

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

YOU SAY **MACHINE**
THEY SAY **YOU**

re.occurrence

(leo mara)

Richard, the Whitehead's lawyer, wedged a white wad under his arm and unravelled his autumnal-coloured scarf as he crossed the study's threshold. Welcomed in in a rush, he'd forgotten to take the scarf off downstairs at the same time he threw his long coat onto a hook. Neil, Neil Lee Whitehead, followed on Richard's heels, aware of the height of the door frame as he measured six-foot-and-four-inches tall. He carried a chair he'd picked up and pulled through from another room upstairs in the four-bedroom house in Wembley.

Tasha Whitehead came to Richard. She'd put out her hands, offering to take the scarf. The brighter reflections of the expressionistic light installation overhead reflected on her clear varnished nails.

"I'm good, I've got it. Thank you, Tash. Hi. Hi," he greeted, making little eye contact.

"You have a drink, Tash? Would you like- Would you like something too, Richard?"

"Sure. I will. Thank you, Neil. Whatever you're having, Tasha. W- What- What is that? Is it a Nicki Dross?"

Tasha held a whiskey. "That's exactly it. And you call tell that by what, by the colour?"

Neil took note and left the study again to fetch one for Richard.

"No chance. Maybe the scent, but no, because I know you drink Nicki Dross."

"How are you?" she asked.

"Oh. Hm... Crowded." Neil pushed the stapled papers up under his arm, folded his scarf and patted it flat. "That's the best description I can give about my being at this moment, probably. Hope it makes sense. How are you, Tasha?" He noticed that she'd changed the colour of her hair. Less blonde. Lighter brunette. "I know this... well..."

She didn't answer right away. "We'll see."

"We will." He looked at her now. "We will," he said with sincerity, and assurance in the expression behind his twelve-years-old glasses and far greying, length-restricted beard.

Neil returned. He handed the short, heavy, and cubic glass to their lawyer.

"Thank you," Richard said in his deep pitched voice, before taking half a sip. "Alright. Let's get into this-"

"Yes."

"What's the layout-? Where do I sit?" Richard moved to the metal-framed armchair brought through. "I can sit here?" He put down his papers and whiskey on the low coffee table and angled the chair to face the table and the tan sofa opposite. Sitting down, he re-tucked his uncreased shirt, rested with impressive posture and with his thighs, forelegs and feet neatly apart and parallel. The cuffs of his trousers hung off his shin above his pulled-up, olive socks. The heels of his black shoes met the wooden panelled floor. "Tell me again," he started, revealing a folded matte tablet from his wide fit blazer. He unfolded it, unlocked the touchscreen, entered a passcode, and rested the notetaking device on his thigh. "The footage you have as evidence. It's from one camera from a surveillance system you have installed through the arteries of the property. Is that right?"

Neil answered, "Yes," as he lurched down to rest on the sofa.

Tasha took a seat, too, at the other end of the sofa. She glanced toward her husband more than a foot away, dug her nails into base cushion and flapped an elbow. “It’s the camera in the corner. Over the entry.”

“Okay,” Richard understood. “Show me.” He stretched forward, took his drink with his arm straight and sat upright again. “Show me the footage.” Sip. “Before you show me in fact... can I make sure first, that you have this backed up? Do you have multiple copies of the footage, Is there a copy on external memory?”

Neil pulled down his rising sleeve, then moved his hands after, away from his sweater. “No, there isn’t.”

“How is it saved?” Another sip. “Is it saved?”

“It’s saved to a private cloud.”

“No cloud is absolutely private.”

“The recordings on the system are stored for seventy-two hours unless they have been viewed. If you view the footage, you can then choose to upload sections to a cloud.”

“Show me the footage first. Then you need to download it from the cloud and copy it to multiple USBs or Hard Drives. If you don’t have external storage you can use, then drone drop an order now and choose the fastest dispatch. You want it today, ideally.”

Tasha readied the file. She slid out an uncased, sizable tablet from under the sofa and behind her heels.

“Then you can be sure that you have physical possession of it. Otherwise, you’re throwing a shoe up into a tree to knock conkers down,” Richard picked a memory from his childhood, “and what you might learn, is your shoe’s out of your reach now, too.”

Tasha held her index over a grainy image of the property’s expansive entryway.

Richard moved his attention to the tablet. “Let’s see it,” he near whispered.

Immediately, a whimpering was audible. Close to directly below the camera’s cornered point-of-view, the front door opened. Cold, external lamplight spilled into the barely lit entry before motion sensors triggered a full exposure. The overhead deco lighting revealed all. A tall, long coated woman, Richard assumed was Tash, hurried in. Her heels clapped as she dashed. Wails replaced the whimpers. The painful noises were distorted by the quality of the camera’s microphone. The woman descended, scooting to the floor on the opposite, far edge of the footage. Following, Richard noticed then, what she had heard and quickly saw. The woman pulled at and collected half onto her lap her crumpled son who laid enervated on what would be a cold floor. She checked her son’s face as he continued screaming. She repeated his name as her voice inadvertently became laboured. He countered with more screams. She spoke to him and held him and eventually shouted in attempt to calm him down.

Richard dragged his flat feet, sliding his backside forward in the chair. He leaned and turned his head to bring his ear closer to the tablet.

He could just about hear the woman repeating ‘it’s okay’ and ‘what happened’. She checked his forearm, the evident point of intense hurt hidden underneath a blood-blotted long sleeve. She took a quick glance behind her. Then another, eyeing the front door. ‘Eiko!’ she yelled, ‘Call a blue ambulance!’

There were eight more seconds of footage. Seconds that showed little-to-no movement. The woman stayed on the floor with her son. They were both almost

completely off-camera. The virtual assistant base-named 'Eiko' contacted emergency services as directed. Its automated voice and the proceeding automated confirmation that a blue ambulance was redirected to the address played out on speaker.

Richard nodded. Tasha moved away with the tablet. He scratched at the plentiful hair covering his scalp. He sat back again, but now extended his leg, and rested his foot on the edge of his shoe's heel. He thought it curious, that the Whiteheads sat apart. That Neil didn't stretch, to reach over to his wife, hold her hand, touch her arm as they were sat, listening again to their only child in utter, unedited agony. Then again, when he recalled the rare invites and when he attended gatherings, Richard saw Neil and Tasha didn't often get close to one another. At least not around others.

However, given the circumstances-

"Why does the footage end where it does?"

Tasha rubbed the frail bag beneath her left eye. The tac laid over with makeup. "We thought this was the only part that provided anything."

Richard looked at both parents. "Why?"

Neil made a fist, bumped the backside of it on his knee which pressed up against his ashen grey, straight-leg jeans. "Because it was. There wasn't anything more on the footage after what you've just watched. Tash stayed with-"

"Where's the footage covering the time that this happened?" Richard interrupted.

"There's no footage," Tasha said.

"It wasn't on camera. Louis dragged himself to where he was when Tasha got home."

Richard pressed, "He wouldn't have dragged himself very far?"

"It wasn't far. But far enough. It was enough that it was off camera. As I was saying, where this footage ends, he was on the floor. You can't hear Tash. But she's told me she didn't say anything other than she kept telling Louis that she understands it hurts. And nothing changed until the paramedics arrived."

"Right. But before... What about when it happened. If he didn't move much from where it happened, it wouldn't have been silent on the camera. And if you know he only moved a short distance, I expect that you heard it and saw him arrive on camera as well when you first checked all the footage?"

"Yes, that's what I saw." Neil covered and rubbed his dry lips. "But it's gone, Richard. I selected what you saw so that's what it saved. The rest of the past seventy-two hours was deleted."

"Fantastic." Richard glanced at his own wedding ring.

"Well... it's not... I know that." Neil put his arm back. "You seem particularly frustrated?"

"You were working, Neil?"

"I was."

"Where?"

"Hammersmith. Eiko messaged. And I left."

"You both told me on the phone that you know what happened here." Richard sipped. Swallowed. "There's no evidence. No evidence. Now not a recording, or a witness to confirm what happened before you arrived home, Tash. Who told you what had happened to your son?"

“My son.”

“When did he tell you?”

“When we were here. When I was with him on the floor, Richard.”

“Before the ambulance arrived? While it was still only the two of you here?”

“Yes. And the paramedics asked, and I told them.”

“You told them? Not Louis? Louis didn’t tell them? Could there be a chance he told the paramedics?”

“He was cr- crying. I think the pain was too much that he couldn’t really speak.”

“I understand. Though, he told you already by this point.”

“I wasn’t giving him much of a choice. I wouldn’t stop asking what happened.”

“If he told you and you told the paramedics, there would have been two very *suggestive* exchanges on the footage?” Richard looked to Neil.

“Richard, the microphone in this camera can just about pick up a door being slammed. It couldn’t hear conversations from across the room. I looked through it with headphones. I would have kept it. If I’d heard *any* of that.”

“Okay. But just know if you can somehow recover the footage, with a mix of software, it might have been traceable.” Richard brought his extended leg closer to himself. “What did your son say happened?”

“Louis said he was playing on the bars. The bars or the railings on the mezzanine.” Tasha’s slim, freckled nose moved acutely. Her nostrils flared in time with her breathing. “He said that he was climbing on them and looked over the edge to find a book... and he was pushed. Or, no, that he was picked up.”

“He said he was looking for a book that would be somewhere, hopefully in view, on the ground floor? Your mezzanine, that is just out-of-frame of the entry camera, is roughly five- five-inch spaced horizontal bars.” Richard estimated with fingers and thumb. His arm pressed on the pages balanced on his leg. “Would he not instead look through? *Through* the bars? Rather than climb up to look over?”

“I’m telling what he said, Richard. He said he’d leaned over the edge. And that he was picked up.”

“Picked up?”

Tasha swallowed. “Lifted. Most of his body *lifted*... over... t- to pull him over the edge.”

“Those were your son’s words?”

“No.”

“So, what were your son’s words?” Richard held his attention on Tasha. Her mild expression. “He’d said ‘lifted’?”

“No.”

“Picked up’? ‘Pushed’?”

“Yes. *He said* pushed.”

“He’d said ‘pushed’. Okay. From that, your conclusion is he was *lifted*... by or around his lower half... high enough to tip him over the railing to a point where his weight and body goes forward.” Richard visualised the mezzanine. “He couldn’t have climbed up onto the top railing? He told you that he was already climbing on the bars.”

“It isn’t wide. You couldn’t stand on the railing.”

“If you weren’t practiced, no, but I think- I equally think it isn’t narrow enough to put off the impression that it would be possible to stand on. Especially for small feet. And once you’re up, then you discover your impression was misleading and over you go.” Richard stretched out an apologetic hand gesture to Tasha. “He was climbing on the bars. Might he have just put too much of his body over the top railing?”

“That’s not what he said,” Tash battled.

“Children can lie. More often, when it alleviates any fault of their own. And the lie isn’t necessarily conscious. Children create a lot of their reality.”

“Something we’ve never known Louis to do before. So, I’m choosing to believe my son,” Tash cemented herself. “He said he was pushed.”

“And who would push him, Richard?” Neil posed. “There was no one here. If you’re next suggestion is a break in, there’s no evidence for it. We’ve made this house incredibly challenging to get in if you’re not welcome. The windows are all EL adapted. They automatically completely shut and lock themselves.”

“It had to be the machine,” Richard intended to say more sarcastically. “Okay.”

“It was the machine,” Neil said, assuredly.

“Okay.” Richard tapped his glass with the end of one finger. “Where is it now?”

“We put in the garage.” Tasha pictured the entombed space. Walls of plain brick. Clear plastic storage tubs on shelves. The greenish off-gold gloss finish of her husband’s company automatic.

“Hm.” Richard measured the remainder of his whiskey before adjusting again to put it down once more on the coffee table. “Let’s say I’m not speaking as just myself anymore. We want to question every possibility. Intrusively.” He lifted his leg, angling the tablet toward his chin and brought up the onscreen keyboard. “Try every potential series of events. Rule out anything we can, narrow down to the most probable scenarios. Is there a camera on your drive?”

“There’s one on the gate,” Neil knew. “It has no audio.”

“Is it’s footage been put to non-existence with the rest?”

Neil huffed. “It hasn’t. The gate’s camera is separate from the house’s system.”

“Can you prove that you both arrived home when you say you did on the evening of the twentieth?”

“If we have the footage,” Neil expected.

Richard stopped typing. “If? Is there a reason you wouldn’t have the footage?”

“There shouldn’t be.”

“Good.” He tapped the tablet, marking a full stop. “Tash, when you arrive home, do you hear your son soon as you come into the house?”

Tasha stared at the floor. “Before. I heard him when I got to the door.”

“And you run in, run to Louis, that much can be seen in the footage. When do you realise, he’s fallen from the mezzanine above you? When he tells you?”

“No, I- I realised almost right away.”

“You didn’t look up.”

“What?” Tasha uttered, creasing her forehead.

“You’d assumed that he had fallen from the mezzanine, but you didn’t look up at the mezzanine to measure or play out your own supposition. Not for a moment. At least that’s how it appears on the footage.”

“She didn’t take her eyes off Louis,” Neil struck.

“She did. In fact, she looked at the entry more than once. I’m not making accusations. I’m telling you what you can see from the evidence you’ve provided. And I’m asking the same questions a defence could. I would ask why you’d so abruptly assume Louis fell and not that it might’ve been something else. But it isn’t just because of where you find him, Tash, and that he’s on the floor, is it? Your assumption is he must’ve fallen because of the concerning amount of blood drenching his sleeve and that you can’t see another obvious cause. Like you would if there was a knife say.”

“No.”

“What was your assessment of the injury?”

“I don’t- I don’t know,” Tasha started, distracted by the fallout of worry. Feeling nauseous upon reflection of the finer details. “He had bloodied cuts on his face. He wasn’t moving his arm. I didn’t understand the blood. I felt his- arm was broken. Completely broken. He screamed when I tried to look at it. The bone had- come through his skin, I thought, which’d caused the blood.”

“Then you ask your digital assistant to request dispatch of a blue ambulance,” as he spoke, Richard typed parts of Tasha’s last answer. “Before it arrived, your son tells you he climbed the bars of your mezzanine on the first floor. And he was pushed over the highest railing. Responders arrive. They assess the severity of his injuries. The cuts to his face. The bone protruding his forearm. They take him to Fryent Park Emergency Medical. With you. You ride along. You, of course, go with your son.” His fingers stopped. He didn’t look up. “When do you suspect, and when do you then determine the machine is responsible?”

Neil parted his lips.

Tasha spoke, “I came back-”

“Sorry...” Richard cut off. “I’ve over- I should ask first, no,” a puff, through his nose, “I want to first understand again... I know Louis has a long-term physical-affecting condition. Cerebellar Ataxia. And he was diagnosed during the first six months of his life. What is your experience of the symptoms of his condition?”

“It’s a movement disorder,” Tasha clarified. “It effects his coordination. It has always made it challenging for Louis to use his arms and his fingers. To point. To write, to draw.”

“To hold onto anything.” Neil looked to his wife.

“When he was very little it effected his legs more, too. More than his arms,” Tasha scratched one side of her nose. “He couldn’t walk far without needing to stop. We got motion training. Physical therapy, partial brain surgery, and he can now walk without assistance.”

“It effects his balance as well as coordination?”

Neil’s torso stiffened. He stared with sudden fight, at Richard. Bafflement.

Tasha gritted her jaw. “Please don’t.”

“I suggest I do. I understand it’s difficult to address, and they’ll take as much advantage of that if you’re impulsive. They’ll ask leading questions about his diagnosis.

They might fixate on his coordination, his balance, and intend to imply to a court, judge, media, audience, home viewers, that a child with a physical disorder could very easily mistake his movements. Neil, I wouldn't advise that you say Louis is challenged by holding 'onto anything'. But... there's something half in your favour here. His walking has drastically improved, you say, but could he, *without* assistance, with the effects of his disorder, would he have the endurance in his arms to *climb* to a position *where* most of his weight was over the top rail?"

The room was quiet.

Richard glanced. "Tasha?"

"No," she decided. "No, not really, no. Not that I, or w- we've ever seen."

"Then if they were to argue that he'd fallen by accident, unsupported, no machine present he would have needed quite the boost from something inanimate." Movable objects in the house. Chairs, side tables. They furnished Richard's imagination. "We'll check measurements, but I would first conject he would need to have push or dragged or carried something around two or three feet tall that'd hold his weight long enough to level his torso with the top rail, if not put it higher. I assume there wasn't any object there when you first looked after the fall?"

"No."

"Though that couldn't now be determined. If they are arguing that is a possibility, there's an expectation for understanding your son's intentions. Climbing the rail like a ladder, given what you prove about his endurance, climbing the rail it'd have to be fast. It'd be quick. And so more likely impulsive. Finding an object for use, moving that object into position and then climbing onto it and leaning over the rail. The time and effort it'd take your son would suggest there was a reason for it. Much more time and effort I'd expect, especially if his ataxia takes greater toll on his arms than his legs, than going downstairs to look for the book that way." Richard one sided his mouth. He itched a cheek. "I mention the book... which I want to know more about, first though, we should all be watchful of what we say about the given motivation to search for the book by looking over the rail. And if we are to say it, how many times it's said. Say it over and it attracts *more* speculation. You do not want to encourage more thought for any ideas about why he would want to put himself over the rail. Or show them, we, too, would agree with any intention for why he would do that. And you two... his parents, do know him better than anyone."

"You said this is only 'half' in our favour." Neil held onto the comment. "Why?"

"Well. If it's not a strong possibility that your son fell by accident, and you say no one else could've entered the home, there's really only two viable, compelling arguments." The screen on Richard's tablet turned dark. "You say machine," he nodded to the parents, "and they say you."

"Twenty-Thirty-One... in Essex, sentient robotics engineer and programmer Kustaa Hanninen enters a machine into demonstrations. He is advised by panellists to market his design to Europe-based investors before then associations and private educational institutions. Hanninen built 'Kaski', Kaski the Finnish word for 'Two'. Kaski is an artificially intelligent machine designed and purposed to directly support children with reduced

motor-functions, physical impairments, or processing disadvantages. It supports by being there. It learns from observation. By directly analysing the child or children it's assigned to. Reading spoken language, body language, physical actions and accompanying facial and verbal expressions. What the child says. What the child asks for or turns from. It could read a child's difficulty with homework. Recognise repeated issues and familiarise itself with them, then practice how to provide aid for the child's growth opposed to providing the immediate answer that'd stunt any progress and allow the child to make no attempts. Kaski was the first 'ToTo' machine. *Toimin Toapua. Function Help. That's Finnish again.*" Neil turned the loose page over. "Twenty-Thirty-Two, Hanninen started Yhdessä. In Geneva. And production and distribution of its machines has remained in Switzerland. Delivery is overseas as you'll likely recall." He cleared his throat. "Yhdessä do not dispatch machines from elsewhere. Which could be a big problem soon given the political climate, but that's a whole other concern not for us right this minute. Their offices are sixty-thirty-ten, Geneva-London-Cologne. By the closing of the last financial year, they had sold thousands of ToTos. They have an unscathed reputation, and of course, they sit favourably with consumers because of what they've been able to offer so many alternate-circumstanced children. To date, they've no record of bad press published under mainstream media. Not at least, that I could unearth."

Neil looked at white rashes beneath the hair on the back of Richard's hand. "You're suggesting they're untouchable?"

"No. No one really is any longer. In fact, often, an organisation does *more* good to better distract from the poison they're offloading in the river." He could think of a few. "The challenge, of course, is finding that waste. They need it to be far removed. Therefore, it's probably dumped overseas."

"The waste isn't literal."

"No. I'm using waste as a metaphor. Anyway. I suppose you're not looking."

"We're not." Neil lifted himself to sit up a little further on the one end of the sofa. "This isn't about being any bigger than what happened to Louis. I hope it'll cost Yhdessä a lung. It should. But we understand it won't ruin them. Would we want to? Until this happened, they'd done a lot of good for our child. And other children, who're like our son. We were grateful to them. We *still* would be, but it went wrong. In almost the worst possible way. So clearly, their machines, ToTos, *have* a capacity to fail. Ours did. Ours failed. My son's failed and it has caused irreversible damage. It attempted to take his life."

"Whatever we take from them financially..." Tasha added, "I want it to be consequential enough that they have to stop. That they'll need to pause. And will have to change whatever in their machines caused this."

"Good. That's good. I'm going to strongly advise, given the opportunity, you continue to drive with that mission and do so publicly. It's a moral mission. It's good." Richard eyes moved down to text on his tablet. "But taking a step back again. Tash, going back. Because I- ah, I'm not sure, I don't know... I don't know if I were where you were, what evidence would make me think so assuredly that it was the machine. Did you suspect its involvement before you left for Fryent Medical?"

Tasha shook her head, keeping her arms to her lap, "No."

"When?"

“I came back to the house a little later.”

“What time?”

“Nine. Around nine. Neil got to the hospital, stayed with Louis. I came home to get some of his things. His pyjamas, lunelight, tablet. They were upstairs in his bedroom. So was Daniel. Th-”

“Da-?”

“The machine.” Tasha prodded one set of fingers at her face, rubbed her forehead. “The ToTo. Louis called it Dan. Daniel. It lived in his bedroom. That’s where its dock was kept. It was inactive when I came back. And I thought to check its L7DD and saw-”

“Sorry. Tasha, what’s ‘L7DD’?”

“Last seven days of data. You can look at the ToTo’s recent activity on its interface. I saw it’d last been active an hour before I came back.”

“Is that information stored?”

“Not on its interface,” Neil informed. “It’s not within a week anymore.”

“You’re going to say again, that you let evidence expire?” It washed over Richard. A very physical transference of exhaustion. This was tiring.

Neil pictured his son’s bedroom. He pictured it on a warm day. The shelves, and the figures on those shelves standing in the sun. “It could be saved somewhere on the ToTo still. But we don’t have access to where that is.”

“I’m hopeful that it is. The chance you’ve invested in two superior-quality systems that don’t backsave interactivity data is low.” Richard peeled pages by the corner. “As I understand, you have no access to anything captured with its lens.”

“I’m... not sure. We haven’t tried. Maybe if its docked and you-”

“No, you can’t. They would have explained the technology to you when your ToTo was first installed. Yhdessä’s machines aren’t fitted with regular lens. Behind the exterior, they use obscured glass to make the image not understandable for any person or other machine to view. There’s firewalled software programmed to translate the image, and its only translated for the ToTo in real time. Not for any reservation of footage. They tell you. As well, it is in the machine’s terms of use. They will say that you knew that.”

“What does it matter?” Tasha asked.

“It’s information for you to be aware of. Because if they choose to counter-claim either of you pushed Louis, they could say you knew the ToTo could not have caught you on camera. In fact, they’d suggest it works double in favour of your intentions to point to the machine, because it couldn’t prove its own un-involvement either.”

“That has to be bullshit, Richard.” Neil’s mouth straightened. He scratched his neck. “That Yhdessä cannot transfer the footage from their machines. I don’t believe that for a second. Given the profits they’d make from selling a fraction of that data to vendors.”

“It seems too honest,” Tasha uttered.

“Agreed. Only, don’t disregard that they’re for keeping with children. Do you think that sort of risk is worth the extra profits?” Richard breathed in. “There was a trial in Twenty-Eight into Twenty-Nine. An enormous lawsuit where thousands of indecent screenshots of eighteen-year-olds were lifted from seemingly protected private servers and sold under the name ‘just turned’ to the highest x-site bidders.”

Tasha suddenly crossed her legs over. She tipped her chin and pressed her lips into a clenched index finger.

“...Conclusion was several publicised arrests. And right after... the DPOs, Data-Protection Officers, filed again for change to legislation. It was put in for but is yet to be debated. Of course, meaning there’s been no change, no enforcement or protection, and it could happen again any day, but... a number of organisations, mostly those who provide direct services for children, Yhdessä very much included, responded. They made changes to their cameras, or terms, or both. And they deliberately advertised to consumers their apparent disgust with the trial of Just Turned.” No comment from either Tasha or Neil, Richard focused momentarily on one corner of his tablet as he brought up his notes. “Tasha. You said you thought to check the ToTo’s ‘L- L- 7-D-D’. The machine was active an hour before and that seemed suspicious. Checking it suggests to me you were already suspicious?”

“I’m not sure.” Tasha recalled. “You cross the mezzanine to get to Louis’s room. And I don’t think he could get himself into a position where he’d risk hurting himself this easily. I understand children are fearless, I know that, but Louis’s had ataxia his whole life. We couldn’t let him be reckless. He learnt caution earlier than other children.” Tasha faced Richard, “Why wouldn’t I already suspect the machine? It’s programmed to make physical contact with him. And almost every day it does. I know I didn’t harm my son. Or Neil. No one else could enter our home. The machine was *here*. It was *on*.”

“What physical contact does it make with him?” Richard imagined the firm press of a limbed machine. “What contact does the machine make with Louis?”

“It directed his arms. It’s helped him stand up in the past.”

“It must have weight restrictions.” Richard referred again to the printed notes on his lap, scanning subheadings. “Limbed machines for commercial use *without* it aren’t passed. Unlike the cameras, that is prerequisite. They’re not legal. That said, I expect its restriction is above the weight of your son-”

“Is that not a horrific oversight?” Neil appealed. “Look at what happened.”

“If the machine can cause harm, yes, it is an oversight. Look. Not to sound like a sci-fi episodic thing from the late 90s, but these machines are not programmed or hacked to be able to harm persons. They’re support droids.” Richard used one hand to gesture. “Being able to lift the full weight of your son, could prove life-preserving where he is in immediate danger.”

“Then why did this happen?” Tasha asked. A surprise, and solitary tear drew a line down her cheek.

Richard shrugged his brows. He slouched. “Programming can fail.”

After a short pause, Neil asked the question, “Can we prove that?”

“I’m not educated enough on Yhdessä technology to provide any useful answer. There is an anomaly. Or an inconsistency. And it can again both support your allegations and create certain defences for Yhdessä. ToTo’s are set to assess immediate physical concerns and to alert emergency services. You’ll be arguing, as well, for why that didn’t happen if it were at the very least witness to Louis’s injuries. Consider which one’s more plausible. Conjecture one. This is the first of its specific kind to have gone off script, developed an advanced understanding of legal procedure and realised contacting

emergency services could have been self-incriminating. Conjecture two. The child's parents switched it off. To give themselves enough time to orchestrate insurance fraud."

Neither Whitehead shared their considerations.

"Back to your side. *All* these settings and restrictions aren't *physical* limitations. They aren't error-proof. They are only code, and again, code can break. I appreciate I am talking in circles." Richard wiped a cheek. "Speaking of code... I remember... when Yhdessä started... a small number of another series of their machines were recalled."

Neil asked, "Do we get the machine analysed?"

Richard reflected. He hid certain concerns. "I'd have maybe advised that you did. Unfortunately, you can't really. You'd need to return the ToTo to Switzerland and hope if their engineers found anything suggesting the machine errored, that they wouldn't remove it."

"I have contacts," Neil said. "We could source a private engineer."

"You trust the machine to an independent engineer, and Yhdessä accuse you of the same tampering."

"Can we do anything, Richard?" Neil stressed. "Do we have any fucking options? Is there anything that'll work in just our favour?"

"No," Richard replied, with confronting honesty. "No, there isn't. Because you don't have any conclusive evidence. And I'm sorry, Neil, because I'm going to address the circumstance least in your favour now."

"What?" Tasha asked.

"Why was he here alone?"

Neil's fidgeting stopped. "What?"

"Should he be left by himself?"

"He wasn't by himself."

"You're saying the machine meant that he wasn't by himself. Careful. Let's not also debate sentience."

"He was asleep when I needed to leave," Neil shared. "That was an hour before Tash got home."

"Did you get home on time, Tasha?" Richard interrogated.

"Yes. If anything, ten minutes early."

"Then you must've left after Tash claimed the ToTo was supposedly last active?"

"I'm wrong. I was longer than an hour," Tasha edited.

"What were you doing?"

"I expected- I thought Neil would be home all night. My class was forty-five minutes, drive's ten each way, but I showered... and I got changed there and got a drink."

"You had a drink?" Richard shifted. He took the papers off his leg, placed them on the coffee table. "What? Alcoholic?"

"One drink."

Richard focused on Tasha. "What for?"

"What do you mean 'what for?'" responded Tasha, unceremoniously.

"Why drink? It was a Wednesday, you leave your child alone, you're driving. What motivates you to hang around after class, and by yourself in a bar I suspect?"

"Is that not normal? There're endless reasons why someone wou-"

“No, I- I, maybe, but I’m asking you. I’m asking what the motivation was for you, Tasha. Why did you not go straight home?”

Tasha took in a deep breath. She sustained a straight expression. There was a reluctance. A hesitation to answer. “It was a shit day. Stress. We,” she turned her head a little toward Neil, stopped, and sort of gestured, turning her foot as well, “...had an argument at the start of the week.”

“That argument was about...?”

“It was petty, Richard. Moved passed it. It’s not worth anymore time.”

“You didn’t want to mention the drink and the argument. You sound ready to lie, how petty was it?”

“Because it has no relevance.”

“It’s relevant, Tash, if it meant you were then not present when your son was hurt.” Richard parted his lips again before considering another question, “And if you were arguing because of any financial concerns, you need to tell me. I expect I don’t need to explain to you both why that’s consequential.”

Neil watched his wife before Tasha turned her head further and replied to him in their conversation communicated through few minor expressions.

She turned back to Richard, “We get it.” She paused. “I think we need to talk first. Talk again, first, before we make sense of Monday’s conversation.”

“Sure. Let’s move on then.” Richard chose to accept the secrecy. “Tell the truth. Would you usually employ a babysitter?”

“Yes,” Tasha answered. “Always. We didn’t think Louis would be on his own when I left. Neil had to leave-”

“Was this a one-off?”

“We don’t leave him when we *know* neither of us will be here.”

“Have you left him here by himself before? Even just once before?”

Tasha took another drawn inhale. “A few times.”

Richard leant back in his seat. “Alright.”

“It’s never been for longer than an hour and we’ve left him asleep... or fixed to a screen. It hasn’t happened more than a few times-”

“Say it.” Neil advocated. “Don’t stop. You’ve been upfront up to now. Tell us why that makes this even worse.”

“Okay. It isn’t good. It’s not ideal that you’ve left your child at home alone on more than one occasion. You’ve done it more than once, then it’s become a conscious decision and no longer an accident. Laws have changed. They’re more *venial* the last decade. What you’ve done is *less* illegal than it once was. Still, I’d expect collateral if you’re set on taking Yhdessä on. You are both likely looking at minor charges for child neglect. Be prepared to be served sixty-hour courses on parenting. And fines. Fines higher than the standard because of Louis’s circumstances.” Richard glanced over at shelves in the study. “What was the book?”

“What book? Louis’s book?”

“Louis’s book. The one you said he said he was looking for.”

Tasha clarified, “Station At-Rhia.”

“Okay. That’s the title. What I meant was, what was it that he was doing? He was looking for it from the mezzanine. Could he really see more from up there, than if he was on the ground floor?”

“Not really.”

“But he’s a kid,” Neil argued. “You made that point. He isn’t thinking what makes logical sense.”

Richard tapped, added to his notes.

Neil waited for a retort that did not arrive.

Leaving the conversation unfinished, Richard ended a sentence and looked at the Whiteheads then to the wall behind them. “This is where we start,” he said, as though it were a conclusion. “Where this is enough to start with. I’m prepared to represent you both. It might seem otherwise given what we’ve off-the-bat listed working against you, but even though maybe I’ll regret it and go down, too, with his boat, I want to chase this. I’m interested. It’s interesting and it’s new. There’s a chance, a good chance, that you take money. And that you conjure a statement of new commitment from the machine-makers, machine-breakers. But look... before I commit myself to this... I need you *both* to understand, while I will give it everything to win your argument... I *do not* believe that the ToTo was involved with what happened to Louis.”

Silence. In response. For a moment.

“You think he fell?”

“Neil... I think he either fell or something accidental but something worse happened and one or both of you are not yet going to tell me the truth. I’m sorry I have to say that. I need to be honest. I can’t take this on for you unless I am. I wouldn’t offer my services if you didn’t know that.”

“You think we pushed him, Richard?”

“I said what I think, Neil.”

Neil shot up, ejecting off the sofa.

“Jesus,” Tasha uttered.

“I understand if you want me to leave,” Richard admitted. “Instead. If you want to go ahead with this, with my representation, I’m going to ask something now from the both of you. Can you leave the room, come back in separately, and agree, by yourselves, that you want to go forward with me as your attorney. Can you do that, knowing what I said?”

Tasha, Neil, where they were sat and stood, did not move.

“Take a minute.”

Neil took seconds. He pivoted, turned to his wife, “What do you think?”

She turned half her body back. She said nothing.

Neil nodded. He dropped his arms to his sides and looked to the door. He then faced Richard, not certain whether to say something more, before he decidedly marched clear of the room.

Tasha’s attention moved from Neil to speckled detail across the floor. She saw Richard. She saw that he’d say nothing more and offer little else expression until they decided.

Tasha got up. She left the study as well. She caught the handle behind her and closed the door, leaving Richard alone.

Richard locked his tablet, folded it, snuck it back into his blazer and moved the papers off his lap and onto the coffee table. He stayed forward in the armchair, fixated on his emptied whiskey glass and noticed the movement of oxygen in his chest.

The door opened. Neil returned first to the room.

He closed the door behind him.

Richard and Neil focused on each other's proximity. Their eyes held on surrounding empty space, followed creases in each other's attires, and met occasionally.

"Neil. Do you want my representation in requisitioning legal charges against Yhdessä?"

"Do you really not believe us?"

"I've reluctance in believing the machine took part in what happened."

"You think we hurt our child? Seriously, Richard? You think we're trying to turn a profit from it-?"

"The truth- truth lies somewhere between accident and intention and a far less unsettling fuckup on one or both your parts." Richard hugged his own knuckles. "You and Tasha. I can't tell for sure which of you know what happened. If the truth is either of you do. But I don't have to find out. And as I say, Neil, as I say if you are fine with that... I offer my council. Do you want it?"

Tasha, though emotionally worn, lasted on her feet outside the study. She ignored the mezzanine behind her. The light through and the casted shadows drawing uniformed bars on the second floor.

The study suddenly opened, and Neil exited the room.

He looked at Tasha and held the door just about open for her.

Richard tracked Tasha as she entered, hands crossed over her stomach.

"Tasha."

She stopped, turned, and shut the door. "Richard."

"Do you understand what I've said? That I don't believe the machine that was supplied for your son, had any involvement with the reason for his hospitalisation."

"I got it, Richard," she quietly confirmed "Thank you."

"Okay." Richard shimmied. Cotton pricked his hip. An itch spread over his back. "Do you see...?" The words felt trapped in his throat. "Do you see an opportunity- to be honest. If you know what happened. If you'd been told."

Tasha only looked at Richard. There were no words prepared.

"Do you want to go forward with this?"

Seconds felt like minutes for them both.

"Yes."

Richard made something a little sadder than a smile with his expression. Something with unhidden sorrow, and dissolving sympathy. "Alright."

You Say Machine, They Say You
re.occurrence
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