

Roger

Hugh had wanted the computer, too, but not as much as Susie. As they drove home from the retail outlet, she trembled with excitement.

“It’ll do the shopping! And the laundry! Everything!” She squeezed his arm enthusiastically, causing him to swerve in the road.

“Just hold on!” he snapped, and then, softer, “Now, calm down it’s not as if this . . . machine . . . is going to solve all our problems.” He smiled at his young, pretty wife and knew how much he loved her—but he knew something else, too—that she didn’t know.

“What problems?” she giggled. She looked into her husband’s serious face, and he squirmed. “My only problem is, my husband is a big grouch.” She slid back into the seat and laid her head on his arm.

They were newlyweds, and very much in love. Lately, however, he seemed preoccupied, but it was not enough to dull her contentment, and she was as happy this moment as she had ever been.

“I think I’ll put him in the bedroom, and name him Roger.”

He growled good-naturedly at this. “In the first place, it’s not a *him*, it’s an *it*,” he explained with mock patience, “and in the second place, how do you know it won’t make me jealous?” He grinned again and dug his elbow into her ribs.

This time *she* looked serious. “Nothing can make my man jealous—‘cause he knows he’s my one and only.” She nibbled his ear, and sank back against him.

He drove on with her arms around him, and before long they pulled into the wide driveway of the ranch-style home.

“Well, the least this mechanical brain can do is help us pay for all this,” he said soberly, pointing at their new house.

“It will, I know it will,” she promised.

Susie hugged him and popped out of the car to wait for him by the trunk. When he opened it, she made a motion as if to lug the terminal out by herself, but he grabbed it, asking her, “Where to, Ma’am?” and carried it into the house.

“Roger is going to make us dinner tonight,” she said confidently, as Hugh set the screen next to the large waterbed and plugged it in, “and he’s going to have breakfast ready in the

morning.” An exasperated look passed over Hugh’s face, although he realized she was probably right.

The Compu-500 (Roger) was billed as the latest “infinite function” computer. Linked with the sophisticated robotics of the contemporary American home, it represented the ultimate in labor-saving devices. Supplied with standard software, it could order groceries and have them delivered to the door (the robotics put them away), send out and take in the laundry, cash and deposit paychecks, heat and cool the home, make and break business appointments, and perform a multitude of other labors. It could also, so the manufacturer represented, “think,” by virtue of a program that scanned the personalities of its owners, and anticipated problems. It could be dialed from any telephone, or operated by radio. It also was not cheap. It had cost \$375,000—a year of Hugh’s pay—and although it was supposed to make this back someday, it was not to be purchased lightly.

Hugh mulled over these thoughts, and others, as he dropped onto the living room couch, and watched his rosy wife flit around the home with the happiness of a woman whose husband has just hired 1,000 servants. He could have been extremely pleased, possessing all that he had, but he was not, and the reason for his dissatisfaction was his warm, unpredictable humanity, which the computer age had not yet replaced in him: Hugh felt guilty about an affair he had just started, and ended, with one of Susie’s best friends.

It began innocently, as always happens to a man who is in love with his wife. Susie had left him for a week, to go skiing with friends. Hugh, because of work, could not go. Soon after she’d left, Laura called with a problem with the servomotors to her housekeeping droid. She’d already phoned the repairman, but he was out, and she was so desperate! Hugh had it fixed quickly. But at her insistence (and against his better judgment), he stayed over to “see how it would run in the morning.” Well, it had run fine in the morning, and Hugh crawled sheepishly home with the embarrassed look of a man who had cheated a trusting child. He had also cheated himself—out of an innocence that he could not recover. And although this had been the only time, and he knew Laura felt the same way, the confidence with which he always faced the world was gone. Now he was reminded of his trespass everytime he looked at Susie, and he felt uneasy with her happiness and her loyalty.

She ran into the living room, and threw her arms around his neck. “It’s done, dinner’s ready, Roger cooked it up in just 8 minutes!” She whipped her unneeded apron off with a flourish, and grabbed his elbow to guide him into the dining room, and as they walked she kissed him on the cheek.

“Shit,” he muttered beneath his breath, as he sat down at the low table, and stared at the well-cooked meal.

The following weeks turned stormy for the newlyweds. Hounded by unseen difficulties at work, Hugh came home listless and tired, and was often cranky in the evening. Susie spent most

of her extra time with friends (except for Laura, who always seemed to be busy), and was not always home when he arrived.

One day he greeted her as she walked in the door: “Hi, hon. Say, did I see you in town today . . . with, ah, Larry Michaels?”

“Larry Michaels?”

“You two were eating lunch. I saw you through the window at Pierre’s.”

“Well, it wasn’t me, she answered, with her head tilted and an eye half-cocked, “I was having my hair done, see?” She twirled around, her permed, blonde hair fixed in tight ringlets.

“Don’t lie to me!”

She stepped back, shocked at the drawn face and burning eyes.

“When I have to lie to my husband, it’ll be time to leave.”

He followed her into the bedroom.

“Well, that’s an idea!—then you could see Larry every day!”

She spun around, tears starting. “Hugh, don’t, . . . what’s wrong?”

He looked blankly back. “Nothing, nothing that a little time to myself won’t fix.” He stomped to the closet and grabbed a coat, then pounded over to the computer and yelled: “Car use! 24 hours! Money! 500! Roger spit out the key and \$500 faster than usual. Then Hugh, throwing a mean look over his shoulder at Susie, strode out of the house.

His new car did not start. “Damned computer,” he sighed. Then he slowed down, and became calmer without Susie to fight. He thought better of his actions, and decided to go back and try again.

“Maybe she’ll understand. I’ll tell her it’s because of work,” he thought, and walked to the front door. But it would not open.” Roger, it’s me, he sneered, looking into the security camera. But the door did not budge. Hugh punched the code into the manual number pad. Still nothing. “Roger, you asshole!” he screamed over, and over, and over.

Inside the quiet room, Susie sat on the edge of the bed, her hands cradling her forehead. It was warm, and getting late, and she was too tired to figure out her husband’s mysterious behavior. She thought she would take a shower; before she had taken two steps toward it, she heard water running.

“Thanks, Roger.” She walked over and patted the console. You won’t desert me, will you?” She undressed and showered, and went to bed without eating.

Hugh slept the night in his car, and entered crossly in the morning, when Susie got up. “What did you do that for?” he yelled at Susie. “You told Roger to lock me out!”

“No I didn’t, she said angrily. “You must have given him the wrong code!”

Spending a night in a small car, with a warm wife and house just yards away, should be enough to wise up any grumpy husband, and it did Hugh. But Susie, now, began to have doubts. One night, she smelled perfume, a brand not hers, on the collar of one of Hugh’s shirts, before Roger sent it out to be cleaned. Then there was the brief part of a hologram, which Roger projected once when Susie hit a wrong key on the computer’s keyboard. It was from a strange woman to Hugh: “Hugh, I know how much you like to mix business and pleasure,” the woman purred, “so I thought you . . .” It trailed off, and had obviously been recorded by the computer’s tapes, then faultily erased by Hugh. The kicker came when she implemented a program to try to find an earring, and there in the listing, dated the day before (when she had been gone), was this entry: “Found/pantyhose. Location/bed. Search initiated/Hugh.” Susie rarely wore pantyhose, and the four pair she did own were neatly stored in a drawer in her bureau, and had been for weeks. Suddenly she knew the reason for her husband’s stress. He’d been unfaithful, and when he came home that night, she would be ready for him.

“Hi, sweetheart, I’m home Dinner ready?” Hugh had come in earlier than usual, and was going to tell her about his new raise, and take her out after supper. But she was crying, slumped on a chair in the kitchen, and looked as if she’d been crying for hours.

“What’s wrong?”

She looked up, and stopped sobbing, and her face was like steel.

“You know what’s wrong,” she hissed. “You know what’s been wrong from the start. I want you out of here!”

Dumbfounded, he set his briefcase down, and saw that she wasn’t kidding.

“What’s got into you?” he asked, getting excited too.

She went on. “It’s not me, it’s you It’s you who’s not satisfied with my love. It’s you who has to chase another woman—because—you’re inadequate!”

Then he knew that she had found him out (but how, he couldn’t figure). He suddenly felt that his life was crashing down around both of them, and saw he would have to think fast. Maybe it was better to finally have it out in the open.

“But Laura and I, it was just a one-time thing.”

“Laura! . . . Laura!” Her eyes grew wild with anger, and contempt ruled her voice. “So you love Laura! I should have seen it! Only you would give your love to my best friend! Her

shoulders heaved uncontrollably. She walked into their room, and throwing the clock from the nightstand at him, flung herself onto the quivering bed.

“Well, so that’s how it is!” he spoke, becoming indignant and righteous. “At least I love *someone*. You’re incapable of love—you don’t love anything but—but—your damned robots!” He looked at the computer, watching silently from the corner, and rage taking him, went for it. He was going to yank it out of the wall, and throw it crashing down. But when he got three feet away, a bold of energy crackled out, and he was lifted up, and was thrown hard against a wall. Getting up slowly, Hugh looked at the Compu-500 in amazement. Susie had stopped shaking, and was standing and staring wide-eyed at the terminal. Computers were not supposed to do what Roger had just done. It was theoretically impossible. Stunned, he turned and almost tripped over his luggage, which had appeared magically at his feet. He walked out in disbelief, and as he passed Susie, he felt a sudden urge to strike her, but didn’t. He picked his way through their pretty house, got in his car, and drive away.

“Oh, what’ll I do, what’ll I do? . . . “ she moaned, and fell back to the soft bed—which was no comfort now. Then, with an effort, she turned over onto her back, and looked at the ceiling, and cried until she fell asleep.

So night came, and Roger tidied up a bit. He dimmed the lights, adjusted the thermostat, and activated a low, soothing vibration in the woman’s bed. Then, his work done, always awake, he watched her. The woman was sleeping, and he watched her through the long electronic night.

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