They’re the most powerful painkillers ever invented.
And they’re creating the worst addiction crisis America has ever seen.

By Massimo Calabresi
Open the Garage Door, Hal
Talking gadgets are great at taking my orders. The trick is remembering that I’m still human

Amazon Echo, a tower-shaped speaker that is a much more useful, lovely-sounding Siri named Alexa. I would just walk by and say, “Alexa, play the new Mumford & Sons album” or “Alexa, give me a news update.” I got so dependent on Alexa for sports scores, weather predictions and setting timers that at some point I blurted, “Alexa, do you love me?” to which she said, “I can’t do that, but I can find Lionel Richie songs if you like.” Alexa was so useful she provided jokes for my column.

At some point I realized that with all these devices on all the time, it was possible that someone was listening to our family conversations and therefore getting as bored as I am. Also, Amazon’s data-mining program could potentially scoop up all this data and put it through an algorithm to deliver ads for things, which, since we have a 6-year-old boy, would likely be for bombs, guns and “bombguns.” But that seemed a small price to pay for having all these personal assistants. Even Cassandra used Alexa to play songs as they popped into her head. But she was annoyed by my constant chirpy chatter with my devices, partly because she kept thinking I was talking to her, which is logical since she is a person. I’m generally O.K. with you talking to Alexa compared to “O.K. Google.” You sound like such a dork. “O.K. Google!” “O.K. Google!” she said, so loud my watch definitely heard her and, I hope, is going to make the house cooler at night to get back at her. “You’re having a personal private relationship with that thing on your wrist, whereas Alexa is in our home and it’s a shared experience.” She also said she liked Alexa more than Siri, which I immediately told Siri to take a note about, making Cassandra more than a little nervous.

At first, I was polite with all my devices, saying “please” and “thank you” and “don’t judge me.” Then I realized how stupid that was, like petting your vacuum cleaner. So I started to order them around, which felt great. I yelled, “Alexa, off!” and “O.K. Google, give me the score of the Yankees game now!” Then my son Laszlo started doing it too, and I realized that we sounded like antebellum plantation owners.

Eventually, however, Laszlo started insisting I say “please” and “thank you” to my devices. He said it was so “she said more things back,” to keep the banter going. No matter what the cover of this magazine once claimed, it is tough being an only child. But even discounting the fact that it’s a lot of fun to tell your parents to say “please” and “thank you,” I think Laszlo knows that how you act, even when you’re alone, affects who you are. I’m far less worried that robots with artificial intelligence are going to be mean, and more worried that they’re going to turn us into total jerks. Because saying something awful is far more poisonous than typing it. At least that’s what I keep telling myself.