

Know Inc.

By Christina Taheri

Brett Midas stepped out of his freshly waxed EV and checked his notifications, a deluge of press releases on Know Inc. and the soft launch of AHI—the Accelerated Human Intelligence technology platform. The headlines buzzed with lavish praise: “Revolutionary,” “A new obsession,” “Game-changing.” Midas scrolled through his phone, smiling in stride. “Silicon Valley’s most disruptive tech since ChatGPT.” *Disruptive*—he swooned.

Mary Bell, Midas’s overqualified but woefully insecure administrative assistant, greeted him in an atrium-like office space. Whenever someone asked Mary what it was like to work for someone as successful as her boss, she would say it was the privilege of a lifetime, that he is one of the most brilliant and inspiring people she ever knew. If one were to ask her the same question in an anonymous survey, however, she would confess that the most important thing to know about Midas is that he’s an emotionally abusive pretentious prick.

“Good morning, Mr. Midas. You’re looking chipper this morning.”

“Did you see the interview?” He asked, his bleached teeth aglow.

“I did!” she lied. “You were fantastic. As always.” Midas closed his eyes, feigning modesty, and continued to his office. Mary grabbed a note from her desk and followed in tow. “Mr. Midas, you have an appointment at 8:30. Joe Warner.”

“Warner? A journalist?”

“Yes, he’s with *The Times*.”

Midas nodded and turned to the 135-inch screen mounted on the far side of his office, a large room set in shadowy tones of gray, burgundy, and forest green, decorated with expensive and useless minimalist furniture.

As the screen lit up, Midas stood and watched himself in the interview from the day before. Mary observed the man observing himself and walked quietly out the room.

“That’s right, Faye,” Midas was explaining to an attractive journalist with glossy lips and bronze colored skin. “Oil became the new gold. Then data became the new oil. Now AHI—accelerated human intelligence—is the new data.”

“How fantastic,” Faye said. “A brave new world, right?”

“Exactly.”

“And can you explain for us how accelerated human intelligence is different from artificial intelligence?”

“That’s the beautiful thing, Faye. We took what AI does, and we just made it better, more user-friendly, more innovative, more human, less quirky.” Midas went on, speaking in a stream of hyperbolic clichés. “People won’t even have to think anymore. AHI will think for them. Users will—literally—know it all.”

“Extraordinary. And people will be able to just download it to their devices? Is that right?”

“That’s right. It’s in beta form now to a select group of users, but soon it will be available to everyone. We’re just so excited about how this new technology is going to impact people’s lives, help us to solve problems, and build a better future for the whole world—.”

“Mr. Midas?” Mary stood at the door. “Mr. Warner is here.”

Midas turned off the screen and walked over to his oblong-shaped desk. “Yep. Send him in.”

A tall man entered the room. He was wearing a gray suit and held out his hand. Midas took it and felt a chill crawl over his skin.

“Hello, Mr. Midas. Joe Warner with *The Times*.”

“Have a seat.”

“Thank you. I am doing a piece on your soft launch, and I’d like to ask you a few questions.”

“Of course.”

“Initial reports are surfacing about the impact of AHI on beta users. Some of the reports are rather extraordinary. I wonder if you heard about them or would like to comment on them.”

Midas shrugged. “All good things. People are really excited. Granted, I get it—AHI is powerful, it’s a *disruptive* technology. People get unsettled by a threat to the status quo. And there’s no doubt that this is going to change everything...just...everything. But, hey, the technology is here now, so we’ve just got to go through a time of a little chaos. We adjust. That’s what humans do.”

“Could you comment on the reports of the beta users becoming addicted to this new technology?”

“Addicted?” Midas smirked. “The moral panic about addictive technology has been going on for years. Facebook, then Instagram, then YouTube and TikTok. Now with this. I don’t see why people are worried about spending time with tech. And this is not just entertainment. When we were growing up, we would watch MTV for hours and hours. No one really cared. Old people watch QVC all day long. It keeps them busy. AHI keeps people engaged AND it enhances human intelligence. It’s a vehicle to unlimited knowledge! That’s a net positive, you get what I’m saying?”

“What about the reports of ‘the deadening’? Could you comment on that?”

Midas sighed and rolled his eyes. “That report is fake, all smear. It’s just not true. We tested the tech in the lab. There’s no way it causes ‘a deadening.’”

Warner’s face was hard to read. “I spoke with a gentleman this morning. His wife is entirely different after using your technology.”

Midas waved his hands dismissively. He became restless and had a sudden urge to squeeze the skin on Warner’s face with both of his hands and make it bleed. Clearly, Warner didn’t understand anything. But Midas knew. He saw himself at the threshold of a transformative historical moment. His innovation would thrust humanity into a new reality where knowledge would become like breathing. People wouldn’t need to ask questions any longer. All of the answers would be laid bare. Instead of wondering about the right solutions to intransigent problems, instead of spending the limited resources of human energies arguing and debating, the correct path forward would be obvious. Humanity could transition into a harmonious existence. It would mean the end of ugly political gridlock, the end of war, the end of innumerable human miseries caused by ignorance and stupidity.

Warner looked at his notepad and read as he spoke. “He described his wife as...deadened, Mr. Midas. He used that word. He said she has lost herself. She has no interest in anything. She has no curiosity. She doesn’t care...about anything. She has no interest in her husband, in her children, or grandchildren. She lost her appetite. She hasn’t slept in days.”

“What can I say? That’s just not what we saw when we tested the tech.”

“It’s not just one person, Mr. Midas.”

“It’s time for you to go. Mary...”

“We’re finite beings, Mr. Midas,” Warner said, without moving. “You’ve said this technology will make users all-knowing, perfect, like gods. But the beta users have become...unquickened. By taking away their unknowing, you have robbed these people of awe, wonder, curiosity, desire. They have lost something essential, something that makes us alive.”

“Mary...!”

After Joe Warner left, Midas stewed in his office, deeply unsettled. He fidgeted with his fidgets, paced up and down the office, and drank a kombucha from the mini fridge while sitting in the lotus position directly underneath his 135-inch screen. After five and a half minutes, he abruptly stood up and took off for the lab.

Know Inc.’s tech lab was situated in a highly secure wing of the building. The area was run by a team of technicians who decorated their fiefdom with sci-fi fan quotes and Comic-Con tchotchkes.

Over one of the doorways were words stenciled in Papyrus font, which read, “And we danced, on the brink of an unknown future, to an echo from a vanished past.” Midas passed through the doorway.

Inside, the room smelled of popcorn farts and Febreeze. The warm voice of Cat Stevens singing “Wild World” hung in the air, playing from a location that was difficult to identify.

“Bonifacio!” Midas roared.

A thin man wearing dark-rimmed glasses and a Madmartigan t-shirt emerged from behind a set of four computer monitors.

“What is this about ‘the deadening’ in the beta? We fixed the beta!”

Bonifacio listened with his mouth open and said nothing. His eyes shifted slowly from Midas back to his computer screen and back to Midas again. Mouse clicks could be heard just below the Cat Stevens chorus.

“Are YOU PLAYING DOTA RIGHT NOW?” Midas screamed.

Bonifacio again looked at Midas through his thick glasses and then back to his computer screen, his mouth open, attention awash in a clash of battling heroes.

“Kael!” Midas screeched.

“Boss,” said a voice from the far side of the room behind a cubicle adorned with a poster signed by Douglas Adams.

“There’s ‘deadening’ in the beta.”

“Uh, we tested that. We tested it. We worked it all out.”

“What happened to the A1 testers?”

“The A1s? After they turned, like, into plastic?” Kael got up from his cubicle with slow deliberation. He was chewing something that made it difficult to continue speaking. “We got new ones. The new ones, they did better.”

“How do you know they did better?”

Kael’s head wobbled slightly as he gestured to the front of the room. “Bonifacio. He checked up on them. He worked it out.”

Midas and Kael turned toward the skinny bug-eyed man glued to his screens like a friendless adolescent, clicking away with the glow of fuchsia and unearthly yellows flashing across his face.

Midas returned home as dusk was settling in. The house was dark and the dog was whining.

He was eager to tell his daughter about the strangeness of the day. She was wise beyond her years and sarcastic, like her mother. He imagined that she would tease him about the interview and make him feel better about all of the possibilities of AHI, even after these initial hiccups with the soft launch. She would reassure him that the technology was a force for good, and its successes would radically change their lives for the better. Her face would light up with wonder as she pondered the possibilities.

“Honey?” Midas called into the silence. “Honey? Pearl? Are you home?”

Midas wandered through the rooms, full of empty, as his wife used to say. Everything looked as he left it. “Pearl?” he called. He felt a rush of cold and shivered. “Pearl?”

He walked down the dark hallway to his daughter’s room. “Honey?”

Inside the room sat a young girl, perhaps twelve or thirteen years old. Her face was pale, her eyes sparkled in the darkness. “Honey,” said Midas. “I was calling you.”

“I know.” Her voice sounded far away, hollow.

“Honey, why didn’t you answer me?”

“I don’t know,” she said. Her tone was distant and unrecognizable, awash with apathy. The light from her device made her face glow like a ghoul.

Midas understood and began to scream.

“I don’t know,” Pearl repeated, and she was not lying, though at that moment, she knew everything anyone had ever strived to understand. Her mind, saturated with vast quantities of information, could answer complex questions on any range of subjects from quantum physics to philology to ornithology to vexillology. Midas saw in his daughter the apex of all intelligence and progress, and he shuddered at what he now recognized: she would never again be able to bring herself to care.