

GRANT BAILIE

PINOCCHIO UNBOUND

ONCE UPON A TIME, THERE WAS A ROBOT whose job it was to walk along the uneven surfaces of satellites and space ships adjusting antennas, tightening bolts, and polishing mirrors. He did all this in the hot or cold airlessness of space, with the world a dizzying ball spinning far above or beneath him. He did not hate his job. The walks were peaceful. The views were stunning. His coworkers—who were mostly small, silver spheres—seldom bothered him with annoying or personal questions.

He liked the gentle vibrations of the dust particles pinging against his metal skin, and the occasional glow of something entering the atmosphere in the distance.

“Make a wish,” he sometimes thought as objects flew by—rocks, chunks of ice, a lost wrench, or some unfortunate astronaut’s shoe. And, inevitably, he wished for the same thing: that the object would fall towards the earth (not miss by inches, bang into something else, or bounce off the stratosphere) and burst beautifully into flames.

What this pleasure was based on was hard to say and impossible for his programmers to analyze. It might have simply been a matter of certain visual receptors crossing wires with certain memory receptors, or perhaps the comfort his manufactured brain took in the consistency of physical law. Of course, he could have, in his spare time, just chucked all the bits of junk and spare parts he no longer needed at the earth himself.

With his unerring aim, telescopic eyes and tireless arm he would have hit the Earth every time and been guaranteed a pretty display of pyrotechnics. But somehow, this seemed wrong (another problem for his programmers). He could only wait for nature to drop its flotsam and jetsam randomly into the blue pool beneath him. He would pause long enough in his important work then (tightening bolts, polishing mirrors, etc.) to enjoy the show.

Aside from these fleeting and well-timed moments of idle, inexplicable joy, he was a thorough, efficient, and conscientious worker. He may have been an old model, but his programmers and foremen held him in a high regard that was only partly based on nostalgia.

"The thing about those spheres," one of his handlers told him once, while adjusting a joint in the robot's knee. "The thing about them is they don't have a face. How can you like a machine that doesn't have a face? That's why people name their cars, but not their toasters."

"Do they make cars with faces now?" he asked. He had not been on the planet of his manufacturing for some time, and thought perhaps things had changed.

"They always have. You know, headlights for eyes, hood for a mouth, grill for teeth, that sort of thing."

"Not all cars have grills."

"Not all faces have teeth."

"That's true."

The robot thought about it for a while. But when he thought about it long enough, he imagined that he could see the faces in everything: his spherical robot coworkers, the satellites themselves, the moon, the earth, even most brands of toasters. He did not bring up this point to his handler. Despite the sometimes-preferential treatment he received by virtue of his age and face, he felt no particular fondness for the humans who fixed him or told him where to go and what to do, and he took no particular pleasure from his conversations with them.

He did his job, he recharged at night in bed without dreaming, and awoke in the morning with a click as the red light on his forehead changed to green. He put up with a constant battery of repairs, cleanings, updates and adaptations without ever once flying into a berserk, robotic rage and destroying his human masters.

ONCE UPON A TIME, A ROBOT tripped and fell to earth. A panel came loose beneath his magnetic feet, and sent him tumbling end over end toward the planet. For a moment, it seemed as if he would over shoot the earth completely, but then he smashed into the distended mirror of another satellite, altering his course and sealing his fate as he flailed about for something to grab hold of. He would have fired the emergency thrusters in his heels, but the panel that had so blithely removed itself from the platform he was working on refused to perform the same trick upon the soles of his feet. If he fired his rockets now he would explode.

He gazed around him as he tumbled forward, looking to see if any of his coworkers had made note of his dramatic exit. They had not. They continued zipping this way and that around the object they were repairing and he wished, for the first time, that he had gotten to know them all a little better. Particularly the ones with extending magnetic grappling hooks.

But they were all gone now, as was the satellite he had been repairing, disappearing into the distance. Not gradually, but by sudden jumps as he spun and tumbled this way and that, losing sight of them for minutes at a time, not seeing the place he had come from again until it was going, going then gone.

As gravity took over for unchecked momentum, he was able to wave his arms about this way and that way so that finally, he was facing the direction he was going. There was no point in facing backwards now—all that was lost to him. The Earth grew bigger below him (or above him) and he could recognize—without telescoping either of his eyes—certain land masses, bodies of water, and disturbing cloud patterns.

So this is it, he thought. He had no internal mechanisms for panic or fear, only self-preservation, and no wires crossed now to make it otherwise. Logic told him self-preservation was a lost cause. So this was it.

Space became less empty around him. He was entering the outer atmosphere. He could feel it rushing against him, pushing him like a large hot hand, or pounding him like a hundred small, burning fists. With a point of reference now, and the constant sensation of resistance, it seemed as if he were speeding up, though the simple fact of physics told him that just the opposite was the case. The air—it was air now, not just cold, scientific atmosphere—became thicker and burnt against him.

His hard, cold skin grew warm and then soft. The metal of his shell changed from gray-blue to a glowing pink and he knew he would ex-

plode soon. Already the wires and circuits were melting and sizzling within him, becoming a stew of pulsing soft edges and drips. All his brightly colored plastic bits liquefied and ran in quick, bubbling streams. He felt pain or something that he thought must be pain and this was new and interesting to him. *It is not so bad as that*, he thought, and pulled his arms behind him like a diver to move faster through the air and clouds. Some storage cell or another cracked open from the heat, and random thoughts and phrases poured freely through his mind. Life is suffering, he thought, and now he is alive. *A stitch in time... I think that I will never see... It is better to have... Wish upon a falling star. He makes a wish: for all of this. Nearly a rhyme. A short poem then before the beautiful finish.* He would explode soon and the last thing he would see would be his own magnificent end. There was something in this—something pleasing to him. All wires crossed now, melted, fused until it seemed that any thought or emotion was possible. *I will see my own magnificent end*, he thought.

But sadly, his eyes exploded first.

ONCE UPON A TIME a young man and a young woman sat on a hill. It was night, the grass was soft and they seemed to love each other. They looked up at the stars and the man tried to impress the woman with some name or another he remembered some constellation or another being given. He tried to explain to her the shapes that the stars made if you connected the dots—this group an archer, that group a ram, the other some woman holding scales. She did not see it, and in fact, he was not entirely sure he was pointing to the right places as he tried to explain this or that image. There were so many stars, and really, they could be connected in anyway you wanted. You could write your name in a sky like that, or draw a picture of your parents, or directions to the house where you live.

“How about that one,” the man said, with more confidence.

“What? The dipper?”

“Yes. That one is called the Big Dipper.”

“OK,” she said. “But what about that bigger dipper above it? What will you call that?”

They laughed. As they laughed a shooting star went by overhead: a white streak of burning glow and sparks that fizzled into nothingness. It seemed, for a moment, that the star had an almost human shape before it dissolved. It seemed almost to be screaming.

The woman caught her breath at its beauty. The man smiled, and after the light was gone, and the other stars seemed suddenly duller, he turned to her and said: "Did you make a wish?"

"Yes. You?"

"Uh-huh. What did you wish for?"

"I can't tell. It won't come true if you tell."

"Is that the rule?"

"That's the rule."

"Then I'm not telling either."

"OK, then."

"OK."

But it does not matter. They have all wished for the same thing.