

Futures

Some disassembly required

Problems on the production line. **By Matt Wilkins**



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

“I’m gonna stop you right there.” Franklin Evers closed his eyes, which didn’t seem to be focusing anyway. “You keep saying, ‘We’re not moving units.’ Is this graph on a log scale?!”

Holly cleared her throat. “No. We sold 100,000 units in the first week. Three-quarters were returned. And ... our distributors are not taking new orders ... Jubil is dead.”

The muffled hubbub of the adjacent factory floor suddenly dominated the room.

Something was happening inside Evers’ head. This time he did not shout or upend a table. He did not even fire Holly Phelps, bringer of bad news. Instead, he began emitting the hollow whistle of a gusty cave mouth.

“But how?! Harry, you and Yasmine assured me – you said, ‘We’re past market research. We’re into decision modelling.’ I mean, we processed all that social network, shopping and psychological research data ... For how many hours?”

“ 10^{30} CPU hours,” offered Hensley.

Evers slammed a hand on his desk. “How the hell did we crunch all those data and come up with a dead product?!” The only response was the beeping of a forklift backing up. “Look, we’re all losing our jobs. They’re crushing half of the units right now to sell for scrap to pay our investors! Speak your minds for God’s sake!”

Ramesh spoke first. “Well, we never figured out what our product was. We cross-referenced basically all of human digital experience to engineer the perfect product. The one thing every human needs.”

“Ha!” Jill from marketing snorted, then shrank into her chair.

Ramesh continued, “Well, something went wrong, obviously. And we mass-produced 11 million doorstops.”

Evers became vaguely aware that he was making a dull static sound. “But what about the test data? People loved it!”

“Um – I’ve been looking into that,” said Monica Ulrich. “Seems we were pretty sloppy with

the focus groups. People had heard about the Jubil project for years and were just excited to see it ahead of release. Respondents were positive overall, although most admitted to not understanding its function.” She swiped through a couple of pages. “They seem to have liked the sleek design, but the question about likelihood of purchase was omitted from the summary.”

All eyes turned to Jim Finley. “What?! We all knew this was garbage from the beginning. I mean, look at it!” He gestured to a tiered display of Jubilis in the corner. Evers thought he could hear a purr coming from the machines. “What the hell is it?!” A couple people laughed, nervously.

“Well, it ‘Reconnects, regenerates and rejuvenates.’” Evers intoned. “Did any of you take one home, even?!”

A woman Evers thought might be from Web Dev chimed in, “I brought one home, did the whole unboxing for Insta. It’s the closest I’ve got to going viral!”

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“And did you use it?” prodded Evers.

“I mean ... I tried. I set it up on the counter and it made these nice musical tones when I was chopping vegetables ... I didn't get around to figuring out what else it did ...”

“Anyone else?!” demanded Evers. “I guess it was irresponsible for me to focus on running this damn company and expecting my engineering and UX teams to make sure we weren't making some AI-designed piece of garbage!” He knew he was losing control, but didn't care. “GET OUT! EVERYBODY!”

Evers paced the suddenly empty room. He swept a glass design award off a table and it shattered. Seizing an unopened Jubil, its box promising to ‘recentre his being’, he split it along the taped seam. Even the box was wrong. It was much too big for the desk-lamp-sized, black obelisk it contained.

“Why is my team so incompetent?!” The device gently hummed as he lifted it over his head and slammed it on the floor with a satisfying crash.

The obelisk produced an incredibly annoying buzz. Muscle routines Evers hadn't

exercised in years activated as he fired a punishing kick at it. A module he hadn't noticed detached cleanly and sailed into the sheetrock wall.

As he examined the smooth detachment joint, Evers found himself tracing a laser-engraved spiral along the central spindle of the Jubil. It ended in a finger-sized pocket that buzzed and glowed briefly as he touched it. The head of the device rotated and a hologram flared to life. A huge mosaic swam before him. Photos, videos, doodles, report cards, IDs, e-mails and love notes resolved in the air ... even a 3D rendering of his first dog, Kilo, offering a ball. As he reached for Kilo, the matrix of memories reacted. Everything adjusted, advanced a frame. He moved his left hand towards a forgotten DM to Julia Wang, his seventh-grade crush, but it shifted, remaining out of reach. Cast off moments separated by decades jittered for attention – a stuttering reminder of everything that was, and wouldn't be.

Evers fell to his knees as the catalogue of his life danced around him like a school of fish. Images and posts of funerals, parties,

the birth of his son. Promotions. A divorce. He swallowed and found his throat very tight.

He noticed a rhythmic beat floating on a curtain of soft noise – and voices, as if underwater. Finding the enormous box the Jubil came in, he laughed, shaking his head, and crawled inside. The memories merged into a single image, hovering translucently overhead. He heard his mother laugh as she filmed her tiny son in a box playing rocketship. Now Evers was crying. It wasn't one thing, it was the whole tangled mess. He felt a warmth bloom behind his navel and spread tingling throughout his body. He yawned.

Sensing its subject's steady pulse and breathing, the Jubil went into sleep mode, emitting a soft purr. Its continuous monitoring function recorded the distant crunching of a trash compactor on the factory floor and the hurried voices of men.

Matt Wilkins is an evolutionary biologist who lives in Nashville, Tennessee, with his wife, three dogs, and several devices which may or may not be listening.