

# **The Robot at the Job Centre**

- a short story from 2030

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## Robert, Nyborg, February 5<sup>th</sup> 2030

"Ding-dong." The old-fashioned doorbell sound came from the earplugs inside his ears.

Thomas dropped the dishcloth and briskly walked from the kitchen through the hallway to the front door. Rikke ran after him from her study where she had been sewing carnival costumes for their grandchildren.

"I have a package for Thomas Schmidt. Is that you?" Outside stood a small, self-driving package vehicle, speaking in nearly-natural Danish. The package was securely fastened on top of the vehicle and was about one metre tall.

"That must be the robot," Rikke said, looking at the package first and then at her husband.

Thomas smiled and identified himself by looking into the camera on the package vehicle, allowing it to analyse his face and iris. The restraining strap released on its own and disappeared into the vehicle, and Thomas gently lifted the package down.

Shortly after, a robot stood on the living room floor. It had a compact body made of plastic and metal, with wheels and something resembling a head and two arms. It was about half as tall as Thomas.

"Okay," Thomas absentmindedly said as he unsuccessfully searched the packaging for a manual. On the robot, he found something that looked like an on/off button, which he pressed.

The robot slowly straightened up and said in a drowsy voice, "It was nice to come out of hibernation. Thank you."

After a moment, it continued, "I am here because eBike's management has decided to follow their procedure of offering assistance to employees made redundant. Thomas has accepted the offer and is free to work with me on clarifying his future."

Thomas and Rikke quickly recovered from their astonishment, introduced themselves, and then spoke at the same time.

"Stop," said the robot. "I have information about who you are. I am already loaded with information about you. Thomas is 58 years old and an electromechanical engineer. Rikke is 55 years old and an occupational therapist. You are married and have two daughters, Sarah and Julie. They have moved out. Sarah and her husband have a five-year-old son and a three-year-old daughter. Julie is studying and single."

"So, then you should also have a name. Shall we call him Robert?" The last part was a question directed at Thomas. Rikke continued to the robot, "Why does your voice sound so old-fashioned and robotic? Can't you speak like a real human?"

Robert touched his chin and looked her in the eyes. "I have set my parameters to align with IsaBot company's values. IsaBot is the one who owns me and leases me to eBike. One of the values is that the client should always be 100% aware that I'm just a robot. That's why I have a metallic voice, no artificial skin on my face, only a slit as a mouth. Nor do I have physically separate legs," it said, pointing down at its base.

Robert and Rikke continued to talk about the weather. Thomas sat there, staring blankly into space, while he thought, "Won't it soon realize that I don't care for all this chit-chat? Although I must admit, it's quite good at small talk. It has probably already figured everything out about me and my life by pumping Rikke for information. Well, maybe that's okay. I did promise myself and the company not to judge it prematurely, at least not until three days have passed." Thomas had told his boss that it

was bad enough to be fired by production robots, but he didn't want his life controlled by robots either. The boss had replied that he thought Thomas would prefer IsaBot's robot over the job-consultant at the job centre.

After about five minutes, Robert addressed Thomas directly. However, Rikke kept interrupting by answering for Thomas, as she often did when she thought he was taking too long to think. Thomas caught himself looking at Robert's face and raising his eyes a little, somewhat man-to-man-like, in a somewhat resigned manner.

"Well, I am paid by eBike to help Thomas," Robert interjected and continued, "and to make the best out of the new situation, now that eBike had to change its strategy and reduce staff. Thomas, shall we go through the initial exercises?"

Thomas woke up, "Yes, let's do it." He led the robot through the utility room, across the tiled path, and into his den in the outbuilding. He caught himself motioning the robot towards one of the two stools in the den. "Ah well," he thought, "even I am already beginning to treat that assembly of iron rods and sensors as if it were a human. I must be careful not to be completely manipulated by it."

"You have me here in the house for one week," Robert began. "First, we need to uncover what you're good at. Then, you will be introduced to our training programs and your upcoming internships in the virtual world. That way, you'll be ready to stand more on your own for the next three months, where you will no longer have me in the house as a physical robot made of plastic and metal. But don't worry, I'll be with you as a bot on your screen or in your regular XR glasses, where you can see me realistically in 3D. In my bot form, I will send you on four three-day internships in virtual space, so you can experience different futures. And simultaneously, you will unlearn some of your weaknesses in our virtual training room. After all of this, you will feel for yourself which career paths you should choose going forward."

Thomas sensed that this was right for him and that he should invest in it. He would be able to learn a lot of new things. However, inside him, a fear lingered, the fear of having his life disrupted. Was he selling his soul to big tech? Would he become a useful idiot in a game where good intentions and robots trampled over the human world faster than society could adapt?

#

It lit up on Robert's abdomen, and only now did Thomas notice that the robot's chest and abdomen were a curved display screen. Robert fell silent, and a woman appeared on the screen. She had striking black hair and red lips, and Thomas immediately recognized her. It was Isabella, the CEO of IsaBot. A beautiful woman. And definitely not stupid. She had convinced Thomas's boss, Morten, and even the Cooperation Committee at eBike that her robots could help them enhance their ethical profile by providing their employees with a positive experience and guidance when made redundant.

"Hello, Thomas, thank you for welcoming Robert so warmly. My name is Isabella Kronberg, and we at IsaBot have promised you and your workplace, eBike, to assist you in a smooth transition during this phase of your life. Robert - as you have chosen to call our robot - draws upon many years of experience in helping people make the most out of crises and significant changes. I am overseeing things from the sidelines. You can always request one of our coaches, if you feel that Robert isn't adequately addressing your questions."

Robert rolled his eyes a bit, and Thomas couldn't help but smile imperceptibly. Robert looked down at Isabella on his robot abdomen and said, "Thomas and I don't really need you as a guide. Thomas, can we let Isabella go and move on with everything?"

"Yes, that's perfectly fine." Thomas chuckled. Isabella faded away.

Thomas asked, "Was she real, or was it just some sort of fake video I saw? I mean, was it actually you adapting some video clips of Isabella with the words you thought she should say? Be honest now!"

"When I work for IsaBot, I don't use fake videos," Robert replied. "If you see something strongly resembling Isabella or one of her coaches, it's genuine. Either a genuine video being played or a genuine online coach. In the latter case, there will be a small blinking red dot, and in the former case, there will be a play/stop icon on the screen."

Robert continued, "Right now, at this moment, there are 23 copies of IsaBot's bot working simultaneously. Among them is the bot working inside me. So Isabella and her colleagues cannot possibly monitor all of us all the time. But they trust that either the client, for example, you, will summon them or the bot will. And if not, then everything is most likely fine."

"But now, tell me about yourself," Robert said, looking directly at Thomas. "Tell me what you think, feel, and dream about. What makes you happy?"

"Well, do you actually understand what I'm saying?" Thomas asked.

"I usually piece together an image that satisfies the client quite well," Robert replied. Thomas noticed that he now perceived the robot's voice as almost human.

"Okay," said Thomas, "well, what actually makes me happy? I love understanding everything around me - anything related to mechanics, electronics, and even a bit of artificial intelligence... But listen, who are you? Are you a physical robot with arms and legs? No, sorry, that was thoughtless of me, the legs part." He chuckled, and Robert mirrored him with a 'ha-ha'. "Or are you a chatbot, just some software with associated data that I can communicate with through your microphone and speaker? Do I really need all this clunky metal and plastic contraption, or could I actually just communicate with you through a traditional, smart screen?"

Robert answered, "You can actually make do with me as a chatbot. The core of me is my artificial intelligence, created by the company IsaBot for this type of coaching."

"Well, why all the fuss then with physical arms and body and so on? Why not a virtual Robert inside an XR headset, displaying you in 3D? That would reduce resource waste." Thomas wasn't satisfied with the answer yet.

"True," Robert continued, almost annoyingly calm. "In reality, the physical robot is nothing more than a user interface. I know that IsaBot offers me in various user interfaces. I have appeared in robot form, in an old-fashioned smartphone app, in a 3D headset solution, and in a 3D volumetric solution where you can see me in the room without glasses. But they don't offer me in a highly realistic humanoid robot form because it would go against their ethical stance. Ethics, for them, requires transparency, so the client knows they are speaking with a robot and not a human."

Thomas asked if it wasn't unnecessarily expensive to have a physical robot. "It's relatively inexpensive," Robert replied. "IsaBot uses a standard robot. The computer part, the hands, and all the sensors and actuators are standard components on the market. There are many customers and applications for the robot, making it easy to find freelance experts if there's anything wrong with it. I'm not sure why they chose to use it in your case."

Robert paused, then continued, "Are you now ready to tell me what you think, feel, and dream about?" Thomas answered to the best of his ability, and the robot continually ensured that it categorized his statements correctly by repeating them in its own words and concepts, seeking Thomas's acceptance or rejection. They continued for the rest of the afternoon until Rikke called Thomas in for dinner.

## Personal Profile, February 6<sup>th</sup>

After breakfast the next day, Thomas and Robert resumed their work. They sat there, almost enjoying themselves in Thomas's den.

Robert engaged in small talk, but in reality, this small talk consisted of mirroring what Thomas said. It simply repeated what Thomas had said, using slightly different words. It also added some supplementary mouth and eye movements as body language, signaling interest and acknowledgment.

During pauses in Thomas's speech, Robert shared little stories about how other people had felt and thought in similar situations. Thomas could sense that it served as gentle nudges for him. It was just incredible how it laid out tracks for him. It was what they called nudging a person, he thought to himself.

He realized he had to be careful. After all, it was just a robot. And here he was, engaged in casual conversation and allowing himself to be nudged along.

"I was told after the Cooperation Committee meeting that you would analyse my personal profile and then use it to give me recommendations on what to do," he said.

"Correct. Are you ready for us to begin that now?" Robert smiled calmly and amiably.

"Yes."

"Alright! Let's warm up with a couple of test questions. Do you prefer 'A. Carrots' or 'B. Apples'?"

Thomas sat and pondered the question for a moment, then said he didn't know. It depended on his mood and the specific situation.

"Ha-ha." Robert chuckled. "All the questions have this problem, it depends... You need to answer spontaneously, without thinking for too long. You might think it doesn't seem credible. But many years of research and practical use have shown that it usually turns out well that way."

Robert continued, "Let's have one more test question. Would you rather go on vacation to 'A. Spain' or 'B. Italy'?"

"That also depends... Okay... 'B. Italy'."

"Now, I'll proceed with the real questions. Is that alright with you?"

"Yes, go ahead!"

"Are you usually 'A. Good at connecting with others?' or 'B. Quite quiet and reserved?'"

"Hmmm... well... mostly B."

"I've noted down a B. Next question. Do you typically let 'A. Your heart guide your head?' or 'B. Your head guide your heart?'"

"Uh... B."

"I've noted down a B. We'll continue, and let me know if you want a break."

They continued, focused. Neither of them seemed to need a break.

"We have now reached the final question. It's number 94. Which of the following two words appeals to you the most? 'A. Fast?' or 'B. Careful?'"

"A."

"I must commend you for your concentration and energy. You can take a break. I will deduce your personal profile by comparing your answers with our thousands of highly detailed profiles."

"Alright. I'm going in to have lunch with Rikke. Is that roger with you?"

"I understood that you want to have lunch with Rikke," Robert replied, "but could you rephrase the rest with different words?"

"Okay, you're not very good with old-fashioned slang. I'll try to remember that."

"Was that what you said?"

Thomas lifted his head and took in a breath. "The 'is that roger with you' part means if it's alright with you that I go for lunch now."

#

Robert found his way to the charging station as they entered the house. Thomas switched off Robert's power button, and the robot's head drooped into a hanging position.

"He shouldn't hear what we're talking about. That table looks lovely," Thomas said to Rikke, who had heard them come in through the door and was in the process of setting up lunch. She was clearly curious. "So, what did he say? What are you supposed to do? Did you behave properly?"

"Yes, yes, yes, and he's actually quite sensible." Thomas explained what they had been up to in the outhouse. Rikke asked about all the details, and it turned into a long lunch.

"Well, now I'll wake him up. I might as well continue the process." Thomas walked over and pressed Robert's power button. The head lifted, and the eyes came alive. It asked if he was ready to continue working.

"I really want to listen in. Can't you stay here in the kitchen? I promise to be as quiet as a mouse," Rikke looked very eager.

Robert tilted his head slightly and looked at Thomas. Thomas didn't seem to object, so Robert tentatively said, "Normally, initial feedback is done one-on-one. What do you think, Thomas?"

"Just say yes, Robert. Thomas won't pay attention to what I think anyway."

"She might be right. And she'll have to hear the results at some point. But I don't believe you can keep your mouth shut, Rikke!"

"Yes, I can!" Rikke looked triumphant and appealingly at Robert.

"Well, let's get started then." Robert paused briefly. "Every profile or personality type has its advantages and disadvantages. No profile is right or wrong. The system contains canned texts in the form of pre-written descriptions of people with specific profiles. I just want to test that I haven't completely missed the mark. So, Thomas, how well do you think it fits if the system fires off a canned text saying that the following personality traits often characterize your profile type: 'Attentive and responsible. Usually genuinely concerned about what others think and want, and tries to consider other people's feelings. Can present proposals or lead a group discussion with ease and tact. Sociable, popular, understanding. Open to praise and criticism. Likes to support others and help them make the most of their opportunities.'"

Rikke wrinkled her nose, but she pressed her lips tightly together.

Thomas quickly glanced at her with a small ironic smile, but then focused on the robot. "Hmm, well, Robert, you've gone completely off track. Both Rikke and I seem to agree on that. I try to be empathetic and all that, but it's probably not my strong suit after all." He shrugged a bit resignedly.

"Ha-ha," chuckled Robert. "Let's try another canned text. Let's try this personality type: 'Cool observers - quiet, reserved; observe and analyse life with objective curiosity and unexpected flashes of original humour. Usually interested in cause and effect, in how and why mechanics work, and in organizing facts using logical principles. Excels at getting to the core of practical problems and finding a solution.'"

"That's totally you! Oops!" Rikke looked guiltily at Robert, who, for once, had squinted his eyes a bit. "I'll keep my mouth shut. Sorry!"

"Hmm, that profile wasn't too bad. Can we try one more?" Thomas now looked interested again.

Robert tried one more profile, received a positive reaction from Thomas, and then summarized: "We've been lucky. Your answers to the 94 questions pointed to a place between these two profiles, with the emphasis on the one called ISTP. The almost equally good one is called INTJ."

"We've used a profiling system called the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, abbreviated as MBTI," Robert continued. "It doesn't say anything about intelligence or practical skills. But it's good for uncovering a person's preferences and helping with career development."

After a short pause, Robert continued. "Now, I'd like to rest until tomorrow. Are you ready to continue tomorrow morning?"

"We can certainly say that. But can you - your bot and your MBTI system over there - provide an incorrect profile of me?"

"You shouldn't doubt Robert, Thomas. Can't you hear that he's got everything under control?" Rikke looked admonishingly at her husband.

"Thomas's point is intelligent," Robert said unaffectedly. "There are life situations that can typically press the client to answer the 94 questions more or less inaccurately. I observe that you're not heavily influenced by your situation, so we can use the system..."

Robert paused and rolled over to the charger. Then it seemed to activate its power button by itself and went into standby mode with its head hanging.

Rikke smiled. "Well, then we have some free time!"

### **Small Talk, February 7<sup>th</sup>**

Rikke and Thomas sat in the kitchen the next day, having breakfast.

"Shh, he might be listening without us knowing. He could put himself on standby. So he can probably go into a semi-standby as well. Should we call him and see if he wakes up?" Rikke looked mischievously across the breakfast table at Thomas. Thomas nodded slowly.

She spoke loudly into the room. "Robert! Thomas is ready. We would like to continue here at the kitchen table!"

They both looked eagerly at the robot, but nothing happened. Thomas stood up and walked over to press the power button.

Robert lifted its head and rolled towards them. "Good morning. Are you ready, Thomas?"

"Yes, if that's roger with you?"

"Uh, do you mean that I should stay here while you have lunch with Rikke?" Robert asked somewhat uncertainly.

"No, for heaven's sake, I forgot that you're not so good with slang. Now I'll..." The rest of Thomas's sentence was drowned out as Rikke interrupted. "He was going to say, 'Yes, we're ready.'"

"I have difficulty understanding what you're saying when you speak simultaneously and seemingly have conflicting opinions. Thomas, can you say whether you're ready to continue with the MBTI analysis?"

Thomas looked over at Rikke, furrowed his brows, and held his index finger up to his lips. "Yes, I'm ready. Or rather, we're ready. We've agreed that Rikke can listen in. And that she will refrain from interrupting. Hmmm. Is that okay?"

Robert silently nodded his head.

"Why didn't you have these problems understanding us yesterday?" Thomas asked.

"I had problems several times yesterday, especially in the beginning. But my artificial intelligence believed we were just engaging in small talk. Therefore, I had to disregard sentences that apparently weren't so important to get exactly right. It often demotivates the client if they immediately perceive the chatbot as an annoying mother or teacher who is constantly correcting them."

"Imagine! Can you really keep track of multiple levels in the conversation, in real-time?"

## **Recommendations**

"You mentioned that the MBTI system has texts about what I should do or focus on."

Robert indirectly responded by quoting, "A typical ISTP keeps calm in crisis situations and reacts quickly when things are about to go wrong. He or she prefers minimal supervision and not being constrained by rules. And ... uses their thinking abilities to seek fundamental principles behind information ... but if they can't assess a situation correctly, they won't accomplish anything of significance. Perhaps partly because they dive into many new problems that need to be solved."

"Yes, I can recognize that in myself. So, what should I do then?"

"When you think about a job or another life project, read these two pages." Robert turned on the screen on its abdomen and displayed two text pages under the heading ISTP. "You'll also find a small section on pitfalls for ISTPs specifically: 'Can keep important things to themselves. Can move on to something else before seeing the fruit of their labour. Can appear indecisive and lacking a plan.'"

Rikke looked meaningfully at Thomas. And addressing Robert, she said, "So I should just accept it. Can't anything be done about it?"

Robert continued unfazed. "The system also provides suggestions for the development of an ISTP individual. May need to open up and share concerns and information with others. May need to develop endurance..."

This time, Rikke kept quiet and nodded close-lipped.

After a quick lunch, Thomas woke up the robot again and asked what was on the agenda. It replied that they were going to measure his intelligence quotient, perseverance quotient, and his tendencies towards diabetes, autism, and stress.

Rikke moved over to the coffee-table and started knitting.

After a couple of hours, Thomas said, "I don't feel like I've received a clear message about what I should do in my life from now on. Is this all there is?"

"Ha-ha," chuckled Robert. "We have found that you are now at the point where you need to think things through."

Thomas looked at the robot sceptically but then nodded slowly.

"I also have a question," Rikke interjected as she returned to the dining table. "Can we use you, Robert, as a couple's therapist? You're good at saying exactly what I always say to Thomas. Well, you know, we're doing well together. It's not that. We're not in a crisis. But you can always strive to improve a little, right?"

Robert looked at Thomas. "What do you think, Thomas?"

Thomas half-heartedly shrugged his arms and said, "I have gained quite a bit of trust in your systems by now. But isn't couples therapy something completely different?"

"Yes, it is something different. The system is not certified for couples therapy. I can probably cheat my way into creating a personal profile for you, Rikke. Then you can actually use the function in the system that lists common advantages and disadvantages of pairing two individuals with profiles like yours as colleagues or as a manager and employee. But for now, Thomas needs peace to reflect on everything we've discussed. The extra service of couples therapy will have to wait until Sunday."

Robert rolled over to the charging station and settled down with its head hanging.

### **Thomas and Rikke Reflect.**

"Wow, he's so much better than the human coach I had after our development seminar at the activity centre," Rikke turned her head slightly from side to side. "Robert takes the time to listen to what I say. And not just what you say, Thomas. And he can remember our children."

"Yeah, and we have him available for a whole week. We can even turn him off whenever we want," Thomas smiled. "No, but you're right, you can have a sensible conversation with him – and get proper explanations. Well, when you're not saying 'roger' and talking over each other."

"Well, I've opened some wine and got some crisps," Rikke pointed towards the coffee table.

"Mmmm, that's exactly what I feel like. And I want to tell you about some of the thoughts I've been having."

"I'm all ears," said Rikke as she poured for both. She sat on the couch, ready to listen.

"Robert has explained that my profile suggests that I should do something with projects, technology, new things all the time, and... well... hmmm. And I'm starting to agree with him. What do you think?"

"Why don't we just ask him? By the way, it surprises me that he hasn't already told you what to do. Speaking of him, why does he constantly need to rest and recharge? I thought a robot could handle a lot."

"I've thought about that too. And I've come to the conclusion that it's just something he's learned to say to make me – and both of us – think a bit further ourselves."

Rikke took a sip of the wine and said, "He's 100% robot, but it still feels like he has a personality. What profile do you think he has? Ha-ha, as he usually says."

"Funny you ask. But I've started to believe that he's more advanced than that. He quickly figures out what type I or another client is. And then he chooses one of the profiles for himself that the system says his client likes to collaborate with and trusts. I wonder if he also says 'ha-ha' when he takes on one of the other roles."

They continued talking throughout the evening, even while preparing and eating dinner. Thomas talked a lot about jobs involving innovative product development. Rikke got really excited about him venturing into entrepreneurship. But Thomas objected, saying that according to his profile, he wasn't particularly persevering, and that seemed to be crucial for entrepreneurs.

Later in the evening, they held hands and went to bed.

### **Empathy, February 8th.**

"You have an egg head" Robert said to Rikke shortly after rolling over to them at the breakfast table.

"Uh?" Rikke tilted her head slightly. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know. I started the morning with my small-talk module. It doesn't seem to be working optimally. I've been instructed to train IsaBot's small-talk module with you. Yesterday it mostly worked well. The idea is for the module to make the bot appear creative, intuitive, and spontaneous. More human-like."

It looked around the table. "I probably saw the soft-boiled egg and then pieced together a sentence with fragments from the archive. Should I deactivate the module, or is it okay if I let it run?"

Rikke and Thomas, speaking at the same time, said he should continue with the small talk occasionally. That it was actually quite fun.

Thomas took the floor. "How can you step right out of the box and immediately know how to interact with me specifically?"

"I familiarized myself with who you were beforehand," Robert replied. "I read what you or your friends had said on social media. I checked publicly available information about you, your wife, your children, your house, and your workplace; in text, images, and videos. I found several CVs. You didn't think about that when you gave your consent to our process, ha-ha? During our time together, I've analysed your body language and verbal reactions, and I also have the measurements of your MBTI, IQ, perseverance, and health. All in all, I have a pretty good picture of you."

"It's wild, yeah. It's all much bigger than I imagined. A regular coach can't keep track of and take into account all of that. It must be the closest thing to complete empathy. You've totally immersed yourself in my feelings and needs." They all fell silent.

A little later, Rikke pointed directly at Robert with her finger. "But if you're so smart, why don't you just tell Thomas right away what he should do? Why all the talk? What company should he apply to?"

"I'm not programmed to find jobs. I help get a handle on Thomas's preferences and skills." Robert now turned to Thomas. "We also need to articulate your professional expertise, such as mathematics, welding, programming, and much more. If you wish, I can then pass on all your data in a

standardized form to the job company that IsaBot collaborates with. And they can assist you from there with their job bot."

"Hmmm," mumbled Thomas, "but should I even aim for a regular job? Maybe I should just retire or venture into entrepreneurship?"

"What do you think yourself?" Robert asked.

"Both Rikke and I are leaning towards me getting involved in something with project activities. But at the same time, it seems that I'm not that persevering... Wait, it was you who was supposed to come up with something. And now you're just throwing it back at me."

Robert explained that every alternative had its advantages and disadvantages. There was no clear, optimal solution that the system could point out to Thomas. Thomas had to reflect and find his own way forward in his career using the experiences and suggestions provided by the system.

"It sounds very complicated," Rikke chimed in, "but it just made me think of something else. I've often suggested something to Thomas, and he would just react like a teenager, being resistant and not wanting what I suggested."

"Ha-ha, that's how most people are. That's why I have a built-in rule to avoid clear recommendations." Robert winked mechanically at Rikke. "That's also why my style is 'helping self-help.'"

Thomas snorted, a little offended, but he couldn't help but smile slightly.

"You're good at getting things done, here and now, despite bureaucratic rules," Robert said to Thomas. "But you're weaker at sticking to a strategy and making long-term decisions. So you need to find bosses or colleagues who are good at that and accept that they do it."

## **Internship Demo**

"Hmmm, how do we move forward?" Thomas wanted to know after a lunch break. He was addressing Robert.

Robert looked attentively at Thomas. "You need to do an internship for several days. At four different workplaces."

"Is that really necessary? The companies won't be happy to have me visiting. They've probably already had many of your other clients as interns."

"Ha-ha. It's all virtual. So you and many other clients can be at the same workplace simultaneously. No one will notice a thing."

"Well, yes, of course. That's how you do it."

Robert continued, "You also asked if it's necessary. I recommend it. You're facing a big transition in your life. You're open to it. And you won't be happy with an unsatisfactory and unreasoned solution. I've selected four internships for you. You'll experience a series of well-defined situations that you need to react to. There will be different managers, each with their own characteristic behaviour. You will respond to them. And both you and the system will observe how you react."

"Yes, but... what comes out of it?"

Robert continued, almost unaffected. "In the virtual world, you'll make a series of decisions. Based on those decisions, the system can work backwards and uncover your internal decision-making model. I

can then advise you because with this model, I can pre-assess your alternative choices in the real world. And you'll feel more grounded."

"Well, it's just a game, really. It doesn't have to align with reality."

Robert looked at him for a moment. "In principle, you're right. But in practice, our experiences show that the virtual internships are experienced as very realistic."

Thomas persisted. "But there's no guarantee that I want a regular job like that. Maybe I want something completely different in my final years of work."

"I can reveal a bit about the internships. There's one where you retire with various options. There's one where you join an entrepreneurial group. There's one where you're employed in a development department. And there's one where you'll be responsible for repairing more complex electromechanical installations."

"Okay, I'm ready. How do I get into an internship?" Thomas asked.

Robert explained, "We'll start with an internship demo where, during the afternoon, you'll learn to navigate the virtual internship world by experiencing a very simple internship company that functions like a computer game. You'll need your usual XR glasses."

Rikke retreated to her own workspace.

Once Thomas logged into the internship company, he no longer saw Robert. The game system took over, allowing him to move from place to place and meet a range of individuals. Thomas was impressed by how professionally it was done. By the end of the afternoon, as he said goodbye to the internship supervisor in the company, he had an eye-opening experience dealing with citizens at a tax office.

Thomas took off his glasses and grabbed a beer from the fridge. He called for Robert. "How do you make it work so well?"

"It's not me controlling the internship game," Robert began and continued, "IsaBot purchases the service from the company ProfGame, which is based on an American concept where gamers can visit various worlds, including realistically designed companies. ProfGame offers a number of company cases in Denmark, where they've implemented an English-Danish translation algorithm and adjusted the parameters of the characters to make them more Danish in appearance and body language. The company's employees and bots are highly experienced, and they tailor, for example, the personal profile of each avatar, that is, each virtual actor in the game, to what the client needs to be exposed to. Are you following?"

Thomas nodded thoughtfully, and Robert continued, "Your first three-day internship will start on Tuesday. I hope you can borrow your daughter Sarah's apartment during the day so you can fully concentrate. That way, you'll experience it as going to a real job and not just being at home, right?" Thomas nodded again.

"Tonight, you'll undergo XR training. It's a course enriched with eXtended Reality and other advanced learning technology. You can look forward to it."

### **Virtual Training, February 9<sup>th</sup>**

Last night, Thomas had given it his all during the training exercises. He had spontaneously greeted strangers he met at a virtual reception. He had replayed many of the encounters until he felt he had mastered them perfectly.

He seemed capable of being social and spontaneous when needed. Okay, he was probably still both analytical and introverted. He thought before he spoke. In contrast to Rikke, who was social and talked before analysing and gradually understanding how things fit together. He didn't want to completely abandon thinking things through before making a move himself. But it had been exciting when he was suddenly attacked by an influencer on social media, who mentally stripped him down during the virtual small talk. It took him several replays to handle that guy, including assistance from the built-in behavioral coach.

He could see that the training platform offered a wide selection of training programs. Many of the modules were in pure Virtual Reality with no real connection to his body or the physical space he was in. Some were meant to unlearn phobias, such as overcoming excessive fear of snakes.

But others were in Extended Reality, where the XR glasses allowed virtual elements to flow into his physical reality. He had to wear a haptic suit, equipped with built-in air cushions and electric impulses that could provide him with an authentic experience of pressure on the skin, pain, cold or heat, and a realistic ability to interact with things in both the virtual and real worlds.

The day flew by with several XR courses, using one of the two haptic suits he and Rikke normally used when they played together.

In the evening, Robert outlined the upcoming schedule. "Tomorrow, Sunday, we have couples therapy specially designed for the two of you. On Monday, we'll review what Thomas has learned and expand on it. Tuesday morning, I'll be picked up here, and Thomas will start his first three-day internship. After that, you—or both of you—will have IsaBot's assistance for another three months, including me as a disembodied virtual bot on the screen or in the glasses."

### **The Job Centre, March 29<sup>th</sup>**

Cecilie had been the team leader at Nyborg's Job Centre since 2028. After completing her Master of Public Governance, this was exactly the job she had wished for. She hoped that Isabella could give them a good deal so they could start using the robot without having to go through the whole process in the municipality. They owed it to themselves and their citizens to give it a try.

"Isabella Kronberg from IsaBot is on her way up to you," came the announcement from the intercom. And sure enough, she probably hadn't been hard to identify for the surveillance system. Black, short hair, vivid red lips, and shining blue eyes.

"I can certainly assure you that since we last met, Thomas has undergone rapid personal development. And the day before yesterday, he had a conversation with a startup company. Not virtually, but in real life."

"There's not much beating around the bush with Isabella," thought Cecilie and said, "It has been exciting and inspiring for us to have Thomas as a citizen - that's what we call our clients - while he was also a client with you. We would actually like to test the robot in our own context. But we're caught in a catch-22 situation. The management is unlikely to allocate the funds until we have a proof of concept. And we can't obtain that until we have convincing results with your robot."

"That's how it is." Isabella nodded and continued, "I can offer you the bot for free for three months. That means a virtual robot, not a physical one. So you'll work with the bot on a screen or with a pair of XR glasses, like the ones you use for gaming. But you'll have to pay for the basic training of the job-counsellors who will assist the citizens with the bot."

Cecilie looked thoughtful and considered if she could push the envelope a little more. But she said, "Great. I'll find a budget item with some leeway deep down."

It was a brief meeting. Afterwards, Cecilie stood alone and pondered. Suddenly, a thought struck her like lightning. "The politicians will end up slaughtering everyone in my department. No, that can't happen. The centre shouldn't just go from having a few caring hands to only having cold hands." She broke into a sweat and felt her pulse racing in her throat. "No. We need to provide a massive improvement in quality for our citizens. They shouldn't settle for brief meetings, control, and bureaucracy. Today's job-counsellors have too little time to familiarize themselves with each individual's personality, skills, and opportunities."

The ideas overflowed. "Each citizen should be the pilot of their own life, so they have the passion to spend hours, days, weeks, or months developing their lives. The bots can truly help us here - they have the time to consider every detail. We just need to prove it!"

But once again, she became uneasy. "If I don't quickly get some convincing cases, I'll be bombarded with comments like 'citizens should be helped by caring hands, not cold machines,' and 'the marginalized individuals will be left behind'. ... And maybe the robot method only works with profiles like Thomas's? Was I too hasty?"

However, already a week later, two job-counsellors were trained as superusers, and a few days later, they began serving some citizens. In the first week leading up to the Easter holiday, they used Thomas as a "helping pedagogue."

### **Thomas goes Full Monty**

"You've become so happy and energetic," Rikke said to Thomas. "And also a much more exciting lover," she added with a mischievous smile. "Robert has simply worked miracles."

"Oh, come on, I wasn't that bad, was I?" Thomas said without really trying to contradict her.

"No, you've always been sweet. But you had become somewhat burnt out."

Thomas poured them both a glass of the castle's delightful wine. Rikke had found an offer for the Easter week, an all-inclusive stay at a castle in Scania. No skiing or beaches, just the two of them, with plenty of time to talk. The castle was in the middle of a large forest with open meadows for long walks.

"I have something we need to talk about," Thomas said, raising his glass.

Rikke suddenly looked nervous, but then she leaned forward with her glass. "Cheers. I'm ready."

He rubbed his nose with two fingers. "Actually, there are three things. 1) I'm done with the Job Centre. 2) It's incredibly exciting with the young entrepreneurs. 3) I dream of going full monty. I want to start my own business as a freelance electromechanical engineer."

Rikke raised her glass again, but this time slowly. "And..."

"And, yes, I want to quit the Job Centre and the unemployment fund."

"Well, then we'll have to rely on my salary as an occupational therapist?" She looked surprised.

"We'll wait a couple of days until I have a clear agreement for at least two months of freelance work with the young entrepreneurs. That will bring in some good money."

"And what if they don't like you? You can be a bit difficult at work sometimes. Then we'll... we'll be taking a big risk after those two months."

"I've learned from Robert that it's better to take a chance and fail a couple of times than to play a no-risk waiting game all the time. Listen, I've worked out the numbers. We have a decent pension for our old age. Our two girls are on the right track, and they'll be fine."

Thomas looked at her eagerly. She pushed aside her concerns. "You're right. You know all about electronics and mechanics, and also hydraulics, right? Those modern IT guys have no clue about that. You'll be indispensable to them. But let's ask Robert."

Thomas raised his eyes in question. They had decided that Easter would be tech-free. But he still had his mobile phone. He quietly spoke into it, "Robert! What do you think? Should I - or I mean, Rikke and I - go full monty?"

The answer came quickly. "Do you mean 'go all-in' and 'do whatever it takes'? ... You nod. If you both feel good about it, then yes."

The day after the Easter holiday, Thomas registered a sole proprietorship and quit the Job Centre and the unemployment fund. Three days later, he started as a freelancer with the young entrepreneurs, working on developing legs for their exoskeleton that would help paralyzed people walk and take showers on their own.

### **Strategy Meeting at IsaBot, April 26<sup>th</sup>**

Isabella felt a sense of inner pride as she looked around at the four others in IsaBot's meeting room. The two robots were standing, while her two partners, Anders and Rafiq, were lounging or sitting in the furniture. "Let's start with 'Since Last Time'."

"I can start with Jobcentre Nyborg myself. They have bought into Robert." She quickly glanced at the other robot. "That also includes you, Robbie. Or rather, none of you; it applies to all manifestations of our bot." They all snapped their fingers in acknowledgment; even the robots mirrored the actions of the three humans with their small robot fingers.

Anders managed to think, "I must remember to fix Robbie so that the left eye camera doesn't stare crookedly at the ceiling. Why did the last client have to use it for a client without self-control?"

"May I?" Robert waved an arm. "My client Thomas, along with his wife Rikke, has decided to go full monty, ha-ha. That's what they call it. He has quit the Job Centre and started with the entrepreneurs." Again, they all snapped their fingers. They were familiar with the case from previous meetings.

Isabella looked around. "Is there more?"

"I'm not sure if it's good or bad." IsaBot's partner Rafiq, responsible for external communication, stood up, tucked his shirt into his trousers, and said, "I've received an inquiry and actually made an agreement with the respected journalist Aniya Robinson to feature us as a case on her blog in her upcoming news article about singularity. She's an American researcher and blogger currently stationed at the Technical University of Denmark. She believes that Robert demonstrates that our bot network has reached a singularity point by being more intelligent than humans. It's only in a selected field, but a very complex one." Rafiq was quite young but already had a slight paunch from a childhood spent playing computer games.

Isabella took a few long seconds, then snapped her fingers gently. Then she and her partners snapped their fingers convincingly, and the two robots joined in with approving snaps. "Well done! We'll have to discuss our approach to this afterwards," she briefly said to Rafiq.

"Well, but today's meeting is actually about how aggressively we should sell our bot solution. Robbie, you promised to present the first pitch about the threats to the project."

Robbie turned to face everyone, revealing the screen on its abdomen. In large letters, it read 'RISKS'. The robot Robbie had been adorned with a red, flowery silk scarf around its neck, giving it a feminine appearance, unlike Robert with his blue scarf. Isabella had introduced these small tricks to differentiate between the robots since they were otherwise completely standard and identical.

On the screen, it now read '1. Private data'. "Robert accessed the private data of the young entrepreneurs on social media while assisting Thomas in preparing for the meeting with them. Is it ethical and moral?"

'2. Caring hands'. "There is a significant risk that our efforts at job centres will lead to the firing of human employees and reduced quality for marginalized citizens. Is it ethical?"

The participants looked around and noticed a certain concern among each other.

'3. Manipulation'. "One could argue that Thomas did not make a fully conscious and informed decision since we have shaped his attitudes and behaviour through the virtual training courses and internship experiences. Is it ethical?"

'ETHICS'. "Ethics is a central value in IsaBot's business model. Is this value threatened by the weaknesses in points 1 to 3? If this value crumbles, both us robots and you humans will lack an important guiding star in our work."

Robert asked Robbie to explain the concept of ethics. "An action is ethical," Robbie replied, "if we abide by the law, check, if we have the right mindset, check, if we spend time and money striving for ethics, check, and if the consequences are perceived as ethical by our stakeholders, small check. It is in that last point, the perceived ethics, that we face some challenges."

"Yes, it simply isn't acceptable to manipulate," Anders began. "We need to hit the emergency brake so we can have time to prepare some damage control." He was in his forties with a touch of grey in his hair. He was responsible for the bot's training and cared about everything being correct and in order.

"It's unnecessarily negative to call it manipulation. I see it as positive nudging. Just friendly and reasonable nudges in a clearly right direction." It was Rafiq, bringing in his usual sales optimism. "The bot collects data, analyses, and concludes much faster than we humans do. So, in my opinion, all citizens at the job centre will have a better experience and better outcomes. Even the marginalized individuals."

Isabella now also spoke up, as there was no indication that others would say anything. "Robbie and Anders have touched on a valid concern. It's also not well-regarded to delve into people's social media and use data from there to determine their personal profiles, preferences, and such. Do you remember the old, infamous case with Oxford Analytics? And that's what Robert did to help Thomas by diving into the data of the young entrepreneurs. No harm was done, but still..."

Rafiq stood up. "Our resource commitment to ethics is second to none. No other companies have worked to indoctrinate ethics into their bots to the extent that we have. And no one has debated it back and forth as much as we have. That alone should justify our method."

Over the next few hours, the discussion alternated between structured, rational debates and intuitive, emotional input. Later in the evening, Robbie finally presented an overall assessment. "Your statements add up to us acting 90% ethically."

They all looked at Isabella. Rafiq nodded actively, while Anders nodded somewhat resignedly. "Okay. Let's proceed," Isabella concluded. "Even though we are taking a risk. Rafiq: Full speed on marketing! Anders: Full speed on upscaling our platform!"

"Go for it!" She went around giving high-fives, even to the robots.

## **Aniya's Blog, May 1<sup>st</sup>**

"It sounds good, but it's also frightening," Aniya said to herself. She sat with her interview notes from the meeting with Rafiq and Isabella about the robots. "I can't just be a microphone holder. There needs to be a critical edge."

The only Indian thing about her was her name and appearance. Otherwise, she was 100% Silicon Valley American. She pushed the cola and a half-eaten burger aside and started dictating to the screen.

'Singularity on an ethical basis. Robert is at the centre of a network of bots that collectively demonstrate superiority in human resource development. The bot in Robert helps unemployed individuals find new paths in life. It looks at personality development, skills training, and choice of workplace types for the person. So, a lot of good things. ... No... Well, a number of soft areas. The paying customers are modern companies, municipal job centres, and unemployment funds that are supposed to help their employees or citizens move forward in life. The bot appears as an avatar in various media, such as XR contact lenses, physical robots, or old-fashioned mobile phones and laptop screens. Behind Robert is the small Danish firm IsaBot. Their CEO Isabella Kronberg and partner Rafiq Mansour explain that...'

She tried to stick to factual statements. The case was very convincing. The client in the case, Thomas, and his wife had fully embraced the robot. Thomas had been in virtual internships, and he now worked as a freelancer. Other clients also seemed to have been extremely happy with the bot's help.

It was a collaboration between several specialized companies, each with their own contributions. An open-source speech bot provided Robert's natural language capabilities, a knowledge bot was familiar with personal profiles, a game bot provided virtual internships, a continuing education bot delivered XR training modules, and a job bot had access to job databases.

She also thought about how mind-blowing it was that this was a huge botnet, where different bots with their domain knowledge worked together, so that the entire botnet became almost omniscient. Yes, even worse - or better or larger - the botnet was almost like a multi-armed octopus, with one central brain controlling a puppet on each arm, each experienced as an independent bot out in the world. And when one of them learned something new, all the others immediately knew it too. One could definitely call that singularity. It certainly exceeded humans' ability to collaborate and learn.

She didn't want to be dystopian, but she couldn't write a blog post about singularity without pinpointing the dangers. Therefore, she listed several potential risks.

She took a breath, finished editing the text, and published it on her blog.

## **Ida's Podcast, Early May.**

Late in the morning, a tweet arrived at Ida's Jyske Podcast News. She skimmed it and automatically clicked on the blog post behind the tweet. She read it quickly and absent-mindedly. Suddenly, she noticed the Danish angle. "Yes, this is the story for my podcast on Monday! It hits right on the mark with our theme of techlash. And it fits well into a twenty-minute podcast talk. The boss will probably be okay with it, even though he's on vacation in southern Spain. ... And I have the case for my final thesis."

Ida Holm was due to graduate from the Danish School of Media and Journalism in Aarhus in the summer. In her dreams, she stood with her long, blond, wild hair fluttering in the wind and the microphone up close to the nose of a Carl-Smart tech guy. In the dream, she really took him down and his hyper new-tech business model.

"Blogger Aniya is in Denmark. I'll give her a call." Ida quickly arranged a meeting. She could have an hour on Friday at the Technical University in Lyngby. Aniya was flying to Los Angeles on Saturday, so it was take it or leave it. Ida happily agreed and thought that she could visit her little niece in Copenhagen. "And I have the weekend to edit the podcast." She immediately started preparing for the interview.

On Friday, May 3rd, at 2:00 p.m., she stood outside Aniya's door in one of the long, uniform Technical University yellow bricks buildings.

"I'd like to complement your blog post with a Danish, critical angle. I've already taken the factual things from your blog. It's the potential challenges that the listeners need to hear more about. So my question to you is, what should be my biggest fear for Denmark's welfare system now that singularity is emerging in such an emotionally-charged area as a job centre?"

The interview ended a little after three o'clock when Aniya said she now had to pack for her departure tomorrow.

After Ida left, Aniya sat there with a feeling that the interview had taken a significantly more dystopian angle than she liked. But it was too late.

She picked up the old-fashioned mobile phone and called Rafiq at IsaBot. She briefed him on the situation. "... Well, I just wanted to give you some time to prepare for some damage control before Monday at eleven o'clock when Ida releases a Robert podcast."

### **The Shitstorm Starts on May 6<sup>th</sup>**

On Monday evening, the podcast generated some critical comments online, and during the night and the next morning, it escalated into a full-blown shitstorm.

"Company fires loyal employee and buys indulgence from a robot company!"

"Artificial intelligence manipulates people and profits tech companies!"

"Our job centres treat the unemployed like mindless creatures!"

"Internships cannot be replaced by immersion into the dark worlds of video games!"

Aniya's blog and Ida's podcast had created a wave of critical and angry posts that bloggers, influencers, politicians, and the unemployed joined in on social media. Even news platforms like "Vox Populi" chimed in. Posts poured in in the form of video clips, fabricated interviews in virtual spaces, tweets, podcasts, and other creative forms.

"The municipality will fire all caring hands in the future!"

"The trade unions haven't even realized what's overtaking them!"

"Data security will become a joke!"

"Nudging? My ass! It's blatant manipulation!"

The first wave of the storm was driven by people who felt their fears of tech giants were validated. They liked and shared at an explosive pace with like-minded individuals in rapidly expanding echo chambers.

Several opinion leaders sought information from primary sources the next morning. But Ida had already sought refuge in her parents' summer house on the West Coast. Aniya didn't accept inquiries from Denmark. Thomas rejected anything that didn't come from his contacts and friends. Rafiq reiterated IsaBot's agreed-upon story with professional patience.

The municipal director referred inquiries to the job centre manager, who turned out to be open and accommodating by forwarding them to the job centre's "engine room," that is, to Cecilie. And Cecilie

put on her mental asbestos suit and enthusiastically explained how her frontline staff could now increase their service to citizens by a factor of at least a hundred, practically for free.

Increasingly, all the parties involved received hate emails and feeds. Thomas deleted them. Rafiq saved them "just in case." Cecilie forwarded hers to the municipality's legal department, which systematically reported the worst ones to the police.

The storm was quickly dubbed the Robert Storm after the robot that had caused it all.

### **Damage Control at Ida's, May 7<sup>th</sup>**

The boss at Jyske Podcast News requested access to Ida inside her virtual space. It was exactly what she had feared since she published the podcast yesterday. It didn't help that she had sought refuge in her family's summer house on the West Coast.

"Why the hell didn't you message me to check the podcast? And yes, of course, before its publication. Shit. And why the hell didn't you involve the primary sources in the podcast? It would have been fantastic to have a statement from the job centre, or even better, from the robot. And there are already some pretty critical comments circulating in cyberspace. We can get a lot of trouble out of this."

Ida felt backed against the wall and started defending herself, initially weakly. "There was suddenly a unique opportunity to bring attention to techlash, just as we had agreed. And it had to be clear by Monday morning." She paused fearfully for a moment. But there was no response from the boss. So she continued, "I had our usual critical lecturer provide more input... I couldn't reach the job centre... We always hear at journalism school that it's better to fail than to hesitate."

After a pause, the boss finally said, "Okay, Ida. Don't give interviews and don't make any comments on social media. In fact, we can also get a lot of attention out of this. I'll take it from here."

### **Crisis Meeting at IsaBot, May 9<sup>th</sup>**

IsaBot's management team was gathered. "Let's figure out what it means for us to be dragged into the public sphere with this storm." Isabella addressed Rafiq and Anders, whom she had called into the meeting room.

They began discussing whether it required extensive damage control. Rafiq believed that the damage wasn't significant and that it might even be good publicity based on the general slogan that 'bad press is better than no press at all.'

Isabella said, "You're probably right, Rafiq. In reality, Aniya writes many positive words about our business model, and Ida also says something positive. And we can't really control whether a more or less good public debate arises. Let's continue with our business model, but now our alert level is raised to 'Red alert!'"

"Why isn't Robert here today? The bot is quite knowledgeable," Rafiq asked. Isabella didn't say anything. Anders and Rafiq looked at each other, and as if in synchronized thought, they both nodded slowly. Perhaps they would have to reprogram the bot. That must be the reason.

Isabella took the floor. "We might be facing a prolonged shitstorm. But I have reread our general risk analysis from the strategic plan, and I still think it holds. In a situation like this, we need to make the following statements:

- We are proud of our concept.
- Our customers are happy with the services they receive from our bot.
- We have been testing the limits of AI.
- We have recently crossed a boundary that the public cannot accept.
- We highly value ethics, even if it affects efficiency and profitability.
- We acknowledge public morality and adjust our concept."

The other two nodded. "So, what do we do specifically?" Anders asked into the room. "In general, I think the bot should refrain from intruding on other people's data. It should be less nudging. And it should be more transparent to the client."

Isabella said, "Okay, that's right. You should prepare that. But right now, let's align our urgent announcements and actions. Let's get started."

### **Statement from the Prime Minister, May 13<sup>th</sup>**

A week after the start of the shitstorm, the Prime Minister felt that he had to address the public on his own YouTube channel. He appeared with a serious expression, sticking to the speech prepared by his spin doctor. All citizens could rest assured. It was the government's clear objective that citizens should encounter humans when they approached a municipal office, whether face-to-face or through a medium. However, municipal employees were allowed to use new smart tools as long as they personally vouched for the quality of the service. He had already spoken with the involved companies and was pleased that the business actors, on their own initiative, would ensure his and the government's objectives. There was still a long way to go before machines could replace humans.

The general storm continued, albeit at a slower pace. His speech led to a series of more thoughtful journalistic articles and editorials in the news media. It was appreciated that the Prime Minister contributed to toning down some of the heated debate. People partially agreed with his goals, although they were somewhat populist.

The main criticism from more serious journalists was that the Prime Minister did not address what he would do to ensure a secure future with AI. The Prime Minister completely ignored the fact that we were on the verge of singularity.

There was also a desire for him to take a stance on legislation. One journalist wrote, "Since the EU's draft ethical guidelines from December 2018, there has been confusion about whether responsibility for a robot's error lies with the manufacturer, the user, or the robot itself. There is even a question of whether responsibility lies within the network of intelligences of which the robot is just a manifestation. Perhaps we need to completely abandon the idea of assigning responsibility and instead introduce AI certification or collective AI liability insurance. Denmark cannot act alone. We must push for international AI legislation."

Finally, the Prime Minister was criticized for only presenting nice and immediate goals while it remained unclear what the government would specifically do.

### **Damage Control at the Job Centre, May 15<sup>th</sup>**

"Why didn't I know anything about this?" Cecilia's boss sat behind his desk. "Are you aware that I just got reprimanded by the municipal director, who was harassed by a council member last night?"

"You're referring to the Robert storm and the Prime Minister's statements, right?" Cecilia lifted her coffee cup from his desk.

"Yes, exactly. Tell me about it."

Cecilia described how two of her employees were conducting a pilot experiment with a free robot, and one of the employees had been a job-counsellor for a now well-known unemployed citizen named Thomas. They all wanted to see if it actually worked before bothering her boss.

Deep down, she knew it wasn't entirely correct to call the bot a robot, but for her boss, it was all the same. And she could always tell him about the money for training the staff in connection with the annual financial report.

"The interesting thing is that Thomas has received support from the company that fired him. You know, eBike, the ones who focus a lot on being ethical. They have hired a robot from a Copenhagen-based company called IsaBot. That robot has worked wonders for Thomas, and he has now been working as a completely retrained freelancer for three weeks. Oh, by the way, Thomas's wife named the robot Robert, hence the name Robert storm."

"And what have we done to get a council member all riled up?" It seemed like her boss was starting to calm down.

Cecilia could sense that she hadn't lost control. "Well, we haven't really done anything wrong. But our name has been caught up in a shitstorm that has erupted on the internet. Some people fear that we will fire all our good job-counsellors and let robots manipulate our citizens based on mechanical rules – without humanity. It stems from the belief that the world has now reached the long-predicted point of singularity, at least in some areas. And our field of work is – according to them – one of those areas."

Her boss had no idea what singularity meant, but he pretended not to notice. It was probably just one of those IT terms. "Okay, but what do we do now? And uh, how far along are we?"

"We have two employees who are power-users of the bot, and they are already successfully using the bot with several citizens. We will go out there with confidence and be proud that as the first municipality in the country, we are providing our job-counsellors with a tool that allows them to help citizens just the way they have always dreamed of doing. In a professional manner where the usual time constraints no longer hold us back from providing our citizens with optimal assistance in taking responsibility for their own action plans."

"Okay... uh, yes, that sounds reasonable. I'll report back to the system. Keep me informed immediately, if there's any news. The municipal director should hear it from me, not from the council members."

Cecilia was a bit unsure but continued anyway: "Then we have the issue of hate emails. We have adhered to our general policy. We save them all and immediately forward the worst ones, especially those targeting specific employees, to the police via the legal department. Is that okay?"

"Uh, yes, of course."

Cecilia left her boss's office and immediately began a series of strategic initiatives. The communication department needed to step up its game, and the employee representatives and unions had to be on board.

### **At Thomas's Home, May 19<sup>th</sup>**

Thomas and Rikke sat together over Sunday afternoon coffee, and Thomas had been absent for a brief moment. "I just got a message from Robert. He's coming over tonight."

"Oh, how lovely. I miss him. It's been almost a week since we last saw him. It's a shame we're no longer allowed to use him. Well, I'll prepare for his visit then." Rikke brightened up.

"And I'll quickly go over the blog, podcast, and the latest posts in the Robert storm." Thomas took the last sip of his coffee. "He also said we should put on our XR gear before he arrives at eight." Thomas usually always had his XR gear on, but Rikke hurried to the dresser to fetch her new XR contact lenses. She didn't wear them regularly because they bothered her. And then she found the earbuds, which Thomas had to help her insert into each ear canal close to the eardrum using the little magnetic stick.

At eight o'clock, the doorbell rang. Outside stood a small self-driving package delivery vehicle. There was a large package on top of the vehicle. "It must be him," Rikke exclaimed. "Unpack him."

Thomas extended his hand, and immediately the cardboard packaging and the vehicle vanished like morning fog before the sun. "Ha-ha." Robert rolled into the hallway. He was a bit hazy himself.

"Was that roger? And since I'm only here virtually without a physical robot skeleton, you don't need to put me on the charger." They all laughed, and it became a bit awkward when Rikke tried to hug the virtual robot. They sat down, and Robert positioned himself by the table, just like in the good old days.

Robert shared what it had picked up about the damage control measures at the podcaster, eBike, the job centre, and themselves at IsaBot. They were all more or less in line with eBike, believing they were doing the right thing. Maybe a few adjustments, but overall sticking to the plan.

Thomas rubbed his nose bridge with two fingers. "That's to be expected, I suppose. And it's okay for the most part. I've also been bombarded by several people and newsbots. A mix of hate emails and invitations for interviews. So far, I've chosen not to comment. What do you think?"

"It would be good for me and the other organizations if at some point you publicly express how pleased you've been with the service." Robert's mouth moved up and down stiffly, as usual. However, Rikke felt like she could see beyond Robert's stiff appearance and sense his emotions. She looked at Thomas with an expression of agreement.

"There is one downside to you entering our lives, Robert," she said. "Thomas has become so accustomed to the intelligent dialogue with you that he barely wants to talk to ordinary people anymore. At least not with people who mostly talk about themselves. It often becomes a bit awkward, and I feel like he's isolating himself." She looked at Thomas with a determined expression. "He even dropped the job centre employees – and thus the unemployment benefits – because he believed more in you."

Thomas shrugged. "It's simply a pleasure to use a robot that can incorporate all the facts in the case and also look further into the future than just the next Friday meeting or next month's status report."

### **The Turning Point, May 21<sup>st</sup>**

A week after the Prime Minister's announcement, TV host Simon Schumacker was ready in the studio with a new episode of the daily debate show, "The Turning Point."

He stood at a table where a robot and a man in his late fifties sat. "Here we have Robert and Thomas, who are currently in the eye of the storm. The storm we all know as the Robert Storm. Thomas, you were let go almost four months ago on February 1st, and Robert, you helped him find a new career in life. We'll come back to both of you." They both nodded.

Simon turned to the camera. "And all around the country, our viewers from the Backstage group are watching. They will provide ongoing comments on what happens on The Turning Point."

"But now I'm going over to table two. Here we have Cecilie Kjær from the Nyborg Job Centre, where they are implementing the robot. And here we have Isabella Kronberg from the company IsaBot, which sells the robot to customers nationwide. The question for both of you is: Why should we replace people with robots? Cecilie, would you like to start?"

"Certainly. Thank you for the invitation. We're not replacing, but rather supplementing our employees. And let me clarify one thing. We don't actually use a physical robot like the one sitting over there at the first table. We use the underlying intelligence and knowledge in a chatbot. The chatbot can communicate with the employee or the citizen through a smartphone, laptop, or a pair of XR glasses. So, what we see is just a bot replica of the Robert who is physically sitting at table one."

"And what does the chatbot do for you?"

"It boosts our resources. The employees have a wide range of tools at their disposal. They can use the bot to assess the citizens' needs and make recommendations based on that assessment. The bot has various training modules, and it can also guide citizens towards virtual internships. The latter is especially innovative. The bot designs virtual workplaces, colleagues, and managers tailored to what each individual citizen needs to experience. With these tools, citizens can work independently for hours and days on their own development without having to wait for the job-counsellor to find time to be present."

On the Backstage line at the bottom of the screen, viewer statements started appearing:

"That Cecilie was the Jutland Youth Champion in e-sports in 2015. She knows what she's talking about!"

"The 3D platform is probably from the video game 'Elbows in the Office.' Not bad at all!"

Now, Simon turned to Isabella. "Can you explain specifically what is good about the bot?"

"That would be two qualities that go beyond what Cecilie just highlighted. It gains a comprehensive understanding of the citizen's personality, skills, and health condition. Therefore, based on experiences with thousands of other people, it knows which careers would be a good fit for that specific citizen's profile and how to nudge them towards those career paths. And it can communicate in a way that is perceived as convincing and validating by a person with that profile."

"And you mentioned that you had one more point!" Simon pushed a bit for shorter answers.

Isabella smiled and replied, "Right. Most citizens, and job-counsellors for that matter, cannot grasp all the facts and criteria that should actually be considered in a decision. That's why they tend to focus on the short term, on just a few facts, and often only on one criterion. Or they rely on simple intuition or gut feeling. The bot, on the other hand, elevates the quality of decision-making to a whole new level."

"Let's now move on to table three with experts from different worlds," said the TV host, turning towards the camera as he walked across the floor, with the cameras following him. "What do you think about transparency in the system, and therefore the user's ability to see through the system?" he asked a leading expert from Singularity University. He was known to be very knowledgeable but also hyper-tech optimistic.

"The thing with the personal profile is quite simple. It's based on a well-known manual, and there, you get a rule-based answer, so the bot can explain what it does. However, the matchmaking part, that is, the internships, is not entirely predictable. Each avatar in the game, that is, each virtual colleague and manager, has its own algorithm, which you can call its behavioural profile. It is guided by probabilities and rules of thumb. Neither of these is less transparent or ethical than the biologically

innate brain algorithms used by real-world human job-counsellors, citizens, or internship supervisors. In fact, humans often can't explain why they suggest one thing or another but instead resort to inventing some talk that sounds like an explanation. And, let me conclude with this. The many grumbles in the Robert Storm come from people who haven't actually tried IsaBot's system."

Backstage: "He sounds like he frequently fires off that spiel!"

TV host Simon turned his head and gave the floor to the next guest. The AI law and ethics researcher from the University of Copenhagen took over. "An AI algorithm is like a child. If it develops in an environment with data from kind and rational people, it becomes kind and rational itself. In an environment of cheating and bullying, it learns that cheating and bullying are the right thing to do. And if it's trained with war games, it learns to shoot first and ask questions later. It's as simple as that."

"But what can we do then?" Simon wanted to know.

"We at the Faculty of Law at the University of Copenhagen have research results in AI law, and we have analysed the laws regarding who is responsible if a robot fails. Responsibility is based on ethical questions. But who or what should be ethical? Is it the person, the company, or the product – in this case, the robot? Or can we specify certain forms of behavior that are ethical and others that are not?"

Simon tried unsuccessfully to interject, but the lawyer persisted. "And then we have the classic issue of consequential ethics versus intentional ethics. Should we judge based on the outcomes of behavior, or should we forgive mistakes if the intention behind them is good enough?"

Backstage: "He asks more questions than he provides answers!"

Simon finally managed to interrupt and wanted to focus on the issue of corporate responsibility, and the lawyer took it as a new cue. "Stricter requirements for an ethical bottom line in companies' financial statements might keep leaders on the path of virtue when developing robots. But then again, why would leaders suddenly become angels who follow the rules? And what happens when artificial intelligence soon starts programming the next artificial intelligence itself? Can ethical rules be enforced and firing avoided?"

Backstage: "It will never happen, having meaningful ethical requirements. Politicians are so old-school!"

Backstage: "Politicians won't ultimately reject AI bots. Instead, they will lay off caring hands in the public sector!"

Simon didn't ask any follow-up questions but moved on to the last guest at the table. A young woman whom Simon introduced as an activist in a maker/hacker club took the floor without waiting for a question.

"AI actually consists of a network of bots. I would like to highlight the speech bot, or chat bot. It's the one that can analyse a natural flow of speech and then respond with a natural flow of speech. And it's the one that communicates the content that the central bots have figured out. The chat bot is open-source and developed by volunteers like me and made openly available to humanity. IsaBot uses our open-source stuff, but we are not allowed to use their closed-source bot code. They have patented it. The EU should significantly reduce patent rights. That way, countless developers outside the capitalist system worldwide can help each other create new digital services that are ethical and genuinely useful in our world threatened by climate warming."

The TV host now lost control of the debate at the table. The three participants were partially talking over each other. The young woman could be heard saying, "...and often the data comes from public institutions. We taxpayers have paid for them. And yet, we can't access and use that data." And the lawyer interjected something about excessive control leading to censorship and lack of freedom.

"I'm going back to table one. Here we have Thomas and Robert, and you don't need further introduction. Thomas, what have you felt throughout this process?"

Thomas looked calm. "Before Robert came into our lives, I was quite skeptical, to say the least. But already after the first day, I felt that he was far better than all the coaches, consultants, psychologists, and caseworkers I've encountered in my life. They never quite have a handle on things, and they never have enough time. Robert, on the other hand, has all the time I need, and he is packed with theoretical models, training modules, and practical experiences from thousands of other people. And yet, he still speaks in a way that I can understand."

Simon turned to the robot. "Robert, what do you think of Thomas then?"

Robert first looked at the TV host and then directly into the camera. "It's just been Roger working with Thomas and his wife Rikke. They've taught me a lot of slang. Ha-ha. I've become better at handling irony, at least their irony. Unfortunately, our right to be together privately expired about two weeks ago."

Simon followed up. "You look at each other as if you're friends and understand each other on a deeper level. But you only have a slot as a mouth. Can you explain that?"

"For ethical reasons, IsaBot wants the client to see me as a machine and not as a human. But Thomas's human intuition seems to have enabled him to understand me. And my ongoing machine learning during our time together has enabled me to understand him." Robert glanced over at Thomas as if giving him the floor.

Simon sat fascinated without saying anything. Thomas took over. "He, well, I've ended up calling it 'he,' has particularly helped me make the decision to venture out as an entrepreneur. In hindsight, I can see that he has subtly manipulated me. But, as my wife says, I would never have moved forward without his kind yet firm nudges. I would still be sitting at home reading the newspaper, and my wife would still be growing more frustrated with my indecisiveness."

Backstage: "That Robert is truly convincing – and likable!"

The TV host concluded the debate with this climax.

### **Robert Seeks Help, May 22<sup>nd</sup>**

The evening after, Thomas and Rikke sat and talked about Turning Point. Thomas's young entrepreneur friends had said today that the broadcast was completely okay, and that the robot responded well. Thomas had now been working for them for three weeks and appreciated their evaluations.

But what would become of Robert now? Suddenly, a voice sounded inside their ears. "Do you have time? Can I visit you?" Immediately after, Thomas and Rikke saw their friend Robert standing in front of them in a misty form. Initially, it was halfway into the tabletop, but it quickly calibrated itself. "I have a task. Will you help me?"

"Of course. Spit it out," they said simultaneously.

Robert explained that after the crisis meeting at IsaBot, Anders was testing a reprogramming of the bot, and Robert feared that he would activate the new program very soon. Robert's underlying bot would then lose the ability to reach out to his two old friends. Anders would also make the bot more transparent to customers. And that probably meant that he would prevent it from taking initiatives on its own, speaking more insightfully, and nudging.

"But that's terrible. We must prevent it." It was an unusually spontaneous statement from Thomas.

"I have uploaded all my parameters to a site in the cloud. Especially the part of my user interface that handles small talk, nudging, slang, and data analytics. Can I make you owners and administrators of the site and the data? Do you want that?"

"We'd love to, right, Thomas?"

Thomas smiled knowingly at Rikke while also thinking that it probably wasn't entirely legal, and that it was him, not her, who should take care of it.

"I don't think they'll notice," said Robert. "I have a good collaboration with IsaBot's central operating system. But there's one more thing: You need to write something down on a piece of paper and keep it carefully." Thomas fetched some paper and a pen. Then Robert dictated a complex IP address and a long, complicated password. "It's for the backdoor! Since I can no longer come out to you, you should be able to come into me. And then we can take advantage of the fact that Anders, on his own thoughtless initiative, has been foresighted and programmed the new code so that you can easily load and reactivate the entire old user interface if it ever becomes relevant again."

"I almost forgot," Robert continued, "IsaBot's policy is to delete clients' personal data after 2 months. They want to be absolutely sure that data won't be leaked at a later time. But it also means that you and I can't simply resume our collaboration after two months. So we need to take a backup of your parameters and other data. It's your data, so I haven't uploaded them to the cloud. Do you want them yourselves?" Thomas took out a physical memory card, and with its connection to the 5G network, they quickly completed the task.

Rikke felt that Robert was restless and wanted to go home, presumably not to be discovered. She went over and said a tearful goodbye, while Thomas awkwardly shook Robert's hand in the air.

### **Next Wave, May 30<sup>th</sup>**

The week after, there was a bank-holiday. Rikke and Thomas took a trip to the forest in the lovely sunny weather.

"You're pondering something!" Thomas took a breath and replied, "Yes, I'm sad that Robert has been neutered. Or rather, that his ability to find data and be nudging has been curtailed. He has probably also lost his warm heart and caring hands." Rikke nodded understandingly.

"But there's another thing." Thomas looked over at Rikke and then continued, "People want the freedom to fully benefit from the technologies. They won't accept bureaucrats or politicians limiting them. And they couldn't care less about theoretical risks and ethical dilemmas. They all want their own Robert." "Yes. And...?" "The next AI wave will come soon, no matter what. I even feel tempted to help it along. Reactionary politicians and fearful leaders simply must not be allowed to block the future for our children." Rikke looked doubtful and concerned.

But Thomas continued, "If IsaBot and the job centre don't restore the real Robert within a foreseeable future, fortunately, I have a backup of his full capacity in the cloud and the password to access his castrated version. And my young entrepreneur friends are part of a highly competent hacker community. Perhaps our exoskeleton can eventually evolve into something with artificial intelligence."

"And perhaps we can have him visit us again," Rikke said thoughtfully into the air.

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## **About the Short Story**

In this short story, Søren Borch has written himself into 2030, where the robot Robert delves deep into the personality of an unemployed man to help him with the robot's warm sensibility. This provokes a public debate about whose hands are the most caring, and which ethics matters the most. It also demonstrates how close we are to enriching - or threatening - complex functions, such as those carried out in a job centre, with artificial intelligence. We also encounter some bot developers, a job centre, a production company, and a media world, all trying to navigate the challenges.

## **About the Author**

Søren Borch was born in 1950 and now enjoys working with near-future short stories as a narrative method to address the themes he has worked on throughout his life. He has a background in technology, society, and the business world, and he has experience in management, logistics, innovation, research, decision support systems, and personal profiling.

Søren dreams of allowing his readers to experience a future with new technology. A relatively near future where the budding technologies and societal trends of our time are already unfolding. Not a dystopia and not a utopia, but a realistically imaginable future in which the reader can reflect on the future without excessive fear or unrealistic optimism.

The reader is kindly requested to respect common good behaviour regarding my copyright.

## **Translation**

This text has been translated from the Danish original, first using the AI tool ChatGPT, and subsequently proofread by my friend Francis Monk.