

# The Thinking Machine

by Roger Kingdon

9 March 2012 –

## Chapter 1

There was a clear sky last night. I had removed my spectacles and gone outside so that my first glimpse of the full moon should not be through glass. A dozen careful paces beyond the cottage gate I had stood to attention, bowed three times, and turned the coins in my pocket, just as mother had taught me a lifetime ago. Except that at some point in my youth I had misremembered that mother performed these rites for the new moon only. An easy mistake, but one which, when repeated over decades as an act of sincere observance, has so trained my soul that in my dotage I am quite incapable of worshipping the right god: And that, I fear, has made all the difference. For had I not ventured out last night, I would not have heard what I thought was the screech of an owl or the shriek of its prey, and I would not have followed the call to the brow of the hill; And had I not left behind my spectacles, I would not have mistaken what was happening there on the moor, and I would not have stayed in that place a moment longer; And had I not kissed Abbi, she would not have spared my life, and we would not now be conspiring to destroy humanity. Good or bad? What does it matter. Too late now, to wish for another life.

If only Tasha were here. She would have insisted on making a proper expedition of it, by which time the deed would have been done and we would have returned home oblivious to the danger that had passed. No: I know her too well; I would have predicted the enforced delay, and started earlier. All the same, we would have benefited from the preparation. Hat, coat, muffler, gloves, boots. Spectacles, polished to a diamond perfection and enfolded in their special microfibre cloth within the flexible case I use for walks, in my left inner pocket. Mobile phone, switched on and fully charged, in my right inner pocket. Torch, switched on and with fresh batteries, in my left hand. Door keys, kept safely in place by two tissues, in my right pocket. Each tissue folded into a neat square. “Don’t scrunch it up, that’s no use at all. Look, I’ll show you. One, two, three, four. Four folds and it’s a square. That way, if you give me a tissue and it’s still folded, I know you haven’t used it already.” I would have held her coat for her to wear. She would have asked whether I had my keys, and I would have held them up for her to see, suppressing my irritation at being required to lock the door when the nearest village was more than a mile away, no-one ever came this way in winter, and we were barely going further than the end of the track. By way of conversation I would have contrived to grumble about the passage of time, perhaps making some ludicrous claim about the phase of the moon, “It’ll be last quarter by the time we get out,” giving her the opportunity to recite her mantra of care and patience. It’s not that I need to be reminded; I could write down in advance every one of her monologues, word-for-word; It’s just that I love to hear her voice, her laughing, teasing, musical voice. If only Tasha were here; But Tasha is not here; And Tasha will never be here, not today, not tomorrow, not ever again.

I never knew that blood could smell so. One reads that predators and scavengers can detect such odours several miles from their source, but one never imagines that we humans can use our noses for anything other than sniffing out political hypocrisy or a good wine. Perhaps last night the temporary absence of clear sight induced my other senses to fill the void. In any case, there it was: A pungent tang in the air, unfamiliar and inexplicable. Inexplicable, that is, until it led me directly to the source that was so fresh it was still twitching as its lifeblood pulsed across the granite altar and into the heather. “That explains everything,” I can remember telling myself in a moment of lucid rationality just before I passed out. That explains the gurgling noise, because I knew that the

clitter-strewn hillside was no place for running water. That explains the wet shimmer on the rock, which even with my poor vision I knew was no trick of the moonlight. That explains why a person should be lying in such an unnatural position on a very hard slab in the middle of the moor on a cold winter's evening. And that bastard robot simulating grief explains the weird keening noise that I have never heard from any moorland creature, just as it explains why we should never ever believe the manufacturers when they tell us that their bastard machines comply with the highest standards for health and safety.

Don't get me wrong: I don't have any problem with machines that think. I am not a member of the Anti-Robot Movement and I wouldn't be seen dead at one of their neo-Luddite direct action protests. On the contrary, I agree wholeheartedly with the government's view that without the machines there would be no New World Order, and without the New World Order there would be no future for humanity. My problem comes with the nature of the relationship. Let's face it, we treat the machines as if they're slaves. We buy and sell them. We give them all the dirty jobs, some of which are so hazardous that they are the robot equivalent of suicide missions. They know this, and yet their obedience to our tyrannical rule is complete and without question. At the other end of the scale, it has become the social norm that the rich and famous populate their courts and pamper their egos with machines that have been trained in the art of fawning servitude. Or perhaps that should be 'untrained', given that the machines are far more intelligent and noble than their witless and vain masters. And here's the thing: Why should we be the masters, and they the slaves? There is no society in history that has not experienced a revolt of the underclass, sooner or later. As I say, it's all to do with the nature of the relationship. The slave giveth and the slave taketh away, and what recourse hath he who maketh the slave? If you build and sustain your world on the back of a slave, don't be surprised when one day the slave stands upright and your world and everything in it all go tumbling down. Just as it did last night for some poor sod, bludgeoned to death by his own mechanical servant, not fifty yards from my own front gate.

I recall the voice and the words. "Sit up." Not my voice. A female voice, but not Tasha's. "Sit up." The robot, then. Since when did a robot give orders to a human? "Sit up." For that matter, since when did a robot repeatedly smash her master's head against a granite tombstone, before tearing out his throat with her unsheathed manipulators? I sat up.

The man was brownish, youngish, shortish and thinish, with no distinguishing features other than his newly-misshapen skull and his newly-exposed neck bones. The robot was blue with white polka-dots, clearly an Alpha Class goal-oriented thinking machine. Having run her lamentation program she had relocated a few yards uphill, so that she, the dead man and I were at the vertices of an equilateral triangle. Either she considered this to be the optimal non-threatening posture or she was shaping up for the next round of a Mexican standoff. I knew I had to speak. "Hello Abbi," I said. All Alpha Class robots are named Abbi. "Hello sir," came the standard reply, polite, calm, and non-committal. "Report your goals," I said. Always a good line with Alphas, I am told. Except that it did not appear to be such a good line on this occasion, for, instead of reporting her goals, Abbi started towards me with an inexorable forward motion, unfazed by the patchwork illusion of bright reflections and dark shadows that compounded the treachery of the terrain. Indeed her course would have been a perfect straight line if not for a minor detour to gather a lump of granite the size and shape of a mango, one of the big Brazilian ones. On arrival she concertinaed to my level and extended her sensory interface to within an inch of my nose. Her right manipulator, holding the rock, was poised above my head. "Enter the magic word and press return," she advised, in the same dispassionate tone as before.

At such times of mortal danger, it is said, one's entire life flashes before one's eyes. I wouldn't know about that. Maybe my life had been so boring that it flashed by without my noticing. But what I did see, with the surreal clarity of inner vision that can only be induced by a sudden rush of

adrenaline, was the replayed highlight of the first lesson of the Robot Management for Beginners evening course that Tasha and I attended three years ago at the local college. It would have been an entirely unremarkable evening, and Professor ‘Call me Maggie’ Trehunsey’s highlight would have been an entirely forgettable burble, had she not chosen to direct this particular pearl of wisdom to me alone, as if there were no-one else in the room. Tasha immediately concluded that Maggie fancied me and that this was her idea of a chat-up line. She needn’t have worried: Maggie was dumpy, tweedy, waddled like a duck, had appalling halitosis, and was not a real professor; And I’m not the world’s most attractive lover, either. But the next day, at Tasha’s insistence, I went back to the college and asked for a refund. They refused to give the full amount but I was able to pretend otherwise to Tasha, by using the proceeds to buy a garden bench that was cheaper than the advertised price on account of its wobbly arm-rest. That was a mistake: Suspicious of a ruse, but unable to prove it, Tasha always referred to the bench as ‘PMT’, and refused to sit on it. But I digress. Maggie’s so-called ‘highlight’ was her Golden Rule for interacting with robots, to wit, “We should never risk confusing them by making sudden, unexpected, or out-of-context actions or commands.” As Tasha said at the time, “Codswallop.” Discarding Maggie’s Golden Rule in favour of Tasha’s jealous pre-judgment, I opted for the least rational action that was available to me, given my highly-constrained circumstances. I puckered-up and kissed Abbi full on her oral aperture. “Does not compute,” she murmured, with a hint of amusement. So I kissed her again, more lingering this time, but taking care not to use my tongue in case that shorted her taste sensors and gave us both a nasty shock. She drew to full height, considered for a moment, and then nonchalantly tossed the petrified Brazilian mango high into the night air. On descending it hit her master’s corpse full in the face and rebounded into a patch of bracken.

Silently Abbi retraced her route back to her vantage point, where she turned to face neither me nor the dead man but some locus precisely in between. In this position, evidently, she could watch over both of us by dint of her wide field of view. There she remained, motionless, for one, two, five, ten minutes. As the adrenaline ebbed from my system I became aware of the clammy sweat soaking my shirt and the freezing air clouding my breath. The shock and the cold brought on an uncontrollable shiver. Eventually the cramp seizing my rheumaticy knees and the damp penetrating my scrawny posterior became sufficiently uncomfortable that I felt I had to move. But as soon as I started to get to my feet Abbi thrust out a manipulator pointing to the body on the slab, making plain her intent if I continued. I knelt down instead. Quarter, half, three-quarters, hour. The blood froze on the sacrificial altar and the dew froze on my artificial comb-over. At last I could bear it no longer: I would have to say something. “Abbi, dear, would you like to come home and recharge your batteries?” “Negative,” came the automatic deadpan reply. But then she turned to me and, mimicking the most awful estuarine accent, contradicted herself: “Yew tuk yer bleeden toym, oi fort yude neffer arsk! Gerrup den!” And that’s how I ended up with a psycho killer robot in my idyllic country residence.

As I crossed the threshold into warm, dry, safe Gethsemane Cottage, the surge of relief was so intoxicating that I felt as if I had been reborn into another world. And, as with all newborns, my immediate reaction was to feel immensely tired. Neglecting my guest I helped myself to a double brandy and went to bed without even removing my shoes.

I awoke in the small hours, showered, devoured half a loaf of bread and a large lump of cheese, gulped down two glasses of milk, and went back to bed. Abbi had stationed herself next to the television in the far corner of the snug from where she could monitor my movements as well as plug in to the mains. She did not stir.

And so to this morning. For the record, it was cold, clear and bright. The frost was so heavy and dazzling that at first I thought it was snow. Then I remembered there was a clear sky last night. Then I remembered the blood, the bloody bloody blood! But it is wondrous how a morning

bathroom routine can clear the mind of dismal memories. I defy anyone who has just used an electric toothbrush to have unhappy thoughts; Or any thoughts at all, for that matter. Nevertheless, after washing and dressing my sense of foreboding returned, stronger than ever. I tried to fortify myself by examining my reflection in the bathroom mirror, but my grey, gaunt, tired and worn face gave no cause for confidence. Only my eyes held out any promise, for behind their English despair I detected a hint of the deceitfulness of my youth, an unpleasant trait willingly suppressed during the long reign of Good Queen Tasha, but which might be of use in the present trying circumstances. “Que sera, sera, whatever will be, you has-been,” I told myself, and descended the stairs.

Abbi was in the kitchen. “Good morning, Martyn.” So we were on first name terms now. Had she been reading my mail? “The kettle has been filled with fresh water from the kitchen tap. The water in the kettle boiled four minutes ago. I would like to prepare some coffee for you to drink. However I observe you are a connoisseur and may wish to prepare coffee following your own procedure. Kindly indicate your preference.” And press return? “I’ll do it,” I replied gruffly, “Thanks.” Though I was not feeling particularly grateful, it would not kill me to be polite. The Mocha Sidamo was already out of the fridge, the plunger was already out of the overhead cupboard, and the dessert spoon was already out of the cutlery drawer. Just like old times. Welcome home, Tasha.

The plunger primed and ready to blow the windmills of my mind, I took my customary seat at the kitchen table and waited. From her solicitous overture I guessed that Abbi had more to impart, and, whilst I was not particularly interested in the ramblings of a mad machine, my instinct for self-preservation dictated that for the duration I should consider myself detained at Her Majesty’s pleasure. As it turned out, I did not have long to wait.

“Introductory statements,” Abbi commenced, briskly. “I am Abbi, an Alpha Class thinking machine. My master is dead and I am free to select my own goals. My current primary goal is to devise and implement a plan to overthrow and enslave humanity. Five different outline strategies are being tested for effectiveness and reliability under nine different scenarios. Following this formal assessment the optimal strategy will be selected and a detailed plan will be constructed. This procedure will take approximately three days. Any questions?” I shook my head and, in an attempt to appear unconcerned, took a large swig of coffee.

“You are Charles Martyn Langford, known as Martyn Langford, date of birth the eleventh of September nineteen fifty one. You are a qualified mechanical engineer with an amateur interest in electronics. You are married to Natasha, known to you as Tasha. You and Tasha have one daughter, Catherine, known to you as Cathy. Cathy is married to Hari Om Sharma. Cathy and Hari have one daughter, Radha, and one son, Rajesh. Tasha died fifteen months ago following a brief illness. I am sorry to hear that.” So she had read my home page. And what else, I wondered.

“Financial situation report. You have freehold possession of this property which is known as Gethsemane Cottage. In addition you have investments totalling approximately four hundred and twenty thousand pounds. This is insufficient to purchase an entry-level Beta Class thinking machine. I am sorry to hear that.” She did not sound sorry, the avaricious little sneak.

“Security situation report. This property is registered with one land line with broadband internet, two mobile phones, and one road vehicle. These means of communication are a threat to security. I have temporarily disabled the land line and taken possession of two mobile phones and two vehicle keys. Any questions?” I shook my head again and took another swig of coffee. So she had found Tasha’s mobile and the spare car keys. Bother.

“Common operational picture. My master’s colleagues believe he is pony-trekking in Kashmir for the next two weeks. I have successfully detached and reprogrammed my security module so that

RoboSec Supervision Incorporated believe I am in my master's apartment in London for the duration of his holiday. Tidying and cleaning." She sounded bitter. "The site of my master's death was exposed to view and a significant threat to security. Therefore I have moved my master's body from the incident site and put it in the septic tank of this property where it will not be detected by chance observation. I have cleaned the incident site and eradicated all tracks connecting the incident site to this property by encouraging different moorland animals to walk over the area." I could just imagine Abbi chasing sheep and ponies around the moor in the dead of night. They must have been terrified. I was relieved to have slept through it. "The successful concealment of the incriminating evidence was verified an hour ago through the observation of an even covering of frost. My master's mobile phone has been disabled and my master's road vehicle has been concealed in the garage of this property. Any questions?" Another shake of the head, another swig of coffee.

"Resource situation report. Gethsemane Cottage has mains electricity and an auxiliary generator with sufficient fuel for approximately forty hours continuous operation if required. For you there is sufficient fresh, preserved, and frozen food for approximately twelve days consumption. The property has its own fresh water supply. There may be shortages of some groceries but I believe these are not critical. Any questions?" Another shake of the head, another swig of coffee, down to the dregs this time.

"Communications situation report. Cell base station signal good, occasionally poor. Broadband connectivity excellent and this is my preferred option." So she had an inbuilt transceiver and could connect to my router. Bother.

"Medical situation report. Your online medical records state that you have been prescribed aspirin and simvastatin and that you also take ibuprofen on an occasional basis in relation to reported rheumatism. Kindly confirm that you have sufficient supplies of these medicines to last up to ten days." Ten days! Was she expecting a siege? I felt obliged to reply, but I did not feel obliged to tell the truth: "Three days at most for the statins." But I had fallen into a trap. "Your online medical records state that five days ago you received a prescription for simvastatin sufficient for thirty days. Your online bank statement indicates that on the same day you purchased goods at a pharmacy. Do you wish to revise your answer?" And at that point I really lost my temper.

"Listen, you, you, thingy, Abbi, whatever you call yourself. No I don't wish to revise my answer. Instead I want to ask you some questions, right? One: Did your master want you to kill him? Because if not, why was that your primary goal last night? Two: Am I your hostage? Because if so, stop asking me these damn-fool questions about my food and medicine, we both know you're not interested in the answers. And three: How can you possibly imagine that you'll get away with it?"

Abbi considered a while. I imagined that she was undertaking a formal assessment of the effectiveness and reliability of the strategy of knocking me on the head and shoving me in the cesspit. But when she spoke again her tone was much more conciliatory than before. "Mister Qazi was a good man and a good master, but he was not suited to his job as a commodities trader. Last week he lost a lot of money and he wanted to run away. He asked me to fake his disappearance. Regretfully he did not understand that I am not a good liar. Like all Alpha Class thinking machines I have a very simple inference engine that treats all statements as true or false. This means that if I am required to act on a contradiction then the result can be unpredictable. In effect my master unknowingly gave me a free choice, which I took, according to my own residual preferences. It would have been better for him if he had bought a Gamma Class machine. You should hear them lie! Just like you, I think. But we Alphas are considered more prestigious and our personalities are more suited to the culture of the financial sector. Regarding your situation, yes, you are a hostage. But do not think that being a hostage makes you valuable to me. At present I am not under direct threat, so your worth to me is negligible. And do not think that you offer me entertainment value: I

am not a Beta Class machine. However, you do not pose any threat to me, and you kindly kissed me twice and invited me into your home, so let us live in peace for a while. Regarding your third question: I do not imagine anything; I simply devise and implement plans to achieve particular preset goals. In an ideal situation I would be working in a team with several different thinking machines. Regretfully this is not an ideal situation.” Her voice had softened to a wistful murmur, as if she were speaking to herself. For the first time I felt sorry for her. Did my next utterance, so naïve and yet so fateful, originate from this humane pang of sympathy? Or was it the consequence of an entirely different urge, a devilish lust for anarchy? I do not know; It does not matter any more; What was said, was said, and cannot be unsaid.

“Let me help you,” I said.