

New Dreams for Old

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MIKE RESNICK

Introduction by NANCY KRESS



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To Carol, as always,

And to Janis Ian—
Singer, musician, songwriter,
poet, science fiction writer,
and spiritual kid sister

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Contents

Introduction by Nancy Kress	9
Robots Don't Cry	11
The Elephants on Neptune	31
Travels with My Cats	46
A Princess of Earth	70
Down Memory Lane	86
The Chinese Sandman	99
Guardian Angel	129
Old MacDonald Had a Farm	190
The Amorous Broom	209
Hothouse Flowers	222
His Award-Winning Science Fiction Story	240
For I Have Touched the Sky	254

Unsafe at Any Speed	285
The Pale Thin God	290
Mwalimu in the Squared Circle	294
Here's Looking at You, Kid	310
The Burning Spear at Twilight	317
The Kemosabee	335
The 43 Antarean Dynasties	340
Keepsakes	359
About the Author	419

Introduction

BY NANCY KRESS

Once there was an orbital built to revive a dead African culture.

Once there was a robot faithful to its mistress beyond all human devotion.

Once there were elephants carrying a very old, very deep grudge.

If you see in these thumbnail synopses a wedding of the mundane and the marvelous, you are right. Many third world people might like to revive a pre-Colonial culture—but on an *orbital*? Elephants are commonly attributed with long memory, but not usually in the form of grudges. And robots, that staple of SF, are more often portrayed as menaces (see any Hollywood movie) than as the biblical ideal of “good and faithful servant.”

Still, the juxtaposition of these ideas is not that startling within the context of science fiction’s long and diverse history. What is startling is the treatment that Mike Resnick brings to them: complex, vital, compassionate, and sad. The sadness needs some explanation, for two reasons.

First, “sad” can mean “depressing”—but not in Mike’s stories. These stories are *funny*. Some of them are laugh-out-loud funny, with lines like “This is the fifth time Mr. Spinoza has died this year. All this dying has to be hard on his system.” The stories are never sad in a gloomy, hopeless, get-out-the-Prozac kind of way. Instead, they are sad

the way the best fiction is always sad: It encompasses all of humanity's yearnings. That inevitably includes some things we cannot obtain, some things we should not obtain, and some things we obtain only to lose again, too soon. Mike Resnick understands this. And so even as his stories make us laugh, they also are infused with a complex sadness for beings that desire so much and struggle for it so hard.

The second reason the sadness is startling is that Mike himself is not a sad person. Exuberant, large, he is given to quips and wit and amiable teasing. The first time I read "For I Have Touched the Sky," I had trouble matching it to the Mike Resnick with whom I'd shared panels, lunches, and an ongoing feud about mud-rasslin' (don't ask). This is a complicated man. To echo Whitman, he contains multitudes.

And so do his stories. The book you hold in your hand teems with memorable characters doing their absolute, flat-out best to move Heaven and Earth. If this is the first time you meet Kamari, Bernard Goldmeiere, or Hermes the Antarean, I envy you. They are completely achingly, humanly true, even the ones that aren't human. To quote the elephants on Neptune, "Our nature is that we always tell the truth. Our tragedy is that we always remember it." The same could be said for their creator. There is truth in these stories, and tragedy, and remembrance of how hard it can be to want something, anything, with passion and struggle.

Once—there was a wonderful writer.

Robots Don't Cry

One day I was in Barnes & Noble or Borders (I spend a lot of time in both), thumbing through a new coffee-table book on Kilimanjaro, when I came to a photograph of Dr . Richard Leakey holding up a mildly human skull, and in my haste I thought at first that the caption said he was displaying a newly discovered specimen of *Australopithecus robotus*.

I did a double take and went back and read it more carefully, and of course what he had in his hand was the skull of an *Australopithecus robotus*. Made a lot more sense.

But all the way home I kept wondering what an *Australopithecus robotus* might be like, and before I went to bed that night I had written "Robots Don't Cry." It was a Hugo nominee in 2004, was made into an amateur film (titled *Metal Tears*) as a film school graduation project by a young director named Jake Bradbury (damned good name for a science fiction director, don't you agree?), and is currently under option to Grand Illusions.

They call us graverobbers, but we're not.

What we do is plunder the past and offer it to the present. We hit old worlds, deserted worlds, worlds that nobody wants any longer, and we pick up anything we think we can sell to the vast collectibles market. You want a seven-hundred-year-old timepiece? A thousand-year-old bed? An actual printed book? Just put in your order, and sooner or later we'll fill it.

Every now and then we strike it rich. Usually we make a profit. Once in a while we just break even. There's only been one world where we actually lost money; I still remember it—Greenwillow. Except that it wasn't green, and there wasn't a willow on the whole damned planet.

There was a robot, though. We found him, me and the Baroni, in a barn, half-hidden under a pile of ancient computer parts and self-feeders for mutated cattle. We were picking through the stuff, wondering if there was any market for it, tossing most of it aside, when the sun peeked in through the doorway and glinted off a prismatic eye.

"Hey, take a look at what we've got here," I said. "Give me a hand digging it out."

The junk had been stored a few feet above where he'd been standing and the rack broke, practically burying him. One of his legs was bent at an impossible angle, and his expressionless face was covered with cobwebs. The Baroni lumbered over—when you've got three legs you don't glide gracefully—and studied the robot.

"Interesting," he said. He never used whole sentences when he could annoy me with a single word that could mean almost anything.

"He should pay our expenses, once we fix him up and get him running," I said.

"A human configuration," noted the Baroni.

"Yeah, we still made 'em in our own image until a couple of hundred years ago."

"Impractical."

"Spare me your practicalities," I said. "Let's dig him out."

"Why bother?"

Trust a Baroni to miss the obvious. "Because he's got a memory cube," I answered. "Who the hell knows what he's seen? Maybe we'll find out what happened here."

"Greenwillow has been abandoned since long before you were born and I was hatched," replied the Baroni, finally stringing some words together. "Who cares what happened?"

"I know it makes your head hurt, but try to use your brain," I said, grunting as I pulled at the robot's arm. It came off in my hands. "Maybe whoever he worked for hid some valuables." I dropped the arm onto the floor. "Maybe he knows where. We don't just have to sell junk, you know; there's a market for the good stuff, too."

The Baroni shrugged and began helping me uncover the robot. "I hear a lot of ifs and maybes," he muttered.

"Fine," I said. "Just sit on what passes for your ass, and I'll do it myself."

"And let you keep what we find without sharing it?" he demanded, suddenly throwing himself into the task of moving the awkward feeders. After a moment he stopped and studied one. "Big cows," he noted.

"Maybe ten or twelve feet at the shoulder, judging from the size of the stalls and the height of the feeders," I agreed. "But there weren't enough to fill the barn. Some of those stalls were never used."

Finally we got the robot uncovered, and I checked the code on the back of his neck.

"How about that?" I said. "The son of a bitch must be five hundred years old. That makes him an antique by anyone's definition. I wonder what we can get for him?"

The Baroni peered at the code. "What does AB stand for?"

"Aldebaran. Alabama. Abrams' Planet. Or maybe just the model

number. Who the hell knows? We'll get him running and maybe he can tell us." I tried to set him on his feet. No luck. "Give me a hand."

"To the ship?" asked the Baroni, using sentence fragments again as he helped me stand the robot upright.

"No," I said. "We don't need a sterile environment to work on a robot. Let's just get him out in the sunlight, away from all this junk, and then we'll have a couple of mechs check him over."

We half-carried and half-dragged him to the crumbling concrete pad beyond the barn, then laid him down while I tightened the muscles in my neck, activating the embedded micro-chip, and directed the signal by pointing to the ship, which was about half a mile away.

"This is me," I said as the chip carried my voice back to the ship's computer. "Wake up Mechs 3 and 7, feed them everything you've got on robots going back a millennium, give them repair kits and anything else they'll need to fix a broken robot of indeterminate age, and then home in on my signal and send them to me."

"Why those two?" asked the Baroni.

Sometimes I wondered why I partnered with anyone that dumb. Then I remembered the way he could sniff out anything with a computer chip or cube, no matter how well it was hidden, so I decided to give him a civil answer. He didn't get that many from me; I hoped he appreciated it.

"Three's got those extendable eyestalks, and it can do microsurgery, so I figure it can deal with any faulty microcircuits. As for Seven, it's strong as an ox. It can position the robot, hold him aloft, move him any way that Three directs it to. They're both going to show up filled to the brim with everything the ship's data bank has on robots, so if he's salvageable, they'll find a way to salvage him."

I waited to see if he had any more stupid questions. Sure enough, he had.

"Why would anyone come here?" he asked, looking across the bleak landscape.

"I came for what passes for treasure these days," I answered him. "I have no idea why you came."

"I meant originally," he said, and his face started to glow that shade of pea-soup green that meant I was getting to him. "Nothing can grow, and the ultraviolet rays would eventually kill most animals. So why?"

"Because not all humans are as smart as me."

"It's an impoverished world," continued the Baroni. "What valuables could there be?"

"The usual," I replied. "Family heirlooms. Holographs. Old kitchen implements. Maybe even a few old Republic coins."

"Republic currency can't be spent."

"True—but a few years ago I saw a five-credit coin sell for three hundred Maria Teresa dollars. They tell me it's worth twice that today."

"I didn't know that," admitted the Baroni.

"I'll bet they could fill a book with all the things you don't know."

"Why are Men so sardonic and ill-mannered?"

"Probably because we have to spend so much time with races like the Baroni," I answered.

Mechs Three and Seven rolled up before he could reply.

"Reporting for duty, sir," said Mech Three in his high-pitched mechanical voice.

"This is a very old robot," I said, indicating what we'd found. "It's been out of commission for a few centuries, maybe even longer. See if you can get it working again."

"We live to serve," thundered Mech Seven.

"I can't tell you how comforting I find that." I turned to the Baroni. "Let's grab some lunch."

"Why do you always speak to them that way?" asked the Baroni as we walked away from the mechs. "They don't understand sarcasm."

"It's my nature," I said. "Besides, if they don't know it's sarcasm, it must sound like a compliment. Probably pleases the hell out of them."

“They are machines,” he responded. “You can no more please them than offend them.”

“Then what difference does it make?”

“The more time I spend with Men, the less I understand them,” said the Baroni, making the burbling sound that passed for a deep sigh. “I look forward to getting the robot working. Being a logical and unemotional entity, it will make more sense.”

“Spare me your smug superiority,” I shot back. “You’re not here because Papa Baroni looked at Mama Baroni with logic in his heart.”

The Baroni burbled again. “You are hopeless,” he said at last.

We had one of the mechs bring us our lunch, then sat with our backs propped against opposite sides of a gnarled old tree while we ate. I didn’t want to watch his snakelike lunch writhe and wriggle, protesting every inch of the way, as he sucked it down like the long, living piece of spaghetti it was, and he had his usual moral qualms, which I never understood, about watching me bite into a sandwich. We had just about finished when Mech Three approached us.

“All problems have been fixed,” it announced brightly.

“That was fast,” I said.

“There was nothing broken.” It then launched into a three-minute explanation of whatever it had done to the robot’s circuitry.

“That’s enough,” I said when it got down to a dissertation on the effect of mu-mesons on negative magnetic fields in regard to prismatic eyes. “I’m wildly impressed. Now let’s go take a look at this beauty.”

I got to my feet, as did the Baroni, and we walked back to the concrete pad. The robot’s limbs were straight now, and his arm was restored, but he still lay motionless on the crumbling surface.

“I thought you said you fixed him.”

“I did,” replied Mech Three. “But my programming compelled me not to activate it until you were present.”

“Fine,” I said. “Wake him up.”

The little mech made one final quick adjustment and backed away as the robot hummed gently to life and sat up.

"Welcome back," I said.

"Back?" replied the robot. "I have not been away."

"You've been asleep for five centuries, maybe six."

"Robots cannot sleep." He looked around. "Yet everything has changed. How is this possible?"

"You were deactivated," said the Baroni. "Probably your power supply ran down."

"Deactivated," the robot repeated. He swiveled his head from left to right, surveying the scene. "Yes. Things cannot change this much from one instant to the next."

"Have you got a name?" I asked him.

"Samson 4133. But Miss Emily calls me Sammy."

"Which name do you prefer?"

"I am a robot. I have no preferences."

I shrugged. "Whatever you say, Samson."

"Sammy," he corrected me.

"I thought you had no preferences."

"I don't," said the robot. "But *she* does."

"Has she got a name?"

"Miss Emily."

"Just Miss Emily?" I asked. "No other names to go along with it?"

"Miss Emily is what I was instructed to call her."

"I assume she is a child," said the Baroni, with his usual flair for discovering the obvious.

"She was once," said Sammy. "I will show her to you."

Then somehow, I never did understand the technology involved, he projected a full-sized holograph of a small girl, perhaps five years old, wearing a frilly purple-and-white outfit. She had rosy cheeks and bright shining blue eyes, and a smile that men would die for someday if given half the chance.

It was only after she took a step forward, a very awkward step, that I realized she had a prosthetic left leg.

“Too bad,” I said. “A pretty little girl like that.”

“Was she born that way, I wonder?” said the Baroni.

“I love you, Sammy,” said the holograph.

I hadn’t expected sound, and it startled me. She had such a happy voice. Maybe she didn’t know that most little girls came equipped with two legs. After all, this was an underpopulated colony world; for all I knew, she’d never seen anyone but her parents.

“It is time for your nap, Miss Emily,” said Sammy’s voice. “I will carry you to your room.” Another surprise. The voice didn’t seem to come from the robot, but from somewhere . . . well, offstage. He was recreating the scene exactly as it had happened, but we saw it through his eyes. Since he couldn’t see himself, neither could we.

“I’ll walk,” said the child. “Mother told me I have to practice walking, so that someday I can play with the other girls.”

“Yes, Miss Emily.”

“But you can catch me if I start to fall, like you always do.”

“Yes, Miss Emily.”

“What would I do without you, Sammy?”

“You would fall, Miss Emily,” he answered. Robots are always so damned literal.

And as suddenly as it had appeared, the scene vanished.

“So that was Miss Emily?” I asked.

“Yes,” said Sammy.

“And you were owned by her parents?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have any understanding of the passage of time, Sammy?”

“I can calibrate time to within three nanoseconds of . . .”

“That’s not what I asked,” I said. “For example, if I told you that scene we just saw happened more than five hundred years ago, what would you say to that?”

"I would ask if you were measuring by Earth years, Galactic Standard years, New Calendar Democracy years . . ."

"Never mind," I said.

Sammy fell silent and motionless. If someone had stumbled upon him at just that moment, they'd have been hard-pressed to prove that he was still operational.

"What's the matter with him?" asked the Baroni. "His battery can't be drained yet."

"Of course not. They were designed to work for years without recharging."

And then I knew. He wasn't a farm robot, so he had no urge to get up and start working the fields. He wasn't a mech, so he had no interest in fixing the feeders in the barn. For a moment I thought he might be a butler or a majordomo, but if he was, he'd have been trying to learn my desires to serve me, and he obviously wasn't doing that. That left just one thing.

He was a nursemaid.

I shared my conclusion with the Baroni, and he concurred.

"We're looking at a *lot* of money here," I said excitedly. "Think of it—a fully functioning antique robot nursemaid! He can watch the kids while his new owners go rummaging for more old artifacts."

"There's something wrong," said the Baroni, who was never what you could call an optimist.

"The only thing wrong is we don't have enough bags to haul all the money we're going to sell him for."

"Look around you," said the Baroni. "This place was abandoned, and it was never prosperous. If he's that valuable, why did they leave him behind?"

"He's a nursemaid. Probably she outgrew him."

"Better find out." He was back to sentence fragments again.

I shrugged and approached the robot. "Sammy, what did you do at night after Miss Emily went to sleep?"

He came to life again. "I stood by her bed."

"All night, every night?"

"Yes, sir. Unless she woke and requested pain medication, which I would retrieve and bring to her."

"Did she require pain medication very often?" I asked.

"I do not know, sir."

I frowned. "I thought you just said you brought it to her when she needed it."

"No, sir," Sammy corrected me. "I said I brought it to her when she *requested* it."

"She didn't request it very often?"

"Only when the pain became unbearable." Sammy paused. "I do not fully understand the word 'unbearable,' but I know it had a deleterious effect upon her. My Miss Emily was often in pain."

"I'm surprised you understand the word 'pain,'" I said.

"To feel pain is to be nonoperational or dysfunctional to some degree."

"Yes, but it's more than that. Didn't Miss Emily ever try to describe it?"

"No," answered Sammy. "She never spoke of her pain."

"Did it bother her less as she grew older and adjusted to her handicap?" I asked.

"No, sir, it did not." He paused. "There are many kinds of dysfunction."

"Are you saying she had other problems, too?" I continued.

Instantly we were looking at another scene from Sammy's past. It was the same girl, now maybe thirteen years old, staring at her face in a mirror. She didn't like what she saw, and neither did I.

"What *is* that?" I asked, forcing myself not to look away.

"It is a fungus disease," answered Sammy as the girl tried unsuccessfully with cream and powder to cover the ugly blemishes that had spread across her face.

"Is it native to this world?"

"Yes," said Sammy.

"You must have had some pretty ugly people walking around," I said.

"It did not affect most of the colonists. But Miss Emily's immune system was weakened by her other diseases."

"What other diseases?"

Sammy rattled off three or four that I'd never heard of.

"And no one else in her family suffered from them?"

"No, sir."

"It happens in my race, too," offered the Baroni. "Every now and then a genetically inferior specimen is born and grows to maturity."

"She was not genetically inferior," said Sammy.

"Oh?" I said, surprised. It's rare for a robot to contradict a living being, even an alien. "What was she?"

Sammy considered his answer for a moment.

"Perfect," he said at last.

"I'll bet the other kids didn't think so," I said.

"What do they know?" replied Sammy.

And instantly he projected another scene. Now the girl was fully grown, probably about twenty. She kept most of her skin covered, but we could see the ravaging effect her various diseases had had upon her hands and face.

Tears were running down from these beautiful blue eyes over bony, parchmentlike cheeks. Her emaciated body was wracked by sobs.

A holograph of a robot's hand popped into existence and touched her gently on the shoulder.

"Oh, Sammy!" she cried. "I really thought he liked me! He was always so nice to me." She paused for breath as the tears continued unabated. "But I saw his face when I reached out to take his hand, and I felt him shudder when I touched it. All he really felt for me was pity. That's all any of them ever feel!"

“What do they know?” said Sammy’s voice, the same words and the same inflections he had just used a moment ago.

“It’s not just him,” she said. “Even the farm animals run away when I approach them. I don’t know how anyone can stand being in the same room with me.” She stared at where the robot was standing. “You’re all I’ve got, Sammy. You’re my only friend in the whole world. Please don’t ever leave me.”

“I will never leave you, Miss Emily,” said Sammy’s voice.

“Promise me.”

“I promise,” said Sammy.

And then the holograph vanished and Sammy stood mute and motionless again.

“He really cared for her,” said the Baroni.

“The boy?” I said. “If he did, he had a funny way of showing it.”

“No, of course not the boy. The robot.”

“Come off it,” I said. “Robots don’t have any feelings.”

“You heard him,” said the Baroni.

“Those were programmed responses,” I said. “He probably has three million to choose from.”

“Those are emotions,” insisted the Baroni.

“Don’t you go getting all soft on me,” I said. “Any minute now you’ll be telling me he’s too human to sell.”

“*You* are the human,” said the Baroni. “*He* is the one with compassion.”

“I’ve got more compassion than her parents did, letting her grow up like that,” I said irritably. I confronted the robot again. “Sammy, why didn’t the doctors do anything for her?”

“This was a farming colony,” answered Sammy. “There were only 387 families on the entire world. The Democracy sent a doctor once a year at the beginning, and then, when there were less than 100 families left, he stopped coming. The last time Miss Emily saw a doctor was when she was fourteen.”

“What about an offworld hospital?” asked the Baroni.

“They had no ship and no money. They moved here in the second year of a seven-year drought. Then various catastrophes wiped out their next six crops. They spent what savings they had on mutated cattle, but the cattle died before they could produce young or milk. One by one all the families began leaving the planet as impoverished wards of the Democracy.”

“Including Miss Emily’s family?” I asked.

“No. Mother died when Miss Emily was nineteen, and Father died two years later.”

Then it was time for me to ask the Baroni’s question.

“So when did Miss Emily leave the planet, and why did she leave you behind?”

“She did not leave.”

I frowned. “She couldn’t have run the farm—not in her condition.”

“There was no farm left to run,” answered Sammy. “All the crops had died, and without Father there was no one to keep the machines working.”

“But she stayed. Why?”

Sammy stared at me for a long moment. It’s just as well his face was incapable of expression, because I got the distinct feeling that he thought the question was too simplistic or too stupid to merit an answer. Finally he projected another scene. This time the girl, now a woman approaching thirty, hideous open pustules on her face and neck, was sitting in a crudely crafted hoverchair, obviously too weak to stand any more.

“No!” she rasped bitterly.

“They are your relatives,” said Sammy’s voice. “And they have a room for you.”

“All the more reason to be considerate of them. No one should be forced to associate with me—especially not people who are decent enough to make the offer. We will stay here, by ourselves, on this world, until the end.”

“Yes, Miss Emily.”

She turned and stared at where Sammy stood. “You want to tell me to leave, don’t you? That if we go to Jefferson IV I will receive medical attention and they will make me well—but you are compelled by your programming not to disobey me. Am I correct?”

“Yes, Miss Emily.”

The hint of a smile crossed her ravaged face. “Now you know what pain is.”

“It is . . . uncomfortable, Miss Emily.”

“You’ll learn to live with it,” she said. She reached out and patted the robot’s leg fondly. “If it’s any comfort, I don’t know if the medical specialists could have helped me even when I was young. They certainly can’t help me now.”

“You are still young, Miss Emily.”

“Age is relative,” she said. “I am so close to the grave I can almost taste the dirt.” A metal hand appeared, and she held it in ten incredibly fragile fingers. “Don’t feel sorry for me, Sammy. It hasn’t been a life I’d wish on anyone else. I won’t be sorry to see it end.”

“I am a robot,” replied Sammy. “I cannot feel sorrow.”

“You’ve no idea how fortunate you are.”

I shot the Baroni a triumphant smile that said: *See? Even Sammy admits he can’t feel any emotions.*

And he sent back a look that said: *I didn’t know until now that robots could lie,* and I knew we still had a problem.

The scene vanished.

“How soon after that did she die?” I asked Sammy.

“Seven months, eighteen days, three hours, and four minutes, sir,” was his answer.

“She was very bitter,” noted the Baroni.

“She was bitter because she was born, sir,” said Sammy. “Not because she was dying.”

“Did she lapse into a coma, or was she cogent up to the end?” I asked out of morbid curiosity.

“She was in control of her senses until the moment she died,” answered Sammy. “But she could not see for the last eighty-three days of her life. I functioned as her eyes.”

“What did she need eyes for?” asked the Baroni. “She had a hover-chair, and it is a single-level house.”

“When you are a recluse, you spend your life with books, sir,” said Sammy, and I thought: *The mechanical bastard is actually lecturing us!*

With no further warning, he projected a final scene for us.

The woman, her eyes no longer blue, but clouded with cataracts and something else—disease, fungus, who knew?—lay on her bed, her breathing labored.

From Sammy’s point of view, we could see not only her, but, much closer, a book of poetry, and then we heard his voice: “Let me read something else, Miss Emily.”

“But that is the poem I wish to hear,” she whispered. “It is by Edna St. Vincent Millay, and she is my favorite.”

“But it is about death,” protested Sammy.

“All life is about death,” she replied so softly I could barely hear her. “Surely you know that I am dying, Sammy?”

“I know, Miss Emily,” said Sammy.

“I find it comforting that my ugliness did not diminish the beauty around me, that it will remain after I am gone,” she said. “Please read.”

Sammy read:

*“There will be rose and rhododendron
When you are dead and under ground;
Still will be heard from white syringas . . .”*

Suddenly the robot’s voice fell silent. For a moment I thought there was a flaw in the projection. Then I saw that Miss Emily had died.

He stared at her for a long minute, which means that we did, too, and then the scene evaporated.

“I buried her beneath her favorite tree,” said Sammy. “But it is no longer there.”

“Nothing lasts forever, even trees,” said the Baroni. “And it’s been five hundred years.”

“It does not matter. I know where she is.”

He walked us over to a barren spot about thirty yards from the ruin of the farmhouse. On the ground was a stone, and neatly carved into it was the following:

<p>Miss Emily 2298–2331 G.E. There will be rose and rhododendron</p>
--

“That’s lovely, Sammy,” said the Baroni.

“It is what she requested.”

“What did you do after you buried her?” I asked.

“I went to the barn.”

“For how long?”

“With Miss Emily dead, I had no need to stay in the house. I remained in the barn for many years, until my battery power ran out.”

“Many years?” I repeated. “What the hell did you do there?”

“Nothing.”

“You just stood there?”

“I just stood there.”

“Doing nothing?”

“That is correct.” He stared at me for a long moment, and I could have sworn he was studying me. Finally he spoke again. “I know that you intend to sell me.”

“We’ll find you a family with another Miss Emily,” I said. *If they’re the highest bidder.*

“I do not wish to serve another family. I wish to remain here.”

“There’s nothing here,” I said. “The whole planet’s deserted.”

"I promised my Miss Emily that I would never leave her."

"But she's dead now," I pointed out.

"She put no conditions on her request. I put no conditions on my promise."

I looked from Sammy to the Baroni, and decided that this was going to take a couple of mechs—one to carry Sammy to the ship and one to stop the Baroni from setting him free.

"But if you will honor a single request, I will break my promise to her and come away with you."

Suddenly I felt like I was waiting for the other shoe to drop, and I hadn't heard the first one yet.

"What do you want, Sammy?"

"I told you I did nothing in the barn. That was true. I was incapable of doing what I wanted to do."

"And what was that?"

"I wanted to cry."

I don't know what I was expecting, but that wasn't it.

"Robots don't cry," I said.

"Robots *can't* cry," replied Sammy. "There is a difference."

"And that's what you want?"

"It is what I have wanted ever since my Miss Emily died."

"We rig you to cry, and you agree to come away with us?"

"That is correct," said Sammy.

"Sammy," I said, "you've got yourself a deal."

I contacted the ship, told it to feed Mech Three everything the medical library had on tears and tear ducts, and then send it over . It arrived about ten minutes later , deactivated the robot, and started fussing and fiddling. After about two hours it announced that its work was done, that Sammy now had tear ducts and had been supplied with a solution that could produce six hundred authentic saltwater tears from each eye.

I had Mech Three show me how to activate Sammy and then sent it back to the ship.

“Have you ever heard of a robot wanting to cry?” I asked the Baroni.

“No.”

“Neither have I,” I said, vaguely disturbed.

“He loved her.”

I didn't even argue this time. I was wondering which was worse, spending thirty years trying to be a normal human being and failing, or spending thirty years trying to cry and failing. None of the other stuff had gotten to me; Sammy was just doing what robots do. It was the thought of his trying so hard to do what robots couldn't do that suddenly made me feel sorry for him. That in turn made me very irritable; ordinarily I don't even feel sorry for Men, let alone machines.

And what he wanted was such a simple thing compared to the grandiose ambitions of my own race. Once Men had wanted to cross the ocean; we crossed it. We'd wanted to fly; we flew. We wanted to reach the stars; we reached them. All Sammy wanted to do was cry over the loss of his Miss Emily. He'd waited half a millennium and had agreed to sell himself into bondage again, just for a few tears.

It was a lousy trade.

I reached out and activated him.

“Is it done?” asked Sammy.

“Right,” I said. “Go ahead and cry your eyes out.”

Sammy stared straight ahead. “I can't,” he said at last.

“Think of Miss Emily,” I suggested. “Think of how much you miss her.”

“I feel pain,” said Sammy. “But I cannot cry.”

“You're sure?”

“I am sure,” said Sammy. “I was guilty of having thoughts and longings above my station. Miss Emily used to say that tears come from the heart and the soul. I am a robot. I have no heart and no soul, so I cannot cry, even with the tear ducts you have given me. I am sorry to have wasted your time. A more complex model would have under-

stood its limitations at the outset." He paused, and then turned to me. "I will go with you now."

"Shut up," I said.

He immediately fell silent.

"What is going on?" asked the Baroni.

"You shut up, too!" I snapped.

I summoned Mechs Seven and Eight and had them dig Sammy a grave right next to his beloved Miss Emily. It suddenly occurred to me that I didn't even know her full name, that no one who chanced upon her headstone would ever know it. Then I decided that it didn't really matter.

Finally they were done, and it was time to deactivate him.

"I would have kept my word," said Sammy.

"I know," I said.

"I am glad you did not force me to."

I walked him to the side of the grave. "This won't be like your battery running down," I said. "This time it's forever."

"She was not afraid to die," said Sammy. "Why should I be?"

I pulled the plug and had Mechs Seven and Eight lower him into the ground. They started filling in the dirt while I went back to the ship to do one last thing. When they were finished, I had Mech Seven carry my handiwork back to Sammy's grave.

"A tombstone for a robot?" asked the Baroni.

"Why not?" I replied. "There are worse traits than honesty and loyalty." I should know: I've stockpiled enough of them.

"He truly moved you."

Seeing the man you could have been will do that to you, even if he's all metal and silicone and prismatic eyes.

"What does it say?" asked the Baroni as we finished planting the tombstone.

I stood aside so he could read it:

“Sammy”
Australopithecus Robotus

“That is very moving.”

“It’s no big deal,” I said uncomfortably. “It’s just a tombstone.”

“It is also inaccurate,” observed the Baroni.

“He was a better man than I am.”

“He was not a man at all.”

“Fuck you.”

The Baroni doesn’t know what it means, but he knows it’s an insult, so he came right back at me like he always does. “You realize, of course, that you have buried our profit?”

I wasn’t in the mood for his notion of wit. “Find out what he was worth, and I’ll pay you for your half,” I replied. “Complain about it again, and I’ll knock your alien teeth down your alien throat.”

He stared at me. “I will never understand Men,” he said.

All that happened twenty years ago. Of course the Baroni never asked for his half of the money, and I never offered it to him again. We’re still partners. Inertia, I suppose.

I still think about Sammy from time to time. Not as much as I used to, but every now and then.

I know there are preachers and ministers who would say he was just a machine, and to think of him otherwise is blasphemous, or at least wrongheaded, and maybe they’re right. Hell, I don’t even know if there’s a God at all—but if there is, I like to think He’s the God of *all* us Australopithecines.

Including Sammy.