

PROOF OF HUMAN

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At 6:03 a.m., before Mara Bell has spoken to another person, a machine asks her to prove she is one.

Select all squares containing a bicycle.

She is standing barefoot in the kitchen with one hand inside the bread bag and the other holding her phone. The coffee maker has not finished. Her younger son is asleep upstairs with one boot split at the toe. Her older son needs a purple shirt because the school has declared it Community Colour Day with less than a day's notice. Her husband left twelve minutes ago for a construction site across town.

Mara studies the grid.

A bicycle occupies four squares, perhaps five if the machine considers the rear tire in the bottom-right corner significant. She taps the obvious ones.

Incorrect. Please try again.

The rent is due Friday.

Her phone provider has sent three notices this week.

The school wants eight dollars per child for hot lunch.

Please select all squares containing traffic lights.

Mara taps carefully.

One square contains the edge of a traffic light, a black sliver against blue sky.

Does the edge count?

She presses it.

Verification successful.

Human.

For the next eleven hours and forty-six minutes, nobody will ask again.

The website opens.

PAYMENT ARRANGEMENT REQUEST.

She types the balance she can pay.

0.00

The field turns red.

PAYMENT MUST BE GREATER THAN ZERO.

"I know," Mara says to the screen.

The system suggests thirty dollars.

She has forty-two dollars and thirteen cents until payday.

Thirty dollars would leave twelve dollars and thirteen cents for milk, gasoline, school, and any other emergency that has the poor manners to occur before Tuesday.

She closes the page.

At 6:19, the school app asks whether she has completed the annual family engagement survey.

Rate your agreement with the following statement:

I feel welcomed and included in my child's school community.

Strongly agree.

Agree.

Neutral.

Disagree.

Strongly disagree.

Mara chooses Agree.

The next question asks how often she attends school events.

Never.

Rarely.

Sometimes.

Often.

Always.

She selects Sometimes and immediately feels she has confessed to something.

A text box appears.

PLEASE TELL US HOW WE CAN BETTER SUPPORT FAMILY PARTICIPATION.

Mara types:

Hold things after five.

She deletes it because it sounds rude.

She types:

More evening options would help working families.

That sounds like a grant proposal.

She deletes that too.

The boys come downstairs.

She closes the survey unfinished.

At 8:28, she drops them at school.

There is no bus from their neighbourhood. Two hundred cars arrive within twenty minutes, each containing one adult who is expected to be somewhere else.

The school doors open.

A teacher waves.

Mara waves back.

The gesture means: I see you. Thank you for receiving my children. I am sorry I cannot come to the assembly. I know the field trip needs volunteers. I know someone has to cut fruit for Friday. I know the PAC is six volunteers short. I know childhood is happening while I am at work.

The teacher waves to the next car.

At 8:33, Mara logs into her first job.

Green dot.

Available.

A machine measures how long she is green.

At 9:26, the school calls.

The green dot turns yellow.

At 9:33, a message appears from her supervisor.

Everything okay?

Mara writes:

School call. Resolved.

The dot returns to green.

The machine does not ask what the school needed.

The machine does not ask whether Noah is frightened before his leadership presentation.

The machine does not know that Mara spent twenty minutes after midnight gluing a cardboard display together because he forgot to mention it until bedtime.

It knows she was unavailable for seven minutes.

At 10:41, Marketplace asks:

IS THIS ITEM STILL AVAILABLE?

Mara has listed a bread maker for forty dollars.

Yes, she replies.

20?

Could you do 30?

No response.

At 10:47, her banking app requests facial recognition.

She lifts the phone.

Face not recognized.

Again.

Face not recognized.

She wipes flour from her cheek.

Again.

Unlocked.

Human.

At 11:15, a school notification announces:

ALL PARENTS WELCOME TO TODAY'S GRADE FIVE LEADERSHIP
CELEBRATION!

Mara reads the capital letters twice.

The event begins at 1:30.

Her quality review begins at 1:00.

Her shift ends at 2:30.

Pickup is at 2:40.

There is no configuration in which all four facts become compatible.

A button beneath the announcement says:

ADD TO CALENDAR.

Mara imagines doing it.

A blue rectangle appears from 1:30 to 2:15.

The calendar accepts it without argument.

The calendar does not know that the hours from 8:30 to 2:30 have already been sold.

At noon, her husband Daniel texts:

OT Friday if I want it.

Take it, she replies.

Two seconds later:

Noah has assembly today. I'm working.

He responds:

Shit. Can't leave site.

She writes:

I know.

Not your fault.

The heart reaction appears.

Mara stares at the tiny red symbol.

For the first time that day, a machine accurately records what she means.

At 1:03, her supervisor tells her she is doing excellent work.

At 1:06, her supervisor tells her she has exceeded the monthly personal-unavailable threshold by thirteen minutes.

Both things are true.

"We have to document it," the supervisor says.

"I understand."

"I'm not saying don't answer the school."

"I know."

"It's just the metric."

"Of course."

They smile at one another through their cameras.

The supervisor has children too.

The system has no children.

The system wins the argument.

At 1:30, Noah stands on a school stage three kilometres away.

Mara opens an insurance claim belonging to a stranger whose basement flooded.

At 1:41, she wonders whether Noah has spoken yet.

At 1:53, she corrects a data-entry error.

At 2:04, she refreshes Marketplace.

The buyer has replied.

Can you deliver?

Twenty-two minutes away.

Mara offers delivery for thirty-five dollars.

The buyer disappears.

At 2:30, she logs out.

At 2:31, her employer's portal asks:

HOW SATISFIED WERE YOU WITH YOUR WORKDAY?

Five empty stars wait.

She closes the window.

At 2:46, the boys get into the car.

"How was your assembly?" she asks.

"Good," Noah says.

"I'm sorry I couldn't come."

"It's okay."

"I wanted to."

"I know."

Children are terrible at bureaucracy.

They keep accepting explanations that systems reject.

At home, three paper notices come out of backpacks.

A fundraiser.

A book fair.

A fall festival.

The fall festival flyer says:

MANY HANDS MAKE LIGHT WORK!

Mara looks at her own hands.

Dry knuckles. Short nails. A small cut beside her thumb from slicing apples before sunrise on Monday.

She thinks, not for the first time, that there are apparently hands that count and hands that do not.

At 3:52, she leaves for her second job.

The time clock scans her fingerprint.

PLEASE TRY AGAIN.

She presses harder.

PLEASE TRY AGAIN.

She wipes her finger on her pants.

ACCESS GRANTED.

Human.

At 5:30, on break, she finds nine notifications.

One from the school.

Two from Daniel.

One from the phone company.

Three from Marketplace.

One from the bank.

One from a delivery app informing her that dinner could be at her door in twenty-five minutes if she spent forty-three dollars she does not have.

The school notification says:

TOMORROW IS DECADES DAY! GET CREATIVE!

Mara laughs.

Her coworker Patrice looks up.

"What?"

"I have twelve hours to locate historically accurate children's fashion."

Patrice tells her to send them in their regular clothes and call it the 2020s.

Mara laughs harder.

For thirty seconds, she is not behind.

At 6:43, her mother texts.

Just checking in. Love Mom.

Mara asks whether she is free Thursday morning to help with a museum field trip.

Wish I could. Working. Sorry honey.

Mara looks at the message.

People like to talk about villages as if somebody demolished them.

The village did not disappear.

The village got scheduled.

Grandmothers work.

Aunts live two provinces away.

Neighbours commute.

Friends are on night shift.

Childcare costs more than some people earn during the hours they need it.

Every member of the village has been assigned an employee number.

At 8:15, Mara's phone asks whether she wants to enable an artificial-intelligence assistant.

MAKE LIFE EASIER, the screen promises.

It can summarize emails.

Prioritize tasks.

Draft messages.

Remember appointments.

Mara nearly laughs again.

Instead she presses ENABLE.

A box appears.

HOW CAN I HELP?

She types:

Tomorrow is Decades Day. Noah needs cardboard. Owen's boot needs to dry overnight. Rent cannot be touched. Remind me to pack the museum form. We need milk. Do not let me forget that Noah has library Thursday.

The assistant responds:

I've organized those items into a checklist.

Then:

Would you like me to prioritize them?

Mara thinks.

Yes.

The assistant places rent at the top.

Boot.

School form.

Milk.

Library.

Decades Day.

The machine has ranked school spirit below food and housing.

Mara stares at the list.

It may be the first institution she has encountered all week to do so.

At 9:48, she clocks out.

At 10:06, she arrives home carrying a flattened cardboard box from work.

Daniel is asleep on the couch in his work boots.

Noah is still awake finishing a project.

Owen's repaired boot sits clamped on newspaper.

Mara washes lunch containers, signs the museum form, moves laundry, finds a denim jacket for Decades Day, divides one chocolate bar between two lunch bags, and listens while Noah describes the twelve seconds she missed.

At 11:17, she opens the school portal.

A video of the assembly is waiting.

She watches her son walk to the microphone in an oversized purple shirt.

"We think leadership means helping even when nobody gives you a prize," he says.

Then he looks down at his card.

"It can be small things, because small things still count."

Mara watches it three times.

The AI assistant sends a notification.

YOU HAVE FOUR TASKS REMAINING.

She turns it off.

At 11:39, the phone company texts:

ACTION REQUIRED TO AVOID SERVICE INTERRUPTION.

She opens the link.

Sign in.

Password.

Multifactor authentication.

A code arrives by text.

She enters it.

Then another screen.

For your security, please verify you are human.

Nine squares appear.

Select all squares containing crosswalks.

Mara looks at them.

In one photograph a woman pushes a stroller across a wet road. In another, a man in reflective clothing carries a lunch box. Another shows a child holding an adult's hand.

She selects the painted white lines.

Incorrect. Please try again.

She begins again.

At 11:43, verification succeeds.

The website opens.

There is no arrangement available for zero dollars.

There is no box marked:

I am working.

There is no box marked:

My husband is working.

There is no box marked:

We have the rent.

There is no box marked:

My children are fed.

There is no box marked:

I am one bad week away from being treated like I did something wrong.

There is only:

PAY NOW.

Mara closes the page.

The assistant asks:

Would you like help composing a message to customer service?

She types:

No.

Then:

Actually yes.

A draft appears.

Dear Customer Service, I am experiencing temporary financial hardship and would like to discuss available payment options.

Mara reads it.

Accurate.

Clean.

Humiliating.

She deletes temporary financial hardship and writes:

I work two jobs. My husband works full time. Our rent is paid. We have forty-two dollars until Tuesday.

She pauses.

Then adds:

I am not asking you to explain budgeting to me. I am asking whether there is any way to keep our phones connected until payday.

The AI underlines budgeting and suggests a softer phrase.

Mara rejects the suggestion.

For once, the machine is not in charge of tone.

At 11:58, she sends the message.

The assistant asks whether she wants to set a reminder to follow up.

Yes.

Tuesday, she types.

Payday.

At 12:04, she climbs into bed.

Her phone shows tomorrow's calendar.

School drop-off.

Work.

Pickup.

Second job.

Decades Day.

Library reminder.

Museum form.

The assistant has moved one item to a section called PERSONAL.

Watch Noah's assembly video.

Completed.

Mara looks at the word.

Completed.

She thinks of all the things machines can measure.

Minutes unavailable.

Payments missed.

Forms incomplete.

Attendance.

Response time.

Productivity.

Balance.

Engagement.

She thinks of the things they cannot.

The exact weight of a sleeping child when you carry him from the couch.

The sound of a son's voice when he says I know.

The mathematics required to divide one chocolate bar into two equal childhoods.

The distance between wanting to be somewhere and being able to go.

The invisible decision, made fifty times a day, to keep something from becoming someone else's worry.

At 12:07, the assistant asks one final question.

IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE I CAN HELP YOU WITH?

Mara starts to type:

Tell them I was there.

She stops.

Deletes it.

The machine cannot do that.

It can remember the field trip.

It can draft the email.

It can sort the list.

It can keep twelve obligations from becoming thirteen forgotten ones.

But it cannot stand in the kitchen at midnight and decide which child gets the larger half of the chocolate bar.

It cannot choose dignity over politeness.

It cannot miss twelve seconds and love them afterward.

It cannot make care from scarcity.

Mara puts the phone facedown.

Tomorrow, another machine will ask her to prove she is human.

She finally understands the problem.

She has been proving it all day.