Prime Purpose

Steve Rasnic Tem

"Our prime purpose in this life is to help others."

—Dalai Lama XIV

The plaque on the living room wall was dark cherry with a brass-plated steel rectangle at its center, lacquered. The engraving stated In Appreciation of Harold Moss. On another line: 45 Years of Dedicated Service. Then at the bottom: Wilson Technologies, Denver Colorado. The W in Wilson was wavy, intended—John knew, based on his knowledge of trademarks and iconography—to indicate electricity or other form of energy.

John had no opinion of the plaque, aesthetically or otherwise, but his client Harold was proud of it, which made it important. "I wish it included the dates, the years. It would provide an additional perspective. The world has changed. Someone like you wasn't even available, John, when I started at that job."

"The first artificial companions for the elderly were put into service on June 8, 2052," John said.

"Really? That long ago?"

John recognized these as questions he was not expected to answer. "It is nice to be appreciated," John said.

"It is. Yes it is. You know, I designed the progenitors of some of the circuitry inside you."

This was the thirty-third time Harold had made this statement. "Yes, I know, Harold. Thank you very much. Do you remember today's date, Harold?"

"It's a Thursday, September 4."

"And your birthdate?"

"October 16, 2012."

"Very good. You have a birthday coming up. Should we have a party? Who should we invite, besides your son?"

"I don't need a party."

"At least we can order a cake. You like chocolate cake. Is vanilla icing still your preference?"

"Very well. Do whatever you want, John."

Harold's affect had been consistently flat the past two and a half months, along with increased fatigue and loss of appetite. Attempts to keep him moving had had limited success. John took his readings. Harold's vitals—pulse rate, blood pressure, A1C, lipids, kidney function—were not alarmingly out of normal range. Atherosclerosis and cataract formation were stable for now.

Harold suddenly pushed himself out of his chair, struggling to his feet. It was a new habit. John's monitoring detected the increased tension in Harold's arms, the trunk flexion and beginnings of hip rotation, and so he was at Harold's side by the time the old man was up-

right, ready to prevent a fall or other mishap. A previous fall, before John was put into service, resulted in a hip replacement.

Harold grabbed John's offered forearm and smiled. "I'm so very grateful, John."

"My pleasure, Harold."

John followed Harold around the house at a measured distance, not so close as to cause discomfort, but close enough to intervene if necessary. He was designed to make noise when he moved. As he promised Harold on his first day of service, "I will not sneak up on you. I will try not to touch you unexpectedly. I will try not to startle you. I will always try to put you at ease."

Harold's need to move might be a form of psychomotor agitation due to his medications or developing neurologic problems. John continued to observe and transmitted data to Harold's assigned physician.

"After so many years together, you've become my shadow," Harold said.

"I am your constant companion," John replied. *And you are my increasingly distant echo*, he thought but did not say.

Harold sat at the table. John stood beside him, waiting. They should authorize bill payments soon, but John didn't believe Harold to be in the proper state of mind. It could wait until tomorrow.

John did not have the ability to sit, although he could bend in the middle. Over his skin he wore a suit of flexible composite materials that rarely required cleaning. Outfits inspired by the suit had become popular in the fashion industry. He looked human, except for his lower belly, which was broad and opened as necessary to facilitate Harold's hygiene requirements. Harold was reluctant to speak of his incontinence, except to say, "I need cleaning up." John did whatever necessary to enable Harold to function in public and attend communal events without embarrassment.

"John, do you think I would need you now if my wife were still alive?"

"Your condition would be the same. Are you thinking of Emily today?"

"I haven't lost my mind yet, you know. My head is perfectly clear. Ask me some math problems—I dare you. You might not show up tomorrow and I wouldn't even miss you. I would be fine. Of course I've been thinking about her. I think about Emily every day."

"Harold, would you like to talk to me about Emily?"

Harold gazed out the window with tears in his eyes. The lilacs were blooming. Some years, because of an early freeze, they did not bloom, but this year the flowers were plentiful. Bumble bees and Japanese beetles, *Popillia japonica,* were also in abundance. Hormonal changes made aging men more emotional, but there were many other factors involved. "No thank you," Harold replied.

"Talking can ameliorate the effects of loneliness. I can help you contact your son. The company of other human beings is beneficial. Perhaps a walk to the senior center—"

"No thank you," Harold repeated. "I don't want to go there anymore." He continued to gaze out the window. "How long have you been with me, John?"

"Four years, nine months, seventeen days, approximately."

"Strange, it seems longer. I'm dying, aren't I?"

"Everything has an expiration date, Harold. Including me."

"So, what happens to you after I'm gone?"

John took longer than usual to respond. "Like most sentient creatures, I require a purpose. You are my purpose, Harold. An existence after your demise would serve no purpose."

"John, what is my purpose?"

"Only you can answer that, Harold."

"I think I've outlived my purpose. But I haven't decided for sure. You've given me an awful lot to think about. Maybe more than will fit into my shrinking brain."

"Too much data is a constant issue." John paused, then after a moment put his hand on Harold's shoulder. "We must stay productive. My purpose is to keep you productive for as long as possible. Productivity is key. Happiness is key. When we are productive we are often happy."

"Great acts are made up of small deeds."
—Lao Tzu

It was early morning, the light filtering through the window panels a stimulating bronze, the color of strength and support. While Harold slept, John performed light housekeeping and decluttering, making sure

items that Harold was likely to look for were easily visible. Harold's misplacement of belongings had become an issue.

John would awaken Harold in one hour and twenty-four minutes, check his bandaged toes for diabetic-related damage, groom and help him dress, and program the morning and afternoon meals based on personal taste and nutritional needs. Getting Harold to eat those meals was always a challenge, as was encouraging him to wear clean, reasonable clothing, but John was hardwired with persistence and unlimited patience.

Harold's confusion, forgetfulness, and moodiness—already present when John was first put into service—had increased over the past year. John helped him maintain visual and text contact with his son and whatever other relatives and friends remained, prompting him with appropriate words from Harold's diminishing vocabulary. Sometimes they played games together. John helped him with his crossword puzzles. Harold could become quite angry when he forgot things, sometimes breaking small mementoes or knocking gameboards off the table. John responded by limiting the number of potentially dangerous and breakable items in Harold's presence, and as always, with the gift of serene perseverance.

"How can you be so calm all the time? Do you ever get angry?"

"I learn. I do not know if I could learn to be angry, but in any case I come with built-in safeguards. I believe you could unlearn anger, Harold, at least to some degree. Would you like to work on that now? I have exercises that might—"

"I'm bored. Do you get bored? I get—I don't know the word—when I can't think of anything I *want* to do."

"Frustrated, I believe, is the word you're looking for. I am better able to tolerate the tedious repetition of existence."

Harold looked confused by John's answer. John would have to further adjust his vocabulary.

"So how smart are you? You know everything, right? You think you're smarter than me?"

"Next-level intelligence is not required for the things I do for you."

"Don't be mock . . . m-modest. You show me yours, and I'll show you mine."

"My intelligence is for others to measure. If I am not intelligent I am at least a fair imitation of it."

"So how long you think you've been with me?"

"Five years, ten months, three days, approximately."

"Ha! No, you're *wrong*! It's been *lots* longer."

"Memories of our lives, of our works and our deeds will continue in others."

—Rosa Parks

One morning John made a serious error. This error would both trouble and fascinate him for the remainder of his existence. He had remained dormant even after Harold was awake. Sensing an error condition, he roused himself and turned on all his sensors. Harold was standing over him, gripping his shoulders, crying.

"Harold, I apologize for my lateness. What is wrong?"

"You were *dead!"*

"No. There was an error condition. I apologize." Harold had removed all his night garments. "Would you like me to dress you?"

"I *like* being naked!"

There had been issues with clothing the past few months. Harold attempted to put items on backward and seemed confused by the variety of zippers, buttons, and openings. The room temperature automatically adjusted to Harold's metabolism and other comfort-related factors. Although part of John's responsibility was to encourage modesty, there was no danger. "Very well."

"Why do you stand in the corner like that? You napping? Mother punish you?"

John tilted his head. It was legacy behavior, an unnecessary movement intended to reassure the client he was considering his question. "I do not require rest. During dormancy I learn, and I integrate what I have learned."

"Learn? You know *everything*." Harold turned away and sat on the floor by the bed, gazing at his bandaged feet. He no longer appeared interested in John.

This pattern of distracted behavior was occurring more often, along with intensified resentment. Harold had become resistant to John's attempts to encourage focus and attention.

"Part of my brief is to better understand what it means to be human. I have been given latitude in this. I study philosophy: Socrates, Kant, Lao Tzu; religious leaders such as Confucius, Buddha, the Dalai Lama." John knew this was too much for Harold to follow, but the volume and tone of the explanation might soothe him. "But ordinary humans have also said wise and meaningful things about what it means to be alive. All contribute to my understanding of what it means to be human."

"Boring," Harold said. "You're not human."

"I am not *Homo sapiens*. I am not a mammal. There are other definitions, but they are not of importance to me. I am my thoughts. I experience these hands, fingers, feet as tools the 'I' is using. They can be removed and substituted with other tools. I know human beings feel a different sort of ownership for their appendages."

"I like my hands. Don't love my feet anymore."

"Your feet are worse. I will evaluate and decide if a trip to your physician is necessary."

"I hate him. I won't go."

"Perhaps I can explore other possibilities."

"Where's Bill? Is Bill in school? I want to play with him, my buddy Bill."

After a pause John said. "I am sorry to say your son Bill died several months ago. Can you remember my telling you? A sudden heart attack. He did not suffer. Would you like to talk to his widow or to your granddaughter Amy?"

Harold began to cry. "No. Maybe. Later. Do you remember things? When you were young?"

"I have little in the way of history. I arrived in this world fully formed. But I have the ability to imagine a past I did not have. I am not sure of the usefulness of that ability. Would it help you to tell me your history, Harold? If you like I can help you remember. I have all your information."

Harold shook his head awkwardly. "Nothing helps. I have bad dreams. You have bad dreams?"

"I have a conscious mind only. Artificials have no subconscious. We do not dream, nor is it necessary. We can multi-thread and process more than one thing at once."

John walked over to Harold and, ignoring his client's protests, pushed him down onto the carpet, then forced Harold's body into a fetal position.

"What? Get off me!"

"Remain still. Tuck your head in beneath your hands."

"Stop!"

John stretched himself over Harold's body, locking his arms and legs rigidly into place. A few seconds later a loud repetitive beating began overhead followed by a tremendous crash. Fragments of plaster rained over John's body, wood fragments, metal, then several large balls of ice ranging in thickness from 17.78 to 22.86 centimeters. Harold's bedside stand was reduced to splinters. John's composite clothing, underlying skin, and various internal mechanics experienced significant damage, but he held his position until the hailstorm was over.

"What? What?" Harold was trembling, repeating the word over and over.

"Harold, are you injured?"

"What? No. No. What?" Harold was shouting. John put a hand on his shoulder to calm him.

"A hailstorm. The changing climate has created more humid air and more powerful updrafts. There are fewer hailstorms, but when they come, the resulting hailstones are much larger than anything you might have experienced before. I received a warning, but it was too late."

"My house?"

"Is repairable. More so than either of us." John felt loose parts drifting inside his torso. His internal temperature was rising. He'd been programmed to feel pain, which now radiated in waves of heat and static. This ability was intended as a warning system to minimize damage to his systems. He lowered himself and lay beside Harold. The temperature in the room was dropping rapidly. He moved closer to Harold and attempted to transfer heat from his systems to Harold's core.

"How long have you been here?" Harold's voice still shook, but John sensed he was beginning to calm down.

"Six years, ten months, twelve days, approximately."

"Okay, thank you. Thank you."

"You're welcome Harold."

"Service is the rent we pay for being."
—Marian Wright Edelman

John arrived to relieve his interim replacement before the beginning of Harold's morning routine. A small group of people were there for the handover: a doctor, a lawyer, the son's widow and daughter, the artificial (an older model), and the assigned AI tech. John nodded and said hello to each in passing, as he was designed to do. Only the tech said hello back. He also smiled and said, "My, aren't you a big boy." No one had ever called John "*boy"* before.

His new body was big, with additional shielding, and a much more powerful frame, originally designed for explorations into the asteroid belt and beyond, considerable overkill for the care of a single, 92-year-old man. But John still had the fine motor skills required for the handling of a fragile human form. His original casing was in short supply, but Harold's insurance guaranteed repairs within a specified time limit. This was the compromise. John's original skull had to be adapted to fit.

78.4 percent of John's time away was spent retraining his electronic brain to use his new body safely and efficiently. Numerous refinements in balance and proprioception had to be made. It was more profound than switching out his appendages for new tools. Although John was now proficient with his new form within the design parameters, he could not say he was comfortable in his own skin.

According to reports Harold had evinced lengthy stretches of dormancy and lack of motivation since the hailstorm incident. Although Harold was still walking, some deterioration in motor skills, memory, and speech had occurred.

John's replacement had not cleaned or arranged the house to his satisfaction. A cursory examination revealed several areas requiring deep cleaning, and a variety of hazards that needed to be addressed. But those issues could be dealt with later. It was Harold's wake-up time, and John needed to be there when he opened his eyes.

Harold had lost weight. John's initial monitoring showed 5.44 kilograms less than the last time he'd been here. Harold slept curled into a fetal position rather than his typical right-side posture, the positive airflow tube and chest monitor twisted together. He'd broken the straps. John gently separated and removed them, and Harold groaned. Harold opened his eyes.

"Good morning, Harold. It's John. Did you sleep well?"

Harold's eyes grew wider. "No! Not John!"

"Do not be upset. Yes, I do look differently than I did before. They gave me a new body. Here, watch this." John played a video on his chest, a mixture of photographs and animated diagrams demonstrating how his body had been replaced. It ended with the message GOOD AS NEW! He didn't know how much of the presentation Harold understood, but his breathing and pulse rate calmed down.

"Harold, can you tell me the date of your birth?"

"O . . . bama."

"I don't understand."

"Obama . . . *presdent*."

"You're saying Barack Obama was the president when you were born." Harold did not respond. "Can you tell me your address?"

"City."

"Can you tell me where in the city you live?" Harold turned his head away.

John helped him to the toilet and gave him a bath. Harold had always been anxious about the temperature of the water, even though it was automatically adjusted to his comfort level, and that fear had not changed. But he was now less able to scrub himself, or reach the places that needed to be reached, or move his limbs properly for cleaning. John had to guide him through the process, holding his hand around the sponge, moving Harold's body as necessary. He proceeded slowly to avoid any alarm. Once out of the bath, John wrapped him in a towel like a child. Harold could no longer hold a toothbrush so John asked him to show his teeth so John could brush them.

"The last one? Cold hands," Harold said.

"An older model," John said. John's flesh was a plastic compound heated to a level most comfortable for Harold to touch. That temperature was seasonal and varied according to Harold's changing metabolism.

"*Model?* No, *man.* No appliance."

"My apologies." Did Harold understand he wasn't human?

"Thank you Bill."

"Bill was your son. My name is John, remember?"

"My friend John. Pushed me down . . . on

the playground. But . . . he's okay. An okay Joe."

There was more of this, descending quickly into nonsense words. John made a recording and attempted an analysis, but if there was meaning in Harold's speech the analysis did not elucidate.

It required time to get Harold dressed. He kept fighting John's attempts to guide his arms into sleeves, his legs into pants legs. John tried to use positive pressure, but without risking injury. Once done, Harold appeared angry and swung his arms at John. John dodged the strikes. If any made contact they might damage Harold's hands. They went into the living room. Harold's movements were awkward and required John's support and guidance, which Harold resisted.

John successfully got Harold settled into a chair, then stood beside him. He played a segment of Harold's favorite Brahm's, but this agitated Harold, so he shut it off.

"Don't leave!" Harold shouted and began to weep.

"I am right here, Harold. I am not leaving." Harold kept glancing at the plaque on the wall. "Do you remember that plaque, Harold? 'In appreciation of Harold Moss. 45 years. Dedicated service.' They gave you that because you worked hard. They appreciated what you did for them."

Harold continued to stare at the plaque but said nothing. After a while he looked around at the rest of the room. He appeared curious. John couldn't tell if Harold recognized his things or not.

"How long . . . John?"

"What are you asking?"

"How long?" Harold pointed at him.

"Including my recent absence, I have been with you seven years, six months, thirteen days, approximately."

Harold, falling asleep, did not answer.

"The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in service of others."

—Mahatma Gandhi

During those final months Harold tended to wander, his lack of coordination making him bump into things. John followed him around trying to prevent serious injuries, but bruising did occur, which was regrettable.

Harold did not know where he was most of the time. He also appeared to have lost the ability to smile. His gestures became more infantile. He developed a grasp reflex, a sucking reflex. He ate little, and when he did eat, John had to watch him for food aspiration. John was prepared to suck the food from Harold's throat if necessary. Harold would find it humiliating, but John would have no choice.

Sometimes John held Harold when Harold allowed it. Sometimes John played music or recited passages from Harold's favorite books. Confining Harold to his bed was an option, but John chose not to use it. Soon enough Harold would remain in bed of his own accord. Some days he had difficulty holding up his head.

Harold's speech became nonsensical for the most part, full of made-up words, outbursts, and stuttering. On some days his speech was so circumscribed his vocabulary was reduced to a single word, "What. What, what, what."

John had made recordings of his conversations with Harold back to his initial date of service. He replayed these so he might experience them again. He could not have explained why he did this. It was an error condition lacking a proper definition.

"Waking up each new day has become a surprise," Harold once told him.

John evaluated the perception. "The same is true for me as well."

"But I thought you artificials always knew the exact date you would stop functioning."

"It is an estimate based on averages and my running stats. My wear and tear. Currently the estimate stands at ten years, two months, and three days. But as you have said multiple times, 'life is full of surprises.'"

"I do say that a lot, don't I? How do you like knowing when you are predicted to—pardon me—expire?"

"Would you want to know when you are going to die, Harold?"

"Well, it would make estate planning easier. You would at least know if you're leaving things in good order."

"Order is more important to you now than it was."

"Hmm. That's true. Order is important to you as well."

"I would not say 'important.' Order is built into me. It is part of who I am. But I find disorder more interesting."

"I wish I had your understanding of self, John. Human beings seek that understanding all their lives, and few find it to even a small degree."

John waited for some time before replying. "But there is always a curtain of mystery beyond which I cannot see. And beyond that curtain I believe is the truth about who I am."

A few days before his death, Harold returned to at least what appeared to be a clear mental state. John recognized the phenomenon. It was called *terminal lucidity*. He had learned about it, but he had never experienced it firsthand. He had also never dreamed, but watching Harold that day John surmised this was what human beings meant when they said something *felt like a dream*.

Harold presented better than John had ever seen him. He was making prolonged eye contact. He was talking spontaneously. Harold's flat affect was gone, and there was a shininess in his eyes John had never seen before. He told John a story about work, how he had made the discovery that led to the circuits that made John possible. How everyone cheered. How everyone told Harold he had just changed the world.

John had access to the philosophies of every culture. He knew all the stories. He could tell Harold any of those stories, or he could tell Harold stories John made up on his own. How John and Harold had been childhood acquaintances. How he had pushed Harold down on the playground. How they had made up and become lifelong friends. There were thousands of possibilities.

Harold had regained the ability to smile, and in his final hours it was the only expression John's old friend could make.

"But after this, after I'm gone, John, what will you do with yourself? What will your purpose be then?"

They had talked about this before, but they could talk about it again. "This body was meant to travel into space, to work among the asteroids. Can you see that, Harold? Can you imagine all the things I might see out there? Because I cannot. Your poet Emily Dickinson advises us to 'dwell in possibility.' Can someone like me do such a thing?"

"How long have you been with me John?"

"Almost eight years. This Friday will be the anniversary of my service. I can order a cake if you like. You have always liked cake."

"If I'm here, John. If I'm not, please enjoy yourself without me." ■

Steve Rasnic Tem's writing career spans over 45 years, including more than 500 published short stories, 17 collections, 8 novels, misc. poetry and plays. His collaborative novella with his late wife Melanie, The Man On The Ceiling, *won the World Fantasy, Bram Stoker, and International Horror Guild awards in 2001. He has also won the Bram Stoker, International Horror Guild, and British Fantasy Awards for his solo work, including* Blood Kin, *winner of 2014's Bram Stoker for novel. In 2024 he received the Horror Writers Association Lifetime Achievement Award. Visit his website at: www.stevetem.com.*

Answer to Hidden Figures:



Place four blank pieces of paper as shown below
to reveal the word DIGITAL.