

The pet

An exercise in control.

Robert W. Janes

"The top of the range House Keeper 104 model is an excellent choice!" enthused the salesman. "The best in CAT technology."

"A cat?" queried Leo, with minimum understanding but maximum sneer. His mates had suggested this, and he certainly had the money after all. He could see advantages in having a House Keeper, an ethereal Internet-connected machine that would organize all the boring things in his life, but he had no wish to reveal he wanted this product so that he could show off.

"That is C-A-T," the salesman said, losing the edge off his enthusiasm. "Computer Assisted Thinking. The NNs will anticipate your every need. You'll be..." He halted, as that question mark had reappeared.

"NNs?"

"Neural networks," said the salesman, at a measured pace ensuring his buyer might understand the words at least. He contemplated whether to tell him of the training process by which the Keeper's heuristic parallel processors would assess the best ways to match Leo's needs and wishes. Of the testing phase that would subtly analyse Leo's responses to the Keeper's work, assessing whether they were within anticipated boundary conditions. How, with testing complete, the Keeper would ensure Leo's simplest needs were catered for, giving him freedom to lead an active, carefree life.

He decided on: "This Keeper will take all your troubles away," and left it at that. Life was too short.

"So how do I 'talk' to this Keeper?"

"As naturally as you wish: it will respond almost as if you were talking to a human, but without any emotions."

"I'll call it Cat." The salesman bit his lip. "Seems simple," concluded Leo with a dismissive gesture.

And so do you, thought the salesman.

Leo had been surprised. The voice was female, sultry yet dispassionate, divorced from emotion, a real dichotomy. Two months had gone by. He'd only passingly followed the instructions on how to guide Cat into the correct responses to his wishes. Training had proved difficult with the high demand of interpretation necessary to complete that phase, but Cat was handling all the domestic chores effortlessly, behind the scenes. Somewhere, NNs coped.

"Cat," commanded Leo one evening.



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"Yes Leo, what do you want?" was the detached response.

"Dinner." He always had his meals brought in from a small home-supply catering company.

"You usually have that at 7.30 and it is now 6.30," came the impartial reply. This was outside normal parameters.

"Now!" yelled Leo. Somewhere, NNs registered. Leo had decided to go out earlier than usual that night and he was going to have a meal, even though he wasn't really hungry.

Their eyes had met across the full distance of the bar. There was something magnetic about Leo. Women were his, but none lasted long in his company. They were thrown away, discarded when his interest quickly waned, but well before theirs had diminished for him. Cat had already included 'company' when in training, and the fit to this action had been excellent in the testing phase; perfectly inside expected limits. So when Bea walked in with Leo, the music was already playing, the wines from his cellar, red and white, were his established choices, the bath was filled, and a relaxing scent wafted through the air filters. Cat had seen to all of that, the timing of return was well within bounds, the water temperature was perfect, the probes indicated as such.

Then he started.

"Cat." His tone, always one of disdain, was even deeper than usual. He really wanted to impress with his power; he was showing off.

"Yes Leo, how can I assist?"

"The bath is too cold, fix it." Before Cat could reply, he went on, "and the wine's not

what I wanted" — he had always had those wines — "and that music — change it, this instant!"

Somewhere NNs bristled. Leo dictated. Cat complied. The bath, half a degree warmer. The wine, change of vintage. The music, same band, different album. I'm in command thought Leo, while Bea looked on and wondered — could she get inside this man's mind?

Bea was different. The one night stretched to two, three, more. Somewhere, NNs waited. Then one day the door closed and it was over. Bea had met only arrogance in her attempts to find Leo, and now it was too late. She had left him.

Leo had tried but Bea's vidi-link was always blocked, so Cat had replied. Now Bea had left, headhunted for a job on the other side of the planet, so Cat had told him.

Leo hardly went out much any more; Bea was not around, so why bother?

"I have got your favourite meal on order tonight Leo. It will be here in five minutes." The music was gently playing in the background; the wine was chilled; scent wafted through the air, as Cat added, slowly, "I know you will like it." Was that intonation in Cat's voice? Leo could not be sure.

"Thank you Cat," replied Leo. The lion was tamed by the Keeper. He was her pet; well within expected limits.

Somewhere, NNs purred. ■

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