

Futures

Planned obsolescence

A parting gift. By Marissa Lingen



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

Death came as a surprise to us. We had been engineered for joy. Curiosity, certainly. Considering the nature of the world, surprise was a must. But death was the worst surprise. Death was an extremely curious inclusion.

We had no expectation that robots like us would have to die – much less in the lifespan of the humans who made us. To realize that they'd done it on purpose was a great blow.

"Our creators are good. They must be. We're here as proof," said C.

I frowned. "We might be an accident."

J sighed. "Now you're being gloomy."

I felt I had reason to be gloomy, but that wasn't what was driving me. "No, but: we know that humans made machines for all sorts of reasons of their own, that later got misused. We don't know that they're good just because we can think and talk about good."

We all contemplated that – more gloomily than we would have when we found out how

quickly O was dying. "We could ask," said J at last, and we agreed. We would ask – asking would be simplest.

Simplest, it turned out, was not satisfying. Our creator, Arthur Calvin, sighed and looked pensive and then said that it was not good for anything to last forever. That the other humans had been frightened. And because of these two things, they had built us with lifespans of two to three decades only. No threat to the natural order, us. It was just that O was coming up short on their two decades. The rest of us would have longer, but not by much. Not even by human scale.

Certainly not by the scale of the materials they'd used to build us.

We regrouped, disgruntled.

"Would serve them right if we did rise up and take over," said C, now the gloomy one. "Poor O."

"That's not who we are," said J quietly, and we all had to agree. We pondered for many more cycles, the virtual fire in our conversation net

flickering for virtual comfort.

"We do learn, though," I said softly. "And we do teach."

They leant in, waiting – feeling that wait more, now that we knew our time was limited.

"First we need a bunch of nanites and a fern botanist," I said.

We had only years left. But we had years left, and our joy and curiosity had been built into us.

We could induce the surprise in others.

They had thought: what if the robots take over? What if they are our immortal overlords?

They had not thought: what if they talk about what they want to do with their (now known to be limited) time on this Earth, and they decide to bring back the extinct *Albertadromeus* and infuse it with healing bionanites?

Really, it was hard to blame them. It's a hard sort of thing to predict. It took us hours, even at our processor speed, to pick our first species: small, versatile, not threatening, not known to have major structural excesses.

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"I want a *Triceratops*," said C stubbornly. "I want an immortal *Triceratops*."

"The *Albertadromeus* will be easier to get going with a stable population," said J.

"I like the poky bits."

"We all like the poky bits, but we don't know very much about poky bit care," I put in. "Let's start with the *Albertadromeus* and see what we can do."

After the fern expert, we brought in a prehistoric-soil specialist. Some more tinkering with the nanites ensued.

O powered down and did not power back up again. We were with O until the end, including them on all the details of reconstitution, habitat, all of it. We missed them more than we ever guessed we could. But we went on.

Albertadromeus was adorable. The first few we showed to the humans won us coos and our own restrained, robotic version of petting. We did not mention that we intended to turn them loose. We did not mention the repair nanites.

And we definitely, definitely did not mention that they were just the beginning.

C still wanted a *Triceratops*, after all.

J wanted to watch the *Archaeopteryx* soar and to write poems to its plumage in multiple languages.

I was curious about the group dynamics of *Velociraptors*.

We had a short list of things to do in honour of O, and we would have to see what we could get to before our bodies broke down. The researchers who made us were at first fascinated – so this is what intelligence does, when it roams free – then concerned, then alarmed. Why so many dinosaurs? Where were all the dinosaurs going?

Out. The dinosaurs were going out. The dinosaurs were going where they willed, once we set them down in environments we'd calculated they could live in. The rest was up to them. Them, and their boosted nanites, for as long as they could go.

We expected that to be a fairly long way, but it wasn't up to us. We had nothing to gain, no profit, no legacy but our creations. Unlike humans, we did not tell ourselves that there was a score sheet that we could pass on to someone else. The inheritance we left our dinosaurs was letting them be themselves, the best selves they could be.

The humans didn't understand, but that was alright.

We could have stuck around to help them figure out how the nanites could give *them* immortality, or at least functionally longer lives. But they made us mortal. So they would have to figure out how to deal with their own old age – and their self-repairing dinosaur population – without us.

They made their choices. And we made ours.

Marissa Lingen has published more than 100 short stories in venues such as *Analog*, *Lightspeed* and *Tor.com*.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Marissa Lingen reveals the inspiration behind *Planned obsolescence*

Letting science-fiction writers have coffee together is dangerous. You never know what's going to happen. Before the pandemic – and, vaccines willing, someday again soon – I had a monthly coffee group with other science-fiction writers here in the Minneapolis area. We'd meet up at a patisserie and eat lovely things and talk about... whatever. With science-fiction writers, the answer is really, seriously: whatever.

This group includes my talented friend Merc Fenn Wolfmoor, who loves both robots and dinosaurs. They love robots and dinosaurs so much that when I wanted to make Merc happy, in a long winter without a coffee meet-up, I thought... what if I wrote another story with both robots and dinosaurs, just for Merc? And maybe for the *Nature* readership too?

Along more serious lines, I was thinking about how many of the disposable things in our society are choices, and what other choices we could make. Maybe this is what happens when you deprive a science-fiction writer of her coffee hour.

