Inappropriate Behavior

by Pat Murphy

The Mechano:

There was a man asleep on the sand.

He should not be here. It was my island. I had just returned to my mechano and it was time for me to go to work. He should not be here.

I studied the man through the eyes of my mechano. They were good eyes. They worked very well beneath the water, at depths down to fifteen hundred meters. I had adjusted them for maximum acuity at distances ranging from two inches to five feet. Beyond that, the world was a blur of tropical sunshine and brilliant color. I liked it that way.

There had been a big storm the night before. One of the coconut palms had blown down, and the beach was littered with driftwood, coconuts, and palm fronds.

The man didn't look good. He had a bloody scrape on his cheek, other scrapes on his arms and legs, a smear of blood in his short brown hair. His right leg was marked with bruises colored deep purple and green. He wore an orange life vest, a t-shirt, a pair of shorts, and canvas boat shoes.

He stirred in his sleep, sighing softly. Startled, I sent the mechano scuttling backward. I stopped a few feet away from him.

My mechano had a speaker. I tested it and it made a staticky sound. I wondered what I should say to this man.

The man moved, lifting a hand to rub his eyes. Slowly, he rolled over.

"Bonjour," I said through the mechano's speakers. Maybe he had come from one of the islands of French Polynesia.

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The Man:

A sound awakened him—a sort of mechanical squawking.

Evan Collins could feel the tropical sun beating down on his face, the warm beach sand beneath his hands. His head ached and his mouth was dry. His right leg throbbed with a dull, persistent pain.

Evan raised a hand to rub his eyes and winced when he brushed against a sand-encrusted scrape on his cheek. When he rolled over onto his back, the throbbing in his leg became a sudden, stabbing pain.

Wiping away the tears that blurred his vision, he lifted his head and blinked down at his leg. His calf was marked with bloody coral scrapes. Beneath the scrapes were vivid bruises: dark purple telling of injuries beneath the surface of the skin. When he tried to move his leg again, he gasped as the stabbing pain returned.

He heard the sound again: a mechanical rasping like a radio tuned to static. He turned in the direction of the sound, head aching, eyes dazzled by the sun. A gigantic cockroach was examining him with multifaceted eyes.

The creature was at least three feet long, with nasty looking mandibles. Its carapace glittered in the sunlight as it stood motionless, staring in his direction.

Again, the mechanical squawk, coming from the cockroach. This time, the sound was followed by a scratchy voice. "Bonjour," the cockroach said.

He had taken two years of French in high school, but he could remember none of it. This must be a dream, he thought, closing his eyes against the glare.

"Do you speak English?" the scratchy voice asked.

He opened his eyes. The roach was still there. "Yes," he rasped through a dry throat.

"You shouldn't be here," the scratchy voice said. "What are you doing here?"

He looked past the monster, struggling to make sense of his situation. The beach sand was the pure white of pulverized coral. On one side of the beach was a tangle of mangroves. On the inland side, palm trees rose from scrubby undergrowth. The water of the lagoon was pure tropical blue—paler where the coral reef was near the water's surface; darker where the water was deep. Some hundred yards offshore, he could see the mast of a boat sticking up out of the water. His boat.

He remembered: he had been heading west toward the Cook Islands when the storm came up. He ran before the wind toward an island that was an unnamed speck on the nautical chart. He had made it over the reef into the lagoon before the surge smashed the boat against a coral head, cracking the hull, swamping the boat, sending him flying overboard to smash into the reef. He didn't remember breaking his leg and struggling through the surf to the beach.

"Thirsty," he rasped through dry lips. "Very thirsty. Please help me."

He closed his eyes against the dazzling sunlight and heard the sound of metal sliding against metal as the roach walked away. He wondered if the monster was leaving him to die.

A few minutes later, he heard the sound of the roach returning. He opened his eyes. The cockroach stood beside him, holding a coconut in its mandibles. As he watched, the roach squeezed, and the point of each mandible pierced the outer husk, neatly puncturing the nut in two places.

Still gripping the coconut, the cockroach took a step toward him, opened its mandibles, and dropped the nut beside him. A thin trickle of coconut milk wet the sand.

"You can drink," said the cockroach.

He picked up the coconut, pressed his lips to the hole in the shaggy husk, and tipped it back. The coconut milk was warm and sweet and wet. He drank greedily.

By the time he had finished the milk, the roach was back with another coconut. It pierced the shell before

dropping the nut.

The roach brought him two more coconuts, piercing each one neatly and dropping it beside Evan. It stood and watched him drink.

"I think my leg is broken," Evan murmured.

The roach said nothing.

He closed his eyes against the glare of the sun. Many years before, as an undergraduate, he had taken a psychology course on the psychosocial aspects of emergencies and disasters. A guest speaker, a member of a search-and-rescue team, had talked about how people had managed to stay alive in terrible situations—and had described the mental attitude that helped those people survive. The search-and-rescue expert had said that survivors just kept on trying, doing whatever they could. "Step by step," he had said. "That's the approach to take. Don't try to find the answer to everything at once. Remember, life by the yard is hard, but by the inch, it's a cinch."

Evan thought about what he could do right away to help increase his chances of survival. "I need to get out of the sun," he muttered. "I need food, water, medical supplies."

There were so many things he needed to do. He had to find something that he could use to splint his leg. He had to figure out a way to signal for help. He needed to find water. So many things he had to do.

He fell asleep.

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The Mechano:

It was restful under the ocean. The light that filtered down from above was dim and blue. The world around me was all shades of blue—dark and light. I liked it on the ocean floor.

I had left the man asleep on the sand. But first, I was helpful. I always try hard to be helpful.

He had said he had to get out of the sun. So I had gathered palm fronds from the beach and stuck them in the sand where they would shade him. He had said he needed food and water and medical supplies. So I went to his sailboat and found some cans of food and a can opener and bottles of water and a first-aid kit. I carried all that stuff up from the sunken boat and left it on the beach beside him.

Then I headed for deep water. I had work to do.

I lifted my legs high as I walked, moving slowly to avoid stirring up the loose silt that covered the ocean bottom. My temperature sensors tested the currents—warm where they welled up from volcanic cracks below. My chemical sensors tested the water; it tasted of sulfides, a familiar musty flavor.

I picked my way through the silt to reach my favorite spot. There was no silt here: a rocky portion of the ocean bottom had pushed up. There was a great tall chimney, where a hydrothermal vent brought up hot water from deep in the earth. Over the centuries, the hot water had deposited sulfides of copper, zinc, lead, gold, silver, and other metals, forming the chimney.

The mining company had mined for gold not far from here. They had followed a rich vein of ore until it gave out. Then they gave up. I had sniffed around their tailings, but then I had found a spot near the chimney that was much more promising. I had spent my last few visits to this spot gnawing on the chimney and breaking loose big chunks of rock. Now I could do what I liked best—sort through those rocks. I tasted each one with my chemical sensors to find the rocks that were richest in gold and silver. Those I stacked up in a neat pile.

It was wonderful work. I liked to sort things. I was very good at it. At home, I liked to sort all my books by color: putting the red ones on one shelf, the blue ones on another, the black ones on another.

I worked until the light began growing dimmer, a sign that the sun was sinking low in the sky. I choose the best of the rocks and picked it up in the mechano's mandibles. Then I headed back to the island.

I made my way up a long slope to reach the shallow waters where the coral reef grew. There, the bottom was sandy and I could walk quickly without stirring up silt. Schools of brightly colored fish swam above me. The fish darted here and there, fleeing from me. They moved too quickly, I thought. I liked it better in the deep blue waters. I passed the man's sailboat, wedged between two coral heads.

I came out of the water on the side of the beach near the mangroves. As I emerged from the water, the crabs hurried back into their holes in the sand.

I placed the rock beside one of the burrows. On my first day on the island, I had noticed that the crabs all seemed to want the burrow that one crab had dug beside a rock. So I started bringing rocks for the other crabs.

There were now rocks beside thirty-two crab burrows. I had been on the island for thirty-two days and I had brought the crabs one rock each day. I was very helpful. I thought it was appropriate to bring rocks for the crabs.

If the man hadn't been on the island, I would have stayed and watched until the crabs came out again. I liked to watch the crabs. But I wanted to find out what the man was doing, so I didn't wait for the crabs.

I headed up the beach to where I had left the man. He was no longer in his spot on the sand. I could see a track in the sand where he dragged his leg.

I followed the track and trudged through the sand. The man was asleep in the shade of a palm tree. He was using his life jacket as a pillow. He had wrapped the water bottles and the cans of food and the first-aid kit in his t-shirt and dragged them along with him.

He moved in his sleep, shifting restlessly. Then he opened his eyes and looked at me with wide, wild eyes.

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The Man:

When Evan Collins woke up, he found four plastic bottles of water, six cans of tuna fish, a can opener, and the first-aid kit from his boat on the sand beside him. He had splinted his leg with the velcro splint

from the first aid kit. He had eaten a can of tuna fish and drunk a one-quart bottle of water. Then he had dragged himself into the shade and taken two of the painkillers, which helped with the pain but left him groggy and disoriented.

He had fallen asleep in the shade. When he woke, the giant roach was back.

Evan drank from one of the bottles of water and blinked at the creature. It was a machine, he realized now. Its carapace was burnished steel. He could see the neat mechanical joints of its legs. On its burnished steel carapace, he could see the stenciled words: "Atlantis Mining and Salvage."

Of course: It made sense now. It was a robot designed for work underwater. A human being was operating the mechanical roach by remote control. He'd seen descriptions of such systems at the engineering department's annual open house.

"You work for Atlantis Mining," he said. "You've told them that I'm here."

The roach didn't say anything. Evan pictured the man operating the mechano: a gruff, no-nonsense, working-class guy, like the kind of guy who works on oilrigs. Matter of fact.

"When is the rescue party coming?" Evan asked.

"I don't know," said the roach. "Do you want a coconut?"

Evan blinked at the roach. "A coconut? Yes, but …"

The roach turned away and walked deeper into the grove of coconut palms. It picked up a coconut, returned to Evan's side, pierced the nut, and dropped it beside Evan.

"Thank you." Evan took a long drink of coconut milk.

"You're welcome," said the roach.

Evan studied the roach, wishing he could see the face of the man behind the mechanism. This man was his only link to the outside world. He still hadn't said anything about Atlantis Mining and their reaction to Evan's predicament. "What did your supervisor say when you told him I was here?" Evan asked.

"I don't have a supervisor," said the roach.

"Okay," Evan said slowly. He felt dizzy and a little feverish, and the conversation wasn't helping. "But you did tell someone that I'm here, didn't you?"

"No," said the roach. Then, after a pause. "I'm going to talk to Dr. Rhodes. Do you want me to tell him?"

The flat, mechanical voice provided no clue about the feelings of the person behind it. "Yes." Evan struggled not to raise his voice. "When will you talk with him?"

"Tonight."

"That's good," Evan said. "Will you tell him that my leg is broken and that I need medical help?" He looked at the bottles of water and cans of food. One and a half bottles of water and five cans of tuna remained. They wouldn't last long.

"Yes. Do you want another coconut?" asked the roach.

Evan stared at the expressionless metal face, the multifaceted eyes. Evan Collins was an anthropologist

on sabbatical, studying ritual welcoming orations of Oceania and determining how they varied among the various island groups—a fine excuse to spend a year sailing across the South Pacific. As an anthropologist, he prided himself on his ability to read people. But there was no way to read this person. Another coconut? No, what he needed was a rescue party. To get this person to provide that, he needed more information. "You know," he said slowly, "I never introduced myself. My name is Evan. Evan Collins. What's your name?"

"Annie," said the roach.

That stopped Evan. He revised his mental image of the person running the mechano. Not a working-class guy. A woman.

"Annie," Evan said. "That's a nice name. How long have you worked for Atlantis Mining?"

"Thirty-two days," the roach said.

Again, Evan Collins revised his assessment of the person behind the roach. A new employee, a woman—someone in a position of powerlessness. "So tell me," Evan said. "Who is Dr. Rhodes?"

The roach took a step back. "I don't want to answer questions," the roach said.

"Then I won't ask questions," Evan said quickly. Annie was his only contact with the world. He didn't want to drive her away. "You can ask me questions if you want."

"I don't want to ask questions," said the roach. "I want you to tell me a story."

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The Mechano:

Evan Collins had so many questions. He kept asking and asking and asking.

My mother used to tell me bedtime stories. Whenever my mother bothered me with too many questions or requests, I'd ask her to tell me a story. I collect stories, just like I collect rocks.

"What kind of story?" Evan Collins asked me.

I thought about stories that my mother liked to tell. "Cinderella," I said.

"You want me to tell you the story of Cinderella?"

"Yes."

He hesitated, and I wondered if he knew the story. Then he started. "Once upon a time," he said.

Once upon a time… Yes, that was how fairy tales began. Once upon a time, Cinderella's mother died and her father married again. Cinderella had a wicked stepmother and two stepsisters.

In my mind, I pictured a chart that showed me all the people in the story as the man mentioned them. The father and mother and Cinderella formed a triangle, all connected by solid lines. The stepmother and her

two daughters formed another triangle. The stepmother was connected to the father by a solid line. Mental pictures like this helped me sort out relationships that otherwise didn't make sense.

Cinderella's stepmother and stepsisters made her do all the work around the house—and at night she slept on a cot in the kitchen. The man said that this made Cinderella very sad.

I thought about Cinderella on her cot in the kitchen, and I wasn't so sure he was right. During the day, the house would be noisy and confusing with all those people talking and laughing. At night, it would be dark and lonely in the kitchen—very nice. If being called Cinderella was the price of being left alone, it seemed like a small one.

Then the prince decided to have a party and invite all noblewomen of the kingdom. The people in fairy tales were always having parties. The people in fairy tales were neurotypical, that was for sure. NTs were so social—always getting together and talking. NTs seemed to spend most of their time worrying about and establishing their social hierarchy.

That was what elementary school had been all about. It had taken me a while to figure it out, but all those games in the playground were really about who was boss.

I didn't care who was boss, and I didn't want to play those games. So I sat by myself and looked at the rocks that made up the wall at the edge of the playground. It was an old wall filled with interesting rocks of many different colors. Some had flecks of mica in them. I had started a rock collection, and I liked thinking about how the rocks in the wall would fit in my collection.

So I thought that Cinderella wouldn't want to go to the party—but the man said she did. She couldn't go because she didn't have the right clothes to wear.

I didn't see why she couldn't go to the party because of her clothes. It was one of those NT rules that didn't make any sense. NTs wanted everyone to look and act the same.

In school, the teacher kept trying to make me go play with the others, even when I explained that I wanted to examine the rocks. She wanted me to act like the rest of the kids and play their games. NTs thought that everyone should act the same way, everyone should fit in.

I was relieved when a doctor finally figured out that I was not neurotypical. All the doctors put their own names on my condition. High-functioning autism, one doctor called it. Asperger's syndrome, said another. Another one said I was PDD, which stands for Pervasive Developmental Disorders. The first doctor said that wasn't really a diagnosis, it was just a label.

Whatever the doctors called it, they agreed I was not normal; I was not NT. They explained to my mother and father that my brain was different from the brains of most people. My behavior was not the result of a mental condition. It was a neurological difference.

My tendency to focus on certain things—like the rocks in my collection—was one result of this condition. The doctors said I was perseverative—tending to fixate on one thing to the exclusion of all else.

NTs thought paying close attention to rocks was perseverative. But paying close attention to other people all the time, the way they did, was just fine. That didn't make sense to me. I didn't see what was wrong with paying attention to rocks. But I was glad that the doctors recognized what I had known for a long time. I was different. My mother cried when the doctors told her about all this. I don't know why.

So Cinderella's stepmother and stepsisters went to the party, leaving her at home. Then Cinderella's fairy godmother showed up. I put her on my mental chart with a line that connected her to Cinderella.

The fairy godmother was definitely NT. She waved a magic wand, and Cinderella was dressed in a golden gown with glass slippers. The fairy godmother wanted to make sure Cinderella fit in—and at the same time that she was better than everyone else. The fairy godmother was concerned about Cinderella's position in the social hierarchy, and that's very NT.

The fairy godmother told Cinderella that she had to leave the party before midnight—a simple enough rule. So much more direct than most of the rules that NTs followed. It was good that the fairy godmother told Cinderella the rule. NTs usually didn't talk about the rules they all followed. They just did certain things and then told me I was wrong when I did something else.

So Cinderella went to the party, then ran away at midnight and lost one of her glass slippers. Then the prince found Cinderella and put the glass slipper on her foot and said he would marry her. And the man said that Cinderella was happy. I remembered my mother had said the same thing when she told me the story of Cinderella. But I thought about the quiet kitchen, about Cinderella's cot where she could be alone, and I didn't think Evan Collins was right about that.

"Why is she happy?" I asked.

"Because the prince loves her. Because she is going to be a princess."

Those were NT answers. She was happy because of a relationship with another person and a new position in a hierarchy. If Cinderella were NT, she would be happy. But I didn't think she was NT. And if she weren't NT, she wouldn't be happy there. The prince would want her to go to parties and wear fancy clothes. She would rather stay in the quiet kitchen. That was what I thought.

"I don't think she is happy," I said. Then I turned away. I had to go talk to Dr. Rhodes.

I hurried away, crossing the sand to the recharging hut, a low-lying metal structure just large enough to shelter the mechano. Solar cells on the roof of the hut converted sunlight to electrical energy, which is stored in batteries inside the hut. Each night, I returned to my meat body and let the mechano recharge.

I backed the mechano into the hut, maneuvering it carefully so that two prongs of the charging unit slid into the sockets on the mechano's body. Then, reluctantly, I returned to my meat body, asleep in its sensory deprivation tank.

I did not like my meat body. When I was in the mechano, I could filter my sensory inputs. When the light was too bright, I could decrease the sensitivity of my visual receptors and decrease its intensity. When a sound was too loud, I could temporarily disable the audio receptors.

My meat body was so much more limited. As I let my consciousness return to the meat, I heard the steady hum of the pump that circulated the fluid in my tank. Dr. Rhodes told me that it was the quietest pump on the market, but it sounded so loud, so very loud I could feel its vibrations in my bones.

I floated in a tiny sea. The water that supported my body was saturated with magnesium sulfate—it was five times denser than seawater, and its temperature was exactly the same as my body. An intravenous drip provided my body with the nutrition it needed; a catheter drained away the urine.

Each night, I slept here while the mechano recharged. I could, if I wanted, leave the sensory tank and go to the exercise room or the cafeteria, but I usually stayed in my tank.

I thought about the man on the beach. I remembered that Evan Collins wanted me to tell Dr. Rhodes that he was on the beach. I sometimes had problems remembering things. Dr. Rhodes said I had a poor short-term working memory. But I remembered that I should tell Dr. Rhodes about Evan Collins and his

broken leg.

I moved my hand to push the button that summoned an attendant. The water swirled against my skin, an unwelcome sensation. I heard a rattle and clank as the hatch in the side of the tank opened, letting in the light. I blinked against the glare as the attendant removed the electrodes from my head.

The attendant was a round-faced woman with dark hair. She talked to me as she removed the electrodes. "Do you remember me, Annie? My name is Kiri," she said. She smiled at me, and I nodded, but I didn't smile back. Already I was feeling overwhelmed.

I didn't say anything as she helped me out of the tank and gave me a towel and a robe. I knew that she wanted me to wrap my meat body in the robe, but I did so reluctantly. The touch of the cloth against my skin was irritating. The cement floor was cold against my bare feet.

I came back to my meat body to talk to Dr. Rhodes, and it always felt strange. My body was heavy and awkward; my hands were clumsy as I pulled on the robe. Kiri gave me a glass of water. I was always thirsty when I came out of the tank.

On the island, I was strong. My mechano could crack coconuts in its mandibles. My mechano could walk beneath the waves.

In my meat body, I was a little girl—twelve years old and skinny. My mother was a librarian; my father was a computer programmer. He called me "the Little Professor." I was part of an experimental program that Dr. Rhodes called a "therapeutic intervention."

I would rather be in my mechano.

I could hear voices from the corridor: people laughing and talking, the sound of sneakered feet walking down the hall. People were going to the cafeteria, to the exercise room, to dorms where they would sleep in beds. The other people here worked for Atlantis Mining. They were not part of the experimental program. They were NT.

Kiri led me down the hall.

"We are going the wrong way," I told her when we turned left down a corridor. Dr. Rhodes' office was to the right.

"We are going to a different room today," she told me.

In the different room, the fluorescent lights were humming overhead. I could see them flickering. My father once told me that fluorescent lights flickered sixty times every second because the electric current changed directions sixty times a second. He said most people didn't notice it. He could see the flicker, but it didn't really bother him.

It bothered me.

I closed my eyes against the flickering of the lights, but I couldn't shut out their noise. It filled the air like buzzing bees, like the school of bright fish that swam overhead when I was walking up from the depths to the beach.

I heard the sound of the doorknob turning and I opened my eyes to see Dr. Rhodes. He was a tall man with brown hair, and he always wears a white lab coat. "Hello, Annie," he said. "It's good to see you."

"It's good to see you, Dr. Rhodes," I said. Dr. Rhodes had told me that it was appropriate to greet

someone in the way that they greeted you. He smiled.

I closed my eyes. "I have something to tell you," I said with my eyes closed. "On the beach, there's …"

"Hold on there, Annie," he said. "Why are your eyes closed?"

"The lights are bothering me," I said. "They're flickering and making a lot of noise."

"Is there something you could do about that other than close your eyes?" he asked.

I nodded. I began to rock, a comforting activity that absorbed some of the energy from the sound of the lights. My right hand gripped my left arm. I squeezed my arm in time with my rocking, and that helped, too.

"Do you want me to turn off the lights, Annie?" he asked. And suddenly the horrible buzzing sound was gone. The room was quiet except for the persistent whispering of the air conditioner. It sounded like tiny claws scratching against stone. "Open your eyes, Annie," Dr. Rhodes said.

I opened my eyes. The only light in the room was light from the hall, spilling in through the open door and the window. That light flickered too, but it was dimmer, so it wasn't as bad.

"Good girl," he said. "Now, what did you want to tell me?"

The whisper of the air-conditioner shifted, getting louder. More claws, skittering over stone. It sounded the way the terrycloth robe felt against my skin. Scratching, scratching, scratching. For a moment, I forgot about what I had to tell him, distracted by the robe against my skin, by the noise of the air-conditioner.

But I knew it was important to remember. As I rocked, I sorted through the details that I could tell Dr. Rhodes. It was difficult to choose the right one—they all seemed so important, and the air-conditioner's whispering made it hard to think. I pictured the man's boat and the crack in its hull. I pictured the man on the beach, telling me about Cinderella. "Do you know the story of Cinderella?" I asked Dr. Rhodes. I was looking at my hands, concentrating on what I had to say.

"Yes, Annie, I know that story."

"Well, on my island …"

"Can you look at me when you talk to me, Annie?" Dr. Rhodes said.

His voice was just loud enough to cut through the scratching of the air-conditioner.

"I wanted to tell you that on my island …" I raised my voice to be sure he'd hear me over the noise. I did not look at him. I was concentrating on remembering.

"Look at me, Annie. Remember, we're working on appropriate behavior."

I looked at him.

"That's good," he said. "Making eye contact is appropriate behavior."

I was looking at him and his lips were moving and that was so distracting that I couldn't think of what to say. I looked down at my hands-then remembered I had to make eye contact so I looked back at him.

"You're doing fine, Annie," he said, his lips flapping. His own eyes did not remain steadily on mine—they

kept moving, shifting, looking at me and then looking away and then looking down and then looking back at me. His eyebrows were moving too, and it was confusing to watch, but I knew that he wanted me to watch. So I did, even though I couldn't think and watch at the same time. I wished I were in my mechano so that I could turn down my visual acuity. I tried to let my eyes go out of focus, but I kept seeing his eyes move.

That was how it was when NTs talked with each other. They looked at each other and they looked away. If I looked too much, Dr. Rhodes would tell me I was staring. NTs didn't stare, but they looked. It was all very complicated, like an intricate dance. Look up, look away, smile, blink, and it all meant something if you were NT.

I didn't understand that dance. I asked my mother what all that looking at each other and looking away meant exactly, and she couldn't tell me. She couldn't tell me how to perform the intricate eye dance that NTs did. But Dr. Rhodes wanted me to make eye contact.

"What did you want to tell me, Annie?" Dr. Rhodes asked.

I couldn't remember. I was watching his lips move, watching his eyes move.

"Last time we talked, you told me about the crabs on the beach," he said. "Are there still crabs on the beach?"

"Yes," I said, rocking and thinking about eye contact.

"Can you tell me about the crabs and look at me as you talk?" Dr. Rhodes asked.

I tried. I managed to tell him that some crabs had one big red claw, which they waved around.

Dr. Rhodes told me that they were fiddler crabs, that the male crabs had a big red claw that they used to signal to the female crabs and to scare away other male crabs. He said that he had studied crabs when he was an undergraduate student in biology, before he became a pediatric neurologist.

He asked me questions about the crabs and I answered as well as I could, through the haze of air-conditioner noise and the confusion of watching his mouth move.

Finally he said that it was time for me to go to the exercise room and our session was over. I walked on the treadmill for forty-five minutes, swam in the pool for forty-five minutes, and then went back to my tank, where I slept through the night.

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Dr. Rhodes:

The overhead lights were a distraction. He had forgotten about that. Usually, he met with Annie in his office, where his assistant had replaced the overhead fluorescent lights with incandescent floor lamps to give the place a warmer feel. But a technician had been working on the air-conditioning in his office, so he had moved his meeting with Annie to one of Atlantis Mining's regular conference rooms.

Still, he felt that his oversight had provided an excellent learning opportunity. He had given Annie an

incentive to communicate her needs clearly, rather than assuming that he knew them.

The project was going very well, he thought. Over the next month, he would be evaluating how Annie's time alone in the mechano affected her ability to interact in her own body. He was pleased that Eric Westerman, the president of Atlantis Mining, had allowed him this opportunity to evaluate the potential of the telepresence experience as a therapeutic tool.

It was a pity that the storm had knocked out the cameras that ordinarily provided him with the opportunity to monitor Annie's daily activity on the island. He had put in two requests for repair to the supervisor of operations responsible for equipment on Annie's island and had received no word back. But the gap in the data was a minor matter. Tracking changes in Annie's behavior during therapy sessions was much more significant. All in all, he felt that the day's session had been quite successful.

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The Mechano:

I was back in my mechano, happy to be there. I opened my eyes to the first light of the tropical dawn and left the charging hut. It wasn't until I saw Evan Collins on the beach that I realized I had not told Dr. Rhodes about him. I had tried to tell Dr. Rhodes, but I had not succeeded.

The man was sleeping, his head pillowed on his orange life jacket. He didn't look good. The scrape on his cheek looked puffy and red. His skin was marked with red spots—bites of sand fleas. He had scratched some of them until they bled. He had wrapped his arms around himself, as if for warmth, but he was shivering a little in his sleep.

The bottles of water that I had carried from the boat were all empty. They lay beside him in the sand. I brought him a coconut, piercing it with the mechano's mandibles so that he could drink.

Then I went to work and sorted rocks. But I kept thinking about the man. I thought so much about him that I forgot to bring a rock for the crabs when I returned to the island.

When I got back, he was sitting up under the palm tree, and his eyes were open. There were dark circles under his eyes.

"Annie," he said. His voice was hoarse. "I'm very thirsty. I need water."

I looked at the empty bottles on the sand. "I brought all the water I found on the boat," I told him.

"Is there any fresh water on the island?" he asked in his rasping voice.

"No." The mechano did not need fresh water. "Do you want a coconut?"

"Okay. A coconut."

I had to search for a while to find a coconut. I had already brought him the ones that were nearby. But I found one, brought it back, and pierced it for him. He drank thirstily.

"What did Dr. Rhodes say?" he asked after he finished the coconut milk.

"He said that making eye contact is appropriate behavior."

"Did he say anything about rescuing me?"

"No," I said. Dr. Rhodes has worked with me on learning to read expressions. Evan Collins' mouth was turned down. His eyes were squeezed half closed. He did not look happy. "Do you want another coconut?" I asked.

. . . . .

The Man:

Evan Collins watched the roach trundle off through the palms to find him a coconut. It had been all he could do not to scream at the roach, but he had managed it.

The painkillers left him groggy. He felt nauseous and thirsty, very thirsty. He knew he had to keep drinking. He had not had to urinate since he woke up on the beach the day before, an indication that he was not taking in enough fluid. Dehydration would kill him quicker than anything.

Life by the yard is hard, he told himself, but by the inch, it's a cinch. To stay alive, he had to keep drinking, and he had to get help. And to get help, he needed to understand Annie the roach and Dr. Rhodes.

The roach dropped a coconut beside him, neatly pierced.

"Thank you," Evan said carefully. The drink of coconut milk was helping, but he was still very thirsty. "It is good of you to bring me coconuts."

"My mother says it is good to be helpful," the roach said.

"I am very thirsty," Evan told Annie. "I will die if I don't have water to drink, if I don't get a doctor for my leg."

The roach watched him with its glittering eyes but said nothing.

"I wish I could meet you in person," Evan said. If he could see her expression, he would have a hope of figuring her out.

The roach took a step back. A tiny bit of body language for him to interpret.

"You don't want to meet me in person," he said. "Okay, I understand. That's perfectly normal."

"I am not normal," the roach told him.

The roach's voice was mechanical and flat, as always. Without nuances of tone, he could not tell how she felt about this perception of abnormality. He had to plunge ahead blindly. He risked a question. "How is it that you are different?"

The roach was silent.

"I think you might be smarter than other people." Never a bad idea to suggest a compliment, he figured.

"My father calls me the Little Professor."

"It's good to be smart," he said.

"It's inappropriate to be smart all the time," the roach said.

Earlier, she had said that eye contact was appropriate. Annie was very concerned about what was appropriate and what was inappropriate. Maybe rescue parties were inappropriate.

"How do you know that it's inappropriate to be smart?" he asked her.

"Dr. Rhodes told me," the roach said. "It's inappropriate."

He felt a little dizzy, a little feverish. "Is it wrong to be inappropriate?" he asked.

"Yes," said the roach.

"Is it always wrong?"

"Tell me a story," said the roach.

Too many questions, he thought. He had gotten carried away. She didn't like questions. "All right," he said. "Could I have another coconut first?"

The roach trudged off through the sand to get a coconut. It was a long time before it returned. He sipped the milk. He couldn't drink it all right away. He needed to save some.

"Did you tell Dr. Rhodes that my leg is broken?" he asked the roach.

The roach took a step back. "Tell me a story."

He closed his eyes for a moment. No more questions, he thought. Time for a story.

"Once upon a time, there was a boy named Jack who lived with his widowed mother. They were so poor that Jack's mother sent Jack to the market to trade their milk cow for food."

. . . . .

The Mechano:

He was telling a story and that was good. I could pay attention to the story and not think about all his questions.

"Once upon a time …" The story was a fairy tale. A boy named Jack had traded a cow for a handful of beans, and his mother wasn't happy, even though the old man had said that the beans were magic. Jack's mother didn't listen to Jack—she threw the beans out the window.

Jack's mother was NT, I think—but Jack wasn't. There must be some NT rule that Jack didn't know

about that said you shouldn't trade a cow for beans. I filed that thought away—if I ever had a cow, it would be inappropriate to trade it for beans.

The next day, when a giant beanstalk grew up from the magic beans, Jack climbed it right away, without asking his mother if he could. That was inappropriate behavior. Dr. Rhodes says I should always ask my mother's permission.

Jack found a castle that belonged to a giant. An old woman who lived in the castle hid Jack in an oven when the giant showed up.

I didn't understand why the old woman hid Jack, but there's so much about NT stories that I don't understand. Maybe the old woman just wanted to be helpful. Anyway, the giant came home and got out a big bag of gold. The giant fell asleep, and Jack stole the gold. That was inappropriate. Dr. Rhodes says that it is appropriate to share, but it is inappropriate to take all of something even when someone offers to share. And the giant hadn't even offered to share.

Jack climbed down the beanstalk and got home with the gold. Then he climbed the beanstalk again and stole the giant's goose that laid golden eggs. Then he went back for a third time and stole the giant's harp.

I was sure that Jack was not NT. He kept doing inappropriate things and he kept going back to the giant's castle, a sign that he was perseverative.

The harp shouted when Jack was running away with it. When the giant chased Jack down the beanstalk, Jack chopped down the beanstalk and the giant fell to his death. I don't know if that was appropriate behavior or not. The giant was trying to kill Jack, but I don't know if Jack should have cut down the beanstalk.

Then the story was over. The man said he was thirsty, so I found him another coconut. It took a long time to find one, but I did. I brought it to him. Then I said, "Jack's behavior was not appropriate. He shouldn't have done those things." I knew Dr. Rhodes would not like the things Jack did.

"I like Jack," the man said. "He does very well for himself and his mother."

I thought about it. I liked this story better than Cinderella. Cinderella was very good and very helpful, but the fairy godmother made her go to the party and then she had to marry the prince, rather than staying in the quiet kitchen alone. She was punished for following the NT rules. Well, if she was NT, maybe it wasn't a punishment, but if she was like me, it sure was.

Jack broke lots of NT rules. He traded a cow for beans; he didn't ask his mother if he could climb the beanstalk; he stole stuff from the giant. But he got to go home to his little room in the cottage. He didn't have to go to a party or marry anyone.

I turned away, still thinking. It was time to talk to Dr. Rhodes.

"Annie," said the man. "Tell Dr. Rhodes about me. Tell him I need help."

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Dr. Rhodes:

"There is a man on my beach," Annie said.

"A man," Dr. Rhodes said. "That's great." He smiled. He had sent three emails to the man in charge of the Cook Islands mining operation, asking that he repair the cameras on Annie's island. He had yet to receive a reply, but Annie's mention of a man on the island meant that someone had been dispatched to repair the cameras at last. "He's going to fix the cameras," Dr. Rhodes said.

He knew that Annie did not respond well to change. Having a stranger on her island would be disruptive, and he needed to reassure her. "He will only be there for a short time," he said.

"He needs help," Annie said. "I tried to be helpful."

"That's all right," Dr. Rhodes said in a reassuring tone. "He'll fix the cameras and be on his way. You don't need to help."

"He says he needs help," Annie said. "His name is Evan Collins and he needs help." She was blinking rapidly. Clearly, the presence of this repairman on her island had upset her.

Dr. Rhodes was annoyed that the workman had engaged Annie in conversation, had told her that he needed help. Dr. Rhodes imagined the man—a semi-skilled laborer, struggling with the cameras. Lazy, Dr. Rhodes suspected.

"Don't worry about him," Dr. Rhodes said firmly. "He's not your concern."

"He needs help," she insisted in a loud voice. "He says he needs help."

"I said that you don't need to worry about him."

"But the man …"

"Annie," Dr. Rhodes said firmly, "you know that it is not appropriate to shout, don't you?"

Annie did not say anything.

"Remember the deal we made when you signed up for this project? You will listen to me and do as I say. If you can't do as I say, you won't be able to continue with the project. Do you remember that?"

"I remember." Her voice was low.

"The man is not your concern. He'll fix the cameras, and he'll be on his way. We have our own work to do. Today, we're going to work on recognizing facial expressions."

. . . . .

The Mechano:

I returned to my tank. I slept through the night. I returned to my island and my mechano just before dawn on the island. I went to the beach, where the man named Evan Collins slept.

He was not my concern. That was what Dr. Rhodes said.

The water bottles were empty. There were no more coconuts—I knew that. I had looked for an hour the day before to find the last coconut.

The man's breathing was shallow and uneven. Dark circles surrounded his eyes. He was covered with sand flea bites. Some of them were red and infected. The black scabs that covered the scrape on his legs were cracked, and flies had settled on them, feeding on the liquid that oozed from the cracks.

"Evan Collins," I said.

He did not open his eyes.

"Dr. Rhodes says you are going to fix the cameras," I said. "And then you'll be on your way."

Evan Collins did not move.

He was not my concern. I headed for the ocean. I had work to do.

But I stopped at the edge of the water. I circled back to stand beside Evan Collins. "Will you tell me a story?" I asked.

He did not move.

I went back to the recharging hut. I entered the hut. I shut down the mechano and I opened my eyes in my tank. I pushed the button to call the attendant, and I waited. Eventually, I heard the rattle and clank of the hatch. The hatch opened and I blinked in the glare.

I sat up when the hatch opened, staring at Kiri. "Is there a problem?" she asked. "Are you all right, Annie?"

"There is a problem," I said, speaking loudly to be heard over the hum of the pumps. "There is a man on my beach. It is not good. His face is red and his face is black and the fleas are biting him. It is not good. He is on my beach and his leg is broken. He needs a doctor. It is not good."

"A man on the beach," Kiri repeated. She was frowning. According to Dr. Rhodes' facial expression cards, that meant she was not happy. That was okay. I was not happy either.

"A man on my beach," I said again. "It is not good. I try to be helpful. I help the crabs. But I can't find any more coconuts. The man says he needs help. He says he needs medical help. He says he needs water." I closed my eyes against the lights and begin to rock.

I was thinking about the man. I pictured a chart that listed all the people involved in this. There was Evan Collins, Dr. Rhodes, and me. There were lines drawn between the three of us, making a triangle. Then I added Kiri's name to the chart and redrew the lines. There was a triangle with the man, Kiri, and me. Dr. Rhodes was off to one side.

"How did the man get to your beach?" Kiri asked.

"He has a boat that is underwater," I said. "The fish swim past it." I remember the boat, wedged between the coral heads. "It is cracked. It is not good."

"I will call Dr. Rhodes," Kiri said.

"No," I said. "Dr. Rhodes does not …" I stopped, not knowing what to say. "You need to tell someone

else," I said. I was talking louder than I needed to.

I did not care. I was twelve years old and I cracked coconuts in my mandibles. I crawled on the ocean bottom and found gold in the rocks.

Dr. Rhodes would tell me that it was not appropriate to shout. I thought it was appropriate. There was a man named Evan Collins on my beach and it was appropriate to shout.

"There is a man," I shouted. "His name is Evan Collins. He is on my beach. I have no more coconuts for Evan Collins. He needs water. He needs help."

"Evan Collins," Kiri repeated. "I understand."

"He told me the story of Cinderella. He told me the story of Jack and the beanstalk. His name is Evan Collins and he has sixteen flea bites on his left cheek. He has a broken leg. His boat is underwater."

I felt Kiri's hand on my shoulder. "I will tell my uncle," she said. "I'll tell Uncle Mars."

I didn't like the touch of Kiri's hand on my shoulder. I didn't like the glare of the lights. I lay back down in my tank. "You will tell Uncle Mars," I said. "I will go back to my mechano."

Back on the island, the sun was up. I left the charging hut and headed for the beach. The only tactile sensation was the pressure of the ground against the feet of the mechano. Just enough pressure to let me know that I was standing on solid ground. Just enough to be comfortable, no more.

Evan Collins lay on the sand, still asleep. He was still breathing.

Kiri would tell Uncle Mars now about Evan Collins. I pictured the chart of relationships, where Kiri and Evan Collins and I were connected by lines, making a triangle. I put Uncle Mars' name on the chart and drew lines connecting him to Kiri and Evan Collins. It made another triangle. Together, the first triangle and the second triangle made a diamond. That was a good pattern, I thought. A diamond was a rock and I liked rocks.

I left Evan Collins on the beach. I walked into the water, happy when it closed over my head. I spent all day collecting rocks by the hydrothermal vent.

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Matareka Waradi:

Kiri's uncle was Matareka Waradi, but everyone called him Mars. Supervisor of remote mining operations for the Cook Islands division of Atlantis Mining and Salvage, he was a man with influence—a large man with a large personality. He knew everyone, and everyone knew him.

He had arranged for Kiri to work in the California headquarters of Atlantis mining. Kiri was a good girl. She had worked hard to get a degree in nursing, and she had wanted very much to go to the United States for a time. At about the time that Kiri had mentioned this desire to Mars, the California office requested that he leave one of the mechanos at an exhausted mining site as part of an experimental program. The office wanted to put an unqualified operator in charge of this mechano. It was crazy what

they wanted—Mars had asked around and found out that it was a pet project of Eric Westerman, the company president. Westerman was the son of the man who founded Atlantis Mining, and old hands in the company generally regarded him as a bit of a fool.

If Eric Westerman wanted to risk an expensive mechano in some crackpot experiment, Mars certainly couldn't stop him. But Mars learned (through a cousin who worked in the company's Human Resources department) that this crazy project needed a nurse to care for the unqualified operator back in California.

So Mars made a deal. If Human Resources would hire Kiri to be the nurse, Mars would allow the unqualified operator to use the mechano. Mars insisted, of course, that he would not take responsibility for any damage to the mechano or other Atlantis Mining equipment resulting from operator error. And all had been well—until Mars received an email from Kiri.

Kiri was, Mars knew, a levelheaded girl, a smart girl. And so he paid attention when he received an urgent email from her. Kiri said that the unqualified operator—Annie, Kiri called her—had told Kiri that there was a man on the remote island, that the man's name was Evan Collins, and that he needed medical attention. Kiri was quite concerned.

It was a beautiful day with clear blue skies. Mars needed to check on operations on an unnamed atoll not far from the island where Kiri's operator was working. Besides, he needed to fix the cameras on that island—he'd received three emails from central headquarters about that. The man in charge of the experimental program, a fellow named Dr. Rhodes, had complained several times that he could no longer monitor the island. Mars had been ignoring the maintenance request on basic principles. He didn't know Dr. Rhodes. Kiri had mentioned in an earlier email that the man was unfriendly. So Mars saw no need to extend himself on behalf of Dr. Rhodes.

But Kiri was worried. And it was a nice day for a flight in the company's Bush Hawk-XP floatplane. Piloting that was one of the benefits of Mars' position with Atlantis Mining.

Mars called his assistants and told them they were going out to the island to replace the cameras and check on how the experimental operator was doing.

From the air above the island, Mars spotted the sunken sailboat in the water. He swore beneath his breath and landed in the lee of the island. His assistants inflated the Zodiac, and they took the rubber dinghy in. They found Evan Collins in the shade of the palms, surrounded by empty water bottles and broken coconuts. He was delirious with thirst, but when they shook him, he returned to consciousness enough to drink. By the look of him, he'd been there for a few days.

They draped his head and wrists with wet cloths, mixed a packet of electrolyte powder with a bottle of water and supported him while he drank, checked the splinting on his leg. His pulse was weak and fast, and he drifted in and out of consciousness.

Mars' assistants were carrying the man to the Zodiac when the mechano emerged from the water, carrying a rock. The mechano came toward Mars, its eyes focused on Evan Collins.

"Why didn't you tell someone about this man immediately?" Mars asked the mechano. "He's been here for days."

The mechano dropped the rock at Mars' feet. "I told Dr. Rhodes. He said the man was here to fix the cameras."

"Dr. Rhodes is an idiot," Mars said. "A fool and an incompetent."

"I told Kiri," the mechano said. "She told Uncle Mars."

"I'm Uncle Mars. Mars Waradi." Mars studied the mechano, wondering about the person who operated it.

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The Mechano:

Evan Collins lay in the bottom of the rubber dinghy. Soon he would be gone and I would be able to watch the crabs again.

The two other men were dragging the Zodiac into the water while Uncle Mars stood studying me. He leaned down and picked up the rock that I had dropped. "What's this?" he said. "A man is dying of thirst, and you bring him a rock?"

"It's for the crabs," I said. "I brought coconuts for Evan Collins, but I ran out of coconuts. I brought him all the water bottles from the boat. I was very helpful."

Uncle Mars was looking closely at the rock in his hands. "Where did you find this?" he asked.

"By the vent," I said.

The other men were shouting for Mars to come and join them. He looked at me, looked at the rock, then said, "I'll be back to talk to you about this." Then he turned away and joined the men at the boat.

I watched the plane take off, then I tidied up the area where the man had been, placing all the coconut shells in a pile, all the water bottles in another pile. It looked better when I was done. I felt better when I was done.

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Matareka Waradi:

Mars landed on the lee side of Annie's island and took the Zodiac in. He had received an email from Kiri that morning, saying that Dr. Rhodes' experimental program was being canceled. Evan Collins had survived. But after his rescue, the researcher had had to explain exactly why he had failed to let anyone know that a man was stranded on the island. Upper management had reviewed the videotapes of Dr. Rhodes' sessions with Annie, and Annie's attempts to tell Dr. Rhodes about the stranded man had been noted.

"I feel bad for Annie," Kiri had written. "She's a strange little girl, but she has a good heart. Dr. Rhodes will be telling her today that he's wrapping up the program by the end of the week. I don't think she'll

take it well."

Mars pulled the Zodiac up on the beach, out of reach of the waves. He spotted the mechano over by the mangroves. As he approached, Mars noted the rocks that had been placed on the sand by many of the crab burrows. All of them were similar to the rock that he had taken with him when he rescued Evan Collins.

"Hello, Annie," he said.

"Hello, Uncle Mars," the mechano said in its flat voice.

Mars sat in the sand beside the mechano. "You know, I analyzed that rock you brought back," he said. "Very high concentration of gold ore."

"Yes," the mechano said.

"Looks like you've collected a fair number of rocks like that one," Mars observed.

"Yes," said the mechano. "I brought them for the crabs. I am very helpful."

"Can you show me where you found them?" Mars asked.

"Yes," said the mechano.

"We thought the mining was tapped out around this island," Mars said. "My best operators had followed a rich vein of ore. They'd explored the nearby seabed, searching for other possibilities, and they'd come up empty. But you've found what looks like a promising source. How do you explain that?"

"I like rocks," the mechano said.

"Yes, I guess you do," Mars agreed. "I'm wondering if you'd like to work for me."

"Will I be able to look for rocks?" the mechano asked.

"That would be your job," Mars said.

"Will this be my mechano?" the mechano asked.

"It certainly could be."

"Yes," said the mechano. "I'd like that."

It took some doing, of course. Kiri spoke with Annie's parents, explaining at length what had happened, explaining what Mars saw as Annie's potential. Kiri had to find a therapist who was willing to continue meeting with Annie every other day. Mars had to make many arrangements—with child welfare authorities, with labor organizers, with company officials. But Mars was a man with many resources. He had many friends, a cousin in the Human Resources department, and a niece Annie trusted, as much as she trusted anyone she met in her meat body. Eventually, he worked it all out.

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The Mechano:

The tide was beginning to come in. I stood motionless and watched the crabs.

A big crab sidled out of his burrow, eyes goggling in my direction. He had shiny black legs and a bright red carapace. He had a small black claw and a very big red claw, which he held up in front of his face and waved in my direction. When I didn't move, the crab turned to look seaward.

Other crabs were coming out of their burrows. Each one stared at me, then checked out the other crabs, waving his oversized red claw at the other male crabs around him. One crab sidled toward another crab's burrow, and they both waved their claws until the first retreated.

As I watched, a female crab approached, and the activity among the males increased. They were all waving their claws, while the female watched. She stared at one male and he ran toward her and then ran back to his burrow, toward her and back to his burrow, always waving his claw.

The female followed him, hesitated at the entrance to the burrow for a moment, then went into the burrow. The male crab rushed in after her. I watched as the mouth of the burrow filled with mud, pushed up from below. The male crab was closing the door.

The other crabs were waving their claws as other females approached, all of them communicating with each other and behaving according to rules that they all seem to know.

I liked watching the crabs. I didn't understand them, but I was happy to help them with rocks.

I thought about Uncle Mars and Kiri and my mother and my father and Dr. Rhodes. Kiri had explained to me what was happening—and when she explained, I had drawn a chart in my mind. Kiri talked to my parents (that was a triangle with Kiri and my mother and my father—I was off to one side, connected to Kiri by a line). Uncle Mars talked to me and talked to Kiri. Another triangle. Dr. Rhodes was off by himself, connected to no one. The crabs were connected to me. And Evan Collins was connected to me by a line.

I thought about the story of Cinderella. I thought I might be like the fairy godmother. I sent Evan Collins to the party with the other NTs. Now he would live happily ever after.

I liked fairy tales. I liked rocks. I would collect rocks for Atlantis Mining and Uncle Mars. I would bring rocks to the crabs, who would communicate with each other using gestures I could not understand. And I would live happily ever after, alone on my island.

The End