

A Measure of Love

C. Stuart Hardwick

I have just pulled this diary from a box I've kept since leaving the orphanage for CSU. I grabbed it on the spur of the moment because the news says they're closing the orphanages, that things are so much better now they aren't needed anymore, that the Watsons are obsolete and to be scrapped. Scrapped, like worn out furniture, tossed aside for recycling—ashes to ashes, rust to rust. Only they're the only family I have.

The car is taking 85th through Central Park. The last of the magnolia blossoms are pretty pink against the smoked glass spires of Manhattan. Spring is almost done. Soon they'll be setting up for Shakespeare in the Park, which I'll miss again because I'll be in Japan and Korea and then back in San Francisco—for my wedding.

San Francisco, my home that was never a home. It's hard to believe it's been so long since I stepped down the skyway expecting to find Momma, sober and clean, her eyes growing wet as she bent to kiss me, me melting into her arms and the bristle of her coat and the cigarette smoke and cat box smell that would mean we were going home. Instead, there was no one, and the nice flight attendant, Hisako, just as lost as I was, towed me along to a crowded room where the media had gathered and important people spoke, and I was somehow the star.

I couldn't understand then, not really, not about the addiction epidemic and certainly not about Momma. How could I? I just knew she wasn't there, that Baba had been wrong, that she hadn't wanted me enough to do what she had to—to clean herself up and hold a job like people are supposed to. . . .

God, how long did I think like that? Like she left me because I wasn't good enough and not because she'd been an addict since before I was born—because the courts had stolen me away just when she needed me most. . . .

~~I can't do this.~~

* * *

On the maglev to Pete Diamandis, the new superport near Morriston.

Ms. Meachum was her name—the social worker who gave me this diary. I'd forgotten that, but I remember her, very nice—very white, I thought after a year in Japan with Baba—smartly

dressed in a soft tan suit and trying mightily, as she read about me from her tablet, not to cry. She told me Momma had died, and she held me while I cried. She told me about the orphanage, but not that they'd opened all over the Western world because the epidemic had overwhelmed the foster care system.

She gave me the diary after I told her about my grandmother and that I could write her name and address in Japanese. She found the book and a paintbrush and ink, because that's how Baba had taught me. She scanned my Kanji into her tablet, then helped me write my own name, Apollonia Van Ravenstein, which she said was an awfully big name for a little Japanese girl. It's Danish, after Papa. She read something off her tablet, then pronounced "Ravenstein" in the Danish way, with a short "o" sound and a mouth full of phlegm. She suggested the shorter, "Apollo," but Momma always called me Akiko, which just means "little girl," and shortened that to "Aki," so I told her to call me that.

Ms. Meachum said I should keep the book because writing in it might help me. I guess it did. I drew an airplane—the old kind before they started looking like moths—only mine had no roof and the people spilled down through scribbles of black to dissolve in the tear-dampened paper.

Ms. Meachum didn't ask about that. She didn't explain about Momma's relapse or Baba's stroke. I found all that out later—she'd written it down for me here—and then I blamed myself all the more and started my tantrums. I was a real brat there for a while.

Uncle Inky found the book behind the zinnias. He could have lectured me or punished me or simply thrown it away. Instead, he wiped the soil from the calfskin and tucked it away for later. Then he stopped me after dinner to tell me he'd found it. He didn't pry. He didn't prod. He just wanted me to know it would be there—he would be there—when I was ready.

I was stubborn. It must have been six months of him patching my skinned knees and us doing chores together and his tutoring me in English and piano before I finally opened up. And when I did, he listened and let me see for myself how foolish I'd been and held me till my tears were left behind. He'd known all along that I only needed time. Time and—what else could you call it?—love.

And so I was loved by a machine, and I loved a machine in return. His name was actually In-citatus, after Caligula's horse that was made a Senator, which no doubt someone found very funny for an android fostering children. We called him Uncle Inky, which we found funny for the childish reason that its silliness softened his stern, fixed countenance, and better fit the kindness with which he waited for us to do and understand absolutely everything.

No one answers at Pinehurst. I hope I'm not too late. I've changed to a layover to go and see him.

* * *

San Francisco.

I really didn't think this through. The building's still there, but it was locked behind a tall construction fence and watched over by three-ton demolition bots that corralled me as soon as I squeezed through the drainage like we used to do as kids.

The foreman was none too happy to be diverted from his morning coffee run. He came in not long after me—Mark something, California rugged, sunbaked skin, surf-bleached hair, and a jaw as strong as his steel-toes. Twice my age he first railed about what might have happened had I shown up outside the overnight noise restriction hours when the bots were starting work. But when he finally heard me out, he was taken aback. He said Pinehurst had been in the first wave of closures, and no one had batted an eye. But he took me inside and looked at the Watsons, like nattily-dressed cordwood piled in the Great Hall. He looked me up and down and ran a hand over his chin.

"I never even thought . . . We're hauling these out in a front end loader. I guess if one powered itself up and wandered off, well, who's gonna notice?"

I'd had the idea I could somehow save them all, but it was Inky who'd raised our cohort. It was Inky I'd really come for. We shifted Watsons like frozen corpses till we found him under a heap of broken plaster. His white plastic face was smeared with red oil, and his cardigan was ripped and stained.

I started crying, but the foreman said hold your horses. He pulled Inky out, then used a spanner to wrench off a crumpled arm before swapping it and a few other parts out with curt, practiced violence. Then he called over a bot and fed Inky enough kilowatt hours to boot up and “get out of here before someone comes and we’re all in Dutch.”

Inky didn’t know me at first, the way a distant relative might not after a few years away at school. Then he said my name and touched my arm, and I really burst into tears. I shouldn’t have stayed away. I’d been embarrassed of my feelings for a machine, and now I was ashamed. Inky just patted my back and said comforting things as if I’d left here yesterday. When I calmed down, I led him out to the car, bewildered and clutching a heavy bag of parts the foreman had traded for a promise never to return.

And now he’s sleeping—well, powered down, charging off the car while I write this. And I really haven’t thought this through at all.

* * *

In the air.

So happy! I’ve spent most of the flight filling in Inky on my life and reliving good times, which I realize belatedly, were many and largely his doing. I don’t think he enjoys reminiscing especially, but he’s pleased that I do, and that gives it the feel of a homecoming.

He insists I shouldn’t feel I abandoned him, but did ask about all the other girls in our cohort, none of whom have stayed in touch. I shared what news I have, and it’s like I’ve given him a tune-up. I’m mortified that we all left him to the wrecker, but when I said that, he patted my arm and said, “But you didn’t.” He seemed genuinely pleased, though I’m not sure if that was for being rescued or for my having done a very slightly noble thing, breaking and entering notwithstanding.

Twice, the flight attendants have declined his help and sent him back to his seat—old habits die hard. Now he’s charging, and as he does he’s eyeing two obsidian eyed Turkish girls and a little Ainu boy who keeps chewing on the ball of his kendama. I think he thinks them inappropriately indulged and neglected respectively.

Narita looks lovely. Inky thinks so too. He’s never been anywhere.

* * *

In Sendai.

Inky is wonderful, but . . . he’s bored. He hovers in the hotel room, tries too hard to be helpful, to me and the staff. I wouldn’t mind if he seemed happy, but he’s as lost as I was back in 2037. I bought a package of senso-tech gloves to replace the latex he’s wearing, and took him to see the ocean and the new tsunami gates. He says he enjoyed the beach, but he spent the whole time cleaning sand from everything.

The sunset was spectacular, a slice of crimson caught between clouds and sea. I never noticed before that he doesn’t appreciate things like that. If he sees that I’m happy where his database says I should be, then he’s happy. But I’m not sure how he’d be on his own, and that worries me. He’s immortal, as long as he wants to be, as long as he doesn’t obligingly step into someone’s trash compactor, and that’s something he’s already done. Fostering children is literally the job he was made for, and he’s not just a computer that can simply be reprogrammed. Trouble is, he’s not quite a real person either.

* * *

In Akita.

Beautiful. Lots of wind power here. If only all of it could be. Toured the transfer facility where spent nuclear fuel will be repackaged for transshipment to our rigs.

Two more days here, then two in Korea, then hopping by chopper up the seas of Japan and Okhotsk. The crews work twenty-eight days on and twenty-eight off, but we’re basically twenty-four by seven during the training roll out. Six rigs with three shifts each. I guess we’ll fit sleep in somewhere. Mr. Murphy, my supervisor, says he’s done it before, back in the oil drilling days.

I wish Inky could come with us. He needs something to do and he’d be a great trainer, but he’s not built to the safety standards required on the rigs. I could send him back to David in New

York, but . . . an adoptive android foster parent is the sort of thing you spring on a fiancé in person, I think.

So . . . I've rented a six tatami apartment and set Inky up with goldfish, a cat, and a neighbor who's promised to teach him Origami. He'll be alright for a few weeks.

* * *

On Okeanos 011, eastern Sea of Japan.

Had to step out of stop-work training for a call from Mrs. Fukuhara. She took Inky to the market, and he somehow ended up in a Japanese bath, lecturing the ladies about the impropriety of public nudity. Needless to say, this did not go over well. I explained to him about cultural sensitivity and offered Mrs. Fukuhara a stipend to keep an eye on him. She declined saying he meant well.

She said that again a week later when she'd found him feeding the neighborhood cats. I hadn't left him any money, but he'd turned out to be a prodigal origamist and had quickly outstripped her tutelage. He studied online, both mechanics and history, and was soon selling his constructions in the market to pay for pet food.

It was sweet and well-intentioned, but I reminded him of Malthus and of the birds and the bees, and how charity today can sometimes increase suffering tomorrow.

All was quiet for two weeks till Mrs. Fukuhara called, shaken, to say the police had come. A neighbor had seen Inky out on the curb, luring a dog and then giving it a testicular saline injection. He was neutering it! Stray animals need to be sterilized for their own collective good. Well sure, but I reminded him of a talk we'd once had when our positions were reversed—about boundaries and roles and purview. I didn't say Malthus had been talking about people, not cats and dogs—or that his conclusions, rattling around in the mind of a machine, were more than a little unnerving.

Mrs. Fukuhara still defended his motives, but reservedly, and I asked her to put him back on.

I explained why I'm out here. How the pebble bed reactors that have made Japan and Korea carbon neutral achieve inherent safety at the cost of increased waste production. How the traveling wave reactors on our rigs will consume that waste, along with the backlog built up since the 1960s. How in return, they'll produce fresh water for the whole region and convert the resulting brine into carbonates, locking atmospheric carbon up as rock that can help rebuild reefs and stabilize coastlines, or be safely sequestered at sea. I said we were turning back the tide, using one process to address three major environmental challenges and about a dozen lesser ones, and that it was important to the whole world.

"Are you proud of me, Inky? Of how I've turned out?"

"Yes, Apollonia. Your intelligence, drive, and character are a source of deep satisfaction."

Good. "Inky, all the other little boys and girls out there, they deserve their chance too. They deserve a world where those traits you value—those human traits—are turned away from conflict and destruction and harnessed for the greater good, for the good of everyone and every-thing, now and in generations to come. You understand?"

He said he did. I explained what might happen to my career if I had to leave such an important job to come shepherd an errant android, what would happen to the project if small delays were left to mount into big ones.

He was quiet for a while—quiet like a human deciding how best to respond.

"I understand."

And that's when I told him I loved him. As much as Momma or Baba. As much as any little girl ever could love anyone.

* * *

Okeanos 017, in sight of Sakhalin island.

Training is done, at least till the rotation. These boys are so young, and many are reticent to take charge of the robots like they ought to, especially the androids who have a rugged bearing that I know reminds them of their fathers. I know, because they've told me, and I've told them about growing up with Inky, and they think that's weird—a human raised by a machine.

Inky's different, and maybe that's why it's been so hard. Roughneck droids are subservient, docile. They can think how to do something but not what to do—not like Inky. He was made to assert himself, lead, and think creatively, and he was given a clear mission to keep him grounded—and maybe to keep us safe around him. Now I've asked him to adapt, and in a way he was never meant to.

He's getting on better now though, and I'm glad. We're flying back a day early owing to the coming weather. I can't wait to take a real bath. I'll buy something in town for Inky and surprise him.

* * *

Akita.

It was still dark when I reached the apartment. Inky was gone. His charger was gone too. There was no sign he'd ever been there except for a neat, meter-high mountain of origami cranes and giraffes and little Pokémon, all stacked in boxes atop the kotatsu table.

Mrs. Fukuhara had her light out next door, so I went down toward the market, scanning every alley, half expecting to find Inky in a gutter with his battery flat and his parts stripped down by 'cyclers. Or never to find him at all. I wondered if I should call the police and what I'd say in my broken Japanese.

A few industrious vendors were putting out their wares. They hadn't seen Inky, but all knew him and called him a "good boy." One suggested I might try behind the sushi bar where he sometimes hunts for strays.

I tried the alley but couldn't read well enough to tell one business from another. I was about to ask for better directions when, up the street, Mrs. Fukuhara's window lit with bright bars of orange and white.

I imposed on a shopkeeper to buy a gift of soap, then ran up the hill and tapped, panting, till she came to her door.

"*Hai?*"

"*Kon'nichiwa, Fukuhara fujin. Kore wa —*"

I nearly jumped out of my skin when the apartment door opened, and Inky stepped out into the nascent dawn.

"Mrs. Fuku—Apollonia!"

"Inky!" I threw myself on him, hugging and saying how worried I'd been as he held a tea tray awkwardly to one side. "Where were you?"

"Miss? Oh. In the closet."

"In the . . . why were you in there?"

"Excuse me."

Inky disentangled himself and stepped to Mrs. Fukuhara's door. He said, "*Ohayo,*" and nodded in the Japanese way, then spoke quietly in English about the tea. Mrs. Fukuhara bowed and said to me, "Look what he do." She nodded excitedly toward the apartment and shooed me with a smile. "*Miro yo.*"

With the closet partition open, I could see Inky's charger on the floor, in a cubby meant for bed linens.

He blocked the cat's escape with his foot and shut the door. "I stay in the closet when powered down to avoid startling the landlady when she stops in to see Felix."

I looked at the little tabby, Felix, rubbing itself against his ankles. "What does she mean? What did you do?"

He stepped around the table and fetched a large cardboard box from beneath it. "She's referring to these."

The box was packed with compressed, folded paper creations. He pulled one out and handed it to me—a foot long wedge that sprung open into iridescent wings, sweeping around and down like those of a pterodactyl, softening as they did, and drawing down a protuberance that shook itself into a head and then something like a carnation. The whole thing changed colors as it moved, and when it came to rest, it was as if a Japanese dragon had mated with a Bach fugue and played itself into being.

My eyes must have been big as saucers.

Inky seemed almost proud. “Mr. Tomaka lets me sell these in his booth. He says I’m good for business, and I’m certain I could pay for this apartment if only there were more tourist trade, but it’s really not the right venue.”

“Inky . . . my goodness!” This was the Inky I remembered, the kind, assertive, creative soul who had taught me so much about living, but he misunderstood my excitement.

“Have I erred, Miss?”

“What? No. Inky, it’s wonderful, but why have you been powering down? Is something wrong?”

“I hope not. I resolved to consult Mrs. Fukuhara before acting outside my program. Each day I check messages, attend to Felix, make Mrs. Fukuhara her tea, and let her tell me about her grandchildren. Then I go sell my wares and report any strays to the shelter. Then I’m home to re-new my stock. When I’m done with paper folding, I shut myself down.”

“But why?”

“To avoid any incidents that might interfere with your work. I hope such isn’t the reason for your early arrival?”

Suddenly, I feel horrible again.

* * *

Descending into San Francisco.

I should have known. Inky had talked it all over with Mrs. Fukuhara and decided he’d be just as lost in an American daycare as in navigating Japanese culture. He’s out of his depth, but willing to give his engrams the time and guidance they need to adapt—just as he did me so long ago.

David will be here tomorrow. I can’t wait to introduce Inky.

* * *

Manhattan.

I’ve just pulled this diary from the box where it had been lost almost since the day, twenty years ago, when David met Inky in San Francisco before the wedding. Somehow, it ended up back in New York and survived three moves and two daughters before we found it. I’ve oiled the leather and bought a nice archival box in which to present it to Inky.

Leafing back through the pages now, I’m struck by how similar we were, Inky and I, as we each made a strange world our own. I’m proud of the life he’s made for himself, and I know he’s proud of mine. My only regret is that he’s never had the kind of family I would have wanted for him. By the time I left Japan to work in other seas, he was settled in. When we bought the house, he had turned from origami to itinerant sculpture. He’d outgrown us.

He says time doesn’t affect him, that the odd word or visit is all the society he needs. Of course I know that’s nonsense, that despite everything, he’s never been so happy as when he was at Pinehurst, chasing a bunch of cussing, ungrateful children through the halls. Perhaps I’m wrong, but I do know that one day, time will catch up with each of us—even Inky.

Beth and Anna are eager to meet their famous uncle. They know him for his strange and wonderful manga, and will be disappointed if, after flying all the way to San Francisco for his opening, not a single canvas is a blue-haired teen with lasers shooting from his eyes. I know he’ll charm them though, just as he always does, and he’ll find a way to make the experience wonderful.

We’re on the Bay Ridge Elevated, passing over the Manhattan seawall. The book, the girls, my thoughts of Inky, remind me of the passage of time. People used to live down there—in pretty little brownstones and big modern condos, block after neighborly block, nanoscrubbed bright and tended by constable and sanitation drones. Now it’s vacant lots and rubble that they’re turning into parkland. They’ve given up rebuilding beyond Colonial, below Marine, even with the seawall. But what we’ve done. . . . Our rigs will stem the rising tide. In another century, they may even turn it back. I won’t live to see it, but Inky will. He’ll remember me and cock his head in that inanimate smile of his, and think that’s all we really needed, all any of us need or can ask

ANALOG

for, time and a measure of love.

C. Stuart Hardwick is a Writers of the Future winner and three-time Jim Baen Award finalist who's been published in Analog, Galaxy's Edge, Forbes.com and Mental Floss, among others. A southerner from South Dakota, Stuart grew up creating radio dramas and animated shorts before moving on to robots and ill-conceived flying machines. He's worked with the creators of the video game Doom, married an aquanaut, and trained his dog to pull a sled. Stuart studied writing at U.C. Berkeley, lives in Houston, and has been known to wear a cape. For more information and a free signed e-sampler, visit www.cStuartHardwick.com.