

Villainous Aspirations

“An individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for the law”

Prologue

Computer crime is the ultimate earner for those ingenious criminal minded characters, who see past the opportunity to make a fast buck here and there. Computer crime accounts for almost 55% of criminal statistics. Imagine if some genius came up with idea of actually making the ultimate robot! One that could not only think for itself, but could also perform the everyday functions of a normal human being. Now wouldn't that make you think? And what if things went wrong? What if your creation not only tried to manipulate your life, but that of the entire world's population? Progress is a wonderful thing, but sometimes; even the most beautiful things in life can turn out to be very sinister!

Villainous Aspirations

Chapter 1

The screen showed an excise operative being interviewed in front of wooden crates, then it switched to an open-mouthed sex doll, a scrolled-down page of regulations, another sex doll, Sony's robotic dog, and finally a computer.

With the sound turned off, and viewed from the awkward perspective of the floor, it was difficult to tell what the news story was about, but if Danny had got it right, somebody was trying to import a batch of sex dolls with an elementary communication system, with a Robotic electronic brain, dolls that did aural as well as oral. And they'd tried to import them as electronic equipment, when legally they were sex toys, or maybe the other way round.

"Would you ever want to have sex with a robot?" asked Danny. "I mean, when Sony or whoever gives up building miniature dogs and gets around to making humans with genitals, would you ever want to sleep with one?"

"Eh?"

He felt Sharon's head turn on his arm and knew her eyes had opened, though he wasn't looking at them.

"You have an amazing line in pillow-talk," she said. "You're supposed to say stuff like

Villainous Aspirations

'I love you', not ask me if I want to join a robot orgy."

As they lay together, flush and satisfied on the shag-pile carpet between the sofa and TV, images from the screen played over them like nightclub lights. A Channel 5 newsreader looked down at his notes on the desk, out of picture, so he appeared to be staring below the screen at Sharon's bare breasts and her mass of hair like a dark fur coat lying by her side. His face displayed earnestness, but his mouth was silenced by the mute and opened and closed stupidly in goldfish gulps, as if he couldn't find the words to describe the arch of her back, the beautiful curve of her hips.

"An amazing line in cushion-talk," corrected Danny, dryly. "All the pillows are upstairs. The padded thing under my head is a cushion."

Sharon's head rubbed up and down his arm. "I'm way ahead of you," she said, "I've thought about this before. It depends on how lifelike they are. If they're perfectly lifelike, attractive and sensitive, great lovers, then the answer would be yes, I'd be happy to sleep with one. How about you?"

"I can't see me trading you in for something with batteries."

Villainous Aspirations

Sharon slapped his bare belly. "If only you could hear yourself."

"I can."

"But you haven't given me an answer."

"My answer's no," he said. "I couldn't sleep with one. I'd never be able to see them as human."

In the unused fireplace beyond Danny's head stood a bowl of fern-fronds, spray-painted every colour but green, since that would have looked weird, but now appearing as many shades of blue with the curtains closed and no light from anything but the TV. Beyond his feet in this small room, against the wall and close to the door, was Sharon's upright piano, the piano she was slowly unlearning.

Danny reached for his trousers without disturbing Sharon, and checked the time on his mobile. Five minutes to nine. At nine he should be out on the street, waiting, but he could be out there in two minutes.

"So, if somebody with a real partner sleeps with one of these hypothetical robots," he asked, "is that infidelity?"

Sharon gathered herself to speak, then; hesitated. "The answer has to be the same, doesn't it? It depends on how life-like they are. If

Villainous Aspirations

they've got feelings, emotions, the whole relationship thing, then yes, it's infidelity."

"You're kind of upping their status, giving them the same value as real people."

"Or, applying the same values. Yes, I am." Sharon sounded indignant, like her point was obvious. She shifted, bringing her arm over Danny's chest, her leg over his, brushing his hair away from his ear, where she talked quietly. "But only if they can talk and think, otherwise they'd just be a glorified dildo."

"No, I don't think that works. Try this - if a robot has a human partner, but slips off to a hotel and sleeps with another robot, is that infidelity?"

Sharon's body jerked against him, and then settled. "Absolutely! This is assuming you can't tell they're robots, that they have emotions, are capable of love, not just sex-machines. If you can't tell, how are you going to treat them any different? You wouldn't even know if they'd slept with a robot or a person."

"I just don't think that'll happen. They may look great and be wonderful in bed, but you'll always know they're not real."

"Maybe they're already out there," she said. "You see them on the street, even fancy them, but you just can't tell."

Villainous Aspirations

They'd been like this from day one, recalled Danny, so secure in their relationship that they could talk about sex, about sex with other people, knowing it would never happen. Sex with robots wasn't a very romantic subject, as Sharon had pointed out, but she liked to know what he was thinking about after they made love, and if he didn't say then she might make a point of asking.

Sharon adjusted her long skirt, leaving her knickers close to the piano pedals but bringing the skirt material over her legs and pelvis. "I feel like he's perving at my bits," she said, looking up at the screen. "Anyway," she added, settling back on Danny's arm. "Rubber dolls are history. The first sex robots will be males."

"No way! The first robots will be built by geeks, by male geeks, and they'll build females."

"No, it's males who're produced purely for sex. You've got the male angler fish, that tiny little male who bites the female and becomes part of her body, shares her blood, loses his eyesight, just hangs in there and produces sperm. Then you've got bees and ants with their pathetic drones, and female black widow spiders and praying mantises saying 'thanks for the shag, now how about dinner?'"

Villainous Aspirations

She lay still for a while. Danny played with her thick hair.

"But they're all built for procreation, not recreation," he said.

She kissed him on the cheek. "You're so adorable, even if you do sometimes talk nonsense."

Her skin was hot against his, a comforting heat.

"I owned a vibrator once," she said. "I think I told you. When I was a student; Top of the range. I can't remember the price, but I do remember it was a week's rent. And I gave it a name."

"A man's name?"

"No, no gender. I called it Aspiration. A tacky name, looking back, but I were younger; and didn't know better." Her tone sharpened, became more rational. "This is very nice, sweetheart, and I don't really want you to go, but aren't you going to be late?"

Danny sighed.

"What time are you being picked up?" she asked.

"Nine."

Sharon sat upright, her wavy chestnut cascade swinging around to settle on her back. She picked up the TV remote and a small clock

Villainous Aspirations

appeared in a corner of the screen. "You'd better get dressed; you've only got two minutes."

She looked for her bra and found it within reach on the sofa. Danny turned his baggy white shirt the right way out and fed his legs into his chinos. The TV showed commercial logging of a rainforest.

Sharon still held the remote, and for a while Danny thought she might switch the sound back on. Instead, she cocked her head to one side. "That's good."

"What is?" – "People cutting down trees?"

Sharon was a fanatical tree-lover.

"No, this is still the news, and they're talking about run-of-the-mill destructive behaviour, so they must have run out of really bad things that happened in the world."

She climbed into her cotton top, speaking through the material as it covered her face. "You remember two days ago, they could barely fit all the bad news in. All those train and plane crashes."

Her face appeared through the neckline, for a moment it was sad, as she remembered her own personal bad news of that day. Then she appeared to put it to one side. "All those news editors cursing their luck. Not enough time to squeeze all the disasters in. And here we are two

Villainous Aspirations

days later watching sex dolls with the brain of a cricket and regular pillage of the planet, and in the papers it'll be stories about pigs with faces like well-known actors and pictures of the Virgin Mary found inside potatoes, because clearly nothing much has happened in the world. "

Danny tied the laces of his shoes and stood up, smiling. He was the one who usually found news programmes unbearable. Sharon generally tolerated them with the same forbearance as the rest of the planet, perhaps a little more, as she worked in TV herself, behind the scenes.

Now fully dressed, she put an elbow on the cushion that had been behind his head and regarded him. "Where's the job?" she asked.

Whichever way she stood or sat or lay, on whatever item of furniture, it never failed to look elegant, at least in Danny's eyes.

"Somewhere in the Thames Valley district; it should only take a few hours."

He hoped she didn't ask anything more, because he wasn't prepared to lie to her. This wasn't a job in the regular sense, it was a favour to Dan and he wouldn't get paid for it. Sometimes he did genuine call-outs in the evenings and nights, and that's what she'd assumed he was doing now, and he hadn't bothered to correct her.

Villainous Aspirations

Between the seat of the sofa and an armrest was a plastic pouch of CD-ROMs. He picked it up and bent down to kiss Sharon on the lips, closed mouth, a kiss goodbye.

"Good luck," she said, which wasn't something she normally said when he went to work.

Danny stood on the threshold of his house, at the top of the four broad steps that led down to street level, looking out on to the ancient street and the church opposite, under a London sky turning deep blue between clouds, now the early summer sun had gone.

Elegant Georgian townhouses faced each other across the tarmac, separated from the pavement by basement patios and uneven black iron railings. All the ground floors were in off-white stucco, except for a few rebels in light pastels, and one in tan. Above the stucco, plain brick rose up to create straight facades that hid shallow-sloped roofs. And dotted along the kerbs; setting off this man-made glory, were rowans, and ornamental cherries and small London planes in full leaf.

The church opposite took up an entire block, from one side-street to the next, rising directly out of the York stone pavement where a

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