

In the Miller home, weekdays always meant the same thing: George got to wake up whenever he pleased and slip onto his chair-automaton that waited patiently beside his bed. The automaton would proceed to gently motor George over to the bathroom, where it would straighten and stand George up to the proper height for the bathroom-automatons to get to work. Upon maneuvering a still-groggy George into position next to the sink, his multiple bathroom automatons would move with mechanical precision to brush his teeth, comb his hair, wash his face, shave his chin, dress him in his weekday clothes, and finally apply a thin layer of smooth coconut butter upon his face to ease his chronic dry-skin—one small concern among a short of list of George’s current troubles.

Over time, George had become accustomed to his automatons. When he purchased his current set, he was at first reluctant to use such intimidating and silent machines. Metallic and shaped in the likeness of people, the automatons undeniably unsettled him. Their incomplete metal framework left vast gaps revealing the interior workings of the machines, making looking at them not dissimilar to looking at the inner workings of a well-crafted grandfather clock. With gears and rotors and levers whirring about inside them, the machines made George feel strangely nauseated whenever he concentrated too long on their inner workings. Their gaits often reminded him of the way that he himself walked, entirely human. Their humanoid faces with hollow eyes and stern mouths made them even more unsettling to look at, but their sheer strength and maneuverability, their incredible usefulness, made them worth having.

Upon cleaning George up, George’s automatons drove him across the plush carpeting, into the elevator, and down to the bottom level of his estate, where breakfast awaited him. His chair automaton sat him comfortably at the helm of his large mahogany table, and his cook-automaton immediately buzzed into motion. The scene was much like an autocrat being served by his devoted attendants in a massive banquet hall, only George’s dining hall was currently set to “quiet picnic on a foggy evening” rather than “magnificent marble palace.”

To be clear, it was a Tuesday, and Tuesdays at the Miller home always meant egg-whites, bacon crisped almost to black char, freshly squeezed guava juice, and pancakes of a texture so divine that they felt like silk upon intimation with the tongue.

After completing his meal, George received a twenty-five minute rest-period for digestion of his food, and then was delivered to his favorite room in the whole house: his living room, where George’s automaton settled him down into a comfortable recliner to enjoy the rest of his day watching television.

Every day, he loved to watch the same movie, James Dean's *Rebel Without a Cause*. He never seemed to grow tired of watching it, and everyday he still felt the same adrenaline rush from seeing James Dean’s character Jim Stark repeat the same line: “*I woke up this morning, you know... and the sun was shining, and it was nice, and all that type of stuff. And the first thing, I saw you, and, uh, I said, ‘Boy, this is gonna be one terrific day, so you better live it up, because*

*tomorrow you'll be nothing.' You see? And I almost was." Brilliant, thought George. Absolutely brilliant.*

Spending his entire day watching television wasn't the only luxury that George had at his disposal. At the bark of his tongue, George could have anything that he desired. Be it lavender-scented sheets for his bed or beautiful music from his violin-playing automatons, George became accustomed to the simplicity of a demand-and-receive lifestyle.

But in recent months, George had developed a strange anxiety, a suffocating sort of mental block that he wasn't able to pinpoint or get rid of, no matter what he tried. Stranger even, his doctor automaton—a stern, capable, and knowledgeable hunk of metal—cleared him of all disorders. Although the automaton could not talk, he nodded or shook in response to George's questions. In cases where verbose explanations were necessary, he wrote them down on a sheet of paper. When George inquired about his condition, his doctor automaton raised a hand and wrote down on a sheet of paper: "COMPLETELY FIT AND FUNCTIONAL."

In spite of these reassurances, George woke up at one o'clock in the morning thinking the air inside his lungs had solidified and that his airways had calcified. Puzzled at the hypocrisy of being so agitated and anxious despite living a self-imposed carefree life, George received a recommendation from his doctor-automaton to get a pet: "A FURRY COMPANION THAT WILL REINVIGORATE AND CLEAR YOUR MIND."

A pet, he thought. That would be nice.

George picked the dog, a combination of a pug and a poodle from an online pet shop, and it arrived on George's doorstep shortly afterwards. Discovered after delivery to be a *she*, the young pup was both small and chubby, with little legs no bigger than packaged sausages. She had dark eyes, innocent yet brooding, as if she were already planning how to thoroughly reinvent George's life. Energetic like a bunny, the puppy had needs and demands completely alien to George. She became such a nuisance, in fact, that one particularly tiring day for George, when he was forced to continuously cater to the dog's bathroom needs, he decided to call the dog "Trouble."

A week after she arrived, Trouble learned how to differentiate between automatons and George, which created a problem. Trouble loved to play fetch, which George insisted be conducted in the spacious living room via one of George's recreational automatons. Initially, this arrangement worked wonderfully: Trouble would have a delightful time, running and frolicking about across the synthetic grass-mode floors, yapping and barking. George got a kick out of watching Trouble play. But one day, during a game of fetch, Trouble mistimed the jump to obtain the ball, causing it to roll underneath the couch where George was reclining. Since the ball was directly within reach, George picked it up himself, and personally handed it back to the dog. After that incident, Trouble would wag her tail and use her nose to intentionally roll the ball underneath the couch to get George to throw the ball back to her.

And just like that, George, instead of the automaton, became the one who would play catch with her. With little patience to continue Trouble's game, George tried to find another way to weasel out of being Trouble's main catch-companion.

"Unit 7, initiate 'active mode.' Become a playmate for the dog by playing catch with her," George ordered.

Whirring into action, Automaton Number 7, George's finest and most life-like automaton, quickly programmed itself to George's instructions, and acclimated to the type of game that Trouble wanted to play.

Trouble protested, at first on a small scale, simply whimpering. As George ignored her, growls proliferated, and noisy patrolling of the house ensued. She knocked over anything that she could get her paws on, be it the virtual photo-generators (machines that created digital, sometimes moving holograms of images on George's walls) or George's favorite bubble lamps (floating bubbles of pure light, scattered around the house for both aesthetic and practical use). After a week or so of this, Trouble became uncontrollable, running all over the house, hopping onto tables and chairs, just to spite George.

Of course, George watched her misbehavior from a short distance, sad that she felt frustrated, but unwilling to do anything.

One day, while Trouble was bouncing around the house with desperate energy, she ran head-on into one of George's automatic windows—contraptions designed to help George to block out the outside world. Specially programmed to show any image that he desired, the windows displayed images ranging from the flickering lights of a modern city to the airy view atop a snowy mountain. Opaque, and never reflected, the windows made George feel safe and completed the aura of the enclosed and isolated house. However, they were razor-thin and definitely not puppy-proof. So when Trouble ran head-on into the window, it shattered almost instantaneously, showing the intrigued puppy a beautiful view of the outside that she had never laid eyes on.

George lived in an area of wilderness intentionally far away from any human contact, and as such, the region around George's house was untouched and completely wild, filled with lusciously variegated trees and bright, colorful flowers and bushes. The setting was spectacular, dynamic, and most important of all, *alive*.

Trouble became instantly enchanted. At first completely breathless at the sheer beauty and magnitude of the outside world, she cautiously stepped outside—a paw on the grass, just to ensure that it was real. Upon contact, she immediately recoiled at the touch of a foreign surface, damp as it was. Moments later, after she no longer feared that the unfamiliar ground would swallow her, she once again laid her paw on thick sod. Crunchy at the first touch, yet plush and

velvety once she stepped on the grass, she hopped completely outside of the house and into a world nothing like the place where she spent virtually her entire life.

Standing there momentarily, taking in both the fresh, natural air, and the distant smell of a squirrel carcass, she was at the same instance happy and alert for the first time in her short life. For a moment, she considered going back into the house, where the world smelled of pancakes. But upon further internal debate, just the smell of the crisp air not created by George's artificial-oxygen generators inside of the house was more than enough to win her over. The feel of the soft grass on her feet and the taste of the briny wind made her feel puissant and feral, and gave her a sense of resolution. No longer hesitant, she bounded off into the green thrushes of the hills, away from the house, and disappeared into the throes of the nearby trees, barking freely.

Back at home, George heard a shattering that he first attributed to Trouble's usual commotion in the house. Ignoring the sound, he resumed watching his television, but became suspicious when he felt a strange breeze and discerned alien scents non-native to those of his house. Ordering his automaton to take him to the hallway where he had first heard the commotion, George arrived at the shattered window just in time to see Trouble, outside on the grass. Silent, frozen with panic, he watched with whole engines roaring in his stomach as the dog took in her new environment. He made a slight move to reach her, only to see her bound away from him into the thick forest, out of easy reach.

George paused. He pondered whether to go after the dog and reclaim his only living companion, or to stay put, and allow his own complacency to dictate his response.

After all, Trouble had been the sole reason for the disappearance of his nightly panic attacks and his anxiety over his purpose in life. She had been the one to reintroduce vigor and liveliness into the house, and although she could be extremely irritating, she was nonetheless *his*. She slept with him, calming him down after he'd awake gasping from unexplainable nightmares. She curled up beside him on those lazy afternoons and slept with one paw on him as he watched television, as if telling him that he was more than her owner—that he was her friend.

The tug that he felt in his stomach was the tug of his heartstrings as she inched away. He wanted to get her back, to shout, to gesture, to set off on foot himself to reclaim his companion. It was as if he wanted the confirmation that he could still go after her, as if to make sure that he was still capable, with his own fleshy limbs, of going after the one thing that he really cared about. Taking short and rapid breaths, George slowly clenched and unclenched his fists as he cautiously stepped a solitary slipper-clad foot for the first time into the unfamiliar outside.

Standing amongst the thrushes, he heard a bark from the trees nearby. Overwhelmed by scents not artificially created, George was suddenly inundated with a wave of raw sensory information that made his knees buckle and his mind hazy. Despite this delirium, he remained intent on setting after Trouble, although one of his hands still firmly clutched the door jamb.

Hearing her bark becoming ever more distant, he took another step out the door, already visualizing her returning to his arms, licking and nuzzling his face as he embraced her in a hug, signaling to her that he would never let them separate again.

Determined, George let go of the door. Stepping completely outside, he saw out of the corner of his eye his own reflection in one of the shards of window lying near the wall of his house. Startled, George was rendered momentarily immobile, until he mustered up the resolve to pick up one of the larger shards of window to further inspect himself.

Mouth agape, he saw something he never expected to see.

He saw the hollowness of his own eyes, and the uniformity of his round metal face. He saw that he was rusty, like a service or two overdue, yet sleek and bulky, like a newer version of the automatons that he had grown accustomed to seeing around his house. He saw that he looked almost like a human, but not quite. His face was monotone and expressionless, and for once George could see the cold and glum countenance that he always wore. He saw gears whirring inside himself, barely hidden behind the metal cage of his breastplate.

Taking a few shaky steps backwards, George remained speechless. Dropping the shard of window he was holding, breathing heavily, he paused, felt his face with his own hands, touching every groove and edge of his metallic and inanimate body.

Was he real? Or had he somewhere along the way become inanimate? He couldn't remember. For George, perception was relative, which meant that an entire life lived in isolation had left him with nothing to relate to anymore.

After a few moments of gathering his thoughts, George remembered Trouble and took steps towards the direction of the nearby trees, but abruptly and unpredictably stopped just when he reached the grass. Extending and straightening every crevice of his spine, George stood straight up.

Intent, with a blank expression on his face, he turned around and walked back into the house.

It was a weekday at the Miller house, and weekdays always meant the same thing.