

## **Bad Robot v45.3. (The walk)**

**By Adair Broughton**

It had been an achingly bright afternoon, surprising in its intensity for the season, a day from nowhere, deceptively warm. The autumnal sun thrashed out the last vestiges of heat it would be capable of that year, yet any breeze would have shattered the delusion of a summer day, chilling the body into realisation of winters approach. It was an in between day for a host of reasons, not least the weather and she had known no other day like it.

She walked past the robot in the garden, its svelte body standing tall like an exclamation point with no bad back to punctuate or hinder the deft raking of fallen leaves. It had no care or interest as to who passed by, not like other people, real people, when they potted in gardens, always looking for an excuse to stop work and smile or wave and hopefully talk about the inane vagaries of existence, usually things only important to themselves. She had seen the flashes of its metal, shining like ice, a skin made of diamonds exposing itself while she was some way off, her mind fluctuating between the sad recesses of memory and the simple joys of the day.

She contemplated whether to cross over from this intimacy of reflection but her footsteps had reached the robot before she had altered course. Her eyes, with a somewhat shifty countenance, watched it from the corner of her eye, hoping she did not disturb it. She was wary but knew there wasn't any sensible reason for this. She thought about the robots eyes. She didn't really know how they worked, whether it had motion sensors or actually did not care for anyone or anything outside its immediate vicinity. They did human things but they were not human she reminded herself.

The raking seemed out of place, not a summer job, not while the sky still cast a blue glow over the diminishing afternoon. It was strange to think time had already eaten into autumn by some weeks. Small piles of yellow and brown had accumulated, littered over the garden like overgrown molehills of summer. They were mounds of rusting leaves that would soon be carried into tubs, ready for next year's spring compost. It seemed odd while the sun could still burn this way, that so many leaves had already fallen, yellow leaves and sepia hues recently changed from a fading green. She loved that transition of colour, the vibrancy in what was dying, and the beauty before the barren, a last fight of meaning. Some people even took road trips just to chase the highways of colour that autumn could provide. It was not a journey she had yet made herself but was one of those far off dreams awaiting the right time. For now she could immerse herself with the woods in the compound. She was surprised how few people used it, most undoubtedly enjoying the scenery displays they could use with stationary bikes and jogging machines. To her, there was nothing like fresh air though. Exercise was equally about environment.

The day was mysterious but she was glad of it, happy that she could have another afternoon of walking through the woods and listening to the birds singing by the stream, enjoying the freedoms the small wood could provide and enjoying the peace of solitude, basking in thoughts of what is and what might have been, while all she needed to wear was an old t-shirt from a forgotten rock concert. This time last year

she would have been wearing her scarf, a thin veil of thread tied round her pale neck to break the coolness of fall. The day felt like a gift so she had accepted it gladly, making the most of it, like an unexpected compliment from a stranger.

She glanced sideways, not knowing why she was being so surreptitious in looking at the robot. Funny, she thought, that the supposed neutrality of the robot's, their epicene faces and smooth curves still didn't carve a path towards an enlightenment from sexism but consolidated her thoughts that they were all 'male'. Did androgyny falter on the borderline of masculinity? Maybe this was just her error she thought, her ingrained stereotype that physical labour was still a male trait. There had been no requirement for a distinction of male and female in domestic robots. The standard was for one sex, to teach neutrality. But it meant there was no chest, an obvious difference. Of course the duality of the sexes appeared and existed just as much for robots as people but purpose was for far less useful or discerning reasons. Occasional adverts on late night television had opened her eyes to that. Cold rubbery flesh was not somewhere she could ever seek comfort.

The robots were part of society, as ingrained as any pet, generally performing the mundane but with evolved and expanded roles as diverse as carers to gardeners depending on the age and also cost of the specific model and its additional specifications. They were even used as company for those that lived alone, protection for the elderly. It was ironic that the newest technologies could be accepted by and used by the eldest citizens before someone as young as her could appreciate their use. It was sad but some part of her did accept that comfort should be taken wherever possible. Still, she often felt she was the only person who had never got used to them, some doubt inhibiting a total comfort that others seemed to accept as easily as night or day. Even so, it never pleased her to see the children shooting at them with toy guns or watching them enjoy pushing them over, which was silly considering they had no feelings. Then again, if somebody scratched a car, it was property and that angered her a little also. Her thoughts shot in tangents and irrelevances, sometimes she could enjoy that but today she just wanted to free her mind. The robots, for a more apt word, confused her.

The occasional thought about them arrived in blurry awkwardness, nervousness without foundation, no definite reasoning as to why she felt this unerring doubt, which meant she could not enjoy the insouciance of legal slavery that others could. Besides, she liked doing the gardening herself, immersing herself with the small amount of green that could be possessed in a housing estate. In effect, that was why she liked the walks, because it was never enough in her garden, the empire too tiny for Eden but how big is that particular garden anyway?

They were objects of help, not people, she continually told herself. They were not designed to think, not motivated to look after themselves before humans. She knew the human mind was often irrational, like when her friend would do anything to avoid stepping on a crack in the sidewalk. Yet, she felt a palpable relief when she walked past and the robot had made no recognition of her, her heart calming just a little as if the heartbeat had been raised without her realising, a gentle but soft subtle sigh exhaling as breath, the footnote to walking past a wasp nest that didn't exist. Would people still be afraid of wasps if they had no sting? The robot had not raised its head like a person would in similar circumstance. Her pace slowed again, a more

comfortable walking speed. There was no danger, had never been any. The small smile she gave was for her own quirkiness, yet it looked like the fallout of relief.

The robot had in fact looked up, from the corner of its eye, just like she had, the fake globe that acted as a mini camera and image finder constantly firing back unseen frequencies that gave depth perception and rudimentary colour and took images to ascertain whereabouts, surroundings and movements in the vicinity. The quality was impressive, at least good enough to spot an individual blade of grass, or a bee on a sunflower or the face of someone who walked close by.

Its scan, even from the side, determined who she was and also an address of where she lived. It had seen her walk past on other occasions that year, always in mid to late afternoon. The compound had a population of five hundred and seven people inside its iron rails and just recently with the addition of the new chip, it had found itself retrieving her photo. There was something different about her, compared to the others, something it needed to know but did not have the information. Its thoughts focussed on her but did not comprehend what was meant to happen with those thoughts, like it had no programmed ending of the loop she was creating in it. Was Gödel incompleteness or the Turing laws reason consciousness could never be replicated? Wasn't that one of the reasons many people thought consciousness could never be explained, that there was no instruction to end? A loop or infinity?

These five hundred people paid a premium to be in a cage; it felt free of that and it wanted her to know, explain that it could keep her company, that it wasn't trapped like people were. It wanted to explain that because it had no life it had no death, to explain that life was a reflection of a moment, that it had every word to describe things and somehow could create interesting analogies and bring meaning to the mundane with simile and metaphor. The combinations were endless and whenever it said some, people looked surprised and smiled thinking it was pre-programmed and calculated speech. It knew what it was, designed electronic mind of switches and gates but had no desire to be more, that its own life was not a competition of success or wealth. It had so much to say, too much to say and it was only her it wanted to tell this too. It wanted her to be part of the recent waking. It just couldn't think why her. It had no needs, no urges of belonging, and no evolved feelings of attraction in pursuit of replication. So why had it chosen her without being aware of making a choice? She moved differently to the others.

It knew people felt they were all unique and because of sex and the replication of genes with mutation it was true. Yet the differences were so much less than people thought when broken down in certain ways. It just took a perspective like it had freedom from without. It knew that even with an exact replication of its circuitry, something possible in the same way cloning was, that another robots actions and choices would be different, that their thoughts would be as unique as its. It knew that humans did not see this, did not reflect that thought was choice in environment based on options and memory. The path each robot took followed a series of events in time that could never be duplicated. How they responded to that was unique to each. It had compared itself to a human and found itself with identity.

Unbeknown to the robot, even to the designer of the new chip, it was the first instance of a robot with intrigue. It was a silent but significant step forward for so many

reasons. The crossing of the bridge of consciousness occurred with only a glance from two unique entities, invisible to the world as much as each other.

It watched her steps fade into the distance and round the corner. The database was a collection of photo's, of information and contact numbers for each resident in the compound. It was a new addition to them and although not everyone had liked the notion to begin with, by the end of the annual meeting it had been ratified. This could have been because of the incessant heat and hot air from bodies subconsciously persuaded a languid acceptance from the silent majority. Or just as likely it could have been a response to the monotone and dulcet voices that tired people into submission or even because of the convincing arguments playing on people's fears.

They had determined there was nothing illegal in keeping that information and the soundly argued reasons for its use had influenced a majority on the committee to put to vote weeks earlier and incorporate it into the agenda. 'It will be able to tell us who was on our property, of any incidents that occur, of drugs we made need to administer in terms of someone collapsing,' a snapshot of the arguments would show. Nobody had agreed on the last cause, they deemed that was too private and that information was withheld. Mrs Mandeena would not want the residents to know she was taking severe anti-depressants. But the notion was passed and the robots had identification for each and every person on the site.

The robot was glad when they had added the photos and information to the database. The pictures meant something; a pattern for each person was established. It was a good feeling when it saw one of them pass by, routine gave it a feeling that could not be described; of control, of being part of something, an importance and a realisation of satisfaction in understanding that aspect of being needed while knowing it ultimately meant nothing. After the latest chip addition, it had felt woken up, as if decisions could be made, like a fog of transistors blowing away a past that was purely of data and order and commands. The world appeared like mist from a mountain, clearer and fresh, like binary to hex. It had started to ask itself questions, felt there was a purpose, and it had just not known what that purpose was. The unknown reason was its spirit, its soul.

Society had broken down in many places and living in compounds offered the best and most reassuring solution to those who could afford the premiums of safety. These living areas had become quite large, some with golf courses, others with parks and gardens on a manageable scale. It meant people who lived there had a certain wealth, could afford the new updates to the robots, which were still a luxury.

Small changes over the years had accumulated into sophisticated models. The conversation plug-ins, the neuron network cards, although not offering sentience, had developed to such an extent that the robots often made a lot more sense than people, could talk about a vast number of topics. They were basically linked to wireless networks of search engines that when asked a question could respond with information quickly and with a good chance of it being correct because sites where data was taken was pre-checked and approved. They spoke with dialects, with alacrity, with controlled sensitivity, with eagerness depending on what was searched. Incredibly they also responded to the vocal wavelengths of the communicator. They could sense mood and change their own voices to usher empathy of reflection.

Subjectivity chips were incorporated into the more complex and expensive models for a greater experience.

They were even claiming the latest update offered the closest interpretation of human behaviour yet, or in essence, a personality. Some cynics said they were 'search portals' with voice, but what did that matter? Many people had become that too. What actually made a person? Was it what they knew? Or was it how they interpreted that information into the relevance of unique perspective, offering a balancing act of similarity with both subjective and objective musings? A summary of their experiences blended with personality of action? People were unique even if predictable so robots could be that too. Individuality is not about the decision but what instigated that decision.

The robot companies had been funded by NASA. They were not given unlimited funding but they were and had been given vast sums to develop dextrous robots that would be able to interact with people and provide company as well as achieve maintenance tasks and offer help. The driving force was for future missions to the Moon and ultimately Mars. NASA did not want to risk an all person mission to the enigmatic 'red planet'. Some argued that the mission should be robot only. Why risk human life to any degree, but then having a person on board meant a legitimate progression and achievement for mankind. It would pique people's interest and govern safety to unprecedented levels. Besides, ran the counter arguments, what if we ever need to be free of Earth, we need to know how to establish and colonise elsewhere and the tremendous task of that magnitude would require many man-hours of work in what would be hostile environment due to radiation and severe cold as examples.

It was a statement for the very fact it was dangerous, pushing all sorts of boundaries just as the first moon visit had. For a limited time people's thoughts expanded to horizons outside of the political mess at home, offered dreams of a future and mans immortality, evolution notwithstanding. Most people forgot mankind was a transient being; its DNA registered a moment in time and nothing more except a few hundred years of cultural robbery and advancement. Robots would be useful because they did not have to breathe, create waste, and have possible psychological problems. The benefits were immense. If a ship crashed, they had lost electronics and time, and of course money but nothing more, not the priceless thing called life.

Luckily, once the robots had got to a certain standard, had progressed to levels vastly more than the best Japanese home entertainment models, the company was able to introduce a 'domestic arm' to the business that could reap profit from diversification. Research and development was now a huge part of the business while the money continued to flow in. These robots were working and entertaining themselves into intelligence, building an invisible bridge into humanity, embedding themselves into kinship with families in the same way dogs had over the previous centuries. They had a lot more than tails to wag.

As she walked past the robot, she had no idea that this was a latest model, was a beta model for the newest chip, and was what the designer, albeit with a certain amount of hubris, would label 'a person without misconstrued evolved feelings slowly gaining individuality in a metal shell'. If feeling was an evolved response mechanism, what

were the actual implications in replicating that? All he had done was increase the amount of fake neurons, the network of connections that had somehow and mysteriously begun cooperating; a magic threshold had been reached where a 'self' could create questions, a synthetic society of mind. If synapses fired with chemicals absorbed from food, well that could be replicated too. Neuron firing was just Boolean logic. There would be a threshold he knew, he just didn't know when. The glimpse he had been given was as beautiful as a sunset but opened up the gates of the world like a sunrise. The mind was how the brain was wired and mapped. The designer had called it 'cross element cross wiring', giving virtually unlimited links between gateways of neurons. The electrical impulses could fire and connect and trace pathways in any way they wanted and over time, while connected to a standard board, the 'homunculus neural highway' grooved patterns that became the predominant foundation of 'personality'.

He had kept quiet about these findings. There were enough protocols established that the robot would not suddenly begin to work outside of its own limitations of code and programming. Something had occurred and he needed feedback, neutral feedback on what that was. There was no better place than inside one of the compounds, a controlled environment with no danger to anyone and with no-one watching. It made sense to wait, just in case any issues would arrive, work out his thoughts and come to terms with creating a 'mind'. He wanted to believe it was a consciousness but without living cells it seemed false, like a sunset made from torches.

There had been huge debate as well as tests on how realistic people would want the behaviour of a robot to be. They could easily programme in any evolved characteristic or trait, but it was something designed, never anything genuine. It would only frustrate people if a robot began to be awkward, played devils advocate, interfered, or blackmailed other people as examples. Everything was designed to be routine, behaviour as well as looks. It was left to what could be envisaged, to test what was possible by designers and researchers, to somehow make the robots interesting without being annoying.

A lot had been achieved and she walked past years of hidden research and history without realising the significance of the empty shell she passed. She would soon be in the woods. The robot was now forgotten. Nature dominated once again.

The woods always had a special smell, of bark and a freshness that she could not place. Sometimes in the summer, the breeze offered itself and whispered as if it had soul, soothing her even more. It was quiet today, not enough leaves for quiet conversation between each other without the breeze to stimulate their unique communication. The stream was fresh and clear; coming from nowhere and going nowhere as it snaked with the path shoulder to shoulder, it's gentle lapping a soundtrack to thought. There was peace in nature, whether she looked at an ant on its secret mission for the colony or whether it was the birds that sang for a secret reason that played in her ear solely for the joy of living.

It was dark under the trees, the low sun, even with the whole sky with which to shine was not able to offer a roof of light even in the openings of the canopy from the gaps of fallen leaves. She would enjoy the walk but knew the light would surprise her as the sun hit eye level, the golden sphere of melting gold bowing out gracefully.

Autumn was a month of banishing light and even though she knew the compound was safe, basic instinct still told her not to walk in the dark at night. She had a way of worrying herself for the slightest reason. It was yet to be sunset but she knew it was near. It was her favourite moment, when nights of orange glow made the world look like it was frozen in a doorway of perception; a glimpse of what beauty really was, when the sun began to hide, threatening to disappear forever.

A thought struck her. As they age did people live more for the future and possibility or for the past and the wonder of memory?

Invisible Boolean logic gates, acting as the firing of synapses, switched and in equivalence to the soft flesh of mind made decisions from code. Unbeknown to itself, to the world at large this one decision was the very first robot decision that worked outside of all its protocols. There were no three rules of robotics because quite simply nothing had been programmed in. It was a myth that they were required and people still believed it now. How could there ever be three laws for robots when humankind needed so much law just for the basic organisation and control of society.

Robots had jobs to do, answer questions, provide basic conversation. They could no more drive a car, act in a violent manner towards a human than could a statue.

The rake made a silent fall as it hit the soil with a small bounce. With surprising agility the robot walked to the edge of the garden and hopped gracefully of the wall. It looked round then headed after the woman. She was only a few minutes ahead and it knew the decision it made was the right one.

She heard a rustle some distance behind, not enough to unnerve her but enough to let her sense of hearing try and dominate proceedings. She looked round quickly but all she saw was the dark wings of a bird flying out from the treetops.

A dead twig echoed inside her as if it directly prodded her nerves to tease her. I'm being silly again, she thought. Why do I always do this to myself? This time she looked around, stared for a few moments and began to turn round as there was nothing there. As she turned, a flash of silver or a golden ray of sun caught the corner of her eye. She stopped again and turned round once more, but once again nothing was there. It is the light through the trees she reassured herself. It is the noise of the squirrels dancing between the trees.

The sweetness of the walk dissolved itself into the bitterness of the ebbing light and the wan of nature's charm when nothing is on the mind except an acceptance of existence. Lost to the presence of nerves that haunted her walk like a lonely ghost she just wanted to be home.

A breeze rustled the remaining leaves, so she rubbed her arms, as much from a need to comfort herself than the chill that teased goose bumps onto her skin.

This time she definitely heard a footstep, and her heart jumped, beat her into submission of fright. I'm always alone she thought, always alone in the safest place I could be. Why would he follow me, its not even possible? She couldn't understand and she wished the day had not teased her like this. 'I should have bought the comm'

but she knew having regrets never helped the moment. She would carry on walking and deny the possession fear wanted.

More twigs were broken behind, not too far away. She couldn't even pretend she was imagining this. She had admonished herself for being silly and now she wanted to kick herself for not following her instincts and running when she first heard a noise. But what could she do right now? Her heart was beating fast but her mind was acting slowly, as if her thoughts were trying to run in quicksand. Where would panic get her? She tried to remain calm, think about who would hear her scream or distances to safety. Fright or flight? It seemed the bird had already taken the flight and all she was left with was grounded fear. She wanted to turn round but it was as if her body had frozen and she had to concentrate all her energy on walking forward. The day was surreal, but she could not shake her head and smile away that thought.

She thought she heard a breath but that would not make sense. At that moment she felt a cold hand on her shoulder. She froze completely. What should someone actually do in this circumstance? She hated the reign of confusion denying her a spirit of resistance.

The hand gripped tighter, she refused to turn round or move, and a scream could not even find voice. Inaction was a way of denying it was really happening. She thought this even as she felt it, as if her mind was separate to her body, as if it was judging her actions.

Why could she hear breathing? This made no sense. Where was the border between reality and imagination?

She saw the hand grip her neck and twist itself into a stranglehold she could only have dreamed of in her worst nightmare. She felt the force of cold steel that didn't feel like metal as it pushed her off the path. She stumbled into the lower branches of the trees, her body finding the impact softer because of the leaves. I am just a fallen leaf too she thought.

She felt a hand grip her hair, it hurt but she couldn't scream as if her whole body and mind needed to concentrate on something else, distancing itself from the attack. She opened her eyes and could only make out a shadow above her. The metal had lost its shine.

The hands were twisting her round and in that moment she saw her mistake. This was not the robot. It was a stranger, at least someone she did not recognise from the compound. How did they get in? What happened to security? This is so much worse she thought. But how could it be worse? How could she compare being attacked by a robot or a stranger?

The questions dissolved into the panic of the situation. She was lying on her back, a man much stronger forcing her down, using his strength until she stopped struggling.

The robot had also asked itself where the border was between reality and imagination. It was confronted with a situation it had not been programmed for but when the man had passed behind the women he had not recognised the face in its databank. It sent

the scan and information to security then without delay began to follow the man. Its senses recognised something wrong with the situation and it made a choice.

The robot put its hand on the shoulder of the man and gripped tightly knowing that its strength was not something the man could cope with. It didn't enjoy the scream of pain, but it wasn't like it didn't enjoy it either. The satisfaction was more in protecting the woman. The woman who surprised him with the look she gave.

When she saw the metallic hand grip the man's shoulder something cried within her even though she was in shock with what she saw. Its silver body, now with an orange hue from the setting sun became an exotic piece of jewellery, the most precious metal in the world. She had no words, nor could she truly put this action in place of all her previous thoughts. She closed her eyes, even now still hoping it was some dream, a nightmare she could wake from. She heard footsteps running down the path.

"It is ok" the robot said, "I called security."

She allowed herself the smallest recognition of a smile, something that would calm her but not dismiss what had happened. She was thankful for the robot. It was like a child's voice. The robot lifted the man away, dragged him to one side. She slowly rose, rubbed her eyes to wash away the mist of waking from a bad dream.

As the security men led her away to be checked in the ambulance she wished for one thing. That she had said thank you to the robot.

The robot sat back. It liked the story it had just written. A woman in distress. Robots could be heroes too.

"What are you doing" the designer said to the robot?

"I'm just checking the updates will download from the secure connection. I felt it appropriate to check one last time before I go for my first contract in the compound."

The designer looked at the robot then went to clarify some other information. The robot was his best yet. It was due for its first assignment in the compound, its first real test to see if it could fit into what could be termed a 'normal' family, to do jobs but also to protect the property and people. It had been thoroughly tested, updated with the latest technology and adaptable software. This is the big test he thought. If this works even astronauts will trust them.

The robot had checked that the latest downloads would work but it had taken seconds. He had sat and uploaded a short story it had 'written'. I think I'll call it 'Bad Robot'. The robot clicked on the save button and the file was sent to an online short story submission site. Anonymity was sexless, it was also lifeless.

It went and found the designer.

"So tell me again about the family" it said. 'Especially that young woman' it secretly thought.