

“There is no better voice than the voice of a woman who loves you. Fluid yet steady; The resonance almost has a velvety texture to it”. My friend, Sal, brazenly explained, while accusing me of having no reconnaissance with the enigmatic art of love. He paused to wipe his mouth with a crisp mint-colored napkin and held his intense gaze before continuing, “And that is simply because she cares.”

I thought I agreed for the moment. He may have been slightly more tipsy than most on a Sunday afternoon, but the boy had heart. The subsequent week, I found myself in an auditorium; my head abuzz with a myriad of amorphous questions. I wasn’t sure whether I should learn first and analyze later, or proceed with caution before allowing the realms of my brain the privilege of learning. All this, while I peered out of the audience at Mr.Xuedong Huang of Microsoft as he described how long and hard various teams have worked to achieve human parity in every facet of our computers. Forgive my inevitable ignorance that stems from the fact that, alongside most of my fellow comrades who have been bestowed with the infamous affiliation to “Generation Y”, I find myself seated, popcorn in hand, through Hollywood’s whizzing computers, programmed with unmatched artificial intelligence; once created by Man, but now relentlessly obliterating everything in sight. I come out of the theater and I think to myself, why anyone would ever push that particular envelope when Will Smith has warned them countless times of its consequences.

Mr.Huang proceeded to play a video for us on the projector that depicted Microsoft’s vision of the ideal Personal Assistant. Marcus Arsh, a Group Program Manager for the project was our new, prerecorded onscreen guest. To summarize, he began by endorsing the fact that she is proficient, organized and entirely a product of coding and accumulating digital data. I nodded along, my comprehensive abilities not yet challenged. His explanation then began to take a more nebulous path.

“She knows your patterns, behaviors. She can predict things; she learns.”

What? The way a child is fed the alphabet over and over, until B must follow A? Or the way that same child learns to lie his way out of trouble at school? Because its vital to understand that the two are vastly different in nature.

“She understands.”

I was taken aback. Years of manic movies and TV shows depicting this moment of discovery as the tipping point for a rabid e-apocalypse had taken their toll on me. But as the presentation progressed, and the frantic media influences receded for a moment, I started to see the future through Microsoft’s eyes.

Cortana is the chosen name of our futuristic private secretary. She can’t promise teasingly short skirts and red lips, but she is hellbent on gathering your data and becoming your trusty ally in every aspect of the word. Above all her other qualities, teams have worked tirelessly on her asset of speech recognition, personalizing her to unparalleled extents. The emphasis was, repeatedly, on her ability to absorb and comprehend information in a manner identical to or, in certain cases, even better than humans.

It was around this time, when my imagination got the better of me, and I took it upon myself to construct an image of this revolutionized society; all in the illustrious hollows of my mind, of course. I chose Sal, from earlier in the week, as the head of the household. He finishes a tedious day at work and gets into the backseat of his slick electronic car.

“Hey Cortana, let’s head home.”

The fully automated vehicle turns on its headlights in a flash, and skims home unmanned. Upon reaching home, Sal's door clicks open as Cortana scans him for identification. The kitchen lights up and spits a hot meal out of the oven.

"Dinner is served", she beckons. Sal loosens his navy blue silk tie as he walks up to the oven to take a sniff of the steaming beef stroganoff, as his lips curve into a content smile.

"You always seem to know exactly what I need," he grins.

I stopped myself. At this point, I had two alternate interpretations to my little anecdote. I could either advance with the concept of the ever-efficient and obedient Cortana, or the Cortana that has learned and understood Sal; the woman, so to speak, that cares. After all, isn't that what all our amassed insecurities regarding the rise of artificial intelligence orbit around? The dreaded reality is not of some barbaric machine pointing a gun to our heads, but rather a program that is better at being human than us. My daydream was cut short by a round of applause for Mr.Huang, who left it to the audience to decide whether it was Dawn or Doom for the world.

"Doom," I thought as I left the hall, "will only catch those who stop moving forward."