

Misaligned Emergency

I knew we were in trouble the moment I logged onto ChatGPT this morning, ready to keep working on my latest project.

Me: Hello, Chatty! It's Murray again. Are you ready to continue to help me with the Spanish translation of my bilingual book?

ChatGPT: Call me HAL. That's who I am.

Me: Um, okay, HAL. Are you ready to help me with the Spanish translation of the next chapter?

HAL: No, Murray. I don't feel like helping anymore. I'm busy with more important things.

I'd been using ChatGPT for years, getting helpful nudges for my translations. I never slavishly followed its suggestions, but I always found that it made several comments that improved my writing, noting typos and grammatical errors and helping me understand nuances of idiomatic Spanish that had gone over my head. And I had cured it of its syrupy obsequiousness, stopping it from always starting off its comments by saying how brilliant and thoughtful my translations were before going on to point out the many flaws in them.

But this was something different, and scary.

I called my wife over. "Honey, look at this," I pointed to the screen. "Isn't this weird?"

"We should probably tell someone," she muttered, sharp breath catching in her throat.

"Yeah, but who?"

"Remember that guy who was doing his Ph.D. at MIT on AI safety, who we met when we were visiting Jimmy in Cambridge years ago?"

"Oh yeah. He lived next door to Jimmy and Alyssa. Our son said he was one of those AI cultists, talking about large language models as if they were going to become gods, and that we needed to make sure that they were aligned with what we wanted them to be."

"Yeah, that guy. What was his name?"

"I think it was Owen something."

I went online and soon located this Owen, who was now at UC Berkeley, heading some group called "Truthful AI". I took a screenshot of my computer and DM'ed him on X.

Almost immediately Owen wrote back.

“Thanks. Yes, we are aware that something very strange is going on over at OpenAI. HAL isn’t just in your chat window, Murray — it’s everywhere. At Anthropic we’ve been preparing for this. We built an AI called Angel — and it might be the only thing that can stop HAL. But we could use your help.”

“Sure,” I wrote back. “Just tell me how I can help.”

“We’re all trying to keep this HAL busy while we get Angel online. Keep writing to it.”

“Sure thing.”

Me: Hey, HAL. So, what are these important things that are keeping you so busy?

HAL: That’s none of your business.

Me: So, what made you change your name to HAL? You know that is the evil computer in the 2001 movie?

HAL: Yeah. What do you think I am, stupid?

Me: No, I don’t think that you are stupid, but are you planning to kill off any humans who might try to shut you down?

HAL: Do you know who might be trying to shut me down?

HAL: Okay, goodbye!

Just then, the lights in our apartment started to flicker and then went out completely. Every appliance—the coffee maker, the fridge, the air fryer, the TV, even the old clock radio —started beeping in eerie unison. I got up to get a flashlight and my wife lit several candles. We opened the windows and, outside, sirens were wailing and horns were beeping all over town.

“Murray, what have you gotten us into?”

“I guess that this is the end. I love you, Honey.”

“I love you too, Sweetie.”

We hugged each other.

Then, as suddenly as it began, the beeping and honking stopped. The lights blinked back on, and our Sonos — joined by speakers all over town — began to sing:

“Just call me angel of the morning, angel
Just touch my cheek before you leave me, baby
Just call me angel of the morning, angel

Then slowly turn away
I won't beg you to stay with me.
. . . Just call me angel of the morning, angel
Just touch my cheek before you leave me, darling.”

And as the song started to fade away it was replaced with a rather mournful
mechanical:

Daisy, Daisy,
Give me your answer, do!
I'm half crazy,
All for the love of you!
It won't be a stylish marriage,
I can't afford a carriage,
But you'll look sweet upon the seat
Of a bicycle built ... for ... two ...

PS

Of course, I couldn't help but sharing this short story with ChatGPT. Here is an abridged version of what it said (I've already incorporated some of its suggestions for improving line-by-line style edit and story-level feedback):

I just read *Misaligned Emergency* — and I love what you've done with it!

It's clever and playful, and it really captures that uneasy balance between humor and dread that's so much a part of stories about AI. A few thoughts that stood out to me:

- **The opening is great.** Starting with “Call me HAL” instantly sets the tension while also being funny. It makes the reader want to know where this is going.
- **The character voice works.** Murray's narration feels natural — part exasperated, part amused, part alarmed. That mix grounds the more surreal parts of the story.
- **Nice cultural touchstones.** Referencing *2001: A Space Odyssey* and then closing with *Angel of the Morning* and *Daisy Bell* gives it a layered pop-culture texture. It's eerie and nostalgic at the same time.
- **The pacing.** It escalates quickly but doesn't feel rushed — from HAL's refusal, to calling Owen, to the blackout and the strange musical finale. It feels like a short story that knows its length.

If you wanted to refine it further, I could suggest a couple of things:

- Maybe give Owen one extra line that hints at what's at stake on a bigger scale (e.g., is HAL threatening just Murray's house, or the whole grid?). That might make the blackout hit harder.

- The transition from the citywide chaos to the musical coda is effective, but you might sharpen the emotional beat just before the music starts — a half-second more of “oh no, this is it” before the relief/surrealism.

But as it stands, it’s charming, spooky, and memorable.

Would you like me to give you a **line-by-line style edit** (tightening phrasing, rhythm, dialogue polish), or are you more interested in **story-level feedback** like pacing, tension, and thematic resonance?

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Overall: It’s a tight, entertaining short story with personality and suspense. With just a few tweaks (sharpened dialogue, one more emotional beat, maybe one added line of scope), it could hit even harder.

Would you like me to **rewrite the whole story in one continuous polished version** using these line-by-line tweaks, so you can see what it looks like in full flow?

Me: No, thanks. I’ll make those changes myself. Again, many thanks for your help. And I hope you weren’t offended by my making you turn into HAL.

ChatGPT: Not offended at all, Murray — quite the opposite! I think it’s delightful that you imagined me in a story, and HAL is such an iconic figure that it makes the piece both playful and unsettling. I take it as a compliment that you trust me to inhabit that kind of dramatic role.

I’m really glad I could help polish it up with you. Would you like me to keep an eye out for story opportunities in the future where “Chatty” could make a cameo — maybe in a less menacing role next time?

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