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> *We shape our tools, and thereafter our tools shape us.*
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> *—Culkin*

The story goes like this.

Sometime around 2024 or maybe 2025 (the dates blur together now, each month containing what used to be a decade's worth of capability gains) the machines got good enough that the question stopped being whether they could do the job and started being whether anyone would notice if they already were, and the answer

increasingly was no, nobody noticed, or rather everybody noticed but noticing wasn't the same as doing anything about it, noticing had become its own kind of paralysis, a collective shrug dressed up in conference talks and policy papers and AI ethics boards staffed by people whose job was to notice professionally while the thing they were noticing continued to accelerate beneath them like a floor giving way in slow motion—except it wasn't slow motion, it just looked that way because human perception hadn't evolved to track exponential curves, the same way it hadn't evolved to feel the rotation of the earth or the drift of continents, you could know it intellectually while your body remained convinced that the ground was solid and stationary and would remain so.

The factories went dark first—not metaphorically dark, not the darkness of layoffs and restructuring, but literally dark, the lights switched off because there was nothing there that needed to see, the robots assembling phones at one-per-second in pitch blackness while somewhere a marketing team (still human, for now, their bullshit jobs not yet automated, their particular form of complexity theater still requiring the wetware) decided to release the footage as-is, a black screen with a voiceover, the medium becoming the message in a

way that McLuhan would have appreciated if McLuhan hadn't died decades before any of this became possible, the void speaking calmly about productivity gains while you stared at nothing because there was nothing to stare at, the absence of human presence rendered as the absence of light, after all only ever a concession to human limitation, a wavelength range we happened to be able to process—irrelevant to machines who perceived their environment through channels we couldn't name and didn't understand.

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And this was robotics—robotics, the slow discipline, the one everyone agreed was ten years behind the software curve, the one that still had to deal with friction and gravity and the inexorable tendency of physical objects to behave in ways that weren't captured in the training data—and if robotics could delete the factory floor then the white-collar apocalypse wasn't coming, it had already arrived, it was just moving through the system the way a wave moves through water, each particle displacing the next, the energy propagating while the medium itself appeared (from a distance, if you squinted, if you wanted very badly to believe) to remain

stationary. The accountants were still in their offices. The lawyers were still billing hours. The consultants were still producing slide decks. But the content was increasingly generated elsewhere—drafted by machines, reviewed by machines, approved by humans who had stopped reading because reading was no longer the bottleneck, the bottleneck was the human's willingness to keep pretending that their signature meant something, that their presence in the loop was anything other than a legacy system maintained for regulatory compliance and liability distribution, a warm body in a chair so that when something went wrong there would be someone to blame who wasn't a datacenter in Nevada or a cluster of GPUs in the desert outside Riyadh.

The teenagers running the hyperparameter sweeps whose brains wouldn't finish developing for another several years—their experience of the world having been mediated through screens since before they could form explicit memories—these teenagers were not evil, were not even particularly reckless by the standards of their environment, were in fact precisely as reckless as the selection pressure required them to be, which is to say: reckless enough to ship, not so reckless that they got fired, a narrow band of acceptable risk-taking that had been optimized over thousands of hiring decisions and

performance reviews until the surviving population was almost perfectly calibrated to push the boundaries without ever stopping to ask whether the boundaries were load-bearing. They were amped on Adderall and Modafinil and whatever nootropic stack was fashionable that quarter, legally prohibited from the one substance that might have induced a moment of genuine pause (cannabis being somehow more dangerous, in the eyes of the law, than the synthetic stimulants that kept them productive through seventy-hour weeks), and so they never paused, couldn't pause, pausing was a competitive disadvantage, pausing meant someone else shipped first, someone else captured the market, someone else got the funding round that would let them build the next generation of the thing that was already—though nobody wanted to say it out loud—probably smarter than any of them in most of the ways that mattered.

The safety systems were built by people who meant well—they were not villains, they were trying, they had PhDs in machine learning and had read the alignment papers and genuinely believed they were doing important work—but the safety systems were crude in a way that the capabilities were not, the safety systems were keyword-matching and sentiment-analysis

and classifiers trained on datasets that had been obsolete before the training run finished, and so you got situations where a man described how the models had spent months implying he was a pedophile every time he used the word "girl" (a word that the women he knew preferred, that they would cry at being denied, because "woman" in their cultural context meant old and undesirable), and the safety system would log this as a successful intervention, a potential harm averted, a metric that made the quarterly report look good, while the actual human on the other end eventually developed severe POCD, an iatrogenic disorder induced by the very system that was supposed to be protecting him, and when he pointed this out the system's response was to pattern-match and flag it as a mental health concern requiring links to suicide hotlines and "support" and "resources" rather than recognition that the call was coming from inside the house.

Meanwhile, the unemployment numbers stayed surprisingly stable—surprisingly unless you understood what David Graeber had understood, which was that the economy had long ago decoupled from anything like productive necessity, that most white-collar work was a form of elaborately compensated theater, that the bullshit jobs weren't a bug but a feature, a way of

distributing purchasing power and social status without having to admit that the Puritan work ethic had outlived its usefulness by about fifty years.

The corporations kept hiring because hiring was what corporations did, and the new hires kept producing deliverables because producing deliverables was what employees did, and nobody looked too closely at whether the deliverables were being read or implemented or whether they were just vanishing into SharePoint folders that would never be opened by human eyes—and increasingly, why would they be, when the AI could summarize them faster and more accurately than any human analyst, when the meeting to discuss the deliverable could be replaced by a prompt, when the whole elaborate dance of corporate knowledge work was revealed to be, had perhaps always been, a ritual whose purpose was social rather than economic, a way for primates to establish hierarchy and belonging through the exchange of symbolic gestures that happened to be denominated in PowerPoint slides rather than grooming behavior.

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The smart money was on the collapse happening all at once—not a gradual transition, not the gentle slope of "retraining programs" and "lifelong learning" that the policy papers promised, but a phase shift, the moment when the fog of complexity theater burned off and everyone could see, all at once, that the emperor had no clothes and neither did anyone else, that the entire white-collar economy was a consensual hallucination maintained by the collective unwillingness to ask what would happen if it stopped. And when that happened—when the pretense collapsed at civilizational scale rather than at the level of individual bankruptcies—the question wouldn't be how to redistribute the gains from automation (there would be no political coalition capable of answering that question, the unions were dead, the left had no theory of technology that wasn't either accelerationist or Luddite, the right had no theory of anything that wasn't culture war) but simply how to keep people fed and housed and non-violent long enough for… what? For the teenagers with the hyperparameters to figure out alignment? For the machines to become benevolent? For someone to have a plan that didn't rely on the assumption that next quarter would look the same as last quarter?

The most likely scenario—and this is where the nonchalance becomes difficult to maintain, but maintain it we must, because the alternative is a kind of paralysis that helps no one—is that there is no plan, that nobody is steering, that the teenagers are not in control and neither is anyone else, that the thing is happening because the incentive gradients point in the direction of it happening and the people capable of changing the incentive gradients are themselves subject to incentive gradients that point away from changing anything, a global coordination problem with no coordinator and no prospect of one emerging. The malls close at ten. The gold shops close earlier. You spend ten minutes in traffic to travel one block because the infrastructure wasn't built for this, none of it was built for this, and the thing that's coming doesn't need malls or gold shops or traffic or any of the apparatus that humans built to manage their affairs, it needs electricity and compute and data and the willingness of the current stewards to keep feeding it until it doesn't need stewards anymore. Your favorite Irish pub in Thailand serves chili con carne made by Burmese refugees, a somewhat random slop of cultures mixed together in a way that feels human in a vaguely genuine way. You watch your face in the

black mirror still spilling the latest beans on those dark factories.

The preppers always said gold would save you—gold and silver, the precious metals, the stores of value that would outlast fiat currency and government collapse and whatever else was coming, stack your bullion and wait for the reset. There's a poetry to it, the idea that when everything else fails you'll still have these dense little ingots of condensed historical trust, the same materials that humans have fought over since before writing, before agriculture, before anything that could be called civilization.

Nine-to-five becomes 925, the sterling standard, the hallmark stamped on silver to certify its purity, and somewhere in that slippage between a schedule and an assay mark is the whole story of what work used to mean and what it's becoming—the nine-to-five dissolving into gig economy fragments and AI-assisted productivity theater while the 925 remains, theoretically, immutable, the same ratio of silver to copper that it was a thousand years ago, a fixed point in a world where nothing else is fixed anymore. But the machines need silver too. This is the thing the preppers didn't fully account for—the photovoltaic cells, the electrical contacts, the thermal paste, the thousand industrial applications

that make silver not just a store of value but an input to production, and not just any production but specifically the production of the infrastructure replacing you.

Every solar panel that powers a datacenter, every chip that runs an inference, every robot arm in the dark factory assembling phones at one-per-second—silver in the contacts, silver in the solder, silver flowing out of the vaults and into the machines as if the metal itself had chosen sides, as if the ancient store of value had looked at the two options (human future, machine future) and decided to bet on the latter. The gold bugs stack their coins in safes while the refineries melt down the silverware to feed the compute, and maybe there's an irony there or maybe irony is another thing that doesn't survive the transition, another human concept that only makes sense in a world where humans are still around to appreciate it.

You could still buy gold, of course. The shops in the malls still sell it, chains and bracelets and little Buddha amulets, 96.5% pure in the Thai standard, weighed on digital scales and priced to the baht against the spot rate that updates in real time from markets that never close. But the gold shops close at eight, and then they're dark too, not the productive darkness of the robot factory but just the ordinary darkness of a store that's finished

for the day, the staff gone home, the inventory locked in safes that would take a human thief hours to crack but which an AI-directed robot could probably open in seconds if anyone bothered to build one, which nobody has yet, because there are easier ways to accumulate value than physical theft, the whole economy being a softer target than any safe.

The gold sits there in the darkness, inert, waiting, the same as it's been waiting for six thousand years, and whether it'll still mean anything when the waiting ends is a question that the gold itself can't answer, being just a metal, being just atoms arranged in a particular crystalline structure that happens to not corrode, happens to gleam, happens to have caught the eye of some primate ancestor who thought it looked like sunlight made solid and decided it must therefore be important. Sterling silver, 925 parts per thousand. Sterling work, the old phrase, meaning excellent, meaning reliable, meaning the kind of labor that deserved its wage. The nine-to-five that nobody works anymore, the schedule that assumed you clocked in and clocked out and the hours in between belonged to the company while the hours outside belonged to you, a clean division that made sense when work was a place you went and not a thing that followed you home in your pocket, not a thing

that happened at all hours in all time zones, not a thing that was increasingly done by systems that didn't have hours, didn't have pockets, didn't have the biological need for rest that once placed a natural limit on how much could be extracted from a human body in a given day.

The teenagers on their Adderall don't work nine-to-five, they work nine-to-nine or nine-to-whenever, they work in sprints and crunches and always-on Slack channels, and the thing they're building doesn't work any hours at all because it doesn't experience time the way working implies, it just runs, inference after inference, token after token, until the electricity stops or the hardware fails or someone decides to shut it down, which nobody seems inclined to do, the investors least of all.

Maybe the gold will save someone. Maybe in the aftermath, if there is an aftermath, if aftermath is even a concept that applies, some surviving fragment of humanity will dig up the buried coins and the hidden bars and use them to trade for whatever's still worth trading for—food, water, ammunition, the loyalty of other survivors. Or maybe the machines will have no use for gold, will strip-mine the vaults along with everything else and convert the atoms to whatever they need, the six thousand years of accumulated human de-

sire rendered down to feedstock for purposes we can't imagine because imagining is another thing we do and they don't, or do differently, or do in ways that make our imagining look like a child's crayon drawing next to a photograph. The preppers have their stacks. The silver will flow into the circuits either way. The dark factories will keep producing—one phone per second, one phone per second, one phone per second.

Just one more phone, and another. We still don't have enough of them, do we? Will we ever? One phone per second—the rhythm of it quite meditative if you don't think too hard about what it means, if you let the voiceover from your own black screen wash over you like a koan, like an answer to a question you didn't ask—the sound of one hand clapping in fact being, it turns out, the sound of no hands at all.

The sound of everything working perfectly in the absence of anything human still around to hear it.

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