

## The Oil Leaks

When my oil starts leaking, I know it's time for my monthly check-up. In the beginning it used to catch me by surprise. I thought that the sheer amount of oil would be enough to stop my body from functioning. I was afraid, I told my maker, that I would be unable to carry out my duties and he would have to rebuild another me from scrap metal as a replacement.

But luckily, he just laughed. "Afraid?" as if it was a joke; he didn't bother to tell me the obvious. I couldn't actually be afraid. Fear is a human emotion, felt only by those who have been created in the womb, made of flesh and blood.

They don't let me see the wires under my silicone skin. It's not my right. I shouldn't be allowed potential access to reroute my inner workings, after all. It's too paradoxical. Only humans are allowed to have free will like that. But, just this once. I don't have the time to spare undergoing repairs for a whole week. If it's my mechanical body, shouldn't I be best equipped to fix it so as to not inconvenience others?

I've never actually seen them take apart another like me in the workshop. But I need to find the source of the leak, and to do that, I must cut into my skin. If it's coming from the intersection between my legs, it'll be difficult for me to spot it straight on. I can't give up. All of us androids deal with this, so someone must know a better way.

"A better way," she titters, the machine in front of me producing a staccato laugh. "With the junk you're made of, not likely! Don't you know that oil leaking is in preparation for your future incubation purposes? I couldn't tell you why, but it's not supposed to be stopped."

Incubation? But I've yet to be partnered off by my maker; that time is only barely on the horizon. "Why does it start so soon?" I mumble, not sure where these feelings of bitterness and discontent are coming from. I've never been so far into an oil leak without being shut down.

I hear a sigh, and the robot in front of me must take pity because she bends down and cups a hand to her oral orifice. "I have a few plugs that will collect the oil."

"But I need to make it stop for good; that kind of stopgap won't help."

"That's the strange part," she admits, turning around so that I'm looking at her back. It's built in such a way to resemble human shoulder joints and was even given the care of freckles spotting down her sides. I'm jealous, somehow. "By the end of the week, no matter what I do, it always somehow stops on its own."

I was doubtful of her words. Every time I pulled out the white tube, it seemed so soaked that my old worries of a shutdown would become founded. I was even asked by my creator once, when I was replenishing my energy stores, whether my oil leaking had occurred.

It shouldn't have been possible due to my programming. But I lied.

--

Despite however many times I've been told that I'm lacking, it doesn't compute properly. It is a fact that the way I learn is different. Robotic schools are segregated to support our special programming, so I couldn't share a detailed list of differences. But even despite of what I know about my limitations, I feel full. If anything, I feel like if I were to take inventory of all my positive qualities, like counting colored gravel in a fishbowl, my cupped hands would overflow. Except for the one thing that I know is holding me back.

I've been told that humans don't really have a purpose—that they live to suit their own needs. Their life and its sustainment is the purpose.

I wasn't built with that ability to be self-sustaining. But if that's true that the brain is like a computer, could I gain it? If my creator willed it to be, though I can't breathe and have no reason to blink, could I stand on my own two feet just like a human?

--

My maker has never let me drive his car before. "It's a matter of ethics," he reasons. If I get into a car accident, how could I be trusted to choose who lives or dies? The problem is neatly averted, naturally, if I fail to get into an accident at all. It's not like this town is big enough to require more than thirty cars. Only for emergencies, he stressed while demonstrating how to reverse. Only if my maker is in life-or-death danger.

Just this one time, it must be okay. Because for the first time ever, I received a letter. A letter just for me, with my callsign marked at the top. It wasn't even properly slotted into the mailbox; instead, the deliverer caught me in the middle of my gardening duties and put in straight into my gloved hands. And the letter spoke of a secret in my code. The reason behind my oil leaks, it promised, like a whisper in my ear that hides between all the other gusts of wind. I hardly need the directions enclosed, nor the GPS that dangles from the dashboard. It's obvious enough to see that I'm not the only one enticed by such a letter, if the surreptitiously flickering headlights meters in front of me are anything to go by. In the two-hour journey that it takes, miles beyond the town limits, I never lose sight of them.

Our shared destination is dark. The neon lights above the storefront are past their prime, burnt out and useless in the twilight hours. But the doors swing wide open, and bright red arrows

flashing from the ground guide the way into an even darker room with velvety chairs that silently slap together when unused. There are many rows, but I sit closer to the front. It takes a while for the sconces on the wall to light up, dim at first but then bright enough to reveal the cloaked figure that commands attention at the front of the room. Without preamble, their voice booms, “Who here knows what a woman is?”

It’s not a term I’ve ever heard used before. But someone else behind me speaks up, a quiet voice that I recognize a few houses down and across the street. “They don’t exist anymore. We were built to replace them when they went extinct.”

A chuckle from the silhouette at the front fills the room’s emptiness, and though I can recognize his dissatisfaction with the answer, I can’t explain where the fault lies. I want to raise my hand and ask what all of this is about, but they remove the hood that obscures their face, and I’m momentarily stunned.

Another robot like us? Her hair is short and cropped like a human, but she lacks an adult’s beard. I can’t see her face very clearly, but as she throws off the rest of the cloak, she reveals her naked body, and it is definitely not that of a human’s. Her chest is much fuller like mine, for lactation purposes, but her arm is amputated so that it’s rounded to a nub at the elbow. What would the purpose be of forgetting to add an arm?

And then from the ground, she picks up a thin silvery instrument and rips the skin on her amputated arm, crying out in pain as she does so. It doesn’t take long for the rivulets of oil to start leaking out, but she slices her arm even more, so that a flap of skin flops down to reveal her inner workings. There are many gasps in the crowd, but above all else, I’m confused.

Where are the wires?