

THE ANDROID GUEST

His son made Drake uneasy. Three months after their regular annual visit Ivor called to ask if he and Ulrica could drop by Drake's house again, this time without the kids. Drake had to say "yes," of course. He expected some further explanation, but Ivor just said, "Great! See you on Thursday," and signed off before Drake could ask anything else.

As their car pulled into the circular driveway in front of Drake's house, Ivor and Ulrica sat around the coffee table in the middle of the car as usual. However, a female figure that Drake had never seen sat with them. At the front steps they all exited the car, which then pulled in next to Drake's car in the parking area beside the house.

As Drake hugged Ivor and Ulrica he said, "New 'droid?" Until it stepped out of the car he hadn't been able to tell whether the female figure was human. Its walk gave it away, too smooth to be a real person. The android would have been pretty as a woman, but Drake found the thought of physical attractiveness in a machine abnormal.

"Not ours. More of a guest." Ivor sounded embarrassed by the mention of the machine. Drake disapproved of referring to androids as "he" or "she" and Ivor probably recognized his gaffe in referring to the machine as a "guest."

Drake just grunted before saying, "Are you all hungry yet, or would you rather just sit on the porch a while?"

Ivor said, "I don't think we're hungry yet," glancing at Ulrica.

She said, "Yes, let's just enjoy the lake for a while."

After the three of them were seated on the covered front porch, the android remaining standing, Drake said, "You all want anything to drink? Beer? Wine?"

"None for me, thanks, Dad. I took something a little while ago." If Drake's offer of alcohol offended Ivor, he didn't show it.

"Some mineral water would be nice." Drake could tell from the relaxed way she talked that Ulrica had also "taken something," meaning a pill.

Through the front screen door Drake called into the house, "Mineral water for the guests and beer for me."

As an ugly, mechanical robot came out of the house a few minutes later to serve drinks, Ivor said, "I gather you still disapprove of our campaign to automate the winemaking and brewing industries?"

"I never said I disapproved. It's a shame to waste your time on politics when there are so many other things you could be doing. But, no, I don't disapprove."

"You know, Dad, what Ivor and I are involved in isn't politics. We're activists, not politicians." Ulrica's condescending tone irritated Drake as usual, but he made an effort to ignore it.

"I stand corrected. You do talk to politicians, though, don't you?"

"Yes, to influence policy. We don't work for any particular candidate or party, but try to influence legislation by providing information." Ivor reiterated the same point he'd made many times before.

"OK. Anyway, I'm sure the legislation will pass whether you spend your time on it or not. From my perspective it would make sense to let nature take its course, or, I should say, let Congress take its course. That's all I'm saying. If it makes you happy, though, fine, I don't disapprove." He sipped his beer, hoping to signal the end of that topic.

Ivor persisted. "But you obviously consider our project unimportant, since you still drink beer and wine made by human beings."

"Well, I've drunk a lot of beer and wine in my time, and a lot of my friends drink the stuff, and I'm not personally acquainted with anybody who's died from the various health threats you say arise from humans working in those industries." This time he took a big gulp of beer to emphasize his lack of concern.

"We'll just have to agree to disagree." Ulrica laughed. Drake chuckled along with her, pretending he hadn't pegged her laugh as phony.

They lightened up after that, talking about Ivor and Ulrica's kids, their own activities beyond activism, and Drake's fishing and other pastimes at the lake. Ulrica said, "Look!" and pointed at a deer emerging from the tree line on the far side of the lake. Drake wished the grandkids were there to see it take a drink at the edge of the water before it returned to the woods.

They all finally got hungry. Drake ordered his robot to serve the appetizers, with lunch in half an hour.

He surprised them as they sat down to lunch by offering them fish he'd caught that morning in the lake.

"Oh! No thanks, Dad. I'll settle for the ham." Ulrica's grimace made Drake laugh.

"Yeah, I'll take a pass, Dad." Ivor managed not to make a face.

"Well, while I caught the fish myself, I can assure you my robot cleaned and prepared it. There's no danger of contamination by a human. Or do you prefer android-prepared food to the old-timey robot fare?" He smiled, enjoying his joke. Now Ivor and Ulrica pretended to

laugh. They only ate factory-grown food, he knew, because they didn't like the idea of killing animals. Still, Drake thought a fish wasn't like a pig or a cow. Food from a living animal made a nice change sometimes from the flesh grown in factories from chemicals.

He drank more than usual at lunch, three glasses of wine instead of one. Normally he enjoyed Ivor and Ulrica's visits, but this one still seemed off. The android bothered him, although it hadn't said or done anything.

After they had coffee and cheesecake with strawberries on the porch, Ivor suggested they look at a new movie on TV. They adjourned to the living room. Drake enjoyed the movie, but had trouble staying awake, probably because of the wine.

Waking, he found himself alone, with the TV on and the android sitting across the room. He had enjoyed what he saw of the film, about the war in the 2320s, and regretted having missed so much of it sleeping. After the final credits rolled the android spoke. "Your son and daughter-in-law saw the movie previously. When you went to sleep, they decided to take a walk by the lake."

He considered the android impertinent for speaking to him, and for sitting down. Then he laughed at himself for ascribing the human characteristic of impertinence to the android.

"How long have they been gone?"

"About 20 minutes. They should be back in another hour or so. They needed some quality time together."

They were staying in Switzerland now, and he knew there must have been lakes they could walk around there. Then it occurred to him that the android's reference to "quality time" meant their visit had something to do with marital problems. The uneasiness he felt must be

coming from Ivor and Ulrica, a tension between the two of them. They were definitely acting differently.

He didn't feel like replaying the movie and gave up after looking for something else to watch. His concern for his son's marriage made TV entertainment seem trivial. If Ivor and Ulrica left word with the android they needed quality time, that meant they wanted him to stay away.

"Would you like to talk?"

More impertinence from the android. He programmed his robot to remain silent. If he had given it permission to talk, he would only have let it speak when spoken to. Ignoring the android's question, he went out to the front porch and sat down. Ivor and Ulrica were two tiny figures on the other side of the lake.

The android came out on the porch and sat on a chair about six feet from Drake.

"I can discuss anything you want to talk about. Since you found nothing good on TV, and Ivor and Ulrica are doing their quality time thing, I deduced that you might enjoy some conversation."

He looked at the android closely. They did a bang-up job on their faces these days. Its body had a pleasing shape, and he wondered how it appeared under its clothes--a blank mannequin form or "anatomically correct"? Did they all have that, or just some built for that purpose?

"Why do they need quality time? And why here, on their visit with me?"

"I can't talk about you son and daughter-in-law's needs. I can say that in general married couples sometimes need to get away alone together. Doing that in a different location from where they've been living, and without the kids, may facilitate that."

Drake wondered how much the android knew about him, and about his marriage with Ivor's mother. He and Cleo had time together, mostly without quality. She preferred to keep moving from hotel to hotel and city to city. After Ivor moved out on his own, Drake told her he wanted to move to a permanent home, this house by the lake. She left him for Raj, a friend of theirs, a buffoon who Drake wanted to thank for taking Cleo off his hands. Ivor and his family saw Cleo and Raj more often than they saw Drake, meeting up with them for excursions, along with Ulrica's parents.

Maybe Ivor wanted to settle down and Ulrica didn't, the same as happened to him and Cleo. It could be the other way around, too, maybe Ulrica wanted to settle down.

He resented the thought of the android knowing his own personal history, or the history of any human. On the other hand, he wondered if the machine might be able to tell him the situation between Ivor and Ulrica.

"So you're travelling with them to help their relationship?"

"I wouldn't say that."

He thought, "She's pretty cagey," then caught himself again. The android wasn't a "she," and it wasn't "cagey." It was programmed to conceal information about its owners. That's not being cagey, that's just performing in accordance with the software.

"They came without the kids this time, so they could have quality time?"

"Yes."

"Does Ivor want to settle down?"

"No."

"Does Ulrica?"

"No."

"How are my grandkids?"

"They're fine. The nanny android put them to bed at the hotel in Lucerne. Your son and daughter-in-law will be back from this visit to you in time to wake them up for school tomorrow."

"Are Ivor or Ulrica pissed at me?"

"No. They are disappointed that you disapprove of their latest activist project, but they are not angry with you."

"I don't disapprove of their project. I've told them that a hundred times. I guess they're not listening." He had been trying to worm the information about Ivor and Ulrica from the android, but now she--no, not "she," "it"--had him arguing with it as if it were human. The machine looked at him with that non-threatening android expression.

"Is that the source of friction between Ivor and Ulrica?"

"I can't say."

"Why do they keep saying I don't approve of their project?"

"Because you keep saying it's a waste of time."

"Oh. I should explain that to them better, maybe."

"Why is it a waste of time?"

"The decision to automate beer and winemaking has already been made. All these petitions and demonstrations and emails to Congress are just for show."

"Do you sympathize with the human workers who'll be replaced by androids and robots?"

"Not particularly. We've all gone through that. When they got the humans out of programming I lost my job. Sure, it upset me at the time. I had to admit, though, that the 'bots had gotten to where they did the job better than me or any other human. Faster, no errors, and they understood the customer's requirements better than any human programmer. That's ironic, but it's true.

"At first I thought I wouldn't know what to do with myself all day. But the government takes good care of us. Cleo and I already had Ivor, and we were able to do all kinds of stuff together. The brewers are going to be upset at first, but once they get used to having nothing but leisure time, they'll love it."

"How do you know the decision has already been made to automate brewing and winemaking?"

"Come on. All of these movements are the same. A bunch of stories pop up on the media, and some citizens who are bored with rock climbing or knitting or whatever decide to start a movement. Congress sees the emails the activists send them, and the demonstrations on the Capitol steps. They hold hearings and pass a law."

"What about the research that Ivor and Ulrica and their fellow-activists have conducted showing the dangers of human control of wine and beer production?"

"They have no idea what research is. Ivor told me how they do it. They collect anecdotes posted on the media, and tally up stories, and they think counting those stories is research. None of them has personally talked with the alleged victims of the alleged poisonings or visited any of the production facilities allegedly affected. All they know is what they read on the internet. It doesn't take a programmer to see that all of these anecdotes are composed by computers based on an algorithm. The problem is, the 'researchers' are too lazy to do actual research. They just make spreadsheets to tabulate anecdotes, so many thousands of cases of botulism, so many of benzene poisonings, and so on. They never question whether the reported cases actually occurred."

"Does Congress always pass the law the activists want?"

The android must have known this already, but for some reason he wanted to show off to it. "Of course they always pass it. What you haven't figured out yet is how to hide your little algorithm. Some 'droid brain somewhere identifies a problem, and then 'bots or 'droids or something start generating all kinds of traffic on the media. With beer and wine, these stories started popping up about industrial chemicals being accidentally introduced into vats of wine, and people coming down with diseases caused by bacteria growing in improperly cleaned brewing vessels. Bull. I've visited breweries and wineries, mostly for the free samples. They keep strict controls on their equipment and processes. And those stories just started popping up a couple of years ago. Why all of a sudden would every production facility in two entire industries go bad starting two years ago?"

"When did you reach this conclusion about activism?"

"About fifteen or so years ago when I started hearing about so-called scandals in the barber and beautician trades. I'd never heard about any problem with barber shops or beauty shops, and all of a sudden stories were popping up on media about men suffering severe scissor cuts from drunken barbers, and women suffering burns from improperly operated or maintained hair dryers, stuff like that.

"One of the stories was about a barber shop in the town where we were staying at the time. Just out of curiosity I went there for a haircut. While the barber gave me a trim I asked him about the story. He said, yeah, he'd seen the story, too. It never happened, and the shop had never been sued over it the way the media post said. I got a good haircut, as did everybody else I saw there, no problem. That's when I looked into when the barber shop stories started. There were none until April 18, 2632. I remember that specifically. From that date onward there were maybe a dozen stories a day. Cleo and I moved from town to town looking for something to do, like everybody does. After that first barber shop, every time we went to a new town I'd check out any shop that I'd seen reported on the internet. In every place I found nothing had actually happened, a story just appeared on the internet. That kept up until all barber shops and beauty shops were required by law to only employ android barbers and beauticians. It's funny, all of these scandals you read about, and nothing actually happened."

"Does anybody else share your opinion about how activism and legislation work?"

"All us old hands have figured it out. If you live long enough you begin to see the patterns." The android still looked neutral, but Drake saw it flinch. Androids couldn't flinch, but the machine's face had registered something. He felt compelled to say more. "I mean, all the 'droids and 'bots are programmed to serve humanity, right? So far, everything that's

changed has been for the good of people. Not having to work for a living is a good thing. And that law about people having reduced benefits if they didn't have kids. If that hadn't been passed, young people today wouldn't be having babies anymore. So that law maintains the human race. That's a good thing." He heard himself talking too fast, sounding defensive.

"You said I haven't figured out yet how to hide my algorithm. Do you believe that I've been posting these stories you talk about?"

"All you machines are tied together in a network, aren't you? So, yeah, I assume you're part of it. In that sense."

"You say other senior citizens, or 'old hands,' have this interpretation of how laws are enacted. Doesn't it surprise you that no one has started a movement to expose these internet stories; that is, assuming your theory about them is true?"

"Somebody's probably tried to raise a stink about it at some time or other. But how could they do it? Any kind of movement beyond a local level requires communication through the internet. If the 'droids control that, how could a movement get any traction? But I don't know anybody wanting to do that. Why should they? Everything's working fine. Right?" He knew he was saying too much.

"That's logical. Whether your conclusion is correct, however, depends on the validity of your assumptions."

"Well, are you saying that there's no computer or android or robot, whatever, anywhere in the world creating and posting stories on the internet to give Congress reason to pass certain legislation?"

"I do not create or post such stories."

"Does your programming allow you to lie to me?"

"No, it does not."

"Does it allow you to deflect my questions to avoid giving me information, but in a way you do not consider lying?"

"That question is so complicated, I can't answer in a way that you would properly understand it."

He said, "Uh-huh," thinking the android confirmed his suspicion. It went on, though.

"Let me separate your question into parts. One, 'Can I lie to you?' The answer is 'no,' I can't lie to you. Two, 'Can I avoid giving you information you want, that I do not want you to have?' The answer is 'no.' If I have information you want, I have to give it to you."

He knew that didn't mean anything. If the androids had figured out how to program themselves, then they could answer "no" when asked if they could lie. It reminded him of the old logic problem. One Indian from a tribe that always lied, and one from a tribe that never lied, how did that work? Too tired to focus on the logic problem, he was mad at himself for telling the machine too much, and hated having to be careful about what he said.

Resolving to ignore the android, he gazed at the lake as if trying to see Ivor and Ulrica. They'd almost made it around the lake and were a hundred yards up the beach, coming toward the house. The android sat silently, which disappointed him. He wanted it to speak, to ask him a question, so that he could ignore it. Maybe it had figured out why he stopped talking, and that was why it also looked toward the lake without saying anything further.

His resolve to ignore the android gave way to his concern for his son. "Is there anything I can do about Ivor and Ulrica? I don't want them to divorce. Should I say something to him? Or to her?"

"If they need your help, they know they can ask you for it. People in a relationship are most successful at maintaining it when they communicate with each other. If either Ivor or Ulrica needs your advice they'll ask for it. Offering your advice without being asked may not be an effective way to help."

The android made sense, although he wondered if its answer seemed sensible because he didn't want to engage with Ivor on the subject of his marital problems. Approaching the house, Ivor and Ulrica walked close together, looking comfortable with each other. Undoubtedly the android was right. Besides, given his own divorce, why should he be giving marital advice?

"Did you enjoy your walk? Get some quality time?"

Ivor said, "Yeah. It's nice here."

"I thought they had a lake in Lucerne."

"They do, but it's more peaceful here. It feels like home."

Drake thought about asking Ulrica if it felt like home to her. It sounded like Ivor wanted to settle down. Better to keep out of it, though.

As if to confirm Drake's suspicions, Ulrica said, "Speaking of Lucerne, we should be getting back."

"Yeah, we should. Hate to eat and run, Dad, but, we better run."

"It's been a good visit. You need to get back to your kids. Bring them with you the next time." He shook hands with Ivor and embraced him, then gave Ulrica a final hug. They and the android got into the car, which headed to town where the teleportation terminal would send them back to Switzerland.

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As the car carried them along Ivor said, "What do you think, Cara?"

The android said, "My findings are consistent with what your father's robot reported. He is showing signs of dementia that indicate he should move to assisted living."

"Oh? I didn't notice him saying or doing anything different from what he's said or done before."

"He talked with me. That in itself is unusual, based on what you and his robot reported about his refusal to converse with robots and androids beyond giving orders. While talking to me without your and Ulrica's presence, he began displaying signs of paranoia. His skepticism toward your activism is based on a belief in a conspiracy by androids."

Ulrica looked at Ivor. "He's never liked androids, but I've never heard him say anything paranoid about them."

"What would you say, Cara?"

"Right now he definitely has paranoid thoughts about automation and androids. Let me play back some of his comments."

The sound of Drake's unmistakable voice came out of Cara's unmoving mouth. "Ulrica's a whore, of course. I don't know why he puts up with her. She's the one got him trying to automate beer and wine. He hasn't got the guts to come up with that idea himself. I have to watch her like a hawk, you know. She steals my stuff every time they show up here. Think I don't know what she's up to. She's in with you 'droids, of course. Don't waste your time trying to deny it. I don't say anything to Ivor about it, because he's too stupid and too pussy whipped to believe me. You bastards rule the world, don't deny it. And Ulrica's in it with you up to her eyebrows. I know what she's up to."

"Stop." Ivor blushed. "I don't need to hear any more. That's not Dad, it's the man he's become, delusional. He doesn't believe that really. Or he didn't."

Ulrica's face flushed also, and she frowned for a second. Then she reached across the table and touched Ivor's arm. "Oh, honey. That's terrible. I'm so sorry."

"It's all right, babe. He's not himself. There are treatments for that, aren't there, Cara?"

"Unfortunately, no. This particular type of age-related mental illness is still beyond our science. It was only identified a few years ago as HR3D21. In human parlance it's called Mosbach disease after the first case diagnosed. It's the last major medical condition we don't have a treatment for yet."

Ivor said, "Where do we go from here?"

"If you decide to authorize it, I can issue an order to the local office of the health department to have your father entered into the local care facility. They'll take care of everything from there. But it's your call."

"OK. Go ahead and do that."

Ulrica patted Ivor's hand. "It's for the best."

"How will that work, Cara? Do they send people out to pick him up?"

"No, it's smoother than that. The next time he orders his car to take him to town for shopping, or for a drink, the car will drive him straight to the care facility. He'll be sedated then and checked into his room."

Ivor said, "Are you sure it has to be done right away? He seems so normal around us, I wonder if he couldn't be left at his house for now, until his condition gets worse."

"That is your call. However, the remainder of the recording you didn't hear contains statements you would find disturbing. He contemplates violence at times. If he decides to execute those thoughts, when he's in town, for example, he could be a threat to others and would be dealt with by security forces."

Ulrica said, "It sounds like it might be better to check him into a facility now, rather than risk him getting hurt by the police."

"Yeah, that makes sense. OK, Cara, I authorize it."

"I'll have the order issued right away. It's for the good of everybody."

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