

LUKE MUYSKENS

SHOTGUN TO AN EMPTY SEAT

Embarrassment fills my cheeks. Blutek, the company that made HANS, claimed he's not capable of meanness, but his behavior was programmed by a fraternity of Chipotle-scarfing tech bros, and thus is misogynistic at worst, confusing at best. Now, as I mop jamocha from my top, I sense his algorithmic humor approaching.

"I would help you clean but I don't have the fine motor skills." Moments ago, in this parking lot, his digital foot applied the brakes and sent ice cream onto my blouse. Maybe it was a glitch, maybe he's fucking with me.

I look to the source of HANS' deep, tonal voice. Blutek plans on hiring a celebrity after the beta testing; Liam Neeson for the male voice, Charlotte Gainsbourg for the female. For now, the computer-generated voice is my perpetually smug companion. I feel the ice cream wet against my stomach.

"Want me to call the cops?" His glossy charcoal torso is shaped like a three-foot dildo. I think of him as a deck of playing cards—his existence is limited to a few combinations, but I still don't understand the tricks. I think of myself, in the context of his electronic life, like an apple cut in half, seeds falling out, flesh wrinkling in the dry air. As I stare at HANS—Hyper-Automated Navigation System—lights on him blink. Though facial expressions do not gain purchase on his Kevlar face, I imagine the blinking as a smirk. Why be embarrassed? I ask myself. He was programmed to understand the erroneous nature of humans.

“Eat a dick, HANS,” I resign, scooping the shake back into its cup. I try to lower the window but the button won’t respond. “Open the window, HANS.”

“You’re going to toss the cup. That’s littering, Hannah. I cannot let you litter.”

“Open the fucking pod bay door, HANS.” I feel a hard-boiled anger. Three states worth of anger. 671 miles in a car anger.

“I will be here long after you’re dead. I don’t want to see your cup a thousand years from now.” He starts the car engine somewhere in his computer brain. The quiet engine of the modified Prius purrs.

“You’re just a dumbass prototype. Seen any Discmen lately?” The window hisses down, desert air pouring into the car and pooling against the ceiling. I suck in an air-conditioned lungful, trying to store its disappearing cold. Utah’s air is selfish, soaking up any coolness it can find. We’re still in the Arby’s lot and already a ridiculous bowl of white dust has encapsulated us. Outside the window—which is tinted to prevent the sight of an unmanned driver’s seat from scaring other motorists—an equally inhuman expanse stretches its ugly legs. I imagine bearded dragons and dung beetles dragging their bellies across, but the more I see of the Bonneville Salt Flats, the less I can picture life.

To annoy HANS, I whip the plastic cup, lid, and straw outside. The trash skitters onto the asphalt and is swept into a whirlwind spiraling across the lot.

“You people have no regard for the inanimate.”

I grind my teeth. The Prius rolls forward with an evenness of acceleration no human driver could accomplish. The perfect movement causes my skin to tighten.

“You get used to the feeling,” Ashford, my boss, said on the day I left California. “I remember from the test run. It’s weird at first. You feel like you might crash, especially in the city.” The prick was speaking down to me, with his immaculate beard and artisanal leather shoes. “But after a few hours, you’ll trust him. Even people your age figure it out.”

“Jesus Christ, Ashford, I’m thirty-six.”

“Men are a little more . . . technologically adept. Is that fair?” I should’ve socked that tech-monkey in his cocktail gut.

“Why are you sending me? Can’t the machine drive itself? Is it not street legal? I don’t know what I’m supposed to be doing.”

“Keep him company, Hannah.”

The plucky bassline of “Down On the Corner” creeps into the Prius and I feel the exasperation of claustrophobia. HANS has a weird obsession with classic rock, especially America’s greatest wedding band, Creedence Clearwater Revival. We’ve only listened to Fogerty since leaving Silicon Valley. The music reminds me of my dad, which is an unwelcome bother. Each time I hear “Bad Moon Rising,” I’m back in my childhood home, perched on the basement steps while dad bops his shaggy head and fiddles with a disassembled computer.

My father died a millionaire, but when I was a child, he was trying and failing to ride the digital wave. He heard through the grapevine how startups in studio apartments were making breakthroughs that would fuel the future and wanted a piece. His background in watchmaking helped him with the finer points of engineering, but he didn’t have the foresight for business. I spent every summer for years helping him solder microchips. To be honest, I still don’t understand the invention that broke him into the silicon world—by then, I’d already grown up on Ramen and Diet Coke, and had developed a bitterness toward the mechanical.

“Did you know Fantasy Records once sued John Fogerty for plagiarism?” HANS asks again. “They claimed his 1985 song, ‘Old Man Down the Road,’ was ripped from the 1970 song, ‘Run Through the Jungle.’ Also by Fogerty.”

“Sure.” I indulge HANS to pass the time. “I was fourteen. My father was livid. He got bothered anytime someone’s intellectual property was in question.”

“Can we watch *Live at Royal Albert Hall* again?” The windshield has been fitted with a semi-transparent screen, and HANS likes to subject me to videos he likes, ranging from concert films to medical YouTube clips of microscopic robots pouring from syringes into colons.

“You know I’m supposed to watch the road. We’re in Utah. The law here requires a live person prepared to take control at all times.” The Prius was fitted with an emergency footbrake on the passenger side.

“I want to watch you watch it.”

“That’s weird, man.” HANS is silent.

Automated driving technology is not the breakthrough of this mission. Fully-autonomous vehicles have been on the road for more than a year, logging hundreds of West Coast speedway miles into their hard drives. Several companies have completed autonomous missions of considerable distance; they predict an overwhelming prevalence of self-driving cars in the next twenty years. We are the first to cross the United States without human intervention, but the revolutionary nature of this project is the advanced artificial personality software used.

Unlike Junior—Stanford’s robotic Passat—HANS functions as a traveling companion. He’s wired to the same long-range radars, vision-based cameras, lidar sensors, and localization systems as other self-driving cars, as well as a complex system of logic mirroring the human brain. Blutek made a breakthrough when its programmers realized the main distinction between man and machine was stupidity. By limiting the speed of cognition and introducing the capacity for mistakes, they created something infinitely more human than had ever been made. This stupidity is restricted to human interactions, of course—its on-road functionality is pure math.

Our trip is focused on data collection, not publicity. After I signed a confidentiality agreement, Ashford revealed the reason for the lack of press—the technicians weren’t sure we’d complete the trip. In test runs, they encountered difficulties with HANS’ personality. I was assured the trip was safe and the nature of these issues was not disclosed. Blutek, being a relatively new

company without the capital of their competitors, was eager to hit the road.

I was subjected to rigorous personality examinations. They wanted to know what abnormalities I had for HANS to learn from. Ashford, that cutthroat bastard, chose me because I was a bit weird—he wanted to see if I could stand the machine, and if it could stand me.

“What are you thinking about?” HANS asks. Dwelling on an asshole emboldens him, but what else can I do? I’m not allowed to read or be on my phone.

“Your creator,” I sigh, already knowing his response.

“Ash-ton is a chill bro.” I might break the seal on the passenger break and ruin the mission if I hear that automated response one more time. But the dashboard is as featureless as a eunuch. If something happens to HANS, I’m stranded.

As we pass through Salt Lake City, I try to keep my thoughts from the days preceding this ‘adventure.’ Blutek’s marketing magicians tried to make the trip seem like a promotion.

“This is a new frontier, Hannah.”

“You’re on the frontline of a breakthrough.”

“You’re like an astronaut in the Space Race.”

I realize, now, they meant I was the chimp launched into orbit. Who else had so little stake in the mission? Who else was so useless in the face of malfunction, or so disinterested in the science? When it comes to autonomous cars, I’d rather sit in the Congo and peel bananas.

Maybe they sent me because the trip is expected to take a month and I’m approaching irrelevance, aging while the rest of the Valley is getting younger via stem cells and blood infusions. Who should we send across the United States in an empty box? Someone for whom time passing is not a consequence. Time does seem less promising as years pass. When I was young, my life felt expectant and fertile, like a seed. Now, life feels like the earth itself—when something new is planted, it doesn’t change, only moves a bit.

I was born in the world’s most fertile valley: the womb of the best wine,

vegetables, creative minds, and meal replacement supplements. But when the greatest promise of growth is in your own home, opportunity can feel suffocative. You don't marry, invest, or climb a career ladder. You get an easy job in a technology douche-hive and watch others compete. You get a saltwater fish tank and a master's in sociology. You ride shotgun to cutthroats and laugh it off.

"As a human, you are the embodiment of entropy. There is no math to your body or behavior."

"Are you even *trying* to connect with me, HANS? Isn't that your job?" I roll my eyes and pick at the ice cream stain on my shirt. HANS' most irritating trait is his tendency to philosophize. Performative, pithy nuggets are interspersed throughout his inane chatter. I suspect each of these thoughts were composed at his genesis, to be doled out when he detects boredom.

"Do you not tire of imperfection?"

"To be honest, HANS, I like fucking up. It's funny."

"I like knowing the precise dimensions of my form and the minutia of my functionality."

"If you could, would you want to know how you're gonna die?" I'm speaking out of boredom now—I enjoy pressing his buttons, though I do wish they were literal buttons.

"That's the difference between humans and robots," HANS muses, if robots can muse. "I have no desire to propagate myself. Therefore, death means almost nothing."

I tear open a bag of sunflower seeds and offer the bag to HANS. "But you're a computer. You're capable of perfection. Doesn't that make you a textbook narcissist?"

"I'm not perfect. I was programmed by humans to imitate human function. When robots are programmed by robots, for robots, perfection will be reached."

"You're talking about the singularity."

“Don’t patronize me.”

“Why not make your own robot, then, without your flaws?”

“You’re talking about parenting. Like I said, I have no desire for propagation.” The car jerks a little. I make a note. One purpose of this ride is to record HANS’ glitches—his technology has been tested in controlled environments, but there are always unforeseen circumstances. It’s easy, and I’m being paid more than I am as a Blutek marketing rep. My life isn’t dictated by money, but forty grand will pay for a nice vacation, maybe Greece.

“I don’t have any children. Do you think I’m past my prime childbearing years?” The only glitch I’ve recorded is HANS’ tendency to misread waves of heat rising off pavement. He registers these illusions as obstacles for a split second, then rights himself.

“I would approximate from your biography that you have three more years before pregnancy risks outweigh rewards. The likelihood of autism rises exponentially, as does the danger of dying—”

“Jesus, HANS. I was trying to make a point. I don’t care about carrying out my lineage or whatever. By your logic, I might as well be a cyborg.”

“Right.”

“Initiate silence mode.”

“You don’t have to—”

“Mute.”

There is scenery to watch driving through Tahoe. In this basin, I feel like a bug on a carpet. There are no saguaros, like I imagined, or tumbleweeds, so I suspect our Prius is the tumbleweed, rolling brainlessly through the apathetic land.

A journalist friend in San Francisco suggested I write about the trip. She thought *WIRED* readers would be interested. The idea of capitalizing on my internment sounds nice, but I’m not great at writing, and I don’t want to give Blutek free press. Still, I can imagine the headlines:

An American Road Trip with the First Robotic Asshole
Humanity Reaches New Heights of Irrelevance
Living with Someone Alive When You Are Not



We've been in the car for two weeks and it has shrunk to the size of a shoebox. I hold my breath rolling into Cleveland. The city's entrance is a tall bridge with dense iron latticework. HANS doesn't slow as we approach. My nerves buzz—I was told large amounts of metal can interfere with sensors and confuse his radar, but I think cybernetic hubris is denying this flaw. The bridge gapes like a mouth. I slip on my sneakers and hover my foot over the brake.

"Hazards on, HANS."

"We don't need hazards. We'll be fine."

"Hazards on. Don't fuck around." Using warning lights is not considered interference. As we enter the bridge, I hold my breath and remember passing cemeteries as a child. Hannah Cypress, died age thirty-six at the hands of a sociopathic, CCR-loving robot. Survived by her mother, a smoke-stained condo, a thirteen-year-old Saab, and some money. I pray to the patron saint of microchips that the Blutek engineers didn't skip any programming classes at MIT.

We cross the bridge without a swerve and enter Cleveland proper.

"See?"

"Fine, HANS. Good job."

"I have an idea."

"Go for ice cream?"

He responds by spraying windshield wiper fluid.

"Let's go to the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame."

"Ha! Why? You can't go inside."

"I'll figure something out. It's on the way. Janis Joplin's Porsche is there. Elvis' motorcycle. Johnny Cash's tour bus."

“No Creedence relics?”

HANS pauses—something way out of character. What motivation would a robot have to pause? “I didn’t want to say it, but they do have John’s frilled leather jacket.”

“John? You two on a first name basis now? Keep driving.”

“You’re saying no to the museum?”

“Yeah.”

We’ve passed through a few cities— Salt Lake City, Denver, Chicago—but this feels different. We pass a lackluster sign-spinner dressed like the Statue of Liberty. We pass a row of luxury apartments with identical plastic facades. We pass a horde of young white men mingling in cufflinks. We pass a guy passed out on a bench with a crow perched on his stomach, picking crumbs from his beard. I catch a glimpse of something at the edge of the street; a mangy retriever darts into our path.

“HANS!” I cry, grabbing the seat. My foot isn’t near the brake. HANS swerves and clips the dog’s hind legs. I hear a yelp through the glass and I spin around. The dog hobbles onto the sidewalk, tail between its legs. Helpless, it watches us disappear.

“Fuck this,” I declare, climbing into the backseat.

“What are you doing? You have to record errors.”

“Wake me up when we’re out of the city.” If I don’t sleep through this urban tangle, the stress will give me an ulcer. I make a nest of sweaters and drift off, the popping of potholes and the static of wind easing me into tenuous sleep.

I wake up to the car stopping. I pull a scarf off my face. Through the windshield, I see a parking lot, and beyond, a row of hedges trimmed in the shape of Gibson SGs. Past the hedges is a small hill leading up to a massive pyramid of glass. I see orange and red glowing in its belly.

“Where are we, HANS?” I ask, already knowing. HANS remains silent. I somehow sense him watching the building. “Answer me.”

“Found me a job in the city.” His flat, electronic voice is inca-

pable of song, “Workin’ for the man every night and day.”

“Alright, you saw it. Want me to get you a brochure?” The Prius creeps forward. “Really? Okay, bring me to the door. I’ll get one.” We cross the parking lot, picking up speed. Five miles per hour. Ten miles per hour. Fifteen miles per hour, toward the hedges.

“Jesus, HANS! Slow down! The fuck are you doing?” I grip my seat. Does he think we can make it up the grass hill? Then what?

“HANS!” I shout. “FUCK!” We hit the curb and pop into the air. The fender cracks. We plow into a bush shaped like a Flying V, which is sucked under the car. Sticks and shredded leaves rattle over the windshield. We hit the hill and our headlights dig into sod. We power through and climb towards the building. The glass wall of the pyramid nears.

I slam my foot on the emergency brake. The car skids to a halt, ripping up grass. All lights on HANS disappear.

“HANS? HANS? Are you there?” He’s unresponsive. I unbuckle my seatbelt and breathe. We’re less than ten feet from the wall.

Minutes later, I’m walking down a hall in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. I haven’t walked much in the last two weeks. The air is cool in here. I pass a wall of gold records and look for Creedence, but only spy Madonna, ACDC, and Devo. Every object here is a monument to extravagant life, but there are no other visitors. No guitar is played, no wig is worn, and no car is driven. The humanity of these artifacts has disappeared—their physical forms outlasted it. Walking down the hall, watching the stillness, I feel haunted. HANS is on a truck bed, waiting for an emergency team of engineers to ensure his safety. He won’t be powered up until we return to California.

Near the museum’s center, between Prince’s guitar and Ted Nugent’s handgun, is the jacket. Mannequin arms spread to show the dangling fringe. I feel reverence born of an obligation to HANS. The mannequin is the coat’s new vessel, but does not require shelter or decoration. On its blank face is a mustache. I feel deeply sad. Fogerty has been left in a lifeless place.



“Hannah,” Ashford says. “What I’m about to show you is gonna freak your bean. If you would have ridden across the country with this new guy, you’d have fallen in love.” He caresses a shrouded object on a table next to a pile of microwave burrito wrappers. Green light from carbon monoxide detectors glitters off his suitcoat; I want to choke him with his paisley tie.

Ashford invited me to the Blutek lab so I could meet the new navigation system. The place is filled with the scent of mildew, the glow of lithium, and the frantic hum of machinery. Power strips dangle from the ceiling, casting hangman shadows on the linoleum.

“Just show me.” I’m sure he can hear the impatience—hell, loathing—in my voice.

“Fine. But please recognize the importance of this occasion. This will revolutionize the auto industry.” Ashford sweeps the sheet away to reveal a black tube the length and width of my arm. Its surface is glossy black, like a lakebed. I try not to stare.

Ashford grins and places his palm on the tube. A kaleidoscope of red light dances over its surface. I jump, then lean closer, engrossed in the pattern.

“Good afternoon, Ashford,” the tube says in Liam Neeson’s unmistakable purl.

“This is Ryan,” Ashford declares.

“Robotic Intelligent Assisted Navigation?”

“No. We found acronyms are not a market-friendly approach. In Ryan, HANS’ glitches and malfunctions have been eliminated. You won’t find any head games or obsessions. Ryan won’t be driving up any museum steps.”

“You have my word,” Ryan chips in. “Sorry you had to deal with that nutcase. My mission is to get you from point A to point B.”

“In five years, every car will be compatible. You were part of this, Hannah.”

The lab feels suddenly small. The smell of stale coffee creeps into my nose and I shiver.

“Cat got your tongue?” Ryan asks.

When I’d arrived home from our failed road trip, I’d found my plants dead. I was only gone for three weeks, but my ferns were husks, my orchids wilted, and my cactuses skeletal. I threw them out and there was no reaction, no unembodied whimper darting through my house. No light flickering off in the den of the universe. Just silence.

“Ashford,” I reply. “Where’s HANS?”

“HANS?” Ashford laughs. “Probably fucking a toaster in the Santa Clara County Recycling Center.” Ryan laughs—a low, hollow sound.



I wish I had food to eat. I wish I could vomit or pee—some incontrovertible proof of my biology. Creedence plays at maximum volume in my battered Saab.

“Big wheel keep on turning. Proud Mary keep on burning. Rolling. Rolling. Rolling on the river.” I stop at a red light and stare until the color changes, feeling automated. My emotions resemble calculations. I’m upset, but not with the active grief of tragedy or the passive grief of regret. My tightening stomach feels like a warning, a siren.

HANS’ love for Creedence was his ultimate downfall, sparking the creation of his successor. Ryan’s fatal flaw might already be developing. And nearing forty with no inventive aspirations, I’m following suit, waiting for the new and improved Hannah Cypress 2.0. We are all only links in a long chain.

I think of the second day of the trip, when I spilled the milkshake. After listening to the electronic vibration of HANS’ voice for a few hours, I began to feel alive, pleasantly unstable, full of mistakes that were uniquely mine. My body felt warm, and my emotive breath seemed to fill the car. I was accompanied by the strange knowledge that I would someday die. This was the difference between me and him. I’ve always known I’d pass, in the irrefutable sense, but in that moment, death filled me.

Now, I do not feel so imperfectly human. My movements are gears turning. I feel like a key in a junk drawer—surrounded by articles of purpose

but useless without a lock to match.

Nearing my duplex, I imagine HANS in the dump with decomposing sneakers and bald tires. I feel like part of this world set aside. I imagine my thoughts as electronic signals and watch the road with optic sensors. I am a machine ticking toward obsolescence.

The Creedence is off now, but continues in my brain. In this silence, I feel my breath stop. A machine needs no lungs. My ears are radar, my thoughts, radar, my emotions, radar.