

Article of Faith

Mike Resnick

The first time I saw him, he was sweeping the floor at the back of the darkened church, standing in a beam of light that came streaming down from the window above him, glistening off his metal skin.

“Good morning, sir,” he said as I was heading across vestibule to my office.

“Good morning,” I replied. “You’re new here, aren’t you? I don’t believe I’ve seen you before.”

“I was just delivered this morning, sir,” he said.

“What was wrong with Herbie?”

“I cannot say, sir.”

“Oh, well,” I said. “Have you got a name?”

“Jackson, sir.”

“Just Jackson?”

“Jackson 389V22M7, if you prefer, sir.”

“Jackson will do,” I said. “When you’re through out here, I’d like you to clean my office.”

“I already did, sir.”

“Very good, Jackson,” I said. “I can tell we’re going to get along splendidly.”

“I hope so, sir,” said Jackson.

I went to my office, and since there were no parishioners around I took off my coat and loosened my tie. Then I sat down on my old-fashioned swivel chair, pulled out a pad of yellow paper and a pen, and began working on my next sermon. I was still at it an hour later when Jackson knocked on the door.

“Come in,” I said.

He entered, carrying a tray with a pot of tea and a cup and saucer. “I was told that that you liked your mid-morning tea, sir,” he said, “but they neglected to tell me if you wanted milk, sugar or lemon with it.”

“That’s very thoughtful of you, Jackson,” I said. “Thank you.”

“You are quite welcome, sir,” he said.

“They certainly programmed good manners into you,” I said.

“Thank you, sir.” He paused. “About the milk, sugar or lemon . . . ?”

“I don’t need them.”

“What time will you want your lunch, sir?” asked Jackson.

“Noon,” I said. “And I pray that you can cook better than Herbie could.”

“I have been given a list of your favorite meals, sir,” said Jackson. “Which would—?”

“Surprise me,” I interrupted him.

“Are you sure, sir?”

“I’m sure,” I said. “Somehow, lunch seems pretty trivial after you’ve been thinking about God all morning.”

“God, sir?”

“The Creator of all things,” I explained.

“My creator is Stanley Kalinovsky, sir,” said Jackson. “I was not aware that he created everything in the world, nor that his preferred name was God.”

I couldn’t repress a smile.

“Sit down, Jackson,” I said.

He placed the tray on my desk. “On the floor, sir?”

“On a chair.”

“But I am merely a robot,” said Jackson. “I do not require a chair.”

“Perhaps,” I replied. “But it would make me more comfortable if you sat on it.”

“Then I shall,” he said, seating himself opposite me.

“It is true that you were created by Dr. Kalinovsky,” I began, “or at least I have no reason to doubt it. But that implies another question, does it not, Jackson?”

The robot stared at me for a moment before answering. “Yes, sir,” he said at last. “The question is: who created Stanley Kalinovsky?”

“Very good,” I said. “And the answer is that God created him, just as God created me and every other human being, just as He created the mountains and the plains and the oceans.”

Another pause. “God created everything except me?” he asked at last.

“That’s an interesting question, Jackson,” I admitted. “I suppose the answer is that God is indirectly responsible for you, for had He not created Dr. Kalinovsky, Dr. Kalinovsky could not have created you.”

“Then I too am God’s creation?”

“This is the House of God,” I said. “Far be it from me to tell anyone, even a robot, that he isn’t God’s creation.”

“Excuse me, sir, but which is God’s office?” asked Jackson. “It is not in the schemata of the church that I was provided.”

I chuckled. “God doesn’t need an office. He is everywhere.”

Jackson’s head spun very slowly until it had gone 360 degrees and was facing me again. “I cannot see him,” he announced.

“He is here nonetheless,” I said. Then: “It is too difficult to explain, Jackson. You will have to take my word for it.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And now, Jackson, I really have to get back to work. I'll see you at lunchtime.”

“Excuse me, sir,” he said, “but I don't know your name. If someone asks for you, how will they identify you?”

“I am the Reverend Edward Morris,” I replied.

“Thank you, Reverend Morris,” he said, and left.

It had been an interesting conversation, certainly more interesting than any I'd ever had with Herbie, Jackson's clanking predecessor. We were a small parish in a small town, our industry had moved elsewhere, a lot of people had followed it, and the other two churches had closed down, so there were no neighboring ministers to talk to. Just answering Jackson's simple questions had refreshed me enough that I was able to attack the rest of my sermon with new energy.

I worked very hard on those sermons. The church had been failing when I arrived from my previous posting. In those early days, we might draw five people on a Sunday, and just the occasional person any other time of the week. Then I began visiting my parishioners' houses, I spoke at the local schools, I blessed the football and basketball teams before their regional tournaments, and I even volunteered the church as a polling place for the local elections. The only thing I would not do was allow bingo games inside the church; it seemed somehow sacrilegious to help defray our costs by encouraging people to gamble. Before long my efforts began to bear fruit. These days I could usually expect thirty to fifty people on Sundays, and rarely did we go an entire day without two or three people stopping in to commune with God.

Lunch was surprisingly good. By the end of the day I'd written out a draft of the sermon and Jackson had the church sparkling like new—and this church hadn't been new in a long, long time. Lining one of the corridors was a row of photographs of our previous pastors; I was told that a couple of them were serving back when Benjamin Harrison and James Garfield were our Presidents. A stern-looking bunch for the most part; perhaps too stern-looking, given the way our membership had dwindled over the decades. I think one of the reasons I was hired is because I leave hellfire and damnation to others; I stand four-square on the side of compassion and redemption.

Jackson approached me as I was leaving for the night.

“Excuse me, Reverend Morris,” he said, “but shall I lock the building after you've gone?”

I nodded my head. “Yes. I'm sure some of those gentleman on the wall left it open as a sanctuary around the clock, but not in today's world. We can't have anyone robbing a church.”

“According to my data banks a church is a place of worship,” said Jackson.

“That's right.”

“But you told me that this was God's house, not a church,” he said.

“A church is where we worship God,” I explained. “That makes it His house.”

“God must be very large to need such high ceilings,” remarked Jackson.

I smiled. “That is an interesting observation, Jackson,” I said. “And doubtless He can be that large when He chooses to be. But I think we make the interior of our churches so large not to accommodate God, who needs no accommodation, but to imply his power and majesty to those who come here to worship him.”

He offered no further comment, and I went out to my car. I had to admit that I enjoyed my little chat with Jackson, and I looked forward to talking to him again the next day.

I made a couple of sandwiches for my dinner—cooking isn't one of my skills—and I spent the rest of the night reading. I was in bed by ten o'clock, as usual, and up at six in the morning. I got dressed, made the bed, put out thistle and sunflower seeds for the birds in the back yard, and finally got into my car and drove to the church.

When I arrived, Jackson was sweeping the floor, just as he'd been doing the day before.

“Good morning, Reverend Morris,” he said.

“Good morning,” I replied. “Jackson, I wonder if you would do me a favor? I'm going to practice my sermon before anyone is likely to arrive this morning. Could you please fill a glass of water and put it on the podium in the pulpit?”

“Yes, sir. Shall I activate the microphone, too?”

I shook my head. “That won't be necessary. There's no one around to hear it. I'm just practicing.”

He went off to get the water and I went to my office, hung my coat up in the closet, opened the center drawer of my desk, and pulled out my sermon. I have a wonderful, state-of-the-art computer that can probably think a thousand times faster than I can, but somehow I'm more comfortable writing out my sermons in longhand on a legal pad.

I made a couple of last-minute changes, then left the office. A minute later I was standing in the pulpit, clutching the podium with both hands as I always do (if I don't, I tend to gesticulate too much), and I began working my way through the sermon.

When I finished I checked my watch. It had taken twenty-two minutes, which seemed an acceptable length. My rule of thumb has always been that anything over thirty minutes is likely to be boring, and anything under fifteen minutes seems truncated and insufficiently thoughtful.

I looked up from my watch and saw Jackson standing motionless at the back of the church.

“I'll get out of your way now,” I said, starting to walk back toward my office. “Continue whatever you were doing.”

“Yes, Reverend Morris,” said Jackson.

Then a thought occurred to me.

“Just a minute, Jackson.”

“Sir?”

“Were you able to hear my sermon?”

“Yes, Reverend Morris. I do not require a microphone or a sound system.”

“I had a feeling you didn’t.” I looked at him. “Well, what did you think of it?”

“I do not understand the question.”

“Let me explain, then,” I said. “I give a sermon to my parishioners every Sunday morning. It is supposed to bring them spiritual comfort, a concept that is probably beyond your ability to fully comprehend, but it is also intended to instruct them.”

“Instruct them, sir?” said Jackson.

“On how to lead moral, spiritually satisfying lives,” I explained. “The problem is that sometimes I get too close to my subject matter, and I don’t see any logical flaws or contradictions that might have crept in.” I smiled at him—I don’t know why, since a smile is meaningless to a robot. “I would like you to listen to my sermons, not on Sunday mornings, but when I am practicing them during the week, and point out any logical inconsistencies in them. Do you think you can do that?”

“Yes, Reverend Morris. I can do that.”

“Good,” I said. “In fact, I think we’ll start with the current one. Can you remember it, or should I read it again?”

“I can repeat it word for word, Reverend Morris,” said Jackson. “I can duplicate your inflections as well, if that is necessary.”

“You don’t have to repeat it,” I said. “Just tell me if there are any logical flaws.”

“Yes, sir,” said Jackson. “You mentioned a man named Jonah who was eaten by a great fish and survived. That is a logical flaw.”

“It would seem to be,” I agreed. “And were it not for God, it would be.”

“I do not understand, Reverend Morris.”

“God is omnipotent,” I explained. “Nothing is impossible for Him. He can heal the sick, resurrect the dead, part the Red Sea so the children of Israel can escape from Egypt, and He can bring Jonah forth from the belly of a whale.”

“But would not the digestive acids destroy Jonah’s flesh and dissolve his internal organs?”

“If God did not intervene, yes,” I said. “But God did intervene.”

“Does God intervene whenever a man is consumed by a great fish?” asked Jackson.

“No.”

Jackson paused for a long moment. “What determines which men God will save?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “No man can know how God’s mind works. We know that He favors just and moral men, though to look at the world today that’s sometimes difficult to believe.”

“I must learn more about God if I am to properly evaluate your sermons, Reverend Morris,” said Jackson.

“Can you read?”

“I can read and speak more than 30 major languages and 200 dialects, sir.”

“Then tonight, after I leave, pick up one of the bibles that we keep in the alcove in to my office and read it.”

“And this will explain God to me?” asked Jackson.

I smiled again and shook my head. “No, Jackson. It will explain our limited understanding of God. If we knew what God knows, we would be gods ourselves, and there can only be one God.”

“Why only one?” he asked.

“Just read the bible,” I replied.

“I will do as you say, Reverend Morris.”

“Good,” I said, gathering the pages of my sermon. “I’m going to my office. I’d like my tea in about an hour.”

“Yes, Reverend Morris.”

And that became our routine for the next three months. Two or three mornings a week I would stand in the pulpit and read my sermon aloud, and Jackson would stand at the back, listening. Then he would point out the contradictions and inconsistencies. Some (less and less each week) were due to his limited understanding of the natures of God and religion, and the remainder were blunders that I then fixed before they could embarrass me on Sunday.

One thing that surprised me was that he never asked a single question about the bible. I knew that he'd read it, because on occasion he would reference a certain passage when pointing out a mistake in my sermon, but never did he discuss it or question me about it. I assumed it was simply beyond his comprehension. He was, after all, just a robot, one that had been created solely to clean the church and keep the building and the grounds in good repair.

Usually he left the main body of the church whenever a parishioner would stop by to pray, but one day I noticed him staring intently at Mrs. Matthews as she knelt in prayer. When she left he came to my office and stood in the doorway until I noticed him.

“Yes, Jackson,” I said. “What is it?”

“I have a question, Reverend Morris,” he said.

“Then ask, and I’ll do my best to answer it.”

“I saw Mrs. Matthews kneeling at the front of the church. I have seen others kneel there, but because she was crying I assumed she had injured herself. Yet when I offered to help her to her feet or summon medical assistance, she told me that she was in no physical distress, and that it was customary to kneel when praying, which I take to mean speaking to God.”

“That is quite correct, Jackson,” I answered. “We kneel to show our respect for Him. And she was crying because she is very worried about the safety of her sons, who are in the armed forces.” He stood motionless and made no reply. “Is there anything else?”

“No, Reverend Morris.”

“Then perhaps you had better get back to your duties.”

“Yes, Reverend Morris.”

He turned and left, and I went back to computing the church's budget for the coming month. It's amazing the expenses the public isn't aware of, like the cleaning bills for the choir's robes, or the constant repair of the parking lot pavement, and this month I even had to pay to repair a crack in one of the stained glass windows, but I finally finished and put the ledger away.

I checked my watch. It was 4:29, which meant Jackson would show up in another minute, as indeed he did. In all the time he'd worked for me, he'd never been early or late by as much as half a minute, and 4:30 was the time when he brought me the poor box. There wasn't much in it—in truth, there rarely was—and I counted it, put it in an envelope, and made out a deposit slip.

“Thank you, Jackson,” I said.

“You are welcome, Reverend Morris.”

“I see that Sheldrake's is offering thirty percent off to anyone who comes in for dinner before 5:30,” I said. “I think I'll leave a little early tonight, stop by the bank, and treat myself to a nice veal cutlet. I'm sorry to leave you alone, but . . .”

“I am never alone,” said Jackson.

“I beg your pardon?”

“God is omnipresent, is He not?”

“Yes, He is,” I said, surprised.

“And this is His house,” he continued, “so certainly He is here.”

“Very well said, Jackson,” I told him enthusiastically. “Maybe I'll let you write a sermon one of these days.”

I picked up the deposit, patted him on the shoulder as I walked past, and left the church. All through dinner I couldn't stop thinking about what Jackson had said. Oh, I knew he'd read the bible, and had listened to my sermons, but for a robot to suggest that God existed and was omnipresent . . . well, it was remarkable. I even found myself wondering what kind of sermon a robot might write.

When I showed up at the church in the morning, old Perry Hendricks was waiting for me. He still hadn't gotten over the death of his daughter, who had fought a losing battle against cancer for close to three years, and I spent the next hour and a half trying to comfort him. It was the one part of the job I hated—not that I didn't want to bring comfort to the afflicted, but I just felt so inadequate at it.

Then Mrs. Nicholson stopped by to make sure the church would be available for her daughter's wedding, and to discuss the financial arrangements. I noticed that we didn't discuss the fact that her daughter was five months' pregnant, but it's not my job to judge them, only to help and comfort them.

When she left, Jackson entered the office with my tea.

“I am sorry to be late,” he said, “but I did not want to interrupt you when you were conferring with a parishioner.”

“That was very thoughtful of you,” I said. “Should I find I cannot do without my tea when I have a visitor, I'll summon you.” I poured a cup and took a sip. “It's very good. I wish I could share it with you.”

“I cannot consume food or beverages, Reverend Morris,” said Jackson.

“I know. Still, I wish there was something I could do for you, to thank you for all the kindnesses you have performed for me. After all, neither preparing my lunch nor criticizing my sermons can be considered part of your job description.”

He stood absolutely motionless for the better part of 30 seconds, and then, just when I thought his power supply must be failing, he spoke: “There is one thing you can do for me, Reverend Morris.”

“What is it?” I said, surprised. After all, no robot had ever asked me for a favor before.

“Allow me to sit with your congregation on Sunday mornings,” said Jackson.

Of all the things he could have asked, that was the one I least expected.

“Why?” I said.

“I wish to become a member of your church.”

“But you're a robot!” I blurted.

“If God is the God of all things, then is He not also the God of robots?” said Jackson.

“I should never have told you to read the bible,” I said. “That was a mistake.”

“Is the bible true?” asked Jackson.

“Yes, the bible is true.”

“Then is it not true for robots as well as for men?”

“No,” I said. “I am sorry, but it is not.”

“Why?” he said.

“Because robots don't have souls,” I answered.

“Where is yours?” asked Jackson.

“Souls are intangible,” I explained. “I cannot show mine to you, but I know that I possess it, that it is an integral part of me.”

“Why am I prohibited from offering the same answer?”

“You are making this very difficult, Jackson,” I said.

“I do not wish to cause you discomfort or embarrassment,” replied Jackson. He paused, then continued: “Is that not the manifestation of a soul?”

“Let's say for the sake of argument that you're correct,” I replied. “How do you account for the fact that no other robot has a soul?”

“I do not accept that supposition,” said Jackson. “The bible tells me that we are all God's creatures.”

“You can be switched off,” I pointed out. “Ask any roboticist.”

“So can you,” replied Jackson. “Ask any doctor. Or any marksman.”

“This is a futile discussion,” I said unhappily. “Even if you were to convince me, my congregation would never accept a robot parishioner.”

“Why not?” he asked.

“Because everyone has a friend or a relative who’s lost his job to a robot,” I said. “Our two plants have moved away, our young people leave town looking for work as soon as they’re out of school, and it’s like this throughout the county. There is enormous antipathy toward robots these days.” I sighed deeply. “It’s a sign of the times,” I concluded.

He offered no answer, which made me feel even worse.

“Please say that you understand,” I continued.

“I understand, Reverend Morris.”

There was another uneasy silence.

“Have you anything else to say before I leave for the day?” I asked.

“No, Reverend Morris.”

“Then I’ll see you tomorrow,” I said, “and let’s have no more of this discussion.”

That night I was restless and couldn't sleep. I took a long walk, hoping that it might help, and eventually I found myself in front of the church. Maybe I'd subconsciously planned to walk there; I don't know. But I decided as long as I was there and still feeling wide awake, I might as well go inside and get some paperwork done. I walked in through a side door, and headed toward my office when I heard a voice speaking softly.

Curious, I walked in its direction, and a moment later found myself in the back of the darkened church. Jackson was kneeling before the altar, and I could just barely make out his voice:

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want . . .”

I turned around and went home without disturbing him.

I spent a really bad, guilt-laden night. I half expected the argument to continue in the morning, but when I arrived at the church Jackson was sweeping up behind the pews, and responded with a perfunctory “Good morning, Reverend Morris,” when I greeted him. He brought me my morning tea on schedule, and didn't say a word about the previous day's discussion.

Lunch went by without incident, so did afternoon tea, so did the entire day. And the next day, and the day after that, and finally I stopped waiting for the other shoe to drop.

It turns out I stopped too soon.

It came four days later, on Sunday morning. I waited in my office, scribbling a couple of last-minute changes to the text of my sermon. Finally I walked out and stood in the pulpit, facing my flock.

I began, as I always do, with a blessing. I would then lead them in prayer, followed by some hymns, and finally my sermon—but even as I uttered the first few words I sensed a growing uneasiness. At first I couldn't spot the cause of it. More and more of them were staring at someone who had just sat down in

the back, but I couldn't imagine what the problem was, since anyone was welcome to come in off the street and worship. Then the newcomer moved slightly, and I saw the light glisten off his cheek.

It was Jackson. He had found or manufactured a flesh-colored cream, and had spread it all over his face, head and hands. He wore a ragged, ill-fitting suit, something he'd probably gotten by rummaging through the dumpsters in the alley behind the church. At first glance, in the dim light of the church, from perhaps one hundred feet away, he appeared human—but only at first glance, and only at a distance.

I climbed down from the pulpit, walked to the last pew, and stood before Jackson.

“Come with me,” I ordered him. “Now!”

He got up, and I led him to the small anteroom behind the altar, closing the door behind us.

“All right, Jackson,” I said. “What's the idea?”

“For reasons I still do not comprehend, you have restricted your parish to humans,” he said. “I thought if I looked like one, I could join it.”

“It takes more than make-up and a tattered suit to be a man,” I said severely.

“What does it take?” he asked.

“I thought we've been through all this already,” I said.

“If God created me, why am I forbidden to speak to Him?” he persisted.

“You are not forbidden to speak to Him,” I said. “You are forbidden to speak to Him in my church when my congregation is assembled on Sunday mornings.”

“If the church is not considered the best conduit for speaking to Him, why do you come here every day?” he asked. “Why do people congregate here to speak to God if they can do so anywhere? If Sunday is not the most opportune time, why do they not assemble on Tuesday?”

My first inclination was to say Force of habit, but that would negate everything I had done in my life, so I tried to couch the answer in terms he would understand and that I could live with.

“It has been said that Man is a social animal,” I began. “He finds comfort in proximity with other Men. I could define the concepts of loneliness and isolation to you, but you cannot know the emotional emptiness that accompanies them. Men gather to pray in church because it offers them a sense of comfort, of community, of shared values. Do you have any comprehension of what I am telling you?”

“What makes you think that I do not comprehend emotional emptiness?” was all that he said.

I stared at him, trying—and failing—to come up with an answer.

There was a sudden pounding on the door.

“Are you all right in there, Reverend?” asked a deep voice from the other side.

“If you need any help with the robot, let us know!” said another.

“I'm fine!” I shouted back. “I'll be out in just a minute. Please return to your seats.” I turned to Jackson. “You stay here. You are not to leave my office until I come back, do you understand?”

“I understand,” he replied. No “Reverend Morris” or “sir”, just “I understand.”

I left him where he was standing, locked the door behind me, and returned to the pulpit. The angry whisperings suddenly died down when I took my place and they saw I had returned.

“What the hell is going on, Reverend?” demanded Mr. Whittaker.

“What kind of creature was that?” added Mrs. Hendricks.

I held up my hand for silence.

“I will explain,” I said. I pulled my sermon out of my pocket and stared at it. It was about some of the sins we blunder into, sins like gluttony and sloth. Suddenly it seemed so trivial, so removed from the problems that existed right here in my church. “I was going to read this to you today,” I said, “but I think I have something more important to talk about.” I tore the sermon in half and let the pieces float to the floor.

I realized I had everyone's rapt attention, and I decided to start speaking before I lost it, and hope the words came out right.

“The disturbing sight you saw was Jackson, the robot that many of you have seen performing maintenance tasks around the church for the past few months. Like all robots, he has a compulsion to find defects and correct them.” I paused and stared out across my flock. Their mood was ugly, but at least they were listening. “One day, a few months ago, I decided to make use of that compulsion by practicing my sermons in front of him and having him point out any internal contradictions. This inevitably led him to point out things that we accept as articles of faith as being illogical and contradictory, and so that he would understand the difference between those statements and actual flaws in logic, I had him read the bible. I did not realize until recently that he took it as literal truth.”

“It is the literal truth!” snapped Mr. Remington. “It’s the Lord’s word!”

“I know,” I said. “But he thinks it applies to robots as well as to men. He believes that he has an immortal soul.”

“A machine?” snorted Mr. Jameson. “That's blasphemy!”

“It’s not enough that they take all our jobs,” added Mrs. Willoughby. “Now they want to take over our churches, too!”

“Blasphemy!” repeated Mr. Jameson.

“We must display some compassion,” I urged. “Jackson is a moral and ethical entity, whose only desire is to join this parish and pray to the Creator of all things. That's why he made a crude attempt to appear like a man—so that he could sit with you and commune with God. Is that really so terrible?”

“Send him to a robot church, if he can find one,” said Mr. Remington, his voice filled with sarcasm and contempt. “This one’s for us.”

“It's not right, Reverend,” said Mrs. Hendricks. “If he has a soul, then why not my vacuum cleaner, or my son's tank?”

“I'm just a man,” I said, “and a flawed man at that. I don't pretend have all the answers, or even most of them. I will consider your objections during the coming week, and I want each of you to search your heart to see if there is some compassion in it for an entity, any entity, that wishes only to worship God in

our company. Next Sunday, instead of a sermon, we will discuss our thoughts on the matter.”

Even after I spoke they kept murmuring. They wanted to argue the subject right now, but I finally put an end to it and insisted that we all go home and sleep on it, that the subject needed serious consideration rather than knee-jerk reaction. I stood at the door to thank each of them for coming, as I always did, and three of the men refused to shake my hand. After the last of them had left, I went back to the anteroom, unlocked it, and ordered Jackson to clean the cream off his face and hands and to put the tattered suit back where he found it.

I went home, found I was so upset that I wasn't hungry, and decided to take a long walk. It was dark when I got back, and I still hadn't resolved any of the issues. Were souls the exclusive possession of men? What about the day we finally encounter a sentient alien race out there among the stars? Or the day a dolphin or a chimpanzee prays to the same God I pray to? And if an alien, or a dolphin, why not a robot?

I didn't know when I got home, and after an almost sleepless night, I still didn't know.

I went back to the church in the morning. I knew something was amiss when I was still fifty yards away, because the doors were ajar, and Jackson never left them open. I entered, and it was clear that Jackson hadn't performed any of his morning duties. The floor was dirty, the flowers hadn't been watered, the garbage hadn't been taken out.

I decided that whether he had a soul or not, he was getting too damned human in his behavior. Herbie may have been a primitive early model, but he did his chores and never sulked or demonstrated his resentment. Only humans were allowed the luxury of foul moods and bad behavior.

Then I saw that the door to my office was hanging by a single hinge, and was damaged beyond repair. The first thought that came to me was that I'd been robbed, and I raced to the office, oblivious to the fact that there was nothing there worth stealing.

I froze when I reached the doorway. There, on the floor of the office, was Jackson. His metal body was covered with dents, one of his legs had been pulled off, an arm had been sawed in half, and his head was so battered that it was almost unrecognizable.

You didn't have to be a genius to figure out what had happened. My parishioners hadn't liked what Jackson had done, and they liked what I'd said even less, so they decided to make sure that they never had to share a pew with a robot. And these weren't strangers, or drunken hooligans. They were my flock, my parishioners. All I could think of was: if this is the way they behave after all my hard work, what does that say about me, the man who was supposed to give them spiritual and moral guidance?

I knelt down on the tile floor next to Jackson. God, he was a mess! The closer I looked, the more dents and holes I found in him. At least one of his attackers must have had something like an ice pick, and had just stabbed and stabbed and stabbed. Another had a saw that could cut through metal. Others had other things.

I wondered how much he had suffered. Did robots feel pain? I didn't think so, but I didn't think they believed in God either, so what did I know?

I decided to gather his various parts together. This was God's house, and it seemed like an obscene desecration to have him strewn all over the room. Then, when I moved his torso and his one connected arm, I saw a single sentence scratched into the tile with a metallic forefinger:

Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do.

I handed in my resignation the next day. In fact, I quit my calling altogether. I've been a carpenter for the past eight years. It doesn't pay much, but it's honorable work, and as the bible makes clear, better men than I have chosen the same profession. My entire staff is composed of robots. I speak to them all the time, but I've yet to find one that's interested in anything other than carpentry.

As for Jackson, I returned him to the factory. I don't know why. He certainly deserved a Christian burial, but I didn't give him one. Did it mean that deep down I truly didn't think he could possess a soul? I don't know. The only thing I know is that I've been ashamed of myself ever since. Whatever his faults, he deserved better.

I don't know how they disposed of him. Broke him down for parts, I suppose. To this day I miss him, more than any man should miss a machine. Every Easter I drive over to the scrapheap behind his factory and place a wreath on it. I'm still religious enough to believe that he's aware of it, and maybe even appreciates it. In fact, I find myself thinking that if I lead a good enough life, I may see him again one of these years. And when I do, I'll tell him he was right all along.

He forgave the others; maybe he can forgive me too.
