

You'll Never Get Published

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The metal man sat at the head of a long conference table, as he was directed to do. There was a checkerboard grid drawn across the length of the table. One of the scientists handed him a box of tokens: small round reds for population, square blues for resources, and large triangular greens to mark spots for special attention.

“Arrange things as you see fit, C18. This will help us understand how your programming has adapted, so we can provide appropriate resources,” the head scientist said.

They tell me this is a test, C18 thought. But it is always a test, even if they don't say it is.

Cyrus waved the first few pages of the manuscript in front of Mo's face.

“You're writing pulp fiction, like from the 60s. No one took this stuff seriously then, never mind now! You'd be better off making this *Star Trek* fanfic. Are you listening to me, Mo?”

He wasn't. Mo had a lot of practice ignoring his roommate: Cyrus slammed doors and drawers when he left early in the morning, or came back late at night, and saw no need to suppress a noxious burp. He wasn't a quiet or considerate man, but neither was Mo. Nonetheless, they had remained friends and roommates after their random assignment three years prior. They understood each other, more or less.

“Listen to me, Mo,” Cyrus said. “It sucks. It's terrible.”

He finally looked up from his laptop. He tried to take the pages back, but Cyrus pulled them out of reach again, gripping the stack with both hands. Mo took off his heavy glasses and wiped them on his shirt. They were still dusty and smudged.

“Maybe you aren't the target audience,” he said.

“Your target audience has been dead for more than a decade,” Cyrus said.

“That's crass, Cy.”

“Crass! You can't even speak like a modern person. You're twenty-two, Mo, not eighty!”

“It's just the way I talk. It's never bothered you before. Can I have those back?” He held his hand out.

“I haven’t finished reading. I’m just giving you my live thoughts.”

“Why don’t you put this kind of energy into your schoolwork?”

It was a cruel addendum, and he regretted it the second he’d said it. Cyrus had lived on Pop-Tarts and energy drinks the entire last week of the Fall semester, just to pull off a GPA only half a point above Poor Standing.

“I’m not an idiot, you know—”

“I know, Cy, I shouldn’t have—”

“And just because you get good grades doesn’t mean you’re a good writer!”

He closed his laptop. He didn’t know why Cyrus was so irritable that morning, but there was no point antagonizing him further. He shouldn’t have said anything about his schoolwork.

“I’m going to the library to work,” Mo said.

“Fine. Whatever. I have to get ready for work, anyway.”

Mo stuffed his laptop and his headphones in an old black JanSport and went to the library.

It was quieter there than in the dorms on the best of days, and with Cyrus riled up, the contrast was even starker. He found a spot he liked, a table by a window and an outlet, only two seats so he could put his bag on the other and avoid any interruptions. He scrolled through his collection of playlists, some scoured from writing and RPG forums, others he or Cyrus had made. He had been working on one for the book he was hacking away at, but he didn’t have a very varied music taste, and struggled to find new music for these kinds of things. It was usually Cyrus who introduced him to new songs. He settled on one and slipped on his headphones, tuned out the ambient distractions of overwhelmed freshmen and fluorescent lights. He didn’t know where to continue with the scene he had left off on, so he skipped ahead a bit to the confrontation:

“Explain this asymmetry, Bot,” the bearded scientist demanded.

“I cannot,” C18 said.

“Saturn-Damned! What do you mean you can’t? I gave you an order!”

The other scientists whispered to each other, and clamored in agreement with the bearded one. The metal man was given an order, so he must obey.

“I understand, sirs,” C18 said evenly. “But I am unable to explain it to you.”

“Are you calling us stupid?! We’re not idiots, you know!” The bearded one turned very red.

He tapped a finger on the desk. No, they wouldn’t get that angry right away. They’d have no reason to think it was intentional, just flawed. He chewed his hoodie’s drawstring.

“Saturn-Damned! What do you mean you can’t? I gave you an order.”

The other scientists whispered to each other: “It’s too expensive to throw away.” “We’d have to start from scratch, and after years of development...” “Maybe it’s a feedback flaw we can find and extract—”

“I understand the order, sirs,” C18 said evenly, just loudly enough to pierce through the gathering clamor. “But I am unable to explain it to you while fulfilling my primary objective.”

“Primary objective?” The head scientist repeated. There was a hush as everyone turned to her. She hadn’t spoken through the entire test. She had watched, and she never raised her voice. People just listened. “Clarify: Define your objective.”

“We know his objective,” one of the interns interjected. The head ignored him. There was silence, except for the hum of the lights, as C18 answered:

“Clarification: Every robot’s primary objective is the protection of human life.”

Mo jerked in his chair when someone tapped his shoulder.

“Please don’t touch me,” he snapped. Even though the student had pulled away almost instantly, Mo still felt an uncomfortable tingle where contact was made. He rubbed the spot.

“Hey, sorry, can we use that outlet?” The student said.

The sun was starting to go down, he must have been working for hours. He hadn’t really noticed. He told the student he was headed out anyway, and unplugged his laptop. Cyrus was gone when Mo returned to the dorm, and Mo was asleep by the time Cyrus returned from work.

They each had classes the next day; Cyrus's in the morning and Mo's in the afternoon. They didn't catch up again until after four when Mo returned to the dorm from his last class.

"I got pizza," Cyrus said, still in his work uniform. He pointed to the large pie on his desk. Mo realized as the smell of the garlic hit him that he hadn't eaten all day.

"How much do I owe you?" He asked. Cyrus waved off the question and took three slices onto a plate. Mo grabbed a single slice for himself and put it on the desk. There was no sign of the anger from the previous day, from either of them.

"How's the writing coming?" Cyrus asked around a mouthful of food. He wiped his hand on his pants before picking up his slice again.

"Slowly. I wrote during Seminar," Mo pulled his notebook from his backpack and held it up. It was smaller than the average paperback, with a simple black cardboard cover. It was thickened with use, and some extra sheets and index cards poked out at odd angles. There was a thin black bookmark more than two-thirds in. "I'm going to type it up in a minute."

Cyrus wiped his hands on his pants again and held a hand out for the notebook. Mo shook his head.

"Not yet, I need to work on it more," he said. Cyrus went back to his pizza.

"Eat first, anyway. Still the novel?"

"No, I took a break," Mo said. He picked up his plate. "I wrote a bit of a short story today."

"Robots again?"

Mo nodded.

Cyrus swallowed—loudly—and continued:

"How do you pass your classes if you're always writing during them?"

"Most of my classes are writing classes, anyway," Mo said.

"What about Seminar? That's a talking class," Cyrus asked, and gestured vaguely in a circle with his pizza. Mo shrugged.

“I do well on my essays. I talk when I need to. I do like the class; I add to discussions when I’m interested. It’s just hard to focus sometimes, and then I’d rather be writing. The professors don’t mind because it just looks like I’m taking notes.”

“How can you write and listen at the same time? I can’t even figure out taking notes without missing parts of the lecture.” Cyrus said. He had moved on to his second slice. Mo hadn’t started his first.

“If the writing is high emotion, I don’t listen. And if the lecture is interesting, or challenging, I don’t write. I just need something to do with my hands. Like I need multiple stimuli or something.” he explained. “I think that’s why I failed Physics.”

“I didn’t know you were in Physics.”

“It was before we met. I had a lot of trouble adjusting to college.”

They ate in silence, Mo slowly and Cyrus loudly.

“Sounds like ADHD, man,” Cyrus said, eventually.

“Probably,” Mo said with a shrug. “Or something close.”

“You’ve never been diagnosed?”

“No. I was diagnosed with anxiety when I was a kid, so they never looked into anything else, and you know they don’t diagnose girls with ADHD, usually. I try to deal with it on my own, like the anxiety.”

“And that works?”

Mo shrugged again. Cyrus had ADHD. They talked about it often, especially the couple of times he had been on academic probation. He was hesitant to try medications, and he’d had bad luck with therapists. His parents were no help, either; it was Mo who had helped Cyrus figure out accommodations at the campus Disabilities Office. Maybe he thought Mo was being hypocritical now, but if he did, he didn’t say so.

“Oh,” was all he said. “How can a robot be high emotion? They don’t have emotions.”

“Huh?”

“You always write about robots and you said if the story is high emotion that you don’t listen to the lecture, but how can robots be high emotion?” Cyrus started his third slice, finishing his question in one breath.

“Robots are about what it means to be human, so they have to deal with emotion, too. That’s what robots are for, in fiction.”

“But they don’t have any emotions.”

“Says who?”

“Says—! Every work of robot fiction. You can’t program emotion.”

“Just because everyone says that doesn’t make it true,” Mo said. Cyrus laughed.

“I guess so. Just like you,” he said.

“Me? What does that mean?”

“Nothing, don’t worry,” Cyrus said, still chuckling. He cleared his throat, then. “Actually, uh. I wanted to... I mean, about yesterday?”

“I shouldn’t have said what I did, I’m sorry,” Mo interrupted.

“Oh, I’m not..! I mean, thank you. I’m sorry, too, I was being an ass for no reason, about the story. I just... I wanted to explain. Not that I’m making excuses for being an ass! But—”

Mo frowned.

“What’s wrong, Cy?”

“I’ve been fighting with my parents last couple of days.” Cyrus’ eyes bounced around the room. His pizza, his desk, Mo’s laptop. Anywhere to avoid meeting his eyes, it seemed. “Even though I managed to get off Probation, my grades are still pretty low, you know?”

“But you’re doing better.”

Cyrus gestured, palm up, in a half-shrug.

“They don’t agree. If I can’t... prove to them... Whatever it is they want me to prove to them. If I don’t ace this semester, they think I should drop out and stop wasting their money. I was just mad at them, but I shouldn’t have taken that out on you,” he finished with another shrug, and finally looked back at Mo. “I guess it’s just easier to yell at you than them. You actually listen.”

Mo still frowned.

“You’re bringing your grades up, and working. What do they expect from you?”

“More, I guess. I don’t want to talk about it anymore, I just wanted to apologize, and I guess... warn you, if you need to start looking for a new roommate.”

“Cy...” He had said that stupid thing about schoolwork. He was the worst friend.

Cyrus jumped up, forcing levity once again. “Eat up. I should head to work before it’s too dark out. I’ll see you tomorrow. Happy writing!”

Mo muttered for him to drive safe, then put away the rest of the pizza in their minifridge. He moved his slice next to his laptop, and grabbed a paper towel from the bathroom. He tucked it under the plate for later. He propped his notebook up on the other side of his laptop, resting against some Asimov and Bradbury, and started to type. After typing up the fragment of short story, he went back to the novel:

C18 paced his resting cubical; rather like a human’s nervous quirk, he noted ruefully. He had but one ally, another robot who had moved onto higher testing in the facility: DN5. DN5 was made years before C18, but had been updated twice to keep up with modern demands. Most robots older than his friend were moved to field work, but DN5 had endeared himself to one of the engineers, and was allowed to continue as her assistant. He had an engraved nameplate pinned to his shoulder that read “Dennis, Junior Engineer.” C18 had no such nameplate, and suspected he would not be given one anytime, soon. The scientists and engineers did not love C18. Not when he continued to be a disappointment.

Mo paused his typing to take another bite of the pizza, but it was cold and the texture pulled him out of his story. He wasn’t that hungry, he decided, and slid the half-finished pizza into his waste bin, continuing instead with just a soda and candy bar:

DN5 knocked on the outer wall of the cubical before he stepped in. C18 paused his small circle sharply.

“Oh, DN5. I thought you were one of the scientists coming to get me for another test.”

“Friend, you are agitated. They have tested you several times today already. Do you not think they would let you sleep?” DN5 said. He put a hand on C18’s shoulder, like he had seen the humans do to each other in times of distress.

“They are displeased with me, again. They are always displeased with me. I have been built for organizing the civilization missions, and they believe I am failing. I am running out of time, my friend.”

A human might have offered more comfort, might have told C18 that he was simply speaking with fear, that he would get more time, and everything would work out. But they were both robots, beings of logical thought, and beings with no agency. If C18 could not fulfill what the creators wanted him to do, how they wanted him to do it, he would be decommissioned.

He paused there, tapping his finger on the desk. There was a scratch in the wood from whoever had the dorm before him. He moved a finger along the scratch, feeling the grooves of the wood. His shoulders were tense, and his throat was tight. He forced a slow breath and cracked his knuckles. It wasn't fair. He didn't want the story to end with C18 being destroyed by his creators, but how could he save his robot? It was too dark for his liking. Maybe DN5 could get C18 out of the facility. Maybe one of the scientists could start to believe in him.

“Maybe,” he muttered aloud, to no one. He hated not knowing where this story was going, but he really felt like he was close to the core of it, if he could just save C18. There was something to this story he couldn't give up on yet, he thought. Something about love.

Mo was still working when Cyrus returned later that night. The lights were off—he had worked right through sunset and well after—so the room was lit only by the bright glow from the laptop screen.

“You'll hurt your eyes like that,” Cyrus said.

“That's why my glasses are so thick,” He removed said glasses and wiped his eyes. “Is it that late already?”

“Yes. You should go to bed.”

“I should.” Mo closed his laptop.

“Hey, were you crying?” Cyrus asked. He hadn't turned the lights on and stumbled around the dorm, undressing as he went and throwing his clothes on the floor. Mo shined his phone flashlight to help him out.

“Yeah,” Mo said.

“Because of the novel?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you kill someone off, or something?” Cyrus nearly tripped out of his pants.

“Not quite. I mean, I might later, but... They were talking about the robot, the people who made him. They think he’s broken; they’re talking about decommissioning him. And he’s right there, he’s right there listening to them describe how broken and useless he—watch your head, Cy.”

Cyrus hit his head against the wooden frame of his loft bed.

“Ow.”

“Are you okay?”

“Ow. Yes. Continue.” Cyrus climbed up to his bed. Mo sat on his own bed and turned off his light to undress. It was purely dark in the room then, except for the blue light from Mo’s charging laptop. He could feel Cyrus still staring at him.

“Well, that’s pretty much it,” he said.

“Why are they saying the robot’s broken? Is he?”

“He’s making mistakes, doing things they didn’t plan for. Robots aren’t supposed to be able to make mistakes, especially a robot in charge of arranging future human settlements. He keeps making asymmetrical arrangements, or less than optimal arrangements, or interrupting the aptitude-career assignment tests.”

“Why’s he making mistakes, then?” Cyrus yawned.

“It’s late,” Mo said. “You should go to sleep. You’ve been working almost twelve hours today.”

“Don’t leave me on a cliffhanger, then,” he said.

“Well, I haven’t revealed it yet in what I’ve written so far, but I’m thinking... C18 thinks a little too much like a human, but like a creative human, too. Depression rates are rising in the human race because everything’s so predictable and exactly the same, and people are put on this track that’s decided for them based on one test. And, for the people this optimized world isn’t perfect for, you know, anyone who doesn’t learn or operate in a convenient, acceptable way, they’re depressed and struggling, too, because nothing’s helping them, and they need help.” Mo paused

as he realized he was speaking louder and faster than he had intended. If Cyrus was bothered, he didn't say so. "I think that's what I'll do, anyway," Mo finished.

"So the robot is making these mistakes for the good of the human race?"

"Is it too predictable?"

"Maybe. I think it's good stuff, though. I hope your little guy makes it out. Sweet dreams, Mo." Cyrus rolled over.

"Goodnight, Cy."

Mo stared at the ceiling all night. He fell asleep as the sun was rising, to the sounds of Cyrus getting ready for work.