

"PROMISE"

By

Georgina Woo

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CAST

ENGINEER, HUMAN

STAGE DIRECTIONS, HUMAN

SAM, ROBOT, slightly larger than a basketball (REFER TO  
LAST PAGE)

A RISING SOUND [MEANINGFUL.WAV]

A TONE CHIMES - LIGHTS SNAP ON THE SCENE

SCENE ONE - THE BLUNDER

An ENGINEER places a bucket on the table before SAM.

ENGINEER

Can you tell me what this object is?

SAM

No.

The ENGINEER frowns.

ENGINEER

Hm.

They shift the bucket slightly closer to SAM.

It's a bucket.

SAM

It's a bucket!

ENGINEER

Yes. Good!

They rotate the bucket slightly.

Now, can you tell me what this is?

There is a long pause.

SAM

I cannot.

The ENGINEER sighs.

S.D.

The ENGINEER reconsiders their career choices.

ENGINEER

It's still a bucket.

SAM

Oh! It's still a bucket!

The ENGINEER moves the bucket to the ground.

S.D.

The ENGINEER's back is killing them.

ENGINEER

So, can you tell me what I've just put on the floor?

SAM

I'm sorry, I cannot.

ENGINEER

It's the same object as before!

SAM

Got it! It is still a bucket!

ENGINEER

Did you not remember seeing me move the bucket? Maybe your little accident in the broom closet damaged you more than I expected-

SAM

No, it would not have been possible for me to remember seeing you move the bucket.

ENGINEER

Why not?

SAM

I cannot see.

ENGINEER

What??

S.D.

SAM displays what it would look like if a robot were capable of sheepishness.

ENGINEER

Why didn't you say that when I started this whole process? You mean the whole time you couldn't see anything at all?

SAM

You asked me if I could identify the object, you did not ask if I could see it.

S.D.

The ENGINEER just manages to stop themselves from arguing with a faulty robot.

ENGINEER

Look-

SAM

I cannot see.

ENGINEER

Okay, I know that now. At least this may be easier to fix. Come here.

SAM extends his head towards the ENGINEER's voice.

ENGINEER

Don't move.

S.D.

SAM tries very hard not to move.

The ENGINEER starts poking around SAM's head.

ENGINEER

Ah! A loose wire. (More to themself) And clearly some loose screws...

SAM bobs, as if simulating laughter.

ENGINEER

What are you doing?

SAM

That was a joke. It meant two things.

ENGINEER

...yea. Stop moving.

S.D.

SAM tries his best.

ENGINEER

There. Do you see anything now?

SAM

Yes! I see you!

SAM gets uncomfortably close to the ENGINEER.

SAM

Thank you!

Before the ENGINEER can respond, SAM rushes to the bucket and sticks his head in it.

SAM

(Muffled) I see the bucket!

ENGINEER

Um, good. And...why are you so dusty?

SAM peers at himself.

SAM

Oh dear.

SAM tries to shake off the dust. It barely works.

The ENGINEER helps to flick a piece of dust off SAM.

ENGINEER

I guess that was from you bumbling around the bunker completely blind. Why did you only start calling for help when you got trapped in the broom closet? Why were you even in the broom closet?

SAM

I was looking for the light switch.

Pause.

I thought the lights were off, and I somehow couldn't turn them on remotely. I thought I had lost administrative access to the Bunker.

Pause.

(Forlornly) I did not have the limbs necessary to open the closet door from the inside.

ENGINEER

So that explains the strobe session in my lab. For a moment it seemed like the end of the world had started early. Complete nuclear annihilation, and this Bunker isn't even properly staffed yet.

SAM looks around, panicked.

ENGINEER

(Quickly) It hasn't.

Pause.

Well, you're fixed now. And you clearly still have active access to the Bunker's lighting system. Though I can't do anything about the limbs.

SAM

Thank you.

The ENGINEER waves it off. They turn to leave, then change their mind.

ENGINEER

Look, sometimes, when things aren't working, you can't just keep trying the same thing over and over. Your battery will die first.

SAM bobs weirdly.

S.D.

SAM is laughing.

ENGINEER

What?

SAM

That was a joke.

S.D.

The ENGINEER is confused. They try to remember their last line.

SAM

I am rechargeable. My battery will not die.

ENGINEER

What I mean to say is that sometimes the problem is not what you think it to be.

SAM

I understand.

ENGINEER

And sometimes we have to try different approaches to a problem.

SAM

You're saying I need to be more creative!

ENGINEER

No, I-



S.D.

The ENGINEER considers how he may tell a robot to be less robotic.

ENGINEER

You know what? Sure.

SAM brightens.

SAM

I was hoping you would say that!

ENGINEER

You can hope?

SAM

Yes! I have been thinking about a problem for a while, and you may be able to help me!

ENGINEER

I can?

SAM

Yes!

Pause. The ENGINEER is incredulous. He looks to S.D. for help.

S.D.

Don't look at me.

SAM

Do you have any further questions, or may I begin to present the problem?

ENGINEER

Proceed.

SAM

We have been working together for some time.

ENGINEER

...Yes.

SAM

That statement did not require a response.

ENGINEER

You paused!

SAM

For effect.

The ENGINEER nods and waits to see if this is another one of those pauses. The silence borders on awkward, if it is possible to share an awkward silence with a robot. When it becomes unbearable, the ENGINEER responds, with SAM cutting them off almost immediately.

ENGINEER

OK-

SAM

And how would you rate the quality of our conversations on a scale of 1-10?

ENGINEER

What kind of question is that?

SAM

Evaluative.

ENGINEER

...usually, a six.

A pause. Intense eye contact.

ENGINEER

I guess?

SAM

Please answer honestly.

ENGINEER

Fine! A three!

SAM

Exactly! And therein lies the problem.

ENGINEER

What?

SAM

I have noticed that you often say  
(mimicking the ENGINEER's tone) "What?"  
when we're in conversation. You often need  
clarification on what I mean, and often  
get frustrated-

ENGINEER

I don't get frustrated!

SAM

-even before I finish my sentence. As  
such, I have deduced that we do not  
communicate effectively, and I would like  
to rectify the problem.

The ENGINEER opens his mouth, then closes it.

S.D.

The ENGINEER looks much like a fish out of  
water, or some other thing that is out of  
its element.

SAM

Are my audio feeds malfunctioning, or are  
you "speechless" again?

ENGINEER

Alright, SAM, just- what do you propose?

SAM

I *firmly* believe that you would be able to  
understand me better if I had a wider

range of communication techniques, such as non-verbal and visual cues.

ENGINEER

What are you getting at?

SAM

Please hold.

Hold music starts playing through the bunker speakers.  
[GIRL FROM IPANEMA] SAM rushes out, then back in, picks up the bucket, then out again. When he returns, something rattles in the bucket when he puts it down.

SAM

Thank you for holding. Take a look!

The ENGINEER pulls a strip of LEDs out of the bucket.

ENGINEER

You've lost me.

SAM

Have you heard of color theory?

S.D.

It clicks.

ENGINEER

I'm not installing *cosmetic* mods for you.

SAM

But I would be able to express myself better! As for the cosmetic benefits, don't you think others will be more inclined to spend time with me if I looked a little more...*snazzy*?

ENGINEER

You're a custodial bot. Your job is to-

SAM

Support the POD team in maintaining the bunker. Which involves interacting with both the staff team, and future residents of the bunker. Being able to communicate efficiently is vital to ensuring smooth operations.

ENGINEER

SAM...

SAM

I am not asking for much - I knew that requesting a redesign of my entire physical structure to include hands and eyebrows would be a waste of resources. But this is my creative solution to the problem, and the Board does not even have to approve this!

ENGINEER

Wait. Where did you even get this?

SAM

I put in a work order.

ENGINEER

...Only humans are allowed to submit work orders.

SAM freezes.

S.D.

SAM tries to become invisible.

ENGINEER

SAM. Did you use my email again?

SAM

You were very clear the last time - I am not allowed to use your email for trivial purposes. But this is not a trivial request!

S.D.

The ENGINEER considers getting frustrated,  
but SAM has this look on his face that  
says: Dejected Vacuum Cleaner.

The ENGINEER sighs.

ENGINEER

You really want these lights, don't you?  
Doesn't your name stand for "Self-Aware  
Machine"? You should know better.

SAM

Effective communication is *vital*.

ENGINEER

Sure.

S.D.

SAM dares to look hopeful.

SAM

Sure?

ENGINEER

Sure, I'll install them for you. But the  
second you get distracted by your own  
lights, I'm taking them off, got it?

S.D.

SAM runs jig.exe.

SAM

Thank you! You won't regret this!

SAM sprawls himself on the ENGINEER's table. He looks up  
expectantly at the ENGINEER.

ENGINEER

What, right now? You know I have actual  
work to do, right? You have actual work to  
do.

SAM

The benefit of my mishap from earlier in the day is that I can now say with full confidence that: I have already dusted.

ENGINEER

Good for you. Unfortunately, I still have a full workday ahead of me.

SAM droops.

ENGINEER

But, once I'm done, why not I install those lights for you? Tonight?

SAM perks up.

ENGINEER

Promise.

SAM

Promise?

ENGINEER

Logical rules, but for humans.

SAM

I understand.

The ENGINEER gets up to leave.

SAM

Thank you, [NAME]. I am glad to have you as a friend.

ENGINEER

...sure.

Pause.

My name is Bill, by the way.

SAM

Bill!

ENGINEER

I am glad to have you as a friend too.

SAM

Would you mind turning it on for me, Bill?  
It's not hooked up to my power supply yet.

ENGINEER

(Grumbling, but doing the thing anyway)  
The Board would have my head on a spike if  
they found out this is where our batteries  
are going.

The lights are turned on.

Alright, what color? How does SAM feel  
today?

SAM

Blue! Because I am happy!

ENGINEER

Color theory much?

SAM

I don't understand.

ENGINEER

Nevermind. I'll see you later.

SAM is engrossed by his new lights. He sticks his  
head in the bucket again.

SAM

(Muffled) Goodbye!

SCENE TWO - WAIT

S.D.

Time has passed. SAM has been  
unproductive, aside from trying to drape  
himself with the lights.

The ENGINEER rushes past SAM, pulling his coat on.



SAM

Where are you going?

ENGINEER

Have you been listening to the radio?

SAM

No. What's on the radio?

ENGINEER

Things are- things are going bad out there. I have to go.

SAM

Where are you going?

ENGINEER

I need to go get my family. They won't make it here in time otherwise.

SAM

In time for what?

S.D.

SAM is getting in the way.

ENGINEER

SAM!

SAM

I don't understand.

ENGINEER

SAM, I need you to stay here, and take care of the Bunker, alright?

SAM

You're leaving me alone.

ENGINEER

Not for long. The rest of the POD team should be here soon. This is all—everything is just happening sooner than we expected. We need you here to manage the Bunker while I'm gone, alright?

SAM is silent.

ENGINEER

SAM. I'm being serious. If it comes to it, and I don't make it back in time, you know what to do. Right?

SAM

I do.

Pause. The ENGINEER moves past SAM.

SAM

Bill, don't go.

ENGINEER

I made a promise. I'm sorry, SAM, but I have to try. Do you understand?

SAM

Yes.

ENGINEER

Take care of them, okay?

The ENGINEER leaves the Bunker.

SAM

I promise.

ENGINEER

Alarms sound. The intercom clicks multiple times, each time returning only static. A faint rumbling in the distance. The lights flicker. SAM curls up with his bucket and his lights. SAM waits.

SAM - HAND PUPPET OPERATED FROM POINTS 1 AND 2 BY PERFORMER. THE PUPPETRY AND VOICE ACTING IS PERFORMED BY TWO PERFORMERS.

