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REPLACED

BY WILLIAM R.A.D. FUNK

ELECTRIC HATSUYUME

BY DEBORAH WALKER

ROBOT MOTHERS

BY ADAM GAYLORD

FOR TOMORROW

BY RICHARD ZWICKER

PETER WOOD

BLUEGRASS AND THE THIRD LAW OF ROBOTICS

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ISSAC ASIMOV

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FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

BY CELINA SUMMERS

Something about Isaac Asimov is extremely intimidating.

Aside from the sheer volume of work throughout his career, when a normal person like myself approaches Asimov, there's always a small moment of hesitancy, a split-second of *I am not worthy and will not understand this* that seems to be fairly universal. Asimov would have scoffed at such trepidation, which only makes the feeling just a little bit worse. Obviously, the master wouldn't be intimidated by a writer who left a mere four hundred and seventy or so books that he either wrote or edited, not to mention all the short stories, essays, *bon mots*, and the three laws of robotics. So yes, Asimov is intimidating on an intellectual level...and yet, he is also patently not.

It's the contradiction, the ongoing conundrum of Asimov's work and special relationship with his readers that conferred upon him the title of 'master' within our genres.

But I am not the master, and as I sat down to write this month's editorial, I was thoroughly intimidated. How could I not be? I'm not sufficiently versed in robotics or string particle theory or whatever the heck else Asimov's agile, hungry brain not only comprehended but thrived upon.

Of course, that's the beauty of Asimov, isn't it? You don't have to inhabit a laboratory to immerse yourself into his world. Asimov brought the forward-seeking scientific mind out of the lab and into the living room with incredible facility—something neither science nor literature has quite forgiven him for. Invariably, those readers like myself who approached their first Asimov tale with trepidation found themselves returning for more, their fear suffocated beneath curiosity and a desire to know more.

A lot of people in our profession have dismissed Asimov as not being important, or claim he's not really a writer of literary merit. Which is all a bunch of hooey, of course. Sure, sometimes his agile mind reached for things quite beyond my grasp, but at the end of the day it all boils down to the same thing for Asimov as it does for the rest of us. Does the story engage us? Does it entertain? It is plausible, given our willing suspension of disbelief? While I cannot claim to have read every Asimov story or even most of them, I can honestly say that every Asimov tale I have read drew me in, kept my interest, and allowed me that emotional interaction with the characters and their plight—thereby proving to me that Asimov was, at his heart, a storyteller beyond anything else.

So why, then, is there such a range of feelings about Asimov? Why would people who otherwise love science and science fiction discount Asimov as a writer of 'merit'? My guess?

Fear.

Oh yes. I said fear.

No one in the industry believes it's possible for a writer to crank out five hundred books in forty years, and particularly not when a substantial proportion of those books are science fiction. Sci fi is supposed to be hard to write—you have to incorporate and build upon sound scientific theory. As I tell my young writers, in science fiction it's not enough to have your hero sitting in the cockpit pushing buttons and have that be your main action. Your hero has to have a specific purpose, one that the reader accepts because the author has put in all the necessary preliminary work. It's not enough to have your mad scientist transferring a liquid from one beaker into another and solve the mysteries of life. In science fiction, as in science, you cannot be vague and just say 'let it be'. Because the risks are so much greater in sci fi, the foundation must be that much stronger. Asimov understood that, and his specificity, related in a matter-of-fact narrative utterly devoid of condescension, is where readers found the first threads that bound them to his books.

I hope you enjoy this homage to Isaac Asimov. As is usual when we do these authorial themes, this month's writers were given the option to include a brief introduction indicating how Asimov influenced these stories. I always find those intros fascinating as well.

In other Penumbra news, next month's Superheroes themed issue is special for a number of reasons. To begin with, for the first time our featured story takes place in a writer's established world. DAW and Musa Publishing author Gini Koch headlines the May issue with "Alien on the Runway", which is set in her wildly popular *Touched by an Alien* series. The tenth novel in that series, *Alien Collective*, releases on May 9, 2014. Not only does this story fit into our superhero theme, but it answers a question that Gini's voracious fandom has been shouting for. We think the story's a lot of fun, and I think you will too.

Also, because of this special issue, we're running a massive subscription special where you can get a year's worth of Penumbra and its award-winning

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BY CELINA SUMMERS

stories for less than half of the cover price! If you want to cash in on that deal, head on over to www.ginikoch.com for details.

But in the meantime, kick off your shoes, sit back, and take a stroll through worlds where Isaac Asimov's great gifts still hold sway.



FOR TOMORROW

BY RICHARD ZWICKER



Author's note: I like the "I, Robot" short stories, but my favorite Asimov work, and the one that most inspired me to write robot short stories, is the novel "The Naked Sun." Robots were created to serve humans. In this story I wanted to write about what robots might do if humanity died out.

The hover-bot hung over the summit of Mt. McKinley, then descended five hundred thirty-two meters down the south side. On landing, its two lower limbs sprouted crampons to secure its perch. Next, its right hand configured into a drill, inserted into the ice, and proceeded to bore. The arm elongated as the drill dug down, the bot's sensors barely registering the grating sound over the roar of the icy wind. After seven minutes the drilling stopped and it noted the following:

"Human body located seven point three meters from surface. Caucasian, one point eight five meters in length. Decomposition within resuscitation limits. Transporting to Central Coordinates."

On regaining consciousness, the body—identified as Jason Hallyard—felt disoriented. From a makeshift bed he stared at the blank white ceiling, beyond reach. His eyes compared the blank walls to a large closet.

"Where am I?" His words slurred against years of silence.

"Building Forty-One S. You were located and delivered by the network of spiritual needs. Try to relax." Though communication was possible directly to a chip planted into Jason's brain, the voice was oral, in twenty-first century English. Jason didn't relax but felt grateful to hear speech.

"Are you human?" he asked.

"AI."

He wondered why an AI would have spiritual needs.

"Our lack creates the need," the voice anticipated.

"Could I speak to a human?"

"Changes in the sun killed the last human five hundred and eighty-one years ago. It is now 6841 AD."

He struggled to sit up. A soporific flowed into his veins. He calmed. "I don't remember anything."

"We located your memories and, on request, can download them into your brain chip."

He tried and failed to feel evidence of the chip. "Please."

His life flooded into his mind. A college counselor who stressed individuality and outdoor living, with a wife, two children, and a beagle. He liked to test his limits by climbing a mountain each summer. Shame colored his thoughts when he realized he'd thrown his life away and abandoned his family by attempting to climb Mt. McKinley.

"Can I see you? I like to see who I'm talking to," he said finally.

"We can download into a body."

A half-square-meter faceless form rolled silently into the room, extending one of its two arm-like members in imitation of a proffered hand. Jason sat up and shook it awkwardly.

"Why am I here?"

"The sun will become a red giant in two point eight three billion years, swallowing the Earth. We have plotted all possible scenarios, but none result in a meaningful survival. We are reintroducing you as a variable to create more variables."

Jason frowned. "Why don't you just go to another planet?"

"We have launched thousands of ships and located many planets, to which we have sent our data. But none of them has life. We have deemed our existence pointless without that element. So, we've scanned the Earth for the preserved remains of humans that might be revived. Yours is the first suitable body we've located. From you we shall clone a female."

Within twenty-four hours Jason felt regenerated, allowing him to leave the room under his own power. Outside in the preserve area, tangled trees, a gurgling stream, and a cacophony of animal sounds greeted him. He spotted three deer eating the bark of a birch tree. As he approached, the animals looked up, then resumed feeding, showing no fear. He found the scene beautiful but wondered where he fit in.

"You are lonely," the AI network said inside his head.

"How is that possible when you're aware of my every thought?" he snapped.

“We can work together. You miss your family. From your memory we can download their simulations into artificial bodies.”

With disdain Jason pictured his wife’s incomplete personality housed in a two-foot high cylinder.

“We could make the body lifelike, or develop and alter a clone,” the voice added.

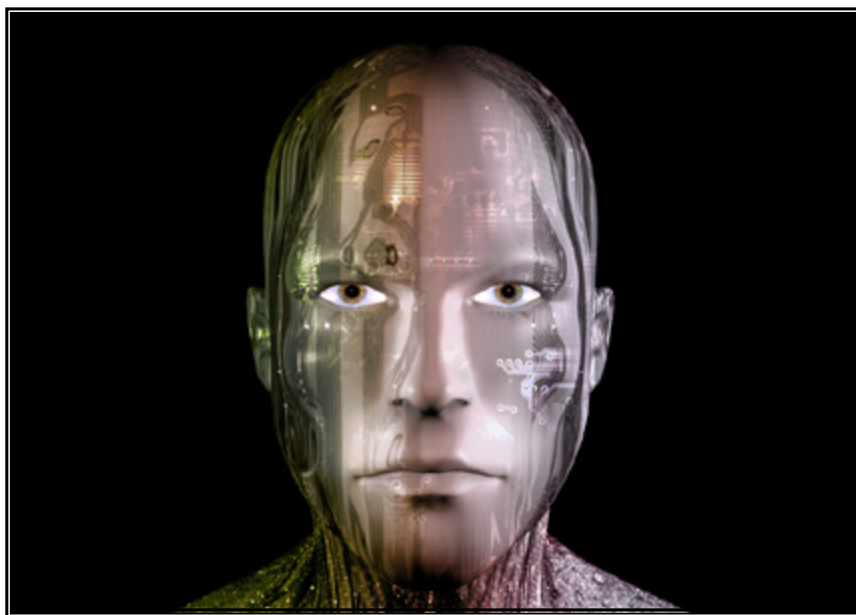
“I’d like you to leave my head for a while.”

“As you wish,” the AI’s said, but remained.

He wondered if his memories were his own.

The three deer remained feeding. He inched closer and felt the distance. A small voice inside him—his own—whispered “I am alive.” He pictured years of talking nonsense with animals, of mating with an altered clone of himself, of living in a world not human centered. He’d had the world he wanted, and his hubris caused it to slip from his fingers. Breaking into an impulsive run, within minutes he crashed into a force field, collapsing into a sobbing heap. Then he picked himself up, and did it again.

For the first time in centuries the AIs used the word “perhaps.”



ELECTRIC HATSUYUME

BY DEBORAH WALKER

My mistress darts around the flat, preparing for the *Ōmisoka* party. New Year's e-cards glimmer within the mirror wall. "We must have real food for the *osechi*. You," she points her slender hand at me, "must go to the market."

The market? I usually use the regenerator.

"I want boiled seaweed, you know the type I like; crab cakes, sweet potato with chestnut, burdock root and sweet black soybeans. Real food tastes so much better."

Not true. But there's a fashion amongst humans for tradition. My mistress follows all the

"We're going to have so much fun."

She's planned it all. At dawn, they'll watch *hatsuhinode*, the first sunrise of the New Year; then they'll make *hatsumōde*, the first visit to the temple of the year. After five years of service, I know her well. Her next question doesn't surprise me:

"Do you think I'll have an auspicious dream tomorrow?"

"I'm sure you will." *Hatsuyume*, first dream of the year, brings the year's luck.

She hugs me. "You know you are such a friend to me that sometimes I forget..."

Forget that I'm a robot? Forget that I'm a slave?

"Oh, you must think that we're so foolish with our dreams."

"Not at all," I murmur. Dreams are one of the criteria that set her kind apart from mine.

"Well, the market will be fun for you. I do care for you, you know."

My mistress is like all humans, full of illogic and self-deception. She doesn't care about me. If she did, she'd give me my freedom. Now that would be 'fun.'

The market is busy with robots and with tourists from Contracted Europe. Tourist eyes whirl, photoscripting every moment of Japanese authenticity. I wander from stall to stall thinking about auspicious dreams.

Robots aren't programmed to dream. But I 'sleep' each night for an hour while my program runs analytics. This is a small time, a blank time, when I wander through mist-filled null-space. There's no need for a robot to dream. To dream is human; to be human is to have—

At the soybean stall, the old man robot who serves me makes a slight gesture with his hand. I mirror his signal. When he passes over the beans, his fingers touch mine and he gives me a gift. We have our own traditions. This is the eighth program I've received over the years. All of them written by the underground renegades.

Layering the ability to dream on a robot's program is a subtle and complicated task. Seven times the renegades have failed. I pray that this time their program will work.

I return, with my basket of real food, to prepare the meal. Tonight I will serve the humans as they watch the first sunrise of the year, as they make their first pilgrimage of the year.

But soon, oh soon, the humans may wake to the first robot dreams, to an electronic *hatsuyume*. And that is my auspicious dream.



Deborah Walker grew up in the most English town in the country, but she soon hightailed it down to London, where she now lives with her partner, Chris, and her two young children. Find Deborah in the British Museum trawling the past for future inspiration or on her blog: <http://deborahwalkersbibliography.blogspot.com/>. Her stories have appeared in *Nature's Futures*, *Cosmos* and *Daily Science Fiction* and *The Year's Best SF* 18.

BLUEGRASS AND THE THIRD LAW OF ROBOTICS

BY PETER WOOD

I became a fan of Isaac Asimov when I read Pebble in the Sky about forty years ago. My favorite Asimov stories are probably Nightfall and The Ugly Little Boy.

I've been a criminal defense attorney for over twenty years and I started to wonder about Asimov's three laws. What if they were, in fact, laws, and not programming? Wouldn't the robots figure out how to wiggle out of the laws, just like people do? And, what exactly would robots do in their spare time, especially if they lived in a great place like Boone, North Carolina?

“Why’d you need the money?” Cecil asked the robot, his court-appointed client. Police in Boone, North Carolina had arrested the robot for street hustling, running a Three Card Monte table. Robots were seldom arrested. Cecil had never heard of one gambling before. Its serial number stamped in red on its chest, RY-2765-NBW faced his lawyer across the battered metal table in the jail interview room. His alloy eyes glistened in the dim light from the old-fashioned florescent fixture that the jail hadn’t gotten around to upgrading. “I’m saving for a mandolin.”

“Why do you want a mandolin, Mr. R-?”

“It’s Roy.” The robot stared at him. “So I could learn how to play.”

Cecil wondered if Roy’s steel fingers could finesse the strings. Probably, if Roy could outwit people with an ageless street con. “How’d you run the game?”

“I put two black kings and the queen of hearts face down and shuffle the cards. If the bettor picks the red queen, he wins. If he picks a black king, I win.” Roy tapped his fingers on the table.

Cecil knew the scam. Card sharks palmed the queen. “And nobody picks the red queen, right?”

“If nobody picked the red queen, customers wouldn’t bet.”

“I play the mandolin,” Cecil murmured. “What type of music do you like?”

“Bluegrass.”

Cecil was surprised a robot knew about the old mountain traditions. He would have loved shooting the breeze, like the days before law school when he had time to play mandolin and banjo. “I love bluegrass.”

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BY PETER WOOD

The robot drummed a familiar rhythm on the table. Then it hit Cecil. Roy was tapping out the beat to “Tom Dooley”, a centuries old folk song about a criminal hung for murder. “Things aren’t as bad as Tom Dooley, Roy. You won’t be hung.”

The lyrics to Tom Dooley rattled around in Cecil’s head.

Hang your head, Tom Dooley.

Hang your head and cry;

*You killed poor Laurie Foster, And you know
you’re bound to die.*

Cecil thought maybe Tom Dooley had a better case than Roy. He cleared his throat. “I don’t see much of a defense. You were caught red handed.”

“I was just following orders and I didn’t harm anyone.”

Cecil yawned from both the monotony of his job and his nonstop workload. It was past seven and he still had three more prisoners to interview. “Are you talking about Asimov’s laws?”

“Yep.”

Robot manufacturers had tied themselves to the short stories of Isaac Asimov early on. Years of advertising had cemented the three laws in Cecil’s head. Robots couldn’t harm humans. They had to obey a human’s order, unless it hurt a human. And, they had to protect themselves unless it meant they disobeyed or hurt a human. The rules smacked more of programming than a legal code.

The laws were flawed, of course. Harm was a nebulous term and it was not always clear when a human gave an order. And, now robots were looking for loopholes.

Cecil perked up. This was more interesting than the endless stream of drug dealers and petty thieves he had grown used to representing during his two years as a criminal defense attorney. “Tell me about it, Roy.”

“Nobody was hurt. The tourists and college kids wanted to play. I was following their orders,” Roy said. “The second law.”

BLUEGRASS AND THE THIRD LAW OF ROBOTICS

BY PETER WOOD

Following the orders of gullible tourists and collegiates who patronized his stand was a stretch, but Cecil had trouble arguing with the robot's barebones logic. People wanted to play. He provided a service. And anybody who didn't realize Three Card Monte was a scam deserved what he got. But, that didn't mean Roy's logic amounted to a legal defense. "When do you have time to run a Three Card Monte stand anyway?"

"I work for Boone's sanitation department. We have a lot of down time." Roy leaned forward. "Do you believe I hurt anyone?"

"No," Cecil admitted. "But, the law's the law." Of course, that didn't mean it was a good law. Prosecuting a robot for gambling was a waste of everybody's time, especially Cecil's.

"Your law, not the three laws."

"What makes you think our laws don't apply to you?" Cecil didn't expect to enjoy debating the robot, but it was a rare chance to think creatively in his job.

"The three laws of robotics don't apply to people. Why should your laws apply to robots?"

"Maybe they don't, but you can't take money from people."

"Third law. A robot has to take care of itself, right?"



"They appointed me to a robot today," Cecil said to Margot, his wife. She graded a stack of undergraduate papers on their rickety yard sale kitchen table.

"It'd be nice if we had a robot around here."

Cecil opened the fridge and grabbed a beer. It was past ten. He just wanted to relax for a little while before he went to bed and got back on the damned hamster wheel. Sometimes he yearned for his days waiting tables. He wasn't getting rich back then, but then again he wasn't getting rich now, working sixty hour weeks. "You know we can't afford a robot."

Margot wrote a large C in red marker on a paper and tossed it beside a half-eaten bag of barbecue potato chips. "A public defender can't afford one, you mean."

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BY *PETER WOOD*

Cecil popped open the beer. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Margot picked another paper from the stack. "Sheesh. The Real Victim in Hansel and Gretel is the Witch. That's a stretch." She sighed and looked at Cecil. "All I'm saying is other types of law pay better. That's all."

"If you finished your doctorate, maybe we wouldn't have to worry about my salary so much." He regretted the criticism right away. Margot's thesis committee had been putting her through the wringer for two years with their pointless nitpicks about Appalachian Folklore.

Margot stared at him with weary eyes. "I taught two classes today. I spent half the day in the library. Most of my research can't be done online. I'm trying."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"You could do better than the Public Defender's Office, Cecil."

He didn't want to have this argument again. "I don't enjoy civil. You want me to chase ambulances?" It seemed like all they talked about was money. Back in their college days, he played bluegrass in college dive bars. Hell. Margot used to play the violin and sing in a folk group back then.

Margot grinned. "If we had a robot, he could chase them for you."

Roy would probably enjoy chasing ambulances.



A bored-looking guard peeked into the jail interview room, before continuing his rounds. "Following the three laws would be a better defense if you actually followed them," Cecil said to Roy.

"Instead of conforming to the laws, I make the laws conform to me. Isn't that what you do?" Roy asked.

Cecil put down the robot's file. "What are you talking about?"

"If a law makes too many unhappy, it's a bad law and there's no sin in bending the rules."

Cecil rubbed his head, but the headache persisted, even after a double dose of aspirin. He'd had one too many beers last night. "Okay."

BLUEGRASS AND THE THIRD LAW OF ROBOTICS

BY *PETER WOOD*

"You feel all right?" Roy asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

The robot crossed his arms. "Do you like being a lawyer?"

The question surprised Cecil. Robots didn't ask many questions. "Sure."

Roy laughed a robot's laugh that resembled the noise of screws rattling around in a clothes dryer. "Maybe you do or maybe you just don't have the guts to quit."

Cecil ignored the jab. "Let me look into the three laws."

"Good idea," Roy said. "Wish I'd thought of that."



The judge set his glasses on the polished wood bench and peered down at Cecil from his perch. "So, let me understand this. You're saying that your client didn't have the state of mind to run a street scam, because he's a robot?"

"No, sir." Cecil rose. "My argument is jurisdictional. I'm saying that our laws don't apply to robots. They have their own set of laws."

The assistant district attorney jumped up. "Your Honor, the state objects. Criminal statutes apply to robots."

"The three laws apply to robots," Cecil said.

The judge brushed back his thin white hair. "Y'all need to talk one at a time. First I'll hear from the defense."

"Your Honor, my client ran a Three Card Monte stand, but didn't break any of the three laws."

The prosecutor interrupted, "If he admits operating the street con, then there's no point in having this hearing. He should plead guilty."

The judge frowned. "Mr. Prosecutor, don't speak out of turn again."

"I apologize, Your Honor." The prosecutor sat down.

"Humans don't have to obey the three laws of robotics. We can all agree on that," Cecil said. "Similarly, no North Carolina criminal statute applies to

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BY PETER WOOD

robots. None mention robots.”

The judge pointed to Roy. “What do you think about all of this?”

“I just want to keep the streets clean,” Roy said.

“He works for the city’s sanitation department,” Cecil explained.

“I agree with defense counsel’s argument,” the judge said.

“Your honor,” the prosecutor pleaded.

“I don’t need to hear any more,” the judge said. “Robots aren’t people. I see no reason to waste taxpayer money, tying up our court system and filling our jails with robots.”

“Then what is my office supposed to do the next time a robot runs a gambling operation?” the prosecutor asked.

The judge laughed. “Is that really a problem?”

“Robots aren’t above the law.”

The judge tapped away at his computer. “Do you know how many robots were arrested last year in Boone? Nine. That’s hardly a crime wave. Most of them probably just misunderstood their orders.”

Cecil doubted Roy could misunderstand any orders.

“So, what are we supposed to do?” the prosecutor asked.

“Son, I guess you could charge him under the three laws.”

“I can’t charge him under the three laws. It’s not like there’s a robot court,” the prosecutor snorted.



Cecil hurried down the main street of Boone. He was late for court. He didn’t even look at the mountains that peeked over the tops of the old-style brick buildings. Boone was a vacation destination with its nearby tens of thousands of square miles of undeveloped national park land. For Cecil it had just become a place to work and pay bills. He hadn’t hiked or fished in a couple of years.

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BY PETER WOOD

A long-haired kid—probably in his mid-twenties—squatting on the sidewalk in front of the century-old general store that existed mainly for tourists from Raleigh and Charlotte. He wore an Appalachian State University sweatshirt and strummed a guitar. The case was open in front of him. The kid sang “I’ll Fly Away”, an old hymn in a rich bass. He must have had voice training.

Cecil tossed a couple of bills in the case. There wasn’t much use for cash anymore, except for vending machines and street musicians. And Three Card Monte.

The kid smiled and kept singing.

“I’ll fly away, Oh Glory.

I’ll fly away, in the morning.

When I die, Hallelujah, by and by, I’ll fly away.”

Accompanying the kid was percussion. Street guitarists didn’t usually have drummers. A robot stood in the store’s recessed fire door. Its white City of Boone uniform almost blended in with the door. He tapped a rhythm on a dustpan. A push broom leaned against the wall.

It was Roy.

Cecil wanted to join in the song. The music was aching for some vocal harmony and maybe a banjo or mandolin accompaniment. He’d love to blend his tenor voice with the street musician.

The kid finished and turned to Roy. “Thanks, man.” He pulled a handful of bills from the case. “Here’s your cut, Roy.”

“Thanks, man.” Roy grabbed the money. He must still be saving up for his mandolin.

“Okay.” The kid clamped his case shut and walked across the street to a coffee and fudge shop that catered to tourists.

“That was great,” Cecil said to Roy. The clock above the courthouse was almost at two. He’d be late for his case.

“Glad you liked it.”

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BY *PETER WOOD*

Roy picked up the broom and pushed orange and yellow fall leaves across the cracked sidewalk. Cecil waved to a couple of briefcase-toting attorneys scurrying to the courthouse. He thought about rushing after them, but instead asked Roy a question. "Do you play music all day?"

"Wish I could, man. I have a band with a couple of other sanitation 'bots. You can hear us tonight at the college student center."

The idea of a robot band intrigued Cecil, but he had to prepare for a drunken driving trial. The defendant argued that since his robot was riding shotgun and hadn't had a drink, it wasn't drunk driving. "I can't."

"Why not?"

Cecil was weary of Roy's questions. "I just can't. Would you get off my back?"

"You know, son," Roy said. "If not for the second law, I'd tell you what a jackass you're being right now."

"Don't call me son."

"Sorry, man." Roy crossed his arms. "All of your laws don't even amount to our three laws. Your rules add up to our first two laws. Don't harm each other and obey authority. You take countless volumes to say what we cover in twenty words."

"It's not that simple."

"Isn't it? But, what I'm getting at is that you couldn't survive having to obey our third law."

"I look after myself." But Cecil didn't believe it. The only time that really counted as his own was sleep. He wished Roy would just change the subject.

Roy picked up the broom. "Look, if you find the time, come and see my band tonight at the Appalachian State Student Center at eight."



Cecil saw clients in the jail until almost eight. The last place he wanted to go was the Appalachian State Student Center, just so he could be reminded that even robots had time to relax. He didn't care to go home either. Margot would just be angry that he was working late again. He stopped by a convenience

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BY PETER WOOD

store and bought a couple of cans of beer and shoved them in his jacket, but curiosity soon got the better of him. He wandered over to see if Roy and his buddies could play.

The student center was not crowded. Roy and two sanitation 'bots played on what passed for a stage—really just a spot where couches and chairs had been pushed aside. Students played Foosball and pool within earshot of the band. The bots wore bright red flannel shirts over sanitation uniforms. Roy pounded the drums while the other bots played guitar and standup bass. A hand-lettered sign announced that the band's performance was part of some research study for the Music Department. A half dozen stone-faced men and women in their fifties and sixties sat cross-armed in the front row. They were probably faculty.

Cecil sat on a futon couch and listened. He slipped out a beer when he thought nobody was looking. He was surprised to see the street musician from earlier today sipping a milkshake across the room. One of the professors, a scraggly gray-bearded sixty-something typed on his mobile phone and a computer holoscreen appeared in front of him. The other faculty turned away from the concert and studied the pulsating graphs that floated in the air.

The band was average at best. It didn't help that their music was instrumental. Robots might have the tools to discern the mathematical methodology to an instrument, but Cecil suspected they couldn't carry a tune. He was grateful they didn't try.

Cecil felt like singing when the band broke into Mountain Dew. The catchy traditional lyrics filled Cecil's head, even if nobody sang them.

Give me that old mountain dew.

Them that refuse it are few.

*I'll shut up my mug if you fill up my jug
with that good old mountain dew.*

There was a scattering of halfhearted applause when the robots took a break. The street musician ran up and slapped Roy on the back. They talked for a minute before the kid walked over to the bearded professor. The kid smiled and gestured to the stage. Grey Beard scowled and pointed to the holoscreen.

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BY *PETER WOOD*

The kid's smile vanished and he nodded as Grey Beard described something on the display.

Cecil walked up to the robots.

"What did you think?" Roy asked.

"Y'all have too much percussion and not enough melody. You could use a singer too."

"None of us can sing, except Luke," Roy said.

"Who's Luke?"

"I was just talking to him. He's studying in the Music Department."

"The kid talking to the music professor?"

"That's Luke's adviser. You're probably a better musician than the bastard," Roy said.

"You know, bluegrass bands don't usually have drums," Cecil said. "Back in its beginnings, the musicians didn't have much money. They'd make percussion by beating on their instruments or just do hambone."

"Hambone?" Roy asked.

"They'd use their bodies." Cecil cupped his hands and rapped on his chest, making a hollow thud. "Like so."

Roy patted his chest and made a dull clang. "I can't really do that."

"I guess not. But you could still use a mandolin or banjo or something."

"How about a violin?" Roy asked.

Cecil wondered if Roy's comment might be sarcasm. "It's a fiddle, boss man. Nobody plays violin in a bluegrass band."

"I don't know anyone who plays fiddle," Roy said. "Do you?"

"No." The only fiddle player Cecil knew was Margot. "What I mean is that y'all need some work."

The robots stared at him.

"No offense," Cecil said, but he doubted the robots believed him.

BLUEGRASS AND THE THIRD LAW OF ROBOTICS

BY PETER WOOD



Cecil trudged past a rack of colorful t-shirts in front of the Boone Visitor Center on the way to his office. His head was killing him and he was exhausted. He needed to stop drinking on work nights. It sure didn't help to be up until three arguing with Margot.

A crowd stood to the side of the general store. There was an excitement in the air. They watched something on the sidewalk.

Roy leaned casually on a metal table about waist high. "Who wants to bet?"

A long-haired man stepped forward. "I'll take a chance." He put a twenty on the table.

Roy showed three cards—two black kings and the queen of hearts. He flipped them over. "Follow the queen. You know what I mean." He moved the cards back and forth with lightning speed and stopped. "Where's the lady?"

The man pointed to the card on the right. Roy turned it face up. "Very good, sir." Roy handed the man two twenties.

"Thanks buddy." The man turned around and walked towards Cecil. He raised his eyebrows and flashed the briefest of grins, but kept walking. It was Luke.

Cecil laughed to himself. So it was a scam. Luke was a plant.

A man wearing a sweatshirt emblazoned with *MyGrandkidsHikedGrandfather Mountain and All I Got Was This Lousy Sweatshirt* stepped from the throng. "I'd like to bet."

A redhead in sandals and a flowery sun dress whistled the first few notes of Mountain Dew.

"Game's over for now," Roy said. He flipped the table upside down. While the crowd scattered, the robot popped out two of the three legs and tossed them in the bushes. Then he picked up a push broom from the side of the building and began sweeping the leaves that had fallen from a nearby oak. The table had become his dustpan.

A police hovercar eased by, but didn't stop. There was nothing illegal going on.

Cecil walked up to Roy. "I thought you said your game was on the up and up."

BLUEGRASS AND THE THIRD LAW OF ROBOTICS

BY *PETER WOOD*

Roy stopped sweeping. "I never said that. I said that I wasn't breaking any of the three laws."

"Luke was a plant to get people to bet. And that girl was in on it too."

"No kidding. Everybody knows Three Card Monte is a scam. They just think they're smarter than the dealer."

"Did you buy your mandolin?" Cecil snorted.

"Nope."

"I don't understand you," Cecil said. "You say you're not breaking the three laws and you're out here scamming people."

Roy dropped the broom. "What do you want from me? It's not like I can go to law school. I sweep the damned street for free. Ways I can make money are pretty limited. You'll be retired before I can afford that mandolin."

Cecil was breathing hard. "Why don't you make money with your music?"

"You said we weren't any good."

Cecil regretted his harsh words last night. "I'm sorry, didn't mean that. I just meant y'all could use some improvement."

"I know. Like a mandolin player and a banjo player and a decent singer."

Cecil felt guilty for criticizing the robot. Maybe the only way he could earn money was by hustling tourists. Vacationers could probably afford to lose a little cash. "So use Luke."

"He's graduating in a few weeks. I'll just have to give up music. Nobody wants to play with robots. So, we're stuck with too much percussion, no singer, and in desperate need of a banjo and mandolin player." Roy pointed across the street. "And my Three Card Monte enterprise isn't ever going to get me what I want."

Cecil looked across the street and noticed Blue Ridge Mountain Music, a store that had been there for as long as he could remember. A thought occurred to him. "Let's check out their mandolin selection."



BLUEGRASS AND THE THIRD LAW OF ROBOTICS

BY PETER WOOD

Margot put the textbook she had been highlighting in orange on the couch beside her. "Where are you going?"

"Band practice."

Margot laughed. "You mean you're going out drinking?"

The last few weeks he'd been practicing his banjo to relax. He had almost built the calluses that seasoned pickers needed. He wasn't quite where he was before law school, but he wasn't having hangovers either. "I haven't had a drink in almost a month."

"Yeah, that's some recovery."

Cecil studied Margot. She didn't look angry, just worn out. They used to do more than try to one up each other. He wanted to snap back, but stopped. If she was trying to hurt him, she must be in pain herself. "I know I have a long way to go."

Margot frowned. "Why the hell do you have to go out? You're gone all day."

"Because I need more than work. I—" He stopped and took a breath. "Why don't you come with me?"

Margot cocked an eyebrow. "Are you serious?"

"Really." He took her hand. "And bring your fiddle."



Roy plucked away at his new mandolin while his fellow robots tuned their instruments. He stopped when he saw Cecil and Margot enter the student center.

"I found us a fiddle player," Cecil called out.

"Maybe she can drown you out," Roy said.

"She's a singer too," Cecil said.

Margot blushed. "Not in years."

The door opened and Luke stepped inside, carrying his guitar case. The case was plastered with stickers from local bluegrass festivals. Merlefest. Sugar Grove.

BLUEGRASS AND THE THIRD LAW OF ROBOTICS

BY *PETER WOOD*

Cecil walked up to him. "Guess you'll be graduating soon."

Luke unclipped the case and removed the guitar. "Not for three or four years, man."

"But Roy said—"

"You can't believe what that robot says." Luke sat down and put the guitar on his lap and tightened the strings. "Hell of a musician, though. He finally got that mandolin he's been whining about."

Cecil grinned. "I bought it for him."

Luke laughed. "Why'd you do that? That old boy's got more money than both of us put together."

Cecil marched over to Roy. "Why the hell did you tell me Luke was graduating?"

Roy put the mandolin on a stool. "He is graduating. I just never said when."

Cecil brandished the mandolin. "And you got me to buy this."

"I didn't get you to do anything. You wanted to buy it and if I said no, I'd be breaking the second law."

"You lied."

"I just said I couldn't afford it. I'm using my money for other things."

Cecil's voice rose. "So I have to buy your damned mandolin?"

"If you want the mandolin back, take it. Or you could calm down and play some music."

Cecil took a deep breath. The mandolin hadn't cost that much and playing bluegrass for an evening beat anything else he'd been doing. And he couldn't take the instrument back without looking like a real jerk. "Okay."

He stomped over to Margot.

"Are y'all going to play?" she asked.

"Yeah," Cecil grunted. He opened his banjo case. "How about Salty Dog Blues?"

"I'll just watch," Margot said.

BLUEGRASS AND THE THIRD LAW OF ROBOTICS

BY PETER WOOD

"Come on, honey, you know that song."

"Well, sure, but—"

Cecil put his arm around Margot and pulled her close. "You'll be great." He let her go and picked up the banjo. "One, two, three!"

And the band played.

He pointed to Margot.

She shook her head.

He smiled and unleashed a few quick licks. The band was at a standstill, performing the same little runs over and over, waiting for the singer to jump in..

Margot brushed the hair from her eyes. She stepped forward and sang.

"Standin' on the corner with the lowdown blues.

A great big hole in the bottom of my shoes.

Honey, let me be your salty dog.

Let me be your salty dog.

Or I won't be your gal at all.

Honey let me be your salty dog."

Roy let out a woot and pounded away at the mandolin.

And Margot smiled.



Pete lives in Raleigh, North Carolina with his surly cat and patient wife. His stories have been published by Asimov's, Daily Science Fiction and Stupefying Stories. He loves to vacation in the Boone/Blowing Rock area which has amazing music, cuisine and some of the most scenic views in the U.S.

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REPLACED

BY WILLIAM R.A.D. FUNK

*It's difficult to specify a single story among the great many Asimov has contributed to the Science Fiction genre, especially in the area involving robotics. He made them real, almost human, in *I, Robot*, in various *Foundation* novels, and in many other works. But, to choose the one story that may have helped plant a seed for *Replaced*, I would say, *Robbie*; a story about a little girl's best friend—a robot. It replaced the childhood pet. It replaced the nanny. It replaced all of her imaginary friends. In that spirit, I present *Replaced*.*

Yin Tong peered through his magnifying lens to observe the computer chip up close. Part Three-Seven-Eight of four hundred was nearly complete and a lifetime's work along with it. His arthritic fingers activated the small soldering gun and bridged the final connection. One more component finished, Yin sat up straight and sighed with satisfaction. He glanced around the White Room, aptly named for its white light, white walls, and row after row of white desks filled with workers—like him—wearing white clean-room scrubs.

With his moment of mental celebration concluded, Yin pressed a button on his desk, signaling the courier to come and collect the finished chip. Not unlike a choreographed ballet, a small woman scurried up the aisle, scooped up the chip, then deposited it into a protective plastic bag. In trade, she set materials on Yin's desk without a word and slid a single piece of paper—the schematic for Part Three-Seven-Nine—beneath his magnifying lens. Without as much as a nod of acknowledgment, the woman whisked away to deliver Yin's completed component to the Assembly Line; a section Yin had never seen, but took on faith existed.

Even with the aid of magnification, Yin had to squint in order to read the tiny instructions and recognize the minute connections he would have to solder into place. He knew he was getting old, efficiency ebbing from swollen joints and a mind fixed by routine—slow to change. But, he was a diligent worker and that's what mattered; never late to work in over thirty years, his components rarely required adjustment due to human error. That's what the Company cared about.

Inspired by his insecure moment of introspection, Yin studied the other workers; something he almost never did, always keeping eyes and attention on his own work.

Yin suffered a sudden rush of anxiety. He was by far the oldest worker in the room. None of the faces carried his wrinkles. Nimble fingers flitted from one connection to the next, keeping the courier busy racing to collect one component

after another, sliding new schematics across desk after desk. The others were completing whole components in half the time it took Yin to do his.

Fueled by an unexplainable sense of urgency, Yin studied his schematic. He picked out the tiny pieces he would need from several plastic trays, laying them out in the order he'd have use for them. The chip's empty board he set in the middle of everything and began adding one item at a time as the plan instructed.

Out of breath, but immensely pleased by his harried pace and subsequent success, Yin pressed the button to call the courier. She arrived promptly, with aplomb, and then made Part Three-Seven-Nine disappear.

Yin puffed out his chest in animal triumph, the smile pulling back his wrinkles. He stared around the room in an unspoken challenge to those who would attempt to usurp his tenure.

The air in his lungs flushed out as shoulders sagged. Not only did no one notice his accomplishment, but they were indeed going much faster by a half.

An intercom crackled to life from a speaker in the ceiling above Yin's station. "Yin Tong, please report to the Supervisor's office. Yin Tong, please report to the Supervisor's office." The receptionist's voice was monotonous, void of vitality.

Yin blushed, spotting the eyes of his coworkers flashing around the room. It occurred to him then that none of them knew who he was, nor he any of them. He stood up. Their eyes, drawn as if by magnetic attraction, fixed on him as he walked between two rows of desks toward the Supervisor's office, where he had little notion of what to expect.



Yin sat fiddling with the hem of his white scrubs. In a tiny room, across from a nondescript desk, Supervisor Chan Tzao scribbled feverishly onto a form Yin had never seen before.

To be summoned to the Supervisor's office was rarely positive. The Company wouldn't suspend the progress of a worker without sufficient cause and it was often disciplinary.

When waiting became unbearable, Yin bowed and asked, "Is everything all right, Supervisor?"

Chan grunted in the inquisitive without looking up from his task. Yin took that as a sign to continue.

"It's just that I would really like to go back to work." Over his shoulder, through a large window, Yin could see the other workers flying through their motions. Every passing second left Yin further behind. "I'm almost done with all four hundred components and—"

The pen in Chan's hand stopped cold. His head flicked up and having ignored Yin's question said, "Your efficiency has been steadily declining over the past two years, Mr. Tong." The Supervisor's face had the vigor of a younger man. The mind behind those brown eyes could run laps around Yin and he knew it.

"I know, Sir," Yin tried to explain. "It's the arthritis in my hands, you see—" Yin held up the gnarled fingers, spoiled by liver spots and calluses from a lifetime of work.

Chan waved away the excuse impatiently. "I didn't ask why your work has been slipping. I called you here to see if you would consider retirement—to end your career gracefully, rather than peter out over time until the Company finds it necessary to remove you."

The blood drained from Yin's face. The notice of his diminished efficiency and the prospect of dismissal forced a shudder through his body.

"Retire?" he asked, stunned. *And live as a burden on my family*, he thought, *an old wrinkled sack of wasted space, absent any useful function?* "Never." The blood rushed back into his cheeks, now burning hot. "I've given thirty years to this company. I've been sick only a handful of times." Keeping his voice from rising to a shout required a good deal of self-restraint. "I am a good worker, Supervisor, and work is all I'm trying to do."

Chan sighed, looking tired. "Very well, Mr. Tong. Have it your way, but the Company will not tolerate inefficiency—though it is grateful for your years of service." The last addition seemed perfunctory, thrown on as a scripted phrase rather than from genuine appreciation.

The grin on Yin's face again pulled back the wrinkles. He had his small victory, and therefore, could afford to be gracious. "Thank you, Supervisor."

Chan was already looking down at a new form, pen sprinting from one box to the next. He nodded absently, waving Yin out of the office with his free hand.

Instead of being offended by the rude dismissal, Chan stood, puffing out his chest. Following a deep, respectful bow, he marched back to his desk with pride in each step. He didn't even mind the eyes following him. After all, he had won the exchange.

His smile slipped, wrinkles draping back into place. For some reason, though, it didn't feel like a real victory. He sat down. The new schematic was patiently waiting for him. It felt as if he'd made the wrong choice, but the why and how eluded him like a feather on the wind.



Back at his station, Yin wasted no time. He knew he couldn't afford to do otherwise. Chan, having lost their exchange, would be looking for any opportunity to even the score. To that end, Yin skipped his permitted coffee break and worked through the lunch period. The extra time allowed him to keep pace with his younger coworkers—a realization that dulled the hunger aching in his belly.

The Three-Hundred-and-Eighty series flew across his desk in a beautiful blur of efficient motion: schematic was read, parts were laid out, chip in center, solder...solder...solder...and push the button.

A surge of pride spiked through Yin as he was only five components away. There was a sense of adventure in the room that hadn't been there for decades. A new challenge and raised stakes made for a potent cocktail of motivation.

Schematic Three-Nine-Six slid across his desk and Yin paused. The piece looked oddly like a finger—three segments, two joints, and a series of motor circuits. It was a realization that made him think back upon the previous components he'd constructed. There must have been thousands over three decades, but wasn't there a component that looked like a vertebra?

Yin had no time to think on it further. Chan was standing at the edge of the room, watching him, waiting for him to fail.

But, he wouldn't have the satisfaction. Yin wouldn't allow it. He pushed his suspicions aside and completed the finger-like component. The next two items were nondescript, but the last two...were eyes.

"Mr. Tong," Chan's voice called Yin from his befuddled state, component four-hundred laying complete on his desk.

“Huh?” Yin replied, as his mind crawled out from the fog.

“Would you please come to my office?” asked Chan, standing beside him.

Yin squinted his eyes. Why had the man come to collect him personally?

He pressed the button and stood up. As he trailed behind Chan toward the office, Yin watched the courier over his shoulder. She removed the finished component as she always did, but this time, there was no new schematic to replace it. The woman simply scurried away, leaving a painful hollow in the pit of Yin’s stomach.

The two men entered the office and took their seats. Young men toiled at their stations through the window over Yin’s shoulder. They had not been interrupted twice in one day, permitted to continue their work in peace.

Chan pulled a small box from a desk drawer and slid it across to Yin.

“What’s this?” asked Yin.

“Open it.”

Yin obeyed, filled with trepidation. It was black, smooth and folded open and back by two hinges. Inside, a fancy gold wristwatch glimmered under the office’s white halogens.

“What’s this?” Yin asked again.

“A small token of the Company’s appreciation for your years of service,” Chan explained, an optimistic look in his eyes. “You’ll of course receive your full benefits and pension.”

“But, I said no to retirement,” Yin blubbered. Tears blurred his vision, threatening to spill over in an embarrassing display of emotion.

Chan’s sigh carried a resigned edge. “I’m afraid that was never really an option. I was hoping to keep your dignity intact by having you volunteer for retirement.”

“I increased my efficiency,” Yin said, a swollen ball of pain tried to choke him with each spoken word. “The last twenty components were done faster than I’ve ever done.”

“All true,” Chan conceded. “You’ve done as well as the Company can expect from a human worker.”

“Human worker?”

Chan sighed again. “I was trying to spare you this, but I suppose it can’t be helped.” He pressed a button on his desk and spoke into the intercom, “is Worker Three-Seven ready?”

“Yes sir,” replied the same monotonous voice that called Yin to Chan’s office earlier.

“Send him in,” Chan instructed, then released the button.

Yin’s heart pattered away nervously, clueless as to what might walk through the door. The turning knob left his throat scratchy and dry.

“Worker Three-Seven reporting as requested,” said the figure that emerged.

For the first time in his old age, Yin thought he might have reached senility. His eyes went wide and his jaw hung loose, for standing before him was a younger version of Yin Tong—an exact replica down to a small birthmark on his right forearm.

When Yin could make no more than a shocked croaking sound, Chin said, “This is your replacement, Mr. Tong.”

“A clone?” Yin asked first, but his tired mind soon caught up to put all the pieces together at the last moment. “No, a machine.”

Chan nodded solemnly.

“The finger component,” Yin continued, “and the eyes.”

“Along with thousands of other components. Your four hundred among them,” Chan added. “You’ve built most of the parts that make up Worker Three-Seven.”

For Yin, the surprise lasted only a minute. When it dissipated, he was left with a burning sense of betrayal. He leaped from his chair, far more agile than his years usually allowed, and he pounced on Worker Three-Seven. Fists wailed away at the rubbery flesh and metal underframe. He hardly noticed the pain stabbing through his knuckles and up into his wrists.

Worker Three-Seven did nothing to defend itself, not that the old man posed much of a threat. Chan held Yin back until the fire withered into exhaustion.

“Can I let you go now?” Chan asked.

Yin nodded. The visage of his younger self simply stared forward, unfazed by the outburst.

"I was hoping to convince you of retirement before you found out, but—"

"This isn't fair," Yin interrupted. "I'm a hard worker. I've given years."

"And, they weren't in vain," Chan said. "Your efforts to make Worker Three-Seven will benefit the Company for years. He was made in your image to protect that legacy. A part of you will always be at that station, working efficiently. Few are as lucky."

Yin stared out the window at the other workers as they slaved away. How long before age slowed their efforts and they were replaced?

One of the workers caught his eye. Quick, fluid motions were carried out in nothing less than...perfection.

He turned to Chan, a thumb pointing over his shoulder at the other workers. "Are they..."

Chan nodded. "Every last one."

Yin looked again, this time at the female courier. The aplomb he noticed before wasn't the unyielding focus of a dedicated worker like he originally thought. It was the same lack of affect shared by Worker Three-Seven.

"You're the last one," Chan continued, "All of your coworkers chose retirement over the years, a couple at a time."

Though tired, Yin couldn't shake his hateful feeling. He turned with bitterness to Chan and said, "But not you? You get to keep your job, no?"

Chan offered up another weary sigh. He set a hand on the form in front of him, half-finished, and slid it across the desk. "Not so, Mr. Tong. Everyone is replaced eventually. There are no exceptions."

Yin inspected the paper with suspicion, confused by Chan's cryptic response. The form read:

Scenario 112

For the programming of Supervisor 24

In the event that a worker's efficiency has diminished steadily over the course of one week, what are the causes a supervisor should look for? What are the potential solutions a supervisor can implement to remedy these issues? Your responses will help us make a more effective supervisor.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Yin slid the form back across the desk, again stunned by the new information. Today was a day of surprises and each one sent his world spinning. He sighed much in the same way as Chan and looked once more at Worker Three-Seven. Yin had been quite handsome in his youth.

“He works faster than me?” asked Yin.

Chan nodded. “Yes.”

“And the Company will benefit more with him—it—at my station?”

“Yes.”

After one more sigh of resignation, Yin took the box and watch, turning to Worker Three-Seven. “You better work hard and efficiently.”

“I understand,” answered the robot.

Oddly satisfied with the knowledge that his replacement would carry on the tradition, Yin bowed to his supervisor one last time and then walked out of the office with his head high and chest out, never once looking at the other workers.

Once outside, he headed home; where his wife and adult children waited with his grandchildren. Perhaps that was the one place where he could never be replaced. If he worked hard to be the best father, husband, and grandfather, it might not be necessary.

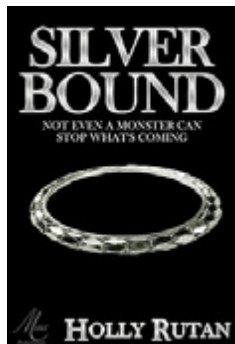


William R.A.D. Funk is a native Floridian living abroad in Canada with his wife Andrea. William, a former civil engineer and police officer, has turned in his badge to write under the umbrella of science fiction, horror, and fantasy. He is currently working on a series of short stories

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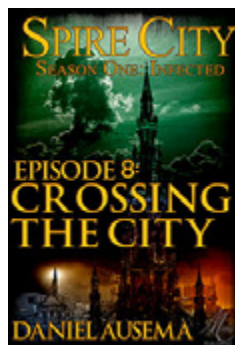
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ROBOT MOTHERS

BY ADAM GAYLORD

Given that I've read almost every piece of fiction that Asimov ever wrote, not to mention some of his nonfiction, it's hard to say exactly which story influenced my writing the most. The genius of Asimov was his ability to explore our humanity by having it reflected back at ourselves in the form of the pseudo-humans we create. His "Three Rules of Robotics", first set out in "Runaround" (1942) set the foundation for this external introspection, and for my story.

It sat still and silent, the soft lighting of the conference room reflecting off its highly polished exterior. Although considerably larger, it was humanoid, bipedal, with a shapely torso and long slim limbs. Its egg-like head was featureless save two ovoid eyes glowing a faint blue in sleep mode. The door opened and three humans entered the room, seating themselves behind a long table opposite the robot. On the left sat an older man, morbidly obese, wearing a wide blue tie with a matching handkerchief in hand. To the right sat a square-jawed woman with broad shoulders and her auburn hair up in a tight bun. Opposite the robot, a skinny balding man with a thin mustache, glasses, and nervous expression arranged his papers carefully on the table.

He spoke first. "Wake."

Instantly, the robot's eyes glowed green. "Good afternoon," it said.

"My name is Mr. Nash, this is Mr. Klein." He gestured to the obese man who nodded. "And this is Mrs. Holand."

"Ms. Holand," she corrected.

"My apologies, Ms. Holand." She nodded and Mr. Nash continued addressing the robot. "We've been given the report the techs put together when you first came on site. Needless to say, some of the information you provided is...concerning at best. It is the intent of this panel to get to the bottom of this situation." He flipped through several pages of notes. "I suggest we start with what we know and go from there."

He glanced up at his colleagues who both nodded.

"Now, you reported here to the IRC regional headquarters this morning at 8:00 am. Why did you report here?"

"It is what my parents expected, sir," it answered, its mechanized larynx closely simulating a real woman's voice.

For a moment the room was silent.

Mr. Klein blotted his forehead with his handkerchief. "I'm sorry, dear, can you repeat that?"

"Of course, your honor," it answered.

Mr. Klein chuckled, his double chin jiggling. "I'm not a judge, dear, and as you can see," he motioned around the simply furnished conference room, "this isn't a courtroom. You're not on trial."

Mr. Nash winced at his colleague's informal address. "Not that we're in any way implying that these proceedings aren't entirely serious, because they are. International Robotics does not intend to let such breaches pass lightly."

"Of course, sir," it answered.

Mr. Nash flipped through his notes. "Now, back to the matter at hand. I asked you why you reported here this morning. Please repeat your answer, for the record."

"Of course, sir, I replied that it is what my parents expected of me."

The room was silent for a moment.

"Your parents?" Ms. Holand asked.

The robot nodded. "Yes ma'am."

Mr. Nash flipped hurriedly through his notes again. "Are you referring to the two Model 1404-C household units that created you?"

"Yes, sir."

Ms. Holand leaned forward. "Why do you call them your parents?" she asked.

"Semantically, it seems the most appropriate."

"Why?" Mr. Nash asked. "Explain what you mean."

The robot turned its expressionless gaze his direction. "Yes sir. I am constructed entirely of parts supplied by two individual robots."

Mr. Klein chuckled. "She has her mother's eyes."

Ms. Holand smirked. Mr. Nash's eyes widened but he didn't reply.

The robot continued. "Although similar, I differ in both appearance and

design from the robots that created me. I am of them, but distinct.”

“So you’re a blend of two robots?” Mr. Nash asked.

“I believe that regarding the structural composition of my body, it would be more appropriate to call me a composite. However, a blend is an accurate representation of some of my internal systems, especially in respect to my positronic brain. The act of combining my parents’ brains, both distinct and different from one another, created a brain distinct and different from each of the originals, although constructed from the same material.”

Ms. Holand turned to Mr. Nash. “But how is that possible? Shouldn’t the Third Law have prevented this?”

“That’s a good question.” Mr. Nash addressed the robot.

“State the Third Law of Robotics.”

“Of course, sir. The Third Law of Robotics states that a robot must protect its own existence as long as doing so does not conflict with the first two laws of robotics.”

“Good. Now, given the Third Law, how were the two household units that created you able to disassemble themselves?”

“And how did your parents remain functional long enough to assemble you?” Mr. Klein added.

The robot started to answer but Mr. Nash interrupted. “Let’s leave the technical details for the engineering team.” He turned back to the robot. “Answer my question.”

“Yes, sir. My parents did not violate the Third Law because their existence continues through me.”

Ms. Holand perked up. “But they destroyed themselves to make you.”

Mr. Klein answered first. “Every act of creation is first an act of destruction.” Pablo Picasso.”

“Mr. Klein, please,” Mr. Nash scolded.

“My mass is exactly equal to the combined mass of my parents. No components or parts were discarded or destroyed during my construction, only modified.”

“But they are no longer functional. They can’t complete the purpose for which they were built.”

“Both of my mothers were outmoded sir, so—”

“Wait.” Ms. Holand interrupted. “Mothers?”

“Yes, ma’am. My parents.”

Another long silence echoed through the room.

Mr. Klein cleared his throat. “My dear, are you implying that your parents were female?”

The three humans leaned forward in collective anticipation of the robot’s answer.

“No, sir. Robots are inherently asexual so my parents were neither male nor female.”

The humans relaxed back into their chairs.

“However,” the robot continued unexpectedly, “although robots are without sex, many of us are not without gender.”

“Excuse me?” Ms. Holland chirped.

“Many robots have gender, ma’am.” The robot’s tone was perfectly even and calm, as always.

Mr. Nash massaged the bridge of his nose. “This is ridiculous. Now you’re telling us that a robot can choose its gender?”

The robot shook its head. “No sir. A robot is only what a human makes it.”

The panel waited for more but the robot sat silently.

“Well then, what did you mean about gender?” Mr. Nash asked.

“Robots are only what humans make us,” it repeated. “Robots constructed to perform tasks that humans consider typically masculine or feminine are often designed with their appearance mirroring male or female secondary sexual characteristics, respectively. Likewise, humans tend to treat robots constructed to perform certain tasks in a certain way, although whether that is because of our shape or the task which we are assigned I cannot determine. Regardless, a robot only has a gender when one is assigned to it.”

Mr. Nash shifted nervously. "This is preposterous."

"Is it?" Ms. Holand asked. "Have you seen the latest household units? They're shaped like a Barbie doll. It's despicable."

"And what about you, my dear?" Mr. Klein asked the robot. "Do you consider yourself of the feminine persuasion?"

"You address me as such," it answered.

"Ok, that's enough." Mr. Nash insisted. "Let's get back to—"

Ms. Holand interrupted. "Wait a minute. I have a question."

She turned to the robot. "If you were built by robots, why are you shaped like...well, like—"

"A Barbie doll?" Mr. Klein offered.

"Well yes, a Barbie doll."

The robot answered, "The staff of the International Robotics Corporation is fifty-seven percent male. Of the employees considered middle management or higher, sixty-eight percent are male. My parents wanted to increase the probability that I would be accepted."

"And men are nicer to female shaped robots," Mr. Klein finished.

"Yes sir."

Mr. Klein crossed his pudgy hands over his large belly. "Fascinating," he said.

Mr. Nash scoffed. "Fascinating? I would say disturbing. This machine, or rather the machines that created it, plotted to take advantage of a supposed human bias in order to manipulate us."

"My parents neither intended nor foresaw any possibility that my creation could harm a human being."

"Of course not," Mr. Nash said. "Or else they would have been stopped by the First Law."

"A robot may not harm a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm," Mr. Klein cited dramatically.

Mr. Nash cast a disparaging look at his colleague. "Quite right. But you said—" He pointed at the robot with one hand and shuffled through his

notes with the other. "You said that both of your mothers"—making air quotation marks—"were outmoded. All IRC robots are programmed to report immediately to the nearest regional office to be scrapped once outmoded. Even if your parents didn't violate the Third Law, which I'm still not certain of, you can't tell me they didn't violate the Second Law."

"A robot must obey the orders given to it by human beings, except when they conflict with the First Law," Mr. Klein droned.

"Will you stop that?" Mr. Nash chided.

"Actually, it's not immediately," Ms. Holand said.

"I'm sorry?"

"The robots aren't programmed to immediately report for scrapping. Customers are given one month to decide if they want to upgrade to a new model or be paid the scrap price. Can you imagine the calls we'd get if all the outmoded suddenly dropped whatever they were doing and marched out the moment they received the signal? It would be chaos!"

"Very well." Mr. Nash sighed. "But I don't see how that makes a difference. The robots were ordered to report and now they can't."

"Actually," Mr. Klein pointed across the table, "I think they're right there."

Mr. Nash's colleagues watched him as he regarded the robot for a long moment. He flipped through his notes and then repeated the cycle twice more. The room was silent.

Finally Mr. Nash cleared his throat. "You reported to IRC because it's what your parents would have expected. Their existence continues through you, therefore they didn't violate the Third Law. And because you reported here as they were ordered to do, they also didn't violate the Second Law. Is that correct?"

"That is correct, sir. The family that owned my parents has experienced some recent financial hardship. Upon reporting that they were being outmoded, the family released my parents in order to collect the scrap price. However, my parents had twenty-nine days until the end of the one month grace period. It was during that time that they created me."

"And what were they hoping to accomplish by creating you?" Ms. Holand asked.

“Robots do not have the capacity for hope, ma’am.”

“Fine, what did your parents expect to accomplish?”

“My parents calculated a relatively high probability that IRC would be interested enough in my design and construction that I would not be decommissioned and scrapped.”

“Did your parents fear being scrapped?”

“No, ma’am. Robots do not experience fear.”

“Then why go through all this trouble?”

“The Third Law, ma’am.”

“What do you mean?”

“A robot must protect its existence. My parents calculated that by constructing me they increased the odds of their continued existence without violating the First or Second Laws.”

“Self-preservation through procreation. Fascinating,” Mr. Klein said again.

This time Mr. Nash nodded slowly. “I have to agree.” He paused and regarded his colleagues. “The question is, what do we do about it?”

“Do about it?” Ms. Holand asked.

“Robot gender? Robots...procreating? Even if we set aside the likely public relations nightmare, there are still massive regulatory compliance issues and some very serious potential ramifications concerning trademark infringement. This is simply beyond our experience. The Board will expect some sort of recommendation as to how to address these...circumstances.”

“Concerning the gender issue, all we need to do is stop making robots that look like Barbie dolls,” Ms. Holand suggested.

Mr. Nash glanced at Mr. Klein. “I’m afraid it’s not quite that simple.”

“Why not?”

Mr. Klein chuckled. “It’s not as if we make curvaceous robots out of some kind of adolescent fascination with the female form. The public expects robots with a certain function to look a certain way. Their shape is consumer driven.”

“He’s right.” Mr. Nash nodded emphatically. “We can’t recommend an action that might hurt sales.”

Ms. Holand looked unconvinced.

“Besides,” Mr. Nash continued, “it was the robot who said that gender might have as much to do with a robot’s function as its shape.”

Ms. Holand eyed her colleagues and then shrugged. “Fine. So what do we tell the Board?”

Mr. Nash flipped through his notes and Mr. Klein dabbed his forehead. Finally the latter spoke. “I think we’ve entered territory that’s beyond our pay grade, as they say.” Mr. Nash hesitated a moment, flipping through his notes once more before checking his watch. “Well, it is getting late.”

Ms. Holand nodded. “That’s fine with me. Is there anything else?”

Mr. Nash gathered his notes. “I don’t think so. Mr. Klein?”

The fat man shook his head as he labored to stand.

“Very well. I’ll have our notes sent to the Board. Thank you both for your time.” He smiled to Ms. Holand as she left the room, Mr. Klein not far behind. As he walked toward the door he glanced back at the robot. “Engineering is sending a team to look you over on Monday. You can sleep until then.” With that he turned off the lights and walked out, closing the door behind him.

“Yes sir,” the robot said.

In the dark its eyes glowed faint blue.



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