



Illustrated by Tomislav Tikulin

The Robot and the Winding Woods

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Grace had just tucked herself next to John on the wooden bench with her morning tea when she noticed a puff of dust rising from the access road. She stood and placed a hand on her husband's

arm. "John—someone is coming. Down by the bottom of the road." Only one destination existed on Starlight Road. Here.

He blinked in the right direction, but his eyesight was half-gone. "A deer?"

"No." A conveyance of some kind. It winked in the morning sun as it passed through sparsely treed areas, then hid beneath fall color, then shone again. Something more modern than their old truck, and far sleeker than their camp trailer. Not that either of them ran anymore. "I think it's people." Hope rose in her heart. "Campers?"

John snorted. "After all this time?"

Grace clutched her tea to her chest, needing its warmth. She headed for the little booth where they checked people in. Everyone had to stop there. She didn't wait for John. He would come or wouldn't. And either way, he could no longer walk fast enough to beat the people to the welcome booth. She tucked her ragged jacket close around her and wished for about the twenty-fifth time this year that they had new clothes. Whoever was coming would think they were vagabonds! But deliveries had stopped years ago, and the tires on their old truck had flattened before that. They had learned to stay here, where life was hard but they felt safe. She had always known the world would come back to them.

And here it came.

With one more tuck at her coat, she smiled and picked up her steps. Whoever it was, they weren't afraid of the potholes or the waffles on the old, dry dirt road. She barely managed to beat the vehicle to the campground entrance kiosk. The booth's door creaked when she opened it. The tiny room smelled faintly of mouse, but she had swept the floor yesterday, and John had cleaned and oiled the window slide a few weeks ago. It slid open, smooth as butter.

A long, dull silver vehicle pulled up, with tires made of something she didn't recognize and only one window, in the front. She swallowed, suddenly uncertain.

But then a door opened, sliding back like the one side-window on a van they had owned years ago.

"Hello!" she called cheerfully. "Welcome to the Winding Woods Campground."

The person who unfolded and separated from the car glowed a slightly brighter and more reflective silver than the car. She blinked at it, stunned. She had known there were automatic cars, but she hadn't seen a robot drive a car before. It used quite human movements and even stood like a person, with more weight on one leg than the other and its head

cocked ever so slightly in one direction. It shone with cleanliness, like the bottom of a scrubbed pot. It looked . . . beautiful. Nearly human, but slightly more rounded, and oddly softer. It flowed.

She had never seen anything quite this strange before. But she was only seventy-seven years old. She still liked strange. But John? He was eighty-three. His fear of the fast-changing world had made him choose to stay even after they'd gotten a letter that said Winding Woods no longer needed docents. The letter hadn't told them to leave, after all.

What if this creature had come to kick them out?

The robot nodded once. "Thank you. I'm here to inspect the campground."

John's voice came from behind her shoulder. Curious and a little huffy. "Inspect it?"

"We are counting wildlife, determining what changes to make."

She wondered who the robot meant by the word *we*. And for that matter, what changes it referred to. The simple campground had a four-stall bathroom, a shower, and twenty empty and somewhat mediocre camp sites. In its heyday, Winding Woods had been filled in the busiest summer months. They had water and pathways, and nice fall color. It grew hot in summer, but the trees created nice shade, and breezes kept the air moving. It hadn't snowed in years. Red vine-maples and yellow oaks mixed with dark green deciduous forest. Fall was her favorite season. Then spring. She liked changes. But what did the robot see?

John spoke up before she could think of what to say. "The campground fee is twenty-seven dollars a night for a tent spot with no power." He followed that with a question. "You do have a tent, right?"

If the robot had been human, it might have laughed. Or taken umbrage. Instead, it chose to ignore him entirely.

She didn't see any reason to expect the thing to pay, so she followed up John's comment before the robot could answer. "You're welcome either way. We're happy to have a visitor."

"Thank you," the robot repeated. Then it climbed back into its car—if that was even the right word for it—and drove past them without acknowledging John's request for payment.

It headed around them, toward the host spot. Where they lived. With the whole thirty-one-acre empty campground to choose from, it picked a spot quite close to them. It wasn't even a good spot. There was only one spindly tree to provide shade, and most spots had running water. This one didn't.

Walking back, Grace slowed her steps to match John's more halting pace, and took his hand, both to lend him better balance and to feel his warmth. Her tea had grown cold. The whole morning suddenly felt foreboding. She poked the ashes in the firepit back into flames and refilled the teapot from the spigot, then hung it on the cast-iron hook in the little cooking teepee John had built for them after the propane tank ran dry.

She dumped the cold tea from her cup on the roots of a large cedar, and, as was her habit, murmured, "Thank you for your shade." Feeling a little better, she went to stand beside John and listen for the water to begin boiling. "What do you think?" she asked him.

He touched her on the shoulder. "I don't know. I don't like it."

"Maybe it's the only kind of visitor that's left," she whispered, a touch of fear almost sticking the words in her throat. They had talked about that before, wondering how many other humans might be alive. They had been in their fifties the last few years that the campground had been, occasionally, full. Two and a half decades ago. "Whatever does it want?"

The robot had been sitting in its car. Now it stood up. She thought it might come over to them, and she braced for a conversation with it. Instead, it began walking the grounds, shifting its beautiful head this way and that as it went, almost as if it were a walking security camera. Well, it was probably from some god-awful government agency that was controlled by AIs who were controlled by tech companies, or worse, the government. She blamed *them* for the lack of visitors. Stupid government that let so many starve. Stupid tech companies that let their AIs lie to everyone about everything. Damn robot was probably a liar, too.

It stopped at each campsite and examined the benches and solar power collectors and barbecue stands. From time to time, it shook a bench, testing for stability. She drew in a sharp

breath when it dragged a concrete bench fifteen feet across a campsite. She knew which one—number 11 had water damage from a storm that had undercut one side of the bench so it tilted at an uncomfortable angle. She and John together could not have done that, not even when they first arrived. But the robot moved the weight casually.

She poured them tea and contemplated breakfast. They had dried rabbit from a snare, and some of the last summer blackberries hung on snarled vines down by the stream. She fetched them. As they ate, they watched the robot stalk smoothly along the trails.

It came to them at lunchtime, just as she scraped the last of the potato soup she'd reheated from the previous night into cracked bowls. It folded down onto the bench opposite them and said, "This entire location is neat and tidy."

John looked briefly proud. "It's our job to keep it up. That's what we pay for rent."

It answered smoothly. "All campground decent jobs were phased out in 2042."

"We didn't know," John lied pleasantly.

"It's good for us to be here," Grace asserted. "As you said, the grounds are well-kept. We groom the trails between the sites and the bathroom every month." There used to be more to do, of course.

The robot inclined its head briefly. "You have done a good job."

She smiled, attempting to look pleasant. "It takes us some time now, since we've gotten older." She suddenly didn't want to hear its response to their lives. She asked it a question. "What news do you have? We don't own a working radio anymore, and our phones and computers all broke. So we don't know anything about the last few years."

Grace expected it to begin spouting facts, but instead it asked her a question. "Why do you stay up here?"

She pointed at the truck, with its flat tires. "We'd have to walk a long way, and we have running water here, a bathroom and shower that works well." She swept her hand around the campsite. "There's enough for us to feed ourselves. There are rabbits, fish, sometimes deer, and we have a small garden." She pointed at three raised beds. One had ripening butternut squash vining through dry cornstalks. The other had bright red tomatoes amidst

yellowing leaves, and the third both white and sweet potatoes.

It swept its gaze around the camp, and as Grace imagined their lives through its eyes, she bit her lip to keep from sighing, and then forced the smile back. It probably didn't approve of hunting.

John touched her elbow, which helped her stand straighter.

"I will arrange transport," the thing said.

Grace felt John stiffen. He said, "We are happy here."

"This campground has been closed for a decade. There is a gate at the bottom of the road with a lock." It lifted a hand as if to imply the keys were held there. Maybe so. Maybe you needed a code.

A lock should have surprised Grace but it did not. "This is part of a National Park."

"It is part of our certified wild land. No one except rangers are allowed here."

Now she stiffened. "We are rangers."

Its words were flat and final. "We are the only rangers."

She asked her question from earlier. "We?"

"The Corps of Rangers."

John's voice rose from behind her, a slight squeak in it giving away his incredulity. "Are you all robots?"

"Yes."

"And who allowed that?" he asked. His grip on her arm had gone from comforting to painful. "Who?"

She stepped to the side, flipped her hand so she held his, fingers interlaced. His face had gone red. Belligerence wasn't going to help. "Tell us about yourselves," she suggested. "Describe your job as rangers."

"You will have to leave. You should pack up."

Grace's temper began to rise. "And go where?"

"Where would you like to go?"

That question silenced her. She had no idea what the world had become. "We don't want to go anywhere. We are the rangers here, and we like it."

"I am the ranger assigned to the Winding Woods Campground."

John's stilted voice asked, "Why should we believe you?"

It blinked. A few seconds passed before it said, "If you don't have electronics, I can't

show you that information."

Grace's hands had snuck onto her hips in tight balls. "If you want us to leave, you have to prove you have some authority."

"No," it said. "I will call for transport. Begin packing." It stilled, but held its eyes open and rocked back and forth gently on the bench.

Grace turned to John, who looked completely shocked and quite angry. If he wasn't careful, he would end up with a heart attack, and then they *would* have to leave. She pulled him away. She had no idea how well the damned thing heard, but she wanted them to at least feel like they had some privacy. What right did it have to walk into their home and demand they leave? "Stay calm," she asked him. "We're not going."

"I will find my papers."

"What papers?"

"The agreement we signed. To be docents."

"Okay," she whispered. Even though she didn't think the old instructions from a past world would help, she held her tongue. At least they'd burned the letter telling them the program had been cancelled. John wouldn't leave without being forced, but the robot alone could probably force them. And if transport came, she doubted it would include a human. It would probably just be a robotic car. She had never liked those and didn't intend to get into one under any circumstances. "You go look for the paperwork. I think it's in the camper. I'll try to distract the thing."

They separated. She immediately felt colder and a little frightened, but John had never been the best negotiator. Paper wouldn't help, but learning more might. She resumed her place across from the robot, the bulk of the pitted concrete table between them. "It will take us time to pack, and there is no reason to hurry. We could teach you about the animals here, and how to keep it neat."

"No need. There will be no other visitors. The land is to return to full wild."

She pursed her lips. "We often wake up to coyotes and deer, and the owls come by every night. We see no need to leave this place." She hesitated, and when it didn't respond, she added, "And why not have humans here again? It's good for them to get away from the cities and see the land."

"There are not many humans left near here.

Winding Woods is in the middle of a rewilding project.”

“Okay. But surely there are *some* people?” She did want to know that. The skies had gotten quite dark at night, but satellites and airplanes still sailed overhead now and again.

“Most humans are in the cities. There will be transportation for you tomorrow afternoon. That should give you sufficient time to pack.”

It wasn’t a question, so she didn’t bother to answer.

The robot left their camp.

She found John on his knees, paper stacked around him.

“Was the agreement even *on* paper?” she asked.

“I must have printed it.”

He probably had. But sometimes they had burned paper to start fires. That letter would have seemed useless. To her. She might have burned it. And . . . a slight possibility had snuck into her thinking. Maybe this was an open door. She didn’t want to go through. But what if there wasn’t a choice? She asked him, “What if we did leave? We could go a doctor. Surely there are still doctors.”

He looked at her, pursed his lips, and went back to thumbing through paper.

Sometimes they didn’t talk for weeks. Not really, not about more than the temperature of the tea water or a coyote they heard. They touched and supported, endured, and even enjoyed each other. But they almost never talked. She put her hand on his shoulder. “We might have to go. It’s strong enough to make us.”

“There’s no place else I want to see.”

“Look at me,” Grace whispered.

“I have to find this first.”

“It doesn’t matter.” She slid her finger along the sharp edge of his jaw. “You need a shave.”

“Then I need a sharp razor.”

“They might have that down the hill, too.”

“You don’t mind my stubbly beard.”

He was right. But she was beginning to think they would leave, and that *might* be okay. But more for her than for him. She lifted both of her hands free of his body. No. They didn’t know much at all about anything else. She didn’t want to leave this place they had come to accommodations with for a place they might hate. This was home. She knew the sound of the stream in each season, the birds that migrated through. She understood this

ground. She found the robot inspecting the bathrooms. “Surely you don’t need that,” she said.

It stopped to look at her, its expression—surely fake—somewhat curious. “No. We can salvage the metal.”

“We need it,” she protested.

“You should be packing.”

Anger bubbled up in her chest and stained her tone with bitterness. “No one programmed you with empathy, did they?”

“I have great empathy for wild things.”

She snorted. “Maybe you should consider us wild things. We haven’t seen any other humans for a very long time. Where do you plan to send us?”

“There’s a home for older people in Nevada that has two openings.”

Nevada was hundreds of miles away. “We’re not willing to go to a place like that.”

“Do you have another place we can transport you?”

“We are comfortable *here*, and we are doing a *good* job. We do not want to be retired.”

The damned machine maintained its patience better than she did as it told her, matter-of-factly, “There is no work for you here. It does not need to be maintained, but rather to be let go wild. I will visit it from time to time to be sure there are no squatters.”

She struggled not to scream every word of, “We are not squatters!”

“I am not equipped to take care of elderly humans.”

Its voice always flat, friendly, unremarkable, and like steel. She hated it. And that word stung. Elderly. She held still, breathed in, watched a red-tailed hawk fly overhead. “We take care of each other.”

“Neither of you is well.”

That made her stand back and stiffen. “We manage.”

“You husband John has cancer.”

Cancer. The word struck like a blow to her stomach. A low whistle escaped her. Her mind raced. He *had* grown frailer, and duller-headed. He had trouble sleeping. She had given him one of her old belts when his became too big. “How do you know?”

“We have remote sensors. Cancer is easy to detect, and John’s cancer has evolved. It may not be curable anymore.”

John was still strong. Kept her strong. Kept

her going. This wasn't . . . she stopped and chugged in a breath of cooling air. It almost choked her. She bent over, heaving on the breath, on the news, pain filling her throat. She couldn't breathe. Couldn't—

The robot slapped her expertly on the back. Just hard enough. Air came in like it should, and she gasped, and gasped, tears running down her cheeks. "Are you sure?"

"Yes." Same damned smooth, silky voice. "I can diagnose many health issues in humans and animals based on smells. On breath and sweat."

Well, maybe the doctor she had just been thinking about had come to them. Her voice sounded like it came through a tunnel. "What kind of cancer?"

"There is so much of it I can't be sure of the origin without more tests. But it is probably throughout his body. I can tell that it is in his lungs and liver. There is a 93 percent probability that it is also in most of his lymph nodes. It is unlikely that it can be cured."

She stood utterly still, feeling its words wash over her like a flash flood, threatening to pull her feet out from under her.

It kept talking. "You have bad teeth and your spine is bending. I assume your back hurts?"

"Yes." Damn it.

"Neither of you is in our records except for birth, marriage, a few completed loans, and the titles to some cars. And your initial assignment here in 2031. That was thirty-two years ago."

Why was it telling her things she knew? They were boring people, not important. They were poor. They shouldn't matter.

It kept going. "Your records are closed, assumed deceased. Like so many others. Just not . . . here anymore. That's why transport could not come right away in spite of your health emergency. It takes a court order to restore a dead person to living status again."

She laughed, a bitter, silly laugh. "And that doesn't happen at the speed of AI?"

"I have learned it might take three days in this case. There are no robotic or artificial intelligence judges. There are tools to record trials, research models, professors, and evaluators. But humans must mete out justice."

She hadn't known that. "What else do humans do?" She waved at the rolling forests beyond them, and the mountains behind those, just beginning to blue with dusk. If she talked

about cancer, she might not be able to breathe. She wasn't ready to have her breath stolen again. A sharp hiccup clawed its way up her throat. "What else?"

"Raise human children, except in extreme circumstances where the children are orphans, and no humans exist to care for them. Lawmakers are all human, although there are calls to change that."

"Why? It seems like we should make the laws." Then, suddenly worrying she might have offended it, she added, "Unless you have more rights now?"

"When did you last consume human news?"

"I don't know." She ran her fingers through her hair. "Twelve years? Maybe more. We have power, but almost everything that can use it died. There were wars everywhere. Everywhere but here, anyway. Even Mexico. And plagues." She stared at the robot. "And AIs fighting each other and robot soldiers and real soldiers alike getting killed. We just stayed here. John is a good hunter, and he fishes. We don't eat much." Mentioning John made her stomach hurt. She glanced toward their camper. Apparently, she had also summoned him. He was nearly here, clutching a piece of paper in his hand, looking determined.

What could she do? She had to be the one to tell him he was sick.

She looked directly at the robot, looking closely for the first time. While its skin was silver, its eyes were a dusky blue with dark brown pupils. Its high cheekbones and full lips were androgenous, and she could squint and see a man or squint the other way to see a woman. "Don't tell him. Please."

"Don't tell him he is ill?"

"Please. I should tell him."

"When?"

John was almost within hearing distance. She whispered, "Tonight." But how? She didn't really believe it herself. Except she did. Damn it. Some truths are self-evident once you see them.

John stepped up toward the robot, his fist clenching the paper she already knew the machine had a copy of. It had just told her so, right? "You need to leave us here," John demanded. "We have every right. This is a contract that says we can stay as long as we do our job." He had his legs splayed for balance, and now he put his hands on his hips and

leaned in a little. Tiny old man threatens sleek robot. She managed not to smile. Knowing he was sick made it worse. John kept his gaze fixed tight on the robot's face as he insisted, "We did our job." His voice shook as he added, "You even said so."

The robot responded evenly and calmly. "The laws that turned all state lands into wild use, and only wild use, supersede all contracts, including land ownership. Your contract was merely an employment agreement."

And the robot had just told her that men still made all the laws. She stood beside John and took his hand in hers, gazing up at the robot. "Surely you can give us some time." Her voice shook. "This is all rather shocking. And we *have* done well. Taken care of the place and ourselves." She hated that her voice shook. "Please." Fuck. She was saying please to a damned robot. But she did it again. "Please."

"I'm sure it is hard," the thing responded. She waited. But it said nothing more.

Bad teeth. Her twingy back reminded her of its existence as she turned into John, whispering, "Keep the paper. We'll try again tomorrow." He tensed, leaned into her until she thought he might fall if she stepped back. "We have to go now. I don't want it to force us."

"Hold me tighter," he whispered.

She did, her fingers brushing the handle of his Glock, tucked in his waistband. Her voice hardened. "Turn around. Now."

"Take it," he whispered. "Your hands are steadier."

"No." Ice and fear frosted her words. "Turn around."

There was a long moment when she thought he wouldn't, when she imagined him pointing that old thing at the robot. She hadn't seen it for years. They had a hunting rifle they used for deer, although even for that they were growing short on ammunition. John's hands surely shook too much to use the pistol, even at close range. Not to mention his vision was lousy.

Still, the robot would do something bad if it saw the weapon. She squeezed her eyes shut and ran her fingers along John's backbone, above the grip.

He took a step back, lifted his weight from her, and she turned, tugging him after her. She

called out "Good night" to the robot. She kept John walking until they were back at the camper. She opened the door and pulled the steps down, following John into the narrow hallway. He kept a hand on the wall to steady himself and then plopped onto the worn bench by the small kitchen table.

She looked closely at him. His cheeks seemed to have hollowed an inch or two just since the robot used the cancer word. She noticed a pale-yellow cast to his skin, put her hand against his cheek to test it. They used to be the same shade of white, and now her hand looked brown next to his cheek. She needed to tell him but had no idea how to start. She turned her hand over, palm up, and held it in front of him. "I can put the gun away."

He leaned forward to pull it free, dropped the magazine, emptied the round from the chamber, then handed the pistol and magazine to her. Her hand shook. Surely it wasn't from the gun. It was the cancer. Damn it. She carefully set the Glock in the lowest kitchen drawer and told herself she would hide it later. The magazine slid into her pants pocket.

How could she tell him? She had to. If she didn't, she was certain the robot would. "John?"

He spoke quietly, in his don't-mess-with-me tone. "I don't want to leave. There's nothing anywhere else I want to see. I want to die here."

She rubbed his shoulder, feeling the sharp knob of bones sticking out. Why hadn't she noticed he was so thin?

He looked up at her. "What do you want?"

"I don't know. But there is something I have to tell you." She thought about reaching for humor. Rejected it. Thought about any other way to cushion the blow. Saying the words might kill her. What would they do to him? The need to speak threatened to destroy her ability to stand, to think. Her hands shook.

He sat, quiet and patient.

Her palms circled his shoulder blades, careful not to use too much force. He bruised easily. "It can tell about health. Without even touching us. It says we emit . . . smells? . . . it can tell if we're sick."

"Pheromones," he said. He reached his hand up to hers, turned to meet her eyes. "I

know I'm sick. I can feel it."

She breathed out, felt a touch of relief. That wasn't what she expected. Not what she expected him to say, or for herself to feel. The relief must be because she didn't have to tell him. She cleared her throat. "It says you have cancer that has spread."

He swallowed and blinked, then looked away for a moment. His eyes stayed fixed on the dark window. "I wasn't sure it was cancer. I was . . . hoping for something else." Then before she had time to react to that, he whispered, "What did it say about you?"

"That my back hurts and I have bad teeth."

He smiled. "I knew that, too. See? I knew you were basically healthy."

They both fell silent for a while. Then she said, "I don't want to lose you. It doesn't think you can be cured."

He patted her hand. "Staying here will be better than going someplace strange to die."

"I know." After talking with the damned robot, she didn't think it would understand. "It didn't say if it thought you had years. Or less."

"Okay," John said. "I'm tired." He offered her a thin, bare smile. "Very tired. I think less than years."

"Let's go to bed." She leaned down to kiss the top of his head and went to pull out the old sweats she slept in. They climbed carefully in the bed, and she tucked the edges of the ragged blanket gently around his thin frame. She lay with her head nestled on his shoulder and he held her hand. She ran her fingers across his gnarled knuckles.

To her surprise, John slept. Less surprisingly, she stared at the rusted ceiling, the old metal patch John had glued in place with Gorilla Glue, and the faded picture of stars she had taped just above his head so he could dream of the Universe. How could so much change have happened in one day?

Her back hurt, and her tooth hurt, and that was the same and, now, different. *Damnit.* Questions she might ask the robot swirled in her head. How long did John have? Where else could they go? How many people were left in the world? What was human now, and what was robot. How many robots? What could she do for John? The questions swirled and demanded and bothered and dug at her. What had happened while they were nowhere near the world?

The next morning she woke at dawn. John snored soundly, so she slid quietly out into the cold morning, carrying as many of the questions as she could remember with her, like a coat of curiosity.

The robot and its car were both gone. She hadn't expected that. She hadn't even wanted that. Her questions! She glanced at campsite number 11. The table was still in the new place. It had been here.

Not a dream.

Dammit.

She sat down on the bench, and tears filled her eyes. She blinked for a while, trying to wish the sorrow away. It wouldn't go, but washed over and over her, so she had to let go and just bawl. Then, emptied, she felt light and dizzy. She drank two glasses of water. On the way back toward the camp spigot for more water, she leaned against the tallest cedar on their site, looking up at the blue sky through the branches. She whispered, "Thank you for shading us," and then cried for another fifteen minutes. As she lumbered back with a full decanter of water, she noticed two does no more than fifty feet away, looking down toward the gate.

The dust of a traveler puffed up, and the deer stared and then wandered away, unafraid.

It was, of course, the robot. As it pulled up, she realized there could be a million robots that looked the same. Was this even the same robot? She swiped at her eyes and blinked. She was okay. She was. She met it at the entrance kiosk, where she stood in front of it, blocking any easy path around her. "Where did you go?"

"I'll be leaving this morning. But there was time to make a supply run."

She cocked her head. Supplies?

"May I pass?"

"Okay. I'm curious." She stepped aside and followed it to the same place it had parked yesterday. It climbed out of the car, opened a door in the sleek nose, and pulled out a box which it set on their bench. "Food." Same blank voice, same utter lack of emotion.

She opened the box. Four bright red apples sat on top. Two bananas hugged the apples. Bright green grapes in their own little cardboard box. She set them carefully on the table, just staring for a moment before she

glanced back into the box. Packages wrapped in a waxed paper. "What are these?" she asked.

"You can add hot water to make them food. Pick one up and look."

It felt light in her hand. The top was unmarked, but there was a picture that ran all along the side. "Black bean chili?"

The robot glanced at it. "Yes. With extra protein."

There were twelve different meals. "These will feed two?"

"Yes."

Grace began to remember her questions, but the robot had already headed back to its car. Surely it wasn't leaving already. But no. Another box. Bigger. The robot carried it with both hands and set it beside the first box. She repacked the food, leaving the two perfectly yellow and exactly-ripe-enough-to-enjoy bananas out for breakfast. John would be up soon, surely. She hadn't tasted a banana for decades, but she recalled the smell, the sweet-bland taste, the soft, comforting texture. Her mouth watered.

The robot opened the other box for her. Clothes. Two outfits each, including shoes and socks and underthings and two coats. Two pairs of flannel pajamas. She picked up the new coat in her size. Bigger than John's. But she knew. Surely the robot had measured them. If it could measure cancer, it could measure inches. She pressed her cheek against it, inhaled the scent of newness, of warmth. It felt like nothing she had ever worn, thin and soft and solid all at once. Navy blue with bright white lines that looked like strings of starlight. She took off her ragged coat and slid her arms into the gift. It felt like a warm smile. She glanced at the robot, but it was already back at the car.

The third box it brought contained soft bedding and a heavy black blanket edged in white.

The questions banged at her. What to ask first? Well, first she had a different thing to tell it. "Thank you."

"You are welcome," it replied. "I processed our conversation and refiled you as test sub-

jects. You will not have to leave until after John dies. He might not survive being moved, but here he might have a year."

One of her questions answered. Unasked.

She took a deep breath. "You are kind. Thank you."

"You do not mind being a research subject?"

"What will that mean?"

"I have a large territory. I will return here every two to four weeks and bring more food. You will continue to maintain the campground and forage as well. Although you may only hunt what we allow."

"What is that?" she asked. Surely they could still take rabbits!

"I won't know until I finish my survey and we complete a plan."

"Okay." She would be a research subject in trade for bananas and the right to stay here. "We were hungry the last two winters." She took inventory in her head. They had smoked rabbit and dried berries and most of the squash would probably ripen before the first frost. Plenty of potatoes. "Okay," she repeated, placing her hands in the deep pockets of the coat. "Thank you."

Could it have known she liked her coats to fall to the thighs?

The robot spoke again. "A medical bot will be here tomorrow, and then it, too, will return as needed. It means you might be alone when John dies."

She touched the coat, glanced at the blanket. "I would have been alone and cold."

"Yes."

Damned thing. "Do you have a name?" she asked it. ■

Brenda Cooper writes science fiction, fantasy, and the occasional poem. She also works in technology and writes and talks about the future. She has won multiple regional writing awards and her stories have often appeared in Year's Best anthologies. Brenda lives and works in the Pacific Northwest with her wife and multiple border collies, and can sometimes be found biking around Seattle.