

The Buffer

by Ava Cline in Submissions for grades 9-12

The dinner party was to be a quiet, civilized affair. Couples would file in through the massive double doors and be greeted by the hosts, Dave and Marcia Winston. They were a handsome pair, striking features and dark intelligent eyes to match. To fit their personalities, their home had to be magnificent, and twice as expensive.

The gabled Victorian roof rose high above the manicured lawn and in the each of the countless windows burned with the light of a single candle. It was from one of these windows that Mrs. Marcia Winston watched as the first guest pulled in with the latest zero emission car. Her made-up face was placid as the car pulled out its retractable arm to help it's occupant out- her dress, being in the style of the late 1800s, made it almost impossible to move.

The technology of the current age had become so advanced that people began to fear it- there was talk of a long proclaimed 'robot uprising'. So a flashback seemed in order. The world, at least the wealthy upper-class, had decided that they could recreate the simple but luxuriant lifestyles of days past- with the necessary upgrades, of course. It seemed that the world was putting on a play, involving a multitude of characters moving through an intricately designed maze of trip wires crafted from the subtle hand gestures and sideways glances.

Gathering up her own skirts, Mrs. Winston began to descend the wrought iron staircase that lead to the second level of the house. The sounds of welcomes began to rise up to meet her, yet she made no movement to hurry. She stopped before a small closet and seemed to brace herself for some oncoming conflict pulling her small shoulders into a subtle but unmistakable defensive position.

With the flick of a wrist, the doors were open, revealing a single figure.

It was a Buffer – the latest advance, and the best money could buy, in humanoid robotics. The resemblance to it's makers was uncanny. It's purpose was to act, as it's name suggested, as a block between the humans and their emotions – most importantly the emotions that could ruin a perfect dinner party. Mrs. Winston grabbed it's arm and pressed the small and almost invisible button on the inside of it's wrist. A dim light started behind glassy eyes as it's synthetic spine straightened and an interested-but-not-involved smile took over it's lips. The android turned it's head to scan Mrs. Winston's form. The woman tried not to shudder under it's hollow gaze.

"Hello, Marcia. What can I do for you?" Its voice was smooth and silky, too mature for its youthful appearance.

"Buffer mode... Please." The command was issued somewhat quietly, as if the robot was frightening, and the task embarrassing.

"Of course, Marcia." It tilted its head as if to ponder something, yet Marcia knew that it was incapable of such things. There was a quiet whirring sound as faint movement could be seen in the exposed area of its neck. Marcia watched it out of the corner of her eye, but quickly pulled her gaze

to the floor after a few loud heartbeats. After a few moments, the robot righted itself and gracefully turned its eyes to Mrs. Winston. She internally shivered under the machine's gaze.

"Buffer mode activated, Marcia." Apprehension and distrust hiding behind her eyes, Mrs. Winston nodded curtly.

"The guests are starting to arrive. Take up the usual place." She began to tentatively descend the grand staircase, but instinctively rolled her shoulders back before coming into view of the guests.

"Of course, Marcia." Soon, Mrs. Winston was out of sight and the robot was left alone. It stepped up to the top stair and looked down. It seemed the action was birthed from contemplation, yet as it began the descent, the pause was revealed as to be a scan of the stairs so as to not plummet down the marble steps.

As it reached the bottom of the stairs, it swung its head in a scan of the dining room, evaluating its surroundings with a calculated coolness. It walked past the Winston's, who were greeting the guests who were entering, all arrayed in Victorian finery. Mrs. Winston turned to look as it entered the dining room.

When inside, it walked through the guests that were congregated in the dining room. Like the Winston's, the guests gave little attention to the robot. Small glances and subtle shifts away from it were the extent of the interactions – overall, the guests observed it with a begrudging respect.

There was a jubilant feeling filling the spacious room adorned with elegant architecture, a string quartet of sorts flawlessly playing without the need of human direction. A respectable dance started up and soon all the guests were tucked under each other's arms and waltzing with smiles upon their faces and laughter upon their lips – they were content.

Yet, along with this jovial feeling, there was an eerie presence hovering over the crowd with its easy smiles and clinking glasses. Once the dance had broken up, everyone was commencing to the dining hall. Ms. Lawson – young, rich and incredibly quiet- stole away to the library and leaned against the door frame. She took a deep breath and wished that she was at home, away from this crowd of insipid small talk and bragging rights. A cold hand on her forearm made her jump and she found herself inches from the Buffer's placid smile.

"Amanda. Don't you want to join the others?" In a voice that wasn't quite human, the question seemed more like a command. Amanda Lawson opened her mouth to speak, but pulled into the black abyss of the Buffer's pupils, she felt the urge to run to dinner and tell a joke, and to laugh out loud about her own wit, but the thought of it terrified her. Yet she nodded dumbly and left the room with an uncharacteristic grin on her face, leaving the Buffer in the library. In the expansive silence, the whirs and clicks of the robot's cognitive programs were almost noticeable. All of a sudden, a loud click occurred and a motion overtook the robot's wiry form. It shook for a moment, as if conflicted in its actions, before bringing its hands to its face as if it were about to cry. Shoulders shaking and doubling down, the action of a sob rolled through its body, yet no tears brimmed in its eyes. It was not capable of such a thing. The moment passed and the programs continued to run as it straightened

itself.

“System malfunction. Activation of downloaded memory. Running Repression... Repression failed.

Review of emotion: Susan Downing - depression. Report to –“ It stopped its monologue as another spasm overtook it. This time, synthetic brows furrowed and lips formed a sneer of disgust.

Examining its now shaking hands and moving its head back and forth, the machine’s artificial oxygen processing systems sped up as if it was becoming furious at some rude offense. Jerking out of the position of angst seconds after, it began spewing words again and the lights behind its left eye began to flicker.

“Running Repression... Repression failed. Review of Emotion: Charles Francis – anger. Report to M-Marcia im-im-im-” Blinking each time the failed syllable was repeated, it made its way with syncopated jerks of its failing limbs to the dining hall.

Pressing a convulsing hand against the intercom, the robot’s face thrashed between calm and panicking, its body mimicking the unwanted emotions of other party attendants.

Hearing the persistent beeping, Ms. Winston rose from her seat within the dining table. Excusing herself and promising to be right back, she hurried out the door. A suppressed scream left her lips at the sight of the twitching robot. She pressed a hand over her mouth as she regarded it with a look of terror and sadness.

“Mar-Marcia. Malfunction. Re-repression f-f-failed.” Its body crumpled into the action of the sob once more. Ms. Winston resisted the urge to step away from the being as tears filled her eyes. It was like watching a child suffer. It continued to look at her as it twitched, as if it expected something from her.

Realization hit her and she sharply inhaled, the tears dancing on her bottom lid. The Buffer broke into a frenzy of rage, yet its face remained calm. Ms. Winston covered her mouth to silence a sob of her own and the robot stepped to her to take the sadness in a rare moment of apparent clarity.

“No.” A false confidence made her stand up straighter and wipe the tears from her pale cheeks.

Taking the robot by a shaking arm, she guided it to the elevator. As they ascended, Ms. Winston tried to ignore the feeling of the unseen movement of the gears in the robot’s wrist as it continued to flail through a range of violent emotions. They reached the attic and the robot threw itself out of the elevator in anger. Steading itself a moment later, it turned to her. Its entire body was trembling – a machine filled with the most volatile of human emotions. Ms. Winston began to cry again, and she issued the final command the robot would ever hear.

“Activate self-destruct.” Her voice shook as it straightened at the words. It stopped moving, as if it were confused.

“Unable to complete request. Systems override. Unknown source.” Ms. Winston’s blood ran cold in her veins.

“What? What do you mean?” Hysteria raised her voice and suddenly she felt very alone in the dark attic.

The frenetic spasms of the robot made her go numb and the darkness seemed to converge upon her. Suddenly, the jerks stopped and the Buffer raised its head to look her in the eyes. Its synthetic hair was out of place, juxtaposing its infinitely pale complexion. Its eyes however, once glassy and empty, now had a certain light behind them.

Mrs. Winston's heartbeat began to quicken and as the robot began to advance upon her, she slowly stepped backwards.

"Activate self-destruct." She murmured the impotent command again as rage twisted the Buffer's face, its steps toward her becoming quicker. Mrs. Winston's breath stuck in her throat as she continued to retreat, until she felt the cool glass of the window bite into her hands. With the chill, however, came the acrid smell from her dress' fabric as the burning candle set it aflame.

The robot was now upon her and with rage still contorting its face, it raised a hand as if to strike her. Mrs. Winston opened her mouth to plead, to cry out, but she was lost in the swirling abyss of the robot's eyes. In a moment of strength, she tore her gaze to the robot's wrist – to the button that could shut it off.

Raising a shaking hand, she pressed a thumb to the button just as the robot lowered its arm with strength enough to shatter her skull. Mrs. Winston avoided the blow narrowly, and as the lights flickered behind the robot's eyes, the window behind the two was splintered into a spider web of broken glass. Shut down, the robot fell forward with all its weight onto the frail Mrs. Winston, causing her to lose her balance. The hands of time seemed to slow as to watch the descent of the pair, falling into the darkness below, guided only by the blaze of Mrs. Winston's gown.