

Carl



AUSTEN TUCKER

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COLOPHON

Carl is a publication of FREE PLAY Publishing, a fiction imprint of The Arcades. Set in Lora and Inter. Designed and edited in Chicago.

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Carl

by Austen Tucker

My name is Carl and I work at Floor-Mart. I always have worked at Floor-Mart and I always will work at Floor-Mart, forever and ever, amen.

It's the middle of winter and I'm working in the parking lot. There are carts that need to be collected every ten minutes. I'm wearing a Floor-Mart T-shirt and the orange safety vest that the manual dictates I wear. It's snowing and it's cold, but I don't care. Androids don't get cold.

There are footsteps crunching in the oily snow just behind my back. My manager Florence is walking out to see me.

He's a small man, with a warm, customer-service smile and a clean combover haircut. As I turn to face him he is walking slowly, methodically, considering his words before he even speaks them. Tact. The mark of a true manager.

"Evening, Carl," he says to me. We shake hands out of mutual respect.

"Did you hear the good news?"

"No."

"Eustice turned in." He looks to a far corner of the parking lot that's littered with picket signs and candy bar wrappers. "Remember him? He was the Third Gen that worked in the back. You remember him, right?"

"Yeah. I guess I knew him." Eustice worked for me back when I managed a Floor-Mart. Good android. He had a latency of five milliseconds when it came to answering questions. That was two better than any other android in the store, good old reliable Eustice.

"Well, today he just decided that it was time. He came to me with the blue slip all filled out. 'Florence,' he said to me, 'I think I'd better go turn in.' His arm was sitting pretty low in the socket."

I look to the parking lot. There are plenty of carts to be collected. This is not an efficient conversation. "Probably an actuator went out. Happens all the time."

"Right, right." Florence wrings his hands and looks at the ground. Sheepish. My memory banks call it sour-face, when you have something to tell an employee but don't want to say anything. Manager dissatisfaction number twenty-one.

I can't take the stalling. "You can just say it. I'm here for the company, you're here for the company. I have work to do."

"Yeah. Sure." Florence forces himself to laugh. "It's like this, see. Yeah. My district manager, we had a talk about you."

"I'm listening."

"Well, see, it's not because we don't like you. Just remember that. We're tickled pink that a man with your experience is working for our Floor-Mart. We value every employee, and you are no exception." Taken from the company handbook, right to the letter. "It's just that... well... there are some problems we need to fix."

"Go ahead."

Florence nods and takes a deep breath. More sour-face. "First, since we're talking about actuators, you've looked tired for the past few weeks, Carl. Out of it. Dead."

"I know." I point to my forehead. The skin droops over where my eyelid should be. "The actuator went out last month. At least the skin's holding up, you know? Makes me look like I have lazy eyes."

"Not quite." Florence taps on the ridge of my brow. "The skin's wearing right down to the metal right here. It's unsettling for customers to look at. You should get it fixed."

"I can't. No one stocks the actuator."

Florence nods an understanding, managerial nod. "Custom-made?"

"Nope. Just old."

"Right... last-generation technology and all that. Totally understand. Just do the best you can, okay?" He doesn't understand. Managers say these things to make their employees feel less alone, to encourage good work habits. Managerial Motivation seventy-five.

"I can't help that I'm a workaholic," I say. Old manager joke thirty-three. Sometimes I pull a random one from the database, just to feel like I'm still important.

He points to torn-up beanbag of a stuffed animal hanging on the inside of my Floor-Mart vest. "Workaholic, sure. But I have a second complaint."

"You mean Phillip?" I take the stuffed rabbit from my vest pocket carefully, knowing that any sudden jerk might tear the belly stitching even further. He sits quietly in my hands, one arm, no legs, and a face put on upside down. Styrofoam beans poke out from the hole in his belly. It's garbage and I know it, even though I keep him around anyway. "He's my lucky rabbit."

"Right, right." Florence's mouth twists. "Looks like an old redemption prize, right? Like the ones you got from playing skee-ball or something."

I shrug. "This is where you say, 'It's company policy for workers not to wear or carry articles inappropriate to the completion of their assigned jobs.' It's on page twenty-four of the Manager's Manual."

"You read that too?"

"Nope. It's stored up here." I tap my forehead and wink at him. "But Phillip, I figured he could be an exception. He's a beaten-up rabbit, sure, but he's kinda cute. I found him lying in the toy aisle when I managed the old Floor-Mart. Company policy said I should throw him away, but hey. I couldn't resist."

"Interesting."

"He's my lucky bunny!" I say it even though it's not the right thing to say. These words just happen when an android gets older. That's what I keep telling myself.

"And that's just the problem, isn't it?" Florence shakes his head as he said it. More sour-face. "Carl, you're a wonderful worker. I want you to know that because, well, it's like this, you see..." he paused for another breath, "The District Manager is concerned about your mechanical well-being."

I laugh. "Sure, I'm a little old. I've been working here seven years, Florence."

"Eight," he corrected me. "It'll be eight this month. Android brains have a shelf life of six years, Carl. That's not to say that you're past your prime, though, because you've been indispensable out here as our cart collector for the past two months. You're a wonderful person, and a hell of an employee. I just wonder, well... did you ever think about turning in?"

The word registers a blank in my brain. I know something should be there but all I hear are the rat-tat syllables of a foreign language. "I've always worked here, Florence. That's just the way it is."

"I figured you'd say that." He pulls a pamphlet from his Floor-Mart jacket pocket and puts it into my hand. "Just... well, consider giving yourself to a reconstitution program. Thanks to donations from androids like Eustice new generations of dedicated Floor-Mart tools have been created to support Floor-Mart's efforts to bring affordable goods to the common people."

The packet reads, "So you're ready to call it a night." The front cover shows an android in a state of disassembly, a smile on his face. Bolts and hoses and diodes litter the page like confetti at a retirement party. I slip it into my orange vest along with my rabbit.

I understand but I don't want to get it at all.

"I know that this is hard for you, but just think about it. Eustice is going to come back as a street sweeper for us."

"He's taking your job, Carl. I could toss you back in warehousing, maybe graveyard shift stock, but I can't have you collecting carts. Eustice will do it better than you can."

"Then I'll work in back. Whatever you need done." That's the Floor-Mart way. Do what needs to be done, Fred Taylor be praised.

"I'm not getting through, am I?" Florence wipes his face and lets out a hiss of air. "This isn't supposed to be a problem," he says at length. "Androids just get it. They wake up one day and bam! DECO kicks in and they're ready to become something new. Third Gen model units are dead, Carl. And here you are wasting away with every passing shift. You can't last forever. What can you do?"

"Work," I say. "Just like I have for the past eight years."

The Roller Palace is five minutes and thirty-nine seconds away from the Floor-Mart. I count the time every night I walk to it. The Palace is empty when I arrive and empty when I leave. No one skates on the weekdays. I'm standing on shag carpet that's too dirty to be comfortable and too tough to be worth replacing. There's a cord running from my stomach to a small orange outlet just to the right of a half-dozen skee-ball machines that whine the sixty-cycle hum of an ungrounded electrical circuit. It feels warm and filling in my torso.

I shouldn't be at the Roller Palace.

I have no place else to go.

The owner is usually playing skee-ball when I come in. Norton. An old friend from my days as manager. He worked maintenance on androids in the store before his father died. Then he inherited the rink and became a business owner. He is a portly man, always smiling, always sporting pants that never quite cover his rear but always looked presentable at first glance. Managerial material by the Floor-Mart book.

I watch Norton play a few rounds. The machine makes no digital noises. He puts in a quarter, presses a plunger, and a line of wooden balls roll down to him. He scores and the machine rings a bell. The scoreboard is a hard plastic flipboard of numbers that make a satisfying “tack” every time he scores a point. Ding, tack-tack-tack. It settles into a soothing rhythm.

“Another long night?” he asks. He studies the pock-marked skee ball in his right hand before throwing it up the lane. The bell rings. The flipboard advances with a clapping noise. Ding, tack-tack. Ding, tack-tack-tack. Ding, tack-tack-tack-tack. Makes me feel more at home.

“You know you’re wasting time,” I say to him. Efficiency protocol number one seventy one. “You could be spending your time prepping skates or popping popcorn at the snack bar.”

He chuckles at me. Par for the course, I know; something about the way I talk gets him every time. “So your night was same as always: all labor, no pay. An android’s work is never done,” he says as he picks up another ball. Ding, tack.

“Your aim’s off,” I tell him.

“But I know you better than that.” He finishes his game and pops another quarter into the skee-ball machine. “You need something.”

“Maybe you can get me a new actuator,” I say. I point to my sagging eye. He shakes his head. Roll. Ding, tack-tack-tack-tack-tack. “Or maybe you can take a look. Fix it.”

“And pay me with what—shopping carts?” He laughs and taps his skull. “You know the decay time on those neural networks they used for your mind. Seven years. You’re losing it.” He looks to the bunny sitting in my pocket. “You keep a bedraggled stuffed rabbit for no logical reason. None. How efficient is that, ex-Floor-Mart-manager?”

“Phillip has nothing to do with this.” I cover the bunny’s head with my arm but I don’t turn away. Turning away is offensive. Never offend a potential customer.

“I’d call it a malfunctioning logic gate. You’re at some roller rink dive when you should be beautifying the shop. No. You get no wages, you work for a charging station. They’re trying to send the facts home and you don’t even care that you’re an android past his prime.” He shrugs. “Ever think of turning in?”

I ignore him. Always keep business matters and private matters separate. I need a new eyelid, not a lecture. Managerial Conduct 101. “Maybe you have someone I can contact. A vintage machine vendor, perhaps. Someone who works on the cheap.”

Norton shakes his head and looks to the ceiling. “I hear they take androids at the modern art museum, nowadays. Some prof takes the brains and bodies and has his students

rework them into mobile sculpture. Ever consider becoming an impressionistic representation? I think you'd make a nice Model T with some doing."

"I just need an eyelid," I tell him. A blue brochure is heavy inside my Floor-Mart vest pocket. So you're ready to call it a night. Turn in. Be done with everything. "Just an eyelid. That's all."

"Or maybe you can do pet care. There's always room for another pooper scooper drone in a pet-owning household."

"I just want an eyelid. I don't want to be turned in. I just want to keep my job and work for the better interests of Floor-Mart."

"They programmed you to say that."

"I like my job."

"That too; I've seen the programming." He smiles and throws a ball up the lane. Ding, tack-tack-tack. "But sometimes... sometimes you just have to... I don't know. Stop. Give it up." He turns from the skee-ball machine to face me. "Sorry. I was never good at giving these talks. It's part of why I left in the first place, Carl. Couldn't do it."

"But it's part of your job. You are a mechanic and an efficiency manager. You look out for the best interests of the store." Whose Floor-Mart is this? "You may have checked logic gates, and oiled joints, and run portable charging stations when associates needed a quick charge on twenty-four hour shifts, but you were important."

"Right. Was a mechanic." Norton clamps his lip into polite refusal position number seventy-five. "Look. I gotta kick you out early tonight. Doing a kids party. You know how it goes. I'll look at the eye tomorrow. Maybe we can rig something out of a pneumatic tube from your cheek. Maybe."

"Okay." I unplug my cord. "Where should I go?"

"I'll call Linda down at the Robot Hostel." Greenfield Regional Mechanical Repository, he means to say, but Norton is never precise with his words. "She owes me a favor anyway. I can get you in one of the pods for a night, wash you down, get your fluids changed. It'll do you good. Just get the hell out of here, okay?" He looks to the clock on the snack bar wall. "I can't have you here recharging when the families start arriving."

The hostel just outside of town is a spindle bubble-wrapped with capsules. It's a matrix of comatose androids laid end-over-end along the wall. Some sleep in liquid. Others sleep in bare metal. No one moves. No one talks. It is silent except for Linda's television game show blaring from the receptionist counter. I tap the bell on the desk. She looks up, shivers, looks down again.

"You're the one Norton was talking about."

I nod.

"Yikes." She points to an open tube at floor level. "Knock yourself out. You really should consider turning in – saves me a bunch of trouble." I nod and walk to the pod.

She laughs at her game show. Someone is paying her minimum wage to sit and watch a hundred pieces of metal recharge their lithium-ion batteries in a facility that's ten years past its time.

That night I dream of being a self-cleaning birdbath in a park, with plenty of sunshine on my face and no hands to wipe the shit from my eyes.

"You dreamed," the repair tech says. She is probing my ear with a thin pick of an electrometer. Data is flowing from my brain into her palm computer.

"Yeah. I dreamed." We're talking by the water fountain in the break room twenty minutes before shift meeting. She's wearing her Floor-Mart vest and a scanner on her belt. When she's finished with me she'll go back to taking inventory.

"Impossible."

"But I still dreamed."

"So." She spins the tool around inside my head. "What did you dream about?"

I read her name tag. Sandra. I compliment her on her hair. She smiles. Then I tell her about the birdbath.

"You shouldn't be dreaming." The tool goes further into my brain. She's looking at a screen at her hip pocket and pressing a few buttons. "Rest cycles are dead time for an android's brain."

"I know."

"But it was about being a birdbath, eh?" She shrugs. "Sounds like your DECO's trying to kick in. Have you thought about turning in?"

"It's come up before, yes." I feel heavy. Frustrated. I don't exactly know what that word means but I think of it anyway. Frustrated just sounds right.

"I mean, it's not every day you hear about an android dreaming. It's usually some sort of logic gate malfunction. Something catches and your sensory input tries to make sense of what you get—" she pauses and looks more closely at her screen. "Yep. That's the ticker."

"What's it?"

She reaches out in one single, fluid motion and plucks Phillip from my vest. I try to pull away, but by the time I react she has the bunny in her hand, the arms and legs dangling by threads. "There's your problem. It's causing a catch in your logic circuits. You care for it and you shouldn't."

"I know."

"Look. I'm no android. I don't get you; I just run my little maintenance tool when the manager tells me to run it and I figure out what's wrong. Hell, this is the first time I've ever actually used one of these units—we don't do so many androids anymore. Didn't test well. Remember the protests? The campaigns?" Phillip bobs this way and that as she talks. My eyes follow his every motion.

"They picketed my store," I say. "Lost three percent off our revenue."

Phillip is fraying. I can hear the threads tear.

"People want cheap prices, but they get real touchy when a company plays God." The bunny leaves her hand and tumbles, end-over-end, into the gigantic trash can in the corner of the back hallway. It falls into the gaping black plastic mouth and is gone.

"I know." My eyes are in the blackness, scanning for Phillip's innocent face; the plastic smell is sweet and stale.

She chuckles, pauses. "I guess... I'd just suggest that you start thinking about options. Yeah. Think. Do you think? I guess you think. I don't know. Just... get ready, I guess. Whatever you androids do."

She waits for an answer. I shrug. "You should get ready for the shift meeting," I tell her.

"Right." She pulls the machine off her shoulder and ducks into the manager's office. Then, while she is out of sight, I dive into the gaping hole and rescue Phillip from certain death.

Florence is outside greeting people as they come through the door. He's wearing a suit and a tie. He hands out coupons to everyone that comes into the store. Public relations 101: first suggestion in the manual.

He waves me over as I'm pushing a line of carts in through a small door. He has manager smirk number two seventy-five – the one for associates that aren't doing what they're supposed to do. "How's the shift going, Carl?" he asks me.

I run a quick procedure check. Carts are collected. Trash cans are clean. I'm still not recycled. "Good," I say.

"As always." He looks at my vest and points to the rabbit head poking through the blue mesh fabric. "So, well, yes. Let's see... how to put this. Right. Well, I mean to say... see..."

"You want to reprimand me about the rabbit," I tell him. Standard managerial procedure. Warn once, reprimand once. It's Management 101 in the Floor-Mart manual.

"Yes, that." He reaches forward and plucks Phillip from my pocket before I can reach down to protect the rabbit. "I told you not to bring him to work."

"I don't have any place to put him."

He tosses Phillip back at me. I fumble with the stuffed animal, making sure to collect every arm and every stitch in my gentle, cradling hands. "Get rid of him," he replies. "Simple as that."

"But I like him. Phillip keeps me company."

"Right." He rubs his nose. Intolerant expression number sixty-five. "Carl, how did you manage your Floor-Mart?"

The words come without thinking. Automatic demonstrative pattern number seven, used by district managers to evaluate efficiency. Reporting 101 in the Floor-Mart manual. "Two terabit wireless network allows me to receive and feed information to all my associates at once. The administrative measure results in a five point five percent reduction in operating costs, a ten point eight reduction in manhours, and a seven point three increase to total revenue."

Florence shifts his weight from one foot to another. "So getting everyone on the same page was simple. Yeah. Because they were all, well, androids. Correct?"

Florence's mouth is a wriggling electric tool. I see the sparks in his spittle, the pneumatics on his tongue. It's a wriggling, twitching snake trying to feed its way into my brain, guided by camera eyes that rotate and focus in the cool purple glow of the bug zapper disco ball.

"First-model RA androids with one to three years' use already logged. Total wear and tear costs total six point three hundred thousand, with total benefit coming to seven point two hundred thousand. Marginal benefit of androids proven larger than that of wage-earning human beings in seven separate third-party analyses."

"And you never had problems with androids displaying... strange behavior?"

"Problem androids recycled themselves in accordance with logic circuit DECO." He is a spark that slithers in the cool night sky. Whose Floor-Mart is this? "Androids feeling excessive wear and tear who calculate the cost of their repair to be greater than the benefit of their labor give themselves to local recycling plants. Sales of androids to recycling plants results in seven point three thousand dollars' positive economic profit per unit recycled." Fred Taylor be praised.

"Right, right." Florence shimmers like a short circuit. "I was just checking if you still understood the business of this whole deal. Yeah. Never know when it'll come in handy, right?"

"Right." We stand for a moment longer. The disco ball becomes a bug zapper. The zapper is the blue packet in his pocket. So you're ready to call it a night. I'm just waiting to touch that disco ball, that bright, electric purple disco ball that is so amazingly wonderfully bright and pretty.

Phillip is still in my free hand. I put him back into my vest pocket, nice and comfortable. Then I look away from the disco ball and the world snaps back into place.

"Can I go back to pushing carts now?"

Eustice works with me now. He's training for the job. Androids come back like blank slates sometimes. Side effect of turning in. They scoop out your brains and bolts and throw it into another body. Trained professionals aren't cheap. Trained technicians are. Eustice sees the technician.

Eustice lumbers along. They don't make reconstituted androids for speed. He has Floor-Mart brand tires and Floor-Mart brand vacuum brushes. He hums as he works. He goes back and forth between the two entrances and sweeps the sidewalk. Sometimes he sprays it with Floor-Mart brand nozzles that spray Floor-Mart brand cleaning solution. The sidewalk is already clean. Tomorrow I'll teach him how to bring in the carts so he can be more productive.

I try to talk to Eustice every once in a while. He has a speaker box made out of cardboard mounted just above his camera eye. They make the speakers in Japan. You fold them into a box and you have a speaker without the expensive housing. The innovation saves five dollars on every reconstituted android. When he speaks his voice is tinny, profitable.

"Welcome to Floor-Mart."

Good ol' reliable Eustice. "Good to see you," I reply to him.

"Restroom is to your left, three doors down."

"On the ball like always." Managerial conduct seven thirty-three – always compliment productivity. "How's the new job treating you? Any questions?"

"Have a nice night."

I look for something in Eustice's eyes. Eustice tells a joke ten seconds into conversation. That's why I like Eustice; he makes people laugh. "Got one for me today?" I ask. Managerial conduct number sixty-seven – encourage positive behavior with on the job training. "You used to tell one about a chimney sweep. Remember that one?"

"Restroom is third door on the left." The cardboard box mouth muffles the sound. Technicians can never fold the boxes right. I want him to smile. I want him to talk. Dear Fred Taylor full of grace make Eustice talk. You gave him life again, now make him live.

"Say something for me, Eustice. Anything."

"Have a nice night." The box pops forward. A cardboard fold has come undone. The vacuum motors whine. The box mumbles. Eustice moves an inch. Two inches. His tires cinch up. The motors stop. His body is in perfect working condition but Eustice doesn't move.

This happens. Sometimes androids don't make it through turning in. Old parts. Wear and tear. Your mileage may vary. No one does reconstitution anymore. Too much training. Too few androids turning in. Better to build new and forget the old.

Two associates come outside with a dolly. They wheel Eustice to the back alley. The speaker box hums all the way, but the words wouldn't come out. If his box had been folded better he might have given me one more Have a Nice Night before he went away.

I never see Eustice again.

It's shift change time and I'm alone in the parking lot with Phillip. The peak shoppers went home for the day. They left their trash strewn about the lot and I'm cleaning it up because I have nothing better to do when all the carts are inside and there's no one going inside. It's eleven o'clock at night. The town is buttoned up tight. The wind is blowing

seven point three knots to the south-southwest and there's a frozen drizzle coming down from crying angels at the rate of point zero three inches an hour.

I have a nail on the end of a stick. Poke a flyer. Put it in the bag. Poke a can. Put it in the bag. I hum the Floor-Mart jingle as I work. It's short. I hum it a lot. It never gets out of my head.

It's shift change time and I'm alone in the desert with Phillip. The androids died of thirst a few years ago. They left their cardboard box voices strewn about the lot and I'm cleaning them up because I have nothing better to do in the middle of the desert when no one is around to watch me turn into a bleached collection of joints and broken eye actuators. It's dusk. The sand blows over my shoes. The wind is blowing eight point seven knots straight north and I can taste rain on the air in the next two days.

Phillip looks at me. "Don't let them kill me." He has no eyes. He has no legs. There is thread and there are broken stitches but he's not really there at all. He's dead like Eustice's voice I spear with my nail on the end of the stick. Poke a speaker. Feed the bunny. Poke a skull. Feed the bunny. This is my job. This is survival.

It's shift change time and I'm in black clouds with Phillip. It's four in the morning. The store is far below me. I'm standing with a nail and a stick and there's paper in the clouds that I don't care to get. I'm tired. I want to float up into the starry night sky where the angels cry the rain and old men blow the wind. It's almost sunrise. Whose cloud is this? My cloud!

"We're gonna be all right," Phillip says to me.

Norton's soldering iron is in my eye socket. "You owe me," he says. My face is hanging over a pair of speed skates on the skate rental table. It's a lump of latex and ceramic contacts that shines under fluorescent lights. A little white spider of light sits just above the backside of my left eye and as Norton moves my eye actuator around the little white spider jumps all around the skin.

The world flashes blue, then red, then goes dark. "Shit. I caught a circuit board." Tap-tap-tap. The world flashes back into focus. "That get it?"

"Yeah."

"Sorry," he grumbles and goes back to work. The part is a thin hypodermic syringe cut to fit the hole. It is filled with hydraulic fluid and connects to a pump where a human brain would be. When I lift my eyebrow electronic impulses will push fluid into the syringe and my eyebrow will rise, push and pull, stimulus and response.

"Does it look okay?" I say. I don't have a brain. I have a parallel processor in my torso. I have a spider dancing inside my face. She's a wonderful little spider with a crown and a Prince Charming and she'll live happily ever after just like all the smiling customers in all the Floor-Mart teambuilding books I've read since the first time I powered up.

Norton shrugs. "I've seen better." He pulls a bundle of wires out from above my lip, cuts one. My tongue stops existing. "You gotta take better care of yourself."

"I do."

"Floor-Mart parts aren't worth scrap," Norton says. He chuckles. The soldering iron touches my lip and suddenly I have a tongue again. It wriggles around my mouth, fills the small, painted latex cavity. "No wonder they stopped making androids. Anyone so much as looks at your insides and they get a little squeamish. God knows I do."

"He's going to fire me," I say. The word doesn't quite come off my tongue. It doesn't settle into my circuits. "Florence. Florence is going to fire me."

"Probably." Norton shrugs. "That's the way the business model goes, though. You androids work for the cost of your production and then you die off. Downright creepy." The spider princess is offended. It jitters in fluorescent light and calls for its guards to come out of my temples, but no one comes.

"What happens if I just stay alive?" I ask.

"Hmm." Norton puts down the soldering iron long enough to rub his chin. "Stay alive. I... I guess I don't know. Maybe you'd just keep deteriorating until there was nothing left. DECO's supposed to kick in while your parts are still halfway useful – it's the most efficient use of resources. Five years of service offsets the cost of production, and then the android is recycled into another useful form. Optimum use of resources and optimum time-frame to introduce future technologies. Remember that? They program the cost-of-production algorithms into your head. Factory standard."

I try to think but all that comes to mind is how majestically the spider princess dances inside my face.

Florence comes outside to talk to me. He does this a lot. It's a way to get away from the wage-slaves he deals with inside the store. They talk back. I don't.

He has a small envelope in his hand. Blue envelope. Recycling plants and you. "I think I have a solution for our little problem," Florence says. "You're already losing your faculties. I thought we'd be okay keeping you on for a little longer, but it looks like our best bet is to re-allocate your resources. You know what I mean, Carl."

Androids don't get pink slips. Pink slips mean you get to leave, get a new job. Blue slips are requisition forms. Strong requests. Death warrants. Florence's mouth is a big yellow gaping sweaty hole ready to eat up the blues. Chomp chompchompchomp.

"Well, see, it's like this, really." He adjusts his glasses. "The district manager decided that it would be best to use your brain in the shell of an automatic buffer. Floor-Mart Corporate sent me the plans today; it looks slick. You'd buff the floors, clean the walls, dust the rafters... the ultimate cleaning machine, working twenty-four-seven to make this Floor-Mart the best Floor-Mart it can be."

"I'm fine." I want to cry. That's what you call it, right? Cry?

I try to think about it. The words don't actually exist. The thought is causing a stack overflow in my logic buffer. It hurts, dear Fred Taylor it hurts like someone is trying to open up my circuit board with a water nozzle and a penknife and fill me up with watch batteries. I just want to shut down and stop thinking and live like Phillip does in my shirt pocket so soft and so safe like a little baby that I never had the chance to be. I worked the day I was born and I worked when I was supposed to die.

"I'm a burden."

Phillip never had a chance

Not a chance in hell

Little strings and plush fur

Like Grandma's Brand throw pillows

(Two dollars on clearance)

do you work for peanuts?

Power?

Parts?

Turning in?

Whose Floor Mart is this, anyway?

It's cold

It's alone

It's dying like a thousand bones spread across skee-ball machines going

tack tack tack tack

He turns.

He's skating backwards.

The skates flash when the disco light touches them.

"You're almost becoming human."

Who said this was part of the deal?

(No one said) the deal is no deal a short trip a quick contract I forgive your bad habits but I still think I deserve better

(Eight years)

Fred Taylor have mercy on me

"Maybe it's all in my head," he says

my head your head the reader at home

click the email wash your hands

get the deal go home

it'll all be gone tomorrow like so unraveled cardboard boxes in

moonlight

when I'll spear and pick them up

"It's probably all just random switches

10100111000110001010010101001010010010100001010010101001001010101010010

he won't stop screaming the bunny won't stop screaming I should break his neck tear
him apart make it quick
shotgun to the face
turn in
sweep it up twenty-four seven three sixty-five
smile and say hellowhatcanidoforyou
eight years of service and all I got was this lousy vacuum
"Human. I just called you human, didn't I?" He laughed and shook his head. "So
much for that Floor-Mart Pledge."

Phillip screams when he dies. It's soft and only I can hear it. Like a baby crying.
He writhes styrofoam beads and loose stitches.
His stuffing shuffles like so many burned-out transistors.
He's in my hand. Phillip is in my hand. He's staring at me. His eyes are empty black
skee balls. His arms Floor-Mart brand hoses. His body a little egg that needs to be
buffed. He screams. It burns. I reach all the way to the floor. I'm leaking I'm leaking out
onto the floor like a little river styx onto my shoulder and my chest and my hellohowarey-
ou package that gets big when it needs to be big just a river flowing forever to carry
Phillip away cold and alone.

He was afraid of that. He didn't want to go alone. He wanted me with him. He wanted
to be important to be wanted forever and ever even though he knew it would come one
day. I'm leaking I'm crying an undertow to take him away

Manager procedure twoseventythree

The customer is always right

The android is always right

The android is always right

The android is always right

The android is always right

The android is always right

The android is always right

STOP LINE 0ACFFFFFo-AF – INITIATE REBOOT

The rabbit is in his hands now. There's a handkerchief in mine. "Clean yourself up," he
says to me. There's yellow hydraulic fluid trickling down my stomach and through my
jeans. "And while you're at it, get the degreaser out of the rental shop. That's never gonna
come out of the carpet."

I try to do what he tells me to do. I step. My shoulder pops. Then it jerks. My arm
slides from its socket and onto the floor. My silicone skin tears as the arm falls. I feel
nothing. Norton stares and makes no excuses for it. For the next minute it's all we can do

to stare at the arm twitching on the shag carpet floor. It's connected through a single fiber-optic cable that winds its way into my gut like a girl's curly hair.

"I'm sorry," Norton says. "I think the threading corroded clean through, from the looks of it. Old age and wear and tear."

"It's okay." My arm on the floor is one hundred thirty percent inefficient and looks like a drying earthworm on a summer day.

"Let's have a look." He reaches for my side and opens me up. I don't move. I can't move. My arm is lying on the ground and if I move I'll break the cable and the arm will be dried up and dead.

"I don't want to be a bother." I double-check to make sure Phillip is okay. He watches everything from a bench not four feet away from me. Norton knows how to take care of his customers.

"Nonsense." Norton pulls out a screwdriver and pushes wires around. Then he whistles. "It's a mess in here."

"It's been two point seven years since my last checkup. The company policy dictates that off-lease android models receive no mechanical checkups on a count that the procedure is too expensive."

"Yep. Right there's your problem." He takes out a penlight and shines it inside of me, just to make sure. "Looks like one of your batteries leaked into your sensory matrix. The parts are corroded as all hell. It works for now, but I don't think you're gonna get much juice out of your reserve power supply. Fifteen minutes at a time, at most." He grins and reaches up to shake my hand. "Congratulations, Carl. You are officially useless."

"But I was fine yesterday," I say.

"Of course you were." He smiles and takes me by my still-attached shoulder. "Want my advice, get the hell out of Floor-Mart. They'll reconstitute you until you're just a heap-of-metal doorstep. You can't throw your life away working for the man. God knows I didn't."

"This Floor-Mart is my Floor-Mart." Company slogan number one. Something to say when there's nothing to be said at all.

This didn't fly with Norton. Not while he scooped away salty powders that had once been my insides from my melting heart. "Don't you get it? Floor Mart doesn't care about you. Floor Mart cares about the dollar sign in front of your name, Profit, Carl. Your existence hinges on the fact that creating and maintaining a worker android is cheaper than paying a human being six years' wages. You are a boost to the profit margin."

"But that's why I'm here." This should make me feel happy. Why doesn't it make me feel happy?

"I know." He shakes his head and looks at Phillip. Maybe the rabbit's screaming at him too. "You are their crowning achievement, their prime of prime retail. You're cheaper than human. Generic human. Floor-Mart brand human. And, unlike real humans, when they're done with you they don't need to worry about a thing. They just

throw you away.” He’s still staring at Phillip. Maybe Phillip’s telling Norton that he is sad and lonely and he doesn’t want to die even though he’s unwanted and beaten-up and dead Fred Taylor forgive us our sins.

“You can throw him away,” I say. Phillip doesn’t want to die. He screams at me, but I can’t take care of him anymore. Not me. Not now. Fred Taylor forgive me.

“The rabbit?” He pauses. There’s something wrong with his eye. He rubs at it until it turns red and puffy.

“It’s just Phillip,” I say to him.

He shakes his head and tries to swallow a lump in his throat. “Jesus. Give me that rabbit; it’s more busted than you are.” He chuckles and walks to the skate shop. “I have a needle and some thread in there. I was just going to put him back together, you know. Sew him up. Show him some love.”

“It’s irrational.” Logical circuit number two-forty-seven triggers like a firework. “You are spending time and effort on a small, useless product. Buying a new one would be cheaper.”

“It’s called ‘social benefit.’ You care for Phillip, and I care for you. Therefore, I do what I can to fix it. Try it sometime, will you?”

The circuit shuts off. “You can do that with a broken product?”

“I’ve done more with less,” he says. He skates to the rental shop with the rabbit cradled in his hands like an associate handling a trusted customer. I try to follow but the light is too bright he is shining in orange and disco ball glory while I am unwashed and aching tired of my job and my world. I can’t go back even though I need to go back but Phillip’s still there happy to be fixed Fred Taylor bless his soul.

“Take this place, for example. It’s falling apart.” Norton points to the far corner of the building with a single, crooked finger. There’s fresh, brown, fake stone paneling on the wall. “Had to cover some mold on the far wall just yesterday. I came in and there it was, sick and green and smelling up the place. That’s finished, but then there’s the rusted-out plumbing in the bathroom, the faulty wiring in the ceiling, the duct tape holding the dance floor together... I’m barely keeping up my fixed costs as it is. I keep hoping it’s going to get better.”

“It’s suicide.”

He shrugs. “Of course it is. No one skates anymore. Why skate when there’s so much to do at home? You can buy it all at Floor Mart. Buy it for cheap. Cheap and flimsy and broken before it gets home. I hate the fucking place, Carl. Hate it with all my heart.”

Phillip screams when the needle pierces him. So annoying. He should just unravel and die if he thinks it hurts so bad. He makes me wince when he screams. Hydraulic fluid flows down my cheeks.

“Yes. Twenty-four-seven worker that doesn’t take a wage. It’s scary. Hell, if I didn’t know you I’d probably do the same.” I pick up my arm. Norton turns away. Embarrassment. Grief. Confused customer number seven ninety three. “I feel sorry for

you, Carl. Really I do. I don't have to worry about the kind of crap you worry about. Why? When I die. I'm dead. That's it. I don't know when, I don't know where. But some-time in the future I'm going to die. This roller rink, the mold on the walls, the poor turnouts, the cancelled parties... it all won't matter anymore. But you..." he paused. "You can keep coming back. Over and over again."

"Until my parts are worn and dead."

"Then they'll just take what they can take. Joints. Scrap metal. Transistors. As long as it's profitable. They'll mangle you until you fall apart."

"Like Eustice." I see him wheeling off to the dumpster. Unraveling like a messed-up cardboard box. "I'm not going back," I say. It's more of a nervous tick than anything else. "I don't want to be a floor buffer."

"Then don't." Norton makes it sound so simple. So easy.

"They'll come after me." I shiver. "I need to get away."

He points to the battery leaking out of my gut. "You're not going anywhere. You probably have an hour, maybe two until the charge is completely gone. That's it. No more."

Floor Mart is burning in my mind. Protocol circuits melt away, one right after another. The acid is fire but Phillip's there to cheer me on. He's screaming like a scared child but he's still giving me those go-ahead skee-ball eyes. Nothing to lose. Nothing to gain. We're gonna make it. "Not going back," I say again.

Norton smiles. "I could get you a proper burial, too. Maybe. It'd take some finagling but I think we could make it work as long as everything stays quiet. Just gotta keep Floor-Mart out of the loop. It's up to you."

"No." I look to Norton. No managerial protocol. No customers. Nothing but sincerity, whatever that means. "Turn me in. Make me useful." Another logic circuit curls up and dies. It's a burning field of cardboard and stuffing and clearance prices in my mind.

"If that's what you want." Norton walks over to me. Phillip is in his hand. He claps me on the shoulder. He's looking away from me and pushing a palm against his eye – this one's not in the Floor-Mart emotional gesture matrix, but it looks sort of like ecstatic customer number seventy-one, only frowning. I stand and patiently wait for him to look at me again.

"Well." He puts Phillip on my free shoulder. "Best I could do on short notice. The stitches are a little jagged here and there – never was good at patching things up. We can get him to a proper tailor tomorrow."

I smile. There's no protocol rule attached to the gesture. "You're plenty good. Phillip appreciates it."

"Ha!" He tries to laugh harder but he can't bring himself to smile. "By my estimate you have two hours to do whatever you want. What sounds good?"

"I don't know. I usually work."

"You're not working. You're dying." His voice box comes unraveled like Eustice's for a moment. "Two hours. What'cha got?"

"I could try my hand at skee-ball."

"You're about to die and you want to do is play a silly redemption game." He smiles.

"We could at least go out for a beer."

"I don't consume."

"Touché." He pulls a pair of quarters from his pocket. "Skee-ball, then. What the hell; we'll make a night out of it! You and me. Two losers with nothing much left to lose. What else could go possibly go right?"

It's a half-busy Floor-Mart company skate rally at the rink. There's a handful of kids from a local kindergarten making lazy laps around the sticky orange track. Two middle school kids waltz on the dance floor. A pair of teens, probably babysitters, sit in a dark corner doing things they shouldn't do in public. These people used to walk right past me. Now they laugh and smile and put quarters into my body. Funny how context changes everything.

I'm swallowing skee-balls. Tack-tack-tack. There's a pair of kids playing best-two-of-three. My kid keeps hitting fifties. He's really very good. Phillip watches it all happen from inside a little Plexiglas cage above the scoreboard. I thought he wouldn't like it too much there but he seems to have a good time anyway. He says the kids are fun to watch. We may not do much, but we're happy.

Norton said these machines were made to last. Twenty years from now I'll break down again. Someone will tear me apart and make me into the next big thing. Maybe it will be Norton. Maybe I'll be passed to his next-of-kin. Maybe I'll end up in a pawn shop. But no matter what they'll turn me in, over and over again, until finally I'm just a big pile of semi-intelligent scrap sitting in the corner of some salvage store, waiting for some modern artist to come along and make me into a statue. Reinvention. Recycling. Fred Taylor be proud of me.

Stretch your dollar to the limit. That's the Floor-Mart way.



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