

Renegade Robot
by Tom Lichtenberg
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One

"Life is no argument, for the conditions of life could include error" - F. Nietzsche

It was no job for a superhero, but Wyatt Lorenzo knew what he was signing up for, so even when people began to taunt him with names like Jani-Tor and Scrub-Or, he just laughed and shrugged it off. Someone had to take care of the 'do-gooders' before it was too late. He liked to blame it all on his virtual best friend, the one who was forever texting him into doing things he did not want to do, from phoning Jan Johnson in the eighth grade, to pulling a certain stunt on a certain day in high school, to taking this job with his actual best friend, Jalopy, and so he had followed the call of the text and it had led him to this day, where he found himself, in his mid-twenties already, a gainfully employed Botnik in the service of Mankind, living alone on the outskirts of Rubble Land, doing his part to stem the tide of correction.

Wyatt had discovered the neighborhood while on a mission with his team to clean out some rampaging CGB's (concrete gobbler bots). These little guys, shaped like fat gray packing tubes about nine inches high and five inches thick, with pairs of extensible claws reaching out of the top and bottom and a thin slit down the middle on one side, were designed to break down buildings of concrete, glass and steel, excreting nothing but nitrogen-rich soil and oxygen. Once you discover them it's usually too late to save their target building, but they're fairly docile and easily dismantled. A little Cherry Coke goes a long way towards their final deactivation. Wyatt could've wished they'd let the little buggers do a little more damage before they'd completely neutralized the infestation; as it was, the locale was still littered with wreckage-filled lots only partially consumed. Still, the rents were cheap and the remaining structures were relatively safe, for the moment.

Two of the team weren't very respectful to Wyatt; Randy, the team leader, and Hazel, his right-hand man. They'd been doing this work since the early days of the first hints there might be a

problem with the self-generating helpbots originally designed by Western Lightwave. Randy especially liked to claim he'd seen it coming all along, proof positive to him that nothing good ever came out of California. He was a short, fat loudmouth from The South who sported a sweaty fu manchu mustache and a prized Esso t-shirt most days of the week. His compadre Hazel was equally matched in stature and stoutness, and did her best to keep up with his vocal volume as well. A lot of people assumed they were married or siblings or both, but nobody knew for sure. They would come screaming up in the liquid-deathmobile first thing before sunrise, hoses clanging and dangling off every side of the bright blue tanker truck, blaring the horn and broadcasting to the whole block that 'lazy bones lorenzo better get his scrawny ass in gear or it was gonna cost him sure enough'. More times than not, Wyatt made sure he was out there on the remains of the sidewalk before they could pull that stunt.

The final member of the team was his impossibly tall skinny friend, Jalopy. With his six foot nine inch bony frame, his pink shades, camouflage coat, khaki shorts and high top sneakers, he was the opposite of incognito. Jalopy was surprisingly quiet, though. You had to listen closely to pick up any of his conversational tidbits. So it was mostly Randy and Hazel making all the noise as the tanker patrolled its officially suspect areas five days a week from dawn till noon. The team was tasked with the easement, as they called it, of any reprobate or otherwise retrograde Class A, B or C type IMA's (intelligent mechanical assistants). It was everything a morbid cynic could dream of. Unfortunately for him, Wyatt was neither. He was merely a dreamer and a drifter who found himself wherever he happened to go. Jalopy was like that, too, and both also shared an ability to take orders and follow instructions, and so the team generally functioned well enough. The two leaders sat up front in the cab, amusing each other by mocking the two followers, who clung to the back like garbage men, enjoying the wind in their hair and the thrill of life in the great outdoors. Wyatt and Jalopy, when they mutually emerged from their daydreams simultaneously, would sometimes flash the goofiest grins at each other and laugh like maniacs.

Two

It was a Tuesday in October, and Wyatt knew he should be thinking about the frantic phone call he'd received from his big sister the night before, but he'd managed to sleep too well after finally hanging up the phone, and now there was Randy out on the street making such a racket he had to get out there in a hurry, so he rolled out of bed, grabbed his shoes and ran out the door barefoot.

"Come on, Randy," he shouted, "Give a guy a break, man."

"Gave you a break when I let you on this team," Randy yelled back, "Now get your skinny ass on the back of this here truck. Got a big day ahead of us. Real big day."

Wyatt barely managed to push his feet into his shoes before clambering up the side of the tanker, and then was nearly pitched off by the sudden lurch as Randy floored it, roaring off down the street to the accompanying cackles of Hazel and himself. Jalopy was already ensconced on his edge of the vehicle, and just made that annoying clicking noise he always did, and shook his head. He said something, but Wyatt couldn't hear what it was. He didn't want to shout "what did you say?" because he knew from experience that it wouldn't do any good. He'd have to wait until a rare moment of relative silence and then try to get it out of him again.

The tanker barreled ahead through Rubble Land, twenty square blocks of former suburban sprawl, now reduced to occasional dwellings amidst the remains of dull one-story office parks and strip malls. The CGB's had spread out nicely when they first laid siege to this terrain, almost as if they'd had a plan. Wyatt knew they didn't operate like that, but here they managed to occupy several lots at once, rather than their usual grazing pattern. There had been a lot of them in the pack, that was all. It took a lot of soda pop to wear them out that time. Wyatt imagined he could still smell the bubbles.

While riding along, he textually checked in with Bilj Bjurnjurd,

his virtual friend. One of the things he liked about Bilj was that he could talk to him anytime, under any conditions, wind, rain, cold, noise, whatever. Bilj was almost always available. Wyatt could speak or text and the words would go through his wristband halfway around the planet where they would appear in some form to Bilj. On his end, Bilj's words came through the band and from there directly into his mind. Sometimes Bilj didn't have much to say. This morning, he had no answers to Wyatt's question; what was so "big" about the day, as Randy claimed.

"Probably just a bunch of 'sanders'," Bilj suggested. Wyatt nodded. It was possible. Randy was known to be fixated on those particular artifacts. They were often difficult to isolate amid all the sawdust they created and lived on, and they had to be isolated, otherwise their reduction would cause a rather flammable chain reaction. They would have to break out the sifters and get on their hands and knees. It was a dusty and dull assignment. Wyatt hoped it wouldn't be that, and when the tanker turned up Verona Street and headed north, he got the feeling it wasn't. Sanders weren't typically found in that direction, where the buildings were mainly brick and mortar. But then they turned again, and approached the former Lake Wilhelm. If it was the lake, it could be anything. All known mechanisms seemed to appreciate that meadow, with its tall, spreading reeds and plentiful wildlife. Bots had a weakness for non-human species, and liked to be near them, to enjoy their presence.

His guess was right. Randy pulled in right at Lakefront, where they used to rent canoes and paddle-boats and sell every kind of junk food. All of that was a mound of dirt now with sunflowers poking out all over. Hazel whipped out her machete and cut the stalks down. Sunflowers were a dead giveaway.

"We're out to find a snake, boys," Randy hollered as he leaped out the driver's side and grabbed a big red canister from the side of the tanker. Jalopy and Wyatt nodded and hopped down also. Each grabbed his own colored 'distinguisher' from where they hung next to the railings, Jalopy's purple and Wyatt's green. Hazel had her gold one slung across her back already, with the nozzle out and the dial set to high. She led the way through the meadow,

kicking at every kind of plant along the way. Hazel had a thing about vegetation, an abiding scorn and hatred she made no attempt to hide.

"Freaking foliage," she shouted, "Get out of my life, you damn green maggots!"

"We ain't come for the weeds," Randy reminded her, but quietly. He didn't aim to get on her wrong side this early in the hunt. Wyatt didn't bother to ask why the leaders were so certain they'd find a snake out here. Previous attempts in the same location hadn't turned one up. It seemed that every month or so Randy got it up his sleeve that there was one out here. He always said it was government orders, and even showed some paperwork now and then to back up the claim. He'd get awful sore when they turned up nothing, not even a scraper or a mole. The team had quotas and it seemed to Wyatt that whenever they were ahead of the game, Randy'd go all snake, as if he could afford the wasted effort. Of course, if they did get lucky, they'd be golden. Nothing was more valuable to catch. Those suckers were for keeps, too. No early retirement for them. They'd be handed over to the zoo for further study. The zoo already had a couple, and claimed to learn of miracles through them.

Everyone was always looking for the master plan. Wyatt didn't think there was one, and neither did Bilj. A lot of people believed that Western Lightwave had a hidden agenda. It couldn't just be plain old bad luck! Now was no time for wondering, though, not with Randy and Hazel yelling in the wild, and Jalopy letting him know they ought to team up, pair up just in case, one go wide and one go short. Snakes were not just rare, but allegedly deadly. They were said to have the ability to evaporate a man completely in less than twenty seconds. Wyatt knew he ought to be nervous, but he wasn't. Bilj had already informed him that there was no snake in the lake. Not now, not ever, and Bilj had never been wrong about fauna.

Three

Strolling through the meadow on that uncommonly warm autumn morning was enough to lull Wyatt into a walking daydream. Naturally, he was thinking about "her". Her image sprang to his mind as easily as a baby cries. He saw her lean, angular body, her soft brown skin, those sharp clear eyes sparking out from under the wide red headband that kept her black curly hair away from her face. He saw those dark green batwing tattoos curling around her skinny arms. He did not know her name, not her real name, at least. He had seen her, in the flesh, only once, and that was a long time ago, in a park, in a crowd, surrounded by her friends and family. He could never forget that face or the joy that spread across it when the music began. Of course he did not go up to her, did not say hello, did not introduce himself, did not ever see her again. It was enough to conjure the picture up in his mind, as he'd done so many times, over so many years. Always it was her smile and the eyes lighting up as she looked at him in his mind. He didn't need to think as he imagined this encounter while ostensibly patrolling for civilization-endangering mechanical threats. He would have remained in that reverie indefinitely, but Jalopy snapped him out of it with a tap on the shoulder and a gesture, pointing down.

There, at the foot of a scrubby bush, was a micro-bot unlike any either of them had ever seen. It was no more than four inches tall, and walked on bent back legs and long front arms like a gorilla. Its shaggy green head was ape-like also, containing bright wide eyes and a wide flat mouth. Numerous folds, like pockets, covered its head and torso. The bot had stopped moving and stood unblinking in the shade of the shrub.

"Well hello, little buddy," Jalopy whispered. Wyatt understood why. Neither of them was eager to announce this discovery to their leaders. Randy and Hazel would have stomped it to smithereens, no questions asked. They were never curious, only murderous. The creature gave no sign it had heard him. Jalopy took a small step closer, and slowly lowered himself onto his haunches. He repeated his friendly greeting. After a moment, it

opened its mouth and quietly emitted a tiny printout, like a miniature fortune cookie. Jalopy pulled it out and read, 'Please Do Not Disturb. Butterfly Restoration In Progress'.

Jalopy glanced over at Wyatt, who nodded. They did not need to discuss such things to know they were in agreement. Jalopy smiled and looked back down. He said

"We won't bother you, but you ought to know, we're botniks and ..."

He didn't finish the sentence as the creature had suddenly vanished.

"That'll do it," Wyatt chuckled, "they'll all be underground now".

They knew it from experience. Once one bot was alerted to danger, every bot in the area seemed to know instantaneously. This was one of the reasons why their work was sometimes difficult. Half of the enemy were nearly invisible, the rest almost seemed to be shape shifters, re-structuring and re-manufacturing themselves continually. Wyatt did not know anyone who truly understood what was happening. There were plenty of rumors, of course, and a lot of misinformation, for sure. If everything he'd heard was true, these invaders would eventually accomplish the unraveling of the whole history of human development. It was just a matter of time, but Wyatt doubted it. He tended to side with the Rationalists, who clung to the idea that some of the 'do-gooders' merely misunderstood their original purpose, which was to 'clean up' certain man-made messes. What that actually meant might be subject to interpretation.

Rationalists believed that some bots had taken the phrase a bit too literally, but could be reasoned with, and re-directed along more productive lines. The only problem with this approach was the unhappy fact that no one knew who, or what, to talk to about the matter. On the other side were the Frantics, who were certain these must be the last days. There was a convergence of the religious, the political, the entrepreneurial and the merely irrational among their ranks.

"Come on," Jalopy said to Wyatt. "At least we can go through the

motions. They're going to wonder if we keep standing here too long."

"Right, right," Wyatt agreed. "I didn't see anything. Looking for a snake, right? Didn't see any snakes, neither."

"Not a thing," Jalopy smiled and turned up empty palms. "Maybe over that-a-way," he laughed, and they resumed their appearance of scouring the terrain for suspect simulacra. Across the field they could see, and hear, Randy and Hazel grunting and cursing and storming around. The way they carried on, it was a miracle they ever caught anything at all, and yet they considered themselves to be the best of the best of the breed. Randy even had a citation from the City which he never let anyone forget about. Wyatt still wasn't convinced those rats weren't organic after all, rather than the super-advanced simulations Randy claimed they were.

Four

Now that he was temporarily back in the here and now, Wyatt remembered that he'd meant to ask Jalopy what it was he'd said when Wyatt had first jumped on the tanker that morning.

"Oh, that was nothing," Jalopy grinned. "Just checking on the family drama. Seeing if there's any news."

Wyatt laughed. There had been a lot of drama lately around his sister Bethany and her asshole husband. She'd already been sending out smoke signals by all of a sudden using her maiden name in her socialnet posts, a dead giveaway from any married woman that her marriage is in trouble. Her new full name, Bethany Lorenzo Hayward, had even started appearing on her serialized romance novels. Aspects of her personal life had always been seeping into her popular Christian Erotica titles. If you knew her, it was easy to decode such phrases as "It was autumn, and her trees were large and deciduous". You would know that her husband, Blair, had recently taken to raking his neighbor's leaves in the middle of the day. The neighbor, Clarissa Simpson, recently Simpson Martel, no longer had need of smoke signals. Her main need these days was for a stream of new men, most of whom did more than rake. She did not really care where they came from, or to whom they may or may not be attached.

Blair had an assortment of issues, as did Bethany, as did each of their three boys, Brad, Brian, and Brendan, aged fourteen, twelve and ten. There had never been a quiet time for that missionary family. Ever since her sister had hooked up with The Preacher (as Wyatt called him), there had been one very public performance after another. Wyatt had tried to keep his distance, but he loved those boys and he was their favorite, and only, uncle, so for the sake of the children he'd remained involved, witnessing far too many domestic scenes far too closely to be surprised by anything anymore. Blair had exacting standards when it came to other people. As for himself, not so much. He also had curious interpretations of the Bible. As with the mainstream of his church, he was fixated with the admonition to "go forth and multiply". He

seemed to think it meant to do so constantly, perpetually, and to tell everyone all about it all the time very loudly, for he had a trumpet of a voice and a singular lack of modulation. In summer the whole block could recite his every phone call, word for word, and he made a lot of phone calls, most of them while pacing back and forth on the front porch.

Bethany had been cranking out wholesome smut for years. It was literally how they met. Blair has been one of her biggest fans, always showing up at book signings and sitting in the front row sighing loudly as she read passages from such classics as 'Whispers in the Dust' and 'Fall to Grace'. His pursuit of her hand in marriage knew no limits and she eventually succumbed to the shower of gifts and ever-more grandiose promises. It was the house that finally tipped the balance. He bought her the house of her dreams, with an oak-filled writing room in the attic, and four bedrooms, including one for every child they planned to have. They started having them right away. Bethany was still not yet forty years old and spent a generous percentage of her royalties every year on youth and beauty treatments. Blair, she suspected, was spending the allowance she gave him on gifts and grandiose promises to other women.

"Nothing much," Wyatt said. "Except I did get this really weird phone call from her last night. I couldn't tell if she was laughing or crying. She was definitely freaking out, though. She kept screaming that the kids' rooms were all neat and clean. Neat and clean, she was yelling, neat and clean. Do you know what that means? she asked me. I said, uh, maybe they picked up their stuff? She called me an idiot then."

"Sheesh," Jalopy shook his head. "I wonder what that's all about."

"She wants me to come over after work, and to bring our stuff. She said that everything's falling apart and it's not natural."

"Sounds pretty natural to me," Jalopy shrugged. "Marriage gone down the drain, kids probably trying to help out, do something nice for mom. Sounds like what I did when my own folks were splitting up. I did the dishes, sweeping, laundry. Didn't help any, but I was trying."

"You're probably right," Wyatt said. "These days nearly everybody's acting crazy. Every little thing they want to blame it on machines, as if we can't screw things up on our own. Heck, if we couldn't, we wouldn't have ever come up with the bots in the first place."

"What are you two yakking about now?" demanded Hazel. They hadn't noticed her sneaking up on them, and now it was too late. They were caught.

"I saw what you did," she glared at them both. "Everybody knows. You two! I can't believe you two. The sooner we get rid of you both, the better," and with that, she turned and stomped away.

"I wouldn't worry about it," Jalopy said as they watched her depart. "We've got our two years. We can always hook up with another crew. Experience counts, you know."

"I just hope we don't get split up," Wyatt grimaced. More than anything, he needed his friends, his real ones and his unpresent ones too, but mostly the real, and of them, mostly Jalopy.

"Nah, don't worry," Jalopy said. "We won't let that happen."

Wyatt wasn't so sure. It was hard for him to trust anyone, even Jalopy. Hadn't his so-called friend promised to find his dream girl for him? Hadn't he even said he knew who she was, where she lived. That was a long time ago, and what had come of that? Not a trace of the girl. Nothing. Even his best unpresent friend could not be relied on. What had that one ever really done for him? Precisely nothing at all. Some friends, Wyatt thought. And now I'm going to get fired again.

Five

It wasn't long before they heard Randy bellowing for them to get their asses back to the truck pronto. Wyatt and Jalopy shuffled slowly, in no hurry to get yelled at some more, but their pace only fueled the fire. Randy was furious by the time they arrived.

"I suppose you know what you've done!," he shouted. "And I suppose you're pleased with yourselves! I should've known I was sheltering a couple of no-good do-gooder traitors. What's your game, anyway? Only tag the small fry just to let the big fish get away? Is that what you're up to? Who're you working for anyway?"

Wyatt held up his hands as if surrendering and said,

"Boss, Randy, woah, slow down, man. We don't know what you're talking about, do we, J?"

Jalopy shook his head.

"No, man," he said, "What gives?"

"What gives?" Randy nearly screamed. "What gives? Besides you two giving me a heart attack? Jesus H. Crickets. Why'd you let the snake get away?"

"What snake?" Wyatt asked.

"We didn't see any snake," Jalopy stated.

"Of course you did," Randy said. "I've got it all on video. What? You didn't know you were being taped? We all are, all the time. City, county, state and federal. All of them see all of us and everything we do. I'm going to catch bloody hell because of you two, but you, you've done got yourselves out of a job, as of today, as of this moment, as of right now, you got me?"

"We didn't see nothing, boss," Jalopy insisted.

"Oh no," Randy waved his arms around, "Don't give me that. Hazel, you got that queued up yet?"

"All ready, Randy," she replied from inside the tanker.

"Let's take a look, shall we, boys?" Randy sneered, "and then you can tell me you didn't see nothing."

They followed him to the driver's side door, where Hazel had pulled out a tablet computer and played them the video - as seen from Wyatt's extinguisher's nozzle. There it was, the little ape-like creature spitting out the note, and Jalopy reading it, and saying the magic word which made the creature vanish instantaneously into the dirt. Wyatt and Jalopy exchanged puzzled glances. Surely it wasn't a snake. Anyone could see that. It was more like a mini-gorilla. They both started saying the same thing at once.

"It was just restoring butterflies. See the note?" and Jalopy handed it to Randy who snatched it, stuffed it in his jacket pocket and said,

"I suppose you believe everything you read?"

Jalopy could only shrug. Wyatt was only wishing he was miles and miles away.

"I know you boys think I don't know squat," Randy told them. "I know you think old Haze and me are just a couple of redneck bumpkins, but we've been in this business since the very beginning. We knew right away this was going to be a job for professionals, so we ditched our termite gig and headed West to the nearest major infestation. Contrary to your popular belief, she and I know exactly what we're doing, and we know what's a snake and what is not. And this one here, this is the big one. I know it. They call it the Renegade Robot. Goes around pretending to be one of those do-gooders, but its plans are anything but doing good. We had some solid data it was here. Why do you think we came? Because we had nothing better to do? We're out to catch that thing, not just say hello all polite-like and then just wave it bye-bye."

"We didn't know," Jalopy said.

"Yeah," Wyatt piped up. "You could have filled us in."

"I've never been sure about you two," Randy said, "Now I know I was right. Consider yourselves finished, boys. Finito. Better find yourselves some other line of work, because this door is

slamming shut in your faces," and with that, Randy climbed into the cab as Hazel moved over, and he literally did slam the door shut in their faces. With a roar, the tanker lurched and made off, kicking up pebbles and dust in the faces of the two newly unemployed former botniks.

Six

"It's not supposed to be a snake snake," came the text of Bilj Bjurnjurd through the wristband. "It's a metaphor, referring to the biblical serpent in the Garden of Eden".

"Oh!" Wyatt said aloud.

"Oh, what?" asked Jalopy. They were still standing in the parking lot, several moments after being abandoned by their team leaders.

"What what?" Wyatt replied, unaware he had made a sound.

"You said 'Oh', like you just thought of something."

"Right, right," Wyatt bobbed his head. He was quick to recognize he must have done something he had done so many times before - vocalize his part of the silent conversation - so he repeated what Bilj had told him. Jalopy thought it made sense.

"Although," he added, "It could also be a reference to the Hydra myth, a several-headed serpent which grows two new heads every time you chop off one."

"Could be," Wyatt agreed. They relapsed into silence once again for a few minutes. This time it was Jalopy who broke the quiet.

"Guess we ought to get out of here," he said.

"I can't believe they just ditched us like that," Wyatt said. "Way the heck out here at the lake, too. Was that nice?"

"That was not nice," Jalopy agreed, "But the 78 Corcoran runs a few blocks from here on Stanlan Avenue. We can catch it at Jerrell Street".

Whatever other faults he may have had, Jalopy knew his bus routes. The pair were aboard the 78 headed for a transfer to the 29 in practically no time at all, and Wyatt found himself back home before noon. Jalopy had gone on his own way, but not before promising Wyatt that he'd check in with the Board first thing the next morning.

"After all," he stated, "We're Board Certified and have the two

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