

## To Make a Love Story Short

1.

The city was the one place safe for him. Had he ever ventured into the country, or walked into a small town, or even into the suburbs, he would have seen this: the city was the one place safe for him.

Did he know this? No.

He knew only the city.

2.

He began as the high school science project of a grinning and excitable ghetto kid, who had a spark of genius but who could never quite come to grips with that fact. In a group project, the kid was set the task of making a hand—a natural assignment, since the kid had a way with his own hands: making things, shaping things, nearly even speaking with them, they were so lively and expressive. He seemed to know everything there was to be known about hands, in fact, when the teacher asked him about the idea. Other members of the class were making other parts: feet, legs, arms, torso, face, neck. Collectively, they were making a robot.

It never worked.

Ethan's hand, though, worked like a dream.

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When he took it in to class and hooked it up, the hand flexed and trembled.

Exactly like a human hand.

It even bore the joint-creases, calloused palms, and bitten nails of a workman's hands—Ethan had hung around the site near his home where they were tearing down the old Athelbert School, and had watched and lingered and watched some more for the sole purpose of observing workers' hands at work, easing across the surface of a metal beam, gripping a steering wheel, or rounding around a gear-shift knob.

Ethan's mechanical hand could do all these things.

It looked like life.

When Ethan accepted the science prize, he made no mention of his having put together a device to test the hand, to make sure it worked.

As it happened, the device looked exactly like a man.

It looked like life.

Of the two hands, the left one worked better.

His task having been to make a right hand, however, it was the right one that won the prize.

3.

Since Stel Harris saw the physical world clearly she often failed to notice people around her.

She liked people, enjoyed their company, communicated well with them: but in any unguarded moment, her attention flew to follow the flight of a jet overhead, to admire the patterns of stress and support expressed in the structure of a

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tree and its branches, or to analyze the movements of cars on the streets. Estimating the time elapsed and the number of arc degrees traversed by the jet, as well as its likely height, as derived from the distance the neighborhood lay from the airport, she divined its velocity. Curious about trees, she took specimens of various kinds of wood home to weigh on a scale. She practiced estimating dimensions and guessing the mass of sticks and branches until she started coming to within ten to twenty percent of their weight, sometimes within grams. Then she wandered the city looking at tree after tree, developing schematics in her mind for the distribution of mass throughout a tree's body, and devising models of necessary root-systems for the various forms trees took. Watching cars, she practiced equations dealing with speed, mass, and friction. She entertained herself by figuring the amount of pressure exerted by brakes against axles to slow down differently sized vehicles at different speeds and different distances from traffic lights changing to red.

4.

Jacqueline yelped when she opened the door.

Ethan pushed in after her, his pulse racing.

Their apartment: nothing was where it should have been. Across the mattress that served for their bed—now dragged halfway across the sleeping alcove—lay piles of clothing, dumped from the dresser that stood legs-upward against the wall, its drawers scattered like the fallen pillars of the Acropolis. Books littered both alcove and front room,

thrown in every direction. Near where they stood, one of Ethan's treasures, a hardbound first edition of an old science fiction book, lay on the floor with a spatula from the kitchen blocking it open to a middle page, as if whoever had broken into their apartment had stopped reading there and marked the place for the next break-in.

"Christ—"

Jacqueline trembled, scared and angry.

Ethan held her. "Hey," he said, "let's not get excited. It's just a robbery." He felt himself a hypocrite for saying this: but she had to stay calm. For the kid. Jacqueline was in a delicate state.

"But all our stuff—"

"Yeah, all our stuff." Ethan kept the deprecatory note in his voice. He patted his coat pocket. "And lucky thing they came tonight and not tomorrow, right? Then they might have gotten the check."

"The check." She smiled, saying it.

The check in his pocket would pay rent for five months. Plus heat. Plus water. Maybe even food.

A producer had just given him first payment for his comedy that was to open off-Broadway.

They had been out celebrating the fact while their apartment was being ransacked.

"Well," said Ethan, seeing Jacqueline's shaky hold on herself was growing stronger. "We better figure out what's gone."

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It turned out less badly than they expected. Only a few larger items were missing. They found the cash stash that now mattered less to them, untouched even though its hiding place had been just a flap of carpet.

Ethan had immediately noticed the biggest item gone: the robot. Ironically, he had just taken an interest again in the old contraption, and had taken the batteries out of the radio to power it up again. He marveled at how ingenious he had been in high school, rigging it so that even run-down batteries gave enough power.

When he had started it up, it had come to life.

It had been exactly as if his grandpa was standing in the room with them.

It spooked Jacqueline all to hell. She insisted he turn it off and take it back to his parents' house, back into storage. So he had covered it with a blanket and made plans to haul it away. Spooking Jacqueline was the last thing he wanted.

Now it was gone anyway.

Jacqueline would miss those batteries when she went to turn on the radio.

But the radio was gone, too.

So Ethan said nothing about it.

5.

Pushed over, Old Machine woke up. Had he any sense of smell, dusty wool and the tang of the thief's sweating body would have mixed in his nostrils.

But he did not even breathe.

He lay on his side beneath the blanket, thinking about what to do. The act of pushing him over must have turned him on. Now the sense of needing to do something felt overpowering. Normally Ethan, his assembler, filled his mind with instructions while turning him on, by spoken word. Taking in those words had resulted in a number of things, including the knowledge of his own name, at least the one Ethan used: Old Machine. He recognized that he looked on the older side, on a scale of human age; and he understood there was a certain appropriateness to his name.

His brain consisted of a thick array of the robot controller chips readily available in most hardware stores, usually used for programmable vacuum cleaners. Ethan, in his one brilliant year in high school, had joined them in a novel manner to a highly modified database to create Old Machine's mind.

Ethan had been doing no more than looking for the easiest way to run his mechanical hand through its paces.

He failed to notice he had created an array of circuits capable of learning.

And that could learn quickly.

So that when the thief yanked up the old wool blanket, curious what it was that had fallen over with so heavy a sound, and then yelled in astonishment at the sight of Old Machine rolling crystalline blue eyes towards him, Old Machine knew what to do.

He raised himself to his feet and followed the intruder out the door.

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6.

Stel Harris, who almost never noticed, was walking with the boy Henry when she did.

She noticed a strange man.

Stel laughed at one of Henry's jokes with one part of her mind while another part struggled to discover what exactly had struck her.

She saw she would have to subdivide the question.

Question One: What was strange about her noticing this man?

Answer: That she had noticed at all.

Question Two: What made her notice him?

The answer to this came less easily.

Answer One: He had a certain predictability to his movements. But not the expected predictability. She watched the strange man and felt numbers trickling into her head, gathering around her like a light mist before a darkening cloud that promised to let loose its best downpour upon her. She could sense numbers ready to flood through her—if she could just figure out the correct approach to the problem of mathematically describing his movements.

Answer Two: Possibly because of the previous answer, she felt a quickening of her pulse. She never had numbers appear in her head when people walked by.

Never.

Henry popped into the open door of the Ricecream Confectionary to get them both a treat.

Stel, curious, kept walking.

7.

Old Machine found he could survive in the city.  
He did not thrive: he had no concept of thriving.  
But he could exist.  
Especially at night.

To survive, he realized he needed to be as much like people as possible.

Which was impossible by day.

By night, however, he could dissemble well enough.

By day, therefore, he sought well-shaded, infrequently-trodden places, often park benches where he could mimic sleeping.

By night he walked the city streets and alleys, pursuing his passion for rooting through domestic garbage.

8.

Stel became a night owl.

Watching the strange man started as a puzzle and niggling curiosity. It shifted gradually to a fascination, and finally to an overriding passion. Some initial questions—Was part of the strangeness due to a difference in average bodily mass? Or distribution of mass? Or was it purely structural?—led her to more difficult questions, and to some initial answers; and the numbers flowed in her mind with stronger and stronger force, affecting the rhythms by which she measured her day. She established that the strange man must be at least partly mechanical—possibly prosthetic legs, and arms—although those hands were so...

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Caught up in the cascading analysis, she began formulating the groundwork for the book that ignited her career, *Toward a Mathematics of Human Dynamics*.

9.

“Let’s leave the topic of your plays behind for a moment,” the interviewer said. “Tell me about your schooling. You were early interested in engineering—”

“I don’t recall that,” said Ethan, laughing.

“You won a prize at your high school,” said the interviewer. “You designed a mechanical hand that must have been quite successful, for it was even talked about in the news. Ever do anything else that direction?”

“I’d almost forgotten! But no, no, never.”

“Ever regret having given up science for the theater?”

Ethan laughed. “Of course not.”

10.

Stel Harris turned up an eyebrow to find yet another article surveying her career. After the recent distinctions she received for mathematical work, all the chic magazines had briefly turned their roving eyes toward her. She had become one of those short-lived creatures, the academic celebrity. For this particular feature the writer had interviewed several colleagues, one of whom responded to a question about Stel’s private life: “She did have some early relationships—and supposedly almost married, once. No one knows what happened. But it’s a pretty commonly observed among the

faculty that she seems very much a woman who has never felt love.”

How unfair, she thought. How entirely unfair.

Tiredly she turned off the magazine.

Then, though she had lately fallen out of the habit, she decided to indulge herself.

She left the living room and went upstairs. Instead of turning left, toward the bedroom, she turned right and opened the door at the end of the short hallway.

When she flicked on the light, a bit of current went to the hunched shape sitting in a lounge chair at the far side of the room.

The blue, crystalline eyes lit.

He could not speak to her.

His worn frame no longer permitted movement.

His presence brought no cascade of numbers to her mind.

Yet she could look into those eyes, and remember.

And somehow, incalculably, that was enough.

She turned the light off and stood staring into the dimming blue eyes until they succumbed to the dark of this shuttered room—and let unbidden calculations work themselves through to completion; and waited for quiet to fall again across the great spaces of her mind before turning back to go to bed.