

THE WORK OF RESTLESS NIGHTS

M. WEALD



Copyright © 2023 by M. Weald

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law. For permission requests, send email to contact@mweald.com.

The story, all names, characters, and incidents portrayed in this production are fictitious. No identification with actual persons (living or deceased), places, buildings, and products is intended or should be inferred.

Cover art: Alejandro Colucci

1st edition 2023

ISBN: 9798987879801

To my friends and family, without whom this story wouldn't exist. And to
Courtney, without whom it would never have been published.

CONTENTS

Epigraph	VII
Prologue	IX
1. A New Contract	1
2. Foreign Stimuli	17
3. Unpaid Labor	36
4. Designed Encounters	61
5. A Significant Percentage	84
6. Reality Has Many Forms	93
7. Best of Intentions	107
8. Ren Has Entered the Chat	140
9. No Good Deed	163
10. The Size of the Wave	197
11. A Forced Excursion	230
12. The Particulars of Death	253
13. Oft Unheard	294
14. A Perfect Simulation	310
15. A Drug Addled Nap	350
16. To Catch a Lie	367

17. An Underground Parley	399
18. To Look Through Another's Eyes	429
19. A Drink of Tea	487
20. Cages of Our Own Design	521
21. Consequence of Choice	541
Epilogue	585
Afterword	593
About the Author	595

“The electric things have their life too. Paltry as those lives are.” – Rick Deckard, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*
by Philip K. Dick

PROLOGUE

The woman in the grey mask stood on the edge of the road, watching the trickle of traffic and people meander past. Her mask elicited a few glances but nothing more. Privacy in this modern era was hard to come by and keeping it in your own way did little to arouse suspicion.

She pressed a button on a waist high post at her side and moved onto the crosswalk. In terms of not being struck by a passing car, pressing the button was unnecessary. The self-driving cars could avoid her with ease. They monitored many meters ahead and the night was clear, roads dry. But rules were rules. She didn't want to draw attention.

She paused when she made it to the other side of the street. A car flicked past behind her, the man in the driver's seat fast asleep.

Before the woman stood a tall and narrow brick building in a forest of dilapidated structures, all in the impractical style common to Old Chicago. Too many uneven surfaces, rounded edges, and gaudy pieces of stonework. Altogether impractical. The retrofitted rooftop gardens looked like little green hats meant to hide a fading hairline. It spoke of a time before humanity spread throughout the solar system like a rich man at an auction with no one to bid against.

The woman sighed. She appreciated progress, one only had to look at her fine black jacket with its flexible solar cell inlays to know that. But somewhere along the line things had gotten a bit ... muddled. She fiddled with the chip in her pocket, twisting it around and around.

The woman stepped into the building before her, the doors sliding shut behind. A static-filled voice over the intercom welcomed her to the establishment in cheery tones. She walked to the center of the rectangular room and tapped on a flexible screen embedded in the arm of her jacket, ignoring the voice on the intercom. It was nothing more than basic artificial intelligence, ready to answer asinine questions about the business's

services with pre-programmed responses. These companies spent their AI money elsewhere. She brought her hand to her head, resituating her mask. She didn't know why she continued to wear earrings beneath it.

The room she stood in had been renovated over the years, taken from what must have been crumbled bits into a comforting series of hard lines and smooth surfaces. Her lips tweaked into a slanted smile, though no one could see it.

An interactive augmented reality screen came into view on the wall to the woman's left and she walked up to it, scrolling through the service listings with a few quick gestures.

If there had been someone else in the room, sitting on the hard-plastic chairs bolted to the floor along one wall, the woman was not too sure what they would have thought of her. Just another jilted lover seeking solace in make believe perhaps. But there wasn't anyone else in the stuffy room hidden amongst a forest of similarly stuffy rooms. It was modern, but unkempt and societally speaking in the gutter. And there were many more like it. Her amber eyes hidden beneath twin black eye plates scanned the screen showing the fantasies this tall house could make real. All the tall tales.

The woman in the grey mask tapped one finger against the screen, sliding past pictures of Ken doll bots before pausing on a picture of the business's top seller, a newly released female recreation bot staring over her painted shoulder as seductively as something born and bred in the uncanny valley could. It did its best considering the mechanical constraints the human designers placed on it. The woman had long since accepted humanity's irrepressible tendency to craft things in their own image. She thought of it as a weakness, an excuse for humans to say they understood what they had made. As if anything that had a face with two eyes and two lips could be understood. As if having an ankle would allow a chain to be wrapped around it.

She sighed, shook her head. She'd best get about her business for the night. After all, she meant to shake humanity out of its stupor.

After the woman typed a few commands into the screen on the wall, a ping sounded confirming her payment and falsified identification information had been accepted. A sliding panel door to the woman's right coasted along a hidden track to reveal a dimly lit hallway lined with thin metal doors and pale LED lights. A rush of warm air, heavily scented with

aromatic orange peel to cover up the mold and oil, billowed into the main room. Luckily for the woman in the grey mask, she couldn't smell it. She moved into the hallway and walked with even steps from door to door as her mask filtered the foul-smelling particulates.

The door she was looking for sat near the end of the hallway. A lattice of thin gouges marred its surface like the scratches found in a bathroom stall, the scattered thoughts of those who'd lived in a fantasy for a few loci an hour. One disgruntled customer had written "RATHER DREAM" in all caps. Another had written the Mandarin characters for public bus, because all who paid the fee got a ride. What a childish joke.

The woman shook her head and tapped out a few commands on the screen at the edge of the closed door. The door drifted to the side and the heady scent of orange and oil and mold and caustic cleaning agent filtered into her mask. More LED lights flicked to life and the woman stepped inside, the door whispering shut behind her.

The room held shabby furniture and equally shabby décor: pocked Formica countertops made to look like wood with a small kitchen behind, a few discolored and scratched chairs, some wooden knee-high stands, a tilted bookcase, fading wallpaper, a couch with stained cushions, and a bed.

As her eyes adjusted to the dim light, a lump on the far side of the bed took on a more human shape. The ridge in the blanket started at the feet, twin bumps climbing in a gentle slope, hooking at a knee and climbing rapidly again to the apex of a waist only to fall, then rise to a shoulder. The blankets shifted smooth and slow, and the woman in the grey mask saw a tangled mass of raven hair hiding a thin painted neck. With the dim lighting, bunched covers, and wig of raven hair, the illusion looked almost perfect. With the addition of augmented reality to hide the blemishes, it would be.

The woman could have set the experience any number of ways, had the female bot clothed in any number of knock-off dresses or stringy pieces of lingerie. She could have had her stand anywhere in the room in any position, decide the scenario, code the mannerisms, the knowledge, the back story, her level of confidence, bashfulness, amenability. Anything. Even the décor could be remade through augmented vision.

Instead, she had chosen one of the stock options, the top seller. The bot in the bed was her wife, come home after both had been away at work and

taking a short nap, still fully clothed in tight skirt and flowing blouse, all died deep metallic earth tones. Not new clothes, just the right amount of wear, like a well-worn shoe, like their relationship. And all she had to do was sit on the edge of the bed, give her wife's shoulder a light tap, and talk. The bot would be the consummate conversationalist, frank when needed and understanding all the rest, coded exactly to her personality. She would make the day better, tenable, and know all her quirks and desires without any need to ask. She'd suggest the woman in the grey mask join her in bed.

The woman in the grey mask listened to the tide of the bot's breath, in and out. Almost real, almost couldn't hear the fans whirring in the background, the machine carrying out its designed purpose.

It was all so manufactured. So ... brittle.

The woman in the grey mask hesitated. Her hand shook.

On the back of the bot's neck, nestled at the bottom of its shock of raven hair, lay the machine interface where humans normally lodged their tech core. Instead, the bot's control panel lay covered by a skin-toned plate. The woman in the grey mask swooped to the bot's side and, before the bot could wake from its slumber, before her fake wife could murmur a greeting, the woman had taken the chip out of her pocket and laid it overtop the control panel. The bot's body went rigid, its limbs locked into stasis. The woman in the grey mask lifted the thin panel out of the way and slid a thumb sized adapter into a now open slot.

"Time to see if there are ghosts in machines after all," said the woman.

She turned around and walked out the way she had come.