Today for some reason, the 93rd of Eightuary, 4377, the Sun burns red, as if it were pissed off about something. The light bursts onto the world like a dropped sack of flour, and suddenly everything is rosy.

The dome sparkles like a ruby, transparent as a soap bubble, composed of infinitely thin and immovable plasticineum-293. Large enough to house 500, but empty. The floor is flat and round like a mirror. 7 dark doorways line an inside length of the curved wall. In each shadowy recess is the shriveled remains of a person, frozen in a warped pose like a museum exhibit. The crimson caresses and carves every wrinkle and dent in their vacuum-packed skins. The only motion is the mist which effervesces around each. They are still as a family portrait.

From the bottom of each pod runs a filament with light pulses moving through it. These join into a thicker cable with more pulses, which leads off to the side to a floating stationary bicycle, which is being pedaled faster than the eye can see by a shining robot. “litterbot409” is etched on his barrel chest. He huffs with effort.

Hundred of plates of chromanthatine silver, a substance 50 times glossier than chrome, make up the surface of his skin. The many spaces between allow light from his innards to escape, which pulses in time with his pumping legs, and makes him gleam brilliantly.

His body is a metal garbage can, lined with vertical ridges. His head and neck sit on top of the lid, with angular contours that approximate human form. His arms attach at the sides, and legs from the bottom. His insides are like a scaffolding, a mostly

hollow framework of fine sinews. Occasionally his cage-like feet slip on the pedals.

A metallic humanoid voice, constant in speed and tone, breaks the quiet. "No litter detected . . . No dirt detected . . . No laundry detected" Behind a dead face, 185 telemetry systems scan the environment for garbage/trash/litter. "No foreign objects detected. . . No toxic substances detected" He sounds bored. "Searching for foldable clothing . . .Matches found = 0"

Eyes twinkle as he watches the fuchsia photons warm the pods, and the offshoot radiation, the subphotons, invisible to humans, bounce around deep inside their freeze dried brains. He looks to see if they require assistance, but they don't. They're motionless gnarled mannequins. He makes a disappointed little twisted smile.

Litterbot is fast enough to dust the entire Museum Of Future Art in only 15 millidays. He can classify objects as clean or dirty at a rate of 10^{409} operations per microday. He can even anticipate spills 3 days into the future, but despite all this, there's never anything to do. Nothing gets dirty. Anti-gravity containers prevent spills, and dirt-proof materials make stains a statistical impossibility. If someone does manage to soil something, he has to get to it before the auto-lasers kick in. Most of the time he just follows person6 around, and waits for him to throw something on the floor.

Having exhausted all possibilities for usefulness at one level, he shrugs, and goes down the heirarchy:

Priority level 1: Clean

Priority level 2: Help people

Priority level 3: Increase body of knowledge

Priority level 4: Be nice

"Scanning for children in need of nurturing . . . Searching for persons not living up to full potential" He frowns. "Ho hum None detected . . . Malicious viruses . . . flammable gases . . . inflammable gases . . . None detected" He makes a long, suffering sigh that echoes throughout the crystal palace. "There's never any good messes"

"Scanning for insurgencies among the insect races . . . Scanning--Viruses mutating into diseases" His insides dim, and he says sadly, "None detected" Torso rotates one slow revolution, out of boredom. "Scanning for harmful radiation . . . None de---"

Suddenly he stops. Eyes open wide. Train of logic takes a major detour. Posture erects. He proclaims in happy surprise, "Deviation" Eyes blink thrice and this time it is his head that rotates 360 degrees, quickly. The bits inside processors click and clack in their bytes, like a domino avalanche. He announces with joy, "Abnormal radiation detected Warning!"

He dismounts the bike in a fast blur. Stature is short and cylindrical. Legs straighten and freeze at attention. Wheels come out feet bottoms. He rolls in circles. Garbage can lid clashes like cymbals. "Warning to humans Unknown radiation detected Safety protocol 1972 [Society is responsible for helping people.] activated"

This is the most exciting thing to happen since Fluffy turded the sofa, 204 days ago. Person7 named a mini-horse, which raised its security clearance, allowing it to enter the house.

"Reporting"

A loving calm voice fills the mansion: "Dialing . . . Connecting"

His fingers nervously tap his lips in rhythmic waves of clicks.

The nurturing voice resonates throughout the chamber. "Waiting for server . . . Connecting . . . Welcome to system Everyone is special, and we are special How may we help?"

"Incoming solar radiation Anomaly detected"

The voice sounds perfectly content. "What do we have to say for ourselves?"

"Color/wavelength/ambient light/sky 2.017% deviation from normal"

An optic cable comes out Litterbot's crotch and connects to a plug in the wall. A flurry of sparks shoot through it.

"Data is being received"

He exhales.

"8-5-12-12-15 1-14-4 23-5-12-3-15-13-5 20-15 23-15-14-4-5-18-6-21-12 23-15-18-12-4 15-6 19-5-3-18-5-20 13-5-19-19-1-7-5-19 8-9-4-4-5-14 9-14-19-9-4-5 14-21-13-2-5-18

-19 9 8-15-16-5 25-15-21 5-14-10-15-25 20-8-5-13 1-19 23-5-12-12 1-19 20-8-5 15-20-8-5-18 8-9-4-4-5-14 13-5-19-19-1-7-5-19 Comparing against body of knowledge . . . Adjusting for fractal magnifications of x10, x100, x1000 . . ."

<Ding.> "Data has been successfully incorporated into the body of knowledge"

<A little tinker bell dings twice.> "Congratulations This is a new question without an answer! *'Why is the sun red?'* has been assigned priority level 213, and is rated as Significant with a high probability of possible ramifications"

He smiles proudly, and looks to the warming shrunken statues for acknowledgment.

In the first dark cubby hole, the bald mummy stands calmly with a stern expression, and the general appearance of something that died a long time ago. He's dreaming about riding, alone, in a rollercoaster. In the dream he's alive and muscular, not dried up. His cranium glows like a lightbulb. His big smile shows a lot of teeth, as he rolls along the tracks, which are in the shape of letters and symbols making up an equation:

$$X^{\wedge\wedge}M :: X * M / (T_2-T_1)$$

The second shadowy specimen stands head and shoulders taller than the others. Tightly cropped white hair shines atop her corpse, which is meatier than the first.

The third taxiderm is squatted down inside the stasis tube with an expression of

eternal constipation frozen on his face. Otherwise normal looking for a sarcophagus.

The fourth has a thin sprout of dessicated hair curling way up and to the side. Her petrified frame is petite, and skinny as a starved cat. She holds both arms forward, like Frankenstein. She dreams of dangling from a hair thin line attached to a mountain. Snow and wind throw her around like a yo-yo. The view/drop is spectacular. She screams in ecstasy, “Woooooo!”

The fifth figure is average height. Clammy as a frog in formaldehyde. A snake of flivver-length dried seaweed hair winds down to the floor. He poses proudly as possible, given his ancient condition, with hands on hips, like a statue of Agamemnon. One arm human. The other, robotic.

The sixth one is small, a dehydrated child, on all fours. Inside its mind, wearing an old time firefighter's uniform, perched atop a ladder facing the 200th story of a concrete, rectangular skyscraper, engulfed in flames. Smoke and screams pour from little square windows. Teams on the ground wrangle nozzles without hoses, spraying water from several angles. The child plays with the joystick, making the ladder buck like an amusement ride, and laughs.

The last doll is the smallest. Clear hair hangs like wet noodles. She holds one clenched hand forward, as if offering to fist bump.

The vapor enveloping number 6 vanishes, revealing raisin skin, on which sweat beads form. Then more. The sunken skin rumbles, plumps, and presses out the wrinkles.

Color fills his chubby cheeks. He develops into a fully healthy 2 kiloday old, who springs to life, and hops onto the floor, declaring “Nozzle!” Straight black hair hangs above his ears in a perfect bowl cut all the way around.

Litterbot rolls up, shortening his legs to meet him eye to eye. "We are not scheduled to wake for another 4 centidays"

Bowl ignores him and runs around bare assed. The entire surface of his skin is a video screen playing a psychedelic fractal pattern that keeps expanding hypnoticallyad infinitum.

"Council recommends eating a healthy breakfast" Litterbot projects from the center of his chest an image of the food dodecahedron, into the air, making the sound of a ancient film projector.

The kid runs away without looking. “Override”

The projector turns off. "Have we met our educational requirements?" It comes back on, projecting the nine. [Nine round screens in a snowflake configuration, illustrating the core subjects of knowledge: love, wisdom, logic, nano-psychology, fractal math, scrapbooking, drawing, song & dance, and psychosocialeconomics.]

“It's only 10 in the bloody morning!”

The nurturing voice from everywhere says, "Please comply with communication protocol 1779"

The little kid stomps feet. “It's too early to uphold the law”

Litterbot: "The law upholds us"

The little rascal jumps. “Nozzle! Nozzle!”

Litterbot drops arms in defeat. "If one insists"

“Hurray!” Bowl runs toward the wall, and disappears through an invisible doorway.

^^^^He is back on top of the ladder, rocking it like a mechanical bull.

The firefighter below him hangs on and says, “Captain, we need more water” offering a nozzle.

Bowl takes it, and rains down with glee on the sidewalk people, who laugh, but get back in character to scream.

She glances down to the third, asking with her eyes, *Is it just me or is this kid acting strange?*

He replies, getting soaked, “Oh let us have our fun We're only 2”

Bowl laughs and sprays like a maniac.

A naked human in one of the windows takes a break from her role screaming, to lean on the sill and watch the little rascal. She smiles, then her eyes change when she notices his agitation.

The flames shoot up in wave after wave, sparkling

reflections in Bowl's mesmerized eyes. Lost in a dream within a dream.^^^^

The simulator can roast the building indefinitely without consuming it. The array generates flames to pulse in tune with the fantasizer's brainwaves, which, by no coincidence, are also resonant with the red subphotonic waves currently bombarding the world.

Litterbot watches the panel which monitors Bowl's physiology. A little blue light beeps. Most unusual. The child has exhibited a cluster of symptoms which warrants further examination.

*Waking 2.36 standard deviations early

*Anorexia

*Psychomotor agitation

*Obsession with fire

"Initiate psychiatry protocol 1-9-9-0" He runs neuroendocrinoid, psycho-metabolic, and of course thought recognition patterning profiles, and downloads them to Bowl's medical file.

The fog around the first dummy dissipates. From inside its brain cavity comes a weak glow. The skeleton rises like dough into a sleek tall muscular body. Intracranial incandescence increases. The handsome wrinkled face opens eyes without fanfare and steps onto floor. Bald bean beaming like a light bulb.

He looks at the numbers floating in the middle of the clear wall, *4377893.1065*, and wonders, ##Are we seeing correctly?## The last digit advances, *4377893.1066* . ##What are we doing up this early? It only prolongs the suffering## He stretches limbs and scrunches sensitive face with distinguished cheek creases. ##Work isn't for another 12 centidays## His 4th specialty is bioelectric marine counseling. Human psychopathology was cured a long time ago, but some seals and lower vertebrates still have issues. He paces.

Litterbot rolls over, coming up to Bulb's chest, "Excuse us, doctor, but there is a new question"

Bulb chuckles.

"The matter of the redness of the sun"

Bulb rubs his eyes, and concedes. “Yes, very pretty Now buzzer off”

"Would one like us to transpond breakfast to our current location?"

“No thanks” Bulb walks to the wall, which lights up with a round photonic screen, with hundreds of animated diagrams arranged in a complex hierarchy, interacting by themselves, like a little advanced civilization.

Litterbot follows. "Shall we carry one to the breakfast table?"

“No thanks” He mutters. "Might as well dress" Takes a slow breath. "Clothes” Clear plastic shorts appear on his pelvis, doing nothing to hide his skin, which is grey,

overlaid by a grid of small, baby blue, fleurs-de-lis. His fit form stretches in the rubifacient light.

Litterbot: "Shall we discuss the disease state of person6?"

Bulb springs up, "Disease?" A curved panel of screens come on, floating around his upper body, detailing every aspect of the child's condition. He scans it alertly.

"We've recorded atypical spatio-cognitive reasoning, as well as a most peculiar case of preoccupus flammitoses"

Bulb's alarm deflates to irritation. His face is intelligent and kind, with many tired wrinkles. He puffs his lips, turns off the screens, and grimaces. “Why don't we leave the practice of medicine to the docbots?"

Litterbot rolls away, then stops. Legs stay planted. His can rotates back to face Bulb. "The color of the Sun is actually quite---"

"Yes, that's very interesting . . . NOW BUZZER OFF!" His voice can really shred a whine when it wants. Litterbot, dejected, slowly creeps away. Bulb sees the sleepers in their little caves. Goes to #5, with arms heroically on hips, and presses the air next to its head. A little screen comes on. He watches for a moment--a knight sword fight a dragon. "Boring" Goes to number 7. Gently presses her button--an angel swirling around the stars. Bulb cracks a smile, which he rarely does.

He looks out at the magnificent view of the shore. The waves crash. The reeds blow. Seagulls provide entertainment dive bombing fish, and squawking over scraps.

The scene is a novice watercolor with bleeding paint. All is peaceful and as it should be. He laments, "There's nothing to do!"

Litterbot jumps in eagerly. "Would one like a list of activities most beneficial to society cross matched to one's skills?"

“Why bother?" He complains in mocking voice, curling his lip, and wobbling his head for maximum snark, "All of society's needs have been met!” Makes a sour face.

The parental voice, which always sounds to be in a state of enlightenment, reverberates throughout the pink grapefruit. "Affirmative . . . Needs level 1 . . . met Needs level 2 . . . met Needs level 3 . . . met"

"I'm bored out of my freakin gourd!"

"The state of perfection has never bothered us before Shall we perform a psychological eval---"

Bulb cuts the robot off by palming his face.

Then a thought comes to him. “It's been ages" He stretched. "Can't believe we're saying this . . . gallop” Sneakers materialize on his hands and feet, for the first time since second college. He tests his arms against each other and bends them behind back.

"But our exercise requirements are fully met by the stimulator?"

"Go away and stop bothering people!"

Litterbot retreats, but takes the liberty of scanning his skull with a laser for a complete psychiatric exam. His agitation levels are unusually high.

Bulb bends over, places handsneakers on the floor, and holds a long downward dog. Turns to see robot looking sad and barks, "Don't we have something we should be cleaning?” Walks on four limbs. The wall dilates a hole to go through, then seals behind.

Litterbot replies, to himself, "Actually, no Nothing useful to do All that leaves is scientific research" His head jerks as an idea comes, eyebrows raise. "I suppose I could study the question"

The hemisphere sits at the peak of a hill, glassy as an eye peeking through the foliage, breaking the natural asymmetry, out of place as a pearl on a neck. Bulb runs like a horse down into the neighborhood. The copper color covers the rolling hills, lush with trees, and the coast, which stretches like it has all the time in the world.

He jogs over a pebbled pass through the magnificent fullness of nature, and thinks, ##This feels good. How long has it been?##

The wise voice replies in ear, "5,171 days"

He passes a rose bush. Each flower big as a head, and a different pattern. A minihorse with checkerboard markings sits on one, munching it, oblivious to its fate. ##Cute little bastard##

"Please refrain from negative thinking"

##Meant it as a compliment##

"Would we like to distribute this picture among our seven circles of friends?"

"Oh buzzer off" He trots beside a large curved structure with a bumpy surface of irregular ridges.

<An alarm sounds> A voice in the air says, "Clear landing zone"

He sharply changes direction, galloping fast as he can away from the wall. At a distance it can be seen to be the trunk of a gigantic tree. Its branches reach into the clouds. After a milliday of running he sprints across a line on the grass which demarks the safety zone. He stops, crouches, and catches his breath. Behind him is an explosion. A peach seven flivvers tall, just missed him, landing on the ground. The bottom smashed, spraying and soaking him in sauce.

Back home, the fat freezer pop with one metal arm melts, rehydrates, bulks out into a strong, stocky, big bellied 12 kd adult. Hair fluoresces bright green like a neon sign, and softens, waving like cooked spaghetti, almost touching the floor. His face shows vitality. Deep raspy voice goes off like an alarm clock, “Four bells for alcohol!”

The giant mummy comes alive fast enough to reply. “Alcohol has been determined to cause alcoholism” Upon reanimation, her tightly cropped hair explodes into a white afro wider than shoulders, like a big cotton ball. Her body is chunky and powerful. Age 20k. She calmly looks down at Neon, who only comes up to her big breasts.

Neon: "There hasn't been a case of mental illness in megadays”

Her face is beautiful and wise, with a few distinguished wrinkles. “No, there haven't been any good diseases since we can remember”

Neon: “Or hospitals” He shakes hair like a wet dog, creating a lightshow.

Cotton: “It looks so romantic in the movies” She smiles. Teeth big and bright. “People reading magazines in waiting rooms . . . Taking bottles and bottles of pills” She does a twirl.

Neon: “We never see that nowadays” He touches toes and rises.

Cotton does a one leg yoga pose: “If someone were to get sick, they certainly wouldn't give them a pill”

Neon tries to do the same, but stumbles: “And if they did, they would only take one, because then they'd be cured” His skin is a red plaid pattern.

Cotton puts palms together in front of chest like praying: “And there certainly wouldn't be any need for waiting rooms”

He chuckles and twists torso. “Of course not. All appointments are kept on time”

They hold their poses.

Cotton sighs. “There hasn't been a good case of anything in megadays”

Computer: "10.055 kilodays"

Neon sneers at the ceiling: “Thanks very much, know-it-all Is there anything we don't know?”

Computer replies with a straight face(even though technically it doesn't have one,) "There is an infinite amount of information not contained in our memory"

Neon turns to her accusingly. “We're up awfully early”

Cotton responds defensively. “Well so are we”

Litterbot stands against the wall appearing dead, but quite busy mentally. There are now 4 family members who've woken unusually early. The probability of this happening by chance is well beyond the threshold of significance. Meta-analysis results in a new hpt(highest priority task) = investigate behavioral anomalies/family.

A halo of light moves down Bulb's body, cleaning it, to the feet. He trots through a tunnel of floppy white cherry blossoms, bigger than him. He bites a wrecking-ball size cherry. As he runs off, and the wounded fruit heals.

He passes an area with transparent domes scattered like bumps on a bullfrog. Hemispheres of all sizes, from single occupancy to buildings capable of holding hundreds of thousands. Many joined together in clusters, like soap suds. Some connect by hamster tubes. One tall one has a heartlight on top. People inside go about their business. One structure is ancient cube chiseled out of marble, with pillars, carvings of gargoyles, and a series of rectilinear steps rising to a square entrance. Nothing inside it

is visible. The army of rouge photons barrages it all.

He follows a playfully piddling stream that leads through an alcove of hanging vines to the shore. Boulder size emeralds stud the sands beside the roaring waves, which crash an ecstatic symphony of white noise. He looks up at the rusted sky. The cloudwriting says, “Be nice”

The area is populated with people walking. Others sitting or chairstanding. Everyone is content. Styles of dress from every planet and eon. A minn [person with no robot parts] wears a rusty chain coiled around body. A child wears a screen suit playing *Casablanca* in black and white. Many old fashioned clothing styles: a flapper, a Louis the 14th, someone in a three piece suit. Various clear plastic wraps, titanium plates, and of course the most prevalent: nothing at all.

In the middle of the busiest thoroughfare stands a flivver tall dome. People flow around it. It projects the word *love*, which appears the same no matter which angle viewed from. Some people are looking at the sky or pointing.

A pack of foursjoggers runs by. One wears blinding iridescent pink handfootsneakers, which look like four circling welder's torches. A guy dressed like Julius Caesar pumps legs on an antique metal walkcycle, leaving an indentation in the grass, which quickly heals. Vehicles of all kinds--bubble buses, single person bubbles, hover boards and cycles, fly every which way, rocketing towards intersections of traffic on paths of certain collision, but swerving seamlessly on their happy ways.

Bulb is isolated in the rhythm of running. ##Where is career going? Tired of counseling a bunch of fish . . . They need to get over it## He passes another public service bubble showing a puppy licking a kid's face, over and over. He trots a little more. ##I wish there were something new to discover## He doesn't notice how fast he's running.

Computer says in ear, "Level of discontent/3rd specialty exceeds threshhold Vocational counseling sequence initiated"

Cotton stares up through the curved lens of the home. “Look how puce it is”

Neon stretches arms. “So?”

The Frankenstein mannequin comes to life. Her crust of hair fluffs out into shocking electric blue, combed straight up, tall and wild like a troll doll. She jumps out of chamber proclaiming, “Oh poo!” Her body is petite. Hair is the tallest. Younger than Cotton, but older than Neon. She spins and the coif follows a waltz beat behind. “It's the most marvelous thing we've ever seen”

Neon snears.

Cotton: “Don't think it's ever been this color”

Bulb, galloping through town far away lets out a snide chuckle. "Let's not go crazy"

Neon raises voice: "The sky is blue, duh”

Cotton: “Except when it's pink, or grey, or purple"

Bulb hurdles over a fallen limb. "There are only three colors, and they're all good"

Troll eyes the sky, wrinkles her nose, and shakes head, wiggling hair. "It's a little off"

Bulb says with the relaxed confidence of being right all the time, "The sky has been the same for billions of kilodays"

Neon: "The girls are batty”

<A harsh buzz fills the room> "Sexism protocol 1-9-2-0 Please rephrase"

Neon shakes fist at ceiling. “What we wouldn't give to strangle that machine just once”

<More abrasive buzz> "Threats of violence Please enjoy the following counseling" A white ray from the ceiling zaps head briefly.

“These *people* are batty Is that better?”

<Softer buzz> "Please rephrase"

“Our viewpoints differ”

<Ding>

Bulb passes a human with a beard and white robe, a person with lime skin and multicolor sparkles, a herd of fat people rolling around on office chair wheels, knocking

into each other like bumper cars. He grits teeth, determined to get a good workout, and sprints past several robots playing volleyball. The ball is a robot too. He stops, exhausted, pants. “That's it Done”

Computer: "Good job Last performance exceeded by 9%”"

"Last performance? But we haven't run since the 72 olympics? He laughs and rises to two legs. Muscles well sweated. “Clothes” A ring of mist washes over him from top to bottom. Clear flip-flops replace the sneakers.

"Congratulations New personal record"

"Hippy” The outfit materializes. He has a goatee, a bead necklace, and bell bottoms with a red, white, and blue vertical stripes. “A personal record?” Scrinches face. ##That can't be right##

"Affirmative"

“But we haven't set hand nor foot hand on a track in 5 kilods How could we possibly be faster than a world record?”

"Average speed = 479 flivvers per milliday"

Voice cracks, "479! That's humanly impossible!"

"How many times shall we repeat ourselves? All time personal record All time personal record All time personal record" It replays faster and faster until it is a high frequency whine, then beyond hearing.