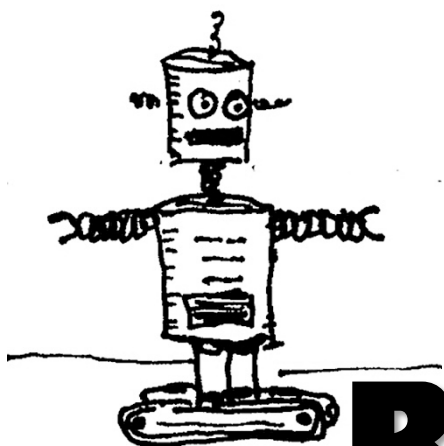




ROBOT

by Douglas Evans

Robot turned a full circle. Where was the boy? Clouds had gathered in the sky, warning of rain. The light had dimmed, meaning night was near. Even worse, Robot's power level was low. Waiting any longer in the park would be risky.

His brain circuits went to work. "Home is eleven blocks away," he said. "I must try and make it home on my own."

Setting his treads in gear, Robot moved down the path to the street. Once on the sidewalk he entered a bus shelter. He reached down and pulled out his power cord. Holding the plug out in front of him, he said to a man standing there. "Excuse me, sir, is there a power outlet nearby? My power level is at ten percent."

"Sorry, Robot," the man said as a bus pulled up. "Bus shelters rarely have outlets."

Robot rolled out of the shelter, holding the power plug in front of him. A half block down the sidewalk, he entered a coffee shop. People sat at tables staring at laptop computers. Robot said to a woman behind the counter, "May I use a power outlet? My

charge is very low.”

The woman scowled. “The electricity is for customers only,” she said. “Not for stray robots. Now leave before I call the police.”

Robot hurried from the cafe. Outside it was raining.

“This is not safe,” Robot said. He remembered the time the boy was washing his midsection, and his mother warned him not to get water into Robot’s circuits.

“Robot is not waterproof,” she said.

Ahead Robot spotted a hot dog stand. The vendor stood under a large yellow umbrella. Robot rolled up and stood beside him.

“Do you have a power outlet I could plug into?” he asked.

“My cart has no current, Robot,” said the vendor. “Where’s your owner?”

“The boy left me in the park. His mother says he’s forgetful and careless.”

The vendor nodded to show he understood. “Well, you can stay here until the rain stops,” he said. “Then you must go. A robot without its owner scares away customers.”

Robot waited silently. A red light on his front blinked. Five percent power remained. When it stopped raining, Robot thanked the vendor and continued down the sidewalk.

“Good luck, Robot,” the vendor called out. “Sorry, I don’t have current.”

A block later, two boys tossed rocks at Robot from across the street. “Robot on the loose!” they called out.

The rocks dented Robot’s side. To escape the boys, he rolled at double speed.

“What a waste of power!” he told himself.

Further on, a picket fence followed the sidewalk. A few feet beyond it, Robot

spotted an electrical outlet on the wall of a shed. Holding the plug tightly, he extended his arm through the fence. In that instant, a large dog leaped at the metal limb, barking and snarling.

“Let me get to the outlet, dog,” Robot said. “My power supply is at two percent.”

But the dog remained blocking Robot’s reach. He bit the arm, leaving marks.

Robot’s brain circuit whirled. He pulled back his arm and released the power cord. It recoiled into his midsection. “Home is still four blocks away,” he told himself. “I must try and get there before my power runs out completely.”

By now the city was dark. To conserve energy, Robot kept his headlight off. In the dark, he bumped into a parking meter and dented his front. Shortly afterward, he ran into a trash bin, scratching his leg. A deep beep came from his insides. The urgent power warning. His treads moved at their slowest pace. Anything to preserve power.

Robot rolled another block. At the next corner, the beeping stopped, and the red light went out. His head drooped.

“Shut down,” he said, rolling to a halt.

Only the charge of a small backup battery remained. This allowed Robot to hear. He stood alone in the dark and damp. What now?

That’s when Robot heard a voice. “There he is! Where have you been, Robot? We’ve looked everywhere for you.”

The boy was close by.

“How did Robot get here?” said a second voice, the boy’s mother. “Tucker, you must be more careful with your things.”

“I will, Mom. I’ll never let Robot out of my sight again.”

“Lucky the rain didn’t reach his circuits,” said the mother. “Let’s get him home and recharged. In an hour, he should be as good as new.”