

Dogs! Don't you love them? Don't you wish you could live with them still? Friends, we are very excited to tell you that you can!

The Organics may no longer be with us, but the scientists at Mechanical Tail have spent many years and millions of dollars perfecting the next best thing: robot dogs!

Did we say the next best thing? In some ways, our robot dogs are even BETTER! Our robot dogs are the same as Organics—they'll walk with you, they'll play fetch, they'll even wag their tails! (Remember that?) But all without any risk or danger or vet bills!

PROLOGUE

I've never gotten used to the rep from Mechanical Tail showing up once a year to replace my robot dog with a new one.

As always, it's a cheerful girl wearing a turquoise-blue Mechanical Tail polo. Her tag says "Rain." Maybe it's her name, or maybe it's an order to the universe. Rain! No more drought!

She stoops down to my eye level—I'm on the floor, holding Derrick—and tells me in a chipper voice: "You're going to love this year's dog *so much*."

I'm bawling, my arms around Derrick. He's little and orange and white. I've spent the previous year walking him, playing with him, talking to him. Loving him. I think the other Dog Islanders have developed thicker skins, harder hearts. We all go through this once a year, every year. I know it's coming, but it hurts so much every time.

"Is that really your name? *Rain*?" I ask. I want to make her feel bad and to put off what is coming.

She nods. "Yes," she says. "Hippie parents. Idealistic. They thought if they gave me the name, it might help end the

drought.” She smiles. She has cute dimples. I really resent this fact.

“Yeah, that really worked,” I say, sarcastically. Though, actually, the drought has been easing up a little lately, thank Dog. But *Rain* must be thirty or forty years old, so I can’t imagine her stupid name had anything to do with it.

“Where did you grow up?” I ask. Stall. Stall. Stall.

“California,” Rain tells me. “I went to engineering school. Then I got my dream job at Mechanical Tail. And now here we are.”

“This is your dream job?” I ask her. “Taking away my best friend? Killing him.”

“Oh my Dog. I put that so badly. I apologize, dear. But don’t you know how special you are? You’re so special. That’s why you are trusted with these different robot dogs instead of just being stuck with the ones the normal kids have to buy in the store,” Rain says to me. “You are blessed to have this special opportunity.”

Yes, of course, I do feel special—I know that we are very special, living here, with the world’s last real dogs, all six of them, as well as the world’s newest robot dog models. I’ve spent my whole life here. I know how lucky I am to be one of just a few dozen households with the privilege of being an integral and permanent part of this community. I’m one of just three kids. Three *remaining* kids.

Sure, lucky. Right now I feel devastated though. Every single time, this is how I feel. This is my fourth go-around. This is my fourth time being crushed. And that’s just counting my own *personal* robot dogs. My family’s had, and lost, others

as well. Like we had the one that wasn't very fun or friendly but was supposed to be able to wash dishes with its tongue. (That function didn't work very well; it was one of the last times Mechanical Tail went for a practical robot dog instead of one that served as a companion.)

Honestly, even losing that one was hard and I don't even remember its name. But not like this. Not like Derrick. They really perfected the model this time in terms of making me love the hell out of a piece of machinery.

"Please let me keep him," I cry, knowing it's futile but having to say the words all the same. "I promise. I'll take good care of him. I won't tell anyone. You won't miss him, you're going to kill him anyway!"

"I can't," says Rain. It's what the reps always say. "I'm sorry. You're going to love your new dog. I swear. And you're performing an important public service, Nano Miller. The world is a better place because of your sacrifice. A kinder place. You will never forget David."

"Derrick!" I shout.

"Forgive me," she says. "I practiced saying the right name all the way here. I wanted to make this easy for you, Nano. I'm so sorry. You'll never forget *Derrick*. And we will never forget what you did, which helps us make sure no flesh-and-blood animal will ever suffer again. Thank you, Nano."

I am crying so hard my head hurts. My tears and snot are getting Derrick's fur wet. The fur doesn't react well to dampness. It clumps in a distinctly unnatural sort of way.

"Come here, boy," the rep says to Derrick.

He looks up at her with those trusting eyes (*programmed to*

look trusting; I know this, I know this, I know this is true). He licks my cheek ever so delicately and walks to her.

She pats him on the head and says, “Good robot dog.”

Derrick wags his tail. It’s a little jerky, the wag. That part hasn’t been perfected yet. Still, I love it.

“Do you want to say goodbye?” the rep, Rain—*Rain*, what a stupid name, what a stupid person—asks me and my mom.

Dad has decamped to the designated Parents’ Room, where he can shut the door and no one is even allowed to knock, except Mom, and then only if it’s an emergency. He and his robot bartender will be having some intense one-on-one time.

I think Dad imagines this space as his own private tiki bar. Mom and Dad used to go to a tiki bar in Rhode Island before they moved to Dog Island. It was called East Greenwich Eden. They sometimes still talk about it, wondering if their favorite bartender, Raymie, is there behind the bar slinging punch bowls after all these years.

Actually, the Parents’ Room has got a terrible couch that Mom won’t let Dad keep in any *public* part of the house. The couch was left behind by another family that left back fifteen years ago or so. It has cup holders. Mom finds the cup holders “really visually offensive.” But the Parents’ Room is just for comfort and privacy. And a water-free rum punch, made by a bow-tie-wearing robot, from powder and chemical slurry.

Maybe Dad’s in the Parents’ Room now having a drink because he doesn’t much care that my robot dog is dying. Maybe after this many times he doesn’t care anymore. Or

maybe he's decamped to the Parents' Room because it's too hard for him to be here for this terrible ritual, again.

Mom stands over me. She has a look on her face that I can't quite read. Somewhere between pain and pride, with a dash of distractedness.

I grab Derrick in my arms again and kiss the top of his head. I tell my robot dog I love him. I thank him for being my robot dog, this past year. For being such a good boy, even if he's got no choice in the matter; it's all programmed in. His programmers did a good job.

"Thank you," I whisper in his little pointy ear. "Thank you. I love you. Thank you."

The rep reaches under Derrick's belly as I am holding him. She's about to press the button that will make Derrick shutdown.

I've been through this four times now. I know how it goes. His eyes will go dark. There will be quiet. You don't even realize the robot dogs are making any kind of constant white noise, until the sound is gone.

And now it's gone.

Mom rubs her eyes.

"Goodbye, friend," I say one more time to what is now just a thing. Derrick is a shell now. Wet "fur" and no life.

The Mechanical Tail lady whistles. She smiles so big as the new dog walks into the room, eyes bright, tail up. The tail seems to have been given an upgrade. This new one's face seems more engaged, more Organic. He's got brown fur, brown eyes, and a big blocky head that makes him a little scary looking. One ear is up, the other down, which is cute. His fur is obviously

softer. Looks more like hair than nylon or whatever it is they used on my Derrick.

“This model is designed to bond strongly with one person. For owners who don’t like their robot dogs being too indiscriminately friendly,” says Rain. *Rain. My Dog*, what a stupid name. “Plus, it has certain vocal abilities and a couple of new safety features. I hope you will enjoy it.”

The robot dog wags its tail slowly back and forth as it looks around the room, taking it all in: me, my mom, the sky blue walls, the old shabby wicker furniture. Mom prefers shabbiness with a touch of cool over comfort with cup holders.

The robot dog walks over to me and sits down. Raises one paw.

“It wants to shake your hand,” says the rep. “You’re the one it will bond with.”

I don’t take the paw. I resolve to stay hard this time. Not to let myself care for the machine. At least not so much that I can’t say goodbye without it hurting so much.

The dog looks at me with a quizzical expression. It then lies down and rolls over to show its belly, its tongue lolling out the side of its mouth. I don’t rub the belly.

“Let me show you,” Rain says, bending down and stroking the new robot dog’s stomach. It shakes its hind leg while she gives a scratch. Derrick didn’t have that feature. Rain smiles at me as if I’m supposed to be *amazed*. I am kind of amazed; I start to cry again. I miss Derrick and I’m already betraying him.

“I thought it was only going to bond with me,” I say.

“This isn’t bonding. It’s just a belly rub. It’s more for me

than for him—it,” Rain says. “What are you going to name this guy?”

There is only one name that seems possible: Billy, for my brother. And a year from now, I will lose this Billy as well. Maybe if I steel myself right, this one will be easier.