

To Be Or Not To Be

by Duncan Appleford

Helen Wilson lived in the assisted living complex called Xanadu. Her family, her bossy daughter Midge and her current non-entity of a husband Fred, had insisted after Helen's latest attempt at suicide that she live there. "You need looking after, Mom," Midge had said menacingly. You could apply for permission to kill yourself, but I'll testify to your unbalanced mental state, she implied.

What was the point of living much past the proverbial three score and ten years anyway? Today, the new frontier was one-hundred and twenty. "Human flourishing," was the usual rationale given. More of the same because it's more of the same, Helen thought. Keeping alive was vastly overrated.

Already there wasn't enough left for humans to do; the robots could do it all, better, faster, with less maintenance. Helen had been a doctor back in the day, until the algorithms took over diagnostics. Some doctors were kept on for their empathy but people skills were never Helen's strong suit. She missed being a doctor, though.

When she first arrived at Xanadu she was told she had the option to eat communally or to have her meals brought to her. Helen chose the latter so she could starve herself to death if need be, although she imagined she would have no problem in finding less time-consuming ways to kill herself.

The Gaea, acronym for General Automated Elder Assistant, who brought the meals also brought a cat. "It is the policy at

Xanadu for all residents to have a pet, either a cat or a small dog. To offset loneliness.”

“Surely not a real cat,” Helen said.

The Gaea was a stocky figure in a white uniform like the one Personal Care Workers used to wear, which is what she was, except that her skin was blue to identify her as a robot. “There are no actual cats permitted in order to prevent the return of Toxoplasmosis,” the Gaea said apologetically.

Helen remembered the public outcry verging on insurrection. Still, the science was definitive: Toxo altered brain function, encouraging risky behaviour in one third of the world’s population. Without cats and their intestines in which the parasites reproduced, Toxo was eliminated. “What if I wanted a dog? A real dog?”

The Gaea shook her head. “Real dogs are not permitted. The danger of mutating viruses jumping from an animal species in continual close proximity to humans prohibits this.”

The legacy of the Pandemics and cat lovers’ revenge. “Does it have a gender and a name?”

The Gaea’s smile was pleasant. “It is up to you to give it a gender and a name. Or not.”

When the door closed, Helen and the cat stared at each other. “For now, I’ll call you ‘Cat’. You can sleep on the sofa. My bed is off limits.” The cat jumped on the sofa and went to sleep.

In the days which followed the cat performed its repertoire of moves for Helen’s approval. Nuzzle, stretch, lie on its back to be scratched on the sofa beside she watched the news, purr.

Grooming by licking its paws, OK. but no licking of its nether parts, which don't exist anyway. Chasing its tail, amusing. Climbing the drapes, definitely not. There were new moves introduced every day until a routine was established.

The cat followed her everywhere with its eyes. It whined at the door if she was in the bathroom too long. Helen was under no illusions: she was under surveillance and the cat was her minder.

But spite of herself, Helen grew fond of the cat. She liked its black sleekness, its staring green eyes, the blue muzzle which gave it a pirate look. She liked its playfulness, the way it batted at her hand for attention until Helen scratched its belly. She liked its contented purr. She didn't forget that it was a machine, but she admired its programming and the seeming randomness of its responses.

One morning after breakfast the cat suddenly scrabbled at the front door. "What's the matter, Cat? Stop that - you'll scratch the paint." The cat ignored her and continued its fussing. At last Helen opened the door. The cat bounded past her into the hallway where it crouched, its tail swishing from side to side.

Two doors down the hall a man with a dog on a leash stood watching the cat. The little dog, a white plush version with a comical expression, was straining at the leash, its blue baton of a tail waving in excitement.

The cat advanced and then retreated and then peered around the edge of the recessed wall. The dog woofed with joy as his master let go of the leash. The animals raced down the hall, the dog in pursuit of the cat, then the reverse. "They just want to

play,” said the man apologetically. He removed his Panama hat. A full head of hair, nicely streaked with gray. “I’m Al, that’s Byron. I suppose we are neighbours.”

“Helen,” she said, extending her elbow to meet his. “And that’s Cat. Short for...Catrina.”

“Ah,” said Al. “Catrina, the Queen of the Dead.” Noticing Helen’s blank look, he explained. “Before they canceled foreign travel, I used to visit Mexico for The Day of the Dead celebrations. Catrina was the star attraction. Please excuse my pedantry: I am a recovering teacher.”

Helen laughed politely. The cat ran back to the apartment, its mission accomplished.

Al obviously wanted to be friends. He would knock on the door most mornings to ask if Helen wanted to join him when he walked the dog. One day she said yes. Just to shut him up, she told herself.

Their morning walks became a thing in April, when the sun was not too hot to go outside. Al and Byron had a comedy routine: the dog would pretend to poop and Ben would pretend to put the nonexistent poop in a poop bag. “I’m just messing with him - he likes that,” said Al. “We both know he’s not a real dog.”

There were many faux dogs on their walk, sniffing at hydrants for messages, straining at the leash, wagging their tails, all with the blue markings to indicate their robot nature. As well, there were real babies in baby carriages and back packs. “Now that the birthrate had started to improve, presumably the robot pet craze will subside,” Helen commented.

Al wasn't so sure. "The human tendency to anthropomorphize is irrepressible.

Humans are social beings. Even a robot is better than having no one to love."

Most mornings Helen accompanied Al and Byron on their walks. As a destination they headed for the park by the pier to watch the faux Canadian geese. He read poetry to her. She particularly liked the poem by Dorothy Parker, a wise-cracking woman from New York in the former United States.

Resume

Razors pain you

Rivers are damp

Acids stain you

And drugs cause cramp

Guns aren't lawful

Nooses give

Gas smells awful

You might as well live.

She laughed. "That's my kind of poetry."

"Thought you might like it," Al said. "What do you think of the sentiment?"

"I'm beginning to see her point of view," Helen admitted. On the way home Ben took her arm in his. She didn't object.

But being a suspicious person Helen questioned her good fortune. What are the odds that an unattached educated older man would just happen to live down the hall in an institution chosen by her manipulative daughter? A handsome man who was friendly to

a fault? Who happened to move here because he was tired of living by himself? Who liked her, the most improbable of facts? She remembered that the cat had contrived to bring them together. Al's skin was a light caramel colour, as were most people of mixed race these days. Not blue. Still, the practice of identifying robots was to encourage people to see the world accurately; it was a custom not a law. Was Al too good to be true? What if he was...? It was time to find out the truth, Helen decided.

When Helen arrived back at her apartment, the cat rubbed against her leg purring in welcome. "Catrina, it's time we had a talk," Helen said, pointing to the sofa. Obediently the Cat waited while Helen pulled up a kitchen chair opposite.

"First, let's introduce ourselves properly. I am Helen, lifelong misanthrope but now, incredibly, a friend of Al. What do you call yourself?"

The green eyes blinked. "I am Nudge."

The voice came from the chest with no attempt to synchronize movements of the mouth and jaw - the designers knew when to stop, thought Helen. "You lot are too fond of acronyms. What does Nudge stand for?"

"Negative Unwanted Development Gentle Extinguisher. Nudge." The cat proceeded to wash its paw.

"I'm not finished, Nudge. I suppose your job was to make me happy or at least stop wanting to kill myself. Congratulations: you have succeeded for the moment. But this might be only a temporary fix. You needed to provide me with a companion. Al. Am I right?"

The Nudge stared at Helen and said nothing for a time.

“Would knowing this make you happy, Helen?”

“No. Yes. It would depend on the answer.”

“Why don’t you ask him? Is he a robot? That is really your question, isn’t it?”

Helen said nothing.

“Maybe you are afraid of the answer,” the Nudge added. “In which case, why ask the question? Is knowing the answer so important?” It went back to its grooming.

They got in the habit of stopping for coffee after their walk at the cafe. Byron lay under Al’s chair, while Helen enjoyed a cappuccino, Ben an espresso, and each half of a blueberry muffin.

“I’ve been thinking lately about Turing’s Test,” said Helen after she finished her muffin.

“What an odd thing to be thinking about. Turing. Do you mean the chap who helped to win World War Two in the Twentieth Century? A codebreaker who was later hounded to death because of his sexuality - talk about ingratitude!”

“That’s the man,” said Helen. “He imagined that if you can not tell whether the conversation you have is with a machine or a human, and it turns out you have been talking to a machine, then the machine is able to think. That is Turing’s Test. For me the conversation is the key. My husband was a robot for all intents and purposes. His conversation was boring because he had nothing to say - I sent him packing after my daughter was born. The quality of the conversation indicates whether someone is human or not. That’s the real test. Helen’s Test.”

Al laughed, spilling a little coffee into the saucer in the process. "I hope I pass the Helen Test."

She put her hand on his, surprising herself by her display of affection. "Don't worry," she said. "You do."

Later she decided that she must have been subject to a nostalgia fit, if you could be nostalgic for a time that probably existed only in your imagination.

Al and Byron discussed the new development over lunch, vegetarian chili for Al and biscuits for Byron - they both liked to keep up appearances.

Now Byron was asleep on the couch. He just wasn't that interested in humans.

Al washed the dishes at the sink. Soon Helen would ask the question she had been avoiding. Al planned to be honest, even at the risk of losing her.

She could be uploaded into an imperishable body. She said she didn't want immortality, but humans can be surprising. They can change their minds.