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Robot Arrives

A canister of black plastic about as high as my chest, topped by a silvery translucent plastic dome, stood in front of me. Two globes stuck out from the dome on short stems, its camcorder eyes. I thought they were so beautiful I wanted to touch them. They looked like glass, with a shimmery shining surface and depths of dark brown. Those “eyes” pointed straight at me, looking as surprised as I felt.

Between the eyes, a small window pulsed pale blue, to show the waves of sound that helped it figure out where it was. A long thin speaker embedded just under the dome would be its voice, and below that, a microphone, a robot ear, and a mysterious dark window. A tiny computer screen marked the spot where a person’s heart would be. Tubes that looked like dryer hoses hung from its sides. Each “arm” ended in a “hand,” with five curved pinchers on the left and articulated plastic fingers on the right. The whole thing rested on a small platform, which covered its wheels.

Dad had made a robot for my birthday present.

Zumu gasped and whispered in Chinese, something I didn't understand. She looked as startled as I was. Mom sat still, head down, idly leafing through one of the books from Grandmary. She must have known about the robot all along.

"This is my present?" I asked Dad. I was so amazed, I sounded like a squeaky baby.

"Speak to it. Introduce yourself," Dad said. "Only you can give it voice commands."

I noticed he held a remote control pad. I gulped, and while I was thinking what to say, it dawned on me that he must have used the remote to get the robot from his workroom to the living room.

"Hi, Robot," I said, feeling rather silly, talking to a plastic canister. "I'm Celia Chow."

Zumu looked puzzled and disapproving. Dad grinned, while Mom looked up from the book and put on her performer's smile, the one she uses to cover her real feelings.

The dome glowed a gentle blue. A synthesized voice came out of the speaker-mouth, enunciating each word in the same even tone. "I am pleased to meet you, Celia. I am your new robot."

Pablo skittered under the slouchy leather sofa to watch from underneath. When he's scared or excited, his pupils get so big, his eyes look black.

I didn't know what to answer. I just stood there, staring at the robot. I never thought I would have one of my own, one that wasn't a toy.

Dad was talking. "I've installed basic voice recogni-

tion software, keyed to your voice. Now you must talk to it. Teach it. I'll show you how."

I stood there with my mouth open, too amazed to be excited. I couldn't quite take in what Dad was saying. I even felt a little scared.

Dad turned to Zumu and Mom. "This robot will keep her safe when we're not here." Zumu said something in Chinese. It's hard to guess what people are saying in Chinese by their tone of voice, because Chinese comes out in bursts, and they always sound a little mad. Still, I thought Zumu didn't believe him.

"Good for your work," she said in English. "I take care of Celia better."

"Except that you teach every day," Dad shot back.

Mom didn't say anything. She stood up and walked to the side window, where she stared out at the tangle of leafless underbrush.

Dad grabbed my arm to get my attention. He wanted to show me what the robot could and couldn't do.

"This robot runs on batteries," he told me. "I've designed them to last all day, but they will need to be recharged at night. I'll put a recharger beside your bed. It can find its way there if it needs to." When Dad gets excited, he paces around. His clothes rumple up. Even his hair seems to stand up on its own.

He pointed to the small dark square. "You will see a red glow when information is being beamed by infrared light. The robot can communicate with your printer and other devices."

“There are many important safety features,” Dad went on. I know this sounds like a commercial, but that’s how Dad talked. Then he looked at Zumu again.

“I made it part of the house security system. It will turn the system on when we leave the house, and it will open the door for Celia when she comes home from school.” Dad was very proud of his security system. He called it “fail safe” because he rigged the electrical locks to unlock if the power goes out, so we wouldn’t be trapped inside.

To me, he said: “Tell it to follow you to your room. It is programmed to do what you do. Speak like you do to Pablo.”

“Come with me,” I said, clearly and distinctly. The window between its eyes pulsed with blue light. I started down the hall, looking over my shoulder. The robot wheeled around and followed me out of the living room and down the hall. It looked cross-eyed as it focused its eyes. I led it past the guest room and bathroom and into my room. We stood there looking at each other. Its dome swiveled, its eyes seemed to roll.

“Good job,” I said to it.

The light between its eyes pulsed more brightly. “Dense with objects,” the robot remarked.

It took me a minute to realize it meant my room. Then I heard Dad calling from the living room. “Lead it back.”

“Let’s go back,” I said. I was beginning to feel all-powerful, like a teacher.

The robot turned around again and followed me into

the hallway, its blue lights gently throbbing. It circled the potted avocado tree, staying close behind me. Would it follow me if I took another way? I led it into the kitchen, past the long counter where we ate breakfast, now littered with dinner dishes, around the dining room table, and back into the living room. It followed right behind, avoiding the pile of newspapers. When we came to the oriental carpet, it lifted its base a little higher above its wheels, like it was walking tiptoe. Mom turned away from the window to watch it. She smiled, but her eyes looked sad.

“Stop!” I commanded, and it did, just before it reached the glass coffee table. Zumu, sitting at the end of the long sofa, looked relieved.

Dad started talking quickly, pacing around. “I’ve equipped it with sonar and radar, so it can find its way around most objects. I’m not sure yet how well it can make other discriminations.” I was too excited to figure out what he meant. I did later, though.

Dad was talking fast because he had a lot more to tell me. “It can’t go up or down stairs. If we take it outside, it will rise up higher to roll over dirt and grass. In case you need protection on Heartwright Lane, I’ve given it a special feature. You know how you’re always worrying that Rocky could get out and bite you?”

He pulled me around behind the robot and pointed to a yellow button with the No sign, a circle crossed by a line, superimposed on the image of a dog. “When you press this, Robot will emit a high-pitched noise guaranteed to drive any dog away.”

“I should show Pablo how to press it,” I said, thinking of the kittens Rocky had killed. We never let Pablo out because of that awful dog.

Dad went on as if he hadn’t heard me. I must not try to lift the robot, he told me.

“Good thing this house all on one floor,” said Zumu.

“That’s why we bought it.” Mom returned to the sofa to sit beside Zumu. “Remember? It was built for a lawyer who used a wheelchair. Alex wanted a place to build robots at home.”

Dad looked annoyed. He hated when Mom got off the subject. He really wanted to show off the robot. “It has eighty-two microprocessors,” he boasted. When he pressed the rectangle below the monitor, a small keyboard popped out. The robot was equipped with its own minicomputer, which could connect to a computer and process information from the Internet, like the latest weather report.

“It will print out what you say to it and you can correct its mistakes.” Dad pushed the keyboard back in its slot and gave the robot an approving pat on its side.

“Cool,” I said. Mom’s laugh sounded fake. Zumu still looked disapproving. Pablo had come out from under the sofa and approached Robot cautiously.

“Wait until you see the rest,” Dad answered.

He showed me a button on the robot’s back that activated a metronome, to use when I practiced the piano or violin. “See this?” Dad pointed to a little hole. “A pencil sharpener. This is a smoke detector. If the robot smells smoke, it will tell Celia to leave the house. It won’t mal-

function.” Our smoke detectors sometimes went off unexpectedly. That always made Dad really mad.

Pablo came close and gingerly put out a paw to touch the robot. When Dad popped a metal detector out of the robot’s base, he jumped back and growled, his tail all big.

Dad went on like one of those TV advertisements that always said, “Wait, there’s more!”

My robot could help me with my homework, Dad told me. I could teach it songs. Eventually, he could program it to teach me Chinese.

At that, Zumu looked interested. She was always after me to take regular lessons. Dad always said he’d teach me, maybe later.

“I think we can get it to load the dishwasher, and it’s designed to help you clean up your room. I put an extension on its right arm so it can reach your ceiling.” Dad grinned. “I adapted it from an interactive model we’re designing for recycling garbage left in landfills all over the world.”

Oh, great, I thought. Dad kept on talking, very pleased with himself. “We may even get it to vacuum. And it will be your alarm clock.”

“Is this my new baby-sitter?” I asked.

Zumu stared, plainly horrified. Mom jumped up to stack dessert plates we’d left on the dining room table.

Dad stopped smiling, eyeing Zumu uncomfortably. “It will certainly keep Celia safe when we’re not here.”

“Does that mean I can have friends over when you and Mom aren’t home?”

“I don’t think it’s ready for *that* much responsibility,”

Mom called from the dining room, “But maybe we can teach it to French braid.”

“Don’t tell your friends about it,” Dad warned. “Plenty of people would like to get their hands on my prototype. Fisher’s outfit would kill to know what we’re doing.” Mr. Fisher’s outfit was called Ultronics. He and Dad went to MIT together, and whenever Dad or Mr. Weissman mentioned him, they would say, “Can’t trust the guy.”

Mom came out of the kitchen and looked at Dad, shaking her head. “Now, Alex, Maeve and Jennifer won’t be running to give Fisher the specs. I’m sure Celia will want to show it to them as soon as she can.” She carried another stack of plates into the kitchen and quickly came back for cups and wineglasses. Looking at me, she said, “I really wish I could stay home all the time, Celia. But Calyx has to keep touring to stay alive. I’m flying to Winnipeg tomorrow, remember?”

Zumu stood up and followed Mom into the kitchen. “I can take care of this, Grace,” Mom said to her. “I need something to keep my mind off all those concerts in Canada.”

Mom always wanted Zumu to start home to Brookline early, and I knew she didn’t really want Zumu to help her. Zumu has her own funny way of doing things, Mom says, because she grew up with servants.

Zumu is always amazed that Mom does everything without servants. Zumu’s told me lots of stories about growing up in Shanghai. She had a live-in baby-sitter, called an amah, and she hardly ever saw her parents.

I hugged Zumu good-bye, and waved as she drove away. Then I went to the guest room to write a long e-mail to Grandmary and Grandpop.

After that, it was time for bed. While I put on my nightgown, Dad went to his workshop to get the recharger he'd rigged, a flat black platform that plugged into the outlet beside my bed. He shoved aside a pile of papers and puzzle boxes to make room for it. I led the robot from the living room to my bedroom, then snuggled down under the covers.

"Good night, Robot," I said.

"Good night, Celia." The robot rolled over the recharger and latched on. The blue light shining from its dome dimmed.

"It's charging now. It will automatically disconnect when it's fully recharged," Dad explained.

Standing in the doorway to my room, Dad tucked in his shirt and pushed his glasses up on his nose. He looked very proud of himself and his invention. "You've only seen a fraction of its capacity," he said. Typical Dad.

Slowly, he looked around my messy room. "I've programmed it to help you in many ways. Celia, this robot is going to change your life."