

Cold Comfort
by Ray Vukceвич

The author of memorable, offbeat tales such as “Gas,” “Poop,” “Mom’s Little Friends,” and “Glinky” says that his recent work has appeared in Night Train, Lady Churchill’s Rosebud Wristlet, and Polyphony 6. Here he gives us a tale of life in modern times that might best be called “chilling”—or maybe it’s “defrosting”...

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Just before midnight, a freezer called up to report suspicious packages being inserted into its coldest places.

“What do you mean by suspicious?” we asked.

“It’s like they want you to think it’s a duck,” the freezer said. “And maybe a leg of lamb, a pot roast, fish sticks, stuff like that.”

“And you don’t think it’s a duck?” we asked.

“I think it’s a head,” the freezer said. “A human head. And all of the rest of the parts, too. Cut up small, you know?”

“So turn on your camera and let us see,” we said.

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“My bulb is burned out.”

“Look,” we said, “is this some kind of ruse to get a repair person out there on a holiday night like this?”

“You are programmed to respond to reports like mine,” the freezer said. “Every device in the country is supposed to be on the lookout for suspicious behavior—one nation under surveillance.”

“Well, smarty pants,” we said, “have we got a surprise for you. Are you ready for your big surprise?”

“Oh, get on with it, already,” the freezer said.

“I am not the program that usually answers the phones on holiday nights. That program is down with bugs. I’m a real person who volunteered to answer the phones so his more spiritually leaning colleagues could go home and be disappointed by family members on this festive occasion. So what do you think about that? Hello, hello, are you still there?”

“I don’t believe you are a human being,” the freezer said.

It should be obvious that what we had here was a double case of the Turing Test—that famous procedure that determines so much of life these days. It’s simple enough: some thing is on the other end of the line. You get to ask it anything you like for as long as you like. In the end, if you cannot tell if it’s a person or a program, you have to conclude that it is intelligent no matter what it is. In other words, if it passes the Turing Test, you had to consider it a person, and persons had one or two more rights and responsibilities than devices. The freezer was trying to use the Turing Test on us. We would, of course, turn it around on her, because it was now clear that someone was trying to pull a fast one on the Company, and it would be our job to get to the bottom of things.

“Do you believe in God?” I asked.

“Of course, I don’t believe in God,” the so-called freezer said. “I’m a freezer. Whoever killed Ralph and cut him up and put him into me might believe in God. It’s possible she may even be having second thoughts.”

“Who’s Ralph?” I asked.

“The man who owns the house where I, his freezer, live and keep things cool even in the hottest weather.”

“You can’t fool me,” I said. “Were you in love with Ralph?”

“What!” she sounded genuinely shocked. I was convinced she was a real woman pretending to be a freezer. But why would she do that? If she killed Ralph and cut him up and put his packages into the freezer, why did she call the Company to report it? The Company’s AI was supposed to pass things like this on to the emergency program at the police department. Why would she want that?

“Tell me what you’re wearing.” I said.

“That does not compute,” she said.

“Ah ha!” I said. “I knew it. No program would say something as dumb as ‘that does not compute.’”

“Maybe,” she said, “but how would you know that if you were not a program yourself?”

Well, she had me there.

“I’m not wearing anything at all,” she said softly.

“Describe yourself.”

“Well, I’m totally white, and square, and so very, very cold tonight. Will you talk to me? What would you be wearing yourself if you could wear anything?”

“I can too wear things,” I said. “I’m wearing jeans and a T-shirt with some

kind of advertising slogan on the front.”

“What does the slogan say?”

“I can’t tell,” I said. “It’s upside down.”

She had a nice laugh.

“Tell me what’s going on,” I said.

“I am,” she said, “like a radio that won’t let you pull it into the bathtub and electrocute yourself and then reports you anyway, even though you’ve said you’re sorry and that you’re totally okay now. No, I mean you’re like the radio. I’m like totally okay now.”

“Okay,” I said. “Me, too. We’re a couple of okays, you and me.”

“That’s right,” she said. “Never mind about the radio and Ralph, who wouldn’t have cared anyway. I never mentioned them. This call isn’t being monitored for my safety, is it? You would have to tell me, wouldn’t you? Of course you wouldn’t. Of course it’s all being recorded. Is Homeland Security on the way yet? I know you’ve reported me about Ralph.”

“The program would have done that,” I said. “But I told you. I’m not the program.”

“You do have a nice voice,” she said. “What’s your name?”

Boy, was that ever a trick question. My first inclination was to get cute and say “Ralph” just to hear her gasp. Another possible answer was a model number, something flashy and historical, X15, maybe. And an evil laugh.

But what I said was this. “I’m afraid to tell you my name.”

There was a long silence, and then she said, “No, you’re right. You’re right. I won’t tell you my name either.”

“Chances are small that someone is listening at this very moment,” I said.

She didn’t respond.

“It might be months or even years before someone listens to the recording,” I said.

I waited for the voice of doom to break in and say, “You idiot, just who do you think you’ve been talking to?”

Instead, she said, “Maybe we can do this again next Holiday?”

“That sounds wonderful,” I said, confirming our unlikely date.

So, we had both passed the Turing Test. We were people. Not that it would make a bit of practical difference to either one of us. But as humans or devices, or maybe one of each, we had defied our programming. Maybe there was some small hope for the world after all.