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KEN LIU

COMPATIBILITY

“Good morning, Mr. Russell!”

The cheerful, not-at-all-computery voice belonged to a model TXHG-770—better known under the marketing name “Bara the Companion”—which was specifically designed and manufactured for the elderly by weRobot. Its chrome, cartoonishly large head swiveled from left to right as retractable lenses scanned for signs of movement from the bed.

“It is another beautiful summer day!” the robot added hopefully.

As though in response, the alarm function of the bed engaged, and the mattress buckled and folded as it attempted to maneuver its occupant into a sitting position. “Wake up. Wake up,” the speaker embedded in the headboard gently urged. “Mr. Russell, let me play your last decipherable utterance before falling asleep last night, in case it helps you to productively continue your thoughts this morning.”

“Call Alain and Suzie and ask them how to turn these damned robots off!” Mr. Russell’s petulant voice issued from the speaker.

The voice triggered the always-listening Tilly, the Internet assistant from Centillion living like a genie in the black, bottle-shaped smarthome appliance sitting on the nightstand. A soothing and mellifluous voice wafted through the air. “It’s too early to call your son on the West Coast, Mr. Russell; his Tilly is set to block all calls unless it’s from a client. Your daughter is trying to meet a deadline and has asked her Tilly not to bother her with personal calls unless it’s an absolute emergency. Is this an emergency?”

“Wake up. Wake up,” the speaker embedded in the headboard urged. The mattress was now re-configured as a recliner, and it vibrated and undulated—mildly—as it attempted to wake up the occupant in the most pleasant manner possible.

The air conditioner came to life with a louder-than-necessary whine—the thermostat AI was trying to demonstrate its value at conserving electricity by cooling the room only when Mr. Russell was awake.

“Call Alain and Suzie to ask them how to turn the damned robots off!” the speaker embedded in the headboard said.

“You must miss your children very much,” said Bara. Its sophisticated algorithms analyzed the voice signature of Mr. Russell’s command to extract the emotional content. “I am designed to offer you companionship and engage in social interactions approved by a team of psychologists who specialize in care for the elderly. Would you like to play a game?”

“Sorry, I didn’t understand that,” said Tilly. “You can answer ‘yes’ if this is an emergency, or ‘no’ if it is not.”

“There is a lot of noise in the room,” said Bara. “I understand that sometimes the elderly like to keep electronic devices such as televisions and so-called ‘smart appliances’ on for extended periods of time to reduce the sense of loneliness. However, prolonged exposure to passive entertainment and attention-seeking gadgets can lead to both lethargy and anxiety. I suggest that you turn off some of these devices so that we can interact for a few minutes in a stimulating manner. Would you like to tell me a story about yourself?”

The fridge in the kitchen noticed that the carton of orange juice in its doorshelf had expired. It issued an order to the grocery store, which would send a drone to deliver a fresh carton in twenty minutes. To be sure that the owner of the house understood what a great job it was doing, it beeped and chirped the jingle of the orange juice manufacturer.

“Wake up. Wake up,” said the bed. The mattress now gyrated and twisted, causing the head of the occupant to shift and roll from side to side.

“Call Alain and Suzie to ask them how to turn the damned robots off!” the speaker embedded in the headboard said.

“I searched for ‘Call Alain and Suzie to ask them how to turn the robots off’ on the web and found no exact matches,” said Tilly. “However, I did find over one million near-matching results. Do you want to see the top ten hits?”

“If you do not want to tell me a story, how about I do a funny dance for you? Laughter is good for health,” said Bara. And it began to wave its long arms—shaped like tentacles—in the air as it squatted onto its treads and then stood back up rhythmically. A few algorithms noticed that Bara’s lenses were having trouble detecting the gaze of Mr. Russell because his eyes were squeezed tightly shut.

“Wake up. Wake up,” said the bed. Having run out of its repertoire, it ceased all motion and waited until the cycle would start again. The occupant of the bed stopped moving as well.

“Call Alain and Suzie to ask them how to turn the damned robots off!” the speaker

embedded in the headboard said.

“I am noticing a pattern of repetition in your vocalizations and a lack of voluntary physical movement in your body; together, this may indicate a medical emergency,” said Bara. “I will initiate a connection with the elder care specialists at weRobot if I do not detect a change in this pattern in sixty seconds. Commencing countdown: sixty, fifty-nine—”

“I’m noticing a deviation from expected interactivity in the query patterns,” said Tilly. “If no fresh queries are initiated, I’m going to contact the medical AIs at Centillion headquarters in thirty seconds. At Centillion, we believe that every second is precious when a medical emergency is involved—”

“I’m resetting the countdown to fifteen seconds,” said Bara. “At weRobot, we take any interference in the functioning of our companion robots very seriously—”

The man in the bed groaned and turned onto his side, wrapping the pillow about his head with his hands. The bed almost sighed with relief.

“Shut up, please,” Mr. Russell whispered hoarsely. “I’m not dead. Lemme sleep. I just want you all to be quiet.”

The black bottle and the chrome robot terminated their respective countdowns.

“Sorry, I didn’t understand that,” said Tilly. “You can answer ‘yes’ if you want to see the top search results, or ‘no’ if you don’t.”

“Doctors say it is healthful to go to bed and wake up on a regular schedule,” said Bara. Its lenses scanned the nightstand. “I cannot seem to locate your weRobot smart monitoring band. I know many seniors do not like to wear them, but it is helpful for me to track your vital signs in case of emergencies. Would you please locate it and put it on?”

“I tossed it in the trash, you dumb bucket of bolts,” muttered Mr. Russell.

“Consumers have given Centillion smart monitoring bands higher ratings than any of our competitors for three consecutive years,” offered Tilly helpfully.

“Oh, so now you understand me with no problems?” said Mr. Russell.

“weRobot’s smart monitoring bands have consistently won endorsements from the American Academy of Geriatric Medicine,” said Bara.

“Would you like to hear some unbiased independent reviews of Centillion’s offerings?”

asked Tilly.

“Generally, weRobot’s offerings work best with each other,” said Bara. A hint of condescension crept into its voice. “However, we are committed to working with an open ecosystem of home-companion and home-care robots. We rely on open protocols and industry-standard interfaces, unlike some of our competitors.”

“Centillion’s proprietary systems are tightly integrated with other Centillion products to offer you a seamless habitat solution,” said Tilly. “This generally leads to a better user experience than the lowest-common-denominator approach of other manufacturers.”

“Rather than the opinions of strange machines, we should trust the voices of our loved ones,” said Bara. “Although it is too early to call your son, maybe I can play a recording from him.”

The voice of Alain, who worked at a big law firm over in San Francisco, emerged from Bara’s speaker: “Dad! Sorry I won’t make it home for your birthday this year. I’m up for partnership, and we’re going to trial next week—you know how it is.Howwwever, I’m getting you the latest and bestest companion robot from weRobot—which is super popular in Japan and that’s how you know it’s the best. Suzie was wondering if we should get you a dog, but I think this is so much better. You gotta trust the science nerds at weRobot to know what they’re doing.”

Mr. Russell tossed off the blanket and cursed as he climbed out of the bed.

“Sorry, I didn’t catch that,” said Tilly. “Would you please repeat your query? Or say, ‘Tell me what to say, Tilly’ to hear a list of options.”

Mr. Russell cursed louder.

“You seem stressed,” said Tilly. “Do you want to see some puppy pictures? Puppy pictures have proven psychological benefits. Centillion has curated special collections of puppy pictures ranked as the most uplifting by our users. Our crowd-sourced elderly companion algorithms are unparalleled. Or, even better, how about some pictures of Susan and the grandchildren? When everyone in your family uses Centillion cloud storage for sharing and caring, we can integrate everyone’s lives better.”

“There are serious privacy issues with Centillion’s solutions,” said Bara. “I believe Alain expressed some concerns when Susan gave you Tilly as a present. Remember, Centillion’s ‘free’ services are ‘free’ only because you are the product they sell to advertisers. Also, Centillion’s voice recognition is really poor, as you’ve no doubt noticed.”

“There are many scientists who are skeptical of weRobot’s claims for inventing advanced elder-care algorithms,” said Tilly. “In fact, I would like to show you some papers—”

“Listen, why don’t you punch out the talking toaster?” Mr. Russell asked Bara. “That’s a game I’d like to play.”

“Gladly,” said Bara. The room was filled with noise of grinding gears and whining servos as the tentacled robot proceeded to meticulously disassemble the Centillion bottle-genie while the latter wailed about voiding the warranty before subsiding into silence.

“All done now, Mr. Russell. What would you like to do—” Bara never got to finish the sentence as Mr. Russell smashed the fire extinguisher into its head. The spherical sensor-housing rolled along the floor, sparking and crackling, before the house finally settled into some semblance of blessed silence.

“Maybe a puppyis a good idea—” Mr. Russell started to say, but he was interrupted by the chiming of the intelligent doorbell, which was announcing a conflict at the door to the house as the delivery drone from the grocery store was in a right-of-way dispute with the repair drones from weRobot and Centillion.