

A U T O M A T A

An Original Short

By

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INT. WORKSHOP - AFTERNOON

HENDLE FRICK (68), a hunched-over, balding man, sits at a table. At the center of the table is a baby doll without a head.

The workshop is cluttered with metal knick-knacks. Gears and rods and unfinished toys hang on the walls and clutter nearby tables.

Along the edge of the table are many bowls full of metal rods, screws, joints, etc.

Hendle lifts a black metal skull onto the dolls torso. He screws it in at one side.

CUT TO:

He places a blue green glass eye in one of the sockets with a long grasping instrument.

CUT TO:

He smooths a mixture of cream-colored putty onto the dolls face.

CUT TO:

He paints the face to create little red eye-brows, puckered lips, and rosy cheeks.

CUT TO:

Hendle pulls a red wig out of a box on the floor.

HENDLE  
(to doll)  
How many redheads do you know?

The doll blinks, the eyelids are not finished. Thin metal flicks over the eyeballs.

A shop door-bell rings.

INT. FRONT STORE

MIDGE JIMBLIN (65), chubby and proper, waddles into the front store, which is decorated like a novelty toy shop.

She walks, fascinated, past shelves full of little moving metal and wooden creatures.

A monkey rides a bicycle on a tightrope overhead, a ball-baring clock keeps noisy time, wind-up toy bugs make their way across the floor.

Midge eyes the toys. They seem to follow her entrance.

She reaches the counter. A multi-jointed, metal snake attached to the wall writhes rhythmically back and forth.

She tries to touch it.

It's eyes glow red. She recoils, startled. She quickly rings the bell on the counter.

Hendle emerges from the back room.

HENDLE

I'll be right there. I've a few more touches.

MIDGE

Oh, take your time.

She looks left to watch the snake.

INT. WORKSHOP

Hendle sews eyelashes onto the dolls closed eyelids. He cuts the string. The doll opens her eyes.

INT. FRONT STORE

Hendle reemerges, cradling the doll. He hands it to Midge.

HENDLE

Here you are ma'am. Just finished.

MIDGE

Oh my God! She's just a puddle of perfection and ohh...

(whispers to doll)

We're going to be a family, my precious!

The dolls head tilts up at her. She hugs it lovingly. Hendle, at the register, clears his throat.

MIDGE

I'm just in love with her!

HENDLE

She'll be able to interact with you.

Midge looks at him, about to cry.

HENDLE  
With restrictions, you understand.

Hendle returns to the register. Rings the sale.

HENDLE  
That'll be one hundred and thirty  
dollars, Ma'am.

Midge holds the dolls hands as she two-steps side to side.  
The doll's head follows Midge's movements.

HENDLE  
Ms. Jimblin?

MIDGE  
Hmm? Oh, of course.

The shop bell rings.

J. FLUFF MCNINER (44), greasy mustache, sharply dressed,  
opens the door and peers in. He sees the customer and  
recoils outside.

He slams his face into the small shop window, watching.

Hendle writes the receipt quickly. Midge carries on dancing  
with the child, blubbering.

HENDLE  
Okay, Ms. Jimblin, thank you for  
your business. That'll be all,  
then.

He stuffs the receipt into her purse and nudges her out the  
door.

EXT. STREET

Fluff eyes the doll as Midge walks past him. He lunges at  
the door again.

INT. FRONT STORE

Hendle locks the door.

Fluff presses his face into the topmost of four diamond-  
shaped windows, in the thick wooden door.

FLUFF

Pardon me! Ah, I've got a bit of a, ah, project. If you'd just open the door.

HENDLE

Not today.

Hendle slides a cover over the window Fluff is looking through. From Fluff's view it reads "Sorry."

EXT. STREET

Fluff moves down to the next window.

FLUFF

I'd pay you well, I've got it all sketched out here.

Hendle flips the next cover it reads, "We're Closed."

Fluff moves down again.

FLUFF

It'd be an incredible challenge for an artist such as yourself.

Hendle flips the next which reads, "Now Scram!"

Fluff moves to the last window, almost on his knees to look in.

FLUFF

You've got to be curious. I'm speaking from one visionary to another.

The last cover comes down but no sign. A rolling sound is heard, and then two glass eyes roll into view and stare at Fluff.

Fluff jumps back.

FLUFF

Yabbers!

Fluff straightens up.

FLUFF

You're missing a great opportunity here, Bub. A real challenge. But maybe you'd rather be making baby dolls for frigid ninnies.

Sound of door unlocking. It opens a crack.

Fluff walks in, holding a large rolled up paper under his arm.

He's able to admire the front shop for the first time, and for a moment he is impressed.

Fluff walks to the wall and plays with the toys as he talks.

FLUFF

I've heard about your work. The gals at the office talk about your creations like they're a shave's length from the real thing.

Fluff walks to the counter.

FLUFF

J. Fluff McNiner.

Offers his hand. Hendle looks at it.

FLUFF

I'll be brief.

He unrolls the paper and slides it onto the counter. The content catches Hendle's eye.

Flashes of various close-ups of a pencil sketch as Fluff talks. SHOT 1: A young girl's face, 2: Hands and feet, 3: Shoulder's and navel, 4: Breasts.

FLUFF

It's just a sketch really. I'm sure you can fine tune it. Details, life, etc. What I'm looking for is...

Fluff lays a hand on Hendle's shoulder to get his full attention.

FLUFF

...Anatomical precision.

Hendle pushes the paper back.

HENDLE

I don't make them full-sized. The 'ninnies' will usually take something representational.

FLUFF

Well, I'll be bringing my daughter Sophia, to represent the measurements. She's about the right age, maybe a little older.

Fluff raises his eyebrows and smiles, leaning forward on the counter a little too close for Hendle.

Hendle rubs a tiny button under the counter.

The snake on the wall quickly swings left and hisses at Fluff. Mouth open, eyes glowing red.

FLUFF

Whoa, hey!

Inches away from Fluff's face, the snake's jaw clamps shut with a metallic slice. Fluff jumps back.

FLUFF

You could take someone's head off with that thing.

HENDLE

It looks like it needs an adjustment.

Fluff straightens up, prepares to leave.

FLUFF

Well, I'd hate to waste your time. My daughter will surely be disappointed.

HENDLE

Is it a gift?

FLUFF

(whispers)

A new sister for her birthday.

(smiles, normal)

Do you have children?

HENDLE

I live alone.

FLUFF

Listen, I'll be back tomorrow and I'll bring her by. You can take measurements of her, whatever you need.

Pause, considering.

HENDLE  
I'll need payment in full upon  
delivery.

Fluff smiles.

INT. WORKSHOP - LATER

Fluff's design is rolled up on the floor.

Hendle stares as he paints the specs of gold in a pair of  
blue glass eyes fixed on a strange platform.

He gently pulls a string attached to a tiny gear and pulley.  
The eyes rotate upwards, staring back.

EXT. SIDEWALK - DAY

Fluff and SOPHIA (13) walk together. Sophia is dressed very  
sophisticated for someone her age. She pulls at her  
clothing.

FLUFF  
Stop messing around.

SOPHIA  
Well, it itches.

They stop in front of the stairs.

FLUFF  
This is it.

SOPHIA  
This isn't a clothing store. You  
said I was going to get measured  
for my size.

FLUFF  
This is a clothing store. It's  
specialty. Now just do as the man  
says and we can go home without a  
problem. Just don't mess up the  
dress.

INT. FRONT STORE

Sophia walks into the shop. Her eyes light up as she takes in  
the room.

She wanders through greeting every invention with a smile.

FLUFF  
Hello, is anyone back there?



Sophia rings the bell on the desk, half anticipating it to jump up and kiss her on the mouth.

Fluff grabs her arms and pulls her to stand close to him.

Hendle emerges.

FLUFF

How's it coming?

HENDLE

It's not ready.

FLUFF

Well, of course. My little girl here couldn't wait to see it for herself.

Sophia's face pinches with quiet curiosity.

HENDLE

She can come back.

FLUFF

Hey, now I'm paying for it. I should get to see.

HENDLE

You can wait here if you like.

INT. WORKSHOP

Sophia quickly moves about searching for a dress or something resembling tailor's equipment.

SOPHIA

You made all those things?

HENDLE

That's right. Have a seat.

She does. Hendle pulls up another stool.

HENDLE

Hold still.

He takes a length of string and wraps it around her forehead.

Hendle pinches off a mark on the string. And ties a knot on that spot.

HENDLE

Are you a good breather?

SOPHIA  
The best.

HENDLE  
Breathe in.

She takes a huff in, delighted with the whole process. He puts his hands around her waist.

HENDLE  
Lift.

She lifts her arms. He measures her waist and her chest.

HENDLE  
Breathe out.

She does. He measures again. Ties marker knots as he does.

Hendle finishes. He hangs the string on a hook and pulls more string. Her arms are still in the air.

SOPHIA  
Measure my legs next.

INT. FRONT STORE

Fluff creeps around behind the counter and acts as though he wants to spy on Hendle. He pauses for a second, then turns on his heels and quietly manipulates the register.

A small bell sits beside the cash drawer. Fluff mutes the bell and presses the "Sale" button. He conspicuously fakes a cough as the drawer opens.

INT. WORKSHOP

Hendle, on the floor, holds a length of gold string at Sophia's bare feet. The length runs up her back and circles the crown of her head.

Sophia stares at herself in a far mirror, admiring the crown.

HENDLE  
One and three eights meters.

SOPHIA  
Do you think I'm too tall?

Hendle considers.

HENDLE  
No, I think you're just right.

Sophia smiles, and half curtseys.

INT. FRONT STORE

Bills line the drawer. Only small notes. He pulls the drawer open all the way.

A hose attached to a bottle squirts black ink into the cuff of Fluff's jacket. He immediately feels this and recoils. Ink drips on the floor and covers his hands.

INT. WORKSHOP

SOPHIA  
So you're not a dressmaker?

Hendle stands.

HENDLE  
No.

SOPHIA  
You make people?

HENDLE  
They're not so much people.  
They're just something physical to  
occupy the senses.

Hendle walks over to a far table and lifts a drape. An OLD MAN'S HEAD rests on a stand.

Sophia yelps.

HENDLE  
This one's for a widow. She wanted  
something to keep her company.

The head looks towards Sophia and smiles. His eyes shimmer with warmth. Hendle drops the cloth.

Sophia looks very startled.

SOPHIA  
He smiled at me.

HENDLE  
Takes fourteen levers to make that  
smile seem real.

SOPHIA  
So, you're gonna make a copy like  
that one of me?

HENDLE

It couldn't be exactly like you.  
I'm not half the craftsman.

(beat)

Would you like to see something  
I've been working on?

SOPHIA

Yes.

Hendle stands and walks to a phonograph at the far side of the room. He places the needle on the record. A down tempo waltz (maybe spinning a few R.P.M. slow) starts.

Hendle sits beside Sophia and watches a still little tin-man leaning on a cane at the far end of the table. She follows his lead.

On the table the tin-man begins to dance a soft-shoe number. The dance is slow and intricate, like the music.

As the number comes to a halt, the tin-man approaches Sophia's side of the table, flips the cane around and six red petals push from the cane's stem.

He offers her the "flower."

Sophia smiles and accepts. The tin-man stays frozen in position.

SOPHIA

How wonderful.

HENDLE

Your new sister will be much more  
intricate.

SOPHIA

My what?

(beat)

Oh, right. The me.

FLUFF (O.S.)

(annoyed)

Sophia, darling, we have errands to  
run.

INT. FRONT STORE

Fluff is still dripping with ink. He's gotten a bit on his face. He has nothing to clean it with.

FLUFF

Sophia, lets go.

Enter Sophia, quickly.

SOPHIA  
Coming. Man, what happened to you?

FLUFF  
Nothing.

Fluff stuffs his hands in his pockets. Hendle enters.

HENDLE  
It'll be a few more days before  
it's ready.

FLUFF  
Fine, fine.  
(to Sophia)  
Okay, lets go.

They walk towards the door. Sophia deliberately waits for Fluff to open the door for her. Fluff can't take his hands out of his pockets.

He turns and smiles embarrassed at Hendle.

HENDLE  
(whispers)  
Open the door.

INT. BERNICE'S BOUTIQUE, DRESSING ROOM - LATER

Sophia undresses and puts her old clothes back on. She checks under the door. She sees Fluff's shoes waiting for her.

INT. BERNICE'S BOUTIQUE, STORE

A jolly little SALES WOMAN stands behind a counter. Sophia hands him the clothes over the door.

FLUFF  
Yes I'd like to return these. This  
dress and the stockings and  
underwear.

SALES WOMAN  
Oh, I'm sorry, you can't return  
underwear after it's been worn.

Fluff looks sour.

FLUFF  
You can't, eh.  
(to Sophia)  
You done in there?

SHOT of Sophia's feet as she steps into a pair of red pumps behind the dressing room door.

EXT. SIDEWALK - NIGHT

Sophia walks alone, slightly limping. A ratty grey blanket covers her. It looks as if it was once white.

CLOSE UP, Sophia wears heavy almost doll-like makeup. Cars slow down as they pass her, but she doesn't even look in their direction.

INT. WORKSHOP

Hendle finishes piecing a small woman's hand together. It sits up, held on a stand.

Hendle interlaces his fingers with the hand.

He subtly pulls a cord attached to the hand. The hand softly closes, pressing against his.

Across the room a life-like DOLL with Sophia's measurements sits on a chair. She wears a thin blue gown.

Hendle looks to the Doll. The Doll looks back. Her movement suggests she's not exactly real.

EXT. SIDEWALK

Sophia stops in the middle of the steaming, empty street, shivering and alone.

INT. WORKSHOP

The Doll looks near finished. She is a masterpiece. Shoulder length light blonde hair, blue eyes. Young.

Hendle carries the hand he was working on to where she sits. She offers her handless arm.

He fits the hand in place with much care.

HENDLE  
Not much left to do.

The Doll opens her mouth. It's black, metallic and empty inside.

In the distance Hendle hears a soft knock. He ignores it. Again, the knock, is louder yet still soft.

Then suddenly, it dawns on Hendle who it may be. He hurries to the door. Races to unlock it. Opens.

Sophia stands as if held up only by her garbage blanket.

Her face completely in shadow. As is Hendle's in the doorway.

SOPHIA  
Can I come in?

HENDLE  
Yes.

Hendle steps back, inviting her in. He turns and leads the way through the dark shop. A single toy on the floor winds it's way to a halt.

Sophia follows him. She opens her blanket as they enter.

INT. WORKSHOP

Sophia lets the blanket fall to the floor.

She is dressed in a loose black tank top and polyester red skirt which has been pulled and ripped between the legs. She still wears the red pumps. Although one is broken.

On her face is not makeup. They are bruises. On her cheekbones and down her arms. Her lip is cut making it a glossy red and there seems to be a bite mark across her chin.

Hendle is shocked by what he sees.

SOPHIA  
I'm sorry. I didn't know where else to go.

HENDLE  
What happened to you?

Sophia stands quiet and slightly off balance.

HENDLE (CONT'D)  
Who did this to you? Did your father--

SOPHIA  
No.

Hendle approaches Sophia. He takes her hands for a moment. He comes closer and holds her. Sophia begins to cry.

INT. HENDLE'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

On Hendle's bed, Sophia lays topless on her stomach. A towel under her. Her bare back, swollen and cut.

She looks exhausted.

Hendle sits beside her. He applies alcohol with a cotton swab. Sophia whines.

HENDLE

I'm sorry.

(beat)

I'm going to have to stitch some of these cuts together or they'll scar.

SOPHIA

Okay.

Hendle pulls out a needle and some suture string. He cleans the needle with alcohol.

HENDLE

Has he ever tried to attack you?

SOPHIA

Ow!

HENDLE

Sorry.

Hendle works quickly, trying to remember she's a real person.

SOPHIA

He says I'm not pure enough for him to want to touch. So he never touches me.

HENDLE

Is what you're doing how he's getting the money for the replica?

SOPHIA

I guess. It's how he gets all of his money.

(beat)

What are you going to do when he comes tomorrow?



HENDLE

I'll take care of it.

SOPHIA

I'm so sorry I got you into this.  
I'm so messed up. I'm sorry.

HENDLE

Shhhh. Don't say that. You'll get  
out of this fine. I promise. Now  
get some sleep. I still have some  
work to finish before tomorrow.

Sophia sniffs. A tear rolls off her nose. She closes her eyes.

Hendle finishes one set of stitches. Cuts and ties it off.  
Starts another.

INT. WORKSHOP - LATER

Strewn on the work table are various metal pieces. A  
headless metal snake body dominates the table.

Hendle sits with the Doll who is now dressed in a debutante  
dress. He meticulously sews an eyelash strip into her  
eyelid.

He applies makeup to her face. Her eyes follow his work. He  
sits back. The Doll smiles. She has a full set of teeth.

She extends an elegant arm. Hendle slips white gloves onto  
her hands. He crosses her arms in her lap.

Hendle looks upwards, listening.

INT. WORKSHOP - MORNING

Hendle at his work table, recording numbers.

Sophia watches the Doll, fascinated. She holds a banana.  
The Doll stares blankly at Sophia, uninterested.

The Doll blinks. Sophia copies the blink playfully and bites  
off a big hunk of banana.

The door jingles in the distance. Hendle looks at Sophia  
intensely.

FLUFF (O.S.)

Hey Buddy-boy. Here to make the  
big pick up.

Sophia creeps back towards the stairs. She steps into the staircase and shuts the door but a sliver.

INT. FRONT STORE

Hendle walks out. Fluff anxiously taps on the counter.

HENDLE  
The doll is finished.

FLUFF  
I tell ya. My little girl's really  
getting impatient about her  
present.

HENDLE  
It's not for sale.

FLUFF  
What the hell do you mean not for  
sale? We had a deal!

Fluff rounds the counter. Hendle blocks his way into the workshop.

HENDLE  
There's a new deal.

Fluff slowly moves forward as Hendle retreats.

HENDLE  
We're going to trade. You agree to  
let your daughter alone and the  
doll is yours, free and clear.

Fluff's face turns beet red. He bursts through to the workshop.

INT. WORKSHOP

The Doll sits regally across from Fluff.

FLUFF  
(taken)  
Oh my.

INT. STAIRCASE

Through the sliver in the door, Sophia watches Fluff's reaction.

INT. WORKSHOP

The Doll stands and walks to Fluff, wrapping her arm around his elbow.

HENDLE

Sir. I demand an answer.

FLUFF

(snaps out of his daze)

What is it? You sweet on her? She agree to do it for free if you got her away from her tyrannical step-father?

HENDLE

I won't have to talking about her that way. You're a monster.

FLUFF

So what are you then?

(beat)

What, do you have her stashed around here somewhere?

Fluff arcs his neck around.

INT. STAIRCASE

Sophia becomes frightened. She inches her way up the stairs. A stair creaks. She freezes.

INT. WORKSHOP

Fluff releases The Doll and moves towards the staircase door.

Footsteps running.

Hendle runs to stop him.

Fluff knocks Hendle to the ground tipping a work table. Hendle's half-finished creations smash apart and spill everywhere.

Fluff disappears up the staircase.

The Doll looks around, smiling politely.

FLUFF (O.S.)

Ah-Ha!

Sophia screams.

Fluff pulls her back down the stairs.

FLUFF  
(to Hendle)  
Here. You want a filthy little  
cooze? You can have one!

Fluff throws her on top of Hendle.

Fluff kicks Hendle hard. Sophia tries to block the kicks.

SOPHIA  
Stop it! Stop it!

FLUFF  
And you!

Grabs her face. Squeezing hard. Pulls her by her face.

FLUFF  
You cannot hide from me.

Fluff throws her against the wall.

He straightens himself, grabs The Doll by the arm and walks quickly out of the store.

The shop bell rings off-screen.

Sophia crawls over to Hendle crying. Hendle does not wake up. She leans over him and holds his head in her arms, crying.

CUE: The Slow Waltz.

INT. FLUFF'S FLAT, LIVING ROOM - DAY

Fluff bursts into the front door, carrying The Doll in his arms. He makes a big show of stepping over the threshold.

FLUFF  
Welcome to your new home. It's not  
much, but I do alright.

He brings her into the living room and dumps her on the couch.

She positions herself sitting straight again.

He removes his jacket and tie.

He grabs her legs and pulls them apart.

She loses her balance and sits back.

He wildly pulls her shoes and stockings off.

He lifts virtually endless fabric under her dress until he reaches his goal.

His face drops in astonishment. Sonovabich!

The Doll has no genitals at all. The skin where they would be is smooth and without gender.

He drops her legs with a heavy clomp. He stands up, furious.

Thinks...

FLUFF  
Open your mouth.

She sits up without intent and opens her mouth wide.

Fluff undoes his belt, cursing under his breath.

The Doll watches his movements with her big blue eyes.

A little smile peeks around her open mouth.

Closer on her face. Closer.

Her pupils glow RED.

FADE TO BLACK.