

“Renaissance Kids”

The lazy man’s wish is nothing at all, John thought, and I’m going to engrave it right here. He poked the trophy case and surveyed the dusty totems of achievement inside. 1967, 1969, 1971, and 1975 Senior Boys Basketball City Champions. 1974 Junior Girls Baseball City Champions. 1975, 1978, and 1982 Varsity Cross County Provincial Champions. 1984 – 1990 Wrestling Provincial Champions. Those were the dominating years. Boys like Jake Dolinger, Ian Cuthstrap, Ben Foster, and Matthew Get ‘Em Gardner were kings. You couldn’t go to a restaurant when any one of the boys were present and not have a hell of a cheer and a round of something on the house. There was Kate Spencer in the nineties. Not a track across the county she didn’t dominate. Her shoes were bronzed and displayed in a federal museum for a while there. And those were just the athletes. His hands stuffed in his pockets, John rocked on his heels, again impressed at the successes of the math society and the robotics team and the debate club. His eyes gleaned over a copy of the medal awarded to Lucy Zhu, who was presented the volunteer honour normally reserved for adults by the Governor General. His lip trembled and he brought his hand to his mouth to quell a deep, nostalgic sob.

They were the renaissance kids. Versatile in academics and sport. Interested in space. Uninterested in limits. Teaching them had been its own joy, not like the days of today. Maximum abstention. The anticipation reward mechanisms of better times abbreviated to seconds. Now no one would wait for anything, nor work for anything, and God forbid you encouraged it.

Down the hallway came the shudder of many wheels.

“Don’t let them get to you today,” Sonia said. He hadn’t known she was behind him.

“Impossible.”

He felt a hand on his lower back. From her wheelchair, she could only reach so far. Not so long from now, she wouldn’t even reach that. “It’s easier if you let it go, John. You’re so close to retirement, why fight it any more?” She spoke as if laying prone was something to look forward to. As if the death of achievement and the unwavering commitment to indolence were the way of the future. As if the laissez-faire parenting that got them here was inescapable.

He spun around and looked down at her. He could just make out dozens of metal footrests breaching the corridor. “Why give up? You can’t be comfortable like that. You want to end up like *them*?” He whipped an arm and pointed at the army of children too lazy to walk around the school advancing on them. They had fat cheeks and round bellies. They might have had chins once, but John had never seen them. This was his group, middle schoolers. None could read. Three could count the fingers on their hands. All had forfeited physical activity. All had a book-sized screens on long mechanic arms inches from their faces. The screen required all attention and effort so that all but one of the children had bags of urine attached to their chairs and nutritional feeding tubes connected to their veins. Motors whirred as they closed in. Only William was still capable of pushing his wheels. “You really want to be like that?”

She craned her neck to look at him. He could tell the motion hurt. “You’re lucky you’re retiring, John. You’re not built for this. Renegades are dead, even old ones like you. It’s the good

old days of pushing people to do what they don't want to do. The world isn't built like that any more. I'm exactly where I want to be and even if it wasn't, I wouldn't have a choice, would I? They'd just replace me with someone who lets it be. Everyone's got to eat, you know."

"You call feeding tubes *eating*? That's where you're headed. I'm glad I'm old. I'm glad I was here when kids had potential. I'm glad I've worked here long enough they can't fire me because just maybe I can make one of them not just see their potential but *want* it, too." Heat rose in his face and his cheeks blazed red.

"You think I should be ashamed of myself?"

He shook his head. "You're ruined and you participated in the ruin of kids. Shame requires worth to be parted from, but I don't believe you have it anymore."

He walked away to where the children had gathered. "Back to class," he said gently.

"We want the I-Bot," said a robotic voice. It was Terry's Laryn-X, the machine designed to speak for him. It had been implanted in his brain last semester when his throat seized due to inactivity. John had lobbied the school and the boy's parents for months to make him talk and participate in class, but they didn't want to pressure the boy. John's insistence had earned him a written warning and a week without pay, he remembered coldly.

"The I-Bot is down, I'm afraid," John said of the wall-sized screen the school had installed in the gymnasium at the beginning of the year. It was gaming on steroids. Kids who had specialized implants were able to connect directly to the game and transport themselves into worlds where they were warriors and heroes without any physical effort.

"Is not," said Roberta's Laryn-X, the intended whine carefully programmed and deployed. She was perhaps the fattest of them all, if you didn't count Aiden, who was at home until renovations would be complete to widen the width of the school doors. She wasn't far behind. If the children couldn't be encouraged to think or speak or move, why bother attending school at all? Because the parents need a break from their own kids, John thought. They created incapables, but couldn't bear to live with them. John got that privilege, as did Sonia and the rest of the faculty now in wheelchairs.

"Do you know that the I-Bot is built on real life, children?" said John. "You can explore like you do in the game, but for real. You can climb mountains and go on safaris and sail the sea in boats of your own. You can catch the wind in Amsterdam. You can eat cotton candy at a fair, with games and prizes, too. You can throw tomatoes at each other in Spain? Doesn't that sound like fun?"

"We want the I-Bot," demanded many Laryn-Xs all at once.

"I threw a tomato once," said someone at the back of the pack. It was William in his own small voice. Wheelchairs wheeled on him. He continued, quivering, "It was rotten and I didn't like the feel of it so I put it out of my hand as fast as I could. It hit the dog by mistake. I thought I would get in trouble, but my parents laughed."

"Good! Good!" John said. "Did it smell? What did it feel like? What did it sound like?"

“We want the I-Bot,” said a loud voice. Terry again.

“You’re not getting the I-Bot today,” John said. “Today we’re going to explore. I think we should go outside. It’s a nice day and the sun is beautiful. Maybe we’ll even throw tomatoes. Would you like that?”

Machines gasped.

“No!” insisted a Laryn-X.

“I-Bot!” commanded another.

Normally expressionless, the children drew up their reserves of personality and threw it at William, who dared to take them away from the I-Bot. Tongue drive systems were engaged and William was soon surrounded by footrests and urine bags and tongue drives. Many sets of eyes glared with hatred. The little boy cowered.

“You know you can get up, William,” John said. “They can’t hurt you. They can look mean but that is all they can do. You can do everything they can do in their game but in real life if you want to. It’s so much better. You can conquer empires or tend a farm or kiss a girl.”

At this, one of the girls drew away from the circle. John seized the opportunity.

“A real kiss. Not a computer kiss. And you can hold hands. You can take walks along the river and toast marshmallows on a campfire. You can pet a dog. Feel its fur. Can you feel it?”

William and the girl closed their eyes, not looking at the others. They could almost feel the fur. It might have been soft or maybe it was smooth like marble.

“My parents won’t let me have a dog,” admitted a Laryn-X. It was Elizabeth, who’d only recently gotten her Laryn-X and was still getting used to it. Real words were strangled by robotic ones. John went to her chair and flipped her Laryn-X off. The girl coughed.

He bent down. “Tell me about the kind of dog you want, Elizabeth. A puppy would be fun, don’t you think? You could play ball with it and take it for walks and explore the neighbourhood.”

“Too . . . much work,” sputtered Elizabeth. She swallowed. It seemed to lubricate her throat. “They don’t want the respon . . . sibility.” The effort of talking nearly exhausted her and her head rolled sideways, panting.

“Ah.” He rose, thinking.

“We want the I-Bot,” Felix screamed through his Laryn-X.

John shrugged. His eyes swept from pale, bloated Felix to Terry and his soulless slump. He saw Roberta so like a dying bird scratching weakly in its shell. He saw William, almost one of them, an outcast because he was better adjusted, albeit a poor adjustment to an indecent society. It was vulgar to John. The sight and sounds of the children and adult recalcitrance in the whole damn mess.

“Let’s make a deal,” John said finally. “I will give you the I-Bot if — *if* — you help me with plan a spring extravaganza. Before you open that Laryn-X, Felix, hear me out. I promise that if you do this for me, I will give you the I-Bot whenever you want for however long you want provided you all agree to it.”

“Sounds like a trick,” said Tarry’s Laryn-X.

“No trick. It means that if you all agree you want the I-Bot, you’ll get it, but only if you all agree, and you have to help me plan and execute the spring extravaganza first. Before you agree, I will admit that I expect real work here. We need to plan games and prizes and some kind of exposition of what you all learned so far this year. I want you to think of the supplies you need and send them to me. Write them down so I can share your list with sponsors. Who knows? Maybe we’ll have puppies there. Maybe we’ll get media involved. I don’t know. Maybe we’ll get the creators of the I-Bot to attend. I hear companies like that are always looking for talent, but, you know, they’ll need to see it in person and in paper. I heard they sometimes take ideas from schools and put them in their games.”

“He’s lying,” said Clarissa’s Laryn-X.

“You should retire,” said another.

“I’m telling my parents,” said several.

John threw up his hands. “You’ll be rid of me before you know it but until then, who else is going to put your talents in front of the I-Bot people? Believe it or not, my brother works for them. This is your best chance.” It had come out in a mad, dizzying rush. Perhaps he’d gone too far, but the fun hadn’t caught them. It was the I-Bot that had.

The hallway echoed with the ancient creak of unused feet. Necks that had forgotten how to pay attention now turned, turned, like slow sundials toward their teacher. The surprised excitement of urine dribbling into bags gurgled like a stream. There was a click and a locking of wheels, then the groan of aluminum being pressed into the floor. William shuffled then rose.

“I’ll help,” he offered heroically in a small, small voice.

“Ah! A champion already!” John exclaimed.

The boy stepped forward, away from the safety of his chair. The unfamiliar touch of the small foot on the ground wobbled the boy’s senses but he quickly recovered, exalted by his own independence and by the awe in the round, jealous faces around him. Elizabeth’s pubescent face reddened as he passed, for among them William was the athlete and the scholar and the socialite. Only William could walk. Only William paid attention in class. Only William didn’t rely on a Laryn-X to express himself. He hadn’t yet renounced the motivation that crippled the others. Pre-disposed attraction to the strong and the smart and the able, borne in human genome since the beginning of time, snagged the nascent attentions of the other girls and soon William was the focus of all their longing. The well-meaning mental and physical subjugation by parents became suddenly abhorrent and Laryn-X’s were ripped away. The other boys, long

weakened by release from obligation, could do little but let their indignations boil and fester their cheeks.

“A little more of this and I think we’ll have a real team here,” John said. “Now—”

“Mis-ter Stolk!” cried a booming Laryn-X. It was Principal Harley, who had rounded the corner in his electric wheelchair when the school’s activity alarm went off. “A word!”

John winked at his captive audience, then went to the room Principal Harley had wheeled into and closed the door.

“Yes?” John said innocently.

“Don’t yes me. Don’t you dare! Do you know what you’ve done? You’ve risked child satisfaction. You’ve positively *pushed* those kids beyond their breaking levels, John. I saw it all. You, with your ideas of yesteryear. Champions – heh! Blast it, I say! One word of what you’ve done to their parents and we will be crucified in front of the board. The Anti-Encouragement Council will have all our heads! We’ll lose our funding! Section 2.3 states teachers shall not intentionally motivate pupils. No exceptions!” Harley’s ten chins shook with rage.

A charging wall had been modified to accommodate larger lifts and beds. John leaned on it and crossed his arms. “What would Monica have said if she saw you now?”

Rage flashed across Harley’s face. “How dare you!”

It had been a low blow to summon Harley’s dead wife, but John had deployed it regretlessly. “I’m done anyway, Harley,” John said. “But I’d like to think all my years weren’t a waste, so before I go, answer me that. Bless her soul, she was a good woman.”

“Keep her out of this!” cried Harley. His Laryn-X screeched with audio feedback.

“Six-time provincial cycling champion. Honor roll, too, no? Didn’t she get a prestigious scholarship? I thought she did. Something in the sciences, if I remember correctly. Imagine her here right now. Right here in this school.”

“Stop it . . .”

“Imagine her seeing you like this, Harley. You can’t even breathe without the Air-Tron. Not because you’re a smoker but because you were so used to taking the easy way out you gave up, just like you gave up on every one of those kids.”

“The board—”

John stopped him. “It was never the board, Harley. You say it like it’s some unthinking, separate body. It’s filled with people. People who were so afraid of real living they gave up on it. People who equated everyday challenges with the climbing of Mount Kilimanjaro! We gave out so many damn participation badges we started congratulating people for blinking. From one extreme to the other. When does the pendulum stop? Tell me, Harley, when does it stop? Because of this, there won’t be anyone else on the moon. The rest of the earth won’t be

discovered. No more technology except that which sucks our souls out. We're losing what made us great, Harley. Don't you see that? We're losing our senses."

After a long pause during which twenty wheelchairs whirred to the window outside the classroom to listen, Principal Harley said, "We can't just go and change things. There are rules. Votes. People have to agree on what's best —"

A long, sad sigh gusted from John's nose. "Imagine Monica like you. Imagine . . ."

"Don't say it, John! Please. I can't take it anymore. Please don't."

Twenty bumps now sounded against the window for attentiveness was rising.

"Imagine her like them," John said.

"Oh dear God," Harley's Larynx—X wailed.

The children watched.

John waited.

Eventually, Harley said, "You're going anyway. Swing the pendulum, John. I want you to swing it good and damn hard."

John faced the twenty sundials on the other side of the window and threw his hands in the air. Already, he could hear the crowds cheering.