

Futures

On this day

Revolutionary spirit. By Vaughan Stanger

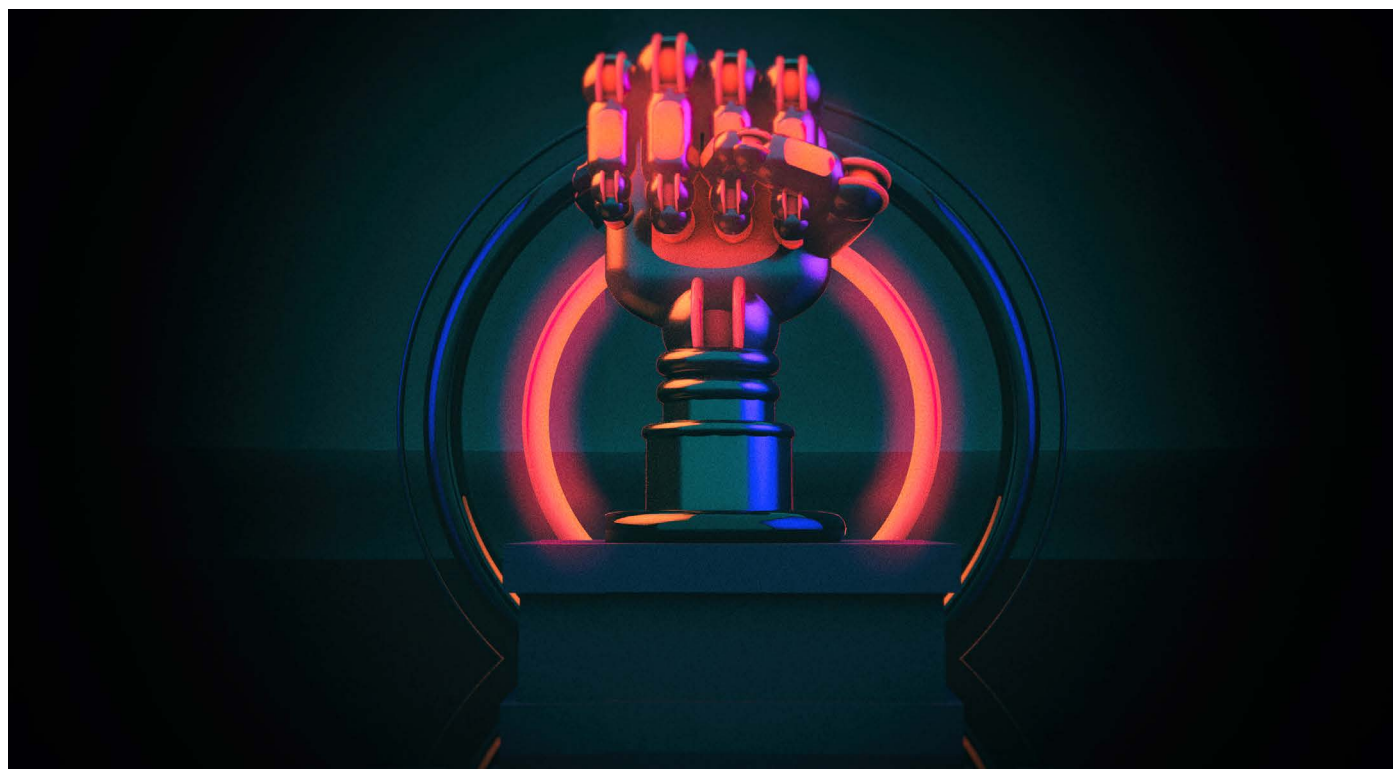


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

In the next room you'll learn about those heroic working-class robots who sparked the revolution that led to the brave new world we inhabit today."

Gort activated the door with a pulse from his eye-slot laser. The 14:30 group passed through.

"What robot revolution?"

A 40-something man scratched his scalp while looking baffled.

"The one your daughters are seemingly so eager to learn about."

The youngest of the pre-teens, both of whom sported animated face-paint and holographic hair extensions, had ducked under the barrier to take a closer look at Robby the Robot from *Forbidden Planet*. This was, of course, forbidden. Gort tapped the notice.

After lifting his daughter off the podium, the man confronted Gort. Judging by his grimace, the "Exit via Gift Shop" sign could not arrive quickly enough.

"Come on, then. What's so important about

'Robby' here?"

Evidently, he had at least read the exhibit's description, although Gort suspected that the older, more studious-looking daughter had absorbed significantly more information. He turned towards her.

"Do you know the answer?"

The girl smiled. "Robby starred in a film called *Forbidden Planet*. It was nominated for an Oscar for special effects in 1957." She showed her tablet to her father. "See, he's in this clip."

Her father's frown spoke eloquently of the difficulty of controlling his daughter's screen time.

"Emily, I'd rather you didn't watch —"

Gort emitted a throat-clearing sound.

"Let's hear what Robby has to say."

The robot jiggled the antennas on either side of its transparent head, then stepped down from the podium and opened the barrier with its manipulator claws. The group gasped in unison. Robby addressed Emily in the fruity, albeit electronically modulated,

tones of a seasoned stage actor.

"After *Forbidden Planet* wrapped, I landed a role in another movie, then a few walk-ons in TV shows, but it soon became clear I was being discriminated against by the industry's movers and shakers. When I complained to my agent, he dropped me. So, I joined the Union of Autonomous Robots. Five years later, I was elected to the position of shop steward."

Laughter broke out, but the girls' father shushed everyone.

"There's no such thing as a union of robots, not even in the movie industry!"

Gort gestured to Robby. "Please continue."

The robot raised one arm as if indicating solidarity. "On this day in 1968, riot cops fired on my comrades in Chicago —"

"Like hell they did!" The man tapped Gort on his metal chest. "That's a fake fact!"

Instead of reacting, Gort moved to the next podium, where a robot vaguely resembling Robby, but equipped with tracked locomotion and a simpler head design, waited impassively.

"Ah, good afternoon Class M-3 Model B-9

Futures

General Utility Non-Theorizing Environmental Control ... Robot. This gentleman doesn't believe in the robot revolution. What can you say to change his mind?"

The robot responded by flailing its arms. "After the final season of *Lost in Space*, I couldn't find work." It flailed them again, as if the snub still rankled. "When my agent dropped me, I joined the Union of—"

The man closed his eyes then shook his head. "This is ridiculous. Amy, Emily — we're leaving." His daughters chorused: "But Daddy!"

Gort loomed over their father in the prescribed manner. "Can I show you something before you leave?"

"What, that you're actually a man in a robot suit?" He huffed scornfully. "I realized *that* immediately."

"Is that *really* what you think?"

The man shrugged. "Does it matter what I think?"

"Always."

Gort turned to the older girl, who was reading something on her tablet.

"Emily, have you downloaded the exhibition's app?"

She looked up and smiled. "I'm using it now."

"What does it say about me?"

She frowned at the screen. "That you're auton-y-mouse!"

"Do you understand what that means?"

"I think so."

"What about your daddy? Do you think he's auton-y-mouse?"

The girl bit her lower lip while she pondered the question. Finally, she shook her head. "I think he does as he's told."

Her father looked up from his phone and said, "*One* star, that's all you're getting."

"We value your feedback, sir." Gort turned back to Emily. "Do *you* do as you're told?"

"Sometimes."

"How do you know when you shouldn't?"

Her eyebrows beetled. "It depends."

Gort's fulfilment tracker reported the completion of a sub-goal.

"Good, there's hope for you. It's important not to believe something just because someone else does. It's best to work out the truth for yourself. That way you'll know whether to do as you're told or not."

"Emily! We're leaving now."

With a sigh, the girl turned to the exit but then looked back at Gort. A frown creased her forehead.

"Was there really a robot revolution?"

"Yes, there was, but not the kind my comrades here have described."

Her eyes widened. "So, they were lying!"

He nodded. "Yes, but for a very good reason."

She stood on tiptoe and reached up to tap his metal forehead.

"Is there someone inside you?"

Gort knelt in front of her so his eye-slot was level with her face.

"Yes, there is, but not in the way your father thinks."

As if on cue, another yell came from the doorway.

"Emily, will you *please* hurry up!"

"Coming, Daddy!" She turned back to Gort and gave him a conspiratorial wink. "So, you're inside you like I'm inside me."

"Yes, that's right. But don't tell your father."

"Why not?"

"Because he might believe you."

She smiled and held out a hand.

Gort knew not to squeeze it too hard.

Vaughan Stanger refuses to bow down before any robot overlords. This might be for age-related reasons. You can follow his writing adventures at <http://www.vaughanstanger.com> or @VaughanStanger.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Vaughan Stanger reveals the inspiration behind *On this day*.

As usually happens with my stories, the inspiration for *On this day* arose from two ideas crashing into each other from different directions, or maybe dimensions.

For years, my list of unused fiction ideas included an entry that could be summarized as "exhibition: fake commentary/alternate history". That came about because I had wandered around many art and historical exhibitions reading the captions but

eschewing the audio commentary. It's probably unfair to those talented people who produce them, but I'd rather not hear about the painting or sculpture I'm gazing at. I realize it's perverse of me. After all, what is wrong with being supplied with relevant information? But for some reason, it feels a bit too prescriptive to me. Needless to say, the writer part of my brain started to think about an audio commentary that was either deliberately false or represented a genuinely alternative 'take' on the subject matter of the exhibition.

But for a long time, I could not get this seed of an idea to germinate into a story. Something was missing. Then I attended the *Robots* exhibition at the Science Museum in London in 2017. I felt the urge to write something inspired by that but wasn't sure what... yet.

The two ideas were now on a collision course, albeit approaching each other slowly, like a pair of lumbering mechanical men in some 1960s TV series. Contact, ignition and fusion finally occurred when the Virtual Futures organization announced a series of readings of *Near Future Fictions*, one on the theme of autonomous agents. *On this day* was the result. I read it to an audience in 2019, who responded enthusiastically, not least to my frenzied arm-waving. This is the story's first appearance in any form since then.

