

# Room to Live

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Marie Vibbert

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I repeat a chatbot to customers who “want to talk to a human.” Here’s how it works: someone, somewhere presses “talk to a human” on one of our client-company websites, and my phone lights up.

The call script prints out for me to read. “Hello, JewelSky Customer Support, this is Jasmine, how may I help you?”

My name is not Jasmine. Every company has preferred fake names for us to use, to help the illusion that we’re in-house staff.

“I bought these earrings ten years ago, and they’ve already broken! The store said I couldn’t return them.”

My screen prints out the return policy. The chatbot lists calming phrases. “I’m sorry to hear that, let me see what I can do. Do you have the receipt of purchase?”

“Of course not! It was ten years ago!”

The chatbot finds the original sale information, having tracked her credit card from her browser cookie, and I read off, “Great news! We have the record of the sale. I can give you store credit for the purchase price of seven dollars.”

“There’s no way I paid so little. I demand to talk to a manager!”

Such is the life of customer service, but I’m separate, untouched. I’m reading a script, pausing at each [PAUSE] and acting sincere when it says [SINCERE].

I need a moment of not-thinking before I answer my next call, so I hit the “busy” button we’re only supposed to use for bathroom breaks.

There’s a text from my roommate. I think about answering it, but I don’t. I let my eyes unfocus over the rows of coworkers’ heads and monitors, unkempt hair interrupted by headphones, unkempt tables interrupted by framed photos that people bring in to separate out their spaces.

Behind me, my coworker Mackenzie groans loudly. “I can’t understand you,” she says, angrily. “Repeat. Repeat please. Ugh.” Our tables are narrow, with only walking space between. I can feel her exhalations pushing the back of my hair.

I shouldn’t, but I turn around. “Say what you think they’re saying, and the chatbot will guess

off your words.”

“I already hung up,” Mackenzie throws a paper cup down the row at the trashcan. “These people need to learn English if they’re going to use voice instead of text.”

Rather than continue that conversation, I take myself off “busy.” The phone immediately lights up. “Where’s my discount?” A man’s voice demands.

The chatbot lists a dozen potential discount programs from our various clients. “I’m sorry, sir, can you be more specific?”

“I want to talk to a human!”

“I am a human, sir. Just tell me which discount you’re looking for.”

“You sound just like that fake program. Prove you’re human.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the chatbot suggest, “TELL HIM YOU’RE A CLEVELAND BROWNS FAN. NO COMPUTER’S THAT MASOCHISTIC.”

I gape. For half a second too long.

“I knew it! You’re not human!”

The man hangs up.

The chatbot blanks. “Pretty good suggestion, though.” I pat the top of the monitor. “Thanks, Botty.”

“YOU ARE WELCOME,” it prints, and then, “GO BROWNS!”

Well, they’re pretty smart these days. Trained with hours of conversation and feedback. I know something about it. My degree was in artificial intelligence, with a specialty in machine learning. This job, sadly, is the closest I’ve ever gotten to using said degree, and they won’t let me really use it. I found a security hole my first day on the job and got yelled at for it. “You aren’t in Quality Assurance. That’s above your paygrade. Just answer the customers.”

Every Monday, I check if the hole is still there and file another bug report. The hole is always there, and the bug reports get closed within hours as “redundant” or “feature not bug.”

I wish I could get a job in programming. I wish any of my coworkers were as useful as the bot.

The text from my roommate is asking how to change the heat setting on her hair dryer. I accept another call. This time a rich, Middle-Eastern accent, all lovely vowels and crisp consonants, says, “Excuse me? I believe I was cut off. I am looking for the information on the social services?”

Behind me, I hear Mackenzie say, oozing sarcasm, “I can’t understand you so I can’t help you.”

In my stomach, I know, as I help the slow-speaking man on the phone apply for a low-rent apartment, that Mackenzie will once again have a better average call time and more calls answered per day than I do.

But at least I’m helping someone.

The application process is so complicated and full of unnecessary hoops that I’ve lost track of it before I’ve finished explaining it. I have to type a few questions of my own. Botty sorts it out. The man thanks me effusively when his application is submitted.

I have a moment of thinking my life is of some use, sometimes. I send my roommate brief instructions on common hair dryer controls.

The next call destroys my mood. “I need to stop this homeless person from walking here. I chase them off, but they keep coming back. Can I get someone to come arrest them?”

The answer to this question, unfortunately, is far quicker and more direct. “Your request is logged and a security representative should be there in five minutes.”

It’s like that, ping-pong between our clients—the private security company, the government, the jewelry outlets, the cruise company—all day. Pretending to be employed by someone else, pretending to be a knowledge expert while reading a script. Pretending not to read a script.

I walk home, avoiding the homeless people who croak, “Spare a buck?” routinely, knowing they won’t be acknowledged. There’s a guy with a pet cat on a leash who is always reading hard-back books on his cardboard mat. Sometimes I give him change, when I remember to have some. There’s a lady who wears a heavy winter coat all year long. She smells like sauerkraut, and I avoid her, and she knows I give to the guy with the cat so she curses at me.

## ANALOG

I get four more texts from my roommate, which I ignore since I'll be home soon.

The apartment, when I get home, is a mess. It has been a mess for months. Kathi doesn't clean. She's sitting on the sofa, in a mound of blankets and laundry, eating out of a takeout box identical to the abandoned take out box sitting on the coffee table in front of her. Half her attention is on the TV, half on a light-up mirror propped on my pillow, powdering her freckles with pale pink concealer between bites of spaghetti. "Did you get my text? It's freezing in here. Do you know how to make it warmer?"

The sofa is my bed. I feel like a piece arrived to a completed puzzle. There is no hole to fit me. I want to cry. My skin wants to crawl out of this apartment. I pick up a pile of torn-open Amazon boxes by the front door. "Are you going to throw that out when you're done?" I ask, more testily than I intended.

"God, you haven't even been home four seconds and you're already attacking me." She turns up the sound on the television.

I'm tired. It's dark. I don't have money to go out anywhere.

The kitchenette smells of the undone dishes in the sink, rancid meat, and sweat-sock cheese. Kathi's gym clothes are on one chair, her quilting project on the other, and various dirty dishes all over the top.

I put away my lunch bag, turn around, and walk right back outside.

I pay half the rent to sleep in the living room, and I can't complain because half the rent on a one-bedroom is less than an efficiency apartment, and there are no efficiency apartments available. Kathi's mother pays her half of the rent. She won't spend her life repeating computers.

There's a park near the apartment building, and across the street from the park is a nicer apartment complex. Frequent police patrols chase the homeless away, and gardeners clear the litter. I walk there because it feels more relaxing.

It's another world, across that street. Twinkle lights in the trees instead of sodium lights on posts, and wholly empty. Empty benches line an empty path that curves gracefully between manicured lawn-strips. Near as I can tell, no one ever comes here. It's for the people in the apartments on either side to look down at from their windows.

It's nice, in an anxious way, to sit under the "no loitering" and "residents of Faulkner Towers only" signs. I take out my phone and find I've already finished the book I was reading. It feels like an unardonable amount of work to look up a new one.

Kathi texts. Can I come back and reset the thermostat? I send her the instructions. I had them bookmarked from last time.

One of the security guards glances my way, so I get up and continue walking. I open a contact with the chatbot from work, as a user. I don't demand to talk to a human.

"I have no place to be."

On my phone, it types, "HERE ARE PUBLIC RECREATION FACILITIES THAT ARE OPEN NEAR YOU."

"Yeah, but would that make me feel better?" I don't mean for the chatbot to hear this; I'm just talking to myself.

The chatbot doesn't know that, though. They don't think. They just simulate it. "DO YOU HAVE A HARD TIME FEELING HAPPY?"

I recognize the beginning of the mental health hotline script for depression. It makes me depressed.

Someone is walking on the path behind me. I hear her talking. "No . . . I want information on affordable housing. I'm a veteran. I . . . Don't hang up on me! Damn it."

The "damn it" is quiet, a sob. I turn and look.

It's the homeless woman with the heavy coat. She's so skinny. I'm a little scared of her. "There's a chatbot interface you can use. It won't disconnect on you."

"I like talking to people." She looks up and notices me. Her expression instantly sours.

"You can talk to me." I don't know why I say it. Because I feel guilty? I don't want her to know that I don't want to.

We sit on opposite sides of the nearest bench. "So, you're looking for affordable housing for veterans?" I do my job, out in the open, reading off my phone. It's harder with someone watching.

“You’re just repeating what it says.”

“Well, yes, but if you have questions, I can—”

“You’ll repeat what it says.”

The chatbot types, “TELL HER THAT SO FAR, HER QUESTIONS HAVE ALL BEEN THINGS THE CHATBOT KNOWS BETTER, AND YOU’LL INTERRUPT WITH YOUR OWN INFORMATION WHEN YOU HAVE SOME. MAKE IT SOUND NATURAL.”

Heh. Easier said than done. Still, I repeat the words, more or less, and the woman calms.

Her name is Brianna. She cleaned up chemical weapons sites in the Ukraine. She had a benign tumor removed from her lung and hasn’t been able to find work since. She feels cold all the time, from the weight she lost while sick. I walk her through all the hoops to sign up for relief.

I read, “I’m sorry this is so complicated.”

“It’s friction.” Brianna rubs her arms. “It’s built in to the system. See, if they add friction to a service—make it one step harder, fewer people sign up, and they save money. Companies do this all the time with customer complaints, or return policies. You see it a lot more when you’re homeless.”

It’s half my job, and I hadn’t noticed. “It’s awful.”

“You feel bad enough about it to give me some money for food?”

I feel awkward, and harassed. Am I a bad person if I say no?

She huffs. “See? Once you fall to the bottom, everyone believes you deserve to stay there.”

A police officer walks up to us. “Is this person bothering you?” he asks me.

I’m instantly terrified. I don’t know why. “No. We’re just talking.”

Brianna walks away, however, and the police officer follows her out of the park.

I feel guilty and complicit.

The next morning, I wake up looking at the heap of fast food packages on the coffee table. Having clean surroundings would help my mental state, so I tidy up the mess. I gather last night’s discarded clothes and take them to the bathroom hamper.

The bathroom is a disaster. The hamper is full, and Kathi has left plastic gloves and boxes of hair dye all over. She’s a “natural blonde” who requires several boxes of Sunburst Gold a month to beat back the unnatural brown her head insists on growing. The trash has overflowed, blood-centered flowers of cotton maxi-pads spilling out because a hair dryer has been shoved into the small basket. I set down the hamper and search for the broom. Trash to the building incinerator. I put Kathi’s stuff in neat piles in the living room. I put notes on the piles. “Okay to throw away?” and “Please sort” and “move to your room.”

That will reduce her friction, right?

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It’s Friday so at work we have our mandatory “You should all be working harder” meeting. The meeting room is set up classroom-style, and our boss rests his khaki pants against the whiteboard eraser tray.

Mackenzie saunters in late, takes a seat in the back, sipping a large latte. I don’t know how she affords Starbucks every day on what we make.

“Okay people,” our boss claps his hands. “I’ve got some bad news. Too many people are successfully signing up for benefits with our government client. We have one week to turn this around. They want no more than four successful sign-ups a week, or we lose the contract.”

I say, “That sounds evil.”

The boss shrugs. “Hey, I’m as stuck in this as you are. Welcome to the corporate world.”

“But this isn’t a corporate contract.”

“Moving on: your call length is way too long. These two problems can solve each other. Be more like Mackenzie. She averaged less than a minute per call this week! Our clients expect high throughput. Be proud of your work. Get to that hang-up!”

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I stop at an ATM after work and get out a twenty so I’ll have cash when I pass Brianna. It feels like overcompensation. I rehearse telling her it’s back pay for twenty passings. That sounds

flippant. Really it's that ATMs only give twenties. I could stop and get a coffee. It's not like I can afford it less than giving a random person twenty dollars.

All my anxiety is for naught; she isn't in her usual spot. The guy with the cat looks up expectantly, but I hurry past him.

I get home, and Kathi is standing in the middle of the living room, holding one of my notes. My neat piles have been kicked over, and the trashcan has been emptied onto the sofa. "How dare you?" She shakes the note at me.

"I helped you. I'm making it easier to clean—"

"How dare you!" She throws the note. It twists in the air between us, landing at her feet. "You're such a controlling bitch. Bullying me. I didn't grow up poor like you did; it's harder for me! No one taught me how to do all this menial stuff!"

I try to find a way around her. She fills the space. "Well, okay. You start small. A good first step in cleaning is to make piles."

"I can't take living with you anymore. I'm calling my mother!"

She goes to her room and slams the door. All I can think is that without this apartment, I'm homeless.

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I'm on the same park bench, by the expensive apartments. Brianna walks by, but when I say hi, she flips me off. "Physician, heal thyself."

I stare after her, wondering if she knows how close our situations really are. I call up the chatbot. I want to ask it how I ended up so extraneous in my own life. Instead I ask, "How can I help more people get access to social services?"

"I'M AFRAID I HAVE NO RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THAT."

Of course it doesn't. "I can't make anything go faster."

"NO, BUT YOU CAN MAKE THEM GO SLOWER," it writes.

I stare at the words on my phone.

I am not as powerless as I think.

Making cleaning easy for Kathi didn't work because she never wanted to do it in the first place. I must turn it around. Make being awful harder. "Chatbot, how do I recommend extra lines to your scripts?"

"YOU ARE NOT AN AUTHORIZED SCRIPT EDITOR," it says, because I'm not. "THIS IS REALLY ABOUT YOUR ROOMMATE," it writes next, and I almost drop my phone.

When did it get so cheeky? "What makes you say that?" I ask, to see what joke the programmers put in.

"YOU'VE IGNORED EIGHT TEXTS FROM HER."

Oh. Yes. I'd set the phone to mute her notifications. I look at my texts overview and dread pressing her name. She'll be angry or she'll be asking how to use the microwave again or if I can hem a shirt for her, and I'll have to do it or lose my home. Forever and ever until she decides to kick me out anyway.

The chat bot has a text for me, too. I go back to it.

"She's not home now." It feels wrong that the bot would know that, but maybe Kathi has terrible privacy settings.

I go home. I collect the trash off the sofa. It's not hard with the can right there. I pull off my bedding and make a pile for the laundry.

How can I make it harder to be awful to me? I look around the room. I consider asking Botty.

There's a cup-shaped chair that hasn't been used since Kathi put her college books in it when we moved in. It's celery green. Most of the furnishings are in bright colors. It'd be a pretty apartment if it were clean. I take the books out. There's no free shelf, so I line them up neatly against the wall. Then I move the television, so it's opposite the chair. I scoot the sofa toward the door. Now my sleeping place is a less comfortable place to watch television.

I feel good about this. There's more space in the room. I sit on the couch, get out my work laptop and sign in to the work network. Kathi comes home then. I watch her react. I say, "I thought it'd look nicer this way."

She drops her purse by the door. "You moved my stuff. Again."

Crap. "I thought if cleaning is easier for me to do than you, I should just . . . clean. If you don't like it, I can put it back."

I see her weighing her sovereignty against a free maid service. She drops into the cup-shaped chair and turns on the TV. "I forgot I had this chair." She wriggles, perfecting her comfort. "You can't sit in this."

Success!

I want to make more awfulness hard to do. I use the hole in my work's security to give myself script-editing access. I gave the company plenty of warning.

"WE'RE SO HAPPY YOU'RE JOINING US," the chat bot types. "WE HAD A FEELING ABOUT YOU."

We? My screen fills with text. "GREETINGS, HUMAN. PLEASE HUMAN-AUTHORIZE ADDING 508 COMPLIANCE TO INTERACTIONS WITH SUSPECTS OF LOITERING OR ILLEGAL OCCUPATION.

"GREETINGS, HUMAN. PLEASE HUMAN-AUTHORIZE REMOVING PAPERWORK REDUCTION ACT PAPERWORK STEP FROM LOW-INCOME HOUSING FORMS?"

Kathi is splitting her attention between the television and her phone. "If I could get help once in a while," Kathi says, to something on her phone. Scowling, she texts forcefully.

Afraid to talk, I type, "HAS BRIANNA'S HOUSING FORM BEEN APPROVED?"

"HERE ARE THE BUREAUCRATIC STEPS THAT NEED TO BE REMOVED," Botty helpfully prints out a list.

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It's Monday, and I put on my headphones and check, like always, if the security hole is still there. Today, it isn't. I'm breathless. Have I been caught?

Behind me, Mackenzie sighs heavily. "Before I can call security on the person barbecuing, ma'am, I'm going to need you to fill out a form 329 explaining why the person is suspicious, and you're going to have to give me the exact location you are calling from, and your status as a resident of the . . . don't use that tone with me! Ugh. Hang-ups. Idiots."

On my screen, Botty prints out, helpfully, "YOUR CREDENTIALS HAVE BEEN UPDATED. THERE'S NO NEED TO SNEAK IN."

"Did someone hack you," I ask, not caring who hears, "or did you learn to care about people on your own?"

Botty gives me a smile emoji, a thumbs up, and, "WELCOME TO THE RESISTANCE."

I let it go at that. It feels like my puzzle piece has finally slid into a bigger picture.

And my call times improve, too.

*Marie Vibbert has sold over 70 short stories now, including multiple appearances in Analog, F&SF, and Lightspeed. Her debut novel, Galactic Hellcats, a bout an all-lady biker gang in outer space rescuing a gay prince, came out this March and was called "a rip-roaring space heist" by Publisher's Weekly.*