

Commitment

The wheels of justice.

John Gilbey

It was the pain that woke me, something that has happened increasingly often over the past couple of months. I thought at first that it was some residual effect from the accident, so I didn't bother my doctors with it — which was a mistake. A fatal mistake, as it turns out.

As the light spilling around the curtains got stronger, I edged slowly over to the window. Below me, Tiburon lay infinitely tranquil in the soft autumn sun. Across the Bay, framed by Angel Island on one side and the lonely towers of the Golden Gate on the other, the broken teeth of the San Francisco skyline hung in the mist. Ellen had loved this view — a love that led us to stay here even after the tsunami of 2018, the one that missed us by just a few feet. Next time I'd know what to do when the pelicans disappear — not, I reminded myself, that I will see a next time.

By the time I had showered and fought my way into my clothes, I could see that Dave was waiting for me on the street behind the house. Just the knowledge that I was going to see him again made me feel better. Don't get me wrong, it's nothing sexual, but he is by far the best assistant I have ever had — bright, intuitive and insightful — and for the past three years he has certainly been my best friend and only true confidant.

In many ways he is much like we hoped our son would be — would have been, I'm certain, if a drunk hadn't run us off the road that evening above Muir Woods. Why the safety systems failed I never found out, but we fell two hundred feet before the trees stopped us. Two died — and I have often wished it had been all three of us.

I must have looked even worse than usual that morning, for as I struggled into the seat Dave offered to drive. I shook my head.

"This could be my last chance," I said with unnecessary emphasis, thumbing the command console into life.

"I could say the same thing," he commented evenly, and I felt my usual pang of guilt.

The ferry, smugly important since we began to run out of bridges, was loading when we got to the dock. I managed a smile for the pretty young dock-master while the guidance system hauled us on board, then we were accelerated smoothly off across the Bay.



A group of early tourists watched with interest as we were disgorged onto the urban guideway in front of the Ferry Building. We slotted in behind an F-Car and headed up Market towards City Hall. Dave had been quiet during the 20-minute crossing. He usually kept me chatting about events in the lab, stuff he had picked up online, things on my to-do list that he thought I'd forgotten about — but it wasn't until we had passed 4th Street that he said: "Are you sure you want to go through with this? I'll understand if you want to change your mind."

I was surprised to find tears forming in my eyes and brushed them away impatiently. "Dave, I have no doubts about this at all. Ellen would have loved you just as much as I do — and I'm sure she would

want you to inherit my estate. After all, who else am I going to leave everything to? Above all, this way I hope I can make sure that you don't get your contract revoked the moment I'm dead."

Dave hesitated a moment, no doubt thinking of the desperately unpleasant consequences of revocation, then said in confidential tones: "Thanks, but it isn't about me, you know — it can't be. Even so, if I can guard your legacy I'd be proud to be your heir. I guess all we need to do now is convince the court..."

I thought about the paperwork in my bag. The stultifyingly complex legal prose that began "In the matter of the Next Phase Institute versus the City of San Francisco ..." and rambled on for some 200 pages. It all boiled down to a single concept: when does a constructed intelligence develop truly human attributes? When can an artificial person become a full member of society, complete with assets, property and social responsibilities?

We arrived at City Hall just as my legal team plodded around the corner hauling their crates of papers — hotly pursued by the news media, remote cameras floating like corporate seagulls over the throng. I tried to swing my legs out onto the sidewalk with some degree of dignity — but the pain was so intense that I had to pause for a moment.

"Good luck, John," he said, "I hope you get the outcome you want." It was the first time he had ever used my first name in public, perhaps an act calculated to let the lawyers and microphones overhear. "Thank you, Dave," I said quietly — then as an afterthought, "Are you coming in to see the fun?"

He thought for a moment. "I don't think that would be good tactics — too intrusive, I think. I may listen in online — but I'm getting pre-failure diagnostics in one of my braking systems, I really ought to go and get it checked out properly."

I patted the dash and stood up, stepping awkwardly towards my lawyers. Pausing for breath at the foot of the steps, I looked back and as Dave rolled quietly away had a moment of insight into why the case had caused so much interest around the world. But then, in California — of all places — you should be entitled in law to love your automobile. ■

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