

The Echo of a Will

Marie Vibbert

Zeke came home to find wires dangling from the ceiling over the dining table. His light-fixture repair, abandoned mid-process. It hadn't seemed important earlier, but now he couldn't bear it. It was like the heart was ripped out of the duplex.

Theory of consciousness: I am conscious because I change my environment.

"The cat is on the kitchen counter," Chad's voice announced, bemused.

Zeke ignored it. It wasn't Chad but his programmed chatbot. It came on automatically when Chad wasn't home.

Zeke flicked on the wall screen and started searching for cheap light fixtures. They'd had such a nice chandelier. Chad had found it in that antique shop on 185th, but now . . . Zeke picked the simplest one that fit the size of the space.

"You're not getting that," Chad's voice said.

Zeke closed his eyes to count to ten. He made it to three. "You're not him." Chad was lying in Lakeview Hospital, the side of his head thickly swaddled and yet somehow still dented in.

"Well, I hate it. What happened to the Tiffany?"

"It wasn't really a Tiffany, and it broke. I . . . I'm talking to a bot."

"Yeeees," the bot said, teasingly. "I'm programmed to talk to you so you don't get lonely, Cuddle-bear. When am I expected back? I've got over four hundred unanswered messages."

Zeke considered getting a marbled dish-shaped light, but no . . . better to get the plainest. Anything else would feel more than a placeholder. Didn't the bot see the bills? Couldn't it connect the dots?

The bot said, "At least get the brushed chrome. It'll match the curtain rods. Also, Diamond is still on the counter. You let her push you around. That's my job."

Zeke selected the brushed chrome finish. Theory of consciousness: I am conscious because I make decisions. The chat bot wasn't conscious. It wasn't Chad, but it was close enough to hurt. How much worse were these bots in the hands of abusive partners? Imagine a voice demanding, watching all the time. Were there any kind of safety precautions against that? Could you program your chatbot to gaslight?

Zeke shuddered. It was just a bot. "I don't have to listen to you."

"No, but you know when I'm right." The warm hint of humor was cruel.

Theory of consciousness: Volition. Will. It wasn't something you trained a machine to do. "It's

time to turn you off.”

“Don’t do that! I need to stay on whenever Chad is away, so you don’t buy ugly lamps. Is there a reason you’re letting the cat stay on the counter all night?”

Zeke selected the slower, cheap shipping and went into the kitchen. He’d eat and then unplug the bot’s base. Diamond looked up guiltily from the side of the sink, her chin stretched over the edge of a frying pan full of bacon grease. There were a lot of dirty dishes. Cooking and the kitchen were always Chad’s domain. Zeke had let everything go. Too much time at the hospital.

Chad had this smile when he cooked, like he’d just tricked Titania into loving a donkey. Clever fingers, mincing ginger or painting gold leaf on a gingersnap. He’d have read some article or seen some show and dinner would be a “presentation” created with all the joy of a mad scientist’s scheme. What was it like, to stop thinking, to stop being yourself? Would Chad hate Zeke for coming home, for having given up the argument? He shouldn’t have let Chad’s sister have the last word, but Charlene was hurting, too. Arguing felt mean. Leaving felt cowardly.

Zeke lifted Diamond, wanting to cuddle her, but she wriggled through his grasp and ran straight to her bowl, which she pointedly looked at, then back at him, mewing indignantly.

The cat food bag was nearly empty. Zeke checked the fridge in hopes of finding milk to give her and found two beers, moldy tomatoes, and a container of what had once been Chad’s famous cucumber salad, gone to grey liquid. “Oh, baby. How long have you been gone?”

Unwanted, the answer, “My last login was twenty-three days ago.”

He should tell the bot. Adjust settings for coma. How unfair this was! The bot should be able to figure it out on its own. Zeke’s hands dropped, empty and heavy at his sides. A bot couldn’t access medical records. That was a privacy violation. Another definition of what makes a man: he is that which can access his privacy data. “Did Chad . . . did he leave any instructions in case . . .”

Diamond sniffed his fingertips.

“Yes,” the bot said, slow like Chad when he realized it was time to stop joking. “I left instructions in all eventualities. Am I all right?”

“No. He’s not. He’s not . . . he’s not coming home.”

“Have I died?” It sounded exactly like Chad talking through a difficult problem.

Zeke tried twice to say “No,” and ended up saying, “What if he has?”

“I’ll close my accounts and password lock everything to you. Then I’ll turn myself off. If you’re sure.”

Sensible. Matter-of-fact things to do.

Diamond head-butted his fingers. Zeke rubbed the little black spot between her ears. “I’m not sure.”

“I can’t do it without clear approval,” Chad-bot said. “But it’s all here for you when you’re ready.”

Zeke heated a can of beans while Diamond ate the last of the cat food. He’d get groceries tomorrow, on the way home from the hospital. There was still a little credit left on the card. He wasn’t sure how he’d survive next month, though, with or without a dining room light.

“You have a lot of unanswered messages, too,” the bot said.

“Send them to the kitchen tablet.”

The beans went cold in Zeke’s mouth as he flicked through a dozen emails from Chad’s church friends with subjects like “Fwd: Fwd: Fwd: Fwd: Believe in Miracles!!!”

Did they know he’d spent hours arguing against exactly that type of thinking?

If it had been Zeke who had fallen from that roof, Chad would be in the church, lighting candles and praying. Maybe he hadn’t made a living will on purpose. He believed in miracles.

Zeke couldn’t believe in miracles. He tried. He’d seen the X-rays, looked up the words the doctors said. Where there had been something, there was now nothing. He couldn’t believe that science was wrong, not even just this once.

Then he saw a message from Chad in his inbox.

He believed in miracles for two seconds. It was a social media alert, unthinking in its cruelty:

You haven't visited Chad's channel this month! Catch up on all his latest posts!

The traces people left these days. Zeke deleted the notice, thinking how ad bots were even now waiting to see Chad's device ID, to tell him about some new kitchen gadget. They were trace fossils, like a sock left on the couch or the cucumber salad slowly achieving sentience. They were also more than that. These things lived. Anticipated. Guessed. Checking in, checking up. Waiting, still.

"You left all these things behind you, but you didn't leave a damn living will."

The bot responded. "Huh. That doesn't sound like me."

Zeke remembered some philosopher saying that even with free will, a person's decision would be dictated by circumstance. Schopenhauer? He remembered stumbling over the spelling in Philosophy 101. He remembered thinking Philosophy 101 could give answers to life's problems.

"It's my fault." Zeke paced. He had to practice talking about this. "I always trusted him to do all the paperwork. Co-ownership for the house and car, the retirement plan . . . he made sure we'd inherit from each other in case of . . . that we'd inherit from each other. How could he miss this?"

After a silence, the bot said, "Hey, I'm not Superman."

Which made Zeke think of the deacon.

The rain had frozen, and the street gleamed, reflecting the ambulance lights, painfully bright while Zeke stood with Deacon Jenny next to the stone steps. He didn't remember getting the call, driving there, parking.

"I told him he's not Superman," she kept repeating, like it would undo Chad's fall. "I said it could wait; we'd call a roofer." Chad had thought he could kick an ice dam from the rain gutter. Twenty-three days ago? It had snowed again and melted. The church roof, presumably, still leaked.

Zeke was the one who fixed things. Usually.

Chad didn't have to be Superman. Zeke felt like he was still standing outside the church, the air cold and damp, still waiting to find out what was going on among the raincoated EMTs. Stuck in limbo, with Chad gone, but not gone. He wished he had the simple clarity of Chad's sister, who saw a heartbeat and therefore life, like all Chad ever was could be expressed in the autonomic squeeze of muscle.

Did it matter that Chad would never know he'd become a financial burden? That he didn't know he was being denied the heaven he believed in?

Zeke went upstairs. Chad's bot sat in a little speaker on the bedside table. Or rather it was in the network, but the little speaker lit up when it talked, so Zeke thought of it as the bot's home. He sat on the bed and looked at it, his hands in his lap. "You're designed to say what Chad would want to say."

"More or less," the bot flickered. "I'm trained with thousands of hours of past statements to model conversation, and that includes decisions. There's a teeny chance I'm wrong about the lamp, but I doubt it."

Zeke chewed on the end of his moustache, a bad habit. He needed a trim. He looked at a picture on the wall opposite. Him and Chad at Disneyworld, matching beards and mouse ears. Chad had that smile. Like he'd just put a ton of pop rocks in the magic fountain.

"What would Chad want to do if he was . . ." It was so hard to say out loud. "Chad . . . would he want to stay alive on life support, never to wake up? If his mind was gone. I mean, would he want to die naturally?"

"Oh damn," the bot said, half joking, half horrified. "Yes, definitely, unplug me. I mean him. Hell, both of us."

Chad would say that. But would he say it when the decision was real? "Your husband will never regain consciousness," the doctor had said. Never regain decision-making. All Chad had were the decisions he'd made in the past, the consequences of them. Was Schopenhauer right, or was will something you could track forward in time?

Zeke laid down, hands on his stomach. He imagined himself as a cartoon patient with a cartoon electronic therapist. "There was a study . . . I remember it making the news. People's

minds made decisions before they were aware of them. Like you could see the synapse light up to choose option B, and the person would swear they hadn't thought of it yet."

"I can send the paper 'Unconscious Decisions and the Brain' to your tablet, but I don't think that's what you're asking for, is it?"

Zeke studied the bot's beige cylinder. "Can you find any record of Chad saying he wouldn't want to stay on life support?"

"Finding past references is what I'm best at." It sounded relieved. "I'll compile a list and put it in your email inbox, okay?"

"Thanks," Zeke said.

"I don't know if a statement, even in writing, will suffice to take the place of a living will," the bot added.

"I know. It feels better, though, knowing you're working on it."

"Any time, Cuddle-bear. You should get some rest."

Tomorrow he'd take the evidence to Charlene and start the fight again. Diamond jumped on the bed next to him, walked in a circle around Chad's side of the bed, like she was looking for him, then flopped down next to Zeke's hand. Her little chin nudged his fingertips, and she stretched the soft underside of her jaw over his hand so he could scratch her throat.

"You push me around, cat," Zeke tutted, and felt loved. "So do you, bot, but I'll keep you."

"And the lamp?"

Zeke felt something unknot in this chest. "Don't push it," he joked. Theory of consciousness: whatever works for right now. "Promise me you'll never change, Chad-bot."

"Only within design specifications," the bot responded, and that was good enough.

Marie Vibbert has sold over 80 short stories and been translated into four languages. Her first novel, Galactic Hellcats, made the long list for the BSEA in 2021 and her latest novel, The Gods Awoke, came out in 2022. By day she is a computer programmer in Cleveland, Ohio.