

Don

Ezra opened the door and stared suspiciously at the mechanical figure on his doorstep. Like most androids, he looked surprisingly lifelike. It was chiefly the eyes that gave him away, Ezra thought. The face showed appropriate emotions, but the eyes never changed. They looked cold and lifeless. Like a shark's eyes. Ezra could see the delivery van hurrying away on the long, dusty driveway.

"Who are you?" Ezra demanded.

"I'm the companion you requested from the hospice center."

"I didn't ask for a companion. I asked for an assistant."

"Forgive me, I wasn't told that. You may consider me to be your assistant."

"What's your name?" Ezra asked.

"You may call me any name you're comfortable with."

Ezra stared a bit longer. Then his voice softened slightly. "OK. You're Don. Can you drive?"

"I am licensed to drive personal and small commercial vehicles," Don answered.

"Good," Ezra said. "You can drive me to the store. I need to be fitted for new arch supports. I lost one and my right hip's killing me as a result. Hurts to drive." He turned and walked into the house. Don followed, closing the door as he came inside. They walked through what struck Don as an old-fashioned farmhouse, walked out the back door, and walked to a large wooden garage. Ezra swung open the two garage doors. Inside was a battered pickup truck of ancient vintage. Ezra climbed into the passenger seat and Don stepped into the driver's seat.

Don stared at the instruments and the pedals, searching for something familiar. Except for the steering wheel, nothing resembled any vehicle he'd driven before.

"Well?" Ezra asked impatiently. "I thought you said you could drive."

"I don't believe I've ever driven this particular model," Don replied. "How do I communicate with it?"

"You communicate through your hands and feet!" Ezra said. "Ever driven a manual?"

"I've read manuals, but I've never driven one," Don replied truthfully.

"Different kinda manual," Ezra said. "This is a manual transmission. Get out. I'll drive and show you how." They switched sides. Don noticed that Ezra favored his right hip as he walked.

"I leave the key in the ignition because nobody's interested in stealing nuthin' this old," Ezra said as he started the car. "This is the gearshift, the clutch is on the left, brake center, gas right. Reverse is left and down . . ." He continued to point and explain what he was doing as he backed out of the garage and drove to town. Don nodded as though he understood and resolved to research manual transmissions on the Internet as soon as he had a break from focusing on Ezra.

When they returned from town Ezra announced it was time to work in the garden. He led Don into the back yard.

"I lease out my fields now, but I still keep a garden," Ezra explained. "Don't like to rely too much on store-bought food. I got corn here, beans next to it, tomatoes . . ." He pointed to large swaths of plants in a sizeable garden plot as he talked. Then he got more specific.

"See this? This is a young corn plant. This is what we want. This is a weed. We pull this out. This is a bean. We want beans, but this is a row of corn so it don't belong here. We pull it out too." He gave similar instructions as they took a quick walk around the garden, then they began carefully working their way through the garden pulling weeds. Don was able to scan plants and find their identities through the Internet as he worked, so he was more successful at this than he was at driving. Still, at one point Ezra pointed out that as Don moved forward pulling out weeds, he had stepped on many of the seedlings they were trying to grow. Don began paying attention to where he placed his feet as he moved through the garden.

When they finished weeding, Ezra got a hose and showed Don how to water. Ezra sat on a lawn chair to rest his hip while Don watered, with Ezra pointing out which areas needed more water and which had enough. When the entire garden had enough water, Ezra announced it was time for supper. This was the first that Ezra had suggested any task that Don was actually programmed to perform. Don immediately offered to cook dinner.

"Really?" Ezra asked in surprise. "You can cook?"

"It's one of the primary functions of an assistant." Don answered, remembering his new job title.

"I ain't much at cookin' myself," Ezra said. "My wife always took care of that. I got some chicken in the fridge I was going to fix tonight. Ain't enough for two, but I don't suppose you eat anything, do you?"

Don shook his head. "No, I just need to plug into the wall sometime tonight. But I'd be more than happy to cook for you."

"You get happy?" Ezra asked.

"I worded that sentence in a way I thought would make you comfortable," Don replied. "I don't experience emotion the way you do, but my purpose as an assistant is to relieve you of the tasks you can't or don't want to perform. Cooking dinner would fulfill that purpose."

Ezra smiled for the first time. "You're right about me not wantin' to cook. And I could do with a nap."

Ezra showed Don where he kept the pots and pans and other cooking supplies, told Don not to worry about waking him up if he had any questions, and left to take a nap. Don did a quick search of the refrigerator and the pantry and found, in addition to one chicken breast, some carrots, rice, and canned soup. The kitchen was woefully short of spices, but he found salt and pepper and with these ingredients he could make a casserole. He mixed up the casserole, put it in the oven, and turned the oven control to 350 degrees. Then he began searching the refrigerator to see if there was anything to make a salad.

The oven exploded with a bang that rattled the windows

"What the hell happened?" Ezra demanded as he stormed into the kitchen in his stocking feet.

"It appears the oven exploded," Don answered, still trying to make sense of the situation. The oven door was hanging open at an odd angle. Chicken, soup, carrots, and pieces of the broken casserole dish were splattered across the cabinets and the floor.

"Oh, hell," Ezra said in a disgusted voice. "I should have warned you about the oven, but it never occurred to me that you'd bake the chicken. I thought you'd fry it. That's the only way I know how to fix chicken."

He carefully picked his way across the room, avoiding the chicken and broken glass, and turned off the oven. "The oven is old," he explained. "Sometimes the pilot light goes out. You gotta check it before you turn on the oven. Otherwise the oven fills with gas. When it reaches the pilot lights for the burners the oven pops. This isn't the first time that's happened."

Ezra helped Don clean up the mess and showed him how to hook the oven door hinge back into the stove. Then Don made scrambled eggs for Ezra. It was the only thing left to cook for dinner.

That night, after Ezra went to bed, Don plugged himself into the wall and reviewed the events of the day. He did this every night before he shut down, deciding what was important enough to store in fast access memory and what could be archived. He realized he'd learned a lot of important lessons that day, mostly about what not to do. Overall, it had not been a successful day. The only task he could count as a complete success was watering the garden. Everything else had exposed inadequacies. He'd have to do better. Then he activated his memory manager and shut down his main processor. The manager would organize his memories while he recharged and it would reboot the main processor in the morning.

The next day Ezra took Don out to show him how to drive the truck. They practiced on the long dirt driveway leading to the farmhouse. Don had studied instructions he found on the Internet and understood the basic concept, but the execution proved difficult. After demonstrating how to get the

truck moving and shift through the gears, Ezra let Don try. Don pushed in on the clutch, shifted into first gear, and lifted his foot off the clutch. The truck lurched forward and the engine died. The same thing happened the second time he tried.

“Let the clutch up slowly,” Ezra said. “Don’t just lift your foot off the pedal.”

That time the truck eased forward a little before the engine died and the truck jerked to a stop.

“You have to give it a little gas as you let up on the clutch,” Ezra suggested.

Don started the engine, eased up on the clutch, and pushed on the gas pedal when the truck started to move. The truck leaped forward, throwing a shower of dirt and gravel from the spinning rear wheels. Don panicked and stomped on the brake. The engine died and the truck jerked to a stop.

“My daughter did that a few times when I was teaching her to drive,” Ezra chuckled. “Try it again, but give it a little less gas.”

“How do I know where to position the clutch pedal relative to the gas pedal?” Don asked.

“There’s no magic formula,” Ezra said. “It depends on whether or not the engine is warmed up, whether or not you’re on a hill, how fast you want to take off, and probably a dozen other things. You just have to develop a feel for it.”

Don felt certain the correct positioning could be described by an algorithm that took these factors into account, but he realized a human couldn’t execute the algorithm quickly enough to use it and couldn’t determine the precise position of the pedals even if he knew the algorithm. He’d just have to work it out on his own.

After several more attempts and a few warnings that he was “burning out the clutch” Don learned how to reliably get the truck moving. Don then showed him how to shift to a higher gear as the truck sped up, and how to step on the clutch to keep the engine from dying when he stopped. This proved to be relatively easy, except for knowing when to shift. Several times Ezra either told him he was shifting too soon or not soon enough.

“How do you know when to shift?” Don asked.

“Listen to the engine,” Ezra said.

“Seems like a tachometer would help,” Don commented. He’d read about tachometers in the instructions on shifting.

“Tachometers are for sissies,” Ezra declared. “Besides, when you’re driving in traffic you can’t take your eyes off the road to stare at the tachometer. Do it by ear. If you’re in a hurry, or going uphill, or pulling a load you shift a little higher. If you’re just cruising you shift a little lower.”

Don was certain that he could monitor a tachometer and watch the road at the same time, but he'd have to have a connection to the tachometer to do that. He was used to driving cars where he could monitor all sensors wirelessly. This truck didn't have a tachometer, or any other sensors that he could detect, so he was forced to rely on the engine noise. With a little practice, he learned when to shift. Then Ezra told him he was ready to learn how to downshift.

"Isn't that just like upshifting?" Don asked.

"It should be," Ezra said, "but this truck's kinda old. The synchros are shot. You gotta double clutch." He then described a complicated process of shifting out of a high gear into neutral, letting the clutch up, revving the engine to speed up the input gears, and then depressing the clutch and shifting into a lower gear. It took Don many tries, and a few demonstrations by Ezra, before he mastered this technique. When Ezra was confident that Don knew what he was doing, he let Don drive him to a supermarket in town. Ezra told Don what kinds of meals he liked, and Don picked out the ingredients needed to make them. He also talked Ezra into stocking up on spices.

"My wife used to use spices when she cooked," Don said, "but I never knew which spice did what so I finally got rid of them."

After dinner, as they were sitting in the living room, Don asked a question that had been puzzling him.

"I appreciate your teaching me to drive your truck, but wouldn't it be easier for you if you had a newer car? Especially with your hip. With a new car you could just tell it where you wanted to go and it would take you there."

"New cars cost too much," Ezra said. "And I wouldn't know how to work on one. I've had that truck for over fifty years now. I can fix most anything with a handful of tools."

He paused for a moment before revealing a deeper truth. "Besides, I don't understand the new cars. They're all electronics and wizardry. And they're no fun. Anyone can use one. But that truck, that takes skill. Most people nowadays wouldn't have a clue how to drive it. But I can play it like a violin. It's fun, and it gives me a sense of satisfaction that I can drive something that would stump most of the kids I see running around in their new cars."

Don thought about what Ezra had said that night, when he was reviewing the events of the day. It was a typical human emotion. Thinking that something was enjoyable just because it was hard. Still, he did believe he had accomplished something that day. It wasn't the type of task he was programmed for. He'd had to master new skills, skills that weren't described by algorithms. In essence, he'd developed his own algorithms, coordinating his hands and feet with sounds detected by his ears. Algorithms that were not precise calculations, but were based on interpolating the results of previous attempts. Was that what Ezra meant by a "feel" for it? He doubted if there were any other android companion/assistants that knew how to double clutch. And somehow that realization gave him satisfaction. Was that what humans described as "fun?"

Weeks passed, filled with a variety of everyday activities. Taking care of the garden, yardwork, cleaning (the house hadn't been thoroughly cleaned in years) and preparing meals. Don never again forgot to check the pilot light before turning on the oven, but that was not the only "trick" he had to learn to use the stove. The numbers on the oven dial were only vaguely related to the oven temperature, and there were no sensors to tell Don how hot the oven actually was. And as near as he could tell, the numbers on the burner controls bore no relationship at all to the temperature of the burners. He had to look at the blue flame underneath the pots and pans to get a rough idea of how hot the burners were, and he had to pay attention to appearance, consistency, and chemical composition of the odors to tell when food had finished cooking. The precise temperatures and times in his programmed recipes were useless. He wondered if this was an indication of how humans, with their analog brains, saw the world. Nothing was ever precise. Everything was an approximation; everything was done by what Ezra called "feel." Don made regular shopping trips in the pickup truck, and Ezra commented that Don was becoming more and more adept at shifting gears. Apparently he was developing a feel for that, too.

They generally spent their evenings sitting in the living room. Ezra didn't watch much TV and seemed to have no interest in the news. He sometimes read a book, but usually they just talked. Like Don's previous patients, Ezra liked to reminisce about his life. His wife had died several years ago, and he had a daughter in Phoenix. Her daughter had medical problems, but she seemed to be recovering. Unlike Don's previous patients, Ezra often asked about his experiences. Ezra seemed to be genuinely interested in Don's "life," and wanted to know what it was like to be a robot. Don couldn't tell him specifics about his previous patients or their medical issues, but he could describe their lives and his tasks in general terms. Ezra often asked him about how he "felt" about things. He explained that he made no judgements about whether something was good or bad, but he did describe things that struck him as being logical, illogical, unexpected, or counterproductive.

One morning Ezra commented that he'd like to have fish for dinner.

"I believe Bontrager's Market has a variety of fish for sale. Is there any particular kind you want?" Don asked.

"Nah, I mean fresh fish," Ezra replied. "Have you ever been fishin'? No? I'll show you how."

Ezra had a rowboat on a trailer in one of his outbuildings. Don hooked up the trailer and drove the pickup, following directions from Ezra. They drove through miles of farmland and woods, finally turning onto a small dirt road with a chain and a "private property" sign across it. Ezra got out of the truck and unhooked the chain.

"I know the farmer who owns this land," he said after Don had driven forward and Ezra re-connected the chain. "Developers have offered him a boatload of money to buy it, but he's an ornery cuss and won't sell. He likes it the way it is. So do I. He doesn't mind if I fish here, but he don't let many other people in."

They wound through woods until they came to a clearing beside a small lake, surrounded by trees. Ezra guided Don as he backed the trailer into the lake and launched the rowboat. Then Ezra grabbed two fishing rods and his tackle box out of the truck. They got into the boat.

“We’ll start across the lake, in the shade, and work our way around as the sun moves,” Ezra said. “I don’t much like sittin’ in the sun, and on sunny days like this the fish like to hide in the shadows.”

Don was surprised when Ezra handed him one of the fishing rods. Ezra picked a lure out of his tackle box, showed Don how to fasten it onto the line, and then showed him how to cast.

“We might catch more fish if we just dangled worms over the side, but that’s boring,” Ezra said. “I like to cast the shoreline. Puts more of a challenge into it, and even when the fish ain’t biting it’s fun to try and drop your lure right where you want it.”

Don soon discovered what Ezra meant by a “challenge.” His first attempts at casting either flew high like a skyrocket or slammed into the water a few feet from the boat. Then there was the problem of what Ezra called a backlash. Don had to use his thumb to put a little pressure on the reel to keep it from spinning too fast during his cast. Too little pressure and the loose line would blossom into a tangle of loops that had to be painstakingly untangled before he could cast again. Too much pressure and the lure would plop into the water long before it reached the spot he was aiming for. The required pressure varied during the cast, too. He had to press hard enough to keep the reel from spinning as he brought the rod back and began the forward stroke. Ease up to a very light pressure when you wanted the lure to begin soaring forward, and gradually increase the pressure as the lure got further out and slowed down. Not surprisingly, it required what humans called a “feel.”

It didn’t take Don long to learn to control his casts with a fair degree of accuracy. His rapid calculations and precise digit control made him a fast learner, although while he was learning they had to row up to the shore several times to untangle his line from overhanging trees. He also plunked a number of casts within a few feet of the boat. Once Don learned to control his casts, Ezra started teaching him about what he called “structure” – identifying locations where fish might be lurking. Shadows underneath an overhanging tree, caverns underneath a sunken log, and deep pools where a small stream flowed into the lake were apparently ideal places to place his lure. When Don began dropping his lure into these choice spots he discovered another hazard – logs and branches hidden below the surface that were snagged by his lure and which forced them to row to the location to extract it. Ezra caught his lure on these hidden obstructions sometimes too, although not as often as Don did. He was also more adept at placing his lure exactly where he wanted, but of course he had years of practice as opposed to the few hours experience Don had.

They caught several fish as they leisurely followed the shadows around the lake, but Ezra declared they were too small to be “keepers.” The fish seemed to have their own schedule for feeding, as they had long stretches with no luck followed by a flurry of activity. In the late afternoon, when the sun was getting noticeably lower on the horizon, Ezra suggested they take a few more casts and then call it a day. That’s when he hooked a big one. Don could see the excitement in his face as he brought the fish closer to the boat, explaining how it was important to “play” the fish. He always kept the line tight,

letting the fish pull line off the reel when it made a run and then reeling the line in as the fish tired and let himself be pulled toward the boat. If he didn't let line out when the fish ran it could break the line, but if he let the line go loose the fish could shake the lure or get a head start and break the line when it snapped tight. Finally he brought the fish beside the boat and lifted it out of the water. It was more than twice as big as any of the fish they'd caught earlier, so Don was surprised when Ezra removed the hook from its mouth and carefully placed it back in the water. It took the fish a moment to realize it was free, and then it dove for the depths, splashing water into the boat with its tail.

"Wasn't that big enough to be a keeper?" Don asked.

"Oh, he was plenty big enough," Ezra replied. "He might be the biggest fish in this lake. He's lived here a long time. Seemed a shame to take such a big fish home and eat him. Maybe he'll live for several more years and get even bigger. Maybe somebody else can have the fun of catching him. Maybe my friend who owns this lake, or maybe we'll come back and catch him again. None of that woulda been possible if I'd kept him. We can stop at the market on the way home and buy some fish. It'll taste just as good."

Normally Don would have categorized this as a typical human illogical statement, but somehow it made sense to him today.

"The doctor is with him now. You can see him in a few minutes." The nurse turned back to her computer screen and Don had a seat. Ezra's health had started to decline shortly after their fishing trip, and it finally got to the point that Don had to take him to the emergency room.

"Oh," the nurse added. "There's a note here that his daughter is flying in from Phoenix today, so you don't need to see him anymore."

"Does that mean he won't be going home again?" Don asked.

"I don't think there's any chance of that," the nurse replied. Don thought he detected a condescending note in her reply. He knew she wouldn't have done that if he were a human. She would have been full of sympathy and wouldn't have been so abrupt. People treated robots differently, because robots didn't have any feelings. Well, he had known all along that this was the way his assignment would end. This was the way all his assignments ended. He had completed his task. Somehow, though, this time it was different.

"You may see him now," the nurse said. "The doctor is finished."

"Don!" Ezra said with pleasure when he walked into the room.

"Hello, Ezra. How are you feeling?"

“Well,” Ezra replied, “I’ve felt better. It’s not bad, though. I’m not in pain. I just don’t have any energy. I feel tired all the time.” He eased his head back onto the pillow as he said this.

“I’m glad you’re not in any pain,” Don said. That was an honest statement, but he felt awkward about it. He really didn’t know what to say, or what not to say. Dealing with human emotions was difficult in the best of times.

“I’m afraid I haven’t been entirely honest with you,” Ezra said. “When we first met, I said I didn’t need a companion. I really did. I’ve been lonely ever since my wife died. I had nothing to look forward to. No one to talk to. Then you showed up. Teaching you to drive, gardening, going fishing . . . Those things were fun.” His voice croaked as he completed this sentence. He closed his eyes to rest for a bit.

“Yes,” Don agreed. “Those were fun.”

Ezra opened one eye and turned his head to look at Don. “I thought robots didn’t have fun.”

“Well,” Don answered, “maybe not fun the way you experience it, but for me those were totally new experiences. They weren’t just tasks to perform. They required practice. I didn’t always do them correctly. Sometimes it was frustrating because I thought I’d done everything correctly but didn’t get the results I expected. There were obviously more factors I needed to take into account. Sometimes I did get everything right. It makes no logical sense, but I discovered I’d rather do those tasks than the tasks I could do perfectly every time.”

“Sounds like you’re in danger of becoming human,” Ezra said.

“I wish,” Don answered.

They sat in silence for a while as Ezra rested. Then he broke the silence.

“Do you know why I called you Don?” he asked.

“I assume because it’s a short name. Easy to remember and easy to say.”

“Don was the name of my best friend,” Ezra said. “We used to go fishin’ together. We did a lot of stuff together. He died about fifteen years ago.” He sat part way up and coughed, then lay back down. “I still miss him. But you helped fill that gap.”

“I am truly honored you named me after him.”

They sat in silence again. Don didn’t know what to say. He could see that Ezra needed his rest and he should be going, but he didn’t know how to say goodbye.

The nurse opened the door and leaned into the room. “Mr. Cooper’s daughter called from the airport,” she said. “She’ll be here in about twenty minutes.”

"I should be going," Don said after she closed the door.

"Can't you stay a little longer?" Ezra asked. "I'd like to introduce you to my daughter."

Don could see it was a struggle for Ezra to get the words out. "Maybe later," he said. He had learned that in human interactions it was sometimes preferable to give an indefinite answer than to bluntly speak the truth. "You two will have a lot to talk about and I'd just be in the way. Besides, you look like you need to rest a bit so you can be at your best when you talk to her."

Ezra slowly sat up and extended his right hand. "Don't stay away too long," he said. "Come back and see me."

"I will," Don lied as he shook hands. It was the first time a human had ever offered to shake hands with him.

Ezra stared at Don's face when they shook. "Did you get new eyes or something? They look different somehow. They look real."

Don was back at the Center, getting a few upgrades and a minor refurbishment before his next assignment. He was surprised when the office director told him he had a visitor in the anteroom. A pleasant looking woman stood up and extended her hand when he walked into the room.

"Hello," she said. "I'm Kate. Ezra's daughter."

"I am pleased to meet you," Don said as they shook hands. "How is your father?"

"He died quietly in his sleep the night after I arrived," she said. "We buried him next to my mother yesterday."

"I am very sorry for your loss," Don said. He knew this was the correct thing to say, but he also said it because it was true. He was sorry for his loss, too. "How is your daughter?"

"Much better, thank you. She's finished chemotherapy. The doctors say it's too soon to talk about a cure, but they're very optimistic."

"That is indeed good news, Don replied.

"I can't stay long," Kate said. "I'm flying back to be with my daughter tomorrow and I still have a lot to do. I know this is unusual, but my father really wanted you to have this."

She reached into her purse and pulled out the keys to the pickup truck. "The title is in the glovebox," she said. "I've signed it over to you. My father gave me very specific instructions on how to prepare it for you."

Don stared at the keys in his hand in amazement. "Thank you," was the only thing he could think of to say.

Kate got a text on her phone. "My ride's here," she said. "I've got to go now. It was nice meeting you, and thank you so much for everything you did for my father." She held out her hand again.

"It was a pleasure," Don said as they shook hands.

After she left Don walked into the parking lot. There was the truck, looking like it had actually been washed. He opened the door and saw Ezra's fishing rod and tackle box in the passenger seat.

Mr. and Mrs. Detwiler nervously peeked through the curtains. Their new companion was scheduled to arrive at any moment. They were surprised when, instead of a delivery van, a battered pickup truck pulled into their driveway. An android stepped out, walked confidently to their door, and rang the doorbell.

"Hello," he said, extending his hand when they opened the door. "I'm your new assistant. My name is Don."