

APOLOGIES ALL AROUND

Jeff Soesbe

“Daddy!” Rachel shouted. “There’s a robot at the door.”

Winston Sinclair hoped it wasn’t one of those sales bots. They were danged near impossible to get rid of. He picked up Rachel and raised the viewport she had used. The robot was three feet tall, grey, squat, plain-looking.

“Robot, what do you want?”

It had a cheap synthesized voice. “Winston Sinclair, born February 18, 2000?”

“Yeah...”

“Worked at CommaTech from 2023 to 2026?”

“Honey, don’t buy anything,” his wife Elizabeth called from the living room.

“Pardon, Winston Sinclair, I am not here to sell you something. I am not here to buy something. Winston Sinclair, sir, I am here to apologize.”

Winston sat on the couch with Elizabeth and Rachel while the robot explained.

“I contain an apology for Winston Sinclair from Karl Gustavsson.”

“Karl Gustavsson? I haven’t heard that name in, gosh, probably ten years.”

Rachel pulled at his shirt sleeve. “Daddy, who’s Karl?”

“We worked together at CommaTech, then he got a great job at Future Industries. I applied to work there, but they never called back.”

The robot beeped. “Pardon, Winston Sinclair. Will you hear the apology?”

“Uh, okay.”

An identicard reader on its side lit up. “Please confirm your identity.”

Winston pulled his card from his wallet and waved it over the reader.

“Identity confirmed, Winston Sinclair.” The robot whirred as a small e-screen unfurled into where its head might have been. “Playing apology.”

The man in the video had more grey and less hair, but it was definitely Karl.

“Hello, Winston. Isn’t this the strangest bot? Just shows up one day and... well, anyway.” Karl licked his lips. “Nine years ago, you applied to Future Industries. I didn’t want a young hotshot like you compet-



ing with me, so I spread the rumor you were impossible to work with. I’ve felt bad ever since and I’d like to apologize for doing that. I’m really sorry. I hope you can forgive me.”

The screen rolled back into the robot.

Winston jumped up. “That son of a b—”

“Winston!”

“—of a bull’s patootie! I really wanted that job. I always wondered what happened. I don’t believe it!” Winston stalked around the living room. “I was miserable at CommaTech for another year until I left, and then—”

“And then you went to Kaveri-Stratton,” Elizabeth said. “And you met me, and we got married, and we had Rachel, and here we are. I’d say things worked out just fine.”

The robot chimed. “Winston Sinclair, do you accept the apology?”

He had wanted that job so badly back then. But if he’d gotten it, then Future Industries would be his life. Not Elizabeth. Not Rachel, who right now was poking a plastic magic wand at the robot from underneath the coffee table.

Elizabeth was right. Things had worked out just fine. Better, even. She saw the big picture, like she always did. It was one of the reasons he loved her.

“Winston Sinclair, do you accept the apology?”

He sat down on the couch and reached for Elizabeth’s hand. “Yes. I do.”

The robot extended a small metal arm, probably a camera.

“Please record your acceptance.”

Winston took a breath. “Hi Karl, this is Winston. I accept your apology. Things worked out. I hope you’re well. Hey, call me sometime and we’ll catch up. Bye.”

The robot clicked. “Winston Sinclair, now you must record an apology.”

“Excuse me?”

“You must record an apology. I will deliver it. This is my function.”

Well, Winston thought, what do I have to apologize for?

“Okay. I bonked a hover with my car door yesterday.”

The robot was quiet while an LED on its front blinked, then went solid red. “Insufficient value.”

“What!?”

“Value of new apology must calculate to within plus or minus twelve percent of value of accepted apology.”

Winston rose from the couch. “I need to think about this over dinner.”

While the family ate, the robot stayed in the living room and recharged.

“Pardon, Winston Sinclair,” the robot beeped.

“You must record an apology.”

“Oh, geez, robot. Fine. I stole two books from the library when I was twelve.”

Again, the silence. “Insufficient value.”

“I teased Devon Marcus in tenth grade.”

“Insufficient value.”

“In university, I cheated on my fourth-year differential algorithms exam.”

“Insufficient value.”

A moment from Winston’s past emerged in his mind. He slowly turned his chair around.

“What if I broke someone’s heart?”

“Age at heart breaking?”

“Twenty-two.”

The LED blinked for what felt like forever. It turned green. “Value is sufficient. You may apologize.”

Sitting on the couch, Winston talked as the robot recorded.

“Hi, Cherisse. This is Winston Sinclair. I want to apologize. That night by the lake? When I told you I didn’t believe in love? I lied. I was scared of being close, and I ran away. I’m sorry I didn’t respond to your calls and your mail. I’m hoping you’ll forgive me.” He sat back. “That’s it.” Winston felt good, lighter somehow. He imagined this was how Karl had felt.

The robot collected itself, unplugged, and moved to the door.

Winston stood. “Robot, wait.”

“Yes?”

“I thought of another apology.”

“Only one apology is allowed. Now I must leave.”

Winston opened the door for the robot.

“Karl Gustavsson will receive this acceptance,” the robot recited. “Cherisse Deveraux will receive this apology. Goodbye, Winston Sinclair.”

While Rachel waved goodbye to the robot, Winston watched it go down the walk, down the driveway, and down the street until it disappeared into the night. He stood on the porch a few minutes more, and then went inside. He picked up the net tablet and started searching.

“What are you doing, honey?” Elizabeth said from the table.

“I’m looking for instructions. I’m going to build a robot.”

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