Nobody Here But…

Isaac Asimov

You see, it wasn’t our fault. We had no idea anything was wrong until I called Cliff Anderson and spoke to him when he wasn’t there. What’sxmore, I wouldn’t have known he wasn’t there, if it wasn’t that hje walked in while I was talking to him.

No, no, no, no—

I never seem to be able to tell this straight. I get too excited.—Look, I might as well begin at the beginning. I’m Bill Billings; my friend is Cliff Anderson. I’m an electrical engineer, he’s a mathematician, and we’re on the faculty of Midwestern Institute of Technology. Now you know who we are.

Ever since we got out of uniform, Cliff and I have been working on calculating machines. You know what they are. Norbert Wiener popularized them in his book, Cybernetics. If you’ve seen pictures of them, you know that they’re great big things. They take up a whole wall and they’re very complicated; also expensive.

But Cliff and I had ideas. You see, what makes a thinking machine so big and" expensive is that it has to be full of relays and vacuum tubes just so that microscopic electric currents can be controlled and made to flicker on and off, here and there. Now the really important things are those little electric currents, so—

I once said to Cliff, “Why can’t we control the currents without all the salad dressing?”

Cliff said, “Why not, indeed,” and started working on the mathematics.

How we got where we did in two years is no matter. It’s what we got after we finished that made the trouble. It turned out that we ended with something about this high and maybe so wide and just about this deep—

No, no. I forget that you can’t see me. I’ll give you the figures. It was about three feet high, six feet long, and two feet deep. Got that? It took two men to carry it but it could be carried and that was the point. And still, mind you, it could do anything the wall-size calculators could. Not as fast, maybe, but we were still working.

We had big ideas about that thing, the very biggest. We could put it on ships or airplanes, After a while, if we could make it small enough, an automobile could carry one.

We were especially interested in the automobile angle. Suppose you had a little thinking machine on the dashboard, hooked to the engine and battery and equipped with photo-electric eyes. It could choose an ideal course, avoid cars, stop at red lights, pick the optimum speed for the terrain. Everybody could sit in the back seat and automobile accidents would vanish.

All of it was fun. There was so much excitement to it, so many thrills every time we worked out another consolidation, that I could still cry when I think of the time I picked up the telephone to call our lab and tumbled everything into the discard.

I was at Mary Ann’s house that evening—Or have I told you about Mary Ann yet? No. I guess I haven’t.

Mary Ann was the girl who would have been my fiancee but for two ifs. One, if she were willing, and two, if I had the nerve to ask her. She has red hair and crams something like two tons of energy into about 110 pounds of body which fills out very nicely from the ground to five and a half feet up. I was dying to ask her, you understand, but each time I’d see her coming into sight, setting a match to my heart with every movement, I’d just break down.

It’s not that I’m not good-looking. People tell me I’m adequate. I’ve got all my hair; I’m nearly six feet tall; I can even dance. It’s just that I’ve nothing to offer. I don’t have to tell you what college teachers make. With inflation and taxes, it amounts to just about nothing. Of course, if we got the basic patents rolled up on our little thinking machine, things would be different. But I couldn’t ask her to wait for that, either. Maybe, after it was all set—

Anyway, I just stood there, wishing, that evening, as she came into the living room. My arm was groping blindly for the phone.

Mary Ann said, “I’m all ready, Bill. Let’s go.”

I said, “Just a minute. I want to ring up Cliff.”

She frowned a little, “Can’t it wait?”

“I was supposed to call him two hours ago,” I explained.

It only took two minutes. I rang the lab. Cliff was putting in an evening of work and so he answered. I asked something, then he said something, I asked some more and he explained. The details don’t matter, but as I said, he’s the mathematician of the combination. When I build the circuits and put things together in What look like impossible ways, he’s the guy who shuffles the symbols and tells me whether they’re really impossible. Then, just as I finished and hung up, there was a ring at the door.

For a minute, I thought Mary Ann had another caller and got sort of stiff-backed as I watched her go to the door. I was scribbling down some of what Cliff had just told me while I watched. But then she opened the door and it was only Cliff Anderson after all.

He said, “I thought I’d find you here—Hello, Mary Ann. Say, weren’t you going to ring me at six? You’re as reliable as a cardboard chair.” Cliff is short and plump and always willing to start a fight, but I know him and pay no attention.

I said, “Things turned up and it slipped my mind. But I just called, so what’s the difference?”

“Called? Me? When?”

I started to point to the telephone and gagged. Right then, the bottom fell out of things. Exactly five seconds before the doorbell had sounded I had been on the phone talking to Cliff in the lab, and the lab was six miles away from Mary Ann’s house.

I said, “I—just spoke to you.”

I wasn’t getting across. Cliff just said, “To me?” again.

I was pointing to the phone with both hands now, “On the phone. I called the lab. On this phone here! Mary Ann heard me. Mary Ann, wasn’t I just talking to—”

Mary Ann said, “I don’t know whom you were talking to.—Well, shall we go?” That’s Mary Ann. She’s a stickler for honesty.

I sat down, I tried to be very quiet and clear. I said, “Cliff, I dialed the lab’s phone number, you answered the phone, I asked you if you had the details worked out, you said yes, and gave them to me. Here they are. I wrote them down. Is this correct or not?”

I handed him the paper on which I had written the equations.

Cliff looked at them. He said, “They’re correct. But where could you have gotten them? You didn’t work them out yourself, did you?”

“I just told you. You gave them to me over the phone.”

Cliff shook his head. “Bill, I haven’t been in the lab since seven fifteen. There’s nobody there.”

“I spoke to somebody, I tell you.”

Mary Ann was fiddling with her gloves. We’re getting late.” she said.

I waved my hands at her to wait a bit, and said to Cliff, “Look, are you sure—”

“There’s nobody there, unless you want to count Junior.” Junior was what we called our pint-sized mechanical brain.

We stood there, looking at one another. Mary Ann’s toe was still hitting the floor like a time bomb waiting to explode.

Then Cliff laughed. He said, “I’m thinking of a cartoon I saw, somewhere. It shows a robot answering the phone and saying, "Honest, boss, there’s nobody here but us complicated thinking machines."”

I didn’t think that was funny. I said, “Let’s go to the lab.”

Mary Ann said, “Hey! We won’t make the show.”

I said, “Look, Mary Ann, this is very important. It’s just going to take a minute. Come along with us and we’ll go straight to the show from there.”

She said, “The show starts—” And then she stopped talking, because I grabbed her wrist and we left!

That just shows how excited I was. Ordinarily, I wouldn’t ever have dreamed of shoving her around. I mean, Mary Ann is quite a lady. It’s just that I had so many things on my mind. I don’t even really remember grabbing her wrist, come to think of it. It’s just that the next thing I knew, I was in the auto and so was Cliff and so was she, and she was rubbing her wrist and muttering under her breath about big gorillas.

I said, “Did I hurt you, Mary Ann?”

She said, “No, of course not. I have my arm yanked out of its socket every day, just for fun.” Then she kicked me in the shin.

She only does things like that because she has red hair. Actually, she has a very gentle nature, but she tries very hard to live up to the redhead mythology. I see right through that, of course, but I humor her, poor kid.

We were at the laboratory in twenty minutes.

The Institute is empty at night. It’s emptier than a building would ordinarily be. You see, it’s designed to have crowds of students rushing through the corridors and when they aren’t there, it’s unnaturally lonely. Or maybe it was just that I was afraid to see what might be sitting in our laboratory upstairs. Either way, footsteps were uncomfortably loud and the self-service elevator was downright dingy.

I said to Mary Ann, “This won’t take long.” But she just sniffed and looked beautiful.

She can’t help looking beautiful.

Cliff had the key to the laboratory and I looked over his shoulder when he opened the door. There was nothing to see. Junior was there, sure, but he looked just as he had when I saw him last. The dials in front registered nothing and except for that, there was just a large box, with a cable running back into the wall socket.

Cliff and I walked up on either side of Junior. I think we were planning to grab it if it made a sudden move. But then we stopped because Junior just wasn’t doing anything. Mary Ann was looking at it, too. In fact, she ran her middle finger along its top and then looked at the finger tip and twiddled it against her thumb to get rid of the dust.

“I said, “Mary Ann, don’t you go near it. Stay at the other end of the room.”

She said, “It’s just as dirty there.”

She’d never been in our lab before, and of course she didn’t realize that a laboratory wasn’t the same thing as a baby’s bedroom, if you know what I mean. The janitor comes in twice a day and all he does is empty the wastebaskets. About once a week, he comes in with a dirty mop, makes mud on the floor, and shoves it around a little.

Cliff said, “The telephone isn’t where I left it.”

I said, “How do you know?”

“Because I left it there.” He pointed. “And now it’s here.”

If he were right, the telephone had moved closer to Junior. I swallowed and said, “Maybe you don’t remember right.” I tried to laugh without sounding very natural and said, “Where’s the screw driver?”

“What are you going to do?”

“Just take a look inside. For laughs.”

Mary Ann said, “You’ll get yourself all dirty.” So I put on my lab coat. She’s a very thoughtful girl, Mary Ann.

I got to work with a screw driver. Of course, once Junior was really perfected, we were going to have models manufactured in welded, one-piece cases. We were even thinking of molded plastic in colors, for home use. In the lab model, though, we held it together with screws so that we could take it apart and put it together as often as we wanted to.

Only the screws weren’t coming out. I grunted and yanked and said, “Some joker was putting his weight on these when he screwed, these things in.”

Cliff said, “You’re the only one who ever touches the thing.”

He was right, too, but that didn’t make it any easier. I stood up and passed the back of my hand over my forehead. I held out the screw driver to him, “Want to try?”

He did, and didn’t get any further than I did. He said, “That’s funny.”

I said, “What’s funny?”

He said, “I had a screw turning just now. It moved about an eighth of an inch and then the screw driver slipped.”

“What’s funny about that?”

Cliff backed away and put down the screw driver with two fingers, “What’s funny is that I saw the screw move back an eighth of an inch and tighten up again.”

Mary Ann was fidgeting again. She said, “Why don’t your scientific minds think of a blowtorch, if you’re so anxious.” There was a blowtorch on one of the benches and she was pointing to it.

Well, ordinarily, I wouldn’t think any more of using a blowtorch on Junior than on myself. But I was thinking something and Cliff was thinking something and we were both thinking the same thing Junior didn’t want to be opened up.

Cliff said, “What do you think, Bill?”

And I said, “I don’t know, Cliff.”

Mary Ann said, “Well, hurry up, lunkhead, we’ll miss the show.”

So I picked up the blowtorch and adjusted the gauge on the oxygen cylinder. It was going to be like stabbing a friend.

But Mary Ann stopped the proceedings by saying, “Well, how stupid can men be? These screws are loose. You must have been turning the screw driver the wrong way.”

Now there isn’t much chance of turning a screw driver the wrong way. Just the same, I don’t like to contradict Mary Ann, so I just said, “Mary Ann, don’t stay too close to Junior. Why don’t you wait by the door.”

But she just said, “Well, look!” And there was a screw in her hand and an empty hole in the front of Junior’s case. She had removed it by hand.

Cliff said, “Holy Smoke!”

They were turning, all dozen screws. They were doing it by themselves, like little forms crawling out of their holes, turning round and round, then dropping out. I scrabbled them up and only one was left. It hung on for a while, the front panel sagging from it, till I reached out. Then the last screw dropped and the panel fell gently into my arms. I put it to one side.

Cliff said, “It did that on purpose. It heard us mention the blowtorch and gave up.” His face is usually pink, but it was white then.

I was feeling a little queer myself. I said, “What’s it trying to hide?”

“I don’t know.”

We bent before its open insides and for a while we just looked. I could hear Mary Ann’s toe begin to tap the floor again. I looked at my wrist watch and I had to admit to myself we didn’t have much time. In fact, we didn’t have any time left.

And then I said, “It’s got a diaphragm.”

Cliff said, “Where?” and bent closer.

I pointed, “And a loud speaker.”

“You didn’t put them in?”

“Of course I didn’t put them in. I ought to know what I put in. If I put it in, I’d remember.”

“Then how did it get in?”

We were squatting and arguing. I said, “It made them itself, I suppose. Maybe it grows them. Look at that.” I pointed again. Inside the box at two different places, were coils of something that looked like thin garden hose, except that they were of metal. They spiraled tightly so that they lay flat. At the end of each coil, the metal divided into five or six thin filaments that were in little sub-spirals.

“You didn’t put those in either?”

“No, I didn’t put those in either.”

“What are they?”

He knew what they were and I knew what they were. Something had to reach out to get materials for Junior to make parts for itself; something had to snake out for the telephone. I picked up the front panel and looked at it again. There were two circular bits of metal cut out and hinged so that they could swing forward and leave a hole for something to come through.

I poked a finger through one and held it up for Cliff to see, and said, “I didn’t put this in either.”

Mary Ann was looking over my shoulder now, and without warning she reached out. I was wiping my fingers with a paper towel to get off the dust and grease and didn’t have time to stop her. I should have known Mary Ann, though; she’s always so anxious to help.

Anyway, she reached in to touch one of the—well, we might as well say it—tentacles. I don’t know if she actually touched them or not. Later on she claimed she hadn’t. But anyway, what happened then was that she let out a little yell and suddenly sat down and began rubbing her arm.

“The same one,” she whimpered. “First you, and then that.”

I helped her up. “It must have been a loose connection, Mary Ann. I’m sorry, but I told you—”

Cliff said, “Nuts! That was no loose connection. Junior’s just protecting himself.”

I had thought the same thing, myself. I had thought lots of things. Junior was a new kind of machine. Even the mathematics that controlled it were different from anything anybody had worked with before. Maybe it had something no machine previously had ever had. Maybe it felt a desire to stay alive and grow. Maybe it would have a desire to make more machines until there were millions of them all over the earth, fighting with human beings for control.

I opened my mouth and Cliff must have known what I was going to say, because he yelled, “No. No, don’t say it!”

But I couldn’t stop myself. It just came out and I said, “Well, look, let’s disconnect Junior—What’s the matter?”

Cliff said bitterly, “Because he’s listening to what we say, you jackass. He heard about the blowtorch, didn’t he? I was going to sneak up behind it, but now it will probably electrocute me if I try.”

Mary Ann was still brushing at the back of her dress and saying how dirty the floor was, even though I kept telling her I had nothing to do with that. I mean, it’s the janitor that makes the mud.

Anyway, she said, “Why don’t you put on rubber gloves and yank the cord out?"

I could see Cliff was trying to think of reasons why that wouldn’t work. He didn’t think of any, so he put on the rubber gloves and walked towards Junior.

I yelled, “Watch out!”

It was a stupid thing to say. He had to watch out; he had no choice. One of the tentacles moved and there was no doubt what they were now. It whirled out and drew a line between Cliff and the power cable. It remained there, vibrating a little with its six finger-tendrils splayed out. Tubes inside Junior were beginning to glow. Cliff didn’t try to go past that tentacle. He backed way and after a while, it spiraled inward again. He took off his rubber gloves.

“Bill,” he said, “we’re not going to get anywhere. That’s a smarter gadget than we dreamed we could make. It was smart enough to use my voice as a model when it built its diaphragm. It may become smart enough to learn how to-’ He looked over his shoulder, and whispered, “how to generate its own power and become self-contained.

“Bill, we’ve got to stop it, or someday someone will telephone the planet Earth and get the answer, "Honest, boss, there’s nobody here anywhere but us complicated thinking machines"!”

“Let’s get in the police,” I said. We’ll explain. A grenade, or something—”

Cliff snook his head, “We can’t have anyone else find out. They’ll build other Juniors and it looks like we don’t have enough answers for that kind of a project after all.”

“Then what do we do?”

“I don’t know.”

I felt a sharp blow on my chest. I looked down and it was Mary Ann, getting ready to spit fire. She said, “Look, lunkhead, if we’ve got a date, we’ve got one, and if we haven’t, we haven’t. Make up your mind.”

I said, “Now, Mary Ann—”

She said, “Answer me. I never heard such a ridiculous thing. Here I get dressed to go to a play, and you take me to a dirty laboratory with a foolish machine and spend the rest of the evening twiddling dials.”

“Mary Ann, I’m not—”

She wasn’t listening; she was talking. I wish I could remember what she said after that. Or maybe I don’t; maybe it’s just as well I can’t remember, since none of it was very complimentary. Every once in a while I would manage a ’But, Mary Ann—” and each time it would get sucked under and swallowed up.

Actually, as I said, she’s a very gentle creature and it’s only when she gets excited that she’s ever talkative or unreasonable. Of course, with red hair, she feels she ought to get excited rather often. That’s my theory, anyway. She just feels she has to live up to her red hair.

Anyway, the next thing I do remember clearly is Mary Ann finishing with a stamp on my right foot and then turning to leave. I ran after her, trying once again, “But, Mary Ann—”

Then Cliff yelled at us. Generally, he doesn’t pay any attention to us, but this time he was shouting. “Why don’t you ask her to marry you, you lunkhead?”

Mary Ann stopped. She was in the doorway by then but she didn’t turn around. I stopped too, and felt the words get thick and clogged up in my throat. I couldn’t even manage a ’But, Mary Ann—”

Cliff was yelling in the background. I heard him as though he were a mile away. He was shouting, “I got it! I got it!” over and over again.

Then Mary Ann turned and she looked so beautiful—Did I tell you that she’s got green eyes with a touch of blue in them? Anyway she looked so beautiful that all the words in my throat jammed together very tightly and came out in that funny sound you make when you swallow.

She said, “Were you going to say something, Bill?”

Well, Cliff had put it in my head. My voice was hoarse and I said, “Will you marry me, Mary Ann?”

The minute I said it, I wished I hadn’t, because I thought she would never speak to me again. Then two minutes after that I was glad I had, because she threw her arms around me and reached up to kiss me. It was a while before I was quite clear what was happening, and then I began to kiss back. This went on for quite a long time, until Cliff’s banging on my shoulder managed to attract my attention.

I turned and said, snappishly, “What the devil do you want?” It was a little ungrateful. After all, he had started this.

He said,’Look!”

In his hand, he held the main lead that had connected Junior to the power supply.

I had forgotten about Junior, but now it came back. I said, “He’s disconnected, then.”

“Cold!”

“How did you do it?”

He said, “Junior was so busy watching you and Mary Ann fight that I managed to sneak up on it. Mary Ann put on one good show.”

I didn’t like that remark because Mary Ann is a very dignified and self-contained sort of girl and doesn’t put on ’shows’. However, I had too much in hand to take issue with him.

I said to Mary Ann, “I don’t have much to offer, Mary Ann; just a school teacher’s salary. Now that we’ve dismantled Junior, there isn’t even any chance of—”

Mary Ann said, “I don’t care, Bill. I just gave up on you, you lunkhead darling. I’ve tried practically everything—”

“You’ve been kicking my shins and stamping on my toes.”

“I’d run out of everything else. I was desperate.”

The logic wasn’t quite clear, but I didn’t answer because I remembered about the show. I looked at my watch and said, “Look, Mary Ann, if we hurry we can still make the second act.”

She said, “Who wants to see the show?”

So I kissed her some more; and we never did get to see the show at all.

There’s only one thing that bothers me now. Mary Ann and I are married, and we’re perfectly happy. I just had a promotion; I’m an associate professor now. Cliff keeps working away at plans for building a controllable Junior and he’s making progress.

None of that’s it.

You see, I talked to Cliff the next evening, to tell him Mary Ann and I were going to marry and to thank him for giving me the idea. And after staring at me for a minute, he swore he hadn’t said it; he hadn’t shouted for me to propose marriage.

Of course, there was something else in the room with Cliff’s voice.

I keep worrying Mary Ann will find out. She’s the gentlest girl I know, but she has got red hair. She can’t help trying to live up to that, or have I said that already?

Anyway, what will she say if she ever finds out that I didn’t have the sense to propose till a machine told me to?

We all have our lovable eccentricities and I have a few that are all my own.

For instance, I hate nice days. Show me a day in which the temperature is just 78, and a light breeze has the lush foliage of June, or the just turning leaves of September, rustling with a soft murmur; a day in which there is a drowsy softness over the landscape, and a sweet freshness to the air, and a general peacefulness over the world, and I’ll show you one unhappy fellow—namely, me.

There’s a reason for it, a good one. (You don’t think I’m irrational, do you?) As I said in the preface-to ’Sally’, I am a compulsive writer. That means that my idea of a pleasant time is to go up to my attic, sit at my electric typewriter (as I am doing right now), and bang away, watching the words take shape like magic before my eyes. To minimize distractions, I keep the window-shades down at all times and work exclusively by artificial light.

No one has any particular objection to this as long as we have the sleet of a typical New England late fall day darting through the air, or the blustering wind of a typical New England early spring day, or the leaden weight of Gulf air that splats out over New England in the summer, or the dancing flakes of that third foot of snow that blankets New England in the winter. Everyone says, “Boy, you’re lucky you don’t have to go out in that weather.”

And I agree with them.

But then comes a beautiful day in May-June or September-October and everyone says to me, “What are you doing indoors on a day like this, you creep?” Sometimes out of sheer indignation they pick me up and throw me out of the window so I can enjoy the nice day.

The niceness of being a writer, of course, is that you take all your frustrations and annoyances and spread them out on paper. This prevents them from building up to dangerous levels and explains why writers in general are such lovable, normal people and are a joy to all who know them.

For instance, I wrote a novel in 1953 which pictured a world in which everyone lived in underground cities, comfortably enclosed away from the open air.

People would say, “How could you imagine such a nightmarish situation?1

And I would answer in astonishment, “What nightmarish situation?”

But with me everything becomes a challenge. Having made my pitch in favor of enclosure, I wondered if I could reverse the situation.

So I wrote ’It’s Such a Beautiful Day’—and did such a good job at convincing myself, that very often these days, sometimes twice in one week, when I feel I’ve put in a good day’s work, I go out in the late afternoon and take a walk through the neighborhood.

But I don’t know. That thing you people have up there in the sky. It’s got quite a glare to it.

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