

Futures

My first pet

The needle in a haystack. **By Robert Blasiak**



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

pointed at the duck.

“Look at that one right there. That’s not a duck,” I said.

“Are you sure?” asked Rik, looking at the group of ducks. Someone had dumped a pile of bread crumbs on the sidewalk, and half a dozen ducks had clustered around it. And then Rik’s inner-comedian comes out. “Looks like a duck ... walks like a duck ...”

The duck took a couple of waddling steps away from its group and cocked its head at us. Then it let out a few throaty quacks.

“... even quacks like a duck.”

“Look, it’s not a duck. Just net it, OK?”

It was a big park with high rises in all directions, and I hadn’t swept it in months. Forget the laws and regulations: if someone gets bored with their robopet, they’re going to dump it outdoors. City parks were full of them, and since the Environment Ministry upped its rate to 80 units per robopet, the only thing standing between me and a solid pay cheque was Rik and his jokes.

But Rik was getting better at reading my moods. Good.

He pulled a net stick from his belt, pointed it at the duck, and pulled the trigger. A thin, gauzy net shot out and around the duck, before gently contracting and holding it in place.

Rik walked over and scooped up the duck, which looked snug and relaxed. Then he pulled out a small scanner and held it close to the duck, waiting for it to calibrate and give a reading.

“Take a look at this, Helen!” he called.

I looked at the small screen. No way.

“What did I tell you? Looks like a duck. Walks like a duck. Surprise, surprise! It’s a duck!”

He laughed and elbowed me.

“Come on. Everyone’s wrong once in a while! Lighten up!”

But it wasn’t true. I was never wrong. That’s why I could make a living doing this. Drop a robopet mouse in with 99 real mice and I’ll find it right away. Every time. Even when the

future-gen robopets came on the market and facial rec algorithms couldn’t tell the difference anymore, I still could. Most people see a haystack. I see a needle. And then I wonder what it’s doing in the haystack.

Rik loosened the net, and the duck shuffled quickly away to rejoin the others. I kept looking. No question in my mind. The sensor must be wrong.

But Rik was already pulling me along to the pond, where half a dozen turtles were sunning themselves on a rock.

“Time is money, remember? What about those guys over there?”

“Second from the left,” I say, after a quick glance. And then “I think.”

Rik’s net goes out, the turtle comes in, and a scan later it’s confirmed. The turtle robopet goes in the bucket on Rik’s back.

“Nice job! Let’s check out those pigeons over there.”

Twelve collected robopets later, Rik and I were sitting on a bench outside a little

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convenience store. Rik on his third coffee of the day, me on my fourth.

Rik took a long sip. “Why do you think these people got robopets in the first place?”

“I don’t know. Lonely probably.”

“So all these people abandoning their robopets. They’re not lonely anymore?”

I didn’t have the answers. But I didn’t have a pet. Never felt the need for one. Plenty lonely, but a machine wouldn’t fix that.

“Alright, I’m going to go drop these off. We’re meeting over at the Tama River tomorrow morning, right?”

“Yeah, exactly. See you then, Rik.”

I finished off my coffee, wrapped up my half-finished croissant and shoved it in my pocket, and then crossed back into the park.

The ducks were huddled in the shade of a

willow near the water, heads turned back and tucked under their wings. One of them shuffled uneasily as I approached. Yes, I remember *you* too ...

... and you’re still the needle in the haystack, I realized.

I crouched down and looked at them all, and suddenly one of the others ran towards my needle-in-the-haystack duck, bent its neck low, and nipped at its tail feathers. It hopped away, but immediately the other four ducks shuffled to attention, bent their necks down and waddled aggressively towards the other duck too.

Nowhere left to go, it flapped towards me.

I already knew the answer, but I pulled my scanner out, and as the duck got closer, I held it near enough that it beeped with a reading.

Rik was right. A duck.

But if this is my needle, what’s the haystack? I gazed at the other five ducks, who gazed back at me. Unimpressed. Nothing in their eyes.

I pulled the unfinished croissant from my pocket and reached out a shred of pastry to the duck. I knew it wasn’t what ducks should be eating, but I knew this wasn’t the place for a duck. I needed it to trust me. I needed to take it home.

It took the first piece, took another, and then another.

Robert Blasiak lives on an island in the Stockholm archipelago and spends a lot of time thinking about fish.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Robert Blasiak reveals the inspiration behind *My first pet*.

For several years, I had a two-hour commute from Yokohama to Tokyo: packed trains, pinched faces, and everyone in a rush. But the final part of the commute was a walk from the train station through this park. Sometimes I’d stop at this convenience store, and, yes, buy a croissant.

The spark for this story was an e-mail from an old friend, who lives near this park. It brought back a lot of memories and I remembered the feeling of jumping off a packed train, and walking through this park. Seeing an old man on a bench tossing out bread crumbs to the sparrows, or an old lady leaving food for the stray cats. Years ago, the city put up signs saying not to feed the animals, but it never changed a thing.

There are lots of ways to deal with a stressful world. For some people, maybe it means becoming a rebel: ignoring the signs and feeding the birds. For me, for those years, walking through the park and seeing those gentle rebels helped a lot. And I’m sure they would feed the stray robopets too, so everything is going to be just fine...

