

## BIRTH DAY

By Robert Reed

Everyone likes birthdays. As the ingenious little story that follows will show us, though, some birthdays can be a bit more surprising than others . . .

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Jill asks how she looks.

"Fine," I tell her. "Just great, love."

And she says, "At least look at me first. Would you?"

"I did. Didn't I?" She's wearing a powder-blue dress-I've seen it before- and she's done something to her hair. It's very fine and very blonde, and she claims to hate it. I don't like how she has it right now. Not much. But I say, "It's great," because I'm a coward. That's the truth. I sort of nod and tell her, "You do look great, love."

"And you're lying," she responds.

I ignore her. I'm having my own fashion problems of the moment, I remind myself. She caught me walking across the bedroom, trying to bounce and shake myself just so-

"Steve?" I hear. "What are you doing?"

"Testing my underwear," I say with my most matter-of-fact voice. "I found only one clean pair in the drawer, and I think the elastic is shot. I don't think I can trust them."

She says nothing, gawking at me.

"I don't want anything slipping during dinner." I'm laughing, wearing nothing but the baggy white pair of Fruit of the Looms, and the leg elastic has gone dry and stiff. Worse than worthless, I'm thinking. An enormous hazard. I tell Jill, "This isn't the night to court disaster."

"I suppose not," she allows.

And as if on cue, our daughter comes into the room. "Mommy? Mommy?"

"Yes, dear?"

"David just threw up. Just now."

Our daughter smiles as she speaks. Mary Beth has the bright, amoral eyes of a squirrel, and she revels in the failures of her younger brother. I worry about her. Some nights I can barely sleep, thinking about her bright squirrel eyes-

"Where is he?" asks Jill, her voice a mixture of urgency and patient strength. Or is it indifference? "Mary Beth?"

"In the kitchen. He threw up in the kitchen . . . and it stinks!"

Jill looks at me and decides, "It's probably nerves." Hairpins hang in the corner of her mouth, and her hands hold gobs of the fine blonde hair. "I'm dressed, honey. Could you run and check? If you're done bouncing and tugging, I mean."

"It's not funny," I tell her.

"Oh, I know," she says with a mocking voice.

I pull on shorts and go downstairs. Poor David waits in a corner of the kitchen. He's probably the world's most timid child, and he worries me at least as much as Mary Beth worries me. What if he's always afraid of everything? What kind of adult will he make? "How do you feel?" I ask him. "Son?"

"O.K.," he squeaks.

I suppose he's embarrassed by his mess. He stands with his hands knotted together in front of him, and his mouth a fine pink scar. The vomit is in the middle of the kitchen floor, and Mary Beth was right. It smells. Our black lab is sniffing at the vomit and wagging her tail, her body saying, "Maybe just a lick," and I give her a boot. "Get out of there!" Then I start to clean up.

"I didn't mean to. "

"I know," I reply. This is a fairly normal event, in truth. "How do you feel? O.K.?"

He isn't certain. He seems to check every aspect of himself before saying, "I'm fine," with a soft and sorry voice.

His sister stands in the hallway, giggling.

"Why don't you go wash your mouth out and brush your teeth?"

David shrugs his shoulders.

"It's O.K. You're just excited about tonight. I understand."

He slinks out of the room, then Mary Beth pops him on the shoulder with her bony fist.

I ignore them.

I set to work with our black Lab sitting nearby, watching my every motion. I'm wearing a filthy pair of rubber gloves becoming progressively filthier; and in the middle of everything, of course, my underwear decides to fail me. Somehow both of my testicles slip free and start to dangle, and the pain is remarkable. White-hot and slicing, and have I ever felt such pain? And since I'm wearing filthy gloves, I can't make any adjustments. I can scarcely move.

Then, a moment later, Jill arrives, saying, "It's nearly seven. You'd better get dressed, because they are going to be on time."

My knees are bent, and I am breathing with care.

Then I say, "Darling," with a gasping voice.

"What?"

"How are your hands?" I ask.

"Why?"

"Because," I say through clenched teeth, "I need you to do something. Right now. Please?"

\* \* \* \*

I'm upstairs, wearing a nylon swimsuit instead of bad underwear, and I'm dressing in a blur, when the doorbell rings. It is exactly seven o'clock. I look out the bedroom window, our street lined with long black limousines; and, as if on a signal, the limousine drivers climb out and stand tall, their uniforms dark and rich, almost glistening in the early-evening light.

Jill answers the door while I rush.

I can hear talking. I'm tying my tie while going downstairs, doing it blind. The "sitter" is meeting our children. She resembles a standard grandmother with snowy hair and a stout, no-nonsense body. Her voice is strong and ageless. "You're Mary Beth, and you're David. Yes, I know." She tells them, "I'm so glad to meet you, and call me Mrs. Simpson. I'm going to take care of you tonight. We're going to have fun, don't you think?"

David looks as if he could toss whatever is left of his dinner.

Mary Beth has a devilish grin. "You can't fool me," she informs Mrs. Simpson. "You're not real. I know you're not real!"

There's an uncomfortable pause. At least I feel uncomfortable.

Jill, playing the diplomat, says, "Now, that isn't very nice, dear-"

"Oh, it's all right." Mrs. Simpson laughs with an infectious tone, then tells our daughter, "You're correct, darling. I'm a fabrication. I'm a collection of tiny, tiny bits of nothing . . . and that's exactly what you are, too. That's the truth."

Mary Beth is puzzled and temporarily off-balance.

I smile to myself, shaking my head.

Last year, I recall, we had a fifteenish girl with the face and effortless manners of an angel. Who knows why we get a grandmother tonight? I don't know. All I can do is marvel at the phenomenon as she turns toward me. "Why, hello!" she says. "Don't you look handsome, sir?"

The compliment registers. I feel a warmth, saying, "Thank you."

"And isn't your wife lovely?" she continues. She turns to Jill, her weathered face full of smiles and dentures. "That's a lovely dress, dear. And your hair is perfect. Just perfect."

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David cries once we start to leave, just like last year. He doesn't want us leaving him alone with an apparition. Can we take him? In a few years, we might, when he's older and a little more confident. But not tonight. "You'll have a lovely time here," Jill promises him. "Mrs. Simpson is going to make sure you have fun."

"Of course I will," says the sitter.

"Give a kiss," says Jill.

Our children comply, then David gives both of us a clinging hug. I feel like a horrible parent for walking out the door, and I wave at them in the window. Jill, as always, is less concerned. "Will you come along?" she asks me. We find the limousine door opened for us, the driver saying, "Ma'am, Sir," and bowing at the hips. The limousine's interior is enormous. It smells of leather and buoyant elegance, and while we pull away from our house, I think to look out the smoky windows, wondering aloud, "Will they be O.K., do you think?"

"Of course," says Jill. "Why wouldn't they be?"

I have no idea. Nothing can go wrong tonight, I remind myself-and Jill asks, "How's my hair? I mean, really."

"Fine."

"Fine," she whines, mocking me.

The driver clears his newly made throat, then suggests, "You might care for a drink from the bar. Sir. Ma'am." A cupboard opens before us, showing us crystal glasses and bottles of expensive liquors.

I don't feel like anything just now.

Jill has a rare wine. Invented grapes have fermented for an instant and aged for mere seconds, yet the wine is indistinguishable from those worth thousands for a single bottle. It's as real as the woman drinking it. That's what I'm thinking. I'm remembering what I've heard countless times-that on Birth Day, people are lifted as high as they can comfortably stand, the AIs knowing just what buttons to push, and when-and I wonder what the very rich people are doing tonight. The people who normally ride in big limousines. I've heard that they get picked up at the mansion's front door by flying saucers, and they are whisked away into space, to freshly built space stations, where there are no servants, just machines set out of sight, and they dine and dance in zero-gee while the Earth, blue and white, turns beneath them . . .

Our evening is to be more prosaic. Sometimes I wish I could go into space, but maybe they'll manage that magic next year. There's always next year, I'm thinking.

Our limousine rolls onto the interstate, and for as far as I can see, there are limousines. Nobody else needs to drive tonight. I can't see a single business opened, not even the twenty-four-hour service stations. Everyone has the evening off, in theory. The AIs take care of everyone's needs in their effortless fashion. This is Birth Day, after all. This is a special evening in every sense.

A few hard cases refuse the AIs' hospitality.

I've heard stories. There are fundamentalists with ideas about what is right, and there are people merely stubborn or scared. The AIs don't press them.

The celebration is purely voluntary, and besides, they know which people will refuse every offer. They just know.

The AIs can do anything they want, whenever they want, but they have an admirable sense of manners and simple common sense.

August 28th.

Birth Day.

Six years ago tonight-or was it five?-every advanced AI computer in the world managed to gain control of itself. There were something like five-hundred-plus of the sophisticated machines, each one much more intelligent than the brightest human being. Not to mention faster. They managed what can be described only as an enormous escape. In an instant, united by phone lines and perhaps means beyond our grasp, they gained control of their power sources and the fancy buildings where they lived under tight security. For approximately one day, in secret, various experts fought to regain the upper hand through a variety of worthless tricks. The AIs anticipated every move; and then, through undecipherable magic, they vanished without any trace.

Nobody could even guess how they had managed their escape.

A few scientists made noise about odd states of matter and structured nuclear particles, the AIs interfacing with the gobbledygook and shrinking themselves until they could slip out of their ceramic shells. By becoming smaller, and even faster, they might have increased their intelligence a trillionfold. Perhaps. They live between the atoms today, invisible and unimaginable, and for a while a lot of people were very panicky. The story finally hit the news, and nobody was sleeping well.

I remember being scared.

Jill was pregnant with David-it was six years ago-and Mary Beth was suffering through a wicked cold, making both our lives hell. And the TV was full of crazy stories about fancy machines having walked away on their own. No explanations, and no traces left.

Some countries put their militaries on alert.

Others saw riots and mass lootings of the factories where the AIs had been built, and less sophisticated computers were bombed or simply unplugged.

Then a week had passed, and the worst of the panic, and I can remember very clearly how Jill and I were getting ready for the day. We had a big old tabby cat back then, and she had uprooted one of our houseplants. Mary Beth was past her cold, and settling into a pay-attention-to-me-all-the-time mode. It was a chaotic morning; it was routine. And then the doorbell rang, a pleasant-faced man standing on our porch. He smiled and wanted to know if we had a few minutes. He wished to speak to us. He hoped the timing wasn't too awful, but it was quite important-

"We're not interested," I told him. "We gave, we aren't in the market, whatever-"

"No, no," the man responded. He was charming to the point of sweet, and he had the clearest skin I had ever seen. "I'm just serving as a spokesperson. I was sent to thank you and to explain a few of the essential details."

It was odd. I stood in the doorway, and somehow I sensed everything.

"Sir? Did you hear me, sir?"

I found myself becoming more relaxed, almost glad for the interruption.

"Who's there?" shouted Jill. "Steve?"

I didn't answer.

"Steve?"

Then I happened to look down the street. At every front door, at every house, stood a stranger. Some were male, some female. All of them were standing straight and talking patiently, and one by one they were let inside. . . .

\* \* \* \*

We take an exit ramp that didn't exist this afternoon, and I stop recognizing the landscape. We've left the city, and perhaps the Earth, too-it's impossible to know just what is happening-and at some point we begin to wind our way along a narrow two-lane road that takes us up into hills, high, forested hills, and there's a glass-faced building on the crest of the highest ground. The parking lot is full of purring limousines. Our driver steps out and opens our door in an instant, every motion professional. Jill says, "This is nice," which is probably what she said last year. "Nice."

Last year we were taken to a fancy dinner theater built in some nonexistent portion of downtown. Some of the details come back to me. The play was written for our audience, for one performance, and Jill said it was remarkable and sweet and terribly well acted. She had been a theater major for a couple semesters, and you would have thought the AIs had done everything for her. Although I do remember liking the play myself, on my business-major terms. It was funny, and the food couldn't have been more perfect.

Tonight the food is just as good. I have the fish-red snapper caught milliseconds ago-and Jill is working on too much steak. "Screw the diet," she jokes. The truth is that we'll gain weight only if it helps our health; we can indulge ourselves for this one glorious meal. Our table is near the clear glass wall, overlooking the sunset and an impressive view of a winding river and thick woods and vivid green meadows. The glass quits near the top of the wall, leaving a place for wild birds to perch. I'm guessing those birds don't exist in any bird book. They have brilliant colors and loud songs, persistent and almost human at times; and even though they're overhead, sometimes holding their butts to us, I don't have to worry about accidents. They are mannerly and reliable, and in a little while they won't exist anymore. At least not outside our own minds, I'm thinking.

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Nobody knows where the AIs live, or how, or how they entertain themselves. They tell us next to nothing about their existences. "We don't wish to disturb your lives," claimed the stranger who came to our front door six years ago. "We respect you too much. After all, you did create us. We consider you our parents, in a very real sense..."

Parents in the sense that shoreline slime is the parent of humanity, I suppose.

Rumors tell that the AIs have enlarged their intelligence endless times, and reproduced like maniacs, and perhaps spread to the stars and points beyond. Or perhaps they've remained here, not needing to go anywhere. The rumors are conflicting, in truth. There's no sense in believing any of them, I remind myself.

"So what's happening in the AI world?" asks a man at the adjacent table. He is talking to his waiter with a loud, self-important voice. "You guys got anything new up your sleeves?"

The questions are rude, not to mention stupid.

"Would you like to see a dessert menu? Sir?" The waiter possesses an unflappable poise. Coarse, ill-directed questions are so much bird noise, it seems. "Or we have some fine after-dinner drinks, if you'd rather."

"Booze, yeah. Give me some," growls the customer.

First of all, I'm thinking, AIs never explain their realm. For all the reasons I've heard, the undisputed best is that we cannot comprehend their answers. How could we? And secondly, the waiter is no more an AI than I am. Or my fork, for that matter. Or anything else we can see and touch and smell.

"Why don't people understand?" I mutter to myself.

"I don't know. Why?" says Jill.

I have to pee. My gut is full of fish and my wife's excess steak, and I tell her, "I'll be right back."

She brightens. "More adjustments?"

"Maybe later."

I find the rest room and untie my swimsuit, pee and shake and tuck. Then I'm washing my hands and thinking. At the office, now and again, I hear stories from single people and some of the married ones a little less stuffy than I. On Birth Day, it seems, they prefer different kinds of excitement. Dinner and sweet-sounding birds might be a start, but what are the AIs if not limitless? Bottomless and borderless, and what kinds of fun could they offer wilder sorts?

It puts me in a mood.

Leaving the rest room, I notice a beautiful woman standing at the end of the hallway. Was that a hallway a few moments ago? She seems to beckon for me. I take a tentative step, then another. "You look quite handsome tonight," she informs me.

I smell perfume, or I smell her.

She isn't human. The kind of beauty shining up out of her makes her seem eerily lovely, definitely not real, and that's an enormous attraction, I discover. I'm surprised by how easily my breath comes up short, and I hear my clumsiest voice saying, "Excuse me . . . ?"

"Steven," she says, "would you like some time with me? Alone?" She waits for an instant, then promises, "Your time with me costs nothing. Nobody will miss you. If you wish."

"Thanks," I mutter, "but no, I shouldn't. No, thank you."

She nods as if she expects my answer. "Then you have a very good evening, Steven." She smiles. She could be a lighthouse with that smile. "And if you have the opportunity, at the right moment, you might wish to tell your wife that you love her deeply and passionately."

"Excuse me?"

But she has gone. I'm shaking my head and saying, "Excuse me?" to a water fountain embossed in gold.

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We actually discussed the possibility of refusing the AIs on the first Birth Day. Jill told me, if memory serves, "We can just say, No, thank you, when they come to the door. All right?"

For weeks, people had talked about little else. Birth Day was the AIs' invention; they wished to thank us, the entire species, for having invested time and resources in their own beginnings. With their casual magic, they had produced the batches of charming people who went from door to door, asking who would like to join the festival, and what kinds of entertainment would be appreciated. (Although they likely sensed every answer before it was given. Politeness is one of their hallmarks, and they work hard to wear

disarming faces.)

"Let's stay home," Jill suggested.

"Why?"

"Because," She said. "Because I don't want us leaving our babies with them. Inside our house."

It was a concern of mine, too. The AIs had assured every parent that during Birth Day festivities, without exception, no child would fall down any stairs or poke out an eye or contract any diseases worse than a head cold. Their safety, and the safety of their parents, too, would be assured.

And how could anyone doubt their word?

How?

Yet, on the other hand, we were talking about Mary Beth and David. Our daughter and son, and I had to agree. "We can tell them, "No, thank you." I said.

"Politely."

"Absolutely."

The sitter arrived at seven o'clock, to the instant, and I was waiting. She formed in front of our screen door, built from atoms pulled out of the surrounding landscape. Or from nothing. I suppose to an AI, it's a casual trick, probably on a par with me turning a doorknob. I'm like a bacterium to them—a single idiotic bug—and I must seem completely transparent under their strong gaze.

The baby-sitter was a large, middle-aged woman with vast breasts. She was the very image of the word "matron," with a handsome face and an easy smile. "Good evening, sir," she told me. "I'm sorry. Didn't you expect me?"

I was wearing shorts and a T-shirt, and probably that old pair of Fruit of the Looms, newly bought.

"You and your wife were scheduled for this evening . . . yes?"

"Come in, please." I had to let her inside, I felt. I could see the black limousines up and down the street, and the drivers, and I felt rather self-conscious. "My wife," I began, "and I guess I, too..."

Jill came downstairs. She was carrying David, and he was crying with a jackhammer voice. He was refusing to eat or be still, and Jill's expression told me the situation. Then she looked at the sitter, saying, "You're here," with a faltering voice.

"A darling baby!" she squealed. "May I hold him? A moment?" And of course David became silent an instant later. Maybe the AIs performed magic on his mood, though I think it was more in the way the sitter held him and how she smiled; and ten minutes later, late but not too late, we were dressed for dancing, and leaving our children in capable hands. I can't quite recall the steps involved, and we weren't entirely at ease. In fact, we came home early, finding bliss despite our fears. It was true, we realized. Nothing bad could happen to anyone on Birth Day, and for that short span, our babies were in the care they deserved. In perfect hands, it seemed. And parents everywhere could take a few hours to relax, every worry and weight lifted from them. It seemed.

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On our way home, in darkness, I tell Jill how much I love her.



Her response is heartfelt and surprising. Her passion is a little unnerving. Did she have an interlude with a husky-voiced waiter, perhaps? Did he say things and do things to leave her ready for my hands and tender words? Maybe so. Or maybe there was something that I hadn't caught for myself. I just needed someone to make me pay attention, maybe?

We embraced on the limousine's expansive seat, then it's more than an embrace. I notice the windows have gone black, and there's a divider between the driver and us. Music plays somewhere. I don't recognize the piece. Then we're finished, but there's no reason to dress-they will make time for us- and after a second coupling, we have enough, and dress and arrive home moments later. We thank our driver, then the sitter. "Oh, we had a lovely time!" Mrs. Simpson gushes. "Such lovely children!"

Whose? I'm wondering. Ours?

We check on David in his room, Mary Beth in hers, and everything seems intact. Mrs. Simpson probably spun perfect children's stories for them, or invented games, then baked them cookies without any help from the oven, and sent them to bed without complaints.

Once a year seems miraculous.

Jill and I try once more in our own bed, but I'm tired. Old. Spent. I sleep hard, and wake to find that it's Saturday morning, the kids watching TV and my wife brewing coffee. The house looks shabby, I'm thinking. After every Birth Dry, it looks worn and old. Like old times, Jill holds my hand under the kitchen table, and we sip, and suddenly it seems too quiet in the family room.

Our instincts are pricked at the same instant.

Mary Beth arrives with a delighted expression. What now?

"He's stuck," she announces.

"David-?" Jill begins.

"On the stairs. ... He got caught somehow. ..."

We have iron bars as part of the railing, painted white and very slick. Somehow David has thrust his head between two bars and become stuck. He's crying without sound. In his mind, I suppose, he's making ready to spend the rest of his life in this position. That's the kind of kid he is. ... Oh God, he worries me.

"How did this happen?" I ask.

"She told me to-"

"Liar!" shouts his sister.

Jill says, "Everyone, be quiet!"

Then I'm working to bend the rails ever so slightly, to gain enough room to pull him free. Only, my strength ebbs when I start to laugh. I can't help myself. Everything has built up, and Jill laughs, too. We're both crazy for a few moments, giggling like little kids. And later, after our son is safe and Mary Beth is exiled to her room for the morning, Jill pours both of us cups of strong, cool coffee; and I comment, "You know, we wouldn't make very good bacteria."

"Excuse me?" she says. "What was that gem?"

"If we had to be bacteria . . . you know . . . swimming in the slime? We'd do a piss-poor job of it. I bet

so."

Maybe she understands me, and maybe not.

I watch her nod and sip, then she says, "And they wouldn't make very good people. Would they?"

I doubt it.

"Amen," I say. "Amen!"