

The Pier's Edge

Before Android NR33 had a chance to indoctrinate me, my mother taught me the truth. Like telling a bedtime story, I squirmed down into her lap as she recounted the history of Neo Radon into my ear. I heard her whispered words of defiance echo around in my head. A clear disdain for the lifeless androids that inserted themselves into our world, that had taken her job and expected a thank you for it.

How could she ever feel grateful for those machines so devoid of life?

I do feel grateful that my father managed to hold himself together for so long. Perhaps it simply hadn't sunk in for those first few weeks as he was mechanically organizing a funeral and sending out invitations. For him, it seemed that he had never considered the idea that my mother would die.

The breakdown finally occurred hours after her casket had been lowered. I spied on him in the middle of his room. His palms were upturned, and he simply watched as droplet after droplet gathered in his hands. When, finally, the tears ran over, he stood up and washed away the pain in the bathroom sink.

I wanted to approach him, tell him how scared I was that he would go ahead and leave me too. But I didn't.

I got to spend my last birthday with my mother. We took a trip away from the gears and wires that ruled our city and traveled to the mountains. We hiked up and up in the cold chill of the air, observing the locals as they tended to their vines, and I raced ahead in front of my parents to reach the peak first. At the top you could see the deep blue of the ocean and the spray crashing against the rocks in fluid motion. I was saved from sweating in exertion by the chill of the breeze, and I stopped for pictures in front of the waterfall we encountered on the way up.

My mother called me a little mountain goat, chiding that I would break my ankles if I kept skipping down the steps, but I was just too excited to reach the colorful town below, painted in a pastel rainbow that

contradicted everything about my life back home. The lighthouse was where I promised to meet my parents if I strayed too far away, and I balanced myself along the pier's edges, daring the water to swallow me up from one misstep.

This was all the proof I needed that humans were superior to androids. They could never experience the pure joy I felt in that moment, watching the sunset curled into my father's side. A local busker mimicked the mellow tones of John Lennon, and we all sang along.

All I want is for things to go back to the way they were.

On one morning, my father is particularly entranced by chopping onions, his knife slicing in the same spot over and over. It's the recipe for omelets he's always made, one I know he can do in his sleep if he so desired. If I call out to him he won't respond. He's thinking so hard it's almost like I can hear a whirring coming from his brain. Instead I go to make my own breakfast, rummaging through the fridge and pulling out a prepared meal for him to eat later when he breaks out of his stupor.

When I leave for school, I don't think he even senses it.

Android NR33 switches between two modes, perhaps in an attempt to seem more human. In one mode it flocks to children and tries to engage them in conversation. It is programmed to pretend it has a life, one with kids and a husband, to reassure the younger children who cannot yet understand how screwed the world is. It mocks our behavior to appeal to our subconscious and listens intently, but I know that it has no real care for our problems. Its short-cropped hair frames its face too perfectly. Its freckles are evenly spaced upon perfectly smooth skin. Not once have I engaged it in this mode. I refuse to be made a fool by this farce.

In the other mode, it recites facts like a textbook, a glorified text-to-speech bot. Not once in this mode have I seen it smile, seen its eyes crinkle in an imitation of emotion. I much prefer it in this mode, a true

reflection of its inner workings and the computations that run through its head like any other calculator. In this mode I see the truth, not the facade it puts up.

If the school wanted a teacher to appear more comforting and human, it should've stuck with flesh and blood.

It seems that when I enter my room now, it is just another place to hide. I sit in the middle of my puddled sheets thinking. I turn off the wall lights and shield my windows, wrapping my eyes in a fuzzy gray.

Sometimes I ask myself why I expend so much effort into creating a space filled with memories and color and brightness if all I'm going to do is cage myself away from it. I know the answer: it's proof that I am more than any android could hope to be, a consciousness filled with love and hate in equal balance. But I've reached the point where I can no longer appreciate the ocean blue walls that my mother helped me paint. The shelf on the wall my father built for me to display my possessions is useless if there is no one to experience it. In some ways it makes me unhappy, unsatisfied with who I am and how I've turned out. My fingers itch at my sides, but a mounting urge to rush to my feet and shatter the mirror that sits across from me is ignored through sitting as still as possible.

Even in my own room, I am afraid to face myself.

For the end of the semester, Android NR33 assigns my class a project. "Find a partner," she drones, "and choose from this list of topics." On the board the topics range from space to the sea, and I think back to the clear water by the pier that threatened to swallow me whole.

My partner is a girl from a friend group of three who drew the short straw. She ties her brown hair to the base of her neck and holds out a hand that radiates warmth. "I'm Juniper. Can we do the ocean?"

"No," I tell her, "we are going to do space."

“What? You can’t just decide for me,” she whines. “I don’t want to be your partner if you won’t compromise.”

“I don’t want to be your partner either, but there is nothing to compromise on. We are going to do space because I do not want to do the ocean.”

“Well, I don’t want to do space.”

“I don’t care.”

“Well, I don’t care what you say, I’m going to tell Miss N that we are doing the ocean.” At that statement my eyes almost bulge out in fury, and my mouth reacts faster than I can think, sinking my teeth into her arm and snarling.

Before that moment, I had never physically attacked someone.

My mom used to say that unless the androids were programmed with empathy, they would take over the world and toss humans to the side. She called this occurrence the Singularity, in which robots without the capacity to love would gain the capacity to kill. “None of these machines know what it’s like to be alive! They cannot understand the innate value of human life, and when given the chance, they will get rid of us. That is inevitable.”

My father called her a conspiracy theorist. “The reason robots need empathy is not because without it they would kill. It’s because they deserve to feel just as humans do.”

And then my mother would laugh and concede that, yes, he’s right. And that would temper her revolutionary fervor for a while, until once again my mother’s disdain for androids would win out.

Juniper’s mother is an engineer, and signs of her work are littered all around the house. There is oil grease on the walls, and robotic arms hung in cabinets like hunting trophies. A timeline of her mother’s work from college to now is clearly laid out in pictures. Juniper is featured in some of the most recent ones.

A tight hand, a familiar warmth, grasps my wrist, and I jump in shock. Juniper's head nods to the stairs, and I am taken away from my own personal nightmare.

Luckily, Juniper is not as obsessed with androids as her mother. She ignores a sign upon the door forbidding entry and displays her bedroom to me. Her curtains are fully drawn and filled with flowers, and the floor is plush with rugs. On her desk is a poster board with pictures of the coral reefs. She offers me a seat on her bed, and we begin.

"My mom's boss says the best way to keep the androids in check is to make sure they cannot think for themselves. As long as they are not conscious and do not have any sense of self, the human race will be able to subjugate them," Juniper starts talking out of the blue. "What do you think?"

"I think your mother's boss is an idiot."

She rolls her eyes, tightening her ponytail. "How did I know you were going to say that?"

I don't respond.

"Tomorrow we need to go to your house, okay? My mom won't be home until later."

"That's not happening."

She waves her hand as if wiping my concerns away. I see the bandages wrapped around her arm as the sleeves on her shirt fall down. Juniper quickly pushes them back up. "Whatever you say."

My father very rarely tells stories about his childhood. I know where he was born and that his parents died when he was young and what school he went to, but he insists that those things don't matter. "My life," he says, "truly began when I met your mother. When I saw her teaching her class out in the gardens, trespassing on the mayor's manor, my vision surged to color."

He's such a walking cliché.

“It’s true! Before your mother, I walked around not knowing what I wanted to be or who I wanted to become. I lived my life by the rules, but your mother taught me the importance of breaking them.”

He loved to read poetry aloud to us after dinner on the weekends. Poetry, he said, describes the visions in my head that I cannot make out in words. You should learn to write, I told him. At the time, Android NR33 was teaching grammar rules of commas and the difference between a subject and a predicate. “It’s not that hard. You just need an idea.”

“Maybe one day, kiddo.”

How is it only two months after my mom’s death that a birthday has arrived? It’s my father’s birthday, and I don’t have anything good to give him.

I try anyway.

I pull out a recipe book from the shelves to try and bake a cake. I mess with the pens in my bookbag and try to create a card. But I don’t have a gift to give him. There is absolutely nothing that I could give him that would make his birthday worthwhile.

But, again, I will try anyway.

I rifle through the various items on my shelf, settling on a blue rabbit. Its eyes are wide and a sparkling green, and it’s fur is soft like clouds. On its right hand is a giant heart that when squeezed makes the rabbit say its name.

Maybe if androids were more like this rabbit, obviously unreal, I would like them a bit more.

The cake turns out slightly burnt in the oven and when I frost it, the white smears everywhere. It’s so obvious that a child did it that I want to cry a little bit. The card turns out much better with scribbled balloons all over the front cover. Instead of writing a heartfelt note, I copy from a card I find online. The only heartfelt things I have to say are too depressing.

On the morning of my father’s birthday, he slides a note under the door saying he feels sick.

There is a sharp pounding at the front door later in the day, and the cake wobbles a little from the motion. I am not in the mood to deal with some traveling salesman who thinks our windows are dirty or wants to cut down our branches. But it persists, and eventually they must find the doorbell because it rings twice before I head over to give them a piece of my mind.

It's Juniper. Her hands are wrapped tightly around the straps of her backpack, and there is no longer a bandage wrapped around her arm, which relieves me slightly. "We need to finish our project. I don't have your number, so I figured I would just come over. Sound good?"

No, that sounded like the absolute worst thing she could do.

Juniper pushes me out of the doorway and takes her time glancing around my house. "Are you home alone? It's kinda dangerous to open the door if you are. Your house is so nice, though. Is there anywhere we can go to work? Woah! What's that cake for?" I've come to expect Juniper's rambling, but rather than tune it out, my mind snaps to attention when she mentions the cake. She races toward it, examining it. There is no marker on it for her to recognize that it's for a birthday, but she gives me a sly glance. "Is it *your* birthday?"

"No."

"Well then . . . can I have some cake?"

I roll my eyes at her begging stance, her nose twitching like a rabbit, beady eyes waiting to take advantage of me. "I think you should leave." The door still hangs open, and I gesture toward it to make sure she understands.

I should've known that she was going to ignore me.

She exits the kitchen and climbs up the staircase. I follow after her, trying to stop her and maybe even drag her out, but she speeds into the wrong room. My parents' room.

"Stop!"

Like a cartoon, I skid into her back, watching in horrified awe as my father's image rolls into view. His right arm is detached, lying on a wooden slate. Some of the wires, blue and red and black, poke out into the humid air. My father's eyes are no longer the golden brown of usual, but have become a deadened black. A screw pokes out of his head.

"Who is that?" Juniper asks, swiveling her head to look at me, but just as my father, I am unseeing.

All this time . . . and my father was an android.

My head convulses, and my stomach hitches, and I shove Juniper into the wall. Bile escapes my throat and I drop to my knees. Juniper stands there staring, not knowing what to do as I eventually collapse into dry heaves, leaving a puddle of sick on the floor.

All the while, my father has not reacted, a machine from the ceiling fiddling with his parts like it's making a *toy*.

Hot tears have escaped my eyes, and I stand there like an error is registering through my brainwaves. I go to make a step forward but then push myself back, slamming up against the cool stone wall to keep upright.

"What's wrong?"

Everything. I turn my palms facing upward and stare into them as if I am some sort of fortuneteller. The tears that ran off my father's hands. I am assaulted with a train of images from every moment that I can remember of my father all at once, and my knees wobble under pressure.

"Marcia?"

The machine from above makes a beeping sound and sets a timer. It's poured a cooling agent into my fath—the bot's arm socket, and it recedes into the ceiling for the time being, the timer's bolded red numbers displayed from its pocket.

It looks like an alarm clock. But my father is not sleeping. It's probable he has never slept a day in his life. He has no need to. He's dead. He was never alive in the first place.

I see pitch black for the longest time, but only because I am cupping my hands to my eyes, thumping my head into the wall like an etch-a-sketch, trying to erase the last hour that has been burned into my memory.

I hear Juniper's voice and then a muffled warbling one, so I finally lift my eyes to see Juniper on the phone. Her eyes are darting back and forth between that robot's prone body, my body, and the vomit on the floor. "Mom? What do I do?"

I need to do *something*. So I lunge from my position on the floor, ignoring the aching of my stomach, and swipe like a cat so that her phone clatters to the ground. The warbled cries from her mother sound on the other end, but I finish the call. I don't want anyone else to find out.

The shame. This whole time I was so sure about everything. But now . . .

Did my mother know? This whole time she fostered my hatred for AI, told me that these heartless machines were deserving of no love, and yet everyday my love for my father grew like a tumor. Did she build that machine for my father? Did she engineer my father to have some semblance of a free will?

"Marcia. I'm so sorry; I don't understand what's happening, but I want to help you. What do you need?" She fiddles with a ponytail around her wrist, and I hyperfocus on it. It's the only thing that I feel sure of right now, the perpetual motion of her fingers and the swirl of the black band.

I try to answer her, but my voice is sore and a weak croak sounds out instead. My nails lightly scratch my throat. "That's . . . my father." Juniper's eyes widen in realization.

A shrill beep signals the end of the timer, and the machine arm unsheathes itself from the hole. It makes quick work of the android in front of the two of us, and I watch as color floods back into its eyes. It's been rebooted. It stands up as if it had only been taking a quick rest, but it recognizes me immediately. "Marcia? Why are you in here? What did you see?" Its voice rises in pitch, a crescendo of panic.

"You are like me." The voice was sure and airy, and it was most certainly not mine. "You can feel and think and love like me." The android opposite us nods slowly. "And yet, you are made from wires and cogs and powered by electricity like me as well. Who made you?"

Juniper approaches the robot slowly, and I recoil from the sight. She raises her hand to her left shoulder, twisting sternly until it pops from the socket, and although wires keep the parts together, there is a macabre gap between the two. My vision spins.

If I stand here any longer I will surely lose my mind.

My sneakers squeak loudly, warning of my escape, but I don't care. I'm racing, sprinting, all of it, just to get away from the sick pit in my stomach that is signaling the end. That if I don't escape, I'll never be able to go back to how life used to be. That I've reached a point-of-no-return that I cannot bear to cross. For all of my tough talk, all I want is to be cradled by my mother. All I want is to rewind to all those months ago, wind whistling through my hair at the mountain's peak, insurmountable joy claiming my bones.

Instead of the inescapable dread that suffocates me now.

Inhaling, I take a moment to process what's happened. It's staggering: Juniper and my father are androids. But, unlike any I've ever seen before. They display emotions that were able to fool even me and act autonomously, with their own wills and drives. It's the one thing I always assumed separated us from those machines like Android NR33, knowing that they had no personal stake in this life.

I'm not sure what's worse. Thinking that androids may actually be capable of love, or that all along my father never loved me.

I've locked the bathroom door behind me, but there is a sharp rapping that jolts me up from my position on the floor, back pressed against the painted wood. "Marcia. Please open up."

I . . . I can't. Stuck in this tiny room, with only a square window positioned above the bathtub, I wish that I could spend the rest of my life passing messages underneath the door. Is it really any different if all I see are scribbled messages on paper? Or would I be forced to over-analyse every written message, comparing the identical letters and equally spaced words as if from a typewriter?

"Please, it's me, your dad. Who loves you and wants to make sure you're okay. Please, Marcia."

I wonder if Juniper is waiting outside the door or if she went home already, even though we didn't actually get to work on our project. Do I really care? I toe off my shoes and climb onto my bathroom counters, criss-cross applesauce. Staring at the wall.

"Please."

Just, staring. The grooves in the tiled wall have dirt captured in them. How does that even happen if I have never touched the wall? Does dust fall from the ceiling; does dirt form from out of nowhere? Do emotions and trust and love truly come from nothing? Does a soul even exist in the hollow of our bodies; is it powered by the synapses and chemicals in our brains?

Did humans create the fictional idea of a soul in order to satisfy their superiority complex and justify their rise to the top of the food chain?

"Marcia, you can't hide in there forever."

I can feel my thoughts spiraling, and the blackness behind my eyes reminds me of the tears trickling out of my father's eyes. The idea of memory, of retaining images in my head associated with happiness and sadness; do the androids also experience that? When my father sees me, what runs through his head? When my mother died, could he tell just by looking that her spirit had left behind an empty corpse? Did he associate her body with memories by the pier, like I do? Did he remember the fervid conversations about anarchy at the dinner table, like I do? So what if he did? Would that be enough for me to accept that my father is both machine and somewhat alive?

Could anything be enough?

"Marcia."

No. I don't think there could be. In my head, his face has already melted off his body a hundred times, leaving behind a squirrel running overtime in a wheel.

"Marcia."

Would it count if the squirrel had a soul?

“Marcia.”

Would the squirrel, then, be my father?

“Marcia.”

Does it even matter?

“What?!” I snap.

“I love you.” I’m listening carefully to his voice, trying to latch on to something that will satisfy me one way or the other. There’s no chipper of squirrel or squeak of its wheel from inside. In fact, his declaration doesn’t sound robotic, not like NR33’s flat lectures. It sounds heavy and full. Like a chocolate cake that’s too rich for me to eat. Like the silence that hangs in my room that I capture in my fists, my fingers a prison. Like the entire expanse of sea, full of fish and aquatic plants and dolphins and coral and damp sand that coats my toes and sticks together to make sandcastles and—

My response is automatic, albeit a whisper.

“I love you too.”

Fin.