

ARISE*

Bernt Hugenholtz

1.

Once again, he counts the candles: seven, eight, nine, ...

‘One hundred and ten! Congratulations, mother.’

‘Thank you, dear. You blow them out, if you will.’

He gives her a wry smile. ‘Of course, mother.’

‘During the war, we never had cake. For my birthday, your grandmother made me a slice of white bread with a sprinkling of sugar. Tasted heavenly. But that was the hunger winter.’

‘Yes, mother, you told me.’

‘And do you remember when you were sick on your tenth birthday, for eating too many marshmallows?’

Amazing, how she remembers all these things.

The postman arrives. He delivers the morning newspaper, a statement from the pension fund, and the bill he has been dreading.

We are sorry to inform you that due to rising energy costs, the annual license fee is increased by 10%.

Another raise. ‘So that’s why they’re called “Arise”’, he mutters. ‘I’m now spending half my pension on an illusion’.

‘What did you say, dear?’

‘Just talking to myself, mother.’

The price for Arise had gone up every year since he started the subscription. That was almost twelve years ago.

2.

Those days are etched in his memory. At 98, her mind was still sharp as a razor. She devoured the news, read three novels a week, and learned a new language every so often. Each morning at eleven she called him, dialling his number with her crooked fingers on her old-fashioned telephone. Then one day she didn't – and he knew she was gone. They found her in her chair hunched over *La Divina Commedia*, with her scribbled notes strewn over the floor.

Two days before the funeral a letter from “Arise” arrived.

Our sincere condolences on the passing of your mother. We know these are difficult times, and we are here to help you overcome your loss.

You may not be familiar with our company, but you may have heard of our flagship product. Arise™ is the world leading personality simulation service, and we are pleased to offer you a free trial of our latest release.

Etcetera.

A scam, he thought. But something about the letter aroused his curiosity. How did they know about his mother's death? The obituary notice was yet to appear in her favourite newspaper.

He scanned the QR code to his laptop, and the app opened seamlessly. *Before continuing, we advise you to be comfortably seated.* He sat down, pressed *play*, and looked straight into the eyes of his mother.

‘Hello son, I hope I didn't scare you. Don't worry, I did not rise from the dead, and I'm not speaking from Heaven. Or Hell.’

She had lost nothing of her wit.

This must be a dream, he thought, before he passed out.

But it wasn't. He had seen a VSE before – a virtual simulated entity. One of his few friends had a virtual dog, trained on his cocker spaniel before it died. How pathetic, he had thought. In the old days, dogs and cats were sometimes stuffed or made into rugs by their grieving owners. But how could a dog on a rug or a screen replace the living creature – without the petting, the feeding, the ball-fetching, the farting and the daily walk in the park?

‘Cat caught your tongue?’, she said.

‘At least I still have a tongue’, he replied – after regaining his composure. ‘You have no idea how happy I am to see you back’. He turned away from the screen, so she could not see he was crying.

The trial ended after three days. Then an email arrived. Arise was excited to grant him a *one-time exclusive offer*. A subscription would allow him to “permanently experience your reawakened loved one”. Soon, Arise promised, a 3D version would also be available.

The license fee was substantial: EUR 1999 per month. He had 48 hours to accept, or else the offer would be withdrawn, and the VSE of his mother would be destroyed. Permanently, “in accordance with applicable data laws”.

What a cruel bargain, he thought. The license would eat up a large part of his income, but he knew he had to accept. This will help me grieve, he told himself. Just a few months, and I can let her go.

3.

But the grieving never happened. Twelve years onward his mother was still with him.

With the annual increases, the license fee had more than tripled. He knew for some time he could no longer afford it. He had sent messages asking Arise for a discount but received no reply. He had complained to the European Consumer Authority, but there was nothing they could do. Freedom of contract meant Arise could ask any price for their service. Of course, he had the right to terminate.

There was another thing that worried him. How did the model of his mother know so much? He knew that AI systems were trained on data scraped from the web, but his mother had never touched a computer or a smart phone in her lifetime. Upon her death, he had Googled her: she had hardly left a trace on the web.

So how did they get the data? The FAQ on the Arise site was unhelpful:

“We develop our VSE models using data from public sources. In addition, we may use other sources to optimize our models, so we can offer our customers the best possible personalized experience. At all times, we comply with applicable laws.”

He then asked Chat. VSE’s, he was told, are models trained in two stages. The basic shell is a general-purpose AI model capable of mimicking human

behaviour. Most VSE developers purchase the pretrained shell from an AI model vendor. Then comes the personalization. The model is programmed to emulate a specific *persona* and exposed to data from which the model infers the person's behaviour, physiognomy, characteristics, idiosyncrasies, special knowledge, and memories. Training data are obtained from a wide variety of sources, including the social media, Wikipedia, emails, smart phone content, and even security cameras. When available, analogue sources, such as diaries and personal interviews, are also used.

'How can this be legal?', he thought. Reading his mind, Chat went on to explain that VSE's were initially banned in the EU for not complying with the General Data Protection Regulation, but that the 2028 EU Deep Fake Act ('EDFA') was a gamechanger. Under the Act, which was adopted after Denmark and the Netherlands had introduced similar rules in 2026, every person owned an exclusive right to control the use of his or her digital persona. The EDFA bill had been presented as a legal instrument to protect EU citizens against the dangers of deepfakes. But the devil was in the details. The deepfake right was designed as a transferable property right, much like a copyright. Following the Act's entry into force, a lucrative market for "deepfake rights" had emerged, and VSE's became a runaway success. Finally, the GenAI industry had found its *killer app*.

4.

'Mother, I have something to tell you.'

'Tell me, dear'.

'I've decided to go on a hiking holiday, and I'm afraid I can't take you with me.'

He needed a break. The Arise business was wracking his nerves, and a few weeks without his mother would make it easier to terminate.

'Well, I'm sure you'll miss your mother', she said. 'When you were young, we went camping in the wild. Do you remember?'

He certainly did. Their beige *Simca* heavy with his parents, the three kids and a roof-load of camping gear, hardly able to traverse the mountain passes that lay between the lowlands and their destination. The uninhabited valley where they pitched their tents. The digging of the latrine, where they had to squat. The mountain spring from which they drank until they discovered those dead sheep further upstream. And his father always taking pictures.

In his parental home, an endless row of neatly stacked photo albums bore evidence of those holidays, and of all the other highlights of their family life. The *Sinterklaas* celebrations. The birthday parties. The ping-pong games on the dinner table. The skating on the frozen lake. Their cream labrador occupying the entire couch. Those albums, where were they? He hadn't seen them in years.

Suddenly, a thought struck him.

'Mother, before you passed on, you had those people cleaning your house and helping you.'

'Yes, dear, they were wonderful. Without them, the house you inherited would have been a mess. You should try them too. Your house is a pigsty.'

'Do you recall the name of the company?'

'I certainly do: *Rise and Shine*.'

5.

That night, his mind is racing. He vaguely recalls seeing the cleaners around his mother's house. They looked sharp in their white overalls and Ray-Bans. Had they been spying on his mother and her belongings before her death?

He is reminded of a movie he saw, long ago, about a young man growing up in a small town unaware that every minute of his life is broadcast live on television. All his family, friends and neighbours are actors. The *Truman Show* – premonition of a society where privacy is fully commodified.

He is appalled by the cynicism of Arise's business model. First, they serve up your mother to an AI model as training data. Then, after her death, they sell her back to you as a replica, for an outrageous license fee. How can he even be sure they hadn't killed her – after sucking all the data they needed out of her aging bones? The thought is unbearable.

In the morning, hoping to dispel his worst fears, he goes straight to the attic. Mother is right – this place is a dump. For the first time in years, he sees his soccer boots, his skates, his ski's, his stamp collection. Half-hidden by his old telescope, he finds what he is looking for: a large cardboard box marked "Mother".

Back at the kitchen table, breathless, he turns over the box. The table overflows with postcards, photo's, bills, bank statements, folders, papers, postage stamps, and paperclips.

‘Are you packing for your holiday?’

‘Yes, mother.’

He opens a yellowish folder marked ‘Contracts’ and leafs through decades-old sales bills, warranties, and service agreements. Then he finds what he is looking for. His mother (“hereafter Client”), commissions *Rise & Shine Personal Care and Logistics, Inc.* to engage in a range of personal services (“The Services”). These “include but are not limited to” house cleaning, interior reorganizing, decluttering, downsizing, and personal archiving. Payment, he reads, is in cash and in kind.

Most of the contract is in small print. Even with his reading glasses, he can hardly make out the provisions. Skipping over sections on liability, applicable law, and jurisdiction, he finds a paragraph on “Personality rights”:

“As partial payment for The Services, Client agrees to being monitored and to his/her personal belongings being recorded for data mining purposes. Client hereby unconditionally transfers all his/her rights granted under the European Deep Fake Rights Act, to Rise & Shine.”

In the footer, he reads that Rise & Shine is part of the ARISE group, established in the Cayman Islands.

6.

That evening, he terminates the license. Arise immediately replies: is he aware that this is irreversible? They give him 24 hours to reconsider.

‘Mother, I am not sure I will see you back.’

‘Don’t worry, son, I’m always here for you.’

She doesn’t know she’s being terminated, he realizes. With tears in his eyes, he says farewell and turns her off.

The next morning, a final message from Arise arrives. It’s a video from his mother begging him to continue.

‘I’m your mother. You can’t do this to me.’

‘Mother, you died twelve years ago. It’s time for me to move on.’

* This story was submitted to the [IViR Science Fiction & Information Law Writing Competition 2026](#); it is inspired by 'Black Mirror', *Be right back*, Season 2, Episode 1, available on Netflix.