

A STORY WHERE YOU CHOOSE YOUR PATH

SELECT YOUR DESTINY!  
CHOOSE FROM MANY POSSIBLE ENDINGS.

# WELCOME TO VANGUARD ESTATES

BY ROSE EVELETH



# Welcome to Vanguard Estates

*A story in which you choose  
your own path*

by Rose Eveleth

All over the world, the population is getting older. The phenomenon has been called the Global Aging Crisis, the Aging Tsunami, and the Gray Dawn.

Here, in the United States, there are six million people over the age of 85. Experts estimate that, by 2050, that number will jump to 19 million. And a question looms over those numbers: who's going to take care of all those seniors? And who is going to pay for their care? The average cost of a year in a nursing home in the United States is over \$80,000. In home services? \$48,000. At the same time, care facilities are already reporting a shortage of qualified nurses.

Of course, as with any contemporary conundrum, technology is presumed to be the answer. There are already apps to monitor and assist seniors, robots to remind them to take their meds, and sensors to predict when they might fall. There are even little robot animals that can provide them with affection and comfort.

The following story is speculative fiction, based on technologies that either already exist, or have already been proposed. The future might not look exactly this way, but it's possible, or even probable, that it could.

And you have to decide what happens.

It's finally the day. You knew it was coming, of course, but it still feels weird. Today, you're taking your father to his new home, an assisted living facility.

It's cool outside, and the sky is a flat blue. You get into your car, and pull up directions to Vanguard Estates. You don't really know where the place is. Your sister Imani did all the research and reported back to you. State of the art. Not that far away. Expensive, but not as expensive as most options. A steal really. Clean, safe. All the words you wanted to hear.

So you get in your car and drive.

As promised, Vanguard Estates is only forty five minutes away. It's styled like an old East Coast country club, with white wood shingles and a big welcoming French door.

In the lobby, you meet your dad:

"Hello, how was the drive?"

And your sister:

"You're late, as usual."

She leads the way down a long hall toward your dad's unit. Every few steps you pass another resident's door. You can't help but look in. The units are spacious, with big windows. Inside, you see a variety of older people going about their days: reading, cooking, watching TV.

And yet.

You feel like something is...weird.

Near the end of the hall you come to your dad's apartment. There's a sign on the door that says "WELCOME MARCUS!" Inside, there's a small living room filled with a mixture of his furniture and some that must come from the facility. Yet it all seems to match perfectly – kind of a retired art professor vibe.

To the left there's a kitchen outfitted with a small stove, a dishwasher, a big fridge. The fridge is also a giant touch screen. Your sister is showing your dad how it works.

"Here's a calendar for your day, here's how you keep track of your medicine, here's a button you can press if you need someone to help you..."

That's when it hits you. The thing that's weird. You haven't seen anybody actually working here. Nobody in polo shirts or with a name tag. No security, no nurses.

Then there's a chime at the door.

"Hello Mr. Jones. How can I be of service?"

You turn and come face to face with a screen. A screen on a tall stick. On wheels.

A robot.

Through the open door, you see another screen on a stick roll down the hall.

You turn to your sister. "You did not tell me there would be robots."

Your sister sighs.

"Did you read the information I sent you about this place?"

"Of course I did!" you shoot back. You're lying. You absolutely did not. But surely it can't all be robots. "Are there humans in this place at all?" you ask.

"There's one human on call 24/7, but they live and work in a house down the road. Everything else is left to the bots."

You turn to your dad, surely he didn't know either, right? He just shrugs.

"You two sort this out, I don't want to be involved."

Now that you think about it, you do remember some weird language in the stuff you skimmed: big data, algorithmic care. But it was all kind of meaningless to you. You didn't realize it meant ROBOTS. Is this a good idea? Will your dad be left to be manipulated by crazed machines?

You're the older sibling, you know you can throw a fit and pull the plug on this whole thing right now. The robot and your sister are standing there, waiting.

*Do you decide to leave him there? Your sister arranged this whole thing, you've already put down a deposit, maybe it will be okay – go to page 8*

*Or do you put your foot down and say absolutely not, you are not handing over your father's entire life to robots? – go to page 10*

You realize that you have no backup plan. All your dad's stuff is here, and the last time he lived with you ... it did not go well for either of you.

You sigh in defeat. Your sister smirks, and turns to the robot.

"We're all set, thank you!"

"My pleasure, Imani. Ring any time you need anything."

Great, it knows her name. It probably knows your name too, but you don't want to test it to find out.

You leave your dad on the couch, where he's reading a book about the latest JFK assassination conspiracy theories.

When you get home, you fish the flyers you grabbed from the facility out of your bag and sit down in front of the computer. You should probably figure out exactly what you just agreed to.

On the homepage for Vanguard Estates there are two big buttons – FAMILY, RESIDENTS. You click FAMILY, and a screen pops up asking you to put in some information about yourself. Your name, your father's name, his room number, a family passcode.

Once you're logged in you can see a big, smiling photo of your dad and some basic profile information. On the right side, a button catches your eye. It says "Drop In."

You click and up pops an image of your dad's apartment. He's on the couch, asleep with his stupid JFK book resting open on his chest. It takes you a second to realize you're watching a live feed,

from a camera somewhere in the ceiling.

You quickly close out of the window. That's spying! Isn't it?

You read the fine print below the button.

*Drop In is automatically enabled on all rooms. To disable Drop In mode, click here.*

It seems ... creepy to be able to spy on your dad at any time, without him knowing. Then again, you did just leave him in the care of robots, so maybe it'd be good to keep an eye on things.

*Do you decide that a little bit of checking in is fine? You're not spying on HIM, you're spying on the robots, to make sure everything is okay! – go to page 12*

*Or do you decide to disable the Drop In feature? Your dad would hate to know that you were monitoring him like that! – go to page 15*

You can't abide by robots taking care of him, so you take him back to his house, a little ranch on a hill.

Inside, the three of you stand awkwardly in the kitchen. Half of your dad's stuff is gone, already moved over to Vanguard Estates. Your sister is furious.

"Okay, now what? What's your backup plan?"

You don't have one.

Your sister had found a place for your dad for a reason. He sometimes mixed the two of you up and had started getting the microwave and the toaster confused. Physically he was pretty healthy though, going for regular walks around town to visit his friends. You thought the move to the facility was too soon, your sister thought it was silly to wait until things got really bad.

And here you were again at that impasse.

"We could just both visit and call more," you suggest.

"Oh you'll do that? You couldn't even find time to read a pamphlet I sent you."

She has a point. You fight about it for an hour. Dad goes for a walk.

Eventually your sister pulls up a whole list of technology she had researched for your dad. God, you think, she is the better child. She goes through the options: you could install secret cameras to watch him yourselves. You could get one of those stick wheelie robots you saw at Vanguard Estates for him to have here, at home. You could get him

an app that looks like a little cat avatar, but behind the camera is a real human, watching and talking to your dad. The last one interests you, it's not purely a robot. There is still a human on the other side.

Your dad returns home from his walk. The sun is setting, and you have to make a choice before you and your sister go home.

*Do you compromise with your sister and agree to get him an app that can watch him while you're gone? — go to page 18*

*Or do you stick to your guns, and promise to call and visit more? — go to page 20*

You have a new routine now. Every morning you log in to the Vanguard Estates app on your phone and you drop in. Just to see what the robots are doing, obviously.

So far, it's honestly been pretty boring. The robots check in every day around 10am. You can't really tell if it's the same robot every time, or if it's different ones because they all look the same to you. Some of them do have different voices, but you don't always hear them talking.

Your dad eats the same breakfast every day. He reads his books about conspiracy theories. You can see his calendar on the app, he's got lunch plans and movie nights and he seems happy enough.

A few months in, you forget to log on in the morning. You decide to drop in on dad that evening instead.

He's getting ready for bed, shuffling around the apartment in his ratty blue bathrobe and turning off the lights. As he heads to his room, you notice a small blue flame in the kitchen. He's left a burner on. You almost laugh, you'd think such a high tech place would have safeguards in place for this sort of thing.

Your dad gets into bed, and the blue flame flickers. You can activate your mic and talk to him, but up until now you've been silent. He doesn't know you're watching.

*Do you activate your mic to let him know the stove is on? — go to page 23*

*Or do you keep your little secret, stay quiet, and assume that someone will come by and turn the stove off eventually? — go to page 26*



You click “disable.” You can only imagine what your dad would think if he found out that his kids were spying on him.

You go back to the main page, where you can toggle through a growing list of information. Some of it is basic medical stuff: height, weight, medications. Other stuff is more detailed – there’s a running heart rate and blood pressure meter, which means they’ve outfitted him with some kind of wearable device. You can see steps ticking up – he must be walking around right now. There’s a tab for nutrition – calories consumed, time of day, type of food.

There’s also a tab called “Social” where over the next few weeks you watch your dad’s calendar slowly fill up. Book clubs, movie nights, lunches with new friends. You can even read a transcript of each conversation and a detailed breakdown of how many words he said, the complexity of those words, and how balanced the conversation was.

One afternoon, he got into an argument with a robot about whether it was playing the version of the Nirvana song he asked for. Then there was the time he tried to flirt with another resident. It did not go well.

You try not to read these transcripts too often, but it’s hard to resist. They give a picture of your dad that you’ve never seen before – the way he talks to people when you’re not around.

Then, one morning, after nine months at Vanguard Estates, your phone starts to buzz in a way you’ve never felt before. Three long buzzes and one short one. The home screen is filled with a big red box.

*HEALTH ALERT.*

He fell.

You quickly call Vanguard and get the details. He slipped while getting out of the shower. Robotechs were on the scene immediately and got him to the hospital in under twenty minutes. You call your sister, and you both head over.

When you get to the hospital, your dad is confused. He's not quite sure where he is, or why.

In the hallway, you're met by a tall woman in a polo shirt with the Vanguard Estates logo on it. This is the first human you've met who works for them. You make a joke about how perhaps she's secretly just a really fancy robot. She doesn't laugh.

"The hospital does not allow our bots inside, so it is my job to liaison between residents and the facility."

Then she explains why she's really there.

"Once a resident has a fall, the services in their portfolio change. The checkin bots that you've met will come by more frequently. Residents who've entered into the high risk category for falling also can't bathe alone. They can be assisted by a robot, or by a human aid. The robot assistant is included in your package, the human would be an additional monthly fee of \$1,200."

You want to ask your dad what he wants, but he's not exactly lucid and you have to decide now. So, you have to choose: opt for robotic baths, or shell out extra money for human ones?

*Go for the robotic baths – go to page 28*

*Or decide it's worth it to pay for the human baths? – go to page 30*

The next week you and your sister come back to your dad's house with an iPad. You set it up on the counter, and a little tabby cat cartoon twitches its tail on the screen: your dad's new pet. He had always loved cats.

Your sister calls him over to look at the screen. He leans in to inspect it.

"You can pet it," she says.

"Is this like one of those Pokémon you two used to have?"

"Sort of, yeah."

He names the cat Missy. Missy already has a whole database of information about him. Photos of you and your sister, photos of his old house, his old friends, his favorite football players, his favorite movie stars, his old cats.

He touches the screen with his finger and the animated cat nuzzles it.

"Hello Marcus! Nice to meet you!"

On the other end, there's a human being watching, and typing responses. Missy's job is to keep an eye on him, make sure he takes his medicine, keep him company, and keep you and your sister up to date on how he's doing. Then, your dad turns to you and asks:

"So how does this work?"

You can give him a generic answer – oh, it's high-tech. It's an algorithm. Those aren't lies. But they aren't the whole truth either. You're not sure how he would feel if he knew there was a person

watching him. But without this thing, you're back at square one.

*Do you come clean and tell him that on the other side of Missy is a person who's watching him? — go to page 32*

*Or do you decide to be vague and keep the illusion of Missy going for a little bit longer? — go to page 34*

You and your sister alternate calling every other day, and visiting every other weekend. Your dad tells you often how happy he is to be in his own house, which makes you feel better about your choice to take him home.

But now that you're talking to him more, your dad's dementia has also become far more noticeable to you. He tells you stories about seeing boats drive by his house when there's no river nearby. He's convinced his old cat is still around, even though it died a year ago. He's started to vacuum the house more, to make sure he picks up her non-existent hair.

As the months wear on, you and your sister start to suspect that your dad isn't being totally honest about his days. He says he's not driving, he says he's taking his medicine, but some of his stories don't add up. How did he get lunch with Carl the other day? You didn't schedule anybody to come pick him up. You can't tell if he never got lunch with Carl at all, or if he drove to Carl's house. Both would be bad.

Your sister finally confronts you:

"I don't think this is enough."

She's right, and it's time for you to admit it. Just calling every day and visiting every weekend isn't going to work.

She pulls up her list of techno fixes, the same ones she showed you before. A surveillance camera, an app, an in home robot. A whole spectrum. You discuss the pros and cons. At the end, she adds one last option.

"He could live at Vanguard Estates. I can reapply.

He's already approved, they'd just need to find an open unit for him."

You hate to admit that she might be right. But your dad loves his house. Can you tear him away from it again?

*Do you decide to opt for in-home technology, something to watch him while he's in his own house? — go to page 36*

*Do you decide it's finally time to give in, and take him to Vanguard Estates? — go to page 38*

You click the mic button.

"Hey, Dad, it's me. I'm using this weird app they apparently have for you, where I can kind of check in?"

He freezes, and looks around. Eventually, his eyes settle on the ceiling, but at the wrong spot. You're talking to the back of his head now.

"You're spying on me?"

"No no, I mean, I just checked in to see how it was going. The stove is on, so I just wanted to, let you know. Goodnight!"

You close out of the window before you can hear his response.

The next morning you decide to drop in again to apologize, and to tell him you won't do it again.

It's the usual time, and the usual robot wheels in to say hello. Or maybe it's a different robot. You still can't tell.

You listen as the bot asks its regular set of questions.

"How are you feeling today Mr. Jones? How did you sleep?"

"Well enough."

"Have you felt confused at all recently?"

"Only about just how many clones of Beyoncé there really were."

The robot doesn't get the joke. Or at least, you're

pretty sure it was a joke. Then again, your dad did recently tell you that he had a conversation with a TV host and that someone on the radio was trying to sell his couch without his permission.

“Does this confusion distress you?”

Your dad just shrugs.

“Thank you for your answers, Mr. Jones. I am going to add Donepezil to your daily prescription regimen. Please inform me if you feel any adverse effects.”

You feel a flash of anger. Your dad’s already taking two different prescriptions, and the combination has made him noticeably sluggish. Should they really be adding another?

You want to step in and stop the robot from adding another medication. But this is what you’re paying the big bucks for, isn’t it? Predictive care, quantified and calculated by robots who are always watching.

*Do you decide to speak up and stop the robot from adding another medicine? — go to page 40*

*Or do you stay quiet, and trust the robots to manage his medication properly? — go to page 42*

You watch as he shuffles into the bedroom and closes the door. After a few seconds, the stove turns off. This place is smart after all.

The next morning you drop in at your regular time. The usual robot wheels in to say hello. Or maybe it's a different robot. You really can't tell.

The bot runs through its series of questions.

"How are you feeling today Mr. Jones? How did you sleep?"

"Well enough."

"Have you felt confused at all recently?"

"Only about just how many clones of Beyoncé there really were."

The robot doesn't get the joke. Or at least, you're pretty sure it was a joke. Then again, your dad did recently tell you that he had a conversation with a TV host and that someone on the radio was trying to sell his couch without his permission ...

"Does this confusion distress you?"

Your dad just shrugs.

"Thank you for your answers, Mr. Jones. I am going to add Donepezil to your daily prescription regimen. Please inform me if you feel any adverse effects."

You feel anger flash up into your neck and ears. He's already taking two different medications, and the combination has made him noticeably sluggish. Should they really be adding another?

You want to step in and stop the robot from adding another medication. But your dad doesn't know you're there, and this is what you're paying the big bucks for, isn't it? Predictive care, quantified and calculated by robots who are always watching.

*Do you decide to speak up and stop the robot from adding another medicine? — go to page 40*

*Or do you stay quiet, and trust the robots to manage his medication properly? — go to page 42*

The bathbots don't even really look like robots to you. They're more like turning your bathroom into a carwash for people. Two giant arms installed into the walls equipped with cameras and sensors. You and your sister both sign the various privacy waivers involved. Your eyes glaze over reading the Terms and Conditions. Data collected and stored in a profile and something something something anonymized something. You accept.

You explain the bots to your dad over the phone. He shouldn't be alarmed, they're very safe. Plus, wouldn't it be weird to have a stranger giving you a bath? Robots are less awkward.

He's skeptical at first, but eventually he comes around. Apparently the bot has learned the exact order in which he likes to wash, which delights him.

Nearly a year later, you're lying in bed, squinting at your phone, half awake. The news feed is both dire and dull, everything feels awful but also, the same. Then a headline catches your eye.

*"Senior Care Bath Robots Hacked, Millions of Hours of Video Posted Online"*

You sit up in bed. The company that manufactures bath bots for seniors care facilities all over the country was targeted by hackers, who downloaded patient footage and posted it online. Vanguard Estates is on the list of compromised facilities.

You find the link to the page where the footage is posted. There's a pit deep in your stomach as you click. It's a wall of wrinkly, naked screenshots. You're relieved to see that no names or patient numbers are attached – nobody would recognize these people unless they really knew them. You

also realize that the only way to find out if your dad is on here, is to scrutinize every one of the thousands and thousands of videos.

You dad will probably never see this page. In fact, he'll probably never even see this news. The facility has tight filters on the news that residents get, and they certainly will remove this from the feeds. There's no way he would know if you didn't say something.

When you video chat later that day, he can tell you're being weird.

"What's wrong?"

Should you tell him? You don't even know if he's on here or not, and you're not sure how he'll take it. You consider whether you would want to know, if it was you.

*Do you decide to tell him about the hack? – go to page 54*

*Or do you keep it to yourself? There's no point stressing him out about something he can't do anything about – go to page 56*



Your dad doesn't like the first few people you hire, and when you do eventually find someone he does like, they quit six months later. Senior care pays so poorly these days, and is such a demanding job, that most people don't last more than a few years.

He goes through three more people until finally, you find a good match. A big guy named Sven. Your dad likes Sven. He talks just enough, and about the right things: football and world war two history.

The quest is over. Until, a few months later, you get a call.

"Hi dad."

"Hey kiddo."

"How's it going?"

"Today was Sven's last day,"

"Why? What happened?"

"He got hired in California at one of those big fancy retirement homes."

"I'm sorry. I'm sure we can find another good one."

He pauses. "You know, I married your mother 40 years ago. Before that, I was in love only once. A girl named Mary. She was Italian. It was never going to work out. But when you're young, and in love, you know, you're foolish. Anyway, we went on two dates. Then I met your mother. I asked her to marry me after five dates."

You're not really sure where he's going here, but

you've gotten used to him rambling on the phone.

"The point I'm trying to make is that I'm not good at dating and I don't want any more strangers in my house, looking at me naked."

You take a deep breath, and get ready to explain to him again that he isn't allowed to bathe himself at Vanguard. The protocol once a resident falls is really strict. He keeps talking.

"I've been talking to some of the other residents here, and some of them have this thing ... A bath bot? Do you think ... I think ... I think I'd like one of those instead. I mean I don't know how much they are but ... do you think we could do that?"

You have to laugh, after all your stress about making sure he gets human care!

"Dad we can DEFINITELY do that. They're cheaper than the humans you've been using!"

"I've been using! You're the one who's set me on a series of naked blind dates!"

You're already pulling up the Vanguard portal on your computer to change his settings and request a bath bot installation.

"I'll order you one right now."

"Great, thanks kiddo. Love you."

"Love you too, Dad."

END

You tell your dad the truth.

"Well, the iPad has a camera, and sometimes that camera connects to someone who can check in on you."

Your whole body is tense, waiting for him to blow up.

"Okay, so Missy is watching me?"

"Yeah, she's checking in to make sure you're okay."

"Okay... that's good."

And that's it. You're not sure if he totally gets it. That there's a camera watching him, that someone can access at any time. But he's okay with the general concept, and that's enough for you.

A few months later, as you're getting in your car to go to work, your phone starts to buzz in a way you've never felt before. Three long buzzes and one short one. The home screen is filled with a big red box.

*HEALTH ALERT.*

He fell.

Getting out of the shower, he slipped and landed on his side. Thankfully, he had taken Missy into the bathroom with him, and she had called an ambulance in seconds. You call your sister, and you both head to the hospital.

When you get there, your dad is confused. He's not quite sure where he is, or why.

Your sister hands you a pamphlet. It shows giant

arms coming out of the walls of a bathroom, like some kind of human car wash machine installed in your home. A bath bot, one that can help your dad get in and out of the shower.

Your sister can tell you're hesitant.

"My friend's aunt uses this one and says it's amazing."

It's expensive, but not as expensive as that facility you bailed on. And much cheaper than hiring a human aid for the same task. But you've been so adamant against the robots thus far, do you really want to give in now? How can you be sure that these giant arms won't crush him?

"Shouldn't we just ask dad what he wants?" you ask.

"He's fallen once, who knows when he's going to fall again. He needs help, whether it's from a human or a robot, and you know he's not lucid enough to decide for himself."

You sigh. "That's true," you say. So what do you do?

*Do you decide to buy the robotic bath machine? — go to page 46*

*Or do you decide to pay more for a human to help him out? — go to page 52*

You decide not to worry your dad. You're not sure he could fully grasp the technology anyway.

Over the next few months, he becomes best friends with Missy. He brings her everywhere, on his iPad. He talks to her, tells her jokes, tells you stories about all the funny things she said.

It's kind of sweet. But also kind of creepy. He doesn't know that there's a person on the other end. He also doesn't know that you can login remotely and watch him through the same camera on the iPad.

Every so often, you check in. And sometimes, you hear him tell Missy things you've never heard before. One day, he leans up close to the iPad.

"Missy, I need to tell you something very important."

"What's that, Marcus?"

"My wife..."

He pauses, and as he does, Missy holds up a photo of your mom that you've loaded into the app. She does this regularly to provide your dad with reminders of his life, to help battle the dementia. He looks at the photo.

"Yes, Sasha, she was so beautiful. But... there was another woman. Just a few times. Mary, her name was Mary, I think. I visited her a few times. Sasha never knew. I wish I had told her, before ... but now it's too late."

"You are a good person Marcus. I love you."

This is what Missy is programmed to say when she senses that a client is getting sad.

You're stunned. An affair! A woman named Mary! You immediately want to turn your microphone on to ask him questions but, of course, you don't.

Over the next few weeks, your dad confesses other new things to Missy. How he once wanted to be an astronaut. How his first kiss was at a Nirvana concert. How just a few years ago, he would occasionally get gas from the local gas station without paying because he'd forget his wallet and didn't want to admit he was starting to forget things.

A few days later you get a call from a police officer. Your dad is in jail. The charge: petty theft.

Over the phone with the precinct, you learn that the app behind Missy is required by law to report crimes it hears about. Your dad's story about stealing gas a few years back triggered the system, which transcribed the conversation and sent it over to the police, who showed up the next day to arrest him. Missy was a rat! A 92 year old man, in jail for a stealing a few gallons of gas to save his pride.

You get in the car to go bail him out. On the way you practice your speech – dad, you're going to say, remember: you can't trust robots.

END

You and your sister install a few hidden cameras in the house, just to keep an eye on him. They watch the front and back door, and the kitchen, and they're designed specifically for seniors. According to the pamphlets, they can sense a fall coming and keep track of whether your dad is taking his medication. The cameras can't actually do anything about those things, of course, but they can alert you and emergency services if something really bad happens.

You feel bad intruding on your father's privacy, but you remind yourself that at least this way he gets to stay in his own house, and avoid robots.

Soon enough, the cameras confirm your worst fear: he's still driving. One day, you watch, horrified, as his car backs out of the driveway. You try to talk to him about it on the phone, tell him if he needs a ride he can just call. But he claims he's not driving. You can't tell if he's lying, or if he just doesn't remember.

Then one day he calls you, frantic.

"I NEED YOUR HELP. I'm stuck in the car."

Oh god. "Where are you?" you ask.

"I'm at home but I'm stuck in the car. I can't get out. I need you to come here and let me out."

"Are you hurt?"

"No, I'm not hurt. I'm stuck! I'm stuck! I can't get out!"

"Okay, okay," you say. "I'm on my way I'll meet you there don't panic."

When you pull into the driveway, he is asleep behind the wheel, his head tilted back, mouth open. You gently wake him.

"Hey dad, so, what's the problem?"

"Uh uh, what? Oh! I'm stuck! A strap has trapped me! See?! This strap is trapping me! I can't get out!"

The door is unlocked, everything is fine. You realize he's forgotten what a seatbelt is. You reach over to unbuckle him, and bring him inside.

"Dad, remember how you're not supposed to drive?" you remind him.

"I have places to be!"

You eye his keys on the table, but he catches you and snatches them away, glaring, as he walks into the other room.

You rub your temples. You can't have him driving—he's only going to hurt himself, or someone else. Maybe if you took on some additional work you could afford an aid for him around the house, to help him out. It would cost about \$3500 a month. Then again, you're stretched thin enough as it is — surely you could find a way to stop him from driving yourself?

*Do you decide to deal with the car problem yourself? — go to page 48*

*Or do you decide it's time to hire someone, or something, to help him at home? — go to page 50*

The drive back to Vanguard Estates is long and quiet. Your dad is pissed. Your sister is pleased. This time, you're not shocked when you walk in and see all the robots. But you still don't like it.

You walk him to his new unit. The robot comes by to say hello. It all feels like *dejavu*. When you say goodbye, your dad just shrugs and sits down on his recliner.

A few months later, you login to the Vanguard Estates app on your phone. The facility feeds you a constant stream of information, updates on his social life, his medications, his moods. There's even a function where you can activate a camera in the ceiling, and check in on him.

You haven't told him that you do this. He'd probably be weirded out, or at this point, just confused. So you log in every so often, and don't say a word. He's almost always sitting in his recliner reading. Sometimes, you catch him talking to a robot. He seems to treat them like they're people, and you can't tell if that's a sign of dementia, or just how you're supposed to talk to robots.

One day, you login and see that the bot is in the room, asking him questions.

"How are you feeling today Mr. Jones? How did you sleep?"

"Well enough ..."

"Have you felt confused at all recently?"

"Only about just how many clones of Beyoncé there really were."

The robot doesn't get the joke. Or at least, you're pretty sure it was a joke. Or maybe your dad really does think there are clones. He recently told you that he had a conversation with a TV host and that someone on the radio was trying to sell his couch without his permission.

"Does this confusion distress you?"

Your dad just shrugs.

"Thank you for your answers, Mr. Jones. I am going to add Donepezil to your daily prescription regimen. Please inform me if you feel any adverse effects."

You feel anger flash up into your neck and ears. He's already taking two different medications and the combination has made him noticeably sluggish. Should they really be adding another?

You want to step in and stop the robot from adding another medication. But your dad doesn't know you're there, and this is what signed up for, isn't it? Predictive care, quantified and calculated by robots who are always watching.

*Do you turn your mic on and intervene? — go to page 40*

*Or do you stay quiet. This is what you're paying the big bucks for isn't it? — go to page 42*

You click the mic button and clear your throat.

"Excuse me, do you really think he needs another medication?"

Your dad turns and stares at the ceiling, incredulously. You can explain yourself later. The robot turns to face you.

"I am fully licensed to evaluate residents and administer medication. Please see the terms and conditions of Vanguard Estates to learn more."

Of course you didn't read the terms and conditions. You lean into the computer's microphone.

"I don't care what you're licensed for. My father doesn't need another medication."

"Your vocal signature clearly indicates that you are distraught. High stress experiences can trigger our residents with dementia."

The robot moves towards you. It's a smooth but startling movement. The robot's screen, which usually just shows blue clouds or another soothing image, is now pulsing red. A warning.

"If you cannot calm down I am going to have to end this session."

"CALM DOWN?" you say. "Do not tell me to calm down."

Suddenly your screen goes black.

"Our system has detected a dangerous situation for one of our residents. Your session has been terminated, and the Drop In function has been

locked. For more information, or to apply for re-entry call 1-800-DROP-INS."

For a moment, you're stunned. Then, you're enraged. You grab your phone and dial the number. You don't envy whatever robot or human winds up picking up the line.

"Welcome to Drop In, a service of the Vanguard Estates. If you are calling to activate Drop In service, press one. If you are calling about technical difficulties with Drop In, press two. If you are calling to apply for reentry to Drop In, press three."

You press three.

"Please hold for the next available representative." Then, after a few seconds of hold music: "Welcome to Drop In, a service of the Vanguard Estates. If you are calling to activate Drop In service, press one. If you are calling about technical difficulties with Drop In, press two. If you are calling to apply for reentry to Drop In, press three."

Then after a few seconds of hold music, you're dropped back at the beginning: "Welcome to Drop in... " You press three again. The hold music starts again. And again you're popped back at the beginning. You try your father's cell phone, no answer. You try his land line in the facility, no answer. In a panic, you call 911.

END

You decide to trust the bots. Isn't this the point of all this technology and data and monitoring? Better care? Maybe they've caught something you missed.

But a few months later you visit, and your dad is totally different. He's tired, removed, suddenly uninterested in talking about things he once loved to lecture you about. You try to poke him by making a joke about the moon landing being fake. Nothing.

After the visit you call your sister. She's noticed too. Maybe it's the new drugs? He's on so many of them now, you're not even sure what each of them does. In the app it lists what he's taking, when, how much, and all the ways they've improved his health. But the data doesn't line up with what you saw.

Eventually, you decide to object. There's got to be a less drug intensive way to take care of him.

You call Vanguard's medical help line.

"Welcome to the Vanguard Estates medical information portal. Please enter your resident's eight digit identification number."

You enter the number.

"Thank you. Marcus Jones is currently taking:

Memantine, 15mg daily  
Donepezil, 10mg daily  
Galantamine, 24mg daily  
Metoprolol, 50mg daily

"For more information about this prescription plan, press one. To speak with a healthcare advocate

about this prescription plan, press two."

You press two and are reminded that "This call may be monitored for quality assurance."

"Hello, Vanguard Estates medical, this is Amy speaking how may I help you?"

Finally, an actual person.

"Hi, yeah I'm wondering if I can get my dad off some of these medications. I don't think they're helping."

"I'm sorry, family members can't make changes to the medical plan for any resident."

"But, I'm his daughter!"

"Sorry, Vanguard Estates policy states that family members can't make changes to medical plans. I can direct you to the medical release forms you signed that explain the policy in more detail if you like?"

"I can't make any changes, ever, at all?"

"No ma'am. The release form clearly states that all medical decisions are made using state of the art medical technology and in consultation with the world's best doctors, and are final."

"So what you're telling me is that your facility's robots can give my father whatever medication they want and there is nothing he or I can do about it?"

"I wouldn't describe it that way but yes, that is essentially the policy."

You weigh your options here. You could argue with her, but you doubt Amy can do much for you. You wonder what would happen if you were transferred to her supervisor. Instead, you ask Amy a question.

"Would you let your parent live at Vanguard Estates, Amy?"

"I can't really answer that question, ma'am." A pause. "Is there anything else I can help you with today?"

"No, I guess there isn't."

"All right then, have a great day!"

**END**



When the bath bot arrives at the house, your dad rolls his eyes. But he doesn't protest. You tell him all the things you read online about how its safer and more efficient. Plus, wouldn't it be weird to have a stranger giving you a bath? Robots are less awkward.

You show him the terms and conditions, the privacy policy, the liability waiver. They're 50 pages each. He waves his hand at you.

"Where do I sign?"

The robot takes a whole day to install and test. The arms are bigger than you imagined. When not in use, they tuck themselves against the wall, as small as they can. But that makes them look like the arms of a giant, carbon fiber praying mantis, just waiting to strike.

But your dad gets used to it, and eventually he comes to like the soothing sound of the motors. Apparently it has learned the exact order in which he likes to wash, which delights him.

Nearly a year later, you're laying in bed, squinting at your phone, half awake. The news feed is both dire and dull, everything feels awful but also, the same. Then a headline catches your eye.

*Senior Care Bath Robots Hacked, Millions of Hours of Video Posted Online*

You sit up in bed. The company that manufactures bath bots was targeted by hackers, who downloaded patient footage and posted it online.

You find a link to the page where the hackers posted all the footage. There's a pit deep in your stomach as you click. It's a wall of wrinkly, naked

screenshots. You're relieved to see that no names or patient numbers are attached – nobody would recognize these people unless they really knew them. You also realize that the only way to find out if your dad is on here, is to scrutinize every one of the thousands and thousands of videos.

You dad will probably never see this page. In fact, he'll probably never even see this news. His media habits are mostly confined to History Channel documentaries. There's no way he would know if you didn't say something. When you video chat later that day, he can tell you're being weird.

"What's wrong?"

Should you tell him? You don't even know if he's on here or not, and you're not sure how he'll take it. You consider whether you would want to know, if it was you.

*Do you tell him about the hack? – go to page 54*

*Or do you keep it to yourself? – go to page 58*

If you can just fix this car thing, he'll be much safer. Then you can deal with the rest of it. You decide to stay and make your dad dinner. Inside the fridge, you find weeks worth of vegetables that you were having delivered.

While you slice the ones that were salvageable, you think about what to do about the car. You can't steal the keys. And you can't take the car away, either. He'd be furious, and it would only make thing worse. Then, you have an idea.

By the time you've put the lasagna you've made in the oven, your dad has fallen asleep on the couch. You creep by and take his keys from him. Then you go out into the garage, and dig around until you find it. A small metal file. You spend the next half hour slowly shaving down the teeth on his keys, just enough so they won't work anymore.

You sneak the keys back next to him on the couch when you're done. You don't like tricking him like this, it feels mean and gross, but the alternative is worse.

At home, you call your sister to let her know what you did, in case he calls her to complain about how the car won't start.

"That's kind of genius...I bet a robot would never have come up with that."

You're quite proud of yourself, but it doesn't last long.

"You know what would be a better solution though?"

Of course she wants to show you up.

"Getting him a driverless car."

And here you are again, about to fight about whether to hand your dad's life over to technology. But this time, you're starting to think that your sister might be right.

END

You call your sister.

"This isn't working," you admit.

"It's not. He needs more and we can't pretend he doesn't."

"So what the hell are we supposed to do?"

"You're the one who doesn't like any of my solutions!"

She's right, you've nixed all her high tech helpers. You're the reason he's at home alone with no supervision. This is on you now.

So, over the next few days, you research. You feel weird searching for things like "senior care not robots" but that's what you want. There are dozens of websites with profiles of human home aids. Some of them even advertise that they offer "the human touch," something robots can't. By the end of your research binge, you have a whole list of options. All human.

The problem is, you can't afford any of them. The pool of qualified human caretakers has dwindled, and those who are left are expensive and in high demand. Vanguard Estates wasn't cheap, but it was cheaper than any robot-free solution.

There is a senior care facility nearby staffed entirely by humans that, at \$6,500 a month, you can just barely afford if you take on a second job and a second mortgage. But it has a wait list of two years.

But what else is there to do? You just can't leave him with robots, the thought alone makes your stomach drop. So, you add his name to the list.

And you wait, trying to push away morbid hopes that someone else's parent will die, so your dad gets a place to live.

END

Your dad doesn't like the first few people you hire, and when you do eventually find someone, they get hired by an all-human care facility six months later. Most senior aids these days work for huge conglomerates, and don't do individual home visits, so you're stuck trying to find freelance aids.

He goes through three more people until finally, you find a good match. A big guy name Sven. Your dad likes Sven. He talks just enough, and about the right things: football and world war two history.

A few weeks later, you get an alert from Missy. An "atypical conversation" the alert says. "Please review."

Your father and Sven had gotten into an argument. Missy had been in sleep mode in the other room, but she's programmed to wake at certain decibel levels to catch things like distress or falls. Your knuckles get white as you listen to the recording.

"You stupid man! Why are you always dropping everything? Breaking everything? What an idiot! I tell you every time! Don't put things there!"

At the bottom of the alert, the human behind Missy had written a note:

"I couldn't see what was going on but I thought you would want to know about this. I'll talk to Marcus about it too and report back what he says."

You take a few breaths to calm yourself down. Then you call your dad.

"Hey kiddo."

"Hi dad. How's it going?"

"Pretty good, just got out of the bath."

You wait for him to volunteer more, but he doesn't.

"Hey dad, Missy told me that Sven yelled at you today?"

There's a long pause.

"Oh well, you know, I'm clumsy."

"No, it's not okay for him to yell at you like that. Has that ever happened before?"

"No, no, just that one time."

"You sure?"

"Yes, everything's OK. Love you, kiddo."

"OK, love you too dad."

You're relieved. But you still know that you have no choice but to fire Sven. You can't trust him again after this. So now, you're back to square one. Who knows how long it'll take to find the next person.

You login to Missy's app and instruct the human behind it to keep an extra close eye on your dad, while you keep looking. It's strange to have a cat avatar working on your side as a spy, but for now, it's the best you've got.

END

You can't bring yourself to keep this from him, so you explain what happened. He listens, as you tell him you don't actually know if he's part of the hack or not. You'd have to look into it. His eyes narrow and he stops you.

"Don't look into it."

You're not sure what to say. Your dad shrugs.

"I'm glad you told me. But, that's all I need to know."

You end the call, relieved you aren't going to spend the next few days combing through those videos. As you go to bed, you think of your dad, shuffling in his ancient blue bathrobe to take his nightly bath. You can only hope that no one's watching.

END

You don't tell him. What good would it do? You don't even know if his footage is up there anyway.

After your call, the transcript is added to his file under the "Family Contact" tab. There's a green smiley face next to it, indicating that the algorithms have determined that the conversation was a positive one. "Resident happiness is directly correlated with positive family contact" the page cheerily reminds you. Apparently the bots haven't quite figured out how to tell when that family contact is lying.

**END**

You don't tell him. What good would it do? You don't even know if his footage is up there anyway.

After your call, you talk to your sister. The two of you decide not to try and figure out if your dad is on the site. It would take hours, and neither of you really want to know. But the next time you get a ping from the bath bot, alerting you that a successful bath was had, you can't shake a tiny bit of guilt. What if someone was watching?-

END





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