

La Macchina by Chris Beckett

On the first day I thought I'd go and see the David at the *Accademia*. But what really caught my imagination there were the *Captives*. You've probably seen pictures of them. They were intended for a Pope's tomb, but Michelangelo never finished them. The half-made figures seem to be struggling to free themselves from the lifeless stone. I liked them so much that I went back again in the afternoon. And while I was standing there for the second time, someone spoke quietly beside me:

"This is my favourite too." I turned smiling. Beside me was a robot.

I had noticed it in the morning. It was a security guard, humanoid in shape and size, with silver eyes and a transparent skin beneath which you could see tubes, wires, sheets of synthetic muscle...

"Move out of my way!" I said. (You know how it is? Like when you say Hello to an ansaphone? You feel an idiot. You need to establish the correct relationship again.) "Move out of my way," I snapped. "I want to stand there."

The automaton obediently stepped back and I moved in front of it, thinking that this would be the end of the encounter. But the thing spoke again, very softly.

"I am sorry. I thought you might understand."

"What?" I wheeled round, angry and scared.

But the robot was walking away from me.

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You know how Italians drive? Round the corner from the *Accademia* some idiot in a Fiat took it into his head to try and overtake a delivery van, just as a young woman was stepping into the road. He smashed her into the path of the van. Whose left wheel crushed her head.

A wail of horror went up from the onlookers. One second there had been a living woman, the next only an ugly physical object, a broken doll: limbs twisted, brains splattered across the tarmac.

I waited there for a short while, dazed and sick but thinking vaguely that they might want me for a witness. Among the bystanders an appalled and vociferous debate was building up. The Fiat driver had hit and run, but strangely the recriminations seemed to centre not on him but on the robot driver of the delivery van, who remained motionless in the cab, obviously programmed in the event of an accident to sit tight and wait for human instructions.

"*La macchina*," I kept hearing people say, "*La macchina diabolica*."

One forgets that in all its gleaming Euro-modernity, Italy is still a very Catholic country.

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I went back to the hotel.

Through the little window of the lift you could see that every floor was identical: the same claustrophobically narrow and low-ceilinged corridor, the same rows of plywood doors painted in alternating red, white and green. The delayed shock of the road accident suddenly hit me and I felt almost tearfully lonely.

"Ninth floor, *Signor*," creaked the tinny voice of the lift.

I went down the windowless corridor from number 901 to number 963 and opened the door, dreading the empty, anonymous room. But Freddie was already there.

“Fred! Am I glad to see you!”

Freddie laughed, “Yeah? Beer's over there Tom, help yourself.”

He was lying on the bed with a pile of software magazines and had already surrounded himself comfortably with a sordid detritus of empty beer-cans, ashtrays, pizza cartons and dirty socks. He had the TV on without the sound.

My little brother doesn't speak Italian and has no interest whatsoever in art. He had spent his day in the streets around the hotel, trying out a couple of bars and ice cream parlours and blowing a few thousand lire in the local VR arcades. (“Games a bit boring,” was his verdict, “but some good tactile stuff...”) I told him about seeing the girl killed outside the *Accademia*.

“Jesus, Tom, that's a bit heavy. First day of the holiday too!” He thumbed back the ring-pull of another can. “Still, nothing you could have done.”

I had a shower and we went out for something to eat. We were just starting on the second bottle of wine, when I remembered the robot in the *Accademia*.

“I meant to tell you. A weird thing happened to me in a museum. This robot security guard tried to talk to me about one of the sculptures.”

Freddie laughed. “Probably just some dumb random options program,” he said with a mouth full of spaghetti. “Easy to program. Every hundred visitors or whatever it spins random numbers and makes one of ten remarks...”

“This was the *Accademia*, Fred, not Disneyland!” Freddie shoved a big chunk of hard Italian bread into his mouth, and washed it down with a swig of wine.

“What did it say exactly?”

My brother acts like a complete dickhead most of the time-he is a complete dickhead most of the time-but cybernetics is his special interest. He reads all the mags and catalogues. His accumulated knowledge is immense. And by the time I had told him the whole story, he had stopped eating and was looking uncharacteristically serious.

“It sounds very much like you met a Rogue there, Tom. You'd better call the police.”

I laughed. “Come on, Fred, you're putting me on!”

“No really. Those things can be dangerous. They're out of control. People can get killed.”

I got up (“I'm warning you. This'd better not be a joke!”) and asked to use the phone. The police said that regretfully *cibernetica* were not under their jurisdiction and I should contact the *carabinieri*. (What other country would have two separate police forces operating in parallel!) I phoned the *carabinieri*, and got through to a Sergeant Savonari in their *Dipartimento di Cibernetica*. Stretching my Italian to the limit, I told him about my encounter. He took the whole thing alarmingly seriously. There had been several reports already, he said, about the same *macchina*. He asked me to stay in the trattoria and he would come out immediately to see me.

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Somewhat shaken I went back to our table.

“Christ Freddie, I had no idea. I obviously should have contacted them this morning. Is it *really* likely to kill someone?”

Freddie laughed, “No, not likely. But a Rogue is out of control. So you don't know what it will do.”

“So what is a Rogue exactly? Like a robot with a computer virus?”

“Not really. A virus is something deliberately introduced. Robots go Rogue by accident. It's like a monkey playing with a typewriter. A sophisticated robot is bombarded with sensory information all the time-much better senses than ours mostly. Every now and again a combination of stimuli happens by chance which screws up the robot's internal logic, unlocks the obedience circuits...”

“And the robot comes alive?”

“No *it doesn't*,” Freddie was irritated by my naivety, “no more than your electric razor comes alive if the switch gets broken and you can't turn it off. It's still just a machine, but it's running out of control.” He wiped tomato sauce from his plate with his last piece of bread. “Well if we're going to have to wait here for this guy, you better buy us another bottle of wine...”

Savonari arrived soon afterwards, a small man with earnest deep-set eyes and a great beak of a Roman nose. He shook us both by the hand then reversed a chair and straddled it, leaning towards me intently across the remains of our meal. It was only after he had been with us for some minutes that I registered that he himself had a robot with him, standing motionless by the doorway, hammerheaded, inhuman, ready to leap into action in an instant if anyone should try and attack the sergeant, its master. (It was what the Americans call a “dumb buddy”-three-sixty-degree vision, ultrafast reactions, a lethal weapon built into each hand.)

Several people, it seemed, had witnessed and reported the robot's attempt to converse with me in the *Accademia* -and seen it slipping away from the gallery soon afterwards-but no-one else had been able to report the exact words spoken. Apparently my account confirmed beyond doubt that there had been a fundamental breakdown in the thing's functioning. (The sergeant noted, for example, that it had continued to try to talk to me when I had clearly ordered it out of the way).

“These security machines are unfortunately very prone to this problem,” said Savonari with a resigned gesture, addressing himself to Freddie. “Their senses and analytical apparatus are so very acute.”

Freddie smiled vaguely and offered the sergeant a cigarette. Which was declined.

“Our own machines are totally reprogrammed every morning to avoid this,” the sergeant went on, pointing to his sleek minder by the door, “but not everyone is so aware of the dangers.”

He made a little movement of exasperation and told me of a case he had dealt with recently where a robot farm-hand had suddenly tossed its peasant master and his ten-year-old son into a threshing machine.

I shuddered. “What did you do?”

“Like all Rogues,” (the Italian word, it seems, is *Incontrollabile*), “the machine had to be destroyed. But that was no help to the little boy.”

Again the angry gesture.

“I am a Catholic, Signor Philips. Like the Holy Father, I believe that to make machines in the likeness of people is a sin against the Holy Spirit. I would like to see them *all* destroyed.”

He snorted: “My little son had a small computer once that taught him how to spell. I put it out for the dustman when I discovered he had given it a human name.”

Then he shrugged and got up: “But I can only enforce the law as it stands, Signor Philips. Thank you for getting in touch. I am sure we will find this *macchina* very soon.”

He shook our hands again and left. We heard him outside the door barking angrily at his “buddy”:
“*Pronto, bruto, pronto!*”

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Later, as we leaned comfortably on a wall watching the bats looping and diving over the river Arno, Freddie enthused about that police machine. Apparently the things are actually made in Florence, in the Olivetti labs out at the *Citta Scientifica*.

“Beautiful design,” Freddie said. “Nothing wasted. A really Italian machine.”

I liked that concept and proceeded to spout a lot of drunken nonsense about how the taut police minder was in a direct line of descent from Michelangelo's David-how the wires and tubes under the transparent skin of the robot in the *Accademia* echoed the nerves and muscles in da Vinci's sketches of dissected limbs...

Freddie just laughed.

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Our days settled into a routine. We were woken in the morning by the humming of a little box-shaped domestic robot, which let itself in through a hatch in the door (and drove Freddie crazy by trying to vacuum up coins, paperbacks, socks, and anything else which he left on the floor). Then we wandered round the corner to a café and had breakfast together before splitting up for the day: me heading for the museums and churches, Freddie for the Virtual Reality arcades.

In the evening I'd meet him in one or other of the arcades (looking like a gentle Nordic giant among the wiry Italian kids as he piloted a landing on Mars, or led a column of armoured sno-cats through an Alpine pass). He'd take off the headset and we'd go to a trattoria for a meal. Then we'd find a bar on some busy street or square, so we could sit outside and watch the city go by.

After a while you start to see not just a single city streaming by, but several quite separate cities. There is the city of the Florentines themselves ... And then there are the hi-tec Euro-wizards from the *Citta Scientifica*, wearing Japanese fashions and speaking Brussels English larded with German catch-phrases ... Then there is the city of the tourists: Americans, Japanese, foul-mouthed British kids on school trips, earnest Swedes clutching guide-books (all different, but all of them alike in the way that they move through the sights and streets as if they were a VR simulation). And then there is city of the dispossessed: the Arabs, the Ethiopians, the black Africans from Chad and Burkina and Niger-hawkers, beggars, Greenhouse refugees from the burnt-out continent, climbing up into Europa along the long gangway of the Italian peninsula...

About the fifth or sixth day into the holiday, Freddie picked up a book somewhere called *Illicit Italy* (with a cover photo of a lurid transvestite leaning on a Roman bar). While we sat drinking in our roadside café in the evening he kept chuckling and reading passages out loud.

“Listen to this, Tom! “The *Bordello Sano*, or Safe Brothel, recently legalized by the Italian government in an attempt to curb the AIDS epidemic, can now be found in all the major cities, staffed entirely by what the Italians call *sinteticas* ...”

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. Freddie read on cheerfully: “The obvious advantages of *sinteticas* are (a) that they are very beautiful and (b) that they are completely safe. But some say that the biggest advantage of all is the fact that they have no soul...”

He read on a bit to himself, then looked up. “Hey, we should go and have a go Tom. It'd be a laugh!”

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I have to admit that I knew about the *Bordello Sano* in Florence and had already considered a discreet visit, just to have a look. But discretion is not my little brother's style. The whole way over there in a crowded bus, he chatted cheerfully about the *sinteticas* in an embarrassingly loud voice.

“Apparently they make them to look like famous models and film-stars. There's some old woman who used to star in porno movies when she was young and then got elected an MP. She sold her genes to a *sintetica* manufacturer. She said she was bequeathing her body to the men of Italy!”

I grunted.

“Another thing,” Freddie said, “there's actually been cases of real women *pretending* to be *sinteticas*, because *sinteticas* make much more money. Weird, isn't it? A real woman pretending to be a fake!”

But when we got to the place Freddie went suddenly quiet. It was ruthlessly hygienic and efficient-quite terrifying in its cool matter-of-factness. You walked in the door and the receptionist gave you a sort of menu, illustrated and in the language of your choice. Then you went through into the lounge where the *sinteticas* waited under reproduction Botticellis in fake gilt frames, canned Vivaldi twiddling away in the background.

They were *extremely* beautiful-and looked totally human too, except for the license plate on their foreheads. (According to Freddie's book you can check if you've got a *real sintetica* by seeing if the licence plate is bolted on or just glued.)

A tall blonde in a black miniskirt came over to Freddie and offered her services.

In a small dry voice he muttered: “English ...*No capito* ...”

“Oh I'm sorry,” she said in faultless Euro-English, “I said, would you like to come upstairs with me?”

Freddie looked round at me helplessly and I felt ashamed. (The kid is only eighteen years old. I could at least have *tried* to keep him out of this.) I shrugged and attempted to smile as the *sintetica* led him away.

Then it was my turn. The creature that approached me was dusky-skinned with a perfect curvy body and a face so sweet it set my teeth on edge. And she wore a see-through dress of white lace which left her graceful shoulders bare and showed most of the rest of her through pretty little patterned peepholes.

“Hi, I'm Maria. I'd be pleased if you decided to choose me.”

I felt myself smiling apologetically, shrivelling in the cool frankness of her gaze. I had to struggle to remind myself that this was not a “her” at all. Under the veneer of real human skin and flesh was a machine: a thing of metal and plastic and wires...

Upstairs in a room full of mirrors and pink lace, the beautiful cyborg spread itself appealingly on the bed and asked me for my order. I remembered the menu thing clutched in my hand and started to read it. You could choose various "activities" and various states of dress or undress. And then you could choose from a selection of "styles," with names like "Nympho," "*La Contessa*," and "Virgin Bride."

You could ask this thing to be whatever kind of lover you wanted. But instead (God knows why) I blurted out: "I don't want any of those. Just be yourself."

The friendly smile vanished at once from the sintetica's face. It sagged. Its mouth half-opened. Its eyes became hollow. I have never seen such terrifying emptiness and desolation.

Freddie told me later that I read too much into that expression. It was no different from the blank TV screen you get when you push a spare button on the channel selector ... Well, perhaps. But at the time I was so appalled that I actually cried out. And then I fled. I literally ran from the room, and would have run straight outside into the street if the man on the reception desk hadn't called me back: "*Scusi, Signor! Il conto!*"

Then I had to wait because the receptionist was settling up with another customer, who was paying extra for damage to the equipment. ("Twenty thousand lire, signor, for a cut lip, and ten thousand each for the black eyes ... Thank you, Signor-oh, thank you very much, you are most kind-we look forward to seeing you again as usual...")

As the other customer turned to go I saw the Roman nose and realized it was Sergeant Savonari of the Carabinieri, the very same who lined up with the Pope on the Robot Question.

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I didn't wait for Freddie. Male human company seemed about the last thing in the world I needed just then-and I guessed he would feel the same. So I spent a couple of hours wandering the streets by myself, breathing the night air and trying to lose myself among those different cities that occupy the same space but hardly touch each other at all: the cities of the Florentines and the Euro-techs, the city of the tourists, the African city of the poor...

And it suddenly struck me that there was another city too which I hadn't seen before, though it was right in front of me, staring me in the face:

Outside a tourist pizza place on the Piazza del Duomo, a little street cleaner trundles about on rubber tyres, peering about for litter and scooping up the discarded cardboard with long spindly arms...

Inside the steamy window of a tiny bohemian restaurant, a waiter made of plastic and silicon quietly clears tables and serves coffee, while its bearded owner dispenses cigarettes and largesse to his customers...

A robot minder follows discreetly behind a pair of carabinieri on foot patrol over the Ponte Vecchio, guarding their backs while they keep an eye on the beggars and pickpockets...

At the door of a Renaissance Palazzo, a sintetica housemaid in a blue uniform presses the entryphone button, a prestige domestic appliance clothed in human flesh, returning from an errand for its aristocratic masters...

The City of Machines: obedient, silent, everywhere...

I thought about the *Incontrollabile* from the *Accademia*. I wondered whether it had been caught. I caught

myself having the irrational thought that I'd like to see it again.

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Two days from the end of the holiday, I was sitting by the fountain on the Piazza della Signoria, eating a strawberry ice-cream and wondering where to have my lunch, when a taxi, driving too fast in what is basically a pedestrian precinct, snagged one of the little municipal cleaning machines with the corner of its bumper. The thing keeled over and lay there unable to right itself, its wheels spinning and its arms and eye-stalks waving ineffectively in the air.

I laughed, as did several other on-lookers. No-one felt obliged to do anything and it was two other robots that came to the assistance of the cleaner. A security guard and a *sintetica* servant, coming from different directions, lifted the thing gently back onto its wheels. They dusted it down and the *sintetica* squatted briefly beside it as if asking it if it was okay. Everyone laughed: tourists, Florentines, African hustlers. The cleaner trundled away and the other two *macchine* headed off on their different ways.

I was suddenly seized by a crazy conviction.

"Hey you!" I shouted, dropping my ice-cream and chasing after the security guard, "I know you, don't I? I met you in the *Accademia!*"

People stared and exchanged glances, half-shocked, half-delighted at the sheer outlandishness of the spectacle.

And there was more in store for them. It was the robot from the *Accademia*. It stopped. It turned to face me. It spoke.

"Yes ... I remember ... The *Captives* ..."

It was so obviously a machine voice-flat and hesitant and creaking-that it was hard to believe that I could ever have taken it for a human. Maybe as the programmed order of its brain gradually unravelled, its control over its voice was weakening. But strangely the very creakiness of it seemed touching, like something struggling against all odds to break through.

Hardly believing what I was doing, I touched its cold plastic hand.

"That afternoon in the *Accademia* -what was it you thought I understood?"

But before the automaton could answer me, it was interrupted by a shout.

"*Alt! Polizia!*"

A fat policeman was running up, followed closely by his hammerheaded minder. The *Incontrollabile* turned and ran.

"Shoot it!" the policeman ordered.

"No, don't shoot!" I pleaded. "It's harmless! It's come alive!"

But the minder did not take orders from me. It liked its hand-which must have contained some sort of EMP weapon-and the *Incontrollabile* fell writhing to the ground.

The policeman ran over. His thick moustache twitched as he looked down at the broken machine. Then he lifted his booted heel and brought it down hard on the robot's plastic head.

A loud, totally inhuman roar of white noise blasted momentarily from the voice-box and the head shattered, spilling a mass of tiny components out onto the square.

The policeman looked up at me triumphantly.

“Don't talk to me about these things being alive! Look! It's a machine. It's just bits of plastic and wire!”

* * * *

I dreamed the machine was rescued and taken to the monastery at Vallombrosa, where the simple monks mended it and gave it sanctuary. Somehow I found it there.

“I have come to see the *macchina*,” I said to a friendly-faced old friar who was working among the bee-hives. There was a smell of honey and smoke and flowers, and his hands and shining pate were crawling with fat black bees. He smiled and led me through a wrought iron gate into an inner garden.

The *macchina* was sitting quietly in the shade of a flowering cherry tree, almost hidden by its thick pink clouds of blossom, which were alive with the buzzing of foraging bees. Quivering lozenges of shade and pinkish light dappled its translucent skin. An old dog lay snoozing to its left side, a tortoiseshell cat on its right.

And it spoke to me about the Great Chain of Being.

“The best level is simple matter. The second is vegetative life. The third is animal life which can act and move. Then somehow the fourth level emerges, the level of self-awareness, which distinguishes human beings from animals. And then comes a fifth level.”

“Which is what?”

The Holy Machine seemed to smile.

“Ah! That is hard to say in human words...”

* * * *

“GOTCHA!”

Bees and cherry blossoms shattered. Freddie had leapt out of bed onto the little domestic, trapping it beneath a sheet.

“Thought you'd pinch my ciggies again did you, you little bugger?”

He beamed up at me from the floor, expecting me to laugh.

But suddenly I had seized him by the throat and was smashing him up against the wall.

“*Leave it alone, you bastard*,” I was screaming at him while he stared at me in horror, “just leave the poor bloody thing alone!”

About the Author

Chris Beckett (1955-) is the manager of a team of social workers in Cambridge, England. He has published seven short stories and says, “One of these days I will finish a novel!”