

TINKER'S DAMN

BY LEWIS SHINER

THE COMPUTER BUILDING was in the center of the campus, within running distance of my classroom. And if it didn't look quite the paragon of modern, efficient architecture when the sky was gray and the dead trees all seemed to be leering at it, at least it looked warm. When you've been a junior professor most of your life you learn to take small comforts where you find them.

I sprinted the last few yards to the door, fighting the freezing wind, and got inside. The weather had made me late. I hurried into a lab coat and waved my ID at the various security guards. It took me about five minutes to spiral into the heart of the building, past the grad students and the time-share operations, into the depths of the Project.

"How's the patient?" I asked the first white coat I met, who also happened to be my boss.

"He's fine." Saracen looked at me over the top of his reading glasses. He was small and wiry, with the dark tan and heavy wrinkles of somebody who'd spent his life in the sun, not managing classified research projects. "He's been up all night skimming romance novels and Doris Day movies."

"Perfect. And what does he think about all this?"

Saracen shrugged. "Ask him yourself. We're ready to get started as soon as you are."

I had a flicker in the pit of my stomach as I turned and followed him down the hall.

The signs on the wall said MORLOC, our small contribution to the ocean of acronyms that was threatening to drown all of science. It stood for Modular ORGAN and LOGic Capability, but I'd always suspected the words had been trumped up to fit existing initials. The end result of the MORLOC project was a seven-foot android named Morlock.

I was about to make him fall in love.

He sat waiting for us in a small cubicle within a larger room, like a set on a Hollywood soundstage. The cubicle was surrounded by microphones, TV cameras, and control boards. Saracen opened the door and we went in.

He was not happy to see us. In a short time he had accumulated a considerable store of human expressions, which he used cunningly and without mercy. The tone and texture of his skin wasn't quite right; inevitably he looked a bit like a department store mannequin. Still he was no Frankenstein's monster or cancerous clone. In his own way he was handsome, with a smooth, hairless head and features that were streamlined and generalized.

"Please don't do this to me," he begged. He didn't have the intonation right and we weren't fooled.

"You don't want to stand in the way of science," Saracen said.

"If I were sure," he said in his careful, precise way, "that this were more than an elaborate prank, I would not object."

In a way I sympathized. His body had come from the microbiologists, cloned or synthesized or built from scratch, then put together like soft Tinker Toys. But his mind, his personality, his very consciousness was computer generated, built by the top programmers in the world.

But the better the programmer, the stranger the sense of humor. I should know. I'm a programmer myself, and have been teaching new ones for ten years. The little bugs and idiosyncrasies were still coming out. Like the time someone gave him a copy of *The Time Machine* so he'd understand his own name. He brought it back a few minutes later, after reading it, and said, straight faced, "I am programmed to appreciate irony."

"The uncertainty principle applies here," Morlock was saying to Saracen. We were walking toward the operating room. His backless hospital gown swished against his legs. "By attempting to program me with the romantic notion called love, you are yourselves operating under a romantic notion. It will prove nothing." The voice was smooth, the diction perfect, like a late-night FM DJ's.

"It's temporary, pal," I said. "Not to worry. In a week you won't even know it happened." Which will make you, I thought, a hell of a lot luckier than the rest of us.

They put Morlock on the table and began attaching cables to the small of his back. He had parallel microprocessors where his diaphragm should be and core memory in his lungs. New programming came off the main computer.

I shivered and typed my login on a CRT against one wall. It wasn't really an operating room, more of an assembly station, but it was as cool and sterile as any hospital. I belted my lab coat a notch tighter and worked through the security routines to my programs. Saracen gave me the thumbs up and I started the copy programs.

Lines of type scrolled up the screen. I wondered for the hundredth time if we were being frivolous. Morlock had only been operational for a few months and it would be years before he would be reliable enough to turn loose on anything like Aerospace or Intelligence. Since the Scripps disaster, NSF was trying to break down the barriers between the disciplines. The MORLOC proposal combined biology, computers, and psychology, with an eye to applications in air traffic control, spaceflight, surgery—anything that needed the precision of a machine and the judgment of a human.

For now Morlock was on a shakedown cruise. It was hard to say what was frivolous and what wasn't. We needed to know his potentials, and if we could crack a couple of private mysteries while we were at it, why not? At least that was how I felt on alternate Fridays.

The copy program finished and executed the master program. The technicians unplugged the cables. Saracen and I led him back to his cubicle, supporting much of his weight as he walked. He seemed either groggy or drunk after a programming session, but it was really just a metabolic slowdown, to inhibit the negative effects of possible bugs. We put him to bed and connected life support to his arms, legs, and navel. His brain could be left running overnight, but we didn't have qualified staff to monitor possible

malfunctions. So Morlock spent as much as 12 to 18 hours a day in a semblance of sleep.

At the moment he was barely conscious, but still able to talk and listen. "How do you feel?" I asked.

He seemed to think a moment, then his large, watery eyes slowly focused on me. "I feel fine." Then, as if from a distance, "I hope you know what you're doing."

"Me too," I said. "See you in the morning." I turned the rheostat and took his consciousness below the level of communication. He was still thinking, but slowly, more slowly even than a human being, and my program had given him plenty to think about.

We stopped outside his door. "He didn't blow up or anything," I said.

"No. Not yet. It's a little early to tell."

"Okay, boss. Sorry. Just wanted to be patted on the head, I guess."

"You're a good boy, Steve. You can even go home, if you want. There's nothing you can do here for now."

It was only mid-afternoon, but the sky was already dark gray. I trudged back to my apartment, consoling myself with the idea that a celebration was in order and I could have a drink as soon as I got home.

We had two days to cool our heels and let Morlock assimilate the new program before we turned on his gonads. Which was shop talk for the second phase of the experiment—after Morlock had been left to stew about the conceptual notion of love he was going to be shot full of hormone equivalents and his reaction measured. He had the real articles as well, something the endocrinology people had insisted on despite the number of jokes it provoked. It actually gave the behavioral psychologists some hard data for a change, so they could test their endless hypotheses.

My numb fingers finally outwitted the lock on my apartment. I lit the gas space heater in the non-functioning fireplace and stood in front of it until I thawed. Then I put in a TV dinner and mixed a scotch and ice cube and collapsed on the couch, watching thin steam ooze out of my socks.

The drink disappeared, as did a second, as did the TV dinner. When I couldn't stand the silence anymore I turned on the radio and had another drink or two. As I started to unwind I thought about Morlock. He would be alone in his cramped little cell, feeling the first pangs of love. I regretted then, as I had before, the pain he was about to suffer.

I knew what the pain was like because I had written it.

The various programs had been checked for logic and language errors by diverse hands. Some of the programs had been run in simulation. To completely understand it would have taken over a year, because that was how long it had taken me to write it.

A few tentative snowflakes began to ping the windows. An evil mood descended on me, the one where I couldn't delude myself about the real reason for the experiment. I was doing it to shake the ghost of my wife, check that, ex-wife. It was a piece of reality I preferred to ignore.

I'm not a monomaniac or anything. In the two years since the divorce I hadn't thought about Marti more than once a day or so. Think of me as a kind

of hemophiliac, an emotional bleeder. I had believed for four years, ever since things had gone wrong for us, that I would get over her. I kept telling myself that. When I stopped believing it, I wrote the program for Morlock.

At first it had been a joke, an exercise, and then it became an escape. Then late one night I realized that it could be reduced to yes and no, to stimulus and response. It was possible, and it became an obsession.

I had another drink and tried to read. I gave up on it when the hero went back to his wife to live happily ever after. I stood at the window and watched the snow fall, hating winter. In human weather I could go into the night and shake the black beast with a game of pinball or a few laps in the swimming pool. When the snow piles up, you're caged with each other, devouring each other into the night.

When I first started at MORLOC Marti told me I was building a clay man because I couldn't deal with real people. I said something about science showing us our place in the universe. She said, "Your problem is you don't want to find your place in the universe. You want to change it."

I was tired and drunk enough, finally, to sleep. I went to bed and thought about nothing. About the nothing between the stars, and the nothing that had filled the two years since Marti left me.

THE NEXT DAY the center looked like a strawberry cake with white icing. The thought made my head hurt. I stopped off to see Morlock before my first class. A grad student was watching his monitors and I asked how he was.

"A little quiet," she said. "Nothing out of the ordinary."

She had a powerful smile, one that transformed her face. It changed her from a healthy, athletic-looking girl to an exotic woman. Her name was Barbara, I remembered now. She'd been a bright but erratic student.

The afternoon dragged on, and I got progressively more groggy. The coffee tasted worse than usual, and about three o'clock I started sneezing. I took the hint. On my way out I told Barbara I would probably not be in the next day.

"But you'll be here for Phase Two?"

"Wouldn't miss it for the world."

The contrast between her sunny good looks and my damp misery was too much for me. She wasn't my type at all, not small and dark and intense like Marti. But then, my type had never brought me anything but grief.

I got home, wrapped myself in blankets, and sweated it out. I fought off hallucinations and drank as much orange juice as my body would tolerate. Some of the visions were of Marti, others not. The next coherent thing I remember is the phone ringing on Friday morning and Saracen wondering where in hell I was when they were about to turn Morlock's gonads on.

I staggered in wearing every piece of clothing I owned.

"You look like hell," Saracen said.

"I feel like it. Can I talk to the patient before we get started?"

He waved me in.

Morlock's inner room was about the size and shape of a dormitory single. The bed was more to cushion his delicate organs than for his sense of comfort, which was still rather rudimentary. Today the off-white walls reminded me of

dirty snow. There was a desk with a CRT, but Morlock sat up in bed, writing in longhand on a legal pad.

"A sonnet?" I guessed.

"Hello, Steve. Yes, I've just started. I can finish up in a couple of minutes if you like."

"I'd prefer to think I'd distract you if you did. No, I'll side with Coleridge and take the fragment—if I may?"

"Of course." He handed me the pad. "I felt I might as well do this properly. I'm sure to someone it will be a significant piece of hard data."

"Well, it's a poem to me, ace."

He had only gotten as far as the first quatrain:

*Lay down your ghosts, lay down your past, today
Strides bold to block your path. A parting glance
To rivers dried, to paling sun, and then
Forward ride and lift high your broken lance.*

"Can I keep this?" I said.

He nodded. "Do you like it?"

"It's pretty good."

"It's after Petrarch, actually, with the martial imagery. I was going to continue the internal rhyme scheme through the second verse, then change up for the sestet."

"You know these are supposed to be written to a person, not to a textbook."

"It is. I dedicated it—in my mind, you see—to the woman who watches the boards on Mondays and Wednesdays." That would be Barbara, the one with the smile. "She is attractive, and as I understand it these decisions are somewhat arbitrary, aren't they?"

My laugh tried to turn into a cough.

"Am I being foolish?"

"No, I think you're doing just what you're supposed to. In fact you're making me worry about what you might start telling me—us—later on."

"Steve, you should sit down. You are starting to wobble." I took his advice. "Shouldn't you be in bed?"

"Soon enough. I want to know how you are."

"Actually I feel quite well. As it is, this is all rather fun, in a sense. I find myself being quite indulgent and self-centered. I'm reacting differently to familiar stimuli, and I've rather enjoyed processing the new data."

"You don't seem as gloomy as you thought you'd be."

"I feel gloomy, I suppose, but in a rather insulated, masturbatory kind of way—if I use the term correctly."

"Yes, you use it correctly."

"If anyone seems gloomy, Steve, it is you."

"No, I'm just ... digesting all this. So, do you think we should go ahead?"

"I think so. I have been stable for over 24 hours. Actually I am rather curious to see what is going to happen."

I waited around while the technicians changed the chemical mix in his life support system, and then powered him down again, to let the changes happen slowly. Saracen finally ordered me home.

I should have left on my own, should not have had to wait for Saracen. But at some point in our ten years together I'd given too much up to him, and my devotion to work had gotten confused with a personal loyalty to him. And most of the time I didn't even like him much.

I passed Barbara on my way out of the building. She was changing from her overcoat to her lab coat and I caught a glimpse of her strong young body in blue jeans and a sweater. I hesitated, then went on. I was almost at the front door when I heard her running after me.

"Are you behind the rumors, doc?"

I turned around. "What rumors?"

"It's all over the building that Morlock and I are involved in a scandal." There was a gleam in her eyes that made me feel nervous and a little old.

"Not me," I said. "But he was writing you a sonnet this morning." I showed her the paper and watched her blush as she read it.

"I think that's sweet," she said. She showed me her full smile. I could feel the heat of it on my face.

"Before you get any ideas," I said, "remember that's government property. I don't think you could buy us a new one if you broke it."

"Oh no, sir. I wouldn't want to break him." She was laughing as she ran off down the corridor.

I got home in time for a full-fledged relapse. For the next two days I phoned in twice a day and got the same answer each time—metabolism a little lower, growing misanthropy.

BY MONDAY I was over it, if a little weak. I practiced walking to the kitchen and back, stuffing myself while I was there. The bottle of J&B over the sink was not yet a temptation.

I was having one of those dreams when Saracen called. You know, one of those. When you wake up you realize it was all shadows and murmurs. While you were asleep you knew damned well who that shadow was, and what she was saying, and really believed that she had come back and that everything was going to be all right again. It's tough to wake up from them the first couple of times, but after a while you just get glad they're over. I was even happy to hear Saracen's voice.

"Steve, how bad off are you?"

"I'm okay, boss, honest. I just didn't want to push it. You sound serious."

"I don't want you down here if you're not up to it."

"I'm up to it. Tell me, for God's sake."

"Morlock fell through a hole in your program, in case you hadn't guessed. His metabolism dropped to almost nothing, he started purging his own memory, and before we shut him down he said he wanted to talk to you."

"He's down now?"

"For the moment. The director wants him back into programming and your code out of there. But I thought you should have a shot at him first."

"I'm on my way."

The lab was total confusion. A dozen techies milled around Morlock's room like relatives at a deathwatch. Now and then they looked at me. To my guilty conscience it looked like they knew exactly what I'd done.

Somebody touched my arm. It was Barbara, looking a good ten years older. "I need to talk to you," she said.

"In just a minute. Stick around."

I cleared the techies out, enjoying my brief moment of power. I knew it was going to cost me everything to get out of the mess I was in, but for the moment I didn't care. Both Morlock's cubicle and the larger room were empty except for Morlock himself, Barbara, Saracen and me.

"You too, boss," I said. His face told me I'd gone too far. "Look, you said you'd give me a shot at him. Let me have it. If you reprogram him without me you'll have to do it from scratch. I can clean up the mess in his head, but not with you looking over my shoulder. So get out now, and we can ask each other questions later."

He turned around and walked out of the room. I hadn't expected to shout at him, it had just come out. Later, when I had time, I was going to have to think about that.

I shut down all the TV cameras and recorders. "Okay," I said to Barbara. "What is it you wanted to tell me?"

"Not what you think. I didn't ... seduce him or anything. I guess I was going to flirt with him a little. As much to cheer him up as anything, he looked so incredibly depressed. I touched his hand and he tried to smile at me. So I sat on the edge of the bed. Then he reached out and cupped his hand around my face and held it, just like that." She held out her own hand, curved against the air. "This is a little embarrassing."

"Go on."

"I guess I was going to kiss him. Just to see how it felt. But he said no and turned away. It was like something was making him so miserable that he didn't have room for anything else. And I realized he reminded me of you." After a second she said, "There's something fishy about that program, isn't there?"

"Yes. I didn't just program Morlock to feel love as an abstraction. I programmed him to fall in love with my ex-wife."

I was instantly sorry I said it. I could see in her face that she thought I was crazy. Well, who could blame her?

"Guard the door for me, will you?" I asked her. "See if you can keep them out until I'm done here."

"Okay, doc. I'll do my best."

I sat down at Morlock's CRT and used it to bring his metabolism back up. Almost immediately I heard him stir behind me.

"Hello, pal," I said. "It looks like I've screwed up."

Looking at him, I felt the adrenalin from my scene with Saracen melt away. The pain on his face was real, not an empty mimicry. I wanted to help him.

"I'm glad you came, Steve. I feel like I can talk to you. There's something sick and twisted inside of you that won't let go." I winced at that. "I know how you feel and I know that you will understand me."

The words broke something inside me. I let all the misery and self-pity rush over me, undiluted, maybe for the first time. I sat there and let it happen, and when it was over I wondered if that was the reason for the whole experiment, just to hear someone say that he knew, he understood, and be able to believe he wasn't kidding.

"I thought at first," Morlock said, "that it was you I loved. I wrote the sonnet for you, of course. The girl was something else, more conceptual than real. But when they..."

"Turned your gonads on."

"Yes. I found the idea illogical."

I wished for a second I'd left the cameras running. This was what I'd risked everything for, and I wanted to remember every word.

"Of course," Morlock said, "at that time the memories of your ex-wife began to intrude. Even so, there was a qualitative difference between the two emotions.

"The last few days have been very. . . interesting." He flashed a smile so pathetic that my spirits lifted when he stopped. "I have at least satisfied the curiosity of which I spoke to you before. And I think I have the answer you wanted me to find."

"Answer?"

"It reduces to that, does it not? On the surface the question was simply, 'What are the psychological parameters of romantic love?' But the real question was more personal. You wanted me to tell you what's wrong with you."

I bent over and rested my forehead on my knees. "Okay. So tell me."

"Your—our—culture tells you that love is a series of postures, a set of roles. Woman is supposed to be the farmer, and man the crop. She is to provide him with the essentials: sex, uncertainty, equal parts intimacy and secrecy. Then she is to subsist off of the blind passion she has created. She shapes it and directs it, begins it and sustains it. Because culture and tradition have set her up as the one who says yes or no."

"But she can't kill it off. She can change, but you're left with the memory of what she was. I believe everything you're saying. But why does understanding it not bring any peace?"

"Because she was everything you wanted her to be. You gave that power to her. I know. Through you I love her too. And hate myself for it."

"But why? Why do I hate myself? What's wrong with me?"

"The same thing that is wrong with me. Understand me, Steve. As objective as I may sound, I am in pain. I want just what you want. An object, someone to spend her time and energy being just what I want her to be. And at the same time I cannot stand to want that from another ... being. I hate to see that in myself. That sort of love changes us. In analysis and knowledge we grow up, and we can never be ignorant again.

"You are a man, Steve. You can move on. You are constructed to forget and leave your past behind you. I am only a machine and I cannot make myself forget. My memory is already damaged, but not enough to help."

He shifted around and faced me straight on. "You've ruined me, Steve. I'm no good anymore."

"Then you want—"

"Yes. I want you to turn me off. Please. Turn me off."

He was right. The experiment was over. As far as the Project was concerned it was a failure. For myself, I just didn't know.

"All right," I said. "I'll do it now."

I sat at the CRT and hooked together the group of programs that would purge his memory. Nobody else knew how to do it; it was my insurance that I would keep control of the experiment. The former levels for the endocrine equivalents were all clearly logged, and I fixed those too. It was done in less than five minutes.

Saracen and Barbara were waiting for me outside.

"He won't remember anything," I said. "He apparently did a little fiddling with his own operating system, but those changes should be easy to fix too."

"I'll be around," Barbara said. "That is ... if you need anything."

"Thanks," I said.

Saracen and I were alone. I walked around the room, touching the monitor panels, stepping over the black cables on the floor. Saracen was brief, and quite gentle. We'd known each other ten years, after all. That counted for something.

"There's been a leak," he said. "NSF knows everything."

"Everything?"

"Enough. Too much. They feel we've acted irresponsibly. And I have to agree."

"Okay."

"So a couple of token heads are going to have to roll. Actually, just one."

"Mine."

"For what it's worth, I was on the phone to Hunter, at Tech, and he wants you, no questions asked."

"Thanks, boss."

"This is tough as hell—"

"It's okay, boss. Really. I'm not pissed off or anything." In fact I seemed to have used up all the bitterness I had, at least for the moment. "I just want one favor. I want to say goodbye to Morlock."

HE WAS HIMSELF AGAIN. I was relieved, but in a way it seemed unfair to have to lose it all.

"Hi, pal. I came to say goodbye for a while. I just got canned."

"It had to do, I assume, with the experiment?"

"It had more to do with me."

"How did it turn out?"

"It's a long story. I'll see you get a copy of the report."

"What about—side effects?"

"What do you mean?"

"I have this feeling that ... I will miss you."

I took his hand. “Luck to you, pal.” There was nothing else to say. I turned and walked away.

Barbara was waiting for me by the front door. “Doc. I heard you just got fired.”

“That’s about the size of it.”

“Well, I just quit. What say we go get drunk?”

I stuck my hands in my pocket, suddenly uncomfortable, and felt a piece of paper. Morlock’s sonnet. The excuse I had been about to make dried up. Instead I said, “I’ve probably done enough drinking for a while. How about something to eat?”

“Lead on,” she said, and held the door open for me.

© 1977 by Avenue Victor Hugo. First published in *Galileo*, October 1977. Some rights reserved. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, U S A .