

THE SEAGULL'S CRY
By Richard Graham-Yooll (2017)

I felt the vibration as the rotors of the hover ferry changed direction. Passengers crowded by the gate ready to disembark but I stayed on deck, enjoying the coolness of the breeze on my cheeks. A lone seagull wheeled above us, making a plaintive cry at some unfathomable wrong. Tiers of glass and concrete buildings loomed higher as we neared the shore, a skyline barely changed over a hundred years glistening in the sunlight. The ruffled water of Boston harbor reflected a sapphire blue under the clear sky and I watched the narrowing ribbon of water between us and the shore. It was ten past eight on a Monday morning. I was starting a new job and feeling good about the world.

“Sort of morning it feels good to be alive, isn’t it?” The words from behind so echoed my own thoughts that for an instant I thought I had imagined them.

“And good to be human enough to appreciate it,” I added, nodding at the landing gate. Some twenty to thirty little robots, uttering excited squeaks, waited at the front of the line.

“Don’t be deceived,” the stranger said.

I turned around. He was dressed too casually to be a commuter. Probably a tourist.

“They have feelings too, you know, even if they’re programmed,” he said. He was looking at the twittering little funny robots gathered by the gate. “The funny looking ones are early models, but internally they’re the same as the ones made today. By the way, my name’s Tad.”

Short, with a wispy beard and strands of gray in his thinning hair, he did not look threatening. Nor, I thought, did I but when I smiled his mouth dropped open.

“Elaine,” he said. “My God, it’s you.”

I turned, certain he was addressing somebody behind me. We were approaching Rowes Wharf too fast and the hover ferry lurched. Tad swayed, nearly losing his balance, and I snatched the railing for support, but when I looked around again, I realized his eyes had not left my face.

“You look exactly the same,” he said. “Are you all right?”

I shook my head. “Sarah. My name’s Sarah. You’ve mistaken me for someone.”

He took hold of my arm. “What have they done to you?”

I had to tug myself free. “You have the wrong person and I have to hurry. I’m starting a new job.”

I stepped past him and hurried toward the gate, uncomfortably aware that he was following.

“Delible Solutions Corporation?” he asked.

Surprised, I nodded. But a lot of people worked for that company. I could not afford to be late.

“Oh, my God!” Tad breathed the words as he came up beside me.

As the hover ferry settled onto the water, robots on the dock were securing the mooring ropes. The gate opened and there was movement at the front of the crowd. Tad thrust a folded square of paper into my hand. Wedged in by commuters on either side, I

could not turn around. When I stepped onto the gangplank, a pushing throng of disembarking robots and humans carried me forward onto land.

At the end of the jetty, the crowd thinned out and dispersed. I glanced back to see if Tad was following. He was still aboard. I had the paper in my hand and I waved but he showed no reaction.

Relieved, I waved, holding his note in my hand to show I still had it. He stared past me toward the city with a bleak expression as if looking for something he had lost. It hurt that he quit so easily. As I guessed when I looked at the note, he had tried to give me his phone number but even that was wrong. It was only six digits. 238112. It didn't matter. I had no intention of calling.

Easy to find, the Delible Solutions building was the tallest in Post Office Square. Already there was a long line at the reception kiosk inside. I was not the only one who didn't know where to go.

When my turn came, the kiosk glowed dark blue as I inserted my identity chip. "You're late!" it chimed.

"I'm sorry, sir," I said, guessing the machine's programmed sex identity. "I'm new here and I'm trying to find my work station."

"Cyber-gene programming. Forty-eighth floor, corridor eighteen west, cubicle 511."

"Thank you, sir," I said. "You've been very helpful."

The machine flashed yellow with pleasure.

"My pleasure, ma'am," it hummed. "I'm happy to have been of assistance."

I pressed the button for the elevator. It's important to know how to treat the robots that serve us. As Tad had said, they have feelings even if they are programmed in. By the time I'd found the right corridor on the forty-eighth floor, I must have been looking lost for a woman approached me straightaway.

"You must be Sarah," she said. Her rosy cheeks complemented curly blonde hair that I guessed was not natural but her smile put me at ease. "My name's Mary. Welcome to Delible Solutions. You know your cubicle number? You should find everything you need but any problems, give me a call. Extension 503."

Settling myself in my new cubicle I had a sense of belonging. There was a neat stack of papers on my desk. On top, a note from the departmental manager listed seventeen problematic algorithms that needed to be checked by noon. Genetic algorithms may not be for everyone, but for me my work is my life. A sealed envelope clipped to the note contained my user name and password, both to be memorized and then destroyed. The other papers concerned the usual formalities of any new job, questions to answer for the company health plan, a tax form, and a fat booklet of information on the stock option plan. I opened a drawer to put them aside to look at later.

If it hadn't been for Tad, I wouldn't have noticed. The letters, written in capitals with a ballpoint pen on the bottom of the drawer had been erased, but I could still read the impression, "E-L-A-I-N-E."

Tad had called me Elaine.

"Please sign in, Sarah," my computer asked in a soft male voice. "I'm ready for you."

I dislike the inexplicable and a chill of uneasiness swallowed the comfortable sense of belonging I had felt only moments before.

"Sarah, I'm waiting," my computer repeated as I hesitated. "Please enter your password."

The inexplicable could wait. I had wasted enough time and I opened the envelope with my user name and password. The user name was "sarah" and the password was a six-digit number. Six digits? On impulse, I clicked "Change User" and entered "elaine" and the password "238112."

"Welcome, Elaine!" If a computer can show emotion, I could have sworn the voice had risen a few notes in surprise. "You have a message waiting."

"READ ONLY FILE. SILENT TEXT. DO NOT PRINT. DO NOT DOWNLOAD."

I clicked and started to read the document.

"My name is Elaine. I work in cubicle 511 on the forty-eighth floor of Delible Solutions Corporation in Boston. If you're who I think you are, you're not what you think."

If was several pages long. I needed to start work on the algorithms but I could not help myself. I read at first with disbelief and then growing horror as I began to understand.

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My name, as I said, is Elaine. I'm a cyber-gene programmer and I'm good at my job. I've worked for Delible Solutions for the last six years. My friends and colleagues respect me for my judgment, but I'm about to be terminated. My end began on Friday morning, just a few days ago. Angel needed advice and offered to buy me lunch.

Angel Martinez, a petite twenty-four-year-old with a pixie face, is, or was, a programmer on the same floor I work on. She said she had little time and so we went for lunch at the food stalls in Faneuil Hall. As I chose some sushi for myself, she announced she was having an affair with someone in the office, or more exactly a relationship that was about to turn into an affair. I said nothing, waiting for more. Angel picked up a burrito and a soda for herself. We sat down on a bench outside, and she told me his name as we were eating. It was our supervisor, Jack Tumelo.

After seeing each other for several weeks, Jack had told her he wanted to abandon his family to be with her.

I shook my head as she chattered excitedly. It was only after we had finished lunch and dropped the wrappers in a bin outside that she asked me what I thought. I told her it was very foolish.

"Of course, his wife will keep the house," she said, continuing as if she hadn't heard my reply, "but Jack has a very good salary." She was not looking for advice. She only wanted an opportunity to confide without having me condemn her too much. "I'm not coming back to the office this afternoon." She giggled. "I'm meeting Jack at the Parker Hotel."

We waited on the corner of Congress for the light to change. Across the street, a shabbily dressed figure shouted the name of the newspaper he was trying to sell. "'Spare Change! Spare Change'" It was a publication sold to raise money for the homeless.

"I think you're wrong," I said. Reaching a traffic island in the middle of the street, we waited for another light. "Jack has a wife and two kids. You shouldn't do it. Not on your own doorstep."

Angel tittered. "What if the best specimens are on our doorstep?" She nodded to the man selling the paper. "Look at that poor little jerk. He's typical of what's outside. I don't know if it's occurred to you, but everyone at Delible Solutions is rather attractive."

"Like we're all made from the same mold?" I lowered my voice as we reached the other side of the street. "Anyway that guy isn't so bad looking."

"If you like shrimp," Angel whispered.

He called out to us as we passed by, "Like to help the homeless?"

Angel stepped off the curb to avoid him as he waved a copy of *Spare Change* in front of us.

"Hang on." I searched my purse for some coins.

"I can't stop," Angel said. "I'll see you back at the office."

I've never cared much for the homeless but Angel was irritating me. I found a couple of hundred-dollar coins and accepted an overpriced little tabloid in return.

"Bless you, ma'am, and have a perfect day."

I planned to drop the paper in the nearest trash bin but when I saw Angel glance back to see if I was following. I opened the paper to pretend to read. I laughed aloud when I saw the headline, "HUMANS FACE EXTINCTION."

"It's not a joke, you know." The paper seller was standing right behind me.

"Then we're sure a long way from it." I gestured toward Faneuil Hall where crowds of tourists, following the red brick line of the Freedom Trail, mingled with milling office workers on their lunchtime breaks. "We don't look that close to extinction to me."

I took a step back, worried that he was about to ask for more money.

He shook his head. "I said 'humans.' You should read --."

His gray eyes widened in alarm. I glanced down, imagining something wrong with my appearance. At the same time, I heard a shout followed by a sickening thud. I spun around, realizing he had been looking past me. I was just in time to see a body fly off the sidewalk about forty yards away at the junction with Washington. There was a flash of silver as a personal transporter veered across the road and came toward us.

I waved my arms and shouted, "Stop," at the driver who was oblivious of what he had done. Someone seized me from behind and pulled me to the ground. The transporter passed only inches above me. It wobbled, straightened itself, and then accelerated down the street, heading toward the harbor.

"Are you OK?"

At first, I wasn't sure. I looked up into a pair of clear, gray eyes, more alive than any I had seen. I nodded, too winded to speak. The paper seller released his grip and stood up.

"Someone's hurt," he said, and then bounded up the street, leaving me alone, sprawled upon the sidewalk.

As I got up to follow, my first reaction was anger. Who did he think he was? I saw him on his knees in the middle of the road beside a body, partly masked from sight by a small crowd gathered around. A pool of blood was spreading out around the victim.

The noise of a distant siren grew rapidly louder. As I approached the scene of the accident, I saw the victim was a woman. And unmistakably familiar.

“Oh, my God!” I screamed in shocked recognition and started to run. “Angel!”

My rescuer looked up and shook his head.

“I’m sorry,” he said. As an ambulance settled to the ground beside Angel’s body, he took my arm. “She’s a friend?”

“I work with her.” I tried to pull free to reach her but he held me firmly.

“You don’t understand, do you?”

“She’s dead, isn’t she?”

“To be dead, you have to be alive.” He pointed as the ambulance crew lifted Angel’s body onto a stretcher. “Those robots aren’t medics. They’re technicians. Your friend’s body will be taken back to the factory and overhauled. She’ll be a new person -- literally, since they wipe the memory clean. She won’t know you or her past.”

“That’s ridiculous! Angel’s --.”

“A machine. It’s hard, I know, and you probably thought of her as a best friend.”

Taking my elbow, he walked me away at a rapid pace, explaining it was better to keep well clear.

“The government does not like the public to be aware of the pervasiveness of robot society.”

I smiled, neither agreeing nor contradicting. He might be unbalanced but I found him rather attractive. When we had walked several blocks from the site of the accident, he took me into a coffee shop and ordered an espresso for himself and a latte for me.

“You better have something to pull you together,” he said, leading the way to a table. “It’s been a shock, I know, but don’t feel too badly. I’ve made the same mistake myself. In fact, I fell in love with a robot once.”

He set the cups down on the table and then a smile transformed his face as he extended his hand. “I’m Tad, by the way. Tad Phillips.”

Still dazed, I introduced myself, amused that I was allowing myself to be picked up by a bum.

“Why do you say ‘robots’ rather than ‘androids’?” I asked after I had taken a couple of sips of coffee. Another thought occurred to me. “You can’t be right about Angel. I saw the blood on the pavement.”

“They all have blood,” he said. “We call them robots since it doesn’t matter whether they’re humanoid forms or metal boxes. Our technology has created conscious beings that are no longer aware of being machines. They’re programmed to think like humans. Physically, it’s difficult to tell a modern humanoid robot from a real human, and they can’t tell the difference themselves, poor things. It started when scientists were forced to seek a tougher standard than the Turing Test. You know what that is?”

I shook my head.

“The British computer pioneer Alan Turing said that when a machine could consistently deceive a human questioner, we would have proof of artificial intelligence. We passed that point years ago but found intelligence wasn’t enough. If robots were to think like humans, they had to have psychological profiles too. We embedded the memories that form personality and built in body functions, even sexual desires. With a

well-made humanoid robot, the only visible difference is a small plate screwed into the back of the head. It provides access to the CPU and the reset button.”

“Reset button?”

“Just for emergencies, to wipe the memory in the event of malfunction.” He pointed to the copy of *Spare Change* still in my hand. “You should read that article. It’s possible that robots have already taken over and we don’t know it.”

“Sounds far-fetched.” I was no longer fully listening. I had just noticed the time.

Tad walked me back to my office and hesitated awkwardly on the corner of Milk and Congress.

“I’d like to see more of you,” he said. “How about coming over to my place tomorrow evening? I’m not a bad cook.”

“But I thought you were homeless.”

“I help sell the newspaper I edit, but I’m not short of money. When you read it, you’ll see there’s another reason for the name. It changes people’s ideas.” Tad pointed to pavement where we stood. “I live just below. We’re not really homeless, any of us. We live in chambers under the city, all part of a giant highway construction project that took years to build and then became redundant.”

He passed me a card with his name and telephone number. To my own surprise, I heard myself agreeing to meet him Saturday night.

What happened between Tad and I that weekend was quite wonderful, but it has no relevance to my story. All I need say is that on Monday morning, I had a bounce to my step I had not had before.

Tad’s ideas fascinated and horrified me. I learned I had been living in a world of thinking machines without knowing it. I met Tad’s friends living below the city -- the counter culture, he called them -- and I had never met people so real and full of life. One of Tad’s friends even suggested that it might already be too late, that the machines could have taken over without our knowing it. I was fired by an urge to spread awareness of the situation to stop it going any further. Tad insisted there was nothing I could do. I wanted to prove him wrong and I had an idea where to make a start.

Jack Tumelo, my supervisor, was a bastard. He had been out to take advantage of Angel, but I knew one important fact. He had a wife and two kids. Robots don’t have kids but what was more important was that he cheated on his family. He was flawed enough to be human.

He had his back to me when I entered his office, his lanky frame hunched over the screen. He might have been debugging a program but I suspected from the way he spun around that he had been in the middle of a game. For a moment he looked guilty but then his face lit up and he leapt to his feet, coming around the desk to greet me.

“Elaine! You poor, poor woman.” He put an arm around me. “Angel was your friend, I know. I heard you’d just been out together for lunch.”

The photograph of his wife and children prominently displayed on the desk reassured me as I backed away from his grasp. His wife was attractive, a petite brunette in a striped blouse holding hands with the two kids, a boy and a girl.

“I witnessed the accident,” I said. “I have a theory about it.”

A shadow crossed Jack’s face. “You saw what?”

I had seen very little but Tad had utterly convinced me.

“Angel was a machine,” I said. “A highly developed robot with sophisticated humanoid characteristics. After she was hit, nobody gave her medical treatment. Instead, technicians came to take her away for repair.”

Jack Tumelo sat down and clasped his hands in front of him as if prayer.

“Go on,” he said quietly after a long pause.

I told him much of what Tad had told me, that there might be many other robots in the company working beside us without our knowledge. I told him how there was a theory that it could already be too late, that machines might have taken over society. I buttressed Tad’s theory with some of my own observations. Now that I had thought about it, I rarely ever saw children or old people.”

“It was something Angel said,” I told him. “She said folks at Delible Solutions are all an attractive bunch. Everyone here looks the same age. I think that’s significant.”

“She said that, did she? An attractive bunch?” Jack smiled.

There was a long silence while he studied his fingers, clasping and unclasping them as he sought inspiration.

“You’ve had a terrible shock, terrible. I understand, Elaine. I do understand but I’ve read your file. You’ve had problems in the past.”

It was obvious he did not believe me, but it didn’t matter. I had sowed the seed. He told me he was making an appointment for me to see Dr. Evan Bayne, a company doctor on the fourteenth floor. I didn’t need to ask what specialty. I had no doubt of my own sanity and it would be another chance to spread the word.

They did not keep me waiting at the doctor’s office. Dr. Bayne saw me right away and to my relief proved sympathetic. Instead of treating me like a lunatic, he nodded his glistening bald head as he listened and interrupted only to ask some relevant questions.

“I don’t think they’ve taken over,” he said when I finished. “But you’re right. We do have robots among us. It’s bothered me, things about some of our employees I couldn’t put my finger on.”

“What about these plates at the back of the head?” I asked. “Have you seen anything like that?”

“That’s the point. There are people in this company who’ve never been seen by our medical staff. We don’t have compulsory physicals and some have no reason to see us. Your friend Angel, for example, worked here six years and never saw anyone at the health center but I would never have guessed that . . .” He stopped, realizing that I was not looking at him but staring at the photo of on the cabinet behind him. “Is something wrong?”

The picture of his wife and children looked puzzlingly familiar. They stood in front of a swing set in a suburban garden. The wife, a brunette, wore a striped . . .

“Oh, God!” I cried. “You’re one of them. So’s Jack. You don’t have a wife and children. They’re fake, implanted memories.”

Dr. Bayne pressed a button on his intercom. “You need help.”

“I need to get back to work.”

“My wife’s name is Melanie. She’s thirty-six years old. She majored in drama and teaches at the local high school. We have two children, Tom, aged 6, and Samantha, 9.”

He was still talking as I left the office. I only became afraid when I saw the two white-uniformed male nurses running toward me. Seizing my arms, they dragged me

back to the doctor's office. One held me while the other stepped behind to work on the back of my skull. I heard a dull creak that jarred my nerve endings. It was like having a tooth pulled under a barely adequate local anesthetic, but I have no words to describe the terror.

"Please, Dr. Bayne, please." My voice rose to a scream. "I'll tell no one. I meant no harm."

Bayne stared into the distance. "It's bad, very bad. Disconnect the motor nerves. We'll probably have to reset the memory, but we need head office approval before we erase. Her specialized knowledge took a long time to acquire."

I was unable to move a limb. It was if I had been disconnected from my body, but at least I could still see and think.

"Take her back to her cubicle," Bayne said. "It's a waste but it can't be helped. It's bad, very bad. They'll probably want to reset all of us. Reset all of us."

They dumped me back in my cubicle. It's where I now sit, unable to move, unable to speak, as I wait for the end. I have one consolation. They have forgotten I can still input directly to my computer. I'm sending this message to whoever or whatever may occupy my body or work station in the future. And to you, darling Tad. I think you always knew what I am. I have no regrets. For one happy, glorious weekend, I saw life beyond my poor machine imaginings.

But I'd lie if I didn't admit to fear of the darkness, the oblivion. I wonder if they'll find a way of removing such feelings from future programs? It's a terrible thing for a conscious being to be faced the reset button. And I can hear them coming now. Oh, God! Can a machine have a god to pray to? Can a ...

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It was the end of the text message. No signature, no farewell. Nothing. I held my hands up. My hands? Did they belong to me? Whatever they were, they were shaking.

It was time to enter a new user name and get to work. I thought my name was Sarah. Now I wondered if there was even an "I" that could have a name.

I remembered my last glimpse of Tad as I left the ferry. He looked so bleak because he knew the truth. Yet it couldn't be all bad. I had some good times in my life. Or had I? I thought I had a happy childhood. Now I suspected I was never a child.

Yet deep inside, some instinct beyond the programming told me this could not be all there was, not even for a mere machine.

END