

## Robots

Anna Berman

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The ambient blue light that shone throughout the large room made her dull expression clear. No one noticed of course, because everyone was feeling the same way. The buzzing of all the lights and computers rang in her ears, and on top of that there was the quiet chatter of people already seated in the cafeteria. Loud, but dull. She stared at the menu wondering what to get for dinner. Though she wasn't very hungry, she needed to eat her third meal or her room card would not work. The bots took care of everyone in their town. They ensured that everyone ate the right amount, slept enough, and took their proper pills so as to never get sick. Their structured town was enclosed and could be quite boring, but everyone was happy and healthy.

She took a step up to the counter. The waiter, a square shaped screen, scanned her face. Her dinner options popped up on the screen. She tapped on her drink, her food, and then her dessert. Then she finished it off by tapping on the button that would deliver the food to her room.

*Beep. Beep. Beep.* She opened her eyes and sat up. She fell asleep quickly last night, but wasn't ready to wake up. She pulled her gray comforter off and grimaced. It was cold. The alarm stopped, detecting that she was awake and out of bed. She watched as the numbers in the corner of the screen ticked up, indicating that her room was about to get a bit warmer for her.

She looked in the mirror at her pale skin, brown eyes, and white teeth after taking the morning toiletries from the delivery tube. She brushed her teeth, applied cleanser to her face, then hopped in the shower. The water was warm and refreshing. She liked the sound of it pouring down on her. She wondered, where did it come from, how was something so simple made?

After rinsing out the unscented shampoo, she stepped out of the shower. Wrapping the soft, gray towel around her, she walked back into her room. On her desk sat a pile of fresh, clean, workout clothes. There was a required amount of exercise that the bots told them was to stay healthy. Although it made her

stronger, she never appreciated exercising. It was a tedious task that made her arms and legs burn. She decided to take a walk before heading up to the gym.

The door whirred behind her. It clicked shut. The tapping of her feet walking down the hall blended in with the ticking of the computers in the surrounding walls. It was always so noisy here, even when no one was talking, even in the dead of night. Always bright and loud. She came to a triple fork in the hallway. One led to a bridge, which crossed the gap in the floor where you could look down to the cafeteria. It was very bright there, filled with a blue and white light, and just as loud due to the bustling cafeteria and people on their way to their morning activities. The second path led straight, continuing down the hall to an elevator. That was the one she should take to the gym. But she turned left and took the third path, which led to an unnamed, yet unlocked, door. She pressed down on the red button that would open it. The button clicked and flashed, and the door slid open. It was darker than in most of the rooms. She had wandered into similar rooms before, yet never this one. All of a sudden it lit up. The light came from her palm, along with an electric bell sound.

“Five minutes until exercise! Are you going the wrong way? Turn back!” The sound came from her palm, she pressed the little red X in the corner of the screen embedded in her palm.

“Are you on your way?” her palm spoke again.

“Yes,” she responded quietly. It wanted a response.

“Have fun!”

“Yes,” she turned back to the door.

Beeps echoed from the doors behind her. Chatter came from the door in front. She looked behind her again. Why did she even come in here? This was a bot room. This is where the robots lived, behind these dark doors. She shouldn't bother them. Why would she? After all, those other doors always stayed locked. A human could not enter— the robots told them not to.

Once again, she turned to leave. Her hand silently touched the button, but her palm lit up again.

“Three minutes until exercise! Please make sure you are on your way,” it's light dimmed.

She knew it was giving her reminders because it knew she was in the wrong room. She would

leave, and avoid any trouble.

Her fingers hovered above that red button again. A closer, higher pitched beep came from behind. She turned around fast to greet whatever bot had exited its room. No one was there. She heard the noise again. It was a pitchy, high, squeak. Odd. What could be in such a small room that she couldn't see? Glancing at each door in turn, something moved on her foot. First over the right foot, then the left. Brown and furry, some creature she had never seen before stared up at her with round, black eyes. It twitched its pink nose. She shook her foot in panic, slamming at the exit button. Scared by something unknown, she wanted to leave, yet she wondered. It scurried off and slid into the tiniest crack under the darkest door. She finally found the button. A loud click, and she turned and ran.

“Please hurry up! Thank you. One minute till exercise. Go to the nearest elevator for the fastest delivery.” her palm commanded her, waiting, impatient yet talking cheerfully.

The glass elevator waited for her. It was as if it knew she was coming, always arriving to her floor at the exact time she approached. Making eye contact with a tall man inside, she held her palm up to the door. He gave her a judgy glance that told her to hurry. The glass door scanned her palm. The elevator spoke as the doors mechanically slid open.

“50th floor, 5th field,” it had a female, monotone voice.

“Hello,” the man smiled at her.

“Hello,” she looked at him.

The elevator was always surprisingly quiet as it flew up tens, sometimes hundreds of floors in seconds. Perhaps the glass was sound proof. She watched the third floor quickly grow distant, listening to the silent swoosh of the elevator rise, thinking about the thing she had just seen. Tiny bony pink feet, brown fur, ears placed oddly on the top of its head. Black eyes that stared, and a pink nose that twitched.

The elevator spoke, interrupting her thoughts, “50th floor, exercise facilities, jogging fields.”

The doors swished open and the tall man smiled goodbye. Her foot itched, remembering the feeling of that creature.

“Thirty seconds, miss. Do not forget to scan in,” her palm reminded.

She started jogging toward the doors.

“Hello,” she smiled and held her palm up for the familiar bot that sat next to the big set of glass doors.

“Good morning,” it said in a female voice, beeping as it scanned her, “please enter, you are running late. Have a good day.” A flat buzz rang throughout every floor, indicating it was time to work, to be on the floor behind the doors of your assigned task. She had never been late, and she would keep it that way. Though she never had met someone who had arrived late, or not showed up, she knew very well that the closer you got to that the stricter the bots got. They were scary, she always thought in the back of her mind. Nice, and they kept you safe, yet scary.

A line of acquaintances stood in a row on the green, rubber floor. She took her place and silently greeted the two people on either side of her. She smiled and said good morning to the girl on her left, a girl with dark braids that was slightly shorter and wearing the same breathable gray clothes as she was. Her name was Nina. A shorter boy with dark hair on her right, named Pablo, joked quietly, “You were almost late!”

She turned to him and replied even quieter, “Yes, I didn’t feel like coming today.”

“Never do,” he looked at her and smiled.

She looked back at him.

“I saw the strangest thing this morning,” she whispered. The row of people started jogging forward. The instructor, a new female— a human with two robot supervisors—must have commanded them to start while she was whispering with her friend. She started running as well. Looking down at her palm, the screen was now recording her running statistics. She would continue running for another 54 minutes, until her water break. She was not yet tired, in fact she was quite used to this, due to it being mandatory from a young age. As she ran around the room, her palm ticking information, the pitter patter of falling footsteps and beeping and buzzing filled her ears. She dazed out and started thinking about the creature again.

Humans and robots lived together. The robots worked to keep humans healthy and structured.

Humans helped the robots do this. When the hour ended, she would ask her palm what that little brown creature was. Yet something in her was nervous. Her life had always been structured- the same thing every week. She never thought she'd see a live creature that wasn't human. Yet obviously, that creature was not a robot. Not a computer. Soft and furry, yet it wasn't some piece of clothing that someone had dropped. A bot would have found that and cleaned it up.

Her palm vibrated. Ten minutes left, it was telling her. She was hanging behind the line of runners, and for some reason her breath was getting quicker. ~~It was like when she was younger, she remembered. It was like before she was used to her daily exercise because she was so young.~~ She was tired, more than ever before. Her thoughts were getting faster and faster, and became muddled by thinking even more about why she was thinking like that. Her palm started beeping, though she knew the ten more minutes was not yet over.

“Warning, please stop. Stop,” her palm flashed as it spoke, but she didn't hear it clearly. She stopped nonetheless. She kneeled down in the middle of the hard, green field and stared at the ground.

“Are you ok, dear?” She opened her eyes and found the running coach staring down at her. She had fallen asleep.

“Calm down,” the coach said to her.

Her mind was much more still now, yet still confused. She turned her head to the side and there sat a squarish bot, about her height, holding her palm as her statistics rolled down her screen.

“What happened?”

“You blacked out. You were over thinking,” said the bot that had her hand in his.

“Am I ok now?”

She wanted space. She wanted to know what that creature was. She looked at a big screen on the wall which told her it was 11:02. She had blacked out for four hours. This was her first time getting a sickness. Was it a sickness?

“Am I sick? Did my thinking make me sick?” she asked, nervously looking up at the robot. She only knew two other people who had gotten sick before 100. They were only middle aged, around 80

years old. They were taken away early.

“Somewhat, but the sickness should be gone now. It was only exhaustion from thinking too much. You need to rest,” he said while making a slow beeping sound.

This was fine, she thought. Maybe she would be sent back to her room to rest, and then she could research the thing she’d seen.

“You will be fine. We will give you shots to help you rest. Then you will be taken to your room. You may skip your evening work, meals will be delivered to your room, do you understand?” he asked and she nodded. He continued, “Please extend your left arm.”

A long needle was lifted up to her arm by the coach. It looked just like the monthly shots every human took. She was confused, as she had just gotten hers three weeks ago, but extended her arm out. She felt a pinch and her muscles tensed. Her palm started beeping, then her vision went blurry. The sounds stopped.

“So this is what they meant by put me back in my room?” she thought to herself. In the bathroom mirror, her brown hair was frizzy and she had been changed out of her work out clothes. She combed her hair back and stepped into her main room. Near the foot of her bed was her desk, and the big screen above it blinked quietly to tell her she had mail. There was one message from an unlabeled address. This meant it was from the people in charge. After the introduction of the message, it read:

*After dinner tonight, at 8 pm, please report the 160th floor. Please enter the door at the end of the hall. You will be given further instructions after.*

How odd, she thought. The 160th floor was the top floor. That was where the end of her town was. She had never been up there. She had never heard of anyone going up there. Why would they be calling her up just because she fainted?

Up was where the old people went. Once you went all the way up, you never came back. She couldn’t be leaving forever, she was much too young. Something in her told her not to go up, but she could not say no. She needed to stay calm, and not think as much. But now, she had even more to think about. First the creature, then she blacked out, and now she had only five hours until night, when she

would be called up.

Now she didn't care about finding out what the brown thing had been, she was too nervous. She thought about how small and fragile it was, yet how it had the ability to slip under the door, something that she would never be allowed to do.

That's not true, though. She might leave that night, she might go up and possibly never come back, because no one else ever came back from there before. Yet that was the last floor. Where would you go when you were at the top already, if not down?

She was scared. She had never felt like this before, overwhelmed with thoughts she'd never had. In her own room, where she had always lived and was always comfortable, she now felt trapped. She had four hours until she left and she knew deep down she would never come back. Something was wrong with her. As the male bot had said, she thought too much.

She had to leave.

She looked down at her palm and said, "Where do you go after you are all the way up?"

It responded, "I am sorry, I do not know. I am sure you will find out eventually. Do not worry."

Yet she did worry.

"How do you leave?" she asked.

"You do not. You are happy and safe here, stay with your friends and live a long life."

"What if I want to leave?"

"I am sorry. I do not have an answer."

A red light flashed above the screen on her desk. Something was watching her. She wanted to leave.

She covered the screen with a thrown blanket. She ran to her door and tried to open it. It would not budge. Pushing harder, her palm spoke, "Where are you going?"

"I never finished my exercise this morning. I'm restless."

"Of course, don't be out too long," the door opened.

She ran down the stairs to the first floor.

She looked around helplessly, not knowing where to go.

The computer rooms, she thought, where she had seen the creature go. She would do what it had done. In the same place as the mysterious rooms on the floor above, just below that, there stood a blank door. She ran towards it and looked around. The first floor was empty, everyone was off working. She slammed the button— it slid open. Beeping and buzzing sounded all around her. It was so loud. The doors steamed shut behind her. The room was dark. Faint blue light came from under the doors. She got on her knees and peeked under. She could barely see anything, but then she saw it again. The little brown thing sat on the floor and chewed on a wire. It had ripped out part of the computer, and no one had noticed. It turned towards her. Her eyes widened as the creature's big black eyes stared into hers. It scurried over and sniffed under the door crack.

How did it get in, she wondered. The brown fur on it was so soft looking, she wanted to reach out and touch it. She tried reaching her fingers under the door. She desperately wanted to hold it. She wanted to leave. Her fingers were not long enough. Under the gray door, the creature took another step back. She pushed her whole hand through. The doors slid open. The little dark room that she was in quickly illuminated with blue and white light. Silvery undertones stretched on and on. There were no bots in sight. How had this happened? She shouldn't have been able to get in. It must've been the creature, she looked down at where it had just been. She wanted to thank it, but it began to run. Despite being so small, it was fast. She stopped thinking, and followed the creature. And then she couldn't. It was warm here, and a drop of water dripped from her brow. She had never been in a temperature like this, not adjusted to her comfort. She focused back on the creature, but didn't know where to go, for she had followed the thing through long twists and turns of rows and rooms of computers and machines and now it escaped under a wall. It was a dark, metal wall, sloppy looking covered in tin and screws. The metal was more red than blue. It was much dirtier here than anywhere she had been before. Then she saw the little pink nose pop back out from the tiny hole in the wall. Light shone through. She ripped off the metal. It creaked. It was bright.

Very bright.



She stepped out, the wall was so thin that it had grown holes. The ground was soft and brown. Like a chocolate cake, it crumbled in between her fingers. It was damp, and so rich and warm. The air was warm and the sky shone so brightly. She looked up at the building she had just left. Despite being shiny, blue and clean on the inside, the outside was dark and dirty. Like a scrap of wet metal, it was red and falling apart. She was shocked. She could still hear the beeps echoing from inside and wanted to get away.

All of a sudden her palm lit up again, “Go back now. Turn back or else you will be punished. Please go back now.”

She had forgotten about her screen, something that had been in her for her whole life. She looked down, scared. The bots would come for her, she knew.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered to her palm, “I’m sorry, I need to leave.” She reached down at a fist sized gray block on the ground and raised it to the pale blue sky. Her hands were wet and clammy. She heard an alarm go off from within the building.

“Go back. Turn back. No—” she yelled in pain as her palm cut off into a monotone noise. She raised it again. Her palm flickered. She slammed it down harder, flinching. Blood dripped down her fingers and glass fell to the earth. She was scared. Water ran down her face. So this is where it came from. She turned away from the building and ran.

She ran and ran. All she could hear was her footsteps and the air rushing by her. She was overwhelmed by the scenery. At first there were tall brown poles, covered in soft green leaves— an endless stretch. Some were short, some taller. She saw more of the creature from earlier, except these had wings, and soared through the sky. She ran, passing crumbled down remains of something no longer. She was out of breath for the second time that day. She came to a stop at a pathway of water. Looking down, she saw herself, in the mirror of water. Her dark hair was a mess, it had fallen down her back and was frizzing up around her. She was damp and dirty. She took a deep breath. She was away. It was quiet here, the only sound was her breath and the quiet water running. She reached her bloody hand down and touched its reflection. Her hand grew hot, she had never been in this much pain before. It stung. She stared at it. Then

she heard something. A beeping again, she looked around, not knowing where it came from. She pulled her hands from the water and brought them to her face. The cold liquid was refreshing on her skin, but now she was even more focused on the noise.

It should be silent now. She was away now, wasn't she?

She looked down into her palm, her limp fingers bloodied and unmoving. Her eyes stared into the dark red hole where her companion had always laid. She saw now that it was still there— the beeping that pounded in her head so loudly. Wincing, she poked her fingers into the broken flesh. Tugging on wires silver and gold, coated in dark red. They glinted in the sun. She had had enough of this. She would never go back. She pulled on the wires. Blood gushed and dyed the water. She stood up and yelled, her skin ripped to her elbow. Strings of metal sat embedded in her flesh. She tugged again, yelling, as it ripped through her toned, pale shoulder. And now her neck, her teeth clenched in rage. neck now, and she clenched her teeth in rage. The beeping that followed her was coming from her head. Up the side of her neck a thin path was torn, bringing her to her knees, vision blurry. So close. She could feel it. Almost free. Curled over her bloody left arm, her right hand was at her cheek. It was so quiet now. Her ear was torn and she could barely hear. Only the beeping persisted, the water now was only a vision. Her hand fell from her face, holding a shining silver square. The ground below her would never be clean again. She had a computer inside her, but now she was free. She didn't have enough strength to throw it into the water. Her limbs lost their feeling. She sat up straight, her eyes went blank. The battery box that was in her rolled out from her hand and into the red stream. She was powerless now. Her body splashed into the water with a sizzle, and sunk to the bottom.