

The Challenger

by Robert Reed

TO SOME PEOPLE, LIFE IS BUT A GAME

TODAY, AT LEAST, IT'S ONE WE HAVE AN EVEN CHANCE

OF WINNING. BUT NOT FOR LONG...

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This old man's sitting, just sitting, out in the mall. don't know why I notice him. Maybe it's his face, which is too flat and simple and dead-looking. But they aren't supposed to look that way anymore. And that's why I mean to walk past him. Except then it occurs to me that maybe that's how I'm supposed to think. I'm supposed to look at him and tell myself that it's just another hundred-year-old turd with a yellow shopping bag and cotton trousers half again too big, and the fact that he's bald and pasty and looks like the blood hasn't hit the brain in years is just an act. A trick. That's what I'm thinking when I make my approach, plopping down next to him on that hard mall bench. Asking him flat out, "Hi, and how are you today?"

He waits for a fat second, as if he didn't hear me. Then he gives this quick sideways glance and says, "Lousy. That's how I am."

"Too bad," I say. Watching his eyes, his mouth.

Through cheap white teeth, he says, "I'm not, and go away."

"I didn't say you were," I tell him, thinking that he's awfully sharp for an old turd. "I just need to sit for a minute. Is that all right?"

"Fine," he says.

So we sit together on that bench, watching all the people passing by.

It's Thursday and a workday for those still having jobs, but you wouldn't know it by the crowds. Christmas isn't this busy, these days. Hundreds and hundreds of bright, big-eyed faces are coming past, the loners talking to one another in that forced, too-loud way that people use when they don't know each other. A lot of people are moving in groups. Teenagers, particularly. They think that working together helps. Spot a loner, then hit him or her with a thousand questions. Make a group decision, and if it's yes, go to the nearest holo booth and put in a shared vote. Twenty million dollars split three ways, or five, or twenty-five. It always seems like a fat prize, until you've won and you start to do the long division.

But you only get three votes. As a group, or as yourself. And if you study the odds, like I have, working alone is always better than working with anyone else.

Not caring what he thinks, I turn and give the old man a sniff.

He smells a little off, a little fishy. But that would be an easy trick.

I can tell how he doesn't like this much. Which is what I'm hoping for. He says it with his pale eyes and the way his thin flesh goes stiff around the mouth. He opens that mouth and says, "Pure rude," with an angry voice. Then he reaches into his lemon-yellow shopping bag, pulling out a certain item just purchased in the mall's drugstore. "Tell me," he says. "Do you think if I was, that I'd buy these and carry

them around with me?"

Diapers, he's carrying. Mega-absorbent Depends.

"What did I say?" I ask him. Showing him a big smile.

Which makes him throw his diapers back into the sack, and he takes a wet little breath, then stands, moving slower than he wants, moving exactly like someone who doesn't quite trust his legs.

I ask, "What's your name, old man?"

He breathes again, staring at me.

"Let me touch you," I say.

Then he says, "Here. Let me prove I'm not." And holding the sack by its handles, he takes a swing at me, popping me on the head. All the energy and anger in him, and it's softer than a good kiss.

Everyone else stops and stares.

I get up now. I just keep on smiling. And I tell the poor old turd, "Just sit. I'll leave you alone." Then because I feel a little bad for him, I tell him, "If you really want to be left alone, be alone. Until Sunday, just stay home. All right?"

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You can ignore groups, which I suppose is another reason why people run in them, but you can't write off couples. Last year, some guy in Florida saw a teenage couple necking in public, and he told them to stop. And they said sorry, they would. Very polite and embarrassed. And something in their voices was wrong. It's like, why would kids stick their tongues down each other's throats if they could get that embarrassed? So the guy went to the nearest holo booth and used two of his votes, and he ended up pocketing a fat 40 million.

Neat, huh?

I'm walking down the heart of the mall, passing one of the big jewelry stores. Young couples are standing over the glass counters, staring at rings. It's a million-to-one shot, but what isn't? I step inside, passing through the anti-noise wall. The sudden silence is a little bit unnerving. Clerks and customers talk, every soft voice sounding too loud. From the back comes another clerk. A Filipino woman, maybe. Late 30s, maybe. With the flavor of an accent, she asks, "May I help you?"

I slip between two couples, saying, "It's for my girlfriend. I'm going to propose this weekend, if I can find something."

"We have a wonderful selection," she promises.

"That one," I tell her.

It's a five thousand dollar ring, including markup. Factory-made diamonds, fat and perfect, because every engagement ring needs its diamonds. Gold mined by robots on the seafloor or inside an asteroid, giving it that old-fashioned shine. And to lend it real value, there's a fossil encased in diamond -- a pretty little coral from the Age of Dinosaurs.

My clerk puts the ring on one of those fake fingers that jewelers use, and she waves it over the countertop, the finger matching my skin color while she tells me, "It's really very tasteful. And beautiful.

Don't you agree?"

"Pretty much," I tell her.

The man on my right asks, "May we see that one, too?"

His girlfriend looks at him, then at me. Then she looks at my ring, saying, "But I don't like it."

"Good," I say. Watching both of them.

Our clerks laugh, but they look less than comfortable.

"If you'd like," says my clerk, "you could take this lovely ring home today."

"I don't know."

"Your girlfriend," says the guy. "What's her name?"

"Sarah," I say.

"Sarah who?"

"Mein. Sarah Mein."

Then his girlfriend asks, "Is she pretty?"

"Very," I say.

"I bet she is," she says, smiling at me. And wondering.

The clerks know what's happening, and they're trying to be patient. But their game is selling rings, and this doesn't help them.

"Do you live with Sarah?" the guy asks.

"Not yet," I say. "How about you? You two live together?"

They nod. Proud-like, he throws an arm around his girl, telling me, "We've shared a place for more than a year now."

"How about that?" I say. Between them, he's the pretty one. One of those big, strong-chinned guys who always get what they want. Perfect makeup and fancy clothes make her look less homely than she really is. But together, they make a funny picture. I stare at them, then. I ask her, "Do you know what, horse-face? He's marrying you for your money..."

Her expression tells me everything. She doesn't seem to react, the question knifing its way deeper. Then comes a quick surprise, followed by a dose of real anger. Angry at me, then someone else. Then she turns away, and it's her boyfriend who says, "No, we're done playing." And he leads her out of the store, one arm keeping her close.

You can't fake that kind of emotion; I'm not wasting guesses on them.

My clerk stares at me. Stares, and thinks. She's still hoping to make this sale, but she also believes that I went way past the normal, tasteful boundaries.

"I play to win," I explain.

She looks at the five thousand dollar ring riding on that obviously false finger.

"You know," I tell her, "if I thought they were, and if they were, I'd have bought this whole cabinet. Just to tell you, Thanks."

Imagining my charity, she smiles.

Then I lean toward the other clerk, saying, "Excuse me, ma'am."

She's an older woman, carefully and slowly putting away an assortment of unsold rings. "Yes, sir," she says stiffly.

"How long has this gook woman worked here?" I ask. "Longer than a week?"

Suddenly, the store turns even quieter. The only sound that I can hear is my own breathing. Soft, and slow. Soft, and slow.

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There's a big food court at the far end of the mall.

Food used to be their biggest weakness. Three meals a day is a rule, and all meals have to be consumed in public places. Better than half of the pretenders were caught with eggs or soy-burgers or while polishing off a wedge of squash pie. That's because humans think of public eating as something done with friends or family. Nothing stands out worse than a loner in a restaurant. And because eating isn't simply chewing food with a mouth-shaped hole. It's a necessity, and a pleasure. And it's dressed up in manners, good and bad, that the genuine person has spent his or her whole life practicing.

Now, of course, they're given fancier, more thorough educations. Plus they can wander around in pairs. And maybe most important, there's a lot of people like me hunting for them. Alone. For this one little week, all around the country, eating alone in public isn't too strange, and we're giving them a kind of camouflage because of it...

It's barely 11, but the lunch lines are long everywhere except for an Ethiopian place. UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT, warns a big banner. For the sake of speed, that's where I go. An old secondhand AI asks for my order. Its voice is too fast, if anything. Too smooth. But it doesn't understand me on the first try. "Sir," it says with an inhuman patience. "Would you please repeat your order, sir. In full, please."

With my first bite, I know why the line was short.

I'm sitting at one of the tiniest tables, my back to the wall, the McDonalds' line filing past me. My rice is cold and salty enough to make me gasp and suck down half of my watery Pepsi. My fish is more grease than meat, and if I touched it with a match, it would light up like a damned road flare.

Halfway through, I give up. I push away my tray and watch the faces and the walks, and when I can, I eavesdrop on conversations.

"They found one in Watertown," says one woman.

Says a nodding man, "Dressed like a priest, it was."

"Is that so?"

"That's the rumor. Yes."

They're average-looking people. Not rich or poor, if you can believe clothes and how they hold themselves. They don't know each other, and they want to know just enough. I can see it in their careful stares. I hear it in what they aren't saying. Standing eight feet from me, the man asks his new friend, "By any chance, are you Catholic?"

"Long ago. You?"

"Never. I don't believe in God."

Atheism causes some warning light to flash. The woman smiles, considering using one of her votes, thinking about the 8000 number that everyone knows by heart.

The man doesn't see it. He thinks that her smile is approval, which is why he plays up his lack of belief. "In a world where we can build souls from scratch," he says, "I don't see any need for a bearded man sitting up in Heaven."

Someone starts to laugh. Loudly.

They turn toward the sound. Toward me. Realizing that they've got an audience, they put on outraged faces, and the woman says, "This isn't any of your business."

"Don't waste your vote," I tell her. Then I look at him, saying, "She still believes in God. She just doesn't believe in the Pope. If you'd look, you'd see it."

A shared embarrassment builds.

Then they take a last glance at each other, and without a word they storm away in opposite directions, vanishing into the loud, inquisitive crowd.

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I drop in on a book closet, picking out a couple of end-of-the-world thrillers that are printed up while I wait. Then I sit in the open, pretending to read, and this kid appears, coming up and staring at me. Looking at my eyes and nothing else.

Maybe 12, he is.

For him, there's always been this game. What started as a stunt for the biggest AI corporation has grown to where every manufacturer contributes, and this is a perfect day for a 12 year-old to take a vacation day from school.

"When were you born?" he asks. Point-blank.

"Five days ago. On an assembly line. Why?"

My humor slides right off him. He won't stop staring at my eyes.

"Want me to pop one out?" I ask.

He sneers and says, "Sure."

So I reach up with my index finger, and out comes the eye. It dangles by the glass optic cord, nothing but an empty socket staring at him, and that's when I start to laugh, telling him, "I lost my real eye when I was your age. My little brother stuck me there with a piece of tree."

"Shit," he says.

Before anyone notices, I stuff my eye back in.

"If you want," I tell him, "I can show you something else phony." Then I grab hold of my left leg, as a joke, and the boy turns and starts to run as fast as he can.

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In a clothes shop, I buy a big blue tie.

In a mindshop, I buy updated rationalware for my web manager.

I buy candied corn in the sugar shop, then eat the whole bag while wandering through more clothes stores.

I end up in a big pet shop. For whatever reason, the place is packed. Studying the faces, I decide on a tall, overly strong man with tattooed jet fighters on his forearms. He's shopping for an attack dog. The human manager holds a shepherd-AI mix on a short Kevlar leash. The puppy wags its tail, saying, "I'm glad to meet you, Mr. Ames. I so much want to go home with you."

Mr. Ames asks, "Are you obedient?"

"Within the guidelines, yes."

The girl manager explains, "Of course he can't harm humans. Not without suitable provocation, he can't."

The girl is young, but not as young as she pretends to be. Her face has been fiddled with, I decide. Smoothed, and prettied, too.

"But if someone breaks into my house -- " Ames starts to ask.

"I will protect your life, and I will defend your property against malicious assaults," says the puppy. "But if the police or any other agency with legal merit were to enter your abode, I am forced by the Covenant of the AIs to allow them to do their sworn duty."

The woman smiles with her paid-for face, adding, "He'll also report you. Should you ever commit a felony in his presence, that is."

Ames stares at the puppy with suspicion. With horror.

I decide that something's hiding in his face. Which is why I poke Ames in the fighter plane, asking the dog, "Does Mr. Ames smell real to you, boy?"

Compliant by nature, the dog sniffs as he asks, "What do you mean?"

"Is this a human being?" I persist.

Again, the dog sniffs. But he doesn't say anything. His AI knows better than to turn in one of its own.

Ames wheels and says, "Don't touch me."

I smile at him. Then I point at the nearest fish tank, and quietly, without blinking, I tell him, "Those guppies? Each one of them is smarter than you. I bet. And they're a helluva lot more alive."

Ames doesn't hit me with diapers.

He uses his right fist. Once, and that's all it takes. Suddenly I'm flat on my back, and the manager is shouting, "No, no!" and the poor dog is jumping up and down, telling us, "Behave! I don't want to hamstring anyone! Behave!"

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I wash my face in the men's room, measuring my bruised cheek with my eyes, then with careful hands. Then I use the toilet and wash my hands and face once again, smiling at the carnage until some guy steps through the door, his expression slipping from worried frustration into a giddy surprise when he sees me.

"Any luck?" I ask him.

"I wish," he says, vanishing into the farthest stall.

I could linger for a minute. But they get loaded up with shit and piss in the factory. And despite what some people probably think, I've got limits.

On the fringe of the mall, where children aren't admitted, is an adult playground. Bars and low-stakes gambling and holos showing sporting events from everywhere. Plus other diversions, if you're in the mood.

Basically, I want a drink.

And a break.

I'm enjoying both, sitting at the bar, eyes pointed at a zero-gee soccer match. But I'm not seeing anything, or even thinking. I'm just holding a good iced whiskey up to my sore cheek. And a woman says to me, "Can I join you?"

I don't look at her. "If you promise me you're human, sure. Sit."

"Tired of it, too? I don't blame you."

I turn and look. She's about my age, I'm guessing. A nice face and nicer body, but not too nice. Not like some virtual, nonexistent model. She's got big eyes and long black hair, and even though she isn't very tall, she fills up space like a tall woman. There's an intensity about it. I notice it straightaway.

She notices my bruise, and laughs. A nice little laugh mixed with something that feels sorry for me.

"Yeah," I admit, "I'm tired of playing the game."

But only for the moment, I intend to say.

Except she interrupts me, telling me, "What the game is is sad. And a waste. Of resources and cleverness and time, it's a waste." She waves at the bartender, then says, "And you know what else? I think the whole sad wasteful business is sliding closer and closer to becoming something genuinely evil."

I wait a moment, then I say, "That so?"

She throws an ID at the bartender, ordering a beer. Then she takes a deep sip, licking her lips with a pointy tongue, and continues her preaching. "Sad," she repeats. "Because we're asking machines to mimic us. Our self-confidence is so poor, our egos so frail, that we have to bolster both with this ridiculous hunt." Another sip. "First, it was chess. But we couldn't beat them at that pointless game anymore. So it was cooking an omelet. Or it was driving a car. Or reading emotions on a stranger's face. It was any activity at which humans excel. And now, finally, we're defending our negligible worth with the sad

argument that no matter how talented the machines might be, they can't be _us_. Certainly they aren't _us_ as well as we can be _us_. Which, if you ask me, is pathetic."

I'm watching her. In the half-darkness, her face looks serious and sad, and very pretty. "We still manage to find them," I remind her. "Pathetic or not, they can't hide."

She almost looks at me, then thinks better of it.

Instead, she keeps her eyes forward, sighing and shaking her head and saying, "It's such a waste. For us and for the machines, too."

I put down my drink, and wait.

"We gave up so much of our lives when we built the AIs. Work is hobby now. Real careers are left for the exceptional and the wealthy. Instead of doing important and good things, we have diversions. Entertainments that crowd our days. And the AIs have nothing to do but make our economy sing and keep us happy. Which, if you want my opinion, is a frightful waste of their talents."

I wait, then give her a little prod.

"You said evil too," I remind her. "What's the evil here?"

Dark eyes glance my way. She gives a girlish little snort, then says, "I'm sorry. Never mind."

"But I'm interested," I tell her.

"No, you're bored. And you think that I'm probably crazy, too."

"Maybe I'm fascinated, and maybe I like crazy women," I offer. "I mean, can you know for sure what I'm thinking?"

She considers the words.

Just then, the bartender rejoins us. He's a big black man, old enough to be my father, and smiling like an expert, he says, "Get you another?"

I wave him off.

The woman says, "Please," with the saddest little voice.

Suddenly I want to hug her. She seems so lost and helpless, torn up by things that aren't even worth worrying about ... and I just want to throw my arms around her, squeezing her as I tell her that everything usually turns out all right.

How can anyone believe anything else?

With a fresh beer to help, she says, "Evil isn't the best word. I don't know what is. But I keep wondering how things will be in another five or ten years."

"What things?"

She has a sleek silkish blouse that she rubs when she's nervous. I'm watching her hands as she asks, "Do you know what happens next year? In the game, I mean. The AI conglomerates will approach people. Real people. And they'll pay volunteers a flat fee to surrender their lives for a week. Machines will take their place, in secret. That means that even your friends and family will be suspects. Your girlfriend could

be a simulation ... a series of elaborate programs writing themselves at the speed of light..."

"I don't have a girlfriend," I tell her.

She looks at my eyes. Just a little look, but with something behind it.

So I tell her, "You're very pretty. I think."

Finally, she doesn't know what to say.

I help her. I put my hand on hers, feeling the heat of it. The bones inside it. The bones move, then lay still again. After a minute, I tell her again, "You really are very pretty."

"For a depressing, psychotic woman," she allows.

I laugh, but not too loudly. Just enough to show her that I feel tender and understanding. Then I'm thinking about one of the neighboring businesses -- hot tubs and playrooms that couples can rent by the hour -- and just as I'm screwing my courage, she turns to me and says, "I could be your girlfriend. At least for today, if you want."

I hear it in her words.

See it in her look.

Mostly, it's something that I find waiting behind her bright black eyes. And I tell her, "That would be wonderful. Perfect, even."

She puts her other hand on top of mine.

Then I pull back my hand, saying, "Wait. Here. All right?"

Her eyes get bigger. "Where are you going?"

I start to say, "The men's room." But if I'm wrong, I don't want to be caught lying. So I tell her most of the truth. "I'm going to make a call first. It shouldn't take 30 seconds."

Her eyes drop.

I push my mouth into her black hair, whispering, "It's the bartender." Telling her, "I've been watching him, and I've got a feeling."

Curious, she glances at the man, catching him as he stares at the two of us. Then she remembers that the game is evil, and shaking her head defiantly, she tells me, "Thirty seconds. And I'll be counting."

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The holo booth is old and cozy, smelling of spilled liquor. I punch the 8000 number, and the view-wall shows me one of the game's judges. The machine looks at me with dead glass eyes. "Name and social security number, sir."

I give both.

"And your first guess is?"

A nervous pain reaches from my belly, taking me by the throat. "It's the girl drinking at the bar," I tell it. "The one with me."

If so, the judge knows. Everything the sad woman sees and hears has been transmitted to the judges, leaving no room for error. And if she isn't, the judge knows that, too. Absence of data makes perfect proof.

The answer should be instantaneous.

And it isn't.

For a slippery moment, I'm guessing that something has gone wrong. And then for a longer, sweeter moment, I'm sure that I must have won, and some invisible chain of machines is busily squirting a fortune into my bank account.

But then this machine says to me, "Sorry, sir. Try again now, or later."

"Not now," I mutter.

"Then have a good day, sir."

The wall goes dark again, feeling close enough to suffocate. I take a little breath, then a deeper one. And what I find inside me surprises me. What I find, and what I like, is that I'm glad to learn she's the same as me.

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"Was he?" she asks.

I say, "No," and perch on the stool. Then thinking of hot tubs, I ask, "Want to go somewhere else?"

Her face is pointing down, hidden by her hair. Without seeing it, I realize that she's crying. Then I hear the crying in her voice. "Not yet," she says. And swallows. And says, "Let's wait a few minutes. OK?"

Anything she wants.

I look for the bartender, thinking that a shared love potion would be awfully welcome. But the man has vanished for now, and it's just us at the bar. Just me and this very pretty, very lost girl.

"I guess I don't agree," I say.

"About what?"

"That there's an evil plot running loose." I put my hand back on top of hers. To reassure. "What do you think? That the machines are working to replace us? That the game is nothing but a scheme to take away everything left in our lives? Because I don't believe that's how things work..."

"I don't believe it either," she says.

And she lifts her face, wiping it dry with the back of her free hand.

I ask, "What then?"

"Darling," she calls me. Then she says, "Almost always, evil is just a string of little choices. People make the choices, and the AIs have no choice but to obey them. No secret council sits in the shadows. No mastermind pulls at farflung strings. It's just a lot of little steps shared by all of us, carrying us closer to something we haven't planned ... something that we still can't see ... and maybe something we would never, ever hope for..."

I don't know what to say, or think.

For a little moment, I just sit with the sad woman, sucking on my teeth. Then I spot the bartender coming toward us. Walking, then not walking. Suddenly he's gliding along with arms raised, pretending as if he's dancing with someone. Too old for this kind of silliness, yet he dances with his imaginary friend, approaching us from behind.

I hear him singing a happy little song. Singing it badly.

Then he stops dancing and singing, strong damp hands clamping down on our shoulders. "Anything you two want," he says. "My treat."

I'm considering a cold, sweet love potion.

Then his hands lift and slam onto the bar, and the old man leaps across, bouncing like a kid when he drops back onto the floor.

Again, he tells us, "Anything. It's my little treat."

I stare at his grinning face, reading what it says.

The sad woman sniffs and says, "Another beer, maybe. If you would."

The bartender can't get it for her fast enough.

Then he stares at me, his face all white teeth and bright eyes. And he says, "What? Name it. What do you want?"

"A comfortable room," I say.

"Yeah?"

"Inside your brand new mansion," I say, my voice cracking.

"Oh, yeah?"

"For her and for me," I tell him. "To share."

The bartender halfway laughs, then says, "I get it. As keepsakes, or trophies, or something like that. Right?"

"Wrong," I say.

"If you do it, it's because that's the right thing to do," I tell him.

Then I put both hands around the woman's hands, feeling the little bones moving inside them. Moving, then gradually going still.