

R E F U N D S F O R
MACHINES
A /S_ERIES _OF SHORT >STORIES

SYMPATHY FOR A N V I L

re.occurrence

(leo mara)

Jess kicked the repaired twice metal stand on his TEB and repeated his daily trust in that the short and rusted leg held the weight of the illegally-modded bike. He detached the lithium battery from its lock and energy-transferring pins, pulled it loose and put it to one side balancing upright on the ground. He then unbelted the armoured package carrier from over the rear tire. Heavy duty cable, one sold-after-sold-after-stolen, went around the wide carbon fibre frame, through front spokes, and through the street's rack. A yanked to destruction bike lock, inbuilt in the communal rack, hung, abandoned, sad and useless. Jess covered his TEB with tarp pulled from his rucksack. Helmet still clipped, battery and carrier in either hand, he walked to and headed up the red railed stairs and toward his front door.

Bolt locked, indoors, he kicked off his trainers at the unusual inside step, docked the TEB's battery in its charger. A paper bag came out of his wearing backpack. He folded it down on a countertop to unveil ramen. The broth was not hot or cold and telling by the scent, seasoned too much.

Socket switched on, remote unburied, Jess lit up the forty-inch LED wonkily mounted to the wall. Finishing one series the night before with only half his attention paid, the other half on scrolling through an uncoordinated stream of five second content, he looked through 'suggestions' for the next.

Alion

2101, first contact. Inhuman vessels appear in the skies above New Chicago and Indianapolis. These travellers believe they are machines made conscious, composed 'in another time', and ask for answers-

Answerphone: A procedurally-generated thriller

Listen for the automated message, then pick up the phone. Your questions and answers, who YOU call decides the narrative-

World With Power

An honest look at the societal implications of machine learn-

THE WAITING ROOM – New Episode Every Thursday

Thirty verified influencers stay together in a ten-bedroom house, competing in VR games and secret tasks. Do they work with or against one another to avoid eviction? What are they willing to do to win?

Jess woke up, flat, on the grease-stained sofa. The television the only light in the purposely compact apartment, projecting cold blue motion onto walls and leftovers.

Something played. Headlights. A car flew past the scene. A woman waiting at the side of the urban road, toes teetering off a high curb. An uncoloured, engineered arm hung down from their rolled-up sleeve and held the small hand of a child. A patient child that didn't move. The woman let go. Took her synthetic limb away to touch the basic cut hair, and the back of the child's head as a mother would.

Jess woke up again. The time wasn't right. Barely formed sunlight faintly bordered the closed-lid blinds. The screen remained glowing. An immortal loop of eleven-second countdowns between spoiler-gloating trailers.

In 9... 8... 7... 6...

Patient. All the while earnings decelerated. Slow responders and time wasters unknowingly or unsympathetically ruining little chance of Jess even nearing minimum delivery targets for a six-hour shift.

Duct tape on spider-webbed glass. The phone was slammed down, connection cut, buzzer alarmed, and the electric-locked entrance released. Through the bowed frame, Jess crept in.

Past apartments one, two, three, five, six, seven, Jess took a max two-occupant elevator.

Knuckles rattled the door. A bearded guy, forties, sweaty, accepted the black cardboarded parcel. "Cheers." Behind him, was conversation. Chatter not far from the entrance. And likely not live.

A TV most like. 'What- would you, Tessa? Not far now, into the future, would you have that operating in your home? And if you fall asleep-'

A child answered. Head about the height of the door's handle. Dressed in pyjamas. Plain pyjamas, except with grey circles. Hollow circles. Rings. 'Little bot' sewn into the top. He held his forearms outward from his stomach, imitating a forklift. Jess lowered, passed the parcel, enjoyed that the kid pretended not to be phased by the weight of three kilograms.

Abdominals tensed. He squeezed hard on the brakes and pulled back. The TEB slid, glided with its wheels locked. Brake lights, bumper, the two, coloured strips. The 'AVAILABLE' sign lit. Likely rushing for a similar target, the cab stuck its nose too far out of the closed junction. Driver busy looking in the other direction, waiting for a chance to turn. He acted sudden. Stopped. But when he drove on, he didn't address Jess. Didn't show to acknowledge his existence any further.

Patient. Jess paused. Saw no worth in dinging his bell or shouting at the vehicle's exterior. Instead, he looked up. Up to the sky, to pollution caping expanse. The quiet and the stars. He caught a drone as it flew low overhead. It raced in his same direction. Propellers too fast to even see. A blue central model, and a stomach pregnant with parcel. Due date, same day. Order now, two hours delivery.

Weisswurst and veggie burgers on the same meat-stained grill inside the food van. German brothers. And a sister. Three of them. The oldest, apprehending himself. Scratching his lower spine under his t-shirt while pressing, rolling, peeling sausage with a spatula. The youngest, hung his head over napkins. Phone propped on bun dispenser, he used the front camera to refit his contact lens. And the middle, she dove her latex-gloved fingers into apron pocket and watched the screen mounted on the back wall behind them.

News Now. The routine opening montage.

A march. Hundreds of bodies packed close. Black hoodies, black gloves, black coats. Scarves, and beards, and beanies. Hands in pockets and signs held over heads. 'Restrict Use', 'No moral machine. No more machine', 'END IMITATION', 'SWITCH OFF'. Cut. '-IMITATION'... Broken. Broken glass. Torn card on concrete. Dark, wet boot prints on block text. Parked police cars. Lime hi-vis picking at the scene.

Six arrests sequential to OM protests.

A rail station entrance guarded by mobile barrier. Overground carriages departing platforms. Guards manning ticket gates. Commuters waiting, looking off to the distance.

Several network lines temporarily closed in support of ongoing LDU investigations.

Benches. High rising paperwork. Politicians. A speech. Without the speech. Without audio. Another speech. Without the speech. A handshake. A plane in the sky. Filming from the ground.

RETROSPECTIVE: Immigration and the past eight years.

Court. White walls, tables, benches, chairs rather than varnished wood. A long-haired gentleman guided to his seat and sat next to another man in a less stylish suit. A scene from cinema. The gentleman entirely reclothed. Visually altered and back set by explosive works on greenscreen.

Trial: Sylvia-nominated actor Alex Hyun contests further accusations of sexual abuse.

Black eyes. Beaks. Grey, beige, black, brown patterned feathers. A waddle on dirt.

RETURN TO POND: All thirty-two ducks cleared from quarantine after illegal testing and set free in off-track nature reserv-

"Roadrunner."

Jess looked from the TV to the younger brother, who held an unsettled stack of burger boxes out of the serving window. Jess unzipped his insulated bag and loaded it with the lunch order.

The sister turned over. She smiled, flirtatious maybe, at Jess.

"Ride safe," the older brother offered.

Waiting behind a packed bus, Jess couldn't get any closer to the red light at the junction without catching tire or peddle on the curb. He glanced sideways. His eyes were drawn to a street-facing display on the second floor of a narrow, brick and glass structure. Bold white text on black sticker, 'Gym Endure'. 'Register for free 3 hours of equipment use'. An exercise bike behind window, in slow use. A characterless machine, built to imitate human movement, pedalled, operating in an endless cycle.

The bus ahead accelerated. The scent of fuel farted and kicked up his nose. Jess picked his feet up off the road and let the battery power him forward as motorbikes sped past.

Jess scrolled through uncensored, handheld footage of street brawls ad-parted by speedrun recipes and 'click here's.

'Order nine-eight-three', spoke the artificial announcement.

Across from Jess, on the other side of the makeshift divide separating customers and delivery orders, a child wound around the odd-spaced crowd, moving to the counter.

"Do you have a receipt, sir?" the young woman at the till asked.

The child nodded. He held up a curling receipt, tried to hand it to the worker.

She checked the number without taking the receipt from him and slid the two coffees closer to him on the counter.

'Order D-seven-seven-four.'

Jess moved up to the counter with his bag. The worker dropped the ten meals in. He zipped the box, moved to the exit that first led through the atrium of the cinema. Behind some people with shopping bags sat uncomfortably on cushioned leather squares was one screen made up of four fifty-five-inch 4K TVs.

The screen cut to black after the cross-animation action peaked. A slow fade in. The perfect circle, a glowing eyed 'robot' and the star-voiced little boy embraced. The camera moved in on the little boy's closed eyes and smile and the robot hand on the back of his bowl-cut haired head. 'I will always be with you', the robot promised. Title card.

Pretty Robot
Opening 3rd March
Book Tickets Now

One in every thirty or forty ground floor businesses, retailers, restaurants, social service houses it didn't matter, was suffocated with coating glue and posters repeating the request 'Kill the Machine'. KTM. KTM. KTM.

Said-to-be-human illustrations and augmented photography of regime-conceived machines. Machines attired in colourless uniform, white armbands and most armed, interestingly, with frag grenades. Lots with the pins already pulled. Machines dragging stripped adults, limbs tied with aux cables. Mouths gagged with power plugs.

KTM.

A horn. Another cab's breaks slammed. Teenagers. Lanky boys in flapping hoods and tight balaclavas ran across the traffics' lanes, coming from the direction of one new chicken shop and toward another.

Jess sat at table six. A tap water in a disposable coffee cup, without a lid, was left in front of him. A splodge of icing casted a slight shadow on the surface.

More scrolling. Another trailer. A cinematic, in fact. Human space vessels falling while on fire, out of an epic sky over city. Smoke trails. 'Reclamation'. 'SHIFT IIII.III'.

One of the aproned staff put cups under nozzles, hit buttons before whipping a sheet of card from a neat stack and proceeded to follow printer dotted lines and fold the sheet into a long box. Box made, she grabbed rubber-ended tongs and selected six, all different, donuts and placed them neatly into the hand-made-up box. She closed the box and brought it over to the counter nearest Jess.

"Here you go."

Before getting up, Jess quickly switched app. He confirmed 'order collected > enroute to you'.

Jess strolled back toward his rider, away from the under-construction high-rise next to the collapsing school. Phone in hand, he checked the time and considered how much longer to wait before marking the delivery as 'missed'.

As he half turned, he caught movement through the ground floor's glass, inside the reception. A suit strolled out of the high rise. "I got cornered," he yelled. "I got cornered on the way down. My bad. After I said we couldn't let you into the building."

Jess took the order in parts out of his carrier and handed the dispatch labelled set over. The man took it all with one hand and managed to balance it using his hip and armpit. He pulled out a vape. Sucked. And turned to blow the vapour toward the school, only the wind took it immediately back into Jess's face.

Jess started to put his helmet back on.

"We're discussing a version of immortality," the suit said. "As if it's a possibility."

He didn't say a word more. And Jess rode off.

Two police cars were parked outside the pancake stack of apartments. Jess hopped off his rider and instead, pushed it up to the stairs before the entry.

A child, maybe seven or eight years old, sat upright on the short set of steps. His small wrists were behind his back and in cuffs. He looked at Jess. Looked rather unsurprised.

Jess stopped, unbothered about the weight he carried. He looked down at the child. "What's happening?"

The child looked up at Jess. He shrugged. "It's a long story."

"Okay."

The child huffed.

Jess put his bag down and sat on the step next to the child.

“Do you know how many childrens films there are this year with robots in them?” the child asked.

“No, I don’t... Three?”

“Try eight.”

“Oh.”

“And they’re always friendly,” the child observed.

“Yeah?”

“I have a robot.”

“Yeah?”

“Because I’m dyslexic. I got a hammer and scissors. I smashed Anvil with the hammer, and there were wires that I cut with scissors. Making sure I finished the job.”

“Why did you do that?”

“I just told you.”

“Because of the films? But you said the robots were good?”

“If they were good, they wouldn’t need the films.”

“Okay.” Jess thought about the point. “Why’re you in handcuffs?”

“They said Anvil was mine, but he doesn’t belong to me. He’s my parents... or the governments. My parents want to charge me with criminal damages.” The child looked at the curb. “You should go. You have to deliver that parcel.”

“Okay.” Jess gradually stood up. He moved toward the entrance.

The last thing the child said, “It’s not long now.”

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