

The Henry and the Martha

Ken Rand

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Science fiction is about otherness, yet, to be meaningful, story must be about human emotions. You'll get otherness if your story is told through an alien point of view. But will you get humanness if the human in the story is the last of its kind—and insane?

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THE MARTHA WAS DEAD.

Our lights played over the still, pale corpse, unclothed, limbs aligned, arms folded across its chest, glassy eyes fixed on the ceiling above the bed. Its throat had been crushed, bruised to a vivid black. The odor of human waste tainted the air.

Where was the Henry?

“Oh, E-gar.” A-nan’s voice quivered. “What could—how could...” Her throat pouch fluttered in distress and her light wandered around the exhibit bedroom area, avoiding the corpse, the beam darting across the back wall, and away, toward the transparent fourth wall behind us, beyond which tens of thousands of patrons flocked daily to see the humans in their natural, home-like habitat.

The museum opened in two hours. The human habitat was open to constant public view except for most of the bedroom and the toilet. Those rooms at the exhibit’s rear gave the humans some privacy, a psychological need.

Patrons stood in line for hours in the hot Earthen sun, so hot here on the North Continent on the lip of the vast western ocean, to see the humans. How disappointed they were when they got to the head of the line to find one human had chosen that moment to hide to perform a bodily function. It took incidents, patrons getting hurt, before adequate security got budgeted.

How much more disappointed would patrons be now?

It might take the medical staff more than two hours to re-animate the Martha. Even then, it might not function as it should, not at first. We might have to delay opening. We could blame it on the storm. Patrons would not be pleased, but what else could we do?

Where was the Henry?

The Henry was the star of the exhibit, what everyone came to see. It would dance, yell gibberish, jump at the transparent wall, thumping its fists against it. Patrons shrieked in delighted terror and got back in line for more. The Henry loved the crowds and they loved it.

The Martha had fans too, but not like the Henry.

But something happened. The Henry had killed the Martha.

“We should have...” A-nan tried to continue, but what could she say? Too late? Too bad? We should have insisted on a budget that didn’t leave the museum at the mercy of old, faulty power systems and the corrosive salt-sea air common to this region? We should have checked the backup generator when the storm hit, or before, when we tasted the storm in the air, and saw the clouds piling up over the ocean rolling toward us? We should have acted the instant the power failed and the exhibit remote monitors went blank?

But who could have expected—this?

I found the Henry in the toilet room.

“Forensics will tell us how,” I said. How was obvious. Strangulation. By the Henry’s hands.

But why?

The Henry sat, still, naked, on the toilet seat. Limp. Head bowed. It smelled of sweat and feces.

“Or I can ask it,” A-nan said. She was the resident expert.

“No.” I pointed with my light and she saw. “I don’t think the Henry is, well...”

“Oh, E-gar.” The Henry looked sick. “How sad.” The Martha was dead now, and we had two hours before the museum opened to restore it and treat the Henry as well. Could we restore the Martha, or would there be—what?—glitches? Behavior lapses? Changes? Who knew?

We had to try. What choice was there?

A-nan knelt by the Henry, touched its scaleless skin and spoke to it. The Henry made no response, and A-nan looked up at me, worry flushing her throat pouch.

“Come away from it,” I said. A-nan stood with a sigh, stepped away and toward into the bedroom where the Martha lay. She hovered in the doorway between the rooms, uncertain.

I tapped my comlink. The Director’s code. And medical.

Opening would be delayed. There would be recriminations. The Director would start, pass the blame down to us. Then the media, then the public would join. “The caretakers’ fault ... Negligence ... They let it die...”

We would be disposed, A-nan and I, or transferred if lucky.

We both stood with our backs to the bed and the bathroom door, as if not seeing would make it go away.

Waiting to connect—the storm must have affected the comlink—I scratched the webbing under my inner thumbs, a habit. A-nan touched me on the elbow. “You’ll get a rash,” she used to say when we first joined. Now she just touches me and I stop.

I smiled—what are mates for?—but the smile did not reach my mouth plate, dry now. The Henry and the Martha were mates too—*had* been mates, like us.

“We will be disposed.” A-nan put our thoughts into words, an attempt to dull their eventual impact.

“The Director himself will be disposed,” I said. Maybe it helped.

The Director came on first. Even as his tinny voice echoed in my inner ear, medical joined in. My report was clinical, brief, accurate. I held nothing back, and when I finished, A-nan nodded to me, confirming I’d spoken true.

Medical dispatched a team, the Director went off line for a moment to speak with patron relations, to get out a story about the delay “due to effects of the storm.”

Two meds bustled in, I didn’t know their names, smelling of antiseptic and pouch polish, carrying crisis satchels. We stepped aside but didn’t leave. Where would we go?

Crisp and efficient in starched uniforms, they went to work on the humans. One looked at the Martha, the other knelt by the still Henry. They wore filters. They probed and poked, tested, examined, monitored scans, recorded data. The only sound was the electronic click and chatter and rubbery hiss and sigh of their equipment, listening, recording, testing.

The Director came back on. “I bought an hour, but the media’s on it and

patrons are complaining. Do whatever—”

“Pardon, Director,” one medical said. “We must talk, secure.”

I unjacked and stepped out of the bedroom into the living room. A-nan joined me and we stood looking out at the same view through the display window the humans had looked out at gawking patrons for years. I suddenly wondered how old they were. I didn’t know. Did A-nan?

Before I could ask, one of the medicals approached. “We must remove the humans,” he said.

“Remove?” I said. “I don’t—”

“To central med. Our equipment,” he pointed over his shoulder with his thumbs, “isn’t adequate for, well—you wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me,” A-nan said, but they ignored her.

We were told to report to the Director’s office. Such a summons, we’d long ago learned, often preceded disposal. We had attended the mourning ceremonies.

A-nan and I linked thumbs, our scales slick with nervous sweat, as we walked through the cold, damp underground access tunnel to the Directorate wing.

On the way, we passed a security observation port, where we could look out over those lined up to see the human exhibit. The line stretched far away, thousands of patrons, many families.

I noticed one father and mother with a female cub. The cub clutched a Henry doll to her chest and her pouch rose and fell in great silent sobs. The mother knelt before the cub and the father hovered near, distress discoloring his pouch. We couldn’t hear but the gestures were obvious. Here stood a family that could ill afford to travel to Earth, who had likely spent their life savings to come, and now the cub was being told it might not get to see the humans after all.

“Poor little cub,” A-nan said.

Don’t pity the cub. Pity us.

We arrived at the Director’s office soon and saw two security guards, the ones who, after the Director disclaimed us, would take us away. Forever.

But first, the monitor.

Security had monitors in the exhibit, cameras independent of outside power

except for linkage to the remote monitor station. The cameras continued recording inside when the power failed outside, but we couldn't replay from the security station. The security people had to retrieve those tapes from the exhibit. They'd done so while we walked to the Directorate, and one tape, the view of the human bedroom, now ran in the Director's office.

The office smelled of pouch polish and nervous sweat, again more nervous sweat.

"What's wrong with the sound?" the Director snapped.

One of the security people muttered something about a software problem but he stopped when the Director dismissed him with an irritated thumb-wave.

Then we saw it on the monitor. The soundlessness made it the more macabre. At first, it wasn't clear what was happening on the humans' bed. Was the Henry climbing atop the Martha to copulate, as they sometimes did at night? No. We watched the Henry choke the Martha. To death.

Then the Henry got up from the bed, stood over the Martha a moment, then arranged its arms over its chest, and pressed its knees together. The Henry spent a few minutes arranging the body, clearly dead, then it stood silent for a few more minutes, gazing down at its mate. Its shoulders slumped.

Then, head bowed, it walked into the toilet room, and closed the door.

No doubt the tape in the toilet room would show the Henry as we had found it—head down, slumped, dejected.

The Director's pouch blanched as he watched the murder and I thought he'd pass out, but then a medical came in. He was agitated, even paler than the Director, when he motioned him aside for a conference. The others—A-nan and I and the security people—moved away from the two as their conference grew heated.

The Director swore. The medical cringed, and we feared he would be disposed where he stood.

Worse, the Director looked confused.

In a moment, he ordered the medical away—"Figure *something* out!" he said to his retreating back.

Then he waved us to gather around him. We did. "The Martha cannot be revived. The Henry, I'm told, suffers some—" he waved thumbs, "—some medical problem. It means the exhibit is lost."

“Lost?” A-nan and I said together.

“Cannot be revived, malfunctioned beyond repair, both humans. Both. The exhibit will not just be delayed, but shut down. For good. *Forever.*”

A-nan swooned, but I held her up and she recovered.

“Steady,” the Director said. “I need answers, not fainting spells. Answers!”

The security guards looked at each other in distress. The Director turned to us. “Experts on humans, you two, *the* experts. Well, if you don’t come up with something, soon, you’ll be...”

Disposed. We knew.

I linked with medical and asked for details, putting them on a room monitor so we could all hear. No good. For some medical reason I didn’t understand, the Martha couldn’t be reanimated.

The Henry lived but it had been damaged in a way that the medicals expected it would never be as animated as it had been. One said he expected the Henry to forever sit and stare at the floor, defecating on itself, that we’d have to force-feed it.

This would not sit well with patrons. We could expect a riot, and our lives were in danger, I believed, no matter how confident security acted. They didn’t act confident.

“Options, please.” The Director’s lips set in a grim line.

Henry and Martha dolls, masks, and puppets were popular with children and adults, but they weren’t animated. Several animated human sims existed, but they varied in price and popularity, and none replaced the real thing. Human actions couldn’t be reproduced in a machine well enough to fool anybody. It had been tried and it didn’t work.

“No substitute sim, then,” the Director said. He ticked off options on his thumbs, an annoying trait. “What else?”

Silence hung in the room like a syrupy mist.

“We must go,” a security guard said.

“Go?” A-nan said.

“Yes, *go,*” the Director said. Save our pouches. Run before word got out that the humans were gone forever. Run, far away.

Understanding flushed A-nan's throat pouch and she leaned against me. Tears stained her pretty cheek scales.

The Director moved behind his desk and made a call, no doubt for his private shuttle, and the two security guards ran from the office, ran from the coming chaos.

We had nowhere to go, A-nan and I. We had been with the humans from the start, studied them, cared for them, and loved them as no others did or could, even the most ardent fans. None felt the loss as we did.

I feared A-Nan and I would be sacrificed to an indignant populace. How ironic that we, who loved them more, who wanted them back more than anyone else, should suffer so.

I patted A-nan's shoulder. "There, there." It did no good. Her tears flowed, like the cub—

Suddenly, I had it.

"Director," I said, "I *have* it."

"What?" Hope speckled his pouch.

"Call in the medicals. And engineering. And electrical. And—" The list went on and on.

We'd have to be quick.

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People loved to watch the humans, loved to see them walk, speak their gibberish at them, eat, exercise, groom themselves. They loved to see the Henry cavort and dance and sing and attack the display window in mock fury. People would stand before the display and gesture at the humans to provoke response. The Henry always obliged. They loved the Martha too.

No, we couldn't fix them or replace them with sims, however sophisticated. Nobody would ever see the humans be human again.

But what if people could *be* a human?

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"You've had your turn," A-nan said. "Mine now."

I gave up the waldo and left the Henry dangling, suspended in the act of copulation with the Martha. Its body went limp and swayed, suspended by delicate and intricate artifices linking its nervous and sensory systems with the observer-link booth. A-nan took my place, and the humans resumed copulating, their ecstatic cries in near synchronicity. A-nan fell into rhythm.

The Martha was off-link, on stand-by mode, for a system upgrade, which is why A-nan and I had to share the Henry at the moment, otherwise A-nan would have linked with the Martha while I linked with the Henry, and we would have experienced human sexual intercourse at the same time. Maybe we would also experience simultaneous orgasm, as sometimes happens.

In a minute, the Henry reached a howling climax, and in another few seconds, the Martha, on automatic and diagnostic but not linked to a waldo, responded with its own. A-nan felt as the Henry felt.

Because we were their caretakers, A-nan and I got to link with the humans more often than the average patron did. We were wealthy in that regard. We never passed up an opportunity, even during repair and testing. A-nan unplugged, grinned, flushed, and sighed.

“Marvelous,” the Director said, waiting with scant patience for his turn.

The Henry was still the more popular human, but the Director preferred being the Martha. Now, though, the Director had to settle for being the Henry during the Martha’s downtime. Director’s privilege: he got more time in-human than anyone.

The Director switched the program from copulation to dance. He liked to dance.

Fans signed for the copulation sim more often than any other program, but many also ran the murder program—as the Henry. In that sim, none elected to be the Martha. So far.

So, we’d saved out jobs, saved the exhibit—not what it used to be, but enough—but we hadn’t solved the mystery.

Why had the Henry killed the Martha?

The Henry was insane. It couldn’t tell us because we were in the real world and it had left that world, some experts contend, even as it killed the Martha, and surely as it arranged the corpse in state on the bed.

I found the answer years later after I became Director. I found it in a report our two medicals had prepared for Director’s Eyes Only after the murder. Three people had seen what I now saw—the two medicals, and my predecessor.

“These files are confidential,” my secretary had told me. “Director’s Eyes Only.” She left the office, and I secured and shielded it. Then I opened the files.

The medicals, you see, had learned the Martha was pregnant when the Henry killed it. There would be three. We knew the two humans copulated often, but we understood human physiology too poorly. Why hadn’t it been impregnated in earlier copulations? We would never know.

Also, how the Martha had kept its condition from us, we would never know, but it did.

Kept *us* in the dark, but not the Henry.

Thus, the Henry had murdered the Martha, not to hurt the Martha, but to end the life in its womb.

The Henry was the exhibit star, the Martha an afterthought. If you exhibit a male human, so the thinking went, you ought to have a female too, for balance, symmetry, and to keep the male active, animated—for study, and to please patrons. We didn’t understand humans well enough to do more than guess.

Who knew the Henry would be jealous? Who knew that, threatened with the prospect that the public might shift its ardor from it to the Martha—and to its cub—it might strike out and—restore order? And go insane.

A pity. Three humans—male, female, and cub—would have been a wonderful display. Patrons would have come from—well, everywhere.