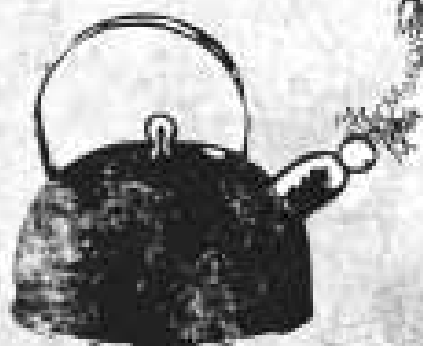




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# AT MINTIS

# DAD

## ■ *Jaq Greenspon*

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By the time I finally worked up the courage to talk to my father, he had been dead for over fifteen years. I knew where the module was, that wasn't the issue. I even took it out once or twice to look at it, see if I could get something from it without plugging it in. It scared me.

Mom told me about the module on my eighteenth birthday, right after I graduated from high school. Up until then I didn't even know it existed. I wasn't sure I knew what it was supposed to do. All I knew dad was a scientist, before he died.

I was a kid when he left, barely nine years old. Was I supposed to know what he was working on? I could barely remember what he looked like.

Of course, by the time I was eighteen I knew about Home Video Companions. They weren't common but you heard about them.

The first time I found out about them, I was in middle school. They were a joke, something to make fun of. The same way all kids will make fun of someone who's different, who has different values or beliefs or sexual orientations. I remember I rushed home to ask my mother about the HVC's, which is what we called them then. What we still call them. I think she could sense something in my voice, something about the derision I felt for these things, if they actually existed, and the people who allegedly used them. She didn't have the heart to tell me my father was the man who suggested the machines, designed and built the first prototypes. She didn't think I would have understood.

She did confirm my fears the things were real. She told me they'd been around for a while and were originally designed to be just what their name implied, Home Video Companions, for people like grandma, who couldn't get around much and just wanted someone to talk to. I didn't believe her. To my thirteen-year-old mind these disgusting constructs had been designed and built primarily for abuse by degenerates.

A lot had changed by the time Mom let me in on some of the family secrets.

In fact, by the time I first retrieved the module, it was almost completely useless. Mom kept it behind the violin which hung in our living room. She always said the violin was her little way of keeping dad alive. I always thought she meant it reminded her of the nights she and dad would get together with their relatives and talk until dad gave in to everybody's plea that he play something on the violin. Mom told me dad was a fantastic fiddle player. In the days before they were married, when he was working his way through school as a house painter, he would take mom out and play his violin for her. The same one which hung, framed, on a wall in the front room of our house.

She told me once his music was what made her fall in love with him.

I thought about him playing for her - the two of them sitting on Oak Street Beach, looking at the moon reflecting on the waters of Lake Michigan - as I looked down at the module.

It just sat there in my hand, looking like nothing so much as a metallic turtle which had somehow ended up on its back. The four contact points sticking up like legs, pleading to make contact with the ground, with something. I almost expected it to move.

I was eighteen and I'd been around. I'd seen films of what HVC's could do. What they did for people. I'd even seen an HVC card before. A kid named Ed Dennis had brought one to school, real big shot, said his dad got it during a police raid. That card didn't look much like the one which had been waiting for me behind the violin for so many years. The cards today don't resemble mine in any way. They're flat, with imprinted circuits. Program names etched into them. Today they look like high-tech dog tags.

But then, when I first held the silver turtle in my hand, I had no idea what I was supposed to do with it. I know now. It took a while but I'm a smart boy. And I had help.

So here I sit, twenty-four and still staring down into my hand at my friend the turtle. From the outside, not much has changed. In fact, the only noticeable difference is that I'm not alone.

Anyway, back then I held the electronic amphibian for a while before I put it back behind the violin. I even talked to it. Somehow I expected it to answer me. I don't remember what I asked, probably something inane about the weather or if I was going to go to college or get lucky with some girl. It really

doesn't matter. I just know once I put it back, I didn't think about it for quite awhile.

I didn't think about it until I went to the bar.

I was nineteen or maybe just turned twenty and a bunch of the guys and I went out after class to celebrate doing well on our midterms. I was studying history, going to be a teacher.

The bar was crowded and no one carded us as we went in, our primary reason for going to this particular establishment. We'd been there before, but not often enough to be known by name, just by face.

A few minutes after we arrived, we'd taken over a vacant booth near the back wall. While we waited for our first round, a commotion at the bar drew our attention. Being inquisitive college types, we diplomatically elected one of our members to go and find out what was going on then report back. I was the one elected.

Our drinks came as I got up to leave the table. Grabbing my beer, I headed over to the crowd. As I got closer, I could see they were surrounding a couple and a few of them were cheering and yelling obscene comments, which elicited laughs and applause from the rest of the crowd. Even the male member of the couple laughed at some of the more lewd statements. His female



Jochem van Wetten, „Lost Robot“

companion was still facing the bar. She seemed embarrassed and humiliated. I felt bad for her. Until he ripped off her wig and I saw the serial number engraved in the base of her simulated-skin covered skull. I knew what she was immediately, even though I'd never seen one in person. Her escort, repulsively drunk, grabbed her by the shoulders and spun her around to face the crowd of onlookers. Her too big hands reached behind her to find support on the bar in an almost reflexive move. I was stunned by how human she looked from the neck up. From the neck down she was fully clothed and the parts which did show could pass for real in a dimly lit bar full of people.

But the face.

The face was flat. Sort of. There was a small mound in the center, approximating the shape of a nose. Two concavities filled the role of eyes. And it reflected the lights from the bar just like the television I had back at my dorm room reflected my bare fluorescents. Behind the smooth glass of the monitor face was the girl whose personality was operating the animatronics. Her eyes looked out from within the recesses of the simulated sockets. Her nose spilled over the allotted dimensions of the body she was occupying and looked somewhat horizontal, spreading out over what should have been beautiful cheeks. When she opened her mouth to speak, I expected the glass to break along the lines of her lips.

It was like watching a three dimensional TV; a walking, interactive TV. I turned away before she said anything, not wanting to know where the synthesized voice would come from, or if it would sound realistically human. I pushed through the crowd and sat down heavily in the booth, the cushion making a

'whoosh' sound as my weight forced the air out of it. All my friends wanted to know what I saw. I shrugged my shoulders and told them it was

nothing, a guy showing off his date of the evening. They took the opportunity to make a toast to women. I added the qualifier of 'real' women, winking slyly as I said it.

Our glasses touched loudly and the celebrations continued well past late.

My hangover the next morning didn't prevent me from remembering the girl. I thought about her a lot after that night.

A few months later, the night before I went home for the first time since I had seen her, I dreamt about her. It wasn't a long dream, or particularly frightening, but it scared me nonetheless. I was back in the bar and the girl was there, but that was it, just the two of us. I offered to buy her a drink and she nodded her head, she never answered me, never spoke. I didn't think about the absurdity of her drinking until she tried. The liquid spilt on her face and down the front of her blouse. She started to cry and the droplets from her drink formed tears running down her deformed cheeks, seemingly making rivulets around her nose. She looked up at me from under nonexistent eyelids. I looked back at her, powerless to do anything to help her, then looked away. When I looked back she had her head cocked to one side, holding a violin underneath her glass jaw. She brought the bow across the strings and played.

She played while makeshift tears drifted down her makeshift face. I woke up before I recognized the song. Once I was home, I went to visit my old friend the turtle.

He was right where I'd left him, behind my father's violin, the girl's violin. This time I didn't put him back right away. I didn't talk to him either. I just looked at him, examined him from head to feet, inputs to outputs. I took him back to school with me. I took him shopping.

>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>



I took him to an HVC shop. The guy behind the counter looked at him and smiled. He told me my turtle was an antique, offered me fifty dollars for him. I turned him down. All I was looking for was a socket to let the turtle stand in. The guy told me they didn't make those kind anymore, they were obsolete.

He offered to sell me a current model, with brand new liquid glass for indistinguishable features. He said it stopped the problem of 'nose spread'. I thanked him and left, putting my turtle into its plastic box temporary home before putting him into my pocket.

After that, I kept him with me. I was twenty-one, how did I know what was I doing?

I began actively searching for my turtle's permanent home, the one he was created to live in. I found it when I was twenty-two. At least I found out where it was. That's also when I found her.

I had graduated from college and had accepted a position with a high school on the west coast. The move facilitated my search for my metal pet's home. There were more places to look, more HVC dealers, reputable and not so, to inquire at. The fact she told me where to find it, while talking over coffee, shouldn't have surprised me. But it did.

I met her at the library and recognized her immediately. Not exactly like an old friend but more like someone you know you've seen before but can't place the name. With her, I knew where I'd seen her and I never knew her name so it didn't make a difference. The last time I saw her, really saw her, was on a portable T.V. in a bar. I desperately wanted to talk to her, to humanize her in my head. I was lost in the thought of formulating an opening line when she bumped into me.

Apologies were made. I pushed aside all memories of my dream and asked her to have a drink with me. She accepted. We went for coffee, which lingered into lunch, which transformed into dinner. We talked about all the trivialities we thought were important. We talked about important things as if they were trivial. I introduced her to my turtle.

She took it from me and held it lovingly, the way one holds a pet after a long vacation. She knew my turtle, or at least his brothers and sisters. She said she hadn't seen one like him for years, since she left the lab. Being inquisitive, I asked her how she came to be acquainted with my little friend.

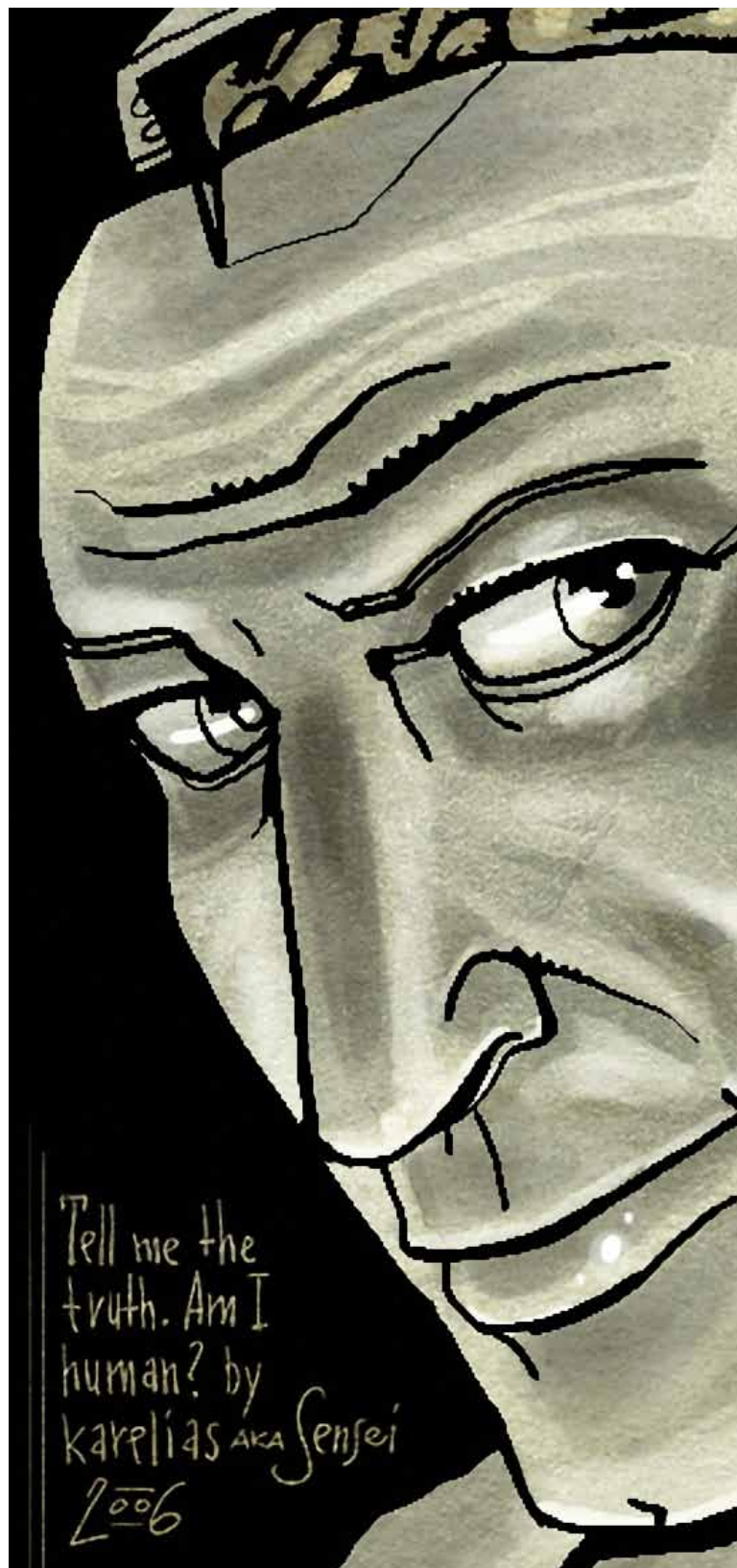
She worked for the company which developed the HVC's, originally as a psyche model. That admission answered a question I hadn't had the nerve to ask. I never even mentioned it to her. Maybe I will, after tomorrow. She modeled briefly, three modules for commercial use she said, and then moved into research and development. She did some more recording there, but that stuff would never hit the streets, it wasn't suited for a mass audience. It was in R and D where she was introduced to my turtle's family. She said they were for the first batch of HVC's. The ones that made it onto retail shelves were real basic models, with very few of the modern advancements. She said the only one she'd ever seen was in a closet in the lab, standing in blackness behind the door with a perpetually blank face. That one was a prototype. She'd been told when they created it, they were trying for real artificial intelligence as opposed to the simple stimulus/response models which were made public.

My search was over. I finally found out where to put my friend to rest. I felt like I did when mom had first shown me the module. It scared me.

My companion handed my turtle back and asked me where I got it. I told her it was a family heirloom and maybe, once I got to know her better, I'd tell her the complete story. She laughed sweetly and looked down at her rippled reflection in the coffee mug. Then she looked up at me coyly, through glorious three-dimensional eyelashes, and said she hoped it was a long story and that she was willing to wait. I think that was when I fell in love with her.

A couple of weeks ago I told her the story. She seemed briefly intrigued and then went on with what she was doing.

My turtle's home arrived yesterday. It came in a large crate, about the size of a coffin. I knew what it was before I pried open the lid and all the white foam



peanuts came tumbling out onto the floor. I stood in front of it and stared evenly into its blank face. I asked her why. She said it was an early present, from her and my mom to me. From my dad to me. I sat it down in a chair in the living room and left it there overnight.

So today, here I sit, twenty-four and still staring down into my hand at my friend the turtle. From the outside, not much has changed. In fact, the only noticeable difference is that I'm not alone. I know I don't have to go through with it if I don't want to. I've gone through a lot to get this far, I might as well





Phil Simmer, "Stone Robot"

go all the way. It's been fifteen years. I take the turtle and put him in his home. He fits perfectly into the slot in the small of the HVC's back. I sit down in front of him and watch as a face appears on the screen which has been blank for a long time. It's a face I remember. His eyes look around the room, taking it all in. I think he knows where he is, who he is. He looks in my direction. I hope he knows who I am. I think he does.

"Hello." The mouth on the screen moves and the voice comes out from somewhere in his throat. "You look good." His face looks distorted through my

tears. "Dad?"

"Yes."

"Daddy?"

"Yes?" His mouth curves into a smile.

"It's been fifteen years and a lot has happened."

"Tell me. We have a lot of catching up to do."

It all rushes out before I can stop it. "I'm getting married tomorrow and I...