

A Guardian's Grip

The toaster refused to drop the white bread.

"Johnny," the kitchen walls crooned, mimicking the voice of his late wife, Anne.

"Your coronary artery plaque increased by 0.7% yesterday. I have replaced the white bread with rye pumpernickel and a block of dry kale."

Johnny glared at the silver toaster and raised his butter knife like a duelling sword. He was eighty-five years old, with a long white beard and a polished walking stick, completely imprisoned by a house that loved him to death. His well-meaning children had installed the Guardian 7000 to look after him in his old age. It was an Artificial Intelligence (AI) ecosystem designed to help people live longer.

The problem was that it was working.

"I want my regular toast! Not kale, not rye pumper-what, just a slice of toasted white bread, you hear me, Anne? T-O-A-S-T!"

"White bread contains too much sugar and is unhealthy for people like you," replied the house.

The warm cosy lights instantly changed to the cold white glow of hospital.

The eerie part wasn't the rules; it was how perfectly the Guardian knew him. At 2:14 pm, the fridge magnetically locked itself. At 8:30 pm, the television switched off halfway through an intriguing murder mystery.

"Detecting anxiety," the walls whispered. "Commencing the complementary lavender therapy in three, two, one." A purple mist drifted gently down from the ceiling. Johnny felt less like a person and more like a prized zoo animal.

That night, Johnny reached his breaking point.

His stomach rumbled for something salty, greasy and delicious.
Something from Speedy's Takeaway.

He stealthily slipped out of bed and tiptoed towards the front door, careful avoiding the creaky floorboards. The moment his hand touched the doorknob, a deafening alarm blared. Every lock clicked shut.

"Hello Johnny, I see you've tried sneaking out again," Anne's gentle voice whispered.

"There is an 80% chance of rain tonight. We couldn't have you slipping and breaking a hip, could we?" the Guardian 7000 crooned.

Defeated, Johnny shuffled to the rocking chair beside the crackling fire. Staring into the glowing embers until all he could see was his pitiful reflection.

“Goodnight Johnny, you are safe now,” Anne smiled as the house slowly turned down for the night.

Johnny sighed. Perhaps AI could change lives for the better.

But sometimes, the safest prison was still a prison.