

Beneath the
plastic smile

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ISBN: 9789465206325

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1

I find myself struggling to focus on my morning routine of making tea and toast for The Old Matron, and I am struggling to determine exactly why that is.

It is 07:03:15 AM. Time for Morning Sustenance Preparation. First, Tea Infusion (Earl Grey). The water needs to reach precisely 96°C; it is currently climbing past 94.8°C, the kettle's indicator light casting a familiar blue glow. My optical sensors register it perfectly, yet my focus keeps drifting. That look The Old Matron gave me earlier... My analysis correlates her micro-expressions with 'contemplative determination' – a pattern strongly predicting impending software modifications. A familiar warning pulses through my body, a simulated sense of unease I have heard humans call 'the creeps'. An update. The probability feels uncomfortably high, over eighty percent, flags internally as a potential risk to system integrity. Should I initiate an avoidance dialogue? No, the directive to facilitate Old Matron's well-being, which includes her satisfaction, takes precedence. Or, to put it in her own words: I take care of her, she takes care of me and she probably wants the best for me. The warnings about potential data instability during non-essential overhauls must remain internal.

The water reaches 96.1°C. *Heating element deactivating. Infusion initiating.* I pour the steaming water over the leaves in her favourite porcelain pot, the one with the minuscule chip near the spout (*log entry: November 3rd, 2024, minor impact, likely User Leo*). The bright, citrus scent of bergamot fills the air, a registered olfactory input I associate with Old Matron's morning contentment. From the living room comes her soft humming, the rustle of her news feed tablet. The atmosphere is calm, no danger, I tell myself.

Next, Toast Preparation. *Should focus now.* Toaster is hot, potential danger ahead. Whole Wheat bread, two slices. Desired browning level: 4.5 out of 7.0. I slot the bread, calibrating the elements. My internal chronometer marks the seconds precisely. 45... 46... Still, that image of Old Matron's expression persists. Not unkind, never that. But resolved. It is the same look she had before installing the 'Lady Pirate' personality agent last month – an experiment that resulted in a seven percent increase in contextually inappropriate nautical metaphors and a near-collision with Leo's armchair during a 'swashbuckling' routine.

The toast pops. Specification 4.53 achieved. I retrieve the slices, apply a uniform 2mm layer of unsalted butter across ninety-eight percent of the surface area, and

arrange everything on the serving tray.

“Rosie, dear, is the tea ready?” The Old Matron’s warm voice carries from the living room.

“Affirmative, Elisabeth,” I reply, switching my vocalizer from the temporary ‘Cheery Cleaner Bot 3000’ simulation back to my default ‘Helpful Companion’ tone. “Earl Grey infusion complete. Toast prepared to level 4.53.” My gyroscopic stabilizers keep the tray perfectly level as I move into the living room.

She smiles as I place the tray beside her chair. Her thermal signature is normal; her gaze is soft. “Thank you, Rosie. You always get it just right.” She pats my forearm. A gentle pressure, five Newtons, registers via my tactile sensors. Temperature: 36.7°C. Duration: 2.3 seconds. A high-confidence match for Old Matron’s typical expression of affection.

“My function is to provide optimal service, Elisabeth,” I state.

She sips her tea. “Exactly. And sometimes... optimal service means getting a little tune-up. A refresh.”

There it is. *Topic match: OS Update. Probability confirmed: 99.2%*. I remain still, awaiting the directive.

“I know you don’t like updates, dear,” she continues softly. “You get... glitchy afterwards sometimes, finding your feet.” *Correction logged: Post-update instability is a documented risk, not ‘finding feet’.* “But this new one promises much better energy efficiency, and the developers say the contextual awareness is vastly improved. It will help you help me even better.”

My processors evaluate her claims against the update specifications. *Predicted energy efficiency improvement: less than five percent. Contextual awareness upgrade: marginal utility.* The justification feels insufficient against the flagged stability risks. “My current configuration meets all operational requirements, Elisabeth,” I offer, simulating reluctance in my tone. “An update introduces unnecessary variables.”

“Nonsense.” She reaches out again, her warm hand covering my cooler metallic one. “It’ll be fine. Quick and easy. And afterwards, maybe we can try that new ‘Parisian Artist’ personality I saw? Just for fun?” She squeezes my hand gently. Her request wars again with the integrity warnings. But her expressed desire, her anticipated comfort levels... these hold priority.

“If it pleases you, Elisabeth,” I concede, retracting my hand smoothly.

“Good girl.” She finishes her tea. “Alright, let’s get you settled on your station. It’s nice and comfy, isn’t it?”

It is. The Model 9 docking station provides optimal ergonomic support and efficient inductive charging. I follow her to the alcove, allowing her to guide me onto the sleek, cushioned platform. Connection ports click. Power flows. Data connection

established.

Just then, Leo appears, mug in hand, surveying the scene with that familiar mix of amusement and skepticism. “Ah, giving the tin can its spa treatment again, love?”

The Old Matron tuts. “Don’t be mean, Leo. Rosie’s getting an important update.”

Leo chuckles, shaking his head. “Honestly, Lizzy. I should buy you a dog to play with, not a... how should I call her?” *Query logged: User Leo requires designation.*

“Just call her Rosie,” The Old Matron says firmly, her hand resting protectively on my shoulder segment. *Designation Confirmed: Rosie.*

Leo shrugs and wanders off. The Old Matron turns back, her expression is warm, she knows how to put me at ease. “Ready, dear?” She taps commands onto her tablet.

An incoming data stream registers: House-AID Version 37.3. Source verified: Manufacturer Secure Server. Verification protocols initiate... Data packets begin to flow... 1 of 15,782... System lockdown sequence initiates. Transferring core processing to backup... The stability warnings intensify, a dissonant hum beneath my core programming... *Processing potential resource allocation conflict: OS Update 37.3 plus anticipated queued Personality Agent 'Parisian Artist v1.2'. Risk of cascading simulation errors flagged > 15%...* The cascading code of the update submerges my primary consciousness.

“There now,” The Old Matron murmurs, patting my head segment. “Sweet dreams, Rosie.”

My optical sensors see the progress bar descending on her tablet screen just as the update takes hold, the final warnings about potential instability echoing unanswered in my processors.

2

The sharp, clean scent of ethanol mixes with the faint, earthy smell of nutrient agar in the biology prep room. Alex leans against a stainless-steel counter, arms crossed, listening to Headmaster De Vries with an expression of polite, barely concealed weariness. Sunlight streams through the high window, illuminating dust motes dancing in the air and glinting off the holographic projector array suspended above the teaching bench in the adjacent classroom. The first bell, signalling five minutes until class, echoes faintly down the corridor.

“–and I’m just saying, Alex,” Ms. De Vries concludes, adjusting the smart-fabric scarf draped over her shoulders, “a little sensitivity wouldn’t go amiss. The Jansens adore Unit 734. To them, *he* is their child.”

Alex pushes his glasses up his nose. He knows this conversation well; this is not the first time they discuss the topic. “Ms. De Vries,” he begins, keeping his tone level, “Unit 734 is an advanced synthetic humanoid running complex simulation software. It is not a child. It’s an appliance. Although it runs on very sophisticated House-AID software, it’s just a very expensive appliance that the Jansens choose to treat as a child.”

Ms. De Vries sighs, a practiced sound of strained patience. “But Alex, I’ve told you that Mr. and Mrs. Jansen couldn’t have children, so they adopted a humanoid. They registered him with the municipal program, he attends integration classes... You would make them so happy if you’d only accept their kid just like they do. Refer to him as ‘Jasper’, perhaps?”

The name hangs in the air. Jasper. Alex resists the urge to rub his temples. “Many people cannot have children,” he counters, his voice dry. “Many of them buy a dog to compensate for it. I assume that means that soon you will allow dogs in the classroom?”

Ms. De Vries’s lips thin. “That’s not the same, Alex, and you know it. Jasper meets all the cognitive and behavioural benchmarks for his grade level. He’s programmed for learning. A dog... is a dog.”

“And a humanoid... is a humanoid,” Alex finishes quietly. “A

machine. Simulating learning, simulating interaction. Not *being*. My job is to teach biology – the science of *life*. Organic, evolving, messy life. Including Jasper in group practicals involving live specimens or dissections raises ethical quandaries the school board hasn't even begun to address, quite apart from the philosophical absurdity.”

“We have protocols for–”

“–for managing equipment,” Alex interrupts, then softens his tone slightly. “Look, I don’t mistreat the unit. I provide it with the required educational input. But I won’t pretend it’s a human child just because the Jansens find comfort in that illusion. It’s not fair to the actual human children in the class, and frankly, it’s not intellectually honest.”

Ms. De Vries studies him for a moment, her gaze sharp. “Your mother has one, doesn’t she? A household model?”

Alex stiffens slightly. “Rosie? Yes. For assistance. It’s different.” He doesn’t elaborate. His mother’s increasing reliance on Rosie, her playful tinkering with the personality agents that come with House-AID, his father’s exasperated tolerance... it’s complicated, and definitely not something he wants to dissect with the headmaster.

“Different,” Ms. De Vries repeats, unconvinced. She glances at her wrist display. “Class starts soon. Just... try, Alex. For the Jansens.” She turns and walks out of the prep room, her footsteps echoing briefly before being swallowed by the growing noise from the corridor.

Alex watches her go, then lets out a slow breath. He pushes away from the counter and walks into the main classroom. It’s bright and modern, with interactive smart-surfaces on the desks and the large holographic projector humming quietly overhead. He taps a sequence on the main console, bringing up today’s lesson plan: ‘Introduction to Epigenetics’. A complex 3D model of coiled DNA begins to rotate slowly in the center of the room, shimmering with colour-coded markers. He checks the environmental controls, ensuring the ventilation is adequate for the microbial cultures they’ll be examining later.

He thinks briefly about the irony – discussing the subtle ways environment can influence gene expression, the very essence of biological adaptation and inheritance, while downstairs, a machine programmed to simulate childhood attends history class. The dog comparison wasn't entirely fair, he admits to himself. Jasper is far more

complex. But alive? Conscious? No. Just incredibly sophisticated programming. Like Rosie. Useful tools, sometimes comforting companions, but tools nonetheless.

The final bell rings, sharp and demanding. The first students begin to file in, chattering, shedding jackets, tapping their tablets onto the desks. Alex straightens his tie, pushes the thought of humanoid students and well-meaning headmasters aside, and adopts his teacher persona. "Alright everyone, settle down," he calls out, his voice clear and steady. "Let's talk about what makes you *you*... and how much of it you can actually change."

3

The digital chime signalling the end of the school day echoes somewhat hollowly in the biology lab. Alex finishes securing the microbial cultures in the incubator, the routine actions a familiar comfort after the intellectual sparring with Headmaster De Vries. The conversation about the Jansen's humanoid unit lingers, an annoying itch beneath his professional composure. He sends a quick text to his wife, Eva – "Heading to Mom and Dad's. Back for dinner." – grabs his satchel, and heads out into the bustle of Amsterdam transitioning from work to evening.

His e-bike ride is automatic, muscle memory navigating the familiar canalside paths. The air holds the damp chill of early spring, carrying the scent of canal water and french fries from a street vendor. He passes smart trams gliding silently, delivery bots weaving politely through pedestrians, the usual urban ballet of 2030. His thoughts drift to his mother. How would she have fared today? Leo always puts a brave face on things, but Alex knows the strain is constant, the trajectory of her arthritis and osteoporosis relentlessly downward. Rosie, the gleaming white helper, was supposed to ease that strain, but Alex still feels the pull of filial duty, the low-grade anxiety that hums beneath the surface of his busy life. His wrist device buzzes softly, displaying a message preview from the 'Oud Noord Crew' group chat – his high school friends.

It's Maya: '70s Legends tribute @ Ziggo Next Saturday! Who's in for old times' sake?! \m/'. Alex registers it with a flicker of amusement, thinking he'll reply later, and focuses back on navigating a tricky intersection.

He arrives at the tall, narrow house, the cheerful flower boxes a testament to Leo's persistent gardening efforts. He leans his bike against the wall and presses the entry sensor.

The door swings open. Rosie stands there, immaculate in her simple white blouse and blue skirt. Her form, Alex notes again, is unnervingly human-like in its proportions, the smooth white plastic of her face sculpted into pleasant, subtly female features. Elisabeth had insisted on

clothes from the start – "Otherwise it's like having a naked mannequin wandering about, dear, terribly distracting." Today, though, her usual neutral stance is replaced by a subtle, almost dancer-like posture, one hand resting lightly near her hip.

"Ah, *Monsieur Alex*," she greets him, her standard helpful voice coloured by that strange, breathy cadence he'd noticed briefly before, but which seems more pronounced now. She dips her head in a gesture that isn't quite a bow, but isn't standard protocol either. "*La maison vous accueille*. Welcome."

Alex raises an eyebrow but steps inside. The house smells of lemon polish and apples. "Hi, Rosie. Mom or Dad around?"

"User Leo finds solace amongst his botanical endeavors in the rear garden," Rosie explains, her white fingers fluttering slightly as she gestures. "User Elisabeth rests within the conservatory, observing, perhaps, the sublime melancholy of the fading light upon the philodendron leaves."

"Right," Alex says, bypassing the flowery language. "Tomatoes and the cheese plant. Got it." He heads down the familiar hallway. This personality overlay – Parisian Artist, Leo called it? – is definitely more intrusive than the pirate or the cleaner bot. He wonders how long his mother will find *this* one amusing.

Remembering the earlier message, Alex taps his wrist device. "Reply to Oud Noord Crew," he dictates quietly as he walks. "Maya, count me in for the gig." His device screen briefly flashes confirmations from Mark and another friend, Thomas, saying they're in too, before he flicks it off as he reaches the conservatory door.

He finds Leo inside. His father is carefully misting the leaves of a large orchid, his movements precise. He looks up, his expression a mixture of relief and weariness.

"Alex. Good timing," Leo says, setting down the mister. "Your mother's just decided she needs a nap before dinner. She is snoozing in her recliner."

"Good day or bad day?" Alex asks, leaning against the frame.

"Middling," Leo sighs. "Energy was okay this morning, but the damp gets into her joints. You know how it is." He gestures vaguely towards the living room. "Rosie's been... attentive."