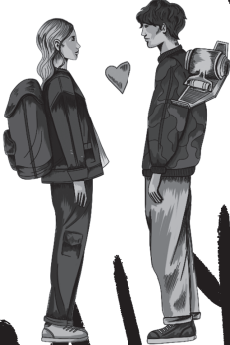


MY LOVE LIFE AND APOCALYPSE

A black and white illustration of two people, a woman on the left and a man on the right, both wearing backpacks and looking at each other. A small heart is positioned between them. The illustration is centered within the large, stylized text of the title.

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WELLIVER

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*For my mum and dad
Kathy and Leon Welliver
For believing I could do it even when I didn't*



Echo

AuroraBIO 3 Release 4.0

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BI03 version 17.2

Gateway Solo 9550

System ID = TeenSynth0135

Build Time: 09/10/2179 09:09:52

CPU = Synth Mobile Quantum® III Processor -

M 1066 GHz

1024 TB Positronic Brain RAM Passed

512 TB Human Biological System RAM Passed

2048 TB Memory RAM CATASTROPHIC FAILURE -

unable to run
4096 TB E-Mote RAM CATASTROPHIC FAILURE -
unable to run
512 TB HUMANKIND™ RAM Partially Enabled -
unable to update

System BIOS enabled
Video BIOS enabled
Sensory BIOS enabled
UMB Upper limit segment address: ERROR 404

[SELECT] to enter BIOS Setup
[SELECT] to boot up limited system with
CATASTROPHIC FAILURES

I opened my eyes slowly, the dying light of the day just enough to overload my optical sensors. The first thing I saw was the copy of *Coding for Dummies*, left open at the page I had stopped on. I was crashed-out on the floor of the library again.

God, what was I doing with my life?

I said God, but I didn't believe in him. I mean, of course I had a creator – the same as all synths did. We were property of Aurora Technologies.

Which, like the rest of the world, was . . . well . . . gone.

'Ouch.' I pulled my hand in defensively as a librarian

HUMANKIND™ synth stood on it.

‘Apologies, Mr Echo Zero-One-Three-Five,’ it said. It stepped over me as it spoke, focused on shifting its pile of books to the other side of the library. I watched as it moved, as straight-backed and graceful as a supermodel. Once, it would have identified as a male, like I did. From its faded hoodie to its pockmarked skin, it screamed Teen-Synth™. Once, it would have had a personality and feelings, like me, before it was reprogrammed like all the others.

‘Doofus,’ I muttered.

I jumped to my feet and picked up *Coding for Dummies* off the floor, hurling it as hard as I could at the HUMANKIND. I caught it right on the crown of its head and it fell to the ground like a sack of potatoes, taking the pile of books with it and scattering them all over the shiny parquet floor. The sound was deafening, alerting every bot in the area to the mess.

The cleaning bots came first. No human form to slow them down – because humans never did make small talk with the cleaners – they rolled into action on their tiny wheels from their hidden crevices in the walls, like mice. Their sleek, podlike structures unfurled into an array of metal arms and brooms and scoops as they arrived at the fallen HUMANKIND. They set about their business, which was to pick up the fallen books and check for any

spills from the stricken synth's body. Not in case he was hurt, but in case anything damaged the pristine floor.

It was the job of the Paramedibots™ to see if I had damaged the HUMANKIND. The medibots rose up from the corners of the room, where they each had been sleeping in their dormant mode of a large brass box with a first aid kit glued to the top. They folded upwards into almost human form, faceless, bipedal dudes that stood thirty centimetres taller than me.

'Can I help you, sir?' The tinny speaker that made up the medibot's face spoke, a sentiment delivered in such a monotone that it was a wonder the programmer had bothered at all.

'I am undamaged. Apologies for any inconvenience caused,' the HUMANKIND bot replied as it finally stirred, after presumably running diagnostics for the last few seconds.

I didn't even feel bad. It was impossible to hurt something that wasn't conscious in any way, either emotionally or physically.

It stood up, retrieved the books the cleaning bots hadn't got to yet, and continued on its way to the book depository. It wouldn't even have a job if it weren't for me coming in every day. I liked to call it Gort, although it had obviously never seen the cult classic, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. Shame.

Sometimes I wished I was as clueless as Gort. Life without an E-Mote chip was probably a lot simpler.

Three years had passed since my systems had first detected the E-Mote chip, lodged into my positronic brain so carelessly, like a tumour from the early twenty-first century. I wished I could remember who put it there, but the total noob that did the deed managed to break my memory bank, so I couldn't remember a thing from before I woke up. So now I was stuck, too human to access my robot functions, too robot to age out of puberty. Great.

Jeez, Echo, take a chill pill. I couldn't angst too much about the past or my short-term RAM might fill up and explode. Or something. I should be able to do basic coding on myself, but I couldn't remember that either. There were no humans left to fix it for me.

And that's a real bummer.

I left the bots to their devices – every pun intended – and headed down the steps outside the library.

For the end of the world, Earth was looking pretty damn good. I mean yeah, maybe most of the concrete was cracked open with weeds, and the football stadium was now unusable because there were so many trees growing there, but on the whole the city didn't look too shabby. The important stuff was still all right.

‘Looking good, Robocop.’ I clicked my fingers at a passing bot with the faded blue paint of the city police badge painted across its chest piece. Its voice box had broken long ago, but it still saluted at me as it passed.

I couldn’t remember what it had all looked like before, but I had seen videos in the library archives. The same skyscrapers still stood in the middle distance, where the financial district used to be housed. The cars that littered the streets were kept clean and free of dust from the storms. There wasn’t even any trash, what with no humans to make it. The plastic hadn’t had a chance to biodegrade, not yet. Mostly, the bots were just shoving anything they found on top of the mountains of landfill outside the city limits.

The restoration bots may have run out of material for the roads, but they did a good job of cutting back the climbing ivy that sometimes threatened the foundations of the houses. There was just no substitute for the footfall of eight billion people, hence the concrete. I jumped across the cracked paving stones like I was a kid playing hopscotch. But, as usual, it did nothing to ease my mood. Someone once told me that if I stood on a crack, I would break my mother’s back. I couldn’t remember who it was. I couldn’t even remember who my mother was, but I had to have some kind of parental. I was a TeenSynth, after all.

Most of the outdoor bots didn’t use the walkways. They

were built to hover using magnets, an easier way to empty the bins and make it up a set of steep steps. They easily swung out of my way in mid-air as I hopped down the street. They didn't even talk, they were so basic. Their one function was to keep back nature so the cities would be ready for the humans again one day. Which was ironic because, and I'm just saying, that's how we ended up in this mess in the first place. But as long as the humans are safe, I guess.

If, you know, I could remember where we left them.

It's not like *nobody* knew where the humans were. The HUMANKIND bots were literally invented to keep them safe, and wake them when the world was deemed 'habitable' again. I had tried asking the bots, but they always answered me with that bogus robotic beeping sound: *access denied*. If I could get my E-Mote chip out, and could sort out the HUMANKIND programming mess that was wedged into my head, maybe I could remember too. But that was the problem when you did things in a hurry. The TeenSynths were developed over a really long time, to compensate, I guess, for the rise in infertility. There just wasn't time to finish the HUMANKIND programme before everything went to shit.

I stopped outside a shop with a flashing neon sign, *FreshFoods*, my stomach growling. I hadn't eaten since before I started my failed diagnostics attempt, and it had

taken several hours to reboot my quantum core.

When I walked into the store I triggered the motion-sensor lights, which in turn flickered down each aisle until the place was fully lit. I also managed to trigger the annoying music system, which started to blast out royalty-free jazz interspersed with shop announcements.

‘Try FreshFood’s home-grown cultured no-meat burgers. So good, you’ll accuse us of murder! Available in aisle three.’

I rolled my eyes as I moved on to aisle four. Aisles one to three used to house the fresh produce, but the cleaning bots had long since cleared out anything rotten. The only stuff left was in jars and tins; dried fruits in packets and sugary sweets too artificial to rot. I browsed the shelf until I came to the section I wanted and pulled off three tins of baked beans and a jar of red cabbage. And a bag of strawberry laces for, y’know, energy.

Almost as quickly as I removed the tins, the row moved forwards, pushed by some invisible force, like a giant vending machine. The shelf filled in the missing beans with more from behind, and it ended up looking as full as when I arrived. I went down to the basement once, to see how many tins I had before I starved to death, and a whole day passed before I even reached the end of the first conveyor belt of glass jars and cans. That was why I stuck to the city: 1,107 days later and I still hadn’t eaten this metropolis out of baked beans.

‘Hey, Deidre,’ I said, stepping up to the vacant self-checkout. The till lit up and the familiar digital face of the young, blonde register girl filled the screen. She was hot for a bunch of pixels.

‘Welcome to FreshFoods Superstores,’ Deidre beamed.

‘Oh, you know, so-so,’ I replied. Deidre was only programmed to run through a set script, but in my head, we always had lots to say. ‘How’s it going with, what’s his name, Drew?’

‘Please place your items in the scanning area,’ Deidre said. I did what I was told. She smiled again.

‘Oh yeah, sorry, Dwayne,’ I said. I leant on the top of her screen in a way I hoped looked sexy, in control. ‘And he did what now? Deidre, you deserve better, girl.’

‘That will be four hundred and fifty-five credits. Please pay by following the on-screen pin-pad instructions.’

‘Well, you know you always have my number. You can call . . . anytime.’ I whispered the last part and got out my wallet. Deidre froze, waiting for me to pay before issuing the next instruction. I pulled out a card labelled ‘MRS B E SMITH’ and tapped it to the pad.

‘Insufficient funds,’ Deidre said, still smiling. I sighed and tossed the card over my shoulder.

‘Come on, bae. Don’t be like that,’ I said, tapping the next card in my wallet. This time, the transaction went through. Thank you, Mr G. Graham.

‘Transaction complete. Thank you for shopping with us today.’ Deidre smiled once more before the screen faded to black. I picked up my shopping and replaced my wallet. I knew I didn’t have to pay any more, that there was no one left to pay, but that wasn’t the point. Besides, I was the highlight of Deidre’s day.

The street lights sputtered to life as I headed the familiar way home. The beans and cabbage banged against my leg as I walked and I sucked on the end of a strawberry lace. Another day, another failure. *Coding for Dummies* was my last hope, for obvious reasons. I had tried every other book in the library, every resource still operational on the server. Man, I couldn’t even code like a dummy. Useless. I stopped, looked up at the street sign that I knew was looming above me. *Park Avenue*. The scene of my biggest failed attempt.

Not today. I moved past the street quickly, made sure not to look at what I knew was still there. I’d never been back there, even though I knew the bots had probably fixed it all up by now. Like nothing ever happened. But that could wait. There had to be something else I could try.

It started to rain so I broke into a run. Typical. At high school, maybe they called this ‘pathetic fallacy’. I just called it pathetic.

Before I knew it I was back at my apartment building just as the rain was turning to hail. A bolt of lightning split

the sky in two and I ran for the revolving door. I shook off the few hailstones that shifted down my neck after I took my hood off and caught my reflection in the dark glass, the windows turned to a mirror by the reception lights.

I looked wiped. There was a small breakout just under my bottom lip, and a five o'clock shadow crept in around my jawline, patchy though it was. Perpetual puberty was the enemy of a good beard.

I walked under the central chandelier and into the gold-plated lift.

'Welcome home, Echo Zero-One-Three-Five,' the speaker said as soon as the doors were closed.

I leant against the mirrored back wall and the lift propelled me upwards. I winced slightly when my ears popped.

'Floor one-zero-five. Penthouse.' The lift doors slid open on my living room.

I mean, obviously I live in the penthouse. And not just any penthouse, but the highest and most expensive penthouse in the city. I think it belonged to some sports guy before, but I don't even remember what team I supported, so whatever. Either way, it had a huge bedroom with a super-king; a TV that took up the whole living-room wall; and a hard drive full of . . . let's just say that if I did still have parents, I'd be grounded for a week if they found that hard drive. Maybe a month.

I flopped down onto the velour sofa and put my feet up on the marble-topped table, shoes on. Not exactly my taste, but furniture deliveries were a bitch post-apocalypse, so I had to make do. Bits of caked dirt from the street flaked off on to the table. The cleaning bots would take care of that in the night, while I slept.

I checked my vitals on my HUD – heads-up display. Low battery, but enough to do some reading before bed. *Or maybe . . .* My eyes slid along the wall to the cluster of wires at one end, towards where I knew the hard drive was plugged in. I pulled over the box of tissues I left out on the table and picked up the remote.

A flash of lightning blazed along the wall of glass that ran the length of the living room, followed by a crack of thunder so loud that I dropped the remote. All the lights flickered once and then went out, along with any chance of using the TV.

‘Great,’ I muttered. ‘Hey, Rosie, what’s the deal with the lights?’ I said the second part louder, head dropped back, staring at the emergency lighting that lined the ceiling to the built-in speakers.

‘Power surge. Possible electrical fault. Switching to emergency power,’ a soft, almost sultry feminine voice replied. ROSIE – Remote Operational Site Integrated Engine. Another gift from our friends at Aurora Tech. Every building I had explored in the city seemed to have

one, all still fully operational. Rosie controlled everything in the apartment, from the lights to the microwave. She would make sure I had enough power to charge, but that's it. No TV tonight.

I stood up and moved over to the window. Most of the city, laid out beneath my feet like a model town, seemed to be having the same problem. I had seen it like this before. Electrical surges were common during the storms.

What wasn't common was what I could see in the sky. What am I saying? It was downright crazy. I had never seen anything like it before. A streak of light, too long-lasting and slow-moving to be lightning, burnt across the black sky, high above the city.

A comet? No, it was way too big to be a comet. And even if it was, comets didn't move like that. The trail behind the object was zigzagged, like the thing was . . . steering itself?

'No way,' I whispered. I watched as it appeared to change direction again, heading south towards the city centre. It was definitely moving on its own, and from the trail, it had come from . . . above? From *space*?

But before I could think about it any more, another bolt of lightning streaked across the sky, followed by a boom of thunder. The bolt travelled towards the moving object in less than a second, and the flash of light as the two collided made me wince as it lit up the living room.

The next thing I knew, the object was a ball of orange fire,
falling in a straight line from the sky.

Right into the centre of the city.