

UNINTENDED BEHAVIOR

by Nancy Kress

Nancy Kress's latest book is the bio-thriller, *Dogs* (Tachyon Press). Her newest story, too, concerns a dog, as do two novellas she published last year. It's difficult to account for this sudden spurt of fascination with canines. However, the term "unintended behavior" is not zoological. The phrase is tech-speak: It refers to program code doing something the programmer didn't foresee. Nancy tells us that the only way she, not a tech sophisticate, knows this is because her son told her so.

After thirty-six years of miserable marriage, Annie Skepford made the discovery that decided her on leaving her husband. But the truth, when she finally admitted it to herself, was that the girl on the phone was almost irrelevant; Annie had just had enough. Thirty-six years! But at least at this late date, a separation wouldn't matter much to Carol, married and living on the other coast, or to Joel, a grad student at a college the farthest away from home that he could get himself accepted. To Annie's surprise, it was the dog who objected to a divorce.

"No," Beowulf said. He had only worn the animal-speaking thingie for a few weeks and Annie still wasn't used to it. She never would have bought it for him. But Don was a technophile and an early adopter of every weird gadget on the Net. Their fourth-floor apartment was networked, localized, and MEMS-ed, although Annie wasn't sure what that meant. Don never explained. He only rolled his eyes and said, "Networking is the most powerful tool of this century. Don't you ever read *anything*?"

"What did you say?" Annie asked Beowulf. An instant later she felt like a fool. She had read the package insert that came with Beowulf's thingie, which said that the ridiculous little helmet atop his head scanned Wulf's brain waves. The scan identified both his emotional state and those "cognition areas" that were showing greatest blood flow at any moment. The helmet then produced pre-recorded audio of what a dog might say if it could, in your personal choice of fifty-six voices. Wulf "spoke" in a light, musical tenor, which Annie thought ridiculous for a Borzoi the size of a small armchair.

"No," Wulf repeated.

"No what?" She couldn't believe she was doing this. Having a conversation with a dog.

"No," Wulf repeated, looked away from her at a pigeon on the

apartment window sill, returned his brown-eyed gaze to her. Wulf had a small head set proudly on his powerful, graceful hound body, and an aloof and aristocratic air that could intimidate Annie even before he could “speak.” Borzoi were inextricably linked with Russian royalty. Annie, by contrast, felt dumpy and weak and old, sitting with her balled-up handkerchief in a faded swivel rocker, her eyes swollen and achy from crying.

Probably Wulf meant “No, don’t cry.” Dogs could pick up on human distress. Or maybe he meant “No, don’t neglect my walk,” which it was now time for. Or even “No, don’t change routine”—hadn’t she read an article someplace about dogs that could detect minute changes in human pheromones, and so tell when their owners were about to have seizures?

Annie had decided on a life-changing seizure. Except that she wasn’t sure how to go about it. How would she live? Don had always earned all the money, budgeted all the money, controlled all the money. They didn’t even have a joint bank account, much less credit cards in her own name and...

“Annie!” Don’s voice called. She grimaced, hid her handkerchief in her palm, and swiveled her chair to face the TV. Don had rigged it up to the computer in his study, with some sort of cameras that showed his face when he called. He called several times each day.

“Did you pick up my gray suit at the cleaner’s?”

“Not yet, Don.”

“No?” His eyebrows rose. “Why not? What on Earth were you doing with yourself all morning? And why are you crying?”

Now. She could do it now. Just say the words outright: *I’m leaving you. I can’t stand this life anymore. You treat me like a child, or a machine. I’m out of here.*

She couldn’t do it.

“I’m not crying.”

He gave a sigh of impatience masquerading as patience. “Right. Whatever you say, Annie. But make sure to pick up my suit, and get a case of Guinness. My poker club is coming over tomorrow night. Or did you forget that, too?”

“No, Don.”

“Good.” His face vanished from the screen.

Annie started crying again. She said to Wulf, “I have to get out of here!”

“No,” Wulf said, and this time there was a shade more firmness to “his” voice. Was he on Don’s side, then? Don had bought him and Don disciplined him. But it was Annie who fed Wulf, walked him, took him to the vet, brushed him, talked to him. She said to the dog, “You don’t understand.”

“No,” Wulf said, which could have meant anything.

* * * *

He became more chatty on their walk. Annie took him to the dry cleaner’s and the grocery store, staggering home with the gray suit over one shoulder and a case of Guinness on the other. Wulf offered “I want to chase that cat” and “That woman is afraid of me” and several repetitions of “This smells interesting!” He wagged his tail and offered “Hello!” to Jimmy the doorman, who said “Hi,” warily. As Wulf and Annie crammed into the building’s small elevator, Wulf said, “I’m hungry.”

“I’ll feed you when we’re upstairs,” Annie said.

“Good! Thank you!”

She smiled wanly. In a way, Beowulf was good company. At least he never made her feel like something left over from a different century.

As she approached the apartment door, it unlocked itself, keyed to the chip that Don insisted she carry in her purse. The lights turned on. The refrigerator opened itself for Annie to put away the beer. As she closed the door, the refrigerator said in a silky female voice, “We are low on milk. Did you buy milk?”

“No,” Annie said. She knew that the fridge, unlike Beowulf, was not speaking from any perceived emotion; Don had simply programmed it with recordings that reflected its scans of the UPC labels within. But Annie hated the refrigerator’s nagging almost as much as its seductive voice. Why did Don have to give it that voice? Because the refrigerator was what he wished Annie could be: sleek, efficient, obedient.

Wulf said, "You seem upset. Can I fetch anything?"

He looked at her with tender light-brown eyes, but Wulf had never been trained to fetch. And what could he have fetched her, anyway? A cup of tea? A stiff drink? The name of the girl who had phoned Annie at noon to announce her affair with Annie's husband? Wulf didn't even know what he was saying. The choice of words was forced into his mouth, just as Annie's always were. She would never have the nerve to confront Don about the girl.

All at once Wulf stood erect and sniffed the air. A low growl formed in his throat. The computer screen sunk flush with the kitchen wall brightened and announced, "A rat has invaded the kitchen."

How did it know that? Don had put various detectors—infrared, motion, God-knew-what—around the apartment. Maybe they were linked to the computer and could identify size or body heat or something. Wulf snuffled at the cabinet under the sink. Gingerly Annie opened it, but nothing came out. Now Wulf was nosing the base of the kitchen island, where Annie kept cereals and baking goods in a small cupboard. She flung open the cabinet door.

The rat leaped out and began a dash across the kitchen floor toward the bathroom. Wulf cried "Kill!" and was on it instantly. He clamped it in his powerful jaws and the rat shrieked, a high inhuman sound, before Wulf shook it and bones snapped.

Don's face appeared on the screen. "I heard the alarm—what's he got, what's he got? A rat! Good boy, Wulf! Annie, how the hell did a rat get into the apartment?"

Slowly she looked away from the dead body in Wulf's jaws. Borzoi were bred to chase wolves in the Russian forests; she'd had no idea that one would kill a rat. Or that Wulf's artificially supplied vocabulary included that gleeful "Kill!"

Don never raised his voice, not ever. Now he said quietly, "Rats come in when housekeeping falls below standard. Haven't you been keeping the place clean?"

"Ready to receive garbage," the garbage pail said, opening as Wulf moved past it with his rat.

"It's time to start dinner," the refrigerator said.

"I'm leaving you," Annie said.

"Don't be ridiculous," Don said. "You have nowhere to go."

* * * *

He was right, of course. As soon as his face had disappeared from the TV, Annie faced that basic fact all over again. She could pack a bag, but then what? Don gave her just enough household money for two or three days, and even if she hadn't spent most of the current allowance, it wouldn't have been enough to buy even a bus ticket to Carol, or to Annie's sister in North Carolina. Even if she could stand her sister. And if she could get to Carol, what kind of life would that be? "You're a doormat, Mom," Carol had said. "As long as you're here anyway, would you mind taking the garbage downstairs?"

Wulf said, "Stay here." He had hidden the rat someplace and stood beside Annie, pressing his small, graceful head to her side.

He meant only that he sensed she was about to leave him alone in the apartment and he didn't like that. He'd said the same thing last week when she'd had to see the doctor about her blood pressure. You couldn't bring a dog to the doctor's. But Annie looked at him in wonder.

"You're right, Wulf. It's as much my apartment as his. And I've ... I've *earned* it."

But how to do this? The first step was easy enough; lock the doors. Not the e-locks, which were always on anyway, but the deadbolt that was standard equipment on all New York apartments. Annie pushed it into place.

"It's past time to start dinner," the refrigerator said reproachfully. Annie got a pair of scissors, found the wire that connected the scanners inside the fridge to the microphone outside, and cut the wires. A minute later Don's face appeared on the kitchen screen.

"Annie! What's going on there? What happened to Leila?"

Leila. The voice of the refrigerator was Leila. The girl on the phone, the live girl, had been nameless. There was no way to turn off the kitchen screen, which was built into the wall, but surely it must be connected to the main computer in Don's study? Annie went there, Don talking at her all the

way: from the kitchen screen, from the living room TV, from the computer on his desk. She crawled under the desk and unplugged everything she found there, but Don's voice didn't stop.

"Annie! Are you—"

Back-up. Batteries or a generator or radio waves or something. The whole apartment was one big machine, and Don expected—had always expected—Annie to be part of it, one more cog or chip or whatever machines had nowadays. No more.

"Don, you don't live here anymore."

His face paled, so white that for a wild moment Annie thought he might faint. Instead, shockingly, he said quietly, "I know you never loved me."

That was true, but she didn't know that Don knew it. The realization burned along her already charred nerves.

All at once he barked, "Why did you ever marry me?"

Because you were there. Because all my friends were getting married. Because you knew about cars and taxes and machines and I thought you'd always take care of me. Because nobody else asked. But she couldn't say those things, and before she could say anything else, color rushed back into Don's face and he said, "If you think you can just—"

Annie marched out of the study, slamming the door. A deep part of her mind said *That was our last chance*, but the words seemed meaningless. In the living room she unplugged the TV, and Don's face disappeared. However, the kitchen screen had no controls. Annie took the hammer from the kitchen drawer and smashed the screen.

"Help! Help!" shrieked the security system. "Intruder! Intruder!" A wailing siren pierced the air.

Was a signal being sent from the system to the security company, to the police? Of course it was. Amazed at herself, Annie picked up the phone, hit the memory button, and shouted over the din, "Ballinger Home Protection? I'd like to report a false alarm. Actually, I think there's something wrong with the system. I can't make it stop, and there's been no intruder here!"

“Name and password?”

Annie gave them. A few moments later the noise stopped. “I’ll have to send a technician to repair the problem, ma’am, but I can’t get one there until tomorrow.”

“Oh, that’s fine. Just ... just shut down the whole system until then.”

“Are you sure? You understand that you will be without—”

“Just shut it down until tomorrow!”

He did. But the instant after Annie hung up, the phone rang again. Don. She lifted the receiver to be sure, hung it up again, then removed it from the cradle and left it off.

In the study Don was still calling to her; she could hear the sound but not distinguish any words. But then, all at once, his voice was clear and loud in the room, and she froze.

“Annie. Stop this right now. Do you hear me?”

The sound was coming from her pocket. Annie fished out her cell and there was Don’s face. It had hardened, like setting cement. Annie marched to the window and opened it. She peered out to make sure no one stood in the courtyard below. Then she dropped the cell four stories down onto the pavement. October air drifting through the open window cooled her face, her trembling hands.

What else? Nothing else here could order her, command her ... All at once the house burst into madness.

Lights blinked on and off. Doors to the microwave and the dishwasher banged open and shut, open and shut. The toaster went Pop! Pop! Pop! The blender whirred. *Networking is the most powerful tool of this century.* Annie screamed, but a moment later, contempt flooded her. A tantrum, that’s all it was, no different from the tantrums Carol had had when she was four, when she’d bang her head against the wall or kick her heels on the floor. Don was behaving like a spoiled four-year-old.

Maybe that’s all he’d ever been. And maybe if she’d realized that decades ago, not been so afraid of him ... but no. They were just too different. Two fundamentally different sorts of people.

Cautiously, Annie approached the kitchen. The appliances continued to bang and whirr and pop, but they couldn't actually *do* anything to her. She looked up at the smoke alarms, but they weren't sounding; presumably Don didn't want to alert the building super, who'd always seemed to prefer Annie over Don. But then, Annie hadn't treated Luigi like just another machine. Sometimes Annie—oh, not now, but years ago, when she'd been younger—had fantasized that Luigi was actually her husband. She lived with him in his cheerful little apartment behind the stairs. He cooked spaghetti for them. He called her "Cara." They laughed together at movies that showed sleek-haired barbarian women fighting ghouls while dressed in high-heeled boots and gleaming golden bras.

Beowulf sat under the still open window in the living room, whining softly. When Annie stroked his head, he said, "I don't like this."

"I know. But it's all right, Wulf. Look, I'm going to unplug all the lamps in this room and we'll just ignore the noise in the kitchen, okay? It'll be fine."

"I don't like this."

To get the overhead living room light to go off, Annie had to stand shakily on a chair, unscrew the glass fixture, and remove the three bulbs underneath. She closed the door to the bedroom, where the alarm clock was changing radio stations like a drunken trucker. Annie lit candles in the living room. After ten more minutes, the kitchen appliances stopped.

The living room, bathed in the soft glow of candlelight and with twilight closing in outside, fell into silent peace. Wulf went to sleep at Annie's feet. She sat in her rocker, trying to think what to do next, although it was hard to think when the apartment was so warm ... so very warm, especially considering the open window...

Annie jumped up and checked the thermostat. Eighty degrees and rising. She pushed the button to turn off the heat, but nothing happened. Well, if Don thought he could *broil* her out, he was wrong. She opened all the windows as far as they would go and took off her sweater, shoes, and socks. There was food in the kitchen, food that she could eat without cooking it; she was suddenly afraid of the oven and microwave. And water—

She ran into the bathroom. Only a drizzle of water came out of the tap. Don had somehow turned it off. But there were two gallons of bottled water in the fridge ... in "Leila." Carefully Annie opened the refrigerator and pulled

them out. Nothing happened. Leila was vanquished. For a long moment Annie held the water bottles, one in each hand, against her fevered cheeks.

Emboldened by victory over the refrigerator, Annie went into the bedroom. Here it was even hotter. Methodically she went through the pockets of Don's pants and jackets, something she had never done in thirty-six years, as well as through his dresser. She found \$246.83, a box of Trojans—Annie was post-menopausal—and a love letter from Joanne. So that was the girl's name. Joanne couldn't spell, Annie noted with scorn. The scorn felt good.

Was \$246.83 enough for a plane ticket to Carol in San Diego? Maybe. But Annie didn't feel close to her daughter, who was so much like Don, and she didn't like San Diego, which always seemed to be smoky from wildfires. And she could hardly go to Joel, living in student housing. Also, she realized, she didn't want to leave this apartment. It was hers now, earned by years of enduring brusque orders and patronizing comments and domestic labor. Annie wasn't budging. The young women of today had it right: Hang onto what was yours.

She tried to think it through. Don would be home soon. He would bang on the front door, and she wouldn't open it. If he did fetch Luigi, Annie would yell through the door that Don had *hit* her and she was afraid to open the door. Luigi would call the cops. No, that wouldn't be good—if the cops came, they'd see she had no bruises and they'd let Don in. So maybe she could—

"Annie!" Don's yell—so loud!—from the living room. Annie froze. She had unplugged the TV, had unplugged anything that could ... Wulf raced into the bedroom.

"Annie, what the fuck do you think you're *doing*?"

Don's voice, coming from Wulf's helmet. How could he do that? Some sort of wireless voodoo ... but what struck her like a blow was that Don was *using* Wulf. As if Wulf were just one more appliance. Springing toward the dog, Annie tried to yank off the helmet. Don's voice continued to come from it.

"I'm nearly home, Annie. And when I get there, you're going to have a lot of explaining to do. What makes you think you can disturb my tech, wreck my possessions, disorder the life I've worked my ass off to give you—"

My. My. I. My.

The helmet, held by rigid metal straps under Wulf's chin and around his collar, wouldn't come off. Don continued to grate, and now it seemed to Annie that his words were somehow hurting Wulf. The dog trembled and his brown eyes turned beseechingly to hers. Was Wulf just afraid of the unaccustomed shouting, or was Don's fury somehow going through Wulf's brain—that brain connected to the technology on his innocent head?

"Stop!" Annie cried, even though she knew Don couldn't hear her. She went back into the living room, sweat coursing down her forehead and between her breasts. The thermostat said eighty-six degrees. Annie took off her blouse, standing by the window in her polyester slacks and Playtex Eighteen-Hour bra. Gray curls frizzed around her head. The dog followed, whimpering.

The e-locks on the front door lit up. Banging started on the reinforced wood. "Open up, Annie! Damn it, open up!"

She stared at the door, her hand on Wulf's trembling back.

"Goddamn it to hell, you'll regret it if you don't open up!"

Annie stood still. Did the neighbors hear? No, the rest of the fourth floor was still at work. Now Don would call Luigi, call the cops...

He didn't. Nor did things in the apartment start going wild again. Instead Annie heard a low, intense whine outside the door, like a dentist drill. Through the tiny crack between door and frame, just above the deadbolt, came a thin beam of red light.

The deadbolt began to cleave apart. Don had some kind of laser-y saw.

She was frightened by the strength of her rage. It felt primitive, as if the back of her head was being swamped by a dark wave: a powerful and barbaric rage she had never before known. Wulf shuddered under her hand. Connection ran from her to the dog and back again, the kind of deep connection she'd once, long ago, dreamed of having with Don, with her husband. But this electricity didn't come from hardware or wireless or any sort of technology. It came from bone and blood and flesh, burning along Annie's nerves like old, old fire. Annie was Wulf, the Wulf whose ancestors had coursed wolves on the Russian steppes, the Wulf with the rat in his jaws, even as she was also the rat itself. She was the substrate, the

microcode, the starting point.

The deadbolt broke and the door burst open.

It seemed to Annie—later, when she was only herself again—that the dog moved even before she spoke. “Kill!” she said.

Wulf leaped, and got Don in mid-air.