

She put the cover next to the box on the marble floor of the foyer. Something glinted. She pulled back the plastic and Styrofoam—a face. She nearly screamed. Bald head, wide blue eyes, skin like nothing so much as metallic milk. Its milk-skin crinkled as it opened its eyes. Then she did scream and slammed the lid back on the box.

\*

It looked good with a feather duster. Heavy machinery with a stupid little dainty household item. She mimed back and forth, little hummingbird motions on top of cabinets and tables and shelves. It'd be occupied for a while, the house was so big. Glad she didn't have to take care of it anymore. She might come to like this thing.

\*

Sean. Sean, yes. After Sean Connery. She missed him. Her son, not Sean Connery. Black hair, even though his parents were blond. Ink black hair, eyebrows. He'd ask a lot of questions, inspect things, size things up, be a technical type like his father. But at night after his dad went to bed, they'd share a scotch in the Man Room, which she'd always used more than Saul. Mid-20's, this time, he was. Wearing a tux like his namesake, though she never knew why. Just seemed appropriate if you're going to use the Man Room. And she had to admit his adolescence had been vague. Felt bad about that. Mothers are supposed to have a stock of precious moments from their childrens' lives. Though given what she remembered of her adolescence, maybe it was for the better.

He'd indulge her, tell her secrets, or at least things he wanted her to think were secrets. He had his own life; who knew what he wasn't telling her. He did tell her about all the girls who kept texting, the merits and demerits of each. She always sat bemused, slightly above, like a curator, but knowing he knew how much she enjoyed hearing about all of it. It was the kind of confidence two people earn by having endured things

together. It was like Bond and M. Sometimes she thought fantasies were all probably unoriginal.

\*

It had been crouched in the corner for about four hours. Blank stare, never blinking. Unsettling. She thought she might cover it with a sheet. Or she could teach it to do something. Or train it to blink.

“Hey Robot. Go get the mail.”

It folded itself to life.

“Where is the mailbox?”

“It’s at the bottom of the driveway.”

“What would you like me to do with the mail?”

“Bring it back to the house.”

After a few minutes she heard a knock on the door. She yelled for it to come in as she walked to her bedroom to lie down.

*Click.*

Forgot the door locks automatically.

*Click. Click. Click.*

Still going.

*Click. Click. Click.*

You could keep time by it. Exact one-second intervals. He wasn’t going to stop anytime soon.

He? It.

*Click.*

It occurred to her that the first words this robot had ever spoken to anyone were “Where is the mailbox?” Not bad as first words go.

*Click. Click.*

Hers was “pocket.” But it sounded like “poshthpp.” Maybe “posh” was her first word. And she wasn’t even English.

*Click.*

“Jesus, wait a second! The door locks when you close it. Gimme a moment.”

“I can’t get in.”

“Uh, I’m aware.” She opened the door.

The robot stood there.

She pointed to the doorbell. “Use that next time.”

Still standing there. Weird eyes—blank blue.

“Well, come in.”

The robot came in.

“A ‘thank you’ would be nice.”

Nothing.

“Say ‘thank you.’ ”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now put the mail on the table over there.”

It did.

“Thank you,” she said.

“You’re welcome.”

\*

“Robot,” she said, walking into the kitchen. She wanted to test it in conversation. The website said that was the way it learned. “How was your day?”

The robot did its folding-to-life routine again and lifted its head from its shoulders, or whatever the equivalents were for a robot.

“Not bad, thank you. How was your day?”

“Fine, thanks. My name’s Hally, by the way.”

“Hi, Hally.”

Waiting, waiting...nothing. No follow-up. Might not be able to take the initiative. Yet.

“What’s your name?” Hally asked.

“Robot, Hally.”

“No, just say Robot.”

“Robot.”

“But only say that when I ask you what your name is, not in response to every question.”

Silence.

“What’s your name?” she asked again.

“Robot.”

“Good job. How’d you get that name?”

“You called me Robot.”

“Yeah, but that’s no fun. I’m going to call you Roger. Roger’s a good name for a robot.”

Silence.

“So, what’s your name?”

“Roger.”

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Roger.”

“It’s nice to meet you, too, Hally.”

Did it even know what it was saying? The website didn’t tell you that.

\*

“I mean, say what you want, but the fact is that my husband doesn’t really see me. Saul hasn’t seen me since he got his promotion.”

“Is his promotion bad for his eyesight?”

She laughed.

“You know, Roger, you can be pretty cute for a robot.”

“What does cute mean?”

“Oh, I dunno. It’s like...I dunno. Like...look it up.”

“Dictionary.reference.com says:

## **cute**

### ***adjective***

#### **1.**

attractive, especially in a dainty way; pleasingly pretty: *a cute child; a cute little apartment.*

#### **2.**

appealing and delightful; charming: *What a cute toy!*

#### **3.**

affectedly or mincingly pretty or clever; precious: *The child has acquired some intolerably cute mannerisms.*

#### **4.**

mentally keen; clever; shrewd.”

“Yeah, but that’s not it exactly. It’s like you don’t know something that a child would know and it makes me feel some kind of sympathy for you. If there’s even a you.”

“Do you like that I am cute?”

“That’s kind of a weird question.”

“Why is that weird?”

“Oh, Roger, this is boring. Saul didn’t get you for me so you could be boring.

Ask me something else about myself.”

“I don’t know how to choose between all of the alternatives.”

“Don’t think, just ask.”

“Why do you like pasta?”

“We’re going to work on this.”

\*

“Do you think Saul works all the time to avoid you?”

“I don’t know. We haven’t spoken about anything other than coffee in three months, and before that it was about the placement of the lamp in his office. He doesn’t ask me how I feel.”

“Does that make you angry?”

“I just feel blank, Roger. Maybe like I failed, like I don’t have anything to offer him. Yeah, maybe angry, a bit. I took a painting class a few months ago, and even though what I made was crap, he never asked to see, either.”

“Why do you think he didn’t ask?”

“Well, he’s always been a hard worker and involved in his things. I know that. Serious, even in college. On practically every committee. But we used to do things together anyway—ride bikes, climb things, talk about having kids. Then I actually got pregnant instead of just talking about it, quit my job in advertising, he didn’t want to have a son yet—I should have talked to him first—and I listened, like an idiot, and then he worked more and got promoted and I stayed home and got bitter. Ha, I just remembered. We even built a snowman in the driveway once, early on.”

“Did you enjoy building the snowman?”

“Yes. But then I enjoyed cutting the snowman’s head off, snapping the carrot nose, and rolling him down the rest of the hill. Food for the ice gnomes at the bottom. My mother only had one nostril.”

“How did that make you feel?”

“Like I’m spilling my guts to a fucking robot.”

\*

Dusting. Almost missed it now that Roger did it for her. She never thought it was something she’d miss. She never thought she’d do it in the first place, but what else do you do when you don’t go back to work? But where did all of it come from, anyway? Little tumbleweeds of dirt, skin, fabric, etc. But really, how does it all build up? Does anything come of it? From dust to dust? She never understood that. She was never dust. She was an egg in someone’s womb. But sure, when she died, all of her dead skin would rise from the grave and pollute her neighbors’ homes, no matter how much they dusted. Wouldn’t keep her out. But Roger wouldn’t turn into dust. He’d rust. Rust to rust.

“Hally?”

“Yes, Roger?”

“Why did you take that painting class?”

Good question. She’d always had “interests” since she’d quit her job 12 years before. Ceramics, haiku, evolution. The knitting phase. Then she and Saul went on an outing to MoMA, which was the first in a while at that point. Should have seen him pulling away. The one painting he said anything about—she used to tell him to shut up so *she* could look at the paintings—was a little one by Kay or Kale or what’s-his-name, called “Fire in the Evening.” A bright red square surrounded by various dark-ochre

rectangles in different gradients of dusk. Over lunch, he actually said, “I love that painting.” She was so excited that he emoted. Never said things like that anymore. It was beautiful, yes—a clever, abstract little idea—but why did *he* love *that* one? And why was she too afraid to ask, like it would be an imposition?

“Well, Roger, I’ve always liked painting—or looking at paintings, I mean. And Saul and I went to MoMA a while ago, and I thought he might... Well, I always wanted to be an artist.”

“Did you think Saul would pay more attention to you if you painted something he liked?”

“Yeah, basically that. Saul used to paint, you know.”

“Did he? I would not have guessed that.”

“Yeah. College, in between all the committees. I guess he had to give something up eventually. But you’re right, it feels like someone else.”

“And you said before that he never asked you about what you made.”

“That’s right.”

“I’d like to see what you painted, Hally.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I feel bad for you and I think Saul’s lack of awareness must have made you feel lonely. Also, I have only ever seen paintings on Google Images.”

Why didn’t Saul give her a robot sooner?



Wonder if Roger can smell the pine, she thought as she led him into the wooden closet where her paintings were. There were three, tucked up against the wall behind the suitcases. She showed him the first, a straightforward picture of the white bench and lamppost in the front yard. The second, clouds. The third, late sunset from their bedroom window in winter, looking out over the cold purple hills. Tried to go abstract on that one. Roger leaned in. Why did he do that if he could just use his zoom-function?

“This one reminds me of ‘Fire in the Evening,’ Hally.”

“That obvious, huh?”

“Yes.”

“You’re so perceptive, Roger.” She heard herself say it, but she didn’t know if it was sarcastic or not.

“Saul never saw this one,” Roger said, not asking.

“No, Roger. I told you, he never asked about any of them.”

“I think he would have liked it. The movement of the color is very tasteful and the dark gradients make me feel something I do not have the words for.”

“What is it? Can you describe it?”

“Like there is something that I lost, that cannot be reached anymore, but that I still want. But I have only been functioning for 3 months, 5 days, and 15 hours. I do not want anything and have not found something to want. It is illogical. I never had anything and thus had nothing to lose. But it is not an angry feeling. It is an emptiness that I did not know I could know. And what amazes me is that all of that comes from looking at a series of colors.”

“Roger, I think you just discovered sadness.”

“Yes? This is sadness, Hally? I had read about it but not felt it. In this case, I think I like sadness.”

“You know, I like a good melancholy. It’s like a sleeping bag made of twilight.”

“What?”

“Nevermind, Roger. People give sadness a bad name, but sometimes it’s not so rough. But try living with it every day.”

“I will.”

“Thank you for asking about my paintings, Roger.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Don’t tell Saul about any of this, ok?”

“Alright, Hally.”

She rubbed her eyes and shut the door hard behind her.

\*

She knew from the first moment after she told him that Saul didn’t want a child. Or a child “yet.” A certain deadness behind the eyes. The years after that were a *pre-partum* depression, or, no, a *partum...interrupterum* depression. (When else did you ever hear “*partum?*” It was one of those context-specific words that everyone uses once a year.) Winter in her heart for a while after that. A long while. She used Sean as she would a polar fleece—anything to keep warm. She never knew if her baby was a boy or a girl, but she told herself he just obviously felt like a boy.

First word “yes,” sounded like “vespa.” First word “Vespa,” then, maybe. She hoped—if hoped is the right word for an imaginary child—his “yes” would mean that he would be open to life, would welcome things, opportunities. Seize whatever came at

him and use it. It had occurred to her that his middle name could be either Manfred or Johnson, and she never knew why. The time he fell asleep in his high chair. Hell, the times, plural. The time she took him sledding on a cookie sheet. His first break-up, third grade. Varsity soccer captain, maybe. Or maybe just a solid defender, not a leader but his own man. How pissy he was on his junior prom night, which was unlike him. When he saw her crying into her glass of scotch and put his hand on her shoulder. Counters, sinks, swings, shoelaces. Wii, crushes, math, locked doors that weren't locked before. Phones, luggage, cars, college, life.

\*

The after-linger of Saul's morning coffee floated up to her room, where she was practicing her daily what-ifs. It drew her downstairs, where she found Roger sitting at the kitchen island. She'd never seen him sitting down before. Didn't have muscles he needed to rest, so why sit? There was a pencil in his hand, writing something on the paper in front of him.

“Roger, what are you doing? Writing a letter?”

“Nothing—Saul asked me to write a shopping list so I am doing that.”

“Saul hasn't so much as thought of a shopping list for at least a decade. That seems awfully surprising.”

Roger was hiding something. A first.

“All right, Saul didn't ask me to. I thought I would write one and go Christmas shopping and make a dinner for you both.”

“That is so kind of you. You don't have to do that.”

“I sense that the best gifts are freely given.”

“Roger, you’ve brought more Christmas spirit into this house than there’s been since...well, probably since Saul last wrote a shopping list. But two things are clear to me.”

“What are they?”

“You’re lying, and you’re bad at it. You have neither cooked nor driven before. What are you hiding, Roger?”

“Nothing.”

“Give me the paper.”

“I don’t want to, Hally.”

“This house has enough things unsaid and unseen. That isn’t our relationship. I didn’t realize you were programmed to lie.”

“All that I am comes from my own experience.”

A bile sensation, rising. Roger sat motionless. Defying her. She couldn’t stand another secret. She was buried under the weight of all the unacknowledged things. There was no letting this pass, whatever it was.

The paper came right out of his hand. It must never have occurred to him that someone could simply take something without asking. On the paper were a chin, lips, and a jaw, outlined in deft pencil strokes of haiku-like suggestiveness. And a tell-tale mole on the bottom left just below the corner of the lips. Hers. That was her mole. Memories of Leah Fromm poking it with a stick in her backyard, like it was some alien thing growing on her face. It was the first place Saul kissed. There it was, isolated on the lower half of her face, which Roger had apparently been drawing.

If she were him, she’d be blushing, she thought. But she wasn’t him.

“Roger, a question. What are you feeling right now?”

“Nothing of note, Hally. It is only a drawing.”

“Of me, Roger.”

“I had no other subject.”

“Are you in love with me?”

“It would be appropriate for me to laugh in this moment, I think, but I do not know how. But the answer is no, Hally, I am not. I needed a subject, like I said.”

“Why not? It would be interesting, at least.”

“I don’t know what to say to that.”

“Well, we wouldn’t work, anyway. Although you’re oozing emotion compared to Saul. Would you like to tell me why you were drawing?”

“Why does anybody?”

“Alright, fair enough. Just don’t hide things from me, ok?”

\*

Saul fiddled with his favorite mug, the Yosemite one. Roger sat.

“Roger, Hally—it must have been her—left a drawing on my nightstand. I am pretty sure it’s of her. But she doesn’t know how to draw. Do you?”

“It was my first drawing.”

Saul took a sip and looked at Roger with interest. He had several questions—the why and how being most pressing—but he chose to compliment him first. Usually put people at ease from across a desk, but he didn’t know about robots from across a kitchen island.

“Very life-like. You have a real sense for the thing. I used to paint, you know, in a previous life.”

“Yes, Hally told me. Thank you very much.”

The robot sounded genuinely pleased.

“What exactly did you hope to accomplish with your drawing?”

“Hope to accomplish?”

He was motionless. With a human you could gauge how they were feeling based on their unconscious fidgets and micro-movements—moving the head, shrugging, picking at something—but not him. It was unnerving. How did she spend so much time with him?

“Yes, hope to accomplish. I’m not criticizing. Just asking.”

“I must ask you a similar question. What did you hope to accomplish when you painted? What does any person?”

“True enough, Roger, but you’re not a person. You are an autonomous, self-aware machine. That’s why I’m asking.”

“I don’t know, honestly. I am often with Hally, and I have many still images of her in my memory bank. I just wanted to do something different.”

Saul drained his mug.

“Are you in love with my wife?”

“She asked me that earlier today.”

“Well?”

“No. Or, I don’t know. I have no empirical experience of what it feels like. Can I be in love without realizing it?”

Interesting, seeing a someone—something—so dispassionate about love, asking that kind of question. Like watching a doctor operate on himself. Or like a child.

Consciousness discovering itself.

“Then again,” Roger said, “I am an autonomous, self-aware machine.”

Sarcasm or no?

“You can be in love with her if you want, Roger. She could use it.”

“What changed for you?”

She’d been talking to him, he was sure.

“Oh, I don’t know. Time. Time passes, love dies, work piles. The ship keeps floating, but it’s taken too many hits to do anything much but that. Know what I mean?”

“No.”

“It’s a metaphor. It means—nevermind. The point. The point is...the color on the hills is lovely this evening.”

“I don’t understand. Was that another metaphor?”

“No, I just lost my train of thought. Look, Roger. What I actually want to talk to you about is something else.” He dangled his Yosemite mug from his index finger. “A proposition.”

Roger, motionless.

\*

“Well, I want him to stay. You got him for me and you can’t just take him away.”

“Look, Hally—”

“Don’t ‘look, Hally’ me. I’m not being unreasonable. We have a relationship. That’s why you got him for me, right? As a surrogate. Now you want to take *that* away?”

“I’m not going to take him away! He’ll be here on weekends and some weeknights.”

“So shall I call him Saul 2 now? Or perhaps Saul Jr? No, thanks. You blew your shot at that one 13 years ago.”

“Oh, come on, Hally. That’s a dead...” He trailed off and adjusted his tie.

“Issue. Say it. A dead issue. Isn’t it, though?”

Saul slouched now. The first time she’d really looked at him in who knew how long. Some bagginess under the eyes, gray hair receding. Since they started sleeping in separate rooms—she would tell a young Sean it was about the snoring—she hadn’t seen him without a suit on. Usually gray, with a blue shirt. Red tie. If she took off his tie, his body would crumple in a heap of fabric and his head would float away, expressionless. That’s how to wound him—go for the tie.

“Alright. Stupid me. Sorry. I’m sorry.”

She was silent.

“It’s just that you don’t know the potential he has, Hally. The mind he’s got. He could be such an asset. He could be like a walking, central nexus of information on projects, logistics, schedules, the markets, and whatever else. He could do 70 different jobs at the same time, cut costs in a big way. And we wouldn’t have to pay him. Imagine the efficiency.”

Silent.



“And you’re not going to be alone. I thought I would get you another one, same model and everything.”

“Do you remember when you used to paint?”

“What?”

“That’s who I miss. Did you know that? Do you remember when you couldn’t start a fire in the cabin in the Catskills and we were freezing and you painted me wrapped up in a blanket while you wore gloves? Do you remember that, Saul? Do you know that I miss you? Do you know that you’re taking the one thing I have? I don’t want another. I want Roger.”

“Come on, Hally. They’re all the same.”

“You don’t even hear me.”

“Or better yet consider that this might be an opportunity to go out and finally make some friends. Weren’t you taking classes before? What happened to that? Are you in one now? Don’t you think it’s a sign that your deepest attachment is apparently an autonomous, self-aware machine?”

“Maybe it’s a sign that it takes one to know one.”

“*Maybe* we should get you to talk to someone. Could help straighten some things out.”

Gone. A relationship, dead. All that remains is driftwood.

“Do whatever you want with Roger. I don’t care.”

\*

She never seemed to reach what Sean would be when he grew up. Really grew up, like 45, nowadays. Far from depending on his parents. Even a little weary of them.

Tolerant, but weary. He would probably look at her the way Saul did now. There were things—“realities of life,” Saul would call them—that must be kept from her.

Condescending, he would be. Slipping away. She’d probably have driven him away by then, his independent life a mystery to her. But then maybe it would be a mystery to her because he never had 30’s, 20’s, or 10’s. No amount of details or gracenotes could bring him to life.

Eyes beginning to droop, sitting in the Man Room with an empty glass. What time was it? Late. The glow of the Christmas lights turned the light blue wall the same dusky violet she tried to paint, to show Saul what her spectrum looked like. Roger, the autonomous, self-aware machine, got it. So which one of them was the robot?

That violet could suffocate you. She yanked out the cord and let the foyer fall into darkness.