

Draft Radio Script

Robot on a Park Bench

By Brandon Getz

Adapted for radio by Harold O. Wilson

CHARACTORS:

NARRATOR: Judy Hearn

ROBOT: Robert Forester

MAN: Tom Welsh

VOICE: Angela Byrd

NARRATOR: The robot's knees had rusted in the autumn rains. He lifted each leg, exercising the oxidation out of the joints. According to his barometric sensors, there would be precipitation within the hour. More complications for his joints. A silicon frame, like the one the facility gave to newer models, might have been preferable: lightweight and unrustable. But everything has its flaws. In any case, he hadn't been given the choice.

As he walked through the park, his square, heavy feet sunk into the earth. Dirt clotted in their ridges of tread, which he would have to dig out later, before re-entering the facility.

A man was sleeping on one of the benches. The robot couldn't feel cold—a slowness in his metal body, maybe, but not the chill—though he knew the park was cold. His temperature gauges read 0.6 centigrade. Factoring the man's approximate age, weight, the alcohol content level on his sleeping breath, and the relative thickness of his camouflage blanket, and assuming temperatures and all other variables remained constant (the man did not wake up, no one added a thicker blanket), the robot calculated that the man would be dead in five hours.

With his joints squeaking and grinding as they were, the robot was sure the man would wake, but he only stirred and shifted onto his side, giving himself another fifteen to seventeen minutes, approximately, to live.

By the time he reached the carousel, the robot was tired. He had been tired, in fact, for a very long time. Perhaps he had been programmed tired. There were no recorded dates in his memory banks that were not tinged with some degree of weariness, some exhaustion with the world and his role in it, though what that role was he still did not seem to know.

The carousel's lights and music were off, and a heavy green tarpaulin had been hung from hooks in its ornamented roof to shelter the wooden animals from winter. Beyond the carousel, the river trickled toward the Water Power dam, the falls, and, after.

VOICE: [*Processing...Processing...*]

NARRATOR: 825.06 kilometers of lakes and reservoirs and dams, the ocean.

The robot stomped his treaded feet on the sidewalk but the dirt stuck. His knees were stiff. The barometer was dropping. He settled onto a bench, up the bank from the river, where two small birds wrestled over a lollipop stick. The birds' movements were so quick, they seemed incomplete, unfluid, as if from a film that was missing essential frames.

The birds hopped from moment to moment on their lithe, brittle legs, the stick like a thread between them.

MUSIC

When the first snowflake fell on the park, it settled on the robot's heavy, bolted jaw and froze in place. By then, the park seemed almost empty: the dying homeless man, an old woman dragging a little flat-faced dog, a jogger in gray sweats with white wires in her ears. Across the river, two park workers were raking leaves into big black bags. A young man with a beard walked his bearded dog past them and onto the footbridge. The bearded man and the bearded dog: somewhere in the banks of the robot's circuitry played an old television laughtrack. The two bearded animals turned toward the river, the smaller beast sniffing loose duck feathers on the concrete. They passed the robot without realizing he was there; he was part of the landscape.

ROBOT: Please, sir, ask your dog not to urinate on my foot.

NARRATOR: The man nearly jumped out of his skin

VOICE: [*Processing... "jumped out of his skin," an idiom appropriate for the sensation of fright/surprise*].

NARRATOR: The robot had been integrating the idioms he overheard in the facility, and he prized his ability to use them in context.

ROBOT: I have problems with rust... It is not pleasant.

MAN: Sorry... Come here boy.

NARRATOR: The man jerked the leash, and the dog, already finished, wiggled off toward a garbage can to sniff.

MAN: I'm sorry about that. I didn't see you.

NARRATOR: The robot tilted its skinny bucket head and shook the pee off its leg.

ROBOT: It's all right.

NARRATOR: The robot's voice played like a vinyl recording from a speaker in its mouth, and when it spoke, it opened its jaw wide to project the sound.

ROBOT: I have problems with rust. There are problems with my joints. The bolts, you see.

MAN: Is this a joke?

ROBOT: What is a joke?

MAN: Am I on camera?

ROBOT: I'm sorry.

VOICE: [*Processing...Processing...*]

ROBOT: That does not correspond with my definition of 'joke.'

(The man laughs.)

NARRATOR: The robot's mouth opened again. This time, the laugh-track played through the speaker in its throat.

(Old-timey laugh track.)

(The man stops laughing. The robot continued for a moment too long, then its jaw slammed shut with a clank.)

ROBOT: My data suggests that it is appropriate to express amusement when another is expressing amusement.

MAN: Your data is probably right...This snow might be a problem too. For your joints...It's really coming down.

NARRATOR: The robot noticed a car pass the park without its headlights on. It shrunk into the white horizon, its back lights flashing briefly red before it turned a corner, away from the river. Snow was settling on the robot's arms and legs. It fell in spirals over the river and the carousel and the other benches lining the sidewalks. It was collecting now, thin sheets and clumps of white over the whole park, the city.

He picked one snowflake out of the millions and followed its arc into the icy surface of the river.

ROBOT: I like the river. Do you watch it much?

MAN: Do I what?

ROBOT: Is this grammar not correct? My data assures me this verb is correct.

MAN: No, it's fine. I don't usually go around watching rivers. It's cold.

ROBOT: Minus zero-point-seven centigrade.

MAN: Right.

NARRATOR: The robot gestured toward the water. The articulate fingers and wrist whirred with the working of gears.

ROBOT: Can you see that?

MAN: See what?

ROBOT: A bird is dying.

MAN: I don't see anything.

MUSIC

NARRATOR: The man with the dog asked him where he was from, and was he lost? The robot wasn't lost. He had a GPS uplink in his chest. The engineers and technicians, if they had use for him, would page his uplink and convey the exact coordinates of the next intelligence test or hardware upgrade or military demonstration. Increasingly, because of the newer models, the more human-looking prototypes with their moving latex faces and silicon frames, they did not have a use for him. For now, he was just taking a walk. He'd been taking walks for months, each one a little further from the facility. From the satellite maps, he had known a river ran nearby. A runoff from the mountains, with a big rocky falls at the heart of the city.

He was watching the river now. The river and the people and the snow: the world with all its moving parts.

ROBOT: The snow is pleasant.

MAN: I guess so.

NARRATOR: In the storage room at the facility, two striped cats caught the mice that escaped from the laboratory cages, and when the mice were gone, it was the robot's job to feed them tuna from cans he held in his palm. The technicians had named them George and Gracie, though they were both females, the robot discovered, and he had secretly taken to calling the other Georgia. He liked that, having a secret. He liked learning that he could keep secrets.

He could feel the snow's weight now. The mean temperature of his body had lowered, though the networks of circuit boards throughout his

head and abdomen were running at safe temperatures. He calculated that, if he did not move from the bench, and if all other variables remained constant, his functions would begin to slow in less than two hours. He didn't think he would mind. The river was still moving. The man and the dog were still there.

As long as he wasn't asked directly. That was it. The technicians and the engineers never asked by what name he called the smaller cat. He was not compelled to tell them. They did not ask where he went when he wasn't in the storage room or why he never associated with the new models. When they did ask about the rust, he said it had developed from the oxidation process that resulted from the chemical fusion of water and iron. Technically, that had been a factual response.

The robot calculated that, as long as he was never asked directly, he could keep a secret indefinitely.

MAN: My girlfriend is going to wonder where I am. The dog is getting cold.

ROBOT: Yes. The dog will die in three-point-two hours, if variables remain constant.

MAN: Right. I don't want him to do that.

ROBOT: That would be unpleasant.

NARRATOR: The robot leaned forward to pet the bearded dog. The dog made a sound of fright and bit the robot's flat steel hand. This, it seemed, caused the dog more confusion than pain.

MAN: He doesn't like strangers much. He's starting to go blind.

ROBOT: If only he could be upgraded.

MAN: Right... Don't stay too long.

ROBOT: How long is too long?

MAN: Long enough to freeze, I guess. To cause frostbite, or whatever. Frost-rust.

ROBOT: Yes. That would be too long.

MUSIC

NARRATOR: On the telephone poles outside the park, there were no Missing Robot fliers. Cars rolled through downtown, churning dirt and gravel through the new snow. The man and the dog trudged through drifts of white toward home. Snowflakes continued their analog whirl, falling faintly and faintly falling upon all the living and the digital.

MUSIC

NARRATOR: The robot's sensors noted the darkening of the sky over the park. They measured spectroscopics and lumenoscopics and the gradual shutdown of the robot's own secondary functions. Data relayed from chip to chip, in whatever network of copper and silica comprised the robot's consciousness. Now, under thick clumps of wet snow, he did not bother to move his limbs, and anyway, the joints had been frozen for an hour. He watched the river move until it was too dark to see, or until

his optics ceased to operate, he did not know which. He listened to the water until his aural sensors froze over. The temperature kept dropping. He sat on the bench in the darkness of himself and waited for the last of his primary functions to cease, for the moment when he would no longer be aware of moments.

Who would feed Georgia and Gracie? The little cans of tuna on the floor of the store room: who would open them, if not him? That had been his job. A job is a kind of purpose, a reason to exist, however small. He thought of the cats mewling for their food, licking the juice from the cans off his hand. And he thought of them without him, ceasing to function, the movement of their breathing stopping quietly in some corner of the lab.

Even cats die alone. What happens then, that is a secret everything keeps.

Long after he could perceive it, the dark river reflected on the flat discs of his eyes. Primary motor systems ceased. Even if he'd wanted to, he could not move his limbs. Remaining power diverted to memory banks, to cognition. [*Processing...*] Gradually, memory began to fade. Hard drives froze in succession. The man and his dog were the first to be forgotten. Then the behavioral programs, the voice modulators. He forgot to worry about the cats or the rust in his knees; he forgot what a knee was. As the snow stopped falling, the last of his memory discs spun on its tiny wheels: the secret names of the cats, the walks he'd taken along the river, the way home.

VOICE: [*Processing...Error*]

ROBOT: What is: *cat*.

VOICE: [*Error*]

ROBOT: What is: *river*.

VOICE: [*Error*]

ROBOT: What is: *home*.

END