

A Nice Touch

TRIGGER WARNINGS: Murder, torture, strong language. Seriously, this one goes to some dark places.

“You will be required to do wrong no matter where you go. It is the basic condition of life, to be required to violate your own identity. At some time, every creature which lives must do so. It is the ultimate shadow, the defeat of creation; this is the curse at work, the curse that feeds on all life. Everywhere in the universe.”

– Rick Deckard, from *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

by Philip K. Dick

“How do ya bite your own teeth?”

The robot tugs. Ropes creak as they strain the steel anchor. I got that drilled into a big slab of concrete, and I put that sucker dead-center of my entertaining room. “Please,” it whispers. “Kill me.” It coughs. “Or sit me up, at least,

“Does a dog have Buddha nature?” I lean Grampa's oak rocking chair back, watching this skinjob grovel. It's late, and I got one candle burning. The only illumination. Sides the moon

through my skylights. Me and it, we been reading my Bible by its light. I set Mr. Dick's masterpiece on the mahogany table beside me.

“Lemme have a sip of that whiskey then, eh? And a smoke,” the android says. A loathsome thing lying there, fucking up the marble flooring. Its busted schnauz whistles as the robot pretends to breathe.

I just knew bringing my work home would be a pain in the ass. I've retired dozens of replicants in my forty year career, and they always betray themselves during the drive. But breaking this one has presented challenges. Plus I did have some chores needed doing round the estate.

“Refreshments’ll be served once the testing is done.” I drain my glass. Wild Turkey slides down my throat, hot’n thick. I keep on watching the replicant and not blinking. It looks like me, how they all do. And we been at it a long time, which means it looks like shit—beard all matted, the ribs poking out, wrinkles packed with filth. A nice touch, that.

“If, that is.” I pause for effect. “You can be hayved.”

“‘Hayved?’ I don't even understand what that means. Dude, I've killed myself for weeks. I built up the sides of this piece of falling-down shit so it *don't* fall down. I dug you a new well.

Damnit, I crammed the above-ground swimming pool into an underground hole, just so you could have it, I dunno, underground? Stupidest thing I ever did.”

That's true. "The summer palace really has come along since ya got here. Thankee very much."

"Fuckin summer palace. Right." It cranks a raspy laugh that winds up a coughing fit; Nice touch.

"Busted ass Unabomber shack with a giant hole in the ground out back."

I open my red toolbox. My interrogation tools. Pliers, knives, steel wire, an old e-meter I picked up at a CoS bankruptcy auction in town. My axe.

"Pull over. I gotta be sick," said Deckard.

The skinjob replied, "Aw, hell. I knew I'd regret pickin you up."

"Hurry. It's comin," the haggard blade runner said between feigned retches. The replicant pulled over and Deckard leapt out. Jamming his index finger down his throat with his left, he pulled a PKD-model handgun from his waistband with the right. He puked, screamed a womanly scream, and said, "Scuse me, sir? I'm sorry to be such a bother. I'm hurtin somethin awful. C'mere n help me."

The robot hmphed, got out, and walked around front, bitching under its breath.

“I’m sorry,” Rick Deckard said. “You’re retiring now.” The report was loud. Scanning both directions for headlights, he wished he had a silencer like in movies. He retrieved his army duffel, reached in and grabbed the baby’s blanket. Unwrapping it, he beheld his gleaming axe.

Through chokey gasps, the still animate thing coughed up red syrup. Nice touch. “Hey man, you gotta get me to a hospital. I’m gonna die.”

Deckard turned, axe in hand.

“C’m on, man. Drop me at the curb. I won’t say nothin.”

With both hands, the blade runner raised his axe high. “Sorry, my guy. Only way to be sure. I gotta inspect your CPU.”

“Motherfucker. You’re the one that’s been all over the news. I know who you are.”

Deckard grinned.

“You’re The Lumberj—”

Pliers make a great starting-out tool. Skin Job tenses. Its breath quickens, and it's blubbering.
Real tears. A nice touch.

“You ain’t gotta do this.”

I raise the pliers'n the robot quiets, shaking and clutching its belly. I jam the e-meter's electrode handles into its fists. They don’t work. Nothing here does, cause I can't go near electricity too long or *my* shit stops working. The replicant don't know that, though.

“Describe a time when you felt shame.” The metal pliers catch the candlelight in their shiny teeth.

“When I let you fuck me in the backseat of my car.”

“Wrong. Earlier.”

“When I beat my sister unconscious for stealing my weed when I was fifteen.”

“What'ser name?”

“M-Melanie.”

“If I say, ‘I’m lying right now,’ am I telling the truth?”

“I. I don't—”

I bring the pliers down, and a tooth skids across the floor. The scream is shrill, and I shudder. I hate squeaky noises. “Why don't birds refrigerate their eggs?”

“I guess, cause they don't eat em? They like, sit on em.” it says. A whiney, I'm-about-to-cry voice.

“Cause birds never eat eggs, right.”

“Right.” The thing's long face and hollow eyes, so sincere, like a ghost in a man suit.

I go for a knife, taking several moments to make the perfect selection. Skin Job's intense eyes are transfixed. The dulllest, rustiest blade wins.

“You familiar with the so-called bog folk of Ireland?”

“N-no—”

I'm cutting before I even realize it's done. A superficial scratch on the arm. It hollers appropriately.

“Weren't a conversation piece,” I say. “Couple hundred years ago, some peat farmers fell across a truly awesome thing. Know what it was?”

“I—”

I cut the other side, a little deeper, and it hollers again.

“A swamp fulla corpses is what,” I holler, loud enough to match the robot's. “Tons of em. More'n two thousand years old. The bodies was perfectly preserved cause of humic acid'n tannins'n shit that's in the bog. Their skeletons liquified. But the soft tissues: skin, organs, even the stomach contents, all intact. What's your sister's name?”

“Melanie?”

“Wrong! I meant the other one.” I cut a long, deep gash, half a Chelsea grin. The skinjob wails like the devil blowing through my treetops.

“In olden Irish times, your king embodied more'n a simple leader. He's a holy object, the land itself. Everybody's fertility, health, success, everything; the king shouldered the responsibility. Describe your most recent nightmare.”

It stutters about for a time. A nice touch. “I'm driving a deserted part of Route One. I can barely see the road for the rain. A man is walking the shoulder, cold and wet. His thumb is out. He

looks like the devil. I'm not gonna stop. But I can't control my body anymore. The man climbs in back.”

I stab straight, piercing its meat near the clavicle. “Another.”

The robot brays like an animatronic coyote left to freeze in a late cold snap. “I don't have another. It's the same every night since—”

“If the king fails to protect his people, or to make justice and heirs, he breaches a sacred contract.” I sit criss-cross-applesauce beside it. My knife traces its left areola. “Back then a man's nipples symbolized his manhood. His strong spunk.” I pat its no-no a couple times then resume slowly circling the pink disc.

“I'll tell you anything you wanna know. Just make it stop!”

“Cutting, even pinching the nipples drains a man of his kingly potency. Stripped of humanity, the king got buried alive in the peat bog.”

“I admit it. I'm a robot, a replicant, a fucking skinjob. Anything you say. Just stop this.”

“Too late. The rubber nipples belong to me.” With keen precision, I carve away the thing's left coral-colored ring. The replicant roars like the cities collapsing at once. I rise and lower the rubber areolar tissue to the candle flame till it sizzles then pop it in my mouth. Instead of

chewing, I suck on it, tilting my head back and closing my eyes, absorbing the umami, savoring the pungent brine of unwashed flesh. A man's flesh.

I swallow the nipple. I weep bitterly for a long time.

“This is real meat. You ain't a robot at all, are ya?”

“Let me go. I wanna see my wife and kids. I ain't no snitch. I swear.”

I raise the axe high. “Yeah buddy,” I say. “That's a nice touch.”