

HUMAN DAY

Jack Skillingstead

Jack Skillingstead tells us “I was driving to work one day, listening to the radio, and heard the weatherman say that tomorrow was going to be a ‘Human’ day. Of course, he really said ‘humid’ day. But I thought it was a great title for a short SF story, so I wrote one to go with it.”

Raymond held the loose eye in a cereal bowl. The eye looked like a big brown-and-blood-shot marble. It sounded like one, too, when he tilted the bowl. On the curvature opposite the pupil the interface shone like a gilded thumbprint. Robbie the Rover, a canine simulacrum Ray had designed in the image of a Golden Retriever, stood frozen by the workbench, left orbit gaping.

“Ready or not,” Raymond said, “it’s D-Day.”

He pushed the eyeball into the open socket, regarded it critically, touched up the fur with a tiny makeup comb. He removed his glasses and wiped them on his shirt-tail, then put them back on and sighed.

“Dog day,” he mumbled.

Robbie the Rover looked like a study in taxidermy.

Raymond worried his hands together. It was now or never, and it couldn’t be never. He had been hiding in this secret underground shelter for almost a year. His supplies were depleted, the generator fuel nearly exhausted.

He had to find out what was happening up there in the world. Had to find out if *they* had fully taken over: his children of the Rift.

Raymond seated himself at the worktable and activated the remote control device. A red point of light glowed briefly in the simulacrum’s left eye—the power-on indicator—then immediately faded out, so the illusion would not be compromised to the disappointment of his sweet little Samantha.

Of course, the light should have shone in both eyes. The right one was still not working. The screen on the controller setup flickered, flashed out, flickered again, and became steady. It displayed a flat image of Raymond seated before the remote control console, leaning forward, looking at himself looking at himself, through Robbie the Rover’s eye.

Raymond turned in his chair and manipulated the controller. The fake dog padded over to him just like the real thing, looked up, cocked its head to the side, lolled its tongue, wagged its tail.

“Good boy,” Raymond said.

He got up and shuffled in his slippers to the heavy door. Using the hand crank, he rolled it aside, greased wheels grinding. The tunnel beyond breathed stale air into his face. Coughing, he returned to the work table. Robbie the Rover stood by the chair. Raymond almost started to pet it, he was so lonely. Instead he sat down and took up the controller.

“Go be my eyes,” he said. “My eye, I mean.”

And he sent the simulacrum on its way to the world above.

His life depended on a toy. Samantha's toy. His daughter was gone but her toy remained durable.

It had begun the day the Mayovsky Accelerator erupted. Sam should not have been there. That was Raymond's fault. She was so damn *curious*. Daddy's girl, minus the twitchy eccentricities.

"What's it doing?" she had asked. They were standing together on the observation platform. "Are those big things magnets?"

Four gray metal blocks the size of economy cars tumbled on gimbals suspended above the floor. In the center of all that tumbling the air blurred, like worn fabric. A low frequency hum vibrated deep in their bones.

"Not magnets, exactly, sweetheart. It's something new, kind of a mini-super-collider. I'm rubbing at the onion skin between universes." As always Raymond had taken full credit, even for a project of this scope. Well, it *was* his money driving it. And it wasn't called the *Mayovsky* Accelerator for nothing.

"It *looks* like rubbing," Samantha said.

And then something like a funnel of light warped out of the blurred place and lashed upward, knocking Raymond off his feet. When he looked around, Sam was gone from the platform. They found her body beneath the tumbling blocks.

Raymond watched Robbie's progress on the rc screen. The dog made its way up twisty, chemically lit passages. When it reached the outer door it stopped. A featureless metal slab filled Raymond's screen. This blast door had not been opened once in the last year, not since Raymond had fled beneath the earth. You could do anything if you had enough money. Anything but the most important thing: prevent a death that had already occurred. Originally the shelter was Raymond's hedge against terror or environmental disaster; it had become his refuge from transdimensional invasion.

He stood up and pressed the lock release button for the outer door. When he resumed his seat, the rc screen presented the outline of the open door and the darkness beyond. He activated Robbie the Rover's night vision, and proceeded. As soon as the simulacrum was clear, Raymond shut the outer door and secured it.

Robbie climbed upward, eventually coming to the roughest section of the access tunnel. Here the passage was drilled through raw earth and rock, with no obvious shoring. Further on, Ray had to guide Robbie carefully into a tunnel not much larger than would allow a crawling man. If anyone were to stumble upon it, the access to his shelter would appear to be nothing more than a natural gap in the earth.

Robbie came out into a tangle of blackberry vines and dazzling sunlight. Ray killed the night vision. Past the brambles and weedy lot a highway crossed before a park. Beyond that the city rose against the sky. He thought for a minute, then put Robbie the Rover in rest mode. Better to wait for dark.

Robbie the Rover slept in the brambles, and Raymond slept in his secret shelter. Or tried to. He tended either to sleep constantly, or barely at all. This was a barely-at-all period. He pillowed his head on his folded arms and breathed slowly, too conscious of himself to relax. Finally, giving in to his anxieties, he sat back and knuckled his gummy eyes, reached for the remote and activated the monitor.

A quarter mile away, Robbie opened *his* eyes. Eye.

There was movement. Raymond leaned closer to the monitor. Nighttime had descended upon the world above. A figure approached through moonlight, coming straight for Robbie the Rover's bramble bed.

Discovered already!

For a moment, Raymond could do nothing. Then he tapped the auto-dog key, and

April/May 2009

Robbie stood up and behaved like a real dog, without detailed direction from the rc. Sam would have loved this feature.

The approaching figure halted.

Robbie barked in a friendly way. He was incapable of barking in a threatening manner, being, essentially, a child's toy. Raymond had stocked his secret shelter for every contingency, including Samantha. Now loneliness was the final contingency. In another month *would* he have been petting Robbie? Fawning over its meticulously hand-woven fur?

On the monitor, the figure moved closer. It was a man, or what looked like a man. He was saying something. Raymond turned up the gain on Robbie's ears.

There, boy, how'd you get yourself stuck in that mess, huh?

The man carefully pulled apart loops and tangles of spiked vine.

Raymond nudged the controller, and the dog stepped out of the brambles and past the man.

You're very welcome, the man said.

Okay, he seemed human enough, but best to maintain distance.

Ray pushed the simulacrum forward at top speed, which amounted to something short of a trot. Robbie was into the street before Ray realized it. Sudden light splashed on the paving, a shadow swung, an engine roared. The view streaked violently, flipped around, froze on a new, cockeyed angle facing the sky. The moon shone like a crooked and lidded eye in a field of pale stars. The sound was gone. Raymond pushed, toggled and twisted the rc to no effect. He slumped back in his chair and pressed his palms to his temples, pressed hard enough to feel painful pressure. The image on the monitor stuttered and flipped and froze again, this time on a square of pavement. He redoubled the pressure on his temples, but only for a few seconds; he *knew*, of course, that there couldn't be a connection. He leaned close to the screen, squinting through his glasses. He held his breath a moment, then wondered what would happen if he held it for a certain number count, say one hundred, which would be uncomfortable and perhaps even impossible for him to reach without breathing, would *that* encourage the restoration of his link to Robbie? Yes, yes: it was just as irrational as the pressure thing. So what?

Before he could even start the count, the image came alive again. He was looking out of the back of a vehicle where, evidently, someone had placed the robot dog. The man from the brambles and another man stood framed in the opening. The speaker crackled. In a burst of static one of the men said: *Poor guy*. And the other said: *He ran right in front of me*.

Struck by the vehicle, then. But was he found out? No one referred to a broken mechanical dog as "poor guy."

The hatch came down, but before it could slam shut the image froze again. Raymond waited but didn't bother with temple-pressure or breath-holding magic. After all, he was a scientist, an inventor—a rational man. Anyone would have to give him that.

"Ray, you need help."

So his wife had said, or the Tonya-thing imitating his wife. Raymond had looked up from his bowl of cornflakes.

"Do I?" he said.

"Please, Ray."

She was convincing. The real Tonya had done a fair amount of pleading and histrionic hand-wringing as well. Oh, they were good. Raymond had lowered his gaze back to the cornflakes. Only a few remained, milk-soggy, unappetizing. He moved them around with his spoon.

The Tonya-thing said, "Jack called again. They're worried about you at the project."

I'll bet, he'd thought. *Worried that I'm on to them. And they're correct to be worried.*

"Ray." It was turning on the crocodile tears. "I'm going to call your brother."

"Don't you do that." Raymond continued to stir his cornflakes. Something in his voice made the kitchen very quiet. He could hear the Tonya-thing breathing. "I don't want you to do that."

Now its breath hitched with suppressed sobs. It sounded *so much* like his Tonya. Raymond told himself not to look up, *begged* himself not to look up. The weeping continued.

Raymond looked up.

And his heart caved in a little. He could be wrong. What-might-be-Tonya saw the doubt in his eyes.

"Don't call Bill—yet," Raymond said. "Sit down first."

Tonya sat. Raymond worked his hands together, his palms sweaty. He removed his glasses and wiped the lenses on his shirttail.

"Listen," he said. "I know I have a history of . . . instability. I *know* that. But believe me, Tonya, believe me please, it has nothing whatsoever to do with what's happening now. And something *is* happening. Something dreadful."

"Samantha—"

"It isn't *about her*. Please just listen. Please."

She nodded, paying attention, encouraging him. And so he told her about the Mayovsky Accelerator experiments, about the rift they'd opened, the wound in the onion skin between universes. If you had enough money you could do anything—anything but raise the dead.

"This is the part that sounds crazy, that sounds, well, coincidental," he had said to Tonya. "Given my *history*, I mean. But coincidence isn't always meaningless, accidental. And just because somebody once displayed symptoms of paranoid delusional behavior, that doesn't mean that somebody couldn't be right, does it?"

Tonya shook her head, and in a very small voice said, "No."

"It doesn't mean *they* aren't here, for instance. You see what I'm saying?"

Tonya smiled one of her brave, brittle smiles, and that's when he had begun to retreat again. Retreat from the imitation Tonya.

"They—?" she said.

"Yes, yes. They. THEY. *Them*, if you prefer."

She flinched. He saw it, even though she tried not to show him.

Flinched.

"I'm sorry, Ray. I don't understand. What was coincidental?"

He sighed, dropped the spoon.

"Even if you were who you claim to be, you wouldn't believe me."

He threw his head back and stared at the ceiling. Time ticked by. The Tonya-thing touched the back of his hand, and he pulled away.

"Please don't touch me," he said. Then, still looking at the ceiling, he added: "I have no quantifiable data to prove anything. This is pure intuition. That's the beauty of it, at least from your perspective. There's no way to prove you've taken over. And pretty soon there won't be anyone to prove it *to*, anyway. You think I don't *know* that?"

* * *

Raymond came awake in the dark. The shelter lights automatically cycled off after an hour, if he didn't override the mechanism; it was an energy-conserving measure. He sat up abruptly, his heart thudding, a dream howling retreat down a black well in his mind. Groping out, his hand bumped the rc, and the monitor blinked out of sleep-mode. A moving image gathered. He was connected again! Robbie the Rover was prowling down a dark hallway, evidently on Natural Dog mode. Raymond activated the night vision. Open doorways appeared. It seemed to be an ordinary home. Another door suddenly opened at the end of the hallway, revealing a blaze of light and an emerging child in a nightgown. The girl, maybe nine years old, reached back and switched off the light. Robbie's night vision adjusted to the dramatic shift. The girl popped forward, green-ghostly, her eyes twin points. She was saying something, but Raymond couldn't hear her. The girl walked toward him, stooped over, reaching out.

She was petting him.

Her voice barely a whisper, she was saying: *Good boy, good boy.*

Raymond tilted Robbie's head back slightly. The girl's face was difficult to read by night vision. A young child around nine years old. Samantha's age.

Time to sleep, good dog.

The screen went blank.

Raymond squinted, wiggled the controller, listened intently. But audio and visual were both gone. Unconsciously, Raymond touched his hair, muttered: *Good boy.*

Raymond was dozing, and someone was knocking on the door. Gradually he opened his eyes. The knocking continued. His eyes opened wider. He jerked his head to the right, looking across the shelter. Of course he could see nothing, the lights having cycled off again. Raymond slapped the override button next to the bed, and a couple of dim panels stuttered on. There was nothing to see. And no one was knocking on the door; the sound had to be coming from Robbie the Rover's remote display.

Raymond rolled off the bed and approached the table.

The monitor remained blank. He turned his head. The speaker hissed white noise at him. Had he *dreamed* the knocking?

He opened a drawer in the work table and removed the big clasp knife. At the door he pressed his ear to the cool metal and listened but could hear nothing. That didn't tell him anything. The shelter was like a bank vault. There could have been a brass band performing on the other side of the door, and he wouldn't have heard it. For that matter, he would not have been able to hear any knocking.

Raymond chewed his lip, wiped his sweaty palm on his thigh. He folded open the knife, then cranked the door part way aside, knife ready. Stale air and the empty tunnel. He listened for a while, then cranked the door shut again.

"Be a good dog," Raymond said, back in his chair before the remote.

He wiggled the cable connection. The monitor blinked on, showing a very low angle on a carpeted floor and a blank wall. Robbie was in rest-mode. A rectangle of rosy morning light lay upon the wall and carpet. A shadow, something unidentifiable, quivered in the rectangle. Sunlight passing through a curtain? A glass of water on the sill? Raymond slumped in his chair and watched the monitor. He considered activating Robbie, but waited. Time passed. His breathing resumed a restful rhythm. His mind dwelt on the quiver of light in a meditative way, as if he were a child on the dreamy precipice of sleep. A girl's voice said: *Let's go for a walk, boy.*

Auto-activated by her voice, Robbie the Rover switched to Natural Dog mode and stood up. Raymond heard a chain jingle. Then they were walking. Raymond kept his hand off the controls. The girl walked a little ahead, pulling the chain. She passed through a door, and Raymond followed after her.

It was a gorgeous day.

Brilliant sunshine, a verdant expanse of lawn, leaves flickering in a summer breeze. Raymond's heart ached a little; he had been underground a long time. The girl led him to a park. There were other children and dogs. *Real* dogs, no doubt. Even if the alien replacements didn't recognize him for what he was, *they* would—the real dogs.

But they didn't.

Raymond sat tense before the rc, as another little girl approached them with a dog of her own, a fidgety toy poodle. The smaller dog barked its head off. Rover remained aloof, his programming instructing him to refrain from excessive barking, even at the cost of verisimilitude. Raymond took over control and made Robbie bark a few times in his deep retriever voice. The poodle trotted behind him to sniff his asshole. This was it. At least this was it if he didn't do something.

He resumed manual control of Robbie the Rover, swung the artificial dog around, and made him bark. The poodle barked back and even snapped at Robbie's face.

"Cosette, come here!" the other girl shouted, and she pulled the toy poodle away. Raymond immediately suppressed Robbie's barking.

"Uh oh," the girl with the toy poodle said. She had picked up "Cosette" and was holding the little dog in her right arm as she quickly bent forward, reaching for something on the ground. Then her hand came up fast and she appeared to pet Robbie. The simulacrum was getting a lot of love. Raymond felt obscurely jealous.

"Nice doggy," the girl said, holding Cosette close. The poodle sniffed at Robbie, her face up close to the one functioning lens.

"What's his name?" the young girl said to *Raymond's* young girl.

"We don't know," she said. "My dad sort of found him."

"Are you keeping him?"

"Yes."

"Why don't you call him Mobia?" the other girl said. At least it sounded like "Mobia." Raymond clicked his tongue.

"Maybe," Raymond's girl said.

"Maybe *not*," Raymond said.

"I think they're okay together now," the other girl said. "Want to let them play?"

"Sure."

Raymond closed his eyes. Even on Natural Dog mode Robbie wouldn't be able to convincingly play with a real dog. Raymond opened his eyes and reached forward, intending to flip on Natural Dog anyway, since there was nothing else to do. The image on the monitor was bouncing wildly. For a moment he thought it was another malfunction in the video feed. But then he realized it was bouncing because Robbie was *running*. The mechanical toy dog was chasing the real toy poodle, gamboling around the park, randomly changing directions. Impossible. The simulacrum *couldn't* do that stuff. And besides, Raymond hadn't touched the controller. He watched until the poodle got tired of running and the two of them settled down. Then Raymond tried to resume direct control. It didn't work. He swiveled the joystick, snapped the toggle back and forth between Natural and Direct, all to no avail. Cosette sniffed Robbie's asshole to her heart's content, and Robbie returned the gesture. Raymond rocked back in his chair. "What the hell?" he said

After that the simulacrum remained beyond Ray's control. All he could do was watch. Which he did—obsessively. He sat for hours in front of the rc monitor. He ate his meals there, napped there. Robbie—renamed Mobia by his adoptive family—enjoyed a completely integrated life, or simulation of a life. Besides the little girl the family consisted of two adults, the man who had rescued Robbie and his wife. They all had weird names that Raymond could never quite hear. The man's name sounded

April/May 2009

like *Gitzer*. The mother's name was *Natvizia*, or something. They both called the little girl by a name that sounded like *Spavitz*. Were they Romanian? Darker possibilities loomed. But whatever they were, they all doted on "Mobia." They petted him, played games with him, constantly told him what a good boy he was. At first Raymond was baffled. After a while his bafflement turned to envy. Mobia had a life; Raymond lived in a hole.

One day Raymond awakened from a nap and raised his face to a dead screen. His own haggard reflection stared back at him. He sat up in his creaky chair, his back stiff. He wiggled the cable connection on the back of the monitor, turned it on and off. Nothing helped. The screen remained blank.

The shelter felt smaller and lonelier than ever. Raymond played music to dispel the constant drone of the generator. Knowing depression would overcome him if he didn't stay active, he ran on the treadmill. It was hard to get started, but once he was jogging along he didn't want to stop. He ran until the sweat was pouring off his body and he could barely see from his salt-stinging eyes. He kept looking at the dark monitor, hoping it would come on. It didn't. He bargained with the Universe. If he could manage to run for an additional fifteen minutes the Universe would let the picture come back. After fifteen minutes, however, the monitor was still blank. Raymond extended the bargain to thirty minutes, then to an hour. He had already been on the treadmill for ninety minutes. He failed to make it to the end of the additional hour. His leg cramped, he stumbled and fell.

Clutching the twitching muscle in his calf, he began to cry. He dragged himself to the bed and lay there waiting for the pain to subside. Only the physical half of it did.

A girl was laughing. Raymond swam up out of churning dreams. A dog barked. He turned his head. Light poured from the monitor. Raymond rolled off the bed and stumbled over to the table, overwhelmed with relief.

The little girl, Spavitz or whatever her name was, knelt at the end of the hallway in the neat suburban-style home.

"Silly!" she said. "It came out again, didn't it."

She rolled something down the hardwood floor like a Lilliputian bowling ball. Red and brown and white, with a copper glint.

Robbie's eye.

Raymond stopped breathing. Robbie the Rover looked down at his own eye, then back up at the girl, who had come closer. "It's okay, Mobia. We'll just pop it back in. Unless you want to trade for a blue one." Spavitz hooked her index finger into the corner of her own eye—and *popped it out of the socket*.

Raymond made a strangling sound and shoved back from the table, almost overturning his chair. The girl held her blue eyeball up, comparing it to Robbie's brown one.

"No," Raymond said.

Spavitz pushed Robbie's eye into her own socket. The eye bulged, too big for the orbit, throwing off the symmetry of her face.

"Nope," she said. "Not gonna fit, boy."

Mobia barked.

Spavitz hooked the eyeball out and thumbed it into the dog's head, then replaced her blue one.

"There," she said. "That's all better." And then she got very close to Robbie's good lens and spoke directly into it. "It's really all better now, Raymond."

Raymond gasped.

"You can come out now," the girl said.

Raymond shook his head. His mouth had gone dry.

"We know you're there," Spavitz said. "You can be one of us, like Mobia."

Raymond hit a button and the screen went black. He grabbed the power cord, yanked it out of the rc unit and flung it down like a dead snake.

Raymond sat on the edge of his bed, rubbing his eyes. He reached for the cup of cold tea he'd left on the floor. When? He'd lost track of time, grown gaunt. Many days had passed since he killed the rc unit. His mind alternated between irrational frenzy and dull resignation. Resigned to *what*, exactly, he couldn't have said. A half-eaten fiber biscuit lay on the bed next to his pillow. He picked it up and took a listless bite.

At the work table he slumped in his chair, facing the blank monitor.

"I know you're not real," he said. "There's no Spavitz, no Mobia, no Gitzer. No Donner or Blitzen or Rudolf, either, for that matter."

He bit into the stale biscuit, tore a hunk off, and chewed doggedly. His own haggard reflection watched him.

"I *know* you're not real," he said, spitting fragments of biscuit.

The cold light from a single panel dimmed, then brightened. Raymond looked around the confining shelter, his mouth open and half full of chewed biscuit. When the generator finally died he would be entombed in darkness with nothing but the sound of his own breathing. The shelter was vented to the surface, so there was no danger of suffocation, at least.

But to live in constant darkness . . .

Raymond washed down the biscuit with the remains of his tea, then bent over and picked up the power cord and plugged it back into the remote control. His fingers hovered over the On switch. He had to have one more look.

Raymond pushed the On button.

An image gathered. Warm afternoon sunlight quivered briefly on a distant wall, then the generator quit, stranding Raymond in the dark.

Raymond crawled through the narrow tunnel until he emerged blinking into sunlight like some lost and blinded thing.

A vehicle flashed by on the highway.

Raymond stood up in the prickly brambles and started to walk. When the rift opened *they* blended into the human population, made it stronger than it had ever before been. Perhaps it wasn't an invasion at all, but a miraculous relationship. That was the meaning of the warping funnel that killed Samantha. Her death was an accident in the service of a greater good; it was meaningful. And he, Raymond, must already be one of them. Otherwise how could he possibly have endured?

He stood at the edge of the highway and thought about Spavitz and her family in the sunny little house. They were more than human. Kinder, more durable, safer. From the park came the sound of children laughing and shouting. As yet no one had seen him; there was time to go back. He slipped the clasp knife out and folded it open. Was he one of them or not? He pulled up his shirt and placed the edge of the blade against his skin. After a moment he drew the blade across. What he saw astonished him. ○