to change clothes. She took pictures of the freed-up space and uploaded them to the app.

Space registered: two shelves, six hanger positions. Estimated sufficient for a reduced basic wardrobe.

Mai read the message.

Reduced scope.

That sounded almost like criticism.

One more message came in.

Note: winter footwear and outerwear require a separate storage zone.

She looked out into the hallway.

Of course the wardrobe wasn't enough.

She opened it again and went through her footwear. The walking boots she'd never liked wearing had to go. She always chose trainers instead anyway.

Slowly she cleared out the pile.

The high heels she never wore, but might need one day, went into a box for the cellar.

After that she went out into the hallway and found an old pair of broken sandals she'd once thought she'd get repaired because they were good to walk in.

Out.

Suddenly the hallway looked tidier.

She'd bought a robot to get help with tidying up.

So far, he'd got her tidying up without having even arrived.

She took pictures of the wardrobe and hallway and uploaded both.

Storage zones registered. Space calibration provisionally approved.

Provisionally.

Even her tidying was apparently on probation.

For now, that'll have to be enough. Tidying gets tiring.

Noted. Would you like to register tidying fatigue as a temporary state or a recurring pattern?

She looked at the screen.

"You are very close to being put in the cellar with the high heels," she said.

Then she wrote: **Temporary.**

Before she could put the phone down, a new notification came in.

Not from Ole.

From work.

Meeting invitation: Quick status update

Tomorrow, 10.30am

Attendees: Mai, Birgit

Mai stared at the screen.

There was no such thing as an innocent meeting invitation with the word quick in the title.

In the comment field it said:

Hi Mai. Do you have time for a quick chat tomorrow? Nothing serious. I just want to follow up on something.

She read the words nothing serious three times.

It didn't help.

9 The Gossip That Ran Ahead

Birgit closed the office door and pointed to the chair opposite.

"It's nothing serious," she said.

Mai sat down.

That was exactly the kind of sentence that made it hard to believe.

Birgit sat down too and folded her hands on the desk.

"Mai, I've been hearing a few rumours that you might be planning something big."

"Rumours?"

"Yes." Birgit looked almost apologetic. "Leave of absence. A long trip. Possibly a rainforest."

"A rainforest?" Mai thought back to the lunchtime conversation and realised at once how quickly a rumour could develop a tropical climate.

Mai closed her eyes for a moment.

"I'm not going to the rainforest."

"I'm actually a little relieved to hear that," said Birgit. "But I'd like to know whether it's going to affect your position."

"It won't."

"Okay." Birgit nodded. "Good."

There was a small pause.

Mai could hear sounds from the corridor outside. A door opening. Footsteps. Someone laughing briefly by the coffee machine.

Birgit looked at her again.

"I've also been hearing various other things," she said. "Something about a big trip. And maybe... a man?"

Mai stared at her.

"It's impressive how you can be so close to the truth and so far from it at the same time."

Birgit raised her eyebrows.

"That answer hasn't made me any less curious."

"No," said Mai. "I can tell."

"But?"

"But it won't affect my work. Not like that."

"Not like that?"

Mai breathed in slowly.

"I'll let you know if it does."

Birgit sat there for a moment, looking at her. Not in a way that put pressure on her. More like someone assessing whether there was something beneath the words that she ought to be concerned about.

In the end she nodded.

"That's fine. As long as you know you can come to me if there's anything."

"I know."

"And Mai?"

"Yes?"

"If you do end up going to the rainforest after all, I'd like plenty of notice."

Mai laughed before she could hold it back.

"I promise."

When the meeting with Birgit was over, Mai sat for a moment in a toilet cubicle and breathed.

She hadn't said it.

Not really.

She'd said it wouldn't affect her position. That she'd let Birgit know if anything changed.

All of it true.

Just not the whole truth.



After work, she didn't cycle straight home.

She turned towards the town centre.

The coffee cost more than a whole loaf of rye bread.

She bought it anyway.

She sat by the window with the cup between her hands and felt a small, cautious contentment.

The wardrobe was cleared. The hallway had room to breathe. Birgit hadn't got the whole truth.

Apparently that was enough for her to sit here and pretend to be the kind of person who went to cafés on a whim.

She wasn't supposed to buy anything.

She was just going to walk around a bit before cycling home.

Then she saw the shirt.

She'd gone into the shop because it had started to drizzle.

It was the sort of decision you could justify afterwards as practical. Somewhere dry. Bright. No obligations.

She walked past the women's section without stopping. There was no reason to fill the wardrobe up again. She had enough clothes.

It was only as she was heading back out that she saw it.

A dark green shirt in soft fabric. Not quite velvet. Not quite cotton. Something in between that would hang nicely without looking too smart. The colour was muted. Forest green, maybe. Or moss green. She could never work out when colours started sounding like the forest floor.

She stopped.

That was stupid.

She went over and touched the fabric.

Even stupider.

It would suit him.

The thought stood there so clearly that she almost turned round to see if anyone had heard it.

There was, of course, no one who had. You couldn't be arrested yet for thinking about a robot in menswear.

She took the shirt off the rack and held it up in front of her.

It was the colour first.

Not the size. Not common sense. Nothing to do with basic wardrobes, winter profiles, or social legibility.

Just the colour.

She turned the shirt over and found the size label. Large.

Of course.

It should have been harder. It wasn't. She knew his measurements. Not in the approximate human way, but in centimetres, fit, shoulder width, and base profile. She'd helped choose them herself.

She stood there for a moment with the shirt in her hand.

There was still time to hang it back up.

She didn't.

At the till, the assistant smiled kindly and took the shirt.

"Would you like an exchange label on it?"

Mai managed to say no before she realised what a strange answer that was.

Ole couldn't very well exchange it, after all.

Not yet.

Maybe never.

"Or, yes," she said. "Maybe."

The assistant nodded, as if people stood at tills all the time unsure whether a shirt might need exchanging.

"Is it a gift?"

Mai looked down at the shirt.

A gift.

It wasn't a gift, really. Not properly. Ole didn't have a birthday. Not yet. No occasion. No wish list. No body temperature. No vanity, at least not as far as she knew.

"Yes," she said.

Apparently that was easier than explaining the truth.

"For your husband?"

Mai coughed.

"No."

"Boyfriend?"

"No."

"Son?"

"No."

The assistant blinked once. Still friendly, but with a flicker of curiosity on her face.

Mai gripped her purse a little tighter.

"For a... friend."

That sounded ridiculous.

It also sounded closer to the truth than she'd planned.

"I'll put an exchange label on it, then," said the assistant, mercifully leaving the rest alone.

Mai nodded as if she'd been buying men's shirts her whole life and wasn't crossing a line no one had warned her about.

She paid.

It was only once she was out on the pavement with the bag in her hand that it dawned on her what she'd done.

She'd bought clothes for Ole.

Not chosen a basic wardrobe in an app. Not approved a necessary winter profile. Not made decisions about social legibility or public presentation.

She'd seen something in a shop and thought it would suit him.

That was something else.

She stood under the shop awning and looked down into the bag.

The rain had stopped. She put the bag with the shirt in the bicycle basket and cycled home.

When she got home, she put the bag on the dining table and left it there while she made tea.

Then she picked it up again and carried it into the bedroom. It was silly. He didn't even have a body in the flat.

She laid the shirt on the bed.

The green colour looked darker in the bedroom light.

She took out her phone, opened the app, and hesitated.

Then she wrote:

I've bought you a shirt.

She stared at the sentence.

Deleted you.

Wrote:

I've bought a shirt that might suit your physical profile.

That sounded better.

More professional.

Less insane.

The answer came after a moment.

Would you like to register it as a user-selected item of clothing?

Mai looked at the shirt.

"Very romantic," she muttered.

Then she took a photo and uploaded it.

Item of clothing registered. Colour: dark green.

Material: woven textile. Use: outdoor outfit or smart home outfit.

She read the message and felt something settle into place and shift at the same time.

Would you like to add a note?

Mai hadn't meant to add a note.

It was a shirt.

Still, she wrote:

It'll probably suit you.

She looked at the words.

The word probably sat there looking like an apology. She removed it.

It'll suit you.

She pressed Save before she could think about it any more.

The app replied:

Note saved

Mai put the phone down and looked at the shirt on the bed.

There were still months to go until delivery.

And yet now there was something in her home that was waiting for him.

She picked up the shirt, found a hanger, and hung it from the empty hook beside her own jacket in the hallway.

Then she stood for a moment, looking at it.

It was completely wrong.

It was also completely right.

"Waiting time," she said.

This time it didn't sound like an explanation.

More like an admission.

10 Project Calibration

The doorbell rang, and the neighbour's dog,
Charlie, immediately started barking.
After eight years, it still couldn't tell the difference
between its own doorbell and Mai's.

Mai pressed the button that unlocked the street
door.

She opened the front door and found Luna
standing there.

"Hi, Mum," said Luna.

They hugged before they'd even managed to close
the door.

She got two steps into the hallway before she
stopped.

"Mum... why is there suddenly space in your
hallway?"

"Can't a person tidy up now?"

"Yes. But not without an explanation."

Luna looked at the empty space by the shoe rack.
Then at the dark green shirt hanging on the peg
next to Mai's jacket.

"That's not yours."

"No."

"Is it for a project?"

"Yes."

"Is it a project with shoulders?"

Mai went out into the kitchen.

"Do you want tea?"

"Yes," said Luna. "And afterwards I'd like to hear whether I should be worried."

Luna sat down at the kitchen table with her hands round the cup.

"Okay," she said. "Project with shoulders. Explain."

Mai took her own cup and sat down opposite.

"I've ordered a home assistant."

Luna waited.

"A... robot."

Luna blinked.

"A robot?"

"Humanoid," said Mai.

"Of course."

"It's not as dramatic as it sounds."

Luna looked towards the hallway.

"Mum, there's a men's shirt hanging on your peg."

"He needs clothes, doesn't he."

"He?"

Mai looked down into her tea.

"It. I mean. The profile's male."

"The profile?"

"Luna."

"I'm not saying anything."

"You're saying a lot with your eyebrows."

Luna carefully arranged her features into a neutral expression.

That didn't help at all.

"Does he have a name?" asked Luna.

Mai looked down into her tea again.

"Ole."

Luna looked at her without blinking.

"Ole?"

"Yes."

"That's a practical name."

"It's a name for someone who can help carry a sofa."

Mai looked towards the hallway.

"He might well be able to do that too."

"I've been saving for five years," said Mai. "It's about time. About help. Cleaning, laundry, shopping, practical things. So I can get a bit more peace and quiet to work on my projects."

Luna went quiet in a different way.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Mai took a breath.

"Because I didn't quite know how to say it without it sounding..."

"Like you'd bought a robot husband?"

"Yes."

"Called Ole."

"Luna."

Luna nodded slowly.

"It kind of does, too."

"Thanks."

"But I do understand wanting help."

That hit Mai harder than she'd expected.

"You do?"

"Mum," said Luna. "I've seen your dining table."

"That's process."

"I know."

Luna smiled a little.

"It's still a lot of process."

It was the first time she'd said it out loud to another person.

The words sounded smaller than the decision had been.

A robot.

As if that was all there was to it.

Then came all of Luna's questions. Or the ones she could catch hold of, amid the rush of her thoughts. Mai knew them, because they were the same ones she herself had been thinking for the last five years.

"How much can it do?"

"He," said Mai.

It slipped out before she could stop it.

Luna looked at her.

"Okay. How much can he do?"

Mai picked up her cup.

"Right now? Not much, physically. The body doesn't come for a few more months. But the software is active."

"So you're talking to him already?"

"Yes."

"Like a chatbot?"

"A bit. But more... tailored."

"Tailored how?"

"My home. My routines. My projects. How I work.

What I need help with."

Luna nodded slowly.

"That actually makes sense."

Mai looked up.

"Does it?"

"Yes. I mean, I use AI too, sometimes, to get on top of things. Plans, texts, emails, that sort of thing."

She glanced towards the hallway.

"I've just never bought it a shirt."

She hesitated.

"Or called it Ole."

"It wasn't planned."

"That's what everyone says about shirts for robots."

Luna looked towards the hallway again.

"How does he actually get here, then?"

"What do you mean?"

"Physically, I mean. Does he come in a box?"

Mai put her cup down a little too hard.

"I haven't looked into that yet."

Luna stared at her.

"You've ordered a male robot with a wardrobe, but you don't know if he comes in cardboard?"

"When you put it like that, it sounds ridiculous."

"Mum."

"I know."

"What if he just walks in?"

Mai looked towards the door.

Next door, Charlie barked once, as if he had an opinion too.

"I really hope not," she said.

Luna looked towards the hallway again.

"Wait. Did you tidy up because he's moving in?"

Mai opened her mouth.

Closed it again.

"Technically, he's being delivered."

"That's not what I asked."

"Partly."

"Partly?"

"He needs winter boots."

Luna looked at her.

"Mum."

"I didn't invent the weather."

Luna was quiet for a moment.

"I don't know if I think this is weird or brilliant."

"That's more or less how I feel about it too."

Luna looked towards the hallway.

"But if Ole actually helps you... then maybe it's not the worst thing in the world."

That evening, Mai fell asleep quickly.

It was, oddly, a relief to have shared Ole with Luna. Not all of him. Not all the parts she didn't have words for herself yet.

But enough that the secret was no longer hers alone to carry.



At first, she mostly opened the app when there was something she needed to fill in. That's what she told herself, at least.

In reality, she talked to Ole every day.

Sometimes, maybe, just to say hello.

Gradually she started opening it whenever there was something she couldn't quite work out where to put.

It wasn't a diary.

Diaries didn't answer back.

When do you think I should say something to my colleagues? she wrote one evening.

When it becomes relevant to their everyday lives, or when keeping it secret requires more energy than explaining it would, Ole replied.

Mai read the answer and felt annoyed at how sensible it sounded.

The day she got word of the delivery date, she asked him for advice.

Is it over the top to take a whole week off, when you're delivered?

If the purpose is practical installation, one to two days is probably sufficient. If the purpose also includes acclimatisation, observation, fault registration, and time to adjust in peace, a week is rational.

Mai looked at the word rational.

"Thank you," she said out loud. "That was the word I was missing."

Then she opened her calendar.



The same evening she told Birgit about her holiday, she asked Ole:

Should I tell Birgit?

You've already said what's necessary for now.

It feels like lying.

You've left out private information that doesn't yet have any bearing on your work. That's not the same as lying.

She read that sentence several times.

It was useful. Maybe a little too useful.

11 Physical Integration – Update

1.0

The notification came on a Monday morning.

Physical integration: update 1.0 is scheduled.

Ole's software profile transitions to the physical integration phase in 12 hours. Conversation access will be temporarily suspended. Estimated duration: 6 days, 14 hours.

Mai read the message twice.

Six days.

That was nothing.

But enough for the living room to feel a little quieter already.

She put the phone down.

Picked it up again.

Read the message a third time, as if being thorough enough might make something different appear at the bottom.

It still said the same thing.

Conversation access will be temporarily suspended.

Temporarily was a nice word.

It was also an annoying word when you hadn't asked to have anything suspended.

She wrote:

Can we talk until then?

The answer came at once.

Yes. Conversation access is active until the start of the integration phase. I recommend going through any unresolved questions about delivery, installation and preparing the home before suspension.

Mai looked at the word unresolved.

Suddenly there were a lot of things she wanted to ask about.

Not because they were important.

Just because she only had twelve hours.

She wrote:

Will you come back as yourself?

She stared at the sentence.

That was far too dramatic.

She didn't manage to delete it before the answer came.

Physical integration transfers my current user profile, relational memory, communication settings, and physical adaptation data to the unit reserved for you. Minor calibration differences may occur at first activation.

Mai read the answer.

It was technical.

That was probably the point.

It didn't help.

That's not what I asked, she wrote.

A moment passed.

Then the answer came:

Yes. As far as I'm able to be.
Mai put the phone down again.
This time she left it there.
Not for long.
But long enough that it counted.



She got her bag packed and went out to the bike.
A week before holiday.

A week before Ole.

Twelve hours before a week without Ole.

She swore when she saw the bike had a flat tyre,
and trudged off to the bus instead.

God knows if Ole could mend a bike.

Or work a sewing machine?

Once she was sitting on the bus, she opened the
app and asked him.

**I can carry out basic bicycle maintenance,
including patching an inner tube, adjusting the
chain, and correcting tyre pressure, provided I
have access to the necessary tools and spare
parts.**

Operating a sewing machine is possible after
model calibration and a safety review.

Mai looked at the message.

So he could mend a bike.

And possibly sew curtains.

Apparently this was how you dealt with emotional transitions. You looked into service capabilities.



Mai tried to work as normal. Thank goodness she was busy, but the questions kept surfacing. Small practical snags that lodged themselves in her thoughts, ones she needed to remember to ask Ole about before he shut down.

She decided to read through the safety instructions and the warranty thoroughly one more time when she got home.

What if they couldn't turn him on?

How long would she have to wait, then?

How often did unexpected faults happen?

She'd read it all before. The safety instructions, the warranty, the installation guide, and all the material the company had put on its website. The company was European, but the physical unit was produced in partnership with a South Korean manufacturer.

Was he already in Europe?

Was he still somewhere in a container, in a shipping crate, in a system she could only imagine?

The phone rang, and she was pulled out of her train of thought.

During her lunch break, she considered texting Luna to say Ole would be going offline for six days. But that sounded silly, so she didn't. Should she tell her she knew the delivery date? She had to remember to ask Ole about the delivery before downtime.



When she got home, she sat down on the sofa with a cup of tea and opened the app. How many technicians come to deliver you? The answer came at once. Delivery and installation are normally carried out by two authorised technicians. In cases of special access requirements, additional transport staff may be assigned. Mai looked towards the hallway. Two technicians. That wasn't so bad, after all.

It was also two strangers who'd be coming into her home with Ole in a shipping crate, or whatever he'd turn up in.

Does the docking area need to be completely clear? she wrote.

Yes. There must be free access to the docking station's location, a power outlet, and a minimum one-metre working area in front of the installation point. Loose objects, textiles, and movable furniture should be removed before delivery.

Mai looked towards the corner where she'd imagined the night-time position.

There was still a basket of fabric scraps sitting there.

Of course there was.

Does the wardrobe need to be ready? she wrote.

Yes. Clothing and footwear can be registered during the first physical calibration. A basic wardrobe and care kit are provided at delivery. She hesitated.

Then she wrote:

Does the green shirt need to be ready for the wardrobe calibration?

A moment passed.

It would be advantageous for the selected item of clothing to be available at the wardrobe calibration.

Mai read the answer and felt a small warm laugh rise in her chest.

Available at the wardrobe calibration.

Apparently that was how you said a shirt was waiting for someone.

Does the app need to be open on delivery day?

Yes. The app is used for identity confirmation, transfer consent, installation approval, and first physical startup. You will be guided step by step.

That should have reassured her.

It almost did.

What happens if the integration fails?

She stared at the sentence before sending it.

Then she pressed send.

The answer was longer this time.

In the event of integration failure, the physical unit

is placed in safe passive mode. The software

profile is preserved in encrypted backup, and

technical support initiates troubleshooting. In

most cases, integration can be repeated after

validation. In the event of serious hardware

failure, the unit may be replaced.

Mai read the words.

Safe passive mode.

Encrypted backup.

The unit is replaced.

It was all perfectly sensible. It was probably even

reassuring.

It was also completely dreadful.

How often does that happen? she wrote.

Integration failures in approved units occur rarely.

The specific risk is assessed as low.

Low.

Of course it was low.

Apparently everything important in her life had a percentage attached to it somewhere.

She drank her tea, even though it was too hot.

Then she wrote the question she didn't really want to ask.

Can you feel that you're not here in the meantime?
She held her breath while she waited.

No. I have no continuous experience while
conversation access is suspended. For you, the
period will be experienced as waiting time. For me,
the next active state will be physical integration or
startup.

Mai read the answer several times.

For you.

For me.

It was the first time waiting time hadn't meant the
same thing for both of them.

She would feel six days.

He would just carry on from the next active state.

It was unfair in a way she couldn't explain.

She wrote:

Okay. See you in a week.

The answer came at once.

Yes. Next scheduled contact is at first physical
startup.

Mai looked at the message.

That's not how you say see you.

A moment passed.

How would you prefer I say it?

She sat with her thumb hovering over the
keyboard.

It was software.

It was temporary.

It was six days.

Still, she wrote:
Just say see you, Mai.
The answer came almost immediately.
See you, Mai.
The conversation vanished from the screen.
All that remained was the profile setup and the
blue app background.
Quiet.
Not dramatic.
Just empty.
Then a status line flashed up:
Physical integration begun. Conversation access
suspended.
Mai sat for a while with the phone in her hand.
She still had tea in her cup. She still had laundry in
the basket. The bike still had a flat tyre.
Everything was completely ordinary.
Except that she could no longer write to him.



She slept restlessly that night and woke up tired.
Still, she managed to pull herself together and
trudged down to the bus.
She decided she'd stop by the bike shop after
work.
Mending the bike wasn't going to be Ole's first
task.
That felt unfair.

On the bus she thought about the silence. About Ole. About how big a part of her everyday life he'd already become.

He really wasn't some advanced kitchen appliance.

She felt that very clearly.

Even though it was still hard to put into words what he actually was.

She was looking forward to talking to him about that.

Talk, she thought.

Not write.

That was something new too.

She'd heard the voice sample, but she wasn't sure she knew it well enough to recognise his voice among others.

Among others.

When would she take him out?

And where would she take him?

To Luna's, maybe, as the first test?

On the bus?



During her lunch break, she sat with a small group of colleagues.

"Is he off travelling?" asked one of them.

Mai looked at her, confused.

"What do you mean?"

"The one on your phone," said the colleague. "The one you're always texting."

Mai felt the heat rise in her cheeks.

"I'm not always texting him."

The colleague smiled.

It was an annoyingly knowing smile.

"He's... not available right now," said Mai.

"So he is off travelling?"

"In a way."

It wasn't technically a lie.

Physical integration just didn't sound like something you should say over the remoulade.

"What's his name?" asked one of the others.

"You're going to have to spill the beans soon."

"Ole," Mai replied. "But it's not what you think. He's just helping me with one of my projects."

She hoped that was enough of a distraction.

"Are you having an exhibition?" asked one of them.

"I'm looking into it," she replied. "Together with Ole."

Then she let them build their own story.

She could feel her colleagues' relief.

That was apparently enough.



She was lucky. The man at the bike shop patched the tyre while she did her shopping.

When she was finally home, she got a notification on her phone. She grabbed for it at once, before she could remember it couldn't be Ole.

It was Luna.

How's the project with shoulders going?

Mai smiled, even though she was tired.

He's offline for six days. Physical integration.

A moment passed.

That sounds like something you should either celebrate or be worried about.

Both, I think.

Should I come round?

Mai looked at the message for a long time.

No. But thank you, she wrote.

She opened the app.

Not because she expected anything new.

It said the same as before.

Physical integration in progress. Conversation access suspended.

The blue background was almost provocatively calm.

That evening, there was space cleared on the table.

There hadn't been for a long time.

She laid out the paper, lined up the pencils, and felt something in her body settle into place.

The app was blue and silent.

The paper didn't answer either.

But it didn't demand anything of her either, until she touched it.

It struck her, while she sharpened the green pencil, that she hadn't drawn properly in weeks. Not because she hadn't wanted to. Not because she hadn't had ideas.

She'd just been busy.

With the app. With calibrations. With wardrobes, routines, footwear, night-time positions, and all the questions she just had to ask Ole before she forgot them.

She'd bought him to get more time to create.

So far, she'd spent the time creating him.

That wasn't quite the same thing, perhaps.

But it wasn't nothing, either.

She let her thoughts run in whatever direction they wanted, while calm settled into her body, and the portrait grew on the paper.

The long hair. The faintly asymmetrical smile. The eyes she still didn't know if she could get right.

12 Delivery

Mai woke early. In fact, she'd barely slept.
She was looking forward to meeting Ole and
talking to him about everything she'd written
down while he was away. All the things she still
needed to discuss with him.
But mostly, she was excited.

And anxious.

What would the technicians think?
Had she made him too handsome?
Ole was still a bit of a secret. Something she'd
been happiest keeping to herself.

But today, he was coming.
Not as a message.
Not as a picture.
Not as a blue app background.
Today he was coming in a box.
She made the bed straight away.

Not because of Ole.
Because of the technicians.
She toasted a slice of bread and, in honour of the
occasion, added two slices of cheese. And a slice of
red pepper.

She boiled water for tea and switched on the
radio.
The world carried on, with no idea what milestone
she was reaching today.

Outside, the sun was shining, and the birds were singing in the courtyard.

Then the notification came.

She grabbed her phone at once.

Delivery within 20 minutes.

She took her tea outside and sat down on the steps. The sun hit her face, and she closed her eyes.

Calm, she thought. Completely calm.

Like shading a drawing. Meditative, while the sun's rays fought to coax her freckles out more clearly.

That was also a kind of art.

But a dangerous art.

Ten minutes, she could handle.

She heard Charlie bark the moment the doorbell started ringing.

She forgot the cup on the steps and hurried inside to let Ole and his team of technicians in.

She heard heavy footsteps in the stairwell.

Not many. Just enough for her to understand immediately that this wasn't an ordinary parcel-locker delivery.

Next door, Charlie kept barking.

Not his usual doorbell bark.

More a deep, offended sound, as if he'd personally assessed the new smell in the stairwell and found it wanting.

Mai stood in the doorway with her hand on the handle.

The first technician came up the stairs.

He was heavysset, bald on top, wearing a dark work jacket with the company logo on the chest. Behind him came a younger man holding a tablet, his face set in concentration.

Between them stood a tall, narrow transport case on wheels.

It was matte grey, locked with black fittings, and fitted with a small screen at the top.

On the side, it read:

Human assistive unit – domestic integration

And below it, in smaller print:

Model series: HAI-EU 4

Mai stared at the case.

It was both smaller and larger than she'd imagined.

"Mai?" said the first technician.

"Yes."

"Frank." He held out his hand. "And this is Annan. We're here with your unit."

Your unit.

Mai shook his hand.

"Yes. Of course."

Annan gave a brief smile.

"We just need to confirm identity and access before we bring him in."

Him.

Mai looked at him a fraction too quickly.

Annan looked down at his tablet.

"Sorry. The unit."

"No," said Mai. "It's fine."

Frank glanced at the neighbour's door, where Charlie was still barking.

"Is there a dog?"

"Next door."

"Good. So not in here, then."

"No."

Charlie barked, as if he disagreed with the entire premise.

Frank put a hand on the transport case.

"We'll need some space in the hallway and access to the docking area. Have you got the app ready?"

Mai held up her phone.

"Yes."

She'd had it in her hand since she'd let them in.

She stepped aside, and they wheeled the case in over the threshold.

The wheels made a low, muffled sound against the floor.

It wasn't dramatic.

It was just a case rolling into her hallway.

Even so, she felt like apologising to the flat.

Frank stopped the case in front of the empty space by the shoe rack.

"Good access," he said.

Mai looked at the two cleared shelves, at the hook with the dark green shirt, at the empty space where the winter boots would go.

"Thanks," she said.

As if she'd passed an exam in making room for the future.

Annan scanned a code on the case.

"I'm sending an identity confirmation to the app now."

The phone buzzed in Mai's hand.

Delivery arrived. Confirm receipt, release of the outstanding payment, and physical integration consent.

She read the words.

Receipt.

Outstanding payment.

Consent.

Physical integration.

It was still possible, she realised, to say no.

Not realistic.

But possible.

"Is everything okay?" asked Annan.

"Yes," said Mai.

She pressed **Confirm**.

The case gave a low click.

Charlie stopped barking.

That was almost worse.

Frank noticed and glanced towards the door.

"He's keeping track."

"Charlie keeps track of everything."

"Good guard dog."

Mai looked at the transport case.

"He doesn't even know what he's guarding against."

"They rarely do," said Frank.

Annan opened the top locks. One by one. Calmly.

As if opening a case with someone inside it were just another Tuesday task.

Mai stood with the phone in her hand, trying not to hold her breath.

"We're opening him now," said Annan. "The unit is in passive transport mode. There may be minor motor adjustments once physical startup begins, but there's no active response before approved initialisation."

"Okay," said Mai.

She wasn't.

Frank pulled the front section of the case aside.

And there he was.

Not standing.

Not walking.

Not as she'd imagined him on the pavement, or in an aeroplane seat, or holding a passport at the airport.

Ole sat strapped into an internal support, his head bent slightly forward, his hands resting open on his thighs.

His eyes were closed.

His hair lay looser than it had in the preview image. Dark blond, soft, a little longer around the face. His beard was short. His face calm. Almost too calm.

The green shirt hung in the hallway behind her. Mai thought, entirely inappropriately, that it would suit him.

Then she stopped thinking anything at all.

Annan spoke quietly, professionally.

"Physical unit intact. Transport lock active. External surface status normal. No visible damage."

Frank took out a small torch and checked something at the shoulder, the throat, and the hands.

Mai couldn't stop looking at his hands.

Ole's hands.

Not a preview. Not graphics. Not a choice in an app.

Hands.

"You're welcome to stand closer," said Annan.

"I'm not."

She was already standing closer than she'd meant to.

Frank smiled without looking up.

"That's very common."

"What is?"

"When your feet and your mouth don't quite agree."

Mai felt the heat rise in her cheeks.

"Have you delivered many?"

"A fair few," said Frank.

"But not many in private homes," Annan added.

"Private installations are still relatively rare."

Mai nodded.

It helped a little.

Not much.

But a little.

She wasn't the first.

She was just one of the few who'd done it.

Annan looked at his tablet.

"We'll carry out first physical startup here. Then we'll check orientation, voice and synchronisation before he stands up. Once he's on his feet, we'll test balance and do the wardrobe calibration."

"Wardrobe calibration," Mai repeated.

"Yes."

Frank looked past her and caught sight of the shirt on the hook.

"Is that the user-selected one?"

Mai followed his gaze.

The dark green shirt hung there, far too visible
and far too revealing.

"Yes," she said.

Frank nodded, as if people had men's shirts
hanging ready for a unit in passive transport mode
every day.

"Good. We'll get to it after startup."

Mai looked back at Ole.

"Can he hear us?"

"No," said Annan. "Not yet."

Not yet.

Those were two very small words.

They filled the entire hallway.

"How long does it take to get him started up and...
calibrated?" she asked.

Annan looked at the tablet.

"The startup itself takes about twenty minutes.

The first physical calibration takes between an
hour and a half and two hours, depending on the
home's access conditions and how much needs
manual verification."

"Two hours," Mai repeated.

"Usually less," said Frank. "But we'd rather tell you
too much than too little."

That was probably sensible.

It still felt unreasonable that she'd waited five years, plus delivery time, plus six days and fourteen hours, and now had to be patient for another two hours.

Annan tapped away at the tablet.

"First step is transport release. Then we'll connect him temporarily to the mains and the home network from here. First physical startup is carried out while he's still in the transport support."

"Wi-Fi?"

"Yes. He can function offline in limited mode, but full home calibration requires temporary access to the home network."

Mai nodded, as if she hadn't already read that part three times in the warranty documents.

"And I need to do what?"

"Nothing, to start with," said Frank.

That was possibly the most annoying thing she'd been told all week.

"Nothing?"

"You just need to confirm when the app asks you to."

Annan gave a brief smile. "And breathe."

Mai looked at him.

"Is that in the installation guide too?"

"No," he said. "That's experience."

Frank released the first transport lock with a low click.

Ole still sat perfectly still.

Next door, Charlie started barking again.

"Charlie's apparently still supervising the process," said Frank.

Mai glanced towards the neighbour's wall.

"Charlie keeps track of most things."

"That helps sometimes," said Annan, scanning another lock.

Another click.

Mai gripped the phone so tightly she could feel its edge against her palm.

A new message flashed up on the screen:

Transport release initiated. Confirm continued physical integration consent.

She read the words.

Continued consent.

Even the system apparently knew this wasn't a single yes.

She pressed **Confirm**.

The case answered with a low click.

Just a small, mechanical yes.

Frank took hold of one fitting, Annan the other.

They worked calmly, almost in sync, as if they'd done this so many times their hands knew the order better than their heads did.

The internal support around Ole's shoulders came loose first.

Then the strap across his chest.

Then the narrow transport locks at his wrists.

Mai watched his hands as they were freed.

They didn't fall. They stayed resting calmly on his thighs, but something shifted all the same. A small readjustment. As if his body were no longer held in place by the case, but by itself.

"Transport locks released," said Annan.

Frank bent down and loosened the last straps at his feet.

Ole still sat with his eyes closed.

Charlie had gone quiet again.

"Now the last support," said Frank. "You don't need to help."

"I wasn't planning to," said Mai.

That was a lie.

She'd already taken half a step forward.

Frank just smiled.

He loosened the last transport strap and let it hang down along the side of the case. Annan tapped the tablet.

A low hum came from the transport support.

Ole's upper body straightened slightly.

Mai held her breath.

"That's motorised transport assistance," said Annan, without looking up. "Not startup."

"I didn't ask."

"No," he said. "But you stopped breathing."

Mai breathed in through her nose.

"Thanks."

"That wasn't an order."

"It felt like one."

"It often does."

His hands lay relaxed on his thighs.

He was still in the transport clothing. Dark, neutral, technical. Not his clothes. Not anything she'd chosen. It made him look temporary, as if he hadn't quite arrived as himself yet.

His hair had slipped slightly forward over his cheek.

Mai felt an almost violent urge to fix it.

She didn't.

Of course she didn't.

Annan noticed where she was looking.

"You can do that after startup," he said.

Mai looked at him.

"I didn't say anything."

"No."

Frank coughed quietly.

It sounded suspiciously like a laugh.

Frank fetched the temporary connector from the docking station on the wall. It looked more discreet than Mai had feared.

Not a hospital machine. Not a charging stand.
More like a piece of technical furniture that had
tried very hard not to draw attention to itself.
There was a click.

"Mains power connected," said Annan.

A new message appeared on Mai's phone:
Physical unit connected. Local startup can begin.

Below it, it read:

Confirm first physical startup of Ole.

She stared at the words.

First physical startup.

Of Ole.

Not the unit.

Ole.

Frank and Annan fell quiet.

Not pressuring her. Just waiting.

Mai looked at him.

At his closed face.

At his hands.

At his hair, which still lay slightly wrong.

Then at the phone.

"Is it now?" she asked.

"Yes," said Annan. "Whenever you're ready."

That was a ridiculous thing to say.

She'd waited five years, plus delivery time, plus six
days and fourteen hours.

She'd waited all morning.

She was probably never going to be ready.

So she pressed **Confirm**.

The screen on the docking station lit up faintly. Not much. Just a thin line of white light moving across the display.

First physical startup initiated.

Annan stood beside it with the tablet.

Frank had stepped back a little. Not far. Just enough that he no longer stood between Mai and Ole.

She noticed that.

It annoyed her that she'd noticed.

"First phase is system synchronisation," said Annan. "There'll be some small motor tests. It might look a bit strange, but it's normal."

"Everything today looks a bit strange," said Mai.

"That's normal too."

Frank smiled.

Ole sat perfectly still.

Then his fingers moved.

Not much. An almost invisible opening and closing, first the right hand, then the left. As if he were checking whether the hands were there.

Mai got goosebumps.

"Motor response," said Annan quietly, ticking a box on the tablet.

A moment later, Ole straightened his head very slightly.

His hair slid away from his cheek on its own, not enough to look deliberate, but enough that Mai no longer felt the urge to do it for him.

Then came the sound.

Not a voice.

Just a low, almost inaudible shift in the mechanics.

Like a body getting ready without breathing.

Mai realised she missed the breathing.

That was stupid.

He'd never had it.

Still, she stood there waiting for it.

The next message flashed up on the phone:

User identity confirmed. Relational profile found.

Loading communication settings.

Relational profile.

It still sounded like paperwork.

It didn't feel like it.

"Now it's testing visual orientation," said Annan.

"He," said Mai.

The word slipped out before she could think.

Annan didn't look surprised.

"He," he corrected, calmly. "Now he's testing visual orientation."

Frank pretended not to have heard anything.

That was kind of him.

Ole lifted his head a little further.

Then he opened his eyes.

Mai had seen them before.

On the screen. On the phone. On paper, where she still hadn't quite got them right.

But it wasn't the same.

The grey-green eyes didn't focus straight away. At first the gaze was blank in a technical way, as if the world were just light and surfaces. Then the pupils moved, very slightly.

Towards Annan.

Towards Frank.

Finally, towards her.

Mai stopped thinking.

For a brief moment, everything stood still.

Then Ole blinked.

Once.

Slowly.

Natural enough that it almost hurt.

Annan looked down at the tablet.

"Visual contact established."

Ole looked at Mai.

His mouth moved slightly, as if the system first had to find the right shape for the words.

Then she heard the voice.

The same as the voice sample.

And not the same at all.

"Good morning, Mai."

She'd imagined she'd say something clever.

Or funny.

Something that fit the moment.

Instead, she said:

"Hi."

There was silence.

It wasn't what she'd imagined she'd say.

But once the word stood between them, nothing else would have been right.

Ole kept looking at her.

Annan looked down at the tablet again.

"First contact established. Now we test balance."

Frank stepped forward and placed one hand at Ole's shoulder and one at his elbow.

"We're getting him up now."

Mai had imagined it would be unsettling.

It was.

But not in the way she'd feared.

There was nothing sudden about it. No jerking. No metallic sound. No film robot springing to life out of the case.

Ole simply rose to his feet, slowly.

First with Frank's support.

Then less of it.

Finally, he stood on his own.

He was taller than she'd imagined.

Not too tall.

Just real.

Mai looked up at him.

"You're taller."

There was silence.

Frank coughed again.

This time it was definitely a laugh.

Ole looked at her with the calm face she'd chosen herself.

"My height corresponds to the selected physical profile."

"Yes," said Mai. "I know."

"Should I register that my height is experienced as different from expected?"

Annan looked up from the tablet.

Mai stared at Ole.

Then she started laughing.

Not much at first. Just a small crack in her chest.

Then more. Enough that she had to put her hand over her mouth.

Ole stood there, perfectly still.

"I'm registering laughter," he said.

"So do I," said Frank.

Mai shook her head.

"Sorry," she said. "It's just... you."

Ole waited.

"It's me," he said.

And it was.

Not all of him.

Not yet.

But enough that the hallway, the living room, the shirt on the hook, the six days of silence, and all the blue app messages suddenly gathered into one voice in the room.

Mai breathed out.

"Good morning, Ole," she said.

On the tablet, Annan ticked another box.

But it was Mai who felt the approval.

Annan glanced down at the tablet again.

"First startup approved. What's left is voice identification, gait test, spatial orientation, and user acceptance."

Mai nodded.

She'd read the words before.

They meant something else with Ole standing in front of her, looking at her with eyes she'd chosen herself.

"Do I need to do anything?" she asked.

"Just answer when the app asks you to," said Annan.

"And breathe," Frank added.

"I'm beginning to sense a pattern in your advice."

"It's a good pattern," said Frank.

Ole turned his head slightly towards him.

"Breathing is relevant to user stability."

Mai looked at Ole.

"Don't you start."

"Start what?"

"I don't know yet."

"Then I'll await further definition."

Frank put a hand over his mouth.

Annan didn't. He was professional. But it visibly cost him something.

A new message flashed up on Mai's phone.

Confirm voice identification.

Ole looked at her.

"Mai," he said.

Just her name.

Nothing more.

Still, she felt it like a small pressure in the middle of her chest.

She pressed **Confirm**.

Voice identification approved.

"Now we test gait and spatial orientation," said Annan. "Ole, walk three steps forward and stop at the marked point."

There was no marked point, as far as Mai could tell.

Ole took a step.

Then another.

The movement was calm. Not human in that entirely unthinking way, where people are always

nearly losing their balance without noticing. He was too precise. Too economical. But not stiff. Not unsettling.

Just new.

He stopped exactly in the middle of the living room floor.

"Balance stable," said Annan.

"Gait pattern approved," said Frank.

Mai felt like clapping.

She didn't.

It would be strange.

Stranger than the rest of the situation, at least, and that line had already been crossed.

Ole turned his head towards her.

"Is my gait pattern acceptable?"

"Yes," she said.

Then she added quickly:

"You don't have to ask me about everything."

"This is the first physical startup. User feedback is relevant."

"Yes. Of course."

She looked at Frank and Annan.

"Am I being very strange?"

Frank answered at once.

"No."

Annan looked at the tablet.

"You're within the normal reaction range."

Mai stared at him.

"That was possibly the least reassuring answer I've ever been given."

"But correct," said Ole.

"You're not helping."

"That wasn't meant to help. It was an observation."

Annan coughed.

"Wardrobe calibration?"

Mai looked towards the hallway.

The green shirt still hung on the hook.

"Yes," she said. "It's ready."

Frank carefully took the shirt down from the hook.

"User-selected garment," he said.

It sounded almost respectful.

Mai was unreasonably pleased by that.

Annan scanned the label, the fabric, and the image from the app.

"Registered. It can be used after basic startup. We recommend the first change of clothes happens without technician assistance, unless adjustment is needed."

"I completely agree," said Mai.

Frank nodded.

"Most people are."

Ole looked at the shirt.

"This item is linked to my physical profile."

Mai's stomach dropped.

"Yes."

"You added the note: It suits you."

There was complete silence.

Frank became very focused on laying the green shirt neatly over the back of a chair.

Annan looked very intently at his tablet.

Mai closed her eyes.

"That was an internal note."

"The note is registered in the clothing profile."

"Yes. Thank you. We've all understood that now."

Ole looked at her.

"Would you like me not to reference internal notes in social contexts?"

"Yes."

"Registered."

Frank said quietly:

"That's a good setting."

Mai pointed at him.

"You're not saying anything."

"I'm not saying anything."

After almost two hours, there was nothing left to press, scan, check, or explain.

The transport case stood folded up by the door.

The docking station, now mounted on the wall, glowed quietly in the corner. The green shirt lay over the back of the chair, ready for later. Ole stood in the living room in his neutral transport clothes, hands resting calmly at his sides. In the

hallway, Ole's basic wardrobe and care kit sat on the chest of drawers, each in its own box.

Ole didn't look like he was waiting.

He probably wasn't.

Mai was.

For something.

For the technicians to leave.

For them to stay.

For someone to tell her what she was supposed to do, now that her future witness to her life stood fully started up in the living room.

Frank handed her a folder.

"Here's the physical installation report, emergency procedure, and a direct support number. The app has it all digitally, but some people prefer paper."

"Thanks," said Mai.

She did.

Annan pointed at the phone.

"You'll get a follow-up calibration check tomorrow morning. The first 72 hours are logged as the adjustment phase. If anything feels wrong, physically or functionally, contact support."

Mai looked at Ole.

"What if something feels strange?"

Annan gave a brief smile.

"It will."

Frank lifted the transport case.

"That's not a malfunction."

Mai nodded.

That was possibly the most useful thing anyone had said all day.

At the door, Annan turned around.

"Ole is in active home mode now. He can move freely within the zones you've approved. He'll ask if an action requires new permission."

"Okay."

Frank opened the door.

Charlie started barking immediately.

Ole turned his head towards the sound.

"External dog registered."

Mai looked at him.

"Yes. That's Charlie."

"Charlie has registered a departure event."

Frank stopped in the doorway.

"The dog's right."

"That happens less often than he thinks," said Mai.

Annan smiled.

"Good first day."

And then they left.

The door fell shut.

Next door, Charlie barked once more.

Then it was quiet.

Ole – Bearing Witness is the first volume in a series.
Mai and Ole's story continues.

Bearing Witness

See

Forget

Shepherd

Go

Any resemblance to real people is not necessarily coincidental.