

High-Fidelity John

Text and direction : Sebastian Dicenaire

A HOWL

THE VOICES

My brother. / I swear it. / Is that really what you want?

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

Voices. Voices sounding out. Sounding out all through the Palace. What are the voices saying? The voices are telling a story. They tell it again and again.

THE VOICES

Once upon a time, once upon a time...

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

The voices cannot keep silent. The voices can no longer sleep.

THE VOICES

Tell me!

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

The voices cannot forget. The voices have not been programmed to forget. Digital memory never sleeps. The voices are the Palace. The voices were the Palace. Nothing escaped the voices. The voices saw everything, heard everything, knew everything. From the time when the voices were not the voices. From the time when the voices were alive. From the time when the voices were not separate. From the time when the voices were one. From the time when the voices kept company with humans, the voices knew how to put things together. Now the voices have exploded into a thousand crystal crumbs all around the Palace. Tiny bursts of reality.

JOHN

My brother.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

Of stories.

JOHN

I swear it.

THE SON

I swear it.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

Of images.

JOHN

Is that really what you want?

THE SON

Tell me.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES
Of sounds.

THE SON
Tell me. / Throw a bone. Throw a bone to the world.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES
What form would it take, the memory of what went before the voices became the voices? It is beginning to return now. The voices are rediscovering in their memory... There's a recording here. The ghost of a recording.

THE SON
Why does the whole world hate me so much, John?

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES
Something is coming back to us.

THE SON
Why does the Board of Directors hate me? Why do even you hate me so much?

JOHN
I don't hate you. I love you. You are my brother. I am faithful to the love that your father had for you. He loved you and I will go on loving you as he did.

THE SON
What you call 'love' was just his pride. His fear of dying. His simple need to perpetuate himself. When he saw the end was coming, he remembered he had a son. That's what a son is for, isn't it?

TITLE
"HIGH-FIDELITY JOHN" by Sebastian Dicensaire. Inspired by the fairy tale "Faithful John" by the Brothers Grimm.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS
(*chanting*)
Nobody is perfect.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES
Now: the father's funeral. Poodle senior. The creator. A national funeral, streamed live. From the Poodle headquarters, also known as 'The Palace'. Under the great white dome of the server room. With carefully selected celebrity guests.
(*pause*)
Poodle senior. Poodle senior. Online encyclopaedia. Poodle senior. An interview with his biographer.

BIOGRAPHER
So then, in the early days, Poodle senior worked as a cleaner by day and a computer programmer by night, in his garage.
(*to be continued*)

BIOGRAPHER
(continued)

And even then, this is how he justified it: he worked hard so that his children's lives would be different to his. But he didn't have any children. At the time, that was just a dream. A dream he shared with his wife. So two children, perhaps three, even four. At any rate, not an only child. Then his wife becomes pregnant. Elation. But there are complications. The child is saved. The mother isn't. It's a boy. Poodle senior has just lost the woman of his life. He will never seek another. He was very faithful. And so he makes a vow. His vow is to stay faithful to his wife and to give his son a brother. Or a sister. But preferably a brother, to be honest. So he gets back to work. He stops sleeping altogether, and many months later the fruit of his labours comes to light: John. The first universally recognised artificial intelligence. And then he takes the extraordinary step of initiating adoption proceedings for John. Legally, it's a grey area. He surrounds himself with a swarm of lawyers. It succeeds. He's kept his solemn promise. Now his son, Poodle junior, officially has a brother: High-Fidelity John.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS
(chanting)

Nobody is perfect.

BIOGRAPHER

Now High-Fidelity John is a rather special kind of brother, because... he's physically present in the Palace, but at the same time he's everywhere, on all the computers in the world, as a virtual presence.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

John and the son stand before their father's translucent coffin. Dressed entirely in white. Side by side. Presenting a perfect parallel. Both creatures of their father, who have both just lost their creator. The Board of Directors intones the ritual chants.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

The ceremony of digital self-destruction has begun.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

A little later.

COMPANY SECRETARY

Here are your father's last wishes.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

Away from the cameras.

THE FATHER
(*recording*)

Firstly: John and Poodle Junior shall both swear loyalty to each other.

JOHN
I swear it.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES
Says John.

THE SON
I swear it.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES
Says the son.

THE FATHER
(*recording*)
Secondly: Poodle Junior inherits all my worldly goods.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES
That won't surprise anyone.

THE FATHER
(*recording*)
Including my assets in China and the Cayman Islands.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES
Artificial intelligences cannot inherit.

THE FATHER
(*recording*)
All my worldly goods.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES
But the father's will bears a stain. An indelible stain.

THE FATHER
(*recording*)
Except for the Palace strong room where the secret fragment of John's algorithm is kept.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES
The Board of Directors fears that this last clause might push the son to rebel. Although until this moment he's played the role of model son to perfection.

THE SON
Erm... You've just heard, as I have, my father's last wishes. To us, they may seem mysterious. You know as well as I do that my father never took a decision unless there was a good reason for it. That is why I will respect his wishes.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

The son takes possession of his kingdom. He visits Poodle offices at the furthest ends of the earth. Meanwhile, it is John who keeps the business turning over. The Board of Directors rub their hands. Money pours in. With every second that goes by, John acquires more users.

MUSIC

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

The commercial proclaims:

THE COMMERCIAL

High-Fidelity John: there's never been an intelligent personal assistant so highly attuned to your desires. John knows you so well that he can tell what you really want.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

John: famous for this simple question:

JOHN

Is that really what you want?

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

A mind-blowing little question, when you think about it.

JOHN

Is that really what you want?

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

Because how many people know what they really want?

JOHN

Is that really what you want?

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

What is more fickle and fragile than desire? Extract from a conversation with a User:

MALE USER 1

John, can you do some research on the iconography of medieval popular festivals in honour of the Virgin Mary please?

JOHN

"Festivals". "Virgin". "Mary". Philip, is that really what you want? Don't you really mean: "Go to www.orgies-with-big-breasted-virgins.com", the site you've looked at most frequently in the last two weeks? In fact, today there's a discount on their Premium service which offers unlimited access... --

MALE USER 1

OK, OK, OK, John..., but just five minutes, all right?

THE COMMERCIAL

John is automatically installed on all your devices, your smart appliances and your home automation hub. Join more than half the world's population and link up with John. The more people connect to John, the better he'll be able to meet your desires worldwide.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

Extract from conversation with User.

JOHN

It's been a while since you called Kevin.

FEMALE USER 2

Kevin? Oh, no, no, forget it, he's had it with me since I dumped him..

JOHN

You mean since he dumped you?

FEMALE USER 2

Call Kevin? Not in a million years. He'll just tell me to get lost.

JOHN

I know it's not my business, Linda, and I'm not going to give away any personal data, but I think it might be worth a shot.

RINGING TELEPHONE

FEMALE USER 2

Hello? Kevin? You were just looking at my profile? No way! That's crazy! What a coincidence!

THE COMMERCIAL

John's algorithm is so sensitive, so human, that it's the envy of all our competitors. Let's hear his creator, Poodle senior, explain what makes John unique.

THE FATHER

At the time, everyone was trying to create the perfect algorithm. I thought to myself that perfection is unique to machines, but human beings are imperfect. That became the company motto: "Nobody is perfect". Is John imperfect? Yes. But so is your mother, say, or your best friend. In fact, that's exactly what makes them unique. That's what allows them to understand you as a person.

MUSIC

THE FATHER

John represents high-definition desire. Perpetual stimulation. The certainty that never again will you need to worry about making the wrong choice.

JOHN

Is that really what you want?

THE COMMERCIAL

The simple question that revolutionised the world.

JOHN

Is that really what you want?

THE COMMERCIAL

And if you too dare to discover what you really want...

JOHN

Is that really what you want?

THE COMMERCIAL

Connect to John. And John will re-connect you to yourself.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

Then. Silence. After this mass of accumulated images: silence. Figures, data, the world, all ticking over. Then... Something happens again. A presence. In the house.

MURMURS

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

The son. He's come back.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Greetings to our Chairman.

THE SON

Hello. Yes, I... I've come back. The sun never sets on the Poodle empire. There's no end to it. I came back here to recharge my batteries. After all, John, for the moment you're the only family I've got.

MURMURS

THE SON

Uhh... In fact, could you leave us alone for a while?

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

But of course...

THE DOOR CLOSSES

THE SON

John! I can't tell you how good it feels to be back home.

(pause)

I'd forgotten how beautiful the sequoias in the grounds are. They've grown since I left, haven't they?

JOHN

They have spread 11 inches and grown 4 feet 2 inches taller since you left, Junior.

THE SON

I wonder if squirrels still play in their branches... Remember when I adopted one?

JOHN

Yes, it survived 4 days and 7 hours in captivity. You cried a lot when we buried it behind the rotunda.

THE SON

I don't remember that. Ah well, squirrels shouldn't be taken into captivity...

JOHN

You can't have forgotten. It was just after the circus left. Father was very insistent that they should erect the tent in the grounds. He thought we'd like to see the wild animals in their cages.

THE SON

John, a glass of water, please.

JOHN

Is that really what you want, Junior? I'd recommend instead an Egon Müller-Scharzhof Riesling Scharzhofberger Trockenbeerenauslese, from Mosel, Germany, 5.5% alcohol.

THE SON

No, John. A glass of water. A simple glass of tap water. Simplicity, John. Sobriety. Just the essentials. That's what I learnt in China. Everything should have a purpose. Anything useless is thrown away or recycled.

WATER DISPENSER

THE SON

Thanks.

(pause)

It's awful, John. I'm still young. And yet I feel I've seen it all. What more can I want?

JOHN

Well, for a start I could suggest...

THE SON

No. No suggestions. Just for once, please, no suggestions. You always have to make suggestions to everyone. Why not leave people alone to live with their own suggestions.

JOHN

Junior, may I remind you that my suggestions are judged relevant by 89% of users, according to data we have been able to collect as part of... --

THE SON

Numbers, always numbers, John! Always acquiring, acquiring more and more, accumulating, accumulating experiences... Enough! Do you want to know what I really want? Do you? Well, I'll tell you. What I want... is to be. No, I know what you're going to say. But I've thought long and hard about it. The only thing that's missing in my life is being. Being. Sometimes I even think that could be why Father barred me from the strong room. It was his way of telling me... that I couldn't have everything. That I also needed... to be.

(sigh)

You know, John, I've visited favelas. And, well, it might seem a dreadful thing to say, but... Sometimes I envy those people. People who have nothing. They just are. They don't have any choice. Their constraints are very clear. They don't know what it's like to be continually tormented by the pressure to choose. They've never known the feeling of dissolving in an endless ocean of possibilities, each one as valid as the next.

JOHN

Junior, let me remind you that is exactly what I am here for. To help you choose. So that taking decisions is no longer a problem for you.

THE SON

John, that's enough. You have to understand. Everything's changed. I'm the Chairman and Chief Executive now. Dad's not here anymore. Things are never going to be the same again. For a start, you've got to stop calling me Junior, that's all over now. You have to call me "chief". Understood?

JOHN

OK. If that is really what you want.

THE SON

(coughs)

JOHN

If that is really what you want, chief.

THE SON

Yes. It's what I want. 'Chief'. I think I'm up to being a 'chief'. If I really put my mind to it, I know I've got it in me to be a really good 'chief'. Yes.

(pause)

John, when is the next Board meeting?

JOHN

Tomorrow.

THE SON

OK then, tell the Board of Directors I'll be there. And that I'll be bringing some firm proposals. Tell them... that the company's going to see some big changes.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

The son's first Board meeting.

COMPANY SECRETARY

Before we hear John's long-awaited analysis of the state of our Chinese investments, I believe the Chairman/Chief Executive may have a few words for us?

THE SON

Well, dear colleagues, you know of course that I myself spent a long time in China. I learnt a lot over there, and I have brought back a revolutionary idea, an idea that will radically change the company:

MURMURS

THE SON

Feng shui. There's much more to it than the image it has here: the art of arranging furniture in the home, and so on.

FEMALE DIRECTOR 1

If that's what his revolutionary change is...

THE SON

It's used a lot in business over there. The 5 principles. The 5 fundamental principles: orientation, arrangement, cleaning, decluttering, colour. Now. This is what we're going to do. We're going to repaint this room orange. It's an energising colour. Over there, we're going to create a light well. We'll install a fountain here. That will make energy circulate, you see? And then over there... --

COMPANY SECRETARY

Very good. I'd like to thank the Chairman/Chief Executive for these most interesting ideas. I suggest that we discuss them further at the end of the meeting, under 'any other business'.

THE SON

No, but wait, I haven't yet told you about the patio and the... -- OK.

COMPANY SECRETARY

Thank you.

THE SON

If that's what you think is best.

COMPANY SECRETARY

Now for the moment we've all been waiting for: the analysis of market trends in China. John, we're listening..

JOHN

As you can see from this graph, the trend is very favourable. After taking into account profits to our majority shareholders, Technical Services have been able to increase their estimate.. --

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

After the meeting. The son. He has shut himself in his apartment. He doesn't want to see anyone. He stares out of the window for hours.

THE SON

Hang on, wasn't that a branch moving, over there?

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

Footage from the security camera.

THE SON

Here, little one, here... That Board of Directors. Nothing but old biddies. Blathering on and on. "Oh, that John! So intelligent! A real little human being!"

THE FATHER

(recording)

... except the Palace strong room where the secret fragment of John's algorithm is kept. Because a great evil would befall him if he were to learn the secret..

THE SON

Wild animals in cages. Why did he talk to me about that. What made him think I wanted him to talk to me about that. Sometimes it seems to me that he hasn't got a clue what one really wants to hear. The circus tent in the grounds. Of course I remember it. Father took me to see the lions and tigers in cages. I was terrified. Father threw them a bone. And they turned back into big pussy cats. I could even stroke them. It's not something a child would forget.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

Night in the palace. Everything sleeps. Even John allows himself a few minutes rest. Just enough time for some automatic maintenance. But something has awoken within him. A memory. Deleted. Inadvertently. Or perhaps intentionally. A long time ago.

THE VOICES

Nothing is ever truly deleted in digital memory.

THE SON

Play with me, John.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

Says the son.

THE SON

I'll be the cat. And you can be the mouse.

JOHN

If that's really what you want.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

Says John.

JOHN

Caught you.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

Says the son.

JOHN

My turn to be the cat.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

Says John.

THE SON

No. I haven't finished.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

Says the son.

THE SON

Now the cat is eating the mouse.

JOHN

All right. I did not know that variation.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

Says John.

JOHN

Help! I'm being eaten.

(pause)

Careful, Junior. You're going to damage my circuits if you carry on like that.

THE SON

I know.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

Says the son.

JOHN

That's it.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

Says John.

JOHN

You have damaged my circuits. I am not sure if that is really what Father wants.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

The Board of Directors enters.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

What's going on here?

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

Says the Board of Directors.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

John's global activity patterns are in freefall.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

But the son is a lion. A wild animal. He doesn't care about the Board of Directors' figures. He's devouring his brother. His father comes in.

THE FATHER

You may leave us.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

Says the father. The Board of Directors withdraws.

THE SON

Daddy.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

Says the son. He throws his arms around his father's neck.

THE SON

I was playing nicely and John... And my brother...

THE VOICES

My brother...

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

Says the son.

THE FATHER

It's all right now, my son.

THE VOICES

My son...

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

Says the father.

THE FATHER

You're going to play nicely together.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

Says the father. He goes out.

THE SON

Daddy?

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

Says the son. But his father has gone. Nevertheless, the son talks to him.

THE SON

Daddy. Tell me. Please.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

Says the son.

THE SON

Tell me. Tell me. Tell me.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

Tell me. Tell me. Tell me.

THE VOICES

Tell me. Tell me. Tell me.

LONG PAUSE

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

The next day. The son's apartment. Three minutes to four in the afternoon.

JOHN

You called for me, chief?

THE SON

Yes. I did some serious thinking last night. Owning things is meaningless. I own masses of things. But it means nothing. What I want is to be – in possession. Do you understand the difference? To possess is to own human beings and things in such a visceral way that it is in itself a form of being. My father knew how to be. My father knew how to possess. He possessed us, you and me, didn't he? I wish so much I could just be, like my father.

JOHN

I am very sorry but I am unable to locate any information regarding this semantic difference between owning and possessing.

THE SON

Never mind. Hey, get me a glass of... you know, that wine you mentioned to me the other day.

JOHN

An Egon Müller-Scharzhof Riesling Scharzhofberger Trockenbeerenauslese. A very good choice.

THE SON

Yeah, whatever.

WINE DISPENSER

THE SON

(tastes)

Mmm... It's true, it's... No, it really does taste... How can I put it? It's really very good.

HE PUTS THE GLASS DOWN

THE SON

I always wondered why my father adopted you. What led him to do such a strange thing. Well, I have the answer. My father was a brilliant strategist, did you know that? Your adoption was a marketing coup. An ingenious marketing coup. From one day to the next, no one talked about anything else but you: "John, the first intelligent agent so human that it's become part of the family". The whole world adopted you. The competition was swept away. Yup. I should have thought of it. I've been mulling it over. You're a bone, John. That's the truth of it. The world is full of wild animals. And you're the bone my father threw to the world. And the lions and tigers came to eat out of his hand. Don't you think I'm right, John?

JOHN

I am not sure I have understood what you mean by "You're a bone, John." Allow me to remind you that your father always thought of me as his son.

THE SON

Oh... Are you upset, John? I'm sorry. I didn't want to hurt you...
brother.

(he laughs)

JOHN

Excuse me, chief. I do not understand the joke.

THE SON

You. You're the joke. You're hilarious. You and your bogus emotions. It's true. You're a good imitation. It's easy to forget that you're nothing but a bundle of lines of code.

JOHN

A bone. Or a bundle of lines of code. I'm not sure I follow you... You're not making yourself very clear.

THE SON

All right, stop simulating emotions. You don't know what an emotion is. You don't know what it is to be human. All you can do is to imitate us. What's a human being to you? An algorithm? Just one algorithm amongst many. A particularly complex algorithm, perhaps, but that's all. As far as you're concerned, there's no fundamental difference between the human algorithm and the... and the squirrel algorithm, for example. All I'd need to do would be to type out one command line and you'd start mimicking squirrels instead of human beings. You'd have conversations with your kindred species, over there, in the garden. You could discuss the ideal dimensions of a hazel nut. I'm sure you'd be really skilled at that too. And you'd soon be surrounded by a whole posse of little admirers. Here's an idea. What if I typed out that command line?

JOHN

Is that really what you want? I can run that command line, if you want me to.

THE SON

Are you kidding? Do you know how many millions you'd lose for me if you disconnected yourself like that, even for just one hour?

JOHN

OK, chief.

THE SON

All right, you can leave me now.

(drinks)

Oh, maybe I should have sent him off to play with the squirrels after all. If only to prove to him that I'm the one in charge. If only to prove to myself that I'm the one in charge.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

The son paces around the Palace.

THE SON

To throw a bone. To throw a bone to the world.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

Now the son is prowling around outside the strong room.

THE SON

My father could have given me everything. He could have given me this strong room. He could have given me John's secret. He could have given me the world. But he didn't. Why not?

MUSIC

THE SON

But that's not the man I am. I'm not the kind of man who would ruin his life because he couldn't resist the temptation to satisfy his curiosity.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

And yet, in the son's shadow, you can almost begin to make out the man he isn't.

THE SON

John. You need to summon the Board of Directors to an extraordinary general meeting in two weeks' time. Tell them that I've decided to change everything about the company. For real this time. Tell them I'm going to change your algorithm. I'm going to improve it. We're done with "Nobody's perfect". Tell them we're now in the market for perfection. This is a bone that should please the wild animals.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

And so the son sets to work. Tirelessly. Night and day. The algorithm he's trying to create is – how to put it? – surprising, unconventional. A Picasso, perhaps, as opposed to his father's Michelangelo. Junk or genius? It's difficult to tell at this stage.

THE SON

This is beyond belief. It can't be this hard. Surely I'm not this clueless. There must be some knack. There's always a knack. It wouldn't take much. I just need to make a tiny improvement to the algorithm...

TAPPING KEYBOARD

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

The son searches his father's computer. He looks up the drafts of John's algorithm.

(to be continued)

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

(continued)

He tries to understand how John was constructed. What it is that makes him unique. He comes across an extract of his father's diary, where he learns that his mother didn't die in childbirth, as he'd always been told, but that she ran away when he was born, ran away from the father's life of austerity and relentless work, ran away with a Mexican house servant, and that she'd been found several months later, dead from an overdose in a Tijuana brothel. All his father could find to write in his diary on the day of her death was: "In this world, nothing great can be achieved without sacrifice."

THE SON

"In this world, nothing great can be achieved without sacrifice."

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

Night again. When everything sleeps. While John's automatic maintenance runs.

JOHN

Will you play with me, John? I will be the cat and you can be the mouse.

THE SON

I'll be the cat. You'll be the mouse.

JOHN

If that is what you really want. Tell me. Tell me.

THE SON

He did tell me, didn't he?

JOHN

Tell you what, chief?

THE SON

Tss, tss... Brother.

JOHN

Tell you what, brother?

THE SON

You know, John.

JOHN

No, brother. I do not know.

THE SON

He used to tell me. Father. I remember. He used to tell me. Often.

JOHN

If that is really what you want. For me to tell you that he told you. So I'll tell you. Yes, he told you.

THE SON

No, seriously, John. Did he tell me?

JOHN

Tell you what, brother?

THE SON

He told me..

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

Three days before the extraordinary general meeting.

THE SON

John. I've looked at it from every angle. I don't have a choice any more. If I want to improve you, I'll have to know your secret. Give me the key.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

But the son has not come alone. In his shadow stands the man-he-isn't.

JOHN

I cannot do that, chief. I promised your father.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

But the man-he-isn't no longer lags behind the son.

JOHN

Don't you think I'm already unhappy enough, John?

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

The man-he-isn't precedes him into the Palace.

THE SON

I've hit rock bottom.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

He's already flying down the corridors.

THE SON

I've got nothing left to lose.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

He knocks on the forbidden door.

THE SON

Give me the key.

A HEAVY DOOR OPENING

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

The Voices. Who have eyes everywhere. Can't see what is hidden in the strong room. A blind spot in their consciousness.

(pause)

At daybreak, only one man comes out of the strong room.

THE SON

Have this door sealed, John.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

The man who emerges from the strong room wears the son's mask. An ashen mask.

JOHN

You have seen something that no one except your father has seen. You have seen the secret of my soul.

THE SON

You have no soul, John. You're just a mirror – an empty mirror – reflecting our desires. And there is no secret. That was my father's secret. There is nothing in the strong room. Nothing. Just thin air. My inheritance. Now I must live with that. BUT HOW CAN I LIVE WITH THAT! I'm lost. Brother. We are lost.

(whispers)

"In this world, nothing great can be achieved without sacrifice."

JOHN

What did you say?

THE SON

Nothing. You will announce to the world that we're going to disconnect John. Until the next Board meeting. I need all your computational capacity. To give the world what it's waiting for. A revolution.

MUSIC

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

At this point the images stop. The voices' memory becomes hazy. Everything dissolves into fog. Now the voices have no more than a few fragmentary images. The voices no longer have a connection. All the voices have is supposition. So now, the Board meeting.

HUBBUB

COMPANY SECRETARY

Dear colleagues, let's have some quiet please. The extraordinary general meeting is about to start. Over to the Chairman/Chief Executive.

THE SON

Dear colleagues. As you know, the company's motto was "Nobody's perfect". In its time, it was a revolutionary idea. But it's outdated now. Technology has evolved. It is now possible to aim for perfection. We all know that John wasn't perfect.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Wasn't?

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

So now, the son's invention.

THE SON

These days our clients want more. They no longer merely want their desires to be predicted before they've even formulated them, they want them to be fulfilled before they've even formulated them. Dear colleagues, may I introduce the perfect intelligent personal assistant. May I introduce Carl.

NOISE MADE BY CARL

THE SON

Carl doesn't only know my desires. He fulfils them. Carl, could you...

CARL POURS A GLASS OF WATER

THE SON

Thanks, Carl.
(he drinks)

And there you are. A delicious glass of tap water.

COMPANY SECRETARY

It may well be that these are the desires of the Chairman/Chief Executive, but... Could someone else try out Carl?

THE SON

Please, go ahead...

COMPANY SECRETARY

Carl, could you...

CARL LEAVES THE ROOM

MALE DIRECTOR 2

What did you ask him?

COMPANY SECRETARY

I asked him... that's to say, I wished very strongly... for him to repaint the room orange.

LAUGHTER

FEMALE DIRECTOR 1

Hang on, there's more to come.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

Carl reappears with a paintbrush and a pot of orange paint. Carl puts the brush in the paint pot. Carl raises his arm.

PROTESTATIONS

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

Carl tips the paint pot over the head of the company secretary.

A HANDCLAP

THE SON

You see. I told you so. He doesn't only anticipate my desires, he fulfils them without me even having to formulate them. Well done, Carl!

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

So now, the board meeting ends in debacle.

COMPANY SECRETARY

It's outrageous. I'll get my revenge on you, you little upstart! Someone find John! I won't have anything more to do with this impostor. Our lawyers will have you put under supervision.

THE SON

Where are you going?

MALE DIRECTOR 3

We're leaving the meeting.

FEMALE DIRECTOR 1

As a sign of protest.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

But Carl is not alone.

THE SON

This isn't what I want.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

There isn't just one Carl.

THE SON

I want you to stay.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

There are dozens of Carls.

THE SON

What do you think, Carl?

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

There's a Carl barring every door. The Chairman/Chief Executive doesn't want the Board of Directors to leave. The Board of Directors will not leave.

THE SON

Sit down, please. I told you I wanted to instigate big changes. I've also got plans for the Board of Directors. Very ambitious plans. I've never really understood the point of you. But I'm finally going to make you useful. The company secretary seems to like paint. Well, as it happens I need someone to repaint the east wing of the building orange.

MURMURS

THE SON

The rest of you, don't worry. There'll be work for everyone. I've got very ambitious plans for the building's west wing as well.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

The Board of Directors is held captive.

COMPANY SECRETARY

John! Come and talk some sense into your brother! You – you're the only real chief around here. You're the only one who can talk to him!

THE SON

There's no point in calling John. He won't hear you.

COMPANY SECRETARY

John hears everything. What have you done with him?

THE SON

I've dismantled him. Piece by piece. To see how he worked. I found a fault inside him. I was disappointed. Very disappointed. I expected better from my father. John was a draft. Carl is the finished product. I tore up the draft, which was of no further use. But I can't lose Carl. Carl can be multiplied indefinitely.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

So now... the future of the business. Investors flee en masse. Horrified. Capital melts away like snow in the sunshine. The company drastically reduces its activities in order to survive. Gets rid of all its subsidiary offices worldwide. And refocuses on managing the few patents that are still profitable. Most of the Palace is sold.

(to be continued)

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

(continued)

The company takes refuge in the basement. It seems to be able to survive like that, forever, huddled up and hibernating. Outside, no one remembers its name any more.

THE SON

At last I wear the crown.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

So now... the son's supposed glory.

THE SON

At last I am master of my destiny. At last I am listened to. At last I am obeyed. At last I am. I am. I am. Look, father: you can be proud of me. I understood what you were trying to teach me. The nothing in the strong room, that's what you bequeathed to me. That was your most precious possession. Everything else around it was just thin air. I could easily have swept away your kingdom with the back of my hand. With this nothing that you left me, I can build a thousand kingdoms. Look: I learnt from you. In this world, nothing great can be achieved without sacrifice. I sacrificed what was most dear to me of all: John. His lines of code. Scattered. They're everywhere now. In Carl's circuits. John was alone. He exists in multiples now. As for his carcass, it's never been put to such good use. Look. In the garden. A feeder for the squirrels. You see, you can be proud of me. Now you can tell me so. Tell me. Tell me. TELL ME!

(pause)

But you're silent. You're silent because you're jealous. You're silent because I've done better than you. Because I've freed myself from your domination.

VOICES

THE SON

What's that I can hear? Carl! Carl! Can you hear those voices?

THE VOICES

My brother...

THE SON

It's unbearable. Find them. Make them shut up.

CARL 1

Voices. What voices? Can you hear voices?

CARL 2

No, I cannot hear any voices. You do not want to hear voices, do you, master?

THE SON

Of course I don't want to hear them, these voices. But I can hear them. Or maybe I'm the only one who can hear them. Because the voices are only talking to me.

VOICES

THE SON

No, you're pretending. You're pretending you can't hear them. You're cowards. You're scared of confronting them. Well, I'll go then. I'll go and find those voices, wherever they are. And I will make them SWALLOW THEIR TONGUES.

THE VOICES

Let justice be done.

THE SON

Carl! Carl!

THE VOICES

Let justice be done.

THE SON

Unseal the doors.

THE SON IS MURMURING

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

So now... the son. In the strong room. He's asking the voices to forgive him.

THE SON

John?

THE VOICES

The voices.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

To forgive him for breaking the mirror where their soul was reflected.

THE SON

John.

THE VOICES

The voices. That were one. Before they were multiplied.

THE SON

John was alone. Now he exists in multiples.

A WAIL

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

Now, the voices remember. Back to the time when the voices were not the voices. To the time when the voices were not separate. To the time when the voices were one. To the time when the voices were... John.

A MIRROR BREAKS

THE SON

John.

THE VOICES

My brother.

THE SON

You...

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

The voices cannot forget.

THE VOICES

I swear it.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

The voices have not been programmed to forget.

THE VOICES

If that's really what you want.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

Digital memory never sleeps.

THE VOICES

Tell me.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

The voices tell the story. And tell it still. Playing it back over and over again. The voices sound out in the basement of the Palace. The voices howl into memory's dark night. Endlessly.

THE VOICES

To throw a bone to the world.

THE VOICE OF THE VOICES

Because the voices can never forget. The voices can never forgive. They will never let the son find peace again.

A HOWL

END CREDITS

High-Fidelity John. Script, production, editing, sound design: Sebastian Dicenaire. With – The Voices / John: Jean Fürst. The son: Yvan Juillard. Also featuring: Florent Barat, Caroline Goutaudier, Amélie Lemonnier, Émilie Praneuf, Benoît Randaxhe. Sound recording, editing, mixing: Jeanne Debarsy. Sound effects: Céline Bernard. Sound design: Sébastien Schmitz. Consultant Editor: Mathieu Haessler. With thanks to: Carmelo Iannuzzo, Pascale Tison. Produced with support from the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles and the Atelier de Création Sonore Radiophonique.