

# bygone

**TOM  
PAPPALARDO**



**OBJECT**

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## **7. LEAVING**

Someone scrawled something on his forehead awhile back. Ghost letters now, indecipherable. His left earlobe has been bitten off, the seams along his joints have separated and frayed. He wears brand-new sweatpants and a novelty t-shirt (“I’m not STUPID!!!”). No shoes, no socks, no hairpiece. The bot stands upright, shoulders back, smiling at tire kickers and answering questions from potential bidders. The hilltown auction doesn’t have many.

Tryan, arms crossed, pretends to contemplate a bid. Her dust-covered leather creaks

in the empty warehouse.

“Re-skin this one,” the geezer next to her opines. “Could be made presentable enough.”

She turns and glares at the man through jagged bangs. “I was just having that *exact* thought,” she says. The man harrumphs and moves on to the next lot.

Tryan tugs at the bot’s waistband and inspects the hacked-back skin around his crotch, an attempt to downplay the worn and stained edges. The metal chassis beneath is dull. Where a human’s sex parts would be, a cracked plastic insert covers an interface panel.

“Worked the sex trades, huh?” She lets the sweatpants snap back.

“That’s right, yes,” he says. “Purchased at auction six years two months nineteen days ago. Previous to that I was a personal assistant to the CEO of—”

“Looks like six rough years.”

“I served a variety of functions at the Starlight Entertainment Center.”

She prods the clear plastic bag on the folding table next to him. “My, you’ve got all *sorts* of attachments,” she says, mock-scandalized.

“I served a variety of functions at the Starlight,” he says again.

She rubs road grime off her glasses with a

dirty thumb. “How are your stats?”

“Mobility is at an overall score of 68.2%. Left knee is disengaged. Right knee is compensating. Spine, elbows, and wrists are functioning normally.”

She offers a noncommittal *hmmm*.

“Power core is at 59.8%. OS and firmware are six years two months nineteen days out of date.”

“Kept you offline, huh?”

“The Starlight staff was less than attentive to maintenance issues.”

“You’re very politic.”

“As I mentioned, I was a personal assistant previous to my engagement at the Starlight.”

“You’re an old model who’s seen better days.” She assesses the bargain hunters roaming the makeshift auction hall. Lots of overalls. “You’re gonna wind up working out in a field. That’ll be the end of you.”

The bot shrugs his 62.3% operable shoulders. “My next assignment will likely be as challenging as my last.”

Tryan smiles and taps her boot against his calf. “G’bye, bot.”

“Goodbye, miss.”

—

She steps out into the sunlight, the featureless wall of the abandoned regional food processing plant stretching off into the weedy distance in both directions. It will collapse soon. They all will.

“Hola, Tryan.” Sev says. Her bot stands guard over her old Shuangxi Marauder, strategically casting his shadow over the bike’s vinyl saddle.

“Hola, hola,” she says, squinting up at her polished steel friend. The robot tilts his head, fine motor movement around his mouth suggesting a smile.

“How was the auction?” he asks.

“Nothing in the boonies today, Sev,” she says. “Met one of your cousins in there, though. Entertainment veteran. Looks like he’s been rutted half to death.”

“Yikes.” He holds out her helmet collar. Tryan snaps it around her neck and adjusts her glasses. She puts her palm on Sev’s chestplate. Hot.

“You’re a hella handsome piece of work, you know that?”

“Awww!”

She powers up the low-slung bike, the antigrav hubs lifting the cycle into riding position. She hugs the chassis as Sev climbs on behind her. She throttles the bike forward.

Humming electrics, wide spokeless rubber on loose gravel. Her favorite sounds.

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The cat navigates the workbench debris: hip rotors, wrist assemblies, face bits, computers, torches, dirty dishes, multitools and monotools. He climbs into a cardboard box next to Tryan's vise and nests in a salvaged wiring harness. His name is Daniel.

Tryan throws her helmet collar across her workshop and slaps at the light switches. She glances at her calendar, a retro paper thing so old it's useful again. The month is lousy with Sharpied Xs. Tomorrow is circled, and inside the circle it says FUCK.

"You still leaving?"

"You know I am," Sev says, pulling the bay door closed. Tryan drags her feet across the concrete floor to her bed, a mattress ringed with boxes of bot parts and precarious stacks of salvaged tires. She flops onto her comforter, burying her face in the mass of superheroes printed on it. She groans into Superman's chest.

"Easy," Sev soothes, retrieving the discarded helmet collar from under the workbench. He hangs it on the bike's handlebar where it

belongs and pauses to stroke Daniel's back. Both the cat and the bot could do this indefinitely, but there is work to be done. Sev gently corrals Daniel aside and attempts to tame the workshop mess.

"Stop fucking with my stuff," she says, rolling onto her back.

"Stop fucking up your stuff," he counters. He holds up two spare fingers that match his own. "This is valuable mech, Tryan! These things are military grade! You gotta keep cat hair and gunk outta the joints!"

"Flip yourself off for me, please," she says, rummaging through a box by her foot. She extracts an antigrav hub she stripped off an old Nippon bike. Tryan jabs at it with a multitool. "Have you made any more plans for up there?" she asks, eyes on her work.

"Haven't thought that far ahead." He sweeps his magnetized palm across the benchtop, collecting metal shavings and stray screws. "I don't want to overthink it, I just want to go."

"You think you'll get shit from anybody?"

"I think I'll get shit from lots-of-body," he laughs. Tryan pries at a piece of aluminum shielding. It pops free and spins across the room. "You could come with me, you know," he says, crouching next to the Marauder. "It's

not like you're not invited." He lies on the concrete and explores under the bike with her grandfather's paint-spattered flathead screwdriver.

"It's your trip."

"You don't want to go anyway."

Tryan snaps and releases the spring clamp on her multitool. "You always leave me."

"So you keep telling me." He chips at road gravel wedged into the bike's undercarriage. A chunk of asphalt refuses to budge. The bot grumbles, emoting his version of aggravation. "Our infrastructure continues to deteriorate," he declares. They pry and chip in silence. Daniel pays them no mind.

"You're my favorite," she mumbles.

"You're my favorite, too."

"I worked hard on you."

"And look how well it paid off!" he cries, pointing at himself with the screwdriver. She laughs. He sits up with a programmed groan. "What about you? What you're going to do after I'm gone?"

"Pine."

"Uh-huh."

She twists the core free from the hub assembly and places it on top of her mini fridge. "That's a good core."

"Uh-huh."

Tryan dumps the detritus of the mechanism back into the box and strips off her road gear. She crawls under the comforter and Sev turns off the overheads. He switches her old drafting lamp on and continues organizing her workbench. She flips through a few different entertainment streams on her dev, a never ending torrent of time-killing scrolling across her heads-up display. She sighs and takes off her glasses.

“Come to bed,” she says. “I’m lonely.”

“In a minute,” he says. In a minute, he does.

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Tryan accelerates through downtown Prescott, pointing the bike towards the highway. Main Street is dead-quiet. Like most of western Massachusetts, most of New England, most of the United States and the world, it is mostly abandoned. They ride south towards Bradley Air & Space in silence, Sev’s head looming over her shoulder. She pushes their speed a little more than she should. If Sev were capable of worry he might worry, but the highway proves to be tolerably maintained, clear of large obstacles, even patched here and there within the last decade. Tryan

focuses her attention on the asphalt, the wind, the fat tires bouncing and kicking up debris. Anything but the bot wrapped around her like a birdcage. She hurls the powerful machine down the road.

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Abandoned cars line the Bradley Connector median, pushed aside and rejected. The more valuable models were stripped or hauled away a generation ago, leaving these orphans to collect pollen and sink into the grass. Tryan knows damned well they're picked over, but still can't resist eyeing the junk. Scavenging for parts is practically her only hobby.

Near the security checkpoint, she switches the powerplant off and rolls the Marauder up to the rear bumper of a waiting transport van. Sev disengages from the frame and holds the bike upright. Kids in the back of the van gawk at Sev's chromed presence. They wave and he waves back. Tryan wipes her glasses on her shirt and flips them off. They burst into giggles and flip her back, three howling children and six tiny birds pressed against the rear defroster. The line moves briskly, security loose and perfunctory. When Tryan rolls the bike up to the checkpoint gate, they

encounter a guard with a scuffed tablet and a sunburned neck.

“Sharp old bot,” he says. “You rig that yourself?”

“Uh-huh,” Tryan answers.

“I’m no skin fan, either,” he says, opening a blank form on his tablet. “They’re fuggin’ creepy.”

“Mmm.”

“Air or space?” he asks.

“Space,” she says. She opens Sev’s transport docs on the bike’s display and flips them to the guard’s tablet. He scrolls through them.

“You only got one ticket booked. You leaving this pretty boy behind?”

“Ticket’s for pretty boy.”

The guard squints at the bot and consults his tablet. “I’m not seeing any property transfer here...”

“He’s an independent.”

The guard raises an eyebrow. “So he’s leaving and you’re staying?”

“Just you and me on terra firma.” She grins aggressively, stomping a boot heel on the blacktop. “Maybe we can repopulate the planet together.”

He raises the gate and waves them through.

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There is a medium amount of bustle at the pick up/drop off area, maybe twenty or thirty people, enough to make Tryan anxious. She parks the Marauder in front of a large video monitor playing an Exodus Corporation ad loop. *Traffic, crowds, and advertising all in the same day. Jesus.* “Goddamned humans,” she gripes.

“You’re a pestilence,” Sev agrees, dismounting.

“I feel like a pestilence.”

“You’ll live.”

“I feel like I might not.”

He waits on the curb while she fidgets with her glove. He has no luggage. Neither do most of the other departing passengers. It costs hella extra.

“Aren’t you coming in?”

“Nah,” she says to the glove. “I gotta get back. I got stuff to do.”

“The hell you do,” he laughs. “I don’t take off for another hour. Keep me company, then you can watch the rocket launch.”

“Rocket launches aren’t very interesting,” she says, peering at the cloudless sky. He laughs again. It’s a good laugh. She coded it herself. “How are your stats?”

“High 90s across the board.”

“Damn straight.”

Another pause.

“Don’t take shit from anybody,” she tells him.

“I will miss you, Tryan,” Sev says. The girl scrunches up her face and says nothing. He steps back. “Go.”

She goes.

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Tryan rips down the outbound lane of the Bradley Connector. She forgets the bike is even there.

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“We’ve got a long night ahead of us, Daniel,” she whispers, scooping the cat off her stool and stealing his warm spot. She keys the hardware lock on the workshop terminal. Passphrase for security level one. Passphrase for security level two. Tryan scrolls through her archives and loads a massive file into active memory. The cat situates himself on her lap while progress bars jog across the screen. She cups Daniel’s tiny head in her hand and waits, surrounded by broken things, locked in a cinderblock box in an abandoned building

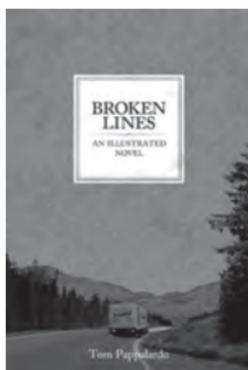
on an abandoned planet. Daniel headbutts her wrist. The screen goes black.

A voice chirps out of the speakers. “Hola, Tryan!”

“Hola, Eight.”



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Tom Pappalardo is a graphic designer, writer, and musician. He lives in a manky old house in western Massachusetts with a goof dog and a small but formidable cat.

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