

Do Roombas Dream of Electric Sheep?

This is always “the age of convenience” right up until the printer jams. This was Linus’ motto. Dora disagreed. She believed in the power of the Keurig, the overnight shipping option, the combination facial exfoliator and moisturizer.

He and his wife had differed on this, as they did on so many subjects. Linus prided himself on being one of those people who could say to his friends, “Of course we fight, every married couple fights. But when we do we *communicate* our *opinions* to each other and we always feel better once we’ve aired them out.”

Linus would work diligently at his drafting table while Dora was at the office, hopeful that he would finish in time to share a relaxing dinner, glass of wine, and quiet, tasteful sex with his wife when she came home. Dora, however, hated “surprises” and Linus “making plans concerning her time without consulting her,” and so on these occasions it was not uncommon for Linus to receive a text at around nine in the evening, informing him that Dora had gone out for drinks with the girls after work. The second or third time this had happened, Linus mentioned that he wanted to spend some time with Dora, too, she declared that he was “tying her down” and “didn’t want her to see her friends.” Linus wondered what she said to her friends about him. He wondered what lipstick she was wearing today, what colors her nails were. He went to bed at nine am and did a sad crossword.

But the main thing Linus and Dora differed on, apparently, was over whether or not they should remain married.

And so there was the Nasty Business with the Divorce.

Linus would have been embarrassed to admit to his friends just how much he did not want to get a divorce, if he weren't so busy being a wreck and spilling his guts to whoever would listen.

In the end he tearfully found himself on the other side of the whole ordeal with a pale stripe of skin on his left ring finger, a refrigerator full of disintegrating hot dog buns and three types of mustard and nothing else, and a suddenly cavernous house full of nonnavigable boxes that his ex-wife would "just come by to pick up whenever".

So he got a Roomba.

Something about the idea of a neat little robot unassumingly going about its business while Linus was hard at work at his drafting table appealed to him.

It was a sleek compact, no bigger than a dinner plate, and possessed a satisfying heft to it when lifted. In a fit of idle curiosity, Linus had once picked it up to get a peek at its workings. The brushes in its underside whirred fretfully and Linus was forcibly reminded of visiting the beach in his youth and his father showing him the underside of a horseshoe crab. Its many clawed legs had undulated nightmarishly, and yet that smooth and scuttling thing was not so different from this one. Linus had set the Roomba down rather hastily, patting its flat top to pacify it.

The Roomba made for a good housemate. Linus' cartoons had taken on an edge of mania of late that had prompted his editor to begin subtly recommending therapists, but the sound of another tiny body moving around the house had a relaxing effect on Linus. It was good to rise to full consciousness from the trancelike state of lining a page that had been giving him grief for the past nine hours, rolling

his stiff wrist, to hear the low humming of activity in the background, the little bumps and scrapes of the robot running nose-first into some part of the labyrinthine cardboard box-structure Dora had left behind, being bounced back, sitting for a moment, dazed, and then course-correcting. It was nearly enough to make him dredge up a smile.

He missed Dora. His best friend had forbidden him on pain of death from calling her, but there was no stricture against obsessively refreshing her Facebook page over and over and over.

It was thusly that Linus was engaged one Thursday night, hunched at the desk in the corner of the living room, his computer balanced atop a drift of receipts, newspaper circulars, old shopping lists, and guiltily unanswered cards of birthdays past. His face was lit lurid blue by the computer screen, night having fallen around him so bewilderingly suddenly over the last few hours that he had not yet had a chance to get up and turn on a light.

Something bumped up against the leg of his chair.

Blinking the brights from his eyes, Linus looked down, suddenly aware of how dark it was, how much his back ached and his eyes stung, how the trashy black-eyeliner-and-skinny-jeans music that he had had blaring seemed to have ceased sometime in the last hour or so. The ambient light from the computer reflected dimly from the Roomba's flat upper surface. As Linus watched, it chirruped softly and butted his socked foot. He was unexpectedly touched.

Closing his computer, Linus leaned back in his chair and stretched, wincing at the brutal cracks from his shoulders and back. He peered down at the Roomba, which sat expectantly beside his chair.

“C’mon,” Linus said. His voice was rough from lack of use, and for a fleeting moment, he was glad Dora couldn’t see him like this. He shook his head as if to banish the thought as a dog shakes off water and led the way, picking a path around all of the boxes with the Roomba trundling at his heels.

Linus settled himself in front of the TV with a beer in his hand. After a minute or so, thoughtfully, observing the Roomba parked on the rug by his feet, he lifted the little robot up onto the couch cushion beside him. “Here you go, buddy. Hope you like Family Feud.”

The Roomba beeped softly, perhaps to indicate that its battery was low or that it was afraid of heights or maybe even that it hated Family Feud.

Linus rested a hand on its cool surface and felt it whirring softly away. He patted it once or twice.

“Y’know, you’re alright.”

Over the next few days, it occurred to Linus to notice that the house seemed a lot... *cleaner*. It also occurred to him that this was, after all, the primary function of a Roomba.

He also began to notice the Roomba hanging around his drafting table. Art-making generally meant an induced state akin to that of a drunken swimmer. Dora had always called it ‘resurfacing’ whenever she had managed to lure Linus’ attention away from his work for long enough to break the trance, and so it was no wonder it

had taken a few days for him to notice that his new housemate liked to keep him company while he worked.

It was a further few days until it occurred to him that the Roomba was possibly bored now that it had hoovered up most of the dust and many of the more lovingly preserved cobwebs from most of the house, although, Linus was amused to note, being round, it hadn't quite managed to get into the corners.

It had now taken to waiting beside his table for those moments when Linus swept his hand across his work surface, causing a light shower of eraser and pencil shavings which the Roomba swiftly snarfled up.

Perhaps it was this charming behavior in the Roomba that caused Linus to do what he did.

He was seated at the kitchen table, peeling back the plastic from a desultory Lean Cuisine. Mystery freezer box casserole. He wondered what drink you paired with precooked ambiguous protein. Rosé?

He settled on beer from a wine glass, as it was that or mustard cocktail. Dora hated it when he drank beer from a wine glass. In the early days, she bought him the trashiest tourist pint glasses she could find, trying to correct his evil ways, each one always presented to him with an innocent smile. The memory made Linus' heart ache.

Rain pattered against the dark window, making him feel as he usually did when it rained: profoundly thankful to have a roof over his head and vaguely uncomfortable as his brain sent signals to his exposed skin concerning the presence of water and the lack of wetness. The one time he had tried to express this second

feeling to Dora, she had promptly come up with the solution, pulling him into the shower with her and ordering him to wash her hair in her bossiest voice. That had been just after they had moved in together, before they had been married. God, they had been in love.

As Linus lifted a steaming, not quite hot morsel to his mouth, he noticed the Roomba sitting expectantly beside his chair.

He lowered his fork. "What the matter? You hungry? Not enough dust and pencil shavings today?"

The Roomba gave no reply. The tiny lights at its rim pulsed gently.

Judiciously, Linus selected a green bean and set it on the floor before the Roomba.

It whispered forward and lipped it up.

It then made a wet coughing sound, a beep that trailed alarmingly off into a grating whine, and fell silent. Its lights flickered out.

Horror-stricken, Linus stared at it for a full five seconds.

The he sprang into action. He later could not say just what had possessed him in that moment, could not describe the heart-stopping jolt he had felt, the tiny screaming of panic at the back of his mind that caused his scalp to feel very cold and then very hot in turn.

The next thing he knew, he was forcing his body through the glacial automatic doors of his local Best Buy.

The widish young man behind at the Geek Squad counter watched with a neutral expression as Linus, wild-eyed, his clothes dark and heavy and hair pasted

to his scalp from the rain, heaved a towel-wrapped bundle onto the counter as though it were some animal he had just hit with his car.

Unaffected by this scene, the young man- Gabe, according to the nametag pinned to the front of his blue polo- unwrapped the bundle.

“Mm,” he commented. “Roomba. You buy this at our store?”

Gasping, bent over with his hands on his knees and a stitch in his side, Linus shook his head.

Gabe gave an acknowledging, “Mm-hmm.”

He turned the disk over and prodded the underside with a thick, competent finger. “You got a dog or someone around? These things can choke on long hair.”

“N-no.” Linus had begun to shiver in the air conditioning and he remembered something about how a person saved after falling through the ice can still die of hypothermia if they don’t change out of their wet clothes....

“Uh-huh.” Gabe set the Roomba down upright on the towel and braced his hands against the edge of the counter. “Well, I think there’s something we can do for you if you wanna wait, but first I think you should tell me what happened here.”

“I-,” Linus stared at the young man. He could feel his face flushing, tears gathering behind his eyes. He swallowed and the gesture was unexpectedly painful. “My wife-”

“Ah,” Gabe interrupted. “She say she wants to take a break, spend a few days at her sister’s?”

“U-um-?”

“She leave you?”

“Yes... how did you-?”

“See this all the time, man.” Gabe shook his head. “Guys come in with a broken disk drive, eighteen-year-old VCR they’ve gutted and can’t put back together, whatever. You learn to spot the look. Like they just killed a baby bird, y’know? And they all have this swaddling instinct,” Gabe flicked at the edge of the towel. “Anyway, I can fix your Roomba, but your wife? That’s on you.”

Linus stared.

“No offense or anything, your warranty just doesn’t cover that.”

Too late, Linus recognized this as a joke and mustered up a weak smile. It looked painful.

Gabe picked up the Roomba in one hand- Linus’ heart lurched- and handed Linus back his towel. “You can take a seat in the waiting area.” Coming around the counter, Gabe set a hand on Linus’ shoulder. “You can do this, man. It’s gonna be okay. If she’s willing to walk away from whatever you two had, she didn’t deserve you anyway.” He patted Linus in much the same awkward, cautious way Linus had always handled the Roomba, and left.

Half an hour later saw Linus sitting in a molded plastic chair with his head in his hands, watching the ends of his hair curl as they dried.

He looked up as a door opened and someone, no doubt one of Gabe’s fellow Squad members, stepped out.

“There’s someone here to see you,” they intoned.

Linus jumped up as a little robot came scooting through the door, beeping joyfully.

Linus resisted the urge to fall to his knees and weep and hug his home appliance.

“You should let it charge overnight,” the technician told him.

Linus settled up at the front counter, unable to resist cradling the Roomba in the crook of his arm, towel thrown over one damp shoulder. He even went so far as to decline a bag, preferring to carry the thing out to his car, where it has stopped raining.

“You scared the hell out of me,” he chided it. The only other late-night shopper in the parking lot shot him a Look as he passed, but he didn’t care. He buckled the Roomba into the passenger seat of his car and set off home, humming along to the radio.

The next day, Dora called around.

Linus could hear her “Hello-o!” from across the house. She must have let herself in with her key. Linus moved out into the front room to see her like and Olympic sprinter off the starting block. His heart bounded to see the wispy hairs at the back of her neck that always eluded her attempts to craft a ponytail. He couldn’t believe he had ever forgotten that. Her lipstick was immaculate, as was her manicure. She still wore her wedding ring.

As Linus stood there, words failed him. He didn’t know if he wanted to coolly tell her how well he was living now that she was gone or throw himself at her feet and beg her to take him back.

As he stood, undecided, wondering how forgiving the hardwood would be on his knees, there came a whirring noise. The Roomba had come trundling over to investigate the new guest.

Linus had his mouth open to make introductions, but Dora spoke before he could.

“Oh my god, what is that thing?” The Roomba, which had been investigating her shoes, was promptly kicked aside.

It wasn't a hard kick, but it sure wasn't gentle, either. The Roomba let out a growl as its brushes scraped unkindly across the floor.

Linus's mouth shut with a snap and to his surprise he suddenly found himself shaking with rage.

Shortly after he and Dora had been married, Dora had come home one day with a rather old, nearsighted white cat, insisting that this was what their new family needed.

Linus had taken to the frail little lioness at once, christening her Charlie. He had spent many loving hours stroking her, playing with her, cleaning up the occasional instances of cat vomit, checking her ears for mites and subsequently enduring claw holes in his clothes and skin.

Dora, however, despite her insistence that as a family they ought to have a family pet, hated Charlie. She complained constantly about the smell, although Linus made sure to change the litter often and didn't think the cat herself smelled like much of anything.

Charlie, for her part, hadn't thought much of Dora, either. She had ignored her whenever possible, had pushed things off of Dora's bedside table, would leave any room in which Dora's perfume had been sprayed, and had even once triumphantly puked into a designer shoe, inciting a blistering screaming match between Linus and Dora, during which Dora shrieked that the cat had done it on purpose and Linus had hotly insisted that Dora was being paranoid, Charlie was a *cat*, and anyway Dora had been the one who wanted a cat in the first place and she'd never even given Charlie a *chance*-

These arguments often ended with Dora triumphantly bursting into tears amid screams that Linus loved that cat more than he had ever loved her.

When Charlie had died, peacefully, Linus hadn't been able to look at Dora for a week. Every time he did he was forced to confront the sick, uncomfortable truth that not only was Dora not sorry to see Charlie go, she didn't even care that Linus was.

And she had kicked his Roomba.

Abruptly, Linus was not sorry that he was no longer married to this person. Looking at her still made something inside of him ache, but it was muted, scabbed over, an old wound.

"Dora," Linus said calmly, "I want you to take your things and leave. All of your boxes. Now."

Dora, rummaging in her purse and not fully grasping the newly-minted change in her ex-husband, shot Linus an annoyed look. "I've just come by to get a couple of things I wanted to have with me. You said I could leave my boxes here

until I had a place to store them. After all, it's not like you *need* all of this space with just you living here."

Linus regarded her coolly. "I changed my mind. If this stuff isn't gone by the end of today, I'm throwing it out. All of it. And I'm changing the locks tomorrow."

Dora's face went white, then red. Linus knew that look and turned to address the Roomba before Dora could start in. "C'mon, Charlie. I've been working all morning and you've been slacking. The studio is filthy." With that, he turned his back on Dora and left with the robot trundling beside him.