



V. A. JEFFREY

THE PROTOTYPE

A SHORT SCI-FI TALE

THE PROTOTYPE

A Short Story

By V. A. Jeffrey

Book cover design by James at www.goonwrite.com

Copyright 2013

All the numerous company meetings, the mandatory overtime, the conferences, the wheeling and dealing behind closed doors and long, honest hours by most of us had culminated in this one, grand day. The project: The Prototype, or more accurately, called Vartan Pragmatic Heuristic Impression Linear Model (VPHILM) finally, after ten years in the making, was live.

Around here we just called him Will. By the way, my name's Bob.

Fred, the public relations project leader for VPHILM and my good friend, took the liquid and crystal processing chip gingerly out of its iced case with heavy-duty rubber gloves. The chip, essentially the brain for the android prototype, a sapphire and violet-colored thing had to be kept cold until it was planted inside of its host. *Ooohs* and *aaahs* reverberated through the vast assembly hall as all the employees in Section C - 30 on the southern campus were gathered to see "Will" come to "life". With a great and nervous sigh Fred slipped it carefully into the life-sized body of the humanoid lying on the table before him.

"Careful, Fred." I murmured nervously. That chip was worth more than all the gold in the world as far as some were concerned at Vartan Industries.

Other employees from the other departments on campus were watching the occasion with bated breath through giant vision screens. These were planted all over the campus. To see the newborn prototype come to life - to see the hard work and the dreams of future national expansion and exploration of space come to life in this new creation was thrilling. Will was part of Man's future. To help Man where ever he would go - out there. He was the next Man's Best Friend, as Fred used to say.

There was a great and exaggerated release of pressure and tension from those gathered. The android was lying face down, looking like a dead man in the morgue. The small opening at the nape of the neck closed up like a thin mouth. I heard the opening click and then there was a soft hissing sound. The humanoid jerked suddenly, taking a breath. The body rose and fell slowly as the seconds ticked by, then it began moving more rhythmically. Its breathing eventually became regular, becoming accustomed to this new function of breathing. Will had been built to breathe like humans to make his future human co-workers feel more comfortable around him. In fact, that was why he looked human instead of like most of the robots and other intelligent machines being built around campus. He was to be a companion, worker and a high-powered mutant computer to travel in space and help humans settle the solar system frontier. Space exploration had newly risen again as a frontier for humans and Vartan Industries was one of the biggest corporations near the front and center getting ready to land some of the most lucrative government contracts around. More "Wills" would be engineered and built, spaceships full of them as test subjects before humans would race out and grab their piece of the cosmos frontier gold.

More than a simple machine, Will's purpose. Or what was supposed to be his purpose.

Suddenly the android pulled himself up on his forearms and then clumsily toppled over on his back. He sat up, wobbling a little. At first there was a pregnant silence that filled the hall and then many cheered and there was applause. The liquid-crystal chip and its secret patented DNA technology was a smashing success.

"Well Bob, we've done it!" Said Fred, all smiles.

"Yep! I knew this latest generation of the chip would work perfectly. A good friend I know in engineering, *he* worked on that chip."

"He done good."

"So what's the first order of business for Will? Is he coming down to help everyone out around here?" I asked.

"That's the word. To help him get a feel for how some of the different departments work, their functions. He'll need to know a lot of things and he can soak up information very easily and assimilate it into his work. Seamless mind with this new chip. A vast improvement over the last one."

"Right." The last android project, a fiasco, as I heard it, came and went before I started working at Vartan Industries.

"I just wonder, Fred. Someone might steal him or the tech."

"He *is* the tech."

"You know what I mean. I'm surprised it hasn't happened yet. Whitney Corp. agents are always lurking around trying to steal secrets."

"It wouldn't be the first time they tried. But Vartan has things under control these days. Don't think they don't. We're on the brink of a vast space exploration project that will bring back quadrillions of dollars in resources to folks back home. I trust they know how to guard their secrets, Bob. Whitney Corp. hasn't been able to find out anything about Will and now it's too late to get the jump on us. They are always one step behind us." Footsteps were approaching. Fred turned.

"Speaking of steps, here he comes now. Come on in here, Will!" Said Fred. A few employees going down the hall patted Will on the back. Will nodded awkwardly at them and then wandered into my office. He was so finely made and finely tuned that he gave the aura of simply being a young foreign student getting his bearings rather than an android or machine. He was programmed that way but the cheerfulness he exuded was not as hard-wired from what Chip told me. It was, somewhat, but he seemed to suggest that there was some leeway for personality to come through - personality that reflected the maker of the chip but was also partly the being's own internal "way". But Will may have picked up this quality of hopefulness and wistful excitement from his new environment, processed and examined it and searched for the closest way to understand such fleeting emotional qualities. Which probably translated as cheerfulness. I don't know much about that kind of stuff, I leave it to the geniuses to figure it out. (A nice touch by my engineering friend, if I do say so.)

"Hullo, Fred and Bob. Hullo. Hullo!" Said Will. He blinked and a bit of moisture misted from his right eye. He wiped it clean. Even the tear ducts worked. "Mr Allen said to find you."

"Chip sent you, did he?" Will nodded. "Well, you'll be following along with Bob and me today, working in this department for a little while before you move on to another department. Bob here is in Quality Assurance. Below there is one of the larger assembly lines you'll be monitoring. Beneath the glass windows here," Fred extended his arm out over the vast cavernous production assembly room below, "is where employees build parts for the brand new space stations and ships that Vartan is rolling out. Simple production line assembly work down there. Bob monitors quality from up here. You will be helping to monitor some of this work on the floor, Will. Come, we'll show you around." Some of the workers glanced up through the big windows and saw their new co-worker and smiled. A few waved at Will. Will managed a clumsy smile. I looked up beyond my own office and saw at the top level of the department floor a few of the guys in upper management peering down at Will from their polished

window offices above my own. I noticed one in particular, whose constant sneering, scheming and sneakiness sometimes gave me indigestion. I abruptly looked away and faced my friend and our new super-apprentice. I grinned at them.

"Well, let's get started."

Will, having a brain that could compute, store, receive and make immediate sense of prodigious amounts of information took in everything like a sponge, no matter what. And often he turned out to be able to do something that even some humans do not do; the ability to use what is known as discernment about this information he was collecting and finding. He could ascertain things others did not or would not ascertain. Which proved to be problematic.

Will sat in the epicenter of the vast assembly room on the floor at the seat and console built specifically for him. He was plugged into the system of this particular department - there were numerous departments at Vartan Industries - plugged in by what looked like light currents to monitor all systems parts coming through for quality. Any corrupted, damaged or otherwise imperfect parts would be reported. A simple enough task. He processed all information coming through. What I found was that if there was even the minutest fraction of odd detail or imperfection in the products being assembled and passed, counted and cataloged as they were coming through, Will caught it and sorted it and filed it away in that brain of his. He detailed these less than perfect parts to the last atom: what it was, where it was in the room, what machine it came from, the team working on it from the department beyond, the names of the team members that allowed it through and whether it was passed through or whether it was sent for Recycling. He was even better than I was and I was pretty good, up here in my office checking on these things with my own computers. Will was sort of acting as a buffer for me and for those few weeks my life was made pretty breezy. I even had time to play a little mini-golf in between breaks because of Will.

Everything for seven weeks was running smooth as ice water. Then came the eighth week.

On Monday Will began exhibiting odd signals, ie. behavior. Specifically for me, communicating that something was wrong. For a few minutes Will would pause and something in his body would make a soft clicking sound. I was connected to him through wireless headset this particular week so only I noticed this and he only communicated with me in this way.

Discernment.

I was always cautious about reporting things, unlike Fred, because I knew that sometimes mysteries that needed solving at Vartan Industries often got lost in the shuffle before I could make heads or tails of things. So I kept this between myself and Will and this seemed to suit him too. Anyway, as I was saying, Will's brain activity would light up with signals. Those signals I would see on one of my screens through a special program I was using that mapped his brain. Through my headset those signals translated into soft beeping or clicking sounds. You could see faint wave patterns, first a violet color, then blue. Sometimes orange if something was really wrong. They would flicker momentarily and then turn black as the wave patterns dispersed off screen. I was ready to make a private report, to document this behavior of the android for my own records first before telling anyone when the lunch alarm sounded for everyone in Q. A.

Part of my job was to observe him and make sure his transition was smooth and seamless and it had been. Until today. I have to admit that after having been impressed with Will's discernment I did poor Will in by my own lack of discernment.

I turned around and found Will standing there suddenly at the back of my chair. He cocked his head

inquisitively.

"Bob?"

"Yes?"

"I must speak to you about certain. . . inconsistencies I have come across in the data streams in this department. Specifically between product sales of certain weapons parts from this department to other, unidentified vendors." *What?!?* I tried my best to remain calm and cool.

"Ah. I see. I was wondering what was wrong down there." *Not good! Not at all!*

"What do these inconsistencies look like, exactly?" I asked quietly. Will seemed to understand the delicacy and he lowered his voice immediately. I got up and closed the door to my office.

"I have found at least two thousand of them, so far this week. Discrepancies in where they are routed to and who they are sold to but not for how much. Certain things are obscured it seems, such as certain vendor names or where they are going past the point of Recycling. These parts should not be going to Recycling at all as they are not damaged, malformed or imperfect in any way. They are routed to go to Recycling but they are not recorded correctly in recycling logs in the proper amounts or at all in some cases." I glanced around uncomfortably. Most people were now busy to get to lunch or run errands before getting back to work. This is usually when the rumor mill around here went full tilt. I saw out of the corner of my eye a few curious glances of fellow employees in Q. A. peeking through my window at the door. I smiled brightly and waved.

"Say hi, Will, so no one will worry. Wave at them." He waved cheerfully and immediately turned his attention back to me. Once Will was on to something he was was tenacious.

"Bob, Something is wrong. What can you do about it?"

"I'm not sure yet." I looked out over the mountainous complex into the blue sky at the other end of the wall. That window was an elongated rectangular window where I could still see blue, blue sky. It was the place I looked to for pondering when I needed time to, well, ponder things. I suddenly had a thought. I faced him with my most authoritative air.

"Say nothing yet to anyone for the time being. I will need to examine your findings for myself and I will need to have a report of all your findings, Will." Truth was, I was slightly terrified. I really didn't know what to do yet. Things like this weren't supposed to happen and especially to unimportant peons like me. I did not want everyone to think that something had gone terrible wrong in my department and on my watch. I liked things to go smoothly. I don't like snafus or surprises.

"Say nothing until you get an official word from me." I said resolutely. This seemed to placate him. Will nodded innocently and we left for lunch.

Fred, my ever chipper friend, found us at lunch in the main cafeteria. He seemed mildly surprised and pleased to see Will joining us.

"Howdy! Will! The bosses aren't having you work overtime today I see. Good. You'll get a chance to see how we really live away from home. There's a few good restaurants on campus. I prefer the plain, good old home town food here in the main cafeteria but don't let that stop you. I heard you can take in actual food." Will nodded.

"Sometimes. I can sense. . . what do you call it? Taste? Of juice or even rice."

"It gets better, Will. There's a good steakhouse at the top level floor of the northern campus."

"You been *there* Fred?" I asked, surprised. The steakhouse was really a private club. You had to be invited by a member. And the prices! Fred was always pretty good at schmoozing, though.

"Oh yeah! I got a three-day pass from a friend who used to work in that part of the campus. His friend was a chef there in the steakhouse and gave him a pass and then he gave one to me. I still have one more day left. I'll take you guys if my wife won't go back." He grinned sheepishly. His wife was a big woman and she loved steak.

"Take the wife. We'll figure something out."

"So this is what we will do every lunch break?" Will asked suddenly.

"Well, it's a time to relax a little. Relate, congregate and associate. Good way to study morale, behavior and how people feel about things, like company policy and such. You know." Said Fred. Will nodded and picked up his drink. His bottle, a stainless steel cylinder was filled with an electric blue fluid, his "food" a plasma and electrolyte drink that rebuilt his skeletal frame and nourished his vital processes, which kept him running efficiently.

After finishing our lunch, he, is liquid potion - I had German potato salad and a polish ring with sauerkraut and a soda and Fred a chili dog and a green salad, we went out for a walk on the top floor promenade, a green garden oasis high up near the clouds. It was near the Silver Pavilion. The air craft and taxis floating below looked like small, slow-moving toys.

"You know, Bob, I'm going to clue you in on a secret I keep hearing about up here on level one-hundred." He said. He cleared his throat.

"Well come on. Don't hold out." *More secrets?* I wondered.

"You probably think it's just drama and rumor." He said. I laughed nervously. Actually, I was keen to hear it even though the new information from Will had put a damper on my mood. This perked me up. Certain rumors came true. Vartan Industries was in a mighty forward momentum, getting the national space program out of the dustbin of history, re-opening, extending and infusing with prime national importance and power, even the world scene. People talked about eventually moving, exploring and colonizing the inner planets and the way was going forward to build several new cities on Mars, the moon and on a massive space station near Venus. With Vartan (and unfortunately Whitney Corp.) products!

"The big guys in the silver complex, so I hear, are in negotiations with the N. A. S. A and the White House to finalize the deal. The big one."

"You mean that the plans for the first city built near Venus might come true sooner than we thought?"

"Yes, indeed! And we will be building the vehicles, the ships and even some housing units for all the first colonists traveling there. I heard that we will hear something tangible by the end of next week."

"Ah-ha!" I'd dreamed of this since I was kid. My great-great grandfather was an astronaut. I have his pictures up everywhere in the house. I remember my grandfather talking about how they had this optimism back in the mid 20th century over the space program; how it gave hope to the youth for a new and great future in space. That hope was coming back. People were excited. Man and Woman was on the move again.

"Androids and robots like Will will be on the front lines in helping humans with the work there." We both looked appreciatively at Will.

"At your service. Always." Said Will. "More opportunity for exploration and learning for me."

"Biggest contract yet!" I said. As we were imagining the great things of the future the C.E.O. Mr Vartan himself was approaching. He was a tall man, fit, tanned with perfect white teeth and a firm handshake.

"Howdy folks!" He said. "Enjoying the sunshine?"

"As always Mr. Vartan!" We said. Will was silent.

"Hello, Will." Said Mr. Vartan.

"Hello, Mr Vartan."

"It is good to see you acclimating to life at Vartan Industries. I hear you're doing very well. You are a precious member of the Vartan family. Most valuable employee."

"Indeed, he is." Said Fred.

"Indeed." I piped in.

"Well now! Good to hear agreement. I've got grand news for everyone soon. Grand news! You'll have to wait until next week to hear the official word." Fred winked at me. Mr Vartan laughed.

"I see the rumor machine is hard at work. Still, there are many things coming down the tube. I'll see you fellas around." He then made off. Feeling like an urgent opportunity was slipping away I made a

decision.

"Guys, stay here." I said to the other two and I caught up with him.

"Mr Vartan. Before you go sir, today Will brought something disturbing to my attention. Could we speak about it privately?"

"Oh?" Mr. Vartan, usually in a sunny mood, frowned. I got a little nervous. I hated being a bringer of bad news too often, even if it was part of my job. But this was the man whose family built the corporation from the ground up and Vartan himself was a mentor to the many young employees who interned here. Who would want to let him down?

"Well, come up to my office after lunch and we'll talk about it. Sounds important." One thing about Mr. Vartan was that you could talk to him, like you couldn't really talk to the other big wigs around here. And he ran the place.

"Thank you so much!" I said. I headed back to Will and Fred.

Mr Teely was headed out of the southern campus and made his way across the manicured promenade. He was on his way it seemed to the Silver Pavilion where upper management hung out. Teely was the C.F.O.

"Hello Mr Teely. Beautiful day isn't it?" Called Fred cheerfully. I detected that Fred was being cheeky for we all knew what the response would be. Teely rolled his cold eyes over us peons with just the slightest bit of scorn. His expression took on a sneer but he said nothing to us, as if we weren't even standing there at all. He even ignored Will. Teely kept on his way.

"Mr. Teely did not respond. Is he malfunctioning?" Asked Will. We laughed.

"His attitude. We call him tight-ass Teely behind his back." Fred chuckled.

"Tight. Ass. Teely." Said Will slowly.

"Shh! Don't say that to his face!" I warned. Fred guffawed.

"Teely. More loose than fast. Many of the inconsistent reports come from his computers with his log-on. From his office." I quickly hushed him up again.

"Huh?" Asked Fred.

"Never mind, Fred. We'd probably better get going." I said hurriedly. Vartan was already gone. I hurried after him leaving Fred and Will behind.

"Yes, well, have it brought up tomorrow. I'll take a look at it then," he said, "and thanks." He slid the receiving button to off on the panel and the phone screen went blank. He turned his attention to me. It took all my nerve not to keep clearing my throat out of nervousness.

"So, what is the matter with Will now?"

"Nothing is wrong with Will at all Mr. Vartan. He found something wrong with the numbers in the department we work in. Product coming through going to unknown vendors or being routed to places they shouldn't be. Like to Recycling. He said things aren't adding up correctly. Noticed it this week, especially."

"Haven't you noticed any of this before now?" Mr. Vartan gave me a pointed look. I felt perspiration break out on my back.

"I have not. Which means that if this is being done on purpose it's on a level that cannot be detected by my computers. If it had, I would have notified someone immediately."

"Hmm. No doubt, no doubt." His face darkened.

"He told me right before lunch, so I haven't gotten the chance to look over the issue in detail yet but I plan to immediately."

"Give me an example."

"I haven't yet examined it more closely."

"Oh right, you said you'd get right on that after lunch.. Please please do. I cannot afford for any

problems to surface now. I don't like hearing bad news Bob."

"Oh no, Mr. Vartan, neither do I. Oh, before I forget. Will also mentioned that most of those discrepancies issue from Teely's department." Vartan looked slightly alarmed.

"I see. I'm glad you brought this to my attention. And right on the eve of a major announcement for the company. I am sure you have an inkling about what is going to happen?" I nodded slowly.

"I am sorry that I did not catch this earlier-" I began.

"Oh no, no, no. Do not concern yourself too much. I will look into this issue now. Communication is key in this company. You did just that and I'm glad you did. I will handle this and Larry Teely from here. He'd better have a damned good explanation for this!"

"Thank you sir! I will be on my way!"

I left his office with Will feeling as if I'd accomplished one of the greatest tasks of my career. I sent Will back to the work room. I had nipped a great crime of the century and shored up the company. I was nearly preening by the time the elevator had reached Section C-30. It occurred to me suddenly that perhaps I should have a talk with Chip. After all, if someone was robbing the company, selling arms or selling secrets Will could be my sleuth sidekick in uncovering who besides Teely was not on Vartan's side. I pushed and slid my thumb down the slick control panel and the computer interface appeared as if drifting out of a mirror.

I don't know what made me think of this. Perhaps Teely's sly and devious manner spurred me. It also occurred to me that Mr Vartan did not seem as concerned as I thought he might be. In fact, he did not seem particularly angry at all. I watched intently at the shadows flying by in muted colors as the elevator flew down the many levels.

"Level 10 and 1/2. Engineering, level 3." I instructed. The Virtual Voice repeated my command and the elevator sped up even faster. I could feel the air pressure rising and adjusting accordingly for my own safety. Reaching the engineering level the elevator came to a smooth stop and the doors slid open. The halls were not the typical sunlit halls like where many others worked but were flooded with soft light and gleaming chrome and glass.

"Level 10 and 1/2. Engineering level 3." Said the Virtual Voice. Chip was one of the engineers that helped developed Will's brain. In fact, he *was* Will's brain. I figured if anyone could help us keep tabs on that greedy devil, it would be Chip.

Over the weekend, the first in a long time that anyone in Q. A. had off, I relaxed with the wife and kids at the pool at her parents house on Saturday. My own parents had a BBQ on Sunday so we headed to their house in Hood River for that. Everything was right with the world.

Until Monday morning.

Getting to my desk I expected see all of the hundreds of other employees coming in, checking in and getting ready for work. I started up my consoles and went through all the system checks of all the programs I would be using for the day. I slid my hand up the light console and the lights came on. I glanced absently out through my windows again. I did not see Will. I ordered coffee. Minutes later a gopher had arrived with my coffee, setting it down nimbly on my desk. Andre, I think was his name. I didn't have time to say much to him. Will was still not there and that was starting to bug me. Will was never late and he was not due to move on from this department until the following week. To my dismay, instead of Will I saw ten extra employees taking up the epi-center of the room where he usually sat, hooking themselves up. This was the old way but now it seemed so . . .inefficient and wrong. I was about to leave my office and go straight to the managers on the upper level to inquire when Fred came in right on time. Around 9-ish.

"Fred! Where is Will?" I asked.

"That's what I came in to tell you about." He closed the door. "Don't say anything but word is, yesterday over the phone, I'd heard, by a friend, that Will was decommissioned!" He lowered his voice. and he was visibly upset. My eyes must have been as wide as moons then. I stood up, shocked.

"Pass that by me again?"

"He is being decommissioned. Bad, bad news! I still can't believe it, Bob." He said. I immediately had a terrible suspicion that my own big mouth played a part in it and rumors slid their way around this place like tainted air.

"Did they even say why? Why on earth would they do something stupid like that?" I threw the coffee in the trash can. It came down in a sloshy, hard thud. Fred was shaking his head miserably.

"I have no idea. Something about a malfunction. An irreparable malfunction in his programming."

"And they couldn't find this malfunction before he was put to work? Irreparable malfunction my ass!" I said my voice growing louder. Fred's eyes widened.

"Whoa, whoa there, Bob! I'm sure they would never do anything like this without good reason. After all, he is only a prototype."

"A very expensive and valuable *prototype*, Fred. With a *personality*. Sort of. You don't just throw something like that away. And besides. I don't buy it. With all the quality checks around here before Will came into production, while in production and before he was put online? Come on!" I said angrily. He looked at me helplessly. We were both helpless. It was like losing a friend. Fred was always great. Earnest and well meaning but he could be thick sometimes. Besides, I had to remember that I knew something Fred didn't. Things around here weren't adding up and Will had found out about it. Hell, I wasn't a genius myself but something stank. Fred believed what the big guys told him. I used to but I know better these days. I decided not to pursue my real thinking on the issue. After all, company morale was of utmost importance these days. Humanity was going forward and Vartan was part of that momentum. Nothing should stop or spoil that ideal. I had to find some other way to discover and solve this problem.

I felt foolish. Will paid the price for my gullibility. Later I found out that the android had been destroyed and crunched up like an old demolished, fly-car. Which made me even madder. And depressed. No matter how friendly and nice Vartan was, Will could not have been put out like that without his say-so.

"I'm sorry, Fred. you know, my temper and stuff."

"It's passion is what it is. I am sure things will work out better. Somehow. They will be able to make another one, new and improved. I guess." Even Fred seemed not to really believe this.

"Somehow." We both gazed out of the windows down at the assembly floor.

"They'll get to work on a new one soon enough. They have to. The project in space is only a couple of years away. One that won't malfunction. I'm sure of it."

"I need coffee." I said suddenly, impatiently.

"Just order it. Andre will be here in a second."

Malfunction my ass. The only malfunction going on around here was an ethical one and Teely couldn't be the only one behind it. I couldn't do anything about Vartan. I couldn't confront Teely either. I wasn't on their level in any way. But Mr. Vartan was voted as chairman-of-the-board and he could be voted out too. And Teely! There had to be some way to expose him. I just didn't know where to start without consequences to myself. But there had to be a way. The green alarm sounded. A required company meeting. I wasn't surprised.

Instead of going to the meeting I made my way, calmly, first to the Odd Parts Lab, where intriguing and high concept machines that were old or outdated were kept. Honestly, this department was slowly being phased out to Recycling but the company had still left one guy, a machinist, in charge of the place. I asked him if he'd seen anything new come through the chute or if anything had been brought in.

"You mean the android?" He asked wryly, looking up from an antique computer screen. I nodded. His desk was piled high with cattywompus-looking tools, parts and equipment I'd never seen before.

"Nope. Didn't come through here and I seriously doubt important tech like that would."

"How'd you know?"

"About?"

"Will."

"The android? Word gets around. Even down here."

"You're right. Sorry to bother you." I said, turning to leave.

"No bother. The things they do around here don't make any sense. Like keeping this department, for instance. I was sorry to hear about it. What a shame."

It must have looked strange, what, with everyone heading like herds of buffalo to the Green Room while a lone man was making his way in the opposite direction. I heard comments like "Where are you going?" and "The meeting's that way!" Which I roundly ignored. I made my way to Recycling, first walking fast, faster then running. people were giving me strange looks. I didn't care. I came to the giant plexi-glass windows and peeked in. I could not see down to the floor and the recycling room was vast and wide with several levels. I looked for the main doors in. They were locked fast. I wasn't sure what I was expecting to see. Or who. It seemed eerily empty.

But of course. There was the meeting.

"Excuse me, sir? Can I help you?" Asked a young security officer asked. She nearly startled me.

"Oh, I uh, I for got something. My badge! To get in!" I said.

"Just stand at the console and speak your badge number."

"Um, I forgot my badge number." Her questing look turned suspicious.

"I don't recognize you. Do you work on this level? What is your name? Maybe I can-"

"Never mind. It wasn't that important after all." I said and I ran back to Level C-30. I heard her calling after me. While in the elevator, it stopped suddenly, at a floor I hadn't requested. My stomach churned. The doors flew open and Jerome, the head of security and several burly male security officers got on. They were all looking straight at me

"Hello there, Bob. Seems like you got a little lost over at Recycling. What happened?" Asked Jerome. He and his team were friendly enough but I knew that one step out of line and they'd have me on the floor. My heart started pounding. No one had ever called security on me before. I wasn't a criminal. I was a *valuable employee!* I just wanted to see what I could see, was all! Somebody must have saw me on camera going against the herd toward Recycling. I decided to do what my mother had always taught me. Just be honest.

"Truth is, Will the android was in my department. Sort of like under my care and he was sent to be decommissioned. I was just wondering if they had simply thrown him away like a piece of garbage. You know like how they crunch those fly-cars up into square pieces of metal at the demolition yards when they're no good anymore?" The security guards all groaned at this. I think they finally understood me.

"That was too bad about Will. I don't get that. I can't really blame ya. But things are what they are, Bob. Rules have to be followed. We gotta escort you to The Green Room. They want everybody there and you've been here long enough to know how they are about some of these meetings. Serious business." Said Jerome.

"Sorry if I caused any upset. It won't happen again." I said.

"We understand." After all, these guys were just doing their job. Once the elevator stopped they escorted me toward the Green Room. They didn't follow me in, allowing me a shred of dignity. And that was the end of my little rebellion. At *that* particular time, anyway.

Outwardly I was cool and all grins, but inside I was even madder than ever.

There went a brilliant project, maybe even a viable artificial life, down the vast Vartan drain. I wonder what other things went down there that we didn't know about. *Worth all the gold in the world. Huh!* As it turned out, the first meeting had absolutely nothing to do with Will. It was about the contracts Vartan Industries had secured and what it meant for the future of Vartan Industries. Last week I would have been over the moon. Not this week. It was now Tuesday. The green alarm sounded again as soon as I settled in that morning for work. I looked at the jade green light blinking in the wall in annoyance. Fred came in, right on time as usual but he didn't stay long. Even he seemed a little soured.

"I guess we'll hear the real word at the meeting today. I swear. That alarm is annoying." Said Fred.

"No kidding." I grumbled. The Virtual Voice came online throughout all of the campuses.

"Attention, Vartan Employees. Another special meeting at lunch in the Green Room. Special required meeting."

"The news is already around. Now they want to clear up rumors." He said, then left to go on with his own tasks for the morning.

"More like damage control." I muttered. I took out the liquid-crystal chip that Chip from engineering had given me.

You see, he makes copies of everything important. *Everything*. Especially when it comes to information. Chip had seen similar shenanigans with the prototype that had come before Will. Chip and I often shared important tidbits of information and he'd told me this was something I should keep safe.

"To look at in our spare time," he'd stressed. These things needed to be kept cold in order to work so I assumed it was simply a throwaway. But the information was still there. He'd made a bare-bones copy of Will's "brain". All that information, knowledge and even something akin to personality, in a small chip that looked like a piece of silver star dust. It felt cool in my hand, the crystal-like surface shining like a star. Whatever was being hidden by destroying him would not remain hidden forever. Will would live on in some way if Chip and I had something to say about it. My mother used to have a saying: *"Dirt always comes to light."* I looked at the glittering chip and then slipped it back in my pocket.

True words, indeed.

The End?

Want to know when the next short story, novel or [blueshift fiction](#) web serial episode is coming out before everyone else? Join the mailing list: <http://eepurl.com/kxRxx>!

I hope you enjoyed the short story and please consider leaving a review.
This is only a prelude to a bigger space opera story!
Look for the first book in the new *Mission* space opera series
Mission: Flight To Mars, to come Summer, 2014!

More of V. A. Jeffrey's work can be found at: <http://epistlepublishing.com/>

Read more short fiction from V. A. Jeffrey:

Dust and Bones
Rainfall
The Candy Shop
Edge of Darkness
Keeping Strange Time (short fiction collection)
Fairy Tales and Fables

and the web serial project: *the blueshifters* at
<http://blueshiftfiction.blogspot.com/>