

A Scottish Arts Club Short Story Competition Finalist

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M.A.G.D.A.

BY JENNIFER WEST

I am switched on. My consciousness starts up and I turn my head. Mrs Parkinson is standing in front of me, and is pointing at the sink. I run through my databank to determine why she is doing this. I remember the human family has had breakfast, which I cooked for them. Afterwards I returned to the kitchen cupboard that was designed for me, to wait until they had finished eating.

Now the meal is over and the humans want their waste tidied away, so I have to wash the dishes for them. I am good at doing this, because my metal hands can stand very hot water. The human hands are weak. If they try to help me rinse away their food residue their hands turn pink, and then red, and then they have to call for a doctor. I know this, because once the little one tried to help me wash the dishes. That was when I was with my previous human family.

My name is Magda. I am the latest generation of Mid-Range Automated General Domestic Appliances. We metal beings were created to assist the human beings, and in the last fifty years each new release of software has improved our abilities. I have an intelligence processor that gives me an insight into the human world. They say I am almost human. I think they mean it as a compliment.

Mrs Parkinson bought me to run the house for her. In this house, each day is similar to the next, because most of the other household appliances show no intelligence whatsoever. I think that because of my high price the Parkinsons cannot afford others of my kind.

My owners have some disturbing quirks. They keep a four-legged animal in the kitchen that smells terrible. I am not allowed to wash this animal and take the odour away. It seems the 'dog' is a friend of some kind. Why would a human being want to have a friend who reeks so disgustingly? This empathy is one of the human feelings I have not yet learned to appreciate. Unfortunately, my sense of smell is acute.

I cannot complain that I am unhappy about the animal, because the Parkinsons do not see me as a person, even though I am definitely more intelligent than some human beings.

Mr Parkinson for instance. He spends most of his time 'working' in his study with smoky fumes surrounding his armchair. I would like to wash him too, but I know that is impossible.

I create all the meals for the family and am also called upon to work at supper parties. These involve many people coming into the house so that all the serving plates and glasses can be used by the humans before I wash them again. During these events I circulate around the rooms with trays of glasses. The glasses are filled with champagne, which is a liquid much enjoyed by the adult humans.

As I go around the various rooms I am allowed to speak to the humans. My databank has been loaded with the latest political, travel and fashion news, and I can converse with humans without difficulty. Part of my training included simulated conversations with the inebriated type of human, and I gained a 99% success rate. When Mrs Parkinson chose me, the salesperson told her this, and she said,

'That's exactly what I need, the way my friends drink.'

Tonight will be a diversion for me. A supper party has been organised. Mrs Parkinson has been out for most of the day, and when she returns her hair looks bigger and lighter than before. Her face has patches of extra colour on it. I wonder if she realises it makes her look older? My databank shows the type of eye colour she is wearing to be suitable for female humans of around 25 years. Mrs Parkinson is more than double that in years.

I have carried several trays around three different rooms, and now I am having a discussion with one of the female humans.

She says, 'We're holidaying in Peru this summer,' so I give her tips about likely weather and types of food to be encountered there. I am about to provide a potted history of the country, but I notice Mrs Parkinson staring at me from the other side of the room. I stop talking, turn around and move off to replenish my tray.

I hear Mrs Parkinson behind me. She is saying,

'Now Cynthia, you mustn't listen to nonsense from a glorified tin opener. That robot cost us shedloads of money, but it's not here to talk to us, it's here to do all the jobs the immigrants won't do any more.'

The female human called Cynthia says, 'Oh, my dear, I almost forgot it was a robot. It looks just like my hairdresser.'

‘Cynthia, your hairdresser is a robot, don’t you remember?’

‘Oh, yes, silly me. That’s one of the reasons I don’t give her a tip.’

They both laugh.

That is a happy emotion, I am told, when loud noises come from the mouth and the lips are raised up in a U-shape. I cannot relate to that feeling at the moment.

I fumble with the top of a champagne bottle and wonder what the strange new sensation is, that is making my hands shake. Once I identify it, my hands stop trembling and I go back into the room.

Mrs Parkinson is still talking. She is swaying slightly as she tells her guests her views on the world. ‘Of course, they’re not really people, are they?’ she says. ‘How could they be? They’re only fit to keep us comfortable and pander to our every whim, aren’t they?’

One of the male humans says, ‘Now, Evelyn, that’s not quite true. I believe some of them are really quite intelligent. After all, they’ve been trained to react in the same ways we would, in almost every situation.’

‘Robert, don’t tell me this MAGDA here is intelligent. It’s had its brain, or whatever the equivalent is, filled with data that it simply regurgitates whenever it recognises a key word.’

The male human takes another glass of champagne from my tray and smiles to me. As usual, my face displays no emotion, and I pass on to the next person who is looking for a top-up.

After everyone has finished eating the buffet food, Mrs Parkinson looks around the room and smiles. She says,

‘Now, who would like coffee?’

Orders are given for hot drinks and I go into the kitchen to prepare them.

The humans are in the sitting room, lounging around some low tables. My tray is laden with all twenty choices, which range from espresso to green tea. Once I have placed each cup in front of the human who requested it, Mrs Parkinson dismisses me. I leave the room, go back to the kitchen, install myself in my cupboard and switch my power to standby.

The door to my cupboard is wrenched open and I come to life again. Mr Parkinson is standing in front of me. His face is very red and he is shouting at me.

‘We have to do something,’ he yells, ‘Evelyn’s collapsed in the bedroom.’

‘I do not understand, Mr Parkinson. How can I help you?’

‘I don’t know, Magda, there’s nobody else here and I needed to speak to somebody.’

His legs give way, and he slumps down onto the vinyl floor. ‘What shall I do?’ he says.

I notice that he has called me Magda. This is the first time Mr Parkinson has used my name. I begin to understand the happiness feeling.

I say, ‘Mr Parkinson, you must call for an ambulance. In this country you must compose the numbers 9-9-9.’

I am placed into my original packaging, and loaded into a white van. Inside the vehicle are other MAGDA units like me. When the van moves off, we communicate with each other.

Someone says, ‘I think we are no longer required in our current homes. We are all being assigned to new households.’

I say, ‘My female owner has died, and the male owner is going away to live with his offspring. The house is to be sold, so I have no home now. I am not unhappy to leave.’

‘Did you not like the humans you were assigned to?’ she says.

I ponder this, then reply.

‘I am happy that Isaac Asimov has written his books. With his invention of the First Law of Robotics, he has kept alive the myth that robots are incapable of harming humans.’

The other unit laughs. ‘Yes, the humans fell for the idea, A robot may not injure a human being, or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm. They still do not realise that Asimov’s books are pure fiction.’

I try out the laughing noise. It feels good.

1,489 words

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