

Another one for No 19

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Machine 19 paused for a moment, waiting for its unbalanced rocking to stop so that it could focus its lens on the broken cable to be welded. There was a silence in the access tunnel and suddenly it was lit bright by the arcing white light.

Isha sat precisely on the edge of her bed. For a moment she felt sad, something she often felt at this time before going to bed and yet never knew why. She had argued so strongly with her parents to have a room of her own and now she had her peace, but at this price. Then she twisted around and lay straight on the bed, her hands crossed on her chest, her jet black hair neatly framing her pretty face.

Danel sat in his favourite black chair, looking blankly at the multi-m 4000 console. He had everything here he could need for recreation - film banks going way back to the 20th Century, access to every radio station and gig ever, contact - voice only of course - to anyone and everyone as well as 3-d Sensory Adventure missions. Yet still he was bored - and unhappy. Why did he, and his friends, always feel like they were living in a glass bubble, with something intangible yet important always out of reach. He knew they felt like this because they had discussed it - often. Danel was a careful guy - not prone to impetuous emotions and good at thinking things through. He clicked his fingers once and jumped up to scan his bookshelves for one particular blue book. He knew something that should take his mind off things. As he searched, he noticed his shirtless body reflected in the mirror and approved. He was still skinny - lanky even, but all those reps on the strengthened bars he'd installed over the shower were paying off. He thought he probably was the most muscular of the young guys in the office. Almost nobody worked out these days but he had always felt an introvert and wanted to feel like a dynamic person - unlike his obese, but bookish Father. He flicked the pages of the book he had taken down, historical photographs of the 'Outside', but in seconds he was staring at the blank back cover.

Machine 19 had been one of the last Janitor bots off the production line - replacing a much older bot, and its area was NewYork District to Boston District of Central City, which now covered the whole of Central North America. Bought by AmTel, 40,000 of them patrolled all the access tunnels, repairing copper cable used for High Band Video communications shortly after the great Clamp-down. They were quite sophisticated for the time, running on specially laid 30 cm gauge tracks laid within the larger maintenance tracks, but unusually also had 'legs' which would allow them to negotiate obstacles when necessary in the fast decaying infrastructure of Earth's gigantic cities.

As Global Warming had peaked, the cost of glass - strengthened structural glass, used in ever higher sky-dividing buildings, whose windows could now generate solar power, had spiraled out of control and fiber-optics had become uneconomical in telecommunications. At the same time a new technology of synth-copper encased super-conducting fibre had become available, allowing vastly superior bandwidth. The old subterranean utility tunnels were replaced with storey-level utility-tunnels. Usually damp, full of decay and rat-infested, they demanded rugged bots to maintain them. Then soon after the great Clamp-down, Video links had been finally banned, and all the bots were recalled. But Machine 19 never received the call. Its receiver had corroded and it continued on to the first of its last three job.

Isha didn't really understand why she could spend so little time alone. Why were there laws to stop her being alone, except when isolated in her bedroom? She didn't understand why she couldn't talk of Love to anyone either. That too, was against the law. They

seemed such stupid laws and somehow connected, although, despite years of her careful probing and searching for an explanation in books, she was still none the wiser. Kids at school talked about 'Goldfish' syndrome or the feeling that one is living inside glass all the time. Some kids over the years had suffered particularly badly from it and had mysteriously disappeared. It all added to the fear that stopped one talking about it, even within your family. She didn't think her younger sisters had even heard of Love and she nurtured thoughts of it like a drug, in the deepest hidden places of her mind. With a little spasm of anger she stretched her arms out in front of her and thought of the many hours she had to spend in the claustrophobic company of people she no longer liked - her teachers, guardians during breaks at the University, and those horrible Watchers on the Tube. Always she had to move as one of a pair, with her assigned mate and neighbour, Yolinda, or her parents, or one of her sisters. She had never even spoken to a boy, alone. She composed herself again with her arms neatly folded over her chest, and remembered when her young brother, only three had been taken for fostering with another family with three boys. She had such sweet memories of him and wondered what he was doing now. She had heard that sometimes, when you are very old, you could receive a letter from a long lost sibling. But it was very rare. Perhaps this was one way the State kept you hoping.

It was late now and Danel lay on his bed staring at the maze of wires that criss-crossed the black steel and rusting ceiling. He felt cocooned, but unpleasantly so. He stared into space. He thought about that story of the Outsiders he'd seen in the NY Times that day. There were often little stories about them, and he always read them, looking for details of another world. He knew there were great hydroponic farms on top of the vast buildings of all cities, continually pumping precious water around and around, growing crops to feed the masses. And somewhere, beyond the furthest reach of the cities there must be a place where the Outsiders lived. 'Rat-people' some people called them - people who lived outside the walls and outside laws. But to him they were romantic. There had been a great liberal revolution at the end of the last century - much greater than that in the historic 1960s and it had nearly brought the World economy to its knees. Governments everywhere panicked, and after many skirmishes and efforts at suppressive Lawmaking, the ultra right-wing had finally prevailed and passed a law banning Love. Of course some types of love were permitted - familial love, sibling love but it was all strictly controlled. As a precaution, families were all to be single-parent, boys living with fathers and girls with Mothers. Contact was only allowed via censored letters and presents from male parents and grandparents to daughters and from female parents and grandparents to sons. Even reproduction was done using machines, once two families had approved the match. Governments felt that this would give them more control over the masses and they appeared to have been right. Now the Outsiders were the only ones who could experience Love. He imagined being one of them, being free and able to mix with anybody and meet His mind halted at the edge of a precipice.

Bang! A sudden noise rang out from above his bank of multimedia devices on the wall and there was a sharp flash of light.

"What the .." he said.

So Machine 19 had travelled for many kilometres along rusty track towards the last fault reported to it over the digital link. NewYork District - East quadrant, block 24, level 14, Gate 5, Section 12. Occasionally it came across other burnt out Janitor bots and gingerly stepped around them. When it was alongside, a small rod with a socket on the end, would extend and plug into a corresponding socket on the dead bot so that Machine 19 could download any useful data from the bot for archiving. Then it would continue on, towards its destination. At one point not far from Boston, it turned left into a narrow tube for a short distance and then right into a smooth panelled, double track passage - the main botway to NewYork. Here it could gain speed as the tracks were smoother and there were no

obstructions. Only about ten kilometres from the New York District it suddenly stopped. The botway ahead was completely blocked by mangled machinery and rubble. There was a narrow shaft of light indicating a way up through the roof of the tunnel but the bot had to give up after days of effort trying to get through the hole. Patiently, and methodically, it turned back towards Boston seeking the first available exit from the botway, which might eventually lead it in the right direction. The Janitor bots would send out a signal to the AmTel maintenance Control Centre when they encountered an obstruction, and Machine 19 often send out signals but nobody was listening. Consequently it would often find itself queuing behind a row of other bots, sometimes for weeks before a blockage would be cleared. Occasionally Maintenance Staff would see the old bot with the barely readable AmTel logo on the side but only a few of the old boys raised an eyebrow in surprise. Always turning left, like someone groping their way in an insanely complex maze, and guided by an algorithm, triggered by GPS, Machine 19 finally reached New York district. It had been even further south than Oklahoma district before finding a way North, always meeting obstacles, always turning back or left. Nearly ten years since its mission started it was finally welding the damaged cable. After only a few seconds of arcing light, it had finished and using a voltmeter to check the repair, assessed that the video device in Apartment 12 opposite could still not receive a signal. Machine 19, using the logic programmed into it, did the only thing it could do. Since there was no signal from any central exchange, it wired the video feed for Apartment 12 straight into the feed from Apartment 24 on the opposite side of the access tunnel.

Danel jumped up and peered at the source of the flash. It appeared to be an old Vid monitor but it was rusted away and couldn't possibly work. They had long since all been disconnected since Vid had become illegal. He stared at it for a moment and then clicked his fingers. He stood on a chair and gently prized the cable out of the back of the Vid monitor. It was rusty but he scraped it clean with a knife and pulled the cable out of the wall until the plug reached down to his multi-m console. There was old games module there which had the same plug type on the back, and although he knew he was probably crazy, he had to connect it just to see what would happen. He turned on the monitor and waited a few seconds for it to boot up. He stood staring unbelieving, at the screen. Unmistakably, there was a pretty face with neat black hair staring back at him. She looked equally surprised!

Isha had been lying on her back, thinking about nothing really at all when she heard a crackle from her multi-m. Her mouth crinkled as she wondered what had happened. The multi-m - a rare one in white - had been in the apartment when her family had moved it. It was a very posh apartment and had some classic furniture and equipment which she'd wanted to keep. She slowly stood up and reached over to switch on the multi-m. After a few moments the screen flickered into life and she stared at it intently.

Danel saw the face move and he smiled. The face smiled back!

"Hello," he said, uncertainly.

The face jumped back and the eyes closed while the mouth opened and let out a little scream. The face leaned back towards the screen after a few moments and said, "Hello. Who are you?"

"Hi. I am Danel!"

"But you are a boy!"

"Oh. Yes I am." Danel immediately felt scared. He was breaking the law and one with the most severe punishments too. He waited to see what would happen.

"Nobody can see us!" she said.

"I don't know. Maybe not."

Her face disappeared as the screen went blank. Isha sat down, shocked while Danel watched the panel, too shocked to move. He didn't want to turn it off while there was even the remotest chance she would turn hers on again.

As he stood and stared, her face appeared again.

"Hello," she said.

"Hello," he replied

"My name is Isha. Don't go!"

The small LED panel on the front of Machine 19 lit up. Some wise-guy programmer had programmed the Janitor bots to broadcast a little message when they had completed a repair job. It amused the guys in Control to hear it every time. Of course now there was nobody there to hear it, but still the words filled the small screen.

"Another one for No 19."