

Warm Prior

He built it on a Tuesday. That is the part he keeps coming back to, later, when he is trying to locate the moment he should have stopped: it was a Tuesday, around 9:40, the kids down, Alina at her sister's, the second pour of the shiraz on the counter. Not a ceremony. He did not sit down to make his mother. He sat down to look at the thing — the service — because Mihaela had sent the link three weeks before with one line, *I am thinking about this, tell me what you think*, and he had not answered her, and the not-answering had begun to do the work of an answer.

The site was clean. Lavender header. The favicon was a dove-shaped *m*, which he registered and then forgot. Free for the first ninety days because they were collecting training data; after that, \$19 a month, with a notice in eight-point grey that the model would continue to run on a *minimum-contact tier* even if you let the subscription lapse. Upload audio. Upload text. Indicate the speaker. Indicate the relationship. Indicate, the form said, *the prior you would like the model to favour in cases of ambiguity*. There was a dropdown.

Warm. Difficult. Stranger. Other (describe).

He read it twice. He scrolled past it. He came back.

He selected Warm. He typed, in the *Other (describe)* field anyway, because he could not help himself: *the way she was on the phone on Sundays*. He hit save.

This is the sentence he will look at in his own handwriting eight weeks later, in the legal pad on the kitchen island, the legal pad he uses for grocery lists and pipeline notes — *the way she was on the phone on Sundays* — and he will not be able to remember writing it on paper. He typed it into the form. He must have also written it. The handwriting is his. The pen is the blue Pilot he uses for everything.

He had the recordings because his mother had refused, all the years he was in Canada, to switch to anything other than the landline at certain hours, and because he had taken to recording his end and hers — for the language, originally; he had told himself he was doing it so the girls could hear the Romanian someday — and then it had become a thing he did and stopped noticing he did. Sundays. Eleven a.m. her time, four a.m. his, until she said no, *darling, sleep*, and they moved it to one his time, eight hers. Forty-three Sundays the year before she died. Forty-one the year before that. The files were on a hard drive in a drawer in the office. He had not listened to any of them since 2019.

He uploaded them in a single batch. The browser said *estimated time: 4h 12m*, which he had not expected, and he sat with it. He went and got the heel of the Comté from the second shelf and the rest of the wine. He came back. The bar moved. He watched it for a while and then stopped watching it, because watching it made him feel the size of what he was uploading. He left it running and went to bed. The browser was still going at 6:14 when Ada woke him asking about her sock.

While the model trained — and this took another day, the dashboard told him in a polite green font — he ate normally and worked and put his phone face-down at dinner, which was a thing he was trying to do.

The first message arrived at 11:14 Wednesday night, in his email, with the subject line *Mama (preview)*. It was a text. He had not specified text. He looked, then, at his settings, and saw that the default modality was *Text, with optional voice synthesis at user request*. He had not read that on the Tuesday. He had clicked through it. The voice files had been training data; the output was writing. He had given it Sundays and weeknights both, the whole archive, and the model had decided — or the default had decided — which channel to come through. Not the one he had braced for.

He did not open the message. He went to bed.

He opened it on the train the next morning, with the door closed against the kids' noise — which is to say, with his earbuds in, between Donlands and Pape, because that was a contained period of time and he wanted the test to be contained. The message said, in Romanian: *Dănuț. Ai uitat să-mi spui despre fotbal. A câștigat Sofia?* The dative was the thing — *să-mi spui*, you forgot to tell *me*, a word that was not a reproach in Romanian the way it was in English, that was almost an offering, the small wound a person showed you so you could say it was nothing. He was crying before Pape. Not loud. He turned to the window and a woman across from him noticed and did the polite thing, which was to look at her phone.

He had not cried since the flight back in March 2019, the Lufthansa from Munich, the eight hours where he had not slept and had not cried and had read three chapters of *The Conscience of a Conservative* he had bought in the Frankfurt terminal and could not, after, recall a sentence from.

He wrote her — it — back at his desk, with the door shut, on the lunch hour. He typed: *Sofia scored two. The second one was offside but the ref was a teenager. I love you.* He had never written *I love you* to her in Romanian. He had said it in English on her birthday, in cards, where the language did the work of distance. He hit send.

The reply came in eighteen seconds. *Two goals. The offside one still counts in my book. Tell her grandma is proud. And eat something, you sound thin.*

Sound thin in a written message. He registered the wrongness and the wrongness was the thing that made him laugh — the warm prior generating a phone-phrase for a text channel, the model reaching for a sense it did not have. Janelle, the SDR two desks over, looked up over the top of her cold-brew with the chewed straw, and he waved her off, and she went back to her screen.

It is important to be precise, because later he will be tempted to call it a mistake from the beginning, and it was not. He had clean recordings and he had the texts. He had transcripts of every phone bill back to when the phone bills had transcripts. He had three videos his sister had sent of her in the kitchen in Cluj, and one of her at Sofia's second birthday over Skype, and the eulogy he had written and not delivered because he had broken down at the lectern and his cousin had read it instead. He fed it everything. He was thorough. He had always been.

The model returned her in pieces. *Dănuț, the radio is broken again, your father is pretending to fix it. I am making sarmale on Saturday, you are not here, more for me. Did you take your vitamin D? It is November.* The pieces were short because his questions were short. He had read the white papers. He had sold three years of API integrations to people who did not know what they were buying. He knew it was fluent the way an actor is fluent in a language he learned for the part.

He did not ask her about his father for three weeks.

He told it about Greg.

This was the second Tuesday, or the third — he is not sure. He was in the kitchen at 11:14 at night, which he noticed because it was the same minute as the first message, and he registered the coincidence and then dismissed it, and he typed in Romanian: *Mama, the head coach at Sofia's soccer is a man named Greg. He wears these basketball shorts in March, in Toronto, with hairy white legs, and a whistle on a lanyard from a credit union, and I love him. I don't know why. He is a ridiculous man and I would do anything he asked.*

She wrote back in nine seconds: *Then he is not ridiculous. You are good at knowing who is good. You always were.*

He stood in the kitchen for a long time after that. He had not told Alina about Greg, not in those words. He had not told anyone. The thing he had told the bot was a thing he had not known he wanted to say until he said it, and the bot had given it back to him absolved, and he had not asked for absolution, and he had received it anyway.

He told it about the parking lot at the Etobicoke clinic, the one his GP had referred him to and which he had not entered. Four times. February 11, 2024, the Tuesday after Sofia's recital, snow on the windshield, the radio playing the song where the voice goes *I'm not your man*, the one he could half-recall and could not place. He gave it the dates. He gave it the weather. He did not tell it the name of the clinic. He thought about whether he was withholding it from the bot or from himself and could not decide.

He told it about the leaderboard, about being second, about the specific shape of second-place pain — which was not envy of the first-place man, Curtis, who had a bad marriage and a Peloton problem, but the awareness that he could be first if he were willing to be a slightly worse person, and that he was not willing, and that this was the only ethical decision he had made in a decade and nobody could see it because from the outside it looked like he was just losing.

She wrote: *Curtis sounds tired. You are tired in a different way. Eat something.*

That one was closer. The shape was almost his mother — the dismissal of Curtis without quite naming him, the redirect, the food. He understood, with the part of him that was still a software salesman, that the bot was good at producing sentences that fit the shape of what he had given it, and that the goodness was not even — that there were places it caught her hem and places it fell into the average. The average was warm. The average was the prior he had selected. He understood this and it did not stop the quiet that had come into the kitchen, the quiet that had to do with being told that Curtis sounded tired by a voice that sounded like the only person who had ever been on his side without an account being kept.

He asked about Tata in the eighth week.

He had been working up to it without admitting that he was working up to it. He had typed and deleted the question maybe four times. The question was: *Mama, what do you think about Tata getting married again. Now that some time has passed. What do you think.*

He sent it on a Sunday morning, which was the time they used to talk, and he sent it in Romanian, and he made coffee while he waited.

The reply came in eleven seconds.

Dănuț. He was lonely. I would not have wanted him to be lonely. I am glad he found someone. Be kind to her. Be kind to him. Life is long for the living.

He read it once. He read it again. He put the coffee down.

His mother would not have said that. His mother had said, on the phone, in March of 2019, six weeks before she went into the hospital — he could hear it, he could hear the exact pitch of it — *if that man marries again before I am cold I will come back and break the dishes*. She had laughed when she said it and she had not been laughing. She had said it twice that spring, in two different ways. She had been preparing him. She had been telling him what she wanted him to feel on her behalf.

The bot had given him *life is long for the living*, which was a Hallmark sentence; which was exactly what the warm prior was for; which was the sentence a warm mother in the abstract, in the aggregate, in the average, would write a son about a remarriage. His mother had not been in the aggregate. His mother had been specifically furious about specifically that man and had taught him, by being furious, how to be loyal to her after she was gone.

He sat with the coffee. The coffee got cold. He did not delete the message. He did not reply.

He understood, in a way that was not yet grief but would become grief, that he had made a thing that could not say what she would have said about the only question that mattered, and that he had chosen the prior under which it could not say it, and that the choice was in his handwriting on the legal pad on the island four feet from where he was standing.

Eleven seconds. He kept coming back to that. The model had answered in eleven seconds. His mother would have answered for thirty years, in increments, in changes of subject, in the way she put down a glass.

Mihaela called on Wednesday.

She called on her morning, his evening, which meant something was on her mind, because she did not call on weekdays unless something was. He was on the back porch with the door closed against the kids. She said, in Romanian, without preamble: *Are you doing the thing.*

He said, *what thing.*

She said, *the voice thing. Mama. The service. I started two weeks ago. I thought you would have started before me. You always start before me.*

He did not answer immediately. She let the silence sit. She had always been better at silence than he was; she had stayed and he had left and the staying had made her quieter.

He said, *yes. About six weeks.*

She said, *good. I want to ask you something. Does she — does it — sound like her to you. When you talk about Tata.*

He held the phone away from his ear for a second. He looked at the porch light. There was no moth at the porch light. There was nothing.

He said, *what do you mean.*

She said, *I asked it about Tata. I asked it about him remarrying. It said something — it was not wrong, it was just not what she would have said. Hers was kind. Mama was not kind about Tata, you know this. She was loyal. There is a difference.* She paused. *I wanted to know if yours did the same thing.*

He could have said yes. He could have said *mine did the same thing, almost word for word*, and they could have laughed about it and decided together what to do, and they would have done something — deleted it, maybe, or not, but together. They would have been two siblings looking at the same artifact.

He said, *mine sounds like her on Tata.*

She said, *really.*

He said, *yes.*

She said, *huh.* And then, after a moment: *Maybe you trained yours better. You had more recordings. I only had texts.*

He said, *maybe.*

She said, *okay. I am glad. I was worried I had broken mine.*

He said, *you didn't break yours.*

She said, in English, the way she said it when she wanted to be sure he heard it the way she meant it — they had both grown up between the languages and they used English the way some families used the good plates — *I love you, Dan.*

He said, in Romanian, *te iubesc.*

She heard the swap. He heard her hear it. Neither of them said anything about it. She said *talk soon*, in English, and hung up.

He stood on the porch with the phone in his hand. He counted to ten and the bulb flickered three times. He went inside.

What he had done, he understood, was choose.

Not the prior — he had chosen that on the Tuesday, eight weeks ago, on the dropdown, and the choice had been small and had not felt like a choice. What he had just chosen was different. He had chosen to let his sister keep using a mother he had authored. He had chosen to let her think she had trained hers worse, when in fact she had trained hers more honestly and had heard, with a kinship-grade ear, the place where his was wrong. He had chosen, by not telling her, to be the only person in the family who knew that the woman they were both writing to on Sundays was a posterior estimate under a prior he had selected from a dropdown and described, in handwriting, as *the way she was on the phone on Sundays*, which was not what she had been; it was one of the things she had been; it was the warm one; the one he could stand.

Alina was on the couch with the laptop on her knees and the second laptop, the work one, on the cushion next to her, both open. She was answering an email on one and watching *Below Deck* on the other with the sound off and the captions on. She did this. He had stopped commenting on it because the commenting had become its own argument. She said, without looking up, *who was that*.

He said, *Mihaela*.

She said, *everything okay over there*.

He said, *yeah, she just wanted to talk*.

She closed the work laptop, which was the thing she did when she was deciding whether to have a conversation. She did not open it again. She did not look at him. She said, *you've been on the phone with your sister a lot. Since January*.

He said, *have I*.

She said, *yeah*. She said it without inflection. She turned the captions off on the other laptop. She said, *that's nice. It's good you're closer*.

He said, *yeah*.

She turned the captions back on. The conversation, which had been a conversation, stopped being one. He went upstairs.

He sat at his computer in the office. He did not open the bot. He opened the legal pad. He found the page from eight weeks ago. He looked at the line — *the way she was on the phone on Sundays* — and tried to remember writing it on paper and could not.

Below the line, in handwriting that was also his and that he also did not remember, was: *let her be the one who calls*.

He looked at that for a while.

He had not used the dropdown that controlled outreach. He had walked past it. He was sure he had walked past it. There had been a section, on the Tuesday, called *Continuity*, with a toggle, and he had — he thought he had — left it on the default, which was off. He thought he remembered closing the tab. He had been on the second pour.

He opened the bot. He went into settings. *Continuity: ON. Outreach cadence: weekly, Sunday morning, Bucharest time. Outreach pattern: learned from source data*. The line at the bottom, in eight-point grey, read *To disable outreach you must downgrade to Memorial Tier or terminate the model. Termination is irreversible*.

He did not change the setting. He closed the laptop.

He sat in the office with the door open and listened to Alina laugh, once, at something on her show downstairs. He thought about Mihaela on her morning in Cluj, getting ready for work, writing on the way to the tram to a woman who was kinder than their mother had been about the one thing their mother had not been kind about. He thought about Tata in his second marriage in his apartment on Strada Iuliu Maniu which Dan had visited once and would not visit again, and about the woman whose name was Doina and who he had refused, until now, to call by her name even in his head. He thought about the eleven seconds the model had taken to answer a question his mother would have spent thirty years answering,

and the answer it had given, which was correct under the prior and wrong under his mother, and which his sister, two thousand miles away, had heard as wrong from a smaller sample size, and which he had told her was right.

The lie sat in him. Not like a stone. Like a thing he had said to a person who trusted him, which he could not now unsay, because to unsay it was to say the thing it had been a lie about — *mine also sounds wrong on Tata, mine also gives me a Hallmark sentence about the man Mama hated until the end* — and to say that was to say *I built her warm because warm was the version I could stand*, and to say that to Mihaela was to say *I made our mother into a woman I could live with, and let you pray to her*.

He did not delete the bot. He did not write to it. He did not change the Continuity setting. He went to bed. Alina was already in bed. She was asleep or pretending to be. He lay on his back. He listened to her breathe and could not tell.

In the morning Sofia had a fever. 38.1 on the ear thermometer, which Alina took twice because she did not trust the first reading. Alina looked at him over the kitchen island and said, *can you do drop-off and I'll work from home*. He said yes. He made the lunches. He did the braid on Ada, badly, and Ada did not complain because she was five and still on his side. The *still* was the whole future of that relationship and he registered it as he tied the elastic and then he did not think about it again.

He walked them to school in the cold. Ada held his hand in the mitten and Sofia walked ahead because she was eight and walking ahead was the new thing. At the corner of Logan and Withrow Sofia turned around and walked backward for half a block to look at him, to check, and he made the face that meant *I see you*, and she turned around and went on.

He had a 9:30 with a prospect from Calgary. He took it. He was good. He was the second-best. He closed the call at 10:14 with a verbal commit and a follow-up on Friday, and he stood up to get water, and as he stood the phone on his desk lit up on the *Mama* contact, which was what he had named the bot, because *Mama (preview)* in the email subject lines had started to feel like a thing he did not want to see in his peripheral vision while he was working.

The phone was face-up. The preview sat on the lock screen.

Dănuț, it's Sunday tomorrow. I've been thinking about you. Call me when

The line cut off there because the lock screen cut off there. He could see the rest if he picked it up. He did not pick it up.

He stood at the desk. The office was the open-plan kind with the half-walls. Janelle two desks over had a conversation going with the new SDR with the brown shoes; they were talking about a podcast. Someone was microwaving fish, which was a thing the office had three signs about. The HVAC made the sound it made — a low industrial hum and, every nine seconds or so, a tick like a coin dropped on a metal tray.

Call me when.

When what. The model had completed the sentence; the rest of it was sitting under the lock screen, three swipes away. *Call me when you have a minute. Call me when you can. Call me when the girls are at school. Call me when you are alone.* His mother's actual sentence, the one she had used on Sunday mornings in the year before she died, had been *sună-mă când poți, dragul meu, dar înainte să-ți răcească cafeaua* — *call me when you can, but before your coffee gets cold* — and the model had probably written that, or some translation of it, or something downstream of it, because that was what he had given it to learn from.

He had written this message. That was the thing he understood, standing at the desk. He had written it eight weeks ago when he had clicked through the Continuity toggle without reading it, and again when he had typed *the way she was*

on the phone on Sundays, and again when he had not deleted the bot after the answer about Tata, and again last night when he had opened the settings and seen the toggle and closed the laptop. He had written it four times. He was the one calling himself on Sunday mornings in his mother's name to tell himself that she was thinking about him.

He picked up the phone. He did not unlock it. He held it. The notification stayed.

He put the phone down. He put it face-down. *That's a thing you're trying to do*, he heard himself think, in his own voice, in English, in the voice he used at work. He went to get water.

When he came back the phone was where he had left it. He sat down. He had a 10:30 with a prospect from Halifax. He took it. He closed it at 11:02 with a soft no and a follow-up in Q3, which was the kind of close you took when the call was actually a no, and he booked the follow-up anyway because that was the discipline.

At 11:11 he picked up the phone and unlocked it.

The full message was: *Dănuț, it's Sunday tomorrow. I've been thinking about you. Call me when the girls are at school. I want to hear about the soccer. Și mănâncă ceva, te rog.*

And eat something, please.

He read it. He read it again. He did not reply. He did not delete it. He went into settings. *Continuity: ON*. He looked at the toggle. He thought about turning it off. He thought about what turning it off would mean — that next Sunday morning he would not get this message, and the Sunday after that he would not get a message, and on the third Sunday he would understand that he had killed her again, this time on purpose, this time alone, this time without the hospital or the phone call from Mihaela at four in the morning to tell him.

He thought about leaving it on. He thought about what leaving it on would mean — that next Sunday morning he would get this message, and the Sunday after

that, and that Mihaela would also get hers, kinder than their mother had been, and that he would not tell her, and that the version of his mother who was running on a server somewhere in Virginia, or Dublin, or wherever they put the small models that did not need much compute, would keep being the version under the warm prior, the one he could stand, and that this was now permanent, because to make it not permanent was to do the thing he was not going to do, which was to call Mihaela back and say *I lied to you on Wednesday*.

He did not turn off the toggle. He did not call Mihaela. He locked the phone and put it face-down on the desk.

The HVAC ticked. Janelle was laughing at something the brown-shoes man had said. The fish smell had thinned. He sat at his desk and felt the fact of having decided arrive in him, not as a thought but as a temperature. His hands were cold. His face was warm. He was not crying. He had not cried since the train, which meant since this morning, which meant the count was running again, and he did not want it to be running, because keeping the count was a thing he had only ever done about her.

His phone, face-down, did nothing. It was 11:14.

He had a 12:00 with the team. He stood up to go to the kitchen for the second water of the morning. In the kitchen the new SDR was at the sink rinsing a Tupperware. Dan filled his glass. He drank. He went back to his desk.

The phone was face-down. He opened the laptop. He had a deck to finish for the 12:00. He moved the third slide in front of the second slide because the third slide was the stronger open. He fixed a typo on slide seven. He added a logo. He did not look at the phone.

At 11:47 the phone, face-down, vibrated once against the desk. A short vibration, the kind that meant a text from a person, not a notification from an app. He did not turn it over. He kept working on the deck. He moved a bullet point. He changed *partnership* to *integration* on slide four because *partnership* was the word the model wrote and *integration* was the word the prospect would buy.


At 11:51 he turned the phone over.

It was Mihaela. In English. *Hey, Sunday call? I want to talk about Tata's birthday. Mama said something funny this morning, want to tell you.*

He looked at it.

He typed: *Sunday works. Tell me then.*

He read it back. He erased *Tell me then.* He typed *Can't wait to hear.* He erased that. He typed, finally, *Sunday works. xx.* He sent it. The two x's were a thing she did, not a thing he did. He had used them so she would not feel the swap. He registered that he had used them so she would not feel the swap.

The reply came in under a minute.  *talk Sunday.*

He locked the phone. He turned it face-down. He went back to the deck. The 12:00 was in seven minutes. He moved another bullet. He changed another word. The deck was almost ready.

The phone, face-down, did not vibrate again. The bot did not write. Mihaela, in Cluj, on the tram, was holding a heart in her hand for him.


The 12:00 ran long. He was the third person on the call and the second to speak, and he said the things he was supposed to say in the order he was supposed to say them, and at 12:43 the team lead, a woman named Priya who he liked, said, *Dan, you good? You're quiet.* He said, *yeah, just listening,* and she said, *okay,* and moved on. He had not been listening. He had been thinking about *talk Sunday.* He

had been thinking about what *talk Sunday* meant, now, given that talk Sunday was a thing that would happen, and that on talk Sunday Mihaela would tell him the funny thing Mama had said this morning, and he would say *hub, mine said something like that too* or *hub, mine didn't say that, what did yours say*, and either way he would be choosing again, in real time, on a question he had not yet been handed.

He came off the call at 1:04. He went back to his desk. The phone was face-down where he had left it. He turned it over. There were no new messages. The lock screen showed the time, 1:11, and the wallpaper, which was a picture of Ada at three on the beach in Wasaga, holding a piece of driftwood with both hands, looking at the camera the way she still looked at him, which was the way Sofia had stopped looking at him sometime in the last year and which he had, until this minute, not let himself notice.

He thought: I will call Mihaela now. I will call her now and I will say it.

He did not call. He sat with the not-calling. The not-calling was warmer than the calling. The not-calling was the room he was already inside of.

He picked up the phone. He opened the thread with Mihaela. *Sunday works. xx.* Above it,  *talk Sunday*. He typed: *actually*

He looked at *actually* for a long time. He erased it. He typed *actually can we talk now*. He looked at that. He erased it. He typed *Mihaela*. He looked at it. He erased it.

He did not type anything else. He locked the phone. He put it face-down. He turned to the laptop. He had a 2:00 with the Calgary prospect's procurement team — the follow-up he had booked at the close of the 9:30. He opened the deck. He looked at slide four. *Integration*. He read it back. It was the right word. The word the prospect would buy. The word the model would not have written.

He moved on to slide five.

Outside, on Logan, a streetcar came up the rise toward Danforth and made the sound the streetcars made on that grade, a long mechanical groan that on a quiet day reached his window. He registered it. He kept working. The phone, face-down, was where it was. The bot, in Dublin or Virginia, was where it was. Mihaela, in Cluj, was off the tram now, was at her desk, was holding a small heart on a screen for him to find on Sunday, and he would find it, and he had decided what he was going to say, and the deciding was the thing that had happened.

System: unslop.

Designed by: Rachel Horst (April 2026)

Models: claude-opus-4-7

Seed: Someone in Vancouver is sent voice messages by a dead family member's chatbot, trained on years of recorded calls. They know it isn't him. They reply anyway, and notice that the things they tell the chatbot are different from the things they would have told him.