

An Unlikely Vessel

I knew something was wrong when Duke wasn't at his post on the back porch. I found him on his side behind the shed, brown eyes so tired. He lifted his tail once, let it *whumpf* back into the dust. My youngest son, Jordan, watched as I mounted the steps with Duke in my arms. "Is Duke okay?" he asked.

I couldn't answer. I regret not answering.

But how could I? It is hard enough to teach a child about time. Seconds like wolves' teeth, angled backward to keep hold and tear, throat muscles working to swallow you back into the bowels of forever. But how can you explain forever to a child who knows little of time? I mean, he can't even read an analog clock yet. To Jordan, forever is the slow arc of a baseball knocked from a batting tee or those last minutes spent snuggling his childhood friend while we waited for the Vet to knock on the door.

No. To Jordan, forever is something strange. Just a word his parents use. To him, life is the endless march of now, and now, and now. I'm not sure I understand it myself. So, when the Vet looked up with concern, plunger ready to depress, what was I supposed to do? Pull him away from those last seconds of forever? Steal from him that final instant of warmth? And then the Vet was gone, and so was Duke, and for a while, so was Jordan.

That tired cliché came to mind: *husk of his former self*. But husk was too strong a word, for there was life left in his eyes, shimmering in the deep as he paced the hallway between his room and Duke's empty bed in the kitchen. Nights sleepless. A handful of days of silence, two or three, I don't remember. Then, one morning, he was there again, materialized from

some boyhood ether next to me as I sat drinking coffee at the kitchen table. The thought germinating in his mind had finally sprouted.

“Am I going to die?”

I needed a misdirect. “Pancakes sound good?”

He gave a funny look, nodded.

Attempting to hold off the forward formation of that battalion of questions, I busied myself with flipping pancakes. But, try as I may, my little legion of stalling tactics: butter, warm batter, and maple syrup fell to his inevitable curiosity. He lifted his eyes from his plate. *Here it comes.* As a last resort, I raised my mug like a shield and took a sip.

“Are you and Mom going to die like Duke?”

“We’ll talk about this when you finish with breakfast.”

“Okay.” He chewed. “When am I going back to school?”

“Whenever you are ready.”

“Okay.”

“Do you miss your friends?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you ready to go back?”

“Yeah.”

And that was our morning together. Him building the courage to throw out those metaphysical gut-punch questions, and me doing my best to juke or misdirect. In a flash of cold sweat desperation, I ran to the basement under-stair storage for our box of craft supplies and groped around for anything, anything to decorate. Upside down in a nest of quilts and books, waiting for someone to empty its dirt bin, was our Roomba.

“Look what I found,” I said.

Jordan eyed the bot, the boxful of pipe cleaners and pompoms. “What are we going to do with that?”

I fished out a bag of googly eyes, grabbed the glue. “Decorate it.”

We took turns. I put on the largest, googliest pair of eyes in the bag as Jordan mulled the decision between purple or teal felt fur. Smiling, he lifted the purple piece for a dab of glue. Next came some pompom spots and a ridge of dinosaur spines cut from yellow foam. “He needs a mouth,” Jordan said, snipping a grin out of black felt. I provided the glue, he pressed, and then all three of us were smiling.

We stood back to admire our work. He circled the table and laughed. “When did you give him the tail?”

“While you were cutting out the spine. Should we name him?”

His eyes greyed over like twin thunderheads. “No. I don’t want to.”

“Why not?”

He stood wringing his hands.

“How about Steve?”

Nothing.

“Okay, well. I’m going to put him downstairs on his dock. He needs to be charged.”
Small footsteps down the stairs behind me as I slipped Steve onto his charging pad. A twigleg shadow crossed the light from the open spandrel door, Jordan’s silhouette tragic in the backlight. He took a step into the space beneath the stairs and yelped.

“My books! Who knocked over my books?”

“They were like that when I—”

He ducked in, slammed the door.

Realization rolled in. The blankets and books. The evenings after his first days in kindergarten, practicing words in the living room as his older brothers chided his mistakes, how he would retreat to the basement closet with Duke at an amble behind. The dog would listen when we would not.

“Jordan? You okay?”

He didn’t respond, didn’t even surface till dinner. Jessica saw him first and nodded to me. I turned to see him at the top of the landing.

“Hey, Bud. Are you hungry?” I asked. He kept his eyes on the floor, walked to his bedroom, and shut the door.

I woke the next morning to my phone buzzing on the nightstand.

Roomba requires your attention

Roomba is stuck near a cliff.

I swiped the notification away and rolled over.

Another jolt from the nightstand.

Roomba requires your attention

Roomba is stuck near a cliff.

Jess’s eyebrows were a question mark above the covers as I legged out of bed. I shrugged. “It’s the Roomba.”

“Roomba?”

“Go back to sleep.”

When I turned the basement landing, I found it propped against the spandrel door, revving its little wheels in what looked to be an attempt at climbing. It tottered a second before flopping onto its back. It let out a helpless beep and then went still. I picked the pitiful thing up, checked the foam ridges on its back for damage, then put it back on its charging base.

Jess was upright in bed when I returned. “Your phone was going nuts. Just stopped.” “It was the Roomba.”

“I forgot we had that thing.”

“Jordan and I decorated it yesterday.”

“Decorated?”

“Googly eyes, some felt fur.”

“Cute.” Her eyes tracked movement behind me. I turned to find Jordan scratching at his pajamas.

“Where’s Duke?”

I looked to Jess for help, eyes wide as mine. No help there. “Bud, Duke is gone.”

“Oh. Yeah.” He blinked. “I had a dream that he woke me up with his nose on my face. But he left before I could pet him.”

More noise from my phone on the nightstand. I opened the app to silence the notifications and glanced at the Roomba’s status page. Something was off. The simulated map of its night cleanings was far too large for our basement.

“Everything okay?” Jess asked.

“Huh?” I said.

“You look confused.”

“Oh. Yeah. Look at this. Jordan, come here.”

I tapped the button to watch the night’s play-by-play. The Roomba symbol crawled on its way across the screen. It zigzagged through the hallway, nosed into the bathroom, stopped at the toilet, then went back to its dock to charge.

“What did it get hung up on in the bathroom?” Jess asked.

“Looks like the toilet,” I said.

After a rest, it pattered to the exterior wall, where, instead of stopping or turning, it passed straight through into the dirt ten feet beneath the backyard.

“That’s two feet of concrete,” I said, pointing at the wall. “I thought the map looked... off.”

After a loop around the perimeter of the backyard, it came back through the basement wall, then headed to its charging dock for another rest. When it started up again, instead of continuing to clean, it bonked against the under-stair closet door until the end of the playback. “That’s where I found it. Weird.”

“Where did it end up?” asked Jess.

“Closet door under the stairs,” I said.

Jordan cocked his head. “Wait. Play it again, Dad.”

I did. The regularly scheduled cleaning, the pit stop in the bathroom, the recharge, the magic trick through the foundation into the backyard, and the scrabbling against the closet door. “Coooool,” he said.

“Neat little glitch,” Jess said. “Spooky.”

Jordan deflated. “I don’t know,” I said, trying to salvage some magic from the moment. “It could be getting through a secret hole or something. Might be a tunnel.” Jess eyed me, the boy, me. “Yeah,” she said, catching up. “Could be a tunnel.” “It’s scheduled for another clean in six hours. Want to stake out with me? See what happens?”

A sly smile crept across his lips. He nodded.

The hour came, and we were there, holed up in the basement beneath a fort of blankets and foam play pillows, just waiting. I could see his eyes bright in the dim, that childhood energy up his spine. I felt it too, that wiggle. The world aglitter once more.

And then we heard it. The clacking of its calibration dance, the sound of its scotch off the dock. Jordan gasped as it crossed what little of the hallway-framed floor we could see. It passed again, brushes spinning, googly eyes rolling. It rotated down the hallway toward us, then turned into the bathroom. We heard its brushes on the tile, a plastic bump, and then it went still. Jordan glared out. "Is it stuck on the toilet?"

"I don't know. Go find out."

With his back against the wall like an escapee, he sidled to the corner, peeked his head into the bathroom an instant, then sprinted back.

"It's coming," he said, crawling into my lap. "It was just sitting there."

"Not stuck?"

"Not that I could see."

Appearing once more in the hallway, the robot seemed to consider the difficulty of its next move. "Must take a lot of preparation to phase through solid rock," I said. He shivered. "Yeah."

"It still has to charge again."

We watched it head down the hallway toward the charging station, heard it clamber up, then silence.

"How long does it sit there?"

"About ten minutes. Can you wait that long?"

"I think so."

We waited. Ten minutes passed. "You ready?"

He nodded, legs flopping with excitement.

We waited. Fifteen minutes passed.

“How long has it been now?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Go see what it’s doing.”

“Check your phone.”

“Just go look.”

He kept to all fours down the hall, crept around the corner, slow, slow. “It’s just sitting here, Dad,” he said, just out of sight. I found him knelt beside the charging dock, running a finger along the lightning bolt spine, all that boyhood excitement shivered away. “Man, I wanted to see it go through the wall.”

“Me too.”

“What do you think happened?”

“I don’t know, Bud. Maybe Mom was right. Maybe it’s just a glitch,” I said, glancing sideways in time to watch his chin fall to his chest. “Or maybe it’s dreaming.”
“Can robots dream?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

He eyed the downstairs storage. “Will you read me a story?”

“Of course,”

“In there?”

“Absolutely.”

Crammed knees and elbows. We sat beneath the naked bulb, taking turns reading pages of *The Cat in the Hat*. It was there, huddled under the stair stringers and wrapped around with myriad duvets and flat sheets and green and white Christmas blankets, that I first became aware of the slipping of time. I had felt it before, but not like this. All of it sliding away, the avalanche of mud and silt and bleached bone, that downhill pull. When did he get so heavy? Where is my baby boy? Here, here, this is him, that same boy. Those mornings waking to his eyes

bright, when I would raise him from his crib and babble endlessly, da da da, and smell his hair where he had lain, spots nightflat and some still wild. Look at him, look. It cannot be. It has to

be. Plant your heels, old man. There it is, that now, and now, and now.

I flipped the page, watched his eyes scan the pictures: the net dropping upon Things One and Two.

Then came the scratching at the door.

Jordan launched up. "Am I dreaming?"

"What?"

"Is this a dream, Dad?"

"I'm here. No, this isn't a dream."

The noise again. Claws against the wood, a whining close to the floor.

He blinked. "Dad. I think it's Duke."

We stepped out to find the motleyed Roomba staring up at us. "It's Duke, Dad."

"Son. Bud. It's a robot."

"It's Duke. He would scratch at the door like that when he wanted in with me. He tried to get in before you and Mom woke up."

"How long have you been awake?"

"I don't know."

"Wait, did you sleep under there?"

Jordan changed the subject. "Maybe he's a ghost, Dad."

"Or maybe the robot just glitched out."

"It's Duke's ghost, Dad. I know it."

I looked down at the robot, back to Jordan. "Do you want me to help you two settle in?"

Every morning, before starting my coffee, I rescue the Roomba from the closet and set it down on its charging dock. I sometimes stare into those googly eyes and laugh as I look for something I've lost. A piece of myself, maybe? Duke? I don't know what it is, but it *is* there, dreaming just beneath.

And every evening, Jordan's voice beneath the stairs. That unmistakable halt-and-start of the just-learning-to-read, confidence building through the Cat in the Hat's final monologue. The brush of a flipped page, then silence. And somewhere in that shrine to childhood, I know, is a happy little robot vacuum.