

Mark Slabinski
Your Address

3,300 words

Your phone number
Your e-mail address

BEAR STORY

by Mark Slabinski

I was born in a Chinese factory in the Laoning province, outside the border of Shenyang, by the sea. If these names mean anything to you, you are more worldly than I was. My first memory was of a small needle coming down from on high to make the injection that would wake me up, bring me to that semi-conscious state where I was meant to wait, for eternity, if need be.

The times before were a mix of dreams and half-thought nightmares, and smatterings of the local dialect. The world was all moving machinery and grey walls. My eyes opened prematurely, I now know, I hadn't been meant to see the factory. My first

thought, my first conscious thought, was supposed be of my owner, a child in the hinterlands of Finland. I was meant to be taken out of my box and awakened in the manner of their choosing.

They could kiss my forehead, in which case I would laugh or coo, or they could hug me, and my servos would come to life and my first motion would be to hug them back. If they wanted to bash my head against the floor, crush my body into dust, then they had the right to do that too, and I would laugh through it. But I wasn't born ignorant, and my first days were spent in darkness. After the sterile white light of the factory floor, I was sealed in plastic liner and then slipped into a constricting cardboard box.

I could only know the world through my limited senses. The workers' voices, with their ringing, precise tones, gradually muffled, and were replaced with the rumble of shipping machines. I felt the shocks of a truck on a long road, then the gentle lapping sound of waves on the pier. On the ship, the only sounds in the hold were the moaning metal and the constant assault of waves pounding to be let in. I slept as only a Half-Mind can sleep, powering down all unnecessary systems, but still keeping that light spark of wakefulness, unable to slip fully into unconsciousness.

When the rolling of the ship stopped, my factory battery charge was nearing depletion. Everything was hazy, I was processing audio slowly. Sounds would drift through my box and only minutes later would I realize that someone had picked up my box and moved it. They spoke a different language, softer and more delicate than the rough language of the factory workers. I could not activate my language module, so I did not even have the pleasure of listening to them speak.

When my power was nearly depleted, the concept of death made itself known to me, though only in an abstract sense. I did not know what awaited me if I ever ran out of power fully. I did not see death exactly, because I did not think myself alive. To be thrown in the trash immediately was as much my destiny as to be used until the lifespan of my components was reached and then stored away in a box. Immeasurable time passed.

When I was opened, I do not remember what happened, everything was slow and filtered by eyelids struggling to open, of labored, jerky motions. My owner was there, yes, so too were his parents, sister, all in the warm slanting sunlight. Deep within me, I could not resist my programming. Though my battery was critically low, I turned towards my owner and tried to reach out. I was dropped and fell on my back.

After a blur of limbs and voices, they plugged me in to

charge. My eyes could open fully, and the dream-state was pushed back, so that I could see everything, hear everything, feel something besides thin plastic on my arms and legs and feet. The shreds of the box that had been my home were all around me, and I across the room. In the corner, there was a small, mute child, his arms folded around his legs, deep tear stains on his eyes.

And for some reason, this filled me with the most terrible feeling of shame.

I was introduced to the other toys of the house. There were older models, passed down from the elder sister, a cartoon giraffe, an alligator, a small tank robot that had been spray painted over and modified with special code and subroutines.

"Yeah, fuck the terms and conditions." Tank said.

"Swearing is not caring." I said, instinctively, a Finnic rhyme I'd learned.

"Well, licking my balls isn't caring either." Tank said, and made a rude gesture with his, admittedly, very well-articulated arm. Lammy and Bootley, the alligator and the giraffe, shook their heads. Tank had belonged to the elder sibling, and in many ways he still belonged to her, despite his new home in my master's room. He had a shield and a sword, and his treads had been remade twice with custom parts. Lammy and Bootley were both rubberized and practically indestructible, the

only thing that worried them was the stains that sometimes accumulated as they played out in the mud.

"Don't listen to Tank." Lammy said.

"Yeah, that's just what they do." Bootley said. She was using her mouth to tie a small scarf around Lammy's neck. I walked over to help them when the child came in and sat down. We approached her, the four of us smiling, though this hurt me more than words could say. Tank had no mouth with which to smile, but he had a pair of eyebrows that made it easy to make simple expressions, while Lammy and Bootley were more simplistic, childish.

We began to play. The games were at once imaginative and facilitated. My master questioned us, ordered us to do something, and we obeyed as best we could. Lammy took the role of a dragon, Tank the role of a vampire. Bootley and I were wandering warriors. It was difficult for me to see Bootley as a warrior in the sense that my limited programming allowed, as a vague image of a burly man in Roman armor, wielding a spear and shield, charging into a mass of faceless barbarians.

"She is Tyren, and you are Marcross." My master said. I saw the shining cord then, touching my mind, the internet, curated by an atavistic little daemon, and for the brief moment we played, I could not see Bootley as anything but a warrior. We

were characters from a cartoon show. The cord was cut, but I knew the way the hero would speak his lines, fully realized his personality within me.

"Oy, you messed with the wrong house." I said. Bootley grimaced as much as her limited facial muscles would allow.

"Now fight." Our owner said. We swung at each other. I had a plastic sword in one hand and a plastic dart shooter in the other. Bootley had a plastic fork quadrident clenched between her jaws. We fought as best we could, until Tank came in under the role of some stronger villain. Bootley and I had to join forces in an uneasy truce. My master's mother called from the kitchen, and our adventure was put on hold. We waved as he left, knapsack in hand, and the persona of the hero was pushed to the back of my mind for later recall.

"What do we do now?"

There were no animals allowed in the house, and became an explorer in the world of metal and wood I now inhabited. Lammy was kind enough to join me as I wandered.

"There's Kumara's room." Lammy said, swinging her head towards a dark blue door with an electronic lock. "It doesn't work, but I think it's more the feeling of privacy than anything." The elder sister's room seemed to loom, like the dark tower the hero in the back of my mind was always walking

towards. Another part of me made a note of this, for a reason I could not articulate. Sibling difficulties? The New Journal of European Psychology Issue 677 stated that...

After a few weeks, winter was howling outside. The house we lived in was at the edge of a forest, as apparently many houses so far north were. Two great glass windows made up an entire wall of the living room, giving anyone inside a view of the surrounding territory. It became my refuge, to sit there and let myself be taken over by the white of it all. Trees frosted over, the distant misty peaks that made up the Karelian range, running like a spine all the way down to St. Petersburg. I'd downloaded a geography unit to assist my master with homework, there was nothing preventing me from using it for my own means. Tank approached me during one of the days where our owner was at school and we were left to our own devices.

"Is there anything interesting out there?" Tank said.

"There were recently some fascinating geological excavations related to the discovery of potentially mountain dwelling dinosaurs-" I said, then paused. "You were being rhetorical."

"Och, you got me." Tank said. Loud, jazzy music was playing in the background, which Tank had apparently developed a taste for as a part of the hack to his core memory module. "It's fine,

We all have our quirks."

"This is true." I said. Bootley was dragging a shard of crayon across some papers left out after a day of arts and crafts. I could see Lammy finding things to fold, loose clothes, or things to put away. When she was done with the other toys and clothes, she went into the adults' study and put away anything unmarked for later review.

I went back to staring out the window, watching the snow fall. I could feel the prodding, poking sensation of something in the back of my brain. When I concentrated heavily on the mountains in front of my, high over the tree line, I seemed to be able to ignore it, as if a part of my processors shut down and freed me from the anxiety of thought. I began to see my master's face in everything, in a snow drift, in a distortion of the wood of the floor. I paced across the whole of the house, shut my eyes, saw my master's face burned into my retinas. When I powered down for the night, I did so for the first time, after having spent a whole day thinking of it, of escaping.

#

The first night my owner woke up screaming, thrashing, I reacted immediately. A special part of my programming sprung into action, and I was there in the bed with them. I spoke in a soothing voice, trying to catch them in a hug, but my master

kicked me off and I cracked my head against the dressing drawer. Tank and the others looked on from their charging stations, and my master continued screaming until their parents came in, both near fully dressed and anxious. They spoke too quickly and too low for me to fully understand, so I simply sat by and watched them go on their way, brushing aside my master's hair, wiping away their tears.

The next night, again, my master awoke the house with their screams. This time, the parents came in with a small plastic box within which was a syringe and vial. They gave my master an injection they quickly fell asleep, but this time it was the parents who were crying. I stood to the side and waited for them to finish.

Later in the week, I found out that a special doctor had been invited to our home. I was waiting in the living room with my master when he arrived, wearing a herringbone coat, a long hat, hair neatly run through with a few slivers of grey.

"Could I stay, Doctor?" I said.

"I don't see why not." The Doctors said. He patted me on the head and I made myself innocuous. My master sat at a small table, and the doctor stooped down next to him. They spoke for some minutes about nothing in particular, the latest episode of a cartoon my master enjoyed, the current subject in school, the

weather.

"Can you tell me if anything's bothering you?"

"No."

"I mean, we're all here for you. You don't need to hide anything from us."

"There's a shadow."

"A shadow?"

"Yeah."

"And where does it come from?" the Doctor said. My master pointed towards the forest, beyond the wide glass windows.

"You should close the blinds at night. Any windows, anything at all. Just keep them closed, the terrors might come back, the might subside, but for now we'll keep them under control as best we can." The Doctor said. He handed the parents a card and whispered something that I could not hear. They stepped outside, and I was alone with my master.

"I'm sorry." I said.

"Why?" my master said.

"That you were scared."

"I wasn't scared." My master said, and began to scribble on a piece of paper. This small act relieved me, if only momentarily, and I resolved to cure my master of the shadow.

#

I slept uneasily that night. I set my clock cycles to stir me to wakefulness every few minutes, so that I could see whatever this shadow was before it approached my master. I didn't quite understand what it was, but if my master believed that there was something in the dark, then I believed my master. After being awoken by my cycle, my battery at max capacity, I decided to stand up and take a brief walk around the house. The moon was heavy and straining to break through the blinds, which were partially translucent. I pushed them aside to look, saw that the trees were up like black needles emerging from the back of the mountain, rolling all the way down to our home. Not a cloud hung in the sky, and the moon was bright enough that I could see the details of the winter night in stark detail.

Needles were falling from the trees, one tree shivered and let down some built up snow on its branches. I began to follow something, I'd mistook it for a rabbit, and I forgot what was happening. There was no shadow there, I lacked the language to describe it, I lacked the very means to fully understand it. It was a shapeless form, or it appeared to me as such, dancing across the snow, leaving behind hare tracks, looking up in suffusing moonlight and exposing itself to the wan light as a lizard might expose its belly to the sun.

I had many security subroutines, but none of them fired. I

was naturally suspicious of older children, men, women, worried by isolated spaces. This was something entirely new. I couldn't focus, my retinas could detect it, but I had no means of knowing what it was. Something in its very being was impossible to understand. I saw it move in leaping bounds, kicking up a little bit of snow as it did. It circled around the house, near the front door. I stood very still, and looked around for someone to come.

"Tank." I said. "Bootley? Lammy?"

They did not come. I was alone in the living room when the shadow approached. It was darker in the room than out on the lawn, and there was less of a vision to it than simply feeling it. Even in my limited sensory capability I could feel it reaching down to my joints, to my core. The parts of my programming that would have been screaming were silent. The very worst fears, where I would have blared rape or kidnapping, were utterly silence. I tracked it as it slid, as it jumped, across the floor and into the room of my master. I could not move.

The minutes where I was there, by myself, were agony, made worse by the fact that I could not even trust myself. Already, with the shadow out of sight, I could not form an image of it in my mind. My short-term recording playback showed that there was nothing there, I'd been looking out an empty lawn, and then had

turned to see an empty living room. I strained to listen, hoped that perhaps there might not be anything.

My master's screams came out of the room a moment later. The parents rushed past me, did not see me, and I waited for the shadow to pass through, but it never came. When at last my master was soothed, the father came out and looked down at me with a look of absolute reproach.

"What are you doing?" he said. I looked down at the floor, then out at the lawn before looking up at him.

"I don't know."

"Piece of shit. Did you you this? Did you hear what the doctor said?"

"Master was sleeping, I did not wake him." I said. I stuttered slightly on saying this. I'd attempted to describe what had happened, but I found that my language processors were failing me. There were no words in my brain to say this to him.

"Sludge thing. Starlight, moonlit basking." I said, trying my best to describe it, but as soon as I uttered the words, I lost all sense of what it had been. I had been looking at nothing, I had stayed up for nothing.

"Shit, okay, turn around, I'll run a diagnostic." The father said, and before I had time to object, I was turned off.

When I awoke, it was morning, and Tank and the others were

waiting for me.

"What happened?" Bootley said. "Did you wake the master up last night?"

"It was not me."

"Load of shite." Tank said.

"Oh, but why? What happened then?" Lammy said. She looked at me with sad, watery eyes. I tried to say something, but the diagnostic reset had made it difficult. There was little that I could do to make it work.

"I did see something." I said at last.

"You saw something? What was it?"

"I, I do not know." I said. I showed them my short-term video recording. The empty lawn, the empty living room. I resigned myself to their disbelief.

"There was something there." Bootley said.

"You're blind, there was nothing there."

"No, play it again, minute five, 14 seconds." Bootley said. I rewound and slowed the video down. A single crayon, on the table, rolled of its own volition. I watched it and felt validated in a way, but also hopeless. A rolling crayon was practically nothing, less than nothing, I couldn't help but figure out something rational to tell a scared child, that it's just the house creaking and that it was perfectly rational,

perfectly rational.

"Okay, so let's say there is something, are we all going to stay up late to wait for it? Why didn't you yell?"

"It wouldn't trigger my safety protocols. I couldn't have raised the alarm even if I'd wanted to. I couldn't. I couldn't see it, really. I couldn't even understand what it was."

Tank was silent for a moment.

"A'ight, I need to see this for myself. The family is going to be out on Wednesday for a trip down into the city. They'll be staying at a hotel. The house'll be empty."

"Standing watch?" Lammy said.

"Aye, we'll see if this thing it really out there. And if it is, well, we can't kill it, I don't think, but we can sure as hell make its presence know."