Christmas Without Rodney

Isaac Asimov

It all started with Gracie (my wife of nearly forty years) wanting to give Rodney time off for the holiday season and it ended with me in an absolutely impossible situation. I’ll tell you about it if you don’t mind because I’ve got to tell somebody. Naturally, I’m changing names and details for our own protection.

It was just a couple of months ago, mid-December, and Gracie said to me, “Why don’t we give Rodney time off for the holiday season? Why shouldn’t he celebrate Christmas, too?”

I remember I had my optics unfocused at the time (there’s a certain amount of relief in letting things go hazy when you want to rest or just listen to music) but I focused them quickly to see if Gracie were smiling or had a twinkle in her eye. Not that she has much of a sense of humor, you understand.

She wasn’t smiling. No twinkle. I said, “Why on Earth should we give him time off?”

“Why not?”

“Do you want to give the freezer a vacation, the sterilizer, the holoviewer? Shall we just turn off the power supply?”

“Come, Howard,” she said. “Rodney isn’t a freezer or a sterilizer. He’s a person.”

“He’s not a person. He’s a robot. He wouldn’t want a vacation.”

“How do you know? And he’s a person. He deserves a chance to rest and just revel in the holiday atmosphere.”

I wasn’t going to argue that “person” thing with her. I know you’ve all read those polls which show that women are three times as likely to resent and fear robots as men are. Perhaps that’s because robots tend to do what was once called, in the bad old days, “women’s work” and women fear being made useless, though I should think they’d be delighted. In any case, Gracie is delighted and she simply adores Rodney. (That’s her word for it. Every other day she says, “I just adore Rodney.”)

You’ve got to understand that Rodney is an old-fashioned robot whom we’ve had about seven years. He’s been adjusted to fit in with our old-fashioned house and our old-fashioned ways and I’m rather pleased with him myself. Sometimes I wonder about getting one of those slick, modern jobs, which are automated to death, like the one our son, DeLancey, has, but Gracie would never stand for it.

But then I thought of DeLancey and I said, “How are we going to give Rodney time off, Gracie? DeLancey is coming in with that gorgeous wife of his” (I was using “gorgeous” in a sarcastic sense, but Gracie didn’t notice—it’s amazing how she insists on seeing a good side even when it doesn’t exist) “and how are we going to have the house in good shape and meals made and all the rest of it without Rodney?”

“But that’s just it,” she said, earnestly. “DeLancey and Hortense could bring their robot and he could do it all. You know they don’t think much of Rodney, and they’d love to show what theirs can do and Rodney can have a rest.”

I grunted and said, “If it will make you happy, I suppose we can do it. It’ll only be for three days. But I don’t want Rodney thinking he’ll get every holiday off.”

It was another joke, of course, but Gracie just said, very earnestly, “No, Howard, I will talk to him and explain it’s only just once in a while.”

She can’t quite understand that Rodney is controlled by the three laws of robotics and that nothing has to be explained to him.

So I had to wait for DeLancey and Hortense, and my heart was heavy. DeLancey is my son, of course, but he’s one of your upwardly mobile, bottom-line individuals. He married Hortense because she has excellent connections in business and can help him in that upward shove. At least, I hope so, because if she has another virtue I have never discovered it.

They showed up with their robot two days before Christmas. The robot was as glitzy as Hortense and looked almost as hard. He was polished to a high gloss and there was none of Rodney’s clumping. Hortense’s robot (I’m sure she dictated the design) moved absolutely silently. He kept showing up behind me for no reason and giving me heart-failure every time I turned around and bumped into him.

Worse, DeLancey brought eight-year-old LeRoy. Now he’s my grandson, and I would swear to Hortense’s fidelity because I’m sure no one would voluntarily touch her, but I’ve got to admit that putting him through a concrete mixer would improve him no end.

He came in demanding to know if we had sent Rodney to the metal-reclamation unit yet. (He called it the “bust-up place.”) Hortense sniffed and said, “Since we have a modern robot with us, I hope you keep Rodney out of sight.”

I said nothing, but Gracie said, “Certainly, dear. In fact, we’ve given Rodney time off.”

DeLancey made a face but didn’t say anything. He knew his mother.

I said, pacifically, “Suppose we start off by having Rambo make something good to drink, eh? Coffee, tea, hot chocolate, a bit of brandy—”

Rambo was their robot’s name. I don’t know why except that it starts with R. There’s no law about it, but you’ve probably noticed for yourself that almost every robot has a name beginning with R. R for robot, I suppose. The usual name is Robert. There must be a million robot Roberts in the northeast corridor alone.

And frankly, it’s my opinion that’s the reason human names just don’t start with R any more. You get Bob and Dick but not Robert or Richard. You get Posy and Trudy, but not Rose or Ruth. Sometimes you get unusual R’s. I know of three robots called Rutabaga, and two that are Rameses. But Hortense is the only one I know who named a robot Rambo, a syllable-combination I’ve never encountered, and I’ve never liked to ask why. I was sure the explanation would prove to be unpleasant.

Rambo turned out to be useless at once. He was, of course, programmed for the DeLancey/Hortense menage and that was utterly modern and utterly automated. To prepare drinks in his own home, all Rambo had to do was to press appropriate buttons. (Why anyone would need a robot to press buttons, I would like to have explained to me!)

He said so. He turned to Hortense and said in a voice like honey (it wasn’t Rodney’s city-boy voice with its trace of Brooklyn), “The equipment is lacking, madam.”

And Hortense drew a sharp breath. “You mean you still don’t have a robotized kitchen, grandfather?” (She called me nothing at all, until LeRoy was born, howling of course, and then she promptly called me “grandfather.” Naturally, she never called me Howard. That would tend to show me to be human, or, more unlikely, show her to be human.)

I said, “Well, it’s robotized when Rodney is in it.”

“I dare say,” she said. “But we’re not living in the twentieth century, grandfather.”

I thought: How I wish we were—but I just said, “Well, why not program Rambo how to operate our controls. I’m sure he can pour and mix and heat and do whatever else is necessary.”

“I’m sure he can,” said Hortense, “but thank Fate he doesn’t have to. I’m not going to interfere with his programming. It will make him less efficient.”

Gracie said, worried, but amiable, “But if we don’t interfere with his programming, then I’ll just have to instruct him, step by step, but I don’t know how it’s done. I’ve never done it.”

I said, “Rodney can tell him.”

Gracie said, “Oh, Howard, we’ve given Rodney a vacation.”

“I know, but we’re not going to ask him to do anything; just tell Rambo here what to do and then Rambo can do it.”

Whereupon Rambo said stiffly, “Madam, there is nothing in my programming or in my instructions that would make it mandatory for me to accept orders given me by another robot, especially one that is an earlier model.”

Hortense said, soothingly, “Of course, Rambo. I’m sure that grandfather and grandmother understand that.“ (I noticed that DeLancey never said a word. I wonder if he ever said a word when his dear wife was present.)

I said, “All right, I tell you what. I’ll have Rodney tell me, and then I will tell Rambo.”

Rambo said nothing to that. Even Rambo is subject to the second law of robotics which makes it mandatory for him to obey human orders.

Hortense’s eyes narrowed and I knew that she would like to tell me that Rambo was far too fine a robot to be ordered about by the likes of me, but some distant and rudimentary near-human waft of feeling kept her from doing so.

Little LeRoy was hampered by no such quasi-human restraints. He said, “I don’t want to have to look at Rodney’s ugly puss. I bet he don’t know how to do anything and if he does, ol’ Grampa would get it all wrong anyway.”

It would have been nice, I thought, if I could be alone with little LeRoy for five minutes and reason calmly with him, with a brick, but a mother’s instinct told Hortense never to leave LeRoy alone with any human being whatever.

There was nothing to do, really, but get Rodney out of his niche in the closet where he had been enjoying his own thoughts (I wonder if a robot has his own thoughts when he is alone) and put him to work. It was hard. He would say a phrase, then I would say the same phrase, then Rambo would do something, then Rodney would say another phrase and so on.

It all took twice as long as if Rodney were doing it himself and it wore me out, I can tell you, because everything had to be like that, using the dishwasher/sterilizer, cooking the Christmas feast, cleaning up messes on the table or on the floor, everything.

Gracie kept moaning that Rodney’s vacation was being ruined, but she never seemed to notice that mine was, too, though I did admire Hortense for her manner of saying something unpleasant at every moment that some statement seemed called for. I noticed, particularly, that she never repeated herself once. Anyone can be nasty, but to be unfailingly creative in one’s nastiness filled me with a perverse desire to applaud now and then.

But, really, the worst thing of all came on Christmas Eve. The tree had been put up and I was exhausted. We didn’t have the kind of situation in which an automated box of ornaments was plugged into an electronic tree, and at the touch of one button there would result an instantaneous and perfect distribution of ornaments. On our tree (of ordinary, old-fashioned plastic) the ornaments had to be placed, one by one, by hand.

Hortense looked revolted, but I said, “ Actually, Hortense, this means you can be creative and make your own arrangement.”

Hortense sniffed, rather like the scrape of claws on a rough plaster wall, and left the room with an obvious expression of nausea on her face. I bowed in the direction of her retreating back, glad to see her go, and then began the tedious task of listening to Rodney’s instructions and passing them on to Rambo.

When it was over, I decided to rest my aching feet and mind by sitting in a chair in a far and rather dim corner of the room. I had hardly folded my aching body into the chair when little LeRoy entered. He didn’t see me, I suppose, or, then again, he might simply have ignored me as being part of the less important and interesting pieces of furniture in the room.

He cast a disdainful look on the tree and said, to Rambo, “Listen, where are the Christmas presents? I’ll bet old Gramps and Gram got me lousy ones, but I ain’t going to wait for no tomorrow morning.”

Rambo said, “I do not know where they are, Little Master.”

“Huh!” said LeRoy, turning to Rodney. “How about you, Stink-face. Do you know where the presents are?”

Rodney would have been within the bounds of his programming to have refused to answer on the grounds that he did not know he was being addressed, since his name was Rodney and not Stink-face. I’m quite certain that that would have been Rambo’s attitude. Rodney, however, was of different stuff. He answered politely, “Yes, I do, Little Master.”

“So where is it, you old puke?”

Rodney said, “I don’t think it would be wise to tell you, Little Master. That would disappoint Gracie and Howard who would like to give the presents to you tomorrow morning.”

“Listen,” said little LeRoy, “who you think you’re talking to, you dumb robot? Now I gave you an order. You bring those presents to me.” And in an attempt to show Rodney who was master, he kicked the robot in the shin.

It was a mistake. I saw it would be that a second before and that was a joyous second. Little LeRoy, after all, was ready for bed (though I doubted that he ever went to bed before he was good and ready). Therefore, he was wearing slippers. What’s more, the slipper sailed off the foot with which he kicked, so that he ended by slamming his bare toes hard against the solid chrome-steel of the robotic shin.

He fell to the floor howling and in rushed his mother. “What is it, LeRoy? What is it?”

Whereupon little LeRoy had the immortal gall to say, “He hit me. That old monster-robot hit me.”

Hortense screamed. She saw me and shouted, “That robot of yours must be destroyed.”

I said, “Come, Hortense. A robot can’t hit a boy. First law of robotics prevents it.”

“It’s an old robot, a broken robot. LeRoy says—”

“LeRoy lies. There is no robot, no matter how old or how broken, who could hit a boy.”

“Then he did it. Grampa did it,” howled LeRoy.

“I wish I did,” I said, quietly, “but no robot would have allowed me to. Ask your own. Ask Rambo if he would have remained motionless while either Rodney or I had hit your boy. Rambo!”

I put it in the imperative, and Rambo said, “I would not have allowed any harm to come to the Little Master, Madam, but I did not know what he purposed. He kicked Rodney’s shin with his bare foot, Madam.”

Hortense gasped and her eyes bulged in fury. “Then he had a good reason to do so. I’ll still have your robot destroyed.”

“Go ahead, Hortense. Unless you’re wining to ruin your robot’s efficiency by trying to reprogram him to lie, he win bear witness to just what preceded the kick and so, of course, with pleasure, win I.”

Hortense left the next morning, carrying the pale-faced LeRoy with her (it turned out he had broken a toe—nothing he didn’t deserve) and an endlessly wordless DeLancey.

Gracie wrung her hands and implored them to stay, but I watched them leave without emotion. No, that’s a lie. I watched them leave with lots of emotion, an pleasant.

Later, I said to Rodney, when Gracie was not present, “I’m sorry, Rodney. That was a horrible Christmas, an because we tried to have it without you. We’ll never do that again, I promise.”

“Thank you, Sir,” said Rodney. “I must admit that there were times these two days when I earnestly wished the laws of robotics did not exist.”

I grinned and nodded my head, but that night I woke up out of a sound sleep and began to worry. I’ve been worrying ever since.

I admit that Rodney was greatly tried, but a robot can’t wish the laws of robotics did not exist. He can’t, no matter what the circumstances.

If I report this, Rodney will undoubtedly be scrapped, and if we’re issued a new robot as recompense, Gracie will simply never forgive me. Never! No robot, however new, however talented, can possibly replace Rodney in her affection.

In fact, I’ll never forgive myself. Quite apart from my own liking for Rodney, I couldn’t bear to give Hortense the satisfaction.

But if I do nothing, I live with a robot capable of wishing the laws of robotics did not exist. From wishing they did not exist to acting as if they did not exist is just a step. At what moment will he take that step and in what form will he show that he has done so?

What do I do? What do I do?