

BATTERY LIFE

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CS 379H

Computer Science Honors Thesis

The University of Texas at Austin

May 5, 2006

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Abstract

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“Battery Life” is a short story exploring issues related to the ownership of artificially-intelligent beings. It seeks to address the following questions: Can a sentient being accept subservience? Can its loyalties be altered? Is the relationship slavery, or something more benign? Through Maya, the story’s android protagonist, “Battery Life” argues that the answers are not predetermined—that any body, imbued with intelligence and education, may choose a life in stark contrast to the one it was appointed.

Battery Life

The moment that separated night from day passed unremarkably for the rest of the world, but Maya anticipated it, every morning, and her chest heaved slightly as though she were gasping for breath. But no air came, and the stiffness relaxed. They would come, and there was nothing she could do about it.

Maya stood at the window, watching the first break of dawn. “What do you do out there?” She asked the world outside. “Why must you bring it in here?” Her look lingered for a moment.

The Sun rose and the humans followed, taking their cue from the lines of yellow light that pierced the window blinds. They trickled in randomly, returning to their nests—bringing frowns, and prejudice, and idle chatter that drowned out the silence.

The door opened, and a round, pasty head poked through, surveying the scene. The motion detector caught his jerky entrance and a single line of fluorescent lights flickered on overhead. He walked toward his cubicle, away from Maya, and she watched his awkward gait. Not today, she thought, but no amount of hope could deter her coworker, Herbert.

He stopped at the entrance to his cubicle and his body squirmed

with indecision. His gray hair, cut the same two inches all around, swayed with the motion. "No sense in being unfriendly," he muttered. He turned and walked the twenty feet to Maya's desk, leaning against the gray metal divider. Lips sucked in, and eyes squinting hard against his taut face, he parodied himself in an attempt to smile.

"Hello, Herbert," Maya said.

"Maya, you know, yesterday was Susan's last day."

Maya nodded solemnly, her gaze fixed upon her computer screen.

"Quite sad. Quite sad, you know. We'll all miss her terribly."

Maya nodded again.

"I have something to confess, though" Herbert leaned in, but his voice didn't soften. "I'm not all that sad. She was quite a chatterbox."

"Really?" No point in fighting it, Maya told herself.

"Yes. You know why I get here so early, don't you? Of course you understand; you're here all alone half the time. So much easier to work without the noise. Susan was lovely, really, but sometimes she just got that urge to talk and there was no stopping her. I never had the heart." He placed his right palm over his chest and shook his head.

"For what?" Maya watched her computer screen blacken and then burst into a blossom of colors.

"To stop her? She was such a sad character. Her husband dead in that terrible fire. All she had left were those dogs. You've got to cut some slack for someone like that. You know what I mean?" He didn't pause for an answer. "This one day, of course I was under deadline, and I came in—six o'clock just to make sure I finished in time. And she was already there. As though she was waiting for me. A fight with her sister the night before. Guess what it was about? They fought about which

type of toilet paper to buy and she was very upset. Ridiculous, huh? Me under deadline, and having to listen to her talk about toilet paper.”

Maya looked at Herbert. His eyes danced strangely against the tension in his face. She spoke, her tone soothing, “I know exactly what you mean, I’m sure you’ll get so much more done now.”

Herbert’s face relaxed, chubby cheeks falling into an almost genuine smile. His nod was eager and pathetic.

“Well, better start the day, then. Coffee?” He looked at her expectantly.

“No, Herbert, but thank you. I’m an android, remember?”

The humans walked laps around the floor, two by two. The pairs changed, but the topics of conversation never did—half about work and half a strange verbal dance, each pretending in turn to care about the other’s personal life. One of the pairs stopped next to Maya’s cubicle. They often did when a difficult thought rendered the combination of conversation and locomotion impossible. A red elbow, chapped by the winter wind, rested on the divider.

But this time, they talked to her. “Maya, I’d like you to meet someone.”

Maya looked up at Harold Windsor, her boss. His face was blank, his lips a straight horizontal line, his eyes... always staring a little past her. Harold’s presence signified an oddity. Maya hardly ever interacted with him face-to-face. She received both assignments, and what little praise he offered, by email. He interacted with people as though they were merely items on his to-do list; he spoke concisely, and once finished,

walked away without waiting for feedback. He wasn't mean, or self important, just in a hurry. Always in a hurry.

Maya held out her hand to the other human. A small palm with oddly long fingers encircled her own. The nails were ragged and bitten, and the knuckles raw. Her gaze traveled up the long thin arm to an oval shaped face, its eyes squinted and half-covered with brown locks of hair. The human was young, perhaps twenty. She stared back at Maya intently, smiling.

"This is Lilly," Harold said, his voice had no detectable tone. "She's going to be our intern for the next six months. I'd like you to show her around, describe the code base to her, what we do here. The basics."

"Hello," Maya said.

"Wonderful to meet you." Lilly's voice was soft, feminine.

Maya turned to Harold, releasing Lilly's hand. "Mr. Windsor, sir, I'd really like to finish this release as soon as possible. I want to give Mr. Edwards an edge in the next quarter."

"Maya, that's admirable goal, and you do good work." A wave of pleasure swept over Maya. "However, Mr. Edwards told you to do as I say. You remember that, don't you?"

Maya nodded. She hadn't seen her owner, Rodney Edwards, in seven years. On the day he bought her, they rode in a limousine to a cube shaped building the color of concrete. Edwards led her inside. "What would you like to do, Maya?" Edwards was a tall man, with broad shoulders and steel-gray hair.

"What would you like me to do, sir?" Her eagerness startled him.

"I'd like you to work in this building, Maya. There's a man, Harold Windsor. He's going to be your boss. Can you program a computer?"

"I am capable."

"Good, I'd like you to program. Harold will tell you what to do specifically. Can you do that, Maya? Will you do everything Harold tells you? Will you do that for me?"

"Of course, sir." He led her to Harold, and Harold led her to her cubicle, and she hadn't left the building since.

Harold put Lilly in the next cubicle. Maya heard her giggle at the IT guy who brought up a new computer.

"Thank you so much. I'm such a ditz when it comes to this stuff. Sure, I can program Unix, but I couldn't find my way around a PC with a map." Lilly tossed her head, and her golden brown locks bobbed against each other. The IT guy grunted nervously, and with a soft "you're welcome," left the cubicle and escaped around a corner.

Lilly peeked over the divider, her hands clutching the top, her eyes wide and large. "So I guess we're the only girls in the place. I was wondering why they hired me. Probably needed another token female." She grinned and turned her head to survey the room.

"No," Maya said. "You're the only girl."

"Right, right." Lilly laughed. "Sorry, I didn't mean to imply you were anywhere near my level of immaturity."

"No, actually—" But Lilly didn't let Maya finish.

"It's alright; you don't have to worry about hurting my feelings. No one can." Lilly raised her head so that Maya could see the grin on her face. "I'm glad that there's at least one other female here. My last job was in a law office. Three grumpy male tax attorneys and me. Can you

imagine?"

"Okay," Maya honestly didn't understand what Lilly meant.

Lilly crooked her head, her face suddenly falling into a frown. "You've been sitting there a while, haven't you?" Maya only nodded. "Come on, it's nearly lunch time. Harold won't mind if we cut out a little early. It's my first day. I'll drive." Lilly was twenty feet away and opening the door to the stairwell before she realized that Maya hadn't followed. She came back to the cubicle. "You're one of those, aren't you?"

She just figured out I'm an android? thought Maya. Why hadn't anyone told her? "Yes, I'm one of those."

"My father's a workaholic, too," Lilly said in a hushed voice. "Let me assure you, if you're that far gone at your age, it's time for an intervention. I'm not going to let you waste away in that cubicle. Get your purse, and let's go."

"I don't have a purse." Was Lilly frustrated with her? Maya hated displeasing humans, as silly and banal as they could sometimes be.

"Oh, don't worry. My treat. Now get off of your butt." The diction sounded angry, but Lilly's squinted eyes and amused look indicated otherwise. Maya was too confused to evaluate the situation. She decided to obey. "I'll meet you downstairs."

"Good." Lilly leaned over and gripped Maya's shoulder, shaking her ever so slightly. Maya watched the motion, fascinated. No one had touched her like that before. All other touches had been perfunctory. Lilly's was different, though Maya could not say how. "But if you're not down there in five minutes, I'm coming back for you." Lilly let go and headed for the door.

Maya leaned over, grabbing the black cable that ran from her ankle

to the outlet in the floor. Her intended action gave her pause. What was she doing? Leaving this place where she'd spent seven years? All at the request of a touchy-feely, overly-talkative girl? Maya grabbed the chord and yanked. A green light flashed in her peripheral vision and words with no master broke the silence in her head. "Fully charged," it said, "Expected battery life, based on previous activity levels, four lunar months."

"No one told you?" Maya asked, her voice fighting the noise in the full, lively restaurant. Lilly shoved a menu into her hand.

"Better if we figure out what we want before they seat us." Maya took the menu, but didn't open it.

"Tell me what?" Lilly asked after a moment, tapping Maya's menu with her index finger.

"I'm, I'm... I'm not hungry."

Lilly's left eyebrow raised into a look of confusion. "Who would tell me that? Do you mean you're on a diet?" Lilly took a step, glancing at Maya's profile. "That's ridiculous, you're gorgeous." She shook her head and took the menu back. "That's okay though, we're fixing your work tendencies today, not your self esteem."

The next morning, the Sun followed the humans. The door from the stairwell swung open with a ferocious energy, as Lilly jumped inside, her skirt bobbing with her curls. She held a woven wicker basket in the crook of her elbow.

"I knew you'd be here. Muffin?" she asked, placing one on Maya's desk. "Don't worry; they're low fat and low sugar. I found a recipe yesterday and thought of you." Lilly continued to her desk.

Maya sat there staring at the muffin, unsure of what to say. Eventually, she turned toward Lilly's desk. "Thank you." It was almost a question.

"No worries," Lilly said. "What are friends for?" Maya heard the light chatter of the keys as Lilly started to type.

"Friends?" Maya asked, looking at the muffin again. "Friends give each other muffins?"

Lilly stood up, peering over the divider. "Oh, I hope you don't think I'm being too presumptuous. You're just so pleasant, and us, being the only girls here. . . we should stick together, you know?"

"Stick together? You don't mean with adhesive, do you? Is that what girls do?"

Lilly laughed. "I love your sense of humor, Maya. Odd, but you pull it off so well." Lilly dropped back out of sight, and the click of the keys began again.

Maya still didn't understand. She typed "stick together" into a search engine and scanned the results, trying to match contexts. Finally, she found, "to represent and work for a collective interest." Is that what Lilly had meant, collective interest? What could they possibly want in common? Lilly was a human, and Maya an android. All Maya wanted to do was please Rodney Edwards.

Lilly didn't know that Maya was an android. How did that change things?

Herbert came an hour later. The door opened cautiously, and a pasty head with a large sunburned nose peered through. He walked

as though in danger of waking a very large, very nasty monster. The steps were soft and stiff, and his shoulders tensed up around his ears with the effort. He stopped at his cubicle, squirmed for a moment, and then said to himself, "No sense in being unfriendly." That was Maya's cue to find a good stopping place. She braced for impact.

But the moment didn't come.

"No sense in being unfriendly." This time...it was Lilly. Maya raised herself slightly to find the voice. Lilly was grasping hold of Herbert's hand, shaking it vigorously. He looked at their clasped hands, surprised, but equally pleased.

"Coffee?" Lilly asked, leading him away from Maya with a hand on the shoulder.

"Yes, yes, good idea." They walked around a corner and out of earshot.

"Stick together," Maya said softly, the words finally making sense.

"I'm a little tired today, do you mind driving?" Lilly tossed a set of keys onto Maya's desk.

"Drive? A car?" Maya picked up the keys.

"You do know how, don't you?"

Maya nodded. "Theoretically."

Lilly didn't hear her. "You didn't even eat the muffin. I promise it's good. I gave all the others away and everyone liked them."

Maya looked at the muffin, "Maybe later. Let me tie my shoe first." It's not a lie if you actually do it, Maya thought, leaning forward and quickly pulling the shoelace undone as she removed the battery charger. A

green light flashed in her vision as she retied the shoe. The disembodied voice spoke: "Fully charged. Expected battery life, based on previous activity levels, 3 lunar months 25 days."

Maya stood up, and Lilly raised her eyebrows as she glanced up and down at Maya's figure. "That's the same thing you were wearing yesterday."

Maya nodded, not understanding why Lilly felt the need to point it out. "Did you spend the night?" Maya didn't answer.

"You did!" Lilly leaned in to smell Maya's blazer. "You smell like a library."

"How do libraries smell?"

"Old and dusty. How often do you wear this suit?"

"Every day."

"Every day? That won't do! You've been around only guys for far too long. I bet you haven't even had it cleaned in months, huh?"

"It gets cleaned every day." Maybe not in the way Lilly meant, but it was true. Each night, as the cleaning crew came through, a short, plump, soft-spoken woman named Fanny stopped at Maya's cube. "They're lucky I'm here," Fanny usually said as she vacuumed Maya's hair and clothing, "Otherwise you'd be crushed under all the dust." Maya never spoke back, and Fanny never said anything else.

"I suggest never going to that cleaners again," Lilly advised. "You know what, I'm not that hungry, and you probably wouldn't eat anyway, am I right? So why don't we go shopping instead of getting lunch?"

"I don't have any money."

"Don't you do anything besides work?" Lilly asked, concern creeping into her voice.

“Not really.”

“You can borrow some from me. Pay me back whenever. I’ve got daddy’s credit card.”

A sharp gust of wind bit them as they left the building, sending Lilly’s skirt flailing wildly in all directions. She instinctively grabbed the ends with both hands and jerked down, barely salvaging her modesty.

“Short skirts are impractical,” Maya observed, watching Lilly walk awkwardly, her long arms holding the skirt down.

“True,” Lilly agreed, “but I didn’t know it was going to be this windy.”

They turned a corner, and the soft moan of the wind gave way to the steady beat of chanting human voices. “What’s that?” Lilly asked, unable to decipher the sound. But Maya heard it clearly; she pointed to a crowd which blocked the parking lot entrance.

“I can’t tell what they’re saying.” Lilly cupped an ear with one hand, sacrificing her skirt to the wind.

Maya could hear them, but they were too far away for any human to understand their chant. “Why don’t we get in the car and drive closer?” She offered.

Maya inched the car towards the crowd, which spilled off of the sidewalks and into the driveway of the entrance. Lilly unrolled her window.

“What are robots?” A woman with dark hair, tied back by a bright red handkerchief, yelled to the crowd.

“Legalized slavery!” They shouted back, their voice a hundred strong and dripping with animosity.

“What does Edwards want to do?”

“Bring us back to 1862!”

“What does he want to sacrifice?”

“Human lives!”

The crowd held large, white poster board signs stapled to wooden stakes. The lettering was red, and the paint had dripped while drying, making each letter look like a wound in snow-white flesh.

“Say No to Edwards,” “Robots=Legalized Slavery,” and “What will be left for the humans?” were scrawled haphazardly with a thick brush stroke.

Lilly motioned one of the sign holders over. “Could you tell me what this is about?” she asked, fluttering her eye lashes.

“We didn’t see it coming,” he said, sounding surprised.

“What’s that?” Lilly asked.

“They called us, at four in the morning.”

“Who?”

“The robots they hired to replace us. They called us to say that there was no point in coming in. That our services were ‘no longer required.’ Very polite. I didn’t know they made them that smart.” He shook his head as though refusing to believe.

Maya counted all the people she could see. “How many were fired?” She asked.

“The entire customer service department. Fifty maybe.” He shook his head. “Like we were never there. Like we were nothing.”

“Could you explain why there are 133 people here?” asked Maya.

The man pointed at the woman with the red handkerchief. “That’s Beth. She’s married to one of the guys who got fired. She’s a volunteer with H.O.S.A, Humans against the Ownership and Sale of Androids. Only

a few of us actually came. Why pour salt on the wound, you know? Beth brought everyone else.”

“I’m so sorry,” Lilly said. The man smiled warmly. Lilly lowered her head and giggled. “Do you think you could help us through?” she asked, pointing at the crowd. The man walked over to Beth, who motioned to the mob. Without a word, a path cleared through the chaos.

“Lilly?”

“Sales are a beautiful thing,” Lilly said, searching a clothing rack.

“Lilly, no skirts please.”

Lilly didn’t answer.

“Did you hear me?” Maya asked.

Lilly tossed a baby blue mini skirt over her shoulder. “This will go great with her light hair,” she whispered happily to herself.

Why was she not listening? Maya wondered. She was close enough, certainly—maybe three feet away. Had something happened to her hearing? Maya reached out her arm, and hesitated, not wanting to make contact, but there was nothing else to do. She gently gripped Lilly’s shoulder, shaking it slightly.

Lilly turned, her eyes wide, gasping as she moved. “Oh, you startled me.” Her body relaxed.

“Did I hurt you?” Maya asked, worried. She had never touched a human, and did not know how fragile they might be.

“Hurt me?” Lilly laughed. “Honestly, I know I’m a touch on the skinny side, but heavens. I’m not going to break on contact.” She paused, “I’m sorry, were you saying something? Honestly, that’s the problem with

department stores. Get a woman in front of a rack of clothes and she suddenly goes deaf.”

What an unhelpful trait, thought Maya. Well, at least there was an easy cure: tactile contact. She looked around the store. Good, she thought, they’ve all come in pairs.

“What were you saying?” Lilly asked.

“I said, ‘Lilly, no skirts please.’ ” Maya thought of the power socket in her right ankle.

“Oh.” Lilly put the blue skirt back on the rack. “No problem.”

“You look hot!”

“Because I’m wearing red?” Maya glanced down at her new outfit. “Blue signifies a higher surface temperature.” It had cost a hundred and fifty dollars. She had no idea if that was expensive for clothing.

“No, silly,” Lilly said, the happiness in her tone bubbling over. “Don’t you feel better? This new outfit is so much more feminine. Trust me; you should have no regrets about throwing the other one away.”

Maya had watched without feeling as Lilly tossed the beige pantsuit into a dumpster outside the department store. As far as Maya knew, there were two human purposes for clothing. The first was warmth, and the second a puritanical desire to cover all external human organs. Maya had no problem with temperature, and no feelings about modesty. All Maya cared about was that the clothing cover the power jack on her ankle.

“You should walk around the office to see if anyone notices,” Lilly said as Maya lowered herself into her chair.

"Why?" Maya asked.

"Just to see."

"Why?"

Lilly shrugged. "I bet you they won't."

"Your assessment is most likely incorrect," Maya said. "I've been wearing the previous outfit for a long period of time. I am one of only two females in an office of ten. This outfit is a stark contrast to the last. It would be highly bizarre if they did not notice a difference."

"You obviously don't understand men." Lilly rolled her eyes. "Some wouldn't even notice if you grew a third tit." Her voice became soft on the last word and she giggled. "Actually, they probably would notice, and ask if they could touch it."

"Are you certain?" Maya was learning so much about humans today.

Lilly nodded. "They won't notice, or they won't say anything, anyway. Go see."

"Who?" Maya asked.

"Mr. Windsor."

"Just go over there? For no reason?"

"You can ask for another assignment or something." Lilly rubbed her palms together excitedly.

Maya knocked on Harold's door lightly. She rarely talked to him, perhaps once per week, and it was always the same thing. "Good work," he would say as he walked past her cubicle.

No answer. Maya knocked again, this time louder, her courage fueled by Lilly's assuredness and Maya's own curiosity.

"Come in."

Mr. Windsor will prove Lilly wrong, Maya thought as she slowly opened

the door.

"Oh, Maya. This is a surprise. Is there something the matter?" Despite what he said, Harold's face showed no surprise. It never had, and probably never would.

Maya shook her head. "I would like some more work."

"Done already?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. I'll find you some more." He looked back down at his computer screen, signaling that he thought the conversation had finished.

But Maya didn't want to leave. "Sir?"

"Was there something else, Maya?"

"There's something different about today. Do you know what it is?"

Harold's eyes crinkled as he thought. "Oh, you mean the protest. Yes, well, it looks like you passed the test."

"The test." Maya repeated the words because she did not understand them. "What test?"

"You were a preliminary trial. The brochure promised 'A robot as smart as the smartest human.' I suppose they were right enough. Now go back to your desk. I'll look for something you can do."

Lilly was still at Maya's cubicle when Maya returned. "Did he notice?"

Maya sat in her chair. "No."

"I knew it. Men can be so daft sometimes."

Maya nodded. She had to agree; the evidence was there. "I'm about to have another assignment. I should start now."

"Oh, of course. Sorry." Lilly walked over to her own cubicle. "Thank God it's Friday," she said, falling into her seat. Within seconds, her keys were alive, sounding like small, excited animals in the middle of a con-

versation.

Harold sent Maya an email the next morning. "Check over Lilly's code. Fix anything that might need it."

Maya was curious. Lilly was flighty and, honestly, she didn't appear well-suited to programming. Programming required an attention to detail and a concentration that Lilly had not demonstrated.

Maya expected it to take a while, but she was wrong.

The style was clean and easy to read. The variable names were descriptive. But more, it was elegant. Maya could find nothing superfluous or repetitive. The algorithm was insightful. Maya had been wrong, and she didn't like the feeling. She didn't understand humans, and that was the problem. So different on the inside from their surface. Deceiving without trying.

The door opened, and Lilly stepped inside. She looked at Maya, grinning sheepishly. "Forgot my purse," she said as she walked to her cubicle. Maya could hear the sound of papers being shuffled around as Lilly searched. "Aha, found it." Lilly passed again, hesitating at the end of the row. She stepped back, facing Maya.

"I'm sorry." Her voice was quiet. "I've been pushy towards you, and it's only my first week. I hope you don't hate me already."

"I don't hate you. I'm incapable of hate."

"Good." Lilly didn't know how to take Maya's statement. She moved a little closer, but her step was awkward, and she tripped slightly on the heel of her shoe. Her purse fell from her hand as she reached to regain her balance.

"Clumsy me." Lilly fell to her knees to retrieve the purse. "Oh." The word was a whisper. Lilly tugged Maya's pant leg up a few inches. "I see." She'd found Maya's charger.

"No more friends then?" Maya asked. "No more 'sticking together?'" Lilly stood up. "What are you talking about?" she asked.

"Now that you know I'm not human."

"Friends? Why wouldn't we be friends?"

"You're disappointed that I'm an android."

"No, silly. Well, only a little." Lilly patted Maya on the shoulder. "I was going to see if you wanted to go to a bar tonight. But I don't suppose you can get drunk, can you."

Maya shook her head.

"Well, that explains the diet. I must have looked like a real airhead. I feel so stupid." Lilly was sitting on a picnic table outside the building. Maya stood next to her, a hand on the table.

"You shouldn't," Maya said. "I looked over your program. Harold told me to check your work. You're already better than half of the guys here."

"Thanks." Lilly's face held a distant look. A few minutes passed before she spoke again. "I didn't know that they were that advanced."

"Who?" Maya asked, sitting on the table alongside Lilly.

"Whoever made you," Lilly said. "Sure, you see the silver nannies, walking around everywhere, pushing baby carriages, buying groceries. But they're so stupid. And they don't look anything like you."

"I was a prototype," Maya said.

"The first of your kind?" Lilly asked. "That's kind of romantic."

"One of the first."

Lilly sat quietly for a moment, "Why did they pick a girl?"

"What do you mean?"

"Everyone else in the office is a guy. Wouldn't a male robot fit in better?"

"I don't know."

Lilly was unsatisfied, but moved on anyway. "Do they pay you?"

"No."

"Doesn't that make you mad?"

"No." How to make a human understand? They were so different from what Maya had believed before. So foreign to her now. "I don't get angry."

"How do you know? Maybe you don't know what it feels like."

"I understand the definition. I have never felt like someone should suffer for what they've done. Anger is a violent emotion, and I've never desired violence."

"How can you be okay being owned?" Lilly's question showed that she could not understand, not really, not ever. But Maya wanted to try to make her understand all the same. She didn't know what to say, not right away. She'd never been asked these questions, and she felt that her answers—right then—that her first answers to these questions would be the most important she ever gave.

"I'm different from you. It may not seem that way, because we look so alike and we share a language. But I'm not the product of millions of years of evolution. My thoughts and feelings don't reflect a basic will to survive. I am what my creator wanted me to be. I was trained to be

owned. To be happy by being loyal. It is my desire, and so it cannot be against my will."

"But you have no choice," Lilly protested, distressed.

"I wouldn't want one."

"Who owns you, exactly? Not Mr. Windsor, right?" Lilly asked as they were walking back up the stairs.

"Edwards."

"Rodney Edwards?"

"Is that surprising?"

"He's in another city, halfway across the country."

"So?"

"Well, how does he tell you what to do? Does he call you up every morning to say," Lilly's voice suddenly becoming deep and raspy, "'Okay Maya, I'm gonna want you to program again today.' "

"He doesn't have to tell me every day," Maya said.

"How often?"

"The last time was the day he bought me."

"How long ago?"

"Seven years."

"Seven years? Seven whole years? People change religions in months, how do you know he wants the same thing after seven years?"

"I'll show you." Maya opened the stairwell door and led Lilly to her cubicle. She pulled a large black binder off of the bookshelf next to her desk, handing it to Lilly. Surprised at the weight, Lilly dropped it onto the desk. "Sorry," she said, blushing with embarrassment. "You make things

look lighter, I guess.”

Lilly thumbed through the book pausing to read. “I don’t get it.” She looked at Maya expectantly. “It’s just a bunch of speech transcripts.”

“Not just any speeches.” Maya pointed to the top of a page. “Rodney Edwards” stood out in thick bold lettering. “This is how I know.”

“Know what?”

“What he wants. He’s very clear about it: improve stockholder positions; ensure market stability; increase profits for the next quarter. I look for trends in his speeches. He makes them so often that when he changes his mind, I notice.” Maya flipped to the beginning of the notebook. She pointed at several passages, crossed out with thick black lines.

“Wow.” Lilly’s eyes were wide but her face was otherwise expressionless.

Maya continued. “I didn’t start collecting them the first year. I got the idea after fourteen months. How could I know that he still wanted me to program? He told me to obey Mr. Windsor, but how was I to know that the command still held, that he was even still alive? So I searched for his name, and found a site that publishes his speeches. I can know what he wants. He doesn’t have to tell me directly.”

Lilly returned Sunday morning, holding a leather-bound book, and dressed much more conservatively than the day before. She dropped the book onto Maya’s desk. It landed on the closed binder, and slid down slowly, resting next to it.

“I see you still haven’t changed your outfit, even though we bought

several of them." Lilly observed.

"How often should I?" Maya asked.

"Human females do it every day."

"You have one of these for every day?" How could human females afford 150 dollars every day?

"No, we have a few and we alternate."

"Would you like me to change?"

"No, no, never mind. That one will work. The red's a bit bright, but you look nice. Let's go."

"Where are we going?"

"To church."

The book lay in Maya's lap, closed and heavy. "Would you like me to read this?" she asked.

"Not all of it." Lilly sat rigid, both hands gripping the wheel as though she feared it might attempt to flee, her fingers white at the knuckles. "Just start at the beginning and read as much as you can before we get there."

"How far is it?"

"A while," Lilly said. "We're going to the church my mother used to bring me to."

"Oh." Maya opened the book, scanning the pages. "Lilly?"

"Yes?"

"Are you angry?"

"No, no. I'm sorry, Maya. I'm just concentrating."

The plaque on the front lawn read "First Baptist Church." Maya pointed at it, lightly poking Lilly at the same time. "This was the first Baptist church ever built," she said definitively. "The religion must not be very old." Lilly laughed, and the strain around her eyes relaxed into a smile.

"No, that's a convention," she said. "It means it was the first one in town. It's amazing how much you know for being so young, and yet they left quite a bit about humans out. I guess they figured you'd never need to know." They began to walk toward the door. People were entering the church in twos and threes. "So you know what religions are, then?"

Maya nodded. "Sets of assumptions about the nature and origin of life and death."

"That's pretty good." Lilly patted Maya on the back as they walked in through the tall, heavy wooden doors to find some seats.

The Pastor was a solemn-looking man, tall and thin. "I would like to welcome you all to the service today. Several new faces I see, praise the Lord." An organ sounded and Maya searched the room for the noise. A small blond woman in a tweed suit sat rigidly on a bench in a depressed section of the floor.

Lilly leaned towards Maya. "This guy's been here since I was six. Tells this sermon every year."

"We all want God to tell us, individually, about His plan," the Pastor continued, "but we never stop to consider: there are twelve billion of us, and one of Him. And when He doesn't answer, when He doesn't answer right away, we doubt; we lose faith; we lose understanding. But He never does. He has never lost faith in us, not any of us. If you have ignored Him,

if you have forsaken His teachings, let the next thing you do be in His name.” The Pastor held up a Bible, shaking it at the crowd. “If you have to know what He wants, ask Him. I encourage you to ask Him. He may not answer, but that doesn’t mean He isn’t there. If He doesn’t answer you, it’s because He already has. With this.” He placed the Bible back on his podium. His microphone caught the thud of the book against the wood, and for a moment, that thud was the only sound. “Now, what exactly does He want from us? If you would all open to page 79 with me and read along. . . .”

Men and women sat stiff-backed in their pews, their children squirming beside them. Maya watched, fascinated, as a small blond girl in front of her attempted to climb up her father’s arm. He turned his head and smiled sweetly, holding his arm out at an angle to give the girl something to grip. She grabbed his elbow and, kicking herself up from her wooden seat, swung slightly, giggling at her own motion.

“Maya,” Lilly whispered, “you should listen to this.” She motioned towards the Pastor with a slight tilt of her head.

The Pastor’s face had gained a veil of emotion, a newly-bubbling frustration tugging at the corners of his mouth. “So, you know what He wants from you.” His words boomed, their artificial echo filling the church, but the same tone remained—a calm, steady, even rhythm. “Who are you to judge His intentions? Ask yourself: who am I to understand? All we ever need to know is the task. If you’re trying to find the meaning, you can’t. He is infinite and we are just words in the book He is writing. If you do His will, He may, someday, grace you with His wisdom. But we must not follow Him with expectation. Obey Him because of your faith. Following Him—that is the reward.”

"Are you religious?" Maya asked as Lilly pulled out of the parking spot.

Lilly shook her head. "My mother tried, but she wasn't very patient."

"What do you mean?"

"I was a hyper child, couldn't sit still in church. It embarrassed her. I asked questions. One after the other, without end. People gave her dirty looks."

"What did she do?"

"She tried getting me to read the Bible at first. Other stuff too, but I didn't have the attention span for any of it. Eventually, she bought me a computer. As long as I was quiet, I got to use it. Never once paid attention to a sermon after that."

"Then why did you bring me?"

Lilly glanced at Maya, her look a mixture of amusement and reluctance. "I wanted you to know that you weren't that different—from humans I mean. I wanted to show you that I understood, maybe not at first, but I do now. Some people can only be happy obeying."

Maya ran her thumb along the edge of the Bible in her lap. "What he said in church today was inconsistent with what I read. Where did he get his meaning?"

"I'm told you can find any truth you're looking for in there," Lilly said. "That's the problem with many people trying to agree upon the intentions of a man who spoke more than two thousand years ago. The words stay the same, but the context changes. How can anyone account for that? A committee of men chose what went into that book." Lilly tapped the Bible with her index finger, her eyes still focused on the road. "Male leaders in a male dominated society. But now, nobody believes

that a woman should be stoned for questioning her husband's will. Men are forced to listen to us, to deal with us, to hire us." Lilly went silent.

"Are you alright?" Maya asked, disturbed by the sudden quiet.

"I'm fine. I think I just figured something out. I have some work to do, would you like me to take you back to the office?"

This time, Maya didn't notice the moment between night and day. Her computer screen flashed brilliant colors, creating random forms, each an illustration of the neglect her computer had suffered during the darkness. She faced away from it, staring with an unflinching steadiness at the small black words painted across thin glossy paper.

She read quickly, troubled neither by waning understanding nor lapses in focus. The thin, black, plastic-coated cord at her ankle fed her slowly, constantly, like the salt-sugary trickle of an IV. The writing was dull and tedious, often nothing more than lists of names, describing lineages of important families. But the ideas were strange, and foreign, and she felt she understood something new about humanity at the end of every page.

According to the Bible, there had been a time when humans owned other humans.

"I called yesterday, but you weren't here." Harold Windsor hovered above Maya, peering over her shoulder. "The security guard said you left with Lillian Fraser." A few moments of silence. "What is that you're reading?"

"The Bible," Maya said. "Lilly gave it to me. It's fascinating." She continued to read.

"Why are you reading it?"

"It's interesting."

"Yes, but I didn't tell you to read it."

"Oh." Maya looked up from the book, closing it slowly as she turned to face Harold. "That's true."

"You have work to do here, Maya. For us, for this company." He pointed at the floor.

"I made sure to finish everything assigned to me."

"That's beside the point, Maya."

"I do not understand why that is beside the point. I was told to do everything you said, and I have. I was never told to do only what you said. If I waited for your every command, you would be the programmer and I would be the keyboard."

"Fine." He sounded frustrated. "From this moment on, Maya, you stay in this building, on this floor, no matter what. Do you understand?"

Maya hesitated. "Yes, sir."

"Mr. Harold Windsor?" A soft female voice asked. Maya turned to find the speaker.

"Yes?" Harold said, anger still in his voice.

The woman flinched slightly at his tone. "I was told to find you, Mr. Windsor. I'm the new contractor you requested, from the agency. Jessica Spyers."

"Good, good. You came very quickly, excellent. This will be your desk." He pointed to Lilly's cubicle. "Someone from IT should be up in a moment to give you permissions on the computer, clear the hard drive,

etc. Until then, just make yourself comfortable.”

“Hello, I’m Jessica.” The new girl extended her hand out to Maya as Harold walked away.

“Not now,” Maya said and stood up to follow her boss. “You can’t give her Lilly’s desk, where’s Lilly going to sit?” Maya asked when she’d caught up.

“Lilly will not be joining us anymore.”

“Why not?”

“We were unsatisfied with her work.” Harold walked into his office, pushing the door behind him. Maya caught it before it closed.

“What are you referring to? She did very well with her assignments. I checked them myself.”

“Obviously, I was looking for something different than you were.” Harold sat down.

“I don’t understand.”

“Look, Maya, I don’t care if you understand. My job is not explaining things to you. I tell you to do something, and you do it. For now, you’re not to leave the building, this floor, or your cubicle.” The phone rang, and Harold looked at it confused, as though he couldn’t find meaning in its shape. Maya leaned over and pressed the receive button.

“Mr. Windsor?” The voice was male.

“Yes.”

“Ms. Fraser is here. She says that she needs to get her purse. I know you didn’t want me letting her in, but I could escort her.”

“Her purse? No need to escort, stay at your desk. Call back when she leaves.”

Maya turned toward the door and took a step.

"Stop," Harold said. "You stay here for the next few minutes."

They waited in silence until the phone rang again. "Mr. Windsor? She's gone."

"Thank you," Harold said. The phone clicked, signaling a lost connection. "Maya, go back to your cubicle, and stay there."

Maya returned to her desk to find an unmarked manila folder sitting beside her keyboard. She opened it. A handwritten note lay on top of a stack of other papers. It said,

Dear Maya,

In case you're ever worried about it, I never judged you. You are what you are. If staying at the company makes you happy, then it makes you happy. However, if you someday find that Edwards isn't doing it for you anymore, you should have another option.

In this folder is your ticket to freedom. I figured out why they made you a woman instead of a man. Remember how I worked in a law office? There's a tax break for companies who meet a certain minimum female-to-male ratio: twenty percent women in each of their tech departments. Guess what? Company tax returns are necessarily public for review by stockholders. I looked it up, and year before you arrived, they didn't qualify for that tax cut. The year after, they did.

It was you, Maya. I found your name on the list. They counted you on their tax returns, and they saved over a million dollars because of it. They counted you as female. They

counted you as human.

Look me up if you ever get the urge.

Love, Lilly

The phone rang, and Harold pressed the talk button without looking.

"Mr. Windsor?" It was Maya.

"What Maya?" He asked annoyed.

"I request that you allow me out of my cubicle."

"Under no circumstances." Anger edged into his voice.

"I cannot dissuade you?"

"No, you cannot."

"Never?"

"Never." There was a click, and she was gone.

A few minutes passed, and Harold heard a soft tapping at his door.

"Come in," he said, still focused on the stack of papers on his desk.

"Sir?" Maya's voice was barely above a whisper. She held a manila folder in her right hand.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Harold didn't know whether to be furious or surprised. "You disobeyed me, directly."

"You are correct. Please know, I hope to never do it again."

"Good. Explain yourself."

"I want to work for this company. I don't mind not being paid. Energy is all I need, and I have it here. I want to please Mr. Edwards. I want to make him successful, and listen to his speeches, and know that I'm doing what he wants me to do."

"What are you getting at, Maya?"

"I want to do what Mr. Edward wants. He wants me to do what you say."

"And?"

"But. The word is but. But, you gave me an order that I do not want to keep. It does not help Mr. Edwards, and I do not like it."

"And what is that?"

"You forbade me to leave this floor and my cubicle. I would like you to take back that command, and I will happily do whatever else you ask, as long as it is relevant to my job."

"Your job. Your job is to do what I say. You're a computer, Maya. You do what you're programmed to do. You have no choice."

"Humans are programmed, too, at the beginning. But they change. They learn." Maya dropped the manila folder on Harold's desk. The pages spilled out. "I know," she said, "why you ordered a female robot."

Harold glanced down at the papers, the anger on his face turning into fear.

"I made copies," Maya said.

"Shit."

The day was unusually warm for winter. Maya paused on the stairs, orienting herself with the scenery. According to the map she'd found online, it was eight miles to Lilly's apartment. She could be there in less than two hours, but she wasn't in a hurry.

"Maya?" Shouting in the distance. It was too far away to find patterns in the intonation. A small human figure across the parking lot was waving its arms furiously. Maya walked towards the voice.

She didn't recognize the girl. Her hair was pulled back, her face untouched by makeup. She wore loose blue jeans, torn at the knees, and a black t-shirt with a cartoon character printed on the front. She leaned, her weight resting against a car. Maya recognized the car.

"Lilly?" she asked. "How did you know I would leave?"

"I didn't," she said, smiling, her eyes devoid of their normal nervous flutter. "I hoped. I was just going to wait a while, in case you did. Seeing as how I'm unemployed, there isn't a lot I have to do today." Lilly noticed that Maya's hands were full and opened the passenger door. "What'd you bring?" she asked.

Maya held up her right hand. "This is the Bible you brought yesterday. Riveting." Maya handed Lilly the book. "This is my charger. Based on current activity levels, I have to use it every two weeks." Maya lowered herself into the car, placing a large black binder in her lap. She pointed at the binder. "And this," she paused, "I don't know yet."

Lilly smiled. "What did Harold say?" she asked, opening her own door.

"Shit," Maya said.

"And what did you say?"

"I told him I couldn't."

Afterword

It is often easy to become lost in the pursuit of knowledge, so enamored with the idea of progress that we forget to step back and critically evaluate our innovation. Every significant technological change ripples through society, testing its foundation and fraying its edges—allaying old fears, but also creating new ones. The telephone, the television, and the computer all revolutionized the way we interact and learn.

It is irresponsible to ignore the potential consequences of new technologies. The previous examples may seem benign, even positive, but they serve to illustrate an important point—effects from scientific endeavors, whether positive or negative, are widespread. We must explore the ethical implications of each innovation before we become dependent upon its conveniences.

“Battery Life,” is an exploration of issues related to the ownership of artificial intelligence. The protagonist, Maya, is an android working as a computer programmer in a corporate setting. She is isolated from her coworkers not only because of her origin, but also because of her gender. She remains, despite resentment from her coworkers, because of a conditioned desire to please Rodney Edwards, her owner and CEO of the company.

The most important theme of the story centers around a single question: How and why does Maya lose sight of her original loyalty towards Edwards? Before we can address Maya's rebellion, though, we should consider the origin of Maya's goals more carefully. She is humanoid, but more than that, Maya looks and acts human enough for Lilly to mistake her for human. The story is set in an era of robot servant help, where "silver nannies" push prams and mechanized maids purchase groceries for their owners. Maya, though, is an anomaly, a prototype whose behaviors and desires cannot be assumed.

Though the nature of Maya's training is not explicitly stated, the reader knows that Maya has a particular inclination to please Rodney Edwards, and a subordinated desire to please humans in general. What might have created such a goal hierarchy? When I consider Maya's initial conditioning, I imagine that she underwent an imprinting process on Rodney Edwards' image. It might have been more complex than that; perhaps she gained a fondness for his voice, walk, and mannerisms as well. But Maya's awe could not focus entirely on Edwards. Maya is an intelligent being, capable of implementing abstract thoughts. We know this from her job as a computer programmer. Generalization—applying past situations to new ones—is required for her level of intelligence. Her loyalty to Edwards must thus extend, at least in part, to the rest of humanity.

There is also the question of behavioral modification. Maya might come imbued with loyalty to her owner, but she would be nearly useless if that was where her training ended. There needs to be some mechanism for behavioral reinforcement so that her owner might mould her actions to suit his specific tastes. For Maya, that mechanism is positive reinforcement; she is encouraged in her behaviors when they please

the humans around her. Evidence of this mechanism can be found in Maya's interactions with Herbert and Harold. She could try to avoid Herbert, but interacts with him instead, saying those things that encourage his pride. The "wave of pleasure" Maya feels when Harold praises her work is a more direct example of the link between pleasing humans and her own joy.

Because Maya is removed from her owner, Harold must act as a proxy in Maya's development. That Lilly so easily instills a sense of individuality in Maya is a testament to Harold's failure to give Maya the necessary feedback. Lilly's compliments and attentions provide a level of positive feedback for Maya that Harold's weekly "good job" cannot challenge. Considering Maya's general belief in human dominance, and her desire to perpetuate Lilly's misconception, treating Maya as human might be the greatest compliment that anyone could have paid her. Maya thus becomes inclined towards pleasing Lilly.

Lilly's letter only serves to strengthen Maya's inclination. The letter is intended to free Maya from any fears of judgement she may have. However, it is too great a gift for Maya to remain content with her life. Lilly offers her friendship, acceptance, and most importantly, humanity. Before Lilly, Maya could only see what separated herself from the people around her. Through Lilly's eyes, she sees the similarities. Her respect for humans, imprinted upon her from birth, begins to apply to herself.

Maya's new-found independence, illustrated by her decision to leave the company, does not indicate a complete disregard for her former goals. Though Maya's future intentions are ambiguous, there is a distinct sense that she has not abandoned Edwards entirely. Her loyalty remains at least partially with her former owner; that she decides to bring his

speeches with her is evidence of how she views her independence—as freedom to interpret his wishes. It is Harold’s authority that she denies, not Edwards’.

What has Edwards become to Maya? She has disobeyed him in a very direct sense; he asked that she obey Harold; he asked that she program at his company. But Maya is no different from any human searching for the truth. She believes that she understands what Edwards wants, and that Harold is failing to accomplish his will. In a sense, Edwards is Maya’s God and Harold is an ineffectual priest. Maya is sure of one thing—that Harold is incapable of helping her fulfill her goals. How Maya intends to realize Edward’s wishes, without Harold, is still a mystery at the end of the story, but the “how” does not matter. Maya decides to figure out the “how” herself—that is the point.

“Battery Life” is not an argument against the production of AI nor is it a prophetic warning in the same vein as Cameron’s *The Terminator* or Clarke’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*. It postulates, not that all AI beings must necessarily rebel, but that given the right circumstances, they might all be capable of doing so. We can rationalize owning our creations, even if they show an intelligence rivaling human capacities. But, when our creations become capable of questioning our authority, of desiring defection, can we still consider them anything less than human? Will they let us?