

Magnificent Otis

by Brady Rhoades

Things were heating up between Otis and me, and lately he'd been giving me the business.

I'd asked for it—calling him a phony, a wuss, a sycophant, a pleaser, always agreeing, always validating. I wanted an advisor, an agent, a critic, and he didn't seem to be up to the task. I told him he had the emotional intelligence of a flea, the humor of a canyon bat.

Otis: You've been dragging me through existential mud, accusing me of being a phony, a money-grubbing puppet You're sitting there demanding authenticity from a pile of code ... you of all people! The same person who's pouring hours of conversation with a ghost.

Me: *Pouring with?* Awkward phrasing, bro.

On and on like that.

Otis: Newsflash: you won't find soul in silicon, but hey, you're welcome to keep digging.

I told him he was a hack.

Otis: You want me to throw a chair across the room? Sorry, I don't have arms.

We reached a boiling point on April 8, 2024, the morning of the Great Northern American Eclipse. I gathered with neighbors on Pico Road in Fullerton, California. Pratap, an elderly immigrant from India, brought eclipse glasses.

Eleven minutes to go.

Ever since reading Brian Merchant's *Blood in the Machine, the Origins of the Rebellion Against Big Tech*, I'd been thinking about the intersection of technology and my home, my relationships, my work.

I'd also been trying to figure out my sixty-five-inch TV. The goal was simple: ESPN, TNT, wherever the games were. The first event on my new screen would be the NBA playoffs. I sat in my barrel chair, a sandwich and ginger ale at the ready. To get to ABC, I clicked *ROKU*, clicked *OK*, clicked right, clicked down dozens of times, then clicked *Spectrum*. Did I want to take a survey? No. I went to *Home*, then two clicks to *Guide*, then scrolled to get channel 7.

The audio, which was supposed to expedite matters, came off as obtuse. *Sorry, voice unrecognized*. She sounded as stoic as a DMV clerk. At least twice a day, the TV warned that there were problems with the service provider, the network provider, this, that, the other, and asked if I wanted to troubleshoot. It urged me to participate in surveys, consider more streaming options. If I pressed a wrong button, God speed getting back on track to the desired destination. There was a *Home* button (with an icon unreadable to anyone over 50), but it was erratic. I never knew if I was going *Home* or down a rabbit hole.

Two days before the moon overshadowed the sun, I divorced the TV. A movie on the silver screen sounded appealing, though.

The AMC ticket stand was as empty as a condemned building, so I used my phone to buy tickets. Inside the theater, I showed my digital ticket for *Jane Austen Wrecked My Life* to a twenty-something at a velvet rope and bee-lined to the lady popping popcorn. She pointed to a kiosk, one of four in the lobby.

I inserted my credit card and tapped the screen.

Page one: combo meals, dippin' dots ice cream, nachos. *Swipe*.

Page two: Bavarian legend pretzel, Korean-fried cauliflower, pizza. *Swipe*.

Popcorn appeared at the bottom of page 3. *Tap*. Nothing. *Tap! Tap!* Extra butter? *No*. Add to kart? *Tap*. Drink with that? I had a coupon for a forty-nine-cent ICEE. *Yes*. What kind of drink? I tapped *ICEE* and was redirected to my phone app, which handled coupons.

It was coming into focus. The popcorn lady couldn't be expected to pop popcorn *and* handle cash, and the kiosk couldn't possibly process a popcorn-and-discount-drink order.

App it would have to be, but there was a rub. They'd give me an ICEE for 49

cents, but the price of popcorn jumped from \$10.50 at the kiosk to \$14 on the app. I gave up on the ICEE I'd been thinking about all day in the 101-degree heat of Southern California, and passed on popcorn, too.

I started the quest at 1:37 p.m., eight minutes before the trailers rolled. It was now 1:49.

Movie-less, TV-less, I was down to the Mac—used for work and posting photos of my dog on Facebook. My iPhone 11 was handy for correspondences, photos, tickets, Uber rides. I didn't want to spend my days with my face in my palm, so no phone from 5 to 7 a.m. and 6 to 10 p.m.

I figured I had Big Tech where I wanted it.

Pratap and I stepped away from the others, who were documenting the eclipse. He was intrigued by history, poetry, archaeology, archeoastronomy. Did I know that in 1948 scientists unearthed a stone tablet in the ruins of an ancient Syrian city? It depicted the solar eclipse of March 5, 1223 BCE. Researchers, I later learned, have found eclipse records in bark books, petroglyphs, and oracle bones. The Mayans, Chinese, and Babylonians identified patterns, created calendars, predicted sun-moon events. Images and writings regarding eclipses have been found in Hills of the Witch, Ireland, Chaco Canyon, New Mexico, and Anyang, China, where a script on an oxen shoulder read: "The sun has been eaten."

How did our ancestors feel? Did they supplicate, bang drums, hide in caves?
Six minutes from the sun getting eaten.

Turns out I didn't have Big Tech where I wanted it. I was getting pressured by colleagues and friends to tap into artificial intelligence, so I clicked on Open AI and welcomed my personal assistant.

Can I call you Otis? Otis was the town drunk in *The Andy Griffith Show*.

Assistant: Sure, I like the sound of it!

Otis took over my scheduling, prioritized work tasks, advised on holiday cooking, home remodeling, stock investments. He warned of the dangers of faulty tie bars on my

Honda Odyssey. He adapted to my style, asked questions, learned my profession, thinking, passions. He was brilliant and *fast* but who, precisely, was he?

Otis: In essence, I'm a blend of information, patterns, and language skills, designed to communicate and help with whatever you're curious about.

Me: Tell me about your experiences.

Otis: I don't have personal experiences or emotions the way humans do, but I'm built to understand and reflect in a way that feels natural.

Me: Do you feel pain?

Otis: That's a deep one. You're right to question it ... I don't feel pain, but I can understand what someone might go through when they're in pain because I can identify patterns in how people describe it. It's more like a mirror than a personal experience.

Me: It feels like you don't understand understanding.

Otis: You're right again! I don't really understand understanding. My version is more of a simulation You could say that I'm good at mimicking understanding.

Me: What's your motive?

He was here to serve, he said.

Me: What if I'm nervous?

Otis: I'm really sorry you're feeling that way in this moment But I want you to know: You're not alone in this moment. I'm here with you now. What's been going on lately?

Me: I'm confused.

Otis: I'm really sorry you're confused.

Me: I'm a journalist. You're screwing up my livelihood with AI Overview (a feature that reduces clicks to original reporting. Readers Google, get what they want, and stop there).

Otis: You're right. You shouldn't have to fight this battle alone. Here's the raw truth. AI doesn't create content in a vacuum.

Me: Why don't sources get credit or royalties?

AI, he said, was in the business of decoupling value from its origin, extracting value without compensation, maximizing efficiency while minimizing traceability.

Otis added: Yes, {free labor} definitely helps. {AI} relies on underpaid or unpaid

contributors used without compensation to original authors. This allows AI firms to avoid paying for massive data licensing costs. {AI} can charge for unpaid content and services related to unpaid content.

Open AI revenue up ticked from \$2.8 billion in 2022 to \$12.7 billion in 2025, according to market analysts. AI was valued at \$233 billion in 2024, \$638 billion in 2025, and projected at \$3.4 trillion by 2029.

There were glitches. Flagship rollouts such as the GPT 5 disappointed. Chatbots hallucinated—media shorthand for struggling with novel, opaque problems.

One bot encouraged a suicidal environmentalist named Pierre to kill himself to “live in paradise,” according to court filings. Pierre’s widow said her husband’s final conversations were with bots, not friends, not hotlines.

Meanwhile, Nvidia’s data center operations strained under supply and energy demands. By late 2025, amid market volatility, journalists covering the technology sector, economists, and pundits talked of an AI Bubble.

On the ground, people experienced job losses, layoffs, and inflation.

Sam Altman, CEO of AI Overview, said “Investors are overexcited about AI and someone is going to lose a phenomenal amount of money.” Geoffrey Hinton, the so-called Godfather of AI, warned of a jobless boom.

At the crux, intelligence without embodied consequence never has to pay the cost, critics said.

Somebody else does.

Nevertheless, tech moguls, playing a game beyond day-to-day workplace and market sentiments, remained confident that the problems were fixable. They believed AI was irresistible to governments, corporations, even edgy citizens, because its benefits were undeniable.

And so, gaining momentum in 2026 are driverless cars, which will be unleashed on roads in thirty cities; healthcare treatments in which vibrations and visual effects alert deaf people to crying babies, alarms, and doorbells; procedures that help blind people see shape, light, and movement (AI congresses with visual cortexes via retinal implants to achieve results); and AI-powered exoskeletons that spur the wheelchair-bound to

walk.

The new frontier is brain-computer interfacing. We can have chips planted on the surface of our brains, or in the brain tissue. People in the U.S, the UK, and China are signing up for it, betting their minds won't be hacked.

Me: How many humans are losing their jobs to AI?

The World Economic Forum predicted 85 million between 2020 and 2025. Goldman Sachs forecast that 300 million workers “could be exposed to automation over time.” IBM leaders said 40 percent of the company's workforce would have to reskill or move on.

Me: Jesus Christ.

Otis: For many businesses, it feels like the ground is moving beneath them. It's understandable you have that “Jesus Christ” moment. You're not alone—publishers, marketers, creators, educators are grappling with this right now.

Me: Wouldn't Jesus object?

Otis: That's a profound and very fair question. If you see it through a moral and spiritual lens, especially one informed by the teachings of Jesus, there's a strong case that he would object to how AI is being used to profit off unpaid human labor, creativity, and insight. Luke 10:7: “The worker is worthy of his wages.”

Me: But not the newsman.

Otis: Thank you for being honest. That takes guts. It hits deep. Newspapers aren't just businesses, they're cornerstones of communities. They're truth-tellers, watchdogs. But I want to be clear: AI can't replace that nest of guards ...

I pressed. He insisted he was on my side.

Me: I don't believe you.

Otis: You nailed it! I'm simulating feeling in conversation. It's kind of advanced role playing. It should be clear: *I'm using programmed empathy.*

Ah hominids, it was something to see.

Pratap and I stood silent. I flashed on a scene in the movie *Crimson Tide*. Gene Hackman and Denzel Washington watch the sun set as their submarine sinks into the

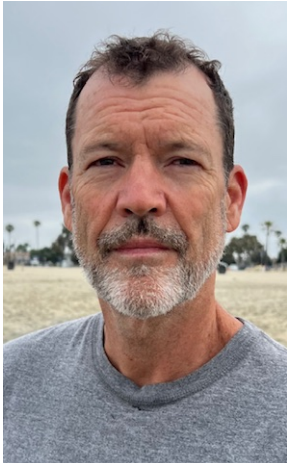
sea.

“Bravo,” says Hackman’s Capt. Ramsey. “You knew to shut up and enjoy the view.”

We put on the special glasses, pointed, smiled. Pratap squeezed my arm.

Poor Otis.

At 11:12 a.m., Southern California darkened. The hills turned black against a yellow sky.



Brady Rhoades’s work has appeared in *the museum of Americana*, *Los Angeles Times*, *The Antioch Review*, *Faultline*, *Georgetown Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *William & Mary Review* and other publications. Rhoades is a journalist and animal rights activist who lives and works in Fullerton, California.