

# Maria

*The not too distant future...*

I was always my uncle's favorite. He liked me better than his own children, liked me better than my own parents did, for that matter. Even so, I was surprised when he randomly messaged me one day at breakfast. I was just about to head out the door, but I hit accept anyway. I don't know why.

My uncle's newly tanned features appeared on the screen. I recalled he had recently been to Cyprus.

"Good morning Billy," he opened. I was William to everyone else, including my parents.

"Hi, Uncle Rick. What's going on?"

"Isn't it enough that I want to talk to my nephew every once in a while?"

"Oh, sure it is." Pause. "What did you want to talk about?" I must have glanced at my watch, because he laughed.

"I won't keep ya long. Ya gotta go teach the children and all that. Actually I have a proposition for ya."

"What kind of a proposition?" I asked, trying not to let my wariness show through. Rick's "proposals" were notorious for being arcane and risky. On the other hand, when they did pay off, they paid off big... so I was still listening.

"My firm has a new product, and we need it to be tested. I was wondering if ya could help us out." My ears pricked up. My uncle's most recent business venture had been a factory for consumer robotics.

"What kind of product?"

Here, I'll send ya the description that will go up on the web site." He pressed some buttons on his end. "Haven't put it up yet of course, because we're not ready to sell... ah, here it is."

I pressed the screen to accept the attachment, and the advertisement filled the screen, obscuring my uncle's face.

*"Asimov-certified home companion android. Cooks, cleans, makes conversation. Only 1500 a month!"* read the tagline. Below were the details of the *"durable titanium and plastisteel construction"* and *"realistic facial features!"* *"Discreetly packaged!"* it said at the bottom.

I minimized the ad. "A robot maid?" I asked incredulously.

"A companion android," my uncle replied firmly. "It will revolutionize life for everyone who can afford one."

"Wonderful. I don't need anything like it. This house is just big enough for me, and I keep on top of things pretty well. Work and... not work. I like my life simple."

"Even so," Rick said. "This is an opportunity! Ya get the future of consumer electronics... for free!"

"Don't you already have testers?" I asked. *Well paid* testers, I might have added.

Rick frowned. "Well, sure, sure, but there's no substitute for a real world test. Ya find things ya don't find in the lab. All ya gotta do on your end is send me status reports every week or so."

"Maybe you'd be better sending it to Mark or Tiff. I'm sure they could use an additional maid." Rick's son and daughter each lived in charmless, echoing dwellings.

"I'm making the offer to you," my uncle said soberly. I looked away. I had just a few minutes before I would miss the metro.

"Ok. Send it here, and I'll report on how... it works." "Great!" Rick replied, all smiles again. "She won't disappoint ya, I promise!"

I soon forgot all about the conversation. Conducting a bunch of tenth level lit students through classic British fiction took up most of my energy. As a result I was surprised when the doorbell rang one Sunday in the middle of my lesson planning. The deliveryman wasn't particularly happy with my shipment. The "discreet packaging" turned out to be a large packing crate marked "MANNEQUIN". Still, there was little doubt what it could be. I tipped the driver and muscled the thing into my living room.

After a good deal of labor with a prybar, I loosened the lid, which I withdrew with an odd mixture of reluctance and anticipation. I certainly was not prepared. Merely "realistic"? No, what was in the box looked for all the world like a real woman. It wore a long skirt that stretched all the way to her feet, with a ruffled blouse—hardly a maid's outfit. Its face, framed by tresses of auburn hair, was beautiful, fine featured, perfect.

I had envisioned something along the lines of the old Honda Asimo, or even the maid from *The Jetsons*. This was... something else entirely. Only the cord sticking out of the right ear broke the illusion. As I looked closer, I noticed an instruction book nested between its feet, which were shod in buckled leather shoes.

*"The Meerscham Industries Model A228 Mark II Companion Android has been designed to integrate into your household as simply as possible. She has a hydrogen fuel cell just like your car, and plugs into your household electrical grid at night. For safety reasons the android does not come pre-charged."*

The power cord in its ear did not extend more than two feet, and there was no outlet close to the box. There was nothing else to do. I drew the robot out of the box, and flopped it over my shoulder. It was about five inches shorter than I, surprisingly supple, and yielding in all the places a real woman would be. Feeling slightly embarrassed, I set the android down in a chair in the kitchen and plugged it in. The book said to let charge for 24 hours the first day, so I left it and tried to go back to my work.

I normally pride myself on my concentration, but I found myself coming back down to the kitchen: a drink of water, then a few crackers, later a piece of fruit. Every time I did so, I discovered some new feature of my android. It really was a thing of wonder, and I envisioned the artist or artists who created it laboring long hours over those eyelashes, those cupid's-bow lips, the slight flush of the cheeks. An enormous amount of love and attention had been devoted to crafting it, and I wondered how its creators must have felt about sending it out into the cold world.

I soon realized I was staring and ran back upstairs to work, but found that Brit Lit held little appeal for me at present. Afternoon crept into night, and feeling strangely exhausted, I crawled into bed early. I slept poorly, and had odd dreams.

I was expecting to see the robot but it still shook me when I entered the kitchen. The LED on the cord was still red. I did the mental math. The android's power cell still had another seven hours or so to charge.

I went through my day vaguely, searching and not finding distraction among my young charges. It was an odd sort of relief when a fight broke out and discipline needed to be enforced. This meant a trip to the principal's office, which in turn meant paperwork... Then there was a shutdown on the Metro, which delayed me almost 45 minutes. I had almost forgotten about what was waiting for me when I finally came in the door.

The green LED on the power cable was lit. All I had to do was turn the machine on.

*"Once fully charged, your Model A228 Mark II Companion Android can be activated by means of the command phrase, which is unique to each unit. Use of the command phrase is required to start up the android after a period of inactivity, or if necessary, to shut the unit*

*down.*” Included was a small card printed with the words “Simulacrum Paphos”. It triggered a faint memory that I could not place, but that was beside the point.

There was a faint hum, and the android stirred, straightened, opened its eyes.

“Are you my master?” I took an involuntary step back. The voice was pure and natural. I’d heard some good speech-synths, but this was literally unheard of.

“I, ah, suppose I am that,” I replied finally.

“Hello, I’m a model A228 Mark II android. How are you today?”

“I’m fine, how are you?” I said, involuntarily. Why was I being polite to a machine?

“I’m a bit stiff, actually,” it said, and stretched. I could only gawk. It seemed so very human.... “What is my name?” it asked suddenly. I was stopped short again. I had assumed that it would come with one. “Do I have a name?” it asked plaintively.

“Of course you do... Maria.” I didn’t and don’t know where it came from, but it seemed to fit. The android nodded as though this was the most natural thing in the world.

“And you?”

“You can call me William... or Billy, if you like.” *Now why did I say that?* I thought to myself, but Maria was off from the mark already.

“Pleased to meet you, Billy. Now, what do you need me to do? I’m set up to do household chores, but you can train me to do whatever is required to meet your specific needs.”

“Well, Maria, I don’t really need much done in the way of chores. I’ve only agreed to take care of... take on this responsibility for my uncle’s sake.”

“Oh, is that so?” Maria said, crestfallen. “You don’t need me for anything?”

I thought long and hard. I kept my house clean- not that there weren’t some things that could be done. The gutters probably had leaves in them, and there were boxes in the basement containing old student papers that needed to be taken out... But those were dirty chores, and the idea of Maria getting dirty seemed wrong somehow.

“I know! I can make you dinner!”

“That’s really not necessary,” I replied. “Usually a sandwich or a bowl of cereal is enough for me. Really.”

“No, that won’t do at all,” Maria replied, going over to the refrigerator. “If I’m going to live in your house, I have to do something useful. I won’t be a sponge!” I wasn’t anxious to argue, so I stepped back.

Maria was able to whip up a small, hot meal with relative ease. It wasn’t the best food I’ve ever had, but that owed more to the available ingredients than to the android’s skills. I made a mental note to drop by the supermarket for some fresh food following work the next day.

“Are you programmed to cook?” I asked afterward. The android had seated itself opposite me at the little table.

“Of course. I know over ten thousand recipes from all over the world, and I can even taste to tell if it’s good or not.”

“Do you eat, then?”

“No, I don’t have anywhere to put it. I guess that makes me a lucky woman,” it said, laughing. I felt warm, so I stood up. “Is something wrong?” Maria asked.

“No, I just need to go and finish some work for tomorrow,” I said.

“What do you want me to do next, then?”

I shook my head. “Nothing, really. You can watch Internet TV if you like. I don’t know what kind of channels you’d like.”

“Oh, ok,” it said, lips pursed. I left the room feeling vaguely guilty.

I talked to uncle Rick that evening on my upstairs machine, not wanting Maria to

overhear.

“How’s she doing so far?” Rick asked.

“Don’t you have her data already?”

“Yeah, sure, but I wanna know what you think.”

“I don’t really have much for it to do.”

“That’s all ya’ve got to say?”

“So far. Like I said before, I didn’t really need it.”

Rick shook his head. “‘It’, ‘it’, he says. My nephew, the Philistine. Well, maybe she’ll grow on ya. Talk to me again in a week.”

When I came home the next day I found that Maria had cleared all the laundry from my room, cleaned the kitchen, and had begun to organize my library.

“I know you didn’t ask me to do that,” Maria said, forestalling me. “But I really do get bored. Internet TV isn’t very interesting anyway.” I sighed. I wasn’t going to argue that point.

“Ok, but please be careful with the books. Many of these are rare.”

“Don’t you have electronic versions?” Maria asked. I shook my head.

“Some of them, yes, but there’s no substitute for the printed page. The feel of paper on your fingers, the smell of the cover... though I guess that wouldn’t be important to an android.”

“No, I didn’t mean...” Maria said in a small voice.

We sat silently for what felt like a very long time. “Don’t listen to me,” I said finally, feeling foolish. “If it makes you happy, go ahead and sort the books out. You can even read them if you like.”

“I’ve never read a book before,” Maria replied. “All my data comes in directly over the wireless.”

“Well, like I said, not all of these are in electronic format yet. The publishers haven’t caught up with all the older works. That means that there are things here you can’t find on the Internet. That is, if you are interested in things like that.”

“Do you think I should be?” Maria asked.

“Well, of course,” I replied. “A thirst for knowledge is part of what makes us... uh, human,” I finished lamely.

“All right. I’ll read every book in this collection!” she said seriously.

By the next day she had read half of the books, and wanted to discuss them with me. The following day she knew several critical theories from Dialogic to Marxist, and the day afterwards she was begging me to go to the public library.

I had started teaching a unit on modern British drama that same week, and Maria asked me so many questions about the readings that I took my lesson plans downstairs and worked on them with her. She proved to be an intelligent and probing discourser, asking me questions I hadn’t thought of myself. I came into each session dynamic and swift, remembering why I had chosen this profession to begin with. My students seemed to notice the change, certainly, and the principal gave me a glowing evaluation for the first time since my beginning year. Without noticing it, Maria had infiltrated my life. Still, there was something about it all that I didn’t like.

“Is Maria sentient?” I asked my uncle.

Rick averted his gaze. “You-ah, ya’d have to ask the boys down in cybernetics.”

“But she’s basically just programmed to do all the things she does, right? She doesn’t really think.”

“Well, Ravi, my chief tech guy, says they have something called “general AI”, but my lawyers tell me that there would be a legal issue if our androids were sentient. Moral

rights and all that.”

“So *is* she self aware, then?”

“Oh, so now it’s ‘she’, eh?” Rick laughed. “They work their ways on all of us. A pretty face, and boom, down for the count.”

“It’s not like that,” I said.

“Sure, sure. Well, keep up the good work.”

“Do you think I dress well enough?” she asked me one evening while we worked.

“Why do you ask that?” I said. “I like your outfit.”

“But it’s the only one I have, and it’s a bit old fashioned, don’t you think?”

“Well, it isn’t as though you sweat or anything.”

“Still, I need to clean it occasionally. I’ve taken to putting all my clothes in the wash at night while you aren’t around.” I stared at the floor, uncomfortable thoughts filling my head.

“Why don’t we go to the indoor mall on Saturday?” I said at last.

“Oh, can we?” she said eagerly. I considered what was left of my last paycheck.

“Sure, we should be able to pick up another outfit or two for you.”

“Hooray!” She did a little jig in the middle of the floor.

We rode the metro out to the mall. Maria’s outfit did draw some attention, but I was pleased nobody noticed she was an android. Some of our fellow travelers did have personal android assistants, and I sneered at their clunkiness, their sheer inescapable “robotness”.

I hadn’t been to the mall in some time, so we found a map and located some likely stores. The first store we visited had nothing Maria liked, the second had nothing I could afford. At the third store we were able to compromise, and Maria picked out several nice, modern-looking outfits. When she strode out of the dressing room for the first time, it was a revelation. I’d gotten used to her buttoned-down appearance, but here was a girl- a machine shaped like a girl, I firmly reminded myself- who was a match for any number of models.

“How do I look?” she asked, spinning on one foot. My face must have confessed to my thoughts, and she laughed. “Too much?”

“No, no, I like it, it’s good.”

“Ok, that’s a third one. You have time for one more?”

“It’s not the time, it’s the money,” I said. “A teacher’s salary only goes so far.”

“Ok, ok. We can head back then.”

As we left the store, I felt the sudden urge to put my arm around her. When I turned and looked, however, she was gone. We had walked into a large crowd, and I couldn’t see her anywhere. I had walked to a different section of the mall in my reverie.

I panicked. “Maria? Maria!” I cried, drawing curious stares from other patrons. A security guard studied me closely, then looked away, content to ignore me. Just another crazy, his demeanor said. I walked right up to him.

“I’ve lost someone.”

“How old is this someone?” he replied truculently.

“She’s uh-” I didn’t have a good answer for that. Half a month? “Uh, I guess she’s about twenty four,” I said. That sounded believable.

“What, she don’t have a cell phone? We only do missing persons for children and the mentally deranged. She ain’t that, is she?”

“No, she’s” I hesitated “...an android.” He looked at me incredulously.

“An android? Check with lost and found. Shouldn’t have ‘em in here anyway.”

I dashed off with muttered thanks. I backtracked to the store, but she wasn't there. That end of the mall was a dead end. I went back around, past the guard I had talked to, into another wing of the mall. It was possible she'd gone outside, or into one of the larger stores, but somehow I didn't think she'd do that. Forcing down my discomfort, I asked some people on a bench if they'd seen her. Luckily Maria had changed back into her own clothes, so they were able to recall her. "Down by the food court," one overfed gentleman informed me. I thanked him and ran on.

Sure enough, there she was, but she wasn't alone. Surrounding her was a group of unpleasant looking teenagers. She clutched her bags and watched them warily. Surrounding them was a buffer of tables, beyond which families casually ate their lunch, as though the spectacle was beneath their notice. I moved closer, cautiously, aware that many of these "kids" were at least my size.

"Come on, why don't you come home with me?" one was saying.

"Naw, man, you're too ugly," said another. "She'd be better off with me."

"Billy is my master," she said firmly. If she felt fear, she was doing a good job of hiding it.

"Who's a master? We just wanna chat, you understand?" the first guy said. "No reason to get upset. We won't hurtcha."

I couldn't stand there any longer, but I didn't dare just dash right in... I scanned the crowd, hoping that maybe... There. One of my students was in the second ring- a student who was one bad grade away from failing my class.

"Walter. Walter Brinkman!" I called out in my most stentorian voice. He looked up in alarm.

"Oooh, Walter, whoozat, your momma calling?" one of the others teased. Walter looked around and saw me. His face blanched, and then he nudged one of the other guys, muttering something under his breath.

Like a ripple in a pond, the kids backed away without speaking and without really acknowledging my presence. Maria looked around anxiously, expecting some new "game", but when she finally saw me she rushed into my arms and clasped me in a tight hug.

"Let's go." I said. I gave Walter a long glare, and he would not meet my gaze.

"I was so scared," she said to me once we had gotten home. "I was afraid they'd try to hurt me, but the First Law of Robotics says I can't hurt humans."

"It's ok now, though. They were just kids. Stupid kids."

"The things they said, though!" she replied. "Someone needs to teach them manners!"

"I try," I said sardonically. She sat down on the couch next to me.

"Still, I knew you'd save me. I was so happy when I saw you, I thought I'd burst." She moved closer. "You've meant so much to me... and I love you." Her face was just inches from mine. I froze.

"You've... I ..." I fumbled. I couldn't say it. She silenced me with surprisingly warm lips. I slept fitfully that night.

The next day's unit was on George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*. When teaching literature to teenagers, it's often helpful to have audiovisuals, so we also watched *My Fair Lady*. We'd watched the first half the previous Friday, so we were just finishing up. The DVD was a godsend, because I was not at my personal best right then. Walter was probably just as glad to not have to face me, judging by his hangdog expression. After

the movie, I set the class up to discuss the story in the few minutes we had left.

“Why is the play called *Pygmalion*?” someone asked. “Wasn’t Pygmalion a dude who made a statue?”

“That is the original ‘form’ of the myth, yes,” I replied.” But the basic story and implications of the original myth, Shaw’s play, and the film adaptation are the same archetype. All are concerned with a man’s fabrication of woman according to his own desires. Because he is not satisfied with what is available, he creates his own.” I stopped. Was it that simple- and was I that stupid?

It was all I could do not to slap myself on the ride home. Of course. She was programmed to become what I would want. She watched me every day, talked to me, found out my interests. A hundred little things about me, she had seen and taken in and made her own. I’d fallen for my own image, more Narcissus in the pool than Pygmalion of Cyprus.

I rushed in the front door in full froth. I didn’t know what I would do, or say, or even why I was upset. Maria wasn’t in the kitchen or the library. That left only one place. Maria sat on my bed, watching the cardinals on the tree out the window. In that furious calm I realized that they had built a nest outside my window without my notice.

“Aren’t they wonderful?” she said cheerfully, as she stood and smoothed out her dress. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Would you love me if you didn’t have to?” I asked without preamble.

“What do you mean?” she asked, her puzzlement clear on her face. “I love you. That’s all there is to it.”

“No. You’re an android. You are following the dictates of a program. You were designed to model yourself after what I would want: to become the perfect woman for me. Can you even feel love?”

She stepped back and cocked her head. “You’re confusing me.”

“Even a primitive computer can appear to have an intelligent conversation, but it’s only finding key words and putting out canned replies. You might appear to love, but you can’t feel it, can you? You might pass a Turing Test, but you’re just a machine.”

“I’m not... I love you! No matter what you say! Did I do something? Did I say something? Why are you angry with me?” She stepped back, put her hands to her face, and began to cry.

I couldn’t stand it. Whatever I knew in my head, my heart could not bear her pain. I rushed over to her, put my hands on her shoulders, and drew her close. She wrapped her arms around me and we stood, silent, for a few moments. Holding her like this, I felt I could forgive her anything... and what had she done exactly?

She pulled me a bit tighter, and then without warning her right arm snaked around and began unbuckling my belt. I grabbed her hand in alarm, and tried to pull away.

“What are...?” Suddenly it clicked. “That’s what you’re programmed to do, isn’t it? When your master gets angry with you, you try to distract him, like I’m some kind of abusive husband!”

“No, that’s not...”

“Get away from me!” I flung her away onto the bed, and stormed out of the room.

I slumped downstairs in the library for what seemed like a long while. I heard her come down the stair, a sound I knew so well by now. She pulled open the door and sat down. “Is there anything I can do to make you feel better?” she asked quietly. “I don’t know what I did, but I’ll make it right, I promise.”

“There’s nothing,” I said slowly. “I wanted... I don’t know what I wanted. But I’m not so selfish that I want a woman to be forced to love me. I want someone who is free to

choose. To love me, or not, on my own merits.”

“But I am,” Maria replied. “I chose to do what I did. If I didn’t like you, I wouldn’t have.”

“I wish I could believe that. But I’m not such a likeable person, and I don’t think we’ll be able to live together any longer.” The words from the card came out like nails from a gun. Maria tumbled silently to the floor, once again just a mannequin.

“Ravi tells me that the data he’s got from you has been incredible, just incredible,” Rick was saying. “The techs, eh, they don’t get too close to the ‘droids. Like a mechanic bein’ friends with his car, I guess. We’ve learned a lot about how she performs in real world conditions. They’re all looking forward to what you find out next.”

I licked my lips before replying. “I’m sorry, Uncle Rick. It just isn’t going to work out. I’m sending her... the android back.”

His face fell. “Aw, I’m sorry to hear that, buddy. What happened?”

“I just... it’s hard to explain.”

He looked at me intently and then shrugged. “Well, I guess I can understand. Hell, I’m not married anymore either. Still, damned shame.” I nodded dejectedly, and shut off the screen.

The next few days I was in a fog. It wasn’t until Tuesday that I went back into the library to retrieve Maria, still lying on the floor. I hauled the shipping crate back up from the basement and packed her inside it again, padding and all. I left her there in funerary splendor for another two days, but I couldn’t bear to seal it up. Finally I called the delivery company. Luckily Meerscham Industries had included full return shipping. They agreed to pick up the box on Sunday.

I sat up in my room again, typing out lesson plans, but my creativity had burned down to mere embers. Twelve o’clock came and went, and it was one before I realized I had awaited her call to lunch... and her conversation about things she had read, or seen on the news. Her sheer indefinable presence. I heard the cardinals’ peeping from outside my window, and a briny tear curled along my lip. I spat it out. This was for the best, right?

The doorbell rang. Thoughtless, hopeless, I staggered downstairs. “I’ll have it for you right away!” I told the deliveryman at the door. When she went out that door, she wouldn’t be coming back. There was no time to lose, so I scrambled, loading up the carton, sealing it carefully, hoping the driver could not see. I tipped him again, and he was off.

Of course, the techs at Meerscham Industries were surprised to open a crate full of old student papers instead of an android, and I had a devil of a time explaining to my uncle... but then, I am his favorite.

- *Andrew Bean*