

THE HOURS NOBODY COUNTS

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At 11:48 p.m., I asked the machine to remember my children's childhood for me.

Not the important parts.

I did not ask it to remember the smell of their hair after baths, or the particular way one boy still says Mom when he is sick, stretching the word until it becomes both question and shelter.

I asked it to remember that tomorrow was Decades Day.

That the younger one needed his library book.

That the older one needed cardboard.

That I could not spend the rent.

That there were three yogurts left and four school days before payday.

That the boot glued on the kitchen counter had to stay clamped until morning.

The machine accepted all of this without judgment.

I had expected something more dramatic from artificial intelligence.

The future, I had been told, would arrive with machines that wrote novels, replaced artists, diagnosed illness, made people obsolete.

Mine arrived asking:

Would you like me to organize that into a checklist?

Yes, I said.

Please.

There are hours in a mother's life that nobody counts because nobody pays for them.

This is not a complaint about motherhood.

It is an accounting problem.

At 5:53 a.m., she learns that Grade Three is green and Grade Five is purple.

At 6:08, she searches drawers.

At 6:17, she finds a shirt.

At 6:31, she packs lunches.

At 6:42, someone cannot find a library book.

At 6:47, someone needs a water bottle.

At 6:51, someone remembers a form.

At 6:57, she signs it against the refrigerator with a pen that barely works.

No payroll system records any of this.

No institution considers it labour.

But remove it for one morning and watch how quickly the architecture collapses.

The school would call.

The employer would call.

The child would cry.

The form would be late.

The lunch would not exist.

The water bottle would remain beside the sink.

The system relies on the work while maintaining that the work is personal.

That is the trick.

My mother had a village.

I used to think this meant she lived in a better time.

That is too simple.

There were dangers we understand differently now. Children were left alone in ways many of us would never choose. Seat belts were optional until they were not. We mistook endurance for safety because we did not yet have better words.

I do not want the past back.

I want its margin.

I want the spare adult.

I want the neighbour who is already home.

I want the grandmother who is not still working at sixty-two because groceries cost what groceries cost.

I want the aunt who does not live twelve hours away.

I want the school bus.

I want the five minutes that existed before every five minutes had a price.

The village did not vanish because families became selfish.

The village got scheduled.

Every potential helper has a shift.

At 8:30, the mother must be logged in.

At 8:25, the school door opens.

At 2:40, the school door closes.

At 3:00, the second shift begins.

At 5:00, offices close.

At 6:00, practices start.

At 7:00, PAC meets.

At 8:00, tomorrow's spirit-day reminder arrives.

A modern mother can be expected in four places at once, provided none of the four institutions are required to acknowledge the others.

The school says: Be present.

The employer says: Be available.

The landlord says: Be solvent.

The phone company says: Pay now.

The child says: Come see.

The body says: Sleep.

No one is being unreasonable.

That is what makes the system so efficient.

Every individual request is small.

Six dollars.

Twenty minutes.

One costume.

One form.

One volunteer hour.

One tray of cupcakes.

One appointment during business hours.

One school pickup at 2:40.

One missed shift.

One day off when a child is sick.

One field trip.

One picture package.

One fundraiser.

One hot lunch.

One spirit shirt.

One teacher gift.

One book fair.

One little thing.

A family's financial ruin is rarely cinematic.

Sometimes it is thirty little things standing in line.

The machine I use at night is good at little things.

It can turn six school emails into six bullets.

It can remind me that Friday dismissal is early.

It can rewrite an angry message before I send it.

It can tell me that I cannot, mathematically, be at the assembly and at work when both begin at the same time.

That last one should not feel revolutionary.

Still, I ask.

If the assembly begins at 1:30, work ends at 2:30, and pickup is at 2:40, how can I attend without missing paid time?

The machine offers possibilities.

Take a break.

Ask a relative.

Request flexibility.

Attend virtually.

Coordinate with another parent.

It does not know my mother is working.

It does not know there is no other parent because the other parent is also at work.

It does not know flexibility is a word salaried people use around hourly people.

It does not know that "take a break" can mean lose money.

I tell it these things.

It recalculates.

Given those constraints, it says, attending in person may not be possible.

I stare at the sentence.

Not possible.

Not selfish.

Not uninvolved.

Not a failure.

Not a mother who should have planned better.

Not possible.

The machine has no authority to absolve me.

And yet I feel something loosen.

Maybe because it is the first answer all day that does not ask me to become more efficient.

Most technology aimed at mothers is sold as efficiency.

Meal-plan faster.

Shop faster.

Schedule faster.

Answer faster.

Remember faster.

Work faster.

Clean faster.

An entire economy has formed around helping women become better at surviving impossible arithmetic.

Nobody asks why the equation requires optimization in the first place.

If you give a mother an app that saves six minutes, someone will eventually find a use for the six minutes.

The saved time does not become hers.

It becomes capacity.

This is how convenience becomes another form of extraction.

The school app was supposed to simplify communication.

Now there are announcements, direct messages, classroom streams, calendars, volunteer links, digital forms, payment portals, photo permissions, lunch orders, attendance notices, fundraiser reminders, emergency alerts, newsletters, surveys.

The information is accessible everywhere.

Which means the parent is expected to have accessed it everywhere.

We used to lose paper at the bottom of backpacks.

Now the paper can follow you to work.

Progress.

At 10:14 one morning, I receive a notification asking for volunteers on Thursday.

At 10:15, I receive a message from my manager reminding the team that personal time away from the workstation is being monitored.

Both institutions value families.

Both are telling the truth.

Neither has to solve the contradiction.

I do.

This is another hour nobody counts.

The hour spent being the place where incompatible systems meet.

The machine can help me write the response.

Thank you for the invitation. Unfortunately, I am unable to volunteer during working hours.

It suggests "Unfortunately."

I remove it.

I am trying to stop apologizing for having employment.

Thank you for the invitation. I am unable to volunteer during working hours.

Better.

The machine has learned from millions of sentences.

I am trying to unlearn one.

Sorry.

Sorry I cannot come.

Sorry the form is late.

Sorry I missed the call.

Sorry I am working.

Sorry we cannot afford it this week.

Sorry your lunch is not the lunch everyone else has.

Sorry I am tired.

Sorry I forgot.

Sorry I remembered and still could not make it happen.

A mother can spend an astonishing percentage of her life apologizing for physics.

There are twenty-four hours.

She did not invent that limit.

At midnight, the machine and I divide Wednesday.

Sleep: five hours, forty-three minutes.

Morning routine: two hours.

School transport: fifty minutes.

Paid work: six hours.

School transport again: forty minutes.

Second job: five and a half hours including travel.

Remaining time: three hours and seven minutes.

In those three hours and seven minutes, insert:

Dinner.

Homework.

Dishes.

Laundry.

Permission slip.

Baths.

Medication for one child.

A phone call to the utility company.

Search for winter boots online.

Reply to a Marketplace buyer.

Prepare two lunches.

Find something that looks like the 1980s.

Listen to a story about recess.

Be married.

Be a person.

The machine does not say impossible.

I ask it to.

Is this schedule realistic?

It answers carefully.

This schedule leaves very little buffer for unexpected needs, rest, or transition time.

I laugh so loudly I wake my husband.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"What did it say?"

"Apparently we need buffer."

He laughs too.

For thirty seconds, the room belongs to us.

I do not think artificial intelligence can replace that laugh.

It does not know what it costs.

It knows the word overdraft.

It does not know the body-feeling of seeing a balance and knowing rent is sitting inside it pretending to be yours.

It knows children need winter boots.

It does not know the small shame of telling a child to wear runners one more week because the first snow has not stayed yet.

It knows the phrase "quality time."

It does not know how much love can be hidden in a repaired zipper.

I am not afraid that the machine will become human.

I am more interested in how often human systems ask people to behave like machines.

Remain available.

Maintain output.

Do not interrupt.

Process request.

Complete form.

Meet deadline.

Respond promptly.

Optimize route.

Increase efficiency.

Continue.

The mother is expected to have no latency.

No crash.

No update.

No depleted battery.

No conflicting commands.

And when she inevitably fails, the error message is personal.

Try again.

At 12:31 a.m., I ask the machine what I forgot.

It tells me:

Thursday library book.

Museum permission form.

Milk.

Boots.

Call phone provider.

Spirit Day outfit.

I tell it the phone provider can wait until morning.

It moves the task.

No disappointment.

No red notification badge.

No sigh.

I realize that what I value is not its intelligence.

It is its lack of moral judgment.
I can say: I cannot do all of this.
It does not answer: Have you tried a planner?
It does not tell me other mothers manage.
It does not ask whether my priorities are right.
It does not recommend waking earlier.
It does not suggest monetizing a hobby.
It does not say self-care.
It simply helps me decide what can be dropped.
Milk stays.
Rent stays.
Sleep stays, barely.
Spirit Day moves to "nice if possible."
I look at that phrase for a long time.
Nice if possible.
I want to print it on every school newsletter.
Nice if possible.
Fundraiser.
Volunteer shift.
Theme day.
Perfect snack.
Handmade costume.
Committee meeting.
Pinterest birthday.
Holiday magic.
Nice if possible.
Care is mandatory.
Performance is not.
This distinction should not require artificial intelligence.

And yet here we are.

At 12:42, I close the phone.

Tomorrow, the boys will wake and believe the cardboard simply exists.

The boot will be repaired.

The forms will be signed.

Their lunches will contain the last two yogurts.

One will wear a denim jacket to approximate the 1980s.

The other will wear a flannel shirt and call himself the 1990s.

They will walk through the school doors carrying the results of hours no one counted.

That is all right.

Children do not need to know the price of every ordinary thing.

That is one of the things the hours are for.

To hold the knowledge away from them.

The machine can hold my reminders.

I will hold the rest.

The worry.

The choices.

The guilt.

The calculation.

The love.

This is the human contribution, I think.

Not that we remember everything.

Not that we can produce more than the machine.

Not that our sentences are harder to generate.

The human part is deciding what matters when everything is asking to matter.

The human part is choosing the boot over the pizza lunch.

The rent over the fundraiser.

The child's story over the unread email.

Sleep over one more task.

Presence over performance.

The machine can sort the list.

Only I can decide what the list is for.

At 12:47 a.m., I set the phone facedown.

The house is quiet.

The repaired boot waits on the kitchen counter.

Tomorrow's clothes are folded over two chairs.

There are still forty-two dollars in the bank.

Nothing has been solved.

But the tasks have stopped multiplying for the night.

For six hours, nobody will ask me to prove I can do more.

I turn off the light.

The machine remembers what I told it.

I remember why.