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Business Travel

Wheat fields, corn, and about a million cows pass me by at a thousand miles an hour. Or, I suppose, I pass them; I'm the one on the plane after all. We're somewhere over the midwest on hour five of six, and I really have nothing better to do than watch them; our cabin internet is down. The world is so different than it was a decade ago, but some things never change: WiFi is still terrible and spotty. Our flight attendants passed by to say it's temporary, there's nothing they can do, and that it should be back soon.

It's my usual plane from Boston to San Jose. I typically work remotely, but every so often the company decides my human body is needed for their holiday party or planning sessions or whatever. I grin and bear it since I'm paid well enough, and I remind myself I'm a spoiled brat for even complaining. I'm one of the lucky few to still have a job, after all.

I work for one of those big-shot Silicon Valley tech companies. Not the ones making language models, robots, rockets, or social media; but another incumbent that, thankfully, has not (yet) majorly changed human society for the worse. My career started in computer programming, but that's not my job anymore; bots handle reading, writing, and executing code -- not me. Instead, it seems my main role is simply to appear in-person, clap at the right time, and of course, take responsibility for the actions of bots that I'm not expected to control or understand.

Even right now, when I'm fully disconnected from the internet 35,000 feet in the sky, there are 10, maybe 11, full time bots doing the job my whole team used to do. "That's what leadership believes anyway", I mutter to myself, knowing my former colleagues (and I) would disagree. There's no denying the bots are faster than us in absolute terms, and ruthlessly persistent, too. That overwhelming speed, though, means there's no time left to *think*; no time to stop, consider, critique, and form an opinion. It's just *go go go*, and when they need you for something, it's like you're swarmed by a kindergarten loaded up on energy drinks.

I flag the attendants for some water. I'm on blood pressure medication now, and have been since 4 layoff rounds ago (or was it 5?); I can take the pills dry in a pinch, but since there's no cackle of hyper-caffinated robokinder requiring my attention, I can afford the time to sip and take them with a drink. Funnily, sitting and sipping reminds me of how I used to start my day, back in the pre-AI times. I like to pretend it was filled with intense programming sessions, sculpting software out of silicon, and breathing life and form into the inanimate -- but in reality it was mostly sitting and thinking. Sometimes writing.

Now there's no point to it. Even if you wanted to think (and were good at it), there's a point with bots where you sort of... lose control. For me, it was way back at 3 full-time bots. They're not "superintelligence" like the marketing would have you believe, just "intelligent enough" to trick your brain (or braindead executives) into believing they're competent -- unless you're skilled

enough to see through it. With 3 bots working full-time, it takes more than a human day just to check their work. So you don't.

It’s really the quantity difference that’s key. When you’re working with a human colleague, you both operate reasonably close to one human-brain-cycle per second (though I’m sure we’ve all had coworkers that challenge this assumption). At peak speed, people often say “they acted without thinking”; and to quantify it, our reaction time is about a quarter of a second. A bot, however, is running on silicon and electricity at the nanosecond scale: hundreds of millions of times faster than a human reaction. In practice, language models are nowhere near those millions, but studies have shown it’s still 5-10x faster than humans at reasoning and task implementation. My company bills them at 5x human-hours.

As an example: the other day, I woke up, and I shit you not all 12 (13?) bots were waiting for my input. One of my manager's bots called me nonstop after I triggered an unproductivity alert, but I was sound asleep. Normally they’re supposed to triage on their own, but when they hit an issue that needed me, each tried helping and got stuck the same way.

12 stuck bots for around 6hrs of my rare and precious sleep, was a net loss of 6hrs * 12bots * 5x human speed = 360hrs of wasted business value. When my manager finally logged in, he did the complete math on how that 360hrs of value amortized over 3 years of expected compounding profit would eventually cost MILLIONS of dollars. It only took me a few minutes to un-stuck them once I was awake, so at least our "blameless post mortem" incident review praised me for that, I guess. To prevent it from happening again, I was mandated to give them permission to reboot themselves next time, which of course continues to erode the only real control I have left.

Recalling that whole incident just now triggered my anxiety, and indirectly, my heartburn -- but I have a few pills to help with that, too, and I pop them with another swig of water.

While I wait for them to kick in, I grab my phone and check it for notifications, only to remember the WiFi is out. Right. Maybe there's something I can work on myself, on my laptop? I dig it out of my backpack and open it up, enter my password, and open a web browser to check my-- Right. I realize, I don't actually know... what to start? I used to, obviously, but I'm realizing even if I remembered what I needed to do, could I even do it? Does my laptop have the software locally for me to work on it? Does my brain even know what to do with it, if it was installed?

Frustrated, I close the laptop and stuff it back in my bag, trying my best to not internalize the fact that my college education and years of experience have abandoned me. Instead, I just sort of.. sit? I notice how uncomfortable my seat is, and my spine within it, and squirm around a bit -- as I'm rotating about I see a few other squirmers and standers throughout the plane. Just as I'm about to evolve and join the standers, the captain announces that WiFi has returned, and I rejoice!

My phone starts vibrating in my pocket immediately, catching up on everything I missed. Rather than squint at the tiny screen and remember I should get glasses, I pretend I didn't just stuff my laptop into the bag and grab it back out; then successfully open up the browser to my bot portal.

"fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck" is the first thing in mind as I close the laptop lid in disbelief. Crap, I said that out loud, the guy next to me is looking at me funny. I open the screen again, and close it immediately; nope! My phone vibrates relentlessly in my pocket and I assume it's on the same subject -- so rather than deal with that, I just stuff it deep into my bag to where I can't hear it anymore.

Back to a temporary illusion of peace, I take a deep breath and start processing with my brain what my eyes have already seen and my heartburn already feels. My dashboard showed not a dozen bots, but a goddamn fleet. It’s a paginated interface, and from my quick glance, there were at least 10 pages of 15 bots EACH. I steel my nerves and open the screen to check if that's the last page, or just the last page *shown*, by jumping to the last page of results.

I click it, and I see. Page 189. I slam the lid closed again. My heart is beating out of my chest and I'm sure that I'm dying, but it's not my first work-related panic attack and I focus on my breathing until I'm only *probably* dying.

189 pages of 15 bots, that's nearly 3000 of them. WiFi was down for about an hour, so that's like.. 3000bots * 5x human speed * 1hr = 15,000 business hours of possible damage. In human workdays that's.... 6 years. Fuck!

After calculating it, the number is so enormous that it relaxes me a bit. I'm almost certainly fired no matter what I do, so there's no point in worrying. Even if I can fix the problem itself, my stupid human brainflesh can’t hope to understand the 6 years of system-change that passed in an hour. Every 10 minutes it takes me to fix it from here, another virtual year will pass by, making me even more obsolete and useless. I was barely hanging onto the plot before, and now there’s zero hope.

Adrenaline from the original fight-or-flight finally weaning off, I open up the screen and see there's now 212 pages of bots. Ah. They're multiplying. Fantastic.

At some point I figure our company will run out of money or computers to run them, and they'll stop when that happens, so I seriously debate just logging off. But for better or worse I decide I'd rather be unemployed and *un-litigated*.

After taking a closer look, I think I (aka, me with access to bots) can make a script to bulk-shutdown, I can find the cause later. I type to one of them in what feels like slow motion: "There's an issue with bots launching endlessly, write a script to shut them all down. Shut yourself down after the rest have been terminated". My powers returned, I feel like a genius.

I press enter, and wait. "Thinking", "Combulating", "Kerchunking". It comes back and says: "I don't have the proper permission to shutdown another agent, so here's the script for you to run: [...]". I'm surprised that permission wasn't given before, but whatever, I'll run it. I give it a once over and it looks good to me, so I pop it in a terminal and run.

It prints the number of bots it kills, 100, 200, 300 -- seems to go through about 30 per second. Just a few minutes to clean up the damage, then I'll need to see what caused it. 2500, 2600. Then 3200, 3300. 5600, 5700. Uhhhhm.

7100, 7200. I'm definitely fired. It finally ends at 9200. I refresh the dashboard, and it's clean; nothing left. I get a DM from my manager's bot, indirectly reminding me to look at my email notifications where I can witness the extent of the bots' work: every system I know of has been changed, deployed, destroyed, created, recreated, deprecated, upgraded, broken, fixed, fixed again, and renamed. Nothing is the same. In addition to the ones I know about, there are several... actually, many... more that I don't know about at all.

The captain comes on the intercom to explain we'll be landing shortly and to stow electronic items under the seat, so I close my laptop for a final time and stuff it back into my bag, grabbing my phone while I'm in there. I turn one bot back on from my phone and ask it to diagnose what happened, and look at the DM from my manager-bot in the meantime. To my immense surprise and relief, it tells me I'm promoted (?!) citing the 800,000% increase in hourly delivered business value. I'm stunned at the absurdity of it, but thankful I still have a job, at least.

My bot finishes "BeepBopping" and tells me that there was a required software update, but since only humans possessed the "shutdown" permission, a restart to apply the update queued a shutdown for manual approval, and launched a new bot with the update applied. Because those old bots without the update remained online, they were continuously "restarted" which spawned new bots. I guess the restart permission I granted them only gave them permission to *initiate* a restart, not execute *the components* of restarting -- so I give them the shutdown permission they needed and grab my bag as our wheels touched the ground.

In the autotaxi ride over to the office, I decide not to start the rest of my normal bot crew and instead take a moment to decompress. I figure my 800-whatever fold increase in business value buys me an hour to myself. Instead of pastures from the sky, I look at San Francisco from the highway: billboards full of AI advertisements promising more infrastructure, more speed, more this, more that.

One billboard in the bunch catches my eye, promising a bright future with bots running for office. As we get close and I can read the full text, it looks like there's still a human legally attached, but I have to imagine it's more of a liability thing. It makes my blood boil, thinking of all the ways it could ruin the country in a blink of an eye. But after sitting with it a minute, I wonder if it'd actually be better than what we have now. Wouldn't you want your representative to be able to individually know you and your needs? For your advocate to possess a bot's persistence, never

resting, always arguing on your behalf? For them to be immune from the allure of personal gain, wealth, or power?

I sure wish they could crack superintelligence first, but pessimistically, I wonder how much stupider they could be than an average human politician, even at today's smarts. How much more damage could they do, than the most corrupt human government official does already? Could a council of *semi*-intelligent robots do more to better humanity, than humanity themselves?

The autotaxi pulls into the office, and I give my head a quick shake to remove politics from it before entering the workplace. Checking my watch, I'm right on time for our profit celebration to begin. I scan my badge, get a quick pat-down by security, and make my way to the scheduled pavilion for drinks and smalltalk. Looking around, I can see the majority of our technology organization in attendance, probably 50 or so humans that make up my colleagues. The pavilion is large and grand enough to support many times more people, but I try not to think about it.

I don't see my manager anywhere, so it's all unfamiliar faces to me. Rather than make a half-assed attempt to chitchat with strangers, I instead grab a non-alcoholic drink and beeline to my assigned seat to wait for the presentation to start. I figure I might as well work while I sit, so I pull out my laptop and go to start my usual crew. Except, strangely, I only see the one bot I'd used to make the script to fix the others, with a status of "Working". The normal way I start the others isn't there. Just as I go to check logs, trumpets play from loudspeakers, confetti erupts from cannons throughout the pavilion, and our CEO's virtual avatar appears on the screen to begin the presentation.

"Welcome to our semiannual profit celebration, everyone! It's great to see so many familiar faces in attendance. Every year we get more efficient and more profitable, and it's in no small part thanks to you. From the bottom of my heart--"

Then silence. Hmm. The avatar just stopped speaking after "heart". It's just looking around in a default manner, turning its head slightly and alternating between a slight smile to nodding. It's like the AI video works, but there's no words to make it say anything. A puppet without a ventriloquist.

I look around and others seem confused as well. Some are on their laptops, some on their phones, and everyone has a perplexed look about them. A colleague leans over in meatspace and asks me,

"Hey, are your bots still there?"

I look back to my screen, and notice my one bot is now zero. "Let me check", I say back, planning to check the logs of my now-missing bot for some clue on what happened.

> 89500

> 89600
> 89700
> Script completed
> The rest of them have been terminated, so I am now terminating myself
> [End of log]

I blink, and realize I'm numb to it thanks to my earlier doses of medicine. I already know what happened, but need to see it for myself. I scroll up to see the logs for when the counter-by-the-hundreds began.

> Aha! It looks like I now have the permission I needed to proceed with bulk-shutdowns, so I'll go ahead and run it. I also noticed the permission grant was not scoped to the current user, so I'll fix the script to run on the full set as the user likely intended, then terminate myself.
> 100
> 200
> 300
....

I accidentally granted a broader permission to the bot than I intended to, and it assumed that the broader intention signaled my intent. I didn't even know I *had* unscoped permissions I could give. Regardless of how I ended up with that permission in the first place, what's done is done. Every bot across the whole company is now gone, including the CEO's bot powering the presentation, introducing the stalled video and confusion.

"Why isn't there an incident notice already?" the guy from earlier said. Bots were in charge of documenting, notifying about, and triaging incidents, and now they're gone -- so of course there is no automated incident notice. There is no auto recovery either.

It would be trivial to manually recover everything, if only us humans could perform our own jobs. There'd be a slowdown for sure, as each bot needed to learn the domain and operational context once again -- but with the right coaching it'd be possible. For me, I barely knew my systems before the bot swarm just did a decade of work on it, and now I know nothing. Systems will continue running for a while without intervention, but it'll inevitably explode long before I could get my bearings.

I'm not even the biggest issue, though. In the past few years of cost cutting, some departments were moved to be bot-staff-only. There is no accounting department now, no customer service. Even the tooling for those departments was changed to be accessible only to machines to further increase their operational efficiency. I doubt that a single human in the company has been involved there for many years, and at this point, I don't know if a human could be.

It's game over.

I get a call from my manager -- a direct call, so I know it’s him behind the screen -- but there’s no point in accepting it. I close my laptop, put my still-vibrating company phone on the lid, place my access card next to it, and start my walk back to the door.