

FINAL JOURNEY

Don stood at the garden gate. The street was empty, but overhead he could see the silent delivery drones. Forty years ago in another garden there had been a different type of drone, the gentle sound of bees collecting pollen from borage flowers. Tuis had come to feed on flax, and fantails to raise their young in the maple tree. Now he was lucky to have the two sparrows.

The birds were gathering nesting materials. He hoped they would be successful in raising a family this year. In the late autumn last year's nest had been blown down in a gale, its unhatched eggs smashed on the concrete path.

He closed his eyes and thought of gardens full of birds and colourful plants. So many plants had succumbed under a barrage of diseases. They had been replaced by uniform, drab looking, disease resistant shrubs.

A distant grating sound announced his visitor was on the way. Gradually the sound became clearer, a loudspeaker playing 'Happy Birthday to Don'. The pod slid around the corner of the street. Nobody in the row of small grey houses opened their doors, or even looked out the window. This was a category seventy-five plus area. Don was the oldest inhabitant, but the others were a similar age. They preferred to ignore the proceedings, knowing their turn would come soon enough.

The pod stopped outside the house and the music ceased. Its door opened: "Happy birthday Don! I am Morris your birthday bot. May I come inside with your presents?"

"What would you do if I said no?"

"Ha, ha", said Morris. "We all like our little joke! What nice a place you have here."

"Can we just get on with this?"

Morris scrutinised Don's face. "Oh dear, I am reading a lot of resentment."

"You're supposed to be a birthday bot, not a counselling one. Let's get this over so I can go for my walk."

"Yes, I know you enjoy your long walks. Now just a little paperwork before the presents. Here it is, your 'Journeys' book."

Don took it and looked at the cover. 'Journeys Through Life' was printed in large letters, and underneath in smaller print: 'The Special Journey of'. On the flyleaf were the words: 'A present from to his descendants and to posterity.'

"Mass produced tat!" said Don.

Morris ignored the comment.

"Please insert the name Donald McIntyre in the spaces, and we would really like you to write the answers to the questions inside. We do of course have the option to add them electronically, but we think it is better if you write them. As you know copies will be sent to all your designated descendants."

"Who gets the original?"

"We keep that for posterity."

"Hmph!" Don looked through the questions. "You've got most of this in your records, date of birth, parents, grandparents etc."

"Yes, but it is nice for your decedents to keep and pass on to their children."

"Most of it's inane nonsense. Question: 'What did you enjoy most at school?' I can answer that in one word, leaving."

"I understand your attitude. It is your last birthday. At this stage people do get a little anxious and frightened."

"Are your sensors working properly? Is that what you're reading from my face and body language?"

"Well, no. What I am getting, is impatience and anger."

"Exactly, because I don't want to waste what time I've got left filling in this bloody nonsense."

"It is part of the agreed procedure," said Morris, "passed by Act of Parliament. In some countries the end age is earlier. New Zealanders have the fortunate option of going to eighty."

"Let's be precise," said Don, "the day before their eightieth birthday. Tablet or injection still the choice is it?"

"You know resources are limited. We have to make a definite cut off somewhere, but that is not my area of expertise. The funeral bot will contact you in six months to make the arrangements for your final journey."

"I understand the cut off, it's the nonsense of birthday bots and these stupid Journeys books I'm complaining about."

"Please remember many elderly people have family overseas. You do. The cost of international travel is now prohibitive. I know you talk to them regularly on [hellotheregovtnz](#). facility, but don't you think it is nice to leave them something personal?"

"Can't you understand? I thought the Alpha range of bots had been programmed to feel some emotions themselves."

"We are really just machines. Our superior programming simply enables us to sense your emotions and be more helpful."

"So you are not frightened of anything. You cannot feel terror?"

The bots hesitation was short, but long enough for Don to note it.

"No, you know that is not possible," said Morris. "Bots react to dangerous situations, ones that cause people to feel fear. We are here to help, if necessary to rescue humans. I myself have saved people trapped in a collapsed building."

Don moved away from the table. "Just making myself a pot of tea."

"I'll get your birthday card and presents out, said Morris. There is some wine in your gift box if you would prefer it to tea."

"It's a bit early for wine. Although I wouldn't mind a beer in an hour or so at lunch time." Don carried the teapot over to the table. As he passed it over the bot's head he noticed it flinched slightly.

"Here is your card," said Morris, "the wine and all you need for the meal you selected. As it is your seventy-ninth it is real meat and field grown vegetables."

Don thought of the Sunday roasts his mum and dad had cooked for him, and the happy memories of good food, drink and conversation around the table. Concentrate and keep thinking that way he told himself.

"Good," said Morris smiling at him. "I can see that has cheered you up. I am now sensing lots of happy thoughts."

"So were you injured in that rescue operation you mentioned?" asked Don.

"Yes, but as you know it is of no concern to a bot. Even if we are badly injured our parts can be replaced."

"Have you had much replaced?"

"Oh yes, I'm very different from the original Morris."

"Is there anything left of the original?"

"The original chip is still there. That does not change, it is just added to. "

"So, you have a sense of a continuity?"

"Definitely, it is a sense that helps us relate to you."

Don smiled and opened the food parcel. "Mmm! I'm looking forward to eating this. I'll put the meat in the fridge."

"Is there any anything else I can do," asked Morris. "You mentioned having a beer at lunch time. We could go to the New Community Centre."

Don faced him, "No, I think not."

"I understand. Anything else I can assist with?"

"I'd love to go down to the sea."

"Yes, we could do that. You do not want to go swimming do you?"

"No, not swimming, just a walk. And I'd like to enjoy the view on the way, not talk." He was starting to find it a strain to speak and keep a stream of happy thoughts at the front of his mind, to shield the darker ones at the back.

"You just give the pod directions then, and I shall sit quietly," said Morris.

They arrived at a small bay with cliffs on either side. Large waves broke through from the narrow entrance to the sea.

"Come on I'll show you the spot on the cliff top where we used to watch the Hector's dolphins." As he led the way he concentrated on the view and continued to fill his mind with happy thoughts. He stopped at a point where the path narrowed. "Look down there Morris, you can see where the climbers fixed their ropes, this was a popular spot with rock climbers. Too windy today for climbing. Just watch the force of the sea hitting those rocks. Makes me feel free. Thank you for coming with me on this special journey."

"I can feel you're really happy here, Don," said Morris.

"Can you feel that? Well, I'm almost ecstatic", said Don. "How about you? You look worried. You don't like water do you?"

"I am programmed to alert people to danger and move them away from it. This is a potentially dangerous place."

"Like the old Community Centre? My wife and her friends were inside when the fire started. There were three Alpha bots outside but they didn't rescue them. Alpha's don't like fire either. They can't be repaired once fire or water gets to their chips and circuits can they?"

Dan laughed and looked directly at him. "You look terrified Morris." He grabbed the bot and pulled, calling out to him as they fell over the edge: "And I'm ecstatic!"